

# Book 3

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## Prologue

*"The most dangerous opponent for a master is a novice. Therefore, seek to be a novice in all things."*

– Isabella the Mad, only general to ever defeat Theodosius the Unconquered on the field

Anaxares, to his surprise, was still alive.

Perhaps his utter irrelevance in the grand scheme of things had seen him spared, he pondered, but such a thought was too optimistic. More likely the *kanenas* had all assumed another one of them was going to trigger the stone in his stomach and one would get around to it whenever they remembered. His impending death was such a certainty he no longer spared any time troubling himself over it – what point was there in cursing the river when you were already drowning? At the very least his last days would be interesting, in a truly horrifying manner. The Tyrant of Helike had seemingly adopted him as a pet of sorts, naming him an official advisor to the crown and now dragged him along wherever he went. The villain was amused by his calm. Calling the contraption the two of them were currently on a litter would have been a misnomer: the boy had essentially built a massive dais, slapped a throne on it and now had it carried around by porters everywhere.

A pavilion could be added to cover the surface when weather demanded as much and tables were positioned to allow for the taking of a meal should the Tyrant demand it. The wretched labour involved offended his sensibilities. *Foreign Slavers Will Be Known By Their Wicked Works*, he added out of habit. *May They All Choke On Ashes And Also Snakes*. The villain had tried to have a smaller, noticeably cheaper throne put next to his for Anaxares to sit on but the Bellerophan had flatly refused. He'd claimed a wooden stool for the people and discreetly carved the sigil of Bellerophon – three peasants waving pitchforks – on the side. The small act of rebellion had been deeply satisfying, if utterly meaningless. Not, he decided, an inept description of his own existence.

*"Finally,"* the Tyrant said, *"we're getting decent weather."*

Anaxares looked up at the massive storm clouds gathering and cocked an eyebrow. The lands between Helike and Atalante were known for the occasional bouts of week-long rain and storms, blown south from the Waning Woods and the madness that passed for

nature over there. The Fae toyed with the winds and the sky the way men did with their clothes, and the farms beneath them paid the price.

"It will be harder for your army to retreat in the mud," Anaxares said.

He knew next to nothing about strategy – in Bellerophon the only people allowed to read books on the subject were the citizens who drew army positions, and even they had the knowledge erased from their minds past their term of service lest they Use It In Horrid Rebellion Against The People – but so far the Tyrant's campaign against Atalante had not impressed him. For one, there'd been no battles. The famous Helikean army had marched east towards Atalante, whose farmers had already emptied their fields, without contest from the enemy. The Atalantians had remained behind their walls as the emptied their treasury buying up all the mercenaries in Mercantis they could afford, only taking the field after they outnumbered the Helikeans two to one. Twenty thousand men had then dutifully marched towards the Tyrant, who had immediately taken his army back through the farmlands he'd just gleefully set fire to.

"Oh, we're done retreating," the Tyrant said cheerfully. "I'm bored with it now. Got what I need anyway."

Anaxares pulled at his third wineskin of the morning, trying to wash down the taste of impending doom. The Tyrant disapproved vocally of his drinking habits, but the man's servants kept bringing him skins anyway.

"As my advisor," the boy said, his bad hand visibly shaking, "what would you advise me to do now?"

Just being called that qualified Anaxares for thirty-three different counts of treason by Bellerophon law. Fifty-something, even, if you counted all the articles about foreign collusion separately. His remains would be on trial for years after the initial execution.

"Return to Helike, slit your own throat and let your replacement beg the mercy of the League," he replied without missing a beat.

"You're a terrible advisor," the Tyrant complained. "I should have you hanged."

Anaxares shrugged.

"If that is your wish."

Less painful of a way to go than internal organ crushing, he assessed.

"You haven't gotten tedious yet," the boy mused. "I guess you can live."

"I am, of course, relieved and grateful," the Bellerophan deadpanned.

"You should be," the Tyrant said cheerfully. "I'm so merciful, it's why my people love me so much."

As far as Anaxares could tell, the reason Helikeans 'loved' the Tyrant was that they had been told they did by men with swords and grim faces. The army, though, did seem genuinely loyal. Not surprising: whenever a Tyrant took the throne, they started invading everything in sight. The last one to hold the Name had broken the desperate alliance of Stygia, Atalante and Delos before the southern Proceran princes had intervened and put her down. Glorious war had been waged, victories tallied, and within a decade all the borders had returned to what they'd been before the woman had claimed the crown. Named or not, one could not change the face of the Free Cities.

"Admittedly there is no other claimant to the throne, since your nephew's death," the diplomat said instead of rehashing the histories.

"Pretty idiot got himself shot by an orc, of all things," the Tyrant said delightedly, the red in his eye deepening for a heartbeat. "He always talked too much, it's how he lost the throne in the first place."

The Bellerophan's eyes sharpened with interest as he swallowed another mouthful of wine. The Tyrant's seizing of the throne of Helike had been one of the most unexpected diplomatic developments of the last decade, in the Free Cities, but precious little was known about. A boy that had been by all reports a nonentity before the coup had in a single day taken control of the city and the army, killed the king in his own bed and purged his nephew's supporters brutally. The nephew in question had fled the city with most of the young nobility and his surviving loyalists, becoming the Exiled Prince in the process.

"Talked too much," Anaxares repeated, leaving the tone questioning.

"See, Dorian's father was a lot like mine," the Tyrant said. "Drank too much, dallied with servants, let the nobility and the army run things. Everybody liked that state of affairs. Dorian, though? He was just so *pretty* and so *good*."

The bitter hatred in those words almost fouled the air.

"Now, the old guard didn't care much for him. But their heirs? The swarmed him like flies a corpse. Hung on to his every word, his promises of reform and a better Helike."

The Tyrant seemed almost amused at the prospect of the betterment of his city-state, as if such a thing was unimaginable.

"They figured out eventually that when Dorian took the throne, he was going to be *an actual ruler*," he snickered. "Their own children would back him in this. Now that angered them quite a bit, Anaxares. If you steal power and keep it for long enough, eventually you start to think you have a right to it."

He waved his good hand expansively.

"So they looked at the only other child of royal blood," he said. "Approached me. And I said: *why not?*"

"They thought they could rule through you," the diplomat said. "A mistake of some scale."

"Most of the I fed to dogs," the Tyrant smiled, that flash of sharp pearly teeth. "The others fell in line."

"You were twelve years old," Anaxares said, feeling old. "And already Named."

"I wasn't the Tyrant then," the boy said. "Just Kairos. Can you keep a secret, advisor?"

"No," the diplomat replied immediately. "I will report everything you say to the *kanenas* at the first opportunity, before my summary execution."

The villain grinned.

"Treachery is pleasing to the Gods Below," he said. "There's a crypt in Helike, under the palace, where the first foundations of the city were laid. There's a creature there, lying under a tomb of stone sculpted to look like someone holding a sword. There is a crack in the side just large enough that you can hear the thing inside whisper, if you press your ear to it."

Anaxares would have shivered, if years of walking with death in his belly had not effectively burned fear out of him. The words were casually spoken but the description felt more vivid than it should have. He could smell the dusty air, feel the unsettling whisper of an abomination against his ear.

"I don't know what it is. My father said it's the first king of Helike, still straddling the line between life and death," the Tyrant said. "The king, though, once said it is the god who once owned the ground the city was built on – tricked into the tomb and forever bound to give us advice."

"Advice?" the diplomat repeated.

"Prophecies," the boy said. "All of royal blood can ask one question if it, in our lifetime."

"And it told you you would rule?" Anaxares guessed.

The Tyrant laughed.

"It told me," he said, "that I would die when I turned thirteen. That there was nothing I could do to change this."

The boy smiled.

"It was," he said, "a great gift."

Looking down at his shaking hand, the Tyrant seemed lost in memory for a moment before he gathered himself.

"We spend so much of our lives, Anaxares, shackling ourselves. Avoiding doing this and that because others would frown upon it. Because it is wrong and wicked and unworthy. Once I knew there was only death ahead of me, I started doing what *I* wanted. I ceased censuring what I was to please others."

"The drow believed the same as you, when they embraced the Tenets of Night," the Bellerophon said. "And look at them now, Tyrant – packs of savages inhabiting the ruins of an empire. Censure Is Just, Law Is Necessary."

*Glory To Peerless Bellerophon, Whose Laws Are That Of The People,* he added silently.

"Your city is the mutilated remains of a people," the boy said. "That you wielded the knife yourself is the only thing setting you apart from the rest of Creation."

"We have no rulers, in Bellerophon," Anaxares said.

This time there was no need for him to speak the words taught to all of them as children, the capitalized praises learned before one could walk. This, he believed for himself. Because the Republic was flawed, deeply flawed, and he could admit this to himself even if he deserved death for it. But what it stood for was... greater than the sum of its faults.

"No crowns. No nobles. No Names. This is not an accident, Helikean, it is a *statement*. We are all of us free or we are none of us free. There is no middle ground."

"You've lived a heartbeat away from death all your life," the Tyrant said, "and still you don't quite get it, do you? You Bellerophans just traded one tyrant for fifty thousand. You don't get to decide who you are. Others do that for you."

The boy rose to his feet, stretching out gingerly. He looked almost fragile, thin and sickly under his red silken robes.

"When those nobles and generals came to whisper treason in my ear," he said, "I did not hesitate. Because I felt like usurping a throne, because I hated Dorian. I was curious to see if it could be done. I was going to die soon, anyway, and what did I care what followed that?"

Anaxares was not a warrior, or a large man. He was thirty and more familiar with wine than a hard day's work. For all that, looking at the boy, for a moment he was convinced he could snap his neck almost without effort. That the bones would break like a bird's, shatter like glass. Then he saw the eye, the damnable red eye, and the Tyrant was a looming titan looking down on him.

"So I did it," the boy hissed. "I crushed them and I stole the crown and I called the would-be puppeteers to heel. And when I turned thirteen, sitting on my throne as the Tyrant of Helike – *I did not die*. Because Fate isn't a path we must follow, Anaxares, it's a tug-of-war between the Gods."

He leaned closer.

"And sometimes, if you put your hands to the rope, you can tug it your way," he whispered.

The Named withdrew with unnatural agility, laughing. The intensity there had been to him was gone like mist in the sun. The Tyrant ripped out one of the banners that flew at every corner of his dais – his personal heraldry, a leering skull with a red eye on gold – and leapt down onto the wet grounds. The porters who'd been carrying the dais hastily slowed, not daring to drop the entire thing even as their muscles creaked lest their ruler be splattered with mud.

"Come along, advisor," the boy said. "We must speak with my general."

Anaxares followed. The soldiers, hard men and women in scale armour with swords and shield, turned into awed children whenever they saw the Tyrant. Some reached hesitantly for the hem of his silks, which the boy tolerantly allowed. There was no sign of discontent among them even after the pantomime that had been this campaign: in Helike, Tyrants did not fail. Not without betrayal or half the world set against them. They would follow the little madman into the fray without hesitation or doubt. The general they were seeking found them first, riding towards them. A woman, the diplomat saw, then his gaze lingered on her throat. Not that she had always been that.

"Sire," the general said, dismounting hastily and kneeling.

"General Basilia," the Tyrant said, patting her armoured shoulder affectionately. "The army is to cease retreating immediately."

Something feral flashed in the woman's eyes.

"We are to prepare for battle, then? The enemy is half a day's march away, we can still set the grounds."

The Named chuckled.

"There is no need to array our soldiers for a fight," he said. "Stay in a column. We will be marching on Atalante before nightfall."

She almost hesitated, Anaxares saw, but did not protest. Loyal, this one. To a boy more than half mad. Gods save them all. He should have brought the wine.

"As you command, sire," she said. "There is a farm not far from here, should I prepare it to accommodate you?"

"No need," the Tyrant said. "My advisor and I will be awaiting our friends on the field."

Without even the semblance of an explication, the boy strode away with the standard resting on his shoulder. The diplomat sighed and made to follow but he was stopped by the general, who put a gauntleted hand on his shoulder. She glared down at him.

"If he dies," General Basilia said, "you will follow him shortly. *Screaming.*"

"Nine," Anaxares replied.

"What?" she said.

"The number of times I've been threatened with death today," the diplomat clarified. "Will we make it to ten before noon? It is an auspicious number, in Bellerophon."

He strode away after that, while she was still too surprised to protest. He found the Tyrant alone in a sprawling field of grass, gazing ahead. The boy hummed, as he approached.

"And now?" the diplomat asked.

"Now we wait," the Tyrant said.

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It was mid-afternoon when the forces of Atalante arrived.

They were a sorry bunch to look at, compared to the soldiers of Helike. Citizen levies armed with spears and shields and decked

in hardened leather, city and caravan guards who'd traded cudgels for swords, unarmoured conscripts with javelins and slings. Only the cavalry looked professional, nobles with long lances and chain mail. The mercenaries looked more fearsome, infantry from all parts of Calernia that dwelled in the mercenary villages surrounding the shores of Mercantis until hired by patrons. There were Ashurans there, he saw, with their curved bows and ornate armours. Levantines with painted faces and hooked swords, even Callowan knights with long banners who must have survived the Praesi purges. Behind him, the army of Helike remained in an orderly column and did not move. The commanders on the other side ordered a halt, but after most of an hour passed without anyone moving orders began being screamed along the Atalantian lines. In good order, the enemy began to advance again.

"They're not even sending an envoy to talk with me," the Tyrant complained.

"You murdered the last one," Anaxares said.

"It's still very rude," the boy said, rolling the wooden shaft of the standard between his palms. "They ought to have better manners than that."

The diplomat watched twenty thousand soldiers marching in his direction and wondered which one would kill him. Hopefully one with a sword. Spear wounds tended to kill slowly, he'd been told, unless something important was pierced.

"Last night, Malicia's hounds set foot in Penthes," the Tyrant said conversationally.

"May The Ground Open Up To Swallow The Base Penthesians," Anaxares replied out of habit.

"The city will be eating itself alive before a fortnight has passed," he said. "Nicae won't move until they've grown fat with Proceran silver and 'mercenaries', Delos will be dealing with the Stygian phalanx moving north. That leaves only our dear Atalantian friends and their escorts."

"Who you have decided to fight," the diplomat said. "Without your army."

"Oh, I could have had General Basilia tear those poor fools alive, if you'll forgive my language," the Tyrant said. "It wouldn't even have been very hard. That's how the Praesi do things, nowadays. Let tactics and preparation carry the day."

The frail boy's lips curled in distaste.

"And to think they were once the greatest among us."



"The Dread Empire is the most powerful it has been in centuries," Anaxares frowned.

"And their Empress plays shatranj with the First Prince across an entire continent, winning more often than not," the Named said. "For all that, they've lost their way."

The Bellerophan raised a sceptical eyebrow.

"It's not about winning, Anaxares," the Tyrant said. "It's about *how* you win."

The standard rolled again between the boy's palms as the enemy host crept ever closer.

"Even now, if I gave General Basilia the order I believe she could win this. It would be a victory, yes, but would it be a victory for Evil?"

"You are a villain," the Bellerophan said. "A victory for you is a victory for Evil."

"A mere clash between armies? No," he said. "It takes more than that. The war I am fighting has little to do with steel: I am soldier for the Gods Below in the game that will settle Creation. A point has to be made, a sense to the story."

"And what is the point of us standing on this field, watching death arrive?" Anaxares asked.

"Twenty thousand men march to end me," the Tyrant said. "They will break, because they are in my way. Watch, diplomat, and learn."

The boy drove the standard into the ground, flying his banner of one in the face of the host that spread across the plain.

"I am Kairos Theodosian," he laughed. "Tyrant of Helike. And I say that my **Rule** extends to even the sky. Come, servants of the Heavens. The Age of Wonders is not dead yet. *Not while I breathe.*"

The cloud above thickened, more black than grey now. For a long moment nothing happened, and then lightning struck the soldiers of Atalante. Thunder clapped, the sky danced to the whims of a madman and Anaxares watched the largest army he had ever seen break apart at the seams. The Tyrant of Helike stood there, smiling.

His hand no longer shook.

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*Letouriste*

Thanks! Have been waiting;)

[\*erraticerrata\*](#)

So Book III begins.

First update of the month, so here's the usual extra chapter (also linked in the extra chapter tab on the side menu):

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/02/08/reign/>

It's titled "Reign" and is from the POV of Dread Empress Malicia. There's a new colour map in the "Art, Maps and Other" section, representing the political borders of all Calernian surface states.

*jonnnney*

I'm curious. Are the green parts in Praes, Levant, the Titanomachy, and the Kingdom of the Dead just meant to show forest or are they independent areas full of fey like the waning woods?

[\*erraticerrata\*](#)

Forest.

*danh3107*

Wew, I was dying there for a while.

*Nanrotinan*

Was I the only one refreshing the page for the past 2 hours every 20-30minutes? Looking forward to Wednesdays again!

*darkening*

Wow. That was one heck of a way to start the book. I can't wait to see how things ramp up from here. Thanks for the chapter.

*RandomFan*

And I remember the real reason why I hate the heroes yet again. Because for all that the villains love bland platitudes as much as the heroes, the heroes always get the trite ones. This is the ever-cliche zealot, but it's one that realizes his madness, and revels in it.

I'm curious about hell, though- in a world where it's a provable concept, why do so few ever think about it? Is it because heaven is just as bad in any who'd be a villain's eyes, or something else?

## *erraticerrata*

I'm not sure where you're getting the hero hate, since none made an appearance in this chapter?

As for the Heavens/Hells that's a more complicated issue. Technically the Hells is where the devils are and the Heavens is where the angels are, in a physical sense. Good and Evil cultures believe that their souls go to their respective Gods after they die, unless angels/devils have a claim to them, but no one has ever passed on to the other side and remembered what was there so there's still a degree of uncertainty. Faith would be a pretty meaningless concept if the afterlife was a physical certainty.

### *RandomFan*

It's just a lingering grudge against the lone swordsman. Destruction is made more insulting if the other party refuses to admit that's what they've done, and even in the end, he didn't \*repent\* of the right things. I don't know, maybe i'll get to see a truly good & competent hero this book- but most of the heroes in the last one failed one of the two.

Even the most destructive of villains have a more interesting perspective relative to the devastation inflicted, which just makes the grudge stick. Even heiress.

### *Lamora*

Calling it right now. The Tyrant has already usurped Bellerophon in some way which is the reason that Anaxares hasn't been murdered by his mages – either by corrupting the mages or by some other explicitly Evil way. I base this on the way that the story keeps touching base on the fact that he's not dead yet from his stomach stone being strange – there's nothing special about Anaxares, so it ought to be something on the other end.

As another slightly more out there callout, I'm gonna say that Anaxares either is in line to gain a Name or the Tyrant is maneuvering him to be, so he can have another Named on his side. Probably something that's a perversion of his own ideology, like Oppressor or something. It's doubtful the Tyrant is keeping him alive purely as a whim.

### *Nivek*

### *Diplomat*

### *George*

Oh wow, yeah, that's used to identify him a whole he'll of a lot.

[.](#)

I thought he would be called Advisor though since the Tyrant kept calling him that

*dalek955*

The Name of Chancellor is empty, and Praes doesn't want it anymore.

*Letouriste*

Hum? To me that looks like EXACTLY he did that purely on a whim,impressed by his reaction,finding some commun ground with him on his way of life.You're not a villain if you don't have people to show off around you:D...well that's not true but you get the idea;)

For belerophon,the key is the opinion of the mass,without ruler or people more knowledgeable than others this is easy to manipulate the opinion of the crow for your purpose.

Here Tyrant spoke about malicia:I think she somehow have way to influence this city.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Or, the Tyrant has worked out how to hack the magic connected to both the stone and the psychic (or whatever) connection with the *kanenas* back home. I think a hack job would be a good first step to corrupting he whole system, no?

*nick012000*

One of his Aspects is Rule, and he can use it to control even things like the weather. I wouldn't be surprised if he decided to take control of the stone so that he can set it off at his whim and ensure that it does not go off before then.

*stevenneiman*

My guess would be that he figured out some dramatic way to threaten the *kanenas*. We know that they have mind-reading powers, and I wouldn't be surprised if they decided not to do anything that might piss him off after a guided tour of the inside of his head.

Alternatively, he might have somehow taken over Bellerophon already. After all, they are used to taking orders and he has an Aspect that seems to be based entirely around doing that.

*Jonnnney*

It might be a proximity issue. When Anaxares was introduced it was mentioned that two of the 10 diplomats were *kanenas* and those two were the ones that he had to worry about, if he

still had the ability to worry. The tyrant could have simply killed those two, rendered their connections null and void, or threaten to kill a large number of Belerephon citizens if Anaxares was killed.

The ability for individuals to read someone's mind from halfway across the country would be a bit overpowered in this universe because it would be simple to just make the connection between two servants and use them for real time communications anywhere in the world.

*JackbeThimble*

That seems like a weird choice. The only skills Anaxares seems to have are drinking, Doublethink and (presumably) poker, doesn't seem like someone who would be very useful as a minion. Also according to Black the thing that separates the Named from the NPCs is the sheer will to impose their will on the world. It's pretty obvious how The Tyrant earned his name but Anaxares seems like the polar opposite of a named.

[Jon Babineau](#)

On the other hand, sticking a Bellerophon(ian?) who pride themselves on not having Names with a Name is right up the alley of this guy.

Maybe create one for him somehow, something faceless and unimpressive. The Republican, or something.

*Nivek*

The thing that makes a Name is the power of a single choice. Anaxares chose to surrender fully to The Will Of The People during the poisoning's aftermath and became unnaturally calm when he did so. Also the story and culture of Bellerophon would support such complete surrender as the trigger for a Name

*Kylen*

I personally believe that his Free City is keeping him alive as a sort of viewing camera to keep an eye on what the Tyrant is up to.

*JackbeThimble*

Their anarchic system would seem to work against that kind of forward planning, unless all of the monitors came to the same conclusion it seems like it would only take one to decide to kill him and any who spoke against the decision would probably be opening themselves up to accusations of treason. I think it's more likely that whatever it was that protected

the Tyrant from certain death has somehow extended it's protection over Anaxares.

*Naeddyr*

Personally, I think they just like good old Anaxares. As far as we know, he's full-on republican through and through, a jaded and blotchy believer, but a believer nonetheless.

*pyrohawk21*

Just a question, but what 'exactly' did you mean with the following couple of sentences?

'A woman, the diplomat saw, then his gaze lingered on her throat. Not that she had always been that.'

I've got several possible ideas, and they're probably good ones... Just wondering if it's 'Plot Important' or background information that hasn't been revealed yet but can at any time, or has been revealed but I've missed it.

Also loving this story 😊

[erraticerrata](#)

General Basilia is transgender and Anaxares noticed the Adam's apple.

*nick012000*

I assumed that "she" was just a eunuch, given the Ancient Greece theme that they've got going on.

*nobodi12*

I was assuming he saw a scar on the neck. Like the general had his head cut off and placed on a body he liked better.

*Yitzi*

Question: How does gender reassignment work on Calernia? Their tech level doesn't seem to be up to the task of hormone replacement, I don't think surgery alone will have the proper effect, and a magical solution (i.e. a transformations spell) seems like it would remove the Adam's apple as well.

*Cicero*

glad you are back, that was an nice opening chapter.

*Cicero*

on second thought, the tyrant and the diplomat are my favourite characters at the moment, since their stories to a degree mirror my own life. Weird how that goes.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

You must live an insanely unique life

*Letouriste*

...he's not the only one:/ me too can feel a kindred spirit in these characters:)

*Morgenstern*

Told that he will die in such and such a time // told that he will die whenever, expecting it any moment -> freedom in knowing death could happen any moment.

Not really "insanely unique" at all. You're just latching onto the wrong things it would seem. Death could happen to any of us any minute - there are many people who realize this, even when not seriously ill. But we do have things like e.g. cancer or birth defects that make doctors tell you you will probably not live beyond point X. People with such an illness will realize this truth even more easily, even though anyone can realize that they could at any moment of their lives have some accident happen to them. Car crash. Household accident (you won't believe how common those are..). Heart failure.. Whatever.

### [ayon96](#)

Hi!

I have some questions.

On epilogue of book 2, Bard said she knew how lone swordsman story would have been in the future but wasn't he going to die since he summoned the angel.

And how strong are gods?

In Beast cursed killed a god and in this chapter there's a god trapped under Helike. Can Named really defeat a God? Compared to other things, how strong are they?

*Iconochasm*

There was some talk earlier, with the captured Deorai the woman at Summerholm, about a distinction between Gods and God's. Warlock has dissected several of the lower-case variety.

*Iconochasm*

"Gods and gods." Stupid presumptuous autocorrect.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

The Bard was explaining how Swordsman's life would have gone had he not taken a Name, IIRC

*stevenneiman*

The Gods (capital G) are the beings that originally built Creation. As I understand it, the only practical limits on their power are that they have trouble with other Gods and that they have agreed not to interfere too much in mortal affairs directly, leaving the matter in the hands of Named and their angels or demons and devils.

The other kind, gods (lower-case g) are beings that presumably are created by the cultures that worship them, such as the war spirit of the Broken Antler tribe. While they have power greater than most Named in most situations, with clever planning, sufficient power or narrative appropriateness (or some combination of the three) they can be brought down. I think they have power roughly on level with demons, though it is hard to judge from so little data on either group. Compared to that, the Gods have power that even angels pale in comparison to.

*Aisaaax*

I know it's super-late to give feedback, but I dislike the recent influx of interludes.

The narration picks up speed... And broken by an interlude. It picks up again... 2 chapters, and another interlude. Then 3 in a row.

Don't get me wrong, they're interesting in their own right. But they break my immersion in the story A LOT.

Hopefully, you don't overuse them like that later.

*Tobias Arboe*

Spelling mistakes:

"the boy had essentially built a massive dais"

"the boy had essentially built a massive dias\*"

"Most of the I fed to dogs,"

"most of them\* i fed to the dogs"

*Naeddyr*

dais is the correct spelling.

*crazedmoth*

And them is the correct word. The corrections are apparently the ones without asterisks.

*Abaddon*



No... The corrections are the ones WITH asterisks. The first example in the top comment just has the spelling from the story listed second with an asterisk for some reason. I'm assuming it's just a typo though since there's no need to assume which is which. The writing in question is just a quick scroll up and If you go look you'll see that "dias" and "the" are what's written in the chapter. That would make "dais" and "them" the corrections.

### *Gunslinger*

Yes, Wednesdays are fun again. I love the Tyrant. Such a mad lunatic. Also what an op ability. Can he also command the gods below to cause earthquakes?

### *MagnaMalusLupus*

The ability is powerful because he follows the groove worn into reality by his Name more closely than perhaps any other (that we've seen so far). He drinks deep from the well of Evil and finds it much to his tastes. He and Heiress would likely get along uncomfortably well.

### *NerfContessa*

Especially if you look to the future and Kairos läßt words.

Remember this moment then. And enjoy it while it lasts.

### *Abaddon*

Stop with the spoilers!!! You, Capt. Obvious, and someone else i can't think of right now are freaking ridiculous. I get that your post is 2 years old and this comment is mostly in the hopes that EE will delete your posts and that anyone who sees this going forward will choose NOT to post spoilers. It doesn't matter how vague they are, nobody enjoys them. Ffs... If you have to talk about how these early chapters relate to things later in the story go to Reddit or something(You know, places designated for those discussions? Places that have features such as hidden comments and posts until you CHOOSE to click on and look at them, spoiler tags, and active moderation that removed spoilers put in inappropriate places...), not here! It's insane how inconsiderate and rude a few people are on here. Between the people already mentioned and Warren Peace's dismissive, rude, and just generally hostile replies i amidst don't want to read the comments. I like to see what others were thinking at the time each chapter was posted though. It's getting to the point where I might just skip it though and that sucks. It's not cool that my(im gonna go out in a limb here and guess other people's as well.) enjoyment of the story is lessened because you just HAD to post your spoiler

in response to a 3-6 year old comment. Why? It's not like the person your relying to is gonna read and engage with your response(Yes,I get the irony. Again this is mostly posted in the hopes that people who are tempted to do this in the future realize what a dick move it is and decide not to do it.).

*haihappen*

I don't think he necessarily commands the weather. As he said, he especially retreated with his army until there was a storm. This seems more like a move a bard would play: The villain, alone against an army, with a storm in the sky. OF COURSE lightning would strike.

But, his "Rule" (assuming its his aspect) could potentially extend not only to the people of his domain, but also earth and sky. That would make everything written a foreshadowing to a part of the plan: how that piece of land is haunted by storms often and he retreats only when their numbers were swelling to their limits.

He is like an mad evil bard. Using story tropes to instil fear and awe; Overcomplicated plan with a myriad of steps; manipulating everything to set up a grand stroke.

I kinda like the tyrant. As mad lunatics go, his motive and actions are somewhat relateable.

Also, the story would not be half as funny or interesting if the POV was the Tyrant himself. Anaxares is the designated witness, both by the Tyrant and the author.

*stevenneiman*

His Aspect is Rule. He explicitly stated that what was going on here was his command extending to the sky itself, and considering that he hasn't actually lied to anyone thus far I'm inclined to believe him.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Basically, he could only do something like calling down lightning, when it's suitably dramatic – that is, when he has a Story behind him. Given that, then sure, he can Rule the sky.

*JackbeThimble*

Clearly the Atalanteans should have known better than to send a ragtag army of conscripts and mercenaries against a professional army lead by a Named with only 2:1 odds. Not sure what they were thinking.

*Letouriste*

Well,given they are obviously not trained to war(apart the mercenaries,and they don't have command) I feel that's right in their alley to underestimate a named...

*Jonnnney*

I'd guess they were thinking, "I don't care about the lives of these conscripts and I only have to pay the mercenaries if they live. So I'm gonna send them out to weaken the Tyrant enough for him to be eventually defeated."

Even if the Helike army had won they still would have lost soldiers and they don't have the money or the people to replace those loses and Procer is eventually going to intervene directly.

*stevenneiman*

I don't think he has any influence over the Gods Below (who aren't allowed to interfere so directly as to control the weather). His power is to Rule, and he applies it directly to whatever is necessary to see his will to reality. All that happened here was a perfectly mundane but powerful storm, that appeared exactly when and where it was supposed to.

[Euodiachloris](#)

He nudged it into being Extra, Supremely Dramatic With Double Whammy™ care of his Name skills. 😊

*Morgenstern*

I'm not sure he even "called up" the storm – he might simply have gambled for a natural one, retreating until one was there ... and then used Rule on what was there, to designate who gets hit by the lightning. Much less "OP" (as some here think), if so.

*Naeddyr*

Welcome back, I missed you.

*Shequi*

Yay! It's back! Interesting prologue. So the Tyrant is \*not\* a practical evil Villain, but has more in common with Heiress and the Truebloods... and even a reason of sorts for it. Fascinating.

*stevenneiman*

The Truebloods are weak because they mix the ideologies. They think that if tradition is powerful, it will be even more powerful if they guide it with modern pragmatism and strategy. Kairos is an example of how the true power of traditional

villainy comes from rejecting that pragmatism, and that it can achieve awe-inspiring results when it does. He just got Creation itself to destroy his foes for no more reason than because he told it to, and nothing the Truebloods have been trying has come close to that level of power.

Meanwhile, Black and Malicia have used pure pragmatism to render that level of power unnecessary, and achieved more subtle but equally potent results. The Truebloods fall short when they try to top the one Tyrant's raw power and madness, and the other Tyrant runs rings around them when they try for pragmatism and cleverness. They won't commit to one or the other, so they'll never succeed.

[alianok1](#)

I like how the ending of both chapters are similar but different, so is the Age of Wonders still going on?

[Jon Babineau](#)

The Tyrant sure thinks it is. Bring on the flying fortresses and invisible tigers!

*Draconic*

Thanks for the new chapter! It's been too long since the last one.

Also, there is something that's been bugging me for some time: Are Dread Emperor Traitorous (mentioned in book 2 chapter 8), and Dread Emperor Treacherous (mentioned in book 2 chapter 1) the same person? They seem remarkably similar, so it could be either a misspelled name, or two emperors, who chose similar names. I think Traitorous appears only in the quotes at the beginning of chapters, while Treacherous appears only in the chapters themselves.

*Kylen*

That's a good question. Maybe they are the same person, given we have evidence of a Emperor who was plotting against himself.

*Dragrath*

People are saying the Tyrant and the Heiress would get along but would they really? Conventional has little in the way of allegiance after all how much have the courts of Praes spent spilling their own blood?

Either way it is an interesting start curious how things will go there feels like far more variability at play than the last book had at this point...

*Kirroth*

I think that Tyrant and Heiress would have a strong aesthetic appreciation for the other's expression of Traditional Evil. But the thing about Traditional Evil is that it's about the obsessive pursuit of individual aspirations. Any alliance between the two would last exactly as long as their mutual goals aligned, be that a truce of an hour or a decades long political marriage. Then the simultaneous multi-layered Sudden Yet Inevitable Betrayals would go off.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

I think the Tyrant would beat Heiress to the punch. He's way better at reading the room... And, the weather outside it, too.



### *JackbeThimble*

Ideologically they appear to be aligned with each other but their personalities are pretty much polar opposites: Heiress is all about the schemes within schemes and a perfectly maintained mask that she never lets slip for a minute, whereas the Tyrant's whole character is based on spontaneity and seizing the evil day no matter the consequences.

### *stevenneiman*

I don't think they are really that similar in end goals. Heiress uses the power of Evil as a tool in order to further her own ambitions of personal gain and success. Kairos detests that kind of thinking even more than Good, and crusades in the name of Evil for its own sake. I think he would rather go out with a bang and leave a scar the world will never heal from than rest on his achievements, while Akua is likely to go out that way but would never willingly sacrifice anything for a goal that doesn't benefit her personally.

### [DarkoNeko](#)

"Most of the I fed to dogs," > them ?

...

Holy shit, he literally commanded a divine strike. Ho-ly-shit.

### *nick012000*

So, I've been thinking for the last couple of weeks: under the paradigm of the world of A Practical Guide to Evil, America would be an Evil nation, wouldn't it? As Malicia thought in the previous chapter, "Ambition to rise was the beating heart of Praesi identity, it was who they were," and the same is true in America. It's a fundamental part of the American identity that

anyone can rise to wealth and power, if they've got the skills and drive to do so. This is not quite true, of course, given how the wealthy and well-connected elite have acted to secure their wealth and power against usurpers, but that's now what the national legend is, and the hypocrisy of it also suits Evil anyway.

On a more day-to-day level, we've got a culture of conspicuous consumption that encourages people to follow their base desires and buy buy buy. Buy on impulse, buy to display status, buy to satiate their desire for food or sex or luxury. Oftentimes, we even approach our religions or relationships with other people that way – corporations refer to their employees as “human resources” for a reason, and our strong culture protecting of protecting “freedoms” means that there's strong cultural forces pushing against judging people for their personal lifestyles and choices. Like the Tyrant said in this chapter, “Avoiding doing this and that because others would frown upon it. Because it is wrong and wicked and unworthy. Once I knew there was only death ahead of me, I started doing what I wanted. I ceased censuring what I was to please others.”

And then you've got the Elites, who build fences out of regulations to hamstring small competitors from becoming threats to their positions. Whose political elites in Washington are all on the take – only really varying who they're on the take from. Who constantly grasp for more, more, more – more power, more money, more authority, maybe even more children to rape if you believe the rumors about pedophile rings in DC.

*nick012000*

Also, since I just thought of it while I was taking a shower: Even the American military fits into the Evil mold, with its reliance on gadgets and gizmos instead of boots on the ground. It's a large part of why the earlier parts of the Iraq War were such a clusterfuck.

*Morgenstern*

... of American ideology, NOT actual identity (anymore). There's a difference... Realistically, the game has been rigged for decades and the American Dream seems mostly dead or undead.

*Morgenstern*

Thus... i wouldn't use “identity” because that coalesces more around what really is there.

In the rest, I very much agree with you 😊

[Ethesis](#)

I'd love to have the diplomat discover the Tyrant had removed the stone.

This is such a great opening chapter.

*James*

I presume that the kanenas have authority to order other kinds of death, in response to stone tampering.

[CorpseMoney](#)

Goddamn I love this series.

.

I didn't expect to find the story on the part relating to the diplomat and the tyrant to be that interesting and unique to read though.

Maybe I am just more of a sucker for war stories instead of individual battles that have been more often in the last few chapters.

I hoped there is more story parts about them in the future though.

*Louise*

Oooh, hello again, Erraticerrata! Welcome back... and thank-you for bringing back your delightful story.

*linnilalartyr*

This Bellerophan guy is intersting somehow.

Why I always laugh when he mention his italic character thought is weird to my ownself.

Which I should feel pity for him when his will is not his and must thought for the people.

But that habit is hilarious somehow.

And this line of the tyrant to the punch. Oh~~~~

"and still you don't quite get it, do you? You Bellerophans just traded one tyrant for fifty thousand. You don't get to decide who you are. Others do that for you."

*Exec*

"His remains would be on trial for years after the initial execution."

That's such a hilariously dark line, Anaxares is a really fun POV character.

A part of me hopes that he survives this entire war against all odds, just because he's so certain of his demise. The Gods seem to like that kind of irony.

*Aotrs Commander*

Showmanship.

I respect the Tyrant. He's not as cool as Cat or Black, but frag damn if he doesn't have that wonderful, cheerful sense of style and presentation. Sure, he's argueably just as bad as Akua, in impracticality, but he has that special something she doesn't.

*burguulkodar*

Love the Tyrant. What is it with evil children that attracts me, I wonder? But he is bold, rebel and daring, and I like it. A lot.

*WealthyAardvark*

Typos:

but precious little was known about  
-> about it

ask one question if it  
-> of it

*Shaequil*

So for all intents and purpose Villains like Heiress and Kairos get a buff simple because they follow the traditional villain formula in that it's almost nonsensical in how they achieve results. Even if it doesn't make sense you do it because you're a villainous soul like Overlord? Matter of fact a lot of the Dread Emperors and Tyrants remind me of Overlord.

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## **Chapter 1: Right**

*"Do not make laws you do not intend to enforce. Allowing one law to be broken with impunity undermines them all."*

– Extract from the personal journals of Dread Emperor Terribilis II

Evening Bell had just rung and the room was now lit with candles.

Most of the Southpool eldersmen – the ones involved in my little visit, anyway – had extended invitations for me to stay in their own homes, but I had politely declined. Governess Ife would have those under watch, for the first time in years. After the



Conquest eldermen assemblies had been made toothless by the near-absolute powers granted to Imperial governors, an abrupt fall for men and women who had once been a power to rival the guilds and the nobility. Their newfound irrelevance had allowed them to survive the discreet purges that had gone through all cities under direct Praesi occupation, which the governors were only now learning had been a mistake. A mistake driven by culture, as it happened. There was no equivalent to eldermen in the Wasteland, where power inside the larger cities was always in the sole hands of the ruling High Lord. Black had apparently been of the opinion that time would smother the institution on its own without any need for blood: Callowans born without having ever known the assemblies would not be inclined to defer to them, particularly when their old powers were in the hands of others.

He'd only been half-right. In Laure – where the guilds and House Fairfax had always been much stronger – the assemblies were already dead and buried before I was born. In Southpool, though, it was a different story. The Counts of Southpool had long been weakened by their proximity to the seat of a beloved monarchy, and the city was not strong enough in trade for the guilds to have a major presence. Governess Ife, now on her third mandate ruling the city, had found the opposition to several of her toll stations and extraordinary taxes to be strong and exceedingly well-organized. There had been riots, and at first she'd backed down after manoeuvring so the manner of it would not make her lose face. Then she'd quietly begun eliminating the most respected of the eldermen, breaking the assembly's influence one corpse at a time. Like most forms of Callowan resistance after the Conquest, the enterprise had been doomed from the start. The eldermen of Southpool were now a pale shadow of what they'd once been, unable to mount any opposition worth the name.

But oh, they *wanted* to.

When I'd had Ratface contact them through intermediaries, they'd accepted my offer without even listening to all the terms. They were lucky I wasn't out to screw them, because it would have been child's play. I wasn't exactly a great admirer of eldermen assemblies – the way eldermen were appointed by the vote of other eldermen made them too much like a knock-off nobility for my tastes – but I needed a check on the authority of governors and they were my most palatable option. It was better than letting the guilds have the reins, anyway. Fairfax kings had spent centuries locking the guilds out of direct political power, and in my opinion they'd been right to. Whenever the guildmasters got a scrap of authority they immediately used it to forced every commerce they could under their thumb, which filled their coffers but also broke smaller traders. Harrion, the owner of the tavern I'd once worked at, had always held the guilds in disdain. He'd been one of the few people in Laure I'd actually liked, so I supposed his opinion might have coloured mine.

The tavern I was currently hiding out in reminded me of the Rat's Nest quite a bit, actually. The wooden walls were just as rickety, the floor creaked like a dying man and the smell of soured wine and vomit was so ingrained it would remain even if the place was put to the torch. I'd preferred dipping in the lake to using the only bathtub they had here, judging I'd come out of that adventure rust-tinged. I hadn't drawn attention in doing so: like in Laure, most everyone living by the lake used it to bathe. Without armour and with only a knife for weaponry, I'd been able to keep my presence quiet. Deoraithe, even half-bloods, were rare outside of Daoine but in this part of the city people knew better than to ask questions. The only reason I'd gotten a few looks was currently entering my room, closing the door behind him. Hakram had put on a cloak but there was no hiding his height or his fangs: Adjutant was the tallest orc I'd ever met, with only Juniper coming close.

"I have it," Hakram said, taking out a thick leather-bound book from under his cloak and dropping it on the table.

I put aside *The Death of the Age of Wonders*, the treatise I was now reading for the second time. Written by Dread Empress Malicia, I'd thought I could glimpse something of how her mind worked through her words. All I'd gotten, though, was that she was a firm believer in checks and balances when it came to the nations of Calernia. That a woman who'd claimed the Tower could believe foreign alliances should be determined by shared interests instead of alignment to Good and Evil was a fascinating departure from the norm, but it taught me little about Malicia as a woman. Dismissing the thought, I cast my eyes on the book Hakram had brought and flipped it open. Columns of numbers and words, scribbled so poorly even my own handwriting was legible in comparison.

"Won't that make for pleasant reading," I sighed.

"I already took a look, it's why I'm late," the orc said. "Here, let me."

He moved the pages with a carefulness that was almost comical, given the size and thickness of his fingers. About halfway through he ceased, and laid a finger on a particular number. Three thousand golden aurelii, spent on...

"Furniture repairs," I snorted. "Maybe she *does* have a sense of humour."

"I've found the carpenters that supposedly did the work," Hakram said. "Elderwoman Keyes knew them. I have sworn statements they did no such thing."

"And we have the ledger from the Guild of Assassins, accounting for the three thousand aurelii," I said quietly. "That should be enough."

Barely a fortnight after claiming my fiefdom in Marchford I'd tasked Ratface to get in touch with all the so-called Dark Guilds of Callow, the criminal mirror to the merchant organization. I really shouldn't have been surprised he was already on speaking terms with all the major ones. The Assassins had been reluctant at the idea of letting me claim a ledger, even if it was to be used against a Praesi. Black had tacitly sanctioned the existence of all the Dark Guilds after the Conquest, preferring limiting them to quotas rather than attempting an eradication that would drive them into the arms of heroes. The Assassins had quibbled until I'd offered them a calm reminder that Tribune Robber could be pulled from his current assignment at any time. The malevolent little shit was starting to have a reputation and I wasn't above using it for my purposes. Still had cost me a small fortune to buy the ledger off of them, which mattered a lot more now than it would have a year ago. Marchford was haemorrhaging coin with no solution in sight, but that was a problem I'd return to chewing on tomorrow. Tonight I had a governess to deal with.

"She didn't have time to cook the books?" I said. "Better than this, I mean."

"She let Heiress' people take care of the official ones," Hakram said, amused. "But she didn't trust Akua with her personal records."

Ah, Praesi backstabbing. The gift that kept on giving.

"You worked quickly," I praised.

He shrugged.

"I knew what we needed, I just had to **Find** it," he said.

I hummed. Adjutant's second aspect, one I still wasn't sure what to think about. There was no denying how useful it had turned out to be – Hakram now frequently stumbled onto exactly what we were looking for, as long as it was feasible for him to do so – but relying too much on aspects was a good way to earn a one-way trip to the graveyard. I'd encouraged him to use it sparingly, but the both of us were drowning in responsibilities these days: there was a reason he'd come into the aspect in the first place. I changed the subject to more current concerns.

"The Gallowborne are in the city?" I asked.

"As of an hour ago," Adjutant said. "They'll be noticed soon, if they haven't been already."

"I don't mind if word spreads," I grunted. "It'll discourage Ife's household troops from getting any ideas."

The eldersmen had assured me that the city guard would stay out of it, but Ife's own men were from the Wasteland. The governess was from a family sworn to the High Lords of Nok, with minor but very old holdings – held since since before the Miezens kind of old. That tended to breed unusually strong loyalties in Praesi.

"One last thing," Hakram said. "Heiress' envoys, they're led by an old friend of ours."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Can't be Hawulti, she hasn't set foot in Callow since our pleasant chat in Liesse," I said.

As the heiress to Nok, the Soninke would have been the natural choice for an envoy here.

"Fasili," the orc said. "Slow learner, that one."

The heir to Aksum. Apparently his aunt bluntly stating he was expendable in a scryed conversation with me had driven him even deeper into Heiress' camp. Unfortunate, that. Aksum sat on half a dozen emerald mines, the largest in Calernia, and it had grown rich off of them. Fucking Praesi, rolling in gold and gems when Marchford wasn't even breaking even.

"Let's gift him a reminder, then," I said. "Come along, Adjutant. Let's have a talk with Governess Ife."

—

The ranks of the Gallowborne had swelled in the six months that had passed since the end of the Liesse Rebellion. They were not a single company any longer: they numbered four hundred at the moment, the members still handpicked by the former Captain Farrier – now a full Tribune. Still, after a conversation with Juniper I'd forced his hand when it came to selection: there were Praesi now, if only a few, and orcs. Keeping anybody but my countrymen out of the ranks of my personal guard would have sent the wrong message, on that much I agreed with the Hellhound. About seven out of ten were still Callowan, though, and some of those recruits were fresh off the battlefields of the rebellion.

Not all of them had fought on the Empire's side.

The first time I'd gotten a report that a former member of the Countess Marchford's retinue had tried to enrol in the Fifteenth, I'd poured myself a stiff drink. My initial thought that this would be an isolated occurrence was quickly proven wrong, as hardened soldiers who'd been ready to run out the Empire not a

year ago kept on flocking to my banner. Juniper had been of the opinion that they should taken in and then dispersed across the legions that garrisoned Callow, never allowed to gather enough they would be an issue if they rebelled again. Aisha had been more nuanced, suggesting that folding some into the Gallowborne first as a sign of goodwill would gain me approval with the people of Marchford. It was Ratface who'd been the dissenting voice. *Take them all in*, he'd said. *Otherwise you've a city full of veterans with no one to fight for. Yet.* He'd been right. The others hadn't liked it but I'd put my foot down. The Fifteenth filled its rank to the brim before the first month had passed, which was when the first problem had come. We had our four thousand men and still recruits kept showing up.

Word had spread outside of Marchford, and the retinues of half the lords and ladies who'd fought in the rebellion had come to my city. I could not scry Black to ask him for advice, as he was in the Free Cities at the moment and scrying spells tended to break up over the mountains, but to all our surprise it was Nauk who found a solution. Or rather, failed to see where the problem was. *Why do we give a shit if we're over four thousand?* he'd said. *Our charter's incomplete.* Every legion, when founded, was granted a charter by the Empress – truthfully the Black Knight, but he did so in her name. It granted the soldiers right to pay, specified right of recruitment and formalized the right to be equipped by the Imperial forges at Foramen. It also specified the size of the legion. The Fifteenth though, unlike any other legion in living memory, had been raised as a half-legion of two thousand legionaries. That part of the charter had been left unspecified as a consequence, which Nauk took to mean there was no hard limit on our numbers.

A reminder that Black always, *always* played the long game.

The Fifteenth Legion now consisted of a little over six thousand men and was still growing. Juniper had hastily brought in recruits from Praes to balance the composition of the legion, but now over half was made up of Callowans. My general regularly made pointed comments about their conflicting loyalties, and she was right to. I'd realized too late that those men and women had not stopped fighting for their rebellion: they simply thought they'd joined the banner of a quieter, more successful one. In Praes, these days, I was seen as a symbol of the permanence of the Tower's rule over the former Kingdom. In Callow, though? *Countess*, they called me, but I knew that some of them really meant *Queen*. This was trouble, in the same sense that fire was warm or Heiress was a megalomaniac. Regardless, if there was currently an advantage to having recruits pouring in from all over Callow it was that some of my Gallowborne were familiar with Southpool. They knew their way around the palace.

"We'll have control of the grounds before you get to the hall," Tribune Farrier said quietly from my side.

The two of us were peering at the silhouette of the former residence of the Counts of Southpool. My personal guard has moved swiftly and professionally to secure the palace, after a relative of the eldermen had unlocked a servant entrance. The Gallowborne would be outnumbered, but it was unlikely it would actually come to a fight tonight. Their presence was largely meant as a deterrent for when desperation struck. *And even if it comes to that, they've fought harder things than men.* After Marchford and Liesse, there was precious little that would make the Gallowborne flinch.

"Try to avoid incidents," I said. "I'd like this to go as cleanly as possible."

Or I'd have to answer to the Ruling Council for the mess. While I did own a winning coalition of the votes there, I was not beyond questioning. Baroness Kendal – Anne, as she insisted I call her now – had not lost her principles with her surrender and Sister Abigail abhorred violence of any sort. The two Praesi members had been uncomfortable at the idea of what was going to unfold here tonight, though both were owned by High Lords opposed to the man who owned the governess. That had been enough to make it a unanimous vote, without the appearance of Malicia's representative. The Dread Empress had sent a messenger to cast her vote anyway, without saying how she'd known what the motion put to the council would be.

"My officers are steady," Tribune Farrier said calmly. "There'll be no fuckups, Countess."

"I've come to expect as much, John," I said, clapping his shoulder.

He blushed. He always did, when I called him by his given name. A part of me was still girlishly delighted I could have that effect on people.

"Forgive me," he said, "but I still believe you should take a full line."

"There's no one in that hall for me to be afraid of," I said amusedly. "A tenth is more than enough. Besides, Hakram will be there."

"With all due respect, ma'am," he said, "Lord Adjutant is a target too. It's been a month since they tried to knife him, we're overdue another attempt."

If you'd told me two years ago that assassination attempts on my closest friend in the world would become a somewhat tiresome

routine, I would have been fairly sceptical. And yet, here I was, wondering how far the next hired killer would make it before someone but a crossbow bolt in them. The last one hadn't even made it past Apprentice's wards before getting put down. Robber had managed to get a betting pool running without having been in Marchford for months, I assumed through the magical power of being a vicious little bastard. Hopefully the next one would make it past the second line of defence, I had twenty denarii riding on it.

"A tenth will be enough," I repeated dryly. "Hakram, how are we looking?"

A green cabinet with a cloak slapped on top it, also known as Adjutant, stirred in the distance.

"Like we could use a bath from a place where fish don't swim," he said.

"That's insubordination, it is," I complained.

"I'll get away with it," he shrugged. "My commanding officer's a soft touch."

"I'm surrounded by insolence, John," I solemnly told the tribune. "What did I ever do to deserve this?"

"I'm told you flipped off an angel," he replied frankly. "That'd probably do it."

"That's..." I started. "Well, kind of true I guess. Still."

I strode away, my escorting tenth falling behind me seamlessly as Hakram came to my side. The tall orc had put on his legionary armour before we set out, making the cloak even more useless a disguise than before. I'd not bothered with plate myself, keeping to a simple cloth tunic dyed in pale blue. The cloak, though, was the one I was becoming known for. The same one Black had given me years ago, now adorned with strips from the standards of the enemies I'd beaten. It swirled dramatically behind me as I kept a quick pace towards the banquet hall of old fortress of the counts of Southpool. I had a sword at my hip, now, as well as the knife I'd taken my first life with. Overconfidence had killed more powerful villains than me. The Gallowborne had cleared the corridors of everyone when they'd seized the palace, so we moved without contest. The hall I was looking for was easy enough to find, as it had once served as the room where audiences were held: it was dead at the centre of the structure. The doors to it were already open, though I whimsically wished they hadn't been. This reminded me of another night, in Laure, when I had been on the precipice of the changes that would lead me where I now stood. A lifetime ago, it felt like.

By the sound of it, the guests had yet to notice anything was going on. I made a note to compliment Tribune Farrier on the efficiency of his men. I strolled into the room casually, casting a steady look around. Twenty people in attendance, with Governess Ife at the head of the table. Servants stood to the side in silence, in the Praesi way. Most of the guests were Callowan, though I recognized Fasili as the governess' right side. A Taghreb sat by him, a young woman I did not know. Hard eyes and a scar on her face hinted at a retainer, and one not unfamiliar with violence. Three of the eldersmen I'd struck my deal with were in attendance, clustered near the end of the table. Like servants. They were the first to notice our presence, as Hakram pulled down the hood of his cloak and the Gallowborne fanned out behind me. For another few heartbeats the conversation continued, then awareness spread and the hall turned silent as a grave.

"Get out," I said. "Now."

When Black had stood in my place, he'd used his Name to spread fear in the crowd. I didn't bother, though I'd finally managed to learn the trick to it. The Callowans rose in barely-veiled panic, streaming by the blank-faced silhouetted of the Gallowborne as they fled. Fasili and his retainer only rose after he finished his cup of wine.

"Governess," the heir to Aksum said, slightly bowing his head. "Always a pleasure."

"The pleasure is all mine," Ife replied with a gracious smile. "Until next time, Lord Fasili."

The Soninke moved unhurriedly, pausing before me.

"Lady Squire," he said icily.

The Taghreb retainer cast a wary eye on me, hand falling to the sword at her hip.

"Fasili," I said. "Do be careful on the way back. I'm told Liesse has a banditry problem."

"A temporary state of affairs," he said.

"More than you know," I smiled pleasantly.

I turned back to the governess, eyeing her curiously. A middle-aged Soninke, her frame still hinting at the slenderness of her youth but now grown thicker. Her eyes were not quite golden but very close. A sign of old blood, Aisha had told me.

"Lady Squire," she greeted me. "You honour me with your presence."



"Governess Ife," I said, grabbing a seat and dragging it at the end of the table facing hers.

The sound of wood scraping on stone almost made her wince. I plopped myself down, then fished out the dragonbone pipe Masego had gifted me. Calmly, under her befuddled gaze, I stuffed it with wakeleaf from a small packet I got from a pocket sown into my cloak. I produced a pinewood match and struck it on the table, lighting the pipe. I inhaled a mouthful of grey smoke and spat it out, carelessly tossing the match into an abandoned cup of wine. There was a long moment of silence, broken only by Hakram failing to entirely smother a chuckle.

"Should I arrange for the servants to bring you a meal?" the Soninke finally said. "I have some of the finest cooks of the provinces in my employ."

I inhaled the smoke, then let out a stream of it. The wakeleaf had become a guilty pleasure of mine, in the last few months. Aisha usually sprinkled a handful of leaves in her tea, as they sharpened wit, but Apprentice had informed me they could be smoked as well. They were, unfortunately, quite expensive. Grown only in Ashur, having been brought from the other side of the Tyrian Sea when the Baalites first founded the cities that would become the Thalassocracy. I used them sparingly as a consequence.

"The night I first became the Squire," I said, "I stood in a hall much like this one."

There was another long silence.

"The story is well known, in some circles," she said, face without expression.

"Mazus wanted to be Chancellor," I mused. "Ambitious, though back then I did not understand exactly how ambitious he truly was. I do not think you suffer from the same flaw, Governess Ife."

"I do not understand your meaning, Lady Squire," she said, eyes wary.

"Greed, you see, I can tolerate," I said. "There's probably been rulers that didn't skim off the top, but I imagine they were in the minority. It's an old sin, that one. As long as it doesn't get out of hand, I can live with it."

"An enlightened attitude," the governess murmured. "If your visit is meant to be a... reminder of the virtues of moderation, your warning has been received."

Hakram calmly placed the ledger on the table, pushing aside a plate filled with pheasant. I would give this to Governess Ife, the fear only showed in her eyes – and even then, only for a

moment. I spewed out another mouthful of smoke, letting the haze wreath my face like a grey crown.

"A thousand aurelii a head," I said. "A point in your favour, that you bought Callowan instead of importing specialists from the Wasteland. Even if what you bought is murder."

"I've no idea what you are referring to, my lady," she said.

"We have the matching ledger from the Guild of Assassins," I replied.

Ife closed her eyes.

"My term is at an end, then," she said calmly. "I will be gone by the end of the fortnight. Will the replacement you have chosen require quarters before that?"

"So you *don't* have a mage in Laure," I said, cocking my head to the side. "Not one that can scry, anyway."

I inhaled from the pipe, letting the wakeleaf quicken my blood. I'd thought, that same night in Laure, that when the time came I would enjoy this. That it would feel like justice. *It feels like killing*, I thought as I blew the smoke. *And less cleanly than if I'd used a sword.*

"As of last night, the Ruling Council has determined that acts committed as an Imperial governor fall under the jurisdiction of Callowan authorities," I said.

She was a clever woman, the governess. She did not need for me to explain it any further.

"It would be a mercy," she said, "to allow me poison."

"It would be," I agreed quietly. "But this is Callow, Governess. We hang murderers here."

The Gallowborne moved forward.

"String her up," I ordered.

She did not struggle as my soldiers took her away. I closed my eyes and leaned back in the seat. Eventually my pipe ran out and I emptied the ashes on a cooling plate.

"It was necessary," Hakram said.

He was standing behind me, close enough to touch. He didn't though. He knew me better than that, had seen me in this kind of mood before.

"When's the last time we did the right thing, instead of the necessary one?" I asked tiredly.

"You think this wrong?" he said. "She commissioned murders, even if she did not wield the blade herself. By our laws, she has earned death."

"I don't think it was personal for her," I said, eyes drifting to the ceiling. "She was just consolidating power. Like I'm doing right now, Hakram. If she deserves to hang, don't I?"

"She was breaking the law," the orc gravelled. "You are enforcing it."

"The only reason I don't break laws anymore is because I *make* them, now," I scoffed.

Adjutant laughed softly.

"And that disturbs you?" he asked. "You have toiled to earn that prize since before we ever met."

"There's nothing right about this," I finally said. "I didn't win tonight because I'm better than her. I'm just more powerful. I have a bigger stick, so I decide how it goes."

"*Humans*," Hakram mocked gently. "You speak that as if it were a tragedy, instead of the first truth of Creation: the strong rule, the weak obey."

"I thought," I said quietly, "that we could be better than that."

"Justifications only matter to the just," he gravelled.

I half-smiled. My own words, thrown back at me. And yet...

"I burned men alive, at Three Hills," I said. "Hundreds of them."

"Your enemies," he said. "Soldiers."

I let out a long breath.

"I have done, Hakram, terrible things," I said. "Ugly things. I'll do more, before this is over. If it is ever over."

Once, when we'd talked under moonlight, the orc had compared trying to change the world to pushing a boulder up a mountain. And then watching it roll down the other slope. *It doesn't work that way, though*, I thought. *There is no summit to the mountain. You just keep pushing until your body gives, and you're the first thing the stone crushes on the way down.* If that was all it could be, though, if all you could ever do was buy some time...

"I made those decisions for a purpose," I said. "I did not cover this land with corpses just to change the flavour of tyranny that rules it. If I don't make it better now, when will I?"

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"We hang murderers, in Callow. Even the ones Black struck deals with."

I slid back the pipe into my cloak.

"Get a message to Ratface," I said. "He is to prepare for the dismantling of the Guild of Assassins."

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### [erraticerrata](#)

If any of you are interested in light novels and chinese web serial (which I'm guessing will be quite a few of you, given how often the Guide pops up in the redsits dedicated to both of those) I'm giving a shout-out to a site called volare novels, which translates quite a few of those.

(Link: <http://volarenovels.com>)

If you're looking for something in a similar vein to the Guide, though of course with the usual transmigration/reincarnation shenanigans so common in the genre, then Poison Genius Consort (<http://volarenovels.com/poison-genius-consort/>) or Great Demon King (<http://volarenovels.com/great-demon-king/>) are some you might find interesting.

*George*

Thanks for the recs, and for another amazing chapter!

*Alegio*

Thanks, i have Belén looking for something good to tras 😊

*Alegio*

Good to read\* freaking autocorrect :v

*Vortex*

I love novel translations from Asia and I have actually plugged your web serial a few times on the subreddit that handles them: /r/noveltranslations.

If you enjoyed poison genius consort, take a look at lightning empress maid. It's something I found recently, and enjoyed

greatly. There is a lot of stuff that is pretty similar to poison genius consort on there too (descent of the Phoenix, genius doctor: black belly miss, and a few others) but I thought lightning empress maid was fun, light, and original.  
<http://www.novelupdates.com/series/lightning-empress-maid/>

*linnilalartyr*

I super like Poison Genius Consort. It's pretty good.

*Gunslinger*

Epic stuff. I love how well Catherine has come into her role. Also what name will Robber come into? He can't be an assassin cause of The Assassin. Maybe a new Role that's a claimant role to Assassin

*PingleBerry*

Thats what he wants you to think

[Jon Babineau](#)

That Fucking Crazy Goblin.

It doesn't roll off the tongue as easy as Squire, but he's happy enough with it.

*Hakurei06*

He may be the first in Creation to turn Little Shit into a Name. Hmm, I'm not sure if there's a precedent for a three word name, so I'll leave it at that.

*RoflCat*

@Hakurei: He's 'Robber', as Hakua mentioned it's a thief name.

Thief -> Assassin

And given that 'story' can be made into a Name (as Akua seems to be doing), Robber might as well become Eyehunter (instead of headhunter)

Wouldn't that be something?

Warlock (Masego)  
Assassin (Robber)  
Captain (Hakram)  
Scribe (Rat Face)

A part of me think Ranger might finds Catherine intriguing if she ever meets with Captain and hear of that "she's like Black and Hye's child" comment.

Under the Dread QUEEN of Callow.

[Euodiachloris](#)

I think just Crazy Bastard will work... xD

*George*

Ah cmon, it's gotta be Robber. The question is if, once we are certain by some means that he's claimed that Name, we ever find out just \*when\* he claimed it!

*Dragrath*

That requires him to not have a name already remember the words of Black.

"I suspect they do have names" The goblins are secretive very so if they had a name they would likely never use it unless they had to and in that case no witnesses...

*Mike E.*

We've been told by the author that the person holding the Name Assassin has been seen on screen. They just weren't identified as such...

*darkening*

Assassin being robber would require a rather high level of mobility as assassin was at the gathered rebel army to kill off the rebel's crown claimant shortly before the battle of liesse. Teleportation has been stated to be impractical, and while name shenanigans are possible, as black said about the Bard, powerful abilities like being able to show up wherever you were needed to assassinate someone would have an unpleasant price.

[mgmtheo](#)

So very very happy to be back with Catherine again. Robber also continues to be one of my favourite characters.

[Emposter](#)

"I part of me was still girlishly "  
Only error I saw on my quick read through. Either "I was still girlishly" or "Part of me was still girlishly". I suspect it started as one, then you deleted it and wrote what's currently there.

*Shequi*

Another: "before someone but a crossbow bolt" should be "put" of course.

*WealthyAardvark*

Typo:

loyalties, and  
Missing space

*Lamora*

That's because Robber was Assassin the ENTIRE TIME, BABY.

*Soronel Haetir*

Given Assassin's duties I would think Robber's position with Cat would be awfully limiting. Assassin needs to be able to move around without comment. And that means not holding positions where those around them in a military chain of command would note an absence. Robber might not be right with Cat this moment but he's been tasked with a job by Cat.

For example, at the end of the last book we know Robber was supposed to be somewhere around Liesse but we were also told that Assassin would take care of the former Baroness Dormer if she refused the appointment.

I tend to think Assassin is Lieutenant Abase (the Blackguard officer we've seen a couple times), though that to is a limiting position in terms of freedom to move around. But at least being in a personal guard rather than the Legions proper would likely mean there is a somewhat looser chain of command, or he simply reports that he has been detached by Black for some task.

*Soronel Haetir*

Another factor that I believe cuts against Robber actually being Assassin is the way Cat met Robber at the War College. That seems like a posting that would tie a person to one place far too much. Robber had been there for weeks or months at least (probably more as he did graduate). A student at the college isn't likely to be able to ditch classes to go off on other business.

And while a Name can keep someone looking young there are still signs of age. I seem to recall a statement at some point that Robber looked young even for a goblin out in the world.

*danh3107*

It only gets harder as you climb the tower Catherine, it only gets harder.

*Hakurei06*

Nah, the first step is the hardest, they say. This is just rest... drudgework.

*Hakurei06*

Blegh... that was terrible.  
\*\*The rest is just... dudgework.

*kgyl21*

"before someone but a crossbow bolt in them"  
^put^

*Letouriste*

Interesting chapter:)  
Guys, forget about robber awakening a name, he is badass enough like that, he don't need that... apart maybe at the end of the novel, like nauk maybe;)

*nipi*

Hell probably "bump" into someone in a dark alley, stab them and take their name. Which so happened to be Robber.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

An error that no one else bothers to point out that drives me fucking mad:

[Blockquote]"I made those decisions for a purpose," I said. "I did not cover this land with corpses just to change the flavour of tyranny that rules it. If I don't make it better now, when will I?"

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"We hang murderers, in Callow. Even the ones Black struck deals with."[/blockquote]

WHO SPOKE THE SECOND LINE?????

The context suggests Catherine, but the formatting says concretely, without any doubt that it was Hakram. I do not think the author means for Hakram to say that line. This story is chock full of this error and it stops me in my tracks every single time, because I need to THINK about it, figure out who was actually speaking, then go back and reread to get into the flow again. It's a really simple thing to get right, and it would go a long way toward making this story look professional.

Here's one possible correct way to write it (out of many possibilities). This changes the original text the least, though there might be other ways to get closer to the author's original intent:



[Blockquote]"I made those decisions for a purpose," I said. "I did not cover this land with corpses just to change the flavour of tyranny that rules it. If I don't make it better now, when will I?"

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them. "We hang murderers, in Callow. Even the ones Black struck deals with."[/blockquote]

Making it all one big paragraph is another possibility. Re-formatting completely creates dozens more.

*George*

Personally I think it's clear and that the story is a lot cleaner and smoother to read without tags on every single piece of dialogue.

*KageLupus*

Actually, if you look at the rest of that scene I am pretty sure that there is an indicator every time the speaker switches. There is also an indicator that Catherine is still speaking after a longer thought, on the order of a full paragraph. Cat says something, has an extended thought, and then says something else with an "I said" thrown in to keep the flow going.

But right at the end there she says a line, makes a gesture (that only takes a single sentence) and then continues her statement. It read as pretty obvious to me that Cat was speaking the whole time at the end there, and breaking it up into several short statements like that gives it more of a punch.

*Alexander LeakingPen Hollins*

no, action paragraph followed by new dialogue is ALWAYS supposed to be a new paragraph. We haven't been given any indication in text or dialogue that there is a new speaker, we assume it's still Cat. The formatting does NOT say otherwise. Not sure where you learned this "rule" but it's incorrect.

*Julie Boraks*

Thx

Sent from my iPhone

>

*Soronel Haetir*

"Find" sounds an awful lot like "Seek". Actually Find might be even better, Seek doesn't imply anything about coming up with an answer.

*nipi*

Find also happens to suggest that it should be out of the nameds control. You can actively Seek something but you cant actively Find something, it just happens if and when it does. Its a "passive skill".

*maresther23*

This is going to explode hilariously in Squire's face. She really is being brutal in her ruling, I wonder if so much blood is necessary for consolidating her power.

*Morgenstern*

So right now Malicia was right in her judgement of the first (few) year(s) of Cat... which should make her plans for Cat work, if not for (seemingly at least) the horrible mistake of underestimating Heiress, thinking that only Tasia is a real problem or that Heiress is probably even just a minion of Tasia. But hey, Black is making a leap of faith in Cat's favor, saying she learns best at/in/from(??) "the deep end", he made the decision to go away after all, thinking all while be fine anyway [just push Cat into the cold water, without even teaching her how to swim – she'll come out of it eventually, even if that means walking on the ground of said water until she finally gets out again at the shore, instead of via floating on top by swimming...], so that would seem to fit together again, click-clack, perfect fit, showing what Black was thinking about with that 'perfect team, being complements for each other' thought about how he makes the leaps of faith and Malicia sees things he doesn't, filling the hole in the plan that the other leaves (if they do).

Or maybe Malicia has started to see more in Cat, too, trusting Black's judgement and thus feels fine in using her to solve the Problem Named Heiress, to solve the other problems that need solving, who knows...

*Alexander LeakingPen Hollins*

EE, I know you're active over at TWF now and again, but in case you missed it, we're doing the april fools swap again. <http://forums.webfictionguide.com/topic/april-fools-swap-2017>

Wink wink, nudge nudge. Pretty please!?

[Urthor1996](#)

Ah the moment the story reminds you, that an angel won't let beeing mugg- er forced into giving out the rightful price on terms not dictated by himself, is nothing they seem to like...

"... even those Black struck deals with..." huh this one is very interesting to...

This story just doesn't really get worse, as most others do.... looks like this will be going for a while longer~

*cdos93*

Careful Cat, this move sounds suspiciously like throwing rocks at a hornet's nest

[Euodiachloris](#)

Nah. Assassins are worse than hornets. <\_<

*Morgenstern*

Yeah, well, Black seemed to be absolutely fine with her "kicking the hornet's nest", \*knowing\* what she does, so... 😊

*stevenneiman*

"Whenever the guildmasters got a scrap of authority they immediately used it to [forced->force] every {bit of?} commerce they could under their thumb"

"All I'd gotten, though, was that she was a firm [believe->believer] in checks and balances"

"the blank-faced [silhouetted->silhouettes] of the Gallowborne"

"I have done, Hakram, terrible things" I don't actually know if this is grammatically correct, but I think it would read much better if "Hakram" was at the end of the sentence.

Well, this is going to be a mess. It's one thing to bully the nobles with Black's support, and quite another to try and defeat a group specifically trained to kill and avoid detection acting against his wishes. I understand her reasoning, but this is going to be messy, painful, and dangerous. I wouldn't be surprised if at least one of her close friends gets killed doing this.

*Morgenstern*

One awful mistake I see in her is STILL not seeming to think the long route out, not even close.. and not being innovative at all. She's still scraping by via making do with what is there and using the old stuff, trying out the mantle, but not making it hers. Exactly why I keep repeating that she is not ready. Just mimicking the few scenes she knows from Black's past is not enough. Just taking pieces here and there from societies that have come before, when she finds they are yet the best ones she saw, even if they are not fully to her liking, is just

wrong, too. Why not make NEW assemblies, but take the old ones that she already SEES are not quite “the right thing”? She’s not there yet. The vision is still lacking. And it’s starting to tell, imho and will do so very quickly. Countess/Queen versus her actual position is going to be a pain in the ass. Just harassing Akua, but not doing more, too. Etc. etc.

But hey, of course – it’s necessary we go down the drain and/or rabbit hole again, this is only the start of a new plot arc, after all and Cat is supposed to develop, all fine.

[ I just refuse to follow all the hints of her replacing Black immediately, pointing out how she has still (a long) WAY to go



the foreshadowing would end in to up the ante for her. There are so many, many NEW and much nicer angling points that have already cropped up by now, how shit could hit the fan in new fun ways. Much more interesting than just killing off Black/Malicia and let her deal with that, jumping over godsknow how many steps leading to an actually FITTING moment in time where that might happen. If one needs it at all... I can’t stop thinking of how the position of “knight” is something that you \*usually\* rather end up in by being \*appointed\* to it, either by the knight who trained you (on-the-field-appointment) or some much higher authority figure, like kings and empresses... for deeds done; and not by your trainer/mentor dying, which is normally the rarest case scenario when it comes to knights... One way or another – she’s not there yet. She’s gone over to not just learning, but now trying to mimick – but the true step would be finally finding her own way, coming into her OWN, as the saying goes. Not just following in someone else’s steps and mimicking them. Also, if the Girl Climbing the Tower should not just be a song for Malicia, but actually more (and not just a wrong interpretation).... Knight is not necessarily what Cat should become at all, even though she starts out as Squire. Transcending would seem to be a good idea for her, what with her breaking the rules etc. etc. ... 😊 (In general, I mean, no matter if Black dies along the way or not, even though I would feel it highly inappropriate and thus disappointing if she should do so \*already\* instead of just being out of the way for a bit, so she can develop some on her own.) ]

## *Ninja*

This strikes me as a mistake. Going after a shadowy group of masterful killers when their hold on power is not yet secure strikes me as very unwise.

## *Soronel Haetir*

Maybe if the guild of assassins were competent, but I have the idea that they are just as wrecked as everything else Callowan. After all they have been limited to soft targets for the last

20 years (if they had gone after ruling Praesi Black's forbearance would have disappeared).

*nerfworld*

Well at least she got more men, cause squire will need them to drag heiress out of Liesse when she makes her move

But killing that guild will be a bad idea since they may agree to join heiress and that one already has enough black op teams running about causing havoc

Think thief still around stealing things in matchford?

*Morgenstern*

There are other ways to disassemble that guild than just kill them off one by one, though... although this chapter so far does not quite give the impression that they are thinking of much else. Still...

*Kylen*

This was a great chapter. I love it when the Crew is being playfully insubordinate with Cat, because it shows they care, at least a bit. I'm not sure why they are going after the Guild, but I'm sure she has a longer ranged plan. Can't wait for next week's chapter.

*Morgenstern*

Has she?

I dunno, maybe the author WILL pull another stunt of things-happening-behind-the-screens-only again... He did do it once already what with Cat's "I'm the Queen (if just for a second), haHA"-triumph, where we never got shown much of her thinking about why Heiress is targeting Liesse exactly and combining it with the mention of something to [bind names..?] there plus the ritual Will was attempting, barring that one sentence of her thinking about the mention of sth. like that being in Liesse and then her following towards Will's summoning place that seems to be the target of Heiress, too (which might have happened without all the other implications coming together, as it was presented, we never got the full bunch to surprise US instead of just the enemy)..

...but... it feels a bit shallow to pull that trick twice \*in a row (of all things)\*.

Would be nicer to be able to piece the hints together beforehand this time, including necessarily a few more hint drops of her ACTUALLY planning something and the direction of it (instead of pulling planning-happend-behind-the-scenes out

of the hat only in the very end), for a change – diversity is ‘the salt in the soup’ for ongoing readability, after all. 😊

### *Morgenstern*

And so far, she does not \*give off the impression\* (to the READER (at least not to me)) that she has thought that far ahead and actually knows what she is doing there already. The impression this chapter gives off is one of general scrambling and scrabbling to find purchase, find a way, and not drown in the cold water she was dumped in (of her own volition, but still... she IS inexperienced in ruling – and (I’d say) it SHOWS).

Like she is not sure herself right now, what she even WANTS to do with all the new power she’s got (anymore, if she ever had... as I said before, she didn’t seem to have much of a plan what exactly to do after her subversion succeeds and she DOES get in a position of power beyond a muddy “i wanna give Callowans some more influence over their own lives back and make life better in general”, no big idea HOW to do that) – and right now she seems/feels even unsure what the “right thing” would even BE... much less how to achieve it.

[ Which would rather fit expectations... she’s still in training, after all, further along than the two year span would normally suggest, but still... she’s SO not finished there – and we need a new heap of problems for the new arc, after all, and further development options 😊

If there should actually be once more more of behind-the-screen-not-visible-to-reader-stuff going on again in HER circle, not just the Calamities’ ranks.. Well, it would seem a bit.. hm... not quite so believable as other things and even less satisfactory if she makes it in the end, seeing how Cat has been presented as this ‘massive underdog scrambling along without plan, acting on events, not planning them, for the most part’ and not as the ‘big thinker’ (yet), only as someone STARTING to think, what with the example of Black (and Co.) presented to her and nudging her along.

Expectations MATTER. Of course there are ways surprises are nice, too, but – as I said. The whole it-was-all-behind-the-screens-approach does not really come off all that well, at least not easily, and not twice in a row. Readers generally don’t seem to like being played for stupid very much and “only-behind-the-screens” instead of pulling of hint-dropping and STILL leading us in a wrong direction and surprising us with the big reveal rather DOES play us for stupid, because it only succeeds by withholding stuff, not giving us insight, cutting out natural POV-scenes, seeing how we’re mostly following the protagonist, DO (seem to) get quite a lot of her thoughts – not giving us the important ones, not even in decisive, but ambiguous hints, seems rather assholery... Most

of us seem to like at least having a decent CHANCE to figure things out. ]

*Morgenstern*

To sum up: It's a thin line to tread.

If Cat DOES already have a bigger plan and better grips on the situation/future implications – she should at least be HINTED AT to have it. The “I will do a lot more bad stuff before the end” goes in that direction, but all the rest of all this “necessary vs. right thing” and blahblah “should it not apply to me/us too” blahblah “laws must be followed, but i never did it” blahblah... “don't like the elder assemblies, but they're my best shot (i cannot think of anything else, least of all new things to bring up on my own)” blah blah ... it's so very muddled, it very much gives of the impression she does NOT have a real plan, but it's more or less just grabbing around in the dark and toying with a multitude of ideas, but not real PLAN, not even in simple but coherent outlines beyond the way too general “make life better for Callowans” / “rule of Callowans”. The How is missing too much / presented as being way too muddled and her being unsure about it instead of “haHA, i have a plan, but i won't reveal it that easily, try to find it in my tiny remarks here and there”.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

I don't believe dismantling the Guild of Assassins will blow up in Catherine's face because of one statement on her part. “If I don't start making things better now, when will I?” This fits Catherine's “story” \*perfectly\*...as such it strengthens her Name/ Role, and the meta power behind the Names themselves. We've already seen a hard example of Story trumping Names. Catherine's “Enemy, Sword in the Stone, Claim” Story squashed both the Lone Swordsmen and Heiress, THEN went on to power her through Mugging the Choir of Contrition.

So long as Catherine is acting in accordance with her overarching Story (Referred to as Working Within/Gaming the Dread Empire to Reform Callow) Catherine won't come to grief by the hand of Fate. In fact, had she FAILED to move against the Assassins because Black made a deal with them, Catherine would've been weakening her story by allowing an element of the post-Conquest Praesi status quo to remain intact. Then Creation might well have bitten her, predictably via the Assassins still being around.

There isn't one example in the Guide of a Named taking definitive action that supports their Story Narrative of that Named coming to grief by it, without “Half the world being set against them.”

Look at the fall of all the major/competent Dread Emperors that have been mentioned. Massive force is all that brought each down. Catherine isn't immune to that level of force, but failing that, so long as she holds tight to her Story, she's bulletproof. No single Hero, no single Villain will ever pull her down.

Unless it's the Bard...but it won't be by direct action in that case. It would be the Bard being clever enough in a meta sense to arrange for the massive force required to topple a Name in the full cry and glory of their power.

Look at what the Tyrant just pulled. Simple declarative belief, backed by ironclad action that proves his "faith" in his Story was all it took to turn the SKY into a weapon of mass destruction.

The same has gone for Catherine numerous times. By military strength alone, Marchford should've been the end of the Fifteenth. Instead Marchford became a pretty strip of cloth on her cloak and a step built for her to climb the Tower.

*Shequi*

I'm willing to bet that Ratface will salvage some parts of the assassin's guild for his own use.

*Morgenstern*

It would seem rather likely that some of her circle have a better idea of "dismantling" the guild than just killing all its members off... 😊 Catherine has, so far, not been the "biggest planner there is", that's more of a job for others, at least in helping her along to find out what is going on and then formulate a plan for it. The Big Reveal in the last book (sword in stone story) seems to have come off by a combination of asking Masego behind the screens and Black pumping her with stories to lead her along to understanding of how stories work – and thus how they might get used and/or influenced or even transcended. I don't see her actually having done that on her own or doing it on her own in the future, as of yet. Way to go, Cat – but ... way to go. And a good thing that is. Progression should take time. Character development should not simply come along in fits and starts and via deus ex machina, tadaa, she suddenly can... a bit of that strewn in here and there is fine, but stories live on coherence and believability, after all. Too much of it and there goes your belief, replaced by stopping out-of-story and "what!?" and "OP" comments. 😊

*Morgenstern*

So far, Cat has been presented more as "thriving on chaos" and only LEARNING to actually plan (much more so: longterm),



besides her one or two great ideas, which ... well.. remain(ed) in cocoon stage so far. Her ideas should unfold into plans and the giant awful badass “butterfly” with her, imho. Big term plans are still in the hands of other characters and/or well they SHOULD be.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

I forgot:

Magic stones in the bellies of Bellephronese diplomats, activated by mental command...done via simple mages and not Named? I think the way the spell works is they get the diplomats to swallow a stone, the Diplomat BELIEVES they know what the stone does because they've witnessed it splatter so many other Diplomats, or heard of it splattering them.

The spell uses the belief of the Diplomats in the ability of the kaenanas to cause their death to actually cause their death. If the Diplomat stopped believing the stone could kill them, the magic isn't there to actually kill them.

Erratic, care to comment?

*Morgenstern*

Instant side thought: If all murderers get hanged in Callow... what about her own? Thinking of Robber and his crew murdering travellers on their way to Akua, anyone? 😊

[Karan Harsh Wardhan](#)

man what an info dump, not sure i can keep reading. my eyes glaze over at all these new names

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## Chapter 2: Might

*“We make the shepherds kings at the end of our stories because they already know how to lead recalcitrant, bleating creatures of limited intellect.”*

– Prokopia Lekapene, first and only Hierarch of the Free Cities

Laure had not had an Imperial governor since the unlamented death of Mazus.

The former capital of the Kingdom had been put under martial law while the bastard was still swinging from a noose in the market place, but no replacement had been appointed afterwards – the

Empress, as I understood it, had used the possibility of the appointment to effect a little spring cleaning at court. The final body count had been comparable to that of a small battle, with even the Truebloods discreetly clawing at each other through intermediaries as everyone tried to place a relative or dependent at the head of the richest city in Callow. It had come to nothing when the Liesse Rebellion had begun, as there had been no question of ending martial law in Laure while the south was in revolt. The issue of what to do with the city had ultimately become the subject of the very first meeting of the Ruling Council, and it had revealed how the lines would be drawn between its members.

There were, theoretically, seven members. Black was one, the designated head of the council and the only member with the right of veto – which he had given to me along with his vote. Baroness Anne Kendal was another, the first appointment I'd made. Sister Abigail of the House of Light was the third, a septuagenarian who'd served as a travelling sister for thirty years before settling in an abbey near Ankou in her middle age. She'd been one of the most vocal members of the House to advocate against armed rebellion after the Conquest. She still had, Black had informed me, been put under surveillance by both he and Malicia by sheer virtue of having so many connections across Callow. The House of Light did not have a true hierarchy but some of its members were more influential than others, and Sister Abigail was in the highest tier even among those.

Hakram had also choked the life out of her great-nephew at Three Hills. He'd been the priest who'd prevented us from scrying the Silver Spears, having volunteered to serve with the mercenaries as a liaison for my predecessor in ruling Marchford. The way she seemed to genuinely hold no grudge over the events unsettled me, I had to admit. Priests who'd been under the vows for long enough were always... unearthly but Sister Abigail was in a league of her own. I'd never seen her be anything but the picture of health and Ratface had told me she'd healed a bleeding gut wound in the cathedral without breaking a sweat. There was power behind the doting grandmotherly smile.

The two Praesi with seats were like night and day. Murad Kalbid was sworn to the High Lady of Kahtan, a distant cousin who'd married into a lesser family, and was exactly what Callowans picture when they thought of the Taghreb. Desert-lean and with tanned skin like leather, the middle-aged man had a closely-cropped beard and moustache that made his dark eyes stand out. I'd never seen him without a sword at his hip and he could light candles with nothing but a word. Satang Motherless, as the Soninke was apparently named, was the survivor of a succession dispute in Aksum who'd come into the service of the High Lord of Okoro. She seemed to me a lesser take on Heiress, when it came to appearance, with cheekbones not quite as high and curves not

quite as full. Her hair she kept in a series of braid the way Apprentice did, though without the magical trinkets. There was a red mark on her cheek that looked like three lines, and I couldn't tell if it was a tattoo or some particularly vivid birthmark. Whatever it was there was sorcery in it.

The two foreigners had wasted no time in striking an informal alliance, working together to nudge the Council in directions their patrons would approve of. Early on they'd tried to suggest that properties seized from the nobles who'd fought in the rebellion should be put to auction under Murad's supervision, supposedly to raise funds for the reconstruction, but I'd stamped the notion down hard with Sister Abigail's support. Half the treasures would be gone before the first sell was ever made, packed in carts headed for the Wasteland. Aisha was convinced Satang was in communication with Heiress, but I was not so sure. Nothing concrete had been dug up by my people, though admittedly what passed for my spy network was barely out of the cradle. I'd still have to act as if she was, just in case. I knew for a fact Akua kept close eye on the proceedings here in Laure, to prepare for the blows before I could land them on her. So far I'd only tightened the screws by stripping the Liesse governorship of lands and by passing a decree that banned any Callowan official from summoning or dealing with devils, but I wasn't done. Not until she crawled back to the Wasteland, or preferably straight into the Underworld.

The last and seventh seat was for Malicia's personal representative, and had gone unfilled. The Empress had sent messengers to cast her vote on occasion, so far only for issues that related to the scope of the Ruling Council's authority over Callow.

Tonight's session would be light, in theory, with only my own accounting of the events in Southpool being a topic after we received the monthly report from the magistrates that now ruled Laure. Baroness Kendal had been tasked with overseeing them personally after the appointments were made, but the two Praesi had insisted on a regular report to the council. They weren't entirely wrong. I doubted a woman like Anne Kendal would try to fill her pockets with bribes but General Orim still garrisoned the city and he'd been openly sceptical about a former rebel being given power over his legionaries. Being able to say there would be oversight by Wastelanders and myself had gone a long way in soothing those ruffled feathers. *Compromises*, I grimaced. I'd had to make quite a few of those lately, and I didn't like it. I missed Black, to my dismay, and more than the man I missed his advice.

The room the Ruling Council used for its sessions had once been the private meeting room of the sovereigns of Callow. The Queen of Blades once sat in that same seat I called my own and so had

Jehan the Wise. So had the likes of Mazus, later on, but that era was over now. It was tastefully decorated – marble floors with hexagonal tiles and old wood panelling under a beautifully painted ceiling – but I wasted no time on the sights before heading for my seat at the head of the table: the other members were already there. All six of them. *So the Empress finally sent her representative*, I thought, studying the woman in question. Soninke, dark eyes betraying a common birth and no callouses on her palms. Not a fighter then. Probably a court appointee. Neither of the other Praesi in the room seemed to know her and that clearly made them uncomfortable. As it should. Wastelanders were afraid of Black in the dark of night, I'd found, but they were *always* afraid of the Empress. She'd given them reason to.

"We've a newcomer, I see," I said, taking off my riding gloves and setting them on the table.

The representative rose from her seat and gracefully bowed.

"An honour to make your acquaintance, Lady Squire," she said. "I am Lady Naibu, representative for her Most Dreadful Majesty on the council."

*Lady Deputy*, in Mtethwa. Ime's sense of humour still made me wince from across an entire empire. I really shouldn't have expected any better of a woman who thought calling herself *patience* would lend her mystique.

"We're pleased to have you with us," I half-lied.

Not that convincingly, if the way Sister Abigail discreetly coughed into her sleeve was any indication. Baroness Kendal smiled pleasantly, murmuring courtesies at the newcomer from her neighbouring chair as Naibu sat and I settled into my own seat.

"I didn't see the magistrates waiting outside when coming in," I said. "Was their report already given?"

"It was delayed until tomorrow, Lady Squire," Setang said. "There's been news of greater import from Dormer."

I raised an eyebrow. Anne Kendal's former barony had been one of the first governorships to be filled after the rebellion – she'd suggested one of the town's eldersmen for the first mandate, to smooth the transition when a more long-term appointee was found, and after having him looked into I'd seen no reason to refuse.

"There's been a Fae incursion," Sister Abigail said. "A handful of Summer court fairies snuck into the town after finagling an invitation, then forced the people to dance until a priest drove them off."

I blinked slowly. The *Fae*? They never left the Waning Woods. Dormer was one of the Callowan holdings closest to the woods, certainly, but it was still a few days of riding away. The only known gate into Arcadia was near Refuge, and- I stopped cold. That was no longer true, was it? Masego had speculated as much months ago and he'd confirmed it since: when the demon of Corruption had lingered in Marchford, it had weakened the borders between Arcadia and Creation. Nothing had come through, so far, but... *Shit*. I need to talk with Apprentice.

"There were no dead, as I understand it," Murad said, facing the sister.

"A handful of sprained limbs was the worst of it," Baroness Kendal replied, drawing his attention.

"Then there should be no need to lower the taxes due," Setang smiled.

The segue was too smooth for the two of them not to have planned it.

"The priority at the moment should be making sure the Fae don't come back," I said sharply. "There's no legion garrisoning the region, if some of the fairies into the rougher stuff come knocking they'll be vulnerable."

"I am told the Fifteenth regularly holds field exercises," Naibu spoke up, the first time since the conversation had begun. "Perhaps one might be arranged close to the town."

I eyed her cautiously. I'd been thinking of saying as much, but hearing the words coming from an unknown had me rethinking it. My men would be close to Heiress' wheelhouse, if they went there, and if she hadn't cooked up some nasty tricks since we last met I'd eat my godsdamned gloves.

"I'll speak with General Juniper," I finally grunted. "It's placeholder solution, regardless. The Fifteenth is based in Marchford so if this become an unstable border there'll be a need for a more permanent presence."

"Reaching out to the Lady of the Lake might yield answers as to why it happened," Sister Abigail suggested. "She's said to know Arcadia better than anyone alive."

I knew the Empire was in diplomatic contact with Refuge, but I honestly had no idea *how* that contact was maintained. Scrying that close to a gate into Arcadia would basically be sending a written invitation to the Wild Hunt but surely they couldn't be sending messengers on foot every time? Less than half of them would actually make it to Refuge: those entire woods were even more of a death trap than the Wasteland. I didn't want to admit

to ignorance in front of those people so I smiled knowingly instead, meeting Setang's eyes until she looked away. *When in doubt, pretend it was always part of the plan.*

"Measures will be taken," I said vaguely.

That should keep them guessing. No one else seemed to have anything else to add, so Baroness Kendal suggested we adjourn for the night – my own report on Southpool could wait until tomorrow, when we saw the magistrates. It was a little abrupt considering how little we'd talked but they'd grown to know a little of me in the last six months: whenever proceedings got too tedious or I had other business I tended to end the sessions early. Council members rose one after another, bowing before asking my leave. I gave it absent-mindedly, eyes on Naibu – who was still seated. Well now. That promised to be interesting. Sister Abigail was the last to leave and she closed the door behind her, leaving only silence. I was about to speak up when Malicia's envoy suddenly twitched. Not just a little, too: her entire body convulsed before stilling suddenly. A heartbeat hadn't even passed before I was on my feet, sword in hand.

"That won't be necessary, Catherine," she said, voice eerily calm.

The Soninke held herself differently now. Straighter in her seat, hands folded primly into her lap. There was command in her bearing.

"Your Most Dreadful Majesty," I said.

The meat-puppet smiled approvingly.

"Deputy, is it?" I muttered. "Someone had fun with that."

"This is a flesh simulacrum with a semblance of personality inserted," Malicia shrugged gracefully. "One of Nefarious' rare slivers of brilliance. It serves my purposes better than coming to Callow in person."

I sheathed the sword slowly.

"Are you always in there, or..."

I gestured vaguely.

"Do not ask that question if you want to sleep well tonight," the Empress smiled. "Suffice it to say, anything my deputy hears will eventually come to my ears. You may consider her opinions to be mine for all practical purposes."

One of those days, I was going to come across something from the Tower that wasn't the stuff of nightmares. But not today, evidently.

"I take it there's things going on I don't know about," I said.

There was a safe bet if I'd ever made one.

"You are not incorrect. First, however, I bring news from the south," Malicia said.

I perked up at that. Black had been in the Free Cities for a few months but word trickled up to Callow slowly. Whatever I heard was always late enough to be largely irrelevant.

"Last I heard he was in Penthes," I said.

"There are currently twelve claimants to the title of Exarch in the city," the Empress informed me amusedly. "A little excessive even for him, but they are effectively out of the war until the matter is resolved. At last contact he was headed for Nicae, but with the latest developments I believe he'll turn to Delos."

I raised an eyebrow.

"It hasn't fallen?" I said. "I thought the Tyrant was marching on it."

It had drawn quite a bit of attention when an unheard-of villain had come out of nowhere and grilled the third of an army on his way to Atalante. Said city-state had been sacked and conquered a few weeks afterwards, its armies dispersed in the field. Apparently half the mercenaries Atalante had bought turned to banditry after the defeat and had then been press-ganged into the Tyrant's army one band at a time. The Named and his army had moved towards Delos afterwards, which was the last I'd heard.

"The initial assault was repulsed," Malicia informed me. "The Tyrant is sieging the city with his... usual flair."

The last part was spoken with distaste.

"The man basically tore through an army on his own," I said slowly. "And he was slapped down by a place known for its *scribes*?"

"There are heroes in the city," the Empress said.

Well, shit. That explained why Black was headed there, too.

"I don't suppose we know the Names?" I asked.

"The White Knight is one," she replied. "And a woman I believe you know, though she goes by a different name now: the Wandering Bard."

I cursed. White Knight sounded ominous like all Hells, but the Bard was a pest I was more familiar with.

"Well, she was bound to turn up eventually," I said. "That's going to be a mess."

"There are at least three others, but on those I've yet to acquire anything concrete," the Empress added.

Five heroes. The usual number, when something was going to go horribly wrong for villains. Was there a specific term for that, I wondered? People used cluster for fish and herd for sheep, there had to be a term for heroes. *A murder*, I snorted. Or maybe a gaggle, like with cats. So Black was going to be stuck dealing with a full gaggle of heroes. That ought to make his year.

"Procer's still staying out of it?" I said.

"Dearest Cordelia has been sending her disaffected soldiers to Nicae," Malicia said. "More than ten thousand already and the number grows by the day. More importantly, she convinced Ashur to lift its restrictions on Nicean commerce – so they can actually afford to feed them. The fulcrum of the war will be the battle that host fights, the current conflicts are merely setting the stage."

"Keeps her too busy to sniff around Callow, at least," I muttered. "Small favours."

The Empress took a hand off her lap and rested her chin on the palm, somehow managing elegance in a body not her own.

"Callow is what brings me here as it happens," she said. "You've been rather busy of late, Catherine."

That, I reflected, did not seem like the beginning of a pleasant conversation.

"Still learning the ropes," I said. "There's so much to do even three of me wouldn't be on top of things."

"Delegating to Baroness Kendal was the step in the right direction," Malicia said. "Continue to find trustworthy individuals and invest them with authority."

I cocked my head to the side.

"Not a lot of those around," I admitted.

Most of the people I could rely on were in the Fifteenth, and I couldn't keep piling civilian duties onto them. Their workload had already expanded massively with the way the legion had swelled.

"Then find leverage on people you do not trust and use them regardless," the Empress said. "Murad has children in Kahtan and cares for them. A scare there would keep him in line. He has



experience commanding a city guard and you need someone to head Laure's."

"I'm trying avoid importing leadership from Praes," I said, trying to keep my tone not accusatory..

"The Empire decapitated Callow's ruling class two generations in a row," Malicia noted. "Train replacements, by all means, but you need people filling positions *now*. Through your actions you've begun to centralize authority in Callow without crafting an administration that can wield that power. The result of that can only be anarchy."

I swallowed. I was, well, out of my depth here. The Empress sighed.

"You are young, younger than ever we were when we seized power," she said. "I do not expect immediate flawlessness of you. What I can teach you, I will."

She leaned back into her seat.

"Let us go over your actions in Southpool, as an exercise," she said. "What do you believe the common perception is of what happened there?"

"A corrupt Praesi governess was removed," I frowned.

"Forcefully," Malicia said. "Strung up in front of the fortress gates for all to see."

"The Empire isn't exactly shy about making examples, as a rule," I said.

"In exceptional cases," the Empress said. "Governess Ife was not one. Removing her was necessary for your purposes, but the *manner* was incorrect. You should have had her assassinated discreetly and moved in your replacement."

"If she just disappears then the point doesn't get made," I grunted.

That whole matter was still like an itch I couldn't scratch, and going over it wasn't exactly my idea of an agreeable evening. I listened anyway: the Empress hadn't managed to command a pack of wolves like the High Lords for over forty years by looking pretty. If she had advice, it was worth hearing.

"It is made to the people it is meant for," Malicia disagreed. "More than that, think on what the people of Southpool saw. Wasteland nobility, hung like a common Callowan criminal."

"She *acted* like a common Callowan criminal," I said, temper flaring as I struggled not to raise my voice.

"Every eye on Callow is on you, Catherine," the Empress said. "*You are the person setting their cues.* If what you employ is violence, in violence they will follow. Against all available targets."

I rubbed at the bridge of my nose, then grunted.

"Fair," I said. "Riots against the legions aren't what I was going for. Still, I don't *have* assassins to use. My closest equivalent is..."

"Currently checking the progress of your opponent," Malicia completed for me, when I let the sentence trail. "The natural tool for you would be the Guild of Assassins, but you've other ideas."

I grimaced. Of course she knew. No part of that had been a question.

"In the future," she said, "have your mages use a more advanced version of the scrying spell formula. Apprentice will know several. The one you currently use is exceedingly easy to listen into. Heiress certainly has been, among others."

That she wasn't being smug about it actually kind of made it worse.

"Their existence as an entity breaks Tower law," I said defensively.

"There has never been nor will there ever be a nation without hired killers," Malicia replied. "You might, at best, disband the organized aspect of it for a few decades. The trade will still be plied as long as someone has a knife and another has coin."

"So I should just allow a pack of murderers to do as they want because people are assholes?" I retorted. "What's the point of even having a law against it then?"

"The purpose of law is not to define right and wrong, it is to regulate behaviour," the Empress said. "You are a ruler now, Catherine. Your only concern should be *control*."

She shrugged languidly.

"If you deem it necessary to assert greater control over the Guild of Assassins, do so," she said. "But attempting to destroy it entirely would set you on a collision course with all of the Dark Guilds. You cannot rule a realm if you are at war with every institution in it."

"Are you ordering me not to disband them?" I asked through gritted teeth.

Anything short of that wasn't going to make me back down. The simulacrum the Empress was possessing studied me for a moment.

"No," she finally said. "If you fail, it will be a learning experience. If you succeed – well, I have been faced with the occasional surprise over the years. I will warn you, however, that you do not currently have the resources to face them."

I grimaced. Marchford had been one of the richest cities in Callow, before the rebellion. Before a demon had set camp for a few days over the silver mines, filling the streets with disaffected miners and their families. There was a reason enrolling in the Fifteenth was so popular at the moment. With bridge that was the main trade route in and out of the hills only just freshly raised after the Silver Spears had torched it, trade had yet to pick up. And that wasn't even counting on the gaping hungry maw that was rebuilding the devastated city. I was beginning to regret having told Robber to torch that manor, since I'd been supposed to actually live in it.

"Apprentice told me the mines will be purged of contamination within a few months," I said. "It'll be easier after that."

"Upon you return to Marchford," Malicia said, "you will be presented with an offer by the Matron of the High Ridge tribe. It could prove a solution to your woes, though you should think long before accepting it."

I frowned. High Ridge? Pickler's tribe, that, and the reigning Matron would be her mother. Ominous.

"Make haste back to your holdings, Catherine," the Empress said. "You'll find greater trouble there than you know – your bastard has been surprisingly competent in suppressing rumours."

The meat-puppet leaned forward, the Dread Empress of Praes looking through it.

"But above all, do not think for a moment that Heiress being silent means she has forgotten you. You might be a legacy, Catherine Foundling, but then so is *she*."

Lady Naibu twitched, then went still. The only sign of life there was the steady rise and fall of her chest.

"It's going to be one of those years, isn't it?" I sighed.

Well this was ominous. Very, \*very\* ominous.

*Gunslinger*

The plot thickens indeed. Poor Cat, having to plod through politics.

On a side note vote for the Guide if you like it on topwebfiction.

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

*metroderus*

The protagonists are all so consistently likable that I occasionally find myself viewing them and rooting for them in the same way I would for protagonists from more traditional stories. Then along comes a delicious moment of “telecommuting via almost-mindless flesh puppet” to make the skin crawl and remind you just what this Practical Guide is for.

*George*

Huh, I root for them full time and whole-heartedly

*nehemiahnewell*

Eh, Flesh-puppets aren’t any more horrifying then The Wandering Bard. I mean, they aren’t LESS horrifying either. They exist at exactly the same level, since their nature is so similar.

[Euodiachloris](#)

The Wandering Bard: Flesh Puppet meets Time Lord via the Master-style hijack/possession route. 😊

*Morgenstern*

I don’t see why mere flesh would make the skin crawl. If it were a PERSON that was made into a mindless puppet, yeah... but as far as I understood it, it is a CONSTRUCT. No real person in there and never having been in there... No problem whatsoever. ( I never quite understood the taboo around corpses, either, to be fair... Yeah, I get the emotions for which it might be a focus point for some time, while people grieve for the person that was once in there, but... a corpse is just dead meat. Nothing more, nothing less. We EAT meat every day... most of us anyway. )

*Cpt. Obvious*

Agree on the “just meat” part. But in my opinion it depends on how this particular meat puppet was constructed. I see basically three ways to make a meat puppet. The simplest probably is to start with a still living body, and here

there's opportunity for some less nice things such as how the body was sourced. It's not too common to find a still breathing body with no one home. It could be a body of someone who died in a fight but they managed to keep the body alive after the original owner vacated the premise. But given this is Praes, I think it would be easiest to buy a deathrow prisoner and evict the original owner.

Another possibility would be to Frankenstein a body from spare parts. Though that would require an artist to avoid creating a really horrifying meat puppet.

Finally it might be possible to simply create the meat puppeft from magic, but I really don't think that's the case here as it would be incredibly "expensive" to do it that way.

*danh3107*

I guess it can only get worse, let's see how Catherine handles it.

*JackbeThimble*

The quality of the editing has definitely improved in this book. I only noticed one typo in my first read-through of this chapter.

Catherine had better vet her Callowan Gubernatorial candidates very carefully, the first time there's a major scandal involving one of them having their political opponents murdered or enriching themselves off the taxpayers she's going to be in a very awkward position.

If she needs to find competent bureaucrats to run her central government the obvious first place to look would be the church, since they're an institution that already has a certain amount of trust from the general populace but are extremely unlikely to maintain their power under a different Regent. They would also be qualified to enforce her proposed ban on diabolism.

*Bart*

Found some:

the first appointment I'dd made  
change I'dd to I'd

I knew for a fact Akua kept close eye on the proceedings  
add "a" after kept

I'm trying avoid importing leadership from Praes  
add to after trying

I said, trying to keep my tone not accusatory..  
Remove the extra period. Also I think you should change "not accusatory" to "unaccusing".

And that wasn't even counting on the gaping hungry maw that was rebuilding the devastated city.  
change "that was" to "of"

Upon you return to Marchford  
change you to your

Those are the ones that aren't mentioned later in the comments at this time.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

The sentence "I was, well, out of my depth..." reads awkwardly. I assume both commas should get deleted, but I can't really tell what the author is going for there.

#### *Barthumphries*

Probably that the main character was, well, out of her depth. 😊

#### *Abaddon*

I think that sentence reads perfectly fine. Try saying it to yourself out loud. Having a slight pause or hesitation before and after "well" feels and sounds natural to me.

(I'm going to use "-" to separate the different parts of the sentence here.) If the sentence were structured the way you are reading it as, "I was well out of my depth." it would break down like this: 'I- was – well out of – my depth.' whereas the way EE wrote it and, I believe, intended it to be read, "I was, well, out of my depth." the sentence breaks apart like so: "I – was – well – out of – my depth."

In the first example(Which is a valid interpretation, just not the intended one I think.), the word "well" is used as an adverb. According to these definitions given in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary:

5 – to a high degree  
"well deserved the honor"  
"a well-equipped kitchen"

6 – FULLY, QUITE  
"well worth the price"

10 – b: in all likelihood  
INDEED  
"it may well be true"

13 – Without doubt or question  
CLEARLY  
“well knew the penalty”

And,

15 – to a large extent or degree  
CONSIDERABLY, FAR  
“well over a million”

In the second(The original and intended usage.) example though, the word “well” is used as an interjection:

1 – used to indicate resumption of discourse or to introduce a remark  
“They are, well, not quite what you’d expect”  
“he says, gesturing at, well, all this:”  
“Many of the legions who dressed fantastically, scantily, or both treated the festival as, well, a festival—a reason to carouse.”  
“But that linear journey can come to feel, well, a bit plodding.”

*WealthyAardvark*

Typo thread, I suppose.

first sell  
Maybe ‘first sell’ is a correct UK usage, but I believe this should be ‘first sale’

said. You’ll find  
Quotation mark missing

*Morgenstern*

There are a lot of minor ones centering around single letters missing or being wrong. Your brain is probably doing the autocorrect there, though. Sad that mine almost never those that – except, even more annoyingly, when looking at my own texts while writing and often even shortly after, needing distance to un-do the autocorrect there... -.-

*Morgenstern*

yeah.. like that. GAH. “almost never DOES that // corrects those”... classic mix-up.

*The Archdevil*

Man, Malicia just knows everything. Makes me wonder if Amadeus has Scribe sending her intelligence reports. And the flesh-puppet must be fun, though I would love how it works.

## *Unoriginal*

She doesn't need intelligence reports from Scribe/Black. She has her own very powerful spy network and I think (I haven't checked in a while) that its implied to be better.

### *The Archdevil*

Fair enough. The established spy network of a villainous empire would probably be better than Black's fledgling-by-comparison network that Scribe runs for him.

### *nipi*

It was mentioned that Malicia can see through the eyes of rodents and crows – her agents.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Wait, seriously? Where the hell was that? I don't remember that at all

### *Barthumphries*

No, she specifically thought that her spy network wasn't as good.

### *Letouriste*

You guys have forgotten "lady patience" right? The spymistress of the empire;) she have her own network for helping malicia...still she is probably less skilled than scribe.

### *Morgenstern*

Ime was implied to have gotten Malicia more info about the Free Cities and what's going on there than Scribe did for Black. Although, maybe he just wasn't interested in that back then... who knows.

### *Naeddyr*

> She still had, Black had informed me, been put under surveillance by both he and Malicia

by both HIM and Malicia

Rule of thumb, if you have a pronoun and a conjunction and you don't know what case to use, just simplify the conjunction phrase and see what comes naturally. It's not "put under surveillance by he" when it's just the single pronoun, so it shouldn't change. Burn the style guides, do not fear them! Listen to your heart,



cut the words down until they obey. Hypercorrectism is a nagging worm in your mind, do not listen to it.

*Morgenstern*

It's like the odd "xy and I" every so often. I am quite sure that is usually used as "xy and ME", too. Or did I just encounter the wrong sources for that (I'm not much for Brits' English, though) 😊

*nick012000*

Maybe Cat should consider turning the Guild of Assassins into something like the Morag Tong from the Elder Scrolls series: a government-sanctioned guild of executioners that act to remove problematic elements in society. If a minor nobleman rapes a peasant's daughter, the peasants could band together and pay to get the nobleman offed. If a group of bandits is attacking a noble house's merchant caravans and they don't have the resources to take care of them, they can hire the Morag Tong. And so on, and so forth.

[Dan Lawrence](#)

I can't help noticing that Catherine currently has a difficulty getting accurate local intelligence due to a feeble spy network, and that the local guild of assassins would likely make for an excellent recruiting ground for spies.

Instead of shutting down the guild entirely she should just carefully turn them into the Callowan secret police. A little training in advanced spycraft from a few Praesi spies, some proper uniforms and a salary. I'm sure not all of them will sign up but you'd get enough with the right approach.

*nipi*

Problem is you need to be able to trust your spies. Otherwise you are just creating a bigger problem for yourself.

*Morgenstern*

Yeah, Black Ops / Intelligence Agency of her own (probably not all of them... some will be ... "beyond saving", but yeah) was exactly what I already thought last chapter... 😊

*Morgenstern*

And/Or "Secret Police" (kinda summed that up under Black Ops, though). Nipi is right about the inherent problem, of course. But I'm sure there's a myriad of ways out there how they could be MADE ... trust-able, if not trust-worthy. Why, oh why, do I have to think of Apprentice now, again? ^^

[vexingvision](#)

I would absolutely buy a book only containing the leading quotes. They're so well done, delicious and clever.

Thank you!

*Letouriste*

Thanks for the update! Did she forget asking Malicia about the way to contact Refuge here?

[Euodiachloris](#)

Not much point: Malicia was basically there as the topic came up. She knows how to get word to Ranger; and, she knows Cat doesn't know. In short, a message is getting to Refuge. 😊

*Letouriste*

Oh! You're right:)

But still, she needs to find a way for herself soon, her web of diplomacy is really thin.

*Morgenstern*

Second that. Then again, Cat is not much for diplomacy so far. First (few) year(s) and all that, just like Malicia predicted... at least so far. 😊

[Euodiachloris](#)

Malicia didn't need to say it. But, there were a few sections talking to Cat where I could practically feel her amusement at the mini-younger-Amadeus in the room. 😊

*stevenneiman*

Remember kids:

If violence isn't your last resort, you didn't resort to enough of it.

[globalgrassroot](#)

"It's going to be one of those years, isn't it?"

As opposed to...?

[gianoria7](#)

As opposed to before she became the Squire, I suppose. Her life was probably easier when she was living in an orphanage while fighting in an illegal fighting ring.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Oh, she has no idea....

### ereshkigala

First time commenting, so this will be about Cat's glorious career as an evil warlord so far and other plot-related stuff.

1) You've managed to give Cat a great balance of frequent brilliance to show she has great potential, just as frequent bull-headedness to show she's still a teenager, and the occasional gross stupidity that makes for a believable main character without the experience of other players in the field. Good job!

2) If anything, your characterisation of other individuals is even better, whether they are Cat's friends and subordinates, or her superiors and enemies. No character is flat, which is a great achievement for any literary work. Everyone is a person, even if they have blatantly stereotypical roles.

3) When it comes to the meat of the story, the unfairness of protagonist (usually good) vs antagonist (usually evil) roles, I find it rather ironic that Cat is on the side of Evil that wants to break the unfairness when she is essentially in a protagonist's position. For all the challenges she faced, Fate still conspired to grant her victory in the end. The way coincidence stretched to extremes to give her the tools to win, from her very first encounter with Black to the way her initial defeats initiated a pattern of three that guaranteed some victory, make her hypocrisy a bit annoying.

4) Am I in the minority that I want to see Heiress succeed or at least survive, and have her and Cat either be forced to genuinely cooperate to avoid being overwhelmed by heroes in the future, or have them as semi-hostile rulers of their own nations by the end of the story? Akua outsmarts Cat a half-dozen times and loses mostly because of Role shenanigans, after all...

### *Letouriste*

Fate? You're wrong, fate is AGAINST her.

She have a supporter(hint when she resurrected) but everything apart that is on her own.

Her meeting with black and the rest is fitting with a story, not the only one still.

Akua is not as smart you think, she just is persuaded she is. Also, she is the one to use the most role shenanigans for her, not cat.

### *Nivek*

Actually, it's implied that until she finished the patterns of three with both Lone Swordsman and Heiress she was functionally immortal. The force that brought her back was probably the second pattern of three. Also Fate doesn't care

which side wins, Fate is the wager not a side (see prologue of book 1).

It is probable however that Cat's habits allow for her to draw from both sides of the pattern since she always seems to pull the most outrageous of her stunts at the very start of the fight for the villainous-shock-and-awe aspect of the story before killing the heroes with a non-magical sword for that underdog protagonist value added to the story at which point she either forces/bribes the non-Named to surrender or destroys them with a dramatic flourish (such as a wall of fire) for some more villain points.

*naturalnuke*

A gaggle is a group of geese.

A clutter (or clowder) is a group of cats.

*naturalnuke*

Heh, a clutter of heroes...

[Euodiachloris](#)

Well, with those like the Wandering Bard falling off shingle, the Bumbling Conjourer just... bumbling into things and every last grandstanding loudmouth Hero o' Helmetless Ham, "a clatter" would be more accurate. XD

*stevenneiman*

Joke aside, I'm pretty sure the proper term would be a "band" or, in a more RPG-influenced world a "party".

*Unmaker*

What do you call a group of people who always bicker but tighten ranks and attack when there is outside danger?  
A family of heroes.

*Morgenstern*

"Band, Cat, it's called a band." was my initial reaction to that one. Although gaggle etc. are, of course, much funnier. Simply "group" also works..  
(Sidenote: I've never heard "family" being used in any RPG so far, since over a decade, but that is probably region-specific?)

*Barthumphries*

Lord of the Rings Online uses the term kinship instead of guild. Fellowship for a small group.

danh3107

Erratic has a history of messing up animal names, a female goat being called a doe...

I mean honestly

*Morgenstern*

Is there any specific word for a female goat? o0 I was under the impression the word was simply.. well. Goat. o0 Funny how I either never noticed that one or don't remember it... one would think a brain like mine would, it tends to push out relevant info and collect such trifles like this one =P

*Morgenstern*

Relevant info meaning real-world info. Job stuff, names, numbers.. Stories and almost everything in it obviously count as collectables ^^

[ereshkigala](#)

Dunno if my first comment went through – I can't see it for some reason. In any case, here are some more general thoughts;

1) Are Malicia and Black making a mistake when they discount magic from the Age of Wonders in their worldview? Sure, the invisible tiger army was stupid, and the turn-to-giant-spider or steal-the-weather thing didn't pan out for some of their predecessors, but why are more useful bits of magic not used? A flying fortress for example would be a massive tactical advantage if practically used. Just fly over an enemy army or fortress out of weapon range, and shoot down at them. Spears, rocks, goblin munitions; if it is falling from a mile high the difference is mostly academic. And if making a flying fortress is an enormous expense in sacrifices because of how powerful the magic has to be, why not make a flying room instead? Just a metal box a few yards across just small enough to not need sacrifices to enchant with flight. Then have Warlock and a Legion's worth of mages (as in, several hundred) produce them one at a time. Usable as individual siege weapons and aerial scouts, or as a flying fortress when assembled together. And if an enemy is really giving them a hard time, load a flying box with a few tons of Goblinfire, fly it over their city, then let it drop. No way to defend against it, and when the goblinfire is charged up by eating the flying spells themselves, it will spread to burn the entire target city to the ground. Weapons of Mass Destruction are always good.

2) With the exception of goblins, the Legions of Terror still use mostly human military doctrine. IMHO, they aren't using non-human soldiers and creatures to the fullest. How about this;

a) Give the Ogres bows or crossbows. At the same range, an ogre should be able to launch a missile dozens of times heavier than a human. Or, for a less heavy missile, have two or three times the range. Basically every ogre could be a ballista. A hundred ogres from one legion could shoot dozens of times before a human enemy army could get into range, inflicting heavy casualties. And once they get into normal ranges? Shoot goblin demolition charges at them. I mean, there are humans that can throw spears 200+ yards with an atlatl. An ogre could send a similar weight much further.

b) Orcs are significantly stronger than humans, but are also taller. They can see over a front-line of humans and better support them. Instead of putting them in the front line, put them in the second with a front line of humans. The human warriors would have close-combat weapons and heavy shields, while the orcs would have spears with more reach than a human army could use. This double line would be highly effective in defending against close-range attacks, especially against armies that don't have non-human warriors.

*Nivek*

As best as I can tell, the practical villains refuse to trust "reusable" magic weapons (for good reason) since if somebody depends on the magic superweapon then it will fail or be turned against them at the worst possible time. One-offs like goblin munitions or suicide goats don't get turned against the sender since they are already exploded. And even those get duplicated/looted and used against the inventor a lot (Martial Sacker lost an eye to sharpeners, Heiress used a munition-filled ghoul during the climactic showdown at the sword-in-the-stone).

*stevenneiman*

As to Age of Wonders magic, Fate makes it basically useless. Winning isn't a matter of superiority, it's a matter of there not being a story about you losing. If she made use of that style of weapons and tactics she might get a few victories in but she would then lose to the first batch of heroes that showed up. At best she could hope to relive the life of Triumphant, complete with exactly the same ending that she died without having accomplished anything lasting except that people still curse her name.

That isn't the main reason though. The main reason is the same one that Kairos didn't just let Basilia stomp on his enemies for him. It would have worked, but it would not have been appropriate. To Malicia the Age of Wonders is dead, and every victory she wins by diligence, competence and pragmatism is one more step in the dance on its grave.

*Morgenstern*

Flying discs weaponized: Ill just say this much: Wind.  
There HAS to be a hero with "wind magic" that can simply turn it aside or even do the "return to sender"...

*Morgenstern*

On further thought... there actually was a lot of mention already about how heroes and villains make wind with their SWORD attacks already, so much that they push back people with it.

*NerfContessa*

Well, that is a view of her I haven't thought about yet.

Ouch, but not wrong...

*Ishot4living*

Hmmm, a hanging of heroes? At least that's how Catherine would love to hear it I dare say 😊

*Unmaker*

Given Black's and Assassin's penchants: A sheath of heroes. Because they always end up with knives in them.

*stevenneiman*

Well, Willy never did. He just wound up hard to clean off Cat's boots.

*Void*

Ok this bugs me, but Catherine grunts a lot. It's her standby, and I can't unsee it.

*Barrendur*

@Void: Grunting, and humming! That's been true of \*everyone\* in the book, not just Catherine, and it's been a problem from the very start. Well spotted.

*Morgenstern*

Grunting = the occasional "hmpf". People DO tend to do that a LOT in real life. Just sayin'.

*MagnaMalusLupus*

She's not meant to be a talker; a point she has made several times. It is very appreciate for such a person to use more emotive than verbal responses.

Z

Sadly Cat is not as humorous now as she used to be though at the start of the chapters, she seem more depressed and mature now.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

At least she didn't murmur...

*Barthumphries*

At least she didn't tug her braid... Nynaeve.

*beleester*

The term for a group of heroes is obviously an adventuring party of heroes, isn't it?

*stevenneiman*

"She'd given them reason to {be}"

"after having him looked into {him} I'd seen no reason to refuse"

"It's {a} placeholder solution, regardless"

"Last I heard [he] was in Penthes" He who? I'm assuming you're talking about Black due to the fact that the next line relates to putting a city out of the fight by arranging a diplomatic mess.

"It had drawn quite a bit of attention when an unheard-of villain had come out of nowhere and grilled the third of an army on his way to Atalante." I'm honestly not sure what this is supposed to mean

"With {the} bridge that was the main trade route in and out of the hills only just freshly raised"

Well, it's interesting to see that Malicia isn't just going for instant solidarity with Black. I really wonder how this is going to turn out.

*Bart*

The prologue for this chapter where the Tyrant called lightning down to burn the opposing troops.

*Lampshade*

I don't understand her fixation with the assassins. It just seems so . . . random.

*stevenneiman*

They're people who have basically been allowed to live exempt from the rules because it would be inconvenient to oppose them. Mazus was like that, and took immense joy in his death. If she can't bring down the assassins by herself, then she might as well admit that everything she's done was pointless because all



she can do is come crying to Black to fix her problems whenever anything goes wrong.

### Shawn Panzegraf

I think I'm having a crisis of faith in the Guide:  
I thought commitment to their Story was a Named's best friend.  
The Tyrant's action against the army of Atalante seemed to drive that point home if the Angel-mugging hadn't.

So Cat goes after the Assassins for her Story reasons, and things get worse? Or is this the adversity Creation puts up as the "test of faith" in her Story? Doing the not-expedient thing of trying to dismantle the Assassins Guild when she really doesn't have the means to do it effectively would seem to be at least akin to the Tyrant leaving his army out of the battle with Atalante's forces. Cat is trying it to reform Callow from inside Team Villainy.

Or is this a case like the Tyrant was criticizing during his murder of the envoys. Cat speaking the words and missing the meaning? That doesn't seem right to me either though.

Anyone have a possible explanation here? (Beyond the obvious, no Name mechanics involved, it was just on balance, as "Malicia" said a bad idea to try and take them down because something like the Assassin's Guild is necessary to the workings of such a society, I mean.)

*jonnnney*

Her reasoning isn't valid for a villain so she doesn't get to cheat the rules. She isn't taking out the dark guilds because it would help cement her power, cow the populace, or because they might oppose her in the future. She isn't even doing it because she wants them to die. She is doing it because it is the right thing to do.

Even more she is going against a fundamental aspect of her story. Last chapter she said:  
"I did not cover this land with corpses just to change the flavour of tyranny that rules it. If I don't make it better now, when will I?"

She is trying to justify her actions to Hakram and justification only matters to the just.

*Letouriste*

She's speak more to herself there and I don't think she try to justify anything, she just reawaken her will and original motivations

*stevenneiman*

There's a difference between justifying yourself and just getting back on course to actually do what you came to do.

*stevenneiman*

The thing is that Tyrant of Helike (or at least Kairos' take on the Name) is a dramatic one, while Squire is a humble and tactical one. Kairos can shake his fist at the heavens and come out on top because that's what his job is to do, especially when it sets the stage for the heroes to come in and screw everything up. Whether he has the means up his sleeve to derail a heroic epic with his Name on it is a question for another day, but right now he is in his element and at least with the way that he interprets his first Aspect he is tapping it like a keg.

On the other hand, Cat is doing something that is from a tactical perspective a mistake (antagonizing a powerful enemy force that she is ill-equipped to counter) and besides her Name is much more realistic which means much more difficulty whenever she tries to do anything. Also, while this might have been a low-level Struggle before, she isn't Taking anything and her other Aspects haven't been revealed. Her Name wins on the open field by superior tactics, and she's not going to have an easy time of using it to fight an enemy like the guild. Of course her interpretation of the Name is all about slogging through uphill battles she's unprepared to face, so she still might pull it off. Ironically in order to have a chance she needs to not have a chance

.

It's weird that Cat would think that the tyrant is an unheard-of villain given that he is named, is a lord over one of the free cities and how he had acquired his name and power.

*jonnnney*

Well Cat is in a fairly unique position of having met most of the Calamities. Plus her mentor has been repeatedly chided for overthrowing a free city while drunk. It probably takes a lot to be considered a well known villain in her book and ruling the free city isn't a point in his favour.

*stevenneiman*

She's used to thinking of the Free Cities as so mired in internecine conflicts that as a whole they cancel themselves out and are unimportant. If she thinks about them at all.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I thought they were referring to *\*THIS\** iteration of Tyrant specifically, not the general idea that *\*a\** Tyrant is in

charge. The current iteration is less predictable than the usual, I gather.

*Morgenstern*

I see an entirely different reason there: He only cropped up very shortly ago in a rather far-flung region. When even Black isn't quite sure about what exactly is going on over there in the outro(? intro??), and Malicia has to inform him... how the hell should CAT know? She had a LOT going on lately and NONE of it had to do with the Free Cities. She is NOT a ruler yet and is VERY concentrated on Callow. That is, btw, exactly the point made here in this chapter... (so glad you confirmed that, dear Erratic, yay!)

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Thanks,

I didn't consider that Cat was justifying. That DOES weaken her story. As to the other point, doing it because its right instead of for a "Villainous" reason, that IS Catherine's Story. Using authority earned from within the Praesi system to effect meaningful positive change for Callow. Or said another way, finding a way to make life in Callow good for the people without the necessity of a successful Rebellion against Praes.

Malicia and Black even conversed on as much, with Black saying "You know, if she wins we're going to have to allow her the power to make the reforms she wants to make. Else we become the next obstacles in her way." (To paraphrase), and Malicia agreed.

In this case though, I think you hit the crux of it with her decision being essentially a matter of Justification, Jonnnney. Cat can be right on one front, and wrong on another in accordance with the internal logic of her story and have the two decisions "cancel out"...leaving her with the result she'd get without Names/Stories factored into it.

Good catch Jonnnney 😊

*Morgenstern*

She basically had a return to old wavering boohoo in the last chapter. That never goes well in a 'verse so bound to story and \*believing\* in it/yourself...

*Morgenstern*

Last chapter she actually reminded me of the Lone Swordsman. Wondering if she took something more from him than just an Aspect until it fades away... All that lamenting and ALMOST being contrite, at least wavering what is actually the right thing, being unsure blahblah... SO Will. o\_ô

### [ereshkigala](#)

On the assassins and other Dark Guilds, why not simply blood-oath them to her? Come to think of it, why didn't Malicia and Black blood-oath all the nobles to them after their victory? You don't have to kill the enemy when you can implant them with suicide triggers or the magical equivalent and force them to work for you.

*nipi*

Because if she tried to get blood oaths then things would have gone the same way as described here: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/02/08/reign/>

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Thieves and assassins tend to be pretty good at rules lawyering, so it'd work for all of five minutes. <\_< Chaos: ignoring boundaries as they please is part of the package. 😊

The better way would be an appeal to avarice (or, at least, not tipping the board over), Vetinari-style. 🤪

*stevenneiman*

Which they both did with general success until now, but might run into problems now that Cat's got her hornet's-nest-kicking boots on.

*Koh*

I am Koh

### [Ethesis](#)

I am really curious to see if Kat breaks the typical mold and doesn't ignore good advice.

That would be original.

*Letouriste*

What? You didn't read book 2 right? This is EXACTLY why her troops love her (well she is badass and loyal too), she doesn't hesitate to listen and change her opinion on matters.

### [Shawn Panzegraf](#)

There's a way for Catherine to kill two birds with one stone, Though I don't know if she can do it given her current wealth-related woes. Turn the Assassins and Thieves Guilds into the intelligence and enemy subversion network she currently lacks. She'd need to win their loyalty and keep them paid, but these

kinds of challenges aren't even near the same difficulty as wiping the Assassins out.

Robber can't do everything. Even the effectiveness of his harassing Heiress's new followers was on the wane as of a few Chapters ago. I'm genuinely curious what will happen next now.

(Though still quite afraid Cat will soon be thrust into one more position of power she wasn't expecting)

*Letouriste*

The way I see that, she need to not kill some assassins who chose to be loyal to her and finish the others

[5th Holy Sheeprabbit, Kilimanjaro Estelion Sharlulu Asheel  
Vinchance Celenalia di ef Falufiluu'Luufilaafee \(The 35th\) da ne!](#)

Hi! Thanks for the chapter!

Two things!

1. I really love those quotes you put at the beginning of every chapter.
2. Is he Setang or Satang?

*Hakurei06*

Fun fact, those quotes are known as Epigraphs, and most herein also qualify as epigrams.

"Setang" means "handlebar" in Indonesian and "Satang" is a Thai currency worth 0.01 Baht, according to that google search, google image search, and google translate tell me. A Satang strikes me as a rather terrible name to give your child (I suppose it's rather like Penny), but at least makes more sense than "handlebar".

*Morgenstern*

\*lol

For a second there, I actually read that as an English-German mix-up =P Handle-bar = sth. you can handle (bar = able) 😊

[Sailorleo](#)

Penny as a name has nothing to do with coinage. It's a diminutive of Penelope.

[aran](#)

"Still learning the ropes," I said.

Considering what she just did to the Governess, that seems like a dark pun.

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## Interlude: Gate

*"Oh, I get it. The real treasure was the people I had executed along the way!"*

– Dread Emperor Irritant I, the Oddly Successful

"Something's coming through," Kilian said.

Dawn was beginning to warm the stones of Marchford's central plaza, but there would be no bustle of humans today. There hadn't been for half a fortnight: the Hellhound had closed off this entire section of the city and garrisoned it heavily at Apprentice's recommendation. Nauk brushed off a speck of ash from the stripes on his shoulder that now marked him a legate of the Fifteenth, irritated at the way the burnt wood got everywhere. The very redhead who'd just handed him the latest bit of bad news had ordered for braziers full of holly and apple tree to be set up in all four corners of the plaza and kept ever-burning.

"How big, this time?" the orc asked.

The Senior Mage muttered in the mage tongue and squinted at the runes that formed in the air.

"Still minor," she said. "The frequency is increasing, though. They're building up to something."

Nauk spat to the side.

"Those are scouts, Kilian," he said. "Like a clan would send before a killing raid. They're looking for weaknesses."

Spikes of iron had been hammered into the stone in irregular patterns on the first day to make it harder for the Fae to step into Creation, but the border had been getting thinner with every dawn anyway. Juniper had prudently ordered that containment wards be set up around this section of the city before moving in legionaries, deploying most of the Fifteenth's mages to attend the defences. Nauk had been put in charge of manning the defences with his *jesha* of two thousand, the largest combat deployment of the legion since the Liesse Rebellion. While Kilian went around marking stones and muttering to herself with her posse of mages

following, he'd looked for more pragmatic means of making sure anything that wandered into the plaza didn't make it any further.

Pickler had set up half a dozen engines of her own design on the rooftops that offered the best lines of fire, sappers huddling around them in quiet clusters even now. Fortifying the alleys was old hand for his legionaries, after the battles of Marchford and Liesse, but Nauk wouldn't bet on stone doing much to hold back fairies. The scrawny little shits were basically magic poured into a body, as he understood it, and he'd seen the kind of damage a properly motivated mage could wreak. Grabbing his now-cold mug of tea from the table where he'd left it, the large orc rose to his feet and drained the bitter brew. Drinking leaf water still struck him as the most absurd of human habits, but unlike a good slab of meat the tea wouldn't leave him indolent afterwards. One of the first lessons they taught young raiders, in the Waxing Moons: always hit the enemy after a meal, if you can. They get sloppy and slow.

There was no great flash of lightning or pretty lights, when the fairy entered Creation. A slight shimmer in the air, then a sparrow was flapping its wings at the centre of the iron spike maze. It narrowly avoided running into the iron-wrought invisible wall that had flattened the first of its kind to come through, skilfully weaving around it. Nauk left behind the informal command centre of his jesha, well behind fortifications and lines of legionaries, and strode to the edge of the plaza where he could get a better look. The fae-sparrow began threading through the maze, unaffected by any wind born of Creation as it flew.

"They've been watching from the other side the whole time," Kilian said quietly.

Nauk had already deduced as much yesterday: the fae never made the same mistake twice. Kilian's course track at the College had been the magic one, though, so he wasn't surprised she hadn't gotten her hand in the broth until now.

"No mischief in this," the orc said. "They're not behaving like tricksters. Something bigger and meaner is telling them what to do."

"My wards wouldn't even slow the Wild Hunt down," the redheaded mage said. "So there's that, at least."

"Don't know shit about fairies," Nauk admitted.

Which wasn't entirely true. He had an old family recipe for braising them with southern spices, but Kilian was quarter-fae and might be displeased by the revelation. Humans always got all offended when orcs mentioned eating other humans, like eating each other wasn't the most natural state of Creation. You'd think they'd never eaten a rabbit, by the way their hackles got raised.

You just had to accept that, to the Clans, everyone else might as well be rabbits.

"The Tower might have reliable records about them, but anything we have is useless," the mage said, brushing back a strand of her short red hair. "Whichever is lord and lady of what might change thrice before one of our days is over. There's supposedly four Courts of Arcadia – one for each season – but the delineation between them isn't clear. They don't all exist at the same time, either."

"That sounds like a problem for General Juniper to figure out," Nauk said cheerfully. "And the Boss, whenever she gets back."

"She's only a few days away now," Kilian said absent-mindedly.

The orc eyed the human amusedly until she coughed to hide a blush and looked away. He had a feeling there'd been precious little military business discussed during *that* scrying session. It was an open secret in the upper echelons of the Fifteenth that Kilian and Cat were involved, though only among officers who'd been there since the founding of the legion. The fresh blood wasn't trusted yet. Nauk didn't have much against Callowans – they were steady in a shield wall and they died spitting in the enemy's face, so there was spine to respect – but he wouldn't be trusting any of those boys until he'd shared a proper battle with them. There was an unspoken line in the sand between the legionaries who'd fought in the Liesse campaign and those who hadn't, one that had overtaken the weaker lines once drawn by race.

The sparrow made it out of the maze after a little while more, landing on the ground. The bid's form shimmered and in its place came a kneeling man wearing silken robes all in shades of blue. Pale-skinned, like the locals, though fine-boned and taller. He was the first one to make it all the way through, and that did not bode well.

"Get that thing out of my backyard, Kilian," Nauk ordered. "Before it can make a mess."

The Senior Mage raised a hand, then made a fist. There was an eldritch crackle and the smell of ashes spread across the plaza as thin spikes of light gathered around the redhead's hands. The fae's silhouette twitched, but it did not disappear. Kilian gritted her teeth.

"O lords of iron, bar my gate through your embrace," she barked. "Choke it that trespasses, smother in coils unmoving."

The twitches identified until there was a sound like bone breaking and the fae dispersed into thin air. Kilian panted for a moment afterwards.



"They've got a foothold," she said. "Prepare for combat."

"*Finally*," Nauk grinned, rolling his shoulder with a loud crack.

The legate cast a look at the legionaries forming a steel-clad circle around the plaza, dug in behind wooden spikes and fields of caltrops.

"UP AND AT IT, YOU WHORESONS," he called out. "THEY'VE COME KNOCKING."

All around the formation swords were drawn, shields raised and crossbows armed. The veterans who'd defended this very city from devils now ready to give the boot to the latest idiots to believe they could get a slice of Catherine Foundling's fiefdom. That was probably the best part about following Squire, Nauk thought. There was always someone trying to knock her off and they made the most hilarious faces when fed their own entrails.

"Outer boundaries are holding for now," Kilian said quietly. "My mages are feeding the wards, though, so don't expect magical support."

"I brought my own support," Nauk said, baring his teeth at the spindly scorpions Pickler had built.

Whatever arcane bullshit had been making it hard for the fairies to cross was gone now, the orc saw. Before there'd never been more than one coming across at a time – the only time two cats had manifested, they'd disappeared before even touching the ground – but now he could count at least three dozen shimmers in the air. The twinkly bastards must have been out of sparrows, because what came out was over thirty tall men and women in splendid court dress. Long-sleeved tunics of frost and woven shadows played off dresses of snow and bones, the fae wearing them even more striking than the otherworldly clothes. They were not humans, Nauk thought. Their faces were too long, their eyes too large and bright. Their teeth were the teeth of killers, not prey. Shades of skin went from dark as ebony to driven snow, not a single one of them resembling another. All were armed. Spears of bone and bronze, swords of translucent ice set with lapis-lazuli, even a few bows of dead wood whose string appeared to be crafted from wind.

"The Fair Folk," Kilian said, tone halfway between longing and fear.

"Twits should have worn armour," Nauk grunted, unimpressed.

One of the ladies idly touched an iron spike with her foot. It shattered like glass. So much for that line of defence, the legate thought.

"Lovely children," the same fae spoke, tone carrying everywhere without ever being loud. "Who speaks for you?"

Nauk pushed aside the legionaries in the front line and made his way through. Kilian followed, hands hidden behind her back. Some of the legionaries had almost dumbstruck look on their faces, the orc saw. Mostly humans. There'd been something lilting in the fairy's voice, like a buzzing in his ears, but after years of dealing with the Red Rage it might as well have been tickling.

"Legate Nauk of the Fifteenth Legion," the orc introduced himself.

He'd stopped sixty paces away, though he still felt exposed so far from the shield wall.

"Senior Mage Kilian, of the same," the redhead added a moment later.

The fae's gaze lingered on the mage, but turned to the orc soon enough. She smiled in a way that was probably meant to be enchanting. She might have succeeded, if she didn't look like a skinny pale pack of twigs in a dress. Nauk like women a little greener, and with a talent for engineering.

"So strong," the fae praised. "So wilful. This will be a day to remember."

What was it with supernatural creatures and thinking creepy worked for them?

"You got a name?" the orc asked.

"I am the Lady of Snags and Bones," she smiled. "The-"

"You're trespassing," Nauk interrupted flatly.

She looked a little miffed at that, the first time her mask of perfection was marred.

"This land belongs to the Lady of Marchford," he continued. "You're walking her street and breathing her air, without permission. Fuck off."

It might have been for the best he'd never taken any of the diplomacy classes, Nauk mused.

"Ah, but we like it here," one of the men said. "I think we'll stay."

There was a round of perfect laughter from the rest of the fae. The man strode forward and bowed theatrically.

"I am-"

"I don't really care," Nauk admitted bluntly.

"Nauk, let the man finish," Kilian chided. "We'll need more than one name for the report."

"There will be no report," the Lady of Snags and Bones smiled. "This place belongs to Arcadia now, and we do not bother with such bores in the Land Resplendant."

"You must have many questions, Legate Nauk," the man said in a conciliatory tone. "We will help you in this."

"Only the one, really," the orc said.

"Ask us, dearest one," the woman encouraged.

"Iron," Nauk of the Waxing Moons said, baring sharp fangs. "Does it spoil the taste?"

"Pardon?" the man said, blinking in surprise.

"For when you end up in the cookpot," he explained.

Kilian finished casting the signal, the number five in Miezan numerals forming out of fire above them, and the scorpions began spitting out bolts of cold iron. The orc unsheathed his sword and began backing away as the first wave of bolts speared a handful of fairies, dragging out horrifying screams as their veins turned dark and pulsing all over their bodies. Now, typically speaking, would have been the dead moment between two scorpion volleys when the sappers reloaded the engines. These were not the classic design of the Legions of Terror, however, they were children of Senior Sapper Pickler of the High Ridge tribe. Bolts dropped down from wooden magazines, a lever was cocked and the scorpions fired *again*.

"LEGIONARIES, FORWARD!"

Commander Jwahir, one his Senior Tribune after – well, even now thinking of that too much was likely to make him lose control, so he forced his thoughts out of that path. Jwahir's voice had been the one calling out, the Taghreb well-briefed on their defensive plans and her role in them. Even with the steady stream of scorpion fire coming from the rooftops, the fairies were not pinned down. Immediately they scattered in all directions, which unfortunately involved down the path of Nauk's own retreat. The so-called Lady of Snags and Bones was one of two that did, as well as some dark-skinned fae with a long barbed spear.

"This could have been painless for all of you," the Lady mourned, advancing with a sword that could have been either crystal or ice.

A crossbow bolt from the ranks sailed straight for her neck and she batted it aside without even looking.

"I feel like this might be the weak part of this plan," Kilian said, hands quickly tracing runes in the air even as she retreated with him.

"Don't be a killjoy," Nauk said. "How often do we get to kill anything ourselves, these days?"

"*Us* killing *them* is the weak part," the mage replied.

The Lady leapt forward like a great cat but the orc was ready for her. His rectangular legionary's shield caught the translucent blade and it bounced off the red-painted steel, though not before heavily denting the surface. Nauk had been a heavy before being an officer, so he wasn't armed like a regular: his longsword swung before she could retreat. She ducked under the swing with a mocking laugh, scoring a blow on his greaves that frosted over immediately. Fucking fairies, now he'd have to requisition another set. Kilian would have been in more trouble than him, since she didn't have a shield of her own, but when the other fae came for her she barked out a word in the arcane tongue and lightning flashed. The fairy parried the bolt of electricity with its spear without missing a beat and went to run through her throat only to hastily retreat when the lightning swung around and went for him again.

New trick, that. Her talks with Apprentice must be paying off. Feet steady, Nauk continued retreating with his shield up even as the Lady continued to assault him. She was too nimble for him to get a proper hit in, especially when wearing a full set of plate. Kilian kept her opponent away by weaving her streak of lightning, constantly murmuring under her breath even as she broke it into separate pieces and finally managed to sink part of it into her opponent's shoulder. The fae twitched uncontrollably, skin burning until a volley of crossbow bolts from their left put him out of his misery.

"You cannot defeat the Court," the Lady of Snags and Bones snarled, face turned ugly by hatred. "We will not die, will not relent, until we have our due."

Her strike sheared off the upper third of Nauk's shield but the legate smashed the rest into her stomach. She flinched, which bought him just long enough to toss the useless thing at her head. She batted that away easily enough and even managed to catch his downwards swing with her sword. Muscles flexing, Nauk tried to force his blade down. *Useless*, he realized. Even one-handed she was stronger than him and worse her pretty little sword was digging into goblin steel. A crack appeared, then the longsword shattered as she smirked triumphantly. She thought he was unarmed, now. *Orcs are never unarmed*. He lunged forward and

his fangs sunk into her throat, his useless remains of a sword clattering against the ground. Nauk ripped out a chunk and pushed on the the ground, swallowing bloodless flesh as the Lady screamed. Ugh. Tasted like bad pork. A spear of flame erupted from Kilian's hand and dispersed the Lady of Snags and Bones for good.

"A gorget would have covered the throat," Nauk told the puddle of water. "That's why we wear armour, you bloody glittering *amateur*."

The closing wall of shields and the crossbows fired from behind them had managed to pick off the fae not run through by Pickler's repeating scorpions. The Fifteenth Legion was, once again, master of the field. Nauk returned for lines as cheers spread, Kilian at his side.

"We'll need to send Juniper a report," he said. "First incursion was repulsed, but it won't be the last."

As if to prove him right, a sharp keen immediately erupted in the centre of the plaza. He glanced back, and the way there was only a single shimmer in the air was not as reassuring as it should have been.

"Kilian," he growled urgently.

The mage was already looking at her warding runes, face pale.

"There's nothing I can do to stop that," she spoke in a low voice. "Nauk, whatever it is it's *huge*. It has a bigger draw on the wards than the last band put together."

The moment he was behind the shield wall he began barking orders. Whatever was crossing, they were hitting it with everything the moment it was corporeal. He'd been expecting some sort of giant winter monster, but what actually arrived was a single woman. Decked in an armour of twisted dead wood from head to toe, her long dark hair was the only part of her visible under the helmet – save for the eyes, an eerie unnatural blue. A sheathed longsword was at her hip and a spear made entirely of bronze was in her hand. The fae glanced at the storm of arrows and bolts headed for her, then tapped the bottom of her spear against the ground. Frozen out of the air, the projectiles fell in useless piles.

"We may have a problem," Kilian said.

Mist rose from the bolts on the ground, obscuring the field of vision. Nauk's officers were not prone to panic, though, and ranks tightened quietly. The mist thickened, then began swirling. Wicked-looking shards of ice began to form in the whirling mess and the legate grimaced at the idea of that spell hitting his

lines. One of which, he noticed with a flare of anger, was splitting in two. A single man in robes passed through them, scowling heavily at the growing storm even as the ranks closed seamlessly behind him. Dark skin, spectacles, could stand to lose a few pounds. Apprentice had finally decided to intervene. The Named strode into the storm, tracing symbols, and a heartbeat later it erupted into a column of steam. The fae stood unruffled where it had been, pointing her spear at the Soninke.

"Do you have *any* idea," Apprentice snapped, "how many experiments I've had to put on hold to come here?"

Nauk choked out a laugh. The warlock's get was in a mood – this was going to *hurt*. A dozen blades of ice formed in the air in front of the spear and shot off in Apprentice's direction, so swift they were but pale blurs. The mage extended a hand and they were yanked to the side, passing to his left before turning around his back and forming into a single large spiked sphere as they returned to the sender. Kilian let out a sharp breath. The orc glanced at her curiously.

"He rewrote the formula halfway through," she said.

"That's nice," Nauk said.

"Nauk," she said. "That's like... solving an equation with blind variables, replacing those variables with the values you want to get an entirely different result and *doing the whole thing in the span of three heartbeats.*"

She sounded admiring, and more than a little envious.

"There can't be more than six people alive today who can do that," she said.

"Look, now he's making a friend," Nauk contributed helpfully.

The fae was hovering in the air now, desperately trying to reach for its sword even as Apprentice glared at it.

"Whoever sent you is still listening, right?" the Soninke said. "Allow me to make this perfectly clear: if you interrupt my research again, *you will be the next test subject.*"

Apprentice closed his fist and the fae wrenched into a ball with a sick crunch before falling to the ground. The Soninke was already walking away, complaining under his breath.

"I *will* abuse my rank to get out of writing the report for this," Nauk informed Kilian, making a tactical retreat before the redhead could protest.

---

*danh3107*

That was so fucking cool holyshit

[intermediarywebserial](#)

Let's hope Nauk kept that badass crystal sword for himself/  
Squire.

*NerfContessa*

Yep.

Never disturb the local scientist superpower.

[ayon96](#)

Will there be an extra chapter?

[erraticerrata](#)

Extra chapter will be out tomorrow. Well, today depending on where you live. I was out of the country for a week so it's been delayed a bit.

For the curious, it's titled "Crowned" and it's from the POV of Cordelia Hasenbach, the First Prince of Procer.

[Emposter](#)

Great chapter, nice to see some some more of Nauk and Killian! Deeply looking forward to next week as always.

Only error I found in my read through:  
"The twitches identified until there"  
Should be intensified I'm pretty sure.

Only other thing I noticed was the comment about the scorpions reloading mechanism.

"down from wooden magazines,"

Personally, I think it would sound better(or more... historically 'themed' so to speak) without 'magazine' being used. Something like "a wooden housing" conveys the same concept, while being a little more dated.

*Able Company*

Almost sure it was stated Dwarves used guns or gun like tech, so magazines could still fit. That being said magazine in the pretext of ammunition storage is a fairly old and dated concept: usually a large container or storeroom for explosives.

*Gunslinger*

Yee gods. Badasses abound in this series. I'm so glad Apprentice is on the good(or evil?) team (atleast for now).

Also gentle reminder that one can vote for the Guide on topwebfiction

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

*The Archdevil*

Apprentice is getting a lot more powerful a lot faster than I expected.

[Euodiachloris](#)

It's amazing what feats the man from Porlock will make you do.  
;P

Mental note to self: never interrupt Apprentice unless bribery is in hand. And, it had better be the best biscuits and the really good china. 😊

*1shot4living*

Such as an angel in a plus size petri dish 😊

*The Archdevil*

While an angel is a good start, I feel Cat would take it even further with the bribery and give him an entire Choir. Contrition maybe?

*1shot4living*

Go big or go home indeed. In a villain's world, there is no such thing as overkill, just not enough backup plans.

*Nairne*

Justice is coming so no need to go calming for contrition

*stevenneiman*

Frankly this wasn't a place where it was appropriate for the Legion to lose, and Masego is in line to succeed the guy who has a collection of the corpses of gods.

*Aimless*

Could you point me towards where it was mentioned that Warlock has the corpses of multiple Gods?

*Kilimandaros*



"There's a difference between Gods and gods, child," the Calamity murmured, "and I've more than a few of the latter's corpses in my laboratory." Chapter 12: Reproval (Book II)

*naturalnuke*

Beautiful.

*Akim*

His Fathers would be so proud 😊

And Nauk personally not only killed a Named but also a Fae ..  
That are some big notches for his sword

*samshadar*

Well, for his next sword anyway... 😊

[Euodiachloris](#)

He did better than that: he got one to pause, blink and double-take. When you disconcert the trolling-is-in-our-genes species, you've doing banter right. XD

*Shoddi*

Let's not forget the rather large and nasty devil he picked apart while riding the Red Rage like a surfboard.

*stevenneiman*

Of course, the literal notch in his sword now goes all the way through, but those are easy to replace.

*JackbeThimble*

I don't think the Fey count as having Names, unless you're referring to the Exiled Prince?

*ereshkigala*

Awesome. It would have been even better if the bantering fae had been interrupted by invisible crossbow bolts, but you can't have everything.

*Letouriste*

Thanks for the update! A really good chapter!  
Some exposition of growth and some badassness;)   
Not much to say apart I wish your story gain more coverage:)

*nipi*

"Dark skin, spectacles, could stand to lose a few pounds. Apprentice had finally decided to intervene."  
Damn! Apprentice has gotten chubby. Thats what happens when you stay locked up in your magic tower.

*Jdub*

Apprentice has always been described as chubby. He's probably lost weight on the campaign if anything.

*cdos93*

Senior Sapper Pickler: Inventor of the Chu-ko-nu.

And I'm calling it now. Heiress -in her infinitely conceited stupidity- has decided that since Demons and Angels have both failed, she may as well strike a bargain with the Fae.

*Euodiachloris*

\*winces\* Devils and demons are bad, but only those with a yen towards a fate worse than a fate worse than death try that. 😊  
I don't think she's that thick. Problem is, she might just be that conceited. -\_-

And, if anybody knows how to use others' hubris, it's the fae.  
<\_<

*Unseelie*

Always strike deals with the Fae, it's an exceptional idea!

*Gunslinger*

If they're anything like the fae from the Pact web novel I'd feel really really sorry for her.

*Unmaker*

Even easier: just weaken the walls to Arcadia with long-term sorcery and let the fae do what they do naturally. No need to bargain, no need to be anywhere nearby when it happens.

*stevenneiman*

"The [bid's->bird's] form shimmered"  
"The twitches [identified] until there was a sound like bone breaking and the fae dispersed into thin air." I have no idea what that word was supposed to be, but I'm pretty sure it wasn't that  
"a few bows of dead wood whose string appeared to {be} crafted from wind."  
"So [wilful->willful]."  
"Commander Jwahir, [one] his Senior Tribune"

"Immediately they scattered in all directions, which unfortunately [involved->included] down the path of Nauk's own retreat."

"It has a bigger draw on the wards [that->than] the last band put together."

I love how Masego's only problem with being called in to fight against an abomination from beyond reality is that it interrupts his experiments. That bit at the end was certainly a threat just about anyone would take seriously though.

*AVR*

More typos

almost dumbstruck look

almost dumbstruck looks (or 'an almost dumbstruck look')

the Land Resplendant."

the Land Resplendent."

one his Senior Tribune

his Senior Tribune

I wonder just how much of that ability to rewrite spells on the fly is Masego's own skill and how much is his name. Though the threat looked to be all his.

*Alegio*

A little short but damn I needed some of this, and what better than some badass asskicking of other dimension monsters?

*Kylen*

I feel this was a great chapter. I love seeing the Fifteenth holding down the fort while Cat tasks care of other equally important business.

*Twifire*

meanwhile, still waiting for Killian to get her wings.

*Morgenstern*

>> The twitches identified until there was a sound like bone breaking < "intensified", not identified.. 🙄

*Morgenstern*

>> Commander Jwahir, one his Senior Tribune after – well, even now thinking of that too much was likely to make him lose control, so he forced his thoughts out of that path. <<

"one" = very unclear what that should be...  
"one of this Senior Tribunes" ?  
"once his Senior Tribune" ?  
"now his Senior Tribune" ?

*Unseelie*

"sappers huddling around them in quiet clusters"  
Sappers quiet? What?

Also Kilians hair must be longer than I thought, considering she could brush back a strand.

*vietnamabc*

Oh man really got buddy cops vibe from Kilian and Nauk.

ALKATYN

REREADERS COMMENTS BELOW. CONTAINS SPOILERS  
Probably best not to read if you are reading this story for the first time, but hey, I'm not your boss, you do you

—

Interesting to reread the description of the Fae we get here in the context of the later chapters. Here they mention there being potentially 4 courts, but so far we've only seen Summer and Winter. Also the wild hunt is mentioned here and in earlier chapters but not much afterwards.

(Side note, I'm confused by the relationship between the Elves and the Fae. I thought earlier they were the same thing but maybe not?)

The description of Killian looking at the Fae with longing hints at the later plot of her wanting to perform the ritual to become more Fae. Maybe shes less comfortable with her mixed blood than shes let on.

Apprentice gets a good moment. Whats the opposite of worfing? Turns up to kill off big scary enemies very easily.

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## Heroic Interlude: Arraignment

*"Sixty-seven: putting an arrow in a villain during their monologue is a perfectly acceptable method of victory. Heroes*

*believing otherwise do not get to retire."*

– Two Hundred Heroic Axioms, unknown author

Delos was organized in tiers. It reminded Hanno of the city he'd been born in, Arwad. Smaller than Smyrna, the capital of the Thalassocracy, it had been even more strictly regimented than the larger city. There were differences, though, that grew more apparent the longer he spent here. In Arwad people lived and died in the citizenship tier they'd been born to, while in Delos positions in the Secretariat and the attending privileges were... fluid. The city itself was arranged to reflect this: behind the walls, districts were built on clockwise platforms that spiralled higher and thinner until they reached the House of Ink and Parchment. The district where one lived was determined by committees of Secretariat, the arrangements subject to monthly review according to performance and seniority. A botched report could see you lowered by a district, reaching fifty years in the civil service could earn you a manse in the shade of the city's centre of power.

The way the city had been built had made it easy to defend in the siege. The Tyrant's forces had broken through the gates once and found the lowest district turned into a killing field, the stairways up to the second district collapsed or barred as the walls of the houses above effectively became a set of inner walls. The Helikean madman had nearly won anyway. It was not his professional army he'd sent as the first wave: only mercenaries and forced conscripts from the people of Atalante. The sheer disregard the Tyrant had spent their lives with had almost managed to buckle the defences, until Hanno had intervened with his associates. Revealing there were heroes in the city had been tipping his hand early, but it was better than allowing Delos to fall. Blooding his team had been necessary, anyway. The sisters had never seen full scale battle before and the Valiant Champion had only ever worked alone. What the Bard did or did not know was buried under a sea of bad liquor, but to his understanding her Role was not meant for fighting.

As for him? To be the White Knight was to be an instrument of war in the hands of the Heavens. His years in the Chamber of Borrowed Lives had shown him the Role behind his Name, even as his skills grew, and made his hazy understanding of this into an irrefutable fact. Hanno was the veteran of a hundred battles, each more desperate than the last, but he'd not spilled blood himself before that day. Or perhaps he had. The sorceries of the Gigantes were beyond the comprehension of men, even those touched by the Gods Above. The Tyrant's response to the repulsing of his first attack had been... unexpected, though not entirely unforeseen. The walls of Delos were sixty feet high and almost half as deep, the most impressive curtain walls in the Free Cities by a fair margin, which made the city brutally costly to assault. The villain, instead of preparing to starve out the defenders, had

instead built a set of large stone towers and filled them with siege engines.

The Secretariat had been sceptical these could be a threat and denied him the permit to launch a sortie to disrupt the construction. The Bard had run around their table and tipped over their inkwells in protest, which had gotten all of them thrown out as well as fined for "disruption of order", "miscreantism" and "wanton waste of Secretariat resources". Hedge and Ash had been quite displeased with her afterwards, but the White Knight did not judge. The Tyrant, once the towers were built, had linked them with rope bridges and brought forward the prisoners. Six hundred and sixty-six per tower, men and women and children from Atalante. And just like that, as Hanno watched from the walls, the Tyrant had them butchered like animals. Sacrificed so that the ground around the towers would rise into the air, floating until it was above the height of Delos' walls. They'd been bombarding the city ever since, night and day. The Hedge Wizard, tanned face paling in horror, had tried to compose herself by noting Praesi mages would have done better. They'd only have needed half as many sacrifices per tower.

They'd lost the first district again a fortnight later after Helikean infantry forced the gate under the cover of siege engines, and if the Champion had not fought her way through the host until she could hold the gates by herself for a bell the city might well have fallen. Hanno had led the counterattack of the beleaguered defenders from the ranks, the Ashen Priestess covering the host with her power so that any wound not mortal would heal within moments. It still might not have been enough, had her sister Hedge not hypnotized the Helikean officers into giving a hundred contradicting orders to their men. The Tyrant's soldiers had been driven out, then the iron gate melted and fused with the stone so it could no longer open. It would not be enough. Hence why Hanno was here on the walls, waiting for a permit.

"You could at least look like you're brooding," the Wandering Bard complained. "At best you're contemplative."

Aoede's feet were dangling off the walls, her ever-present flask in hand. He could smell the hard liquor from where he stood, the breeze carrying it like some toxic fume. The Wandering Bard looked like a hundred other girls from Nicae, full-figured and with dark curls going down to her back, but the stained leathers and the lute slung over her back set her apart. So did the way her liver had yet to kill her. Every Named learned the trick to burn poison out of their bodies early in their career and it could be used to sober yourself up, but as far as he could tell she didn't use it. Interesting, though not as much as the way she sometimes moved between places faster than should be possible. Aoede often acted the fool, but she knew too much to be harmless.

Of all the heroes in his band, she was the one he was wariest of. The others had their motivations worn on their sleeves, but the Bard? Behind the haze of drunkenness there was an intent he had yet to figure out.

"Brooding is pointless," Hanno said in tradertalk. "If something distresses you, act upon it. Otherwise you surrender all right to complain."

"So speaks the Choir of Judgement," she said. "Though you're fairly moderate for one of theirs. Most would have executed the upper Secretariat and taken command of the siege after our little tower episode."

He eyed her silently for a moment.

"I do not judge," he finally said. "That is not my Role."

"You're going to be a fun one, I think," Aoede grinned.

Hanno wasn't quite sure how to take that, so he let the matter go.

"Do you have a reason for seeking me out?" he asked.

"Secretariat just validated your permit," the Bard said. "Tonight's the night."

The White Knight looked upwards, at the floating towers and the people manning them.

"Good."

—

The earth under the towers gave a dim red glow in the dark, though it was not enough that torches and magelights were not used all over the floating platforms. The moon was near-gone tonight and behind clouds to boot, so the dark silhouette of the massive eagle was not greeted with shouts of alarm. Hedge was as graceless in this form as when she was human, but she managed a landing at the feet of the easternmost tower without crashing into the wall. The other three heroes riding her back, tied to it with ropes, slid down quietly. The Bard was gone again, no one knew where. Hanno adjusted the longsword at his belt when the moment he touched solid ground and put on his barbute. The solid steel helmet with the T-shaped opening lacked the protection of a visor, which most warriors preferred when wearing plate as he was, but the White Knight preferred the better visibility. The Champion and the Priestess came to his side a moment later.

Though they were both women, the two were a study in differences. The Ashen Priestess was tall and slender where the Champion was short and bulky, the first aggressively serene where the second

always wore a sunny smile. The only commonalities were the tanned skin common to Levant and the Free Cities as well as his own native Ashur and the dark hair – though Priestess wore hers short while Champion kept hers in a thick braid that reached halfway down her back. As befitting of a martial Named the Champion was decked in plate even thicker than his own, her helmet forged to look like a snarling badger. Ash, as her more gregarious sister insisted she should be called, wore a mere coat of silvery mail covering a padded tunic. He could feel the power wafting from it, though it was not sorcery. Names like the Priestess' relied on the magic of priests instead of mages, that gift of the Heavens that wove miracles beyond understanding.

The shape of the massive eagle shuddered, then collapsed into a kneeling woman. The blood relation between the Hedge Wizard and the Priestess could be seen with even cursory examination, the two sisters sharing much of the cast of their face as well as their build. The eyes were where they differed the most. Ash's hickory-like eyes were common in the Free Cities but Hedge's eclectic arcane bag of tricks had come at a cost: one of her eyes was blue, the other a vivid shade of yellow. The mage's colourful patchwork robes were covered with barely-visible arcane symbols and more pockets than she could possibly be needing. Hedge stayed kneeling for a moment, then coughed out a few feathers.

"Gods," she gasped. "I'm going to be craving rabbit for weeks."

Champion helped her up to her feet, then clapped her back. Hanno saw the mage repress a wince.

"Eagle trick, very great," the Levantine heroine said, her tradetalk heavily accented. "Witch can have many rabbits after victory."

"Wizard," Hedge corrected absent-mindedly. "It's a genderless noun."

The Champion ignored that as cheerfully as she usually did.

"We shouldn't linger," Priestess said. "We'll be seen."

Hanno cleared his throat quietly to draw their attention.

"Swiftmess will be of the essence," he said. "If they cut the bridges between the towers, this will get much more difficult."

"Kill invaders quick," the Champion agreed. "Then go back for parade."

"You can fill out the paperwork for that, if you want one," Hedge muttered under her breath.



The White Knight grimaced at the thought. It would take at least a fortnight to get the form to request the request form.

"You know the plan," he said. "Let's end this for good."

They moved seamlessly, what they lacked in experience made up by the instincts of their Names. The door at the bottom of the tower was barred but the greataxe the Champion used – almost as tall as she was, and used single-handedly with her large shield on the other hand – smashed it down with a single swing. The hall behind it was swarming with Helikean infantry but Hanno did not waste time engaging them. The Priestess and the Champion would take care of it. Calmly unsheathing his longsword, the White Knight headed for the stairs. A cluster of soldiers tried to get into his way, shields raised, but a trickle of power to his legs had him smashing into the mass of them like a trebuchet stone. They scattered under the impact and Hedge hurried behind him, dropping a ball of multi-coloured light in their midst that exploded into bindings. His first kill of the night came when a spearman atop the stairs thrust the tip towards his head. The flat of his blade slapped away the shaft, then a twist of the wrist buried the point into the man's throat. Without stopping he flicked out the sword, the Wizard pushing the body below when it fell on her.

Hedge's assessment had been that the ritual room would be close to the middle of the tower and she was proved correct: a heavily barred iron door with glowing runes on it was the only thing on the second level. Letting the Wizard finagle her way through the wards would have taken too long and he could already hear soldiers rushing downstairs, so Hanno drew on his Name. The Light flooded his veins, harsh like a desert wind hollowing out his insides, and it wreathed his hand in a gauntlet. He punched through the iron like it was parchment, ripping out the bar holding the door in place on the other side.

"That's one way to do it," Hedge said.

She hurried inside anyway. The room was covered with ritual symbols, painted in what he was fairly sure was blood. In the centre, surrounded by a pentagram whose every corner bore line joining the broader web of runes, was a single perfect disc of obsidian.

"Stoneglass," the Wizard grimaced. "Of *course* they'd use the most unstable kind of anchor available."

"Is this a problem?" Hanno asked.

"There's a not insignificant chance the ritual will blow up instead of converting," she said.

The White Knight frowned.

"How not insignificant?"

"Eh," Hedge said. "It'll work out. Probably."

He did not think that had been meant to be reassuring, which was good because he was not reassured in the slightest. Before he could reply, the mage muttered something under her breath and strode into the symbols. Immediately a dozen orbs of red light appeared in the air, but the Wizard snapped her fingers and a bluebird slipped out of her sleeve, wings flapping as it chirped merrily. A dozen rays of fire instantly incinerated it, but by the time its ashes fell to the ground Hedge was barely a foot away from the disk. A spherical barrier of transparent force formed around it but the Wizard whispered an incantation and it started flickering until it disappeared entirely. She deftly placed a polished pebble on the disk and backed away hastily.

"We don't have long," she said, absent-mindedly producing a little mirror to catch a ray of fire and turn it back against the orb that had shot it out. "Are the others done?"

Hanno cast an eye down the stairs. There was a plume of ash as Priestess dispersed a man out of existence with a word, and not a single person or object in the vicinity of the Champion remained unbroken. She, at least, seemed to be having a good time.

"More or less," he replied.

He whistled sharply, drawing their attention. The Champion waved, Priestess sighed and immediately began making her way up. Hanno's attention turned to the stairs leading above and he frowned. He'd heard soldiers earlier and prepared himself to cover Hedge's back, but none had arrived. That was not a good sign. The White Knight put a spring to his step and emerged on the third floor, which was abandoned. There was a pair of unmanned ballistae and racks full of projectiles as well as a set of stairs leading to the roof, but no enemies. The threshold to the side led to the rope bridge linking this tower to the next one and he immediately moved towards it. The arrow whistled an inch to the left of his head, the soldiers on the other side of the bridge already in formation. That was no issue, but the way two of them seemed prepared to cut out the bridge was. Instead of pouring more reinforcements into the fight below, the Helikeans had retreated in good order and positioned themselves to cut off their losses if necessary. How unpleasantly competent of them.

Barely a heartbeat had passed since the arrow clattered against stone and Hanno's mind quickened. He would not make it across the bridge in time, which would endanger the entire operation. He would not make it across the bridge in time on *foot*. The White Knight was moving forward before he even thought of it, Name pulsing inside of him. The winds howled through his veins, carving their marks.

**"Ride,"** he whispered.

Light roiled violently by his side, taking shape and flesh until a horse stood – without breaking stride Hanno hoisted himself on it, extending his hand so that the lance of light would form inside it. The horse moved swifter than any mortal mount could have, across the rope bridge within three breaths. The lance pieced through the first soldier's torso, flesh wafting smoke, and a sword stroke sent the other one's head tumbling to the ground. He'd moved quickly enough the Helikeans were too surprised to immediately attack. Hanno let go of the lance, allowing it to disperse, and the horse's hooves caved in the head of the man at the centre of the enemy formation. A heartbeat later the mount was gone and he dropped to his feet, landing gracefully even in plate.

"Fucking Hells," one of the archers in the back exhaled, knocking an arrow.

The longsword cut through both the bow and his throat in the same swing.

"Retreat," an officer barked. "Collapse the next-"

He swallowed his tongue before he could finish, clawing at his throat as he choked. Hedge had caught up. There'd been twelve soldiers, before he'd crossed the bridge. Now there eight, seven when he caught a man's blade and broke it before his hand snaked out to grab him by the neck. His grip strengthened, the cracking sound heralding another death. These were Helikeans, though. The descendants of the same soldiers who had waged war on the mightiest nation as a single city-state and forced the man to surrender or see Salia burn to the ground. They did not flinch or fail. One allowed his blade to run him through to keep it stuck as the two remaining archers took aim again – only for the first to twitch, then disperse into a cloud of ashes that had the other coughing. Priestess had arrived. By the time the Champion had crossed the bridge with her axe raised, there was no one left alive on that side of the tower. The other two heroines made their way more slowly.

"Kill everyone," the Levantine complained. "Like hog."

"What do pigs have to do with this?" Hedge blinked.

"She means we hogged the kills," Ash said.

"Yes," Champion agreed enthusiastically. "You all big hogs."

"Would you stop calling me a-" Hedge began, tone irritated, before Hanno cleared his throat.

"You can take point, Champion," he told the short woman. "We need to get to the westernmost tower and *fast*."

There were seven towers, in all. The Wizard's overtaking of the ritual on this one would take care of roughly half, but for the destruction to be complete they would need to do the same on the other side. They were on the third story now, where all the rope bridges would lead, so at least there would be no need to move around. That did not simplify matters as much as Hanno would have thought, as he found out. By the time they cleared the third tower, the one they'd landed on had begun to move. There was a deafening sound as it rammed itself into the second tower, half-collapsing but continuing to push it into the third one. At the fourth they found the bridge out already cut when they arrived. Hedge would not be able to turn into the giant eagle again until dawn, and she lacked another form that would carry them all. Priestess managed to craft a thin line of solid light for them to walk across while getting peppered with arrows. The Champion took three in the chest but her Name was remarkably robust: it barely slowed her down. Less than an hour had passed when they arrived to the last tower, but it had still taken much longer than he would have liked.

Behind them three towers had impacted into one large ruin, but the central one was barely touched. Hedge would have to add some momentum to the conversion on this side if they wanted to break the central tower, which she informed him would increase those "not insignificant" chances of blowing up. The seventh tower was already deserted when they arrived, the rope bridge that used to lead to it having been cut from the sixth tower's side. Magelight could be seen shining through the stairs that led below.

"This is a trap," Priestess said.

"Not even a subtle one," the Wizard added.

"We mighty," Champion argued. "Trap feeble and dim, like Procer soldier."

"It doesn't matter," Hanno said. "We need that tower moving."

And so down they went. There was no iron door here, only a single hall that took up the entire inside of the tower. A banquet hall, as it happened. There was a long table set there, set with a feast that would have fed three dozen people – and it was still warm, by the looks of it. There were five seats set, and one was already filled. The Bard waved.

"You lot really took your time," Aoede said. "I've been here like, forever."

The only other person in the room laughed. Behind the table the same ritual array that Hanno had seen before was reproduced in

painstaking detail, save for one difference: at the centre of symbols, the obsidian disk was set on a ridiculously gaudy throne flanked by leering gargoyles. One where a boy was lounging lazily. He couldn't have been more than seventeen, but he looked frail for that age. His limbs were thin and his skin unhealthily pale, his body topped by wispy brown curls bearing a crown of gold with jewels set in them. The boy had a sceptre of ivory across his lap, with a roaring gold lion's head. The Tyrant of Helike smiled at them, his ugly red eye twitching.

"So you'd be the White Knight, then," the boy mused. "And sundry sidekicks. By all means, sit. I've had a meal prepared for you."

"The wine is great," the Bard said. "Fruity, with a hint of arsenic."

"You've had enough of it to kill several villages," the Tyrant commented. "I'm actually impressed."

"Pheasant look good," Champion said.

"Poisoned," Hedge hissed at her in a low voice. "The word you're looking for is *poisoned*."

Hanno ignored them, calmly making his way down the stairs. The villain stirred on his throne, looking at him.

"Is this the part where you rail at my Evil ways?" he asked. "I've been looking forward to that."

"I do not judge," the White Knight said.

The silver coin appeared in his open palm, as it always did. As a child, Hanno had seen the laws of men fail. He'd believed in the citizenship tiers, before he'd seen what they did to his mother. And yet Ashur was on the side of Good, was it not? So many places across Calernia were, and yet injustice was rampant. The thought had tormented him, as a child. How could one tell which laws were just and which were not? Picking and choosing was... imperfect. One's discernment could never be flawless. It was constrained by the events of one's life, the limits of one's intellect. Hanno could have, he supposed, destroyed the laws he'd seen destroy his mother. But what would he have replaced them with? His own beliefs, as fallible as those of the men and women who'd crafted the laws he railed against? That was not rectifying an evil. It was replacing it with a different shade of the same. But he'd found an answer, hadn't he? He flipped the coin, watched it spin in the air. It landed on his palm. The crossed silver swords, not the laurels. The Seraphim had rendered their judgement.

"Kairos Theodosian, Tyrant of Helike," the White Knight said, tone eerily calm. "The Choir of Judgement has looked upon the sum of your existence, and found you wanting."

Heat flooded his veins, lighting up his senses. For once, everything felt *right*.

"The verdict is removal from Creation."

The boy cackled madly.

"Now *that's* the stuff, hero," he said.

The Tyrant rose to his feet, twirling his sceptre.

"Bard, play something ominous," he ordered.

Aoede raised a finger, drained the rest of her cup, then picked up her lute. Every other time she'd played in front of Hanno it had sounded like she was committing musical murder but this once, the song ran true. Deep and urgent and dark, like death circling. He almost shivered.

"Your soldiers are dead," the Priestess said, standing by his side.

"You are alone," the Wizard said, hands already tracing runes.

"Your skull make cup," the Champion enthused. "Get me many lovers."

The boy grinned, red eye burning.

"I am the Tyrant of Helike," he said. "Dead or not, *they are in my service*."

The villain's sceptre pulsed gold and made a sound like a gong ringing. Hazy silhouettes formed in ranks in front of him. Soldiers, all of them. Ranks upon ranks filled the room and they unsheathed their swords, strung their bows. Lances were raised and horses whinnied.

"Shit," Hedge cursed to herself. "We got monologued. Never let them finish the monologue, Hedge, that's how they get you."

The soldiers moved and the White Knight charged. There was a sheen of light to his sword, and not even spectres were beyond his ability to cut. He sidestepped a lance, cut through the apparition's belly and carved through the head of the man-at-arms behind it. The heat built up inside of him, spilling out in motes of power as he killed his way through the host. The Hedge Wizard spat out a stream of smoke that enveloped the spectres in front of her as Priestess wove a circle of sunlight around her that burned the soldiers whenever they neared it. The Champion bashed a spectre's face with her shield, apparently indifferent to the fact that they were intangible. She was not, as far as he could tell, even using her name. The Tyrant's crown lit up and shot a beam of red light at him, because naturally the madman would turn

his regalia into a magical weapon, and Hanno grit his teeth as his plate began melting. If it was not lethal, then it was just pain and obstruction. Those he could deal with.

Hedge threw a small ball of fur at the Tyrant that turned into an angry ferret, distracting enough by clawing at his face that the beams ceased. Now would be the time to call on another of his aspects, he knew. But even with the villain distracted, spectres kept appearing faster than they could be killed and the Champion was beginning to get buried. The moment she was, the sisters would be under assault and it was all downhill from there. There were on the Tyrant's chosen ground, and Hanno had seen enough heroes die in the Chamber to know how this would end.

"Hedge," he called out. "Crash the tower."

"We're still *in* the tower," she reminded him.

"Yes," he said patiently. "There's no way we could survive that. *Therefore we will.*"

"Do it, Alkmene," Priestess hissed. "We can't keep this up."

The Wizard cursed again and leapt forward, turning into a sparrow before she hit the ground. She began rising in the air but archers took aim and Hanno hurried towards her – too late, he'd be too late. One after another, the arrows clattered uselessly against the Champion's great shield as she charged *through* a spectre to get there in time. Casually, she decapitated an apparition and kicked the intangible body into another. The sparrow flew through the melee, weaving around swings and arrows to land in a crash on the obsidian disk. The Tyrant threw a now-dead ferret at her, but taking the stoneglass off the throne had been enough. The tower, after a heartbeat, began to fall. The villain frowned thoughtfully.

"I had something for this," he said. "This tower will be your grave? No, Anaxares said that was second-rate. This isn't over yet?"

The gargoyles flanking the throne animated and began flapping their stone wings, grabbing the Tyrant by the shoulders. The dragged him upwards, heading for the stairs. The boy suddenly inhaled.

"Oh! *I'll get you next time, heroes!*" he said shaking his fist in their direction.

By the time the villain was out the hall, which was still falling, the spectres had dissipated into a thick mist lingering on the ground. Hanno waited until the Wizard had turned back into her proper form.

"I don't suppose putting the disk back will end the freefall?" he asked.

"With the momentum we have going?" she grimaced. "It'll blow up in our faces instantly."

The White Knight sighed. So much for the easy way.

"Everyone, gather close," he said, reaching for his Name.

They did. Hanno closed his eyes and gathered his power, waited for the beginning of the impact that would signal they'd touched the ground.

"Wait, how are you not wounded?" Hedge said. "I saw you take hits."

"Witch not so smart," Champion said. "Ghosts no real, can't hurt."

*"Ignorance is not a magical power,"* the Wizard yelled.

The White Knight felt the shudder under his feet, and instantly released all he'd gathered. The world went white.

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### *JackbeThimble*

So Calernia gets some competent heroes at last, and we get some real action for the first time this book, excellent chapter.

I remain a bit perplexed by the story structure here, with the main plot apparently playing out hundreds of miles from the protagonist.

### *Cir\_C*

I think it is setup for Black vs White Knight which will have deep ramifications for the story going forward. Seems like with Catherine being the Squire and all she will get swept up in their conflict and maybe she will be forced to make her Choice, the only Choice that truly ever matters...

### *Theo Promes*

I don't think so – these guys are competent, yeah, but they play by the rules, like the tyrant. heroic action to break the siege, epic showdown with the evil overlord, escape by the skin of their teeth out of the falling tower. Black is someone who breaks the rules, so unless there are mitigating



circumstances, I'd expect the calamities to wipe the floor with these heroes, they don't have nearly the same experience. Remember what the actual fuck ranger gets up to when she's bored, and we are talking about four of her party mates...

*Cpt. Obvious*

Ranger is on another level if you are looking at skills and power. She's many centuries old, if not millenia, and the legend other legends grew up hearing about. Remember when Captain went for a week long rampage? Grew larger than a three story house? Remember how Ranger played with her to keep her from killing to many civilians in Ater? She held back so she wouldn't kill Sabha by mistake. She didn't even use her Name powers...

Ranger is more dangerous than the rest of the Calamities together if you are only looking at straight up fighting.

What makes the rest of them so dangerous is Amadeus leadership and mind, not to forget their strong loyalty which is all but unprecedented among Villains.

*nipi*

I think all heroes except for the White Knight and Bard will perish. And they will find their way to Cat once the Tyrant is dead.

Personally I think the Tyrant will try to kill Black. Maybe in some grand plot to kill the Calamities and heroes in one fell swoop.

*Letouriste*

You're wrong cir ce, she already made her choice long ago. She's a bad guy on the evil side...I wondering if the act of killing your mentor is powering your name...in particular if the relationship between them is deep.

[Euodiachloris](#)

I'd be really interested in that particular coin toss when it comes to working as Team Black-and-White vs Evil Classic. Because Black and White are equally unconventional takes on the usual expectations of their Roles at this point in time, if in different ways.

Because I very much doubt that the majority of White Knights have had "I do not judge" as the root of their conviction before... 😊

*Cpt. Obvious*

Hanno is a hypocrite! He claims he doesn't judge and that he is leaving that to the Choir of Judgement. Thing is that Judgement can see everything about whoever they are passing judgement on and are never making a wrong judgment.

Sounds great, right? Or does it?

This is Judgement with a capital. Judgement doesn't weigh good against bad, it doesn't see gray, just black and white, guilty or innocent, and the verdict is live or die, no second chance ever.

And Hanno knows that. He also knows that very few are perfectly innocent. Almost everyone has done something that weighs on the side of Evil. It doesn't have to be much. If he flipped that coin for everyone he met a lot of good people would die. So he only uses it when confronting someone he believes is evil. So he does judge. He judged that the Tyrant was so Evil that he flipped the coin knowing what the verdict of the Choir of Judgement would be.

So Hanno definitely passes judgement on the people he meets.

[intermediarywebserial](#)

It feels set-up so that he finds someone who lands on the laurels, like maybe Squire, but even Squire knows the shit she does.

*Jeffery Wells*

It's setting the stage for the next phase. Black and the Calamities's role as precursor and guide is basically complete, but they are now in the way for the next generation to rise. Traditionally that would be solved with murder, but for Catherine to murder Black to get his Name would ruin her character. My guess is these events are leading to Black's death, so Squire can transition and gave the larger war that is building.

Also, it can't be all action all the time for the protagonist. We've gotten to the boring part of her story, where she figures out how to be a competent ruler, and the heroes side story allows for time skips without being jarring.

*Misza Mojcysz Schmidt*

That's because they weren't eradicated at the start of their carriers. Lone Swordsman and company were a n00b team, that's only a good foe to n00b villains like Squire and Heiress, not Calamities.

*danh3107*

That was so horrendously cliché it looped back around to being entertaining. How do you do it Erratic?

*Naeddyr*

That's easy: you write something so cliché, so troperific that is actually \*loops back around to being entertaining\*!

*Letouriste*

Hahaha

[Euodiachloris](#)

You left out "but, only with deft handling". 😊 Because, when it comes to Hammer Horror levels of campy cliché, you really need to know how to handle the volatile things, or they blow up in your face. XD

*stevenneiman*

It's easy. Just have everyone in the story acutely aware of the fact that it's all cliché. On one hand we have a hero specifically planning on the fact that if something is obviously impossible for any of them to survive they will get through it unscathed, and on the other a villain so trope-aware that he not only plans out his hammy one-liner but also requests dramatic background music.

*JackbeThimble*

So Delos' White Knight is also Harvey Dent?

*Nairne*

Yea. While we have Cat in the role of the Dark Knight. See? Even the naming fits (somehow). Seriously though, I can see how she flips responsibility on the White Knight. Flip a coin, butcher a bunch of people, leave dealing with the aftermath to someone else. Because they will definitely have a better solution, and he can essentially wash his hands of any flaws and problems that may arise from that.

*nipi*

Well Harvey Dent was the White Knight before becoming Twoface.

And Cat will be whatever Callow needs her to be.

*Morgenstern*

Uhm... if I remember correctly it was the Joker that gave Harvey Dent the coin tick while making him into Twoface... no?

Basically, the White Knight IS already Twoface, unless the coin toss is actually meddled with by Heavenly Powers That Be (he did say something of laurels – although... that doesn't necessarily have to mean there are even laurels on THIS specific coin, come to hink of it ^^). Would be funny if the coin actually stopped effing working with someone he really, really would have liked to kill (even though he "doesn't judge") and/or if he could be made to doubt what he did so far... aaaaall those lives taken for a coin toss, my ass, yeah.

*darkening*

"There's no way we could possibly survive that. Therefore we will"

heh, I love how important genre savviness is in this series. And the tyrant is \*such\* a great character. Can't wait to see what he'll do next, I mean, half of creation isn't arrayed against him, so he can't fail yet.

*Cir\_C*

At first I was a little bummed that this was an Interlude, but somehow this ended up being really great set-up for the White Knight and his harem, though it seems like he also isn't interested in any of them romantically, which is also a trope just the same. What the Guide is really good at is taking the obvious tropes from various genres and make them so obvious that they then have a completely original feel to them because they are super important to the background lore.

And this talk of Names vs Roles I think is incredibly important to the background lore/story that is at play throughout and beyond the events of the Guide. The White Knight, for instance, is the Name a person takes up/comes into, which in-universe gives them limited super powers, either active powers called Aspects or the passive powers like the ability to detox poisons as mentioned in the chapter, and marking them out as individuals of some import in the greater story. But even beyond that, what Role someone plays in that larger story seems to be far more mercurial and even more powerful and influential but in a subtler way. I think the best example of this is Black vs. the previous Black Knight. Black remarks that he really can't get much power from his Name, he can maybe manifest a spear-sized bolt of Name juice to use as an attack whereas his predecessor could summon a massive storm of Name power to fight. Yet, it is Black who has helped lead the most sustained period of Praesi military success in generations and has proven to be one of the most capable individuals in the story. This leads me to believe that this is because Black's Role in the Guide itself has caused this to be the case. And what is his role? His Role is the Mentor to the Protagonist, Catherine, not merely a stock Villain or a backwater warlord as Black himself once said. It is more important for a

Named person in the Guide to be in tune with their Role than their Name, it is what provides them with strength their Name couldn't even hope to measure up to. I posit that this is just further demonstrates that Guide is at once a fun and engaging story but also a brilliant commentary on the nature of story-telling, by exposing and internalizing the meta-narrative devices authors use, the Guide becomes in truth a Practical Guide to Story-telling just as much as to Evil.

But I must admit I'm just shooting from the hip and wouldn't be surprised if I wildly over-thought all of this...

*AVR*

Black was a great general before Catherine made her way on to the scene. Focusing on what works rather than on what powers Names seems to have made him great.

Kairos the Tyrant seems to be the opposite. He's thrown himself into the role which powers his Name and can summon an army of ghosts in moments without even being out of breath afterwards. It doesn't bode well for him long term.

Hanno the White Knight seems to be between the two. More power than Black, but not army or storm-summoning level, he summons a magic horse and fights well, and apparently he can protect a small close group from massive damage when he is prepared and has the story on his side. He seems less devoted to his role than the Bard expected, anyway.

Typos

Names like the Priestess'  
(Priestesses, Priestess's or Priestess, not Priestess' here)

the coughed  
then coughed

knocking an arrow.  
nocking an arrow.

they arrived to the  
they arrived at the

There were on  
They were on

*Kallikrates*

Wrt. Black: You can also look at it as he was living through his own backstory, while being one of the protagonists at the same time (The champion and love interest for the innkeepers daughter on her way to become empress).

It is a story telling classic to branch a story with younger characters while showing more senior characters in more of a support role.

*Daemion*

"Ignorance is not a magical power" ... it is, if belief shapes stories and reality is a story.

I quite like the new heroes. Competent, somewhat funny and they don't have that holier than thou attitude of the previous batch. The Tyrant is just having fun and doing whatever he wants for the hell of it.

And soon the Calamities will walk into all of that. It'll be explosive. 😊

[mgmtheo](#)

"Praesi mages would have done better. They'd only have needed half as many sacrifices per tower."

Good to see Imperial efficiency is well respected. Can't have the filthy do-gooders getting the wrong ideas.

*agumentic*

"Sixty-seven: putting an arrow in a villain during their monologue is a perfectly acceptable method of victory"

The reverse is also true, as we all seen.

*nipi*

No killing a hero is never acceptable. That's why that job falls to villains. However doing so during a monologue is effective all the same.

*Burnsy*

Hey, now these guys actually seem like a likeable, competent group of Heroes. The Tyrant is really committed to stereotypical villainy, but he makes it work.

The Calamities are going to rip these poor sods apart.

Also I notice that the naming scheme for Heroic Interludes has switched from fencing terms to legal ones. That's interesting, wonder if the naming scheme for Villainous Interludes will get a shake up too.

[Brent Chance](#)

The theming on the interlude names is likely due to:

- A fencer being a type of Swordsman.
- The White Knight being an agent of Judgement.

*Burnsy*

I assumed so too, although its interesting that Cordelia's interludes also got fencing terms last book. Following the pattern I'd have thought that her's would be based on something like chess terminology. Maybe EE just bases it on the main Hero/Villain that Cat will be facing?

This is just me musing and rambling, by the way. I just find naming patterns interesting, like the "All According To..X's Plan" arc in Book 1.

*stevenneiman*

Burnsey: Actually, the second interlude for Cordelia was called Precipitation, implying possibly a weather theme for her interludes. I can't recall what the first one was called.

*Burnsy*

Ah, but that was a regular old Interlude, primarily Anarxes. And since it was about the Tyrant and called 'Precipitation' and then he did that whole mass destruction thing with a storm in the prologue, it was probably foreshadowing that.

*Morgenstern*

> The Calamities are going to rip these poor sods apart. <

I sure hope they do. =D And if one of them SHOULD die in the process, I seriously hope they get a DESERVING end and not just some shitty offing by hero because hero. That would suck so much, this being a story NOT about the "Good Heroes", but one making most all of us rooting for the other ones who are the real protagonists, in main and side story, as well as the ones driving this whole story of "new Practical Evil" and how to do it... (and winning!? We hope...)

*Morgenstern*

Hm.. come to think of that... after all the description of Scribe's relationship with Black and all the foreshadowing for "Black's demise now, in a week, a month, or a decade"... and her not being truly one of them (according to the "Dramatis Personae"), but only closely related, probably not really Evil either... I can totally see her doing the Page move, where Page didn't succeed... popping up in front of Black to take the killing stroke in her own breast – and fucking things seriously up in other respects because of one

less Spymistress being around that was rather important to the whole Black('s) organization... Well, or simply dishing out one hell of a revenge right-back-at-you. 😊 (And whatever would Ranger do? Or Malicia.. or the other Calamities.. this would seriously not just involve Cat, not by far... She's nowhere near either unless the fighting moves to Callow once again, because she is there...)

On the other hand... if Cat can resurrect herself... I'm seriously wondering and have been for a while why Black has the extra title of "Carrion Lord"... we didn't yet get an explanatory flashback for that one. =/

### *Morgenstern*

I mean, yeah, of course, it might just be that he has left such a massive trail of corpses in the past... but that would be a rather lame explanation for such an extra name. Also, higher necromancy seems to be quite common in the higher ranks of Evil, not just by the examples of Gods-know-how-many former Tyrants/Emperors/Empresses... always destroy the corpse and make sure they cannot rise... But yeah, this new hero bunch now has an Ash priestess... it just won't fit in my head that of all the tropes this trope of the villain coming back should NOT apply, if they The Practicals even fall at all, what with this being THEIR story, too (and not just Cat's, judging by the title, whatever the character summary says about "main protagonists" and listing all the older ones only under "Praes").

### *Morgenstern*

Hm... further thought: We have some a multitude of hints by now that "the Uncivil Wars" are incoming – somehow I for one seriously doubt that is all just about civil war of the Free Cities against each other, and very much suspect that we will also see an civil war in PRAES upcoming. That, though, is the exact silver lining Black has hinted at in the extra-chapter on his and Malicia's meeting, that he simply does not dare to hope for (yet), because we all know how the Gods like to smash such hopes and overconfidence... better to prepare for the worst. War against the Truebloods would be directly down Black's alley, though – and Catherine is very much steering that way, if you ask me (as is Malicia in using Cat to probably get rid of Heiress and to get rid of Tasia in the process (potentially by other means, though), too). Heiress and Cat seem absolutely destined to clash again. And what can that mean other than a war against the nobles backing Heiress? If Cat doesn't totally fudge it because of Fae invasion, vengeance is finally incoming... and that will mean a carrion trail... unless we should surprisingly really see only a sociopolitical clash because of "seek new allies"



blah. Somehow I doubt that will go over all that well, though. Especially with Cat being so unsure of what exactly even is her alley there and how to make it work and then the Fae meddling on top, stacking cards against her once more and FOR Heiress in giving her time to get that much closer to her goals. All is hinting at a culmination of Nobles' Plans in the span of one year. I don't see even Malicia getting past that through only diplomacy, however brilliant and ruthless, and embarrassing her opponents to de-fang them. The title theme "Uncivil Wars" would seem to second a BRUTAL clash, militarily-so, not only politically backstabbing-wise. Simply defusing that after all this foreshadowing and with the background of the other two books? I don't see it that working quite well. It would be too little badassery and shit-hitting-the-fan in there, if all just ends in a tiny logical puff and "all is well without (actual) war"...

### *The quietist*

Gotta say The Tyrant might be my new favourite character. He just seems to enjoy his Role so much he really is having "a jolly good time".

### *nipi*

Exactly! Come now and enlist in the Helikean army! Places in the front row guaranteed.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Pass. Although, I might choose the Role of Cannon Fodder if the alternative is Seeker of Licenses and Forms in Triplicate by Last Monday. 🤪

### *Burnsy*

Double posting but I was struck by a sudden train of thought and I need to get this idea/theory now. This also got massively out of control and rambly, apologies.

So I was thinking about how these guys seem more like an actual heroic party, while Willy's guys were, frankly, a complete mess. Then it struck me, William was The LONE Swordsman. The fact that he was running around in a five-man band instead of going solo was even something Cat complained about. He was never supposed to be a leader, he wasn't meant to be the protagonist in the story the Gods had planned, Cat was!

According to the Gods plan, Cat was supposed to choose to become a hero the night that she became the Squire. Her story was supposed to go something along the lines of; making a heroic escape from the Black Knight's villainous clutches, fleeing to Summerholm and joining up with the Lone Swordsman.

The two of them fight and kill all the Squire claimants (accidentally ensuring that Heiress becomes Amadeus's inheritor) and then run off and join up with the rest of the heroic crew. Eventually Willy slinks off to do his broody loner thing while the rest of them go on some adventure that bonds them forever etc

The thing is, Cat's whole thing with the 15th was taking a bunch of talented people with crippling flaws and helping put them in positions where they reinforced each others weaknesses and became a greater whole. Instead of fostering division like William, she'd have got the Bumbling Conjuror, Thief, Hunter and TWB working together as a real team.

Then in the end of the Book 2 equivalent she and her group become the first to kill a Calamity in Summerholm and then head South to fight Heiress, Apprentice and the Fifteenth Legion. They team up with the Exiled Prince, setting up for them to help reclaim his throne in the Book 3 equivalent, and then William sends word that Heiress has summoned and unleashed a demon and they race to Liesse just in time to fight and defeat her. Apprentice escapes, swearing revenge, and William summons the angel of contrition. Cat ascends to the Queen of Callow and begins preparations to lead the next Crusade.

That was the plan anyway. Unfortunately for the Gods, Cat said screw that and now they have an incipient Dread Empress waiting to climb the Tower.

*Jaertin*

I like it! Explains why this White Knight got Hyperbolic Time Chamber training. Cat was supposed to take up the mantle of White Knight and lead the Callow adventurer party, and eventually take down Amadeus. Then suddenly they were short a White Knight and the heroic party was in shambles with Lone forced into the wrong role.

I think the Lone Swordsman was supposed to be their Sixth Ranger, Mamoru type person. The guy who shows up conveniently when the fight is turning against the heroes, then leaves, and is mysterious/more morally ambiguous than the main party. Probably supposed to be Cat's love interest too.

*Jaertin*

Come to think of it, I suspect Apprentice was also "meant" to join the heroes. Heiress already has magical means so he's not a great fit with her. The Bumbling Conjuror, however, was an obvious filler, and a filler means something else was meant to take that place. It even fits thematically, if Apprentice joins the heroes then with him, Cat and the Hunter you have three students turning against their evil masters. That might be a

significant pattern in addition to generally making the heroic party the anti-calamities.

Even Apprentice's half-demonic upbringing works in eventually making him the Merlin to Cat. Of course realistically Apprentice would never turn against his loving parents, but the Angels are noted to have a very poor understanding of human nature.

*stevenneiman*

I had noticed the bit about how bad Angels are with people skills too. Supposedly there are tons of stories about demons trying to masquerade as humans and being found out by some fundamental misunderstanding of human nature, but so far demons are two for two with trying to trick humans (the corrupted pony and the fake demon), while the Heavens are zero for one with their failure to convert Cat. They even had the advantage that it took a while for her to even make her own decisions before she could choose to stand up to them.

*Yitzi*

I'm not so sure that Cat isn't following the plan. After all, she did say near the end of book 2 that she felt that Creation itself wanted her to succeed, and that doesn't really fit if she's not playing her proper role (and quite an important one). She's now essentially on the fence between the two sides...and in a setting like this, that is quite a significant position.

*Dianna*

That is an interesting thought. Cat is on the fences between the two, and Oh look here is the White knight and the Black knight. Both competent, both reasonably likable... I too almost think it will be like her first name dream all over again, having to choose between the sides, except in that instance, Cat basically told both of them their way wouldn't cut it, as well as telling the angels to shove it.

So while it might be an interesting thought have her, say, have to choose between the White and Black knight, she has already made her choice.

*Burnsy*

True, but I think the angels wanted her to win against Heiress because, you know, the demon summoning. Then she says suppose to be Mafie Contribute, Queen of Blades, Crusade, yadadada.

The gods above are basically a bunch of GM's desperately trying to railroad Cat back into the plot they had planned.

"What the fuck she didn't die?? We buffed the Lone Swordsman, nerfed her and set up a rule of three to give him stat bonuses. How the fuck is she still in the game?"

"No look, it's fine, we've sent an Angel of Contrition, she'll be back on track in... what do you mean she rolled a nat20 on her intimidate check!?"

*Son of Arathorn*

Haha! Wouldn't a DnD in this setting be so glorious tho? Stay bonuses for how in tune with your Role and Alignment, Unique Aspects approved by the GM according to prior, and the setting is wonderful. Anybody want to do this?

*stevenneiman*

That wasn't a grand plan for her to succeed, just her Name trying to finish its pattern of three with the LS. Of course then Akua went and screwed it up with her pet abomination and again by providing Cat with an "enemy" for the Sword in Stone trick. For a supposed archnemesis, Akua has a strong habit of accidentally helping Cat. First she maneuvered Cat perfectly into a position where all she had to do was pull off an impossible victory in the eleventh hour against non-Named, and threw in an awesome tactician ally to balance some of Cat's weaknesses at no extra charge. Then she played the bad cop to let Cat win desperately-needed support as the good cop twice, then she passively pulled Cat's ass out of the fire just by needing to beat her for the pattern of three, then she fixed Cat's Name and gave her a chance to get a sweet new set of Aspects when her extra trump card backfired (while also throwing away that mandatory victory unused), before finally providing the enemy required for Cat to steal her resurrection and defeat the Lone Swordsman once and for all. She's less of a fearsome threat to Cat's objectives and more like some kind of annoying Santa claus.

*Dragrath*

I love the argument you guys brought forth very convincing, but don't forget there are more than the gods above and their angels 😊 The powers of villains come from the gods below so Cat could very well have been breaking someone's plan yet still following a "plan". As after all, we have seen so far that the gods below want mortals to do their own thing rather than follow a script thus bonus power for add-libbing the story 😊

*cdos93*

oh wow, that makes a ridiculous amount of sense. The new heroic party also draws parallels with the "intended" group of heroes. To use the 5 Man Band trope:

Cat/White Knight as the Leader – pretty self explanatory  
Thief/Hedge as the Lancer – foil to the leader. Thief would be the Han Solo type Lancer only interested in money at first, and Hedge is the Snarker in Contrast to the strait-laced Knight  
Hunter/Champion as the Big Guy – The melee expert in each group  
Conjurer/Ash as the Smart Guy – Pretty obvious, being the magic casters of the group.  
Wandering Bard as The Chick

*NerfContessa*

If you're a Sith, sure.

Cat ain't though calling her The Cat Sith wins many a pun contest.

Luve the hedge witchzard btw.

*stevenneiman*

Interesting thought. I don't know if the plan was that precisely laid out, but it does make sense as an alternate timeline where she took part in all the same battles and won for the other side. It would also fit with the fact that she has the new Aspect Take, if it could have somehow worked retroactively to allow her to keep the allotted victories and spend them elsewhere.

Personally, I think it's more likely that what she did was throw off the Lone Swordsman such that he never had the narratively appropriate moment to win. She pushed him into a leadership role that put his Name on the fritz, and then managed to play Akua and William against each other such that their assigned victories basically canceled out. Finally, she turned the two idiots against each other one last time so that she could steal the sword in the stone, and with it William's moment of victory. Now she has not only the power and authority to rule Callow, but the stolen will of the heavens ensuring that she does, and villain or no she has the will of the people to support her claim and make this a story about her ultimate triumph. In a way she draws power from not only being the heir to Black and Malicia's pragmatism but also the power of both Good and Evil, and a Name that despite its weakness is designed to handle either and theoretically both. It's also a transitional Name, which means that she has the chance to grow into some new Name, though I'm not sure what it would be called.

*Dianna*

The Gray Knight? Catherine the Gray? Or maybe just The Knight? Not sure if the world could handle such blatant Neutrality. Though Ranger and Archer don't seem to have any particular alignment.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

When you've got a figure who tests anybody, regardless of status or allegiance by basically saying "screw convention: come at me if you think you're hard or canny enough" – you're in [uncannily Green](#) territory. Which, is technically, in Blue and Orange Morality and, therefore, doesn't actually give a flying fig about the whole Black vs White thing. 😊

Interestingly, Cat seems to have a faeish thread to her tale: she's bedding a faeblood lass, and is in the process of telling a bunch of trueborn fae to go screw themselves: her turf! "Mine! My own! My duty, my view, my people, my word! I keep what I own by whatever means I can!" is the very heart of Green. 😊

### *Barthumphries*

Warlord Catherine the Necromancer, Queen of Blades.

*nick012000*

Wait, the White Knight's a Heroic version of Two Face?

.

At least this time in a story, flipping a coin Actually have meaning. Given that angels exist.

### *Unoriginal*

Pretty much, except he may or may not have the choir of judgement vetting them before they he does the wetwork.

Pretty sure the Choir of Judgment is in on it though and I would put it at 50/50 chance that if so no one had been found innocent as of yet.

### *nehemiahnewell*

He didn't kill "the upper Secretariat" because "he does not judge." I think it's safe to say that judgement is discerning.

### *Unoriginal*

Replying to myself here, but @nehemiahnewell we don't know if he flipped the coin or not. Maybe he didn't, maybe he did. But honestly it sounds just like a being of extremes to judge

almost anyone as wanting and unworthy or at the very least in need of tough love.

*nipi*

Apparently ignorance is the greatest power of all. The madman who believes that nothing is real will be invincible.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Indeed: just look at how quickly Catherine is gaining powers thanks to the controlled ignorance Black has been fostering.

### [malphasius](#)

It seems like certain stories or patterns are locked into Creation itself. The last two books it has been the pattern of three that gave Cat so much trouble. How much do you want to bet that there is also a rule of opposites. Meaning that with both the Black and White Knights in the same general area they will have to have a one on one showdown. Of course knowing Black he will find a way to subvert this.

*stevenneiman*

Depending on the direction the story goes, it might be that Black dies setting up a way for Cat to defeat the White Knight. Suddenly, vast responsibility and power will be placed on her beyond what she expected, and she will have to figure out a way to cope. Maybe she'll even end up killing both Knights and claiming their Names, though if she did she would need to prove that it was what Amadeus wanted or she'll have the other four and a half Calamities and possibly the Dread Empress looking for payback. Not a good position for anyone to be in, even if they did somehow end up with two Names at the same time. Probably more likely that she takes on the mantle of Black Knight and just kills Hanno. We'll just have to wait and see.

*Dianna*

I think it is pretty clear that Cat is going to be the next Black knight, she had her chance to go good last book. As for two Names? How would that even work? Names are Roles, they signify the part a person plays in a story. I don't think anyone can have two Names at once, especially two Names so obviously opposed to each other. You can't be an offensive force for good, and an offensive force of evil at the same time.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

"You can't be an offensive force for good, and an offensive force of evil at the same time."

Sure you can, if you're offensive enough,

*Morgenstern*

"It takes a NOVICE to defeat a master." – If Cat would suddenly be pushed into the next name by Black dying ... no longer novice. To hell goes all that nice foreshadowing (even though that might have been purely meant for un-Named Cordelia against Empress Malicia, but... it didn't feel like it..).

But maybe I'm just turning a willfully blind eye there, because I feel Cat *\*already\** getting into Black's name as horribly inappropriately way too early. And I effing hate the "Mentors have to die" shit. Especially when Cat is NOT a hero for whom this trope was made for...

*Morgenstern*

Names are Roles? Nahnahnah... now you're mixing it all up. Names and Roles are definitely NOT the same thing. Otherwise you'd never need two names for the same thing and that would just be bullshit.

*Letouriste*

"Wizard," Hedge corrected absent-mindedly. "It's a genderless noun."

I'm just seeing too much in this or you made a feminist character?^^

In any way this chapter rocks:D really funny. I've particularly liked the banter(of course) and the depiction of Delos;)

Did the white knight see each recent hero death? He talked like he had see hundred of downfall of heroes...

You managed to make a good heroes group:) well,that's probably not as hard than their contrepast given there are a lot of inspiration for that everywhere:)

[erraticerrata](#)

Merriam-Webster's definition of wizard: "1. One who practices magic; a sorcerer or magician". No mention of gender there.

*stevenneiman*

I don't think she so much a feminist as just offended by having the incorrect term applied to her. Consider how Masego would react if someone called him a warlock, with or without capital w. Besides, there's a fair chance that witch has a Evil connotation given its negative use in the real world and the



fact that the Exiled Prince called Cat one despite her lack of any magical talent whatsoever.

*Soronel Haetir*

I'm going to laugh so hard when he flips his coin judging Cat and it turns up laurels and then he stands there confused and is killed.

*Dianna*

I think that means he has to try to take her as his Squire XD. Oh god that would be fun to see.

*Naeddyr*

There are so many ways this could go, trickery-wise too, depending how integral their "virtue" is to an angel. If Judgement really IS Judgement and IS just... Ho boy. All sorts of shenanigans can be arranged, ALL SORTS OF.

Conversely, if the choirs are just in-name-only or more political in nature (ie. the angels CHEAT), then that's a way to bring a paladin to fall through doubt...

*stevenneiman*

Or Cat will find out about the coin and just tell Masego to create an illusion of laurels. Then run him through because he doesn't think he's allowed to fight back. Alternatively, convince him to check one of his allies and then do the opposite illusion and make him kill them. That would probably be even funnier.

*1shot4living*

Or Cat with some Name trickery makes it land on its side. Shenanigans ho!

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I don't think the coin flip would be laurels. More likely for it to land on the edge and balance there. The second part of your comment could still apply

*Son of Arathorn*

Triumphant! (May she never rise) I can't wait for the patreon to get enough slaves, 1 chapter a week isnt enough for my addiction. On a side note, I wonder if Ratfaces Ex will ever return? I feel like this is the calm before the storm, watch out White Knight, you've never faced a villain like this: "Unleash the goat!"

*Morgenstern*

Eh? Ratface's Ex = Aisha? Return from where/what? o0

*Morgenstern*

Confused because as far as I know she's never been gone. Or did you just mean "more text for her"?

*GeneralChaos*

Ratface's Ex is the name of an undead explosive goat from the first book. The name the sappers actually uses is "Aishadn't Have Done That" or something, but Cat is anti-pun.

[mondsemmel](#)

Hey there, thanks for the update!

Quick reminder: I wrote some feedback on the website in a comment on another post, which might have been overlooked. It's here: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2015/03/20/summary/comment-page-1/#comment-3649>

*stevenneiman*

"Hanno adjusted the longsword at his belt [when] the moment he touched solid ground and put on his barbute."

"a pentagram whose every corner bore {a} line joining the broader web of runes" I assume it should be that and not "lines"

I really wonder whether Kairos has figured out some way to avoid losing like a classic villain or if he's going to die like Triumphant (may she never return) having won great victories but ultimately unsuccessful. He seems like he might be setting up a pattern of three with the way that he fled the scene defeated with a cheesy one-liner, but that would probably be spoiled by the fact that he was defeated by multiple enemies rather than a single nemesis.

He's far too trope-aware to not see where this is going at this stage, but at the same time he has yet to do anything to protect himself from a Heroes triumphing in the eleventh hour. Anything we know about, at least. He seems to dislike blindly following any preset patter, but at the same time he has thus far been acting like a massive ham and doing nothing to avoid the cliched path to defeat.

*Vin*

I absolutely love the Tyrant.

*Unmaker*

Classic good versus classic evil with a classic ending. Which is why Black and company do their best to subvert the sh\*\* out of the situation – they don't *want* a classic ending.

And the Bard amuses as always, but she didn't get much screen time this time.

[gianoria7](#)

The Bard always gets the appropriate screen time.  
It's even probably one of her Aspect...

*somnolentSlumber*

Most would have executed the upper Secretariat and taken command of the siege after our little tower episode."

"out" should be "our"

"Fucking Hells," one of the archers in the back exhaled, knocking an arrow.

"knocking" should be "nocking"

"Oh! I'll get you next time, heroes!" he said shaking his fist in their direction.

Should be a comma after "said"

*Dvo*

Any chance we can see some of that excess patreon money contributing to an extra chapter fund? Maybe price each extra chapter at 150 or something? Just gives extra incentive between intervals of donation goals.

[ficial](#)

Going to be interesting when the heroes eventually fight their way to Cat, the coin is tossed, and it comes up Laurels.

.

If the white knight said he fought more than a hundred battles in his experience, so, does that mean that Black and co had fought a lot, a lot more? I mean a villain's life span is naturally longer than a hero's. And Black did say that his group had put down a lot of heroes even in just a year. (But I forget the exact statistics already.)

*Soronel Haetir*

Black said that he has personally killed 23 heroes (or heroines) and orchestrated the death of more than three times that. I'm not sure where you think you saw a yearly stat.

*Morgenstern*

There was a kind-of "yearly stat" for CAT, about what she achieved in just two years... maybe the confusion stems from there?,

### Shawn Panzegraf

1) Black is going to die. He's said it himself, and knowing his end isn't exactly far off is, I think a big part of why he's gotten so paternal with Cat. He heard and acknowledged Malicia saying that was a weakness of his, one he's turned into a kind of strength, but still a weakness. Yet he doesn't change what he's doing. Malicia told Cat that Black is going down. She even gave Catherine a rough expiration date for Black. I believe Malicia is trying to save Black. Since he's going to die because he did all the wetwork when he was helping Malicia consolidate power versus the Truebloods, Malicia is out to finally destroy the Truebloods by taking down Heiress's mother, and with her the rest of the Truebloods. The fact Malicia is willing to risk Heiress reaching an endgame that would end Malicia's regime says a lot about her loyalty to Black, despite the crippling fear she constantly wrestles with. However, Malicia is pragmatic enough to realize there's a good chance she can save neither Black or herself.

In subverting the pattern of Evil Classic Dread Emperors/ Empresses, Malicia is doing something none of them ever did. She's actually putting effort into trying to ensure Praes remains in New Evil hands if/when she and the Calamities fall. Rather than allowing the New Evil Legacy created by her and the Calamities to vanish in the hands of the next Evil Classic asshole. Don't believe for an instant Malicia isn't aware Cat's been hearing "The Girl Who Climbed the Tower." So long as Cat doesn't try to cut down Malicia's time as Dread Empress, I don't believe Malicia is opposed to Cat taking over. With the Truebloods gone it could be doable...and, assuming Cat proves she can handle Callow, I see no reason why Malicia wouldn't consider Cat a viable New Evil heiress (little "h"). This is supported by Malicia taking so much interest in what Cat wants, and stepping in to help advise her/avoid making missteps in Black's absence as much as Cat will allow.

2) The White Knight was built by the Heavens to be the end of New Evil. All that experience watching thousands of conflicts between Heroes and Villains that resulted in his being so genre-savvy. It smells of an attempt to create knockoff "New Good." Except the Heavens really don't know how to take their hands off the steering wheel. Hanno might've got it done. Hanno as Grand Bitch of the Heavens is a dead man walking. Hanno has the goods to absolutely wreck the Tyrant and any other Evil Classic he runs across. He has the goods to be a pain in the ass even to New Evil, but while he might bring down Black and the Calamities, he'll fail to close the deal when Cat comes to bat (Not just because she's the Protagonist either. Did anyone else sense the

disconnect in Hanno? He's basically JUST the White Knight. He "White Knights" to White Knight, as a result of his early negative experiences. He doesn't seem invested in anything as a person beyond playing his Role...just like the Tyrant.)

3) I kinda feel sad for Heiress. She's doing all of this to free her father and herself. Yes, she's an awful person...but she's falling into that Evil Classic trap of thinking she'll still be able to enjoy/savor any victory she achieves no matter how many lines she crosses, and of course she wouldn't be able to even if Cat wasn't going to ultimately stop her. None of that means I won't cheer when she GOES DOWN IN FLAMES, but yeah a little sad for her.

4) I'm not sure Cat will become the Black Knight this book. If she does it'll probably be fairly close to the end of this book IMO. There's definite ambiguity in her being Black's heir, yet the whole Girl Who Climbed the Tower thing. Don't really know what the two possible (or perhaps successive) paths mean.

(Anyone else have theories on the Black Knight/Future Dread Empress alternate/successive path issue?)

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Wait... "crippling fear?" Malicia? Sorry but either I completely missed something really important, or you completely imagined something really important

*Morgenstern*

Nah, it was absolutely mentioned directly in the story... how Black would have called on Wekesa to take the asshole down who put her in his seraglio and must have repeatedly raped her for fun, ending up in her being heavily traumatized and having absolute angst about ever being that helpless and out of control again, ending up in the assumption (it seemed to be Black's POV, more or less, but possibly inserted with some third person know-it-all...) that Malicia is all about CONTROL. She doesn't do leaps of faith – Black is necessary for that. He did the leap for Cat and Malicia seems to have trusted him on this, which enabled Cat proving herself – to become a fine new tool in the Empress's accessory, it would seem. Of course, if Cat is sticking to Malicia's plans for her (or even Black's plans for her)... is dubious. 😊

*Morgenstern*

Something along the line of "they wanted to see her old laugh again and see the fear in her eyes vanish", and how Black wouldn't even had to have asked Wekesa (Warlock) bc. in his own way Wekesa loved her, too (and then that line about her eyes and laugh).

*Morgenstern*

(And how Black's way would not have been poison, but calling on Wekesa for the most horrible way ever to take someone out. But having felt he needed to leave that victory to Malicia's own hands.)

*Barthumphries*

It could be something like Black Catherine the White Knight. You know, like the Los Angeles Angeles of Anaheim: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Los\\_Angeles\\_Angels\\_of\\_Anaheim](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Los_Angeles_Angels_of_Anaheim) Their primary website lists them as the "Los Angeles Angeles". However, for legal reasons they have to be known as the city that they're actually in (Anaheim) so that's still part of their legal name. Los Angeles and Anaheim are in different counties in CA and everyone in CA knows they're absolutely not the same place, but most people outside of CA don't know the difference. It's like thinking that New York and New Jersey are the same place.

Anyway, why not claim both names? Just because nobody's done it before, why should that stop her?

*RandomFan*

I think someone has probably done it before, if it can be done, and would be able to tell you exactly why taking a villain and hero name at once is a bad idea. Two neutral or good names is fine, though.

*RandomFan*

Well, still implausible and likely to end badly, but vastly superior to two opposing names, and also to evil names. evil doesn't play nice with anyone, not even itself.

*Barthumphries*

Perhaps if she sold out as coopting the good name... If she were to **\*\*Take\*\*** the good name. 😊

*stevenneiman*

Oh no, you were stronger than I thought, how could I be defeated so easily, etc. Toodles!

*Morgenstern*

Hedge stayed kneeling for a moment, the[n] coughed out a few feathers. (needs the "n" in there)

There'd been twelve soldiers, before [...]. Now there [were] eight, (needs the "were" that is missing)

*Morgenstern*

You know, it would be fun to see the White Knight getting wind of the succession plans of Black/Malicia for Cat (what with that "only a novice can...")... and then come for Cat to get their New Deal of Disturbing the Balance of the World undone. Failing, of course... I could totally see that, as the Bard is all about THAT and seems to dislike/fear Cat the most, while not being all that concerned about the trouble of the different realms.

(Especially if this is supposed to be some kind of New Deal for (the) Good – it totally makes sense, if you're ruthlessly-ends-justify-the-means and

AngelsWantYouToBringJudgementToThatAndStopEvilMasterplan (which necessarily NEEDS the second generation, on whom all eventually hinges!) to go for the \*apprentice(s)\* first, the supposedly still-weak guys that are despite being yet-weak meant to succeed and bring about the longterm-generations-plan WHILE they are still (supposedly) weak. Pragmatical move is to off the weaker help first and only THEN go for the big ones behind them, when they have less help, after all.)

*Morgenstern*

On an off-hand note: I'm really waiting for the Dead King and probably the Chain of Hunger, too, to make his/their move in this book, after all that foreshadowing when it comes to them... they HAVE to be up to something ... or there has to be a reason why they're not ... "coming out to play" currently (although... maybe it might even have to do with the Arcadia/Fae or, if on the hilarious side, Triumphant supposedly being in Hell, too, where the Dead King has obviously already moved in, at the very least having barged through the front door).

*Morgenstern*

I'm also interested in finding out if Ranger will pop up somewhere again. I mean with all that Chaos incoming... there's gotta be something of interest to HER, too, hasn't there? I don't really see her not coming to help in the last moment for Black, for example – or at least going after someone responsible for revenge (Scribe, too, btw...). Hm. So many contingencies... Black's death would cause so many OTHER ripples, I can't help but feel that would upset the whole main plot (as far as what it seems to be so far) for THIS book, besides the whole Cat-is-not-ready-point, because it would draw in too much other stuff/people besides Cat. \*headscratch

But who knows, maybe you actually do have some genius plan to put it all in line and I just fail to see it for being partially blinded by the Shiny Badass Bastards One Can't Help But Root For Them hypnosis employed for greater shock effect when the Dump \*does\* come early... \*shrugs

*Morgenstern*

But yeah, my main point for ranger was “worthy targets”, what with that extra chapter on her we got. In all THAT, there really should be worthy targets, no?

*Morgenstern*

\*ahem  
Ranger.

(Yeah, Badasses You Can't Help But Root For 😊 – applying to her, too \*g\* Their thought child is certainly \*getting there\*, I have no doubt. Just on the road yet.)

*Barthumphries*

Can't respond to most of your comments on this thread, could be spoilers

[julienbrightside](#)

I wonder if one of Champions aspects are DENIAL.

[darklordzargon](#)

Witch is also a genderless noun only pop culture refers to witches as women.

*Bista*

I cant help but imagine Hedge Wizard is Paul Giamatti.

*burguulkodar*

Oh hell, I love this helike brat!

*Poetically Psychotic*

I do so love a good pure evil villain. Complex characters with sympathetic motivations and deep plans are all well and good, but contrasting them with a villain like Tyrant who's only in it because being so over the top dramatically evil is \*fun\* makes both groups shine. Call it a foil, call it a palate cleanser; either way, it works quite well.

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## Chapter 3: Demesne

*"You can never have too many tiger pits, Chancellor. That's the same lack of vision that has people say "that's too large a field of energy to absorb" or "calling yourself a living god is blasphemy"."*

– Dread Emperor Malignant III, before his death and second reign as Dread Emperor Revenant

Marchford had come under attack during my absence.

That much became clear as soon as we got in sight of the city. There was no dramatic plume of smoke announcing it but the way the Fifteenth had been deployed was sign enough. The outskirts of the city were untouched but I could see from a mile away that the central plaza had been heavily fortified and was manned with soldiers and siege engines – all of them pointing towards the inside instead of the outside. Juniper had managed to keep life going outside of the restricted zone she'd carved out in the middle of Marchford, to my approval, but that she'd even needed to do this much was telling. I'd learned much about Legion formations, over the last year, and what I was looking at was standard practice for a long-term static defence. Whatever fight had been picked it was not over, even if there was nothing to see right now. Just when things had been starting to pick up for the city, I glared. Typical.

Zombie the Second kept a slow pace, as I was the only mounted member of my party. The Gallowborne were infantry through and through and Hakram, who I would have preferred to be mounted, could not be. Orcs panicked horses just being being close, unless they were trained war destriers. Those were in a short enough supply that any the Legions of Terror could get their hands on were sent straight to Thalassina. The Thirteenth Legion was garrisoned there and, having been raised out of Callowan rebels and criminals, actually had a cavalry contingent. The knights of the Kingdom could have eaten that bunch for breakfast and still been hungry, but compared to the orc wolfriders that represented the Empire's only other mounted option they were still a vast improvement.

"That's two rings of defence," Hakram said. "Whatever tickled the Hellhound was nothing to sneer at: she usually prefers stacking the first line to defence in depth."

Which meant Juniper had to face the serious possibility that her first line of fortifications would be swept away by the opponent. There weren't a lot of forces on Calernia that could threaten a hardened wall of legionaries backed by mages and siege engines. Most of them were supernatural in nature.

"You lost a month's pay, then," I said, squinting at the city ahead. "That's too blatant to be Heiress' work."

"Whoever physically assaulted the city could be a catspaw for her," Hakram said smugly. "It's impossible to prove she *wasn't* involved."

I cursed under my breath. That was the same as people blaming Assassin whenever any prominent figure died – it could be true, in theory, but how the Hells would anyone know?

"You're never going to win, either," I pointed out.

"Until I do," Hakram grinned toothily. "Just a matter of time."

I'd put money on heroes, myself. They always turned up at the most inconvenient of times, and just when Marchford was beginning to have some breathing room would have definitely qualified. No head was on a pike by the road, though, so I could safely assume no hero had gone into my city and committed suicide by Hellhound.

"Did anyone have fairies?" I said.

"Ratface," Adjutant said after a moment.

"I hate it when he places bets," I muttered. "He always knows more than he's letting on."

We'd had to form the pool on the down low, since Juniper frowned on the practice. Something about it diminishing the dignity of officers. The general couldn't technically punish me for anything, but she insisted on hour-long meetings about patrol routes and drills whenever she caught me involved. The Hellhound's sadism knew no bounds. I cast a look at the column of Gallowborne following behind, then sighed.

"Let's pick up the pace," I said. "The sooner I hear the reports, the sooner we can take baths."

Hakram frowned at me.

"I washed in the river not three days ago," he said.

"So now you smell like river *and* wet dog," I said, spurring on Zombie before he could reply. "Soap, Adjutant, soap."

It was rare enough I got to have the last word these days I savoured the feeling all the way to Marchford.

—

A patrol met us outside the sight of the city walls, or at least the *promise* of walls. After I'd had the parts of the city wrecked during Battle of Marchford made liveable again, getting some

actual defences for my home built had been a priority. I'd charged Pickler with designing and building the fortifications months ago and she'd had a shiver at the words I was fairly sure was a sign of arousal for goblins – her eyes had gone a little wide and fluttered, too. The first plan the Senior Sapper had drafted would have turned the city into the same kind of army-breaker Summerholm was meant to be, but I'd sent her back to the drawing table after a quick look. Marchford was not a border fortress and while it was to be the seat of the Fifteenth it would live or die on trade. Which her seven overlapping rings of walls and bastions would complicate a great deal: no real thought had been given to civilian streets and arteries, or even housing districts. The second draft had been much more reasonable.

The towered curtain wall around Marchford she'd sketched was nothing too fancy, but where the Talbot Manor had stood before I'd had it torched would become a proper fortress. Permanent barracks were added to accommodate the Fifteenth, with access to training fields for drills and mock battles. That draft I accepted, and mandated she start working on when feasible. That was the first rub, unfortunately: being feasible. Her sappers had been needed to repair the bridge in and out of Marchford, and when that was over simply would not have the numbers to undertake as large a project as building the fortifications for an entire city. Not if I wanted to be done before a decade has passed, anyway. That wasn't acceptable: the entire reason I needed those walls *now* was so that when Heiress tossed her next abomination at me my soldiers would have something to stand on.

The obvious solution was drafting hand from the rest of the Fifteenth, but Juniper had flatly refused. It was one thing to keep sappers busy in peace time, another entirely to draw from the rank and file for a civilian project. Especially when she was integrating a massive influx of Callowans and other fresh recruits into the Fifteenth, trying to turn them into a cohesive fighting force. Fortunately, Marchford was a mining city. There was available skilled labour, which at the moment milled around aimlessly or enrolled into my legion to make ends meet. That was the second rub, so to speak. Those miners would need to be *paid*. I was, sadly, close to broke. There was not enough trade coming in to fill my coffers, and raising tariffs on what was currently coming would just kill it off entirely. Taxing a city who'd effectively been sacked less than a year ago and of which a third of the population had lost their income when the mines closed – courtesy of Heiress fucking me over with a demon whose corruption was still far from gone – was a good way to have revolt on my hands. I still drew my pay and so far had done little to spend it, but it was a drop in the bucket compared to what was needed.

The only saving grace here was that my legionaries also drew pay from the Tower and had nowhere to spend it but Marchford. That had slowed the bleeding some, though there was only so much that

buying ale, whores and grub could do for a city. In the end I'd had Pickler outline the foundations for what would be the city walls and freed her to take care of the bridge. We needed the trade more than the defences, right now. Staring at those ropes and pickets put me in a foul mood, a reminder that soon I'd need to either borrow coin or effectively go bankrupt. I'd ordered Aisha to look into my options before I left for Southpool, so maybe she'd have good news for me. That'd be a first.

I dismissed the patrolling legionaries without bothering to ask questions about what had happened to the city, heading straight for the guildhall Juniper had appropriated during the Battle of Marchford and never returned. On the way there, after having sent off most of the Gallowborne back to the barracks for well-deserved rest, I was presented with the sight of a tired but still ridiculously pretty redhead escorted by a gaggle of mages.

"Lady Squire," Kilian smiled.

I spurred on Zombie instead of replying, scooping up my Senior Mage by the waist and setting her in front of me before she was even done squeaking in surprise.

"Cat," she protested. "We're in-"

One arm still wrapped around her waist, I leaned forward to interrupt her with a kiss. She smiled against my lips before sliding a hand around the nape of my neck and replying in kind. Teasingly, I bit her lip before withdrawing when we were both out of breath.

"Kilian," I finally said. "I missed you."

She rested her head against my breastplate, for once the fact that she was slightly taller than me not apparent.

"Missed you too," she muttered. "Even if you're making a spectacle of us, you utter brute."

Hakram cleared his throat loudly, because he was the most inconsiderate creature ever spawned in Creation. I ignored him, pressing my lips against the crown of Kilian's head and already craving something stronger. I hadn't seen my lover in two months and to say I'd missed her would have been something of an understatement. Hakram cleared his throat again, louder.

"We're having a moment, you sack of sentient manure," I said.

"Good afternoon to you, Senior Mage," Adjutant said, cheerfully ignoring my insult.

"Lord Adjutant," Kilian replied, with as much dignity as she could manage while wrapped in my arms.

"I see you've been abducted by some sort of barbarian warlord," the tall orc mused. "Whenever you manage to free yourself from captivity, I imagine we'll be needing you for the staff meeting with General Juniper."

The redhead wiggled in my arms and reluctantly I allowed her to slid off the horse. Zombie the Second took all of this rather placidly, staring at a food stall on the other side of the street with greedy eyes. Kilian coughed, got her pixie-cut hair in order again and composed herself.

"I was actually sent by Juniper," the Senior Mage said. "The general staff was assembled for a meal, so she's extending an invitation. The most pressing reports could be handled at the same time."

I grimaced. Well, no sense in delaying it. I could go for a bite anyway, there were only so many times you could eat standard Legion rations before wanting to jump off a bridge. *Oh*, and I'd get a real bed tonight. Gods that would be nice. I snuck a look at Kilian, drinking her in even if legion gear was the opposite of enticing. With a little luck I might even have company in that bed, and I was looking forward to that a great deal more than sleep. After I'd learned that our scrying sessions were very likely being listened in on I'd curtailed, uh, certain activities we'd sometimes indulged in when time allowed.

"You're staring, Cat," Hakram said.

"Am not," I lied.

I slid off my saddle and handed Zombie to one of the Gallowborne. Kilian smiled and began moving, Adjutant and I following.

"Killjoy," I hissed at him under my breath before we caught up.

He grinned back unrepentantly. One of these days, I promised myself, I was going to get a minion that didn't give me lip.

—

"No wonder you're so small," Nauk said. "Look at the size of those portions."

I pointed my fork at him over my bowl of oxtail stew and sambusa.

"I will end you, you ugly green gargoyles," I promised. "Don't think I won't just because you're a legate now."

Hune rumbled in approval.

"His commander would handle the paperwork more quickly, if she had his rank," the ogre said.

There were no seats capable of accommodating someone the other legate's size, so in the end someone had taken off the back of a stone bench and dragged it inside. Unlike the rest of us, who were taking our portions from the communal bowls, Hune had been brought her own. Considering her side dish of koshari was larger than my torso I could see why.

"I'm not doing the forms for it, if you murder him," Aisha said, daintily picking at her plate from her seat at Juniper's left.

"They'll be handled promptly, don't you worry," I said, and Hakram cursed under his breath.

He should, since they would most definitely end up on his desk instead of mine. The Hellhound speared another slab of uncooked red meat with cumin from the bowl only orcs were using and dropped it on her plate.

"Don't start murdering officers, Foundling," the general said. "I'm told it's habit-forming."

That was almost a joke, and I still wondered at how the orc was willing to unbend even that much in private. Never when anyone but the general staff was there, but it was still like night and day compared to when the Fifteenth had first been formed. Going through the Liesse Rebellion together, all the desperate battles of the campaign, had warmed her considerably towards me and the officers who could once have been considered my "faction" in the Fifteenth. Those old lines were long gone, now. Like Captain had once told me, showing proficiency at violence was the quickest way to earn an orc's respect. Ratface and Kilian were chatting with Pickler further down the table but I refrained from sending a longing look in that direction. There would be time enough for that after we were done eating. I dipped the sambusa in the stew and bit off a piece of the meat-stuffed pastry. Still warm, I hummed in appreciation. Someone had gotten their hands on a decent cook from the Wasteland.

"So," I finally said. "Looks like I missed a battle."

The amiability – or what passed for that with Juniper – slid off my general's face the moment the subject was broached.

"A single skirmish, so far," the Hellhound said. "Fae crossed over from Arcadia in small numbers."

Further down the table, Ratface smothered a grin. The bastard, in all senses of the word. He'd be filling his pockets deep with that one.

"Do we know why?" Hakram asked.

The conversation in the back had petered out when I'd begun the formal part of our meal, and Kilian was the one to field the question.

"They're claiming the land for Arcadia," she said. "Exactly how far their definition of 'the land' extends isn't clear at the moment."

I fished out a piece of ox and popped it into my mouth, chewing thoughtfully and wiping my hands on the cloth afterwards.

"That's a problem," I said. "I'm already using that land."

"We think they're Winter Court," Nauk said. "They used ice, anyway, and they were arrogant little shits."

"They're all arrogant little shits," Juniper grunted. "Wouldn't be fairies otherwise."

Sometimes it was reassuring to see that the vast majority of my officers were even more terrible at diplomacy than I was. Made me look better than comparison, at least.

"No negotiations were attempted so far," Aisha said, the exception to that last thought. "That does not mean, however, they are impossible."

"They did not seem inclined to negotiate, Aisha," Kilian said mildly. "Otherwise we would have tried."

I raised an eyebrow. She must have been on the scene herself, then. I would have been worried, but the redhead knew how to take care of herself. She might lack in power compared to some other mages, but she made up for it in swiftness and control.

"I believe the terms used by Legate Nauk after the introduction were 'fuck off'," the Taghreb said, tone sardonic.

I shot the orc in question a look. He grinned, then shrugged. Well, Nauk had always been more of a blunt tool than precise instrument. There was a place for that. Sometimes it wasn't about how fancy the trick was, it was about how hard you could clobber the other guy. And as far as clubs went, my legate was among the finest.

"Dealing with fae is like dealing with devils," Ratface said. "They always screw you on the technicalities."

"I'm not taking the option off the table," I broke in. "But at the moment, that's not the situation we're looking at. If they're invading our priority is clear."

"Defences," Juniper growled with approval. "Our mages have set up wards, but the reports are the border between Creation and Arcadia is thinning regardless."

I glanced at Kilian, who grimaced.

"That is beyond my knowledge," she admitted. "Apprentice might know more."

"I notice he's not here," I said. "What's he been doing all this time?"

"He cleared out the strongest of the fae to cross and threatened them not to attempt it again," Hune said. "He did not leave his tower before, and has not since. It borders on dereliction of duty."

The ogre's tone was thick with distaste. *Masego*, I sighed internally. *How are you worse at making friends than I am?* Not, I would admit, that Hune was the cuddliest of my merry bunch. She didn't speak much and was easily irritated. I'd had her under my command for about a year and still knew next to nothing about her. Hakram, usually a fount of useful gossip, had nothing to tell me about her either. Quiet, competent, never socialized much even at the College. Nothing I hadn't observed with my own eyes.

"Lord Apprentice is not officially part of the Fifteenth Legion," Juniper said, in the tone of someone who'd had to make that point before on several occasions. "He has no obligation to us."

"I'll talk to him," I said. "Assuming he can't contribute, what do we have on our side of the field if the fae come back?"

Pickler rocked in her chair, which I noted with amusement was stacked with cushions so she'd sit about the same height as the rest of us.

"My sappers have built two rings of fortifications around the plaza, using the existing houses as props. We've installed cast iron foundations on everything, which Senior Mage Kilian informs me should afford them some protection against fae magic," she said. "To target the fae themselves, I've had scorpions of my own design installed and nailed to the rooftops. One of the invaders used strong winds during the incursion, which would limit their effectiveness, so I've also had catapults loaded with sharper-filled iron balls placed behind the second ring."

Pickler seemed as if she wanted to say more, but one look at Juniper and she rethought the notion. I checked with a glance and, predictably, Nauk looked like she'd just slipped him some tongue. Ugh. I should not have inflicted that image on myself.



"We need to consider the possibility those fortifications might be made permanent," Juniper said, thankfully claiming my attention.

"We'll need to redirect civilian traffic through different streets if that's the case," Ratface said. "The plaza sits in the middle of the main artery in and out of Marchford."

I sighed.

"Start looking into it," I ordered. "Wishful thinking isn't going to make this go away."

The Taghreb bastard raised an eyebrow.

"Well," he said, "if you believe some of the stories..."

I looked at Aisha.

"Him you'll do the forms for, right?"

"They're already filled just in case," the Staff Tribune replied without missing a beat.

"Defence is all well and good," Nauk grunted. "But you don't win wars from behind walls."

"Can't send scouts into Arcadia, Legate," the Hellhound said. "Not with the way it warps time. The logistics would see them dead or the information gathered useless."

"So don't send scouts," the large orc said, baring his teeth. "Send an army. We happen to have one of those lying around."

"We don't know enough to commit to that at the moment," I said. "For all we know, this could be a minor incident that will never escalate."

There was a moment of silence at the table. Hakram was the first to snicker, which broke the dam. Laughter splattered over the room, ebbing after a few moments.

"I'll talk to Apprentice, see what he knows," I said, still smiling. "Anything else that's urgent?"

"No Legion business," Juniper said, and that was that.

We dug into the meal properly and I allowed the renewed sounds of chatter to wash over me. It was, I thought, good to be home.

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[tijayarnie](#)

I love how comfortable they are with each other

*Nafram*

hmmm, this chapter was rather short, I suppose it was necessary though, since it seems to be the tie-in kind, now that Cat's in Marchford, the more interesting parts, such as Pickler's mother and whatever Masego has been up to can begin

[Euodiachloris](#)

Oi, you forgot her first love! I think I know how Pickler and Engineering are getting along, but the details were rather sparse! Could stand to see them together, rather than reported on! 😊

*Daemion*

Awww, Cat just broke the Gallowborn's little hearts. They were crushing so hard on her and she is now obviously no longer single.

*Letouriste*

Well I sure they already know long ago, that's a secret and all but the Gallowborne is protecting her tent 😊.

*Daemion*

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2016/09/28/interlude-rats/>

"Squire stopped before her men were too bruised to walk, clapping them on the shoulder amicably before dismissing them. Ratface idly wondered how many of them were already in love with her. Her relationship with Kilian was not common knowledge – he'd made sure of that – and Named always attracted admirers the way carrion attracted flies."

It's not common knowledge, not even among the Gallowborn.

*Morgenstern*

Well, after THAT it IS common knowledge, rest assured. 😊

*Jonnnnz*

Yes, soldiers react with heartbreak to two women making out.

*Morgenstern*

Heh. Right back at you. Me like. And so truuue.

*The Archdevil*

I almost wish I was in the Legion, but then I stop to think, and I'd have died to a demon in Marchford. Or one of those knights before it.

*BryceWilliam*

Sliver Spears... and Knights.

These things do not match.

*The Archdevil*

Were they mounted cavalry? I can't remember. I just call any armored warrior on horseback a knight. Station and status mean nothing to me.

*Letouriste*

Thanks for the chapter:)

I have some difficulty to understand the banter in this chapter:/ My English is not as good I thought before^^...or is this my humor?



[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

What specifically were you wondering about?

*Letouriste*

Don't know anymore, looks like I improved my skills a lot since two years ago.

*Alegio*

Finally we got Cath back and in one of my favorite situations, gossip time with the officials.

And... time for cath, hakram and masego to go tourist on arcadia? normal people cant be there so I guess they should be sent to scout.

[Euodiachloris](#)

I think a certain part-fae could risk it. If she doesn't mind maybe gaining permanent wings. Going to Arcadia itself would probably trigger certain genes into getting their arses properly in gear. 😊

*Morgenstern*

That seems more like a horribly fast route towards killing Kilian off, though. Not only because racism might be a thing for the fairies, too, giving them even more incentive, if they learn about that quart, but because she is an un-Named humanoid who has already shown herself as standing on the wrong side during that first incident. (Unless that should give her protection by the other Courts, but... seeing as the one who tried to get through at this border here... they are probably directly on the other side, closest ones to the border... have fun trying to get protected by anyone in those circumstances, much more so, if you should have been thinking of her going in there ALONE...)

[Euodiachloris](#)

Wut? Why alone? \*confused\*

[gianoria7](#)

Thanks for the chapter 😊

I wonder what Cath could take from a fairy...

And I suppose it is completely impossible that having to fight Fae might help Kilian awaken her Fae blood. Yep, totally impossible.

*Gunslinger*

The banter between Cat and her officers is one of the joys of this series. Also are those new clues we are getting about Robber's possible powers?

Vote for the Guide on topwebfiction. It shouldn't be lounging all the way down at 8

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

*letouriste*

robber? what are you talking about? i don't see a single mentioning of him or his activities in this chapter:o  
also,yes that's weird not many people have read this chapter yet whereas last week the classement on topfiction was high...

*Gunslinger*

Aargh I realized I confused Ratface with Robber. He's so often in the background I end up reading one as the other

*Unmaker*

The calm before the storm. And Cat has enough enemies that her rather public liking of Kilian just paints a large bullseye on Kilian's head. The smart players knew anyway; now even the dumb ones will know.

And a thought from last time that I want to post before it potentially becomes a reality:

The Tyrant was faced with certain death (supposed infallible oracle predicting his doom). He avoided it by becoming a Named. Anaxares is faced with certain death (kill switch operable by many, many people who have reason to kill him). I think the main reason the Tyrant kept Anaxares alive so far is the Tyrant sees the parallel and is waiting for Anaxares to get fed up and maybe gain a Name himself.

### [Thanatos](#)

Unmaker, you're here as well? I haven't seen you around much in years 0.0 Great to see you again

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I read the oracle's words as being more "what he needed to hear" than "literal prediction of future events." But your possible explanation is as good as any and better than most. Expecting Anaxares to gain a Name isn't even necessary, the parallel itself potentially explains a lot.

### *Morgenstern*

What with the many signs of serious illness left on the body of the Tyrant, I would very much second the notion that he only avoided death via becoming Named, which is known to prolong one's lifespan, help against poison, ensure you never get ill again... he still is stuck with such heavy symptoms, he surely had a death-ensuring illness (when it comes to humans) before. 😊

### [Mental Mouse](#)

No, it is literal prediction, but the exact wording was trickier than Tyrant has revealed yet. We'll see it in one of the bonus chapters.

AVR

Typos

drafting hand from  
drafting hands from

to slid off  
to slide off

look better than comparison,  
look better by comparison,

*Burnsy*

I cannot wait to find out what Maesgo's been up to in his tower. I assumes its something horrifymazing, and will leave the Fifteenth stunned.

Absolutely adorable to see the rest of the Legion interact. Kinda sad to think that this might be going on behind the scenes whenever you read a more traditional good vs evil, swords and sorcery type story.

### *Morgenstern*

- 1) Orcs panicked horses just being [ > "by", not "being"] being close
- 2) a short enough supply that any ["of" necessary here] the Legions of Terror
- 3) After I'd had the parts of the city wrecked during [the] Battle of Marchford made liveable again
- 4) but [the place] where the Talbot Manor had stood before I'd had it torched would become a proper fortress. [alternatively rewrite the whole sentence... e.g.: "where the T.M. had stood before ... , a proper fortress would rise"]
- 5) Not if I wanted [it] to be done before X
- 6) The obvious solution was drafting hand[s] from the rest of the Fifteenth
- 7) skilled labour, which at the moment milled around [which for heavily-implied-at-least people? Yeah, one can definitely do it with "labour", I'd say, but it still feels kinda "yuck"... although... actually, "who" does not feel much better, if I try it out... strange, that ^^°]
- 8) Taxing a city who'd effectively been sacked ["who" for a city? Are the citizens implied there, the city being a pars pro toto? Seem rather unusual, "who" normally being used for people... "that'd been" or "which had been" etc. would seem to be the normal choice, just like in the next clause there..]
- 9) heading straight for the guildhall Juniper had appropriate[d] during the Battle of Marchford
- 10) reluctantly I allowed her to slid[e] off the horse
- 11) Made me look better than [ > should be "by"] comparison, at least.

PS, side confusion:

"She might lack in power compared to some other mages, but she made up for it in swiftness and control." Wait, what!? Kilian!? She was described as the one with the MOST power in the Legion,

what with the wielding non-standard lightning spells and NOT having much control, what with her fairy genes trying to get out every time she went all-out... Did that now change around, after conversations with Apprentice?? oO Or is "some other mages" simply not pointing at Legion mages AT ALL, but at the really powerful ones?

*burguulkodar*

Why doesn't she kill a horse to let Hakram ride? rs

*Jago*

I am not sure she can after the resurrection. It was part of her old squire powers, but it is part of her new squire powers?.

I notice there is no mention of her limp or of the scar in the recent chapters. It is possible that some or all the damage has been healed by the resurrection or her use of Rise after the Lone Swordsman hit her.

*Abrakadabra*

Pickler is like: "It's getting me harder than terminator armor!"

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## Chapter 4: Developments

*"The viper that bites a Matron dies poisoned."*  
-Taghreb saying

After the table was cleared most of my officers went with it. They had duties to attend to, after all. While Juniper wasn't holding the legion to wartime duty rosters, the influx of fresh recruits in the Fifteenth meant the usual peacetime hours were far less than what was currently being demanded of them – especially with a budding portal to Arcadia in need of garrisoning. Of the four that remained seated at the table when servants brought wine, only two were a common fixture at these little meetings. Ratface and Aisha effectively ran what passed for my network of informants, through his underworld connections and her relatives in the nobility. They'd done well, in my opinion, but they were going up against spymasters who'd had decades to place their own people or outright inherited a web of informants from their predecessors. Spies were among the most precious parts of a noble's inheritance, in the Wasteland.

Pickler, on the other hand, was a rarity. As much because she had no interest in these things as because she rarely had anything to contribute. That she'd stuck around would have surprised me, had I not remembered the Empress' warning: I was going to be presented with an offer by the Matron of the High Ridge tribe. Pickler's mother, allegedly estranged. I didn't know much about that situation save for assurances I'd received that having Pickler in the Fifteenth wouldn't mean a Matron would be looking to slide a knife in my back. Robber, usually maliciously eager to gossip, had been tight-lipped when I'd brought it up. Goblins always closed ranks the moment you brought up anything relating to what went on inside the Grey Eyries. Still, I could guess at the shape of it. Pickler's open and vehement distaste for politics could not have gone over well back home, or her lack of interest in anything that didn't involve building new and improved ways to kill people.

Kilian was around more often, as my Senior Mage. Since she had a finger in everything from our magical defences to setting up scrying channels her input was occasionally needed. And with Apprentice so often holed up in his tower these days, she served as our expert in the supernatural when he wasn't around. Her knowledge wasn't nearly as expansive, I had to admit, but she'd placed highly in the War College's mage courses for a reason. Where Masego would have a tailored solution to any problem we encountered, Kilian simply hammered in obstacles with group rituals and repeated spellwork. Less elegant, maybe, but I didn't want my legion to ever become too dependent on Apprentice. When it came to fights he'd be at my side more often than not, and it wouldn't do for my mages to become ineffective whenever he wasn't around. There was a reason my teacher deployed Warlock as a combat asset on his own instead of the leader of other mages.

That made for six of us in the room, if you counted Hakram and myself. There'd never been any debate about Adjutant being there, of course. At this point not having the tall orc at my side felt like I was missing a hand. I'd noticed over the last year that Hakram rarely spoke in meetings, not unless he wanted a point clarified for my benefit, and did not often venture his own opinion. Sometimes he gave it to me in private afterwards, but more often than not he simply kept his peace. Hakram listened and waited and when I came to a decision he saw that turned into a plan of action. It made it easy to rely on him, that I knew he had no objective – hidden or not – he was working towards. Of all the people I was close with, he stood alone in this. I accepted the cup of Vale summer wine Ratface poured from the carafe, allowing myself to savour the taste. It was a little early in the day, admittedly, but I was going to need a godsdamned drink if we were going to talk about the mess currently known as Marchford.

"So, watcha got for me," I prompted.



The two Taghreb traded looks. For all that their relationship had apparently imploded years ago, in my experience they actually got along fairly well. Ratface inclined his head and Aisha cleared her throat.

"The upheaval in the Wasteland continues," the Staff Tribune said. "The mass defections started by the High Lady of Aksum, while slowing in frequency, have yet to end."

I grinned. It always put me in a good mood when I heard about the Truebloods get the bad end of the stick. Not long after I'd extorted three high nobles into backing the creation of the Ruling Council, one of them had officially withdraw from the Truebloods. High Lady Abreha of Aksum, the cackling old bat who'd cheerfully betrayed her fellows the very moment the wind had turned. Though she had not joined the Loyalists, Malicia's faction in Praes, losing a High Lady had started an avalanche of setbacks for the Truebloods. Lesser nobles had begun withdrawing their support or been assassinated by successors who did before a fortnight had passed. While few of them changed their allegiance to the Loyalists, the humiliation for the remaining Truebloods had been both public and potent. I'd watched all of that unfold with no small amount of glee.

"The most recent defection was by a lord directly sworn to Wolof," Aisha said. "As High Lady Tasia is the head of the Truebloods, the loss of face involved was massive. Rumour has it she could not afford to match the bribe offered by the Empress, which has... interesting implications."

I let out a whistle.

"We've confirmed Heiress has made no attempt to send any of the revenues collected from Liesse to the Wasteland," Ratface added. "Cat, I think there's a wedge there."

"Praesi stabbing Praesi in the back," Pickler said derisively. "There's a surprise."

Aisha raised an eyebrow.

"An interesting comment, coming from a goblin," she said.

Pickler shrugged, then looked away. That was as much as she seemed to want to get involved, at the moment.

"And all these unaligned nobles, what are they doing exactly?" Hakram asked.

Aisha smiled, then gracefully sipped at her wine. I could see no hint of her teeth as she did – that was Praesi etiquette for you.

"They are no longer unaligned," the Staff Tribune said. "High Lady Abreha has begun to gather them under her banner."

"The Moderates, they call themselves," Ratface added.

I raised an eyebrow.

"That's a promising name, but I'm not getting my hopes up," I said.

"The Moderates oppose certain of the policies championed by the Empress," Aisha said, "but do so without the undercurrent of opposing the Empress herself. They're growing as an alternative to the Truebloods for nobles who disagree with certain recent reforms."

The approval in her voice was not masked in the slightest.

"So they're the good, polite racists," Pickler said bitingly. "There's a relief, I thought there were only bad, rude ones."

"One does not need to hate greenskins to realize breeding restrictions on the Tribes are necessary," Aisha replied, tone aggressively mild. "Or to believe that orcs chieftains being made nobility would disrupt a very delicate balance of power."

"It probably helps, though," the Senior Sapper said with a flash of needle-like teeth.

"That's enough of that," I said quietly. "Pickler, you know Aisha's not one of *those* nobles. She's never treated you anything but politely. Aisha, half your people would accept making a bridge out of dead goblins as a decent way to save on stone. She's not swinging out of the blue."

The Taghreb noble's face went blank, but she inclined her head. Pickler grabbed her goblet and drank.

"I do love these little chats of ours," Ratface said. "But I believe there's one last thing for you to mention, Aisha?"

The lovely Staff Tribune cleared her throat.

"Infighting between the Truebloods and the Moderates has already begun, but their agents at court do agree on one prominent matter," she said.

Well, that ought to be good.

"I'm on the edge of my seat," I said drily.

"To be blunt," Aisha said delicately, "that point is *you*. You are worrying them."

"She's had knives at her back since she became the Squire," Hakram said calmly. "What makes this unusual?"

"When you were merely the Squire, Lady Catherine, you were a minor threat with the potential of turning into a larger one," the olive-skinned aristocrat said. "Your coming to command the Fifteenth, while unfortunate, was not judged overly alarming. That changed, however, when the Fifteenth *kept growing*."

"They think you're amassing a private army to come knocking at their doors," Ratface grinned nastily. "Their tender noble hearts are all aflutter at the notion."

"That's absurd," Kilian spoke up from my left. "We don't have nearly the men for that. We're what, six thousand now?"

"Seven thousand as of the census last week," Aisha said. "By my estimate, we'll be eight thousand come summer. The size of two standard legions."

"I don't have the corresponding number of mages under my command," the redhead frowned.

I frowned, then pieced the discrepancy together.

"Mages are required to graduate from the College before service," I said. "We've been taking in Callowans."

"There simply aren't that many mages available for us to bring into the fold," Aisha agreed. "Many went to the Fourteenth when it was formed, and there are rumours a Sixteenth is about to be raised."

That, I realized with a grimace, was a problem. A lot of the legion military doctrine rested on the fact that mages and sappers would be available in proportionate numbers to the amount of regulars. No wonder Juniper was insisting on drills so much. She was going to have to revise her tactics entirely before we next got into a fight.

"I don't suppose any of you have a workaround?" I asked.

"We could recruit from civilian talent," Aisha said. "That would bring complications, however."

"Good mages in the Wasteland have patrons," Ratface said. "They're not allowed *not* to."

"And they'd need to be trained to Legion standards," Kilian murmured. "We don't have the facilities for that. Not to mention using the War College's methods without sanction would be low treason, at the very least."

"Joy," I muttered. "Think about it anyway. If you have a stroke of genius, you know where my door is."

Hakram set down his wine with a metallic clink.

"Practically speaking, what does the nobles being worried about our numbers mean?" the tall orc gravelled.

Ratface shrugged, looked at the other Taghreb in the room.

"Support for the only visible check on your power," Aisha said.

"Heiress," I said.

Well, wasn't that a treat. It would have been too much to hope for I'd be allowed to expand my ranks without there being consequences, I supposed. I passed a hand through my mess of a hair, which I'd taken out of its usual ponytail for the meal. It would need combing soon. Kilian nudged me with her knee under the table, smiling.

"We'll find a way," she murmured. "We always do."

I pressed a kiss against her shoulder as Ratface rolled his eyes and Aisha politely looked away. Acknowledging the sight of emotions in others was impolite, for Praesi, unless you were deeply intimate with them and behind closed doors. Pickler was looking at us like she would some sort of strange chimera, more puzzled than anything else. The goblin notion of romance, as I understood it, was rather different from the human one.

"That's one," I said. "Ratface?"

"Are we done already?" the Taghreb said. "It was just getting interesting."

His lips tightened immediately afterwards, swallowing a whimper, and Aisha smiled. I suspected he was going to be limping out of the room when we were done. The bastard coughed.

"I've placed people in the lower rungs of two of the major Dark Guilds," he said.

While there were apparently quite a few minor criminal associations that styled themselves guilds, there were only three in Callow that really deserved the name. The Assassins, the Thieves and the Smugglers. The Thieves had been the ones to make it through the Conquest the least affected, and the first to strike a deal with Black. Their activities were tacitly allowed as long as they didn't threaten Praesi interests, in exchange for a few concessions. The only really important one among those was informing on any resistance group they came across. No wonder my teacher hadn't been actually challenged by one of those in the

two decades he'd run Callow. He really had eyes everywhere, didn't he?

The second guild, the Smugglers, had not gotten away unscathed. Not because the Tower had tightened the screws, at least not in the usual sense. They'd been making a fortune out of importing Praesi luxuries before the Conquest, but their roles as middlemen had become unnecessary when actual trade routes had opened. Making it worse, quite a few drugs and substances that had been illegal under the Kingdom were nothing of the sort under Praes. After floundering for a few years, they'd managed to find a niche in importing foreign luxuries through Mercantis while bypassing tariffs – the Wasaliti, after all, was no longer patrolled by war barges. Their following attempts to get weapons into Callow had been met by the assassination of half their leadership, and they'd taken that warning to heart. Since they'd restricted their activities to what wouldn't earn Black's attention, offering a cut of their profits in penance. They were a pale shadow of what they'd used to be, though, by far the weakest of the three guilds.

The Assassins had happened upon a middle ground between those two, neither crippled nor largely untouched. Their more patriotic elements had been purged by the Named who exemplified their trade, leaving only hardened professionals behind. Those had shown no qualms in cooperating with the Tower and even some Imperial Governors, though assassinating Praesi without unofficial sanction had been forbidden. While not as numerous and entrenched as it had been before the Conquest, the Guild of Assassins had settled comfortably into its new role. They had, if anything, thrived under the rule of officials coming from a culture where their trade was not only accepted but held in some esteem. Few nobles of the Kingdom would have ever contracted a Dark Guild for work, after all, but Praesi were not above employing local talent when bringing in their own specialists would have been too costly.

"The Smugglers were easy enough to infiltrate, since I've had indirect dealings with them in the past," Ratface said, shaking me out of my thoughts. "As for the Thieves, getting a foot in was doable but rising in the ranks will take years. They tend to operate in local cells."

"You couldn't get anyone in the Assassins?" I asked.

The handsome Taghreb shook his head.

"They recruit by invitation only," he told me. "Murder convicts, mostly, taken in by spiriting them out of prison before they hang."

I made an understanding noise. That would make it tricky to get anyone inside. If Black had managed the feat, he'd never told me.

"Got anything out of it so far?" I said.

"Nothing all that useful, though one piece does stand out," Ratface mused. "The Guild of Thieves has recently had a change of leadership. Their 'King of Thieves' was overthrown."

"A shadow war across Callow would have been noticed," Hakram said.

"They don't operate like that," the Supply Tribune said, shaking his head. "The person in charge is whoever has some fancy crown. Any member of the guild can try to steal it."

I raised an eyebrow. That seemed like a horrible way to run an organization, considering anyone close to the guildmaster would be tempted to steal it. Besides, all it took was for an idiot to get lucky once and you'd have a fool at the helm. Aisha made an approving noise and I glanced at her. Ah, of course she'd think well of it. Praes was run on basically the same principle, only with more murder and demons.

"Keep an eye on them," I finally said. "I'll want to know where they stand when we move on the Assassins."

Ratface nodded.

"Speaking of," he said, "I found out what you wanted. They've none or negligible presence in Marchford."

"Well, I was due something uplifting," I muttered. "Any idea why?"

"The Countess Marchford hated them deeply," Aisha said. "She cleared them out of the city a few years after the Conquest, after they killed her husband and infant son."

I leaned forward in interest.

"How?" I asked.

"She torched the entire city quarter they operated out of," Ratface told me grimly. "Had anyone that crawled out of the ashes drawn and quartered in the public square."

Well. Not exactly something I could replicate across Callow. Horrifying as that method was, I couldn't help but be somewhat impressed. Elizabeth Talbot had not been one to fuck around, when she wanted something done. The Duke of Liesse had no business ever getting near a throne, but the Countess Marchford would have made the kind of queen that took more than a page in chronicles. Not all of it good but, Hells, who was I to throw stones?

"My turn?" Pickler asked impatiently.

I looked at the two Taghreb, but neither of them had anything to add.

"Good," the goblin muttered, then straightened in her seat. "Lady Foundling of Marchford, I bring an offer from Matron Sever of the High Ridge tribe."

I watched my two Tribunes from the corner of my eye. Ratface looked surprised and concerned. Aisha's brow rose, until her eyes widened in understanding. Then her face returned to pleasant and unreadable. *Something that passed through Court at some point, then*, I thought. I'd been under the impression goblins stayed out of Praesi politics, so my curiosity sharpened.

"I've got an official letter for you to gawk at," Pickler continued, discarding ceremony as quickly as she'd taken it up, "but the gist of it is this: the High Ridge tribe and its allies would like to establish a goblin settlement in your lands."

I blinked.

"What?" I said, for eloquence was one of my foremost virtues.

I paused.

"Is that even *legal*?"

"The Empress reinstated breeding restrictions to show favour to the Moderates," Aisha said quietly. "In a gesture of goodwill, however, she allowed the establishment of a new goblin tribe for the first time in two hundred years."

"Matrons fought over the right like a bag full of angry cats," Pickler shrugged. "Mother's the most vicious old bitch of that pack of vicious old bitches, though. She ended up on top of that pile of bodies."

"There's never been a goblin settlement outside of the Grey Eyries before," Hakram said, sounding surprised.

I glanced at him.

"Foramen," I reminded him.

"Foramen has been ruled by humans since the Miezani occupation, even if goblins work the forges," the tall orc replied.

That... might be true? I really had no idea. Praesi history not related to the Tower wasn't something I'd read a lot of. Anyway, no point in quibbling since odds were he was right and this wasn't the most salient issue at the moment anyway. My eyes returned to the Senior Sapper.

"That's an," I started, looking for the word, "... interesting offer."

"She doesn't expect you to accept out of love for goblinkind," Pickler said, amused. "She's offering for the goblins in question to build fortifications for the city, free of charge. The tribe would occupy the designated land but pay rent for the privilege, as well bribe you generously for your generosity in considering the matter. Everybody knows Marchford's ledgers are bleeding like slow raider."

I felt it safe to assume the raider in question was bleeding because he'd been too slow to dodge a knife. That expression told me a lot about how what living in the Grey Eyries would be like.

"I've been looking into ways to fill the coffers," I said, glancing at Aisha.

The lovely tribune shook her head.

"While I find the notion of a tribe of goblins within sight of where I sleep horrifying, none offered terms you would find acceptable," she said. "There's quite a few families willing to make a loan, and some are even willing to forego interest. All want a governorship as part of the deal."

"Come on," I griped. "There's got to be at least one that just wants to fleece me."

"With almost no remaining Praesi governors, anyone who could secure such a post under your reign would gain a massive advantage against their rivals," Aisha said. "None are willing to forego that chance. I have, however, accumulated some funds when they attempted to bribe my intermediaries. The appropriate portion was added to your treasury."

"That's something, I guess," I said, reluctantly amused.

The mirth died quickly enough when my gaze returned to Pickler.

"You talked about rent," I said. "Not a grant of land."

"While swearing fealty to you would have been hard enough to swallow," the Senior Sapper said, "The possibility that one day a male descendant of yours might rule Marchford pretty much killed that idea."

She shrugged.

"They're not wrong," the yellow-eyed goblin said. "It'd be pretty disgusting for a Matron to take orders from a man."

"I'm feeling somewhat insulted, right now," Ratface mused.



Pickler eyed him pityingly.

"You're a fine warleader, Ratface," she reassured him. "You're just not cut out for important matters like ruling or raising children. Men are too emotional for those things, it's not your fault."

"Matrons have taken orders from Dread Emperors," I pointed out, morbidly fascinated.

I'd always known the Tribes were a matriarchy, but I'd never actually *seen* that in action before. Pickler was a clever, intelligent and talented officer. Who'd somehow come to believe that barring half her people from leadership positions could be anything but shooting herself in the foot.

"Tyrants don't count," she said, eyeing me sceptically. "They're Named. They're not like other men."

"So you're telling me an entire culture recognizes me as objectively better than Ratface?" Hakram said, leaning forward.

I snorted.

"You're a traitor to your gender, Hakram," the Taghreb said. "For shame. Where's the solidarity?"

"I recognize you're objectively better than Ratface," Aisha told Hakram. "I'm sure I could get a petition passed around to collect broader opinion."

"So I'm to leave this room both without all my toes unbroken *and* my dignity?" the bastard mused. "You people are animals."

Pickler sneered in the general direction of the gallery before returning her attention to me.

"Think it over," she said. "Left the letter in your affairs, since I didn't want to bother remembering all the legalese. They'll expect an answer soon."

I nodded slowly. I had no intention of agreeing to anything before talking it over with a few other people, anyway. That the Empress had allowed this at all meant she tacitly endorsed the idea, but scrying her for a conversation wouldn't be a bad idea. Getting Black on the other side of a bowl would be even better, but I had no real way to contact him. Pickler slid down her pile of cushions and saluted me before stalking away. Aisha and Ratface took the hint, and made their exit not long after. Hakram was polishing off the rest of his wine, so I turned to Kilian. Who was already looking at me, I was pleased to see.

"So, Senior Mage," I said. "When do you get off duty?"

"I've no responsibilities until afternoon tomorrow," she replied with a smile.

I raised an eyebrow.

"How'd you manage that?" I asked.

"I forewent my free days for the last month," Kilian said. "Though I did manage to walk the city a bit before that."

"Oh?" I said, fingers toying with the edge of her tunic.

"Found a little shop in the merchant district," she said idly. "They do very interesting things with lace."

My breath caught. Smiling impishly, she leaned closer.

"I'm wearing one of their creations right now," she murmured.

I rose to my feet.

"And we're done here," I announced.

Catching Kilian by the hand I immediately headed for the door but paused when I passed by Adutant.

"Hakram," I said. "My buddy. My friend."

"Cat?" he replied bemusedly.

"I've been sleeping in an empty bed for two months," I said. "If someone knocks at my door before noon tomorrow for anything short of an invasion, I will have them *hanged*."

Kilian snorted, and we were out of the room before the orc could reply.

—

I woke up in the middle of the night.

The armful of redhead at my side was still asleep and my pillow was decadently soft after having been on the road so long, so I closed my eyes and buried my head back into it. Someone banged on the door again, more urgently this time. I cursed, then got up. Kilian's eyes fluttered open.

"Cat?" she asked sleepily.

"Go back to sleep," I said. "I'll be back in a moment."

I almost went to open the door before remembering I was naked. Picking up a shirt from the pile of dirty clothes I really needed to have laundered at some point, I slipped it on. The asshole on the other side of the door banged again. Adjusting the shirt to

it covered my thighs, I made my way to the door and wrenched it open. On the other side, a legionary with lieutenant stripes stood with his hand raised.

"What?" I hissed at him.

The Soninke took in the sight of me dishevelled, half-asleep and entirely furious before gulping nervously.

"Lady Squire, the Winter Court is attempting to invade the city," he managed to get out. "General Juniper sent me to wake you."

I sighed, then rubbed the bridge of my nose. One of these days, I was going to learn to keep my fucking mouth shut.

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### *The Archdevil*

"Don't bother me unless we're being invaded"

Meanwhile, in Arcadia...

"She said it! She wants an easy night with her lover! We attack at midnight! "

Freaking fae folk. They always ruin everything.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Nah. I think it was the Cosmos who sent the Fae a gilt invitation... after it stopped cackling. Probably also embossed. With curilcues. 😊

Cat didn't just tempt fate, she practically advertised.

### [boballab](#)

Except fate or the cosmos isn't the ones Cat is going to take being disturbed out on. Let that be a lesson kiddie's, never except gilt invitations from the cosmos they are always bad for your health.

.

Well, she is doing what plots in stories always happen to do. And this world revolves around stories.

*danh3107*

I can't think of anything particularly witty to say....

But damnit Cat getting rid of the Assassins will bite you in the ass.

On the other hand the Goblin plan most definitely will, but she needs the funds.

What a web what a web.

Oh and Faeries at the gate, better go kill them.

*stevenneiman*

Not really. If the land is a lease and not a grant, then their use of it is tied to her or at least someone who continues her policy. If they kill her off without the ability to be absolutely 100% certain that she didn't have a mechanism in place to kick them off the land in the event of her suspicious death, they would be evicted from the territory. That would be both expensive and embarrassing if they had what would be basically a full city at the time.

Also, they know that Black will be very displeased if they do anything to harm or even seriously inconvenience her.

One more thing is that they have problems with insufficient mages and sappers. Reaching out to the goblins might not do anything about the mage deficit, but it's bound to make it easier for them to get more sappers in the long run.

*One filthy greenskin*

She already has a tribeful of replacements coming soon.

*Ploogle*

She really should have seen that coming. She should start saying stuff like, "Don't bother me unless Heiress is dead," that'll put her gift to good use.

*Jonnnnz*

Great, now you went and created Devil Heiress.

[Edward Conway](#)

"One does need to hate greenskins"

^

not(?)

*Shequi*

"I recognize you're objectively better than Ratface," Aisha told Nauk

Pretty certain that should be 'Aisha told Hakram'

*Gunslinger*

Haha loved the ending there. I knew the moment she said that to Hakram that there would be an interruption. Can't wait to see Cats new powers in action.

I recognize you're objectively better than Ratface," Aisha told Nauk. I'm assuming that should be Hakram.

Also @erraticerrata would you be okay if I (or anyone else really) kept plugging the topwebfiction.com link every week? Make it a thing like they do for Twig.

[erraticerrata](#)

Sure, go ahead!

*The quietist*

How's Twig doing atm? I stopped following a few months ago when i was buried under work and Sy was having an extended breakdown in New Amsterdam

*Gunslinger*

I am currently on Arc 5 actually so I don't know what's up ahead. Sorry

*BryceWilliam*

its finished.

*ProdigyNevling*

It's heading towards the end now. I would recommend catching up since the finale is near which is fun to catch. Idk why BryceWilliam would lie about it but he did. Traditional Wildbow ending is happening.

[Thanatos](#)

What? No. No, it isn't finished. Close to, but it's not over yet.

To answer OP, Sy is steadily losing control over the do's and dont's of his hallucinated mental constructs, to the point where he can't tell who's real anymore and who's not. With him having to lead his army in that state in a brawl with Helen's big brother, it's very interesting indeed.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Readers have been claiming Twig was "almost done" since arc 5. I don't even care if it's a consensus this time, I'll believe that shit when I see it.

I've been taking a break from Twig while catching up on Iron Teeth, which has been surprisingly good. Last I saw, they had seen Helen's brother but not engaged him. Can that much really have changed in just a few chapters?

*stevenneiman*

You should probably post the link each time you do.  
For this one, <http://topwebfiction.com/>

*Gunslinger*

Also we haven't see Robber in a while so I'm guessing he's now the new King of Thieves. Of course it might be against Legion regulations though.

*Cicero*

You forgot that there is still a heroic thief on the prowl, i find it more likely that she has taken the crown.

*stevenneiman*

Yeah, I think BC and LC were the only Named of the original band who actually died. And WB, sort of.

[Thanatos](#)

Don't forget the campy spearbearer who died fighting the demon at Marchford. I liked that guy.

*Letouriste*

Thanks for the chapter:)

I'm surprised cat didn't think about how convenient the thief system is. She just have to send someone infiltrate the guild, one of her minions, and next help him to take the crown and she get a whole guild at her feets;)

Then she destroy the guild from inside and reforme the better members in her own men.

A simple plan, probably complicated in the making but that should work.

I also think this Gobelin migration is perfect for the robber/pickler ship

They just can defect in this tribe together.. furthermore the members will principally be from their tribe anyway.

*Cpt. Obvious*

As I remember it Pickler and Robber are from different tribes. Robber is definitely from the Stonebreaker tribe. At the moment I can't remember what tribe Pickler comes from, only that it's not the same as Robber.

Also Pickler isn't really on speaking terms with her mother and hates the whole tribal system and the Matrons in particular. If she has any tribe today it's the 15th. Still there seems to be some kind of genetic programming going on that makes it hard for goblins to rebel against the tribe mentality. Or it's the Gobbler that brings them in line with the rest of goblin society. That last would however seem to be going against the spirit of the Gods below as it's been presented. Directly controlling the subjects is more in the Gods above ballpark.

But the same is also seen amongst the Orcs. Though they seem to have an easier time resisting their genetic programming. Though they do tend to resort to snacking while fighting.

My point being that I'm not certain that Pickler would welcome having her mother set up a new tribe anywhere near Marchford as it's now home base for the 15th.

*Cap'nSmurfy*

"I've been sleeping in an empty bed for two months," I said. "If someone knocks at my door before noon tomorrow for anything short of an invasion, I will have them hanged."

Oh Cat when will you learn? Once again, Cat forgets that she's Named. She made the odds of invasion 100%

[gianoria7](#)

Thanks for the chapter.

Cat should seriously start to memorize every possible flags so that she knows what not to say...

By the way, in the Table of Contents, the link to this chapter also appears just before "Book 1".

I suppose that this is not supposed to be like this.

*stevenneiman*

"Everybody knows Marchford's ledgers are bleeding like {a} slow raider."

"That expression told me a lot about [how] what living in the Grey Eyries would be like." alternatively, "how living in the Grey Eyries would be."

"Left the letter in your [affairs->effects?]"

These fae have no idea what they're getting into. They already interrupted Masego's experiments, and now they're interrupting

Cat's time with Killian as well. This is going to end very badly for them.

AVR

Typos

on he other  
on the other

had officially withdraw  
had officially withdrawn

hammered in obstacles  
hammered down obstacles

one my foremost  
one of my foremost

passed by Adutant.  
passed by Adjutant.

shirt to it covered  
shirt so it covered

*WealthyAardvark*

Typo:

It always put me in a good mood when I heard about the Truebloods get the bad end of the stick.  
-> getting

*Dragrath*

Cat should have known better than to say such taunting words... No doubt it will give the Fae some advantage considering the rules... Even worse if there are named Fae(I have no idea if they have names but if they do I'm sure one will attack because of Cats declaration... )  
Some Fae gotta pay 😊

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Names are a thing of Creation, and the fae are not. So no, I don't see how or why that would be possible.

[Nerazim Praetor](#)

I thought Arcadia was *technically* part of Creation but *kinda not really*?

[Nerazim Praetor](#)



I honestly hope learning to keep her mouth shut is the last thing to happen in this series.  
Like, the last chapter would have someone saying "by the gods, *Squire learned to keep her mouth shut*"

*JHajek*

Hi, I made a map of Calernia. It's my first time making one, so I hope you will like it (if not tell me why 😊). Do you think it can be posted with other maps? Thanks for any reply.

Here is the link: <https://ibb.co/gtrBAa>

PS: I will make this comment once more after the next chapter is posted to let more people know about it. Dont be mad, please... 😊

*Barrendur*

@JHajek: Wow, that map looks incredible! It's very appealing visually... but as I am just a reader here, I can't really comment on its accuracy.

\*I\* like it a lot, for whatever that's worth 😊

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Before it gets confirmed as true or false, I have a theory about who Assassin is. E.E. confirmed he has appeared on screen, and I'm making the leap to assume he has had speaking lines as well.

I think Assassin is the one member of Black's personal guard that Cat has spoken to on at least two occasions. It's just something that my subconscious spat out at me while reading a different story, so I have a fairly high degree of confidence despite the fact that I'm a bit hazy on WHY I think so. My best retroactive explanation is that there's not really any other reason for those conversations to have happened, so they kind of stick out.

What do I win if I'm right? Can I get a cameo somewhere? =)

*Morgenstern*

" Getting Black on the other side of a bowl would be even better, but I had no real way to contact him. " – That's the idea, darling Cat – NOT always asking him, but doing things on your own. 😊 As anyone can see, absentee (but-not-dead, just far-enough-away) mentors work fine for that. ^^

*Nick*

Proofreading:

... The tribe would occupy the designated land but pay rent for the privilege, as well **\*\*as\*\*** bribe you generously for your

generosity in considering the matter. Everybody knows Marchford's ledgers are bleeding like **\*\*a\*\*** slow raider."

*Isa Lumitus*

I've got a crazy idea for Cat: Accept the offer from the goblins, and give them the city of Marchford. Let the Fae incursion be THEIR problem.

I seem to recall reading something about the virtues of using your problems to solve each other.

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## Chapter 5: Beachhead

*"Look at how edible you are. You're basically asking for it."*

-Warlord Grog the King-Eater, addressing the king of Okoro during the sack of the same

"So what are we looking at?" I asked.

I took my helmet when Hakram offered it, clasping the chin straps as I checked the longsword sheathed at my belt. The moon was out in full, but it was hard to tell given how many torches there were out in the streets. Legionaries were evacuating the citizens of Marchford according to Juniper's prepared plan as we made our way through the streets, half the Gallowborne behind me. The rest was still assembling under Tribune Farrier. They'd catch up eventually. I wasn't sure whether I'd want them to follow me into the fray, anyway, but if nothing else they'd be able to bolster our lines.

"The first defensive perimeter collapsed almost instantly," the tall orc said. "Hune's men dug in behind the second one, but they're out of their breadth here."

I could see the blizzard that had overtaken the central plaza of my city even from where I stood, a column that went high into the sky like some cheap snow imitation of the Tower, so Adjutant's words struck me as a bit of an understatement. I'd pit the Fifteenth against anything that had feet or claws, but you couldn't stab the weather. Well, they couldn't anyway. I might be able to work something out. In my experience, you could stab pretty much anything if you tried hard enough. Now *there* was a decent motto for the freshly-founded Noble House of Foundling. If I ever got around to having any descendants – and I wasn't planning on it, at the moment – I'd have it put up on a spiffy

banner for when they inevitably got into a fight way out of their league. A legacy to be proud of.

"No shit," I said. "I meant what kind of forces are they fielding?"

"Infantry," Adjutant said. "Every single enemy soldier should be considered a mage, and their weapons look primitive but they have no trouble cutting through ours."

"You'd think people would get tired of that gimmick," I sighed. "Anyone looks like they're in charge?"

"Not as of the last report I got," Hakram replied. "I'm guessing if there's a leader they're either still in Arcadia or hidden by the storm."

We turned the corner, a line of legionaries moving aside with hasty salutes so they wouldn't get in our way. I nodded absent-mindedly, not really paying attention.

"They have wings, right?" I asked, making a gesture that was meant to represent flapping butterflies but came across as mildly obscene.

"That's how they overran the first perimeter," Hakram agreed soberly. "Headed straight for Pickler's scorpions to take them out then spread across the rooftops. Hune moved crossbowmen to box them in, it's working for now."

That did not feel like a long-term solution. Eventually they'd find a way to get through and there was no way I was allowing a bunch of fae to run wild in Marchford. Gods, just thinking of the cost of rebuilding after a rampage was enough to make me feel faint. Why were my enemies never considerate about collateral damage? Admittedly I'd ordered Marchford Manor torched myself, but I sure as Hells wasn't taking the blame for the devils and that walking horror Heiress has set on the city.

"Mages can't do anything about that?" I said.

"They're busy making sure the blizzard goes up instead of covering the city," Adjutant said. "They're working on shutting it down entirely, but whatever's making it packs a punch."

"Have you-"

"Sent a runner to Apprentice before I even caught up to you," the tall orc interrupted me.

Hakram, you prince among men. Always on the ball. If there was someone could make this mess less of a mess – or at least someone else's mess – it was Masego. I wasn't all that eager to head into a snowstorm without someone who could make fire at my side, truth

be told, cloak over my plate or not. If the Fair Folk wanted to make it snow, I wasn't above retorting with a whiff of the ol' brimstone. We were close to the plaza, now, and I could feel the temperature steadily dropping. Joy. The two of us slowed when a legionary popped out of the woodworks and immediately headed in our direction, dropping a knee when she got in front of me.

"Countess," the young Callowan said.

"Up," I ordered. "You were sent for us?"

"Legate Hune conveys her respect and would like to inform you the southern part of our formation is close to collapse," the light-skinned girl said.

Gods, how old was she? Seventeen at most. Barely two years younger than me but she felt like a kid, all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and one bad day away from getting on a battlefield she wouldn't walk away from.

"She has reinforcements headed there?" Hakram asked.

"We're stretched thin until Legate Nauk moves his men into place," the messenger replied. "She fears what she can spare will not be enough."

Well, *fuck*. Hune had three thousand soldiers under her command – one time and a half the size of what a kabili should be – and she was still hard-pressed? Given the relatively small size of the area she had to contain, that meant the fae were tearing through her men like wet parchment.

"We're close," Hakram said, eyeing me.

"We're going," I replied. "Tell the legate as much."

The girl got to her feet and saluted as I turned to the Gallowborne behind me. The officer at their head was an orc, one of the few in my personal guard.

"Lieutenant Sark," I called out.

"Ma'am?" the officer replied.

"Send word to Tribune Farrier: we're headed south. He's to back up the lines there immediately. Same for your men."

The greenskin eyed me calmly.

"You'll be going into the storm, ma'am?"

"Looks that way," I grunted. "Gotta get at whatever's in there."

He grinned, showing off yellowing fangs.

“Good hunting, Warlord.”

See, stuff like that was like I liked having orcs backing me. No insistence on coming along or waiting for Apprentice, just an encouragement to go out and kill things that wanted to kill me. I didn't waste time on any further talk: we moved double-time for where the enemy assault was apparently the strongest.

—

Legion doctrine for static defence was fairly straightforward. Establish a shield wall of heavies everywhere without walls, place sappers and mages behind it to disrupt enemy formations. Most of the killing was actually behind the melee, by bolts and fireballs shot into the massed enemies. Unfortunately, both the Miezan legions and the Praesi inheritors had crafted that tactic relying on one assumption the Fifteenth was currently paying for: that they would have more or better spellcasters on the field than the enemy. The Empire was the only nation on Calernia with a formal mage corps in their army, so they usually had at least twice the number of spellslingers the enemy did if not more, and the Miezan empire had been *built* on sorcery the likes of which had never been seen before or since. Neither nation had ever tangled with the fae, and it was showing.

Instead of the orderly shield wall I was expecting, I was currently looking at half a dozen clumps of legionaries desperately trying to fight off the enemy while fairies darted past them to take a bite out of my panicking sappers. The sharp cracks of munitions and disorderly crossbow fire announced the death of a few more of my goblins every few heartbeats. I was confused at how the fae could have managed to break a shield wall without one of their own until the first time I saw some dark-skinned man dressed in furs glow as he spoke and a human walking out of formation as if in a trance, just to get speared through the throat. The Winter Court was falling on my men like a pack of wolves, using ice and illusions and charm to break them apart and pick them off one at a time. The defensive formations of Hune's men were not a rampart so much as a buffet the enemy could choose from at will.

Most of the fairies were shaped like eerie humans with wings, though not all. Wolf-like hounds made of ice and shade wove in and out of sight, tearing out throats and mauling men over their shields. The only saving grace of that disaster I was watching was that it wasn't also in the middle of a blizzard. Silver lining, eh?

“That is *not* how I saw my night going,” I admitted.

“They're probably smarter than devils too,” Hakram growled with distaste.

My longsword came out of its scabbard without a sound and I move forward with my shield raised. Adjutant's axe and scutum immediately moved to cover my left flank as the Gallowborne spread out in ranks behind us. Hune's sappers took cover behind them as soon as they could, retreating with relief, and then a heartbeat later I was in the thick of it. A pale-skinned woman in a flowing blue dress that shimmered like a mirror leapt in my direction, a bone sword in hand. I breathed in, breathed out, and felt my Name stir. The beast grinned, eyes opening: my veins warmed and the world slowed. *Hello, old friend. Would it be strange to say I've missed you?* The sharp point of bone was headed straight for my throat, uncaring of the gorget protecting it, and I wasn't taking the risk of letting that blow land. The flat of my sword lightly tapped the fae's wrist, nudging the strike away, then with a flick of the wrist came around to tear straight through my enemy's throat. I had at no point ceased moving forward. A heartbeat later, the fae's headless corpse fell to the ground behind me.

Weeping Heavens, it was good to be back in the field.

To my left Hakram sunk his axe into the head of a shadow hound, hard enough shards of ice flew and its muzzle hit the ground. With a grunt he tore it out, then brought down an armoured boot on the creature's neck to make sure it wouldn't get up. I could feel myself smiling, the battle-joy taking hold of me. Gods, after all this talking I'd been forced to do lately it was such a delight just being able to *hit* something. The Gallowborne were advancing steadily behind us, picking off any fae trying to charm them with crossbows before they could get too close. The fairies swarmed in the air above them, but my personal guard was made of sterner stuff than that. They'd been through Marchford and Liesse: a bunch of fae weren't going to make them flinch. I left them to it, moving towards Hune's besieged legionaries. Ragged cries of "Fifteenth" came when they saw me, and they threw themselves back into the fray with fresh ferocity. That drew some attention. The fae, strange translucent wings flapping, hovered in front of me. I genuinely could not tell what gender it was, if it even had one.

"Let go of your weapon, sweet one," it crooned.

My shield smashed it in the face, breaking its nose with a brutal crunch. Huh, so fae *did* bleed red. You learned something every day. I started speaking again, so I hit it again with morbid fascination.

"Here, have it," I replied drily, ramming my sword through its chest.

"Don't play with your food," Hakram chided absent-mindedly.

His axe went clean through a wild-haired fae with two spears of shadow, then when it fell the bottom of his shield came down on her head repeatedly until it was nothing more than bloody pulp.

"I'm not impressed with the calibre so far," I said. "Enemies that weak shouldn't have broken our lines."

Immediately after saying that, I hunkered behind my shield and braced for impact. The tip of a bronze spear punched through the steel, an inch away from my right eye, and I grinned. I'd had a feeling that would hurry things along. I ripped my arm out of the leather straps binding it to the shield, stepping back as I took a look at my opponent. Male, wearing an armour of twisted dead wood. Couldn't see much of him aside from long dark hair and entirely blue eyes staring at me like I was an insect. Eh. I'd gotten more scathing disdain from Praesi nobles, he'd have to step up his game if he wanted to make a dent. There was a bronze sword at his hip, still sheathed. I flicked my wrist and the contraption of steel wires Pickler had built me triggered, dropping my knife on the palm of my gauntleted hand. If I triggered it differently, it could even shoot the knife like an arrow. My Senior Sapper made the best toys. There were another three fae decked in the same armour at the new one's side, fanning out to flank Hakram and I.

"Nauk described a female with the same gear as responsible for the last blizzard," Adjutant said, hefting his axe over his shoulder.

"Four heavy hitters, then," I frowned. "Someone's looking to make an impression."

The first deadwood soldiers ripped his spear out of my shield, then laughed. It wasn't a human laugh, or even a person's. It sounded like the ice of a lake cracking come spring, like frost sharply spreading over glass.

"Children," he mocked, and though he was speaking no language I knew I understood him perfectly. "We are the footsoldiers of Winter. The Sword of Waning Day. Die screaming."

"Oh hey, a pack of flunkies with a fancy name," I deadpanned. "Never slaughtered my way through one of *those* before."

They moved as one. Before the first exchange was even done I was very, very glad I'd scrapped with the Hunter before. I'd had precious little training against opponents using spears save for my fights with the hero, and if I hadn't learned to read movements from that I'd likely have earned a gaping hole through my shoulder within the first five heartbeats of the fight. The two deadwood soldiers who focused on me were quick, light on their feet and worst of all they knew how to work together. Soldiers, I decided, might not be the right word no matter what

they called themselves. They were like hunters, harrying a prey into position so the finishing blow could be struck. Unfortunately for them, they were going to have to reconsider their position in the food chain of Creation. I closed the distance with the one who'd spoken, getting in up and personal where his choice of weapon was more hindrance than help. I nearly ate a bronze shaft in the teeth but instead ducked under it, sliding my knife into the armour about where his lower ribs should be.

The goblin steel bit into the wood but failed to punch through. Not regular wood, then. Everybody always got these fancy enchanted things, it was godsdamned unfair. I had to dance away when a spear tip pierced through where the back of my leg was a heartbeat before, then sharply twist my footing when when the first deadwood soldier went for my throat. They were too quick, I thought. In plate I wasn't able to keep up, and my armour might as well be silk for the difference it would make if they landed a hit. I heard Hakram bellow and glanced in his direction: he had a spear through the leg, though he'd traded that for his axe buried in one of the fae's neck. Right between the helmet and armour. It did not slow the enemy down, to my dismay. The deadwood soldier simply ripped out the axe, tossed it away and unsheathed her sword. Adjutant spat to the side, threw his shield in her face and took the spear out of his leg. He did not look concerned in the slightest about how he was bleeding.

My momentary distraction was costly. I saw the spear blur from the corner of my eye and hastily slapped the shaft to the side with the flat of my sword, but I'd missed the other one: it punched straight through my plate, then my knee, then entirely through and into the pavement. I was stuck where I was like a bloody pig on a spit. The soldier who'd hit me unsheathed his sword as the other one, the one who'd spoken, drew back his spear as it became coated with frost. This was the most pain I'd been in in over a year, and for a moment I focused on biting down on a scream. Then I watched a frosted spear head moving with unnatural swiftness towards my head, the whole world narrowing down to that one threat. I was not going to be able to dodge that, I knew. All the lessons I'd learned from some of the most celebrated killers of our age flashed through the back of my mind, but I pushed the aside. Eyes crossing as I followed the trajectory of the spear, instead of trying to move my body I bid my time and then *bit*. I caught the very end of the point between my teeth.

If Black ever heard of this, I thought, he was going to drill me until I died. The fae shifted his footing to simply push the spear forward – which would be very, very bad – but I spat it out and parried the sword blow from his partner. This was going to end very quickly if I didn't start moving again, so I flicked my wrist at the sword fae and forced it to duck smoothly under my thrown knife while with my now-free hand I tore out his spear,



flooding power in my arm to compensate for the poor angle. Bleeding like it was going out of style, one leg hanging loosely and pretty much useless, I eyed my opponents.

"She struggles still," the sword fae noted in voice that sounded like a deer's death rattle, like an owl swooping down.

"Title of my memoirs," I gasped. "On that note: **Rise.**"

Thick chords of shadow spread across my body as my wounds closed. A little more of that bundle of power inside me faded away. Luckily I hadn't had to use much of it so far – I doubted I'd run into anything as useful to Take anytime soon. The sight of my wound disappearing in the span of heartbeat, healed perfectly, was enough to give the fae pause. The healing wasn't painless, of course, it hurt just as much as the wounding had because the Choir of Contrition was obviously a bunch of bleeding sadists. That moment of surprise cost them. I forced power into my legs and in the blink of an eye I was on the deadwood soldiers with a spear, ramming his buddy's own weapon through the small chink between his wood breastplate and the lower parts of his armour. The creature gasped in pain but I ignored it, twisting to meet the assault of the other fae. The sword was angled for my throat, which was smart of him: I'd just conclusively proved that hacking away at my limbs was useless. Nothing short of a killing blow was going to stop me. Unfortunately for him, sword blades going for me was something I was intimately familiar with. I caught his wrist, twisted it sharply and forced him to his knees. A hard stroke was enough to send his still-helmeted head tumbling to the ground. I glanced at the one with the spear through the belly, saw he was on his knees desperately trying to take it out.

"A year ago," I said, "that struggle comment would have been a great set up."

The point of my sword went through one of the eyeholes, came away wet with blood and some silvery fluid that turned into smoke. I got ready to back up Adjutant, but he'd apparently turned the situation around. He tossed the corpse of one soldier at the other and, taking the spear by the shaft two-handed, began to brutally beat down the still-living fae.

"Hakram," I muttered. "That is *not* how you use a spear."

The fae tried to retreat but I kicked it in the back, having approached quietly, and Adjutant brought down the spear – without even needing to turn it around, since he'd been holding it upside down – to pierce the creature through the throat when she was down. We caught our breaths for a moment, him still bleeding and me feeling my Name's power simmer down without an opponent to take it out on.

"I can't help but notice the blizzard hasn't gone away," Adjutant finally said, bending over to pick up his axe.

I eyed the raging winds ahead warily. Behind us my legionaries had managed to get their line in order, only to be entirely relieved of pressure moments ago when the fae started fleeing back into the blizzard. While giving Hakram and I a very wide berth. That showed a remarkable understanding of how that fight would go.

"Could be there's another one inside," I said.

"Ten denarii there's something even nastier in the middle," Adjutant said.

"That's not a bet," I said, "that's you stealing my hard-earned salary."

I sheathed my sword.

"The one who talked," I said. "He said something that troubles me."

"We are the footsoldiers of Winter," the orc quoted softly.

"If they're not lying," I said. "If those were really the rank and file..."

"How strong will an officer be?" the orc completed.

What did that even make the fae my legionaries were having trouble with? Skirmishers? *Or civilians*, I thought, and the shiver that went up my spine had nothing to do with the cold. Nothing here was adding up. I didn't know much about the fae, but if they'd attempted to invade Creation before *someone* would have fucking written about it. I refused to believe there could be several hundred books about the godsdamned Licerian Wars, which hadn't even happened on this continent, and not a single one about 'that one time Arcadia poured out as an unstoppable flood of death'.

"There's other gates in and out of Arcadia," I said. "And they don't seem to have trouble like this. There's fae in the Waning Woods, sure, but they don't invade places as an *army*. Refuge is a day's walk away from a gate and they're still on the map."

"So why, then, is the Winter Court sending soldiers here?" Hakram asked. "Is it because this isn't a proper gate?"

A wave of warmth washed away the cold a moment before someone cleared their throat. I turned.

"I'm rather curious about that myself," Masego said. "And I know where we can find answers."

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[mgmtheo](#)

Now I'm wondering about heraldry for the noble house of Foundling... A goats head on a green field? Motto: luctor et emergo (struggle and emerge)?

[The Old Hack \(@The\\_Old\\_Hack\)](#)

I am now snickering madly trying to imagine how you could heraldically represent an exploding undead goat. Thank you.  
\*snicker\*

*Vin*

Goat Skull surrounded by green flame (goblin fire) is my guess. Or something akin to that. Maybe a skeletal/rotting goat standing majestically on a hill surrounded by green flame?

*General Chaos*

Very, very late, but use a gif. I'm pretty sure magic can do that.

*Naeddyr*

A goats head flammant on a field of vert?

*corrado alamanni*

She needs to find a human male with whom to make a noble household to rule callow!

*Cpt. Obvious*

She's got thousands of brothers and sisters. The Foundling's are not a small family...

*Gunslinger*

It's great to finally see Cat let loose again. Hopefully she hasn't gone soft. I wonder what happened to the Hashmallim's sword though?

On a side note, do vote for the guide on topwebfiction (<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>).

*Unoriginal*

She wont use it, (the sword), Cat reflects on Black mentioning somewhere that heroes and villains using magical weapons to get a leg up eventually have it fail on them at a critical time.

*Letouriste*

She is using the sword, it lost all his powers and is now just a sharp blade

*Morgenstern*

What Letouriste said. Was directly described at the endfight of the last book. 😊

[greatwyrmgold](#)

No, it's a *cool* really sharp blade. Also deliciously ironic.

*danh3107*

God I loved everything about this chapter. They Fae tactics were brilliant.

1. Create favorable terrain, i.e the blizzard.
2. If your troops lack discipline and real formations, disrupt your enemies instead.
3. Cheat like motherfuckers.

Oh man that was cool

*danh3107*

\*the Fae

that was embarrassing

*The Archdevil*

This wasn't the Fae creating a beachhead in Marchford. This was the Fae opening the door for Squire, Adjutant, and Apprentice to establish a beachhead in Arcadia.

There's gonna be a lot of dead elves when all is said and done. And possibly two new Aspects for Kat, to go with Take.

*TheCount*

like Keep and Share?

...If she can't Keep rise and Share it with her legionaries...

\*shiver\* the Praesi nobles would go to open war against her the moment they find it out ("°A°")

*Nairne*

The Gallowborn would take on a whole new meaning. The Undying Legion.

*Manuel Cao*

Would she get two new ones or just one? I get that she lost Struggle since that was her own aspect but I thought the Squire always has Learn. Wouldn't she have gotten that one back since it is inherent to the Squire?

[gianoria7](#)

To Manuel Cao:

I don't think they always get Learn.

It's just that anyone who becomes the Squire first has to learn a lot of things. So they obtain Learn to help. In fact, it's generally the first Aspect that is obtained (like in Cath's case)

In Cath's current case, however, she doesn't need to learn as much as before, so she doesn't need her Name to give her a crutch for learning.

So I don't think that she will regain Learn.

It's the same for Struggle.

She isn't struggling as much as before, so she will probably gain another Aspect instead.

As for what kind of Aspect she could get from invading Arcadia, I don't know what it will be, but I'm sure it will be bad for the Fae.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I was thinking almost along the same lines... Give and Multiply?

*Dragrath*

Elves are different from Fae... Elves just sit back in their forest being purist racist isolationists that got kicked out of elven society for being purest racist isolationists...

Fae are extradiemensional beings akin to demons and angels

*Soronel Haetir*

I like that the beast within woke up. And also that her basic Name manifestation didn't change.

[vexingvision](#)

You just made me want to get back into playing Illwinter's Dominions.

Well done. I was looking for an excuse to field crazy, enchanted fairies to tear through shieldwalls.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

And, yet... the Fae are still somewhat less teeth-grindingly annoying to me than those Elves. \*shrugs\*

*Akim*

Thats because they are oldschool fairies not those tolkienized snobs.

*Wolfkit*

Meanwhile, the elves of the Golden Bloom are snobs to the eleventh power such that they are quite possibly the epitome of satire with regards to elves.

### [ayon96](#)

What's the Licerian war?

*Shequi*

The Licerian Wars have been referenced several times in the books so far. It appears to be the conflict that brought down the Miezian Empire and thus gave rise to Praes as an independent entity.

### [Nerazim Praetor](#)

Eh? But then it wouldn't have happened on a separate continent, no?

*Jago*

The Miezian Empire territories in this continent where colonies. It is like how the European wars made it possible for the USA to gain independence. While the great power is being teared up by wars that ravage its core, the colonies gain independence.

AVR

Typos

out of their breadth  
out of their depth (Usually. It might be that orcs use a slightly different phrase.)

dropping a knee  
dropping to a knee

illusions and charm  
illusions and charms (I think)

a bronze shaft  
(bronze spear as a name refers to the metal of the head. The shaft is usually wood.)

I bid my time  
I bided my time

*Unmaker*

More:

I pushed the aside  
them

I got read to  
ready

*JHajek*

Hi, made a map of Calernia. Check it out here: <https://ibb.co/b9DLME> and let me know of any error you find. Thanks 😊

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

That looks effin amazing, although I could question the geological viability of some of the bodies of water. That inland sea below the Dominion looks a bit weird. But *damn* that's a cool map.

[Euodiachloris](#)

If in doubt "some damned fool of an enthusiast tried to summon something a lot bigger than their head" is the answer.



[erraticerrata](#)

Damn, I totally forgot to reply to you. Awesome map. There were a few spelling mistakes in the first iteration but you seemed to have fixed them. Anyways, I linked it in the map section and beautiful work.

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

"I had a feeling that would hurry things along"

Cath is so genre-savvy, she doesn't tempt Fate, she taunts it and makes it her bitch

*Letouriste*

The start of the cat dominion in Arcadia 😊 or just a good excuse for asking for more money to the tower^^

*nipi*

Road trip with Masego? Im sure he can use the exercise.

*Arancaytar*

Dangerously Genre Savvy doesn't even begin to describe Cat.

*Arancaytar*

What the actual fuck, Squire?

*The quietist*

Shenanigans that come with being named. As she comments Black would get positively sarcastic about that little move.

*M*

"Oh so me catching a spear with my teeth is 'showing off' but you stabbing me 'a little bit' to provoke a Name dream is a-okay?"

*Letouriste*

A really bad shenanigan honestly, just no way teeths can stop in any way steel with speed/strength behind. the teeth should be just shattered.

For pulling that off you would need to move backward at the exact same speed as your opponent and the strike would need to not have any tiny movements and just go straight.

*The quietist*

The joy of being a Name is the ability to do this sort of bullshit and just have reality bend around you a bit as far as I can tell.

*George*

Good thing she has magic powers and reality warps around her actions to make interesting stuff work!

*Arancaytar*

And Yet She Persisted.

[kg121](#)

There is a video ad for 'Humera' which is autoplaying here. I don't care about autoplaying video ads much, but when it takes control of the scroll, shunts the page to the bottom, refuses to



let me scroll up and read the chapter, and loops to do it repeatedly, that I have an issue with. Plz fix, I like not having to use adblock here.

*stevenneiman*

The reason why Refuge doesn't get Fae invaders through the gate is probably because they don't want to remind Hye that they exist. Apparently that went badly for the Wild Hunt, and I'm pretty sure that they're fairly high up the food chain.

*stevenneiman*

Oh, and

"but they're out of their [breadth->depth] here." I'm pretty sure the term refers to drowning, but in any case "out of your depth" is the common form.

"[one time and a half->one and a half times] the size of what a kabili should be" It might be correct as-is, but it would read smoother the other way.

"See, stuff like that was [like->why] I liked having orcs backing me."

*Morgenstern*

Well... one explanation that instantly crops up in my mind there is that Hye didn't care if the Fae tried to make her forget... and "someone" is now rampaging in Arcadia and the Fae coming out here are actually fleeing through that one rip in the fabric that happened to be luckily close by =P

On the other hand, maybe they're just pissed that someone made a rip in that wondrous fabric that they did NOT commission...

*dalek955*

was on [one of] the deadwood soldiers  
got [ready] to back up Adjutant

*dalek955*

[it] started speaking again

*Alegio*

Chapter best moments:

3. "A year ago," I said, "that comment would have been a great set up."
2. "Hakram," I muttered. "That is not how you use a spear."
1. You could stab pretty much anything if you tried hard enough.

Seriously dude from where do you get all this? Pure freaking gold XD

*nirge*

typo: one one – on one

*Byzantine*

Noooo! I've caught up.

*Mike Porter*

my thoughts precisely! Now i have to actually wait for updates and stuff...

*Morgenstern*

" I was very, very glad I'd scrapped with the Hunter before. I'd had precious little training against opponents using spears save for my fights with the hero, and if I hadn't learned to read movements from that I'd likely have earned a gaping hole through my shoulder within the first five heartbeats of the fight. "

And people keep saying you can't learn from a fight directly. 😊  
[ Yeah, I know, it was more about the Aspect "Learn" blahblah, but it just reminded me soooo much of Hye's chapter... 😊 ]

*Lrse*

When did she switch to using a longsword? Was this remarked on anywhere?

*Jago*

Probably since she had extracted the Lone Swordsman longsword from the stone. Even if it has lost its magic it still is extremely sharp and using it make a statement too.

*Alex Walters*

Refuge is still on the map because even the Fae don't want to poke Ranger.

*Schumi23*

"I started speaking again, so I hit it again with morbid fascination." probably 'it started speaking again'?  
Loving the story so far 😊

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## Chapter 6: Backlash

*"One learns more from defeat than victory. Therefore, fear the general that has never won a battle."*

– Isabella the Mad, Proceran general

Masego hadn't changed a bit since I last saw him. Tall, dark-skinned and boyishly chubby under his loose clothes. His spectacles were fogged by the cold. He'd put on a thick cloak and his trinket-threaded braids were covered by... I was honestly at a loss as to how to describe that abomination. Knitted colourful yarn vaguely shaped like an ugly hat trying to devour an equally awful hat?

"I'm sorry. I'm happy to see you and all but what is *that*?" I asked, pointing at the inanimate creature squatting over his head.

"My father knitted it," Apprentice replied, tone defensive. "Didn't want me to go out in the cold with my ears uncovered."

I almost asked him which father had committed that crime against anyone with eyes, but I wasn't sure whether that thing would be more disturbing if made by the Warlock or by an incubus, so I refrained from finding out. Probably the incubus, I morbidly thought. Warlock had always been impeccably dressed every time I saw him. Even the occasional casual worse-than-death threat hadn't been enough for me to stop noticing how ridiculously attractive the man was. Between him and Malicia, Evil had the whole hot and dangerous thing covered. Though Kilian was all I needed, of course, I loyally added afterwards. Certainly much less likely to kill me, and I'd come to learn that was not a given in relationships when you were a villain.

"Catherine," Hakram said.

"I'm here," I hastily replied.

"Masego, you've got something?" the orc prompted.

"Yes," the Soninke mage said, pushing up his spectacles. "The anchor for the blizzard is further inside. I've narrowed down a location."

"You can't just break the spell from here?" I asked.

"It's not a spell. And spells cannot be broken, only dispersed," Apprentice said. "This blizzard is pouring out of Arcadia through a semi-stable gate."

"Shut the gate, shut the weather," I said. "Got it."

"Possibly," the bespectacled man said. "It depends on how strong the bleed over from Arcadia into Creation was."

"I'm not having permanent winter in the middle of my city, Masego," I said. "Broke, demon-tainted *and* covered in ice is where I draw the line."

"We take the hard stances," Hakram said gravely.

The prick. I was about to reply when I caught sight of movement ahead in the storm. Within a heartbeat my sword was back in hand and Adjutant's axe raised.

"We'll revisit that later," I said, taking the lead and moving into the blizzard.

"I'm a rebel," I heard Hakram tell Masego in a pleased voice.

"And you cheat at shatranj," Apprentice replied peevishly.

"I don't even need to, with you," the orc said.

I sighed. Did heroes have to deal with this much bickering? At least neither of them were prone to monologues, there was that. The howling winds and the snow they carried were blinding but not a problem for my little crew: a bubble of translucent blue power formed the moment we entered, courtesy of Masego. Between that and the warmth he was radiating, this was almost comfortable. Almost. No sight of the movement I'd glimpsed, which I naturally took as a bad sign. Just because *I* couldn't see more than a few feet ahead didn't mean the fae could not. For all I knew they were quietly surrounding us even as our boots crunched in the snow. Stealthy we were not.

"Masego," I said. "If we were surrounded, could you tell?"

"Yes," he said. "With the right instruments."

I paused.

"Do you have the right instruments?" I asked.

He blinked behind his spectacles.

"No," he said. "With the amount of fae magic flooding the area the best I can currently do is locate the direction of the gate."

"How long have we been walking?" Hakram frowned.

"I can't tell," I said. "That is probably not a good sign."

"Time dilation inside Arcadia varies wildly from place to place," Masego contributed helpfully. "In some sections a night could last a century in Creation, in others merely a few heartbeats."

"We're not *in* Arcadia, though," I said. "Right?"

Apparently howling winds did not make awkward silences any less awkward. You learned something every day. I glanced at Apprentice.

"Masego?"

"We're close to the gate," he said.

"Masego."

"Should be there soon," he said.

"*Masego.*"

The chubby Soninke cleared his throat.

"I cannot tell," he admitted. "To my senses it *feels* like we are, but that shouldn't-"

With a quiet ping the javelin punched through the shield bubble and would have taken the mage in the throat if I hadn't snatched it out of the air by reflex. I glanced down at the weapon. Bronze, covered in runes. That were glowing. I managed to throw it away a moment before it blew up in shards of metal and ice, some of the shrapnel scoring lines on my cheeks.

"We come in peace," I blatantly lied, calling out into the storm with a sword in hand.

Hakram tried to turn his laugh into a cough.

"Catherine," Masego said, "the fae are unparalleled masters of deception. They're not going to fall for-"

The blizzard cleared ahead of us, revealing a slender silhouette. A man in a scale armour of woven dead wood and obsidian, horned helmet covering his entire face – even his eyes – save for his chin and mouth. The pale skin revealed under was pale as a corpse's. A spear in hand, he sat astride what would have been a long-legged shaggy horse if not for the long horn protruding from its forehead.

"I hate it when you do that," Apprentice muttered.

"Good evening, Lady of Marchford," the fae said.

My wariness immediately went up a notch. The lesser fairies hadn't quite managed to sound human when they'd spoken, too melodic and sing-song to be entirely mortal. The deadwood soldiers hadn't even tried, magic and images dripping from every word. This one, though? He sounded like a person. The most dangerous monsters were always the clever ones.

"That's me," I agreed. "And you are?"

"A Rider of the Host," he replied politely, inclining his head. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

I could feel the capitalized letter in that, the same way you did when someone spoke a Name. This was not headed in a pleasant direction.

"Rider, then," I said. "I don't suppose you're moving people behind us as we speak?"

"You have my word no fae will attack while under truce," he replied calmly.

That wasn't a no. I glanced at Masego, who nodded sharply. Whatever was coming at our back when negotiations inevitably broke down – and if I was being entirely honest with myself, there was no real chance they would not – he'd be the one to handle it.

"So you're in charge of the fae invading my city?" I said.

"I was given command of this host," the Rider said.

Eh, close enough. The way he'd worded that instead of giving me a yes or no probably meant he was omitting something, but the intricacies of fae politics were something I gave a remarkably low amount of fucks about. *Do not make me learn fae politics, you bastards*, I silently thought. *I can barely handle the human ones.*

"I don't suppose you'd just scamper back into Arcadia if I asked?" I said.

The Rider smiled, revealing a mouthful of milky sharp teeth.

"Are you offering a deal, Lady of Marchford?" he said.

"Gods, am I ever *not* falling for that one," I muttered. "Look, whatever you are. I could drum your sorry excuse for an invasion out of my backyard, but I'll take losses doing it. No getting around that. I've got other cats to skin, so why don't we just call it a night and both walk away?"

"That sounded like a threat," the Rider noted.

"It was," I replied frankly. "You're probably some sort of force to reckon with back in Arcadia, but this is *my* wheelhouse. I've walked away from the corpses of scarier stuff than you."

"Lady of Marchford, this *is* home," he said, smiling.

"Catherine," Masego whispered.

"I'm a little busy at the m-"

I bit down on that. Last time I'd passed on Apprentice's advice in a bad spot I'd walked right into demon fun time, swiftly followed by the screaming soul surgery interlude. Learn from your mistakes, Foundling.

"Yes?"

"Remember that question you asked me?" he said.

I nodded.

"We are," he whispered. "They took across a shard of Arcadia."

Oh, this just kept getting godsdamned better.

"Rider, did you pricks fairy-land the middle of my city?" I growled.

"The truce is over," the fae replied.

The blizzard swallowed him instantly.

"So that's a yes," I said. "Gods Below and Everburning. You bastards are starting to catch up to Heiress on my murder list."

I didn't hear them coming, because they didn't make a sound. It was the kind of instinct my Name gave me, the same that allowed me to catch an arrow in flight or roll out of a building on fire before it collapsed – both of which had happened to be depressingly often since I became a villain. A slender wedge of mounted fae ghosted out of the howling winds, spears at the ready. Like the Rider who'd spoken to me they were astride the murderous-looking cousin of a unicorn, though their own armours lacked the obsidian that had been on the last one's. Maybe he *had* been in charge. My eyes narrowed at the sight of their hooves never leaving a mark in the snow. I wouldn't put that above them, really, but more likely... My wrist snapped up and a spear of shadow coalesced, tearing unflinching through the wind and straight through the lead rider's chest. He dissipated, the lot of them just a cold mirage.

"Cat," Hakram said, tone alarmed.

My eyes swivelled where he was pointing his axe, to our left. Another wedge of mounted fae. A trickle of Name power drifted up to my eyes, forcing them to sharpen in the poor light. They weren't leaving a trail either. Which meant... And would you look at that: another silent wedge was coming up from our back. They, one the other hand, were leaving hoof prints. The answer seemed clear, which two years of dealing with Akua Sahelian had taught me meant they were probably fucking with me. I formed another spear of shadow and swivelled to throw it to our right, the only

avenue that they weren't visibly using. A heartbeat later the faint silhouette of a rider ducking under the spear, pressing against her mount, flickered into visibility for the barest moment. *There you are.*

"Brace yourself," Apprentice said.

Blinding blue light flared up, his bubble turning into a broad rectangular panel straight in their path. The rider at the tip of the wedge, still closely pressed against her mount, guided her unicorn into leaping over it. And hit another panel with a dull thump, this one entirely invisible. I snorted. That was a new trick. The two wings of cavalry split smoothly, beginning the way around before the lead fae had even hit the ground. The blue panel's glow intensified before it blew up, detonating in a flash of heat and light.

"Masego, can you tell me where the talker is?" I asked.

"Behind them," the Soninke replied without missing a beat.

"That's where I'm going, then," I said. "You boys try not to get yourself killed – I'm pretty sure I can't afford a double funeral."

I began moving before they could reply. I'd barely taken a dozen strides before the protection of whatever ward Apprentice had going on ceased, the wind almost battering me down. I'd gone through the middle, since it was the clearest path, but the riders in the back of the two columns peeled off and went straight for me. So much for the easy way. That made one, two, three... eight in all. Joy. I was going to be feeling this in the morning, wasn't I? Stilling my breath, I stood my ground with my sword in hand. I'd been taught to deal with mounted men, though not fae. *The only dangerous part of a lance is the tip*, Black's voice reminded me. *Watch the horse. Cavalry tramples what it can't skewer.* These were spears, not lances, but the principle held. The riders were used to hunting together, I noticed. They silently adjusted their angles so they wouldn't charge into each other if I managed to avoid them.

Whatever sorcery had made them almost invisible was gone, but I was smelling a rat. So far they hadn't once used a straightforward attack, there would be more to this. Frowning, I formed a small orb of shadow and shot it at the leftmost rider – who guided his mount a little to the side to avoid it, never breaking stride. Not a fake? There was a flash of flame behind me as Masego got serious and my question answered himself: only half the riders cast a shadow in the sudden light. Gods, I was already starting to hate fighting fae. So, how did one dodge a blow they couldn't see coming? *Don't be where it hits*, if Captain was to be believed. I'd been taught that lesson one hammer swing at a time. Name power trickled into my legs and I pushed off, sending a



spray of snow behind me. I kept a low profile, eyeing the spears headed for me across a loose half-circle, and shifted tracks to head *under* a unicorn before I could be turned into several bloody pieces of Foundling. My sword flashed up, opening the creature's belly as I slid under it and I winced as the ice-cold water that flooded out of the wound.

I landed in a sprawl behind the faltering beast, forcing myself to my feet and running in the direction Apprentice had told me. I could feel the riders wheeling around for another charge behind me and resisted the urge to blindly shoot a spear of shadows in their direction. My well was deeper since my Name had been restored, but there were still limits to what I could draw on. I couldn't afford to waste too much power on longshots, not with a hard fight ahead of me. Now, running away from a mounted killer with your back to them and flat fields around you was about the single worst position you could be relative to cavalry. I was not unaware of this, of course, but standing my ground back there with the other two at my side was a losing battle. Our bag of tricks was nothing to sneer at, and had only grown since the Liesse Rebellion, but there was only so long we'd hold our own against creatures that were literally defined by trickery.

No, the way to end this was ahead of me. Cut the head of the snake, other assorted and vaguely violent metaphors. The riders behind me would catch up soon enough, but I was banking on that changing nothing. The silhouette of the Rider of the Host was hard to make out, even with Name sight, but it was there. On a hill, overlooking the scrap and radiating genteel disdain. Yeah, that one had all the little marks of nobility to it. Even in Arcadia, some things were the same. I got to the foot of the hill before the enemy caught up. Glancing at the Rider, I was considering my options while the spears got ever closer when he spoke up.

"Enough," he said. "I will deal with this. Break the others."

Ah, there it was. I did love a bit of hubris in my opponents. I'd mouthed off to the big bad fairy and gotten in front of it, of course it was going to want a piece of me. And it wouldn't want its underlings to get involved, because it was making a point. Probably not about honour, with the fae, but arrogance would do in a pinch. I wasn't picky.

"Yeah, good luck with that," I said. "Last time I saw Masego get pissy he torched a demon so hard it melted the stone under it."

"We are not demons," the Rider said, raising his spear. "We are not mindless abominations. Our existence has purpose."

"You're also supposed to have brains," I said. "So I genuinely don't understand why you're making a mess here. Even if you

somehow manage to beat my men, you have to realize the Empire is going to throw all you until you break."

"These matters are beyond your understanding, Lady of Marchford," he said.

"I'm going to enjoy punching that line *right* out of your mouth," I replied cheerfully, baring my teeth.

The spear lowered, the Rider charged and my Name howled in joy so loudly it drowned out the wind.

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### [erraticerrata](#)

First update of the month, so as usual there's an extra chapter. This one is titled "Usurpation" and is from the POV of the Tyrant – though before he became that.

Link here for the lazy, though as always it'll be in the extra chapters tab:

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/04/05/usurpation/>

### [keldernael](#)

Don't take too bad the criticism on the Tyrant chapter. I love when you add to your world with characters not directly linked to Praes. Kairos is interesting with his different kind of Evil.

Concerning the third book, I hope that Faerie will be only a part of the story. Or you could make a shorter part like book One.

I collected all your chapters in a file to read on my iPad, and I found a few statistics :

Book One with 30 chapters (28 +P and E) has a length of 150k words ;

Book Two with 62 chapters (49 + 11 interludes – P and E) has a length of 260k words ;

Book Three for the moments has 9 chapters (P+6 +2I) and 35k words ;

and finally the extra chapters (8) have 30k words ;

Total 475 000 words, 100k less than War and Peace, and 6k less the Lord of the Rings; You have only two years since the prologue of Book One.

Thank you for your work.

*naturalnuke*

First and nice.

*danh3107*

Pretty cool.

*Gunslinger*

Vote for A Practical Guide to Evil on topwebfiction if you wanna see more smug fairies getting their asses handed to them.

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

*Edward Conway*

"Rider, did you pricks fairy-land the middle of my city?"

miss out a word?

*Daemion*

It works if you treat "fairy-land" as a verb and that's how I read it myself.

*Morgenstern*

What Daemion said. It's a new-word(verb)-invention 😊 "to fairy-land" = to make a place a fairyland or part of a fairyland 😊

*Barthumphries*

realize the Empire is going to throw all you until you break.

Either add of after all or change it to say, "throw all it has at you until you break."

*Morgenstern*

Or simply. "going to throw at you until.." Whatever it throws with is insignificant to getting the meaning.

*Roger W*

"They, one the other hand" On  
"winced as the ice-cold water that " At  
"going to throw all you until you break" Not sure about this

*AndR*

> going to throw all you until you break

Probably 'going to throw all you around until you break', though I'd usually see this written as 'toss around'

Nerazim Praetor

I read it as "throw all at you" kinda like "throw everything at you"

*letouriste*

thanks for the chapter!:) )

i'm not understanding the criticism i've read about this chapter on the bonus/special one.

this chapter looks just fine to me, that would be perfect with more tension but the enemy and the timing for that is off anyway;)

maybe later if the fae are revealed having interesting goals.

mordered

And another good chapter, gods above and below, I love the setting of this story, the way you've structured it and your writing style. I really liked the bonus chapter as well. I'm always looking forward to a new chapter every week and I really missed it when you were gone between books. Looking forward to next week.

Kind regards from your fan in the Netherlands,

*Jeff*

I love this story more and more as it progresses. The banter is great. Keep up the great work.

I'm curious as to the fae's motives in invading. Hopefully we'll get some insights there.

*Morgenstern*

Second that. Nice chapter; see nothing wrong with it, so I'll directly state that, as others seem to have commented negatively on it. o\_ô

*Morgenstern*

[ I'm, obviously, not on the next page yet... 😊

Were they complaining about the other action in the Free Cities and the Calamities, most of all, getting too little limelight? Would be about the only thing I'd complain about. They ARE, after all (Black most of all), the "other" protagonist(s) of the story, and if you don't just do flashbacks, but actually have them act \*in the present\* people rightfully expect to get more of a mix of present-action A and B to lead them together more quickly and not

action A drawn out seemingly way beyond the same time it should take by giving it less scenes (more behind-the-screen action and jumps in time I'd guess, but that's the \*impression\* one gets anyway: while B is going on over months, A feels like it cannot be more than a week over there, but that week is strung out across all those months B takes) when B gets massively more scenes).

But I'd second that decreasing their screen time IS about the only move one can pull (short of turning them into the dumb guys) that one can decrease reader rooting for the OTHER protagonists and possibly even more than for the one so designated... and that is about the only thing short of turning them into really dumb or otherwise unlikable guys (which does not fit how they were presented so far and would break reader consent) to make them more... redundant. Speaking of redundancy, the one that has come most fully into their role and filling about the same space as his older counterpart (Wekesa/Warlock) is Masego/Apprentice. My money is thus on Warlock to fall first, IF any Calamity should fall at all at this point. We ARE, after all, obviously still in the "get to know the world" part of the whole story, still in the "apprenticeship" part instead of the "moving around as actual 'hero' (pardon the word..) of the story in their own right" part, and even the starting part of "trouble in the homeland" can be argued to not be finished at all, because Cat's "getting to know the world"-storypart is obviously so far done by STILL bringing up new trouble invading her homeland. That would, actually, argue for NO Calamity falling AT ALL at this point, no matter what the word count is, it seems to just mean that the series is longer / more fully developed in detail, thus taking up more words, than other series that are done in e.g. a trilogy of lesser book spine width.

So, as far as storybuilding is concerned.. reader expectations matter, these chapters/books feel far shorter than they are in wordcount-sense 😊 The story hasn't moved along enough yet to go on killing off Calamities, even if people start talking about the plot inexorably seeming to hint at that incoming somewhere along the line, as the usual thing to do when you have an older troupe vs. the new party that is meant to succeed them, no matter how, the older ones get "replaced" by the new ones, because somehow many people cannot imagine both being around for very long at the same time, that is: once the new party has actually transitioned into being FULLY developed, giving off much the same vibes (if maybe differently distributed between them), thus ending up in redundancy WHEN you get to the point where you would basically have one Role doubled into two people. Barring Masego, I don't see anyone of the "new troupe" even really close to that stage yet. Not even Cat, who is still mimicking, as I have said already elsewhere. ]

*Djd*

It occurs to me that conscripting a few dozen fey would get rid of their mage shortage rather quickly.

*Barthumphries*

You realize what the whole point of this is, right? Catherine wins, beats the fairies, but she comes back three years after she went in. In the meantime, Heiress will have taken full control of the entire region and Catherine's overfull legion will have been broken up to help fill other legions (especially the new legion that's being formed).

And in the meantime the whole situation at Court will have changed and Black will officially be on the outs. He'll still be friends with Malicia, but she won't be able to openly be friends with him.

And all because Heiress helped open the gate and promised to give the faeries part of Callow if they win. See, if the fairies win, then they beat Cat and they get an area that isn't Praes so she won't care. If the fairies lose, then Cat gets at least a couple years of her life sucked away so either way Heiress wins.

*Letouriste*

What would be the point of the time skip then?

Also, if I remember right heiress and her mother will soon start each of their plans so they don't have a need to trap her more than a few month anyway.

In three years this story will probably be already finished given the pace of the plot.

The way I see that:

- like someone upside said maybe that will lead to an alliance with faes 😞

- the fae have some plans and will be an major actor in the futur wars

- the fae are crap and will just be used like a political blow toward her (like look at this fail of governor! Remove her from her post!)

- maybe a new character will appear in this fight against the fae, a runaway one, a diplomate fae (lol), a person causing havoc in fairy and leading fae toward fleeing.

*Barthumphries*

"What would be the point of the time skip then?"

To set Catherine back, to give her further obstacles to overcome. To better let her see who's her friend and who was an ally of convenience.

*Cap'nSmurfy*

I'd say you're right about her losing some time, but 3 years is far too much. A few months at most maybe. Remember all the plans are coming to a head in less than a year, no way Catherine's just not going to be there. Arrive at the last minute maybe (though thats really more of a hero thing)

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Oh, so that's why Masego wasn't sure they were in Arcadia. He could tell they were, but he "knew" they weren't.

I forgot to say it a couple chapters ago, but what kind of name for a goblin is Sever? Either it was meant to be Severer, or it doesn't have to be a noun who does a verb. That kinda detracts from the Awesomeness of the Gobbler imo, a lot of the interesting implications of that name just went \*poof\* =(

So are we going to see a goblin named Tomer or Johner or Amyer now? Or maybe it means she's from Sev?

AVR

Typos

Cut the head of the snake,  
Cut the head off the snake,

one the other hand,  
on the other hand,

### [Ethesis](#)

So. She gets an aspect out of this.

*Cap'nSmurfy*

"Gods Below and Everburning"

Only noticed that now. Catherine's started swearing like a Villain.

*Morgenstern*

Hmmm... wait... I just had to think of that moment, when Wekesa and Black came out of Arcadia as a quick detour... wasn't that, too, a Blizzard-thingy? Maybe someone is actually simply pissed that they killed that peasant and chose to retaliate in seemingly-like matter of targeting one of theirs (but not those two directly)?

*Morgenstern*

"You have my word no fae will attack while under truce,"

Ooooh, I gotta remember that one. “no fae” and “while under truce”, two catch words in one and the same sentence \*gg  
Oh wait... there’s a third, too: “MY word”. \*lulz

*Morgenstern*

“I was given command of this host,” > So. How many other hosts are there?

*Morgenstern*

And by the way... I really wonder why she let him finish that conversation. No one ever said anything about HER not attacking... 😊

Tops, there was never any direct mention that a truce WAS even there at that moment... unless you meant “parley”, not truce, but not even conversation is a parley either, not even when it’s the two leaders of opposing hosts that talk with each other.

*Morgenstern*

“every”. Argh... Seeing the typo in the middle of the vanishing reply after having clicked the post button: Classic.

*Morgenstern*

“my question answered [himself ->] ITself” [questions have no gender..]

opening the creature’s belly as I slid under it and I winced [as > at] the ice-cold water that flooded out of the wound.  
[or, if you wanna keep “as”, get rid of “the” and “that” : winced as ice-cold water flooded out of ..]

*Morgenstern*

I couldn’t afford to waste too much power on [longshots > long shots; we’re not talking about photography here, are we?], not with a hard fight ahead of me.

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## Chapter 7: Elaboration

*“Ah, but being defeated was always part of my plan! Yet another glorious victory for the Empire.”*

– Dread Emperor Irritant, the Oddly Successful



We'd gotten the usual banter and I'm-going-to-kill-you, no-I'm-going-to-kill-you posturing out of the way, so it was now time to get to the stabbing. Admittedly my favourite part, especially when I wasn't taking on a hero. This sad sack of smugness might pack a punch, but he wasn't carrying a solemn promise of victory handed down by the Heavens. If I started chopping of limbs he wasn't going to get back up with an irritating one-liner about Evil always being defeated. As good ol' Willy had learned in the end, that wasn't always true anyway. Sometimes Evil snatched a last moment resurrection, stomped in Good's skull and went dancing with a good-looking redhead afterwards. Probably not victory the way the Gods Below or the average Dread Emperor conceived it, but I wasn't going to be taking life lessons from people who'd thought the invisible army plan was a good idea.

The Rider didn't seem to bother with the same tricks his minions had used, devouring the slope on the way down faster than I believed was actually possible. It occurred to me that most everyone I fought had cavalry while I had to make do with a pack of malevolent goblins, which struck me as pretty unfair. Before I could further lament the fact, I had to unsheathe my sword and brace myself for impact. It would have been a mistake to think of the Rider as a mere lancer, I decided. For one, his murderous unicorn effectively had a second spear jutting out of its forehead. More than that, unlike most horseman, killing his mount was unlikely to slow him down much. The way he'd introduced himself had me guessing he was in some way linked to the state of a horseman, but I doubted taking care of that would knock him out of the fight. Creatures that introduced themselves with fancy titles usually had some power to back up that presumption. That or they died early and bad.

Eyes calm, hands steady, I watched the points of the spear and the horn come for me. The spear would be the dangerous one: it wasn't like the unicorn could twirl around the horn for a second go once it was past me. I hoped. Letting out a long breath, I adjusted my footing to be able to dash forward without missing a beat just before the Rider got in range. The horn I ducked under, the spear I narrowly avoided – it scraped my left pauldron – and I made to slide under the unicorn to open its belly. The back of the spear hit me right above the nose, knocking me down as I cursed. I rolled to the side, but not quick enough: the unicorn's hooves came down and caved in my breastplate. Strike one for my plate being anything more than expensive dead weight today, since that could easily have been my ribs. I hated breaking ribs, half the time shards got into my lungs and I ended up coughing blood.

I managed to swing at the spear point before it took my throat, knocking it aside, and rolled before the unicorn could continue dismantling my plate. That thing was being way too bloodthirsty. Sure I hadn't been a virgin for a few years, but there was no reason for it to take who I brought into my bed so personally.

"Look," I gasped, managing to get on my feet and hastily backing away from a swing. "He was a fisherman's son. They swim all the time, do you have any idea how *fit* they look?"

Murder made horse was not impressed by my protests, if the way it tried to kick me was any indication. The Rider, what little of his face could be seen expressionless, fluidly adjusted his hold and slapped down the spear at my head. Too fast for me, when I was still sidestepping his mount. It dented my helmet, which was a much more acceptable loss than my skull. I took back everything unpleasant I'd said about my armour today. The second strike I parried, but his handhold shifted again and he *twisted* deftly hitting my sword out of my hand. All right, this was headed nowhere. If I didn't want to end up an expensively armoured corpse I was going to have to change the beat to this. Before the third strike – this one a lunge – could put me further on the back foot, I managed to get back in front of the unicorn. Predictably, it objected to this state of affairs and with a whinny took a step forward to put its horn through my throat. I was still unarmed, but I *did* have two free hands.

My gauntleted hands closed around the horn and I sharply pivoted. *Lift with your legs, Cat*, I reminded myself. Before the Rider could rearrange my presented spine at spear point, I flooded my limbs with power and *pulled*. For a single glorious moment I lifted the unicorn, swinging it forward like some kind of wildly failing mace until it reached its apex over my head. At which point the horn snapped. This had not, I mused, been one of my better plans. Below getting into a verbal fight with Heiress at the Tower, though still above letting William go at Summerholm. I hastily threw myself out of the way, seeing the Rider gracefully leap off his mount from the corner of my eye. The moment I got back on my feet I aimed my arm at the downed unicorn – which looked like it had broken a leg on the way down, good for me – and snapped my wrist. The backup knife shot like an arrow, sinking right into its eye. *Pickler, you queen among goblins. I can't believe I argued with you about a second knife being overkill.*

I stepped back and picked up my sword, adjusting my cloak around my neck.

"Let the record show I'm not above murdering a unicorn if it looks at me funny," I announced.

The Rider glanced at his dead mount indifferently.

"A worthy effort," he conceded. "If ultimately futile."

I paused for a moment, too many scathing replies on the tip of my tongue for me to be able to settle on a single one, but I ended up having to back away when he tried to run me through. I blinked in surprise: he'd been fast, on the unicorn, but this was

something else. Quicker than even the deadwood soldiers had been, and they'd been in a league above me. Was that part of the fae package, then? Sorcery and tricks and swiftness. Not great on the staying power, but if they killed you before it became an endurance match that was hardly a problem. The fairies would be useless as tits on a sparrow if they ever tried to make a shield wall, but that wasn't the way they fought at all. It was like fighting an army of skirmishers, all of them mages, with a backbone of heavy hitters behind them. That was not a good match for the Fifteenth, or even the Legions of Terror in general.

Sword in hand, I circled the Rider silently. Another flicker and the point was skidding off my arm, leaving a long scar on the steel – I tried to catch the shaft with my free hand but it retreated too quickly. All right, so finesse wasn't going to get me anywhere. Closing the distance should have been my solution, but I was wary of getting that close to a creature so much faster than me, spear or no spear. I was going to have to take a hit, I realized with a grimace. I could walk it off if it didn't hit anywhere too lethal, and while his weapon was in my guts it couldn't defend. I missed the days when the initial parts of my battle strategies hadn't involved getting my stabbed instead of my opponent. Stepping forward, I kept my eye on the spear. That proved to be a mistake. The Rider took a hand off the shaft and a heartbeat later a gust of chilling wind slammed into me.

I dug in my feet, but it wasn't enough. The wind intensified and I was sent flying upwards, like I'd been smacked by a god's invisible hand. The world spun around me but I kept just enough awareness of my surroundings to notice the four javelins of dark ice forming in a loose lozenge ahead of me. About where I would be in a few moments, I assessed with strange clarity. And it was a sucker's bet that whatever made that ice darker would enable it to punch through plate. Well, couldn't have that. Fortunately, I still had a few tricks I'd learned since Liesse I'd yet to unpack. My Name flared, in the way it did whenever I formed a spear of shadows, but I went for something more... tangible. The darkness pooled together into a circular pane right in my trajectory, and I twisted so that I would hit it feet first. It was not quite as steady to the touch as solid ground, but it would do. I allowed my knees to bend when I hit the pane and effectively threw myself back down in the opposite direction.

The first ice javelin skimmed the edge of my gorget and I winced. I half-turned, still falling, and saw that two other projectiles were going wide. The last one was headed for the middle of my back, though, which was less promising. I formed an orb of shadow in my palm as it neared and shot it straight into the point at the last moment – the javelin exploded into shards when it hit, and I braced myself for my coming reacquaintance with the ground. Optimism, that. Instead I turned back to face the sight of the Rider with translucent wings sprouting off his back, just as his

spear punched through the plate covering my belly. I gasped in pain, writhing around the point, and he tore it off without missing a beat. Kicking me away he fluttered back and I landed bleeding on the ground. My knees gave and I ended up in an ungainly crouch.

"Rise," I croaked.

Nothing happened, and panic welled up.

"*Rise*," I repeated.

No, it was working I realized. Just *slowly*. The wound began to close at a snail's pace, and I could feel it drawing much deeper from that bundle of power than it should have. Shit. Black had warned me, hadn't he? Borrowed power always turned on its user.

"Your lack of understanding of your own aspects is a marvel to behold," the Rider commented.

A flicker and he was in front of me, palm thrust out. I forced myself out of the way of the gust of wind, hissing at the pain of my still-closing wound.

"Thrice gifted is your Name," he said, idly circling me. "Thrice used can your stolen power be, from dusk 'til dawn."

Well, that was useful to know. Would have been even better to know it before I'd gotten myself run through twice, but beggars can't be choosers.

"Thanks for the tip," I grunted. "While we're at it, I don't suppose you'd care to tell me your nefarious plans?"

I readied myself for another rousing round of Catherine-tries-not-to-die, but the attack never came. The Rider was twitching, mouth twisting in discomfort.

"Since you are about to die anyway," he said reluctantly, through gritted teeth, "I might as well reveal the depths of your failure."

Wait, what? That never worked. Not even with Heiress and she lived for this stuff. It certainly didn't look like he *wanted* to tell me any of this.

"This struggle is but a distraction," the Rider said. "You are meant to waste time and die here while the true war is fought in Creation."

Masego had told me once that Arcadia worked according to different rules than Creation. I'd only been pretending to listen when he'd been talking about how that affected the creational laws governing the flow of time – which was, apparently, a

classical element. I *really* needed to learn what those were at some point – but one part had actually been interesting enough I'd tuned back in. Arcadia was, in a lot of ways, rawer than Creation proper. In Creation stories bound only the Named, but in Arcadia everything was a story. It was why everything was so changeable. I was standing in front of an enemy clearly winning against me, at his mercy, and had just prompted him to gloat and reveal his plans. So he *had*. Even if he didn't want to.

"Alas, I am in despair," I badly lied. "Tears, woe is me. Why would you do something so wicked?"

The Rider cursed in a tongue I could barely process as spoken.

"If Summer is at war, so must be Winter," he said. "The boundaries have been thinned, the host will be assembled."

I squinted at him.

"You're insane," I said slowly. "You'll... never get away with this?"

The fae looked at me, then at the dead unicorn. There was a long moment of silence. Then he bolted. Just... legged it, as fast as his little fairy feet could manage. I frowned, then raised an arm. I formed a spear of shadows and shot him in the back. The Rider cursed again, though he managed to avoid most of the damage – all I did was clip his shoulder. That might be more of a problem than I'd thought, though: one of his wings burst into existence, then out. Huh. Was this what being a hero felt like? No wonder they were always so overconfident. I caught up within moments. For all that some intangible tide had turned in my favour, he hadn't gotten any slower. The spear wove elegantly around my sword, but instead of letting him drive me back I forced my way close. His palm shot off, but I was in no mood for a repeat of the flight adventure. I punched his hand, which while not the most elegant of solutions still broke a few fingers with a hard crack. The Rider turned his wounded shoulder to me, and the wing formed a moment later.

I was blown back like I'd been hit by a blast of pure unformed magic – my occasional spars with Masego had taught exactly what that felt like, in unpleasant detail – but pivoted on myself and used the momentum to take a swing. I hacked into his elbow, tearing through the wood and obsidian scales, before having to raise my arm to block a swing of the shaft. I almost made a comment about how the tides had turned, but bit down on my tongue at the last moment. Gloating was for amateurs, and here in Arcadia might have very final consequences. My gauntlet was half-crumpled but that didn't hurt any less when I swung again, decking him in the face. He flinched back and my sword came down again. Cleaved straight through the elbow this time, the limb

flopping to the ground. The lack of blood was a little off-putting, but I didn't break my stride.

My leg swept his as I rammed my pommel into his chest, but I realized a moment too late that wouldn't work on this kind of an opponent. His good wing burst into existence, getting back on his feet, and he slammed the bottom of his spear into my chest. Gods, I was basically wearing scrap metal at this point. Even knowing how that had ended up for the Exiled Prince I was tempted to get an enchanted suit of armour. Might not get my ass killed if I used it only the once. I smacked at his hands with my pommel and he dropped the spear. Within a heartbeat a sword of frost had formed in his hand but an orb of shadows had formed in mine: I rammed it through the spell, dissipating it before it could form properly. I heard a grunt and in a spray of crystal-clear water a forearm emerged from the stump to replace the one I'd cut off. Well, there went attrition tactics. I went for a killing stroke instead, side of my sword smashing into the side of his neck.

There was a spray of scales and he fell: I stepped back to adjust my stance for a deeper blow. Both wings flickered into existence, and before I could hit him agains he shot off into the sky. Well, shit. It figured that if he could grow an arm back he could fix whatever I'd done to the shoulder. I was debating how feasible it would be to make a series of shadow platforms to pursue – not very, it ate through my reserves like you wouldn't believe – when a rope of green smoke slithered its way through the air until it coiled around his foot. The Rider hacked at it with another ice sword but it just went through, cleaving through his boots and doing nothing to the smoke. Which was pulled a moment later, smashing him into the ground like a falling star. Hakram idly walked up to him, burying his axe into the skull repeatedly and with great enthusiasm. I turned to eye Masego, who dismissed the green smoke rope with an idle gesture.

"Catherine," he greeted me calmly. "I see you're still alive."

"Arguably my best skill," I replied.

The dark-skinned mage blinked.

"Catherine you *died*. Not even a year ago," he said.

I might have insulted myself by accident there, I reflected. I cleared my throat.

"Your guys are taken care of?" I asked.

"Most," Hakram replied, wiping sweat off his brow as he joined us. "Some fled."

*Kill-stealer*, I mouthed at him. He grinned back unrepentantly.

"I meant to take a prisoner for interrogation, but they were not inclined to cooperate," Apprentice said.

I glanced at the corpse of the Rider. With all three of us we might have managed to capture him, but given how dangerous he'd been that would have been risky. Probably for the best he'd gotten the orc treatment.

"I learned a few things from this one," I said. "This whole fight was bait. They want us to wander around Arcadia while they mass for an assault on Marchford."

"I suspected as much," Masego shrugged. "We're no longer in the shard."

I frowned.

"How d'you figure that?" I asked.

"We're not surrounded by blizzard, for one," he said. "And I cannot feel the boundaries of the shard anymore. We're in Arcadia Resplendent, that much is certain."

I sheathed my sword, trying to hide my surprise. He was right, about the blizzard. It was still windy out but visibility was clear. I hadn't even noticed. When it had gotten easier to move I'd been paying attention to the fight, and must have unconsciously chalked it up to my Name taking care of the problem.

"He said something else that caught my attention," I said. "Something about Winter having to be at war when Summer is."

Hakram looked vaguely pained and I felt with him. The idea of there being a whole other breed of these guys out for our blood wasn't exactly thrilling. Masego looked pleased, naturally, because he wasn't going to have to rebuild a city that was broke, demon-corrupted, iced in *and* on fire. I did not care for the way that list kept getting longer.

"That explains a great deal. The Courts of Arcadia are named after the seasons, but they have nothing to do with those same seasons on Creation," Apprentice said. "Consider them more like states of mind. When Winter and Summer become the two existing courts, it means Arcadia is at its most contrary."

"If they're pissed at each other," I said, "why is Winter making itself my problem?"

"Symmetry, Catherine," the bespectacled man enthused. "If Summer is at war with an enemy exterior to Arcadia, Winter must be the same. I would say there is no personal enmity behind this

invasion, not that fae can truly be personal about anything. The weaker boundary at Marchford simply made it the obvious target."

"Stop sounding so cheery about creatures trying to murder us," I requested, then shifted uneasily.

Back in Laure, the Ruling Council's session had been delayed to talk about an incident in Dormer: a handful of Summer fairies making a mess down there, though not a large one. The picture that was putting together was not one I liked at all.

"How likely is it that the courts could be targeting the same enemy?" I asked.

Masego blinked.

"Impossible," he said.

Oh, good. That made the mess even more complicated but I'd take it.

"Though, of course, from the fae perspective no nation as we know them would be considered the 'same enemy'," he added absent-mindedly. "Making the distinction largely academic."

*Don't punch him, I told myself. You still need him to get out of this place.*

"Should have led with that, warlock's get," Hakram said, tone amused.

"Oh," Masego said.

He glanced at me reproachfully.

"It was a very poorly-phrased question," he said.

"Quit while you're ahead," I advised. "All right. Fine. So Winter's going to keep attacking as long as Summer does, and we have no idea *why* it's attacking or even who specifically."

"If I was trying to keep you busy and had an understanding of the fae mindset," Hakram said. "I would provoke a war with Summer, knowing Winter would be forced to mirror the action. Likely at Marchford."

I sighed.

"Heiress," I said.

That did sound right up her alley. As Governess of Liesse, even if Summer was at war with her city specifically, I'd still be forced to protect her from the consequences of her actions. It was my duty as a member of the Ruling Council, and her city was



full of Callowans to boot. Meanwhile I'd have to deal with an assault on my demesne from an entirely different court, eroding the strength of the Fifteenth while simultaneously forcing me to use other means to deal with Summer. It was the kind of overly complicated plot with massive potential for backfiring that was her bread and butter. Hells, she might as well have signed the whole thing. I clenched my fingers and unclenched them.

"Winter's got a boss fairy, right?" I said to Masego.

"There will be a king or a queen, yes," he agreed.

"If I punch it until it dies, that feels like a problem solved," I grunted. "If Winter stops attacking then Summer would have to as well, no?"

The chubby mage frowned.

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "Possibly. Regardless, Catherine, if you attempt to fight the ruler of a court you will get killed. Those creatures qualify as a god by most measures."

"Dying's never stopped me before," I said.

"We lack angels to loot for a resurrection, this time," Hakram said. "Cat, there's no need to go at this alone. This is bigger than us. The Tower needs to step in."

*If Malicia gets involved I'm tacitly admitting the Ruling Council can't run Callow without her help,* I thought. I bit my lip. I'd need to think on this more.

"First we get out of here," I finally said. "Masego, you said we're no longer in the shard. Does that mean we can't leave the same way we came in?"

"We'll need a gate to step through or a fairly powerful fae to open a path," he said.

"Do your thing, then," I said. "Where's the closest gate?"

"Explain the fae to me, Apprentice," he muttered. "Find me a gate, Apprentice. I could be taking apart a pocket dimension right now, you know. *They* never ask for anything."

He just beginning to trace runes in the air when Hakram cleared his throat. I looked at him, then the direction he was pointing at. There were snow-covered hills as far as the eye could see, with the occasional thicket of dead trees and a few distant mountains. There was also a path now, paved in ice. It snaked across the hills towards what looked like a glistening city.

"That wasn't there a moment ago," I said.

"We weren't looking for a gate a moment ago," Apprentice said.

"Gods, I *hate* this place," I cursed.

I eyed the road, which began atop the hill just beyond us and looked as pristine as if it had just been built. For all I knew it had been.

"We're not using that," I said. "That is an *insultingly* obvious trap."

Hakram clapped my shoulder, amused.

"It would be an easier walk than the snow," Masego said, just shy of complaining.

"You could use the exercise," Adjutant said, nudging him.

I blinked. If Hakram was next to him, then who had – I went for my sword, and someone laughed.

"You lot are *terrible* at not getting killed," Archer told me cheerfully, hand still on my shoulder.

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### *BarthHumphries*

Typo thread. Getting it in so I can respond to it as I read without reading more comments.

#### *BarthHumphries*

I had to unsheathed my sword and brace myself for impact.  
Change unsheathed to unsheath

The back of the spear hit my right above  
Change my to me

Not great on the staying power, but if they killed them before it became an endurance match that was hardly a problem.  
Change they to you, and change and to an.

hadn't involved getting my stabbed instead of my opponent  
Change my to me

and before I could hit him against he shot off  
Change against to again

AVR

Some typos. They might include duplicates of Barts', since we're apparently doing this about the same time.

hit my right above the nose,  
hit me right above the nose,

became and endurance  
became an endurance

ungainly crough.  
ungainly crouch.

The idea of being  
The idea of there being

to rebuilt a city  
to rebuild a city

*Shequi*

"in a spray of crystal-clear water a forearm emerged form the stump"

form > from

*stevenneiman*

"He {was} just beginning to trace runes in the air when Hakram cleared his throat."

[mgmtheo](#)

"You lot are terrible at not getting killed,"  
I mean apart from Cat they have all never died, and Cat came back so even that doesn't really count.

*Barthumphries*

Called it! And I was wrong. I figured Heiress started the fae invasion to cause a time skip... Which I might still be right about... But probably aren't.

*danh3107*

That was.... FUCKING COOL

You manage to take my expectations and turn them on their at every turn. Brilliant

Archer showing up as she did isn't a coincidence (obviously in this story), I have a feeling what may become the new calamities is getting their start right now in Arcadia.

(I'm squeeing really loudly right now)

*Naeddyr*

NOW we're back in form and cooking with green fire!

So, does anyone think "Summer" is Good-aligned and vice versa? Might be nominally so, at least on a superficial masquerade level, which is why Heiress' actions have basically assigned Cat the role of 'Good' in a sort of play enacted in Arcadia.

But she's dabbling with forces she does not understand! you say, and it is indeed so. We might see Cat going through a sort of dream-quest acting out the What Could Have Been version of herself, except not y'know mind-controlled fanatic Queen Purge-All-Evil IV.

*The Archdevil*

Why does Summer have to be good aligned? They're attacking a city of Callowans, probably mostly civilians, while Winter is attacking a fortified city defended by a Legion of Terror, which serves the biggest Evil empire we know of. Not to mention the defenders have fought off a demon from the Planes Below before.

If Winter's attack is indeed just a balancing action since Summer is attacking, maybe they chose Cat's city not just because it's a weak spot in the border between Arcadia and Creation, but because the defenders actually have a slight chance of rebuking them, which would mean Summer would have to halt their attack as well in the best case scenario.

[Euodiachloris](#)

They're Fae: they don't do Good or Evil. At best, you get Protagonist-Antagonist pairings or just plain Foils with a long-term Frenemy thing going on (and, pity the poor blighters caught between 'em). 🙄

Fae are Blue-Orange to the point of sociopathic cat-hood, and are always Outside Context in an Eldritch Abomination way. It's what makes them tick. 😊

*stevenneiman*

That would make sense. Monologues to clearly helpless and defeated enemies are a very Evil thing, and the Rider was compelled to give one just because he had the upper hand. Of course, their version of Good and Evil is probably even more blue and orange than that of the elves.

Interesting that this is the second time she's ended up using Good stories to defeat Evil enemies while still upholding Evil objectives herself.

*Morgenstern*

Nah... he had one because Cat nudged him that way, it would seem. Fairies are kind of the literal type in many stories... throw them buckets of sand to count, give them requests they have to fulfill etc.

*Morgenstern*

Wait, what? Since when is Cat upholding Evil objectives using Good methods instead of upholding Good objectives and going the Evil way to get there? oO She subverts Good rules/actions occasionally, USES them, yeah, but the plan of action is basically Evil, I'd argue, while her endgame wishes are Good. What with wanting to save a country full of people by killing off some thousands of them and all that...

*naturalnuke*

It was at that moment the The Rider realized, he'd fucked up.

*The quietist*

Calling it now the city is Sanctuary and Cat is gonna meet Ranger. Should be fairly sweet.

*darkening*

Sanctuary isn't in arcadia. Though it has a nearby gate which leads to a lot of fae being around.

*Morgenstern*

Well, we don't know if the Gate there is not actually what seems to be the city gate, just that it's the Gate leading out of Arcadia, which means the city IS on the other side, in Creation... Sanctuary could be a perfectly acceptable solution to that conundrum.

*Shequi*

Yay! Archer. I knew she was far too cool & well-defined to not show up again.

*Letouriste*

I didn't expected much from this chapter but it's great:)  
Well,I'm not sure I understood everything,name shenanigans can be pretty complicated and you throw several at the same time^^

*Jnnnnnkzn*

I have a feeling that somehow the snow will end up on fire. Catherine hasn't burned anything to the ground recently, and it's kind of a thing she does. I don't know how she will achieve it,

but I am imagining a flummoxed Apprentice trying to explain how she should stop ignoring reality so effectively.

*nipi*

And it doesn't count if the flames aren't green.

[Euodiachloris](#)

I could almost feel pity for Heiress if she did trigger this. Messing with the Fair Folk? If they think you are playing their game well enough to approach their level (well, the basement, at least), they make sure you can't ever stop, especially if you desperately want to because all you value has become ashes around you.

Because it's fun! 😊

*Cicero*

this chapter does not show up on the right side in the book three chapter list

*Morgenstern*

Does as of now. 😊

*Zaits*

Just finished my reread of the first two books, so I have two questions: one for the readers and one for the author.

1) If the White and Black Knights are meant to be each other's counterparts, it has to reflect on their respective retinues. Now, I recall someone calling White Knight's party a harem, but since a romantic interest being displayed on-screen isn't a requirement, the same logic could be applied to Black. I would argue, though, that he subverts the harem setup as he does everything else. His inner circle includes:

Sabah, who has Obey as an aspect, but has accepted never becoming a central character on her own, and is married for about two decades;

Eudokia, a Delian who followed Black into Praes and is personally loyal and protective to him nearly more than the other Calamities, but is apparently content with the current state of affairs and is well aware and pleased how much her stereotype of overly attached nerdy girl creeps people out, invisibility or not;

Wekesa, a gay best friend, happily married (though Black did offer to kill Tikoloshe);

Hye, the only person he has romantic feelings towards. Also, healthy relationship from the start is the best subversion;

Alaya, uncannily close to being his childhood friend (making a

promise under the stars, holding hands, having a harmonic understanding of each other both in public and in private, undergoing a tragic twist of life in his absence etc.); and an unnamed as of yet Assassin.

I forgot where I was going with all of this, but if Ime is wrong and Assassin is a woman (who had appeared on screen in first two books), who would that be?

2) Regarding the worldbuilding: in the comments to "Countdown" EE has mentioned that Hell's counterpart to angels are devils, and demons are more of a natural disaster. Does the Heaven have anything to counterbalance the demons, then?

Sorry for the wall of text.

*Daemion*

As I understood it, Angels are few in number but individually quite powerful, while with the devils and demons it's more about quantity. So they are in balance.

*Morgenstern*

Assassin is supposed to be more closely related to Malicia instead of Black, but that might all be a set-up, after all... although Black asking Assassin to take him out, should he ever become a threat to the Empire would fit with him sticking to Malicia, too, not just very close relations with Black (more "normal" friends would rather balk at the idea, I guess, but.. Assassin..).

I was actually wondering if Ime has shown up in Book I already... But I'll really have to go take a look at all that and simply write down characters/names to get a full list to look at. One wouldn't really expect someone quite that important, but that can be subverted as perfect distraction, too.

*Morgenstern*

\*ahem

" sticking with 'him' (or her.. = referring to Assassin) "

*NerfContessa*

Few chapters made me laugh so hard as cats accidentally heroing the fight with Rider...

*Morgenstern*

Also, another one I always wondered about was this strange... advisor figure ... on the Goodside. Though that might have been meant to simply be one of the Countesses or even Cordelia?

Have to reread... I think there was some "reveal" although it might have been a faked reveal... hmmm....0

cdos93

Spin off dealing with the many successes of Dread Emperor Irritant, the Oddly Successful, when?

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

One: Winter is basically Unseelie, Summer is Seelie. I SERIOUSLY doubt Erratic is trying to reinvent the wheel by going with all-original Fae mindsets, especially while using so many of the Sidhe characteristics. Neither are "Good"...but with Summer/Seelie humans tend to have a slightly better chance of being offered an out-at-a-cost rather than the near-certain horrific death of being hunted down by the original Wild Hunt (Unseelie) or the Hounds of Annwyn (major Unseelie lord, prototype from which the Wild Hunt legends eventually evolved).

Humans tend to consider the Seelie "Good" for this reason, and the Unseelie "Evil"...but it is WAY more complicated than that. For instance, say you manage to avoid your near-certain death at the hands of a major Unseelie Fae...in legends they often do stuff like give you blessings that make you into a virtual demigod back among humans...or come and rescue you in epic fashion when all hope is lost. Things the Seelie almost NEVER do. (Ie: It is remotely possible to earn the respect, or at least the affection of a master for a treasured pet from some of the Unseelie. The Seelie's "Good" characteristics run skin-deep, no more.

The Dresden Files do an EXCELLENT job of illustrating how Seelie/Unseelie, Summer/Winter work..there's a bit of original spin there with the Unseelie being engaged in a war against Eldritch Evil Abominations to defend humanity...but otherwise Queen Titania and Queen Mab/The Queen of Air and Darkness are TEXTBOOK Fae. Even down to the taking of champions/consorts from human stock.

I think Erratic may be doing a bit of original spin themselves... but it seems fairly nose-on for the Sidhe Courts.

Two: Arcadia itself is the truly original material here. It seems to run a bit like a legendary Fairyland, but much more like an original part of Erratic's very original story setting. The stuff about everything being a story in Arcadia is gold IMO.

Three: I ADORED the small info-dump from the Rider about how Cat's Take works. That was done with some absolutely beautiful writing. As was Cat's manipulation of the everything-in-Arcadia's a story, and the Rider's reactions. Cat's genre-savviness made a very cool appearance as well when she bit down at the last second on making a comment about the tides having turned.



Awesome material. Loved this chapter.

*danh3107*

Well said, I really want to see Erratic's take on "Mab" and "Titania", the Dresden Files can be a hard act to follow in some respects, but I love this version of arcadia so much more than the nevernever.

*Morgenstern*

"Tides have turned" = superbad comment when said when YOU are being struck \*lol

*Ed*

["Catherine," he greeted me calmly. "I see you're still alive."

"Arguably my best skill," I replied.

The dark-skinned mage blinked.

"Catherine you died. Not even a year ago," he said.

I might have insulted myself by accident there, I reflected. I cleared my throat.]

This section of dialogue is pure comedy gold.

*Gunslinger*

This chapter was comedy gold.

"That thing was being way too bloodthirsty. Sure I hadn't been a virgin for a few years, but there was no reason for it to take who I brought into my bed so personally."

"Alas, I am in despair," I badly lied. "Tears, woe is me. Why would you do something so wicked?"

I like the bit about stories being more important in Arcadia. It ties in really well with the Faerie mythos and once again genre-saviness saves the day. Book 3 started out slowly but it's been slowly ramping up the awesomeness (Archer's introduction is great).

On a side note, I'm so tired of Cat having to constantly react to Heiress' plots. I enjoyed the beat down she got in the finale of book 2 but I'm waiting for her final day.

P.S: If anyone is still reading this do consider voting for Practical Guide to Evil on [topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil](http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil)

## *Morgenstern*

I'm more waiting for Cat taking the initiative and making \*Heiress\* react for a change, not necessarily the end right there..

---

So, Take is now officially a replacement for Struggle, only instead of coming from an established tendency to get into uphill fights it stems from an established tendency to win uphill fights, and instead of activating once per day it can be used three times. Kind of a relief that it's not just a borrowed piece of power that would eventually run out completely in the least convenient moment.

That raises a question: since Catherine is still a Squire and still in a position of apprentice to Black and Malicia, so Learn is still up her alley. Ranger has her own Learn, and so we know that at least this aspect can vary depending on the person. Catherine got jumpstarted by Black personally as a Squire who didn't know languages, swordfighting or politics necessary to become a fully realised Named, lead armies or rule Callow, so her variation lets her memorize and comprehend anything as long as it's being taught to her consciously. Hye is a half-elf, naturally strong, taught by the same woman who trained the Emerald Swords. She also inherited her father's adventurous streak, so her Learn presumably can pick mainly fighting-related skills, though in any situation. Now Catherine has everything she has initially bargained for (an army, free reign over Callow, public appreciation), but every potential mentor of hers is away, she's in a situation that becomes increasingly over her capability to manage, and if I understand Heiress' plan's timeline correctly, she's rather pressed for time. What would Learn look like if she got it now?

## *Dragrath*

Of course Heiress is behind it... she never lets a convoluted high chance of failure plot slip her by all intents releasing Eldrich abominations to keep Cat out of her hair while she does who knows what...

I really wonder what her full plot is so far we know she is a daddies girl scheming to beat her mom the tower Cat (as well as who knows what else) and seems to be gunning for some outside the norm role by trying to deal with every variety of Eldrich horrors.

Also love how Arcadia literally follows any and every story suggestion genre savyness is really the only thing that can save Cat here as faeries OP as expected for the orange-blue type moralities

*arancaytar*

Heh

[Nerazim Praetor](#)

Eyes calm, hands steady  
Hye's spaghetti

*Morgenstern*

I have gone to the trouble of actually going back to the chapter where the Lone Swordsman died, because I couldn't let these complaints that he somehow died "unfairly" or "irrelevant" and "being presented as a mook" stand, to face them off with DIRECT EXCERPTS. Here you go:

William, covered in soot, EYED ME WITH HORROR.

"All according to plan," I lied.

"You're dead," the Lone Swordsman said. "I cut your head off."

"Eh," I shrugged. "I got over it."

I paused.

"Also, YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO REPLY--"

[He is obviously too SHOCKED AT THE MOMENT by her  
"resurrection"!]

---

"I am the heiress to the King of Callow," I interrupted calmly.

"There is no King of Callow," the Lone Swordsman said.

"Yet a man rules it, and I am his chosen successor," I said.

[...]

William took the opening to dart for the blade, wrapping his fingers around the hilt and tugging it out. It did not move. His eyes turned to me, SCARED for the first time since I'd met him.

"It isn't yours anymore," I said.

"It was granted to me by the Hashmallim," he said.

"It's a sword in a stone. You did that yourself, with no one forcing you," I smiled. "It's a symbol, now, in a story about Callow."

"She's an orphan," Heiress said quietly, aghast as the situation sunk in. "She's the Squire."

[It would seem that "Squire" is also an opening to become King/Queen, because it's the base station for a noble to become a knight, which works via the route of having to train as squire first...

More than just Black (the knight training her! and if Names are taken that way – the one she is meant to succeed eventually!) ruling Callow right now... (even if not in the \*name\* of king, he effectively IS its current ruler)]

---

The Lone Swordsman was so fast on the move he almost blurred to my Name sight, even damnably faster than when we'd gone for our last round. THIS TIME, THOUGH, HE WASN'T PREDESTINED TO WIN. [SHE \*IS\*, right now!] That made a difference.

I stepped around his blow BUT ATE HEIRESS' SPELL RIGHT IN THE FACE: some kind of dark shroud that stuck around my eyes. I flared my Name, clearing it up some, but it was hard to make out William's sword as he swung again. I TOOK THE HIT to the shoulder, at this point utterly indifferent to the fact that it bit through steel and into my flesh.

"STILL DEAD," I reminded him, forming a burst of darkness around my hand and slamming it into his chest. He went flying and I ran for the sword.

[...]

William's boot hit my back and I was sent sprawling but he'd made a mistake: I fell forward, and Heiress' next spell hit him instead. He yelled in dismay as a swarm of something sounding like bees gathered around him and I took my fraction of an opening, falling belly first right in front of the altar. Heiress cursed, then actually tried to curse me, but I grinned in triumph and my fingers closed around the hilt of that fucking sword as people kept trying to kill me with.

[HERE HEIRESS AND WILLIAM ARE EFFECTIVELY CANCELLING EACH OTHER OUT in trying to get to Cat – AND they have ""ACCIDENTALLY"" (SEE: PREDESTINED TO WIN!!!) KNOCKED HER \*INTO\* the altar instead of just down.]

---

Gods, it burned even through the gauntlets. There was a heartbeat of pure pain and then it felt like I'd just gotten a bright stick to the face. There was warmth, and everything went white.

I was standing alone in a featureless plain.

[ -> EFFECTIVELY TAKEN OUT OF WHERE SHE WAS FOR A SPELL!!!]

---

"You can't cheat me," I laughed. "You're not the Gods. You're part of the story too. You have to follow the rules."

I opened my eyes, looking up into the perfect blankness.

"And if you won't give me my due," I said. "I'll Take it."

They shrieked but the power flowed into me. I felt my body spasm. My heart beat. My blood flow. The plain blurred, collapsed into me as I laughed.

I WAS STANDIN IN THE CHAPEL AGAIN; \*\*\*THE LONE SWORDSMAN'S SWORD THROUGH MY BELLY\*\*\* [!!!!]. William's green eyes stared into mine, my hand on his shoulder as I used him to stay up. It was a strangely intimate pose.

"WHAT IS THIS, Squire?" HE WHISPERED.

I RIPPED OUT THE THING INSIDE OF HIM, took it for my own. HIS SKIN TURNED PALER; HIS FACE BLOODLESS. [She is RIPPING OUT HIS GODSDAMNED ASPECT – and as she did, when her Name was ripped out, for a few precious seconds HE CANNOT ACT. Besides, HIS SWORD IS STILL STUCK \*\*IN HER\*\*!!!]

"Rise," I replied.

[...]

The sword was still in my hand, the blade that has once been his. I rammed it into his neck, biting deep as he fell twitching to the ground.

---

Now tell me how that is the Lone Swordsman being meek and “not even TRYING” to do anything about his situation or “at the least not being his usual self while doing so”. He DID hit her. IF SHE HADN’T BEEN DEAD ALREADY \*\*\*AND\*\*\* PROTECTED BY THE NEW NARRATIVE OF PREDESTINED RULING OVER CALLOW (!!!) PLUS \*\*HER RIPPING OUT ONE OF HIS ASPECTS\*\* – he WOULD have killed her (again). He might have gone for her head a second time, I concede that. But please re-read here in excerpt, how he was UTTERLY SHOCKED and JUST SAW THAT CUTTING HER HEAD OFF DID NOT WORK the last time, either.

And the very end – is ALL ABOUT HIM BEING “turned into a pillar of salt” BY THE SHOCK OF HIS ASPECT BEING RIPPED OUT ON TOP – plus her, at the moment before, when he buried his blade in her and hit the belly instead of something vital, still being DESTINED TO WIN for a few precious seconds, even if the Queen title faded away before she truly got it (which would have turned it into her new Name).

### *Morgenstern*

The “orphan” part of course implies further that she actually COULD BE the “hidden princess/prince” that is so very common in stories – who will be the only one to be able to “take the sword out of the stone”.

(Hey, this might even explain why (or at least would fit with the fact that) “Take” was the Aspect she got!!)

So three things combine for her claim: Being Squire who can obviously become a lot of Noble Titles; Her being apprenticed to the \*Black\* Knight who \*currently rules Callow in effect\*; her being an ORPHAN who just COULD BE, potentially, the royal child hidden in an orphanage.

Well, actually fourth and fifth in the line, of course: The sword in the stone (stuck there for William’s ritual, but it is NOW, nonetheless, a “sword in the stone”, literally – and thus can be used as such figuratively) as well as the William-backed claim that “this is still Callowan soil”, directed against Heiress ruling this piece of land as now being part of HER domain, of course, but STILL enabling the metaphor being ALSO used in OTHER ways, ENABLING THE WHOLE TRICK.

Neither Heiress’ action NOR William’s, for that matter, was meant to give her this opening or even made with that as even a slight thought-in-the-back-of-their-head (they might have at least taken other precautions if they had even remotely thought of it – but not having seen before that such a twisting/ subversion would be possible DOES NOT MAKE THEM DUMB – it simply makes them LESS GENRE-SAVVY // TOO FOCUSED ON THEIR OWN IDEAS; and, funnily, they probably NEEDED THAT FOCUS for their ideas to work – just like Cat is here superimposing her own Will by focusing on the OTHER theme/trope for a story).

I bet if they had not been too flabbergasted at this SUDDEN TWIST, they could have found ways to NEGATE that, again, by further subverting it. But IT TOOK THEM JUST A MOMENT TO FULLY REALIZE THE IMPLICATIONS – AND THAT MOMENT WAS ENOUGH. Simple as that. In a World of Stories – this is what CAN happen. NO FAULT OF THEIRS.

*Morgenstern*

Oh, and here's the last thing you should focus on: Heiress did not succeed in taking this piece of land FULLY out of Creation – she MOVED IT INTO ARCADIA!!!!

Now, what did we just learn what Arcadia is all about??? Correct – that it is EVEN MORE based on stories. That fairies have to RUN, when someone REALIZES they can TWIST THE STORY in their favor by USING THE RIGHT WORDS / setup. So, the final straw breaking the camel's back here is in it being ARCADIA OF ALL PLACES.

*Morgenstern*

Belief Matters.

(BTW, \*our\* wishes as the “Gods” of the Story, being the Readers, could be argued to have helped further. Of course, we have been set up by Book I as introduction to WANT to have Cat and Co. succeed because it is HER/THEIR story.... author playing the Guideverse and a bit of a Guide/Leader in that respect, but there you go... We overwhelmingly WANTED her to succeed, too. And thus she did, at least if you want a still more metatext-philosophical-version of events [anyone know “Sophie’s World” (i hope that is the correct title) by Kierkegaard? there, too, the characters are trying to turn the very events of the BOOK, later realizing that they are in a book and eventually, maybe, even managing to get out of it..). Just like shit hits the fan all the time, because WE want/heavily expect by now Action and Badassery...)

*Morgenstern*

[ If that latter assumption by me is correct, the Calamities (or at least Black) should be very safe as of now, seeing as the majority of commentators here is not ready for them/him to die, no matter all the hints that they/he might and EVENTUALLY likely will, no matter what we wish ... with some hope left that there might actually be another trick way out of all that mess – and don't we root for it... 😊  
The only thing turning that around on its head would, of course, be more comments in the direction of “xy MUST die”, “more realism please” etc., which could, in that version of storybuilding, actually change the genre midterm, while the author himself, alone, would not be “allowed” to do so (not

if he doesn't want to disappoint his readers, the REAL Gods of such a setting). ]

*Morgenstern*

( In other words... the author would be playing Fate, while we are the Gods that determine what Range of Fate Is Even Allowed At All. )

*jonnney*

Small note. The Chapel was never in creation. It was the corpse of an angel in a dimension created by Triumphant, meh return if you want. Heiress merely moved/manipulated the dimension to accelerate the passage of time and capture the angel. In fact we know that it wasn't the same time change affect as Arcadia because time passed at roughly the same rate in the outside world.

Also, you're using way too many RANDOM capital letters. It is almost painful to try and read what you're posting.

*Vysirez*

I was quite pleased with the way you handled things at the end of book 2. Specifically because Cat actually managed to make some successful plans for once. With a couple small exceptions, until the end of book 2 all of Cats plans were fairly worthless and she basically brute forced her way through things. Was somewhat disappointing, but you turned it around a bit at the end of book 2. I hope the trend continues.

Coming to the reason for my review here, I have to say I struggle a bit with the wide variance of 'power' levels in the story. It has become basically impossible for me to predict how well Cat is going to do in a fight. One chapter she is killing powerful devils without taking a hit, next chapter she is getting stomped by a fae of indeterminate ability. Having no way to judge my expectations poisons the story a bit for me. Not a lot, but a bit.

*cburschka*

Luckily there is one thing Cat is even worse at than staying alive, and that's staying dead.

---

## Villainous Interlude: Chiaroscuro

*"It is a shallow soul who fights to the cry of 'might makes right'. The truth is more concise: might makes."*

– Dread Emperor Terribilis I, the Lawgiver

When young mages were taught the limits of sorcery, one of the first principle they were introduced to was that of Keter's Due.

The largest sorcerous event ever to take place on Calernia was the creation of the Kingdom of the Dead by the king known to history as Trismegistus: a single man had, within the span of ten hours, cursed to undeath the entire population of an area comparable in size to the Wasteland. Though of course details were sparse, given that this had transpired before most of the continent was literate, through the higher order of mathematics introduced by the Miezans it was possible to piece together the broad lines of what had unfolded. Though High Arcana essentially bypassed the need for direct conversion and sympathetic links that limited lower sorceries, even those mysteries could ultimately be understood through numbers. A recent understanding, that. Early magic had been limited by capacity to channel power of individuals, the mental and physical exhaustion they could take before the continued manipulation of the laws of Creation burned them out.

The Taghreb had attempted to go beyond those limits by breeding with supernatural creatures more apt at using sorcery, most notably the djin. Limited success was attained: to this day, mages born to the southerners were on average more powerful than those born in the rest of the Empire. The Soninke solution had been less... carnal, and ultimately more successful: behind the walls of Wolof, the first ritual magic of Praes had been born. Those early rituals were brusque and inexact, relying heavily on human sacrifice to make up for deficiencies in what was not yet known as spell formulas. It was still a massive improvement over individual forms of sorcery, though this superiority was ultimately the reason further progress stalled: already having an edge in spellcasting, the ancient Soninke kingdoms sought to lessen weaknesses instead of improving a strength. A mistake that cost them in the War of Chains.

As in most things magical, the Miezian occupation changed everything. The foreigners from across the Tyrian Sea brought across with them Miezian numerals and the Petronian theory of magic. Though in many ways inferior to the Trismegistan theory later adopted by the Empire under Dread Emperor Sorcerous, the Petronian theory turned the ramshackle artistic ritual efforts of the Soninke mages into a proper method. The energies released by human sacrifice or other means of fuel began to be quantified and measured, matched to the requirements in scale and effect of what the mages set out to achieve. Which ultimately led to the



discovery one of the great limits of sorcery: in the span between the release of energy and its conversion into a spell effect, whether it be ritual or individual, some of that energy was lost. Worse, that quantity of energy was not fixed but proportional to the total sum of energy released.

What was actually wasted varied from a tenth to fourth when it came to individual casting, but could go up to seven parts out of ten when it came to rituals. Though advances in spellcrafting and the theft of the entirely different Baalite spell formulas inherited by Ashur managed to lower that proportion, no spellcaster had ever managed to get the waste under a tenth in any form of sorcery. That tenth was colloquially known Keter's Due. To turn an entire kingdom into undead, the Dead King in his capital of Keter was forced to open a stable and permanent portal into one of the Hells. And while nine tenths of that energy was properly channelled in ritual, the remaining portion turned the city of Keter into a warped ruin of anomalous magical phenomenon. The problem of Keter's Due was that it limited what could be accomplished by ritual magic if you were in any way invested in where it took place. The larger and more powerful the ritual, the more dangerous the waste of power released.

Akua's intentions were of titanic scale, which meant this was a titanic problem.

Turning Liesse into a ritual array had been achievable, especially after the widespread sabotage of all major infrastructure that had followed her taking stewardship of the city. Who exactly was responsible for that, she was still unsure. It had been too subtly wrought to be Foundling's doing, and too moderate a retaliation to be the Lord Black's. That left the Empress, but there was no way the woman would have allowed her control of the city if she actually knew what Akua intended. Her best guess was that she had not been the target at all, which was somewhat amusing if an irritation. Even with that interlude, Akua had been satisfied with the gain she'd made in the rebellion. Liesse's wall ran with old and powerful wards, and the city had been built by the corpse of an angel. Tying both those assets into her own project had been a highly stimulating magical puzzle, one she'd been working on since the age of thirteen. And she had done it.

Akua was genuinely regretful that there was no one should could trust enough to boast of the achievement. It might be the single greatest accomplishment of her life. It was, though, somewhat of a comfort that eventually every living soul in Calernia would tremble at the mention of it. Powering the array had been the first issue, and one she'd come very close to solving at the Battle of Liesse: imprisoning a Hashmallim would have given her everything she needed and more. Unfortunately, Foundling had turned the Lone Swordsman's blunder to her own purposes. Akua was

not a debutante trying to pull off her first poisoning, so of course she'd had alternatives prepared. Fuelling anything of this size with demons was asking for trouble, considering the Due, so she'd had to look into gods. Securing the entity that dwelled in the heart of the Greywood had proved unfeasible, but her second target had panned out. Mostly.

The seventeen conduits she'd had her agents acquire – to the cost of many, many lives – were kept under enchanted sleep in chambers below the Ducal Palace. The seeking rituals she'd done had revealed that the entity they were bound to was artificial, not a natural force, but that made no real difference. According to her calculations it was even more powerful than the Hashmallim had been, which was a boon as well as a curse. When a stable binding was established and she triggered the array, Keter's Due would effectively wipe Liesse and its immediate surroundings off the map. That was not an acceptable result, since she would be on the premises and fully intended on staying human. That was arguably the brilliant part of what she'd achieved with her array. She had found a way to still use the waste energy, what could be construed as a pre-conversion escapement that effectively negated the downsides of such a large ritual. Given the scale of the entity she'd found, however, she'd had to revise her schematics and broaden the size of the array's escapement.

That meant more stone needed, more time and an ever-growing list of liabilities.

Secrecy was paramount: the moment the Named of the Empire became aware of what she was making they would immediately move to destroy her. Though she'd prepared Liesse for assault, Akua was not ready to face the full might of the Legions of Terror. Her infiltration and co-option of both the Scribe's and the Empress' spy networks in Liesse was a temporary state of affairs. The longer she had to falsify the information coming out of the city, the higher the chances her agents would be caught and purged. Already Malicia had flushed out the first level of her infiltration, and even if she was abroad Scribe would catch up eventually. The Webweaver was a tool, not a player, but she was a very effective tool. There were, of course, more pressing threats. The worst of which had been unleashed by Foundling, who seemed to have a bottomless bag of talented lunatics to throw at Akua's plans.

The heiress to Wolof was about due another of her backers coming to a grisly end, so her mood was already cautious when she allowed Fasili into her solar. There was no point in shuffling the parchments on her desk – she knew better than to keep anything compromising where there weren't two dozen highly lethal wards forbidding entry to anyone but her. There were only seven safekeeping this room, a mere warning by Praesi standards. The Soninke bowed after entering, lower than he should to anyone not

the Empress. Fasili was a fair hand at flattery, a skill helped along by the stunning good looks bred into all highborn Praesi.

"Lady Akua," he greeted her. "Gods turn a blind eye to your schemes."

"Lord Fasili," she replied, affecting warmth.

She didn't particularly care for him, though he was useful. Having the heir to the High Lordship of Aksum on her side opened doors and brought resources, even if he was semi-openly feuding with the woman who actually ruled that region. If she'd not been Named he would have been sizing her up for a dagger in the back to afterwards usurp control of her own faction, but as it was she was untouchable. That didn't make him trustworthy in the slightest, but it did mean he was not a rival. He was a danger mostly to her other supporters, squabbling for the position as her right hand. For now, there was no need to deny him the perception that he was.

"I bring unfortunate tidings," the man spoke in Mtethwa. "Another patrol has been destroyed."

*Surprising*, the Named thought. After Foundling's goblin had begun killing off her patrols she'd ceased using Praesi and had instead conscripted Callowans, knowing Squire would be reluctant to kill her countrymen. Maybe enough to recall her tool to Marchford, if he killed a few.

"She has gained in ruthlessness," Akua said.

There was an undertone of approval to her voice. She'd learned the hard way not to underestimate the other woman, and seeing Squire adopt the more enlightened attitudes of the Praesi did not entirely displease her. It did not benefit her, of course, but Akua having strong enemies meant that Evil itself was strong. A skilled enemy was often more useful than an inept ally.

"Though you are no doubt correct," Fasili said, "in this instance the deaths lack the marks of the *other's* agents."

Akua's lips quirked the slightest bit at the word the man had used. Other. *Nyengana*, in Lower Miezan. The connotations did not carry across the languages. It meant *not us, therefore inferior*. Not other tongue on Calernia offered such a broad selection of terms to convey contempt as that of her people. The amusement was, however, fleeting.

"But it does bear marks," she prompted.

"A survivor was left," Fasili said. "He claims their patrol fell prey to a hunting party of fae from the Summer court."

Akua's face remained the picture of serenity.

"Not unexpected," she smoothly lied. "Though ahead of my predictions."

The *fae*? What in the name of the Dark Gods were they doing so far out of the Waning Woods? She'd been aware that Foundling was having trouble with the Winter court since the very first incident – the bastard Taghreb with the odious name Squire had running her spy network, though a talented amateur, was still an amateur – but she'd chalked that up to unforeseen side effects of using a demon of Corruption. Even Triumphant, may she never return, had only used those sparingly. Within a decade the thinning of borders would have fixed itself without any need for intervention, and if it kept Squire busy until then all the better. This, though? This was not a coincidence. If both courts were making a move on... Well, what they were attacking was the crux of the issue here, wasn't it? It was unlikely to be the Empire, which left the unfortunate possibility it could be Callow itself. That could be problematic, given that almost the entire extent of her resources was tied up in the former kingdom.

The heiress to Wolof delicately grasped her decanter of Praesi wine and poured herself a cup, then one for Fasili as well. The other Soninke bowed his head in appreciation and took a seat when she wordlessly invited him to. He discreetly passed his palm over the cup before taking it in hand, skilled enough that the alchemical pellet of lesser antidotes made no sound when it sunk into the wine. For all that High Lady Abreha seemed to think little of her heir, Akua had found him to be everything a noble of Praes should be: ruthless, patient and subtle. He'd already arranged the disgrace of two possible rivals for his position since he'd returned to her court, in both cases through a dizzying series of catspaws and intermediaries. If she'd not had two devils discreetly tailing his every move, she might even have missed some of the intricacies of his plots. As it was, Fasili was in the palm of her hand. She knew who he was sleeping with, who his enemies were and where his coin was kept. It would be the work of a slow afternoon to destroy him, if the mood ever struck her.

She wouldn't, of course. The other Soninke was a talented commander of men – though not as talented as Ghassan had been, before Foundling had ripped out his soul – and his schemes occupied enough of the players in her court that they had no occasion to dig too deep into her own activities. He'd made one attempt to investigate that himself, but the man he'd bribed to transcribe her architectural plans had been made to disappear the same day, along with the entire chain of intermediaries used. The message had been duly received and no further attempt ever made. Akua did like to deal with intelligent men: she never had to repeat herself. Sipping at her wine – her own pellet had already

been at the bottom of the cup when she'd poured – the Soninke allowed herself to enjoy the taste of home. This particular one was from the outskirts of Nok, the grapes grown there tinkered with over centuries so they would pair well with the taste of antidote.

It was something of a faux pas among the nobility to serve wine where one could taste one's precautions.

"We'll narrow our patrol routes and double the numbers deployed with each," Akua said.

Fasili inclined his head, allowing the faint trace of a smile to touch his full lips. He *would* be amused, Akua thought. Like most war-inclined aristocrats in the Wasteland, the man knew the deployment doctrines of the Legions of Terror inside out even if he'd never stepped foot inside the War College. This particular measure was straight out of the treatises penned by Marshal Grem One-Eye, as they both knew. Most Wastelanders never bothered to read those, preferring to settle for what had been written by the Black Knight who, even if Duni, was still Praesi. Neither Akua nor Fasili, however, had been inclined to pass on the insights of the greatest military mind of their age simply because it had been born inside a greenskin body. Though Malicia's dismissal of everything the Empire stood for was a mistake, it would be just as much of a mistake not to learn from the successes she had gained from a degree of practicality. Talent must be used wherever it was found. That much the Dread Empress had divined correctly.

"I've been given to understand that the Moderates are gaining ground," Fasili said, tone casual. "Rumours imply that High Lady Amina might formally withdraw from the Truebloods."

Which would mean Foramen and the Imperial Forges were not longer aligned with Akua's mother, cutting off another means of influence for the Truebloods. High Lady Amina was owed half a tenth of any profits made by the Imperial Forges, making her one of the single wealthiest individuals in Praes. Losing those coffers – as well as the knowledge of the quantity and location of any armament made in the forges filling them – would be a major blow. The Named sipped calmly at her wine, then arched an eyebrow.

"Inconsequential," she finally said.

Fasili managed to hide his surprise well enough that the only detail to betray it was the slight widening of his eyes. Akua watched the gears grind behind that handsome face, almost amused. If she was not bothered by the Truebloods falling apart, it meant that she was no longer dependant on them for backing. The implication there being she'd either struck deals with individual members of the faction that made their affiliation irrelevant –

which she had – or that she intended to strike out on her own. Which she did, in a manner of speaking. She would not turn away the allies Foundling's reckless accumulation of troops was gaining her, but the days where her efforts had been an extension of her mother's designs were coming to an end. It would be strange, to stand without the protection the woman had afforded her all these years even if she hated her. Strange and exhilarating. The cage was finally breaking.

"Do you ever get tired, Lord Fasili?" Akua asked suddenly.

The man blinked.

"Of?"

"This," she said, tone whimsical. "Of what we are. Of what we do."

There was wariness in those eyes now. He was wondering if she was trying to entrap him in some way, to make him misstep so that she could bind him closer to her will. Akua could have told herself she didn't know why she was speaking with this man, someone she could use but not trust, but that would have been lying to herself. *Because Barika is dead*. The pang of loss there surprised her, as it always did. Praesi did not have friends and confidantes, she'd always been told. They were too obvious a target, too large a liability. And yet on most days she still turned to her left to share a thought, only after realizing that the girl she would speak to was long dead. Barika was not the costliest loss she'd incurred at Liesse, but it was the one she felt the most often.

"Never," Fasili replied. "My line is that of kings and Empresses. It would be a disgrace to reach for lesser prizes."

In most cultures, Akua mused, one of her closest allies admitting to wanting a throne he believed she herself coveted would have been cause for a rift. For Praesi, though, it was duly expected. Ambition was bred into them before they were even born. Each High Lord and Lady saw to it their inheritors were more beautiful, more intelligent, more powerful than their predecessors. Some families had eschewed the Gift in their ruling line, for necromancy and diabolism often complicated the succession, but those that hadn't always brought in the most powerful mage they could secure. Praesi aristocrats were expected to always look *forward*. If they could not claim the Tower or a Name, they were to strengthen the family and prepare the grounds for their successors to surpass them. For any trueborn Praesi to not attempt to reach the heights their ancestors had touched, to never try to go even further, was... blasphemy. Turning your back on everything that had come before you, all that set you apart from those beneath you.

Fasili Mirembé has assessed he could not currently claim the Tower or become an independent force through a Name, so he had aligned himself with Akua. Through this he sought to better his position, gain material advantages and favours that would allow him to either further the interests of Aksum or his own. Most likely he intended on being her Chancellor, if she became Dread Empress, and bide his time until he could knife her and become the Emperor himself. None of this offended her. Ambitions like these were what kept her people sharp, what set apart Praesi from the rest of Calernia. Akua's people never settled for what they had been born with, never allowed themselves to stagnate. The Dread Empire had gone through hundreds of different faces and iterations before it had conquered Callow, but in the end it *had*. Because the Kingdom of Callow had been the same since its foundation, while Praes shifted with every Tyrant. And now Dread Empress Malicia wanted to kill the very soul of their nation.

Borders set in stone, never to advance again. The wonders of sorcery that were the envy of the continent, suppressed or abandoned. The High Lords, the very whip that drove Praes to improve, neutered into irrelevance in a fate more insulting than mere extermination. Centuries of toil to make the orcs a warrior caste incapable of functioning without the Tower thrown to the wayside by granting them authority. The goblins, who would always answer to their Matrons above anyone else, allowed to sink their claws in the Legions of Terror. Oh, Akua knew what was being done. Malicia and her Knight were making Praes a nation where the power was in the hands of institutions, not Named. An Empire that was no longer malleable for every Tyrant to make into whatever tool they needed to overcome the forces of Good. A fixed monolith, bound together by a philosophy that was none more than the absence of philosophy. A nation that did not stand for anything but standing.

"Do you know why the Truebloods are losing, Fasili?" she asked.

"My great-aunt has splintered the opposition," he replied immediately. "Without a united front, Malicia cannot be overcome."

Akua smiled, the open display of emotion making him uncomfortable.

"They were never going to win," she said. "After the civil war, when she set aside Black's cold hate and refrained from a war of extermination against the nobility, we came to believe the Empress was one of us. That she played the Great Game."

"Iron sharpens iron," the other Soninke murmured.

*And the sharpest iron takes the throne,* she finished silently. Praes would always be strong, for only the strongest could claim

the Tower. Every child that mattered was taught this from the cradle.

"But she doesn't, Fasili," Akua said. "This whole time we've been trying to win the same way we did with the Maleficents of the Terribilises of olden days. Acknowledging she has touched greatness but knowing that to grow again the Empire needs a fresh Tyrant. One still hungry."

"The Empress has achieved more than almost any before her," Fasili conceded reluctantly. "It is then her due to keep power longer than almost any before her. This changes nothing. In time she will lose her way and be overthrown."

"She won't be," Akua said. "Because while we schemed for advancement, to be her successors, she has waged a war of destruction on us. And a few months ago, she won."

The dark-skinned woman brushed her hair back, though it was perfectly styled.

"She barred the office of Chancellor, the most important ward against reigns that linger," Akua began to enumerate. "She opened the highest ranks of the Legions and the bureaucracy to lowborn and greenskins, smothering our influence there. With Callowan grain she has made field rituals irrelevant, severing the bond that kept the lesser nobility dependant on us. Trade with Callow has established sources of wealth we do not control, ending our ability to win through coin. All we have left is the court, where we claw at each other for ever-lessening gains and she smiles down at the corpses."

Fasili had gone very, very quiet. He eyed her with barely-veiled horror.

"She's not trying to win the Game," she said. "That wouldn't matter. No one can win forever. She'd trying to *end* the Game."

"Then we must rebel," he said. "*Now*, while we still can. If you bring this to the attention of the High Lords, they will back you. To do otherwise would be folly."

Akua drank daintily from her cup.

"They already know, Fasili," she said. "The hard truth of it is that if we wage war, we will lose. We cannot beat the Legions, and the Legions are loyal. Lord Black will not turn on his mistress and the Warlock bound the soul of the last envoy to a chamber pot. The Truebloods attempted to win through guile, and they have failed. My mother clings to her crumbling plans and grows desperate, while the weak-willed among them seek to surrender."



She met his eyes calmly.

"For that is what the Moderates are: a surrender. Do not think otherwise for a moment," Akua said. "In exchange for survival and scraps of influence, they turn themselves into coffers and spell repositories for Malicia to plunder as she wills."

"I will not allow my blood, a line that goes back to the *War of Chains*, to be used as a fucking *court ornament*," Fasili barked, eyes burning. "Evil does not surrender. Evil does not bow to inevitability. We spit in the eye of the Heavens and steal our triumphs."

Akua allowed the unsightly display of emotion to pass without comment. It was not unwarranted, when one learned one's entire way of life was teetering on the edge of destruction.

"I never believed in the Trueblood cause," Akua admitted idly. "At the heart of their movement there was a sliver of hypocrisy. They believed their ways are superior, and therefore they should lead Praes. But if their ways were truly superior, would they not already be ruling?"

"*Their* ways," Fasili repeated, eyes narrowed. "You speak as if they are not yours as well."

"You've read the treatises of Grem One-Eye," she replied. "So have I. Would your parents have? I know my mother did not, and many consider her mind as sharp as the Empress'."

"There is a difference between reading the words of the foremost general in the Empire and discarding everything we are," the other Soninke flatly retorted.

"The duty of our predecessors was to make us more than they were," Akua said. "They have succeeded in this: that is why we see a brilliant tactician instead of mouthy greenskin brute. For ages we've sought to forge better bodies, better sorceries, better minds – and yet we fight the same ways we've done since Maleficent first took a dagger in the back. We improve capacity without ever addressing *perspective*."

"If that were true," Fasili replied, "we would not be having this conversation."

"We're not having this conversation because of our families," the dark-skinned woman said. "The Empress is the one who forced our eyes open."

"The Empress would see us eradicated," the heir to Aksum hissed. "And she is *succeeding*."

"And for that," Akua replied quietly, "We owe her much. Fasili, when was the last time that we were truly in danger? Not of losing the throne to another of the great families or of failing another invasion. When was the last time the High Lords and Ladies faced *extinction*?"

The man bit his tongue, then actually thought.

"The Second Crusade," he said. "When the first revolt against the crusader kingdoms failed."

"And from those ruins rose Dread Emperor Terribilis II," Akua said. "One of our greatest, and a Soninke highborn. He did things differently from his predecessors and turned back two Crusades."

"And so we should surrender to our superior on the throne?" Fasili said bitterly.

"You miss my point," she said. "We flirted with destruction and we became *better*. Seven hundred years have passed since then, Fasili, without ever being in such a situation. We've become soft since then, narrow-minded. Arrogant."

She smiled thinly.

"And so the Hellgods put us through the crucible again," she said. "*Adapt or perish*. Are we relics to be discarded, or the beating heart of what it means to be Praesi?"

"We're not done," he said. "We're never done."

"My mother," Akua said, "would have me be the swan song of Praesi villainy. The last stand, raging against the dying of the night. But our parents succeeded, Fasili. They made us better than them. We can *learn*."

"Take what made them successful," the man said slowly. "Make it ours."

"Praes is a story," she said. "A Tyrant to lead us. A Black Knight to break heroes. A Warlock to craft wonders. A Chancellor to rule behind them. And an Empire like clay, to shape into the tool they need: an entire nation built to empower the ambitions of a single villain."

"Our Empress rules," he murmured. "Our Black Knight leads. Our Warlock crafts nothing and our Chancellor *is* nothing. All the while the Empire calcifies into institutions, impossible to move."

Yes. Finally, he was beginning to understand. None of them were acting as they should, not in the way that mattered. Malicia was more Chancellor than Empress, Lord Black had reigned as king in all but name for twenty years and the Warlock learned without

ever building. They were trying to change the story but oh, they had not thought that entirely through had they? Because once the changes began, they were no longer in control. Anyone with the right power could shape the story too. Akua looked at them, and she did not see rulers. She saw stewards. They had made themselves to be administrators, and in Praes those ever only had one function: to enable the designs of the villain above them.

"Foundling came closest to understanding," Akua said. "It's how she beat me, at Liesse. It wasn't her Name she used."

Akua drained the last of her cup, gently put it down on the desk.

"It's never been about the Names, you see," the Diabolist smiled. "It's always about the *Roles*."

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*Ashan*

Well, that's ominous. So the Calamaties have been trying to change the story by adjusting their roles in the story so that Evil can win, and Akua is trying to twist the story to reassert the administrators (the roles she believes them to have taken) as underlings to the Tyrant/ruler, which she's trying to take for herself as Diabolist.

*danh3107*

God, Akua is incredibly evocative, brilliant and utterly loathsome at the same time.

Great stuff all around

*Cir\_C*

Ooooo this means that my theory about Roles being what truly mattered in the Guide is essentially confirmed. I will have to wait a bit to really understand the implications of this...

*jj\_simpson*

Would you refer me to where Roles are mentioned previous to this, please? I honestly can't recall hearing that term before this chapter.

*Cir\_C*

The one that really got the ball *\*ahem\** rolling for me was the Heroic Interlude Arraignment, there were many vague statements made by the White Knight about his role as having

an even greater importance than his name. We are not far enough in yet to draw any kind of serious conclusions about roles but we are getting there.

*Shequi*

The quotes from the Book of All Things include the line that Roles came into being and were gifted with Names by the gods.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

You're going to have to reread all of book 1 then. Roles are discussed alongside Names rather frequently

*Nairne*

I look forward to seeing how Akua will lose (I hope Cat will turn her scheme to her advantage).

*Levi Kalden*

I think the reason she will eventually lose is not a faulty in her plans but simply the fact that she is a classical villainess. And from all the dread emperors before we know evil always loses

*Esryok*

Did Akua just monologue herself into a name transition?

*Letouriste*

Fitting for a villain right?^^

she vocalised her goal, her path and her role awoken. Brilliant.

*Byzantine*

It could have happened awhile ago.

Notice she is never called Heiress the entire time.

*Morgenstern*

Heh. I wonder if the author just grabbed the name "Diabolist" from what commentators were suggesting as the one he most liked or if they were simply right. ^^

*tynam*

The narrative expressly tells us at the end of book two that Heiress' most important goal in the Liesse campaign was to get her name associated with demons and devils. So it was pretty clear all along.

## [Euodiachloris](#)

Let me guess: Heiress nor fully understanding the nature (and provenance) of what she's tapping into for power = Bad News. 😊

*Letouriste*

That new entity? Yeah, feel troublesome;) I expect cat turning that in her advantage.

*beleester*

I feel like that's part of the job description for a Diabolist. Using, and inevitably mishandling, the Things Man Was Not Meant to Know.

## [Euodiachloris](#)

True... 😊

*Letouriste*

"The Dread Empire had gone through hundreds of different faces and iterations before it had conquered Callow, but in the end it had. Because the Kingdom of Callow had been the same since its foundation, while Praes shifted with every Tyrant. And now Dread Empress Malicia wanted to kill the very soul of their nation."

Haha, like if the nobles have anything to do with the conquest;) All that is on commoners

*RandomFan*

It was on the nobles before. Perhaps it will not be now, perhaps that is the future Malicia is building- but there's no way Heiress will see that, when she's the embodiment of nobility. Without that, you see a power vacuum where you should see an attempt to increase the number of heirs to the throne.

Whether the goal is to build a structure for their heirs to step in and take over when they fail, or to build a structure that will last even after the tyrants fail is irrelevant. Both look like mere stewardship to Heiress, because of the blinders that she must have to acquire this name.

Black, at least, must understand that struggle is at the heart of villainy- even if he'd make all such struggles external if possible, he understands that strife is the crucible of potential.

## [Евгений Пермяков](#)

My wild guess is that change of narrative may be even deeper than that. What if instead of a story about villain and

heroes on personal scale, Malicia builds a story about Empire ? The legions are definitely a move in this direction, forging a single entity where normally a set of personal armies of nobles would be. And with the narrative changed from heroes and villains into conquerors and conquered, the inner struggle would be a minor detail and easily stomped.

*RandomFan*

That seems more of a hero's speed, honestly- the hero's story is often that the hero is merely the medium for the kingdom's or god's ambitions, with the possible exceptions of the ruling class heroes.

*Letouriste*

I think akua will win this,taking the Throne and kill malicia. Malicia is too focused on her rival for seen clear the extend of akua.

My guess is she's know what akua do but underestimate her,letting her grow too much and now this is too late.she will lose when she is winning for real,typical villain.yeah typical villain,malicia is transforming in something different,she create an opening for her back.

Before this chapter I expected malicia to be be the next boss and the story finishing by a fight against the good coalition with cat empress...but now I see more a show-down with akua until the end:

- akua on the throne
- akua destitute but surviving=>cat don't gain the empress title
- cat fighting the good coalition with black
- black dead or crippled,out of the main plot
- cat win but let an opening for akua
- cat and akua showdown
- cat win,new empress of a big ass empire and performing differently

*jonnnney*

Akua is not interested in the throne. She sees Malicia becoming an administrator who is managing a country that has no designs to grow, no longer the empire of Praes. Rather than fight her directly she seeks to utilize the power structures created by the Calamities and rule over them at a higher level. She likely seeks to rule all of Calernia with Praes and Callow as mere provinces in her new empire.

What would really surprise me would be if Akua is correct is assuming that Malcia and Black don't want to ever expand the borders of Praes. I had always assumed that once Callow had truly become a part of the Dread Empire the combined forces would start swallowing up free cities or individual

principalities. Black seeks to win in such a way that 500 years later heroes will know that one time having your victory being ordained by heaven simply wasn't enough. He doesn't really achieve that merely by controlling Callow. The Dead King has ruled his kingdom unopposed for something like 2500 years, but his borders don't grow. An empire that constantly conquers, corrupts, and then converts to evil is something that would strike fear in even the most devout Heroes.

*beleester*

I'm betting on Akua taking the throne as a final boss, with Cat bringing her down. And possibly putting Black or Malicia back on the throne, because this story has been all about twisting protagonist tropes to support Evil, and "restoring the rightful King" is totally a heroic narrative.

I'm also going to place a bet that she collapses the Tower in the process, because villains always have a collapsing lair, and because this whole story has been about smashing the system of "Good vs Evil," and that would be the perfect way to say "No, we aren't that sort of nation any more."

*Yitzi*

If Roles matter more than Names, then does that put Cat more on the side of Good than she realizes?

*Letouriste*

more like neutral.

The way I see that, her role is unification in every sense of the term.

Meaning she will integrate both evil and good in a single entity, way more powerful than before.

Her role is changement in the very balance mechanism, a big fuck you for the majority of the gods (apart one maybe).

The combined empire will start on the evil side because that always how that work (evil=revolution, conquests etc..., we have our very nations build on this)

(Good=stabilisation and strengthening of the people, evolution).

*Rq*

My take on it is that Cat has filled the role of the true Black Knight. (Just like Akua seems to be sidling into the role usually occupied by warlock, with the creation of this array). She's been breaking an awful lot of heroes in a short span of time. Almost every major battle she's in seems to see a hero bite it or at least get horribly mangled.

Post drawing the sword out... I'm not sure. She doesn't seem to be lined up to fight heroes the way things are going. She

might have actually changed the role, or be in the process of changing it. Need more data to be sure.

### *Gunslinger*

Poor Akua really misses having someone to monologue to. Any guesses what the entity is? I thought of the Deoraithe nature spirit but that isn't an artificial one. Or was it created in the aftermath of the elvish purge?

The interesting revelation here is that the fae invasion is not Akua's plot. Directly at least.

### *Zengar*

I think the Summer invasion is probably a side effect of the magical backlash that Heiress THINKS she has channeled to her benefit.

### *jonnney*

My guess is the Summer invasion is the Forever King up in the Golden Bloom doing whatever he can to stop Diabolist from achieving her ultimate goal. He was able to move his entire kingdom to Arcadia merely to avoid the possibility of a fight with Triumphant. He and his followers are likely the individuals with the greatest ability to control the actions of the Fae. Ranger and her followers mostly just hunt them.

It wouldn't surprise me if the Deoraithe God is the spirit of the forest in the Golden Bloom displaced from that land along with its original inhabitants. It is the forest itself that isn't allowing the elves to have children, that sounds more like the actions of an entity that controls the forest rather than the trees themselves.

### *Letouriste*

Maybe the trees are sentients, like ents for example or their lesser brethren.

### *Shequi*

Akua's entity is whatever it is that the Deoraithe Rangers are bound to. Her 'conduits' are presumably Rangers themselves.

### *Euodiachloris*

Wouldn't surprise me to learn that the "god" is actually a Summer Fae who filed their own serial numbers off a bit as a lark/disguise/entertainment/way to stay in that part of reality – and, it backfired. Or, at least, somebody related to the Summers.



After all, if Winter captures them before Summer rescues them... things get interesting! And, somebody mortal deserves spanking for using them as a battery! Eh, we don't know exactly whi... all of the region, then? Sure, that'll do! 😊

[Euodiachloris](#)

/who for whi -\_-

*Levi Kalden*

It feels a bit like they both got played

AVR

Typos

limited by capacity  
limited by the capacity

many, mnay  
many, many

was nore more  
was no more

brushed hear hair  
brushed her hair

instead of mouthy  
instead of a mouthy

AVR

& one more

know as spell  
known as spell

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

many, mmay died  
I think there was an extra comma, and the M in Mmay should be capitalized. Those poor Mmay people, dying like Bothans for Heiress.

*Morgenstern*

Nice trolling, Warren. ^^

*somnolentSlumber*

deficiencies in what was not yet know as spell formulas.

“know” should be “known”

it meant that she was no longer dependant on them for backing.

“dependant” should be “dependent”

Fasili Mirembe has assessed

“has” should be “had”

by a philosophy that was nore more than the absence of philosophy.

“nore” should be “no”

She’d trying to end the Game.”

“She’d” should be “She’s”

“And for that,” Akua replied quietly, “We owe her much.

“We” shouldn’t be capitalized

*nick012000*

>the remaining portion turned the city of Keter into a warped ruin of anomalous magical phenomenon.

Phenomena. Phenomenon is singular, phenonema is plural.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Yes, and the context calls for a singular noun. Not sure what you’re thinking here

*NerfContessa*

Yeah.

And to think 2 chapters ago some moron Rudely stated  
That the opposition was  
Flat and uninspired cliché...

*Iconochasm*

What exactly is the difference between Roles and Names?

[Jeffrey Gassenheimer](#)

A Name is what you are called in a story, a role is what you do in a story (speaking in a narrative sense)

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

That’s a name, not a Name.

*RoflCat*

From my understanding, essentially:

Names – Your job titles, giving bonus towards doing your job (and possibly causing you to have certain quirks like Masego's OCD to be precise)

Roles – The positions in the plot, which relate to the state of Creation and less on individuals.

Using Akua's example for Black, his Name is Black Knight, but his current Role is more or less Dread Emperor.

Which is what Akua learned from seeing what Cat did back in Liese.

She's Squire (Name), but by using the situation to her advantage, she put herself in the Role of the one who pulls the sword from the stone, instead of the usual Role of "The Black Knight's Squire/successor" (which is something Heiress would've/could've become)

*stevenneiman*

A Name is a bundle of power and importance. A Role is the purpose that the Name is expected to serve. For example, the Black Knight's Role is to lead the Legions of Terror against Praes' enemies, the Squire's Role is to attend and serve a Knight while learning how to do their job, and the Role of the Wandering Bard is to observe, bear witness, and push the narrative along without acting overtly.

A Named can sometimes make some choices about their Role, like how Cat chose to make hers involve using brute force to do what needed doing, but she couldn't choose to, say, make her Role independent of the Knights or magic-based.

What Akua was referring to may have been that Cat is trying to make part of her Name be about serving as a popular figure who protects the people of Callow from both the callousness of Praesi Villains and the fanaticism and carelessness of Heroes. In the battle of Liesse, she was doing both since she faced on one side a Hero willing to mindrape the entire population of a metropolis in order to win a victory for Good, and on the other side a Villain whose exact goals were unknown but certainly wouldn't have been beneficial to the people of Callow.

[Euodiachloris](#)

That's the thing about a Squire. They need to be able to serve the whatever the Knight they are in service is dedicated to and learn whatever they can from them: no more, no less. And, Amadeus has quite purposely given Cat a lot of leeway to learn her trade while she adapts Callow to the Empire. And, visa versa. Something Cat has been predisposed to do from day one. 😊

Her Role is basically to serve him until she can either surplant him... or she finds another Role of her own. 😊 Any bit parts she plays doing this? File it under "training". XD

*arancaytar*

I guess she isn't Heiress anymore, then...

*Lucas*

She is kind of going over her head huh? And she doesn't seem to see the stories as we, she doesn't see that evil is always losing but that evil is always changing?

Well nice chapter.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Chiaroscuro (n) -

\*the treatment of light and shade in drawing and painting.

\*an effect of contrasted light and shadow created by light falling unevenly or from a particular direction on something.

*Vin*

Hey Author, just wanted to ask, why the heck don't you have your patreon link on this site at all?

*Letouriste*

? The patreon link is in the right corner upside, just below the top fiction vote link.

*stevenneiman*

"[to->at] the cost of many, many lives"

"[Not->No] other tongue on Calernia offered such a broad selection of terms to convey contempt as that of her people" alternatively, "not another"

"A fixed monolith, bound together by a philosophy that was [nore->no] more than the absence of philosophy."

The bit about wine flavoring gave me quite a laugh. So very Praesi.

I'm not too worried about this though. Akua might recognize that the Calamities have beaten the nobility by changing the game, but here she is relying on vast sorceries powered by the sacrifice of a god. She might as well be claiming to be clever and original because she's the first one who thought to put an invisible army of sapient tigers IN a flying citadel. For all her talk, she's more Sinestra than Truimphant (may she never return).

*agumentic*

It makes sense though. She can't bring the game on the old track like Trueblooded tried, doesn't have resources to match Malicia in a thousand little contests for power like Cordelia does, and won't be underestimated if tried to rebel the same way Calamities did. But one well thought-out grand plan that can be put through the final stages in a small no-spies time window when it's still seen as something far-fetched and ridiculous, instead of a real something that can happen? Can happen, and really the only way for her to get power and survive.

*beleester*

I think she *\*wants\** to be a Sinestra. The Praesi nobility thrived in a setting where the Dread Emperor raised flying fortresses full of invisible tigers to conquer the world. It wasn't a long-term winning strategy, but it kept the "Great Game" going.

I think the way she's "changing the game" is by recognizing that there's no reason the *\*Warlock\** has to be the one who raises vast sorceries, or that the Empress needs to be the one in charge of conquering the world. There's a vacancy in the story which she can fill as the Diabolist. It's like a "reboot" of the setting – same old song and dance between Callow and Praes, but now with a Diabolist.

(Also, on a meta level, the protagonists in this story are trying to bring an end to the Great Game, the constant conflict between Good and Evil, while the antagonists are trying to continue it by various means. So in some senses, she's *\*already\** taken the role of the Big Bad.)

*nick012000*

Also, random thought: Cat's going to stumble across Heiress's spell totally on accident when she shows up to protect Liesse from being attacked by the fay, isn't she?

*Morgenstern*

Yup. Although the "totally on accident" is not really an accident, if it's the side effects of Heiress' array setup that draws the Fay and thus Cat, because of unleashing the ONE thing that was sure to snoop around that weakened border due to Heiress' releasing the demon... biting its tail again, that snake, and once again not truly realizing it, because of having their mind on greater things... 😊

Although I'm missing the whole "I'm gonna break Creation" avenue here that Heiress was on before. Now she just seems to be gambling again at the Role of Leader that Malicia does not SEEM to fill, from Akua's/the Diabolist's oldschool point of

view as she is STILL thinking in the old terms... classical. If any muddling is taking place at all as far as that is concerned, then the Calamities are actually \*sharing\* in their actions, but Black IS following Malicia's lead, after all, as we saw/heard once more, rather clearly and directly, in their last chapter just between the two... so Malicia IS doing the leading, at least mostly, although she relies on multiple advisors, too, picking and choosing from their advice, just like an Empress would be thought to do, after all. She's also wrong about Warlock, imho. Wekesa HAS created things... he just hasn't presented all that much BIIIIIG and hilarious stuff to the public, like invisible tigers. He's more into pocket dimensions (linking multiple of them for his "one" tower), mutations, genetic engineering etc. – flying, firebreathing, biting pigs only being an unwanted side effect... 😊 If that isn't creation, I don't know what is.... And Black not doing hero destruction as he should? Bwahahaaaha... 23 by his own hand and thrice that number in other ways, was it....

Akua seems to have picked up on "finding talent in whichever form it presents itself", which is an interesting tidbit, because the combatting of racism by Black's and Malicia's big plan(s) and actions seems to be working not just on their own affiliated, but also on the Truebloods' children. But, so far, she doesn't seem to take that tidbit and turn it into much of anything useful (besides taking Callowans in the very lowest places, as patrols to be killed off...).

Chiaroscuro and its definition fit perfectly into the theme of how viewpoint, once again, is shown to influence a lot what anyone sees. Although, there's probable still more to it, it's also about the "light" and "shadow/night" (Good and Evil) mixing that the Black/Malicia's troupe is all about. One that Akua seems to be disinclined to continue, which is just another kind of racism, in a way. She sees that she should adapt – but she is taking away the wrong lessons (mostly), reverting back into the old power grab and being all about POWER, even in her theory/dream of making the institutions her own, leaving them intact (which, btw, is in HER view presented here equal to negating the advancement she wants, curiously enough, because she equals it to stand-still; let's just say her own view is very muddled and occasionally paradoxical – but hey, then again, that's just NORMAL for a helluva lot of real-life worldviews, so... fitting).

### *Morgenstern*

tidbit-addition: Basically, Malicia has simply \*incorporated\* the Chancellor role into her own. She rules AND leads. Which is, by the way, a VERY artificial distinction. The two words basically imply much the same... a good ruler better also be a good leader and not only rule by handing out orders and

suppressing others, but inspiring them and being an example. Hey.. now that I wrote that... do you note how Malicia has inspired even Akua, at least to a certain percentage...? 😊 \*g

*nipi*

“and the Warlock bound the soul of the last envoy to a chamber pot”  
XD

[Roger W](#)

“no one should could trust” she could?

*Zaits*

Back to the early mention of a spy in the ranks of the Fifteenth, I'll have to note that no senior officer mentioned had died as of yet. Nilin doesn't count precisely because he was placed to support Nauk and avoid scrutiny of Black's background checking agents.

I mention that because it's stated in this chapter that creature blood (specifically, djinn) allows for better capacity in sorcery. That brings the question: what if Aisha gets more than just passive bonuses from it? We already know that she'll survive the Uncivil Wars, so if my theory is correct, she'll either turn her coat in the end or gets away with it, unnoticed.

*agumentic*

Reading about Akua gives me almost perverse pleasure, like one can get from cutting himself.

[Phantom](#)

Despite all that is happening , I actually finds it interestingly unexpected that everyone thought the Heiress knew what is going on with the Fae while she is actually having no idea about the Fae at all.

*Byzantine*

I suspect whatever she is trying to use as a power source involves the Fae in some way. And they aren't happy about it.

It would be very interesting if someone managed to get the Summer and Winter courts to attack the same enemy at the same time. Given they can attack the same country it seems like it could be done.

*Ploogle*

Hmm, possible. They can't attack the same enemy, there must be some way of differentiating the two. In this case, Heiress

now Diabolist and Cat are of the same empire, but of opposing factions. Therefore they aren't on the same side.

*Morgenstern*

Well, if that "enemy" is meant rather individually... one could direct the PERSON behind xy, while the other attacks the organization of said person, as they are not the same (person(s))...

*Morgenstern*

Ehrm... what did I just write? o0 direct = should be "target"... Ehrm.

*Naeddyr*

"Of fucking COURSE it's got to be Heiress" is a pretty powerful instinct to have.

*Cpt. Obvious*

Well, it's unsettling how often it is correct.

*Tolk*

Your Interlude is as eye-opening as ever. So, Diabolist huh? She's gotten the jump on Squire in name advancement at least. Cat's going to need Archer to stick with her to have a chance I reckon.  
Thanks for the chapters.

[Euodiachloris](#)

I dunno. She seems to have firmly latched on to the "summon and torture things bigger than your head" part of Diabolist. I don't see the longer term advantages in that Name, whatever Role she uses it for, [for some reason](#). < < Warlock as a Name at least gives some scope to take or leave the things what can out-think you (or, in some cases, give them the chance to indulge their parental instincts for mutual happiness: whichever). 😊

*Morgenstern*

...aaaand – I caught up. \*gulp  
Oops.

*Ward*

There is now fan fiction

<https://forums.spacebattles.com/threads/a-practical-guide-to-escalation-worm-a-practical-guide-to-evil.518686/>



*alegio*

Only the nobles can have poisoned wine especially made to taste good with the antidote.

*arancaytar*

I like how the Praesi have taken Chronic Backstabbing Disorder to the point where wine isn't poisoned because you want to harm someone; it's just poisoned as a matter of general etiquette.

*Raza*

Just woke up the morning after reading this and realized...

We've been explicitly told by Masego that unless the White Knight or the Black Knight dies, Cat is out of luck for a name advancement. And of course, we have those fighting each other next chapter, to get our thoughts invested (which is as far as I've read so far). But the exact phrasing Akua used here before claiming a \*new name\* to fill the role-gap left by Warlock, leaves one other role gap just like it: the one traditionally occupied by the Black Knight.

Now I've been thinking – and probably many of you with me – that neither the Black nor White Knight position really fits Cat. So I'm betting that a) Black fill find his ability to kill heroes permanently diminished, because his role in the story in that regard has gone to Catherine; b) neither the Black Knight nor the White Knight die in that exchange, and b) Catherine will claim the Grey Knight Name and handle the heroes, matching Heiress-Diabolist move in claiming a new name from the void of an empty role.

*Raza*

In fact, I'll go one further. Akua just said that Black and Malicia 'didn't think this entirely through', which seems like betting on a crippled horse. Akua's list of the classic Praesi roles leaves one Warlock-shaped and one Black Knight-shaped Role open; Warlock took on Apprentice, Black took on Squire, and despite Black's words on the subject I'm still not sold that either of them wanted to be replaced \*themselves\*.

That just leaves me the question of why Malicia didn't nip Heiress in the bud; if she understood this mechanism, she'd have to have understood that Heiress was a volatile piece on the gameboard. And Malicia has basically told Cat that she knows what Heiress wanted the Hashimillim(sp?) for, despite Akua thinking that if the tower knew her plans for Liesse, she'd be violently and immediately taken out.

[\*glassgirlceci\*](#)

Rarely do I both love and hate an antagonist to such an extent. Akua is infuriatingly competent, and while I can respect that from a storytelling perspective, I can't help but want to see her die in a Catherine-induced beatdown.

*WuseMajor*

Honestly, my favorite thing about this chapter was the rather subtle point that Squire assumed the whole Fae plot was a scheme from Heiress... and then we get this one and find out she has less info about the Fae than Squire. Which is just kinda funny.

*Goodpie2*

For \*fuck's sake.\* You have more interlude chapters than plot ones at this point, for the love of Christ. \*Stop it.\*

*Lynn*

if cat and akua ever managed to put aside the past, curb akua's racism, and work together... gosh, they would be a force of nature. the brightest minds from two entirely different mindsets, working together; terrifying to think about. luckily, akua is a raging racist so this reality will never come to be, and we get to watch catherine curbstomp her.

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## Heroic Interlude: Appellant

*"One hundred and twelve: always be kind to any monster held in a cage by your nemesis. When it inevitably gets loose, it will remember the kindness and attempt to destroy the villain instead."*

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

A series of explosions rocked the machine and the enormous drill ceased spinning.

Though the Lowest Plaza still had a massive gaping hole in its centre, Helikean soldiers were no longer pouring out of the tunnel: when the Tyrant had fled, swearing 'eternal and unholy revenge', they'd begun retreating in good order. Hanno let out a sigh of relief. He'd not needed to tap into any of his aspects to turn back the breach, but after unleashing his Name so many times he was starting to tire. Ash was already making her way through the Delosi soldiers, curing anything short of death with a touch and that semi-permanent frown. The Ashen Priestess was admittedly

one of the more combative healing Names: it should perhaps be expected that her bedside manner was rougher than that of the average priest. The White Knight wasn't exactly displeased. His memories told him that the all-loving types often had difficulty dealing with the realities of war, especially those sworn to Compassion. Their inability to reconcile the way Creation was and the way it should be could lead to some very ugly breakdowns.

The Champion was currently collecting "trophies", hacking off the tip of swords so she could make rings out of them to add to her necklace. There were already enough of those that the thing could be considered an additional layer of mail around her neck. A somewhat grisly ritual by heroic standards, but that was always the way with Levantines. The heroes that had founded their nation had been rebels fighting the Proceran occupation, after all, and they'd been much more willing to bloody their hands than the average Named on the side of Good. Hanno sheathed his sword and took off his helmet to wipe his brow. Hedge crawled out of the wreckage of the machine moments later, covered in soot from head to toe. She'd gone in there to blow the runic array powering the drill while he held the line, and one again gotten off essentially untouched. Hanno wasn't surprised: there was a reason he kept sending her on the riskiest ventures.

As long as the Hedge Wizard and the Champion kept bickering 'amusingly', they were essentially untouchable. Their heroic band would be much too grim if they died, too dark for the amount of absurdity the Tyrant kept injecting into this siege. The White Knight eyed the giant drilling machine belching smoke and sighed again. Well, the flying towers had been a wash so he supposed it made sense for the Tyrant to try underground afterwards. Usually even villains hesitated before trying that route, since there was always the risk of running into a dwarven tunnel, but this particular monster was a reckless one. Almost too reckless, he'd begun thinking of late. Every assault that had been made on Delos so far did have a decent chance of succeeding, but they were also all half-baked enterprises. It was like victory and defeat didn't particularly matter to the man planning the operations, which was somewhat worrying. If taking Delos wasn't the way the Tyrant got what he wanted, *what* was?

Delosi officers began arranging crews to drag away the broken machine and cordoning off the hole in the ground until it could be properly filled. The Secretariat's armed forces were not particularly strong, in his opinion, but they were well-organized and had superb morale. Delosi believed that the decrees of their Secretariat were the will of the Heavens, so whenever they were deployed they would not break regardless of casualty rates. It had not been unusual for half a battalion to be wiped out on their first deployment, in the first skirmishes of the war, and yet the same men and women who'd been through that grinder did not hesitate going back to it the following day. He could respect

that, the act of putting your faith in something larger than yourself. In this case it was somewhat misplaced, of course. The Secretariat was an institution made my men, and so held the flaws of those men. To find infallible judgement, one had to look higher. Hedge made her way to him, patting away the soot with a lack of method that spread the unsightliness more than got rid of it.

"That should be it for a fortnight, at least," she said. "Unless he thinks up another machine."

"He's tried above and below," Hanno noted. "We should expect a dimensional shortcut next."

The Hedge Wizard snorted, her mismatched eyes shining with anticipation.

"If he's going to meddle in Arcadia that problem might just fix itself," she said. "The Courts are on war footing; they'll be shooting everything that moves."

"The first step always works, Hedge," he reminded her. "It may backfire later but it's a virtual certainty he'll make it into the city."

The dark-haired woman grimaced.

"That sounds like you're asking me to do ward work," she said. "Breaking those I can manage, White, but *making* them? That stuff is hellishly complicated and it blows up if you get even one number wrong."

Hanno had been about to suggest a mere alarm measure instead of something more taxing when he saw Delosi troops coming down from the upper levels. The White Knight felt curiosity rise when the officers among them ignored the efforts of the other soldiers and headed straight for him. The highest-ranked among them, a weedy woman with a commander's insignia branded on her breastplate, came forward and saluted sharply.

"Lord White," she greeted him. "There's been an accident."

"A large one, for a commander to come inform me personally," he said.

"There was a fire in the House of Ink and Parchment," the commander said. "An entire wing collapsed. Casualties involve several members of the Secretariat."

Hanno's eyes sharpened.

"Which ones?" he asked.

The commander didn't know since she was not high-ranking enough to be cleared for the information, as it turned out, but she'd been provided with a list. For once Delos' obsession with records was saving time instead of costing it. The olive-skinned hero scanned the scroll, skipping the names of anyone not ranked Secretary – anyone below that had no real influence in the city. *Secretary Colchis, Secretary Mante, Secretary Theolian. Secretary of War Euphemia.* Every single high-ranked member of the Secretariat who'd at any point spoken in favour of Delos continuing to intervene in the war past the siege.

"That fire was not an accident," he said quietly. "It was enemy action."

Hedge looked at him grimly.

"You think the Tyrant used the assault as a distraction?" she asked.

"Wasn't our Kairos who did this," Aoede said.

Hanno released the handle of his sword. The Bard had not been there a moment ago, but in between a single blink of his eyelids she had... filled the space. Arm slung over Hedge's shoulder, the Wandering Bard for once wasn't smiling.

"You should have some memories about this," Aoede told him. "This is-"

She never got to finish. Of the twenty-odd officers that surrounded them, over half had weapons in hand: the Bard vanished before a knife could take her in the belly, wielded by the very commander who'd brought him news.

"Stand down," Hanno barked, blade in hand.

In the span of a single heartbeat the hero noticed three things. First, all the officers with their weapons out looked horrified. Second, there was the faintest trickle of power inside them. And third, they were now turning their weapons on themselves. The White Knight dropped his sword and wrestled down the commander before she could slit her own throat, but Hedge was not so quick. The others dropped to the ground, dying or dead, before anything else could be done. The commander stopped fighting back after a moment and he only just managed to keep her from biting off her tongue. Name pulsing, Hanno focused on the power he'd glimpsed. He managed to feel five layers of something before it was gone, washed away before he even tried to make it disappear.

"Commander," he said calmly, releasing her mouth. "Are you with me?"

The woman blinked.

"Lord White?" she croaked. "Why am I on the ground?"

Hanno got back to his feet, helped her up.

"Can you remember anything unusual that happened to you today?" he said.

The officer paled.

"No," she admitted.

"She wouldn't," Hedge said quietly. "Someone Spoke to her."

The Ashuran glanced at his companion.

"You've seen this before?" he asked.

"I know the theory," the Wizard replied. "Five orders. One to wipe the memory, one trigger, one act and two contingencies."

This... he'd seen this before. Fought this before. The White Knight closed his eyes, breathed in and out until his heartbeat slowed and then ceased entirely. In that moment, his mind filled. A thousand lifetimes he had lived yet not lived, spread across centuries. Hanno focused, filtered through two points: compromised officers, high-tier leadership crippled. Seventh Crusade, White Knight. No, opponent was the Dead King. First Proceran War, Good King. No, this wasn't bribery. *The Paladin, fall of the Blessed Isle. Conquest.* Commander of the vanguard and the western flank assassinated, had to be replaced by officers less seasoned. Every outpost off the Isle gone dark. Sentries made unable to see the placement of goblinfire at the base of the walls. His heartbeat returned.

"Calamities," Hanno spoke. "We're fighting the Calamities, and they're about to attack."

There was a sensation in the back of his head, like a lever being pulled, and a ward covering the Lower Plaza awoke.

A faint smell hit his nostrils and soldiers began dropping like flies.

—

Alkmene wasted a good two heartbeats looking at Hanno like he'd just murdered her puppy. The Calamities, as in those scary Praesi fuckers up north with a graveyard full of heroes behind their lair? Shit. *Shit.* Words stronger than shit, which were not coming at the moment because oh Gods they were all about to die.

*Productive panic, Hedge,* she reminded herself. *Productive panic is how we survive.* They were now inside a ward, which had been remotely triggered and until now had been hidden behind the much larger magical emanations coming from that godsdamned drill from

the Hells. Alkmene tested the strength of said ward with her mind and found she might as well be trying to bring down a wall by pelting it with pastries. Modify it? And now the back of her eye was itching, just from a light probe. Whoever had designed that pattern was a vicious bastard and a half. All that was left was alleviating the effects, then. Her teachers had always taught that that a Gifted faced with a ward could only do three things: break, modify or alleviate. By the looks of it, this one was a straight translocation ward that was bringing in some kind of gas at a fixed rate.

Hedge pulled up a scarf from under her robes and covered her mouth. Most poisons could be outright ignored by Named and the rest could be burned out with a trick, but quantity ingested did influence how well that worked. From the way all the Delosi were stiffening and falling to the ground so quickly, this was not a weak brew. Not magical in nature though. That made things easier. Muttering a word of power, Alkmene created a ball of air in the middle of the plaza. The translucent sphere began spinning, sucking in the gas as fast as it could. She kept murmuring and it kept expanding, devouring more and more. Wouldn't save many of the soldiers, but it would at least make sure their band didn't go into the fight with enough paralysis poison in their lungs to kill a dozen oxen. Ash, in the middle of the incapacitated men, slammed her staff against the paving stones. There was a pulse of power and the people on the ground began breathing again, turning this from a massacre to a crippling blow. On the other hand, by doing that she'd... Hanno was running towards her sister faster than anyone in plate should be able to, but he wouldn't get there in time.

A red wedge immediately opened up in the sky above Irene and a burning rock the size of a house fell through.

Alkmene cursed, flicked her wrist and sent the ball of air straight at the projectile. For a heartbeat it seemed like it would push it back, but then with a pop the spell gave. It was just enough of a delay that her sister was able to prepare herself, thank the Gods. Before the pocket meteorite could smash her into paste Irene was swallowed by a cloud of ash that swirled around her before spearing upwards. The rock itself turned into ash when it made contact, hitting the ground and obscuring the entire plaza in a thick cloud. Alkmene sharpened her eyes just before visibility went and winced at what she saw. Irene's eyes were already grey, which was a bad sign. She'd already used too much power. The Hedge Wizard set that aside the moment she began to feel another spell being crafted, and looked upwards. There was a ball of opaque blue light hovering in the sky above the city, a stable shielding ward. The Warlock, she realized with a dry swallow. She was going to have to fight that. What had her teachers called getting into a mage's duel with Praesi again? *Death by stupidity*, she remembered. But godsdamnit, she'd have to

anyway. If the Warlock was busy with her he wasn't smashing everything down here to bloody chunks. Alkmene cursed again and fished out three tiles from her pockets.

She threw them ahead of her, watched them form three steps hovering in the air.

"You don't have to win, Hedge," she encouraged herself. "Just, you know, not get horribly killed. It's all about the standards."

Nervously laughing, she began the climb up.

—

Even as the ash billowed past him, Hanno replayed the sequence of events of the last sixty heartbeats in his mind. Nonlethal but dangerous ward that affected mundane soldiers, triggered as the opening move. Their spellcaster moved to mitigate the damage, taking herself out of the equation. Their healer then attempted to heal the affected, leaving herself wide open for retaliation while the other two fighters in their band were too far away to intervene.

Had the Ashen Priestess been a common healing Named, that projectile would have killed her instantly.

They'd almost lost a fourth of their fighting strength before the first exchange was over, and that realization sent a shiver up his spine. These were not military tactics, they were *hero-killing* tactics. Targeting people in their charge to make them expend effort, then immediately striking their weak point with overwhelming force. Their opponents were not only used to fighting heroes, they were used to fighting *bands* of heroes. The White Knight calmed his mind. There would be three of them. The Warlock was in the sky, and Hedge was moving to distract him. Now he needed to find the Captain and the Black Knight before they could take one of his companions out.

"Ash," he called out. "Champion."

"We here," the Champion yelled back.

"One, five," a man's voice calmly said. "Brazier."

Magic flared in the distance and the place where the Champion's voice had come from burst into flames. The light was enough for Hanno to make out a lone silhouette to his left. A man. Short, in plate with a heater shield and a longsword. The White Knight, without making a sound, headed in that direction. With a burst of speed he emerged behind the man and rammed his blade in his back — only to pierce through shadows that collapsed into a pool before snaking away along the ground. There was a faint whistle and he ducked under a crossbow bolt, almost missing the second



one aimed at his knee. He managed to parry that one at the last moment, though it marked his armour. The hero could still feel the presences of Ash and the Champion, dimmed. They were still alive, though the fire had hurt. Gritting his teeth, he made his choice and followed the shadows.

They were swift, but not swift enough to outpace a hero on foot. After a few moments it became glaringly obvious he was being led away from the plaza, towards the second level of the city. The sound of fighting erupted behind him, the Champion hooting in joy, but he'd have to trust they could handle themselves. Leaving the Black Knight unattended with an ash cloud as cover was just asking for one of them to die. Hanno found steps under his feet, a sure sign he was leaving the plaza, and shortly afterwards felt the pressure over his shoulders vanish: he'd left the bounds of the ward. The ash cloud behind him, the hero looked for his opponent and found him almost instantly. In the middle of the avenue stood a man, in a bare suit of plate that had the marks of frequent use. His shield had no heraldry painted on it, his sword went without decoration. The only splash of colour was those unsettlingly pale green eyes that could be seen through the slits of the helm.

"You're a long way from home, Black Knight," Hanno said.

The man did not reply. He moved forward, shield raised. The White Knight felt the Light flood his veins, scouring his insides, and with hard eyes met the enemy.

—

The enemy had made a mistake when they'd chosen poison as their means of attack. The method had been clever enough, Irene would concede, as the sheer quantity of poison had made it hard to counteract. Now that she had this much ash to work with, however, it was child's play to neutralize the effects. After absorbing the airborne toxin with it she'd directly targeted the enemy ward with her power, since Alkmene was apparently incapable of doing as much. Hammering blindly at sorcery with miracles tended to lead to unpredictable side effects, so instead of destroying the ward she'd erased the part that was bringing in the gas. Or at least she'd begun doing that, before nine feet of plate and muscle with a giant hammer had come for her head. How they'd not seen or heard the behemoth approach, given that the ash cloud had settled on the ground by then, was beyond her. Likely the woman's Name was involved. Regardless, the Champion had stepped in before her earthly body could be made an earthly corpse.

"You not just big girl," said heroine enthused, narrowly avoiding a swing. "You *biggest* girl."

"I'm flattered," the Captain replied politely. "But also thrice your age and married."

The Ashen Priestess had never thought much of fighting banter. If you had breath for it, you weren't trying to kill your opponent hard enough. The Champion was more or less holding the enemy at bay for now, so she focused on the ward again. She could see why her sister had found the structure troublesome: there were little patterns that would make even looking at it dangerous for a mage. Doing so through the lens of a miracle, however, meant it could not touch her. Irene began sharpening her power into a chisel again, breaking one rune after another. Her soul was only loosely attached to her body by a chord, high in the sky as she continued chipping away at the ward. The Priestess smiled as she wiped another cluster, then felt the chord being tugged. Looking downwards she saw the Champion's shield getting caved in by a hammer blow, quickly followed by the heroine getting punched in the face. Both hits she had gotten by standing between the villain and Priestess' immobile body. Irene had seen the Champion laugh off a horse's kick, but after that punch she spat blood before forcing the Captain back. She then unkindly slapped Irene's body in the face a second time, the chord forcefully dragging the heroine back inside at the impact.

"Ashy," Champion grunted as the Priestess blearily opened her eyes. "Get your *miera* joint. This no stroll in park."

Irene eyed her companion in confusion before she caught the meaning. *Get your shit together*, Rafaella had meant.

"The ward's out of play," she said. "I'm back."

"Good," the Champion said. "Two-time big girl now."

Said 'girl' was not currently attacking them, Priestess could not help but notice. The Captain was not wearing a helmet so the studded earring in her left ear was quite visible. And currently glinting with sorcery.

"Confirmed," the Captain said. "Going full tilt."

"I no like sound of this," the Champion admitted, throwing away her crumpled shield and hoisting her axe.

"It's nothing personal," the villain said. "I was given an order, and now I **Obey**."

The moment she spoke the word, her presence in Creation became *heavier*. Aspect. Well, that was going to be troublesome. The Ashen Priestess reached for her miracles as the Captain blurred into motion.

—

Hanno's sword slid off the shield and he backpedalled to avoid the blades that would have scythed through his knees. At least

now he knew how the villain had shot two crossbows at him earlier: the Black Knight's shadow extended into two tendrils behind his back, the two of them wielding swords simultaneously to the villain's own movements. The sheer amount of fine control that had to go in that was staggering, not that the hero had time to stop and stare: even with the Light sharpening his reflexes beyond human capacity he was having trouble coming close without taking a hit. The first time the villain had revealed the tendrils he'd waited until their blades were locked before plunging two blades straight into the White Knight's neck: they'd gone through the gorget and would have gone on to his spine under it if he hadn't detonated the Light beneath his skin to blow them back. The burns from that were painful, and unlike other wounds wouldn't start healing given enough time.

Hanno breathed out, having a little space, and timed his advance. The first shadow-wielded sword skimmed his shoulder as he shot forward, trailing sparks. The second came down in a swing but he rolled forward, landing on his feet just in time to parry a lunge that would have gone straight through his eye. The White Knight slapped away the shield, flicked his wrist, and with wide eyes saw the fuse on a clay ball reaching the bottom. It exploded in his face, throwing him back. Before he even landed on the ground the Black Knight was behind him, shadow tendrils swinging swords at the height of his neck and torso. Gritting his teeth, Hanno detonated the Light on his side to stop his momentum – it blew straight through his plate. He took a shield bash to the face, blinding him, and then felt a blade go straight through the elbow joint of his sword arm. Biting down on a scream, he reached for his Name and let out a pulse of blinding light. By the time he was steady again, the Black Knight was twenty feet away and the shadow limbs were aiming crossbows at him.

The hero moved his blade to the hand with a functioning elbow behind it. He wasn't as good with his left as his right, but it was a near thing. At the moment he could only see two shadow tendrils, but Hanno wasn't falling for that again. He'd seen a third one hiding those goblin munitions behind the shield, after knocking it aside. The crossbows drew back, however, when both Named heard the sound of marching troops coming down the avenue leading up to the third level. Reinforcements, the Ashuran thought. Alone against the villain they would be wheat waiting for the sickle, but with him too? No matter how many limbs the Black Knight had, he only had one torso. The Delosians spread across the length of the avenue in a shield wall, bowmen setting up behind them. The villain's limbs retracted and he patiently waited for the soldiers to approach. What was he... *No*.

"Retreat," the White Knight bellowed.

"Two, five through eight," the green-eyed man spoke calmly.  
"Half."

Hanno felt magic flare in the distance and saw the villain flatten himself against the ground. He followed suit, and a heartbeat later felt the warmth of a spell pass above him. He got back on his feet as soon as his senses told him the danger was past, jaw tightening when he saw the aftermath of the sorcery. Every soldier in the avenue had been cut through at the waist as if by a giant blade. Blood and viscera stained the stone even as the men twitched away the last of their lives.

"Warlock, you have bled," the Black Knight said. "Walls were damaged. Recalibrate."

Some of the houses had been sliced through as well, Hanno saw, but he was far past caring. He'd just seen two hundred men butchered like animals quicker than you could fill a glass. The White Knight breathed out, mastering his fury. *I do not judge*. To take justice in his own hands was surrendering his blade to chaos. Only the judgement of the Heavens was not limited by the shackles of mortal perspective.

"**Ride**," Hanno hissed, running.

Light howled into existence, sharpening itself into a steed that the White Knight mounted without missing a beat. His sword returned to its sheath as he devoured the distance, a blinding lance of light forming in his extended hand. The Black Knight cocked his head to the side and the shadow tendrils extended from his back. Hanno waited for the swords, but instead they extended even further and pushed the villain off the ground like giant spider legs, tossing him towards a rooftop to the left. By the time the Ashuran got to where the villain had stood there was nothing left to charge. The mount disappeared a heartbeat later and the lance with it, Hanno landing on his feet. His gaze turned to the rooftop, where the Black Knight was studying him.

"Two, six," the man said. "Pitch."

Everything went dark just as the tiredness from using the aspect hit him.

—

"Oh, *come on*," Hedge yelled as she started falling.

It had been bad enough when little dots of red light that burned straight through everything began pursuing her, but now this? There was no way using giant snakes made of flames as a mobile semi-sentient defence could be considered reasonable. Mages used those as a fancy knockout-punch, not *decoration*. She only had two tiles left — that little dot surprise had punched straight through one before she learned what they did — which meant she wasn't so much ascending as leaping from one stair to another. While at least a league up in the sky, pursued by killer lights

and *very insistent giant fire snakes*. Normally the absolute sheer terror knotting up her guts would have been crippling, but having come within an inch of death seven times within the last few moments she'd punched straight through that ceiling of fear into another realm of fresh and previously unexplored horror. She was never going to use a staircase again, and anyone who tried to make her was going to spend the rest of their life as the ugliest frog she could manage.

The Hedge Wizard summoned the two tiles back to her, shoving one under her feet hastily so she'd stop freefalling. The dots were slow enough they'd take a bit to catch up, but she was now officially back in snake trouble territory. The odd-eyed woman winced as she saw the spell construct's jaw unhinge. Just before it closed on her she muttered a word of power and both she and everything she touched turned into flame, just long enough for the snake to pass through her. She came out of it wearing fuming robes and knowing she was running out of tricks to survive that. Her Name allowed her to use and understand sorceries so wide in scope and different in nature that it was effectively impossible for anyone else to know them all, but it did have one glaring flaw: she could never use the same trick twice the same day. Her bag wasn't running low, at the moment, but it was certainly running low with things she could use to avoid giant flaming snake death. This was, she reflected, a bit of a problem.

She wouldn't be able to keep this up much longer, while the Warlock did not even seem to be running his actual defences. Could he even, from inside that bubble ward? He'd been casting area-wide magic sporadically, but she wasn't actually getting any spikes in magic from in there when he did. There was actually a non-negligible chance he was just triggering distant wards while overseeing the battlefield. The most direct action he'd taken so far was the pocket meteor, and that was before she'd found him in the sky. *So if I break that bubble, I might be disrupting their entire plan.* That was the kind of risk she had to take, horrifying as that notion was. Alkmene did not think they were going to pull through this otherwise, not with how dim she could feel the others getting. Hanno was getting the worst of it, she sensed, but whoever Champion was scrapping with was delivering a hell of a beating. Hedge gingerly rolled her shoulders, watching the swarm of light dots approaching.

The wizard summoned her free tile to her hand and tapped the one she was standing on three times. It broke her heart to destroy an artefact she'd made so recently – because of their equally recent flying tower fiasco, as it happened – but it was marginally better than getting destroyed herself. The tile began lengthening and she ran down the length, feeling it becoming more and more brittle the longer it spread. Halfway to the bubble it shattered under her feet. She managed to get the second one in place before beginning to fall, angling it so it served as a sloped ramp.

Immediately she began sliding off but another word of power had her soles sticking to the surface, allowing her to start running upwards. Not, unfortunately, fast enough to lose the dots. Hedge muttered under breath and flicked her wrist: a ghost image of her, reproducing her magical signature, began running away across thin air. The dots weren't sentient at all, unlike the snakes, so it would be enough to fool them.

One of said snakes managed to loop back to her right before she got to the bubble, though, leaving her only an instant to make her decision. She went with the risk, since her last tile was already beginning to break. She leapt on top of the bubble and pressed herself against the ward, hoping to all the Gods the snakes had been designed not to collide with the bubble. The fire construct veered away at the last moment and she clenched her fist in triumph. Not dying, her favourite kind of victory. Immediately she began tinkering with the ward beneath her. Unlike the first one they'd been hit with, this one had been designed to weather a beating instead of being hard to modify. Small favours. No doubt the Warlock already knew she was there, so her window would be very, very small. Huh, this was actually massively strong. She could have unloaded her entire arsenal at this and barely scratched it. Were the villains under the impression she was a slugger kind of mage?

With a smile of triumph, she switched the last two runes, preparing the fae flame even as a circular hole in the bubble opened.

There was no Warlock inside.

There was, however, an unstable elemental matrix that had only been kept from exploding by the containment ward.

"You utter *asshole*," she managed to say before it blew up.

—

The warhammer came down and shattered Champion's shoulder, then spun to turn her left kneecap into powder. The Captain did not even attempt to kill the downed heroine this time, going directly for Irene. She'd learned from that initial mistake.

"**Heal**," the Ashen Priestess murmured.

The shoulder snapped back into place, the knee yanked itself up and the Levantine woman got back on her feet. Irene had been tapping into her aspect for over half the fight and it was starting to take a toll. The wounds healed themselves more slowly now, and not as fully. Given how absurdly tough the Champion was she was able to walk it off anyway, but it was a game of diminishing returns. In more ways than one: the Captain's hammer came down on the box of light surrounding the Priestess three

times before Rafaella was able to engage her again. After the third blow the box thinned, and Irene was certain if the villain had time for a fourth it would outright break. If it did, she gave it half and half odds she survived the experience. Unfortunately the Champion now got back into the fight a little slower every time while Captain showed no sign of tiring. Whatever aspect she'd used earlier wasn't empowering her by much, but it *wasn't running out*. This had effectively become an endurance match, which villains weren't supposed to be able to win. They would this time, though, because the Calamities had hit when their band was fresh from turning back an enemy assault.

That did not feel like a coincidence.

"Champion," Irene called out.

"Small busy right now," the Levantine replied, ducking under a hammer blow.

The mere force of the swing was enough to kick up a cloud of ash behind them.

"I need you to buy me sixty heartbeats," she said.

"Also want moon and stars?" Champion complained.

"It's that or we die," the Priestess frankly replied.

Rafaella smashed her battle axe into the behemoth's plate, driving her back a step and cracking the metal.

"Dying not good," the Levantine conceded.

The Captain leapt back.

"I need Burden in, um," she said. "Big square in the middle."

There was a pause.

"I'm not Black, Wekesa," she retorted irritably. "I don't keep track of where everyone goes all the time."

Thirty heartbeats left. She could make it. Her aspect continued ebbing as she pushed another one to the surface. That was the limitation on Heal – she could keep it going, but making it *stop* took time. There was a flare of magic in the distance and suddenly the box flared into existence above her head. A moment later it broke and massive pressure forced her to her knees. Champion was still on her feet even if she was buckling, she saw, but Captain seemed almost unaffected. The hammer rose and she blurred again.

"**Oppose**," the Champion laughed.

There was a sound like a crack made in the weave of Creation and the pressure lifted. Rafaella's axe smashed into the head of the hammer that would have split open the Priestess' head, the impacts perfectly matched. Both weapons flew back and Captain warily stepped away.

**"Ignite,"** Irene croaked out.

All over the field, the ashes began smouldering. She could feel them pulse in harmony with heartbeat, as much a part of her as any limb. The heat rose and the ashes began rising into the air, forming into spears. The Captain took a look around, then cracked her neck.

"Been a while," she said. "It won't be gentle."

The villain's eyes turned blood red, her body convulsed and she began *shifting*. They were, it seemed, not yet out of the woods. Worse, the woods were starting to look rather hungry.

—

This was not working, Hanno thought as the blade sheared through his cheek. The wound began to heal almost immediately, but his Name didn't replace blood. Of which he had lost too much already. The White Knight's eyes narrowed when he saw his opponent giving ground. He was hearing something. Was the villain ordering another strike? Hanno sharpened his hearing, catching only the last words.

"Listen closely."

Then the munitions detonated. The hero hissed, involuntarily clasping his free hand to an ear. The man had used the elongated sticks that made light and noise earlier, but this was different — it made only noise, but was *horribly* loud. In that moment where pain filled Hanno's thoughts, the Black Knight made his move. The olive-skinned hero brought up his sword in time to parry the first strike and sidestep the tendril-moved blade that would have sunk straight in his carotid. But he took the shield bash to the face, and then the other shadow-wielded blade went through the slight space between his breastplate and the lower parts of his armour that only mail covered. The sword chipped on the rings, but it tore through his guts anyway. The sword in the villain's hand drew back, and in that movement Hanno read his death. It would take him in the eye, killing him in a way no Name could prevent. The world slowed. It wasn't about power, the White Knight knew. He'd gauged how much both their names could throw around, and he trumped his opponent handily. It was the disparity in skill and experience. Hanno did not have any tricks his opponents had never seen before, and he had not seen most of his opponent's.



That had always been going to be the way, he'd known from the start. He would have to go against villains who'd been around for decades longer than he, who'd been accumulating power and skill long before he'd even been born. It was why he'd left for the Titanomachy instead of going north to die like the others. *I am not enough, but I am more than me.* The Light flooded his veins again where it had started to ebb and he silently spoke the word he needed to.

## **Recall.**

They flooded through his mind until he sorted them by height and build. *Knight Errant*. Hanno's body moved by itself, the reflexes of his Name replacing his own. He leaned backwards, the tip of the villain's sword passing just above his nose, and his hand closed around the grip of the sword in his gut. Ignoring the struggling shadow tendril, he hit the Black Knight in the chest with the pommel. The impact bought him a moment he flawlessly used to spin around his opponent. The very instant they were back to back he slapped away the tendril-moved sword that would have taken the back of his knee and with two swords in hand stepped away from his opponent. The villain did not miss a beat, stepping into a lunge that Hanno turned into a parry that knocked the sword out of the man's hand. It did not stop him: a tendril caught the sword and swung for this throat as the other one slapped another blade into the palm of his armoured hand. No, this wouldn't work either.

He touched the flood again. *Righteous Spear*. Tossing away the villain's weapon, Hanno felt the sword in his hand flare with light and turn into the spear he needed. A parting gift from the Gigantes, a weapon that could be whatever his Name required. The barbed tip of his spear flicked towards the villain's throat but bounced off the shield. The Black Knight immediately closed the distance and Hanno spun with the man's swing, shaft of the spear coming to knock down the side of the shield before he spun back to – to have the shaft be caught by a shadow tendril. Weapon forced out of his hand, Hanno touched the flood again. *Sage of the West*. His armoured gauntlet expertly caught the side of the shield and he leveraged his weight to slam it into the villain's own helm. The man was caught off guard long enough for Hanno to slide under his guard and flip him over his back. He pivoted smoothly to hammer his heel into the villain's helmet but the side of his greaves was caught.

**"Destroy,"** the Black Knight said.

The life he'd been tapping into... disappeared. Like smoke. He was the White Knight again, standing awkwardly with his foot in his opponent's grasp. The villain grunted and smashed him into the ground like rag doll. Tendrils of shadows with two dozen of the clay balls from earlier wrapped around him, all lit. Hanno

touched the flood again. *Thief of Stars*. He slid out of the bindings, though the edge of the explosions caught him. He was tossed to the ground, landing in an ungainly sprawl. It wasn't enough. He'd have to... The coin appeared in one hand as his weapon reformed in a burst of light in the other.

"Burn," an indifferent voice ordered.

The stream of flame caught him in the chest. His plate was of the finest steel that could be found in the Free Cities and still it *boiled* in the blink of an eye. The force behind the flames was brutal, driving him into the pavement as the stone scorched and cracked around him. Mercifully, it ceased. The time to worry about the state of his body after the fight was past, Hanno acknowledged. He breathed out and let the Light fill him. He'd lost hold of the Thief, now the White Knight once more, and his body hoisted itself back to its feet. Flesh a tapestry of red and black, he stood to face his enemies. There were two, now. The Black Knight and his sorcerous accomplice. A tall black man in burgundy robes, currently eyeing him with distaste.

"Wekesa," the Black Knight said. "The Wizard?"

"Survived the blast," the Warlock replied. "Currently chasing my second fake."

"Then why are you here?" the other villain asked.

"The Tyrant is retreating."

There was a heartbeat of silence.

"You're certain?" the Black Knight said.

The sorcerer rolled his eyes.

"No, I confused them with the *other* besieging army that's leaving," he deadpanned.

"A backstab I expected, but a retreat?" the Knight murmured, then shook his head. "Are any of them on their third aspect?"

"Sabah's got her two on their second, the Wizard hasn't even used one," the dark-skinned man said.

The Black Knight sighed, then sheathed his sword.

"We can no longer win this," he said. "Full retreat."

"They're on the ropes, Black," the Warlock said.

"Yes," the other villain agreed darkly. "We have them cornered, with all their trump cards left. That is not a story that ends well for us."

"You're not getting away," Hanno and the Light said.

The Warlock glanced at him then smiled unpleasantly.

"Well, you say that, but..."

Everything went dark again.

—

It was night out when Irene finally hit her limit.

Hanno would survive, which was what mattered. The magical burns had been nothing she hadn't seen before, if never quite so severe, but there'd been some things she could not fix. There were two patches of skin gone almost stone-like on the side of his neck and a few others on his side that seemed able to simply ignore her miracles. It was like the Heavens saw nothing there that needed to be healed. She'd have to ask him about it, when he woke up. Her sister was sprawled across a chair behind her, looking exhausted, and the Champion was snoring away loudly on the only other bed in the room. She didn't begrudge the Levantine that in the slightest: she'd had most bones in her body broken at least three times, and Irene had not had the power left to both soothe away the lingering pains and deal with the White Knight's wounds. Washing away the last of the peeled-off skin with the wet cloth, Irene dropped the resulting mess in the water bowl by her side.

"He's rather plain for a hero, isn't he?" Alkmene said quietly, studying their leader.

"That speaks well of him," Irene replied, dragging herself up. "Means he's not vain."

She brought a short stool next to her sister's seat and with a sigh dropped her head on Alkmene's arm. The odd-eyed woman stroked her hair affectionately.

"You know what I mean," her sister said. "Look, we didn't change much when we became Named but there were *some* changes. I'm a little thinner. You're taller than me by at least an inch more than before."

"That's because he's a Judgement boy," the Bard said.

Both sisters flinched at the interruption. Aoede was sitting by Hanno's bedside, pulling at a bottle of rum.

"Where have *you* been all day?" Irene asked flatly.

"Nowhere," the Bard grimaced. "They've figured out a few things."

It would have been impolite for either of them to pursue this any further, unfortunately. One did not simply ask another Named how their Name affected them. The answers tended to be intensely personal, and sometimes forcing an answer could have grave consequences for everyone involved. The olive-skinned woman brushed back her curls, waving her bottle.

"But like I said, it's because he's a Judgement boy," she continued. "The Seraphim don't have a lot of tolerance for self-delusion. You're taller 'cause in your head you were that much taller than your sister. Irene is thinner 'cause she never thought of herself as going to keep those pounds."

"That's fascinating," her sister said blandly, reaching for a pitcher of wine and pouring herself a cup. "And you didn't warn us the fucking *Calamities* were coming to town because?"

"Here's a warning, since you want one. Don't drink that," the Bard replied easily

Irene frowned and her sister pulled away her hand from the cup like she'd been burned.

"Why?" the Priestess asked.

"There's five Calamities," Aoede said. "You've met three. One's retired. And the last one is..."

"Assassin," Irene whispered, eyeing the cup like it was snake. "It's poisoned?"

"And just when the both of you are flat out of power to burn," the Bard said admiringly. "None of us ever saw a whisk of him, and he's still come closest to killing a hero today."

Priestess found her hands were shaking.

"They've learned to work around me some," Aoede said quietly. "There's rules. I knew they were coming but not *when*."

Irene waved away the unspoken recriminations they'd been offering. The Bard was not the enemy.

"Merciful Gods," Alkmene muttered. "This has not been our day."

"We've got some time before Hanno is back on his feet," Priestess said. "We can rest a bit."

"Seven days and seven nights before he wakes," the Bard said. "Only one thing to do until then."

"And what's that?" Irene asked, raising an eyebrow.

The bottle of rum landed in her lap.

"For once," the Ashen Priestess said, bringing the bottle to her lips, "I think you might actually be right."

---

*danh3107*

Jesus Christ Almighty only Begotten Son of the Father Most High

I'm running out of titles for Jesus, that's when you know I'm shocked.

This chapter was.... Utterly utterly brilliant, action-packed, intriguing, heart pounding, intoxicating and it left me completely breathless.

I love this story so much, and we saw the Calamities in action.

I'd say I'm at a loss for words, but I keep typing so clearly that's not the case. If/when you publish these as a book set I'll be the first person in line.

*naturalnuke*

THE MYTH, THE LEGEND!

I highly enjoyed this.

[boballab](#)

And just think it was 5 hero's and only 3 Calamities, if Ranger and Assassin took part of the fighting the heros would have died.

*Morgenstern*

Well, Assassin obviously did take part in the end, but the Bard cheated again, and so no hero died at all. 😊 Guess Assassin really is not for sneaking in multiple methods of death at once? Somehow, I would've expected more in that one tiny aspect of this chapter, after all it was building up to. After all, there are five heroes in the room, even though the Priestess is the obvious first target to get rid of. And only ONE method to kill her employed? Seriously... Assassin needs to go deeper into their trick box.

*1shot4living*

You get the feeling that Assassin was just "doin it for the LOLS"

*Morgenstern*

Still absolutely LOVED this chapter, of course. 😊

[erraticerrata](#)

Assassin doesn't ever participate in melees like this one. There's a reason some people in the Empire believe there's no such Named, just a very talented cadre of killers answering to Black.

*Morgenstern*

Thanks for the clarification. As far as I am concerned, I didn't speak about melee/action sequences, when it comes to someone named "Assassin", just to ensure that does not get misunderstood. 😊

*nick012000*

Hey, now, I wouldn't underestimate someone just because they're named Assassin. Just take a look at the Savior of France, after all.

Dragons are simply bigger sparrows, after all. 😊

*jamesc9*

On a search for "saviour of france" "assassin" I find this discussion:

and I'm struggling to understand it..

Could you fill me in, please?

*GunnarS14*

Basically, when the game was first released in Japan, it was much harder to level everybody up. Since Sasaki was a 1 star rarity, he was much easier to strengthen. Also most other low rarity Assassins weren't just straightforward offense, and so were less useful. Most common enemy in the first Singularity outside the tutorial were dragons, who were classed as Riders, which are weak to Assassins. So, easier to obtain and level up Servant whose effective against the most common type of enemy in the area and is also from the original Visual Novel meant he was used by almost all players at this time. This region was France, so he was the one who "saved" France by letting all the players actually beat the region. All the memes spawned from this.

*Ginger*

Me second

*auwildthing*

Totally agree, loved the snakes and ladders too.. lol

*Austin*

This is easily in my top 3 favorites stories I've ever read, and I've read a LOT of stories

*Nemesh*

That was one of the best interludes yet. Thank you

*samshadar*

Gods below, what a chapter! This was incredibly powerful, easily the best I've ever seen a fight described in any book I've read. Congratulations! 😊

*PingleBerry*

000000HHHH YEAH! On other notes, you have your first fanfic for this story on SB

[erraticerrata](#)

Saw that, yeah. I'm on Spacebattles most days, so I actually came across it even before the thread started redirecting traffic to the site. Figured the first one would be a crossover with Worm.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Well are you going to give us a link or do I need to start googling it myself?

[oshha](#)

Here:

<https://forums.spacebattles.com/threads/a-practical-guide-to-escalation-worm-a-practical-guide-to-evil.518686/>

[random\\_human](#)

"Their heroic band would be much too grim if they died, too dark for the amount of absurdity the Tyrant kept injecting into this siege."

So that's interesting. Does the setting or certain stories have their own set tone? Because Shoo Out The Clowns is a tried and true technique to make a story darker.

And are hero-killing tactics so rare? I know that in the stories that we are 'spoofing' they aren't but these are laws of reality. Genre-savvy is expected here, unlike other stories where villains have every reason to believe they are in a sensible world. I find it hard to believe only Black and Cat have had the bright idea of working around common tropes.

### *The Archdevil*

There's having an idea to work around cliches like monologuing, and there's putting it into action. When all is said and done, it's not the Name that matters, but the person behind it. Most wouldn't have the willpower to reject their Role, and would eventually find themselves performing the very cliches they hated and wanted to avoid, without even noticing.

### [random human](#)

I actually really dislike the idea of Black and Cat just being Randian Ubermensch superior to all others in history. Maybe I just read too much fanfiction but it's very repulsive to me. So I'm hoping that there's another reason for it.

And I'm not sure I follow your idea. Cliches do not just rise out of the ether, they happen because they make sense in-universe. Even here there's nothing to suggest that a magical force compels someone to act a certain way, rather the opposite is true. It's just the laws of probability here are forcing certain story elements to crop up. They do it because to them it's the sensible thing to do because they genuinely believe the moral that they think the story is telling, villains and heroes alike.

And it's part of why I so heavily dislike the idea of Black and Cat just knowing better than all of them.

### *1shot4living*

Black and Cat aren't the only ones though, only the beginning of a new era perhaps if you consider that the White Knight as well as the Diabolist have been very aware and even manipulating the story to suit them, they are not alone, perhaps just the most visible from our perspective.

### *Iconochasm*

They're not the only ones. Remember the old Dread Emperor who forbid the Legions from engaging when they were assured of victory? That example really demonstrates that it's not just about doing what seems reasonable. What seems reasonable will often fail, due to the narrativium the universe operates on. So a competent Named will operate a meta level above that, like Black backing off there, or when the White Knight relied



on their certain doom in the falling tower to get them out alive. The "special" factor for Black is that he's trying to operate on a meta-meta level, manipulating the Names themselves.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

There's nothing to suggest a magical force is compelling people to act a certain way? Uhhhh excuse me, but just a couple chapters ago Mr. F. Rider was compelled to share his diabolical plans when he clearly didn't want to. The concept you prematurely dismissed is actually a major driving force in this world

#### *The Archdevil*

Were you responding to me or OP?

#### *Zach*

This was explicitly because Arcadia operates under different rules where people are bound even more tightly to "the narrative" than in Creation (which Arcadia is not a part of).

#### *RandomFan*

Yes, but in order for Shoo Out The Clowns to work, you need to take them out on both sides. If the story goes that dark, either the tyrant needs to change his tone *\*first\**, or he's going down along with the comedic relief. In other words, the heroes are matching the villian's tone appropriately, and that offers protection in this genre. In a more serious one, dark and gritty doesn't cover for dark and gritty, but the story doesn't want a joke villian when it goes dark and gritty.

I don't know if it's ever stated they're *\*rare\**, but the tyrant doesn't care to use them, or at least not in nearly as overt form as black-and-the-rest are. Plus, even if it's not a new idea, they might not have had a chance to go up against them before. I'm not sure it's the novelty that leads to the horror and effectiveness, though.

The calamities probably have put more time into this than most villians we've seen. Praesi don't seem to have local heroes in any real numbers; I would not be surprised if most villianous lands are in the same position. The calamities have had more chances to fine-tune their hero-killing procedures than most villians get. They may be no triumphant, may she never return, but they're still a villian group that managed to conquer and hold a heroic kingdom, without killing everyone and everything inside first. Very little will give you more experience fighting heroes than that.

As for why the White Knight sounded horrified, it was probably a "they aren't just attacking at random, they're after \*us\*" realization.

### [erraticerrata](#)

No tactics the Calamities used here are ground-breaking by Named standards. Plenty of villains have targeted mortals to bait heroes before, splitting a heroic band in several different fights is a staple of fantasy, ect. What scared the White Knight is more the professional manner in which those tactics were employed. No monologues or warning shots, no posturing. They went for the throat from the onset.

*Lucas*

Also, there is something that compels them to act accordingly with their roles right? Like the apprentice has to answer even stupid questions.. and we saw other examples, like in Arcadia

*stevenneiman*

The tricky thing is that most Villains who are aware of the narrative either decide to just have fun since they can't win, or else their frustration with the way the game is rigged against them drive them onto the exact paths that they lose by. Also, most of them don't really truly expect to win, like how Akua claims to be playing for keeps but is acting like Sorcerous or Sinestra. Most Villains in the end have a very distorted understanding of what victory really is, as evidenced by the fact that their most feared Tyrant who even had winning in her title, didn't do anything except make a big mess before she died.

*Cpt. Obvious*

If by "except make a big mess before she died." mean conquering all of the continent of Calernia (except for the Titanomacy perhaps?) before being back stabbed by her "allies", who then squandered it all away. Then you're not wrong.

*Cpt. Obvious*

Oh, forgot about The Golden Bloom, The Everdark, the Kingdom Below, The Chain of Hunger and of course The Kingdom of the Dead. She didn't conquer those.

*Cpt. Obvious*

Hero killing tactics are probably not all that uncommon, but the Calamities are!

Traditionally a Band of Five is a Hero thing. They band together in order to defeat the Evil Villain who has killed every Hero who has tried to free Creation of their taint. And after their victory, because in the stories Good always does, they may stay together or go their separate ways.

Villains on the other hand are usually too arrogant, greedy and unstable to work together. Not to mention that Villains forming a Band of Five and actually help each other to cover each other's weaknesses or enhance others strengths is incredibly rare.

The Calamities being a Band of Villains that has no backstabbing going on, appears to not only tolerate each other but actually be the best of friends prepared to risk their lives for each other is unprecedented. And they've been developing and using Hero killing tactics for more than forty years by now.

So yeah, their Hero killing game is pure Next Level.

*nerfworld*

Huh, so the bard is backing these guy to distract Black and crew away from what Diabolist is doing?

And is she still giving villainy tips to the tyrant?

*Letouriste*

Uh? What?

*Jonnnney*

I'm not sure how much control over who she is backing. Don't know how many other groups of heroes there even are on the continent of Calernia and the bard might not exist when not part of a group. I do agree that she wants Diabolist to win because her story ends in failure. If two great evils, Calamities vs Diabolist, clash in an evil empire and the evil with more destructive potential loses it changes the story even more. I'd guess that every previous time such a conflict occurred in Praes the more evil won.

[boballab](#)

I think everyone is missing the point still getting tied up in the Name and forgetting the Role even after Akua explaining this. Black is actually changing the story because while he has the Name "The Black Knight", he is actually filling the Role of "Tyrant", The Warlock is doing the same thing. If Black succeeds in changing the story then what is known as "Good" will be destroyed forever or at least changed

as well. That is why the Bard wants the Diabolist to win because the Diabolist is a villain of the original story and in the end "Good" will triumph over "Evil". Black is not just a temporary threat to the Gods Above as all the villains that came before him were, he is an extensional threat to them and all that rely on them.

*lightdefender*

Well, damn.

I know the Calamities retreated in the end, but *damn*. At first I said do not piss off Wekesa, but pissing him off may be more survivable than giving him time to PLAN.

*1shot4living*

Planning? Definitely some A-Team vibes going here. "Give me a minute, I'm good. Give me an hour, I'm great. Give me six months, I'm unbeatable," and all that jazz.

[Euodiachloris](#)

It just highlights why William's zany scheme to try killing an isolated Warlock wasn't that crazy. Sodding difficult and several shades of dangerous, sure. Particularly when the Bumbling Conjuror was the only real counter-mage on Team Nominal Hero. But, when reading this, it's abundantly clear that that tactic was always going to be a walk in the park compared to taking on Team Calamity at almost full strength.



*The Quietist*

Sheeeeeeeeeeeit, that was beyond fucking cool. The chapter really hammered home just why the Calamities are so fucking terrifying. Also White Knight power OP plz nerf, now I get Black bitching about reality favoring Good. Though Hanno is smarter than most Heroes to have gone south to train first as opposed to getting hilariously stomped by heading straight into the fight.

*haihappen*

Yeah, the White Knight, or at least this one, seems to have a reserve of previous iterations that he can call upon, and he just burned through several of them. If he can still Recall them then he is OP.

But I think the White Knight is so powerful because the powers aligned to oppose him are powerful. StrongAsTheyNeedToBe comes to mind.

*The quietist*

I wonder if Ranger will end up fighting White simply because it gives her an opportunity to fight every BAMF ever rolled into one.

*Morgenstern*

That would actually be very fitting and hilarious. Though, if the White were really OP, he just might end up being the one to finally kill Ranger (which probably wouldn't end well for anyone)...

*kinigget*

so this is what full-scale battle between Heroes and Villains looks like...

I am *\*not\** disappointed

I can only *\*imagine\** the kind of terror Cat will be when she reaches this level

[Not a robot](#)

So I just realised that the Calamities really *are* the villains here. I might be rooting for Cat, but I'm not rooting for Black or Warlock and certainly not for Praes in general. What Wekesa did to those soldiers was utterly monstrous, and I found myself hoping White would win this one.

*nick012000*

Not really any different to what America does to terrorists. Wekesa just did it with precision-guided magic instead of a precision-guided bomb.

*RandomFan*

Wekesa? Seriously? All he did was kill them- exactly like the heroes did when facing the tyrant's forces. No more trauma, no more horror, just a more effective killing. 200 in a single strike or in 200, who cares? they're dead either way, and it's just as valid either way. Note that black's reaction to the building's destruction was "recalibrate- you have bleed" which I interpret to mean that the attack only meant to kill the soldiers not destroy the structures.

I agree that something monstrous happened: Black's mind control was monstrous, though at least they weren't awake down there. Treachery followed by suicide is still a horrible thing to force on them though.

Attacking the government directly might have been, but that's fair in war, at least.

Quite frankly, this was entirely tame for villains, and was kinder than the entire angel plot, which a hero was responsible for. It probably was kinder than any plot the Lone Swordsman pulled, actually. They're monsters, but I'm more impressed with their restraint than ever before.

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

Oh, I know that very well. It wasn't what he did, exactly; it was just the utter disregard for human life it showcased. Yes, lots of people die horribly in battles, but this wasn't a battle. This was a means to an end, a showcase of power, and ultimately entirely unnecessary. I'd feel exactly the same if a Hero did the exact same thing against the Legions, but the White Knight showed, in his outrage, more moral fiber than I've seen in most of the story.

M

>ultimately entirely unnecessary

If Black didn't kill those soldiers, they would have killed him, or forced him to retreat. How is that unnecessary?

Tolk

@Not\_a\_robot you do realise those troops were preparing to get themselves slaughtered in an attempt to kill Black right? You don't even need to consider Wekesa's love for Black when he attacked enemy troops that weren't retreating from such a battle where they are so outclassed; they were advancing instead. Sure, I'll give those troops props for that, because your morale has to stay so high to actually fight a Calamity without a Name. Getting in the middle of that fight seems like a bad idea to me though.

I'm not saying the Calamities aren't Evil, but I am saying that calling Warlock Evil for killing enemy troops also means you should call Good Named magic users Evil when slaughtering enemy troops enmasse.

[boballab](#)

Oh dear God, what was done is what happens in a war and that was a battle in a war. Also you want monstrous? That is the God's Above the so called "Good" Gods since they care less what happens to their tools, err I mean heros. Look at what happened to William the Lone Swordsman he was used and abused by an Angel just as all the heros are. The whole of creation that is Calnerna is nothing but a game to the Gods (both above and below) that is why neither side truly wins, it just cycles back and forth and the slaughter just keeps going on

and on. Unlike all the fools that came before him on both sides Black realizes this and is trying to break the cycle

*Zachary A Sloan*

I think the issue in this particular conflict is that it wasn't even accomplishing anything other than "vaguely hoping that boosting Kairos would be good for the Dread Empire, because Malicia said it was a good idea."

Black's biggest weakness is blindly trusting Malicia. The things he decides himself are almost always good ideas that would be a net positive (merging Callow and Praes, killing off the Praes nobility, empowering greenskins, etc).

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Think about your average Fantasy Epic or Space Opera: now, think about all the green-, blue- or greyskins who get down down as simply mook filler. When you actually look at what happens to them, it's pretty brutal. But, it doesn't matter: they were Bad Guys™ and we don't need to expend worry over what happens to them or those they leave behind. 😊

Bet you wince at '50s Westerns for mowing their horribly caricatured "redskins" down the way they do with the gungho, "Ain't we being gritty but admirably heroic, salt-of-the-earth anti-heroes to look up to for standing against the tides of barbarism?" vibe constantly jabbing you in the ribs when they casually commit genocidal acts against people on-screen. 😊

\*just points at most Modern Warfare shooters without adding anything more\* Well, *Spec Ops: The Line* gets a pass. 😊

Or, how about the Ur-epics of White Knights and Scheming Viziers: the romances written about the Crusades. *The Song of Roland* is horrific when you realise what the merry band of who you're supposed to root for is actually doing to their "vile" enemies simply because most of them are supposed to be heretics (which most aren't: you have to believe in a specific dogma to cast aside or deface the thing before you can technically be a heretic – not believing it from the get-go just makes you of a different faith). <\_<

Heroes doing horribly gruesome things to their opponents either for the fun of it or out of sheer pragmatism in warfare goes even further back than Homer. But, it's OK if they do it: they're on Our Side™. 😊

*Letouriste*

Monstrous? In which way? The death was really quick.way better than ripping their souls or burning them right?



## *Letouriste*

Oh I see.that's the disregard for human life? Wait,wtf???  
You talk about warlock here! The very same man dissecting  
living and dead creature in his lab,inheritor of demon  
sumoners and often seen playing with souls^^.  
Of course they are villain! And don't forget  
wekesa,assassin,black,ranger and miss gigante are not  
considered as dangerous than scribe;)

## *Not a robot*

Which is exactly why I am not in a hurry to read an interlude  
from Scribe's perspective, as I'm pretty sure murder is just  
a means to an end to her more than anyone else. And yeah, I  
know he does, but that's Evil on a more... whimsical level.  
This is planned and organised for seemingly no other purpose  
than being as big an bastard as possible. I still like the  
characters, I still respect them, and I don't hate them for  
it. I just now realised that, whatever my opinion of them,  
they are absolute monsters and I get why Good is always so  
reluctant to work with Evil.

## *Morgenstern*

BTW, the sooner one side stops the other – the sooner this  
war is ended. Which seems to be exactly what the Calamities  
are all about. It is rather the OTHER side here that wants  
eternal war where no one can win, personified in the Role of  
Bard...

## *Morgenstern*

Uhm. Sorry? Black and Wekesa were doing a PRECISION strike  
during WAR. Black chided Wekesa on ACCIDENTALLY raising risks  
to get ANY civilians at the same time (those houses that might  
have been evacuated or NOT, bc. sb. always stays behind,  
refusing to go...). It doesn't get any LESS evil, if you're  
actually in a fantastic war about forces that cannot be made to  
find a peaceful compromise, because the opposite side is out to  
effing \*kill you\*. Letting that band of heroes romp free will  
kill MORE "simple soldiers" and civilians than anything else.  
You seem to be forgetting the part where the Heroes mass-killed  
the forces of Tyrant without blinking an eye – plus bringing  
down those fortresses on the very city they are "defending"...  
AND inviting Villains to go there. Instead of meeting the  
Villains out-of-city... Why aren't you speaking of the fact that  
this band of heroes failed to meet the enemy army BEFORE it  
could engage the city? It is NOT as if they weren't there  
already. The whole book started out with the heroes BEING THERE  
ALREADY. And yet, the Calamities managed to go to that city  
first, with enough time to implement all those traps before the  
heroes ever arrived, it would seem.



Somehow those heroes are not very good at planning to spare either soldiers or civilians or they would simply REFUSE to let mere humans take part at all, but put them far, far, FAR away from where the action is likely to take place. Black and Co. do NOT seem likely to go for those humans simply to anger the heroes. They are only going for them \*when it makes sense\*, when the Heroes \*are there and will defend them\*, thus draining the Heroes' resources.

And I'm not entirely sure even Tyrant would go for mere humans for sheer laughs. He seems to be very much about going up against HEROES. Even though he might have some package for all the humans laughing at him, being mean to him, or pitying him...

I'm almost sure, that ray of destruction (or whatever it was) that Wekesa cast to cut those soldiers in two was not even meant to actually get the civilians – it was counting on the effing Hero being THERE who can summon a horse to stand in front of them.

Only he didn't do it, the ruthless "hero" molded after their fashion.... Which effectively means that the part of changing the Guideverse into a more real setting is already succeeding. It's definitely not just people like Black or Cat on one side, it has already changed the very (leading) Heroes of this story, too. Only Bard does not seem to realize or want to realize it – or is still counting on turning the wheel back by having this Practical heroes band triumph over Practical Evil only to be met in turn by the Oldschool Evil (which is, as we have already learned, though, \*not quite\* simple Oldschool anymore, EITHER, so yeah, I personally think Bard is overlooking a few things, just as Akua is and Malicia might be and others are). The Change is Already In Progress. Has been for some time, it would seem.

*Morgenstern*

Uhm yeah.. that "BTW" comment should have come here, \*after\* the other one. o\_0

*Morgenstern*

Basically: Both sides don't give each other one tiny scrap in general as long as they are about war and exterminating the other side. Goes to show how horrible war is, but definitely not how horrible at least being practical about it is.

The US so-called precision strikes in war are not that at all in too many cases and that is why they are so horrible, not the other way round. The problem is the defining of any male of fighting age as outright "enemy" instead of actually trying to get the real enemies. They are killing way too many civilians.

I don't see Practical Evil doing that here so far.

*Morgenstern*

I am not contesting the notion of Warlock (including Apprentice) being uncaring about sentient life and thus "monstrous", what with all the dissecting, trying to break the whole world etc. as in "science, baby – it doesn't care about you and it transcends any morality". Just to prevent someone reading this into my words. 😊

*Zachary*

The problem is that this war is a really dumb one to get involved in. This isn't really equivalent to something like the Conquest (where forcibly merging Praes and Callow was actually a pretty reasonable thing to do given a deeper understanding of why they keep going to war). They're blindly boosting Evil-aligned Free Cities out of the assumption that this will somehow help hinder Procer.

Basically, more harmful acts require greater justification, and the justification for this military involvement is pretty weak. That being said, there's nothing wrong with their specific acts during the attack.

*Vortex*

We have seen a lot more sacrificed for less. I would point you to the lone swordsman calling up a rebellion that had zero chance to succeed and gave heiress an opening to unleash a demon of corruption. And then trying to sacrifice a whole city of civilians to an angel of contrition.

*stevenneiman*

He humanely and efficiently killed enemy combatants who probably would have died from slower wounds if he hadn't. Recall that William was perfectly willing to mind rape thousands of innocents and that Good was willing to put the stamp of approval on him doing so. And that Hanno kills people for the same cause and similar leadership, then claims that he doesn't have any responsibility because he was "just following orders".

This band (except for the Bard) might be pretty decent as heroes go, but don't forget for a moment what their side stands for and who they tolerate as allies.

*stevenneiman*

Oh and remember that despite his "Just following orders" schtick, Hanno is happy to cut through his own army of foes without even checking them, just because he assumes they

aren't important.

Also, remember that the only things he really fights for are tradition and authority, not people for their own sake.

*Solaire*

@Not\_a\_robot

I find it redundant that you actually read that far till now just to complain about not liking a Villain doing Villainous things on a story based on Villains.

Also, to point out, many many chapters before, Cat Already pointed out that Black is a monster when he hanged the rebels in front of her, just to show her what villains can do. If you felt uneasy about villain killings, it is more obvious to make a comment to complain at that chapter than here.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Seems the walking Role of Trope Enabler which is the Wandering Bard doesn't currently handle subversion or deconstruction all that well...

I think the Calamaties are on to her quite specifically, somehow. And, she might only now be aware of that. 😞

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

She hasn't been good with Subversions since the beginning, and that might be the thing she's only now realising.

*Morgenstern*

As I understood it, she is specifically aware of how they can slap her out of existence for some time by doing it three times over, like Black did when she popped up at the "battle" with the "rebel host" in Callow. They seem to have done that here, too, if I got the insinuation. That might be why she didn't warn the Heroes of the Calamities' coming.

Or maybe the Bard is simply (also) limited to ONLY being allowed to talk of something, when it actually happens / the Bard is sure of the exact circumstances (as she was talking about herself knowing they would come, but not WHEN/WHERE exactly). Maybe she is prevented from talking about it at all, if she can't give the details, but only "vague prophecies". She's not a Prophet, after all, but someone who is defined to "recount" the story.

*1shot4living*

Perhaps it is a part of her role, as a Bard she can tell the story as its happening or even about to happen to provide a

good moment of suspense and such, but providing spoilers would ruin the story?

*stevenneiman*

I don't think they're after her specifically, but they're trying to kill what she stands for and lives by, which has much the same effect. More so even, given that dying of stab wounds probably wouldn't harm her any more than dying of alcohol poisoning did.

*veteranMortal*

Why does everyone forget about Scribe?

Pretty sure Scribe is at least as dangerous as the others...

[gianoria7](#)

One of the reasons she is so dangerous is that everybody is underestimating her.

This is why she is the most dangerous Calamity.

*Morgenstern*

"Forget"ing her, I would suppose. Going unnoticed seems to be THE key feature we know about her so far. Goes in line that everyone IS "forgetting" about her. It's one of her Aspects.

*Morgenstern*

(Or sth. the like.)

[erraticerrata](#)

Scribe's not technically a Calamity, though she is affiliated with them. The "official" members are those listed by the Bard.

*Morgenstern*

Aaaand that too, of course. ^^ But seeing how the question was posed about "forgetting" her... 😊

*Morgenstern*

I'd wager we can count her as "calamity" lower case, though ^^

*stevenneiman*

@Morgenstern I would guess something like Fade, for the way that she can fade from the memories or at least the attention of anyone she doesn't want to realize how dangerous she is.

Then maybe something like Manage to allow her to keep on top of so much more than anyone else could handle without missing anything, and I have no idea about her third Aspect. Remember that Aspects are always a verb relating to what the Named himself or herself is doing, and I assure you that the Scribe is not forgetting anything.

*Morgenstern*

I thought of "Forget" as a command to others, in that case, obviously. You're probably right about it being more about what the person using it does, though. 😊 Thinking how the Tyrant has "Rule" to use it on other/sth. else as one instantly reminded hint. I'd have to re-check the whole books, though, to feel really, really sure. ^^ (Maybe it's all the university studies, but I make rather sure to never take anything for granted, much more so when it comes to assumptions on fictitious works – which do, however, have the great asset of being able to actually be clarified once and for all by the author, should they so wish. For that one story as it is, at least.)

[cardizzle](#)

I'm fairly sure Scribe is Assassin.

*The quietist*

Not so sure myself remember Scribe being amused about how Assassin would be pissed he'd missed some of that cult in the sewers. I can imagine they might be romantically involved though, or at least friends. My only theory about Scribe is that she's Delosi, especially since she mentioned she and Black met in the Free Cities.

[cardizzle](#)

I don't remember a sewer cult.

*stevenneiman*

I rather doubt it. Aside from one key skill (being ignored and underestimated), their Roles and skillsets are very different. Scribe works as an administrator, and her great weapon is her ability to control the Praesi bureaucracy in ways that nobody else can and allow herself and her allies to use the substantial resources of the Dread Empire to deadly effect. She's also a sort of villainous Bard, able to travel wherever she needs to be and see and understand whatever she needs to, but unable to act directly. The difference is that she has that power over the paper trail where the Bard has it over the story.

Assassin's abilities might be equally subtle in their own

way, but much more personal and much more direct. Scribe arranges for people to be killed and other things to be done, and Assassin just kills people.

Of course I try not to be too certain about any of this, as the story has come up with plot twists and reveals more surprising than that in the past.

*Joebobjoe*

They're in bureaucratic hell. Scribe is the most dangerous calamity for where they are.

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Alright, there's a certain thought that's been bugging me since the dialog about patterns for Praes and Callow as a whole: why Names? The divine interference, while technically unlimited, is shown to target separate individuals, not entire nations or professions. We already know that different species like elves have a different imprint on the Pattern, and that it can affect numerous people at once, so something like more pronounced national stereotypes wouldn't be impossible.

My theory is that the Gods' opinion about what happens in the Creation mostly concerns The Choice That Matters. From the point of view of an average person society as a whole is a pressing, but vague concept, while a charismatic Named can change his ways. Since people trust first and foremost other people, and give the more abstract opinions only as much credit as the one who expresses them, a Named can be as convincing as a close friend or a family member, all without coming in direct contact with the audience, only as a story.

This is why stories are so important for Gods both Above and Below: they describe what sways people's hearts and cliches allow them to predict what will happen next and how it would affect The Choice. Just as Lone Swordsman noted, heroes and villains are meant to inspire, and tropes allow for long-term planning where a broader stereotype would leave more room for interpretation or attract less attention. Emperor Treacherous is exactly the kind of person to win a civil war or a presidential election and grow even more popular for it, despite not being much of a winner in general.

Think about Arcadia, a world shaped more by perception than physics and created to accommodate souls in corporeal form: it's a place where without reality to counterbalance them behavior is enforced by the tropes. A person is exactly as powerful as they are plot-relevant, Arcadia even lives on Webcomic Time (presumably attention-based). It's not a stretch to imagine that outside of it people's choices are being influenced too, especially in the matters of faith.

*Yitzi*

I have a different theory about the Names: The whole “creation as a cosmic wager” deal reminds me a lot of Eddings’ Belgariad setting, where matters were likewise settled via choices and contests between agents of Light and agents of Dark.  
(This is why I find Cat’s position “on the fence” to be extremely interesting.)

*Mike E.*

Damn, the Calamities are very well-rehearsed working together to have what appears to be a library of contingency plans to be enacted with a simple set of codes. That was insane to read. The POV jumping took a few reads to figure out properly though.

*Letouriste*

Yeah, the professional feeling is really well made:)

*Gunslinger*

Holy shit this was epic. I’m a bit disappointed that the heroes all came out alive. Also wekesa was impressive as usual it’s black that really shined. Fucking hell he totally wrecked the white Knight.

*maresther23*

Captain fought two Named at the same time.

[Euodiachloris](#)

She dished out impressive pwnage. Using only one Aspect, and even resorting that one midway.  
To all intents and purposes, she may’s well have gone into that fight complaining of backache. 🤪

*stevenneiman*

In fairness, only one of them was a martial Name and she had to resort to a dangerous trump card to come out on top. Even so, that was awesome.

*Gunslinger*

Indeed, I guess my disappointment is the same one as Black. The general unfairness of the universe that gives heroes Trump cards.

*Letouriste*

In all the fight the heroes looked outmaneuvered, so much I expected them to all die...and then you reveal they all still have

trump cards:o

And how the hedge magi managed to flee the explosion without using an aspect?

Well,Thanks for the chapter anyway that was good:)

*Jonnnney*

She said she had a few things left that would defend against giant flaming snakes. I'd imagine those same defenses would work against an explosion.

*maresther23*

"The first step always works"

Tyrant first step: drill underground

Effect: breach Delos defenses

Black first step: kill the leaders of Delos

Effect: take the city out of the war

*Shequi*

So... does that initiate a Pattern of Three between Black and White, beginning with a Draw?

The knowledge of how many times a day a Named can call upon their Aspects clearly drives Black's tactics in Named combat.

[boballab](#)

"So... does that initiate a Pattern of Three between Black and White, beginning with a Draw?"

No, the Pattern of Three doesn't begin with a draw, it begins with a victory for the Villain and the Hero escapes with his life because the Villain monologues. Remember that is what happened to Cat, she beat William and then didn't kill him, letting him escape. Their second battle ended in a draw and the third ends in William's victory (That is why Cat let her head get chopped off).

*Morgenstern*

I rather doubt "let" is the correct impression here.

She prepared for the contingency all right, by preparing to be raised and use what she had coming instead of simply going down "doomed" as she was (or rather: seemed!). But it was the skill of Will that lopped it off, not the story, even if you take those "pattern of three" thingy for real (which I can't really do, because the count doesn't add up for me). Also her believing in that pattern and only preparing for defeat, not victory might have shifted things a bit (her going into a DUEL at all, while she know she's not as good as him...), as somebody else said quite a few chapters ago.



## *Morgenstern*

So, in a way, it was also Cat being stupid (plus Will simply being good at fighting)... I don't get why people keep seeing Cat as somehow being OP or too savvy or whatever, as long as she always has those repeatedly grinding-on-the-nerves lapses of good sense, turning events only by a hair's breadth via luck and hilarious-overplanning /-at-the-moment-last-ditches instead of being actually practical.

## *Solaire*

Well, Black is actually "won" over White but he let White go despite having "assured" of victory. This setting is quite similar to Cat's when she let the Lone Swordsman go when she can kill him too.

So there is actually a high possibility of the Pattern of Three happening unless there is some other reason to convince this is otherwise.

## [boballab](#)

The situations are not the same. The first meeting between Cat and William was single hero vs single villian. This is more similar to Cat and William's second encounter which was a draw: Group of villians vs a group of heros. Keep in mind in that draw a hero did die, so no this wasn't a Black "victory" over White.

## *NerfContessa*

Yep.

Other stories should look at exactly this chapter for epic yet intelligent forces fighting.

Nough said.

## *Solaire*

Either you have not worded it right, or you had simply confused the settings and what is necessary to logically win or lose. Also to note, even though Black and White are fighting in groups, Black vs White and fight each other individually during their battles. Also another note, during Cat's first win over the swordsman, they are not fighting alone too, there are other claimants involved in the battle too.

## [boballab](#)

You keep missing the obvious: the Black v White fight was planned and fought as nothing more than as a part of a group battle and again is in no way similar to the first Cat v

William fight. Black's whole fight was based on what the others in his group were doing against a group of hero's. Black even states at the end of the fight to Wekesa, there is actually no way for them to win at that point: "Yes," the other villain agreed darkly. "We have them cornered, with all their trump cards left. That is not a story that ends well for us."

If Black had not pulled out at that moment the villains would have been defeated, the best they could get is a Draw.

Now lets look at Cat's first fight with William. Cat wins the fight, William uses his Trump cards early and Cat was not part of a Named Villain team (She was looking for Rebels on her own Book 1 Chapter 11 Sucker Punch) and neither was William part of a Hero Band (He was forming a rebellion in the city), she was working alone and so was William. Hell it was her fight working with William that secured the Name Squire (Book 1 Chapter 12 Squire). As you may have noticed Black already has his name and him and White didn't fight on the same side. Also unlike the fight between Black and White, William was at Cat's mercy and she let him go by pushing him off the wall and into the river just as Black got there. Bottom line the first fight between William and Cat was nothing like the fight between the Calamities and Whites Hero Band.

Now lets look at Cat's second fight with William which was a Draw. Cat enters the fight with Hakram already earning his name (Adjutant) and Warlock and Apprentice already in the city. William had Thief, The Wandering Bard, The Bumbling Conjuror and Hunter (Book 2 Chapter 5 Recognition and Chapter 8 Reversal). The fight starts with 3 Named Villains against 4 Named Heros in Chapter 8 (Warlock isn't in at the beginning). Now here is one of the few differences between the fight we see between the Calamities/White's Band and Cat/William round two: The Hero's attacked the Villains in Cat/William round two and it is the opposite with Black/White and that matters since the attacker in both cases had to retreat and get a Draw or they would have lost. The second difference it that in Cat/William the Hero's stayed too long monologuing and Warlock appeared (a trump over what William was doing) and killed the Bumbling Conjuror forcing the Hero's to run for it and leaving a wounded Hunter to be captured (Spent Hero's/Fresh Calamity). In the Black/White group fight no one died on either side because Black recognized that if they stayed a Hero would use a trump to kill one of them and or get them captured so he wisely didn't banter and retreated. Black didn't make William's mistake from Book 2 Chapter 10 Release that you have been wanting him to make.

*stevenneiman*

I think it might actually have been a loss for Black against Kairos. He was the one on whose account everything actually happened since he gave Black the setup and then forced him back by retreating.

I really do wonder what his game plan is, since his whole backstory of rejecting tradition seems to speak against him blindly following Evil's agenda the way his nephew followed Good's, but at the same time he's spoken out against Malicia's attempts to break the wheel and he acts deliberately cliché.

*KageLupus*

The Heroic Axiom at the top of this chapter reinforces something I have been thinking for awhile now: The side of Good is chock full of people who hardly count as such at all. The axiom is saying "Be nice to the villain's caged monster, because it will be useful to you if you do so". Not because that monster is imprisoned, or wasn't given a choice, or any other reason you would expect from a Good person. Instead, it just says to be nice because it will be useful. That kind of pragmatism falls into the same grey area that some Villains operate in.

William was a perfect example of this. He was labeled as an Anti-hero for doing things like torturing prisoners just to leave a message. Not for information, not because it was a distasteful thing that had to be done to save the day. He wanted to demoralize and terrorize his enemy and was willing to cross any line to do so. That is the textbook definition of a terrorist. But because he was given a mandate by Heaven he was considered a Hero, regardless of how he acted.

Basically, it feels like everyone in this setting looks at someone like the current Tyrant of Helike and says "That is what a Villain is, and look at how Evil he is. All Villains must be the same." So Catherine gets lumped in to the same bucket as these crazy Villains, even though all she wants is to make things better for her country. She was just as willing to go to war over it as William, but because of which side she started on reality as a whole puts her at a disadvantage.

*Morgenstern*

Heroic Axiom: I guess more people are also wondering about how "the beast" perfectly fits our formerly "Cursed" and the one treating "it" nicely being Black? Someone seems to have read that book and taken it to heart. 😊

(As far as the backstory that we so far saw is concerned, btw, I can't shake a lingering "smell" of "Peasants Out For Revenge/Retribution" plot, anyway, them taking on any Roles/Names that they can get their hands on... doesn't necessarily always end in

a path down the slope. "You're the one who named me evil before I ever did any villainous deed, don't wonder if..." and so on and so forth. "Them" including quite a lot of people, of course, in a world where "Fate" tries to put people in templates that don't quite fit much of any actual person. Stereotypes and labels almost always fall short.)

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Congrats, KL, you have discovered one of the central themes of the story!

*Morgenstern*

" The heroes that had founded their nation had been rebels fighting the Proceran occupation "

So... one can get Heroes cropping up \*against Good\*? I mean, we knew already that Good nations will fight against each other, too, but I never quite saw Heroes involved or even cropping up from that. So Heroes against Heroes should also be a thing, too, not just Villain against Villain; basically "anything goes"? Interesting.

*stevenneiman*

This reminds me of a thought about a setting I'm designing for GURPS.

"When our noble allies of other races fight against the encroaching darkness, that's glorious. But when our petty backwater tyrant makes a land grab against them, that's also glorious."

*jonnnney*

It has been mentioned by Black that one of the great powers of the world is lead by both a hero and a villain, so yeah anything goes. Good fighting good is how the original Kingdom of Callow came into existence. The Queen of Blades conquering the Duchy of Daoine.

*Morgenstern*

Captain's stud being visible: BAAAAAD mistake. (No, I haven't read the full chapter yet, but no matter if in this one or some chapters following... the instant-communication having been seen is gonna hurt at one time or another. Might even get \*influenced/twisted\* instead of just being shut down. Ouch. Very ouchy.)

*Morgenstern*

update: Seems this will be upcoming. Or the Heroes seriously did not notice and Bard was not there, which would be rather hilarious. But somehow I can't see that not getting used

somewhen and ending in Shit Hits The Fan and only scraping by and getting out by hair's breadth, probably even one of them dying because of it.

### [erraticerrata](#)

You're assuming, of course, that the stud is the actual anchor for the scrying spell.

#### *Morgenstern*

I wouldn't necessarily call it an "anchor", but at the very least a kind of "inlet" to meddle. Unless that is just another nice trap like the ones prepared for the Wizard in this chapter, of course \*g

#### *Morgenstern*

Maybe it's because the thing is so very reminiscent of those tiny in-ears people apply in the real world and I have read too many stories using such real-stuff-into-fantasy-conversions \*shrugs

#### *Morgenstern*

Many other systems, of course, do not need any actual material for telepathy \*shrugs\*  
It was just the first thing instantly coming to mind. Maybe that's what it's aimed at – more's the fun then for us, when the Heroes should have the same instinct. 😊

#### *Morgenstern*

Warning: Massive post incoming.

I'm (obviously) not really good at "cutting it short". Far from it.  
So, I did the CONSCIOUS thinking this time, because it bugged me, especially since you yourself reacted to it... thus: clarification incoming. (That is, I HOPE I do not muddle it even worse, but I don't think so.)

#### *Morgenstern*

Okay, so I thought it more or less through, far as I got, consciously this time, seeing as you already "jumped on that" and "I still don't quite get it". "it" meaning magic in the Guideverse in more general thinking, too, I guess (or so I feel). 😊

– First and instantly arising question:  
What is the actual definition of an "anchor" (in magic) for the Guideverse?

Just anything in terms of physical material to be in specific places one needs for some spells to work? Some integral part of the spell/ritual? (Like Apprentice needing the hearths for the warding spell.)

[With the exclusion of physical materials = ingredients used up by the ritual, of course. It obviously has to be sth. that has to \*stay (inviolable)\* on the spot or the spell would, seemingly, break (or worse).]

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– \*\* [1] Scrying, the out-of-story considerations to my while-reading-reaction : \*\*

Usually denoted as sth. to actually SEE in(to) other places; spell massiveness defined by 1) how far you scry, 2) the quality of scrying (including other senses as another quality thing possible to add) [as the basic things] and 3) security of scrying, 4) tricks of the trade: what materials, formulae etc. to use to make it safer / less costly [as the additional / optional ones]; and all of that WITHOUT an anchor at the place you want to scry, just using a bowl of water as the most common basic “ingredient” almost everyone knows as a device for scrying from some story. Most stories I know never ever use any anchor for scrying (least of all in the place you want to scry, if anything you have to have been to that place before or know someone there that you scry), although they might use wards to prevent others from scrying back or doing other stuff through your connection (if they detect it, which is always a possibility).

Not sure, if / how / to which extent this “usual definition (by other stories)” applies in/to the Guideverse, seeing how you answered that I am assuming an anchor for \*scrying\* when I was talking about my first (unconscious) impression). [Some more thoughts on “anchors” in that respect below.]

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I can now say, after consciously thinking about it, what (in)formed that \*first impression\* (without actual thought, just as direct reaction during reading) that cropped up from that – which was actually NOT one of \*scrying\* (as in the “usual” definition I know) \*at all\* [ = thus my confusion and still-confused re-comment when you started talking about \*scrying\* as answer to my comment ] :

1) seeing how the Calamities all TALK to give info to Wekesa what to do where  
2) seeing the stud on person (while the other two have sth. to prevent seeing a possible other stud on them, unless I was mistaking Wekesa having long hair over his ears and Black wearing a helmet) [more on that below] = in combination with fact 1)

= adding up to instant reminiscence of those in-ears that professionals in OUR "real" world use 😊 [too many movies? ^^]

Seeing how you answered, that was probably simply a massive mix-up my brain did by connecting two inherently unconnected tidbits of this chapter. \*shrugs\* It does that sometimes, latching on to wrong things and creating confusion. 😊  
(Sidenote: Isn't that what makes for use for surprises by authors all or at least most of the time, if hints are strewn in at all = i.e. when not just relying on readers simply \*not knowing\*? ^^ The mistaking-/confusing-things I mean.)

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\*\*\* Further thoughts due to that : \*\*\*

– \*\* [2] If Warlock SAW it all (\*)– why the hell would he need any talk by them \*at all\*? \*\*

( (\*) = that's what scrying implies to me (as the first most basic thing you ALWAYS get when scrying, even with the most basic version of the spell) – is it, though, in the Guideverse??

It \*did\* SEEM to be all about seeing as the first thing judging from the first two books, and then potentially hearing/talking/listening in as the second, but the seeing being there \*all the time\* as the underlying concept you cannot remove. = If there is no seeing, it is no scrying, but sth. else.)

Secondary notion: Might be because he's not meant to instantly do stuff on his own when he sees fit and informing them, but only acting on requests?

That might fit with actual scrying-as-I-know-it (see term definitions above), i guess.

I still don't \*quite\* see why they would need those numbers for \*that\*, hmm....

> Third/Fourth notion:

– Might just be meant to be confusing to enemies... (doesn't "feel" quite right on first look, though, but that might be intended.) Potential hint for that: Some place in the back of my brain seemd to register that some number cropped up at least twice, which just might not make sense at all, that is: if thinking of actual specific mini-regions of the city, denoted before-hand [sorry lacking the correct word/term for that right now... like when you make many parallel and diagonal lines over the map to get tiny spaces?].

– UNLESS, of course, we are speaking about / thinking of simply using clock-numbers meant to designate the direction around the person speaking = no confusion there, totally makes sense.

[back to professionals' method, with a slight twist of not using assumed in-ears for \*talking only\* ^^ – although i AM wondering then, if there are any actual clocks like we have (they use some other counting for time in the legions at least) and/or how many numbers are on \*those\* then... or anything else that would serve as idea-giver for that notio. unless you simply denote directions and the start for that at random, starting a normal count from 1 (up to whatever, depending on how many you can think of) at this random starting position.. it just might be sth. intuitive (minus what you choose as starting position), i guess. what's directly in front of you for the start maybe? behind, left and right are rather normal directions on top, fine calibration in between those usual directions being the problem.]

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Sidenote -Telepathy:

Misapplied term by me, wrongly coming up in the first confusion due to your coment, when I was scrambling for a term to show I was NOT thinking of scrying at all, sorry. Would have meant the same problem/question(s) cropping up.

I was \*thinking\* of that D&D spell (also used in many other RPGs/stories, far as I know) that lets you TALK (not \*think\*) to each other over such-and-such a distance "as if you were standing right next to each other" (so even possible to only whisper). Cannot currently for the life of me remember the name/term for \*that\* thing. =/

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– \*\* [3] Scrying in general: \*\*

I was, so far, obviously actually of the unconscious impression that scrying did NOT always need magical "anchors", but that such anchors were used to further safeguard the scrying to make it a two-spots-only-connection as far as possible (so that only people at the two spots connected by the "anchors" (e.g. the mirrors used in one example) can see/listen in). Far as I can relate back, if that is a mis(in)formed impression it cropped up due to the scrying on the battlefield of Marchford where there was a room full of the "usual"-seeming bowls of water with a spell on them known from other stories that \*simply let you look at something\* (probably even without hearing yet?) WITHOUT any anchors needed at the spot to which the image in the water connects. If the mages had to implement anchors in those spots, it either was simply not mentioned (probably in the assumption that we all knew about that by then) or I simply missed it.



> Problem arising if anchors are needed for the most basic version of that: What happens if those anchors are found?

Simply remove such an anchor, influence it, use it... ??  
(Are we to assume that there are almost always heavy wards against that? Spells to hide them, that do not themselves crop up on "magical vision" (which would, obviously, defeat the purpose..)?)

– Secondary thoughts to that:

> Shouldn't such anchors BE (normally) find-able by beings who are supposed to be magical ones, potentially able to somehow "sense" magic or be "visual" in their version of seeing, like mages can usually switch their sight to "magical sight" at will in other works? I.e. the anchors being a) magically active and b) part of the ritual/spell?

[where b) brings up the idea for there probably being some way to influence/use this.]

[ For an on the spot notion: I am thinking of at least that one demon as one thing coming to mind. Why did it not notice and attack those anchors, if there WERE anchors, \*had to be\* by that understanding? Hindered by being in that horse and then "not of import" anymore anyhow? Trying to stay in hiding and not risking being exposed too soon by knocking a few things over as a panicky horse might? There might have been other occasions as well, I'd have to go back first, though, to check. ]

> Or is that simply \*not possible\* in the Guideverse??  
Or at least "not easily", "not by just anyone", but only the VERY highest order of magic(al) users/beings?

= If anchors are absolutely necessary (things on the spot you want to scry) and cannot be more or less easily detected on top, that would be a deviation from what I know of magic in all the other stories ( = thus assume "as the usual" as long as stuff is not pointed out as being different in the Guideverse, either explicitly or by example) and thus probably a case of "you wanna point that out somehow" (in-work or out-of-work) for the reader.

Unless I read all the "wrong" stories (for that), of course.



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– \*\* [4] Captain's stud, other possibilities cropping up as instant ideas: \*\*

– Might just be some personal item (maybe a gift from her husband? or some memory thingy from her past, who knows).

(Which would, thinking of sympathetic magic (what I know of/ as such... if that can be applied to the Guideverse at all), of course still mean it can be used against HER, in the worst version even to control her, if ever acquired by some of their/her enemies.)

– Could be related to her control over “the beast/rage”. Though I personally would rather doubt that, even more so after that story of her defeating a god (lower case) to drag away its knowledge of how to use the rage instead of one’s consciousness being eviscerated by rage’s rampage. Would already doubt it by Black seemingly being able to wake her out of it even before that – although that simply might be something else. No other people so far seemed to be able to do that, after all, in that chapter of her going on rampage.

– – – – –

– Keeping in mind my seemingly-DIFFERENT understanding of “scrying” beforehand, me thinking of an entirely different spell, in my first version (direct reaction while reading) I was not thinking of what I understand a magical “anchor” is, but rather some kind of “enhancer” / “securing ward” to the connection, even more so as an afterthought when thinking about what it could mean if the spell base were scrying and not something else.

I guess my first impression-connection of action-movie “in-ears” just might equal an anchor, though? Not sure... The mind-jump between magical anchor and device for listening is not really easy for me to make, somehow. To me, it feels more like such a device in a magical world would be some far-flung extension of the original spell, NOT a direct part of the spell itself – but still something that one can use. (#)

\* Anyway, what I was thinking of back then was more along the lines of the following (assuming it was some more removed device, not an anchor (as far as I understand the term “anchor”)) : \*

Especially to simply listen in, of course, assuming someone would take over the post of “observer and tactical director” on the other side, of course. But I was more thinking of tampering with the device to try to turn it into listening in even when they are not consciously using that device to convey anything or use it as sympathetic-link for actually scrying on them or something. Simply listening in and trying to act on it, if you understand the code, is, of course, already doable in a mundane fashion by their opponents as they TALK. Obviously more or less LOUDLY so.

The most extensive usage in that thought, of course, still being tampering with the original spell/ritual via following the link back to its source and potentially modifying it

(very, very hard, difficult, time- and energy-consuming, though, I'd have said, but someone just might have what it takes and be perseverant enough),

– e.g. as one basic thought: adding in own, wrong orders that seem to come from one of the people linked that way..

(one might avoid all the hassle of meddling with the spell/ritual at all, if one could get one's hands on the original device directly, was one of my basic ideas, if one has what is needed to POSE as the other person to use it (if a more basic thing: simple voice mimicking should do..); but the same might be done magic-wise, I guess, if one has the juice, knowledge, and experience for it, but why the hassle..)

– OR at least (#) stopping it from working; maybe shielding specific people or regions from being reached that way.

(#) Could likely simply destroy the device for that effect, of course ( = being my very first thought for how to abuse such a device), if you can reach it manually or target it with a destructive spell. Which should already cause some havoc, if someone is suddenly taking out of the connection and thus cut off from the command center, kind of.

### *Morgenstern*

... and I definitely have to go back to Book I, for the very first scrying scene when Cat got an introduction. ^^

I do remember it as being some heavy-duty-scrying bc. of who was talking (and probably in which situation), and sure, that felt like there were "anchors" (or rather wards??) there, but I don't remember it conveying that such had to be there \*all the time\*, not only for two-way-"holo"-talk-"as if there in person"-with-heavy-security. (#)

Guess I have to revisit the other scrying scenes, too, because they mostly seemed rather different. The pools in the first scene with Black seemed like just another (bigger) way of the mirrors Heiress used – thought it was different from normal, more basic scrying. But after much and much thought something about "the same material" and tiny stones is scraping at the back of my mind... Might be one of those "repeat, repeat, repeat" things, because it's such a long time in between plus going against "the normal"? My memory is not perfect, either, though I do seem to tend to memorize more than other people (or simply other things, who knows...). I guess it's also different if it's your own story versus someone else's. My players on my gaming table \*always\* remember less than I do – but, then again, I have the whole background, they do not; I know what to focus on, what's really important and what is just diversion – they don't. I guess there is some similarity here to players at a gaming

table in that respect when only reading a book, especially if stretched out over a long time (I have never read much web serials so far, this is more or less my first, at least the first I actually kept on reading and didn't drop because of the waits), so that might be just what is happening to me here, right now.

( (#) The latter might fit this here situation, though, come to think of it.

Simply didn't think of that before, though; as I said, I didn't think about it being scrying at all, but just Warlock having made gimmicks so that the others can speak to him and he doesn't need the upkeep of yet another spell (no 2-way-speaking and only speaking, not seeing for those gimmicks), potentially at a price for the lower cost (e.g. security measures, like, I thought so far, scrying in a more basic version; maybe I just got scrying horribly wrong there, clinging to the old known definition that refuses to be thrown out ^^).)

*Morgenstern*

" Unlike the first one they'd been hit with, this one had been designed to weather a beating instead of being hard to modify. Small favours. No doubt the Warlock already knew she was there, so her window would be very, very small. Huh, this was actually massively strong. She could have unloaded her entire arsenal at this and barely scratched it. Were the villains under the impression she was a slugger kind of mage? "

Yeah, I guess their intelligence service wouldn't be so very bad to not even know her Name that she has been openly addressed with. Hedge wizards are not known for being Archmages, after all. Nice trap, so very inviting to its intended victim. 😊 I'm celebrating this chapter so much right now ^^

*Morgenstern*

" There's five Calamities," Aoede said. "You've met three. One's retired. "

Huh. And people think Villains/Heroes never (much) get to retire, huh?

[erraticerrata](#)

Ranger retiring as a Calamity doesn't mean she gave up her Name.

*Morgenstern*

Huh? Ah. You're talking Name-wise.

I wasn't really thinking of that, here. More of "retiring" (switching ... "jobs"? life-choices etc.) in a more general sense. Yeah, she obviously did not give up her Name. But it would seem to be ever more in evidence that one can switch roles, and probably then even Roles?

*Morgenstern*

Seeing how Ranger never gave up hunting... that role/Role speculation, too, might simply be a misassociation because of one word, of course. \*shrugs

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Anyway, aren't the speculations half of the fun? 😊 I like how you don't spell things out too openly and mostly avoid direct statements affirming or outright denying anything. 😊

Personally like all of that stuff: surprises because something is incoming that I never anticipated as well as being able to go back and find hints afterwards and also my suspicions being confirmed as true. The best is always a good mix of the three. =)

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General disclaimer:

What I do in my comments (besides typo spotting, if the mood strikes me for those) is just some observations and a lot of speculation, simply because I cannot help the thought machinery going ticking on some stuff, even if it's occasionally just some puns incoming 😊

[ My rambling during the last few chapters' comment sections is also just one of "likelihoods" at most and trying to make general comparisons to other stories and stuff I saw go down; I always try to keep an open mind, personally – just because I don't think something likely (even if as in "not likely to persuade me") doesn't mean I don't like the occasional (positive) surprise of someone pulling it off anyway. Only that I'm a sceptic about some things (which still includes a potential of "curious how you would pull that off (potentially including: without xy)").

So in case of author reading in: Take it with a grain of salt, in case you should be reading those, too. I'm more talking to/with other readers (and occasionally even just rambling on on my own to get that whirlwind in my head to slow down a bit (oops)).. in some cases I might simply be procrastinating/relaxing from other stuff by occupying my mind with, well, other stuff than that stuff ^^ > If I shouldn't... just say so. I can always just do it with wordpad in my PC and never post it anywhere..

But it's always nice to get the occasional tidbit/hint (or even diversion ^^) out of the author, of course, just because ^^ Gives me the feeling you care about us, which is heartwarming. =) ]

*stevenneiman*

You can retire, it just needs to be a spur-of-the-moment decision, because you have no chance of surviving if you're one day away from retirement.

*Barthumphries*

Haven't read all the comments yet, but a Ctrl+F didn't find "typo" so...

Typo thread

there was no one should could trust  
add "she" after "one"

to the cost of many, many lives  
change many to many

shortly afterwards fell the pressure over his shoulders vanish  
change fell to felt

*somnolentSlumber*

She'd gone in there to blow the runic array powering the drill while he held the line, and one again gotten off essentially untouched.

"one" should be "once"

Her teachers had always taught that that a Gifted faced with a ward could only do three things: break, modify or alleviate.

Every colon used before and after this one should be a semicolon. This single instance is correct.

*stevenneiman*

"He'd not needed to tap into any of his [aspects->Aspects] to turn back the breach"

"and [one->once] again gotten off essentially untouched"

"and shortly afterwards [fell->felt] the pressure over his shoulders vanish"

"She managed to get the second [on->one] in place before beginning to fall"

*WealthyAardvark*

The Secretariat was an institution made my men  
-> by men

### Stephen R. Marsh

Interesting that both the Tyrant and the other army both betrayed them and left them in the lurch when they could have pressed forward and won.

#### *Morgenstern*

Well, Oldschool Evil wants the reputation for themselves, no?

It would also have ruined his “see you later some other time” (or sth. the like), that only works as trope move, if you actually DO leave, not stay and get back into the fray immediately (those chapters seem to be supposed to very much right after one another (#), if the heroes are “in somewhat bad shape already” because of the last move against Tyrant), if he wants to set himself up for a Win over those same heroes and not just losing because of “over-staying” and losing due to “perfectly good win chances”.

( = Probably even the same thing Black saw and thus called the retreat, only Tyrant made his move earlier; Tyrant might even have been at a viewpoint where he could better overlook how the battle was going, if you credit him with enough intelligence to see the same thing coming – not being in the middle of the fray enabling him to simply see this a few moments earlier than Black who was right in the fray).

The other Villains might just say them more as rivals. And Tyrant might just even label them under “those shitty people with so-called empathy”, because they are restrained/practical evil, which also calls for going against them.

Tops, “Villains will always stab Villains in the back, even during fights with Good/Heroes” was recounted in-story as THE ultimate trope for (Oldschool) Evil, for explaining why the heck they always lose. They keep NOT closing ranks during major fights with Good (who seem to \*always\* close ranks, as soon as Evil gets involved and it isn’t just “bickering” (wars) between Good nations for national reasons, territory/power...).

---

(#) = On a sidenote:

Which sadly makes for shitty pacing (at first impression / during the first seven chapters), btw, because Cat’s story seems to be months, while these interludes happen in mere days, **\*\*it would seem\*\***.

I am quite sure, after this chapter as the utmost stone in the board for that (what with the Calamities' preparations obviously having taken place behind the screen) that there was one big months-long gap between the Tyrant killing diplomats, preparing to attack other cities, and then the flying fortresses plus this one. Problem being that the hints for that are somehow too obscured in the first few interludes, or so I feel. I had to reason out-of-story that it must be so, but the lack of a tiny bit more info during story made itself felt as nuisance factor while reading, because it shunted me out of the story.

*Morgenstern*

Gack... -.-

" The other Villains might just say them more as rivals. " >  
"say" = "see", of course..

*ben*

Great chapter! The fighting was excellent, but just as much I loved how there were also lore drops all continuing from the words of Heiress at the end of last chapter "it's not about the Names, it's about the Roles."

Like, Black and Wekesa discussing whether something is winnable based on aspect usage, and Aoede pretty much outing herself as The Most Important Hero on the side of good. Because of how she Tells things, including The Story, I feel like defeating her is the ultimate end game if the Calamities and the Empress want to change the story permanently. I hope they and/or Squire manages it because that's going to be impressive to watch.

[blitzbasic](#)

"You're a monster, aren't you?" I spoke softly into the night, looking at him from the corner of my eye.

He smiled. "The very worst kind," he replied.

Thank you for reminding us who the bad guys in this story are.

*Morgenstern*

He. I like how that comment can still be turned both ways. \*g

Sad pun: Can't shake the immediate real-world feeling of how simple humans can be the worst kinds of monster..

*Morgenstern*

Gotta say that whole discussion about war, the "action(s)" that we love in stories, and how did what and what is more



horrible, was turning rather “real world” rather quickly. Which, if I’m honest, doesn’t feel like such a good thing. It’s not that we would want such things in real life, now would we...

Somehow I don’t wanna read stories that way. “Action”, war, killing etc. are all interesting in stories, imho, because we KNOW that they are only “in story” and \*because\* we do not have those things around us right now and \*because\* the people portrayed as “fatalities” or even “collaterals” are .. well. Not real people. Including not rounding them up to be real people. It would never serve for escapism otherwise. =/

*Morgenstern*

It’s enough if such thoughts crop up in the back of my head during reading. I really don’t \*have to\* have them come out outright in discussions on top of that and ruining the fun feeling of the story. Guess I’ll stay off the comment section for the next few chapters, this is turning to serious for my taste at the moment; can’t stomach this more than once in a while. It’s not as if we didn’t have actual war looming on the horizon in the real world... I really don’t need the turn into over-dark and bitter in stories on top of that all the while. Sometimes is okay. But not every turn when hilarious (seemingly? made to look-)unrealistic action sequences happen. I thought they were meant to be entertaining and given you some shiver, but an ultimately \*pleasurable\* one...

*Morgenstern*

Ehrm... ” and how did what and what is more horrible” -- “how” should have been “who” dammit.

*Morgenstern*

... and “given” was meant to be “giving” argh.

*stevenneiman*

Uh, the guy who’s literally using the exact same logic as the nazis tried at the Nuremburg trials to justify his penchant for killing?

*Morgenstern*

“Just following orders”?

The White Knight then? Or Captain? They obviously both do.. 😊  
She even has it as an Aspect... \*g

*blitzbasic*

Following orders is not a bad thing if the people that give the orders are good. The White Knight doesn't follow orders to escape the responsibility of his actions, he does it because he doesn't trust his own judgement to be just.

*Morgenstern*

Because it cropped up so very much this time (and I ended up clicking on the TV tropes link about this series):

Does someone wanna give those following two a shot for application-discussion?

<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/LovableRogue?from=Main.LoveableRogue>

<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/JustifiedCriminal>

(I will not be reading this for quite a few days, taking a real-world-break from this, but I assuredly WILL come back for answers when I'm in the mood again; I am very much interested in opinions to see what the variety of perception is here, as I think we do have a rather large variety, judging from the discussion this chapter.)

*Tofuuu*

Great chapter! I've been binge reading this because it's so good. I think i'll be rereading this. Also just a suggestion, could we get like a page for all the quotes? It's hard to remember which chapter to look for them. Not just the start of the chapter quotes some lines are really well delivered too! it sends shivers up my spine I'd be happy with a page dedicated for them.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Geez, at first I was intimidated seeing there are already 100+ comments on today's chapter, but it turns out most of them are from the evil banker Morgenstern.

I was expecting Warlock to die this battle, I thought Akua doomed him when she called him out last interlude.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Maybe she would have. Except, she's a little wrong. The guy is highly creative in an area traditional for Warlocks: cheesing the opposition using remote spell-constructs built around nested trolling.

Seriously, that was some epic-level, dangerously arcane Heath Robinsonism he had going on there. Sheer artistry. 😊

*jonnnney*

Akua effectively stole his role in the Empire of Praes. Specifically the creator of evil wonders. I think she was successful because Warlock doesn't seek to destroy the good half of creation. Rather he seeks to understand, manipulate and then break all of creation. I think the Apprentice said it best in Chapter 37:

"Fuck the Gods," he said, calmly. "Every single one of them. I can respect what you and Uncle Amadeus are trying to accomplish, I really can – but you're looking at the other prisoners, when you should be looking at the bars."

I think this is the main thing that Diabolist fails to realize. Most Villains are champions of the Gods Below in a war against half of creation. The Calamities and their successors aren't just being evil in a different way. They are fighting to change the base concepts/assumptions of the war and by doing so they are challenging all of creation, not just the good. This empowers them to achieve what few other villains have accomplished, but it leaves the traditional Praes roles open for others.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Appellant (n), law: a person who applies to a higher court for a reversal of the decision of a lower court.

I thought that was pretty unsubtle, but I'm not actually sure how it applies to the chapter.

*Nafram*

Well, is it just me, or did Black just set up a Pattern of 3 in his favour?

Considering that the Calamities went there with the express purpose of killing the heroes, which they completely failed, revealed themselves and some of their capabilities, failed to take the city as a secondary objective AND we're back stabbed by their allies, not to mention that they lost the element of surprise and failed to ensure that Delos left the war, with Black even outright saying that it was impossible to win that?

In short, the Calamities, while impressive and shown to be superior to the Hanging of Heroes they faced, failed to accomplish any of their objectives and lost key advantages, while the Heroes successfully repelled the surprise attack without any Hero casualty nor any permanent wounds and now aware that the Calamities are there and that they assassinated some key members of the Secretariat.

Clearly, this was a loss for the Calamities

*Solaire*

Now that you have said it, I am actually disappointed that how impressed everyone were at the Calamities despite their obvious unsuccessful attempts.

*nobodi12*

what was that thing about the coin? The one in White Knight hand?

*Cap'n Smurfy*

He uses it to judge people Two-face style. See his previous interlude for details.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Here's a fundamental question I'd really love to see answered. In the Guide Prologue, the two Factions of the Divine later identified with "Good" and "Evil" respectively are spoken of in equal terms. It states all out conflict between them would have wiped out Creation. Then goes on to state both sides willingness to engage in the Wager thought of as "Fate."

We fast-forward a bit, and certain grooves get carved into Creation through the repetition of these patterns. From these recurrent pattern/grooves, we get Names/Roles.

So, how did we start from a point of relative equality between Good and Evil, and then end up where Good gets all the OP-reality cheats. All the narrative-defying miracles, and assists from the upper echelons of their pantheon?

From the way Black and Malicia burn to create an example to the Heroes of a time when being Good JUST WASN'T ENOUGH, we're given as the audience to understand that if it hasn't always been this way, it's been this way for so long that even accessible scholastic resources don't tell of a time when the metaphysical shoe was on the other foot.

Why does Good default to the more powerful position? To keep with theme, one would expect for every Angel who interferes to create a Hero, an Arch-Devil would be doing the same with Villains. Did the Gods Below almost immediately decide they didn't care if Good swallowed Creation?

I mean the One Choice that Matters itself can get heavily skewed. Many people with the will and the inherent personal moral ambiguity to go either Hero or Villain could easily be swayed to the side of Good not because they believe in Good, but because Good clearly has more and more consistent advantages to hand its followers.

I adore the Guide. I'm Team New Evil all the way. Yet a lot of times when I look at the story and think of a Yin/Yang symbol,

visually it feels like instead of being equal spirals, in the Guide the White Spiral would be 66.6% of the material, and the Black Spiral the remaining 33.333%

I don't get why Good gets to alter reality willy nilly. (Now they're packing hundreds of Doctor Who-like incarnations in the White Knight's head to make up for the disparity in skill, talent and experience.)

If, every time Evil pulls itself up a rung with huge effort, by dint of special individuals of enormous commitment and will. Good gets to pack hundreds of unearned lifetimes of experience into a White Knight who is the quintessential Villain and just doesn't know it. How does the Wager ever resolve in anything but lasting victory for Good...eventually?

I mean I could understand if there'd been an epoch sometime thousands of years prior, where for centuries Good got the short stick from reality. It'd be cyclical. Symmetrical even.

Either way, it won't dampen my love for the Guide. Adored this last chapter. Just something that's been gnawing at me a long while.

*Barthumphries*

Because most people don't like tragic stories. By and large, they don't sell. So any story worth telling basically has to allow good to win, in some way.

"So, how did we start from a point of relative equality between Good and Evil, and then end up where Good gets all the OP-reality cheats."

Because otherwise Evil wouldn't deserve to win.

*nick012000*

Because the Evil gods were about people being free to follow their own path, while the Good gods were about people following their will. It then logically follows that the followers of Good are then subject to much more interference and receive much more support than the followers of Evil – if the Evil gods interfered like that, they'd be undermining their own positions.

*Solaire*

@Shawn Panzegraf

Damn, now that you said it, it almost made good in general seems like the old school evil where "the wonders of evil" still exist. This almost made me thought that Black is planning

to do something like that, by turning good to seem like something evil.

### *Phantom Renegade*

Keep in mind everything I'm about to say comes from a feeling that I can't quite put to rational argument.

I feel there is a balance but it's an asymmetric one. Consider Praes in all its previous iterations, a Dread Emperor(ess) rises to power, creates a evil wonder, no doubt draining the empire of many of its resources, uses it to get some early victories and then inevitably gets turned back by the forces of Good or backstabbed or something like that.

How did Praes not get itself completely eradicated by the forces of Good when it's always putting itself in a vulnerable position?

There must be some dynamic of characteristics between Good and Evil that allows this ebb and flow to continue unimpeded, it might be that on average Villains are more competent than Heroes and so heroes need the divine intervention to even things out, in fact Villains Wonders might themselves be the counterpoint to the Heroes' divine intervention.

It might also be that Evil is more inherently alluring than Good thus ensuring that Evil's ranks are replenished faster and would kind of be in theme with there being an endless number of devils and demons but a fixed number of angels.

Also considering your argument of:

"Many people with the will and the inherent personal moral ambiguity to go either Hero or Villain could easily be swayed to the side of Good not because they believe in Good, but because Good clearly has more and more consistent advantages to hand its followers."

It might be that in the Tropes being enforced by creation a person who decides to go to the side of Good not because they believe it is the right thing but rather because it afforded him or her more advantages would actually be pushed into the side of Evil.

Either way it might simply be that the balance feels skewed because we are reading from the PoV of Villains when they are in a high point and thus constantly at risk of being overthrown by Good. It'd probably feel the other way around if we were reading from the PoV of a Hero claimant who kept surviving by the skin of its teeth in Praes occupied Callow, dodging plots deadly plots from the Calamities and Scribe that keep popping up left and right.

*BarthHumphries*

Because Good always quits early.

Think of every heroic movie you've seen or book that you've read. The evil kingdom has risen up, and Good goes and cuts off the head of the snake (sometimes literally, sometimes metaphorically). Then they rejoice and go home, able to live their lives in peace. Only that doesn't really eradicate the evil kingdom. And it may be more of a detente than a peace.

For instance, take Russia and the USA after WW2. Even after the wall fell, and we became good friends, is there anyone who doubts that Putin would invade the US in a heartbeat if he thought he could get away with it? No, of course not. Well, maybe Trump, but I digress.

*Kylen*

I personally enjoyed this chapter silly for showing a MUCH higher level of power and skill than we're used to seeing. It shows you the playing field BK and associates are playing on, which is leagues from Kat and Co.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

I get that the Gods Below were about mortals choosing their own direction, as opposed to those Above believing mortals "needed to be lead to greater things."

That said, the Gods Below making firepower available to Villains those chose to seek it wouldn't at all undermine their position IMHO. If the Villain(s) made the choice without any interference from the Gods Below to seek and gain power from them, that Villain would still be acting as a free moral agent (What they espoused in the beginning.)

As for the PoV being different if we were watching a Hero narrowly survive in Evil-dominant Callow, the parallel doesn't work. ALL Heroes are given strength, talents and resources that handily trump their Villainous counterparts.

Likewise for the argument that Evil may be Quantitative while Good is Qualitative: If such were the case individual choice would be largely irrelevant. It wouldn't have taken this long for mortals to catch on that the Heavens are always going to cheat while the Hells lie largely quiescent.

I'm totally for Good having its own advantages, but this "Creation itself is out to get all Villains" takes it a bit far IMHO. Again, it's like the Gods Below are utterly indifferent to their own cause. Could also understand if they didn't lend support in anything like the same ways, but did lend it.

At one point Good and Evil were only deterred from direct conflict by the certain knowledge total destruction would result. So now we have the following situation:

Good and Evil each choose one chess player of amateur skill. Good puts an earpiece in their player's ear, allowing a concealed chess grandmaster to coach the amateur playing for Good. Evil sees this, but Its response is to allow the game to continue as-is, good-cheating included.

I guess what I'm ultimately saying is this: DESPITE his hundreds of Time Chamber-granted incarnations, the White Knight was still losing out, so great was the skill disparity. STILL the world-narrative saves him. Cheat Mode+ wasn't enough, but Good pulls it out anyways.

How does that say anything meaningful about the choices made by Hanno, Champion, Hedge Mage and Ashen Priestess? With everything handed to them, plus genre-savviness supplying them with outs regularly, where's the downside in their Roles? It's less Heroes V. Villains and more Villains Vs. A Creation Hostile to Them, with Heroes nothing more than the equivalents of white blood cells.

It makes it that much harder to feel like the Villainous achievements matter, when its clear there is absolutely no upper limit as to what the Heavens will endow their tools with the continue enforcement of the status quo.

If it's about the narrative in a meta-sense, the world would be inherently Evil-slanted. Look at Cordelia (First Prince of Procer) own situation. Even after she proved the Pravis Bank was of Praesi origin, her peers kept going to it for gold to continue the civil war.

*alegio*

Daaaaaaaaaamn dude! With this I am now scared of the calamities, not because of their powers but that sheer efficiency with which they fought the heroes. Blacks fighting style is the most ruthless thing I have ever seen, the white knight said so himself, he was stronger but black was using his name in a more efficient way.

And this is why black will always be my favorite villian.

*arancahtar*

Damn. Watching the Calamities from the other side is terrifying.

*Captain Napalm*

Believe the hype. That was amazing.

*cmonman*



Hard to take the White Knight as seriously as Black when he has an aspect as limited and ineffectual as Ride. A good name-powered-leg-jump could avoid that as easily as Black's shadow trick. And so could numerous other things for that matter.

*Cestarian*

I don't why web novels always do this, but I fucking hate interludes, and placing them to create a cliffhanger is an insult to all your readers, placing more than 1 in a row is also an insult. I don't know what moron first thought of this, but it's a hell of a good way to get people to skip over chapters out of annoyance.

*The Occupant*

I like these heroes. Unlike Willy most of the time (freeing the slaves soldiers was one of the exceptions) they actually act pretty heroic.

*Poetically Psychotic*

That was fun.

*Levi Kalden*

Heroes are fkn anoiing they won't die

[vuthuha912](#)

Great chapter. It was fun.

Even when I know that proxy wars are a part of warfare, it is very tiring to see.

The first attack while terrifying, has some problems. To start, you show your hand too early, when you strike, you should aim to finish off the opponent with overwhelming strength immediately so that they aren't prepared. The next fight is going to be hell as the opponents have time to prepare better.

If the army is retreating then this is not a band of heroes being cornered anymore, can't we just try to kill one of them, please? Hanno is lying right there, it is weird that you don't cut his head off immediately. This is a classic horror movie character mistake. You double tap.

Just one attempt at killing your opponents is not great, send multiple. It is vital in war that you keep your opponents on their feet so that they're mentally pushed to the breaking point.

*Lynn*

i've always thought it was such bullshit that hero's are so blatantly favored by the gods and names over villains, but now, after seeing that, i'm beginning to think they need such

favoritism to make things a fair fight. what villains lack in raw power and support from godly beings, they make up for in skill, cunning, and smarts. it was fun to see the calamities at work.

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## Chapter 8: Lies

*"Invading? Good Gods, of course not. We're merely manoeuvring."*  
-Dread Empress Sinistra II "the Coy", after being hailed by the garrison of Summerholm

Archer hadn't changed at all since I last saw her. Fine white chainmail went down from her throat to her knees, splitting in a skirt. Over it she wore a long leather coat that came up in a hood that was currently down. The dark green linen she'd covered her face with last time had not been brought up, leaving open her exotic dark ochre face and hazelnut eyes. Only people across the Tyrian Sea had that skin tone: not the Baalites or the Yan Tei but those from some faraway land whose inhabitants were known only as the tigermen. The pair of longknives at her hips were sheathed and her ridiculously large longbow still strapped to her back, along with a quiver full of arrows closer in size and thickness to javelins than anything else. Even under the armour faint curves could be glimpsed, and there was no denying she was almost as good-looking as she thought she was.

"Lady Archer," Hakram greeted her respectfully.

She'd pretty much mauled him effortlessly on their first encounter, which tended to leave positive impression on orcs. I brushed off Archer's arm, frowning at her.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

She ignored me, to my irritation. Huh. I wasn't used to people doing that anymore. Whether they were my enemies or my friends, everyone paid attention when I glared these days. That had a way of happening when you'd killed as many people as I had.

"Sweetcheeks," she grinned at Masego. "How are we?"

"Less than pleased by the appellation," Apprentice replied.

"It's a compliment," she assured him.

"Stop verbally molesting my people and answer the question," I said.

She glanced at me, still grinning.

"What's the magic word?" she prompted.

For a heartbeat, I seriously debated ordering Masego to cast something on her. Nothing lethal, just unpleasant. Her hair turning into snakes, maybe. Would that be *magic* enough for her? Ultimately I sighed. This wasn't worth getting into a pissing match for.

"Please," I said.

"Well, since you asked nicely," Archer shrugged. "I was headed for your little city – what's it called again, Marching, Mossboard? – when I spied with my little eye a bunch of very lost villains."

She knew what the name was, I thought, meeting her eyes. She knew I knew she knew what the name was. She was just pulling my strings because she could. It was good to know that even if the better part of a year had passed she was still a major pain in my ass.

"You are the poison ivy of people," I told her. "Why were you headed for Marchford?"

"Your boss called in her marker for the Hunter incident," Archer replied. "Asked Lady Ranger to send a fae expert."

I smiled thinly.

"So where are they?" I said.

Hakram snorted. Masego looked like he wanted to inform me Archer was the expert even if he knew I was being sarcastic, but barely managed not to.

"That's hurtful, it is," she said, sounding pleased. "My turn to ask the questions then. Why in the all the bloody Hells are you lot this deep in Arcadia?"

I blinked.

"How deep are we, exactly?" Masego asked.

"Not as deep as yo could be, sweetcheeks," Archer replied without missing a beat, wagging her eyebrows. "But to put it in laymen's terms, you're pretty close to Skade."

"The seat of the Winter Court," Apprentice said, sounding surprised. "That shouldn't be possible, we haven't wandered long enough."

"This place seems to have a very loose definition of possible," Hakram grunted.

"The orc gets it," Archer said.

"There's rules even in Arcadia," Masego said flatly.

"The rules in this neck of the woods are whatever the King of Winter says they are," the woman shrugged.

"The implication being that the King wants us in Skade," I said quietly. "*That's* going to end well."

"Yeah, I meant to ask," Archer said. "What did you guys do to piss off the Winter Court? Did you abduct some of their people?"

"We didn't *do* anything," I complained. "They just showed up one day, started invading my city and got really condescending about not telling me why."

Archer rolled her eyes.

"A few warbands is hardly an invasion," she said.

"Squire's not exaggerating," Hakram said. "They've stated their intention is to conquer Marchford."

The ochre-skinned woman raised an eyebrow.

"That's... unprecedented, as far as I know," she said. "Fae mess around with mortals outside Arcadia all the time, but they don't stay there as a rule. Are you sure you didn't piss them off somehow?"

"I honestly can't think of a way I would have," I replied.

"Huh," she said. "Well, you're still lucky in a way. You're stuck with Winter and they're shit at fighting. Whatever poor bastard is stuck with Summer is in for a rough ride."

"The ones I've fought so far weren't pushovers," I said.

"If you'd been in a scrap with the host of High Noon you'd have a lot more holes in your armour, Squire, and they'd still be smoking," she said. "Summer's the season of war. They always win the round against Winter if it gets to a pitched battle."

Ah, the familiar feeling of being in over my head and yet still glimpsing another peril over the horizon that would be even worse. I was depressing how used to that I'd gotten.

"That's a nightmare for another night," I said. "If you were headed for Marchford then you know a way out of here?"

"Sure," Archer said, and pointed towards the city.

It was still insolently glistening, but at least I had a name for it: Skade. It was also apparently the seat of the Winter Court, so the way my instincts had been screaming *trap, trap, this is a trap* was once again justified.

"Do you have a way out that *doesn't* involve us dying painfully?" I asked.

"I was headed towards a gate before I saw the lot of you," Archer said, "but that's meaningless now. This close to Skade we're going wherever the King wants us to go."

"So if we walk in the other direction..." Hakram said, trailing off.

"We'll get back here in a few hours," she said. "Though if he's pulling that sort of stuff at least he'd not meddling with time."

I sighed. Was I ever going to meet some sort of all-powerful creature that wasn't a real prick about it?

"So to Skade we go," I grunted.

Archer nodded.

"Better keep off the road," she said. "Otherwise they'll see us coming. Wait until night time and try to sneak through?"

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"We're taking the road," I said. "Apprentice, you have parchment and ink?"

"Oh thank the Gods," Masego muttered, then cleared his throat. "Yes, I do."

"We're going to caught pretty early," Archer pointed out.

"Caught?" I smiled. "Why, we're not hiding. We were, after all, invited."

—

About an hour in we ran into a hunting party. Not in the sense that they were hunting for us, but in the way that Callowan nobles hunted deer and rabbit. There were a dozen fae, all mounted on too-perfect white horses, but among those only four mattered. Two men and two women, colourfully dressed where the others were in drab blue-grey and armour. The nobles – for I was relatively certain that was what they were – immediately took the lead and diverted their party towards us. Of them the first to speak was a man dressed in a tunic of woven shade and starlight

which hurt to look at if I did it for too long. My companions spread out warily, but as I'd told them to did not reach for their weapons.

"Well well well," the noble began. "What have we--"

"*Finally*," I interrupted. "You there, the ugly one. Dismount immediately and give me your horse."

I was careful not to point at any guard in particular, letting them decide among themselves exactly who I'd been speaking to. There was a flicker of surprise across all their faces. This was not, it seemed, going the way they'd thought it would. Good.

"Pardon me," the man said. "But what did you just say?"

"I *ordered* your attendant to give me his horse," I corrected haughtily. "I have to say, the reception so far has been most disappointing. I expected envoys to meet us at the border, not for us to have to walk like peasants."

"You are mortals," one of the ladies said, tone bemused.

"I am the Lady of Marchford," I sneered. "Here at the personal invitation of the King of Winter. Obviously you were sent to welcome us, so surrender horses for myself and my retinue. We've wasted enough time."

There was a heartbeat of silence as they all stared at me. I offered back my best impression of Heiress, silently conveying that to such a hallowed personage as myself their mere presence was almost offensive. One of the ladies smiled, her teeth looking more like a crescent moon than bone.

"We welcome you to Arcadia Resplendent, Lady of Marchford," she said. "I am the Marchioness of the Northern Wind. Please forgive the manners of my uncouth companions."

"There is nothing to forgive," I said, my frown heavily implying that there *was*.

"It will be our pleasure to escort you, my lady," the man who'd not spoken added. "Though it pains me to be so direct, may we see the King's invitation? Since Winter has gone to war, none are allowed to wander without one."

"Of course," I replied dismissively. "Servant, show them the invitation."

I gestured at Archer, who raised a mutinous eyebrow at me.

"Do not tarry, sullen wench," I said, savouring every syllable. "Or it's a smart blow to the ear for you."

She glared at me and grit her teeth but took out the folded sheet of parchment, handing it to a guard. Said guard rode closer to the nobles and presented it. They looked at the parchment, then at us, then to the parchment again. It was fake, of course. I'd known it would be pointless to try to forge something that would pass muster, since we had no idea if invitations like that even existed and what they *would* look like if they did. So I'd gone the other way and made it a *ridiculously obvious* fake. It was even signed 'the King of Winter', since none of us knew what his actual name was. I could see the nobles wanted to immediately call us out on it, but they hesitated. I smothered a grin. It was just like dealing with Praesi. It was a transparent lie, so naturally there had to be something they were missing. Was it a trap aimed at them, perhaps? A true invitation made to look like a fake so they would offend and give pretext for execution?

"This is a false invitation," the first fae to have spoken finally said, tone wary.

My companions stirred, preparing for a fight, but I'd bluffed with thoroughly empty hands often enough to know not to react.

"Aleban, don't be obtuse," the Marchioness laughed. "Of course it's true, look at the signature."

Aleban looked about to protest, then his eyes suddenly narrowed at the Marchioness. The other male fae began to grin nastily and the other woman steered her horse subtly away.

"Since the Marchioness of the Northern Wind states it is true, then it must be," he said sneeringly. "I am sure His Grace will be pleased when you bring them to him for audience."

"Oh, I would never dare overstep my station in this manner," the Marchioness smiled. "The Lady of Cracking Ice is the darling of the Court, surely her hand is best suited for this task."

Said Lady had been the one edging away and even as her face went thunderous as the sudden swerve in conversation I could not help but notice she was quite stunning. Most fae were subtly wrong, with faces too narrow and eyes too large, but this one was outright ethereal. I was almost reminded of Kilian by the cast of her face, though she had sharper cheekbones and paler skin than my lover.

"I simply could not claim this privilege in the face of so many nobles of superior rank," the Lady demurred. "The Baron of Blue Lights humbled us all with his singing last night, surely introducing such hallowed guests would be another feather to his cap."

"You are too kind, my lady," the fae who'd been grinning replied smoothly. "I am but a paltry courtier compared to the might that

is the Duke of Sudden Rime. Would it not be best for him to have this honour?"

Aleban, who was apparently a duke, smiled serenely.

"You are too humble, my good Baron," he said. "No one but you is a match for this task. Do you not agree, Marchioness?"

"Oh, most definitely," she said, deploying a fan of pure ivory with a flick of the wrist and hiding her vicious smile.

"It is agreed, then," the Lady of Cracking Ice murmured.

See, that was my favourite part of dealing with schemers. They always thought too deeply, and when it made them uncertain they immediately began passing the potential backfire to someone else. Fae were supposed to be the trickiest creatures in existence: if there was even a speck of uncertainty they'd make sure none of the fallout could mar the hem of their dress. We weren't out of the pit yet, of course. Even if they went along with it now that didn't mean they wouldn't turn their cloaks the moment we entered Skade and claim they'd been toying with us all along. Got us in the city, though, and that was the first step.

"All of you show me such favour," the Baron said calmly. "I will not soon forget it, I assure you."

The guard returned the 'invitation' to Archer, who looked like she really wanted to stab someone in the face. I hid my glee behind a dignified façade. Ignore me, would she? My vengeance would be as swift as it was petty. Our escort ordered guards to dismount and I paused a moment when I realized that unlike mortal riders, none of them used spurs or even a saddle. There was just a beautiful silk blanket. *Not using the horse for a getaway then*, I thought. I was a more than decant rider these days, but I'd never tried it without a saddle. My companions mounted after I did, with varying degrees of success. Hakram was pleased his horse hadn't begun blindly panicking the moment he approached and Archer was a better rider than me by the looks of it. Masego, on the other hand, was hugging his mount's flanks and looking pale.

"Apprentice," I said, bringing my mount to his side.

"This is unnatural," he muttered back. "Mages walk or fly. This horse business is just asking for a broken neck."

"Sounds like you've got it under control," I lied.

"Is there an issue, Lady of Marchford?" the Baron asked.

I smiled blandly.

"None at all," I said. "By all means, my lord baron, take us to Skade."



"It will be my pleasure," the fae replied darkly, to the amusement of the other nobles.

We set out down the road, the fairies leading the way, and Archer rode closer to me.

"*Sullen wench?*" she hissed.

"You're right," I replied pensively. "That was a bit much. I take back the sullen."

—

I'd seen quite a few beautiful places, in my time.

I'd seen the Silver Lake under moonlight, when it was most deserving of its name. I'd seen the royal palace of Laure, stone and tapestry and centuries of power. I'd walked the halls of the Tower, where opulence was a given and horror lurked behind every drape. Even the Wasteland had been beautiful in its own harsh way, flickering from storm to blinding sun in the span of a bell. None of them held a candle to Skade. Arcadia was not Creation, and so not bound by its rules. The Winter Court had taken this to heart when it had built its seat. Archways carved from snowstorms, streets made of solid glistening water and even auroras turned into lanterns: it was madness, but a madness utterly bewitching. I could see trees made of ice with leaves of stone that shook in the breeze, bridges of mist linking towers that were solid a moment and gone the next. The gate into Skade was an archway of ever-shifting ice, a high relief that changed the stories it depicted with every look. And in front of it, in two unmoving rows, stood Swords of Waning Day. The same soldiers I'd fought in Marchford, made a silent honour guard. Our party rode up a gentle slope, headed for avenues inside.

Then the first soldiers unsheathed their swords.

For a moment I panicked, but kept my face calm. If this came to a fight we weren't making it out alive: Hakram and I had struggled enough with two, two hundred were far beyond our capacity to handle. Any notion they were taking those out for a salute was dismissed when they turned towards us. No, I noticed after a moment. Not *us*. Archer. Who did not look particularly surprised.

"Soldiers, what is the meaning of this?" the Duke of Sudden Rime asked.

"This one smells of the Darkest Night," one replied, pointing his sword at Archer.

The woman cleared her throat, gave me a sideways look.

"The Lady of the Lake has visited Skade in the past," she said. "She, uh, might have left an impression."

The deadwood soldiers hissed like angry cats when she mentioned the Ranger's title. From the corner of my eye I could see the fae nobles exchanging glances. They looked surprised, then cast very wary looks in my direction. Oh, right. I'd called a pupil of the Ranger a sullen wench and threatened to slap her around. They had to be wondering who the Hells I was to be able to get away with that. I smiled prettily in their direction, which seemed to unsettle them even more.

"She's with me," I said. "And will not fight unless provoked."

"Her mistress took the Prince of Nightfall's eye and *set it on a ring*," the soldier barked.

"It makes for very tasteful jewellery, if that's any consolation," Archer said.

"So this is what dying stupidly feels like," Hakram mused.

"I'm sure Lady Ranger will give it back if he asks nicely," I lied. "Regardless, Archer is part of my retinue. She is not to be touched."

"Who are you to-" the soldier began, before a fracture line ran along the length of his body.

His eyes widened, then he fell into a shower of shards.

"I am bored with this interlude," the Lady of Cracking Ice said. "Shall we proceed?"

We did, and the soldiers gave us a wide berth. I leaned towards Archer.

"And Summer is worse?" I asked.

"Way worse," she said grimly, then lowered her voice. "So we're in the city. What's the plan now?"

"The situation is fluid," I replied. "We're keeping our options open."

"I was afraid you'd say that," Hakram cursed.

I smiled winningly at my companions.

---

## *erraticerrata*

And back to the main plot. First update of the month, so extra chapter! This one is the first of a series, titled Warden. Split POV between Black, Klaus Papenheim and Cordelia Hasenbach. Always in the Extra Chapters menu, but link for the lazy:

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/05/03/warden-i/>

### *calathas*

Spelling Errors I noticed:

[“Not as deep as yo could be, sweetcheeks,”]

You\*

[he’s pulling that sort of stuff at least he’d not meddling with time.”]

“He’d not meddling with time”

Missing a word here at the least, not sure what you want to use here.

[she said. “I am the Marquess of the Northern Wind. ]

Referred to a Female Elf as Marquess, instead of Marchioness or Marquise. Not sure if this was intentional or not.

Other than that, great work on the chapter. Super excited for the Fae court.

### *ALKATYN*

Typo at the very top “bDread”

### *AVR*

A few more typos

leave positive impression  
leave a positive impression

I was depressing  
It was depressing

going to caught  
going to get caught

went thunderous as the sudden  
went thunderous at the sudden

### *hexxart*

One more that I caught

I was a more than decant rider these days  
I was a more than decent rider these days

*Banananon*

decant rider  
decent rider

*Rustndusty*

more than decant rider  
decent

*stevenneiman*

"Not as deep as [yo->you] could be"  
"I was a more than [decant->decent] rider these days"  
"bridges of mist linking towers that were solid [a->one] moment  
and gone the next." I don't think it's wrong as is, but "one"  
is more customary

I think the one you were confused about was "at least he's not  
meddling with time", calthas

*ALKATYN*

I like this. Nice to see Cat is learning that she can't solve all  
of her problems with a direct fight. Seems to be a theme of  
adopting the skills of her enemies and turning it against them,

*Letouriste*

She always been like that:/ remember the time she talked with  
the others futur squire around a campfire in the first arc?

[intermediarywebserial](#)

That wasn't her idea, if you remember.

*danh3107*

My my, I really do enjoy your fae Erratic.

*Naeddyr*

I am cackling. Love this, as long as it lasts.

*The Archdevil*

That's the perfect term for what I've been doing as well.  
Something about arrogant elves playing along with a Villain is  
just highly entertaining. And the pettiness Cat has towards  
Archer makes it even better.

*Cpt. Obvious*

Necro posting!

Small correction. These are Fey, not Elves. The Fey are not of Creation but Arcadia. The Elves on the other hand are of Creation. They are not really related. Hye, also known as Ranger and The Lady of the Lake, is half Elven, while Killian is a quarter (or was it an eighth?) Fey.

*Necro post SUMMONER*

I'm a Necromancer and I summon you

*kinigget*

Cat

Cat no

Cat what are you doing

stop teasing the horrifyingly powerful immortals

it's not nice

*Ed*

But it is friggin hilarious and under these circumstances...

FULL SPEED AHEAD DAMN THE TORPEDOS.

Pretty much screwed in the non nice way in any case might as well see if you can brazen out something of a win.

*NerfContessa*

Ahahahahahha.... Knowing what is to. Come.... Ahahahahahaha

[gianoria7](#)

...  
Is Cat actually hoaxing the Fae?

...  
Okay, I can't really see that ending in any good way at all.  
Well, it's awesome, so who cares 😊

I wonder if they're actually going to meet the WInter King.  
And how he will react to the fact that he "invited" the Squire..

Summer is way worse than Winter.

...  
I don't know why, but this revelation makes me happy.

*Letouriste*

This is the thing with villain;) always marching to their obvious death and miraculously surviving with a defiantly one liner...looks like a lot like heroes like that.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Fae are neither Good or Evil, it's more Hot vs Cold/Orange v Blue.

*jonnnney*

The Winter King did invite them. They are going to Skade because the King of Winter wants them to go to Skade. He didn't use a written invitation, but he also didn't give them a choice.

Cat is hoaxing the Fae that are currently guiding her. I'm guessing she is trying to find a way to play the part in a story that has a happy ending.

The names of the group are Squire, Adjutant, Apprentice, and Archer so she could pull off the part of a group of heroes fighting in defense of their kingdom.

The King of Winter declared war on Marchford and then "invited" the countess to his court. This could easily lead to a peace treaty or joining together in a war against Summer. She is the Queen of Callow so she could increase the size of the Wanning Wood or give the fae access to a certain Duchy in the north that is trying to make a fuss over being ruled by her.

The fae are bound to their roles in the story, Cat isn't. It shouldn't be too hard for her to find a role that suits her.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Is it weird that they would euphemise "please" with "the magic word" in this world, where there are so many other, more prominent & usually dangerous ACTUAL magic words? It seems like a tragic accident just waiting to happen. Imagine asking Masego to say the magic word. There's no telling what hell he'll unleash!

*Tolk*

Lmao. Winter's weaker and Summer's stronger? So that's a "weaker" Fae noble? GG guys, they're done for.

*stevenneiman*

I think that the Winter Court is more prone towards scheming and the Summer Court is more prone towards direct violence. They seem to have a connection to Good and Evil, and it is generally the role of villains to scheme and plan behind the scenes only to be foiled when their schemes come to fruition and the think themselves ready to face the heroes on the field of battle.

*Unoriginal*

Bavarian Fire Drill combined with gigantic ovaries seems to work on the fey. Wellllll, time for things to go horribly w-right.

*fp*

This chapter was especially amazing. I was laughing pretty much the whole time.

*Barrendur*

\*These\* elves strike a deeply familiar and authentic chord for me. I'm an English-born American, and the Summer and Winter Courts of Faery are something I recognise from folklore, fantasy and fragments. They aren't the chauvinistic, androgenous beauties of Tolkien's world, largely indifferent to the doings of the Younger Races – no, these are the faery queens of 'Tam Lin' and 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', and murdering knights like Long Lankin, eerie and sinister figures intensely interested in humans... usually to the humans' cost. These elves emerge from under the hill on All Hallows Eve, or from amongst the standing stones to carry off fair young men and women, or murder babes in their cradles. Several 1970s (and later) English bands released songs based on, inspired by or created whole-cloth from ancient legends of the sorts of elves Erraticerrata is depicting: Steeleye Span, Fairport Convention, Jethro Tull and Tempest. It's worth checking for bands and songs on YouTube.

*Letouriste*

Well in fantasy we call them "fae" And not elves, they are distincts and often present in...non American fantasy(yeah America pretty much kill folklore of others countries so this is always elves, dwarfs and dragon everywhere)

*danh3107*

They're distinct in present in American fiction too, you know, like this story.

*Letouriste*

Thanks for the chapter :) read this while listening some valse for the first time in years, really fitting ^^

*cdos93*

Ballsy move Cat.

This... this is the kind of logic which results in cities being taken with nothing but donkeys and copious amounts of alcohol.

*stevenneiman*

And the other Calamities never shutting up about it.

*Ishot4living*

You think if we Beg the Author he'll have Cat get hilariously drunk while winning this?

*Kai Merah*

Oh, good lord, I love Cat. So very, very much. Was grinning madly this entire update.

*Unmaker*

So the way to get to fae is to use the 'big lie' technique? Surely they have used that before, being the master manipulators they are.

*Ed*

I think it's more "tie them into your story in the way you want" than big lie. It's becoming more and more apparent that the story has more power than most realise and it seems those who are more "fantastical" are tied tighter to the stories aims.

*stevenneiman*

Awesome chapter. I especially loved the part about how she actually signed the "invitation" with the words "the Winter King" because she didn't know his name and she still got in with it. And how even when they knew she was lying, they spent only a few seconds deciding to allow it followed by a much longer time playing hot potato with the blame for doing so. And I am yet again reminded of how for all the annoyance she causes, Akua has actually helped Cat along tremendously. Not only has she always helped Cat earn the approval of the people of Callow by playing the bad cop, but when Cat needs to act like an arrogant prick she couldn't have hoped for a better role model. Or Role model, as the case may be.

*arancaytar*

Refuge In Audacity is hilarious when it works.

*arancaytar*

> a more than decant rider

A decant rider is one who swiftly pours out of their saddle, I'm guessing.

*Mash*

Was that 'Sullen Wench' bit a reference to the show Archer, or was that just the happiest coincidence of all time?

*Cpt. Obvious*



Yes!

(Oh come on! That was an open goal. I'm just amazed no one else got suckered in before me.)

*dalek955*

I suspect that the Lady of Cracking Ice isn't really just a Lady.

The Marchioness refers to her as "darling of the Court". She's extra beautiful, at least by fae standards. Higher-ranked fae go along with her suggestion for who should end up with the hot potato. She's powerful enough to disintegrate a Sword of Waning Day without even gesturing, and Masego later notes that she was the strongest of the party by an order of magnitude even though the competition includes a Duke.

I think her role in Arcadia's stories is that of lost royalty or a child prodigy. In that case, her actual power level could be that of a Duchess or even a Princess, with her title as a mere Lady being basically window dressing indicating her youth or humble origins.

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## Chapter 9: More Lies

*"Gentlemen, there is no need to worry: our plan is flawless. The Emperor will never see it coming."*

– Grandmaster Ouroboros of the Order of Unholy Obsidian, later revealed to have been Dread Emperor Traitorous all along

A few years ago I would have been able to enjoy the beautiful madness that was Skade as we rode through it, but being apprenticed to Black had ruined me. Now I was wondering how a city with a population of a several thousand could manage to feed itself when all the fields around it were covered in snow. Or who cleaned the streets for them to remain this pristine. Were there fae street sweepers? If so, were they available for hire? Marchford didn't look nearly as nice. And that was without even getting into the logistics of running a monetary system when everyone and their sister could make illusionary coin. Unless all coin was illusionary? This entire race was giving me a headache just to think about. The rest of my companions seemed more concerned with getting their bearings, which I already knew would be pointless. I'd looked back after we turned a corner twice now and found an entirely different street behind us, the second time even on a different floor. The seat of the Winter Court was

nearing Tower-levels of mindfuckery, though at least it wasn't also full of death-traps and demons. I hoped.

Archer's casual assessment of the Winter King as "pretty much a god" wasn't a significantly better alternative, but I'd take what I could get.

If I was getting out of this with most my organs on the inside, it would be by picking a story and sticking to it. The fact that'd I somehow wiggled my way into being the heroine when facing the Rider of the Host likely meant Arcadia didn't care for my being Evil so long as I *acted* heroic. That broadened my options a great deal. There were at least half a dozen tales about some clear-sighted commoner with a Good heart walking into the court of Callow and unmasking the schemes of wicked courtiers trying to trap them, though my introducing myself as the Lady of Marchford might have killed that in the crib. Trickster stories, then? Trying to outwit fae at the game they'd allegedly invented struck me as asking for an invitation to a feast that lasted a century, but with the story on my side I might pull through. Sadly, I hadn't been abducted by a fairy queen with designs on my virtue so professing my pure-hearted affections for Kilian would be of no use. To be honest I wasn't great with temptation anyway. Wouldn't be sleeping with one of my senior officers if I was.

"Catherine," Hakram said in a rasping whisper. "Watch."

I glanced at the tall orc, then around us. We were riding through a marketplace of sorts, filled to the brim with hundreds of fae. Stalls that were riots of silk and pale wood offered an array of wonders for perusal. Some one-eyed old man with skin dark as a Soninke's was offering a bottled wish, moonlight made silver and the heart of a once-good woman, all set on an elegant quilt of woven winds. Fares just as absurd stretched as far as the eye could see, the entire plaza much too large for the width the surrounding walls suggested. I saw Masego eyeing what a peddler promised to a drop of the blood of the Forever King with sharp interest, so I kicked his foot. He jumped in surprise and then coughed in embarrassment.

"You start buying things here and you'll leave with a dozen different fae owning a slice of your soul," I hissed.

He looked mulish.

"It's not like I'm using *all* of it," he whispered back.

That was the single most Praesi thing I'd ever heard him say and rubbed the bridge of my nose in despair. You'd never find a Callowan selling their soul like that, I thought irritably. Well, except that one time I'd become a villain. So maybe sometimes you found Callowans selling their souls like that, but in most cases

I felt like my opinion held up. I glared at Masego anyway, until he gave up with a huff.

"Don't you pout at me, you're a grown man," I muttered.

When had I become the voice of reason? People were supposed to talk me out of things, not the other way around. Still, this felt dealt with so I turned my attention back to the marketplace. Hakram wouldn't have been interested in the wares here, I was sure. The orc take on having an economy was raising cattle, looting other clans and the occasional bit of barter. Aside from books and booze there wasn't much in Adjutant's tent and I would know: I riffled through his stuff at least once a month when I got bored. So what *had* he been trying to point out to me? I began paying closer to attention to the fae themselves instead of what they haggled over, but how they were dressed wasn't what caught my attention. It was how they behaved.

Two fae bargained over a silver chain almost perfunctorily, going smoothly back and forth until it became clear the man – who looked like a noble fallen on hard times, his robes threadbare and his hands without rings – could not afford the chain. At which point he publicly bemoaned his lack of wealth, going on twice as long as he had while bargaining. There was something wrong here, like they were acting instead of truly talking. Further away I saw a gorgeous but common woman hacking off her beautiful golden locks and offering them in exchange for a precious stone, and that was when it finally *clicked*. On the other side of the market place I found an earnest-looking man pawning off an heirloom ring missing its jewel in exchange for a pretty ivory comb. It was an old tale, one children in Callow grew up hearing about as a warning about blind good intentions. *They're going through stories*, I realized. *All of them*. There wasn't a single outcome here in the hundreds of conversations taking place that wasn't already set in stone.

It was enough to make me shiver. They might almost look like us, but the fae were *other*. Something apart, obeying completely different rules. An entire people of actors going through the motions since before Creation even existed. How many times had they gone through their stories, I wondered? If Roles were grooves worn into Creation by repetition, accumulating power by repetition, then these were an entire race of Named. Everyone from the chimney sweeps to the king himself, following along the paths set for them. And now I'd just walked into the midst of that with a lie on my lips, throwing myself headfirst into a maze of interwoven tales that went back unbroken since the dawn of existence. Gods Below, this was more dangerous than I could have ever dreamed of. I forced a smile on my face and sat ramrod straight on my horse as we passed through the market. I met Hakram's eyes and saw fear there to mirror mine. *We're in over our head. More so than usual.*

"This must be where we part, Lady of Marchford," the Duke of Sudden Rime announced.

I could see interest and fascination in his too-blue eyes as he watched us, having long chased away his initial distaste at our presence. For all that he was more than willing to pawn off responsibility for us to the Baron. Was this a story as well, I wondered? There might not have been an exact precedent for my actions today, but if another tale was close enough they might have moved towards it. Or perhaps not. Their arguing over who'd be responsible for us had felt too organic, not at all like the haggling fae behind us. It had felt like they'd been genuinely unsure of the outcome, no matter how smoothly the conversation had gone. Still, how much could I rely on that impression? Fae were some of the greatest liars to ever exist. There were too many unknowns at play here for me to get a good read on the situation.

"I am *most* certain we will meet again," the Marchioness of the Northern Wind said, flashing hungry teeth. "I look forward to it eagerly."

"I'm sure our dearest Baron will take great care of you," the Lady of Cracking Ice added, smiling at the fae in question.

"Your reception has been most graceful," I replied, careful to avoid even the implication of debt.

The nobles tittered and rode past a house of stone too white to be anything of Creation, disappearing the moment they turned the corner. The Baron turned to us, face expressionless.

"As I've not been given instruction by His Majesty to bring you under his roof, it seems you will be settling in the guest palace," he said.

"That will not be necessary, my lord baron," a voice intervened.

The fae nobles we'd encountered so far had been sharp-faced with even sharper tongues, but none of them had struck me as made for strife. Intrigue yes, and cruelty absolutely but fighting? None of them had the silent assurance of someone used to taking lives. This one, though, looked like he'd been made for war. His mount was ebony, and I did not mean that in a poetic sense: the horse was sculpted out of dark wood, polished so perfectly it could have been black marble. The man himself was wearing a sober long-sleeved tunic with buttons of shade, the sword at his hip slender and without a sheath. I could feel the power in it, and not mere sorcery: it felt like sharpness made object, a principle made into thing. His skin was pale and his cheeks freshly shaved, thin red lips forming a permanent scowl. A black silken blindfold covered one of his eyes, silvery writing sprawled across it. I'd never seen someone who fit the turn of phrase of being *raven-*

*haired* better before: just looking at the dark locks I could almost hear the flap of wings.

"My Prince of Nightfall," the Baron of Blue Lights replied, bowing low.

"That ought to end well," I muttered.

The prince's eye flicked in my direction at the words, meeting my stare. I matched his gaze and found myself peering into darkness, a night so dark no stars would ever grace it. I began to drift from my body until I reached for an older memory, one branded into my soul. I felt my back snapping again, my bones grinding to dust as the weight above spoke a single word: Repent. *I've stared down Hashmallim, fairy, a little dark isn't going to cow me. Night is when villains rule.* I found myself on the horse again, the Prince of Nightfall smiling amusedly.

"His Majesty sends his regards, and grants these awaited guests the use of the Still Courtyard until they can be properly received," the one-eyed creature spoke.

"A great honour," I said, which for all I knew could be true.

Well. Fuck. I'd never seriously hoped the Winter King wouldn't know we were in the city, but him sending what looked like his Court's equivalent of one of the Calamities had not been the plan. Not that I *had* a plan, per se, but this definitely wasn't it. Having Aisha along right about now would have been great, since my companions might all be Named but between the lot of us all we knew about plotting would barely fill a page. Written large. There might even be illustrations.

"I look forward to your attendance of Court on the morrow, Baron," the prince said, the implied dismissal clear.

The Baron of Blue Lights bowed gracefully a second time, eyes lingering on us before he left. Confusion and fear were plain in his gaze. *I feel for you, my friend,* I thought. *There's probably someone out there who knows what's going on, but it's sure as Hells not either of us.* I nodded politely at him and Hakram elbowed Masego so he'd do the same with the rest of us. There was a long moment of silence with only the five of us in the street. The Prince of Nightfall smiled at Archer, somehow conveying a few centuries of hatred in a mere quirk of the lips.

"Did you know, girl, that I once swore if your mistress had a child I would feed it to her?" he idly said.

"The Lady of the Lake isn't one for children," Archer replied with a friendly smile of her own. "She much prefers jewellery."

While I admired the guts behind mouthing off to the immortal creature that had night for eyes, I kind of wanted to throttle her right now. *We don't taunt the monster, Archer. Not when it's already out to get us.* Oh Gods, was this what it felt like being in charge of me? The balance of appalled and impressed was miraculously even. How had Black not had me killed off by now?

"While I'm sure you and the Lady of the Lake have a colourful history," Adjutant said, "we are all here under the banner of the Lady of Marchford."

It was a sad day when the orc in a group was the closest thing you had to a diplomat. I yawned in an almost offensively fake manner to change where this was headed.

"Alas, I am but a feeble delicate young girl and travel has tired me," I said. "Is the Courtyard far, Your Royal Highness?"

"Ah, I forget myself Lady Foundling," the Prince said. "You are well known for your... frailty, after all. It was untoward of me to delay."

There was enough sarcasm injected in that single word to poison a well. I was reluctantly impressed.

"All is forgiven," I drily replied.

"If you and your retainers would follow me, I will lead you to the Courtyard," the one-eyed fae said, his horse moving into a trot without prompting.

We trailed after him and I gestured for Archer to come closer. She leaned in.

"I thought the whole changing-seasons motif meant fae are reborn when their Court comes around again," I said quietly. "Like a cheap cousin to reincarnation."

"It does," she agreed.

"Then he's missing an eye even now because..."

She nodded.

"*Every time?*" I whispered.

"She likes the ring," Archer shrugged.

Whoever had first said that Named became crazier the older they lived clearly had something of a point. It wasn't long before we arrived at the Still Courtyard, though my guess was that it wasn't because it was all that close. More that *everything* in Skade was close, if you were high up enough the fairy food chain. The Prince of Nightfall was royalty, if the title was any

indication, but what exactly that meant I was unsure. Was he related to the king? I wasn't sure whether fae could even have children if they didn't have them with mortals. The Still Courtyard was a low-hanging square building with a front of ornate greenwood pillars and bare stone steps. Through the arched entrance I could see the courtyard it was named after, a pristine garden of untouched freshly-fallen snow. A dozen blue-attired servants were already kneeling outside when we arrived, none of them daring to look up. They didn't even register in the prince's eyes, as far as I could see.

"I hope your rest will be peaceful," the raven-haired fae said.

Ah, implied threats thrown our way by someone who could kill me with relative ease. He was making this feel like home. The Prince cast a look at Archer, then moved on.

"I will see you all in Court on the morrow," he added. "Until then, Lady of Marchford."

"Looking forward to it, Your Royal Highness," I replied with insincere enthusiasm.

The Prince of Nightfall rode away without glancing back, leaving us and the servants alone. They were still kneeling, so I cleared my throat.

"So," I said. "About those rooms."

They rose, and as I peered at them I saw they were... hesitant. Not afraid, I decided, but unsure of what they were supposed to do. *They're not used to having guests, I thought, or maybe just not mortal ones.*

"I am the steward for this courtyard, Hallowed Ones," a female fae said, bowing before us. "We are honoured by your presence and have arranged chambers for your leisure."

I thought about asking for her name but held myself back. No, it wouldn't do to get too involved: I might be stepping into a story by accident. I looked down at my armour, which was sadly full of holes where people had taken it upon themselves to stab me, then at Hakram's similarly scarred set of plate.

"I could use a nap and a bath," I said. "How about you lot?"

Apprentice leaned forward on his horse.

"Does this courtyard have a library?" he asked.

Well, good to see he still had his priorities on order. I swore on all the Hells, if Masego landed at the bottom of the sea the first thing he'd ask the mermans was if there were any books around.

"It does, Hallowed One," the steward said. "Maeve can take you to it, if you so desire."

Maeve was, from the look of it, a very pretty servant with a low neckline who was now smiling invitingly at Apprentice. Another servant looked at her, then Masego and his face turned thunderous. Well, I mused. If there was anyone among my companions I could feel pretty safe wouldn't get involved in some deadly fae love triangle, it was Apprentice. Masego gingerly got down from his horse and immediately headed inside, gesturing for the servant to follow him.

"See you later," I called out, then sighed. "Someone stable that horse. We're only borrowing it."

"I could do with a nap," Hakram admitted. "Feels like I've been awake for days."

Odds were decent we had been.

"You should also take a bath," I encouraged.

The orc wrinkled his nose.

"I washed myself in the river when we were returning to Marchford," he said.

"He smells like blood and sweat," Archer commented. "It's quite nice, actually."

"See, *Archer* likes how you smell," I told him.

He grunted in displeasure but silently conceded the point, dismounting as the Named in question turned to look at me.

"What was that supposed to mean?" she said.

"You live in the woods and I've only ever seen you wear one outfit," I replied frankly.

"You could see me *out* of it, if you asked nicely," she winked.

"We've been over this before," I said, dismounting and handing off the reins to a servant.

"Sadly," Archer sighed, doing the same.

We made our way inside, pausing as we passed the threshold. There was no sound. In a city there was always noise in the background, people talking or working or the hundreds of different that kept it all going. Even out on the field, you heard animals or wind or the gurgle of water. Here there was only silence so absolute the sound of my breath felt like someone screaming. The Still Courtyard, huh. That would take some getting used to. Ahead of us



the footsteps of the servant leading us to our chambers were soundless, and the entire thing made me uncomfortable enough I felt the need to keep talking.

"So what's with your 'hitting on everything that moves' habit," I said. "You realize that even if you showed up naked in Masego's bed he'd be more likely to ask how you got your scars than anything else, right?"

"Nah, I just like fucking with him," she admitted with a grin. "He gets so confused and offended."

"I don't," I said, "and you keep offering."

"Twice isn't exactly a lot," she said, rolling her eyes. "Still, let me put it this way. How long do you think you'll live, Squire?"

"I'm a villain," I said. "So theoretically forever."

"I didn't ask for the Evil manifesto," she said. "We've had villains in Refuge, I know the speeches. What do *you* think."

I shrugged.

"If I make it through the next few years, maybe another twenty after that?" I guessed. "Depends on the opposition I end up getting."

"We never have a guarantee we'll make it through the first story," Archer said quietly looking ahead. "Named have more of everything – power most of all, but also danger. I could die tomorrow or in ten years, but sooner or later I get an ending. And when I do, I want to have lived as much as I could."

I could see where she was coming from, honestly. There were a lot of perks that came from being Named, even if I hadn't partaken in most of them. Got that as much from my own sober inclinations than Black's outright austere example, I figured. You only needed to crack open a history book to see a lot of Black Knights and Warlocks had sown their wild oats with enthusiasm. Hells, Masego's father was married to an *incubus*. Dread Emperors and Empresses outright had a seraglio, even if Aisha kept assuring me sex wasn't a large part of that. As for heroes, well, good-looking and righteous was a pretty common type for a lot of people on Calernia. If anything heroes were more likely to end up in bed with another hero than villains were with other villains. I was hardly chaste myself, but sleeping around had never appealed to me past my initial fumbling attempts to learn what I liked. What I had with Kilian mattered to me as more because I could trust her than because she was delightful in bed. Trust was a lot more precious to me than sex these days.

"You're actually quite prudish for a Callowan," Archer said. "Your people are a lot more salt-of-the-earth as a rule."

"I wouldn't use Hunter as a measure for Callowan mores," I snorted. "That outfit was a little bare by anyone's standards."

"Those leather pants, though," Archer sighed fondly. "He had an ass like you wouldn't believe."

I wasn't exactly eager to discuss the merits of the buttocks of a man whose hand I had hacked off after beating him savagely, so I wisely decided to go into my rooms when the servant showed them to me. The ochre-skinned girl took the hint, following another servant to her own. My guide was the steward from earlier, and before I could even take a look around she knelt at my feet.

"Hallowed One," she said, looking down. "An invitation awaited you when you arrived at the Courtyard. May I give it to you?"

I was genuinely tempted to say no and see what came of that, but kicking the hornets' nest could wait until I'd had a bath.

"Sure," I said. "It was sent specifically for me?"

"An invitation is always sent to the Courtyard, Hallowed One," the steward said hesitantly. "It's simply that usually we... do not receive guests, in this part of the season."

And just like that today's game of *this does not feel like a coincidence in the slightest* had found a winner. Eyes still on the ground, the fae offered me a scroll with a seal of frost on it. It would have looked natural if not for the emblem that could be glimpsed in the ice. What the emblem actually depicted I had a hard time understanding, the image blurring under my eyes and the words *Duke of Violent Squalls* coming to the front of my mind whatever I did. Fancy.

"There's a bath adjoining the room?" I asked.

"Whatever you require will be found," the steward said.

Close enough to a yes, I figured.

"That'll be all, then," I said.

Time for a bit of light reading, I supposed.

Interesting interesting, and another week to wait and see how it turns up.

Woe is me, my suffering unparalleled on this earth.

*Letouriste*

Lol, your suffering is hardly "unprecedented"  
Most readers are the same.

ALKATYN

TYPO THREAD

" at leas half "

ALKATYN

"was a pretty commong type"

AVR

promised to a drop  
promised to be a drop

*NerfContessa*

Still not fixed 3 years later...

But dang, it begins.

Cats most strange journey.

*Barthumphries*

This must me where we part,  
Change me to be

What I had with Kilian mattered to me as more because I could trust her  
Remove as

*stevenneiman*

"In a city there was always noise in the background, people talking or working or the hundreds of different {things} that kept it all going"

"What I had with Kilian mattered to me [as] more because I could trust her than because she was delightful in bed"

Pretty light this time. I only caught 2

*nehemiahnewell*

So is the an opportunity, or a trap.

If someone answers with a Kosh I will have to throw something at them.

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

Yes

*nehemiahnewell*

\*Throws a rock at the Kosh Robot\*

[Euodiachloris](#)

With fae? Both... with a side of terrific (all senses of the word) and an option on fantastic (all senses of the word). 😊

AVR

The bit about her being sure that Apprentice would be the one person who wouldn't get into a deadly fey love triangle suggests there'll be some sort of mess there.

Probably finding out why Winter is invading is a definite opportunity though.

[Euodiachloris](#)

I think the various romantic plotlines and tropes are about to stumble into the solid reality of wherever-on-the-spectrum-he-is combined with his chronic asexuality and find themselves breaking a toe or two. 😊

*Morgenstern*

Winter seemingly does not want to be at war, they only do what Summer has started, remember? More opportunity, if you ask me. But of course, things (hindrances, rules etc.) being what they are, there IS a lot of danger there, probably. Make a misstep and that's it, Winter will WANT to be at war. And they quite probably cannot outright make any peace initiations, if I'm guessing correctly, because only the one who starts it can probably end it and not the one who has to follow. I'm quite sure, though, that it is actually in Winter's best interests, if Summer is stopped from doing what it does and thus that someone is given a hint at what they have to stop (the reason for the attack) for that to happen. Arcadia never seems to WANT to invade reality, we have been told. So if that is true... Winter is desperately trying any backways there are although they are slippery as a shitload of ice (just had to ^^).

*Naeddyr*

Less cackling all around this time. Awaiting more cackleicious hijinks later! Thanks for the chapter!

nipi

““All is forgiven,” I drily replied.”

Oh crap! Did she just forgive them for the invasion?

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Oh crud

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Maybe the winter king will give backsies

[Euodiachloris](#)

<\_<

Tolk

Shh! Erraticerrata might not have noticed!

...  
..  
.  
.  
.  
.

Oh who am I kidding? Of course the Prince of Nightfall was chortling on the inside at Cathrine’s slip-of-the-tongue. FURK!

*Morgenstern*

I’m actually more concerned about the “we’ll see each other again” and the –“That ought to end well,” I muttered.– at the moment, that is, about the question whether things are taken literally or if sarcasm counts towards Things That Are Stated WILL Happen.

*Morgenstern*

“All is forgiven” might not be such a bad thing, if one remembers how (if correct) \*Summer\* started the war and Winter is only following (if that is correct). Winter and Marshford should definitely make amends somehow, if this whole Arcadia on war plotarc should find a positive end. 😊  
(If Winter should, contrary to my beliefs so far, be able to turn the thing around on their own, i.e. stop mirroring and force \*Summer\* to mirror them... that would be a big-puff-solution, hot air coming from the whole war-balloon. But I would guess it takes a lot more than that. Wouldn’t be “interesting”, storywise, otherwise, now would it? ^^)

*Morgenstern*

Things to be potentially concerned of, mini-addendum: Add to the list that she outright stated she's a villain – here, of all places.

*gyndroid*

I mean, does it matter? This isn't pact, she and the fae can lie all they want. I'm not sure the difference between lying and promises, of course, and Catherine seems concerned about the latter.

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

I really want to see this visualized, infeasible though it might be

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

One thing I think we can all agree on is that The Duke of Sudden Rhyme is the greatest emcee name so far discovered by mankind.

*Hakurei06*

You might even dare say, that she “went black and never came back”.

[taborask](#)

I'm a little confused, are the Fae and elves different species? Or are elves simply a particular kind of fae that happen to live in the mortal world? The latter doesn't really make sense with the Bard's comments on there being an elven nation somewhere though

[Euodiachloris](#)

All and neither. 😊

[ryubosj](#)

Elves and Fae are different

*Morgenstern*

Far as I understood, the modern fantasy rule applies: They are definitely not the same, but whole different races (that might be somehow related and “akin” in some ways at least, though).

*Cpt. Obvious*

Noticed that part about playing these roles since before Creation? Arkadia is older than Creation and so are the Fey.

Elves on the other hand is of Creation. They didn't exist before the Gods shaped Creation, so they are not related to the Fey any more than humans are.

Look at Arkadia and the Fey as the prototype the Gods created before Creation. It was too perfect, the Fey too bound by the stories. They kept repeating the same pattern over and over again with no room for change in any direction.

So the Gods moved on making Creation. There's still stories but the people are not as tightly bound. They can decide to break a pattern, though it may cost them. Still it makes it possible for the Gods' experiment to play out. Is obedience or freedom, order or anarchism, good or evil the more successful path?

*Shequi*

The sheer level of ominousness is overwhelming.

*alegio*

Before I start reading the story I must say that dread emperor traitorous is probably my favorite emperor. And one day I hope to be as great in the art of trolling entire nations as he is.

*Mike E.*

Bad: Having to wait a week between updates

Good: Damn this is a solid story, almost feels like no words go wasted on the page.

[joanneeve](#)

Hello Erraticerrata,

A friend of mine, who has been following this story since book 1 chapter 3, has just gone into a Hospice for palliative care. She is no longer able to read the story any more as her vision is starting to fail, but loves work. Is it ok if I make a handwritten copy of this for her so that her carers and family (as well as myself) can read it to her?

Thank you.

[erraticerrata](#)

Of course!

[joanneeve](#)

Thank you so very much.

[The Aimless Passerby](#)

...couldn't you just print it out? Right click on the webpage and select Print.

[joanneeve](#)

Yes, but she is using the novel as a goal to stay with us. And she loves hand written letters and such. And this way her children have something special when she does leave us.

*alegio*

Just finished reading, and I must say:

1. I knew they were all named since the start!!! Beings that exist inside a loop of repeating stories inside the meta based story? Yep it had to happen.
2. Catherine is finally getting her turn to exploit all those heroic tropes she always hated, this will be fun.
3. Ranger steals the eye every year? Or beacouse of the time-fuckery of Arcadia the change of seasons is diferent? If it actually is every year then Ranger is even more of a monster than what I thought.

[joanneeve](#)

We have not yet really met her in the story and I love her more and more.

*Gunslinger*

We did get her interlude. If you haven't read it yet, you should. It's phenomenal.

[joanneeve](#)

Gunslinger,

I have read this story through several times. And yes we have met her, twice in fact, however we have not yet met her since she left the side of Black. Considering how awesome Archer is, Ranger must be amazing.

*Morgenstern*

Random sidecomment: I found that "they're all Named" idea really funny, because it seems to mirror the exact idea I encountered in some RPG game, where you get to decide whether to save them and their stories or make entirely new stories to save 'em (if you save 'em). ^^

*Nicole Weaver*



The faerie court changes seasons based on a variety of things... boredom, a great victory or a great defeat, an underling pulling off a coupe and crowning themselves ruler of the new season.

Its not the seasons of a year as we understand it. It could be hundreds of years or a decade, at least if the author is loosely using faerie lore (and it appears they are)

*arancahtar*

I can't really see Fae using any kind of "normal" economy. Maybe they just have an insanely complex unwritten system of favours and other non-quantifiable exchanges?

*arancahtar*

Also the part where she grabbed a unicorn by its horn and threw it was probably a bit exhausting.

*Morgenstern*

At the moment, I'm still a bit concerned about that part. If sarcasm should \*not\* count, she just made herself weak, after all... that might just come back to bite her in the ass.

*Nicole*

Sarcasm and falsehood are usually fine when dealing with the fae. Its actions that start to carry weight. Remember, its all about the story to them and stories are more exciting with humor, sarcasm and wit. So this didn't weaken her, if anything her games so far have drastically increased her power in relation to the fae.

I'm very excited to see what the Winter King has in mind. A creature like that is probably going to be a cross between a good fantasy writer, a politician, a storyteller, a manipulator and of course very physically/magically powerful.

Black would make a good Fae King, since he understands and uses the elements of a "story" to win his fights and kill heroes.

*arancahtar*

As they're on opposite ends of the alignment spectrum... would that count as Squire corrupting the innocent hero, or Archer redeeming the villain? 😊

*Miaow*

Archer isn't a hero. This was made clear in the demon of corruption arc. Presumably it wouldn't be any different from

Black and Ranger going at it, if Squire started sleeping with Archer.

*Morgenstern*

Quite probably none of those. Sex does not entail "more", emotions and such, necessarily. 😊 Why should it entail such a big story mechanic?

[gianoria7](#)

I'm pretty sure Archer is Neutral, and not Good.

*Letouriste*

The plot is giving me headache, too many possibilities here, so I will just say:  
Thanks you for the chapter:)

*Letouriste*

Thank you\*  
This is not really we can't modify comments

*Letouriste*

Not really great\*  
^^

Comment inception, sorry

[RedoneAgain](#)

I am pretty sure that Maeve is a common fae name in stories and such and is usually associated with ice, darkness. Also fae with that name are generally a queen/ridiculously powerful. So... a possible friend trapped in the dungeon by the evil rulers or, because Catherine said Masiago was unlikely to get caught up in a love triangle he will obviously get trapped in one with the king's possible wife or maybe his daughter or something.

*Nicole Weaver*

The servants are at her service... my first request "fix my armor." It could easily be argued such is due a guest and is not a gift, merely what a guest is due.

[Tapas \(@tapas\\_app\)](#)

Hi Erraticerrata,

Hope you are doing well!

Sorry to leave you a note on here. I had a little trouble finding an email to contact you. I work for an online publishing platform

called Tapas (tapas.io). Would love to talk to you about possibly using our platform. I can give you more details on how we work and the possible benefits. If interested, please contact me at [jessicasanchez@tapasmedia.co](mailto:jessicasanchez@tapasmedia.co). Thank you for your time!

[cowlute](#)

I'm not sure if it's the first actual time, but I feel like it's the first time Catherine's sworn "Gods Below" and not "Gods Above". But maybe I missed it quite a while ago and just caught on. A pretty cool change nonetheless and I would appreciate if someone points out to me where she first changed!

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## Chapter 10: Entrance

*"No one ever won a war by being shy."*

– Queen Elizabeth Alban of Callow

The door didn't make a sound as it closed. I was in a pretty little antechamber decorated in shades of wood, leading into a large bedroom. I eyed the featherbed with untoward intentions, noting it was twice as large as my own in Marchford. Silk covers and enough pillows for three people: this was exactly the kind of staggering decadence I'd been promised when I'd hitched my wagon to the Evil horse. Instead I had to deal with goblins who couldn't keep their knives in their pants, half the Empire out for my blood and a demesne whose ledger ran so red it looked like it was bleeding. All of which I had to handle while sleeping in woollen sheets, to add insult to injury. There had to be someone I could lodge a complaint with. Hells, maybe that could be the first thing I ever prayed to the Gods Below about – *how about some grapes and oiled up manservants, you stingy fucks?*

With a snort I unbuckled my belt and sheath, tossed them on the covers. Normally getting out of my plate was a job best fit for two, but I'd been stabbed enough today it had gotten a great deal easier. I got rid of the greaves first, then the gauntlets and then fiddled with the breastplate and pauldrons for a while. By the end of it I had a lovely little pile of goblin steel full of murder holes on the ground, and with a sigh of pleasure I got rid of my armoured boots. The smell was ripe, so I tossed them as far away as I could. Being Named got me out of many of the little ugly details of life – didn't get sick anymore, tired much slower and I hadn't had my monthlies in about two years – but it did nothing for sweat. Or what the inside of a boot smelled like after a hard day of fighting.

The aketon I placed on the bed, leaving me in only a pair of heavy cloth trousers and able to breathe comfortably for the first time in what felt like forever. I passed a hand through my hair, tugging off the leather ring keeping it in a ponytail. I grimaced at the sensation of sweat long gone cold, then forced myself to get up instead of just dropping on the silk to lie there like some sort of moaning spineless mollusc. There was an archway into a side room to the left, so I picked up the invitation scroll and padded that way. Strange how even this far into a land of ice I barely felt the cold: I was fairly sure that wasn't my Name at work. Who knew, maybe even fairies got gold. To my pleasure I found a low bath set in a quaint little square of stone, already drawn. The water was limpid, almost impossibly so.

It also did not seem to be warm.

I got closer and dipped a toe inside, flinching at the wintry temperature. Yet after the moment the cold started to feel refreshing. Purifying, almost. Huh. Well, it wasn't like I had alternatives. I placed the scroll by the edge and got rid of my trousers, gritting my teeth before sliding into the bath all at once. The sudden cold was overwhelming for the first few heartbeats but when I got used to it the sensation from earlier returned. It was rather calming, really. I ducked under the surface to rinse my face and hair, shaking underneath before coming back up close to the side. Carefully I broke the seal on the scroll having shaking my hands off the worst of the droplets, watching the frost dissipate. Inside was an invitation, like the steward had stated. Not directed at me specifically, I noted, but at whoever was in the Still Courtyard.

Whoever that usually was, they were pretty far up the food chain. The language was both elaborate and ingratiatingly polite – and given that it was the Duke of Violent Squalls who'd sent this, that probably meant this was for royalty. Or not, I frowned, reading the lines again. No mention of royal title was made, but some of the phrasing implied the receiver was *foreign*. Regardless, it was an invitation to a ball held in the Duke's palace in the city, after nightfall. A masquerade to boot, because evidently I'd stepped into a shady Proceran romance. At least Hakram would be at home, I thought with a grin. He had like three of those stashed under his bunk. The one I'd thumbed through involved a lot of corsets being manfully ripped off and longing sighs all around. It was a sign of my deep love for the orc that I hadn't told Robber about my find.

I set the scroll aside and leaned against the side of the bath, closing my eyes with a sigh. The Winter King, I decided, would have more than one place to stash guests until he could receive them. It was not a coincidence we'd been sent to the one where there would be a vaguely addressed invitation waiting for us. We – I – had been meant to get this. More than that, the way I'd

lied through my teeth to get us into Skade had either been expected or was something the quasi-god ruling this place intended to use. For his advantage, probably. That was usually the way it went. What in all the Hells the ruler of half of faekind would want with a Squire from the Dread Empire was where I was drawing a blank. The Winter Court had staked a claim on Marchford, sure, but I was beginning to grasp it was more complicated than that. For one, if a noble of the calibre of the Lady of Cracking Ice had stepped into my city there would be corpses from wall to wall.

Instead we'd gotten a few of their soldiers, a single group of riders and a bunch of aristocrats that must have been hilariously low down the pecking order for them to be taken out by mere legionaries. I didn't mean to sell the Fifteenth short: there weren't a lot of forces in the Empire or out of it I wouldn't pit them against. They were highly skilled professional soldiers led by the most talented tactician I'd ever met, with the core of their troops blooded against devils and heavy cavalry. They were not, however, equipped to stand against a host of demigods who could warp the landscape with an idle thought. No, if the Winter King had been serious about getting a foothold in Marchford right now he'd have one. Actually taking the city, then, had not been his objective. *If you know the means and the results, you can grasp your enemy's intent*, Black had taught me.

The attacks had been the means. The results were that I'd sallied out to fight the fae, by necessity stepping into Arcadia to shut down the door on their fingers. There was a distinct possibility, then, that getting me here – whether that was Arcadia in general or Skade I could only guess – had been the entire point of that affair. I took a moment to master my rage at the thought. I had no way of knowing how many casualties we'd taken on the second attack, but the number would not be small. My soldiers, killed just to get my attention. I breathed in and out until I could think beyond *murdering my way through everyone responsible for that*. All right. We'd been pushed towards Skade by the Winter King, and after getting there had been directed to the Still Courtyard. I was willing, for now, to assume that had been the plan. I'd been neatly guided to the city, every step thinking I was bluffing my way out.

At the Courtyard we'd found an invitation waiting for us, meant for someone of high rank but perhaps not of the Winter Court. I was pretty sure mortals didn't usually come this deep into Arcadia unless they were as ragingly insane as the Lady of the Lake, so odds were this invitation was for another fae. That meant the Summer Court, and wasn't that just another kettle of equally murderous fish? The Courts were meant to be at war, I knew, but somehow they were not. Summer was out there making someone regret their decisions and Winter was puttering about in my backyard – yet even with that difference from the norm, the

stories were unfolding. Like they had in the marketplace, everyone going through the motions and always leading to the same outcome.

"He wants us to play someone else's role," I spoke into the empty room.

We'd been summoned to fill the shoes of some Summer fae, inserted into a story we didn't know the plot of. *Why?* And that was the question, wasn't it? Two people out there were playing shatranj on a board I didn't know about, and once more I was a pawn. I wouldn't be finding any answers in a bath, though, so it was time to go. I hoisted myself out, reaching for the cloth set aside on a bench to dry myself. I raised an eyebrow when I saw my trousers had disappeared, setting the cloth on my shoulder and heading for the bedroom. My armour was gone as well, I saw, as was everything but my sword belt and cape. Neatly placed on the bed was a dress of green brocade with accents of gold thread, along with an ornate fox mask of gold with green accents.

I tried on the dress as much out of curiosity as because I wouldn't be going out naked in the corridors to ask for my plate back. It fit perfectly: sleeveless, high-collared and going down to my ankles, it was the single most comfortable thing I'd ever worn. A looking glass made of ice to the side told me the cut was hinting at my having cleavage in a way that was slightly less than honest. I could move easily in it, though bending over was tricky – still, no more than it would have been with armour on.

"Well, it wouldn't do to show up at a masquerade in plate," I murmured.

I buckled my belt around my hip, adjusting so my sword would be easy to draw. Looking for something to replace my boots I found exquisite crystal slippers. *Not happening*, I snorted. Those would be impossible to fight in. The pair of supple leather boots by them was more to my taste, as were the green silk thigh-high stockings inside them. Hadn't worn anything this nice since I'd gone dancing with Kilian in Laure, I thought, and decided I was definitely stealing all of that when I bailed out of Arcadia. The cloak settled comfortably around my shoulder, Hakram's handiwork of striped banners flourishing behind me as I turned to pick up the mask. I left the room to look for the others, blinking when I saw out the window that night had already fallen. How long had I been in that bath? *Stupid question, Catherine. Like time means anything here: Could have been in there just long enough to dip your toe and it'd still be dark out.*

Archer's rooms had been just further down the hall so I checked there first, but the door was open and no one was in. I wandered a bit before running into a servant, who after the obligatory kneeling and abject submission guided to me to the library – I was apparently the last out and all the others had gone to

Masego. Library, as I found out, was something of a misnomer. Though the walls were covered with stacks filled with volumes, the amount of plush chairs and tables made it clear this was meant to be a room where people were received. Small orbs of fairy flame floating like chandeliers lit up the place with a subtle blue tint. Apprentice was easily found: he was alone on his chair, an orb floating right above his head as he paged through a manuscript. Two piles of volumes flanked him and he paid no attention whatsoever to the others.

This was the first time I'd ever gotten a good look at Archer, so I paid close attention. My guess that she was stacked underneath the layers seemed to have been right on the nose: her grey vest and white shirt curved noticeably. Over it she wore a long woollen coat of darker grey, embroidered with gold patterns along the border that matched the exact shade of the gold on my dress. Long grey trousers ending in soft leather shoes, her neck covered by a carelessly arranged silk scarf matching the coat. I could see the handle of her longknives peeking out, but of the bow there was no trace. She had a thinner face than I would have thought, and a remarkably slender nose. Hazelnut eyes met mine, going up and down my dress with a grin. Yeah, I'd seen that one coming.

I almost laughed when I saw Hakram. He wore a dark velour doublet and matching trousers that made it clear exactly how broad his shoulders were, but the amusing part was the cape: black fur with pure white bordering, it made him look like Creation's fanciest warlord. The axe – not his own, it had been broken earlier this one was too silvery to be his after repair – hanging off a leather ring at his belt lent him a slightly more martial appearance, as did the thick leather boots. The skeletal fingers that had seen him called Deadhand by his own peeked over the edge of his sleeve, unnaturally still.

"There were golden earrings and white war paint," he said in an aggrieved tone. "*War paint*, Cat. What is this, the War of Chains? No one's used that in centuries."

"I'm sure you'd make for a very costly hour at a brothel," I reassured him.

He groaned and covered his eyes.

"I always did wonder if orcs have the same... machinery down there as we do," Archer said with a shit-eating grin.

"We're not having the 'what do orc genitals look like' talk," Hakram replied firmly.

"I have a book, I'll loan it to you," I told Archer.

She raised a perfect eyebrow.

"Got curious," I shrugged. "And he gets all irritable when asked about it."

"Masego never changed," Adjutant said, desperately changing the subject.

We all turned towards Apprentice, who was still reading.

"I think he's under a silencing ward," I said with a frown.

I took out the the invitation scroll and tossed it at the dark-skinned mage's head. It hit him right in the glasses and he nearly jumped out of his skin, dropping the book and hastily dispersing the spell around him.

"Oh, is it time to leave yet?" he asked.

"My guess is that will be whenever we decide to go," I said, "but we've got places to be. Go get ready."

That got some attention from the others.

"The invitation?" Archer asked.

"We're going to a masquerade," I said. "To find out exactly who we're supposed to be."

"That seems counterproductive," Masego pointed out. "We'd be wearing masks."

I wasn't sure if I was just terrible at the vague-but-meaningful announcements or Apprentice was that much of a pain, but clearly my technique needed work.

"Did you notice how we're all wearing different clothes, Masego?" I said.

He paused, pushed up his spectacles.

"Yes," he lied.

Archer coughed into her hand, failing to disguise her laughter.

"I'm guessing there's a fancy outfit in your rooms," I patiently told Apprentice. "Go put it on."

"My robes are clean, if that's what you're worried about," he said. "There's a self-cleaning enchantment on them."

So *that* was why he never used the Fifteenth's laundry chains. I'd always assumed he had some poor – literal – devil handling it.

"We also have masks," I said, bringing up my own.



I glanced at the others, who didn't seem to have their own, and Hakram gestured a table in the back. Theirs were there: a black obsidian bear for Adjutant, and a gold-and-grey falcon for Archer. Apprentice snapped his wrist, whispering a word in the mage tongue, and a thin blank carnival mask of ice formed over his face. It accommodated his spectacles perfectly, at least.

"Fine," I said, "have it your way. But don't come complaining to me if the fae make fun of you."

"Do I *have* to talk with them?" he asked very seriously. "I'm not even close to finished with these."

He rapped his knuckle atop the pile of books to his left to clarify. I bet the Lone Swordsman never had to deal with shit like this, I thought irritably. Killing him had been an act of justice just for that.

"You can bring one," I said. "And only read when someone's not verbally trying to entrap us into something lethal."

He muttered under his breath. His fathers had spoiled him, I thought. I didn't want to make assumptions here, but I was betting on the incubus for the worst of it. He was probably a soft touch when it came to discipline. The matron at the orphanage always spanked us if we made noise after lights out, now *that* was a firm hand. I took back the invitation and adjusted my cloak.

"All right, you sad excuse for a band of minions," I said. "Gird your loins, we're going on a magical adventure."

Archer clapped, painfully slowly.

"I'm guessing the speeches aren't why they put you in charge," she said.

"Last time we went on an adventure I ripped out someone's soul," Apprentice said. "Do I get to keep it this time if we do it again?"

"Hakram?" I asked despairingly.

"Have you seen how tight those trousers are?" he grunted. "Doesn't get more girded than that."

If we all got killed, I better go last. I felt like I'd earned it.

—

There'd been a carriage waiting for us outside the Courtyard. Four white horses and a coachman who'd bowed to us as we claimed the seats inside. I'd gotten Hakram on my side, making the

tactical decision to sacrifice Masego behind if Archer got grabby. I peered out the window, watching Skade in the light of ever-present fairy lights. I didn't recognize any of the streets we went through from earlier, though that didn't mean much. The night sky above us was just as confusing: now and then I got a glimpse of the stars they way they looked above Callow, but most of the time they were entirely foreign constellations. The way they kept changing between every look probably didn't help. We were quiet on the way to the duke's palace, only stirring when we began to hear music in the distance.

A beautiful voice was singing, though I couldn't make out the words yet, accompanied by what seemed like a set of string instruments. The carriage eventually slowed and I waited patiently until servants came to open the doors for us. I stepped down onto a woven blue carpet leading to a set of stairs, moving aside to make room for the others as I stared at the Duke of Violent Squalls' palace. Gods Below, it was made of *wind*. Walls and stairs and columns, sculpted out of every stirring wind that looked like a physical thing. Boreal lights shone like lamps and I could see more of them inside, in a grand hall. A servant attempted to take my cloak and I waved him off as the others caught up to me.

"Stable and self-sustaining," Apprentice murmured. "Interesting. I don't think it could be reproduced outside Arcadia, but the underlying principles..."

"Think about that after we've made it through the night," Adjutant said.

Archer finished adjusting her falcon mask over her face and gallantly offered me her arm. I rolled my eyes and strode forward. Servants parted for us, bowing low, until we reached the summit of the steps. There a man with spectacles was holding an unrolled scroll in his arms, discreetly peering at us through the glass. An announcer. *So much for the masks hiding identities*. I slowed in front of him and he began to speak, then closed his mouth. He looked panicked for a few heartbeats before clearing his throat.

"Lady Catherine Foundling of Marchford, the Squire," he announced.

I looked at him, then suddenly ripped the scroll out of his hands. I ignored his protests and scanned through the list of names until I found where he'd been looking at. Four names, the most important of which was the first: *Princess Sulia of High Noon, envoy for the Summer Court*. I gave him back his list.

"Fuck," I said feelingly.

Archer was announced as 'Lady Archer of Refuge, first pupil of the Darkest Night', before catching up to me.

"What do you know about how wars start between Winter and Summer?" I asked her.

"They have several reasons, never use the same twice," she replied.

Behind us Hakram was announced as 'Lord Adjutant of the Fifteenth, the Deadhand'.

"Is one of them some princess called Sulia getting her ass killed at truce talks?" I asked.

The other Named frowned.

"That rings a bell," she said. "But I think she gets captured. Trap?"

"Isn't it always?" I grunted.

Masego joined us after his introduction of 'Lord Apprentice of the Wasteland, Son of the Red Skies'. We all clustered at the threshold of the entrance hall for a moment.

"Problem?" Hakram said.

"We've taken the place of diplomatic envoys from Summer in a story," I whispered.

"That doesn't sound good," Apprentice said. "I suppose it's a good thing we have you along."

I glanced at him.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're very good at murdering our opposition," he said, genuinely believing he was giving me a compliment.

I occasionally forgot Masego had been raised by villains. For him that probably counted as praise.

"You don't know for sure I'm going to kill someone," I said.

"Not gonna lie, I'll be disappointed if we don't," Archer noted.

"I've done diplomacy before," I continued.

"I don't think extorting the High Lords counts," Apprentice said.

"Or looting that angel," Hakram added.

"I think bullied might be more accurate," Masego said.

"If you guys keep this up I can *guarantee* you someone's getting killed," I said.

"That's the spirit," Apprentice said, patting my shoulders. "Now let's move along, Catherine, we're blocking the way. You really need to pay more attention to your surroundings."

He strode into the hall before I could come up with a reply, still gaping. The others followed, Archer turning back only long enough to give me a mocking grin.

---

*Kingbob12*

My first chapter after finally catching up, and it's amazing! I love them all so much.

*Teal*

Mine too!!

[shimizubad](#)

First time being first, normally there's tons of comments before I finish reading. Love the story, but I don't normally know what to comment.

[shimizubad](#)

Damn, minutes late to submit

[The Aimless Passerby](#)

Don't start with that crap here.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Well maybe you shouldn't have left a comment then?

*letouriste*

--

anyway, getting first is not so hard. the posts are out the same day at around the same hour every week and there is not any F5 army or cultivators here.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I'd like to think no one here is trying to get the first comment because we're all more mature than 12 year olds, but apparently not 😊

Grow the hell up! Post because you have something to say! There is no other reason to do so.

[shimizubad](#)

Calm down, and sorry. I wasn't trying being first and I don't normally comment if I don't have anything constructive to say. It's just that it wasn't showing any comments and I thought "well, why not". I don't Normally comment here because by the time that I start reading there's already tons of comments and everything I had to say had already being said. This time I was already tired enough that I oversimplified what I wanted to say and now that I read my comment again I really sound like a 12 year old sacreaming for attention.

Now a tip: I noticed that some trolls started doing it just to see people pissed. You know what not to do with trolls, don't you?

*knockoffnikolai*

Don't worry about Warren NFL Peace Report, they tend to be abrasive at everyone. It's nothing personal.

*Lucas*

Thanks for the new chapter 😊

*The Archdevil*

I was dying at "Last time we went on an adventure, I ripped out someone's soul. Do I get to keep it this time?"

Masego always makes the chapters better.

*sheer\_falacy*

That was beautiful.

" A servant attempted to take my cloak and I waver him off as the others caught up to me."

waved instead of waver

"What do you know about how wars start between Winter and Summer?" I asked her.

"They have several, never use the same twice," she replied.

That doesn't quite line up. Also, "never use the same twice" doesn't really work with Cat trying to figure out what's going to happen to her.

### *Euodiachloris*

You can have a trend in results without repeating the steps to get there. 😊

AVR

More typos

fairies got gold.

fairies got cold.

handle of her longknives

handles of her longknives

broken earlier this one

broken earlier, this one

darks-skinned

dark-skinned

the suddenly ripped

then suddenly ripped

### *Morgenstern*

" Walls and stairs and columns, sculpted out of every stirring wind that looked like a physical thing. "

I'd guess "every stirring" is meant to be "ever-stirring".

*stevenneiman*

"Who knew, maybe even fairies got [gold->cold]"

"Carefully I broke the seal on the scroll having [shaking->shaken] my hands off the worst of the droplets"

"The axe – not his own, it had been broken earlier this one was too silvery to be his after repair" I'm not sure exactly what this was supposed to say

"I took out the the invitation scroll and tossed it at the [darks->dark]-skinned mage's head."

"Apprentice snapped his [wrist->fingers]" alternatively,

"Apprentice flicked his wrist"

"I got a glimpse of the stars [they->the] way they looked above Callow"

"I looked at him, [the->then] suddenly ripped the scroll out of his hands."

*WealthyAardvark*

decision to sacrifice Masego behind if Archer got grabby.  
-> Masego's behind, possessive?

*JackbeThimble*

Since book 3 started there's been something strange about Catherine's voice. This hasn't affected the interludes but the main plot chapters have gotten much more wordy than they need to be, constantly going off on stream-of-consciousness tangents that don't really add anything to the story and are actually kind of repetitive and annoying. This hasn't been as noticeable in the last few chapters since they've mostly been action and worldbuilding but even so I feel like the past 10 chapters have been at least twice as long as they needed to be. There is also a tendency to add lots of unnecessary detail (like was it really necessary to spend two paragraphs describing the process of getting undressed and going to the bath?). I remember a similar thing happened in the later chapters of HPMOR and Worm and eventually it got so bad that they became almost unreadable. Maybe this is like a common step in development as a writer, once you hit your stride where you no longer have to worry about producing you find yourself going crazy and overdoing it? Something to consider anyway.

*letouriste*

maybe you see too much in this, this is the place of stories.  
cat taking a bath have probably several meanings  
here^^.also, this is possible the clothes will impact the next  
few chapters in a way so they are important.

*lennymaster*

I believe you worry too much about the quality of the story dropping. Most of these tangents either serve as world building, setting the mood or adding humor, all of which I think are important. I do however believe that these take up more of the chapters and slow down the pace of story development as well as stretch out passages between action scenes. In the long run probably good, since it rounds out the books with high quality writing, however annoying in the short term it may be to some.

I believe this development stems from erraticerrata preparing for reaching the 350\$ donation goal on patreon and thus the additional Monday chapter release. The counter is after all already at 301\$. Maybe in a few months time we can all enjoy twice the amount of Guide per week.

Question to erraticerrata at this point, although it has most likely been answered at some point, I am simply too lazy too look, when will you publish this amazing series?

*Nicole*

I love how hilarious the banter and thoughts are. It is a bit different, but I feel like its a good different 😊

*amy*

no, no... they're not getting "longer than they need to be...", it's just that the narrator is getting to know us better. that's why today's quote was about shyness...

[taborask](#)

I really agree with this actually. My biggest complaint about WildBow's writing has always been that his characters go off on incredibly long tangents explaining every detail of their decision processes to one another. I stopped reading Twig when it got so bad that entire chapters would consist of about 5 minutes worth of story, since everyone was engaging in thematically inappropriate monologuing the whole time.

Erraticerrata isn't anywhere near that bad yet, but I've definitely noticed him heading in that direction.

*James, Mostly Harmless*

I suspect that this is a case of the Winter King tried to hold a war, but nobody came because Summer is going after Heiress ...

*letouriste*

hum...from what we know summer have a stronger army so that don't make much sense to provoke a war from their side.

*Morgenstern*

The "Summer's envoy getting captured" would seem to imply exactly that having happened at least once, though.

*kinigget*

Cat's idea of diplomacy does tend to be "do what I want and maybe I won't stab you"

if the Winter King thinks she's going to fall into the role given to her then he \*clearly\* doesn't know her very well

[Euodiachloris](#)

I shudder to think what roles he's trying to stuff Hackram and Masego into. Archer? Meh. Ranger's trained her... she can probably deconstruct it in her sleep without unpicking what passes for reality around her. ;P

*Cpt. Obvious*



Can you see Masego pay enough attention to a story that he will play any role other than Masego, Apprentice, son of Warlock and pissed off because they keep disturbing him when he's reading?

*Nicole*

I would imagine as powerful as the Winter King is, he specifically looked around for someone who fit the role best... and we know summer is warlike. Catherine might very well be a mirror image of the envoy who was captured.

*letouriste*

thanks for the chapter, liked that:)  
all the chapter felt significant and the masego bit was really funny^^

*Shequi*

You just got sassed by Apprentice, Cat. That's gotta sting.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

I don't think the Fae look at their Court wars from any rational standpoint like "Summer is the season for war, so they're stronger." As Cat said, the Fae are like a race of Named invested in telling/re-telling their stories. I don't think the results of the stories they work their way through matter to them nearly so much as the acting them out.

I really adored the passage where Hakram pointed that out to Cat when they were passing the market. That encapsulated the Otherness of the Fae, and likely set the tone for what's going to happen in the larger sense here.

As for being overly wordy...it's the deeps of Arcadia. Probably one of, if not THE most exotic locale the story will feature. I feel it more than merits the extra descriptiveness to effectively convey that sheer Otherness which infuses Arcadia in general, and Skade in specific here. I mean what's the point of characters visiting an intensely magical, reality-optional locale if that doesn't carry across to the reader's sensibilities?

*Cpt. Obvious*

Also remember that Fey can't die in Arcadia. Or rather they can die, but will resurrect the next time their season starts over. But as Arcadia makes as much sense as sneakers on a fish Winter and Summer both exists at the same time just so they can make war on each other.

Remember that little tidbit about Ranger ripping out one of The Lord of Squalls (I think it was) eyes and setting it in a ring?

Archer was telling the others about how the Fey resurrected every winter in Arcadia. The fact that he still didn't have that eye implied that the loss of the eye might carry over when he reforms. But Archers comment about how much the Lady (as in Lady of the Lake) liked that ring suggests that Hye actually travel to Arcadia every Arcadian winter to rip that eye out again. There's a reason Ranger isn't particularly welcome in Arcadia. Not that she seems to care much...

*Soronel Haetir*

It sucks to get shoved into a play when you don't know your lines (or even whether you are the hero or villain).

*alegio*

I believe that these chapters where the Nameds just talk among themselves and build their characters are probably my favorites, only way to get better would be with a certain goblin tribune that collects body parts, but one cant have all in this life.

And the way Cat has been "collecting" her gang of Nameds makes me think that in some time Heiress will end up joining. Seeing how she by now should have her own group of nameds to oppose Cats and how the groups most glaring weakness is around the social part.

*Morgenstern*

Aisha, though. 😊 Plus Ratface for the more dubious parts of society..

*stevenneiman*

I don't see it. Akua is defined entirely by the parts of Praesi culture that Cat and Amadeus are trying to remove, and she's too stubborn to see the truth that their style of practical evil is better. Besides, she's just too much of a loose cannon and all of her most useful skills require her to remain such.

*Unmaker*

"You can bring one," I said. "And only read when someone's not verbally trying to entrap us into something lethal."

Translation: He won't even get past the title page.

In the heroic interlude, it was stated that:

*As long as the Hedge Wizard and the Champion kept bickering 'amusingly', they were essentially untouchable.*

I am wondering if a similar principle applies here when Cat plays straight 'man' to her subordinates' comic foils. If that were true, you would think that Black and company would be using the principle. But I can't imagine Black actually playing straight man or comic foil.

*maresther23*

Have we read the same interludes? Black and Captain bicker like siblings. Black and Warlock have an ongoing prank war using names. Black and Malicia spend their time with word games and evil plots. Ranger ignores all the inanity around her. Scribe is the ultimate straight woman ever. They are hilarious.

*stevenneiman*

And lets not forget about the goats and the dragon, or that time he toppled an kingdom drunk.

*stevenneiman*

Scribe and Black also has the same unspoken and unrequited love as Page and Exiled Prince, but not quite so painfully obvious. In other news, I really wish I could edit my comments on wordpress rather than having to look at my typos and know that they will persist for all eternity.

[Webway](#)

ikr best piece of web fiction on the... web.

*Dragrath*

I love this series haha yeah dangerous role you got placed in Kat... Yeah the otherness of this place really hits home with these details the fae telling out stories the sudden plot driven changes happening in a mere instant as the story calls for yeah unnatural and dangerous.

I can't wait to see how Kat messes up the story 😊

Though yes she will have to be really careful as the Fae are OP as hell... Yeah straight up fighting isn't liable to be effective unless the "plot" of this story calls for it...

*anonymous*

The link to this chapter in the TOC leads to "Chapter 11: Swerve" instead

[David Lynch](#)

I admit, I came here to say this as well.

*Edward Ryan*

wow this is really good but is 'fairies got gold' supposed to be 'fairies got cold'

*burguulkodar*

This was hilarious. Love Masego.

Wooff

On the Table of Contents, the link to this leads to Chapter 11. You should probably fix that.

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## Chapter 11: Swerve

*"Only if it's 'being executed'."*

– Dread Emperor Terribilis I, upon being asked for a last request by a hero

There were hundred of fae inside, each more glittering than the last. I'd seen the court of Praes and the opulence of its nobles, but this was a *Court*. That capitalized letter mattered. These immortal creatures had been at this game since the Empire was nothing but a madwoman's dream and the difference showed. We'd gone through the duke's antechamber and entered what must be the reception hall, keeping together as we did. Hakram being at my left had a reassuring weight, like having a shield. Our entrance had made a stir but we weren't immediately approached: all we got was a myriad of discreet looks as fae murmured over their drinks. Archer took wine from a tray of silver cups, ignoring my disapproving look as she tasted the glittering liquid and hummed in approbation.

"Good stuff," she said.

"Don't get drunk," I warned.

"You know the poison trick works for flushing out liquor, right?" she said.

"And if this was wine from Creation I would have kept my mouth shut," I said. "It isn't."

"Eh," she shrugged.

And on that bit of stunning eloquence we silently agreed to let the matter go for now. Given that I'd seen her guzzling down hard liquor instead of tea for breakfast last year, I was willing to bet on Archer being able to hold her drink better than most. Anyway, I had more pressing cats to skin than trying to make a sober woman out of this one. The reception hall had half a dozen interwoven stories of the same wind-material this entire place was made of, all centred around the ballroom floor in the middle of the ground level. Which was, for now, empty. Or almost – I'd

finally found where the music came from. There were seven fae on a podium against the wall, most of them playing instrument but a single one singing the words I still couldn't make out even this close. Magical shenanigans, I assumed. The melody was sad and I could hazard a good guess as to why: all of them were clapped in silvery chains and looked like they'd gone a few rounds with an Imperial interrogator. And not one of the nice ones.

"Those aren't Winter fae," Hakram said, watching the same people.

They were most definitely not, I grimly thought. Their clothes were in tones that matched the décor but they themselves stood out. There was a warmth to their being that all the other fae around them lacked, a softness to their silhouettes: to my senses they felt like candlelight while the guests felt like ice. *Summer Court prisoners*. I was beginning to glimpse a shape here. I was in the shoes of a Summer princess, likely part of a diplomatic mission of some sort. After coming to a masquerade thrown by a duke, I would then run into some of my fellow Summer fairies who'd been forced into servitude and cruelly beaten. Someone was trying to goad me – the role I was in – into doing something unwise. Interesting that the princess would be expected to save them, though. Summer wasn't as prone to tormenting mortals in the stories as Winter, but they weren't exactly paragons of kindness either.

"That's where we're expected to go," I murmured. "So let's go elsewhere. Any of you know anything about mingling with aristocrats?"

"Smile and pretend you're listening," Masego said absent-mindedly. "If there's a lull in the conversation say *how interesting* with a mysterious look."

"So that's a no," Archer said amusedly.

Well, she wasn't wrong. I took the lead and went to the left. The others followed. Entering one of the side galleries seemed to have been an unspoken signal that we were fair game for conversation: all the guests who'd been keeping their distance began approaching. I wasn't the only target, it swiftly became clear. Or even the first one. Some green-haired woman with eyes that looked like jewels struck up a conversation with Masego about magic and I gave it up as a lost cause the moment the words "partitioned stable matrix" were spoken. As far as temptations went that was one was mostly harmless, so I left him to it. Archer was approached by tall grinning dark-haired twins – of different genders, I thought, but it was hard to tell which was which – bearing bottles of liquor that looked harder than wine. *They're tailoring themselves to what we want*, I thought.

"Lord Hakram, I believe?" an older fae coughed out. "You have the looks of an orc from the Howling Wolves, if I may be so bold."

Adjutant raised an eyebrow.

"I am," he gravelled.

"How nostalgic," the noble smiled gently. "It has been ages since I've encountered one of your kind. I had the pleasure to visit the Antlered Field when the one called Kharsum became Warlord."

The tall orc leaned forward unconsciously.

"You saw the election of the Unifier?" he asked.

"Oh yes," the fae said. "Always a lively affair, orc statecraft. I've watched battlefields littered with fewer dead."

I'd been wondering what take they would use with Hakram. Orc history made sense. His people had lost so much knowledge since the War of Chains and the occupation that followed. Every bit of lore from back then was worth more than gold to his people, another piece of stone to add to a mosaic that was still more bare than filled. He glanced at me and I nodded. Sticking together wasn't making us any gains at the moment, we'd have to wait and see what the flow of the story was. I was rather curious what angle they'd assail me with, truth be told. Unless they could find me a practical way to turn the Imperial governorship system into a functioning nation-state, they didn't have much to distract me with. The answer came in the form of the Baron of Blue Lights – one of the nobles who'd escorted me into the city – strolling casually in my direction. When we'd last met he'd been wary but interested. Now he looked at me with open hatred.

"Antagonist, are you?" I said with a smile before he could get a word in.

He blinked, face going entirely blank for a moment. Like his entire being had shut down. *You lot don't like it when I don't speak my lines, do you?* I'd found my first lever to pull. Wouldn't get me through this mess, but it was something I could use.

"Do you enjoy the singing, my lady?" he said after a moment, defaulting back to sneering.

I'd seen Heiress pull better sneers than that, I thought with amusement. He wasn't even silently finding the very concept of my existence distasteful. Second-rate performance.

"Not one much for music," I said. "Also beating the performers seems in poor taste, but that's just a personal preference."

"Captives have no rights," he said.

"I mean you guys haven't signed any of the Calernian treaties about prisoner treatment, so I guess you're factually correct," I

mused. "Not that the Empire has either, mind you. The whole blood sacrifice thing would be a breach of terms I imagine."

The Baron seemed completely at a loss as to where to go from there.

"They will all be whipped if one misses a note," he tried.

"That's nice," I said. "Does everyone take a turn, or is it just the one torturer? Never whipped anyone before so I don't want to make a fool of myself in public."

I wondered what it said about me that I was beginning to enjoy myself. Obviously there'd been an assumption here that on moral grounds I would object to the Summer fairies being chained up and tormented. Swing and a miss, that. Not only were those musicians essentially immortal creatures that would come around again next time Summer happened, but they were also not mine to protect. Now if it had been members of the Fifteenth or Callowans on that stage, he'd be choking on steel right now. My motivation to save fae from fae, though, was effectively nil. I'd been taught the hard way, after all, that if you tried to save everyone you only ended up getting more people killed. I wasn't unfamiliar with hard choices and this... simply did not qualify. I wasn't risking my life or the life of my friends for ultimately meaningless fairy schemes. *Villain, Baron, not hero. I get to pick my fights.*

I patted the Baron of Blue Lights on the shoulder and left him blank-faced behind me. I idly wondered whether my refusing to bite I had killed the trap entirely, or if I'd merely survived the first volley. Probably the second one: my luck was the stuff weeping despair was made of. And just to confirm that shining sliver of pessimism, lounging by a pillar I saw the Prince of Nightfall eyeing me wryly. I grimaced. This one wouldn't be as easy to fuck with.

"Enjoying the masquerade, Lady of Marchford?" he said.

Predictably, the man's mask was a raven. I got the less than reassuring feeling that it was watching me independently of the wearer's eyes. I leaned against the railing by his side, watching the empty ballroom below.

"It's been enlightening," I replied. "Pretty obvious trap, for entities supposedly cunning made flesh."

"A well-laid trap does not rely on surprise but on the opponent's nature," he said.

A servant with a plate approached us. There were two pipes on it, both already lit: one smelled sweet and musky, and the Prince grabbed it. Ground poppy, if I was not mistaken. The other had the distinct sharp tang of wakeleaf, a personal vice of mine.

"Is it poisoned?" I asked the dark-haired fae.

"If I ever decide I want your life," the Prince said, "poison will play no part in your death."

"That's not a no," I noted.

"It is not poisoned," he sighed.

I took the pipe. Would be a shame to waste the stuff, especially when I could so rarely afford it these days. Ashur had raised all its prices on the merchandise imported by Praes after war blew up in the Free Cities, and the island was the only place where it was grown. I inhaled with a little sigh of pleasure and blew out the grey smoke.

"Your King picked wrong when he baited me into coming here," I said. "Whatever it is you're after, you're not going to get it."

"That's the beauty of it, Lady Foundling," he smiled, face framed by a cloud of poppy. "What we want is what you want. Our victories are one and the same."

So the Prince was in on whatever his boss was up to. Good to know. I wasn't deluded enough to think my idle talk had been enough to trick the man into revealing that, so the implication was that the Prince believed it *didn't matter* if I knew.

"Where's Princess Sulia, right now?" I asked suddenly.

He chuckled.

"Setting fire to the south of your little kingdom," he said. "Even for one of us, the Princess of High Noon has a beautifully simplistic view of things."

I inhaled again, let the wakeleaf warm my blood and sharpen my wits. The idea of an entity with the same kind of power I could feel emanating from the Prince being loose in Callow was horrifying beyond words, but I could not flinch now. I might never get another occasion half as good to gather information.

"Now I get that you think you can mess with *me*," I said. "I'm just a wet-behind the ears Named with a single aspect."

The Prince of Nightfall blew a ring of smoke, raising an eyebrow.

"While my role has little to do with intrigue, that is an exceedingly poor lie," he said.

I kept my face calm. Could he really tell? Masego would know, but he also knew better than to say anything. I'd learned from the fights of the Liesse Rebellion that aspects were trump cards to be used sparingly and best kept hidden – the Lone Swordsman had



known about Struggle before our second fight and used it against me, which he wouldn't have been able to if I'd kept it quiet. I'd taken in the lesson and kept what I'd gotten in the aftermath of the Battle of Liesse close to my chest, the edge hidden until I could use it to crush Heiress.

"No idea what you're talking about," I lied. "Anyway, like I was saying, messing with me is one thing. Invading Imperial territory like the Courts have been doing, though? That's another. There's bigger fish in that sea, and you're pissing them off."

"Your Calamities are away," he said. "And even if they were not, their finely crafted defences were not meant for us."

Two things I could take from that, I thought. Either they'd struck Callow now because the Empire's most dangerous villains were all abroad save for the Empress – who had to stay in Ater – and they expected whatever they were after to be achieved before the Calamities came back. That or they genuinely believed they could take on Praes on its traditional battlefield and win. Of that, I wasn't convinced. When push came to shove there weren't a lot of drastic measures the Dread Empire was above taking to get a win. While in Arcadia the Legions would get wrecked, but on Creation the fae were weaker. And if there was a Calernian nation with the magical know-how to make real trouble for the Courts, it was definitely Praes – or the Kingdom of the Dead, I supposed, but you'd have to be a special kind of stupid to take a crack at that. Entire Crusades had been annihilated without even reaching Keter.

"It's still a bad fight to pick," I said.

Another servant with a plate of pipes came by and the Prince traded his for a fresh one. I glanced at the second hit of wakeleaf.

"Is it poisoned?" I asked again.

"No pipe you will be offered tonight will be poisoned," the dark-haired fae said irritably.

I took the second one. There was a still a bit left at the bottom of my current pipe and the waste broke my heart, but I couldn't know if I'd get another offer.

"The first time I ever stepped into Creation," the Prince of Nightfall told me, pulling at his pipe, "I found it a brutish, ugly thing. A pale imitation of Arcadia painted with lesser pigments. While my fellows rejoiced across the fresh playground, I began to withdraw."

The longer he spoke, the colder I felt. Not the sharp bite of winter, I decided, but more like the cool air that spread after sundown. I tugged my cloak closer around my dress.

"I paused after coming across a fox," he continued with a smile. "It had fallen into a trap laid by one of your ancestors, you see. A snare that caught its foot. It knew it would die, if it remained there."

I frowned.

"It chewed off its foot," I guessed. "The smart ones do that sometimes."

"Yes," the Prince of Nightfall agreed. "And it escaped. An insignificant animal, yet it could do something that would never have occurred to any of us."

Oh Gods did I not like the sound of that.

"You're chewing off your foot right now," I said.

The dark-haired fae blew out a thick stream of smoke ahead of him. He leaned forward suddenly, and right in front of my face clacked his teeth mockingly.

"Our teeth are a great deal sharper than a fox's, Lady of Marchford," he said. "Beware you don't get chewed."

Dropping his pipe onto a servant-held plate that hadn't been there a moment earlier, the Prince of Nightfall sauntered off. I let out a long breath and stilled the trembling in my hands. I took another pull of wakeleaf and closed my eyes. *Hello fear, my old friend. It's been a while, hasn't it?* I spewed out the smoke and opened my eyes to find another fae leaning by my side. Tall, like most of them, and so pale he might as well have been made of snow. He was closer than was strictly proper and his hare mask did not hide the affection in his eyes. I'd seen the first of my antagonists, I thought. Looked like it was time to meet an ally.

"My lady, this is a trap," he murmured softly.

"No kidding," I said.

"The Duke of Violent Squalls means to entrap you," he said. "Soon he'll make a scene to trick you into a wager. You must not rise to his provocations."

I sighed.

"What's your name?" I asked.

His face went blank. I was supposed to know him, then. Which meant the Princess of High Noon had friends in Winter. I glanced

at how close he was standing to me. Maybe more than a friend, even. Wasn't that the stirrings of a proper tragedy? Woe was them, love from across opposite sides. Gods Below, even William had known better than that.

"I am Prospin, the Count of the Last Gasp," he said stiffly. "As you well know."

"Tell me about this wager, Prospin," I said.

"My lady, you *can't*," he implored, reaching for my hands. "It would destroy me to lose you."

Oh yeah definitely more than a friend. I took away my hands before he could touch them.

"I'm sure you'll survive," I replied drily. "Now tell me about the godsdamned wager."

"How you toy with my affections," he lamented.

The Princess of High Noon liked them clingy, apparently. Took all kinds.

"In exchange for the freedom of the musicians, the Duke will ask that you wager your voluntary captivity," he said.

"How's the wager settled?" I asked.

"Duels, for you are a creature of war," Prospin said. "He has three champions ready."

Creature of war, huh. I guess we did have that in common, the princess and I.

"Terms of the duel?" I prompted.

"Death or surrender," the Count whispered.

I clenched my fingers and unclenched them. I could work with that.

"My lady, they are ready for you," he said. "I beg of you, do not give them what they want."

And there was the truth, wasn't there? They'd been ready for me since the beginning. Every move I'd made since the first attack on Marchford had gotten me deeper into their plan. It was an infuriating feeling, and I got quite enough of that from Black already. Except my teacher wasn't here: there was no safety net under me, no monster looking over my shoulder and smiling at my enemy. If I fell here I'd break more than bones. The thought only refreshed the fear from earlier and that was unacceptable. I would not be cowed. I would not be made their puppet in this

eldritch game they were playing. They wanted to push me around? Fine. Now it was my turn, and I was going to *push back*. I'd been drawn into their tempo for too long, and that was how you lost fights. At best I'd manage to crawl away to survive, and that just wasn't enough. Not when I'd have dead soldiers to buried when I returned. They were owed better. If I couldn't solve a problem, well, I could always make it *their* problem.

"Which one is the Duke of Violent Squalls?" I asked.

"My lady-" the Count began, but I had no patience for it.

"Prospin," I said. "You can either tell me, or you can go over this railing before I ask someone else."

The fae's face went blank.

"He's the man by the ballroom floor," he said after a moment. "At the centre of the cluster of nobles."

I glanced down and saw the group he was talking about. The Duke wore a grey doublet with cuffs of wind, same as his palace, and his mask was shaped like a wolf. His cronies were tittering at something he said.

"Thank you," I told the Count absent-mindedly.

I walked away without bothering with any further talk. On my way down I passed by another face I recognized, the Lady of Cracking Ice, and she offered me a nod. I looked at the beautiful white gloves she was wearing and smiled a feral smile as I came closer. By her side was a distinguished-looking man in armour, the sight of whom had me adjusting my thought.

"I need to borrow something for a moment," I told the man, reaching for his gauntlet.

I got it off his hand before he could properly react – it was largely ornamental, held there only by clasps – and got moving before he could protest, throwing a 'thanks' over my shoulder. The Duke of Violent Squalls and his cronies hadn't moved, the man in question with his back turned to me as he replied to another noble's question. I was maybe three feet away from him and he couldn't be bothered to pay attention. Well, that was just asking for it.

I judged the gauntlet's weight, then tossed the chunk of metal as hard as I could into the back of the duke's head.

It hit with a beautiful thunk. The fae yelped and I could feel the gaze of every single person at the masquerade going to us as he turned to face me with rage in his eyes.

"Evening," I said, puffing at the pipe. "Don't think we've been introduced. My name is Catherine Foundling, and I hear you want to throw down. Let's get this going, shall we?"

I blew the acrid smoke in his face for that extra touch and decided, why the Hells not?

"Bitch," I added.

The entire hall was silent as a grave, save for the sound of Archer's belly laugh.

---

*danh3107*

Did Catherine just call a powerful evil fairy bitch?

God I love this story

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

"Bitch"

Well good thing she had the wakeleaf powering her wits. So eloquent!

[benthelynx](#)

So good. Daft. Predictable (of her). But good.

*Griff*

Holy shit, I think Catherine is actually the most badass character out of all the webserials I've read.

Bullies angels, and now even fae? All with her big ol' "fuck you, and fuck this" attitude? That's just great, your writing is fantastic.

*PingleBerry*

This is probably not going to end well...for the Fae

*Captain Amazing*

The Fae are actually aware of Catherine's nature, or at least the king and Nightfall know. I'm pretty sure Nightfall almost explicitly said he wanted her there to remove the part that was hobbling them. Traps play upon people's nature after all. I think that duke is some sort of political rival the king wants removed.

B

I don't think so. Every interaction with the fae in this section has reinforced that they are part of an ever repeating story. Even if the Duke is a rival to the King, he wouldn't care. The King will always be the King or at least return so before the next cycle as that is what the story requires.

As the prince said, what the King and Prince want is to break their chains that force them to replay the same story over and over again. So what I believe their goal is is for Catherine to win the three duels thus transferring control of the prisoner Summer Elves to Catherine. Bound to Catherine and in the mortal world, I suspect they won't pop back to where ever they were supposed to be at the start of the next cycle thus breaking this story.

*RandomFan*

Or just carve a new path. Fae are creatures of tales and stories, but if there is a second way the story goes, perhaps that second way will be an option for every reprise of the tale? A weaker, softer, harder path, but... They might just want her to carve new ruts, and the price doesn't matter.

*Hakurei06*

The question here is whether or not this duel counts as enforcing the story or derailing it.  
I wonder who's going to be Cat's second?

[philosophize70](#)

"...what the King and Prince want is to break their chains that force them to replay the same story over and over again."

Which is essentially what the Empress and the Black Knight have been doing. Coincidence? I don't think so.

*Morgenstern*

And here I thought she would finally break the story and see what happens THEN, by NOT falling for it.... instead she just makes her own version of it, as far as I see. The duel(s) is(/are) part of that story. Where's the VILLAIN now?? She could have simply refused to make that wager, let the captives die / see if they actually kill em – and if they do, refuse to make a fuzz because of it and demand retribution. Now THAT would have broken the story. This? Not so much. At least it doesn't feel like it (as of yet), but rather felt like it just re-confirmed and even strengthened it by putting her own twist on it (only) and not breaking it. o\_ô

I'm admittedly confused right now about where this is going, so I hope there is some other twist now coming up that will actually surprise me, seeing how this didn't go at all like I thought it would/should ^^

*jonnney*

I don't think the King is always the same King. If that were the case then Archer would have known what name to sign at the bottom of the fake invitation in chapter 8. It is likely that the titles remain the same, but the individual fey holding said title changes from time to time.

I agree that the Prince and the King would like to break the chains that force the repeating of the cycle. Their motivations could simply be freedom from the story or something mundane like holding onto their current power. They are able to do so now because the summer court is away and these Villains are capable of changing the story on the fly.

It is important to note that while there is a cycle of rebirth the story itself changes with each retelling. As Archer said they never use the same reason twice.

*stevenneiman*

@Morgenstern there's a concept in martial arts called purposeful compliance where you respond to an attempt to move you by going along with it and turning the energy against your attacker instead of resisting like they expected. Cat's doing the same thing here, by moving the story along at her pace rather than letting the fae try to push her along. Considering how incompetently they tried to pidgeonhole her, their real plan probably involved her subverting the whole story.

*Naeddyr*

Oh you've raised my cackles again. This is a great arc, please no switching away to anyone else!

[erraticerrata](#)

Until the arc is resolved there will be no other POV.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Raising your cackles isn't actually a thing. You might as well have said this dings my phlebotomy

*1shot4living*

This tale doth mightily ding my phlebotomy. Another!

*Naeddyr*

Congratulations, you almost got a joke.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

And you almost made one

*Syndic*

I... think I know how Archer feels right this moment. Because I'm reasonably sure her laugh was just like (a more female version of) mine^^

*Nicole Weaver*

I am waiting for Catherine to make off with the power of a fae. They think warping reality is fun and I am sure Catherine will enjoy more fully playing a fae role 😊

The fae would be terrified of her like they are of no other mortal.

*MagnaMalusLupus*

Not sure I agree with that. The fey all have the power of a Named, as they are all much more tightly bound to the Story than other beings. Cat's whole thing is that she not only rejects but rebukes the Story at nearly every turn. She's riding along the edge of her Name in the same way Black is, and I don't think that power that drags her more heavily into stories is something she wants. We've already seen how easily the Rider was forced into a story, knowing full well it would lead to his death; Cat has enough genre savvy to know what problems that can cause.

*Tagline*

This made me think back to the metaphor of a fox chewing it's paw to escape the trap. Calling it now that the fey are planning to use Cat to break out of being trapped by the story, since she defies and subverts it constantly, especially with the way the chapter ends.

*Nicole Weaver*

Sorry, by "playing a fae role" I meant "using the magical and reality warping power of the fae to break their stories too. Fae seem to only have one aspect, so I think she can Take it then do to their stories what she has done to her own.

*dalek955*

Typo thread:



half a dozen interwoven [floors/levels] of the same wind-material  
("Stories" is technically correct, but here in Arcadia it's  
particularly important to distinguish between floors and tales.)

As far as temptations went that [] one was mostly harmless

[Well,] you guys haven't signed any of the Calernian treaties

whether my refusing to bite [] had killed  
or

whether [by] refusing to bite I had killed

the island was the only [place] where it was grown

just a [wet-behind-the-ears] Named

dead soldiers to [bury] when I returned

*Gydd*

for the 'stories/floors/levels' thing, I like the phrase  
'interwoven stories' for the precise reason you dislike it.

In Arcadia, it's hard to tell what is meant to be a story, and  
what isn't. I can well imagine that this would extend to the  
architecture.

[Euodiachloris](#)

I dunno: a storey made of stories sounds very fae. (Note how  
the Commonwealth brands of English avoid the problem? 😊 )

*stevenneiman*

"There were [hundred->hundreds] of fae inside"

"most of them playing [instrument->instruments] but a single  
one singing"

"I'd been wondering what [take->tack] they would use with  
Hakram. "

"I idly wondered whether [my->by] refusing to bite I had killed  
the trap entirely" alternatively, remove the "I"

*arancaytar*

Cat has many talents; a tolerance for being fucked with is not  
one of them.

*Letouriste*

The bitch is just perfect^^ now he can't let his champions fight  
for him without losing face completely right? He will need to  
take the field himself:)

*dalek955*

Great, now she's facing the big guy himself, on his own ground, in a world where authority equals asskicking.

*stevenneiman*

A powerless (but entertaining and relatable) underdog facing down a clearly unbeatable enemy? We all know how this goes.

*Gunslinger*

This fae arc has been phenomenal so far. My only complaint being that we don't get chapters more frequently.

*nick012000*

>"It is not poisoned," he sighed.

>"No pipe you will be offered tonight will be poisoned," the dark-haired fae said irritably.

Odds that the Prince of Nightfall was thinking something to the effect of "Fucking Praesi" right then?

*Morgenstern*

One thing I didn't quite get there, though, was why she wouldn't think about the possibility that he simply might be \*lying\*, too. Not Praesi enough? Or somehow assuming that being part of a story somehow equals not being able to lie? Doesn't make much sense to me that the latter should apply... \*shrugs

*danh3107*

In most stories Fae are incapable of lying.

*jonnnney*

The fey are tricksters they are willing to speak half truths and sins of omission, but lying outright would simply be too easy. Plus it seems that if you lie in Arcadia you merely change what is actually true. So, for all intents and purposes, if the Prince says the pipes aren't poisons then they can't be poison.

*stevenneiman*

@Jonnnney I bet you're right. Which probably means that he was sighing because she managed to make him give up on poisoning her via pipe.

*Barthumphries*

The problem is that what you say in the realm of the fae is also generally true. She said she only has one aspect. He

asked if she was sure and she doubled down. Odds are that when she reaches for her second aspect, it will be temporarily unavailable because she herself confirmed that she only has one aspect.

*Alexander Leaking Pen Hollins*

Oh no, she might still get poisoned by a pipe. No pipe OFFERED. TO HER. will be poison. Should she happen to find a try with some pipes and snag one off it, well... or take someone elses.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Actually, the Duke might well be a paper tiger. (At least compared to say, the Lady of Cracking Ice). If his primary Story is this one, his Champions do his fighting with the Princess of High Noon. Catherine pulling him into a fight might be the physical equivalent of the blank-face she gets when her statements conflict with the Princess's role that they would have Catherine play.

Not that this gets her completely out of the woods. As we saw with her fake invitation, high-level Fae seem capable of deviating from story. It's just not their "natural state" I guess you could say.

Whatever the case, what Catherine did seems like both the right AND the wrong move. Breaking away from the Story where she gets captured in Sulia's place was necessary, and will likely give her some advantage with the Duke. Unfortunately, as the Prince of Nightfall predicted, Catherine has fallen into the meta trap due to her own nature. The King and Prince are playing a deeper game than this Story, after all.

This might actually lead somewhere good for Catherine. Despite the fact the Fae are all about their Stories, there likely is some ACTUAL animosity between the different Courts. Animosity that finds no real expression in retreaded Stories. Catherine being a Villain, and the Winter Fae being the "Dark Side"...would seem like there's some potential for alliance there in helping her sort out at least Marchford's woes.

Though it disturbs me profoundly the Prince of Nightfall knew Catherine's hiding a second, probably recently-developed Aspect. That's some pretty inside knowledge for beings existing outside Creation. Catherine must be important to their goals indeed.

*Morgenstern*

I find it not surprising at all for a being of pure MAGIC that they would be able to see Aspects just like Masego is \*shrugs

*Morgenstern*

So \*that\* tidbit would not be any cause for that conclusion in my book. There are others, of course. 😊

*jonnney*

After regaining her name Catherine gained her first aspect in a matter of hours. She has now been ruling half an empire for months and controls arguably the most powerful single legion/ army on the continent. The deduction that she has gained another aspect in all that time is easy to make.

*Nicole*

I am trying to remember what a 2nd aspect of hers is? I know the last 3, but this time around I only remember Take. Did I overlook an aspect? She even thought to herself she is lying, so I think I did miss something.

*Darkening*

Pretty sure it's a secret from the readers for the moment too, she's been hiding it.

*Morgenstern*

Conclude I'm really, really curious about the next (few) update(s) by now, to finally get to now where all of this is actually leading. =D Damn... having caught up sucks XD

*Unmaker*

What was said about motives was:

Prince: "What we want is what you want. Our victories are one and the same."

Prince: "An insignificant animal, yet it could do something that would never have occurred to any of us."

Catherine: "You're chewing off your foot right now."

You interpreted that as:

"what the King and Prince want is to break their chains that force them to replay the same story over and over again"

Which makes sense, and is a very interesting variation on how the Calamaties are trying to change the story of Praes. And if they have watched Catherine they know she is of the same mould, i.e. she uses and abuses stories rather than blindly following them.

The critical questions are:

What story are the King and the Prince trying to break?

How do they expect to use Catherine?

Will Catherine go along with this?

*Unmaker*

~!@#\$\$%^&\*()\_+

Meant to be a reply to B.

*Shmeezy*

The fae wanted Catherine to avoid the duel completely. It would break them out there cycle of endless wars with the summer court, and free them up to do something else, possibly wage war on creation. She's throwing a wrench into things as per usual.

Btw great story man, I just caught up.

*amceres*

Why are people assuming that Catherine avoided the trap?

Prior to speaking to Prospin, she literally said that she wasn't going to risk herself in order to free the Summer musicians. Then, she talks to someone who begs her not to do (what she wasn't planning on doing anyways), and she initiates a duel. The fae know Cat pretty well, it seems.

Aren't fae famous for setting up bets that they can't lose? That could mean, bets where they benefit regardless of which party wins... My thought: the Princess has always won the duel, so they arranged for someone to take over that isn't constrained to the story. If Cat wins, then, somehow having a human "own" summer fae is useful for the winter fae (as said by B). If Cat loses, then the winter fae have beaten the Princess...

*George*

The fae not losing doesn't mean Cat loses. The situation isn't zero sum. So she doesn't have to subvert the King's plans, only navigate them to a win-win scenario.

[julienbrightside](#)

That ending had me laughing out loud.

*burguulkodar*

Ouch. Moving to your own Tempo. As a fencer, I know the value in this. The point is not about creating a new game or story, but to move into your enemies' calculations whenever they did not expect you to. That can lead to some surprising victories.

*Poetically Psychotic*

"Thank you," I told the Count absent-mindedly.

Foolish foolish little mortal. Do you know what thanking a Fae implies? Indebtedness. And you were doing so well up til now.

Lemon

I'd just like to note that "Anyway, I had more pressing cats to skin" might be the best line I've ever read.

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## Chapter 12: Double Down

*"It admittedly took me a few years to make my peace with the fact that Lady Foundling's take on diplomacy is essentially to bring a bottle of cheap wine and a sword to the table, then remind the interlocutor that while the wine might be awful it is still arguably better than being stabbed."*

-Extract from the personal memoirs of Lady Aisha Bishara

"You insignificant *insect*," the Duke of Violent Squalls barked.

I smiled pleasantly. So it *could* work. The Duke was addressing me directly instead of the role of the Princess of High Noon, which I needed him to do badly if my plan was going to succeed. Well, plan might have been a little too ambitious of a word. I was following my instincts, which while usually leading me to breaking someone's bones also tended to get me out of corners in more or less one piece. I could not win this if I played out their story, I knew. I would be quite literally fated to lose. Time to drive the cart off the road. Chaos had always been where I thrived, and no people were so ill-equipped to deal with it as the fae.

"That hurt my feelings, it did," I replied, rolling my eyes. "We going stand here trading insults all night, or we going to talk terms?"

"You give me insult in my own home and speak of terms?" the Duke hissed. "I should destroy you where you stand."

I could feel wind starting up in the ballroom, the hem of my cloak stirring with it. There were probably Names that gave you a precise read on how much power an opponent could throw around, but sadly Squire wasn't one of them. All I got was that he was a glacier compared to the icicle of the average fae, not that far beneath the Prince of Nightfall himself. Joy. That was, I mused, the first hint that Duke or not he probably had a large role in the story of the Winter Court. Was the Winter King trying to use me as a catspaw to get rid of an enemy he wasn't allowed to touch? Unlikely, I finally decided. While I was supposed to get into conflict with this one, the dispute was also supposed to be

resolved by champions. My hacking his head off wasn't supposed to be in the cards.

"You won't, though," I said. "Because I'm a guest and the lot of you are all about rules. That's a fairly big one, as I understand it."

"You will not be my guest forever," the Duke of Violent Squalls said coldly.

The wind his cuffs were made of turned furious without his visibly doing anything to cause it. I'd need to have a talk with Masego about how having the aristocratic title to something something worked, practically speaking. Might be a way to sever that. Without his magic the fae was just a man in fancy clothes, and I wasn't above stabbing those when it got me what I wanted.

"Somehow I doubt that getting into a pitched battle in the streets of Skade is going to go over too well with your king," I said. "I'm *his* guest too, remember?"

"If you think that makes you untouchable, you are severely mistaken," the fae said.

"You'll still get a slap on the wrist," I smiled. "And I get the feeling that a king's slap around here tends to... leave marks."

Around all us, all the faces of the fae I could see were blank. They just stood there in utter silence, not so much as breathing as they watched it all unfold. It was like standing in a hall full of statues.

"I'm a kind soul, though," I lied. "So I'm offering you a way to seek redress that dodges the issue."

"A formal duel," the Duke said, pale lips stretching to reveal teeth of ivory. "Yes, that would be acceptable. Crushing you under my heel will be most satisfying."

*And now I have you*, I thought. No champions, just the immortal monster and me in a ring. With a little prodding he'd eagerly left behind the story of the Princess of High Noon becoming captive and walked into entirely uncharted territory. I did not pick that word by mistake: there was no map we were following, here. No story. Which meant, I figured, that I could insert my own. *How do you beat someone you can't beat?* I mused, remembering rocky fields in a land that right now felt so very far away. More innocent days, those, when I'd been playing at war instead of waging it. But I had not forgotten the most important lesson I'd learned from the War College: don't win according to the rules, win despite them.

"So all that's left is settling on the wager," I said.

The Duke's lips stretched even further into an ugly rictus.

"If you lose, you will cede me the soul of everyone under your command," he said.

"I'm not under her command, for the record," Archer called out from an upper level.

I gestured rudely in her general direction without bothering to turn.

"Sure," I agreed. "What I want is-"

"Yes, yes," the Duke said, waving his hand dismissively. "The Summer fae can have their freedom."

"Those poor bastards aren't my problem in the slightest," I said with a raised eyebrow.

I tapped my third finger, eyeing his own hand. The piece of jewellery responsible for the seal on the invitation I'd received could be glimpsed there, a ring of white wood set with a flat opal positively reeking of magic.

"Your signet ring," I said. "I want it. I also want to have always had it."

"That is a heavy price for you to demand," the Duke sneered.

"You just asked me for a few thousand souls, jackass," I replied flatly. "Don't whine about trinkets, it's unseemly."

"Your death," he said, "will not be quick."

"I'm hearing a yes," I said. "Anybody else heard a yes?"

"I agree to the terms of this wager," the Duke spoke through gritted teeth. "Since you are so eager to die, let us proceed. Will the ballroom suffice?"

I grinned and wagged my finger.

"I spent all day travelling," I said. "A delicate flower such as myself needs rest before strenuous exercise. You wouldn't be trying to *cheat*, would you?"

I gasped in mock-surprise.

"I thought better of you, Duke," I said solemnly.

"Dawn, then, on the Fields of Wend," the fae replied with a sneer. "My honour will not suffer for a longer delay."



"You should put it out of its misery, if it's suffering that much," I replied, because I had never learned to quit while I was ahead. "Still, I agree to your terms."

I mentally added to my list the need to find out exactly what those Fields were. Sounded like it might be important.

"A spot of entertainment before Court," the Duke of Violent Squalls smiled. "How refreshing."

I would have cast aspersions on a place that counted blood sport as entertainment, but considering I'd made more coin in Laure from the Pit than the Rat's Nest a saying about stones and glass houses came to mind. Although, frankly, someone who could afford to live in a house made of glass could probably do with a few rocks thrown at them. If *anyone* got that rich there were bound to be a lot of peasants starving in the background. I had nothing more to gain from continuing the conversation, so I suppressed my urge to get the last word and strolled away. My pipe had gone out, I noticed with a sigh. Typical. Before I made it more than a few feet away all the fae around us started moving again, like a spell had suddenly been lifted. Whispers flared up immediately, but I wasn't intending to stick around and learn what they were. I found Hakram hastily making his way down the stairs without needing to look for long, dragging a protesting Masego along as Archer watched on in amusement.

"Well," Archer said. "That certainly livened up the party."

"Glad I could be of help," I replied sardonically.

"You were had," Adjutant gravelled.

I raised an eyebrow. Masego let out a little noise of understanding.

"Everyone under your command," Apprentice said. "Given your position on the Ruling Council of Callow, that could be argued to apply to every soul in the former kingdom as well as the Fifteenth. Oh dear."

I blinked. *Shit*. Hadn't thought of that. I'd been more or less at the head of Callow for a year now, but it had never quite sunk in that I wielded the bastard cousin of a queen's authority. I still thought of myself as Catherine Foundling, the Squire, not anything more.

"He couldn't *really* collect on that, could he?" I said.

"With that large of a debt owed him, the Duke could likely be able to come into Creation in the fullness of his power," Apprentice said. "After that, I have no real notion. It would be unprecedented as far as I know."

"The Calamities would smoke him before it got to that," I frowned. "And Ranger can take the Prince of Nightfall even in Arcadia, she could handle him."

"I'm not sure she would," Archer said. "Depends on her mood at the time. A duke might not be enough of a challenge for her to bother."

"She'd just let a few million people get their souls stolen?" I said, appalled.

"You're the one who just wagered them," Archer pointed out. "The Lady of the Lake is beholden to no one, Foundling. The suggestion that she is would go... poorly."

Huh. I'd always like the stories about Ranger best when I was a kid, but that put them in a different perspective. I passed a hand through my hair.

"I'm not going to lose, regardless," I said. "So it doesn't matter."

"You have a plan," Adjutant said.

"Something like that," I agreed. "Need some time to set it in stone, hence why I delayed. We need to get back to the Still Courtyard."

"Already?" Archer complained.

"Actually, I have an assignment for you that doesn't involve," I said.

"Sounds serious," she said.

"Try to find out anything you can about the Duke of Violent Squalls, while you're drinking yourself to death," I told her. "And I do mean anything you can. Even small details could be useful."

"That seems like something that should have been done before you threw a gauntlet at him," Archer noted. "Though, praise where it's due, funniest thing that happened all night. And I include Adjutant's clothes in this."

"Glad to have you on this team," I said with a sigh. "Masego, on our way out I need you to have a good look at the Duke. Pay close attention to what he looks like."

"I've seen him in my spectacles," Apprentice said. "Anything more is unnecessary."

So those could do more than just see sorcery. That was useful to know.

"Let's go," I said, giving the fae a last glance. "We're wasting daylight – and don't you godsdamned dare to correct me, Masego, it's an idiom."

He scowled all the way back to the carriage.

–

The moment a ward came down to prevent fae from eavesdropping on what would be said inside the library, I turned to my two companions with a winning smile.

"All right, gentlemen, I have work for you," I said.

Apprentice took off his spectacles, laid them on the table.

"I imagine my task has something to do with why you asked me to look at the Duke," he said.

He murmured a few incantations and tapped a finger against the left rim. A wispy image of the the Duke of Violent Squalls formed above the spectacles. With a flick of the wrist, he made it rotate. I leaned forward to have a closer look: I'd stood in front of that very fae, and I couldn't recall that much detail about the clothes he'd worn. I let out a low whistle.

"That's something," I said. "How good are you with illusions?"

"Not my field of specialty, but anything possible with Low Arcana I can achieve," Masego replied casually, as if he hadn't just stated he could match the work of over nine tenths of the mages in Calernia in a fairly difficult branch of sorcery.

"I need you to make me a glamour," I said. "One I can wear."

"Now does not seem the right time for you to develop a sense of vanity," Apprentice said.

"I need you to make me look like I'm related to him," I continued, ignoring the aside.

He hummed.

"I'll need an anchor to inscribe the Working on," he said. "Using anything of Arcadia will make it particularly effective, which should improve the quality of the result."

"Get one of the servants to find you something, then," I said. "A necklace, if possible, one I could wear under my clothes."

He nodded absent-mindedly, clearly already thinking of the logistics of what I'd asked him to do. Masego with a puzzle would not pause to ask me why I wanted to look like I was related to the fae I was going to kill, but I could feel Hakram's eyes on me

even as Apprentice rose to his feet and left both the room and the ward behind him.

"The signet ring, that you will 'always have had'," he said. "Looking as if you were a daughter of his blood. These are not coincidences."

"Which leads me to what I want from you. I need you to Find me a story about patricide in one of these books," I said, gesturing at the stacks around us.

Hakram cocked his head to the side.

"Daughter who never knew her parents kills a duke, only then realizing that the signet ring on her hand matches his livery," the orc said. "Fate led her to kill her father. A tragedy, but one that sees the daughter a duchess at the end in a hollow victory."

Ah, Hakram. If I had a hundred people with minds as sharp as his Callow would run itself.

"That's the idea," I agreed softly.

"The part I'm missing is why you would want to be a Duchess of Winter," he said.

"We've gotten in a place where think that what we want out of Skade is to leave it alive," I said, plopping my elbows on the table. "Arcandia, it makes it seem like everything outside is distant. But we entered it for a reason."

"To shut down Winter's invasion of Marchford," Adjutant said.

"Winter can't invade Marchford if Marchford is part of Winter," I murmured.

"That's..." the orc began. "Cat, there's risks. And there will be consequences. As long as you rule the city, it will have ties to a Court that places in Creation usually *don't*. We have no idea what that could mean."

"We have a fucking portal spewing blizzard where my marketplace should be, Hakram," I replied tiredly. "That ship has sailed. The fae are there and they're not going anywhere. If I'm one of their aristocrats, at least I get to make rules in my demesne."

"The Empress will have some things to say about one of her cities also answering to the King of Winter," he gravelled.

"She won't like it," I agreed. "But I think she'd like a slugging match with Winter even less. Praes can't afford that right now, not with Procer lurking at the gate. She's a practical woman, when it comes down to it. You've seen the kind of heavyweights

Winter can deploy, if they need to. You really think the Legions can handle that?"

"The Legions of Terror can kill anything in Creation or out of it," Hakram replied without missing a beat.

The ironclad certainty in that voice was a thing to behold. That was something I was only beginning to understand about orcs. I'd once thought that they just separated everything into ally or enemy and that it lent them a certain clarity, but it ran deeper than that. Orcs were slower to come to a belief than humans, but when they did that belief would not waver. Hakram had decided I was worth following, and that certainty had carried him all the way into a Name. Never mind that no orc had held in in over a millennium. Juniper also believed that the Legions of Terror could take on any opponent, and so she'd crushed mercenaries and devils alike with mere cunning and ruthlessness, playing them every step of the way. They were both exceptional individuals, but I could see a trace of what drove them in all the orcs I knew. I thought of what the Clans would have been like, at the height of their power, and almost shivered. A hundred thousand orcs, knowing deep in their bones that their Warlord could not be beaten. No wonder the Soninke had been terrified of them for centuries, that the Deoraithe had raised a giant wall spanning leagues just to keep them out.

"But casualty rates would be high, until we found the proper method," Adjutant finally conceded.

"Hold on to that thought, Hakram," I said. "When we get back home, I'm pretty sure we'll need to clear out the host of Summer."

"That'll be a fight to remember, when we're old and grey," Adjutant replied, baring his fangs.

In that moment he reminded me acutely of Nauk, and I felt a pang. I missed them, I realized. My little band of misfits. Juniper and Aisha, Ratface and Pickler – and Kilian, most of all. Hells, I missed Black, the man that was so very carefully not-my-father, whose approval I craved as much as I feared it. The sermons at the House of Light had never said Evil would feel like this. Like a family, the only one I'd ever had. Maybe that was how the Gods Below got you, I thought. They made you love people who could do horrible things just enough that you'd forgive them for it.

"Let's make sure we live that long first," I finally said. "The Duke is going to plaster me all over the floor if we don't cheat. Find me my story, Adjutant."

"And then?" the orc asked.

"And then," I smiled, "we're going to bullshit so hard it becomes a prophecy."

---

### [erraticerrata](#)

First update of the month, so extra chapter. The continuation of the last one, titled Warden II. It's in the Extra Chapters tab, but link for the lazy: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/05/31/warden-ii/>

*naturalnuke*

I Love It!

*Shequi*

I swear, I thought you'd switched narratives again. Then I realised that you were doing the first update of the month thing, even though it's actually the last day of the month.

*Nicole Weaver*

You are amazing. You have me excited and cracking up and apprehensive all at once. Thank you 😊

*PingleBerry*

Ohhhh Cat... you cheating devil.

*danh3107*

"And then," I smiled, "we're going to bullshit so hard it becomes a prophecy."

Beating the fae at their own game, bullshitting

God erratic, you top yourself seemingly every week.

*Matthew*

"We've gotten in a place where think that what we want out of Skade is to leave it alive," I said, plopping my elbows on the table. "Arcandia, it makes it seem like everything outside is distant. But we entered it for a reason."

I'm pretty sure that it's supposed to be

"We've gotten in a place where I think that what we want out of Skade is to leave it alive," I said, plopping my elbows on the

table. "Arcadia, it makes it seem like everything outside is distant. But we entered it for a reason."

*Hakurei06*

I'd need to have a talk with Masego about how having the aristocratic title to something something worked, practically speaking.

physical phenomena?

*KageLupus*

No, Cat has it right in this sentence. All of the nobility shown so far have followed the pattern "aristocratic title to something something". Duke of Violent Squalls, Lady of Cracking Ice, etc. Cat is just poking fun at their naming scheme here.

*Barthumphries*

Looks like this is the top typo thread. Ok, this first one is a long one – I think there's a missing word in the end of the third paragraph:

"Something like that," I agreed. "Need some time to set it in stone, hence why I delayed. We need to get back to the Still Courtyard."

"Already?" Archer complained.

"Actually, I have an assignment for you that doesn't involve," I said.

"Sounds serious," she said.

—

That doesn't involve what?

Also:

Never mind that no orc had held in in over a millennium. Change the first "in" to "one".

*Captain Amazing*

Aww. My theory was explicitly shot down. This makes me both happy and sad at the same time. Back to reading.

*letouriste*

mine was confirmed:p  
well that didn't amounted to much^^

varoksa

So are we going to get the Winter Knight maybe? we already know there can be neutral names.

*M*

>“The part I’m missing is why you would want to be a Duchess of Winter,”

Capital letters, clearly a name, if not Name.

# James, Mostly Harmless

Kat becoming a Duchess, even if not The Duchess, is going to have interesting implications and effects in Callow.

# James, Mostly Harmless

She could certainly match Harry snark for snark, although she is not his equal as a mage! But Mab would be very unhappy ...

*letouriste*

“prophecy” O.M.G i got chill here,i know this is not a Prophecy and she was just saying but still,got me imagining scénarios so awesome that word don’t make that justice.

i want MOAARR

[illegible]

Steamer rducks can fly bro:D bloooooooooooooooooooooo

r0000000aaaaaaarrrrrr

\_\_\_\_\_

(yeah i'm hyped :p)

*Naeddyr*

Oh nooo, now that she's got a plan, it can go all sorts of wrong!

---

Yeah, even without the whole “a plan explained onscreen has to fail” thing, she’s trying to invoke a tragic plot a la Oedipus through time paradox, glamouring a face everybody already knows and beating an immortal master of winds.

Even if the tragedy doesn't turn "father unknowingly kills daughter" way rather than "daughter unknowingly kills father" or if she doesn't become her own grandmother, she can still end up dooming herself through some unforeseen implication of the plan.

*Morgenstern*



Might all depend on \*what else\* that story Hakram will decide on has in it, if that's how things actually work in Arcadia.



Anyways – great surprise. Loveyloveydovey. I LOVE working surprises. =)

*Barthumphries*

Ok, if she's always going to have had the ring, then I figure she will have always had it. So I did a Google search in previous chapters and found this:

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2015/06/10/chapter-11-sucker-punch/>

"Not that kind of work. I'm looking for a ring."

Well, technically, she was looking for a fighting ring. But still, seems suggestive taken on its own, doesn't it? If, during the fight, she "remembers" every statement in her life like that, it just might help her win by confirming her role in the story.

Also, there were some typos in that linked chapter – I posted a comment about them there.

*Joebobjoe*

Squire, you're forgetting the reason Winter went to war in the first place. The Courts must remain balanced. By doing this you're giving The Diabolist a nice Summer home with minimal effort on her part.

*Shoddi*

Interesting point. If Katherine's succeeds, it could allow the fae to wage a proxy war in Creation between Kat's Winter and The Diabolist's Summer. Of course, I'm presuming that to keep the balance, Akua would become (by choice or force) Summer's proxy. If that is the case, I wonder how much clandestine (or overt) support each court would offer?

Great writing. Please keep it up!

*Morgenstern*

Yeah, still wondering about that, too. Does the plan within a plan (within...) go so deep, what with the Prince/King playing on her very nature that they foresee this and somehow need her to act as however-nominal agent of the Court of Winter to do something about Summer? Or do they just not care / are fine with what's going on (them suddenly invading "reality", what they never even seemed to want to do so far), no plans to stop Summer's invasion/the reason for it, after all, but maybe even opposite interest in their own mirroring invasion?

I wonder what the implications for a change of seasons/Seasons/ phases are, if that should work and what you suggest be the mirror effect... what happens if the Courts get past the mirror effect? Do they go to war with each other again? What other s/ Seasons are there? Questions upon questions... "come back next time". =D

### [taborask](#)

Plus, we have no idea how becoming a member of the winter would change Katherine. Clearly the fae aren't iron bound to follow their prescribed stories, but that doesn't mean she won't be suddenly shackled into participating in them to a certain extent. Unpredictability is probably her greatest strength, and it seems like that's exactly what fae lack the most.

This really, really seems like a bad plan even in the best case scenario, unless she intends to pass of her duchy to another fae and create a new title for herself that won't be as bound by their laws

### *Nicole Weaver*

The 2nd aspect of her name seems to be something like "Subvert." The fae are bound to stories by their nature, not their power. I am sure there will be complications, but from what I have seen, Catherine is going to be free to act, but with consequences if she acts too far outside the fae stories.

Regardless, this would drastically increase her power. Also, recall the Summer Court is already in creation and doing decidedly un-fae kinds of things... I think this move on Catherine's part will bring her equal to Heiress again. It sounds like she already has power over the Summer Fae.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Ways I would describe Akua:

1. Heiress
2. Schemer
- 2b. Cat's "personal" antagonist
4. Aristocrat
5. Magic user
6. Trueblood
7. Diabolist

It's confusing to me to hear her being referred to as "the diabolist," that just doesn't seem like an important facet of her character at this point in the story. Especially since she's sworn off the practice for pragmatic reasons, for the time being.

## [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

That's amazing the character is so complex, though. To come up with seven attributes describing characters from the Phantom Menace, for example, I'd need seven characters!

Q

You are taking one extreme but not the other. With cat part of the winter court, winter is no longer at war with reality and are free to go back to Arcadia and by extention summer will do the same but cat will be part of the court while Akua won't have secured a place as a summer aristocrat.

I'm interested in knowing what the usual end is to the winter summer story. The prince compared himself to a fox chewing off its own leg. If winter normally loses to summer, which is possible considering they seem to be the bad guys in the story about the princess, they may be roping in cat so that they can change their story and defeat summer.

[csimple](#)

Doesn't parse well for me:

"That was, I mused, the first hint that Duke or not he probably had a large role in the story of the Winter Court"

"Whispers flared up immediately, but I wasn't intending to stick around and learnr what they were."  
learn

"Actually, I have an assignment for you that doesn't involve," I said.

– Seems incomplete

"Arcandia, it makes it seem like everything outside is distant. But we entered it for a reason."  
Arcadia

\*\*\*\*\*

Great Chapter.

Okay, I call that Cat will get all her three aspects within the third book, seeing that Squire is a transitional name, and we would be following Cat for the role of [some\_color] Knight, and then aspects for that, and then big final fight.

*Unmaker*

Having a Duchess of Arcadia more or less permanently in Callow will allow (maybe require) the Summer Court to do something similar.

I don't know why several commenters think Diabolist has the same sort of 'deal' with the Summer Court – fae aren't demons and in order to get the Diabolist Name, Akua probably had to do something heavily demonic related. I get that Keter's Due for Akua's actual spell may have been the breach to Arcadia (the previous story hinted fairly heavily that way), but what reason does Summer have to deal with her? If anything, Cat getting to be a Duchess of Arcadia without Akua getting to be Summer nobility would be more balanced – right now Akua has three fairly clear advantages over Cat: 1) major political power, training, and acumen, 2) Named-level sorcery, and 3) a full Name rather than a transitional one. Cat having a high court fae title would balance some of that.

If any race can be said to be half way to being all Named, it would be the fae: their titles look and sound like Names, they run on stories, and they have magic that can resemble Named powers. So I am going to go out on a limb and guess that, if Cat gets the actual title Duchess of Violent Squalls, it will actually turn into a Name. She still has a transitional Name after all.

*Nicole Weaver*

the reasoning is the summer court are loose in creation pretty much right where Heiress is based. I wasn't aware she has become a Name of Diabolist (and I don't recall it being stated anywhere). I think someone just called her a diabolist because she messed with demons once or twice.

With Summer Court loose and at war, it seems a safe bet Heiress is to blame. It's a pretty short leap to think she has an alliance and is ordering them to attack Callow to punish Catherine and because Winter would then attack more directly.

*nipi*

Umm a while back some of Heiresses minions were attacked and she wasn't aware that the fae were around before then. It's highly doubtful that she intentionally drew them into creation. More likely that the fae have an interest in stopping her or maybe they want access to the artificial god or whatever Heiress wants to use to power her grand scheme.

*letouriste*

Diabolist was Named like that in the interlude a few chapters ago.

and no, she was surprised and annoyed by fae coming so that's not part of her plan neither...at least for now

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Exactly. There are some commenters who are often insightful, who can help you understand the story, then there are a frightening number that seem to jump to random conclusions and speak confidently as if their guesses are confirmed facts.

Sorry if I'm picking on this one commenter in particular.. Perhaps you're not a native English speaker and this is a learning experience, like "sometimes a cigar is just a cigar"

*Nicole Weaver*

It says your comment is responding to me, but it doesn't seem to be due to the way it is phrased?

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I really don't remember Akua being Named Diabolist, and that would be a really, REALLY big deal that I'm pretty sure I would remember.

*Barthumphries*

She'll just add it to her collection.  
Squire (eventually Warlord) Cat, the Necromancer, Ruler of C-Town, Duchess of Wintery Something.

[taborask](#)

Public service announcement: we're only \$32/month short of the next Patreon goal where we'd get 2 chapters a week. If anybody isn't a patron yet, now would be a good time!

*nipi*

"Although, frankly, someone who could afford to live in a house made of glass could probably do with a few rocks thrown at them. If anyone got that rich there were bound to be a lot of peasants starving in the background."

Crap! We've got skyscrapers and shit.

[jamesc9](#)

And a third-world with resource curses.

*nipi*

"Not our peasants! Everything is fine here" \*waves the argument away and adjusts his blinkers\*

*LostDeviljho*

Okay, but if this actually works does that mean Cat will have retconned herself into being part Fae?

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

...at which point Masego's glamour becomes permanent? That's going to be one distraught Killian...unless Killian has \*always\* known Cat to look like that. This could get confusing.

Nicole Weaver

Oooh! That is a fascinating potential complication. Now I am excited to discover how much Killian is affected by her heritage. 😊

[glassgirlceci](#)

Omg I can't think of a way to say how much I fucking love this. But I do.

Skythe

I thought fae were supposed to be the greatest liars in all of creation or something?

[vuthuha912](#)

It was very funny how Cat approached this whole story thing. It is like she has a natural understanding of storytelling that most people don't have.

She would make a nice writer or mangaka in a Modern AU with Black as her professor and all her friends as inspirations for different characters in her stories. Let's have a Monthly Girls' Nozaki-kun AU with the whole cast.

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## Chapter 13: Forgery

*"The heart of warfare is deception. Therefore, the generals who can deceive even themselves are invincible."*

– Isabella the Mad, Proceran general

Researching the old fashioned way would have taken much more than the single night we had. Much, much more: after a while I noticed that every time we took a book from the stacks and looked away, another one appeared in its place. Hopefully Masego hadn't noticed that, or I'd never be able to convince him to leave. Already telling him that we couldn't loot the library on the way out was going to be a bloody chore, I wasn't eager to fight that battle twice. In the end, we relied on Hakram's aspect to get our

results: Find. There was no denying how useful that trick had proved to be since he'd come into it, but I remained wary. That was always the trap, with Names: they gave you an advantage that would enable you to crush all your enemies, if you just... kept leaning into it. And it was always so very tempting to, wasn't it? The more you used it the more effective it became, the stronger the advantage got.

I'd become so used to relying on Learn to, well, learn things that when I'd lost the aspect after Liesse I'd found myself almost crippled. I'd been teaching myself the Old Tongue, the Deoraithe language, before the dust-up with Heiress. When I'd gone back to the books afterwards I'd found to my dismay that I was going to have to start almost from the beginning. The information in my head was incomplete, like I had learned vocabulary lists by rote instead of actually figuring out the language. Almost a year later, I wasn't even even fluent. Back when I'd had Learn, I would have spoken like a native in six months while barely putting any effort into it. Black had been right, as he often was: people who depended on their Names for results fell apart when robbed of those powers. *If you use your Name instead of skill, you never develop the skill.* There was a reason my teacher had taught me swordsmanship the hard way.

That was the axe I had to grind with Find. When Adjutant used it, he found in a matter of hours answers that would normally have taken us weeks. It handed us solutions, and if we ever started to rely on that we'd be *screwed* the first time we ran into a hero that could shut it down. We'd played with the aspect nonetheless, to figure out how it worked, and found it wasn't without limits: the information he looked for had to be at hand and the need for it clear. As far as I could tell, he wasn't warping Creation to get us what we needed. He was using a weaker version of Providence, the golden luck that always had the very thing they needed land in the lap of the heroes at the best possible moment. Masego had theorized that what the aspect actually did was tinker with the odds, essentially making something that could possibly happen much more likely to *actually* happen. Adjutant wouldn't ever be able to point a spot on a map and have that location be full of ancient magical weapons, but he *could* crack open a book at the exact page he needed to read.

I'd worried that the library might not have the story we needed, but the refilling stacks effectively killed the fear. Here in Arcadia, an aspect so subjective in nature was massively more powerful than it would have been in Creation: reality was more fluid in the realm of the fae.

His first attempt found us a story about a shepherd from Summer killing a Duke of Winter in single combat with a sling, winning the battle for Summer. It had a familiar ring to it. It was an old and popular tale in Callow that we'd first gained the Red

Flower Vales by a shepherdess killing a Proceran prince with the same weapon when the prince tried to steal her flock. Dead princes always made for fireside favourites, in my experience. Callow had not forgotten the the Proceran betrayal after the Third Crusade. The story was not, however, what we needed. Hakram narrowed his search on the second attempt and found something more to my liking. A boy from Winter becoming a soldier to escape a prophecy he'd kill his own father, only learning too late his mother had had an affair with a Lord of Summer after killing the very same man on the battlefield. That had a shape we could use. It lacked the inheritance, but it stacked the odds in the favour of the long-lost child.

He tried again and found something even closer. A prince of Winter abandoning his own daughter in the wilds for she was fated to kill her father, only for her to be found by a childless prince of Summer and be raised as his own. Killing her birth father on the field, she became a Princess of Winter only to find the horrible fate still dogged her: she was sent as as the champion of Winter to settle a duel, only to find the man who'd raised her to be her opponent. This evidently being a tragedy, she won again and destroyed everything she'd ever loved. Grim, but I could work with that. Stealing bits from both parricidal stories to craft it into a fresh one should do the trick. I leaned back into my seat with a servant-provided cup of wine, Hakram frowning at the pages as he read the third story once more.

"Prophecy's the important part," I said.

"We don't have one," he pointed out.

"So we *make* one," I replied.

"I don't think scribbling 'Catherine murders a duke, gets a duchy' on a parchment will get us anywhere," the tall orc grunted.

"When I fought the Rider of the Host," I said, "he trapped himself into a role. Had to reveal things to me because of it. I think that has long as the fae recognize it's a story, they're bound by it – no matter how obvious a lie it is."

"So we need the fairies to know there's a prophecy, one just good enough to pass as true," he said. "That's... problematic. We'd need that knowledge spread before the fight."

"Apprentice would be able to make a scroll look old and magical," I said. "There's no reason we couldn't make a dozen fake scrolls and throw them through the windows of high-ranking members of the Court tonight. The Duke himself doesn't have to be warned – ignorance is part of the tragedy."



"Still feels thin," Hakram gravelled. "You can make yourself look like his long-lost daughter and it'll help, but we need more."

"A tragic element," I said, thinking out loud. "It doesn't have the right weight if I genuinely don't care I just stabbed my 'father' to death."

I sipped at the wine again, wondering at how it tasted exactly the way Vale summer wine did at the peak of summer when served cold, the heavy heat making it the sweetest thing you ever drank. No wonder Archer had kept hitting the bottle.

"I could have Apprentice put the belief in my head that the Duke is actually my father," I reluctantly said.

Hakram grimaced.

"I like Masego, Cat, and I doubt there's a better mage in the Empire save for Lord Warlock – but messing with memories is always bad business," he said. "You weren't conscious when he operated on your soul. It... wasn't pretty."

Mostly I remembered searing pain and a lot of screaming, so I'd take his word for it. Masego had saved my life, that day, but the process had been less than pleasant.

"We'll shelve that, then," I said. "What else do we have?"

I was an orphan. That was a prerequisite for any of this to be able to work, I thought, but I couldn't make more of it. I was the Squire. That had been my trump card in Liesse, given the roots the Role had in both Praes and Callow, but in Skade there was no ground to gain from it.

"The Winter King brought us here," Adjutant suddenly said.

I raised an eyebrow.

"So he did," I agreed.

"Set aside the story for a moment," the orc said. "We're here because he wants something from you."

"We don't know what that *is*, though," I said.

"A hungry warrior will trade his sword for meat," he quoted in Kharsum.

*If you need something bad enough, you'll take even a terrible deal.* In other words, we had some kind of leverage on the King. The Prince of Nightfall had compared the Court to a fox gnawing off its own leg – there was desperation in that image, not just viciousness. Pretending we had an immortal winter god's backing when getting into a fight with an immortal winter lesser god felt

like fool's gamble, admittedly, but hesitation was the province of the slow and the dead. Fuck it: I'd already faked the king's signature to get into Skade in the first place, after all. If he'd wanted to turn the screws on us for that, we'd already be screaming.

"I have three things," I murmured. "A prophecy, an heirloom and the word of a king. Now *that* has the right weight to it, don't you think?"

Hakram shivered and I smiled.

—

"You look the way bad decisions feel," Archer told me.

It was past midnight when the ochre-skinned girl swaggered into the library, reeking of liquor and throwing herself onto the table in an ungainly sprawl. Masego, who'd been finishing up the eighth fake scroll until she'd put her hand over it, sighed and moved his work to another table. I picked up a book and dropped it on her face as my reply, though even drunk she had the reflexes to snatch it out of the air. Archer wasn't wrong, exactly. After Apprentice had given me the silver chain enchanted with the glamour I'd had a look in the mirror and winced. Kilian pulled off the fae blood, but it could be kindly said that I did not. My features were already sharp and constant fighting had put muscle to my frame, so the exaggeration of both traits with a few fae features thrown in made me look like a pile of harsh angles forced into a person's shape. I did, however, look like I could be related to the Duke of Violent Squalls. That was the part that mattered.

"I'm hoping you have more than insults to give me," I said.

Archer rose to a sitting position with a tired moan, dangling her legs off the edge of the table.

"You picked a fight with a bigwig," she said.

"He's a duke," I said. "That was given."

"He's *the* duke, Foundling," she said. "Look, you know it's not the same king or queen in charge of Winter every time the season comes, right?"

"I'd gathered," I said.

"The role can go to all the fae that are right now princes and princesses," Archer said. "They have different natures, so the story of Summer and Winter can unfold differently according to who has the crown on both sides. That's why sometimes one Court

wins and sometimes the other. Outcome's decided the moment the story starts."

"He's not a prince, though," I pointed out.

"He's just as bad," the other Named said. "Whenever you have a Winter ruler trying to avoid the war, he's the one that fucks it up. He's the cornerstone for the war happening anyway."

"So if he threw his masquerade..." Hakram said, trailing off.

"Then the current King is trying to avoid a war," I finished. "The Duke's *important*."

On the bright side, the odds of my getting away with pretending the King of Winter was backing me had just significantly improved: I'd be ridding him of a nuisance.

"So even for a duke he's going to be a bastard and a half to kill," I said.

"That's the word," Archer agreed. "Things I have also learned: man's not married, he's got a bunch of minions on his side and he uses what wind sorcery would be if it was actually useful in a fight."

"Wind sorcery *is* very useful," Masego disagreed without ever looking away from the scroll. "It lacks the offensive abilities of some other elemental spells, but it has few equals when it comes to dictating and restricting enemy movement."

"It *feels* like you're to disagree with me," Archer said, "but your words prove my point."

"It's the basis for scrying, you ignorant thug," Apprentice snapped.

"Ooh, scrying," the woman replied, rolling her eyes. "*That'll* tip the balance in a fight with a Named."

Gods, I missed Juniper. Nobody squabbled this much when she was around to glare. People without strong opinions didn't become Named, I knew, which was why you could never have a band of them in a room without it coming to *some* arguing. It didn't help, though, that Archer's mission in life was to be the piece of gravel in everyone's boot and that Apprentice was exceedingly easy to rub the wrong way.

"This conversation's postponed until we're back in Creation," I ordered. "Archer, I know you have a fascination with asses but you don't need to be so much of one. Apprentice, you *know* if you let her irritate you she's going to keep pulling your pigtails."

"But she was wrong," Masego muttered mulishly.

Archer hid a grin behind her hand and I moved to change the subject before they could start again.

"Heard anything about the Fields of Wend?" I asked her.

"There's a lake outside the city," she replied. "With shifting glaciers in it. They use it to throw balls sometimes."

Not, I thought, a good battlefield to fight against someone who has a knack for using winds. Not that any place in Winter was, to be honest. Still better than a closed space like the inside of the palace had been, especially since the damned place had been built from the Duke's power.

"Well, that ought to be interesting," I said.

"So now we wait for dawn?" Archer asked. "I might actually die of boredom, Squire."

I glanced at Apprentice.

"How long until you're done with the scrolls, Masego?"

"Give me an hour," he replied absent-mindedly.

"Stay awake, Archer," I said. "I have something for you to do after this."

"Tell me it doesn't involved paying attention to what people are saying again," she implored.

"I want to to break people's windows by throwing lies at them," I replied.

She grinned.

"Sometimes, Foundling, you say the sweetest things."

—

I managed to grab a few hours of sleep afterwards. Enough that I was fresh, anyway. I could have slept longer but my mind was awake so instead I found myself trudging to the courtyard this place was named after. Servants popped up out nowhere, not unexpectedly, and I sat by the edge of the snow with a steaming cup of tea and a pair of sweet apple turnovers. I'd say this for the fae, they cooked better pastries than anything I'd tried back in Creation. By my estimate there was still about a bell left before dawn, so I took my time eating. I heard footsteps behind me, a sure sign one of my companions was also awake: the fae didn't make noise. Archer plopped herself down, leaning back against a wooden pillar. She had a plate of cold cuts and yet another bottle of wine, I noted with dark amusement. I wasn't

sure it was possible to empty the cellars of Winter, but she was certainly giving it a gallant effort.

"Did you even sleep?" I asked.

"Couldn't," she replied. "I'm too curious about what's coming."

I hummed. If all went well she wouldn't need to fight anyway. Besides, even if she'd been up all night she didn't seem tired in the slightest. I wasn't actually in the mood for conversation, so I let silence reign as I drank my tea and nibbled at the pastries. Couldn't muster much of an appetite – never could before a fight, though during I always ended up feeling hungry.

"So what's your deal, exactly?" Archer said suddenly.

I eyed her sceptically.

"My deal?" I repeated.

She scarfed down a piece of meat before replying.

"Every Named has one," she said. "Lady Ranger wants to break anything that thinks it's stronger than her. Your mage wants to open up Creation to see what the gears look like. The orc wants to murder everything in your way."

"And you?" I deflected.

"You already know what my thing is, Foundling," she smiled. "I want to live *large*, so I can die without regrets. You, though? I can't seem to get a read on you."

Funny thing, this. I was more used to being on the other side of the conversation. I'd had one just like this with Hakram, what felt like years ago. Then another with Masego, when I got a glimpse at the detached mania that lay at the centre of him.

"People don't usually ask me that," I said. "Don't need to. I'm pretty straightforward, when it comes down to it. All I want is to dig Callow out of the pit it's in."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Aren't you the Tower's lieutenant there, nowadays? Seems like a done deal."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" I grunted. "I have the reins, within limits. I won. Pit's still there, kingdom's still in it."

Archer eyed me, expression unreadable.

"So that's really all you're after?" she said. "Picking up a half-crown for the land you were born to?"

I smiled mirthlessly.

"Disappointed, are you?" I said.

"You're the heiress to people who changed the face of Calernia," she said, not denying it. "And I don't mean conquering a kingdom – who gives a fuck about where borders are drawn? That comes and goes. When the Lady of the Lake was with the Calamities, they broke a story old as dawn. Just picking up a lesser piece of that is... *small*."

The word was spoken with distaste.

"Last year," I said, "I crushed the skull of a man who thought he was a visionary. He wanted to save Callow, he insisted. Thing is, I don't really believe you can save people anymore. I tried that and it doesn't ever quite seem to work right. I think it's because it doesn't matter, if they worship at the House of Light or sacrifice at some dark altar – most days they're just people, and those are the same everywhere. They till the same fields, pay the same taxes, marry their neighbours and die fat if they're lucky enough."

"Named are more," Archer said. "We're the brighter flame: the people who can actually *change* things."

"Are we?" I smiled. "The part of the Conquest you pay attention to is the Calamities sweeping all opposition aside. You think that's because they were mighty, but that's not the part that matters. They were figureheads, enablers. Praes won because it had grown as a nation while Callow had not."

"The Empire grew because villains *made* it grow," she replied flatly.

"And don't you think it's telling the most successful villains since Triumphant put their efforts into reforming institutions rather than building a bunch of flying fortresses?" I asked. "People won that war, not Named. Malicia and Black, they're brilliant – but there's been a lot of brilliant Named over the centuries, on both sides. What makes those two different is that they know change comes from the bottom, not the top."

"That's..." she hesitated.

Heresy, she wanted to say. That it went against everything we knew. History was forged by the hands of those that stood out and crowned themselves with power, those precious few even the Gods recognized as apart from the masses. *Except that's a lie. A thousand Dread Emperors and a thousand Kings, but nothing ever changed – until what lay behind them did. It's not the tip of the blade that kills, it's the force that drove it into your belly.* That was, I was beginning to grasp, what I'd done wrong in

Callow. I'd fought to put all the authority in my hands with the vague notion that I could fix it all afterwards, but how was that any different from what the Lone Swordsman had been doing? There were people all over the Empire who could make things better, if they were allowed to. And if there were forces trying to stand in the way? Well, I was a villain. The parts of Creation I did not like, I would *break*.

"Right now I have an enemy in Liesse who thinks by sheer will and ruthlessness she'll drag Praes back to a golden age that never existed," I said. "I'm not worried about her, deep down, because even if she claims I'm the one going against the grain *she's* the one fighting the tide."

I broke off a piece of turnover and popped it into my mouth.

"Last spring, a little boy gave an orc a crown of flowers. There's something beyond any of us happening in the Empire, right now," I said. "Malicia and Black think they control it, but I don't think they *do*. They're watching the story when what's important is the people telling it. They want me to part of the machine they're built, but I don't think that's my role."

"Then what is?" Archer asked quietly.

"When heroes and villains come knocking in the name of fate," I spoke, tone calm and measured. "When they try to drag us back to where we were by force with a Choir behind them or the host of some howling Hell – *I'll kill them all*. Every last one of them."

Softly, Archer laughed.

"Ah, Foundling," she murmured. "I was wrong about you – you're not boring at all. You're just as mad as the rest of us."

I looked up at the sky. Night was dying.

"Drink up, Archer," I said. "Dawn's coming and we have a god to rob blind."

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### *Darkening*

Hm. Great speech by cat here. Looking forward to what she plans to do in the empire once she's back, seems she plans to empower some groups that might make a difference. Fun as the fae are, I really want to see where things go back in callow.

*danh3107*

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Shivers erratic, shivers

*1shot4living*

Seconded

[Euodiachloris](#)

The war cry of True Neutral, that.

"If you won't stop trying to make me fight for your ever-so grand vision which, incidentally, rarely ever benefits me and mine, I'll glass you in the eyes and feed you to the pigs – whoever you think you are."

*alegio*

Thats what I was gonna say

*callmesteve*

Thirdded. That is a beautiful speech.

[godkiller999](#)

And Archer says Cath dreams small, while everyone is trying to be great, she aspires to bring greatness.

*xacual*

I just caught up with the story this last week and decided to comment on this new chapter. I feel like Cat's plan here will go off without a hitch, but it will be the aftereffects that get her.

From what I recall, Kilian's fae grandmother was probably a member of the Summer Court if her hair going fire and vivid green eyes have anything to say about it. So what would happen if we have a now Duchess of the Winter Court having a lover that belongs to the Summer Court? I feel like it would turn into some kind of tragedy. Also feel like it might be the impetus that sets off Kilian getting a Name.

*MagnaMalusLupus*

What I'm thinking also might happen is that Cat's glamour might stop being a glamour; if that ring is going always have been hers, her looks might too.



*stevenneiman*

I could easily see either one of those happening. On one hand becoming one of the Fae doesn't shouldn't be possible, but on the other hand she's trying to BS her way into a story where she already is one, in a land where BS is power.

On the other other hand, I feel like it's going to make quite an interesting mess if Cat ends up getting assimilated. That would not go well for the Fae at all.

### *Ad Astra Major*

Not to be overly critical, but as a canary in a mineshaft signal that I think the story's lost the plot a little bit, I'd like to say that the deconstruction of tropes has always been a strength of this story, and the main thing that kept it intriguing early on.

Recently the focus on Roles instead of just Names, and in particular the fae characters inherent need to comply with them is starting to feel like just a big convoluted lampshade hanging on what's essentially a story arc that's being driven by exactly the kind of narrative tropes that previously the story was deconstructing and Cat was focused on subverting.

Cat's no longer the determined urchin willing to consider the methods of villains in pursuit of noble goals, she's just another villain scraping and fighting for power within the Empire. She says she's doing it because she sees something worthwhile to protect by fighting the other factions within the Empire, but is that really any different from any of those self-same factions that want to see their people ascendant?

This whole arc, meanwhile, has been her playing at fae Court drama being driven by a the obscure aims of the King of Winter, and what feels like page space filling entertainment coming as a mix of banter between the party, descriptions of the exotic landscape of the Winter Court, and meta-parody of typical fantasy plots.

It feels lacking in character development, and more like distraction from the actual plot, meant to just take Cat off the board while Malicia and Cordelia play intrigue games. Cat appears to have picked up a new angle to take in her pursuit of power at the end of this chapter, so hopefully that will play out further once we're back out of Arcadia but I kinda wish she had had this insight about two chapters into the process of managing the ruling council and we could've seen all that playing out in place of this arc.

### *Vortex*

I would suggest that it is the first sign of a weak story that you can predict every last thing about it. If the story does nothing but subvert and deconstruct tropes I would get bored of it eventually as the same thing happens over and over. I think it's okay to go on a different direction once in awhile even if that way leans heavily on trope.

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### *Ed*

You're kinda right, Cat is no longer the determined urchin, because she isn't. She is the utterly determined commander of a significant force with loyal and quite powerful people following her, you know things that have developed over a bit

of time for her. Wait what is that character development? Well fuck me with a ditch digger.

Right at this point in time she is attempting to avoid having the part of the world she is in charge of, you know commander, significant forces etc. To avoid having that overrun by a massive Fae incursion which would incidentally kinda kill all her forces and also all the people she has a responsibility for. And also kinda end the story, though being killed hasn't been all that permanent before for her so it may but tragedy of that level is not really where I'd like to see this story go. If it did however I'd still read it, because you get writing like Cats monologue at the end of the chapter there.

Cat becoming entangled with beings so far above her power level and beating them because she refuses to lose? That is how this story has gone from the very first chapter and that is how it is still going.

*jonnney*

If anything her epiphany about the the best way to improve Callow is coming too soon. She is an orphan pit fighter who had a few months of training from Calamities, a few weeks of training in a military academy, and a year+ of acting as a general of a legion. The idea that she could figure out both what the Empress and Black are doing and then how to apply the process to Callow in a few months of governing full on Mary Sue territory.

It only makes sense that she can come to this realization because she is dealing with the alien minds of the fae.

*Matthew*

I think it makes sense. The importance of institutions vs. Named is something Black has probably been drilling into her for her entire training. He made her read Agricultural atlases.

This isn't an idea that Black was hiding. I also have to imagine that while she's been in charge of Callow, she's been asking Black a lot of questions. He probably gave her an introduction since he use to run Callow. He set up all of the institutions in Callow. It makes no sense that he wouldn't tell her the philosophy behind everything he's done in Callow for the past 2 decades and ask her to think of improvements.

*1shot4living*

Also, Name shenanigans. Remember, they're all mad here.

*jonnney*

@Matthew

Well Black went to the free cities within a week or two of Catherine becoming the quasiqueen of Callow and scrying doesn't work over mountain ranges because of plot reasons. So while Catherine has many questions about ruling the only guidance she has received from the calamities is a few conversations with Malicia's meat puppet.

Black might not be hiding the theory behind the reforms, but he can't just spell it out for her. It doesn't match his teaching style and it doesn't allow Catherine to forge her own path. Yes he gave her the atlas and a children's book, but that is all he gave her. If he tells her what to do the story of Callow doesn't change.

*callmesteve*

I disagree with the OP here. She's been fighting and learning for about as long in-world as we've been reading this. I don't doubt that Black has been talking about this out of scene with her, and we can tell that he's been pointing her at it for quite a while. Heck, that scene where she beats Heiress in book 1 is starting her off on this. It might be to deal with Names or Fae, but Foundling is also very far from stupid. Also note: She may have figured out the why, but the how is much harder.

I have no doubts that the author will pull a [b]glorious[/b] plot twist at the end anyway.

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Do you want naturally written character/plot developments or artificial ones that make no sense? I actually like seeing multiple plot developments though i get your frustration since we only get one chapter per week and it feels like we read half as much of Cat.

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@Matthew

*Thyrfa*

I think that what you are complaining about is an inherent weakness of the serial format, arcs that are a little bit off of the main story thread seem to drag and be lasting forever, but if you were reading it in a published format it would be a quick side jaunt.

aw3

This is the third 'what is your role' conversation we've had but it still gives me chills. Fantastic writing.

[gianoria7](#)

"I wasn't even even fluent"  
To many "even"

"forgotten the the Proceran betrayal"  
To many "the"

"I want to to break people's windows"  
To many "to"

Also, since Cat is talking to Archer, I think she meant "I want you to"

Thanks for the chapter 😊  
Cat is Epic.

[gianoria7](#)

By the way, once Cat scam the Duke into giving her his Nobility Title, will she gain his power over wind, or are those powers just a Fae thing?

*Nairne*

Once (and if) she gets the title she will be in a position where speaking with the Winter King is possible so who knows what kind of deal she could propose.

*Bubba HoTep*

More typos:  
"we ran into a hero that could shit it down"  
Should be "shut it down"

"It feels like you're to disagree with me,"  
should be "you're trying to disagree with me"

*Tulip*

"we'd be screwed the first time we ran into a hero that could shit it down"  
Pretty sure that was meant to be "shut".

*stevenneiman*

"Almost a year later, I wasn't [even] even fluent."  
"I think that [has->as] long as the fae recognize it's a story, they're bound by it"  
"felt like {a} fool's gamble"

"It feels like you're [to disagree->disagreeing] with me"  
"They want me to {be} part of the machine [they're built->they've built/they're building]"

AVR

& one more typo

me to part  
me to be part

*ravin*

be screwed the first time we ran into a hero that could shit it down  
shit = shut?

*Esryok*

"... she was sent as as the champion of Winter to settle a duel, only to find the man who'd raised her to be her opponent."

Uh. Careful there, Cat. Follow too closely a story that ends with the heroine killing her surrogate father, and methinks Warlock will have some words for you.

*stevenneiman*

Oh dear. That's a very good point.

*maresther23*

It might actually help, Fate hates repetition, and if she already killed her Father...

*M*

Black was very careful to *\*not\** become a father figure to Cat. I think it was even explicitly stated at one point.

*esryok*

2.12 – Reproval

I was perfectly fine with having no idea who my progenitors were – parents were more of an abstract concept for me than anything else. If anything the closest thing I'd ever had to a father figure was Black, and wasn't that a terrifying thought?

2.14 – Situation

"Catherine," he greeted me warmly.

I found myself engulfed in a hug I leaned into, against my better judgement. I had missed him, much as it pained me to admit it.

## 2.49 – Triumph

Warlock had said that one day I would have to make a choice, and I believed him. And when that day came, when the knife was in my hand, I knew that if I killed [Black] I'd miss him. As a teacher, as a mentor, as perhaps the closest thing to a father figure I'd ever had.

I believe Black's efforts were insufficient.

*pyrohawk21*

hahahaaahaaaHAAHAAAAHAAAAAAAAA!

Oh man... Cat's going to be a NIGHTMARE in the future to those trying to protect the existing world order. She has found the role she wishes to play, and whilst it is heresy against everything people have believed before, may eternity and existence help you if you go against, for all of the Heavens and the deepest pits of hell will not.

Because Cat is the Guardian of Progress. And nothing will stop her from destroying you if you attempt to stop Progress from occurring.

*nick012000*

You know, for all the scorn heaped on the flying fortresses by those in the New Villainy camp, I think they really would be a significant force multiplier to any nation that possessed them, as long as they didn't grow to be dependent on them. America keeps the world's strongest Air Force in the world for a reason, you know. Flying fortresses can't replace boots on the ground, but they can *\*supplement\** them if used properly (most likely in a logistical role).

Same thing for things like the invisible tiger armies; they obviously can't replace the legions, but they could supplement them by doing the things that they can do that the Legions cannot (namely, acting as deadly night skirmishers). Heck, even the Knights of Callow fall into this sort of area.

By spurning such obviously useful auxillaries to their Legions, they're effectively turning down power out of ideological reasons, and that's basically heresy, both to Evil in general, and to their philosophy specifically: they're acting like hypocrites.

*Bubba HoTep*

Either the side of Good has good anti-aircraft spells, or flying fortresses require unmanageable amount of fuel, fuel being human sacrifices of course.

## *GiantTurtle*

I feel like you're forgetting some of the history, and the wider context. For starters, the intelligent tiger army was an outright failure, with the tigers turning on the empire pretty much straight after they were created, and achieving nothing of note.

The flying fortress, though effective (I believe it was instrumental in the last successful invasion of callow before the calamities?) would be an absolute guzzler of human sacrifices, if the Tyrant's floating siege towers are any indication. More importantly, it was the flagship of the current Tyrant, and almost certainly deeply infused by Name fuckery. This brings the empire into over reliance as it becomes part of the Tyrant's story, and hence, Hero-bait. This is exactly the kind of reliance that Black warns against with enchanted weapons, and we see in this chapter with Hakram's Find. These things can all be powerful, but ultimately lead to their downfall.

None of this is to say that Black & the Calamities haven't made attempts to supplement their power: they've seriously strengthened the legions by incorporating the orks and goblin munitions, and possibly even the ogres as shock troopers (not sure about that). The point is that they've been careful to avoid infusing their powerbase with their name, which is a fatal mistake in this world, at least for villains.

I wouldn't be surprised if the calamities had considered these options, and judging by the use of the blood magic and meat puppets, they've found some to their liking, that they can incorporate. My bad if any of this is inaccurate, I was working from memory.

## *Unoriginal*

They aren't, stories are dangerous things and they can't risk picking up parts of stories that end with the villain's defeat, they have to forge a new path and this is recognized in the text previously.

And about the knights, twofold reasons: First, they do want heavy cavalry with similar capabilities to a knight but that comes with fundamental problems along the lines of What breeding stock would they use.

Furthermore, A chivalric order is not the route they want to go about it in either, they would have to rebrand it to be something other than, well here's an example: Knights of the Rose Order or whatever overblown purple-y prose name was picked

## *beleester*

From what we've seen of the Tyrant's fortresses, there seems to be two big issues:

1. They're expensive to produce (like any castle), and on top



of that, they require major-league ritual magic with lots of sacrifices.

2. They require a magical anchor that can fail catastrophically if, say, a ragtag band of heroes stages a daring raid on them. In general, the New Villains don't like to rely on magical items that will always end up failing them at the worst possible moment.

As for the sentient tigers, the problem with them was getting them to obey orders. Invisible tigers are fun to unleash on your enemies, not so fun when they start gnawing on your own troops.

(The sentient tigers and the invisible army were actually two separate villainous schemes, but combining the two sounds like it would only make the problems worse.)

*stevenneiman*

The problem is that it's a fundamental part of the story that any villain who relies on fancy magic will have it backfire or be cut off at the worst possible moment, granting the heroes a victory. While all of those magical solutions could be useful under the right circumstances, most would need substantial investments and a certain degree of reliance to be better than conventional solutions. Use flying fortresses for logistics, and any time it would actually do something carts wouldn't a team of plucky heroes would just come along and destroy your fortress, leaving your troops to starve. Also, the invisible army and the tigers were separate incidents, and I think the problems were that the invisibility magic didn't work and the tigers deserted.

*jonnney*

Meh, the tyrant of Helike had like 7 flying fortresses and all it took was a few hours and a group of newbie heroes to take them down. Having an army in a castle in the sky is nice until the castle falls from the sky.

You want air support? Send in the Sovereign of the Red Skies. Ain't nothing gonna be flying up there.

You want deadly night skirmishers? Send in the goblins they can slit throats and blow shit up.

*nipi*

"Killing her birth father on the field, she became a Princess of Winter only to find the horrible fate still dogged her: she was sent as the champion of Winter to settle a duel, only to find the man who'd raised her to be her opponent."

Are you sure thats the story you want to go with Cat? You do remember Warlocks warning about betraying Black?

*Nicole*

Somehow I doubt trying to lock her into a story will work very well. She already died as a "loss" just to make sure the end still happened the way she wanted.

*Dana*

She's planning to become the daughter of a Fae & a powerful member of the Winter Court. Why wouldn't it work? She's sticking her head in the noose.

*permeakra*

So, Steal, Break, and Kill? Girl, that's hardcore. And you aim to be the antithesis of the Bard... This is going to be interesting.

*Akim*

Yeap.

The Bard still thinks Malicia is the enemy.

And Catherines goal makes her the spiritual successor of Amadeus.

His goal was to rip out the gods heart and show it to them bevor he kills them and breaks the mold.

He taught Cat to see the stories, to be a writer instead of teaching her his own Role to inherit.

This is what this Arc is about.

Cat entered the Realm of Story to learn Writing by choice instead of instinct.

*Rq*

We know she has take, and break seems very very in character, but I don't see kill as being an aspect for her. My money is on "inspire" to parallel Blacks "lead" the way take and (presumably) break parallel conquer and destroy

*stevenneiman*

My thought is Choose. It would allow her to perform such feats as resisting influence and mind control, and possibly also to break free from the story for a few key moments, like when the story calls for the bard to escape instead of getting killed.

*sheer\_falacy*

I think some kind of resistance to influence and mind control would be very appropriate. In the whole story, probably the things that pissed her off the most were when Black mind

controlled her not to interfere with the hangings and later when she realized that the only reason she cared at all about the hangings was because her Name was trying to force her into a redemption arc. She really hated both of those.

*permeakra*

"Kill" is what she declared, and the law of narrative is that statements come back to bite you in your ass.

---

This level of determination makes me think that even if Cat loses her try at Dread Empress' crown and ends up a disembodied head in the Hall of Screams, she'll just lead a revolt to give Praes its first "democratic government".

*Applemonkeyman*

Typo:

we'd be screwed the first time we ran into a hero that could shit it down.

I think you meant

we'd be screwed the first time we ran into a hero that could shUt it down.

*Shequi*

What Hakram's multiple attempts at Finding her a Story tell me is that there are a lot of potential branches that Tale can take. She needs to be very careful or she will end up in one with an ending she doesn't like at all.

*Nairne*

That's why she is stacking the "facts" in her favor. The heirloom, the prophecy, etc.

Though I admit the prophecy part could be weak. Although, most traditional stories end with the prophecy fulfilled so it could work. It could also be the kind of wishful thinking that drags her into deep shit, and we still haven't seen her in that kind of situation in this book. Half dead and escaping the fire she created in the first book or full on dead and having to scrap for a win against both Aqua and William (I admit it went decently well for her, but it was still a pretty close thing), losing Seek to the corruption devil (demon? having a hard time remembering which one it was), take your pick. Cat just has a knack for being thinking she is on the bottom, just to make a wrong step and fall into an even deeper and darker ravine. Still, as they say, the Goddess of Fortune waits in the deepest

hell (or if you like that analogy, then think of Pandora's Box).

It all depends on how much she prepares and how well she can execute, and improvise (and I bet she will have to because she doesn't have enough time to read all the stories).

*stevenneiman*

Devils are the small fry, which there are an infinite number of and I think also infinite varieties of. Demons are the big guys, whose presence is enough to turn the tide of battle of defeat entire armies.

*George*

Devils get stronger with age; there's a really powerful ice one that Apprentice has a contract with.

*Dylan Tullos*

I've been reading this story for a while, but this chapter helped me realize some things that I hadn't quite been able to put into words earlier. I was impressed both by Catherine's understanding of how power comes from people at the bottom, not just those at the top, and by her failure to think through the logical consequences of her thoughts.

The people of Callow do not want to be ruled by foreigners. Even when they're not particularly fond of their own nobility, their lords and ladies are still Callowan, not Praes. Countess Marchford is many things, but no one could call her a puppet of Praes, dancing on the Dread Empire's strings; Catherine Foundling, on the other hand, is the Black Knight's Squire, a loyal servant of the Dread Empire. Rule by her is rule by Praes, no matter how she tries to disguise it. Malicia and Black can give her as much rope as they please, but at the end of the day, she jumps when Black says "Frog".

The Dread Empire slaughtered Callow's army. Their Governors robbed the country for years, and their soldiers murdered not only those who rebelled, but their families. Every one of the fifty people that Black hanged at the inn had friends and distant relatives, and none of them are going to forget that Catherine Foundling murdered their loved ones. The next generation of Callowan heroes aren't magically going to support Praes because one collaborator saved a city from the devils that another faction of Pres unleashed on them. Black seriously underestimates the human ability to hold a grudge, especially against foreign invaders with a radically different culture.

Catherine talks about how a little boy gave an orc a crown of flowers, but that orc would have crucified the child in an

instant if Catherine gave the order. The Legions have been killing traitors, and the families of traitors, for a very long time. A single moment of joy and gratitude can't erase that legacy, and it can't erase the knowledge that your "savior" would torture you to death if their superior officer told them to.

Time and time again in history, we see tyrannies fall not when they are at their most oppressive, but when they are seeking to reform and loosen their grip. The people they rule still remember the bloodshed and terror of the old days, and they no longer have the same overwhelming, constant fear to keep them in line. Catherine thinks that "democracy" means progress in the direction she wants, or at least a direction she's comfortable with; but if the people of Callow actually had a vote, they'd string her mentor up on the gallows and put her right next to him.

### *agumentic*

Except people of Callow already think that Catherine Founding is "one of ours" in the end. For every killed traitor there is a Fifteen's soldier and his family and friends, a servant of a Baroness Kendal, someone from Marchford or just a Callowian who is afraid to speak out.

Peasants may prefer Callowan nobles (though that could be argued), but the efficient suppression left them no open way to rebel. But now they don't need to – because they can just support Catherine Founding, who is surely leads a quiet rebellion, reading her forces until their's weakness to strike. She even managed to put one of the better leaders of Liesse's rebellion – Procerian plot, that – into the ruling council, and accepts rebellion's soldiers into her legion. She protected a town against a horrible demon, released by the actual Praesian noble, and even turned away from the execution before being order by Black Knight. Every good thing that comes from the government is probably her idea too. What more arguments do you need? She is certainly on the Callow's side, outsmarting every enemy.

People will go for surprising strides to explain the conflicting ideas in their heads, such as "Praes is bad" and "My life's getting better" and "Non-noble Praesians are not that different or bad when you get to know them" and "If I openly rebel, I'll die". Cat offers a very good solution for that conundrum, for all the above reasons.

### *Euodiachloris*

She might be Evil, but she badass and she's our Callow-branded form of Evil. Cut her open, and see "Fuck You, I'm Laure" written all through her.

### *Letouriste*

Hum...your cat is pretty much in agreement with our time;) This is exactly the philosophy building up everywhere in democracy these days.the enemy being most corporations,the sheeps trusting flowering words without thinking much(in politics and religion) and the people lacking access to modern education and basic ressources.

Here the first two are Names and people living in the past(you shown that when only the veterans were willing to participate in the rebellion,not the young people) and the third is people in procer.they know only warfare for so long and are short-sighted

*maresther23*

Down with the Great Men Theory!

*Dylan Tullos*

Agumentic, Catherine asks one of her own Callowan soldiers what he thinks of the Empire and the Empress. His response is a four-letter word. As far as I can tell, no one in Callow is loyal to the Dread Empire; some people are willing to fight the Legions, and others aren't, but there is no substantial "Team Praes" faction in Callow.

Procer certainly supported the rebellion, but the First Prince can't make peasants rebel if they're happy under the Dread Empire. Any attempts to label the rebellion as a "Proceran plot" will be roughly as successful as the unending Soviet efforts to claim that every independence movement in the Baltics was the product of the CIA. Whatever Praes says, the rebels know full well that they chose to rise, and that they would do it again if they thought it would work this time.

The narrative of "Catherine Founding as secret rebel" only works until it becomes obvious that she's not going to rebel. Then she's not a hero, just another collaborator in the service of the Black Knight. Given how hated Black is throughout Callow, her close association with him is only going to undermine her legitimacy over time. No one is more despised than the man who conquered the Kingdom and murdered the families of rebels, and Catherine is his handpicked apprentice.

All those non-noble Praesian legionaries seem like nice folks, but Callow's people still remember how they hanged little Alice. She was only nine at the time, but her da was a rebel, and the sergeant dragged her to the gallows and strung her up right next to him. Every time that nice sergeant gets a drink, the barkeep remembers how she pulled the lever and murdered his daughter's best friend. That's not the kind of memory that goes away because someone tips generously and tells drunken stories about how much they miss their family.

I agree that people will go to surprising lengths to construct a consistent narrative out of inconsistent facts. But the fundamental narrative is still resistance; finding a way to free Callow, put the Black Knight's head on a pike, and hang every Praesian legionary from the nearest tree. If Catherine wanted to be part of that narrative, she could try to make herself Queen. If she chooses to ignore what the people of Callow want, she'll be discarded in favor of a new champion.

Catherine is trapped in her own narrative, where the blood feuds of centuries, prejudice against worshipers of Evil, and xenophobia about orcs and goblins can be magically set aside because she has better ideas. She thinks that she's fighting the Gods, and she might be able to win that battle. The battle she can't win- the battle that it's absurd to even try to win- is the one where she sells Callowans on the idea that being subjects of the Dread Empress is something they want.

*esryok*

Could go either way. I doubt we'll see a full scale rebellion again, for a couple reasons:

1. There is no critical mass of rebellious people left in Callow

– There was *\*just\** a rebellion which saw many of Callow's die-hard patriots die hard at the hands of Black.

– The political narrative of "Cat/Praes is the worst" has been muddled by Black's long efforts to maintain apathy in the latest generation and Cat's own actions, e.g. establishing the ruling council, sparing Baroness Dormer, and saving Marchford and Liesse from hellspawn. Folks need a clearer sign of Evil to rally against her.

2. There's nobody to rally behind.

– The only nobles of note left in Callow are the Countess of Marchford (Cat) and the Duchess of Daoine (not trusted by the rest of Callow).

– If we believe Black, there won't be any new Callowan heroes until Cat fails in her Role.

3. The Narrative won't allow it.

– We just had a rebellion. It's too soon for a sequel.

– Cat is positioning herself as the protector of Callow. A tragedy about her failing to protect Callow is more satisfying than a tragedy about Callow not giving her a chance to do so.

So if Cat goes down I think it'll have to be from the Tenth Crusade and the House of Light's condemnation. Or fallout from Winter's/Summer's meddling. Or the Guild of Assassins murders her. Or Masego betrays her 'cause something something corruption. Or the High Ridge tribe screws her over. Or Akua turns Callow into a new layer of Hell.

Oh what lovely choices Fate has.

*jonnney*

What Catherine is really doing is selling Callowans on the idea that a Meritocracy is better than a Monarchy. In the old Callow non-named peasant can never be a baron, count, or king no matter how skilled they are or how hard they work. In the new Callow a skilled non-named peasant who works hard enough and long enough might become the governor of a province. She has broken the Aristocracy, given the every man the opportunity to raise himself up from obscurity, and improved the quality of life of everyone in the country.

Would you rather live in an evil empire with a high quality of life and the opportunity for advancement or in a good kingdom where you're born poor and you die poor no matter how hard you work?

*permeakra*

Erg, dude. It is a medieval-style world. Meaning that for 90+ % people the world ends beyond plains of their village and their lord is a representative of God on Earth. Meritocracy is not a thing there.

Cities? There are some people their that would like meritocracy in a form of plutocracy to take place, because they have money.

And other people? They don't give a damn.

*Rhino*

Plup~

So, to begin with, french speaker here. I blame any occurence of bad english and/or insufferable arrogance on my origins.

Anyway, I finally caught up with the story after a year of on-and-off reading, and I thought that I had to tell you how much I loved it. Cat is imo a great protagonist, her allies are a lovable bunch and you genuinly made me laugh a few time (for context, it's not something that happens that much to me, and you did it through another language). So, yay to you !

As a sidenote, as a bisexual I was very, very happy to come across a main character who is one. So yeah, my liking of Cat may not be that obective, but this the first time in my life that I can indentify myself sexually with a protagonist, so sue me. Double yay to you !

Finally, I currently have a FATE pen&paper rpg campaign inspired by your take on Names, Roles, Aspects and Fate (heh) running strong for five months now. I put together a bunch of genre-savvy fantasy geeks, and we're having a great time. Triple yay to you !



Anyway, keep going strong, hope you are having as a good time writing his story that I'm having reading it.

*Yitzi*

"The Gods disagreed on the nature of things: some believed their children should be guided to greater things, while others believed that they must rule over the creatures they had made."

I'm starting to suspect that these might not correspond to Good and Evil per se, but rather that Good and Evil are both of the "rule over the creatures they had made" persuasion...and Cat is the champion of the other side.

*Letouriste*

Yeah, i had this impression when she resurrected herself: maybe some god helped her and encourage her in the background.

The way creation is now the "rule over" faction probably hurt badly the other side.

Procer is on the other side, they don't depend of heroes, but they are way too late and underdeveloped. their first prince is a warmongster and the population have Been oppressed for one or two generation, only been used for dumb war.

Maybe that god faction is struggling right now and need cat to change things

*jonnnney*

Remember the opening to the Prologue is a quote from the "Book of All Things" which is essentially the Bible of the good gods in Callow. It is going to be biased against the Gods Below.

*Dana*

No: the champion of the "not rule over their creatures" side is obviously Cordelia. She doesn't have a Name. Cat does. Cat lost the game at the beginning of the story.

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

Can't wait until Cat has to save Heiress from the champion of summer ...

That is the real twist, of course.

*Dylan Tullos*

ersyok, the question is not "can Black terrify Callow into obedience?". The answer to that question is Yes, at least most of the time. The question is "Can Catherine make Callowans feel like they're okay with being part of the Dread Empire of Praes?"

The entire mythology and culture of Callow is built around hostility to Praes. Their great Heroes and Kings fought against the Dread Empire, and every child grows up hearing stories of the people who refused to surrender to the forces of Evil. The only difference between active rebels and obedient subjects is the belief that Callow can win; if they thought they would prevail, the country would rise up in a heartbeat.

Black can win battles, and he can terrify people into submission. But he can't make Callowans into Praesi, and he can't make them forget their culture or their long, proud tradition of resistance to the Dread Empire.

Catherine is casting herself as the protector of Callow. The real tragedy won't be her failure to protect Callow; Catherine is good at violence, and he knows how to fight outside enemies. Catherine's great sin and failing is hubris, and it should be her downfall. She always thinks that she can fight harder and win through, that she can beat any foe. But when the people she seeks to protect are her enemy, when ordinary Callowans finally realize that they don't need Heroes and rise up on their own, Catherine will finally see that she can't protect her people from their own choices.

### *Soronel Haetir*

Except that those stories aren't being told nearly so often (or openly) as they once were. Black has been in control of the education system for a couple decades now, the people just having kiddies of their own are the first to have gone through that entire system. And you can be sure that Callowan schools under the Dread Empire are not telling any history of successful resistance. They are instead playing up every bit of corruption, self-dealing and uncaring attitude that the now-dead nobles displayed. And also being sure to point out how taxes are so very much lower now (remember, that is why Black was angry with at Mazus – Mazus was making people care again).

### *Unoriginal*

Parents teach their kids stories and not every child goes to an Imperial school keep that in mind, yes it's a logical assumption that is happening but the process would take generations and they don't have mandatory schooling for everyone.

Also, this is a high fantasy setting, Information and stories can't just propagate online like what those of us who have grown up in the internet age expect.

### *jonnnney*

Actually the answer to the question, "Can Black terrify Callow into obedience?" is no. Black does terrify most Callowans, but

he achieves obedience through apathy not fear. If he only ruled through fear then there would be a rebellion every year and every new hero would have immediate backing from the populace.

The culture of Callow isn't just hostile to Praesi. It is hostile to the Principality for when they treated it like a protectorate after the crusades. It is hostile to the Golden Bloom due to what the elves did to the Deoraithe. Callow is better than the rest of the continent.

Why would the ordinary people of Callow rise up? They don't need heroes, but they still need rulers. "Our lives are significantly improved by these heroes, but we don't really need them. Lets murder all of them because of reasons!!!!"

*M*

Black has a spy network. Networks like that are basically designed to break cultures over time. Take Catherine-she grew up in Laure , and as such was influenced by Callowan sulture, but her first thought when she desired a stronger Callow wasn't about starting a rebellion, it was about joining the legions.

Callow's culture is already massively changing, and that's what makes Black such a great... not!villain for me.

*Dylan Tullos*

In a peasant society, education usually isn't about school. Farm kids work during the day, and they learn their lessons from their parents and older family members. The stories that their parents and grandparents tell them shape their worldview, and they're not going to prefer some Praesi bureaucrat's version of history to their own granddad's story of the final battle against Black.

This is Catherine's fundamental problem. She's not just trying to say "you can't beat Black." That's an easy narrative to sell. She's trying to say "you want to join Black." You want to join the man who murdered your great-uncle, who hanged your next-door neighbor and his entire family, who put his boot on Callow's neck.

It doesn't matter how corrupt or despicable Callow's nobles are. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, and it's easy to forget how much you hated the old Baron when he died bravely fighting against the Praesi. Whatever the Praesi tell them, Callow's people remember the Queen of Blades. They remember the First Crusade, and the fall of Dread Empress Triumphant. Erasing the memory of a culture is almost impossible, and it's even more difficult when everyone knows what you're trying to do.

For thousands of years, Callow fought against the Praesi, and they won more than they lost. That legacy matters. When Black

tells them to forget, to submit, to admit that they're inferior and that they can't possibly resist the Dread Empire, it just makes them more determined to hold on to their identity as a people. The last rebellion had little chance of success, pitting an army of farmers against the Legions of Terror and an untested band of heroes against the Calamities, yet thousands rose anyway.

I'm trying to imagine a narrative that would make Americans happy to be ruled by Russians, or Russians happy to be ruled by Americans. I can't think of one, and the rivalry between America and Russia is a historical eyeblink compared to the endless conflict between Praes and Callow. Even the Gallowborne, who joined the Legions of Terror to avoid being hanged, have too much integrity to buy what Black is selling. Catherine may be the only Callowan who wouldn't rise up if she thought that she could win.

Propaganda works best when it's reinforcing beliefs that already exist. Low taxes are nice, and nobles can be awful, but Callowans aren't eager to believe that they'd be better off as a province in somebody else's empire. They aren't enthused about a chance to bend the knee to people who think murdering an entire family is an efficient way to punish one person's treason. Black's agents can talk all they want, and people will smile and nod in public, but the stories they tell behind closed doors are stories of Heroes, not tales of good collaborators who did as they were told.

*Soronel Haetir*

Perhaps if Black's goal were actually getting the Callowans to like the Empire I would agree with you. But up to this point his aim has been much less ambitious, apathy is good enough for his purposes. Apathy ensures that the Callowans won't rebel, once that apathy is deep seated enough then would come time to make the peasants actually choose the Empire. It's no accident that the first serious Callowan rebellion kicked off after a Preasi governor got greedy.

Changing the minds of Callowans is likely Cat's long-term job (at least as Malicia and Black see things).

*Dylan Tullos*

There are different kinds of apathy. One form is "Who cares who's in charge?" Callow doesn't have this form of apathy. Twenty thousand peasants rose with Countess Marchford; you don't get that kind of rebellion out of people who aren't concerned.

Another form of apathy is "Why bother, nothing's going to change anyway." This is quite powerful in Callow, and it explains why more young people didn't rise. They don't remember an independent Callow, and they're used to thinking

of the Legions as invincible. This kind of apathy is powerful, but it's also fragile. If the Exiled Prince had beaten Catherine, all of the fence-sitters would have seen that the Empire wasn't invincible. The problem with using fear and despair as motivators is that your first major defeat will show the people who still hate you that you can be beaten.

The greedy governor was just the trigger; Callow's people were looking for an excuse and an opportunity to rebel, and they would have found it sooner or later. Despite all of Black's work, they were still willing to rise up decades after their conquest and occupation.

Catherine is Black's apprentice. Right now, the people of Callow are eager to see one of their own in power, and they're anticipating the day when she betrays her masters and drives the Praesi out. In the long term, her continued loyalty to Black will take away any legitimacy she has in the eyes of her people.

Convincing a nation that they should be happy with rule by an alien culture, especially one they have a long, proud history of resisting, is never an easy job. The Gallowborne lieutenant says it best when Catherine asks him what he thinks about Praes. "F\*\*\* the Empire," he said, spitting to the side again. "F\*\*\* the Tower, and f\*\*\* the f\*\*\*\*\* Empress too." If that's the reaction that Praes inspires in a man who serves in it's armies, they're a long way from apathy.

*jonnnney*

How many times are you gonna post the same comment that ignores fundamental aspects of the story and the nature of the world the story is in?

Book 2 Prologue

"We are running out of options, uncle," Cordelia admitted. "The longer we delay, the more the Empire strengthens their grip on Callow. The reports are unanimous: outside the cities, most of the Kingdom no longer cares it is under occupation. They do not think the Legions of Terror can be beaten and the standard of living for the peasantry under Praes is better than it was under the Fairfax dynasty. They have no stomach for rebellion and if we wait a few more years I am afraid they might actually resist an attempt to liberate them."

You might think you can compare Americans to Callowans for some strange reason but it is TRUTH in this world that most of the kingdom does not care that it is under occupation.

*Dylan Tullos*

The main plot of Book 2 is Callow rebelling against the Dread Empire. Thousands of peasants decide to risk their lives fighting against the Legions, knowing that they're going up against the armies that conquered Callow and the Calamities who slew their greatest heroes. That's curious behavior for people who "don't care that they're under occupation".

Large numbers of Callowans want to rebel against Praes when the Dread Empire is at its strongest, when their harvests are good, and when the rebellion is being led by a Hero whose leadership skills are practically nonexistent. Clearly, the rebels aren't "apathetic" about who runs their country. As for resisting liberation, Callow has bad historical memories of being "liberated" and turned into a client state of the Principate. They're not interested in changing from a province of Praes to a province of the Principate, but that doesn't mean they don't dream of being free from foreign occupation altogether.

Peasants are never fond of foreign armies, and they're justifiably scared of rebellions that could lead to the Legions burning their crops and hanging their children. The real test of loyalty isn't "Are they willing to obey when we'll kill them if we don't?" but "Will they be loyal if we take the army away?". "Loyalty" inspired by fear of consequences and the apathy that comes with despair are not remotely the same thing as actual contentment. If people weren't concerned about who was in charge, Black wouldn't need to have an army on hand to keep his boot on Callow's neck.

You keep saying that Black doesn't rule through fear, that Callowans don't really care who's in charge. If that's the case, why does Praes need Legions to garrison the country? Couldn't they just take the soldiers away and have Callowans remain loyal without Legion swords at their throats?

Taking one quote out of context ignores the larger narrative: Callowans hate Praes, and they hate being occupied. Lieutenant Farrier serves in the Fifteenth, fighting for Praes, and his feelings about the Dread Empire are expressed in one four-letter word. He's not resisting because he thinks that the rebellion is doomed, not because he "doesn't care". If he had Malicia and Black at his mercy, he'd put their heads in a noose and watch them kick.

I'm surprised that you would accuse me of ignoring fundamental aspects of the story when half of Book I and most of Book II are about Callow rebelling against Praes. You say that the truth is that Callowans don't care about the occupation, but I guess all of the thousands of peasant

rebels who fought with Countess Marchford and the Lone Swordsman didn't get the news.

*M*

Plot of book 2 isn't Callow rebelling against the Dread Empire, it is about an antagonist to Cat failing to start as massive rebellion against the empire as he wanted to. If you want, it's about old Callow (swordsman, heroes, rebellion against occupation) against the new Callow (Catherine, villains, we are a province of praes now). And the new Callow won. That story arc is done, settled, finished – Callow won't rebel until Catherine either completely fails in her ambitions or gets new ones.

As for the quote from the captain you keep mentioning... That was before the battle with the devils, when Gallowborne hated Cat. After, they were seen fanatically defending her against any criticism. Think that signifies change in opinions too?

*permeakra*

>to hold on to their identity as a people.

You assume that there is a nation of Callowan people.

There is not one. Nations are a thing of industrialized period, because they are not a thing if there is no mass media and mass culture.

*MetruX*

Well, to compliment the others who are speaking of the rebellion, I must say some simple differences from this world to our own, since from a common reader vision it won't appear.

First and foremost, this world is ruled by actual Gods who intervene in the world, not directly, but through a kind of subtle mind control. We see it in heroes and in villains, it is very prominent, but you forget that EVERYONE is influenced by them, just not as much as the Named. When a Hero appears and say aloud "I WILL free this kingdom!" the people will rally. They will feel the will to rally and rebel, even if they were fine before, and will account it to the Hero's charm. Besides, the percentage of population who rised to the war was trully small, evermore if you notice how half the troops were the, previously, almost destroyed military of the kingdom. Thus, the first point is: the story shapes people in this reality ALOT more than in our own.

Secondly, I must notice how death is differently viewed throughout the ages. In the beginning, death was common, we struggled to live each day. We evolved, and life got easier. Then, we started

killing each other more and more, since the world around us couldn't give us that much danger. Finally, war became a relative rare thing, medicine allowed us to commonly outlive the old nobles, and even punishing of crimes has become lenient. We now see death as something trully atrocious, that should not happen and will be seen once in a couple of years, usually in someone that you don't know very well. Now, looking at the picture in the world of this story... Death is commonplace. You have a war every once in a while, there are plagues and magic, monsters, devils and fae, even angels and Named bringing death all the time. Even if you live without war, pest and famine, you will still know people who died to hazards or to Named shenanigans. When you see death every month instead of every couple of years, it looses part of it's importance. Thus, the second point is: these peasants may very well not care half as much about these death's than we would, ESPECIALLY when the new way makes things better, with less deaths and suffering.

Thirdly, you must see that the Story of every place in here is NOT shaped by theyr full history, only by the Role that this place takes. What does this means in practical terms is that when this Role is broken, a time of Change will come, not only in the way of life, but on the way of thinking and feeling. What Change this will be, will depend on who holds the rein and molds this place. This is precisely why Black can't make it himself and neither control Cat into doing it, it must come from within the kingdom, since Callow is not completely part of Praes. As long as she is the one making the choices, and doesn't fail in her purpose, the whole reality will slightly bend to have her way, until it fixates in a new Role for Callow.

Lastly, but not least, although it's not story related, I am not a native english speaker, thus there may (and probably will) be errors in this big text. I hope you don't put it against my arguments, since my errors come from this lack, and not of another kind.

*Dylan Tullos*

MetruX:

Your mastery of English is considerably better than my mastery of any language but English. I shudder at the thought of a native Spanish speaker reading one of my old posts in Spanish.

I agree with much of what you're saying. Names and Roles do change the nature of reality, and both Praes and Callow are forced into a Story. The problem that Black and Catherine have is that the Story the Gods tell favors the status quo. Triumphant can conquer the continent, but in the end the world unites to bring her down. Though I do believe Triumphant was far more capable and successful than practically all of the other Tyrants, she had the Story working with her in the first



part, helping her to conquer the whole continent. Once she won, the Story turned to the side of Good, since Evil can't be allowed a permanent win. The more she tapped into the power of Narrative, the more vulnerable she became to the underlying belief that Evil has to lose in the end.

If the villain won, there would be no story. The First and Second Crusades conquer Praes, but in the end Terriblis II drives the crusaders out of his Empire. Terriblis II was also a capable and brilliant ruler, but he did not win entirely through his own ability any more than Triumphant lost entirely through hers. The Story wanted Praes to lose, but if it disappeared, there would be recurring villain for the next chapter. Black complains that the deck is stacked against Evil, but the deck is actually rigged in favor of repetition; Evil invades, Good drives them out, but Evil is always allowed to return to their den and plot the next invasion.

Right now, the Gods seek to free Callow so that the Story can continue, with Praes invading every few years. They're like an author who always wants to reset the world of their story to the way it was, and while they haven't succeeded perfectly, they've largely managed to keep Callow and Praes locked in the same old cycle. Black seeks to break that cycle, but he can't do it as long as the Story the Gods tell has power.

Black has great power, but that power is limited by his Role. His solution is to share power with the Legions and their commanders, ordinary people whose rules aren't prescribed by the narrative. Though they have less power, they have more agency, and they can prevail where Black and the Calamities could not win on their own.

Black isn't just interested in finding a new Role for Callow; he wants to break the Roles and the Story altogether. In the long term, this means putting more and more agency in the hands of unNamed, like the Legionaries and commanders who conquered Callow. Any change that provides more agency to ordinary people weakens the Story, which is all about Named.

The problem with weakening the Story is that Black doesn't get to pick and choose. Callow relies on Heroes because they've always had lots of them, but Procer has only one Hero, and their government and military don't depend on having Named in charge. As Callow becomes more like Procer, they won't need Named to tell them to rise up, and they'll become more capable of thinking and planning for themselves.

If Black succeeds, and the Story weakens, then Callow will behave less like a Good nation and more like an ordinary nation. And ordinary nations hate being occupied by foreigners who come from a radically different culture, much less foreigners who are actually members of different species.

Black's two goals are to break the power of Stories and to add Callow to the Praesi Empire; unfortunately for him, those goals are largely incompatible. As soon as Praes suffers a military defeat or another round of civil wars, Callow will rise up and reclaim their independence, whether they have a Story behind them or not.

*nick012000*

I really doubt that. The whole point of Squire's Story is that she's turning Callow from a Good nation to an Evil nation, by amplifying their negative traits, most notably their stubborn independence. The next time the forces of Good come knocking, if Squire's been successful, the people of Callow will go "fuck off" and rally behind her, regardless of whether or not they're still being ruled by the Tower.

*Aarik*

Minor... Nitpick? Random fact?

The story of David vs Goliath has a bit more to it that gets overlooked to turn it into a faith allegory or a bigger harder fall thing:

David was offered the standard armor, shield, sword setup thing Goliath was using for their dual-

And David went "Wait, I'm not a soldier, I don't know how to use this shit, I'mma bring the sling I've been using to kill wolves for years instead, I know how to use that."

The story was about not fighting your enemy where they're strong. David fought using the tools he was best at, rather than what was expected of him. That's how the big nation's get you, they trick you into trying to fight them the same way they do, 'fairly'/'honorably' where they have all the advantages.

Also a little bit of not trying to be what you aren't.

*Dylan Tullos*

nick012000, I think that Callow's stubborn independence is a fundamental trait which isn't really Good or Evil. Callowans fought against Praesan and Proeran occupation, even though one nation is Evil and the other is Good, because neither nation was Callowan. I don't see how a strong sense of independence is inherently an Evil trait, or how that independent streak could somehow become compatible with accepting rule by the Tower. Poles don't like being ruled by Russians, but that doesn't mean they like being ruled by Germans, either. The single biggest obstacle to Catherine's legitimate rule is that she's a vassal of the Black Knight and a servant of the Tower; as long as she retains

those qualities, she has no leg to stand on when she accuses others of being foreign puppets.

Black's long-term plan is to weaken the power of the Story and the Named it creates. As the Story grows less powerful, the automatic tendency of ordinary people to rally behind their Named grows weaker, and those ordinary people gain more agency. Most of Black's top people are personally loyal to him, not to the Name of Black Knight, and they wouldn't automatically support his successor.

As Callowan Names grow less powerful, Catherine won't be able to rely as much upon the automatic rallying effect. She'll have to provide good reasons for the people of Callow to stand behind her, defending the Tower against the Procerans, and the use of the words "defending the Tower" will automatically inspire Callowans to reject her. Lieutenant Farrier serves in the Gallowborne under Catherine's personal command, and he wouldn't throw a copper to Malicia or Black if they were starving in the gutter. If she can't inspire her own soldiers with any sense of loyalty to Praes, then she has no chance with the larger population.

*M*

You do realise that Farrier quote is a wee bit out of date by now?

*esryok*

"The single biggest obstacle to Catherine's legitimate rule is that she's a vassal of the Black Knight and a servant of the Tower; as long as she retains those qualities, she has no leg to stand on when she accuses others of being foreign puppets."

I'm not so sure about this. Catherine is indeed subordinate to the Tower and a part of its power structure, but neither she nor the other Callowans we've seen regard her as acting in the best interests of Praes. Her efforts may well turn out to the Empire's benefit, but this is a side effect of her actual goal "gain control of institutions within Praes to improve the lives of Callowans."

Callow is, apparently, legendarily insistent on holding grudges. For this reason I agree that Cat still has a lot of work to do to properly preserve the Callow as a nation within the Empire, on par with the Soninke/Goblin/Orc/Taghreb nations. But I continue to disagree that her approach is fundamentally incorrect. It's looking good so far.

*Dylan Tullos*

M: The Farrier quote would only be "out of date" if he'd said anything to suggest that he changed his mind. As far as I know, he hasn't. The Gallowborne were enthusiastic about defending their own people from devils summoned by a cackling Praesi aristocrat. That doesn't mean that Farrier or his people have changed their minds about Praesi in general, or that Farrier's "F\*\*\* the Tower" attitude has gone away.

esryok, it's very easy for an approach to look good when the Empire is strong and the harvest is abundant. The real test of success is how Callowans feel about the Praesi when the Empire looks weak or the harvest fails.

Many Callowans view Catherine as acting in Callow's best interests. Many of the Legions view Catherine as acting in the Dread Empire's best interests. What happens when those interests don't overlap, when Catherine is faced with a choice between doing what's best for Callow and doing what's best for the Praesi?

Black told Catherine that Praes's population is still growing. Sooner or later, food imports from Callow, Procer, and the Free Cities won't be able to keep up with the constantly expanding number of mouths to feed. At that point, Praes will have to either reduce their own population by sending hordes out to fight and die, or start taking a larger share of the Callowan harvest. The first option would destroy the Legions of Terror, reducing them to the ineffective mobs that Praes used to rely on. The second option would motivate Callowan resistance, since the Praesi would be starving Callowans to ensure that they had enough food for their own people. Think of the Irish Potato Famine, except there wouldn't be any blight or disease, just a steady stream of food flowing south while Callowan cities go hungry. I can't think of anything more likely to destroy Catherine's status than being forced to choose between the well-being of her Callowan subjects and her Praesi masters.

*esryok*

The solution will have to be to cut down on the Praesi birthrate (well, the *\*actual\** solution probably involves lots of death during the "Uncivil Wars" but I'm pretending we don't know that for the sake of discussion).

Previous attempts failed because the Praesi narrative relied on the unrest created by population growth, but if Cat & the Dark Council are successful in weakening the existing "Praes grasps, Callow is grasped" story then Malicia might be able to implement population controls and have them stick.

*Dylan Tullos*

esryok:

I'm still somewhat puzzled about the origins of the "Uncivil Wars". We know that the Truebloods are crippled and steadily losing power, and that the Legions are dedicated to Black. The only real threat to Malicia's power must be Heiress/Diabolist, and I don't know what she's up to. I suspect it's going to be big and successful, though; we can't have "Uncivil Wars" unless Heiress successfully destabilizes a Dread Empress who is currently at the height of her power.

Civil wars or foreign invasions are ultimately short-term solutions, so the only viable option in the long term is the population control you mention. Maybe Malicia's roundabout approach to solving the problem will work, but I foresee problems with Praes liking conquest too much. Population control is hard and unpopular, while conquering other nations to steal their food is the Praesi way.

I feel that the Wandering Bard has a good point; all of the "practical evil" is a direct result of having Malicia and Black in charge. Any system that relies on a handful of people is fundamentally unstable, so I'm curious to see what Malicia and the Calamities are doing to prepare the system for their own deaths, and ultimately Catherine's death. Lasting peace and stability can only be achieved if Dread Empire Foolhardius doesn't take over and declare war on everyone, which is a very likely eventual outcome if we look at Praesi history.

If Catherine and the Calamities win, I want them to win the hard way, with capable opponents and dramatic tension. I feel that Catherine has been winning for too long, and that she's due for a serious defeat soon, just to remind her and us that you can't always win through bravery and determination. This story frequently reminds us that only Heroes get to win the easy way, and I want the Calamities and Catherine to go up against enemies who are their equals or betters. So far, I can't think of a single true, lasting defeat that Team Calamity has suffered, and I want that to change. Invincible Villains are just as uninteresting as Invincible Heroes.

*lennymaster*

You forget that Black is already weakening the the Story and thus Tropes like the one that Evil always loses and that especially in feudalistic times like these people did not care the least about who ruled them as long as they were not hungry, aswell as the fact that callow already lives now for more than TWENTY YEARS under preasi rule.

Also if you think that even a single one of her victories was easily attained, that even a single one of her plans went down without a hitch and she did not have to make plenty sacrifices, (the left side of her face wich is still completly numb and her

permanent limp just to name a few) then you either have not really read the story or you have a really scewed view of what hardship means.

I do hope that erratica will not be convinced to have Cat suffer into one foul tasting victory after another as so many authors do these days.

Not every fight needs to grind our protagonists into the dust to be plenty dangerous and entertaining.

*Dylan Tullos*

lennymaster:

"Evil always loses" is getting weaker. That doesn't mean that it's being replaced by "Evil always wins".

If you believe that Callow doesn't care enough to rebel, and Callow then rebels, you should revise your theory to fit with the facts, instead of insisting on the impossibility of something that already happened. Half of Book I and most of Book II focus on Callow fighting Praes; clearly, twenty years under Black's tyranny hasn't quite managed to break Callow's spirit.

One form of hardship is losing. Catherine hasn't done a lot of that so far. Another form of hardship would be losing friends or loved ones. Who has Catherine lost?

Every fight doesn't need to be impossibly hard. But there's a reason that most stories feature underdogs struggling against the odds, or at least have antagonists who are equal in strength to their protagonists. The Calamities are much more experienced and capable than the Heroes they go up against, and it robs their conflict of dramatic tension. In the same way, pitting Catherine against a strawman like the Lone Swordsman diminishes her value as a protagonist; beating up chumps just isn't as impressive as going up against real opponents.

*LostDeviljho*

A thought on the "Uncivil Wars" thing: Civil wars would be something that happens during a period of instability. Instability like, say, one of the two figureheads of the current empire biting it.

We have the White Knight \*and\* the Black Knight in the free cities right now, and that's obvious Nemesis material. They've clashed once already. They'll probably clash again. Maybe even three times.

You see where I'm going with this?

And losing Amadeus would be a real loss, not just for the Empire, but for Catherine. He's a... well, not father figure, that's been stated several times at this point, but he *is* a mentor for her, one who she actually likes, and depends on for guidance more than a little bit.

(The other option for someone to lose is Killian, and I don't even want to think about that.)

*JustSomeoneRandom*

Are you aware that people have been mentioning the gallowed fiercely defending Cat now. Ferrier also supported Cat and her ideals after the demon fight. Yes, he still hates the praesi. But he is currently on Cat's side when it comes to getting Callow out of the pit it's currently in. In a less radical way than the Adjutant, he is a supporter of Cat's way, not a begrudging follower that will try to escape at the nearest chance. Black was doing something similar to what the Roman empire did when they assimilated a province, he gave them a mostly better life and only required them to follow Praesi rules in return. The remainder of Callow that was dissatisfied enough to rebel was already small, and with Cat solving the mistreatment by integrating Callow as a proper province, most of what was left after the rebellion failed is now growing closer to acceptance. Heck, even during the rebellion the rebels were unsatisfied with the volunteers. The majority was already apathetic and Cat is giving the rest a banner to rally behind. Cat isn't a traitor in their eyes, she is their best shot at a better Callow for some, an example that this meritocracy might not be all that bad for others and just a new person in charge of taxes for the rest. Callow still isn't happy with how things are going, but they aren't angry anymore either.

*Letouriste*

Wow so many big block comments:o  
You revived the comment section^^

*SarahZero*

It's speeches like this that makes me think Cat is going to break yet another part of creation, that of her own Name. Instead of succeeding the Black Knight, or even the White Knight, I fully expect her to make a new title, the Grey Knight. Neither truly Evil nor truly Good, the champion of the masses killing villains and heroes alike to allow people to make their own way. I think it fits what we've seen so far of her personality and goals. Cat might even be enough to break the pattern of stories (Good vs Evil) entirely, and usher in the age of neutrality where the sentient races are truly free or make their own world.

## NPC

I haven't posted anything for a while but I feel the need to weigh in on the integration of Callow debate.

1. The South of Callow didn't explode in popular Rebellion. The Lone Swordsman, an army of mercenaries, and the Duke of Liesse invaded then the remaining knight and nobles rallied to their banner. While I have no doubt many of the levies were dissidents from across Callow but on the other hand how many were local farmer ordered to be there by the local nobles? Remember those same nobles who rose in rebellion were never removed from power in the South of Callow after the Conquest. Meaning the South was probably the least indoctrinated and least policed part of Callow.

2. The rebellion of Liesse might be an indicator of strong support for rebellion remaining in Callow, true. But it could just as easily be the last gasp of a failing cause. Remember the last of Callow's Knightly Orders were murdered in their sleep and the nobles turned on each other while the commoners sold them out to save their own skins. That's not exactly the heroic doomed last stand stories are made of to motivate the next generation.

3. The Lone Swordsman took Marchford in a surprise attack in the Epilogue of Book I. Not a popular uprising. An interesting fact to remember.

4. Remember perspective is important, what one person's eyes sees as the truth maybe very different from another's. Catherine's from Laure, the old capital of the Kingdom of Callow and a major center of trade. She, other city dwellers, and the more educated high classes no doubt have a skewed perspective of how much people care about the old Kingdom as they were the ones who benefited from it at least in terms of prestige and power. Furthermore it sounds like many of the ex-soldiers of Callow joining her Legion are probably in the same boat, city dwellers or from families with high levels of education, not peasants with farms and families to go back to. Meaning they might not be the most reliably way to judge the mood on an entire nation.

5. The former Marchford soldiers are even more suspect as a good indication of the mood of Callow because they are from Marchford, one of the Southern cities not under direct governorship but rather ruled by a very competent noble with good reason to hate the Empire. Furthermore due to being on the wrong side of the rebellion, now they have to either go into exile as mercenaries uprooting their families and leaving their home behind or serve a new Named Countess who might or might not be loyal to Praes. They might not want to fight for the Empire but that doesn't necessarily mean they want to fight against it either. Furthermore there's always the possibility of group think, maybe they think by hating on the Empire their sending a message to



Catherine that they are personally loyal to her alone or they're trying to say that they're behind her whether she reaches for the Crown of Callow or the Tower. Again perspective factors into this, Catherine is worried that her power base is fractured while the First Prince of Procer laments that Callow has already been corrupted, who's right? We don't know because we only have perspectives, not facts. Even the few facts we get are colored by the persons presenting them and methods used to gather them.

6. I would recommend not trying to apply modern ideas of nationalism to a medieval setting, a fantasy setting, and especially not a medieval fantasy setting. Nationalism is a fairly new thing in the grand scheme of things and peasants are unlikely to have anything more than a vague idea what goes on the next town over.

7. Population distribution is important to remember. Maybe this setting has enough magical healing, fewer plagues, and advanced farming techniques to support large cities but for the vast majority of human history you needed at least 90%, if not 95%, of the population working the fields just to have enough surplus food to support the other 10%. Again city dwellers, former soldiers, and the upper classes will have a different perspective of Callow than ignorant peasants and it's very likely that those ignorant peasants outnumber the former by several orders of magnitude.

8. The author has repeatedly foreshadowed that unrest will never go away. The tensions between the Soninke and Taghreb, the feuds between the Greenskins, and most importantly the Dukes of Liesse who never forgot they used to be kings in it's own right before conquered by Callow. The possibility that if times get too hard that Callow will dust off old heraldry and reach for hidden weapons will always exist and that will never go away. You just need to suppress it militarily, convince the population that they're better off under you, or make them think they have a stake in the Empire.

9. I think many people underestimate cognitive dissonance in humans. We have an amazing ability to lie to ourselves especially when our pockets are being lined and we are given a target to hate. See the economic prosperity Callow has enjoyed with unrestricted access to Imperial trade routes and ports, for the next target to hate look across the mountains to Procer. Or did you think Black and the Empress didn't know what they were doing fanning the flames of civil war in the Principate?

10. The biggest problem in integrating conquered territory is usually racism. The conquered get abused by new nobles, greedy administrators, and occupying soldiers; then excluded from government, commerce, and military service. It's a long slow process, that often fails, to get over it which is why Black

started on it right away. The Thirteenth legion wasn't just raised to cobble together some cavalry, save on manpower, and intimidate the South of Callow. Or did you think it was an accident the author mentioned Callow veterans from the Thirteenth legion were teaching in the academy and running business in the capital. They have been working at this scheme for more than twenty years.

Sorry for getting so wordy. Any chance of a discussion forum? If one already exist could you point me to it.

*Dylan Tullos*

NPC:

Thank you for making so many good points. You're right to draw attention to the fact that we are limited by perspective, and you're correct in pointing out that rebellions are often too complicated to fit into a simple narrative.

1. Plenty of rebellions are triggered by the arrival of foreign help, and I don't think Procer's assistance says anything about Callow's feelings one way or the other. However, you're right to remind out that plenty of peasants show up because that's what they do when the local noble calls them up. Understanding motivations is always complicated; when a Praesi legionary asks, everyone is a loyal subject of the Dread Empire, and when your local knight asks, you're ready to die for Callow. Discovering true opinions is not easy when there's so much pressure to lie.

2. Black does an excellent job defeating the rebellion tactically. He makes their defeat inglorious and hideously one-sided. Whether he'll be able to defeat the larger spirit of rebellion...well, the jury's still out on that one. Black is a master of winning battles, and even wars, but winning the peace is harder.

3. Given how thoroughly the Eyes of the Empire seem to have infiltrated any local resistance, the Lone Swordsman was smart to rely on a surprise attack instead of a popular uprising. No evidence either way. Again, it's really hard to tell what people are actually thinking when there are men with swords who might stab them if they say the wrong thing. Cheering the current winner is usually the safest approach, and it's difficult to determine who's a true believer when so many Callowans are doing their best not to get stabbed.

4. These are really excellent points. No one really asks peasants what they think; instead, they tell them what to think. I'm not sure how you could even get an honest answer out of the peasantry at this point. Praise the old Kingdom too much, and you could draw the attention of the Empire's Eyes;

praise the Empire, and the local rebels could mark you for death when the rising begins. Better just to complain about the weather.

5. I was actually referring to the Gallowborne, not the former Marchford soldiers. The Gallowborne volunteered to serve the Praesi as soldiers because the alternative was hanging, but they aren't exactly fans. It's worth noting that Cat's answer to Lieutenant Farrier's condemnation of the Empire is that "well, they may be evil, but they make the trains run on time." This is somewhat unsettling; yes, the Praesi do have a better system of economic management, but they also use death row prisoners as human sacrifices and murder entire families when one member rebels.

6. I wasn't applying a modern idea of nationalism, but a medieval one. Medieval peasants didn't get particularly upset over what lord ruled them, but Christian peasants wouldn't exactly be overjoyed to find themselves under the rule of Satanists. Since Praes openly worships Evil, it's not just a matter of whether you pay taxes to Lord A or Lord B. And Callow clearly does have some sense of national identity, since they don't like the thought of being ruled by the Good-aligned Procer. All of the text evidence suggests that the Callowan idea of nationalism, though very different from the modern form, is alive and well. Even Black's plan involves using a Callowan Squire to harness that nationalism rather than trying to wipe it out.

7. Yes! And I suspect that many peasants are focused primarily on getting the harvest in and praying that armies stay far away from their village. They can still be anti-Praesi, but they're not going to have the time or energy to rebel without either provocation or outside help.

8. The key problem with Praes's current setup is that it relies too heavily on the military option. Legitimate governments can handle setbacks, but the Praesi response to a defeated Tyrant appears to be either assassinating them or turning them into a puppet, and Callow's relative quiet is far too conditional to be stable. With a huge and capably led rival staring at them across the border, Praes needs actual unity, not the kind you impose with a knife to someone's throat.

9. The problem with aiming hatred at Procer is that both they and Callow worship God, while the Praesi are demon-summoning enemies who have invaded Callow seventy times throughout their long history of warfare. Religion often fills in for nationalism in more medieval societies, and Praes's ongoing worship of Evil undermines any attempt to retarget Callow's xenophobia.

Cognitive dissonance works both ways. Even as Callowans become more prosperous, they're not going to fall over themselves giving credit to Praes. It's very easy to enjoy the increased benefits of peace and good economic management while insisting that those Evil-worshipping monsters can't possibly have anything to do with the good times.

10. Yeah, Black is smart. As long as Praesi rule Callow directly, they'll always be a conquered, rebellious province. Only a Callowan can convince other Callowans that they're not going to be second-class subjects forever. A successful transition from occupation to ordinary times needs Callowan legionaries and administrators.

*NPC*

What is this, a logical argument on the internet? \*faints\*

I think your making a rather big assumption in the role of Good, Evil, and the House of Light. You equated Praes to Satanists and Callow to Catholics but I don't think that's quite right. These little to suggest that the House of Light preaches, indoctrinates, or persecutes in a manner to provoke such a drastic response from the population of Callow. In fact, I thought the House of Light seemed a bit weak as far as international religions are concerned.

I think a better example of the Good vs. Evil split would be the wars of religion in Europe between the Catholics and Protestants centered around the Holy Roman Empire. What started as a righteous struggle to determine the faith of the Empire turned into a series of increasingly political wars that served the geopolitical goals of the rising great powers while religion was reduced to a tool of the Kings and a casus belli for their wars.

The following paragraph is pure supposition on my part and not part of the argument. I equate Empress Triumphant's conquest and cruelty as the Saint Bartholomew Day Massacre that sparked the hatred, but time has passed and wars have been fought, hatred has dimmed and trade and self-interest have risen. Now what Empress Malica needs is a France, a Catholic (Good) nation to betray it's religion's collation for it's own self interest. Because on the Continent a nation with Praes's wealth and magic, Callow's farmland and population, backed by professional legions would be able to secure a lasting hegemony so long as everybody else doesn't gang up on it.

*lennymaster*

Of course most stories start with an underdog, but what most authors fail to do is make the protagonist at some point stop

being the underdog, or at the very least stop being as much of an underdog, because after a while having your maincharacter getting their ass handed to them at every turn but still somehow accomplishing ANYTHING stops making sense.

And so they either always let their enemies escape, usually thanks to a completly brainhaired redemption/mercy moment from the protagonists side, to come back bigger and badder then ever before or by giving the antagonist a ridiculous amount of luck and/or foresight.

Sometimes they just give them constantly bigger and badder enemies to fight without ever letting them face a weaker one just to show ho much they have grown.

And The Lone Swordsman was defenitly not a pushover, just because his cause and goal where idiotic in Cat's eyes does not mean he was not dangerous.

After all he killed Cat in their last to final round, wich she counted on thanks to the rule of three.

She was simply smart enough to use the resources at her disposel, namely Apprentice, and prepare for that eventuallity. In a way that posed a massive risk to herself, her followers and her plan, after all any half decent mage with a bit of time could haver very easily messed her undead body up in a bad way. Considering her words, this outcome was only one of several she prepared to deal with. And only then she managed to kill him.

Does anybody still clame that her fights and victories were easy ones?

*Dylan Tullos*

lennymaster:

Most authors introduce new enemies that "level up" with the protagonist. That way, we get to see progress when they face last season's enemies and easily defeat them, but the protagonist doesn't just get to curbstomp this season's Big Bad.

If the author wanted to make the Lone Swordsman formidable, he should have had him beat Catherine in their first encounter. Instead, Catherine beat the Lone Swordsman, spared his life, and branded instructions on his Name as part of her larger plan. She didn't even treat him as a rival who needed to die; to Catherine, the Lone Swordsman was nothing more than a stepping stone on the path to victory. That's pretty much the definition of a "pushover".

William only beat Catherine in the third round because of the "rule of three", and even then it wasn't an actual victory. Catherine had already established her ability to survive fatal wounds in their first fight, and both necromancy and soul traps are known tools in this universe. A smarter adversary would have picked up her body and taken it with him to burn it,

rather than repeating the mistake he'd made in their first encounter. That "victory" cast William as the idiot villain who insists that there's no need to look for a body because the hero couldn't possibly survive the fall. In a universe with zombies and vampires, burning the corpse is a reasonable first step, and cutting a head off is nothing more than an inconvenience. After underestimating Catherine once, there was no possible reason for William to make the same mistake again.

When the protagonist is smarter, tougher, and more charismatic than their enemy, it robs the story of dramatic tension. Catherine's fights and victories against the Lone Swordsman are easy because she's smarter than him, plans ahead, works well with others, and takes advantage of his overpowering stupidity. She's also better at fighting. Whenever they talk, she gets to be clever and funny, while he mutters strawman lines that even his own allies make fun of.

Antagonists can maintain credibility if they lose. They can't maintain credibility if the protagonist beats them up and lets them go, then outmaneuvers them at every turn. Nothing could be easier than beating a Hero who doesn't inspire loyalty in his friends and who can't kill you properly when the Story itself is conspiring to help him.

*lennymaster*

One, she is a Villian, anybody that is not somehow emotionally connected to her is considered either an adversary or a stepping stone.

Two, he very much tried to cut her body into many little pieces, he merly failed because Apprentice and Adjutant managed to drive him off.

Three, Cat may have been smarter then William, but he definitely was the better fighter, as shown in their second confrontation in Summerholm, were she merly accomplished a draw by the skin off her teeth until Warlock showed up. There the rule of three very possibly saved her ass. And neither was Cat in any way good either in planning ahead, like forcing her third Aspect in the presence of a Demon, nor in working well with others, she repeatedly made plans and manipulated her allies into positions to help her go through with her goals without ever telling any of them about it, because she did not trust them enough.

She merly got better by learning through those mistakes.

Four, you completly ignore Heiress, who shemed Cat into the ground in all occasions BUT the one in Liesse, where she still acomplished her primery goal, as she herself stated. Some might have argued that Heiress was beaten shortly after Cat defeated Will the first time in Summerholm, until the moment Cat figured out that that was merly a ploy by Heiress to make Cat overestimate herself.

Five, yes, the whole point off the book is to show that Heroes

are oftentimes, not always but many times, worse in most regards than their countering Villians. But they still win, over and over and over again they win. They are considered Heroes despite going to much futher lengths and dipping just as deep into morally grey waters as the Villians. And still they get the praise and the respect of the population despite never actually changing anything for the better but rather keep hold of the status quo no matter the price of doing so.

Like Batman who never kills, but beats people into bloody, oftentimes permanently disabled pulps and considers himself better than his enemies.

The Black knight makes it repetadly clear that he would not mind so much being beaten fairly by people who actually deserve it, but Heroes win often only thanks to their prophecies, their their ridiculous Artifacts, the power of love/friendship, mercy and Mary Sue like powers of reality manipulation. that is one of the pillars of this story world, Heros that get their victories handed to them by the literall GODS insted of actually acomplishing them.

The White Knight for example is, as stated by Black and himself, more powerful then his decades older counterpart.

*Dylan Tullos*

lennymaster:

1. "Adversary" and "stepping stone" are perfectly acceptable ways for a Villain to view most of humanity. If they're going to have a serious enemy, though, they need to be more in the "adversary" category than the "stepping stone" category. The Lone Swordsman's overwhelming failure against Catherine makes it impossible to view him as a capable foe.

2. I believe my complaint against the Lone Swordsman was his unfortunate tendency to fail in stupid ways. In his place, Catherine would have had some method of disposing of a body quickly. Fire would work nicely. If you're fighting a zombie who already came back from the dead once, cutting their head off is more of an opening move than a finishing one. One smart idea would be to take Catherine's body with him. If she's too heavy, he could take Catherine's head with him. That wouldn't slow him down too badly, and it would make it a lot harder to bring her back functionally.

If I can come up with that plan in two minutes, William could have come with something as good or better in the time he had. Necromancy is a real thing in this world, and failing to plan for it is planning to fail.

3. Catherine is surrounded by a team of capable, loyal people who make up for many of her flaws. And she is capable of planning ahead; look at the way she anticipated her defeat in

the third encounter and arranged a soul trap so that "decapitated" wouldn't equal "permanently dead".

4. Catherine forced Heiress to run in their first battle. Even if it was a trap, Catherine won the War College contest handily, used her legion to beat Heiress's demons, and watched as her mentor forced Heiress to stab herself. I specifically recall Heiress thinking about how she underestimated Cat, and failed to achieve all of her objectives except taking control of Liesse. Catherine literally broke every bone in Heiress's body, executed one of her closest supporters, and came out covered in glory as head of the Ruling Council of Callow. If that's defeat, I think victory is overrated.

5. I'm not objecting to morally grey or even downright evil "Heroes". I'm objecting to incompetent Heroes who get outsmarted and beaten down at every turn. There's nothing wrong with having the "Heroes" defend a corrupt status quo, but making them be chumps robs the work of dramatic tension.

The Story of this universe is rigged in favor of Heroes winning in the end. Story or no Story, Black has put dozens of Heroes in the ground. He didn't do it by fighting "fair". When he complains about how Heroes play the hand that they're dealt, Black sounds fairly ridiculous; they didn't make the rules, and Black would be the first to say that you should use whatever advantages you have ruthlessly and without hesitation. That's what he does, after all.

If I was fighting against a foreign invader and supernatural forces offered me overwhelmingly powerful weapons, I wouldn't hold back because the commander of the invaders thought I didn't "deserve" such an unfair advantage. A victory handed to you by the Gods is still a victory, while a defeat won through your own merit and determination is still a defeat. Black invented the saying, "One grace, victory. One sin, defeat." He doesn't get to complain about how Heroes fight to win.

In terms of raw Name power, almost everyone is stronger than Black. He tells us that his predecessor could knock down a tower with a flick of his wrist, while Black can't do more than useful tricks with shadows. The Tyrant of Helike can rain lightning from the skies, so clearly it's not that Villains are universally less powerful than Heroes.

Black's "weakness" is that he refuses to rely on his Name. The Tyrant can summon storms because he is dedicated to his Role in the Story, and the Lone Swordsman can heal himself endlessly because he's equally committed to the plan his Choir laid out for him. Black lacks power because he has independence, because he refuses to draw too much upon powers that would gradually trap him in Someone else's story like a train on a track, immensely strong but incapable of choosing his own course.



Most Villains get their victories handed to them by the Story just as surely as Heroes do. The Tyrant of Helike slaughters an enemy army with no more than a few words; he doesn't "earn" his victory any more than the most overpowered Hero does. The only difference is that the Tyrant inevitably wins in Act I and II, while the Heroes will inevitably win in the end. As long as he plays his role properly, he'll manage to escape certain death and overcome impossible odds until the Heroes stop him just as he stands on the brink of total victory. After all, it wouldn't be a good Story if none of the villains scored any victories along the way; they have to lose in the grand finale, but the battles in between are actually rigged in their favor, helping them to win until the time is right for them to lose.

*lennymaster*

While your arguments still do not convince me, it is hard to argue against them.

I have the conviction, that should the story continue as you think, then one of two things will happen.

Either Cat will lose most of her power, army and support, which she then will continue to either win back, a nearly impossible (unrealistic so) feat, or find a way to still accomplish her goals, which would make all her previous battles and sacrifices mostly hollow ones.

Or by losing someone, maybe even several of the few people close to her. The logical persons would be Black, which would be quite sad but also to some degree fitting, or maybe even more likely Kilian. Losing Kilian would be extremely depressing, if for no other reason than the one that their relationship is one of the smoothest and most elegantly introduced and maintained ones that I have ever seen. Most authors either completely overblow this small, at least in something that is not primarily a romance, but still very important story element, or make the reader not care the least for the protags love interest. There were even quite a few ones I would have massively preferred if they had never been introduced in the first place. Kilian however shows her enormous importance to the small nonetheless necessary levity for the story not in how often, but rather in what senses she is either present, mentioned or thought of.

Nonetheless I thank you for this frustrating though fascinating discussion and hope to continue further ones in coming chapters.

P.S.: A few great examples for several different aspects of story building for avid readers would be; for both character development and well evolving romances Laurell K. Hamilton's Anita Blake, at least if explicit sexual content does not bother you.

David Weber's Honor Harrington for an amazingly well developed world.

Aleron Kong's Chaos Seeds and J. L. Langland's Demons of

Astlan for amazing comedic moment in an otherwise serious story.

A Practical Guide to Evil is however THE ONE STORY I have EVER read that has managed to develop all these aspects into one such amazing whole. Thank you erratica!

*Dylan Tullos*

NPC:

Sorry I didn't reply directly. For some reason, the "Reply" section was missing from your post when I brought it up.

I've already reported you to the moderators for using reason and facts. Everyone civilized knows that proper Internet discussion involves misspelled profanity and repeated use of the phrase "lol". Please get it together before we're forced to drive you from this forum.

While the House of Light doesn't seem terribly organized as religions go, their teachings still shape the beliefs of ordinary Callowans. Cat doesn't rank among the most devout people, but she remembers them denouncing the Gods of Evil and the demon-summoning Praesi. As an organized power base, the House of Light does not seem formidable; as a cultural influence on the minds of young Callowans, it does important work in shaping the beliefs and values of the country's people.

If you spend your childhood hearing stories of saints and heroes who fought the Praesi, you're a lot more likely to identify with the Resistance rather than the occupiers. Whether that identification turns into active resistance depends on individual personality and circumstance, but the "Callowan Heroes fight Praesi Villains" narrative is clearly present and powerful. Black even seeks to use that narrative, casting Catherine as a Callowan Hero against Heiress, the embodiment of Praesi Villainy. He seems to like judo as a fighting style, redirecting his enemy's strength and seeking to turn it into a weakness.

Your Thirty Years War comparison is excellent. Black and Malicia are clearly trying to steer Praes in the direction of pragmatic nationalism, "Evil" in the sense that they're willing to do anything to secure their nation's power, but not "Evil" in the oddly principled manner of Helike's Tyrant. They don't want their neighbors to see the Praesi as an existential threat, and they're fine with their subjects worshiping the Gods Above as long as they pay taxes and do as they're told.

The only flaw in the Thirty Years War comparison is that Cordelia Hassenbach refuses to fall into Malicia's trap. Instead of seeking to expand Procer's temporal power, she is forming alliances with old rivals and enemies against Praes, ignoring old territorial ambitions and showing the continent that Procer is

committed to a principled foreign policy. We get to see her thoughts, so we know that it's not a trick, that Procer's First Prince is genuinely committed to her role as Warden of the West. For Cordelia, this war is a righteous struggle against a nation that sought to destroy her own, and her ability to set aside national rivalries in the greater cause of Good makes her Praes's most dangerous enemy.

I completely agree that Malicia needs to make this about power and secular ambition, not Good vs Evil. As you say, she needs a country to backstab the Good coalition, just as France did in the Thirty Years War. It was necessary for Malicia to destabilize Procer if she wanted to occupy Callow, but one unfortunate consequence of her decision was the creation of Cordelia Hassenbach. The First Prince combines practical statesmanship with an absolute determination to tear down the "Practical Evil" that poured gasoline on the fire of Procer's civil war, and even the new Legions of Terror can't fight the united armies of Good.

Procer seems to be as big as Praes and Callow put together; the Principate's weakness is their fondness for political bickering and civil war, not a lack of soldiers or money. Formidable as the Dread Empire is, I don't think they're inherently stronger than the Principate, though Black's Legions of Terror seem to be higher-quality than any other mortal army on the continent. (On an unrelated note, I think there are serious problems with the design of the Legions, but that's a minor point. This story isn't about creating an effective military doctrine for a fictional universe.)

I like the comparison of Triumphant to the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. It's not forgotten, but it happened long ago, and present-day rivalries tend to overshadow old memories. Malicia needs to keep those rivalries going, to help Good nations forget that they once stood united. Cordelia needs to make peace, to end old feuds and remind the nations of Good that they once stood united under a Crusading banner. As for which of them will succeed...well, the story's not done.

*Dylan Tullos*

lennymaster:

Thanks! I'm really curious to see how things work out, and I appreciate both your perspective and your book recommendations. I read the Honor Harrington books way back in high school, and I enjoyed them greatly. I will check out Kong and Langland's writing at the next opportunity.

[glassgirlceci](#)

Jesus Christ, that was amazing. Whenever I think I couldn't love this story more, you prove me wrong.

...She is TOTALLY going to have to stab the Bard.

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## Chapter 14: Trick

*"I can't beat your band of heroes, true, but what if there were another eight bands also out for my blood? Ha! What are you going to do, form a line?"*

– Dread Emperor Irritant, the Oddly Successful

I took one look at the Fields of Wend and started cursing in Mthethwa. Lower Miezan just didn't have that register of pure spite the Soninke tongue did. A mile of glaciers lay at my feet, their differing heights and shifting movements filling the air with the sound of fracas every few heartbeats. Named or not, if I got stuck between two of those I'd be a woman-shaped pile of broken bones. I was really hoping the prophecy of lies was going to work out, because if it didn't it was going to take Hakram most of a day to find all the bloody pieces of what was left of my body.

"You got fucked on the arena," Archer noted cheerfully. "And not even in the fun way."

"I'd noticed, thank you," I replied crabbily.

The only saving grace of the Fields was that the uneven relief would make it easier to take cover when the Duke of Violent Squalls started throwing a storm and a half at my head. I was very, very glad I'd decided not to wear armour. I wasn't so good a swimmer I'd avoid sinking to the bottom if I slipped. My plate had been repaired by the servants and set out for me, but I'd chosen something lighter instead. Grey trousers went down into the same pair of good boots I'd taken to the masquerade, over them a thick gambeson that went down to my knees. After my last few scraps with the fae I'd learned that my plate served only to slow me down. The sword at my belt rested comfortably, the handle veiled by my usual cloak. I'd gotten little use out of the garment and its supposedly spell-resistant abilities since Black had gifted it to me, but today seemed a good day to bring in an additional precaution.

The four of us had taken the carriage to the duelling grounds and found quite a crowd waiting for us there. More fae were in attendance than there had been at the masquerade, though by the

looks of it they were still all aristocrats. Before being a pain in my ass, Archer had taken the time to discreetly point out the handful of fae she'd bombarded with prophecy the night before. At least one of them had the scroll on his person, idly toying with it as he watched us. Would it be enough? I had no idea. Masego's glamour amulet was nestled safely under the gambeson, and I'd been met by a sea of blank faces when I'd arrived, until they all resumed normality. I couldn't know whether that meant they'd bought it, but it was too late to back out now anyway. The crowd parted for us effortlessly until we came to stand by the Duke himself. I eyed him carefully. The bastard was in armour, unlike me. Plate of what seemed like actual silver – though I wasn't enough of a fool to hope the metal would be as soft as it should be – and a cape of blue silk dotted with pale hellebores. He had a falchion at his side, ornately jewelled, but no shield. *Mage, I thought. Free hand needed for spellcasting.*

That was good news of a sort: it meant that he couldn't simply command the winds with a thought. Possibly. Relying on that assumption might just get me killed, so I'd have to fight as if he could until proven otherwise. A fae I'd met before, the Lady of Cracking Ice, smoothly stepped between myself and the Duke.

"Since we've all arrived," she smiled, "we can begin the proceedings. At the invitation of the Duke of Violent Squalls, I will be serving as the officiant witness. Does the Lady of Marchford have any objections?"

"None," I said.

"This is pleasing," she said. "As is custom, I must ask you if the grievance between the two of you can be resolved by any other manner."

"No," the Duke of Violent Squalls spoke carelessly.

"He could kneel at my feet and beg for mercy, then I'll consider it," I suggested.

Wind picked up sharply around us as the fae aristocrat glared hatefully at my face.

"Didn't like that, did you?" I mused. "That'd be a no, then."

"Very well," the Lady of Cracking Ice said, sounding amused. "The terms set by the offended party were death or surrender."

"I withdraw the outcome of surrender," the Duke spat.

"This is quite irregular," the Lady said with a frown.

"I'll allow it," I shrugged. "Didn't intend to let him surrender anyway."

"Since both parties are in agreement, it will be so," the Lady conceded. "Participants are to make their way to the Wending Heart and stand at their respective edge. The duel will begin when the blue light above your heads shatters."

I glanced at the Fields. What she'd called the Heart was easy enough to find: it was the tallest of the glaciers, topped by a perfectly round platform of maybe forty feet in diameter. There was already a shining blue orb hovering over it. I watched the glaciers around, getting a read for the movements: staying on flat ground with someone who controlled the wind was a death sentence. Ranged combat was no specialty of mine, but if I wanted to live long enough to make it to close quarters I'd need some form of cover. Hakram clapped me on the shoulder.

"Wade in their blood, Cat," he said.

"That's the plan," I replied.

I cast a look at the other two.

"If you have to die," Archer said, "*die loud.*"

I would have settled for a 'good luck' but that wasn't really her style, was it?

"Get it done quickly," Masego told me. "I've experiments that should not be left unattended for too long."

"Love you too," I mouthed back.

Rolling my shoulder to limber it up, I began my trek to the Wending Heart. Time to find out whether the magical power of lies could kill a man.

—

There was enough snow on the glaciers that the way wasn't too slippery. I was more sure-footed than a mortal had any business being, regardless. Couldn't remember when I'd last tripped or slipped on anything, though even before becoming the Squire I'd not been prone to clumsiness. Probably because I was short, it saddened me to admit. No need to adapt to growing limbs if they stayed the same length.

"It will be most amusing to make a plaything out of an entire kingdom," the Duke spoke as we moved. "No fae has ever possessed such a bounty of souls."

He walked so lightly he didn't leave footprints, I'd noted. It was doubtful I'd be quicker than him, armoured or not.

"You know, I keep hearing about you Winter fae being great at mind games," I said. "But so far? Not impressed. I've had better

quality trash talk from orcs and I'm pretty sure that Heiress could make you cry, given half a bell."

We both made the leap to the Heart, his landing admittedly more graceful than mine.

"Why bother with such games?" he said. "You are outmatched beyond your understanding."

"Not the first time I've heard that line," I laughed. "Usually the person speaking it is dead before sundown."

I took the northern edge as he strolled to the southern one. Behind me a lower platform of ice was idly drifting, maybe fifteen feet below. There were a few spires on it that would do nicely as a shield until I could find a good angle to approach. I unsheathed my longsword as he did the same with his falchion, sneering, and with a loud crack the blue orb above us broke. Before I could so much as blink wind howled, and I was casually tossed off the Heart. For a heartbeat I watched the distant ground under me and, with cold detachment, considered that this wasn't exactly a great start. Even as I began falling I saw a large globe of air forming around me and made the decision that I wasn't sticking around to find out what that would do when completed. My Name flared and I formed a circular pane of shadow under my feet, leaping off it towards another glacier.

I landed rolling in the snow, arrows of wind hitting the ground behind me and spraying ice everywhere. Archer might have undersold the whole wind magic thing a bit, I thought. I cast a look backwards the moment I got back on my feet and saw the Duke was standing at the edge of the Heart where I'd begun the duel. And he was lazily pointing a finger in my direction. Great. I made a run for it. Two glaciers to pick from: what looked like a barren peak of ice or another flat platform below. I picked the platform – better line of sight – but when jumping down found myself hurtling towards a wall of perfectly still air. Ugh. Wind magic was good at restricting movement, Apprentice had said. The understatement trend continued. I hated fighting mages, it was all tricks and no slugging and slugging was what I was best at. I forced myself to twist in the air and landed feet first on the apparently-solid wall, allowing a trickle of power to go down my legs so I could throw myself at the ice peak instead of falling into the waters below.

I hit the ice with a grunt and plunged my sword into it so I wouldn't just start slipping, hanging by a single hand. Another trickle of power into my arms and I spun on myself, tearing out the sword and landing more or less on my feet at the top of the peak – just in time to duck under a sharp-looking sickle of wind. The Duke of Violent Squalls was no longer standing at the edge of the Heart, I saw. That was a mixed bag. On one hand, he no longer had high ground and a good field of vision. On the other, I had

no godsdamned idea *where* he was now. I got an answer when the peak under me exploded in a shower of ice and I caught the glint of a moving blade in the spray. *Below, and behind.* The falchion sliced through my cheek, missing a deeper wound only because my footing had quite literally been shattered. I bit down on the hiss of pain and swung blindly at the silhouette of the fae – but he was gone before I could get even vaguely close.

I landed on what remained of the peak with my cloak over my head to shield from the falling ice, managing to vault to another glacier before a wind spear the size of a ballista's bolt tore through the ice under me and collapse the whole thing. Shit. If I got hit by that, I wasn't walking away from it. I kept moving even if I didn't have a precise destination in mind: so far every time I'd slowed for more than a moment I'd been hammered by magic. All right, so this was like fighting an extremely mobile armoured mage without any need for incantations, who could very likely fly as well and would be unaffected by the terrain. I'd, uh, had better days. *Here's a rule for not dying stupidly,* I remembered Captain telling me. *Never give a mage room to set up. The longer they have, the more dangerous they get.* The few spars I'd had with Masego had only reinforced the notion. If I wanted to avoid further nasty surprises I needed to know where the Duke was.

"Gods Below, this is going to hurt," I muttered.

I climbed to higher ground and crouched, waiting for my enemy to catch up. The first strike I saw coming. A cylinder of wind with ice shards inside formed ahead of me and began spinning ever faster, shooting out a volley of glinting ice spears that tore through the spot I'd been in a moment earlier. The second, though, I did not. The entire glacier I was standing on broke in half and even as I moved to the left side the Duke of Violent Squalls came out of the waters below, like an arrow adorned with translucent blue wings. He was carving his way up with his falchion, now wreathed in a wind version of the weapon that was three times the size of the original. I let the reflexes of my Name take over, stepping back: If I'd been a heartbeat slower, I would have lost an arm. As it was he ripped his way up the side of my body and straight through the clavicle. The wind weapon blew up a moment later, tossing me onto another glacier before I could strike back. I managed to land on my feet, sliding back and blood flowing down the mangled gambeson.

"Rise," I said, the aspect coming to the surface.

I'd gotten what I wanted, but the pain wiped away any notion of smiling at that victory. I'd touched the edge of his cape while he was carving me up, slid a thread of my Name's power into it. A variation on the trick I used with the bone contraptions crafted to trigger goblin munitions, though this had been much more



delicate. If I focused I could get a vague sense of where that bit of power was, since it was as much a part of me while away as it had been before. And right now, it was circling around my left. The flesh knitted itself back together as the aspect I'd Taken from the Lone Swordsman did its work, though it pained me that I'd had to use that card this early in the fight. It would be diminishing returns, from now on, and I could only use it another two times. My feet padded against the snow as I focused to keep a read on where the Duke was, astonished by how quickly he was getting around. Just ahead was an ice spire, and in about three heartbeats by my estimation he'd be behind it. I blew out a steamy breath and called on my Name, fashioning a spear of shadows that shattered the spire in a heartbeat.

Let's see how he dealt with being on the *other* side of that. I'd been moving before the spear had even left my fingertips, so I came out of the mist just as the Duke was turning in my direction. I swung with a grunt of exertion, tip of the blade managing to cut through the tip of his nose as he smoothly leaned back. With a flick of the wrist I reversed the strike, hacking through the edge of his right eye just before our bodies impacted. He screamed in anger as we rolled on the ground. Unlike the fae, I knew how handle myself to come out on top when we slowed. Not much of a scrapper, this one. I slugged him in his bleeding face as I drew back my sword, the sound of my fist crushing the bones of his nose the sweetest of melodies. A burst of wind threw me off him but I managed to have it put me back on my feet, immediately going back on the offense. He swung his falchion without even trying to hit me, the displacement of air caused by the strike magnified until it became a squall that knocked me off my trajectory.

I adjusted my angle without flinching and hacked down at his shoulder. I grimaced before the strike hit: I'd misjudged my strength, that was going to hit plate instead of neck. To my surprise, my blade cut straight into the silver-like metal. I felt flesh give underneath, if not deeply. My sword, unfortunately, was now stuck. His free hand pointed towards my chest and the spear of wind that impacted me a moment later blew me straight off my feet. Along with breaking half my ribs and puncturing a lung, by the feel of it. I managed to keep enough of a grip on my sword that it came with me while my body hit a wall of ice behind me with a dull thud. I coughed out blood, feeling the lung he'd struck beginning to fill already. Hells, that magic hit like a horse.

"Rise," I rasped out.

Slowly, almost reluctantly, I felt the wound beginning to heal. It felt like getting stabbed all over again, Merciless Gods. I managed to push myself back to my feet anyway. The Duke's hand

was on his armour, looking appalled. And *scared*, I saw, for the first time since the duel had begun.

"What madness is this?" he barked. "You do not have the power to even begin to touch my armaments."

I wiped the blood off my lips and grinned red.

"Guess it was just meant to be," I said.

Strike one for the power of lies. It wasn't handing me the victory in a handbasket – the fake prophecy hadn't been well-crafted enough for that – but I'd touched the story just enough I could twist it. That there was a *chance* for me to win. The hole in my lung closed, though my ribs still felt like a clan of orcs had been stomping on them. With only one good eye left and a broken, blood nose the Duke had come out ahead but he no longer looked so pristine. With a snarl of rage, he flicked his hand upwards and I took that as my cue to make a tactical retreat. I jumped atop the wall behind me and legged it to another platform. Good instinct, I saw a moment later. Winds roiled in a circle enveloping the entire width of the glacier then came down like the hand of an angry god – the entire mass broke like glass and sunk under the water, sending waves in every direction that had the glaciers rocking like ships in a storm. The Duke of Violent Squall had not moved, wings keeping him aloft in the air as his eyes searched for me. Deciding that running the Hells away was the better part of valour, I ducked behind an ice spire and continued my escape.

The sliver of power in his cape told me he was on the move a heartbeat later, when I concentrated. Going under the water again, I thought. Running out of tricks, was he? Or perhaps fae weren't *allowed* to be too creative. If they could make too many decisions, their stories might not unfold as they should. I gauged where he came out of the deep and moved to flank him. I felt the Duke pause and smiled. I'd done enough damage the creature was wary now. He seemed to be hiding beneath a glacier's cliff, so I crept quietly atop and only allowed a trickle of power into my legs when it came time to leap, teeth bared and sword high. Another eye, I thought. If I could take its vision away this would become a great deal easier.

I realized I'd fucked up about halfway to the ground.

The Duke of Violent Squalls was not under me, waiting to get stabbed. His cape, however, was. Trap, and I'd literally leapt at the occasion of falling into it. A globe of air, the same magic he'd used early in the fight, formed around me. A heartbeat away from my feet touching the ground the air *solidified*, trapping me like a fly in amber. I stayed there hanging, barely able to breathe, as a spire of ice shimmered and revealed itself to have been the Duke. The snow-pale fae smiled and idly waved his hand,

the globe shrinking closet to my body before rising higher in the air, taking me with it.

“Sooner or later,” he said, “vermin gets caught. Shall we give them a spectacle worthy of my name, Lady Foundling?”

His wings beat and he took me back to the Heart still in his globe, landing fluidly on the ground as I hung in the air above him. I could feel the fae on the shore watching us, though I couldn't see them. The Duke has positioned me as if I was still about to fall on him, a mocking smile on his face. Four spears of ice rose were carved out from the ground by roiling wind, rising to align with my shoulders and knees.

“Did you think resembling my form would make me hesitate?” he asked amusedly. “Let me disabuse you of the notion.”

In that moment I watched his eyes and saw his entire concentration had gone into manipulating the spears. That was the thing with magic: no matter how old and bad you were, it was impossible to cast more than one spell at a time. He was *invested*, and withdrawing from that would take a few moments. The Beast laughed, standing behind my shoulder and baring its fangs. I could feel its warm breath on my cheek, feel my Name pulsing with it. For a moment I almost forced myself to speak, to ram a cheeky reply down his throat, but I pushed down the urge. *Monologues are for amateurs*. The spears began moving, slow to my eye, and I reached for the second bundle of power inside of me. Heat flowed through my veins and in the back of my head I heard a snapping sound, the very same the Penitent's Blade had made when I'd broken it over my knee. I'd thought about keeping it, after Liesse. When it was just a very sharp sword. But then the day after it had become light as a feather, for angels were not prone to metaphor, and I had seen my death writ on its edge. So I'd broken it, into a hundred pieces I'd had scattered over rivers and lakes so it would never be forged again.

It had not been an act without consequence.

**“Break,”** I croaked.

For an instant all I felt was my will pushing against something infinitely larger. If the Duke had fought me, I grasped, I would have been swept away by the tide effortlessly. But he wasn't fighting me. Magic was will, and *his will was in the spears*. The globe shattered, the Beast howling in approval. I'd been caught with my sword raised to strike and though the momentum had been blunted that was again how I began descending. Panic went through the fae's eye and a hastily-redirected spear caught me in the shoulder – but it was the wrong one, I laughed – then another tore through my side and finally my arm came down even as the ice tore through flesh and bone. The tip of the blade punched through the silver armour and straight through the heart.

"You," he gasped.

"Me," I replied, taking all that was left of my Name and pouring it into the blow as I scythed down through his body, cleaving it in half.

Icy red water poured out of the gaping wound and I ignored the pain from my shoulder long enough to raise my blade one last time, meeting the Duke's eyes as I struck. The head flew. I let out a groan of pain and exhaustion as I dropped to my knees. Shit. I'd been spending power like coppers throughout the entire fight just to survive, and now the well had run dry. Couldn't even muster my last use of Rise, it was slipping through my fingers. I groped blindly for my hand and found a signet ring there, gurgling out a triumphant laugh. With an ugly gasp I broke the spear that had bit deep in my shoulder, leaving the ice inside and haltingly getting to my feet before trying the same with the one in my flank. My fingers were too weak – I botched the job and cried out when the ice dug deeper into my flesh. I saw the fae on the shore, vision swimming, and almost wept at the idea of having to make my way back there. Worse, the Heart was still rocking from the massive blow the Duke has struck earlier with his magic, though it was almost unnoticeable now. I paused. Entirely unnoticeable. The hair on my arm rose. Something was wrong. I looked down at my blade and dropped it in surprise. The red droplets falling from it were staying in the air, frozen. And now that I'd dropped it, it was staying still as well.

The Duke? Was this a variation on the globe from earlier? If the Duke wasn't dead – no, he had to be. Otherwise I wouldn't have the signet. There was a sharp snip from behind me and I turned. There was someone sitting at the edge of the Heart, a piece of ice and a knife in hand. He – it was a man, slender and dark-skinned – was carving the ice. His hair was long and dark, coming down in waves over his shoulders. On his brow I glimpsed a crown, fashioned in grey dead wood and weeping blood-red sap. He turned to me and a single glance was enough to have me fall to my knees. The ice in my shoulder *burned*, until the pain left and a strange and terrible clarity replaced it.

"Catherine Foundling," the King of Winter spoke.

The words were not words. They were mountains old as dawn ground to nothingness one season at a time, they were ice so deep in the heart of the world it had never seen the light of day. My ears were bleeding.

"Come, sit," he ordered. "It's time we had a little chat, don't you think?"

---

*Soronel Haetir*

Well, isn't this going to be a fun conversation.

[Euodiachloris](#)

I think "eep" is the appropriate response. Well, normally. Cat, however, is probably going to stick a foot in her mouth. 😬

[godkiller999](#)

Oh what a cliffhanger to be left on.

*JackbeThimble*

Don't feel too bad your grace, you were never more than a glorified side-quest anyway.

*PingleBerry*

Eheheheheheh. Dis gun be gud.

*Naeddyr*

Ruh roh.

*Naeddyr*

Good chapter, things happening, quick and nice.

*sheer\_falacy*

Alas, so much for "We do not kneel". I guess some things are a bit harder to resist than a Dread Empress.

*1shot4living*

Do you think a "superhero landing" would count as kneeling?

*Sadpanda*

Well the Fae Kings are gods. Emperor/Empress is nothing against that.

*Paradim*

She might be \*required\* to kneel, now. If she's become a Duchess of Winter through this scheme, doesn't that put her under the authority of the King of Winter?

*RandomFan*

As long as you deny it as a gesture of respect and sell it as one of exhaustion instead, it doesn't count. Alternatively, there are details to kneeling besides falling to your knees, though I do not know what they are.

I'm assuming you're talking about the one in front of the king of winter.

*Letouriste*

Kneeling generally involve only one knee in ceremonies and the like, with your hands on the heart or somewhere on your head or shaping something complicated or behind your back etc...

Nobody fall on his two knee except when you have something to forgive...I think...^^

The we do not knee is from black anyway

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Yes, "WE" do not kneel was from Black. What part of WE are you missing

[benthelynx](#)

And one could still see the ice of her fathers spear in her.

*danh3107*

There goes dear old dad, and he was replaced by a scary as hell super fairy.

Winning?

*esryok*

I wonder if Cat will still be the Duke's abandoned daughter the next time the court reforms. And what if it's a cycle where he is meant to be King of Winter? Can she come back, murder him (there's a groove in Fate now!) and become Queen?

*George*

He's always Duke; the Princes(ses) take turns at King.

*nipi*

Remember the "as if it always were so" part of the bet.

*Cpt. Obvious*

I'm a bit uncertain of the consequences here. On one hand Fay are said to be resurrected every time their season comes around. At least as long as they are killed in Arcadia. On the

other hand its been implied that a Fey killed outside of Arcadia will be truly dead. It's also pretty obvious that they retain their memory. That should mean that they've all died innumerable times and know well that they will resurrect. It would also explain why they are so willing to go to war, as dying or getting mutilated is just an inconvenience.

But this Fey were scared when Cat started to get the upper hand. That does not compute if he will resurrect as usual.

It has to have something to do with the bet, or he knows that the King will take this chance to eliminate this Role, perhaps by ceding his Role to Cat. And as she's not of Arcadia she will not reset the way the Fey does which would effectively mean he will stay dead.

So I'm guessing he's not going to be around when the winter court is reset next time.

Whatever the case Cat has effectively created a new story which has to be a novelty for the Fey.

*Nairne*

The chapter really made me smile.

[taborask](#)

Arg, can't believe we have to wait a week to see where this goes

*Komploding*

Pure awesomeness, I can hardly wait for next week!!

*Cooper*

Take and Break, eh? I suppose the third aspect will be Bake a Cake :p

Bake could actually be fun though, especially without that pesky Manton limit. Uhh, Make is decent. Quake is a good one, but then you end up directing shields. Rake is technically a verb.

But the best two options by far are Fake and Wake. Wake is extremely ominous/powerful, imo – the one I would be most terrified my opponent having in a fantasy narrative, even more than the canonical Take and Break. However, a lot of the scariness comes from Waking things that are greater than yourself to fight some portion of your battles for you, which seems fairly antithetical to Cat's tale. Fake, on the other hand, fits her personality and actions to a T, and could be quite strong without being \*too\* boring in application.

*nipi*

Or Wake as in her wake?

Im still waiting for her to get a power or something that involves green flames 😊 I mean Heiress intentionally made it so that people would connect her to demons but Cat has been connected to goblinfire.

*dalek955*

My brother and I have been puzzled as to how Heiress made that work. What people actually saw was "Heiress uses devils. Heiress uses demons. Catherine Foundling gives her a spanking and takes them away because she's not mature enough to handle them."

*beleester*

Stake. As in "Putting something up for a bet". As in "making desperate gambles that put your whole kingdom at risk and hoping you'll find a way to cheat afterwards" which is Cat's main MO.

*stevenneiman*

I kinda doubt that it will be a rhyme, but if it is that would make a lot of sense.

*Anonymous*

What about 'Create'? She's trying to 'create' a new world (as in, forging a new way (or story, if you will), not literally creating it) where people aren't simply tools of the Gods and Named.

*Shequi*

There's also Slake, as in "to Slake a thirst"

*Shequi*

So Cat has the aspects "Take" & "Break".

I'm kinda hoping that her third aspect rhymes too.

Interesting that she got it by making an actual decision too; I had wondered what happened to The Penitent's Blade, and now we know.

It's also as entirely negative effect; it can only destroy. What does that say about Cat's personality?

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While gaining two aspects in mere hours after reclaiming her Name might seem unfair, there's a couple of reasons it might have been sensible. First, she reclaimed it by holding onto her Role in contrast to Chider having essentially none of her own. When the Name is back, she's no longer Learning the ropes, and soon wins Take as a replacement for Struggle. She's still as entrenched in her Role as before, so there's a possibility to establish another aspect.

Second has only become clear in this chapter, as there's a parallel to Black's assessment of Catherine as "something that would use what it could not break and break what it could not use". This is core of her Role as a ruler of Callow, and she solidifies the second half of that principle by not doing the stupid thing and breaking the sword herself instead of letting the Hashmallim to decide when it would happen.

I'm actually interested in what the third part of that Role, since the problems piling up on Cat's table and the unclear as of yet direction the Callow would take (former rebels seeing her as a queen, goblin settlements, the governorship system etc.) will need being stated clearly by the end of the book. How do you think would Callow evolve (historical examples of permanently occupied kingdoms are optional) and what third aspect would it give her?

*nipi*

"Destruction always comes before creation." I wonder what shell Make of the things she Takes and Breaks.

[Euodiachloris](#)

"Fake" springs to mind...

*The quietist*

Could the third aspect be Make? She Takes Callow, then she Breaks the old power structures, and Makes them anew. This actually works with the broader Roles metaplot, this is what her mentor did and this is what she will do in turn as she takes his role in fate.

*narcoduck*

"It is a shallow soul who fights to the cry of 'might makes right'. The truth is more concise: might makes."  
– Dread Emperor Terribilis I, the Lawgiver

---

Break looks an awful lot like Destroy, though given the word used I guess this direct contest of wills can result in either of the

sides breaking. I'm glad that she still has Rise, though, it might still come in useful, even if Akua had seen it and wouldn't count on a nonlethal wound doing the trick.

>and I had seen my death writ on its edge  
I know she probably meant magic item backfire, but I can't help but think that breaking it into hundred pieces and throwing them in water just means some fortunate hero (or a hundred) will stumble on one of them later.

*nick012000*

>I can't help but think that breaking it into hundred pieces and throwing them in water just means some fortunate hero (or a hundred) will stumble on one of them later.

Senbonzakura Kageyoshi.

*1shot4living*

Remember that she's still Squire, so she doesn't have a top tier Name yet, so it could be that Break is a lesser version of Destroy, or it could be that Break simply fits her Role, as you can't make anything from something you completely Destroy usually.

*Nicole*

I'm super curious when she steps past Squire if she will get upgrades to her current powers, or totally new ones. I know Black mentioned that he had to learn his powers as Black Knight and he was the Squire as well, but it might mean that the upgrades changed them a bit? idk, but its going to be fun to find out 😊

*agumentic*

>So I'd broken it, into a hundred pieces I'd had scattered over rivers and lakes so it would never be forged again.

How nice of Cat to create collectibles for some future Calernia open-world RPG.

*Letouriste*

You made my day:D

*Morgenstern*

" the very same the Penitent's Blade had made when I'd broken it over my knee. I'd thought about keeping it, after Liesse. When it was just a very sharp sword. But then the day after it had become light as a feather, for angels were not prone to metaphor, and I had seen my death writ on its edge. So I'd broken it, into a

hundred pieces I'd had scattered over rivers and lakes so it would never be forged again. "

Why do I have that lingering "uhoh" feeling now and cannot stop thinking of other shattered swords that were reforged after all?  
^^°

*dalek955*

Eh, for all of those that I can think of, the heroes still had all the pieces.

[HappyNap](#)

Great chapter – made my B-day that much nicer. Can't wait for the next one... well, i can and will have to, but still. Keep up the good work

*alegio*

Happy B-day! 😊

*ICSM*

So, Take and Break.

The third one is gonna be something like Use, or Exploit, isn't it? Because that pretty much sums up our Foundling's M0. She takes what she wants, breaks it, and then uses the bits and pieces she needs. That's what she did with the angel, that's what she did with her own body with all that necromancy stuff, and that is what she just did with Fae nature.

*Lumi*

yay I finally caught up! go cat! yay fairies! I love stories with fairies.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Oh, then you'll love my story too, then:

It was a dark and stormy night. And fairies have taken over the elementary school, so there was no school tomorrow ever again! The end.

It's so great knowing I have a fanbase now

*Aonar Faileas*

So if Cat is the Duchess of Violent Squalls now, does she get fancy wind magic? 😊 (Was honestly kind of hoping/wondering if we'd get to see if she could Take Fae magic....)

*alegio*

I love how everyone knows that Cat had no way of actually defeating the duke and outside interference (Whether it was fate or the fairy kings schemes) was the only think that let her win.

And Break? Black will be SO proud of his little villian after knowing she defeated the fae demigod with a power like his own. (Even more than he already is)

*Nicole*

Black doesn't destroy, he subverts. He brings stability. I expect sooner or later her opposing aspects to put them into direct conflict.

*M*

One of Black's aspects is literally "Destroy".

*Nicole*

M, i'm not disputing that. I'm just not sure he is going to be excited to know she has the abilities she does. She can Take even one of his own abilities and break one other one. He knows (he has shown it and so have the other calamites) that a conflict is essentially expected at some point.

Its interesting that one of her powers mirrors his, but its probably the one he will be least happy about. 😊

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

How about this for a Third Aspect: \*\*\*Remake\*\*\* It fits better into the entire "something that would use what it could not break and break what it could not use" than a simple "Make" (which, BTW, sounds entirely too positive/constructive to be a Villainous Aspect).

Remaking something flows in the same vein as Take, but with far more flexibility and utility in a variety of situations. Cat would benefit enormously from an Aspect effective in combat, social/political settings, and for utilitarian needs. Plus it could help address her gaping ranged combat deficit. Mage lobbs a fireball at Cat, she \*Remakes\* said fireball and does a return-to-sender with the former fireball now being something much more horrific.

With regards to the results of her victory in the Duel Vs. the Duke: The Prince as much said he and the King are seeking an expanded level of freedom from the Stories. Having Cat as a Duchess (while doing something practical, like "suggesting" she appoint a Steward/Seneschal to stand in for her in Arcadia on a day to day basis) likely gives the King and the Prince exactly

what they were after. I could actually see Cat getting some Fae mojo out of this. If she's nominally one of the King's subjects, and has the Fae "pedigree" of power (though not at the Duke's level of course. It'd have to be in line with Cat's prophecy of lies)...that might well be the metaphysical license that lets these Winter Fae come and go in and out of Arcadia as they wish.

Just a theory. It'd be nice to see Cat pick up some tricks that go beyond her Name. Other Villains have done it with their fell sorceries and the like. Why not? Plus it would be a nice balancing agent plot-wise against what Heiress has cooking. Not to mention the Winter side just feels like it aligns more thematically with Villainy.

*Nicole*

Since the fae changes aspects/roles, it makes sense the power would be kept in an item, like a ring 😊

*Naeddyr*

Oh yeah, Cat.

'Break'? Seriously, that is not constructive!

Literally 😊

Anyhow, other rhymes:

Take, Break and Remake  
Take, Break and Make  
Take, Break and Shake  
Take, Break and Heartache

*TheCount*

Thanks for tha chapter!

I think Cheat or Gamble would fit her nicely. She DID cheat Dead, the rules of Usurping a name, an Angel and the Creation after all, into standing up after a deadly dual she lost, reclaiming the powers she lost, stealing a resurrection and tricking the rulership of a kingdom respectively.

She also likes to gamble at important times like at the end of the last war in the warcollage, claiming power near a demon of corruption and now this! Putting the citizens of her kingdom and her subordinate's life up to a duel as a bet for a fancy magical ring and her own life.

As for the rhyme of the powers, that's not so important (but a nice touch if you can pull it off), no other Named had rhyming powers/aspects.

*lennymaster*

That is not just a ring, that is THE signet ring of the House of Violent Squalls if I remember right. And that she has as if it ever were so.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Her next aspect will be Cake.

As in, "you're not a hard opponent, you're Cake," and her opponent wilts.

*Barrendur*

@ erraticerrata

A wonderful chapter; appropriately mythic but simultaneously metafiction-y, as the fae themselves seem to be, and the characters (with an awareness of Names and Roles) must be. It's incredibly good stuff! 'A Practical Guide to Evil' is the best (most sophisticated, most imaginative, most interesting/best constructed) of the dozen or so web-serials I read weekly. Thank-you.

By the bye, the "handle" of a sword or similar weapon is properly called a HILT, and "spoke" is not grammatically synonymous with "said".

\*\* "Catherine Foundling," the King of Winter spoke \*\* should be \*\* ...the King of Winter SAID.\*\*

"Spoke" is used to say that someone said something; "said" is used to say their actual words. Ex: I SPOKE, and what I SAID was, "Blah blah blah."

*Nicole*

I have the impression it was meant specifically as "spoke" due to the description that followed, It was just put in a separate paragraph, rather than kept in the same one that might have appeared more proper to show the weight of his words-as-actions.

*Yitzi*

Learn, Struggle, Seek, Take, Break. Is it just me, or are they getting stronger?

*Soronel Haetir*

Well, she did get a second chance at the aspect thing, so now she has a much better idea of what is useful.

And there is another power-up coming if she manages to make the transition to Knight.

I suspect there aren't many that get to go through three names (even if one is a do-over).

### *Phantom Renegade*

Eh Seek seemed, from the little we saw of it, like it'd be on par with her current crop of aspects. Probably a good thing she didn't keep it though, they're already having trouble not using Find, Seek would for sure lead to a unexpected downfall.

Probably a matter of maturity, knowing how to set things up and guide events so you don't repeatedly find yourself in situations where you need to use an aspect to get you out of a jam. I just hope our favorite orc doesn't get too hurt when it all comes crashing down.

### *Byzantine*

Seek seemed to be a version of Path to Victory.

But in this world that may not be a good thing, because an aspect like that being turned on it's wielder would be an inescapable death sentence.

### *Morgenstern*

...and YAY for this chapter. Just to have said that, too. Just about all we were increasingly made to want over the last chapters 😊

### *Nicole*

I find it interesting. Her previous powers were things that lasted. Her new ones appear to be one-shot type powers (or limited use in the case of Take).

One other thing I noticed, she has now used Rise 5 times. She came back with it first, then used it in a later battle. Then used it like 3 times here. I'm not sure how that fits with the "3 uses" bit the fae told her.

### *agumentic*

3 uses in one battle, as I understand.

### *Nicole*

Hmmm, interesting. If that is how it works, why would she ever want to Take another power? Battle healing is basically the best thing she could Take as often as she is busted to bits.

I suppose it is still a great way to give her a power that villains don't really have a access to.

thanks for the clarification

*M*

Taking a power means that your opponent can't use it, presumably. Making a hero do with only 2 aspects is a very good power.

*Letouriste*

3 per day i think, we got information about that in the first fight with the fae soldier

*Byzantine*

She wouldn't want to Take another power.

But powers stolen through Take are incomplete, eventually she is going to run out of "Rise" entirely. In other words there are two different bars – one is the limit she can use in a day and one is the limit before it runs out entirely. So consider it like having batteries: She can use up to 3 batteries a day, but eventually the pack is going to run out entirely.

*Gunslinger*

Fantastic chapter. I wonder how break can be used. Is it break physical objects near her? Can she break armies? Spirits?

The best news though is that we only have to wait till Monday now that the second Patreon milestone hit.

[erraticerrata](#)

That'll be for July, not June.

*Gunslinger*

No problem, still excited to get more of the guide.

*AVR*

Typos

sea of blanks faces  
sea of blank faces

broken, blood nose  
broken, bloody nose



Four spears of ice rose were carved out  
(lose 'rose' or 'were carved out')

*LostDeviljho*

"The words were not words. They were mountains old as dawn ground to nothingness one season at a time, they were ice so deep in the heart of the world it had never seen the light of day. My ears were bleeding."

Well this is sure to be a fun conversation.

[chris S](#)

I've been thinking about it and Break is a really scary Aspect in it's potential purpose. Imagine the "non-standard" ways you could channel it. Breaking enemy lines. Breaking fortress walls with but a word. Breaking someone's will.

Breaking the Rules that Good and Evil run by.

*Dylan Tullos*

chris S:

Break is a really scary Aspect. Like most immensely powerful weapons, though, it needs to be handled very carefully.

When Catherine uses Break, something is going to break, but there's no guarantee that the right thing will be broken. If she locks swords with an enemy and speaks Break, her blade could be the weaker; if she locks wills with an enemy and speaks Break, her will could be the weaker. Sometimes you Break the Rules...and sometimes they Break you. Vague Words of Power are often immensely useful and powerful, but it's dangerous to use a command whose effect is so uncertain.

*Nicole*

Its some interesting logic (and fun!), but I do not feel your conclusions are warranted by the text. She has used it a single time and only the thing she wanted to break actually broke. So far Name aspects seem to do exactly what the user wants (at least for villains). I expect that will continue.

*TheCount*

He is right though.

"

"Break," I croaked.

For an instant all I felt was my will pushing against something infinitely larger. If the Duke had fought me, I

grasped, I would have been swept away by the tide effortlessly. But he wasn't fighting me. Magic was will, and his will was in the spears"

Its really IS a contest of wills, but she can probably break most things easily...

Although, the force of belief still remains a mystery to see. (example: A wall, with those on the otherside and on it beliving is unbreakable, as it never broke in history, even if the enemy got in the city, the wall never broke, they either climbed it or got through the gates (or underr the wall))

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I had a hard time imagining this setup. There are several different glaciers, and enough water to swim in. So the Heart was a lake on top then? What were they walking on? I have spent a fair amount of time on actual glaciers, I feel that knowledge is probably working against me here.

---

Just a lake with chunks of ice big enough to be called glaciers, shifting and standing apart enough that jumping from one platform to another and diving between them are both feasible options. There's a reason Lady of Cracking Ice is the witness at this fight.

*MagpieJack*

I think it's more like a lake with lots of large floes (and/or small icebergs) floating in it.

*Dylan Tullos*

Nicole:

Rule of Cool! Even if my wild guessing is entirely unjustified (and it probably is), it would be sweet to have Break backfire on you at the worst possible time. I like the thought of a double-edged Aspect, though I agree that there's no real text evidence for it.

*Nicole*

Hehe, I agree... though I like our Squire enough I just want to see her keep steamrolling everything that gets in her way 😊

*AMC*

What do you mean "no real text evidence"?

Cat spent 50% of the library scene last chapter warning us about unfaithful Aspects. (And previously, though I don't remember where.)

Isn't the "backfiring Aspect" supposedly one of the mechanisms that The Story uses to make The Villains lose?

[taborask](#)

I don't think there was ever discussion of the Aspects themselves backfiring. The concern is more in line with the issue with magic armor, in that it allows for more opportunities for somebody else to hijack the narrative and use it against you.

*Nicole Weaver*

Less backfiring aspect and more dangerous weaknesses. Like talking too much at the point of victory, or crushing the heroes without letting them fight back.

We saw when the calamites went after that group of heroes. They treated aspects like unbeatable trump cards and tried to get the heroes to exhaust their trump cards before striking a fatal blow.

*Daniel*

Dread Emperor Irritant sounds hilarious.

*Byzantine*

Based on all her quotes "The oddly successful" is a good description. She basically pulled what Cat does. On everyone. All the time.

For example I suspect those poor Heroic parties ended up fighting each other.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

The more I think about it, the more I'm sure Cat gets something solid and measurable out of this victory. My hunch is that she believes retroactive ownership of the Duke's Signet Ring will give her sufficient clout with the Winter Fae to either expel them from Marchford, or redirect them against Princess Sulia's forces wrecking the area around Liesse.

Given that Fae authority seems tied to the power of the individual Fae aristocrats, I'm not sure how Cat could have political clout within the Winter Courts whilst otherwise remaining unchanged. I'm sure it's doable, but it's definitely not how I hope it goes given that Heiress is powering up, Cordelia is bordering on launching her Crusade, and the White

Knight is OP beyond the telling of it with his ability to essentially become the situationally perfect Hero at the drop of a hat.

Set against all that, I don't think some innate wind magic would unbalance our beloved Squire in the least. Of course like every other success since becoming the Squire, new Fae mojo should come with its own complications.

What does everyone else think?

*Byzantine*

She said what she hoped to get out of it last time: She just created a story and by the right of the story she *\*is\** part of the winter fae now, so they can't attack Marchford to even out the balance because it already belongs to them.

*dalek955*

Scene-setting should probably mention that the glaciers are floating on water, rather than driving around on the land that "field" implies.

Also, I seem to recall Cat's last fight against fae (the Rider) demonstrating that armor is not useless.

*TheCount*

The Fae weapons still go through mundane armor quite easily, but she needed the extraspeed now that the armor would have negated with its weight.

*arancaytar*

New aspect, and it even rhymes!

Take it, Break it, Booty Quake it.

*ArkhCthuul*

Well, restarted reading after a hard won battle of leaving this story time to get elongated, and wootshed through the last chapters like nothing.

This one is amazing both in execution and portent, now I'll utilize the fact I haven't yet caught up and enjoy the conclusion. 😊

*arancaytar*

We're well into No Man Of Woman Born territory here, Cat. If you try to break a legendary weapon to prevent it being used against you, you're just tempting narrative causality even harder.

---

## Chapter 15: Bestowal

*"Most live out their days on an isle of vapid ignorance, shying away from the dark and hungry waters that surround it. To seek power is to brave the tides, but one who does should not expect to see those shores again."*

– Translation of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely attributed to the young Dead King

I forced myself back to my feet. This was too close to kneeling for my tastes. The movement came easier than I'd thought, easier than it *should* have – whatever he had done with the ice, it had strengthened me. For however long it would last. Fae gifts were notoriously fickle things. The King was carving his bauble of ice, ivory knife shaving off one sliver after another another. The sound was almost deafening, in the silence that had grasped this world. I made my way to the edge one step after another, almost slipping as I sat down. My bare hand held onto the ice and I managed to settle by his side without tumbling down into the waters, pushing down a groan of pain. The ruler of Winter casually allowed another sliver of ice to fall down, indifferent to my struggles. I opened my mouth, then closed it. I'd stood before entities as powerful as this one before, but for once I was entirely unsure what to say. Not cowed, perhaps, but so aware of the current frailty of my existence I might as well be.

"You did well with Auster," the King said.

I could still hear echoes to his voice that had me cringing, but it was not as brutal as it had been easier. I wasn't seeing things instead of hearing words, at least. Had he restrained himself, or was I getting used to it? The second thought almost had me shiver. Some changes could only come at a price.

"First time killing a Duke," I croaked. "Wouldn't recommend it."

My throat was scraped a little too raw to manage flippancy properly, sadly. My attempt at humour fell flat – looking at the King's face for too long hurt my eyes, but from what I glimpsed there was no trace of amusement.

"Larat believed you would avoid the tale entirely," the King said. "But he is a creature of war, mine own Hound of Winter. One does not rely on the Prince of Nightfall to trace the path ahead."

The lack of depth perception probably didn't help his case, I thought, and the almost chuckle that escaped me set my lungs aflame. *Gods*, that was not a pleasant feeling. I needed to get run through less often.

"You backed me in a corner," I said.

"And this offends you?" the King of Winter said, sounding amused for the first time. "Submission is ever the lot of the weak. If you would rage at anything, rage at your own impotence."

I hacked out a mocking laugh along with what might just have been a chunk of my lung. The bit of flesh stained my lips red as I spat it out, like rouge paid for in blood.

"I'm not," I said. "Impotent. Wouldn't be here if I was. You need something from me."

"Ah, mortals," the creature fondly said. "Always you seek to bargain until the very last breath. Your kind is a wonder."

I'd always believed, deep down, that if I ever met a god it would be about this condescending. I was darkly pleased to be proved right.

"I already took what I need," I said.

"You took what I allowed," the King replied. "Do not mistake allowance for triumph."

Even with the clarity the ice had forced on me, I was exhausted. It had taken every scrap of what I had to get me through the fight with the Duke taking only three lethal wounds – never before had I ever spent that much power so quickly. His power had not made me better, not really: it just felt like I was too tired to sleep. If I'd been having this conversation with Heiress I would have called what was being said posturing, but what need did the fucking King of Winter have to posture with me? He could end me with a thought. He was in a league so far above my own even trying to grasp the difference between us might kill me. *And Ranger fights things like this for sport*. Merciless Gods, what kind of monsters had Black gathered under his banner?

"I'm too close to the grave to play this game properly," I said. "I lied my way to a claim. Are you going to deny me?"

He laughed. It sounded like wind against dead branches, like blood freezing inside a still-beating heart. I could feel the bones in my neck creak, feeling so fragile a single snap would break them.

"This is Winter, Catherine Foundling," he said. "You own what you kill."

"Then you'll stop attacking Marchford?" I asked.

"That purpose has already been served," the King said. "We are now part of the dream you call Callow."

And that settled that. I'd achieved what I'd set out to achieve, though I knew there'd be a price coming. It left an unpleasant taste in my mouth, the way this had all gone down. I'd been played since the beginning by something so much more dangerous than me that there was no retaliation I could deal out. The leverage I'd thought I had was enough to keep me alive, but nothing more – and pushing it would likely get me killed. I sat there next to a god, and prepared to make a mistake. I'd once thought that Masego's need to always be exact was because he was the Apprentice, but that wasn't entirely true. He'd had that tendency before he became the Apprentice, I now believed. Archer had led me to the greater truth: Named, whatever their Name, were *more*. We were larger in everything, and when we grew our flaws grew as well. Urges that had been ignorable when we were mortal no longer were. Black would always seek victory regardless of the costs, Archer would always indulge in what appealed to her and me? I'd once thought it was my reckless streak that had grown into the flaw that would get me killed, but that wasn't quite right. It was that the part of me that would have been able to bite its tongue was long buried. My mouth opened, knowing I was about to commit a blunder. Because this wretch of a god had killed some of my people, and I could not let that go unanswered.

"You killed my men," I said. "When you sent your fae into my city."

"Your men would have died," he said. "What does it matter, that it was my doing or that of time?"

"You robbed them of the life they could have lived," I replied through gritted teeth. "You *took* from them. A debt is owed."

"Their existence weighed less than wind," the King said. "Nothing can be taken from nothing."

"This is not a bargain, King of Winter, it's an *oath*," I hissed. "One day, we'll meet again. Not tomorrow, not next month, not for decades. After your game's played out. After I've learned to kill gods. On that day, I'll come to collect."

"Will you?" he wondered.

It did not even take a heartbeat. Instantaneous would have been wrong still – it had always been the case that the water in my eyes was frozen. I felt blood running down the side of my face that should not be feeling anything at all. My bad leg, the one that still limped when I tired, twisted and broke with a sound like dead wood snapping. I heard the whistle of wind, more

deafening than a hundred thousand horns, and after a flare of pain that dragged me to the edge of unconsciousness I heard nothing at all. I choked on my own tongue as frost spread over my skin, robbing me of the last of my senses.

"If I were a prince," the King told me, "I would be the Prince of Bleak Solstice. Some of that remains even under the Deadwood Crown."

I was a prisoner in my own body, the only sensation left to me the feeling of his fingers tipping up my chin.

"I could inflict on you every pain you've ever felt and some you cannot even conceive of," he said idly. "But you are of no use to me broken. One of those flitting around is quite enough."

His thumb ran its way up my cheek until it rested under my eye, and his other hand came to match it on the other side.

"You are in need of a reminder, Catherine Foundling," he said, "of the difference between bravery and ignorance."

The King clucked his tongue.

"No, not the eyes," he said. "Yours are too dull to make a fitting ornament. Something, perhaps, a little more pointed."

He withdrew from my face and the relief lasted for barely a moment before I felt his hand tear through my chest. I screamed soundlessly as his fingers closed around my beating heart, ripping it out like he was picking lint from cloth. The sorcery that had blanketed my senses lifted like a veil, leaving me on my feet with the King standing in front of me. I could see my heart in one hand, frozen black and solid. In the other was the bauble he'd been making out of ice, now a perfect carving of the moon. He thrust it where my heart had been, flesh closing around it as he withdrew and it began beating.

"I recognize you as heiress to the Duke of Violent Squalls," he said. "Made by prophecy, heirloom and the word of a king. Your inheritance, claimed by rite of blood, is confirmed."

I gasped for air, feeling the blood in my veins cooling further with every passing moment.

"Catherine Foundling," he said. "I name you Duchess of Moonless Nights. I grant you the seat of Marchford, and on these sacred grounds claim your fealty."

My surroundings ebbed away, replaced by deep and bottomless darkness. I stood there unmoving, seeing only the dark-skinned king and the blood-red sap dripping onto his brow from his wooden crown.



"I demand no fidelity and offer no respite," the King of Winter laughed. "I demand no faith and offer no protection. I give you slight and deceit, I receive hatred and betrayal. The Court of Winter receives you as one of its own, 'till your last desperate breath clawing at the dark."

Power pulsed in my chest, spreading through my veins. I felt the third part of my soul, the missing aspect I had yet to forge, fill with something old and too large to comprehend.

"I stand by my oath, dead thing," I rasped. "Before my days are done *I will see you unmade.*"

"Then you are a Duchess of Winter in truth," the King grinned, teeth like stolen moonlight. "I charge you with the defeat of Summer, Catherine Foundling. I charge you with the making of peace, exacted from the battlefield."

He leaned forward.

"You have six times the coming of your title, or your heart is forever mine," he said.

Hands rose to my face again, to my eyes.

"Now sleep," he said, "and *dream.*"

Fingers pulled down my pupils and darkness took me.

—

Dawn does not exist, then it does.

I see two cities and two lands around them. One is made of plenty, orchards of fruitful trees and fields of green. Juice runs down the chin of children as they bite into peaches, playing under the sun by pale walls. Colours for which there are no names yet fill half the world, proud lords and ladies clustering at the feet of a crowned and faceless silhouette. In its gaze is Summer, the heat that burns and hangs in the air like vapour. The other land is ice and illusion, and there nothing grows. Wind howls and creatures die under knives of obsidian, the warmth of their blood staining lips and chasing away, for a single blessed moment, the cruel bite of the chill. There the games of the children are vicious, for victory can only come from the defeat of others. At the heart of a maze, lords and ladies with smiles treacherous cluster at the feet of a crowned and faceless silhouette. In its gaze is Winter, the cold that that devours and leaves only absence behind.

War does not exist, then it does.

The hungry reach for the bounty of the full and this brings strife, as their taking is not gentle and this offence cannot go

unanswered. Clarion calls make the sky shudder, for the host of Summer is a thing of might. They come in silk and steel, red pennants stirring in the wind like the promise of blood to come. Where they go noon follows, relentless and unforgiving as its heralds. Winter is not announced. It creeps like a snake in the dark, a slithering host of shades and clawed things that *want*, want until it hollows them out. They wear dead things and wield sharpness torn from the ground, eyes covetous under the blanket of night. None are valiant in the dark but all are desperate. *Justice*, the hooves of white winged horses thunder as they take flight. *More*, the blue-eyed things on horned horses whisper back, slender lances glinting. There are cries and screams. The moon falls, burnt black, and as it breaks the world Summer triumphs.

Noon spreads across two lands. Nothing is left of the hungry but ashes, trampled contemptuously. Ice melts away, leaving behind bleak black earth. The world is made a festival and Summer prospers, ripening again and again. The proud grow ever prouder, until the first fruit spoils. The sun does not rest and the land buckles under it. Pride turns to arrogance and under red pennants lords and ladies spill blood, turning on each other. Only one can have most, and none have ever tasted defeat. The land is scorched but there is no relief, for Summer advances and does not know retreat. The red haze hangs in the air like sickness as stomachs go from full to bursting like the fruits gone overripe, fire and steel claiming all until only the crowned and faceless silhouette remains. It remains seated on the throne as yellow leaves and roots claim the world, facing the sun until only a seared carcass remains.

This is the truth of Summer: everything burns out.

Green sprouts from bleak black earth, and from this harvest a city grows. Spring has come. In the other land yellow turns to orange and brown, leaves falling to the ground as the land is finally freed from agony. Autumn has come. From those remains grows a city, feeding on what little there is to offer. One land grows to plenty, the other dies a slow death. The sun rises, ice spreads.

The story comes again.

The hungry reach for the bounty of the full and this brings strife, as their taking is not gentle and this offence cannot go unanswered. Clarion calls ring out, but they are silenced. The serpent slithers into the heart of Summer, offering peace and hidden fangs even as its hunger sharpens behind honeyed words. Poison spreads in the blood and champions die, for not even the mighty can overcome the many soft deaths of Winter. When the host of Summer comes it is gaping and limping, fresh to a war that came unannounced. *Justice*, the hooves of white winged horses thunder as they take flight. The shades laugh as they devour

them. *More*, they whisper back to the dead. The mighty die slow among their red pennants, striking at smoke and mirrors as snow begins to blanket the world. The sun grows ever paler until it falls from the sky, shattering as it breaks the world and Winter triumphs.

Night spreads across two lands. Proud corpses are clawed to bloody bone as the host clad in death and theft spills forth. Juicy peaches are ripped from trees and bitten into as the trees that bore them wither and die. Ice snakes across once-green fields made bare by the hungry. Winter feeds, feeds until it can almost understand fullness. It is not enough. Pale and gloried walls are torn down, pennants drained of colour until all is bare and empty and still the host *wants*. There is less and less while there are still many so vicious games are made ever more vicious for in the end there will be only one mouthful left, and only one mouth to devour it. The night deepens and desperation does with it, as bleak winds and starvation take what murder and betrayal does not. Not even feeding off each other is enough. Then only the crowned silhouette on the throne remains, unmoving in the cold as it tries to feel something, *anything* and dies an empty husk.

This is the truth of Winter: we all die alone.

The cold turns on itself and a remnant of a remnant frees itself from the ground, green sprouting from the bleak black earth. From this harvest a city grows, for Spring has come. In the land that was once Summer, the bare bones of what was once plenty are gnawed on. A city of the dying forms around the little turning to nothing, for Autumn shapes itself out of the coming of absence.

The story comes again. In the end, there is no end.

—

I wasn't sure exactly when I crossed the boundary from sleep to wakefulness. There was no transition, no burst of awareness. I was not awake, then I was. The thought had me shivering. I was under quilt, in a bed more rough than soft, and wearing clothes I didn't remember putting on. I rose to a seat and found myself surrounded by bare stone walls that were somewhat familiar. There were sounds coming from outside, but one closer: in a corner of the room, slumped in a chair, Hakram was snoring. *Marchford*, I realized. *I'm back*.

"Catherine?"

I glanced at the door as Adjutant jerked awake at the noise. Masego was at the threshold, looking somewhere in the middle of relieved and worried. I brushed back my hair absently.

"So," I said, "There's now a god on my murder list. Someone be a dear get me a drink – it's going to be a rough few months."

---

*danh3107*

I don't think I have any words to describe how the summer and winter imagery moved me.

Bravo

*Darkening*

I am in full agreement. That was exquisite.

*Nicole Weaver*

Me as well. Incredible

*Morgenstern*

Yup. Yummy. Moooooore... don't leave us craving, but we all know you will. ^^

*ArkCthuul*

I can only agree, deeply moving and flawlessly executed. The whole chapter was marvelous, and Catherine Ice Heart,... Wow, just wow....

[godkiller999](#)

What would have happened if Cath already had all her aspects?

*nehemiahnewell*

She wouldn't have fit, probably. She could take the tale because there was room for it in her own story.

[intermediarywebserial](#)

Regardless, not like she has much time to use it:

"You have six times the coming of your title, or your heart is forever mine,"

Only six years for success. No time at all to the King of Winter. Let's hope it's enough.

*theart0fwar*

No! Six time the coming of her title, moonless night, to defeat Summer. Six month to stop the invasion on the other side of Callow.

*Morgenstern*

Or, just as probably, the aspect would have been murder and gotten eaten by what took its place \*g

*Morgenstern*

murdered. argh. damn you non-existent edit function, damn you.

*Gunslinger*

This was fantastic. Not just the prose, but the imagery of it. Just brilliant.

The implications of the events are pretty dire.

1. I'm worried about the relationship between the cold hearted winter queen and the fiery half faerie.
2. Catherine has only 3 years to kill the Winter King?
3. What is with the italics when she makes the i will see you unmade oath? It's not her 3rd aspect cause it's not bold. Also the text says the aspect was filled up making me wonder if she gave up that aspect for winter powers.

[inkthief](#)

Where did you get the 3 years from? She got a deadline of six moonless nights so about 3 months to make peace with summer. She won't be duking (lol) it out with the WK until decades at least.

[inkthief](#)

Sorry, meant 6\* months, not 3.

*Gunslinger*

Ughh sleep deprived commenting. I thought it meant 6 seasons or cycles of winter.

*Morgenstern*

Huh. Right. That just might make more sense...

I thought she's got six times her Title, meaning six times the story unfolding, six attempts to succeed in the story that ever comes again... hmmm...

*Morgenstern*

You know, because of six resurrections and six times of getting (to be) her Title anew.

*Morgenstern*

You're not all that mistaken Gunslinger. That interpretation IS there, not just from sleep deprivation. 😊

*haihappen*

Most likely not 3 Years.

She is the Duchess of The Moonless Night. So she has 6 times that her title comes, i.e. a moonless night. If the Moon cycle works the same as in the real world, this would mean 6 coming of the new Moon phase in the moon cycle, i.e. approximately 5-6 months.

BUT, in a note: The King of Winter did not specify whom she had to meet on the battlefield to end the war...

*RoflCat*

I think that's what he's banking on, for her to break the cycle of Summer and Winter, given her...history of breaking things like this.

So that Winter King will not die alone with nothing, nor will Summer win and destroy all that is Winter.

She is part of Winter now, but at the same time she's also not a Fae, so he's likely expecting her to use that non-Fae mindset to break the current story and forge a new one, possibly something in... 'cycle' that would allow the king to remain.

My guess: She break the cycles from Summer-Winter -> Spring-Autumn into the normal seasons (Spring->Summer->Autumn->Winter) that ebbs and flow their populations.

It does break the actual 'war' between Summer and Winter since it's a clear cut on who'll win in their season, but each side will still gain their victories over time and the story will remain the same.

In Summer, the hosts of Summer slaughter the hosts of Winter, slowly expanding their area

In Autumn, the hosts of Summer weakens from the poisons

Winter resorted to using in their disadvantageous stage

In Winter, the hosts of Winter slaughters the hosts of Summer, creeping back over the land.

In Spring, the hosts of Winter turns on each other over the

'last bite' and their numbers dwindle while Summer gains the time to rebuild

*vietnamabc*

Hum I wonder what would happen in 3 years, from 2.15 Black also became a knight after 3 years and then he wrote the journal. Coincidences?

Also I got very strong vibe of future Winter Knight here, no need to wait for that old pale Duni man to croak.

*Metalshop*

I love that her villainous fatal flaw is mouthing off to the powerful.

*Quest*

Not quite Hubris. Audacity?

[ayon96](#)

Patreon pledge reached it's goal. So, are there going to be twice weekly updates?

[taborask](#)

yeah, but he said they wouldn't start until july

*nerfworld*

So the story of callow and praes is similar to the relationship between summer and winter? the one with surplus and the desperate taker? and ultimately the empire will be forced to expand again to sustain it population

*James, Mostly Harmless*

To expand on Nerfworld's point, both relationships are similar to to the relationship between good and evil. If Kat can succeed in making peace between Summer and Winter, she may be able to deal with the other relationships.

*Morgenstern*

Yeah, because achieving balance there could mean just finally enough to fill the bellies of all and peace everlasting. But seriously – is that something one would expect of a villain story? Not sure if even practical evil can achieve that much... Hmm...

*Shequi*

That makes it very interesting that Winter has made itself part of the story of Callow, which is the land of plenty in the Praes-Callow tale.

As the Black Knight once said, the pattern is for Praes to grasp, and Callow to be grasped; but of course Callow has occupied Praes in the distant past, which fulfills the "Summer wins" version of the tale.

*Alegio*

I totally love Cath, she is awesome... But why does she never asks for help!? I understand she wants to do things her own way but still, she has some literal god slayers that would gladly help her! I wish at least once she would ignore that pride and ask Black to crack some skulls.

*Letouriste*

Black is away, he CAN'T help for now.

*Morgenstern*

Yeah. And that includes Captain, the one who slew a god, not God. 😊 I wonder into which category the Kings/Queens of the Fae fall.... hmmm...

*Dianna*

Who knows she might. My hope is that we finally get to have a meeting between Cat and Ranger (arranged by Archer). That would be fantastic, and make sense as Ranger probably has the most experience God and Fae killing.

*stevenneiman*

Black needs her to learn and grown, which means that he can't fight her battles for her. The Ranger would do this sort of thing for the fun of it, but it's questionable whether she would do it for a genuine reason if someone asked. Besides, her goals aren't mutually exclusive with Black's but they aren't the same either, and she needs accomplishments like this to give her story weight before she tries to do the things she needs to do.

*Gunslinger*

Lot's of cool replies to this. I just want to add another point is that she might not want their help because it would hurt her agenda. She needs to prove that she can lead her own vision of Callow and that cannot be done when you call warlock for every problem.

*Letouriste*



Thanks for the chapter:)

I had something to say but I forgot before i finish reading^^

That just show how your story is entrancing;)

*James, Mostly Harmless*

Now both Kat and Heiress are running around with their hearts outside of their bodies. I have a feeling that Heiress's heart is easier to get to than Kat's!

*nipi*

Was Heiress missing a heart aswell? I thought it was just her soul that was absent from the body.

*M*

Well she is a heartless bitch regardless.

*Letouriste*

Heiress is not heartless,she would not love her father so much if she was.she is just ruthless and ambitious...remember her sense of loss when her confidante got killed?

An heartless person would not feel that.

---

Cat: "Are you sure this will work?"

The King: "I have no idea!"

*arancaytar*

Don't be such a baby. Hearts grow back!

(no they don't)

*The Archdevil*

Has Cat been übercharged? It's about time.

*Q*

What I'm wondering is Cat's title of duchess of moonless nights sound very close to the names of the princes. Prince of nightfall. Prince of bleak solstice. The other fae high nobility have name that are more physical things. The lady of cracking ice the Duke of violent squalls. The duchess of moonless nights sounds in line with possibly being the princess of moonless nights.

---

"The moon falls, burnt black, and as it breaks the world Summer triumphs"

Get some cover from the sun, and Cat's title will be active more or less permanently.

### Mental Mouse

There's also a lot of foreshadowing here...

### *Morgenstern*

One typo that cannot be ignored:

I could still hear echoes to his voice that had me cringing, but it was not as brutal as it had been easier.

Should obviously have been "earlier".

### *stevenneiman*

"shaving off one sliver after [another] another."

alternatively, one sliver after another after another

"In its gaze is Winter, the cold [that] that devours and leaves only absence behind."

### *BarthHumphries*

Unlike the fae, I knew how handle myself  
add "to" after "how"

There is less and less while there are still many so vicious  
games are made ever more vicious for in the end there will be  
only one mouthful left,  
add a comma after many

The night deepens and desperation does with it,  
change does to deepens

Someone be a dear get me a drink – it's going to be a rough few months.

Either add "and" or a comma after dear

---

Given how devils were described in the story to be born as personifications of a concept that are bound by their nature to keep close to it, and that they are summoned by diabolists to be used as tools related to those concepts, it looks like the Fae are doing the opposite of that, summoning humans from much bleaker Creation to cut some corners their stories don't allow. The behaviour not bound by one's nature must look at least as alien to them as behaviour that is looks to humans.

Of course, following this analogy, the King may or may not know that he essentially summoned a demon. He gave her his previous title, which is maybe enough to tell his name, but there's nearly nothing else to Cat's advantage right now, so short of baiting Summer into a raid on Skade she's not getting her heart back any time soon.

On a side note, given how he measured time given to defeat Summer in moonless nights, did he just turn Catherine into some backwards werewolf? This is how one loses their medical license!

*narcoduck*

Haha, what. Is she going to turn into her Fae disguise during every new moon? Actually...

*stevenneiman*

The thing that makes his game so dangerous is that he brought someone into the land of stories whose best skill is ensuring that her enemies' stories end badly, after making an enemy of her. And then he compounded his error by giving her a time limit to get payback, meaning that he now has 6 months to live.

*M*

You seem to be implying that he *\*isn't\** suicidal.

*Darkening*

No, he gave her a time limit to bring peace to summer and winter to get her heart back. She can take as long as she likes killing him once that's done.

*Nicole*

Failing to get her heart back doesn't mean she will die. It likely means she will have less or no free will, but that isn't quite the same as dying.

*Panster*

That was some really good writing. Wow.

*Eduardo*

Poetic. Nice prose. Thanks.

*Aaron*

"That purpose has already been served," the King said. "We are now part of the dream you call Callow."

*\*flails wildly\**

I thiiiiink, though I'm not sure, that this is the King more or less saying he wants to use Callow, or more specifically the idea of Callow as a weapon to break the chains of the narrative that Cat is wielding, as a way to break the Fae out of their own narrative cycles.

Which means he *\*needs\** Catherine, which means she is going to kill the shit out of him and it'll be awesome.

(Really, he should have just paid it back. A loan of soldiers, years for years, to pay back the debt seems like it would have cost him very little and gained him not being murdered by Catherine later.)

*nehemiahnewell*

Ah, but Winter is murderous and backstabbing. I think he bound her closer to Winter by making her his enemy. What does he care if he dies in the doing? He's tired of this, all of this, and it won't even end.

*stevenneiman*

Good point. He did comment that she was truly of winter after she swore to kill him. And now that I think of it, he might very well be a death seeker who deliberately ensured that he would be dead for real in six months.

*Random Fan*

Yeah, making her murderous and backstabbing is probably a winter thing, where summer is murderous and facestabbing. I think there's more to it than that, though.

Keep in mind "you own what you kill"; I suspect he is trying to tie her in even further to the narrative-breaking plans-killing him might not land her the crown, but I would be entirely unsurprised if it won her his principedom. Others have said the name sounds like a prince(ss)' name already, so It would be a quite plausible secondary plot for Pyrrhic victory. I doubt his primary goal is his own death, but he might surprise me. Certainly, he has been provoking her, and while attributing intent to the fae is inherently risky, if there is a purpose it would be unsurprising.

@stevenneiman: I don't think the six-month time limit is to bring about his death, but peace won from the battlefield. Though bringing about his death probably would manage to take back the heart without compliance with his terms.

*Nicole*

In the story the King of Winter and the King of Summer haven't died. The King endures. He has no reason to believe that she will succeed in killing him and if she does, she becomes the Queen of Winter as the cycle has always been...

### *Dragrath*

Yep Catherine truly has gotten herself in over her head like always that is got to be an aspect tied to her name. Only 6 months to resolve what the Fae have never been able to achieve as it is in opposition to their nature... Lets hope that the now Fae part of her will not make that impossible... Lets remember that her lover is descended from Summer...

### *Byzantine*

Fae are forever bound to their stories.

They cannot find peace because they have no story which end "happily ever after."

Cat has to \*make\* one. It may just be an impossible task, or it may be the start of everything changing. If Cat can break the story of the Fae I suspect the Gods themselves are going to suddenly start paying very close attention.

---

Actually, Black states in 2.15 that her grandmother rode with the Wild Hunt.

### *The Archdevil*

Kilian's grandmother rode with the Hunt, not Cat's.

### *Morgenstern*

Kilian's grandmother riding with the Wild Hunt seems like exactly the thing he is referring to, pointing out how her "being from Summer" seems wrong, as the Hunt seems associated to Winter (or none?) ... 😊

### *Ming*

Was the "pulled down my pupils" deliberate? As opposed to "eyelids". Because that was a delicious piece of imagery.

### [Shawn Panzegraf](#)

This is entirely doable,  
The Fae are considerably weaker in Creation, while still bound by their Stories. Also, Princess Sulia has been described as simple-natured even by mortal standards. Putting one over on someone as arrogant as the Prince of Nightfall (who, let's not forget,

completely failed to anticipate Catherine's chosen course of action himself) shouldn't be impossible by any means.

I thought this was what the King was up to. I just didn't see the "meet my time limit or your heart is mine forever" ultimatum coming.

The Fae story would be horrifying enough if it was just Summer always being Summer, and Winter always being Winter in this Eternal War. The fact Summer becomes Winter and Winter becomes Summer, and still the War seesaws back and forth through endless Cycles....The Fae can do all the arrogant sneering about Glorious Arcadia they like, but in point of fact Arcadia is too Hellish even for the Gods Below.

Heh, the Gods Below likely chose at the Dawn of Creation to rent out Arcadia and live in the Hells, the Hells being the cushier digs and all.

*redaeth*

6 months, half a year, from winter to summer or back again. That is pretty poetic right there.

AVR

Typos

under quilt,  
under a quilt,

be a dear get  
either:  
be a dear and get  
or:  
be a dear, get

*arancahtar*

Not hard to see the parallels between the eternal war of Winter/Summer and the eternal war of Praes/Callow. "More" – "The Pattern for Praes is to grasp."

Catherine (just like Black) means to break one of those, and has had a surprising amount of success. Yet the other seems pretty unbreakable. You can't end the seasons – what would that even mean? So the analogy has to end somewhere.

*Unmaker*

"But you are of no use to me broken. One of those flitting around is quite enough."

The king is saying that there is a broken power (Name?) moving around. That doesn't sound like anyone I can think of: none of Cat's crew are obviously broken, Heiress seems villainously whole, Black's crew are definitely all there, the Heroes are OK, the Tyrant is healthy despite the prophecy of his doom, etc.

Any ideas?

[Phantom](#)

My guess is most likely ranger, she is crazy and also seemed to have only one or two aspects.

*beleester*

Ranger has three – Learn, Perfect, Transcend. We saw them in her interlude.

*Morgenstern*

I thought he was referring to the Prince of Nightfall.... \*shrugs

*Morgenstern*

Or the Duke of the Violent Squalls that she broke by killing him, probably even more likely.

[chris S](#)

““I recognize you as heiress to the Duke of Violent Squalls,” he said. “Made by prophecy, heirloom and the word of a king. Your inheritance, claimed by rite of blood, is confirmed.””

so.... Catherine is -at least temporarily- part fae now (potentially, due to the way magic and stories work in Arcadia).

Are we going to see some interesting new magic feats arising?

*Nairne*

Well, the third aspect got replaced by, how it was put, “something old and too large to comprehend”. Who knows what kind of perks and downsides that fact has.

*MagpieJack*

My guess is that it's Winter itself that settled in.

Perk: Is not, technically, an Aspect. Promising that “I solemnly swear not to use my Aspects against you” allows her to blast people with Fae ice. A ritual disabling or dulling Aspects won't affect her Winter powers. Narrative conventions like “the first to use all three aspects in a duel loses” may also not apply fully.

Downside: Makes her susceptible to Fae conventions, anti-Fae magic and etc. instead. Another possible con is that since she never earns a third Aspect she doesn't transition properly from Squire to... whatever she ends up as (I've got money on "not Black Knight"). Bonus downside: Killian has Arcadiand blood and, being a red-head, is almost certainly Summer court. This comes with ALL SORTS of potential issues starting with are they even allowed to bang anymore.

### *Bookworm*

Fun stuff. Just want to point out that she is going to have the winter king "unmade". That was her oath. Not kill. Not murder. She is going to send him to oblivion. It makes me wonder how the story of the Fae would balance with the gaping hole an absent Prince, with all of the stories and interactions attributable to him, would make from being unmade.

### *Darkening*

It's Winter, land of treacherous ambition. There'd probably be a whole slew of promotions seized and you'd end up with one less random townsfolk or something.

### *Nicole*

I am getting the distinct feeling that Cat is going to have a fun legacy. Like that Empress they all swear they hope stays in hell. When they mention Cat, its going to be like "Catherine Foundling, may the world not fall apart."

I'm sure there are better ones too. Anyone have some fun ideas for what will be tacked onto her name in the centuries to come?



### *knockoffnikolai*

You are assuming there will still be a world after she's gone.

### [nineran](#)

Anyone else creeped out by how the King refers to Callow as a dream ("we are now part of the dream you call Callow."), tells Cat to Dream (and she has a vision of summer vs. winter) but then she allegedly wakes up, only she can't remember that moment of transition that breaks the dream from reality? I'm having inception flashbacks: does the ice-heart mean that (she's fae enough that) she can now only dream of being in Creation while sleeping in Arcadia (except possibly on new moon nights?) until she earns her heart back?

Also Winter ranks theory:

Given that rank of nobility is listed as the X of Y where X is



current rank (baron, duke, prince). Could Y indicate how high that X can go, with:

Physical things being capable of less high rank than non-physical things, both in descending order by frequency of occurrence? e.g. cackling ice < violent squalls < nightfall < moonless nights < bleak solstice?

Thoughts?

Also, interesting that both nightfall and moonless night don't have an adjective...

(and of course, I could be overanalysing).

*Pbnj*

Hmm....I'm thinking it's the uniqueness and nature of the referenced event that reflects the power of the title as well as how often it changes hands.

For example: Volent squalls can be frequent yet powerful, but who's to say that the fae holding the title today is the same as last week?

*Vysirez*

I struggle with the continued extreme levels of power you describe. It is extremely hard for me to see how Ranger can walk all over the fae as she does, doesn't really matter how good you are with a sword if your opponent can control reality.

That aside, Ranger is evidently just that good, so I struggle with Cat ever being significant when compared to the likes of Black and Ranger. More and more it feels like Cat wins/survives because she's the protagonist, rather than by any ability or action of hers. I say win/survives since most of the time she doesn't win, she just survives.

I love stories where it feels like the protagonist is fighting above their weight class. You managed to get that at the end of book 2, however the rest of the time Cat's opponents feel so far above her that no longer feels like she's fighting above her weight class and winning, but that she is winning by author fiat. Not that it really seems like she's winning all the time, often she survives whatever is going on, but serves only as the pawn of whomever is currently using her. I guess you might manage to have her pull another win at the end of this book, but if she spends all her time stumbling around only getting a real win at the end of each book, I doubt I will stay interested. Not sure yet if that is how things go, but it's trending that way.

Your characterization and dialog are great, just some of the other stuff I'm struggling with.

## *Helot*

I think it has something to do with the tier of their Name. Squire is a first tier name. It transitions into Black/White Knight (or possibly something else?) Ranger is probably not a first tier name.

What happened to Catherine is that her Tier was reset, so she's starting over. Problem is, everyone is already used to her being a three aspect squire, so when she's back down to one, she feels weak, and it looks as though she should be losing constantly.

However!

Catherine isn't relying on her Name to win. She's relying on her Role. A Squire is someone being trained by a Knight, so her Role is to follow in the footsteps of her mentor... who just happens to be a badass Calamity, regularly taking out threats that should kill him.

By utilizing her Role over her Name, she's punching above her weightclass, if her opponents are using their Name instead of their Role.

You can see her that she was completely outplayed by the King of Winter. He even references her wording of 'Prophecy, Heirloom, King's Word' when he swaps out her heart. And the fae she replaced will just be back, once the seasons turn again 6 times. The Duke isn't out, he's just down.

As a side note, this whole situation feels a LOT like Harry Dresden from the Dresden Files. Summer/Winter interactions, Power Granting, just she's not as good as him at messing with Fae.

## *Mental Mouse*

That "six times the coming of your title" isn't six winters, it's six new moons. That said, her oath also has power....

## *Exec*

Fascinating chapter.

The way that Summer and Winter relate to Praes and Callow is interesting... is there a different version of Arcadia in each part of the world, each with its own repeating story that matches the 'surface'?

Or is this just a way of showing that Callow and Praes, Summer and Winter, Good and Evil are all the same story repeated in infinite variations throughout every being and land made by the Gods?

Really makes me curious about how the other continents fit, like the massive Elf Kingdom, the Gnomes, Yan Tei, etc.

[Mental Mouse](#)

That will be touched on later.

Steve

“’till your last desperate breath clawing at the dark”

Wow.

WOW.

Well played sir, well played indeed!

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yep, just spotted that on my reread.

Kenshin135

“ ...side of my face that should not be feeling anything at all. My bad leg, the one that still limped when I tired...”

Wait, so she still had the numb face and limp? I would’ve thought resurrection fixed those, or maybe Rise. Especially since they weren’t brought up again as a problem since. Unless it’s Name shenanigans; she believes those injuries are part of her therefore they are and thus weren’t something to be “fixed”? Too old and therefore not repaired even by the super healing that is resurrection? Or she really doesn’t have them and he was just making her relive the memory of them as proof he could?

Chinthor

So kinda sorta joining up with Winter, but not really. And being tasked with fighting Summer on their behalf. Love the writing, but is this turning into a Dresden novel?

OceanFlex

I’m really hoping Squire’s next name is Moonless Knight. It would be a pun, which she hates, but that makes it better. Plus, that crescent moon she has for a heart for now is mighty symbolic, and who knows how long Winter will be bound to Callow now that a Lady is also a Duchess.

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## Villainous Interlude: Proscenium

*"We should never forget that for a great evil to be defeated, a lesser evil must first become great."*

– Queen Eleanor Fairfax, founder of the Fairfax dynasty

Liesse was under siege, though forces had yet to deign test her walls. With the Summer Court having seized both Dormer and Holden, the two Callowan cities closest to the Waning Woods, the Empire had abandoned the south and begun mustering north of Vale instead. With fae hunting parties scouring the land coming from the west and the east, Akua had been forced to rely on her own wiles to keep her territory safe. Summer was holding court at Dormer and the true threats had yet to take the field, but even lesser nobles of Arcadia were dangerous enough. Unlike those of Winter, they would not control and subjugate the population: all those who did not immediately bow to the Queen of Summer were destroyed a riot of flame. Which was rather unfortunate, since Diabolist still needed southern labour to finish her work in Liesse. The fae were not being accommodating of her timetable.

Gathering a force of her own to field had proven tiresome, though she'd been granted an unexpected boon. Since she'd publically sacrificed the last mercenary force she'd hired in Mercantis – not that the merchants had particularly minded, after she'd paid up her very expensive penalty fees – hiring fresh blood had been difficult. The war in the Free Cities had ensured the most reputable companies were already all being employed by one side or the other, anyway, leaving behind only the dregs. Levantine raiders too savage for that already savage nation, a company of unreliable drow exiles and, amusingly enough, Helikean soldiers who'd been enemies of both the Exiled Prince and the ruling Tyrant. The last of those three were the steadiest, but they numbered only a thousand.

The boon, she had engineered herself with the gracious help of Mother and Dread Empress Malicia. Even as the south of Callow went up in flames, the Wasteland had gone to war with itself. After High Lady Tasia of Wolof had defaulted on several payments owed the Tower for granted privileges, Akua's cousin Sargon had immediately attempted a coup. Normally he would not have dared: it was one thing for Cousin Sargon to set himself against Mother, another to attempt the theft of the due of a Named. But the Diabolist had sent him a discreet message, conceding to his claim in exchange for several concessions involving gold and sundry favours. Armed rebellion exploded in Wolof before the day was out. Sargon had won the initial skirmish after deploying a dozen powerful devils, at which point Mother had responded by unleashing a demon on his men. The mess that ensued escalated in brutality.

Dread Empress Malicia sent in all the Legions garrisoning Praesi territory to restore order even as what remained of the Truebloods watched the greatest among them being cornered like an animal. Akua had, naturally, reached out to the most prominent members left. Gold, men and mages had flowed to her territory as Holden fell to the Summer Court and she became flanked on both sides. Including her mercenaries, Akua now had slightly over ten thousand soldiers under her command. Of them almost a tenth were mages, though only a handful of those could touch High Arcana. Still, it had been an effort to keep the delight off her face: oh, the kind of things she could *make* with this many spellcasters at her disposal.

And she would have to make them, of this there was no doubt. No reinforcements were coming for the foreseeable future. The legions of the Wasteland were busy keeping Wolof contained, and would not be able to march anywhere for months. There'd been talk of some of the legions guarding the Red Flower Vales under Marshal Grem One-Eye coming south as the orc himself took operational command, but Proceran movement on the other side of the border had smothered that notion in the crib. Cordelia Hasenbach might rule over a mongrel nation, but Akua had to give her this: she was a fair hand at the Great Game. With One-Eye and his men remaining to prevent an invasion by the Principate, command had fallen to Marshal Ranker in Denier – who'd also had to decline, as the Duchy of Daoine had declared full mobilization of the Watch and refused to give any explanation.

That left General Istrid with seniority, and she'd stripped Summerholm of its garrison before marching south to muster all she could north of Vale. As a crowning irony the single largest army in Callow, the Fifteenth under General Juniper, was forced in a defensive position at Marchford and unable to participate. The gate into Arcadia could not be left undefended: the Winter Court might just decide to establish a beachhead of their own, and not even Praes could withstand the pressure of two Courts running rampant. Until Foundling reappeared, her people were paralyzed. It had been most amusing to see everything Squire had built over the last year collapse the moment she was gone, Diabolist had to admit. Upon hearing word of Squire's disappearance into Arcadia the Praesi among the Ruling Council had swiftly struck a deal with the Guild of Assassins and seized power in Laure before declaring martial law across Callow – a move greeted with widespread rioting in the cities.

Best of all, when the usurpers had first accessed the treasury they'd found absolutely nothing: the Guild of Thieves had already emptied it in full, and to add insult to injury taken a tithe of a tenth from every Imperial Governor's own funds. Callow had descended into utter anarchy and in the chaos Akua's own hands were freer than ever before. She held the only remaining stronghold in the south, her workforce had swelled with refugees

and until Summer was dealt with she was essentially untouchable no matter what she did. The Empire could not afford for her to rise in rebellion, not with this many wolves at the gate. The situation, Diabolist thought, had fallen into her lap like a gift from the Gods Below. The dark-skinned woman strode the smouldering battlefield where her forces had prevailed not an hour past, Fasili trailing her dutifully. He'd been in command for the engagement, the largest one her army had waged so far.

"Fewer than two hundred casualties, Lady Diabolist," the other aristocrat said. "The revolving wards were a success: all their heavyweights focused on breaking them rather than firing mass magic at our troops."

The conversation would be a very different one if the new wards had failed, Akua thought. There'd been a Count among the catches of the day, and if one of those had decided to decimate her ranks she'd have lost at least a fifth of her soldiers. What the fae of Summer lacked in subtlety, they more than made up in destructive power. The very reason that her mages had been instructed to capture instead of kill, at it happened.

"I want their corpses raised by nightfall," she ordered. "Form a separate unit from the unded, under a cadre of necromancers. I expect their ranks will swell before this is over."

"It will be as you say," the other Soninke nodded.

"As for the wards, I've been told one of them was fractured," the Diabolist said. "We'll need to refine the concept."

"Your First Mage is already designing improvements," Fasili replied. "We won a great victory today, my lady. Fae with titles of this magnitude are hard to kill, much less subdue."

The Diabolist's lips quirked the slightest bit at the words. Fasili would take it as approval of his flattery, but the truth was different: it had been a very long time since any Praesi had a First Mage. The title had fallen out of favour when the Name of Warlock emerged: being the most powerful of a High Lord's spellcasters had been judged to be meaningless when there was the greater accolade of a Name to be claimed. Her revival of the title had been for largely personal reasons, though she did approve of the tribute to ancient custom.

"The Count of Golden Harvest," she said slowly, savouring the title.

"And two Baronesses," Fasili added with a vicious smile.

Fewer than a hundred fae without court titles had also been caught, though they paled in importance compared to the other three. They would be useful fodder, true enough, but for some

rituals quality was required over quantity. Leaving behind the sea of tents her soldiers were setting up for the night, the two of them made their way to the wide flat plain to the side of where the battle had taken place. There were four massive wards in place there, her mages milling around them like busy little bees. The largest held all the lower-ranked fae, shackled in iron and badly beaten. Though much weaker than the titled fae, their number alone was enough to make them dangerous: a hundred and fifty mages maintained the ward in rotating shifts to ensure no concerted attempt could be made to break the glowing sigils hanging in the air that kept them prisoner. The other three wards were not so heavily manned: they held one of the high-ranked nobles individually each of them under three times three bindings, all interlocked and reinforcing each other.

It was around the wards imprisoning the Count of Golden Harvest that a greying Soninke with a closely-cropped beard was kneeling, fingers dancing nimbly across a set of runes floating in the air. Akua studied them curiously: High Arcana, all of them, yet she did not recognize all of them. She was not surprised. Brilliant she might be, but she was still young and Dumisai of Aksum had spent a lifetime plumbing the depths of sorcery. A moment later the runes rearranged themselves before disappearing as a hum of power came from the ward surrounding the Count. The fae grunted in pain, drawing interest from the mage close to him.

"Is it physically painful to have more than nine tenths of your power restrained?" he asked in Mtethwa.

"I will see you made ash for this insolence, sorcerer," the Count of Golden Harvest hissed.

"Your threats are of no academic value, creature," the man noted. "This is most unproductive."

"First Mage," Fasili interrupted, his head dipping in respect.

The sorcerer jerked in surprise, only then realizing he had company behind him. He smiled at Akua's right hand man hesitantly.

"Good evening," he began, then trailed off. "... You."

"Lord Fasili Mirembé," Akua provided, too well-practiced to be openly amused..

"Yes," he said. "That."

"Papa," the Diabolist greeted warmly as her father rose to his feet.

"Mpanzi," the older man smiled. "Lord Warlock's research appears to be accurate. From what I've seen fae are made of the same

matter than Arcadia itself – there is no difference at a fundamental level between one of them and, say, a stone taken from there.”

“How *dare* you,” the Count said angrily.

Her father absent-mindedly waved a hand and a gag of blue runes appeared in the fae’s mouth, stuffing it shut.

“Your ritual is prepared, before I forget,” he said. “Very good materials you’ve secured. Conversion rates for fae will be much higher than with human sacrifices.”

“That will be all, Lord Fasili,” Akua said, half-turning towards him.

“By your leave, Lady Diabolist,” the other Soninke bowed.

He cast an irritated glance at Papa before leaving, but there was no true heat there. Her father’s absolute lack of ambition in matters of authority made him the opposite of a rival and her known fondness for him meant he was too costly to retaliate against for a slight as minor as the one he’d been handed. No doubt an officer would be on the receiving end of Fasili’s irritation before the night was over. One of the drow, most likely. They found it difficult to take orders from a man, even if that man had given his allegiance to a woman, and Praesi highborn did not have much tolerance for insubordination.

“He seems a very reliable young man,” Papa said, watching him walk away.

*He would have you dead within an hour if given leave,* Akua thought. Her father had spent his entire adult life under the distant, if vicious, protection of Mother: he’d never had to develop the kind of nose for enmity that most powerful Praesi mages needed to survive. His judgement in these matters was... lacking. In most people Akua would have considered this a crippling flaw, but in truth she preferred him like this. Unaware of the dangers lurking around him, able to do what he loved without worry. She could keep him safe from the scavengers. Diabolist had made it very clear to her subjects that Dumisai of Aksum was not to be touched: feeding a scheming minor noble to a swarm of imps in full view of her court had made that point very thoroughly.

“He has his uses,” Akua conceded.

Papa nodded, already visibly bored with the avenue of conversation.

“With today’s lot you’ve almost two hundred of the lesser fae,” he said. “That should be enough for a Lesser Breach.”



The term was fairly technical, and few aside from Praesi mages would have known its meaning. Diabolism was, at its heart, a branch of magic concerned with the summoning, binding and contracting of devils. And demons, of course, though resorting lightly to such creatures was the path to fates worse than death. Her people had practiced this kind of sorcery since days predating the Miezan occupation and while it had originally been a means for a single practitioner to gain power or knowledge, under the Empire it had become developed as a tool of war. Dread Empress Triumphant – may she never return – was widely held as the greatest diabolist to ever live, above even the Dead King. She'd summoned and bound entire legions of devils, put demons at their head and her bindings had been so well-crafted they had held for centuries after her demise. To raise an entire hosts of devils, as she had, means other than summoning them one at a time had to be used: the amount of wasted time and power would otherwise be massive.

The method to get around this was called a Breach: a portal into one of the Hells would be opened, with a mass binding woven into it. Any devil crossing into Creation would be subject to said binding, allowing for a degree of control – though a much looser one than if the binding had been designed for a specific entity instead. Convention divided Breaches between the Lesser and the Greater. Akua herself had used a Lesser Breach at Liesse when deploying her army of devils until the mages of the Fifteenth shut it down, fuelling it with the lives of the Stygian slaves. A Lesser Breach was temporary and unstable by nature, impossible to maintain for long. A Greater Breach was a different matter entirely, and only one had occurred in all of Calernian history: the Dead King's ritual in Keter, which had opened a permanent and stable portal into one of the Hells. Little progress had been made since then in understanding exactly how the Greater Breach had been made, though Diabolist had come to understand some part of it.

"More fuel would be preferable, but I don't have the time to spare," Akua said. "I'll have to do with limited numbers and make second Breach when we've the fae for it."

"You'd get more meat for the expense if you went lower than the Thirtieth Hell," Papa pointed out. "As it is a seventh of that power goes into the Due."

"Foundling made it very clear during the Rebellion that a well-trained army will tear through anything lower than the Thirtieth, given time to prepare," Diabolist replied. "The Summer Court is in a league above what her forces were back then. If I want the devils to survive the first engagement, I can't use *chumaili* or *kichabwa*."

Her father hummed, mulling it over.

"Well, you won't get many *walin-falme* but you can be sure they won't die easy," he said.

The term meant *imperial guard*, in an archaic dialect of Mtethwa. The devils were old favourites of Tyrants seeking to invade Callow, preferred to more bestial breeds for their above average intelligence and ability to use forged armaments. They were also noted for their resistance to fire, though it was difficult to model how effective it would be against fae flame. Their leathery skin and deformed bat wings had many mages speculating Dread Emperor Sorcerous had used them as breeding stock to create the much larger winged monsters that were used to access higher levels of the Tower, and would allow them to answer fae flight on the battlefield. It was a shame, truly, that she would not get more than four hundred of them from the Lesser Breach. Their inaptitude for tactical thinking was perhaps their greatest weakness, and the reason they usually served under the command of the Black Knight of the era. Akua lacked such a commander however, which was why it had been so important to capture the high-ranked fae. The Lesser Breach could wait until the prisoners had been brought back to Liesse, but Diabolist intended to summon her officers tonight.

"The Count first," she said.

"For the best," Papa agreed. "He'll be the most exhausting."

The two of them strode into the ward keeping the Count of Golden Harvest contained, the thick and heavy magic washing over their skin. Her father flicked his wrist and the gag in the fae aristocrat's mouth dissolved.

"You court your doom, mortals," he said harshly. "My Queen will have vengeance for what happened today."

"There is a theory by a very clever man," Papa said, entirely ignoring the threat,, "that fae can die in truth."

"Your ignorance rivals only your arrogance, sorcerer," the Count sneered.

"Slitting your throat returns you to Arcadia, to be born again," her father continued. "But, ah, fae are made of power are they not?"

"We are Summer incarnate," the creature smiled. "You will all burn under the sun."

"Yes, power incarnate," the greying man said admiringly. "What happens, then, if this power is *used up*?"

"No mere insect can undo the workings of the Gods," the fae said.

"I do not believe," Diabolist said, "that we have been introduced."

The Count glanced at her with contempt.

"I know what you are, cursed one," he spat. "Defeat is carved into the bones of your kind."

"My name," she said, "is Akua Sahelian. I am a villain."

"The pale imitation of an ancient enemy," the fae mocked.

"Oh yes," Diabolist agreed softly. "That is exactly what I am. *The Enemy*, they call us in the West. I am the last of a line unbroken since time immemorial. My kind has usurped the mantle of gods, stolen secrets from beyond Creation and turned kingdoms into sea. I am Praesi of the old blood, fae. You should kneel in awe."

"You are the dying ember of a fire long gone," the Count sneered. "Soon to be put out by the might of Summer."

"You think you know *might*?" Akua laughed. "I will turn your blood to smoke. I will feed the horrors that crush your bones with the sound of your screams. The hearts of your children will raise my fortresses to the sky and make my ships sail on solid ground. You may have been godlings in your wretched home, but you've stepped down from that pedestal – and down here, we bleed the likes of you over altars. Your poor, misbegotten creature. You actually believe you have a chance."

Her Name pulsed beneath her skin even as her eyes turned cold.

"But you're in Creation now, Count. Here be monsters."

The Count smirked.

"Do you seek to frighten me, child? Summer does not know fear."

Akua slowly unsheathed her knife, resting the wickedly sharp edge on the side of the fae's throat. He looked into her eyes, undaunted. Diabolist smiled.

"No, not yet," she murmured. "But I will *teach* you."

---

*Gunslinger*

Welp!!

A small note, despite how much I despise Akua, I actually like her father. He seems like a chill dude.

*Letouriste*

Agree. too bad the guy will probably die soon: /

*BryceWilliam*

Cat is gonna kill the shit out of him, and I will relish Akua's anguish

*AVR*

Mmm. He seemed a relatively harmless duffer before, now he's shown to be near as much a sociopath as the rest of the Evil nobility.

The most interesting line there IMO was – “The pale imitation of an ancient enemy,” the fae mocked. – it does suggest the fae are on the side of the gods, confirming a less definite line earlier.

Also Cat's second thoughts about gathering power to herself seem to have been proven correct.

Anyway, typos.

for he night,  
for the night,

came form the  
came from the

openly amused..  
openly amused.

destroyed a riot of flame.  
destroyed in a riot of flame.

insoburdination.  
insubordination.

*Travis*

How so?

*stevenneiman*

“destroyed {in} a riot of flame. ”  
“tents her soldiers were setting up for [he->the] night”  
“they held one of the high-ranked nobles individually {in} each of them under three times three bindings, all interlocked and reinforcing each other.” alternatively, just

a comma would work

"I'll have to do with limited numbers and make {a} second Breach"

On the subject of the story, Dumi is like Masego. He might be smart enough that he could learn to survive in court, he just isn't interested in anything but the science of magic.

*jamesc9*

Replying to Travis, someone told Cat that she was centralising power, and unless she made a plan to wield it, there would be anarchy. There was anarchy.

*NerfContessa*

Kitten!! ^^

*Jonnnnz*

I kinda would have agreed if he hadn't so gleefully agreed to open a rift into hell. As it is, the question should be if he didn't orchestrate this. His wife/jailer/patron is replaced with his daughter/protector/patron, and now he gets to experiment with things that will kill a bunch of civilians. And he won't take any blame, because Akua is crazy. But would she be so crazy without his influence?

*danh3107*

What a shitshow, Cat has her work cut out for her when she gets back. Man do I hate Akua, but she is really fun to read.

See you next week erratic

*Nairne*

I really agree. I hate her but she makes it a profound type of hate. The type that will be missed when finally vanquished.

*Darkening*

Man, I don't like giving credit to Akua, but her speech to the fae at the end was pretty great. "You're in creation now Count. Here be monsters." I'm a sucker for a good villainous gloat. I can't wait for the collective "oh crap" when Cat gets back and starts beheading the folks that screwed things up for her back home.

*vietnamabc*

Let it never be said that Akua won't go full measure in Praesi old school of terror.

*nerfworld*

Welp

At least we now know who was screwing with Cat finances from earlier

The thieves guild must be under the command of that heroic thief

*Nairne*

I doubt it's "under the command" but she could be a member or partner.

*MagnaMalusLupus*

A few chapters before Catherine went into Acadia, she received a report that the Thieves Guild had a new king, as someone had stolen the crown; I would wager rubies to apples that the new king is the Thief. Because Cat can't catch a break.

*Nairne*

Could be. I seem to have missed it.

*Jago*

Or maybe Ratface and Robber emptied the treasury (that was already mostly empty) and robbed the governors.

*nipi*

Oh well. Cats always broke. Shes even got a close aspect of it to her name.

*Barthumphries*

And, side note to that, someday an enterprising group of heroes will chat with a new angel and learn exactly what happened. And then they will go on a mighty quest to recover and reforge that feather/sword which Cat Broke. And they'll actually recover two shards, but then they'll run into the quiet assassin that Cat paid to watch some other shards, and the assassin will go get Cat, and Warlord Cat, the Necromancer, Queen of Callow, Duchess of Moonlight Nights, Empress of Praes, will descend on that little band of heroes will all the might of everything that she has, then rescatter the pieces that were gathered.

Either that or some Praesi villains will start regathering the pieces.

[nextgidea](#)

Looks like it is once again going to be a three-way fight when Cat comes back!

There is a theory by a very clever man," Papa said, entirely ignoring the threat, "that fae can die in truth."  
– Pretty much sure it is the Warlock, and if Warlock knows it, there is a good chance Apprentice knows it. And if both Apprentice and First Mage knows it, I am predicting fae-killing maneuvers by power draining!

That also raises the question for me, when Cat killed Duke, was it perma-kill or will Duke be reborn when the cycle resets. If it perma-kill, and Cat is now permanently part of Winter Court, then the story could not go as usual. [It was said that Winter/Summer story ending is decided the moment their Kings are chosen] Maybe someone can correct me if I am wrong?

\*\*\*\*\*

Some typos:

Gold, men and mages -> Gold, men, and mages  
unded -> undead  
he night -> the night  
hum of power came form -> from  
amused.. -> Remove on period  
insoburdination -> insubordination  
To raise an entire hosts of devils -> an entire host of devils  
threat,, -> redundant comma

I think it is intentional to convey absent-minded style:  
"Your ritual is prepared, before I forget," he said. "Very good materials you've secured.  
If not consider:  
Before I forget, your ritual is prepared...

*nipi*

The duke will probably be reborn. Probably not as a duke tough. Remember the "as if it always were so" part of their bet. Cats stuck in the Winter court for the foreseeable future.

*Cpt. Obvious*

Up until now (and this is my second read through after the series was completed) I've believed that Fey dying outside Arcadia were dead as in permadead. Apparently that was wrong.

But that also makes it sound as if I was right in theorizing that Ranger makes a trip to Arcadia every time the winter court resets. And she does that to find the Fey she ripped an eye from.

So my theory is that every time the reset happens that eye disappear from the ring she set it in, and so she goes to collect it again. That would explain why Ranger is so hated by the winter court. And she must really like that ring...

Now to the question about the count of squalls or what he was called. I'm not sure he can be resurrected. At least not until Cat dies or in some way loses the Fey title. And if he's resurrected it certainly won't be as The Count. Remember that apparently he was the primary opposition to any King that try to avoid starting the war with the Summer court. But that title was bestowed on Cat, and though she's now of the Winter court she's not of Arcadia and won't be bound to their cycles of resetting. So even if that Fey is resurrected he won't be a threat to Cat or to the King's plans.

### *Hardcore Heathen*

Typos, in order of appearance:

>though forces had yet to deign test her walls  
This is probably gramatically correct, but the sentence just feels awkward and stumbling, which is not how you want the first sentence of your chapter to roll out.

>With fae hunting parties scouring the land coming from the west and the east  
Are fae hunting parties scouring the land that is approaching from the west and east, or are they scouring the land as they approach from the west and the east?

>those who did not immediately bow to the Queen of Summer were destroyed a riot of flame  
Destroyed [in] a riot of flame

>Since she'd publically sacrificed  
publicly

>tents her soldiers were setting up for he night  
[t]he night

>they held one of the high-ranked nobles individually each of them under three times three bindings,  
>they held one of the high-ranked nobles individually[,] each of them

>too well-practiced to be openly amused..  
too well-practiced to be openly amused. [removed extra period]

>She'd summoned and bound entire legions of devils, put demons at their head and her bindings had been so well-crafted they had held for centuries after her demise.  
>She'd summoned and bound entire legions of devils and put demons



at their head. Her bindings had been so well-crafted they had held for centuries after her demise. [The "Her bindings..." section of this sentence is, as-written, an independent clause, and needs to be combined with a proper comma + conjunction or separated into another sentence, as I've suggested here.]

>Which was rather unfortunate, since Diabolist still needed southern labour to finish her work in Liesse.

Interesting how her name in narrative went from Akua to Diabolist between paragraphs, there. This section is from her POV, so I wonder what prompted the switch in self-reference? I've noticed that Cat never thinks of herself as Squire, which is probably tied to her whole narrative arc about Named not actually mattering. But with Akua, it's more mixed, and I'm not sure how much of that is simply out of a desire to mix up the verbiage for referring to her and how much is significant self-reference.

*cookiehunter*

also i think he got a typo where it is stated that the council took over Liesse and it should be Laure

*jamesc9*

The Council is Cat's (former and future) administrative body. It can't have taken over Liesse, because that's full of Akua. Laure is the former capital, so if I was going to take something and work outwards, it's a potentially good pick.

*Nairne*

Oh, I guess no-one imagined how much shit Cat will have to get through to keep her dream.

*Barthumphries*

So nobody has commented that Akua has apparently switched Names. Instead of Heiress, she's now Diabolist. Did I miss something or is this new to this page?

*Nairne*

I believe it was a punchline at one of the interludes earlier in this book. It was about Aqua's thoughts on receiving the post of governor of Liesse and how powerful the wards on the walls are and what not.

[benthelynx](#)

After the battle of Liesse.

*George*

You missed something. The transition was foreshadowed previously then revealed in:  
<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/04/19/villainous-interlude-chiaroscuro/>

*Nicole Weaver*

Thank you! I missed that last line and your link really helped 💖

*Barthumphries*

Typos

though forces had yet to deign test her walls.  
change "to deign" to "deigned to"

were destroyed a riot of flame  
add "in" before "a"

Gold, men and mages had flowed to her  
add a comma after men

[lordcirce](#)

Happy birthday to me. And as a gift... I get to see Heiress "winning". Oh, excuse me, Diabolist.

Man, when this first started, I was expecting the whole "war with the fae" to be something minor. They invade, get driven back, and events move on. Instead, they are proving that Callow's destiny to be invaded over and over is embedded deeper than we might have thought. Arcadia embodies stories, and this seems to me like the world countering Cat's attempts to change Callow's story.

---

And, just like that, the Uncivil Wars are officially open! Given how even a last-moment demon summoning was enough to stall most of the legions for months, the lengths Malicia went through to delay this mess are understandable. Sahelians' divorce has been as ugly as it gets without openly confronting each other.

I honestly don't know, where will the Squire go first: to Liesse, where most of the fighting happens, to Laure, where her support and financial foundation has been gutted recently, or to Dormer, where her heart lies.

Also, how the hells is capturing a Summer fae easier than killing them?

*Morgenstern*

Uhm.. you seem to have misunderstood a sentence in this chapter or two... It was explicitly said that capturing them was much HARDER than killing them... o\_ô

---

Ah, I thought that sentence implied that the wards would have failed if they went for the kill. I read it again and I don't know where I took that from.

H.

Yep, between the Callow civil war, the Free Cities war that Black's dealing with, this Praesi civil war, and Callow broken \*again\* with the war against the fae, we now have enough wars for it to count. In fact, if this current one is Summer vs. Winter, then they have indeed all been civil wars.

*beleester*

Liesse or Dormer. She needs to both make peace with Summer, and kill or thwart Diabolist's plans. And those feed into each other – by stopping Summer from invading, she removes the fuel for Diabolist's summons. She does need to secure the rest of Callow and the Ruling Council, but the damage has already been done and there's no clear target for her to smash, so I'm not sure what she'd accomplish there.

Perhaps Dormer, then Liesse – cut off the Summer invasion, then race to Liesse to shut down Diabolist's plans. Gotta save the final boss for last.

Except Catherine has a six-month timer, and that implies that she won't be able to stop the invasion for quite some time.  
Hmm...

*Darkening*

Y'know, if a couple hundred low fae and 3 nobles are barely enough or an unstable temporary portal to hell, what the heck did the dead king sacrifice to make the greater breach in the days when sorcery was even less efficient than it is today?

---

Well, his sorcery is as efficient as it gets, since its efficiency of 9/10 is an absolute ceiling for singular casters, as stated by Akua in Chiaroscuro, as opposed to rituals being less efficient in general and hers specifically getting only 6/7 out of these lower fae sacrifices. Singular casters being more efficient is probably the reason as to why she's summoning "officers" herself.

*The Archdevil*

A whole country full of people, whom he then raised in undeath to invade said Hell.

*Nairne*

I believe it was mentioned somewhere that the Dead King masterfully used the power that goes to the Due as it is called (the so-called waste during a ritual), so it's probably that.

*beleester*

No, the Dead King couldn't avoid the waste, which is why his kingdom is sort of Mordor-ish. <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/04/19/villainous-interlude-chiaroscuro/>

"And while nine tenths of that energy was properly channelled in ritual, the remaining portion turned the city of Keter into a warped ruin of anomalous magical phenomenon. The problem of Keter's Due was that it limited what could be accomplished by ritual magic if you were in any way invested in where it took place. The larger and more powerful the ritual, the more dangerous the waste of power released."

*Morgenstern*

So. After this I am waiting to see what exactly the Dead King has done in all those years... to the Hells. The ones that Akua is now trying to access.... I'd be a bit disappointed, if that should not mean things going awfully wrong from a totally unexpected side, because she once again underestimated someone she should not and/or simply "forgot" / has a blind spot in certain places.

Besides Cat coming back with Winter at her back, of course. Aren't we all gonna enjoy seeing what's in the bag for those scumbags doing exactly what everyone feared they would the second no one is there to directly control them?

( Although I surely AM a bit disappointed in that specific regard – if Akua's point of view should be inherently true in the news she gets from all over Callow, that is – that Cat's troupe members that did stay behind seemingly did absolutely nothing to stop that freak show of Praesi trying to take over... =/ )

*Morgenstern*

Or, who knows, maybe the old Dread Empress everyone wishes to never return actually does rule over there and/or battle the Dead King for the crown over there ^^ ... maybe, tiny tiny maybe we will see bits and pieces of her rule return, if Akua sets them free? Probably too much to... [insert-word-of-choice] for, though. ^^

*Morgenstern*

Although it would be hilarious. It seems much more of a figure of speech, though. A legend built afterwards, but never true. Although, if legends CAN make things true in this world? Uhoh... I see some endgame baddie alright. ^^

### *The Archdevil*

I just remembered this. Back during the College war games, I believe during the 5-way melee, Cat heard either Robber or Pickler humming the Girl who climbed the Tower, and one of the verses keeps coming to mind. It was something about Shining on a Moonless Night. Which back then, none of us picked up on. But now, that line has a pretty clear meaning.

=====

It's actually about the opposite phase:

They say the third step is the cruelest  
Walk when the moon is at her clearest:  
Love ends with the kiss of the knife,  
Trust is the wager that takes your life

Drama incoming. I'm afraid to see just what has Cat missed (or, more probably, what ties she'll have to sever to keep climbing).

### *Burnsy*

So in no particular order, things Cat will need to unfuck/fuck up in a spectacular fashion after she gets back:

Rioting in Callow  
Chaos in her own army  
The goblin settlement  
Diabolist  
Diabolist's mercenary/trueblood army  
Diabolist's demon army  
The Summer Court  
The Queen of Summer  
Killian  
Thief  
The Thieves Guild  
The Assassins Guild

And Black and the Calamities are off in the middle of a threeway with the Tyrant and the White Knight.

And there's whatever schemes Malicia/Cordelia are cooking up that she'll inevitably get caught up in.

Gods Above and Below can this woman ever catch a break?

[nineran](#)

You know what they say about when you have one problem, you're in trouble, but when you have many, they solve each other?

*Dylan Tulllos*

"Today we set aside Good and Evil. There is only one sin, defeat. There is only one grace, victory." – The Black Knight, at the Field of Streges

"For whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." Galatians 6:7

If Heiress loses, then she's a traitor that deserves a slow and painful death. If she wins, then she needs no justification. This, in the end, is why the Praesi can never build anything that lasts. Whatever Black accomplished- whatever he told himself- the Praesi are trapped in the Story. Not just by the Gods, but by their own culture, their worship of strength above all else.

Heiress is wrecking everything Black built, shattering Callow's peace and endangering Malicia's grip on the Wasteland, and yet all will be forgiven if she wins. The Praesi love their power games so much that they'll accept an Empress who wrecked their Empire just as long as she succeeds in taking the Tower. Just as it is in Callow's nature to be grasped, it is in Praes's nature to grasp...and when Callow is in their hands, the only worthy target is their own rulers. They can't stop fighting for power, even when they could lose everything they've built.

For all of Black's cunning, his endless plots and schemes, his attempts to pit his brilliance and leadership against the culture of his own people, he was building on sand. And when a man builds on sand, his house may stand strong for a few years, or a decade, or even his own life. But in the end "the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it." (Matthew 7:27)

[Alex Straughan](#)

Only when dealing with the praes nobility.  
He's forever changed the way, Callow, Orcs, Goblins, and Commoners view the Empire.

*Barthumphries*

"The Praesi love their power games so much that they'll accept an Empress who wrecked their Empire just as long as she succeeds in taking the Tower."

It's more like, Trump just won the Presidency. I didn't vote for him, and our country is now doing worse as a result... but maybe if I go cosy up to him then he'll name me to some lucrative Cabinet position. The Praesi are pragmatic and

entirely willing to make the best of a bad situation. And, maybe, after I'm named to a Cabinet position, I'll get some good press for how I handle things and I can make a run for the Presidency in 3 years...

*Dylan Tullios*

Alex Straughan:

"It had been most amusing to see everything Squire had built over the last year collapse the moment she was gone, Diabolist had to admit. Upon hearing word of Squire's disappearance into Arcadia the Praesi among the Ruling Council had swiftly struck a deal with the Guild of Assassins and seized power in Laure before declaring martial law across Callow – a move greeted with widespread rioting in the cities.

Best of all, when the usurpers had first accessed the treasury they'd found absolutely nothing: the Guild of Thieves had already emptied it in full, and to add insult to injury taken a tithe of a tenth from every Imperial Governor's own funds. Callow had descended into utter anarchy and in the chaos Akua's own hands were freer than ever before."

Next time Catherine promises them that things will be different, Callowans will know what her promises are worth. The Praesi robbed the treasury, seized power, and right now their legionaries are putting down riots by cracking heads. The idea of a united Dread Empire, where Praesi and Callowans would be equals, is officially dead. In some ways, it's worse than it was before Catherine took over, because she promised Callowans that their new Ruling Council would protect them from Praesi exploitation. Now that the Ruling Council has completely failed in its duty, they won't be eager to trust them the second time around.

Black's greatest success seems to be the conversion of the orcs to Team Practical Evil. The goblins have dubious and unclear loyalties, and I'm not sure about how Praesi commoners feel. We haven't seen that much from their perspective. Also, I don't think the Legions are representative; as members of Black's personal fiefdom, they're much more likely to be loyal to their patron than random peasant farmers whose main concern is probably "plant the seeds, pray to the Dark Gods for rain". As several posters pointed out earlier, pre-literate societies tend to encourage a high level of disinterest in politics.

Callow, though, has most definitely not "forever changed" the way they view the Empire. Right after Catherine promised that things would be different, the Praesi backstabbed them,

confirming every historical Callowan belief about Praesi treachery. There are a whole lot of rioters in the streets right now, and they're not celebrating how happy they are to be part of the Empire, or talking about how much has changed. They're fighting against a Praesi occupation that proved for all time how dishonest and vicious the Dread Empire is. Good luck convincing them that they want to be good subjects of the Dread Empire now.

BartHumphries:

I agree about Praesi pragmatism, but it's important to remember that the support of the Praesi nobility is vital to maintaining or overthrowing the existing Tyrant. Malicia hasn't "won the Presidency", but she has backers who want her to win. They want seats in her Cabinet, or restored power to the nobility, and they're willing to undermine the stability and power of the Dread Empire for their personal benefit or the status of their class.

The main concern of the members of the Praesi ruling class is their own wealth, prestige, and power. Many of them are willing to see the Empire grow weaker, as long as they can grow stronger. Malicia has been a very "good" Dread Empress. Her partnership with Black led to the conquest of Callow, and her reign has seen the reform and improvement of the Legions of Terror. Praes is stronger under her rule than it has been for centuries, so it's not like a coup is necessary to restore the glory of the "old days". They've only conquered Callow twice, and one of those times was

If the nobility was willing to support her whole-heartedly, Heiress/Diabolist would not be in a position to threaten Malicia's rule. In this context, "winning the Presidency" has very little to do with popular support, and a great deal to do with having backers among the High Lords and Ladies. Heiress's supporters aren't removing a weak Empress from power; they're disrupting a strong Empress at a time when Praes faces a very real threat from a resurgent Procer. They're ultimately less concerned about the Dread Empire's success than they are with their own possibility of gaining a "Cabinet seat", or even a chance at the Tower itself.

These people aren't just accepting a bad situation and doing the best they can personally. They're creating a bad situation for Praes in the hopes that they can advance personally, even if it means endangering their grip on Callow or even opening the Dread Empire to outside invasion. Like the Proceran princes who happily plunged the Princedom into civil war, the ruling class of Praes ultimately views their game of thrones as more important than their nation's success.



*Dylan Tullos*

Edit to my earlier comment:

The Praesi didn't rob the treasury, the Guild of Thieves did. However, they did still take over the Ruling Council, declare martial law, and show all of Callow that the whole "voice in your own affairs" thing was just another Praesi lie.

*M*

Eh, I do not think it is so dire. Sure you can spin it as Callow being betrayed by Praes once again, but you can also spin it as those particular Praesi betraying Catherine directly, giving Cat an option to get her rulership back with full support from Callow and not separating from Praes.

*Barthumphries*

The important people will realize that, but the common people might not. And there's a lot of them. And quantity alone contributes at least something to quality.

*Alexander LeakingPen Hollins*

Heiress got a upgrade!

And... god damn.... that last paragraph... I never expected her to be capable of turning me on, but whooof.

*Unoriginal*

Well, now at least we know why you go by Alexander "LeakingPen" Hollings. \*Wiggles eyes brows\*.

=====

Was it the wickedly sharp edge of the paragraph or "I will teach you" comment?

*dalek955*

Hmm, clue as the what Heiress's Name feels like to her. It pulses, whereas Cat's howls or laughs and Black's turns implacably.

*nipi*

Hmm... Cat got a "winter" aspect and Heiress/Diabolist plans to open a portal to Hell. Anyone else think we might see Hell freeze over? At least partially.

*Dylan Tullos*

M, BartHumphries:

The "Reply" button isn't working right. It won't let me put my post directly under yours.

M:

Callow is under martial law, the people are rioting in the streets, the Praesi on the Council have usurped power from the Callowan members, and the treasury is empty. Oh, and the Summer Fae are invading. Sounds pretty dire to me.

The whole justification for the Ruling Council was that Callow would finally have a voice in its own government, and that Callowans and Praesi could live side by side as peaceful subjects of the Dread Empire. As soon as Catherine disappeared, the Praesi members seized control of the Council and declared martial law.

Callowans aren't interested in making nice distinctions between "good Praesi" and "bad Praesi". What they see is that the Praesi are treacherous snakes who can never be trusted not to seize power at the first opportunity. The only thing worse than refusing to make any concessions is making concessions and then betraying them, and that's exactly what the Praesi did.

Catherine made promises that she couldn't keep. She created a ruling Council, and it fell apart. She promised an end to martial law and direct Praesi rule, and now the country is back in the hands of the same Praesi nobles she promised to liberate it from. Clearly, she's powerless to effect real change, and even the Callowans who support Catherine can feel justified in rising up against the Praesi liars who betrayed Callow's brief hope of change.

BartHumphries:

The common people are fundamentally right. Praes did betray Callow, and Catherine and her allies within the Dread Empire weren't able to stop them. Whether their failure was caused by malice or simple weakness is irrelevant; they didn't uphold their part of the contract, and now the Praesi nobles are in charge again.

The thing about social contracts is that they're both very powerful and very hard to repair. The previous social contract was "Do as you're told or we'll crucify you". Obviously, this wasn't a popular contract, but it was simple and honest enough; the Praesi were evil monsters, and they acted like it. When Catherine came around, though, they started saying that they cared about Callow, that they wanted to give Callowans a chance to rise within the Dread Empire and have a real say in how their country was governed.

Malicia and Black revised the old contract, where the people of Callow were a conquered province under military occupation, and they tried to replace it with a new contract, where the people of Callow were a loyal province of the Empire with local autonomy and government in the hands of their own people. That new contract failed when the Praesi members of the Council seized control and declared martial law.

In this case, failing is much worse than not trying at all. As long as the Praesi were just foreign tyrants, it was possible for them to turn over a new leaf and try to persuade Callow that change was possible. Once they announced a change, then went back on it, it became much harder to sell the same story to Callow a second time. It's like a criminal promising to change his ways; the first time, people might believe him, but they're a lot less likely to buy his repentance if he goes back to crime as soon as he's out of jail.

---

In regards to perception of Praesi as liars the solution is quite obvious: kill the current Praesi stirring trouble and work with new, properly intimidated ones. Between Truebloods falling apart, Akua pulling together the rest of the forces they loaned her (for what, by the way? Political favors?) and the loyalists being the ones who enforced the martial law, a clearing of the house might be arranged.

In Praes, the Empress is preparing to finally crush High Lady Tasia, who is already in the desperately-summoning-demons stage. In Callow, meanwhile, Cat is in her right to remove the Loyalists in the ruling Council, and if asked, tell the Empress "I tried to include your supporters, they attempted a coup the second I turned away". The only Praesi with political influence in Callow will be the Diabolist, and the first stage of the plan always works, so let's hope that whatever ziggurat she's building will misfire noticeably, but not too devastatingly, so she can be made a scapegoat.

*Dylan Tullos*

--:

One of the underlying problems with the Praesi mindset is the belief that structural problems can be solved by killing people. It's like curing a plague by treating each individual victim, while ignoring the underlying causes and the method by which the plague spreads.

Praesi culture is the plague. Malicia and Catherine can kill one or ten or a hundred nobles, but their successors will have the same culture and belief system. It's not like no Tyrant has ever purged the nobility before, yet every time

the people who take over adopt the mindset of their predecessors. No matter how many times they're intimidated into behaving themselves, they'll always be on the lookout for a time when they can backstab their way to power.

As you point out, the Praesi nobles on the Ruling Council were "Loyalists", which means that they were willing to do as they were told as long as Malicia and Catherine seemed strong. The moment they showed weakness, the nobles pounced. Their behavior shows us that there are no true noble "Loyalists", just opportunists waiting for the right moment.

This is the start of the "Uncivil Wars" period. Based on that title, we have good reason to suspect that Malicia isn't just going to put down High Lady Tasia, that Catherine isn't going to smash Diabolist, and that things are going to get a whole lot worse. But even if they didn't get worse now, even if Malicia and Catherine were able to restore order, it wouldn't matter. Praesi backstabbing and nastiness are based upon centuries of ingrained tradition, while their current practicality and reasonable behavior are based on Malicia and Black making them behave.

Malicia will die. Black will die. Catherine will die. No one can rule the Dread Empire forever. A long time ago, Bard told the Lone Swordsman that Praes's current practicality was a short-lived thing, a brief instant in a long history of impractical cruelty, greed, and arrogance. While Malicia and Black focused on institutions, the underlying culture remained the same, unaffected by their reforms.

Maybe Black is right to think that he can fight the Story, that he can defeat the Narrative, but he can't fight against the hearts and minds of his own people. In a society where common soldiers sing "The Girl Who Climbed the Tower", where every man and woman can dream of ascending through murder and treachery, there can be no lasting peace. There is no Imperial dynasty, no rule of law, only an long line of Tyrants who murdered their way to the throne before being murdered themselves. Even if they had no other reason to rebel, Callow would be better off leaving just so they wouldn't get caught in the middle of Praes's endless civil wars.

Callow knows this. Malicia may be willing to make promises, but her successor won't keep them. Her governmental reforms will die with her, and Callow will be back under the boot of a Tyrant who will view them as a conquered province to be looted, a subjugated people to be terrorized into compliance. If they revolt soon, when Praes is in the middle of the Uncivil Wars, they'll have a chance to win and keep their independence. If they wait too long, they could spend

generations living under Malicia's successors, who are very unlikely to be as practical as their current Dread Empress.

*draxsiss*

its interesting, I could see the Dead King declaring war on Akum, Just becuase he is activly engaging in a war with demons he might see her as a "problem to nip" (although my personal side theory is he had a similar offer to Cat to be the unknown savoir as a bonus name or something when he decided to just solely go after demons) Things are shaping up great I look forward to the next chapter.

[nineran](#)

I think I've missed something.

Cat's aspects were: Learn (she mentioned she didn't learn languages as quickly anymore), Struggle, and something that she never knew that got cut away but the spot for that Aspect returned when she did the Angel quest.

Was that a complete refresh? Originally I thought Take was this new third aspect, but it appears that it is instead replacing Learn. What happened to Struggle?

Cat's aspects NOW are: Take (currently using Rise), Break (? it's formatted like an aspect, and there were 'consequences' to breaking the Penitent's Sword, and the Duke's globe), and Winter's-Duchess-of-Moonless-Night.

BUT she tells the prince of nightfall: "I'm just a wet-behind the ears Named with a single aspect." Cat lies, but Cat doesn't usually lie without the narrative around the speech indicating a lie... so what am I missing?

=====

No, her Name was completely reset upon being returned from Chider. She lost Learn and Struggle (Seek was cut away back when the demon got to it), but since she was just as immerced into her Role as before, she restored two aspects in a matter of days.

Take is a replacement for Struggle, only instead of coming from an established tendency to get into uphill fights it stems from an established tendency to win uphill fights, and instead of activating once per day it can be used three times.

She lies about Break because it's her secret weapon, and pulling a trump card so early in a story would mean it will not have as big an impact later.

*Author Unknown*

Great chapter.

How much time has passed in Creation while Cat has been away? It's going to be really interesting to see people scramble to prove their loyalty when Cat comes back and they find out she is even more bad ass than before.

*Dylan Tullos*

By definition, "loyalty" is something you have when there isn't a sword to your throat. The main lesson Catherine is probably going to take away from this is that you can trust a Praesi noble just as long as the sword is at their throat, and not a moment longer.

*Shequi*

A Continuity Error:

Back in "Juncture", Akua's father was named as "Nioro of Aksum". In this he's "Dumisai of Aksum"

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2016/09/14/chapter-38-juncture/>

[TeK](#)

Diabolist is *truly* a best girl.

*burguulkodar*

Akua's growing on me. Would grow even more if instead of turning against the Tower or Callow, she would attack the good-aligned nations. You know, the important is that evil wins in the end. And infighting just lets good have an easier time.

[mafidufa](#)

Typo / continuity note I noticed on a reread – Akua has an offhand thought about Fasili possibly taking out his anger on an officer, probably a Drow. The description given doesn't seem to fit with how we later learn Drow to be like.

*Kai Wingless*

I noticed that as well! I figure this must've been before the Everdark got fleshed out. Seems the original concept for the Drow was probably closer to what they are in traditional d&d fantasy. I'm glad EE went with what they did though.

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## Villainous Interlude: Stormfront

*"The covenant of the hungry lasts as long as the meal."*

– Taghreb saying

Anaxares was having a tea party with monsters.

A civil one, he had to admit. The ridiculously large and opulent table – it was Ashuran pearwood, he was fairly sure, which meant it was worth a small castle – had been set on a platform in the morning, long before the Black Knight had actually arrived. There were jewels set into the surface of it that glinted the same no matter what light fell on them that he believed would be able to shoot out beams of energy if the Tyrant spoke the right incantation. At least the whole thing wasn't floating. The boy had suggested all of this should be happening with the platform a hundred feet up in the air, but Anaxares had flatly informed him he wasn't setting foot on anything that wasn't touching solid ground. After the usual round of inventive death threats, the Tyrant had conceded the point and instead had gargoyles place over all four corners. At least one of them was badly failing to pretend it was still inanimate. Anaxares had thrown a biscuit at it earlier, just to see what it would do.

Glare at his back when it thought he wasn't looking, apparently. Foolish creature, all Bellerophans knew you should always assume someone was looking at you. *The Kanenas See All, For Their Eyes Are The Eyes Of The Law And The Law Is Omniscient*, he added dutifully. Kairos had put on a version of the Helikean infantry armour that was made of pure gold, with pauldrons he suspected were actual real skulls. All three people at the table were politely pretending they could not hear the hissing angry ghosts bound inside said skulls. The Tyrant had tried to dress him up in silks but Anaxares had ignored the servants and instead continued to wear his old diplomat's robes, which he made a point of washing himself. They were beginning to look rather frayed, but accepting clothes from the boy would count as Taking A Bribe From A Foreign Despot. Him aside, the two villains sitting across each other were a study in contrasts. Studying Named as openly as he was always a dangerous business, but Anaxares was already a dead man. What was left to fear?

He'd expected the Black Knight to be some tall muscled Soninke, but the villain was short – shorter than the Tyrant, if not by much – and pale like a Callowan. He'd not believed that particular rumour to be true. Weren't the farmers on the side of Good? It was hard to tell what his build was under the plain plate he wore, but it was obvious that though he was no slab of muscle he was an athletic man. In opposition Kairos Theodosian was so thin he looked almost sickly. Like most people of the Free Cities the Tyrant was tan and dark of hair, that last part one of the few things the villains had in common. It was the eyes,

though, that set them apart the most. The murderous red eye of the Tyrant looked upon everything with warm poison while the pale green gaze of the Black Knight was cold, unmoving detachment. They were two different takes on an old breed, these villains, and though their faces were pleasant and smiling Anaxares could smell the violence wafting in the air like summer heat. The Praesi set down his cup on the saucer, Nicean porcelain clinking softly.

"That was the purest arsenic I've ever drunk," the Knight said. "My compliments to your alchemists."

There was a reason Anaxares had left his own cup untouched. Unlike these two he couldn't be expected to walk off a mouthful of poison.

"That's very kind of you," the Tyrant beamed. "We tortured the secrets of substance refinement out of a Taghreb exile a few decades back, so really it's all thanks to the Empire."

The two of them were still smiling. Anaxares would have shivered, if terror had any point to it.

"I see you've set your table with fire rubies," the Black Knight noted. "A nice touch. I might lose an eye if you triggered those without warning."

"Burn," the Tyrant suddenly barked, leaning forward.

A heartbeat of silence passed and nothing happened.

"You could have flinched, at least," the boy pouted.

The Black Knight smiled serenely, drinking another sip of poison.

"Shame the rest of the Calamities couldn't come," Kairos said, whimsically changing the subject.

"It would have been most impolite of me to enter your camp without some precautions," the green-eyed man said.

"Are you implying I would murder an ally in broad daylight for no good reason?" the Tyrant said, aghast.

"You would," Anaxares said.

"I could state it outright, if you'd prefer," the Black Knight kindly offered.

The crippled boy tried to drum his fingers on the table casually, but his hand was shaking so badly it looked more like he was thumping it. The ghosts bound to his armour screamed angrily, the sound strangely muted. The diplomat was beginning to find it soothing, to be honest. He felt too weary to scream in horror



himself but having someone else express the sentiment was gratifying.

"Don't," Kairos finally decided. "My most trusted advisor took the fun out of it."

Green eyes turned to study said advisor almost curiously, to the man's dismay.

"You are Bellerophon, correct?" the Knight asked.

"You already know the answer to that," Anaxares replied, picking up a biscuit.

He'd been assured those weren't poisoned, so he broke off a piece and scarfed it down.

"It's been a subject of debate as to why you are still alive," the pale-skinned man said, not denying it.

His eyes flicked at the Tyrant, who shrugged.

"Haven't done a thing," Kairos said.

It was actually hard to tell when the Tyrant was lying, in Anaxares' opinion. He did so frequently and about matters both mundane and important without rhyme or reason, which meant establishing a baseline for truth and lies was difficult.

"Thinking too much about why is the curse of unenlightened peoples," the diplomat asserted. "Peerless Bellerophon Is Always Correct For The People Cannot Be Wrong, May They Reign Forever."

"I love it when he does that," the Tyrant said. "It's like they're whispering sweet propaganda straight into my ear."

"Bellerophon does have a surprisingly effective indoctrination apparatus," the Knight agreed.

Spoken like an Enemy Of The People, Anaxares thought with a frown.

"So why are you haunting my doorstep, Black Knight?" Kairos suddenly said.

There'd been no transition from pleasantries to business, no hint or warning. The Bellerophon had seen him do this many a time now, with almost everyone he spoke to. He was not sure whether the quicksilver change was meant to unsettle whoever he dealt with and gain him an advantage or if the Tyrant was genuinely that unstable. It might, he suspected, be both.

"We meant to speak with you in Delos, but events conspired against it," the other villain replied.

As a career diplomat, Anaxares could admire how well-crafted that sentence had been. The use of the word conspiracy would imply fault, while on surface absolving responsibility – a counterpart already on the defensive would feel bound to offer explanation. A shame that tactics like those were worthless against the Tyrant. The boy, after all, was mad.

"Your play there spoiled my amusement," Kairos complained. "I was a sennight away from making a dragon from the bones of their fallen. I was going to crash it into the citadel and demand their surrender."

"You would have been repulsed," the Knight said, and it was spoken like a fact.

Considering every assault by Helike on Delos had met that exact fate, Anaxares believed him to be entirely correct.

"That's the problem with Praesi, these days," the Tyrant replied with an unpleasant smile. "You worry too much about things like victory and defeat."

"No worry would have been necessary on your part," the pale man said. "Victory would have been yours if your host had assaulted the walls instead of retreating."

"And how *boring* that would have been," Kairos said. "I take no hand outs from the Tower, Carrion Lord."

"We have enemies in common," the Knight calmly pointed out. "Dismissing the possibility of common striving against them is counterproductive."

Kairos cackled.

"You don't have a pattern of three against the White Knight, do you?" he said.

The Praesi's face was blank, a wax mask without expression. Then, slowly, his brow creased.

"Neither do you," he said.

"Someone's hourglass is running out," the Tyrant grinned, sing-songing the words as his red eye pulsed. "Regretting taking that apprentice, are we?"

"My decision has never been more justified," the man disagreed serenely.

"*Spineless*," Kairos stated with thick contempt. "You lack rage, Black Knight. If you were any more resigned to your fate you'd be licking the boots of the Heavens."

The Knight did not seem particularly offended by the insults. He did not seem, Anaxares, as the kind of man who could easily be offended. It would have been most unpleasant to negotiate with him.

"There is a difference between acknowledging the possibility of failure and embracing the outcome," the Praesi said.

"That you even accept the chance of defeat is disgusting, if you'll forgive my language, much less that you plan for it," the Tyrant hissed. "You are a *villain*. We do not go gently into the night."

"There are graveyards full of men who thought the same," the Knight replied. "They died having accomplished nothing."

"You're scribbling on sand and calling it a legacy," Kairos mocked. "Nothing that happens before or after you matters – only the decisions you make *now*. And those I see you make? I find lacking."

"Means are irrelevant," the Black Knight coldly said. "Results dictate all else."

"I despise you and everything you stand for from the bottom of my heart," the Tyrant enthused. "Shall we work together?"

Anaxares quietly choked on the biscuit he'd been nibbling at, entirely ignored by the other two.

"That would be best," the green-eyed man acknowledged. "The Empire is not interested in direct intervention. Resolution by local actors is preferable in Her Dread Majesty's eyes."

"What you actually want is for Procer to lose their pretext to go a'crusading," Kairos laughed. "So what's the plan, my dearest friend? Peace with Nicae?"

"Cessations of hostilities between League constituents would allow you to turn your attention elsewhere," the Black Knight replied. "There are no real gains left for you to make."

"And just by coincidence, that 'elsewhere' happens to be eyeing your borders," the Tyrant mused.

"Aligned interests are not the same as subordination," the other villain said.

"Not all that far, though," Kairos said. "Regardless, Nicae's not interested in peace right now. They're growing too fat on Proceran silver and soldiers."

"Stripping them of that fat would make them reconsider their position," the Knight said.

"One last battle, eh?" the Tyrant laughed. "That could be interesting. But they've so many heroes, my dear friend. I'm terrified of what those could do to me. I'm only one boy, after all."

Kairos had not even attempted a token effort to make that lie sound plausible, the diplomat noted.

"We intend to engage the White Knight and his companions again," the pale man said.

"I feel safer already," the Tyrant grinned toothily. "It's so nice, having friends."

The Black Knight nodded, unmoved.

"Scribe will be in contact with you shortly," he said, rising to his feet.

The boy waved away the notion, unconcerned. He waited until the Praesi was at the edge of the platform.

"Black?" he called out.

The man glanced back.

"I'm going to betray you, you know," the Tyrant promised.

The thing that looked back at the boy then was not a person Named or not. Humanity had slid off that face like water off a clay mask, leaving behind absolutely nothing – the thing behind those eyes was coldly taking their measure, calculating the span of their usefulness and the death that would follow it. Carrion Lord, they called him, and the diplomat finally understood why. Why this... thing could cow the third of a continent.

"You will try," the Black Knight replied. "They always do."

—

The diplomat had expected them to leave after the other villain exited the camp, but they remained at the table. Kairos was still drinking his tea, exaggeratedly holding up his little finger so it never touched the cup.

"What are we waiting for?" Anaxares finally asked.

It was the crown of noon, and staying in the sun this long always gave him a headache.

"The counteroffer," the Tyrant said.

The sound of the teapot's lid being raised drew his attention a moment later. There was a woman leaning over it, from the Free

Cities by the looks of her. Long and curly dark hair, curvy under her leathers that he could smell reeked of spirits even from where he was seated. The stranger had a silvery flask in hand and was pouring what looked like Proceran brandy inside the teapot – she didn't stop until it started spilling over, only then pouring herself a cup of 'tea'. Nine tenths of that had to be liquor, he thought. And it was probably still lethal to drink, not that it stopped her from gulping down her her cup and messily wiping her lips with her sleeve.

"I don't know where you get your arsenic, Kairos, but it's the good stuff," she said. "You can really taste the almonds."

"Anaxares, this is Aoede the Wandering Bard," the Tyrant smiled fondly. "She's here to manipulate me like she did near Delos."

"You're a heroine," the diplomat said, face creasing in surprise.

"I'm starving is what I am," the Bard complained. "Hand me a biscuit, would you?"

Anaxares did, too baffled to object.

"Did you have fun with the Big Guy?" Aoede asked with her mouth full.

"You were right," Kairos said. "I want to kill him *so very much*."

"Yeah, he doesn't really play your kind of game," the Bard said. "Who's this charming fellow, by the way?"

She was pointing the remnant of his biscuit at him like a wand, hand wavering as she poured herself another cup of of tea-flavoured liquor.

"This is Anaxares, my most trusted advisor," Kairos grinned. "I abducted him. He's not very happy about it."

The dark-haired woman squinted at him, slurping her cup loudly. For a moment Anaxares could have sworn she was entirely sober and studying him with a piercing gaze, but then she choked on the liquor and the moment was gone. She thumped her own chest until she stopped coughing, spilling biscuit crumbs everywhere.

"You're a class act, Tyrant," she said admiringly, still breathless. "Haven't seen anything that brazen since Traitorous."

"Flatterer," Kairos replied. "Now, speak treachery to me Aoede. Treachery most foul."

"Right," the Bard said, putting her cup down and leaning against the table. "So obviously I'm trying to trick you to your death here."

"As is only right and proper," the Tyrant agreed.

"So here's something for you to consider," she continued. "You should off a Calamity."

"Or not," Anaxares suggested mildly. "We could, in fact, not do this."

"Tell me more," Kairos ordered.

"So your grand plan, it's not really a plan," the Bard said. "It's a juggler's philosophy."

"I've no idea what you could possibly mean," the Tyrant smiled.

"First step always works, so always have a first step going," Aoede said. "Now, a lesser soul would say all that will accomplish is destroy more and more of Creation until it all collapses on your head because you missed a beat."

"The part that matters is the dance," Kairos smiled. "Not the bow at the end."

"And I applaud that, I really do. Here's the thing, though," the Bard said. "You're running out of enemies, Kairos Theodosian."

"I can make more," the Tyrant pointed out.

"Lesser ones," Aoede shrugged. "Not a lot of heroes running around at the moment and you've already slapped around most of the League. You need to expand your roster, my friend."

She added an exaggerated wink after calling him that, to the Tyrant's visible delight.

"So I backstab Praes, if you'll forgive my language," he mused. "Alas, killing a Calamity also helps the horse you have in this race."

"You don't need to wield the knife yourself," the Bard said. "Use my heroes against them, just blatantly enough the Big Guy knows what you did."

"It is lesser treachery that you peddle, then," Kairos replied, tone disappointed.

"That's where you're wrong," the dark-haired woman slurred. "Point isn't to make the Calamity die, it's to *make an enemy of Black*. He loves them like family, you know. You need to hurt him at least that deep if you want him not to let go of the grudge. Anything less and the moment he's back in Praes you drop off the stage."

"This plan involves making an enemy of one of the most dangerous men on this continent for no tangible gain," Anaxares said. "It is not a good plan."

"Don't be foolish, advisor," Kairos said. "Making an enemy of one of the most dangerous men on this continent is the *point* of the plan, not a side-effect."

"And to think you said I was bringing lesser treachery to the table," the Bard said shaking her head. "I'm wounded, Kairos."

"I'm deeply sorry," the Tyrant said. "As an apology, let me offer you this: *nocere*."

The jewels on the table immediately lit up and shot half a dozen beams of scorching red light at the Wandering Bard, who disappeared into thin air before a single one of them made contact. There was a long moment of silence.

"She's playing you," Anaxares pointed out, aware it was blindingly obvious but believing the boy could use a reminder.

"Oh yes," the Tyrant smiled, and his eye pulsed red. "Just imagine the kind of enemy she'll make, when I betray her too."

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### [erraticerrata](#)

We're on the new update schedule, which means updates both Monday and Wednesday now. First update of the month, so extra chapter night. This one is titled "Raid" and is from the POV of Robber, set while Catherine is still in Arcadia. It's in the Extra Chapters tab, but link as usual: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/07/03/raid/>

*Naeddyr*

Hurray!

Great two chapters so far.

*dusting*

Oho, so you guys actually do more than once a week.

I do apologize for this rudeness but i have never bothered to look further into you than reading this story, so i have no knowledge of how to address you and your team.

I do hope you can forgive this slight.

Now to the all important part.

How much money do i have to throw at you to make it three times

a week?  
If at all possible, which i sincerely hope.  
Mfg Dusting.

[erraticerrata](#)

There's a Patreon goal for three updates a week. I'd mean I could write full time, too, which I'd quite enjoy.

*Letouriste*

Yay!!! Can't wait the day you can make this kind of writing full time;) Sadly I can't help for now, I badly lack money:(

*Fulmi*

They're all as mad as a hatter and i love them all

*Bubba HoTep*

I really hope Anaxares survives. Doublethink spouting Homo Soveticus are my kind of people

*Petya*

The Free Soviet People Are Deeply Offended By Your Blatant Lies, Poor Fool, Sick With The Plague Of Capitalism.

[MrPicklesAndTea](#)

I'm trying to remind myself that the topic here is doublethink because I'm having an apprentice moment where I want to tell you that you just called this guy poor, but sick with capitalism.

*Paxton Johnson*

i mean, capitalism is the cause of poverty and income inequality

o v c d e r ^

2 updates per week? Wow i never knew i needed this so much in my life :^)

*1shot4living*

I second that, best surprise I've had all year.

*Anna*

I'm screaming with delight!

*Renasma*



I might cry happy tears. You're my favourite thing im reading right now and more updates will be awesome

*vietnamabc*

Come on Akua, make a proposal stat, he is rightly your type of man.

Also not cool Bard, collaborating with Evil like that wouldn't endear yourself to other Heroes. From "Raid" I expect Thief wouldn't mind giving Bard a smackdown.

---

Yeah, in Lone Swordsman's band she was far more subtle. Then again, she was the one who told William that putting Ophon in the charge of defense was a good idea, and baited Exiled Prince into Squire's crossbow range (admittedly to avoid him being corrupted along with the rest of Silver Spears).

*The quietist*

Shit I hadn't even clocked those particular manipulations...

*Letouriste*

I think she tried to give him a chance to win. Cat was not strong at that time so he could succeed if he was less careless

*stevenneiman*

Hadn't realized that avoiding him getting corrupted might have been the reason why she had the Prince killed. That makes a lot more sense now.

*JackbeThimble*

I don't buy that that's the reason why she wanted the Prince dead (or even necessarily that she did). The bard is pretty consistent about always backing the classic evil against the practical evil. Everything we've seen of her indicates that she would have considered the collateral damage from a corrupted Exiled Prince acceptable if it made a bigger headache for Squire, Black and the Empress. Especially since the most likely result of that would be heiress enslaving all of the Silver Spears and the Exiled Prince.

*Cpt. Obvious*

The Wandering Bard loves her stories, and the Practical Evil gang threatens those stories. With Villains starting to adlib it gets harder to know what people will be doing next.

*Jonnnnz*

So, the smart villains are building stories for themselves to reflect successes of legends, the Tyrant as Traitorous who eventually killed himself as the ultimate betrayal, and Heiress as the Dead King who conquered a hell. Do they really not see how this will end? The Tyrant dead, Heiress in hell for eternity, both by their own hand? Villains of legend lost even as they won (excluding perhaps Triumphant, who may have won even as she lost)?

*Dylan Tullos*

The Tyrant wants to burn bright. If he dies early, he's already lived longer than he expected to. For him, "winning" is a journey, not a destination, and he'd rather cackle and hatch mad plots for two years than do steady, boring work for twenty. Kairos is the anti-Black; he sees how things are going to end, and he welcomes it.

Heiress would probably be quite happy ruling a Hell for eternity like the Dead King. I see him as one of the great winners, a villain so successful that he established himself as an immortal ruler of the underworld. I wouldn't call him a "loser".

Triumphant seems to have something of the Tyrant's mindset. She conquered an entire continent, but she made so many enemies and inspired so much fear that half of the world united to bring her down. She "won" in the sense that she became a legend, but her strategy is closer to Kairos than Black. Though she seems to have been practical and highly successful as a conqueror, her methods of rule ensured endless rebellion, and she made Praes so terrifying that traditionally neutral powers intervened to help Calernia defeat the Dread Empire.

*JackbeThimble*

And Black modeling himself on Terribilis II

---

Seriously, since when is Bard so bold? I thought that stuff like the same personality being behind all her faces ("Haven't seen anything that brazen since Traitorous.") or her advice never doing anyone good ("So obviously I'm trying to trick you to your death here") was more obscure Name lore. How broadly is stuff like the pattern of three and first step of the plan really known?

*maresther23*

Bard OP pls nerf

*RandomFan*

She's so bold when it works out, of course. The Bard knows the script, and she knows the ones that end in her favor. There's only so much deck-stacking she can manage, but there's a lot she can pull off.

Trying to use cunning ends poorly on the Tyrant, trying to use blatant truths that happen to play her as close to a villain as she can is incredibly effective.

Pattern of three is standard name lore for people who actually have mentors, experience, or been looking into it- Black's trying and/or tried to have Squire manage achievements in ignorance, otherwise even she would have known it, I suspect. Same with first step of the plan, though that might not actually be *\*true\**.

Her advice never doing anyone good (citation, please? there are a few times she seems to give good advice?) and the same personality being behind all her faces is probably obscure named lore, but revealing all the ways that this Bard is not good is a great tactic to bring to dealing with him. He is on the Side of Evil, not victory. He doesn't mind losing. He doesn't mind it at all. If the heroes have to play dirty to take him out, that's a greater victory than a true triumph.

*stevenneiman*

One small correction: Even Cat knew about the Pattern of Three. The thing she was never told about was how fast she was supposed to grow, which she is still reaping the benefits of being ignorant of.

*RandomFan*

Cat didn't learn about it until accidentally getting herself into at least one, though. If Black had been less of a sink-or-swim mentor, she'd have found out sooner.

*JackbeThimble*

Examples of Bard giving bad advice:

1. Telling the Exiled Prince to challenge Cat to single combat leads directly to him getting killed and the Silver Spears getting routed at Three Hills
2. Telling William to put the unsullied commander in charge of the defense in Liesse leads to the defense collapsing when he's killed by Heiress' ritual
3. Telling William to summon the angel almost leads to Heiress capturing it and actually leads to Cat surviving her pattern of three.

If there are counter-examples please mention them, I can't think of any.

*stevenneiman*

Kairos' character is based on the idea that he already knows everything he would need to know to come to sensible conclusions and make workable plans, then he doesn't because he's crazy and he wants to make a mess of things more than win. I would assume that he would already know about what the Bard is, and would be more prone to going along with the Bard's suggestions (at least partway) because he was entertained by her honesty in manipulating him.

And the Patters of Three have their power BECAUSE everyone knows about them.

*Gunslinger*

Wohoo, two chapters a week!! Loved both of them, but I loved how brazenly crazy the Tyrant is. He's essentially a walking fuck you to all of creation.

*mavant*

For years I've claimed I would not wirehead given the chance, but here I am wishing I could have this on an IV drip forever.

*Captain Amazing*

This is, genuinely, one of the most impressive chapters I have ever read. The Bard showing up without immediately saying it was her, Anaxares' simply amazing one-liners, the little details that set the scene: I had to stop multiple times because I broke out in hysterics. Well done.

*darkening*

With all the build up about anaraxes still being alive, I'm expecting something amazing

[knockoffnikolai](#)

A message from the future: YOU WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED

*Letouriste*

That tyrant...you can't hate him^^

He is way too playful for that.he has something really grand about him.

Even if he betray you,you can't even be angry at him...how unfair is this?

*stevenneiman*

I feel like he's supposed to be somewhere between Dread Emperor Traitorous and Dread Empress Triumphant, may she never return.

*stevenneiman*

"the Tyrant had conceded the point and instead had gargoyles [place->placed] over all four corners."

"not that it stopped her from gulping down [her] her cup"

*Aotrs Commander*

My frack. I think the Tyrant must be reaing the Evil Overlord's Handbook to \*specfically do the opposite.\*

I can only tip my hat to his gumption. I mean, he's going to die horribly and rightly so, but it should be fun to watch.

(Maybe not so much if he actually kills a Calamity, though; I like tose guys and girls....)

*burguulkodar*

I like the kid, but he's a bit off even my range of evilness here. I don't know, betraying everyone that's around you doesn't seem practical

*mr\_squiggle*

I think you're mixing up arsenic (some compounds smell of garlic) and cyanide (can smell of bitter almonds).

*jflb96*

Apparently you have to have the right genes to get the cyanide/almonds link. It's something like 20-25% of the population, I think, that or it's 75-80%.

Either way, I can confirm that powdered cyanide didn't smell all that much of marzipan when I was working with it, though that might've just been everything else in the mix.

*jflb96*

I'm glad that someone said this, so that I don't have to.

Apparently it's a genetic thing to have cyanide smell like almonds, though I can't remember whether it's 20-25% with or without the right genes. Either way, I think I'm in the without group, as I don't remember any particular scent of marzipan.

*zafyrusowo*

I'm starting to really love the Tyrant, he's such a intentionally irrational character, and Anaraxes' replies are always amusing as well

*Fewl*

Those Who Succumb To The Temptations Of Capitalism Shall Only Ever Be The Most Impoverished Of Us All, Until They See The Truth Of The Will Of The People.

[vuthuha912](#)

Very cute the meeting between Tyrant and Black. Two shorties discussing murder and ideology.  $\geq v \leq$

*Onos*

So I dunno if anyone has pointed this out already EE, but arsenic ain't almondy (that's cyanide) but can occasionally be slightly garlicky.

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## Chapter 16: Shambles

*"See, this is exactly the kind of trouble I'd be avoiding by mind controlling the entire world. You fools are making my point for me, can't you see?"*

– Dread Emperor Imperious, shortly before being torn apart by an Ater mob

"That's not the good news face," I said.

There were only three of us in the war room: Juniper, Ratface and myself. We'd have a real staff meeting later today or tomorrow, but for now I'd kept the people to a minimum. When the whole family was at the table discussions tended to take longer, and for now what I wanted was a solid notion of what had happened in Callow while I was gone. And, to my unpleasant surprise, I'd been gone quite a bit longer than I'd thought: three months as of the morning I woke up. Considering Summer had already been probing the borders when I'd left and being well aware that Heiress was going to go full bastard the moment I disappeared, I was not expecting a basket of flowers. Yet the sheer dourness on the Hellhound's face gave me pause. I glanced at Ratface – he wasn't looking any happier. Well, at least it was unlikely to be worse than having my heart stolen by an angry Winter god. Weeping Heavens, let it not be worse than having my heart stolen by an

angry Winter god. I firmly believed that was not too high of a bar to set for this conversation, but already I was getting the beginnings of a headache.

"Everything's fucked," Ratface flatly contributed.

"Fucked *how*," I prompted. "That's the important part."

"Military affairs first," Juniper said. "We are at war on at least two fronts, possibly up to five."

I missed the days when two mortal enemies had been the upper limit, not the starting point.

"Summer," I counted out. "Heiress?"

"Diabolist," Ratface corrected grimly.

"She transitioned?" I said. "Shit. I had my money on her aiming for Dread Empress off the bat."

"You weren't the only one," my Supply Tribune said. "Everybody's wondering what her game is, right now."

"A lot of people dying, if I had to venture I guess," I grunted. "All right, Juniper, lay it on me. Summer. What are we dealing with?"

"We don't have hard numbers," the Hellhound replied. "Trying to scry them lost two mages their eyesight."

The dream I'd had before waking up in Creation was still fresh in my mind – it didn't feel like a memory, something that would fade in time or become less vivid. A Name dream was the closest equivalent I could come up with, and even those didn't feel quite as... tangible, afterwards. Considering some of the things I'd seen Summer do in that sequence, I wasn't all that surprised scrying them was dangerous. It must have been like staring straight into the sun.

"But you have guesses," I said.

She nodded, and tapped her thick fingers against the map spread across the table to get my attention. There were two red stones set in southern Callow: one on Dormer, the other on Holden. Considering those two were the closest Callowan cities to the Waning Woods, why they were marked as Summer strongholds needed no explanation.

"We've received intelligence from General Sacker that was collected from refugees of both cities," Juniper gravelled. "One of them was former Royal Guard, so we can put more stock in her assessment of force numbers. At least five thousand both times, and we're fairly sure it wasn't the same army."

Ten thousand godsdamned fairies. No wonder she'd looked like someone had shot Aisha, earlier. Even the few hundred lesser fae we'd had to contain in Marchford had inflicted rough losses on the Fifteenth, and unlike those poor expendable bastards Summer would have titled fae leading their hosts.

"Have they moved since taking the cities?" I asked.

"No," my general said. "Not on any large scale, anyway. They're sending raiding parties but nearly all of them are headed towards our second problem."

The orc did not need to point at the black stone set over Liesse for me to know what she was talking about.

"She shouldn't have any forces to speak of," I said. "I had the Ruling Council strike down her right to anything but a city guard."

And her own personal retinue, a privilege granted to Praesi highborn that not even I could touch. Given her high birth the number allowed was not negligible – a thousand men – but still very far from an army.

"She doesn't care about the Council anymore," Ratface said. "No one does, Cat. But we'll talk about that mess later."

A trickle of the fury that went through me at those words must have shown on my face, because when the dark-eyed Taghreb looked at me he paled. I took a long breath, calming myself. It did not escape my notice that the temperature in the war room had significantly cooled. *Joy, another power that'll start backfiring if I don't learn how it works, I thought. Just what I needed.*

"She's hired mercenaries," Juniper said. "Levantines, Helikeans and allegedly some drow."

"The last bunch she hired was wiped out to the last man," I frowned. "By us, even."

"She scraped the bottom of the barrel in Mercantis," Ratface said. "But over half her people are from the Wasteland and those will be reliable. She's pretty much taken over the Truebloods."

"And her mother's done nothing about this?" I said, surprised.

"Her mother is fighting her own war in Wolof," the tanned man replied. "Against a nephew trying to overthrow her and the Legions trying to contain the angry beehive the city turned into."

"The Empress intervened," I said.



"With a light touch," Juniper grunted. "But she can't allow the kind of summons they're throwing at each other to spill out into the Wasteland. There's reports of a demon being used."

I didn't ask what kind – *any* kind was bad enough. That meant no reinforcements from Praes, which was as much a relief as it was a problem. We'd be on our own for this.

"Praesi," I said. "So, household troops and mages?"

"A lot of mages," Ratface said. "And with Liesse currently packed with refugees, I don't need to tell you how bad that could get."

"If she so much as sacrifices a single man she's rebelling," I coldly said.

"She's already rebelling, Foundling," Juniper said. "She's been summoning devils to pit against the fae – your Council made laws against that. And you don't assemble an illegal army of ten thousand if you intend to return to the fold afterwards."

"She's reached her end game, then," I muttered. "Fuck. It's always trouble to fight Praesi when they're cornered. Everybody knows that."

There was no longer any debate about whether or not Heiress – no, Diabolist, I needed to remember that – was ending up on the chopping block by the end of this. She'd given me an excuse to see her head on a pike and she knew I would not allow it to pass me by. Which meant that, by the end of her play she intended to be beyond any sanctions I could inflict. Was she trying to carve out her own kingdom in southern Callow? That would be building on sand, she was hated there.

"All right," I finally said, still digesting the news. "Those two are covered. Now what's the rest?"

Juniper glanced at Ratface, who shrugged then cleared his throat.

"Duchess Kegan has put the Duchy of Daoine on war footing," he said. "She's mobilizing both her army and the Watch, and she's refused to explain why."

"Oh *come on*," I barked. "I already conceded Council authority doesn't extend to Daoine. What the Hells more does she think she's going to get by rebelling?"

"We don't think she's rebelling, not since last week anyway," Juniper said. "She's imprisoned Praesi in the duchy but she hasn't killed them and she hasn't declared war on the Empire."

"Deoraithe don't declare war," I replied flatly. "You realize there's a one going on when you're neck deep in Watch."

"I said the same thing, but then Robber returned from the south," Ratface said.

"Special Tribune Robber," Juniper sternly corrected.

Considering how much grief she'd given me over promoting the goblin, I was more than a little amused she was now insisting on the proper address. It wasn't that she'd disagreed that Robber with a detached cohort would bleed Akua's forces in the south, the orc was well aware of what the vicious little bastard could do. But removing an 'insubordinate wretch' like him from the usual chain of command and the supervision it entailed had not sat well with her. She was Legion to the bone, though: now that he had the position she wouldn't let anyone dismiss the respect it was supposed to carry. Not even Robber himself, much as he tried.

"Yes, Special Tribune Robber," Ratface said, barely refraining from rolling his eyes.

He was going to be paying for that later, by the look on the Hellhound's face.

"He broke into Liesse with a tenth," the Supply Tribune continued. "And found out the Diabolist has Deoraithe stashed below the Ducal Palace, at the centre of some sort of array."

I raised an eyebrow, reluctantly impressed.

"Her laboratory had to be a regular fortress," I said. "He managed to get through the wards?"

"Not exactly," Juniper growled.

"He ran into the Thief," Ratface said, eyeing me carefully.

"She was bound to turn up eventually," I sighed. "I'll get furious about her meddling when I can spare the time. So, captive Deoraithe and the Duchess mobilizing her troops. Might not be rebellion, then."

"We can't afford the risk that it is," Juniper said. "Marshal Ranker pulled the Twelfth Legion from Summerholm to reinforce her at Denier in case she needs to deny the crossing."

Ranker would be horribly outnumbered, I frowned. Eight thousand legionaries against what, a conservative estimate of twenty thousand at least a fourth of which was Watch? Ranker's Fourth Legion was heavy on the sappers, since the core of it had been raised from the tribe she'd once ruled over as Matron, but there was only so much preparation could do.

"Marshal Grem should be in charge," I said. "What has he been doing?"

"He deferred operational command," the Hellhound gravelled. "He's need in the Vales."

"Which brings us to our fourth problem," Ratface said. "The Principate is moving."

"Godsdamnit," I cursed. "Is there anyone who's *not* trying to invade us right now?"

There was pause.

"The Golden Bloom," the Taghreb said.

"Don't you bring the fucking elves into this, Ratface," I said. "We already have a net surplus of genocidal maniacs."

"The Tower's used the emergency channels to inform everyone of general rank or higher that the Golden Bloom is phasing out of Creation," Juniper told me.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"Last time they did that was was when Triumphant was kicking around, right?" I moaned.

I ignored the twin 'may she never return' the other two spoke, while pressing their knuckles to their foreheads.

"That's not a no," I decided. "And just like that, Diabolist kicks up the priority list. Fucking Hells."

"Most likely, yes" Ratface grimly agreed.

"If One Eye's staying at the border, that means we have three full Legions sitting this out," I said.

The First, Tenth and Eleventh. Considering a dragon and a vampire ran the last two, I could at least find a silver lining in the fact that their absence would limit collateral damage. Two thirds of the Tenth Legion were undead mostly because General Catastrophe had the nasty habit of torching his own soldiers as well as the enemy. What that would do close to a major city I preferred not to think about.

"The Marshal has sent word he does not believe the Principate seriously intends to make an invasion attempt," the Hellhound said. "The two principalities at the border assembled their armies, but they don't have the men to breach the Vales."

"They're just acting up so our Legions can't leave," I grimaced. "We could call that bluff."

"We can't afford a slugging match with the First Prince when our own backyard's on fire, Cat," Ratface said. "She gets to have this one."

How lovely, that the old trend of Procer screwing over Callow continued no matter who was in charge of it. There were some permanent constants in Creation, like the Tower being a pile of horrors beyond human understand and the Principate always being run by a bunch of rapacious assholes. One of these days, Cordelia Hasenbach and I were going to sit down and have a nice little chat over the subject. Knives might be involved.

"So your mother's in charge of Imperial response, then," I said, eyes flicking to Juniper.

"General Istrid," the orc replied, galarling, "has seniority. She's currently mustering north of Vale. Her own Sixth Legion has been joined by General Sacker's Ninth already. The Fifth under General Orim is supposed to be joining them, but has been delayed."

Orim the Grim and his boys served as Laure's garrison, so I supposed we'd arrived to the part of the conversation where I was going to get *absolutely livid*.

"Tell me," I ordered.

Ratface swallowed loudly.

"Foundling," Juniper said. "Your shadow's moving. Cut it the Hells out. It's not the Supply Tribune's fault your Ruling Council collapsed."

Surprised, I glanced behind me and found my shadow still as it should be. I raised an eyebrow. Juniper wasn't the type to exaggerate, so I'd take her word for it.

"Sorry, Ratface," I said. "Picked up something in Arcadia, it's making my Name act up."

The Hellhound's eyes narrowed.

"Is that why you've turned into a botched weather ritual?" she asked. "Learn to control it before we march. If you can make ice at will it has useful implications for our supply train."

Only Juniper, I mused, would respond to my usurping a part of Winter by trying to make me into the Fifteenth's personal magic coldbox. I coughed to hide my amusement.

"I'll get right on it, General," I said. "Tell me about Laure, Supply Tribune."

"Approximately two weeks after you disappeared into Arcadia," Ratface said, "Murad Kalbid and Satang Motherless executed a coup in the capital."

I closed my eyes and counted to ten. I'd tried, I *had*, to involved Praesi in ruling Callow. I'd held up my part of the deal I'd struck with the High Lords on the Empress' side. I should have remembered that even if they were Malicia's tigers, they were still fucking tigers. They'd always strike when they smelled weakness.

"And they succeeded?" I asked, eyes still closed.

"The two Callowan members of the Council are gone," the dark-eyed man said. "Sister Abigail was killed in broad daylight, allegedly by members of the Guild of Assassins. Baroness Kendal was wounded, but she managed to flee and no body was found."

I opened my eyes.

"Her Dread Majesty's representative?" I prompted.

"Disappeared," Ratface said. "If anyone knows where, they're not telling. The usurpers are turning over every rock in Laure looking for her so it's probably not their doing."

"Oh, they're not going to be finding that woman anytime soon," I murmured. "So they murdered their way to the top, like good little Wastelanders. Then they declared martial law?"

"Across all of Callow," Ratface agreed. "There's been rioting in every major city as a consequence."

I cursed in Kharsum, which had the Hellhound frowning. She kept telling me my accent was horrible, more offended by that than the rough language.

"How bad?"

"Bad enough General Istrid is mustering outside Vale because she believes if she tries entering the city she'll have to take it by force," Juniper said.

"The governors you appointed, the Callowans," Ratface said. "They're denouncing the current Council as illegitimate and refuse to answer to Imperial authorities until you 'restore order'."

"They weren't sure I would come back," I groaned.

"Neither were the usurpers," Ratface said. "They took a risk by making their move."

I chewed over that for a while.

"Why's Orim stuck in Laure?" I asked. "Those two are treacherous pricks, but they aren't idiots – after the initial riot they should have lined the pocket of the Guilds to calm things down in the city."

"They don't have the treasury," the dark-haired man said, sounding amused. "When they tried to take it they found the vaults empty."

"Then who the Hells has it?" I asked.

"Guild of Thieves," Juniper informed me. "They left a note."

"They have to know they're declaring war on me by doing that," I frowned.

"Special Tribune Robber found the source of their courage in Liesse," Ratface said.

I blinked. Before I'd left, he'd told me that the Guild was under new management: a new King of Thieves had taken their reins. No, not a king – a queen.

"Thief," I hissed. "The Thief did this. She runs them now?"

"As far as we can tell," Ratface said. "She, uh, passed a message through the Special Tribune. If you have an issue with what she's been doing, you can take it up with her in Laure."

I narrowed my eyes at him.

"You're leaving something out," I said.

"She was rather unpleasant about the phrasing," the Supply Tribune replied frankly.

I decided not to push. I was pissed enough as was and more anger wasn't going to make me think any clearer. I leaned back in my seat and closed my eyes again, thinking this through. I had six months to either break the Summer Court or force a peace settlement on them. I hated the thought of giving Akua any longer to prepare, but bloodying my army on the walls of Liesse when there were still flame-happy demigods wandering the countryside would be a major blunder. I couldn't just march the Fifteen south, though. I needed General Istrid's army in the field, and they weren't moving until the Fifth Legion joined them. Juniper's mother was reckless but not even she would take on Summer with only eight thousand men. So that meant I had to clean up the mess in Laure before taking care of the rest. Opening my eyes, I set my hands on the table.

"I'll need Nauk and his men ready to march," I told Juniper. "And Robber's cohort. Laure takes priority for now."

"We'd be thinning the defences around the portal," the Hellhound said.

"We're emptying them," I said. "Winter's dealt with, at the moment. I bought us at least six months until anything goes down."

Six times the coming of my title, the King of Winter had said. Overly dramatic phrasing but at least I had a number.

"Then the rest of the Fifteenth be moving as well," Juniper said.

"Six months, Hellhound, is also our timetable for wrecking Summer," I said. "I hope you've been thinking about ways to kill fae."

"Oh, Foundling," the orc replied happily, baring her teeth. "I have been thinking of precious little else."

I was not too proud to admit to myself that Juniper scared me a little, sometimes.

"Give Nauk two thousand men," I told her after a moment. "That should be more than enough. That leaves you a little over full legion to work with, no?"

"More," my general replied. "As of yesterday's census, the Fifteenth Legion now numbers eight thousand soldiers."

I blinked.

"*What?*" I spluttered.

"The south is literally on fire, Cat," Ratface said. "And we have a reputation for both taking in Callowan soldiers and killing anything that invades the region. We've had a *lot* of recruits pouring in."

"As well as some less desirable individuals," Juniper added coldly. "The nephew of the defunct Countess of Marchford showed up last month."

I raised an eyebrow.

"He tried to take back the city when it was under fae siege and occupied by what's pretty much two full legions?"

Nobility wasn't as inbred in Callow as it was in the Principate, so that level of blatant idiocy was a little surprising.

"He's renounced his claim on Marchford publicly, actually," Ratface said. "Says he wants an audience with you, won't talk to anyone else."

"He's in a cell," the Hellhound said. "I've no patience for agitators."

"I'll look into it," I said.

Another thing for the list. There either needed to be more hours in a day or I needed to find a way to get rid of sleep entirely.

"We'll have a more formal meeting to plan our operations, but get Nauk ready to go as soon as possible," I said, rising to my feet.

I made to leave, but turned when Juniper called out.

"Foundling."

I met her eyes.

"Catherine," she said, more softly. "What happened in Arcadia?"

"You'll get the whole story when everyone's there," I said. "But in short? I fucked up. The Winter King was playing me before I ever stepped foot in there."

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"Doesn't matter," I finally added. "I think I got what we need to win this war."

The hourglass had already been flipped and time was slipping away. What I'd thought I needed was more of it, but I might have found a way around the need. I was the Duchess of Moonless Nights, nowadays. And Apprentice had once told me that high-ranking fae could open portals both in and *out* of Arcadia.

---

*jor*

out of arcadia?? hmmm....

*Morgenstern*

No longer needing to "convince" some fae to open a portal for them, like Black and Warlock had to.... 😊 That is, if she can find out HOW and get the grips on it. Apprentice sure has the technical know-how, but implementing it might be a bit more difficult. Still.... portals. =P

[intermediarywebserial](#)



Damn, I thought six times the coming of her title was referring to the seasons, so at least three years, but I guess not.

*Ethan Smith*

So did I – But then that was probably too generous. Unless of course that IS what it meant and she assumes it's 6 months which would be quite funny

*DC*

Only caught this on a reread: Moonless nights presumably refers to new moons (when the entire moon disappears), so six of them is six lunar months.

*xacual*

Since Cat is a Duchess of Winter, can't she enlist some of the lower nobility to come with her? I can't really see a reason why she couldn't.

*Gunslinger*

I'm not sure she'd want more fae in creation though. Give them more of a foothold than they already have

---

Interesting idea: can she open something like a Lesser Breach? I realise that rules for crossing over from Arcadia are different than the ones for Hell (if anything, Arcadia is a similar position to the Creation as the Creation is to Hell), but maybe there are ways to bind Fae?

*Haihappen*

I second that idea. Perhaps Masego can whip up a binding around the portal? Caveat: Binding lesser nobility sworn to other higher lords&ladies could result in "ruffled feathers". Apart from that, Is there a reason why the fae would even USE that portal? It surely has "By entering this portal, you accept the term and conditions" written on it.

*OmniscientQ*

Bah. Nobody ever reads the EULA

*vietnamabc*

Ah the sudden but inevitable betrayal. And so the Uncivil War begins.

*danh3107*

If Cat can summon some Deadwood soldiers on command, or even lesser nobility, I'm going to start cackling like a madman.

*Haihappen*

I guess she would be able to persuade some, if, and thats a big IF, the King of Winter did not issue a policy of not interfering with his little plaything.

He surely has an endgame that may not be apparent, apart from being a suicidal immortal.

Of course, by persuading, I mean "bribing", and she should be very careful about the sort of promises she makes.

*Gunslinger*

And so it begins. Lots of cool touches in this chapter such as Cat scaring poor ratface. I can't imagine how scared the rebels would be once they find out Cat is back. She might hand them over to Apprentice to play with.

On a side note the second last line doesn't make much sense – "What I'd thought O needed was more of it, but I might have found a way around the need."

*Nairne*

It's about time my friend. She is probably thinking about opening portals to move her army.

*Vamair*

This "O" is a small portal.

*Morgenstern*

It's a typo... O is directly next to I... o\_ô Just in case someone actually hasn't noted although I would guess that was not the problem with understanding the sentence? Yeah, it's about her probably being able to now open portals and thus \*maybe\* move a lot of people a lot faster (through Arcadia), as she is now of both planes. Unless, of course, they should somehow get lost in Arcadia on the way and lose time instead of win it (thinking of how Cat has lost three MONTHS in there during her little visist)... Seems the time can get faster AND slower in comparison, which is pretty shitty for such plans. It tends to come back to bite you when you least need it... ^^

*Renasma*

Hype.

*Nicole*

Ooooh, I love it!! talk about the ability to sneak attack! Wow!  
(at least against non-fae)

I am soooo curious about all the new powers Catherine picked up.  
Edge of my seat!

Excellent chapter 😊

*Nairne*

While that's a very interesting point, I'm more interested in how she will dispatch her enemies.

Suddenly two chapters a week seem like not much (still better than one though).

*Morgenstern*

... and non-MAGES, you seem to forgot. Akua has a heck of them, so it will definitely not work against her. Probably not against the other Praesi either. Might come in handy against Procer, though, when that jar of pickles is finally opened.

*Dragrath*

The question is if Akua's forces are still mages. I wouldn't be surprised to hear she underwent something akin to the Dead Emperor guy(forget exact title/name oops) and converted her entire domain into a literal aspect of the hells as well she is a freaking Diobolist now... 0\_o  
Luckily she is probably focused on currently sacrificing Summer by stealing their very existence as fuel for demonic rituals...

*JC*

Catherine Foundling? Or Jeff Bezos?

Both seem to have learned the power of supply chain management.

*Kingbob12*

Goddamn. Kat is gonna end up going full Calamity at this rate.

*Morgenstern*

Power- and intimidation-wise, probably. 😊

I'd argue there's still some more lacking in terms of character, plans, hero-offing tactics etc., though 😊

*Morgenstern*

But yeah, I definitely like where this is going and HOW. =)

*Nairne*

Thanks for the chapter.

*Tempestiel*

Just a thought, maybe the elves are bugging off because Cat's on a warpath? 😊

*Haihappen*

And before this is over, something or someone is gonna BURN. Hmm, how to kill a god made of magical energy? What substance to we know eats magic? \*cackles away\*

*Anna*

Cat is thinking with portals! :v

*Haihappen*

She needs to learn how to kill gods. For Science!

*Nairne*

I'm sure that would be the reason for Masego, Science (ehm, Curiosity?). For Cat it would be more like Applied Science 😊

*Burnsy*

There are two Legions commanded by a vampire and a dragon?? Has that never come up before? That's awesome.

I wonder what those particular creatures are like in the Guideverse. We've seen pretty unique spins on most stereotypical monsters so far, so I'm looking forward to those two appearing in story at some point.

Also I adore Cat. She's so entertaining to watch, I can't wait to see her rampaging her way across Callow.

*Morgenstern*

It HAS been mentioned before. Somewhen already in the first book, I think. 😊

*jonnney*

I believe the dragon is the one that Black famously negotiated with. The undead legion was mentioned when Black was taking apart the rebel army.

Here is a list of the legions if you are curious.

[http://abridged-guide-to-evil.wikia.com/wiki/Legions\\_of\\_Terror](http://abridged-guide-to-evil.wikia.com/wiki/Legions_of_Terror)

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So, Catherine thinks she has at least one advantage: a way around to spare time that consists of having the Fifteenth march through Arcadia. This way, she can come ahead of the deadline and solve all her problems in less than six months.

What are the chances that she'll run into the elves instead?

*ICSM*

Like, one in a million. Which makes it a sure thing.

---

Especially since actually pulling it off would allow her to catch a break.

*Haihappen*

Actually, Moving her Army through a portal to finish her objective ahead of schedule would result in them arriving in the nick of time for dramatic effect. Because the elves are not only big on the narrative imperative but also huge drama queens.

*JackbeThimble*

The elves seem to be pretty strategically conservative. Picking a fight with a team of villains backed by half a legion and led by a de jure Fey duchess in Arcadia seems like it would involve quite a few irreplaceable casualties, especially since she's the enemy of their enemy anyway.

*Cpt. Obvious*

After some of what the Wandering Bard said to the elves she talked to outside of Liesse it appears that the elves is in a bit of a bind.

Though they apparently are unaging, or so close to it that it's not worth arguing about, their population is in decline as ever since they occupied The Golden Bloom there haven't been a single birth.

The Elves being isolationist racist supremacist assholes they wouldn't think of asking for help, or consider the idea of having made a mistake in settling in the bloom. So phasing the entire Golden Bloom out of Creation is probably a defensive move. Though I doubt even Robber could get one of them to admit that the Deorithe mustering their army is in anyway troubling to them.

*Oaden*

So is there a accepted means of pointing out the minor spelling errors (like the o instead of I in the last paragraph)

*Cicero*

"General Istrid," the orc replied, glaring, // should be glaring right?

*nipi*

"And Apprentice had once told me that high-ranking fae could open portals both in and out of Arcadia."

So she can now basically teleport armies across creation, Yes? Cant wait until Hellhound sees this.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Catherine Foundling: orphan, baby Calamity, undead-munitions-raiser, demon-killer, angel-scammer, Callowan noble, Winter noble, creepy shadow-maker, teleport-spammer... walking supply chain refrigerator. xD

*Haihappen*

Also, her heart is Frozen, and she just can't Let It Go. Wait until she starts making snow and ice golems, filled to the brim with munitions and goblinfire as by the Foundling trade mark.

*Nairne*

Can't let it go. I wonder if that could become an aspect 😊 (probably not, as it's a sentence, but maybe "Keep"?).

*mavant*

Now you're thinking with portals!

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Am I the only one wondering if the Second, Third, Seventh, Thirteenth and Fourteenth Legions are ALL tied up in the Wasteland? Even going with the lower number mentioned for Sacker's Eighth Legion of 8,000 to a Legion, that's 40,000 Legionnaires with the effective operational command structure to be deployed against 4-5 different targets. I get that the craziness going on with the attempted coup in Wolof against Diabolist's mother is a big deal, but FIVE Legions big a deal?

I suppose if Malicia has deployed Two Legions on each side of the Wolof internal feud to contain their Demon and other summonings, that'd be four of those five Legions tied up, and maybe the fifth of those not otherwise engaged Legions is keeping Ater itself secure?

Thirty-two thousand men seems like a lot for containment of Wolof though. What does everyone else think?

*Kilimandaros*

Legions are four thousands strong, only fifteenth is eight thousands strong because of previous half-legion shenanigans. "even she would take on Summer with only eight thousand men" meant two legions: Istrid's 6th and Sacker's 9th. So it makes 20 thousands in Wastelands, 24 if you would also count 8th Legion (it isn't listed in this chapter, you mistakenly listed it as Sacker's). 24 thousands in whole pre-conquest Praes, we can't really say how many might be needed somewhere else than Wolof. Problem is that 4 thousands of them are from green 14th Legion and 13th is heavy on cavalry which isn't exactly useful in cities. However it still minor problems, big problem is that they are there to suppress not to burn everything to the ground. What can be a bit troublesome when thousands years old lineage of mages is infighting without pulling their punches.

*jonnnney*

I'm guessing Wolof is merely the most pressing concern rather than the only concern. I'd be surprised if there wasn't a legion keeping an eye on the Goblin tribes at all times and another in the Greenskin Marshes keeping an eye on the Watch/Orcs. They mentioned the Empress is using a light touch, so I would say two legions keeping the Hellspawn out of the Wasteland.

*Archon*

Six times the coming of your title does not sound like a time limit. It sounds like a use limit...

*RandomFan*

Duchess of \*Moonless Nights\*, not the calling on her new Fae-heir powers. She has Six \*moonless nights\* to bring peace from the battlefield before she loses her heart forever.

It's not a use limit. Or if it is, it's fae trickery where it's masked as a time limit.

*RoflCat*

I mean, given how the duke summoned squalls for his use, maybe it is ALSO a use limit.

As in when she uses her title in combat, it would also turn the location into a moonless night.

Alternatively her power spikes under moonless nights.

But hey, maybe that'll be how she gets back at Winter, by binding Arcadia to the concept of time. Instead of the Summer vs Winter being like a match of DotA or similar game that after the victory is decided the players all leave the game, then Spring or Autumn take over as the clean up crew. Make the cycle of season binding over the fae, so rather than a match that resets after reaching a conclusion, it's a cycle that never ends.

In Summer/Winter, their respective Court advances. Then in Spring/Autumn, the advancing Court loses their momentum. (and the current ruler may change here)

*Captain Amazing*

I had thought she needed to be the Duchess of 6 more duchies, but your explanation makes much more sense.

*agumentic*

"Sister Abigail was killed in broad daylight, allegedly by members of the Guild of Assassins"

Since no one else said it – RIP Abigail, we hardly knew ye. You seemed like a pretty cool old church gal.

*stevenneiman*

"You realize there's [a] one going on when you're neck deep in Watch"

"the Tower being a pile of horrors beyond human [understand->understanding]"

Well, this is a number of fine messes Cat's in now. I wonder if Kairos' plan to piss off Black is going to work.

*amc*

anyone else worried about how time in Arcadia doesn't necessarily map to time in "reality"? Cat could take her legion on a "shortcut", and show up 15 years later (or before!)

*Dragrath*

Yeah though the before part could be interesting and there is a question if her new title/role in winter might allow her influence over how Arcadia messes with time, which like everything else in the realm surely follows story rules to the ultimate extreme meaning arriving exactly when the plot for a spun story calls for it. So presumably learning how to spin stories of Arcadia will be a means to control that time dilation...



*jonnney*

I'm getting the feeling that the King does at least nominally want Cat to succeed so I'd say that the timing isn't gonna fuck her up too bad. Plus Black and Warlock managed to reverse the time shenanigans so it isn't a stretch that Apprentice could do the same.

*Darkening*

Time flows faster or slower depending on how the wind is blowing or the whims of powerful fae, but I don't believe it can run backwards.

*Captain Amazing*

I think it's become clear now that Foundling's group is starting to mimic the setup of the Calamities.

The Squire, the student of Lord Black.

Adjutant, her fiercely loyal second in command for Captain.

Apprentice, son and protege of Warlock.

Archer from Refuge, student of Ranger. (Notice how she tries to get in Catherine's pants?)

Finally, Thief, the embodiment of a criminal profession and ideological outsider, for Assassin.

It's uncanny and virtually has to be Role shenanigans. Black now has literal replacements in place should he fail.

*Gunslinger*

Huh, pretty interesting. The Thief is A hero though. I doubt she'd be part of cat's entourage

*Darkening*

We'll just need to make Robber a Name then.

*Nairne*

That's a pretty poor distinction. I'm more inclined to believe Thief is more like Hunter. A name very slightly on the Hero side of the border.

*Allison*

I want Robber to be a Name so badly. Just think of the repercussions!

*Gunslinger*

At this point I suspect erraticerrata is just teasing us and will never make him a name. I can get that though, the sheer awesomeness of a named Robber would shake creation

*maresther23*

He already has a name. It is all all sneaky and hidden because of his culture. One of his aspects is Invincible.

*alegio*

I go out and stop reading for 2 weeks and.. well, s"!t happens.

Giving Heiress the name Diabolist is something I had not thought about but in retrospective makes lot of sense. She became the heiress of the old villians ways, demons, rituals, sacrifices, all that is what she now is trying to represent.

*Nairne*

I guess it's a contest between the old ways and the new.

*callmesteve*

Some chapters are missing from the ToC: The backstories of Captain and Warlock, and probably others. I wanted to re-read those for the shock-and-awe factor, but darn if I can't find them.

[erraticerrata](#)

They're in the Extra Chapters tab, which is separate.

[vuthuha912](#)

The response from the Praesi member of the ruling council is shameful, to say the least. They collapse at the first sight of trouble. The sheer stupidity of attempting a coup when your southern regions are on fire. What is the logic exactly? Do they even want to keep Callow or not? I wonder why Malicia should give any Wasteland nobleman position on the ruling council. Just choose some normal bureaucrat who actually knows their job and can work with others. It is important that they don't flinch at the first sight of trouble. Publicly condemn the rebels, organize aid for the refugees, evacuate people from the nearby area, and collaborate with the House of Light for godsake to stabilize and heal injured refugees. Didn't even attempt to organize a response? Do any of these people know the basic principle of ruling?

If you are not capable of defeating the enemy and keeping your gain then there is no point in attempting treachery. What are they going to do after successfully taking over? They are surrounded by enemies with no clear way of retreating. And they

just throw a golden goose away for such small gain as a year or two of taxes. This is an opportunity to unify the council and further integrate Praes and Callow. They threw it away. With that performance, Malicia would be an idiot if she let these people in any public office ever again. I swear logic and long-term planning slide off these people like water off a leaf.

These actions are treasonous. They went against the long-term interest of the empire for personal gain. Just execute or exile them, banish the family, confiscate their property and ban any member from 3 generations of that family from taking public office. I heard incompetence run in the blood. Let that be a deterrence for incompetence, cowardice, and disloyalty in your government.

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## Chapter 17: Allegiance

*"There's a natural hierarchy to the world, Chancellor: there's me, then my boot, then all of Creation under the boot."*

– Dread Empress Regalia

It felt good to be back in plate. It felt even better to know that I'd be facing opponents that could actually be deterred by armour – no more of this 'fae blades cut through everything' bullshit. It'd been like fighting a hundred less competent version of the Lone Swordsman, though admittedly with much less lecturing thrown around. Small favours. My cloaks swirled behind me as I walked down the stairs, the most recent addition to it glimmering even in the dark. How Hakram had managed to get his hands on a piece of the Duke of Violent Squalls' clothes I had no idea, but the wind-like cloth had been added as another mark of victory to my name. A third of the black cloth was now covered by stolen banners of dead men. *How many years, before there is no black left?* At the rate I was making enemies, not many. If I survived the year, odds were Akua Sahelian's would be joining the lot. There was a thought to warm my absent heart.

It was cooler, underground. There'd been two sets of goals in Marchford, before I'd taken the city back in the rebellion. The cells for petty criminals, near the centre of the city: the ones I was currently in. The other had been for highborn prisoners, in a wing of the Countess of Marchford's manner. The very same I'd had Robber put to the torch purely to piss then-Heiress off. If I'd known back then I'd have to pay for rebuilding the godsdamned thing, I might have held off. The awareness that I'd ordered that manor burned followed me into the dark. The man I was visiting,

after all, had once called that seat of power his birthright. Elizabeth Talbot did not have any children, but she had a whole tribe of relatives. Her designated heir was her brother's son, Lord Brandon Talbot – who'd been among the rebels broken by Black but had managed to escape and survive.

From the fact that his head had not ended up on a pike in the following months, I assumed neither my teacher nor Malicia had thought him worth the effort of hunting down. With that in mind I'd expected to find a living example of every noble wastrel tale waiting down in his cell, but the reality was different. Brandon Talbot was a man in his early thirties, powerfully built with a thick beard and long hair held in a ponytail much like mine. He was seated on a stone bench in the back, managing to make the position look almost dignified even if his well-tailored clothes had obviously not been washed in some time.

"I was beginning to think I'd been forgotten down here," the man said.

"No such luck," I replied.

I glanced around. There was a table and seats meant for guards, under a pair of torches, and I claimed one of the chars. Turning its back to the prisoner, I straddled it and propped up my elbows atop it. He was staring at me, I saw, a strange expression on his face.

"Taking a good look?" I said.

He blinked, then shook his head.

"I mean, I'd heard," he said. "But it's another thing to see it. You're so *young*."

I hid my surprise. Usually, at this point, my enemies offered up banter. Or a denunciation of some sort. Maybe a dig at my height, which made stabbing them afterwards a sort of justice.

"Age stops mattering, when you become Named," I said.

"Age always matters," he disagreed softly. "There was a time this country didn't make soldiers of its children."

I smiled thinly.

"And then we lost," I said. "A lesson learned."

"Of all the things we lost back then," Brandon Talbot murmured, "I think I might grieve that one the most."

"Is that why you came here?" I asked. "To tell me of the past glories of the Kingdom?"

"The Kingdom died," he said, tone sad. "Once on the Fields of Streges, and again when the Carrion Lord snuffed out the dream last year."

"It was not a Callowan dream," I replied harshly. "It was a Proceran one, bought with the First Prince's silver."

"Oh we all knew that, deep down," Lord Brandon admitted. "That we were being used. But we glimpsed a world that was more than waking up every morning with the Tower's boot on our throat. It was not a bad dream, Countess Foundling."

"Lady," I corrected. "*Lady* Foundling."

He peered at me, dark bangs and darker shadows framing his face.

"Are you really?" he asked.

"To you?" I said. "Yes."

The man laughed.

"You think I'm your enemy," he said.

"I think you committed treason," I said. "I've hanged men for less."

"And yet here I am," Lord Brandon said. "Without a rope around my neck."

I smiled mirthlessly.

"It would be a very grave mistake," I said, "to confuse curiosity for mercy."

"But you *are* curious," he said. "Most would have sent me to the gallows without even an audience. Your orc certainly wanted to."

"General Juniper would have been well within her rights to give you a traitor's death," I replied harshly.

"I'm not trying to speak ill of your friend, Countess Foundling," he said, waving away the notion.

Blue eyes considered me carefully.

"She *is* your friend, yes?"

"Something like that," I said.

"And yet they say you fight for Callow," Lord Brandon mused. "Most would think those two things irreconcilable."

"But not you?" I snorted. "If you're looking for a pardon for that concession, you're knocking at the wrong door. I'm eighteen, not an idiot."

He did not entirely manage to hide his surprise when I mentioned my age. Oh fuck him, I thought. I wasn't *that* short. I'd been almost an inch taller than Black before he left, it wasn't my fault I was surrounded by godsdamned giants all the time.

"What do you want, Lord Talbot?" I said. "You had to know you'd end up in a cell if you turned up here."

"I want you to save Callow," he said. "While there's still some of it left to save."

"Always the cry of the highborn, isn't it?" I laughed, darkly amused. "Bring it back the way it used to be! When everything was perfect because we were rich and powerful and we ran the fucking show."

"This land was at peace, once," he said.

"I keep hearing people talk about bringing back the Kingdom," I said. "Like putting a crown on some Fairfax relative would magically fix this fucking country. You all act like everything was perfect before the Conquest, like it was some never-ending golden age. It wasn't. I've read the records, and what you're trying to resurrect never existed. All a rebellion won would accomplish is slapping a fresh coat of ruin over a bitter truth: all that's changed is whose palace the taxes build."

"If you hold us in such contempt," he said, "why claim to fight for us?"

"Because there's a difference between Callow and the Kingdom," I hissed. "One is *people*. The other's gilding. People I'll draw my sword for, every time. The rest can burn. It's not worth a single drop of godsdamned blood."

"The people are dying, Countess," Lord Brandon said.

"So they are," I conceded tiredly. "And so I go to war again."

"I don't mean the fae," the noble said, shaking his head. "Or even the butcher you gave Liesse to. *Callow* is dying. Our way of life. Another fifty years of this and we'll be light-skinned Praesi, save for a few bitter enclaves."

I didn't reply, because he was right. I knew he was, and worst of all I didn't have a solution. Because the monsters were as cunning as they were powerful, and they had been playing this game since before I was born. Winning it through schools and trade and the featherweight of apathy. It was one of the first

thing Black had ever told me: he didn't need people to agree, just not to care. And it was working, wasn't it? During the Liesse Rebellion, no holding north of Vale has risen. So few soldiers had answered the Duke's call that he'd needed to bolster his forces with mercenaries. The dream the noble said my teacher has snuffed out had been a feeble thing from the start: peasant levies ordered into the field, barely held together by household troops and foreign soldiery. And before the war was done those same levies had delivered the same nobles who'd called on them at the feet of Black, bound in chains. Fear, I knew, had driven them there. But also more than that: no one in that army had really believed they could win anymore. Some hadn't even been sure they should.

"I know," I admitted.

"But this is not your design," Lord Brandon pressed, leaning forward.

His eyes were alight, almost fervent.

"I'm trying to find a path between destruction and rebellion," I said.

"The let us be Callowans," he said. "Changed, perhaps, but still us. There is still a spine under the boot, Countess. There's still a flicker of the flame no matter how many times they stamp it out."

"Those are pretty words," I noted. "I don't trust pretty words, Talbot. I trust practical measures. Tangible things I can work with."

"Bring back the knightly orders," he said.

I stared at him for a long moment. The knights of Callow, huh? Even over twenty years after the Conquest, their silhouettes were still branded behind the eyes of children who'd been born long after the last of them were disbanded. For a lot of people, the knights were Callow, just as much as the bells of Laure or golden fields spreading as far as they eye could see. They were also a basketful of military orders disbanded by order of the Dread Empress because they were a direct threat to Praesi hegemony.

"I don't have the authority to repeal Tower decrees," I said.

"Not lawfully," the noble said very, very quietly.

It still rang loudly, in these rooms empty save for the two of us. Treason had a way of doing that. I looked at him, and finally understood what I was sitting across from.

"You're not an agitator," I said. "You're an *envoy*."

"So I am," he agreed softly. "We've watched you, Countess. Seen what you preach more than empty words."

I'd been playing this game for too long to be fooled by flattery.

"Don't lie to me," I said. "You're not coming to be because you think I'm worthy. You're coming to me because you're *desperate*. Because in fifty years, we'll be light-skinned Praesi – and if I die, you're not getting another Squire who gives a shit about Callow."

He did not deny it. I allowed myself to see it, for just a moment. Knights come again, and this time on my side. Not riding down my legionaries. With Summer and the Diabolist ahead of me, the thought was horribly tempting.

"How many?" I said, mouth gone dry.

"You have not agreed," Lord Brandon grimaced. "You must understand that–"

"You're asking me to cross Dread Empress Malicia," I said, tone like steel. "If you think you grasp even a fraction of how dangerous that woman really is, you're a fucking fool. *How many?*"

The man studied me in silence for a long time.

"Two thousand," he said. "More may emerge if you don't butcher us in our sleep."

Two thousand. Gods be good.

"The Duke of Liesse didn't even have that much horse," I said faintly. "And Black had most his knights killed in their sleep."

"Those of us that rose with Gaston of Liesse went to die, Foundling," the noble murmured. "Reaching for that dream, one last time. It was the old, the tired, the despairing. The rest of us stayed hidden. To teach old ways to the young, and wait."

*Half the houses in the city will have swords and spears stashed under the floorboards or hidden away in the attic, I'd told Juniper the first night we spent in Marchford. Because this was Callow. Because we'd carry a grudge for ten generations, if that was how long it took to even the scales. Because those who wronged us always, always paid the long price no matter what it cost is. And now I'd just been told that two thousand knights were hiding in the countryside, biding their time. Under Black's nose, for years. Pride in my countrymen warred with horror at the thought of what could have happened, if they'd all risen. Praesi thought they knew about patience but they'd only been invaded the once, and not like us. We've had wolves at the gate since the First Dawn. It taught us hard lessons and oh, look how well we've*



*learned them.* I was more moved by the thought than I cared to admit.

"How quickly can you gather them?" I croaked.

Lord Brandon kept his face calm, but his eyes betrayed him.

"Two, maybe three months," he said.

"You'll be part of the Fifteenth," I said. "Under General Juniper. Anything less is declaring war on the Tower."

"It is a lesser yoke," the dark-haired man said, "than the one currently choking us."

I rose to my feet, feeling faint. I could feel the Beast's head leaning over my shoulder, its warm breath heating my cheek. It was grinning.

"I, Countess Catherine Foundling of Marchford," I said, "do order the creation of the Order of Broken Bells and charge Lord Brandon Talbot with gathering men under its banner."

The man looked about to weep, and softly nodded.

"You'll be out within the hour," I said. "Get me knights, Talbot. Before it's too late."

—

"I don't like this," Juniper said.

It was almost noon. Leaving the orc to hover behind me, I put a hand against the glass and tried to feel warmth. Nothing. I was so cold to the touch these days that my breath should come as vapour. I stared at the sun and idly thought that the conversation that I was about to have would have better fit the night.

"Are you listening, Foundling?" the general growled. "I don't fucking like it, this *inner circle* shit. We're a legion, not a gang. Officers of the same rank get the same briefings."

"What I have to say isn't for everybody's ears," I said.

"Hune should be there," the grim-faced orc continued as if she hadn't heard me. "She's my second, not Nauk."

"I trust Nauk," I replied without turning. "Hune is a blank slate."

"Then have one of your little talks with her," the general said. "Like you did with Ratface and Aisha."

I snorted.

"Jealous we never had one?" I teased, sounding more light-hearted than I felt.

"Please," she dismissed. "I already see too much of you as is. Couldn't stomach more."

Before I could summon up a reply, my 'inner circle' began piling in. They'd come as a group, it seemed. Only officers for this one: Masego was holed up in his tower, seeing to the experiments he'd left in the hands of the assistant he's stolen from Diabolist, and Hakram was keeping Archer busy in the sparring yard. Leaving her to her own devices would just lead to more property damage I couldn't afford to repair. Nauk was the first in, from the sound of the steps. Robber and Ratface came in bickering about 'misappropriation of Legion resources', which I'd probably have to look into at some point, and Aisha's presence could be deduced from the dainty sigh that followed them. Pickler was light-footed and silent, but my ears were more than mortal now. Kilian wasn't here. I owed it to her to tell her when it was just the two of us.

"Boss," Robber called out. "Do I not even get a 'good murdering, you filthy goblin'? I really feel like I've earned it."

"The filthy in particular," Aisha commented.

I turned to look at the officer's I'd had at my side since the College, who'd followed me through a rebellion of my own making and bled in my name. I did not manage to smile.

"Oh *shit*," Ratface cursed.

He'd always been a perceptive man.

"About an hour ago," I said, "I committed treason."

There was a heartbeat of shocked silence, then the room exploded. Aisha's face had gone blank, Juniper looked furious and Pickler somehow managed to be bored in the face of a blunt admission of sedition. Nauk was grinning and thumping the table. Ratface's face was darkly pleased and the noise covering all the rest was Robber's loud, shrill laughter.

"If I may request specifics, Lady Catherine?" Aisha politely asked.

Well, I wasn't back to Lady Foundling or Lady Squire. That was something.

"Yes, Foundling," the Hellhound barked. "Tell us more about the *forveala'sak* treason."

I didn't know the Kharsum term she'd put in there, but by the look on Nauk's face it must have been truly filthy.

"I've founded a knightly order," I calmly said. "And released the former Countess' nephew to fill its ranks. I'm told we should have two thousand riders within three months."

Not a single hint of her thoughts touched Aisha's face. Ratface leaned forward, face eager.

"Are we rebelling?" he asked.

"You shut your fucking mouth," Juniper shouted. "We're not rebelling."

"Not unless the Tower forces me to," I replied frankly.

"Fingers crossed," Nauk laughed loudly, like I'd just handed him a bag of rubies.

"How many cousins and uncles do you have in the Legions, Nauk?" Aisha asked him, tone emotionless. "Think for once in your life."

"Now," Juniper interrupted, turning to me. "Now you choose to pull this shit, when the horde is at the gate."

"That is the best time to pull something like this," Pickler clinically said. "The Tower can't afford to antagonize us. Not if it wants to hold Callow."

"So we're going rogue," Robber grinned malevolently. "About time. I was getting tired of playing nice."

"I will not see the Fifteenth turn on the Empire while I breathe," Juniper said and her voice was like bedstone.

That killed every smile in the room. There was no longer any anger in her voice, I heard. She was beyond that now. She was looking at me and I'd ever only seen her with eyes that cold when she was thinking of how to destroy an enemy. I'd learn to read orcs, since my days in the College, but even if I hadn't I'd know exactly what I saw on her face: betrayed. She felt betrayed, by someone she'd thought a friend.

"Juniper," Aisha spoke softly into the silence. "Listen to her. Don't assume."

The Hellhound shook her head.

"Is that what this has all been leading to, Catherine?" she asked, and the genuine grief in her voice tone cut me like a knife. "Recruiting Callowans. Subverting officers. Gathering Named Were you trying to ease us into treason before we ever began?"

Her voice shook.

"Was it just so you could carve yourself a kingdom?"

"Hellhound," Nauk said, and for once his voice was soft. "We all knew this was coming. From the beginning."

"Not like this," Juniper said. "Not like this."

"I'm not rebelling," I told her, meeting her eyes. "I'm not asking you to fight your mother, Juniper. Or you your family, Aisha. But things can't continue as they've gone on. Not anymore. Not after all the lines they've crossed."

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them. Gods, why did I have to feel so cold? My gaze swept across the room.

"There's something sick in the Empire," I said. "You've all seen it. Some of you have felt it first-hand. Merciless Gods, the people ruling the Wasteland think half the people in this room are *cattle*."

"And you think raising a banner will change that?" Pickler said, eyes hooded. "You're good at killing, Foundling, but you can't kill a thousand years of hatred. Your sword is of no use there."

"If the people in power can't even stop killing their own," I said quietly, "why are they still in power?"

I felt the shiver go through the room. Was this what William had felt like, when he'd first spoken to his rebels behind barred doors and shuttered windows? That weight, power and responsibility both. It would kill me, if I was not careful, like it had killed him.

"We've taken oaths," Juniper said. "All of us, and *you too*."

"Yes," I agreed. "I swore. To the Legions. To what Praes says it is."

I stared her down.

"Do you think the High Lords live up to those oaths?" I asked. "I look south, and I see the highest among them rebelling for the second time in two years. Twice she's walked away with a warning, free to bleed us again. How many of us do they get to kill before we say *enough*?"

"They'll never stop," Ratface whispered fervently, addressing everyone and no one at all. "You know that. They'll never stop unless we *make* them."

"And how many people will die, for that better world?" Aisha asked quietly.

"Mountains," I replied. "But for once, it won't be us doing the dying."

The beautiful Taghreb closed her eyes, let out a deep breath.

"Emperors rise," she said. "Emperors fall. The Tower endures. Gods forgive me, the Tower endures."

I did not allow myself to feel joy. This wasn't over yet.

"Beautiful things, ideals," Pickler said. "But I'm a goblin, Foundling. You can't eat principles. You can't carve a tunnel with them. They don't win wars."

Robber let out a whisper of a laugh, and my eyes immediately went to him. I'd never heard him a noise anything like it in all the time I'd known him. It had sounded, I thought, almost wistful.

"They kill us," the Special Tribune smiled, "for sport."

Pickler turned to face him, face flickering with dismay.

"Robber-"

"Listen to me, Pickler," Robber said. "No, actually *listen* for once. The Matrons, the High Lords, the whole fucking lot of them. They've had the crown for centuries. They're fat, now. Lazy. *They think they own it*. You know what that means. You're a goblin, right? They don't get to play if they're not willing to bleed."

"We can't win this. We can't beat them," Pickler hissed angrily, but her voice broke after. "I will not let us die doing the right thing. We are going to *grow old*, all of us. I will not – I don't-"

"We can," I said softly. "You know that already. It's what scares you. No shame in that. I know what's ahead better than any of you, and I'm terrified. It'll be blood and mud and grief, but don't think for a moment we can't do it."

The Senior Sapper took her hands off the table brusquely, to hide their shaking.

"It'll be to the death, Foundling," she said, amber eyes flicking away. "To the death. Do not start this lightly."

She sagged in her seat afterwards. Ratface's eyes sought mine and he chuckled.

"I always thought I'd die railing at them, you know," he said conversationally. "Just another corpse for the pile."

He paused, body shaking with nervous energy.

"I was brought into this war when they tried to murder me in my bed," he said. "You never needed to ask."

My eyes went to Nauk, who'd gotten up to lean against the wall. His arms were clasped and there was something hungry in his gaze.

"To the end," he said, fangs bared. "I made my choice before I knew it was a choice, Callow. To the bitter fucking end."

And just like that, there was only one. Juniper was close, had been this whole time, but she'd not moved in a while. She came closer to me, spine straight but shoulders tight.

"Swear to me, Catherine," she said hoarsely. "Not my mother. Not any of them. That they won't be the enemy."

"I swear," I told her, and offered my arm.

For the second time in our lives, she took it.

"Warlord," she whispered, and it sounded like an oath.

It should have felt like a victory, I thought. All I felt was cold. Gods, all I felt was cold.

---

*HTJ*

Eh. Treason for some cavalry?

Seems iffy.

*WirelessGrapes*

I think it's sorta kinda treason to prevent a future war. Cat's playing the long game now, similar to how Black did it. Take them now, to prevent them from rising up later.

Honestly, if Black can see what Cat's doing, with the continued 'cutting out the rot of Evil', I can see them letting it go. Not joining, gods no, but letting other people fight them. If they have to fight the Calamities, it'll be a while now.

*sheer\_falacy*

It's not just getting her cavalry. It's getting her cavalry that would otherwise fight her later, so it's net 4000 cavalry. And as Pickler points out, it's at the perfect time, for the same reason that it was the perfect time for Diabolist to pull off her bullshit. Praes is distracted, all of the other legions

are busy, and there are multiple enemies of both Catherine and Praes that desperately need to be dealt with to the point that they can't really fight someone who is fighting those enemies.

Still very dangerous, and I'm surprised at the treason happening now since it hadn't really come up until the meeting with this noble who she didn't like very much.

*Naeddyr*

Yes, it doesn't get her just cavalry.

It gets her \*Callow\*.

[Alex Straughan](#)

2,000 of the worlds best heavy cavalry is not "some cavalry"

Also, even more important is the story they come with.

When all hope is lost, the Knights of Callow ride to the rescue!

*Sean*

Its not "some" cavarly, its 2,000 of the most elite heavy calvery in the world. It will earn her fierce loyalty from all Callowans and serve as an INCREDIBLE bost of morale. The 15th is some 8,000 troops, those 2,000 are a 25% bost in man power.

More importantly, they're essentially comming from nowhere. Throwing off all her opponents calculations.

Thats not even getting into what those knights represent.

*JackbeThimble*

If they can provide anything like 2 thousand heavy cavalry? Empires have been conquered by less.

*stevenneiman*

It's not just the cavalry, though two thousand mounted knights for her rather than against her is certainly nice. It's about what it was always about for Catherine, which is making Callow into part of the Empire, and a valued and respected part.

*nipi*

2000 highly trained heavy cavalry used correctly might be as good as 20 000 infantry.

As I understand it resisting chavalry charges required tight ranks and a strong nerves. Chavalry truly shined when the enemy

ranks broke. Cat has goblin munitions and mages to help that along.

### *Poetically Psychotic*

Normally cavalry is best used for harassment, scouting, and crushing routed forces, because a cavalry charge is too easily broken or robbed of momentum. But in a continent without firearms of any kind, widespread use of explosives, or even \*pikes\*... heavy cavalry is going to be an absolute \*nightmare\*.

### *raudhbjorn*

You make the mistake of this King that this isn't what Black and Malicia had planned all along. The Empress NEVER steps down. Someone HAS to topple her off the throne and in order for their plan to succeed, it has to be Cat that topples her and that means it HAS to be treason.

### *Jeffery Wells*

It's a lot of cavalry.

### [MJ topic](#)

Treason for a symbol of Callow. For a symbol of new era.

### *corrado alamanni*

She needs troops the empress is at fault for not keeping her nobles in lines. Fuck her

### *The Archdevil*

And so the Uncivil Wars truly begin. Gods Below, it's been far too long in the making.

H.

No, we're well into them already.

1. Liesse rebellion
2. Free cities war
3. Wolof uprising
4. Cat, for Winter & Callow vs. Summer

Also, these aren't war \*yet\*:

5. Diabolist
6. Daoine is mobilizing
7. Cat defying Malicia by accepting knights
8. Ruling council coup in Laure

And all of them civil wars.



*Shequi*

The first battle of the Uncivil Wars was Three Hills, if I remember one of the snippets of Aisha's memoirs correctly.

*RoflCat*

@Shequi: The Uncivil Wars related quote from Aisha's memoir was about the seed they sown in Liese (Heiress)

Three Hills was forging Fifteenth into the unit it will need to be to face what comes in Marchford.

*Letouriste*

Yeah you're right

*danh3107*

"Warlord," she whispered, and it sounded like an oath.

I love Orcs, I love them so fucking much it's unbelievable

*WirelessGrapes*

Wai-wai-wai-wai-wait.

Did Juniper just get a fucking name?

*danh3107*

She was calling Cat Warlord, as most of the Orcs do. It's incredibly significant because it's one of the few times Juniper doesn't call her Foundling or Cat.

It also has immense significance for Orcs, as the Warlords were almost like walking divinity to their people.

[\*wirelessgrapes\*](#)

Ah, makes sense, the only other time I remember seeing that was when Hakram got his Name officially. Thanks for the clear up.

[\*Arno van Sinderen\*](#)

It would be a rather amusing subversion of all expectations if Cat became Warlord instead of Black/Grey whatever knight

*Bcurly*

Well, she is known for killing people and burning things

[\*Ethesis\*](#)

I'd love it if that became her new name.

*Hakurei06*

I'd argue for a transition into Green Knight, especially with her recently becoming a literal force of nature, if it weren't for the fact that she's part of the Court of *Winter*.

Actually, now that I think about it, If she manages to kill the literal fucking King of Winter, it's not unimaginable that she forges a Spring Court from the ashes or in preparation.

*JackbeThimble*

We have a fairly firm word of god that Catherine isn't going to be The Warlord.

*Cpt. Obvious*

I think I remember it being said that Amadeus also has been called Warlord by orcs. In his case I think it was Grem One Eye who started it. Which makes it kind of fitting that Juniper was the first to name Cat as Warlord back when she was recruited into the 15th, if I remember correctly.

*Cpt. Obvious*

Or was it Hakram?

*Nairne*

No no. She just acknowledged Cat as a Warlord, albeit reluctantly.

*Kingbob12*

The Orcs and the Goblins are so wonderfully vicious and loyal. Goddamn do I love each and every one of them. Robber and Nauk above them all though. Those two are fucking amazing.

*HandyCapped*

Goblins? Loyal? The goblins under Cat are special cases under the Special case, with the capital S. Normally, their only 'loyalty' is directed to the Grey Eyries, and even that is represented only in the hierarchy in their vicious power struggles of cloak and dagger.

*vietnamabc*

Hey Mr.E, any chances you have been playing Tyranny? Because I think Malicia is relying on Catherine to rebel because it is impossible to achieve her and Black's goal by obeying, therefore

by rebelling she will stay loyal. Not by molding Callow to Praesi but rather adopting Callow virtue to Praesi.

*obsidianorangutan*

Alternatively, Foundling killing off the bluebloods gives Malicia plausible deniability. If she succeeds great, one of the biggest oppositions to her rule is eliminated. If not, then Kat was a illegitimate rebel who she can condemn

*Dragrath*

Aye good argument you two, I think that puts things aptly. They need an outsider to pull off a role they could never reach as for a villain to win they need to even more blur the bounds of good and evil which is hard to do when Moreover she can succeed where they can't because she isn't just yet another Praesi but a Callowan that has adapted to the Praesi. And agreed on the plausible deniability. as it really is a win win situation from Malicia's point of view. Granted that seems to be the kind of machinations she goes for so it is to be expected.

*HandyCapped*

Remember, everybody, that Cat was never in on the machinations of those two. They were grooming her to be the autonomous ruler of the vassal state of Callow under the curtain of Praes all along, and what is a better way to achieve that, but to revive the greatest representation of Callowan pride and to interconnect that with the might of Praes? Callow will retain it's fire, but march under the "correct" flag.

Considering this and the grudge with the antagonistic system, that the two schemers harbor, in addition to Cat's own disposition, the future of her being transitioned into the role of a Grey Knight seems all the more likely, despite my suspicions against the exact wording of it.

[ayon96](#)

Awesome chapter!  
By the way what were heiress's aspects?

[ayon96](#)

I know what's head(ahead) better than any of you, and I'm terrified.

*nehemiahnewell*

Was that a term of respect, or did Cat just graduate from Squire? With her cloak woven from portents of fallen, or maybe conquered, enemies, it would fit.

*George*

Term of respect IMO – not enough foreshadowing for it to be a transition.

[Alex Straughan](#)

It's the second time shes been called warlord.  
Perhaps you mean she needs three?

[Mental Mouse](#)

It's more that Warlord would be an orcish Name, not a Callowan one. Hakram could conceivably transition to Warlord, but Cat can't. Any name she gained would be a Callowan one.

Trying to avoid being *too* spoilery: Under her own power she'd apparently have leapfrogged clear over her mentor's Name. *With* Winter, she's about to jump the track entirely.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Bah! I could've sworn we had spoiler tags, but apparently not.

[nextgidea](#)

The road to hell is paved with good intentions.  
Oh wait, we are Evil, and the whole point is to Do Wrong Right.

An excellent chapter as usual, with character reinforcements. Also, we get to see a new character, I wonder how would Lord Talbot would fit in "inner circle" of Kat.

\*\*\*\*

Some typos:

There'd been two sets of goals in Marchford, before I'd taken the city back in the rebellion –  
Goal → gaol

I claimed one of the chars → chairs

I know what's head better than any of you, and I'm terrified →  
head – ahead

The Senior Sapper took her hands of the table → off the table

*Laferno*

Gaol is an archaic spelling for jail. Not a typo.

*Hakurei06*

Yes, and the argument here is that "goal" in this context is a typo thereof.

*Digitize27*

It's not archaic, it's the accepted British English term.

*stevenneiman*

"There'd been two sets of [goals->gaols] in Marchford"  
"And Black had most {of} his knights killed in their sleep."  
"I turned to look at the [officer's->officers] I'd had at my side"

*Naeddyr*

Ooooh shiiiiit.

Well, I think this is still part of Black's and Malicia's or Black's or Malicia's plan. They're pragmatic.

But man, this really shows the corrosive and corruptive nature of the temptation of Good. To turn Cat so easily, within five minutes of talking! Brandon is a silver-tongued rogue.

*Oshi*

If you think for a second Cat's done any of this with Good in mind then you'll be surprised when the knife is in your throat. She chose the path she has always been on. The knights are just another set of tools. She will be Empress.

*vietnamabc*

Treason!  
No, this is patriotism!

*Letouriste*

The funny thing is these two words are often one

[\*Mental Mouse\*](#)

"Treason doth never prosper, and why is that? Forsooth, if it prosper, none dare call it treason."

*NerfContessa*

Indeed

Aside from being a bit too fast this is Ana mazing chapter.

And so it begins...

[edrey](#)

and where is kilian, she should be in first line

*Letouriste*

Explained in this very chapter;)

*The quietist*

Making a really long term prediction is that start of this book/  
end of the next one sees Callow more or less resurrected but  
Hasenbach getting her crusade unable/unwilling to admit its  
validity.

○ =     = '     , = ,     ~ ~ ~

That seems like a decision they will regret sooner or later.

*Naeddyr*

Rereading this chapter slowly actually gave me chills, twice.

Now, what will the Order of the Broken Bells wear as their color?

White? No, that won't do at all.

Black? Possibly. Show them which side they're on now.

Or... Green?

I still think Catherine is bound to be the Green Knight, the fae  
knight who goes to a wedding and gets her head chopped off in  
order to win a bet and get the other guy's head chopped off.

*Naeddyr*

Another prediction: Catherine is totally going to subvert  
Thief. That role just seems perfectly suited for twilight-  
allegiances, and she seems like a pragmatic lass.

---

I can't wait for Robber to call them castrates.

*Shequi*

Bells are usually cast in Bronze. So that, for their colours?

*Naeddyr*

Bronze can have a (jade) green patina, too. 😊

*Hakurei06*

I think she can manage it if she's able to put a literal end to winter and forge the Court of Spring from its ashes. Better still, if it means Summer petering put into Fall (not Autumn, Fall. Names have power)

*Mental Mouse*

> I still think Catherine is bound to be the Green Knight, the fae knight who goes to a wedding and gets her head chopped off in order to win a bet and get the other guy's head chopped off.

She already did that once. And arguably again in the Winter fight, thanks to her stolen Rise.

*Renasma*

I have so much hype for that one word. It is the best title. There's so much implication. I squeed.

Warlord.

Nauk was the only one more outspoken about his allegiances: the other orc had decided that Cat was the warlord of their generation, and as far as he was considered that settled the matter. Every matter, really. Good orcs did not question their warlord, though they ripped out the guts of anyone who did.

---

Given how she's planning to change all of Praes, presumably including nobility, Im personally hoping for High Lady of Marchford.

*RoflCat*

Still think Dread Queen of Callow.

Not Empress.

*Letouriste*

She try to uproot the nobility so queen is out for me.dread do not suit her much right now....maybe a mixte of dread and a good thing+empress+her speciality(something like defying,visionary,selfless?^^ probably not the last one:D)

But the way that go,I expect something akin a republic but with less bureaucratic bullshit and the tower still there but changed.more power for communities too...an assembly looks good,something akin what cat already tried for callow but

with all sides represented this  
time:goblins,orcs,daoine,trolls etc...

*Thebes*

At least her Name is happy with her decision.

*cmcd*

"The people are dying, Countess," Lord Brandon said.

"So they are," I conceded tiredly. "And so I go to war again."

What an awesome line. Well done :).

---

Just how did Hakram stich a piece of wind to Cat's cloak? I can buy that he Found the piece that had a sliver of her power in it, but then what, whistle in the needle?

Also, nice job calling all the officers that are confirmed not to be a spy and then folding them in one by one to peer pressure Juniper. This oath better not be in vain, or EVERYONE will remember it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Rebuilding cities: \$\$\$

Smiting insurrection: <blood>.

Having a personal cabal you can trust: Priceless.

*Dianna*

Something to note. Cat wondering how long it will be before there isn't any black left in her cloak. Like she is becoming less and less black, or perhaps, less like Black. I personally don't think she will become Black Knight, her story is too much treading the line between good and evil. In her first trip inside her name, she didn't side with either the Good or the Evil versions of herself.

Also, the Fea are bound by the stories of creation, good and evil in constant battle, summer, and winter in constant battle. It would seem to make sense that to make a peace between them, you would somehow make a peace between the Good and the Evil. I am also on the ally with Thief train since it would only help the whole making a peace idea.

*nehemiahnewell*

Eh, I'm pretty sure she's solidly evil. I suspect a moment of waver, a time when it becomes uncertain, but that she recommits.



That said, I do expect her to take a different path then the Black Knight.

### *Letouriste*

Her name is evil ,her role is not.

### *Moginheden*

Her name is Squire. That is a transitional role that can become the White OR Black Knight. She was recruited by Evil, but nothing in her Name or Role is forcing her to be evil. When her name backlashed against her, it was because she was setting up a narative where she was destined to fail, not because she was doing good, or even switching sides to Good.

Black and the Empress would have an issue with her switching to Good, but her Name and Role would be fine with it. (I also think Black and the Empress would be fine with bringing back the knights as long as their loyalty can be chained to thw Tower. They might have to take action agaist Cat due to politics though.)

Personally I see Warlord as her eventual Name. It is an Orc Name, but if enough Orcs believe in her, she might get it anyway. (Names are linked to belief and people repeating the story)

### *Kilimandaros*

@Moginheden:

Black and Malicia's main problem with knightly orders is also important reason why Catherine choose to establish one – they are essential symbol for people of Callow. As long as Foundling's story of rebuilding Callow (not as a Kingdom, but part of Praes) is still on, Order of Broken Bells is acceptable (even if not exactly legal). Of course it's passable only because current situation is quite dire, but in the overal view they are problem because they could delay or even stop transformation of Callowan into fair skinned Praesi.

About Cat becoming Warlord, Erraticerrata directly stated that it's orc Name and thus Catherine can't become one. It's like no Praesi mage can become Wizard of the West. And even if collective faith of orcs could elevate non-orc to Warlord title it would need some more than few hundreds orcs in Fifteenth. I very much doubt that in the Steppes or even other Legions Catherine Foundling is thought of as Warlord.

### *KageLupus*

As soon as this book started off with the Black Knight going off to fight the White Knight, I thought it was pretty obvious that Cat is getting set up with a choice. The Squire graduates to become a Knight after the old Knight dies.

So Black and White end up offing each other nearly simultaneously, and then the Squire has two paths laid out before her. Follow in her mentor's shadow (heh) and promote the Praesi ruling of Callow, or become the shining beacon of the people that Callow needs and try to turn the table on the Empire.

But Catherine is not known for accepting choices thrust on her if they don't suit her plans. So she tells all of Creation that there is a new page in the book, and she will make her own story. A Black Knight that uses institutions and cares for people. A White Knight that sets aside pretty ideals in favor for practical concerns.

Pragmatism made flesh and steel. A Grey Knight, willing to sink to the depths to achieve her lofty goals.

*Dianna*

KageLupus

Beautifully put, that last bit, and a very good argument. I must have missed where it was stated Cat couldn't be Warlord. We will see what she becomes.

*Gunslinger*

Nearly missed the chapter, still not used to Monday releases. And what a chapter it was!! Fantastic stuff. Junipers oath at the end was the killer.

Also typo corrections:

goals should be gaols

Manner should be manor

All a rebellion won > All a rebellion win

Seen what you preach more > Seen that you

gathering Named Were > gathering Named. Were

*Author Unknown*

"Is that what this has all been leading to, Catherine?" she asked, and the genuine grief in her voice tone cut me like a knife. "Recruiting Callowans. Subverting officers. Gathering Named Were you trying to ease us into treason before we ever began?"

Now Hellhound, that's just uncalled for, Cat doesn't make long term plans, or plans in general unless 'wing it' counts as a plan.

*Naeddyr*

Letouriste, I earlier had an amusing thought about republics and Cat. I would love poor Anaxares becoming part of the party and cynically showing off how the Power of the People Is Not Bestowed From Above and so forth to nudge her, even if just a bit, towards a republican form of Callow.

*Blinks*

Two thousand heavy horse, now there's an interesting thing though making use of them could prove tricky. Cat has spent most of her time as an infantry commander and utilising cavalry is it's own special set of skills never mind integrating them with the rest of her command.

Name wise i expect her to make her own.

*AMC*

Undead cavalry horses, anyone?

*Komploding*

The story seems to be set at a turning point in this worlds history, i.e. The stories about which life revolves in this world are heading into uncharted territory.

This is shown by black and Malicia taking the empire in a new direction (deviating from traditional evil), Heiress transitioning into a new name (Diabolist) and most recently by the Winter court itself. (The fair courts are said to follow grooves worn into existence since the dawn of existence itself, never deviating or halting, and yet now, Winters Duke (who is a keystone in Winters narrative) is dead and his seat of power claimed/given by/to a mortal.

This strongly points towards Cat getting a new and unprecedented name as she seems to be the main linchpin in all of these events. I find it likely that her full name will come to reflect all this, Perhaps she will become a knight and then transition yet again, after all why not something unprecedented for a new age? Maybe it will have something to do with ushering in a new age? Founder perhaps rom foundling?

She (Cat) has the true loyalty of Orcs and yet is not one, only Black has done this, the Goblins want to trade and at least interact with her (I imagine this will be expanded on in later chapters), she (Cat) is tied to the Tower, the epitome of Evil and yet is doing something morally Good (saving the people and soul of Callow), also she has been noted to look vaguely Deorithe on top of being figuratively tied to the King of Winter with a

story interacting with Summer (as a bonus her paramour has summer fae blood). So to recap, she has ties to Good, Evil, Orcs and Winter. Ties to Summer, the Deorithe and the Goblins have been hinted to come/be expanded on in future.

If this isn't entirely unprecedented in this world's histories I don't know what is

I don't know what is.

Sorry for the long post, I started writing and got carried away, thoughts?

*Dylan Tullos*

It's important to acknowledge when you're wrong, and I was wrong.

I said that Catherine couldn't possibly convince Callow to trust her after her Praesi allies backstabbed her. I said that there was no way to recover after failing to keep your promises.

I was right to say that recovery was impossible. A Ruling Council that includes Praesi nobles is now completely impossible. But Catherine didn't try to recover, to restore the previous bargain. She escalated.

By declaring war on the Praesi nobility, Catherine is showing Callow that she's strong enough to defend her country from outside threats. By restoring a Knightly Order, she's also showing Callow that she's determined to protect her country's culture and traditions.

Callow will never be reconciled to Malicia or Black. They could never be loyal to a woman who was merely Black's apprentice. By declaring war on the Praesi nobility and resurrecting a knightly order, though, Catherine isn't acting like a puppet of the Tower. She's acting like a Queen.

Callow has a Callowan ruler right now, the Fifteenth is mostly composed of Callowans, and they're going to war with most of the Praesi nobility. If Callow is finally rid of Praesi occupation, a more lasting alliance might be possible. As long as the Praesi don't have direct control over Callowans, I think most people could live with a distant overlord.

How do you sell Callowans on the idea that there are "good" and "bad" Praesi, rather than just bad Praesi? You fight a war against the Praesi, which is always popular, and you recruit "good" Praesi to help. If they get practical independence, knightly orders, and a chance to kill lots of Praesi, I suspect that Callowans will forgive the fact that Catherine is still technically sworn to the Tower.

*John C Maddux*

"How many years, before there is no black left?"  
Jesus Cat, lay off. Poor guy has enough death flags as is.

*Aotrs Commander*

\*sigh\*

Not gonna jump to too many conclusions, but for the first time in this entire series, I'm a bit disappointed in Cat. This may have been the wrong decision to make, I fear, save for maybe the purely military level.

But then again, I start to wonder if the point of Names was deliberately to ensure that the countries are basically Names in and of themselves, deliberately engineered by the [expletive] pantheon to always be self-sustaining and push people into it (or nudge strongly)... And Cat may even have made herself Story-vulnerable by tying herself up to the fae like she did, so... I certainly wouldn't put it past this series, at any rate – she's been unwittingly caught by this exact sort of manipulation before once, after all (the incident with the Swordsman, black and the hanging rebels).

We will have to see what Malica and Black's reaction will be, and whether they will immediately scream traitor. I would really like to hope they do not, but we shall see.

[burningwrites](#)

You made me cry twice this chapter.

*warbob1991*

"There'd been two sets of GOALS in Marchford, before I'd taken the city back in the rebellion."

I believe the word should be "gaols."

[Kenfucious](#)

Started reading this series recently.. This right here? This is a powerful chapter.. Really caught my attention. Well written and well done.

*Me*

Bloody hell this chapter, the end with the 'inner circle' meeting? I wanted to cry.

*Martin Hrádela*

The end with Juniper was really powerful. I was on the verge of tears :).

I know im late to the party but I feel this was a long way coming. The empire weakened, her gaining a new power from Winter, even if the cost is great and the hinting about the callowans hiding arms and holding grudges, the knights of callow being so heavily mentioned as well as the hints with the inner circle. It had to be a part of Blacks plan as well at least somewhat.

Cat has to have a new Name, too many things are a "pivot" at the moment. Maybe some variation of Knight. Grey, Green, Winter. But i feel it will be something else entirely. She is the protagonist in the Story of stories after all :).

*CalebG*

Holy fucking shit I love this series. I wish I wasn't a broke college student and could donate on Patreon. Ily Erraticerrata ♥

*Stürmchen*

"How many years, before there is no black left? At the rate I was making enemies, not many. "  
How about the colourful Knight

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## Chapter 18: Crack

*"Kingdoms don't die on battlefields. They die in dark, quiet rooms where deals are made between those who should know better."*  
– King Edward Alban of Callow, best known for annexing the Kingdom of Liesse

Masego's mage tower did not even attempt to look like anything else. It was at least a hundred feet tall, for one, which was taller than some keeps I'd come across. But that alone could have been the work of masons. The moat surrounding it was a different story: twenty feet wide and circling the building, it held no water but instead pitch-black darkness. No bottom could be seen, and a few months back I'd dropped a stone to see if it would do anything. As far as I knew, it was still falling. Apprentice had been particularly cagey about telling me exactly where the Hells it led, if anywhere, but that was in part my own fault. I'd flatly forbidden him to proceed with his original notion, which had been to fill a normal moat with giant fire-breathing lizards. Not dragons, he'd been very insistent in telling me. They didn't have wings, and weren't nearly as large. But the idea of those things inevitably getting loose and either rampaging across

Marchford or making a lair in one of the silver mines had led me to put my foot down.

He'd been very snippy about it.

There was a single stone arch leading across the moat to the dark iron gate in front, wide for two people at a time at most and bare of any railing. There was a reason I picked messengers that weren't faint of heart when trying to get in contact with him. I tread across carefully. The entire surface of the tower was covered in grey mosaics and leering carvings of obsidian, which he'd assured me were there for purely magical purposes. He'd thrown enough magic babble at me to justify that point that I was pretty sure that he just really liked how it looked. Being raised by a devil and a villain had let my friend to have some fairly specific tastes in architecture, sadly, which could be best described as 'nightmare trying to seem friendly and failing'. The iron gate was covered in runes, and there was no knocker. In the centre, an iron-cast wolf's head stood out from the surface and animated when I arrived. There was a devil bound inside, I knew, though Masego had tried to not say as much by referring to it as 'an entity from a secondary realm of existence'.

"A visitor," the wolf said. "Only the worthy may gain entrance here. To prove your wit, answer me this riddle—"

"Answer mine first," I replied flatly. "Who's going to find out if my punches can dent iron if they don't open right now?"

The wolf paused.

"That is now how this usually goes," it complained.

"I get that a lot," I smiled thinly.

"Your name is on the allowed list," it said. "You may enter."

There was a pause, then it added *uncouth barbarian* in a loud whisper. I flicked its eye out of spite even as a doorway opened on the surface, ignoring its yelp and string of curses. The lowest level of the tower was much like any entrance hall decorated by a Praesi with too much gold to waste, though there was one major difference. Namely, the winged tapir that was fleeing down the stairs with loud shrieks as a dark-skinned woman in robes ran after it. It'd been a while since I'd last seen Fadila Mbafeno. Once one of Akua's minions, I'd nearly killed her in Liesse before Masego intervened and said she was too talented a practitioner to waste. He'd extracted an oath from her to be safe she wouldn't turn, in the early days, though she'd since been freed of it. Those kinds of binding magical oaths caused some fairly vicious side-effects if allowed to linger for too long. There was a burst of blue light from the Soninke's hands and shining chains emerged from her sleeve, wrapping around the

shrieking tapir and forcing its wings and feet to stop moving. She grunted in effort when dragging it back to her. I cleared my throat and had to admit I found the look of surprise and panic on her face when she realized I was here delightful.

"Fadila," I said. "Keeping busy, I see."

The winged tapir kept shrieking at the top of its lungs until she kicked it, at which point it moaned plaintively.

"Lady Squire," she said, panting. "Some of the specimens occasionally get... rowdy."

I snorted.

"First time I met Masego," I said, "he was catching a fire-breathing pig with wings."

I squinted at the tapir.

"That doesn't breathe fire, right?"

"He does not," Fadila replied, trying for poise. "Which has very interesting implications, considering the amount of sorcery he's been exposed to."

"I'm, uh, sure it does," I lied. "Masego should be expecting me."

"He's set up the scrying room on the second level," the Soninke said.

Oh, good. Then he'd found a way to get in contact with Black like I'd asked him. Apparently it was possible if we took advantage of the relay system the Empress used to receive my teacher's reports, but he'd told me piggybacking on that without killing some of the mages involved would require some finagling.

"You have fun with this abomination of nature, then," I said cheerfully, passing her by.

The tapir was licking her feet in what I gauged to be a gesture of appeasement, but she didn't seem moved by the offering. By the time I was nearing the second level the shrieking had started again. The door to the scrying room was already open, so I wasted no time in going. This wasn't the kind of place where it was healthy to wander, no matter what Apprentice insisted. The man in question was kneeling in front of a wall covered entirely by polished silver, the work so finely done it worked as a mirror. He muttered something under his breath and the silver shone for a heartbeat before dulling.

"Figured it out?" I asked.

Apprentice rose to his feet, brushing off his shoulder.



"If I shunt off enough of the Due into a dispersal ward, the weight shouldn't cascade," he told me.

"An obvious solution," I said, pretending I knew what any of that meant.

He eyed me sceptically but didn't bother to call me out.

"I can initiate the connection at any time," he said.

"Before you do that, we need a little chat," I said. "I don't want to keep you in the dark, so I'll just state it outright: I might have dabbled a bit in treason."

"Dabbled?" he said, frowning over his glasses.

"You know, dipped a toe in the treason pool," I said.

"I wish you would have told me beforehand," he replied. "Now I'll need to rework Marchford's ward pattern to be able to face advanced scrying rituals."

I cocked my head to the side.

"That's it?"

"Oh no, treason," he said in a mockingly high-pitched voice. "No villain has ever done such a thing before. All my extensive interest in Imperial politics is now put in danger."

I snorted.

"What's that voice supposed to even represent?" I asked.

"How little I care about any of this," he replied frankly. "I'm sure you'll find some compromise with Uncle Amadeus, and the Empress probably knew you were going to do this before the thought ever crossed your mind."

The bespectacled mage pressed his hand against the mirror-wall, spoke a word in the arcane tongue and idly made for the door.

"Now, if you'll excuse me," he said. "I think one of the tapirs got loose."

"Stuff like this is why you don't get to have giant fire-breathing lizards," I called out.

"You have no standards, Squire," he complained one last time before closing the door behind him.

The wall had been pulsing this entire time, but with a silvery ring an image came into focus. Pale green eyes met mine as I leaned against a table. Black's brow rose in surprise.

"Catherine," he greeted me. "Masego tapped into the relays?"

"The technicalities went over my head, but yes," I said. "Hello, Black. It's been a while."

"It has," he agreed calmly. "I expect you've a reason for this. We'll have to rebuild the entire network now – this will have sent flares for anyone looking."

"This morning," I said, "I founded a chivalric order."

The pale man did not seem particularly surprised, though it was always hard to tell with him.

"I wondered if they'd get in touch with you," he said. "I assumed they already would have, if they were ever going to."

I blinked.

"You knew there were knights in hiding?"

He seemed amused.

"I am not without Eyes, even in the south," he said. "Though I can't say this strikes me as a wise decision. Making such a bold move for a few hundred men in cavalry is inviting backlash for limited gain."

"Two thousand," I said quietly. "Likely more."

He wasn't openly shocked. He had too much control for that. But his face went blank, for a heartbeat, and that was the closest thing he'd ever show.

"I miscalculated," he said, and I could see his mind working furiously behind the calm. "No centralized organization – ah, relying on local support. Cells with no contact after the initial founding. Whoever came up with the notion is most likely dead by now. What a waste."

Only Black, I thought, would go within moments from realizing he'd been outsmarted to being saddened at the loss of such talent.

"I thought you'd be angrier," I said.

"Angry?" he mused. "You'll have folded them into the Fifteenth, if I'm not mistaken. You've obtained half a legions' worth of the finest heavy cavalry on Calernia for the Empire. Pleased would be closer to the truth, though doing this without Malicia's sanction will bring trouble."

I frowned.

"She wouldn't have given it," I said.

"Not without exacting concessions in exchange," he said. "Which you'll have to make anyway, unless you intend to wage war on the Empire."

His eyes narrowed a fraction as he studied me.

"If that is your intent, giving me prior warning was a mistake," he said.

"I don't want to fight you," I confessed. "But I don't think you'll like what I'm about to do."

"You know where I draw the line," he reminded me.

"I'm not going to oversee the eradication of my own people's culture, Black," I said.

"Then don't," the dark-haired man frowned. "I take no issue with Callowans having a way of life, only the aspects of it that threaten Imperial control."

"Imperial control is what got us here in the first place," I flatly replied.

"An independent Callow is not feasible," he said carefully. "You know this."

"I know," I said. "But if this is going to work, there's going to be a need for heads on spikes. The rot needs to be cut out or we'll be here again in five years."

"You've more immediate threats to deal with than the Wasteland," he said after a moment.

He was not disagreeing with me and it was enough to have me shiver. He'd told me, once, that after the civil war that saw Malicia crowned he'd wanted to get rid of the Wastelands' nobility. It was the Empress who'd stopped him. I wouldn't be going that far, but – *he was not disagreeing with me.*

"I do," I said. "But after..."

"After," he agreed softly. "When I return."

His image on the wall turned and I heard someone speak to him.

"Then block it," Black said. "Before they can-"

The mirror-wall dulled, my teacher's profile disappearing without warning and leaving only my face looking back at me. I breathed out slowly. So I wasn't burning this bridge by doing what I intended to. Relief flooded me as I closed my eyes. I stayed

there for a moment, and eventually I thought back to an evening long ago, on a balcony where a storm was gathering. I'd asked Black a question, back then and I could still hear his reply like he'd just spoken it. *When they get in your way? Step on them.*

Of all the lessons he'd taught me, I thought, I had learned that one best.

—

"So are you going to tell me why you made sure I wouldn't be at that meeting?" Kilian asked.

We'd come to share a wineskin by the ruins of had once been Marchford Manor, the blackened remains swept away months ago by Pickler's sappers. Rain and wind had scattered the ashes, leaving behind only the remains of the garden and the gaggle of statues that had filled it. The two of us were seated on a scorched stone bench, its once-elaborate carvings now hidden by soot. I passed her the wineskin and watched my lover drink from the Vale summer wine. Night had just fallen, the moon slowly climbing to its apex. I hesitated for a moment, then forged on.

"I've gone against the Empress," I said.

The quarter-fae was lovely, in the shade. Her red hair had grown long enough it bordered the limit of what was acceptable by Legions regulation, framing her pale face and hazelnut eyes like a tongue of flame. Kilian set down the wineskin after a moment.

"The noble Juniper put in a cell," she finally said. "He talked you into something."

"I've been headed there, I think," I said, "since the moment I learned there was a coup in Laure."

"There will be consequences to that," the redhead softly said.

"There would be consequences to doing nothing," I replied. "I chose the ones I could live with."

She remained silent for a long time. I could feel her, now, in a way that I previously could not. The bundle of power inside of me sang out when it came closer to the smaller sister-thing inside her. I no longer needed to hear or see her to know when she was in a room.

"You've never been very good at compromise," Kilian said.

I frowned.

"I've done almost nothing but for the last two years," I replied.

"You compromise," the lovely mage said, "when the other is stronger. And you are no longer powerless."

"I'm not sure what you're saying," I admitted.

She smiled gently at me.

"Why did you not tell me with the others?" she asked.

"I thought I owed it to you for it to be just the two of us," I said.

She drank another mouthful of wine, then passed me the skin.

"Catherine," she said. "Don't lie to me."

"I'm not-"

"You didn't want me in that room," Kilian said calmly, "because if I left you over this, you didn't want it to happen in front of the others."

I very nearly denied that. But instead I took the wineskin and drank.

"The thought might have crossed my mind," I said.

"I'm not sure whether I should take that as a kindness or an insult," she murmured, looking up.

It'd been a long time since I'd last felt without so much as a speck of control over a conversation. I hadn't missed the feeling.

"When we started this," Kilian said. "I knew I'd always be third in line. Behind Callow, behind the the Fifteenth. On a good day, if duties allowed, I might wiggle up to second. But not often."

I felt my stomach knot.

"Kilian, I know we haven't spent a lot of time together lately. I've not been able to-"

She leaned into me and pressed a kiss against my shoulder.

"I'm not angry about it, Cat," she said. "I just told you, I knew that from the start. But you're leaving me behind. That's just a fact."

"I'm not," I insisted.

"I have fae blood," she said. "But you took two people into Arcadia, and I wasn't one of them."

"Kilian, it was *dangerous*," I said. "The kind of things I do in places like that, the kind of risks I take, they're..."

"Too much for me," she finished after I hesitated. "Because I'm weak."

"You're one of the best mages in the Fifteenth," I said.

She chuckled wearily.

"And what does that matter, when you have the Apprentice at your side?" she said.

"I don't share a bed with Masego, for one," I sharply replied.

"Is that what I'm to be remembered as, then?" Kilian said. "The girl who warmed your bed on your way to power?"

"That's not what I meant and you know it," I said. "I *trust* you."

Her eyes met mine.

"Then why wasn't I in that room?"

I looked away first.

"Just because I was afraid doesn't mean I don't trust you," I said. "I've told you things I've never told anyone before, Kilian."

"And I love you for that," the redhead smiled. "Even though it's stupid and dangerous and it might just get me killed."

The rush that came with her saying those words had never dimmed and I gloried in it for a moment. But then the smile went away.

"But now I think of the conversation you had with them, earlier," she said. "And I know you made a decision. You needed to convince all of them, and there was a risk I could distract from that effort. So you made the call."

She sighed.

"You know, I think the better part of everyone you love in this world was in that room," she mused. "And you manipulated them anyway. I don't believe you had that in you, when we first met."

*You're wrong*, I thought. *I'd just never had a reason to use it.*

"I'm glad you do now," she murmured. "We'll need it to survive the coming months. But I have to think of myself too."

"I thought you were happy," I murmured. "With us, with-"

*Me*, I left unsaid.

"I am," she said, laying a hand on my cheek. "But you're leaving me behind, Cat. And the kind of things I would have to do to catch up would end us anyway."

"I don't believe that," I said.

"As long as I don't control my blood," she said, "My magic is shackled."

"Masego could find a way," I said.

"He already has," she replied. "It's an old ritual. It requires sacrifice, and would make me as a full-fledged fae."

"Kilian, I'd put half of Winter on an altar if it helped you," I honestly said.

"It would require humans as a stabilizing element," she added quietly.

My heart skipped a beat.

"You can't seriously be considering that," I said.

"It could all be done lawfully," she said. "It would be costly to buy the death row prisoners, but demand has lessened and I've the funds for it."

"It's not about the law," I hissed. "It's about *decency*. They're people, not things."

The redhead chuckled softly.

"You can take the girl out of Callow," she said. "But not Callow out of the girl."

"You're Duni," I said.

As good as Callowan, in most Wastelanders' eyes.

"*They* make that distinction, not me," Kilian said, tone hardening as she withdrew her hand. "I am Praesi, Catherine. It's not any more a crime for me to love my home than you yours."

"This isn't about where we're from," I replied, aghast. "It's about *human sacrifice*."

"And how many of us will die so you can make what you want out of Callow?" she said tiredly. "I don't see much of a difference. At least it's strangers I would be using."

"There is," I started, but stopped when she lay a hand on my shoulder.

"I don't want to have this fight, Cat," she said. "If I did I would have brought up the notion when I first learned of it. I'll just say this: if there's anyone who should be able to understand how hateful it is to have a yoke around your neck, it's you. To just be... less than you could be."

"There's lines you can't uncross," I said.

"And how many of those have you left behind?" she replied quietly, rising to her feet.

My stomach dropped.

"That's it?" I said. "Just like that you're leaving me?"

*Because I won't condone bleeding people like animals,* I bit down on. Kilian's face was hard to read in the dark, but there was no joy on it.

"No," she finally said. "But I need to think. About what compromises I'm willing to make to make you happy."

She passed a hand through her hair.

"I'll be sleeping in the barracks from now on," Kilian said. "Take care of yourself, Catherine. It only gets harder from here."

I watched her walk away in silence, and kept watching long after she was gone. Eventually I looked up at the moon, and wondered if I was even still capable of crying.

---

*xacual*

I wish I could say I was surprised that this happened, but I'm really not. Cat has some really big hypocrisy in her that she's willing to do harsh, even terrible things herself, but she doesn't like the idea of Kilian doing the same. I mean, is this really any different than her sending Robber after any of Akua's people? You could say Robber was killing enemy combatants, but death row prisoners are going to get killed anyway. So be practical Cat! Let them have some use before they're gutted anyway.

Personally I'm more interested in the aftermath of that ritual. If Kilian becomes a Fae, which I said in a previous comment before would probably be a Summer court one, it will create an



interesting story of the “star-crossed love of a Summer Court Fae and a Winter Court Noble”.

Something like that anyway. I just want to see Kilian get a Name of some kind to be honest.

*xacual*

I realized something after rereading the last few chapters but Cat here is denying Praesi culture. Praesi culture has always used human sacrifice as an acceptable means to an end. We learned a while ago that every Praesi city does a ritual every year to make sure the little arable land they have near the city is usable. To Praesi, a human sacrifice is nothing astounding. I'm sure if she had brought it up with any of the officers, they'd wonder why she was making a big deal about it.

So what I'm saying is that, if Cat really is serious about what she's doing, she's going to need to reconcile Praesi's culture with Callow's even if it means she might have to accept some practices she doesn't like.

*JackbeThimble*

Not necessarily, part of having a truly federal system is that you don't always have to live side-by-side with people you don't like. It's entirely possible to get human sacrifice banned in Callow while it remains legal in Praes. It's also worth keeping in mind that the main reason human sacrifice was so common in Praes was that it was necessary to grow food. Now that they essentially have a free-trade zone with Callow this will become less and less necessary and human sacrifice may become less common or disappear altogether through simple economic forces.

*xacual*

I don't know. I mean there's a ways to make human sacrifice more 'ethical' without abolishing it entirely. Like offer prisoners the chance to take part in a ritual, but in exchange their families will receive some money or things along that nature. Plus I mean that's only one example of human sacrifice magic that we know of. I'm sure there are tons of other good and bad examples.

I just can't help but see Cat as being hypocritical about it since she really has no claim to any kind of moral high ground after she had some guy's soul ripped out of his body.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Cat never liked human sacrifice, even when it was used to save her own life.

*usernamesbco*

She's okay with executing people, but not using their deaths for something practical? Still sounds like hypocrisy to me.

*corrado alamanni*

Killing for retribution is different than killing for convenience.

Like killing a murderer or also eating a murderer to not waste the meat

*Cpt. Obvious*

Yet she is well aware that both goblins and orcs consider eating an enemy perfectly normal. Hakram even has a thing for eyeballs, raw...

*Levi Kalden*

I think she has a problem with putting their lives above her own in a fashion of killing them so she can live or even just for convenience. It's not quite logical but Moral never is

*Jago*

And the "star-crossed love of a Summer Court Fae and a Winter Court Noble" tale was one of those Hakram and Cat used to spin their tale in the Winter court.

I suspect it will go that way, and it will be (or at least try to be) a tragedy.

Maybe Cat will be able to subvert it.

*stevenneiman*

I think part of it is that she viewed Kilian as a wholesome escape from the ugly choices her life had become filled with, and even if it was a tiny thing compared to the choices she's chosen for other people to pay herself, seeing Kilian forced to make such a choice ruined that. It's not fair, or reasonable, or rational, but that's just how emotions are.

*corrado alamanni*

The first step toward the tower

*vietnamabc*

And we got the first couple fight. Dunno why we need specific human sacrifice, I thought it would be something like Name Dream, something you chose for yourself ala Dresden Files' changelings.

*RandomFan*

Fae are higher on the chain of power than humans. Magic seems to require a name to get power quickly, or earning power. The fastest way to do the latter is sacrifice, I regret to inform you. The most cost-efficient sacrifice seems to be humans, though other stuff is more effective apparently.

*nipi*

In the last chapter we learned that fae are a much more efficient sacrifice than humans though.

*jonnney*

I'm guessing the fact that human sacrifices yield less power is the reason human sacrifices are needed along with fae sacrifices. The energy released from a human sacrifice is a known quantity while the energy from the fae sacrifice would be hard to predict. With such a complex ritual there needs to be a few known constants to balance against the many other variables.

*agumentic*

Huh. Well, I never felt like that particular relationship was built to last, so not really surprising. Would be a pleasant surprise if it works out though. I also don't really think there's anything wrong with sacrificing death row inmates, but I see how arguments could be made against it.

*Jackbethimble*

If you're gonna have a death row you might as well make use of it right. More controversial would be sacrificing the terminally ill (in exchange for an agreed-upon payment to next of kin of course)

*nipi*

Unless ofcourse the sacrificing affects the souls of those being sacrificed.

*JackbeThimble*

As far as we know there's no way to determine whether souls even exist after death unless they're captured somehow, so whether that happens would mostly be a matter of religious belief.

*nipi*

Pretty sure the people in the story know souls exist. Cat having a piece of her soul cut out, Masego saying he isn't using all of his soul anyway, former emperors becoming wraiths after their death, the existence of Hells, etc.

*JackbeThimble*

Word of god says no one knows what happens to souls after death.

*stevenneiman*

The issue might be something about a slippery slope. If it's OK to profit from killing death row inmates, then whether or not she does it deliberately the supply of sacrifices is going to be a part of her decisions about laws and punishments. That means that if she allows it at all, there's at least a risk that it will mean killing people specifically to provide a power supply.

*JackbeThimble*

She could just ask Killian to go back to Praes for a weekend to get her sacrifices.

*Soronel Haetir*

I am more than a bit surprised that Cat is so against using prisoners for this. I could have easily seen her balking at specific individuals but not at the process itself.

*sheer\_falacy*

Remember how she reacted way back, after her first fight with the Lone Swordsman. Some prisoners were killed to keep her alive, and she was unhappy with it. Some of that was her name being unhappy with her "redemption arc", but some of it was just her. It's a somewhat odd moral for her to have since she's certainly done worse things, but it is consistently a moral that she has.

*Soronel Haetir*

Okay, I was mixing two episodes that were temporally close: Cat's queasiness with executions being used to personally help her (being healed after the squire-claiming fight) and her outright anger at the time over the executions of the traitors. A large part of the latter was Name-driven and once Cat realized that she was even more pissed about her head being messed with than she had been with the hangings. I was sort of mentally bleeding my expectation of her reaction to a repeat of the hangings over onto the healing.

*nipi*

Its a strong callowan moral taboo she is displaying. She has struggled with the fear of becoming praesi instead of being callowan. Im not surprised at all.

*Hakurei06*

I'm reminded of the verse of a song...

They say the third step is the cruelest  
Walk when the moon is at her clearest:  
Love ends with the kiss of the knife,  
Trust is the wager that takes your life

Gods know how the rest of that went, anyway.

*lennymaster*

Does anybody remember in wich chapter that song was identified as "The girl that climbs the tower"? I think it was the one in wich she had the Talk with Hakram, but I cannot be shure.

*Bob*

Chapter 49:Triumph. Book 2.

*The Archdevil*

It was a meeting with Black. He was reciting it, I believe, when she came out of the bath.

[nineran](#)

I'm fairly certain it was later removed.

*danh3107*

I uh, don't have a witty comment to make here. This just kinda sucks for Cat.

*Voice of Reason*

Honestly, I hope they break up. Though I love this story, I've never really liked this romance with Killian.

*letouriste*

really? they were pretty nice together;) personally,i think they will come back together later.

*stevenneiman*

I thought that they were a cute couple, and that their relationship was as well-written as the story in general. My one worry is that the reason that it went so well before was because relationship problems and assassinated lovers are hero

business, and now suddenly she's having relationship problems as a result of thinking like a hero, which means that her story might be weakening. Fae powers and a new cavalry division notwithstanding, this is not a good time to lose the advantage that her strong story has afforded her in the past.

*Eve*

Personally, I never enjoyed the relationship. The fact is, Killian, kind of didn't have much of a personality. "She was hot when she was mad." Otherwise, she was pretty much just there to be there, and be a girl who was in a relationship with Cat.

You literally can't even try to describe her personality beyond that much. Maybe their relationship was written alright but it wasn't interesting personally, since it just went through the motions of an relationship and didn't seem to amount to anything.

I hoped it wouldn't come to a fridging situation because Killian deserves that much. But I really wanted them to break up eventually. Organic relationship progression.

This is ideal for me, because frankly, this makes her more interesting, and I would prefer a clean break as compared to drama over and over again. Fingers crossed.

*beleester*

I think making the hero tropes work for her has turned out pretty well so far. Aside from the whole business with the Sword in the Stone, Cat is very focused on protecting civilians in her territory against anyone who threatens them, hero or villain. That's when the narrative (and the audience) has been most on her side.

If anything, I'd read it the opposite way – the fact that she's having relationship problems is an indication that her hero story is still going strong.

*Jackbethimble*

I think Archer's getting some very memorable drunk texts tonight.

*Jonnnney*

Let's hope they can come to a compromise and sacrifice Praesi nobility instead of prisoners.

*letouriste*

akua have some in liesse right? i remember a little whisper cat gave to her last book;) if this is enemy i think cat can deal with this

*letouriste*

what a big death flag:o now i can easily imagining their story finishing in blood,killian blood.

btw,killian fae side is related to summer or winter? i thought that was summer but this chapter made me doubt about that.

*H.*

She calls down lightning, which I think would be Summer? I don't really know.

*nipi*

Hint: redhead

*nipi*

Her bloodline was also somewhat fire resistant if Im not mistaken.

*JackbeThimble*

Nipi I think you're thinking of Aisha

*xacual*

If you go back to volume 1 where she goes all overboard with magic, her hair went fire looking and her eyes turned bright green.

*Jonnnney*

Remember the spring and fall are also options.

---

Dread Emperor Obvious to the rescue! Black mentioned that her grandmother rode with the Wild Hunt, which comes from Winter. Lightning is a standard spell, fiery hair is more likely to be a "fae Courts are states of mind" thing.

Also, will she have to lock herself into a story, bow to a Court, or shorten her lifespan to that of an average fae's while in Creation?

*JackbeThimble*

Where was it stated that the Wild Hunt ran with winter? (Not saying it wasn't, I just don't remember it).

*æw3*

As sad as I am for cat, I can't help but agree with Killian.

*Vamair*

I wish they go on with that ritual. Not just declining seems a bit like hypocrisy, but also now that Catherine is considered a Winter Fae and Killian is supposed to be a Summer one, things are going to get even more interesting.

*nipi*

Somehow I think the Winter King knew about Kilians fae bloodline. Might be an important bit in his grand scheme. Leading Cat to create a new story that he desires?

*danh3107*

Thinking about it again, this is basically a perfect chance for Archer to get in Cat's pants.

*kinigget*

Killian is right, of course. Cat's never been very good about compromising her principles, and this is a big one

But here's the thing though: not only would it let Killian "catch up" and once again make her an equal partner in their relationship, it would give the 15th their very own Summer fae, and while that might clash with Cat's new Winter nature, it would leave then in a decidedly stronger position over all

Cat has always prided herself on her pragmatism, but this is a core value, the kind of line that can not be crossed lightly

Of all the things she's done that she can't take back, this might just be the hardest

*Kilimandaros*

They could never be truly equal partners in their relationship. No matter how strong Killian becomes she still will be Catherine's subordinate. Killian is professional soldier and while becoming Named probably allows to relinquish the duty, I really doubt that even Legions have regulations about status of soldier who transcendent humanity to become full-blooded Fae. Even if she were to become Named (which is doubtful if she was to become full-fledged Fae, not to mention her redundancy with Masego), she still has no way to attain Catherine's status. Of course it's all under condition that equality in relationship is desired outcome and it's based on their personal power/status.



*kinigget*

True as far as it goes, but this is all about power, and becoming full Summer Fae would erase a huge chunk of the distance between them

Killian is feeling powerless and useless, this would help \*her\* feel like she has an actual purpose again

[Mental Mouse](#)

It has been mentioned that the Praesi generals include both a dragon and a vampire.

*NerfContessa*

Exactly.

Honestly, cat even in the recent Ost chapter you haven't done something 2ith that... Dissappointting, small but still.

*Shequi*

Wow, hell of a mood whiplash between the first half of this chapter and the second, ee.

*Luis*

I think the problem is human sacrifice has meaning in this world. It's not just blood and bone you use up but maybe a human soul.

What makes human sacrifice and demonic taint so abhorrent is that irrevocably alters or destroys the soul.

You can kill a man or torture him and you will be a monster with a little M, you start trafficking with demons, and human sacrifice and you move on to big M territory especially for something as transient and mundane as power.

*Duckie*

Now the question is, if she does go threw with it and become a real fae... If she is indeed Summer like the most obvious sign points too. Will the fact that Summer and Winter don't mix well together in general cause them to fight... Or will their star crossed love be what ends the war story between the two sides? It's not an unheard of tale of such love ending wars after all.

*vietnamabc*

So the twist is Kilian became Summer nobility and their marriage will join the two court?

*JackbeThimble*

Archer: Hey squire, how's it going?

Squire: Someone tore my heart out of my chest and replaced it with a ball of ice. Oh and also my girlfriend left me.

Archer: So... you're single now?

*Dianna*

So anyone else get a feeling of impending doom when Black said: "When I get back"?

That just feels like the sort of thing people Who Aren't Coming Back say. Good luck Cat, because without him, some tell me you will end up fighting his precious Alli.

*Dianna*

\*Something Tells me\* 🤪

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I actually like it better the first way

---

Yeah, especially after that interruption. Someone tracked his connection, which either means someone was listening in (heroes or nobles, the latter possibility more worrying) which means an outside party knows about Broken Bells (and I'm still astonished nobody made an emasculation joke yet); or given the "Then block it, before they can-" bit, it's more likely someone's been scrying on the Calamities, which means the heroes are on their doorstep. Alternatively, Cat mentioned that it's not advised to scry close to the Waning Woods, since the Wild Hunt can pull a Candyman and pop out of the scrying bowl, and the connection between Marchford and Nicae went straight over that forest.

*Morgenstern*

Not really. I actually got a rather sinister foreboding sense of enjoyment about the "When I get back". People say that all the time. The ones that don't AS WELL as the ones that DO. My personal sinister-ly joy was about the thought of either of them finally getting what both want. Getting rid of the darn backstabbing Praesi nobles like Black wanted to do from the start. In my mental picture for that split second, he was somehow someone Cat gave the free pass to do so ^^ Instead of him sending her... One or the other way, I'd be rather disappointed if HE died so soon. As I said somewhere else, it's time for Warlock. But not Black. At least not yet. Because Cat is getting there, but not there yet, so we'd have an audience's darling hole, which can be even worse than any plothole.

*Morgenstern*

sinister\* (momentary) joy

The stuff that happens to your grammar, if you think of two versions of the sentence at the same time... duh. -.-

*Morgenstern*

But yeah, I guess this author might just pull off even that without killing the mood. 😊 So I'm more or less up for anything, but still keeping my fingers crossed for Black, because I like him so, so, SO much. ^^°

[taborask](#)

I'm surprised Cat being Winter nobility now hasn't come up in the last 3 chapters. You'd think she'd have mentioned it to somebody at least, like, once

[kgyl21](#)

"Being raised by a devil and a villain had let my friend"  
^led^

"That is now how this usually goes,"  
^not^

*Kadath*

Also, point of order: Cat was gone for 3 fuckin months, comes back with a chunk of Killian's Arcadian opposite lodged in her, and expects Killian to just roll over and be a comfort woman. I'm not exactly surprised this is how it turned out, given that Cat's more emotionally intimate with Apprentice than her own girlfriend lately.

[Phantom](#)

Cat keeps call and see herself as a willing villain in the past, and yet now she denies something she had already done a lot of times, killing others for her goals.

That seemed so contradictory, I hope it is not going to advance forward as a gaping plothole in the future

[Tyson Tiatia \(Imagination\)](#)

"You can take the girl out of Callow," she said. "But not Callow out of the girl."

Callow is, fundamentally, one of the 'Good' nations. In a world where people (collectively, not individually) are explicitly divided into Good and Evil, there will inevitably be differences in culture and values that seem hypocritical or odd from an outside perspective.

To the Praesi, human sacrifice is just another thing that's done. It's practical, effective, readily available (if expensive) and so is judged in terms of cost-to-benefit. If a Praesi is arguing against human sacrifice, they're likely to be arguing based on the cost, the efficacy, or the trouble of going through the process. They'll never use the argument, "Because it's wrong."

The Callowans have the opposite view. "Human sacrifice is evil." This is a statement which is presumed to be intrinsically true. There is no situation where this statement is not considered to be true. Evil is Evil is Evil; it's a tautology. Callowans are Good, therefore Evil is bad, Human sacrifice is Evil, therefore human sacrifice is bad.

Our dear Squire may be a Villain, and she may have sided with the forces of Evil. When she considers her actions objectively (or as close as she gets to it) she states that she is a Villain, and her actions certainly support that.

But if you look at her whole mentality, she really embodies a well-known saying: She may be Evil, but she hasn't internalised Evil; She's a villain, but deep down she's still thinking of herself as the hero of the story (of Callow).

tl;dr – Cat's central character arc is that she is an Evil Villain with Good values and a Heroic mindset. This is one of the glaring examples of that inner conflict in action.

### *Blinks*

Because stories are important, how you and others see you are important in our world but far more so in this one. Heiress shifting herself over to Diabolist shows this better than anything else.

Human sacrifice isn't just a matter of principles or simply a minor line to cross. She's killed people before, they were going to die anyway, it's for the best. Those are excuses in a world where good and evil are legitimate and actual forces. It's another step down a very very dark road and while Black and the Empress show it's possible to do so and not devolve into cackling loonacy their sheer effectiveness shows just how rare that is.

### [CorpseMoney](#)

The whole thing with Killian was tiresome to me from the beginning, all the references to their relationship. Stereotypical strong black lesbian bored the fk out of me, i like villains which is why i read the story. yasss get more cold, and ruthless, fk love, and feelings.

## *TheTowerRemains*

Neither of them are black, Catherine is callowan and as referenced here Killian is Duni, or a pale skinned praesi from the callowan border.

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Catherine is Deoraithe, who are black totally-not-Irish with a grudge against elves. I agree that it still doesn't make Cat "stereotypical strong black lesbian", but some stuff like gender not being a thing in Helike or the male-to-female ratio in militaries (or is this a universe where a gap in physical strength between unNamed men and women doesn't exist? Nothing else indicates that, but still) feel tumblr-ish. Not in ideological sense, I just feel that there must have been more organic way to work all that into the descriptions, or just to be more subtle and trust readers not to be idiots and connect the dots themselves. Then again, most stories that make a point out of it do it more hamfistedly, so maybe that's just me enforcing the oppressive culture or whatever.

## *Eve*

Oh boy, this is a little... I have problems with their relationship but neither of them are black, not that it would matter.

My own issue is with Killian's personality, and how little she interested me personally. If you have a critique at least try to make sure you're basing it on actual parts of the canon.

## *Blinks*

Killian is basically the "oh yeah, the girlfriend, i forgot about her".

She doesn't really register all that much.

Basically she's Cat's introduction to evil before she goes all in and starts making out with Diabolist.

## *Shawn Panzegraf*

I wish this had been framed with Killian taking the initiative. Rather than Killian deciding to go through with the ritual and that defaulting to being the end of her and Cat, or not going through with it to make Cat happy, I would've liked to see something like this:

Killian: I know how you feel about human sacrifice Cat. Just like you know I do NOT feel the same way about it as you do. I've told you I'm tired of being less than I could be, and anyways if I keep settling for less the process of you leaving me behind

simply continues. So, rather than asking me if I'm leaving you, you need to ask yourself whether you're leaving me if I go through with this. I'm having a very hard time with you placing more value on the lives of convicted murderers than on us, so until you've answered that question we need to be apart.

All through the conversation Killian is laying out the reasons she feels strongly about this. It felt like Cat didn't listen to anything except the morally debatable point of human sacrifice. (Which, for the LIFE OF ME, I cannot understand why she would kick up such a fuss when the sacrificees are \*already\* condemned to die. If this were a question of Killian being responsible for taking lives that otherwise would not be taken, this would be a more valid debate. What Cat is essentially saying is "It's better to get absolutely no benefit from ending the lives of killers" and calling that being anti-human sacrifice.

Cat is so gung-ho to preserve Callowan culture. Telling Black to his face she won't oversee the eradication of HER culture. Yet she offers none of the respect for Praesi cultural mores that she wants the Praesi to demonstrate toward Callowan sensibilities. The hypocrisy, as others have said, is a bit thick.

Personally I'm dearly hoping Killian just goes ahead and does it. It's easy to say you'll cut off someone you love for doing something you're against. Harder to do, especially when what you're against isn't something traditionally bad for a relationship. Like cheating etc etc.

*ArkhCthuul*

Well, nthatnwent downhill fast, as expected. Though I did hope someone would bring up l cats new nature, maybe even herself.

Isn't it possible that swearing fealty to a high ranked Noble would be enough to make Killeen far?

Cat is a Duchess after all, mayhap THE Duchess....

*arancaytar*

The ship! 😞 😞 😞

*arancaytar*

Isn't Kilian related to Summer?

Not that Cat expected to go there when she originally set out, but in that case wouldn't it have been a spectacularly bad idea to take her into the Winter court?

[glassgirlceci](#)

No 😞 kind of pissed at Cat for being so hard-headed right now. I was afraid this would happen...

*Cestarian*

Aww poor Catherine, she's such a freakin hypocrite tho. She did fuck up by not having Kilian in the room when she told everybody about her treason though, must be regretting that a whole lot right now.

I wonder what effects it'll have on her though, Kilian has always been her anchor to sanity, the only shoulder she trusts enough to lean on. Losing that, and at such a desperate time, it would break most people...

But at the same time, I don't think she wants Kilian to become a fae, that thought probably scares her a lot more than the idea of her using a sacrifice to do it. She'd be an incredible boon to the fifteenth as a fae, almost a rival to apprentice even. But Fae have a reputation for not living very long when they're in creation if I recall correctly. It's what would scare me the most anyhow.

*Aotrs Commander*

Well, Faith (mostly) restored, since the first thing Cat did was go tell Black. And Black reacted in the way I really wanted him to; rationally.

(Why I try not to rush to judgement...)

But, Cat... Duck, you are pretty much going to go and execute a load of people right next. Why in the merry hells are you taking objection to that sort of thing serving more than ONE purpose? Practical Evil is your whole schtick.

I mean, ye gods, it's not like that a large percentage of your army literally eat the corpses of your enemies or anything. You are, frankly, being a bit of a hypocrite, and a little bit arrogant and now I'm more worried than ever that the fae-ening has had some really bad effects no-one has realised.

*Gobbler*

So, you can cause the death of thousands for your ambitions but she can't kill a few death row prisoners to fix herself? What a hypocrite.

[vuthuha912](#)

Well. Black should be thinking about trying to build a cavalry force in Praes right now or I would be very disappointed. Come on. Genetics alters the horse so they can survive in Praes' s environment, borrowing some trainers or transferring some

legionaries to Callow to learn about cavalry would be great. May be designated some areas for breeding and taking care of the new horse breeds.

I wonder what was stopping him from experimenting on horses since he obviously can buy one. Camel cavalry should be a great counter to horse cavalry since camels can survive in the desert. Maybe, we can create a camel through magic genetic altering somehow. You make man-eating tapirs but not magic desert horses?? Praes is weird.

Does Black have a sort of PTSD with magic animals due to the sentient tiger army and man-eating tapirs business? If Black and Warlock are trying to create camels while those camels turn out horribly? Maybe fate is stopping Praes from getting its own cavalry forces. I wonder if the DE's previous attempts at magic animals have turned the story into a complete death trap for future villains.

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## Chapter 19: Order (Redux)

*"In the aftermath of a rebellion do not execute merely those who rebelled. Remove those that remained uncommitted as well, for any power not bound to you is a threat."*

– Extract from the personal journals of Dread Emperor Terribilis II

The gate opened into Fairfax Square.

A year ago, this plaza had been filled to the brim with people come from all over the north of Callow to see the Empress bestow her rewards upon the victors of the Liesse Rebellion. Now? It was night-empty, though that had as much to do with the hour of the night as Laure's recent... troubles. I'd thought about trying to open the portal directly into the Whitestone, since it was much closer to the palace, but ultimately decided against it. Even after experimenting with the power under Masego's guidance it was still a roll of the dice where I'd carve a way out into Creation: better to take the widest place I knew in the capital and limit the risks. As for the time, well, it was much easier for me to open gates when it was dark out. My title in Winter likely had something to do with it. Not that even darkness seemed to affect the hard limit I'd found to my power: I could only open a portal once a day before my body began to revolt against the amount of fae power coursing through my veins.



Pushing myself to a second opening had hurt enough I'd not tried for a third. Having most liquid in my body freeze might very well have killed me, if not for the healing power I'd stolen from a hero and Apprentice's immediate and panicked help. The coming of dawn seemed to wipe away the slate when it came to fae sorcery in my body, for some arcane reason, which was my most promising lead around the limitations so far. But given how dangerous toying with this power had turned out to be I was much more inclined to let Masego run the calculations in his tower than try more direct experimental methods. What I'd stolen in Winter, I had been forced to admit, was not without limits. No matter. It was still a massive advantage over all my opponents. Zombie the Second's hooves clacked against the stone as I emerged first from Arcadia into the deserted heart of Laure. Legionaries followed in good order, their armour touched with frost even with the furs they wore over it.

"Three days," Nauk said, striding to my side as his soldiers spread out. "*Three days*, Catherine."

My horse stirred uneasily as the presence of an orc so close, but I stroked his neck until he calmed. Even mounts raised with greenskins never got entirely accustomed to them: there was just something wrong about the way orcs smelled, apparently. Considering that anything that moved qualified as meat for the cookpots, according to the Clans, I couldn't really blame them.

"I don't think all our crossings will be so uneventful," I replied.

"I don't care if we have to fight a running battle every time," he laughed. "It was a month and half's journey, if we marched my people halfway to the grave. The Fifteenth's the fastest army in Creation now. Hells, we barely even need a supply train."

"The fastest inside the Empire, maybe," I said. "I wouldn't try to portal anywhere I haven't been before."

"The warlock's get said he'd be able to run the numbers for it," the orc legate said.

"Masego was raised by a vicious creature of pure Evil and also a devil," I said. "His definition of *safe* is a little skewed. I'm not using his model unless we get really desperate."

"So in a few months, then," Robber grinned.

I'd heard the goblin approach, for once. I was getting used to his skulking.

"You never know," I sighed. "We could get through a single year without drowning in the deep end."

"Just wouldn't be the Fifteenth if it we were fighting battles we're supposed to win," Nauk contributed.

That was so sadly true I didn't bother to deny it.

"Hakram?" I asked the Special Tribune.

"With the rear guard," he replied. "We've had some curious little bastards coming closer."

I grimaced. While no Winter fae had made contact my sentries had reported silhouettes in the distance keeping an eye on us. I doubted any of the big ones would bother to come in person, but until I knew whose underlings those scouts were I'd have to tread carefully. I might be a Duchess but I was a Duchess of *Winter*. As usual, the side I'd ended up on was the one known for vicious infighting. I watched the legionaries move into a defensive formation across Fairfax Square and drummed my fingers against my saddle.

"Robber," I said. "Hunt me some rats. I want anyone aligned with a Dark Guild in my city in custody, and soon."

The goblin's eyes glinted malevolently in the dark.

"And if they don't want to come along?" he asked.

"You're operating under my authority," I replied. "Use whatever means you deem necessary."

The chuckling sound he made was so unpleasant it should have counted as a crime.

"You'll have them by sunup, Boss," he said, saluting so sloppily I barely recognized the gesture.

He whistled sharply as he trotted off, his merry pack of killers popping out from the ranks to assemble around him. They looked like ugly green imps, I thought as I watched them, but they acted more like a pack of wolves – clustering around the nastiest among them, eager to sink their teeth into something.

"General Orim will have the city under martial law," Nauk said. "That means patrols in the street."

"Adjutant will be handling the Fifth," I grunted.

In part because of all the men I had with me I trusted Hakram the most not to get into a pissing match with another legion, in part because he was *the Adjutant*. The importance of Hakram being the first orc Named in centuries had been piled on over by the messes we kept getting ourselves in, but it was no small thing. His kind looked at him with something like a worship, an old dream given new flesh. Orim the Grim was an orc of the Lesser Steppes: by my

estimation, being faced with an orc with a Name instead of a Callowan girl with the skin tone of the enemy he'd spent half his life fighting would make him more apt to listen. My few past conversations with the man had been stilted, if polite, so there was no relationship to call on from my side. It was coming to regret, these days, that I'd not cultivated closer ties with the generals and marshals that served in Callowan territory. Having a better idea of the kind of people they were would have been useful in planning my actions.

The Gallowborne were the last to leave Arcadia and immediately they closed ranks around me. Tribune Farrier cast wary eyes around us, seeking out danger in the shadows. His inability to follow me in Arcadia had made him even more stubborn about my being accompanied at all times, which I hadn't thought was actually physically possible. Getting him to close the rear guard had been like pulling out nails with my teeth. Hakram took the tenth that I'd put under his direct command years ago – Sergeant Tordis' men, though she was now a Lieutenant – and after offering me a nod from a distance headed west through the streets. The largest barracks in the city were close to the wall there, and that would be where General Orim had his headquarters. Hopefully he'd manage to handle that situation before it became a problem. I was, after all suddenly dumping almost two and a half thousand soldiers into a boiling pot that had already tipped over several times.

"Royal Palace?" Nauk said.

I nodded.

"Pass word down to your people," I said. "If they see any Praesi in this city that are not part of the Fifth, they are to put them under arrest."

"They won't like that," the broad orc said.

They weren't meant to.

"They get one chance to surrender peacefully," I said mildly. "If they resist? Kill them."

The legate grinned.

"Aye," he gravelled. "That we will."

Nauk's kabili of two thousand split into five groups of two cohorts, marching down the major avenues leading up to the Whitestone. The full cohort of Gallowborne remained around me as we took the centre of the formation with my legate's own four hundred in front of us. It wasn't long before we started getting attention. People peeked at us through shuttered windows, still too afraid to break curfew to come out. It was hard to read the

mood of a city in the middle of the night, but *fear* was what I was getting. With the fake Ruling Council and the Fifth Legion openly at each other's throats, that was more than understandable. We encountered our first patrol a quarter hour in – drawn by ripples we were causing in the city, a pair of lines from the Fifth came to see what was happening. They ran into the leftmost wing of our formation but were sent straight to me for an explanation. The Soninke lieutenant in charge saluted hastily when she realized who she was dealing with.

"Ma'am," she greeted me. "Lieutenant Tomuka, Fifth Legion."

"Lieutenant," I replied pleasantly. "You may continue with your duties, though I believe you'll be recalled to the barracks soon. The Fifteenth is taking over."

"We, uh, weren't aware you were going to be coming, ma'am," the Soninke said. "Our scouting lines didn't report a force headed for the capital."

"They wouldn't have," I simply said. "Before you return to your patrol, I have a few questions for you."

"I'm at your disposal," she grimaced.

"The usurpers in the Royal Palace," I said. "How many men do they have at their disposal?"

"Five hundred, by our latest estimate," the lieutenant said. "They've barricaded upper Whitestone and forbid access to even legionaries."

I raised an eyebrow.

"And General Orim has allowed this?"

"The general says as long as they're holed up in the palace we won't have to put down any more riots," she replied frankly. "It's not worth making an issue about."

I leaned back on my saddle.

"Only five hundred, Nauk," I called out. "We go in hard."

Loud orcish laughter was my only response. I glanced down at the uneasy lieutenant.

"I'd suggest sending a runner to any patrols in the area," I told her. "Wouldn't want anybody caught in the crossfire."

"I'll kick that up the ladder, ma'am," the Soninke said noncommittally.

Oh well. It didn't particularly mind an audience, truth be told. It might remind General Orim exactly who he was dealing with, when we sat down to have a little chat.

"Dismissed, Lieutenant Tomuka," I said, spurring Zombie the Second ahead.

A single line of Gallowborne broke from formation to follow me as I headed for my legate. Even when surrounded by other legionaries they didn't feel I was quite protected enough, evidently. Nauk was in hushed conversation with one of his officers, a Taghreb with the marks of a commander on her armour.

"Nauk," I said, interrupting him. "Scout reports."

The orc turned to me after clasping his second-in-command on the shoulder.

"Three barricades," he said. "About a hundred people on each. We're assuming the rest will be inside the palace."

I hummed. It would be smarter to wait until we had some flanking positions before making an assault, but I wanted this done with as quickly as possible. These people were too unimportant for me to be able to spare much effort on them. I doubted the enemy had anything in their employ that would be able to handle an assault by legionaries, anyway.

"I'll take the central one with the Gallowborne," I said. "Staggered hit on the other two."

"You're hogging the good stuff, Cat," the orc complained.

"Well, this ought to make up for it," I said, "If they don't surrender, Legate, I want you to *make a point*."

"We flagging them as not citizens, then?" he pressed eagerly.

By Legion regulations, Imperial citizens – even those in rebellion – could not have their corpses eaten after death, unless their will specifically stated otherwise. Even at the height of the Liesse Rebellion, the people who'd taken up arms had qualified as citizens. The Tower, after all, claimed all of Callow as its own.

"By my authority as the acting head of the Ruling Council, I strip any hostile forces inside Laure of their citizenship," I replied after a moment.

That was a way to get my point across, sure enough. Corpses with their faces chewed off and missing limbs might well appal most of the city, but it would send a message to the High Lords: *fuck with Callow under my watch and I'll take the gloves off*. It was about time they started catching up to that truth. The Taghreb

commander paled at my words, but she knew better than to comment. I glanced at Tribune Farrier.

"Muster your men, John," I ordered. "We're taking the lead."

"Gladly, Countess," he said, a hard look on his face.

Farrier had never thought much of Praes, and though he'd come to have a rough sort of camaraderie with the men and women of the Fifteenth his opinion of the Empire at large had taken a sharp nosedive when news of what had happened in Laure spread. He'd made it abundantly clear in the past that he followed *me*, not the Tower, and he'd not changed that stance by an inch in the months since that declaration. Nauk's cohort split to allow us passage and I led my personal retinue forward at a brisk pace. It wasn't long before we entered the pale facades and sprawling gardens of the Whitestone, and from there it was only a matter of time before we ran into the barricade.

The Ruling Council's hirelings had picked a good spot. I'd give them that much. They'd propped up crates and carts between an iron fence surrounding a garden and the high wall of what must have once been a noble's compound. The avenue was narrower than most, and I could see from atop Zombie that even at this hour the barricade bristled with pikes and crossbowmen. The latter of those weapons was as clear an indication of the origin of the soldiers as the skin colours I could discern in the dark: Callowans and most other Calernian nations fielded bows, not crossbows. And certainly not the lever-action crossbows whose designs were the work of the goblins of Foramen's Imperial Forges. Household troops, then. Not mercenary pushovers. I set Zombie at a trot, gesturing for the Gallowborne to stay behind as I closed in on the barricade. I could see the enemy soldiers stirring, crossbows being brought to the fore.

"Disperse, citizen," a man's voice called out. "By order of the Ruling Council of Callow, this section of the city is closed off."

A Taghreb had risen atop a crate, and he'd been the one to speak. An older man, scarred and with a curved scimitar at his hip. He looked liked he could be Aisha's uncle, though one from the ugly side of the family.

"There is no Ruling Council," I said. "Only two Wastelanders who illegally seized power and botched it so badly they have to hide from rioters."

"General Orim acceded to our demands to stay out of this area," the man replied impatiently. "You will be written up for disobeying orders if you press us any further."

I snorted.

"Look at the symbol on the shields of the men behind me," I said. "Do they look like they're part of the Fifth?"

A golden noose on a field of red was what he'd find. My personal retinue had not existed for long but there were few people in Callow who wouldn't recognize their heraldry. They'd made something of an impression, in Marchford and Liesse.

"Gallowborne?" he said. "The Hells are you doing this far north? No matter. The Ruling Council passed a decree forbidding entrance into the city to any legion but the Fifth. Your presence here goes against the Tower's law. Your general should fuck off south to play with the fairies."

"If Juniper was in command, we wouldn't be talking," I said. "You'd be eating your third volley. But I'm a soft touch. You get a chance to surrender before I string you up above the city gates."

The Taghreb laughed.

"And who do you think you are, girl?"

Huh. It'd been a *while* since the last time someone hadn't recognized me. Or basically fed me a line just asking for a witty retort. If I'd been in a better mood, I might just have toyed with him a bit. I wasn't. I wasn't angry either, just... irritated. That I had to lose hours dealing with the greed and stupidity of short-sighted fools when I should have been dealing with the monsters torching my homeland.

"Countess Catherine Foundling of Marchford," I said. "The Squire."

"And I'm the fucking Empress," the Taghreb mocked. "I'm just hiding the tits under the-"

I called on my Name, forming a spear of shadows, but something... bled into it. The power I'd gotten from Winter, the one that had grown tendrils into my soul when I became the Duchess of Moonless Nights. I abandoned that working and turned my will to the enemy commander instead. Shadows coiled around his neck, coming into existence, and there was a sharp sound. His head popped off his body and fell to the ground where it shattered into shards of ice. Well, that was new. Not worth having my heart literally ripped from my chest for, but it would come in useful.

"I've got another half-dozen titles," I continued calmly. "I won't bother to list them out. Now that idiocy killed your commander, who's in charge?"

"*Fire*, you fools," a woman's voice hissed. "Before she kills us all."

"The hard way it is, then," I sighed. "GALLOWBORNE, FORWARD!"

I formed a panel of shadow in front of me to catch the crossbow bolts, frowning at how easy it was. It didn't take any less power than it had before, I noted as the steel-tipped projectiles thudded into the makeshift shield. The well was just deeper than it used to be, deeper than it *should* be in a transitional Name like mine. Weaker than the kind of power I'd felt in the Duke of Violent Squalls, but not by that much – and wasn't that a terrifying thought? That kind of a gain never came without a cost, and I wasn't sure what I'd be paying with. If I ended up losing my soul because of fae shenanigans, I was going to be *pissed*. I just knew that stealing it back would be horrendously difficult, and I didn't have the time to spare to murder my way back into a semblance of humanity with all the other things going on. The enemy didn't bother shooting at me again after it was made abundantly clear they might as well be aiming at a wall, instead aiming their crossbows at the raised shields of my retinue.

I wasn't having any of that.

Dismissing the shield, I called on the power a third time. I'd shot bolts of shadow out of my hand before, and even learned how to strengthen or weaken them: this time I poured as much as I could into the working without it blowing up in my face, and loosed the projectile at the foot of the barricade's centre. The resulting explosion of wood and screams had me blink in surprise: I'd essentially pulverized three feet of barricade and assorted people with a gesture, and I wasn't even winded yet. *Yeah, definitely sitting down with Masego to have a talk about this.*

"Plug the gap!" the same woman's voice called out.

"Fire," Tribune Farrier's voice calmly ordered.

My own people's volley did little more damage than the sporadic fire they'd been subjected to – it was hard to hit a target holed up behind cover, even a panicking one – but it did what it had been meant to: suppress the enemy before the first rank hit them. I spurred Zombie forward into the gap I'd created, where the enemy was trying to form a line, and didn't even bother to call on my Name. My warhorse trampled his way through the fledgling formation and I spilled a man's brains on the ground with a measured stroke of my sword. There must have been ten soldiers around me, but they were tired and scared and facing a Named. Well all knew how it was going to end. Within heartbeats the Gallowborne were at my sides, methodically butchering their way through the Praesi troops. Pikes and crossbows were no match for veteran sword and board infantry like my retinue on the best of days, and even less since I'd taken to occasionally drilling them myself. The skirmish was quick and brutally one-sided, the back of the enemy formation beginning to run for it before the front



even collapsed. I waited for us to have seized the barricade properly, then picked out Farrier from the crowd.

"Tribune," I said. "Send a runner to Nauk. The centre is secure. The Fifteenth is to advance on every front and converge on the Royal Palace. Leave a detachment behind for our wounded."

I glanced at the rest of my personal guard. They were not, by the looks of it, particularly thrilled by the victory. There'd been nothing to this fight but whimpers and dead men. Like the seasoned professionals they were, the Gallowborne went around finishing off the enemy wounded as the meat of the cohort resumed formation.

"The rest of you, with me," I said. "Let's get this over with."

I led and they followed. The outer gates to the Royal Palace were wide open, and its grounds freshly tread. Evidently the runners from our last engagement had made it here ahead of us. The gardens were similarly deserted but up ahead I could see where the remaining forces of the Ruling Council were waiting for us. Crossbows were peeking out of windows on both levels of the main hall and the large gates in front were closed. Probably barricaded from behind. I trotted up ahead again, and ignored the hesitant hail from a window to the left. Cloak streaming behind me, I guided Zombie to the bottom of the marble steps and stared at the massive bronze gates.

"**Break,**" I said.

My Name flared even as the metal crumpled like parchment under my eyes, falling apart with a sound like a gong being struck. In the hall behind, two dozen soldiers stood shaking and pale.

"Surrender," I ordered. "I will not tell you twice."

As the Gallowborne silently spread their ranks behind me, soldiers began dropping the swords. In the windows crossbows dipped as men retreated and the poor fools in front of me knelt. Farrier came to my side and I addressed him without looking.

"The two usurpers will be inside," I said. "Secure them."

"By your will, Countess," he murmured.

I got off my mount and offered the reins to one of my soldiers, dismissing John's strong suggestion that I take an escort with a sharp gesture. They would be more hindrance than help where I was headed. Ignoring the terrified soldiers as I strode into the palace, I headed straight for the heart of what had once been the seat of power for the Fairfax dynasty – and the Albans before them. The room where the Ruling Council had once held its sessions was deserted, and the door to it locked. Nothing the

strength of the Named couldn't force open. It was evident by even a short look that the luxurious room hadn't been used in some time. The two Wastelanders must actually have been arrogant enough to have used the former throne room for their audiences. Idly taking off my helmet and shaking loose the hair under it, I set down the chunk of goblin steel on the table with a loud thunk. My gauntlets soon followed it, thrown carelessly as I headed for the chair at the head of the table. I paused there, my hand on the arm of it.

"I've felt you looking since the moment I left Arcadia," I spoke into the gloom. "Come out."

The woman slipped out of the deeper shadows in the corner, idly strolling to the seat on the other end and plopping herself down on it.

"Evening, Squire," the Thief said. "Fancy meeting you here."

---

*danh3107*

Cat is getting shit /DONE/. Now that's what I'm talking about!

---

I'll perhaps say a blasphemy, but all things considered I like the reaction episoded more. Maybe Wildbow's writing has spoiled me, but an other person's point of view is a thing that epic victories such as in Liesse desperately need. I was even somewhat disappointed when Augur's prediction interrupted Klaus Papenheim in the middle of his asesment of the rebellion, since he had just dismissed Squire as a secondary villain sent by Black Knight to hold back the Exiled Prince, so he'd have no good explanation for Black's stretching the duration of the rebellion. He'd probably just tell that Black Knight's getting too sure in his victory, and file the Prince's death under consequences of having to fight three Named, but it would still help not to be immersed in Catherine's perspective too much. It's part of why I wait for every first Wednesday of the month on the edge of my seat.

*nerfworld*

Quick showdown

*nehemiahnewell*

These aren't real opponents, on a narrative level. Or even a practical one. They haven't successfully consolidated anything.

*letouriste*

the true opponent here is thief and cat know that well;) ok "opponent" is kind of a stretch given this is obvious they both want close a deal

*Darkening*

I find it very odd seeing Thief confronting Cat face to face. I'm pretty confident Cat could take Thief apart without half trying if it came to a straight fight. Soooo. What's Thief got planned :/. An alliance against Diabolist maybe? I'd bet the thieves' guild has members inside Liesse, and Thief could probably be a pretty nice asset for any sneaky business needed. Cat's named team \*has\* been missing an Assassin equivalent to truly match the calamities.

*nerfworld*

Got my money on cat killing thief and robber getting the name

*Author Unknown*

Robber as an assassin would be awesome.

"Squires Assassin has struck again."

"He has, had, plenty of enemies. How do you know it was Squire?"

"All the silverware is missing."

[Luxuria Tenebris](#)

"All the silverware is missing."

That can still be Thief

*The Archdevil*

"All the silverware is missing"

I'm pissing myself.

*Shequi*

Cat could definitely kill Thief in a straight fight, which is why Thief would never give her a straight fight.

*George*

Why would there be a straight fight, though? I'm pretty sure Thief could still escape. Something like this isn't how a Thief dies; a Thief dies when they get caught.

*sheer\_falacy*

I love Cat ruminating on just how darn inconvenient it would be to lose her soul. Ah, villains.

Also, these guys really are a special kind of stupid to rebel like this. Like, I'm kind of astounded that they were able to reach any kind of balance with Orim – it seems like even without a Named, proper troops could ruin these guys. There really was no possible way for them to survive this.

*Imagination*

Remember, it's not just the usurpers and the legion in the city, there's a hell of a lot of townsfolk as well. And the townsfolk are NOT happy about this.

Orim has 4000 soldiers, but he has to police the entire city and maintain the rule of law while the usurpers only have to hold the important entrances. If Orim diverts too many of his soldiers, well, that's what all the riots were.

*letouriste*

they would have succeed this with the money;)  
they lost everything because of thief.also,maybe they could have made a deal with malicia when the city calmed a little.  
they didn't expected cat to come so quickly,or even come at all.

*mupi*

Looked at from Orim's perspective, the 'usurpers' are merely continuing the Praesi tradition; thus without some kind of direct word from Authority (ie, Black or the Dread Empress), he's unlikely to actively work to thwart them. With Cat back in the picture as Squire, he'd be reluctant to cross Black, and thus likely to (at least reluctantly) follow her orders as well.

*Spinner335*

Damn, that was awesome, by the way does anyone else think that Robber is going to kill Thief and in doing so somehow steal her name?

*Warren Peace*

That sure seems to be a popular idea around here. I don't see it though, I think Thief is pretty secure in her Name. Besides, as we've already seen, Robber isn't inclined to attack Thief in the slightest

*Imagination*

I feel like this statement embodies Cat's entire mentality when it comes to people messing with Callow.

[Frank Baumgarten](#)

Hello, i was wondering (since i prefer to read on my kindle instead of a screen) if there is a ebook version of this available? Or if anyone else is interested in one?

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All right, I'm back from my third reread and it's as good time as any to bring up a subject I've been thinking about for a long time: Akua Sahelian is an unreliable narrator that makes shit up more often than not (at least when she's thinking about her plans).

She's not a person whose words can be trusted easily in the first place; if her first reaction to the fae invasion is any indication, her instinct is to put up a poker face and pretend everything is going according to the plan. However, she also seems to think that way.

Back in Book 1's epilogue Heiress regrets that she now has to be at cross-purposes with him, since Catherine became a Squire instead of her and so should be removed (also believing that Black is too pragmatic to hold a grudge, implying he has to gain something from siding with her that is worth losing his chosen apprentice). Her master plan is foreshadowed in the same episode as something that would allow her to take over the Creation through the Name she'd transition into.

Later, in Coup de Théâtre, Akua makes a couple of amusing mistakes like dismissing Scribe as non-threatening and talking with the Bard (in the same breath with thinking about her words being lesser form of Speaking), but more importantly, she starts articulating her running theme of trying to bring back ye olde evil ways while calling Malicia the reason that the Empire stagnates.

In the second epilogue Heiress states that she never intended to kill Squire, and that she wasn't going to deal with Lord Black from anything but a position of power. Also, she's calling the nemesis plan a work of two years, when she stated in Coup de Théâtre that she's been setting up the pattern of three for a year, but I'm writing it off as a typo.

In the current book most contradictions are so far ideological in nature, so Akua is probably doesn't really lie to herself as much as she's keeping to the ideology she's been raised in. Still, I'm gleefully expecting the moment when she notices that even the phrasing she used for describing the Praesi dream, "to always

look forward", is the same she used for Malicia, and she's the one who's been held back by the calcified institutions.

*Feedback*

Robber is no Thief material. That is too subtle, too silent for him. He does not steal, he plunders, he robs.

*nerfworld*

That is stealing, i mean there the black and white knights so "thief" is just the good version of the dastardly robber

*haihappen*

Oh Robber, ye nameworthy piece of insubordinate death. What name shall you get?

Bandit? nah, sounds like some highwayman stuff.

Brigant? too tame.

Predator? hmm, close, getting somewhere...

Raider! (Or Reaver) How about that?

Perhaps with a nice shady adjective?

Shady Raider!

*MagnaMalusLupus*

@haihappen From what we have seen so far, all villainous names are single words, with the sole exception of Black Knight (which exists as counterpart to White Knight) where as all Good names we have seen are two words, with neutrals trending towards one word. The only possible exception to the two name hero thing that we have seen so far is the Paige, who might have had an adjective we just weren't told, or more likely was a Good aligned neutral, like Hunter.

*The Archdevil*

Dread Emperor/Empress. That is a name, not just a title.

*MagnaMalusLupus*

@The Archdevil the actual Name associated with the Dread Emperor/ess is actually Tyrant, which has been mentioned several times.

[erraticerrata](#)

That is incorrect. Tyrant has been used as a gender-neutral shorthand, since it's an archaic version of the Name, but the Name is Dread Emperor/Empress.

*MagnaMalusLupus*

I stand corrected by WoG and my theory lies dead; maybe as a contrast to the Good King/Queen, but that feels flimsy.

*Blinks*

I dunno, thief would seem to be more of an inbetween. Much like Ranger, can go either way.

*ALKATYN*

Typo:

"Pikes and crossbows were no match for veteran sword and board infantry like my retinue on the best of days, and even less since I'd taken to occasionally drilling them **\*\*myself\*\***"

*Bubba HoTep*

Typo:

I didn't particularly mind an audience, truth be told. It might remind General Orim exactly who he was dealing with, when we sat down to have a little chat.

*stevenneiman*

[Well->we] all knew how it was going to end."  
"even less since I'd taken to occasionally drilling them [myself->myself]."

*Hakurei06*

Hmm, do you think Catherine can just... **take** the treasury's contents from Thief?

*MagnaMalusLupus*

Maybe, but she might have to \*Take\* Thief's aspect to do so, and I really doubt she wants to give up \*Rise\* any sooner than is absolutely necessary.

*Hakurei06*

Borrowed power eventually turns on its wielder.

*ArkhCthuul*

Finally.she starts to.throw some winter stuff around, like.it.  
Still.would be good.to.actually.read her explain it.to someone  
other than Masimo, it's necessary for the narrative to do it some  
time, and the longer she waits...the more.troublesome.  
Still, being actually more.powerful than allowed is never good :p

*cmcd*

Another awesome chapter, thanks.

*Soronel Haetir*

Unless she can get the time shift under control I see the ability to open gates from Arcadia as being an extremely dangerous move. Okay, so you end up on the battlefield you wanted, but it's months too late, your allies have already been slaughtered.

*Nastybarsteward*

Could Robber become an evil replacement for the Hunter Name..?

Could we have a more goblin sounding Name maybe?

He is one of my favourite characters, something in me revels in the pure joy he gets from being the most vicious, nastiest, deadly, malicious, lil bastard out there, and the sheer depth of artistic creativity that he puts into his work.

True commitment. ;D

*Morgenstern*

"My horse stirred uneasily as the presence of an orc so close, but I stroked his neck until he calmed." (AT instead of "as")

But... wait a second... ZOMBIE THE SECOND \*stirs uneasily\* at the sight of an orc??? That doesn't make sense... Zombie is a meatsuit led along only by her will. No zombie horse should have such reactions any more, imho. o\_0

*Imagination*

That would be because Zombie II is still alive. It was mentioned at the end of book 2, I think.

*Morgenstern*

Oh dear. She really didn't turn it yet? Huh. Tender spots all over. Then I'll be waiting for the moment this comes back to bite her... ^^

*Cpt. Obvious*

No that's Zombie III or IV...

*Morgenstern*

And thanks a lot for the clarification. I was really stupefied for a second there.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)



What time shift? When Cat opened the Portal into Laure, Nauk was exulting that the trip only took three days. A trip that even at death-march speeds would conventionally have taken a month and a half. Unless something very untoward happens (like when Cat actually begins fighting the forces of Summer), I think we've seen the last of Squire coming off the loser due to Arcadian time distortions. Remember, the Winter King wants his agenda furthered. Cat and the Fifteenth ending up irrelevant to current events because they lost months while marching through a Portal that Cat opened is far too banal a failure to further anything the King wants.

*Lucas*

Great chapter. Thank you 😊

*Morgenstern*

After finally having read the whole chapter: ME LIKE. Cat is finally learning how to make an entrance ^^ And I really like her progression. She's getting closer. Poor Ali. Maddie will so like this – and then again, probably not. Hmmm...

*arancaytar*

... I thought orcs took great pride in eating their meat raw, actually.

*d0m1n1c*

I don't understand why she's against human sacrifice, but OK with ordering Orcs to eat people; her line last chapter about human sacrifice bleeding people like cattle seems contradictory with her embracing of Orc dietary custom.

[intermediarywebserial](#)

Ah, I get it. She can have good soldiers' faces eaten, but sacrifices of death-row inmates is too much. GG.

*Cpt. Obvious*

Me thinks people are trying to hard at being logical.

We all have illogical hangups. One of Catherine's just happen to be human sacrifice. In most modern societies murder is not considered acceptable. Yet death penalty is still accepted in some places even knowing that innocents has been and continues to be executed occasionally. The laws says that the death penalty is only to be used when there is no doubt the accused is guilty. And yet mistakes are made and innocent people are executed. Is that really not the same thing as murder?

If you go looking using nothing but logic there is a lot of things that fail to make sense. Cat having an aversion to human sacrifice while still not being above nailing people betraying her trust to crosses is just one more of those.

*Stürmchen*

"The well was just deeper than it used to be, deeper than it should be in a transitional Name like mine. "  
How about the Winter Knight

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## Chapter 20: Skew

*"An alliance of victors is like a hearth in summer."*  
– Julianne Merovins, tenth First Princess of Procer

I'd met a handful of heroes since I'd first become the Squire, and Thief was one of the harder ones to place. She was, quite blatantly, an egotist. Yet she lacked some of the traits that were common with the more arrogant heroes: both the Lone Swordsman and the Exiled Prince – the Prince in particular – had been almost unnaturally handsome. The appearance of a Named usually changed to reflect how they thought of themselves, after all. Yet Thief was not particularly good-looking, I noted as I studied her. Maybe two inches taller than me, she was a skinny woman with short dark hair and blue-grey eyes. The leathers she always wore had been cut for her frame, but weren't particularly tight: much like me, she'd have little to show for it if they were. Most of all, she lacked the *weight* to her presence that I'd come to associate with powerful Named. William, for all his flaws, had been able to mesmerize a room full of rebels with but a few words. I had a hard time imagining Thief ever doing the same.

"You sure you should have taken off that helmet?" the heroine smiled. "You've seen how costly a mistake that can be."

I withdrew my hand from the arm of the chair, and slowly sat down. The seat wasn't made for someone wearing plate, evidently, and it groaned under the weight of my armour.

"We going to play the threat game?" I asked bluntly. "Thief, I could have killed you with a hand tied behind my back last time we met. I've since murdered a demigod for power. We both know how that fight goes."

The other woman's eyes turned cold.

"A fair fight, maybe," she said. "I'm not in the habit of having those."

I snorted.

"And *I* am?" I replied. "Look, I'm as willing as tangle as the next villain but if I get an occasion to put a shot someone's back in the dark, I'm sure as Hells taking it."

"How remarkable," she sneered.

"Well, I *have* been spending a lot of time with goblins lately," I said. "But I gotta say that putdown's a little rich, coming from someone whose entire Name is about theft."

Thief smirked.

"Oh?" she said. "Is someone displeased their treasury's gone?"

"I am," I smiled thinly. "I'm about to have to find food and lodgings for at least a hundred thousand refugees while also running a military campaign and I don't have the funds for any of it."

"The Tower will shell out the gold," Thief dismissed.

"The Tower's putting down internal troubles, and I'm about to spit in its eye," I said. "It's not going to be giving me a single copper for the foreseeable future."

"Villains stabbing each other in the back at the first sign of trouble," the heroine grinned unpleasantly. "History does tend to repeat itself, doesn't it?"

"I'm not-" I began, then stopped. "Oh *fuck you*."

She blinked in surprise.

"Who do you think you are, exactly?" I asked.

"A heroine, *villain*," she replied.

"Someone tried to mind rape a city of a hundred thousand last year, Thief, and it sure as Hells wasn't anyone on my side," I barked. "You think being William's minion for a few months gives you a pass to be an asshole forever and still have the moral high ground? Think again."

"I spoke against that," Thief hissed.

"Words are wind," I said. "You could have taken a stand. You didn't. So much for heroism, eh?"

"I might have made mistakes," she said through gritted teeth. "I'll own up to that. But you know what I'm not, at least? A godsdamned collaborator."

My face blanked. I'd been called a traitor before. By a crowd in Summerholm, when I was fresh into my name, and by the Lone Swordsman in the months that followed. But it was the first time anyone had actually called me a collaborator to my face. No doubt quite a few people had thought it in the past, but I'd never actually heard it spoken out loud. It stung more than I would have liked, even now. Things with a grain of truth to them usually did.

"I took the path that damages Callow the least," I said.

"You took the path that involved selling your soul to the Hellgods," she replied flatly.

"I got a close look at the Hashmallim, in Liesse," I said. "I think you think your side's any gentler than mine, you've been listening to stories too much."

"My 'side' hasn't stolen an entire fucking kingdom," she snapped.

I shrugged.

"And what's it done to free it since?" I asked.

"It rebelled," Thief said. "And you murdered the people that did. I'm sure they felt very *saved*."

"You think putting a crown on Gaston Caen would have helped this country?" I said, leaning forward. "Gods, Thief, the man fled into exile before the first legion was in sight of Vale during the Conquest. He was a bloody coward and the First Prince owned him down to his toes."

"So you say," the heroine sneered.

"So the *facts* say," I coldly said. "You think she poured that much silver into a doomed rebellion so an old rival of the Principate could be restored? She wanted a western protectorate to push back Praes, that's all there was to it."

"Elizabeth of Marchford would have been queen," Thief said. "She would not have settled for that."

"You think she would have had a choice?" I pressed. "After Praes burned the land on the way out, who would have leant the coin and crops to keep Callow alive through the winter?"

"That would have been the Empire's fault," she hissed.

"Gods Below, am I tired of hearing about fault," I shouted.  
"Fault and blame and Good – none of it *fixes any of this*. If you want a solution, you deal with realities. With what exists, not the pretty little world that 'should be'. Praes would have acted in its interest, and that meant torching the country. Procer would have acted in its interests, which was making us a protectorate. Anyone who plans without acknowledging that isn't planning, they're lying to themselves. That's what I can't stand about the lot of you. Do you think doing the right thing is enough? Fuck you. I've had to bloody my hands to get this far, Thief. I didn't enjoy it, and some of the things I've done will haunt me to my grave. But the only clean victories are the ones in stories. Preach all you want, *I have gotten things done*."

I panted, out of breath, my tone quieted.

"Which of you pricks on the other side can say the same?" I asked.

"Sometimes you have to take a stand even if you know you can't win," she said.

"That's pride talking," I replied. "That's killing people for your principles, and I can't think of anything more selfish than that."

Thief laughed bitterly.

"You know, there's truth in what you say," she admitted. "But none of it would have mattered if you were a heroine."

I'd been at this game long enough that the surprise never made it to my face.

"William was never meant to lead," Thief said. "He was terrible at it. But I look at the party we had, and can't help but thing there was always supposed to be one. All of us were born in Callow, except for the Wandering Bard – and I'm not convinced she was supposed to be a part of it. One Named for every Calamity, if you'd been on the side of Good. And we've all seen what you can do with an uphill battle."

"I know them, the Calamities," I said. "I know what they can do better than most. It wasn't a fight that could be won."

"The Heavens have a way of evening odds," she said.

"Prayer is what people rely on when they've run out of plans," I replied. "I've no patience for it."

In this, at least, I was truly Black's successor.

"What you've built is collapsing," Thief said.

"By the end of the year, there will be no Praesi governor in Callow," I said.

"I'm not talking about the governors," she said. "I'm talking about the Ruling Council."

"It's done," I said tiredly. "I tried, it failed. Come sunup the two of them will be dead and I'm not surrendering that authority ever again."

The heroine frowned.

"You're naming yourself queen," she said.

"Vicequeen, most likely," I said. "A ceremonial title: I can't run the country if I'm waging war abroad, and it's become clear I'm not great at it anyway. I'll name a Governor-General to handle everything and keep power in name only. The Tower won't accept anyone but a villain at the head of Callow."

Thief stared at me for a long time.

"What do you want, Squire?" she said. "I thought you'd come here to threaten me or force a fight, but that's obviously not the case. Why are we here?"

"A tenth," I said.

The heroine blinked.

"What?"

"You get to keep a tenth of the treasury," I said. "The rest goes back in the vault."

"Are you trying to bribe me with coin already in my possession?" she asked.

"Bribe, no," I said. "I'm hiring the Guild of Thieves."

"We're not for hire," Thief said.

"Fine, I'm giving you a 'gift' for anticipated services, then," I grunted. "Do I need to wink, or are we on the same page?"

"That's not-" the heroine stopped before finishing her sentence. "What do you want to hire us *for*?"

"The Empress and Black have networks of informants forty years in the making, backed by the Legions of Terror," I said. "The First Prince has a hundred thousand battle-hardened veterans and the wealthiest nation on Calernian at her feet. If I want to play in the same league, I need talented people and I need them *now*. Your people are criminals, but they're criminals with presence in

every Callowan city and a fountain of foreign contacts. Right now I only have eyes in the Legions and the Wasteland – I'm blind everywhere else and it's already cost me."

"I'm a heroine," Thief reminded me.

"If William had stuck to killing criminals in the streets of Summerholm, I would have given him a salary and a godsdamned badge," I replied frankly. "I work with the monsters because they give me the means to do what I need to, not because I have any illusions about what they are. I don't fight heroes out of principle, Thief, I fight them because they keep trying to kill me and make a mess of Callow in the process."

"And if I don't cooperate?" she asked lightly, but her eyes betrayed how serious she was.

"This is the part where I say 'if you're not an asset, you're a liability', right?" I sighed. "I get back the treasury, is what I do, because I need it. And then as long as you stay out of my way, I will politely pretend you don't exist."

I smiled thinly.

"And I think you will," I continued. "Stay out of my way. It's not like you want any of my opponents to win instead: I'm the lesser evil. Besides, in case you hadn't noticed, there's wolves at the gates. I don't have the time or energy to spare on pointless pissing matches."

The Thief stared at me in silence. I met her eyes without flinching.

"Assassin tried to recruit me, when I first came into my Name," she suddenly said.

"I'm told he's a regular bundle of laughs," I replied.

"The conversation couldn't have lasted more than a quarter hour," Thief said. "To this day, I shiver when I think of it. That... *thing* was death made flesh."

I wasn't sure where she was headed with this, so I kept my peace.

"And yet," the heroine said, "I think you might just be the most dangerous villain I've ever met."

"You've never met Black," I said.

"It's not about power," Thief replied. "You make it easy to want to follow you. Because you make sense, because you get results. I should try to kill you tonight, because if I don't you might just damage Calernia beyond repair."

"Will you?" I asked.

Silence reigned.

"Baroness Kendal is still alive," Thief said. "She was wounded, but took refuge in the cathedral. The priests are hiding her."

I nodded slowly, then rose to my feet.

"I'll need the treasury back in the vault before I leave," I said.

"Minus our tenth," Thief smiled bitterly, looking up at the ceiling.

I made for the door, passing her by.

"Squire," she said. "No, Foundling now I suppose. If you ever become what you say you're fighting..."

"Then more dangerous people than you will be putting me down," I replied, and walked away.

I got the last word, I thought, largely because she had nothing to reply to that.

—

"Lady Squire," Orim the Grim greeted me.

He'd been sleeping until recently. I'd learned to tell the signs, with orcs – the voices got a little deeper, and they showed their teeth more often. The general was almost as tall as Hakram, who was unusually so for his kind, and his skin was of a yellow-green I'd only ever seen in goblins before. It was uncommon in the Lesser Steppes, I knew: almost all my legionaries from there were of a green so dark it looked like black. Of the man himself, I knew little. When it had become clear he'd remain one of the important people of Laure for the foreseeable future I'd asked my own orcs about him, but gotten only vague outlines. Juniper had told me he'd been chieftain of the Silent Men before Black recruited him halfway through the civil war, one of larger clans in the Lesser Steppes. Nauk had remembered he'd been known for his warring with the Deoraithe of the Wall, and all Hakram knew was that he'd once wiped out an entire smaller clan in a single night for having stolen some of his cattle. I wasn't surprised, considering the cognomen his legion had earned during the Conquest: *Exterminatus*.

The Fifth had been under Marshal Grem's command during his assault on the Wall, a campaign undertaken to make sure none of the Deoraithe would be with the army of Callow at the Fields of Streges. After taking one of the forts, Orim the Grim had put every soldier in it to the sword as keeping any prisoners would



have slowed his march. That had happened a long way from Laure, though. In the capital his reputation was as a fair but distant commander who would not hesitate to resort to violence if pushed. His open enmity with the late Governor Mazus had won him some esteem, since the Fifth's legionaries had made it a point to put the governor's men in their place whenever they could. I'd been raised to the sight of big armoured orcs punching the teeth out of city guard who overstepped, and it had gone a long way in teaching me to see greenskins were not the enemy. A long time ago, that. My ascension to the Ruling Council has not granted me any better insight into the man, since he'd withdrawn from any relation to it after ensuring the Fifth would not have to obey any orders from its members.

"General Orim," I replied.

The room in the barracks was almost bare, a sure sign the orc didn't use it regularly. In my experience greenskins like to decorate with trophies from victories anywhere they stayed longer than a few weeks. The Fifth's general staff was nowhere in sight: it seemed Orim had grasped that this wouldn't be that kind of meeting. Save for a table with a jug of some dark alcohol – almost empty by now – and two cups to accompany it, there was little of note here. I'd not been offered any of the drink, and had not asked: orcs drank liquor hard enough to leave holes in whatever it touched. Something about their stomachs taking to alcohol differently, Hakram had told me. As it happened said orc was seated at my side, across from the general. He polished off the rest of his cup and let out a pleased little sigh.

"Callowan drink just isn't the same," Adjutant said.

"They make passable wine in the north," the general replied amusedly. "But nothing close to *brannahal*."

My eyes narrowed. I did not recognize the word. It was from an older dialect of Kharsum, I thought, but aside from the part meaning fire I didn't recognize the rest. As for the mention of the north of Callow, I almost grimaced. 'Wine' to the north of Ankou was actually a heavily concentrated version of brandy made by farmers and cattle-herders out in the field. It was said that in a pinch it could be used instead of lamp oil.

"Deadhand tells me you're to handle order in the city," Orim suddenly said.

Coming from a Praesi, the way he'd been called by his nickname instead of his Name would have been an insult. From an orc, though, the meaning was different. The Clans didn't really have titles aside from chieftain. Even their rare mages did not get much distinction from the mass. Orcs who distinguished themselves in some way earned a nickname, and for someone not sharing a clan

to use it was a mark of respect. Evidently Adjutant had made some inroads here while I'd been busy in the city.

"I have the usurpers in my custody," I said. "I'll be executing them publicly come morning and re-establishing a civilian government afterwards."

"We're under martial law," Orim gravelled.

"We don't have the soldiers to waste to enforce that," I replied calmly. "I need you with General Istrid as soon as possible."

"She knows the people here, general," Hakram said. "If she says the peace will hold, it'll hold."

The older orc conceded the point with a grunt.

"Where is the Fifteenth headed?" he asked.

"I've sent Juniper south," I said. "She'll be gathering additional men as she goes."

"She should be marching to Vale," the orc bluntly stated. "To put her soldiers under her mother's command."

"That won't be happening," I replied frankly. "The forces will remain divided for the campaign."

"Ruling Council's dead," Orim said. "And it didn't have authority of the Legions when it was still breathing."

"I am the Squire," I coldly said. "Her Dread Majesty is preoccupied with Wolof and Black is abroad. My orders are not to be gainsaid."

The general's face went stony.

"Knightsbane's fought two wars and a hundred skirmishes," he growled. "So have I. What do you have under your belt, three half-baked battles? The soldiers should go to Vale."

"I could make this about power," I replied idly. "We both know that using a sliver of power I could order you to drown yourself and you would. But I don't need to. I have information you don't. The chain of command is clear. *Do it.*"

The orc was twice my size. Scarred, bursting with muscle and capable of popping a man's neck off his shoulders with his bare hand – and yet he knew better than to try to loom. Orim glanced at Hakram and saw only ice there. Adjutant had picked his side long ago. The general scoffed, but did not push any further.

"You'll have orders for General Istrid," he said, tacitly offering to carry them.

"Juniper is already in contact with her by scrying," I said. "The Knightsbane will be marching on Holden as soon as your men arrive."

The older orc frowned.

"We're pretty sure the fae can portal from one stronghold to the other," he said.

"They can," I confirmed. "We'll be splitting their forces with multiple assault so you don't bear the brunt of it."

"And you think they'll just let General Juniper leisurely stroll south?" he sceptically asked. "They've raiding parties out."

"And the Diabolist has an army out in the field," I said. "So far the Summer Court has refrained from hitting Liesse. I've sent two Named down there to remedy to that. Akua Sahelian will have to be dealt with after the fae are repelled, and I don't want her forces fresh when it happens."

Apprentice had been less than pleased at being partnered with Archer, but sending either one on their own would have been a disaster.

"My detachment will be stabilizing Laure, then we'll move on," I continued. "To Denier. I mean to free Marshal Ranker's legions if I can."

Orim's dark eyes lingered on my skin, the visible reminder that I was at least half-Deoraithe by blood.

"Kegan's not to be trusted," he said. "She was never comfortable under the Tower – the Fairfaxes allowed her to run things the way she liked without even tribute."

"I know what she wants," I said. "That gives me leverage. And twenty thousand men is nothing to sneer at, if they can be pointed in the right direction."

"Rely on them and you'll get a knife in the back," he gravelled.

"The correct word is use, not rely," I said. "When can I expect you to move out?"

He mulled over it.

"Two days," he said. "Supplies are mostly ready, but I want them prepared for a hard march."

I nodded.

"We should be gone, by then," I said. "Until we are you can liaise with Adjutant if you need anything. I'll be busy pacifying the capital."

He saluted, reluctantly, and I pushed back my chair.

"Hakram?" I prompted.

"I'll be in touch, general," Adjutant said.

We left together. I still had over a bell before dawn, by my reckoning, but I'd need to sleep at some point. And when I woke up, I'd have to make sure the largest city in Callow didn't start rioting the moment my legionaries left. Joy.

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*danh3107*

Making deals with Thief seems like a recipe for betrayal, but considering who Cat has dealt with...

She's less than an amateur, hopefully this plays out well.

*agumentic*

She's still a hero, even if neutralish, so she won't stab someone in the back after a deal, not without believing it'll be for a greater good. And Cat is extremely good at making it look like loyally working for her is for a greater good, more so because she believes and works for it herself.

*JackbeThimble*

I don't think there's any hero rule against deception. Even if there are hero rules I'm pretty sure she's already breaking several by committing to any kind of long-term collaboration with the Evil Empire.

*Duckie*

Not to mention her name is Thief... Even an honorable thief still bends the rules to fit their goals. Other wise they wouldn't be a Thief. Deception and rule bending and stealing is what a Thief does. Robin Hood is considered a hero of sorts, but in the end all he did was steal the wealth of the rich. It doesn't matter what he did with it, because in the end he still stole it and thats regardless a bad thing to do. Basically i'm saying if any Hero Name can use deception and rule bending and still be considered good, its the Thief.

*therealgridlock*

Technically Robin hood was the (duke?) Of the area, he actually owned the land, the sheriff was embezzling those funds against the king appointed ruler's wishes.

This is often overlooked in the telling to just emphasize silly communist propaganda, but the fact of the matter is that Robin hood had a mandate to see to the proper management of that land and it's people, and he was fully within his rights to stop a corrupt sheriff from illegally levying heavy taxes against his people.

Believe it or not feudal law wasn't all one way, the peasants still had rights, and could seek redress if they wanted to.

Don't believe communist propaganda.

*Casscabbage*

Yeah, you're right. The feudal system was so great. Anyone saying otherwise is a dirty commie.

*agumentic*

It's not that there's rules against deception, it's more that the stories don't really go that way. There's stories about heroes outsmarting villains, there's stories about heroes toeing the line of honorable things, there's even stories about heroes agreeing to work with villains to undermine them. But, I really can't remember the story that goes: "And then the hero stabbed the villain in the back, after dealing with them in good faith and villain never going against letter or spirit of their word".

Thief is the hero that can bend the rules of "good" and "bad" a little, but it's because they still work for what they think is good, in the end. And Cat makes it look like working with her fits this line of thinking far better than working against her.

Still, I am not completely discounting the possibility of betrayal – Thief can decide that Cat took one step to far, or after a big talk from some hero – say, White Knight – she decides that working with Cat is wrong, but I mark it as unlikely.

*corrado alamanni*

This is what i want to see heroes who both help and moderate her

*xacual*

So Archer is still working with Cat and the Fifteenth? I hadn't really expected that without some kind of scene saying so. I mean the Winter Court thing was handled, so I thought there would be some scene with Cat talking Archer around to helping with Diabolist and the Summer Court.

[zaddek](#)

I actually thought something similar until I reread the most recent chapters. I'm pretty sure that Archer was actually sent to help Cat with the Summer Court but got pulled into the Winter mess when she met up with Cat in Arcadia. Winter probably hadn't even attacked yet when the Empress called in the marker with Ranger to get Cat a fae expert. So I'm pretty sure Winter was a freebie for Cat.

*JackbeThimble*

I doubt it took much persuading to get Archer to go after Diabolist. She has a serious grudge against Akua for getting Hunter killed in Marchford and a big part of her motivation seems to be trying to prove that she's just as badass as Ranger so generally speaking she probably tends to move towards any big fight she sees brewing, whether or not she knows or cares what side she's on.

*Nairne*

Plus Archer did mention that Cat is interesting (sort of, I think the exact wording was a little different).

*Shequi*

And Cat is suddenly single, and Archer is a terrible flirt...

*Nicole Weaver*

We already know how independant Ranger's people are. Archer fulfilled her orders and now seems a bit curious what cat is up to. As well as enjoying herself dealing with the monney wrenches cat throws in everyone's way. I expect Archer to stick around until things get boring again 😊

[Euodiachloris](#)

And, hey: more Fae and Tower politics to stymie on top of a good fight. What more could a girl who doesn't like either ask for? 😊

I can see why Archer has decided that sticking to the sociopolitical grenade that Squire currently is is good for a laugh.

*Nicole*

Euodiachloris, right? That and she seems to consider Cat a potential conquest. The 15th is just a barrel full of fun for her 😊

[boballab](#)

If you haven't noticed Cat is forming her own version of the Calamities and their Names are mostly transitional. Cat's Squire to Black's Knight, Adjutant and Captain, Apprentice and Warlock, Archer and Ranger. Robber might be the counter part to Assassin since that is what he has been doing for Cat and Aisha might be the counter to Scribe (Remember she has been keeping Cat's history and is one of her spymasters).

*JackbeThimble*

RIght now it looks like Thief is probably the counterpart to assassin with her and Adjutant sharing the role of scribe

*Cpt. Obvious*

Thieves may or may not be murderers, assassins are. So far i don't get Assassin vibes from Thief. Remember that she infiltrated Liesse, and pulled a knife on Robber to stop the goblins, minions of Evil, from killing the Praesi guards, more minions of Evil. That doesn't make me feel like Thief has the making of a assassin in her.

In her own name she does seem quite capable. Remember that she was able to steal a fleet of ships and barges only to throw them down in front of the gates of Liesse. That's a pretty powerful ability if used intelligently.

*JackbeThimble*

Have we ever covered what happens when a hero or villain switches sides? either intentionally or as a result of falling/redemption? If there's some special consequence for a hero acting evil I feel like Thief is risking it here.

*BryceWilliam*

I think with a Name like Thief you get to toe the line a little bit.

*Jonnnney*

Heros and villains can work together long term. Black once referenced the fact that one of the world powers that helped defeat Triumphant was run by both a hero and a villain. As long as they mostly keep to their own moral code there isn't going to be any good vs evil side switching.

*RoflCat*

Given how Cat took the Role of a hero in Sword in Stone against William, my guess is nothing so long as it doesn't goes against their Name.

Thief, like Squire, seem to be a Name that can go either way (or to give another example, Ranger herself is 'neutral' but she took side with Evil during Conquest)

Not to mention that even if she is a Noble Thief, what Cat is having her do should still be within the acceptable range of her Name (gather info for the benefit of Callow)

*George*

Didn't Catherine lose power for a while when she went outside her Role? Same thing for Thief, I imagine, though her Role is much less about doing the 'right thing' than a role like White Knight.

*alb*

awesome chapter, it gets better and better! Thanks for writing

*JackbeThimble*

There's no way Malicia's going to stand for this, if the Imperial governorships are abolished it's not just a massive insult that the Empress can't let stand without losing face, it will seriously decrease the empress's own power over Praes since so much of her influence among their nobility comes from controlling the lucrative governorships. it will also sever the biggest institutional bond between the two countries, essentially turning them into de facto separate states, and remove the only real incentive the Praesi nobles have for supporting the occupation in the first place. Either Cat will have to offer some kind of compromise (maybe they could give landed noble titles to Legion veterans or a mix of veterans and younger praesi nobles) or war is basically guaranteed.

*Kilimandaros*

Currently Malicia has no way of waging war with Catherine, doing so would pretty much lose her Callow for near future. Between Calamities abroad, nobles fighting in Wolof, First Prince lurking behind the border, Deoraithe mobilizing the troops, Summer Fae raiding south of Callow and Diabolist pretty much rebelling against the Tower she can't antagonize the Squire. Catherine is her best shot at restoring order in Callow. Imperial Governors pretty much all died or are going to die (Akua) so Catherine declaration doesn't really mean anything – even if Ruling Council was to be re-establish Catherine had the power (4 out of 7 votes) to avoid making any new Praesi governor anyway.



Noble titles for Legion veterans is pretty much sure way to antagonize Truebloods, so I can't see how it would work for Malicia. They fought against making orcs from steppes nobles, so how would making orcs, goblins and Callowans nobles make any favour with Truebloods or Moderates?

*JackbeThimble*

The war isn't going to last forever. Catherine may be the man on the ground now but she has to reckon with what malicia will do once the war ends. The Legions aren't all orcs, goblins or Callowans. Not even most, there's plenty of Taghreb or Soninke especially among the officers, not that what the Truebloods want is going to matter once since they're about to be exterminated.

*lennymaster*

If you have not noticed, the Truebloods are becoming more and more obsolete. Malica even managed to bleed the most powerfull and richest, their inoffical leader, Diabolists mother, dry of funds and support over the last twenty years and is still working to get more and more power into the hands of institutions. Replacing them by lifting veterans up to nobility from the legions might well be Malicas plan. After all the Preasi thriving to never look back and always reach higher makes it impossible to entirly wipe out the station of noblity, but weaken it and fill it with loyal subjects, why not?

*George*

A Catherine who is going against Malicia doesn't have four votes on the Ruling Council, because Malicia's puppet was one of her four.

That's ignoring that the composition would be renegotiated, of course.

*JackbeThimble*

George: That's the point, Catherine just said she's going to abolish the ruling council the old fashioned way, essentially declaring herself the sole power in Callow without any clearance from the Empress.

*sheer\_falacy*

Malicia's puppet wasn't one of Cat's 4 votes on the council. It was her, Black (who delegated to her), and the two Callowans. Then there were the two Praesi who decided to commit complicated suicide and Malicia's representative.

*Jonnnney*

If it means the tributes continue to flow, callow kneels, and no heroes pop up to usurp the tower's rule I'm thinking she's fine with it. Also if you think Malicia didn't see this as a possibility then you REALLY don't understand the name of Dread Empress.

*JackbeThimble*

The tributes don't continue to flow if she lets her vassals get overmighty. If one of your subjects gathers a massive personal army, controls the entire civilian government of one of your largest provinces and has much more support from the people there than you do then they have the power to rebel any time they want, no ruler can tolerate this situation for long if they want to remain a ruler.

*jonnnney*

Yes, IF Catherine rebelled then Malicia would put a stop to it real damn quick, but Catherine is the disciple of the Black Knight and Cat knows the costs of going against the calamities. Even more if Catherine is going to get her way she is going to have to agree to several concessions from the Dread Empress. Once Cat starts to renege on any of the concessions Malicia will know Cat is rebelling.

Also, you are failing to see how Malicia benefits from strengthening Catherine. A strong Callow in subservience to the Tower via a disciple of the Black Knight is terrifying to the High Lords. Once the Diabolist is gone the Praesi are going to have to decide whether they want to focus on fighting the reforms which weakens the Empress or strengthening the Empress in order to keep a hold on Callow.

*Nicole Weaver*

Well, we know from Black's tutelage the Tower basically wants Callow for its ability to export food. If Cat can convince them she is loyal to the Tower, perhaps they can set up a prisoner-for-food program that gives the Tower what it wants and lets it focus on its current enemies.

Its also important to remember that Cat has an intermediate title. If things go south, she just might decide Empress is her next step.

*George*

I think powerful Names require you to fit yourself to them to be claimed; I don't think Catherine could be Dread Empress and not be more Evil than she is right now. I don't think she

could successfully claim that Name then go on to successfully make things better for Callow long term.

*Cpt. Obvious*

Necroposting... Yeah I know it's considered bad form, so sue me.

It's been shown that both Black and the Malicia HD have plans for Cat. But it's also been hinted that they are not the same plans.

It appears that Black is looking to be replaced as the Black Knight. His plans are long term and meant to keep on ticking over long after he is gone. He has turned himself in to the boogeyman, his name being the stuff nightmares are built on. And as feared as he is amongst the enemies the Praesi nobles fears him even more. As they see it the only reason that he hasn't wiped out all Praesi nobles is because Malicia has stopped him from doing so.

But he see a future where the nobles are inconsequential and the Empire is stable, and that future has no place for Amadeus as the Black Knight. He, and the rest of the calamities are too monstrous for that future to have any chance of surviving. Instead he is grooming Cat so she will be his successor, and while fully capable of taking over all of the responsibilities of being the Black Knight she will be a uniting force not because everyone is deathly afraid of her but because she is a straight arrow whose word can be trusted once given. Sure, stab her in the back if you want, just know she is considering death as a less than optimal state and has bullied angels, the spear point of the gods above, into resurrecting her. Also Robber tends to go hyperactive when she dies, and even amongst goblins he is considered to be something of a homicidal maniac. But he will probably be saving you for her to take care of once she gets better.

As scary as he intend for her to be she will still be someone most Praesi will be looking up to. After all she has come all this way going from not knowing anything about her parents and being brought up in an orphanage in Callow to pacifying Callow and rooting out the treasonous nobles.

Add to that the Dread Empress rising from serving wench to the longest ruling Dread Empress of the greatest empire of creation, at least as far as the people of Praes knows.

These two will be evidence that it is possible to better your station in life. This jams with the Praesi drive to better their situation. And for once the dreams are not only for the nobles.

What Malicia's plans are is harder to guess, but it almost seems she's grooming Cat to take the throne. After all giving Cat stewardship of a bleeding citty, the fifteenth and making her set up the council for her old hometown are things that will teach Cat the art of ruling. The Black Knight certainly isn't the Name of a ruler, while Dread Empress most certainly is.

While they are both grooming Cat there is little chance that they are looking at the same endgame plan, and so far none of them has asked Cat what she thinks about it. And given the way plans, others and her own, tend to crumple whenever she's involved I feel it's a safe bet that there are going to be some interesting times ahead for those who survive, or get resurrected or turned into undead abominations of nature, Cat doesn't discriminate the undead..

*Shequi*

Cat hasn't said she's abolishing the Imperial governorships; she's said she's just not going to let Praesi hold them, I think.

*JackbeThimble*

Same thing from Malicia's perspective, if she can't name her governors (or is forced to pick from people who will almost automatically be more loyal to catherine than herself) then she's effectively lost control over Callow and a lot of her leverage with her own subjects in Praes as well.

*Morgenstern*

Ehrm. I'm pretty sure she said in this very chapter that the Ruling Council did not work out – and that will be that. She will appoint ONE governor who only holds power in name (in her absence), and become Vicequeen herself... So, Queen after all...

*jonnnney*

@Jack

Malicia has already given up the right to appoint imperial governors when she gave Catherine a majority vote of the ruling council. Effectively the Empress has little to no control over ~half of her big cities, but as long as the illusion of control remains then everyone is placated.

@Morgen

A single person can't run an entire kingdom which takes months to cross. There still needs to be local rulers in each of the cities/provinces. Whether these local rulers be dukes, princes, governors, city councils, or what have you they need

to exist in order to maintain a level of control. Prior to Catherine's trip to the winter wonderland these local rulers were called imperial governors and answered to the ruling council. After all the trouble has been dealt with I'm guessing these local rulers will still be called imperial governors and they will be answering to a General-governor who answers to Catherine who answers to Malicia.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*Metalshop*

Can I just say I love how much political wrangling Cat does? The fights and the magic and the weird societies are all really cool, but my favorite part is honestly watching her try to kickstart a functioning country.

*George*

Yeah I think it does an amazing job of grounding and providing context for all the sweet magic.

Also I live for lines like 'dipping a toe in the treason pool' and 'I lied.' tags.

*Shequi*

So, wild mass guessing time: What will the 15th's Cognomen be after this war?

*The Archdevil*

"Kill them, take their shit!"

*JackbeThimble*

Demonslayers

*jonnnney*

"Fuck the gods"

*Kilimandaros*

Pretty sure that both "Kill them, take their shit!" and "Fuck the gods" can't really be cognomen, some kind of warcry maybe, but not a cognomen. Demonslayers also didn't really match, because they didn't kill even single demon – Akua recalled it to the standard.

*beleester*

Devilslayers, then. They certainly killed plenty of those.

### *The quietist*

Demonslayers strikes me as a bit too heroic/showy of a name, think about the ones we know so far- Regicides and Ironsides the former is a criminal term and the latter a sort of bleak defiance. Maybe the Coldhearts for obvious reasons plus they're going to kill a lot of Summer Fae.

*nick012000*

So, it looks like the guy who said a while back that the Lone Swordsman's party was meant to be Squire's hit the nail on the head.

What's more is that it looks like it's turning out that way regardless: she's just recruited Thief and Archer, and she has Apprentice to fill the Role of the Bumbling Conjuror, and Adjutant to replace the Hunter. That makes five Named in her band.

If the Wandering Bard fills the mentor Role the way she seems to, then that means that Cat has someone to fill that Role for her as well: the Black Knight.

### *Letouriste*

Kinda disappointed by the chapter^^ just two discussions and, even if they are important, are not the most thrilling.

If you were still on a one chapter by week schedule we would still be hungry.

Anyway, I find myself craving for more the days where you don't post anything so I guess the book is starting to roll for real

### *Naeddyr*

I prefer these kinds of talking chapters (that aren't infodumps) to multichapter fights because in these, things happen and get done. I mean, in the last few chapters we've had huge, huge changes to the status quo, starting from the end of the fight with the Duke, and it's mostly been talking and wrangling.

### *Dianna*

Same, I love the fights but live for the politics and banter. I love how competent Cat is getting at both.

### *James, Mostly Harmless*

Thief is right in a way, Cat has the right background to become a hero which is why Black was having an eye kept on her while she was still in the Orphanage. But Thief is also wrong per Book 1

Chapter 4 (<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2015/04/22/chapter-4-name/>): ““I was wrong,” Black said, though he didn’t sound like he was admitting an error. “You never could have become a hero. You lack the mindset for it.””

### *Blinks*

You know, i read that section again and the one following it and what really stands out to me more than anything else is that she didn’t actually accept either side.

She killed her evil side and denied her good.

I think i’m more and more starting to buy into the idea that she’s simply not going to be either black or white knight but something else.

### *George*

Yeah, I see a bit of a chance at Black Knight just because the current one may have changed the Role a bit, but I think we can safely discount White Knight, Warlord, and Queen of Callow in favor of erratic doing something clever.

---

I recall there being a Name called Knight Errant (White Knight used his skills in his fight with Black). Do you think that might be it?

### *Dianna*

George. I feel similar about her rejecting both sides. In the comments, I have heard the term Gray Knight, and Green Knight, passed around (Though don’t ask where they got Green from). But I have to disagree with you on the name “Warlord” right now that feels like it could be being foreshadowed, given all the orcs are calling her that. Then again it might not, who knows. But what is Cat if not a Warlord (or Warlady)? She gains power mostly through her ability to kill stuff, and she uses war to gain even more power. That was the whole point of letting The Lone Swordsman go, to start a rebellion and gain power. She is doing the same with this war, though she didn’t plan for it this one to break out, she is still using it for leverage to gain yet more power.

### *The Archdevil*

Gains power through her ability to kill stuff, has power over Cold now, frequently animates her own body, causes conflict where many die. Possibly Necromancer name?

### *B*

I don't know if Cat will ever actually get a full Name. Her staying with a transitional name and still coming out on top is just the sort of spitting Fate in the eye that would be thematically appropriate for Cat.

Cat's purpose in this story is to be a breaker of Fate. Black cracked the foundation by tweaking the Story, but it's Cat who will shatter the grooves in Creation established by the Gods by using Good and Evil as she needs and rewriting the Story to suit her purposes. She's neither Good nor Evil because those are terms defined by Fate. Despite the guarantee that Cat will use whatever full Name she receives as she pleases, her accepting a full Name kind of feels like a slipping back into the grooves.

### *Tide of Khatanga*

I think she'll be Black Knight. The way the story repeatedly reminds the reader that Squire only leads to Black or White Knight, it tries quite hard at foreshadowing a twist. So much that I think Cat becoming the Black Knight as initially planned will, in fact, be the twist..

The way her story is shaping up, she can't be Warlord or that kind of stuff. She's not about commanding and ruling, she's about fighting. Her legend tells about that time she torched a city to flush out a hero. About how she punched down an ogre, a castle gate and a fortress-sized devil, in no particular order. About how she battled a demon and won. About how she broke an angel to her will. About how she killed a highborn Fae in duel. She isn't known for her command (Juniper is the one commanding anyway) or her rule. She's known for picking impossible fights and winning.

If the word wasn't so firmly associated with Good, I would say she's heading towards Paladin (which is roughly covered by White Knight here). But she's a villain and the closest evil counterpart is Black Knight. The Name is just a coat over the true player that is her Role anyway.

### *Dragrath*

Dianna I think the Green Knight comes from the legends of King Arthur but I don't think it really fits as the Green Knight is a Judge or tester of the character of The knights of the Round and in legends It just doesn't match Cat at all.

### *Shequi*

She's already a Knight.

A Moonless (K)night...



## *The quietist*

Agreed, though perhaps if she had become a hero she would have done a Black i.e. shift her role down a pragmatic institutional path i.e. no final battles one on one in fiery castles. Which would mirror the broader pattern as one side evolves changing the other in turn.

## *Euodiachloris*

Note to self: add Orcs to the list of people to never get into a drinking match with.

I'm pretty sure they can handle pure ethanol. 😊

## *Vortex Magus*

Typos:

>Praes would have acted in its interest, and that meant torching the country. Procer would have acted in its interests, which was making us a protectorate.

Praes would have acted in its interest, and that meant torching the country. Procer would have acted in its interest

(They're both singular nations, so "interest" should be either singular or plural – the same for both of them)

>"William was never meant to lead," Thief said. "He was terrible at it. But I look at the party we had, and can't help but thing there was always supposed to be one.

"William was never meant to lead." Thief said. "He was terrible at it. But I look at the party we had, and can't help but thing there was always supposed to be one more hero.

(Pivotal sentence confused me for a bit!)

## *Vortex Magus*

>"The First Prince has a hundred thousand battle-hardened veterans and the wealthiest nation on Calernian at her feet.

Calernia?

(I'm pretty sure the continent's name is Calernia, right?)

## *George*

Yeah it's Calernia. Could say wealthiest Calernian nation, of course.

## *Morgenstern*

Calernian "soil" is what I read as missing. Unless one just corrects it to "Calernia".

*Morgenstern*

Ehrm..

"William was never meant to lead," Thief said. "He was terrible at it. But I look at the party we had, and can't help but thing there was always supposed to be one."

You corrected the thing that needed no correction ("one" refers to LEADER, the role which William was \*not meant for\*.) and your mind seemingly autocorrected = overlooked the one glaring typo: "thing" should be "think" in this sentence. 😊

*Vortex*

Eh I am pretty sure that if she had said "William was never meant to be leader" then yes you would be correct. But "William was never meant to lead" makes the implied "one" different and it is necessary to specify that there is "one more leader" in the sentence.

You are totally right about thing -> think though LOL

*Shequi*

I think by "there was always supposed to be one", she means one party.

*Laferno*

"[I think you think your side's] any gentler than mine, you've been listening to stories too much." -> "If you think your side's]..."

"We'll be splitting their forces with multiple [assault] so you don't bear the brunt of it." -> assaults

And you think they'll just let General Juniper leisurely stroll south?" he [sceptically] asked. -> skeptically

*Shequi*

Sceptical is the correct spelling. Skeptical with a k is a US-specific neo-usage. I'm sure ee has said somewhere before that they are used to Commonwealth English.

[Barthumphries](#)

Well all knew  
change Well to We'll

The outer gates to the Royal Palace were wide open, and its grounds freshly tread.

I have no idea what the latter half of this means.

And it didn't have authority of the Legions went it was still breathing

Change went to when

*stevenneiman*

"Look, I'm as willing [as->to] tangle as the next villain"

"the wealthiest nation on [Calernian->Calernia] at her feet."

"it didn't have authority of the Legions [went->when] it was still breathing."

*Ren*

And just like that, we have our fifth Calamity equivalent.

Squire – Black Knight

Apprentice – Warlock

Adjutant – Captain

Archer – Ranger

Thief – Assassin

*Dianna*

Maybe, maybe, though in my heart Robber will always be on the list of Named in the Jr Calamities. Theif can never truly fit into the bloodied, broken, and ravaged place He ruthlessly ripped out of our hearts.

*jonnnney*

There are 6 calamities. Given Thief's squeamishness about killing guards and her becoming the spymaster for Catherine I'd call her the Scribe equivalent.

I'm still holding out hope that Robber gets a name and becomes the Assassin equivalent.

*Cicero*

is he not already one? i think in one of the interludes akula described him as a named one. And goblins do not talk about their names.

*Jonnnney*

It's unclear atm. There have been allusions to him having a name, but his personality and power don't match up to them. His encounter with thief showed his limited strength and he thoughts about Pickler and his fear of the matrons regarding

the stone tongue makes me think he lacks the strength of personality to be a named.

*narcoduck*

Vice Queen? That's interesting considering what Akua is railing against in her interlude.

"Praes is a story," she said. "A Tyrant to lead us. A Black Knight to break heroes. A Warlock to craft wonders. A Chancellor to rule behind them. And an Empire like clay, to shape into the tool they need: an entire nation built to empower the ambitions of a single villain."

Foundling to lead, her 15th Legion with a Knightly Order to break Creation, Apprentice to defy the Gods, and a Governor General to rule behind them. Where Praes calcifies, Callow bends to the whim of a waif of a girl to become something new.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

First,

At this point there have been MULTIPLE 1-on-1 conversations between Black and the Empress where Black points out Catherine's STORY of working within the Praesi system to rebuild Callow is his Callow Endgame, meant to exterminate even the POSSIBILITY of new Heroes rising in Callow "Unless Foundling loses her way." Malicia has agreed, or at least gone along with Black on this every single time it has come up.

Second, Malicia (just like Black) is ACUTELY aware that Black's time as the Black Knight is coming to a close. She was aware of that (and told CAT as much during their FIRST personal meeting) and that's why she was so keenly interested in finding out "What does Cat WANT?"

When you announce in a matter of fact way that the Black Knight's expiration date is nearing to the individual who traditionally succeeds the Black Knight as the new Black Knight, you're already looking to the future.

Three, Malicia has made it clear to Black where she draws the line at the free hand she's given him to mold Squire as he sees fit. Black, in turn, and as he just recommended Cat by scrying mirror has made it clear where HE draws the line. Cat hasn't crossed any of those lines...what's MORE:

Fourth, Black AS MUCH AS STATED that when he returned, he and Cat would go on a good old fashioned put-noble-heads-on-pikes reaving. It was even freaking CAT out, how far Black was telling her he was willing to go so long as she understood Callowan Independence wasn't in the cards.

Fifth, the Dread Empire judges by results. If this all blows up in Cat's face, of course she's a treasonous bitch for claiming

partial autonomy over Callow and forming a Knightly Order. If, on the other hand, the Fae are repelled, Diabolist is dealt with and Procer is kept on their side of the border, there will be public laurels for Cat, and private concessions to the Tower for going rogue in a limited way. Behind the scenes however, Black and Malicia will approve of her effective seizing of the initiative to, as Cat say, get things done.

Or at least that's how I see the various chapters implications.

*jonnney*

That's pretty much how I am seeing it.

*Soronel Haetir*

"An alliance of victors is like a hearth in summer."  
– Julianne Merovins, tenth First Princess of Procer

–

I thought even the female leaders of Procer were styled "Prince". Certainly the current holder of the role has made a point of being addressed as 'Prince'.

*Shequi*

That's a Rhenian usage. Cordelia insists on "First Prince" because Prince is the official form of the title – even for female rulers – in Rhenia.

That's explicitly mentioned in the Prologue to Book 2: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2015/11/04/prologue-2/>

*Fantasyaddict*

Hi, I've read your entire series so far, and love it. I think with a good edit and ending book 1 early you'd have a great book to release. 1 significantly better than most of the self published fantasy novels out there. I at least would buy it in a second.

[Reveen](#)

Pretty disappointed Thief doesn't have anything of substance to say in response to Squire's rant. You'd think she'd be a little bit sharper and be able to find a chink in her rhetoric to point at.

---

Cat's rhetoric is not that solid, given how much of it relies on promises, but between being the only major player in reach that doesn't want Callow on fire, and Thief's own mindset of a

rascal that meddles with the right people to get away with it, the more she objects, the easier is it to undermine both her only feasible option and her “at least I’m trying” moral high ground.

Cat doesn’t build a solid argument, she probes for Thief’s objectives and morals, and then proposes a course of action that would allow her to keep hold of them, loosely.

*Dylan Tullos*

Cat’s argument is simple, practical, tailored to her audience...and wrong.

Unlike Cat, we’ve actually seen inside Cordelia Hassenbach’s head, and we know that she isn’t interested in expanding Procer’s borders. The First Prince seeks peace among all Good-aligned states, and she would be glad to have a strong, independent Callow as an ally.

Cat has a skeptical view of Procer, and history justifies her skepticism. She can’t know that Cordelia came to power with a genuine commitment to serving the cause of Good, not increasing Procer’s secular power. If Black and Malicia are “Practical Evil”, Cordelia is “Classic Good”; she’s willing to play the game of thrones, but she keeps her eye on the larger goal, and never forgets that the Princedom has a larger role to play in the battle between Good and Evil.

As Cat’s strength grows, a rebellion against the Tower becomes more and more possible. Most of the Fifteenth is Callowan now, and most of her new recruits are former rebels. Callowans are learning the methods of the Legions, developing the knowledge and experience they’d need for a successful uprising. If Cat manages to make peace with Summer and thwart Akua’s plan (big ifs), she’ll have a substantial, battle-hardened army trained in Legion methods and entirely willing to kill Praesi on her command.

Black is placing a great deal of trust in an apprentice who isn’t loyal to the Dread Empire. The day will come when Callow’s interests no longer converge with Black’s plan, and the First Prince will be ready to lend her aid to any Callowan rebellion.

(Also, I just realized his plan to eliminate Callowan Heroes isn’t going to happen. Cat just resurrected a Knightly Order, and she’s rejected the idea of Callowans as light-skinned Praesi. We may see a return of traditional Callowan Names under Cat’s command, but it looks less and less likely that they’ll go away.)

Dylan, but Cordelia isn't just forging an alliance of Good nations, she's doing it to launch the tenth crusade. It's stated in the first interlude where she appears, that a war abroad is her only way to both consolidate the principalities and to keep the otherwise unemployed soldiers out of her rivals' hands. Her motto is "We are the wall"; leave her to stew in peace for a couple of decades, and she's not the wall anymore.

*Dylan Tullos*

\_\_, I am sorry if my reply is out of order. The "Reply" button doesn't appear on your latest post, so I can't be sure that my post will appear under the comment I was responding to.

Yes, the whole point of forming an alliance of Good nations is to launch the Tenth Crusade. But the Tenth Crusade isn't going to involve Procer invading the Dominion of the Levant, or turning Callow into a protectorate, or any of the territorial adventures that they're so historically fond of. Cordelia Hassenbach has accepted that Procer's borders are just fine as they are, and she's not interested in expanding at the expense of her neighbors.

Thanks to the Tyrant Kairos, Procer has a partial solution to at least one of its problems. Cordelia has been able to ship off thousands of her soldiers to serve as mercenaries in the Free Cities, where they can serve Procer's interests rather than being an ongoing problem. She's acting as "the wall" against Kairos, who adores playing the part of the villain, and reinforces her Good vs Evil narrative just by existing. A long peace would be bad for Cordelia's status as the Warden of Good, but it doesn't seem likely right now.

Unlike Black, Cordelia is just fine with a strong, independent Callow. By accepting that Procer doesn't need to grow its territories, she's opened the door to being a real ally, rather than an imperial power that needs to control Callow. What would be the problem with a Tenth Crusade that liberated Callow, drove the Praesi back to the Wasteland, and ended Malicia and Black's reign? Catherine would have a chance to rule a stronger, more functional Callow without Praesi interference, and she'd have an allied nation whose cultural ethos isn't based on compulsive backstabbing. That doesn't seem like a bad thing to me.

[BarthHumphries](#)

"What would be the problem with a Tenth Crusade that liberated Callow, drove the Praesi back to the Wasteland, and ended Malicia and Black's reign?"

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2016/10/12/heroic-interlude-prise-au-fer/>

The first crusade was a good one. The second crusade was “crushed into dust”. The third “ended in disaster and the end of the crusader nations – to further compound the disgrace, a weakened Callow was occupied by Procer in its wake. The Fourth Crusade, a last-ditch attempt to reclaim Praes, was drowned in such a sea of blood by Terribilis that never again was a crusade to turn East.”

After that, the four following crusades never attempted to fight the “Evil” Tower and Praes, they instead all turned against the truly greater evil, “the Dead King and his realm of horrors, a monster who called even devils to heel.”

Then he waxed on about the seventh crusade. Strangely enough, although there have been nine crusades, William only reminisces about 8. I’m not sure what happened during the ninth crusade.

Anyway, the tenth crusade might sweep towards Praes, because “Malicia was no great warlord, not the way Terribilis had been, and her greatest general was getting old.” But someone has to kill the Black Knight first.

“The First Prince of Procer was plotting a Tenth Crusade, holed up in her capital, and William would give it to her. But it would not be a Proceran enterprise, and it would not end with Callow as her protectorate. The rest of Calernia would not stand for that sin being committed a second time.” Or would they? You’ve heard of the golden rule, no not that one, the one that says, “He who has the gold makes the rules”? After the First Prince retook Callow, and had beaten back Praes, would the rest of Calernia really have the strength to stand up and tell her, “No”? Not to mention, pretty much all that fighting would happen in Callow. Most of Callow would be decimated, most of its cities would be destroyed, and then how would ruined Callow be expected to protect itself? No, she’d have to claim it as a protectorate, even if but for a “temporary” time, or it’d just get retaken a few years later.

*Dylan Tullors*

Barthumphries:

The First Crusade defeated Triumphant, and in the Second Crusade, it was the Praesi, not the Crusaders, who were “crushed into dust”. Heiress mentions the aftermath of the Second Crusade as the moment when the Praesi came closest to their destruction as a nation. Terribilis II managed to save the Dread Empire from division into crusader states and cultural obliteration. He defeated the Third Crusade, and



destroyed the Fourth so utterly that no Good nation ever tried to occupy Praes again.

As you say, every other known Crusade has been against the Dead King. I assume that the author's failure to mention the Ninth isn't an oversight, and that there's something unusual about the last Crusade in Calernia.

Since we have the benefit of seeing inside Cordelia's head, we know that she doesn't want to occupy Callow. Cordelia is focused on Procer's role as the Warden of the West, the defender of Good. An occupied Callow would be a constant source of discontent and rebellion, a weakness that would give Praes an opportunity. A strong, independent Callow, allied with Procer against the Dread Empire, would allow Cordelia to complete her Grand Alliance of Good vs Evil, shutting the Praesi up in the Wasteland.

Cordelia lives in the north of Procer, facing off against the Chain of Hunger, with the Dead King always waiting for a chance to invade. Her primary concern isn't "how can I expand my territory"; it's "how can I protect my people". She would be glad to rebuild Callow, no strings attached, so that the Kingdom can return to its historical role as the guardian against Praesi invasion, freeing her people to return to their historical role as the guardian against the Chain and the Dead King.

Catherine is used to the princes of southern Procer, who are shielded from Praes by Callow and from the Chain and the Dead King by the northern realms of Procer. The southern Princes are safe from the forces of Evil, and they're frequently willing to weaken the cause of Good if it increases their own secular power. After all, it's not their lands which are going to get invaded. Cordelia comes from an entirely different situation, and her focus is on working together against Evil, not backstabbing fellow Good nations.

The question isn't "Could Cordelia turn Callow into a protectorate?", but "Does she want to?". Since we've seen inside her head, and know that the First Prince is genuinely committed to avoiding Procer's past mistakes, we can see the possibility of a real alliance between Procer and Callow. Cat can't see that possibility, but it's real, and if she ever gets to meet Cordelia, she could learn of an alternative to her current arrangement with Black.

[Barthumphries](#)

"Does she want to"

No, the real question is, "Would she have to?" I don't think her allies, and her people, would be just fine with donating lots of resources to a land on the brink of starvation.

Basically, it would be like West Germany after WWII (where a couple slices of bread might be all the average person had to eat for a day, and with all their factories destroyed), but with Hitler still alive in East Germany. Sure, the American people were fine with shipping millions of dollars in food aid, and military aid to thwart Russia but would her people feel the same way, especially with "Hitler" (i.e. Malicia) still alive in the country next door? Probably not.

*Dylan Tullos*

BartHumphries:

Cordelia wouldn't convince Procerans to rebuild Callow out of the pure generosity of their hearts. They would pay to rebuild Callow so that Procer would have a powerful ally standing between them and the Dread Empire. As we've seen in the Free Cities, Procer is willing to give huge sums of silver to their allies so that the Good-aligned Free Cities can hire mercenaries to fight the Tyrant. There's no meaningful difference between giving the Free Cities money to hire mercenaries and giving Callow food and aid in rebuilding. In both cases, Procer is acting for practical reasons, supporting an ally so they'll be strong enough to fight Procer's enemies.

Having Malicia alive and in charge of the Dread Empire makes Cordelia's case simpler. If their main enemy is still a threat, it only makes sense to ensure that the state that traditionally halts the Dread Empire is capable of doing their job. Every copper they spend on food now is a copper they don't have to spend on armies later. As long as Cordelia frames her arguments in terms of "rebuilding Callow's armies" rather than "helping Callow's people", she'll be fine. It just so happens that rebuilding Callow's armies means helping Callow's people, since it's difficult to recruit peasant levies when their families are starving to death.

America didn't pour wealth into West Germany because Americans were all nice people who felt for the poor Germans; we paid to ensure that our client state would be strong and stable enough to resist Soviet influence. Procer would pay for a Callowan army that could resist the Legions, freeing Procer from the need to fight the Dread Empire on their own. No charity or goodness is required.

[Dan Lawrence](#)

Is it intentional that Cat's mooted title of 'Vicequeen' is just a letter away from Ice Queen? I mean now that she's single it could also be argued that she's building her kingdom of isolation. She also still has the power to **rise** like the break of dawn...

If she starts telling herself to let it go, or breaks into song then I'm calling it.

*Imagination*

I'm personally still amused that the 'Gallowborne' are only one letter away from the 'Callow-born'

*DocTao*

Is there a possibility that Cat is gonna get the Chancellor name? If we think of a name as a thing with its own motives, that one has been repressed for a while, must be dying to get on the field. Work with and at the same time oppose the Tower.

*Barrendur*

@Erraticerrata:

Thank-you! Fantastic chapter, and the "where do you stand?" exchange between Cat and Thief was so good – squee! Vivid, meaningful dialogue between two well-realised (well, Thief a bit less-so) characters, consistent with their histories and personalities... ooh. And It was incredibly satisfying to see how Cat's actions match her intentions, and how it hurts when she fails... and I do like the fact that Thief is revealed as a bit of poser; like real-world Liberals, she just never thought the implications through. Doing the right thing and failing is nothing more than a grand gesture; it's neither heroism nor useful.

*George*

It might be better to keep real world politics out of things, in my opinion.

*nehemiahnewell*

One thing that worries me...

" "And the Diabolist has an army out in the field," I said. "So far the Summer Court has refrained from hitting Liesse. I've sent two Named down there to remedy to that. Akua Sahelian will have to be dealt with after the fae are repelled, and I don't want her forces fresh when it happens." "

She's turning to deal with Akua after she deals with summer. If she had to deal with Akua on the way to dealing with Summer she

would be garentteed a win – it would be the first step, and villains always win the first step. But dealing with her afterwards is consolidating her victory. Squire tends to win the conflict, but is thwarted in the afterward in a way that leads to more conflict.

Likewise, Akua had a big step up, so Squire to Diabolist was Squire as the underdog. But now that she's the Duke of Moonless Night they're once again peers.

Squires path to the top isn't complete yet, she's still in a transitional name – I could see her defeating her peer and rival for the final time if she was on her final name, but she's still in a transitional one, and Akua has some sort of plan to ascend further.

I'm sort of done with her, but I suspect Akua will find a way of swing it where her actions might break the letter of the law... but so did Squires. Both of them "had" to do what they because of the situation. Squire was just warned she'll have to make concessions because of resurrecting the Knightly Orders. I think Akua is that price.

She'll be able to swing her actions as for the glory of Praesi even if against the letter of the land. And as Squire did the same it's all ok.

*George*

Wasn't taking this city the first step?

*nehemiahnewell*

Nah, it was prep work. These weren't 'real' opponents. If thief decided to make it a fight, sure, but she fell in line. It's just like how Tyrant killing everyone but Anaxares didn't count. It needed to happen for Tyrant to make his war, but didn't really count as part of it. Just prep work.

Well, that's my viewpoint.

But by putting her off till after and raising the Knightly Orders, I think she's given up this chance to get rid of Akua.

*George*

I think keep work happening off screen is usually what the first step is, and that that's why it always succeeds.

[BartHumphries](#)

"But by putting her off till after and raising the Knightly Orders, I think she's given up this chance to get rid of Akua."

I think it's clear now that Diabolist is her counter, the antagonist to her protagonist status, her archnemesis. I agree, I don't think she's going to be getting rid of Akua any time soon. I think it's going to be like The Princess Bride:

(spoiler alert)

Kid: "Who gets Humperdinck?"

Grandpa: "I don't understand."

Kid: "Who kills Prince Humperdinck? At the end, somebody's got to do it! Is it Inigo? Who?"

Grandpa: "Nobody. Nobody kills him. He lives."

Kid: "You mean he wins? Jesus, grand-pa, why did you read me this thing for?"

Grandpa: "You know, you've been very sick, and you're taking this story very seriously. I think we'd better stop now."

Grandpa gets up as if to leave.

Kid: "No, I'm ok. I'm ok. Sit down. I'm all right."

As much as I'm annoyed/angry that Diabolist might not die and otherwise get what's coming to her, the narrative structure of the story might just keep bringing her back. Ad just because she lives doesn't mean that she wins. 😊

PS What's the update schedule for this story now? I thought I heard something about twice a week?

*virtual\_maniac*

Another typo:

I'm as willing as tangle as the next villain

I'm as willing to tangle as the next villain

[Tal Morgan](#)

I finally caught up, so have a brief review.

It would, I think, be foolish to strenuously avoid comparisons between this and Worm, but for my part I think you've surpassed it. There's several points that I appreciate where you've improved upon it; for one, it's gratifying to see such firm acknowledge of the evil that Catherine has signed on with, and the cosmology that you've laid out seems to preclude the kind of late-story ludicrous power scaling that made Worm fall apart for me.

It's also very telling to me that you aren't afraid to let Catherine simply /lose/. Worm threw obstacles at Taylor so she was always threatened, but she never precisely suffered a serious setback or out-and-out defeat. Leviathan was fairly emblematic of the tempo of her story; Brockton Bay was laid to waste, but that was framed as a bloody victory rather than calamitous defeat, because Endbringers had been built up as that big a deal.

Catherine has had more of a mixed track record. She's had her spectacular wins, but she's also had occasions where in the course of the campaign she's tried something and simply failed. Gambled and lost. Her enemies have outsmarted her, or been more powerful than expected, and she's been forced to abandon her objective and retreat, her only victory of the encounter that she kept it from turning into a rout.

This speaks to a confidence in where your story is going, a desire to avoid pointless escalation, and an understanding of the need to actually plan things out.

Not to say it's perfect. Chapters could, I think, benefit from a sentence-by-sentence read-through to address some technical failings, but unfortunately I'm not really the person to do that, and equally I understand the limitations of your schedule. That said, I am very happy with what I've read so far!

*Dylan Tullos*

Tal Morgan:

When has Catherine lost?

She defeated her rivals for Squire in Act I, beat the Lone Swordsman, and won the competition for control of the Fifteenth. In Act II, she crushed the Exiled Prince and his Silver Spears, defeated the demonic incursion, and killed the Lone Swordsman. She even beat Akua to within an inch of her life.

The biggest setback she had was the collapse of her Council, and she's recovered instantly from that, executing the Praesi usurpers and essentially declaring herself Queen with Black's support. I can't think of a single fight that Catherine has actually out-and-out lost.

The Calamities are even worse. If this story was told from a different viewpoint, they'd be fantastic antagonists, terrifying monsters who have killed a graveyard's worth of Heroes. Since they're protagonists, though, they destroy dramatic tension. Black is obviously smarter and more capable than all of the Heroes he goes up against; during his fight with the White Knight, there wasn't a single point where I felt that he was in danger of death or even serious injury. He

dominated the fight, and at the very moment when the Story might have swung things against him, he simply disappeared.

Much as I enjoy the world and the story, the author writes "Heroes" who are far less intelligent and formidable than their adversaries. With the single exception of Cordelia Hassenbach, who seems to be a worthy opponent for Malicia, none of the heroes we've met are real challengers for Team Practical Evil. Though he's far superior to the Lone Swordsman, the White Knight is hardly a match for Black, and his team, though earning high marks for banter and general awesomeness, were effortlessly outsmarted and outfought by the Calamities.

On one hand, we have a team of Villains that have worked and fought side by side for decades, veterans of at least two major wars and a hundred smaller skirmishes. On the other hand, we have a plucky, adorable team of Heroes that fights hard and does well against Kairos's Classic Evil. Fun as they are to read about, I never feel that they have a chance against Black and company, which means the only real tension comes from the conflict between Classic Evil and Practical Evil.

Maybe I'm forgetting some important defeats, but so far I haven't been impressed with the quality of Catherine's Good-aligned opposition. So far, they've either been supremely incompetent (Lone Swordsman) or simply not that threatening (Thief). For a protagonist's victories to be meaningful, they need adversaries who are formidable. Akua has stepped up in that regard, but there hasn't been a single Hero who genuinely seems to be close to Catherine's equal, and that shortcoming weakens the story, limiting Catherine to easy victories over chumps like the Exiled Prince and the Lone Swordsman.

*nehemiahnewell*

Yeah, and Akua has the problem that she's the explicit champion of a failed path, and is so anti-charismatic that you can't even pseudo-root for her.

[Tal Morgan](#)

"When has Catherine lost?" She's never lost a story arc, no, but there are definite occasions such as when she attempted to unlock her third Aspect early, or sallied out to try and rescue her wounded from the freshly-released demonic incursion, where she has simply tried something and failed.

*Dylan Tullos*

nehemiahnewell:

Yeah, Akua is not the kind of villain people love to cheer for.

With the vital exception of Cordelia Hassenbach, I feel like we're being robbed of alternative perspectives; Cat never really runs into anyone who can argue with her or convincingly present a different point of view. Most of her officers worship their Squire, and the Heroes she's encountered so far are either incompetent (Exiled Prince, Lone Swordsman) or not particularly good at big-picture planning (Thief). I'd like to see some perspectives from people who don't play on Team Squire and aren't inept or megalomaniac villains. White Knight is promising, but he's focused on Black, not Catherine.

*nehemiahnewell*

His surrender of personal responsibility is so abhorrent that it's basically impossible to have a meaningful discussion with him unless you're full in to divine command theory territory. He himself won't engage with it, giving up responsibility to others.

You just saw her rebuttal to his argument. She's met an angel, and doesn't see them as morally superior to Man. Quite the reverse, she finds them evil brainwashing monsters unworthy of respect in a personal sense.

There can be no discussion at that point.

*Dylan Tullos*

nehemiahnewell:

Oh, I'm definitely not defending the Lone Swordsman. The only possible justification for his actions is that he went insane after he murdered his sister, wandered into the wilderness, and fell prey to an angel who was looking for a mentally fragile Callowan to use as a human sacrifice. The other Heroes in his band seem more or less human, while William thinks, talks, and acts like a badly programmed robot.

The problem is that the Lone Swordsman is incapable of making rational arguments because he's been brainwashed by an angel. If he was a functional human being, he could point out that Black and Malicia are ultimately going to die. Sooner or later, an old-school villain is going to become Tyrant, and they'll be able to use the professional Legions Black built to engage in the traditional Praesi hobby of trying to conquer the world. Unless Catherine wants Callow to eventually end up under the rule of Akua, or someone like her, she needs to find a way to break away from the Dread Empire.

That's just one argument, and it's not hard to find others. The current crop of Villains in Praes is exceptional. They're the only ones since Triumphant to actually conquer Callow, two successes out of seventy attempts. Clearly, Callowan



independence isn't impossible; Catherine's defeatism is a product of historical ignorance and well-founded fear of the current Legions. But successful rebellion is just a matter of waiting for the inevitable Praesi civil war, and rising when the time is right. If William had the good sense to stage a rising when Akua made her move, with the two thousand knights Catherine just recruited, he could have liberated Callow while Black was distracted in the Free Cities.

I said earlier that Catherine never loses, and I think that's true. But she never really wins, either. No matter how many people she kills and victories she wins, Foundling is building on sand. Praes isn't going to change if she kills a thousand aristocrats; their replacements always be looking for another chance to rise, to seize power in Callow. Malicia will die, Black will die, and the Calamities will die, but the culture of the Dread Empire will live on.

Breaking is easy. Building is hard. So far, Catherine has broken everyone in her path, and she's built...nothing. The Ruling Council is dead. Callowan trust in the Dread Empire is nonexistent. Her own success comes from the fact that Callow sees her fighting the Dread Empire and hopes that she'll eventually lead a rebellion. Praes views Callow as a conquered province, just as they did at the start, and Callow views the Praesi as foreign invaders, just as they did at the start. All of her battles and duels and victories have brought her here, and she's still trying to build a functional nation with a sword, insisting that enough violence can magically solve all of the problems she doesn't have real solutions for.

*nehemiahnewell*

I was actually talking about White Knight with his coin flip. He might be better than the Lone Swordsmen, but his surrendering of personal responsibility is if anything even more absolute.

*Stürmchen*

Good and evil make it thrGrey Knight

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## Chapter 21: Example

*"To conquer until all of Creation is desert or province: that is the ideal of Praes. Mock their failures if you must but do not*

ever forget their victories.”

– King Albert Fairfax of Callow, the Thrice-Invaded

The sword tore through flesh and bone with a meaty sound, sending the guard's head rolling on the ground. A waste – Black would not have pursued him, had he fled. Shaking the blood off his blade with a flick of the wrist, the green-eyed Knight stepped deeper into the Pirate Queen's sanctum, feet burdened with grim purpose.

“Amateurs,” Ranger said from his side. “They didn't even have a proper watch.”

“They thought they were safe,” Black replied.

“They won't after tonight,” Warlock added. “If any of them survive, anyway.”

The chatter was unnecessary, but he'd long become used to Warlock's cheerfully morbid comments enough that it barely registered. Still, he traded a half-amused, half-exasperated glance with Ranger. They met another corsair on their way to the throne room but this one did not even get to open her mouth before Wekesa turned her upper body into ash: dealing with the pirates was child's play after a year of back alley dogfights with his rivals and the Order of the White Hand, not to mention the civil war that followed. Not a reason to get sloppy, but overestimating an enemy was just as dangerous as overestimating them. By the time they reached the doors to the Pirate Queen's own throne room the sounds of the mess outside had started to drift up to their ears. Curses and screams of terrors tore through the night's quiet, the same reaction Captain always elicited when she dared to cut loose. Black pushed open the driftwood doors in front of him without breaking stride, ready to finally put an end to the night's slaughter.

“They sent the Black Knight and his death squad for little 'ole me? Guess I should be flattered,” the Queen laughed as she rose from her throne and unsheathed her cutlass. “So which of you feels like dancing with death, children?”

Ranger sighed and shot the Queen in the leg, arrow knocked and flying faster than you could take a breath.

“Is it me or does that never get old?” Warlock mused. “They always get the funniest look on their faces when we won't play along.”

The Pirate Queen dropped to the floor with a hoarse cry of pain, clutching her leg. Black wasted no time closing the distance and kicked her cutlass out of her hands.

“You are correct,” he said. “I am the Black Knight.”

"Do you have no honour –"she started.

"No," Black replied, crouching to be of a height with her.

"Drop the knife, Pirate," Ranger called out. "Otherwise the next one goes through the eye."

There was the clatter of metal on the ground and the Queen let go of the blade she'd pulled from under her tunic, grimacing.

"Fine, you lot are big and bad," she snarled. "You made your point. Why am I still alive?"

"Because you set half of Thalassina on fire a few months back," Black said.

"You going to parade me around Ater 'cause I've been a bad girl?" the pirate asked with an ugly smile. "And to think I'd heard you were dropping the old way bullshit."

"You misunderstand me," the Black Knight replied. "It takes talent, to execute an operation of that breadth."

"You should work on your recruitment pitch, love," Queen sneered. "I'm feeling a mite uncooperative at the moment."

Black's eyes hardened.

"Your prize ship has been sunk. Most your lieutenants are dead. You are kneeling on the floor of your very seat of power," he murmured. "Bringing you to this took me four people and a rowboat, Pirate. You asked me what my point was? This is it. Do not make me repeat myself."

"Fuck it, and fuck you," the Pirate Queen smiled. "I'm not flying an Imperial flag, and I'm sure as Hells not gonna take orders from the Tower. Do your worst, boy – I've laughed in the face of harder men than you."

Warlock's eyes became wreathed in fire and the dark-skinned man stepped forward, but Black held up a hand to stop him.

"You call yourself the Pirate Queen, but I've noticed your crews sometimes refer to themselves as corsairs," the Black Knight said.

"You trying to bore me to death, Knight? I'll give you points for originality,"

"Unlike pirates, corsairs are known to sometimes operate under official sanction," Black said. "Not as part of a nation's navy, but as... auxiliaries of a sort."

The Pirate Queen eyed him dubitatively.

*"If we're not raiding Praes then who?"*

*"By the end of the week word will spread to the Free Cities that the pirate threat has been dealt with," Black smiled coldly. "I expect merchant shipping to Thalassina to resume soon after."*

*"Well look at the balls on you," the Queen whistled. "Won't they just bail again when I start boarding their boats?"*

*"Not if you confine yourself to a handful of them per month," Black said. "A risky business, certainly, but there will be enough who think the payoff worth it. The Dread Empire would, of course, collect a cut in exchange for the right to operate in its waters."*

*"So you want my ships on a leash, is that it?" the pirate sneered. "What if I say no?"*

*The green-eyed man laid the flat of his blade on his knees.*

*"That is your prerogative."*

*There was a long moment of silence as the Queen mulled over the offer. Sighing, she finally spat in the palm of her hand and offered it to the man in front of her. Black spat into his own without batting an eye, ignoring her puerile attempt to crush his fingers when they shook on it. He rose.*

*"A woman named Scribe will come tomorrow to work out the details of the arrangement. A pleasant evening to you, then," the Knight said as he sheathed his sword. He made for the door, but before he could pass the threshold the Queen called out to him.*

*"Knight," she asked. "If I'd said no, what would you have done?"*

*"Used your head a prop when making the same offer to your second-in-command," Black replied, not even bothering to turn as he strode out of the Pirate Queen's throne room.*

*There was no slow transition between sleep and wakefulness. I was one, then I the other. I rolled out of my sheets still tired and padded across the room to the window. Dawn had come a gone hours ago, by the looks of the sun. Grabbing a blanket from a seat, I wrapped myself in it but found it did nothing to hinder the cold. It wasn't coming from outside, I supposed. Breathing out quietly, I stared at the gardens sprawling below and considered the Name dream I'd just woken up from. It'd been a while, since I'd last had one of those. I'd known for years that Black had handled the pirates based in the Tidelesse Isles after the Empress ascended to the throne, but that there'd been a Named involved was not common knowledge. Considering that the pirates had first come from a Praesi fleet smashed by the Thalassocracy one at port, that they'd eventually be forced back into Imperial service was*

darkly amusing. The history lesson wasn't why I'd gotten the dream, of course. I had decisions ahead of me.

Robber, by now, would have prisoners from the Dark Guilds. If there were any from the Thieves I'd have to release them, but that still left the Smugglers and the Assassins. Months ago, I'd thought to dismantle the Guild of Assassins. Even before Ratface had laid out the logistical difficulties of that, I'd had a little chat with the Empress on the subject. Pointless, she'd called the entire enterprise. I still disagreed with her. There was a difference between a handful of men and woman who killed for coin spread all over Callow and an organized guild of them. The part she might have been correct about was that the amount of time and resources I'd have to sink into this far outweighed the gains to be made – namely, the absence of a godsdamned gang of killers for hire in my homeland. The situation had changed since she and I had talked: back then, all I'd had to worry about was Heiress plotting in the south. Now I had other cats to skin than a guild that probably killed fewer people in my territory every year than roadside accidents.

My Name was urging me to make vassals of them. Pretty bluntly, too. I clenched my fingers and unclenched them. It wasn't a decision I was willing to make before looking one of them in the eyes. I turned away from the window. Breakfast, first, and then a show. Hakram should have organized everything by now.

—

"It's not a Praesi invention, you know," Adjutant said.

"Huh," I said. "That's surprising. They're the ones famous for it."

The sun had melted any traces of frost our passage had made in Fairfax Place. Not that anyone would be able to see them anyway: the plaza was packed to the brim with the people of Laure. Hakram had to place criers at street corners to arrange as much, since just nailing parchments announcing the mandatory presence would have been largely pointless. The overwhelming majority of people in the capital couldn't read, and it was still one of the most educated places in Callow – some of the Fairfaxes had encouraged scholarship, though never to the extent of funding academies like they did in some of the Proceran principalities. I imagined that kind of expense would have been hard to justify when the Legions could be marching on Summerholm at any time. It was impossible for a crowd this size – there must have been twenty thousand people in the plaza alone – to be silent, but it was *quiet*. The appearance of my legionaries had been so sudden no one knew quite what to make of it.

"Miezans brought it with them over the sea," Hakram told me. "It was the punishment for rowdy slaves."

The tall orc was standing besides me, so I could see the displeasure on his face as he spoke. Considering orcs had made for very popular slaves in the Miezan Empire, I could take a guess as to why.

"So when Triumphant was using it, it had... implications," I murmured.

Adjutant refrained from adding 'may she never return' though his hand twitched when he suppressed the reflex of bringing his knuckles to his forehead.

"I'm telling you this because the High Lords will think it's part of the message you're sending," the orc said.

I nodded. The both of us watched Nauk's men drag the usurpers to the tall wooden crosses we'd had placed in the middle of the plaza. Satang looked numb, but Murad was struggling against the pair of Callowan legionaries forcing him to move. One of them lost patience and cracked a gauntleted hand across his mouth, drawing blood. The two Praesi were hoisted up the cross, and then an orc brought out the iron spikes and the hammer. Satang's hoarse scream filled the plaza as the legionary nailed her first wrist down.

"You are rowdy slaves to me," I muttered. "Well, that ought to get their attention."

"They'll be pushing to censure you through the Imperial court," Hakram said.

"The Court I have to worry about isn't in Ater," I replied.

Another gut-wrenching scream echoed as the work on Murad began.

"Breaking entirely with the Tower would have consequences," Adjutant said. "Ones we are ill-equipped to handle."

"I'll be calling myself a vicequeen, no a queen," I said. "There's an implication there I still answer to Her Dread Majesty."

"You're claiming a territory as large as Praes as under your direct command," Hakram pointed out. "You'd be more an ally than a vassal."

"She'll get tribute and soldiers," I said. "She struck the same deal with Daoine."

"You're not this thick," the orc gravelled. "Don't pretend."

Callow wasn't Daoine, of course. Its fields fed the Wasteland and its population was near the size of Praes'. There was a difference in the balance of power – Malicia could not allow me

to just declare the de facto independence for a territory this large. It would be a major loss of face, influence and wealth for her. She would likely have to deal with internal rebellions if she was somehow convinced of the notion.

"I'm done letting High Lords having a say here, Hakram," I said.

"Please," Murad screamed, but the legionaries forced his legs together and drove a spike through the flesh and bone.

"Then find concessions to make," Adjutant replied. "We'll have around twice our number in legionaries on the field by the end of this. Fighting them would not end well, and the Empress will give the order if you leave her no other choice."

I conceded the point with a sullen grunt. Kilian hadn't been wrong on one thing: I had tired of compromise. The last spike tore through Satang Motherless' ankles and the legionaries wiped the blood off their armour with calm professionalism before moving away. The two Wastelanders hung from their crosses limply. Time for my part, then.

"The Ruling Council is officially dissolved," I spoke, weaving a thread of power into my voice so it would carry for blocks. "As of this moment, I take command of Callow until martial law is lifted. A Governor-General will be appointed shortly to oversee Laure."

I paused to let that sink in.

"You may disperse," I finished.

I allowed my eyes to scan the crowd. This was, in essence, the pivot of my presence in the capital. If a riot ensued everything was gonna go to shit – I'd need to leave behind a garrison and it was all down here from there. The scene with the two usurpers had been as much to sate them with blood as to offer a reminder: rebels died ugly deaths. Silence, the kind you only got in a church, reigned supreme. Then the first man knelt. From there it was like an avalanche. Within heartbeats, there was not a man woman or child standing in Fairfax Place. I breathed out slowly, then composed myself.

"Take me where Robber keeps them," I ordered Hakram, and we left without a word.

—

Going back Dockside was oddly nostalgic. I'd earned coin for blood here, back in the day. Would that the trades I made were still so innocent. The warehouse belonged to the fishermen's guild, though they were more a loose association than one of the true powers claiming that same name. It smelled of salt and dry

fish, the reason why becoming obvious when the two of us entered: rows of bluegills and widemouth basses were hanging from the ceiling. I vaguely knew the salting was done different in other parts of Callow, but Laure was known for its particular take on the process. Southpooleans insisted their way of doing it was better, but they were just as wrong about that as they were about everything else. That was the lightest thought I allowed myself before painting blankness over my face. Weakness had no place here. There'd been legionaries standing guard around the warehouse and what looked like at least half Robber's cohort was spread inside.

Crossbows out, they kept an eye on the two dozen Callowans who'd been dragged out of their beds last night and brought here without an explanation any more elaborate than a kick in the back if they weren't moving fast enough. None of them were tied, I saw, save for a single pair. A man and woman who looked – and smelled liked tanners – but had an entire tenth of goblins keeping an eye on them at all times. Robber strutted up to me, a bit of blood on his lower lip, and massacred yet another salute.

"I've got a treat for you, Boss," the Special Tribune announced.

"It better not be a corpse," I said.

It was always a godsdamned corpse with him. He was like the world's most murderous cat, only it was worse because he was supposed to have a conscience. Or whatever the goblin equivalent of that was. *Probably more knives.*

"I would never," the yellow-eyed wretch said, deeply offended. "I'm a tender, gentle soul. I'm just misunderstood."

"I saw you eat a man's finger once," I said.

"Well, he was dead," Robber shrugged. "Wasn't like *he* was going to be using it."

He made sure to pitch his voice high enough to our guests would be able to hear him. I used to wonder whether he did things like for entertainment or for interrogation tactics before I'd realized there was no real difference between the two for him.

"So what have you got for me," I asked.

Engaging him would only keep sending this conversation spiralling further into madness and mind games.

"Smugglers' Guild," he said. "All except my present. Those two 'tanners' with enough steel and poison on them to kill a small village."

I raised an eyebrow.



"How'd you find them?" I asked.

"Ratface had them marked as potential members in his briefings," the goblin said. "We only had to kick the door and run in screaming to check if they actually were."

I resisted the urge to rub the bridge of my nose. *Results, Catherine*, I reminded myself. *He still got results.*

"Anybody high ranked?" I said.

"Top two Smugglers in the city," he said cheerfully. "Was going to torture that out of them, but they kept telling me. They seemed to think it would make us release them."

"Black tolerated their activities," I said. "They're not used to Legion attention."

To my teacher it had been more valuable to keep an eye on what was being brought into Callow illegally than to curtail their activities. Knowing him, he'd probably considered their dodging fees and tariffs like a payment of sorts.

"The were sloppy," Robber grinned viciously. "If that's the best criminals your people have to offer, it's no wonder you turned to Praes to get things done."

"We've a hole in the budget," I warned him. "Don't think I won't sell your hide in Mercantis for a few coppers."

"Please," he cackled. "I'm the official footrest of the queen of Callow. I'm worth at least a couple silvers."

I managed not to grimace at that, but it was a close thing. Not the footrest thing, that was an old joke between us, but this 'queen' business. That was a warning from him, that the rank and file of the Fifteenth expected for me to have a crown by the time we'd cleaned up the mess. Balancing the next few months was going to be like walking a tightrope. I allowed him to waddle away like he'd won. Little 'victories' like that usually kept him happy for a day or two, and when he was in a good mood he got into much less trouble.

"The assassins are watching you," Hakram said quietly.

I knew better than to look.

"Let's talk to our guests, then," I grunted.

I gestured for the goblin cohort to get the prisoners moving, seating them on a row of wooden crates. A few of them recognized me, apparently, because the moment I got closer they spoke up.

"Lady Foundling," a man in his fifties called out. "I must really protest. This is entirely unnecessary! We could have met at our offices-"

I glanced at the lieutenant standing behind him. She grinned, then smashed the copper bottom of her crossbow into the back of his head.

"Let's make one thing perfectly clear," I said. "This is not a courtesy visit. If you want to walk out of this room alive, I would discard the notion that you are in any way *protected* by the deal you made with Black."

I turned cold eyes on the crowd, saw a few shiver.

"I am not him," I said. "I have different expectations of you."

Sharp laughter came from further down the line. It was a woman, in her twenties with a missing eye. Looked like she'd been in a few scraps.

"Posturing," she said. "You don't have the balls to go against the Carrion Lord. We all know who you answer to."

I studied her for a moment.

**"Choke on your tongue,"** I Spoke.

Her eye went wide. She tried to breathe but couldn't hand desperately clawing at her throat. You could have heard a pin drop in the warehouse, by the time she fell blue-faced to the ground.

"I trust," I said, "that there will be no more of that."

Several of the Smugglers had pissed themselves. I wrinkled my nose in distaste. Robber was right, they'd gotten *soft* under Imperial protection.

"Callow is at war," I said. "You have been called upon to serve."

The man from earlier – he must have been the local head – nodded in abject submission. His hands were shaking.

"Anything you need, Lady Foundling," he babbled.

"You'll be sending representatives to the Fifteenth," I said. "They are to put themselves at Supply Tribune Ratface's disposal and obey his every order. And while you do that, gather rations for an army on the march. You'll be keeping my army supplied through the Wasaliti on its way south. I've no patience for parasites while the country is under siege."

That should allow Juniper to manoeuvre the way she needed to. Marchford just didn't have the supplies for an extended campaign, and with both the war in Wolof and General Istrid gathering legions near Vale there would be no time to requisition what we needed. I turned to the two assassins, who'd been watching all of this in silence. They were not scared, I saw. They weren't from a breed as easily unnerved as the smugglers.

"Neither of us has the authority to grant any demands you could make," the man among them said.

"Not even the head of our Guild in Laure would," the woman added, then shrugged. "Kill us, if you must. It makes no difference."

"You can carry a message," I said. "That will do."

"And you think the Guildmaster will listen?" the man said, cocking his head to the side.

"We have watched your men try to find us," the woman told me. "Prune branches if you can. The tree will survive."

I'd asked Ratface, a few months ago, to find me the Assassins. So I'd be able to wipe them out in one go. The anger that had driven me back then – the righteous indignation at the concept of a band of killers being allowed to run amok Callow without consequence – was not as sharp at it used to be. I had no spite left to spare for mortals, not when I was set against forces who thought of ripping out my heart as a mere warning.

"I won't kill you," I replied softly. "Oh no. I'll drag you back to Marchford, and then I'll let Apprentice rip out the information I need from your minds."

The woman's body stiffened ever so slightly.

"You'll most likely survive that," I casually continued. "Though not unscathed. What's left of you, I will trade to the Winter Court for a favour. They do enjoy their little games, the fae."

I felt the room cool around me.

"I doubt *you* will, though," I said. "Winter tends to play rough."

"Striking at us would take men you need elsewhere," the woman said.

The male assassin's eyes flicked towards her, then he sighed.

"A message can be carried," he conceded.

"Tell your Guildmaster that he's on notice," I said coldly. "His actions over the next few months are what will determine whether

I go through your ranks with fire and sword and all the things that are *worse* I've refrained from using."

The woman nodded slowly.

"And the terms?" she asked.

"You take a contract in Callow, it goes by my desk," I said. "There's so much as a shoemaker that dies without my approval and I rip you out root and stem. You don't need to worry about running out of work, though."

I smiled thinly.

"I have a list," I said. "It will grow longer, before all is said and done."

The man considered this for a moment.

"And should the Guildmaster acceded to your request, will you handle the matters directly?"

"I'll be the one handling you," Adjutant said from my side. "Won't be hard to find. There's not a lot of orcs with one of those."

He brought up his bone hand, displaying the fingers. It made the assassins visibly uncomfortable, hardened as they were. They were, after all, still Callowan. Necromancy was the Enemy's tool, and one of its most unpleasant ones.

"You're dismissed," I said, gesturing for the goblins to untie the assassins.

It wasn't enough to worry about this war. I had to worry about the one after that, and when the High Lords knocked at one gate and Procer snuck through the other? There would be a need for ill-gained goods and dead men. All it cost me to get them was a principle.

I was fast running out of those.

---

*danh3107*

Getting some major Black vibes Cat, which is what the dream was supposed to do I reckon. Up the tower we go.

[godkiller999](#)

Cath is slowly losing all her mercy, it's kind of beautiful to watch.

*stevenneiman*

This wasn't about mercy, or at least not mercy granted out of respect for life. This was about being willing to work with a tool that she disapproves of.

*Gunslinger*

Umm, Cat's brutality this chapter made me feel a bit uncomfortable. That smuggler lady was probably a right piece of shit but gods that was a nasty way to go. I guess it's par for the course, she is after all heartless now ....

*Type*

Well all of squire's remaining compassion seems to have been frozen, with her heart. Definitely EVIL now.

[ryubosj](#)

now if only Killian would ask for those slaves again.

*Fantasyaddict*

overestimating enemies is as bad as \*underestimating\* them

\*They\* were sloppy

And I was fast running out (cut of principles)

*stevenneiman*

"overestimating an enemy was just as dangerous as [overestimating->underestimating] them"

"Used your head {as} a prop when making the same offer"

"Dawn had come [a->and] gone hours ago"

"pirates based in the [Tidelesse->Tideless] Isles"

"I'll be calling myself a vicequeen, [no->not] a queen"

"[The->they] were sloppy"

"She tried to breathe but couldn't hand desperately clawing at her throat." I'm not sure exactly how this sentence was supposed to run

I don't know if the last line was edited since you posted, but as it is now it is clear and correct.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

Cat's given up a lot here. She's finally given up her dream of being the Hero. She's finally given up the ideals she had for Callow. She's finally given up the idea that she can save

everyone. Now, all she wants is for the most of her people to have the best life possible. And she's lost a lot of compunction to get it.

*letouriste*

finally? she given up on the hero bit since some times now^^

ALKATYN

Typos:

"Dawn had come **\*\*a\*\*** gone hours ago, "

" "I'll be calling myself a vicequeen, **\*\*\*no\*\*** a queen," I said."

**\*\*\*The\*\*** were sloppy," Robber grinned viciously.

"And should the Guildmaster **\*\*\*acceded\*\*\*** to your request, will you handle the matters directly?"

"I'll be the one handling you," Adjutant said from my side.

"Won't be hard to find. There's not a lot of orcs with one of those." Should be "these" I think?

*Morgenstern*

Meaning-loss/change typo:

" Not a reason to get sloppy, but overestimating an enemy was just as dangerous as overestimating them. "

The second one should obviously be "UNDERestimating", not "over..".

*Darkening*

I think the first one should be underestimating, not the second actually. Since he's commenting that it's a good thing Warlock's taking them seriously despite not being an actual threat.

*Morgenstern*

" A man and woman who looked – and smelled liked tanners – but had ..."

Should be "...who looked – and smelled – like tanners, but had..."

o " . .

Might be that she is doing all of this because she lost her heart, her conscience.

ALKATYN

Great chapter overall. The recurring theme seems to be ruthless pragmatism. Will be interesting to see if this leads Kat to a heel face turn somewhere along the way, makes an interesting contrast with her reactions to Black back in book 1.

You could explain it as a side effect of the ice heart, but that seems cheap narratively. But could make a nice moment with her justifying it that way but realising it was all her.

Re the assassins, one problem with her deal is she has no way of verifying that they are giving her all of their contracts. They could easily give her a bunch and leave out ones she'd disapprove of.

Other random thoughts:

- \* Surprised she hasn't experimented with her Fae powers more, but maybe that was offscreen.

- \* More focus on Robber lends credence to speculation he will get a name. Personally find him a bit irritating, he works okay as a contrast to others but the continuous cruelty gets uncomfortable. Though I suppose that in itself could lead to a conflict where Kat has to reign him in, or he gets his own character moment.

- \* I'm still not totally clear why it's assumed she's rebelling against the Tower and getting her own crown. Other than recruiting the knightly orders everything she's doing is consistent with what you'd expect a villain general to do. (Yes she killed some Praesi, but they were blatantly rebelling,). You'd think she could justify 90% of what she is doing with "The empress commanded me to keep control of Callow for the Empire, I am doing that by whatever means necessary."

- \*\* Also unclear why her non-Callowan soldiers don't seem very fussed by the possibility she is going against the tower. Yeah she's popular with the troops, but they all served the Empire before her, and should be well aware of the normal consequences of rebellion.

*Naeddyr*

I think the reactions of the Fifteenth and the citizens is just... they can feel the story, and all signs point towards Catherine the First.

*nick012000*

I think it's more likely that the Praesi are expecting her to wind up either Dread Empress or in the hall full of decapitated heads on chains.

*Blinks*

...Catherine the Great?

*Jonnnney*

Grasping for power is what a villain does. Her mentor is known in Callow for the invasion, but Black is best known in Praes for the successful rebellion.

The officers of the 15th, besides Juniper and Aisha, all have ample reason to hate the high Lord's of Praes and love Catherine. The rank and file have seen her defeat Demon, Angel, and Fae. They would follow her to the gates of hell itself, rebellion against the tower is a small all things considered.

*Cpt. Obvious*

Her freshly brutal pragmatism isn't so hard to explain. She had set up a system to govern Callow, and the moment there was even a chance she might get caught or killed in Arcadia these two Praesi took out a contract on the Callowans in the counsel. The Priestess was murdered in broad daylight and the noble was wounded but managed to get away. Both of these Cat was friendly with, so taking out a contract on them makes it personal. To make it better the assassins guild handled the contracts, and only months earlier she'd been talked out of trying to drum them out of Callow. So she's partly blaming her self at least a bit.

The smuggler woman poked the bear at a very bad time. She's been trying to be fair, to allow the smugglers guild to continue operating as the act as enablers and actually generate more legal trade. But instead of cooperating people has seen it as a sign of weakness and that Black is controlling her. If they think they can laugh in her face without consequences then she has to show them that they are wrong. And as they are a guild of criminals they have to be aware that there are monsters here who can kill them as easy as breathing.

*The Archdevil*

People keep speculating on whether Cat will become the Black or White Knight. Why hasn't anyone suggested the idea that she Takes both Names, Breaks them, and might use her third unclaimed Aspect to merge the pieces into a single Name of Knight. After all, "she will use what she cannot break, and break what she cannot use."

*lennymaster*

I think it more likely that she becomes Warlord. Adjutant called her that the moment he became Adjutant and now Juniper called her that as she agreed to be part of Cats quasi rebellion. Now all we need is a non orc (maybe Robber when he comes into his name? Or even a Callowan like the captain of her guard?) calls her that.

*The Archdevil*

except Warlord isn't really a Name, per se. It's a title given to the being an Orc will follow to the Hells and back, because they exemplify everything an Orc wants in a leader. If I've read the story correctly, that is.



### [Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

Them calling her Warlord/Warchief was significant because in their culture, Warchief were demigods deserving of absolute obedience, who you could unquestioningly follow to lead you to victory. It said more about the respect they hold for Cat than about her future Name, I think.

*Jonnnney*

Black mentioned that Warlord was a name common among the orcish tribes prior to their enslavement.

I personally think the name is unlikely for Catherine. It is more likely to be what Deadhand was for Hakram. A title that gives her the power to forge her own name.

*MagnaMalusLupus*

Directly from the chapter where her heart is replaced Cat mentions that the bundle of fae power took up the third aspect slot.

“Power pulsed in my chest, spreading through my veins. I felt the third part of my soul, the missing aspect I had yet to forge, fill with something old and too large to comprehend.”

Now maybe I’m badly misunderstanding this, but I’m pretty sure that suggests that her third Aspect is now ‘Duchess of Moonless Nights’, and I really don’t think she will be getting another aspect as Squire. How that will affect things if/when she transitions will be interesting.

*Mike E.*

I love these little sidebars showing the various Calamities working together. A very finely meshed team.

This was awesome:

“Your prize ship has been sunk. Most your lieutenants are dead. You are kneeling on the floor of your very seat of power,” he murmured. “[B]Bringing you to this took me four people and a rowboat[B], Pirate. You asked me what my point was? This is it. Do not make me repeat myself.”

[benthelynx](#)

Excellent chapter. If you ever start another story, I’d love to see Callow in five hundred years – whether it is The Light That Was Extinguished, The Darkness That Holds Back Horrors or The Light Revived.

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

I find the constantly lessening value Catherine places on human life a very interesting journey to follow. I can, surprisingly, completely understand and agree with every action she has taken this chapter, but I'm curious where she will end up eventually.

*Jonnney*

It is interesting to me that commenters are making such a big deal about Catherine brutally killing one uppity smuggler. Prior to her winter wonderland excursion she was planning on having every member of all three guilds put to the sword.

[ryubosj](#)

The point for me is that a couple weeks back we had Kat objecting to Killian killing people, however here we have her doing something much worse to someone who isn't a soldier or a death row prisoner.

*letouriste*

i wonder if her current ruthlessness and aggressivity would not be linked partly to losing her heart?  
she is cold now;) maybe in 6 months she will recover from that and start to balance more her actions

*Sean*

Long ago I concluded that Foundling would win. The only question is, at what cost? Will she end up atop a throne, acting as cruel and ruthless as any Dread Empress. Or will she be a benevolent dictator?

*arancaytar*

Cat, you just gruesomely executed two criminals for political purposes.

I mean, style points for acting like the team you're on, but exactly what was your objection to Kilian's use of ritual sacrifice?

*amc*

I love Cat, but no one will seriously suggest that she's not a hypocrite.

*arancaytar*

Darth Vader approves.

*alegio*

Every chapter Cat is getting to be more and more like Black. Which is not really that surprising seeing how he is not only his mentor but pretty much his adopted father by now, but still if things keep going like this everything will go either really good or really bad.

And is it just me or does Rober getting more and more screen time feels like hinting for a new name? Dunno, it could be just Erraticerrata giving us readers a little love with our favorite little killing machine, but still could be something.

### Shawn Panzegraf

See, I agree with Arancaytar: Cat gets off Killian's back about the human sacrifice needed to unshackle Killian's magic and become full Fae, she gets her love interest back, and more importantly the two might actually work as a loving Villainous couple in much the same way Warlock and his Incubus work. Killian as a full-Fae would make her relevant again, especially given the current situation. The two sticking together and supporting each other through fulfilling the Winter King's demands would flesh Killian out and give Cat essentially another pseudo-Named as an asset.

The bit Erratic wrote about Cat being able to FEEL the kinship with Killian's Fae side, and how it sang out to her was beautiful. I really, REALLY hope that Erratic relents and has Cat experience a moment of realization concerning how hypocritical she's being. Black has his deeper-than-Names/Roles relationship with Malicia.

Discarding the relationship aspect of the story, especially when the big thing that draws Cat to Killian is that she can trust her and be herself around Killian denies the narrative window into showing Cat during brief unguarded moments of stolen happiness. I felt, and still feel their relationship added another dimension to the story.

On another point, Cat's internal thought about "Having no spite left for mortals, when she was set against powers that considered tearing her heart out a warning" was a PERFECTLY handled look at just how deep down the rabbit-hole Cat's some. How she's moved into being a Player in the Big Picture. While Hakram's warnings about what Callow represents to the Empire, and the danger Cat is exposing herself to by essentially treading on the spot where her mentor draws the line with Cat's idea of being Queen and an essentially almost-Ally-rather-than-Imperial Province plan for Callow really paints the picture of what's currently happening for us readers without it becoming Infodump-Exposition. Hakram's exchange with Cat conveyed the necessary exposition, but did it in a very smooth/natural/organic manner of delivery Erraticerrata should be praised for.

Getting necessary exposition to feel like dialog that naturally belongs in the narrative isn't nearly as easy as it might look to some.

All of this said, while the recent setup content has been well done and absolutely necessary post-Return from Winter. I'm hoping the transition from setup to more dynamic events is handled as well as the setup has been. Though now that issues of Thief and the usurpers in Laure are handled, it isn't very clear what Cat's next/immediate objective is going to be. From something a couple Chapters ago I was thinking something got mentioned about working on things with Daoine/Duchess Kegan, as part of Cat's efforts to free up more Legions.

Everyone else's thoughts on Cat's next move?

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

[Евгений Пермяков](#)

\*sniff\*

Our little girl is growing up! It's so heartwarming...

*Shoddi*

... I see what you did there.

*Simpli*

Maybe it is just me but...the more and more things are going on, the more I would love for our "heroine" to fail – and that badly. For now things have been going on, good or bad with a few collapses and lapses, more or less in the way Catherine wanted/ was able to form.

Maybe it is just my love for the Dread Empress and First Prince little plays – but I would love to see Catherine fail in her "rebellion" and trying to change the whole system of Prae etc. because if she succeeds...wouldn't that just fit to the way heroes work in this world? Or in most other stories and novels of such kind?

I would like her to fail because she might run into problems she can't just overpower or cheat, because there are forces bigger, badder and more experienced than her. Not a final setback but one that puts her own still "young" position into perspective.

*Roger W*

then I the other Was?

*draxsiss*

I now have a theory, Cat took the deal with for her resurrection, She already agreed that queen will be her transitional name and this is just her journey to get their, Their was more left unsaid in that transaction and they deliberately kept us out of the loop.

*nasiba*

For the first time, Cat was actually \*scary\* here. Like, Black scary. I approve. The fae presence in her soul, I hope that stays even when she gets her heart back because the girl was overdue a power up, for real.

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## Chapter 22: Govern

*"We do not forget."*

– Official motto of the House of Iarsmai

I hadn't set foot in a House of Light since becoming the Squire, though to be fair my attendance at the daily sermons had always been shaky. This wasn't just any house, though: it was the Alban Cathedral, the beating heart of the faith in Callow. There were hundreds of brothers and sister here at all times, and Praesi occupation had done nothing to change it. The priests, after all, had not taken part directly in the fighting for the capital during the Conquest. They'd healed any who went through their doors, but none had taken the field. The House of Light did not concern themselves with who ruled the land, only the souls of the people who lived on it. Or so they liked to say. Some priests were more politically-inclined than others: a few of the sermons had been very harsh on the subject of Evil and its servants, though they'd always refrained from outright preaching rebellion. That was the line Black had drawn when conceding freedom of worship in the conquered kingdom.

The main hall was filled with beds when I entered, though thankfully most of them were empty: with the end of the riots, the influx of wounded had ceased as well. I left the Gallowborne outside, and for once Tribune Farrier did not protest: the idea of being at risk here was as absurd for him as it was to me. White-robed priests stirred when I strode in, with an older woman coming forward. She did not have any marks distinguishing her from the others – the brothers and sisters had no ranks, and seniority did not always mean authority – but the simple fact that she was the one headed for me said it all. She had Deoraithe blood, I noted. Too pale to have both parents from the Duchy though. The sister bowed.

"Sermons have been suspended for a sennight, my lady," she said.

"The it's a good thing I'm not here for one," I replied. "Take me to the baroness."

She smiled with feinted confusion and began to answer, but I cut her off with a sharp gesture.

"I'm Catherine Foundling," I said.

"I am aware, Lady Squire," she said.

"Then you should know deceiving an Imperial dignitary while the city is under martial law qualifies as treason," I said. "Don't make that mistake. It would get ugly for both us, and I'm not here to hurt her."

"The cathedral offers refuge to all," she insisted.

"Look outside, sister," I said tiredly. "There are no refuges left. Don't make me ask twice."

She looked like she'd bitten into a lemon, but didn't protest again. There were catacombs under the cathedral, every child knew, but people not sworn to the House of Light were not allowed to set foot in them. Most of the Fairfax dynasty was buried there, save for the few whose heads were in the Hall of Screams. I hadn't known for sure there were rooms other than the graveyard carved out in the foundations, but it was easy enough to suspect. They had to keep the food somewhere, not to mention the more contagious patients. Baroness Kendal was in one of the rooms that served the latter purposed, if I had to guess. I could feel power coming from the walls that made me uncomfortable, had the Beast raising its hackles underneath my skin. The whole cathedral was full of it, but it was particularly pure down here. I wasn't surprised, considering I could be more than twenty feet away from consecrated grounds. The sister knocked at the door and the baroness herself opened it, her arm in a sling.

"Lady Catherine," she said, blinking in surprise.

I looked at the priestess.

"You may go," I said, and it wasn't a suggestion.

She didn't enjoy that, but I didn't particularly care. I turned to Anne Kendal, taking in the sight of her. She was still pale, and not in the pretty way she usually was – it was the pale of someone who'd bled too much, not the ivory of good breeding.

"May I come in?" I asked.

"By all means," she replied, moving out of the way.

The room wasn't much to look at. A cot and a small table covered with fresh linens. A water basin in the corner, and an open book on the bed: something religious, by the looks of it. The baroness closed the door behind me.

"I'd invite you to sit down," the baroness said, "but I seem to be short on furniture."

"I don't intend to stay long," I half-smiled. "You should sit, though. You still look like you're recovering."

"The assassins punctured by lung and cut into my spine," she admitted. "Even the touch of the Heavens has been slow in working."

*Gods.* I hadn't thought her wounds had been that bad. No wonder people thought she was dead. And I'd probably let the people who'd done it go not a bell ago. The taste of self-disgust was thick on my tongue.

"I was aware of the risks when I accepted your offer," Kendal reassured me, misinterpreting the look on my face. "Praesi play for keeps."

"Don't they just," I muttered.

So did I, these days. I had a fresh batch of corpses in the city to prove it.

"I'd heard the Fifteenth had arrived, but I hardly believed it," the baroness, smoothing a silver curl back as she sat on the bed. "They'd have had to leave months ago."

"We went through Arcadia," I said.

She stared at me like I'd just grown another head.

"That's... possible?" she said.

"If you're a Duchess of Winter," I replied.

She looked genuinely unsure what to say at that. I forgot, now and then, that the kind of eldritch places I went and the many different creatures that tried to kill me in them were just legends to most people. Stories they never expected to see take flesh. I'd lost those kind of certainties: if it could be real it was and it was probably after my head for some godforsaken reason.

"Will you be using that as your title?" she finally asked, which she probably felt was relatively safe grounds.

"I'm leaving that up in the air until I've had a chat with Her Dread Majesty," I said. "I don't suppose the priests carried word of what happened today?"

She shook her head.

"They say isolation from the worries of Creation will allow me to heal quicker," she said.

"Ruling Council's dissolved," I said. "I stormed the palace last night and had Murad and Satang publicly crucified just before Noon Bell."

"Gods save us all," she whispered, closing her eyes. "It is ill-bred of me to say as much, but they deserved to die. Not this painfully, but they did."

"My legionaries will put them out of the misery after sundown," I shrugged. "Point will have been made by then."

That was as much pity as I was willing to expend for those two. I only had so much to spare, and there were many souls more deserving of it.

"If I may ask, who rules Callow then?" Kendal asked, eyes fluttering open.

"I do," I said. "But I'm going off to war for Gods know how long. Congratulations, Baroness Kendal: you've just been appointed Governess-General of Callow."

She eyed me carefully.

"There is no such thing," she said. "And if there was, the Empress would frown upon it."

"The Empress will have to cope," I said. "And I'll have to give her something for it, I'm sure. No doubt she'll have her price ready when we speak."

"I suppose I should thank you for the privilege," she finally said.

"Don't thank me," I said. "I want you to turn this country into something functional while I go off to kill the people burning it down. I'll leave you my seal – that gives you authority over everyone in Callow who's not in the Legions."

"The city must be in shambles," the baroness sighed.

"Heal quickly, Anne Kendal," I said. "Your home needs you, and so do I."

—



In the end, it took two more days before Laure was settled. The appointment of the Governess-General was met with enthusiasm by the city – she was well-known there and better liked – and quiet distaste by the legionaries of the Fifth. None of them had forgotten that she'd once been the Baroness Dormer and one of the foremost nobles of the Liesse Rebellion. That she had been made the highest-ranking person in Callow after myself was a bitter pill to swallow. They'd just have to deal with it: I didn't have anyone else remotely as competent and trustworthy at my disposal. That made for one fire mostly put out, so on to the next: the Deoraithe. I'd used the Fifth's mages to scry Marshal Ranker and inform her I would be headed for Denier immediately, though I couldn't give her a clear date of arrival. It was a good thing I didn't even try an estimate, because this time travelling was... difficult.

What I took my soldiers through did not look like Winter. Or Summer, for that matter. Unless I was mistaken we'd marched through the borderlands between both. It had been deserted on Winter's side, but on the last few days of the journey we'd begun to see larger and larger patrols from Summer gathering in the distance. It took us a week, in the end. Still shorter than it would have taken us through Creation, but inexplicably longer than it took us to get to Laure from Machford. There did not seem to be any rhyme or reason to the time spent in Arcadia, and my control on it was erratic. I'd barely needed to do anything the first way through, but on this one not getting stuck for months had been a constant struggle. I did not believe our third way through would go uncontested.

The gate opened a full day south of Denier, since I'd never been in the city itself. I allowed my legionaries a bell to recover on these less-treacherous grounds before beginning the march anew. My two and half thousand men came in sight of the city's walls on the evening of the following day, though the Marshal's scouts found us long before that. I didn't bother to meet them in person – Nauk served as a go-between while I spoke with Hakram. When it came to Legion gossip, Adjutant was without equals.

"So," I said as Zombie trotted at his side. "Fourth Legion."

The tall orc shot me an amused look.

"Cognomen *Blackhands*," he said.

"I already knew that part," I complained. "Everybody knows that."

"They don't usually know where it's from," Hakram gravelled.

"Ranker was the Matron of the Hungry Dog tribe, before she took up with Lord Black. She took all goblins of age with her into war and sent the children to half a dozen other tribes."

I whistled, reluctantly impressed.

"That's a hell of a bet to make," I said. "He was still an up and comer back then, and the Empress a relative unknown. Still doesn't tell me where that cognomen is from."

"Hungry Dog tribe had a ritual, when time came to choose their matron," Adjutant said. "All the candidates put their hand in a brazier – the one who kept it the longest got to rule."

"High pain tolerance doesn't mean good leadership," I grunted.

"It's about who was willing to suffer the most to get it," the orc said. "I can respect that. Ranker kept her hand in there for half a day, long after everybody else had abandoned. Her left hand's a blackened ruin, and she's refused any healing ever since."

"And they named an entire legion after that?" I frowned.

"Officers in the Fourth kept the tradition," Hakram said. "Even those not goblins. Most of them take healing afterwards, but everybody has to be willing to burn for power."

"That feels like it should be against regulations," I said, then glanced at him. "... is it?"

The thing with being Named was that rules only applied to you if you allowed them to. For example, my relationship with Kilian was technically breaking a rule about fraternization – she was under me in the chain of command. I'd learned the most important of the regs, but some of the smaller ones I'd, uh, only skimmed. In my defence, there were a lot.

"It's skirting the line about voluntary injuries," the orc replied. "That can qualify as desertion, if you're not careful. But the Marshal's been with the Carrion Lord since the beginning. Those that were get to run their legion however they want."

A woman used to getting her own way, then, and one of the three highest-ranked military officers in the Empire to boot. I narrowed my eyes, thinking back to an old Name dream of mine – she'd been with Grem One-Eye and Istrid during the civil war. That'd been what, thirty years ago? And she'd already been a matron candidate before that. I wasn't clear how old you had to be for that, but at least ten years old felt like a safe bet. Considering it was rare for a goblin to make it past thirty-five, that Ranker was at least forty was notable.

"How old is she?" I asked.

"Near sixty," Hakram said. "And no, nobody knows how she made it that old. Most common guess is that Lord Black had rituals done to extend her lifespan."

"He doesn't like using blood magic," I frowned, as there was no real question about what kind of a ritual could be used for such a purpose. "He would have needed a very good reason."

"She's the most powerful goblin in the Empire, bar none," Adjutant said. "And she's a vocal advocate for the Tribes being involved with the Legions. Pickler says a lot of the Matrons were in favour of going isolationist after the civil war."

I raised an eyebrow.

"They made a lot of gains when Malicia won the throne," I pointed out. "Breeding restrictions were lifted and they pretty much run the Imperial Forges."

That part hadn't been taught in the histories back at the orphanage, but it had been in the pile of books Black had dropped into my lap when I first became the Squire. I'd taken me a few years to understand that those were meant in part to be a primer to Imperial politics – by learning how all the major players had gotten where they were, I could get a read on what they wanted. Before the civil war the High Lords of Foramen had owned all the forges in the city, though they'd used goblins as labour. Malicia had given ownership to the Tribes and only allowed High Lady Banu to take a cut from the proceeds. A significant one, but it'd been a sizeable blow to her power base. I'd not been surprised to learn that she was part of the Truebloods.

"They've always had a bend that way," Hakram shrugged. "And no one gets involved with the Tower for long without getting burned. I can understand wanting to take their win and go home."

I hummed.

"So she's a key player, then," I said. "If she goes, the Matrons she'd keeping in check get bolder."

"She's not someone you can bully, Cat," he warned. "She's run Denier for twenty years and the Fourth is rabidly loyal. Get on her bad side and even *our* goblins will get restless. She's to the Tribes what One-Eye is to the Clans."

The looming figure of an era, he meant. Even Juniper got star struck when she spoke about Marshal Grem, and she was not a girl who impressed easy. I allowed the conversation to ebb as I considered what was ahead of us. Duchess Kegan who'd raised her army of twenty thousand was only half the problem I had to deal with. I knew what the Deoraithe wanted, and our shared enemy was common ground enough I was more or less confident I could point her in the right direction. The question was whether I could make Marshal Ranker buy into the notion. Marshals weren't just the Imperial officers with the authority to command several legions: they had a broader responsibility put on them.

One-Eye was charged with securing the border with the Principate, Marshal Nim with keeping peace in the Wasteland. Ranker was meant to keep the Duchy of Daoine in check, positioned near the best crossing of the Silver Lake's tributary to slow the Deoraithe down if they rebelled. I had, theoretically, the authority to give her orders. But her responsibility to keep an eye on Daoine came straight from the Tower, and that meant gave Ranker at lot of leeway. Malicia's orders came before anyone else's, no matter the circumstances. I remained silent all the way to the city, but no solution presented itself.

—

Denier was a sleepy little city, about the size of Summerholm but nowhere as heavily fortified. It had rarely ever seen fighting: whenever the Empire had bypassed Summerholm and crossed the Hwaerte, they tended to go straight from Laure. The city had been stormed during the Conquest, but it had surrendered after a token resistance — it was in no way capable of resisting the likes of what Praesi sappers could unleash. Its only real military importance came from the fact that it stood near the easiest crossing into Daoine. Higher up the river the harsh currents made navigation tricky and the making of a pontoon bridge nigh impossible. The waters west of the city were almost lazy in comparison and full of large mud banks. There was no bridge into the Duchy, of course. That no such thing would be built without the sanction of the Dukes and Duchess of Daoine had been one of the conditions written into the treaty that saw Daoine folded into Callow after the First Crusade. No Fairfax had ever dared to go back on that word, even when the northerners flouted the authority of the throne.

The greatest general in Callowan history, Elizabeth Alban, had famously attempted to invade the then-Kingdom of Daoine. By the the Queen of Blades had already proven her ability by occupying three principalities of what was not yet the Principate, crushing a Liessen rebellion and turning back a Praesi invasion. The expectation had been that, within a few months, the Deoraithe would be made subjects of Callow. Instead she'd had to slog through the countryside for two long years, losing thousands to ambushes and night attacks while her supply trains disappeared. Historians usually noted that given another year she might have won anyway by forcing a decisive battle at the capital of Daoine, but the invasion had collapsed when the Praesi had crossed the border again under Dread Empress Regalia. After the Wastelanders were defeated and the Empress killed as her flying fortress crashed into Laure, the Queen of Blades had begun planning a second invasion.

So the Watch had murdered her in her bed, in her own seat of power.

No ruler of Callow had ever forgotten that pointed warning. Had half the population of Daoine not been wiped out by Dread Empress Triumphant when she took the continent, the Duchy might very well be a sovereign nation to this day. A combination of worries about Praesi resurgence even after Triumphant died and Eleanor Fairfax's deft diplomacy – helped along by her famous 'friendship' with the Queen of Daoine – had seen the kingdom made a duchy, though one so removed from the authority of the throne it was effectively a vassal state instead of truly a part of Callow. That state of affairs had been maintained after the Conquest, with regular tributes and fixed war time obligations being signed over to the Tower by treaty. My short-lived Ruling Council had changed nothing in that regard: Duchess Kegan's envoy had flatly refused any notion that they were subject to its authority and I'd recognized that as a fight I couldn't win. And wasn't even sure I wanted to, to be honest. Daoine had always gotten on just fine on its own. *Don't fix it if it ain't broke.*

The gates were open for us when my soldiers finally made it to Denier, ranks of legionaries atop the walls watching us. I rode in at a brisk pace, and only reined in my horse when a Taghreb with the markings of Staff Tribune headed in my direction with two lines for escort. I quietly ordered the Gallowborne to allow them passage, though Farrier saw to it they immediately surrounded the legionaries of the Fourth when they got lose.

"Lady Squire," the olive-skinned man greeted me, sharply saluting.

"Staff Tribune," I replied. "You look like a man carrying a message."

"Marshal Ranker asks that you attend to her immediately, ma'am," he said.

I cocked my head to the side.

"My men are not yet settled," I said.

"I would handle this myself, my lady," he said. "The Marshal would like you to that within a bell Duchess Kegan will be crossing the river with a party to treat with us. If you're to be part of the conference, you will need to be briefed."

I smiled at the Taghreb, cursing viciously inside. Well, there went my plan to work on Ranker for a day or two before talking with the Deoraithe. One of these days, I was going to force Fate into a physical manifestation and then I was going to *stab* it.

---

*naturalnuke*

"One of these days, I was going to force Fate into a physical manifestation and then I was going to stab it."

I will enjoy remembering this line when it happens.

*Unnamed goblin*

Stab the kidney, loot the corpse!

[Aaron Wagner](#)

So, then I'm guessing, bard is getting a perforated kidney at some point

*amc*

That sounds like a line that will bite back...

*Igcis*

"You can stab anything if you try hard enough."

*Talmora*

Stabbing seems to be a way to relieve stress in a lot of books. I wonder how effective it is in reality..

*The Archdevil*

Very. If you can afford it, get a couple sand bags you can hang from trees or something, a combat knife, and just go wild. It's very therapeutic, not to mention a great workout.

*dalek955*

Wouldn't stabbing sand wear out the knife?

*The Archdevil*

you aren't stabbing the sand, you're stabbing the bags. The sand is to hold the bags still enough to stab.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

This is actually incorrect, extremely so.

This kind of "venting" is as counterproductive as it gets. While you may experience a small relief in the short term, in the long term, it serves to only INCREASE your restlessness and violent impulses.

I would strongly recommend not trying this.

*Blake T*

Sounds like something a sandbag would say.

[MrPicklesAndTea](#)

Yeah! Take that stupid sandbag!

[greatwyrmgold](#)

A lesson our Squire desperately needs to learn.

*danh3107*

Sometimes you spend hours trying to come up with something witty to say on your favorite web story's comment section.

Then you just say "fuck it" and say: Fate's a real cunt.

*jamesc9*

I'm not sure that that's an appropriate gendered insult.

*haihappen*

Treat it like the Australians use "cunt": its a synonym with calling somebody annoying, stupid, a coward or a plain asshole. Completely gender-neutral.

*Nairne*

"One of these days, I was going to force Fate into a physical manifestation and then I was going to stab it."

Ahh wouldn't that be fun.

*Cicero*

"The Marshal would like you to that within a bell Duchess Kegan will be crossing the river with a party to treat with us. "

should be "would like you to know that" i think

*stevenneiman*

"[The->Then it's a good thing I'm not here for one"

"I wasn't surprised, considering I [could->couldn't] be more than twenty feet away from consecrated grounds."

"If she goes, the Matrons [she'd->she's] keeping in check get bolder."

"By [the->then] the Queen of Blades had already proven her ability"

"The Marshal would like you to {know} that within a bell Duchess Kegan will be crossing the river"

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

[Not a robot](#)

Cat vs. Fate endgame confirmed?

*Jonnnnz*

Fate, no. Gods on the side of good, for which humanity is nothing more than a part of their plan? Probably... And those are close enough

*haihappen*

You know the God of Fate in Pratchett's disc-world novels? He/ It appears in a few books, and is veeeery stab-worthy. The general theme in discworld is that the gods play games with the souls of mortals. Either because they try to win more souls/ power, or are goaded into it, or are simply bored. Reminds me of a certain universe...

*Soronel Haetir*

Talk about climbing the Tower, making Fate itself your bitch.

*amc*

Is anyone else remembering the scene(s) during the college war games with the round-robin betrayal? Can I predict: In half a bell, Cat will convince the Marshal that Kegan doesn't want her [Ranker] to let her [Kegan] help Cat. Then everyone can feel like they're betraying someone, and go home happy...

*Letouriste*

Don't work for long.she need something lasting a few days at least

*Dragrath*

I'm still willing to bet on blacks assertion that he thinks Goblins do have names only they keep them secret like everything goblin's do. Ranker with those accomplishments and an age twice that of a Goblin's lifespan? Along with Robber those are two very high profile goblins with all the signs towards having possible names.

*Letouriste*



Robber don't have a name.he would not be in the legions otherwise.and I think male goblins can't have Names,period.

*darkening*

Orcs didn't have names for ages and now we have adjutant. Things change. That said, I doubt robber has one yet. I imagine apprentice at least would notice.

*delspaig*

Maybe he did notice and just didn't say anything?

"What? Of course the goblin has a Name, I assumed you all knew already."

*Morgenstern*

Uhm.. what exactly is your grounds for thinking Robber could not be in the legions, if he had a Name (that was kept secret)? There IS something special about him, something that makes him (as a MALE who CANNOT rule, as old goblin tradition dictates) incompatible with the \*tribes\* – which is exactly WHY the matrons decided to let him go (or, basically, shunt him off) to the legions... I see no problem there, in either case, him having a (secret) Name or not...

*Morgenstern*

On the contrary – the legions are the ONE option he has, where he IS allowed to lead... even female goblins, at least in theory, because "Legions standards and not tribe standards"...

*Theo Promes*

There seem to be plenty of ways to extend lifespan if you are, uh, willing to make sacrifices... if Ranker was a named, I doubt they'd be sitting around guarding a river, that seems like a waste of name power, considering the way the calamities and cat get used to further the empire's agenda.

Robber, however... I wondered about that a couple times as well. He seems awfully good at what he does, and a natural leader of his people, and really good at surviving all sorts of things he really shouldn't. Also there is a certain parallel between his story and cat's, both are coming from nothing and spitting those with power in the eye before stabbing them in the kidneys... Usually named seem to be aware of one another, however we know that isn't true for the sneakier sorts (like assassin) and it would be fitting for a goblin anarcho-murder specialist Named to have that aspect no matter what. Maybe al of them have it, as you suggest.

*Soronel Haetir*

Except that Named tend to live longer by simply not aging. The Calamities are great examples of this, they still appear mostly young (other than perhaps an aged tiredness to their eyes).

*Morgenstern*

Not exactly necessarily true. Remember: Names look as THEY think of themselves, as THEY themselves think they SHOULD look. Who's to say Named cannot "age" in looks, if they start thinking of themselves as BEING older instead of having those indoctrinated "Named don't age" thoughts? If THEY think it appropriate and think of themselves that way... I would think they WOULD look that way, if the mechanism is truly all about their SELF-perception. \*shrugs

[ebagriel](#)

I wasn't surprised, considering I could be more than twenty feet away from consecrated grounds.

→

Couldn't

"The assassins punctured by lung and cut into my spine,"

→

my

[nineran](#)

What will Cat grow up to be? Or, more practically, what is Squire about to transition into? If this was a hero's tale, perhaps Champion. Except we've seen her, and she's kinda laughable. Protector? Guardian? Both too hero-like.

What's the story that we tell about Cat? Here's an orphan that smashes everything in her way in order to get what she wants. She's loyal. She cares about her responsibilities. She thinks out of the box.

If only we had Knight-Commandants. Or Knight-Protectors. Or Knight-Generals (ok, maybe not that one). Oh well, the chivalry orders are dead. Or maybe not 😊

But while they live (and if they were revived) could they be sworn to the Lady of Callow? A Praesi title on Callowan soil?

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## Chapter 23: Reassessment

*"From small slights, long prices."*

– Deoraithe proverb

For all that the marshal's envoy had impressed upon me the urgency of the situation, I found myself waiting. The balustrade overlooked an inside courtyard, and from my perch I watched the soldiers milling below. I'd left a line of the Gallowborne down there along with Robber and a line from his cohort. My personal retinue wouldn't be mingling with the goblins, but the Special Tribune and his men were not so distant. They were, perhaps, a little *too* friendly. I winced when Robber rolled all over the paving stones, clawing at another goblin's eyes and cackling loudly. Their sharp nails drew blood on each other, but aside from my own visibly horrified Callowans none of the legionaries seemed anything but amused. The other greenskin was larger – likely from a Matron lineage, then, since those were supposed to be bigger and smarter than other goblins – but my own bastard was younger and more vicious. It ended with him sitting atop his opponent, licking the blood off his fingers to the cheers of all the goblins in the courtyard.

The door my back was turned to opened silently, but my senses had gotten even sharper since Arcadia. I could feel the air moving, almost, and the soft creep of leather boots headed for me. The only other person in the room came to stand by my side at the balustrade, deftly climbing atop a stone seat so they'd be able to lean their elbows against the edge like I did. I didn't show surprise, or even bother to turn around. I already knew who it was, and years of dealing with Robber had taught me the dangers of allowing a goblin to set the beat of a conversation.

"Tribe?" a soft voice asked.

"Rock Breaker," I replied.

Marshal Ranker chuckled, the sound a dry rasp.

"I can see why a barren old bitch like Weaver would get rid of him," she said.

Only then did I glance at the small, wrinkled old woman that was one of the three most important commanders in the Legions of Terror. Marshal Ranker's skin looked like leather left out too long in the sun, all cracked and dry and a brown-green that was unpleasant to look at. Her face was a curtain of heavy wrinkles leading to thin brown lips and a pointed chin. Her eyes, though, had me wary. Deep set and dark, with small threads of red in the sclera. This one was ancient, by the standards of her people, and old goblins were either dead or exceedingly dangerous. The infamous blackened hand her legion was named for was curled and

unmoving, looking crippled for good, but I knew better than to take anything shown by this woman as face value.

"Her loss," I said. "His record speaks for itself."

The goblin clicked her tongue.

"That boy learned his lessons too well," she said. "We tell them they're supposed to be fearless, but that's a lie. They're still supposed to be afraid of *us*."

Of the Matrons. I didn't know much about the Tribes, not that anybody did, but what little I'd learned from Robber and Pickler had not endeared their ruling class to me. It had always been absurd to me to wrest authority out of the hands of the capable because of some arbitrary objection to those capable individuals having bollocks. If there was one aspect of Black's philosophy I had wholeheartedly embraced, it was that power belonged in the hands of the competent – wasting talent out of petty bias was to lessen all those involved.

"Fear's never enough," I said. "Not on its own."

"Empires have been built on less," the Marshal snorted.

"Not this one," I said.

There was a pause.

"And yet you crucified them," Ranker said.

"They crossed me," I replied. "Some fear was required."

I got a bark of harsh laughter for that.

"Marshal Ranker, of the Hungry Dog tribe," she finally introduced herself.

"Catherine Foundling," I said. "Duchess of Moonless Nights."

"I'm aware," the goblin lightly replied. "As I'm sure you are that you've had crossbows pointed at you since you first stepped into Denier."

I smiled wryly.

"You're not going to mention the fact that this entire room is rigged with demolition charges?" I asked.

Smell was a sense as well, and I'd learned to recognize the sharp tang of goblin munitions.

"Much like you weren't going to mention you sent your Adjutant to poke around the city," she replied.

"He's not a spymaster," I shrugged. "Just a friendly orc who likes to share a drink."

"The dangerous ones always smile," the Marshal said.

I snorted.

"I've been advised you're not someone to trifle with," I told her.

"I considered trapping your little crew in an avenue and setting the whole thing aflame with green," Ranker casually said. "Your tiff with the Empress has poor timing. But that would trigger another uprising, and that'd be even more trouble than you."

The sheer nonchalance she'd just admitted that with was chilling, but I was no stranger to cold these days.

"All I'm doing is hacking off the dead wood," I said. "And there's a great deal of that. You've been around long enough for-"

"Save me the speech, Duchess," the goblin interrupted cuttingly. "I'm not one of your lapdogs, and whatever hopes you're peddling I don't care for. I'm a fucking Marshal of the Dread Empire, kid. I know where my loyalties lie. If it comes to it, I'll kill you if only to spare Amadeus the pain of doing the deed himself."

"The way things used to be done in Callow won't work anymore," I said. "You have to be aware of that."

The Marshal hacked out a laugh.

"And whose fault is that? I read Sacker's report on Summerholm. The Liesse Rebellion is as good as your doing. You set up that highborn chit in the south who's giving us trouble now, too, and to add insult to fucking injury you're taking advantage of an invasion to make a power grab," she said. "As far as I'm concerned the only difference between you and those poor bastards you nailed to crosses is that you have a bigger stick and catchier battle cry."

"I actually have a purpose, unlike those 'poor bastards'," I replied coldly. "And I'll see it through no matter how much wailing comes from the gallery."

"I've been threatened by scarier Named than you, Duchess," Ranker said. "And I'll say this for the Chancellor – he wasn't dumb enough to do it in my own territory. You've risen quickly, and we all know how that story goes. The fall comes as quickly, and twice as hard. Take care not to drop your carcass on anything I care about."

I sighed.

"Are we just going to stand around trading veiled threats all day?" I said. "I was under the impression Duchess Kegan was headed our way."

"There is no *us*," the Marshal said. "You're one conversation gone south away from rebellion. And you have some sort of plan for the Deoraithe. Out with it. If it has to come to steel, let's get it out of the way."

"You wouldn't leave this room alive if it did," I said flatly.

Ranker eyed me with those dark, deep-set eyes.

"No," she agreed. "But neither would you."

I'd seen that look in the faces of people before. William's, when he'd decided to call Contrition onto Liesse. Akua's, when she'd told me she would collapse the dimension were were in if I refused to negotiate. Ranker wasn't Named – she lacked the feelings of power and weight both – but she did have that kind of resolution to her. She would, if she found my intentions unacceptable, rather bring down this entire place on our heads than allow me to go through with them. I'd never had that goblin razor-sharp fearlessness turned on me before, and it wasn't a pleasant feeling. Could I kill her before she even spoke an order? I had no doubt. I shouldn't, though. There was nothing to *gain* from it, and it worried me the urge was there. Kilian's soft accusation that I hated to compromise came back to my ears, along with the bundle of things I still felt about that conversation I'd set aside rather than deal with. Had I become too used to getting my way? Or maybe it was subtler than that. I'd won often enough that the idea of losing even in a small way had me reaching for violence. Because Ranker would be beating me, by coercing me into revealing my hand like this. That was a fact.

The surrender of control rankled. I'd stayed in this room even after smelling the munitions because I'd believed that whatever measures she had taken they wouldn't be able to kill me. I'd done that even after being told by the person I trusted most in the world that I was dealing with a real threat. Stupid. More than that, I'd been *arrogant*. Ranker had survived the death of more powerful villains than me. *This isn't a mistake I would have made a year ago*. I would have liked to blame this on my Name, on whatever the Winter King had done to me, but that felt like a cheap excuse. I'd gotten so used to reaping the lives of non-Named like wheat I'd stopped seeing them as truly dangerous, and that was the kind of conceit that got people killed. I wasn't in a small pond anymore. I'd reached the sea, and the things that lurked in it would gobble me up if I didn't start stepping more carefully. I breathed out. *Decide on your objective*, I told myself, returning to Black's old mantra. *Decide what lines you're willing to cross to get to it*. If I retreated here, all I lost was pride.

Perhaps I could use a little less of that.

"I want take Kegan's army through Arcadia," I said. "And use it on my enemies. The fae first, then Diabolist."

"And why would she agree to that?" the Marshal asked.

"Because I know what she wants," I said. "And I can help her get it before it's too late."

The wrinkled goblin looked down at the legionaries in the courtyard.

"We can deal," she finally said.

—

We met the Deoraithe at nightfall.

Only ten of them came across the fishing boat, but they did not need to be any more: nine of those wore the brown-grey cloaks of the Watch, longbows strapped on their backs and longswords at their hips. I'd never fought a full-fledged member of the order once charged with manning the Wall protecting Daoine from orc incursions, but I knew better than to underestimate them. Even the half-baked observer they'd sent to the Lone Swordsman's side had managed to put an arrow in my back barely an inch away from my spine. I still had the scar, a pink puckered star on the tan skin of my back. The tenth, then, must have been Duchess Kegan Iarsmai. The woman was short – though still taller than me – and learn, with always-moving brown eyes and the stride of someone used to others following behind. She wore no highborn clothes, only hardened leather armour with the crest of her house on the chest. The Duchess had forgone a helmet, allowing her long dark curls to stream down her back. She was not ugly, but neither was she pretty: her features were hawkish and her middle-aged bearing carved of sternness.

Our side of the negotiations was less uniform in nature. Marshal Ranker had taken a tenth of hardened Soninke and Taghreb regulars with her, while I'd picked a tenth from the Gallowborne. Callowans, mostly, but also two orcs. They were ten steps behind myself and the sole goblin on the scene, and the looming silhouettes of the Watch stayed at the same distance when the Duchess advanced. She glanced at Ranker with open dislike, then frowned at the sight of me.

"'Evening," I said. "I'm-"

"Lady Catherine Foundling," Kegan cut through. "We have paintings of you. Marshal, I was not made aware there would be a Named tonight."

"A last moment adjustment," Ranker replied. "But not unfitting. She does have to authority to treat with you."

The Duchess turned her eyes to me.

"Daoine is not subject to the Ruling Council," she said bluntly. "Nor will it ever be. Our tributary arrangements with the Tower need no broker."

"Not what I'm here for," I said. "I hear you have an army assembled on the other side of the river."

"That is none of your concern, Squire," she said.

She glared, at both me and Creation in general.

"Ancestors save us from meddlesome children," she muttered in the Old Tongue.

"I also speak that," I replied in the same.

She offered me a sneer.

"Poorly," she replied.

Ouch. That actually kind of stung. Wasn't my fault it was a hellishly complicated language. Even Alamani wasn't as bad, and people from other parts of the Principate preferred speaking Lower Miezian than learning the language.

"You're not crossing, Kegan," Ranker informed her.

"You think a second legion and whatever the Carrion's Lord apprentice brought will be enough to stop me?" the duchess coldly replied. "No amount of traps will be enough to turn me back. I am due, Marshal."

"It would be," I shrugged. "I've beat worse odds, Watch or no. But I'd rather avoid a fight."

"Then *get out of our way*," the Deoraithe hissed. "My debt lies not with the Tower."

"I know," I said.

"So how many did the chit take?" Ranker asked. "Twelve? Fifteen? Surely not twenty. You can't have gotten *that* soft since the Conquest."

"The man who beat us at the Wall is a *long* way from Denier, goblin," Kegan said. "Do not make me teach the two of you what we have learned since those defeats."



"You won't get there in time," I said, and her eyes went back to me.

"You know not what you speak of," the duchess said.

"I know Akua Sahelian a lot better than you do," I smiled thinly. "You'd have to march through the entire span of Callow, and if you force the crossing you'll be doing it with the Empire harassing you the whole time. She knows that. She *planned* that. By the time you get to Liesse, she'll have finished whatever ritual she's cooking up."

"I wanted answers from you, but I already obtained them," the Marshal said. "What we have now is terms."

"For *what*?" Duchess Kegan asked.

I rolled my shoulder, delighting in the crack.

"Allowing you to use my shortcut," I said.

---

*salamence*

Oh man oh man oh man. Loved the scene with Catherine and Marshall Ranker. Catherine's pride took a hit, but she could lose some of that and get better. I'm also glad to see she hasn't lost sight of the greater picture.

Like she said, "If I retreated here, all I lost was pride. Perhaps I could use a little less of that."

*vietnamabc*

This is ridiculous now with so many factions and power blocks, which is exactly what happens in civil war. Chaos is the ladder in full effect here.

*Kingbob12*

Ahhh, nice to see Catherine is relearning a little bit of humility. Might just save her life one day. The goblins are so fascinating, short lived, brutish little things. Full of cunning and steel, no doubt, but brutish all the same.

I imagine this is what an Elf might feel when watching humans. How strange a feeling this is, to be an elf.

*Gunslinger*

I'm also surprised Ranker is so loyal to the empire, rather than the Matrons/Goblins. I suppose its the same kind of loyalty Kat gets from Robber.

*Letouriste*

No no no you got that all wrong. her loyalty goes to black... well goblin loyalty is strange but I'm...thinking this is that

*Cpt. Obvious*

I'd love to learn just what went down between Amadeus and Ranker. Not even the goblins in the Legion dare to go against the wishes of the Matrons. Yet Amadeus managed to convince the Matron of the largest tribe, the Hungry Dog tribe, to disband it to instead take a post in the Legions?

Well there's Sacker also, another mystery former Matron, though from what I remember being said she's a lot closer to the Matrons and thought to be more or less in their service. Kind of their unofficial envoy.

But Ranker seems to have broken cleanly with the rest of the Matrons and switched her allegiance to Black, or perhaps rather to Amadeus.

There's a story there, I'm sure of it...

*Naeddyr*

Thanks for the chapter!

So, no bets on whether Cat is actually leading the Duchess to a situation that is going to go totally out of control with fae armies left and right with devils as the sidedish.

*Gunslinger*

Haha Ranker is awesome. Still admirable that Cat decided to back down instead of making it an issue of pride. I wonder if there is any hard feelings about the Daoine observer. Wasn't she supposed to be one of the Duchess' relatives?

Also if you like the series vote for it on topwebfiction ..  
<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*Thanatos*

Careful with that – the Duchess' official House motto is, as we learned last chapter, "We do not forget". I presume we'll learn the meaning of that within the foreseeable future.

*danh3107*

Careful Cat, hubris is just as likely to kill you as a hero or stupidity.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*Austin*

There you are again Ward! That's the third place I've seen you now!

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Psst, he can't see this!

*lulol*

Catherine needed the reminder.

*Hrky*

Hahaha, amazing!

*xacual*

Feels weird to have Akua's appointment placed on Cat's lap when she had nothing to do with that. Is Ranker actually that stupid? Also how does Ranker know about the lot she had crucified only a day or two ago? Conversation between the goblins?

*jonnnney*

Cat sent a letter of recommendation to the Empress in support of Akua appointment. More importantly, Catherine failed to kill her rival in Liesse.

Mages would have communicated the information about the crucifixions to all of the legions at the very least. You don't crucify someone with the goal of keeping it a secret.

*darkseven*

Here's hoping Catherine wins Ranker over. I'm also hoping Catherine works things out with the Dread Empress, or things are going to get kind of messy.

[edrey](#)

southpool, it wasn't denier, the cty,  
ranker really is great

[chris S](#)

Didn't Cat say in an earlier chapter she didn't expect to get through Arcadia the third time uninterrupted?

I'm fully expecting them to get attacked by fae if they use Arcadia to get to Diabolist

*Letouriste*

Yeah...and she plan to use that twice more at the very last.probably way more

*crazedmoth*

And hopefully after the Summer Court are defeated in Creation they won't trouble her again in Arcadia.

*crazedmoth*

I think that's kind of the point – Cat did say she would be using the Duchess' army against the Fae as well as Diabolist, after all.

*Morgenstern*

Which is all the better, because it would fit the Winter King's requiremens of pummeling them into submission and only THEN revealing that they are there to HELP... 😊 \*g

*Morgenstern*

requiremenTs. argh. -.- ALWAYS just after you clicked the "send" button. -.-

*AVR*

Or worse, delayed. The second trip took longer than the first despite crossing less distance. The third could be longer still.

[reveen](#)

It's cool seeing people shutting down Catherine's wannabe Iron Lady schtick. "Just shut the fuck up and tell me what you want". Should have been Thief's reaction to her though IMO.

*alegio*

I dont know why, maybe it was just me, but this chapter didnt feel as fluid as the others. Not really forced but just not as fluid as the others

*stevenneiman*

"She does have [to->the] authority to treat with you."

I quite liked the way that Cat got her unpleasant reminder to take people seriously even if they don't have Names. You'd think she would have learned it from what happened to that one goblin (Chider? I don't remember for sure) that thought she could beat Cat just because she had a Name and Cat didn't at the moment.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

What the hell is Ranker saying in this paragraph? Chits? Ten or twenty WHATS? I don't get this:

"So how many did the chit take?" Ranker asked. "Twelve? Fifteen? Surely not twenty. You can't have gotten that soft since the Conquest."

#### *Darkening*

Chit is a derisive term that she's using for Akua. And twelve or fifteen Watch members I believe since akua mentioned kidnapping a bunch of people linked to some artificial spirit and we know the watch are linked to some sort of spirit that empowers them.

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## Interlude – Apprentice

*"The source of wonder and horror is the same, and the boundary between them thinner than you would think."*

– Dread Empress Sanguinia I

"That is a Count, I believe," Masego announced.

Father's spectacles were of no use at this range, so he'd had to use his Name. An aspect, more specifically – **Glimpse**. Apprentice disliked relying on the power conferred onto him by the Gods Below, as he'd always considered it something of a crutch that would cripple his ability to improve his casting without such means, but he could not deny the abilities it lent him had their uses. Even from a mile away, behind a set of obscuring wards, he'd been able to gauge the forces animating the Summer fae. The intensity and breadth of those forces were inferior to those of the Dukes and Duchesses he'd observed in Skade but superior to those of a Baron. There were outliers, of course. The Lady of Cracking Ice had been by an order of magnitude stronger than the other nobles accompanying her in the initial meeting even though her title was the lowest. He suspected the rough equivalent of Roles that was carved into the consciousness of fae was the true

factor behind the power those entities could muster, but without proper investigation it was impossible to turn this into a credible thesis.

Regardless, this particular fae seemed to have the power common for one titled Count. The power of his Name keeping his eyes from blinking, Masego studied the fluctuations in the forces. A shame the Count was not in range of his spectacles. One of the enchantments on them helped him quantify the energies at play in a way his aspect simply could not. Still, the actual forces did not seem greater by a significant margin than those of the same-titled Winter fae he had studied. The qualitative difference that allegedly allowed Summer to win every time open war was waged between those Courts must have come from a different source. Nature of the energy, perhaps? The symbolic properties of fire and ice as per the table of classic elements were cleansing and preservation – typically, aggressive properties won over defensive ones when diametrically opposed. Could it be that simple? The dark-skinned mage itched for ink and parchment, but it would have to wait.

“I told you,” Archer crowed. “We just need to keep shooting stronger ones in the head and eventually a big one will show up.”

“That is a vast oversimplification of still poorly understood social dynamics,” Masego replied peevishly.

“You know, really smart people don’t actually need to use long words,” the ochre-skinned woman grinned.

That was such a brutal insult that Apprentice remained too appalled to reply for a solid thirty heartbeats. By that time, Archer had strung that ridiculously large longbow of hers. Even with the power of his aspect having faded away, Masego could see the sorcery worked into it. The wood, already magical in nature and likely from the Waning Woods, had been further strengthened and so had the string. It was, in his estimation, physically impossible for anyone but a Named to successfully draw that bow. Even then, what the woman was preparing to do seemed rather dubious.

“He’s a mile away,” Apprentice said. “There is a breeze. Longbow range is, at best, four hundred yards. Useless against armoured targets past two hundred. The distance you are aiming at is over four times that.”

“That’s very impressive,” Archer grinned. “Learned all those pretty numbers from a book, did you?”

Masego had, in fact, learned those numbers from a book on military tactics he’d borrowed from Hakram. He coughed to hide the blush that touched his cheeks at being caught out.

"For a mortal, those numbers matter a lot," the woman said, eyes hooded with pleasure. "For a Named, they matter a little. For *me*, though?"

Her grin turned sharp.

"If I can **See** it, I can kill it."

Vision-driven aspect? Given her Name, it was only logical. Masego's train of thought was interrupted by the sight of Archer on the move, and for an instant that was all that filled his mind. He'd fought at this woman's side before, but he had never witnessed her in action with a bow – only seen the arrows she shot. Archer moved so swiftly he saw only a blur, string taut and then loose as the first arrow flew. Another two followed before a heartbeat had passed. Merciless Gods. His eyes followed the last arrow, studying the properties as it flew. They were silent, and so clearly enchanted. No, he realized, not enchanted. Made of material with natural sorcery. *Inherent properties*, he understood with a sharp intake of breath. Silence, and some kind of amplification. Sharpness or penetration, he could not tell. It did not matter. Most defensive wards relied on the assumption that any projectiles targeting them would be either entirely mundane or have an active sorcerous component to them, more commonly called an enchantment. The arrows Archer had used would sail right through those, qualifying as neither by the strictures of sorcery. Mage-killers. That was what those projectiles were.

As a child he'd often lingered around Father and Uncle Amadeus whenever they used Imperial business as an excuse to have drinks and bicker, and one of his favourite games had been 'could you beat'. He'd demanded a plan for the two of them to vanquish everyone from the Dead King to a company of legendary heroes, and always been given an answer. Until he'd asked them for the plan to fight Ranger. The two of them had traded looks, and then his uncle had smiled over his cup. *Don't*, he'd replied. Watching that woman's foremost apprentice at work, he was beginning to grasp why. The Count didn't realize he was being targeted until the first arrow took him in the chest. Fire flared as he fell, but the second arrow nailed his shoulder to the ground anyway. The third went through his left knee, immobilizing him for good.

"Do your stuff," Archer said, waving her hand like she'd not shot a godling thrice in broad daylight.

Masego gathered enough concentration to activate the dispersed components he'd left around the area where'd they killed the last two patrols. The Count rose into the air, shackles of chirping light forming around his limbs. That should keep him prisoner for the duration they needed, and so the first step of their plan was complete. Apprentice dispersed the obscuration ward around them, since neither of them were using their Names anymore, and began the walk to their prisoner. It'd been over a month since

Catherine had sent them south to 'bait the Summer Court into attacking the Diabolist'. Masego had been assured that the notion made strategic sense, not that he particularly cared. Only now did he realized that Catherine had used his eagerness to secure some high-quality fae specimens to rope him into doing actual work. Truly, she was becoming more ruthless every month. That was how *he'd* been talked into going south, anyhow, but he'd wondered why Archer had acquiesced and asked her as much. She'd been sent as a fae expert on loan from Refuge, not a soldier to be used in the Squire's wars.

"Eh, just staying with the army would have been boring," she'd replied. "Hakram's not even around to spar with anymore."

Adjutant had informed him over one of their nightly games of shatranj that those 'spars' mostly consisted of Archer beating him black and blue until she felt like having a drink, which thankfully was frequent. He believed the orc. The foreign-looking woman had brought more drink than rations in her haversack on their trek south, and insisted they stop at villages to replenish her stock.

"That seems like a thin motivation," he'd said.

"The idea of screwing over Sahelian does give me the good kind of shivers," the woman had admitted. "And, well..."

Ah, he'd thought. He could understand the unspoken reason as well. As a boy he'd sometimes wondered why his father did not lead the Calamities. He was the most powerful among them, after all, capable of wiping a city off the face of Creation in a single night. He'd always liked Uncle Amadeus, but like did not usually enter the equation when it came to villains. The strongest held command, that was the natural order. Now, though? He'd learned better. Masego could probably kill Catherine, if he truly put his mind to it. Two days of preparation required at least, but it was doable even with the power she'd gained in Arcadia. He didn't want to, though, and not just because taking up her burdens would be atrociously inconvenient to his research.

She had a way about her, that... It was hard to explain. Sometimes he thought of it as akin to the way smaller celestial orbs circled around larger ones, but that ignored some fundamental aspects of it. It was warm and nice and almost addictive, being part of the family around Catherine Foundling. That heady sense of *belonging*, the way that when she talked you believed there was nothing you couldn't do. Apprentice did not enjoy 'adventures', as a rule, but he believed his life would be lesser if he'd not followed Squire on them. And so he did not ask any further questions of Archer, because neither of them would be comfortable with where that conversation would take them. Some things were best left unsaid, and in the end he was not inclined to bare much of himself to this stranger. For all that it was nigh impossible



to get the woman to shut up, Masego still knew next to nothing about her or what she was capable of. This was not, he thought, a coincidence.

They hurried on the way to the Count. His scrying ritual, adapted to notice the outskirts of the presence of fae instead of looking at them directly and facing the full backlash, had told him there were no patrols closer than half a day's march. Still, their actions today were as good as lighting a beacon for anyone looking for them. They needed to be gone before anyone came looking, if this was to work. Which he wasn't sure it would. Neither of them, as it turned out, were particularly good at planning. Apprentice usually let Catherine and Hakram handle this sort of menial work, and Archer had admitted that her plans usually didn't go much further than 'fight the enemy until it died'. He'd agreed to sharing a drink with the woman only once on their way south, when they'd come up with their plan to push Summer to attack the Diabolist. They'd tried to guess why Liesse had not been attacked yet, when the two cities to its flanks had already been taken by Summer. Masego had eventually mentioned the ancient but powerful wards protecting the city, and the other Named had agreed that those would give fae pause. They were, after all, exceptionally sensitive to boundaries.

They needed, therefore, to make it easier for Summer to attack the city. Sadly, neither of them knew anything about military tactics. Apprentice *had*, however, made a comprehensive map of the wards in the walls of Liesse before the battle of the same name. Leaking that information should help, they'd agreed. So he'd written it down on a parchment, they'd located a small fae patrol and handed it to them. Or tried to, at least. The fae captain had ordered them to immediately kneel and swear allegiance to the Queen of Summer or be destroyed, Archer had offered them a drink instead and they'd rather taken offence to that. A quarter hour later, they had five fae corpses she'd had to kill with a broken bottle and they weren't anywhere closer to their objective. They'd tried again, attracting another small patrol and just leaving the scroll with the information on the ground while hiding. The fae had torched it and ordered a search of the region. Five other corpses later, they'd agreed that diplomacy did not seem to be working. Alternatives were needed.

Wondering what Father and Papa would do in a similar situation Masego had arrived to the conclusion that capturing a fae and rewriting their mind so the information was inside it before releasing them to the Court was the most expedient solution. Archer's suggestion that they just carve all the details on the corpses of the fae was clearly flawed, since there was no guaranteed they wouldn't just torch the corpses on sight like that had the scroll. They'd ambushed a third patrol, keeping the captain alive and Apprentice had taken out his tools to tinker with the forces that passed for the creature's soul.

Frustratingly, there hadn't been enough room. As entities who did not *learn*, per se, there was no space inside the mind of the fae for much aside what was already there. Carving out some unnecessary things like the ability to see or the knowledge of how to use sorcery had resulted in unmoving bodies with blank eyes. Worse, apparently removing the ability to move stopped them breathing as well – that was just poor design, he'd complained. Archer had suggested they abduct several captains and spread the information across them, but that would both take long and risk more inaccuracies the more operations he had to do.

"We need a bigger fish, then," Archer had suggested.

"We're in a landlocked region of Callow," Apprentice had reasonably pointed out.

She'd called him a condescending pedant, he'd called her rampantly ignorant and they'd eventually agreed that a more powerful fae was needed. Simply flaring their Names wouldn't work, since for all they knew it might draw an entire army. Archer had then introduced the notion of ambushing a patrol and then remaining close by, then killing the fae who came to investigate until one holding a sufficient high title showed up. He hadn't liked the plan, but been unable to come up with a better one. A sennight later, here they were looming over an imprisoned Count. The fae glared at them, only barely conscious.

"How dare you-" he started, but then his mouth closed.

Masego tied off the spell structure and left it active to keep the creature silent. He was in no mood for a rant, not when he had to do such a delicate operation. Reaching into the pocket dimension he'd created after the rebellion, Apprentice took out the leather pack holding his tools in place and casually created a pane of force to hold it. Humming lightly, he took out what looked like a knife so thin it could not possibly cut anything. He looked at the fae and patted the man's shoulder reassuringly.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll cut out the part that dictates pain very early. It shouldn't hurt at all after that."

"It's much less creepy when they don't scream," Archer noted approvingly.

Masego got work.

—

Well, it had worked. More or less. The two of them were hiding in a bush under an obscuration ward, watching the host of Summer spread to surround Liesse. The Diabolist had seen them coming, which had interesting implications. Either Sahelian was using the same indirect scrying he was but more accurately, or she'd found

another way entirely. Most likely the second. Wolof had many secrets in its vaults. Regardless, they knew the Diabolist had been aware of the fae headed her way because the army she'd had on the field had retreated behind the walls and was now manning them. As well as a truly impressive amount of devils, Apprentice noted. She must have used a Lesser Breach to gather so much on a short notice. Her skill with sorcery continued to impress. The two Named watched the host of Summer spread across the plain, for it was a sight to see.

Ten thousand fae, he'd estimated. Entire regiments of ivory-armoured fairies stood ramrod straight, spears held high and a river of banners and pennons fluttering in the wind amongst them. Archers armed with longbows of pure white wood stood behind them, feathers not of any creature known to Creation fletching their arrows. Not a single one of them could be called anything but young and beautiful, the ardour of war wafting off them like a fume. Fae bearing trumpets of gold and rubies stood in every regiment, ready to let out the clarion call of conquest that lay in the heart of every Summer fae. A thousand knights in silvery plate sat astride winged horses, long lances and shields of exquisite make in their hands. They were forming in a loose triangle behind the infantry, their mounts stirring eagerly. The nobles stood out starkly from the rest, colourful figures made of fire, steel and silk that warped the air with heat wherever they stood. No two sets of plate they wore were the same, every one a masterpiece that would have made a mortal craftsman weep to look at.

The defenders were no less dreamlike to witness. Praesi soldiers wearing the distinctive colours of the family they were sworn to on their tabards manned the few bastions on the wall, their chainmail blackened dark as a crow's feathers as was the custom in the Wasteland. Their armaments were sharp goblin steel, the finest blades of Calernia put in the hands of men and woman trained from birth to use them in the service of their lord. Between them stood rows upon rows of *walin-falme* devils. Tall and with the dark leathery skin of bats, they wore plate marked with the brand of Wolof: red and black, a curving golden lion inside the splash of colour. These bore spears and axes of cast iron, the metal known to be the ugly death of fae. Spread amongst all of these were small clusters of Taghreb and Soninke in tailored robes, panes of lights inscribed with runes flickering around them. War-mages, the finest the Wasteland had to offer. This was not an army that would go gently, not even against the strength of Summer.

It was a host ripped straight from the old days of blood and darkness, when all of Calernia had feared the sound of Praes at war. It was an ancient dream, this one, but Masego's fathers had taught him better than to love it.

"I forgot to ask before we left, but do we actually want Summer to win?" Archer asked, chewing on dried meat.

Masego blinked, shaken out of his thoughts. While he'd been spellbound, his companion seemed less than impressed.

"You weren't paying attention during the briefing?" he said.

"Nah," she admitted easily. "I figured you would."

Apprentice cursed.

"I thought *you* would," he admitted.

"It's their fault for making it boring, really," Archer said.

"They kept talking about logistics and supply trains," Masego agreed bitterly. "I don't *want* to know anything about those, Hakram."

"I mean, just guessing here," the dark-eyed woman said. "Foundling wouldn't want all the people inside butchered right?"

"I *think* not," Apprentice said. "She gets irritated about people killing Callowans unless it's her doing it."

"So we don't want Summer to win," Archer pointed out triumphantly. "They do tend to burn stuff a lot. And people. I don't think they understand the difference very well."

"Everybody burns people, it's a common execution method across Calernia," Masego replied absent-mindedly, trying to remember anything about the briefing aside from Adjutant's voice droning and Catherine drinking too much. "I think we may want them both to lose."

"Is that something that happens?" she asked, sounding puzzled.

He glanced at her.

"Have you won every fight you were in?" he asked sceptically.

"Well, no," Archer said. "I spar against the Lady Ranger. Never landed a blow on her unless she allowed me."

Apprentice drew on his extensive military experience, which consisted of three battles where he'd largely spent his time setting people on fire or exploding them when Catherine asked.

"I think it's like shatranj," he mused. "You know, towards the end of the game when most pieces have been taken. We want them both to lose pieces."

Archer glanced at the city and grimaced.

"I think we may have given Summer a bit too much of an advantage," she said.

Masego followed her eyes and paled. One of the fae, on a winged horse, had ridden up to the city walls. The volley of arrows shot at her burst into flame and scattered into ashes long before they got close, and it only got worse from there: a torrent of heat formed in front of her and impacted the walls, beginning to melt the stone. Well, that was one way to beat the wards. They could not be held back by the boundary if there was no boundary.

"This is bad," Archer decided.

The Diabolist, though, did not flinch. A heartbeat later Apprentice's ward shivered as a large-scale ritual triggered. The waves of sorcery coming from Liesse were almost enough to scatter it, though when he had a **Glimpse** at the city he saw this was but a sliver of what had been at play. Slowly, Liesse and the ground under it began to rip their ways out of the soil. *And only this much wasted power?* he thought. At least a mile around the city should have been turned into a wasteland, for something this large. The Diabolist seemed to have managed to keep it all within a hair's breadth of Keter's Due, which meant this working might have had the single most efficient ritual array in Praesi history. He was itching to have a look at it even as Liesse rose into the air and kept rising, tons of soil falling out from under it. He could almost see the array itself, what had gone into activating it. This was no mere blood sacrifice, she'd used fae to fuel it and, just for a moment, the Apprentice touched something greater than himself. A larger truth still beyond his understanding, a mystery in the almost religious sense of the term, and though he could not grasp it just witnessing part was almost enough to... And then the moment was gone. He was shivering and more excited than he had been in years. He'd nearly transitioned into another Name, just by looking at this. He was close. In the distance, the host of Summer lit up a thousand bright colours as their wings formed. The soldiers and devils on the walls prepared to meet the assault.

"We have, technically, accomplished the task we were sent south for," Masego said.

Archer looked at the army of Summer taking flight.

"Retreat?" she finally asked.

Streaks of sorcery filled the sky with sounds like thunder. As devils spread their wings and the battle began in earnest.

"For now," Apprentice said. "We'll be back."

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[erraticerrata](#)

First update of the month, so extra chapter. This one is titled Deadhand and from (predictably) Hakram's POV. It's in the Extra Chapters tab, but link here as usual:

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/08/02/deadhand/>

*danh3107*

H-o-l-y SHIT, that was fucking cool. Also an interesting introspection into Masego's mind.

And it's only the first chapter of the evening.

Erratic, I think I love you

*Morgenstern*

Second that.

I especially liked the part about Masego being soooo \*close\*. Probably a bit because it had that satisfying ring of "yes, finally it's being confirmed", but also because the moment was just so nice. 😊

[nineran](#)

I noticed the "almost religious" and have been thinking about what magical person would cross dimensional lines, work with or study reality, and for it to be almost religious, but not traditional good. I can only come up with "Occultist" or "Shaman".

Thoughts?

*Ethan Smith*

Hmm I could see Occultist – I've been trying to think of what Cat could transition to beside Black/White/Maybe Grey Knight

*Theo Promes*

damn that was epic. Also, masego transitioning? iiiiiiinteresting. Love his interplay with archer, they are like laurel and hardy with superpowers. And a weird take on ethics.

*nehemiahnewell*

Huh, I wonder what name Masego almost seized and if he will achieve it.

Also, I was in stitches through the 'do we want them to win' conversation. I will never look at those two the same again.

### *Darkening*

I forget Masego's a Villain sometimes, and then I see him rip out someone's soul or flay the mind of a demigod. Hm. Wasn't expecting Masego to change Names while Warlock is still around, wonder what name he's approaching.

### *Darkening*

Also, I feel like Diabolist might have a better chance at recruiting him if she tried it again now...

### *Letouriste*

Nope. he said in this very chapter that being near cat make his life MORE meaningful. diabolist don't have much to attract him with, and I think his loyalty is set now.

### *Darkening*

Yeah, he did say that, and then he saw a work of sorcery from Diabolist that inspired awe and wonder in him and nearly made him switch to another name. I doubt he *\*will\** switch sides, since he does like being around Cat, but never forget he's a Villain at the end of the day.

### *Letouriste*

He could just capture her and rip the knowledge from her brain.

But I think he doesn't need her for transitioning because the cause is likely the powering fae ritual itself. he could just recreate something close with his own fae captives.

### *Vamair*

You can notice Catherine hasn't got a single Named with an actively villainous Name among her peers. Apprentice, Adjutant, Archer, Squire, all of them are neither villainous nor heroic or can transition into both (unlike villainous Warlock, Assassin, Black Knight, Empress, Tyrant and heroic Exiled Prince, Lone Swordsman and Wandering Bard, White Knight, Champion, etc.).

It feels like they're going to cut themselves a third role in the tales.

Also, if an Apprentice transitions, Kilian can become a new one. Not sure that she will, though.

### *Misterspokes*

Dread Empress/ Emperor is the Name...

*sheer\_falacy*

Everything about this chapter was amazing. I love their utter failure at subtlety, how polite Apprentice was while rewriting someone's head, and their debate about who they actually wanted to win.

And I do hope that Akua is doing something more interesting than a flying city. Yes, it's a classic and she's a huge fan of that sort of thing, but the Dread Emperors and Empresses who are really remembered are the ones who did absurd things that no one had done before. No one remembers the name of the second Dread Emperor to turn themselves into a giant spider, after all.

*arancaytar*

Their dialogue is one of the funniest parts of this series 😊

*nick012000*

Apprentice/Archer OTP.

*Dimensional*

A flying city is cool and all, but.. it's a lot less useful against some one who is bringing an army through Arcadia (well at least it after the wards have been removed by a convenient attacking army). Now given said army is coming through Arcadia so will only arrive with just enough dramatic time to stop whatever shenanigans are going down, but narrative story based travel time beats flying citadel I think.

*Darkening*

I'm guessing she's going full out and planning to do an Ascension (descension?) ritual on a flying city guarded by sentient invisible tigers and giant spiders.

*MagnaMalusLupus*

On the subject of possible names that Apprentice almost grasped;

- Arcanist
- Sorcerer
- Magus
- Primalist
- Archmage

*dalek955*

Loremaster  
Savant  
Thaumaturgist

*nehemiahnewell*



Considering his quest to break the working, the Illusion, of Creation and see beyond. To challenge the Gods he feel are no better than him, and how he almost saw something of the true nature of reality... The Gnostic sounds like a possibility to me.

[Trikki](#)

Maybe a Name that indicates his desire to understand everything about the workings of Creation.

– Scientist

– Savant

– Heretic (Though if it's the Gods who are handing out Names, I wonder how likely this one is... In this chapter Apprentice mentions his dislike of using his Aspects, but he still felt close to Ascension, so going against the Gods Below might not affect getting Names)

*Warren Peace*

If it was a Name he WANTED, he would have taken it. Therefore it was probably a Name he didn't particularly want. That's what MY Apprentice would do, anyway.

[nineran](#)

YES! This is what I was trying to do, too.

I like Arcanist, Magus, Primalist and Loremaster. I'd like to add Occultist to the hat.

With these alternatives available, I can't really see Shaman anymore. I can't see Masego being about bodily fluids.

Savant, Thaumaturgist, Diviner are all too... good. I think we've seen a White Sorcerer and a White Wizard in this series.

*beleester*

Typo near the end: "the host of Simmer"

I'm a little underwhelmed by Diabolist's plan so far. Basically it's the old flying fortress, but bigger. If this is a story, it's one of those cash-in sequels that doesn't add anything new.

I hope there's something more to the working. Maybe she's going to pull an Ultron and drop the city top of her enemies? Or maybe she's going to take the city into orbit? (That would be a little out of genre, but at the same time it's so totally Bond Villain that I want to see it.)

*nehemiahnewell*

Isn't her whole thing her unwillingness to admit the old ways were nothing more than dramatic failures, her desire to turn back the clock?

*Dragrath*

Kind of she wants to convey that the old ways mattered i.e. will build into success eventually or something like that. But I would be disappointed if she didn't have more than a flying city so hopefully she has more than just turning back the clock 😊

*stevenneiman*

"Her skill with sorcery continued to [impressed->impress]"  
"this [workingl->working] might have had the single most efficient ritual array in Praesi history"

She's a traditionalist, but to the methods and the ideals of old Praes. So yes, this is a flying fortress but you can bet a thousand human sacrifices that's not all she's up to.

*Hai*

Given that Akua developed a way to safely channel Keter's Due, and that she is sacrificing both copious amounts of fae and a god... What if the flying city isn't the main effect of her ritual, but the side effect?

*Morgenstern*

Not her. Her DAD. 😊

*Morgenstern*

And yeah, when I read this, I did NOT think of a flying fortress, but this being Keter's Due instead of the miles-around-devastation Masego expected. The two things were rather connected / same train of thought, after all...

*Letouriste*

Hum...masego want knowledge, he want being godlike and he will probably stay by cat side. so no dominating Names but still mind blowing and rebel-like+intellectual-like...any potential name goes to mind?

Transcendant?

Magister?

Void mage?

Disector?^^

I don't manage to imagine his futur name:o

*Unmaker*

Those two are f\*\*\*ing hilarious.

Apprentice almost transitioned just looking at the work that Diabolist's father did. Why doesn't that man have a Name?

### *Darkening*

Because he doesn't have a Cause, probably. I recall Black saying that named are named because they have a crazy strong desire and the will to go after it or something like that. And Akua's father just wants to do his research, spend time with his daughter, and be left alone. No ambition.

### *Sashimi*

But he does have a Name? First Mage. The one no (other) Praesi wants because there are more... prestigious Names out there.

### *Unorignal*

It's a title, not a NAME. Nonetheless, he was a potential warlock but he didn't pursue it. Instead, he spent time researching

### [wirelessgrapes](#)

I know it's late and completely unrelated to this specific chapter, but this was a line from Book 2 Chapter 18 about the Silver Spears cavalry: "Gods Below and Everburning, what manner of wicked things I wouldn't do to have cavalry like that". The answer is commit sorta treason.

Just found that tidbit cool and wanted to point it out.

### *Gunslinger*

I think not," Apprentice said. "She gets irritated about people killing Callowans unless it's her doing it."

Hahaha I love Masego

### *Shequi*

If Masego came into another Name, then could the vacant Apprentice be a certain redhead?

### *Warren Peace*

Great chapter! I would have thought that between them, App&Archer would be able to come up with a semblance of strategic thinking, but they were endearingly inept =)

### *ArkCthuul*

Well, given the semireligious undertones prophet might also work.

Overall one of the funniest and scariest chapters at the same time, kudos!

*Isa Lumitus*

I'm just going to add my voice to the choir saying that the characterization of Apprentice and Archer were great.

I can't see them working as a couple... but the ship tease would probably be entertaining.

*neodarklight*

This chapter reminded me of a scene in A Geek's Guide: Corporation of Occult Research and Extermination, abbreviated as AGG: CORE, over on the spacebattles forums. More specifically, the flirting between the bloodthirsty sorcerer with no social skills and the oni warrior girl with no social skills.

*cartesiandaemon*

Oh gosh, that's lovely. Oh god, how did no-one get them to repeat their main goals back to them? Or maybe send a reliable non-named along with them? But I'm glad they didn't, it was so great.

*burguulkodar*

I love this kids. So funny! And amoral. Like really evil amoral. Fascinating.

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## Villainous Interlude: Exeunt

*"If Creation is not mine, what need is there to be a Creation at all?"*

– Dread Empress Triumphant, First and Only of Her Name

"They think they have us cornered," Fasili said.

There was laughter in that tone, the intonation he used in Mtethwa implying mocking irony – he'd inflected the word for 'think' with the same sound as the one for 'fool'. Winds were whipping at the city wildly as it rose into the sky, the power Akua had called ripping Liesse from solid ground and casting it up. The aftermath of the ritual she'd called on still burned in her bones, pulsing in time with her heartbeat. It was the largest

working she'd ever undertaken, dwarfing even the two Lesser Breaches she'd made in her lifetime, and it had been exhilarating. The traces of that monstrous sorcery would permeate the region for decades to come, long after every trace of the fae currently trampling it were gone. Standing atop the highest bastion of the city gates, the Diabolist and her mortal second-in-command were watching the army of Summer splayed below. A host of legend, she conceded as she studied the glittering ranks. But she had one as well and it would not come out the lesser of this strife.

There were two princes and a princess among the ranks of the enemy, the strongest hand the Summer Court could play without sending its own Queen into battle. One of those stood head and shoulders above the others: the same princess who'd forced Diabolist to trigger her ritual early when she'd begun melting the ramparts with brute force. Given the cascading nature of the wards woven into the walls, if she'd been left at it much longer the entire outer rampart would have crumbled along with most of the dark-skinned aristocrat's army. No matter. Akua had planned to use the ritual as soon as the enemy made their move anyway, though she'd expected an assault of thousands and not a single fae. The highest caste of the Fair Folk was nothing to sneer at, she acknowledged. Among all the entities she could call on nothing but a handful of obscenely ancient devils could match their power. She had three of these summoned, as it happened, a perfectly symmetrical match. The Gods Below sometimes saw fit to hand gifts to their most faithful, and who else but she could still claim that title?

"The harvest has been plentiful," Diabolist said. "Let us reap the benefits in full."

The ritual array for turning Liesse into a flying fortress-city was not the one she'd been building for all these months, of course. A ritual so straightforward would not have required Akua to sink all the resources at her disposal into the city. No, all she'd done was activate a secondary array, one she'd originally designed as a security measure in case the Legions of Terror came calling too early. It was the reason she'd allowed all those refugees from the south behind her walls, even if like rodents they ate up her granaries: hey could serve as acceptable fuel in a pinch. Ultimately, that had proved unnecessary. She'd managed to acquire a Duchess of Summer with her traps before needing to retreat and the fae noble had been more than enough for the purpose. Diabolist preferred this outcome, as it happened. Keeping the city full of refugees should stay Foundling's hand when the hour of reckoning came. And if didn't? Well, there were always uses for such large quantities of lifeblood.

The High Lords of Praes knew how to turn massacre into power better than anyone else, living or dead.

What had finally driven the fae to attack, she wondered? Was it taking a Duchess? The reaction seemed too delayed for that, weeks passing before the attack came. Until recently they'd been content to fight her in the plains of the south, rightfully wary of the wards protecting her stronghold. Akua's instincts were that Foundling had a hand in this, but the latest news had her in Laure crucifying fools. The Diabolist had had to resist the urge to roll her eyes, when she'd heard resistance had been attempted after Squire had entered the city. As if the likes of Satang Motherless and Murad Kalbid had it in them to thwart the likes of Catherine Foundling. Akua's enemy had flaws, but she was a power worthy of the Name she had claimed and growing more Praesi by the year. A pair of castoffs from the Wasteland were nothing more than dust in the face of that. More interesting was the way Squire had been able to travel so quickly. Given Foundling's recent journey in the realm of the fae, Akua was inclined to believe she was carving paths through Arcadia to move faster than Creation permitted.

A fascinating notion that, one that while not unknown – the Calamities had done the same on occasion and there were records of heroes doing so as well – had never been used on this scale before. It was one thing for a handful of Named to hurry through the outskirts of Arcadia, quite another for an army to march through the territory of the Courts. Whatever had happened in Winter after Squire wandered inside its boundaries, she'd gained great power there. Measures would have to be taken so she couldn't pull the same trick on the Diabolist, but that was a notion for later. Today, after all, Akua Sahelian was going to war. The phrase, even as an idle thought, set her blood aflame. It felt *right*. It felt like she was finally touching upon what she had always been meant to be, unsheathing a blade for the first time after years of forging it. Liesse reached the height it was meant to and then ceased ascending, stabilizing in its flight. Beneath her the wings of the fae coming for her head lit up the field and the winged cavalry began its charge upwards. Clarions sounded, piercing the afternoon air like blades. The call of Summer. From the walls of Liesse, a hundred hide drums began to beat. Doom, doom, doom they announced. *Praes is at war. Tremble, any who stand in its way.*

"Lord Fasili," she said. "Take command of the army. I will be joining the fray."

"May you blot out their horizon forever, my lady," the Soninke replied, bowing.

There was fervour in his eyes. He too understood what this battle stood for: in this twilight of the Age of Wonders, the last true sons and daughters of Praes had taken up arms. *Oh, you poor fools of Summer. Twilight is the coming of night, and night has ever been our time. We will own the dark and shape the day that comes*

*after it.* Adjusting her long crimson, Akua breathed in the wind and reached for her Name. It was pulsing inside her still, like the blood in her veins, as much a birth right as the rest. **Call**, she whispered inside her mind, and as her aspect rose to the surface her mind unfolded across miles. A small sliver of it inside every devil she had brought into Creation, an iron shard inside their very being that shackled them to her will. This was more than the mere bindings her ancestors had managed. It was ownership in truth, the kind of tyranny that had once been the sole province of those who climbed the Tower.

"Fly," she ordered, and every one of them heard the words. "Scatter all that opposes me."

A full thousand *walin-falme* spread their leather wings instantly. Her harvest had been bountiful indeed: once she'd thought she would have only four hundred to call on, but the revolving wards designed by her father had allowed her to capture so many fae she'd managed over twice that. The devils took flight eagerly, screaming promises of death in the Dark Tongue. Diabolist could have called on a flying chariot to carry her to war, but it would have only slowed her down: rising smoothly over the edge of the rampart, she strode onto the afternoon sky. Beneath her feet glass-like panels of force appeared and she strolled towards the wave of enemies filling the air. Only one other person did the same: the man who'd taught her this spell, her father. The first wave of fae rising through the air reached him before they did her, but she was not worried and for good reason. Without Papa so much as raising a hand, all the enemies that came close to him started... bubbling up under their skin, before simply exploding in bursts of flame. Smiling at the sight, Diabolist glanced at the insolent things headed for her. A swarm of ivory and steel, flying pennants of red and gold. Doom, doom, doom the drums sounded. A promise, an oath.

"Justice," the fae clamoured.

"Death," Diabolist replied, and granted it to them.

High Arcana runes light up around her, coming easier than they ever have before, and the air in front of the enemy formed into a ball that condensed for three heartbeats before detonating with a sound like thunder. A hundred fae were swatted down like flies, their bright wings winking out, and twice as many were tossed aside by the impact. Raw power pumped through her veins, her very Name feeding on the sight of her supremacy. The tide of fae swallowed her up as the enemy host headed for the walls, while in the distance the winged cavalry charged straight into her swarm of devils. The melee that ensued was brutal, cast iron in furious eldritch hands smashing into the silvery arms of the Summer Court's peerless knights. Diabolist paid it no further mind, as waves of fae were falling upon her.

"Seven lanterns, lit and smothered," she incanted. "I have spilled blood and broken bone, known the desert sun and offered pure incense."

High Arcana wove itself into her words, every syllable shaping the runes according to her will as if she were painting with sorcery.

"Howl, hunger, hollow. Threefold is my will: obey, winds."

When it came to wind sorcery, not even the finest of the Soninke could match the Taghreb. A current of bone-dry wind formed at her back, sweeping around her and gathering all the fae that had been approaching her with it. Laughing, she quickened the sweep and broadened it until the dozen soldiers she'd first caught became hundreds. The current of air, full of flesh and steel, formed into a ball above her head when her hands rose. Her fingers formed a fist and with a sick *crunch* metal and bodies alike shattered. Her veins burning at the power she still held onto, Diabolist flicked down her hand and flung the ball into the enemy ranks – it carved a line through them, though killed precious few.

"It seems mere soldiers are no match for the likes of you," a voice spoke from ahead.

A pale woman with golden hair, her scale armour a different shade of green in every scale, stared at her calmly. Sword in hand, she saluted gallantly.

"I am the Countess of First Bloom," she introduced herself.

Diabolist closed her eyes. She could feel the fae landing on the walls, fighting her soldiers and dying in droves as wards and goblin steel carved through them. Her mages snuffed out fae lives with streaks of lightning and darkness, sending rituals old as Wolof into the throngs of assailants. Streams of lesser devils poured out of summoning circles, a storm of shrieks and claws that died as quick as they came into existence but left behind bleeding limbs and tired hands. Deaths, so many deaths, of both mortals and fae. Every one of them permeating Creation with strands of power.

"In the name of my Queen, I consign you to death by the flames of Summer," the Countess announced, irritated by the lack of response.

Diabolist smiled.

"I will teach you," she said. "What fire truly is."

**Claim**, she spoke silently. Her third aspect, and the one worthiest of a ruler. In a heartbeat, all those strands of power



shivered and fell under her authority. The aristocrat gathered them to her, siphoning them into the spell she'd begun crafting even as she spoke.

"Burn, misbegotten creature," the Countess of First Bloom cried out.

Heat turned to fire, a torrent of bright golden flames pouring out towards the Diabolist. She was a mighty thing, this Countess. But not mightier than a thousand deaths made sorcery. Akua's silhouette was wreathed in power, for a heartbeat, and then for a hundred feet in every direction the sky turned into a nightmare of dark flame. Not quite hellfire, but centuries of mages in Wolof had managed to craft the closest thing to it a mortal could manage. A hundred grasping hands and hungry maws of flame devoured the noble fae and any foolish soldier who'd come too close to the struggle. The golden flames that had arrogantly attempted to take her life were buried and smothered, the hellish scene lasting for thirty heartbeats before disappearing in a curtain of wisps. There was nothing left of the Countess, not even blackened bones. The Diabolist stood alone in the sky, the fae soldiers parting around her like a receding tide. She had not taken a second step since first casting. Doom, doom, doom the drums sounded.

The walls were holding, by a thread. Her soldiers died like dogs under fae spears and swords, but wherever Summer gained a foothold sorcery scoured the walls clean. The casualties were brutal, but what did she care when her dead men rose within moments to hold their blades again? Her thousand devils had lost the clash against the winged knights, but taken a toll: half her *walin-falme* were gone, but so was a third of Summer's most dangerous soldiers. Papa, bored with simply allowing fae to die on his defences, had gone to toy with them. Now they were fighting an enormous snake of green lightning, dispersing it with their lances only to find it forming again behind them and having left a few smoking corpses in its wake. It was only when a Duke went to duel him that her father retreated to the walls, activating a set of wards to force him back before joining the defence. The three greatest of her devils were there as well, Diabolist saw. They towered above the rest, but there was a reason they were not with the lesser devils she had meant them to command: the same princess who'd almost collapsed her walls had landed atop the rampart, and after burning clean any Praesi who came close to her had begun to fight all three at the same time.

She was, the Diabolist realized with dismay, *winning*. Of her three great devils the one she could see most clearly was a massive creature of rippling ebony muscle, two large sets of horns growing atop his hairless head. Jenge Kubawa, he was called. The Lord of Despair, a devil from the Twenty-Seventh Hell said to have once held back the invading army of Aksum for a day

on his own, in the days before the Miezán. Akua watched the fae princess rip out one of his horns, shove it into his throat and follow through with a burst of flame that burst straight through his chest and out his back. She would have to go and handle that situation. Still, that left the two princes unaccounted for, which was even more worrying. Where were they – ah.

"A praiseworthy resistance, for mortals," a man said contemptuously, tone belying his words.

Two fae stood in the sky across her, neither of them using their wings. Without even needing to exert their power the air around them warped from the heat, idle mirages flickering at the corner of her vision. The one who'd spoken was dark-skinned like a Soninke, though his pure white hair lent him an unsightly appearance. He was, otherwise, beautiful – and his armour of burnt stone was touched with red veins that made it look like burning coal. Against his shoulder a spear of pure crystal rested. The other one was pale and dark-haired, his perfectly-cropped beard looking sharp enough to cut flesh. He wore no armour, only long robes of woven sunlight and flame. His fingers delicately clasped around a sword of pure gold, runes inscribed on the flat of the blade ever-moving. She knew better than to look in any of their eyes. Doom, doom, doom the drums went.

"I am the Prince of Deep Drought," the pale one said with a beautiful smile. "Would you be the Lady Diabolist?"

"A presumptuous question to ask, when half your party has not introduced themselves," Akua replied.

The dark-skinned one sneered.

"I am the Prince of Burning Embers, mortal," he said. "*Kneel.*"

The weight of the order struck her like a blow, but Diabolist was indifferent. The soul he was trying to command was far, far away. She would not need it for some time yet.

"I am Akua Sahelian," she replied. "You may yet survive, if you swear yourself to me."

The Prince of Deep Drought looked sympathetic.

"My lady, though my brother spoke uncouthly the sentiment was correct," he said. "This battle is lost. Sulia will destroy your devils, your army will fail and you cannot hope to triumph against two princes of Summer. Surrender to us, and make obeisance to our Queen. You can find fulfilment in her service."

"I cannot win, can I?" the Diabolist asked.

"That is the truth," the Prince of Deep Drought agreed.

Akua smiled.

"I have two truths for you in return," she said. "I am a villain, and *this is the first part of my plan.*"

Out of instinct, the two of them began moving. Too late.

"**Bind,**" Akua said, calling on her final aspect.

It was meant to force devils to her will, this power of hers, but fae were not of Creation either. This and the sheer power of the entities before her limited what she could accomplish, but in the end this lay at the heart of her Name: to be the Diabolist was to hold power over creatures foreign to the world. The Prince of Burning Embers jerked, then the spear he held spun smoothly and went for his brother's throat. The other prince's eyes widened and he called on fire, his assailant evaded the flames without missing a beat as Akua willed him to do. The fight that followed was swift and merciless. She'd picked the least powerful of the two to bind, but he was clearly more used to combat: the other was a superb swordsman, but relied more on sorcery and Diabolist's puppet simply did not allow him to use it. Twice she let the Prince of Burning Embers take hits on purpose, in places that would endanger his life but not his ability to continue using his spear. It would make him easier to finish off afterwards. In the end, she did not manage to kill the Prince of Deep Drought – though the spear tore through his stomach. Feeling her control slip, Diabolist raised an eyebrow.

"Kill yourself," she ordered.

Eyes raging, the Prince of Burning Embers ran his own spear through his heart even as his brother tried to stop him. Runes lit up around Akua as she began using the massive power coming from the death of a Prince of Summer to empower another spell, casually eyeing her remaining opponent.

"Shall we revisit the issue of victory, prince?" she asked.

"Let's," a woman's voice said, and the panels of force that served as Diabolist's shield shattered like glass.

Pain tore through Akua's side as fire claimed her flank, hastily put out by a barked incantation that froze the entire section solid. Gods, how could she not have felt the princess coming towards her? The woman's hair was fire-red, her skin pale and her eyes a terrible thing to behold. Like the heat of the sun made flesh, just being looked upon by them was exhausting.

"I told you two not to get arrogant," Princess Sulia of High Noon said. "Mortals are trickier than Winter, this campaign has proved as much."

Diabolist steadied her breathing and healed the burned flesh on her side. The flames had gone straight through the armour she wore beneath her cloak, ignoring seven layers of enchantments – five of which were meant specifically to ward off fae.

"She seized him, Sulia, how could even a Named –" the other fae began, but the princess cut him off.

"We have no stories here," she said. "Except the ones they make. It is madness, rampant madness. Order must be restored. To ashes, if needs must."

"Oh, I quite agree," Diabolist said. "You have no place here. And you've delayed my plans long enough."

The Princess of High Noon eyed her, perfect face disdainful.

"I've no time to waste bantering with cattle, you'll simply have to –"

The fae royalty went still. Akua glanced at the other one – the prince was akin to a statue as well.

"Retreat," Sulia called suddenly, and the word echoed across the entire battlefield. "To Arcadia."

The dark-skinned aristocrat raised an eyebrow.

"But we were only beginning to get acquainted," she said.

The Princess of High Noon bared her teeth.

"We will return, Diabolist," she said. "We will finish this fight, once Summer is no longer being invaded. You and your compatriot laid a cunning trap, I will grant you this much."

Not even a flicker of surprise touched Akua's face. A portal opened and the two fae vanished in the blink of an eye, taking the corpse of the prince before she could do anything. All across the battle gates into Arcadia opened, the host of Summer disappearing through them without warning or explanation. Within twenty heartbeats, there was no one left in sight but her own army. There was a long moment of silence, then a cheer that shook the heavens. The Diabolist remained where she stood, before finally surrendering to a discreet bit of genuine laughter.

"Oh, Squire," she said almost fondly. "You truly are the gift that keeps on giving."

Doom, doom, doom went the drums.

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*danh3107*

That was everything I hoped Akua's powers would be. Brilliant, an old school villain reveling in her unholy power, saved at the last by her rival.

Brilliant

*1shot4living*

May she never return.

*Dianna*

Shit... Cat what now? Brilliant Chapter btw, Akua's seems happy though, living her age of wonders dream. I hope Cat finishes up in Arcadia and kicks her ass real quick though. Can't wait for the show down.

Other thought: I am putting in my bet that Cat is going transition into the Name of Knight. An embodiment symbol of Callowan might and the ancestral protector of her kingdom.

*RoflCat*

Given her speech to Archer, I get a feeling she might even become something else entirely.

Like, even 'regressing' from Squire to just Orphan/Foundling, and then actively transition into whatever Name fits the situation before eventually return to just being 'Foundling'

In the same way that Akua became Diabolist by creating her own story, Catherine might just create the story of Foundling.

Her aspects would be something universal, one that might not even empower herself but rather those around her.

*Dianna*

I can't say that won't happen, but I don't see where you are getting her idea for her aspects. Explain? Also can you regress? Have we ever heard or seen of that? Whatever Cat becomes I feel it will be foreshadowed that it is at least possible.

To support my argument no one has the Name Knight, without the Black or White attached, so she would be carving her own story. Also, the Empress said when she and Cat met "A Squire will in time become a Knight." I trust her information and feel it a very fitting name for the protector of Callow.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

It's also an appropriate Name for a student of the Black Knight who rejects some fundamental aspects of (the local forces of) both Good and Evil.

*stevenneiman*

Cat might have some ability to empower other, but I very much doubt that she would lack personal power as well. I would expect one of her Aspects to be something like Inspire, perhaps.

*Drejzer*

I was thinking more along the lines of a Grey Knight, balancing in the edge between Good and Evil, but rejecting both.

*vietnamabc*

Just pure classy. Nothing better to start a day then a blood ritual.

*Spinner335*

Wow.....Squire is going to have a tough fight ahead of her....I suggest opening a portal above the city and dropping all the goblin fire through it.

*1shot4living*

I'm pretty sure that would be Black's advice for just such a situation. "A flying fortress you say? I've never seen a flying fortress that didn't look better with a bit of goblin fire on it."

*Darkening*

Well. Cat's gonna need to rush that third aspect and getting control of her Winter powers, because she looks completely outclassed magically at the moment in every direction. I mean, sure, if she could get close to Diabolist she might be able to keep her from using sorcery the same way Diabolist used the spear guy against the other prince, but man. Akua's throwing around some serious firepower these days. And that Princess is gonna cause all sorts of problems. Can't wait to see the fifteenth and the Deoraithe have their own scrap against the hosts of Summer. Maybe we'll get to see just why the Watch is such a big deal.

*Letouriste*

No need for a duel, the pattern of three is finished. Masego and his magic+archer mage killer arrow should do the trick. or masego against the father first mage and cat with archer.

*Darkening*

There's no \*in-universe\* need for a duel, but the external narrative feels like it would be fitting.

*Cpt. Obvious*

Masego against the first mage? Three incantations in they would be arguing all the way into the closest arcane library. They'd be cooped up for weeks if not months..

*lennymaster*

The power she gained by becoming a Countess of Winter took the the space in her soul meant for her third Aspect.

*Misterspokes*

Are you sure? Is there something I missed that supports this assumption?

*goliath1303*

"I recognize you as heiress to the Duke of Violent Squalls," he said. "Made by prophecy, heirloom and the word of a king. Your inheritance, claimed by rite of blood, is confirmed."

I gasped for air, feeling the blood in my veins cooling further with every passing moment.

"Catherine Foundling," he said. "I name you Duchess of Moonless Nights. I grant you the seat of Marchford, and on these sacred grounds claim your fealty."

My surroundings ebbed away, replaced by deep and bottomless darkness. I stood there unmoving, seeing only the dark-skinned king and the blood-red sap dripping onto his brow from his wooden crown.

"I demand no fidelity and offer no respite," the King of Winter laughed. "I demand no faith and offer no protection. I give you slight and deceit, I receive hatred and betrayal. The Court of Winter receives you as one of its own, 'till your last desperate breath clawing at the dark."

Power pulsed in my chest, spreading through my veins. I felt the third part of my soul, the missing aspect I had yet to forge, fill with something old and too large to comprehend.

[ayon96](#)

No it just meant the power to make the third aspect is filled with winter's power.

So her third aspect is gonna be winter related

*goliath1303*

"Power pulsed in my chest, spreading through my veins. I felt the third part of my soul, the missing aspect I had yet to forge, fill with something old and too large to comprehend."

To me that sounds like her third aspect was subsumed by her fae title.

*Nairne*

Frankly, I can see the princess and Cat getting along (as much as they is possible anyways).

*Nairne*

As much as it's even possible anyways.\*

*nick012000*

>Beneath her feet glass-like panels of force appeared and she strolled towards the wave of enemies filling the air. Only one other person did the same: the man who'd taught her this spell, her father.

Wasn't Hedge Wizard doing the same thing during her fight with Warlock?

*Gydd*

Hedge was using a set of three levitating tiles, not walls of pure force

[\*benthelynx\*](#)

Also, may merely have been a referring to those in this scene- it didn't say only one other could do the same, just that there was only one who did.

*Morgenstern*

Also, it might just be any person Akua knows of or even just any Praesi.

*kinigget*

Oh Cat, what did you do \*this\* time?

Still though, Diabolist's arrogance is going to be the death of her sooner rather than later I'd say

*Vsh*

She offered an army of allied-ish super ninja soldiers a shortcut through summer lands in Arcadia. I mean, she knew that



third pass through fae realm was going to be a fight, so why not use invite a meat shield to go along?

*Nocebo*

One internet point says that Cats lover and the Princess are related

*BryceWilliam*

I'm so excited for Cat to kill Diabolist's farther, its going to happen and when it does I will relish her sorrow

*Morgenstern*

... this. And still cry for \*him\*. Because, somehow, this man has a strange appeal, despite his being obviously totally uncaring about the whole of Creation.

*Letouriste*

Yeah,he is nice.in a way he remind me of masego but with fatherly feelings

*OldSchoolVillain*

I suspect that Cat will be occupied with Diabolist, but that Apprentice and Hakram will remind the world how Dead hand truly earned his moniker.

*goliath1303*

By having a hand that's dead?

*stevenneiman*

Frankly, my money is on him having a nerdgasm with Masego, which kicks off a chain of events in which Masego creates a full Name for himself and lets Akua's dad become the new Apprentice. We already know that Masego's goals don't exactly align with those of the Warlock name, since he just learns practical combat magic as an offshoot from his theoretical expertise and what he really wants is to study magic and learn the deepest secrets of creation, so it would make a lot of sense for his new Name to be something different, allowing him to leave the Apprentice Name vacant while Wekesa was still alive.

This is supported by the fact that just watching the work of Akua's dad was enough to give him a flash of insight that almost allowed him to ascend instantly, and when they meet in person he can explain in detail exactly how it all worked. The one problem is that he actually likes Akua, so he'll probably be mad if Cat is the one to kill her, and nothing else would really fit the story.

*velorien7*

A beautiful chapter. We get such a perfect view of what the name of "Diabolist" really means, as well as of the dramatic old-school villainy that we've mostly only heard about indirectly.

One thing: this chapter is from Akua's POV. She wouldn't think of herself as "the dark-skinned aristocrat" any more than an Earth character would think of themselves as e.g. "the Caucasian".

*Morgenstern*

Doesn't mean there can't be any bit of third person POV or slight insertion of one of the enemies watching her as POV  
\*shrugs

It's rather common to do this and most readers never notice, even though some will see it as bad style.

*Iconochasm*

The constant oblique references to people by their descriptions and characteristics are a mainstay of classic, cheesy fantasy. I believe EE does it constantly as both an homage and to reference the fact that PGtE is a story about stories.

*stevenneiman*

It's third person limited narration, which means that it only talks about what she knows and perceives, but doesn't necessarily talk as she would. If it was first person like Cat's chapters that would be a different story.

*Dimensional*

1st up – Diabolist calls on all of her aspects in this fight. she revels in her name and it's power. Black and all Cat has learned so far is that that is a losing strategy for a villain, as evil loses, and Name power will fail at the most in opportune time.

Call, Claim, Bind.  
Interesting.

Break trumps Bind I think. But ultimately Akua must fall to Hubris of some sort – It's the Evil Way.

*2xMachina*

The Calamities specifically refrain from using any Aspects if they don't have to. Using all 3 is just inviting others to take you out, when there's no longer any cards up your sleeves.

*Dragrath*

Yeah using all three aspects is a bad move though I suspect she has sorcery based cards still up her sleeves, she still has set herself into a very bad situation.

Honestly I wouldn't be surprised if she turns herself into a devil or worse for her final trump card seeing as she is The Diabolist. Her magic rituals are what she has always relied on in the past after all.

[chris S](#)

So Diabolist uses wind sorcery eh?

Now.... who do we know that claimed fae powers from a certain Wind wielding Winter Fae?

Something tells me Akua is in for a surprise when it comes down to facing Cat.

[joanneeve](#)

Suffering withdrawals already...need more chapters.

[benthelynx](#)

Aren't we all?

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*Morgenstern*

"We have no stories here," she said. "Except the ones they make. It is madness, rampant madness. [...]"

I really like that tidbit, reminding us how stories are MADE by humans in Creation, not just lived out (which probably does NOT only apply to Fae). 😊

*Letouriste*

That was kind of cute actually.they don't see the madness in themselves;)

*Gunslinger*

Wow, Akua is seriously OP. I wonder how Cat will handle her. Her winter powers don't seem as powerful or flexible. And come with a lot of drawbacks too.

*Letouriste*

"Adjusting her long crimson" what?

*Tim*

Cape I would guess. You're a villian walking in the air that is also a battlefield. If you're not wearing a cape something is very wrong.

*narcoduck*

"Twilight is the coming of night, and night has ever been our time. We will own the dark and shape the day that comes after it."

This is great considering Cat is the Duchess of Moonless Nights

*Marucstitus*

I bet Cat TAKES Akua's BIND and totally fucks shit up.

*Misterspokes*

She either TAKES BIND or gets bound...

*The Archdevil*

Nah man, Cat TAKES what she can use, and BREAKS what she can't. Either way, Diabolist is losing an Aspect.

[coloreddragonfire](#)

No, she TAKES CLAIM, and then CLAIMS BIND. And then BINDS CALL, because why not.

*beleester*

Akua's soul isn't in her body, remember? Cat wanted to have Apprentice rip out her aspects at the end of Book 2, but couldn't.

*Dimensional*

Actually thats an interesting point, can Cat Break whatever conects Akua to her Soul? And what would that even do?

*stevenneiman*

I would bet that Cat Takes Bind, uses it to hold her in place for a kill, and then when Akua tries to trigger her ultimate form that she had to die by an enemy's hand to use, Cat will Take Claim and then Claim the power before it settles on Akua. But that's all pure conjecture on both our parts for now. We'll have to wait and see.

*Burnsy*

You know what, one of my favourite things about this is that despite how powerful Akua is now, I can easily see how she'll inevitably destroy herself.

So much of her power is amplified by blood rituals and human sacrifice that she'll need more people for resources sooner rather than later. The more people she kills, the more enemies she makes, the more she'll need to kill for power to fight off her enemies. The cycle repeats again and again until eventually her own powers end up being her downfall.

She's the story of Evil in miniature, which honestly is probably exactly what she always wanted to be.

### *KageLupus*

My favorite part about this chapter is right at the end. Akua is facing down two high powered fae, and that princess alone would for sure give her a run for her money in a fight. Then they all stop and run back to Arcadia because of something Cat is doing. In Akua's mind she was in a really tight spot and then Cat's actions saved her.

But Cat and Akua have completely separate goals. Catherine's whole plan with Apprentice and Archer was to have them stir up some trouble and get two of her enemies fighting each other. And that plan was a rousing success; Akua had to activate her flying fortress before Cat arrived, she lost thousands of soldiers, half of her summoned devils, and all three of her strongest demons. On Summer's side, they lost a third of their winged cavalry, who knows how many foot soldiers, a couple of mid rank nobles and most importantly one of the more martial Princes.

And don't forget, Akua dying here would actually have been a bad thing. If she died there is a chance her flying city would come tumbling down, but even if it didn't the host of Summer would have a much better chance of taking the city. Apprentice and Archer might be confused on the matter, but Cat absolutely would prefer it if all of the Callowans in that city could survive the current conflict. First she handles Summer and gets that threat out of the way, then she comes for Diabolist herself, and ideally doesn't lose tens of thousands of her countrymen in the fallout.

I would say that Cat came out the clear victor in this whole three way fight

### *Darkening*

I'm not sure if Akua's devils actually died or if the princess just disengaged to save the prince.

*stevenneiman*

Not sure about the other two, but it was a fair while after the Princess eviscerated the first one that she came back to the Prince's rescue. I certainly wouldn't be surprised if she had managed to kill the other two as well.

### [Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Let's also remember that Callow is now a part of Winter, or at least Arcadia, in a very loose sense so far as the King of Winter claimed. Summer's rush home might hit a snag or two before their already diminished host arrives.

If Cat is EVER going to try and extract that peace making on the field of battle from Summer, she isn't going to get a better opportunity than a Summer already seriously winded from bearding a Named Lioness in her own den.

### [coloreddragonfire](#)

And now we know whose part Cat played out while she was at the ball of the Winter Fae. The princess is called Sumia here, while she was called Sulia in Chapter 11. Still the Princess of High Noon in either case, though.

*stevenneiman*

typo thread:

"[hey->they] could serve as acceptable fuel"

"Clarions sounded, piercing the afternoon [afternoon] air like blades"

"High Arcana runes [light->lit] up around her"

"air around them warped [form->from] the heat,"

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

When a villian relies on the maxim of the first step always working, shouldn't that guarantee that they'll ultimately lose in the end?

*goliath1303*

It doesn't predict or cause any final outcome. It only has to do with the first stage of any given plan and the fact that it will already succeed. After the first step the story can go any which way. Remember the Tyrant's strategy? Something along the lines of: Always have the first stage of a plan in play, then you can't lose. Of course Black told him that that would inevitably implode on him, but Akua doesn't have the same plan. Kairos is so unpredictable is because, once the first stage of whatever plan he's executing is over, he completely abandons that plan in favor of implementing the first stage of the next one. Rinse and repeat. Akua however has a Grand Plan and just

happens to be genre-savvy enough to know that while she's in the first stage of it, she won't lose. Will she call in the end? Anytime after stage one, almost certainly. Is there a chance though, however remote it may be, that she becomes the next Triumphant(May she never return.) and subjugates all of Calernia? Absolutely, and it doesn't matter one bit to Akua that the chances of that are smaller than Triumphant herself making her reappearance at the head of the Hosts of Heaven, instead of leading an army of devils and demons.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Also: Akua already has all three Aspects of the name she just recently took on, while Cat's still coming into her third? Is Cat's slow growth here an effect of her accelerated growth elsewhere?

*goliath1303*

"Power pulsed in my chest, spreading through my veins. I felt the third part of my soul, the missing aspect I had yet to forge, fill with something old and too large to comprehend."

He fae title subsumed he third Aspect.

*arancaytar*

Catherine has never managed a third aspect, and Akua is already done after transitioning? Just not fair.

*goliath1303*

"Power pulsed in my chest, spreading through my veins. I felt the third part of my soul, the missing aspect I had yet to forge, fill with something old and too large to comprehend."

Her title as Duchess of Moonless Nights took the place of her third Aspect.

*ereshkigala*

I am still in the minority wanting both Akua and Catherine to succeed, I see.

### [Adrian](#)

Ok, i really hope Akua dies in this book, and dies badly, even if is evil i hope Cat kills her fathe rin some horrible way in front of her, better yet making it clear is all Akua's fault.

*Max Scherer*

I dont know why people like these kind of chapters. I mean it is kind of intersting to read the PoV of her sometimes, but it

actually irritates me more and just is frustrating to read. I said it in the first book, but Akua is just one of these Characters i just cant stand and hate with my whole being and that her plans in this series just seems every time to work perfectly is just painful to read and not enjoyable. Granted in book two her plans with Liesse mostly didnt work, but the most important one to get the city did work, so yeah. So yeah i cant really give an objetive review and just get really salty reading this and stay with my opinion Akua should have been killed in Book 1(And i know the story would maybe be not as intersting or good, but i hat it if there is just too much fucked up for the MC. She just cant get a breack with all that is happening around the continent)

*goliath1303*

In one of Akua's PoV chapters didn't she says that she had something like 20 goals she was hoping to achieve by doing what she did up to, and including, setting the demon loose, joining the 15th as an auxiliary and subsequently betraying Cat, and trying to trap the Hashmallim? And she only achieved one of them. That's a far cry from "her plans in this series just seems every time to work perfectly", wouldn't you say?

*Lemon*

"To be the Diabolist was to hold power over creatures foreign to the world."

Uh oh, that's quite ominous. Backs up her ambition to rule Creation.

If it wasn't for Akua's last line, I would have thought Cat interrupted her endgame. Getting the fae in escalating war to power stronger and stronger sorcery with their bodies. Still going that route, though.

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## **Villainous Interlude: Decorum**

*"Morality is a force, not a law. Deviating from it has costs and benefits both – a ruler should weigh those when making a decision, and ignore the delusion of any position being inherently superior."*

– Dread Emperor Benevolent

Two years at most: that was how long Amadeus had to live.



Maybe only a year, if he blundered badly enough. He'd walked away from his meeting with the Tyrant of Helike knowing this, and was still exploring the implications. When no pattern of three had formed with the White Knight after their confrontation in Delos, Black had found several implications. The first was that the scope of that hero's story was narrower than he'd thought: it extended only to the civil war in the Free Cities, and as an outsider to that narrative Amadeus did not have the *weight* required to qualify as a rival. That possibility had been a factor in why he'd cautiously called a retreat even though the Calamities had, arguably, been winning. If they were mere side-characters in that conflict, the most likely pattern for them was to be victorious early then brutally crushed after the heroes improved their power. A whetting stone for the blades of the Gods Above, essentially. By removing himself early he would not have allowed the pattern to truly form. And yet, the premise was flawed.

The White Knight, Scribe had informed him, was not of the Free Cities. He was Ashuran, somewhat surprising given his dark skin. A little digging had allowed his spymistress to find out the man's mother had been a Soninke exile, eventually executed because of one of the labyrinthine laws that governed the citizenship tiers of the Thalassocracy. The White Knight's reason to be involved, then was not 'right of birth'. The two sisters that were part of his heroic band were themselves from the Free Cities, but neither the House of Light the Ashen Priestess had served in nor the hidden covenant of wizards her sister had studied under had been harmed by either Praesi forces or those of the Tyrant. 'Personal connection' wasn't the reason either, then. Amadeus had made sure that both those places of origin would remain untouched for the duration of the war: heroes with butchered families, adopted or otherwise, became infinitely more dangerous.

The only motive that fit was 'ethical opposition', but if that was the case Amadeus should have ended up the rival to the other Knight. He represented a larger and more active power than the Tyrant of Helike, arguably with a deeper historical connection with Evil. Unless, of course, some deeper unknown connection existed between the White Knight and the Tyrant. That theory had been buried during his conference with the vicious child from Helike: the other villain was not bound by a pattern of any sort.

Amadeus did not consider his own intellect to be superior, in the larger scheme of things. He'd been at the side of Wekesa for decades and early understood that Warlock was perhaps the most brilliant mind to grace Praes in ten generations, however narrow his interests. Only Alaya stood in the same league, a mastermind who'd been able to fill the function of two Named for over forty years with sheer cunning and ruthlessness while facing men and women who were bloody ambitions made flesh. He was not the

strongest, either. In matters of brute force, Sabah could snap him in half in the span of a single breath when it came to martial might Hye stood unequalled under the sky. Black wasn't even the best at killing: Assassin's body count dwarfed his, for both Named and mortals, and had been collected without ever taking a single wound. As for Scribe, the way she'd effectively become the bureaucracy and spy network of an entire kingdom without ever having a permanent office was far beyond his capacity. Amadeus' only noteworthy talent, in his opinion, was clarity of sight. The ability to look at a situation if not without biases then with fewer of them than anyone else doing the same.

That same clarity was how he'd understood why he was not currently in a pattern of three. The White Knight was, in fact, supposed to face a Black Knight as a rival. That individual was simply not him.

Midnight bell was nearing, the villain thought as he glanced up at the starry sky. Wekesa was already asleep inside the gaudy tent he'd taken out of his pocket dimension along with most of their supplies. There would be no waking him until dawn. Sabah was napping at his side, buried in blankets up to her neck like some sort of gargantuan cocoon. Sitting on a log, Amadeus stirred the fire ahead of him with the long stick he'd carved out earlier and shaped a plan. Planning with two years in mind, he now had to destroy or neuter every major threat to the Empire before Catherine became the Black Knight. He would make a second series of schemes in the days to come with the notion of him surviving only a year in mind, but first he needed to establish what the optimal results could be. He'd once thought he had a decade left in him still and planned to have his apprentice ready to replace him in half that but the timetable would have to be adjusted. There were four fronts he would have to settle: Callow, Praes, the Free Cities and Procer. In the back of his mind gears of iron turned as his eyes remained on the dancing flames.

Callow and Praes, as it currently stood, were intertwined issues. The former kingdom was, last he'd heard, under attack by several forces. The Courts of Arcadia, the rebel forces of the Diabolist and a potential Deoraithe uprising. Alaya already had plans in the works for the Diabolist, but that was no longer enough. She had to be dead within the next six months, with minimal casualties. This much he could rely on Catherine to accomplish, and solidify her grip on Callow in the process. The Courts had been an unexpected set of pieces in this game. Amadeus had three standing operational plans for the Legions to turn back a fae incursion depending on where they crossed, but none were designed to handle a full-fledged invasion. Winter had been temporarily handled by his apprentice, but that was mitigating the symptoms instead of the root cause. It was necessary to find out *what* had driven both Courts to leave Arcadia and permanently destroy that

incitement. For now, Amadeus lacked the information needed to make a decision. Scribe would need a few months still to find out what he wanted, so he'd have to trust Catherine to hold them at bay until then.

She should be able to, and that calibre of opponent would quicken her growth. Dealing with creatures whose power was massively larger than her own would prepare her for the fights with heroes she would be facing as the Black Knight. The nature of fae being so closely associated with patterns would also sharpen her eye in this regard, enough she would not be caught on the wrong side of a narrative easily. The dark-haired man had originally meant to train that aspect of her against the High Lords through the controlled battleground of rule over Callow, but in this case the substitute was superior to the original. The Deoraithe were a thornier issue, especially since he still did not know what had driven them to act. Alaya and he had originally allowed the Duchy of Daoine to remain untouched after the Conquest because it served as an ideal border state against the Golden Bloom, both because of the Deoraithe's rabid hatred for the elves and their limited avenues for growth. While powerful, by themselves they would never be powerful enough to be a true threat to the Empire – and their culture essentially ensured they would never seek foreign allies.

Now, though, it had been proved they could be made to move. Unless the motive for their deployment was unique and incapable of being reproduced, the odds of which were low, then it was possible for Daoine to be leveraged into action again. That made them a liability, the kind that could not be allowed to exist with a crusade on the horizon. By the end of the current unrest, Daoine would have to be either bound to Catherine definitively in her capacity as ruler of Callow or broken beyond capacity to act. If it was the second case, the best time to act would be after they'd fought battles in the south: wiping out the Watch in their own territory would be extremely costly. *Destroying the army and culling the population of breeding age by four tenths should be enough.* Amadeus disliked leaving a wounded enemy still breathing, but logistics dictated exterminating the entire Duchy would require too many resources and take too long. He'd send word to Grem and Ranker to assess the situation and act accordingly, if he was unable to return in time to pass judgement.

That left the more complicated issue of the relationship between Callow and Praes, or more accurately the Dread Empress and the Squire. Catherine was about to seize direct power over her homeland, which was one of the outcomes he'd considered most probable. The moment the Ruling Council had been formed, there were only two ways it could go forward: either Squire would terrify the Praesi establishment into submission or she would wipe it out entirely and become de facto queen. Neither result displeased him, as the Ruling Council had always been meant to be

a crutch that would allow his apprentice to learn to rule. Given how long Amadeus had left to live, such a slow-paced process was no longer feasible: Catherine discarding the crutch by herself accelerated the process by a few months. Alaya would be furious at the loss of control, he knew, but she would be aware that Catherine ruling Callow with the backing of the population was an unmitigated victory for the Empire. Squire breaking away entirely from Praes was, after all, impossible.

That was the truth under the surface current, and why he'd never once felt threatened by his apprentice gathering an independent power base. Catherine was, after all, a villain. The Principate would not consider Callow ruled by villainous queen any more acceptable than it being an imperial possession. Strife between Praes and her kingdom reborn would only weaken her in the face of Proceran advances: as long as Catherine Foundling held power in Callow, she needed the Empire to survive. Amadeus had taken more stringent measures as well, of course. Though Callowan soldiers had been part of the Fifteenth since its foundation, he'd made sure to give her mostly criminals in the initial batch. That meant that all her closest collaborators were Praesi: her general and all the senior staff were from the Wasteland. Though being in close proximity to a charismatic Named for several years ensured their strongest loyalty would be to her, their ties to the Empire made them into counter-weights against thoughts of breaking away entirely.

Much like him, personal loyalty mattered a great deal to his apprentice. As long as declaring independence antagonized all the people closest to her, Catherine would seek a middle ground instead. Since a boundary had been set in that direction, the other boundary had to be established on the Praesi side. Alaya should already be working on a way to bind Squire to her, and would be well aware that coercion would result in permanent enmity. He did not have to bother himself with this part of the equation. Instead, what he would have to turn his eyes to was the stability of the Wasteland. Alaya's magnificent decades-long plan had finally come to fruition and destroyed the Truebloods in full. Three legions would scour Wolof clean as soon as a winner emerged from the succession struggle there, removing a nest of unrest in Praes for at least twenty years. It would not be enough. Every former Trueblood not currently aligned with these so-called 'Moderates' would have to be killed and their entire family line ripped out root and stem. Amadeus was not above borrowing the strength of Callow to accomplish this, if other legions balked at the slaughter. The Clans were loyal, and need not be touched, but he would need to have a frank conversation with the foremost Matrons and explain to them that if they made a single questionable move Wekesa would bring down the Grey Eyries on their heads. Ranker would back him in this, he knew. She'd long run out of patience with the more isolationist of the Matrons.

All of this would secure their back within a year, if handled properly, which left exterior threats. The Principate was the foremost among those. Cordelia Hasenbach had roped in both Levant and Ashur, which have her utmost naval supremacy and a quiet southern border. When Procer came knocking, it would be with everything but the northern garrisons. At least a fifty thousand professional soldiers, easily twice than in levies, and that was without counting any armies sent to reinforce by the Dominion. If most of the Legions were at the Red Flower Vales, it was possible to resist that strength as long as there was no unrest inside Imperial territories. That was not enough, he decided. If Procer retreated with enough of its force intact, the problem was only delayed by half a decade at most. The Principate had to be decisively beaten, its alliances sundered and the First Prince killed. She was, frankly speaking, too dangerous to leave alive. That meant campaigning inside Proceran borders in an offensive war, which would most likely lead to defeat given the current balance of forces.

It was time to start using harsh measures, then. Using the Calamities to destroy the capital of the Principate, for a start, should incapacitate its ruling infrastructure. Using a surprise strike to torch and poison the central principalities, the main farmlands of Procer, would lead to widespread starvation come winter. As for the Thalassocracy, if they could not be reasoned with Assassin would need to eliminate their entire two highest citizenship tiers. That would create chaos that could buy the Empire two years at least, and if Procer could be dealt with during that time the chances of Ashur resuming the war alone were low. The Dominion of Levant was too far and too decentralized to cripple in one stroke, but their ties to the alliance were also the weakest. They would not remain committed if victory did not look feasible. There were even harsher moves that could be made, of course – the Tower was still in contact with the ancient abomination that ruled the Kingdom of the Dead. But putting that devil back in that bottle after it was uncorked would be impossible, and in the long term more dangerous to imperial interests than the current Procer.

Amadeus had spent over fifty years carefully making sure not to burn too many bridges, to avoid the very kind of crusade the First Prince was assembling, but the hour of reckoning had come. The Principate needed to be so badly damaged it would not recover for a generation, if possible while leaving most of Levant's strength intact – the Dominion would not be able to resist the bait of a weakened south if its armies were still strong. Most importantly, Cordelia Hasenbach had to die. Even if another war of succession did not erupt, whoever replaced her would be part of one of the regional power blocs Alaya had made emerge. They would have powerful internal enemies to deal with, and given the nature of the Highest Assembly that meant a Principate divided in

fact if not in name. All of this, though, would come next year. There was a more immediate problem at hand, the Free Cities.

The balance of power could not be allowed to swing in the favour of Good down here. At the very least, neutrality had to be forced with the Tyrant remaining in a strong position. The threat of Helike armed to the teeth at her back would force Hasenbach to keep troops in the south to dissuade an attack. *Neutrality would be better than an outright victory for the Tyrant*, Amadeus thought. If the Tyrant won, Procer had an excuse to wage war in the region and secure it before turning to Praes. If the balance was restored, they had a knife at their back and no diplomatically acceptable excuse to remove it. If Procer started intervening in the affairs of foreign nations, its allies would protest. Hasenbach could not afford to lose them if she wanted a crusade in more than name. *And the moment the Tyrant is no longer a threat, the entire Free Cities will start viewing the troops she sent as an invasion force*. The desired outcome, then, was a truce in the Free Cities with a guarantee they would not participate in the larger conflict. How could Amadeus accomplish this?

Currently, Atalante was under occupation and Delos out of the war – the removal of the more combative elements of the Secretariat by Assassin had seen to that. The strife he'd begun in Penthes was keeping them busy, though they'd still managed to repulse an attack from the ramshackle army of Bellerophon. The slave armies of Stygia, headed by their Magisters, had joined Helike on the march to the last remaining active opposition in the war: Nicae. Which was filled with mercenaries, Proceran fantassins and its own decently skilled forces. Taking Nicae out of the story, after marked but not severe casualties Nicae should fall to enemy forces. With a band of heroes backing the city, though, the situation was different. It became 'the last stronghold, besieged by the hordes of Evil'. Defeat was virtually assured as long as this remained the narrative, and Amadeus did not currently have enough authority with Stygia and Helike to properly influence their decision-making. They would have to be bypassed entirely, then.

The lynchpin of this entire situation, as far as he could tell, was the White Knight. He was the Named keeping the band together. Without him they would either disperse or lose the coherency needed to be a true threat. If the White Knight was dead, Amadeus believed he could turn the victory of the Evil-aligned cities into a bloody draw that would weaken both sides enough they could be forced to negotiate a truce. The Tyrant would be trouble – he'd already begun disrupting Warlock's scrying, which had cut off the dark-haired man's conversation with his apprentice – but he was also fickle. As long as he was presented with a more enticing game than his current one, he could be brought to the table. All Amadeus had to worry about was surviving the boy's

inevitable attempts to kill him during the battle for Nicae. Contingencies were already being put in place. The key to this entire situation, then, was eliminating the White Knight. The villain poked at the flames again.

It could be done, with the right preparations. The lack of pattern would not hinder this.

"You look like you're up to no good," Sabah said sleepily.

Amadeus smiled. It was an old joke, now more comfortable than funny.

"Did I wake you?" he asked. "I apologize."

"I sleep lighter than when we were started out," she said. "We're getting old, Amadeus."

The Black Knight chuckled, sliding down the log to sit next to her.

"You've still got a few decades in you," he said. "Enough you'll see your both your children get grey hair."

"Amna's raised them well," she said wistfully. "I think of them more often than I used to, out on adventures like this."

Both time she'd given birth she'd left his side for a year afterwards to mother the children, but inevitably Sabah had left Ater to join him – he'd spent most of his time in Callow, the last twenty years. Her husband had done most of the rearing, repeatedly refusing promotions in the Imperial bureaucracy to have enough time for it. Black rather liked the man, though how his old friend had come to fall in love with that diminutive, mild-mannered specimen had long been a subject of wonder.

"I think," he said, "that our time is drawing to an end."

The large Taghreb turned amused eyes to him.

"You're not usually this maudlin," she said. "We've handled worse than the Tyrant. He's like a crippled take on Heir, only with a sense of humour."

"He really was a pompous ass, wasn't he?" Black smiled.

"Catherine's rival is worse," Sabah grunted. "I'm looking forward to the kid hacking her in a few pieces."

"It will be a learning experience for her," Amadeus murmured. "Killing the Heir was a turning point for me."

"You were softer before," Sabah agreed softly. "We all were. I still remember what it felt like back then, looking at his corpse. Like there was a storm ahead."

She frowned.

"Feels the same now," she admitted. "Like we're reaching a pivot."

*I'm going to die soon*, he almost told her. But he couldn't, because if he did she would fight it. Even harder than Warlock would, because Warlock understood that some things were worth dying for. Captain didn't. She had no great cause, no febrile drive to understand the nature of Creation. Sabah only wanted them to live as long and happily as they could, and if she had to cave in other people's heads for that so be it. He'd always loved that about her, the purity of the sentiment. He'd never met another Named like her, so unconcerned with their own power. In that sense she was the strangest among them.

"Do you ever regret it?" he asked suddenly. "Coming with Wekesa and I, the morning after we first met you."

She looked at him, bemused.

"We've been at this over forty years, Sabah," he said. "We've killed so many people I can't remember all the faces. We won, when it mattered, but there were dark days too. Those just don't make it into the legends."

The massive Taghreb patted his shoulder gently.

"You're an idiot," she told him, not unkindly. "You two are family. You might as well ask me if I regret breathing. Besides, if I hadn't come along you twerps would have mouthed yourself off into an early grave."

She paused.

"And you and Hye would still be pretending you still didn't desperately want to bone," she added.

"Sabah," he protested.

"Oh, she's just teaching me swordsmanship," she mocked in a high-pitched voice. "Like that didn't turn into an excuse for you two to get sweaty and handsy before the first lesson was over."

"I learned a lot from her," Black said.

"I know," she said. "Tents don't block out noise very well."

As one of the foremost tacticians of the age, Amadeus recognized that this was not a battle he could win. Retreat was required.



Besides, at least he'd never used an entire roasted pig as a courting gift, unlike some other people that would go nameless.

"I need you to do something for me," he said.

She raised a thick eyebrow.

"Eudokia tells me Procer is still sending grain and silver to Nicae by land convoys," he said.

The Tyrant, for reasons only known to him, was allowing them to pass untouched.

"We need to turn the screws on the city before it turns into a battle," he said. "The emptier their coffers and granaries, the better."

It would be easier to force them to negotiate if they were all but destitute.

"Been a while since I hunted on my own," Captain said, staring into the flame. "Might do me some good. The Beast gets wilful when I keep it on the leash for too long."

He nodded silently and left it at that. Eventually she drifted back into sleep, the two of them nestled close to the fire.

"Two years," he murmured. "It will be enough. I'll *make* it enough."

The Gods could help anyone who got in his way, if they so wished. It would make no difference.

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*Kingbob12*

Man, all these Villain chapters one after the other have been so fantastic. Amadeus in particular is so cold and clinical and determined. I'm gonna be sad when he dies.

*nerfworld*

Damn, captain going to get ambushed hard during that caravan attack then

*Darkening*

Huh, yeah, that would explain why Tyrant's leaving them alone, to goad Black into sending someone after them so he can take them out. Black's scary as hell in this, seeing how casually he

thinks about butchering 40% of the population of a region, having assassin murder entire castes of Ashur, etc. As much as I don't want Captain to die, since she's oddly endearing for a rampaging werewolf, seeing Black lose his cool over it would be fascinating. I'm not sure if he'd flip out or just go even colder as he worked for the Tyrant's death. Whatever happens, I'm sure I'll enjoy reading it. Was kinda hoping we'd see what's going on in Arcadia today, but this was really interesting to see too.

*Misterspokes*

Remember that those two castes are 9 people, 1 second rank citizen and the 8 third rank.

*Roger W*

Strictly, it's not 40% of the population.

It's 40% of the breeding age population. Anyone over the age of ~30 (assuming "true" peasant lives", or ~40 otherwise), and under the age of 14 is not part of that, and that's post eliminating the army, which is almost entirely breeding age. I'd say 15 to 25% of the total population. Lower the closer to "real" peasant lives as the lifespan drops and the child mortality (and hence # of children) rises.

*Zach*

Like Catherine has said, Black isn't a good person. He wouldn't have a problem with literally genociding the population of Procer if it allowed him to up-end the narrative of Evil always losing.

*PingleBerry*

SILENCE!

If you say it it might come true...

*Cap'n Smurfy*

Shit, Captain is definitely the most likely to die. Black hasn't noticed the Tyrants trap and she has the least connection to the new generation. Adjutant is pretty much her counterpart to Catherine and they aren't related. Warlock and Black Knight both have apprentices and from what we know of Assassin dying isn't likely. Plus she's nice, least deserving of it and wants to go back to her family. It's too tragic, therefore all but certain.

*RandomFan*

I just hope it's a mistake and not a betrayal. That Black genuinely didn't anticipate it. Of course, this could be a fake-out, but what'll really sting is if Black planned on it happening, and her not surviving.

### *The quietist*

Shit I've never seen Black this resigned. Where's the rage against the Heavens? The rage to bend fate itself?

### *The Archdevil*

Some things you can't fight against. Black's been a Villain for a long time, especially a Black Knight according to the story. He should have a sense of when he's dying by now, and him knowing a rough estimate isn't all that surprising.

### *RandomFan*

As a villain, you get one wish. If you work hard and do it right, maybe it'll come true. But to aim for more is to ensure you lose all of them in the end. A man who chases two rabbits catches neither.

He's willing to die to ensure his victory, just like William was. There's no rage in the equation at all, just the same determination that there was before. Half turned into a prop against the other half. He's willing to die to change that.

### *KageLupus*

Black isn't really a "rage" sort of guy. At least, not in a big dramatic way. He just sees a problem and then decides to fix it, and once those gears start turning Creation will either change or get ground into dust.

This chapter actually shows off exactly why Black is such a terrifying person. He realizes that the way the current story is playing out, he is going to die. He then proceeds to give zero fucks about that fact as it relates to him, and just starts focusing on what it means for his plans and what he needs to do to accomplish them.

Black is one of the most ruthlessly cold and logical characters I have ever read. He has an idea for how the world should be and lets nothing stand in his way of making it so. Thousands of years of Praesi history and tradition? Throw it away because it is impractical to his needs. Some country might cause trouble if left to their own devices? Murder so many of them that they are literally unable to muster an army for at least a generation. There is no solution too terrible to be considered when Black has a problem. If he chooses not to go for it it is

because it wasn't as efficient a solution to the problem at hand, not because there is a line he wouldn't cross.

*Isa Lumitus*

What do you mean where is the rage? Black starts to think he dies within two years, and in a couple hours starts hatching a plan to kill ~100,000 people. It sounds to me that he's going on the Last Dance

That 100,000 figure is just a guess, but he's planning to basically nuke several goblin tribes, and a human city. Then he plans to cause a famine, hopefully reigniting a civil war. And then plans to kill so many people in another nation that it's crippled for a generation.

He is definitely raging against the Heavens... It's just that he's hoping Cat can finish what he started.

*danh3107*

There were so many deathflags raised this chapter....

Almost all of them for Captain, damn

[Euodiachloris](#)

At least she didn't hoik out a locket with a picture of the hubby and kids. 😏 She is unlikely to make it, but she's assured of making a lot of people regret waking up that morning before she goes down.

And, something tells me she could pull a pyrrhic defeat off with her death: lose, but undermine the winner by doing so. 😏

*RandomFan*

Of course, all Amadeus can do is build a structure and hope it lasts, in the end. It won't, not forever- but long enough to count, I hope.

Odds are he'll die without knowing whether it worked out or not. Winning in death is a very callowan notion, though- as he said, villians die cursing their enemies. He's learned a lot from them; that shouldn't surprise me. It still feels like a heroic notion, to die for something greater.

I wonder- was the heiress right, about some of them at least? That they've become mere stewards? Amadeus seems very aware that he's holding the title of black knight until Catherine is ready, at the least.

*RubberBandMan*

So Amadeus realizes that the White Knight is destined to struggle with a Black Knight, just not him. Which leads him to think that obviously Squire is going to change into Black Knight to fight this White Knight.

So Amadeus decides that White Knight must die, because he knows he outlives Amadeus? I'm not sure if this makes sense or if this is a logical absurdity. I know named are epic story bait, but then there is stuff like the Shining Prince and Page, who got killed without any sort of connection between them and Squire.

*nerfworld*

No, it cause if the White Knight has no rival among them then that may mean he will be used against Squire in the future after squire kills diabolist and has a opening for a new rival

*Letouriste*

He just realised the white knight is meant to be a futur rival for his squire;)

The key word here is futur, this is not set yet. so he can kill him, there is just no story around that => the last sentence where gods will go in his way refer partially to that; meaning he will fight a hard battle but he still will win at the end, because this is his way

I guess now black will not being in many stories: maybe one in the free cities if he lose something or someone: (, maybe one in the principate and his final one where he dies

*Roger W*

Kill THIS White Knight.  
Leave a neophyte to oppose Catherine.

*Byzantine*

He's trying to end the story before it starts. Breaking a pattern once it begins is almost impossible, but by striking before the pattern can take hold works. It's how the Calamities have operated all along.

It won't save him, his death is destined and he can't prevent it, but it can save Catherine one hell of a headache.

*usernamesbco*

Sadly, he's being wrong genre savvy. Cat may be a villain, but she's a Callowan villain. Since they're historically Good it's understandable that he's missing the nuance. Aside from the obvious cultural differences I think she's going to have more in common with the darkest sort of antiheroes than the Stupid Evil villains the Empire produces. Her strongest ties to the

Empire are her friends and subordinates (who are caught in her gravitational pull and already knowingly assisting her with treason lite) and Black himself. I think he'd be much less blasé about his impending death if he realized he's the only thing really binding her to the Empire.

His other blind spot is much more concerning.

"Alaya [...] would be well aware that coercion would result in permanent enmity. He did not have to bother himself with this part of the equation."

The Dread Empress Malicia is no longer his friend Alaya, and he's the only one who hasn't caught on yet. Malicia is a control freak who is not going to take Catherine's plans for Callow well, there's been SO MUCH foreshadowing on this. That statement is a death knell. She's going to alienate Cat.

"he now had to destroy or neuter every major threat to the Empire before Catherine became the Black Knight."

...nevermind his actual Name, this has definite Knight Templar Parent vibes. Which is adorable but has unfortunate implications after the duel in Arcadia. Dammit, Amadeus.

### *sheer\_falacy*

I love how analytical Black is in this chapter, but I'm kind of astounded that he doesn't consider the 5th major threat to the Empire: the Calamities. After he dies, depending on how he dies, they could easily ruin everything he's worked for. We heard what happened once when he went missing – Warlock destroyed someones soul and Captain killed a village. None of them care about Praes (well, we don't know about Assassin, but it's unlikely) – they're all tied to Black, and only Black. Heck, Captain's Name is fundamentally tied to him – I wonder if she'd become the Cursed again without him to Obey.

Actually I guess if he arranged his death to be obviously caused by Procer then that would solve one of his problems. I think 4 in 10 would be generous casualty numbers for them if that happened.

### *Letouriste*

The 4/10 was for daoine but yeah, I think he already have contingencies for that since long ago.

### *Byzantine*

In all likelihood he will be the last calamity standing, apart from the Empress herself. In Evil, just as in Good, when the successor finally reaches maturity the original is doomed. Apprentice is on the edge of claiming a new Name, which means

Warlock doesn't have long to live. Captain just had basically every relevant death flag thrown all at once.

Assassin is likely to go out in a blaze of glory following Black's last order to him, probably with no one ever quite sure if he really died until the next claimant to the Name occurs.

Ranger parted ways a long time ago.

The Empress? She's going to be around awhile yet. Her end will likely come because of Catherine. We will see.

I'm mostly curious what will happen with Scribe, once Black is gone. She's not the type to go on a murderous rampage, but I can't quite figure out how she will die.

*Spinner335*

Nooooo Black don't die.

*Letouriste*

Hum...so now we have a good take on where the story will go and still have a lot of suspense:o  
Very well written;)

o " . .

>Mfw i hand my legacy to a hero. (yea i know she isn't a hero but she probably won't end up being a villain in the most conventional sense neither, probably will be called villain by

heroes and hero by villains but meh)



*Rq*

Alternative conclusion: Black is supposed to fight a White Knight, but not *\*that\** White Knight.

I don't think that this is at all likely, but it does also explain the lack of pattern, and matches the faked prophecy about Catherine killing her adoptive father figure.

*Morgenstern*

Somehow I always thought that had a lot more to do with how THIS "White Knight" is not THE White Knight (of his time) at all, but has basically all FORMER White Knights bunched up into him. He's not really himself, not really a *\*person\** anymore *\*at all\**. it's all gotten burned out of him. How can someone like that EVER have any *r/Rival*? Seems much more like a drawback for this White Knight version that is also some kind of a merit he might be able to use against his enemies OR they against him...



*Nightlurker8*

Did... did he just casually send his best friend to die? thats cold man.

*Byzantine*

He either didn't think of it or he's considering that once he dies the calamities are going to go insane. Captain, Warlock and Assassin all need to die before him. And he knows it.

*haihappen*

Either the foreshadowing is really strong in this one, or we, the audience, are swimming in a sea of red herrings. Also, this screams "this is a set up!". Also, this screams "this is a set up!".

It is nice to see what decisions the characters are making based on their respective information.

My personal 2nd favourite guess: The Squire must become a Knight, but it is not ultimately determined which one. Catherine is unlikely to become a White Knight, as she lacks the mindset of a hero. The Black Knight staple also may not fit completely, as she never conquered anything, strictly speaking, she only takes up the sword to defend the people (more or less accurate...). In the Monochromatic spectrum, she is more in the middle, a very solid Grey.

Grey Knight. Unknown? Unlikely? Definitely Unconventional.

my favourite theory I will be keeping to myself 😊

*Byzantine*

The problem really is this world doesn't really have an appropriate name for Catherine to transition into. Grey Knight would fit her best of the obvious options but it isn't a Name as far as we know.

[erraticerrata](#)

There would be no cultural drive anywhere on Calernia to birth a Name like Grey Knight, which effectively ensure it could not come into being.

*mavant*

The Green Knight, perhaps? She's done the returning from fatal injuries bit.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*Th3saint*

Why do i get the feeling that if they off white then squire will get the title just to mess with everyones head, i can see it now "yes i am the white knight and a villan live with it".

*Morgenstern*

I at the very least agree on the VERY heavy feeling that somehow, funnily, Black forgot to take into account Catherine, when still thinking he can mold her into THE Black Knight.. she just isn't. She won't be. Hakram's late chapter made that rather clear.. Funny how someone like Black of all people seems unable to see that and plan for THAT eventuality. o\_ô

*Morgenstern*

So I wonder... what else did he not see or simply forget or think too unlikely in his hubris? 😏

*Morgenstern*

Yes, hubris. Because despite his "Alaya and Wekesa are the great thinkers", somehow HE is making the plans her and thinks that will work out, come Heaven or Hells. Oh well.

*Morgenstern*

Random acute sidenote: I wonder how far exactly Arcadia covers this world... i.e. how far Cat can go... Anyone else suddenly having an image of HER popping up in the Free Cities (and thus, maybe, fighting this strange "White Knight" that is no person and no one W.K. of his time anymore, after all)?

*Byzantine*

I think the problem is there are only two possible roles for Catherine, as far as we are aware. But she isn't really cut out for either of them. Squire is neutral, and suits her best. She is a Villain, but she isn't really the type of Evil that's appropriate for Black Knight. The world needs a better Name for her, really.

Regardless, as far as Black is concerned she doesn't have an option as to what she will transition into. If something else happens he is going to be shocked.

[Jesse Coombs](#)

Great Chapter!

"It was necessary to find out what had driven both Courts to leave Arcadia and permanently destroy that incitement." – I believe enticement is meant, not incitement.

"The Principate was the foremost among those. Cordelia Hasenbach had roped in both Levant and Ashur, which have her utmost naval supremacy and a quiet southern border." – gave, not have

"You've still got a few decades in you," he said. "Enough you'll see your both your children get grey hair." – remove the first your

*Misterspokes*

Both would work, depending on the nature of the bait.

*Roger W*

driven => incitement

drawn => enticement

[The gallowborne](#)

I will miss you amadeus

*Laberlampe*

Some thoughts and a few pet theories:

Catherine will ally/ get together with Cordelia.

They would complement each other really well, with Cordelia doing the ruling/scheming and Catherine being the fighter. Both are also more in the neutral area and pragmatic, rather than really idealistic or evil. It would also make sense story-wise, Cordelia has way to many uncertainties and possible backstabbers in her own ranks and that is not even counting the dominion. As stated in this chapter, either side winning is not really a realistic outcome, as casualties will be too high to keep away other threats.

That they are good-ish and evil-ish also should not be a problem. If i remember correctly one of the free cities has two rulers who are doing the same thing.

Second theory:

Catherine will either not be the Black Knight or become something else along the way (possibly Empress).

Simply a guess with a bit of argument in her being too good and most likely a pretty important ruler soon.

This will be really awkward if this has not been entirely planned yet, but at least the first one i would really like to see.

If it is bs, then i still say thanks for the chapter and please continue the good work, you make a lot of us really happy every week.

*Cicero*

If i remember Catherine aka foundling heard the same song as the current empress when she was young. The one about climbing the tower. So i find the empress theory more likely.

*Twifire*

catherine's growing so fast, black must die so she can take his place. if she wasn't so competent, he would have a few more years to live. instead, her unparalleled growth will enable her a much more long lasting story, and a greater empire than he has. she will not be the stragiest (and our current black knight has a name that doesn't fit his role, speaking of which,) catherine will be the sword of the empire instead, waging war and killing goodies with a blink of an eye.

edit:

Besides, f I hadn't come along you twerps would if I hadn't

*Shoddi*

I notice in Black's analysis of the White Knight's band of heroes, he left out the Unconquered Champion. No mention of her background or motivations, or how she fit in the group. Odd for him to overlook an enemy.

*amc*

maybe cat falls into another ridiculous plot device that literally bleaches her. then, she can be "white knight" and still be a villain...

but – yeah – i'm pretty nervous about the "prophecy" of killing the father figure...

*maresther23*

I think I can see the story Bard is constructing. One of the Calamities is killed and the rest go nuclear, so the forces of Good join together in a desperate Crusade to stop them. It does have a ring to it.

You can even ignore all the little details! If Captain was killed by Tyrant, well, Evil is petty. If the war has been planned by both sides for decades, meh. And if they make Callow a protectorate, well, they helped a fellow ally of Good. Evil needs a counter-narrative...

*maresther23*

Oh s... Bard is Black's foil.

Cat was supposed to be Black's foil. But instead he recruited her, completely changing the narrative of Callow Vs Praes. The

Gods counterattacked, as Malicia warned him, by sending the the storyteller par excellence: The Bard.

*NerfContessa*

Sadly, you are correct.

And for Black not seeing ITT, well, even he can't focus everything equally...

*Barrendur*

@Erraticerrata: I don't know quite what narrative magic you're employing, but your story is so ENGAGING that:

A] I find myself checking the story-site several times a day, even when I know there's no update scheduled;

B] I'm almost stunned with disappointment when I come to the end of each new update (That's all? That's it? N0000000!); and

C] I think about 'A Practical Guide to Evil' even when I'm not actively (re-)reading it, and daydream myself as a character in that world.

Thank-you, thank-you Erraticerrata!

'A Practical Guide' is creative, complex and consistent. It's character-rich and has rich characters; its viewpoint is startlingly sympathetic \*to\* the characters (and we're NOT talking Mary Sue-style, author-compelled sympathies here); it doesn't shy away from the necessary darkness, but it doesn't revel in it (though some characters might; yeah, I'm looking at YOU, Tyrant!).

I'm 50 now, and I remember books being this good, once. It would be a tragic loss if you didn't somehow publish this.

*Lamora*

@erraticerrata Trivia question for curiosity, what are the other Choirs besides Contrition and Judgement? And do they have a counterside in the Hellgods?

*Jonnnney*

The choirs are angels not gods. Their counterside are the layers of hell. The combined might of all the angels is the same as the combined might of all the demons and devils.

*Darkening*

Granted, individual angels are a lot more powerful since devils are infinite and angels are not.

[erraticerrata](#)

I believe I've been asked that question before, but pretty much there's enough that listing them is pointless since only a few of them will ever be relevant to the story. Other Choirs have already been mentioned, though, notably Mercy and Compassion.

### *The Archdevil*

I'm honestly hoping Cat breaks the pattern and doesn't kill Akua. Imagine them actually working together, Akua the Dread Empress and Cat her Black Knight. Oh, might as well throw Cordellia in there as Chancellor. A truly balanced Council of Three, with Good (Cordellia), Neutral (Cat), and Evil (Akua).

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Right, because that council of three would be stable forever! None of them would ever kill the other two!

### *The Archdevil*

Never said it would last. Just said it'd be balanced.

### *Dylan Tullos*

This is the fundamental problem with all of Black's plans; everything depends on him.

Malicia doesn't trust the Calamities, and they aren't loyal to her. Without Black as their leader, there isn't any guarantee that each Calamity won't pursue their own agenda, endangering Malicia's control of the Dread Empire. Scribe thinks Black should be Emperor rather than Malicia, Warlock follows Black and couldn't care less about the government of Praes, and Captain's loyalty is with Black, not the Empress (Assassin is unknown).

Just as Black can cripple Team White Knight by killing the White Knight, his own death will spell the end of the Calamities. However powerful and dangerous each Named is individually, it's teamwork that has enabled them to kill so many Heroes and survive doing it. Once Black is dead, they can be picked off one by one by whoever replaces the White Knight.

The same problem applies to the Legions. The marshals are loyal to Black, not Malicia. When he dies, she won't be able to rely on her officers anymore. How can she be sure that General Ranker isn't planning a coup? Malicia will be forced to choose between packing the upper ranks with her supporters, crippling the military efficiency of the Legions, or living with the threat of brilliant commanders who have the ability and the following to pull a successful coup.

Black is the center of the reborn Dread Empire, the man who brings it all together. Malicia can trust the Calamities because

she trusts Black, and the Calamities obey Malicia because Black does. In the same way, Malicia knows that the Legions are loyal to her through Black, obeying his orders just as he obeys hers. The moment Black dies, Malicia can't trust her Legions or the Calamities. Everything Black has worked for will inevitably collapse in proper Praesi style, as Malicia seeks to control Named who aren't interested in working for her, and the Legions begin to conspire against a ruler who doesn't command the military's loyalty in the same way Black does.

The Calamities won't follow Catherine. The marshals view her with distrust, a feeling that will only grow when she declares herself Vicequeen. Too many of Black's plans relied on his personal relationships, and Catherine can't fill that hole. The more successful she is in Callow, the more the Praesi will fear her ambitions. Black is the link between Catherine and Malicia, the mutual mentor and friend that both of them can depend on. In his absence, it's only a matter of time until the Empress decides that Catherine Foundling is far too ambitious and powerful to be left in charge of Callow.

This entire chapter is Black frantically trying to avoid the fact that his death ends the current Dread Empire. Instead of standing united behind their Empress, the Calamities and marshals will all be pursuing their own personal agendas. The current setup only worked because, as Akua points out, Black was "Emperor" while Malicia was "Chancellor". Malicia could deal with the endless internal conspiracies, foreign plots, and details of government, while Black focused on the big picture, strengthening the Legions and managing occupied Callow. Malicia can't handle the duties of Chancellor and Empress, and she'll break the Dread Empire trying.

Strong systems don't rely on one person. For all of Black's accomplishments, he never achieved fundamental change. He can go out with a bang, but everything he built will start to collapse before his body is cold.

### *Morgenstern*

Except Cat is meant to replace BLACK, in that train of thought, NOT the Black Knight, no matter what he said about that in this chapter, because of the rivalry with White Knight not coming up (which might just be faulty analysis, as THIS specific "White Knight" is not really THE White Knight, either, and so HE (too) would be the one why no r/Rivalry is upcoming)... It's about his Role and not the Name and this is not really about the Dread Empire ("as is"), if we follow that line of thought, but a Praes that DOES become overturned and made into something else. The people you worry about in that theory? They, T00, are meant to be replaced by the new troupe. So, the old loyalties of the old troupe don't really matter much, at least not for long.

The strange problem is that we see that and Black's "gears" just might have built it into his plans, but HE is still seemingly making the mistake of thinking in the wrong terms, that is – and ONLY then – if we are meant to read a "Dread" before the "Empire". But all I can find on scrolling back up is actually "Empire" \*g\* – that might just fit another type of Empire 😊

Precious Alaya obviously might have to go, too – unless SHE submits. Not Cat... (Although poor Aly is rather unlikely to do that, what with her history and wanting to be the one who calls the shots from now on. Anyways, if Cat survives, she's not likely to just be the sword of someone else. She has shown advances at becoming a storyteller, too, just like Black – and the real opposition / r/Rival is thus, correctly, the Bard or rather Fate, for whom Bard is just a puppet on stage. This is not about replacing pieces on the stage, this whole story, metagame-wise is about overturning the board, after all.)

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When I say, Black seems to be forgetting Cat, I actually means those irritating tidbits of coming close to replacing him as in Name/Role, but WHILE obeying Alaya like he did – I just don't see her do it. Also, a tiny wee bit, about when it comes to his own death. She's not about to take his mantle, far as I can see, that's where he seems plain wrong. He might die, but not for that reason, and she will not take over that way, and that Empire won't be Alaya's one – even though the gears farther back, as you just formulated it, seem to turn farther than Black does consciously see, which gives him kind of a victory, but not exactly what he consciously still seems to plan for, if Cat triumphs, as she is likely to do (unless the author pulls the stunt of suddenly trying to insert a new protagonist midway through the books).

*PingleBerry*

Oh and I think I figured out who Assassin is.

Its Hune.(I actually think its Robbers assistant)

Probably not but I can hope guddamit.

*Nastybarsteward*

Still think Warlord would fit our sweet Lady Catherine better. Yes, it is a ruling name for orcs, but not so much as it was primarily a banner to war, a leader and warrior that orcs would (quite literally) kill to follow... now why does that sound familiar?

The Black Knight is a weapon in a rulers hand, fiercely loyal, but never a ruler himself.



Catherine is different and while I don't think she'll become Black, I don't think she'll be the White Knight either. But joining with the first prince at some point really is an intriguing idea.

*Morgenstern*

Sure is. ^^

Warlord: I actually thought the tidbit of Hakram in his chapter calling out something like "it is still an Orcish Name and can never be anything else" was quite... enticing. Screaming "break me" (this "rule"). =P

*Morgenstern*

Simply because isn't that what Cat is doing? Stuff that people claim is impossible to do and changing stuff that supposedly "will never (be) change(d)"? ^^

*EducatedDEAD*

People keep assuming that it means Black is going to die. The story has already mentioned that the Calamities want Black as Emperor, which would also prevent him from becoming the White Knights rival.

*Morgenstern*

That, too, is an interesting idea (although not one I personally think overly likely, nice as it might be).

But the reason might actually be twofold, coming from both sides or, if one-sided, from the WHITE Knight's side. The Heavens frigging ERASED him as a person. He is just copies of FORMER White Knights, popping into place as needed – unless the one former White Knight version comes up that Black killed before, no rivalry is possible from the WHITE Knight's side, because all the former rivals of all the former White Knights are dead, too, just like those White Knights are that got "copied" into this one... He's a copy. Tons of copies, but still a copy. How can a copy be truly narrative-worthy? He's something the Heavens/Fate seem/s to try to use, because they desperately needed SOME replacement and/or because someone ELSE has changed their precious Stories too much and they now need to cope and are currently just TRYING to cope and coming up with a rather haphazard solution...

*Morgenstern*

I wonder, though, why Black never thought about this tidbit here. I mean, he saw it in action and seemed to \*realize\*

what was going on with that "White Knight" at the time – how come this does not figure into his musings, like AT ALL? =/

### [Mental Mouse](#)

No, that's simply his Aspect **Recall**. He only gets the fighting style of other heroes, though he also has a magical weapon (a gift from the gigantes) that can shapechange to suit them. He does seem to be a depleted personality (there will be more discussion of that in the comments), but he is not actually *becoming* the other heroes.

*Nicole Weaver*

I spent the entire chapter waiting for Black to get taken out in mid thought. It just seemed like the perfect moment for arrogance to catch up to him.

Im glad that isnt how it went. I really like Black.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I just realized: Masego has two fathers, so you would think he's adopted. But all the orcs call him the Warlock's Get, which means offspring. So: HOW DOES MASEGO EXIST?

### [Euodiachloris](#)

You can be a chip off the old block without having direct biological links. \*shrugs\*

*Roger W*

Magic?

I mean, we can at least theoretically take an enucleated egg, the chromosomes from 2 different sperm, and start an embryo.

*Jonnnney*

He was adopted at a young age then lived in Arcadia for 5-6 years.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Can't be. In this case he wouldn't be the "Warlock's Get", then. So you're basically accusing all orcs of lying, and I think that's very unlikely

*maresther23*

Because when the guy that summons meteors for fun tells you "this kind is my son" you don't discuss genetics with him, you smile and say "Brilliant kid, he has your brains and his Dadas smile"

## *OldSchoolVillain*

“Warlock’s Get” could just be their version of referring to Masego as Wekesa’s son – they don’t necessarily know or care whether he was adopted or produced traditionally.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Sure, that could be so, but considering how often the orcs repeat it, and repeat it (literally every single time) do you actually believe that? Come on. Like the author would really put allll that effort in for literally nothing.

Look up the word “get” before posting more boring explanations

## *Dimensional*

I don’t think Catherine is going to become Black knight or White Knight. Squire is a transitional Name, but she has already been offered the transition to Queen, and her aim’s are and have always been about ruling Callow. Any name she transitions to almost must be about leadership, and both of the Knight names are not. The obvious one is Dread Empress, but Cat doesn’t want to rule Praes. The story is hinting strongly that that’s where she is going to end up but I’m assuming there will be a step along the way that is not Squire. Possibly a new name – a dark mirror of a more traditional Callow Name. Dark Queen? Fae Queen?

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

How was she “offered” the Name Queen? I don’t think this ever happened. She doesn’t even have her third aspect of Squire yet, she’s not about to chage Names now

## *Cicero*

When she took the Sword out of the Stone i think.

## *Darkening*

The Choir of Contrition offered her the name of Queen of Callow as the fulfillment of her “redemption” storyline with William. That was a rather special set of circumstances and I doubt her transitional name really had that much to do with being given the opportunity.

## *Jonnnney*

When it comes to the rulers of Callow and Praes you get your name once you take the throne regardless of your prior name. If you rule Praes you’re a Dread Empress/emperor if you rule Callow you’re some sort of King or Queen.

*Morgenstern*

How about Queen or Empress of a new Empire, losing the "Dread"?



*Shawn Panzegraf*

First, I think the theory that everything that Black, the Calamities & Malicia has built will fall with Black is bollocks. First, they influenced Praesi politics of all things into keeping a viable Chancellor from forming. Second, the Orcs and the Goblins are stronger than at any time prior to their societies originally being gobbled up. Third, as Black said, Malicia is intelligent enough to find a means of binding Squire to Praes without coercion.

"New Evil" has been more effective in two generations than all of Old Evil combined over centuries. That's bound to have etched a groove into Fate.

Second, I do not believe Captain will die at this time. The Tyrant will try, as the Bard suggested, but Captain's story of one faithful-from-the-heart right hand minion to Black is stronger than her story of mother tragically cut down. Black's fall will likely involve Captain cradling his dying/dead body, then going apeshit on his killers. She may well die then.

The Calamities never thought they'd stay on top forever, but they've started something. If they are clever, their fall will only strengthen that which they've given so much to.

*Dylan Tullos*

Shawn Panzegraf:

They didn't keep a viable Chancellor from forming. Malicia may not have the Name of Chancellor, but she has the Role. She handles the Chancellor's traditional duties, managing internal politics with the nobility and external intrigue, while Black serves as both Emperor and Black Knight, building the grand strategy of the Empire and leading armies in the field. In one of Akua's sections, she discusses how the real reason for the ban on the Name of Chancellor is to prevent someone else from usurping the Role Malicia is performing.

Goblins aren't loyal to anyone. The fact that the Goblins are stronger is a danger as well as an advantage; if the Dread Empire stumbles, the Matrons could hatch their own plot to seize power, or simply to secede. Everything we've seen of Goblin culture suggests that they prize bravery, cunning, and ruthlessness. In good times, when the Empire is strong, they'll go along, but if they sense weakness, they pounce.

Orcs do value loyalty, but it's intensely personal. Black is their Warlord, in Role if not in Name, and they'll follow him anywhere. Malicia does not command that personal allegiance. While Goblins are sneaky and backstabby, Orcs generally revere skill in battle, which Malicia lacks, and have scorn for plotting and scheming, the areas where Malicia excels. She's just not the kind of leader who can inspire their loyalty.

The Calamities win because they work together as a team. Once Black dies, there is no team. Captain is loyal to Black, Scribe is loyal to Black, Warlock is loyal to Black, and Assassin is a complete unknown. Captain is a devoted follower, not a leader, Warlock is utterly disinterested in leading, Assassin seems to work best alone, and we Scribe mostly appears when she's by herself or with Black. Malicia doesn't directly inspire loyalty in any of the Calamities; they follow Black, who follows her. Without Black, the Calamities go from a united force to a divided group with different agendas that doesn't trust the Empress and isn't trusted by her.

In terms of raw power, the Tyrant is stronger than any of the Calamities; he may be stronger than all of them put together. Old Evil always loses "in the end", but it is capable of doing immense damage before the fall. Tyrant's story of "false ally" fits nicely with Captain's story of "right hand woman". Nothing is more appropriate than an Evil leader backstabbing an ally and killing his most trusted friend.

"New Evil" has been successful because Black kept everyone working together. Without Black to keep all the different members of Team New Evil on the same page, it's only a matter of time until traditional Praesi backstabbing leads to New Evil turning on itself.

The fundamental problem with enacting change through autocracy is that everything depends on the autocrat. Black has changed things from the top down; once someone different is in charge, he doesn't have any way to guarantee that his changes will stick.

### *Morgenstern*

Except in structures that might survive, as other people grasp at it, because they see advantage therein. Like the orcs and other people in the Legions. Like finally getting rid of the Truebloods. Like Cat going one ore more step(s) further... and people following in her wake.

It is definitely not the Dread Empire anymore that will rise out of this, like a phoenix out of the ashes (\*unless\* everything falls into ashes and stays there squabbling for pieces for next few decades or centuries, which might then see a turn back to the old, if some new really powerful Evil

Named rise up, i.e. if the Bard, that is Fate using her puppet and the strings, succeeds instead), but something else that will keep a CHOP of the "new practical evil" soul. But not all. If he thought it wouldn't go further than that, he'd be dead wrong. But no matter this thinking or in places just the (probably/occasionally only misleading) wording – the plans Black made so far all pointed at... well.. becoming something else. Overturning the whole structures, morphing them into something else. And they seem damn pretty effective THERE. It's just the old people that won't stay, that don't really matter... time for new seeds that have been grown differently...

*DocTao*

The idea that Black dies might be wrong as someone above stated, transition to another name fits the facts he uses just as well. Squire will still most likely transition to Black Knight imo, because of all those named-dreams (have we looked at those altogether, with the new ones?) and all the foreshadowing. Perhaps into a different one, though in that regard, perhaps she wont progress "forward", but instead sideways, into Heirress?

#### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

That's right, she's actually dreamed she's Amadeus, when he was already Black Knight! Not just when he was Squire. That has to be significant, that can't possibly be a normal Name dream, it wasn't even her own Name!

*Morgenstern*

Really? Seems like TOTALLY normal Name dream to me, what with the Name in question being Squire that is MEANT to transition into Knight and LEARN about being a Knight...

*arancaytar*

Black's POV chapters are just hell on the fourth wall. 😊

*Lucas*

Can't black just change or lose his name instead of dying?

*stevenneiman*

typo thread:

"Sabah could snap him in half in the span of a single breath {and} when it came to martial might Hye stood unequalled under the sky."

"At least [a] fifty thousand professional soldiers"

"Enough you'll see [your] both your children get grey hair."

alternatively, "Enough you'll see your children both get grey

hair”

“Both [time->times] she’d given birth”

*DocTao*

Can Scribe and Assassin still be the same person or has there been an instance where this was impossible?

*Morgenstern*

Pretty sure there was an author comment somewhere that said Assassin is definitely a man – so, unless you’re banking on Scribe being a transgender identity....? 😊

(Might even have been outright said that those two definitely aren’t one and the same, but less sure about that.)

*mavant*

It seems Black is ignoring a couple of options. One is that his apprentice has already demonstrated an effective technique for surviving the loss of your name. Black could zombify, drop the title to Catherine, then continue on his merry way as an undead monstrosity à la the Dead King. Maybe he could even claim another name afterwards – Squire would be available... A second is to steer into the turn regarding his missing pattern of three. One common narrative (perhaps not in Calernia?) is of two figures who are “the best at what they do” but on opposite sides being forced to work together by circumstances like an outside enemy / greater scope threat, and in the process discovering a friendship that lasts a lifetime. The Tyrant presents an obvious candidate. Black could exploit this narrative by taking the inevitable next betrayal by the tyrant as an excuse to join the White Knight in battle (potentially saving his life at an opportune Big Damn Heroes moment).

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I lost you when you said to steer into the turn. That is really very bad advice to tell a driver, because even in the random instances where it’s correct, it’s more confusing than not. Really there is no rule of thumb for controlling a slide, besides assessing the situation.

1. Look where you want to go
2. Steer where you’re looking

Those tips will allow you to react correctly even in the heat of the moment. Yours will cause even more accidents.

But then you also think Black could be friends with Tyrant, which isn’t any better of an idea.

*mavant*

No, my proposal was for the Black and White Knights to be a buddy cop movie.

[M I Fitri](#)

Huh?

*ArkhCthuul*

When the chapter started all.i.could think of was "don't kill him off while he's thinking!".  
A lot.of implications, but also some.blind.spots showing. I would love for Black to actually live... Als It is.unlikely.

*Raved Thrad*

As I read the parts where Amadeus' thoughts were detailed, I could hear Wesley Snipes as Simon Phoenix in my head going, "That's who you remind me of: an evil Mr. Spock."

*aran*

IIRC we later learn that Hanno's mother sacrificed her own life to cast a curse avenging her husband, so (if this isn't a retcon) this seems to be a rare case of Scribe getting something wrong.

(Though the Ashurans \*did\* erase all records of her afterward, so it would be tricky to get the true story.)

*Fulmi*

I'll weep when Black die. He's such a an easy villain to love.

*Lemon*

I love how Black's focus on stories so much has made him extrapolate his death because of Creation resisting obvious bait to even make him a side-character against White Knight.

But Hanno will be a great Hero for Catherine. The way he avoids personal responsibilities with his coin would make her so angry. She might even be able to beat some sense in to him.

[vuthuha912](#)

You don't understand, Amadeus. Your friends love you and not just using you as a tool. They are not going to get over you peacefully. They are not as cold as you think.

You are thinking about giving Alaya an opportunity to befriend Cat, aren't you? The way both of you did a long time ago and the way you did with Cat. Yet, Alaya is not nearly as charismatic as you. She has the charm but not the thing that makes people love her deeply like you. Another thing is that Alaya is no longer the



girl you befriends a long time ago. She no longer wants to become friends with anybody, not just Cat. Cat is not her child. She doesn't even care for Cat the way you do.

And Amadeus is blindsided by the Bard. When he met the Tyrant, he purposefully projects a cold and inhuman machine so that the Tyrant will be more likely to strike at him. The Tyrant didn't know about the love he has for others because how can a person like that truly care for anybody. Thus, logic dictates that killing a bodyguard or a demolition expert is just an annoyance. However, now that the Tyrant knows, he is going to strike where it hurts. The Bard is a true bitch, isn't she?

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## Heroic Interlude: Injunction

*"Forty-nine: if any wizard over the age of fifty suddenly becomes evasive when asked about your parents, you may safely assume yourself to be either royalty or related to your archenemy in some way."*

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

The interesting thing about morality, Hanno had found, was that it evolved across the years. Living through shards of a hundred heroes and heroines' lives had made it impossible to deny as much, though he disliked the thought that concepts like Good and Evil could be mutable. The Book of All Things, after all, did not change – neither should ethics. Yet, a few thousand years ago, most of Calernia had once practiced slavery. The ancestors of nations that now found the very notion repugnant had then been unable to function without it. Procerans, in days before there was a Procer, had raided each other for plunder and workers. The Titanomanchy had built its wonders as much by the legendary craftsmanship of the Gigantes as on the backs of a hundred thousand Arlesite slaves. Even Ashur, his homeland, had once kept a citizenship tier beneath them all where forced labourers and servants were inducted into. But over the years, that ugly reality had been... outgrown. Recognized as unworthy of all those who would call themselves the children of the Heavens.

And so slavery went from commodity to sin, and Creation was made a little brighter. There were, of course, holdouts. The drow of the Everdark still sent raiding parties to the surface to grab the unwary and spirit them below. The Kingdom of the Dead still farmed men like crops, growing them and reaping them in an even darker kind of sin to swell the ranks of its armies. In Mercantis people were sold like cattle to all those who had the coin and

the inclination, the City of Bought and Sold concerned solely by the lustre of gold. But the city famous for it, the one that had perfected the art of chaining others centuries before the Miezans first glimpsed the shores of Calernia, had always been Stygia. Its slave phalanxes, the Spears of Stygia, were famous on the continent for unflinching obedience and having had fear scoured out of them by the concoctions and sorceries of the Magisters. The entire city was a den of iniquity every passing day in a way that made the worst excesses of Helike pale.

The White Knight watched the tall banner floating above the camp, gold and grey set with two pure white cranes. Redress and Retribution, they were called, the patron spirits of Stygia. Lesser gods that had settled in the heart of the city when it was first built – he knew this for a fact for he'd watched one of them millennia ago centuries ago. *Golden beak dipped in blood, eyes older than her entire bloodline red with hatred that was utterly inhuman. It would not matter. She was the Sword of the Free: she would wrest her people from chains and lead them to found a city in the east. A land where no would ever rule over them again. She rose, wounded but unbowed, and fought again.* Hanno blinked, chasing away the memories not his own. Over two months since he'd fought the Black Knight and still sometimes the other lives trickled through into him. He'd come very close to dying, that day. That had consequences.

"Money for thinking," the Champion said.

"Copper for your thoughts," Hedge corrected in a low voice.

"Copper is money," the Levantine replied condescendingly. "Witch wrong again. Do you no get tired of it?"

"Let's move," Hanno said, interrupting before the bickering could start in earnest. "Follow the plan."

He saw the Hedge Wizard open her mouth from the corner of her eye, but her sister thumped her with her staff. Priestess was, he had to admit, the most reliable of his companions in temperament. Though considering her competition was a drunken disappearing Bard, her actively argumentative sister and brawler who kept trophies of her kills, that might not be saying much. Still, he knew from the Chamber of Borrowed Lives that no Named who lived longer than a few years managed to avoid growing some... quirks. The power conferred onto them by the Gods shaped them as much as they shaped it. Regardless he got along with her the best. More than once they'd found themselves sharing a comfortable quiet in the back while the rest of their band bickered aimlessly. The four heroes crept across the grassy field, Hedge's spell keeping them hidden from the moonlight even as they neared the outskirts of the Stygian camp. A palisade of wooden stakes had been raised and spear-slaves patrolled behind them. He could hear them pass by, when he pressed his ear against the wood.

"Priestess," he said.

The dark-haired woman nodded. The tip of her staff traced a circle on the surface of the palisade and a heartbeat later the wood crumbled into ash. They passed through, one after another. Hanno glanced at Champion and Hedge through the slit of his barbute.

"Half an hour," he reminded them. "That's all we'll need. Retreat afterwards."

"Will make river of blood," Champion said enthusiastically from under her badger-shaped helm. "Eat hearts of enemies."

"That's cannibalism," Hedge said.

"Not so," the Levantine said. "Says in Book. Allowed if they wicked."

"The Book of All Things does not excuse eating people," the Wizard firmly stated.

"Maybe in lame Free Cities version," Champion replied sceptically.

They both turned to the Ashen Priestess, the only individual among them with an actual religious education. The heroine stared back with hickory-coloured eyes.

"I'm not humouring this with an actual response," she informed them flatly. "Get moving before I decide to make the two of you incontinent."

"Mighty Priest-Witch true monster," the Champion said admiringly before fleeing.

Hedge met her sister's eyes for a moment longer before making a tactical withdrawal, paling a bit.

"Can you?" Hanno asked, morbidly curious.

He had a trick to discern lies – it was common, for those sworn to the Choir of Judgement – but using it drew on his Name and he still had a fight ahead of him.

"I fed Alkmene an herbal concoction when were we twelve to make her believe I could," Priestess admitted, the sly shadow of a smile on her lips.

Hanno would have snorted if the situation was any less serious. They fell into step together naturally, his longer stride shortening to accommodate her own. There'd been no need to rely on his few memories of fighting Stygia in the past to deduce where the Magisters would be camped: while the entire rim of he

fortified camp was rough burlap tents, the centre was absurdly luxurious and bustling with servants during the day. Without Hedge to guide them around the wards and keep them out of sight, the two of them had to be careful. The White Knight could feel sorcery, if he attuned himself, and Ash could outright see it – but neither of them were trained in picking up on the subtler effects, much less bypass them. They sidestepped an alarm ward early on, but found to their displeasure that deeper in there was another ward that circled entirely around the circumference of the camp. The Priestess could dismantle it, of course, but that would be giving away their presence. They hid in the shadows for a while instead, waiting for their distraction to arrive, and were eventually rewarded by a spray of fireworks that set fire to a dozen tents in the distance followed by a booming voice challenging the entire camp to single combat. Slaves soldiers immediately began to mobilize, and only then did the two heroes cross the alarm ward. Stealth was no longer the game, now. Swiftmess was the line of life and death.

The first Magister they found was obviously drunk, a grey-haired woman leaning against a post and breathing like someone trying not to throw up. Lean face, eyes dulled by liquor and long dark robes whose sleeves tangled with the many rings on her fingers. All Magisters were mages, and only gained the title by showing power and ruthlessness. Neither of those things mattered, when the mage could not see you coming. The White Knight's sword took her in the throat without warning, hacking straight through. A cry of surprise came from ahead, the corpse dropped and the battle began.

Green sorcery lashed out in a stream at him, but Hanno ducked to the side and broke into a run. A Spear of Stygia burst out of a tent to the side, but in a flash turned into a pile of ashes. The Magisters were aware they were under attack, now. Within moments at least a dozen more mages stormed out of the large silken pavilion in the centre of the camp, the rings on their hands glinting as they immediately began spellcasting. The Wandering Bard had told him there were fifteen in total, sent by Stygia to lead its army against Nicae. Decapitating the head of the snake was why he'd taken come with his companions tonight. A slave army without masters was as good as paralyzed, and might actually retreat back to Stygia. The more casters joined the fray, the closer to him the spells came: they stood in a tight cluster, and for all that they were wretched souls one and all he almost admired the skill being shown. Spells led into each other, herding him into harsher attacks like a horse being led to water. The Light flooded his veins, sharpening his reflexes far beyond limits as he began to weave and duck through the volleys directed at him, not even a full step ahead. Another slave tried to spear him through the side, only to be caught by the edge of a black orb that saw the man's skin contract and tear under the sudden

pressure. The Magisters did not care who else died in their attempt to put him down. He'd expected nothing less from slavers.

"**Ride**," the White Knight said.

Light wove itself into a horse in the blink of an eye and even as Hanno deftly leapt onto its back he felt a lance of light form in his hand.

"Aspect," one of the Magisters noted, tone calm.

"Suppression," another ordered.

Fourteen jets of black light bloomed, emanating from outstretched hands, and combined their streams at him. Hanno struck at the malevolent power with his lance, but after a few heartbeats his weapon broke into shards and the power of the Magisters tore through his mount as well – the White Knight grit his teeth to ignore the pain of the feedback from having an aspect overpowered. He fell kneeling to the ground, unsheathing his sword again.

"Full attack, before he uses a second," a woman's voice stated.

Before the White Knight could react, three stakes of obsidian nailed both his feet to the ground, going through his armour like it was butter. The twelve remaining Magisters finished their incantations a moment later, fire reeking of sulphur blooming in their hands.

"We are Magisters of Stygia, boy," the woman who'd just spoken, a cold smile on her face. "Even heroes kneel before us."

The twelve spheres of hellfire hit him in the chest almost simultaneously. Hanno unhesitatingly flared the Light under his skin where the impact was happening – though that was enough to spare his flesh, their spells melted straight through his plate and threw him into a tent like a rag doll. If he'd not used his Name, there would be a smoking hole where his ribcage currently stood. With a grunt, he rose to his feet and tried to get the silk panels off his head before he could get hit again. No doubt the slaver mages were feeling rather smug at the moment, certain of their superiority. They'd been batting him around since the beginning, after all. That was their mistake. They'd used their strength on the one who, of the two present, could take a beating. All the while ignoring the other.

"Though their horses and chariots are like a river unto Creation, though their spears be forest and their sword be mountains, the Gods pass judgement unto them. Do not dread, for I bear the word of the Heavens and that word is **begone**."

The Ashen Priestess' voice rang loud and clear like a trumpet across the chaotic camp. Finally rid of the silk, Hanno was just in time to see the circle of blinding light form around the standing Magisters. Panic flickered across their faces for a single moment, and then the miracle wiped away the world. Even his Name wasn't enough to keep the ringing out of his ears, or prevent the blindness that burned his retinas. Ten heartbeats later, when the terrible whiteness finally left his eyes, all the White Knight saw where the Magisters had once stood was a faint shimmer of light. Of the men and women, there was not a trace. Ash was panting, leaning on her staff: this was one of the more strenuous miracles she could call on, and one that took long to prepare. Against the likes of the Calamities, attempting to use it would be a death sentence. But these had been a different breed they were facing. Men and women ready to lean into their arrogance. And for all that the miracle took long to bring forth, there was no denying the effectiveness of the harsh judgement of the Heavens meted out. The White Knight limped to his friend and allowed her to lean on his shoulder: they needed to get moving soon, but they had a few moments still. There was a flicker of movement behind them and Hanno's fingers tightened around the grip of his sword, but it was only a bird. A pigeon, to be exact, and it landed on his shoulder.

"Well, the distraction worked," Hedge said, her voice unnaturally coming out of the bird's mouth. "Maybe a little too well."

A sound like a dozen cauldrons rolling down a street resounded behind them, which from experience he knew meant the Champion was running. The Levantine came into sight not long afterwards, her breastplate splattered in so much blood she might as well have dipped it in a barrel of the stuff. The White Knight frowned when he saw no one was in pursuit. Even with the Magisters dead the slave soldiers should be continuing the fight. Why was no one following?

"Funny cripple here," the Champion announced delightedly. "Giving speech. We beat him like renting mule, yes?"

"The Tyrant?" the White Knight said.

Why was he – *oh*. The hero closed his eyes.

"He's taking over the Stygian army," Hanno said.

"Can he even *do* that?" the pigeon complained, too close to his hear for comfort.

"Masterless slaves and a ruler Name? It's basically handed to him," the Wandering Bard announced cheerfully.

All their eyes flicked to their wayward fifth member, who was leaning against a wooden pole with a flask in hand. Said hand,

apparently sweaty, slipped and she nearly hit the side of her head against her support before gamely trying to pretend she'd always meant to do that. Hedge snorted, which was impressive considering she was a bird at the moment.

"Where were you, Aoede?" Ash asked.

"Seeing a guy about a thing," the Bard replied vaguely.

"You are the world's most terrible riddler," the pigeon stated. "There's no mystery, only non-answers and a blatant drinking problem."

"The point of this was to remove Stygia from the equation," the White Knight said, ignoring the byplay. "We've failed."

"But you successfully hit another point by accident, so it's all good really," the Bard told them with a smile.

Hanno frowned.

"And what would that point be?"

"Taking a tool out of the other monster's toolbox," Aoede said, toasting her flask. "That said, my lovelies, now might be a great time to leg it. You're about to have a very motivated army looking for you."

The hero glanced at Priestess, who shrugged in resigned agreement.

"Retreat, then," the White Knight said, feeling somewhat robbed of a victory.

Even as they began their flight, Hanno saw the Bard slipping an arm around Champion's armoured shoulders and leaning close.

"Do you happen to like monster stories, Rafaella?" she asked.

"Speak me more," the Levantine grinned.

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### *Darkening*

Huh, wonder if this was part of Bard's deal with the Tyrant. Also, interesting to see the Kingdom of the dead apparently has a breeding program, so there's actually an explanation for the inexhaustible armies of the dead.

*Nicole*

I also thought the explanation for the armies of the dead was awesome 😊

*Shikome Kido Mi*

It's great to know the Dead King is smart enough to avoid a common necromancer trap. I've always argued complete conversion of the population to Undead is impractical and any one advocating it is dooming their society to nothing but decay and a slide to oblivion. Even Warcraft III's Scourge kept living cultists.

You should just convert most people and have the remainder converted after they reach a certain age or die of unrelated causes while they breed new life to make new undead. It could be like retirement: work hard, raise a family, and then become an undead monster to avoid the ravages of age.

*Amoonymous*

Honestly, the people the Dead King keeps could quite feasibly be living in a (slightly regulated) paradise. A happy/distracted people are a complacent people after all; the slight regulations would be things to make them more effective undead (like say diets and exercise).

After all, the Dead King has uncountable undead to handle everything necessary to raise the population to a...harvestable age.

Of course it could also be hell on Calernia or anything between the two.

*Veyros*

Exactly like Khelt from Innworld. Everyone lives in this utopia kingdom ruled by an undead, but when they die their bones are used to make soldiers, farmers, servants, etc to serve the living.

*Julian*

Yeah it's basically morally ok slavery, as long as it doesn't mess with souls that is.

*goliath1303*

Wow, not even the slightest aren't too give a freakin spoiler warning... Thanks for that!

*NerfContessa*



Agreed.

Later info tells us more, but it would be the easier path to follow

Also, bard you monster... Poor Sabah...

[edrey](#)

so the bar in the move, i really hope captain don't die

*maresther23*

You Spooky Bard! Why do you have to be so overpowered.

*Lamora*

Write the last knights of Callow riding into the heart of Summer, the ideal of Callowan heroism, with a Callowan bearing a Praesi Villain name at their head leading them you coward.

If Squire doesn't pick up a new Name in that fight, then White and Black are truly the only kinds of knight left.

*AshSlanabrezgov*

Winter Knight?

[edrey](#)

the Queen's knight, the Red knight, the moon knight, i like the last one, combine with the duchess of the moonless nights

*mavant*

She is the one, sailor no moon!

*Jonsense*

Moonless Knight. An upgraded Dark Knight.

*Shequi*

I'm more and more convinced that the Wandering Bard is not a hero.

*nerfworld*

That's obvious, she's the stage hand keeping the actors in line and making sure they follow the script so the audience(gods above and below) enjoy the show

*Oshi*

None of them are Heroes or Villians. As far as I can tel they are just pieces on a board shaped to move against each other. I wonder if in the end the world will actually have Free Will...

*Ravdalicious*

The Wandering Bard is a hero. You just aren't using the definition of hero we got from the introduction, but rather the definition of one as we know. A hero in this world is one that strives to bring the world to act according to the plans of the gods above. It is not about innocent lives, saving countries, or other such things – those are things that happen to align with that more often than not. The Wandering Bard has literally said that she'd prefer Akua to win over Catherine, because Catherine might actually be good for Callow.

Or in D&D terms: Heroes are Lawful according to the gods, not necessarily Good. Villains are Chaotic according to the gods, but not necessarily Evil.

*Byzantine*

She's THE hero. Her entire purpose in existence is, at any and all cost, to make sure the Gods above never actually lose. She is their ultimate trump card.

Right now, then she has to make sure Praes loses. She doesn't care how much Evil gets done, how many suffer, etc in the process. She just needs the new brand of evil the Calamities have created to die.

*stevenneiman*

She's a hero, which is to say someone dedicated to ensuring victory for the Gods Above. The fact that she's willing to arrange the deaths of any who get in her way (even by accident) and to try to mindrape thousands of people doesn't make her not a hero as the Heavens understand the term.

*danh3107*

Champion versus Captain eh? Interesting

[wirelessgrapes](#)

It's not even a fight. Captain dominated the \*fuck\* out of Champion and the Priestess. One v. One results in a dead Champion. Bigger, stronger and much more experienced.

*sheer\_falacy*

A villain going against a hero, one on one, after they've fought before and it was made clear that the villain was bigger, stronger, and more experienced?

That's a very bad story for Captain.

*nick012000*

Only if Champion had a training montage first.

*Cicero*

Remember, its about stories. And who knows better then anyone else how to craft the correct story? the bard. Hence the talk about monster stories.

*Morgenstern*

Now I am wondering, if the Bard has a little monster story about how to change a kinda-werewolf back into a happy little human to save it for leading its merry little life of family and love..

*Cpt. Obvious*

She have all the stories. Every single one. But she's got no use for happy ends for Villains. She's playing a very long game.

*PingleBerry*

Champion vs Captain....but which will win? I suspect its the Captain due to how this story likes to subvert things, but it could equally be the Champion...

*Brian P.*

I really, really want the Bard to suffer some kind of unending torment by the end of this series. Seriously, I dislike her more than the Heiress/Diabolist, probably because she's such a smug meta-player.

*unorginal*

That is literally her life, it's why she drinks so heavily, you don't need to wish for shit because she is living a nightmare where whenever she is not needed she ceases to exist. That and the fact that she lives with the fact that she presumably subsumes a bard everytime she takes on a new face.

*Cpt. Obvious*

Also for how long has the Name existed? How long would you stand seeing the same stories play out over and over again. The groves getting deeper and deeper cementing the stories until they are more or less permanent. Evil digging its claws into creation. Heroes following the rut of their Name and neither Good nor Evil getting any closer to prove which

philosophy is the more successful so the game just keeps going.

And watching over all these stories is the Wandering Bard never allowed to rest from it all. Never allowed to form a meaningful relationship as she is constantly ripped out of Creation only to be reinserted where needed to nudge a Hero or Villain to follow the "correct" story. And if she were to die she just wakes up in a new body to continue her work.

How many millenia would it take before you would wish you'd never held a lute? How long before you would start drinking to silence your thoughts if only for a moment? How long before you would try to find a way to end it all?

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

How was this result a good thing from the hero's perspective? What monster's toolbox?

*Ploogle*

Its removing a tool from Black's tool box.

*nerfworld*

Black remember? She told the kid that she would arrange her heroic pawns to do something that would help the kid so he could hit black hard

*vietnamabc*

When Black said he was the worst kind of monster, I think Bard is one too.

If a person can become a Name, what if a Name becomes a person? I think the Bard is a story incarnate so when the story is broken, she will truly die.

*Cpt. Obvious*

She's not story incarnate as much as the keeper of all stories. She can nudge Heroes and Villains to follow a story of her choice, but as long as there is anyone that remembers any story she will exist to guard it. So no death for the Wandering Bard as long as people keep the stories alive.

*Letouriste*

4 interludes at once^^ i guess we will come back to cat Wednesday?

*Gunslinger*

The sad thing is that I'm really enjoying these heroes. It would be cool if they'd join Cat but really doesn't seem likely.

Also the opening quote has to be my favorite axiom among the hero axioms so far.

*RandomFan*

I love all of them except for the Bard, because bards evidently deserve a kill-on-sight policy from now on. Even if the Wandering Bard is a dramatic outlier, it's still worth killing the rest to balance it out anyways.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*Victor*

Damn the bard's got her fingers dipped in every pie it seems. She's one cold motherfucker, . The scariest thing is that she's ruthless as fuck for a "good guy", she manipulated William into doing "what was necessary to win against Evil" which turned out to be attempting to brainwash a shit ton of people into doing an Angel's bidding and when that didn't work she was like fuck it I guess I'll just try with another Hero. Her only interest seems in beating Evil, no matter what she has to do. Scary.

*Shikome Kido Mi*

The funny thing is, for all that she wants to destroy the Calamities for what they stand for... The Bard is pretty much their heroic counterpart in many respects.

[edrey](#)

so let me guess, Captain dies, Black in rage attack white but he is killed, Cat becomes the black knight then she kills hanno but before, he impregnate ash and the baby is left with her sister, the wizard, then later the boy becomes white knight and kill cat, thats is the typical tragic story of revenge, too boring to say the true

Cat should just TAKE both Names and transcend into a new name

*stevenneiman*

typo thread:

"he'd watched one of them [millennia ago] [centuries ago]" one of those has to go

"A land where [no->none] would ever rule over them again"

"there was another ward that circled entirely around the circumference of the [cmap->camp]"

"caught by the edge of a black orb that saw the [man;s->man's]  
skin contract"  
"The Levantine came into sight not [logn->long] afterwards"

*AVR*

The Titanomanchy had built its wonders as much by the legendary  
craftsmanship of the Gigantes as on the backs of a hundred  
thousand Arlesite slaves.  
(probably in the other order, 'on the backs of a hundred  
thousand Arlesite slaves.' first, in context)

the man;s skin  
the man's skin

close to his hear  
close to his ear

*Shequi*

"She was the Sword of the Free: she would wrest her people from  
chains and lead them to found a city in the east. A land where no  
would ever rule over them again. She rose, wounded but unbowed,  
and fought again."

I'm guessing, from the relative positions of the cities, that the  
Sword Of The Free was the founding agent of Bellerophon.

Which would mean that a City nowadays dedicated to the Hellgods  
was originally founded by a Hero.

*Dylan Tullos*

That explains so much. I had wondered why Bellerephon was so  
fiercely egalitarian, especially when all of the other realms,  
Good or Evil, seem to have some form of hereditary ruling  
class.

I'm surprised that Bellerephon is willing to ally with the  
Magisters at all. Even if they do worship the Gods Below, their  
entire society is built around being "not-Stygia". Does  
Anaxeres know the story of his city's founding? Even when he  
thinks negatively about the Stygians, he doesn't seem to  
distinguish them from other Tyrannical Foreign Oligarchies that  
Oppose the People; if he knew the truth, you'd think that  
Stygia would occupy a special place in his curses.

*Cpt. Obvious*

Ah! But the Sword of the Free is one of the Gods below! The  
freedom fought for was not only freedom from mundane slavery  
but also freedom from control by the Gods above.

*alegio*

Got hit by a dozen OP wizards on the chest and only lost the armor, just after getting and aspect overpowered? Freaking heroes and their freaking hax -.-

And the Tyrant is getting more troops, Im getting scared about the calamities. :s

[BarthHumphries](#)

Typo

Decapitating the head of the snake was why he'd taken come with his companions tonight.  
remove "taken"

aran

Is **Begone** an aspect? It doesn't fit the normal verb pattern.

JarlZarl

I think she was Speaking to empower the miracle. That is also bolded

Levi Kalden

It's extremely annoying that heroes have basically god given plot armour

---

## Chapter 24: Vanguard

*"My dear Chancellor, I didn't murder my entire family and use their blood to turn myself into an undead abomination to be told I couldn't do things."*

– Dread Emperor Revenant

We'd wasted another sennight at Denier, to my displeasure. In part haggling terms with Duchess Kegan, who must clearly have been a fishwife in a past life, and in part because we were waiting on the Twelfth Legion to finish its march towards us. Those four thousand men were still led by General Afolabi, who I'd met once before when the Lone Swordsman was making trouble in the city the Twelfth garrisoned. I'd been unimpressed by his inability to handle the mounting tensions in Summerholm, he'd been unimpressed by the fact I'd launched an ambush on a hero in his own backyard without warning him. Neither of us were particularly pleased to see the other, but if I had to traipse

through Arcadia I'd rather do it with thirty thousand men than twenty-six thousand. Besides, I rarely had to deal with him directly: he was under Marshal Ranker's command and his legionaries stuck to their own camp. It took us another three days to ferry the Deoraithe army across the river with fishing boats and barges, the mounting delays driving me up the wall.

The longer we tarried here the longer Diabolist had to set up her end game. I was anybody's guess how long we'd be in Arcadia, and more importantly where the gate out would be. After all, I didn't control that part. Masego had given me a very complicated explanation on the subject involving alignments, symmetry and what had struck me as a bit of religion no matter how much mathematics he brought into the mix. My own understanding was a bit simpler: my will was a needle. By opening a gate I was punching through the fabric that was between worlds into Arcadia, but where the needle had to punch through to get me *out* of Arcadia was determined by where I'd come from and where I wanted to go. No doubt there were sundry metaphysical implications to all of this, but if I wanted to be babbled incomprehensively at I could just buy people drinks. Hells, considering I'd basically taken control of the treasury for Callow I could actually afford that these days. Progress.

Our supply situation had been another headache, and I'd never missed Ratface more than when Ranker sent a copy of our stores for the campaign to my desk. The Marshal and General Afolabi had essentially emptied Denier and Summerholm's granaries to ensure they could operate alone for a few months, but there was a major difference between driving those supply carts down Callowan roads and through the wilderness of Arcadia. Getting the matter sorted took another two days, then another two when Duchess Kegan insisted on bringing her own carts across the river instead of relying on Legion ones. My officers learned to enjoy their wine cold, because the temperature in the room when I heard about that descended *sharply*. There'd been talk from the Deoraithe of keeping a different supply train instead of keeping all the rations together, but after I glared the meeting table frozen they'd 'magnanimously' declined to further pursue the matter.

And now here we were, over a fortnight after when I'd wanted us to leave, assembling the allied armies in the darkness before dawn. The largest gate I could open was an equilateral triangle seventy feet at the base, so there was no possibility of going through in ranks. It would have to be a marching column, which had prompted another round of what I refused to even call bickering. I knew bickering, it was the true tongue of all my closest friends. There was fondness in bickering, a give and take. This was just an ugly brew of distrust and spite spilling over what should have been an exceedingly straightforward manner. Marshal Ranker had wanted her two legions to go through first, and General Afolabi had backed the notion. Duchess Kegan had



suggested her own infantry be the first to cross, heavily implying the goblin couldn't be trusted not to set up an ambush for her army on the other side. Ranker had then wondered out loud if there'd been enough left of the body of Kegan's younger brother to identify him after Grem One-Eye killed him at the Wall, during the Conquest. Before that could get any uglier, I'd slammed my fist on the table.

It had promptly broken, because these days I was pretty sure I could punch through iron if I put my mind to it. That wasn't worrying in the slightest.

Anyhow, that had gotten their attention. I'd told them that it was *my* fucking gate so my people were going through first, led by myself, after which Ranker's Fourth would follow. The Deoraithe would go through next, and General Afolabi's legion would be in charge of the rearguard and covering our supply train. Tactically speaking this entire disposition was shit and nobody liked the compromise, but apparently breaking furniture made people less prone to arguing with you on minor details. Robber had since informed me that rumours went around the camps about my temper, nowadays, but I doubted even Black would have been able to handle this level of futile squabbling with a smile. As for Juniper, well, she'd have sent them to cool their heels by digging holes and filling them at least twice by now. Gods, I missed the Fifteenth. The wretches gave me lip, sure, but at least they did whatever I asked them to without arguing for a quarter bell first. Still, here we finally were. The blood in my veins cooled and power wafted off my armour like smoke even as the gate shuddered open before me. I found myself panting when my mind finally returned to itself, leaning against the neck of my horse. I waited ten breaths for the tiredness to leave me before looking at the Gallowborne around me.

"Forward," I ordered.

We went through. Moving into Arcadia was a hard feeling to describe. It wasn't a pressure, not exactly. It was like being stripped away of a second skin you didn't know you had, leaving you feeling oddly naked even when wearing full plate like I was. I'd ridden ahead of my retinue so I had a moment to get my bearings before they caught up to me, breathing in the scene. It was night here too, but nothing alike. The fields south of Denier were cabbage and radish, mostly, while here it was long grass as far as the eye could see. A lazy breeze had the fields shivering while in the sky above us a full moon hung. I would have known we were in Summer even if I were blind, just from the irrational hatred I could feel welling up inside of me. The power I'd gained in Skade did not like being here at all, and the hatred sharpened when I glanced up at the moon. *Really?* I thought. *The moon?* My title was Duchess of Moonless Nights, so I saw the logic in it,

but come on. *I've fought some pretty absurd things since I became a villain, but I draw the line at the godsdamned moon.*

I spurred Zombie the Second ahead as the Gallowborne came through behind me, immediately spreading out in formation and following behind me. In the distance, a few miles ahead, I could see tall and pale towers reaching for the sky. I frowned as I looked: the power I felt from that place was a mere shard of what Skade had felt like, so this was unlikely to be the seat of the Summer Court. But it was likely there'd be fae there, and the faint presence of the exit gate I could feel in the distance was beyond it. *Far* behind it. Shit. I'd had strong suspicions I'd have to fight my way through the third Arcadia voyage, but an expedition into the heart of Summer was beyond my worst expectations. Fighting the Summer Court in their own territory was not a recipe for success. *But what choice do I have?* We'd have to move quickly, before Summer could muster its entire army and strike at us. Force march directly to our way out, ignoring the fae as much as possible – getting drawn into a campaign out here would be consigning the thirty thousand soldiers I'd managed to assemble to the grave. It wasn't long before the entirety of the Gallowborne were behind me, and the moment the first of Nauk's legionaries set foot into Arcadia I began moving forward.

I wished Hakram was at my side, but I'd had to leave him back in Creation to make sure no idiocy would unfold between the 'allies' while my back was turned. The great tragedy of Adjutant was that I could only have one of him.

"Ma'am, are you certain we shouldn't wait for reinforcements?" Tribune Farrier asked quietly from my side.

"I need to be sure there's no army waiting to ambush us," I replied. "If we have to give battle when most our forces are stuck on the other side of that portal, I have no words for how fucked we are."

The dark-haired man nodded obediently, though he did not seem convinced. Since I was astride a horse I was the only one whose head was above the grass, and I allowed myself to luxuriate in the feeling of being the tallest person around for once as we moved towards the towers. My retinue moved warily in a square formation I was near the middle of, the greenery making the lines wobbly: this was not land made for marching. I could see no trace of any roads, and to my mixed relief and dismay no road conveniently appeared after I had that thought. When nearing a mile away from the gate, I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth. No sign of anyone, but the grasslands made it hard to gauge that accurately. There could be ten thousand fae crouched down somewhere and none of us would notice until we stumbled over them. My instincts screamed trap, though in all fairness they almost always did. That healthy level of paranoia had kept me

alive through a few years of being mortal enemies with Akua Sahelian, though, so I wasn't inclined to dismiss it out of hand.

"It's quiet," one of the soldiers behind me said.

"If any of you finishes that thought, I'm feeding them to Nauk," I said sharply.

I reined in Zombie and the entire formation slowed as I leant down to hide my profile, waiting for the hammer to fall. Nothing, huh? Nice try, but I wasn't falling for that again. I waited for another thirty heartbeats and sweet, sweet vindication came in the form of a volley of arrows taking flight from our left. A trickle of power touched my eyes and my sight sharpened, gauging the number of shafts. A hundred, maybe? Not many more than that. The Gallowborne reacted professionally, falling in the testudo formation mere moments before the projectiles finished their arc. If they'd been mere arrows, that would have mostly nixed any notion of inflicted casualties. Unfortunately, on the way down trails of fire bloomed behind the arrows and they hit the shields with streams of flame. I had no room to manoeuvre, stuck inside the formation as I was, and I wasn't going to risk an arrow-catch while fighting bloody fae. I threw myself off Zombie the Second moments before a pair of arrows hit his neck and flank, detonating with burst of red and yellow flame. My mount died instantly, and I swore filthily in Taghreb. Those *utter* bastards.

Did these pricks even understand how much a good warhorse cost? Some of us actually had to pay for things, not just play pretend with a fucking illusory economy. They'd damaged him enough I probably wouldn't even be able to raise him from the dead: I still needed mostly intact muscled to make a corpse move, necromancy or not. Only a handful of my retinue died to the first volley, though I saw that the arrows punched through steel shields and detonated afterwards to burn even when they couldn't kill. Rising to my feet, I unsheathed my sword and ripped my heater shield from Zombie's falling corpse. A second volley was in the sky before we'd recovered from the surprise of the first and I winced in anticipation – I could see what they'd meant to do. First wave damaged the shields, second hit the unprotected soldiers. This was going to hurt. I hid my surprise when I saw the arrows fall in a half circle around us instead, though I grasped what they were actually doing the moment I saw the tall grass going up in flames. Sorcery drove the flames to complete the encirclement rather than burn aimlessly faster than I could say *I really hate fighting mages*. So they wanted us to stay penned up and die.

"GALLOWBORNE," I called out. "SHIELD WALL AND FOLLOW ME."

I strode to the wall of flames ahead, shield up, and let the frozen river of power that was my third aspect come to the fore. I wasn't using it – I'd not yet grasped it well enough for that –

but just using the power was enough for my purposes. The fire stood three feet taller than me, but that hardly mattered: with a hiss I unleashed ice onto the flames, smothering them and carving a path ten men deep.

"Lion Devours Gazelle," a man's voice calmly stated ahead.

I charged through, the shield wall behind me, and saw silhouettes emerge from the grass even as a third volley flew at us. This one did not arc in the sky: it was shot straight forward, and though the impact was not as strong the bursting flames shot holes straight through my ranks. Pale blades like ivory were unsheathed in perfect silence as four dozen fae formed into two lines in front of me. The fae were tall and lovely, dark-haired and wearing a tabard marked with an oak over their silvery chain mail.

"Charge," I barked.

The longer before we closed in melee, the more they'd thin us out with arrows. The Gallowborne were but a step behind me as I ran, the sensation of over a hundred steel boots thumping the ground in unison sending a shiver down my spine. I felt hot breath against my neck, the Beast licking its chops hungrily. It was eager for blood, after the frustrations of the last month. Truth be told, so was I. The man ahead of me struck lightning-quick, fearless, but he was no Duke of Violent Squalls. Not even a deadwood soldier. I stepped around the blow and flicked my wrist, tearing through his neck between the helm and the mail. The face of the woman behind him was splashed with crimson but she did not flinch: she went for my neck without missing a beat. The flat of my blade touched hers, redirecting the blow, and my shield hit her in the stomach. She coughed blood and before she could react the pommel of my sword hit her in the eye – I felt the skull cave under it, but my boot stomped down on her throat and crushed it to be sure. In front of me, I saw nothing but grass. I turned and saw the same all along the line: my retinue's charge had been met for a moment, then the fae had disengaged without even attempting a proper melee, melting into the greenery.

"Oh *shit*," I realized.

The fourth volley killed at least twenty of the Gallowborne. They'd fallen out of formation when trying to force the fae into close range fighting. Ahead of us four dozen fae formed into two ranks, pale swords in hand. We'd been at this for perhaps a quarter hour and already almost a third of my retinue was dead or wounded.

"Shield wall," I ordered.

Lion Devours Gazelle, the unseen commander had called it. *Piece by piece they eat us*. The fae had perfectly grasped the weakness

of my force, compared to his. We had few crossbows – a mere three lines – and no good line of sight to use it. Range was theirs, and the moment my crossbowmen revealed themselves they'd be eating a volley. Trying to get up close would just result in the same thing every time: a quick and fruitless melee followed by the Summer fae disengaging just before the archers fired.

*Bleeding us one skirmish at a time, taking us on a merry chase until all that's left is a trail of corpses.* By the size of the last volley and the number of swordsmen who'd faced us, I'd guess they weren't more than a hundred. We'd had double their numbers in hardened veterans when the steel came out, led by a Named. Another quarter hour of this and our numbers would be even. Another quarter hour after that and they'd outnumber us. There was nothing I could do about it save attempting to charge them by myself, and they'd just spread out to shoot at me from every direction while a handful of swordsmen kept me pinned.

"They beat us," I said, the words leaving a sour taste in my mouth.

Farrier was to my side, cheek burned red and an arrow wound on his shoulder, and I saw surprise flicker on his face.

"Countess," he said, "we can still–"

"The longer we're at this, the more soldiers we lose," I cut through. "Call the retreat."

I hadn't noticed in the heat of the fight, but they'd been drawing us further out. Towards the towers in the distance. *A hundred is about the size for a heavy patrol. I'm not liking the odds there isn't an army waiting for us there, even if it's not a large one.* If we went any further and they had reinforcements coming, we were as good as dead. They'd fire at us while we retreated and we'd take losses from that, but if I got stubborn here I was risking a wipe-out. I'd lost fights before. Been outmanoeuvred by Juniper, been beaten by Black's superior skills or crushed by Captain's overwhelming might. But never before had I been so harshly outclassed when it came to tactics, and I did not like the feeling one bit. So this was Summer. The season of war, I'd heard it called. I'd seen nothing like the people I was facing now in Winter, and the thought had me uneasy. These weren't warriors they were soldiers and soldiers fine enough to be the match of the Legions. *We can't linger in Summer,* I thought. *We'll lose the entire army if we misstep even once.* Farrier had barked hard enough that my men were already retreating in a semblance of good order, and I saw some of them were picking up the corpses of their comrades.

"Leave the bodies behind," I ordered, tone bitter.

"Countess, you can't possibly mean that," a lieutenant said, tone aghast.

"We can't afford to be slowed down," I said.

I watched the silhouetted of the fae in the distance, their swordsmen already dispersing into the tall grass. Getting ready for another volley already.

"We'll be back for them," I said, clenching my fist.

There wasn't much I could do right now, but there was one thing left. I reached for the power of Winter inside me, grasped as much as I could and poured it into my sword until the metal frosted. I kept taking more and more, until I felt my blood go from cold to freezing. Any further than that and it would turn to thick red slurry inside my veins. Gritting my teeth, I swung the blade ahead of me. Ice sprouted into wall ten feet high along the arc of the swing, even as exhaustion flooded me. I'd used too much tonight already and now my armour felt like an anvil on my back.

"Hurry," I said, raising my voice. "It won't slow them down for long."

By the time the fae ceased pursuit, there were barely a hundred members of the Galloworne left.

There would be a reckoning for this.

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*PingleBerry*

Well. The Summer Court has officially joined the list of "to be fcked up"

*danh3107*

Hmm, man I dislike Fae. I thought I disliked the Winter Fae, but now I think I hate Summer more.

*HiThere*

Well, for myself this chapter has made me respect Summer. Previous encounters with summer didn't show much of their tactical side, but this encounter has convinced me there are proper soldiers among them and not just "have higher base power than Winter".

*Dabba*

Catherine's hipocracy is so mind-blowingly ridiculous. Im really starting to hate her

### *NerfContessa*

First, it's hypocrisy as in being a hypocrite, not being Hypocrath, ergo a sworn doctor.

And second: what in this specific case makes you say That?

### *Juliet*

Catherine's entire shtick so far is that she swings a bigger stick and abandons her scruples one step at a time.

She can bait hundreds of men like the Silver Spears into goblin fire, but hold a grudge for someone baiting her to charge into magical fire.

Even Hakram acknowledging he can't sleep with Torris like he used to because she's under his command now, while Cat slept with Kilian and excused it as Names getting to break rules.

Thief has already called her out on her hypocrisy, Catherine ends up proving her right – in a lot of ways, “you can't do against the empire” and then Cat proves her words were a lie, she might have needed a villain start, but if she had joined William like Thief suggested after branding his name...

### *Gunslinger*

Damn she got her arse handed to her. If she was expecting a fae army why not go in guns a blazing with goblin explosives and such. Also how is she going to get to the diabolist?

### *1shot4living*

Arcadia you say? A realm made of pure magic? Rumor has it goblin fire burns magic, but no one would be stupid enough to try that.... Right?

### *The Archdevil*

Goblin fire burns magic, but can fire really be that effective against the Summer court

### *1shot4living*

I'd really love to see. Break might shatter some fundamental concepts too.

### [intermediarywebserial](#)

When goblinfire burns fire? I reckon it'd do some damage.

### *nipi*

Goblin fire burns everything. Alas if eventually burns out.

*Letouriste*

Oh shiiiiiiiit. 0\_0

*naturalnuke*

"Fuck it."

\*lights match\*

[MarquisWhale](#)

That might not be such a good idea.

If the Arcadia is a realm made entirely from magic, than the moment people from Creation step into it, wouldn't it stop being Arcadia? So either the premise is wrong, or something else is missing.

My guess would be that when people cross into Arcadia, they are disassembled and assembled again into magic. It could explain the uneasy feeling one gets when crossing. It would also explain why faes can't be killed in Arcadia, but can in Creation. In Arcadia, their existence is magical, and so the magic is simply cast again, while in Creation, they are built from...well, something not magic, and therefore die.

You could also use it to explain the passage of time. If you were to assume time does not flow in Arcadia, and assume in some places of Arcadia, the entire conversion takes less time than in others, let's say a day, you could say the only reason it took someone two days through Arcadia to get to somewhere is because it took one day in Creation to convert his body, no time for him to move through Arcadia, and then one day again for him to convert back.

Of course, since you are practically dead the moment conversion starts and only begin to live again when it's fully done, it would seem to you like you just passed through the gate. And seeing as time does not flow in Arcadia, you could spend what seems to be a year there, and still emerge two days after your crossing in Creation.

Of course, if one had bad luck to enter and exit in two places where it takes a year to convert, he could be but a few seconds in Arcadia and it wouldn't matter.

So if they really were all made out of magic, either goblinfire would eat all of them, or it simply wouldn't work against magic, since it has been reassembled. Otherwise you get a paradox bomb, a magic bomb that eats magic.

*1shot4living*



A magic bomb that eats magic sounds like the best thing since a Prince got headshot because he wasn't wearing his helmet, but I do agree with your assessment of Arcadia converting everything that passes through it into magic. Magic, the base code of the universe. This one at least.

*Cpt. Obvious*

A small correction. Fey that are simply "killed" in Creation apparently will still resurrect in Arcadia the next time their court is reset. This was explained in one of the extra chapters or in a Villainous interlude. Akua Sahelian mentioned it in a conversation with a captive fey. Her "solution" was to harness the energy making up the Fey's life and use it to power a ritual, and that way there would be nothing left to revive or reincarnate. We also learned that the magic the Fey consists of is identical to the magic Arcadia itself consists of.

*Darkening*

Guerrilla tactics, huh. Would've expected that more from winter than summer.

*esryok*

I feel like when Winter fought their level of coordination was just a touch higher than "everyone is doing their own thing, but all at the same time." Versus this skirmish, wherein Summer is very deliberate and working in a Juniper-esque "always select the correct tactic" manner.

*stevenneiman*

Winter doesn't fight on the battlefield, not well at least. Their fighting style is about deceiving their enemies and finding ways to weaken them before the battle starts. If they end up in a fair fight against Summer they die alone. Summer, on the other hand, is the season of open war. They might be arrogant when dealing with forces they can handle, but they also know exactly how to use tactics to deadly effect.

*HandyCapped*

Skirmishing with ranged and mobility superiorities, not guerrilla tactics. Right up their alley.

[benthelynx](#)

This doesn't feel like the start of a story that goes well....

*Hardric62*

Nah, it's a story about winning against overwhelming odds despite everything going against you. The better ones.

### Barthumphries

And to think, if everyone had stopped and chatted, they could have made friends and joined up to defeat Diabolist.

### *Hardric62*

Guys, you just pissed off one of the most prominent adepts of the Queen of Escalation (rumors she's an actual avatar of the Queen are still ongoing). This gazelle will come back, and she will kill this lion, then his entire pride just to make the point. At least by taking the point she avoided losses in one of the other formations here. I'm sure it would have led to another round of complains. (Also, hurray for catching up).

### *Shequi*

"Queen of Escalation" might not be an actual name, but it's a damn fine & fitting title.

### *Elbrasch*

She might have to fight for that title with Taylor motherfucking Eyegourger.

### *Shoddi*

No, Taylor was Queen Administrator. Lung, on the other hand, was King of Escalation. But I digress...

### *stevenneiman*

Typo thread:

"if I wanted to be babbled [incomprehensively->incomprehensibly] at I could just buy people drinks" "Comprehensive" means complete and thorough, while "comprehensible" means possible to understand  
"Duchess Kegan insisted on bringing [he->her] own carts"  
"If we have to give battle when most {of} our forces are stuck"  
"I'd not [ye->yet] grasped it well enough for that"  
"These weren't warriors{,} they were soldiers"

### *AVR*

More typos

detonating with burst  
detonating with bursts

the silhouetted of the fae  
the silhouettes of the fae

into wall ten feet  
into a wall ten feet

of the Galloworne left.  
of the Gallowborne left.

[BarthHumphries](#)

> of the Galloworne left.

Still hasn't been fixed.

*Nocebo*

"I've fought some pretty absurd things since I became a villain, but I draw the line at the godsdamned moon." Of course you don't fight the moon, you steal it! We only need to get a big enough purse for Thief!

*Ishot4living*

Bag of holding for the win!

*mavant*

I think some more experimentation with portals is warranted. Treat this as a defeat, completing a pattern of three in the portal usage, then start over and hopefully find a better path. If there's a way to open a portal in the river, perhaps it would open into a river in Arcadia? That could save a lot of time.

*George*

Masego seems to already know a lot; they probably just aren't that controllable without being further aligned with the far (such as by growing into her aspect)

*George*

With the fae, rather.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*Victor*

How come there was an update today, only saw it cause I was gonna re read another chapter, got no notification lol. Anyways it makes sense that Summer would fuck over Cat, she needs to kill them in order to get her heart back anyways so this just makes it easier I guess

[reveen](#)

That's a very Punk Who Just Got Clowned On In a Schoolyard Fight  
By the Kid Who Does Karate thing to say, honestly.

Also, I know she's basically a villain at this point but I wish she wouldn't do the acting genuinely offended that your enemies are attacking you thing. That's just obnoxious. And it's probably tripping up the universes Villain flags.

### *Imagination*

Sounds more like a Callowan thing, what with the whole "steal an apple from a Callowan farmer and his great-grandson will sock yours in the eye and take back three".

And she's not offended that they're *attacking her* she's offended that they just killed over half (more than a hundred) of her personal guard. The men and women she trained personally, the ones she trusts to guard her back, the soldiers she spends the most time with out of all the Fifteenth.

And they did it with such contemptuous ease that they forced The Squire and her forces to retreat without contest and without even retrieving their bodies.

This is the first and only time that Cat has ever lost completely and utterly. She achieved none of her goals, lost a significant number of troops she personally cared about, was forced to flee the field, inflicted **no** meaningful cost to the enemy, and by ceding the initiative and falling back like she has she's given Summer the time to marshal and respond.

No positive outcomes, lots of negative consequences. The first and only time in this entire series that the protagonist has faced a situation which is 100% a loss in almost every conceivable way.

The entire plan to strike Summer and Diabolist has just come to a screeching halt, and that has to *burn*.

### [edrey](#)

some questions, just curious, there is a arcadia for each continent?, there should more nations there arcadia looks like a reflection of the other side, and messing with patterns in arcadia can change creation? can cat punch the moon? that would be great

*arancahtar*

Only one way to find out.

*arancahtar*


I probably missed this, but did the Gallowborne start taking regular legionaries? There were only a hundred deserters when it was formed, so their numbers have definitely increased.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Guys/Gals, you're missing something here:  
We ALREADY KNOW that Cat found a way to make Summer pay for this. Or do you think Princess Sulia left off her face-to-face versus Diabolist, after Diabolist had just made one Prince of Summer kill another, because Squire got her ass kicked outside a minor Summer border outpost?

Princess Sulia wouldn't have called for a full-scale withdrawal back into Summer unless some very un-fun (for Summer) shit was going down in there.

ArkCthuul

I agree Shawn.  
Thqts.what makes me.worry, given Cats... still AT escalation one has to wonder what she did to cause.that kind of reaction...  
Stell.the moon? Cause an eclipse? Claim the title or Summer Lady?  


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## Chapter 25: Intent

*"Trust the Heavens but tie your horse."*  
– Callowan proverb

It was past dawn when the last soldier crossed the gate.

As soon as Robber stepped foot in Arcadia I had him prepare his cohort for scouting, but held off on sending him until Marshal Ranker's legion was through. A few quiet sentences with her and moments later a thousand goblins melted into the countryside, with warnings about fae patrols and the kind of tactics they'd deployed so far. I had a pavilion mounted for me half a mile away from the gate, surrounded by Nauk's two thousand, and settled on a folding chair while my few mages tended to the injuries of the surviving members of my retinue. I could have gone to sleep, but I still was too angry to rest and unwilling to miss anything. Instead I sat chewing on my mistake with a wineskin in hand as the reports began filtering in. There was not a soul within a mile of the gate, the scouts said. Neither was there any sign of the bodies I'd left behind, and even the places I'd skirmished at

were now pristine: no sign of fire or fighting. Half a bell later one of Ranker's officers reported her line had found a road to the west that looked like it was leading to the towers in the distance.

When the sun finally rose over the horizon, it found me still in the pavilion. There'd been one last development, not too long ago: Robber's cohort had caught a fae close to the road, when confirming it led to the towers. Said towers, the report also elaborated, were actually a fortress. One whose walls were now manned. They knew we were coming. I sent word to the Marshal and the Duchess to join me the moment the hamstrung fairy was brought into camp, Hakram hovering behind me. He felt guilty about not having been with me when I'd run into trouble, as if I hadn't been the one to order him to say in Creation to supervise.

"Would have made no difference if you were there," I said.

"You don't know that," he gravelled.

"It... this wasn't about power, Hakram," I said. "I alone would have been able to cut down a third of them, if they'd fought the way I wanted them to. The Gallowborne would have wiped them out if it had been a melee. They've killed harder things than lesser fae. We fought them badly – I fought them badly, and I lost."

"You did as well as you could," he said.

"They're not invincible," I told him, irritated at the attempt at comfort. "They picked their ground, their time and the lay of the engagement. We just need to start thinking of them as a proper army instead of just a troupe of fairies, because they're sure as Hells *fighting* like one."

"Well said," Duchess Kegan stated, her approval a tad condescending.

The ruler of the Deoraithe was not growing on me, it had to be said. I wanted to like her, I really did, but she was like the human version of a stone in your boot. Ranker brushed past her rudely, to the highborn's irritation, and I was careful not to show amusement. I'd gotten this far by pretending to be above the bickering, taking sides would be surrendering what little advantage I had.

"Your boy caught one of them, then," the Marshal said, gingerly climbing atop a folding chair and helping herself to my wine.

She sniffed at the nozzle, hairless brow rising.

"Vale summer wine? Fancy."

She drank anyway, not that it would do much for her. Goblins were better at processing liquor and poison than either orcs or humans.

"Robber's good at finding things," I said, letting my voice carry enough that said Special Tribune would hear it from behind the pavilion flap where he was currently lurking.

"Stabbing them too," my murderous minion contributed with a grin as two other legionaries from his cohort dragged a fae heavily bruised and missing an arm.

Male, this one. More lightly armoured than the ones I'd run into, but his leather armour bore the same symbol I'd seen on the tabard of the patrol: a green oak. His remaining hand and feet were bound tightly, leaving him unable to do anything but kneel at an uncomfortable angle.

"I won't need you for the interrogation," I told Robber.

The goblin pouted, which on his face looked positively horrifying. Like a fish trying the same, but with needle-like teeth peeking through.

"Can I watch at least?" he wheedled.

"Scram," I said, and he read the mood correctly.

He swaggered away without pushing it, arms around the shoulders of his two cohorts, and I refrained from sighing at the sight. There were witnesses. The fae was gagged, so I rose to my feet to force down the cloth.

"Whose lands are we in?" I asked.

The soldier spat on my boot.

"Not the answer I was looking for," I said.

"Call back the boy," Ranker shrugged. "And send for knives."

"Torture will take time," the Duchess frowned.

"Better to move delayed than move blind," the Marshal said.

Hakram cleared his throat, drawing their attention. I glanced at him.

"You forget you have a Named leading you," the orc said.

Ah. Well, I'd never used it on fae before but considering how they were bound to stories it might actually work better than on mortals.

**"Answer my questions,"** I Spoke.

He twitched, fighting against the order, but eventually stilled.

"Whose lands are we in?" I repeated.

"The Count of Olden Oak," the fae said.

"How many soldiers do you have?" Duchess Kegan asked.

The fae smiled sardonically and said nothing. Ah, the wording. I asked him the question as Ranker sent the tan woman a mocking look.

"Two thousand," he said through gritted teeth.

"Any other nobles here?" I asked.

"The Baron of Dawning Day."

I frowned. That was two titled fae, which struck me as too many for the middle of nowhere. Weren't most of the nobles out with the army of Summer?

"Ask him where in Arcadia we are," Ranker said, thoughts going along the same line.

"The border marches," the fae replied when I did.

The two older women exchanged looks.

"If we march a sennight to the north, what will we find?" I asked.

That was, after all, about where I felt I'd be able to make a gate out. *Let it not be the city of Summer, let it not be –*

"The lands of the Princess of High Noon."

I needed to start being more careful about what I wished for, I decided. I glanced at the other commanders of the army, silently asking if they had any other questions. Neither did. I shot Hakram a look, and without any need for words he stepped forward and casually snapped the prisoner's neck.

"Be a dear and drag that outside, would you?" I said.

He snorted in amusement, but obeyed.

"So we need to march deeper into Summer," Ranker said, sharp eyes on me.

"And quickly," I grunted. "They'll consider this an invasion, there's a good chance they'll recall their armies from Creation to drive us out."



"Then the fortress had to be taken," Duchess Kegan said. "We can't leave two thousand soldiers at our back, not with the amount of supplies we carry."

"Agreed," I said. "Reports said it was a castle, curtain walls at least forty feet high. Legion standard?"

The last two words were spoken looking at the Marshal, who nodded pensively.

"Mages around the siege weapons, to ward from their magics," she added. "Securing replacements out here would be difficult."

"We've no notion of how long it would take to break down fae walls with mortal trebuchets," Duchess Kegan said disapprovingly.

"I understand time is an issue, Duchess," I said impatiently, "but I'm the only one here who's tangled with them. We rush those walls and we'll lose thousands, likely to no gain."

"If you use legionaries, yes," she said. "The Watch will take the walls and open the gates. Be ready to invest the fortress and deal with the nobles."

I raised an eyebrow.

"You didn't bring any ladders," I pointed out. "Or any siege fixtures at all, for that matter."

She smiled thinly.

"There will be no need for them," she said.

I glanced at Ranker, who chuckled.

"At worst there's fewer Deoraithe in existence," she said, tone making it clear she believed this to be no great loss.

I eventually nodded. If nothing else, I'd get to have a look at why so much fuss was always made about the Watch.

"We march, then," I said.

—

Nauk's two thousand took point. There screens of goblins to the side in case any surprises had been laid out for us, but our advance went unchallenged until we came in sight of the fortress. It was an impressive piece of work, compared to a mortal castle, but compared to the likes of Skade it was rather mundane. Pale walls encircled four towers, whose only hint of sorcery was the way they were intertwined in a way that evoked roots. Glittering soldiers in the same silvery chain mail and tabard as the patrol stood atop the rampart, armed with bows and swords. There weren't

two thousand up there, by my estimation – maybe half that – which meant they'd kept reserves. The large oaken gate opened when Nauk's legionaries ceased marching well out of bow range, a single mounted man riding out even as I frowned. Behind me the allied army spread, the Deoraithe host right behind while the two legions took the wings. I didn't even need to focus to feel the power wafting from the rider, or notice it wasn't in the league of the Winter counts I'd encountered. The baron the prisoner had mentioned? Hakram at my side, we watched the fae caracole atop his white steed and raise his lance in a mocking salute.

"You have entered the lands of Summer Eternal, invaders," he called out. "Only death awaits you here."

I heard someone striding towards me, Nauk's legionaries parting for them. I wouldn't be taking the Gallowborne with me today, not after the losses they'd incurred. Farrier had protested but his own shoulder was only held together by mage healing, and if it got broken again within a fortnight he'd be crippled for life.

"A champion," Duchess Kegan said, occupying the side of me Adjutant didn't. "How quaint."

I'd read enough about Deoraithe to know what they thought about this kind of posturing in matters of war. I didn't answer, waiting for the armies to reach their assigned positions as the fae continued yelling.

"Are all of you cowards?" the rider called out. "Will not a single of you meet this Baron of Dawning Day on the field to redeem your honour?"

"He's in crossbow range," Adjutant said. "Shall we give him a princely answer?"

I chewed over that.

"I don't trust our shots to put him down," I finally said.

"I have the finest bowmen in Calernia under my command," the Duchess said.

"Better to kill him now, so he's not on the walls to make trouble for your people," I said. "Hakram. Can you do it?"

The orc looked at the baron for a long moment.

"Shouldn't be too much trouble," he said.

"Then shut the bastard up," I ordered.

He laughed, clapping my shoulder before striding away. I felt the Duchess' gaze on me.

"A princely answer," she repeated. "Is is true, then. You had the Exiled Prince shot instead of duelling him."

"If I personally killed everyone in my way I'd never have time for anything else," I lightly replied.

She let out a sound that could be construed as amused.

"Perhaps there is some of the blood in you," she conceded.

That would have been slightly more touching if she hadn't just spent the better part of a month being a pain in my arse. If she wanted to rope me in using my Deoraithe heritage she was barking up the wrong tree, regardless. I knew nothing about my parents and to be frank I wasn't particularly curious. Whoever they'd been, they had nothing to do with the person I was now. Still, the woman did have twenty thousand soldiers under her command and they wouldn't be going anywhere after the scuffle against Akua was over. Needlessly antagonizing her would be foolish.

"All I've ever known of Daoine was through books," I said. "Oh, and one of your relatives that put an arrow in me that one time."

"You spared her," the Duchess said. "That did not go unnoticed."

Truth be told that had more to do with Black's orders than any notion of mine, but I saw no need to tell her that. That aside, wonder of wonders: for once my reputation for leaving a trail of corpses in my wake was coming in useful. People were starting to assume that whenever I didn't kill someone I did it on purpose.

"She's a talented archer," I said. "An inch to the side and it would have cleaved my spine. It'd be a shame to waste that kind of talent."

"High praise," Kegan said. "Perhaps she will live up to it today."

I raised an eyebrow.

"She's here?"

"She finished her oaths last year," the Duchess said. "The entire Watch was mobilized to put down the madwoman in the south. An unexpected turn of events, that Daoine would share an enemy with you, but not entirely unwelcome."

Well now, that was positively friendly. I'd have to be a special kind of idiot for that sudden thawing of tone not to worry me. Especially since it was happening the first time we were having a conversation out of Marshal Ranker's earshot, surrounded only by soldiers known to be loyal to me. The picture that was painting was very, very dangerous. I clenched my fingers and unclenched them. I could try to probe her intentions and beat around the

bush, but that kind of game wasn't my specialty. I could cope with it in small doses, but I wasn't betting on getting the upper hand against a woman who'd ruled a duchy for several decades. Fuck it. It was sad to admit, but I had more burnt city incidents that diplomatic victories under my belt.

"You're talking a lot more sweetly than usual today," I bluntly said.

"There will be an after the war," Duchess Kegan said. "It is not too early to begin considering it."

"In my experience, people who talk that vague are tiptoeing about treason," I noted.

Her face showed no reaction. Why was everyone trying to negotiate with me so good at keeping their thoughts hidden?

"Your actions of late might be considered that," the Duchess said. "Dissolving the Ruling Council. Naming a former rebel Governess-General of Callow. Replacing every Praesi governor with a Callowan, save for one."

Denier, that. The man under Ranker's thumb had never given me an excuse so I'd had to settle for waiting out his term. I could see what she was hinting at, and I needed to shut down that avenue right now if I didn't want a third godsdamned civil war in a row to erupt the moment Diabolist's head ended up on a pike.

"Callow will stay under the Tower," I frankly replied. "That isn't up for debate. The nature of that relationship, however, will be renegotiated. I have backing in this."

The older woman's eyes narrowed to slits.

"Does the Carrion Lord mean to depose the Empress?" she asked, finally discarding the pretences.

"No," I replied, about as sure of this as I could be with someone like my teacher.

"Interesting days ahead," the Duchess finally said.

"Procer is coming," I said. "Not this year, I don't think, but within the decade."

"Offers were made, during the rebellion," Kegan acknowledged.

I'd always suspected, to be honest, but it was still an upset to have that suspicion confirmed. While I'd been fighting a war with swords against the Lone Swordsman, there'd been another war entirely going on behind the scenes. I was only now beginning to grasp the form of it, and what I learned was chilling.

"Let me guess," I said. "Independence and an alliance?"

"As well as a princess for my grandson, when they come of age," she replied.

"But you didn't bite," I said.

"Grudges incurred after the Third Crusade have yet to be settled," the Duchess said, tone harsh.

I frowned. The Deoraithe held on to slights like a drowning man to driftwood, but that still felt like too weak a reason. It wasn't like Praes hadn't taken regular runs at the Wall for over a thousand years. Hells, Dread Empress Triumphant had infamously crucified a King of Daoine for not bowing low enough.

"And?" I probed.

She hesitated, then continued.

"The Watch has guarded the Wall for a long time, Duchess Foundling, but that is not what it is *meant* for," she replied. "The border being quiet allows us to tend to an older duty."

There was fervour in her voice, by the time she finished speaking. *The Deoraithe hate the elves*. That was no great mystery. Perhaps not common knowledge, but any book about Daoine's history made a point of mentioning it – the Deoraithe had once lived in what was now the Golden Bloom before being driven out of it. Warlock had once theorized in front of me that the Watch was meant to imitate the strange abilities elves gained as they grew old, gaining through sorcery what the others were born to. Was that what she meant? That without the orcs raiding west Daoine could turn its attention to the elves?

"A conversation to finish at another time," Kegan said. "The duel you ordered is coming."

The entire conversation hadn't taken long, but in that span Hakram had made his way through Nauk's legionaries. My Adjutant had always been tall even for an orc, and I was almost certain he'd grown taller since coming into his Name. Not as broad-shouldered as Nauk or stout as Juniper, but he carried himself with a *presence* nowadays that had an almost physical weight to it. He'd grown into his power and it showed. Hakram no longer used the sword and shield that had been his lot as a legionary: first he'd traded the sword for an axe, then the shield for another axe in the wake of our fights with the fae. He'd told me that if we were going to keep fighting creatures that could cut through steel like parchment he'd rather carry a second blade than dead weight. The weapon the orc took in hand as he strode onto the field was more a long and large hatchet than a battle axe in a conventional sense, goblin steel forged into a

haft and head he still twirled like it weighed nothing. The Baron of Dawning Day ceased his strutting atop a horse when a challenger appeared, reining in his horse and guiding it to face Adjutant.

The legionaries in the first ranks began stomping their feet and it spread like fire among the Fifteenth, goblins and orcs and men of every stripe. The ground shook under two thousand steel-shod boots, and to that harsh meter voices rose to match.

"Dead the hand and dead the man,  
Sharp the blade and sharp the fang  
For no matter how tall they stand  
When iron rests we see them hang."

Hakram's stride went unbroken as he called out to the fae, his words drowned out by the voices and beat as to the sides of the host the other Legions of Terror joined their boots to the song. Ten thousand souls stomping as my legionaries sang their eerie anthem. The Baron of Dawning Day's lance descended and without any further taunts he charged.

"Lord or priest or knight in pale  
On burning hill or dawning vale  
The scale settles it all the same:  
Red and broken lies the name."

Adjutant did not move, calmly awaiting the charge. My heartbeat quickened at the sight, but I trusted in him. Given his size and strength, the natural comparison among the Calamities for my right hand was Captain. I'd fought them both, though, and knew that was a mistake. Sabah was strength and swiftness unrelenting, more hurricane than woman when moved to violence. Hakram... Hakram fought like Black. Even more than I did. Patient and measured and ruthlessly brutal in motion. The lance shone brightly under the sun, but still the orc did not move. Only when the mass of muscle and steel was teen strides away from him did his hand whip out: the axe spun, blade sinking through steel plate between the eyes of the Baron's charger.

"Dead the hand and dead the man,  
Sharp the blade and sharp the fang  
For no matter how tall they stand  
When iron rests we see them hang."

The white horse died and momentum carried it in a messy slide across the grass as the Baron deftly leapt off it and landed like a cat on the ground. Adjutant moved three steps to the side, taking his second axe in hand as the dead horse tumbled just past him. Casting his lance aside, the Baron of Dawning Day unsheathed a sword bright as the morning he was titled after. The orc awaited him patiently, unmoved by the sight. In the blink of an eye the fae was on him, sword leaving trails of light behind

every swing as he furiously tried to take his opponent's life. Calmly giving ground, Hakram avoided a cleave turned into a thrust a little too shallowly: the green skin of his cheek parted under fae steel, leaving a blackened mark like it had been burnt. The Baron avoided the haft of the axe with mocking ease, but it was a distraction: Adjutant's fist caught him in the chin. Bone broke, for an orc's strike was no small thing and this orc had strength beyond mortal bounds. Spitting teeth, the fae snarled furiously and harsh light bloomed in front of him. I sucked in a breath: even from where I stood I could feel the heat of it, and so close it would have been impossible for Hakram to dodge it.

"Queen or king or Heaven's get  
Never unpaid goes their debt  
Learn bitter with the last breath  
The left hand gives only death."

When the light died out, Adjutant's smoking frame towered three feet back from where'd he'd been. He was steaming like cooked meat but unharmed. I could still feel the wisps of his Name on him, the remnants of the aspect he'd called on: Stand. He'd withstood the strike of a demon using it, once. Fae sorcery was lesser in comparison. I saw his axe had been turned to blackened scraps by the Baron's power, though, and felt a sharp surge of fear. The sound of his laughter dispersed it. He'd been driven back to the horse's side by the impact, and deftly he claimed back the axe he'd left in the mount's head. He didn't close the distance again, though, which I found strange. Though visibly shaken by the way his sorcery had failed to quell his opponent, the Baron immediately returned on the offensive. Light flared around the blade, and only then did I understand Adjutant's intent. The orc's legs lowered, the muscles of his arm flexed and his skeletal hand dug into the horse's flesh: with a loud grunt, he seized the entire corpse like a mace and smashed it into the charging fae. The Baron hastily tried to cut through the flesh, but only succeeded in parting the belly: the mass still ploughed him downwards like a fragile doll. The carcass bubbled and burst in a shower of gore as the fae emerged, panting, but there was no recovering from his misstep. The crescent blade of the axe caught him in the neck, cleaving to the spine. The orc booted his stomach to wrench the steel out, leaving him twitching in the gore, then calmly cleaved straight into his skull.

"Dead the hand and dead the man,  
Sharp the blade and sharp the fang  
For no matter how tall they stand  
When iron rests we see them hang."

Dead. And now, just now, when the sight of it was still fresh in the eyes of the fae above? That was the moment to strike. Even as thousands of feet thundered in approval and Hakram's blood-red axe rose to the sky, I drew Duchess Kegan's attention.

"Now," I said. "Send them in now."

The older woman nodded slowly, still troubled by what she'd just seen, and drew a red scarf from a pouch on her side before holding it up. Without a sound, two thousand men and women of the Watch broke into a perfect run. Like the song had said, there were scales to settle.

And like the song had said, Summer would lie red and broken for it.

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[\*mgmtheo\*](#)

The song is perfect, and I'm very excited to see Daoine's contribution to Cat's rise to power.

[\*wirelessgrapes\*](#)

Hot damn, Hakram's a fucking \*orc\*

*samshadar*

Considering he is the first orc to bear a name in a thousand years, he is \*the fucking orc\* 😊

*pyrohawk21*

Have I yet mentioned that I LOVE this story?

Because seriously, I really, REALLY do. I can not wait for it to continue. In fact, I'm probably going to be really sad when you've finally written the last book of Catherine's story.

*jor*

HAKRAAAAAAAAAAMMMMMMMMM!!!!!!!!!!!!

*Naeddyr*

What a baronous reply.

*Josh*

I've been catching up, really interesting story. I'm curious about why we haven't seen Killian yet. I hope Cat hasn't made an oversight that will bite her in the ass.

*Letouriste*



Killian is with the fifteen, marching toward liesse among the others

*Josh*

Ah, I must have missed that. Convenient though, do we know which side of the fey her ancestry comes from? Being her consort might be significant somehow.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

The Courts seem to rotate identities with the seasons, like how the northern and southern hemispheres change seasons yet always remain opposed. The question might not be winter or summer, but... I dunno, A or B? North and South sound a little silly.

*Letouriste*

She is red haired so summer for sure;)

*Cpt. Obvious*

As her hair tend to look like fire when she overextend Summer is probably correct, but it could also be Autumn. Lots of red in the leaves in the autumn.

*danh3107*

Perfect, PERFECT

I'm not sure if you imagined the tune and rhythm when you wrote that song, but I could /feel/ it in my bones.

*Spinner335*

Does anyone else think the song helped Harky win because songs are basically stories and they were singing about how the deadhand will see his enemies dead and with how connected the fae are to stories I feel it helped.

*Matthew*

That would be interesting if they can tell their own stories in Arcadia.

If they can get the Summer story to be.. "Summer diverts the Winter armies of abomination to turn on their compatriot, the diabolist, and thus stops the invasion," that's a win for Cat.

*amc*

this ^

*stevenneiman*

They already at least hijacked a story to get the Duke of Violent Squalls thing to work out, so I wouldn't be surprised if they can mess with the story of Summer, especially give the way they just drowned out their old story about defeating Evil invaders with one about Deadhand being badass.

*Metalshop*

It might have been helpful even in Creation. Adjutant is a new name, which seems like it means that Hakram's actions and circumstances will shape how it interacts with the world and Fate. Given that battle poems have already been established as a quasi-lost orcish art, it makes sense that the first Orcish Name in centuries would benefit from an army doing it for him.

[nineran](#)

Plus, he started this trend while reciting poetry the last time we saw him demolish an enemy in single combat (Extra Chapter > Conspiracy II). It was only about 80 legionnaires who saw him, but stories grow. He's building his story from the ashes of who the orcs were.

I also think that Sabah's story ... makes it clear that there is no more scope for the Warlord name. She ate it, for lack of a better word.

*Shequi*

It strikes me that pretty much every comment that Cat makes about Megan is something that most other people would say about her.

*Shequi*

Kegan, rather. Damn auto-correct.

*Sinjako*

I'm checking this site waaay too often.

*nick012000*

So, taking a bit from Bleach, are we, ErraticErrata?

Ceros never kill anyone, after all. They just leave them a little scuffed and smoking. 😊

*Letouriste*

Nothing to do with bleach:/

Btw, who is ceros? A last arc character? I stopped reading at some point in the arc, i lost interest

*nick012000*

Ceros are the energy blasts that Hollows use in Bleach, which are very similar to the energy blast that the Summer Fae uses in this chapter.

*Letouriste*

Thanks, I had forgotten it

AVR

Typos

say in Creation  
stay in Creation

better a processing  
better at processing

city incidents that  
city incidents than

There screens of goblins  
(Either) There were screens of goblins  
(Or) Three screens of goblins

teen strides  
ten strides

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*nobodi12*

Another song! Unfortunately not on the same level of the:

"The knights will get the glory  
The king will keep his throne  
We won't be in the story  
Our names will not be known

So pick up your sword, boy  
Here they come again  
And down here in the mud,  
It's us who holds the line."  
"

The dead hand song reminds me of Kipling's "But Iron, cold Iron is the master of them all".  
It is good to have songs but you can improve.

*vietnamabc*

Hmm so what is the differences between fae and elves? I imagine Daoine send the Watch to fight fae to train them before fighting elves.

*Letouriste*

fae lives in Arcadia and are made of magic or something like that.they gain power by stories,adding artificially weight to their being.

Elves are creatures of Creation and gain power by aging.they are also cowards and racists.the fae don't make a distinction between a rock,a tree and a sentient being.they accept only Named.

*Letouriste*

I mean the elves of golden bloom,not the others^^  
I can be wrong.we don't know much on them

*Darkening*

WB mentioned that the other elves \*aren't\* racists, and these elves broke off because they were disgusted by the interbreeding and the like.

*Nastybarsteward*

I'm starting to wander if Hakram is to become \*Warlord\*...

*Gunslinger*

Transitioning into Warlord would indeed be fucking epic. But somehow I feel like Warlord would not be the name of someone who serves another. And I don't see Hakram ever leaving Cat,

*stevenneiman*

Honestly, Adjutant doesn't sound like a transitional Name to me. In some ways, he seems to have more raw power than Cat, and it doesn't seem like he's building up to anything the way Cat is. Heck, he had mundane versions of most of his Name powers from the moment he joined Cat.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

What makes you think Hakram would be a good Warlord anyway? His personality and his Role are both massively unsuited to be Warlord, and I'm pretty sure he wouldn't want to have that Name anyway. It wouldn't advance any of his goals or agendas, so what's the point? Besides being an excuse for disgusting fanboy (or girl) squeeing and gushing.

*Nastybarsteward*

As all of Cat's Named so far are totally different Names (although some filling similar roles) than Black's retinue, with Adjutant being a completely new Name altogether, maybe I should just stop guessing. 🤔

*Cpt. Obvious*

Some of the names are transitional, such as Squire which usually transitions into a Knightley name, or Apprentice that can transition into Warlock. So we know that two of the five can transition into the Names of Calamities. I also think that Archer is a Name that can transition into Ranger, but that would require that Hye is killed or that she somehow abandons the name first. And good luck with the first option.

*M*

Hmm. Hakram getting The Black Knight? I don't see why that wouldn't be possible.

*Gunslinger*

I now get (maybe) why Diabolist thanked Cat when the summer fae withdrew. That must have been about the time Cat invaded.

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Thought that was obvious...

*Dianna*

So has anyone wondered what kind of Names we would have in our world?

Don't know why, but the one we came up with was Cashier. Their Aspects: Smile, the ability to smile through anything. Grind, the ability to do insane amounts of work no matter their physical state is not catatonic. Survive, they can come out unscathed from the most severe physical and mental abuse.

Truly, the Cashier is a Hero who fights long and hard to keep the world together.

*Metalshop*

Freaking. Amazing.

*arancaytar*

I see Cat is not the only one who likes to use mounts as blunt weapons.

*Letouriste*

Btw, how many gallowborne she had before the skirmish? 150? 200?

### [erraticerrata](#)

A full cohort, which means two hundred men. She effectively lost over half her personal guard in that first skirmish, if you include the wounded.

*Letouriste*

Thank you:)

### [edrey](#)

well, hakran's name is subordinate of cat's and hers is transitional, so he could change name too, right?  
the elves should appear soon too, the summary said the forever king was pondering war, and the best moment is now, i hope ranger show herself soon, all overpowered people showing up  
other thing is that the story cat use to kill the duke said a orphan, adopted and trained by a prince of summer, kills his father, a prince of winter, become prince then kills his other father by orders of the king, so cat had the title, the order and taking the place of sulia in skade make the relationship so if cat could steal sulia power too somehow she could take by surprise the two kings, not too mention using the story of sword in the stone to become queen of arcadia, procer would really have problems with that, elves or not right?

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Wait, why are they invading the castle now? They just beat the fae champion, which stood in for the full-scale battle, right? If not, what the hell is the point of dueling a champion in the first place, if there are no stakes at all, and literally nothing is on the line (besides the lives of the participants)? What the hell is the point of the fae sending one out? None of this makes any sense.

Unless, maybe it's not supposed to make sense. Maybe it's intended to show just how badly the fae are enslaved to their customs (their cultural story).

I expected Cat's wording of her Command to "answer my questions" was going to be a problem, because she didn't specify \*true\* answers. I suppose it still could be, they haven't won the castle yet.

I had a fridge moment thinking about a few chapters ago, in the run-up to Squire's duel with the winter noble. It's nice that she's harnessed the power of the Story, but she's half-assing it, to her own detriment. I mean, what are the limits to that power? Could she have had Hakram Find a story where the long-lost daughter had such fighting prowess that she won "without ne'er a scratch on her form" or something? Why not try it?

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Or, maybe she finds a story where in his last breath, the Duke of Violent Squalls bestows upon her his entire fortune. Does he actually need to possess something in order to give it away, or can the Story create things into existence? If she can say "I want your ring, and I want to always have had it" and get away with it, I don't think my ideas are unreasonable.

HJPEV would be sickened by this lost potential! It's too bad Masego doesn't have the right personality to teach Squire the scientific method.

#### *RandomFan*

In the case of the story- I don't think it's that usable. Yeah, stories can exist and implausible things can happen, but you don't have perfect control over which story you're in. As long as your theoretical story runs the same basic path as the one she actually used, there's no way to control which one it ends on.

Plus, a more common story is probably more potent, and therefore worth using despite the flaws or downsides of not using the obscure variant. Yeah, that one exists, but it's going to be a tight squeeze to hit those rails in specific.

The fae might be bound to stories, but there are enough of those that at least some have will- free will, even. They can't go off the rails, but they can try to control which track the story goes along. As long as her version existed, I am almost certain that your proposed version would be impractical to ensure through any means other than actually being that competent, or a distinctive lie unique to that work. It's only when there's no story out that they're inevitably doomed- I think the rest of the time it's just "trying to use their power to tilt the narrative." In other words, I think Catherine could have won that fight, but the Catherine at the start of the series would still be doomed even with the deck stacking. After all, the orphan killing her own father isn't the only story on the table.

I think HJPEV would get one of those reminders that if the system were this simple to game, it would already be being gamed- that you can't break it in a day. Much like his batty experiments in the original work, only much more deadly and with much less potential for safe testing. That's just a prediction, though.

#### *Dumdum*

I commented earlier saying that trust the heaven's but tie your horse was an actual Muslim saying. Why did that comment fail

moderation? What was so unacceptable about it? This is ticking me off more than it should probably because I'm tipsy, which I'm only mentioning so it sounds like I'm less of a Muslim so this reply has more of a chance of passing moderation. You see where I am going with this...

*Morgenstern*

Why moderation? Have you considered that it might just be a technical mistake that your post failed? I had that happen to one of mine before (just as I did the opposite – one of mine being doubled, somehow).. it happens.

*Morgenstern*

Posts normally pop up INSTANTLY here, which means there IS NO moderation...

*Morgenstern*

No “your post is awaiting moderation” popup usually means there simply is none. Unless a post is up for some time to then get deleted \*afterwards\*, which would be obvious, of course. So what happened? Post not popping up or your post getting deleted? The former means you simply had a technical problem during the attempt at posting...

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## Chapter 26: Advance

*“You’d be surprised at the breadth of things that can be powered by the souls of the innocent. Fortresses, swords, my favourite chandelier.”*

– Dread Empress Malevolent II

Calling how they moved a formation would have been inaccurate.

A tide, maybe, or wisp of fog. The grey-brown cloaks fluttered behind them as the Watch charged towards the fortress, the fae only recovering from the sight of my right hand slaughtering their champion when the Deoraithe were mere feet away from the base of the rampart. A volley of flame-touched arrows bloomed, but it was like trying to catch smoke in your hand: the flames touched only the ground and the Watch began its ascent. Duchess Kegan had said that they wouldn’t need ladders, and now I saw why. Every soldier took out a pair of steel stakes and I watched as the first to move forward leapt up before ramming his first



stake into the stone. Using it as support, he threw himself up and bit into stone with his other stake. A flick of the wrist got the first stake out of the stone, and then he hoisted himself up again. Twenty feet up the wall, in the blink of an eye. *Merciless Gods*, I thought. I might have been able to do that, but one of my soldiers? Suddenly Daoine's dream of taking the fight to the elves seemed more than an elaborate ritual suicide.

The fae did not lose their composure, continuing to pour down arrows. At my side Duchess Kegan raised her hand again, a black scarf in hand. The three thousand remaining soldiers of the Watch, longbows already strung, released a volley of their own. The arc was perfect, almost pleasurable to watch, at though the projectiles were mere steel they scythed through the Summer fairies who'd been careless enough to leave the protection of the crenels. A burning log was tossed over the rampart but the Deoraithe did not miss a beat. Those allowed room by the angle pressed themselves against the stone and let it pass them by, and a woman whose chest would have been caved in instead leapt *atop* the log, using it to leap again upwards and resume climbing with her stakes. *And Grem One-Eye beat them*, I thought. *When they were defending their own damned wall*. I'd always thought that in a few years after she was seasoned Juniper would be the best tactician on Calernia, bar none, but what I saw was forcing me to reconsider. It was one thing to beat devils, another to crush *this*.

Less than eighty heartbeats after they'd begun moving, just after another volley shot by the Watch who'd stayed behind forced the fae to take cover, the first Deoraithe landed on top of the wall. The fighting then was not so one-sided: Kegan's monsters were quicker and stronger than humans had any right to be, but so were the fae. Longsword met longsword as a dozen footholds formed on the rampart, but the Watch had not been deployed to take the wall. As soon as the last Deoraithe made it up, the clusters moved again and disappeared into the fortress. Headed for the gate, no doubt. *My turn*. Nauk's men made way for me as I marched to the front of the two thousand legionaries of the Fifteenth, eyes on the still-closed gates. Adjutant joined me moments later, armour blackened by the sorcery of the baron he'd put down.

"They're impressive," the orc gravelled. "Maybe the finest soldiers on Calernia, pound for pound."

I hummed, not disagreeing. Now that the initial shock at their performance had waned, though, I felt that I was missing something. Only a quarter of Duchess Kegan's army was made up by the Watch. Why, if they were so effective? If she had twenty thousand of them the Wall would never have fallen during the Conquest. Were there requirements to being able to become part of the Watch? It couldn't be that they were all mages. Deoraithe weren't known to birth a lot of those, and no one had five

thousand mages to field save for Praes – who'd bred those numbers up over millennia – and perhaps Procer, by sheer dint of its population's size.

"Resource investment," I murmured.

Hakram raised a brow.

"Legion officers and mages take half a decade to train properly," I said. "The Empire can bear that because it's rich and its population large. Daoine is a *duchy*, not a kingdom. They might not have the means to support too many of those – that kind of power can't come without a material cost."

Praesi were wealthy beyond comprehension and cheated with blood sacrifices besides, otherwise raising even a single flying fortress would beggar the Tower for half a decade. Deoraithe didn't have that shortcut available, though. Them grabbing people to sacrifice, even if they kept it strictly in-house, would have been noticed eventually.

"Every time one of them dies a small fortune goes up in smoke," Hakram grasped, brow creasing. "They do have the population to field a larger army than twenty thousand. A choice was made."

"Quality over quantity," I said. "They began treading that path long before the Reforms took Praes down the same road."

Duchess Kegan's hand, then, was not as strong as she had been pretending. How many years would it take to replace any casualty incurred by the Watch? She might be able to afford that in times of peace, but if she ever warred against the Empire her treasury would be bleeding out from a dozen different unavoidable expenses. If I could realize this at a glance, I had a hard time believing that Malicia and Black could not. Was that why they'd never acted like they considered Daoine a real threat? Something to keep in mind, when I next spoke with the duchess. It was not long after we finished speaking that the gates began moving, a dozen silhouettes on each side pushing the massive copper things open. In front of them the rest of the Watch had clustered together in a tight formation, and the moment the way was clear they began a smooth and almost leisurely retreat. I unsheathed my sword, raising the blade.

"FIFTEENTH," I screamed. "ADVANCE!"

The nut had been cracked open. Now the butcher's work could begin. The ranks behind were four hundred broad, following behind just short of a run as Hakram and I took point. The retreating Deoraithe split around us, a few of them ceasing their retreat just long enough to shoot arrows at fae trying to close the gates before we arrived. *Fifty feet*, I gauged. The soldiers of Summer behind the gate hurriedly sent a volley at the Fifteenth, the

same kind of chest-height shots that had torn through the Gallowborne. This wasn't my retinue, though. It was a full *jesha* of two thousand, half the forces making up a regular Legion of Terror. These men had been trained to deal with mages, and without missing a beat the mage lines within the Fifteenth returned fire. A wave of fireballs flew, tailored for size instead of strength or speed: the spells taught in the War College were not the most powerful or the most effective. They were the most *flexible*, the formula easy to adjust for the situation. Every mage cast, and when the large balls of flame met the arrows a curtain of flame flickered across the grounds. Not a single projectile made it through. Heat licking at my face, I strode through the already-fading fire. *Twenty feet.*

"Been a while since we were in a scrap side-by-side," I said.

"Liesse, I think," Hakram mused. "Learned a few things since then."

"So have I," I said. "Try to keep up."

There were maybe ten feet between me and the fae when I dashed forward, sinking into my Name. I'd always found clarity in doing that, in allowing the world to slow as my perception deepened and my blade followed, but it was different now. The air no longer felt just crisp, it was *cold* – like a windless winter night, everything tinged with frost. An arrow flew towards my throat but my sword came up without missing a beat, slapping it to the side as I pivoted on myself and fell on the first rank of the fae. At my side a roar sounded and blood sprayed high as Adjutant began to paint in red. We hit their line like a trebuchet stone, ploughing straight through. There was no room for elaborate tactics, here, no Lion Devours Gazelle. If they didn't hold the gate, they were done for: they had to stand and fight. It would be a red gutter before long, and the gutter was where I shone. One of the fae threw tongues of flame at me and I didn't even bother to dodge them: they hit my armour head on with only hissing steam to show for it, the ice-cold steel unmarred. My shield hit the opponent in the stomach, smashing him back, and I gutted him with a clean sword stroke.

Adjutant stood at my side, sweeping the enemy aside with wild laughter as we drive deeper and deeper. There was a deafening sound behind us as Nauk's heavies impacted the fae line, orcs and humans in a tightly-locked shield wall beginning their push. This was not the kind of battle the Summer fae were meant for, I thought. Not these, anyway. Mere swords and bows were no match for the implacable advancing steel wall of the Legions of Terror. The path Hakram and I were carving through the enemy filled with soldiers, a wedge in the enemy formation that split them. Already they were wavering – the Watch had killed hundreds on their way

through, and what stood behind us now was not the full strength of the enemy. There still had to be some left on the walls.

*"Spargere,"* an officer's voice called out.

Small clay balls with lit fuses sailed above the ranks, falling in the throng of fae. The sharpers exploded a moment later, shredding flesh and bone. With a resounding cry the shield wall pushed forward and the army of Summer folded under the pressure.

*"Fire,"* the same voice called out.

Four dozen balls of flame flew above the fae ranks. They wouldn't hit anyone, but they weren't meant to. One by one they detonated, the pressure flattening the fairies under them even if they didn't kill anyone. The fae lines wavered and again the cry sounded, the shield wall pushing forward. I'd been killing my way through anything foolish enough to stand in my way, the tip of the spear, and finally I saw only one woman in front of me – behind her was an empty courtyard, leading deeper into the fortress. There was fear in her too-large eyes. Her sword parried my blow, but her grips was weak. With a grunt I pushed down, flexing my muscles as she joined a second hand to her first and desperately tried to hold me back. Too weak. I broke through her guard, carving her from shoulder to rib across the body. After so many strikes against armour even the goblin steel of my sword was starting to dull, but with enough power behind the blow that mattered little. I stepped onto the courtyard lightly the sound of fangs tearing through flesh heralding Adjutant following me as he tossed a corpse with a ripped throat to the side. Heavies filled the corridor we'd open, splitting the fae in two, and it was the beginning of the end for them. They began to break.

*"We can leave them to Nauk,"* I said. *"We have a Count to settle matters with."*

The orc nodded, licking reddened chops. The inside of the castle was still made of the same white stone, but in the shady corners I saw roots peeking through. Count of Olden Oak, huh. Might be more to the title than just heraldry. A set of stairs led to the upper keep and without wasting any more time I began the way up. We passed through an empty banquet hall without slowing, my gaze lingering at the larger and larger amount of roots I saw growing through the stone from every corner. Was this entire fortress a tree, the oak the fae noble was named for? I knew fuck all about what oaks actually looked like, having been raised in a city, so I could be looking at one for all I knew. There was another set of stairs in the back of the hall and we headed there, the both of us feeling the pressure coming from higher in that direction. We ended up in a corridor covered with living mosaics of leaves that shifted with every glance but didn't stick around to look at them: through an arc we could see a third and final set of stairs, leading to what I would have called a basilica if the the

coloured glass of its windows didn't display the glory of Summer victorious.

The way up was long and sharply sloped, the stairs broad and too large to be covered in one stride. The sun shone down, but it was not illuminating stone: we were surrounded by the brown bark of an immense oak, growing in the centre of the towers we'd glimpsed from the outside. The large structure ahead had copper doors like the outer fortress, though these were wide open. The atmosphere was eerily green-tinged.

"Twenty denarii he's waiting for us inside on some kind of oaken throne," I said.

"I'm not taking that," Hakram snorted. "Twenty denarii we get a monologue about the might of Summer before the fight."

We kept moving even as we talked but the moment we rose onto the first step the strange buzz of fae wings sounded in the utter silence. From the heights of the giant tree ten fae descended on translucent wings, landing halfway up the steps with unnatural grace. Each of them held a leaf-shaped shield and a long lance of wood. I raised an eyebrow.

"So if he'd been called the Count of Plentiful Cows, would you be fighting with udders and hooves?" I called out.

The words echoed across the distance, my mockery repeating twice more before fading.

"Though crowd," Adjutant deadpanned.

The ten fae spread in a line without replying, wings flickering out of existence, and the spears rose. Since the grim-faced pricks weren't willing to save us the climb before we fought it out, we began the way up. I caught Hakram studying them carefully as we rose then punched his shoulder to draw his attention, eyebrow raised.

"Go to the Count," he gravelled. "I'll handle them."

"You've used one aspect already," I frowned. "And your other one's not much use in a fight."

The tall orc bared his fangs.

"I feel... close," he said. "To the third."

Ah, and now I understood why he'd suggested it. Iron sharpens iron, Praesi were fond of saying. They meant it as a justification for their obsession with scheming against one another, but I'd found the saying had some truth in it. For both villains and heroes, conflict drove advancement. No, perhaps that wasn't exact. Weighty actions allowed you to sharpen your Name,

and conflict had a way of birthing those. Whether it was arguing with an enemy or beating them down, a Named could temper themselves. It wasn't that Hakram thought he'd stomp over all these fae – they were obviously meant to be an elite guard of some kind, no matter how ridiculous their equipment. But he believed that a dangerous enough fight might allow him to reach his third aspect.

"I don't like risking you," I said, more honestly than I'd meant it to. "Duel's one thing, this is just taking a risk to hurry something you'll get eventually."

He half-smiled, which given the size of his teeth still made him look more horrifying than sentimental.

"You can't be the only one taking risks," he chided. "And we'll need all we can bring to bear, soon. If not for this war then for the next."

I was still less than fond of this idea. It wasn't just that finding a replacement for Adjutant would be impossible, though there was no denying that was a fact. Even if Apprentice fused Ratface and Aisha into a single abomination of nature the combined talents wouldn't be able to handle a tenth of the work he did. Hakram was my friend. Gods, probably the person I was closest to in all of Creation. My first instinct was to kill anything that might threaten him and put the head on a spike to ward off anybody else who might want to try. I knew that look in his eyes, though. It was the same one he got before disappearing for a few bells and a problem mysteriously solved itself – there would be no talking him out of this no matter how much I glared.

"Wade in their blood, Hakram," I finally said, raising a gauntleted fist.

"Luck in battle, Catherine," he replied, hitting his fist with mine.

We were only two steps away from the fae, and they'd yet to move. I supposed they thought it made them look imposing.

"The way is barred," a fae said.

"So was the front gate," I replied.

I dashed forward, sending a sliver of power into my legs. Bypassing a step entirely I landed in front of the rightmost fae, whose spear immediately whistled towards my throat. From the corner of my eye I saw movement – ridiculous as they looked, they were quicker than the soldiers from earlier and better coordinated. If it had come to a scrap that would have mattered, but unfortunately for them fleeing was another game entirely. I formed a circular panel of shadow in the way of the one trying to

flank me and ducked under the spear of the other, never breaking stride. Wouldn't have worked if I was any taller, but for once being so offensively short was an advantage. The shadow pane shattered a heartbeat later, but I was already on the step behind them. I glanced back and saw that none of them was deigning to pursue. Hakram ripped the shield out of the hands of one and smacked another fae's face with it, but he was surrounded within moments and the situation looked sharply to his disadvantage. My fingers tightened until the gauntlet creaked, but I forced myself to look away and continued my way up. He wouldn't have told me he could handle it if he couldn't.

I forced myself to clear my mind the way I'd been taught even as I headed up to the structure that was the crowning glory of the fortress, the very heart of the Count's domain. From the sides of the stairway – there were no rails here either, though unlike with the Tower I was willing to cut Summer some slack since at least they could fly back up if they fell – I could see roots leading up to the inside of the building. Well, that was promising. I'd seen my fair share of fucking horrors in Winter, I supposed I was due exposure to the other side of the coin. The copper gates were open, like I'd seen earlier, but as I made it to the top I finally got a glance inside. For the first time since breaching the fortress, what I saw gave me pause. It wasn't the tall silhouette of the Count that gave me pause, his back turned to me as he gazed out the green and red glass in front of him. It was the sight of the inside of the basilica, though the living wood that made hundreds of stacks filled with books and baubles was a stunning sight. No, it was the hundred corpses of the Gallowborne that hung from the branches covering the ceiling.

I let out a long, quiet breath. Fury was not unknown to me. I'd felt both boiling anger and frozen, bitter hatred since I'd become the Squire. But the sight of men and women who'd died for me trussed up like trophies in someone's sanctum killed the emotions in me. I'd seen the Carrion Lord once. The monster the tales spoke of, instead of the sardonic teacher I'd come to love. Seen the humanity in him smothered like a candle, leaving behind only a thing capable of anything if it furthered its objectives. If someone was looking at my face right now, I thought, they might just see the same thing. He'd told me, once that were the same in some ways. Maybe he was right, because right now I felt capable of being monstrous. My footsteps broke the silence in the room as I walked forward, the heartbeats of the Beast echoing in turn. It was there, I knew as well as I knew my own breath. Still as the grave, but looking at the Count with my eyes. It did not delight in the violence to come, for once. It *bowed* to it.

"I'd never considered any of this personal," I heard myself say, my tone without a speck of feeling. "I am, after all, invading your home. You've not participated in the invasion of Callow, and

my only reasons for sieging this keep were of a strategic nature."

The Count of Olden Oak turned to face me, tall wooden spear in hand.

"But this?" I murmured, looking at the corpses of people I'd known, trained with, laughed with. "This was a choice. Those have consequences."

"Duchess of Moonless Night," the fae greeted me calmly. "You seem displeased."

"We passed civil the moment you hung up those corpses," I said. "I could torture you for this, I suppose, but that's a cheap sort of satisfaction. Meaningless, really. There's no evening this particular scale."

"Winter pretending to be righteous," the man mocked. "A farce of farces."

"I revoke your right to exist," I said, tone measured. "I will take what I want from you, and then you will end."

He opened his mouth to speak again but I shot forward. The man wore no armour, only green robes, but with fae that meant nothing. My sword came down but the shaft of the spear caught it – whatever sorcery was in the wood made it harder than steel, my blade bouncing off. I was past caring. I smashed my shield into his shoulder, but his hand came up to block it: green light shone on his palm and the momentum of the strike vanished. I gave ground, stepping back and slowly circling around him. Swift as a hawk he struck, spear aiming for my eyes, but I hit the tip of his spear with the top of my shield to knock it off course. The spear rose past my head but instantly a branch grew from it, whistling towards my throat. I blinked in surprise as it pierced straight through, only backing away in time to prevent it from severing my spine. My vocal chords were done for, but I no longer needed to speak an aspect to call on it. **Rise**, I thought. The wound slowly began to close even as the branch that had grown from the spear withdrew back into it. So this was a Count of Summer, I thought. I had no makeshift prophecy protecting me from this one, no shield of lies to blunt his power.

He would lose regardless.

I moved forward again and the spear whipped out, tearing a hole through my shield – a last moment adjustment prevented it from piercing through the hand that held it. He made to withdraw the spear but I focused my will and the ice welled from the steel and froze it stuck inside. I managed to swing at his face before he forced it out anyway, twisting away from my blow – I cut clean just underneath his eye. Green light came out instead of blood,



bark growing to fill the wound. I was not the only one with a healing ability, it seemed. The hole in my shield froze shut with dark ice and I went back on the offensive: his growing trick was too dangerous to allow him the initiative. The tip of my blade probed his guard as I angled my feet for a thrust, his eyes flickering down to notice it. The Beast howled. When he slapped aside the thrust with his spear I was already moving, twisting the momentum into a pivot that smashed into his spear when he managed to block it again. I tore through no flesh, but the strength behind the strike threw him back a few feet. I was stronger than him, then. My title of Duchess was not entirely meaningless.

The spear snaked forward as he moved towards me, casually slapped aside. Even as it passed my flank I saw the branch grow and head for my kidneys, but I was ready for it this time. I dropped my sword and caught the bursting wood with my hand, forcefully moving it aside. Ice glistened on the lower edge of my shield, sharpening it like a blade, and I rammed that edge into his shoulder. I cut through the robe and he hissed in pain, then wrenched out the shield while throwing myself to the side before the two branches growing from the first one he'd made could punch through between my ribs. I landed in a roll, without a weapon, and the Count smirked. Green light shone the gaping wound going from his shoulder to his pectorals, bark filling it instantly. I flicked my wrist and Pickler's contraption triggered, a knife slapping down onto my palm. My Senior Sapper had made sure that there would always be steel in my hand when I needed it, her sharp little mind ever-refining the tool I'd once used when fighting the Lone Swordsman.

"You seem to be at a disadvantage, Duchess," the fae mocked.

I had no interest in trading barbs with meat. I charged again but found the distance between us had been too lengthy: the Count flicked his fingers at me, a dozen strands of green light shooting towards my chest as I advanced. I stepped aside, adjusted my angle and continued moving forward but he still had control of the sorcery: the strands struck down at my boot, roots growing from them and nailing me to the floor. My momentum cut short, I had to force myself back in order to avoid tripping. Immediately the fae struck, moving to the side my shield didn't cover with the grace of a cat. My knife wouldn't be able to do much against the spear, at this distance. *You have made a mistake*, I thought with vindictive satisfaction. I adjusted my grip on the knife to be the same I'd use for a sword, and then with a flicker of will from the short blade a full sword length of dark ice grew. I cut through the spear, and thought it immediately began to grow back his eyes widened.

I tore through my boot out of the roots effortlessly. I'd already proved I beat him in raw strength – arrogant of him to think he

could bridge the gap with sorcery. My shield hit his stomach, knocking the breath out of him without his little healing being of any use. My blade carved straight through the wrist that held the spear, and though it grew back in bark that didn't bring back the weapon to his hand. Sorcery attempted to do so, but when it began rising from the ground I exerted my will again and froze it stuck. I cut his throat, without missing a beat. Green light filled the wound, but I was already striking again. I sliced through his eyes and he screamed, but a heavy groan sounded out behind me. I risked a glance and saw that a hundred spears of wood were descending from the branches covering the ceiling. In that heartbeat, the world slowed. I could move out of the way, give ground again and avoid the danger. But I didn't want to. I wanted to crush him under my boot, and the bone-deep hatred I'd felt when first entering Summer well up in response.

I didn't set it aside, this time. I took it, owned it, carved it into a weapon. It was mine, and it would answer to my will like any other aspect.

**"Fall,"** I said.

The world went dark. A boundless night sky spread above us, without a single speck of light to break the black. There was a cold here that was old and merciless, and the branches that would have pierced me slowed and turned grey. The sap inside them froze and they *died*. The Count of Olden Oak's bark-crafted eyes stared blindly into the dark as he panicked. I could feel a flame inside him, feel it dimming with every passing heartbeat. Frost spread across his body slowly, and I could feel him on the brink of death. I smiled and the night went away, wrenching me back into the sunlit basilica. He was barely conscious now, so little of him left a child could have beaten him to death. His power would grow back, though, given enough time.

"Oh, you don't get to die yet," I said. "I still have a use for you."

What little was left of his mind smelled of fear, and it was not unwarranted.

---

Kingbob12

Take, Break, Fall. Those are some nasty aspects Catherine has there. I love it.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

> "Something [inside Cat] that would use what it could not break and break what it could not use."

From the Book 2 Epilogue. Her aspects are about taking what she can use and destroying what she can't. FORESHADOWING!

[wirelessgrapes](#)

Goddamn that's a \*vicious\* fucking aspect

*The Archdevil*

May the Duke freeze for eternity as Masego's personal mana battery. A Duke of Summer has to be good fuel for rituals.

*The Archdevil*

Also, I love that Cat's third Aspect is an action and a Season. Fitting that it's the transition of power from Summer to Winter.

*callmesteve*

I second all of the above. Epic and interesting in its implications.

*Nairne*

A Count\*

*Shoddi*

Leveling up a certain quarter-fae senior mage consort, perhaps?

*arancaytar*

I thought she balked at that because it would also require humans? Hypocritical as that may be.

*Cpt. Obvious*

I think the Duchess of Moonless Nights may feel this count had it coming.

*HUMAN Rights activist*

You can't have Human rights if you aren't real. Also

NO MERCY FOR SUMMER SCUM

*Fadili*

I think Cat's getting a girl some jewelery (that can be used in a ritual).

*Shequi*

Is she going to give him to Masego... Or to Killian?

*Cpt. Obvious*

Akua already proved that the Fey are pretty good ritual fuel.

*danh3107*

I could curse here, make an exclamation... I don't think that carries enough weight. (Imma do it anyway)

THAT WAS FUCKING METAL

*Nastybarsteward*

Hmmm, what would be the soundtrack for that fight me wonders?  
\*best evil laugh\* 😊

*pyrohawk21*

This... was good. And Cat's third Aspect is very much here.

First is Take/Rise.

I've forgotten what the second is, can someone remind me?

And now we've had the third revealed. Fall. And it is VERY suited to Cat.

For she has always and will always face an uphill struggle. But those who think themselves above her will find that they Fall before her.

*nick012000*

>I've forgotten what the second is, can someone remind me?

Break.

*pyrohawk21*

Okay, so the second is Break. Her three Aspects actually work really well together. And considering that this is a narrative universe... Well, the three of them tell a story. And there is power in that.

First she Takes something from her opponent. Then she Breaks something they had thought would stop her. And finally, they shall Fall before her.

And the fact that Fall is also another name for Autumn, she gained it from the Winter Court and is now facing the Summer Court...

Well, there's a LOT of narrative strength behind Cat now...

*Soronel Haetir*

Her second aspect is Break.

*nick012000*

Typo thread?

>my only reasons for sieging this keeps were of a strategic nature."

Either "this keep" or "these keeps".

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

There are far too many typos for a typo thread to be of any use here. A bunch of them were bad ones, where I couldn't even come up with a realistic guess about what they were supposed to say, and had to just skip them and move on.

That's the price of Wednesday chapters, apparently. Overall not a bad trade.

[Barthumphries](#)

Is is true, then.

Change the first "Is" to "It"

"Though crowd," Adjutant deadpanned.

Change Though to Tough

twisting away from by blow

change "by" to "my"

I cut through the spear, and thought it immediately began to grow back his eyes widened.

Change thought to though

I tore through my boot out of the roots effortlessly.

Remove through

*stevenneiman*

"[at->and] though the projectiles were mere steel they scythed through"

"as we [drive->drove] deeper and deeper."

"her [grips->grip] was weak."

"I stepped onto the courtyard lightly{,} the sound of fangs tearing through flesh heralding Adjutant following me"

"The large structure ahead had [coppers->copper] doors"

"[Though->tough] crowd"

"twisting away from [by->my] blow"

"Green light shone {from} the gaping wound"

"without a single speck of light to break the [back->black]."  
"The Count of [Olden->Golden] Oak's bark-crafted eyes"

### *Darkening*

Well hell. That was a thing. Interested to see an explanation for how her new aspect works exactly. Take and Break are fairly straightforward, but Fall sounds a bit more abstract. And Hakram probably has a new one too! That'll be fun to see. Hm. Wonder what she wants the Count for. She's not much for blood sacrifice like Diabolist, though given how absolutely livid he made her maybe she'll make an exception. Maybe use him to transform her girlfriend into full fae? Hm. Or maybe she wants to have masego experiment on killing off powerful fae permanently for when she goes for Winter.

### *stevenneiman*

I recall a discussion of sacrifices to help Kilian, so I'd guess that she either wants to use him for that or she wants to hand him over to Masego and see if he has any similar insights to Akua's about the possibility of using up the power that comprises a fae so that they never respawn.

### *Darkening*

Looking over it again, the opening quote about what souls can be used to power really makes me more confident she's gonna sacrifice him for killian's ritual. It'd be nice to have her get a little more narrative importance over just being Cat's girlfriend that she occasionally sees, and being a talented full fae sorceress would probably go a long way for that.

### *Morgenstern*

Seeing how his power grows back... he would be far better suited as mana battery for Masego, imho. Siphon off of him forever... or until that one time you really need ALL of it. Ouch.

### *RoflCat*

Earlier:

"Do you seek to frighten me, child? Summer does not know fear."

Akua slowly unsheathed her knife, resting the wickedly sharp edge on the side of the fae's throat. He looked into her eyes, undaunted. Diabolist smiled.

"No, not yet," she murmured. "But I will teach you."

Now:

What little was left of his mind smelled of fear, and it was not unwarranted.

Does this count as a 'win' for Catherine over Akua?

*RandomFan*

Akua's capable of being nasty enough that I'm sure that her victim's been taught fear too. Catherine has the record for speed, she got to skip the entire post-defeat bravado step, but Akua probably did it first, even. So I'd call it a 'draw'.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I'd call it a victory of Akua over the summer fae, at least. They took her lesson to heart. Not sure how Cat has anything to do with it.

*draxsiss*

Ah but if all fey are connected at least from a narrative sense, is the only reason Cat's felt feat because Akua already taught them it?

[Barthumphries](#)

No, people in stories feel fear all the time. It wouldn't be a new emotion to the fay.

*George*

Oh god it's so cool!  
Neat to finally learn about the Watch, and taking her third aspect is a big deal.

*Metalshop*

This new Aspect seems very powerful, but I'm worried that it's also the most villainous. Not that it's evil, but that it has the double edged sword built in. The most common way to invoke an Aspect seems to be some variation of "I [Aspect]" or "I will [Aspect]", so I could very easily see this aspect being extremely powerful before ultimately getting used against her.

*tynam*

I was just thinking the same. All the aspects we've seen so far describe something the owner does. "Fall" seems exceptionally likely to come back to bite the user.

*kinigget*

Now this?

This is why I read this story

Not because it's hilarious, though it is that, but simply to watch Cat become something terrifying and ruthless

And I do hope she's going to use him for what I think she is

This is how principles shatter

### [Euodiachloris](#)

In which the Count learns the hard way *why* you should carefully analyse the specific target audience *before* you go for a brutal set piece. Ass + u + me (but, mostly you). 😊

### *BumblingBehemoth*

Anyone have an idea what Hakrams third aspect will be?

#### *Ketura*

Something like Obey. He's getting it right after acting as champion for Cat and then right after taking on a group of fey so she could continue. I'm seeing a pattern of "Cat told me to do this, so I'm DOING it."

#### *MagnaMalusLupus*

Given the odds he was looking at maybe something like Prevail or Overcome. Perhaps not villainous enough though. It could be the same as Captain's Serve. We've seen duplicate aspects before, with learn on Squire and Ranger.

#### *Nastybarsteward*

Cleave maybe?

### *Th3saint*

What frightens the count is that winter is beating summer in warfare.

Probably thought that it was a victorious last stand story because in war summer crushes winter.

### [Pentrose Son of John](#)

Ah, yes, being savvy to the tale is of little use when you misidentify the story being told. I feel this is a story of Catherine coming into her Power, which means that she has an advantage, which is enhanced in Arcadia.

#### *Nastybarsteward*

There is a big difference in rank, she is a duchess, much higher than a count.

But, she is winter court which seems weaker, although as you



say using proper military tactics like the summer court does is probably confusing them somewhat.

*Letouriste*

Yep, she is more and more villainious by chapters^^ i guess the grand final of this arc is killing winter?...would be pretty badass if she can permanently cripple both fae sides

*Soronel Haetir*

I worry that Break and Fall are so close thematically. She ought to be really gods-damned powerful at wrecking things but it's going to make making anything of Callow that much harder, for example.

*nehemiahnewell*

Yeah, they're vary close narratively speaking. Though break is more absolute. A fall doesn't have to be to death, any defeat can be a fall. On the other hand, break ends something completely. It also doesn't seem to be as hard to use. Break pits her will, and can backlash. I suspect Fall is easier to wield. I doubt she could simply Break an army, for instance, but all her opponents might Fall agaisnt her, taking it out bite by bite.

Having both aspect so close together is limiting though. Which I suppose makes sense. She's moved on from being a novice, but she's in a rut at this point. She has to break out of her current story of conflict leading only to more and worse conflict, destroying what she's trying to protect. Breaking out of it probably requires her to be more then a Squire though, to be someone who stand on their own, rather then a transitional role.

*vietnamabc*

About Fall, wonder what angel feels about this Aspect, I think the final transition test would be for Cat to Fall an Angel.

Black already feels outclassed because the story of the White Knight is not the one to oppose him, the White Knight I think exists here to oppose Tyrant because of the role. I think Amadeus would be defeated by Hanno and Cat would be the one to pick up the pieces and fight both Cordelia and the Tyrant.

*Ash*

We're told Cat will one day become either the Black Knight or the White Knight, and either way Squire is inherently a transitional Name, so whether she ends up a Knight or something completely different she won't be the Squire forever. So

hopefully her next Name will be something more suited to rebuilding Callow – to create one must first destroy, etc, etc. She has to break the world to change it.

*anon*

We all know she's the girl who climbed the tower.

*Lutrine*

When Cat used Fall, the sky went black without lights. Did she just shorten her clock by making a Moonless Night?

*Fork You*

FYI the url of this chapter is chapter-25-advance instead of Chapter 26.

*M*

I am not so sure Fall is an aspect. It felt more like using Winter's power she has to do a thing, sorta like Speech. Has the same black bold style too.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Aspects are also bolded. She didn't **Take** anything from he guy, and wouldn't want to unless it was clearly more useful to her than **Rise**, which is a tall order, seeing how often she relies on it.

*Soronel Haetir*

It may also be that 'Fall' is not yet a complete understanding, given how the power was described during the bestowal:

[Barthumphries](#)

Soronel Haetir, if you meant to have something after the colon, it's not showing up.

*Byzantine*

She twisted the power of Winter into an aspect, Fall.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

You do realize that winter and fall are not the same thing, right? If this was the power of winter, maybe it would be called winter?

*nehemiahnewell*

She certainly tapped into it. Her Fall is a thing of death and cold. People are talking about it conceptually, about making an Angel Fall for example, but it seems more like defeat, loss, and death. I could see it killing an Angel, tainting it with mortal death, but not corrupting one.

Winter is the dead time, the still time. And when she called upon it she drowned the world in Moonless Night.

### Euodiachloris

Hmmm... when you think about it, it's quite a wide Aspect. Fall (autumn), a fall, a fall from grace, to fall from a great height, to fall down, to fall upon some poor unfortunate's skull like a ton of bricks, to fall upon a surprising situation, to fall apart...

*amc*

I would love to see this abused:

In the middle of heroic monologue, Cat sets an anvil to \*fall\* on the hero's head.

### edrey

Black is lead, conquer and destroy , cat is take, break and fall.  
a very dark martial nature  
so Black leads a new age, conquer callow and destroys the will of the havens,  
cat take his legacy, break the opposition and make kingdoms fall.  
truly each name is a story  
also, i hope the interrogation to the count answer some questions too

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*Zoolimar*

Somehow it reminds me of this

*Barrendur*

Ah no, Cat, the new Aspect should have been MAKE.

Are you more than just a Destroyer, girl? If not, then \*you\* will have to fall and be replaced by a Creator, if Callow is to live.

So perhaps this is a Scapegoat/Sacred Champion story; Cat destroys all Callow's foes, becoming ever more evil to do it, and finally sacrifices/destroys \*herself\*. Callow is reborn, purged

of/preserved from the evil of Foundling/Squire/Duchess of Moonless Night/Dread Empress Retaliation(?)....

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

She has plenty of time to **Take** a suitable aspect, if she comes across one.

*tynam*

It's seems very unlikely that you can build anything lasting by replying on a stolen build aspect.

*Yitzi*

Keep in mind: Three is a very significant number in this setting, and this is only Cat's second set of aspects.

*nehemiahnewell*

Yes, and again, Squire is Transitional. This Aspect means she isn't someone who can fix thing,s grow thing, nurture things, guide thing. But she isn't at a point in her own story where she's mature enough to do so. She still fights every fight, tries to win every battle, takes what she can take, and ruins the rest.

a more nuanced approach is needed, but she isn't there yet.

*nipi*

Not to mention that her recent one was pushed upon her. She might get a new one when she reclaims her heart.

### [reveen](#)

"Are you more than just a Destroyer, girl?"

Not really.

### [Barthumphries](#)

Those are her current traits. When she ranks up into a higher form (Warlord Catherine, the Gray Knight, Duchess of Moonlit Nights), she will lose her current traits and gain traits that are appropriate for her new name. Presumably, her future traits will be more conducive to nation building, after she gets into a position where such traits will be more useful than the traits she currently has for her transitional Squire name.

*arancaytar*

I've been waiting for the point where Catherine becomes a scarier fucker than Black, and I think we just reached it.

*Jonsense*

Fall (or Autumn), is the season where Summer slowly loses to Winter.

*Darkening*

That does seem like it might make her more effective against Summer in particular given the nature of arcadia.

[julienbrightside](#)

Finally caught up to the newest chapter.  
Can't wait for more to come.

I wonder if there's a Name called Blasphemer, the power to deny miracles and magic.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

I had a very similar thought Lutrine,  
The Winter King (and Fae in general) seem like just the kind of technicality-loving bag of dicks that would count the Moonless Night created by Cat's newest Aspect against the six appearances of it she gets before her heart belongs to the Winter King for good.

Worse, Cat almost certainly won't twig to that interpretation. Will get the thing with Summer taken care of in like three months, but by then having used her new Aspect 4-5x. Goes back to the Winter King and he says "I told you, you had six appearances of your title before your heart belonged to me. I said NOTHING about the passage of time, the seasons, or the calendar. Did you not hear what I told you when I Bestowed your title upon you?"

Which will lead in to who Cat's after, post-Akua & Summer.

Or at least that's one way I could easily see it going.

[Barthumphries](#)

Good catch. Can you link or copy/paste what he said so I can reread it? 😊

*ArkhCthuul*

Very well done.

Fall. So many interpretations.

Loved the chapter.

[aristobulonietoalcaraz](#)

I had a very standardised sentiment Lutrine,  
The Winter King (and Fae in ecumenical) appear like just the form  
of technicality-loving dish of dicks that would numeration the  
Moonless Night created by Cat's newest face against the six  
appearances of it she gets before her centre belongs to the  
Winter King for proficient. "  
"The Count of [Olden->Golden] Oak's bark-crafted eyes"

*caoimhinh*

Cat's Aspect of Fall is quite similar to Divine Power Monochrome  
in Feng Shen Ji.

A Domain, an area of effect ability that drains energy and life  
force out of everything except the user (unless the user  
specifically targets something to avoid involving bystanders), to  
the point that light is dimmed and everything turns grey within  
the field of power.

Of course, Cat's Aspect involves ice and darkness in it.

*Youghurt Pooh*

Hm I am more interested what happens when cat use her new aspect  
Fall on something that is flying? Like something big that is up  
in the sky, hmm?

It will probably Fall. Haha get it?

*Max Scherer*

As much as i rant in previous comments i am still reading and  
this right here is one of the reason. Cat is just so fucking  
badass and boy do i love her. That was sooo fucking epic!

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## Chapter 27: Expedition

*"No matter how hallowed the crown, it fits only one head."*  
– Proceran saying

There were no maps. That was the great dangers of Arcadia, I was  
learning. Well, that and the fact that it was a shifting  
hellscape filled with quarrelsome demigods. I'd not realized until  
now how much planning a march depended on the maps provided to  
Fifteenth by the Tower: we had no idea what was ahead of us now,  
and any reports brought back by scouts might have become  
inaccurate by the time we reached the place they'd been. I knew

where we needed to go – could feel it in the back of my head like an unmoving iron spike – but that knowledge came without a precise idea of the distance I needed to march. Based on the last two times I'd travelled to Arcadia I was guessing about six days, but that was a *guess*. We could be here for a fortnight if I was misjudging the situation. We'd set out with rations for three weeks, expecting to resupply when we met up with the Fifteenth back in Creation, and we had since... expanded our granaries. The regulations for the Legions of Terror forbade looting, but I was Named: I could overrule those whenever I wished. They were mostly meant to avoid antagonizing local populations when the Empire took territory, anyway, so I was breaking the letter more than the spirit.

And Hells, since for once in my life I wasn't fighting in my own homeland I'd ordered Robber to loot this fucking fortress to the bedrock. Taking anything heavy would only slow us down, but there was plenty of jewellery, gold and silver lying around. It would have been better to have Ratface along for that – the Taghreb was capable of squeezing silver out of stone, given a bell – but he was more useful to me at Juniper's side, preparing the second phase of our campaign against Summer. Night fell all too quickly as the armies camped around the fortress, torches and bonfires lighting up the dark. I'd claimed the basilica where I'd beaten the Count as my command centre, and it was where I'd be holding my meeting with the senior staff of the combined armies. Passing the banquet hall I'd glimpsed on my way up earlier in the day I raised an amused eyebrow at the sight of two goblins with knives prying out the gilding from the corner of the high table before shoving the gold in a bag. Enterprising lot, Robber's cohort. I decided not to ask how they'd gotten so good at ripping off precious metals from objects, since I'd really prefer not to know.

The Summer Court was torching southern Callow, it was only fitting that their own treasures would pay for the rebuilding of it. The Deoraithe were too proud to ask for a cut and Ranker was from the generation that had drafted the regulations I was breaking, so amusingly enough it was all going in my war chest.

The entire fortress had been ours a half-bell after I'd smacked down the Count, Nauk's men sweeping in and the other two Legions taking the walls on the sides when the fae there pulled back to deal with my men. Ten corpses and a bloodied but satisfied Adjutant had been waiting for me when I first left the basilica – he'd gotten his aspect, he'd said, but he'd rather keep what it was exactly under wraps for now. The fae personal guard looked like they'd been hacked to death with his axe, not some power, so I was rather interested in what had allowed him to bridge the gap. It could wait, though. If there was one thing I'd learned about aspects in the years since I first became the Squire, it was that they were trump cards best kept quiet until they could

shine. The knowledge that I had Struggle, back in the day, had allowed the Lone Swordsman to plan around it. Best to leave Hakram's new weapon unknown until it could be slapped down on the table at our enemy's detriment. The officers were already waiting for me when I passed the still-open copper doors, settled around a large circular table clearly stolen from another part of the castle. It still had dried blood on it, not that anybody seemed to care. No insulting slogans had been carved on the surface, though, so it probably wasn't a goblin who'd found it. They liked to leave a mark, my little monsters.

This particular meeting had required broader attendance than the usual triumvirate of Ranker, Kegan and I: a hooded figure from the Watch stood silently behind the seated Duchess. At the Marshal's side an old acquaintance was frowning, General Afolabi. He seemed displeased that Nauk was in attendance, representing my jesha from the Fifteenth. I could see his point – as a mere legate the large orc was by far the lowest-ranked person here – but he could put his objections in a pipe and smoke them, for all I cared. Speaking of. I took out the dragonbone pipe Masego had once gifted me and ripped a small pouch of wakeleaf. I'd earned it, after today. I struck a match on my aketon and inhaled in puffs until fire caught, tossing aside the blacked pinewood. In my absence, Adjutant had been more or less in charge. Though his official rank in the Legions was technically below that of a tribune, by virtue of being Named and my right hand there was no one here who could gainsay him about much of anything.

"Done stripping the place clean?" Ranker said as I claimed the seat across from her.

I inhaled with a sigh of pleasure, then blew the smoke idly.

"Jealousy is unseemly in a woman of your rank," I replied with a smug smile.

Hakram cleared his throat.

"You all know why you're here," the orc gravelled. "Casualty reports first."

"Twenty-nine dead," Kegan said calmly. "The wounded will be back on their feet by morning."

Merciless Gods, and they'd been the ones to scale the walls. Everyone and their sister had a bloody arcane weapon, these days. It was a good thing I'd reinstated a knightly order, because otherwise I was going to be the only one on the field without some awe-striking shock troops to deploy.

"Two hundred and change dead," Nauk volunteered. "Mages are handling our wounded, maybe another fifty will need to stick with the supplies for the rest of the march."



"Less than a hundred for the Fourth and the Twelfth together," Ranker said. "The Fifteenth took the brunt of the assault for us."

Two thousand fae in a heavily fortified position, and we'd wiped them out with fewer than five hundred casualties in the span of a day. I could get used to being the one with the numerical advantage, if things went that smoothly every time.

"From my interrogation of the Count of Olden Oak I learned that these were Summer regulars," I said. "A border garrison to check Winter aggression. Half their number was stripped when the Princess of High Noon invaded Creation."

"If this is the quality of soldiery we'll be facing, perhaps this entire matter has been overly planned," Duchess Kegan noted.

Marshal Ranker hacked out a laugh.

"This was a siege, you twit," she said. "Not what those boys are meant for. On a plain with equal numbers and some nobles to back them they'll be trouble."

The hooded man behind the Duchess stirred at the insult but Kegan settled him with a glance. I watched the interplay without a word, pulling at my pipe. The wakeleaf was blunting the sharper edges of my mood, perhaps for the best.

"I agree with the Marshal's assessment," Hakram said. "They showed their mettle when they tangled with the Gallowborne: if they catch any of our infantry without crossbows or mages, it will go very differently."

"Which leads us to the crux of this matter," Afolabi said. "Where are we headed, Lady Squire? Surely you made inquiries with your prisoner."

The Count of Olden Oak was currently a guest of the Fifteenth, tied up under seventeen layers of wards and a rotating watch of mages. I'd been forced leave so many to the task that to take care of my wounded I'd had to send for mages from the Fourth.

"We're headed for the lands of the Princess Sulia, as some of you are already aware," I said. "When politely asked, our friend revealed that it'll be mostly a straight march to there. Only two obstacles in the way: a river and the keep of the Count of Golden Harvest. We're in luck for the second one – the Count is currently in Creation, along with most his troops."

"Is there a bridge or a ford?" Ranker asked, leaning forward.

"There's supposed to be a bridge, if we keep down the road that led us here," I said. "I wouldn't count on it still being

standing, though. They had time to send messengers before we took the fortress."

"As long as the bare bones of s structure remain my sappers can take care of it," the Marshal dismissed.

"We'll be relying on you, then," I acknowledged, spewing out a stream of smoke. "Even if the river was swimmable we have too many supply carts for that to be valid way across."

"We should begin marching before dawn," Duchess Kegan said. "We've already wasted a day on this castle. The longer we tarry the higher the chances the armies in Callow are recalled."

None of us was eager at the idea of fighting the higher ranks of the Summer Court on their own ground. In Creation their power was limited, but out here? There were some entities numbers meant nothing again and the Princess of High Noon struck me as one.

"Forced march," Nauk grunted in agreement. "We're in their lands now. Our way to get out of this with most our feathers is to be gone by the time they'd done mobilizing."

"We'll exhaust our soldiers if we follow your... *plan*," General Afolabi drawled in disdain. "And risk ambush, if we move hurriedly. Legionaries dead on their feet will be ill-equipped to handle fae harassment."

"The orc is right," Duchess Kegan retorted flatly. "Better we lost a few hundreds to ambushes than thirty thousand to a hopeless pitched battle."

"Nauk," I said, and though my tone was calm it sounded out like a clap. "The *orc's* name is Legate Nauk of the Fifteenth Legion."

The Deoraithe met my eyes, displeased, but I matched her stare. We both knew I was in the right in this. Eventually she nodded, lips thinned.

"Legate Nauk is correct," she conceded.

I smiled mirthlessly, blowing out smoke. If she wanted to keep on good terms with me Kegan would need to watch her fucking mouth around my people.

"Whatever the pace, we need eyes ahead," Ranker spoke into the silence. "The Fourth and the Twelfth have scouting contingents. Your detached cohort under the Special Tribune can join them."

"I have another task for them that'll take them away from the army," I refused. "Consider them unavailable for the foreseeable future."

"What *are* they doing?" Afolabi asked.

I raised an eyebrow at him.

"The matter is sealed, General," I replied. "I will unveil it when I deem it necessary."

"This isn't the time to play mysterious," the man said through gritted teeth. "We're in hostile territory with no path of retreat. Recklessness will get us *killed*. Your last gamble torched a third of Summerholm, Squire. We cannot afford a repeat performance."

From the corner of my eye I saw Nauk's fist clench and he half-rose from his seat but Hakram sent him a quelling look. I drummed my fingers against the table lightly, taking the pipe out of my mouth.

"You're leading to something," I said. "Spit it out."

"Marshal Ranker has the rank and the experience to make the proper decisions," the Soninke said. "Command of the expedition should be formally ceded to her."

I glanced at the goblin in question. She didn't seem surprised, but neither did she seem appreciative. Not her idea? Hard to tell.

"No army of Daoine will ever take orders from Praesi," Duchess Kegan replied coldly.

"Marshal Ranker?" I prompted, tone light.

"You've yet to make a major mistake," the goblin said. "Doesn't mean you won't."

Mhm, there were subtleties to that reply. She wasn't disagreeing with Afolabi, but she was distancing herself from the push somewhat. Either she was leaving herself room to throw him under the carriage after using him as a catspaw or she truly had nothing to do with this.

"You fucking Wastelander prick," Nauk growled. "Do you really think you-"

"Nauk," I interrupted without looking at him. "Sit down."

He did. He'd heard me use this voice before.

"I've perhaps been too lenient," I said. "I do have less experience than most the commanders at this table, hence why I've been taking advice. But allow me to make something perfectly clear, General."

The temperature in the room descended sharply, and for once it was on purpose. I met the Soninke's eyes, and to his honour he did not flinch.

"I am in command," I said, cocking my head to the side. "Here. In Callow. Wherever we meet for the rest of your natural life. I'm not going to threaten you over this, or seek revenge for the slight. To be frank, you're just not *important* enough for me to spend that much time on you."

The man blanched in anger. I set my pipe on the table and slid it towards him.

"I could speak to you," I noted. "But I don't really need to, do I? Whine all you like, we both know the chain of command here. So what you're going to do instead is head downstairs to the kitchens, to clean my pipe. When you're done, you may come back and sit at the table."

I tapped my fingers against the table impatiently.

"Now," I ordered.

Choking on his rage, the man snatched the pipe off the table and strode away. That was the last sliver of attention I gave him.

"As Marshal Ranker said, we should send scouts to have a look down the road as soon as possible," I said, continuing as if nothing had happened. "Duchess Kegan, given the speed the Watch has shown I would trouble you to send a detachment of it ahead to check on the state of the bridge."

"I've a hundred used to going into the Steppes to map orc movements," the Deoraithe replied, tacitly agreeing.

It wasn't that she was cowed, because she wasn't. Neither was Ranker, for that matter. They'd both dealt with scarier villains than me, though I was playing catch up in that regard. But I'd just made it clear that, if pushed, I was willing to push back. I might still be too young for them to see me as an equal but I was, at least, not someone to be fucked with lightly. It would be enough for now. I glanced at Hakram, and he began speaking again.

"Now," he began, "for the forces we'll dedicate to guarding the supply train."

—

We were back on the road by dawn the following morning. The first day was uneventful, but that very night we first saw the signs of trouble to come. None of the armies involved had set up a fortified camp before dark, given the pace we were putting the soldiers through. It would only slow us down, and given that the

Deoraithe did not practice the same doctrine the meat of our army would be unprotected besides. Double watch and a ring of fires had been deemed barley sufficient, but if we'd not posted goblins out we would have still missed the fae studying us in the dark. Only a handful and far out of the light cast by the fires, but to goblins the dark made no difference. No attack followed, but from then on it was clear there was an enemy force watching us. That we could only guess at the size and position of it was dangerous, given how good at ambushes Summer had already shown itself to be. The lack of attack, though, led me to a theory. Arcadia ran on stories, didn't it? More than that, on story *logic*. Time and distance were dictated as a consequence, unless a bigwig like the King of Winter decided otherwise.

If I was right, then it would all play out when we got to Princess Sulia's lands. One the last day, at the last moment. I spent most of the second day's march trying out the notion, thinking of how it could be turned to my advantage. No sign of the fae in daylight, though the Watch detachment Kegan had promised came back with news: they'd found the bridge. As expected, it had been scuttled ahead of us. Ranker spent an hour asking the cloaked soldiers for details before declaring she could have a bridge able to support two carts at a time up in a bell and a half. I'd eat into the day's march, but swimming was apparently not an option: the current was harsh and the river broad. When we camped out for the night I sent for a tenth of mages, half of what the Fifteenth had left – the rest had all gone with Robber. More than once during the night I wished I had Masego or even Kilian along, instead of these ones. The difference in skill showed badly. I emerged only around morning bell, exhausted, and found I wasn't the only one in that state. The fae had hit us during the night, in a manner of speaking.

A handful of soldiers had appeared at the edge of the camp and shot fire arrows at the tents of the Fourth, retreating before a response could be mustered. The damage was minimal so Ranker had originally thought this to be the work of a few reckless fae scouts, but when the attack repeated at the edge of the Twelfth's camp the Marshal and the Duchess understood exactly what was happening. Both goblins and Deoraithe were familiar with the kind of tactics a smaller mobile force could use against a larger invading one. Every hour or so fae popped out of the woodworks and shot their arrows, not to kill or even burn supplies but to keep our soldiers awake. They were eroding strength through exhaustion, and not even the Watch was able to catch up to them on their home grounds. They succeeded in their ploy, to my irritation, and there was little I could do about it. We allowed the soldiers to rest for a few hours during the afternoon when we finally reached the bridge and Ranker put her sappers to work. So far we'd been left untouched during daylight, but I was of the opinion they were trying to make us drop our guards during the day in anticipation of a strike. The other two agreed.

Attacks intensified during the third night, to my mounting frustration. We'd camped on the other side of the river in case they torched the bridge Ranker had built during the night – it was wooden – and it proved a farsighted precaution. It went up in flames mere hours after nightfall, cutting off our best path of retreat. Putting together our scout reports, we'd come to the conclusion that there were only about three hundred fae currently harassing us. A flea on the lion's back, but the lion was having a hard time getting a good night's rest. This time they went for out sentinels shortly before dawn, and we had to rouse the infantry to force them to retreat. It was on the fourth day they attacked, though not exactly in the manner we'd predicted. A full two thousand fae led by a noble tore into our scouts ahead of the column. I hesitated to sally out myself, since I wasn't sure if it was a distraction while another force readied to attack the glaring weak point that was our supply train. I sent Adjutant instead, but by the time he arrived the fae had disappeared and left only charred corpses behind. They hit our scouts twice more that day, and though I was furious I eventually pulled back them back closer to our armies.

The Twelfth had already lost two hundred scouts to the mess, and the Fourth half that. Almost as much as the total casualties we'd incurred taking the fortress, without a single scalp to show for it. Ranker wasn't a Marshal for nothing, though. That night she cooked up a few surprises for the enemy. Half past Midnight Bell the sound of buried demolition charges resounded, catching the enemy sneaking around our back by surprise. The sappers waiting on the fae quickly found themselves outmatched, but they'd not been meant to win that fight: the Watch sallied out in full to hit the fae, carving out a few hundred corpses before they managed to flee. There was a sense of relief in the camps after that when the fae didn't dare to continue the harassment that rose my wariness. Ranker's too, as it happened. They struck again at dawn, while the soldiers were still half-asleep, but at the Marshal's suggestion we'd filled the supply wagon with soldiers and when the five hundred fae recklessly going for the carts arrived they were greeted by a steady crossbow volley. This time we managed to take prisoners, and the interrogations that followed were... illuminating.

We'd crossed the domains of two nobles already in our march, both of them gone to war with the host of Summer. Warned ahead of our arrival by the messengers of the Count of Olden Oak, the skeleton garrisons left behind had followed at a distance while sending runners ahead for reinforcements. The garrisons of all the surrounding demesnes had gathered under the Lady of the Verdant Orchard, four thousand in full, and taken to delaying and harassing us until a larger army could be assembled to wipe us out. Word had been sent to the heart of Summer, Aine, and to the Queen herself. What would come of it our prisoners had no idea, but I didn't want to stick around to find out. If the Queen of

Summer took the field we were fucked beyond Lower Miezán's ability to express. With a better idea of what was on the other side, the decision was made to pick up the pace. As the prisoners had said, the fortress of the Count of Golden Harvest was empty of all life. It broke my heart to leave the place unlooted, but I didn't have the men or time to spare for it. It was a calculated risk to keep marching past nightfall on the fifth night and it paid off: the fae raiders stripped another hundred men off our skin, but we managed to reach the edge of Princess Sulia's domain.

We fortified the camps, for that last night, and heavy but rotating watches allowed the soldiers to rest up before the last day and the battle I could feel in my bones was coming. Following that iron spike in the back of my head, I led the host to a wide grass plain by midmorning. This, I knew instinctively was where I could open the gate out. I took my time surveying the grounds. To the north the road continued across the plain, but our surroundings were not so uncluttered. To the west hills rose, low and round in the beginning but growing too steep to march through the deeper they went. To the east a sunny forest sprawled out for miles, the trees thick enough one could easily hide an army in there. It felt like a trap, though one whose jaws had yet to close. Last time we'd needed six hours – a bell and a half – to get the army through the gate. Which meant we had to hold this plain for at least six hours in the face of whatever came knocking. Ranker and Duchess Kegan came to join me as our armies spread across the span of grass, the three of us silent for a while before I spoke up.

"Defensive positions," I said. "When Summer comes knocking, I want them to be warmly received."

"Good grounds, for a battle," Ranker murmured. "If all you've promised comes to pass."

"Let's hope it does," I replied. "You'll be a very farsighted corpse by sundown if it doesn't."

"The sole saving grace of this affair," Kegan said.

I couldn't help but snort, but the amusement left me quickly. This was it. The day that decided whether I'd wrecked my chances at quelling the mess in Callow or not. *Let's find out which of our traps has the sharpest teeth, Princess of High Noon.*

Two hours later I opened the gate and we both rolled the dice.

---

*George*

A little terse and details-oriented, but I think it did its job pretty well and I'm excited to see how the battle plays out. The details we were given should prepare us well for the details we weren't.

*Jakob Israelsen*

I like how Foundling got her own domination moment like the one when Black Spoke to Heiress, and even without Speaking.

*kunkkakola*

anazing as, always

*Shequi*

Humiliating Afolabi was potentially unwise.

*Letouriste*

Not really the choice there:/ she can't give out command for the whole thing to work. she could have done without the pipe thing but I agree some punishment was necessary. he suggested changing commander in the middle of the campaign, which is often a bad idea

*Shequi*

It's the pipe cleaning that I'm referring to. Her insisting on Nauk's proper rank and title from Kegan will have been a plus point with Ranker, who probably hasn't yet been clued into Cat's total antipathy to all forms of racism/speciesism. But she then threw that away by humiliating Afolabi, who is Ranker's 2IC

*amc*

I worry that this Tragic Flaw of arrogance is going to get Cat in trouble. It seems like her major victories so far have come when she is the underdog of the game, and if she acts too arrogant, she loses the position that she's best able to navigate.

It's all a little like cringing at the naive heroine who goes into the dark basement alone...

But, maybe that's why Narrative Causality had to replace Struggle. Struggle is the aspect of the underdog, but Break and Fall are aspects of a major player. (Who can, maybe, afford to be a bit arrogant?)

[greatwyrmgold](#)



There were no guaranteed wise decisions to be made. Cat made a risk assessment (perhaps not objectively) and decided which risk she disliked least.

*darkening*

Huh. What could robber be doing with ten mages. Planning to sacrifice the count and use the power to take a shot at the princess?

*The Archdevil*

Maybe they're infusing Robber with his power, making him a pseudo-name. Just an explosive little surprise for the Princess.

[joanneeve](#)

I believe Killian may be with him...

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Why leave it at Killian? Why not include Masego and Black too while you're believing things? Why not include all the calamities in this little fantasy?

[joanneeve](#)

I did not mean in a relationship. I meant that they are currently working together.

*Kizuna*

He meant Killian isn't even in this realm...

[MrPicklesAndTea](#)

But we all agree that Robber stole Killian from Cat right? That goblin boy's big boy wins every time. 😊

*Shequi*

More than 10 mages; Nauk's Jesha of 2000 men should have 100-200 Mages, depending on the composition of the companies. If 10 Mages are half of what the 15th has left, Robber might have upwards of 80 Mages with him.

What the hell is he doing?

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Awesome writing. Love it!

*crazedmoth*

Typo thread:

"the great dangers" should be "one of the great dangers"

"filled wit" should be "filled with"

"silver of of" should be "silver out of"

"sonly fitting" should be "only fitting"

"forced leave" should be "forced to leave"

"bones of s structure" should be "bones of a/the structure"

"nothing again" should be "nothing against"

"barley sufficient" should be "barely sufficient"

"out sentinels" should be "our sentinels"

*stevenneiman*

"shifting hellscape filled [wit->with] quarrelsome demigods"

"maps provided to {the} Fifteenth by the Tower"

"it was [sonly->only] fitting"

"As long as the bare bones of [s->a] structure remain"

"There were some entities numbers meant nothing [again->against] and the Princess of High Noon struck me as one."

"Our way to get out of this with most {of} our feathers"

"I do have less experience than most {of} the commanders"

"[One->on] the last day, at the last moment"

"[I'd->It'd] eat into the day's march"

[BarthHumphries](#)

by the time we reached they place they'd been.

change "they place" to "the place"

Even if the river was swimmable we have too many supply carts for that to be valid way across.

I believe "not" should be added after "that", if I understood her gist correctly.

Double watch and a ring of fires had been deemed barley sufficient

Change barley to barely

One the last day, at the last moment.

Change One to On

This time they went for out sentinels

Change out to our

There was a sense of relief in the camps after that when the fae didn't dare to continue the harassment that rose my

wariness.

Remove the first "that", and add commas after "after" and "harassment".

*Shequi*

Wild Mass Guessing!

What's Hakram's new Aspect? Personally I'm hoping it somehow draws on the combat poetry he drew on in the fight against the Catacomb Children back in Ater.

*The Archdevil*

Seek and Stand so far. Maybe Overwhelm? Nah, too improbable with only a single person. Overpower is possible. He has quite often overpowered his enemies. Perform could work, since he always performs as the song say.

And Hakram took down the Summer Noble to the 15th's War Chant as well.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Shouldn't theories include why Hakram doesn't want to tell Cat for now?

Ill guess he's got **Discreet**, where no one can see him, and he's planning on using it on Cat during his frequent dallies with lady-orcs lol

*The Archdevil*

It explained pretty fairly why Aspects are something to keep hidden. They're trump cards, and shouldn't be revealed until the exact moment they're needed. Otherwise, enemies can plan around them.

[nighzmarquls](#)

In think it's sing.

*stevenneiman*

My thought is that it's Fulfill, in the sense of Fulfilling his promises. Considering the kinds of things he's promised Cat, that makes the Aspect almost as fearsome in his hands as Obey was for the Captain.

Also, @The Warren Peace NFL Report, Aspects always take the form of an imperative verb, which is to say that you could say the word by itself and it would be a complete sentence commanding an action.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

What I don't get is why Princess Sulia even gives enough of a shit about an army OBVIOUSLY on the march from point A to B (and it being her land, Sulia is undoubtedly aware that's where a portal into Creation can be formed) since if said army is making for that point, breaking off with Heiress was idiocy after the price she'd already paid to half-crack that nut. Finishing with Heiress, THEN turning to face Cat would've been much more intelligent, since Sulia believes Diabolist and Cat to be in cahoots.

I can grasp she might want to face the army from Creation while they're still in Arcadia, but is a home field advantage versus an army she was going to have to fight one way or another really worth wasting all the work she put into breaking Diabolist? Even assuming Sulia could deal with Cat, after doing so she's going to have to go back and essentially do the entire siege versus Diabolist over. Most of what Diabolist lost were summoned Devils... so given a week or two she's sure to have made an excellent start on replenishing their ranks.

It just seems a very weird choice to me, and not very story-ish. Sulia squared off with Diabolist at the crux moment of the siege, then...Retreat. I get why Erratic did it. She needed Sulia to bloody Cat before Cat confronts Diabolist, but unlike 99.8% of the Guide, Sulia's pull-out from the siege felt EXCEPTIONALLY contrived.

*danh3107*

I have to agree, they had to be aware that Cat didn't give a single shit of what was in Summer lands

*stevenneiman*

The thing about Fae is that they take immense pride in their homeland. Even beside defeat in a battle she could have won, Sulia would not have been willing to tolerate an invasion force trampling through their perfect fields, offing nobles left and right, and pillaging castles. A more pragmatic force would have rolled out the red carpet and led Cat straight to the place where she could fight their enemy for them (while also getting a great look at the legionaries while doing so), but for all its tactical skill Summer is still proud and irrational. Also, being saved at the last minute from what would have been an early end to their place in the story is very much a dramatic villain thing.

---

Remember how this looks from Sulia's point of view. Since they have entered the Creation, they've been fighting mostly expendable troops covering magical traps: save for illusions, it's pretty much what they usually see in Winter, though Sulia

states, that mortals are, if anything, trickier. Then in the area with several recently disappeared patrols they find their brainwashed commander with the instructions on how to breach Liesse's walls. And finally, as soon as their forces have committed to the siege she feels that a Duchess tasked to defeat her has just entered her lands.

She doesn't know they aren't going on an actual campaign to Aine: she wasn't approached by a messenger, it must have either be some kind of awareness over her domain or a call from her Queen. She doesn't know that Squire and Diabolist are enemies: Summer fae don't really negotiate enough to ask stuff like "are there more than two sides in this conflict?". So far she's been fighting expendables that permanently kill fairies to summon more expendables, and suddenly she was made aware of a force that is 1) larger than her current opponent's, 2) actually invading Summer, as opposed to quietly plotting for world domination in her demesne, 3) uses genuine military tactics like siege and scouting ahead of the marching army instead of retreating constantly and sacrifice to summon to sacrifice ad nauseam.

I'm more interested in the reason for the fae to conquer Callow, since the main suspect was actually minding her own business in Liesse before the whole mess started. Was it Bard meddling to give Akua the advantage or the elves trying to circumvent Keeper of Stories' warnings&

*cmomnow*

Basically what a few people above said already, but it needs stressing more strongly. These are not logical or pragmatic beings. It's questionable whether they can even be considered sentient. They run on pre-written rules, like a machine or a program. Sure, summer programming would likely include good warfare practices but it seems those are trumped by higher order concerns like "Prioritise defending summer when it is invaded by a winter noble over all other things, including some ambiguous invasion of creation."

*arancaytar*

Not voluntarily, at that. <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/06/28/villainous-interlude-proscenium/>

And apparently, by now Akua knows that she's coming – possibly for days, depending on how Arcadia fucks with time.

Might be time enough to prepare a trap. Akua can't enter Arcadia on her own, but she definitely has lots of captives who can...

*amc*

Yes – there has to be some clever way for Cat to control the amount of time she spends outside of Creation... Otherwise, this “shortcut” may be extremely dangerous.

*arancaytar*

This is part of why Cat’s people are so unquestioningly loyal to her.

[awesmepersn](#)

I wonder if ‘Fall’ can be used in a different sense on the flying city the Diabolist has. Hmm.

*kelioez*

Oh, that’d be dope

*Captain Amazing*

I think her fae title is messing with her so that she loots Summer.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

The idea that Cat’s actual goal, as a single Duchess of Winter, would be an intensive assault upon Aine (you know, where the SUMMER QUEEN, counterpart to His High Douchiness the King of Winter is based) is brain-dead babble. An assault upon Aine would either be with all of Winter taking the field, or not at all. The Summer Queen could fry Cat’s entire force without rising from her throne if they got within fifty miles of Aine.

I can however see, if I squint, the fae story-logic of Sulia being unwilling to allow a Winter noble to go tramping through her OWN lands without offering opposition. It still doesn’t explain the violation of fae story-logic required for them to pull out of the siege at the critical moment, but narrative structure must at times trump characterization. (If Diabolist had not herself taken the field, killed a Summer Prince and then found herself confronted in turn by Sulia, I could totally get the pull-out from the siege. There wouldn’t have been a critical moment in said siege, so the insult to Sulia’s domain would take precedence.)

As someone else mentioned though, Summer came into Creation and started tearing shit up en masse for a REASON. Sending two Princes with a Princess in overall command is a massive endeavor, likely the brainchild of the Summer Queen herself. Withdrawing

like this from Creation would seem to threaten that goal, whatever it might be.

I for one cannot understand why the rest of Winter is sitting on their hands through all this. Sulia has the bulk of Summer invested in this Creation-oriented endeavor. It seems like Winter is...doing nothing. I get that they're trying to change the cycle, but they could have made the success of their catspaw (Cat) more likely with a few hit-and-run forays into the Summer Marches to accustom Sulia to alarms from the homefront. It wouldn't even have cost them anything.

[nighzmarquls](#)

I think maybe winter and summer royalty are trying to lose.

King and queen working to break the board.

In spite of the pieces.

*Cpt. Obvious*

Problem is that if either court would triumph then the winter king loses his game. He isn't out to win. He is setting Cat up to break the story about winter and summer going to war for good.

It won't free them from being ruled by stories but it will wipe the slate clean so they can form new stories. For at least some time the Fey will not know what every day will be like, or how the day will end. He doesn't even know how Cat will try to achieve this as he was very careful not to tell her what his expectations were.

[mclovin2016](#)

Thought a bell was 1 hour, not four... oh well 😊

*Cpt. Obvious*

It's probably related to old marine time keeping. A shift was four hours on, for hours off. The ships bell wS used to signal the time.

It's not a perfekt fit as the bell was rung every half hour. Once for the first, twice for the second and so on. To make it easier to count the bell was rung in a parrern of two. So for third bell it would be rung twice followed by a short pause and then once more. When you heard eight bells, or four groups of two if you like, it was time for a shift change. But the day was also divided into "bells". So you had Midday bell at 12, noon bell at 4, evening bell at 8 and so on. I don't know I ever learned all the names fort the bells in English so I'll

stop there rather than try to make some up and inevitably get them wrong.

OK, so I looked them up, and I had them wrong. They were called:

Middle watch 0000-0400

Morning watch 0400-0800

Forenoon watch 0800-1200

Afternoon watch 1200-1600

Dog watch 1600-2000

First watch 2000-2400

I've heard the "watches" called bells, but can't seem to find any confirmation online. Also the Dog watch was often divided into First and Second Dog watch.

*Onyavar*

The follow-up chapters are all already bring written, I just want to point out that I fully expect all that loot from summer to vanish back in creation. Fae gold.

[vuthuha912](#)

I don't know why but I am always angry when thinking about that highborn twit. What is he even talking about? They are fighting in the middle of enemy territory, he tries to stir up unrest among the commanders. What a fuckwit move. Don't you know that changing the commander in the middle of battle is extremely stupid. Did he want this operation to end up in smoke?

Please demote him immediately and bar him from taking military office. Don't even bother threaten him, Cat. Just punish him immediately. His stupid political move while facing a common enemy deserve an instant demotion at least. Some people might even call that treason as he has directly threaten the benefit of the Tower.

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## **Interlude: Commanders**

*"When historians try to pin down Foundling's methods they point to the Battle of the Camps or the Princes' Graveyard, but those came later. After she'd learned her trade. If you want to understand how she operated, look to the Battle of Four Armies and One – from the beginning to the end, she was playing an entirely different game from every other commander on the field."*



– Extract from “A Commentary on the Uncivil Wars”, by Juniper of the Red Shields

Nauk of the Waxing Moons was having an interesting day. He'd been woken up before dawn when the watch officers had been forced to break up a brawl between legionaries of the Fifteenth and the Twelfth: the enmity between Afolabi and the Boss had trickled down, and no one who'd been through Marchford and Liesse was inclined to leave any teeth in a mouth that talked shit about Catherine Foundling. The poor fuckers were lucky they'd not run into the Gallowborne when flapping their mouths: that grim collection of paleskins drew steel over things like that and didn't sheathe until the blade was red. The legate had been in a mood when he'd stepped to the scene, but Hakram already had it in hand. The men from the Twelfth were handed to their officers for discipline – and with Marshal Ranker looking over Afolabi's back no one was under the illusions they'd get off lightly – while his boys were dragged back into their part of the camp. Fighting among legionaries when in hostile territory drew sharper sanctions than just brawling: it would be a hard flogging for them. When Deadhand had said their punishment would be delayed until the return to Creation they'd smirked, but that had disappeared real quick when Hakram had added that to even it out he'd deliver the flogging himself.

Nauk fancied that the memory of his old friend stomping a fae noble by swinging a horse one-handed would scare them into acting like proper fucking legionaries for a few weeks at least.

“She made another enemy,” the legate grunted as he watched the last of them leave.

“He's Soninke old blood,” Deadhand replied. “Was never going to be a friend. He's more useful as an example regardless.”

The good thing about Hakram was that he didn't believe in kissing ass. Never had. If he said the Boss' decision to send a godsdamned general of Praes out of the room to clean her pipe like a misbehaving child had some sense to it, it meant he believed it. He wouldn't have been afraid to disagree openly if he did – not with only Nauk around to hear, anyway. The legate spat to the side.

“If you say so,” he said. “The Wallerspawns weren't moved, by my reckoning.”

The other orc's brow rose. Nauk scoffed.

“She speaks with a Laure accent, Hakram,” he said. “She's as much one of them as I am.”

"She'll still smack you in the mouth if she hears you say that word," he replied. "We have larger scores to settle than old grudges like that one. They're our allies, at least for now."

Easy for Deadhand to say. *His* grandfather hadn't died taking a run at the Wall. The old scrapper had been too deep in the Red Rage to retreat when the Watch came out in force, and ended up with his head on a spike for it. It might still be there for all he knew.

"Deoraithe, then," Nauk conceded in a grumble.

"Kegan's hard iron, I'll give you that," Hakram conceded in Kharsum. "But she was watching, and she'll remember next time she feels like pushing."

"Politics," Nauk snorted. "Glad you're the luckless bastard stuck dealing with those."

"Not that different from College alliances, when it gets down to it," Deadhand replied, turning to gaze out into the night. "Everybody wants something."

The legate grunted, conveying his general fucking distaste for Wasteland schemery.

"Grab what sleep you have left," Hakram finally said. "Tomorrow's a red day if there ever was one."

Nauk of the Waxing Moons grinned, baring ivory chops to the night.

"Looking forward to it," he said.

They got to the place by midmorning, and even as the rest of the armies dug in Nauk pawned off his duties to Commander Jwahir to study the grounds at his leisure. The Taghreb woman was a better hand at organizing, anyway. He'd picked her as his second for that very reason when he'd lost his brother so fucking senselessly at Three Hills. The same eerie road they'd used to get here continued to the north, supposedly reaching Aine and the seat of the Summer Court eventually. How long it would take to get there, no one had any idea. Apparently time was subjective in Arcadia, which sounded like the kind of shit the warlock's get babbled about after a few cups. Not close enough for whatever was in there to reinforce the opposition in time, which was the important part anyway. There was no sign of the enemy for now, and they'd checked. The woods to the east were empty, and thick enough besides you couldn't march in proper ranks through them. The hills to the west couldn't be marched through from the other side, as far as the goblins could tell, but that meant fuck all when the opposition had wings. If Nauk was in a betting mood,

he'd bet on Summer placing a nasty surprise in there to flank them where the lines were engaged.

At least this would be a defensive engagement. The kind of fight most of their host were best at. Wallerspawm liked to let the enemy come to them and they were heavy on bowmen besides, while Marshal Ranker's gang of cutthroats had the sharpest sappers in all the Legions. As for General Afolabi's Twelfth, their cognomen was *Holdfast*. They'd stopped a Callowan force twice their size from making it to the Siege of Summerholm, during the Conquest, by digging in and letting them die on their palisades. After losing a full kabili at the onset of the Liesse Rebellion and needing the Fifteenth to bail them out of the mess in Summerholm, those boys and girls would be eager to wipe off the black marks from their record. They'd fight with fire in their bellies no matter what came calling. The absence of reliable information about what *that* would be had been a stone in the large orc's boot for this entire expedition. Apparently there was going to be some kind of princess, but what the Hells did that mean? The legate was more interested in numbers and those were still anyone's guess. The almost thirty thousand assembled here were nothing to fuck with lightly, and Nauk would bet on them to handle up to twenty-five thousand Summer screamers no matter what nobles backed them.

Thirty thousand would be dicey, though. More than that and it was going to get bloody, and not in the way the legate enjoyed. The Fifteenth had been outnumbered before, at Three Hills, and outclassed at Marchford. But never both. Even the Boss would have a hard time pulling a win from that mess if it came down to it. *Speaking of*. Pretending he couldn't see Jwahir looking for him with her report-face, Nauk legged it as discreetly as an orc his size could. Catherine was sitting on one of the decadent cushioned chairs they'd looted back at the fortress, lounging like a lazy cat with that dragonbone pipe of hers. Nauk occasionally wondered if she knew what even just this much dragonbone was worth: you could buy a mansion in one of the better parts of Ater for the gold it would earn at an auction. She blew out a stream of smoke as he rested his elbows on the back of her chair, the wooden frame groaning in protest.

"Nauk," she greeted him.

She spoke his name the way it would be spoken in Kharsum. It was always eerie, when she used the tongue of his people. She had a flawless heartlands accent without having ever stepped a foot there – Name fuckery struck him as the guilty party there. The legate could the side of her face well, from this close. Sharp and high cheekbones that had gotten even sharper since she'd gone into Arcadia to exact her share of hide from Winter, tan skin had had gotten ever darker with all the marching in the sun they'd been doing of late. Whether she was pretty by human standards he

had no idea – she certainly had her fair share of people panting after her, though she'd ever only given Kilian the doe eyes. Nauk knew better than to ask how that had turned out. It hadn't escaped anyone's attention that the two of them had been keeping separate beds for months and that they rarely spoke directly to one another anymore.

"Cat," he growled back.

"Shouldn't you be preparing your men?"

The tone was casual, but he knew to take it seriously anyway. The Boss was nowhere as much of a hardass as Juniper, but she liked to run a tidy crew. Even those who'd been with her since Rat Company were expected to pull their weight.

"Jwahir has it in hand," he said. "I'll look it over later. There a reason you haven't made the portal?"

"I expect that they'll appear not long after I do," she replied, amused for some reason beyond him. "Better we dig in first."

"Gonna be a rough one, this," Nauk grunted. "Might take us more than a bell and a half to retreat if we're under fire the whole time. And the last ones to leave will be given a bitch of a fight."

He'd been standing close to her long enough to start feeling the cold now. Whatever she'd done in Winter it had changed her. Worse temper, though she'd never exactly been a delicate flower, and nowadays wherever she stood was always a mite frosty. Nauk didn't mind. It reminded him of home, of the Steppes in spring just after the snows melted. From his height he could see the corner of her mouth twitch. The blade-smile. Someone always ended up bleeding out on the ground before too long whenever she made it.

"Princess Sulia will be in command, on the other side," Cat said. "She was described to me once as having a "beautifully simplistic view of things"."

"Don't need to get fancy when you can torch everything all the time," Nauk said, admiration and disgruntlement warring for his tone.

"Dealing with someone like that is a lot like dealing with a hero," the Boss mused. "She'll enter the field thinking she knows the story ahead of her, because that's all she's ever known."

"I'm guessing that's not a nice story, for us," Nauk said.

"It's a story about invaders taking a beating as they try to retreat," she said. "Most likely capped with a last stand at the gate to cover the last of us fleeing."

"We taking the rearguard, then?" the legate asked.

Would be a fight to remember, that was for sure. He wasn't fond of the notion of sacrificing his *jesha* to cover other Legions and Wallers— *Deoraithe*, better he use that even in his mind, he wouldn't put it above her to be able to smell shit like this — but if that was what was needed to win the war he'd grind his fangs and take the reaming.

"Oh Gods no," Catherine laughed quietly. "Summer's going into this with the perception that our strategy is all about limiting losses. I didn't come here to flee limping, Nauk. I've come for *blood*."

Nauk felt his shoulders loosen and chuckled. Not because of the words, though they'd been reassuring enough, but because of the tone. *Quiet*. Catherine Foundling was always at her most dangerous, when she got quiet. Time to make that known across two worlds, he figured.

—

"The girl was right," Duchess Kegan said.

Adair shifted on his feet, watching the same sight she was. Countess Foundling had opened her gate but a half-hour ago, not long after the goblin had finished her preparations, and already the host of Summer was arriving. They were coming from the north down the road, as had been anticipated, but Kegan doubted that was the only direction they would strike from. This Princess Sulia had proved competent enough to annex most of southern Callow: she'd have more subtlety to her intent than a mere battering ram.

"About the timing only. She was wrong about the numbers," Adair said softly. "My men say over fifty thousand."

The ruler of Daoine closed her eyes, allowing herself the weakness only because no one but her old friend was close enough to see it. More than fifty thousand. They could barely afford to fight half that.

"Summer must have mobilized its full might to crush us," she finally said. "There cannot be anything but sentinels left in Creation."

"The Fifteenth and the Knightsbane's command were on the move due south when we crossed the gate," Adair noted. "She might have meant for all of us to serve as bait while they take back Dormer and Holden."

"Neither force is large enough to hold the cities, if Summer attacks afterwards," Kegan said, frowning.

"She is young," Adair shrugged. "And yet to be defeated. That breeds arrogance."

"She is not a fool," the duchess murmured. "Let us be careful to avoid the mistake of taking her for one. It would be a costly misstep to make."

And oh, what delicate dance it had been to deal with that terrifying child. Where the Carrion Lord had dug up this monster she did not know, for surely the stories about her being an Laurean orphan were a smokescreen for the truth. Obscure Imperial wards did not go on to win the kind of battles Catherine Foundling had, not after *two years*. Twice heroes had died at the girl's hand, devils and demons scattered by mortal men under her command, a resurrection forcefully snatched out of the hands of a descending Hashmallim. These were the signs of a legend in the making. If the Black Knight had ever been linked to one of the People, Kegan would have believed Foundling to be a child of his own blood raised in obscurity to avoid the knives of the High Lords. As this was not the case, she must have been found young and trained away from prying eyes to be unleashed as a weapon to suppress future Callowan rebellions. The villain's foresight never ceased to chill her blood, schemes decades in the making coming to fruit at precisely the right time.

Still, it seemed his weapon had gone slightly astray. She was on her way to becoming a power in her own right, and that meant she could be negotiated with. Kegan had early understood the same truth that Ranker – that rotten old bitch – clearly did: to prevent Foundling from realizing the strength of her position, the stick had to be used with only a rare carrot dangled. It was a careful balance to strike, given what they were dealing with. The Duchess of Daoine still felt her blood run cold when she remembered that slip of a girl glancing at a general of Praes, casually mentioning she could Speak to him if she wished. The implied threat had been lost on no one at that table. *Cross me and I will take away your free will, easy as snapping my fingers.* Gods, barely eighteen and she could already use her Name to impose her will on others. Not even the Carrion Lord had been this precocious and Kegan knew the terror of the man better than most. Her own aunt had been left an arrow-filled corpse in her own fortress when the Duni was still but a Squire, swatted down like a fly in inside of the most heavily defended fortresses on Calernia. Praes was not to be trifled with, not without very good reason.

The gruesome mantle of the Calamities was being passed to fresh Named, and though yet young these monsters would grow as dangerous as the old ones.

Adair stirred again and it claimed Kegan's attention. She followed his eyes and saw the host of the fae spreading across

the plain, facing the fortifications. Around sixty thousand she counted, revising upwards the earlier assessment. There were knights on winged horses that the duchess anticipated to be trouble even if they could not use sorcery, which seemed unlikely.

"The hills," Adair murmured.

There was, Kegan saw, a single person there. In a hooded cloak, leaning back against the slope as they sharpened a sword with a whetstone. At this distance, not even the Watch could get much more from eyesight. Whoever they were, they did not seem inclined to move from the height. A *chronicler*? Kegan wondered. It seemed odd for a scholar to be armed, or be here at all. She was debating sending scouts to make inquiries when movement emerged at the head of the army of Summer. Two silhouettes, both mounted. One pale and dark-haired with a perfect beard, wearing robes of woven flame and sunlight. A sword rested at his hip, no other weapon visible. The other was taller and there was no doubt about her identity: the Princess of High Noon was as the tales told, hair like fire and terrible to behold. Swirls of heat marred the air wherever she moved. The Princess Sulia was bearing a banner of truce, and rode halfway between the two awaiting armies before slamming the wooden shaft into the ground. Foundling's right hand found them not long after, the imposingly tall orc with the necromantic abomination at his wrist. He nodded politely, and etiquette dictated Kegan return the same. She did so grudgingly.

"Lady Foundling invites you to join the party that will meet with Summer," he said.

"Then I will do so," Kegan replied flatly. "This is more than we bargained for."

"It always is," the Adjutant smiled, sinisterly baring teeth. "You've seen the person in the hills?"

"We have," Kegan replied.

"She instructs they're to be left alone," the orc said.

"Why?" Kegan frowned.

"The exact words were "if that's who I think it is, we *really* don't want to get in her way"."

"Quaint," the duchess sneered, not allowing the uneasiness she felt to show.

An ally of Foundling's? No, it couldn't be. All the Named that followed her were accounted for. And if it was a Winter fae the army of Summer would have moved to attack them. It could not be the Wild Hunt, since this was not the seasons for it – only in

Spring and Autumn did these entities come into being. Too many factors were unknown to her on this battlefield and Kegan did not like it in the slightest. She joined the rest of the *diplomats* regardless. The Countess herself and Ranker were all of it: since the other side had not cluttered the grounds, there was no need for them to do so. The goblin's face was a mask, but the girl herself seemed remarkably at ease. Like they weren't walking to treat with demigods in the fullness of their power. *Monster*, Kegan thought. Only a monster would be half-smiling as they approached the fae.

"Princess Sulia, I presume?" Foundling said.

"Duchess of Moonless Nights," the creature replied.

It hurt to look at her for too long, Kegan found. Like staring into the sun.

"Word *does* spread fast," Foundling drawled, tone amused. "Who's the man with the sharp beard?"

"I am the Prince of Deep Drought," the fae said, and though his face was beautiful the hatred turned it ugly. "We finally meet, pawn of Winter."

The girl clucked her tongue.

"I'm at least a rook, really," she said. "There's no need to be insulting."

Was she really unaware that every time she spoke the fae shivered with the urge to kill her? Kegan wondered with dismay. Why had she even come to treat if she was only going to taunt them?

"You wanted to talk," Ranker interrupted.

It was adding insult to injury for Kegan to ever have to feel *thankful* towards the likes of that withered old prune.

"Surrender," Princess Sulia ordered, and there was a weight to the tone that almost made Kegan want to kneel. "All of you may still swear yourselves to Summer. Only the broken thing wearing Winter's seal needs to die today."

"It's always refreshing to meet someone who's worse at diplomacy than I am," Foundling noted, seemingly impressed.

The Duchess of Daoine gritted her teeth. Was the girl still pretending she'd not carefully used Kegan's enmity with Ranker to get her way more often than not, baiting them to argument only to come in as a "mediator" at the last moment? Not even the Carrion Lord was this smug a manipulator – the Knight had the decency not to pretend he was doing anything but taking what he wanted from



you. The Princess of High Noon ignored the Named, instead turning her eyes to the sole goblin.

"You need not die pointlessly, mortal," she said. "The laws of Summer will shield you after you swear allegiance."

The goblin's burned hand clutched tight until her sharp nails drew blood on her own palm. She met the fae's eyes with a grin full of fine fangs.

"I am a Marshal of the Legions of Terror, you pretentious tart," she said. "I live by only one law: *one sin, one grace*. You want my surrender? Come and take it."

The fae's eyes turned to Kegan, and she'd steeled herself. She felt what Ranker must have, the crushing weight on her shoulders that wasn't even an exertion of power – the Princess of High Noon did this just by sparing a mortal a sliver of her attention.

"I am a Duchess of Daoine," Kegan replied coldly. "I answer to neither god nor men, much less the likes of *you*."

"Quarter will not be offered twice," the Prince of Deep Drought said, tone sad. "It is not yet too late."

"Speaking of that," Foundling said, popping her neck with a gruesome cracking sound. "If you want to avoid me beating you like a rented mule it's not too late to make peace. I'll need hostages and reparations, of course, but you can still get away with losing only a hand."

*We are going to die*, Kegan realized with crystal-clear clarity. *We are going to die because whatever the Carrion Lord did to teach this child broke her mind.*

"Did you think we wouldn't notice the Prince of Nightfall's stench wafting from the woods?" the Prince of Deep Drought mocked. "He only had time to bring a third of Winter with him. You are outnumbered still."

The duchess glanced east, where there was still no sign of anything in the woods. Had the fae been tricked, or had the scouts? There was a game at play here and she knew neither the rules nor the players.

"I'm trying to be merciful here," Foundling said, and the lie was so insultingly blatant Kegan almost cringed. "Are you really going to spit on my goodwill?"

The Princess of High Noon did and the ground where she'd spat caught fire.

"Ah well, I tried," Foundling grinned, and it was an unpleasant thing to watch. "See you soon."

—

The fae held to the terms of the truce, the enemy army not beginning to move before the three of them had returned to the fold. A part of Ranker was sharply curious about whether they were respecting truce terms as they were held in Calernia or whether the concept of truce as known to Calernia had initially come from Arcadia, which was widely held to have existed before Creation itself. A matter for another time. She'd slip the question in her correspondence with Tikoloshe, the staggeringly ancient incubus might have an inkling. The Marshal had planned the defences of the allied armies without the knowledge of there being reinforcements from Winter inbound, if there truly were reinforcements inbound. She'd had eyes on Foundling's little raider ever since he'd first come to Denier, and though her scouts had lost track of him after the fortress her people had noticed the large amount of mages who'd disappeared with him. Was that the Squire's plan? Using the Count of Olden Oak and some unknown ritual to pretend Winter had sent troops, faking the presence of some powerful Winter fae. Wekesa's son took orders from her, so he might have coughed out a few secrets before she set out on her journey north. That would be deep cunning and deep planning, however, and she'd not struck Ranker as that kind of villain so far.

If false, it was the kind of bluff that could easily be called. It might gain them some time, but not much and not enough to affect the outcome. The evacuation had already begun, with the supply – and loot – carts leaving first. The former Matron saw the logic in it. They'd have to be taken across eventually, and this kept as much military strength on the field as possible for as long as possible. The Deoraithe regulars were slated to go through next, with the rest of the order to be determined as the battle unfolded. Ranker had been watching the Squire's movements carefully since it had come out she had some scheme in play, but gotten little information for it. After the gate out was opened Foundling had some of her few remaining mages scry across, and established contact for a few moments before breaking off. Her own mages had been listening in, and no words or images had gone through. Ranker, she-who-has-the-bearing-of-one-of-high-rank in the stonetongue and one-meant-to-stand-above-others-mercilessly in matrontongue, had been through more red days than any other goblin alive. She'd been warring in the Eyries when the Calamities were still in their cradles, she'd killed her way through the civil war and the Conquest and a dozen minor actions besides.

For the first time in many years, though, she felt like she was walking in deepest dark. The Squire was mad, this was obvious. All Named were, the successful ones merely managed to make that madness methodical the way Amadeus and the Empress had. And even with those two, one could glimpse the cliff edge and the

sharp drop that followed. Sadly, that meant Ranker genuinely could not tell whether Foundling has been taunting the fae royalty because she was confident in victory or because she was too far gone to be able to conceptualize her own defeat. Even if this Prince of Deep Draught – and Gobbler take them all, weren't these titles even more pretentious than the ones Wastelanders jerked each other off with? – was correct and there were Winter fae in the woods, unless there were a great many more hiding than the twenty thousand implied this was still not a winning hand for the allied armies. The only visible unknown factor was that madwoman in the hills, and Ranker had needed no instructions from the Squire to steer clear of that. Putting aside that nothing good had ever come of an army picking a fight with a single mysterious stranger, Ranker had seen that ugly hooded cloak before.

There were some kinds of crazy not even goblins were willing to touch, and that one definitely qualified.

The Marshal's general staff gathered around her as the fae began their march, questions painted on their faces. Aabir, her Staff Tribune, took one look at her and grimaced. He'd known her for a long time, long enough to read the truth off her if she wasn't trying to lie.

"She still hasn't told us the plan," he said. "This is madness, ma'am. How can we be expected to fight when we don't know all the forces at work?"

"It makes sense, in a way," Kachera Tribune Saddler said more cautiously. "We do not know how well fae can scry in their own realm. We cannot leak a plan we are not aware of."

Ranker raised her black hand and was granted immediate silence.

"As as I see it, there are two options here," she said. "One, Black's Name rotted his mind and he went the way of the Old Tyrant, appointing a raging imbecile as his successor. If that's the case, even if we're not dead today we'll be in a few years. There's other wars around the corner."

Procer, she did not need to say. They all had the rank to be in the know.

"And two?" Saddled asked, eyes blinking sleepily.

He was getting old, wasn't he? And to think he was merely forty.

"Two, the Squire is the kind of brilliant that walks hand in hand with crazy and stupid," Ranker said. "I'm choosing to put my faith in Black. Make your own choices, but whatever they are get ready for a hard ride. The fae mean business – expect to have two sorcerers on par with the Wizard of the West pounding us."

Dangling a bit of hope, appealing on the worship of Amadeus that had become as much a part of the Legions as the singing and the drills and then an immediate threat to prepare for. It should be enough to keep their minds on the battle. Ranker wished she could be so easily distracted, but she was too old to fool herself. She climbed onto the platform she'd had raised to get a decent view of the battle, her bones protesting the indignity before she settled on a cushion. At her sides messengers, mages able to scry and signal officers stood ready for orders. Afolabi would have a similar set up on his side of the fortifications, and he was enough of a professional his grudge against Foundling would be put aside for the battle. *You poor fool*, she thought. *You should be more worried about her grudge against you. The girl's Callowan, they gnaw on those like bones.* She dismissed the thought and turned her eyes to the battle, to Summer on the march. Ranker had prepared the plain for a hard battle, and today she would get to see how fae died.

The allied camp consisted of two ringed wooden palisades, with the gate in the centre. There was an avenue with smaller movable barricades going straight through, punctuated with two sets of rough but solid wooden gates. Ahead of the first palisade she'd had her sappers dig a trench ten feet deep with spikes at the bottom, which had unfortunately limited how much work she'd been able to order on the plain. There were weight-triggered demolition charges buried according to the Third Delay Pattern she had herself designed during the civil war, but she didn't expect to see much death from those. The lily field was what would blood them, closer to the trench. An array of pits three feet deep with a sharpened stake at the bottom, hidden under branches and dead grass. The prince and princess had retreated into their ranks for the offensive, warier than the Marshal would have thought. The chit in the south must have bled them at some point for them to be this careful. Might yet work out to her advantage, Ranker decided. The first line was the same infantry they'd seen earlier in their expedition through Summer, and it kept advancing until across seven points in that line demolition charges blew.

The spray of blood and flesh had long ceased being exciting and turned into cold mathematics, coin put into tools that killed men but could have been spent otherwise. The assessments in her unspoken records shifted with every battle. Though the damages had been minimal, the enemy could only guess at the concentration of charges and it stopped them from advancing. Right out of the farthest bow range they'd shown at the fortress, as she had meant them to. The wings of the three first ranks of the fae lit up and Ranker glanced away, their trajectory already happening in her mind. The winged cavalry in the back wasn't moving, as she'd guessed it would not. The Watch was being kept in reserve to deal with them, but it seemed that her assessment that the knights would only strike after the fight was engaged was correct. Ahead

of her agonized cries sounded, so Ranker deigned return her attention closer to camp. Two for two, it seemed. The Princess of High Noon had only figured that there would be demolition charges ahead of the trench, and so sent a first wave to clear them and gain a foothold. Instead they'd gone straight into the lily field and were bleeding out like stuck pigs with the sappers on the outer wall tossed sharpeners to clear out those who'd landed on solid ground.

Now the fight began, as the second wave that had taken flight moments after the first landed in the shreds of meat and bone that were their comrades. The lily patches had been revealed, so they managed an actual landing this time. If Princess Sulia had meant for them to then attack the walls Ranker would have called her a fool, since they could have directly assaulted the walls. But that wasn't the intent at all, was it? The third wave, right behind the second, was the one to assault. The second was bringing up bows, finally in range to use those devastating fire arrows that had harassed the allied camps on the march here. The Legions fired their crossbows straight into the bowmen in good order, while the Deoraithe standing between the first and second wall sent a volley into the sky at the fae headed for the wall. A costly trade off, Ranker saw. Legion crossbowmen took their toll but the enemy fired back and fires bloomed across the palisade, hurriedly put off with sand and dirt. There were damned holes in the outer wall, and when the enemy infantry came marching in they would have breaches ready for them. As for the bloody useless Deoraithe, they barely killed a hundred. Shooting fae in the sky was like trying to shoot a fish in the ocean.

The melee at the outer palisade began in earnest, but Ranker wasn't worried about that. The legionaries would hold steady against numbers that low. The other waves in flight were more worrying, one to back the bowmen and the other the vanguard. But most worrying of all was the dozen fae that rode out of the ranks in a scattered line and raised their hands. A rolling wave of flame swept across the plain and the Marshal's dead hand twitched. One after another, her charges blew from the sorcerous heat. A field full of potholes but clear of dangers ahead of them, the fae infantry resumed their advance. The Marshal felt a grudging sliver of respect for the Princess that was her opponent. She'd been willing to send a few thousand into the grinder just to keep the enemy busy while she prepared a clear way forward for the rest. That was the kind of decisiveness that won battles. Not, however, if she could help it. Ranker gestured for one of her mages to come closer.

"All mage lines," she said. "Wave fireballs to knock the fae out of the sky before they land on the outer palisade. Steady, constant."

The order went across smoothly and the broad balls of flame that bloomed got the situation under control. Trying to kill Summer fae with fire was like trying to drown a salmon, but the impact was enough knock them down. Those that try to fly above instead ate arrows as the Deoraithe finally began pulling their weight. Outer palisade was in hand, for now, but the fae army was hungrily devouring the distance as it charged forward. That was, Ranker saw, when Winter struck. The darker half of the Fair Folk did not come announced. It moved in silence, a tidal wave of warriors adorned with dead wood and black stone that struck the eastern Summer flank like a snake. At their head a one-eyed man rode a horse of shadows, the spear in his hand glinting of murder. They were impressive to watch, but the Marshal did not care how fucking impressive they were. She watched for numbers, and found only the twenty thousand the Prince of Deep Drought had sneered at. The same numbers pulled off the flank of Summer in good order, slowing the assault some but not by enough. If these were all the cards Foundling had to play, the battle was a loss slowly crawling to them.

The wave of infantry hit the outer palisade and the legionaries buckled. Deoraithe reinforced them, but there was only so much room and the fae *kept coming*. Ranker could see the rest of the battle play out in her mind. They'd hold, at least until Winter began to break. Then the pressure would strengthen and they'd lose the outer palisade. And then inch by inch they would die, painting the ground of Arcadia red. Summer would lose half its army, she thought. But it would win, and only wisps of the army that had come into Arcadia would escape through the gate.

"Marshal," her Senior Mage's voice whispered urgently.

She'd not heard him coming to her side, deep in thought as she had been.

"I'm listening," she said.

"Lady Squire's mages scryed across the gate again," he said.

Ranker licked her teeth.

"Same as last time?" she asked.

"Just a contact, then nothing," he agreed, then flinched and turned west.

The madwoman was still sitting on her perch, the former Matron saw. No, what had drawn her officer's attention was the gate that had just opened in front of the hills.

"Kolo, what is that?" she said.

"A gate, Marshal," the Senior Mage replied.

"I can see that," the goblin snarled. "Where is it from?"

"Creation," he whispered.

There was a sound then, that Ranker had not heard in twenty years. A horn, but not the large horns the Legion used. The kind of blowing horn that someone could carry in hand. Once, twice, thrice the call went out. *All knights charge*, it meant. That call had not shuddered across a battlefield since the Fields of Streges, and the Marshal was not ashamed to admit she felt the age-old shiver when the knights of Callow charged through the gate, killing lances down as they whistled through the air. The banner she did not recognize, a bell of bronze with a jagged crack through it set on black. Three thousand of the finest cavalry Calernia had ever seen ploughed into the western flank of Summer and Ranker began laughing.

"Oh, you conniving bitch," she said breathlessly. "You never intended for us to evacuate, did you?"

Eyes bright, one of the only three Marshals of Praes rose to her feet.

"Orders," she said, facing her mages. "My dears, do I have orders."

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### [\*greatwyrmgold\*](#)

Geez. Catherine's only beaten one demon, tricked one fae, and flipped off one angel, and people already think the Calamities must have trained her from birth. If things keep escalating, people are going to say she's the illegitimate child of the Dead King and Empress Triumphant (may she never return) by the end of the series.

### [\*Barthumphries\*](#)

She's actually Emperor Traitorous.

"How do you know that you're not actually me?"

"I don't, but if I were I certainly wouldn't abdicate to you."

"Hmm, good point."

### *SagaDuWyrms*

I bet she's the reincarnation of Triumphant. Either that or some God got bored and decided to see what a child of The and Amadeus would be like.

*NerfContessa*

Hilarious.

Honestly, how do we know traitorous the 1st and his successors are actually dead?

[tmeenaks](#)

I wouldn't even be dissapointed in that case. Traitorous is my favourite emperor by far. I mean, Triumphant's cool and her her "Why not" line was undeniably great, and there was also the empress who had a pit full of man-eating tapirs if I remember correctly, but Traitorous is just so goofy. That quote from the Order of Unholy Obsidian actually made me laugh.

*darkaxz*

Traitorous is one of my favorites too. Him and Irritant.

*Kai Wingless*

"I've yet to encounter a situation that couldn't be improved by a copious amount of lies and body doubles."  
– Dread Emperor Traitorous

[MrPicklesAndTea](#)

I can't wait for Empress Triumphant to return.

*Poetically Psychotic*

I actually saw this one coming, not that I expect that to make it any less awesome next chapter. What was a delightful surprise is how the other generals see her as an enigmatic and possibly deranged mastermind, rather than an engine of brute force who has become exceptionally good at applying it in just the right place. The end result is the same, but trying to plan for one when your opponent is the other will only end in misery and blood.

*Bart\_KF*

"Quarter will not be offered twice," the Prince of Deep Drought said, tone sad. "It is not yet too late."

"Speaking of that," Foundling said, popping her neck with a gruesome cracking sound. "If you want to avoid me beating you like a rented mule it's not too late to make peace. I'll need hostages and reparations, of course, but you can still get away with losing only a hand."



*We are going to die, Kegan realized with crystal-clear clarity. We are going to die because whatever the Carrion Lord did to teach this child broke her mind.*

This is far from the first time this story made me laugh, but god damn was it an impressive one. Even better that this is exactly what an uninitiated witness to Catherine Foundling's Godsdamn Ridiculous Antics should be thinking right now. It fits right into the story of They Never Saw It Coming.

*gamingamingaming*

Wow, it's going to be so crazy when Empress Triumphant (may she never returns) returns

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## Chapter 28: Gambits

*"I've yet to encounter a situation that couldn't be improved by a copious amount of lies and body doubles."*

– Dread Emperor Traitorous

Well, it'd taken two years and some change but I was finally on the right side of a cavalry charge. And all it had cost me to get there was a lot of murdering, and that one spot of high treason.

The thoughts were flippant, but the sight before me killed the urge to continue in that vein. Three thousand knights of Callow were breaking through the western flank of the fae, taking death with them wherever they went as they carried the banner I'd named on a spur. I'd read about the chivalric orders, the men and women who had once been the pride of the Kingdom, and I thought I'd understood the kind of weight they could bring to bear. I'd been very, very wrong about that. Two thousand fae died in the blink of an eye, pierced by lances and trampled by destriers. It wasn't that the knights were gifted with eldritch power, not like the Watch. They were mortals through and through, though trained in war since they could walk. Neither were they like the paladins of the Order of the White Hand, sworn to fight Evil and made able to call on lesser miracles for it. Or so the old books said, anyway. The Order had been long buried by the time I was born, Black destroying it in an exceedingly thorough manner so that no hero would ever rise from their scattered ranks. No lost daughter of the White Hand would ever claim an old birth right and bring rebellion to Callow.

No, they were just Callowans. I watched a gout of flame splash against the breastplate of a long-haired woman and leave it untouched. Just Callowans, but no babes in the woods for it. The knights of Callow had not been forged by the old wars with the Principate, though enough of those were fought. No, they were the answer of the Kingdom to the sorceries of the Wasteland. There was a reason a Warlock could not simply wave his hand and burn a thousand of them to ashes. *Clad in steel and prayer*, the old song went. Hymns from the House of Light were carved into their armaments, mere grooves in steel until sorcery touched them. Then they glimmered, and magic slid like droplets off a duck's back. It was not immunity: they could still be harmed through the protection, often had been, but it was telling that when Black had thought to break them he had turned to orcs and pikes instead of whatever madness Warlock could have unleashed. In front of goblin steel, the armaments of the knights were armour like any other. There was a lesson in there. The chivalric orders had been founded to check a threat, and when the nature of that threat changed they were caught flatfooted and destroyed.

Today, though? I'd found them an enemy that could not, *would* not change.

"Captain Firasah," I said, and the mage at my side stiffened. "Word from the other side?"

"She has gone through, ma'am," the one-eyed Taghreb replied.

Firasah had been one of the mage officer who'd tried to scry the Summer forces when the Fifteenth had still been in Summerholm. She was one of the lucky ones – she'd excised her eye before the burns from the backlash could spread across half her face. Not all the mages had been so fortunate. She'd hesitated when I'd told her we would be scrying Winter while on the march, but as I'd thought my title shielded the mages from the frozen fury that had poured through the connection. It had done little to soothe the Prince of Nightfall's temper, when I'd found him, but the bait of Summer crippled I had dangled had been too tempting for him to resist. The lateness of the arrangement had limited what forces he could bring, though, more than I would have wished. Another ten thousand fae would have made it all much easier. He'd taken another royal with him along for the ride: the Princess of Silent Depths. They'd asked for prizes and to know my plans.

Naturally, I'd lied.

"Good," I replied quietly, closing my eyes.

I'd begun this battle thinking I was aware of every string being pulled. Winter was out for blood and plunder, unquenchable hunger in their bellies. Kegan and Ranker wanted to leave Arcadia as soon as possible, convinced this fight could only be measured in shades of defeat. And Summer? Summer wanted to crush me. To turn

the quibbling mortals who'd dared step foot in their domain to ashes. I'd understood that before the other two commanders in my army, because I had an advantage they didn't. I still remembered that hard-bitten hatred I'd felt after crossing the gate, when I'd gazed upon the moonlit field. It didn't matter, whether or not it made tactical sense for the Princess of High Noon to withdraw from Creation to assail us. She *had* to. It was in her nature. I was of Winter, and Summer could never shy from a challenge as brazen as the one I'd issued. This battle had always been a certainty. It was a matter, then, of stacking the odds in my favour. I needed a story, or at least an engagement that had the shape of one. A larger Summer force blundering into a trap had served that purpose, leaving me only with the need to, well, make an actual trap.

So I'd spared the Count of Olden Oak, though through his actions he had earned an ugly death at my hands one day. Because a fae of count rank could *open gates*. Not gates like mine, sadly, but their ability to sort of step through the boundary protecting Creation could be extended to a group. Like half of Robber's cohort, along with enough mages to keep the Count of Olden Oak suppressed by layered wards. Iron knives had to be taken to him to convince him of making the gate, sadly, since the flame of Summer inside him made Speaking ineffective. Robber had been able to take care of it. He'd gleefully informed me that the College had an entire week of classes dedicated to the subject, along with the question of 'how much torture is too much torture'. The answer was apparently more complicated than I'd assumed. The goblin's assertion that it was an old cadet favourite along with the class about why 'vast and terrible powers' were not a valid reason to lack a supply train, I chose not to think too much about.

When back in Creation, his orders were to scry Juniper in a hurry. Depending on where the Fifteenth was relative to where he emerged with the Count, there could be two options. The first was that the legion would be too far too join up in time for the battle, in which case he was to simply call for the knights to ride in haste ahead of the infantry. The other was to bring all he could across and smash the fae flank according to the directions I gave him. I'd confirmed, before the beginning of the fight, that the second situation had come to unfold. On the other side of the portal that had just opened the entire Fifteenth was arrayed, and by now they would have begun to cross. So would Apprentice and Archer: the person who'd been on the other side of the scrying I'd arranged the moment I opened the gate was Masego, Captain Firasah was certain of it. Good. Then I could proceed according to what I'd meant this fight to be instead of a lesser scenario. Wiping out Summer in full here would be too much to hope for, I was aware. We were too deep in their territory for that. But if I played my cards right, I might just get what I needed to fight this war on my terms.

The thing was, when I'd left Marchford I'd been thinking of taking a force through Arcadia as a risky gamble that would allow me to steal a march on the Diabolist. After all, everybody knew fae were stronger in Arcadia. Able to use more of their power. The assumption of every commander in this war had been that I would try to fight them in Creation, where the grounds were more to my advantage. But were they really? The thought had been in the back of my mind since Laure. I could concentrate the Legions and the army of Daoine in the south and try to smash the Summer Court there, but that would be *costly*. We'd lose thousands in that fight, and thousands more would be too wounded to be of any use when I put down Akua. If I got Winter involved, that meant letting rapacious fae loose in Callow under the command of an entity I'd have a hard time handling, much less killing if it came to that. And even if I won, then what? Maybe we chewed half their number before they retreated having cost us twice that much, and then they would just pop out from somewhere else. The Fifteenth and whoever else I dragged with me were perhaps the most mobile force on Calernia at the moment, but the fae had the same advantage and they were better at using it.

So if I didn't want them to waltz past my army and burn Callow from the Waning Woods to the Silver Lake, I needed to dictate where they had to go. The way Juniper had done to me in our first war games, giving me her flag so she could be certain where I'd be instead of waiting out the days to a draw. The first place and moment I knew they'd be for sure? Here. Today. I had to bleed them hard here, because Arcadia was the only place where I could make their numbers meaningless. As long as I had the story on my side today, I could butcher them in droves in a way I simply couldn't in Creation without losing thousands myself. I couldn't end them here, that was true. There would be a second battle, and to be able to dictate when and where that one happened I was going to have to get a little... reckless. This was the only chance I'd get, which meant we were returning to the old standard of all or nothing. I'd never lost that bet before, and I didn't intend on starting today.

Most everything had been going the way I wanted it to, which was why I'd been less than surprised when Ranger had shown up. There was no doubt it was her: I knew that cloak for my Name dreams. I'd swiftly given orders to not provoke her in the slightest – as I understood it she refrained from killing Praesi for sport more out of courtesy for Black than any real fondness, and that might go out the window the moment someone irritated her. I'd thought she might be here for the Prince of Nightfall, to collect a second eye for her jewellery, but she'd not stirred when he'd come out. And she'd made no move against Princess Sulia, which had been my other guess. That was... not good. Were it someone else I would have presumed she was waiting for the fae to tire themselves out against each other before sweeping in, but that went against my understanding of Ranger. If she was here for a

fight, she'd wanted whoever she was fighting at their peak. The longer she refrained from getting involved the more nervous I got, but what the Hells could I do about it? I was pretty sure I could take Archer, if I needed to, but the other Named had been pretty frank about the kind of margin her teacher outclassed her by.

That had pretty blatant implications about how that fight would go if I picked it, which I *really* didn't want to.

I opened my eyes and watched the battle. I still had cards to play, more than the opposition probably thought, but if I wanted to make this a win I'd have pick the right moment. To the east, Summer and Winter clashed. The centre of Winter's line was made up of a chunk of five thousand of my old buddies the deadwood soldiers, and they were chewing up the Summer regulars real bad. The flanks, though, were made up of the same rabbled that had assaulted Marchford – and they were taking a bloody beating. The tricks that had worked on my legionaries left other fae indifferent, and unlike the Summer fae those twits didn't fight in a proper battle line. *Warriors against soldiers*, I thought. My 'allies' had to take out their heavies early when the left flank wavered, a thousand Riders of the Host on their murderous unicorns charging out of the woods to slam into the enemy and take off the pressure. The winged knights of Summer took flight, though, and with matching numbers on both sides there was only one way that scarp would go. The battle in the sky above them wasn't going beautifully either.

Princess Sulia and her easily offended patsy had lit up their wings and flown above to scrap with the Prince of Nightfall and the Princess of Silent Depths, and watching that go down made me want to wince. The Winter prince opened with filling the sky with a howling blizzard, which the Princess of High Noon promptly screamed out of existence. Just screamed. Not even fire or anything. That must have been embarrassing. Watching the Summer royalty fight was giving me a notion of what it must have been like watching Apprentice and I go all out. Sulia kept the Winter royals busy up close and personal while the Prince of Deep Drought lashed out with sorcery. The Princess of Silent Depths slowed them down some when she called on some kind of power whose weight could be felt even from where I stood, bringing down crushing pressure that dented the ground under them – pulping fae from both sides in the process – and nearly knocked the Summer pair out of the sky. Didn't last long, though, and Princess Sulia retaliated by hacking her arm off and smashing the Prince of Nightfall's nose with it. I would have admired her style, if I wasn't next in line on her kill list.

It was unfolding like a lesson on why Winter got whipped whenever it came to a battle, and though they were holding for now – Silent Depths made herself a brand new arm out of ice and

promptly tried to strangle the prince on the other side with it – that hourglass was going to run out eventually. Couldn't let that happen, much as I would have liked for the Prince of Nightfall to become an object lesson about why trying to use me was a bad idea. I still had a use for them.

The east was going more smoothly. Regulars of the Fifteenth were establishing a beachhead as they continued crossing, though it would take a while before there were enough to be effective. Apprentice had told me months ago he'd be able to turn fae into portal-makers of my own calibre, given a prisoner of sufficient rank, but I couldn't help but notice the portal he'd finagled was noticeably smaller than mine. I suspected there was another lecture about the ins and outs of turning fae into fodder for runic arrays on the horizon, and I wasn't looking forward to it. As for the knights of Callow, well, they'd carved their way through what must have been four thousand fae before withdrawing in good order. They would have taken more if the fae in front of them had not taken to the air instead of docilely allowing themselves to be run down. Now the Summer soldiers were attempting volleys, but even their tricky little fire arrows weren't swift enough to catch up to good cavalry on the move. The knights rode out of range, losing only score of men to the fire: heavy plate armour was nothing to sneer at, and without the fire sorcery those arrows were little different from mundane ones.

They formed up again and began wheeling around to take the fae in the back, to my delight. A few thousand Summer regulars had hastily formed a line where they'd been charging before, only to find themselves facing nothing. It took the edge off the mass attacking the walls of my camp as well, and on that side Afolabi's legionaries were teaching the fae how the Twelfth had earned its name. I might not like the man, but when it came to war he knew his business. I could already see a threat forming, though for now the advantage was ours. The fae who'd been readying themselves to weather another cavalry charge had nothing but a few hundred legionaries of the Fifteenth in front of them, and if they took it into their head to take that gate there wasn't much Juniper could do about it from her side. I'd have to give them something else to worry about.

"Captain," I said. "Get the message across: they're to meet me on the field. They just need to find the loudest screaming."

"Ma'am," Firasah saluted.

I rolled my shoulders under the plate. Shame I couldn't have prayers carved into it like the knights, but considering I'd kind of sold my soul to the Gods Below odds were all I'd get from that was charred skin. Well, maybe not sold. It'd been a little too casual for that, wasn't like I'd had a scribe make the transaction official. Pawned felt more accurate. I sent a runner

to Nauk and watched as all around the central avenue of the camp barricades were set aside. Hakram came to me side not long after, fresh from the fighting on the outer palisades. His axe was slick with red and his pauldron cut straight through. His good mood was evident.

"Sortie?" he asked.

"About that time," I agreed, tying my hair in a ponytail.

I shut the claps of my helmet and slid on my gauntlets, flexing the armoured fingers carefully. Good. They might not be much help against a proper fae blade, but they did ensure that whenever I punched something it broke.

"Duchess Kegan sends word that she'll have regulars and the Watch follow," Adjutant said. "Since those winged knights aren't coming from us."

"Numbers?"

"Nine thousand total," the tall orc said. "Marshal Ranker is of the opinion that pulling off more will weaken the walls too much."

When it came to sieges, at least, I was inclined to follow the old goblin's lead. She'd been the one to mastermind the taking of Summerholm and Laure, during the Conquest.

"They're pulled as close and thick as we'll get them," I noted.

"She said the same thing," Adjutant grinned, like the ugly green cat who'd caught the bluejay. "First blooming before we begin our countercharge."

"You know, I'm sure there's a lot of things Summer is ready for," I mused. "Magic, flying fortresses, Named. Goblin engineering, though? I doubt it's one of them."

Nauk's two thousand formed into an avenue-wide battering ram, heavies at the front, and the Deoraithe readied behind them. I took the front, with Hakram at my side and the remains of the Gallowborne clustered around me. Behind us, near the centre of the camp, the sound of gears and pulleys releasing filled the air. A dozen ballista bolts tipped with cold iron screamed through air, followed a heartbeat later by trebuchet stones. The Gallowborne opened the gates wide for me, and in front of us I saw scores of fae bleeding on the ground even as the ranks ahead were punctured with rocks the size of horses. Ranker had been kind enough to soften the opposition for us, and would continue pounding at the flanks as we drove forward. Gods was I glad the fae disdained machinery.

"FIFTEENTH," I called out, unsheathing my sword. "FORWARD."

All the Hells broke loose, but for once we were the damned.

---

[\*erraticerrata\*](#)

Extra Chapter for the month is in the usual tab and linked here:  
<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/09/04/closure/>  
Titled "Closure", it's from the POV of Dread Empress Malicia.

*danh3107*

Good chapter as always, even though it left me Blue Balled.

*Rnt169*

IKR

*Laberlampe*

Damn this was good and its not even finished.

*stevenneiman*

Typo thread:

"Or so they old books, anyway." I'm not sure what this was supposed to say

"he first was that the legion would be too far [too->to] join up in time for the battle"

"according to the directions I [have->gave] him"

"I knew that cloak for my Name dreams"

"[One] someone else I would have presumed [she] was waiting for the fae to tire themselves out"

"If she was here for a fight, she'd [wanted->want] whoever she was fighting at their peak"

"made up of the same [rabbled->rabble] that had assaulted Marchford"

In other news, I'm really looking forward to more of this. I'm also interested in reading about how Malicia feels about Cat's little spot of high treason though, so I'll keep reading and wait for the next chapter.

[\*Hakurei06\*](#)

Not sure, but wouldn't it be "for once, we were not the damned."



Since fate generally conspires to put Squire against a wall whenever possible?

*Byzantine*

She's saying they are the things breaking loose from Hell.

*nerfworld*

Legion of the damned i think

Usually there the ones facing the equivalent in the event

In this case the Legion is the doom-bringer and summer is the hopeless army

*Stachy*

"The east was going more smoothly."

I think the gate the knights rode through was opened on the western flank?

"I might not like [he -> the] man"

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

The following lines are so garbled I don't have any clue what they are supposed to be:

*Or so they old books, anyway*

And

*The goblin's assertion that it was an old cadet favourite along with the class about why 'vast and terrible powers' were not a valid reason to lack a supply train, I chose not to think too much about.*

And

*One someone else I would have presumed she was waiting for the fae to tire themselves out*

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

There should be a paragraph break between these sentences:

Pawned felt more accurate. I sent a runner to Nauk and watched.  
..

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Oh, and the line that begins "Ol' One Eye" is VERY confusing. I had to stop reading to try and remember how Marshall Grem got there, then I wondered if EE meant to say Ranker there,

but that didn't work either. THEN finally I remembered that it was referring to one of the fae.

I think it really needs to be changed or clarified.

[nineran](#)

I think this may be a typo:

"Since those winged knights aren't coming [from->for] us."

"I knew that cloak [for->from] my Name dreams"

[nineran](#)

Also,

"I'd begun this battle thinking I was aware of every string being pulled."

this makes me think that she's about to be proved wrong, but then I see nothing to support that theory; she's talking about all the strings she knows. The only string she doesn't know about is Ranger, and that note about nervousness is a para or two away. Some rearrangement may be called for?

[Barthumphries](#)

typo

were made up of the same rabbled that had assaulted Marchford  
Change rabbled to rabble

*George*

Body doubles huh? Mysterious.

You've put out a beautiful pair of chapters this week, erratic!

*amc*

seconded. is it Ranger that's doubled? She's the only one that we only have "visual" confirmation of...

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

What the Hells are you talking about? The body doubles line was from the quote at the opening of the chapter!

*nick012000*

So, the Knights of Callow's "thing" is anti-magic armor. Makes sense for that sort of thing to work quite well against enemies that rely heavily on magic like pre-Malicia/Black Praes, and why

they failed so badly when the Praesi made physically-superior non-magical infantry.

*M*

One of their things. They can have more.

*cmonnow*

@people-wondering-two-chapters-ago-about-tactical-decisions

[[" It didn't matter, whether or not it made tactical sense for the Princess of High Noon to withdraw from Creation to assail us. She had to. It was in her nature. "]]

...yup...

*ICSM*

"I might not like the man, but when it came to war he knew his business."

My new headcanon is that Calernia is a continent in Eternia, and that whenever Cat becomes Queen, her castle will be called Grayskull.

*Dianna*

Yes!

Or should I rather say: HEYYEYAAEYAAA EYAEYAA!

[nextgidea](#)

"What the pupil must learn, if he learns anything at all, is that the world will do most of the work for you, provided you cooperate with it by identifying how it really works and aligning with those realities. If we do not let the world teach us, it teaches us a lesson."  
– Joseph Tussman

Cat is really, really good at this. She understands the levers and pulleys of the world and how to set them up for her own gain. In the Commander interlude, Juniper refers to this battle as the base for understanding Cat's methodology, while later battles will show her more experienced. What is her methodology? She understands the Role, and Narratives. She plays Xanatos Gambit better than anyone else.

"" It didn't matter, whether or not it made tactical sense for the Princess of High Noon to withdraw from Creation to assail us. She had to. It was in her nature. ""

I believe what she will eventually learn for next battles would be to push those levers even more efficiently. Right now she recognizes them and can arrange the scenes, but can still miss.

\*\*\*\*

And this is quite necessary, seeing as though competent, she is no Tactician/Strategist on the level of Jun/Summer/Adameus/One-Eye etc. She is not exactly winning top prizes in the ruling, seeing her political structures fall down within weeks. She is not the top level fighter, and most Names can probably defeat her in a fair fight. (Though Cat has no indication of giving fair fight)

This has been a journey. In the college, Cat was thinking outside the box, and she managed to secure a draw. Only later, she started to exploit the narratives of the role and started exploiting and frankly adjusting the roles where she always emerges victorious.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

This is bullshit. What does Cat have against he-man anyway?

*I might not like he man, but when it came to war he knew his business.*

*RoflCat*

Similar thing to what she told the Page to tell the dead Exiled Prince?

WEAR YOUR FUCKING ARMOR.

*Letouriste*

Lol 😂

*James, Mostly Harmless*

If Cat is trying to turn the story around on Summer, she needs a way to convince Summer of that. I am hoping to see in the next chapter the 15th sing about it!

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

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## Chapter 29: Scale

*"Ah, mortal wounds. My only weakness."*

– Dread Empress Sanguinia II

This wasn't like fighting devils. Wasn't like fighting mortal soldiers either, because mortal soldiers couldn't summersault in mail and swing swords like they were feathers. We'd bloodied the fae so far but that had been through tactics, no what I'd been taught to call qualitative superiority. It was one thing to lead Nauk's heavies in forcing a gate when we outnumbered the enemy ten to one, another to charge into a sea of Summer swords and expect to come out on top. We would have to anyway. If the eastern flank was allowed to collapse, we were all fucked. The knights had bought us a lull and they were far from done with the day's bloody work, but now the Fifteenth and its allies needed to bring it all home. Summer would have trump cards of its own, of that I had no doubt. I refused to believe all they had in their arsenal was regulars, winged knights and a handful of nobles. If that were the case, they wouldn't have a history of crushing Winter in open battle. My role, then, was to force the hidden blade into the open and promptly break it.

There were probably elegant ways to do that, fancy manoeuvres and strategies, but Akua hadn't been entirely wrong when she'd called me a thug. I didn't have the time for elegant, so watering the ground with red until something came to stop would have to do.

Fire greeted us when we came out screaming. Ribbons of flame shot out like spears, shivering through the air and burning clean through steel and flesh. The tongue that would have put a hole in my belly I cut without without missing a beat, and Hakram contemptuously ignored the fact that his own shoulder was smouldering. We were the only ones so dismissive: sorcery the fae had shaped in the span of a breath stopped a shield wall two hundred wide, and stopped it cold. We couldn't allow them to pull these kinds of surprises often, I thought. We didn't have the numbers to handle those kind of casualties. They could trade three fae for every legionary sallying and still have it be nothing more than a drop in the bucket. I'd enjoyed having the bigger army on my side, at the fortress of Olden Oak, but now I was back in familiar territory: outmanned and in way over my head. I smashed into the Summer line like a runaway cart, the slivers of power I'd fed into my legs when I got close seeing me shoot forward quicker than the enemy had anticipated. I hacked my way through some poor fool's hand and threw him at the man behind him, face grim.

The hateful thing about the fae was that their sorcery was not rituals. Every one of them was at least a middling caster, and their tricks were heads and shoulders above those that the Legions taught their mages. Cutting my way into the throng had

only killed the fire ribbons of the fae in front of me, the rest could have cared less. We weren't entirely unprepared, though. What few mages had not gone with Robber finished their ritual a few heartbeats later, disrupting the fae flames and allowing the heavies to finally close the distance. My insistence that Apprentice teach our mage contingents some things to deal with the fae was paying off, though they were few and no replacement at all for a caster of Masego's calibre. With Adjutant at my side, I set to keeping the fairies busy. Perspective went up in smoke as we waded into the enemy host, replaced by quick flashes of movement and steel. My shield was carved away strike by strike, ice growing to fill the gaps without the need for me to even will it as I traded glancing blows for death strokes. Calm, measured, ever going forward. This was not war, it was just a chore taken care of to the backdrop of screaming.

Nauk's voice screamed for a wedge to be made and to my sides legionaries took formation, shields high and swords piercing forward like this was just a drill on the training yard. Getting our foot in the door had been costly, I saw from the corpses and flickers of sorcery that still took lives every few heartbeats, but we had it. At this rate there would not be much left of Nauk's jesha by nightfall, but we had bought something precious with those lives: room for the Watch. The cloaked Deoraithe did not deign to use bows, this time. They took to the left of our wedge with knives and longswords, scything through the Summer regulars with war cries in the Old Tongue. The rank and file of Daoine's army poured in behind them, propping up the Fifteenth. They were no legionaries, but they were well-trained soldiers in mail with swords and shield that did not flinch in the face of sorcery. I caught all this in a glance, for it was all I could spare. The trail of dead behind me had apparently marked me as enough of a threat the fae were getting *inventive*.

I ran through a soldier but her charges' momentum had her collapsing on me, another three fae piling up on me as a dozen of them rose in the air and began calling on colourful lights. A few crossbow shots from the Gallowborne slowed them down, but I was too busy dealing with the writhing, clawing mass trying to pull down my shield to be thankful. The lights hit the lot of us like a dozen sharpeners, tearing through flesh and bone and blowing up straight off my feet. I was thrown against the raised shield of one of my retinue and sharply refused his hand to help me up: my fucking shield was gone, again. And my sword was bent and burned to the point of uselessness. Those *pricks*. I'd spat in Malicia's soup already, where did they think I was going to be getting goblin steel from now on? I sidestepped a spear, chucked the remains of my sword into the man's face and ripped the weapon out of the fae's hands. Had no idea how to use one of these, so I snapped it in half and broke a soldier's jaw with the shaft before taking her exposed throat with the point.

She had a sword, thank the Gods, so I lifted it up her corpse and took it in hand. Too light and long for my tastes, but it would do. Anyways, it wasn't technically corpse-robbing if the battle wasn't over right? Deoraithe arrows took care of the flying casters before they could have another go at blowing me up – and huh, my breastplate was actually melted and I simply hadn't noticed – so I gripped the neck of a fae trying to put a spear in Hakram's back and squeezed until something gave with an ugly crack. He grunted thanks and I waved them away, barely remembering to drop the corpse in my grip first. The Fifteenth had gained ground since the Watch had taken the field, steadily advancing as the cloaked lot essentially took care of the left flank. Watching the fights there was hard on the eyes. The Deoraithe were as quick as the fae and twice as ruthless, deaths on both sides happening almost faster than the naked eye could see. Whoever led Summer now that the Princess of High Noon was busy beating Winter royalty raw had to know they were in trouble, I thought.

Our sortie had put a knife in their bellies, and between the knights and the Watch the palisades had managed to sort themselves out. Ranker's engines were still pounding wherever the fae were thickest, and though bloody trails could no longer be seen now that they'd gotten used to it every shot still left its share of dead. The trade of corpses was in our favour, and if Juniper managed to get enough men on this side of the gate then we'd have them encircled on three sides and it wouldn't *matter* if they were more than us – it was the soldiers at the edge of the circle that fought, not those in the middle. They needed a win on one of the three sides, and they needed it quick because even if they unfucked one of the flanks as long as my sortie went unchecked there was a chance we'd split the meat of their army in two. If we did, they were done. *So bring out your monsters*, I thought. *Now is the time.*

The fae lines parted and I finally got to see Summer's answer to the Sword of Waning Day, the deadwood soldiers that had given me so much trouble on our first encounter. Fae tended to prefer mail, and light one at that, but these were different. Heavy plate of gold from foot to neck, thick gleaming rubies dotting it in arcane patterns. Golden armet helms atop, with the thin slit for their eyes steaming from whatever was inside. Long heater shields polished like golden mirrors, almost as if someone had tried to make a kite shield for a footman, covered their left flanks. In their right hands halberds of pure ivory were held. Was I supposed to be impressed they used a two-handed weapon with one hand? I was pretty sure I could do the same. Wherever the tread the greenery smoked and died, which did not bode particularly well. If they were half as good as killing as the deadwood soldiers, then Nauk's legionaries were going to rout. I'd taken *Named* to handle a few members of the Sword of the

Waning Day, and there must have been at least ten thousand of these shiny bastards ahead of me.

Well, at least I knew what part of this battlefield the enemy commander was most worried about. I looked at those rubies, and the armours that seemed made of pure gold.

"Catherine," Hakram gravelled. "Why are you smiling?"

"Because by the time this is all over, I'll be able to afford rebuilding Marchford," I said.

The golden fae slammed the butts of their halberds against the ground as one, a wave of heat washing over me and everyone else I could see. The warmth didn't leave, afterwards, it hung in the air. The Summer fae in it quickened, while my legionaries grew sluggish. Oh that was just *bullshit*. Warlock could probably do something similar, but there weren't *ten thousand* of the handsome bastard. Ranker, bless her wretched goblin soul, caught the danger. She had the ballistas fire at the golden fae, a dozen bolts that should have punctured their ranks. Instead the cold iron-tipped bolts hung in the air mere feet in front of them, and slowly began to turn. That, uh, wasn't a great development.

"Dodge," I yelled.

On the bright side, they'd been aiming for Named and not legionaries. Unfortunately that meant me, and even though I flattened myself against the ground and avoided the worst of it two of them tore into the same shoulder. Gods, those things were fucking heavy. I bit my lips to avoid screaming and crawled on the ground trying to get them out as the golden fae began to advance. My fingers were twitching too much, pain continuing to roll through my body in harsh waves. It was the iron, wasn't it? You couldn't steal fae power and not expect to have some fae weaknesses come with it. Adjutant was the one who got them out of me, and I muttered **Rise** through gritted teeth as my broke shoulders and ribs snapped back in place and the wounds slowly started to close. The well was beginning to run dry, I could feel. Another damned liability I was going to have to deal with. Hakram's plate was dented in three places, but the bolts hadn't broken through. The sight was no comfort. He must have called on his aspect for that, and that was another advantage we'd just lost.

"Is it possible to bruise a lung?" I said, spitting a thick gob of blood to the side. "Because I think I bruised a lung."

Whatever Hakram would have replied I didn't get to hear, because I was too busy exploding. Or at least that was what it felt like. At least a few of my ribs were now more powder than bone, an entire pauldron was liquid and burning through my aketon and to add that special touch I was now falling. From the sky. Where I did not remember going of my own will. I coughed blood again but



managed to shape a pane of shadow and ice under me, landing on it like a rag doll. The strange noise of fae wings in action erupted, and a dark-skinned woman in mail of jade came to face me. Her eyes were golden as the armour of the fae who'd been wrecking my day, golden as the Diabolist's. For all that, she was no Soninke. Her power filled the air so thickly I could almost taste it. Duchess, I thought. She had to be. Unlike the Summer nobles I'd fought so far, she did not talk and posture. She pointed the tip of her sword at me, and I hastily broke the panel that held me up. The air where I'd been exploded again, not in flames or light but as if the wind itself had gone mad. Another panel formed under me, and this time I landed on my feet.

**"Rise,"** I barked.

The ribs began to fix themselves but it was slow work and Gods I might not be able to afford slowness.

"Wither," the duchess said, her voice stunningly musical.

Three panels, I judged in less time than it took for my heart to beat. That was how many supports I'd need to leap my way to her. I moved before the thought was finished, and that was the only reason I survived. The hem of my cloak was caught in the area where her power surged, and the cloth thinned and dried instantly. Considering the amount of water there was in my body, the thought of what would have happened to me if I hadn't moved was chilling. I moved faster than any mortal could have, but in the sky only the fae reigned. When I landed on my second panel she simply flew higher and pointed her sword at me again. *Fuck*. This wasn't a Rider of the Host I was scrapping with. If I kept this up, I was going to get killed. I unmade the panel and dropped down another fifteen feet before landing on another. We were staggeringly high, I only now noticed. That first hit had sent me up as if I'd been tossed by a trebuchet. Below us the golden fae had engaged the Fifteenth and the Watch, and the engagement was gruesomely one-sided. I needed to wrap this up quick if I wanted to have an army left by the time I broke my legs landing.

"Aren't you supposed to introduce yourself before we tangle?" I called out.

If nothing else, her title would give me a better read on what her powers came from.

"I am the Duchess of Restless Zephyr," she replied. "You are a corpse."

I wasn't particularly fond of being on the wrong side of that line, I decided. The healing power I'd stolen from the Lone Swordsman was being a real trooper about getting me back into fighting shape, but it only worked so fast. At least I was no

longer in any danger of choking on my lungs. I leapt another two panels upwards to avoid getting exploded after her announcement, keenly aware that I was burning through power quickly. Even just maintaining a panel was draining, and unless I wanted my blood to turn to ice again I was going to have to find another solution.

"Would you like to make a wager?" I called out.

*Come on, you're fae, I thought. You lot feed are always up for a bet.*

"No," she replied, after trying to explode me again.

*That was starting to get old, I would admit. Play to her nature, Catherine. She wants a kill, not a crippling. She's been throwing around hard hits since we started.*

"I am going to destroy you in one blow," I lied, sword rising above my head as if I was preparing some trump card I really wished I had right now.

The Duchess of Restless Zephyr laughed. She was maybe thirty feet below me, and in the face of the flaring of my Name she smiled mockingly.

"You are no true duchess," she said. "Just a mortal playing the fool. Learn your place."

Unlike my parchment-thin deception, the ball of roiling winds that formed above her head was very much a threat. She kept feeding power into it while I tried to look like I knew what I was doing. Which I might. Maybe. It was a gamble with horrendous odds, but still better than jumping around beneath the clouds and hoping she ran out of juice before I did. Studying her face I gauged when she was about to finish preparations, the sneer and hint of triumph giving it away. If I got hit by that ball, what was left of me was going to rain all over this battlefield in little chunks. I really hoped that would hold out for her as well, because I was about to surrender an advantage that had saved my life at least three times in the last year. Her wrist began to move my fingers tightened around the hilt of the sword I'd stolen.

"Take," I said.

Her eyes went wide as we both felt the same thing: my Name claiming ownership over the winds she'd been gathering. The remains of what I'd stolen from the Lone Swordsman vanished, and instead a painful surge filled the aspect. I gritted my teeth to avoid screaming. Claiming Summer power when I was already bound to the Winter Court felt like my insides turning out. I struck down with my sword and the ball of winds followed, smashing into her and detonating. Dry winds howled all around as the arm she

brought up to shield herself was ground out of existence, her tall silhouette plummeting down like a gold of old had kicked her back down to Creation. My control over the winds was beginning to wane, and I hurriedly forced them down to follow the Duchess. She'd fallen in the back of the lines of golden fae, the ground heaving at the impact, and that was where the winds unleashed the fullness of their fury. Fae were scattered like insects, the hurricane my opponent had meant to destroy me with blooming life a flower in every direction. That, I mused, should help my army get their bearings back.

Then the winds contracted, crushing whatever they'd drawn in with them, and shot back up towards me as my aspect once again became a shapeless bundle of power needing to be defined.

"Shit," I said, for my wit was peerless in any world.

I was quick to flee, but not quick enough. The ball had been popped already, but the winds were far from tender: they pulsed and detonated into a circle that had me sailing through the sky for the second time today. And was that the feeling of another rib breaking? Ah, no, just fracturing. It had happened to me often enough that I was beginning to be able to tell the difference just from the kind of pain that had me clenching my teeth. I couldn't even tell what direction I was falling in. I shaped a pane of ice in front of me but I was going so fast I just tore right through it. Another two tries only managed to slow me down and cut the side of my neck with shards. The landing was going to be problem, I mused. And this time I couldn't rely on stolen hero tricks to get me back on my feet afterwards. I was debating creating three panes in a row to see if that would do the trick when I felt my fall slow. Yanked out of the air, I started to float down like a feather until I was caught in a strong pair of arms.

"We meet again, Foundling," Archer grinned.

"Are you seriously trying to pretend you were the one to cast the spell?" Masego asked peevishly. "You're not even a mage."

I sighed, leaning back bonelessly in Archer's arms so I could stare at the braided Soninke.

"Hello, Apprentice," I said.

"Do I need to explain to you how gravity works," Masego said, "And what it does to the bones of women in plate falling from the sky?"

"I am invincible," I gravely said. "Gravity bends to my will."

Naturally, Archer took that as an excuse to drop me.

---

JC

Excellent. Quips and danger abound.

Looking forward to Sunday.

*Letouriste*

Sunday? Not Monday?

*danh3107*

Archer (and Apprentice) ex Machina huh, classy

*Jonnnnz*

Well, they have been taking their time since they left for Cat before Summer did.

*Graham*

> Naturally, Archer took that as an excuse to drop me.

I love Archer so much.

[Euodiachloris](#)

She's the Bully Big Sis nobody wants to spend too much time around... until you really, really need her. 😊

*naturalnuke*

I love this story.

*Big Brother*

Archer is easily my favorite character, just for her attitude.

*amc*

I think this too... and then Black shows up, and I'm cured...

*Komploding*

You have me drooling for the next chapter every time, thank you for this exceptional story!

*Darkening*

Well, no more magic healing. Guess she needs to start being (somewhat) less reckless and stop taking mortal wounds for fleeting advantage.

*nick012000*

Well she could just go back to her old necromancy tricks to force herself to keep going in spite of them

*stevenneiman*

Well, no more Name healing. Magic healing is still on the table, and she has someone handy who's pretty good at it if need be.

*TheCount*

Thanks for the chapter!

Typos that i noticed:

her tall silhouette plummeting down like a gold of old had kicked her back down to Creation. – gold -> god

the hurricane my opponent had meant to destroy me with blooming life a flower in every direction. – life -> like

*ALKATYN*

More typos:

We'd bloodied he fae so far  
no what I'd been taught  
blowing up straight off my feet

*crazedmoth*

"something came to stop" should be "something came to stop me"

"Olden Oak" I think should be Golden Oak, but I'm not certain.

"wherever the tread" should be "wherever they tread"

*Bubba HoTep*

One more typo:

"watering the ground with red until something came to stop" should be "watering the ground with red until something came to stop **us**"

[Barthumphries](#)

More typos (or the same typos but uncorrected):

We'd bloodied he fae so far but that had been through tactics,  
no what I'd been taught to call qualitative superiority  
Charge he to the  
Change no to not

I ran through a soldier but her charges' momentum had her  
collapsing on me,  
Change charges' to charge's because the soldier only had one  
charge and we are speaking of the momentum belonging solely to  
that charge

Wherever the tread the greenery smoked and died  
Change the to they

*maresther23*

No Cat, Robber is Invincible. You just Fall.

*Spinner335*

I ship the AA pairing.

*Mythalian*

Apprentice + Archer = True.

*Cicero*

I simply love this chapters, were Catherine is simply being  
awesome and witty.

*Rnt169*

Effortlessly brilliant chapter

*Nastybarsteward*

I so badly want to see Ranger in action... maybe she'll get  
involved if her pupil Archer gets hurt. \*stabs Archer in the  
back\* 😊

Another great chapter, had a real sinking feeling in my gut when  
cat lost Rise, eager to see how it pans out, and how she uses  
this new stolen aspect.

*Nastybarsteward*

Also, interestingly, when Cat gets to depend on an aspect, she  
swaps it out. Meaning she isn't getting too dependent and  
complacent on her aspects as Black taught her not to.

*crazedmoth*

I don't think she swapped it out because she was depending on it. She swapped it out because if she hadn't taken the winds she'd have been turned into mush.

### Cpt. Obvious

She'd already used **Rise** two times (or was it three?) this day. At most she could get one more use of it, but then it would be very slow. Not something you'd like to depend on in the middle of a battle.

So stealing that wind power was probably the best thing to do.

### *darkening*

She doesn't have wind powers anymore. It mentioned take going back to being formless and undefined. Maybe because it's not an aspect she's stealing this time?

---

It seems she can steal anyone's power for a limited amount of uses, it's just that Rise as an aspect has its limitation of three uses per day, but can replenish itself and is generally tailored for being used by people. In contrast to that, the wind ball was both a one-time spell (which she, as a non-mage, cannot really use) and born of a power, antagonistic to her.

### *RandomFan*

She might have broken Take by doing that, I can't tell. It's something she shouldn't have as what she is.

Or maybe it just couldn't hold what she took, and/or it was consumed by Fall and Winter.

### Euodiachloris

Catherine has been spending way too much time around the goblins, Robber in particular. Her response to seeing all that fancy armour had me in stitches. XD

### *Theo Promes*

totally. "oh look, they are bringing shiny loot to the battlefield!" Best response to the enemy's elite deploying, ever.

---

All that would disappear once Summer ends, though. I'm not sure that with all the stuff currently happening in Free Cities she'll sell all the loot to Mercantis in time.

### *Letouriste*

She can still melt the gold and buy things in praes with that? Not many people would see the difference with normal gold

### *Darkening*

Anyone that's ever played an rpg and seen high level enemies in tricked out gear coming after them knows that feeling. "Ohhhh, I'm gonna be wearing those gauntlets when we're done here..."

### Cpt. Obvious

People have it wrong. Cat isn't the illegitimate daughter of Amadeus or anything like that. She's from matron stock, but were exiled as she was cursed at birth to look human.

It explains so much...

### *TheTime*

Take is for Call  
Fall is for Claim  
Break is for Bind  
now the only question is – wil Cat be able to use them effectively and in the right order?  
because if not, Bind will be her end.

---

Akua: "Your attemps to overwhelm my army are useless! No matter how many of them die, more will come to my **Call**!"

Cat: "Nice devil army you got there. It would be a shame if someone would just... **Take** it over."

### *Dylan Tullos*

\_ \_:

TAKE, like every other aspect, has to be used in the right time and the right way. Trying to usurp the control of a devil army that is literally connected to Akua's soul is almost definitely not the right way.

Akua is Diabolist. Fighting her on her terms, on her chosen ground, is a recipe for defeat.

*vietnamabc*



Kill, maim, loot. Just another day with the goblin. Now why didn't Cat brought Archer with her when she met Thief, I want to see The League of Woman on the Edge.

*stevenneiman*

If Robber ever takes a Name, you probably just listed at least two of his Aspects.

*Barrendur*

@Erraticerrata This chapter is fantastically well-realised, and I'm delighted to see Apprentice again. I am wondering, though, why every nameless grunt Fae Cat meets in the battle is female. Is it significant that the "rank-and-file" Fae soldiers are women... ah, she-Fae? 😊

Syntax problem: you wrote [Cutting my way into the throng had only killed the fire ribbons of the fae in front of me, \*\*the rest could have cared less\*\*]... and that doesn't make any sense, though lots of people use the expression.

If someone could have cared LESS, that means they DO care somewhat, since you're saying they COULD care less than they already do. If you say someone COULDN'T care less, you're saying they care so little that they're not capable of caring ANY LESS than they do currently... in other words, not at all.

Yes, I am the grammarian about whom your mother warned you. 😎

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Sure that's all well and fancy, but part of it being an idiom is that it doesn't have to make logical sense when you break it down. People still know what it means. It's not like correcting someone saying "should of" instead of "should have" or something

[LaNuup](#)

Exelent chapter, as always. Can't wait for the betrayal of Winter, that will probably come. And I really liked the Duches of Restless Zephyr.

As the only point of critique, Erratic, you are getting sloppy with typos. Over the last few chapters small typos and sentences that changed midway appeared more often.

*stevenneiman*

I'm pretty sure is that the general consensus is that the King of Winter is trying to commit suicide by protagonist. He set a deadline for how long it can possibly take for their conflict to resolve, pissed her off enough to swear to see him undone,

and then just left her to her own devices, and then showed that he had plenty of reason to be sick of eternity.

### *Byzantine*

He's been stuck in this cycle longer than creation has existed, and win or lose in the end he's always suffered.

Besides if anyone is genre savvy its going to be a freaking ruler of the Fae. He knew what he was getting into. Maybe he thinks he can change the story before the end, or maybe he's just ready for the cycle to close.

### [nineran](#)

List of typos:

We'd bloodied [he->the] fae so far but that had been through tactics, [no->not] what I'd been taught to call qualitative superiority.

I didn't have [the->delete] time for elegant, so watering the ground with red until something came to stop would have to do.

We were the only ones so dismissive: the sorcery [that] the fae had shaped in the span of a breath stopped a shield wall two hundred wide, and stopped it cold.

I'd enjoyed having the bigger army on my side[, ->delete comma] at the fortress of Olden Oak, but now I was back in familiar territory: outmanned and in way over my head.

I hacked my way through some poor fool's hand and threw [him->it??] at the man behind him, face grim.

Cutting my way into the throng had only killed the fire ribbons of the fae in front of me, the rest [could->couldn't, unless Cat speaks incorrectly] have cared less.

This was not war, it was just a chore taken care of to the backdrop of screaming. < get] goblin steel from now on?

She had a sword, thank the Gods, so I lifted it up [off] her corpse and took it in hand.

Anyways, it wasn't technically corpse-robbing if the battle wasn't over[, ] right?

The fae lines parted and I finally got to see Summer's answer to the Sword of Waning Day, the deadwood soldiers that had given me so much trouble [on our first encounter ->earlier].

Wherever [the->they] tread the greenery smoked and died, which did not bode particularly well.

I really hoped that would hold [out->true] for her as well,  
[As] Her wrist began to move[,] my fingers tightened around the  
hilt of the sword I'd stolen.

Claiming Summer power when I was already bound to the Winter  
Court felt like my insides [were] turning out.

plummeting down like a [gold->god] of old had kicked her back  
hurricane my opponent had meant to destroy me with blooming  
[life-> like] a flower in every direction.

detonated into a circle >> what?

I couldn't even tell what direction I was falling [in->toward].  
>> Because the direction one falls in is down.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

From wikipedia:

The armet is a type of helmet which was developed in the 15th  
century. It was extensively used in England, France, Arcadia, and  
Spain.

### *Letouriste*

just base bloody battle and a stroll in the sky^^ didn't look  
like she had planed anything against the trump card of the enemy  
though(the golden faes).how did she planned to take care of them  
without the accidental wind attack?

### *crazedmoth*

I imagine that originally she thought the trump card would be  
one big, flashy monster or something, that she could take down  
herself, rather than just elite troops.

### *Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

### [Tal Morgan](#)

Minor note from the historical pedant in me; if Cat knows how to  
use a sword, she knows how to use a spear. If you look into  
Historical European Martial Arts, the biomechanics of most  
weapons, the basic level of How Do I Sword versus How Do I Axe  
versus How Do I Halberd are actually very similar. The basic  
blows of, for example, a sword and a pole-axe are the same, it's  
just that a pole-axe can also use certain plays specific to it,  
like fencing with the butt and hooking people with the head. A  
spear likewise has certain plays available to it relating to its

length, but the majority of it is the exact same thrust work as with a sword, particularly half-swording.

At the fundamental level, a knife is a fist except sharp, a sword is a knife except long, and a spear is a greatsword except longer.

I know, I know, you're not really going for historical accuracy here, and the specifics of medieval melee combat aren't really the focus of this story. Like I said, It's the historical pedant in me 😊

*Byzantine*

It's not a question of that, really. I think it's more a matter of Cat thinking of them as two entirely different things.

If she actually set about learning to use a spear she would rapidly figure out it isn't really any different, but she hasn't and so doesn't think she knows how.

[Tal Morgan](#)

Except HEMA treats it as a holistic whole right from the start, which is kind of my point. Anyone who learns how to fight in a historical manner knows that it's all one system; you don't learn to fight with a sword and with a dagger and with a spear, you learn \*how to fight,\* and then APPLY that to sword, dagger, spear, whatever. Your instructor will have demonstrated how it all ties together, with some advanced examples to illustrate the point.

Again, I get why Catherine thinks like this. This isn't a story that really sweats any kind of accurate mapping to real-world history, particularly not in details like this. But if it were, the kind of mental block that Cat has would be totally out of place.

[Ethesis](#)

I'm wondering if she will power up her girlfriend with fae sacrifices. The one guy got used for portals, but ...

I've enjoyed reading this unfold and the outside perspective as well as the Dread Tyrant cleans up.

*Urist*

Archer seems too strong from all the stories we have heard about her. At some point in this story it was told that "this much power has to come with massive drawbacks" (in that case concerning Bard). But I don't see any huge drawbacks with Archer

*Urist*

I somehow mixed up Archer and Ranger here

*green*

"I am invincible," I gravely said. "Gravity bends to my will."  
Naturally, Archer took that as an excuse to drop me.

LOL

*sjoshuan*

Love the chapter!

Found an error:

\* Repetition of "without" in "The tongue that would have put a hole in my belly I cut without without missing a beat"

*Seraphim*

5 years late but:

A bone fracturing IS a bone breaking. It's tge same, by definition

I love these stories, but damn

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## **Chapter 30: Riot**

*"The classic Callowan blunder. Sending an army into the Wasteland you can't handle if it comes marching back as undead."*

-Dread Emperor Sorcerous

Magical healing felt slow and inefficient, after having grown to the heroic alternative, but it had to be said that Masego was exceedingly good at it. It was better not to think about how many people he must have needed to cut open to get there. Hopefully at least the majority of them had been dead at the time, though with Warlock you could never be sure. It was all flying pigs until he got in a mood, then it was corpses all around. Apprentice politely clapped my shoulder to signify he was done and I rose from my crouch.

"You'll need a blacksmith to truly rectify the state of your armour," he said. "But it is no longer liquid, at least."

Speaking of liquid, Archer was polishing off the bottom of a copper flask even as we spoke. The two of them seemed in a decent mood, though not eager to join the fray. Given that Summer's army could be quite literally world-ending if it got into the swing of things, I didn't blame them. I got the blood and what looked like flakes of skin off the hilt of my sword – Gods, those were probably mine weren't they? – and took a deep breath.

"All right," I said. "First we need to pick up Hakram. Before we do, Archer, could you tell me what the Hells your teacher is doing here?"

She ignored me, finished guzzling down whatever liquor she was packing and dropped the flask to the ground. It was a good thing the enemy already knew where we were, otherwise no doubt they could find out just by following the trail of those that no doubt followed in her wake.

"No idea, Foundling," she replied cheerfully. "She won't be here for the princes and princesses. She got bored with those a while back. Whatever it is, though? I recommend not being even remotely in the vicinity of her way. That, uh, doesn't tend to go well for people. And gods. And castle that one time."

It said a lot about the Lady of the Lake's reputation that I wouldn't be particularly surprised if she'd destroyed an entire keep because it had made the poor decision of being built somewhere inconvenient to her. Black had told me there were to people on Calernia against whom it was useless to think in terms of victory, where one could only attempt to limit the damage and lose the least amount of skin possible. One was the Dead King, who he'd charmingly referred to as 'the original abomination'. The other was the Ranger, whose utter disregard for odds I'd been raised hearing stories about.

"Well, I'm not intending to get in a fistfight for her, that's for sure," I grimaced. "I've recently run out of borrowed lives."

"I fear you may run out of ribs as well, if you keep at it," Masego drily said.

Now that was just unwarranted. I hadn't broken any of those in, like, at least sixty heartbeats. I was going to ask about having them reinforced with steel, though, because nowadays they were snapping like twigs.

"I can't commend your judgement but your pain tolerance is impressive," Archer added, never one to leave someone unkicked while they were down.

I flipped her off.

"Goat-daughter," she replied in Taghrebi, ridiculously proud of knowing the word.

"Masego have you been teaching her cusses?" I sighed.

"It was either that or arguing about whether Creation is a sphere again," he admitted.

I raised an eyebrow at Archer.

"I'm just saying, do you know anyone who's gone the whole way around?" she said. "Have you done it yourself?"

Apprentice twitched and I decided to change the subject before he went on a rant about how he'd proved Creation was round. I knew better than to hope he did not have three philosophers and several volumes to reference.

"We'll table that for later," I ordered. "I, uh, left Adjutant back in the middle of the melee. Anyone have any suggestions of how to take him out? Our target is east."

I ignored Apprentice's peevish murmur about how Hakram, at least, probably hadn't broken any ribs. That was a deeply unfair comparison, the orc had a whole aspect about not breaking.

"We could kill our way through," Archer suggested.

Ah, Archer. Violence wasn't her only tool, just the only one she ever bothered to use.

"I'm open to other suggestions," I prompted.

That was when the screaming began. Sword in hand faster than I could blink, I turned to look at the source of it. It was only one voice, though a remarkably loud one. The Duchess of Restless Zephyr was back in the sky, missing an arm and most the half of the body attached to it. One of her wings was pure flame, I saw, which made her flight awkward but admittedly still better than I could manage.

"I'd *really* hoped she was dead," I said.

"She seems peeved," Masego said, master of observation that he was.

"You could say we didn't part on great terms," I conceded.

The dark-skinned mage's eyes glimmered with Name power, peering at the Duchess.

"She's bleeding out power," he noted. "Her very frame is unstable. I expect she will detonate, left alone long enough."

Archer whistled merrily, stringing her bow.

"Never bagged a duchess before," she said.

"That'd be kill-stealing and you know it," I said.

I did not, however, tell her not to put arrows in the woman until the issue went away. It was one thing to banter with my companions, another to allow a threat of that magnitude to live even a moment longer than she needed to. It swiftly became clear that screaming at the top of her lungs was more than a coping mechanism for the fae. A pack of a hundred winged knights peeled off from the rest, lances high as they formed up around her. It would have been untrue to say I felt the weight of the Duchess' gaze, but I was pretty sure if she was capable of glaring someone aflame I'd be a bonfire right now.

"I might run out of arrows," Archer said. "The fancy ones, at least."

I eyed her quiver, which looked plain but had as much sorcery wafting off of it as all her enchanted ammunition put together.

"They're in range, for you?" I asked.

"Sweetcheeks," she grinned. "There's not a damn thing in any world that *isn't*."

It was talk like that that had me believing the ochre-skinned woman wasn't a villain. None of us who'd managed to live this long would so willingly dip down hubris and slip it too much tongue. Archer wasn't all boasting, at least. She nocked her first arrow smoothly and released almost quicker than I could follow. The arrow flew. A hundred yards from the fae it was buried in a wave of flame and I thought that the end of that, but moments later a single silhouette fell from its horse. I sharpened my eyes and let out a staggered breath. Right between the eyes, from at least a mile.

"See?" Archer preened.

"Archer," I tried.

"I told you," she interrupted.

"Archer they are *charging*," I barked. "*Keep shooting.*"

She pouted, but smooth movements followed and arrows took the sky. I looked at Masego, who seemed more bored than worried.

"I don't suppose you have something to stop a cavalry charge?" I asked.



"It is unlikely any of my wards would do more than slow them down," he said. "In Arcadia, that is. Layering is pointless if they unmake the layers as fast as I craft them."

"Keep the Duchess busy, then," I ordered. "She has this nasty wind trick."

Speaking of the devil, the screaming had ceased. She was hurtling through the air, keeping up with the knights, and pointing her sword at us. The rider next to her toppled from an arrow through the neck, Archer chuckling at my side.

"Masego," I said urgently.

The air exploded, but a transparent box formed around it. The winds howled, barely contained.

"Interesting," Apprentice praised. "Derivative work, of course, but fae do tend to keep close to their title and Court."

The box contracted until it broke, and the wind dispersed with a hiss. Gods I'd missed having a powerful mage around. It made it so much easier not to die. Archer was ignoring us, taking apart the knights one at a time. How many had she slain, easy as swatting a fly? Twenty, maybe more. When she ceased moving, though, I cleared my throat.

"There's still some left," I helpfully pointed out.

"I'm out of mage-killers," she said.

The air exploded again. This time Masego had evolved his defensive measure: a series of transparent walls redirected the fury of the wind, ultimately heading back towards the charging fae. It dispersed long before reaching any of them, but just what he'd been able to do might be deterrent enough that the Duchess wouldn't try it again. If she'd pulled that when they were closer, they would have lost a few for sure.

"You don't have any other enchanted ones?" I asked.

"None that are fireproof," she said, calmly unstringing her bow.

Given the size of the thing I would have said something about overcompensating, but now that I'd actually seen her use it the words stayed stuck in my mouth. Skill was skill, no matter how ridiculous-looking the tool enabling it. Archer unsheathed her longknives, tapping one against her leg impatiently.

"They could hurry up, at least," she complained. "Not like we can charge back at them."

"Oh my," Masego murmured. "That could... No, first I'd have to overtake the matrix."

"Apprentice," I said, a little worried.

"Everything is going to be fine," he said dreamily, eyes still filled with Name power.

I had never more wished to have a shield. And so the three of us stood valiantly against the coming charge. Apprentice was muttering to himself, lost in his own world, Archer had taken to cleaning her fingernails with one of her blades and I was silently wishing I could just duplicate Hakram a few times and not have to rely on these two anymore. More like valiant-adjacent, maybe. I steadied my breath and adjusted my stance as the knights and Duchess angled their descent, the lot of them moving flawlessly together.

"Whither," the Duchess of Restless Zephyr screamed.

"**Deconstruct**," Apprentice replied, fingers dancing across a stream of shining runes.

The fae aristocrat yelped, losing control of her spell. The bone-dry winds slipped her leash, turning on her. Her wing of flame dispersed as her body turned to a husk, skin turning to leather in the span of a heartbeat. She crashed, but I couldn't spare a longer look than that: I was too busy trying not to get skewered. Flattening under the lance wouldn't work. I'd never gotten anywhere by betting against fae reflexes. Instead I sunk into my Name, let the calm wash over me and watched the tip of the weapon. *The only dangerous part of a lance is the tip, I told myself*, repeating Black's words. I pivoted around it at the last moment, letting the knight pass me by. Immediately I had to duck under the horse of the man behind him, sword coming up to split its belly open. I emerged drenched in blood and guts to see the third rank was too far ahead to strike me, but the fourth had adjusted its angle. And was converging on me. Apprentice came to the rescue, a sphere-like black rip into the fabric of Arcadia forming amongst the fae. It didn't seem to do much but draw them closer to it, but it should keep them busy for at least a bit.

That left the first rank, which had deftly landed on the ground and was turning back around. I heard screams and laughter to the side, which probably meant Archer wasn't in too much trouble. Even as lances turned to me, I felt an itch between my shoulder blades. I knew better than to ignore the hints of my Name, and moved before a thrown javelin could add a steel component to my spine. The thrown weapon sunk into the ground and exploded in flames, the enemy knights riding straight through the screen of fire. This, I decided, was not going to work. Even if the Duchess didn't come back from her mistake, there was only so long I could keep avoiding being run through. Especially if I had to dodge javelins at the same time. Relief came in the shape of Archer, who barrelled into the flank of the knights charging me. She was riding a horse, because of course she was. Two arrows were stuck

in her mount's neck and she used them to guide it along with no small amount of spurring. That... could work. Maybe. I wasn't above fleeing a losing fight. Masego's black sphere must have petered out, because I heard the whistle of javelins let loose followed by neighs.

I was already moving, though, and the thumped into the ground behind me. There were still half a dozen knights after my hide, even though Archer was making a joyous nuisance of herself, and it was those I went for. They were on the ground now, and while the sky belonged to the fae down here they were in my wheelhouse. I ran at them, smoothly cutting the distance. They'd learned from the last time, adjusted to my speed, and when I pivoted around the first lance I found another two aimed at my chest. An exertion of will had a panel of ice forming in the way, breaking instantly but buying me a precious few heartbeats. I pushed a sliver of power down my legs and leapt at the knight I'd just avoided, colliding with him atop the winged horse. I took a hard knock in the nose and he tried to slide a knife in my ribs, but I caught his wrist and twisted it to throw him off the horse. Which was not best pleased about this turn of events. I tried to slide my feet into the stirrups, but the neighing fucker was bucking me off. And now the other knights were back at me. Great. I had to throw myself off to avoid taking a javelin in the chest.

"Fine," I growled. "The hard way."

I rammed my sword through the horse's eye as my free hand whipped up to blast a knight off his horse with a spear of shadow. I kept the power close, forcefully shoving it into the dying mount through my blade. The beast twitched once, twice, and its dark eyes went pure blue. That was new.

"Up," I ordered, and it rose back to its feet.

I leapt on, and this time there was no bucking. I looked for the others and found Archer had already retreated, and forced a visibly dismayed Masego to ride with his arms around her belly. Considering Apprentice hated even regular horses, a winged one had to be a nightmare for him. I set my mount to riding with my mind alone, the knights gathering in a wedge behind me. That was going to be a problem.

"Retreat," I called out.

Archer laughed, but at least she listened. I dug into the muscle memories of the horse I'd raised and put on my finger on the part that concerned flight. The wings extended brusquely and as I screamed it began batting its wings and we rose into the air. So did our pursuers. The feeling of the wind whipping at my face was exhilarating, but death followed close. They were already gaining. I sent the horse downwards to avoid a javelin, but when it exploded into flames the fire formed into a hawk and hurtled

back towards me. Within moments a menagerie of birds was forcing me into acrobatics that had my heels digging into the flanks of the dead horse – Zombie the Third, I mentally named him – as I tried my best not to fall off. The other two caught up with me and I gestured towards our forces still fighting on the field, but Apprentice shook his head.

“The Duchess,” he said.

My arm whipped out to cut through the shaft of a javelin. I smothered the fire that came out with ice before it could form. Godsdamnit.

“Fine,” I yelled. “I’ll draw them off.”

I took a sharp right to avoid incineration, flicking my wrist to send a knife into my palm. The knights were on me. This was going to be *tricky*. They had range, damn them. The knight at the tip of the wedge rammed his lance halfway through into my mount’s body, but it was too dead to care at the moment. I leapt off my horse onto the bastard, desperately trying to convince myself this was a good idea. My armoured boots hit his chest and he fell off, but brilliant wings burst into existence. Right, falling wasn’t a problem for them. I managed to land on the saddle but my boots were slick with blood and it was bucking – even as I began to slide I saw the lance going for my knee. *Don’t die, don’t die, don’t die*. My foot landed on the tip of the lance and even as it ripped into the saddle I kicked the fae’s chin. Blood sprayed and teeth with it. I began to fall but managed to sink my knife into the horse’s flank, hoisting myself back up. The Name reflexes were barely enough to save my life, sword coming up to slap aside another lance so it just pierced through my only previous pauldron. Heat at my back, it was time to move. The wave of flame hawks was at my heel.

The horse was beginning to go down so I leapt off again, screaming every Mtethwa curse I knew and then some. The knight I impacted didn’t manage to bring up his lance in time, but he did manage to sock me in the mouth with an armoured hand. I tasted blood. My knife found his throat, and I took the trade gladly. Heat again, and so close I left the blade. I bunched up for another jump but it was too late. I was blown off by a storm of flame, what little skin I had exposed taking the brunt of it as even my plate warmed. I grit my teeth and formed a pane of ice to land on, licking my busted lip and pointing my sword at the fae.

“Taking all comers,” I croaked out. “You only outnumber what, fifty to one?”

Half the lances flickered with light and turned into swords as they fluidly formed in a circle around me. Bury me in numbers, would they? And this time with blades to take care of me if the lances failed. I panted quietly, and planned the timing. My

control was still rough. As one, without a word, they charged. There would be no dancing around all those blades, Named or not. It was a good thing I didn't intend to. I watched the enemy close in and, at the last moment, broke the pane. I began falling again as the knights closed in on empty space, though disappointingly enough they were too skilled for collisions to ensue. The smoothly slid around each other even as I landed with a thump atop Zombie the Third, almost slipping again before I shoved my boots into the stirrups. I wasted no time in getting the Hells out of there. That was as long as I could buy the other two. They'd gainfully employed my many near-death experiences, I saw. The Duchess of Restless Zephyr, still unconscious, hung floating in a bubble of blue light Masego was dragging behind them with a chain made of the same. I caught up with them before the knight caught up with me: dragging the fae aristocrat slowed them down.

"I swear on all the bloody Gods, Apprentice, if you had me do that just to get a live duchess I'll bury you so deep underground you will never see light again," I yelled.

Brow creased in concentration, he waved dismissively. We fled towards the melee, where things were not unfolding as well as I'd hoped. The attack I'd stolen from the Duchess had slowed the golden fae down, but they'd formed back up and even with the Watch backing it the Fifteenth was taking a beating. At a glance, half of Nauk's legionaries were already dead. The entire line was buckling, even with the Deoraithe regulars propping them up. We managed to get in bow range before the knights were on us, and it was enough to make them break off at least for now. *Close*, I thought. I caught sight of Hakram swinging his axe towards the centre of our line, but he was having trouble with the enemy. They were fast as a Named, and though not as strong as the orc there were a lot of them. I guided my horse down, but Masego called out for me to wait. I watched my companions pass over the golden fae, and there Apprentice cut off the chain binding the bubble to him. A moment later the bubble popped out and the Duchess began to fall, dropping in the ranks of the golden fae. Nothing happened.

I glanced at Apprentice, who was fiddling with runes, and only looked away when I heard the world groan. Bone-dry winds formed around the Duchess' body and blew up violently, turning the fae by it into empty husks that fell apart like sand. It continued to grow, the winds scattering in every direction and tearing a gaping hole in the golden fae formation. *Masego, you beautiful sack of pedantry. That might just even the field out.* The dead horse smoothly flew down, and I landed in front of a gaping Adjutant as the winds whipped behind me.

"Get on," I ordered. "We're hunting royalty."

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[wirelessgrapes](#)

Apprentice getting Cat to have to ninja her way through like 50 mounted fae knights just to get the magical power of a fae Duchess is exactly like him.

*danh3107*

Did apprentice just make a bomb out of a corpse? The absolute madman, also brilliant, also mad.

*Byzantine*

I believe he used the Fae's power as a makeshift weapon.

It's pretty much what Akua is doing, just more... direct.

*sheer\_falacy*

"She's bleeding out power," he noted. "Her very frame is unstable. I expect she will detonate, left alone long enough."

She was a bomb either way, he just made sure she went off in the right place and at the right time.

*Big Brother*

This is why I enjoy Apprentice when he has a major role. And one of his Aspects is Deconstruct, which is interesting. Great for following in Warlock's footsteps of using Boundaries as a source of power.

*Rnt169*

Well, at least it's only two days to the next chapter. Oh, why can't we get more patrons to get three chapters per week.

*John*

And the wait continues. Every minute kills me a little inside.

*George*

Nice.

◌      "      . .

<https://imgflip.com/i/1vngkj>

*Naeddyr*

Ok, this is some hero shit going on. At least that's what it feels like: all this scrappy fighting and legolasing all over the place by the skin of her teeth isn't exactly terrifying villain behavior, this is Cat's hero shadow bringing the thrills to the audience.

But of course the judge of Refuge awards her only 6.5 points. Not enough 360's and eye-hunting.

*Naeddyr*

\*from refuge

*Byzantine*

Cat is an orphan who was supposed to be a Hero but said "fuck that." Instead she became a villain and continuously steals heroic roles anyway. It turns out it doesn't actually matter if you are a Hero or Villain if you can take the role regardless.

*AVR*

Typo thread

grown to the heroic  
grown used to the heroic

And castle that  
And a castle that

"Whither," the Duchess of Restless Zephyr screamed.  
"Wither," the Duchess of Restless Zephyr screamed. (I'm almost certain)

I sunk into  
I sank into

and the thumped  
and they thumped

The smoothly slid  
They smoothly slid

through my only previous pauldron.  
through only my pauldron. (or something like that)

not a strong as  
not as strong as

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*Bubba HoTep*

Typos:

on a rant about **who** had proved **that** Creation was round.

and put ~~on~~ my finger on the part that concerned flight

*vietnamabc*

Apprentice + Archer = best buddy cops duo.

*DocTao*

Archer doing a Bard on the drinking game, didn't Archer invoke an aspect to do this stuff last time? Pet theory: Bard pulled a switch and Ranger there for her? No real backing from the story on that though, I don't think.

*Byzantine*

Names tend to invoke their aspects as little as possible, if they have any idea what they are doing.

Archer had no reason to use her aspect against these Fae as it wasn't shooting an arrow over a mile away; ie it wasn't outside her regular abilities.

*Letouriste*

Now she has a flying horse:D

And masego seems nearing a new name, should gain this by the end of this war I think

*BumblingBehemoth*

Does anyone else love the fact that we got a jab at flat earthers in this chapter?

*Letouriste*

Well, honestly I would not be surprised if creation is flat^^  
Given this is god-created and all...

But yeah, that was funny:D

*Blinks*

What is Ranger doing there... then again if she's tired of Princes and Princess' then the only thing left is Kings and Queens. Could be trying for one of them I suppose.

I doubt Winter will show up but Cat is currently taking apart the greater part of Summers entire army so maybe the ruler of Summer is going to make an appearance.

*alegio*



"Masego, you beautiful sack of pedantry." This describes him so perfectly that I have nothing more to say.

*ArkhCthuul*

This chapter was very hectic and more than a little disjointed regarding overall flow.

You can do much better, even if Masego was really cool once again. 😊

*Levi Kalden*

I waited for Zombie Pegasus ever since we first met the fee

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## Chapter 31: High Noon

*"My dear friends, I have a confession to make. Some creative reframing of the truth may have taken place during the planning of this coup."*

– Dread Emperor Traitorous, addressing the Order of the Unholy Obsidian upon successfully usurping the throne from himself

Now, in my experience planning the ending of a lesser god required three necessary steps. The first of them was, naturally, lies. Though this once I had found no make-believe prophecy to ensure this fight did not begin and end with my being incinerated, I *had* prepared a few nasty surprises. The Summer Court didn't really bother to talk with mortals except to give them orders, as far as I knew, and that was going to come back to haunt them. The second step was a certain proficiency for violence, which between four battle-hardened Named we should have covered. There would be no talk of my taking on the Princess of High Noon by myself. That would return us to the whole incineration outcome, which I would confess I was less than fond of. Archer would have less of an impact using longknives instead of a bow, true, but with her and Adjutant at my side we might be able to keep the princess distracted long enough Apprentice could hit her with the good stuff. Well, Evil stuff. The labyrinthine mess that was adjusting my terminology now that I was consorting with the damned could wait to be sorted until there was less of a war going on.

With a little luck, at some point in the next decade I'd have a day where no one was actively trying to invade Callow. That was the dream, really.

The third step was having a *right* to that victory. It was different than the false prophecy I'd used to kill the Duke of Violent Squalls. One was, as I liked to think of it, plausible deniability. It gave me an excuse to win, if I could manage it. After all, I'd still had to stab the bastard to get his stuff. Having a right was more like fixing the scales, the way Fate did for heroes. It was still short of providence, the golden luck that dropped the laurels in the lap of the Heavens' favourites, but it was close. When I'd fought Heiress and the Lone Swordsman in Liesse, I'd walked over two Named that were each a match for me on their own on my way to take the sword in the stone and my resurrection with it. The weights of the scale had been in my favour, then. It didn't guarantee victory, but it made it easier for me to win and harder for my opponents. The signet ring had done the same thing for the Duke of Violent Squalls. I'd 'always had it', which at least in Arcadia had given me claim to the fae's power before it was physically on my finger.

Finding an equivalent for the Princess of High Noon had been the hardest part of this. I couldn't just rely on the fact that she had invaded Callow: I was, however unwillingly, doing the same to Summer. That scratched off the mark on both sides of the slate, I was betting. There were dozens of stories about hard-headed young girls facing down gods for some cause or another, but all of them about heroes. I'd wiggled my way into that sort of role before, but only when standing for a greater cause than myself. I fell short of that here. They keystone would have to be found in the way that even with my Named companions I still stood hilariously outclassed. It was an old shape, that, the underdog triumphing over the unbeatable opponent. I'd chewed on that for days, pruning story after story until I returned to one of the oldest ones I knew. From before the House of Light, when Calernians had prayed to the Gods Above and Below but also made sure to give offerings to the ancient things that strode the world. Dread Emperor Sorcerous had once famously called usurpation the essence of sorcery. There was a deeper grain of truth in that, one broader in meaning. Transgression was the essence of what it meant to be Named. Breaking the rules for your own sake or that of others. And one of the most ancient of those transgressions was the blade meant to break the Princess of High Noon. *The theft of fire.*

Would it be enough? I could not know. Never did, until the blades were out and chaos reigned. But I'd gotten this far by doubling down whenever the stakes were raised, and I would not flinch today.

The four of us had flown east, to where the fae clashed. Winter was not getting the better of it. The centre, where the Sword of Waning Day fought, had managed to gain ground. But the flanks were collapsing. The Riders of the Host had managed a harsh draw with the winged knights of Summer, but come out more bloodied and

forced to retreat. To the sides the Summer regulars were driving back the Winter fae one step at a time, defeat already writ large. It would end with the deadwood soldiers an island in a Summer sea, collapsing when the winged knights returned to shatter their lines. While the lesser fae died in droves, the royalty that led them had fought just the same. There again, Winter was losing. The Prince of Nightfall now stood alone against the Princess of High Noon and the Prince of Deep Drought, the princess who'd been with him nowhere in sight. They were on the ground now, the armies giving all three of them a wide berth. I did not like the one-eyed prince. He'd been party to his king's playing of me, and been free with threats besides.

Watching him battle two other royals, though, I felt a reluctant sliver of admiration. I'd not been wrong, in thinking him made for strife more than any other fae of Winter. The Princess of High Noon was more powerful., blatantly so. She moved like a storm unrelenting, howling winds stirring in the wake of every strike as she crushed everything in her way. The Prince of Deep Drought had been wounded, one of his arms held to his body only be strings of red, but he wove sorcery like an artist. Flame and light and dust, moving with Princess Sulia as if it knew her movements intimately. And facing that fury was a one-eyed man, clad in a long tunic of shade with a slender blade in hand. Trying to strike him was like trying to grasp a shadow, and though he was outmatched in every way he did not retreat a single step. None of the three paid us any mind when we took the winged horses down, dismounting more swiftly than gracefully. Hakram had been pale as sheet the whole ride, and was now visibly glad of being on solid ground. I glanced at my companions, then cleared my throat. I supposed I would have to say something before leading them into the storm.

"So we're going to stab a god," I said. "I mean, we've done it before. But this one is a few places higher in the pecking order of things not to trifle with."

Archer snorted.

"But we'll win because we stand for something greater than ourselves?" I gallantly attempted.

"We do?" Apprentice asked, surprise. "What?"

"Violence," Archer suggested.

"Peace, order and the Imperial way," Hakram offered, the filthy traitor.

"We lie a lot," Masego mused. "It could be lies."

"Lies and violence," Archer proudly called out, raising a fist.

Apprentice did the same, apparently under the impression this qualified as a battle cry. I refused to grace the mutiny with a response.

"Just don't get yourselves killed," I sighed. "I don't want to have to train up replacements."

The fae royalty took notice when we joined their little tiff, the Summer fae breaking off and angling so we wouldn't be able to flank them. The Winter prince offered us a mocking salute with his sword.

"I'm guessing the Princess of Silent Depths is dead," I said, not bothering with greetings.

"That is mostly accurate," the Prince of Nightfall replied, because why would fae ever be anything but vague?

"Can you handle the sorcerer?" I asked, eyeing the Prince of Deep Drought.

"He cannot," the Summer prince sneered.

"Yes," the one-eyed fae replied with a nasty smile. "You'll be dancing with Sulia?"

"That's the idea," I agreed. "I put together a crew of miscreants and everything."

The red-haired princess eyed me like I'd tracked mud onto her priceless carpet, or maybe like I was the mud.

"They have made an abomination of you," she said. "More than mortal, less than fae. Destroying you will be a mercy."

"I get that a lot," I replied honestly.

At least in Procer, the House of Light had apparently declared me anathema to the Heavens. I knew because Black had the report framed and sent to Marchford. It hung on the wall of my bedroom across from the bed.

"Shall we begin, Granian?" the Prince of Nightfall taunted his Summer mirror. "I've been meaning to see how many limbs you can lose before dying."

The Winter fae's translucent wings burst into existence and he shot off into the sky. The Prince of Deep Drought looked at Sulia and she nodded. He followed, leaving the four of us facing the heaviest hitter the Summer Court had to offer short of its queen. Why had this seemed like a good idea again?

"I played your role, for an evening," I told the princess. "Was a bit of a bore. Had to liven it up myself."

"I was not made for intrigue," the Princess of High Noon said. "This, however? I was born for it. From it. This was a blunder, Duchess. You are attempting a story, but that is worthless if you do not have the power to carry it out."

"You think you're my opponent," I smiled coldly. "An interesting thought. Let's see where it gets you."

Three things happened in the heartbeat that followed. Princess Sulia's wings sprang to life. Adjutant and Archer charged forward. And I spoke one word.

**"Take,"** I said.

Two columns of fire erupted from my back, not concerned by the plate in the slightest. I screamed hoarsely, but this was a necessary sacrifice. If she went up, we were done. She could just stay up there and bombard us until there was nothing left but ashes, and trying to match her up there with the horses was a good way to get ourselves killed. I felt the Winter power in my veins reacting violently, even worse than when I'd stolen sorcery from the Duchess of Restless Zephyr. These were only wings, even if made of sorcery, but the power was so much *purier* it felt a dozen times worse. I hastily discarded the power, heralding the first bet of this fight. What happened when I took something was still unclear in a lot of ways. Would she get the wings back even if I released them? I was hoping not, that my aspect severed the connection by appropriating what I took. If that wasn't the case, I was going to have to pull out an upset that I *really* needed to come later. The flames gutted out and I let out a hiss of triumph when they didn't reappear on the princess' back. This might not be a permanent state of affair, but for now it was putting our foot in the door.

Apprentice was incanting, the light of runes glinting off his spectacles. We needed to keep him uninterrupted long enough to make a difference. I'd never fought at Archer's side before, not with her using blades, but Hakram had felt like an additional limb ever since he became the Adjutant and he was used to her from all their sparring. Four blades struck as one and it felt *right*. Like coming home. The fae's sword clattered against mine, beginning to carve through until ice grew to stop it. The princess ducked under the swing of Adjutant's axe, pushing me back effortlessly and smashing Archer in the belly with her fist. The other Named was thrown off, but she landed on her feet and she was back into the fray within moments. Heat pulsed off the princess and cold came from me too met it. Her power dwarfed mine, but she would not win this uncontested. The three of us pressed the offensive. Without even a word needing to be said, we fell into a rhythm. I forced a parry, setting the fae up for Adjutant's strike as Archer used the opening it made to attempt to draw blood.

She was beating us anyway. Flame blew Hakram off his feet, charring his face, and without him to distract Archer was caught by the throat. I desperately wove ice and shadow around the princess' wrist, and the heartbeat it took for her to disperse it earned my companion just long enough to wriggle out of the grasp. Her breath was laboured, but at least her neck hadn't been snapped.

**"Rampage,"** Adjutant growled.

The orc charged back into the fight, his charred skin healing. Every strike was stronger and faster than the last, until even the Princess of High Noon had to take care.

**"Flow,"** Archer managed to croak.

It was almost hypnotic to watch her longknives move. There was no single blow, every attack coming from the last in an uninterrupted stream. She moves as she had when firing arrows, but that was comparing a candle to a bonfire. Between the three of us, we almost stood a chance. I turned a probe into a lunge that would have taken the princess in the neck, but she contemptuously moved an inch to the side and ignored it. I saw her sword rise to carve through Hakram's wrist and snapped my own, my last knife landing in my palm. I threw it at her head and the blade spun gracefully before being sliced cleanly through. The axe took her in the chest, breaking coloured mail but no skin. A boot to the stomach pushed the orc back, but he was still growing stronger. It did not slow him for long, and in the moment where the princess stood on only one leg Archer's longknives struck. The two blades came from opposite directions, one for the knee and the other for the neck. Without missing a beat Princess Sulia jumped and lay herself flat, strikes passing above and beneath her. She twisted sharply and a boot to the face shattered Archer's chin as she was sent sprawling to the floor.

Breath caught in my throat, I adjusted my wrist and pumped the entire arm full of my Name. I hit her at rib-height, the strength of the blow sending mail rings flying, and she smashed into the ground hard enough the earth dented. Her eyes turned gold-red, the heat grew, and Apprentice finally finished casting. Twenty-three sigils of blue light came into being above the princess with a loud hum, though not loud enough to drown out her pained groan. Heat shimmered around her and one of the sigils popped. I glanced at Adjutant, panting. The skin that had healed was beginning to flake off, the burns returning if not as grave as before. Whatever power had possessed him was gone, though. Archer was back on her feet, but her lower face was one large and bloody bruise. Another three sigils popped. We didn't have much longer left.

**"Oh, oh,"** Apprentice said, watching the struggling fae with wide eyes. **"I was wrong, fundamentally wrong."**

Shit. That did not look good at all. The bespectacled mage laughed, looking utterly crazed.

"It cannot be quantified," he muttered. "The method was erroneous from the onset. It is all made of the same building blocs, and those blocs are a *figment*. Mysteries, miracles of smoke and mirrors. The godhead is not behind boundaries, it is a *trick of perspective*."

Power rippled across his frame, his eyes glinting with a light that had a shiver going up my spine. One of the sigils formed again, though it popped moments later.

"Apprentice," I said carefully, and he interrupted.

"No no no," he laughed. "Not that. Not anymore. Hierophant. Usher of mysteries. Vivisector of miracles."

Was that what this was? A transition in the making?

"You are a god, yes?" he smiled at the Princess of High Noon, pushing up his glasses. "*Show me a miracle, then.*"

He waved his arm carelessly and Archer's jaw set itself back together with a loud crack. Fingers clutching something only he could see, the Hierophant brought his hands down. The sigils glowed so bright I had to shut my eyes in pain. *Like a star being born*. For all that, the words that drifted to my ears were calm.

"Everything burns," the Princess of High Noon whispered.

Arcadia broke. The brightness passed, and I opened my eyes to a world of endless ashes. I'd called on something of the same breed, when defeating the Count of Olden Oak, but it had been nothing but a drop to this ocean. Princess Sulia stood with restored wings, hair of flame and eyes that burned with something *more*. Above her raised hands hovered the sun. I could feel myself buckle from the pressure alone, my hair smouldering against my sweat-soaked scalp. Masego's spectacles shattered in his eyes and he screamed. Hakram wavered, then fell to his knees. The burns from earlier were spreading across his face. Archer's hands shook like leaves until she stabbed a longknife into her leg, the pain allowing her to not be swept away by the weight bearing down on all of us.

"You may feel honoured," Princess Sulia said. "I have ever only called on this to bring an end to Winter. The four of you will be the first ashes on this field formed of Creation."

"You're wrong," I croaked.

"Will you try to take the sun from me, Duchess?" she said, amused. "You will burn, one way or another."

She was right, of course. If I tried using Take I'd die before I finished speaking the word. I was the Squire, after all. No role stood behind me in this. But I'd meant it, when I'd told her I wasn't her opponent.

"Not that," I grinned, all teeth and malice. "There's not four of us."

Behind the Princess of High Noon a woman appeared, short-haired with blue-grey eyes. She wore loose leathers and her face was red with sweat.

"Yoink," the Thief said, and stole the sun.

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*BBBence1111*

I can't seem to find the next chapter button, so I think commenting is in order.

This is easily in the Top 5 of stories I've read. I could start listing things I like, but writing everything is faster so I'm going with that.

And of course I catch up on a chapter that ends with stealing the sun.

*Byzantine*

Oh gods. What an awesome and awful place to catch up.

Welcome to the story.

*Idan Dor*

Alright, took me a week of reading but I read everything. That was incredible, going to patreon this.

This chapter specifically was incredible as well. It started with our boy Traitorous (who really needs a spin of novel) doing his schtick amazingly well and ended with an incredible fight and "providence" of the ancient legend of fire.

One suggestion (which might never be found, buried here as it is), the extra chapters should state before and after what they are so you won't read ahead. I suspected they will include spoilers so I only read them by doing "next chapter" and reading them at the right time, but by just looking at them, it is very hard to tell which are those one can read yet and which aren't.



*Dwwolf*

Gods, the GF had to ask me if I was alright....I was laughing like a maniac at that "Yoink".

*dadycoool*

Quite possibly the highlight of the entire Guide.

*Roger W*

"matcher her"

[SpacyRicochet](#)

I didn't even notice, but Catherine actually did round up her entire Calamity Junior party! Didn't even think about Thief filling Assassin's spot! Good going, Cath!

*Shequi*

Oh.

Oh!

That was a Pivot.

"The stories have been around since the dawn of Creation, meaning there's an endless variety of ways they can go. A pivot is a point in time or a decision where the Named pushes her story in a particular direction. It influences the kind of powers you develop."

Cat has just formed her crew of miscreants, tuned to take power from and then defeat powerful otherworldly threats.

Diabolist is \*fucked\*, and not in a good way.

*James, Mostly Harmless*

Cat's ruminations at the beginning of this chapter tells me that she needs her universe's version of the Aarne-Thompson classification systems for folk tales (see [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aarne-Thompson\\_classification\\_systems](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aarne-Thompson_classification_systems)). Extensive cross-referenced indices of folk tales and themes would make fighting gods so much easier for her!

*Nash Equilibrium*

So awesome. I bet that Warlock is feeling a proud paternal moment as his son spreads his wings, even if he doesn't inherit the Warlock name. And I'll be interested to see what happens with the Hierophant name, since it doesn't really sound like a villainous one.

The Thief stealing the sun caught me completely by surprise, and I feel disappointed with myself because I really should have seen it coming. Cat even mentioned that the story she was crafting was about the theft of fire, and yet I thought that her using Take qualified. That said it's kind of funny that Thief is planning to be the wily Coyote that stole fire for the mortals.

*Soronel Haetir*

And just think, with the Sun gone they are now standing on Cat's playground, that of moonless night.

ALKATYN

Gods below.

So, we've seen new aspects from Adjutant and Ranger (I think?). Both of which are totally in keeping with their roles and general characteristics. Also Masego has made his foreshadowed Name transition. Heirophant, depending on your preferred source is a user of ancient mysterious, beings beyond our realm, etc. So makes perfect sense with his recent use of the power of Fae. Wonder if it also applies to demons, and what the difference is between his Role and Diabolist.

ALKATYN

Also this is the second time recently we've seen a transitional role "graduate" to a different role than expected. Heiress -> Diabolist (rather than say Emperess or Chancellor) and now Apprentice -> Heirophant not Warlock. Which implies lots of interesting possibilities

Firstly, since those two (and adjutant) both seem to be new roles that didn't exist before, it implies that the creation of new roles is easier than we had expected or easier now than it was in the past. Perhaps the Calamities change in how villains behave has had wider reaching effects than expected. The world is changing and Names are arising the match it.

It also adds more credence to the theory that Foundling will advance to a different new name rather than Black Knight. In fact at this point I'd be more surprised if she did the latter.

Even wilder speculation: The association with Fae she has, and heirophant seems to have as well, and her recent mixing of heroes and villains in one team may imply she is moving in a direction of unaligned names not directly tied to heavens or hells.

*stevenneiman*

I think it's less that Names are generally easier to create now than in the past, so much as that Black has set Cat on the path to live out a new story, and a new story needs some new characters. Of the two new Names, one of them clearly represents societal progress and social justice (proof that Orcs now actually have a seat at the table) and the other scientific progress and the triumph of reason over superstition (even when something actually is magic, it can still be scientifically understood and controlled).

### Cpt. Obvious

Triumph of reason over superstition. That right there is a clear sign that Heirophant is a Villainous name. There's no way the Gods above would approve of that.

### *Able Company*

Great world building I agree but none of these names are new

*goliath1303*

Umm yes, they are...

#1 Hierophant is new. Traditionally Apprentice would transition into Warlock, normally by killing/defeating whoever currently has the Name. As far as we know nobody has ever had this name before Masego.

#2 Diabolist is also new to the best of our knowledge. Normally Heiress would become something like Chancellor or Dread Emperor/Emperess, although we know from Akua's first conversation with Black that that Name is flexible and, I've assumed since reading that part, can actually transition into most Names given the right circumstances.

#3 Adjutant is definitely new. First of all Orcs have not had Names for centuries(millenia?). Grem one-eye almost gained a name, but in the end didn't quite get there. That makes Hakram the first.

Squire, Apprentice, Heiress/Heir, etc. are all Names that we know have been around for multiple incarnations and I'm petty sure Names like Archer and Thief have also been around for awhile. Since they're such common archetypes in stories, and because nobody has surprised/confused by then having said Names, it seems likely. The majority of the Names in this story are most likely ones that have had multiple claimants, but there are definitely several that have never been around before. I think that Cat & Co. forging new Stories and Roles is kinda one of the underlying themes to PGtE so it makes total sense to me that there would be a mix of old(Because stories have been around for long time and

certain roles are almost universal.) and new(Because they're being passed the mantle of the Calamities. Their whole thing was changing the game.) Names.

*Digitize27*

And what follows the sun's theft, but a moonless night?

*George*

oh shit Digitize, I think you're right. Gonna be nuts.

*ArkhCthuul*

The punchline, or grabline? was.amazing. The chapter itself very gripping, and we.get another Name.

What more is there to want (but ten chapters a week)? 😊

*amc*

great! finally, a shenanigan worthy of Cat!

*brendan*

Rereading and actually hitting the side chapters this time, so I wanted to ask...is this the "Thief of Stars" the White Knight taps into during his first fight against Black? The way he thinks about that aspect implies that the lives he's vicariously lived weren't all in the past...

*Raved Thrad*

It would be really funny if "Yoink" was actually the name of one of Thief's aspects.

*GeneralChaos*

Dread Emperor Traitorous more like Dread Emperor Hilarious.

*Misza Mojczysz Schmidt*

Please tell me that Thief's aspect is not "Steal" but "Yoink"

[Cpt. Obvious](#)

Sorry, in the older comments the WoG (Word of God, ie erraticerrata, ie the author) is that Yoink isn't an aspect as it wasn't in **bold**.

Still I agree. Yoink would be an awesome name for the aspect **Steal**.

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## Chapter 32: Close

*"Oh, on most days we lose. But once in a while, just once, it works. And those moments of perfect clarity where all the world is in the palm of your hand, a hundred thousand middling minds made into flawless assembly by your will? Those are worth all the rest."*

– Dread Empress Regalia II

Well, we weren't all going to die. That was nice. If my mouthing off had been followed by Thief failing to steal the sun, I would have been *real* embarrassed before I got my fool ass killed. Wasn't exactly enthusiastic about a heroine with shaky allegiances getting to shove the – possibly, I wasn't sure exactly how this worked – literal sun in her knapsack, but it did beat dying horribly. So, you know, I was willing to chalk up that one as a win. The skin of Thief's hand was cracking and black by the time the orb of fire disappeared, even though she'd never touched it at all, but away it went. The moment it was gone, Sulia *screamed*. I imagined it was a lot like losing an aspect, and when Masego had cut out mine the process had been excruciating. She collapsed to her knees and the lights went out. The not-world we were in began to collapse, wrinkling on itself, but I was having none of that. Now, if I'd pit my power against the Princess of High Noon she would have crushed me effortlessly and then maybe allowed me a moment to contemplate the sheer stupidity of my actions before ripping out my spine. This wasn't a fight, though. Power was leaving her like a leaking sieve, and even though I suspected that even whatever was left at the end would be enough for her to beat us again I wasn't going to give her the opportunity to get her shit together.

**"Fall,"** I said.

It hadn't been dark on the ashy plain, not exactly. It'd been not so much darkness as the absence of light. My power filled the endless expanse, propping it up and claiming the framework for itself. I saw my companions shiver in the sudden cold, now nothing more than shaded silhouettes in boundless dark. The night sky above us was without stars, but it didn't feel like anything was missing. *A sky from before there were stars*, I thought. In here, whatever this place was, my will was the only one that mattered. Masego spoke a word, but there was only silence here. Silence, cold and weight. I turned my eyes to the Princess of High Noon, saw her frame light up with steam as my aspect slowly smothered the power of Summer inside her. She fought it harder than the Count of Olden Oak had, slowing down the process to a crawl. Letting out a long breath, I closed my eyes and sharpened

my mind. Black had first taught me the exercise when I'd begun to learn the sword, but I'd only understood its true worth when I came fully into my Name. My mind became as a blade, the way I would when I formed a spear of shadows, but I let myself fall deeper into the process. Distractions and stray fought fell away. Doubts were scoured clean until nothing was left but pure, sharp intent.

With a clear and resounding snap, the Princess of High Noon froze.

I opened my eyes and released the night. After the utter silence that had preceded them, the noises of the battlefield were deafening. A wave of exhaustion nearly toppled me, though it did not scatter my wits enough for it to escape my notice that my blood flow had slowed. A few exertions away from it to start turning into red sludge, if I was lucky. I was out of the game for hours, maybe days. *But I'm not done as long as I can speak.*

"Masego," I rasped. "Bind her."

Sulia wasn't dead, oh no. When I'd made the decision of fighting here in Arcadia, even with all the odds I'd stacked in my favour, I'd hesitated for one reason. The losses I would incur had to be made worth it by a greater gain. Bleeding Summer alone was not enough to drive me to make a gambit like that, not with what I was putting on the line. There were major liabilities to fighting the fae in Creation, of course, but that in and of itself wasn't a reason to fight them in Arcadia instead. The risks taken by giving battle in Summer were too high to justify the decision with just that. But then I'd stopped thinking of this battle as a battle alone, and placed it in the context of a campaign. There would be a final clash between my forces and the Summer Court, that much was certain in my eyes. And given that any advantage of mobility I had through my portals the fae had as well but better, when I returned to Creation there was no real way for me to dictate where that last clash happened. Considering the Legions were at their best on prepared grounds and anything but our best might just come short, that was not a recipe for victory. I'd understood that I needed something to force their hand, and that was why my soldiers and my allies were now dying on this unearthly field.

The Princess of High Noon was my leverage, and I'd not understood exactly how strong that leverage would be until only two royal fae had come to stand for Summer. There should have been three, which likely meant the Diabolist had gotten rid of one for me. I'd give this to Akua Sahelian: she was a horrid, cold-blooded and treacherous monster but when she put it all on the line she could slug it with the best of them. I was still going to stab her repeatedly and burn the corpse twice, of course, but I could respect the strength if not how she got it and how she used it.

Two royals meant there were two people left to lead the armies of Summer. If the Prince of Nightfall killed his opponent, and I believed he could, that left the Queen of Summer as the only heavy hitter in her court. She wouldn't be able to let that stand, not with Nightfall and a princess left to back the King of Winter. If the other court turned its eyes on her, and it was in their nature to do so, then she'd lose that fight and badly. With Sulia back at her side, she could *maybe* scrap out a draw. She needed the Princess of High Noon back, and needed her badly.

So if I dragged Sulia back to Creation, bound and gagged? Then the Queen of Summer could only come to take her back or face destruction. My bet was she'd come with her entire army, where I wanted and when I wanted. I honestly couldn't think of another way to bring the war to a close in the next three months and some that remained of the time the Winter King had given me, and so here we were.

Hierophant, for though the change was young already I could no longer think of him by his old Name, did not immediately reply. Over his palm hovered the shards that had once been his spectacles, and though the enchantments on them were gone there was something a great deal more dangerous to be glimpsed in them now. The last thing they'd witnessed was the Summer sun in the fullness of its glory, and that light was still alive in the glass. It might never leave. Masego left the shards hovering in the air, weaving arcane patterns, and lightly touched his eyes. He could no longer see through them, I realized. He'd glimpsed a miracle and the miracle had burned away his sight. The dark-skinned mage smiled strangely, and then his fingers dug into his face. With a scream he ripped out his eyes, blood trickling down his face as the glass shards broke again and again until they were nothing but small gains. Forming into two orbs, they set themselves into his eye cavities. There was a shimmer of heat and the blood turned to red vapour as dull glass eyes replaced the ones in his hand.

"The whole Hierophant thing was kind of attractive, until you did that," Archer said. "Way to ruin it."

"It was a fair trade," Masego said, voice pensive.

The bloody eyes disappeared without need for even a gesture, whisked out into the pocket dimension where he kept his tools.

"Seven pillars hold up the sky," he said peacefully.

There was a cadence to it, the hint of an incantation. Seven wooden pillars formed around the fallen Princess Sulia, looking distinctly physical. My knowledge of sorcery was limited, but even I knew the most traditional limits of what a mage could do. It was the kind of thing that was useful to know when killing caster, and since Diabolist was one I'd made sure to learn at

least the broad strokes. It was possible to turn power into material substance, but the draw should have been *massive*. Comparable with teleportation, and the only people who'd ever managed that were the Miezans. Masego seemed to have done it casually, and did not look winded in the slightest. Like he'd just ignored a law. Gods, what had he turned into?

"Four cardinals, one meridian," he said. "The wheel unbroken, spokes that are not. Thou shall not leave the circle."

Four runes appeared around the fae, linked by a circle of pale light. The ice shattered but Sulia hung in the air, faintly conscious yet unable to move. I helped up Hakram from where he was still kneeling, eyes closed and breathing irregularly. He leaned heavily on me, which almost saw the both of us toppling to the ground until Archer caught his other side and steadied us.

"Careful there, big guy," she said. "This isn't the place to take a nap, though I salute your attitude."

The orc cleared his throat, but did not say anything. He was in even worse state than I was. I looked for Thief, but she was gone again. Not much about the aftermath, that one. The disappearing act wasn't so much mysterious as it was a constant irritant. I'd been known to be, uh, less than polite on occasion but at least I didn't leave in the middle of things. I felt the gaze on me before the entity it belonged to deigned to land. The Prince of Nightfall ignored us entirely, touching the ground by the Princess of High Noon and studying her with a harsh smile.

"Oh, Sulia," he murmured. "The sheer indignity. You'd have been furious it if it was one of us, but *mortals*? No amount of lives will allow you to wipe that shame away."

"You killed your prince?" I asked.

He turned to me me, single eye shining with amusement.

"Very much so," he said. "If the end ever comes, he will still be flinching when we next meet."

"We need to break the army," I said. "Quickly. My troops are going to begin evacuation as soon as I send the order."

"There is nowhere she will not follow you, with Sulia in your hands," he said. "You lack not for boldness. I wonder if I should be flattered, that your domain resembles mine so closely."

"Ah," I said, nodding as if I had any idea what he was talking about.

"Your third aspect," Masego said, long accustomed to my wiles. "It is... more."



The raven-haired man glanced at the braided mage, inclining his head by the barest fraction.

"You have good eyes, for one of your kind," he said.

The Hierophant inclined his head in return, accepting the compliment wordlessly. The Prince of Nightfall breathed in deeply, as if he was savouring the heat, and looked up at the sky. It was still day, I saw. The light still shone. Yet there was no sun. That might be a problem. What exactly had Thief gotten her sticky fingers on?

"I will lend a vassal to escort you back to your lines, keeping to the spirit of our bargain," the prince said. "Do not forget your end."

How the Hells I was going to manage to pay the price he'd demanded for his assistance was a headache for another day, I decided. I looked at the battle lines and saw Summer was wavering. They'd felt the defeats that had happened on a deeper level, and it was costing them something.

"We've won," I said.

"The Duke of Green Orchards will call retreat within the hour," the fae agreed. "You killed his sister earlier, and they have no champion left to match me."

I looked west, to the hill, and saw the silhouette had yet to move. The Prince of Nightfall followed my gaze, single eye narrowing.

"If she is not gone by dawn tomorrow, I will have my due," he said.

I looked at him, then shrugged.

"Good luck. Gods know you'll need it."

—

We pursued the enemy when they retreated, but not far and not for long. I wanted Summer thinned of all the meat I could manage before we fought them again, but I was well aware that the moment Princess Sulia had been defeated an hourglass had been flipped and we wouldn't survive the last grains running out. Masego said that, in the worst case, she could turn a journey of several days into one that would take her until nightfall. We should be able to manage that. Juniper only sent two thousand regulars across before closing the gate, the flanking force they represented taking its toll before the fae host managed to extricate itself. Mostly green recruits, I noticed. It was so very typical of my general to use a battle in goddamned Arcadia to blood her fresh

recruits that I couldn't help but smile. Juniper was Juniper. I was pretty sure if we ever invaded one of the Hells she'd just treat it as tempering exercise. The knights and the Winter fae did most of the hard work in running down whatever soldiers of Summer were cut off from the retreating host, and though it was only a rough estimate Marshal Ranker sent me an officer with her best read on the casualties. On our side, nearly six thousand. Nauk's two thousand men at the beginning of the campaign had been whittled down to a bare five hundred. Most of the rest were Deoraithe regulars and fewer legionaries, though the Watch had allegedly lost a tenth of their number.

Summer, by Ranker's estimates, had lost around twenty thousand of the sixty they'd brought to the plains. Among those, over a third of the ten thousand the golden fae who'd very nearly wiped out Nauk's jesha had died. They'd suffered more from the two blasts that had been extracted from the Duchess of Restless Zephyr than mortal blades, apparently. I wasn't looking forward to another scrap with the golden ones, and fully intended on a sit-down with the Hellhound over the subject. This had been a victory, if a bloody one. We'd traded losses at over thrice dead for every one of ours. Winter, though, had not made out so well. Twenty thousand had been led here by the Prince of Nightfall, but only nine thousand would leave the field. Their cavalry was good as done, while the winged knights of Summer still had over half their numbers, and they'd lost one of the three royals directly under the King in the battle. I wasn't all that broken up about it, to be honest. A Winter that was better off than Summer but still weakened was very much to my advantage.

Our wounded had been sent through first, the slow work accelerated when Masego crossed into Creation with the Princess of High Noon and then used our other aristocratic prisoner to forge a second gate that our men could use to evacuate. I gave Duchess Kegan leave to use that one to get her people out at her own leisure, getting the Legions through the one at behind the palisades. It was quicker this time around, for a variety of reasons. One more gate, lesser numbers and our officers had managed the logistics of this before. It was past noon when the last few hundred began to file through, and sitting on the bloody grass I let out a sigh of relief. Masego was lying down on my left, dull glass eyes thankfully hidden by his closed eyelids. It would be a while before I got used to those. He had to be on this side to close the gate he'd crafted, he'd told, me and I'd decided to remain with him so he wouldn't get distracted.

"The Queen won't be able to follow us for some time," the mage said. "There are difficulties, to something that powerful crossing in Creation. They weren't meant to."

"How long is some time?" I said. "A week, a month, a year? I can't have her stuck here for too long. Not if I'm to win this war decisively."

"No more than a month," Hierophant said. "She would not be able to stay for much longer than that, either. She's too deeply intertwined with Aine."

"I can work with a month," I grunted. "I'll need around that long to have everything in place for our second tilt."

"It won't be anything like today," Masego warned.

"They always get better, the second time around," I agreed softly.

The others had already gone across. I'd told Archer I didn't mind if she wanted to go have a chat with her teacher, but the other woman had shuddered and muttered something about *hunting eyes*. She did enjoy her dramatics. Ranger, if that was really her, still hadn't moved. Might have been she just came to have a look? Regardless, as long as it wasn't made my problem I was glad to wash my hands clean of the whole thing. Nothing good came out of meddling in the affairs of Calamities, even former ones. I sighed, then hoisted myself back up onto my feet. Gods, I was going to be more bruise than woman tomorrow. I offered Masego a hand, but saw his fingers were tracing the grass. Casting? No, he was trying to move the green strands. And failing.

"Oh fuck," I whispered.

I looked ahead, to the gates. Maybe a little more than a hundred people left between the two of them, but none of them were moving. Frozen like statues. I'd seen something like this before, shortly before getting my heart ripped out.

"She's here," the Hierophant said, rising unsteadily.

The difference in light was so subtle I almost missed it: it was the shadows that gave it away. Even with the sun missing, the light had been cast as if coming from the something that no longer existed. Now, though, the angle was different. It all came from above. Hand shaking, I looked up. There was no sky. Only an ocean of golden flames, as far as the eye could see. Masego began murmuring softly and with a sound like a gong transparent wards formed around the soldiers still leaving. They resumed their movement for a heartbeat, until the wards shattered.

"You said we should have had until nightfall," I said. "Aine is days away, and she wasn't moving."

"No, not moving. She was *casting*," Masego said, regretful. "Time has been suspended across all of Summer."

I cast a panicked look at my soldiers. Shit, at the *gates*. The Queen might be able to cross through those. If she did, we were done. All our armies wiped in moments.

"I have never done this before," a soft voice said, awed.

In front of us stood a young girl. She couldn't have been more than fourteen. Her skin was tanned, but not like a Taghreb or the people of the Free Cities. Like a farmer, and her hands held the calluses of one who tilled fields. Her hair was a mass of golden curls, let loose without styling. She wasn't beautiful, the way some fae were. If would have taken her for some farmer's daughter, with those broad shoulders and solid muscles. Her eyes were brown, unremarkable, and when she smiled at us her cheeks dimpled.

"Is this what he saw in you?" the Queen of Summer wondered. "You change the patterns."

My mouth was dry. I had the itch to cough, but my body was still and beyond my control.

"It is not enough," she said after a moment, and the sorrow on her face was heartbreaking. "The story will correct itself. All you represent is delay. How tired he must be, to embrace this."

She sighed, then peered at us.

"There are five of you," she said.

I could not even nod.

"Born under cursed stars," she told us gently. "You most of all, Catherine Foundling. The five of you would be woe unto all you behold."

She had no weapon in her hand but I had not felt this terrified in a very, very long time.

"I will spare you this," she said. "I'm sorry. It's all I can do for you. Summer is not kind."

Hierophant's hand moved, but the Queen glanced at him and it stopped.

"If you'd had a few years, Masego," she said. "You have not seen enough."

Her hand rose and the sky fell. *Now. Come on, now is when you come. She has to be why you're here.* I'd never heard anything more beautiful than the sound of a sword clearing the scabbard. The sky split in half and Ranger stood between us as if she had always been there. My hands were shaking, and though I abhorred

the weakness it stood for I was so relieved I could move again I almost didn't care.

"It was the Chancellor, who named us the Calamities," the hooded woman said, a single sword in hand. "The man always had a way with words. 'You are a calamity to friend and foe alike'. Only ever screamed when he died, though. I guess it's hard to be witty when getting drawn and quartered."

She hummed.

"The Woe," Ranger said, mulling over the word. "Too broad a mantle for you five now, but you'll grow into it."

"I have no quarrel with you, Lady of the Lake," the Queen of Summer said, brow creased slightly.

Just the sight of it made me want to comfort her, even remembering she'd just tried to kill us.

"Run along, kids," Ranger said, face hooded by shadow save for the sharp grin on her face. "Once is all you get from me."

"We could help you," I croaked.

The blade did not move, and neither did the hand that held it. And yet for a heartbeat I felt like my throat had been cut, like blood was gushing out. The intent had been so strong it had almost become a fact.

"I dislike ignoring my impulses," Ranger said casually. "So do not suggest that again. He would be angry, if I killed you, but we've been angry before. It passes."

"My soldiers," I said, knowing I was testing death but unwilling to leave them behind.

The Calamity shrugged carelessly.

"What are they to me?"

She couldn't have... no, not even Black would. But I looked behind me, and there was no denying the truth. The Deoraithe, the legionaries. Nothing left but ashes. She had not protected them. Only the two of us.

"You will not leave," the Queen of Summer said.

She spoke the words easily, and still I felt my bones creak under the weight. Ranger unsheathed her second sword and the pressure vanished.

"I looked for you, in Aine," the Calamity said.

"It would have been a meaningless fight," the Queen said.

The Named had already ceased to pay attention to us, I saw. She'd given us our chance, and that was all she felt she owed.

"So you had me running through a maze instead," Ranger snorted. "Cute. No maze here now, though. Too far from your throne."

"This strife is unnecessary," the Queen insisted, as if she couldn't possibly understand why this matter was still spoken of at all.

"I don't think we've ever been properly introduced," the Calamity laughed. "I am the Ranger. I hunt those worth hunting. Rejoice, for you qualify."

We fled, through the ashes of men who'd fought for me not hours ago. The gates closed, and the last of Arcadia I saw was a lone silhouette standing in a storm of flame. We'd won today, I told myself. Even with how it had ended.

I should have gotten used to that bitter taste in my mouth by now.

---

*PingleBerry*

Well shit.

*Ben*

I read this too quickly the first time and thought that the Queen of Summer had wiped out ALL of the combined forces (including Ranker and Kegan) other than the Named. But if I'm reading it right it's just the hundred or so that had not yet gone through the gates back into Creation. Or am I still missing something?

*Rnt169*

no, I think that's what happened.

*beleester*

There's nothing indicating the attack went through the gates into Creation.

*Kingbob12*

Fuck Ranger is scary. She seemed so cheery back when she invaded the Dead King for the 4th time!

## *Byzantine*

I get the feeling the Dead King cannot die in truth, so she's just having fun with him.

And the way Black spoke of her and him. I guess he is the closest thing she has to an equal, at least in terms of sheer destructive power.

## *stevenneiman*

He's nowhere near her league in terms of damage potential. I'm not entirely sure what it was she liked about him, though it might have been his ambition. Black might actually be the least physically powerful of the Calamities, though he's fearsome in terms of absolute power. After all, he's the leader and strategist next to Ranger herself, the guy who can call down unholy fire against his enemies and the woman who once killed a god (even if it was small g) with her bare hands.

## *samshadar*

Byzantine was referring to Black comparing the Dead King and Ranger... I think killing the entire populace of your Kingdom and turning them into your undead servants qualifies.

## *goliath1303*

I'm pretty sure that Byzantine was referring to this:

"Black had told me there were to people on Calernia against whom it was useless to think in terms of victory, where one could only attempt to limit the damage and lose the least amount of skin possible. One was the Dead King, who he'd charmingly referred to as 'the original abomination'. The other was the Ranger, whose utter disregard for odds I'd been raised hearing stories about."

It was part of Cat's thoughts a couple chapters back. It was after Archer told her that Ranger had grown bored with hunting princes and princesses a while ago so she had to be there for something else(i.e. the Summer queen).

## *RandomFan*

If Ranger were- is- a villain, she'd consider herself winning, because she'd win for all of her life until the day she lost. I kinda get the feeling that's a deal she'd take, and be happy with. I don't think she has any long-term goals, though. She might, but that's not the feeling I get. She's playing, whatever alignment her name has.

Black is playing to win long-term, which is new and novel- especially since it might work. I think he's interesting, not her equal. He'll never be her equal, either, if you trust his own predictions- which is a tragedy, but perfectly legitimate.

*Jeffery Wells*

Ranger is chaotic neutral on the D&D morality scale. She's not a hero or a villain, she's like a force of nature. Her goals have nothing to do with good or evil, so she can spend years traveling with monstrous villains before seeing up a refuge that trains mostly heroes. It's like her morality system is perpendicular to the classic good vs evil, and it only intersects right in the middle.

[Phantom](#)

Well, given Ranger's attitude. I am more concerned with how the dead king had survived ranger four times. I give that at least he was quite capable.

*Akim*

Because the dead King built the best training Parours. ? And if she killed him there would be no more Carnival for her.

*nipi*

Well it was implied that the Dead King does change bodies.

And somehow I have the impression that he isn't much of a fighter himself. That's what the undead minions are for. So Ranger might not be interested in him per se.

*Byzantine*

Like I said, I'm pretty sure he can't actually die in truth, so while Ranger may have destroyed his avatar the first time she went there, it didn't accomplish anything but making him mildly annoyed.

*Shequi*

It strikes me that Ranger has exactly the same attitude as most Elves; Named matter, ordinary soldiers don't.

*TeK*

More likely is that Catherin is like a daughter to Black and Mazego is a son of Warlock, who are both her friends. If a Thief was there, she might've been evaporated.



*Jtebb2*

I will remained utterly convinced that Cat is the daughter of Black and Ranger until proven otherwise. Then I shall ignore that proof and maintain my belief.

*kelioez*

Like, the author has officially stated that they aren't, so ur really just making a fool outta urself

*Cpt. Obvious*

In the words of Adam Savage:

**"I reject your reality and substitute my own."**

*The Quietist*

Well then she was bored and killing time. Now she's got a new prey and is clearly in some sort of zone hence Archer commenting on "hunter's eyes" as to why she wasn't going to go say hi.

*JC*

How does the Ranger even do what she does?

*Byzantine*

She is the most powerful Named on the continent by a significant margin. Combine that with being half-elf and trained by their best. Ranger is utterly terrifying. If she is hunting you, Run. Not to get away – to limit how many people you like get killed in the process.

*Darkening*

Well, elves are already practically demigods, she's a half-elf... and she's a named on top of that. So that's a good base. Then there's her aspects, which lead her to perfect any skill she sets her mind to and then transcend it into something more than merely mortal skill. Sorta like how Tolkien's elves would become so good at, carpentry or whatever that they could make magic stuff just by being really, really good. But she directs all of that into killing things. Have we gotten any indication on how long Ranger's been doing this? I got the sense she was already a veteran when she ran into Black in that tavern the first time, and as a half-elf she's probably got a long lifespan.

*esryok*

Based on her extra chapter (Regard) she's at least 140 years old, and I get the impression it is a fair number of decades more than that.

*stevenneiman*

Named are all immortal until killed, so she could be theoretically any age. And yeah, between being half elf and having Aspects designed to make her grow more fearsome with each insane stunt she is probably one of the most dangerous beings in Creation. Of course, that still doesn't explain how she was able to cut the burning sky, but it's hardly out of line with her power shown elsewhere.

*kinigget*

Villains are immortal, Heroes can be resurrected

Those are the rules

Unless you're Cat

*wigg55*

BS exponential curve aspects and agelessness.

*Byzantine*

Sucks, but honestly she should have seen it coming, with Ranger waiting there.

There are only two things in Arcadia that hold her interest now: The King of Winter and the Queen of Summer. And this was Summer territory.

Interesting, though, she just Bound Thief to the party in Name and Story, and hence in truth. That's going to have implications, I think. Ones Thief may not be happy with, but she will deal with as long as Catherine doesn't go all murder-happy on innocents.

*M*

There is nothing explicitly saying that it's Thief and not Robber that is "the fifth woe".

*Rnt169*

As much as I would like Robber to have more screen time, I think members have to be Named??

*M*

You don't think Robber is a Name then?

*Kirroth*

On the one hand, an good group of five needs The Sneaky One. That could be Thief or it could be Robber. Thief would seem to be in the lead, but she's a Hero that got strong armed into helping out and doesn't really seem a proper part of Cat's circle. Robber is far more closely tied to Cat's narrative.

On the other hand, Cat's all about altering patterns, so I wouldn't even narrow it down to just those two. I'm even weighing odds that Diabolist is the fifth. She'd make an excellent Starscream.

*stevenneiman*

@Kirroth I very much doubt that she would be willing to work with Diabolist. She killed William, who was a way more sympathetic character and who at there's at least a theoretical possibility that if he renounced the Gods Above he could be a decent person, but Diabolist doesn't give that kind of vibe, in a way that makes killing her an much more attractive option. With, of course, very thorough precautions against her coming back in any form, at any time.

*maresther23*

Goblin names are sneaky, Black said so when talking about the Matrons. Robber has "heard the wind" and knows the music of "The Girl Who Climbed the Tower". Finally, and not least, see the moments when he says he is Invincible and tell me it is not an Aspect.

[Cpt. Obvious](#)

It wasn't in bold. **Aspects** are always in bold.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Robber is a name, not a Name.

*James, Mostly Harmless*

Ranger also bound Archer to Cat's team, which I think is a bigger deal than binding Thief.

*Byzantine*

It's a bigger deal in that she gave implicit permission for Archer to stay. But it isn't as major in terms of the Narrative at play.

*nipi*

Evil parties are always more fun with a good guy thrown in the mix. RPG wisdom. 😊

*nehemiahnewell*

I'm surprised that the Summer Queen is surprised. The Ranger seems as much a slave to her habits as any fae, and she knew she was prey. She should grok that, it's a mirror of her own kingdoms limited nature.

*James, Mostly Harmless*

I got the impression that the Summer Queen was not actually surprised by Ranger's appearance. It seemed more like she was dawdling a little so that Ranger could appear just in time to save Cat and Masego ...

*Byzantine*

If she was, I don't think she had a choice. Fae are bound by the story, and the stronger the Fae the stronger it binds them.

*Jago*

She recognized of tired is the king of Winter, and probably it is the same for her. They are retelling the same grand tale again and again, with two possible outcomes and the same pararell tales. A prison that will last forever. Sad.

*jor*

damnit they just too OP

*Shequi*

Downer, somewhat.

I wonder what the Queen of Summer is nominally Princess of when not wearing the crown.

Also, did anybody else notice that Thief now has the burnt hand motif of Ranker's Legion?

*Shequi*

Also also:

"The Woe," Ranger said, mulling over the word. "Too broad a mantle for you five now, but you'll grow into it."

Confirmation of what I said in the previous chapter. This was a Pivot, the start of a story for the 5 Named under Catherine's banner.

*nehemiahnewell*

Huh, that's interesting. You're right, she does. Even if it came from a different source, that might matter. It's an element of a story, after all.

*stevenneiman*

Very observant. I hadn't noticed the way that she shared Ranker's burnt hand. Of course, being a hero, she might have access to some unfair means of healing that, but on the other hand that might not work with a wound that came from the Summer sun.

*Nastybarsteward*

Been now they've fled we won't get to see the fight... 😞

*Nastybarsteward*

\* But

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Except maybe in an interlude on Wednesday

*Nastybarsteward*

It's interesting that the queen of summer sounds rather un-fae like in appearance, even if she most definitely is in power. As Cat has become a noble in the court of winter, is it possible the queen of summer wasn't fae to start with...?

*Terion*

I think the Queen is Old fae. The lower fae seem to be shaped by the stories of mortals into unnaturally beautiful beings. Maybe the queen is too fundamental to be affected.

*Nastybarsteward*

The king of winter was still very much fae in appearance, wasn't he?

Whereas the queen of summer was a muscular 14yr old human girl

in appearance.

And one who was in awe of her own power at that.

[Cpt. Obvious](#)

My first thought was that she is born again every spring, grows into her early teens as spring turns into summer, and ages as summer passes.

I might be far off the mark, but it would fit the setting as it's often how summer is depicted.

Winter on the other hand is almost always depicted as a grizzled mature or older man, with frost white beard and hair.

*Shequi*

Maybe she's a Changeling. That's another old Fae story.

*Vortex*

I imagine the queen's age would be tied to the seasons. When summer is young so is she.

*Letouriste*

So now masego can teleport?:D

*danh3107*

"I am the Ranger. I hunt those worth hunting. Rejoice, for you qualify."

And lo, did the blueballs abate and all who pined for release find satisfaction.

*stevenneiman*

typo thread:

"Distractions and stray [fought->thoughts] fell away"

"It was the kind of thing that was useful to know when killing [caster->casters/a caster]"

"You'd have been furious [it] if it was one of us"

"if we ever invaded one of the Hells she'd just treat it as {a} tempering exercise"

Also, I'm kinda feeling like Ranger seems a bit more overpowered than she did last time we saw her. When she invaded Keter she always seemed like she was skating along the thin edge of possible, but here she just seems like she can do whatever she wants.

*RoflCat*

When you keep Transcending the next bigger thing, eventually you get that OP.

I mean, back then she was simply hunting Dead King's ghost heroes.

Then during the Conquest she probably took part in hunting some of the big Named on Good (like Wizard of the West)

Heck she already has Prince of Nightfall so beat that she ALWAYS come for his eye.

And now, my guess is that whatever 'souvenir' she'll take from the Queen will help Cat defeat her later on.

[zlzhou](#)

Also "thou [shalt]"

*Unmaker*

It is too much to hope that Thief will drop a sun-ball of flame on Diabolist. Diabolist and her father would just figure out how to use the power somehow. It is a really good question as to what in the nine hells Thief is going to do with the stolen Sun.

*Matthew*

Well, if Cat is lucky, Akua will summon the "True demon of Outer Darkness" and then having a spare sun will be useful.

*RandomFan*

And if Cat really manages to never have a time where summoning a sun is a "good idea" or one where summoning a sun is a "best we've got" prior to that point, there is a value in plopping down a sun in the middle of winter. I doubt it'd take out a king, but off-guard, it might let her finish off a prince or princess.

[Евгений Пермяков](#)

>"Your third aspect," Masego said, long accustomed to my wiles. "It is... more."

Huh. That's ominous.

[Luxuria Tenebris](#)

>"The night sky above us was without stars, but it didn't feel like anything was missing. A sky from before there were stars, I thought"

It was ominous before, now it sounds ancient and terrifying.

*Nastybarsteward*

Just the way like it!

---

Combined attacks, or even stealing his own Reality Marble to come as a princess or a queen when the next Winter comes? At

least we now know that the titles don't refer to any actual aspects on Creation.

*mechanicalrain*

Victory though superior strategy, one of the best ones to enjoy. Hopefully all the men that died did so for something, and she manages to leverage the victory into actual gains, rather than the temporary reprieve from Summer of 1~ish months.

[Hakurei06](#)

It said the Deoraithe and the Legionaries, but were the knights also asked? that spells Bad News, since unlike the Legionaries she can't just recruit another 2000. Be good if the watch were cut down a bit, though.

*Danica Bihlmaier*

The last few hundred that hadn't gone through the portals yet... no more. Knights seem to have been gone way before that.

*Byzantine*

Only a fraction of the army remained on the Arcadia side of the portals, and the Knights were likely among the first to leave.

*Snoogle*

So the Prince of Night"fall" says that the "Fall" aspect is close to his domain.

For a Duchess of the Moonless "Night", that sounds way awesome. I can't wait to see what that could mean.

=====

Damn, replied to the wrong comment.

Combined attacks, or even stealing his own Reality Marble to come as a princess or a queen when the next Winter comes? At least we now know that the titles don't refer to any actual aspects on Creation.

[Luxuria Tenebris](#)

"I am the Ranger. I hunt those worth hunting. Rejoice, for you qualify."

"I dislike ignoring my impulses," Ranger said casually. "So do not suggest that again. He would be angry, if I killed you,

So Cat is worth hunting, that is interesting

*Terion*



I don't think she considers Catherine worth hunting. I think she just means that by default she instinctively silences anything that opposes her, in word or deed. Permanently.

*The quietist*

Nah just she found the offer to help insulting. This is her kill.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Your "nah" is insutingly dismissive. Especially since you're not even right.

*goliath1303*

That's hilarious coming from YOU, of all people...  
Especially, especially since he WAS right and you're wrong.

*RandomFan*

Don't chide him for dismissing his peers, and then promptly do the exact same thing. His sounds more plausible to me, but both are possible. (In fact, I think both are the case in truth.)

*Idan Dor*

Hmmm, maybe it's the zeal of a new highly powerful opponent that makes it harder to suppress her instincts? She wouldn't have lasted long with the Calamities (or to be more precise, \*they\* wouldn't) if she had no way to suppress those instincts.

I am wondering about Ranger's kill count right now, she would have had no problem hunting Warlocks on the height of their power in their own fortresses. I wonder how many top heroes and villians she had hunted during her time.

I find it interesting how the King of Winter is attempting large scale changes to the story and shifting of the patterns. The Courts are somewhat supposed to mirror stories and narratives, I wonder if this is him mirroring Black's story? And if so, to what end?

Thank for the chapter, EE, it is certainly, as others mentioned, a pivot for the Woe.

*Danica Bihlmaier*

"very tired" was what the Queen of Summer said. The Winter King seems to want an end to the endless repetition of endless cycles and not much more beyond that.

*Morgenstern*

That is, if she is right, of course.

[taborask](#)

That's a really interesting way to see it. I didn't think he needed to have a reason for wanting to break the cycle, but it absolutely makes sense that this might be a reflection of the general "narrative shift" that Praes is trying to take

*AndR*

Nah, Ranger just tends to kill people who insult her.

*The Quietist*

Can't reply directly to you Warren for some reason so I'll post here. Just to say "nah" was in no way intended as insulting it was just a randomly used word... Chill my friend.

*Morgenstern*

"Slang" is all of how it came over to me o\_ô That's the problem with written words and not being able to see facial expressions, gestures, and hear a tone, I guess 😊

*George*

It seemed clear to me that Ranger was talking to the Summer Queen with the first bit, then Catherine with the second bit. Personally I read it as Ranger being offended at the implication that she needed help.

*Sinjako*

I am desperately hoping that Diabolist is the fifth Woe. Imagine Catherine's face when she finds out reality just played its biggest joke on her. It would fit with her character development very well too. So far, she's had to a lot of nasty things, but nothing as deeply personal as this. This would be the first time she's HAD to do something that offends her to the core of her soul.

[joanneeve](#)

Cat and her are bound in a story of three that Cat is unaware of.

*Thebes*

I thought there could only be one pattern of three between two named.

*Shequi*

No. Cat and Akua's pattern of three has been completed, and "creation does not embrace tedious repetition"

*lennymaster*

No, I think it would be way more awesome if everyone thought Thief was the fifth member of the Woe, right next to Squire, Hierophant, Adjutant and Archer. But when she tries to betray Cat Robber suddenly stabs her and reveals himself to be one of the Woe (I think Saboteur would be a fitting Name). Originally I had pined for Kilian to be one of Cats band of killers and the love interest, but that seems more and more unlikely.

[Ethesis](#)

I had hoped she would use the bound Fay to elevate her love interest.

[Mental Mouse](#)

She's still need humans as well, which was Cat's sticking point. (Presumably this would be to keep the new fae Killian alive in Creation.)

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Why in the Hells would Diabolist ne part of this? She's not there, and no one there is even talking about her. How does your idea make any sense?

Ranger was making a parallel to the Calamities, so you want Akua and Cat to be TEAMMATES? What the hell?

*goliath1303*

So you say "Your "nah" is insutingly dismissive. Especially since you're not even right." In response to a fairly innocuous comment and then, LESS THAN 10 MINUTES LATER, you post this condensing reply? You have got to be the least self-aware person I've ever seen. I'm saying this to you on a public internet page, let that sink in for a minute...

*ArkhCthuul*

Wow...that was sufficiently.epic, even if it was.clewr that ranger.would.intercede.  
Still.wow...

*MagnaMalusLupus*

I love this story more and more, but I'm not loving that party name; being a Calamity makes sense, as a calamity is an event, a noun, a distinct entity. Woe is an emotion, and isn't really

something quantifiable; you can have 5 calamitous events, you can have 5 tragedies befall you, you can have 5 curses bestowed upon you, hells you can even encounter 5 banes of your existence, but it doesn't make much sense to say you have had 5 woes. That being said, tragedy seems a bit too heroic, curses doesn't work what with there being a Name of the Cursed, and Banes doesn't really roll off the tongue. Just a thought though, considering how much Cat has fought with literal gods and angels and such, and given the Hierophant has a direct connection to dissecting the divine, perhaps Blasphemies would be apropos. Thoughts?

*beleester*

Woe isn't always an emotion, it can also be used to mean something that causes you trouble. The typical phrase is "suffering from woes," e.g., "The company is suffering from financial woes after poor sales of its product."

Although you're right that it's usually an indefinite number – you can suffer from woes, but you never suffer from one woe, or five woes.

*Cloudy\_Mind*

"Woe is an emotion, and isn't really something quantifiable". Not entirely true. Woe and Calamity are very closely associated.

Woe – great sorrow or distress.  
– things that cause sorrow or distress; troubles.  
Calamity – an event causing great and often sudden damage or distress; a disaster.

*Snoogle*

"Calamity: an event causing great distress."

"Woe: great sorrow or distress."

Black the Calamity caused Catherine the Woe.

I like this parallel.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Use the dictionary if you don't know what a word means. You're on the internet, it's stupid easy.

*George*

No need to be rude about it, man.

*goliath1303*

Especially considering that 11 minutes before posting this, he was getting on someone ELSE'S car about being dismissive. The lack of self-awareness is honestly impressive.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*Dylan Tullos*

Am I the only one who really doesn't like Ranger? She's essentially a narcissist in love with her own cunning and ability, endlessly seeking out bigger and better challenges without any regard for the consequences to the people around her. For all of her age and experience, Ranger is a child endlessly demanding new thrills, maiming and murdering purely to avoid boredom.

I'm personally hoping that the Queen wipes her out. Ranger treats those around her like toys that exist only for her own amusement, and it's about time for her to run into someone powerful enough to stop her little game.

*lennymaster*

I agree with you on that one, but it would be way too boring if either of those two died.

Cat's big thing however was to build a better Callow and to kill everything, be it mortal Named or even a God to achieve that. How many Gods does she need to kill, starting with the Queen of Summer and continuing with the King of Winter, to whom she promised revenge for her dead people in Marchford, to become interesting to Ranger, especially after Black's most likely coming death?

*Blinks*

You're not alone in that but then i'm somewhat contrary by nature.

I want Black to get outsmarted, Ranger to lose, Warlock to be over powered, scribe to be surprised and the Empress outmanoeuvred.

Ranger, i think, has her time coming though. You don't get to be invincible like she, apparently, is. That's the kind of thing begging for a story where she loses.

*Soronel Haetir*

Except Ranger doesn't have any over-arching ambition. She just goes from one situation to the next looking for a good time. I see her invulnerability somewhat like how the first step of a villain's master plan cannot fail, Ranger goes

beyond that by not having a master plan to begin with (of course she isn't really a villain – or a hero for that matter – just a bored near-immortal out for #1).

From the intro comment to the Ranger extra chapter about how the Kingdom Under considers Refuge a protectorate of sorts I get the feeling that even the most powerful nation on the continent isn't confident about their ability to defeat her, at least not without suffering costs all out of proportion to the gain.

*Dylan Tullos*

Soronal Haetir:

I attribute Ranger's survival to both her impressive skills and her ability to never be the center of a really big Story. As you point out, she doesn't have an agenda beyond her own entertainment, so she is never a suitable champion for either the Gods Above or Those Below. At some point, Good Heroes will sacrifice themselves, while Evil Villains will be destroyed by some combination of Heroic sacrifice and the collapse of their overelaborate plans. Since Ranger isn't actually Good or Evil, she isn't bound by either set of conventions.

I don't know who could bring Ranger down at this point. She's more formidable than any Named we've met so far, and if she can survive the Queen of Summer, I don't think any amount of raw power would be sufficient to destroy her. We just don't have enough information to speculate about any weaknesses other than arrogance and addiction to danger.

[Nehemiah Newell](#)

Honestly, Ranger has made several moves that could take her off the board. She's made herself a big enough player and wildcard that removing her could be the first step in several plans. She's given motivation here – she had no reason to get involved beyond amusement, and in getting involved she thwarted a god. That not the kind of wildcard any mastermind likes leaving around.

Likewise, she's helped the forces of evil a great deal. She certainly should have people wanting to bring her to justice, or revenge their murdered parents just like the other Calamities.

And her placelessness means there's no story that will be left hollow by her absence. She isn't being pulled into her doom, but neither is she protected so that she can fulfill her role in a story.

I can see her falling very quickly and unexpectedly.

[vexingvision](#)

I'm with you. I have a string dislike for god-like NPCs. Cat struggles, Black schemes beautifully, even the Bard has limitations in what she's doing.

Ranger just seems all-powerful for no other reason than she is.

*Dylan Tullos*

Nehemiah Newell:

The problem with targeting Ranger is that she's too powerful to fight unless you absolutely have to, and you can never be sure that she's going to end up as your enemy. Ranger is unpredictable enough to take any side, and by going after her, you draw her attention. In purely practical terms, it makes more sense to treat her like a natural disaster and hope that she doesn't wander in your direction.

In a world with a single superpower, the superpower would need to wipe her out simply to destroy a "wild card" that could threaten the proper order of things. In a conflict between two Great Powers, neither side can afford to risk driving her into an alliance with the other team. If Ranger was consistently pro-Good or pro-Evil, there would be no incentive to leave her alone, but we can see that she spends most of her time amusing herself in ways that don't help either side exclusively.

Anyone with a motive to kill Ranger for what she did as part of Black's team during the Conquest also has a motive to target Black and the other Calamities. Since they're still active, while she's mostly retired, it would also make sense for Heroes to go after them first.

It's not that there aren't lots of people who would really, really like Ranger dead. It's just that she's never first on anyone's "Must Die" list (except the Prince of Nightfall. Only Ranger could make me feel sorry for a fae). As a second-tier threat who requires a first-tier effort to kill, Ranger is effectively shielded from retribution. Those with the power to possibly bring her down have bigger concerns, and they can't ignore their chief rivals to bring down Calernia's most dangerous wild card, especially when the blowback from a failed attempt could endanger their larger plans.

That said...I really hope that you're right and I'm wrong. Out of all the characters in this novel, I want Ranger dead the most, purely because of her unique combination of insufferable arrogance and vicious, childlike motives.

## [Shawn Panzegraf](#)

The Queen of Summer would sooner cut out her own tongue and cauterize the stump than speak the words she did about Cat's little group and then see them survive. She only said what she did about them being The Woe because she was utterly, completely, absolutely certain that Catherine and Masego were about to die, breaking their Calamities-in-the-making-like group.

The Chancellor named the Calamities, and look how their story has gone. The QUEEN OF FRIGGING SUMMER named Catherine's squad. It's a stronger story-base than that the Calamities received, by FAR. Knowing Stories as she does, the Summer Queen is NOT happy right now.

Much love for the Ranger.

## [Ethesis](#)

Well said.

## [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Huh? Ranger named them the Woe, not the queen.

*RandomFan*

Not quite. "The five of you would be woe unto all you behold." is the Queen's words, just like "You are a calamity to friend and foe alike" is from the Chancellor. Ranger just formalized it.

*goliath1303*

Do you ever get tired of being dismissive, condescending and rude? Especially since you're assertions are normally wrong...

*Addicted*

Everyone shut up just shut up! The great Author doesn't have time to read your boring words. Just shut up and give the author money so he writes dammit. Here take it take it all.

(J°□° J[\_\$(5)\_\$\_J[\_\$(5)\_\$\_J[\_\$(5)\_\$\_J[\_\$(5)\_\$\_J

What are you waiting for take it and write. I need my fix man.

..... .

..... .

..... .

(/ )/

What's taking so long !!!!!

## [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Except that you're wrong. Every author enjoys getting comments



*goliath1303*

Ya, he should have probably put a little more effort into sounding sarcastic! Oh, wait... That was about as sarcastic as it's possible to get through text.

*Eirishluck*

Typo and/or Grammar issues:

"If my mouthing off had been followed by Thief failing to steal the sun, "

shouldn't that be "had not" or "hadn't" instead of "had"

"It was the kind of thing that was useful to know when killing caster,"

shouldn't that be "casters" (plural), doesn't read right in singular form

*Ben*

Sorry to fail at reading, but did we learn what the Prince's price for aid was?

*Morgenstern*

Nope. It was not specified here. Just that Cat has no idea how to pay that price (yet) and does not really want to pay that price.

*James, Mostly Harmless*

Woe may not have the panache of Calamities, but it will make for much entertaining word play!

*Johiah*

New reader caught up after a week of avid reading.  
Love this.

*mavant*

"Raise your hand if you've ever felt personally victimized by the Ranger."

(everyone except Ranger raises a hand)

*5ColouredWalker*

How could you forget the end of the story?  
Mortals who steal from the gods always suffer in the end.

[benthelynx](#)

Apparently part of my brain is still not okay with this story ending as a tragedy like worm was. I'm still hopeful that ultimately the very mild in which the story is cast will be broken.

*RandomFan*

I will gladly debate that worm was a tragedy day and night. (It was a terrible place, but Taylor won, and the world was better for her existence.) That said, I'm sure it's inevitable that we're going to see Cat lose some. Even if she achieves her goals, there will be prices.

*Naeddyr*

Worm: a tragicomedy.

[benthelynx](#)

Oh, paying some prices are always going to happen. But there is a difference in degree and consistency that becomes a thing of its own.

*nipi*

" but the other woman had shuddered and muttered something about hunting eyes."

Awww... Aint that sweet. Knew she had the hots for Masego.

*Komploding*

"Ranger stood between us as if she had -always- been there."  
This sentence caught my eye, did Ranger just do that elven thing where she chooses which laws apply to her but in Arcadia?

*George*

It seems likely she can do that, but I don't know how likely it is that she used that in particular.

*Soronel Haetir*

I am reminded about how in chapter one of book 1 Cat always loved stories about Ranger the best. I suspect that has changed.

*Barrendur*

@Dylan Tullos:

I also detest Ranger. Her arrogance is unappealing to read about, as is her apparent belief that everyone in the ENTIRE world is irrelevant (or a terrain hazard), save for her and her current target (and maybe some of the Calamities).

I've always found 'invincible' characters frustrating and tedious... especially when they murder without any \*hope\* of their ever being held accountable. Ranger leads a self-obsessed, pointless existence, as a (from what I've read so far) pointless character.

*green*

Ranger is not:

- \* a Hero
- \* a Villain
- \* impressed with your bullshit
- \* fucking around.

*Onos*

Little typo/continuity error EE, in a later book Masego muses that he can't close his eyes anymore but here you have his eyelids intact.

*Jago*

Masego eyes see through his skull (he often looks to his back without turning the head), so even if he closes the eyelids he can't close the eyes or, to be more precise, he can't close his sight.

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## **Villainous Interlude: Cadenza**

*"Taxes. Taxes and triplicate forms."*

– Dread Emperor Terribilis I, upon being asked what powerful sorceries he would use to humble the High Lords

Warlock had eyes on it from the beginning.

Not scrying, for that could be traced, but delayed relays that caught images at regular intervals. Wekesa had formed enough alternating way stations that while it was possible to follow the trail back to the beginning, it would take months at a flat minimum. What Amadeus saw was puzzling, at the start. Procer sent decoys caravans, armed to the teeth, but those were seen through easily. He sent Sabah to hit the lone carts using lesser known paths, and these carried the ingots of silver and gold that were being fed to Nicae. The two first true caravans were ambushed and seized at the same location, which led him to a possible answer: consecrated grounds. By having blood spilled at the same hands at

the same place, ritual weight could be crafted. That might signify his initial notion that this was a trap put in place by the Tyrant was correct, because the heroes under the White Knight would not lower themselves to use blood magic in this manner. Not with a man sworn to the Choir of Judgement at their head. Then the third caravan used a different path, and blood was spilled in a different location. He had, evidently, been incorrect. Reassessment was needed. Scribe had begun placing agents in the ranks of the Helikean army long before the war between League members began, and he turned to her for clarification.

"He caught my agents," Eudokia said.

"All of them?" Black frowned.

"Yes," she confirmed. "They still serve as soldiers, but any information they try to pass gets replaced by the words to a Helikean drinking song about a shepherdess and her three husbands."

The Tyrant's doing, then. The boy did like to pretend he has a sense of humour.

"Extraction?" he said.

"Even removing the soul from the bodies doesn't sidestep the issue," she said.

Name application, then, possibly an aspect. There were few sorceries in existence that could truly affect a soul in a manner more complex than cutting out parts and outside the Empire that branch of magic was not often studied. Infiltration of Helike was a resource sink, then, though one he might revisit should he need to busy the villain for a span of time. Scribe turned her focus to Nicae, at his instruction, and continued the other task he had assigned her. The fourth caravan took a different route again, and this contradicted his read of the matter. *If the intent is opaque, change the perspective.* Amadeus marked the locations on the map, and had Wekesa study them.

"If the next one dies here, there's an arcane pattern being formed," Warlock said, tapping a cattle path that would begin to sketch out a circle from a bird's eye view.

It was not the location where the fifth caravan was destroyed. Repetition in the face of failure, Amadeus believed, indicated either incompetence or that what was perceived as 'success' by the beholder was not the objective. The sixth caravan passed through the initial route, and he ordered Captain to let it pass. It was possible that the later caravans had been a smokescreen to draw him away from his first thought, that of consecrated grounds.

"If that's what they're doing his mages are botching it," Wekesa said. "He can still consecrate the grounds to Below like that, but if he doesn't maintain a regular pattern then it'll be so weak it'll be useless. There's a reason the old crowd uses prisoner sacrifices for the effect, it allows you to control the alignments."

"The drivers have been women more than men," Amadeus said.

"There's rituals that take gender into consideration, but not this kind," Warlock said. "And they're exceedingly imprecise, so there's no way they could take out Sabah. It's too fluid a concept to be used as a solid anchor."

That was usually the way, with cultural mores. *If the intent is opaque, change the perspective.* Neither consecration nor geographic location. Temporal placement? The hours where the caravans had been taken formed no useful arcane pattern, according to Warlock. Using the date by the Imperial calendar led to a dead end, but then outside Praes it was rarely used. The Free Cities counted the years from the founding of the League, but that was another dead end. The ancestral calendar of Helike was similarly useless.

"Keteran Calendar," Warlock finally murmured, peering at a table full of opened books with a cup of wine in hand.

Amadeus adjusted his thinking, bringing the corresponding numbers to mind. Nothing that seemed relevant to him.

"Take out the second killing," Wekesa said. "Then instead of using only the date as is, subtract using the year Sabah was born."

The Black Knight closed his eyes, assembled the answers.

"Spell formula," he said. "But this is ridiculously indirect."

Warlock ignored him, scribbling ink on parchment and translating numbers to runes then speculated requirements from there.

"It's not just that," the Soninke grimaced.

"It would take thousands to create even a minor effect with so weak a sympathetic link," Amadeus pointed out.

"The effect itself is how I know we're on the wrong track," Wekesa sighed. "Look, this is a projection of the illusion that would be formed if this formula was empowered."

Warlock tapped the table once, and spell light glowed softly. In front of them, a hand was rotating in the air. Only the middle finger was raised.

"This is the Tyrant's play, then," the green-eyed man murmured. "That as good as confirms it."

The combination of childish insult and advanced understanding of spellcrafting mechanics was telling. That a secondary pattern inserted into the primary one purely for the sake of the taunt was there at all was somewhat worrying. Amadeus had not been under the impression the Tyrant had mages this talented as his disposal, or such understanding himself. Another change of perspective was needed, but before that more information must be obtained. In a calculated risk, he sent Sabah to sack the seventh caravan. A different route, once more. Amadeus drank, watched the flames and thought. Eudokia came with her reports when the moon was high.

"The magisters were open to negotiations to have their army returned to them," Scribe said.

"But?" the Duni prompted.

"Distraction," she said. "They've already secured other means to accomplish this."

The Tyrant. That he'd bothered to involve Stygia at all spoke volumes: they had a role to play in his ultimate intent.

"He rules Helike," the Black Knight said. "Occupies Atalante. Has a representative from Bellerophon, struck a pact with Stygia and prepares to siege Nicae."

Eudokia nodded without a word. She'd understood the order perfectly.

"The Bard?" he said.

"Still gathering," she replied, and disappeared into the night.

Amadeus closed his eyes and thought. Eliminating theories one after another would take too long, and the caravans could not simply be allowed to pass. The longer Nicae could afford to import supplies from Ashur, the longer the siege stretched out and the longer he would have to remain. He could not afford to stay away from the Empire for that long, not with the... colourful rumours about what was currently unfolding there. To find the pattern, then, he would need to begin with the individual or individuals that had crafted it. Necessary common factor?

*Understanding of High Arcana.* Nothing less could be used for a ritual of this class. Still and silent, Amadeus counted. He had known seventeen individuals capable of using High Arcana, in his life. He brought up every single conversation he'd had with one of them, and sought commonalities in perspective. In the back of his mind, the gears ground. Too shallow a pool of information. He repeated the exercise, adding everything he'd ever read from an

individual who cleared the condition to the process. Two days he stayed there, his companions knowing better than to disturb him. It was night again when he opened his eyes.

"Planar perception," he told no one at all.

The understanding of sorcery of that level led to a different understanding of Creation as well, one divorced from the material concerns that shaped his views. To Wekesa, for example, the lay of the land they both looked at was fundamentally different. Looking at the situation through the version of this filter he could construct, he found his answer. *Height*. No topographical map of the region accurate enough for his purposes could be obtained, which meant direct observation. Warlock handled it, putting together the images obtained through relays.

"You're right," Wekesa admitted. "If you look at the pattern using the height they were killed at instead of the location, I can recognize the shape."

"How many do they need?" he asked.

"Assuming I'm correct and the first killing was a decoy, four more," his old friend said.

"Nine in total," Amadeus said. "Thrice three. A killing stroke?"

"Offensive in nature, at the very least," Warlock said. "We stop shy of what they need?"

The Black Knight smiled, very mildly.

"No," he said. "I think not. They will get exactly what they need."

Eudokia found him as he ate for the first time in days, methodically replenishing his strength.

"An offer was made to the Secretariat," she said. "Penthes as well."

The pale-skinned man chewed thoughtfully.

"He aims to be Hierarch, then," he said.

How the Tyrant had managed to exert pressure on Bellerophon enough they would agree to this would have to be found investigated. Such a lever was too useful to be left solely in the boy's hands.

"Assuming he secures all the votes," Amadeus said. "Intent?"

"Broader games," Scribe suggested. "His methodology requires constant opposition."

That was a possibility, the green-eyed man thought. A straightforward one, however. That did not immediately disqualify it as a possible objective, but it was not a mark in its favour.

"Worst case scenario," Eudokia asked, changing the approach.

"Tenth crusade, involving the entirety of Hasenbach's coalition," Amadeus replied without missing a beat. "Dead King uninvolved. Chain of Hunger unable to exert strength. Drow situation unchanged."

"Kingdom Under?" Scribe said.

"In another expansion phase," the Black Knight reminded her. "They will profiteer through weapon trade, at most."

They'd left behind the question of what the Tyrant was after, and were instead studying what effect he could have on the Empire under the worst circumstances possible should he ascend to the position.

"He would be a destabilizing factor," Scribe said, and there was no greater insult in her eyes than what she had just uttered.

"One without the ability to grab land or hamper commerce outside affordable losses," Amadeus said. "By nature, even should he manage to align with Procer he will be damaging to them."

*Not worth directly opposing in this*, the verdict was. Not unless other information surfaced that changed the forces in play.

"I've assembled an initial dossier," Eudokia said.

Amadeus raised an eyebrow.

"Different face, but she has been active in Procer," Scribe said.

"She's behind Hasenbach?" he asked.

If the Wandering Bard had enabled the First Prince to rise, the failure in intelligence that had resulted in him being unaware of this was... massive. It put everything he knew of the Proceran situation in question.

"No recorded contact," Eudokia said. "But she was in Rhenia."

The Black Knight was too old and far too removed from the boy he'd once been to let the dismay touch his face.

"The Augur," he said. "There could be indirect influence. Anything further back?"



"No link to the Troubadour or the Magnificent Minstrel," Scribe said. "But getting anything prior to the Conquest has been... difficult."

The records had been tinkered with, she meant.

"There's no precedent for an uninterrupted stream of consciousness," Amadeus said.

"Heavier inheritance," Scribe suggested.

Name dreams writ large. It was possible. Few things were not, when it came to Named.

"A line of Wandering Bards going back for centuries, advancing some collective purpose," he said. "That is... an issue. There must be limits."

"She has never intervened directly," Eudokia said, and he waved his hand in irritation.

They'd both known what. It was a staple of bardic Names, being able to influence the story but rarely change it with their own hands. Power only through fronts, never wielded personally.

"Has she ever been linked to anyone not Named?" Amadeus said.

Reluctantly, Scribe shook her head. Given the incomplete records at their disposal, she was unwilling to commit fully to that theory.

"When attached to the Lone Swordsman, she operated within his moral boundaries," Eudokia said.

Limits to her actions dictated to the story she was bound to and the nature of its heroes. Another theory to test.

"It's her blind spots we need to find," he said. "The majority of the threat she represents comes from her awareness of our movements."

Eudokia nodded. Amadeus frowned.

"Pick a target," he said. "Assassin is at your disposal. I cannot know."

"Risk margin?" she asked.

"I trust your judgement," he replied.

No more need be said. Sabah killed, four more times. But as skilled as the mages of the Tyrant were, they were not Warlock. A single strand of hair was placed in the centre of the runic circle, and the curse meant to kill Captain found another target.

Usurpation was, after all, the essence of sorcery. After it was done, Wekesa complimented the ritual. It was, apparently, not derivative of Praesi work in the slightest though it had been designed under the shared Trismegistan theory of magic. Behind the tall walls of Nicae, the Ashen Priestess died screaming. There was no warning, and no saving her. The ritual had been performed to kill a Named much more physically able. Amadeus approved, when he learned of it. *Always kill the healer first.* Targeting the White Knight might not have succeeded, and of the others the Priestess was the most apt to tip the balance in a clash. Before dawn, every practitioner involved on the attempt on Sabah's life was dead. They left behind a note indicating they had taken their own lives out of guilt. Assassin's sense of humour had grown whimsical of late.

"Your reasoning?" Scribe asked, after.

"No hero was involved in the story until the very end," he said. "It was a struggle purely between villains."

"Ah," Eudokia said. "She can only see us when we stand opposed to her narrative?"

"Possibly," Amadeus frowned. "Otherwise she sacrificed a heroine for no visible gain."

"If she is bound by the White Knight's morality, she could not do so," Scribe said.

"Possibly," the green-eyed man repeated. "I am... unsettled, Eudokia."

Her eyes were still as ponds.

"The word for 'bard' we use comes from Old Miezian," he said. "Language has evolved, even in our lifetime."

"If the line were that ancient, there would be records," Scribe said. "Unless."

"Unless," Amadeus agreed softly.

Unless something was cleaning up behind them, be it their Role or the Gods Above. Such a direct intervention would allow similar direct meddling from the Gods Below, of course. Balance in spirit, if not in practice. Yet he could think of only one event in Calernian history that would qualify. *The creation of the Kingdom of the Dead.* Which preceded written history in Praes by centuries, by conservative estimate. If the line of 'Bards' was that old, the Heavens had been playing a longer game than any of them. The ramifications of that were beyond the scope of his understanding, a feeling he was unused to and did not particularly care for.

"It could be Triumphant," Eudokia said.

*Triumphant cost us so much more than we gained.* If she'd been the intervention of the Gods Below, they had let themselves be robbed by the opposition. Black closed his eyes.

"If she cannot be killed, she must be trapped," he said.

He felt Scribe nod. She sat at his side, close enough to touch but never quite getting there.

"You are tired," Eudokia said.

Innocuous words, but the deeper meaning was there.

"I am dying, I think," he murmured.

There was a long silence.

"If Catherine wields the knife, I will destroy her," she said, as if she was speaking of the weather. "And if I fail Hye will not."

Amadeus did not reply. If he'd been the kind of man to pray, he would have prayed then. But he was not, so instead the gears began to turn and he wondered how many of the people he loved he would have to kill, before it was all over.

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*danh3107*

The Ashen priestess' death being a footnote in the larger story here is pretty staggering, Black just subverted every deathflag meant for Captain and used them against his opposition, overcoming two different Named powers to do so (well three including bard).

Cat has a long, loooong way to go

[edrey](#)

well, it could be a trick too, facking the dead of one heroine then making her use of her big miracle to kill them.

---

Tyrant still hasn't used the heroes to kill a Calamity, so Bard's plan is still pretty much in action.

*Jeffery Wells*

That's what he was trying to do, and failed. The mages were on the side of the heroes. The question is whether he anticipated this failure and this is his betrayal of Bard, or if this is just a normal failure.

Remember, first step always works, for a villain.

*Morgenstern*

I'm more concerned about the resurrection thingy, to be honest... Heroes can be resurrected, right? The Priestess IS a heroine. "Useless" sacrifice? Maybe not... In some stories heroes even come back greater in power when resurrected...

[Cpt. Obvious](#)

There has to be some limits to how a Hero can be resurrected, otherwise they would be coming back a lot more often. The choirs obviously can do it as Cat proved. But I doubt just any priest or priestess can pray a miracle like that out of their Gods.

There's probably a time component to. Otherwise Hero remains would be lugged around as people were tracking down those individuals who does have a thumb with the Gods and can sweet talk a resurrection out of them. So no resurrection for the plastered conjure once his carcass has started to rott, or something like that.

My point is that resurrection is probably still pretty rare for Heroes, even if it's a lot more common than it is for Villains. Kind of obvious as it takes a divine intervention, and the Gods below pretty much takes a hands off approach to the entire God shtick.

Thinking about it I can almost see the logic. The big game is all about proving which ideology that is most successful. The Gods above se resurrection of their most obedient pawns, the Heroes, as a way to get more boots on the ground in the fight against Evil. The Gods below on the other hand sees the dead Villains as a prof that he or she wasn't good enough. And by staying dead the Villains makes place for a new crop of Villains to take their place. Eventually a new villain in the same class as Triumphant will raise through the ranks.

*Blinks*

I really don't like it.

For all accounts and purposes she simply died for no good reason out of the blue. This was not something she did, not something her allies did. It was simply "Wham!" she dead. If it's that easy to kill named, and it was at the end of the day

very easy. Then the good old D&D scry and die should have been blacks go to method from the start.

*nick012000*

Teleportation consumes too much power for "scry and die" to be effective. It'd probably require dozens of human sacrifices every time you want to do it.

*esryok*

Maybe they can't normally pull things like this because it requires Fate-weight to achieve? Her death was part of the climax of a story. I'm picturing this like rubbing two balloons together to build static: the conflict between the villain factions built up a fatal amount of magical & Name power, and then at the last moment switched it from Captain to AP.

I suspect a staged conflict would not work.

*stevenneiman*

The thing is that he cheated not only tactically but also narratively. The spell he used was intended to kill a villain, with the lack of drama associated with a minor villain character dying offscreen to another villain. Black used his own magic to convince the spell that was already destined to successfully kill someone to a target who normally had more plot armor. It's worth noting that he still, even if unintentionally, targeted the least fan-favorite-y of Hanno's gang. He might have had tactical reasons in his own mind, but he passed up the entertaining boistrous bruiser, the funny mage, the entertaining (even if she's also a nasty person) Bard, and the one male character who's gotta be the heartthrob for any audience members who swing that way.

[Cpt. Obvious](#)

The spell was intended to kill someone. It was targeted at Sabah through scribing her name (or was that Name?) into the ritual. As I understand it Scribe had Assassin sneak in a hair from the Ashen Priestess into the ritual focus providing a physical link that's easier for the magic to follow than going by just a name. Wekesa mentioned that the ritual was sloppy which probably was why they could change the focus like this.

This was also a pretty massive ritual that feed on the blood spilt by nine caravans, so it's not like Warlock can just whip something like it at will. So it was a bit like a perfect storm.

The Tyrant tries to kill Sabah using a huge but sloppily crafted ritual. Amadeus figures it out. They happen to have something from a hero that can act as a link and Assassin can place it. A lot of pieces had to be in place for this to work, so don't expect to see it done again anytime soon...

Cpt. Obvious

Oh, and they couldn't target the Wandering Bard as she tends to disappear when attacked. Besides even if they had a sample from the WB she no longer inhibits that body.

*Blinks*

Except they know all the heroes in the good guy party and it's not as if Praes is going to have troubles with human sacrifice.

It's basically just reduced the Hero party to a complete non-issue. At all.

Why should Black fight them, struggle with them? Pull up a load of sacrifices and take them out one by one. Job done.

Climax of a story or not, it wasn't her story. She wasn't involved. A named shouldn't die as what was, basically, an afterthought. It reduces them in the story to little more than chaff to go along with the others.

It also raises the question of with the First Prince is still breathing. If a ritual like this can kill a Named then why bother with assassins? Just nuke her from the next country after. She's not even a Named.

I find it a terrible direction to go in.

*esryok*

My reading is that they can't just get a pile of bodies and murder any old random Named. The ritual was a part of how Warlock killed Ashen Priestess, but it wasn't the entirety of the process or even the most important part of the process.

Paraphrasing Cat's list of "How to kill a God," the process involves: misdirection, violence, and earning it in the eyes of Fate. Maybe this kind of ritual could successfully (directly) target a new hero, but if they went after Hanno's party? Black & co. seem confident the only reason it worked was the Tyrant vs Praes story.

As for the First Prince, she will see your premeditated murder and raise you an Augur.

*corrado alamanni*

Bard is best girl I do not approve

## *Darkening*

Oh wow that last part. Is Black gonna clean up the calamities before he goes out? The last time he nearly died that went on a rampage, and he's trying to leave a legacy behind, not a go out in a blaze of destruction. Huh.

## *Darkening*

On another note, as much as I don't want Cat to be the one to kill Black, I feel like him getting stabbed to death with the knife he gave her would be incredibly dramatically appropriate.

*matbag248*

Maybe he asks her to do it?

## *Byzantine*

Earlier in the story it was noted how every one of the Calamities left means to be stopped, in case they ever becomes corrupted somehow.

I suspect the one for Black is going to fail and Catherine will be the one who has to kill him.

## *Big Brother*

Maybe not stabbed to death, that's a pretty brutal way to do it, and highly inefficient, which he'd disapprove of. A steady slip between the third and fourth ribs from behind for a quick death would probably sit better with him, if he had to die by Cat's hand.

## *haihappen*

The "Stabbed by his own chosen successor"-trope enhanced with "Killed by the first weapon he ever gave her". Yes. But, good things come in three's: "Disobedience by sacrifice" -> Malicia orders Black to kill Catherine, but in Black's understanding, that would lead to the annihilation of everything that he spend his live achieving. So, a choice must be made.

## [Ethesis](#)

Better is Cat gathering the woes to find a different name and to subvert fate so Black doesn't die.

## *KageLupus*

Only way I see that happening is if the situation devolves into Black needing to pass on his mantle to Cat, in which case things have truly gone tits up. Although that would be a

pretty powerful narrative. It would almost blur the line into a heroic sacrifice, but the end result is to empower a new villain who is going to keep trying to bring the whole Good v Evil narrative crashing down.

... Hells, that actually doesn't sound that unreasonable now.

*Nairne*

"Ethesis

Better is Cat gathering the woes to find a different name and to subvert fate so Black doesn't die.

Like

SEPTEMBER 20, 2017 AT 11:30 AM"

I could get behind that idea.

*nipi*

Remember the story cat used against that duke of winter she dueled. I call foreshadowing.

*Jago*

I think it will lead to Killian death, not Black.

[Ethesis](#)

Since the Winter Knight is the White Knight of Arcadia there is a fun possibility there.

*xenowriter*

woah

*matbag248*

I don't think Cat will kill Amadeus, unless someone also kills Scribe. Else she would die and we have many more battles to go through.

On a side note, I was rereading some of the chapters in book 2. I found this:

Gods Below and Everburning, what manner of wicked things I wouldn't do to have cavalry like that.

She did get her cavalry, just had to do a little spot of treason or dipped a toe in the treason pool.

*Kingbob12*

Assassin has a truly macabre sense of humor. And Cat is building the exact same cult of personality that bonds her with her Named



as Amadeus built with his own so long ago. Scribe could so easily be Adjutant here. Scary thoughts.

*Snoogle*

Scribe is not a full-on Calamity. They are 5: Black Knight, Ranger, Assassin, Captain, Warlock. Scribe is a 6th, sort of not-really-but-barely honorary Calamity.

Cat has her 5 Woes if I'm reading this story correctly: Squire, Hierophant, Archer, Thief, and Adjutant. Meaning there would also be room for a 6th, honorary, not-really-but-barely Woe.

How many people love Robber again?

*haihappen*

Everybody loves Robber.

*Akim*

Lets goat the Author in doing this

*Rnt169*

I know I do, a lot.

*stevenneiman*

I'm trying to decide which of the Calamities he would be equivalent to. He has aspects of Ranger and Assassin both, and his position as the sixth pseudo-member is like Scribe, but all of the equivalents are already filled since Hakram pulls double duty as both the Scribe and Captain equivalent. I guess that means the teams might not match up perfectly 1:1.

*Nairne*

Adjutant is Scribe – a few chapters before he just threatened Thief in a similar manner if she ever betrayed Cat.

*Jakob Israelsen*

Didn't Warlock do something similar? Or did he only do that for his son?

*stevenneiman*

Cat has described Hakram as serving both the roles of Scribe and Captain to him, being both a fearsome warrior to fight beside and an invaluable administrative resource. As for the others, Masego is clearly her Warlock, and I'd say that Thief is her equivalent of Assassin (though the

parallels are the weakest for that one) and Archer is her Ranger, complete with training from the cheese monster herself and with hitting on the equivalent of Black.

### *Soronel Haetir*

Black has still given Cat no real reason to want him dead, he has, in fact, supported her in pretty much everything she wants to do. As I recall he as much as told her that even the treason of forming her cavalry unit could be smoothed over. And the things she doesn't like were not his idea or recommendation.

Just like Black told Cat he would not lie to her because both the lie and the truth would be revealed at a terrible moment for him I just don't see his machinery spitting out an answer that turns Cat against him before something else kills him.

### *Byzantine*

I get the feeling if Cat kills him it's going to be a matter of necessity. Black corrupted by something, as she almost was.

It's the only way I can see her managing to kill him without it backfiring horrifically, no matter how much Black tries to account for it.

### *LaNuup*

Right now Cat Cat is in no way capable of killing Black. Both Hierophant and Archer would not support her and Hierophant probably even directly oppose her. And Black has an advantage concerning information, resources, and personal skill and forethought.

And all of this is not even considering that Cat lacks a motiv. On the other hand constructing a motiv would be simplicity itself for Black if he actively wanted her to kill him.

### *Adept Arcanist*

Yeah, if he dies I figure it'll either be in a grand heroic sacrifice to buy Cat the time to escape and continue their work, or else some sort of quiet mercy-killing where he asks her to wield the knife herself.

Either way, I'll be heavily surprised if him asking her to kill him/let him die doesn't lead to one last repeat of "a monster" "the very worst kind" as a response to him telling her to let her father figure die.

### *JC*

Amadeus is terrifying.

Still, isn't Champion on her way to kill Captain?

[LaNuup](#)

She was on her way to intercept Captain. But considering Captains second form she is faster and more mobile than Champion, whose Name and abilities seem to go into the line of being an immovable opponent.

=====

Doesn't help when the Bard can just **Wander** her anywhere the plot needs them to be.

*RandomFan*

I'm pretty sure Wander doesn't work on the rest of the group, or everyone else would be nigh-impossible to deal with. She didn't use it with William, after all, and I can see a lot of uses for it on attack.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

Holy fuck, I really need to see either the Bard's or the White Knight's reaction to this.

*haihappen*

That makes for an interesting YouTube reaction video... (oh how i despise those, shall their makers burn in the ninety-ninth hell)

*PingleBerry*

This will be....interesting

*OldSchoolVillain*

I suspect that the intervention of the Gods Below was neither the Dead King nor Triumphant, may she never return. I'd bet that the Gods Below waited, let the Wandering Bard build up weight in the narrative and accumulate a metaphysical debt, and then responded in a long game in the form of Amadeus and Catherine Foundling.

*haihappen*

Isn't what the Diabolist is cooking up a direct consequence of the Bard's meddling?! If there is such a thing as karmic debt, the Bard could try to achieve Balance by making bad stuff happen?

More likely "It's all part of The Plan."/"For the greater Good!"

*Matthew*

The Bard desperately needs “cartoonish evil” to win so Akua is totally acceptable.

Akua confirms the story. Black makes the story irrelevant.

*Shequi*

Killing the Ashen Priestess is disrupts the White Knight's 5-man band, but at the cost of setting up the Hedge Wizard with a Revenge motive against the Calamities for killing her sister.

[LaNuup](#)

They can not know for sure whether the Calamities or the Tyrant killed her, so if the revenge does not work in a very unspecified way, like kill the man who killed my sister, instead of kill Warlock for killing my sister, he should be more or less safe.

*mechanicalrain*

It's completely plot dependent, if it's convenient for the Hedge Wizard to be used to kill off a character, that's what will happen. I mean, I'm hoping the whole bunch of heroes die quickly, as they're a rather unlikable bunch (at least IMO), but I'm expecting them to kill a couple of the Calamities.

---

Hanno now leads what's pretty much three comic reliefs against an enemy that doesn't dick around as much as the Tyrant did. Either they automatically adapt, upgrading the Champion to a monster hunter and the Hedge Wizard to a revenging archmage, or Kairos turns the entire setup on its head in some unexpected way.

---

The urge is stronger when we see the Keeper of Stories on screen herself, but I still wish for Catherine to **Take** whatever Aspect allows her to transfer her consciousness, and then force her to **Wander** into nothingness.

*haihappen*

More likely Catherine would Take her knowledge, and her head would explode. If not, she would die not much later of alcohol poisoning.

*Rnt169*

I love the fact that the conversations are done in a very convincing manner, i.e. with very little explanations in them (since they know each other well, realistically very little needs

to be said explicitly), with just enough hints for us to understand the plot, rather than conversations being the tool to explain the story.

*vietnamabc*

OTOH, 3 books and only now we know the name of Scribe. The lack of details is really maddening, Amadeus just casually dropped in major details and we won't see its effects until much later.

*haihappen*

Scribes name being Eudokia was known much earlier...

*sheer\_falacy*

"He rules Helike," the Black Knight said. "Occupies Atalante. Has a representative from Bellerophon, struck a pact with Stygia and prepares to siege Nicae."

Eudokie nodded without a word. She'd understood the order perfectly.

She may understand the order perfectly, but I don't. What does it mean?

(Also, incidentally, there's a typo in her name there)

=====

He takes after Theodosius the Unconquered and wants to lead the Free Cities.

[taborask](#)

I'm really confused at how they figured out that the Wandering Bard is behind all this, and that her Name allows consciousness to carry over. Is she supposed to actually be ALL bardic names? Also, when he says that he's dying why would she jump to the assumption that Catherine would be coming for him? Or that he'd just let Cat die?

I get that Black and Scribe have a whole "we've been at this for decades so most things don't have to be said explicitly" But it feels like they're jumping to impossible conclusions

*haihappen*

Black told Cat as much that many of his predecessors were killed by their Squires...

*TideofKhatanga*

The Calamities spent a lot of time studying Almorava of Smyrna and did it again with Aoede of Nicae. That they went for her

first when they attacked the heroes in "Appellant" is telling. They can't have missed the very strong connection between her and Aoede of Nicae, both Wandering Bards have the same personality, quirks and methods. Considering that they knew a lot about how Almorava's Name shaped her life, it's only a matter of time before they guess that Aoede is effectively the same person in a different body.

From that point onward, wondering just how many lives the Wandering Bard has lived is the next logical step. Black considers her the most dangerous hero he's facing, and I'm surprised that they haven't yet developed a rivalry of sort.

As for Catherine killing Black, it's also logical. There's only one true way for the Squire to become the Black Knight. If the Black Knight has to die while his Squire is alive, then she must be the one doing the killing, else the story is improperly told and we can't have that. So, when Amadeus says he's about to die, it's normal for Eudokia to immediately think that Catherine will be wielding the knife.

*Matthew*

There's nothing that says the Squire has to be the one killing the Black Knight.

The wise old mentor dying by an enemy's hand while his squire is not quite ready is... very cliché.

<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MentorOccupationalHazard>

Seriously, all that has to happen for Cat to get the title is for Black to die while she lives.

*Shequi*

>>> Black considers her the most dangerous hero he's facing, and I'm surprised that they haven't yet developed a rivalry of sort.

Good point. They are both the "Mastermind" Role/Archetype of their respective side.

*TideofKhatanga*

Reply to Matthew: the wise old mentor dying by an enemy's hand is a Heroic cliché. The last time Cat exploited a heroic storyline (finding a sword in a stone), the world tried to rewrite her as an heroine. And Amadeus mimicking Good methods to achieve his goals is the reason he's so much physically weaker than any previous Black Knight.

Catherine can become the Black Knight without killing Amadeus herself, but she'd have to actively avoid that storyline and she'll be much weaker for it. Partly because she's a Villain. Partly because Black Knight is a Praesi name and the proper way to earn those is the Sith way. They both know it. Considering that Cat has often thought about how she's going to kill Black and his most loyal friends, and that Black himself is now planning to murder his entourage so Cat can survive killing him, they both seem to want it to end this way.

Initially, I thought that the Guide would sidestep that issue by having Cat transition into something else (like a human version of Warlord), but after all the heavy foreshadowing we had, I'll be quite surprised if the current Black Knight survives this book.

*Matthew*

In Reply to Khatanga

The question is can Black subvert "the story?" The whole goal for Black and the empress has been to make Praes no longer a name based empire but an institutional one. We already have an example of that in Procer which is nominally good, but names are just the cherries on top rather than being crucial to its governing structure.

As such, both Black and the empress have to know that retiring the Calamities eventually was always part of the plan.

The "story" sets up the villainous names in such a way that even the most successful villains will be killed by their own side eventually. That is if Good fails to win directly.

There is no way that Black and the Calamities haven't discussed this and have not figured out a way to say "Screw that!"

Having the Woes fight the Calamities is a victory for "the Story." Having Black kill the Calamities preemptively to save the Woes is still a victory for "the Story."

Black is not going to let "the Story" win. I am also reasonably sure that the Empress and Warlock are on the same page about not letting "the Story" win. Scribe should be on the same page as well. They all know that they are fighting "the Story." Cat killing Black would represent a tactical setback for our forces of free will and institutionalism. There is no way that Wekesa and Malicia would let it become a strategic defeat for their entire side retaliating against the Woes.

Hell, that would be a great reveal.

Bard's plan is to sew dissension in the ranks by forcing Cat to kill Black through some circumstance, setting up the Calamity vs. Woe showdown which would doom the new Praes... Only to find out that Malicia, Wekesa, Sabah, and Hye are all pre committed to not retaliating over this because their whole bit is using rationality... (though never those words) to subvert and defeat "The Story."

Sean

@Matthew

Subverting the story seems to be Black's, and to a somewhat lesser degree, Malicia's primary motivation. However it seems like the rest of the calamities are more motivated by personal loyalty than mission.

Akim

In reply to the question why there is no rivalry between Bard and Black :

The wandering Bard sees the Dread Empress as her rival. Not her Minions. Black is but a very important Piece to her, but not the Player.

[Mental Mouse](#)

More fool her....

[taborask](#)

You'd think Eudokia would have been prepared for it then, since she must have known that was a very likely scenario (and more importantly, that Black probably expected it to happen)

TheCount

1st: thank you for the chapter erratic!

2:

Cat's plans to make a "peaceful" Calowan and Prasei relationship... but its also stated (in book 1 at that) that black and the calamities dont have a place in that plan. Black also tells Cat about his "master", the previous black knight who died in a battlefield, surrounded by the enemy, because of his own overconfidence, despite/because his powers to topple tower(s) with one swing. Black also had a talk about this very topic with catherin somewhere...the same chapter he is talking about his "master" iirc.



3:

Warlock made it quite clear Cat's soul would suffer for a looong time if she killed Black and she also figured that scribe would want to kill her if she killed Black.

4:

i think bBack will kill his friends, because they would hunt Cat even if he explained everything to them, even his acceptance, if not desire for it to happen so.

*Cyrinx*

Am I the only one that thinks that Ranger is the counterpart/foil for the Bard? One is the elusive prey, never being able to be truly killed while the other is the relentless, unbeatable hunter?

Makes a lot of sense to me.

And Black commenting on how many loved ones he has to kill could hint at that he plans to kill Ranger, in an effort to even the scales between Good and Evil – to have a weight/right to be able to kill off the bard for good? That taking on Ranger doesn't go without sacrifice is made clear by now too...

[Pentrose Son of John](#)

No, I had the exact same thought.

Both have been around for we don't know how long, and seem undefeatable in rather different ways.

Wandering Bard may be taken down, but she always comes back. Her powers are subtle and best wielded behind the scenes. Ranger is, in many ways the exact opposite.

---

It's Interesting to note what do different people know about the Wandering Bard. William considered her pretty much an average heroine, albeit a bit meta. Akua noted that the entire bardic Name family had more insight in the workings of Fate than the average archmage, so she probably does too. The Empress mentioned to Cat that Bard can change faces, and given that Scribe tells Black the same, we can assume that the Dark Council in general thinks they are dealing with a Named with a disguise/redesign Aspect. The Bard herself casually dropped in the conversation with Kairos that she was around to see Treacerous, and elves regard her as an older entity.

Also, Bard being the counterpart to the Dead King confirmed? He too is immortal and can change faces, according to Ranger's Interlude. That would also explain the same personality

persisting through all iterations of the Name, instead of a few more epoch-appropriate versions with ever-expanding lore library. Rebirth as opposed to avoiding death and all that.

*Oshi*

You're assuming the Dead King is aligned with the Gods Below. All signs point to it being more of a he's to fucking scary for anyone to keep.

---

The whole undeath/diabolism deal he has doesn't scream 'neutral' to me. Given how at least on Calernia those are attributes of a villain, he must have started off as one. Tower still keeps contact with him, he openly admires Triumphant and heroes wage crusades against him. All that points to him being a villain successful enough that Gods Below don't see the need to evict him. After all, we haven't seen any direct action from either Gods so far, since the whole Fate gamble only allows them to bestow power on lesser agents (angels, demons, devils, Named, good/evil races). They may think that letting one of their own to run a lesser Hell instead of its native devils is an acceptable deal.

Also, another possible parallel is that Willian states that all four crusades against the Kingdom of the Dead were led by heroes sworn to Contrition. Bard muses when going to meet the White Knight: "Contrition, in the end, had not done the trick. Maybe Judgement would." It's possible that in counterweight to Trismegistus conquering a lesser Hell, She of a Thousand Faces got to strike the deal with Hasmallim (at least until Catherine got them whipped). I mean, it's not like dealing with Choirs is that common: the Good counterpart to diabolists are priests, who channel the powers of Gods Above, not summon angels themselves. Also, don't forget that Eleanor Fairfax was sworn to Contrition. That might have been Bard's doing too.

*Naeddyr*

I'll just interject here a thing:

I have the impression that being Evil is not necessarily the same as being aligned with the Gods Below. We know that the Gods Above are the control freaks who want to nurture humanity by controlling them, and that the Gods Below want humanity to find its own way. Evil with a capital is not evil because the GB want them to be assholes who go around murdering orphans for the fun of it, Evil with a capital is evil because it has become the side of the Dichotomy that is allowed to express that side of humanity. Small-evil is a

hurdle for humanity to ascend, not the goal. The goal, I think, is a humanity that is not beholden or needing of gods.

The end result would be a humanity that is moral and good by its own volition and its own strength. Cat, who has absorbed that and is, relatively speaking, a good person, while still working and siding with Evil against the GA, qualifies perfectly well for Evil as long as she follows her own path and follows her own selfishness.

Similarly, a Dead King who gives the middle finger to the GB is also an epitome of Evil, just a much more evil one considering the whole genocidal madman thing.

*esryok*

Just focusing on "Cat is a relatively good person" bit:

The Guide has been pretty upfront about Team Calamity being both Evil and evil, and Team Woe isn't much better. I mean, Catherine is vicious, spiteful, cold, tyrannical, manipulative, and murderous. \*She is not a good person.\*

Of course she's also an absolute delight and I want her to keep doing her thing, but that's because this is a wonderfully clever story, not because I want people like Cat to succeed in general.

---

To Naeddyr:

> We know that the Gods Above are the control freaks who want to nurture humanity by controlling them, and that the Gods Below want humanity to find its own way.

What? I thought that this whole 'Fate' thing was about Gods solving their gamble by means of mortal champions with limited resources. After all, all the guidelines the GA gave people (with churches, sermons and all that) are community centered, not some direct orders.

Closest things the heroes have to superiors are angels, and we've only seen one Choir, Contrition, whose entire thing is to recruit people who want to amend the wrongs they condoned. While they are essentially robbing people of their free will by showing them the world as they see it, Masego specifically mentioned that **both** angels and Demons are driven by absolutes and thus harmful to people, not because they explicitly want to rule them.

In contrast, the Gods Below have no organized religion and don't grant prayers for free, all the while bestowing their blessings on people who bend others to their will. The whole "turn an entire kingdom into undead puppets" thing doesn't scream 'find your own way' to me.

Did EE ever confirm that interpretation or are you making stuff up to make the protagonist's side look better to the modern reader?

### *Komploding*

I understood the Dead King to be the same person since the beginning seeing as how he transformed himself, his kingdom and those within it into the undead, I find it likely that Cat is the counterpoint to the Wandering Bard, as she was originally supposed to lead the lone swordsman's band of heroes but instead is a villain and has the power to (according to Queen of Summer) change the narrative like the Wandering Bard, except Cat does it in a much more direct sense. Maybe the Gods below needed to wait this long to oppose the Wandering Bard was so that it was possible to affect the story in a direct manner?

---

Just above every visionary Named thinks they have a means to tug the plot their way. Cat crossed paths with the Bard three-ish times, is simply too young to be the sole counterpart the millennia-old heroine, and we don't know to what extent she can warp stories she has no Role in. I know that "but it would be so coooool" is a legit reason for things to happen in the Guideverse, but the entire world shouldn't necessarily turn around **our** story's protagonist. A sense of bigger things happening outside of the frame is a big part of this story's appeal too.

### *James, Mostly Harmless*

Bard is a lot scarier than she appears, especially if she has been working for the Gods Above for as long as Black thinks. However, I have a sneaky feeling that when Bard finally comes into direct conflict with Cat, that Cat will subvert Bard's story to her own ends!

### *Euodiachloris*

Black is already quite happily throwing indirect spanners Wandering's way to warp her plots. Or, something like spanner-spewing landmines, at least. 😊

And, if he wants to be killed by somebody other than Cat, there's a certain Bard connected to a White Knight he can think circles around... White Knights also traditionally go after Black ones and either kill them or get killed by them, and visa versa. Why not use it to shield Squire?

Kidnapping part of Wandering's plot and using it for his own gain might be juggling matches in a fireworks factory, but if

he can balance the cost-benefit to both sides to create a one-one draw that amounts to a nul, it could be worth it. \*shrugs\*

*Mike E.*

Do we know Black's aspects? Is his eidetic/photographic memory and ability to analyze data just him, or what he got when he became the Black Knight?

Also loved the whole analysis and subverting of the ritual. I believe EE has stated that Assassin has been on screen, we just didn't know it was him/her. I am so curious as to who it actually is...part of me is wondering if it is actually Scribe.

[ficial](#)

I wonder if Assassin has some kind of Fight-Club-ish split personality, where the person who is Assassin doesn't even know it, and Assassin per se just takes over for a bit when there's work to be done.

*KageLupus*

When Cat first meets meets the Empress, there is a line about how Cat has already met Assassin. They specifically use a masculine pronoun, saying that she has already met "him". Thief also refers to Assassin in the masculine when she says that she met him. That isn't to say that Eudokia isn't some kind of front, or that Assassin being a man isn't misdirection, but I don't think it is super likely.

*Idan Dor*

Black's aspects are, as stated in the Epilogue of book 1:

The moment his agents had gotten him the news he'd felt his Name react. Lead. Conquer. Destroy. All three of his aspects were awake. He hadn't felt this alive in decades, and even as the south of the kingdom he's conquered resumed the war he'd won he felt a strange joy welling up inside of him. Interesting years were ahead. And this once, just this once, he was willing to break a rule of his. Baring his teeth at the Heavens, Black dared them to deny him.

"Just as planned," he said.

Lead, Conquer and Destroy. The memory thing is probably more of a thing he gotten from his time as a Squire with the whole standard Learn schtick.

As for the assassin, I'm assuming it's the blackguard lieutenant as his name was mentioned but then he never really did anything. But him being Scribe is still possible.

## *Shequi*

Lieutenant Abase, was I think the name of the only Blackguard Member we've actually "met" on screen.

## *IncognitoMe*

My theory for Assassin is that we've seen him as one of the people surrounding Cat when she was a brawler in the pit and not yet apprenticed to Black. Point in favor of this are the files on Cat and Black's mentioning of a preemptive strike to take her out to prevent her rise as a hero. Yes, the files we're probably made by Scribe but Assassin might have done some scouting.

Also, it might be that we have only seen Assassin in disguise as the nature of his job demands him to be secretive.

Going with Assassin's humour I'd like to imagine him as Zacharis, the drunk healer from the pits, having PTSD from his time training assassination from childhood and subverting this trope of being this mysterious inescapable entity that kills everything in his way as a ruthless and cold contract killer. Alcoholism might be his Name-strengthened quirk, like Cat's mouthing off and hand clenching.

I mean, having the most competent killer pose as some incompetent healer would embrace the irony that he's always showing in his kills.

I do see the points to Scribe having Assassin as a second persona, but there are too many points against it:

1. Scribe mentioned she joined the Calamities years after they toppled the Empire from Nefarious and the five Calamities got their Name from the Chancellor, so Assassin must have been around earlier.
2. It's been mentioned that no one can hold two names at the same time (though multiple personalities might subvert this, but come on, that'd be a cheap cliché twist).
3. I have some more points but it would just be such an obvious and easy conclusion to the whole thing if Scribe was Assassin and I want to be intrigued.

One of the main points of Scribe being Assassin though is a quote taken from the prologue of book one:

"Warlock cast a look around, looking for the fifth member of their little band and coming up empty."

They specifically mention Scribe, Warlock, Black and Captain and it would just fit coining the five Calamities before introducing the concept of their merry band to us. What do you guys say?

## *Soronel Haetir*

I suspect Assassin is the Blackguard officer we've seen a couple times. Low enough in the ranks to go unnoticed around Black but an officer so not likely to be questioned if he says "Lord Black told me to go take care of ..."

*Snoogle*

Black's aspects get named in a chapter I've forgotten the name of but I believe it was somewhere in the Callow Civil War, they are Lead, Conquer, Destroy.

If you want to see Assassin on screen, my best guess is to go back to chapter 1 when a "silent silhouette in a dark cloak" helps up the would-be rape victim. I mean, Black said that one of the men should take her home, but there weren't any other blackguards around during the incident if I remember correctly... So that would be my personal best guess.

If anyone has a better idea, shoot.

*Snoogle*

I just noticed my answer is nearly identical to the one written by Idan Dor. How do you delete stuff here?

*Darkening*

Lead. Conquer. Destroy. Destroy's probably a lot like Cat's break, lead and conquer are a bit more up in the air. Maybe Lead helps him with planning when he's Leading a group or an army? Conquer is probably a combat boost of some sort.

*Nairne*

Now that I think about it, it would be pretty scary if Ashen Priestess died so Hierophant can't take her miracles for himself, effectively weakening him in the long run and possibly denying The Woes any resurrection miracles.

I agree, that it would be interesting to see a heroic interlude sometime soon to get a feel of the heroes reaction to the Ashen Priestess dying. I'm also curious who they will blame, would make me smile if they cast blame not only on the Tyrant and Calamities but also on the Bard. That would make it easier for her to manipulate them (to a certain extent though).

Aw damn... now I want another chapter to read...or more like a whole another book to read... ://

*Soronel Haetir*

Didn't Warlock do something similar? Or did he only do that for his son?

—

Wekesa 's threat regarding Amadeus was far more explicit than for Masego.

### *Blinks*

Ah, i think Black just noticed the problem with regards to his friends and his successor.

As to Catherine killing Black while it is fairly in theme for the Squire and the Black Knight neither of the two holders of those particular Names are ones to follow stories unless on their own terms and Cat doesn't actually want to kill him. It's hardly as if she longs for the power he holds.

### *nobodi12*

What about Robber being the Assassin. Since no one has seen him he could have been a Goblin or an Orc. And and Robber is one of the few goblins we haven't heard aging.

### *esryok*

Robber thinks privately to himself about his age (way younger than Assassin) and childhood, not to mention he's performing shenanigans in Callow + Arcadia while Assassin is doing his thing in the Free Cities.

\*Maybe\* Assassin has Bard-level teleportation and shapechanging powers, but more likely they are two separate people.

### *Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

### *shana*

Using the Rule of Three and the stories put out so far, I'm starting to think that we might get a bait and switch of sorts. Heiress moved up, Masego moved up, and I think before the end of the current conflict Cat will too—but a Squire currently has two particular options: Black Knight, as she's been groomed, and "White" Knight. Given her current alignment, "White" won't necessarily make her a Hero if she transitions that way.

I have to wonder if we won't be seeing a new Name: Winter Knight. Adjutant has already demonstrated that there's a new tide of roles coming, and I'm optimistic that this book will have some fascinating twist.

### *Big Brother*

Squires also served under Kings and the occasional warrior Queen. There's probably precedent somewhere for a Squire to be named as the legitimate heir to a King or Queen, and thus



transitioning into that Name. The Heavens already tried to offer Cat the name of Queen, maybe she'll Take it this time, serve as Malicia's Callowan counterpart, and act as the link between Praes and the "Good" nations.

### *Bookworm*

I have read most of the comments and doubt many will get to this one. Just a two observations. The line that strikes me most out of this interlude is the following:

"The word for 'bard' we use comes from Old Miezana," he said.  
"Language has evolved, even in our lifetime."

Isn't the real question the etymological origin of "bard", as all Names are archetypical descriptions, in a way. It's all about association. What was "bard" associated with when it became a Name?

In our world, the word's origin revolves around concepts of "praise". There is a Slavic outlier indicating "sacrifice" also. This indicates one possible direction toward which the Name is moving.

The second observation is the title of "cadenza" which is an ornamental, sometimes improvised, piece in music that does not affect the underlying structure of a song. In other words, this chapter is pretty and very enjoyable, but of little substance in terms of the Story/Plot.

### *esryok*

I think "Cadenza" is in reference to how the Calamities managed to kill the Ashen Priestess without the Bard stepping in. The efforts to orchestrate and subvert the murder-ritual were a story about conflict between the Tyrant and the Calamities, apparently distinct from the story about the Free Cities civil war.

That the ritual was turned to target the Ashen Priestess \*was\* an ornamental, possibly improvised detail that didn't affect the underlying structure of "Calamities beat the Tyrant."

I wonder if she was unable to perceive the villain vs villain narrative, or if it was just the "cadenza" she was blind to?

### *Rnt169*

definition: a virtuoso solo passage inserted into a movement in a concerto or other musical work, \*typically near the end\*.

### *Rnt169*

So maybe this chapter indicates that Black Knight's career is coming to an end and maybe is a tribute to his career: i.e. his swansong

### *TheTime*

Here is a theory – there is no Providence. It's just the Bard, always was the Bard, arranging for lucky "coincidences" for their dear heros. Maybe it's one of their aspects.

### *Soronel Haetir*

Sorry, not buying. It's been described how a hero can learn overnight how to use a power that would take a villain a decade to master among plenty of other interventions by the gods above.

### *stevenneiman*

The Bard is one of the most effective agents of the Gods Above, but she (or possibly it, I don't know if we've confirmed that it's always female) is far from their only agent.

### [Евгений Пермяков](#)

Went through comments and ...

Amadeus do have my sympathy, but there are other reasons to make it unlikely for him to be killed by Cat, at least at the moment. Their stories are, at the moment, rather unrelated. Current Cat's narrative is about her war with Arcadia residents and, to some extent, Diabolist. If she grows within current narrative, her name should be related to said narrative and not Black's succession.

Furthermore, if we look at her Name aspects and that of Black, Black is clearly tied to military and more specifically, to army, while Cat is not. Theoretically speaking, I could imagine her coming into name of the Ranger, as Cat's aspects fit.

I can see two prominent theme's in Cat's current narrative: war with magical denizens and protection of her property. The first could result in Names of Paladin (and it would be hilarious), Exorcist, or other variation of a Purifier. The second narrative is a common trope for heroes and various ruler names, so Queen is not off the table. interestingly, it could be acceptable for Malicia as Empress is still above a Queen. Finally, Cat is caught up in fae business, In particular, Cat 'always had a ring of a heir of a fae', so if this sticks, she will be tied into Fae.

### *Darkening*

Evil gods need paladins too.

*stevenneiman*

I would strongly suspect that her Name will be something new, or at least something revived. Not sure about the name itself, but I agree that it is probably related to defending her people. It might also be an old Callowan Name traditionally but not explicitly tied to Good.

*Juniper*

One thing no one has speculated on that I've read.... Is who is the counterpart to Malicia for Cat? Or perhaps she is simply part of the next set to serve her?

*Blinks*

Cat is her own Malicia.

*nipi*

Black cant loose. Hes got perspectives:  
<http://www.giantitp.com/comics/oots0763.html>

*Question*

Searched but could not find it, does anyone remember which chapter was it in that Black's "Lead" aspect was revealed?

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So far we've only seen him use **Destroy**, which works similarly to **Break** and can disperse other Named's Aspects. I wonder if **Conquer** holds some stolen power in it...

*esryok*

At the end of Book I's epilogue:

The moment his agents had gotten him the news he'd felt his Name react. Lead. Conquer. Destroy. All three of his aspects were awake. He hadn't felt this alive in decades, and even as the south of the kingdom he's conquered resumed the war he'd won he felt a strange joy welling up inside of him. Interesting years were ahead. And this once, just this once, he was willing to break a rule of his. Baring his teeth at the Heavens, Black dared them to deny him.

"Just as planned," he said.

*stevenneiman*

I don't remember the chapter name, but I remember that it mentioned all three of his Aspects together. You could do a

google site search for "lead conquer destroy" and it would probably come up.

[shankarsivarajan](#)

" 'Kingdom Below?' Scribe said."

Is this the "Kingdom Under" of the dwarves?

*stevenneiman*

Depending on how the Fae work, there's some chance that Kairos and Amadeus are at some point in the process going to be going "WTF where did the sun go" and assuming it's sorcery performed by the other side.

Or maybe Black will have seen that coming too.

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

So I'll be completely honest here and say that the Ashen Priestess was by far my favourite of the heroes' party and I'm sad and completely bummed out that she's dead now. Bleh. \*blows raspberry\*

Seriously though, amazing chapter EE. Thanks as always.

[frolamiz](#)

Thanks for the chapter!

Given how ash is often associated with resurrection, I think it is possible for the ashen priestess to come back at the worst possible timing. Resurrection may even be one of her aspects.

*Dan L*

So... Black's looking for a force on the side of Evil to counterbalance the Wandering Bard. One that masquerades as a Named and joins existing groups, but isn't really part of the core dynamic. One that appears precisely where she is needed as if by great magic, and never intervenes physically. One that operates in the background arranging pieces on the board, and claims a Name that heavily involves manipulation of narrative.

And he is having this conversation

with

SCRIBE.

*ArkCthuul*

Exactly my train of thought. 🤔

So much potential for double crossing, I shudder merely thinking about it.

Also this chapter was wonderful again :8

*Warren Peace*

"I am dying, I think," is a rare line where it's actually appropriate for a character to murmur. Otherwise, I don't think that word means what you think it means.

Murmur, (n): a soft, indistinct sound made by a person or group of people speaking quietly or at a distance.

The key here is soft and INDISTINCT

*Warren Peace*

I found this chapter rather hard to follow. All the different place names run together, like the 5 the Tyrant is associated with. I know they're all supposed to be distinct, but does that actually matter?

Then this chapter seems to INTRODUCE TWO WHOLE NEW RACES, via offhand remarks that lack the context to make sense of them. So the Kingdom Under is distinct from the Dead King's kingdom? Black's comments seem to imply the K.O. is dwarves, at least in a generic sense, but nothing along those lines has been mentioned before, so it's confusing. And now Drow are a race in this world also? This was a very poor way to introduce these brand new ideas

*esryok*

The drow have been brought up a couple of times, most notably when Diabolist hired a band of drow mercenaries as part of her army defending Liesse.

Dwarves were first referenced in Book I, when Black was explaining that Praes is a backwater kingdom that stands no chance against either the Kingdom Under or the civilization of the gnomes.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

That's good to know, for sure, but I don't think it detracts from my point any.

*Raved Thrad*

Damn. I actually feel bad (well, a little bit) about the Ashen Priestess dying, if only because she seemed the most competent of Hanno's band. Still, killing the healer first IS always good, sound tactical doctrine.

[vuthuha912](#)

I know that the Tyrant is good but him making a play to get a Hierarch despite all the disadvantages that he is facing as a Villain is quite cool. However, I still think that Black needs to be careful since a guy that can plan that far ahead can't be just a normal Stupid Evil Villain.

I don't really know how to proceed currently. On one hand, aiding the Tyrant so that the Evil side in the League can stand against the Good and stop the entire region from joining in the Crusade is logical.

Yet, aiding the Tyrant too much and letting him dominate the League is not a great long-term move as the Tyrant is a Chronic Backstabber. He will betray his "allies" when it is the most inconvenient for them. Still, if he left the situation to play out on its own, he runs the risk of the Tyrant dying and leaving the entire region falls into the hand of Good.

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## **Villainous Interlude: Thunder**

*"We have grown to mock Tyrants for they are mad but that is a very dangerous thing. A madman thinks the world other than what it is, and in a mortal that is a harmless thing. Not so in one who moulds Creation to their will, as all Named do."*

– King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

Anaxares had been named a general, at the Tyrant's orders. Sixty-seven, the diplomat mused. He was now technically committing treason under sixty-seven different articles of Bellerophan law, and starting to wonder if he would reach a hundred before he died. His remains would be on trial for at least a decade, and he did not envy the Defender Against The People who drew the wrong lot and was made to defend his rotting corpse. It seemed to few, to have grown from middling fifty counts of treason to over sixty when made to serve in a foreign army. The law codes were in need of revising. It should have landed him roughly in the eighties. The mere fact that no difference was made between officer grades was a glaring oversight, and if allowed a few moments to make a statement before the *kanenas* summarily executed him he would jot down a few notes on the matter.

"Pay attention, Bellerophan," General Basilia barked. "This is important."

Kairos' foremost commander was currently attempting to teach him the basics of war, as he would apparently be given command of five thousand men during the assault on the walls of Nicae. When Anaxares had asked the boy why, morbidly curious, he'd been answered only by off-putting giggles. Troubling.

"I will not. I am a diplomat in the service of the Republic," he said. "Anyone but the officers drawn by lot learning military tactics is illegal."

The woman glared at him, sceptical.

"Are you telling me your shithole of a city doesn't have career officers?" she asked.

*War Is Of The People, Served By The People And Ordered Only By The People.*

"That would be setting apart individuals from the rest," he said, somewhat offended on behalf of Bellerophon. "This learning can and should only be temporary, removed after it had seen lawful use."

"Gods, no wonder you fucks have never won a war," the general said, aghast.

Anaxares narrowed his eyes at the wicked foreign oligarch. It had been determined by the Will Of The People that enough draws counted as a victory, and therefore proof of the superiority of the Republic in all things. That this was factually incorrect by the standards of wider Calernia was irrelevant to the purposes of this conversation.

"Who do you even learn from?" Basilia asked.

"Bellerophon has secured the finest military manual in existence to train its officers," he replied.

"*Manners of War* by Tyrant Theodosius?" the general asked. "I suppose the *Ars Tactica* by the first Terribilis would be close enough."

"*A Hundred Victorious Strategies*," Anaxares said.

Ah, that made sixty-eight. Leaking of military information to The Deceived Servant Of A Grasping Despot. General Basilia's lips twitched as if she was trying very hard not to weep or laugh.

"Isabella the Mad's book?" she asked, voice rough.

"She was the only one to ever defeat Theodosius on the field," the diplomat said.

"That's, uh, a very generous assessment of the Maddened Fields," General Basilia said, and tried to pass her convulsive laughter for a cough.

He sighed. Mockery, he thought, was the last refuge of those afraid of the First And Mightiest Of The Free Cities, May She Reign Forever.

"Well, at least you haven't learned any bad habits," she said. "You won't be on the first wave over the walls, anyway, if you listen to your commanders you should be fine."

"I will not," Anaxares said.

The woman frowned.

"I will actively attempt to hinder your victory, should I remain in a position of authority," he informed her serenely.

"I'll remove you from command," she threatened.

"Do so," he said. "Please."

Was there a lawful difference between having temporarily served in a foreign army and remaining in service? Ah, yes, the third amendment. Unfortunately it only applied after death, with the assumption being that any Bellerophan committing such treason would immediately be killed before trial could take place. Another area in need of clarification to be pointed out to the Republic.

"The Tyrant has his reasons," Basilia finally said. "He sees further than anyone else."

"He is drunk with power," Anaxares told her gently. "And quite possibly mad."

"They're all mad, diplomat," the woman said, smiling. "That's why they win. Theodosius took on the entire Principate at its peak and walked away the winner. That takes something stranger than courage. Oh, we have the finest army on Calernia don't get me wrong. We can handle thrice our number in what everyone else has to field. But it's with a Tyrant on the throne that we shine, and it was the fortune of my life to be born under one."

Anaxares was not unaware of the blinders the Republic had set around his eyes, though he'd never seen the need to attempt to take them off. It was his first time, however, seeing the same thing on the face of someone not from Bellerophon. How strange, that they too could have faith in something greater. It took the diplomat tipping over a carafe of wine over three maps and wilfully misremembering the names of his commanders before the Helikean gave up in schooling him. Kairos sent for him, but when



he entered the tent there was no sign of the Tyrant. Seven people stood stiffly under the silk panes, eyeing the embroidery with cold mistrust. And good reason. It was gold thread, a blatant misuse of wealth that should be in the hands of the people.

"Diplomat Anaxares," a woman said, tonelessly.

*Kanenas*. She was not even trying to hide it. The others all had that muted look on their faces that would have betrayed their function as well, had the Bellerophan been traitorous enough to attempt to find such a thing out. Anaxares did not bow, for that was a foreign flourish judiciously disposed of by the Republic. All men were equal, even with those who could kill him with a thought.

"I have committed treason on sixty-eight counts," he said, and calmly listed them.

The longer he spoke, the more the tension left his shoulders. It was not that Anaxares had ever expected to live through any of this, or even dedicated a great deal of thought to the matter. It was, after all, out of his hands. But it was a relief, that this strange affair finally be closed. That his fate had been left dangling had been a burr in his boots, an irritant. His existence and the contradiction it represented to the truth of Bellerophon should not have been left so long unanswered.

"If the Republic is willing to provide ink and parchment, I have comments to submit to the eyes of the people for after my execution," he said.

He'd never considered using Helikean tools. No proper Bellerophan would have read anything written with them. The seven *kanenas* studied him.

"Your pending execution has been suspended by vote," a man said. "Your services to the people have made you a Person of Value."

The diplomat watched the seven other people in the tent. They stared back, unblinking. Something rose inside of him as the silence continued, something he had not felt in a very long time. He'd thought the years had scoured it out of him, but perhaps that had been vanity. It was not hope, of course. He had no use for that. It was *anger*. Harsh, unforgiving fury. How dare they? How dare they turn on what they should be, on everything they should stand for?

"No," he hissed. "This is *unacceptable*."

"This committee has been empowered to record and respond to your words," the woman who'd spoken earlier replied flatly.

"There is no such thing as Person of Value," Anaxares snarled. "If the people have decreed this, the people are *wrong* and in need of purging. We are a Republic of *laws*. I have broken these laws. I must be executed according to them."

"To go against the Will of the People is treason," another woman said.

"Then execute me, by all the Gods," he shouted. "The people have committed treason against the Republic through this vote. This is how he *wins*, you fools. By bending what we are. It only needs to happen once and everything we've built is stained."

Eyes hard, he stared them down.

"We are the Republic of Bellerophon," he said through gritted teeth. "We do not compromise. We do not make *exceptions*. I will slit my own throat before allowing this."

"Correct," the man said.

"Correct," another man said, and a woman with him.

"Treason," the woman from earlier replied.

The air in the tent grew thick with sorcery as all seven *kanenas* went still. Something broke with a sickening crunch behind the face of the three who'd agreed with him. Anaxares did not look as the bodies dropped. Citizens did not get involved in the debates of the *kanenas*, or the grisly ends they inevitably came to.

"You are forbidden to commit suicide by law," the woman said. "And to wilfully take actions that will result in your death as well."

"You can't do this," Anaxares said.

He was genuinely afraid for the first time since boyhood. This... Gods, what was this? It was wrong, all wrong, something had broken and he needed to **Mend** it.

"We do nothing, diplomat," a man said. "The People Have Spoken."

They left him there, shivering in his own sweat. His hands shook and he had to sit for his legs would not longer bear the weight of him. Nightfall was coming, and with it the assault on Nicaw. The armies were gathered, but he cared nothing for it. Yet he would have to lead the soldiers, for if he did not the Tyrant might decide to kill him and he was forbidden by law to chance this. The boy. The boy was behind this, one way or another. Kairos was waiting for him on a throne that overlooked the walls, all grey stone with a dozen gargoyles fanning him and feeding him grapes. He had a cup in hand, though not of wine. Juice of some sort.

"What did you do," Anaxares demanded. "*What did you do?*"

The Tyrant of Helike laughed, laughed with his red eye shining and his weak arm clutching at his robes like claws.

"Oh yes," Kairos Theodosian murmured. "You'll do nicely."

"You've tainted us," the diplomat said.

"I gave them what they wanted most, deep down," the Tyrant said. "Under all the laws and the lies."

A gargoyle waddled up to him, stone wings folded over its back, and offered a wineskin. The Bellerophan saw it too well. His eyesight should not be this good, all these minute fractures in the bespelled rock should never have been noticeable. That realization brought exhaustion with it that had him half-toppling on the platform the throne was set on. He took the skin and drank deep, drowning and drowned.

"Would you like to hear a story, Anaxares?" the Tyrant asked. "It's a thing of beauty, this one."

"This must be unmade," the diplomat begged.

"Oh, it's too late for that," Kairos smiled. "Much, much too late. This story, my dearest friend, is about three people."

Anaxares' hands were no longer shaking, his body numb at the horror of what was happening.

"The first is a monster," Kairos said. "She's not like the others monsters, though. She has no face and as many lives as there are stars, and behind those veils only one single burning desire. It's a thing I can see, you know. What people **Wish**. And when I look at her, what I see is *glorious*."

"The Wandering Bard," Anaxares croaked.

"Now, this monster she has plans and plans and plans," the Tyrant sighed admiringly. "So many irons and so many fires. She doesn't care about any of us, when it comes down to it. All she looks at is the line in the sand that's just a bit above the reach of high tide, and we can't have that now can we? She's not real picky about what she'll use to wipe it away, practical creature that she is."

Kairos leaned closer, grinning widely.

"Let me tell you a secret, my friend," he whispered. "She's already won. The opposition was watching the wrong fire the whole time, and the intricacy of the trap is *exquisite*. She made the kill without them ever seeing her."

"She's losing," Anaxares said. "The Calamities killed one of her heroes with your own sorcery."

"No no no," the Tyrant said. "You're looking at it all wrong. Even if my pretty little mages had been untroubled, the Beast would have survived. The Healer should have too, life split in half with her sister. A touching story of sisterly love, if you care for that sort of thing. She didn't because she was a *sacrifice*. Her weight was stolen, because there was another use for it. With nothing you can only trade for nothing."

"Then you are a pawn as well," the diplomat said. "In the Bard's game."

"Funny thing, control," the boy mused. "Everybody thinks they have it. Because they follow Fate or fight it, because they see the lines or make them. No one is in control, Anaxares. Not even the Gods, otherwise what would be the point of Creation? We're not the answer, we're the question. The book even says so."

The cripple hacked out a laugh, patting himself.

"She thinks I made you to kill me," Kairos said. "She's wrong, my dearest bosom companion. I'm not some Praesi of the old breed, oh no. I have more unusual ambitions. But here I am, getting ahead of myself. We have a story, yes? The second person is not a person at all. He is a *thing*."

The hate and contempt in the boy's voice had an almost physical weight to it.

"He thinks he's a person and that's the most disgusting part," the Tyrant smiled. "Cogs and wheels and he started out thinking it was about being right, about being fair, but it hasn't been like that in a long time. He just wants to win, but it's a kind of victory that means nothing at all. That poor, blind pile of cogs."

Kairos chuckled.

"He thinks what runs him is reason but that is a conceit," the Tyrant said gleefully. "That will sting, when the lie is stripped away. He thinks he's above pride, you see, but that's about all that's left of him because he thinks everyone lives by his rules, Anaxares. Even if the ends aren't the same, he thinks the *means* are."

The boy's good hand rose, fingers walking the arm of the throne like some small nimble creature. The odd-eyed villain snapped his fist shut instead of walking it off.

"Just like that," he said. "Plot and plan and seize a crown at the end, even if this one isn't really a crown. More like an

agreement, and you know I have a weakness for those. The old Emperors, they got it. That the Empire was the tool, not the aim. But in his little head Praes is the centre of the world, and as long as he thinks like that Aoede is going to whip him again and again, if you'll forgive my language."

"She's going to kill him," the diplomat said.

"Of course not, my beauteous blooming flower," the Tyrant tutted. "Nothing so crass. She's going to *hurt* him. And when the cold thing turns into a wounded animal, well, that's when he starts making mistakes."

"And the third person is you," Anaxares said. "Pulling all the strings."

Kairos turned to him then, and the smile on his face was one of pure and childlike joy. The Bellerophan had never seen anything half so terrifying.

"Gotcha," he said, like a child pulling a prank.

The cripple shivered under the setting sun, his face almost feverish.

"I heard a story about one of the first kings of Helike, once," he said. "His father had gathered a great menagerie of animals, it goes. Peacocks and great lizards, gazelles and aurochs from all over Calernia and beyond. And one lion as well, brought in as a cub. It lived in a cage all its life, fed choice cuts of meat meant behind bars. So the first thing that king did, when he took the throne, was open all the doors."

The Tyrant hummed.

"I heard a lot of reasons why he might have done that," the odd-eyed boy said. "Revenge on a father who cared more for animals than him, getting rid of expensive frivolity and even because he believed caging animals was wrong. I think, though, that I understand him. Just a little."

Kairos leaned forward.

"I think what he wanted was to see if a lion was still a lion, having lived in a cage all its life," he confided. "I think he just... wanted to see what would happen."

"What did?" Anaxares asked, tone rough.

"The lion slaughtered them all," the Tyrant of Helike grinned, and the red in his eye was an endless sea of blood. "Nature tells, my friend. Nature always tells."

The boy's grinned widened, long and sharp and pearly white.

"I wonder what *your* nature is, Hierarch."

It was a title and a curse, the ruling seat of the League that had only once been filled since the founding.

It was all these things, but most of all it was a Name.

---

*danh3107*

Ho boy, this was foreshadowed heavily, but it still took my breath away.

*TameCurtsy*

I completely missed the foreshadowing. Where was it?

*Idan Dor*

I know of two:

Most of our resident Bellerophan are Villainous interludes, only his first two appearances are not.

Second, last chapter Black mentioned that he thinks the Tyrant is attempting to become Heirarch of the free cities. After wondering that, he wondered how the Tyrant managed to assert so much control and power over Bellerophan (which hints they might be the usual bottleneck).

Anyone spotted more?

[Hakurei06](#)

"This is Anaxares, my most trusted advisor," Kairos grinned. "I abducted him. He's not very happy about it."

The dark-haired woman squinted at him, slurping her cup loudly. For a moment Anaxares could have sworn she was entirely sober and studying him with a piercing gaze, but then she choked on the liquor and the moment was gone. She thumped her own chest until she stopped coughing, spilling biscuit crumbs everywhere.

*Warren Peace*

How is that big blockquote supposed to apply? It seems completely irrelevant, it has nothing to do with foreshadowing the Hierarch

*David*

Well, there are ways to see a blossoming Name, and given her nature, it would be reasonable to assume that the Wandering Bard has access to those abilities. Likely, she saw the early seeds of it, and caught on to what everyone's favorite Tyrant was up to.

*TeK*

It is obvious that Tyrant wanted to become the Hierarch himself, but alas, his most trusted advisor schemed to betray him and take the title for himself. This is an Evil trope, which Tyrant specifically set up to drag Anaxares into a Name. Hence, foreshadowing.

*goliath1303*

Is honestly impressive how often you talk down to people and belittle/dismiss their ideas and speculation while never managing to actually be in the correct side of the guess. It seems like it's a feedback loop for you or something.

You take a strong and aggressive stance against somebody's idea/s.

You're proven wrong.

Next time you have a different idea than another poster, instead of disagreeing politely and having a discussion where you present the tasks why you believe what you do, you double down on that aggressiveness and attack them.

Rinse, repeat.

Do you do things in this format so that you don't have to actually price and defend your reasoning? It sends like it. It's like you think of you don't ever present your predictions, you can't be wrong and if you attack someone else's and they're correct, oh well. They're not gonna call you or several chairs later and say "See Warren, I was right!". If, however, they're wrong you can say "I told you so!", thereby feeling like you won something. Completely ignoring the fact that you "Told them so.", but were wrong 10x as often.

*stevenneiman*

@Warren Peace it's exactly the sort of thing that Traitorous would do to set up the person who hated him most of anyone in Calernia to the position of power that everyone thought he was gunning for himself. We'll have to wait and see where in all the hells he's actually going with this, but it is a Traitorous style of scheme.

## *Darkening*

Wow. What \*will\* he do now that he's been made the head of a nation and violently rejects the very idea of such a thing. Huh. I might have expected him to get a name, but this is a very odd turn of events. I can't wait to see where it goes.

Alex

I like how Person of Value initializes to PoV, which is a pun on Point of View. Anaraxes is our point of view character for things pertaining to the Tyrant.

[taborask](#)

I honestly didn't see this coming at all, though it feels kinda obvious in retrospect. The Tyrant might be my new favorite villain

[wirelessgrapes](#)

I'm trying to think of what ability the Tyrant has in the story. First off, he's right. This is a story, no matter how different it seems from other stories. The difference in this story is that everyone is still fighting the story, but when everyone is fighting the story, the only thing that changes are the roles. Regardless of how 'ahead' everyone thinks they are, there is still going to be a final hero, there's going to be a final stand.

And that 'final hero' is Cat.

Tyrant, with his WISH aspect, gains Medium Awareness (<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MediumAwareness>), and so he sees what he shouldn't. He sees little bits and pieces of the story, and he's decided that there's no use in fighting it. He's hoping that, in the end, he's the protagonist. He's running a Deadpool style, in which, if he's funny enough and crazy enough, he can be a protagonist. If not, well, then he's gonna wreck some shit. If Amadeus has accepted his death because of the story he was forced into, Kairos has acknowledged that he must lose because he's the Tyrant. He's Akua with less ego and preternatural foresight.

In the end of this story, with everyone trying to skirt the rules and play their own game, there can only be one person who truly changes the game. Amadeus knows this is Cat. He knew it when he gave her the knife. He knew it when he found her in the alley.

I don't think that he planned to meet Cat. This is a story not unlike any other. When Creation makes a story, they make a story. What I think happened, is that he looked over a scouting sheet on Cat just before he arrived in Laure at the beginning of the



story. Whether he wanted to double check the potential heroes in the city, or because his Name forced the story, once he walked past an alley and saw one of the potential Named in an alley, with a knife to her throat, he knew that she could be the protagonist, *\*his\** protagonist, if he just stepped in. He was fully prepared to let her go to War College, because that could be a story in itself, but the opportunity was there, and so he intentionally signed his own death warrant as the Mentor in exchange for immortality in the Practical Guide to Evil.

He's just too arrogant to admit it.

When it comes to the Tyrant, he's the one who is breaking the fourth wall. He's seen what lies outside of Creation, and the existential crises that would arise from it. He's Crazy Sane (<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/CrazySane>), because he knows he's either going to lose or be crazy enough to win.

And so, the Heavens always win. Since this is a story about breaking stories, Masego will probably break the walls of Creation in the final conflict, and allow Cat to truly break the story. But, if this story is about breaking stories, a finale that involves breaking the overarching story *\*is\** the story. No matter what, the forces beyond Creation wins.

If Creation is the process to find whether Good or Evil is better, the answer is that there will always be shades of gray, and only in balance can we find the best way of life.

Or it's 42 if Creation is secretly just a Deep Thought calculation.

[\*wirelessgrapes\*](#)

Another line about Cat that I want to add:

If the story is about breaking stories, then the origin has to break origins. The final hero of a story breaking story has to be a unique origin. They can't be from their own nation. It takes someone who is formed by breaking the trope to break the tropes.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

I'm gonna tie Cat's Role and Name progression into this discussion too. Word of God has stated in 'Villainous Interlude: Decorum' that the Name 'Grey Knight' (which a few people has suggested) does not exist due to the lack of cultural drive for the Name. If Cat is to truly break the story, one part she'd break would be the transition from 'Squire' to 'White/Black Knight'. Based on excerpts from the quotes of chapters, could it be that her future Name is indeed, 'Foundling'? The sheer number of people she has

influenced in Callow/the Legions/Tribes/Clans, giving her a cultural weight strong enough to turn her name into a Name?

[wirelessgrapes](#)

I actually don't think Cat will ever transition. There's power in a transitory name like Squire. She's not restricted in ways that Amadeus is, and there's a story in a young up and comer being the underdog to beat everyone. The moment she "graduates" her name, is the moment that she is part of the game, and not the outside factor that separates her from the rest of the bigger players who manipulate stories already (Amadeus, Bard, Cordelia, Tyrant)

[taborask](#)

Damn. Up until now, I had no idea where this story is going but I think you're right. I'll eat my own hat if at some point Kairos doesn't stare down the camera and say something like "This isn't just a story, WE are a story, and the readers of that story are watching us right now"

*Jonnnnz*

I think that you are giving the Tyrant too much importance. His strategy is a failing one (as has been pointed out already), doubly so since he admitted the Bard's inevitable victory.

But I think that what separates Cat and the Bard is that they haven't set an end goal for themselves but rather think in terms of affecting long term change on people. The Bard, being forced to see things through the perspective of heroes sees the inevitable failing of villains, while Cat sees the inherent impotence of heroes. They may want the same thing, but the gods have had centuries to twist the Bard into an agent of their agenda, just like they have the world to some extent (with the Queen of Summer hinting at that). On the other hand, Cat wants humans to stop depending on stories and gods. This is the big clash at the end of it all.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

Yeah, Tyrant knows he lost, but he has to have some kind of hope, or at least he had to when he started. To be Named in general, you have to be willing to take Creation and change it with nothing but your own two hands. He just sees the futility in it. I'm glad we didn't see stuff from his perspective, cause that would've broken a lot of good foreshadowing in terms of the world building.

[Cpt. Obvious](#)

I think you are wrong about Named needing to have the will to change creation. Heroes are chosen by their Gods to do the Gods will on creation. And the classical Villain, at least the Praesi kind, "knows" they will never be able to win. It's in all the stories they have ever heard growing up. The Villains scheme until the strongest or smartest of them remain. Then they raise terrible armies of undead, massive flying forts, schools of flying piranhas and whatever else they can dream up. Only to go to war on Good and end up killed by Heroes or backstabbed by their "friends". They all know that's what awaits them, yet they take pride in being the best villain possible with the most ambitious and insane plan. That they fail isn't important as it's a given from the moment they got a name. The important part is that they fail as magnificently as possible.

The pinnacle of the classical Wasteland Villains career is to be able to stand at the top of their tower cackling madly as the last of the heroes finally brings it all crumbling down. It's how Villains end. The only difference they make is in the history books. The story stays the same.

Heroes are empowered by their Gods and are not supposed to rebel against the order of things.

Among Villains there will occasionally be someone who does break the mold and tries to change creation. Amadeus is one, as is Cat. Alaya might be one, but the rest of the Calamities and the Woe aren't really in it to change Creation, but rather they are drawn along by Amadeus and Cat.

*Dainpdf*

Black knew about Cat beforehand. He knew she had the potential to become a hero and went to kill or recruit her. There is an Interlude showing Scribe telling him about her. Also, of course that's the way the Tyrant sees things. He's clearly a megalomaniac. His prescience may be heavily distorted by that.

*ravin*

can u link in that interlude?

*Adarsh*

Yeah, I did not see this one coming.

*Soronel Haetir*

Interesting that Kairos so misreads Black's assessment of Praes, even as he understands his mindset so well. Black is fully aware

that Praes is insignificant even on the continent, let alone the rest of the world. A great deal of his strategy has revolved around not ticking off the major powers.

*Byzantine*

But also interesting he seems to have gotten a pretty good read on the Bard, though I suspect his ultimate assessment is off as well. Black is not really the Bard's enemy. Catherine is. They just aren't aware of it yet.

*Byzantine*

Oh gods.

The Tyrant is going to betray everyone. He's going to break the Bard too. And he just gave a Name that has not existed for thousands of years to someone who should never have had a chance at having one.

This is going to be interesting.

Oh, and Diabolist? Sorry, but the Tyrant just pretty much secured top old-school villain.

[Nehemiah Newell](#)

Well, yes, but while I hate both Diabolist and Tyrant, I hate to hate Diabolist, while I love to hate Tyrant. Like, Diabolist has consistently been the least interesting of the antagonists, while Tyrant is a joy.

I'm glad to see his game remains good, and hope he hangs on long enough to be an enemy of Cat, rather than a far off event.

*vietnamabc*

Diabolist is there for the little shit Joffrey experience and being a training wheel for Cat, Tyrant is the real deal. Also dat moments when both the GM and the player goes meta and rule-bending to the max.

[onedollargum](#)

The Diabolist is the Eric Sparrow of this story =P

*Warren Peace*

what the fuck is an eric sparrow

[Alyxe](#)

I waaaas going to whine about seeing the post notice, taking awhile to go to the link and finding it gone but.. can not, after

that. Wow! The Tyrant is definitely shooting up my favourites now with this. And Anaxares, Named and Aspected like that?!

Bravo... well done, good sir, well done.

*Arnunart*

So anyone else think ranger is dead? Because her fighting the queen of summer and getting hit with a curse at the right time would be the thing that could kill her. I mean you make a mistake fighthtjngng a god and well you die.

*Idan Dor*

Damn, you might be right! Fuck, remember Scribe's statement from last chapter? Something like I will kill Catherine if she holds the knife and if I fail, Hye will not? Of course Hye has to go first. Damn!

*RoflCat*

I don't know if it'd be Ranger, if anything Malicia seems more likely as a target between her having less combat potential and has shown to be able to fail (Warden extra)

And if Malicia is gone this way, it can lead to Cat vs Diabolist for the throne (alternatively Cat defeat Diabolist, but appoint Black as Emperor instead, possibly getting some points with Scribe and Ranger for it and still leave herself free to run Callow)

*Warren Peace*

no. something that major wouldn't happen just out of the blue, randomly. unless you can point to some foreshadowing everyone else has missed?

*Dotorator-1 47*

did the Tyrant made himself second in command so he can be "the Dragon" (<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TheDragon>)?

[edrey](#)

now that was dramatic, if warlock dies, making masego the wizard's nemesis or akua's father becoming the new warlock would be the most logical right?

so what is the goal of kairos, how he will betray the bar? the general was right the tyrant is just great

*Warren Peace*

there is no Apprentice currently

### Cpt. Obvious

While I can't see Masego transition from Heirophant to Warlock, to me that would seem like a step down, Akua's father was once considered the equal or possibly even better than Wekesa. So if the Warlock were to die he would probably be able to grab that Name. While he lacks the ambition he would do it for his daughter. And Akua certainly have ambition enough for the both of them.

### *Naeddyr*

That's a strange and roundabout way to become Hierach. It probably IS a title for a Diplomat, but I'd expected to see a transitional period.

Is this how it is with other title Names? People get them ""de jure"" even though they're not even close to being qualified / ratified / thronified yet, and then they have to fight for it? Suddenly, a man living on a farm is tired of the civil war raging through his home and becomes King. Three candidates for Emperor fight until one of them WANTS it more than the others.

Strange Roles lying in stories distributing Names is no basis for a system of government. Supreme Executive Power Derives From A Mandate From The People, Not From Some Farcical Narrative Performative Omen.

### vamair

I don't think that a man on a farm can be The King. On the other hand, if he started a rebellion and is leading it, then it's completely possible for him to become King even before he's crowned. Though even in this case he has to do something to prove he's the true King. Draw a sword from a stone, for example.

### *Yotz*

Any oaf can draw a sword from a stone, to judge trueness of the King on that is a blunder of legendary proportions.

Now, on the other appendage, if A Man From A Farm would be able to \_put\_ a sword in the stone...

### *Idan Dor*

That is such a good monty python scene, just watched it again. It is also surprisingly extremely relevant with the Hierarch being Bellerophan and actually chosen by The People, however misguided they might be.

---

Transitional period may still be going on. Remember, Cat got her **Learn** as soon as she woke up from the Name dream and Rashid seemed to have some Aspect too, seeing as he was fighting better in a room full of goblinfire than in a camp while using his stealth trick. Given that both the current war and the Name of Hierarch are confined to the Free Cities, there may well be another claimant waiting behind the walls of Nicae.

Other possibility is that the mess that was Catherine's claiming the Name of Squire (for and a half claimants, a hero on the loose, a quarter of the city on goblinfire) was due to its ties to the larger conflict. Power calls to power, and so the three Named fighting in Summerholm later meet again to fight over the future of Callow in Liesse; an episodic villain hired by one of them to get rid of another and killed by the third has enough narrative weight left in her to posthumously claim a Name herself, even if for a short time.

In contrast to that, most of the setting up for electing a Hierarch happened offscreen: the offer to the good members of the League probably included formally giving reins to a third party, so they wouldn't commit blasphemy by taking orders from a villain. Likewise, the whole period the kanenas were delaying Anaxares' execution they were probably observing his changes of personality from being carried by the current of his people to proclaiming that both people and kanenas are wrong in breaking the law for him. The transitional period happened, it just was artificially put together by the Tyrant as he conquered more and more of the League for his friend.

---

Also, note how starting from "Stormfront" all his interludes are explicitly villainious, as opposed to the neutral one he shares with Cordelia Hasenbach and a nameless prologue to the current book.

### *TideofKhatanga*

Oh gods. I have no idea what's going on anymore, most theories I had now lay in shambles and I'll need to read half the story again keeping this chapter in mind but, gods, it's awesome.

### *Shequi*

So Kairos has opened the cage of Bellerophan Laws, and Anaxares is out amongst the prey.

Mend... Interesting, as a villainous aspect. Hierarch is going to be a fun one to watch.

*nick012000*

>Mend... Interesting, as a villainous aspect.

Personally, I'm wondering if he can do the same sort of things that Josuke Higashikata from Jojo's Bizarre Adventures could with it.

---

No healing for the villains, remember? Hes also not a mage (otherwise he'd be a kanena), so that road is also closed for him.

Though, it's a pity that the last scene in this chapter doesn't have a window for Anaxares to fall out from.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

I suspect Anaxares is only a Villain from a specific point of view. From his own, mainly – Mending the rule of law on behalf of others with no wish to take power yourself... is not typically Villanous. He shares a lot with Cat: to save Callow, she consciously decided not to pick Hero. He may not have chosen to go Named, but that's kind of the point – Bellerphoran culture doesn't go in for personal choices on this. He's the Reluctant Anti-Hero/Villain/Whatever they need, whatever they thought they wanted or were going to get.

To save what he can of Bellerophan Democracy from itself (and the Tyrant), I think Anxiares is going to pick "anything that has a shot". Even if that's tipping the board. 😊

x

Darth Vader justo wants order forma the galaxy.

It's not the ends but the means that form the alignment.

### *NerfContessa*

Yeah, hell shake up a lot of. Things.

### *mechanicalrain*

I wondered in previous chapters what would be the impetus behind the diplomat being granted a name, and I must say, the fanaticism and iron will he's shown in the chapter has been astounding. His display of desperation and utter willingness to die is probably what will drive him in his role. Bravo for this chapter!

### *vietnamabc*

OTOH, that means this dude is the perfect person to sic on the Fae, guy is so steadfast that Fae trickery just wash over his head.



*-Mech-*

I wonder if he'll be successful or not so much in his role, considering he fits both a tragedy and a villainous tale.

And yeap, he probably has a huge advantage in any contest of wills. There's the drawback of his principles and morals not being developed solely by himself, so as to speak, but the underlying tone of self-sacrifice he takes makes him an underdog in a way. No matter way this goes, he's certainly an interesting character, and its unfortunate that he's purely a side character to drive the plot forward.

*James, Mostly Harmless*

The Tyrant has long known that he will die young, but I get the feeling from this Chapter he will die soon, so he created Hierarch as his successor to carry on the fight against the Prince and Praes.

*Phantom*

I must have lost track of the story somewhat, but I am sure that I remember reading the title of Hierarch in the story's chapters before this somewhere....

*Idan Dor*

It was mentioned at least once in a top of the chapter quote about diplomacy. That's what I remember, anyhow.

*Imagination*

"We make the shepherds kings at the end of our stories because they already know how to lead recalcitrant, bleating creatures of limited intellect."

– Prokopia Lekapene, first and only Hierarch of the Free Cities

The Hierarch is the leader of the collected Free Cities.  
Anaxres is the second Hierarch to have existed.

*Shequi*

There's another one as well:

"Diplomacy is the art of selling a deal you don't want to people you don't trust for reasons you won't admit to."

-Prokopia Lekapene, first and only Hierarch of the League of Free Cities

From <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2015/08/26/chapter-22-just-according-to/>

The one about Shepherds is from <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/02/22/chapter-2-might/>

I also now understand why the First Hierarch has a name that's taken from 2 empresses of the Byzantine Empire...

*Burnsy*

So, somewhat relevant to this. I just finished compiling all the chapter headers, organising them and formatting them to tv tropes. They're over on the quotes page, I think I've got them all. but if anyone spots one missing then go ahead and shift it over.

[\*Phantom\*](#)

While I remember those quotes, those chapters seemed to be quite far behind than I recalled about seeing that title.

I assumed that it's most likely mentioned by Black somewhere in the previous chapter or someone else more recently.

*mupi*

It's in the previous chapter ("Cadenza"), Black and Scribe are discussing the Tyrant's plans:

--

"He aims to be Hierarch, then," he said.

How the Tyrant had managed to exert pressure on Bellerophon enough they would agree to this would have to be found investigated. Such a lever was too useful to be left solely in the boy's hands.

"Assuming he secures all the votes," Amadeus said. "Intent?"

--

Apparently, Black was wrong ...

[\*Phantom\*](#)

Nice thanks, no wonder I felt like I have seen that title so recently but can't find it.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*Addicted*

I wonder what cats FALL would do to rangers TRANSCEND

*Bell Towers*

Now I'm even MORE worried for Sabah and (the tiniest bit) for Warlock, but I'm also thinking this might just be really good feels bait.

I mean, the Lone Swordsman made some pretty big claims from a position of power and he had the stones to follow through ("let's kill a calamity, guys" "let's bring a literal angel into creation" "we're gonna start a crusaaaaade") and Cat dropped him like dirt in the end. Black has Cat's deviousness x1000 and his compadres are monsters in their own right so things might still go their way.

This chapter was Amazing btw, did not see that Name reveal coming.

*randomcommentername*

In rereading I've noticed something strange; in the Precipitation interlude, Anaxares makes references to Bellerophon being landlocked. In the maps, it is surrounded on three sides by water. Typo, misdrawn map, or more evidence of the 1984-esque indoctrination of Bellerophon?

*Jonnnney*

Bellerephon is a single city in the middle of a peninsula. So the city and it's sphere of influence is landlocked.

*Author Unknown*

Wow. This was awesome. I loved the stubborn little diplomat and now he becomes Hierarch. Ahahahahah.

Can you imagine trying to get him to give an order?

"What is your command?"

"No man is above another! No man has the right to command another! Follow The Peoples will!"

"The people will you to give us a command."

"Execute them all! They have strayed from the path!"

Or how about negotiating a treaty? Or any number of things. I'm so looking forward to seeing more of Hierarch.

*Gunslinger*

Holy shit did I not see this coming. I mean I expected he'd get a name, just didn't think he'd get THE name.

*Sinjako*

The Tyrant's perspective on Amadeus is completely spot on. To others that say Black knows his insignificance, He really doesn't. His Praes-centrism comes through in his world view( Boohoo villains always lose, i just wanna win.

*Sinjako*

Wait a minute. The Tyrant comes off as the Joker from Batman. If that is true, then Amadeus would be Evil! Harvey Dent (Two-face), Anaxares is Harley Quinn (SO many similarities), I'm not sure who the bard is (Ra's al Ghul?).

Oh my god, Catherine is Batman (The dark knight).

*beleester*

I thought Hanno was Good Two-Face? "I do not judge" and all that.

*Soronel Haetir*

Okay, something we've been told is that what separates Named from everyone else is will. Anaxares would seem to put that on its head, he is admirable in his steadfast belief but he seems to have exactly zero will of his own.

Does Kairos actually have an aspect that can foist a Name onto such an unlikely recipient?

*RandomFan*

He has the same will I think a lot of heroes have: A steadfast belief in the way things should be, and a certainty that when they aren't that way, they need mending. But he has a lot of will to make things the way they should be, it's just that he trusts outside sources to dictate what that is- like the White Knight does.

*Lynx*

I don't dislike interludes but... 2 in a row? If it gets to three I'm afraid I'll suffer from cardiac arrest.

*rangamal thenuwara*

They are there to let us know what is happening in other parts of the world and also give us info on how their world works. And he also make sure to finish sub-arcs within the story before going through interludes so that we don't have cliffhangers.

*Nastybarsteward*

Is the HIERARCH definitely a villain?

*Idan Dor*

Anaxares has been getting Villainous interludes for a while now (all of them except his first two appearances), so supposedly

(at least for this one) the answer is yes.  
Not necessarily an Evil style name like Praes' names, but remember that Bellerophan itself is "aligned" with Evil even though it is nothing like Praes' style of Evil.

*Naeddyr*

Rereading the thing again, noticed a big character mixup in book one:

in the chapter where sergeant Kamilah is introduced (rescued during the wargames), she's not mentioned later in the book at all, so I thought she was an abandoned character seeing as how 'sergeant Kilian' was there immediately after, but searching the blog she's mentioned in later stuff, and Kilian is a lieutenant so you've just automatically written "Kilian" instead of "Kamilah" in that chapter.

[Karmagator](#)

Wow, the comic relief became a named and thus relevant to the story... this is great 😊

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Eh,  
As someone who actually thinks Ranger is cool, I probably shouldn't be surprised I'm also in the minority that's not terribly fond of this Tyrant/Anaxares thing. The Tyrant has had some amusing moments, and one cool one when he called down lightning, but his doings feel more like a distraction than anything else to me.

Like it or not, Diabolist's magical whatsit is the biggest magical happening since the Dead King's rise turned the capital city Keter into a hellscape.

Honestly, I only find the Tyrant relevant insofar as he's clogging up events as to whether or not Cordelia is going to get her Crusade versus Praes. More than that, the Tyrant's views aren't even internally consistent from one moment to the next. He despises Black for being a passionless gamer of the Story/Role system, but doesn't hate the Wandering Bard a trillion times more for essentially being the automated, semi-autonomous Course Correction Mechanism of the Heavens? He's disgusted that Black isn't a person in his view, but thinks he is. Yet that same disgust doesn't find purchase in the being who swaps faces & identities like other people change clothes?

I love the Guide, I really do...but the Tyrant stuff doesn't really add a lot to the story for me. No other major personalities from the Free Cities supposedly so integral to Procer being able to

make a Crusade work. The only member of the White Knight's band with a memorable personality is the Hedge Wizard(ess).

Maybe it will all connect up in some awesome way down the line, dunno. Just know I'm MUCH more interested in the Catherine Chapters. The Free Cities conflict feels very bland. A prop to keep the Calamities outta the catastrophes going on in Callow.

With so much rampant destruction, I'm finding it hard to see how the Free Cities won't be too war-weary and treasury depleted to sign on for Crusade.

---

From Cordelia's point of view, the conflict in Free Cities is relevant only to securing the border with Helike. They wouldn't contribute to a crusade anyway, since they typically are too tied into they own squabbles to send a big enough force to Callow. Still, an active Tyrant in Helike would also make it impossible for Cordelia herself to commit.

As for inconsistent views, it's more of his personal bias against people who don't want anything for themselves (remember how he called Dorian out on the same thing he hated Amadeus for), turned into an Aspect of his own. Tyrant doesn't hate Black Knight because he games the Fate, or because he strayed from the old ways of evil, but because he keeps his objectives fluid, because he makes compromises. On the other hand Kairos can comprehend Bard's desire (presumably, destabilize the evil nations) and since she influences the Fate indirectly, she's never actually been confronted on that point, and from his point of view it's a sign of keeping to her desires.

Oh, and it's nice to finally see someone call Amadeus out on some hypocrisy in regards to his own importance. By the looks of it, at least some of Tyrant's plans will bear fruit, so if Black subverts all the flags and actually sees through it, I will be very disappointed if we won't see him laughing at having misread his 'ally' so much.

All in all, I think the main difference is that you have been reading it as a part of the main story, while I've been reading it as central points of a side plot in the same world: it's not necessarily worse only because it's not an underdog story.

*burguulkodar*

Funny thing to say, since my two favorite characters are Ranger and the Tyrant. Masego gets the third.

*Dylan Tullos*

Well, that answers Black's question as to how the Tyrant managed to gain Bellerephon's support. Oddly, Black was thinking in Traditional Evil terms, such as mind control or threats, while Kairos simply engaged in practical politics; it's a lot easier to get Bellerephon to buy into the idea of a Hierarch if the man with the Name is going to be a native son. I think this may be the first time we've seen Black completely blindsided, and it suggests that he really isn't as well prepared to deal with Kairos as he thinks he is.

[vuthuha912](#)

I think the Tyrant really plays up his Traditional Evil character so Black is blindsided by it. He even compared Tyrant to the Heir. From Black's POV, someone like that is unlikely to do so much for the benefit of another person.

Malicia and Black built their relationship based on a shared dream, friendship, and trust. It is not like Tyrant and Anaxares are friends. The Tyrant is incapable of having an actual real relationship because he is playing a role all the time. Black Knight is both a machine (Carrion Lord) and a person (Amadeus). His friend and Cat loves the person, not the machine. Tyrant is so into his role that there is barely any humanity left in him to form actual attachment. Therefore, it is very unlikely that he would give so much power to someone.

Still, Tyrant is spot on in his analysis of Black. Black really considered his Praes as the center of his world. Praes is his greatest love. His goal is for the country to pull itself together and stop shooting itself in the foot. Black is arrogant, not in the sense that he thinks his ability is better than everyone else but that he thinks everyone else will act like his expectation regardless of their own motivation or feeling. His friends should not be upset when he dies, they should not act irrationally and threaten Cat because it won't benefit Praes. Cat will kill him even if she does not want to because killing him benefits Praes and Callow. It is like he expects everyone to discard their personal feelings for their end game (or what he believes to be their end game). There is this disassociation between him and the world around him. I wonder if his Name is reinforcing this problem of cold detachment. It is a lot easier for a hero killer to be detached from his victims. He can't have a bleeding heart and be a stone-cold killer at the same time.

And he is actively enforcing this detachment on his own. The way he keeps himself from monologuing, keeping his emotions bottled up, doesn't indulge in anything aside from a little awful wine and occasional pranking, etc. Black is trying not to be human since he believes that this is the fastest way to his end goal. But, he is still human and one day it is going to be too much and he is going to break.

He is too used to following his way that he does not even stop to think whether the end is still worth it or not. Is his end goal Praes really worth all his friends life? If he finally reach his goals but all his friends are dead then it is still worth it or not? What's the point of a better Praes if everyone he ever care for is dead? It would be a meaningless victory but for the Black Knight, victory is the only thing that matter while Amadeus slowly dies inside that role. The road of darkness can only lead to hell. Once Sabah or Wekesa is dead, he will get it. It might be a little late but you are never too old to learn.

Black is too Batman in his approach. Thus, Joker-like villains i.e Tyrant and Bard are his weakness. He is incapable of imagining their end game so his prediction of them is always going to be insufficient. Who can blame him? The Bard and Tyrant are very odd. Tyrant's end game seems too broad, anything goes for him. The Bard is also the same. It is best that he ignored them and focus on his own objective. Don't try to predict them, just do what you think is right.

*stevenneiman*

Typo thread:

"Nightfall was coming, and with it the assault on [Nicaw->Nicae]"

Poor Anaxares. I think he's one of my favorite characters. The surreality of his life is just hilarious, and the surreality of his thought processes even more so. He's convinced he has a death sentence, and all he can think is that the laws aren't well enough written if he's got twenty less charges of treason.

*ArkhCthuul*

That was.totally bonkers...In a good and Evil way, well.done!

Poor.Hierarch...

*Exec*

Brilliant. I honestly thought that Anaxares was just comic relief, but this development is so much better.

*burguulkodar*

Now that the Free Cities actually have a Hierarch, what will he set out to do? Attack? Defend? Promote democracy far and wide?

I liked the Name transition, but I still don't understand how exactly he will be able to find his own Free Will from now on and do the choices that are necessary in a war or in politics in general. He seems too brainwashed for that, but perhaps he has the potential hidden within.



[aran](#)

Always wondered how the kanenas reached consensus on things. Simple majority, losing side is instantly executed? Damn.

*sjoshuan*

Typo in "Anaxares' hands were no longer shaking, his body numb at the horror of what was hapening." -> "happening"?

[fearxant](#)

fearxant a0814cc162 <https://wakelet.com/wake/A0neso4WFol6UZltbMXZ4>

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## **Villainous Interlude: Calamity I**

*"That's the thing with invincibility. You have it until you don't."*

– Dread Empress Prudence the First, the 'Frequently Vanquished'

Nicae had been built thrice, with three different intents. The original settlement had spawned from the federation of a handful of fishing villages banding together to facilitate trade with the Baalite colonists settling the shores of Ashur after having absorbed or exterminated the tribes that lived there. The shape of them could still be seen, the three largest of those villages having over the centuries grown into the three ports of the city. The second time had come after Stygia took half the infant Free Cities by military force, back in the ancient days where they were the only Calernians to have a standing army. Nicae was occupied for decades, until the Stygian army attempted to force their general onto the throne of Stygia and the chain of events that would lead to all freeborn Stygians being forbidden to take arms began and heralded the collapse of the fledgling Stygian empire. The office of Basileus was proclaimed as absolute ruler, tall walls built to shield the people from marauders and a war fleet built. What was left of that intent was now known as the Old City, the beating heart of power in the maritime city, raised in old stone and winding streets.

The third and last time Nicea was built anew was after the Second Samite War, when repeated defeats at the hands of the Ashuran fleets proved the ruling Basilea's incompetence in matters of war beyond question. So the office of Strategos was born, the admiral who'd managed to bring them back from the brink give control over

all military affairs and promptly overstepping his given powers by raising a second set of walls to circle the slums that had grown past the old ones and ordering the construction of the Greenstone Rampart. A set of greenstone towers jutting out from the sea and protecting the three ports, warded intensively and bristling with dwarven engines. There had been foresight in this, in Black's opinion. Though Nicae had never won their wars over rule of the Samite Gulf in the centuries that followed, the Greenstone Rampart ensured the city itself never fell from the sea. Ashur had to settle for terms instead of subjugation, and Nicean sails continued to be seen in every ports – if never quite as free to trade as they would have liked.

The city had been built to resist armies not led by villains, unlike the hardened castles of Callow, and it showed. If Summerholm had been assaulted by a handful of floating towers as Nicae was, the Royal Guards would have been focusing trebuchet fire from the positions behind the walls to bring them down before the outer rampart could be overrun. All that the Niceans managed was sporadic ballista fire that did little more than chip at the foundations. The massive ramps being tugged forward by enslaved citizens of Atalante and Delos lumbered forward, archers killing the slaves by the score by barely slowing the advance. A mistake, this. They would run out of arrows long before the Tyrant ran out of expendables. How it would unfold from there was as good as writ, if the heroes did not get involved. The Stygian phalanxes would climb the ramps and scatter the mercenaries and militia that held the rampart, forcing the Niceans back behind the taller walls of the Old City as the Helikean army passed through the gates untouched. From there, it would be butchery. The armies of Helike were better fit for field battles than siege, but their infantry was hardened and well-armed.

The famous Helikean horse would not be able to bring their full strength to bear inside cramped streets, would not be able to use their devastating combination of horse archery and spears, but they would run down scattered mercenaries like animals. This was the writ of the battle, as it stood. The only question was of where the heroes would intervene to attempt to turn the tides. The outer walls seemed the most likely stage, for whether it held or broke would decide the battle. Yet the towers were hero-bait in its finest incarnation. Amadeus was not unaware of the tactical advantages that having a force in the sky gave, against a mundane army, but there was a reason he'd stamped down on any notion of the Legions of Terror fielding them. There were practical concerns, like the logistics of feeding a host that was leagues above the ground and the requirements to raising such a fortress in the first place, but most of all it was that flying fortresses tended to *crash*. It was like hanging a sword with rope above the heads of the men in that fortress and sending a formal invitation to any present hero to cut it. Whatever fleeting advantage was gained by the fielding of the fortress was

inevitably overshadowed by the massive costs incurred when it was brought down.

"Slid past their wards," Wekesa whispered in his ear over the enchanted piece of silver he'd inserted under the skin. "Someone tried to improve them recently, but their caster has more breadth than depths. Scrying patterns in place."

"Locations," Black said.

"Hedge Wizard is headed for the towers," Warlock replied after a moment. "Valiant Champion with the Proceran fantassins on the wall. Can't find the White Knight or the Bard, though the scrying grows unstable over on three, twelve to fifteen diameter. I'd say our boy Hanno got his hands on an amulet to scramble us."

Tricks rarely worked twice on heroes. It would have been overly optimistic to believe that the enemy would not seek to neuter the tactics they'd displayed last time, even if this was only a mildly effective parry. As the communication spell that connected Wekesa to Amadeus and Sabah was derivative of scrying, it was likely it would be made ineffective when the Duni engaged the White Knight. Only inexact sorcery prior to the distance being closed could feasibly be deployed.

"No sign of the Ashen Priestess?" Amadeus asked.

"Not a one," Wekesa confirmed. "She might actually be dead, Amadeus."

"I imagine she will be," the Black Knight replied. "Until it is decisive for the heroes that she is not. Too many third aspects remain unknowns for us to assume we've seen the last of her."

"Once in a while," Warlock said amusedly, "we do take Creation by surprise. We might have gotten lucky, for all you know, hit some weakness we were unaware of."

"We do not belong to the side that gets lucky, my friend," Amadeus murmured.

The villain closed his eyes, weighing his options.

"Sabah, keep an eye on the walls," he said. "Do not back the Tyrant against the Champion unless it is a certainty the city will hold."

"And if he's about to die?" the Taghreb replied through the spell.

"Let him," Black said. "Our only concerns are that Nicae falls and the White Knight dies. He is essential to neither."

"I hear you," she said.

The instructions were enough that she would be able to tap into Obey, if it proved necessary.

"Wekesa," he said.

"The Hedge Wizard again, I'm guessing," he mused.

"Yes," Amadeus confirmed. "And more. Red Skies protocol."

There was a lengthy moment of silence.

"We haven't gone that far since the Conquest," Wekesa said, and his voice was pleased. "You're certain? No collateral damage concerns?"

"Reputational damage is irrelevant if the Tyrant becomes the Hierarch of the Free Cities," the green-eyed man murmured. "All targets of opportunity are fair game. Use what you will, save for what falls under the Dark Day protocol."

"Ah, you sweet thing," Warlock drawled. "I *have* been meaning to try out a few spells."

Power bloomed in the distance. The stars above them began to grow crimson, staining the night, and the Black Knight moved. He had a hero to kill.

—

He'd crafted another decoy, for he had no reason not to. As expected, the Hedge Wizard ignored it. She flew directly for the towers, her great wings flapping on one of the three dozen open scrying links he'd crafted. It had taken decades to refine this particular method of farsight, creating runic arrays that would grant him eyes wherever he needed them without actively needing his attention and steering. It was also one of the reasons Wekesa rarely took the field in person: the arrays were exceedingly easy to disrupt, if found. Using distractions to keep the enemy guessing at his true locations while he worked his Gift from behind wards was the most effective use of his abilities. Warlock did occasionally miss the vindictive pleasure of incinerating the opposition in person, but he was no longer a young man. Incautious villains did not get to live as long as he had.

"It will be good night," he smiled, watching the battle unfold.

How long had it been, since Amadeus had granted him this much leeway on the field? Too long. Oh, his old friend still forbade the use of any sorcery that would grow unchecked if not stopped and any permanent rifts in Creation, but Wekesa was not eager to use the spells that would fall under the Dark Day protocol. Magical plagues had a nasty habit of growing beyond anyone's control, and only a fool would expect to keep a leash on a

permanent portal linking to another dimension. The Dead King had managed it, some Soninke argued, but even millennia past that man's apotheosis mages still sifted through the remains of his reign to advance their craft. Warlock was disinclined to renounce his humanity for another form of immortality when villainy alone could yield the same results, properly used. It was a poor man's escape of the Final Shackles, anyway. For all his power, the Dead King remained undead. His nature had grown eminently less changeable, his ability to learn crippled, while humanity... Humanity was such a miraculous fluctuating thing. Tikoloshe would not have remained so eternally fascinated by it otherwise.

Behind his wards, watching it all, Wekesa stroked his beard and found three opportunities. The first was the outer walls. Sabah had yet to get involved there, and so he need not be worried about her being caught in the crossfire. Dead under the walls, killed in hatred. And now the Stygian phalanx was marching up the ramps, more blood would flow. Power was largely irrelevant to what he was setting out to accomplish, for the kind of force that could be gathered by mass sacrifices and theft of godhead was a blunt instrument. It would be used then spent, leaving the practitioner that called on it spent as well. No, what he sought was *affinity*. Finding similarities on both sides of the boundary before thinning it enough the realities grew muddled and overlapping. It was not a flawless method, of course. There were an infinity of Hells and more adjacent dimensions than even he could discover, but he could only use those he knew of. Knowledge, as in all things, was the great limitation.

Wekesa knew many things, though, secrets old and new ripped from ancient tomes and the minds of lesser gods alike.

**"Imbricate,"** he murmured.

Two-hundredth and seventy-third Hell. The realm of slaughter unending and meaningless. On the weaker side of the scale, weak in devils and imprisoned souls both, but it was so very close. The Tyrant was responsible for it, stripping this battle of much meaning save his own whims. The blood across the field and walls shivered, then boiled. Guiding the alignment took all his concentration, balancing the power he was willing to invest through the runic arrays to the depth of imbrication that was useful. Creation and Hell snapped into place, and his lips quirked. Men rose around the ramps and on the wall, missing limbs and bleeding and every one of them dead. The corpses took up their weapons, broken or whole, and those that could not struck with bare hands instead. Driven by endless hatred the dead turned on everything in sight, including each other. Screams and chaos spread across the battlefield, but Wekesa paid no attention. The imbrication would fade away within the hour, and needed no more supervision from his will. Now, where was the little Wizard?

Inside one of the towers, if the trail of her Name could be trusted. Which it could not, given there were tricks to fake this and given the nature of her Role she was all but mandated to have them. An interesting thing, this Name. The Hedge Wizard relied on providence more than the average hero, in his eyes. By Heavenly mandate she would always have the exact trick needed to escape the trouble she was in, more irritatingly hard to kill a pest than any save a bardic Named. Abandoning subtlety was occasionally needed to deal with the likes of her. The Tyrant had lost his finest mages, and so his floating towers were even more unstable than ones the heroes had wrecked at Delos. No doubt the boy expected to detonate them at some point in the battle, and Wekesa would grant him his wish this once. Delving past the outer wards was a thing of ease, given that there were Helikean standard and so a century of learning behind anything come of the Wasteland, or even Callow for that matter. Callowan Gifted were largely amateurs borne of a particularly shoddy apprenticeship system, but centuries of being assaulted by Praesi mages had forced them to develop very effective, if simplistic, warding schemes.

Actually attacking the core was unnecessary. The conversion array that kept the tower afloat was so flimsy any proper disruption would lead to cascading failures. Wekesa's own offensive, meant to manifest limited kinetic force within the range of a mile at a regrettably high conversion rate, shone and one single rune in the tower's array was damaged. Thirty heartbeats later the tower exploded, heated rocks carving a swath of destruction in the outer city. Civilian casualties, he noted, would not be light. Ah, well. It wasn't like Amadeus was trying to annex this one. The scrying spell he had pointed at the location blanked until he adjusted the parameters, reforming to deal with the arcane energies still filling the air. The Hedge Wizard *had* been inside, he saw. Yet remained largely unharmed by the explosion. Half-phasing into Arcadia, by the likes of it. Clever, but given the unstable nature of the tower's array the energy would have scattered across the spectrum. She would have been affected. The Hedge Wizard, running across floating tiles, began to head for his decoy. Warlock smiled fondly. Trying to trace his location through it, was she?

"Ah, youth," he said.

He'd cleaned off the rust. It was time, he supposed, to get serious.

—

The young woman was bleeding, bent in a corner and moaning in pain. The White Knight slowed as he came by her and came close. Amadeus raised an eyebrow, but Hanno was not so foolish as that. The sword cleared the scabbard in an instant, cutting through the

animated corpse's neck. A twist of will had the other three corpses he'd scattered across the rooftops pull the triggers of the crossbows just as the hero's sword began to touch flesh. It was not enough. The sword flashed out and parried the two bolts that would have taken him in the back, letting the third pass him by for it would not have touched him. *Mistake*. The third bolt hit the goblinfire ball he'd put inside the woman and green flames erupted instantly. The Light formed a blinding halo around the White Knight before the fire could touch him, the Heavenly power soon devoured but allowing him to retreat without it touching his flesh. There was only so much of the Light the man could call on without hollowing himself out, but Black knew better than to turn a death match with a hero into a matter of endurance. That way lay the wiping of a bloody lip, a trite quote from the Book of All Things and an improbably second wind when he himself was at the end of his rope.

The three corpses leapt down the rooftops and ran towards the White Knight, open and clearly visible wounds across their bellies. The kind a villain might put a ball of goblinfire in, if he so wished. Amadeus had not, of course. It would have been a waste of substance he had a limited stock of as well as the introduction of an uncontrollable factor to a battlefield where precision would be key. But Hanno could not afford the chance, and so he backed away to give himself room. *Mistake*. Amadeus' shadow snaked across the gloom behind him, puncturing the loose pavestones and detonating the demolition charge under his feet. The explosion would have earned broken bones from less powerful a Named, but for a White Knight the only advantage won was toppling him. Another twist of will and three crossbow bolts whistled at his prone form. He rolled over at the last moment, evading all but one, yet that last bolt struck his arm. Not his sword-arm, unfortunately, but he would have to deal with the wound regardless. The three corpses retreated out of sight. Hanno ripped the bolt out of his arms and cauterized the wound with Light, predictably.

"Is this all you amount to, Black Knight?" he called out. "Smoke and mirrors, ambushes and a handful of tricks."

As if engaging a hero on their own terms was anything but sheer stupidity. The provocation was not a very skilful one, a betrayal of the man's youth for all the danger he represented. Amadeus gave him what he wanted. From the ruins of a home across the street, a corpse in armour identical to his plate strode out. Unsheathing a plain steel sword, the undead offered Hanno a mocking blade salute. The hero charged, but he had learned. He flared the Light before coming close to the puppet, shrugging off the crossbow fire from the other dead. *Mistake*. There was no need for him to arrange detonation when the hero's blade was wreathed in Light. The sword went clean through the plate and the goblinfire blew, spreading across the edge. The White Knight

hastily dropped it, and there went the shapeshifting weapon that was of clear Gigantes make. The hero's lips turned to a snarl and he made a blade of Light. A liability to exploited. Killing heroes, in Amadeus' eyes, was much like peeling an onion.

Layer by layer it went, until all that remained was the weeping.

—

Gods, she'd forgotten how nightmarish it got when Warlock went off the deep end. The sky had gone red and the dead were rising. Typical. That strange Levantine girl was having the time of her life with it, though, and so was the Tyrant. He'd begun screeching about treachery from his hovering throne, pleased as a cat that got the cream. The boys were underestimating this one, she thought. Amadeus thought he was straight out of the old Imperial mould and so doomed to shoot himself in the foot at his moment of triumph, but he did not smell of that kind of crazy to her. Whatever schemes he had going, and Sabah did not care to parse out the insane maze that would be, she doubted they would involve rising too high. He was the kind of irritating prick that made a virtue of defeat and pissing everybody off, just like the Heir had been. And Wekesa, well, he did tend to think that everybody that wasn't a mage was a little slow. Considering he'd been set to starve or freeze to death in the Wasteland while on the run as Apprentice, back when he'd met Amadeus, she was a little amused at how he kept turning up his nose at practical skills. Like starting a fire without getting a devil involved.

The Champion kept the wall afloat when the mercenaries began to run by using an aspect, though Sabah was too far to hear what it was. Whatever it'd been, though, it had turned Proceran rabbits to lions. They were carving their way straight into the Stygian phalanx, not that the Tyrant seemed to care. When it came to the two of them, the Taghreb judged it an even match. The heroine never managed to land a proper hit, but the beams of light the villain used hardly scuffed her plate. Sabah sympathized, having taken a swing at the muscled girl herself in the past. Anything but the war hammer the Levantine with the badger helm walked off: it was like hitting a wall. A different story when the Beast came out, but there weren't a lot of things in Creation that could ignore Sabah when she let that loose. Captain sniffed the air, and grimaced at what she got from it. Brimstone, and the red in the sky was getting deeper. Sooner or later something nasty was going to start raining down. Better if she could finish off her heroine before it got to that.

She seemed like a good kid, the Champion. Heart in the right place, spoiling for a fight the way the young ones often were. Heroes still cutting their teeth tended to think they were invincible, before running into their first proper villain. Those that survived that emerged stronger from the experience, and



there lay the problem. Sabah didn't particularly care if someone worshipped the Heavens instead of the Gods Below. Her people's deities were most loved when they were looking somewhere else. *Imagine the kind of pricks they'd be if we weren't on their side,* Sabah, her mother had been fond of saying. The issue was that when heroes got a little killing under their belt they tended to go looking for a bigger fight, and right now Praes was the biggest fight to be had on the continent. Except for the Kingdom of the Dead, but who'd be dumb enough to try that? Hye didn't count, she had an odd knack for killing things she shouldn't in the place where she should have godsdamned common sense. Still, it was a shame. The Champion truly did seem like a good kid.

Sabah had killed a lot of good kids, over the years.

Didn't particularly enjoy it, but if the choice was between the people she loved and some young fools who thought they could fix the world with a spell or a sword, well, that wasn't a choice at all. World didn't really want to be fixed. Wasn't supposed to be. But the broken chariot kept on rolling down the road, so why fuck with what worked? Amadeus had tried it for forty years and he'd had good days for a toil, but a lot more bad ones. Wekesa had understood quicker, washed his hands of the whole thing and instead taken care of his son and his experiments. But Sabah wasn't willing to let Amadeus into the deep end with only Eudokia to prop him up, so Captain she had been. Was and would be. Sometimes that meant doing things she didn't like, but she doubted anyone in the world enjoyed their work everyday. She got her hands bloody, but it could have been worse. The truly dark things Amadeus always did himself. He'd never been one to let others do his dirty work for him, if he could avoid it. Sabah watched the fight on the ramparts turn, biding her time, and she was not made to linger.

The Tyrant summoned a stream of what looked like spectres – he'd regret letting something like those loose with Wekesa on the battlefield, she mused – and while the Champion held the mercenaries around her died until she was forced to retreat. Best keep an eye on that, Captain mused. Wouldn't do to let the girl meddle in Amadeus' fight with her leader.

Sabah followed the heroine into the streets, eerily quiet for a woman her size.

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JC

I wonder what Hierarch can even do...

And of course, RIP Sabah.

Unless something surprising happens. While this story tends to be tongue-in-cheek with the meta knowledge of narratives that all the characters seem to have, it's (regrettably) stuck to a fairly predictable pattern so far.

*Jedidusk*

The Hierarch can Mend.

[Ethesis](#)

I now fear for Warlock.

*danh3107*

Hmm, another deathflag for Captain. Another week to wait...

[edrey](#)

well, the bard told the champion about monster stories, so is likely a trap, from a miracle or magic, probably the first, the pristeness is alive and waiting( hiding with divine protection or something) because magic or explosives can't hurt the beast( maybe before she transform) and i really don't see warlock getting killed or losing control of his magic and killing captain, no matter how much the storie help the wizard

*lennymaster*

It was stated in the last chapter that the Priestess is ACTUALLY dead. Bard directly or inderectly took the opportunity, sacrficing her, to use the presence of her and her Name in the world and story to do something. Some have argued in the comments that it was for killing Ranger by weakening her or strengthening the Summer Queen during their fight to get the dangerous wildcard she represents out of the game.

[edrey](#)

it was stated by the tyrant, no a hero, they can't kill captain without her miracles, or something of the same level, and warlock making a mistake with his magic is stupic, so how are they going to kill a calamity without a foolish deus ex machina?

*Duckie*

Who says the Bards goal is to kill them? At least for right now I don't think it is. From what I understood in the last chapter with Tyrant. It looks more like they want to corner the Calamities, they wan't to force them to go crazy again. They will do that by wounding Black severely with what ever

power Bard got from killing the Priestess. Bards goal probably is more along the lines of creating Choas to ignite the will of others to fight for the "greater good" in this moment at least. What better way to kick off a massive Crusade then to have a city wiped out by raging lunatics from the evil empire. Sense the summoning an angel thing failed to start it. Then again one of them might die while going crazy..

### Cpt. Obvious

WB said she'd hurt Amadeus where it counted, through the ones that he loves. He loves Hye (Ranger) as his lover and partner when she lets him. He loves Wekesa as a brother. His relationship with Assassin is an unknown. And finally there's Sabah. She is a mother figure for all the Calamities, and all of them love her. Catherine loves her!

If the Wandering Bard want to screw with them so they lose their focus then Sabah is the target to go after. Captain is the one of the group who's closest to Black. Much like Hakram is Cat's shadow Sabah is Amadeus rock.

### *Warren Peace*

Really? Is the Bard even concerned with the lv.1 fight going on in Arcadia right now? Directly concerned, that is. I don't see why she would go through such trouble for something so tangental to the main story, from her perspective. Sure, either participant could play a minor role in important things to come, but the Queen has Arcadia as her true home, and Ranger has clearly indicated that she isn't interested in taking a leading role in the shaping of Calernia.

in fact, I can think of several reasons the Bard might have for preferring to keep Ranger around and living, safely stowed by her lake.

### *goliath1303*

It's too bad you didn't list any of the several reasons you can think of...

I think the complete opposite argument could be made. Cat is the main character of this story so I think it could reasonably day that what's happening in this chapter is "something so tangental to the main story" when compared to what's happening with/around Cat & Co. You really can't see any reason why Bard, whose consciousness we've recently learned STRETCHES BACK FARTHER THAN RECORDED HISTORY and, as confirmed by the Tyrant, has a master plan she has been working on for a very long time, might seize an opportunity to take Hye off the board permanently? The person who is

Chaotic Neutral incarnate? If I were making a play that involved offing any of the Calamities, especially Amadeus, making sure she isn't around to avenge that death would be my #1, #2, and #5-20 wishes. Taking somebody like her out isn't something you can do on a whim, but if a promising situation presented itself so close to the time that plan was going to be initiated it would be crazy not to seize it.

For the record, I don't actually believe that that's what's going on here. I just like playing devils advocate and really hate how dismissive you are of other people ideas while not providing any of your own beyond vague and mostly empty half-guesses. Even when you do venture a sliver of a prediction you don't provide any reasoning to it, yet are so quick to jump down other people throats and tell them they're wrong. The worst part is that normally(I know this isn't the case here, but my point stands.) you direct more of your attack towards the person commenting than you do the actual comment itself. So that previous paragraph was an example for you to look back on and get an idea of how to discuss ideas with fellow people.

*Unmaker*

@Duckie

Bard plans to wound Amadeus by forcing him to kill all the people he loves. That was one point made in the last Villainous Interlude: Bard somehow set up the situation where the White Knight could not officially engage the Black Knight in a pattern of three, which means the White Knight will engage Catherine, which would destroy Amadeus's plans (I consider that Catherine is an essential part of Amadeus's plans). So the Bard essentially made Amadeus choose between his plans and his loved allies and Amadeus chose his plans without hesitation.

[Ethesis](#)

Catherine becomes the Winter Knight who need not be a hero to also be the White Knight.

That is fraught with perils.

*maresther23*

What if Bard's plot is whatever she did in the Epilogue of Book 2?

*Morgenstern*

I'm seeing Warlock getting killed for a long time... though maybe not quite so much anymore now that Apprentice has taken another

name. But still... the man is just aching for it, feeling too secure despite all his 'wouldn't do to get careless, what with being old'.

---

Typo thread!

Unconquered Champion -> Valiant Champion

*Warren Peace*

Lots of typos in this one. Using the word "mused" twice in the last paragraph bothered me; I would change the second instance to "thought" or something.

[edrey](#)

if i remember correctly, unconquered champion was the one who sent black to a pocket dimension causing captain and warlock going crazy, for three days i think

*Rnt169*

Very intricate story telling, after the last three chapters I have realised how much hints and foreshadowing is given. Pity we can't go through this like a book, serialised stories are a bitch when you have to keep track of so many tidbits. Here's to hoping EE can publish these books in good time.

*Big Brother*

I'm curious how I can earn the title "The Frequently Vanquished" That in itself seems like a tale worth telling.

*Morgenstern*

Well. Someone who loses a lot, but always comes back.

*MagnaMalusLupus*

"Ah, but being defeated was always part of my plan! Yet another glorious victory for the Empire."

– Dread Emperor Irritant, the Oddly Successful

Book 3, chapter 6

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She was probably the one who opposed King Albert Fairfax of Callow, the Thrice-Invaded, author of the quote from the chapter twenty one:

"To conquer until all of Creation is desert or province: that

is the ideal of Praes. Mock their failures if you must but do not ever forget their victories.”

*nick012000*

imbricate (verb): arrange (scales, sepals, plates, etc.) so that they overlap like roof tiles.

Interesting choice of Aspect for Warlock, there. I think “overlap” or “overlay” would probably work just as well and be more understandable, but maybe he has other powers derived from it besides his ability to overlay different planes over the top of each other, like the ability to grow a set of scales over his skin as armor.

*Morgenstern*

He’s made to seem like (having been) a scholar – thus, a bit stranger words seem to fit perfectly, imho. 😊

*Warren Peace*

E.E. is the king of arcane words with meanings that don’t have anything to do with their apparent roots, like fantassin.

*goliath1303*

Once again, wrong. First of all imbricate makes sense in the example shown here(I’m betting it also has more ways to be implemented that we haven’t seen yet.) because Warlock is sorting through the overlapping dimensions and then thinning the barrier between Creation and the one he chooses.

Secondly though, and this is the real kicker, fantastic isn’t something EE made up out of whole cloth. If you type that 1 word into Google the first result is the wikipedia page for “Infantry” which is pretty telling, but a few results down it shows that its a French word with this definition: “fantassin

(Fr.). A foot-soldier. This term is derived from the Italian fante, a boy, the light troops in the 14th and 15th centuries being formed of boys who followed the armies and were formed into corps with light arms, hence the origin of the word infantry.”

*d\_o\_l*

So at this point, I’m 90% sure that Ranger is already dead:

1. The Queen of Summer is part of Cat’s story. Ranger can’t kill her before her big confrontation with Cat, it would be too anticlimactic. At the same time, Ranger’s Name won’t allow her to retreat or give up once she’s set her eyes on a new target. Therefore, the only possible outcome of their battle is Ranger

being killed, or somehow made unable to continue pursuing the Queen. The Queen has no reason to imprison her, and imprison someone like Ranger is an exercise in stupidity anyway, so the only other real option would be for Ranger to sustain a crippling injury.

2. Ranger has bound herself to the Calamaties, and the Calamaties are clearly on their way out. Someone last week was speculating that the way Ranger has lived for so long is by never allowing herself to become seriously involved in a story. But then she joined the Calamaties, and now she's involved in Cat's story as well. Even someone as insanely overpowered as Ranger can be defeated if the story demands it.

3. Building on that, Ranger is pretty stupidly overpowered. There has to be SOME limits to her power. If she can kill the Queen of Summer, then what can't she kill? She becomes a walking deus ex machina.

4. There are some pretty damn suggestive quotes from the last couple of chapters:

"Let me tell you a secret, my friend," he whispered. "She's already won. The opposition was watching the wrong fire the whole time, and the intricacy of the trap is exquisite. She made the kill without them ever seeing her."

...

"Even if my pretty little mages had been untroubled, the Beast would have survived. The Healer should have too, life split in half with her sister. A touching story of sisterly love, if you care for that sort of thing. She didn't because she was a sacrifice. Her weight was stolen, because there was another use for it. With nothing you can only trade for nothing."

...

"She's going to kill him," the diplomat said.

"Of course not, my beauteous blooming flower," the Tyrant tutted. "Nothing so crass. She's going to hurt him. And when the cold thing turns into a wounded animal, well, that's when he starts making mistakes."

And today:

"That's the thing with invincibility. You have it until you don't."

Everyone thinks Sabah is going to die, but they thought that before, too. Black has been doing this for a long time, and he's really good at it. He's not going to miss obvious death flags, he knows how to avoid them. But while he's all busy paying attention to the Tyrant and Sabah, the Bard snuck off and set in motion the

events which will lead to the death of the one person he never even thought was in danger.

JC

Oh nice.

*Snoogle*

That is actually really possible.

I've found that EE usually puts at least 4 hints of foreshadowing for any major event going on. Up to 3 I can therefore put away to coincidence (since some of those don't necessarily talk about Ranger) but this makes 4 that could hint to her... I'm really curious now. Up until this comment, I didn't think Ranger could ever be defeated but now... You raise some interesting point.

[Ethesis](#)

True, but I'm hoping that having the sun stolen lets Ranger survive this.

*haihappen*

Could also be Warlock. Since he was the one to divert the death-curse to the Ashen Priestess, the Hedge Wizard now has a "Heroic" motivation, i.e., avenging her sisters death, to kill him.

But otherwise: I dig the angle to target Hye. Her death would wound Amadeus the most, of all of the Calamities. Because of their past mentor/lover-relationship, and that she is the most "invincible" of the Calamities.

Also, I love that our very informed Villians missed the Hierarch Name being already taken and still operate under the assumption that the Tyrant is aiming for that. Otherwise they would probably change their game. All their projections are wrong...

Truth be told: I have no idea what the Tyrant's End Game could be.

*nick012000*

Pretty sure the Tyrant's end game is to be the guy who caused the second Hierarch in League history to happen and go down in history as such. Immortality through legend, not through the physical body.

[Euodiachloris](#)



I'm also betting Tyrant isn't getting a full picture, either. And, although he knows that, he is still falling into the trap of thinking that knowing about the dangers of going meta makes it easier to avoid them for the time being. 🙄

*RoflCat*

Given that the last time Scribe mentioned killing Cat if she poses a threat, Black considered having to kill her/Ranger to keep Cat alive because Cat is more important for his plan.

If so, Ranger dying would certainly hurt his emotion, but it won't hurt the machine that much.

If Bard's goal is to return Praes to the way of Evulz (since she protected Diabolist), I think her real aim should be Malicia who's the other center of the Reform.

Kill Malicia, have Diabolist or someone else equally Evulz take the throne, and then Cat and Black will be forced into a civil war to dethrone that person.

[Ethesis](#)

How did the Tryant get so powerfully smart and understanding?

He is young and doomed and already seems a match for the Calamities as a team –and determined to take them out.

*Morgenstern*

I don't see why Ranger would have to KILL the Queen. The Queen can very well survive to take her place in Cat's story – all Ranger really needs is a TRINKET, like with the eye she took from the Prince of Nightfall... And anyway, fae always seem to come around again with each new cycle, no matter how gruesomely they were killed the last time, so there's another way around in there. \*shrugs

*Morgenstern*

That said, the quotes you gave D0 seem pretty for implying Ranger and not just any other one of the Calamities. But Wekesa and .. Ally, was it? are his oldest friends – so it might apply to them as well, not just to his "one true love".

*Warren Peace*

I think you mean Hye?

*Warren Peace*

No wait you were referring to Malicia's given name, Alaya

## *Liver*

Now that you bring it up, it does seem likely. Ranger inadvertently setup what usually is a teacher that saves the new generation and then stays behind and sacrifices herself to the Big Bad. And if there is anywhere where story trumps power levels, it is Arcadia.

There is tidbit from book 2 i remember that supports this. Black said "I pity anyone fool enough to try." to anyone that would try to hurt him though Ranger so attempts on Ranger's life are not things Black is concerned with.

I also remember Bard saying that she is a pebble and i think William thinking that "a pebble is all it takes to break a machine". I can't see to find the passage, but that means Bard as already picked up a "break Black" flag. Black is only one so far with any machine symbolism with his name.

## *Warren Peace*

I appreciate the organization of your comment, it makes debunking it so much easier 😊 I'll go point-by-point:

1. As someone else pointed out, Ranger's goal is likely not to kill the Summer Queen, but to claim a body part for jewelry.
2. Ranger had once bound herself to the Calamities, but she has unbound herself since. She's made it clear she's the Lady of the Lake now, not a Calamity anymore.
3. Narrative-wise, is there a better way of preventing this than by banishing herself to her own quiet domain, and only flexing that over-poweredness to defend her own turf? A.k.a. exactly what she's doing. I suppose you could argue that by taking on Summer Q. in Arcadia, she's outside of that protection, but come on. Since I've negated points 1 and 2 already, this on it's own doesn't suggest anything.
4. All of the quotes you picked are operating under the assumption that the Bard is directly concerned with the 1v.1 fight in Arcadia, and I don't see why she would be. I just finished writing about this in another comment though and I don't feel like tapping it all out again, but it's just a bit further down.

---

This is how it makes sense to me, but what do I know? I thought Heiress transitioning to Demonic Girl or whatever was so plainly stupid as to not be worth even considering, so me thinking something is stupid isn't a good reason to dismiss it apparently.

*nick012000*

Also,

>“I imagine she will be,” the Black Knight replied. “Until it is decisive for the heroes that she is not. Too many third aspects remain unknowns for us to assume we’ve seen the last of her.”

I’ll point out that we know all of the Ashen Priestess’s Aspects by now: she had Heal, Burn, and Begone. I don’t think any of those would contribute well to self-resurrection. Not unless someone brings her back as a Dark Souls-esque fire zombie or something, anyway.

Oh, wait, Warlock just cast a spell to reanimate every dead body in the city.

*Imagination*

While Begone was formatted like an aspect, it was explicitly described as just one of many miracle that the Ashen Priestess could call on. We don’t know clearly one way or the other.

*thespaceinvader*

I just checked the chapter and Begone is definitely referred to as a miracle, rather than an aspect. It’s pretty explicit about when aspects are being called upon, in that fight.

Besides, Black’s point is that there are too many third aspects that they don’t know, not that they don’t know hers specifically – they’ve only seen 2 each of Hanno’s (Ride, Recall), Irene’s (Burn, Heal, even if Begone is an Aspect it was not witnessed by the Calamities directly), and the Champion’s (of which we only know the name of one, Oppose, and potentially now the third which might be something like Rally), and they don’t know any of Hedge’s or the Bard’s, and nor do we.

That’s more than enough room for one of them to have an Aspect or a trick that could resurrect someone. Albeit, the Tyrant’s chapters make it clear that the Ash Priestess is as gone for good as anyone gets in this story, he doesn’t know that.

*RandomFan*

I’m pretty sure we know she still has wander- she’s been pulling tricks tied to that, and i think we got a confirmation of Wander in her last iteration- but yeah, they wouldn’t know for sure, and she hasn’t visited them again.

*Shequi*

Black has misread Kairos over the Name of Hierarch, then. That means there's a variable in the battle he's not accounted for.

*TideofKhatanga*

That also means that "reputational damage" will come bite Praes in the ass. If Warlock does something over the top, it won't be hard to convince Hierarch that a crusade is in order.

*beleester*

Is Hierarch really the crusading sort, though?

To Anaxares, all the other nations are Corrupt Foreign Despots, Wicked Foreign Oligarchies, etc. etc. Not something that the Free Citizens of Glorious Bellerophon should concern themselves with. He's basically fanatically Lawful Neutral.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*aran caytar*

273 is [kabbalistically significant](#) (which is not a coincidence because nothing ever is).

*Ethereal*

"Someone has to and no one else will."

=====

So, about the foreshadowing we got in this chapter.

My guess about how Sabah will die is that her first Aspect (and the only one we have seen her use) will fail her, since she's relying on it too much.

Note how Black formulates the orders that would allow her to tap into Obey:

- 1) Wait near the point of the main assault on the walls.
- 2) Support the assault only if it fails.
- 3) The objectives of the mission are to take Nicae and kill White Knight, so she doesn't to protect the Tyrant.

Now, while Captain is not a program and doesn't necessarily behave according to the letter of the orders, but I'll remind you that the order that she used to power her Name on transitioning was as simple as "Whatever is there, win. Come back to us." And now Amadeus forgot (or "forgot") to include the second part on their biggest operation since Conquest, and with the Bard on the field to boot.

What I'm thinking will happen is that since Champion isn't really going to hold the walls all on her own or interfere with the Knights' duel, no orders actually apply to her, so Sabah has two useful Aspects left at most, and Champion already demonstrated that two of her own Aspects are suitable for fighting the Captain in close quarters. Whether Rafaella transitions mid-fight, has a story-powered trap or simply has a way to use the third Aspect for scoring a decisive blow depends on the Bard, who's now either observes the Knights, the Captain's advance or is talking to the Tyrant.

Though I'm still hoping that Anaxares will be able to Mend her at the last moment.

### *OldSchoolVillain*

The thing there is that Captain also still has two of her own Trump cards hidden away. She doesn't really obey that much herself, she just taps it when Black orders her to. Even aside from that, The Beast is still on the field and available as a sort of fourth Trump card that Captain can call on when she needs to, which gives her another advantage. Whether it will be enough, when the Heavens so casually bestow New Powers as the Plot Demands, remains to be seen.

### *alegio*

This feels dangerous for Warlock, dunno why.

### *Warley Echeverry*

I feel so bad that my first ever comment on this story is a problem I have with it, but I've been reading since the beginning and noticed something strange. Where are all the other NAMED. In Chapter 1, Catherine, before she was Squire, mentioned that she'd thought that Booker was a Name at first. And later in the story we meet Augur, who seems to be the only fully non-combat Name. In these last few chapters we meet Hierarch, who's implied to be a civil leader and not really a military one.

What this all implies is that:

#1: Names are more common than we've seen, otherwise Cat would never have thought Booker was one.

#2: Named don't HAVE to be warriors, and therefore be killing each other all the time.

So my question is, are there no legendary teachers in this universe? No fishermen? Sailors? Beggars? Doctors? It seems like every story ever in this world is about war, and there's no stories about shepherds or explorers or anything else.

If there were, even if Named were blisteringly rare, the vast majority would be non-combat classes, since they aren't killing each other.

*Warley Echeverry*

Edit: completely forgot about Scribe being a non-combat class too, but that's still begs the question of why there aren't more.

---

Well, Fate is a gambit that centers around the conflict between Good and Evil, and combat is the easiest way for a Named to contribute to that conflict. All noncombat Named you mentioned are either support (typical healer Names, Augur) or administrator and leader for one of the sides in the conflict (ruler Names, Scribe, Chancellor).

It's not Arcadia for everyone and their mother to have a Name, only the resolute people representing a tendency supported by either Gods qualify. And since it's stated in Cadenza that divine interference is roughly symmetrical in amounts of power granted (not in methodology), if you grant a power to someone not inclined to fight, nothing stops your opponent from propping up someone who'll eventually come and straight up murder your Fisherman or Beggar.

Remember, Named aren't just characters in stories, they are the ones who qualify for the patterns already entrenched into Creation and spread by the word of mouth: each one is a protagonist for at least a couple of stories of their own.

By the way, the tendency bit is why Bard is so stupidly overpowered: she's not just a counterpart for the immortal lich in Keter, not just the one who decides which story will catch on and which will be forgotten: her Name represents everyone who's ever told a story.

*Warley Echeverry*

That's the point, it's not a conflict between good and evil.

It's been reiterated several times through the story that the Gods below and the Gods above aren't at war. They made a BET.

Their bet is about whether Good or Evil will triumph in the end and it seems like a lot of the "neutral" stories would be perfect for that.

*blitzbasic*

Cat was young and inexperienced and had no idea how the world works. What chapter one cat thinks about names doesn't have to be true.

*beleester*

Selection bias. Even if there is some sort of legendary Beggar, a Herschel of Ostropol type who's famous for outwitting the rich and powerful in funny ways, we're not going to hear about him, because he's going to take one look at the Praesi and say "Nope." There are better people to beg from than the ones who think that torture and murder is a jolly good time.

Likewise, maybe there's a Sinbad the Sailor type who's having swashbuckling adventures in far-off lands and bringing home cargoes of exotic spices, but unless Catherine or one of the Heroes has an urgent need for The Best Sailor Ever because they need to assault a port city or something, they're not going to meet them. This is a story about kingdoms going to war, so any Names we encounter in this story are going to be people who can go to war.

More generally, I'd point out that you generally don't get stories told about you unless you have *\*something\** important at risk. The sailor who has a safe, profitable voyage probably isn't The Sailor. That doesn't necessarily mean all Named are fighters, but it means that it's inherently a high-risk profession and they've got to be able to handle it.

*Lynx*

*\*Dies\**

*nobodi12*

Stop playing with our feelings. Each chapter is "pray the gods below that the Calamities survive this one"

*arancaytar*

This chapter is a bit of a reminder that no, just because practical evil doesn't kick dogs when it is not cost-effective, that doesn't make it not *evil*.

*Soronel Haetir*

Something I don't understand is why this particular battle is even being fought. Did Nicae decide to buck the League and reject the Hierarch vote? Seems like that would wreck the League.

*OldSchoolVillain*

I think that the Tyrant just needed to INVOLVE all of the Free Cities in order to enable the Name of Hierarch. That's what scribe suggested in her last interlude (Cadenza, I think?)

*Dylan Tullos*

This chapter demonstrates why I'm still cheering for Team Good rather than "Practical Evil". Warlock is utterly indifferent to the people he kills; he could murder half of Calernia to advance his magical knowledge, and his only concern would be the difficulty of repeating the experiment. He's basically a magical Josef Mengele.

The Tyrant's description of Black as a "machine" has never seemed more accurate. Black is so focused on accomplishing his goals that he's lost the ability to truly care about anything else. It wasn't that long ago that he was considering how to arrange the death of his closest friends to prevent them from getting in Catherine's way.

Sabah is nicer, but she admits to making her living by "killing good kids". She's not concerned with right or wrong, only with "us" and "them". Though Captain doesn't believe in Black's grand plan, she follows him anyway, shedding the blood of people who haven't done anything to her because her friend asked her to.

Villains have a protagonist-centered morality. As long as they get what they want, other people really don't matter. I'm looking forward to the moment when Black suffers the same grief that he's inflicted on countless innocents throughout his career, and all of Calernia learns that the Calamities aren't as invincible as they claim to be.

### *OldSchoolVillain*

I understand where you're coming from, but also you should keep in mind what team "Good" has enabled in the story. William callously tortured enemy officers to draw out his target. He set a city of innocents on fire and risked wiping it out entirely in a (fortunately successful) attempt to weaken Warlock. He summoned a mind-raping Angel to another city of innocents to start a crusade. The Bard enabled Diabolist to become what she is when she stopped the elves from killing her. She carelessly enforces the status quo of war and conflict just to keep her side on top. She backed and even pushed William's mind-raping-angel plan just so maybe her side could scrape a win either then or in the future.

Part of the moral of this story is that being 'righteous' isn't enough. Being Good isn't enough. Yes, the calamities are Evil and cause mass slaughter but their intentions – at least, Black's intentions, and therefore the rest of the party – is to preserve and defend Praes, their homeland. The calamities have a purpose behind the fires that they start – the side of 'Good' starts fires because their opponents are Evil and for them, that's all that matters.

In short, A Practical Guide to Evil comes across really as a gray-scale world where Good Is Not Nice and sometimes Evil is the best option.



*Dylan Tullos*

OldSchoolVillain:

You make excellent points. I'm not so much for Team Mind Control as I am looking for an alternative to Team Practical Evil, and I find the current champions of the Gods Above a great deal more tolerable than the Lone Swordsman. The White Knight isn't perfect, but he hasn't yet tried to turn anyone into a meat puppet with an angel pulling the strings.

Black's intention is to defeat the Narrative of the Gods Above and free Praes from its role as the eternally defeated villain. Warlock's intention is to enjoy his marriage, raise his son with love, and conduct experiments that involve mutilating human souls and live vivisections. He couldn't care less about Praes, and Sabah seems to be in it primarily because she's besties with Black. Black is a well-intentioned extremist, but the rest of his party isn't interested; they do evil things because they feel like it or because they want to help their friend, not because of any concept of the Greater Good.

I think it's important to distinguish between the Bard and the Lone Swordsman, who seem to be lacking in the free will department, and the Good characters who have reasonable, sane goals. Cordelia is quite understandably upset over the Dread Empire's decision to fund Procer's civil war, and she is dedicated to protecting her own nation, just as Black and Malicia seek to protect theirs. The White Knight's party is full of Named with solid motives and intact personalities, not angelic chew toys. I'm not going to cheer for the mind-controlled tools of the Gods Above, but I honestly prefer Team Flawed Good to Team Practical Evil.

Also, loving Anaxares as Hierarch. A devout believer that fanatically rejects the very concept of hierarchy is now in charge of the League! One reason I love the Tyrant so much is that he just has so fun with it; Black may be more practical, but Kairos just loves what he does.

[vuthuha912](#)

Your view is so clear that it is refreshing.

I just know that Black method of ruthlessness is going to bite him in the ass later. He is too focused on his goal yet kinda forgets the true reason behind his goals? It is like he loves his country because he loves its people – Sabah, Wekesa, Alaya, Scribe, etc. Yet, on his way to building a better world for them, he faces the choice of having to harm them. It sounds ridiculous but actually happens a lot. Like, a father constantly working to give his daughter the best life possible

but doesn't spend time with her. It calls "this mistake the head for the tail" in my country. It is dangerous because the consequence can be very, very subtle and by the time you fully recognized what it is, there is no way to change.

Black has never faced a steep enough consequence before. Everything he sacrificed is his – his consciousness, love, emotion, enjoyment in life, etc. It is acceptable until it is not. The moment the consequence spread to his friend, he is going to break. By then, it might have been too late. I know it is going to destroy him. He is a human, not a machine.

I am looking forward to him recognizing that victory with such a high price is meaningless. It would be messy and fun as hell. Even though I love him, I think the pain will be educational.

I always think there is a place for ruthlessness but in the end, compassion needs to be the core for success to be long-lasting. Currently, Black is a little too deep in his role – the heartless monster whose only purpose is to achieve victory for his side. He is slipping more and more into ruthlessness just to win and he needs to stop before it is too late. I wonder if he should try to befriend non-Names to gain a better perspective and keep himself from going too far, like a Morality Pet. He has Malicia but she has ... other problems ...

As for the side of Good, if the hero is Superman or Captain America then I am going to support him wholeheartedly. It feels insulting that William is even considered as a hero compared to Cap and Superman. Even Xun Yu from Ravage of Time – the lighter version of Black, is better than these heroes.

Personally, I like Cordelia enough but she is playing with fire. A common enemy is a good solution to the problem of civil war but bringing religion into the mix is not going to end well. Not to mention, a common enemy doesn't always work. Just look at China. The first thing many well-educated officials do when faced with a formidable enemy is to sue for peace, take bribery, sabotage their own side, betray their leader, etc. There is an abundance of cowards and fuckwits throughout history. You never know which one you'll get to deal with. Procer need time for the population and the economy to recover and did a whole lot of preparation. 10 years is the minimum period. If you don't have enough grain to last the entire population for at least several years then don't even bother trying to fight. Your starving population will cut your head off before your enemies can. War is not a political game. It is serious business and Cordelia might be treating this too lightly.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Time to weigh in:

The White Knight better than The Lone Swordsman? However screwed up William was (and summoning the Angel of Mind Rape is pretty screwed up) Hanno literally decides who lives and dies based on a COIN TOSS! Hanno is Two-Face without the outward scarring. His POV Chapters talk about how he believes taking action based on his own idea of right and wrong is "Surrendering his sword to Chaos."

Put more simply: Hanno is not a Moral Agent of ANY sort. If the Gods Above give him the itch to pull out his coin and toss it while in the presence of someone he's just met, who he's seen do nothing which is either good or evil, if the Coin lands Crossed Swords Up, Hanno is going to kill that person without a qualm. Every single bit of White Knight PoV we've gotten has emphasized Hanno's belief that only the Heavens should decide who lives and who dies. He blames free will itself for the death of his mother.

By comparison, William Bin Laden was a paragon of morality. Hanno wouldn't even strike at the Tyrant (who he was aware had started aware and was besieging the city the Heroes had chosen to defend FOR FUN) until he saw the result of his Coin Toss.

The Wandering Bard allowed Diabolist's rise, simply to further her own ends.

Ashen Priestess, Hedge Wizard and Champion have reduced themselves to little more than Igor-like henchmen of Hanno the Enemy of Free Will.

The current crop of Heroes have all the likability of a case of the crabs, with none of the fun that went into becoming infested with them.

Warlock is the epitome of Evil because he didn't break down into tears over the fact his striking a military target would cause extensive civilian casualties? Well then, I suppose we should run out and paint the words MASS MURDERER on the doors of the veterans who made up the bomber crews during the fire-bombing of Dresden. It's the same thing, right?

Sabah is doing what pretty much everyone does. Choosing those she loves over those she doesn't. If Black and Wakesa were the town's blacksmith and alchemist respectively, she probably wouldn't ever kill anyone. Her family chose a warlike path, so she decided if it takes piling up a mountain's worth of dead Good Kids to bring them home safe in the evening, it's worth it.

I can't honestly say if someone I loved was doing something I thought immoral that I would let them DIE if someone tried to stop them from doing that immoral thing. Black and Wakesa are creatures of extremes, so Sabah has been forced to take violence to extremes. She isn't glorying in the thought of ripping the

Champion to pieces. It's simply an ugly, unwanted chore that needs doing in her mind. It doesn't make her morally commendable, but it's hardly a cloak of Unspeakable Evil either.

So long as whoever represents Team Heavens are enemies of free will, in my mind all things are permitted to tear down said enemies of free will. Even Cordelia Hasenbauch doesn't want her Crusade because Praes is doing Evil. She wants to USE a coalition of other nations to strike Praes down PREEMPTIVELY, in order to safeguard her country. (For those who want to say "Well, Malicia started that by turning the Calamities loose on Procer before the Conquest of Callow, and then by funding the Proceran civil war: Let's remember that Procer has a reputation CENTURIES in the making of cold-bloodedly grinding other nations under their bootheels via cat's paws, proxies, and surreptitious financial investments. Cordelia herself acknowledges Procer's reputation is so bad that the Gigantes will kill any one of her people ON SIGHT. Procer has done everything in its power to keep the Free Cities the unstable collection of shit-holes they are, again for centuries.)

Yet Cordelia has the mind-boggling gall to claim the Mandate of Heaven as justification to deliberately engineer a continent wide Crusade that will DIRECTLY kill millions of innocent people, and kill tens of millions more due to the famines and plagues that inevitably follow that scale of warfare in a Medieval setting.

Why? "Because the madmen are coming." Except they aren't, and Praes ISN'T coming. It's the same sort of high-minded pretext would-be conquerors always proclaim. A Crusade versus Praes will by necessity involve an attack on the breadbasket of Praes: Callow. Sure, sure, Cordelia will shed a few crocodile tears for the tens of thousands of Callowan farmers and their families that will starve the winter following her resource-denial slash-and-burn campaign, but she'll have Uncle Klaus give the order with a clear conscience and go to an untroubled sleep that night nevertheless.

*stevenneiman*

As I understand it, the difference between Good and Evil is that Good tries to serve the Heavens, while Evil is allowed to serve its own ends, with little import placed on what those ends are. For that reason, Black and Cat are both evil, even though Black regularly uses genuine improvements to the standard of living as means to an end, and Cat's ends are about improving things for her people out of genuine (if ruthlessly calculating) benevolence.

I'm still not sure what exactly the Tyrant wants, but I very much doubt that it's anything good for the Heavens, so he is Evil.

On the other side, Hanno, Cordelia, and the Bard all serve the

Heavens instead of choosing their own goals, though only the Bard really understands what that means, and she's even less human than Black.

The interesting thing is that of that list, one of the villains is the only one who considers the deaths of innocents to even be a negative consequence of her plan, everyone else just considers whether mass murder is the most efficient tool to achieve their objectives, and Kairos might or might not do it anyway because it's funny.

*Dylan Tullos*

Shawn Panzegraf:

The White Knight may have surrendered his free will to the Heavens, just as the Lone Swordsman did, but he hasn't done anything particularly unethical. Hanno hasn't targeted civilians, subverted anyone else's free will, or done anything except fight the Tyrant and his soldiers in open battle. Until his ethics are tested, we can't actually know whether he would kick puppies or burn down orphanages because an angel told him to. As of now, the only person he's done his coin flip on is the Tyrant, who practically has EVIL written on his forehead in giant flashing letters.

I find his band quite likeable and entertaining. Ashen Priestess is (or was) the big sister, the responsible adult babysitting her enthusiastic but frustrating little sister and the Champion. I cracked up when the Champion suggested that only the wimpy Free Cities version of the Book of All Things prohibits cannibalism. I'm pretty sure that they're fighting Kairos because he's obviously, gleefully evil, not because Hanno told them to.

Warlock mutilates souls and conducts vivisections people while they're still alive. As I said before, he's basically a magical Josef Mengele. There's a major difference between being willing to kill civilians as part of a larger war and being utterly indifferent to the loss of human life, and Warlock clearly falls on the wrong side of the spectrum. He doesn't care about right or wrong, good or evil, only about his husband, his son, and his freedom to gain more knowledge, no matter how many innocent people he has to murder or experiment on along the way.

Out of all the Calamities we have a viewpoint of this far, Sabah is the most sympathetic. But her entire moral system consists, as you say, of "I'm going to look after my people and too bad for anyone else." You're right to say that we all care more about some people than others, but most of us don't let our friends lead us into invading other countries and murdering people who've never done anything to us. And if we do, then

we're bad people, because right and wrong aren't dependent on who your friends are. Peer pressure is not an excuse.

Black couldn't care less about how many terrible crimes Procer has committed. He's not seeking revenge on behalf of the Gigantes or the Free Cities, and he deliberately funded Procer's civil war for the single purpose of destabilizing the Princedom so that they couldn't interfere while he invaded Callow. There's nothing "preemptive" about her planned Crusade; Praes delivered the first blow, and she's going to do everything in her power to ensure that they won't be able to attack Procer like that again.

Also, the Dread Empire really doesn't want to argue that the historical crimes of a nation should be held against it. They're the ones who crucified their way across all of Calernia before half of the world finally brought Triumphant down. If you want to say that modern-day Procer is evil because of actions that Cordelia herself admits were wrong, then modern-day Praes is in a far worse position, because they've done nothing but kick puppies for the last several thousand years.

Praes conquered and occupied Callow within living memory. They're a nation with a long history of seeking to unjustifiably invade their neighbors, and they recently succeeded in a big way. You claim that the madmen aren't coming, but a Praesi Villain is summoning demons and raising her own flying fortress in the heart of Callow. Is the rest of the world supposed to stand by while Diabolist does her best Triumphant imitation?

Black invaded Callow, slaughtered their army, and subjugated their people. In the process of doing this, he also funded Procer's civil war, leading to the deaths of tens of thousands of Proceran conscripts and farmers. Apparently, the rest of the continent is supposed to shrug and accept this, as though Praes has some kind of divine right to invade their neighbors and pour gasoline on civil wars without consequences.

Though you're entirely right to point out that peasants usually suffer most in wars, I don't see what Cordelia's alternative is. Behavior that is rewarded will be repeated, and allowing the Dread Empire to keep Callow permanently would only encourage their expansionist tendencies, making it only a matter of time before the next Dread Emperor/ess starts looking at the Proceran border for their next conquest. Any reasonable ruler would recognize the Procer needs an independent Callow to keep the Dread Empire in check, and Cordelia Hassenbach is nothing if not reasonable.

[tetrikitty](#)

I got the impression that the Heavens were actually guiding the results of his coin flips, though. In that case, it would be perfectly reasonable to decide whether to kill people based on that.

*stevenneiman*

We should know soon enough who's right. If the Ashen Priestess makes a dramatic reveal, then we'll know that Black was right and he didn't really get a kill, meaning that most likely it was just a slip-up on the Bard's part or that she couldn't intervene. If the ashen Priestess is properly confirmed dead and the Hedge Wizard comes out looking for revenge, then that probably means that Kairos was right about the Bard trading her for something or someone else. Maybe Hye, maybe not.

*ArkhCthuul*

The whole chapter I was waiting to read a "and then x happened and (S)He died."

Phew, damn suspense...

Single I don't like ranger much and an off screen death would fit her well, I really hope its her...

*green*

more and more I'm wondering what the Bard's game is here. what did Tyrant see when he saw her Wish? and for that matter... what is Tyrant's "lolplanlol"? despite his deliberate wacky insane hijinks, he's obviously got one—and it isn't what anybody is expecting. is Tyrant playing Bard, or vice versa?

the thing about Worm was that it started with a small piece of a small story, but by the end the story was shown to have been far larger than anything that could possibly have been imagined in the first book. here, I think we're starting to get glimpses of that larger story, and it's going to be stranger than anything hinted at so far... and possibly much, much worse.

GOOD TIMES LOOKIN' FORWARD TO THE RIDE W0000

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## Villainous Interlude: Calamity II

*"Who should really be afraid, between the dragon and the peasant with a sword?"*

– Dread Emperor Reprobate the First

The Hedge Wizard was attempting an offensive. Wekesa was more irritated than worried, but these things had a way of growing out of control if allowed to go unchecked. The girl had used an aspect relating to conversion to survive the trap laying behind his decoy, an expected outcome though the specifics of her counter had come as something of a surprise. It had been a mistake on his part to strengthen the detonation in hopes of an early crippling: she'd made the power her own and promptly shoved it through an exotic spell formula. Proceran-derived, by the looks of it. Interesting, that. Practitioners of the Principate had been heavily influenced by the Gigantes traditions that still lived strong in the Titanomachy, though they still subscribed to the much-maligned Pelagian theory of magic. When it came to broader sorcery they were far behind Praes, but there were few their match when it came to enchantments. The sleeping spell Wekesa had used to keep the Hunter under control last year, for example, had been a modified take on an old Proceran enchantment. Removing the requirement of true love's kiss had been a stark improvement, even if it weakened the overall strength.

That the roots of the Wizard's formula were in enchanting had been obvious. The only way she could have successfully used an amount of power that large and unstable was by forcing a strict condition on it. Two thirds of it had gone to waste regardless, but the remainder had covered seven miles in search of the assigned criterion. She'd found five instances, because Wekesa wasn't a fool and he'd laid false trails. Running after the relays of false positives would keep her occupied for the moment, until a proper response could be mustered. This was, in the end, the limitation of the branch of sorcery the Soninke had chosen to master. It lacked the *immediacy* of more direct magic. Wards and boundaries required outside factors to be accelerated in forming or a great deal of preparation. The raging dead on the walls had returned to the grave, by now, and it would be a quarter bell yet before the Red Skies were ready for actual use. Watching the scrying screens in front of him, Warlock tracked the silhouette galloping across the plains towards his second relay.

She'd chose the shape of a horse, this time. Shapeshifting had always an interesting branch of magic, in his eyes, but ultimately a dead end. It was fixed to the limits allowed by creational laws and even High Arcana could at most allow slight deviation from this. No shapeshifter could take the shape of a dragon, for one, or even most creatures with sorcerous nature. The physical and metaphysical composition was too different, and something could not be made of nothing – particularly if that



something had markers fundamentally different from anything else in Creation. Warlock put the thought aside. He would return to those experiments soon enough, after this little dust-off was settled. His son had sent him promising results before Wekesa had to leave for the Free Cities showing that tapirs, unlike pigs, would gain wings but not the ability to breathe fire if infused with enough sorcery. That meant there was a qualitative difference between what lay at the heart of a dragon and – ah, yes, distraction. Warlock tapped into one of his inert arrays with a thought, arranging the runes through the medium of High Arcana.

He'd have to use his own will for this, which was unfortunate. Wekesa was aware that few aside from the oldest Soninke bloodlines and the purest of the Taghreb had as much power to call on, but it was still a limiting factor. No mage had endless power, and burning out when calling on the kind of sorcery he did would have... dire consequences. A circle of runes formed in the air above the shapeshifted wizard and locked with a hum. A hundred times the gravity should be enough to turn her to a smears, he estimated. The array triggered without missing a beat, but the Hedge Wizard's form shimmered. Instead of being plastered all over the grass she reappeared three feet to the left of his spell, human again. Warlock raised an eyebrow. That had looked like teleportation, but it was mathematically impossible. Adjusting the nature of the scrying array, he dismissed the gravity circle and studied the sorcerous trail. Ah, displacement. She'd let the power push her through the half-existing space between dimensions. There must have bled, or she would have reappeared directly outside his spell instead of drifting to the side.

Drumming his fingers thoughtfully, Wekesa tapped into another inert array. A different approach, then. Direct applications had proved ineffective but perhaps indirect would see better results. A bag of tricks as eclectic as hers would not come without drawbacks, which made it an obvious avenue of approach. Forging four runes of containment on cardinal points, Warlock crafted an inwards zone of disruption: within the boundaries, all power would be randomly amplified and diminished. His lips half-quirked when he saw the tiles she used to walk across the sky rip straight through her sleeves in their uncontrolled expansion, exploding in a shower of shards when they forcefully surpassed their capacity. The Hedge Wizard used the blood from the cuts in her hands to trace a line across her face, and to his displeasure this sealed all power on her. She ran out of the boundaries dictated by the zone, unharmed save for a few cuts. Warlock dismissed the spells, glancing at the seven inert arrays that remained around him. He could, of his own capacity, use perhaps another four workings of this calibre without being at risk of burning out.

The girl was proving to be troublesome. The Wizard of the West had wielded ten times her raw power, but he'd been... brittle. Breakable, when outplayed. This one was weaker but fluid, and Wekesa wondered if that was what she'd always been meant to be. The White Knight had been gifted an aspect that made him extremely versatile, a way to compensate for Amadeus' massive advantage in experience in skill. The Champion was apt to weather great violence and had previously been paired with a powerful healer that dabbled in offensive miracles. The fighting elements of this heroic band, by the look of it, had been crafted specifically to kill the remaining Calamities. It wouldn't be the first time the Heavens attempted such a trick, but it was the first instance in decades where the band managed to come together before core members were eliminated. A greater degree of caution on his part was advisable.

Warlock began to insert his will into an array, but ceased when he felt his relays being tapped into. The girl had found one of them, and instead of following to the next in the line was... mapping out the inner workings? He saw her lips move on his scrying screen, reading the word. *Learn*. Wekesa's face creased in wariness. It was one thing for a transitional Name like Squire or Apprentice to have that aspect, quite another to see it in a full-fledged Name. Ranger was living proof of how dangerous it could be, given enough time to accumulate weight. The Hedge Wizard smiled in triumph, then created another relay to add to his own system. Using that, she immediately followed the current down to his current location. Her face appeared on the scrying screen ahead of him, looking back.

"Found you," the heroine said, eyes hard.

She'd used her second aspect, Warlock mused. He could return the courtesy.

"**Link**," he replied.

Laws were nothing more than boundaries, and it had been his life's work to learn the manipulation of those – even the law of sympathy. This was his most abstract aspect, but perhaps the most dangerous. It allowed him to create sympathetic links between entities that, by right, should have none. In this case, one of the remaining floating towers and the relays the Hedge Wizard had just taken over. Idly tapping a rune, Warlock used his access to trigger the collapse of the tower and the power raged through the connection. The impact was brutal. Her right shoulder, the entire arm and part of her rib cage simply... evaporated. The heroine threw up blood and Warlock began crafting an array to finish her off, but she managed to whisper one word.

"**Repurpose**," she said.

The same conversion aspect as before, he deduced. The leftover wisps of the the tower's power – and ah, it had collapse on the city as well, though not exploded – came together like blue smoke and reformed the mass she had just lost. The result was more magic than flesh, he noted, but it would allow her operate well enough. Not a single-use aspect, then. Neither was Imbricate, which made them an even match in this regard. Wekesa leaned forward, breaking the scrying connection and ignoring the battle. She had earned his full attention.

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Ride would have been a lethally dangerous aspect, in the hands of another hero. It leant a sharp increase in speed, armament that ignored enemy armour and and protection that nothing short of concentrated spellfire would be able to dent. It was wasted on the White Knight. The man had spent too long learning the skills of others and neglected his own abilities, turning an aspect that should have been a near-unavoidable killing stroke into a weak gambit unlikely to ever draw blood on another Named. Shadows hooked through the window and dug into the walls, dragging him through the space and tossing him straight through the door in the back of the house. Brushing off wooden shards, he landed one street across and through the opening watched the White Knight pulverize the entire wall in a blinding flash of light, the aspect dimming after it had struck a target. Hanno landed in a crouch as Black sent out his shadow tendrils, green eyes seeking structural weak points. Two sharpeners detonated a heartbeat later and the roof collapsed on the hero's head as the villain made for the rooftops. Better to change his angle of attack before reengaging.

He'd already baited out one aspect without using any of his own, though admittedly two of his three were less... direct than those of his predecessors. Lead strengthened whoever he led on the field, but had no real use in a duel such as this, and while Conquer was currently sharpening his physical strength and reflexes it would do little else in this kind of situation. The aspect was better fit for war than skirmished between Named, a reflection of his departure from the traditional role of the Black Knights of old. As for Destroy, it was best employed as a tool for denial of enemy abilities. Anything it could accomplish on a purely physical level could be accomplished by more mundane means he had available, and should he ever attempt to use it in direct opposition to a hero's aspect the difference in power would see him promptly crushed. Or worse, corner his opponent badly enough they would have to learn new abilities on the spot that he had no solid measure against. It was a balancing act, this, where he must carefully lead the enemy in a position where they could be killed without ever overpowering them by too much.

The most effective moment for the kill was usually when the hero had pulled out their trump card, or just after they had, and even then there were risks. Should he ever fail to manage a killing stroke then, the situation could be reversed in a heartbeat.

Now, with Ride taken out of the equation the second stage of this fight should be approaching. The moment the White Knight was put in a dire situation he would tap into the aspect that leant him the different skillsets he'd used to recover from his incoming defeat in their last duel, but this was not a state of affairs that should be approached lightly. For one, Hanno would become exceedingly difficult to contain the moment he began using these other skills. The loss of his enchanted weapon should hinder him, the very reason Amadeus had arranged its destruction, but it would have been foolish to assume the man could not produce similar results using the Light. It was, after all, the very stuff of the Heavens shaped by will. Maintaining it had to be tiring, however, and this had been a side-benefit to be achieved by getting rid of the artefact. Amadeus knew better than to attempt to win through heroic exhaustion, but slowing down the enemy was very much possible. And if the White Knight attempted to compensate for that by using his Name, well, he would be effectively hollowing out his own power and heading directly for a collapse down the line. That would be another opportunity for a kill, in Black's experience, if he was quick enough.

The dark-skinned hero emerged from the rubble without wounds, dark eyes searching for the opposition. Amadeus exerted his will and one of his two remaining corpses moved behind the shutters of an empty house, drawing enemy attention. He struck in just that moment, staggering four blades at calculated intervals. The first held by a tendril was parried when the White Knight immediately turned to face him, the second would have struck at the weak point of the greaves but was avoided by a shift of footing and the sword he swung himself was caught in hand. *Mistake*. His shield struck the hero in the chest, taking advantage of the weakened stance to throw him off his feet, and the fourth blade plunged down from above and went straight through the plate. Goblin steel scraped against the collarbone instead of carving it. He'd been imprecise, and so lost an opportunity for a deeper wound. Unfortunate. Amadeus gave ground immediately and the shadow-held blades retreated with him, just in time to avoid the burst of Light the hero detonated in his wound to seal it.

A costly way of healing, this. The touch of the Heavens on mortal flesh was never light, or without consequence. Amadeus could see the function it was meant for, though. If the White Knight was truly meant to face Catherine after she'd succeeded him, then he gave the man six in ten odds of winning a duel against her. His apprentice still had the nasty habit of overcommitting at close range once she'd drawn blood, and a semi-offensive form of healing like this would be damaging to her. Combined with her

lack of experience with different kinds of Named, the White Knight's aspects would gain him a decisive advantage in a clash. As usual, the Heavens stacked the fight before the fight ever happened. Best he never let it come to that, for everyone's sake. Catherine was too important to die at the hands of some hunting dog of the Seraphim.

"Thousands will die tonight, because you keep me from checking the Tyrant," the White Knight said, circling around him.

Heroes did have a fascination with talking, didn't they? Black reached for the bundle of power he'd left in the second corpse that remained, watching through its eyes. Sixty to eighty heartbeats before it arrived, depending on the struggling. Running out the hourglass by talking was acceptable.

"I have no personal enmity with anyone here," Amadeus said calmly. "And this war is not of my making."

"Yet you participate in it," the White Knight pressed. "You have responsibility for this. Guilt."

"I've been afflicted by many things, in my old age," Black said. "Guilt is not one of them."

"And you believe this makes you better?" Hanno said.

"Oh, I am very much a monster," Amadeus conceded, reluctantly amused. "But then so are the things you serve and yourself as well. A mere different shade of barbarity hardly puts you in a position to lecture, White."

The hero would have replied, but Black's undead cleared the corner and the man went still. The corpse held a struggling woman in its arms, knife at her throat.

"Surrender or she dies," Amadeus said.

The man went directly for him, without hesitation. The Choir of Judgement did not suffer lack of decisiveness in its servants. A twist of will saw the woman released and she fled straight to hero and now *that* had him hesitate. A different matter, a hostage and an innocent in need of protection. The White Knight was not the first hero sworn to Judgement he had fought. Their kind was taught to think of people in particular categories, and during that heartbeat the hero had to readjust his assessment of her. In that very moment Black struck, blades in motion. One tendril was sent directly towards the woman's back, slowly enough Hanno could parry it if he moved there.

"**Recall**," the hero said.

He blurred in motion, shaft of light lashing straight through the shadow holding the sword as he protected the civilian. *Spear-wielding skillset, possibly a lancer. High mobility, expect piercing strikes.* No wound, but Amadeus' base objective had been achieved regardless. Now the more difficult work could begin. In silence, the green-eye man advanced.

—

It was getting warm out, and not just because Sabah was swinging half a hundred pounds of solid steel at the kid. Warlock's ritual with the sky was getting stronger, getting closer to what he'd pulled at the Fields of Streges. It was only a matter of time until the rain of fire began, and anybody's guess if he would limit it to just that. Captain wasn't eager to start dancing around tower-sized burning rocks falling from above, but she was no stranger to it either. The Valiant Champion was way ahead the curve even for a hero her age and she'd learned from their fight at Delos, but she wasn't used to fighting an opponent like Sabah and it was costing her. That shift in her footing, right there? It was meant to deal with something Captain's size, yes, but something on four legs. A monster, not a person. The hammer ploughed into her shield and tossed her into the wall, though the thing didn't break. She'd learned the trick for putting Name power into weapons since they'd last fought, though she used it to strengthen the steel instead of add sharpness to a blade the way most Named did.

Given another few years, this one would have been a right terror. She hit like godsdamned trebuchet and her defence got stronger with every scrap. Sabah had fought quite a few heroes meant to stand and deliver, over the years, but this one was head and shoulder above the rest of the crowd. She could take punishment like a Holy Shield and still swing like a Blood Sword. At least she didn't go berserk like the latter. Even with the Beast out Sabah had found him hard to put down when he started spasming and his body unhinged. Those people from around Hedges were weird fucks, even for Callowans. Still, tonight was tonight and not in a few years. The kid was still out of her league for now, and down an aspect as well. Sabah hadn't had to use one of hers yet, though since this was their second scrap she'd probably have to at some point. The more you fought heroes the more of a pain they became, as a rule. Putting some length to her stride, Captain moved to strike while the iron was hot.

The first hit the Champion ducked under and it put a hole in the wall, but the second nailed her to the floor through the shoulder. Didn't break bone, though. Fucking Name strengthening. Sabah kicked her in the stomach but she brought up her shield in time and it just blew her back a few feet.

"Good fight," the Champion praised, grinning through her badger helm. "Getting blood flow."

"You've got the most potential to grow out of your band," Captain replied honestly. "I'm glad we're fighting now and not after you went adventuring a few years."

"Life is adventure," the girl philosophized in broken tradertalk. "Kill many things back home. Much slaughter of other claimants."

Well, they did say the Named of the Dominion were closest to the old breed of heroes. The ones who'd gone traipsing like well-armed vagrants around Calernia, killing dragons and looting every tomb in sight. Before the House of Light had gone and civilized them, like that entire religion wasn't about licking the feet of the angels telling you what to do. Sabah had never understood why anyone would pay a tithe to be given sermons, but people out of the Wasteland did tend to get strange ideas in their heads. Captain usually left the statecraft to Malicia and Amadeus, but she did know that when it came to commerce middlemen always screwed the buyers. Why most of Calernia wouldn't think to apply something that simple to the Gods they kept to, she had no notion.

"I don't suppose you could just go back to Levant?" Sabah asked. "Leave the Empire alone. I'm fairly sure Black would not pursue if you just stuck to your borders."

"Eh," the Champion refused. "Much boring. No good fight there. Procer all peace-talking, now. You legend, Biggest Girl! Many songs for slaying of you, and drinks without pay."

Not talk about the power of friendship or justice to be served, which she had to admit was rather refreshing. There were only so many times you could get those speeches before they kind of... melded together. About half of them quoted the Book of All Things, too, and Sabah hadn't read that so she never got the references. She sighed.

"I apologize, then," she said. "Because I don't think this ends well for you."

"You much kicking of my arse," the heroine ruefully admitted. "But I Valiant Champion, not no-balls Arlesite. I stand, and **Exalt.**"

Second aspect of the night. They were doing brisk business. Sabah watched the ripple go through Creation and frowned. Domain, huh. Champion types did tend to have those. Amadeus had been caught in the Unconquered Champion's pocket dimension a few years back and Sabah had... not taken it well. Wekesa hadn't been able to locate him at first, so they'd had to face the possibility he was dead. She'd lost control of the Beast when she'd been told the news,

and woken up to a butcher's yard of half-eaten corpses. She still had dreams about that, sometimes. She'd not been that out of control since she'd been a young girl. If Warlock hadn't started carving into the soul of the hero's childhood friend to find a hint about what the nature of the dimension was, the others might have thought him dead too and that would have gotten... bad. If Ranger had come down from Refuge to avenge him, she didn't think Vale would have survived it – or anyone trying to get her to stop, for that matter.

The girl's domain was just an arena, Sabah saw. Old sunny stone with empty stands stretched in a long oval, but maybe not so empty as they seemed at first. If she sharpened her ears she could almost hear cheering and applause. The two of them were standing in sand, and the Valiant Champion raised her axe. Her movements were more fluid than before. She was probably stronger inside here, a sharp increase of everything as long as the domain held. Fit with the word, anyway. *That poor kid*. She'd picked her grounds, yes, but she'd also taken Captain somewhere she didn't have to worry about the consequences of going all out. It was one thing to lean into the Beast when there was a risk she'd end up eating a portion of Nicae. Another when it was just the two of them. Sabah rolled her shoulder, and dropped the hammer.

**"Unleash,"** she said, and the world went red.

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### [erraticerrata](#)

First update of the month, extra chapter! This one is titled "Dues" and it's from the POV of Thief.  
(<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/10/02/dues/>)

danh3107

Alright Sabah gets to cut loose some, I like her beast perspectives, they're always fun. These heroes had a lot more fight than I expected.

### [intermediarywebserial](#)

Unleashing before Champion gets her third aspect out is a big risk here.

*NerfContessa*

Not to mention that fighting a champion in an arena as a monster is... A story she doesn't want.



JC

RIP Sabah? She even noted how the Champion seemed to know how to fight against beasts. Though I'm not sure what kind of monster tale ends in a gladiator's ring.

Wekesa seems to be falling into a classic story. Dropping scrying means he doesn't know about Sabah disappearing, right?

Interesting exposition about former 'murderhobo' heroes, as well as how these heroes seemed designed to take the Calamities out. The Heavens are cheating bastards!

Looking forward to next update. I expect a few of the Calamities to die there.

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I hope this is the tale of Androcles and his lion, though what my associations with gladiator games tell me is that she tries to reduce the narrative weight of Sabah being another person to Sabah being a challenge. Unfortunately, she had to step in that one.

*stevenneiman*

On one hand, this is the power that killed a god in single combat and I don't think Champion has the power to match that, but on the other hand I think you might be right about this turning into a glory match with a big scary monster, and Sabah did seem to miss the fact that she just gave the Champion a chance to use a useless specialty.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

The murderhobo influence is clear, but a lot of classical heroes (from Heracles to Beowulf) did much the same thing.

*usernamesbco*

Murderhobos, and I think I caught a reference to Cú Chulainn's ríastrad.

"Sabah had found him hard to put down when he started spasming and his body unhinged."

[Cpt. Obvious](#)

Gladiator arenas are usually not a good place to be for beasts and monsters. Also remember that this arena is the Valiant Champions domain. It exist to be the arena where the Champion fights monsters and men in glorious battle to the death in front of the clamoring audience. It's where the fights always are grueling, the participants matching in power and skill, and

where the Valiant Champion, though both bloodied and bruised, stands as the ultimate champion of the arena accepting the adoration of the audience. That is this domain's only purpose and as that's the only story that ever has been told here it runs deep. This is not where Sabah would want to be. And I don't know if the fact that the Champion is specialized at fighting beasts slipped her mind because of some aspect of this domain, if the arena called to her beast or if it simply was the feeling of freedom from the risk of going postal on innocents that made her release the beast. Whatever the reason I don't think it was the smart thing to do.

I think she fell in the trap of trusting to much in her Name powers rather than skill and experience. Black has been preaching this to Cat over and over. She was slowly winning as herself. She wasn't outclassing the Champion but constantly coming out on top of their exchanges.

[nehemiahnewell](#)

Things are getting worse, each of the Calamities seems to be maneuvering themselves to the point of their own loss here.

*nick012000*

I dunno. I looks like Warlock and Black Knight are winning their fights, to me. Hedge Wizard can only use each magical trick once, after all, and now that her arm's made of magic, it's entirely possible that Warlock would be able to use that as an opening to attack her. Remember when Black mentioned to Cat that if she got a necromantic leg, a sufficiently skilled magician would be able to turn it against her? I'm not sure what'd happen if he used Link or Imbricate on her arm to link it to one of the Hells, but I doubt it'd be pleasant for her.

*Matthew*

Warlock and Black are winning slow and steadily. Creation has altered heroes so they will have counters to the Calamities' "murder by numbers" toolset.

Now, I don't think the counters will work. Black and Wekesa will pull it out.

I think the people saying Ranger is going to get killed are correct.

I suspect the Calamities are going to have to "Be the Villains" and pull some raw power down to win.

But, I think that the Calamities are going to have a Pyrrhic victory where, despite winning here... the "Calamities" will be finished as a unit.

*haihappen*

The hedge Wizard accomplished what she was meant to: distract the Warlock. Now, the other Calamities are without magical support.

She may not be meant to defeat the Warlock, but she is the perfect match to grab his attention.

As for Sabah, yeah, she stepped right into the trap. An obvious trap. She noticed herself that he was more akin to fight monsters than humans, and she transformed into one to fight him... \*sigh\*

As for Black, his measured no-risk approach seems doomed to backfire at some point. Perhaps by taking too long one of the other get killed, and he loses his cool?

Also, we are missing one Calamity: Assassin.

Is Death Made Flesh maybe kept in reserve as an evil deus ex machina?

*lennymaster*

Matthew: Champion is female. I think it was even mentioned somewhere that White's Band of Heroes having only him as male and Priestress (deceased), Champion, Hedge and Bard as female Heroes was some kind of counter to Black or Squire.

[taborask](#)

We know one of them is going to die, but at this point it's anyone's guess

[nehemiahnewell](#)

Captain had a death flag earlier, but her lose would hurt, but not threaten the Calamities. It also wouldn't really mirror the lose the Heroes had. I'm guessing Warlock. I don't think they could survive long term without Wekesa, and he's the one who seems to be slowly be being outmaneuvered. Also it could lead to a scene of his final spell going utterly out of control, to the point where the damage leads to further problems down the road.

*Blinks*

You could well be onto something there. Warlock is Black's oldest and possibly best friend. He's also essentially the "oh shit" button.

*Akim*

You mean the atomic football

[edrey](#)

well, with captain there are two possibilities, one is the priestess is alive and inside of the pocket dimension, two she will release the pocket when the hellfire and more fall from the sky and kill her. the lost of contact is a clue. for warlock, he lost his "eyes" and using the towers that the tyrant own is a mistake, with a heroine who is lead by providence and can LEARN well that is a problem black should had destroyed the talisman and contacted the others that is a mistake for him

*stevenneiman*

To be honest, I give each of the Named involved an independent 1/3 or so chance of dying, including the already supposedly dead Ashen Priestess. I'm almost certain at least one Calamity will survive, but beyond that I wouldn't take bets on any of it.

*Darkening*

The Tyrant's comments a few chapters back about them, "Watching the wrong fire all along" and such made me and a bunch of other people think the Bard's done something to Ranger using Ash's death. It would certainly fit with his comment about making Black a wounded animal instead of a brilliant strategist if they killed the woman he loves.

*Blinks*

The worst part of reading these, is getting to the end and having to wait.

*Soronel Haetir*

At least this wait will only be a couple days instead of a week like when the first couple books were being posted.

*vietnamabc*

Man anyone read Champion's dialogue in Arnold's voice? (even though she is a girl)  
Damn let it never be said that Heaven does not cheat, also really good observance of Sabah to compare Angels with salesman, Heaven is practically a pyramid scheme.

*Kai Wingless*

Personally I give her a thick Russian accent.

[edrey](#)

so white aspects are ride, recall and protect(?), no surprises there  
wizard's are learn, repurpose, only two for now, she is dangerous but she needs to grow  
champion's is oppose, exalt and one similar to lead( the one she use last chapter and captain didn't hear), she could be tricky  
captain losing control maybe is the clue here

[edrey](#)

Repurpose, what a mistake

*Naeddyr*

I bet you did that on porpoise.

*stevenneiman*

I'd actually bet on something like Slay for Champion. It would fit with the monster hunter theme, and would be a nasty trump card to pull out in a situation like this. I'm guessing that the inspiration thing is a secondary gubbin like the way that Willy was also a human lie detector (despite the fact that none of Swing, Rise, and Triumph could give such an advantage). In general, the heroes seem more prone to get sweet perks on top of their Aspects. Besides, I wouldn't be surprised if she could inspire others just through being a hero alone, since she's dealing with people who revere heroes the same way Basilia does Tyrants.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Not Protect... we'll see White's third aspect in a bit, it's a weird one.

*nick012000*

Am I the only one who's seeing more and more of the Stand Users from Jojo in the Black Knight? Not just the way he uses his shadow, but also the way he fights enemies that are stronger than him with wits and cunning.

*Akim*

Without going meta on who will win.

I love the way you pin down the personalities of every major character and even or especially Warlocks SysAdmin take on fighting makes him scarier than anybody else. Because with all his power he would rather nerd out than to fight.

Sadly there will never be a peaceful meeting between Warlock, Hierophant, Diabolist and her father and Hedge Wizard and the possible Wizard of the West. No MagicCon.

Maybe someone should mention the Idea to Amadeus. Every named magic user taken out without ever using violence.

*stevenneiman*

I just realized that Heiropphant will get a sudden power boost as soon as he meets back up with dad, since he's got a collection of dead gods.

And now I can't unsee the image of an ancient demon in a trenchcoat asking Masego "Hey kid, you want to buy some miracles? First one's free."

*Haihappen*

"He, wanna buy some Miracles? No? Also got some minor gods, spirits in a bottle and some grade A paradoxes. Thats the real shit man!"

*Burnsy*

What are the odds that innocent bystander of Blacks's is Assassin, ready to stick a knife in the White Knights back?

*Zaits*

Given that killing the White Knight by making him call on his Aspects and kill before he gets his second breath, too high. Thanks for pointing it out!

*blitzbasic*

Do we know the gender of Assassin? The only one who saw it and lived to tell is Thief, but I don't think she was specific in that regard.

*OldSchoolVillain*

Assassin was a shapeshifter. Possibly a case of Every Assassin rather than simply The Assassin. I can't see the hostage being assassin though – Assassin wouldn't have bothered struggling while out of sight, and also this would be an open appearance midbattle. Their skill set is better applied to eliminating wounded but recovering Heroes afterwards.

Alternatively, it IS Assassin, and the White Knight kills them after they attempt to backstab him. As I said, their skills aren't suited to open combat, and the loss of his Shadow (possibly his Scribe as well, if those theories are correct) WOULD make Black a great deal weaker by forcing him back a step and slowing him down in the future.

*stevenneiman*

In her POV chapter, she saw Assassin first as male, then as female, then as indeterminate gender, and I believe as speaking with a dozen different voices as well. My guess is that they either have some kind of disguise Aspect, or that their identity can shift entirely.

*nipi*

Nah. Probably just a preprepared and instructed civilian. I can totally picture Black saying: "When my undead releases you run to the hero. Trying to escape before that would be unfortunate."

*Unnamed goblin*

Sabah: I'm not locked in here with you, you're locked in here with me!

*narcoduck*

Tyrant is of course absent again. This probably means he's about to win, and both Black and Bard will lose important pieces soon.

*Mike E.*

So we learn that Ranger has Learn, explains why she is so OP as hell...decades of using that aspect instead of just having it while in a transition name.

*nipi*

Ummm... We learned all of Rangers aspects back when she went to play at the Dead Kings mansion. Learn, Perfect and Transcend.

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/01/04/regard/>

*Mike E.*

My memory isn't THAT good 😊 If I had just binged to this point likely would still be fresh, but I got stuck into the weekly wait for it in the middle of the war college.

*Mike E.*

Also, only 3 Calamities involved in this fight, so one more Calamity interlude that closes the battle out?

[Phantom](#)

Since it is said that the heroes are tailored to fight against the calamities.

It made me worried about Sabah was she was sent to another ring, because the valiant champion was said to fight like she was

fighting against beasts and she still had her third aspect hidden too.

*nipi*

I wonder if Unleashing The Beast is a smart move against a hero who is experienced in hunting beasts?

*nipi*

Also been wondering about the hooks Malicia has placed in the Legions. Wonder if she has tried putting one in Cat? I mean she did always feel like kneeling and stuff when around Malicia.

*Letouriste*

Normal reaction before a ruler^^, I don't think that work on named but I could be wrong.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*Letouriste*

Had difficulties to start reading^^ I expected things to turn bad in the chapter:)

I think no calamities will die here but hierophant and the tyrant will grab all the benefits.

Sabah should survive this, she only used her first aspect right? I guess she will turn things around with the third we don't know and survive without killing the champion.

Assassin don't have any screen time yet so I don't know what his position in the plan is...maybe bail black out if things turn bad? Or counter the move of the tyrant in some fashion? If that's the second then he will fail.

Black win or loss don't matter much in this fight, he can't die and the danger lie elsewhere. even if the white knight die the plot don't change much. the heavens just need another hero in a few years. maybe one different from the norm, a last try.

Warlock is the most in danger I think, but this chapter seems confirm the hedge wizard is only there for hinder him and break the link between the fight. so warlock is not the target. the tyrant should move in the blind spot the heroine created, under advices from the bard.

The tyrant can't know the situation for ranger, not even the bard can given she is not in creation and the bard power seems limited to creation because we never seen her in Arcadia...for now at least. So ranger should be safe from his plan...

He plan to hurt black and black don't care much about himself. we don't know at all his relationship with assassin so he should be safe for now (didn't read the chapter with thief so that could



change there).

So the possible targets are scribe, warlock and Sabah.

Warlock is very unlikely so there are two possibilities:

- tyrant kill Sabah after the fight against champion, using the distraction of warlock and the fatigue of Sabah. She seems to be the sort to die in a trap.

- tyrant kill scribe after using hyerophant like smokescreen for his actions.

Probably one death given all the foreshadowing. Black should have predicted the attempt and collusion with Bard but his information about hyerophant is wrong so that blind spot is worrying (I think scribe has been tasked with observing the tyrant and his army but her spies are out of the game already)

Ps: I really like Sabah: ( I want her to have some peace out of the fights for a few years after Black's death if he dies. Maybe dying in the final war cat is waging

*Letouriste*

Wow I have written so long I change of POV in the middle^^  
I can't see scribe dying here, she has uses in the story yet

Should be Sabah after all: / or no calamity at all be just a very big wound on one of them?

*Dylan Tullos*

I can't help feeling that this whole engagement is a mistake.

Black and the Calamities have lasted this long because of their proud tradition of unfair fights. Look at their first engagement with the White Knight's party; they wait for the Heroes to tire themselves out, take them by surprise, and control the entire engagement from start to finish, retreating the moment it looks like things might go against them. Even then, that fight was far more "fair" than usual. As Warlock points out, the Calamities prefer to isolate and slaughter new Heroes before they can even meet up with other Heroic Named, depriving opposing parties of essential members before the conflict even begins.

This time, the Calamities are going in against a party that has the advantage of having fought them once before and survived, with a Tyrant who's openly planning to backstab them. Black is cut off from communication with the rest of the party, and they're all fighting separate battles, unable to take advantage of their decades of experience working as a team. So far, all of them are winning, but they won't be able to call for help in the event of a sudden change.

They need to engage as a team, under circumstances they control, with a clear line of retreat. Instead, they're stuck in a

situation where they have to fight one-on-one against the opposing Heroes, in a chaotic warzone, with their retreat endangered by the Tyrant's forces. For the Calamities, winning isn't primarily about improvisation; it's about rigging the game from the start, so that the Heroes are hopelessly outmatched before the first sword is drawn. Black's victory at Streges was won on the training grounds of the War College, in the relentless training and planning to create professional Legions of Terror designed to defeat Callow's traditional army.

This isn't a battle where some casualties are acceptable as long as the objective is achieved. Every one of the Calamities is an irreplaceable resource, an essential part of a team united by shared experience and loyalty to Black. If the Heavens lose Hanno's entire party, they can simply recruit new Heroes, but the Calamities are the most formidable Villains since Triumphant (may she never return). Black can win the battle, defeat the White Knight's party, and accomplish every one of his objectives, but he still loses if a single Calamity dies.

*limlimrevolution*

I agree with you completely about the nature of this fight being very ill suited to the strengths of the Calamities. The Heroes are specifically tailored to counter each of their specialties and fighting styles, the Calamities are being forced to fight separately, and the battleground is full of chaos. Not to mention Tyrant somewhere in the background just waiting for the perfect moment to backstab them. This is the kind of fight that the Woes keep finding themselves in, where the odds are very heavily stacked against them and they have to improvise to pull a victory out by the skin of their teeth. Black and his crew have been around long enough to know better than to get into these kinds of fights in the first place. Now the trap is starting to close in on them and I just hope that they can get out of it in time.

*ArkhCthuul*

Ohuh

The way this is written let's me fear for all three, sou fiend!

Also, Exalt? Given the source this now seems like a younger Solar battling an older Lunar...and that's not a nice picture for Sabah...

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Uhh, did you actually read the Lunar Exalted supplement? A Pre-Betrayal Lunar Exalted, versus a newly Exalted Solar would result in the Solar being turned into a fine red mist. The new Solar's only shot at survival there would be if they happened to be the reincarnation of the Lunar's mate, causing the Lunar to either go easy on them or have an emotional breakdown.

Returning to the Guide-Verse: I don't think Black loses a Calamity here. The death of the Ashen Priestess was a strike at Sabah that got redirected. I'm pretty sure what the Tyrant "purchased" with that was his new pet Hiearch.

Beyond that, the Bard's machinations have met with far too much success so far. (William's failure to foresee Cat going Sword-in-the-Stone on him wasn't in the Bard's wheelhouse.)

Even Heroes, even THE Meta Hero, can't have it her way ALL of the time. The Story of Practical Evil fizzling due to a nudge from the Bard and a villain so Classic Evil he makes Diabolist look Practical just...there's no (as the Bard would say) SHAPE to it.

What there IS a Shape for is the complete collapse of Black's intended strategic objectives for going into the Free Cities in the first place. The Calamities don't have nearly the narrative weight there that the Tyrant has...and the attempt to stillbirth Cordelia's Crusade was doomed from the moment the Conquest succeeded.

The Story of the Calamities is the Story of a unique Villainous Band. They're meant to fall in the Crusade they never could've prevented...not unravel during the B.S preliminaries. That's what the Bard wants of course...because in the event the Calamities live to fall during the Crusade, Cat picks up the torch and carries Practical Evil onward, ever onward.

The Tyrant is too damned ridiculous to be able to be the ruin of a Calamity. Even with the Bard's Monster Hunting Lessons, the disparity in skill and power between Sabah and the Champion is measured by order of magnitude. Going Arena Domain just slows the bleed, or at least it should.

Likewise Warlock...for all that he's been more taxed this battle than at any time in recent memory, has decades of skill and experience over Hedge.

IMHO, these aren't the sorts of "Villains are overwhelming Heroes, triggers improbable Heroic power-up" type conflicts. They're inexorable grindaways by veterans over rookies.

Finally, the Heavens played EXTREMELY fast and loose by finger-snapping these custom anti-Calamity Heroes into existence. Giving the Gods Below equal opportunity to get absurd on behalf of THEIR champions.

*Dylan Tullos*

Shawn Panzegraf:

Tyrant specifically says that it was Bard (the monster with as many faces as stars) who let Ashen Priestess die so that she

could use the power of her sacrifice. She'll be the one making the purchase, not Kairos.

I'm confused by what you're saying. So far, the Bard hasn't been having her way all of the time, or even most of the time. The Calamities beat her during the first rebellion in Callow and Catherine killed the Lone Swordsman. We still don't know what her plans are in the Free Cities, though Tyrant says that she's going to kill a Calamity, and that Black is completely unprepared for whatever she's planning.

Agreed that the Villains are steadily winning so far. The problem is that Bard knew they'd be winning, and has something planned. Her strategy isn't to let the veteran Calamities inevitably grind down her capable but inexperienced band of Heroes; it's to let them get tired and distracted before she springs her trap. We don't know what she has prepared, but she's not going to just throw a weaker team of Heroes (they lost Ashen Priestess) at the same people who beat them last time and expect a better result.

Every time Black complains about the Heavens cheating, I want to laugh at him. This is the man who slaughtered Callowan knights and peasants with Legions that outmatched them so badly they might as well have been unarmed. He's the man who systematically murders individual Heroes before they can even find their team, and he sends Eyes of the Empire to find potential Heroes and kill them before they can even discover their powers. The very concept of a "fair fight" is disgusting to Black, but he has the audacity to whine when the Heavens do their best to create a band of champions that he won't be able to slaughter.

We have good reason to believe that Bard wants to kill a Calamity, and she's not going to fight fair. Even if each Calamity outmatches their opposite number among the White Knight's party, the fight is close enough so that both Sabah and Warlock are tired and distracted. All it takes is one push at the right time, one slip at the wrong moment, and Black's little team will lose both an irreplaceable member and their reputation for infallibility. Once that happens, it's all downhill from there.

### *Panic*

So I am starting to think that maybe all three will die.

Captain already has the death warnings since before and is now a monster on all four in a arena vs a Hero who is more used to fighting beasts.

Black is fighting his good counterpart and he already told us as much that he would die soon.

Warlock fighting someone who is a very good counter to him magic wise.

Plus fate can't allow there to be two different teams of Villains working for the same side while Heroes only have the one team. Forcefully balancing the scales and all that.

*Miaow*

This is all misdirection. Sabah may have death flags but she will live and probably kill the Valiant Champion. Black doesn't die to White, that much is almost certain (especially with White throwing his aspects in so fast). Warlock has the toughest fight on his hands and the fewest aspects in reserve, but I don't think he dies—Hedge will just distract him long enough that the Tyrant will do something bad for both sides.

Ranger, however, is becoming narratively inconvenient due to her nature as an extremely overpowered fighter—in other terms, she's a walking deus ex machina. So far, she's been kept out of the story by her lack of interest, but her involvement in the wider plot could only be described as "bullshit" and as the stakes rise, the likelihood of Ranger getting involved—if only to bail out Black, one of the few things she actually gives a damn about—goes up. So Ranger has to be written out somehow, or "Why doesn't Ranger just solve the plot" becomes constant fridge logic.

Of course, given how Ranger's been established, the narrative wouldn't be plausible if she just died anyhow. She could be put on a bus to some kind of extradimensional hunting trip, but that would be a cheap plot device. So my bet is that while Black is obnubilated with the Free Cities, the Bard's plan is to eliminate the most dangerous of the Calamities, who is also the one Black least expects to be in danger, and of course, the one whose death will hit him hardest, since they're lovers.

In addition, Ranger dying in Summer is likely because it has to be the Squire who fights the final confrontation with the Queen of Summer in Creation to close that story, not Ranger killing the Queen in Arcadia. Also, what Ranger is doing is fundamentally foolhardy—she expects to pull through because her entire role is about getting stronger the stronger her opponents are, but Bard has pulled some strings behind the scenes so that her Learn-Perfect-Transcend powerup won't be enough this time.

Ranger being the Bard's kill is the best match, I think, in terms of both Catherine's story and the Tyrant's PoV we had. The only other possibility, I think, is Assassin being killed off somehow, but that would seem random. The Calamity who dies is definitely going to be one Black doesn't expect, not one he took a calculated risk with.

*lennymaster*

I would agree with you on all points, but Ranger is also the least likable of the Calamities. Even Assassin, while there is little to be seen of him yet, has the wierd charm of killing his targets in such humrous and humiliating ways going for him.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

@Dylan: I'll have to disagree with you about the Bard having her own way. As I said, William's failure to protect the Angel of Mind Rape until it could manifest was just that, HIS failure. Every step along the way, the Heroes danced along to the Bard's tune.

As a Bardic Hero, the W.B is essentially a general. She doesn't possess the means to remain materially involved once the planning is over and the outcome of the battle has to be left in the hands of her subordinates following her plan(s). So far, the Bard has been able to get pretty much every Hero she comes in contact with to follow her directions, with few if any questions asked.

As for the Black Knight slaughtering peasants and hopelessly outmatched troops, I would respectfully point out that the residents of the Kingdom of Callow were the ones doing the slaughtering of Praesi, generation after generation after generation. Callowan Knights broke Legion lines so regularly that when a single Legion finally managed to retain cohesion in the face of repeated heavy cavalry charges, they gained enduring fame throughout the Empire for doing so.

In this last Chapter alone, Warlock mentions the Wizard of the West had TEN TIMES more power than him or Hedge Wizard. The Conquest wasn't some effortless rolling over of Callow. Callow kept on doing things the way they always had, while Black redesigned the entire Praesi war machine from square one up. Even then, Praes didn't overpower Callow. They beat them via superior tactics and strategy.

As for Black killing Heroes before they can get their feet under them, and his apparent dislike for fair fights, the reason is brutally simple. The Heavens NEVER fight fair. Hanno is described as having "more than ten times as much raw power" as Black. Hedge Wizard spits on the very idea of magic being an intellectually intensive practice in a field so vast that true mastery can come only via specialization. Instead she can blithely whip out literally ANY spell effect her little heart desires once a day. That's not even a hard limitation for Hedge Wizard, as she demonstrated while evading Warlock's energy-dragons using small variations on spells to get around the "Once Per Day Rule." The Champion has already DOUBLED in strength just since hers and Captain's last fight a few weeks earlier.

As if the Villains being flatly outclassed in terms of raw power every single time by Heroes isn't enough, Heroes can do things

like learn in a day and a night a skill that would take a Villain decades to master. Hell, as Hanno so crassly demonstrated all a Hero has to do to invoke invincibility is commit a heroic act that should result in the hero's death 100% of the time.

Villains come to every single fight outclassed in every material way...Even then, the SINGLE material advantage they have that Heroes don't (remaining in their physical prime until slain) can be turned against them. If they employ so much skill it utterly blows the doors of the Heroes immediately, Heroes invariably rise from their beating, wipe off their bloody lips, quote the Book of All Things...and then roundly annihilate the Villains due to a sudden inexplicable power-up.

In a world where what passes for natural law decrees "Every tangible advantage shall ALWAYS lay with the Heroic Named" nothing a Villain is capable of can be construed as actual cheating.

The Heavens never, EVER send their Heroes forth to do battle without first cheating for them in every conceivable way.

With Hanno, we're even seeing the Heavens violate the one territory where it was possible for a Villain to gain superiority over a Hero. Skill and Experience. One RECALL Aspect, and Hanno can call on the skills and powers of any of a thousand different Heroes. Hell, Hanno doesn't even have to pick a single Hero to emulate. Instead, he's able to switch from one to the next like flipping a switch at combat-speeds.

Black's complaints aren't "whining." I'd be pissed too if I'd redesigned the very Modus Operandi of Evil itself, and the Heavens just shrug, snap their fingers and POOF...Instant Squad of Customized Calamity-Killers. Reality itself bends at greater than ninety degree angles to keep the advantage with Good.

Which, incidentally, is why I believe the existence of a truly courageous Hero is flatly impossible in the Guide-Verse. It doesn't take courage to join the side that will bend reality at every turn to make things come out golden for you. Killing immature Heroes isn't cheating. It's eliminating cheating reality-benders before they figure out to start really bending reality in absurd ways.

*beleester*

"It doesn't take courage to join the side that will bend reality at every turn to make things come out golden for you. "

Except for the part where the last dozen or so people to join that side got killed by the Calamities without accomplishing anything meaningful. Did you forget that part? The entire reason that Cat decided to go with Team Evil instead of adding her body to the pile of dead heroes? The "bending reality"

isn't anywhere near as powerful or effective as you make it sound – it just keeps it from being an outright curbstomp.

And it's not like it's exclusive to the Heavens either. Evil can accomplish pretty much anything so long as they call it "the first step of my evil plan." And Cat has made a career out of twisting heroic tropes to Evil's advantage (Struggle was as much of a "heroic second wind" as we've seen any of the actual heroes get.)

Also, I'd take the Calamities' internal monologues on what heroes are like with a grain of salt. Of *\*course\** they're going to think that it's unfair whenever the Heroes give them a challenge. Because they're obviously perfect and free of weaknesses, so the heroes *\*must\** be cheating, right? Nobody's ever gotten a second wind or attempted to change tactics in a real fight, ever. /s

It's not cheating, it's just having a Name. Anyone who has a Name gets three free cheats, plus extra cheats whenever the audience is feeling sympathetic. Heroes are just better at getting audience sympathy, because they're, you know, *\*not evil.\**

*lennymaster*

It only became stopping the Villians from curbstomping the Heroes since Black and Malicia created practical Evil, before that the only time the Villians actually won was with Triumphant (may she never return) and that led to a crusade that saw Preas damaged to a point it did not recover for generations.

And all of this still leaves the ridiculous power advantage, their absurd magical weapons (wich always fail or turn against the Vilians that try to wield any at the most inopportune time possible), the Heroes inexplicable powerups and practical invincibility in the face of absolut Bravery/Stupidity.

And no, it does not take any bravery in the Guidverse to be a Hero, not because of golden luck, but rather because of their UNQUESTIONABLE, HEAVENMANDATED MORAL SUPERIORITY.

No questioning of ones purpose or righteousness, no questioning of sacrifices made or caused. Yes they feel bad for a time, they scream to the Heavens: "WHY!?", but in the end some angel, another Hero, some random/wierdly wise old geezer/merchant/smith/guard/healer or just strait up friggin Bard show up and assure the Hero they are doing the right thing/sacrifices are unavoidable/war is war/ the Villian would cause much worse destruction if left unstopped or the most cheat of all answeres, "Then do better next time!", and boom the Hero can continue on as before reasured and unshackable in their goal.



*Dylan Tullos*

Shawn Panzegrab:

When I get my own way, I usually get something I want. Bard hasn't gotten a free Callow, and she hasn't killed any Calamities (yet). Nice as it is for her to be able to get Heroes to dance to her tune, winning requires those Heroes to beat the Villains. As of now, none of the Hero parties that she's supported have actually won.

I'm somewhat confused by your statement that Callowans have been slaughtering Praesi for generations. Well, yes, when the Legions of Doom invaded Callow, the Callowans did slaughter them, in the same way that homeowners would shoot an invader who broke in and charged them with an axe. It's called "self-defense".

In any case, I wasn't criticizing Black for using the resources he had available to set up one-sided and brutally "unfair" conflicts. I was criticizing him for the obvious hypocrisy involved in hating the Gods for being "unfair" to the poor, persecuted Villains while he himself has made a career out of being "unfair" to the isolated rookie Heroes he puts down before they even have a chance to learn how to use their powers properly. Obviously, the Gods are going to use every tool at their disposal to ensure the victory of their chosen champions, just as Black uses every tool at his disposal to ensure the victory of the Calamities. The fact that they have more tools does not make them horrible, horrible monsters, no matter how much Black whines about it. (Their apparent fondness for Mass Brainwashing does make them horrible, horrible monsters, but that's not what Black is complaining about.)

Black beat Callow because he had a better army and a better team of Named. Callow traditionally beat Praes because they had better armies and better teams of Named. The Dread Empire's addiction to fielding incompetent hordes and making overly complicated plans is not Callow's fault, and they're not somehow "cheating" for taking advantage of Praesi stupidity. Defending your home from an invading army is not a crime.

Warlock says that the Wizard of the West had ten times more power than Hedge Wizard. That doesn't mean he had ten times more power than Warlock, who obviously has more juice than Hedge. We don't see her raising armies of the dead or blowing up floating castles with a single spell, do we? We don't know whether the Wizard of the West was stronger than Warlock, but it clearly didn't help him, since Warlock outmaneuvered the Wizard and destroyed him at Streges. Notably, Warlock doesn't spend all of his time complaining about how he can't possibly beat the mean overpowered Hedge Wizard, who can perform any spell once a day. He just gets down to beating her.

When Black faces Callow's rebellion in Book I, he assembles overwhelming forces, calls upon the assistance of veteran Named that the Callowans have no possible answer for, and utterly defeats the rebels without fighting a single battle in the field. From the perspective of a peasant going up against the Carrion Lord, Black might as well be a God Below for all the chance they had of winning. Does Black send most of his Legions home so that they can have a decent chance? Does he fight powerless and blindfolded so that some peasant with granddad's old spear might actually kill him? No, because Black isn't an idiot. Neither are the Gods Above. Both of them are evil with a small e, but they all understand that war is not a game and that there are no prizes for good sports.

I was going to respond to your last point at more length, but I see beleester beat me to it. How many Heroes does Black have to kill before he stops whining? He's been on top for twenty years, he's filled entire graveyards with the Named who tried to free Callow, and he's created the most powerful Dread Empire since Triumphant (may she never return). Things didn't come out "golden" for the amateur Heroes the Calamities massacred, and it took extraordinary courage to even take up the mantle of a Name, knowing that the boogeyman was going to come for you the moment you did. I think that you just refuse to give Heroes credit for anything, no matter how much they deserve it, because you agree with Black that they're "cheating". All I can say is that if they paid money for those nasty reality-bending cheat codes, then they deserve a refund.

The Gods Above have done some legitimately awful things. Their angels mind control entire cities, and they deliberately sabotaged Praes's agriculture and population growth to drive future conflict. However, they are not somehow "bad" for ensuring that the Heroes who serve them are as well-equipped as possible to survive and win, and their Heroes are not "bad" for taking full advantage of the resources they have. If I was in a war, and I had powers that allowed me to fight more experienced enemies, I would use them as extensively as possible. When my enemies complained that it was somehow wrong for me to use my cheaty reality-bending powers, I would laugh at them.

War does not destroy the concepts of right and wrong. It does, however, destroy the concept of "cheating". William is wrong to use angelic brain bleach on an entire city. He is not wrong to fight Catherine with a magic sword or super healing powers. William has a job to do, and he's going to do it as best he can. If Catherine is angry over the fact that he gets more help from the Gods Above than Catherine does from Those Below, maybe she should have signed up with the other team.

She dislikes the fact that he has those powers. Guess what, Catherine? You're ridiculously OP compared to the vast, vast

majority of people in Calernia, and you've never listened to a single complaint about how wrong it is for a young girl to get all of these advantages just because she has a Name. You can't turn around now and insist that all of your special powers are wonderful and righteous, but that horrible Lone Swordsman is just terrible for having more than you. It's like listening to someone who inherited a hundred million dollars insisting that it's those awful billionaires who are preventing us from having a more equal society.

*stevenneiman*

He wasn't complaining about the heroes using unfair tactics, he was complaining about how Good had an unfair advantage, and that heroes got what they got for free.

For a better comparison, imagine if you were a master of video games, but were poor. You started playing some "free to play" MMO, and reached a level of skill completely unmatched by anyone else on the server. Now imagine that every day you had to struggle to beat incompetent noobs because they were willing to spend money on pay-to-win features you can't afford, and you know that one day you'll lose a fight, and with it all the respect you've earned as the best fighter in the game, because someone who was willing to shell out for those advantages came at you with skills that were mediocre instead of bad. And when they did they would probably say something stupid like "Git good".

Now imagine that that game was the entirety of existence, and that if you ever lost a round you or one of your few loved ones would die, probably an unpleasant death. That's what Black is complaining about.

[vuthuha912](#)

I do think that Black was in a culture where no matter what you did you can only end in failure so he is a little salty that the other side seems to have it so easy. You know the grass is greener and all that. Besides, as a Villain and the military leader of an Evil country, he can't just praise the other sides while recruiting so he did some 'creative reframing of the truth'. It is true that he works really hard for those victories, he just simply doesn't mention the other side's effort. Smack-talking your opponents is stable in any battle be it in ideology or sport.

I like Black a lot, but, just because I want him to win, does not mean I am incapable of seeing his faults. I do think he should have been there for Malicia – advise her and push her to stop f\*\*cking around with the Trueblood. Not to mention interfering in other land politics too deeply is not a good thing. The Tyrant can handle it, just go home and let him do the hard work. Also, most of his friends don't really share

his dream for the country. He should find some other friends who actually share his goals. Cat is a little young and a Callowan, Malicia is too far away. Some Praesi who won't be affected by Name and are not in the military would be nice – you need different perspectives after all.

Black Knight is not a good name if you want to change your country. It is too aggressive in nature and military-oriented. If Chancellor did not have treachery written in the job description, I think he should consider it. Chancellor in our country isn't the one who deals with the nobility, the Emperor did because the noble directly threaten Imperial power. The Chancellor advises their leaders on policies, logistics, and strategies. With Black loyalty, Malicia might be able to overcome her predecessor's fate. Zhuge Liang was a proper Chancellor, he can lead the troop and administrate his country just fine.

*stevenneiman*

The thing about heroes is that they actually are almost as brave as the villains. It takes courage to charge the machine gun nests even if you have reason to suspect that you might be bulletproof. The thing is that their bravery is likely to get them more than a good fireworks show as they go up in flames, since the Heavens cheat on their behalf. Also, heroes usually have far less raw power than villains, but raw power is a funny thing in Creation since being outmatched is in most cases an advantage. The Wizard didn't have ten times Wekesa's power, he just had ten times Hedge's power and didn't use it as well. The other thing is that Heroes tend to be given a lot of things that villains have to earn or take for themselves, and even beyond that they seem more likely to get extra stuff, like the way that William basically had a fourth Aspect that let him detect lies.

All in all, I would describe the heroes as being like a GMPC that the GM has decided is going to win this fight, and they're willing to cheat to do it. They might even give them worse stats than the players have, but they'll make up for it with GM fiat that things go their way, and occasionally roll dice out of view and claim they came up 20. The way to win is to somehow sucker the GM into thinking that they've been winning, by a small margin but enough that they don't have to adjust anything, then reveal that you had a hidden advantage that can end the fight in one round before they can respond.

*Bonesawer*

I think that most people are missing that Black wins a mixed victory regardless of the outcome of this conflict. While the loss of Captain and/or Warlock is a serious loss for the current Empire, it saves significant destruction in the future once Black

is dead. They are the most destructive and emotional of the Calamities, and the ones that need to go first in the sequence of Calamitous deaths for Catherine to take over with a minimum of conflict.

It seems unavoidable that at least one of the Calamities will die in the current or immediately subsequent conflict, given the weight to the Story of Catherine's band gaining (though not yet earning) their Name. My bet on the first Calamitous death is Warlock, given the recent full ascension of Hierophant. I would dearly prefer it to be Captain, as I certainly want to see Warlock see Hierophant.

*stevenneiman*

That... actually makes a lot of sense. I wonder if Black would be cold-blooded enough to kill his allies if he knew they would rampage out of control once he died.

I do agree with you in the hope that Wekesa gets a chance to see his son again. I think he would die happy if he could see that Masego's already taken a Name as cool as his own, and one that's only going to grow stronger with age (especially once he has a chance to raid Wekesa's lab for more miracles).

*stevenneiman*

Typo thread:

"There must have {been} bleed"

"but it would allow her {to} operate well enough"

"The aspect was better fit for war than [skirmished->skirmishes]"

"she fled straight to {the} hero"

"The Valiant Champion was way ahead {of} the curve even for a hero"

It's kind of interesting how they respond to the slaughter Black considers necessary. Black doesn't seem to count it as a plus or minus, Captain mildly regrets it but just considers it the stressful part of a job she chooses to do, and Wekesa is having a wonderful time unleashing the full horror he's capable of on an area full of civilians. Well, maybe not the full horror, but even he considers Dark Day protocols scary. The fact that he just casually figured "oh, slaughter unending and meaningless should do the trick" for causing a bit of chaos on the walls really brought home how inhuman the Calamities really are.

*Max Scherer*

I say they go for the kill of Scribe. It would hurt the most to loose her.

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## Villainous Interlude: Calamity III

*"The truth of monsters is that, in the end, they die. If they didn't we would have to call them gods."*

– Eudokia the Oft-Abducted, Basilea of Nicae

The Beast moved, but Sabah was within it. It was not control, for control was an illusion, but it was enough. She could yet think, even with blood and heat pumping in her veins. The Valiant Champion screamed a war cry and swung her axe, but what did the Beast care for this? The enemy steel dug into her flesh, blood and fur spraying, but with a roar she bit down on the hero. The shield gave under her fangs, even with the strength of a Name behind it, and she crunched into the plate before throwing the Champion to the side. The Beast had wanted to swallow the girl whole, but Sabah knew this would have been a mistake. Covered in blood and spit, the heroine rose to her feet. She began to speak but the Beast huffed out a laugh and struck again. The wound the axe had carved was already healed, the intertwined madness and power within her growing with every moment. The heroine raised the broken remnant of her shield but a shoulder bump was enough to send her crashing into the walls of the arena

Stone broke, bone broke and the scream whetted the Beast's appetite.

The Champion was better at fighting beasts than men, but Sabah was not like anything the girl had ever thought before. Of all the Calamities, only she had embraced the old truth: if you were strong enough, even Fate broke under your teeth. Fountains of sand exploded behind her as she charged and the heroine hastily leapt onto the stands. The cheering sounded, oh, and the clapping as well. The Beast roared and it drowned out all the worlds. Claws scrabbling against the stone rails, Sabah gave when the enemy tried to use to high grounds to strike at her head. Tail twisting behind her, the Beast paced the sands of the arena and waited for the Champion to come down. The girl was catching her breath, though. Wasn't moving. The Beast crouched, then leapt onto the stands. Benches and flickering silhouettes shattered as she rolled onto the stone, rising back to her feet. The sun came

down harshly, blinding her, but Sabah sniffed the air and felt the wounded enemy coming closer. Petty arena tricks.

Clawed paw rising, the Beast struck down into the stands. The arena shook. Again and again she did, until the entire wing collapsed beneath her in a shower of stone and dust and sand. The glare of the sun was gone, now, and she saw the Champion hopping from ruin to ruin. Shaking herself clear of the dust, Sabah forced her will onto the Beast. Claws closed around stones as she rose onto her back legs, tossing chunks of rocks the size of houses at the heroine. She dodged the first, swatted aside the second but was buried under the third. The Beast licked its chops in satisfaction and leapt onto the stone, shattering it and the stands beneath it. There was a tunnel underneath and the Champion flopped down onto the ground.

**"Rally,"** the heroine gasped.

She shone like the sun and all the flickering silhouettes flocked to her, filling her until her strength swelled. Her armour was smoking, her axe shaking with barely held power. Sabah recognized the aspect from earlier but the Beast cared little for the detail. Her paw whipped out from the outside, tearing through the outer wall of the tunnel and sending the Champion flying again. She landed on her feet at the very top of the stands, where the domain ended, and charged back down. The Beast sniffed the air. Blood, blood and ruin. The heroine's strength waned and her little world with it. Sabah leapt down onto the sands and let her tail sweep a trail behind her, turning to watch the enemy. The Champion did not flinch, and followed her without hesitation. The Beast wanted to be a thing of teeth and claw, but Sabah thought otherwise. Her long legs swatted at the sands, sending up a cloud, and in that blinding curtain she struck. The heroine stood fast, both hands on the handle of her axe for her shield was long gone. The shining blade cut through the Beast's leg, but Sabah did not pause. She rolled over the heroine, and the wild joy of hearing bones creak and plate give filled her senses.

It was a wonder, that even after calling on an aspect the Champion was strong enough to throw her off. The Beast hit the wall and howled as her leg grew back, bone and flesh sprouting from the cut. The heroine's breastplate was dented, and her lips dripping with blood. It was enough to make the Beast *hungry*. Sabah stalked forward and waited for the heroine to charge. The sweep was not meant to hit her, just force her into the right place. Claws closed around the struggling heroine, and the Beast swung her down at the stands. Again and again and again, until there were a dozen gaping holes in the stone and only then did she toss the girl up in the air. The Champion rose higher and higher in the sky, until she touched a ceiling that wasn't and crack snaked across the firmament like it was a pane of glass. The arena shattered, and the smells of smoke and death wafted to

the Beast's nose. They were in the city again, where they'd first crossed. The Beast roared, and went for the kill.

Sabah watched.

—

It had been a very long time since Wekesa had found an opponent this troublesome. He'd grown arrogant in his old age, it seemed. Come to believe that a mere few layers of deception would be enough to keep a hound of the Heavens off his back. This entire battle was something a tactical mistake, in his eyes. This was far from the first time the Calamities split to deal with a heroic band, but the circumstances were not in their favour. Amadeus was adamant the White Knight had to die, however, and in this Warlock was not inclined to disagree. Not as long as Masego was attached to that Callowan slip of a girl. Promising as the young villains assembled around Catherine Foundling were, they were not ready to deal with this calibre of heroic opposition. Better to crush the Wizard to dust here so she would never be a threat to his son. Crushing a rune-covered stone in his palm, Warlock murmured an incantation and watched a bubble form around the Hedge Wizard. A derivative of the effect demons of Time could have, this, at least in theory. Actual observation of such a specimen would have been too dangerous even for him, as the Fourth Hell was nothing to trifle with.

The heroine was stuck, at least for now. He immediately gave ground while weaving High Arcana, the seven spears of red flame that formed sinking into the bubble. It was a crawl, from his perspective, but it would not be from hers. The Wizard moved, inch by inch, and the bubble popped. She had, it seemed, seized the guiding flows and broken them. Unfortunately for her, that did nothing about the spears. She twisted around most, but one took hit her in the shoulder and another in the leg. That should have crippled her, but the illusion she'd replaced herself with broke instead. The heroine stood a foot to the side, panting. Wekesa frowned and penned her into what he'd come to call a quicksand ward. It didn't prevent anything, not exactly. It simply made any exertion of power or movement much harder than it should be. Against a practitioner of limited power like her, forcing a burnout was a perfectly viable strategy.

"You killed my sister, you monstrous old fuck," the Wizard gasped. "You're not walking away from this."

Buying time to cast with distracting words. He'd pulled the same trick many, many times.

"I'm rather surprised it stuck," Wekesa noted. "I suppose once in a while luck smiles on the opposition."



Her spell flared into existence. The Liessen Chisel, by the looks of it. One of the better Callowan works, an old favourite of the Wizards of the West. It had been crafted specially to cut apart the stabilizing elements of wards, but to accomplish this it did require a certain of raw arcane power. She'd chosen poorly, given the ward around her. Her spell collapsed the ward and a heartbeat later her wrist bones both snapped. She screamed, but did not stop casting. Heroes had an irritating tolerance for pain. A mundane mage would have lost the thread of whatever they were casting when inflicted with such a distraction. High Arcana runes bloomed in front of the both of them.

"She was better than any of you," Hedge hissed. "She was *good*."

"She was Good," Wekesa corrected. "And evidently not quite better enough to avoid the Tyrant's ritual."

Her eyes went wide. Ah, she hadn't known that bit had she? There was more than one intent at work in this band of heroes. That light delay in working her will gave him the initiative. The red flares formed around the heroine's head, the intensity of the glow they produced varying wildly. She finished her spell a moment later and the moment the power took shape all three flares exploded into a cage of red. The green smoke she'd crafted went through the bars, but she was forced to dismiss it and create a cone of force around herself to avoid being incinerated. Wekesa's spell would have fed on both of her castings, which should earn him just long enough to craft something more powerful while she got rid of it. Duels between Gifted were very much a game of shatranj, in his experience. Reacting to the immediate movements of the pieces without glimpsing the long-term intent was a good way to end up dead.

"You're not invincible," the heroine barked. "I just need to find the right trick."

The red cage transmuted into red smoke a moment later, but he placed the last rune and four bands of transparent force formed around the wrists and ankles. They tightened without any need for prompting, crushing bone. Amusingly enough, what part of her wrists that was not powdered was now almost reset from the initial snapping. Warlock could have gone for a more lethal working, but he was wary of committing to such before she'd used her last aspect. Each of them had called on two, and the odds were that the loser of his duel would be the first to give in and call on the third. His own loss, he knew, was unlikely at this stage but very much a possibility. He'd already begun to prepare an exit strategy in case it came to that. The Hedge Wizard wrapped strings of sorcery around her limbs to keep them working, so naturally Wekesa inserted a little gift into the spell and turned them into angry snakes. He felt sorcery take hold of his own limbs and almost smiled. Ah, a transfer. Classic Stygian

work. He did not bother to craft an answer: the third layer of the wards on his person prevented the spell from ever going through.

"Have you ever considered," Warlock said, "that there is no *right trick*? That for all the gifts the Heavens have dropped onto your lap you could die here tonight?"

The blue pane of light hit her head-on, sending her stumbling to the ground, but her limbs shapeshifted into some sort of lycanthropic derivative by the looks of the hair. Interesting, considering under most recorded instances lycanthropy was a curse and not a natural state of being.

"They don't really encourage you to think about consequences, do they?" Wekesa continued blithely. "Your masters, that is. Perhaps you-"

He paused, then chuckled.

"Oh, you crafty child," he said. "You almost had me there. *Almost.*"

Hellfire was a drain, usually, but with the Red Skies so close to the boundary it was barely an effort to form them. The smell of brimstone filled the air and the crimson flares devoured the spell she'd formed while he talked. Not one he'd ever seen before, this, though the shape had similarities to Keteran formulas. Cascading of some sort? That would have been very dangerous, if it had it the wards on his body. Instead the hellfire engulfed the girl and she dropped to the ground. Another three heartbeats before she died of it, and he prepared to counter whatever trick she'd use to get away from certain death. That was not, as it turned out, what he should have prepared for. A beam of light hit the downed heroine, and it took Wekesa a heartbeat to parse out the sequence. This particular spell was, in theory, an offensive one. But it had a central sequence in the formula modelled after a miracle, which meant... the hellfire gutted out and the Tyrant grinned, lounging on his floating throne above them.

"I have come to betray you," the cripple cheerfully said.

"Alas, I am surprised," Warlock replied sardonically, and snapped his wrist.

The throne exploded and the boy went flying. That, he reflected, had been worth the seven hours of preparation. The Hedge Wizard was back on her feet. If they thought two of them would give them an advantage, they were sorely mistaken. They'd only given him more to work with. There was a soft sound at his back and the villain turned. An empty bottle of wine had been dropped on the

ground. The Wandering Bard, if he had to venture a guess. The heroine cursed and shot him a glare.

"I'll be back," she said, and wings sprouted from her back.

She shouldn't have taken the time to talk, he mused. He finished the spell before she'd risen more than a foot into the air, and the sliver of darkness touched her back. Every wound he'd inflicted with his sorcery tonight reopened and she dropped screaming. The Tyrant was back on his feet and trying something. Dangerous for his age, this one. Another runic stone broke under his grip and the bubble formed before both it and the villain disappeared. He should be stuck in Arcadia for at least a few moments. Things had grown out of control, here. If both enemy factions were on the move and even the Bard had played a hand – and wasn't it fascinating she would have had the chance to do that even with Assassin after her? – then the others were in danger. Time to wrap this up.

"**Reiterate**," the Hedge Wizard croaked out.

Ah, there was the third. Light collected around her body, a different take on the spell from earlier that had reformed her missing body parts. Warlock brought down his hand and the hellfire spear drove through her skull.

"Consequences," he reminded the dead heroine, and made sure there would not be enough left for a resurrection.

—

Amadeus was faintly amused at the notion of anyone trying to kill him with a bow when he was a known acquaintance of Ranger. The volley of Light arrows trailed behind him as he ran across the rooftops, splitting tiles and thatching both. An archery-based Name, this one. Warlock had been the one to kill the last Archer, but the green-eyed had tactics to deal with the likes of this. The shadow tendril tossed a brightstick in the White Knight's face, himself avoiding blinding by pushing a sliver of Name power into his eyes to blind them preventively. A heartbeat later he'd gained his sight back and three swords whistled towards the sides of the hero. *Change*. Still blind, Hanno batted away the blades with his bare hands and tugged at the length of one. Amadeus immediately cut it, forming a branch from another tendril to catch the falling blade before retracting all of them. Hand to hand fighter, if he was not mistaken. The Levantines were known for those. Black attacked again, eyes sharp. The enemy was shifting between skillsets more slowly, now that he'd gone beyond twenty. Thirty in a night might be his limit, though that was not an assumption to be relied on.

The blow dented his shield, and did not even require the Light to do so. Dangerous. Amadeus tossed the now mostly-useless tool in

his opponent's face and placed his blows. Blade to the ankle, avoided. Blade to armpit, parried bare-handed. The crossbow bolt from the last tendril hit the back of the knee but failed to penetrate. The villain clicked his tongue disapprovingly. That had been almost point-blank, meaning Name power had been at work. He ducked under an open palm that would have collapsed his throat, pivoted around the hero and rammed his blade under his arm. The White Knight danced away but his bare hand was cut by one of the blades coming around. The second should have punched through the back of the knee, Name or not, but the hero deftly stepped atop the blade and flipped away before Black could cut the connection and make him fall. Breathing hard, the White Knight raised both hands above his head and a greatsword of Light coalesced. *Change*. Not a known quantity, this skillset. There were greatsword wielders among the Lycaonese to the north of Procer, but the Principate was ever thin on Named.

A probe, then. It was worth sacrificing his last corpse for what would be learned. The undead charged out of a ruined house from behind the White Knight and was cut down without a second thought. From too far, Amadeus noted. The greatsword had lengthened. Not something he would be unable to deal with. The Black Knight advanced cautiously, shadows stirring behind him, and the greatsword rose again. The Light flared, and for a heartbeat the shadows he manipulated were lit out of existence. Amadeus did not miss a beat, for he'd been waiting on such a trick since the beginning of this duel. The few heroes he fought more than once all tried it, thinking him crippled without his additional limbs. The moment where White was occupied amplifying the Light, he accelerated and closed the distance. The greatsword came down, longer than before, and when he sidestepped the cut it twisted and turned to a lateral blow. He leapt and his armoured boot landed on the White Knight's faceplate. The roiling Light had the goblin steel smoking, but he used the man's head as a stepping stone and leapt again.

By then the shadows had returned to him.

The blade drove itself into the White Knight's back, piercing a lung before the Light burst out and scrapped it. Unfortunate, though inevitable. He only had so many blades hidden in his shadow, and two thirds were already gone. There was limited space inside, unfortunately, so decisions had to be made about what occupied it and there were tools more versatile than swords at his disposal. The White Knight's stance adjusted as Amadeus landed fluidly on the ground. *Change*. Seven heartbeats for the full shift, this time. The hero was overusing his aspect. A single longsword of Light, this time, held in one hand. The villain raised an eyebrow, recognizing the stance from the very recent past. The Lone Swordsman had used it, in Wekesa's illusory reproductions of the tussle in Summerholm. That had interesting implications. The White Knight was using the skills of Named,

then, as he had suspected. William of Greenbury had been largely self-taught, meaning there was no teacher, mundane or otherwise, to draw these skills from. It was quite possible Hanno was limited to heroes as well, dead ones in particular. That this could be done at all set an interesting precedent, one he would have to ask Warlock to look into.

Black let out a long breath. He was beginning to tire as well, though he'd conserved his strength as much as was physically possible. He was no stranger to working through tiredness, and how he would not to compensate for it. The White Knight strode forward at a swift pace and swung. Amadeus stepped out of the blow, circling cautiously. The Lone Swordsman had been heavily dependant on his blade, as he recalled, which was a limitation the one made of Light would only work partially around. Was it worth trading a minor wound for a more severe one? No, that was hurried thinking. The moment he began to bleed the tide began to turn. He feinted to the side and was immediately parried, or would have been if he hadn't dropped the sword. He twisted to catch it with his other hand and reversed the momentum, but he'd made a mistake. He'd taught Catherine too much, there were similarities in their ways of fighting. And the Lone Swordsman had duelled her several times before dying. The boot caught him on the shoulder and he only barely managed to land in a roll, backing away hurriedly as the other man advanced. He *had* wondered with the White Knight would rely on the skillset of a relatively green hero.

Hanno was not without cleverness, and unlike his first aspect this one he had fully mastered.

Still, this was an avenue to exploit as well as a weakness. Bringing back to mind the few sparring sessions he'd had with his apprentice before she left to quell the Liesse Rebellion, Amadeus adjusted his angle. Feint to the side, but he let the prompt parry pass him by. The second feint where he pretended to attempt a similar manoeuvre to before, the White Knight ignored and instead darted the sword of Light at his neck. Black caught the wrist and there was a heartbeat where the both of them were going through sets of instincts. The hero acted first, giving in to them and using a counter that would have worked perfectly if Amadeus had been inclined to continue fighting with the same fondness for close range as his student. The punch went wide, for he was already backing away and freeing the wrist. Instead he angled his blade to the side and carved into the White Knight's throat, the full weight of his body pivoting behind him. Blood sprayed out as he gave ground, closed by a burst of Light. That would have been a kill, on a lesser hero.

The White Knight opened his palm, and there was a silver coin in it. Amadeus let all other distractions fall to the wayside. The

coin spun in the air, one side with laurels and the other with crossed swords. It fell back on the palm, swords up.

"Amadeus of the Green Stretch, Black Knight of Praes," the White Knight said.

The point of the sword went through the roof of his mouth. Amadeus withdrew his bloodied blade and put the full strength of his Name behind the swing, but when he touched the neck it bounced off. Something infinitely larger than him swatted him down and he was thrown down onto the pavestones. They collapsed around him, the ground shaking. Seraphim. His plate was ripped open and he was bleeding from the eyes and mouth. The White Knight was collapsed as well, a mere five feet away, but it might as well have been a mile.

"Formulaic aspect," the Wandering Bard said. "You're a little young to know about those, I suppose. Should have let him finish, Big Guy. You don't interrupt the words of the Choir of Judgement without a price."

Black closed his eyes and sought out his surroundings for a corpse to raise. It was deserted of anything, dead or alive. He got on his knees, spewing blood and shaking. She could not intervene directly. If he managed to strike the final blow before the hero recovered, this could still be salvaged. Sinking into his Name he called on the shadows, but they did not heed his will. He'd exhausted all he had simply to survive the blow from the Seraphim, damn them and damn him and damn them all. Creation ripped open in the distance and howling winds spilled out. The Tyrant of Helike fell out, without visible wounds. Amadeus closed his eyes. *Solutions. Or a way to turn this into a mutual defeat, should this prove impossible.*

"Well isn't this is a mess, if you'll forgive my language," the Tyrant grinned. "Your ornery friend with the spells cost me a **Wish**, but it was worth it to see all this with my own eyes."

He still had an aspect. His other two were done, but Destroy could still affect the situation even if he could not. Affecting a physical structure? There was a half-collapsed house close enough he might be able to make it collapse onto the White Knight. The backlash from using the aspect without a speck of power to his Name would likely kill him. Alternatives were needed. The Tyrant strolled to the unconscious hero and with a groan slung his arm over his shoulder.

"I'll just be taking this," the odd-eyed boy said. "Don't mind me, carry on."

"Enemy," Amadeus croaked. "He is your enemy as well."

The Tyrant shrugged.

"Why do you think I'm doing this?" he said. "Given long enough you might figure out a way to kill him, and it's not like this one can do anything about it. Can't have that, can we?"

He pointed his thumb at the Bard, who waved cheerfully.

"Until next time, Black," the boy smiled, and dragged the hero away.

For a moment Amadeus considered collapsing the house, but this was mere petulance. With another Named shielding him, it was a guarantee the White Knight would survive. There was a loud crack from the rooftop. The Bard, he saw, had a bag on her knees. There were walnuts inside and she was breaking them open before popping them into her mouth.

"That's going to cost me, you know," the Named said casually. "It was supposed to be Hedge, but your Warlock is a fucking *terror* lemme tell you. Makes the old country proud."

Nothing good could come of listening to bardic Named, but he did not have the power left to shut down his senses.

"Would you like me to tell you how your friend is going to die?" the Bard asked.

"Bluff," he said. "Champion does not have the skill or story to handle Captain."

"She's not fighting Captain," the Bard said. "She's fighting a monster. 'swhy I picked Champion. The domain, big guy. She was bound to let out the Beast in that."

The White Knight was finally far enough that his amulet ceased taking effect.

"Warlock," the green-eyed man said. "The Bard is here. I am incapacitated. Sabah under threat."

"Amadeus," his oldest friend's voice replied. "She's..."

Black closed his eyes, and that was the only moment of weakness he allowed himself. The grief, the fury, it all went into the box and he closed it shut. All that remained was the cold clarity that was his only remaining safeguard. Green eyes opened, turning to the Bard. She broke another walnut, chewing it loudly.

"You still don't get the story that made it happen," she said.

"The caravans," he said, but did not elaborate.

There was something here he was missing. Pieces to the puzzle.

"You don't speak Levantine," the Bard said. "Or you'd know their word for maiden doesn't have a gender. Meaning's closer to 'virgin'."

Lack of sexual congress alone became the qualifier, if that was true. Every caravan had a single individual leading it, he remembered, men and women of different age and origins. Amadeus did not speak any of three major Levantine dialects, or even the Baalite tradertongue they'd been influenced by. There had been no need, and so many other things he had to learn.

"Monster took the maidens, and repeatedly, so that's one," the Wandering Bard said. "Now, I needed a monster-killer and she's the closest thing we have left to one of those. That's two."

He might as well have wielded the blade himself, he thought. He'd killed her one order at a time.

"Third, I needed the monster to be the one attacking," the Bard continued nonchalantly. "That was the easy one. Love, Amadeus. Love always fucks you over. All I had to do was suggest Champion join White after the wall fell, and your dear friend stepped in."

It wouldn't be enough, Amadeus thought. They'd only fought once before, and not on that story. There lacked weight. The old thing wearing a girl's face smiled, nut cracking in her hand.

"You could say it was a team effort, pulling it off," she said. "Our little secret, right?"

He did not reply. Engaging her any further could only be to his detriment. Warlock would be coming in all haste.

"I'd say sorry, but you brought this down on yourself," the Bard said. "I could probably destroy you in full, big guy, but that would take *time*. And effort. So I'm going to give you advice, instead."

The Wandering Bard leapt down from the rooftop, half-falling. She came close, kneeling at his side.

"Go home," she said. "Murder your little friend in the Tower and reign until someone puts a knife in your back. You're not as good at this game as you thought you were."

Hatred, Amadeus thought, was pointless. A bias that brought no benefit. And yet.

"But you won't, will you?" the other Named sighed. "You don't negotiate."

She rose back to her feet, brushing away walnut shards.



"I doubt we'll meet again," she said. "And fucking Kairos slipped one by me, so I'll have my hands full."

The Wandering Bard looked down at him, shoving her hands in her pockets.

"This one feels like a sin, doesn't it?" she mused. "Remember that, when the gears start turning."

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### *Arawn Emrys*

What I'm taking from this is that Bard is The Story itself rebelling against Black's attempts to change it. He's reached the point where he is a real threat to the way the world works. Not just his plot with Cat, either. That scene a few chapters ago with the Praesi noble thinking about how he's changed the empire. He's managed to destroy the Chancellor, and to fundamentally alter the roles of the Black Knight, Dread Empress, and Warlock. He was actually doing it, changing the story. I'd say that Traditional Evil is something created by the Heavens as much as the heroes. It gives the illusion of rebelling against them, and the appearance of freewill, but it's just as locked into the Story as anything else.

The Heavens themselves seem to be very much against Free Will in mortals. Look at the two Choirs we've seen so far. One rips out the free will of everything in the vicinity, and the other is represented by a hero who literally refuses to make a decision on his own.

### [reveen](#)

Depends on what you mean by free will. Does a rando norm trying to survive Diabolist's crazy or living under Black's jackboot have any more freewill than the Names do? Villains and Evil are defined as wanting to gain power and lord it over those weaker than them, they're just as likely to strip people of self-determinism as the heavens. Except the heavens are in the wrong because they dare do it to the Ubermensch?

### *Dana*

And let's remember that the Ubermensch are only Ubermensch because they embody stories. If Black cared about rebelling against the narrative in principle rather than out of megalomania, he'd be like Cordelia and not be a Name – but he needs/wants it for some reason.

As for the "Free Will" point, I think it's pretty clear that neither "the Heavens" nor "the Hells" represent that. The gods that didn't believe in interference are...well, presumably not interfering. (And to the extent they have a champion, one suspects it's Cordelia.)

*Dylan Tull*

"With some the word liberty may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself, and the product of his labor; while with others the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men, and the product of other men's labor. Here are two, not only different, but incompatible things, called by the same name – liberty. And it follows that each of the things is, by the respective parties, called by two different and incompatible names – liberty and tyranny."

– President Abraham Lincoln, "The Wolf and the Sheep"

This is exactly why I don't buy into the idea of Villains bravely resisting the tyranny of the Gods Above. It's not that I don't think they have solid arguments against the Heavens; clearly Good is not particularly good when it comes to respecting free will. I simply don't see the benefit in replacing manipulative divinities with arrogant Nietzsche-worshipping Villainous rulers.

Very early in the story, Black claims that his side (Evil) believes that the strong have the right to change the world. The Gods Above also believe this. Of course, Black considers it unfair and "cheating" for the Gods Above to use their superior powers to deny him the right to do as he pleases, while he thinks that it's natural and right for him to use his superior powers to deny everyone else the right to do as they please.

*Abrakadabra*

You Just believe what Lincoln said, huh? Ohink for yourself, for gods sake!

*tynam*

Black doesn't think that is natural or right for him to use his powers. He thinks he's a monster. He just thinks that's an acceptable price to pay.

*stevenneiman*

Evil believes in free will for those willing to use it. In practice what this generally means is that the most powerful and ruthless people are allowed to dominate those who can't fight back, but in theory a place like Bellerophon or even a

functional anarchist state fit the bill. Overall I would describe Evil as taking free will to the extreme where it becomes self-destructive because given utter freedom certain people will choose to restrict the freedom of others. In contrast to purist Evil, Black's Evil actually forms a nice middle ground where people are allowed some freedom of expression but still given enough structure to their lives that the system is stable.

Good is about everyone serving Good, which can mean that things sort of work out in a make-the-trains-run-on-time kind of way when everything goes according to plan, but when it's challenged as Evil has always had the purpose of doing, it's willing to turn to tactics potentially as bad as or worse than those of Evil, and it does so in an organized fashion.

*HandyCapped*

Each and every one of you have forgotten one very important thing. Free will and the power to act upon it are two completely different things.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Just because one side is assholes who don't respect free will doesn't mean the other side does.

*Eldritch*

Jeez. The 'hero' talking about how love is a weakness, and taking ruthless advantage of it. There's a story there, and it ends with the bard insane, villainous, and then dead.

*Greg*

While I agree that Sabah's death is somewhat anticlimactic and am a bit disappointed by how it turned out, I have another comment/question to raise:

Does Hanno/White Knight's healing actually have any consequences, as was previously stated? Because he's taken so many wounds now that he's had to heal like that, and the text before now has implied that the flesh there is "healed" but stiff and ruined and can't be healed any further. At this point, with the amount of crippling/maiming/mortal wounds Black's inflicted on him over multiple fights, if his healing technique actually does screw him over somehow he should be well into screwed over territory.

Obviously it doesn't NEED to have such consequences, as Heroes are OP and we have William's RISE example. But Hanno seems to lack a healing aspect like that, and his technique was outright stated before to be dangerous and more of a stopgap measure. His body should be covered with these scars and barely able to move, by the previous description of its side effects.

Also, I was confused about why a Seraphim can intervene directly when judgment is being passed, but I guess this is just a new rule that Black didn't know about (hasn't he fought Judgment-aligned heroes before? I could've sworn that was stated somewhere).

*Dana*

It's a consequence of White Knight's "Formulaic aspect", right? I don't think that was Bard joking. Maybe it means that when White Knight is caring out some essential trope – e.g., "My Name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die" – he's uninterruptible.

Which is the perfect aspect to fight Cat with, to be honest, since she literally can't not make snide remarks disparaging that kind of thing.

*Byzantine*

I suspect she can be snarky. It's physically stopping him that's a problem.

[reveen](#)

That. Was. Beautiful. Ice fucking cold actually. I love Bard.

*jtebb2*

Interesting,

I've never hated Bard more.

Sabah was a decent woman, a wife and mother, a devoted friend and soldier. Don't get me wrong, I won't pretend that she was an innocent or that Champion didn't have equal justification to kill her. I won't even take issue with Bard knowingly sacrificing the "maidens" to enact her plan. It's part of her agenda and I can respect that even if I disagree with her. What makes me despise her, what fills me with disgust, is that she stuck around to gloat. She takes pleasure in Sabah's death and she takes greater pleasure in the pain it causes her friends. From a villain that would be expected, if not acceptable. From someone who claims to be on the side of good, it's hypocrisy of the highest order. She is every bit the monster Black is and worse.

Black deals with his enemies because it is necessary to fulfill his agenda, but he doesn't take pleasure in the pain he causes on those who have not wronged him personally. Bard does, she will kill whoever she needs to to fulfill her agenda, and she will revel in the suffering of her enemies.

Long story short: If bard were a hero, then killing Sabah would be an unpleasant chore, not a delightful escapade. Since killing Sabah was a delightful escapade, Bard is not a hero.

Long Story even shorter: Bard needs to die badly.

*ereshkigala*

I don't get it. How did Sabah die? Not only was she winning, but the Beast shattered the arena thingy too.

*Dylan Tullos*

"The Beast had wanted to swallow the girl whole, but Sabah knew this would have been a mistake."

"The arena shattered, and the smells of smoke and death wafted to the Beast's nose. They were in the city again, where they'd first crossed. The Beast roared, and went for the kill.

Sabah watched."

My best guess is that Sabah could beat the Champion as long as she was controlling the Beast, but lost when she became a bystander, observing rather than directing the Beast's instincts. Beast probably ate Champion whole, just as it wanted to in the first place, and some combination of the monster-killing story and her own powers enabled Champion to kill Beast from the inside.

[reveen](#)

Sabah launched Champion up into the air above her.

And to use Smash Bros parlance, I bet Champion has a pretty good Down Air.

*ereshkigala*

Yeah, the air-tossing was pretty stupid. I mean, she was already smashing Champion repeatedly to the ground. Why not continue until she died? In the arena, nobody else could interfere.

*stevenneiman*

She's a monster dehumanized in the eyes of Fate and the audience, fighting against a noble but clearly outmatched hero with no hope of victory. Not only that, but Bard managed to finagle it into a story about that monster claiming maidens and then assaulting the city and facing a hero specialized in fighting monsters.

Terribilis the Second made it a policy to refuse better odds than that, and he was right to do so.

*mupi*

On the gripping hand, it wasn't the Beast/monster who killed the maidens. The story makes it clear that there's a separation between Sabah/Captain and "the Beast" This separation, while not "physical" in the Guideverse, is still an important part of the narrative; it carries story-weight – and it's something the Bard wouldn't be aware of, wouldn't be able to account for. I also seem to recall that the Beast killed a god in one of the Interludes; if you can kill a god, it's going to take more than a good story to take you out (the weight of monster/maiden/Champion is just that, a story. Cat has shown us how easily a story can be captured and subverted. What story subverts monster/maiden/Champion? How about "hopelessly outmatched plucky band of (anti-)heros escapes an overly complicated trap set by a conniving monster who has been manipulating events for centuries"? We've also already seen Warlock survive a story-weight blow. Finally, Sabah hasn't tapped Obey yet, and Black consciously made the decision to continue, even knowing that there was a trap intended for Captain. Even if he didn't know the exact nature of the trap, the fact that he consciously proceeded anyway has Weight to it, the kind of weight that can affect a Story, and he carefully arranges matters so that Captain can tap into Obey, without giving explicit orders that would give additional weight to the maiden/monster/Champion story. Therefore, I wouldn't be surprised to find Captain survives her encounter.

Having said all that, Black knows he's on his way out. If he is on his way out, then the Calamaties must be on their way out. Indeed, if 'the Woes' are to succeed, the Calamaties must be gone, or at least mostly gone (Ranger is disconnected enough from the Story to not matter, though as noted numerous times, if Cat kills Black, she would definitely be Interested again). Black knows this, it's heavily foreshadowed in his thought about "how many of his friends would he have to kill..." What better way to steal the weight of a story than turning your enemy's plot around so that they think they are winning, but in fact, each of their victories actually gains you something long term? (cf the battle between Cat and Juniper at the War College. Juniper gave Cat a series of wins, in order to gain the only victory that mattered in the end). So, I won't be surprised if Captain actually does die here.

*stevenneiman*

Typo thread:

"This entire battle was something {of} a tactical mistake"

"but one took [hit] her in the shoulder"

"[what->the] part of her wrists that was not powdered was now

almost reset [form->from] the initial snapping"  
"if it had [it->hit] the wards on his body"  
"the hellfire [gutted->guttered] out"  
"but the green-eyed {man} had tactics"  
"and how he would not to compensate for it" I'm not sure what that was supposed to say  
"He had wondered [with->whether] the White Knight would rely on the skillset of a relatively green hero"  
"Blood sprayed out as he gave ground, {the White Knight's throat} closed by a burst of Light"

*Sam*

Mind you, we don't know Sabah is dead. We have Bard claim she set it up, half a sentence from Warlock, and no on screen confirmation. Not only Heroes have a tendency to survive supposed off-screen deaths.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Gotta say, I hate W.B and Hanno so very much. The one claims to be a Hero, but persuades other Heroes to commit atrocities. While the other is Two-Face without the talking to himself and facial scarring.

I really don't get how anyone can think the Heroes are the good guys. Every bad thing Diabolist does Bard is a direct accomplice to by preventing Diabolist's assassination. She talked William into summoning the Angel of Mind Rape by comparing it to Eleanor Fairfax doing it to stop hundreds of children per year being turned over to the Dead King as tribute.

Really hoping Sabah isn't dead. Her conduct during the fight with Champion was anything but monstrous....

It's a brilliantly well done plot arc. Creating characters readers love to hate takes a special talent 😊

[reveen](#)

Have we been given any reason to believe the Heroes *shouldn't* do everything in their power to bring down the Villains? Even if their actions are unsavoury? God knows the Calamities would be willing to do things just as bad and worse, for far worse reasons. Even if Black is the biggest Cinnamon Roll character in history, which he isn't, I can't see how you can view what happened here as anything but karmic, regardless of whether or not you like it.

We see the forces of good do nasty stuff and we're all look 'oooh, how mean of them' but in reality we're viewing the story from the perspective of the ideological forces in opposition to

good, and have seen very little of how the larger cosmic game is being played out.

*Dylan Tullos*

reveen:

Well, I personally believe that there's an important difference between "unsavoury" and "mass mind control". To me, that kind of mind "adjustment" is worse than murder; instead of killing someone, you're taking away all of their choices, making them into a puppet of Contrition who has no ability to choose Good or Evil anymore.

I'm not rooting for Team Calamity, and I do agree that the Villains are quite capable of doing horrifically evil things in the name of their generally selfish and unpleasant goals. I just draw the line at remaking people into things so that Good can have a successful Crusade.

When Good dropped the hammer on Black in this chapter, I cheered. They were harsh and ruthless, but Black finally (hopefully!) suffered a karmic defeat. But karma is what happens to you as a result of your decisions, not what happens to a nine year-old who gets drafted into the Crusade when an Angel shows up to brainwash them into repenting of their "sins" and fighting legionaries with their bare hands. Even though I want Evil to lose and I don't buy into Black's complaints about "unfair", turning cities of people into mind-controlled zealots is just unquestionably evil.

*Dylan Tullos*

Shawn Panzegraf:

Two-Face's coin is governed by random chance, while Hanno's coin is directed by the Choir of Judgement. There's an important difference between deciding who lives or dies based on an actual coin flip and respecting the decisions of an angelic jury that specializes in judgement. Your criticism is only valid if you think that the decisions of Angels are somehow more fallible than ordinary human jurors; if they are as or more capable than regular people, than Hanno is simply executing the decisions of a court of law.

You make a strong case for Bard being evil; between deliberately sparing Diabolist and evil mind control, she's clearly not good in any sense that regular humans would find reassuring. (I don't think it was Eleanor Fairfax that summoned the Angel of Contrition for the Crusade against the Dead King. She was involved in the First Crusade, and the Dead King's Crusade was much, much later).



Sabah's conduct wasn't monstrous until the end, when she let Beast take over. One slip may have been enough to doom her. As for "loving to hate", I've been waiting for a Calamity to die for a long time. I was hoping for Warlock, who cheerfully mutilates souls, but Sabah's death brings us one step closer to his end; they worked as a team, and the loss of each member renders the whole group that much more vulnerable.

#### *AbraKadabra*

Hanno is worse Than two face. Two face at least trust to chance. Hanno trust in a fokkin alien to make the right decisions while he himself stnds aside and hipocritically does not own up to the decision and the guilt involved in said decision that léads to taking a life. I did not take the life, it was the angels decision, therefore it is all good. I am Just a tool, a cog in the machine, as some war criminals said in real life.

#### *alegio*

I dont think Sabah actually died, she never used all her aspects and being a diferent entity from the beast should help her a little against the story.

And damn Wekessa IS brutal.

#### *Jago*

It is possible that the Beast died, but Sabah survived. They are separated enough that thre a chance Sabah will survive even without the Beast

#### *Jago*

Actually, it can be that simply Sabah has lost control and is slaughtering everyone.

The Warlock message doesn't give any definitive information:

"Amadeus," his oldest friend's voice replied. "She's..."

#### *Nash Equilibrium*

I find it interesting that there's been so much speculation on Sabah's death, considering all the other implications happening in this chapter. The most major being the pretty strong likelihood that the Bard just started a pattern of 3 with Black. Her line about "This one feels like a sin", and the rest of the monologue strongly apes the pattern of 3 between Cat and the Lone Swordsman, with her first victory sounding somewhat similar.

Additionally, it would explain why no pattern of 3 formed between the Black Knight and the White Knight. If the White Knight isn't the leader of his band in terms of narrative weight, then a

pattern wouldn't form (just like why no pattern formed between Adjutant and Thief, there wasn't really any narrative there) so White couldn't form a pattern with either Black or Tyrant, explaining why the latter doesn't see the White Knight as a threat. I'm not sure whether this plays into the Tyrant's comment on the weight of the Ashen Priestess being stolen by the Bard, but it would be a convenient explanation.

With regards to Sabah, we really don't have enough information to know whether she's dead or not, especially because there is a precedent for people being trapped in Domain Aspects for days at a time, so while we know she exited the aspect, we don't know when. Also, considering how patterns of 3 have worked in the past, and how the Bard works, it would be quite fitting for her to create a pattern where Black's loss is relatively light, so that when Black has his chance to win, her loss will be equally so. I'm making some assumptions based on the pattern between Akua and Cat here, where her "loss" in the first book was so meaningless as to not really even qualify as such within the narrative, so when she got her "victory" via Chider, it was equally meaningless. If that is how these work then that would be right up Bard's alley to do, so that Black stays out of the picture for a while, allowing the Crusade enough time to build.

Either way, I'm looking forward to the next chapter, though I'd love to have it go back to Cat now.

### [Tohron](#)

Was about to mention noticing the potential pattern of 3 with Bard and Black myself. Given Bard's general story awareness, it seems like that's a known risk on her part, and her comment about "I doubt we'll meet again" seems like she'll be actively avoiding any more encounters with Black Knight to avoid having that potentially reach its conclusion.

*goliath1303*

I took that to mean that Black won't be meeting this specific incarnation of the Wandering Bard again.

### [Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Why do I support the Calamities and demonize the Heroes we've seen?

Let's see: Black pretty much emancipated the entire Orc race. His/Alaya's/The Calamities reforms of Praes have, at every turn, been designed to stamp out the repellent "Classic Evil" elements. Malicia's most recent coup demonstrates this effectively. Akua's mother/Family have been sitting on the largest convergence of Devil and Demon-summoning capacity on the continent. By goading a coup into existence there, much of that diabolic potential for destruction was exhausted, with little cost to regular people.

Yes, Black orchestrated the Conquest. One can easily argue however that bringing the repeating waves of attack by Praes and defense by Callow to a close, he actually saved vastly more lives in the long run than the Conquest took. We KNOW his methods stopped the practice of sacrificing thousands of lives to power flying death-fortresses and the like.

Meanwhile, all we've seen from the Heroes is some domestic terrorism and LITERALLY will-less adherence to the Kill List of the Heavens.

In point of fact, the only Hero we've EVER seen do anything that actually helps regular people is Thief, with her Robin Hood-esque behavior Assassin scared her out of continuing. (And Thief is currently wondering not only if she's a Heroine, but if she EVER WAS)

Yes, Black and the Calamities do bad things...but the result of those bad acts are generally a net increase in quality of life for more people than are harmed by their actions. Heroic bad acts, on the other hand, have no such evidence of benefit.

Look at the Crusade launched when Eleanor Fairfax, the Queen of Blades had HER turn and SUCCESSFULLY summoned the Angel of Mind RAPE. MILLIONS of people, most with nothing but the divine zeal which had burned free will from their souls, throwing their lives away hurling themselves at the Dead Kingdom. Which did nothing but give the Dead King a mountain more bodies to corrupt (and is probably where he got his last crop of undead ex-Heroes Ranger took out during her last visit.)

Black & Co are at least trying to do something different. That's commendable enough in a world where, prior to the Calamities, NEITHER side seemed to care in the slightest about regular people.

Killing Heroes before they can get rolling simply prevents exactly the kind of carnage William's utterly pointless rebellion causes. (Even William as much as admitted his figurehead King, and dependence on Proceran silver gave him doubts. He brushed them aside with moral platitudes and an "It will all work out somehow, if we can just kick Praes out of Callow" delusion.)

I support self-determination. Black seems to support choice, provided it falls within the bounds of not destabilizing the Empire. (Every government in history that lasted long enough to merit a page in a history book took a dim view of sedition and armed civil rebellion, including enlightened Western civilization governments.)

*Dylan Tullos*

Shawn Panzegraf:

If the Dread Empire didn't want huge numbers of Praesi and Callowans to die in an endless cycle of invasions, they could stop invading Callow. Generally, the people who are at fault for thousands of years of war and bloodshed are the ones who keep attacking their neighbors, not the people who are trying to defend themselves.

The same logic applies to rebellion. If the Praesi wanted Callow to stop rising up against their occupation, they could try not occupying them. What are the Callowans supposed to do, meekly accept the occupation and collaborate with their new foreign overlords? When you conquer a people by force of arms, you can expect violent resistance. There's something wrong about a way of thinking that insists that violence used for the purpose of conquest is perfectly legitimate, but violence used for the purpose of resistance is somehow bad or wrong.

Black is quite fond of using terror as a weapon himself; he hanged rebels before the Lone Swordsman hanged legionaries. If his opponents choose to adopt his methods, how does he have any right to object?

I'm pretty sure that Malicia's actions didn't result in increased quality of life for Procer. She poured fuel on a major civil war, leading to tens of thousands of additional deaths at a conservative estimate. There are as many people in Procer as there are in Praes and Callow put together, and neither Malicia nor Black considered their well-being when they were doing their best to destroy the Principate. Obviously, "caring about regular people" is not their priority, or they wouldn't be taking part in actions that harm so many innocent peasants.

Eleanor Fairfax wasn't responsible for the Crusade that reached the walls of Keter. That said, I find the Heavens' use of mind control just as morally depraved as you do. I just don't confuse believing that the Heavens are small-e evil with believing that Team Practical Evil is somehow good.

There's something fundamentally flawed about a way of thinking that blames the oppressed and not the oppressor for every act of violence. Praes invaded Callow, murdered entire families for the crime of plotting rebellion, and sent in noble governors to loot and terrorize the country. They provoked rebellion, then systematically murdered anyone who had the audacity to demand their country back.

You say that Black supports choice "within the bounds of not destabilizing the Empire". Translated, that statement means that Black supports choice as long as no one does anything that gets in his way. The moment they do, he reserves the right to murder them and their entire family with no hesitation or

remorse. "Stability" is the traditional battle cry of every tyrant throughout history, and Black is no exception.

You say that every government disapproves of sedition and armed civil rebellion, and that's true. Every government does disapprove. It's just that some governments do nothing to provoke such a rebellion, and others invade their neighbors, put them under foreign occupation, and then get mad when the people they murdered and looted have the nerve to fight back.

*Abrakadabra*

Bullshit. Read again please.

*Jago*

Just to point it out, Dykan, you are forgetting that Praes has a very strong reason to invade Callow, one that has worked for plenty of populations during human history: they need to eat!

Praes is incapable to produce enough food to feed all his population. And the "Good" kingdoms have done what they could to stop them from trading for food.

And Procer has tried to invade and subjugate Callow plenty of times, so you are berating Praes for something while considering it normal for Procer.

Neither side is good or respects the common people, but Blak and Malice want stability and that will make the life of the normal people better on the average.

*Deviant Loader*

It was mentioned in the story that heaven cheated by using Bard, I dunno why but I guessed that heaven recruited some bad character in hell to do their bidding, and this therefore explained why the Bard was acting like a villain and using their tactics to fight them back instead. It also explain why the Bard was allowed to drink and engage in debauchery.

I understand that in the story, Black disliked to be used as a prop to further the story of other characters like other villains, but by reading the comments, I felt ironic that people predicting that Black is either going to die how it was going to be as a story like a mentor, or to be used in some way to further Cat's character or used as background character in some way.

*Dylan Tullos*

Deviant Loader:

As we see with the Lone Swordsman, some Heroes are allowed to behave in anti-Heroic ways. They don't have to be paragons of Goodness to serve the Heavens.

Also, "Hero" does not mean "monk". Heroes are required to fight Evil, not swear oaths of sobriety and abstinence.

Black dislikes being used as a prop by the Heavens; as we see, he's quite willing to use himself as a prop to further his own schemes. Catherine represents the next step in his grand plan, and Black's comfort and importance are entirely irrelevant compared to Black's victory. Villains who need to control everything and be the center of everything can never accomplish anything; once he chooses Catherine, Black is happy to give her center stage while he works in the background to ensure her success.

*Jonnnnz*

Ok, I have an issue. The Bard is a hero because gods picked her to carry on with their plan. She can't be a hero because she cares about people; the Tyrant made that clear. But the gloating monologue after executing someone's friend makes her no more a hero than Akua (a person the Bard never tried to stop). She's in clear villain territory on every level other than who she chose to fight (and choosing Black over Tyrant and Diabolist means that she isn't fighting to protect, as is the narrative necessity for a Hero). I'm lost here, really.

*Dylan Tullos*

Jonnnnz:

The Bard is an agent of the Heavens, but I don't think she's a Hero. Heroes are the actors, playing their assigned roles according to the will of the Heavens. Bard is the director, ensuring that the Story has a proper ending and that the status quo is preserved.

As long as you think of Bard as a Hero, her behavior is going to be confusing. Once you think of her as a different kind of agent, with a different set of rules and restrictions, her behavior makes sense.

*OldSchoolVillain*

That actually makes a lot of sense – Bards in some contexts are used by both sides, so it being a neutral name means a lot of her actions fit, and would allow her to make the moves that a hero can't.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Dylan Tullos:

First: In the ONE concrete instance we've seen of organized decision-making by Angels, they flatly attempted to violate the rules because they didn't like that Cat refused to become their new Contrition-Muppet. If the Angels are willing to violate rules, and (as was said when some of the Choirs were described earlier, "Those touched by Judgment...Did not survive the experience if they were found wanting." (Direct quote)

So, Angels only support the rules so long as the results dovetail with their agendas (That's our sample size.) According to the Author, the Choir of Judgment is also willing to kill people simply for not meeting or exceeding their moral standard.

From these things I conclude that the Angels controlling Hanno's coin have no more right or moral justification to call on Hanno to kill if they're supposed to be on the side of good. They're doing basically what Black does when he dispatches Assassin after a target. If the one is Evil, so is the other.

My objection to Hanno rather than the Choir of Judgment is based on Hanno actively believing the use of free will in matters of life and death to be nothing more than "Surrendering his sword to chaos." Hanno's loss of his mother left him with a need for meaning and direction, and just like the parasites of Contrition, the Judgment Choir leaped in and used this damaged man as a headsman.

Even worse, I think Ashen Priestess and Hedge Wizard might've actually been the only "Heroes" we've seen in the story interested in, you know, actively propagating good for non-Named. Champion was just a Klingon with rabies, looking for the bigger better fight. They drank Hanno's Kool-Aid and died for it.

Bard wants everything in black and white. So does Diabolist, and her mother before her. The problem is its down to shades of gray, but Bard will dip the agents of the Heavens in Evil-Sauce if it gets her the tidy black and white narrative she wants.

What I wonder lately is if BARD has free will. If so, by what premise does she actually justify all this death and horror? Even if the Heavens record-breaking cheating stops the story-altering of Black and his people...someone is going to emulate them eventually because they've been more successful than anyone but Triumphant (or more successful if you subscribe to Malicia's "I'd rather rule Praes forever, than the continent for a year.)

*Dylan Tullos*

Shawn Panzegraf:

The Angels are at war with Black, and by extension Catherine. Right and wrong still exist in war, but there are no "rules".

Catherine is an enemy combatant, and they have the right and duty to kill her if they can manage it. I object to the Angels using evil mind control, not to the Angels doing their best to stop Catherine from gaining a huge victory for Team Practical Evil.

If you're arguing that the Angels are morally equivalent to Black, I would agree. That's why I think this is a story about Evil vs Evil, with both sides being morally depraved and generally terrible people. It's just that Protagonist-Centered Morality has us cheering for the viewpoint characters.

Good point about Hanno. I don't object to him judging the Tyrant, because Kairos is pretty obviously guilty, but the fact that he thinks of using his own judgement as chaos is damning. Now that you mention it, I can see a pattern of Angels using people who have lost faith in themselves, taking advantage of their desperation to create perfectly obedient servants.

I agree with you about Ashen Priestess and Hedge. They were trying to fight Tyrant, which is commendable. As for Champion... well, she's honest about what she is. Levantine Heroes belong to an older school of heroism, where the Named are driven less by a sense of justice and more by a burning desire to punch the biggest monster and then drink all the beer. Worth mentioning that we don't know if she's dead yet.

Breaking Calernia out of black-and-white thinking is vital if any progress is going to be made. The underlying problem is that Black is, well, Evil. He's not Stupid Evil, but no Callowan or Proceran is going to look at the Calamities and say "Hey, maybe mutilating souls isn't that bad!". It's a little bit difficult to change people's thinking when you self-describe as a "monster". No matter how successful Praes has been at convincing people that they're not Stupid, it's plain that everyone still believes that they're Evil. How would Cordelia have managed to ally Procer with the Levantines and Ashur, if they didn't believe that Black's Practical Evil was a threat to the entire world?

There is no such thing as "cheating" in war. There are good actions and evil actions, right and wrong, but "cheating" simply does not exist. Black uses every tool at his disposal to secure victory, and so do the Gods Above. They simply have more tools at their disposal. Black is not obligated to be fair, and neither are the Heavens. No matter how much he whines about it, they're doing the same thing he is; trying to reshape the world to fit their desires. The only crime of the Gods Above is being more successful than he is.

*LanaKane*

hihihi, Archer referencing Sterling Archer LOVING IT!



[beleester](#)

Looking back at the last Heroic Interlude, Bard asked the Champion about monster stories. I missed that bit of foreshadowing.

*ArkhCthuul*

Beautifully done chapter.  
Nothing more to add, really. A whole.

*Exec*

Honestly Captain had so many death flags that I was hoping you were pulling another fast one on us...

Would've been hilariously unexpected if the Calamity that died was Assassin, the only one with no flags, getting off-screened like everything else he does.

RIP Weremom

*Max Scherer*

Wow i didnt know that i want bard on a pike as much as Akua....

*aran*

Still don't understand what exactly Kairos "slipped by" the Bard. Was it Anaxares becoming Hierarch?

*Edgeofdoom*

'— Eudokia the Oft-Abducted, Basilea of Nicae'  
Hold on — \*squints\* Coincidence or not?

*Eldritch*

Jeez. The 'hero' talking about how love is a weakness, and taking ruthless advantage of it. There's a story there, and it ends with the bard insane, villainous, and then dead.

[vuthuha912](#)

Well if anyone has to die, Sabah seems like the one with the least amount of importance. Warlock is the mage, Black is the army, Malicia is the queen and Scribe is the Spymaster. However, Sabah is the heart of the Calamities, her death would f\*\*ck Black over emotionally. He can't win forever — there is always a bigger fish.

He made a mistake but he is not paying for it, Sabah is. It should push Black into training for a new and better generation to take on his mantle.

It is so tiring, isn't it? You and your friends did all those horrible things to win and to help your country. Yet, your team at home is busy tearing everything down while you are gone. If Black gave up on Praes after 40 years, I would not blame him. If the Calamities just retired after the Conquest, Sabah would still be alive right now. You are more than 60 years old, Black, maybe 70 years old. You should retire after the Crusade if you have the chance.

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## Chapter 33: Promises

*"No matter how good the horse, it can only bear one saddle."*  
-Callowan proverb

Our march through Summer had taken a month, from the perspective of Creation. Longer than I would have liked, but still miraculous compared to how long it would have taken me to come down from Denier the old fashioned way. Juniper agreed.

"Hugging," she sneered. "You've gotten soft, Foundling."

It was awkward embracing an orc with a solid two feet on me and broad as a barn, but I put the effort in. For all that the Hellhound mocked me, her grip was tight as well. We'd not gone this long without seeing each other since the Fifteenth was founded.

"You haven't," I said. "Gods, what do you eat? It's like they carved you out of slab of muscle."

She tried not to look pleased at that, but I'd been dealing with wilier operators of late. My general was a refreshingly open book. Ratface had apparently gone mad with power since I'd suborned the Smugglers' Guild to him, but since he'd abused his power to find me a fresh crate of Vale summer wine I was going to let that one go. Pouring myself a full cup of the pale wine, I allowed myself a little sigh of pleasure after sipping the alcohol. The stuff I'd dragged with me through Arcadia just wasn't the same, mostly cheap red vintages from the south. The two of us claimed the folding chairs in her own tent, not having bothered to gather people in the larger command pavilion. We'd have a proper briefing with the others at some point, but I wanted to talk with her before Marshal Ranker and the Deoraithe were dragged into the conversation.

"You'll have news for me," I said.

She grunted in assent, sniffing at her goblet full of aragh before downing it. A sure sign this was to be informal: Juniper never touched anything stronger than watered wine in the usual officer meetings.

"Holden is back into the Imperial fold," she announced. "General Istrid and her legions annihilated the fae garrison and are now fortifying the grounds."

It was one of Juniper's little quirks that she only ever referred to her mother by her rank even in private. As for what she'd told me, I was pleased. I needed to herd the Summer Court through known grounds and allowing them two footholds into Callow would have muddied the waters. Now they'd have to come through Dormer, which made it a great deal easier to plan for them. It was shame three legions and some of the finest battle commanders in the field had to be left where I couldn't use them, but anything less and I was fairly sure the Summer Court would try to force passage. After our last scrap they'd be wary of picking a fight with the Legions of Terror on a chosen field, though. They might win but their losses would leave them too weak to be able to handle the army I'd assembled. Some days it gave me pause, that I'd become someone who could use twelve thousand veterans of the Conquest as a mere deterrent. I'd come a long way from pit fights and waiting tables.

"Losses?" I asked.

"Light," the orc noted. "It was only the bare bones of a garrison. You kicked the hornet's nest when you invaded Summer."

"Oh, I pissed them off way beyond that," I grunted. "I've got a Princess of Summer in chains, Juniper. They'll be out for blood."

"Keeping that prisoner secure is a logistical nightmare, I'll have you know," the Hellhound growled. "Kilian and half our mages had to be set aside permanently so we'd never lack practitioners for the rotations."

"It'll be worth it," I said. "Largest bargaining chip I could get my hands on short of taking the seat of the Summer Court itself."

"You assume the fae can be bargained with," the Hellhound said.

"They always cut deals, it's in their nature," I said. "And if for once I can avoid having to pay the price by scraping myself raw, I'll have no complaints."

"Devils and fairies always get more than they give," the orc warned.

"Then it's a good thing I stole a lot of their shit," I replied bluntly. "I don't mind overpaying as long as I get what I want."

I'm not going to get stuck in games with them, Juniper. I'll get exactly what I need not try for an inch more. Only way I can get away without getting fucked too hard."

"We'll get nothing if we're not winning," she said. "Don't lose sight of that."

That was the Praesi way, wasn't it? No, maybe not Praesi. The way of the Legions, Black's way. Compromise could be reached, but only from a position of strength. On their own terms. Our way, I must confess. Kilian hadn't been wrong when she'd said I had no taste to compromise when I could get things how I wanted them instead.

"Masego's getting ready for the Queen," I noted. "Or as much as he can, with an entity like her."

"The Hierophant now, I hear," Juniper said. "Fancy Name. Never heard of it before."

There was hint of doubt there. Older Names, those better known, tended to be more powerful than relative outliers like my friend's. They'd accumulated more weight over the centuries, greater legends to draw from.

"He'll pull through," I said. "Always does. But I'll admit, for this kind of work I almost wish Diabolist was on our side. There's a lot of bad to be said about the old school, but they have a peerless record when it comes to things like this."

"She might pull it off," the Hellhound said. "But whatever she gained from that victory she'd use to screw us the moment the battle was over."

"I know," I sighed. "The competence doesn't come without the rabid crazy. And speaking of dear old Akua, where the Hells is she?"

"We have no idea," Juniper grunted. "Scrying doesn't work, and the last time we had eyes on her was when she took Liesse above the clouds. She could be anywhere by now."

I frowned.

"She can't stay up there forever," I said. "She's got over a hundred thousand mouths to feed, and if she starts dragging civilians to altars she'll have riots on her hands."

I wasn't sure what a riot would look like a dozen leagues above solid ground, but I'd guess it wouldn't be pretty. Akua's mind was like a sack of angry, treacherous badgers but she wasn't stupid. She had pretty thick blinders on, sure, but I'd never

seen one of her schemes collapse on its own. She wouldn't be nearly as dangerous if they did.

"Ratface says she can manage two months at most," the Hellhound said. "A guess based on what she reported to your Ruling Council when she was Governess, with the assumption she was lying through her teeth on the numbers."

I'd trust the Taghreb's judgement in this. He was a middling tactician at best but when it came to supplies and logistics, there was no better man in the Fifteenth. I'd been lucky to get my hands on him back at the College, and even Juniper occasionally offered praise of his abilities. Never where he could hear, and always tempered with generous criticism about his more underhanded dealings, but that my general said anything at all was telling.

"So now we have to guess at the where she'll be coming down," I said.

"We don't know enough about what she's after to be remotely accurate," the Hellhound grunted. "Will she be after supplies? If so, Vale will likely be the target. Is she aiming to cripple the Legions in Callow, to carve a realm from the ruins of the south? If so, she must turn her eyes to Holden."

"Or she could be after sorcery," I said.

"Legion mages don't have the learning to even try to unpack that," Juniper said. "You'll need the Hierophant to write a report about possible targets."

Then I'd need Hakram to go through it and cut out all the unnecessary parts Masego would have added, I noted silently. Odds were Hierophant would write me a damned volume with an annex twice as thick. The Soninke was ridiculously wordy, when given ink and parchment. I drank deep from my cup, mood soured.

"So we have a month before the Queen of Summer can enter Creation, if Masego is to be believed," I said. "Then another month before Akua drops down from the sky to fuck everything up, as is her sacred and solemn duty."

"Busy year," Juniper snorted.

"At least Procer hasn't invaded," I said, trying for a bright side. "And no one's unleashed a demon in a year."

"High Lady Tasia did, in Wolof," the orc reminded me.

"I can't believe I have to lower my standards lower than they already are," I complained. "Well, nobody's opened a permanent portal into the Hells. There. I refused to go any lower."

"Give it time," Juniper grinned, ivory fangs flaring.

She'd meant it as a jest, but there was too much truth to it for me to laugh.

—

It would be two days before the armies marched south, beginning the trek to Dormer. We were still waiting on supplies and we had a horde of wounded to deal with. I could have begun to put a dent into the pile of urgent scrolls that no doubt awaited me, but for tonight I decided I'd done enough. My body could go on, but I was exhausted in a deeper way. There were only so many twists and turns I could take before it was too much. I slogged my way back to my tent, painfully aware that no one would be awaiting me inside. I'd passed by Ratface's quarters beforehand and ignored his many requests for me to look at the books in favour of bullying him to hand me another bottle. Juniper and I had polished off the last one after she'd finished her aragh, talking for a few hours until it got dark. It still amazed me that the two of us had gone from being at each other's throats to people who could actually enjoy the other's company, no matter how much she insisted otherwise. It was rare thing for me to seek two bottles in a day, but I had a feeling I'd need another drink if I was going to sleep at all tonight. I could still smell the incinerated corpses of the soldiers I'd failed in Arcadia, the hundreds that had died at the whim of two vicious creatures beyond my understanding.

There were Gallowborne around my tent and I spent a few moments chatting with them before going inside. They'd gotten off light from the last battle in Arcadia, and Tribune Farrier was already recruiting to fill the ranks left empty by the dead. I hoped the volunteers would understand what they were in for. I'd gotten half my retinue killed because I'd been sloppy and arrogant, and while I didn't intend to ever make that mistake again there were harder fights ahead. I wished Black was there so he could tell me about his own guard. He'd had his for decades, he must have known ways to keep them safe without making them irrelevant. Or maybe he didn't. My teacher might not share my qualms about people being killed in his name, not even people he knew. I'd gotten harsher in the last few years but I was still a long way from being iron as cold as the Black Knight. There was no candle lit in my tent, but to a Named that made no difference. That was why I saw the silhouette sitting on the edge of my cot, and though for a hopeful moment I thought it was Kilian the notion disappeared when the details sunk in.

It was a woman. Soninke, dark eyes, and while shy of pretty not exactly ugly. I'd seen her before, known her under the name of Lady Naibu. *Lady Deputy*, in Mtethwa. My hand left the grip of my sword and I inclined my head respectfully.

"Your Most Dreadful Majesty," I said.

This was Empress Malicia's own puppet, the soulless flesh simulacrum she could use to be two places at once.

"I've already told you there is no need for such formality," the Empress dismissed, using someone else's hands.

I glanced at the flaps of the tent but the Gallowborne had yet to move.

"You may consider this a private audience, Catherine," Malicia smiled.

Fuck. My tent was in the middle of an army over thirty thousand strong. The boundaries of the Fifteenth's fortified camp were set with wards Masego had designed personally. I had thousands of sharp-eyed goblins running around. And yet there she was, on my own godsdamned bed. This could have been an assassin and no one would ever have known. I wasn't ashamed to say that it was almost enough to scare me, this reminder about how far the Empress' reach went. I set the bottle on the table and ripped out the cork.

"A glass as well, if you please," the Empress said. "It has been ages since I've tried anything from Vale."

And she knew my favourite wine. I wasn't even surprised, to be honest. Black had already told me he'd had a file about me before I ever became the Squire, and it was pretty much a given the Empress would have one twice as thick somewhere in the Tower. I poured her a goblet as well and handed it to her.

"Thank you," she said. "I hear you've finally met Ranger."

I blinked.

"This is turning out a lot more civil of a conversation than I expected," I frankly said.

The meat-puppet chuckled. It would not do forget that was what I was looking at, to be taken in by the charm and the pleasantries. I was dealing with a woman who'd hollowed out a body of its immortal soul for the sake of convenient conversation.

"Did you expect me to come storming in, demanding justifications?" she said. "The Empire is a balancing act, Catherine. I do not introduce weight without careful consideration."

There was silence after that, until I realized she was still expecting to answer her first sentence. Gods, I was exhausted. And near enough to tipsy.

"She came real close to killing me," I said. "Just for suggesting I could help her in a fight, if I'm not mistaken. She's not much like the stories."

"I am not particularly fond of her myself," the Empress said. "And not only because she attempted to talk Amadeus into running me through and seizing the throne after the Conquest."

I grimaced. I'd gotten hints from Scribe there'd been undercurrents of that in the past, but never heard it so bluntly stated before. Or been sure the Empress knew of it.

"She's a monster," I said. "Bad as the Diabolist, in her own way. I don't get why Black likes her so much."

"Love," the Empress said. "It is love, my dear. She's an extraordinary creature, I'll grant that. Her little philosophy is what drew him in, and eventually what parted them."

I raised an eyebrow. That the puppet managed to see that in the still-dark tent was another detail I filed away for the future.

"Be all you can be," Malicia murmured. "Do anything you want. If someone stands in your way, end them. If you cannot, respect that rule until you can end them."

"That's just anarchy," I said. "I won't lie and say I don't break laws when it's useful, but I still recognize there's a need for them."

"It is easy to believe your whims are the only law of Creation, when you grow powerful enough," the Empress replied. "She will kill herself sooner or later, crossing something she could not afford to cross."

"She got into a death match with the Summer Queen," I said. "I doubt that'll do the trick but she won't walk it off easy."

I was getting tired of standing up with a goblet in hand, so I downed the wine and grabbed a chair. I set it to face the Empress, sagging against the wooden frame.

"Hye always did overestimate herself," Malicia shrugged. "A matter of little import, in the end. She's remained in her little hovel in the woods for decades and shows no sign of greater ambitions."

I could have told her otherwise. That Archer believed her teacher was the best thing to come along since the Gods had whelped Creation, that I'd lost three hundred soldiers because Ranger couldn't be fucked to do anything about them. But those words I kept for people I trusted. I respected the Empress, what she'd accomplished and the people she'd crushed to get where she was,



but I didn't trust her in the slightest. So instead I leant over to grab the bottle and filled my goblet. Fishing out a satchel of wakeleaf from my pocket, I grabbed my pipe as well and looked at Malicia.

"Do you mind?" I asked.

"By all means," she said. "A filthy habit, but one I tolerated in Wekesa for over forty years."

Good enough. I struck the match and lit the dragonbone pipe, taking a deep breath. Time to get to the meat of this conversation, I believed.

"I created a chivalric order," I said, and blew out a stream of smoke.

"I am aware," the puppet replied. "The obtainment of cavalry, I do not begrudge you. We've never managed to secure more horses than needed to replenish the ranks of the Thirteenth Legion without risking rebellion. But this is more than cavalry. It is a Callowan institution."

"You tried to kill it," I said bluntly. "The both of you. It failed, so I'm making use of it instead."

Malicia raised an eyebrow.

"Another decade and it would have disappeared painlessly," she said. "It takes coin to train armed men, Catherine. Their means had to be running low, especially given the numbers you managed to gather."

That was true enough, and the reason the knights had approached me in the first place. A little more honesty, then. I drank from my cup and chose my words carefully.

"I won't allow them to disappear," I said. "They're a keystone of what Callow should be."

"There lies the issue, my dear," the Empress said. "The abolition of the Imperial governorships, I can stomach. You will have to be publically given sanction for it and pay for the gain of authority, but as a tool they have effectively run their course. The forging anew of a Callowan state, however, is a different matter. In large part your people have defined themselves as nation by their resistance to outside invaders. Some of which currently occupy the country."

I pulled at the pipe, inhaled the bitter smoke and let it out.

"I've never called for rebellion against Praes," I finally said.

"That is irrelevant, and untrue besides," she replied flatly. "You've preached the destruction of the aristocracy of the Wasteland, which cannot feasibly be achieved without warfare. That is rebellion, no matter your semantics. Even if you personally never raise your banner, Catherine, you will not live forever. Your successors will inherit a well-armed and centralized ethnically Callowan state, trained at the expense of Praesi gold in the methods of the Legions. It is a certainty they will seek independence, by force of arms if need be."

I grimaced. She wasn't wrong, not entirely. Fifty years for now, if I got myself killed, I could easily see the next Governor-General call on mostly Callowan legions to give Praes the boot. And it was not the outcome I wanted, seductive as the idea of a resurgent Kingdom was sometimes. Even if they managed to win, which I knew better to assume, half the country would be ruined for a generation. And should they succeed, it would just be going back to the old cycle of invasion and death, the plague on my birthplace I'd taken it upon myself to end.

"I tried the Ruling Council," I said. "It *failed*, Malicia. Badly."

"You botched the Ruling Council," she corrected. "It could have been in the palm of your hand, but you disdained the methods to see this through. All the while chipping at Praesi authority by hanging one governor after another. It was a functional method of rule, Squire. You dislike Wasteland influence, but you seem to forget that we *won* the Conquest. I've already compromised a great deal. Almost more than is reasonable."

"You also engineered the destruction of an entire culture," I bit back. "You won, yeah. But I'm not in this seat across from you because of my sunny personality. I'm here because you want Callow to be brought into the fold without having to put down another dozen rebellion and assorted heroes. You had to know there would be costs to that."

"Then present me with alternatives," Malicia said. "I could attempt to craft one myself, in truth, but that would be a mistake. If you want to hold the power and authority you do, both granted to you by the Tower, then prove you deserve them. You are not a partner, if I have to salvage your every blunder. You are a burden."

That was harsh, but I recognized it for what it was. An invitation. An opportunity to actually become a player in Imperial politics. That wasn't the kind of offer that came twice in a lifetime. I set aside the half-empty cup and breathed out the wakeleaf smoke.

"Name me Vicequeen of Callow," I said.

"An empty title," she replied. "Your Governess-General will be doing the governing while you lead your legion."

"I won't keep it long," I said. "A few years at most. And you'll have set the precedent that the Tower appoints them."

She did not reply but studied me instead, which I took as prompting to continue.

"They have to be Callowan, that's what I ask," I said. "You still get to pick someone that won't hinder Praesi interests."

"And the knights?" she said.

"Folded into the Legions," I said. "Malicia, you and Black have occupied this country but you haven't really made use of it. You got taxes out of the governorships, but what else? If all you want is to shake a land until gold comes out, there's easier targets. You can still get your cut from the viceroy, but there's so much more that could be had. How many Callowans are really in the Legions, aside from the Fifteenth? There should be a portion in every one, even those in the Wasteland. Callow has population on par with Praes, and if you don't need to use your armies to keep it in check that population goes to fill your armies. You could get cavalry that doesn't need to eat its full weight in meat every month. Hells, you could start fielding priests with the Legions if you name someone who has pull with the House of Light. But to get all that, you need someone Callowans will actually *listen* to."

"And you can accomplish all this?" the Empress said. "Without breaking from the Tower?"

"Yes," I said hoarsely. "No matter who gets in my way. Whether they be gods or kings or all the armies in Creation."

On the second evening I'd ever spent with Black, I'd remembered a sermon from the House of Light. One about the really dangerous devils. How they gave you exactly what you wanted, and let you find your own way to the Hells with it.

I took her hand anyway, Gods forgive me.

---

*PingleBerry*

That...went far better than expected.

*stevenneiman*

Cat's dealing with someone who is viciously rational, and who has a surprisingly similar list of goals even if they're prioritized differently and pursued for different reasons. Of course, she's also just been told that this is, if not necessarily her last chance to get things right then close to it. And I'll eat my keyboard if Malicia didn't work at least one way to force Cat to do something she doesn't want to do in there somewhere.

*haihappen*

More Like Malicia is warping Cathrine perception and options so that Cathrine will do what is necessary to achieve what is "right" or "the only way". Without Malicia ever misleading oder coercing. Malicia and Black operate on from the same book on this one I believe.

*danh3107*

Real apt there at the end, deals with the devil and all that.

And another week we wai-

no wait, I'm having flashbacks to before we hit the capstone in patreon. Thanks Patrons, you guys are wonderful.

*Johnnnny*

It isn't actually Cat that's making a deal with the devil for getting everything they want here 😊

*Byzantine*

Indeed. This story will almost certainly end with her Empress, or at least having held the title.

Malicia is making a miscalculation.

*ArkhCthuul*

Agreed, yet I think they're both the Devil and the poor drive woman dealing with him. Ehm her.

*Gunslinger*

We're inching closer to the 3 chapters a week milestone too.

*rangamal thenuwara*

Yay, \$525 now. \$225 more.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Nice chapter.

## *1shot4living*

It may have gone better than expected from Cat's perspective, but Malicia still plans for her to be beaten by Diabolist. No matter how that plays out it won't end well for the agreement she just made.

## *lavos*

I was under the impression the plan was for Diabolist to make her weapon, use it against Catherine then Malicia walks in and takes it to use as deterrent. Ideally just long enough for Catherine to take the place of it.

## *Pipiemman*

Don't forget that Cat told Archer that she doesn't think that either Black or Malicia are in control. Meaning she probably doesn't actually plan on continuing to be under the Dread Empire, or at least not under Malicia

## [Evgeny](#)

Callow has a well established place in the world order : a shield of Procer against Praesi. This is not a comfortable place. Within Dread Empire Callow has no established place, so Cat can carve out one. And since a great reformation is going to happen anyway, it is much easier than it could be.

Putting it simply, Callow's perspective in Dread Empire looks much better than independently or under Procer. This makes any attempts to leave Dread Empire questionable. But playing a political game within Dread Empire is something Cat should look into.

## *Dylan Tullos*

Evgeny:

Previously, Callow's place was as Procer's shield against the Dread Empire. Now, they serve as the Dread Empire's shield against Procer. In either case, they will serve as the battlefield in a major war.

Callow's position in the Dread Empire has changed drastically. Previously, they were an occupied province that served as a source of food and money for the Wasteland. Now, though they're still under the Dread Empress, they have their own ruler and army, and they don't have Praesi governors running their cities. The problem with that kind of change is that it could go either way; even if Malicia keeps her side of the deal, there's no guarantee that her successor won't decide to put Callow back under Praesi nobles.

An independent Callow would have to fight the Dread Empire regularly, but out of seventy invasions, only two have succeeded. Would it be better to fight every generation than to submit and hope that the Dread Empire will continue its current reasonable politics? Fighting can have a high cost, but so can surrendering and hoping for the best.

*Abrakadabra*

As someone WHO hails from a country which was a battlefield for 150 years between two great powers, I Say that Cat is right.

[Evgeny](#)

@Dylan

> Now, they serve as the Dread Empire's shield against Procer.

Nope. Black said pretty clearly what Dread Empire needs Callow for. Food source. Farming. And to do farming, Callow needs to be relatively safe. One of the reasons Black operates in Free Cities is to make life miserable for Procer, so it couldn't try anything funny.

>even if Malicia keeps her side of the deal, there's no guarantee that her successor won't decide to put Callow back under Praesi nobles.

There are several way to deal with this. For example, number of nobles might be greatly decreased and existing Callow nobles need to marry some Praesi nobles, forming stable alliances.

> Fighting can have a high cost, but so can surrendering and hoping for the best.

Again, we are talking about feudal society. Even if Malicia tries to build a national state, it is a long way in the future. Feudal states are very loosely bound, and allow huge amount of infighting. Meaning that Callow has plenty of opportunities to carve out a place for itself in the Empire.

Being a major rich province in an empire definintely beats existence between two large states.

*Dylan Tullos*

Evgeny:

The stupid website won't let me reply directly to your message, so I apologize if my response is in the wrong place.

You make excellent points. There are real advantages to being a member state in an empire that isn't Stupid Evil, especially when your alternative is fighting that empire every generation. If Praes maintains a loose grip and continues to let Callow have their own ruler and preserve their own customs, that could be a deal that Callowans could live with.

However, the advantages of the deal don't remove the underlying problems. As you say, intermarriage between members of the nobility is often a valuable way of creating ties between different parts of an empire. But Callowan nobles wouldn't last a week in the Wasteland; they're simply not accustomed to a society that has turned poisoning into an art form. The underlying religious differences also make it difficult, since most Callowans would object to marrying someone who openly worships the Gods Below.

The greatest danger isn't the Praesi nobility, though. It's the real prospect that the next Dread Emperor/ess could simply declare that Malicia's changes were over. The fundamental problem of autocracy is the whims of the autocrat, and there are plenty of Praesi who would gladly support an end to the current trend of Callowan integration. If that happens, Callow would be in a very bad place, and they wouldn't have an easy way of getting out.

Also, there's no guarantee that Procer will cooperate with Black's plans to keep Callow safe and use it as a source of food for the Wasteland. Since we have "Uncivil Wars" on the horizon, the Dread Empire might not be in a position to protect Callow from Procer. In a Cold War that could turn hot, there are disadvantages to being in the middle, especially as an ally to one side.

*George*

Ehh, the way I remember it, it's not so clear cut what she plans, but I'll have to look back at it I guess. Her main goal there is usurping Diabolist's weapon, which Cat will certainly be happy to not have in the hands of Diabolist.

[nehemiahnewell](#)

She plans for Catherine to provoke Diabolists weapon, to give creation an example of it's use, but Catherine is still the tools he has at hand to seize it.

*Byzantine*

She doesn't want Diabolist to win – just to last long enough to use her weapon once.

*narcoduck*

Hahahahaaaa. Priests of Light fielded with the Legions of Terror. That's a sentence.

*Blinks*

It's a sort of end game fantasy army in most strategy games of that type..

If you can get your opposites stuff in your armies by hook or crook they tend to be massive force multipliers.

*vietnamabc*

That is serious OP stuffs like apocalypse incoming level of cooperation when the end is nigh... Cue Black/Bard going on with some outrageous plan to break the current meta Good/Evil.

*Big Brother*

I follow that principle whenever I play Command & Conquer. Send in a spy to shut down the defenses, followed by an engineer to take over the command center so I can start producing the enemy's tech. Massive increase to offensive/defensive capabilities with opposite-equal forces working side by side.

*Pipiemman*

I've wanted to mention this awhile ago, but this is the first Catherine chapter we've had in a little bit. I only noticed during her fights in Arcadia, but Cat's title is the Duchess of Moonless Nights; a moonless night is the darkest night of the months and could thus be called a black/the blackest night. So her title is pretty much Duchess of Black Nights which feel too close to Black Knight to me to be a coincidence.

What do other people think? Am I just making an over complicated conspiracy theory here?

(Also like that her last aspect is the antonym of the last aspect of her first main rival. Fall versus the Lone Swordsman's Rise)

*stevenneiman*

I'm pretty sure the black night/Black Knight thing is a coincidence, but now that you mention it the Fall/Rise thing probably isn't.

My guess as to Cat's final title is that she'll end up with some kind of synthesis of Callowan and Praesi virtues, possibly even a combination of a Callowan and a Praesi Name, like Grey Knight. She's always derived strength from the duality of being a Villain with actively benevolent intentions and occasionally heroic methods, so it would fit for her Name to reflect that.



Two Woes already have entirely new Names, and there's implied to be a very good chance that both the Black and White Knight Names will be up for grabs soon.

Of course, she might just go with a classic and simply become the Black Knight.

*nick012000*

I think it's more likely that she'll go straight from Squire to Empress of Praes.

Part of the national culture of Praes is that anyone can take the Tower, if they're driven and powerful enough, no matter what their background is. If Callow is to become truly a part of Praes, if Callow is to dream the Praesi dream, a Callowan needs to take the Tower.

*soonnandnaanssoon*

Grey Knight is, unfortunately, a Name that is not going to exist. EE stated it in the Comments section in Villainous Interlude:Decorum.

I agree with the Callowan-Praesi culturally mixed Name theory, but apparently it just isn't Grey Knight.

If she becomes the Night Knight I'll die of laughter.

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

But the Winter Knight is also the White Knight (without being necessarily Good).

*ForgottenToupee*

This is not a coincidence because nothing is ever a coincidence.

[taborask](#)

If you convert "Moon" and "Black" to numbers, and then divide the latter into the former, take the result and translate to Hebrew letters you get "MAZ". This was an aMAZing chapter.  
#TINACBNIEAC

[tetrikitty](#)

She's clearly going to be the Moonless Knight. 🤪

*goliath1303*

Nobody is going to draw the connection between Cat's title of "Duchess of Moonless Nights" and "the darkest night" which is

what one of the, I believe, Driftwood Soldiers carried Ranger when Catherine & Co. first entered Slade. Specifically he said that Archer couldn't go any further because she "smells of the darkest night" which was exclusive by her taking Cat about Ranger stealing the eye of the Prince of Nightfall every time Winter comes around.

*Emily*

Typo Thread!

" She's not \*mch\* like the stories."

[edrey](#)

so kilian is taking care of sulia, two red haired in the same room, nice. but she wants a deal? i hope is related to her heart and her oath to the winter king  
akua is looking for the moon? how can a city fly for two months? that is a lot of energy  
also why is that it looks like the empress is planning more than just a talk with cat, and killing the trueblood is in the list right? what about he name of heir or aprendice? to many questions really  
nice chapter, a little slow but with weight

[edrey](#)

right, if kilian becomes a claimant, and there is other one in liege, they would be able to find it

*stevenneiman*

I think the Truebloods were basically dealt with as of "Closure". There might still be holdouts, but I don't think that it would require any particular cleverness of Malicia's part to deal with them at this point. That ended with the power of Malicia's greatest rival within the Truebloods dead, and basically everything she worked for dismantled.

[edrey](#)

well, black would do it, if he is no killed in the free cities that is

*stevenneiman*

Typo thread:

"It's like they carved you out of [slab->slabs/a slab] of muscle."

"I can't believe I have to [lower->drop] my standards lower than they already are" Grammatically correct, but two "lower"s that close together reads weirdly.

"It was {a} rare thing for me"  
"It would not do {to} forget that was what I was looking at"  
"She's not [mch->much] like the stories"  
"your people have defined themselves as {a} nation"  
"another dozen [rebellion->rebellions]"

*Letouriste*

I don't know why, I expected that talk to go the warlock way^^

*Letouriste*

Also, why even field the armies toward liesse if the city is gone? I expected the city to fall back just after the battle. Now the move doesn't make much tactical sense...or I miss something?

*rangamal thenuwara*

Ah, good point. But it was also mentioned that with Sulia as bait they are going to make a trap for the Summer court. So I think Cat is going to make the trap where Summer first appeared? Maybe also since that area is unpopulated now?

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*TideofKhatanga*

So, now we know that Diabolist's plan involves opening a permanent portals to one of the Hells, and that Cat still doesn't know how to keep her mouth shut. She probably never will, that may be against the nature of her name at this point. The mention of fielding priests of Light and knights with blessed armour in the Legions of Terror makes me think that Cat is going to break something in the setting's overarching story. Good and Evil characters can ally in some circumstances but, for Good and Evil institutions to work together long-term and on a large scale, there's some serious reframing of the narrative to be done.

Also, Malicia has to be aware that her Squire is going for her seat now, even if said Squire doesn't know it yet. There's only one person in the setting that has the power to transform Praes and Callow as deeply as Cat plans to, and do so "without breaking from the Tower" and "no matter who stands in [her] way".

*usernamesbco*

"Well, nobody's opened a permanent portal into the Hells."

...have you ever wanted to dope slap a fictional character?

*BumblingBehemoth*

This is more of a question for last chapter but is it possible that Hakrams Name could be transitional like Cats and with the death of Captain he could acquire that Name? Only thinking this because they both serve similar roles to Black and Cat

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Imo, Nauk feels a closer parallel to Sabah than Hakram. Both suffer(ed) from a berserk-state (Red Rage Vs Cursed), both are deeply loyal to their respective leader figures, both have had experienced suppressing their berserk state via following orders from their leaders (Nauk in book 2 in Marchford after Nilin's death Vs Sabah as the Cursed), both are heavy-hitters. Add to the fact that the name Captain was sort-of ripped out of an Orc god, the Name sort of comes back full circle if Nauk becomes the new Captain.

*BumblingBehemoth*

Yep yours is better lol

*crazedmoth*

On the other hand, Sabah was always incredibly powerful, she had a name before becoming Captain, and she was highly relevant to the then-protagonist, Black. Nauk... hasn't really been important to Catherine or the story for a very long time.

*e 4 ~ , \ = S - ^ . . i v , \ . J . W . . .*

I wouldn't expect Malicia to act mad or angry in this conversation because it would be counterproductive to her purpose, but i would expect some clever barb or twofold saying that Cat would realize afterwards and go dayumn grill you scary. And yea i am not counting the implied threat from her being in her tent uninvited, that's too obvious.

That's kinda what we have been told to expect from Malicia so i don't think that im wrong to expect to expect it. Unless ofcourse such a thing exist and im unable to find it same as Cat untill it is revealed which would be awesome but i doubt it. / TopsyRambleOff (Perhaps the author can add such a thing afterwards when she/he is editing this story to publish it)

[reveen](#)

" but i would expect some clever barb or twofold saying that Cat would realize afterwards and go dayumn grill you scary."

I wouldn't because Malicia is a professional political operator and not a hack trying to be clever.

e 4 ~ , \ = S - ^ . . i v , \ . J . W . . .

Except that's exactly what she did. Git rekt.

*werafdsaew*

She told Malicia she'll give up the Vicequeen title in a few years, but she told thief that she's not surrendering authority ever again. So she's lying, but to whom?

*RoflCat*

To be precise, the conversation was

"By the end of the year, there will be no Praesi governor in Callow,"

"I'm not talking about the governors," she said. "I'm talking about the Ruling Council."

"It's done," I said tiredly. "I tried, it failed. Come sunup the two of them will be dead and I'm not surrendering that authority ever again."

I think by this Cat means that no Praesi influence is going to rule Callow, which she does reiterate to Malicia here:

"They have to be Callowan, that's what I ask," I said. "You still get to pick someone that won't hinder Praesi interests.")

[reveen](#)

Uh oh. I think Squire just fucked up!

It's very likely the Malicia already anticipated what Catherine wanted, then put on a song and dance about being annoyed with her. All so she can manipulate Cat into thinking she just convinced the Dread Empress to make a deal. Malicia just turned Catherine and Callow in it's entirety into her direct puppet to use in her own ambitions as she sees fit, while giving Cat the illusion of being in control.

It's important to remember that for all she's accomplished Cat's still a kid vs an adult who's been at this her entire life. At the age Cat was getting into back alley fistfights for money Malicia was pulling off tricks like this in her sleep. All Cat's hard edged practicality makes her precocious, not a peer.

Here she basically just doomed her ambitions for a stable Callow under Praes from the start. Praes isn't going to stand for it in the long run, either New Evil takes and Callow is gradually chipped away, or it fails and whoever takes over from Malicia burns it all to the ground.

Meanwhile, this deal basically obligates the entirety of Callow's forces to Malicia's side in the coming Uncivil Wars. I hope Cat enjoys fighting other people's battles for them.

*werafdsaew*

Remember her chat with Thief? Praes will burn the land on their way out if Procer succeeds in liberating Callow, and she does not want that, so she's obligated to fight Procer anyways. I also doubt that Malicia is going to be a part of the Uncivil war; it looks to me that that the Uncivil Wars is going to be about who is going to succeeds Malicia after she's killed for whatever reason.

*blarg2429*

Agreed. They're called the Uncivil Wars, after all— an obvious play-on-words in relation to the term "civil war."

*Dylan Tullos*

reveen:

I agree that Catherine is way out of her league negotiating with Malicia, but this isn't a terrible deal. Yes, Catherine is obligated to fight for New Evil in the coming Uncivil Wars, but she was always going to fight Classic Evil. And since she's going to be on Malicia's side, the Dread Empress won't object to her restoring the Knightly Orders or creating a Legion with a majority of Callowans.

I agree that, in the long term, New Evil is going to be bad for Callow. However, the long, proud Praesi history of backstabbing and civil war suggests that there will come a time when the Wasteland is too busy fighting itself to pay attention to Callow. Once that happens, the reforged Knightly Orders and the new Callowan Legions can drive the Praesi out and restore the Kingdom. Catherine may be drinking the New Evil Kool-Aid, but there's no guarantee that future Callowans will magically forget their deep and abiding hatred for the Praesi, especially once they have the strength to do something about it.

The Lone Swordsman's rebellion was morally flawed because it relied on mind control; it was flawed in practical terms because he didn't have an army that could fight the Legions. Malicia seems to be willing to let Catherine build that kind of army. Once enough Callowans have served in the Legions, the Praesi won't enjoy the qualitative advantage that made the Conquest possible. Even if she doesn't intend to, Catherine may be the person who makes Callowan freedom possible, despite her own defeatism.

[reveen](#)

The problem with the deal is that it shines a giant spotlight on Catherine and her actions. Before she had a great deal of freedom to get away with shit because she's just one piece of

the political structure of Callow's occupation. Now she's going to be the direct contact between the Tower and Callow's rulership and expected to make the kingdom toe the party line. Malicia is going to want to grind down Catherine's idealism and make her more of her servant and Catherine can't do a thing against it because now if she's pushes back against the Tower then all of Callow is pushing back against it.

Catherine was better off trying to make the system work as just a disciple of Black, building up her reputation and slowly infecting the system with her agents until Malicia's position becomes less stable and Catherine can take power easier. This is too much too fast and I genuinely don't think it's occurred to Catherine that her ambitions would need decades and decades to achieve like it did with the Empress herself.

Also, I suspect that if Malicia survives to fight the Uncivil Wars or the Crusade she's going to try to use Callow as a bulwark and Catherine as her attack, and in the process grind down Callow's population, armies, and resources

### Evgeny

I think you mix Callow culture and Callow state. Cat doesn't give a damn about the second, and rightfully so – states are in a constant state of flux in feudal settings and doubly so in fantasy feudal setting. Callow culture, on the other hand, is something Cat want to preserve, and Malicia doesn't have much objections against it. In fact, Callow culture, with less emphasis on backstabbing, might be preferable for Malicia.

Admittedly, Malicia wants Callow culture to change so it better suited Praes political structure. But again, cultures always change, and fitting into Dread Empire is not a bad deal on its own.

### *Dylan Tullos*

reveen:

You're right, there are big costs associated with being Vicequeen. Catherine won't have nearly the same freedom of action that she had before. But that's a natural consequence of acquiring more power.

As a disciple of Black, Catherine couldn't abolish the system of Praesi governors. She couldn't restore Knightly Orders and preserve that vital aspect of Callowan culture. Now that she's Vicequeen, Malicia is going to demand a price for everything she does, but she has the power to do far more than before.

Ultimately, this isn't about Catherine or Malicia. Both of them are going to die sooner or later. What matters most right now for Callow is repairing the damage Praesi occupation has done to Callowan culture and building a military force that can protect Callow's people. In time, that military force could be turned against the Dread Empire. Without a modernized, capable army, and a people with restored confidence in Callow's ability to win military victories in the field, no rebellion is possible. With a revived sense of Callowan pride and trained soldiers; well, Catherine may be a dedicated collaborator, but she won't live forever. Hopefully her successor will have more courage.

Evgeny:

However much Malicia may appreciate having subjects who don't view scheming and backstabbing as the most honorable of professions, she's rightfully troubled by the fact that most Callowans view her as an unholy abomination in service to the vile Gods Below. Traditional Callowan culture has many things to say about the Dread Empire, none of them good.

The problem with separating Callowan culture from the Callowan state is that being Callowan requires some form of resistance to the occupation. No proud people could endlessly submit to foreign rule and foreign taxes without losing their pride and identity. By allowing Catherine to replace the Praesi governors, Malicia has agreed to let Callow be ruled by a Callowan, which is a minimum requirement for national self-respect.

Callowans probably don't care that much about which dynasty rules them. But there's a world of difference between disinterest in the internal squabbles of Callow's nobles, all of whom worship the Gods Above, and being forced to submit to your hated foreign enemies. The Praesi are always waiting their chance to stab Malicia in the back, but the Callowans are much more likely to stab her in the front. There's no magical way for Malicia to keep the elements of Callowan culture that she likes, such as loyalty and honesty, without also keeping the elements she doesn't like, such as the proud Callowan tradition of fighting the Dread Empire.

[Evgeny](#)

@Dylan

>Traditional Callowan culture has many things to say about the Dread Empire, none of them good.

Traditional Russian culture has many things to say about their government, none of them good. The internal opposition



is close to non-existent, the clowns wearing this suit are just that: clowns.

Same potentially applies here. In feudal society, a peasant only cares about his immediate suzerain.

As for potential rebellion... The only thing Malicia needs to do is to forge strong economical ties between Callow and Dread Empire. Doing so was the idea anyway. With strong economical ties, noone in power would find a rebellion profitable, ergo, won't support it. So, Dread Empire would need only to deal with occasional heroes.

*MetruX*

I don't know, but seems to me that everyone is forgetting something that Malicia said, showing her thoughts. You see, we talk about what will happen after Cat... But Malicia herself made her Name crippled, to give Praes to the institutions, instead of to the Tirant. The big thing is: Malicia KNOWS there will be an after her, and maybe both of them knew where Cat will go after Vicequeen... I mean, both sides agreed that the precedent is that THE TOWER chooses the title holder, not Malicia herself. Thus, Cat can not only be aiming for that, knowingly or not, but Malicia probably knows that, and knows, as much as Black does, that to "win" she'll need her dream to survive her. Likely, Cat will succeed both their dreams.

[nehemiahnewell](#)

No, Malicia intends to live forever. She wants long term stability, but that because she intends to be alive to enjoy it. The legacy dream is Black's, not Malicia's. Though Malicia only gets what she wants if Black gets what he wants – as everyone has implied, any 'true' visionary could overthrow her – she's more Chancellor than Dread Empress in a lot of ways, and that isn't a role of direct power.

Indirect power in spades, but it requires that everyone else keeps playing your game, rather than flipping the table. People like the Black Knight, they're the ones who stop the table flippers. Malicia isn't doing it on her own, though.

*Dylan Tullos*

nehemiahnewell:

I don't see much point to Villains having an extended lifespan. I suppose that in theory they can live forever, but in practice most of them don't last as long as normal people.

Being Dread Empress and wanting to live forever, or even a really long time, are mutually incompatible goals. There are

an extraordinary number of people with the motive and the means to plot the assassination of the Dread Empress, and sooner or later one of them is going to succeed. A truly brilliant Empress might live for a century or two, but the sheer number of enemies and plots ensures that you'll slip up eventually.

Actually living for thousands and thousands of years means abandoning power and deliberately isolating yourself from anyone who could hurt you. Black has accepted a shortened lifespan as the logical price of having the opportunity to change the Dread Empire, while Malicia hasn't yet realized that no amount of brilliance can keep her safe forever.

Al

I see the best scenario as making the callowans like the sonninke & taghreb: part of the empire, but with distinct culture.

the way to seal the deal is to have callow (probs cat) climb the tower, as someone said before.

if callowans dream of the tower and callow is part of the empire, the story of praes changes.

pras-callow is food sufficient, since callow is no longer needed to be grasped. the question would be the new story... is it a

praes+callow vs procer cold war fought by proxies (both in magical detente thanks to D's weapon & C's ladder)?

or does the p+c pop keep growing and now procer/levant/other needs to be grasped?

and what about the hierarch!

good work ee.

pleasure to read you

*miles*

Holy smokes. A few days of reading, and I've burned through the entire story to this point. I don't know how I'm going to be able to wait for the next chapter, now that waiting has been forced upon me.

*Lhomp*

For me it seems obvious that Akua will strike during the fight against the queen of summer.

That gives her an uber-Fae to power her weapon, or just an occasion to kill her enemies in one strike.

*arancaytar*

Shut up

*Shut up*

SHUT THE HELLS UP CATHERINE

*Dylan Tullos*

Fighting Fate is one thing, but taunting Fate like that is just stupid.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

The thing about Callowan national identity being tied to the resistance of foreign invaders is that Callowans have NEVER had a palatable alternative to constantly defending themselves from would-be conquerors. A Callow that sees even two or three generations where the entire country doesn't get wrecked, and instead the professional soldiers keep the country from being wrecked might well be more palatable to the mid-level merchant from the Weaver's Guild...or even the six hundred bottom-level weavers just interested in their families having enough to eat, and their children having an opportunity at something better than they themselves had.

Give the people that, and I think you'll find a cosmopolitan disinterest in which Gods are worshipped by the ruling elite will become the norm for most people.

[vuthuha912](#)

I really think that Praes should have integrated the culture between the two countries more than they currently did. Yet, the problem is the Truebloods, they are too dangerous for Callowan. It is like delivering a goat to a tiger. Trueblood will eat Callowan alive. I always wonder if you have a country that has a tradition of cavalry then why don't you use it. Probably because Black was afraid that they will rebel if he tried too soon after the Conquest. It takes time to forge a better relationship between Praes and Callow, the foster system, educational system, and military are supposed to be the tools for integration.

If the Imperial Governors were doing their jobs instead of trying to line their pocket then Praes would have succeeded. Urg... those short-sighted fools.

The only thing that keeps Praes from success is Praes and its culture of backstabbers. The moment those two Wastelanders on the Ruling Council attempt a coup, I know that Praes is not ready. No truly clear sight people would decide to have a coup at a time like that. They should have tried to work with the rest and aid the Legions to put down the rebellion immediately. Forging loyalty and a relationship with the other side are more important for the future of Praes. Showing Callow that Praes would keep their end of the bargain and that they can be trusted to work for the benefit of both Callow and Praes. But no, they just have to backstab for such meager and short-term benefits.

Black and Malicia need to spread their ideology to others. Maybe they already did with the Legions but the state bureaucrats seem

to lag behind in this matter. Seriously, if only two people are seriously trying to change Praes then no wonder you guys fail.

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## Chapter 34: Talks

*"Tonight we must speak of Callow, that stubborn graveyard of empires. Princes and princesses of Procer, we must now admit this truth: we have lost an entire kingdom to peasants and bandits."*

– Beginning of First Princess Éloïse of Aequitan's speech to the Highest Assembly, on the subject of withdrawal from occupied Callow

"HAIL!"

Three thousand swords rose in salute, bare steel shining under the sun. I'd read about this, in what few records of the knightly orders still remained. A steel avenue, they called it. An old tradition born under Elizabeth Alban when the Queen of Blades had annexed almost a fourth of what was now Procer in a series of lightning-quick campaigns. It had only ever been used to honour ruling kings and queens of Callow, and now I was being greeted with one. The bluntness of that defiance was almost refreshing, since they had no idea I'd just been granted vicequeenship of the Callow. I'd talked a good game to the Empress, but I wasn't unaware that by founding the Order of Broken Bells I'd saddled a hungry tiger. Now I had to ride it, or be dragged down and devoured. I wondered if rulers ever truly managed to be in control, sometimes. Malicia and Black certainly gave off the impression they were, but how much of that was a front? The more authority I gained the less I felt like I held the reins.

Brandon Talbot looked better than he had last time I'd seen him, a filthy prisoner in the underground gaols of Marchford. His dark beard was cropped closely, his hair combed with care and he now stood with his back straight. Proudly. I had no trouble believing a woman like the Countess Marchford had thought he would make a worthy successor to her title. His plate was of Callowan make, of lesser steel than what the Imperial forges could make but covered in hymns of the House of Light. Old, it was easy to tell, but recently polished and very well-maintained. There was no telling it had been used in battle a mere few days ago, much less against the likes of the Summer Court. I strode down the steel avenue and he fell in at my side.

"I hear congratulations are in order," I said.

The man inclined his head.

"I will only remain as Grandmaster of the order for a few years, Your Grace," he replied. "Until a younger candidate can be raised to take the title."

He'd been elected by acclaim, as I understood it, in large part because he'd been the one mad enough to walk into Marchford unarmed back when Juniper was running it. That kind of risk-taking always earned some respect from soldiers, in my experience, especially with the kind of stakes he'd been playing for. Another hail sounded when we passed the end of the twin rows, headed for open pavilion that was the command tent for the Order of Broken Bells. A pair of tall banners trailed the wind to the sides, showing a pair of cracked bronze bells set on black.

"We would have flown your banner as well, Your Grace, but your quartermaster informed us you have none," he said.

I kinda wished I'd been there for that conversation, Ratface of all people trying to explain to a highborn that I might have a demesne but I'd not actually bothered to get any of the symbols a proper noble considered their due.

"Never got around to it," I said, entering the pavilion.

Robber had put a goat skull on a pike and tried to pass it for my heraldry, but Hakram had him assigned to latrine duty for a week in reprisal. Ah, Adjutant. He'd taken to my petty kind of justice like a wolf to a limping lamb.

"House Talbot has been dissolved, but it would be an honour for you to claim our sigil," the man suggested.

An arched silver bridge set on blue, if I remembered correctly. There was worst heraldry to be had – the rulers of Hedges had sheep as theirs, which boggled my mind – but it wasn't *mine*.

"That won't be necessary," I said politely.

No wine at the table in here. Right. Callowans didn't usually start drinking until the evening, and and it wasn't even noon yet. Even if the knights had been dispersed in the countryside for over two decades, I couldn't help but notice their chairs were nicer than mine. Except the one I'd looted from Summer, anyway. That one was sinfully comfortable and I actually slept better in it than my own cot. I took the seat at the head at the table and Grandmaster Talbot seated himself at my right. I slapped down a sheath of leather on the table and took out the parchments within, Aisha's beautiful Lower Miezian cursive filling it.

"You've officially been granted the rank of commander in the Fifteenth Legion, Grandmaster Talbot," I said. "You've got more three times the men under you a commander usually does but you don't qualify for legate rank, much less general."

"Because I am Callowan," he smiled thinly.

"Because you never went through the War College," I corrected. "You don't know shit about Legion tactics. You'll still counted as a member of the general staff, though, so you'll be in the high-level briefings as the commander of our cavalry contingent."

Aisha had bitterly complained about the bureaucratic nightmare that was getting a mere commander that kind of clearance, but she'd gotten it done anyway. I could have just waved around my seal and gotten it done on my personal authority as the Squire, but I didn't want to go that far unless I was forced to. Juniper already gave me enough lectures about how far we'd strayed from traditional Legion structure, and it would look better to the rest of the generals out there if I at least pretended I cared about the proper way things were done. The noble read through the papers, then glanced up.

"This states I have been given leave to organize the Order's command hierarchy as I wish," he said.

"The Empire doesn't have a precedent for a cavalry contingent this large," I said. "Even the Thirteenth Legion only has a thousand riders."

He nodded slowly.

"Knightly orders were limited to a thousand full-fledged knights, under House Fairfax," Grandmaster Talbot said. "One of the reasons there was such a wide variety."

I was a little amused he was tiptoeing around the reason for that. Under the Alban dynasty the orders had been much larger, but there'd been a bunch of small-scale conflicts between them and nobles, both sides arguing the other was overreaching their authority. Triumphant had razed the whole squabble to the ground, but when it had begun to pop up under Eleanor Fairfax's grandson he'd stripped the orders of their fortress holdings and severely limited their size. A dozen of small orders was a lot less dangerous to the nobility than three or four large ones, and easier to fold under the command of the crown when invaders came knocking. Traditionally it was the crown prince or princess who'd held command, a tradition that ended when Juniper's mother had shattered the charges of the Shining Prince at the Fields of Streges right before a goblin slit his throat.

"Banners of a thousand," Brandon finally said. "Under my ultimate command. We still have many squires in our ranks, and a single battle was not enough to season them."

"Get it written properly," I ordered. "And get the parchments to Staff Tribune Bishara before nightfall. She'll be expecting them."

"A very talented woman," Talbot said approvingly.

There was a look in the man's eyes I wasn't unfamiliar with. Well, Aisha *was* exceedingly pretty. I doubted she'd be interested in a Callowan twice her age, but him looking wouldn't hurt anyone as long as he kept it mannerly.

"A detachment of five hundred could be arranged to serve as your personal guard," he said, putting away the parchments.

"I already have a retinue," I said, raising an eyebrow. "Red shields, golden noose on them? They're hard to miss."

"The 'Gallowborne', yes," he said. "Criminals and Praesi."

"I've trained a lot of them myself," I said calmly. "On foot, I'd put any of them against three of yours. I doubt there's any company on Calernia that's been through rougher fights."

"They're sharp men, I'm sure," the Grandmaster said. "But a match for five hundred knights of Callow?"

I drummed my fingers against the table.

"The Gallowborne," I said, forcing the calm to stay even as the temperature in the pavilion descended sharply, "are my retinue. They've been mine since I snatched them from the gallows, Talbot. They've bled for me. They've *died* for me. And they will remain at my side until they can no longer serve."

I was uncomfortable with how possessive that had sounded, and the bearded man did not speak of the matter any further. Eager for a change of subject, I cleared my throat.

"You told Adjutant you needed to speak with me," I said.

There was a reason it wasn't Hakram handing him the paperwork, and it wasn't because I'd been looking for a sword salute. Though I wasn't complaining I'd gotten one, either.

"There are matters it has been brought to my attention you left unfinished, Your Grace," he said. "I understand we are at war, but they still need to be dealt with in haste."

I leaned against the back of my chair.

"I'm listening," I allowed.

"House Foundling," he said, and grimaced. "Forgive me, but that it an orphan's name. It is not fit for the ruling dynasty of Callow."

"What a funny coincidence," I drawled. "I *am* an orphan."

"You share that name with thousands of others," he said. "Your Grace, you must consider the difficulties this will cause. Taking a reigning name is in order."

I drummed my fingers against the table, again. A sliver of my opinion of this whole bullshit must have shown on my face, because the knight had to repress a flinch.

"As of last night, I am the Vicequeen of Callow by official sanction of Her Dread Majesty Malicia, First of Her Name," I said. "Not *queen*, though. My successor to the title will be chosen by the Tower, when I see fit to surrender that position. There's no need for a fancy dynastic name."

"Your Grace-" he began.

"The title will remain in Callowan hands," I interrupted flatly. "Compromise was reached. Leave it at that. To be frank, Talbot, you're not really qualified to weigh in about the shit that goes on that high up. I've survived dealing with the High Lords by stabbing them repeatedly and publicly until they got cautious. They would swallow *you* whole and spit out your bones."

He seemed a little offended by the brusqueness of that, but he'd have to make his peace with it. What I'd said was very much true. If I put this poor bastard in a room with Akua Sahelian she'd have him on permanent puppet strings before a quarter hour had passed.

"Your line will still rule Marchford in perpetuity," he said. "The name matters, Your Grace."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"I became Named as Catherine Foundling," I said flatly. "I will die with that name as well."

"There must be records of your birth parents," he tried desperately. "A Deoraithe name will not be as well received, but it is still something."

"As far as I'm concerned, the closest thing I'll ever have to a father is down south killing fools," I replied coldly. "And he doesn't have a last name. Born a farmer, you see. As for the people who birthed me, they are strangers. I owe them nothing and will take nothing from them."



The man bit his tongue, but it was clear he wanted to argue.

"I am not a noble, Talbot," I said. "I don't really like them, as a rule. No offence meant to you in particular. I've bled for every inch of power I have, and the notion of anybody just... inheriting theirs has grown repulsive to me. There will be no restoration of highborn power in Callow."

"You will still reign, Your Grace," he said. "You must realize that certain measures have to be taken to cement your legitimacy."

I peered at him closely, and read the deeper hesitation there.

"Oh Gods," I said. "You want me to get married."

"The baron of Hedges has a son your age," he pressed on. "All the branches of House Fairfax were exterminated after the Conquest, but there are remains of other ancient lines. Duchess Kegan is the foremost remaining Callowan noble, and a direct marriage alliance with the House of Iarsmai through a cousin would yield great benefits."

"You can't be serious," I said, mildly horrified.

"I am given to understand you might prefer the company of women," he said delicately. "There are certain miracles known to the House of Light that could make such an arrangement feasible."

"I go both ways," I replied faintly. "But that's not the issue here. I have a – I'm not looking for anyone, Talbot."

"I have heard that you keep company with a Duni, yes," he hinted. "You would not be the first ruler of Callow to keep a paramour, if you'll forgive my crassness."

Merciless Gods. I was eighteen, so I supposed in the eyes of the remaining nobles I was fair game in the marriage alliance market. Callowans got married a lot later than Praesi, since unlike the Wastelanders we didn't actually *breed* bloodlines, but nobles did tend to be ahead of the curve in that regard.

"That's not happening," I said flatly. "And this conversation is over."

I wasn't getting saddled with a lordling or a child anytime soon, no matter what people might want. I honestly wasn't sure I wanted to ever have kids, and even if I did make that decision down the line it wouldn't be to pat some fucking aristocrats on the back. There were a lot of things I was willing to bargain with, but who shared my bed wasn't one of them. Brandon Talbot's lips thinned, but he did not argue.

"I'll get heraldry done," I sighed, throwing him a bone as I rose to my feet. "Get the paperwork to Aisha, Grandmaster. We'll speak again at the staff meeting."

I could not get out of that pavilion quickly enough.

—

I'd chosen to hold this meeting under the stars, since I felt most comfortable at night these days. The bonfire crackled, flames high and occasionally licking at the roots of the tall oak that oversaw our little quiet corner of Creation. Masego had slapped down some complicated-looking wards the moment he'd arrived, not even bothering to vocalize an incantation. His new Name came with some perks apparently. I took a moment to let this all settle in. It was the first time all five of us were in the same place, in Creation at least.

Archer was seated on a wide branch above us, because she never wasted an occasion to literally look down on everyone else, and with a knife in hand she was carving what looked like like a sphere out of dark wood. Her ochre skin looked ever darker at night, and though she'd left her longcoat and silver mail behind in favour of a woollen brown tunic and trousers, she'd kept the dark green scarf that she usually covered her lower face with around her neck. I had a much better look at the curves on her, without the armour on, and she winked when she saw me looking. I turned away. Because it was in Archer's nature to be a bloody pest at all times, she made a point out of dropping the wood shavings on Masego's head until he got tired of asking her to stop and put up a translucent pane of sorcery over his head.

Hierophant himself looked... strange. Familiar yet different. He wore a black cloth blindfold over his glass eyes, but sometimes bits of red and yellow light could be glimpsed through it. His hair was still long and braided but the shining trinkets he'd once worn in them had been replaced by dull bars of iron carved with runes. His usually colourful robes had been traded a black tunic that made him look like a chubby crow when he was sitting, but actually lent him something of a presence when he was on his feet. The Legion-issue boots were an amusing last touch to the ensemble, worn down as they were. His fingers kept twitching, as if to reach out for something no one else could see.

Hakram sat at his side, his heavy plate made something else entirely by the ravages of the battles we'd been through. The goblin steel had been darkened by Summer flame, twisted by heat not of Creation, and though it still fit with padding under the metal the appearance reminded me of the steps leading to the Tower. The obsidian that had been warped by sorcery, shaped into silhouettes of weeping men and women one must tread on to rise. Adjutant had gone through the crucible of fire and become stronger for it. His Name pulsed steady to my senses, firm yet

oddly serene. His hand of bones was eerily still, reeking of dark sorcery anchored into his very Name. His eyes were dark and still as ponds, the fangs glinting in firelight still bloody from his supper.

Thief sat across the fire from me. I'd never been in her presence long enough to notice before, but she didn't hold herself like a commoner. I'd had etiquette lessons at the orphanage and I recognized the same marks on her, in the way she kept her wrists straight and her back as if leaning against a high chair. Her leathers were loose, but I could tell we shared a body shape. She was taller than me, since it was basically divine mandate that everyone but goblins be, but not by as much as the other. Dark hair and blue-grey eyes that were always moving, always looking for movement. Pale fingers were toying with a carving knife that was clearly sapper issue: she has wandering hands, this one, and a habit of picking up knickknacks. Must have been part of her Name, because it seemed too compulsive for a mere habit.

Five Named were sitting around the fire. That was, I knew, no small thing. Even more now that Ranger had tossed us a name, turning the curse of the Queen of Summer into something more. The Woe, she'd called us. It had felt like a pivot then and still did now, the beginning of something larger. What it would be, I was almost scared to find out. Hakram tossed up a wineskin at Archer, which was enough to distract her from pissing off Masego for a bit. I took that as my cue to begin.

"So, on our first outing together we robbed Summer of what appears to be its literal sun, before capturing a princess of the blood," I said. "I'm not one for omens, but it strikes me as a good note to begin on."

"Lies and violence," Archer cheered, dropping the wineskin on Masego's shield.

The Soninke mage snatched it, taking a gulp and coughing when it went down the wrong pipe. Apparently a fresh Name didn't mean he could handle drink any better. Good to know. I felt Thief glance at me, raising any eyebrow at what Archer had said.

"Archer is a horrid wench, and whatever she says about mottos is not to be trusted," I stated.

"Well, it's still better than sullen," the Named in question mused.

There was a heartbeat of silence.

"I expected something more... professional," the Thief finally said.

I raised an eyebrow.

"Did the Lone Swordsman run that kind of crew?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"No," the heroine conceded, "but your band was a step ahead of us the whole time. I always thought it would be rather business-like, on your side."

"You thought we were a step ahead?" Masego croaked, wiping his mouth.

Hakram snorted.

"We strolled from one disaster to another, trying to keep the fires from spreading," the orc said, sounding amused. "Mostly fires not of our making, I'll add."

"Haven't been in this outfit for long," Archer said, "but it hasn't struck me as overburdened with plans."

"That's going a little far," I intervened, mildly offended.

"We got into Skade by writing on a scrap of parchment that we could, Catherine," she pointed out. "Don't get me wrong, I'm on board with our whole 'that's stupid enough they'll never see it coming' way of going at it. But masterful schemers we are not."

"You had us dead to rights at Summerholm," Thief frowned.

"We only understood what was happening after the city was on fire," Masego said.

"And we got blamed for that, after," Hakram added.

"Everything in Liesse unfolded according to your plan," Thief tried.

"Arguably. Though she did get killed," Adjutant said.

Archer's eyes swerved to me.

"Wait, you *died*? Have you been undead this while time?" she asked. "You don't look it."

"Resurrected," I replied.

She looked even more dubious.

"You're a villain, Cat," she said. "That's not exactly in your wheelhouse."

"Yeah, the Hashmallim weren't real pleased about it either," I grunted. "They threw a fucking fit."

"Is that how that happened?" Thief frowned. "I did wonder. You talked a Choir into breathing second life into you?"

"Talked is a strong word," I mused.

"We've settled on 'bullied'," Hierophant contributed helpfully.

"You bullied," the Thief said slowly, "the entire Choir of Contrition. Into resurrecting a villain actively trying to oppose them."

"Not even the Lady of the Lake fucks around with angels," Archer said approvingly. "That's actually impressive."

"Don't bring Ranger into this," I grunted. "She came a heartbeat away from slicing my throat open the only time we met."

"Oh, she's always like that," the other woman dismissed. "Don't take it personally. She once threw Tinkles out a window for hitting on a trader girl instead of practicing his stances."

"I'm glad he was sloppy, then," I admitted. "Hunter was hard enough to put down as he was."

Thief blinked, then looked up at the woman on the branch.

"I forgot," she said. "You are an apprentice of the Ranger as well. You must have known him well."

"He was only around for a few years before joining up with your little rebellion," Archer shrugged. "Of the Lady's five pupils he was always the odd one out. Not surprised he ran off, though it was still monumentally stupid."

"He was," Thief began, looking for a diplomatic word, "different."

"Half-naked," I said. "Half-naked is the term you're looking for."

"I never minded the sights, Catherine," Archer grinned. "The man had a body worth a stare. The bells, though, and the tattoos? Gods, it was like he was trying to ruin his looks."

"The tattoos weren't a Refuge tradition?" Thief asked, looking surprised.

"Is *that* what he said?" Archer snorted. "No, they aren't."

Masego cleared his throat politely.

"This conversation is both baffling and horribly tedious to me," he informed us. "I believe you were addressing us, Catherine?"

"Right," I said, and immediately delegated. "Hakram."

The tall orc straightened, putting aside the wineskin he'd been hogging this whole time. Thief had thawed a bit when we talked, but her guard went right back up when she turned to him. There was story there, I thought. Adjutant must have had one of his little talks with her at some point. I trusted him, so I wouldn't meddle, but I'd have some questions to ask my second.

"We currently have two threats that must be dealt with," Hakram gravelled. "The first is Summer Court and its queen. The second is Akua Sahelian, lately the Diabolist."

"The villain that let the devils loose on Liesse," Thief said, eyes gone cold.

"That's the one," I said. "And believe me, devils are some of the milder stuff she's thrown at us in the past. You've gone to the city yourself, I hear. You saw what she's up to."

"Some sort of ritual," the skinny Callowan said. "It involves Deoraithe that are part of the Watch, and that's about all I know."

I glanced at Masego, who somehow picked up on it. That was going to keep being creepy for a while.

"While I've not conducted such experiments myself, I've read the notes my father has on the Watch," the mage said. "They are connected to a deity of unknown nature, and gain their supernatural abilities by binding themselves to it through rituals they call Oaths."

"Our best guess at the moment is that the Diabolist is trying to get at the deity through them," I said.

"Considering the massive size of the array she created in the city," Masego said, "she will need at least a lesser god to empower it. The scale of the effect might be comparable to that of the creation of the Kingdom of the Dead."

"Liesse is also currently flying," Hakram said. "Which will make it difficult to assault. That aside, the city's current location is a mystery."

I met Thief's eyes.

"I'll have my people look into it," she said.

I nodded.

"Much as I hate giving Akua a reprieve, she's not the most pressing threat at the moment," I said. "Summer's out for blood,

and its Queen will be crossing into Creation about a month from now. What we can do about her is not inspiring. Masego?"

The dark-skinned mage smiled thinly.

"Given at least three days of preparation, I can buy us a quarter bell before she breaks through my wards and massacres every single one of us," he said.

"That's reassuring," Thief said cuttingly.

"Not great, I'll admit, but we still have two cards in hand," I said. "First we have the Princess of High Noon, which she *really* needs if she doesn't want to get knifed by Winter after we're all dead. And we have the sun, courtesy of your kleptomania."

Thief looked faintly amused, but did not reply.

"So," I smiled. "We've got the whole night, and wine I really doubt was legally acquired. Let's see if we can think of something to avoid dying horrible, horrible deaths. The floor's open, my friends."

---

*danh3107*

Great things happen around campfire circles after dark, great and terrible things.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

Well, time to trawl through the older chapters to find the first time the Calamities all sat around a fire.

*sheer\_falacy*

I think that's going to be nontrivial, since Assassin isn't exactly around them a lot. Or is in disguise for it, which is equivalent for us.

*snarky*

Assassin was disguised as the campfire in all the flashbacks

*stevenneiman*

In Ranger's first interlude, all of the Calamities except possibly Assassin were in one room together. However, I have no idea if Assassin was there, and I don't think Scribe was. There was also the Name dream where Black first met Wekesa before he

was the Warlock, but I don't think that any of the others were there.

*ArkhCthuul*

My thoughts exactly.

Another food for thought chapter.

I love it when I have a lot of finished ones to read...

*Adarsh*

I wonder how Ranger stacks up against her mother.

And honestly the fact that he is confident about holding off a god for any period of time tells me his power has increased quite a bit.

*stevenneiman*

I think he's at his strongest against anything that vaguely resembles a god, capital or lower case g. Besides, that's with preparation, and he hadn't even HAD the Name long enough to prepare anything with it when he first went up against the Queen of Summer.

*JK*

Hearing it in their words, the way Cat and friends have managed to pull things together seems suspiciously like the divine providence that we keep hearing about and keeps heroes working. Plus the resurrection... there might be something more afoot than just being skilled.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

We already know that this is Cat's Story, because we're reading it. It's a Story about Stories being pitted against one another to fit an atypical Story. There has to be the overarching Guidelines to the story, but the Story itself takes a new shape. So, you take the parts that are normally in a Story, and fit them into the Structure in a strange way to build yourself a new one. We have the team build now, and there has to be some plot armor, because this is Cat's show.

*Gunslinger*

Stories aren't limited to heroes alone though the heavens do cheat quite a bit. If you remember the formation of the Calamities had a lot of providence in it. Essentially I guess if you're role has narrative weight then you can twist fate around to augment it



*sheer\_falacy*

They're being kind of self deprecating about it. Yes, there's a lot of improvisation, but they absolutely do make plans and put effort into them. They got into Skade with a handwritten note because they thought about how the Fae would respond to a handwritten note, not because they randomly tried it.

There is some amount of "this is Cat's story" at work, but a lot of it manifests in the form of competent people putting effort into winning. The fact that they banter is not mutually exclusive with it.

Also, Lies and Violence can be a pretty effective strategy.

*Dana*

They're the protagonists of the story... and they're getting the kind of breaks that protagonists get. Heroes typically also have to make plans and put effort into them to win, despite the whining.

The meta-irony is on point.

*Levi Kalden*

Self deprecating humor is some of the best

*amc*

is that an intentional impression? (I mean, yes, it's accurate; but are the Woe being explicit about it to gain "rag-tag-band-of-..." status?)

[Alyxe](#)

Mmmmm... tasty, tasty. Vicequeen, Lady of House Foundling...-happysigh- Thank you for the chapter.

A few notes:

...Juniper already gave me enough lectures about how fare ((far)) we'd strayed from traditional Legion structure, and it would look better to the rest of the generals out there if I at least pretended I cared about the proper way things were done...

Simple typo.

...There will be no restoration ((restoration)) of highborn power in Callow."...

Ditto, unless highborn power resides in their high class restaurants? -g-

...But masterful schemers were ((, we)) are not...

Lost comma and a typo. -tease- So many unneeded oxford commas all over the place and you could not spare one for where it was necessary? -g-

...One ((Out of)) the Lady's five pupils ((,)) he was always the odd one out...

Awkward phrasing, it feels like you meant to phrase it one way but changed midztram. I put another mid-dialogue comma in there, as both grammar and the pause heard when speaking it naturally agreed.

*stevenneiman*

"the fangs [glinting->that glinted] in firelight still bloody from his supper" As it stood, the sentence was saying that the firelight was bloody, not his fangs  
"The first is {the} Summer Court and its queen"

*sheer\_falacy*

"We've settled on 'bullied'," Hierophant contributed helpfully.  
; instead of ' in We've.

*Dana*

Interesting: Cat is way more deferential to the Juniper & "Legion way of doing things" than she is to Calloway's.  
Probably because it doesn't cost her anything.

*stevenneiman*

Juniper's telling her that she's a soldier and should act like it. Even if that's inconvenient it's also reasonable. Talbot was telling her that because she's sort of a noblewoman she needs to prioritize her people's dumbest expectations above her own happiness.

*Cpt. Obvious*

And she despise the idea of nobility inheriting political power and status rather than earning it. By folding the Broken Bell into the Legion she makes their upkeep a matter of state finance rather than being dependent on the support from the nobles. This will also mean that squires can be requited from the entire populace rather than just from those who either have the family finances to support them or has a noble as a patron. That way their loyalty will in time shift from the nobles who sponsor them to the state of Callow or the Legion if that's how they end up being financed. This defang what's left of Callowan nobility who historically has been able to withhold the knights under their command as a way to control the ruling king or queen.

AVR

A few more typos

There was worst heraldry  
There was worse heraldry

You'll still counted  
You're still counted

A dozen of small orders  
A dozen small orders (or 'A dozen of these small orders')

raising any eyebrow  
raising an eyebrow

There was story there,  
There was history there,

the Princess of High Noon, which  
the Princess of High Noon, who

[BarthHumphries](#)

I guess this is the typo thread then, first "typo" that Ctrl+F found.

but that it an orphan's name.  
change it to is

The bonfire crackled, flames high and occasionally licking at the roots of the tall oak that oversaw our little quiet corner of Creation.  
Shouldn't that be licking the branches? Or is the fire floating in the air and occasionally reaching down?

*Big Brother*

Thief and Archer are the best additions to the story since Masego was introduced. And to have them working together with Cat now, openly, is so great. The thought of the Chaos to come has kept me smiling for the better part of a week.

*Nafram*

Personally, I would've liked to see Robber as a Named and part of The Woe, but I suppose this may be for the best. I just hope that the rest of Cat's High Command don't get shoved into obscurity. They deserve a fair share of the spotlight too

*Big Brother*

Well, we know Juniper survives the upcoming Uncivil Wars, and probably has an important place at Cat's side as her

strategist.

Robber is probably the Cat version of Marshal Ranker. An impossibly old goblin leading an extremely dangerous Legion. All goblin sappers, knowing Robber, each almost as crazy as him.

*stevenneiman*

I think Robber will be the Woes' sixth ranger, same as Eudokia is to the Calamities. Whether he'll take on a secret goblin Name, develop a new Name like several of the Woes have, or just remain a badass without one is yet to be seen.

*Gunslinger*

Haha Thief's induction was great to read. Also I'm curious to know what the "miracle" that Talbot suggested was.

By the way in Thief's dialogue it says Choir of Compassion. I think it should be Contrition.

[SpacyRicochet](#)

I'm betting that miracle is just supposed to make sure that Catherine would be able to actually impregnate a lady. Keeping the bloodline alive if she wasn't willing to compromise to a purely political marriage with a male.

And of course, if she would actually care for that.

[SpacyRicochet](#)

This is completely unrelated to this chapter (haven't read it yet, even), but can someone please point me to the chapters or storyline where Catherine and Aisha had their falling out? I missed that somehow and it's messing up my reading.

*rangamal thenuwara*

Umm, Catherine and Aisha had a falling out? I have no recollection to that effect. You sure that happened?

*Jonnnney*

They didn't have a falling out. Catherine is Catherine and it is Aisha's job to manage the Praesi political side of the 15th and that is a stressful damn job.

[Hakurei06](#)

... do you mean Kilian?

[gianoria7](#)

I don't remember Cath having a falling out with Aisha.  
If you meant Kilian (the redhead half-fae mage that used to warm Cath's bed), then it happened in Chapter 18: Crack.

[SpacyRicochet](#)

Yeah, I mean Kilian. \*mutters about remembering names\*

Thanks everyone!

*stevenneiman*

Cat had a falling out with Kilian over the issue of using human sacrifices to power a spell that would fix her fae problems (By either turning her all human or all fae, I forget which), and to my recollection she's still on good terms with Aisha.

[Cpt. Obvious](#)

I'm posting a pointless comment, but Killian was talking about using a ritual to strengthen her Fey heritage in order to be able to release it instead of getting caught in mid transition when dipping too deep into her magic pool. It would allow her to use a lot more magic and gain some Fey advantages such as flying, regeneration and probably glamor. Probably also a stronger affiliation with some elemental magic.

A lot of speculation has been about what court her Fey blood comes from. Her hair color and the fact that it takes on the appearance of fire when she tries to double dip in her mana pool makes it likely that her Fey ancestor was of the summer court, which should mesh well with her slinging fireballs around.

Oh, and she would probably be suffering from the story weaknesses of the Fey...

*Nafram*

It's going to be tough for Talbot to adapt, but he'll come around, I believe. After all, he was the one who dared offer the Knights to Cat.

Of more import is that plans, beautiful plans are being crafted and preparations are underway. I'm looking forward to see the Woe in action

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

This isn't the first time you made me laugh. Not chuckle or grin, but laugh. But this is the first time you had me sit down to read & laugh instead of dropping my tablet and ROFL0L. Damn fine writing.

*Letouriste*

Honestly when we have been presented to thief in summerhold(must be there that the queen will appear,just for the irony) I didn't thought much of her.now I think you managed to make her a good character:) she is interesting,really interesting

*James, Mostly Harmless*

Now that Cat's army has escaped from Summer and has a respite from marching and battle, I hope that we get to see recent events from Duchess Kegan's and Marshal Ranker's perspectives. Kegan already thought that Cat was a monster, and that was before she defeated a Summer Princess and stared down Summer's Queen!

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*colm*

Anyone else picture her heraldry as something a goat goat standing in green flames?

*colm*

\*as something like.

sorry for the typo. I was using a phone.

*narcoduck*

There's a shutterstock for that.



*nipi*

I wonder if it should have blue eyes now? Like the flying unicorn or whatever she raised from the dead.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

This looks more like an insect than a goat. I'm not sure the artist has actually seen a goat skull before

*Shequi*

If I were designing Catherine's Heraldry (and I am...), I'd use the (undead) Horse and Goat as the Supporters, not as a Charge.

The themes you would want to bring out on such a shield would be the associations with (Goblin)fire and the (moonless) night. Something like:

"Divided per Fess Flamme, Sable et Vert, the division inferior by one fifth. In Chief an Annulet Argent Luna in Eclipse flanked by two Mullet Argent"

In simple terms, a Shield, divided horizontally into Black (upper) and Green (lower), the dividing line being 2/5ths of the way up the shield and stylised as flames. In the upper half the moon in an eclipse flanked by two stars.

*jonnney*

I think you would need to have the broken remains of Angel, Demon, Faerie, Hero and Villain involved in some way. It needs to be something that evokes the sentiment, "Whether they be gods or kings or all the armies in creation."

*stevenneiman*

Well, it is now.

*ereshkigala*

MOAR AWESOME!

I hope we eventually get a prequel with Black forging the Calamities. I also hope it'll be as awesome as this.

*Jworks*

Do we know how many of the 5 have transitional Names? Obviously Catherine and Masego (previously), but what about archer, adjutant, and thief?

*RandomFan*

I believe, though I may be mistaken, that all the listed party members do not have truly transitional names. Then again, Heiress was a far more active threat when she had a transitional name, outright setting what is the second most dangerous monster on a city. I'm probably subconsciously judging by power manifest, which is wrong.

I don't know what they'd transition to, though.

[kanadaj](#)

I feel that apart from Squire (obvious), Archer might actually be a transitional Name towards Ranger.

*RandomFan*



I feel that Archer is transitional towards Ranger, but only in the same way that Black Knight, Chancellor, presumably Warlock, and Diabolist all can transition into Emperor/ Empress. I might be over-estimating Archer here, or over-estimating the inherent power of Ranger's name, (that while most Rangers are not Ranger, they have their own things to offer) but those are my thoughts on the matter.

The same applies to the others at the campfire- there are transitions available, but the names themselves aren't designed to grow into something more. Thief could steal a crown, Adjutant could become Commander, and so on- but all of that is optional, and the names are at mature power levels already- except for Adjutant, as a new name, and possibly Hierophant, as an obscure name. Both might need more time to build fame to be a fair match for things like Diabolist or Tyrant on power alone.

That's just my interpretation though, I may be wrong.

*stevenneiman*

I'm pretty sure that everyone except Cat has permanent Names now. All of the transitional Names we've seen so far have been clearly transitional just from what they're called. A Squire is an attendant to be mentored by the Knight and presumably someday become a Knight him/herself. A Heiress is someone in line to claim a title, and an Apprentice is of course someone who learns from a master to do the same thing they did. Now that Masego has made the transition from Apprentice to Heiropfant, I'm pretty sure that the Squire is the only one who's still got a transitional Name. Adjutant, Thief, and Archer all seem like things that someone could be their entire life after they've become them, and if anything Heiropfant seems like an old hero or villain's Name, which fits the way that Masego will grow into it. I actually suspect that Heiropfant is the most dangerous of the Woes in the long run, since I'm pretty sure he has either Learn or an Aspect that has the same potential like Dissect or Analyze, and while it might be harder for him to find appropriate test subjects, I expect him to make up for it in the sheer power that they provide him.

*Jabes*

So, while I have been reading the comments a lot, one stray thought has occurred to me that I have not seen mentioned at all... what would happen to an emperor or empress with a trustworthy chancellor? Namely, the chancellor is supposed to rule, think about who has been ruling this entire time... and we know his time as the black knight is limited, but maybe not his time alive, even freeing the name for his apprentice...? Other than that, I have enjoyed the series the entire time, but this past book has been amazing! Thank you!

*RandomFan*

I bet that Amadeus would rather die than become Chancellor- but he's okay with making a sacrifice to achieve his ambitions, so it's not inconceivable.

*Morgenstern*

Far as I remember it was stated somewhere that Black is acting as the actual \*Emperor\* and Malicia is the one who would fit the role of Chancellor, even though she is the Empress by Name...

*Morgenstern*

Which would fit to the Bard lately calling him out on it, saying he should "just kill this little friend of yours" and sit on the throne himself, at home, until someone stabs him in the back, aka 'end the charade' because 'you're not as good at this [storytelling /-twisting] as you thought'...

*Jabes*

Why would he rather die? He has been ruling already, he has been doing a lot of "meta" work (by which I mean he has worked to reform bureaucracy, the military, laws, and even taxes), and it would allow him to really reign in the power of the nobles. He has not personally led the legions except in very specific cases since Malicia was confirmed as the Dread Empress, even, so it would be more like what he is now, other than the hero hunting. It would even be a great way to hand things off to Cat.

*RandomFan*

Because Amadeus has a distinct disdain for politics with nobles, the very bread and blood of the Chancellor role, and while he has the gifts for it, it's probably a very distasteful option. The thing is, he wants to do something that is incredibly out of character for a Chancellor, I'm pretty sure just from listening to it: Nuke all the nobility.

I mean, he wouldn't be bad at it, but it has a lot of the things that make him angry in its very core, even if it is an option.

*stevenneiman*

The problem, though, is that Black and Malicia basically killed the Name, and made it a crowning achievement having done so. Besides, I'm pretty sure that the Role of Chancellor is to stab the Tyrant in the back, and while Black might be able to get away with setting up a coup so that the story will stumble

because it expects him to follow through, i don't think he could pull it off if he did take the Name of Chancellor.

*nipi*

I fear Cat is on the path of committing the mistake of many great rulers – not leaving a competent heir/successor.

If Malicia ever chooses the next viscount then the prosperity of Callow and its identity will not be high in her list of requirements.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Says who? If she was that indifferent why bother with Catherine in the first place? I'm pretty sure Malicia, if she even outlives Cat, is very interested in keeping her bread basket happy and not rebelling

[kanadaj](#)

You don't need an heir when you have the plot armor.

*nipi*

@The Warren Peace NFL Report  
Happy yes. Callowan no.

I doubt its in Malicias long term interests that callowans maintain a separate identity from the rest of her empire. Cat was opposed to having callowans turned into praesi.

*Shequi*

And yet Catherine is taking the route that the Empire already takes. The Soninke, Taghreb and Duni don't think of themselves as less than Imperial citizens, but they are all distinct human ethnicities within the Empire.

Cat's method, applied properly, will have Imperial Callowans in short order; a distinctly Callowan grouping, but without any desire for independence.

*Fern*

You're looking at it the wrong way. See, Cat is taking Black's approach to politicking: namely, building institutions that hold up on their own without being babysitted by one Named man or woman. Cat's trying to set it up to where even if Malicia picks the slimiest fuckboy in Callow she can find, Callow/Praes will still survive as an institution.

Good nations survive because of good leadership. Great nations survive in spite of any leadership, good or bad.

*jonnnney*

Cat's has a greater concern than appointing an Heir. She needs to fundamentally change the story of Praes and Callow. If she can create a story about Callow becoming a strong and fundamental part of the Empire and she can have an entire generation of Callowans who believe in such a story. Then a successor will occur naturally from the narrative just like the name of Adjutant appeared due to the reforms.

*Ben*

I get that you plan for the worst, but Catherine doesn't seem to consider Ranger killing the Summer Queen a possibility. I wonder why that is. I get that there is a big step up from prince of Winter to the queen of summer, but the fact that Ranger can mine for jewelry from a winter prince's eye socket should give Catherine some hope.

*ereshkigala*

Yeah, no. The Princes and Princesses were a major threat to Cat and friends, but one that could be fought and defeated. The Queen OTOH comes in and casually annihilates everything not shielded by Ranger without even trying.

That's an order of magnitude more power.

*RandomFan*

It probably does. The fact that \*all Ranger took\* was an eyeball should remove some of that hope. The queen would need to make Ranger kill her, or Ranger would need to want to, or the queen would need to be dangerous enough that fighting to maim wasn't an option.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Awesome chapter! LOLed standing in boring lines this morning

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

I gave this some substantial thought before commenting, The miracle Talbot was suggesting can't be something intended to target Cat directly. Talbot's a Knight, and his training probably leaves him at least as aware as Cat that (using the example Cat herself used in Arcadia, when thinking about how nice it'd be to have a set of magic-countering armor like the knights have would like just leave her with charred skin from the House of Light prayers etched into said armor to give it its power) that Villain + House of Light miracle = Bad thing happening to the Villain.

Talbot was also still recommending Cat marry a guy, despite thinking her being a lesbian would be the impediment to the production of an heir.

There's also the fact that Talbot didn't suggest Cat marry a highborn woman. Propagating a bastard with a woman she isn't married to wouldn't really help the legitimacy thing.

Wild as it may sound, I think Talbot was suggesting some (temporary) sort of gender-bending shenanigans. I can still think of stumbling blocks for that theory, but Talbot mentioning marriage to a highborn male that he doesn't think Cat would bed as a lesbian for the purpose of cementing at least her bloodline for Marchford seems at cross-purposes.

*Fern*

seems pretty cut-and-dry here: this story's world is much more laissez faire about same sex relationship, and nobles seek power through any means. To the young Talbot man, using a miracle to become a woman would be worth it if it meant s/he could marry the new ruling Queen of Callow.

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

Or it could be a miracle that allows a lesbian couple to produce offspring, as discussed higher up in the comments. Becoming female wouldn't really make Cat like you, I think; she'd consider it both an insult to her intelligence as well as a blatant attempt at manipulating her through her sexuality.

*Soronel Haetir*

The chapter I would love to see is Masego with Wekesa and Tikoloshe after the transition to Hierophant. Although with Wekesa off in the Free Cities and that campaign not looking so great for the Calamities I'm not sure that will actually come about.

*stevenneiman*

I expect that multiple of the Calamities will die, but I really do hope that if Wekesa is going to die he at least gets to have his proud father moment first.

*Al*

I get Cat protecting the Gallowborne but... she coulda folded 100 knights or so.

Crop of the crop

Call 'em "Gallowriders" or sth...

Just my \$0.02

Love the Woe interaction, looking forward to meet their 6th ranger!

*jonnnney*

She is already on thin ice by creating the knightly order. If she puts them in her retinue then it will look that much more like a full on rebellion.

*Fern*

I like how Cat's toolbox is a variation on Black's, even though both are focused on having a wide toolbox. Black is more focused on removing obstacles and conquering/destroying objectives, so he gets the Calamaties (destruction) and Scribe (occupation). Cat is focused less on power and more about adaptability. Her whole group is geared towards projecting hard and soft power through improvisation and causing as much chaos (mostly by repurposing other people's plans) as possible. That one of her first aspects was Take is telling, I honestly think Masego got Heirophant more as a result of Cat than anything else.

*RandomFan*

I might be able to agree, but he's always had an interest in the otherworldly, so he also deserved it on his own merits. He was raised by an inhabitant of the hells, he's been studying a demon, he's probably been involved in dissecting at least one god- fae might be icing on the cake, and he might be more qualified and interested for having joined Cat, but he doubtless could have earned the title on his own merits, given time.

If he was supposed to be with Diabolist in a "heroic cat" timeline, between the hells, the demons, the god and the fae, he'd probably wind up with it anyways, since he'd be seeing all the same stuff.

Besides, Diabolist is taken, and he doesn't seem like the sort for patricide.

*Soronel Haetir*

Agreed that Masego's not the sort for patricide, for one thing there is nothing that action would bring him that he wants that he could not obtain just as easily in some other way. And it would bring all sorts of trouble (even with graduating to Heirophant I believe he is still using his fathers and uncle Amadeus as a shield).

Masego is simply far too much a bookworm to desire power for its own sake.

*jonnnney*

I think Masego was always on the path to get the Name Hierophant. He simply obtained the name much faster since he is allied with Catherine. Not only was he able to experience things that he would not have in his lab, the Queen of the Fae, The library of Winter, A demon of corruption, the corpse of an angel, etc. But he also gained the backing of a story. A different kind of Villainous group needs a different kind of Caster backing them up.

*stevenneiman*

Personally, I think it was kind of inevitable, considering his parentage. Wekesa didn't really fit as the Warlock, he just took it because it was the most powerful magic-based Name available. He'd always been much more about the research and learning that the Name allowed him to do than the red skies that are his actual job as Warlock. Close enough for a guy who didn't have anything better, but once Cat started spawning entirely new Names around her there was no way that Masego wasn't getting in on the action, especially since he didn't even have the chance to be a Warlock since his father was alive and well.

[Evgeny](#)

Cat's toolbox is about "Lies and violence" and taking.

*arancaytar*

> I have a – I'm not looking for anyone



*Kai Merah*

Random passer-by seeing Cat's group in action: Whoah

And that's why they're called the Woes!

[reveen](#)

I can't help but shake my head at Catherine's stubbornness here.

I can understand being uncomfortable with a marriage, but accepting a dynastic name would be at least a little something to fulfill the cultural and political expectations of being a queen. Her ambitions for Callow to be a client state of Praes and not just a nation under foreign occupation are best served by working within the cultural and political context of Callow. This isn't just stupid random bullshit, these are important cultural touchstones of the country that will help cement her rule on a psychological and cultural level.

If she can't swallow her pride and put down a few of her Legion trappings she should have had Kendal made Vicequeen with herself as governor. But instead she wants to accept the high profile symbolic title for herself without wanting to change herself to best make use of it.

If she can't start using soft power and keeps using violence for her solution to everything all she's going to build in Callow are graveyards.

*Cicero*

Isn't what Cat's story is partly about? Doing things differently? Look at it from her perspective? She has seen only noble houses as mostly horrible way of governance, so the idea of building her own must disgust her. It would change her story from a nobody to a noble.

[reveen](#)

Her deal is wanting to work within the existing Praesi system to make things better, and there's no real reason not to apply that same thinking to Callow's traditional political system. Or she could just try to brute force Callow into her own little despotism, but that's not going to be the stable system she wants.

And the entire point of joining Evil is doing things that she finds distasteful to achieve her goals. It's kind of hypocritical to stop the buck here at having her own noble house when she's already stepped over piles of corpses to get where she is.

*amc*

But, you forget that she's trying to keep Malicia and the Tower friendly. It's a different story if the ruling Empress names a martially-talented orphan as her governor-general (and then vice-queen), than if the Empress names a noble. 'There is power in stories', etc.

*OldSchoolVillain*

You realize that Cat took the title of Vice Queen because she was the only one Malicia would accept in the position, right? To put it in Story terms Cat is the Empress of Callow while Kendall is the Chancellor. Kendall runs the country while Cat sets out long-term sweeping policy, such as becoming a true piece of Praes. She doesn't NEED to swallow her pride and become the perfect noblewoman because A) she has Asha to deal with them for her, and B) because she ISN'T trying to lay down a dynasty. Worst case scenario she goes to the nearest imperial orphanage and picks out a next-generation version of herself.



That . . . actually might be interesting. A line of Foundling Squires and Black Knights in MarchFord, rather than a bloodline.

*Metruux*

It seems to me you're quite the extremist. She isn't. She isn't even working towards having a line of succession, she just took the position to create a precedent, that both Callow is ruled by callowans, and the ruler is chosen by Praes, thus making them both connected while still maintaining Callowans culture. She DOESN'T wish to stay in this position for long, and neither to become a noble herself, so why bother with noble costumes?

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Honestly, the solution is easy. Get over her outrageous level of hypocrisy about Killian wanting to do the \*exact same thing Cat's done, REPEATEDLY\* (Killing people to further her goals), and then reconcile with Killian. As Vicequeen, she can grant Killian a title, and marry her. THEN the House of Light could work their mojo on Killian.

If all Cat wanted was to get sweaty, Archer would oblige her. So would many of the other human females in the 15th (few as they may be). Cat may not be a great beauty, but for women from Praes power is quite the aphrodisiac.

Cat doesn't seem heavy into the casual bed-buddy thing though. The numerous times she notes she'll be going to bed alone, that her tent is empty, or that no one is waiting for her add up to her missing Killian IMHO.

I think Killian wants Cat to prove she wants to be with her enough to bend on the use of sacrificed murderers and rapists. IMO, Killian is far more aware of the inherent double-standard Cat's been applying. Cat's outrage at the idea of humans sacrifice might've held more weight with Killian if the Squire hadn't started a very bloody rebellion for use as a stepping stone.

*amc*

besides, i could have sworn that it was mentioned somewhere early on, that Cat is bisexual (not necessarily gay). I guess, the fact that the cast has only ever seen her with Killian, just gives the impression.

[Tal Morgan](#)

The tragedy is that, at least as far as titles are concerned, Talbrot has a pretty solid point. The kind of chaos Callow has undergone, a few nods to tradition like that could be a much-

needed stabilising factor. Inherited titles might be ripe for abuse, but they do at least tend to cause less rampant upheaval than “whatever you can claim by might is yours by right,” something I suspect Callow would appreciate.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Hmmmmmm... no. If Cat throws her “foundling; orphan; could be anybody” status away simply to make chummy with the upper crust, she cuts herself off from her own sense of identity, not to mention the very roots of her own Story (in her head, she’s not rising simply to be a rags to riches Cinderella who will live happily ever nobily after with oodles of children to ensure a legacy – she’s got far more than that tale on her plate).

For her, chuckling “Foundling” out equates to yanking some of the batteries out of her Role while she’s busy using it. Bad Things, nothing but.

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## Chapter 35: Questions

*“To bargain with devils is to paint with your own blood: the greater the work, the harsher the price.”*

– Dread Empress Maleficent II

I shivered in discomfort when I crossed the boundary into the prison. It felt wrong in a fundamental way, and if I’d not already gotten enough hints that becoming the Duchess of Moonless Nights had changed my nature in some eldritch way this would have done the trick. There were worrying aspects to that. I’d already made sure that cold iron didn’t really hurt me more than any other kind, but Masego was of the opinion that spells crafted to affect entities not of Creation would sting a great deal more than they used to. Given that diabolism as a sorcerous discipline dealt with exactly that, I was going to have to take a few precautions before dealing with Akua. Who was now Diabolist. If she could be sure she could grab a godsdamned Hashmallim before even coming into the Name, she could deal with my bastardized fae title: those two things weren’t even close to being in the same league. I shook away the thought. The place where I now stood wasn’t another dimension, not exactly. The way Hierophant told it, if he was to keep the Princess of High Noon contained he very much needed for her to be in Creation.

Her power was lesser here, a large part of it surrendered to cross a threshold she did not belong on this side of. If she was in a pocket dimension, however, then all bets were off. Even after being robbed of the sun, Princess Sulia was absurdly powerful and she might just rip her way through the wards with her bare hands if she needed to. So the prison my mages maintained was on Creation, a complicated array that had me reaching for a drink just to look at the plans of. I'd forced Masego to use progressively smaller splurges of magic babble until he found the right metaphor: the whole thing was a drain, more or less. A bunch of escapements had been attached to her that bled out power as quick as she regained it, dispersing it into Creation. The results weren't pretty: the grounds around the prison were alarming to look at, a circle of land that grew, got overripe and died in the span of a dozen heartbeats. And then again, and again, and again.

Ratface had poked his nose in and asked whether the phenomenon could be used to accelerate crops, and gotten the reply that it could. But the crops would be, essentially, plant-shaped dust. And possibly poisonous as well, because why wouldn't the fae make this as horrifying as possible? I'd left the quartermaster plotting with Pickler about possible uses for it, catching something about 'targeting farmland' but also 'spoiling rations'. Should have expected that, really. It was the Praesi way to look at things best left not meddled with and ask 'can we make a weapon out of this?'. *That's how you lot got the Wasteland, Ratface.* They were still a step short of cackling and attempting to steal another country's weather on the villain ladder, but I'd remind Hakram to keep an eye on those two anyway. The last thing I needed was a bunch of Summer-birthed plant monsters running amok in Callow when we finally gave the Courts the boot.

The Princess of High Noon was still hovering in the air, runic shackles on both her wrists and ankles. She was awake now though. Her hair was fire, much like Kilian's when she drew too deep on sorcery, but that was where the resemblance ended. My... Senior Mage looked human, though more delicate in her bones than the average Duni. There was nothing mortal about the looks of Princess Sulia, though: she was power made flesh, a blind sculptor's dream of what people would look like.

"My warden visits," the Princess of High Noon said.

"That'd be Hierophant," I replied easily. "Though I suppose the responsibility ultimately lies with me."

"Have you come merely to equivocate, Duchess?" the fae said. "If so, spare me your presence. Better silence than your ramblings."

"I came to talk," I said. "I happen to have a few questions for you."

"And I will indulge you in this?" the princess mocked.

"Could be I'll have you tortured if you don't," I noted.

The mocking smile did not wane in the slightest.

"I have been under the knives of Winter across many, many lives," she said. "Anything mortals could muster would be childish imitation."

"Speaking as someone who's been on Masego's operating table, you are very much mistaken," I said. "And that was when he was *helping*. But you're right. I won't have you tortured. I don't really condone the practice, as a rule."

"Then the King of Winter has left traces of who you once were inside this misshapen carcass you wear," Princess Sulia said. "Rejoice, Duchess. You are less an abomination than you could be."

"Again with the abomination talk," I said, rolling my eyes. "That's no way to treat someone come to bargain with you, Sulia."

She actually laughed at that. It didn't sound like a person's laugh, more like exhaustion and heat and the clash of steel against steel.

"You have already struck bargains, mortal," she sneered. "Two that my eyes can see. I wonder what you promised Larat, to have him risk my wrath on the field."

That was the Prince of Nightfall's name, I was pretty sure. The Winter King had mentioned it once, but the whole getting my heart ripped out afterwards adventure had ensured it didn't have a place of honour in my memory.

"I'll trade that secret, for questions answered truly," I said.

Her eyes turned to me, and if I had not stolen a mantle of power I suspected it would have physically hurt me to meet her gaze. Even as it was, it pricked behind my eyes to match her stare for stare.

"I do not often bargain with your kind," she said.

"I imagine the while incinerating them on sight thing limits your options in that regard," I replied drily.

"There is little of worth to be found amongst mortals," she shrugged, or tried to.

Her bindings didn't allow a lot of room for movement. Normally she wouldn't even be able to speak, but Hierophant had released that binding before I came in.

"Nine questions," I said. "And I will give you the terms of my bargain with the Prince of Nightfall. You are to answer them to my satisfaction, or they will not count."

"You seek to rob me, child," she sneered.

"I already have," I replied with my most unpleasant smile. "Yoink, remember?"

Her face boiled with anger and I cursed myself mentally. I really need to learn to shut my mouth when treating with monsters. If I'd managed to not fucking declare war on the King of Winter halfway through our conversation, in the middle of his very seat of power no less, I'd still have an actual heart instead of whatever he'd shoved into my chest.

"Enjoy that transient victory, Duchess," she said. "Summer comes for you now, and there is no escape."

I sighed.

"You know, I don't actually *want* to fight you people," I said, using 'people' in the loosest sense of the word. "You invaded my home without provocation and started butchering everyone that didn't kneel to a queen from another realm. I'm not Ranger, Sulia. I don't get into death matches with demigods for the bragging rights."

"You think we want to stride this godforsaken wasteland?" she burst out. "Creation is madness. The disorder is like an itch none of us can scratch, and the people —"

She bit her tongue, glaring at me like I'd forced her to speak up.

"Nine questions," I repeated. "For the terms the Prince of Nightfall gave me."

I paused and hastily continued.

"With the previous stipulations added," I finished.

I still had the pact the King of Winter had forced on me to barter with if that wasn't enough, though I'd rather avoid handing a potential weakness like that hand wrapped to one of my most dangerous enemies. The Princess of High Noon was supposedly terrible at scheming, but the rest of Summer was bound to have some noble that was a fair hand at it. The fae grit her teeth, but after a long silence calmed herself.

"I accept this bargain, as the terms were stated," she said.

Gods, finally. I'd been after answers since the moment the damned Winter Court had popped up in Marchford and so far had gotten

only cryptic comments for my troubles. I'd thought about getting my hands on a Winter noble for interrogation more than once, but I wouldn't be able to trust answers from someone too low in the pecking order – and a Count was probably as high as I could aim to grab, even now. The Princess of High Noon was second only to the queen, in the Summer Court, and probably the least tricky operator I could hope for at that hallowed height.

"Why did the Summer Court invade Callow?" I immediately asked.

Eight questions left.

"It was an obligation," Sulia replied. "As Winter was waging war upon Creation, so must we. Her Majesty chose Callow as our enemy, and I know not her reasons."

That explained, to an extent, why the Courts could be both be fighting me when Masego had said they shouldn't be able to attack the same target. If Winter was fighting Praes and Summer was fighting Callow, the difference should be enough to appease whatever arcane rules they obeyed to. It also confirmed that the Summer Queen was up to something: she hadn't been forced to pick Callow, and I doubted she'd made that decision without a reason. That meant there were two fae rulers trying to get something out of my homeland, and in both cases I had no real notion of *what* that was.

"When the queen lives as a princess, what is her title?" I asked.

Seven questions left. This one came at Hierophant's request. He'd told me he would have a better idea of how to counter the queen if he knew what form her powers usually took.

"Princess of the Morning Star," the fae replied through gritted teeth.

Hadn't liked that one, huh. She clearly knew why I'd asked. I'd wonder about exactly what the implications of the answer were when I had mages with me to make sense of it.

"What forces remained to the Diabolist when you left the field at Liesse?" I asked.

Six questions left. This one she took better than the last. Akua had not made a friend there, looked like. She usually didn't.

"One greater devil," the Princess of High Noon said. "No more than six thousand mortals. Twice this in undead and lesser devils."

Good. This wasn't anything I couldn't deal with, considering the armies I had at my disposal. I'd have to be a raging imbecile to think this was all Diabolist had at her disposal, but it should

make up the bulk of her strength on the ground. I mine could beat hers, all that was left was the battle between trump cards. That one would be harder, given how long she'd had to prepare, but I had four other Named on my side. My bag of tricks went a lot deeper than hers, these days, and if that failed I had the right kind of people to smash my way into a victory.

"What is your plan to escape this prison?" I asked.

Five questions left, and she looked furious. Had she really thought I wasn't going to ask that? I'd been dealing with the Ruling Council and the High Lords for over a year. Green I might be, but I wasn't *that* green. She really was terrible at this. *Or simply not used to bargaining from a position of weakness*, I thought. What were the odds she'd been in a story that went like this before? I very much doubted she'd ever played a question game with Winter, if the talk of torture was any indication. There was a very real chance she was flailing because she'd never stood on grounds like these before. *You and me both, Sulia*. I was just better than the fae at keeping my head above the water.

"I am transmuting the flesh of my left arm into power not siphoned by your array," the princess said. "It will allow me to break through the wards eventually."

"Answer's incomplete. When will you be done?" I pressed.

"In a month," she grunted.

It figured. She would probably have broken out in the middle of our tangle with Summer and wrecked our armies from the inside. Hierophant was going to have to take care of this somehow. Now, for Juniper's question.

"There are golden fae in your host," I said. "What are their weaknesses?"

Four questions left. When they'd fought against the legionaries under Nauk, they'd ripped straight through the men until Masego and I had dropped a pair of surprises into their formation to take their pressure off. They seemed to be the equivalent to the Sword of Waning day that Winter fielded, though a great deal more dangerous. Unlike the deadwood soldiers they fought in a real formation.

"The Immortals are bound to the Queen of Summer," she said. "Should she die they will perish as well."

Hardly a weakness, that. There had to be more to it.

"And?" I prompted.

"They weaken away from Summer," she grudgingly added. "They carry banners with shards of the sun, but should these be destroyed they will lose much of their power."

And now my mages had a target. Progress. I'd covered everything I'd been asked to find out by others so far, which left me four questions to try to ferret out what I personally wanted to know that didn't qualify as an 'immediate concern'. By the standards of my officers, anyway. I was of the opinion that the answers that would win us this war weren't numbers or weaknesses.

"What does the Summer Court mean to do with Callow, if they take it?" I asked.

Three questions.

"The taken territories are to be made part of Arcadia and Summer itself," the princess said. "Along with all those who live in them."

I closed my eyes, mind spinning. The Winter Court had tried to do something similar, I was pretty sure. During the attack that I'd gone into Arcadia to end, the fae had brought a shard of Arcadia into Creation. That had failed, but the Winter King had taken me as a vassal afterwards, binding Marchford to him through me. If Summer was after the same ends, then that lay at the heart of the plays on both their parts. If Summer grew larger, then the balance between it and Winter swung in their direction. It might even introduce fresh stories to the Court's advantage, and would explain why the Summer fae had been forcing Callowans to swear fealty to the Queen of Summer in my reports. I was still missing something, though. If grabbing land had been the objective, why had Winter struck one of the most fortified targets in Callow? The Fifteenth had been at Marchford for months before they began their attacks. Sure it would have been easier to cross there, but Summer had proved it wasn't impossible to do so in other places. If Winter had opened a gate into, say, Vale? They might have grabbed the entire central plains of Callow before the Legions could react. Sulia had already stated that Winter had been the ones to begin this dance, which brought forward even more questions. He hadn't been the one reacting, meaning it had been a deliberate choice.

"Why did the King of Winter target Marchford, specifically?" I asked.

Two questions.

"I cannot know for certain," the princess said.

"Your best guesses," I grunted.



"The boundaries were thinner there, making an invasion possible," the fae replied. "Or he needed a Named in his service to act in Creation without crossing himself."

Shit, hadn't given her an actual number of guesses. Just plural, so she got away with two. It wasn't worth using another question to ask for what would be more speculation on her part. I might have misread the situation, I frowned. When Summer had crossed, they'd had the weight of symmetry on their side: Winter was at war on Creation, so they must be as well. That might have made it easier for them to leave Arcadia, and they'd certainly been better at it. They'd spread a lot quicker and in several places compared to Winter's one failed beachhead. Since the Winter Court had been the ones to begin the pattern, and an unprecedented one at that, they might not have had another choice than to go for the lowest-hanging fruit that was Marchford.

Then again, if I put myself in the King's boots, what better target than Callow was there? On Calernia, at least. There was no other territory so divided and recently weakened by war. If he'd pulled this shit in the Principate, he would have been in a great deal of trouble. The Free Cities, maybe, but there were far more players there and a larger amount of Named. All he'd have to deal with here was a Squire with her crew and the Diabolist down south. My people were untested, many recently come to their Names and Akua had 'going to rebel real soon' good as stamped onto her forehead. It occurred to me, at that moment, that I might be the cause of all this. That I might have ensured the Winter Court would invade my homeland and force Summer to do the same by allowing the Liesse Rebellion to happen in the first place. I'd put blood in the water and the monsters had tasted it, taken it as invitation to come out and play.

"Merciless Gods," I whispered.

Thousands had died, in the rebellion, but how many more to the fae? All of southern Callow had been occupied. My own legion had come under assault. Hells, I'd created the perfect conditions for the Diabolist to try her crowning scheme and there was no avoiding the truth that putting that madness would be bloody work. I'd let a hero go, once, and spoken words to him. Years later and Callow was still paying the price of that decision one corpse at a time. I took hold of myself. I could not afford to show weakness in front of a Princess of Summer, even one my prisoner. I met her eyes and saw she had missed nothing. She did not delight in my horror, but neither did she shy away from it. *I need to know*, I thought. To get at the bottom of this, before it was too late. This was larger than fae plying their usual tricks. Both Courts were playing for larger stakes than I'd thought.

"If either Court keeps part of Callow," I asked hoarsely. "What happens in Arcadia?"

One question left. The Princess of High Noon smiled, slowly and broadly.

"I do not know," she laughed. "Nothing, my queen says, for it will pass. Everything, your king says, for that clay has never been shaped."

I felt like I'd been handed the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle, the one that made the shape of the whole clear. The Winter King didn't actually care all that much if I could force out Summer. He'd prefer it, because then any advantages that would come into being would be entirely on his side. But even if I failed, as long as I lived he still had Marchford and a Named he could influence. He would have an even deeper connection to my city than Summer would manage with their stolen territories, if he kept my heart. It dawned upon me that, as far as he was concerned, he had already won. It was just the degree of victory that remained to be determined. The Prince of Nightfall had compared the fae of Winter to foxes chewing through their own keg to escape a trap, back in Skade. Willing to destroy something part of them to escape a greater doom. And I'd seen, when I'd become the Duchess of Moonless Nights, the unending circle that was the lives and deaths of the Courts. The outcomes were always fixed from the start, but that was because in that circle there were only *known quantities*.

If I became part of that, if Callow did? In Arcadia, the Summer Queen had said the 'story would correct itself'. She thought this attempt would fail and everything would return to the way it used to be when the wheel turned again. She was just playing out her role as assigned to her, Summer Ascendant destroying everything in its path. But the King of Winter thought he could escape the wheel, and was gambling with the lives of everyone in Callow for his roll of the dice. It didn't matter so much that he beat Summer so long as an outcome without precedent lay at the end of the road. Even if he lost, he could be born to a different story when the wheel turned. If the wheel turned, which would no longer be a given. I'd been looking for a master plan in the Praesi tradition this whole time, but there'd never been one. It was just a desperate man throwing stones in a pond so the same old reflection would stop staring back at him. If a single thread of fae influence remained in Callow by the time this was over, it might be enough to drag then entire country into the mess. I had just become the greatest living liability to peace in my homeland.

I had to break them both, the royals on each side. Destroy everything that they were. The consequences otherwise were beyond what I could easily understand. I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them. The Summer Queen. She would be the lynchpin of this, as the only one of the two I could reach.

"Sulia," I said. "What is the role at the heart of the Queen of Summer?"

My last question. My most important.

"Threefold are the duties of the Laurel Crown," she said. "To destroy Winter. To protect Aine. To see the Sun victorious."

Three, always three. And I would need them all in my palm, if I was to bend a god to my will.

"Now complete your end of the bargain, abomination," she hissed. "You've had your fill of me."

"I will take the crown of seven mortals rulers and one, to lay them at the feet of the Prince of Nightfall," I said.

Her face went still. A glimmer of something like fear passed through those shining eyes, and shit that wasn't good at all.

"You know not what you have promised," she said. "*This must not come to pass.*"

"Then tell me why," I said.

Silence, silence and hatred.

"I thought as much," I murmured. "Sweet dreams, Princess of High Noon."

I left. I didn't look for my friends, though I felt the urge. Right now I felt too disgusted with myself, with them, with everything I had wrought since I first became the Squire. I loved them, and I should. I'd paid an ugly price for them. How many lives I claimed I wanted to save had I traded away to have them at my side? I sought someone else instead, someone who would not pick at the loathing. I needed advice, and I had the puppet of one of the greatest living rulers in Calernia within my reach. I found the woman waiting in my tent and sat down in front of the body Malicia was looking through from far, far away.

"You said you would teach me, once," I told the Empress. "So teach me now. I need to outwit a god in the flesh, before a moon has passed."

Dread Empress Malicia, First of Her Name, Tyrant of Dominions High and Low, Holder of the Nine Gates and Sovereign of All She Beheld, watched me for a long moment.

Then she smiled.

---

*danh3107*

Merciless gods that spooked me, as befitting of the season.

"Lo unto those who willingly seek evil, for their gifts are always given with a smile."

*NerfContessa*

Yep.

But, like with almost all cats decisions with what she knows at the time her only option with even a smidgen of choice init.

*Darkening*

Well, that's ominous as hell. Wonder how 'ruler' is defined. I mean, the principate is overflowing with princes, but maybe it has to be true overlords? Hm. Probably not, she'd have to hit... what, every kingdom on Calernia for that? There's not \*that\* many nations around. I can't even guess what giving Nightfall a bunch of crowns would do... Make him the Winter King forever? Perhaps with him as king winter tends to win and Sulla doesn't want that? Mm, he's a bit too martial for that if Winter's success tends to rely on their superior scheming. Also, holy hell does Ranger come for his eye when he's the king? I mean, Archer did say every time.....

*stevenneiman*

I think that giving him the crowns would mean that he would claim the power of them for Winter, which would shift the balance of power permanently in Winter's favor. What I think the Winter King is actually hoping for is to push the situation into something where the stories will destroy him utterly, rather than just killing him until Winter comes again and he returns as a Prince.

Alternatively, he might be hoping to merely grant the Prince of Nightfall enough power to ensure that he becomes King every time and that disrupting the pattern that much might destroy him (the current Winter King that is). He doesn't want to win, he wants the cycle to end, or at least to leave him out of it.

[nehemiahnewell](#)

Yeah, Cat's thought, that she can 'fix' this by killing the Winter King and reclaiming her heart, seems hopelessly naive. Treachery is the nature of Winter, and I don't think 'survival' is important to the King at this point. If she's of winter, and she takes back her heart, Winter still has her heart through her, and there's a symmetry to her becoming

Queen of Winter and Queen of Callow at the same time, and then setting both aside at the same time.

It would be the perfect gamble that screwed her over – she needs to keep the vice-queenship for several years to get her ducks in order, but she can't hold it without tying Callow to Winter through herself. Not to mention she's having problems, if mostly subtle ones, with how much 'fae' she holds now. More and she would have to desperately deinvest herself of it, even if it cost. Fae is as limiting as Undead, in its own way, and we have the Warlocks thoughts on that subject.

I doubt the King is the only one to feel that way either. I suspect whatever Nightfall is attempting is equally hubristic, and equally unconcerned with his own survival. What's getting the Black Knight into trouble is his assumptions that other people have long term priorities like he does. It only fitting Cat gets into the same kind of trouble with the same kind of assumptions.

*Theo Promes*

Yeeees, Malicia ftw. the lady who climbed the tower with her brain. This will be fun.

x

Malicia is not the girl who climbed the tower.

She ruthlessly took it through murder and deceive like each emperor before her.

[MrPicklesAndTea](#)

That's how climbing that tower works silly.

*narcoduck*

So who actually started first? In Chapter 7 elaboration, Rider says "If Summer is at war, so must be Winter" but now Sulia says "As Winter was waging war upon Creation, so must we"

Also, Princess of the Morning Star? Ominous

*rangamal thenuwara*

The Winter King and Prince of Nightfall conspired to fool their own army into invading the creation first to change the story?

[edrey](#)

at first i thought the forever king had a hand in this but until now we know nothing unless the queen had fallen for him and that is her reason, we have to wait for the queen to answer

that  
and for morning star, if i recall correctly it's the simbol of  
lucifer, fallen angel, demon king so if you ask me she is the  
perfect sacrifice for akua to open a portal to hell

*callmesteve*

Yeah, we already can guess that's one of Diabolist's goals.  
After all that babble on the rules of conversion and how it  
was so difficult to open a portal, the fact that she's  
building a massive ritual (and the flight one was lesser!),  
and the fact that Foundling stated that at least no one has  
opened a permanent hellgate...

There will be at least an attempt.

*nipi*

Cat wasted a question there. She already knew that answer.

*Shequi*

Rider didn't actually say Summer was at war; he just said that  
if one was at war the other had to be.

*Dragrath*

Well The morning star at least irl is Venus which has long been  
associated with beauty. Or at least until we actually visited  
the place and realized it is a literal depiction of hell only  
worse... That and the name does have a connection to the devil's  
name before his fall so yeah lots of ominous grounds but with  
the added perks of divinity based around beauty..  
So I am quite curious how the name will play out in a story all  
about names and roles.

*pyrohawk21*

That is NEVER a good sign. And dear gods am I scared to find out  
just what giving the Prince of Nightfall the crowns of 8 mortal  
rulers will do to, and probably through, him...

x

And ONE, I guess that'll be either the head of summer por  
winter.

*stevenneiman*

No, it specifically said MORTAL rulers.

[edrey](#)

well, i think is the free cities, 7 cities and anaxeres as the head with a crown no crown

*nipi*

7 mortal rulers and one. The last one doesnt have to be mortal.

*callmesteve*

Yes, seven mortal rulers, \*and one\*. That sounds like an important distinction even beyond the usual "year and a DAY" counting used in that sort of thing. Normally these big bargains have that, but here it seems even more.

I suspect that it's some sort of story or rule of ascendance, where he gains power over all creation (pun intended, and maybe it's that way on purpose), or at least can stop the battles going on. It might also be sacrificial, since I somehow suspect that sort of power would be tied to/countered by an impermanence in the form of his death, but all heck is likely to break loose.

It is likely a symbol of fealty to him, or in proving that he (well, his champion) can defeat the others, making him the ultimate ruler.

I keep hoping that she finds a way to take out both sides in truth, but it's going to be tough. Some of the shenanigans she has pulled are epic, but taking out Arcadia (is it possible to do that for good)? That is really one for the record books. Still, the fae are not as fun to read about as some of the games that she has played against mortal opponents. Those at least are both more unpredictable and less impossible to defeat. The fae and elves have the deck stacked too far in their favor, though I suppose that's also a reason to take them down.

My guess is she manages to do it, but then Diabolist uses the distraction to open the gate and the fourth book will be in one of the hells.

I also hope that she can repair her friendship with Killian. That was rather sad. There weren't really any good options for that battle.

*Jago*

With Thief in her group, there is an interesting trick that Cat can try, depending on the burial uses of the past: robbing 8 graves of kings, possibly people whose line and kingdom have ceased to exist centuries ago. That will neuter the symbolic value of the crowns while fulfilling the letter of the bargain.

*MetruX*

Just reading late the last chapter when this one came to pass... I must say that I'm already imagining how she's going to twist those three to beat the Queen...

*Byzantine*

I don't think she wants to beat the queen. She wants the King and Queen to destroy each other.

*rangamal thenuwara*

Yeah, most brute-force/straightforward way to solve her dilemma would be to betray Winter and with the support of Summer defeat Winter and force Winter King to release Cat and then back stab Summer. I guess that's where the teachings of Malicia will come in handy? Or maybe that plan requires too many things to go right – making it just wishful thinking?

*callmesteve*

That both sounds more fun (read as controlled chaos) and more likely, considering how she fights. First a big crazy mess and on-the-fly planning, and then a drag-out fight where she refuses to give up. That sounds more like it will lead to the aforementioned event.

*RoflCat*

Destroy Winter – technically Cat's goal is now to destroy BOTH Summer and Winter, to ensure neither have a lasting hold in Creation as well as sorta fulfill Winter King's desire of breaking the loop.

Protect Aine – never going to invade that anyway, no problem here

Sun victorious – I think Cat might use Sulia's sun on Akua, to 'defeat' her thus making it a victory for the Sun. (I feel like Icarus story would work, with the sun burning away whatever sorceries Akua used to keep the city afloat) Though in order to do this and makes it fulfill the Queen's role, Cat might have to make Sulia the Queen instead.

*nipi*

There are a lot of Callowans in that city. Cats not going to be all that keen on dropping it from the sky. Well not before an evacuation through a portal or something an even then its her city. Those are expensive to build.

*callmesteve*



A portal like the one that Akua is planning to create?  
Admittedly, that one likely goes to a hell...

[nehemiahnewell](#)

Hmm, a mix of answers we already know, and hints of things to come. I'm surprised she needed the question about the Winter King, as he basically told her just that, while the bit about the crowns is ominous as hell.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Nine is thrice three, and thrice three is a killing stroke according to Villainous Interlude: Cadenza. The nine questions to kill Arcadia.

*nerfworld*

That's some heavy foreshadowing for sure, now putting money on squire never being a knight and just becomes next empress

*callmesteve*

Somehow I don't think that would happen. She seems like a hero in that still. She'll break down what needs to be, but once done she'll likely pass the role to someone else. She is mainly really good at fighting and accidentally good at politics (sorta), but she really hates the latter, and ruling in general. The former is also frustrating to her because she is always outnumbered and hates losing both the sacrifices she must make and the losses in war, ESPECIALLY against people like Heiress who don't care about casualties so long as it gets them what they want.

So, since she uses the Gordian Knot approach, I suspect that once she gets all the (other?) insane murdering astartsbay out of the picture, she will toss it back, maybe even to Malicia, if she can really be trusted to continue to break the cycle of win/loss AND be nice to Callow while at it. If not, I suspect she will stay loosely affiliated with a similar goal, and try to break the whole story for good.

At that point, it sounds to me like the only possible successful outcome is to break all magic and make everyone normal, without villains or heroes, but that seems like there should still be a better outcome than I am thinking of. I really hate "The Magic Fades" as a theme, and it's overplayed. It is also too predictable an ending to be worthy of this work so far. So, it almost can't happen because PG2E won't play anything that we expect, unless this really is what we don't expect since we expect it and know that it won't be used for that reason... but that way doth madness lie. I'll say that, meanwhile, expecting the unexpected is not truly

expecting, since it is still unexpected even if it's expected, or else you'd know what it is. So, hopefully, that part won't change.

This awe-inspiring twist of always winning in a way no one expects seems to be the true subtext of this work so far: Gambit Rouletting into a seemingly normal ending, but before it happens, twisting it into a new and awesome one.

The win at the battle of four armies, or whatever it's called, where she beat Akua that first time: She played them all and then took a draw, but she got a really good commander and her own army out of that against all the odds and Akua's cheating. The win against the Lone Swordsman: She wrested control of that ritual from both him and Heiress, shutting his plan down hard and getting herself resurrected by ripping off an angel, the torturing the ever-living crap out of those responsible.

So, I can hope that the ending to this will be similar, where the cycle of fighting can die out, AND Names stay. Perhaps they can get new ones that are also suited to peaceful use. The argument between the gods is also interesting; the dark ones want man to learn, not follow. This may mean that if evil wins or breaks the game, that there might be something more after.

I hope that the next arc ending is similar to the others. I / like/ the serious-but-mostly-nonlethal approach so far, and really hope that Foundling does not suffer a major loss in the process of delivering a good arse-kicking. I don't know how that will go: Around this time, there's usually a dark-before-the-dawn moment when people close to them are hurt, but that is tricky. On one hand, it seems like it has to be played to remind her of the stakes and give resolve (and remind the reader that it's not all sweetness and light), but she has that already, it's horribly sad and upsetting to the readers too, and there does still seem to be a noticeable lack of sweetness or light (hellooo, this is about a villain...), and she just had a bunch of her army TPK'd by the fae queen. Maybe that counts? Also, that trope is used in near-literally every book of this genre, so perhaps the genre-breaking will come in again? Crappy stuff is bad, but crappy stuff that we can partially guess feels worse. I dislike when the plot suddenly gets all dark because everything else has already happened and the stage has to be set for the real big bad. The plot might be some shade of grey because of all the stuff Heiress has done and what bargains Foundling has to make, but PLEASE don't take that next step. The previous (4th) paragraph highlights why I like this. It's tough, and not always all shiny; but she always has an epic win. Changing this would break \*this\* story for me.

Another note is that this normally applies to heroes. What does an antivillain get? Do they get similar treatment since nothing goes well for them, or does it not apply because it's hero-

only? Would it imply that she is still somewhat heroic? She is already enough disadvantaged without losing someone.

Oh, dear, it's going to be Killian, isn't it... No Name, currently distanced, currently no purpose save as a mage, emotional attachment AND no way to make it up after she's dead... ohcrap. I really hope that this does not happen to anyone..

[D. D. Webb](#)

It is redundant in this of all stories to say "that's not good," but *damn*, that is not good.

*callmesteve*

Awesome! You read this too? I need to catch up on TGaB again...

*Byzantine*

So, anyone care to find the story to see what has her so spooked about that promise?

*Spinner335*

Mwahahahahahahaha

*TheCount*

hehe...heheHEHEHEE\*maniacal laugh\*  
ahem

even if by symbol only, giving him the crowns would make him the ruler of the kingdoms they are from, as he can appoint the new rulers, who would (most likely) need to swear fealty not to the king of winter, but to the one who is the prince of nightfalls... giving him easy acces to creation.... or the ovnership of most of calernia...

but thats just my opinion, would you like some tea?

*Bonesawer*

woot-WOOT! This was a masterful chapter.

*Sean*

It feels like Malicia and Black have fulfilled one of their greatest ambitions. They've crafted a weapon with which to break the story in one of the most fundamental ways that could be imagined. Her name is Cat, and she's about to commit theocide.

[shimizubad](#)

the term is deicide, but besides that, I think you're right

*nipi*

So a possible next name for cat Deicide or maybe just God-slayer?

*callmesteve*

I do suspect that was the goal, yes. I think even Malicia could not have done it, and may try to stop her in the end, but ouch. She's a villain/hero hybrid, and I suspect that those circumstances are going to be innately important to whatever she ends up. It's also dangerous to her sanity, and the safety of, well, everyone. Fear the decent person, for there is not limit to what they can do if they feel they must...

Hopefully it does not result in Black's death, though. He's been expecting it, but what if there was no chain of three because Foundling will get White first? That mentor role does tend to lead to death for them, but if Foundling CAN get a new name that isn't Black Knight, perhaps it will be short-circuited. Masego got Hierophant, a power upgrade that still leaves Warlock alive. If there are any parallels, she'll get a new (in both senses of the word) Name that leaves Black alive. It would also be funny if Black can be proven wrong or outmaneuvered in this.

Again, Black's death seems unnecessary (he thinks it is, but Cat's MO is to get new endings that work out better than expected) and it would be an expected event. It would break more precedents (both in and out of the story world) if he survives, the new breed of villain is attempting to be one where they work as a team and don't try to kill each other off (Not quite the same, but I view replacement as similar; they actually are friends and not like Sith lords), and it would both give her more supporters and be a happier event. That assumes that the story does not want to make a turn for the dark. I always worry about that.

*stevenneiman*

As everyone else has already said, that is ominous. I'd love to find out what exactly will happen when the Prince of Nightfall gets his seven crowns and one, but I doubt it will be good (or Good) for anyone involved.

Onto my usual business, the typo thread.

"she might just rip her [ay->way] through the wards"

"Again with [he->the] abomination talk"

"I imagine the [while->whole] incinerating them on sight thing limits your options"

"[I mine could beat hers,->if mine could beat hers,/Mine could beat hers;] all that was left was the battle between trump cards"

depending on whether it's a conditional statement or two assertions.

[edrey](#)

great, cat had go from "only taken what i need" to "i need to kill all royals"

and about her been part of winter, it should end if she change to other name so for the next arc she should be a full fledged knight

*Dragrath*

That assumes she will ever be a true knight as I feel she has broken so far from the mold that any name she gains may be unpredictable after all she has been raised to break stories not to carry their mantle forward.

*RoflCat*

If anything, she already paved a path for her to become a ruler Name with the Sword in Stone before.

So far I've seen 4 ruling names that Cat has had contact with in some form.

Queen – the time the Harshmallim attempted to convert her to Good.

Empress – the tower song

Warlord – At least Hakram and Juniper already call her that.

Matron – Ranker

But if she's going to break the mold, I get a feeling whatever her name ends up as there'll be a massive twist to it.

Like if she does become a Knight, it'd be something like Rogue Knight.

Dread Queen (not Empress)

etc.

*callmesteve*

I call Warlord, Knight, or Foundling. It really would be a great twist if those pre-chapter blurbs don't just refer to her by name, but Name... I should check. How do they refer to other Named?

Warlord could be fun since it fits well and only orcs could get those before. She gets along well with them, and orc names are actually back again, and the only-for-orcs bit simply makes it more likely because of how she tends to break things like that. It would be a great warning to the others, too, since they'd have to take notice that a human got a terrifying ORC Name.

Knight would be neat since she trained as a squire and combines elements of both good and bad – thus she can't truly be either black or white. This way she avoids becoming the indoctrinated Good or replacing her mentor Black. It would imply that she actually broke this role too. (Perhaps a better name would be Grey Knight – she sees the world in shades of it already (Good is not good, and Evil can be), and it's quite a powerful role. Lots of authority and some measure of autonomy, since she would be solely bound by her own ethics.)

Foundling would also be an interesting one. I have no idea what it might actually do, but she's been fairly well foreshadowed to get it. It is interesting in its own right since it implies that she has formed a new Role that no one has ever used before by dint of her... unique... methodology and ethics, and it implies her heroic origins (what else does an orphan become?). It also means that she has moved so many people by what she has done that it warped her name and status into a Name. Better yet, she can squash those annoying people bugging her about heraldry and so forth (I imagine that if she gets a full name, the people bleating about marrying her off will disappear in fear of an... accident). If she gets THAT as her Name, she gains enough power she can ignore them, yet it is also a permanent uncomfortable reminder of who she really is: The peasant-hero who broke (will break?) the nobility. She even has a pipe for them to smoke it in.

H.

Seven mortal crowns, and one.

Seven mortal. And one more \*who isn't\*.

Cat just vowed to defeat the Dead King, he who Ranger invades for fun.

And she didn't even notice! Really, \*really\* not a good oath to have sworn.

*Gunslinger*

I'd say the summer queen would factor into it too. That's probably what freaked Sulia out.

*Morgenstern*

As would the Winter King... And probably some other smaller gods as well, who knows.

*callmesteve*

I almost suspect she'll fail, but steal her heart back later and kick the crap out of them for it too.  
She's allied with Thief as well... Does she need to do it personally?

*Phantom*

The mention of the the Princes' Graveyard, in the top quotes before might gave a hint to what had happened to Cat trying to acquire the crowns.

[edrey](#)

no, the prince graveyard should be in the war with procer, killing the prince of hanoven, the uncle of the first prince, this arc shouldn't be that long,

*nipi*

- 1) Throw an existing kingdom into chaos.
- 2) Induce it to fracture into smaller kingdoms.
- 3) Take the crowns of the rulers of said kingdoms. Dont necessarily even have to kill them. All that was asked for were the crowns.

*2xMachina*

Even better: Crown 8 village heads as Kings under Cat. Take back the crown and pass it to Nightfall. Promptly dissolve the 8 Kingdoms.

*Unoriginal*

Won't work like that, this is the kind of story there is a villain smart-ass who makes an enemy of the hero to be that way, by for example saying (the villain) saying that he would let the heroes family go before promptly dropping them off a cliff. This isn't an exact comparison but its the general way stories flow and what might work in stories for heroes doesn't always for villains even in Arcadia.

Anyways, while the Fae might have to accept such a technicality it's not a good idea to borrow trouble, much less from the Fae.

*Unoriginal*

Wrote that really fast and didn't spell check until after I posted so here are some corrections for my other comment.

Won't work like that > It doesn't work that way

This is the kind of story there is... to be that way > This is the kind of story where the villain is a smart ass who makes

an enemy of the hero by for example telling the hero he would let his family go before promptly dropping the family off the cliff.

[beleester](#)

Even symbolically giving the Fae a crown might be a problem, given how they run on stories. We've seen the characters make things happen by doing things that \*look\* like stories even if they really aren't. Cat managed to make herself a Duchess by taking the Duke's signet ring. And she got her victory in Liesse by declaring herself heir to the throne of Callow and pulling a sword from a stone, even though the kingdom is long dead and the sword wasn't set up for that purpose.

*ForgottenToupee*

So the thing that sticks out to me the most is that Sulia won't tell Cat why the Prince of Nightfall must not get those crowns. Unless it's a magically significant thing that Maesgo will explain, I kinda think it's something Cat also has the power use since she is Winter and Named. Otherwise, there wouldn't be a problem with telling Cat, right?

*callmesteve*

Ooooh, interesting...

*thatthing*

Love your story, thanks for the chapter.

*DocTao*

Q this chapter

"Threefold are the duties of the Laurel Crown," she said. "To destroy Winter. To protect Aine. To see the Sun victorious."

....

"I will take the crown of seven mortals rulers and one, to lay them at the feet of the Prince of Nightfall," I said.

/Q

Most obvious 'plus one' crown, but not certain. The Laurel Crown belonging to the former Princess of the Morning Star.

Implications of that name are unclear to me, as a Lucifer link (angel and demon both, Diabolist?) seems too far-reaching and planet Venus unlikely.

Q ch 13

"If I were a prince," the King told me, "I would be the Prince of Bleak Solstice. Some of that remains even under the Deadwood Crown."

....



"I charge you with the defeat of Summer, Catherine Foundling. I charge you with the making of peace, exacted from the battlefield."

The other the Deadwood Crown belonging to the former Prince of Bleak Solstice.

Wiki. ""The Solstice occurs twice each year (around June 21 and December 21) as the Sun reaches its most northerly or southerly excursion relative to the celestial equator on the celestial sphere....the term solstice can also be used in a broader sense, as the day when this occurs. The day of the solstice has either the most sunlight of the year (summer solstice) or the least sunlight of the year (winter solstice) for any place other than the equator.""

Do we know the in story season/date? And in a month?

Also, in the first book there was something of a Lost Crown (bar?), which i suppose referred to the Crown of Callow?

*Dainpdf*

" It was the Praesi way to look at things best left not meddled with and ask 'can we make a weapon out of this?'. "

Things such as Akua...

...Malicia.

" I had just become the greatest living liability to peace in my homeland."

Bet you Akua felt that sick burn all the way up there.

*arancaitar*

> "You know not what you have promised," she said. "This must not come to pass."

Fun times ahead.

*Big Brother*

I feel like the Seven Mortal's Crowns and One are a way for the Prince of Nightfall to become the Winter King AND let him step into Creation with his full power.

But, what happens if the crowns are laid at the feet of, say, a quarter Fae from Summer. There's quite a bit of weight to a Duchess from Winter offering what is essentially a Champion's Tribute to a member of Summer. Because a Champion conquers the lands and hands the rights to their liege.

[edrey](#)

Dread Empress Malicia, First of Her Name, Tyrant of Dominions High and Low, Holder of the Nine Gates and Sovereign of All She Beheld, watched me for a long moment.

Then she smiled.

that is going to be fun, really. Malicia teachings are something way beyond any league  
ps.( it should be behold no beheld)

*callmesteve*

No, Beheld.

*Nastybarsteward*

So, the heads of seven mortal rulers. Can the plus one be his own head, neatly placed atop the seven others, at his own feet...? 😊

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*Nocebo*

Well, getting the crowns won't be THAT hard with Thief around

*TideofKhatanga*

Especially since Thief has one herself.  
I wonder how precisely defined is "crown" there. There's probably seven countries on Calernia that use crowns as their currency.

*nipi*

Cat hands the Prince of Nightfall 8 coins and walks away laughing.

Well probably not.

*Misterspokes*

The promise is for the Crowns of Seven Mortal\*s\* rulers and one. Why can't it refer to the choirs of angels whom Lord over Creation in Control of the Narrative? The and one could be any of the semimortals we've met, including the king of the dead, winter king, summer queen or even someone like Malica to represent Evil...

*callmesteve*

Yesss... Is that not a typo after all... That could get REALLY bad.

*jonnnney*

Does anyone else think the seven mortal rulers are the 7 high lords of Praes?

*green*

I really REALLY want Cat to become the Gray Knight.

also... oh. oh SHIT. now I think I'm beginning to see what the Wandering Bard is working towards, and what she's afraid of. how far will this ripple go? how far has it already gone?

*ArcWraith*

Seven mortal rulers and one? That could be miscellaneous rulers across Calernia, but I think its more specific. I'm guessing he wants the Free Cities. 7 cities, and one Heirach.

[muffinfluffer](#)

"Even after being robbed of the sun, Princess Sulia was absurdly powerful and she might just rip her way through the wards with her bare hands if she needed to."

Err Spelling.

Correction:

"Even after being robbed of the sun, Princess Sulia was absurdly powerful and she might just rip her way through the wards with her bare hands if she needed to."

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## Chapter 36: Malice

*"It is impossible for the Empire to make an appreciable gain so long as this gain is a loss to every other nation on Calernia. To remedy this, we must discard the traditional lines of allying only to Evil polities and make it so that it is in the interest of other powers for us to rise."*

– Extract from 'The Death of the Age of Wonders', a treatise by Dread Empress Malicia

"When beginning a scheme, one must first consider the desired outcome," the Empress said. "All other practicalities are derived from this, and determining whether that outcome is feasible at all is the most important part of the process."

I'd lit candles, tired of the gloom inside my tent even if I could see through it. Malicia had taken one of my folding chairs and somehow managed to make it feel like a throne just by the way she held herself – through another woman's body, no less – while I'd dropped into the seat forcefully borrowed from the Count of Old Oak. 'Looted' was such an ugly word. I'd used one of the candles to light up my pipe and propped up my feet against a low stool. Black had never insisted on a formal setting for his

lectures and the Empress seemed inclined to continue along the same lines. I'd laid off the wine for the night, deciding the wakeleaf would be indulgence enough. At this rate I was going to run out of satchels of the stuff, though now that Ratface had the Smugglers under him getting my hands on more shouldn't be too troublesome. Still costly, though. Letting out a stream of smoke to the side, I drummed fingers against the ornate chair arm. I knew what I wanted, I was just pondering the right phrasing.

"I want the fae out of Callow and their influence removed," I said.

Malicia smiled. It wasn't breath-taking, not the way I knew she was in person, but just looking at it made me feel at ease. Comfortable. Like I was sitting across from an old friend and not one of the most dangerous women alive. It was the smile of someone who had studied the image that best brought out those feelings and crafted a flawless replica to wear. The Empress was made up of smoke and mirrors in arrangements that had been refined for decades, an illusion masterful enough that it remained effective even while I knew what she was doing. She was everything Akua Sahelian wanted to be, and wasn't that a terrifying thought?

"You are using an absolute, Catherine," she chided. "Avoid these, for they leave no room for compromise. You should be aware, by now, that there is no such thing as an absolute victory. The Empire conquered Callow through overwhelming military victory, but did this remove the realities of its occupation? Compromise, much as you dislike it, is a necessity. Without something to offer as boon, your enemy has nothing to lose. This ensures from the beginning that your opposition will be entrenched."

"The Imperial governorships don't feel like a compromise, from where I stand," I pointed out.

"Because they were not a compromise with Callow, whose perspective you still espouse in large part," Malicia replied. "They were the boon granted to the High Lords after they were denied the direct subjection they believed their due."

I grimaced. Praesi aristocrats ruling over Callowan cities would have been... bad. The way the histories said the Proceran occupation had been, and probably even worse. When Callow had been divided into a handful of principalities under royals that displaced the old aristocracy, the entire kingdom had been in state of constant simmering rebellion. The knightly orders turned bandit against the foreigners, Principate dignitaries were knifed in dark alleys by everyone from thieves to merchants and fields went untilled as farmers disappeared into the countryside rather than toil for the invader. It hadn't been great battles that saw the Principate withdraw but the constant grind of attrition on every facet of the occupation.

"That would have been disastrous," I said.

"Very much so," Malicia agreed. "That is not to say the governorships were not designed to quell unrest, of course. It is not happenstance that Imperial governors were only granted four year mandates, or that Amadeus was given authority to oversee them."

I drew on my pipe, looking for the meaning in that. Four year mandates. From where I stood, what did they mean? The sweet smoke hung in the air before my eyes for a while, until I dug far enough back in my childhood I could get a handle on what she'd meant.

"Mazus was hated," I said. "But every four years, there was hope he wouldn't be given another mandate. That his abuses would come to the attention of the Tower and that he'd be recalled."

"Impermanence," the Empress said. "That was the key. The belief that the enemy could be removed, if they were patient. And who did you look to for salvation, in this matter?"

"The Tower," I said. "Black."

I kept my breathing steady, but my blood ran cold. Every time I thought I understood the breadth of the plans they'd made to keep Callow part of the Empire, I found another hidden knife. It was deceptively simple, wasn't it? If the heroes that popped up failed and failed visibly, then relief had to come from another source and the only one available was the Tower. Imperial governors had been allowed relatively minor abuses that filled their pockets and kept their families happy in the Wasteland, while my people were taught to look for deliverance in Ater one mandate at a time.

"To conclude this matter," Malicia said, "that is why your abolishment of this system is not offensive to me. I no longer need to appease the High Lords, for as an internal threat they are ended for the foreseeable future. The remaining objective is to stabilize Callow as part of the Empire, and you represent a valid alternative in this."

I dimly realized, in that moment, that this exchange had not occurred naturally. She had, even before first mentioning the occupation, known how I would react to that mention. The Empress had then used what I'd say to lead into what was both a lesson about what I'd come to her for help and a gentle reminder of the political currents I'd have to deal with when getting Callow back on its feet after all this. Gods. It was such a little thing, but such a telling one. That a woman I'd barely spoken to a handful of times could predict me this easily and fold that into a broader intent without missing a step. I cleared my throat.

"No absolutes," I conceded. "I want the fae physically gone from Callow and any harmful influence removed."

"Good," Malicia smiled, and for a fleeting moment I was reminded of sunny days on the docks and the first girl I'd ever kissed.

There'd been seemingly genuine joy on her face and for a heartbeat I'd believed it. She wasn't using sorcery, I knew that. There was no artefact or Speaking at work. She could spin me around with just words and body language. I wondered if it was more effective because I was Named – I'd not been able to study people so closely or accurately, before becoming the Squire. I'd become more sensitive to details, and that sensitivity would feed straight into her game: I'd grown used to listening to my instincts, and my instincts told me what I saw was true. Gods, if that was true then she'd managed to turn one of the basic advantages every Named took for granted into an edge for her alone without exerting so much as a speck of power. I reached for the bundle of Winter inside me, let the freezing cold flow through my veins. I was careful not to let the bleed affect the temperature, since it would be as good as sending up a written notice of what I was doing. The icy sensation spreading through me brought some much-needed clarity with it. I pulled at my pipe to hide the vapour that would have come out of my mouth amidst the wakeleaf smoke.

"Then let us speak of the entities that would stand in your way, should you seek to achieve this," the Empress said.

"The Winter Court," I said. "The Summer Court. Possibly the Diabolist, if she goes full opportunist."

"These are entities that will actively oppose you," she said. "Extend your perspective, my dear, to those who do not want you to fail but may withhold assistance for their own interests."

I frowned.

"The Dark Guilds," I said. "Some of the upper echelons of the Legions of Terror. I'd say the High Lords, but you seem to have them in hand."

"Those of them that would invest in seeing you defeated have already done so through the Diabolist," Malicia said. "You may consider the aristocracy of the Wasteland as no longer in play. Let us begin with the lesser liabilities. How can you clear them away?"

"I have no leverage on the Guild of Assassins," I admitted. "Haven't found a real way to affect them aside from threats. The Smugglers have been scared into cooperation. And for the Legions, doing anything there is like throwing a stone in a glass house."

They answer to you and Black alone, so meddling never struck me as being in the cards."

"That is because you still think of yourself as a separate entity from the Empire," the Empress gently said. "Discard this perception, Catherine. A few scrying sessions making it clear that you speak with my authority end the issue entirely. If I am to rely on you, as you wish me to, learn to rely on me as well."

I balked, more out of habit than any reason I could express in words. I fiddled with the shaft of dragonbone and forced myself to seriously consider what the Empress had said. Had I ever really considered myself as part of Praes? I already knew the answer to that, deep down. I'd taken my first steps onto this path with the notion that I would join the Legions to gain authority and then use this authority to change things in Callow. The heart of it had always been that I'd be part of the Praesi hierarchy without ever *belonging* in it. I'd stuck to that, even as the situation changed month by month. I'd relied on Black, sure, but only to teach me and shield me from other Wastelanders. Even when I'd forged the Ruling Council, the motives for its structure had all revolved around limiting Praesi influence in my homeland. There was a reason it had stung back in Laure, when Thief had called me a collaborator. I still saw the Empire as the enemy and for years I'd been dancing from one flourish of rhetoric to another to avoid owning up to that, because almost everyone I loved came from it. Saying I didn't oppose Praes, just the parts of it I found unacceptable. That I was willing to live with what it could be, if not what it was right now.

But I was running out of excuses to not make use of the parts of the Empire that I'd already said I believed in. I wasn't above throwing around my weight as the Squire to get my way, because I'd always thought of the Name as *mine*. But it wasn't, not really. Praes at large listened to the Squire because she was the apprentice to the Black Knight, the leading villain of the next generation of Calamities. The moment I'd taken Black's hand I'd chosen a side for everyone to see, and lying to myself about it wouldn't get me anywhere. I couldn't have the authority coming from being part of the Tower's rule without actually *being part of the Tower's rule*. It wasn't a nice thought. It was bitter, and it felt like I was spitting on everything I'd ever dreamed of as a girl. But it would work. And if I kept mouthing off to heroes about how their pride and principles just got in the way of getting the shit that mattered done, then I had better be ready to follow through. Otherwise I should not have lived this long.

"Then please do so, Your Majesty," I said, taking a deep breath. "Can I assume you have leverage on the Dark Guilds?"

"Malicia," the Empress reminded me. "Call me Malicia, darling. And I have a few irons in the fire. Scribe was the one to call

them to heel after the Conquest but I've people in their ranks. Enough that a message can be sent."

I breathed out. There were only smouldering remnants in my pipe, so I took a last pull from it and set it aside. The smoke drifted lazily in the candlelight, a wall that would do nothing at all to protect me from the woman in front of me.

"That leaves the worst three," I said.

The Empress shifted slightly in her seat and I side-eyed her. There was something... In some intangible way, I felt like I could trust her more now. Also like I should take my feet off the stool and straighten up. The Winter cold wavered when I realized exactly what she'd done. *She's mimicking Black's body language*, I thought, horrifyingly impressed. If they were closer in height I might never have noticed. There was an amused glint in the puppet's eyes when I stared at her face. She knew perfectly well that I'd noticed.

"We arrive at the interesting part," the Empress said. "Before touching upon how these entities can be affected by us, consider their nature as agents and how this informs their actions."

My brow creased.

"I'm not sure I follow," I said.

"As an example, let us study Cordelia Hasenbach," Malicia said.

I leaned forward interestedly. It wasn't everyday I got to have an assessment of the ruler of the Principate from the mouth of the very same woman who'd been fighting her across the continent for the better part of a decade.

"At first glance, dearest Cordelia is the most powerful individual on the surface of Calernia," the other woman said. "She commands the largest and wealthiest nation on the continent, her armies are recently blooded and her personal diplomatic reputation is pristine."

"Procer's isn't," I immediately said. "The reputation, I mean. No one that has a border with the Principate remembers them fondly."

"Indeed," Malicia smiled. "The history of the nation she rules does influence what actions she can and cannot take. At a more basic level, consider the limits of her position. Cordelia Hasenbach is Lycaonese, the Prince of Rhenia. Her support base is primarily Lycaonese as well, which means it is poorer and less populous than that of her internal opposition. She can only project military strength temporarily, for the Lycaonese armies are needed at the northern borders. What does this mean for her position in Procer?"



"She has rich, powerful rivals," I said. "And she needs to keep them in check if she wants to keep her throne."

"Precisely," she smiled. "To compound the issue, the civil war that Amadeus initiated and I fed has ravaged large swaths of the Principate, leaving her with large amounts of dispossessed and unemployed soldiery. She is unlikely to face open rebellion, as it would be reputational suicide for any ambitious rival to try to remove her by force after the last decade of war. Yet if she does not deal with this issue, she risks being set aside in favour of a ruler that will."

"So she needs to keep her soldiers busy and out of her lands while she rebuilds the Principate," I frowned. "Then why Praes? Why Callow? There's easier targets. Sure her reputation will take a hit if she scraps with Levant or the Free Cities instead, but it's kind of *expected* of Procer they're going to be real pricks to their neighbours."

"We now return to your earlier insight about reputation. If Cordelia acted as you said, she would face the same issue that the Empire traditionally does," Malicia said. "She would stand alone. Make no mistake, Catherine, Procer has been greatly weakened. It cannot afford war on more than one front, which is certain to erupt if the Principate turns expansionist again. The Calernian balance of power would be shattered if she was allowed to make gains."

I chewed on that. Hasenbach needed a war, but she also needed her other borders quiet. Which meant a target that didn't worry everybody else, and the way she could accomplish that was...

"A Crusade," I sighed. "It *has* to be a Crusade, from her perspective. She can't not be at war and she can't take on any of the southern nations without pissing off the others. But if she's fighting Praes, not only can they not backstab her they might actually have to help."

"And so we come upon the nature of Cordelia Hasenbach as an entity," the Empress said. "She must be at war, but cannot be at war with a nation that is Good. These are the rules she has to obey."

"It's why she can meddle in the Free Cities but only to back the faction fighting Helike," I said. "Otherwise her southern borders catch fire. She has to fight against Evil or her alliances all collapse because no one can trust Procer."

"Have you wondered why I never expressed fears of you attempting an independent Callow, Catherine?" Malicia smiled. "This is the reason. Assuming you achieved that result and even sought to remove the impetus for Imperial invasions by trading us grain, you would still have to face Procer. You are, after all, a

villain. An acceptable recipient of dear Cordelia's wrath from a diplomatic perspective, and from a political one a long-term threat. Procer cannot afford another hostile border, from a purely logistical standpoint. It needs Callow to be Good and at war with Praes, to keep them both in check."

That made it twice that she'd turned an offhand example into a pointed lesson as to where I had to stand. As I understood it this was unusually straightforward for her, but I wasn't surprised. She would be tailoring her approach to who she was approaching, and I wasn't unaware I reacted best to people being direct. The part she'd left unspoken was that if Callow with me at the head was at war with the Principate, it would be without the Legions backing me. That wasn't ending well for my side, and since Praes wouldn't be able to tolerate a Proceran protectorate just across the river that meant Callow would once more become the battlefield of the continent when the Tower made its move.

"Point taken," I said. "Nature, huh. The Summer Court is the easiest to figure out. The Queen has three rules that bind her, I've been told: destroy Winter, protect Aine and 'see the Sun victorious'."

"All points of pressure you can feasibly reach," Malicia said.

"I've got the sun stashed away, so I can bargain with that," I said. "Threaten to destroy it, maybe? I get the impression to actually do that in Creation would be a very bad idea, but it wouldn't be the first time I lied to a god. The other two are a little trickier."

"As I understand it, my dear, Winter is not a static state," the Empress said. "It is transient, fated to come and pass. You do not need to think of destruction as requiring force. If what Winter is no longer corresponds to what Summer believes it should be, that may very well qualify as 'destruction'."

"You mean force it to pass into Spring or Autumn," I said, taking a look at the notion. "I'm fairly certain the seasons only shift when either Summer or Winter has lost the war. I'm not sure that's feasible."

Malicia smiled warmly.

"It would be a mistake, to believe yourself bound to the traditional fae outcomes," she said. "This entire affair began by one of the Courts believing these were not impossible to avert."

*A way to make Winter no longer Winter.* There might be something to that.

"That leaves Aine, the seat of Summer," I said. "I can make gates so getting there isn't impossible, just... really stupid. There's

no winning a fight there, and the fae can cross back into Arcadia much easier than they come into Creation. It won't be undefended."

I paused.

"I'll need all three, if I'm to force the Queen's hand about anything," I said. "She's not really a thing that gets compromise. Anything less than complete failure, anathema to what she is, and she'll just keep on slugging."

"If your strength is insufficient, borrow strength," Malicia said. "She has enemies as well, does she not? If I understand your plan correctly, this assumption lay at the heart of your taking prisoner the Princess of High Noon. Should Summer fail to secure her return, should they lose too many soldiers, they will afterwards fall in the face of oncoming Winter. This is one of the limitations she must abide."

I spared a moment to hope my intentions weren't this fucking transparent to everyone out there. I would have spared another to be intimidated by the fact she'd understood my plan without being involved at any point in the making of it, but I'd grown dull to that breed of surprise by now.

"Winter winning fucks it all up too," I said frankly. "I'm not sure if *worse* is the right term, but it will definitely be a similar yet different shade of godawful."

"Let us speak of Winter, then," the Empress lightly said. "You have treated with the King of Winter in person. Become bound to his Court, in part, and fought at the side of his greatest captains. What did you glimpse from this?"

"Take two vicious, spitting furious cats and shove them in a bag," I said. "Then add that it has been there since time literally immemorial. The King's the cat *real* desperate about getting out of that bag."

"A colourful description," Malicia said, arching an eyebrow. "Yet short on useful specifics."

I almost laughed, until I remembered how fucking dangerous it would be to actually like this woman.

"He doesn't have a plan, I think," I said. "Or his plan was just to drag Callow into this mess and he doesn't really need to control what comes after that. He wants out, Malicia. I don't think *how* he gets out actually matters all that much. And that he thinks that way at all is scaring the other fae. I don't think he's supposed to."

"That," the Empress said quietly, "is worrying. Wekesa once told me that Arcadia is akin to a first draft of Creation, and mirrors it still. If Winter is meant to be the reflection of villainy, and yet bound to it, there are... implications."

I didn't have to look all that far to find the villains who'd made the largest mark on Calernia in the last century, so her meaning was pretty clear.

"It's not that clear cut," I said. "The parallels aren't so direct. But it's crossed my mind, yeah."

"A matter to consult more sorcerously-inclined minds over," Malicia finally said. "Desperation is a useful tool, Catherine, especially if it can be given outlet. If your read of the creature is correct, it is the easiest of your obstacles to bargain with."

I grimaced.

"He has my heart," I said bluntly. "And I don't mean that in a romantic sense. Ripped it out to make a point which, uh, complicates negotiations a bit."

The Empress smiled, almost fondly.

"I sometimes forget how much Amadeus has left his touch on you," she said. "Catherine, one cannot always deal from a position of strength. That is mere vanity. And doing so does not mean the negotiations will be at your expense."

"Fae always screw you on deals," I reminded her.

I'd always thought that Black's quirk of lips was terrifying, the blade-smile that always heralded something dark happening to someone he thought deserved it. Looking at the Empress' face then, the languid and almost lazy amusement, I found something to match it. This had been the closest to a glimpse of the person underneath the crown I'd gotten since I'd first met her, and what I saw there had my fingers itching for a blade.

"Darling, you forget what side you chose," she drawled. "You stand with the Dread Empire of Praes, Catherine. We have murdered gods and made doorkeepers of demons. We have tricked angels into damnation and made orderly host of the hordes of Hell. Fae?"

She smiled amusedly.

"Fae will be a pleasant reprieve from the High Lords, my dear. Let me show you."

*Fuck, I thought. Now I like her.*

---

Kingbob12

Goddamn I love Malicia. And especially Cat trying so hard not to be charmed. As if Cat ever had a chance.

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

Same here.

ArkhCthuul

Agreed.  
Lovely chapter.

[ijustwanttoread573](#)

No matter how much I know it's a bad idea for Cat to like her, I can't bring myself to disagree. Now we're getting a closer look at the woman who's changing the story of an entire nation, possibly the world eventually.

callmesteve

Exactly. I still can't really read her, though. I think that's the point, actually.

To some extent, she really IS evil and manipulative, but even those who might not like that still have to agree with what she wants.

But with Cat and Malicia working together... Cue Jaws theme...

[DroughtBringer](#)

Great chapter.  
Also: I can't help but liking her either....

vietnamabc

So that is why all spies are assumed to be compromised when Malicia talks to them directly, the lady pretty much weaponized charm.

Also Winter = Old Evil really wants out, I think the guy see that the board is about to be wiped so he want to be out of the game, I think Bard would try something like Hashmallin but on much larger scale, like Judgement Day types of board-wiping since there's no way Good can win conventionally now, Evil has

entrenched way too deep, its influence is too wide to contain now so we need a hard reset.

*stevenneiman*

I don't think he's trying to escape a sinking ship, so much as one that's been stuck in the doldrums since time literally before time. I doubt that the Bard is planning any kind of nuclear option since she's bound by the traditions of Good, since in a sense she is the traditions of Good. If she was, I think that the King of Winter would deliberately put himself in the blast radius just to have it over with.

*Christian Oaks*

Lol talk about wrong for the bards desire for a nuke

[Cpt. Obvious](#)

A lot can be done that's technically Good, but is objectively evil. The Wandering Bard has been around for a very long time and knows all about the technicalities of Good and Evil...

*vietnamabc*

Calling Bard Good is really stretching it since her recent actions don't really seem that heroic to me, baiting William to brainwash a city, throwing Hanno to crazy evil Tyrant and putting the two sisters to sacrifice is what Evil and general douchebag usually do. Even Black does not throw his teammate to the wolves like that.

About Winter even if the board is reset, I think the guy will still be reincarnated and stuck in the new cycle so this is why dude want out now and not later since there is not much of a later.

[benthelynx](#)

Hitler is a perfect example of the rationale of the greater good.

*Ed*

Vietmanabc -You've made a very common mistake there 'good' does not mean nice. They were the sacrifices that had to made so that the greater good was served and evil could not prosper. Those that gave their very lives should have done so gladly in the knowledge that their sacrifices would make a difference in the eternal fight against evil.

[Robert Allaband](#)

There is a saying that goes something like this: To plumb the true depths of Evil you must first strive to do the greatest good. There is also the quote by Nietzsche that definitely applies to the Wandering Bard who appears to be an immortal soul that takes over mortals bodies: "He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee."

The Wandering Bard is a much greater monster than the Calamities because she will do the most despicable things all in the name of the "Greater Good".

*Levi Kalden*

In that sense she is somewhat of a mirror to Cat

*Mike E.*

The road to Hell is paved with Good intentions...

*Dainpdf*

That, plus she's the most proficient Speaker around, that we know of.

*callmesteve*

Not to mention that she does not need to Speak (at all, not even the normal kind!) to compromise; she can do it wordlessly. I still think she did not do that \*here\*, though. Cat is probably too useful on her own to be put on strings like that, plus it's unnecessary. She already wants to do something very much like what the Empress does, or at least it would go that way eventually. That's not to say that she has not been backdoored (Ew, not THAT way!) by the Empress; I am sure that Malicia would make sure that someone who is that dangerous would have a hidden control so that she can't turn, even if it's unlikely. Remember Masego and that exploding pendant...

*stevenneiman*

Bard is a perfect example of the difference between good (the concept of morality as understood by people outside the Guideverse) and Good (the divine faction within the Guideverse). Remember that the brainwashing superweapon that the Bard wanted William to unleash was literally Good incarnate.

The thing about the Bard is that she'll do horrifying things in the name of Good, because all she cares about is doing her job of making sure that the stories run smoothly and the villains lose. She doesn't care any more than Black does if

her method of winning causes harm to the innocent, and if anything she has more destructive means available since a villain's nastiest tricks are all inevitably self-destructive.

*jonnney*

The bard is a viscous bitch, but with her lifespan her fear is a valid one. Her main fear seems to be of what happens after Malicia, Black, and Catherine create a Empire that fully absorbs the strength of Callow. She fears that after than power is solidified another Triumphant will arise and with twice the land manage to turn Calernia in a world power solely devoted to evil.

*tynam*

Bard doesn't appear to care whether Good wins, as long as everyone keeps playing the same game. Her problem is that Malicia and Black changed the rules and she doesn't want the new variant to catch on; it would end the gods' experiment.

*danh3107*

Fuck, /now/ /I/ like Malicia, at least even more than I did already.

*Naeddyr*

Tricked Angels into damnation? Oh my, I don't think we've heard that one before. 😊

Thanks for the chapter. You really want to like Malicia, and for Malicia to like Cat. Cat is probably a fresh of breath air, so I'd guess Malicia is somewhat fond of her, though of course her perspective might be Praesi noble enough not to.

*stevenneiman*

I think Cat reminds Malicia of Black, and Black of Ranger.

*Letouriste*

Maybe cat would remind ranger of malicia?^^

[Cpt. Obvious](#)

Cat is a mirror image of Malicia, if that mirror is tinted, comes from a fun house and had a run in with an exploding undead goat carrying a satchels worth of goblinfire.

*nipi*



@Letouriste

That would not be a good thing for Cat.

*The quietist*

I don't think she does LeTouriste, Ranger's main objection to Malicia is she doesn't get hands dirty while Cat most certainly does.

*callmesteve*

I like to think that is the case. It's hard to tell, but they might legitimately care. I am pretty sure that despite their positions and their side, it does not stop them from still caring.

Perhaps more so in the Empress' case. With so few true friends and having to constantly babysit a rabid sack of nobl – uh, / badgers/, perhaps she would value friends more. However, it evidently does not stop her cryptic mentor/chessmaster act, apparently.

*Cpt. Obvious*

She's played the Game for so long I doubt she can feel friendship with anyone she hasn't known for at least ten years. And even then I don't think she'd trust them. There were some glimpse into Malicias thinking way back when we learned that she's got her hooks into all the officers in the Legions. We also learned that she didn't fully trust Amadeus not to blow his top if he learned that she had installed a form of mind control in people he considered close friends. But she felt she needed that extra layer of control if Amadeus one day would turn on her.

Malicia simply doesn't do "friends" anymore.

*stevenneiman*

That last line had me wheezing with laughter. Excellent work as always, EE.

*callmesteve*

Quite.

*Burnsy*

I like her too.

...Goddamn she's good. Shes the tyrant of an explicitly evil empire who clawed her way to the top with the sole motivation of making Evil as a very concept more powerful AND I LIKE HER.

*haihappen*

Helike is not always on the side of Evil. It flip-flops depending on who is in charge.

[frolamiz](#)

I think he meant tyrant, not Tyrant =)

*stevenneiman*

Despite the male and female versions of the title being "Dread Emperor" and "Dread Empress", the gender-neutral term for the Named ruler of Praes is "Tyrant". This is kind of confusing given that it's also the only term for an evil ruler of Helike, but I don't think either nation consulted the other when it was deciding what to call it's Evil rulers.

[Cpt. Obvious](#)

Well in Helike tyrant is not only a job but also a Name. The job kind of comes with the Name...

*callmesteve*

I am not sure she's trying to improve /Evil/ per se, save for the fact that she got drafted much like Cat, and it's simply the only side she can be on, and the only one to work from to fix things. It's more like she's just trying to break out of these stupid wars and get everyone to behave nicely, albeit with Evil tactics.

Oh, wait, she's trying to turn the Dread Empire into a bureaucracy... Nope, still Evil!

*jonnney*

I do like her, but while she is definitely trying to make Praes more powerful she isn't too concerned with evil. While the Tyrant is a soldier for the gods below in a war to control creation Malicia doesn't care about the gods above or below. That is actually the main way that she is similar to Catherine, while the traditional Villain declares war on half of creation the girls who climb the tower are willing to make war, or even peace, with any and all of creation in order to attain their goals.

[nehemiahnewell](#)

Catherine and Malicia, sitting in a tree. Pe el oh te te ie en ge.

*Gunslinger*

Holy shit is Malicia awesome. Using her body language itself to exploit named.

*Gunslinger*

Also I feel like time has been passing on Cat's side but any of them are yet to hear of Captain's death. I wonder if it has already occurred at the time of the current chapter?

*stevenneiman*

We don't have 100% confirmation that she will die. Really, it comes down to whether being the Bard offers protection against the way that things always go to shit when you gloat. Regardless of side, what she gave Black was nothing if not a villainous monologue, and those aren't even a good idea in real life where reality itself won't conspire to screw you if you give one.

*Misterspokes*

I love that Malicia is like "Bitch, you forget, we're the Black Tower, the premiere source of Grade A, Unrefined, Captial E, evil on the continent; now that you've made it clear you've thrown your lot in with us, we'll be sure to fix that little problem you have with one of the 4 nastiest fae in existence..."

*callmesteve*

That is a good summation.

*narcoduck*

Man, Malicia is really living up to her boasts. Really shows why the Dread Empire is at its most powerful since Triumphant which took a continent wide rebellion and two foreign empires to defeat. Makes one wonder where those two foreign empires are now...

*Jonnnney*

I believe one has fallen apart, the founders of ashur, but the other is still chugging along with a villain and a hero sharing leadership.

*vietnamabc*

Yeah how does it work in realities? Are Good and Evil divided into 2 parties and they debate on the Assembly like democracy?

*Letouriste*

No I think the hero lead the country in the sunlight whereas the villain take care of managing it in the shadow.each one

take care of the flaws and limitations the role/name of the other have. this is also possible the equilibrium is different for each generation of partnership

[\*benthelynx\*](#)

Perhaps think Arutha and Jimmy the Hand (Raymond E Fiest)

*jonnnney*

I would guess that good rules the cities while evil conquers their enemies. Could also be an evil sorcerer working with a good warrior.

*Shoddi*

Aaah!! \*places knuckle against forehead\* May she never return!

[\*Evgeny\*](#)

My, my. Haven't Cat just found a new love? That would be interesting.

---

This talk makes me think about how Arcadia relates to Creation, in a fundamental way. Stories are said to be the grooves in Creation, and Arcadia seems to have nothing to base itself on but stories.

If you tried to draw a graph of how much the Fate affects the world (and could compose a solvable equation for it), then Creation would be the family of solutions that peaks on Fate-influenced points but ultimately approximates zero over infinite stretches of the graph, since it has a material world to fall back on. Arcadia doesn't, and so its family of solutions would be the one with cyclical graphs that never cross the x axis (never fully become real). They can become close enough for an entity on the border to cross from one group of stable solutions to another. but doing so would bring a whole new unexpected set of outcomes.

If we go back to the 'groove' metaphor, humans can be represented by a ball rolling into the groove, capable of going in different directions inside of it and even of leaving it given enough speed. The fae, on the other hand, are more like a patch of earth lit by a candle standing on it: their actions and thoughts are shaped by the story they are in. Akua's father mentioned that a fairy isn't different on material level from a stone in Arcadia, meaning that what makes them semi-sentient is purpose (defined by the Story) and power (granted by the Role they are playing).

This, however, is a theory, which is why i have to ask. Erratic, is there such a thing as uninhabited part of Arcadia, or a wood

falling in a forest without anyone to hear it doesn't exist there in the first place?

Cpt. Obvious

It seems unlikely erraticerrata will ever answer this question, so I'll post some thoughts about the Fey.

It seems they are fully conscious of the stories and has played them so many times they've run out of possible variations. Summer wins. Winter wins. Sulia is defeated. She wins. She never gets sent there. The trader sells the flask of dragons tears or not. They've played all the roles. Made all the choices and knows what comes next.

That's why they got so confused and even scared when Cat and friends inserted themselves into the story they were playing. Suddenly the script was changed and they had no idea what would happen. For the first time in a long time something was changing and they had no idea what would come from it.

That, changing a story is something that they can't do. But that doesn't mean they aren't sentient.

*Rani*

Cat/Malicia new OTP.

Malicia = Best Girl.

Malicia = Love

Malicia = Life

frolamiz

Thanks for the chapter!

frolamiz

If you apply the same logic to Malicia, you understand why she want so much Demonist's weapon to prevent the war with Procer. She need the permanent threat of Procer's invasion, but prevent it from happening to keep Callow and Cath under the tower.

*Unnamed goblin*

Nice reminder of Who is the Boss here.

*Morgenstern*

\*sigh

Really? She leaves out the business of Prince of Nightfall plus all those crowns? Even though she JUST came from Sulia who

basically TOLD her what bad, bad shit that means, one that even Sulia is scared by? -- One would think that would be something to MENTION to someone like Malicia, when having THIS talk about important problems, especially in the context of talking about problems to be expected from Winter... \*sigh

*Brian P.*

Cat's got a month to defeat and/or trick two minor gods and their entire armies while retaining enough forces to then immediately go fight against an Evil Diabolist that controls a flying city, and you want her to take on side projects?

*jonnnney*

Just a guess here. I think the seven mortal crowns are the crowns of the seven high lords. . (Some people think it is the free cities, but about half the city-states don't have individual rulers.)

Promising a Fae the head/lives/souls/crown of all the high lords of Praes isn't something you mention to the Empress of Praes.

*Dylan Tullos*

And at last we reach the moment when Catherine accepts her leash. She's been dancing around the subject for a long time, trying to pretend that she's not a creature of the Tower, but she's finally realizing the truth.

Every one of her "rebellions" was within the limits of what Malicia had already planned for. Even if she acted sooner than Malicia anticipated, Catherine was always going to end up as Queen of Callow, regardless of what title she used. She became a servant of the Dread Empire the moment she accepted Black's offer, and now she's one of Malicia's most useful tools.

Catherine wants to pretend that words like "collaborator" and "traitor" don't apply to her. In reality, she's turned Callow into a province of Praes and trapped her people in service to the Tower. When Malicia falls- and she will fall- Callow will be caught in the Uncivil Wars that follow. I don't think trading a Praesi invasion every generation for a Praesi civil war every generation is the best of trades, but Catherine seems to be stuck with it.

*esryok*

Perhaps her reasoning is that proper integration with the Empire will help to pacify it. Black told us the story of Praes is to grasp and Callow to be grasped. If these stories are

transcended as Cat intends, there's room for the next story to be a bit less bloody.

*Dylan Tullos*

esryok:

That's a good theory. Maybe Catherine is right, and an Empire with Callow will be a little less inclined to infighting.

But stories are powerful, and they have the ability to take new forms over time. If Praes's role is to grasp, and Callow is no longer available to be grasped, what will stop the new, larger Dread Empire from grasping at Procer?

The Story right now has Praes as the Bad Empire, and Callow as the Good Kingdom. However, Black's whole strategy depends on nations being capable of changing their Roles. He wants to make it so Praes doesn't have to be the Bad Empire; the Story might force both Praes and Callow into the role of Designated Villains, leaving the Principate as the Heroes.

*esryok*

I agree. If Team Evil fails to fundamentally change Praes at the same time as it digests Callow, then everybody loses except the Bard.

Makes me wonder whether a Crusade would help or hurt Team Evil's story. On the one hand, a holy continental alliance descending on the Empire sounds pretty bad. On the other hand:

- Praesi High Lords are currently subdued
- Callow's ongoing anti-Praes narrative was just suppressed (according to Black, at least)
- Praes in general is easier to govern after (during?) a major conflict
- The Callowan tribes drew together while opposing Praes & Procer. Now the Principate is giving Praes+Callow a common enemy.

A crisis is an opportunity, indeed!

*jonnnney*

The problem with the crusade isn't the war itself. The problem is it allows the first Prince to fully solidify her control over the whole Principate and heal the wounds caused by decades of civil war. Furthermore it unites all of the good nations into an alliance similar to the free cities which will likely grind down Praes over the following decades.

*callmesteve*

Both of their goals are to make sure that Callow is well-enough integrated that any wars are external only. Also to make sure that IF Malicia ever falls, that it does not take out the Empire, far as I can tell. I am not too certain that it's possible for Malicia to fall for quite a while.

*callmesteve*

See Lord Vetinari for more on THAT one...

Now I know what this reminds me of!

*vietnamabc*

So does that make Cat captain Vimes?

*stevenneiman*

The POINT is to turn Praes and Callow into a single unified, stable whole that isn't going to have a bloody rebellion every generation. By providing a reasonably stable source of food for Praes and producing a unified if not uniform culture, Malicia hopes to create a state which can actually keep itself under control, even after the people who set it that way leave the scene.

Whether that's actually going to work out at all is another question entirely, but I wouldn't say it isn't possible that it will work.

*Abrakadabra*

You should read more history. Being stuck between two great powers is BAD for your nation.

*usernamesbco*

Idk, I saw a lot of Cat realizing just how much Malicia (and Black by extension) have manipulated Callow in general and her in particular. Even before the story officially started, she was being manipulated into joining the Legion.

It's been mentioned before that Cat will take what she can use, and break what she can't use. She's being useful for now, but I'm wondering if Malicia may have shot herself in the foot with this little power play here. She doesn't have the relationship with Cat that Cat has with Black, there's no real foundation there.

Even Black usually takes a light-handed approach, excepting the hanging incident in Summerholm (which was later justified and basically forgiven when Cat realized William and Good had suborned her free will). Black giving her the tools she needs



and letting her do her thing are making her feel grateful and beholden to him, while I think Malicia's more controlling approach is going to make Cat ornery.

*alegio*

I have always felt chills when the Calamities get serious and/or talk about their intentions, Im just gonna say that Malicia didnt disappoint on that front.

*Spinner335*

I suppose the winter thing makes sense. The King of Winter seems to be imitating Black as best he can, they both after all want to break the cycle.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*arancaytar*

This ship would be the most terrifying vessel in Creation.

*callmesteve*

Idon'twanttoknow.Idon'twanttoknow.Idon'twanttoknow.Idon'twanttoknow.Idon'twanttoknow.

Lalalalalalalalala, can't hear you, lalalalala...

How else do I say that it would be rather scary and disturbing, but somehow I think it would be funny to see?

[vexingvision](#)

Yess.

[edrey](#)

malicia making cat fall for her was expected, she is the empress after all and cat is way too young  
if i recall well, there are 7 high lords, with cat there are 7 and one for winter, a pity i was hoping for the free cities

*Rodrigues*

There was nothing left to imagination huh? I'm kind of sad that there was nothing that we could figure it out by ourselves. everything was interpreted for us readers ;/

*callmesteve*

Not the crowns. I still wonder what Role that will play...

[benthelynx](#)

I'm left wondering if the chapter name is merely a play on the empresses name or what more will be revealed?  
And if there is more, how will Black respond?

#### [nextgidea](#)

"It is impossible for the Empire to make an appreciable gain so long as this gain is a loss to every other nation on Calernia. To remedy this, we must discard the traditional lines of allying only to Evil polities and make it so that it is in the interest of other powers for us to rise."

Since Evil is mandated to be defeated again and again by its role and narrative in the Story, how does it vanquish its opponent? By making sure that Story breaks and the cycle is broken.

Herein you can contrast and compare Praes and Winter. Both have realized that odds are stacked against them in current form, and have decided to change Fate themselves. But how they do so, is very telling. [Whether the fact that both realized at same time is due to inter-connection between Arcadia and Connection is entirely another matter]

Winter has decided that it will win the war against Summer (or at least not lose it). Whereas, Praes has decided that it will have Good as an ally, or at least as someone who does not make it their life's aim to oppose them, and even may help them to rise in strength.

[ They started by setting itself as salvation – Corrupt Governors? Black is Answer, Feeling rebellious? Squire is the solution ]

It seems to me that while several details are handicraft of Black, overall brush strokes and Political framework have been much likely Malicia's.

\*\*\*\*\*

There is lots of other stuff in the chapter which gives food for thought. I would need time to gather my wits and think on that...

#### *Fanon*

We've seen Papa Black as he trained Cat, now we see Mama Malicia being an equally reassuring and absurdly competent parental figure as she helps Cat deal with her heartache~

#### *Darkening*

I was rereading this and saw the line about making winter not be winter. I'm... curious, what effects placing Summer's sun in Winter's sky would have.

*vietnamabc*

Praise the Sun! All shall be well.

*Byzantine*

Probably explosive, given this is Fae magic we are talking about.

*nipi*

Just a random Question. Do mountain goats exist in this world?

Cat could use them to upgrade her undead goat bombs:

*jonnney*

Better yet, see if Hierophant can figure out how to give them wings. Flying undead suicide goats.

*stevenneiman*

Now that I think of it, just one of those would be enough to bring down the city for anyone who has sufficiently little concern for civilian casualties. Goblinfire really is a massive factor in the way that tactics work because you can't rely on vast magical power to deal with it since if a goblinfire bomb goes off in just the wrong spot (which Fate can occasionally guarantee), it can turn the most powerful magical array into nothing but more problems.

*nipi*

I don't know. The Goats probably wouldn't have the instincts to use their new limbs and thus the same would apply to Cat once they are undead.

*Jabes*

I was so glad to hear Cat finally facing her own hypocrisy. That she finally has to accept Praesi, not just view them as tools, has been something I have been hoping for.

*Aotrs Commander*

Huzzah!

Now, THIS is what I've been longing to see since... Pretty much the start of the story. Finally... FINALLY, Cat and Alaya are on the same page... Because, as daft as it is, as dangerous as Malicia is... She ISN'T Cat's enemy, and heck, even thinking her of such is a path that will lead right back to square one. (And a reason why, personally, would very much NOT want to see Cat become Empress.)

Watching people realise they are on the same side and ganging up is one of my favourite things in the world and it so very rarely happens on the villain side of things.

Also, a terrible thought occurs... Cat+Alaya... That's kind of scary...! (Unlikely, but it'd be fracking interesting to see...!)

I wonder if Cat realises that culture changes over time, and the inevitable result of their path will see a change in the culture of both Praes and Callow towards a new, more unified culture...?

*green*

oops... meant to leave the comment from last chapter on this one. oh well! XD

*Abrakadabra*

So. If Winter is the reflection of Evil, but the Winter King wants to end it all, Than he is basically a reflection of Black, right?

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## Chapter 37: Procedures

*"Truth and silence lie better than the silvermost tongue."*

– Soninke saying

It was a little odd to be half-naked in front of three people, but the only person that was feeling awkward about it was Hakram. The moment I'd begun unbuttoning my shirt he'd cleared his throat and looked away, and had been staring at the ceiling of my tent for a solid half hour by now. Considering I had it on good authority – Robber, ever up for a bit of gossip if it was at someone else's expense – that he was still sleeping around on the regular his prudery for this was pretty amusing. As for the other two, well, Masego couldn't have been any less interested in tits if he tried and this wasn't anything Kilian hadn't seen before. I shifted on the stool at the memory of some of the instances where she'd done a great deal more than just looking and Hierophant clucked his tongue disapprovingly.

"Don't move," he said. "This is delicate work."

I'd have to take his word on that, since I couldn't actually see what he was doing. He was prodding around the area of my heart with a long oaken wand covered in runes that was entirely ignoring my flesh, pausing now and then to look at the collection

of hovering runes in the air by his side. Kilian was crouched at his side, forming a ball of light over her upturned palm. They'd said it was because they needed a 'point of comparison', though they'd been vague about what exactly that meant.

"It's not grounded in the heart," the Senior Mage frowned.

"Agreed," Masego said, and I felt him poke something inside me.

Runes shifted in the air and the redhead inhaled sharply.

"That should kill a human outright," she said. "It's enough sorcery to turn all the liquids in her body to ice."

"Named, Kilian," the blind Soninke reminded her. "And this 'moon' seems to have been purposed to regulate the energies."

I cleared my throat.

"So you have answers for me, then," I said.

"We can confidently say that your third aspect is bound to your title of Duchess of Moonless Nights and not the heart replacement the king forced upon you," Hierophant said. "A fascinating piece of work, that."

"So when I get my heart back," I prompted.

"You should keep the aspect, assuming you remain the Duchess," Kilian said. "Though it will severely limit your abilities."

I met her eyes, but she turned to look at the runes.

"The moon the King of Winter placed inside you serves two purposes," Hierophant elaborated. "The first it to mimic the role in your body your heart would. Fascinating, as I said. I did not believe the fae had so keen an understanding of human anatomy."

"And the second?" I said.

"You might consider it a heart in the magical sense," Masego said. "All the Winter power that you can bring to bear is siphoned into it, then released for your use natured in a way that lessens the damage to your body."

"That feels like something that's going to fuck me over when I get my actual heart back," I said.

"Without that filter I'm not certain you will be able to use your third aspect," Kilian said. "I've never seen the direct aftermath, but I was given to understand it is a domain?"

"And I definitely know what that is," I lied. "Pretty sure Hakram doesn't, though, so to be polite someone should explain."

"Actually," the orc began, but I shushed him.

"It's all right, Hakram," I said. "We're your friends. You don't need to pretend with us."

"I explained to you what that is mere months ago," Masego said, sounding surprised as he eyed the orc. "Perhaps you should drink less. It's beginning to affect your memory."

Adjutant glared at me helplessly and I grinned.

"I'll keep an eye on him, I promise," I told Hierophant.

The dark-skinned mage nodded, then looked up at me through his eye cloth.

"Creation is, in essence, matter with a set of rules imposed by the Gods upon it," he said. "A domain is when an entity, in this case you, temporarily overlays different matter and rules over it."

Well, that sounded mildly blasphemous. And incredibly dangerous.

"In your case, 'Fall' appears to create a bubble of empty darkness where you may use Winter energies to lower the temperature beneath what should physically be possible," Masego continued. "Unusually offensive in nature. Most domains provide different territory and a comparative advantage to the entity that creates it."

"It shouldn't be possible for a Squire to have a domain at all," Kilian said frankly. "Transitory Names are not strong enough. Domains usually belong to lesser gods, full-fledged Named late in their career or particularly ancient monsters."

"It's a rare ability even among heroes," Masego noted. "Aside from the Champion lines in Levant and allegedly the Saint of Swords, there shouldn't be any other living human practitioner."

"Then how did I get one?" I asked. "I didn't exactly rub a lamp and make a wish to get this, Hierophant."

"Djinn were usually bound to urns, not lamps, and did not grant wishes," Masego replied absent-mindedly. "It does occur naturally in some entities. Every dragon has a domain at their heart of their body, it's what allows them to breathe fire. And Father has theorized elves essentially become a living domain when they get old enough."

"You have a pretty good look at my body right now," I said, raising an eyebrow. "See any scales or pointy ears?"

"No," Hierophant told me seriously. "And I would be able to see them even if they were invisible."

I saw Kilian's lips twitch from the corner of my eye.

"Now," Masego muttered, "this is not conclusive by any means but I do have a theory."

"All my ears are listening," I said.

He stared suspiciously at me but I gave him my most innocent smile. His frown deepened, so maybe I needed to put some work into that.

"I believe this to be a leash," Hierophant said. "You are given powerful abilities, but to make use of them properly you must give the King of Winter foothold in your soul. Removing that foothold turns what was once an asset into a liability, giving you strong incentive to remain bound to him."

"There's more to it than that," Kilian said quietly, and Masego seemed surprised.

The Senior Mage flicked her fingers and three rows of runes parted from the rest.

"I've never had occasion to do a full mapping ritual on my father," the redhead said, "but this corresponds more or less to how his body reacted to fae sorcery as a halfblood. Higher tolerance, but there's no actual attempt made to make it *harmless*. In someone born, that's only natural. But in an artificial construct?"

"Power limiter," Hierophant said, glass eyes gleaming under dark cloth.

"Your saying he screwed me," I said.

I paused.

"More than previously believed," I added.

Kilian nodded slowly.

"When you draw deep on the power, you must get backlash," she said.

"My blood starts to freeze," I admitted.

"You were crippled," Hierophant said bluntly. "You have the power of a Duchess to draw on, but if you actually did so it would kill you. It explains why you were at such a disadvantage fighting that Summer duchess in Arcadia, when in theory you should have been on even footing."

"Countess at most," Kilian said. "Your domain allows you to fight out of your league but the King made certain you would never be powerful enough to be a threat to him."

I clenched my fingers. This shouldn't have come as a surprise, even if it did. I'd been so focused on how the threat was my stolen heart that I'd never thought to question the additions to my power I'd discovered. Archer had told me that the Duke of Violent Squalls was supposed to be one of the big names in the Winter Court. Someone who was supposed to turn the story back to war if the fae that ruled Winter was trying to avoid it. There was power to that kind of role, and by taking his title even in a different form I should have swung a great deal harder than the average duke or duchess. I'd thought it was because I wasn't really fae, but evidently there was more to it than that.

"Can you fix this?" I finally asked.

Masego smiled.

"If I were still the Apprentice, no," he said. "But such miracles are now within my purview. I will need preparations and the process will not be gentle, but it can be done."

"You'll still get backlash," Kilian warned. "You're a mortal bearing a fae title, that much is unavoidable."

"The proportion of power than can be drawn before backlash could be increased tenfold, at the very least," Hierophant said. "A Duchess in full. You've an unusually tough constitution, you should be able to weather it."

"Ominous," I said. "Get this ready. The sooner we get it done the better."

"It could be ready tomorrow, but three days hence would be easier," Masego said. "For ritual purposes, the new moon will benefit me."

The mage got back to his feet, adjusting the black robes over his corpulent frame. Kilian followed suit, brushing back red hair in a gesture I followed with my eyes out of habit. Masego left the tent without bothering to excuse myself, entirely forgetting Hakram was still in here. The redhaired mage lingered for a moment.

"Catherine," she said.

I hesitated.

"Dismissed, Senior Mage," I replied.



Her face shuttered and she gave a stiff salute before leaving. I began to button up my shirt again, fingers almost shaking. That had taken more determination than I'd expected.

"You decent?" Adjutant asked.

"Never," I drawled. "Villain, remember?"

"No one's a villain every hour of the day," Hakram grunted. "And if you're being lippy about it, that's a yes."

I struck a suggestive pose when he turned, my top two buttons still undone, and he groaned.

"Just too much woman for you, I understand," I said sympathetically.

"You're barely half an orc," he gravelled.

"I'm vicequeen of Callow, you savage," I grinned. "That could be construed as treason."

"If you have me arrested, who will handle the paperwork?" he said.

"You have always been my most loyal," I hastily replied. "Never doubted you a moment."

The orc snorted and reached for the carafe of wine Masego had refused to let me touch. He poured two glasses and pressed one into my hand. Oh dear. That was the herald to a serious conversation, wasn't it? The joke about his drinking habits died unspoken on my tongue.

"We haven't talked about it," he said.

"The heart?" I said. "It hasn't been a priority so far, to be honest. It was functional and there's other fires to put out first."

"Cat," he said flatly. "You know that doesn't work on me."

My lips thinned. No matter how well it served me, there were times I wished he was just a little less perceptive.

"There is nothing to say," I grunted.

"It's a nasty habit you have," Hakram said. "Thinking admitting something hurt you means you're weak."

"Already got that speech from Masego last year," I sighed. "I cope. We're in the middle of a godsdamned war, in case you hadn't noticed. This is so far down the ladder of shit I need to deal with it's not even worth mentioning."

Hakram drank from his cup and I did the same.

"You were happier, with her," he said. "Everyone saw that."

"Happy doesn't come into this," I barked. "I didn't sign up for *happy ever after*. The colour of my cloak's a bit of hint there."

"Bullshit," Hakram said, and it was vehement enough I flinched. "That's an excuse and you know it. Fix this or don't, but do not pretend that being a villain means you have to be miserable. You know that's untrue."

"What the fuck do you want me to say, Hakram?" I hissed. "That I miss her? It's not exactly fucking riddle when I feel like I put a fresh knife in my ribs every time she's in the room."

"That is a start," the tall orc gravely said.

"She wants to cross a line," I said tiredly. "I can't stop her without doing the same. Talking's not going to change any of it, so this is just salting the wound."

"I understand she wants to do a ritual," Hakram said cautiously.

"She wants to slaughter people like animals," I spat. "To get rid of whatever it is that screws her up when she draws too deep on magic."

"Human sacrifice," he said. "How many?"

"I didn't ask," I said. "It doesn't matter. One would be too much."

I eyed him, saw the lack of expression on his face.

"Gonna take her side, are you?" I bitterly said. "Say I've done worse. That it makes me a hypocrite to find even the idea repulsive."

"You assume much," Hakram said. "Do you think Callowans fed most the altars in Praes? Wars with the Kingdom came once a reign, Catherine. In peace they looked for fodder in the Steppes."

That have me pause, because he was right. I had assumed, deep down, that no one born on his side of the Wasaliti would really get where I was coming from. One of the reasons I'd never talked about this with anybody. It had been extremely presumptuous of me.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly. "I didn't mean-"

"I know," he sighed, fangs flashing. "I will not pretend my people are anything but red-handed, Catherine. We have fed upon mankind since the First Dawn. We kept slaves and sacked cities,

splattered blood across the writ of Creation. But this, we understand. The Miezans taught the Wasteland to hate chains, and in turn the Wasteland taught us to hate the altars. When Lord Black decreed the Legions would no longer bleed their own for victory, he earned deeper loyalty than he understood."

I looked away, because I knew that Black hadn't done that because he thought it was right or just. He'd thought it necessary, that those rituals were a crutch that did more harm than good. He probably knew that already. Most of the orc generals likely did as well, but to greenskins action always mattered more than intent.

"I've killed people," I said. "A lot of them. Because they were my enemies, because they were in my way. Sometimes even to make a point. Guilt, what was actually *deserved*, I stopped bringing into it somewhere along the way."

Hakram drank and did not speak.

"I started the Liesse Rebellion," I admitted suddenly. "I let the Lone Swordsman go after starting him down that path. Because I needed a war to rise."

The orc set down his cup.

"I suspected," he gravelled. "It was too personal for you. More than it ever was when you were pruning away the undesirables in Callow."

"In sparing him, I killed thousands," I said. "I used them as a tool. And that's despicable, Hakram. I hate it, that for a moment I stood in the same place the High Lords do when they decided to hike the taxes or murder a few of my people for convenience. I think that's the line I can't live with crossing. Being the kind of person that doesn't see people as people, just *objects*."

"The kind of person that would use killing others as fuel for a ritual," he said.

"I know it's different for Praesi," I said. "You read Black's journal, same as me. There were years where sacrifices for the fields were all that kept famine away, and I won't cast stones at people doing ugly shit to survive. But there's no need for that anymore. Not if the grain can come from Callow instead. But it's still done, and there has to be a point where culture isn't an excuse anymore, right? Gods, if it was someone's culture to eat fucking babies does that mean I just have to smile and pretend it's not vile? Because there's a lot of that going around, Hakram. The Matrons are our allies, so we have to pretend the things they do every year to boys just like Robber *because* they're boys aren't revolting. Ratface's own father tried to have him knifed in his bed because he was inconvenient, and I'm

supposed to just laugh it off and say 'that's the Taghreb for you, there they go murdering again'? Fuck, I've done dark things but at least I don't pretend it's all right for me to have done them. I don't *encourage* it."

Gods, but it felt good to actually say that out loud. Because I knew who I'd sided with, and now more than ever I knew who I answered to. But there were compromises that rankled. Things I had to pretend I didn't see because I couldn't pick every battle that should be picked and still think I'd win. That was the thing, with stories. They never told you that the ogres had kids that would starve without a father or that the valiant knight that helped you was part of a larger institution that might trigger civil war if left unchecked. If you wanted a clean ending, one that didn't leave a bad taste in the mouth, you had to end the story just after the victory. Otherwise you got to see that you could win loudly once, send Evil skittering back into the dark, but that everywhere across Creation there were lesser evils taking place every hour of every day and there wasn't much anyone could do about it.

"Ah," Hakram said softly. "You hadn't realized."

I looked at him.

"That Kilian is Praesi," he said. "With all that entails."

"She doesn't *need* to do this," I said, almost pleadingly. "She's not as powerful as she could be, it's true. But she's still better than the average Legion mage. If it came down between her dying and the ritual being made, Gods forgive me but I'd do it. Because I'm in love with her, and I'm selfish and I'd rather be a monster than lose her. But it's not going to kill her, to be who she is. This is just wanting more for herself at the expense of others."

"She can do it legally," Hakram said. "Using death row criminals at auction."

"I know that," I said through gritted teeth. "And I know that the people who'd bleed wouldn't be choir children. That they'll die anyway, probably on another altar in a way that benefits someone else. That even in Praes you don't get the noose lightly. But if they hang, Hakram, that's law. That's the exercise of justice, or the closest the Wasteland can have to it. There's a difference between hanging someone for a crime and slitting their throat open so your magic comes more smoothly. And it stings that I shared my bed with someone for more than a year who doesn't get something that basic."

I drained the rest of my cup.

"Gods, is *human sacrifice* too low a bar to set?" I said, and I felt exhausted. "Because in my enemies I'll live with it. Until I can make them stop, and I will. But Kilian's on my side. Used to be a lot more than that. And I refuse that this should be who we are."

I looked at the orc.

"What's the point of any of this, if we're just the High Lords with a nicer reputation?" I asked. "I'm not better than her even if she does this, Hakram. I'm probably worse, if a count can be kept for things like this. And we both know I'll do worse things before this is over. But I won't put on a smile and pretend this is all right. I'm not willing to be that person, not even for Kilian."

The tall orc finished his cup.

"This is," he said, "half the conversation you needed to have. Perhaps you should seek the other half."

He left the tent, left me alone with the words I'd spoken still filling the silence. They were no comfort. Never had been.

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*naturalnuke*

Thanks for another chapter. C=

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

A solid half the conversation indeed.

*danh3107*

>The Saint of Swords

Hah, I get that reference.

Great Chapter as usual

*JC*

What is the reference?

*Byzantine*

Probably a Fate/Stay Night reference.

A Domain in this story is roughly the equivalent to a Reality Marble in the Nasuverse.

*nick012000*

Emiya Shirou from Fate/Stay Night, I think.

*Kai Wingless*

I remember watching this scene, but with a different set of subtitles. The line "Have you enough swords, King of Heroes?" was such a good line. The official subs don't hit quite the same way, I think. Though there's no way to fix the activation speech, lol. Just have settle for the fact that Japanese poetry doesn't always translate to English in a meaningful way.

*danh3107*

It's most likely Unlimited Blade Works, from Fate/Stay Night. The domains are very similar to the magic called Reality Marbles.

*MagnaMalusLupus*

Regardless of anything mentioned by others about the anime series, the term Sword Saint is attributed to the Japanese swordsman and author, Miyamoto Musashi; aside from writing a book on tactics still read to this day called the Book of Five Rings, is also considered to have been the greatest historical Japanese swordsman. Complete bastard too, but undeniably good at killing.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Wait, Fate AND Stay Night are one thing? What is it, a book? An anime? I've never heard of it

*Byzantine*

@ Warren, since it won't let me reply directly:

Fate/stay night is one particular entry in the Fate series. Technically I'm referring to it by the first path while the actual Reality Marble only gets called on in the second path, but meh.

It's generally a visual novel series that at various points has expanded into anime, movies, and games.

*Shequi*

Hmmm. I suspect the above are correct about the anime link, although my first reaction to the phrase "Saint of Swords"

was to the Shogun Executioner from C&C, which first appeared in the mission "Behold the Mighty Saint of Swords"

### *Darkening*

Hm. A little insight into Cat's current moral status, a promise of a power boost soon, and a possibility of her getting drastically weakened when she gets her heart back later. Not the most exciting chapter, but certainly some important moments in it. At least if she does get nerfed over this domain thing once she gets her heart back, she can always transition to get a new and improved set of aspects.

### *Dainpdf*

I'm just waiting for Masego to get the ritual ready and it involve bleeding a score of people. And then Cat will have an aneurysm.

### *JackbeThimble*

One of the reasons Cat likes Masego is that he hates human sacrifice too. Mostly as a matter of professional pride rather than morals but still.

### *Clint*

I'm just getting tired that in every arc this same physical/name nerf keeps happening in different ways , it and the bard are becoming repetitive to me

### *Jago*

The Bard is repetitive by nature. Probably Cat has a problem with that, it is how this universe works, it tries to put up sequences and the first nerfing of its third aspect set up that.

It can be a sequence of three struggles against a power that tries to remove her third aspect: first time she loses it (a loss), the second time she gets it but it is nerfed (a draft), the third time she gets it and it is very powerful (a victory).

### [wirelessgrapes](#)

Actually seeing Cat's thought process is interesting. She makes some good points, in that she can't just be the High Lords with a nicer bow. I have the view that she needs to refuse the sacrifice, because otherwise she'll lose her 'Good Evil' Story tag. Heroes fight adversity, not hurt others to go around it. Maybe the sacrifice won't ruin it, but you have to have a red line somewhere, other wise you end up with the Red Line Fallacy.

## [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

She doesn't need to be so controlling about what someone else wants to with their own life, but she IS Named I guess

### *Darkening*

Is it really being controlling to other people to simply refuse to closely associate with people that commit human sacrifice for personal gain?

### *Dylan Tullos*

The Warren Peace NFL Report:

Cat isn't upset over what Killian is doing with her own life. She's upset over what Killian is doing with other people's lives; specifically, murdering them to give herself a power boost.

The Gallowborne are criminals, and they'd be the first to admit that they deserve a noose. But It's one thing to kill a man, or even to sacrifice a human being in a moment of crisis. It's another to think of people as objects to be traded.

Cat is a general and a ruler; she'll sacrifice her people when she needs to. Killian thinks like a slave trader, viewing people as commodities that exist for her convenience and profit. These mindsets are not compatible.

### *luminiousblu*

"But It's one thing to kill a man, or even to sacrifice a human being in a moment of crisis. It's another to think of people as objects to be traded."

Is it really? Like no, is it REALLY different? Generals go to war thinking of numbers, not names. It's 'acceptable' to lose 4000 people in this battle, we have enough to go on. We'll 'let the javelinmen screen the heavy infantry', because we'll 'only lose 200'. Rulers will say, 'we can let the people in the north starve, because they're really not that important to our infrastructure and it's either them or the south'.

Killing a man who is already legally dead is not particularly bad, in my eyes. If they're going to die anyway they may as well be made useful.

### *burguulkodar*

For me it's like using the dead corpses of dead row criminals into fertilizer or involuntary/unwilling organ donors after the sentence. They aren't BEING killed for



that reason, but since they will get killed anyway, might as well do things useful with their bodies/organs.

In the case of Praesi, the energy of death can turn into a magic power. It's very much alike. It's not using their souls, or so I understand. Just the energy of the ritual.

*Dainpdf*

She doesn't want to be just the High Lords, but I think it's more from a "I wanna be able to live with who I am" perspective than just "I need this story practically so I can achieve my objectives".

*Gunslinger*

Catherine's getting a power upgrade. Wohoo. Though odds are of good of course that something horrible will go wrong leaving her with another headache. We are still after all on the kick Cat side of the plot curve.

Also reading Cat's reading made me flip flip over her anger. At first I did consider that Cat has done plenty of murdering and soul tearing just to make a point. But then the last point about the issue, about Killian not even understanding why it is a bad thing was pretty convincing. At least in the sense that her reasoning makes internal sense.

On a side note, she had no qualms using that poor summer Duke as portal fuel. Grooves in creation they may be but Fae are still sentient beings.

*danh3107*

It's Been hinted that Fae are in fact, not actually sentient at all. Warlock compared their internal workings to being little different than a stone in arcadia.

*LM*

Fair. But I took that to mean Arcadia itself is sentient

*Shequi*

That wasn't Warlock, that was Akua's First Mage / Father.

[vamair](#)

I don't really see why the noose or guillotine or whatever is better than the altar. Is it because sacrificing people create incentives to condemn more people to death and for lesser crimes than usual and therefore warps justice?

*Dainpdf*

I think that's it.

It stops being "the State removes you because you are a threat", with punishment foreseen in law, and becomes "the State denies your humanity and deems you a resource because you committed a crime, plus we need some blood for the blood god".

*RandomFan*

Either that, or there's some religious symbolism. Maybe the church of light believe, or even hint that it condemns the sacrificed to hell, in certain circles, or the folklore says the same. If it has lasting post-mortal consequences... well.

*Daemion*

As Cat has said, using the fae in a ritual was a bad thing. She is aware of that. The sticking point between Killian and her is that Killian sees nothing bad or wrong in killing people for a ritual.

It's necessary evil vs. institutional murder.

It's a matter of morality based on cultural differences. Killian's morality has been formed as she grew up in an evil empire where there is no great significance given to human lives... while Cat grew up hearing religious and heroic tales in which human lives were always important.

Honestly, I don't see how they can bridge these differences. Even if Masego found a way to unlock Killian's potential without spilling any blood, Cat would still know that Killian is a person who doesn't mind ritual sacrifice for personal gain.

*letouriste*

maybe EE will give us the answer wednesday:)  
i am honestly curious about that too.

the story can go a lot of ways:

- killian could die in the next battle(would lead to cat regretting things)
- cat find a right way to do that(on enemies?)
- cat or killian get convinced by the other somehow
- they both agree to find another way
- they definitively break up but in good term
- other ways?

*KageLupus*

It would almost feel like a cop out at this point, but I really do think that Killian is potentially on a path to gain a Name herself. After Masego transitioned into Hierophant the

role of Apprentice should be available again. And here is Killian, working under and with a Named mage to increase her knowledge and power.

The two main reasons I can see for her not to become the new Apprentice are that it would too neatly sidestep the current moral dilemma her and Cat are in, and that throwing in a new Named would throw off the current five man band. They already have a mage in Hierophant and we have seen what happens when a group has redundant members in it (Bard v Bumbling Conjurer). Killian deserves better than to play second string even after gaining a name. And would be more than rife for a tragic murdering if the story called for it.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Everyone here always thinks their favorite character is about to become Named, or already is Named, or whatever stupid ideas. Look at how commenters talk about Robber, if you can without barfing all over your monitor.

### *Shequi*

There are at least 2 claimants for the Name of Apprentice – Killian is one, but Masego has his assistant Fadila Mbafeno who might try to Claim it, and as far as we've seen if there are multiple claimants there's usually only one survivor...

### *stevenneiman*

Fae are definitely sapient, but I'm honestly not sure if they're sentient, with the exception of the Winter King. In any case, they're still inhuman monsters in a way that death row inmates will never be. Also, it might affect her perspective that her most loyal troops were originally death row inmates, and I'm not sure if that bias is unreasonable.

### [onedollargum](#)

You might have mixed up sapient and sentient there. :3

The gallowsborne are living proof that there can be redemption in service. Not that value = morality, but I agree her history with them is likely a heavy influence.

I wonder if Hierophant needs human sacrifice for his upcoming ritual...

### *Dainpdf*

Our Fae are Philosophical Zombies. Although, given this is Akua's father, he just might not recognize the sapience of anything he deems convenient to bleed.

*2xMachina*

And then Mesego brings human sacrifices to the ritual to remove Cat's limiter.

"What? I thought you knew"

*Engineer*

Huh, Cat still has qualms about human sacrifice? Murder is murder, whatever your justifications for it and as she said herself: "justifications only matter to the just". So, follow your own advice Cat.

Letting those convicts die without utilizing their inevitable deaths for a better purpose seems like a terrible waste of a perfectly good power source. Did she forget the upcoming slugfest with Diabolist?

I'm fairly certain Black would not approve.

*Dainpdf*

Cold blooded murder is different from killing in the battlefield. Killing an enemy because you need to, in a matter of life or death, is different from slaughtering for convenience.

Even from a utilitarian point of view, Cat is a ruler and as such her actions define what is acceptable justification for actions.

*burguulkodar*

For me it's like using the dead corpses of death row criminals into fertilizer or involuntary/unwilling organ donors after the sentence. They aren't BEING killed for that reason, but since they will get killed anyway, might as well do things useful with their bodies/organs.

In the case of Praesi, the energy of death can turn into a magic power. It's very much alike. It's not using their souls, or so I understand. Just the energy of the ritual.

*Dainpdf*

Ignoring the fact that you seem to have posted three identical replies to three different posts...

The problem with using the corpses of death row criminals (beyond the fact that the death penalty is barbaric) is that it creates perverse incentives. Prison labor leads to increased imprisonment.

*Levi Kalden*

That is sadly the problem with morality. You have to draw the line somewhere because morality isn't a thing of logic. Some people will see the line drawn to late some to early (I belong to those) because otherwise you will not stop. I don't think she picked the right fight since I agree that a resource should be used if it doesn't change the outcome (in this case the persons death). But I have to admit the hypocrisy in my own morality as it is formed from many different influences. Therefore I can't condemn her for this flaw even if it's there

### *Myth*

The hypocrisy is strong in Cat. Human sacrifice is wrong but forcibly removing the soul from someone for being allied with your enemy isn't?

That aside, enjoyable to read yet one of the weaker chapters so far in my opinion. Also I am getting the feeling that Diabolist wont die in this book. That it will end with the defeat of the Queen of Summer and King of Winter.

### *RandomFan*

Keep in mind, if there's any spiritual consequences from being sacrificed, they're probably permanent, while Cat said that the soul removal thing was temporary, followed by a proper killing or return to a living body. Still horrible, but in a different way.

Still, I'm blaming Church of Light brainwashing that seeped in through the cracks.

### *Dainpdf*

She needed the soul removal to win that fight, which is a pretty major one. She can argue it was necessary evil in order to defeat Akua, who is okay with unleashing demons on people. Plus, she fixed it later.

This is just Killian wanting a boost and just not seeing what would be wrong with sacrificing a few people for it.

### *Petya*

Err, he meant the removal of soul of one of Aqua's generals, for the sake of revenge in the AFTERMATH of the battle. She just torn out the soul of living human being instead of swiftly killing him for the sake of PETTY REVENGE. But I may got something wrong, because I honestly do not see anything wrong with using death row prisoners for sacrifice. It is akin for me to donation of your body for science, or for organs to save another human live. Meat is meat, death is death. If it comes anyway, you should use the heck out of it. The corpse is hard to offend, usually. Also, having the

literal fae mage on your side might just as well save a few more lives of her legionares, and by extension – civilians. Also also, it can be used as a narrative element to be used against the Court of Summer, if Kellian fae form is any indication, we all but directly told that she is a descendant of Summer. And, would you look at that, a love between a Summer and Winter fae, you can even scramble it to be a pivot to allying both courts, preventing and effectively winning the war, while reaching the wishes of Winter King, and how many lives that could save (and/or endanger) is anyone's guess.

But to be fair, I also tend to see no reason in funerals and general traditions associated with death, aside from being a useless waste of resources. Turning bodies into the soilent green or fertilizer, while not spending so many land or money on cemeteries is really usefull, and I can't find the reason it is not wildly implemented, aside from general stupidity of population. And I also would not see necromancy as anything Evil, if it existed. A large chunk of humanity seem to agree with me on the terms of necromancy though.

*Dainpdf*

Donation of bodies to science is generally voluntary on the part of the deceased (prior to dying, of course) or their family. Not decided by those in power.

*burguulkodar*

For me it's like using the dead corpses of dead row criminals into fertilizer or involuntary/unwilling organ donors after the sentence. They aren't BEING killed for that reason, but since they will get killed anyway, might as well do things useful with their bodies/organs.

In the case of Praesi, the energy of death can turn into a magic power. It's very much alike. It's not using their souls, or so I understand. Just the energy of the ritual.

*Bonesawer*

I'm seriously looking forward to the sucker punch that Cat's power boost needing blood sacrifices is going to bring (I'm guessing but it seems too narratively perfect for EE to pass up). I hope she comes down on the 'accepting blood sacrifices' side of the fence. It's just too morally inconsistent, and more importantly impragmatic (against the heart of the storyline groove she is following after).

*Bonesawer*

\*inconsistent/ impragmatic not to

*Dylan Tullos*

Bonesawer:

The issue here isn't whether Cat is willing to do evil things to protect Callow. That's one of the major themes of the story, and she's proved many times that she's willing to cross the line. If that means performing one blood sacrifice, or a hundred, Cat will do what she thinks is necessary.

Cat's problem with Killian isn't that she does bad things; Cat admits that she's done far worse. The cause of their division is that Cat knows what she's doing is evil, while Killian sees absolutely nothing wrong with taking a man's life to give herself more power. Cat and Killian are both pragmatists, but Cat does evil for a good cause, while Killian is willing to do evil for purely selfish reasons, without even acknowledging the harm her actions cause to real people.

People aren't objects. Even when she treats people like objects, Cat understands this. Killian doesn't. Ultimately, no relationship can survive that kind of difference.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I don't think it's so simplistic. This isn't about morals at all, at least not at its core.

I think it's more that Cat sees Kil as her connection to being "pure" or "innocent", and if Kil goes through with the sacrifice ritual, she can't represent those things to Cat anymore. Really Cat is being disgustingly controlling here, asking Kil to be something she's not for the sake of Cat's subconscious dissonance.

*Dainpdf*

Perfectly captured the essence of Cat's argument there. Black's plan of making sure all of Cat's inner circle are Praesi tests her again and again, grinding against her morals and worldview.

Much like when she associates Black with a father figure, she tends to forget who she's dealing with. Malicia also got plenty of use out of that.

*letouriste*

i still don't see why they could not just take some of akua confidants for the ritual. If they are her enemies that should be okay?...i think^^

hakram is pretty cool here:D

"Considering I had it on good authority – Robber, ever up for a bit of gossip if it was at someone else's expense – that he was still sleeping around on the regular his prudery for this was pretty amusing."

that sentence was complicated;) you forgot an " , " between "regular" and "his prudery" i think.

*stevenneiman*

I think that Hakram's Role is tied to supporting his CO (Cat) whatever she does, and not in changing her course. Like Eudokia once said about her own place on the team, without Hakram Cat would do the same things just not as well. It makes sense that he gets her to confide in him and put her thoughts into words, since he knew that the repressed emotion was tearing her apart. Now that I think of it I wonder if this is one more attempt by Fate to railroad her into a redemption story. Often villains who became Evil for noble reasons (which there's no argument Cat did) are forced back to the side of good when they feel hostility or betrayal at the discovery that one of their Evil companions did something that even they find morally repugnant. Sending it from her love interest is just twisting the knife, but it would make the feelings stronger and the redemption more likely, if she was the sort to go for this. Doesn't matter of course, since turning Good wouldn't accomplish anything and Cat wouldn't throw away everything she's worked for over an estranged love even if it would.

As far as typos go:

"Every dragon has a domain at [their->the] heart of their body" there's other ways to correct this, but that's the simplest

"The colour of my cloak's a bit of {a} hint there."

"It's not exactly fucking riddle when I feel like I put a fresh knife in my ribs every time she's in the room." I'm not exactly sure what this was supposed to say

Also, I think that the proper word is "prudishness", not "prudery". It's clear enough, but it reads a bit weirdly.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

They can't use Akua's goons for the sacrifice ritual because Cat has stupidly gone and entrenched herself in this position, and it doesn't have anything to do with the original problem anymore. Any compromise that ends with the ritual happening is a loss for Cat now. Her feelings on compromise have been discussed completely I think.

People do stupid things when their insecurities motivate decision making, and Cat is no exception.

*Cayle*



Dead is dead. It seems so hypocritical and pointless. Catherine is like a bloody vegan in an abattoir, killing is fine but eating meat is wrong.

*RandomFan*

It's probably Church of Light Brainwashing, abet done manually. Sacrifice probably is an act of worship to the gods below in their book, while the death penalty is absolutely okay.

In fact, I don't know what the consequences of Human Sacrifice are, but somehow I get the impression that it looks, to a Callowan, at least, more like dealing with something else than ripping out the life force and transmuting it. If there's someone at the other end of that trade, then it's dealing with the dark gods directly, which is unprecedented for her. Also, it might mean condemning souls and not just lives.

*Dylan Tullos*

Cayle:

Dead is dead. If the only way for Cat to stop Akua was to make a hundred sacrifices, she'd do it.

This isn't about the sacrifice; it's about the mindset. For Cat, taking life is something you do when you have to, to protect the people you serve. For Killian, taking life is something you do for the sake of convenience, because it provides a benefit. Cat thinks of human sacrifice as a crime she could commit for the greater good, while Killian thinks of it as an expensive good. Like many Praesi, she rejects the concept of morality outside of "good for me or the people I like" or "bad for me or the people I like". Cat does evil things, but she hasn't rejected right and wrong, and she hasn't reached the point of thinking of people as cattle.

*Cayle*

What is need? Those governors she crucified were pretty inconvenient wouldn't you say?

She's tying her concept of necessity to some ideal greater good (for callow) scenario. When she met Black she cut a throat for power. She saved the Lone Swordsman knowing how many would die from it. She's sacrificed people many times now and she'll do it again.

*Dylan Tullos*

Cayle:

That's a good question. For Cat, "need" is about what the people of Callow need. For Killian, "need" is about what she personally needs.

Cat understands that crucifying people or sacrificing them on an altar is small-e evil. Killian does not. People she doesn't know are objects, stepping stones that she uses on her rise to power. Cat also uses people, but she doesn't dehumanize them in the same way, doesn't make them automatically less than her simply because she has power and they don't.

Cat's moral system assumes that life has value, and that it can only be taken for good cause. Killian's moral system assumes that she has value, and that people she doesn't know personally exist for her convenience. Cat is a moral pragmatist, seeking the Greater Good for her people, while Killian is essentially denying the humanity and reality of other people for her personal profit. The slave trader metaphor is the best one I can think of to describe how Killian thinks.

### *Blinks*

Motives matter. Reasoning matters. You start looking at people as nothing more than ways to increase your power that's an awful step to take.

Dead is dead simply doesn't cover it.

There's a difference between killing someone for giggles and killing someone for a crime. Especially in a world where good and evil are legitimate and verifiable things.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Let's be clear here: motives matter TO YOU. Do not take it farther than that. This very chapter mentioned that to greenskins, motives really don't matter. How did you miss that?

### *Blinks*

In a world with good and evil?

Motives matter to more than just ME.

### *Kadath*

Cat's been avoiding Killeen because she doesn't want to be convinced by her point of view. She's afraid of slipping even further than she already has.

### *Fanon*

For the sake of my KilliCat ship, I'm perfectly okay with human sacrifice!

I really hope Cat's ritual also requires human sacrifice and that'll force her to allow Killian's as well.

It'll also force Cat to admit how selfish she is, that it's okay for /her/ to sacrifice lives for the Greater Good, but won't allow others to do the same.

That corruption of morals sounds absolutely delicious 😊

### *OldSchoolVillain*

Cat does indeed sacrifice for the "greater good" (if not the Greater Good). The problem here is, as some people have stated, that Killian isn't making these sacrifices for a greater good, she's making them to solidify and increase her personal power, with no stated motive in how she plans to \*use\* that power. That's the issue Cat has – opposite of the Orc mindset she noted earlier, she's looking at the intent behind the action, and Killian's is evil. Not Evil, the way Cat and Black work, but plain evil in the way that Akua and Lady Tasia (gods below rest her soul) and hells, even Triumphant – may she never return – worked.

### *Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

### *Big Brother*

Cat's heart has been replaced with "The Moon." Maybe Killian's can be replaced with the Sun they stole from the Princess. With Hierophant performing a ritual in three days time on the New Moon to increase the limit on Cat's Fae power, he could possibly follow up with a ritual to bind the Sun to Killian at Dawn. There could be significance in that. The Dawning of a new Power in the Summer Court coinciding with the actual dawn could lend great weight to Killian in the story, and help Cat break the cycle of Summer and Winter.

### *Fanon*

And if that and KilliCat happens, Summer and Winter will be parlayed through romance, further breaking the cycle of conflict!

### *OldSchoolVillain*

More likely they'd end as star crossed lovers. Cat could only bear Princess Sulia's WINGS for a few moments, how well do you think Cat and Killian would be able to bear each other's touch with that kind of equal and opposite power?

*nipi*

Hmmm... Wasnt Kilian close to a name. There might be hope of her surviving such a procedure.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Not that I remember. Do you have any evidence from the text—NOT speculation from the peanut gallery—to support this idea?

*kinigget*

I see

So it's less the practice itself, though she does still find it utterly abhorrent. The bigger problem is the attitude

Congratulations Catherine, you managed to have the one objection thst doesn't make you a hypocritical

And at this point, I think she'd settle for getting Killian to understand her objection

*kinigget*

There's also the fact that for Killian this actually isn't about convenience or personal power. It's about being worthy to stand beside Cat.

See, compared to the vast majority of mages, she's well ahead of the curve, but compared to Cat, she's falling behind. As much as cat might say that it doesnt matter and that she doesn't need this, she's still *\*badly\** missing the point. She's not seeing how important it is to Killian to be able to match the girl she loves

I do believe there's an understanding that can be reached here, where Killian acknowledges that this is a wrong, and Cat acknowledges why Killian is willing to do it anyway.

### [Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

Wasn't it stated somewhere that human sacrifices messed with the immortal soul of someone? If so, sacrificing someone, no matter how evil, condemns them to an eternity of torture and robs them of the ability to redeem themselves in a next life. Considering Cat's attachment to her own redeemed death row inmates, her refusal makes even more sense in that case.

*RandomFan*

I don't believe that it's ever been confirmed, but I've been throwing around the idea that at least the myth is there, even if it's impossible or against the rules.

*RandomFan*

I actually don't believe that's the case, because that strikes me as horribly unlikely, but it wouldn't surprise me if both forces of evil and forces of good have claimed it at various times. I mean, for good, it means that the villain must be stopped, and for evil... it's terrifying, the idea of that. So both sides have propagated misinformation on it for so long that most people have a negative gut reaction to the very idea.

[reveen](#)

If Killian can't understand why you feel the way you do then she's not worth your time. Like, Cat might say "I'M IN L0000VE", but that's the fact that she's still pretty much a toddler talking. She's known Killian for, what, a couple years? Just because you've screwed someone doesn't mean you know them.

*pato*

I just recently realized there are some interesting parallels between the history of Calernia and the Crusades in the 11th century. Was this intentional?

Praes = Islamic empire, Procer = Europe

wat

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

Maybe the whole Crusade thing Procer is planning have it away?

*Sieral*

I'm really disliking Cat's romantic sidestory here. Especially when it's distracting me from the actual plot I care about,

*Shrike*

Nice Three Worlds Collide reference 😊

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

What I don't get is that Killian isn't talking about scooping up some innocent virgins to sacrifice. Remember at the beginning of the story, the two Legion members Cat killed with the knife Black gave her? Even with Black hearing the confession of the legionary who covers for his serial rapist friend by having killed numerous rape victims, and catching the other legionary in the act of attempted rape and conspiracy to commit murder, the penalty was going to be a mere five years imprisonment.

If serial rape, conspiracy to commit murder, and multiple counts of second degree murder are only worth five years in prison under

Praesi law, extrapolate from there what one has to do to actually get condemned to death. Likely mass or extensive serial murder, rape-murders etc etc.

My point here is that if Cat saw ANY of the men or women condemned under Praesi law to die committing the acts that got them death sentences, she would kill them without even benefit of trial, and without a qualm.

These monsters forfeited their humanity long before the Praesi incarcerated them prior to their imminent executions. They are absolutely going to die anyways. Why is gaining a positive benefit from killing a monster that will die whether you purchase their last few hours of life or not wrong?

Cat can talk about how when she kills its to accomplish a greater good all she wants, but what she really means is she reserves the right to murder to further her agenda to herself.

Beyond this fact, Cat stated herself that if the ritual was necessary to save Killian's life, she'd go ahead with it herself. Every time Killian draws too deeply on her magic, those wings try to appear, Killian goes into seizures and then collapses, helpless for the next several days. Mage lines are priority targets in battle. ESPECIALLY versus a Praesi enemy like Diabolist, who has an intimate understanding of Legion doctrine. All of Cat's other mages are also War College graduates, ie Praesi. Does she think any of them are going to risk their lives to haul Killian to safety mid-battle WHEN, not if, one of her collapses occurs when the Fifteenth is being pressed hard?

Diabolist has already considered killing Killian to hurt Cat. Her taunt in the Hashmallim chapel about having turned Killian into a ghoull says as much. The fact she was lying at that time doesn't mean she hasn't given the idea further thought.

Much like Harry Potter breaking up with Ginny Weasley didn't make her any safer from Voldemort because one's nemesis doesn't read memos regarding the current state of their nemesis's romantic relationship, just because Cat and Killian are no longer sleeping together doesn't mean Killian isn't still marked out by Cat's enemies as someone to kill in order to hurt Cat.

If I were Killian, I would find the notion of unnecessarily suffering a malady that leaves me helpless as a newborn babe for days at a time every time I go the extra mile with my magic to serve Cat's interests utterly intolerable as well. Cat is asking Killian to continue running unnecessary risks with her life for the sake of Cat being morally comfy. It's bullshit, and demonstrates Cat doesn't really love Killian, and never loved her. Love makes you put the other first before yourself. If you aren't willing to do something you find morally detestable to

remove a clear and ongoing threat to the life of the one you claim to love, you don't really love them in my view.

*Dylan Tullos*

Shawn Panzegraf:

First of all, the Praesi "justice" system isn't likely to be particularly just. Remember the chapter where we got to meet the city guard? The commander was completely corrupt, and her guardsmen were basically henchmen who did whatever their boss told them to do. I don't think these are the kind of people who fuss about whether accusations are fair or not. So Praesi death row is probably going to be a mix of really horrible criminals and people who annoyed someone powerful and got accused of a really horrible crime.

But Cat's problem with Killian isn't that she's killing condemned criminals for the Greater Good. As you say, Cat's done that herself. She would understand if Killian did the sacrifice to strengthen her ability to better serve the Fifteenth and fight Diabolist. Her problem is that Killian sees absolutely nothing wrong with killing people to gain power, that Killian fundamentally views people she doesn't know as livestock who exist to give her a benefit.

Cat is willing to hurt and kill people to make the world a better place. Killian turns people into objects who don't matter, and she uses them for her benefit. Both of them are willing to perform similar actions, but their mindsets are so different that there's no room for compromise. If circumstances were different, Killian would sacrifice Callowan rebels just as easily as she killed Praesi criminals, and she wouldn't have the slightest qualm about murdering Cat's people to gain power.

Your definition of "love" requires someone to surrender all of their beliefs and principles as soon as it's convenient for the person they love. If Killian was making her living as a slave trader, would Cat be expected to accept that as well, in the name of "love"?

Life for people like Cat and Killian isn't safe. Their job requires them to risk their own lives. Cat risks her life for a higher purpose, to improve the lives of the people she knows and cares about, as well as people that she's never met. Killian does not care about the lives of people she's never met, and she doesn't understand that sacrificing them is evil. Cat will do evil things when she has to, but she understands that they're still wrong; Killian doesn't seem to grasp the concepts of small-e evil and small-g good. They're just not morally compatible.

Thankfully, Cat isn't willing to surrender everyone she is and become the worst kind of Praesi just because her girlfriend thinks that would be convenient. She would kill to save Killian's life, but she won't smile and pretend that murder isn't wrong so that she can have a relationship with someone who feels that way.

*Cayle Brown*

Thank you! It's driving me crazy that people keep minimising Killians issue.

*georgeoswalddannyson*

Killian always comes across as pretty mature, and level headed, at least way more than Cat about lots of stuff. I'm looking forward to see them have heart to heart and seeing where she really stands on this.

[Kran](#)

ohmigosh! NExt chapter 2 minutes late! Thee end is nigH! Kappa

*Petya*

"if it was someone's culture to eat fucking babies"  
I see what you did there.

[glassgirlceci](#)

Ugh, I'm really sick of Cat's hypocrisy here. I mean, the fact that I loved her and Kilian together plays a role, but still. I honestly am surprised that she still has this sticking point.

*d0m1n1c*

I still don't understand why she's okay with Orcs eating people, but not okay with human sacrifice; hell, she even used baby eating as an example for something worse.

I don't see a distinction between ordering her orcs to, as a fear tactic, eat the people they were going to kill, and potentially using those same people as fuel for rituals.

*OnneWerda*

I wonder why the three people that Black sacrificed to save Cat after her first encounter with the Lone Swordsman didn't come up in that conversation.

*Cotillion*

I'm on my... third? Reread of this series and this objection of Catherine's never made much sense to me, but I think I've finally



got it. The use of death row prisoners in Praesi society has parallels with the for-profit prison system, in that the ability to use these criminals to the gain of society creates an incentive to make sure they continue to exist. I think that this is one of the rare occasions where EE has missed the mark on making their point – this chapter could use another pass-through to try and restate Cat's argument on this. Looking at it from the perspective of a for-profit system makes Cat's argument much more consistent with her own morality, because the entire point of the Guide is about how systems and patterns force behavior, and how to break or transcend those patterns. The practice of bleeding prisoners over altars in order to gain an advantage is a systemic problem with the institutions of the Dread Empire of Praes, and this is what Catherine takes exception to. Her character is about using abusive systems to break those same systems, which is why she rationalizes her own atrocities.

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## Chapter 38: Host

*"It is said that the founding First Prince spoke of Procer as a great tower, every principality a stone raising it to ever greater heights. I have found the sentiment more poetic than accurate. Procer is no single tower but twenty-three of them, and their owners constantly steal each other's stones to rise at the expense of the others."*

-Extract from 'The Labyrinth Empire, or, A Short History of Procer', by Princess Eliza of Salamans

Even having kept out most of the general staff, the pavilion was crowded. Enough that we'd had to bring in a second table to shove at the end of our usual one, a ramshackle assembly Pickler had covered with a tablecloth in a move that fooled absolutely no one. It made me want to wince a little, considering who was seated around it. We were looking like disorganized amateurs to some of the most powerful people in Callow. The wine, at least, they couldn't complain about. Northern red, because I sure as Hells wasn't breaking into my own stash for the sake of people I mostly couldn't stand, but decent vintage and cooled by mages. I'd helped myself to a cup early because I already had a feeling this conference was going to scrape my nerves raw. If there wasn't frost on something before this was over, I owed Hakram more than I should have willingly bet. I'd stolen a horse – with wings, even – from Arcadia as well as gems and my favourite chair, but I had no illusions Zombie the Third would still be in

one piece when the dust settled this year. That meant buying another charger, and those were costly.

To the left, Duchess Kegan Iarsmai of Daoine was seated, managing to convey general disapproval at the existence of everybody else without her face actually turning up in a sneer. I was reluctantly impressed by the feat, which was magic in its own right. Her second had taken a chair for once, the hooded and silent man I'd taken way too long to learn was called Commander Adair. The head of the Watch, though his title was just that and not a Name. That hadn't always been the case, historically speaking, but as far as I knew the last Commander had been killed by my own teacher years before the Conquest. Something about skirmishes with the orc clans that lived in the Lesser Steppes had prompted him to step in, and explained how Black had forged bonds with prominent chieftains like Grem One-Eye and Istrid Knightsbane before the Praesi civil war.

To the right, the senior officers of the Legions of Terror had clustered. Marshal Ranker was at the heart of them, not even her blackened twisted hand managing to make the sight of a wrinkled goblin her size perched on a cushioned stool entirely humourless. She'd brought her own Staff Tribune and on her other side sat General Afolabi Magoro. The dark-skinned man had been less than fond of me even before I'd publicly spanked him for speaking out of line, and since then never faced me with anything less than the blank emotionless mask that was taught to all Soninke highborn from the cradle. Tonight, though, there was something wary about him. The Empress had been good as her word, I mused. Malicia had whispered in the right ears and made it clear that those who did not fall in line behind me were earning her displeasure as well as mine.

It would be a lot easier to dislike the monsters I worked with if they weren't so competent, I thought.

Adjutant was seated at my left, a courtesy offered to Juniper who'd taken his usual place at my right instead. If the Hellhound was nervous at the prospect of addressing hardened veterans most of which outranked in both formal authority and experience, there was no trace of it on her broad face. The only cup of wine my general had taken had been duly watered, and left mostly untouched. Of her general staff, only three had been called to sit across us. Ratface, though mere a Supply Tribune, had the place of honour. The report he was slated to give was by far the most important. Staff Tribune Aisha Bishara flanked him on one side, here as much because she knew the duty rosters of the Fifteenth like the back of her hand as because I intended on picking her brains about the people here after the conference was over. The last addition was Grandmaster Brandon Talbot, and it had been a row to get him a seat in here at all. Juniper had made it clear she didn't trust him in the least, commander or not, but

I'd stood my ground. The same reasons she disliked him were why he needed to be in here: he was a voice for the Callowans, something none of my other senior officers could feasibly pass for. Considering more than half the Fifteenth had never stepped foot in the Wasteland, there was a need for that now. The Hellhound might not like it, but it was the truth.

It was more people than I would have liked, for a conference this sensitive, but the realities of the situation had imposed. The soldiers gathered outside formed the largest host Callow had seen since the Conquest, but it wasn't near as united as the forces that had fought. A little less than half of them were Deoraithe, loose allies to me at the best of times, and the chain of command on the Praesi side was a fucking mess. That I was on top, no one could deny. Under that, though? Marshal Ranker had everyone else beat in rank and seniority, but Juniper commanded the largest legion by far and answered to me alone. Afolabi wasn't a contender in this sense, but he had connections in the Wasteland and his Twelfth had gotten off the lightest casualty-wise from our expedition through Arcadia. That Kegan openly feuded with Ranker and spoke to Juniper like she was a particularly stupid child had made any attempts to keep things civil in the past a throbbing headache.

"All right, everyone's here," I eloquently begun. "We'll begin the march south tomorrow at dawn, but before we do it's time everybody was brought in on the campaign plans."

"That would be pleasing," Duchess Kegan said coldly.

"Unorthodox, making plans without your senior commanders," Marshal Ranker added.

I reached for my cup, and reminded myself I still needed those two. It wasn't feasible to shove them both in a bag and run away with their armies as they fought inside.

"Our operations are contingent on factors none of you have the clearance to know about," Juniper growled.

"A *Marshal of Praes* lacked clearance?" General Afolabi said.

I turned to Adjutant.

"Hakram, you seen my pipe?" I nonchalantly asked.

The Soninke stiffened in his seat.

"In your tent," the orc sighed.

"What a shame," I said, and gave Afolabi a friendly grin.

I could have done without the approving look from Kegan, or Talbot for that matter. Just because I was stepping on the fucker didn't mean I was any fonder of the rest of them.

"Before we set out, certain logistics have to be seen to," Juniper said. "Our host currently numbers near forty thousand soldiers. The battles in Arcadia saw an unusually high proportion of wounded, many with wounds that are beyond mage healing. Supply Tribune Bishara, report."

Aisha inclined her head a fraction, then addressed the table in a calm voice that was very clearly trained.

"As you are all aware, the Imperial-held city closest to our camp is Vale," she said. "Though it is not garrisoned at the moment and has proved recalcitrant to assist the Legions of late, this situation has been remedied."

Marshal Ranker eyed me.

"You have people in the city?" she asked.

I raised an eyebrow.

"In a manner of speaking," I said.

To be accurate, Thief had people in the city and she'd gotten in touch with them. That she'd been able to do that at all had interesting implications. Namely, that the Guild of Thieves had access to a form of communication swifter than riders. It couldn't be scrying, since they shouldn't have the mages for that and scrying was a lot less common than my exposure had led me to believe. The High Lords used it and so did the Legions, but outside those ranks it was actually fairly rare. Less now than before I'd been born, since the Warlock had published a spell formula on par with the ones the old Wasteland families had kept to themselves, but in Callow there weren't a lot of mages that could scry. Same with most nations outside our borders as well: the highest tier of practitioners in Procer and the rest might know how, but even then not as proficiently as Praesi. The knowledge had been slow to trickle out of the Empire, though it was only a matter of time before it did. Still, that Thief had a trick that worked along same lines had been both intriguing and helpful. She'd contacted the guildmaster in Vale and gotten the man to pass the messages I needed.

"Though we will detach two mage lines to keep the worst of the wounded stable, treatment will have to be deferred to outside institutions," Aisha continued.

I felt more than one look cast towards me at that. Though she'd not spoken the name, none of these people were unaware that 'outside institutions' meant the House of Light. Brothers and

Sisters sworn to the Heavens, healing legionaries of the Tower. It wasn't without precedent on individual basis, I knew from my childhood in Laure, but cooperation that open certainly was. I'd had to reach out to Governess-General Kendal to get that stone rolling, since she had pull with the priests. I spent more time negotiating than stabbing people that deserved it, nowadays, which never failed to foul my mood even if it was necessary. My Staff Tribune inclined her head again, her contribution finished for the moment. Marshal Ranker was the first to speak up.

"Akua Sahelian," she said. "Do we have a read on her locations? I dislike sending off wounded without escort until we know she'd not going to ambush them."

"Nothing solid," I said. "Unless Duchess Kegan has something to share?"

It was an open secret among the people in the pavilion that what Diabolist was up to involved fucking with whatever empowered the Watch. She might have means to keep an eye on the other villain we didn't know about.

"She's still in Callow," Kegan reluctantly said. "We know nothing more."

"So far the Diabolist has avoided direct confrontation with the Legions," Adjutant gravelled. "While this cannot be relied on, if she seeks to damage the armed forces of the Empire she has better targets."

The three legions in Holden, under Juniper's mother. They'd been warned to keep an eye on the sky just in case.

"Wounded legionaries and a civilian city are an easy target," General Afolabi said. "If ritual fodder is what she seeks, Vale is wide open."

"The Diabolist can strike any city in Callow if she wants," Juniper grunted. "There isn't much we can do about it. Vale is still the best bet for our wounded."

I drummed my fingers on the table.

"I've seen the most of Akua of anyone in this room, as far as I know," I said, leaving a heartbeat for someone to disagree. No one did. "From what I understand of her, she's not going to actively harm Praesi military strength unless it's set against her. No matter what she's cooked up in Liesse, she's going to need the Legions in the coming years. She wants to be in charge of more than just a flying city and for that she needs armies."

"You believe she means to overthrow Her Dread Majesty," General Afolabi said.

He didn't seem particularly surprised. Whether it was because he hid it well or because of course Akua was going to try to take over the Empire, I couldn't tell.

"She'll need more than Liesse if she wants to breach the Tower," Ranker snorted. "Even if the Empress doesn't dig into the nasty stuff down in the vaults, it remains the most heavily fortified place on Calernia."

"Better schemers than I have failed to predict what Diabolist is after," I said flatly. "Guesswork will lead us nowhere, and we have more pressing concerns."

I glanced at Juniper.

"The supply situation has been addressed," the tall orc said. "Supply Tribune Ratface, elaborate."

The Taghreb bastard smiled lazily.

"We've been in touch with the Legion headquarters in Ater and they're sending rations and armaments down, but it'll take at least three weeks to get it all in order," he said. "Until then, we'll be relying on brave Callowan volunteers to ship us food down the Hwaerte."

"You mean smugglers," Talbot said, lips thinning.

"Food is food, Grandmaster," Ratface replied, managing to make the title sound like an insult. "Unless you would prefer magnificently legal starvation, of course. That could also be arranged."

Ranker's Staff Tribune coughed into his hand to disguise a laugh, but his Marshal didn't even bother to hide her smirk. Fucking Hells, you'd think a literal god out for our blood would be enough to make them stop sniping at each other for a week.

"Ratface," I warned.

"No offense was meant, my good knight," the Taghreb apologized.

I turned a dark look on him and he made an effort to look a little more contrite. We'd be having words about this later, and by the face Juniper was making that would be after she got done with him.

"You're all aware we'll be marching on Dormer," I said. "We'll be keeping to the river as we go down, for ease of transport. It'll delay us some but if we keep the pace we'll arrive at the city in time to pre-empt the Queen of Summer."

"Yes, the Queen," Duchess Kegan said. "She has already demonstrated her ability to wipe out hundreds in moments. How is this do be dealt with?"

"I expected Warlock's boy to be here to explain that," Marshal Ranker noted.

"Hierophant is currently making preparations," I lied.

Masego had bluntly told me he would rather set himself on fire than attend the conference, and I'd chosen not to fight that battle. This was delicate enough a balance without bringing his lack of social graces into it. The only worse idea I could come up with was bringing Archer, who by now would already have hit on two of them and brawled with a third.

"We will be bringing outside pressure to bear on Summer as we engage them," Adjutant said.

Ranker's eyes narrowed.

"Fae," she said. "You dealt with Winter again."

"I employed the services of a talented negotiator, this time," I replied vaguely.

An understatement. I'd never seen the Empress in her element before, and it had been an... eye-opening experience.

"We don't need to exterminate the enemy host," Juniper said, as if she'd seen nothing difficult about tearing through a bunch of demigods and their mostly invincible magic army. "But a position of strength will need to be achieved before we can force terms on them."

"They won't fall for the same tricks twice," Ranker warned.

"They lost most their winged knights," Grandmaster Talbot said. "But the golden fae proved unusually resilient."

They'd wiped out three quarters of Nauk's force while simultaneously handling the Watch and a brutal pounding from Masego, he meant. They'd been hard fuckers to deal with.

"They're called the Immortals," I said. "And we found a weakness."

"Their standards," Juniper said. "Getting rid of them will sap their strength."

"If this is to be a victory, that must take priority," Kegan said. "I will not send the Watch into the grinder twice without assurances."

"Hierophant will be busy handling the Queen, but I will be deploying Named to settle the matter," I said.

"The nature of the planned engagement has not been touched upon," General Afolabi said.

"We meant to assault Dormer directly," Juniper said.

Ranker scoffed.

"And give them walls?" she said. "That'll double the butcher's bill."

"Open field won't work for us," I said. "We don't have twenty thousand Winter fae in the woods ready to pop out. If we're to have any chance of beating them, they can't be in a position to bring their full force to bear."

"I've read the accounts of the siege in Arcadia," the Hellhound said. "It stood out to me how ill-equipped they were to deal with Legion siege tactics."

"Summer's not used to being on the defence," I said. "And they've never seen anything like goblin munitions or our engines."

"Both of which we could use from our own fortified position," Afolabi pointed out.

"Fae will be weaker in Creation," Kegan said. "The possibility of a field battle has perhaps been too hastily dismissed."

"Your Deoraithe are not trained to deal with the kind of quick redeployments flight allows the fae," Juniper told her bluntly. "Your soldiers would be a liability."

Duchess Kegan looked down her nose at the orc and smiled mockingly.

"Perhaps a more experience voice could weigh in on the matter, girl," she said.

The temperature in the pavilion cooled and the Deoraithe's eyes turned to me.

"*General Juniper* has more experience than you," I smiled brightly. "Since being appointed at the head of the Fifteenth, she has won three pitched battles and a siege. What great victories do you have under your belt, Duchess?"

Ranker's vicious satisfaction was palpable.

"Lady Squire speaks true," Afolabi suddenly said. "Summer has demonstrated it has trouble dealing with unorthodox tactics. I



would prefer the walls be ours, but penning them in the city would rob them of several advantages."

I was feeling generous, so I'd chalk that up to him deserving his rank rather than the Empress having had a word with him.

"You have something in mind," Ranker said, studying me. "For Dormer. I'm assuming more elaborate than tossing sharpeners at the walls."

I leaned back into my seat.

"Summer has some skill with fire," I said. "But then, so do we."

*Gods, I thought, it's never a good sign when goblins grin like that.*

---

### [DroughtBringer](#)

Great chapter, but they always leave me wanting more...

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*therealgridlock*

>.>

I don't remember being here before.

*danh3107*

>"Summer has some skill with fire," I said. "But then, so do we."

Haha, time for goblin fire. Man I love this story

*Nairne*

Yep. Let's burn down a city or a half at least :>

### [Robert Allaband](#)

Cat you will never get rid of your rep of burning everything down with Goblin Fire, if you keep helping with burning everything down with Goblin Fire.

*naturalnuke*

>Embrace the Reputation!(-5 Prestige)

*Levi Kalden*

It has to be on her coat of arms

*RoflCat*

>“Hierophant will be busy handling the Queen, but I will be deploying Named to settle the matter,” I said.

More Yoink? At the rate we’re going Thief is going to have so much magical stuffs in her space that she might as well call it mini-Arcadia.

>“Summer has some skill with fire,” I said. “But then, so do we.”

And so the legend of Catherine the Squire who set cities on goblinfire continues.

*Shoddi*

Mind your manners, else the Squire  
Burns your town with goblinfire.

*ArkhCthuul*

Hehe...  
Indeed.  
Very good transitory.chapter.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

I wonder how long it’d take for Thief’s hammerspace to develop a pixie infestation...

*BryceWilliam*

Cat.. Cat.. are you SURE its a good idea to be throwing around goblin fire in Arcadia?

*Darkening*

She’s not talking about Arcadia. The fae are occupying Dormer, a Callowan city, and I think another city too? Though that might have been retaken. Either way, she doesn’t plan to fight the fae in Arcadia again, since that would basically be suicide via fire goddess. On that note: HAhahahahahahahahaha I can’t wait to see how the summer fae react to actually finding themselves vulnerable to burning when they’re used to being fireproof and burning other people. It’s gonna be hilarious.

*Matthew*

It was already established (I think honestly rather lazily) that the Summer fae can be burned. During the battle in Arcadia, the Legion mages roasted a bunch of them.

### *Darkening*

Pretty sure they were just using the concussive blast from the fireballs to knock them out of the sky rather than burning them. I could be wrong, but I don't think so.

### *narcoduck*

Geographically speaking, where are they now? They're closest to Vale, but they're going to march due east to the river and continue south along it? Seems like a long detour to Dormer.

### [Luxuria Tenebris](#)

Looking at the map i have to guess that; 1. There are rivers, not on any of the maps they are talking about, or 2. They are closer to the main river, but Vale is the best place to send them, since the other cities are harder to reach for some reason

*I'm the retarded critic. Take it with a grain of salt please.*

The legends of the Goblin Fire Knight.

### *Gunslinger*

I wonder if the Empress knew about Cat's promise to the Prince of Nightfall. It seems like a pretty big thing to leave out and would have factored into any negotiation with Winter.

Also any theories as to the Diabolist's eventual location? The most obvious answer would be Dormer, right after the Queen has been dealt with but I doubt it would go that way.

### [Hakurei06](#)

I'm not sure if she told her, but I wouldn't be surprised if she knows anyway.

### *vietnamabc*

Obviously Cat has disclosed it but the author has not showed here, like we still do not know exactly about the negotiations between Malicia and the Fae.

### *Nairne*

It would be quite fitting with how Cat handles things to have the Summer Queen get bound by the Diabolist just after the fight with Summer finishes.

*OldSchoolVillain*

That's some (literal) Firepower that Cat really won't want Diabolist to get her hands on. Cat wants Summer to be weakened but still capable of bleeding Winter badly enough to make the Fey a non-issue for the time being and give her the opening to reclaim her heart.

*stevenneiman*

I'm not sure as to the location, but I have a sinking feeling that whatever Akua does is going to include figuring out some way to hack the Watch. At best Cat will be out one very useful and versatile tool when their power is removed, and at worse they'll fall to Akua's control and wreak havoc when Cat is least expecting it. Or maybe Cat will be expecting it and she'll already have a contingency lined up.

*gingerbread\_man*

The time for another city burning incident has come. It was inevitable really.

*Big Brother*

Still trying to guess what the Fifteenth's cognomen is gonna be. Won't be BURN, that's Cat's thing.

[Hakurei06](#)

Deicides?

*vietnamabc*

And people thought Harry Dresden was bad...

*Big Brother*

First sentence of The Foundling Files would be "The City was on fire, and it wasn't my fault."

*Byzantine*

@Big Brother: Close, it would be "The City was on fire, and it wasn't my fault, again."

*Popadopolis*

"The city was on fire and it wasn't my fault this time."

[Robert Allaband](#)

Goblin Fire has to be somewhere in her coat of arms.

*Popadopolis*

I'm thinking it should be a goblinfire background, and a castle in the foreground, with an orc and a knight mounted on rampant goats to either side... maybe the sun up in a corner.

*Big Brother*

The Sun eclipsed by a New Moon.

*goliath1303*

.... The sun eclipsed by the, what now? The new moon is when there is no visible moon à la The Duchess of Moonless Nights.

*rangamal thenuwara*

Reminded me the absolutely hilarious discussion about that by Goblins.

"That was a mistake," Lieutenant Balker offered.

"It got worse," Captain Clipper suggested instead, flirtatiously allowing her teeth to peek through her chops.

"You're all amateurs," he told his minions. "And no, that wasn't another suggestion. Clearly we should be going with I can't believe that worked."

There was a murmur of approval from the ranks, though some filthy traitorous elements dissented.

"Fear the goats," someone called out. "The one true motto of the Fifteenth."

I personally like :You're all amateurs

*Theo Promes*

I'd suggest Firestarters, but cat would probably veto that, claiming she didn't start it at all, thats not how it was.

*Cicero*

"Summer has some skill with fire," I said. "But then, so do we."

O man, that sentence made me grin. Cat really has a thing for goblin fire.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Made you grin? Well, Ranker beat you to it. And, she could possibly make every Jack o' Lantern in a four-block radius feel jealous, too. XD

*nick012000*

>"Summer has some skill with fire," I said. "But then, so do we."

"I'm the only one that gets to burn down Callowan cities!"

*Shequi*

And the Green Flames leap higher...

*nipi*

And Cat will continue to build her reputation with goblinfire. Looking forward to the goat bombs.

Also typos:

Ratface, though mere a Supply Tribune

Namely, that the Guild if Thieves

[Barthumphries](#)

This must be the typo thread. I tried to post one to chapter 35 a few minutes ago and it wouldn't let me, so I saved them up to post on the most recent thread.

2017/10/16/chapter-35-questions/

I imagine the while incinerating them on sight thing limits your options in that regard,  
Change while to whole

2017/10/18/chapter-36-malice/

If Winter is meant to be the reflection of villainy  
remove he

2017/10/23/chapter-37-procedures/

The first it to mimic the role in your body your heart would.  
Change it to is

then released for your use natured in a way that lessens the damage to your body.

Add a comma after "use" or instead add a "but" there

Masego left the tent without bothering to excuse myself, entirely forgetting Hakram was still in here.

Change myself to himself

*nipi*

Guys shes just a Luddite that likes burning down cities.

*alegio*

You want unorthodox? Nothing gets more unorthodox than setting the magic fire people on fire, MAGIC fire.

[gianoria7](#)

Goblin Fire is not just a magic fire.  
It's a magic DESTROYING fire.  
It's

[gianoria7](#)

I hit TAB by mistakes...

Goblin Fire is the kind of fire that can transform a series of protective wards, spells and rituals into a combustible so powerful that half a city would go in flames.  
And it's very fun to use.

*Nastybarsteward*

Man, I love this story so much. I can just see the green flames flickering her eyes already! 😊

*Shoddi*

For the Fifteenth's cognomen, I cast my vote for "The Woebegone".  
... where the goblins are strong, the orks are beautiful, and the Named are above average.  
(my apologies to Garrison Keillor)

[Barthumphries](#)

I like that! Mind if I use it? 😊

*Shoddi*

Sure, though the middle part should actually be "good looking", not beautiful.

*Sieral*

"Your Deoraithe are not trained to deal with the kind of quick redeployments flight allows the fae," Juniper told her bluntly.  
"Your soldiers would be a liability."

I'm probably missing something. Why is the Empire trained to deal with these redeployments while Deoraithe is not?

*Kingbob12*

the Deoraithe fight mostly from the Wall they man, they aren't really a traditional army.

*narcoduck*

I think the idea is that no one is trained to deal with the Fae on an open field (insert Game of Thrones meme). From what I've seen, the Watch depends on being more mobile than their foes which kind of falls flat against flyers. I read it as telling Kegan not to be overconfident in her army's strength and not try to take the Fae on their chosen battlefield. Instead, the Legions will start a siege battle which is *\*their\** strength.

[Euodiachloris](#)

The Empire has used air power before... in civil wars, no less. They know all about flying fortresses of doom. Both visible and invisible.

The Legions probably have a file (or eighteen) on aerial tactics. 🤪 Speaking of; anybody know where Scribe is, just so I can dodge-roll in the right direction away from her? ;P

*callmesteve*

Nice implications and a good quote.  
Rather set himself on fire than attend, nice.

I can't wait until the Fae get Cat's signature treatment – Poof, Poof, Flambe!

*Engineer*

I really wonder why the Goblins didn't get a red letter when they invented Goblin Fire. Oh sure, those lawn loitering Gnomes will rain death and destruction upon you for building a goddamn farming machine, but make a Fire that can burn almost anything and everything in perpetuity and the Gnomes are like "Meh"?

I'm willing to bet an aspect that there is a story there.

*Big Brother*

Can Aspects be gambled? That'd be a nice interesting twist if that came up in a betting pool.  
"Alright, we've got 7 months wages on the Summer Queen biting it, 12 months on Diabolist swooping in at the last moment and claiming the "technical" victory like she did at Maechford, and a, uh... What's this? Who's the jokester betting an 'unclaimed third Aspect?' ROBBER!"

*Nemo*

There's a story, but it's not a new one. They're doing it because if you want to keep people backwards for some reason, the farming machine is a much bigger deal.



Think about what Black would say. (Though Amadeus *of the Green Stretch* is probably the more relevant name here.) Him and his notebook with the column on the Empire's arable land by year. Goblin fire lets you win battles more dramatically, and it might change the outcome of a war here or there. Whatever. An agricultural revolution lets you support a larger population with fewer farmers. And then you get to specialize, and you get more occupations that society barely had a few generations ago when people were peasant farmers by default, and you start advancing even faster.

Maybe all EE was thinking of is that in our own history the Industrial Revolution started with farming machines. Maybe the Gnomes only flattened it because it was a warning sign that more was coming. But I'd rather think it's important in its own right, because nothing I'm saying would have escaped the characters.

*darkening*

Black's explanation was basically that alchemy falls under magic and the gnomes are only concerned with Science. Beyond that I dunno.

*Akim*

So, Ratface, what's the current pool on Akua turning up in Dormer?

*darkening*

I'm guessing nobody's enough of a sucker to bet against that. Just on what she'll do there and when.

*Isa Lumitus*

Somehow, I have this image of Diabolist using Cat's love of goblin fire against her. Mostly by trying to convince the Matrons that Cat is seeking the formula so that she can produce it herself in whatever quantities she needs.

[shiw where girls sell sex toys](#)

Is anyone here in a position to recommend Sexy Secretary Outfits?  
Thanks x

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## Chapter 39: Exposition

*"It's hard for people to understand what it means to have been part of the Fifteenth. We were farmboys and thieves, not people that were ever supposed to matter. Fodder for noose and ledger. But then she came along, and told us we were to be the doom of gods. Heavens forgive me, but I believed her then and believe her still."*

– Extract from the 'Forlorn Memoirs', author unknown

The banners flew tall in morning wind, carried by the Gallowborne. Two banners now, for I had not forgotten my promise to Talbot. A silver fifteen in Miezan numerals set on black was the herald of my legion, the standard under which it would fight until we were all ground to dust by time or steel. I kept to the colours, but by emblem was different. Silver scales shivered over us, measuring a crown and a sword. The sword weighed heavier, as much on cloth as it did in Creation. House Foundling's words were sewed under them, the one debt I owed Akua Sahelian I would never be able to repay. *Justifications matter only to the just.* Grim words, perhaps, but none had rung more true since I'd taken the knife and the offer behind it. Juniper had not commented on them after an initial guarded glance. The two of us marched with the vanguard, though when we came in sight of Dormer she would retreat to her command post to rule over the battlefield. The Hellhound killed with her mind, not her hands. She was more terrible an opponent for it.

Ahead of us lay plains that had once been green, before Summer came to own them. Now half the land was scorched black and the rest lusher than was possible in Creation. Orchards bore fruits regardless of the season, fields already harvested grew again tall and golden wheat. There would be food shortages, in the coming months. My homeland had seen war twice in three years, this one even more devastating than the last. Even if the blackened earth was made cultivable again, how many of those fields would lack men to till them? Summer had killed many, harmed more and I knew Akua would bring deeper wounds still. She was of the old breed, the one whose madness was worthy of some awe if only for the scale of its folly. Walking the aftermath of Three Hills I'd gotten a glimpse of what that felt like. Seen fate written in mud and blood and eerie green flame, and though doom had lurked in that vision when I'd thought of embracing it I had felt so gloriously alive.

I'd fought battles since then. Desperate ones, and the pull of that first moment had long faded. It would have been a lie to say I did not still relish in victory, in breaking whatever lay in path, but I had been tempered by so many dances on the blade's edge. It was one thing to gamble the lives of strangers for your purposes, to risk it all on a roll of the dice, but I'd come to dread it. I'd won more often than not, so far, but how long could

I keep that up? My mistake had been coming to love them. It was also my last saving grace. How easy it would have been to become like Black, utterly divorcing affection and necessity, if I'd not found a family in my companions. My teacher had done great things, by embracing that cold unfeeling clarity. But atrocious ones as well, and I would not follow him down that road. The more my Name and the mantle I had stolen from Winter set me apart from humanity, the more I understood I had to grasp tightly onto it. The thing I'd become otherwise would care nothing for what I wanted to build.

"We've come a long way from the College, haven't we?" I said.

For once, Juniper did not chide me for being foolishly sentimental. The Hellhound had been my opponent once, I thought, if never quite my enemy. It felt like a colourless dream now. I'd grown to rely so much on her that I'd feel lost if she was gone.

"Didn't think much of you, back then," she grunted. "Too mouthy. Not as clever as you believed you were."

"I never did manage to get the drop on you, after the once," I chuckled.

It was a strange thing, recognizing that someone was cleverer than you. And Juniper was, I would not deny it. It wasn't so clear-cut a thing as most people pretended when posturing, of course. Cleverness was no perfect shield. The smartest woman in the world could be outmanoeuvred by a fool, under the right circumstances. Or by luck, or by a myriad other factors that no one ever really liked to talk about. But the fact remained that Juniper saw things I didn't, when it came to strategy. Pondered a few steps deeper, arranged her thoughts more clearly. Diabolist did the same, when it came to plotting, and it had little to do with her Name. There was always someone better. I'd felt slighted by that when I was younger, as if just by being me I had to be the best at everything I undertook. Nowadays I just felt relieved, that I had someone at my side who could steer us away from the mistakes I would have made. Was there anything more worthless than pride, if the cost of it was the death of those precious to you?

"You always get strange before battles," Juniper sighed. "After too, sometimes. Like you're far away."

That was pretty funny, coming from a woman who was in the custom of finding high ground to sleep on whenever a fight was finished. And that was without mentioning how she'd apparently napped through the latter part of the Battle of Marchford.

"You're odder than me," I said. "Calm as you are. Nauk can't stop grinning for half a day before a battle."

"Hakram doesn't," she said.

"Hakram's different," I replied.

She grunted, conceding the point.

"Used to think he was a coldblood," Juniper admitted. "Everything was surface deep with him. Nothing real under."

Coldblood. A disease of the mind, I'd been taught. People who felt less, didn't get remorse or really understand consequences. Adjutant had told me some things in the dark that let me see why she'd thought him one. What she'd taken for absence was just apathy.

"I take after my father more," the orc said.

I looked at her, surprise. She rarely talked about her family, and what little she did was only about her mother.

"He's the one who raised you, right?" I said.

"Until the College," she said. "He's always been... calm."

"So he lost the rite of raising," I said.

The orc looked amused.

"Read that in a Soninke book, did you?" she said.

"Taghreb, I think," I shrugged. "I had a lot of books plopped onto my lap before meeting you, the titles kind of meld together nowadays."

"The custom exists," she said. "But only Praesi think it's common. If a couple needs to fight to choose who'll raise the child, they shouldn't be having children. It's a sign of immaturity."

"Well, I learned something today," I mused.

She bared the faintest hint of her fangs in what I knew to mean amusement. Or flirtation. Probably the former, all things considered.

"I have it too," she said suddenly. "My mother's blood. The battle-joy."

I studied her in silence.

"I was born for this," she said. "Of this. It's what I am and I can't remember ever craving anything else."

It was always hard to tell with orcs, but I thought she looked uncomfortable. Almost ashamed. No fangs visible, hairless brows pressing together.

"We're supposed to want glory for the clan," she said. "To make our own grow stronger. But all I saw were fucking huts and cattle and I couldn't wait to leave. I almost ran away, when I was younger. There's only so many times you can sketch out formations in the dirt before you feel *choked*."

I knew that feeling. I had followed me in Laure, when I was waiting tables and picking up bruises in the Pit when I should have been in the Wasteland, learning at the College. Like I was just wasting away my days. That I should have been out there doing something, *anything* but just sifting through the muck to earn enough coin to really begin my life.

"I hate the orphanage, at the end," I quietly said. "It wasn't that they were out to get me, it was just..."

"In the way," Juniper finished. "Quicksand you'd get stuck in if you waited too long."

She laughed hoarsely.

"I used to fight battles in my head when herding aurochs," the orc said, almost sounding like she was mocking herself. "All the victories of the Conquest, how I could have won them better."

"I kept a tally of who I'd kill when I had the authority," I admitted. "Mazus was always top of the list. But then he hanged, and it had little to do with me."

Juniper hesitated.

"What Lord Black was to you," she said. "You were to me."

My face flickered in surprise.

"Not a mentor," she growled, but the irritation petered out. "The offered hand, I mean. If I hadn't become your legate I'd be a junior officer in someone else's legion right now. I never thanked you for that."

"Don't," I said. "I wouldn't have gotten this far without you, Juniper. Stings to admit it, but it's true."

"Wouldn't be the same without you either," she said. "It's not about the rank, Catherine. The rank is just what gets me there. I want..."

There was something burning in my general then that I'd never seen in her before. I'd seen her cold and amused and furious and

irritated more times than I could count. I'd even seen her tender, though only with Aisha.

"More," she said, sounding angry at the inadequacy of the word. "Three Hills, Marchford even Arcadia. No one's fought like that before. We get to *make* that. They'll study our battles, centuries from now. Some other girl stuck herding godsdamned aurochs will think about our mistakes, how she could have outsmarted our opponents."

"Making history," I mused.

She laughed.

"Fuck history," she said. "We're changing the face of *war*. And it's just beginning, Catherine. The storm ahead will make this all look like drizzle."

Ahead was Dormer, the full might of Summer and the Queen that ruled it. But she thought beyond that, and so did I. The Diabolist had carved doom out of stone and sorcery, and she would not quietly into the night. And on the horizon, Procer sharpened its blades. In a year or ten, the Principate would come calling and with the greatest army on the face of Calernia. There would be heroes in that host, and not like the ones I'd killed. The real legends, the heroes weren't bound to small stories like mine. The Calamities were the greatest monsters of the age, but they'd lived so long because they kept their wars small and their enemies distracted. One day the great Named of the other side would come forward and the old wars would be born again. Those that warped the lands, flattened mountains and burned cities. I'd have to be ready for them, for the people who wanted to make my home the battlefield of the continent again. If I could not have peace in truth, then I would settle for the peace of the grave.

It was the kind of victory I'd been trained for.

"I don't think," I said quietly, "that we'll be remembered fondly. Not you, and certainly not me."

"Ah," Juniper of the Red Shields smiled. "But they *will* remember us."

Silence reigned for a long moment after that, more comfortable than I would have thought. The Hellhound wasn't someone who felt the need to fill the air with words when she had nothing to say. Something I'd grown to appreciate, since Archer had joined by band. The quiet was how I came to hear it even though the wind blew the other way and we were ahead of the thick of the host. The Fifteenth and its allies trailed at our back like a great snake of glittering steel, and it was from my legionaries that the song came. Lightly, at first, the words indistinct even to my

Name-sharpened ears. But after the first time it was sung, thousands more voices joined in. Even the vanguard around us.

"I was born out in the green where their banners flew high  
And the boots of the great lords they did tread over us  
Oaths we made and service gave, kneeling to the oldest lie  
But now the world's turned around and we sing this chorus."

Orcs and goblins. Soninke and Taghreb. But, most of all, Callowans. The muster of my homeland sang, light and bright but there was such *anger* underneath. It scared me. My veins sang with it, but it scared me.

"Come forth you old devils,  
Bring out your lesser evils  
Blight the skies and the land  
You'll be met sword in hand

One day your children'll tell  
Of the deep and rebel yell,  
That on his field so sombre  
Conquered host of horror."

Juniper looked up at the sun. The red-painted steel had warmed over the march, though like most orcs she did not sweat easily.

"I wondered if they'd sing it," she said.

"You knew about this?" I said quietly.

"Aye," she said. "Nauk penned part. Named it too. *In Dread Crowned*."

Gods, what had I unleashed? I'd thought I understood. That I had crafted an escapement for what would have made Callow claw at itself, a release that would let it change and escape the curse that defined it. But it wasn't just Callowans that sang. Greenskins and Praesi joined their voices to the chorus, and though their anger was of a different make it was no less harsh for it. There was a story the House of Light liked to use in sermons. That on the day of the First Dawn, the Gods Below had created all the evil in the world and released it. The Gods Above had caught it all in the box without a lock, and Creation would have been as the Heavens had the first of men not opened it, seduced by the whispers of devils promising godhood lay within. That was why the brothers and sisters taught rules, the priests said. So that on the last of days, when Good triumphed, the evils would be forced into the box again. Again it would be without a lock, but mankind would have learned. They would not open it again.

I'd carved a crack into the box and now the insides were spilling out. It hadn't been evils, inside. It had been anger. Bitter old

anger that had not before been given a banner to rally under. It had one, now. It flew behind me, scales that weighed crown and sword and found the crown wanting. There was a promise there I had not meant, but was written for all to see.

"On the plain where folk were fair we stood and greatly slew,  
And by the ford a score devils with a great demon too  
Prince and page and swordsman proud to our steel they all fell  
The world stolen we take back and damn you all to Hell

The chorus came again. My blood ran cold, and pressed against my ear the Beast laughed. It was awake, alive and savouring every moment of this with malevolent glee. *Blood*, it whispered. *There will be blood over this*. The Fifteenth Legion sang, and declared war on the mighty of the world. My general was looking at me.

"You promised a revolution, Warlord," Juniper said.

She bared her teeth, perfect ivory fangs.

"We will not settle for anything less."

She laughed, harsh but joyous.

"Did I not tell you?" she said. *"They will remember us."*

It spread. To the legionaries of the Twelfth and the Fourth, men and women not bound to me. To the Deoraithe, though not as many. I had gathered forty thousand soldiers to my banner, and they sang of treason to the morning sky. I could hear refrains in it, slivers of people I knew. Robber's sharp, vicious smile as he whispered *they kill us for sport*. The fever in Ratface's eyes as he said *they'll never stop unless we make them*. Pickler's warning, echoed in every chorus. *It'll be to the death, Foundling. Do not begin this lightly*. I'd spoken the words. Those had consequences, for Named more than any other. *If you employ violence*, the Empress had told me, *in violence they will follow*. I had not made peace. I had traded one war for another, and this one would be a thousand times bloodier than the last. I would be woe unto all I beheld, the Queen of Summer had so sadly told me. There had been a weight to the name when it was granted to me and finally I was feeling it in full. I'd thought I owned this, because I'd been the one to speak the words. That I could control it. Oh but the arrogance of that. You couldn't break open a dam and order the river.

I had taught them this. And Gods, they had learned. One decision after another, spitting in the eye of gods and compromise both, and I had promised them that if we paid the butcher's bill we could change the world. I'd told Archer that there was something happening in the Empire beyond any of us. That they were not in control. Neither, I understood then, was I.



"Be they high or resplendent our oaths stand taller still  
And in the west do quiet lie graves we have yet to fill  
Learn ye mighty that from Tower's shade to vales of red  
The Fifteenth by call of horn stands ever crowned in dread."

The song carried us all the way to Dormer. Behind broken walls  
Summer awaited us, a riot of silk and steel not of Creation. We  
had made good time, as it was not long past Noon Bell. We had  
until dawn before a god in the flesh came to destroy us.

It was no longer, I thought, the worst of my problems.

---

*1shot4living*

Took me a moment to find the rhythm, but when I got the song  
going in my head... Damn

*Thenre*

I could never find the rhythm. Still bone chilling.

*Amelia*

It's come out you Black and Tans, I'm almost certain

*Tetra*

Damn, that's what I was singing it to in my head, then I  
reach the end and see your comment. Interesting how we both  
thought that

*Dainpdf*

I used mostly the rhythm of Panzerkampf, by Sabaton. It works  
very well for the longer lines.

*ArkhCthuul*

Yeah, that chapter alternating gave me the chills and the  
feels.

Wow....

*Hoactzin*

I half expected Cat to get a new name at the end of this chapter.

*OldSchoolVillain*

I think she will after all. This isn't the first time she's been called Warlord, and now she has forty thousand soldiers from all the races of the empire raising her as exactly that.

*Gunslinger*

The author was pretty explicit that Warlord was solely an Orcish Name. She might be called Warlord but it lacks the cultural weight that the name needs.

*nipi*

Nah! I think she'll get something more ominous. She does have slaying gods on her to do list.

*James, Mostly Harmless*

Nipi, Godslayer has a certain ring to it! If not as Cat's Name, then as the Fifteenth's name for they are slayers of devils and gods.

*Zach*

good god I'm happy the author doesn't take the advice of their comments section

[greatwyrmgold](#)

It's a neat name for the Legion, though. A bit on-the-nose, but at this rate it won't be inaccurate much longer.

*Dainpdf*

Warlord is an orc Name though. I don't think she can. Looking at her situation, I'd think she'd become Revolutionnaire or something of the sort.

*Duckie*

Yeah considering the author made it clear that Warlord was an orc name. I imagine she wouldn't get that. I would have to agree it would have to be something along the lines of rebellious naming. Catherine the Usurper has a nice ring to it.. While it is true its not her goal to take over anyone's throne. Her name has shown the ability to out right steal/ copy someones power which in a way is usurping their authority as a named. Sense their powers are supposed to be unique to just them. While she now also leads an army of people who are actively singing songs of rebellion. But who knows what it really will be i'm pretty excited to find out. Hopefully we won't have to wait long.

*nipi*

I dont think Malicia would be comfortable with the name Usurper. Governor has already been banned.

[Barthumphries](#)

"The author was pretty explicit that Warlord was solely an Orcish Name. She might be called Warlord but it lacks the cultural weight that the name needs."

How many orcs does she have following her at this point? She is the heir to Black, who is heralded as the Savior of the orcs. And she's continued his reforms. In this chapter, we specifically heard orcish voices blending in with all the other voices.

Warlord Catherine the Necromancer, Queen of Marchford, Duchess of Moonlit Nights, Empress of the Tower.

She's going to need more training to get that necromancer bit, but it's her evil heritage and she's going to need more power some day.

*Wombat*

This just gave me the shivers

*TheCount*

You are not alone

*danh3107*

I am a wordy, impatient man. For once I have no words

*Pipiemman*

Were the song lyrics made from an altered version of "Black and Tans"?

[erraticerrata](#)

They were! Couldn't get the measure down quite right for the chorus, so I went for a more traditional structure.

[Barthumphries](#)

This one? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCnGD6xv5ik>

*Naeddyr*

Oh no, oh yes, oh no, oh yes.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*BryceWilliam*

I was born out in the green where their banners flew high  
And the boots of the great lords they did tread over us  
Oaths we made and service gave, kneeling to the oldest lie  
But now the world's turned around and we sing this chorus."

Come forth you old devils,  
Bring out your lesser evils  
Blight the skies and the land  
You'll be met sword in hand

One day your children'll tell  
Of the deep and rebel yell,  
That on his field so sombre  
Conquered host of horror.

On the plain where folk were fair we stood and greatly slew,  
And by the ford a score devils with a great demon too  
Prince and page and swordsman proud to our steel they all fell  
The world stolen we take back and damn you all to Hell

Be they high or resplendent our oaths stand taller still  
And in the west do quiet lie graves we have yet to fill  
Learn ye mighty that from Tower's shade to vales of red  
The Fifteenth by call of horn stands ever crowned in dread.

Marching song of the 15th legion

"In Dread Crowned"

(for anyone who wants to read it without having to jump around  
the chapter)

*BryceWilliam*

side note, who wants to bet that the rhythm of the song Cat  
heard is the same as this one?

cause i'll take \*that\* bet

*James, Mostly Harmless*

This should be accompanied by "I am the Common Man" by The  
Battlefield Band (<https://youtu.be/mdjG4T3YyWQ>) and "We Are the  
Worms of the Earth" (listen here <https://youtu.be/QRARHJE9Las>,  
but originally by Clam Chowder who did a much better version).

*Dainpdf*

I accompanied it in my head with instrumentals by Sabaton XP

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

You need worthy opponents. So we are entering the end of Book 3?  
I think Book 4 will be about Procer.

*Oshi*

Book 4 will be Cat claiming her new name and defeating the White Knight. Book 5 will be Procer.

[ayon96](#)

There will only be four books

[erraticerrata](#)

There will be five. Not sure where you got this idea.

*Lhomp*

I think this book will end in a three way battle between Summer, Diabolist and Catherine's forces, Black will die and it will be the trigger for a Proceran crusade.

*Dainpdf*

I don't think Akua will come out so early. She might, but it just feels like she's a longer term opponent.

*nipi*

You know somehow I think Akua will lose her body and her dad but the soul shall remain. She has that horcrux thing going on.

[Nguyen Hong Hai](#)

So all hail to Dark Lady Diabolist?

*Gunslinger*

The poem was great but I loved the back-history we got for Juniper the most. Also did not think Nauk was the creative type.

*Letouriste*

Me neither^^

I didn't realise how much I wanted more of juniper:)

*Nafram*

Well then, now I must simply hear the song. I can't wait for Wednesday either, to see the Fifteenth break a God

[DroughtBringer](#)

Wow. That was amazing. I have no other words.

*naturalnuke*

Can we get a bonus chapter Friday???? Pls

[benthelynx](#)

Another excellent chapter.

Also I think you meant she in this sentence:

““What Lord Black was to you,” he said. “You were to me.””

*Taelel*

I keep seeing The Beast being mentioned but i have no clue where it came from 😊 i mean Cat's Beast not Captain's

*Imagination*

It's her anthropomorphising her Name.

*Imagination*

Nope, personifying her Name.

I always get those two mixed up.

*nipi*

Hmm... Now that I think about it the Champion might be bad news for Cat aswell.

*George*

Nah, only if she gives full control over to the monster, like Captain did at the end there.

*OldSchoolVillain*

Unlikely. Aside from the fact that 'creation disdains such reputation,' Captain's Beast was unleashed, not chained or channeled. They were one, but at the same time, very different. Cat's Beast is shackled to her, leashed in an entirely different way. She may let it out occasionally, but ultimately she doesn't let go the way Captain ever did. If the Champion even survives Black (I doubt it), then she and the Bard will be in for a nasty surprise should they try the same story to take down THIS monster.

*kinigget*

Cat's only goal this entire time has to been to keep Callow above water

She's con promise most of her principals, turned against the light, and unleashed a civil war

Through all of it she tried to claim that she was different. That while she served the Tower she was still somehow \*better\*

Meanwhile, while she wasn't paying attention, she managed to gain the utter loyalty of the 15th, and influence far more

Largely without meaning to, she gave a new generation something to rally around, a cause to fight for

And only now does she begin to understand what she has wrought

The world is changing

The Calamities brought change, but even they could only go so far

Cat will see it done

*nipi*

Well calamities are events. They happen and then people pick up the pieces. But woes? Woes might not be as flashy but they do persist.

\*Grins evilly.\*

*Dainpdf*

I don't think she has their loyalty so much as the symbols she created do. That's why she says she has no control. She can steer the cart a bit, but there are no breaks.

*Author Unknown*

Every time there is a new chapter, I am blown away by the writing. Wow, just wow.

*James, Mostly Harmless*

Bard made many mistakes in Villainous Interlude: Calamity III (<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/10/04/villainous-interlude-calamity-iii/>), but this chapter illustrates her worst mistake: assuming that Black is her enemy. Black, as terrible and powerful as he is, is merely a herald to one who will shake and reshape worlds. John the Baptist if you will, or Sauron in his role as Herald to Morgoth.

*Dainpdf*

John the Baptist as in Cat's followers will co-opt Black's movement after he is dead, or Sauron to Melkor as in she corrupted him and he will survive her?

In all honesty, she is more the Sauron to his Melkor than the other way around.

*nimelennar*

Damn. Between Cat's Fifteenth, and the changes made by Malicia...

I think they were right, back when Cat let the Swordsman go, that this is a redemption story. Not of Cat herself, being redeemed from a villain to a hero, but of an entire Empire, being redeemed from Dread to Heroic.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

So my dear Bard, is this lore good enough for the annals?

*Gran*

I have to admit I'm rather disappointed with Cats characterisation these past few chapters. And for what I hope is good reason.

It's like you decided that Cat was getting too Dark and so she had to have /so,e/ kind of standards, just because everyone needs them. And then decided to do it in the worst possible way. With judgemental preachiness and glorifying the ever sought after inner "humanity". I have to admit I absolutely hate that trope. The glorification and obsession with being "human" (but only a certain type of course) and all that comes with it in these stories. It's a very very overdone trope at this point. And one that I can't help think Authors fall back on when they feel they've pushed themselves into a corner with their characterisation and so need an easy out to make their characters "better" without actually doing any of the work of characterisation and how that should change based on the plot and the person, and instead just throwing a basic idea of "humanity" into the person so that they can change in whatever way you like. After all the very idea is absurd, I'm not surprised however that even in a fantasy world and a world of might and magic and Names so different from ours it comes out in the generic fantasy way of being "better" and being "good" even though it's not out that way. What a disappointment.

I get that Cat will likely continue to grow and do more and more but at this point she's feeling more memetic than anything. "Cat can do anything because she's Cat!". "Cat will change the entire world in her image because she's Cat!". "When the story ends Cat will rule over the ashes and everything will be amazing because Cat will put all the things in the world we've been taught to see as wrong right!".

I hate to say this because I actually really liked her character up to this point but I'm really beginning to hope she actually



loses something soon. She just keeps seeming to pull wins out of her ass. Everything that seems like a loss is just a small set back for an even bigger win later on. No matter what happens Cat will win in the end is how this Story just seems to go and it seems rather obvious that at this rate even the characters acknowledge it. A lot of the sense of overall suspense has left the story. Sure in battle people may get a bit worked up but we're all sure Cat will pull something out of her ass at the exact moment she needs it to win and it's beginning to take a lot of the actual punch out of the story...

[reveen](#)

I'd be content with Cat winning all of her battles, but having to watch war grind away her friends, allies, her country and everything she loves and ultimately having to face the fact that her ambitions are a fire that will ultimately consume everything she cares about.

But we keep getting excerpts from books in the future written by people who we shouldn't be sure if they'll live or not talking about how still totally awesome she is in hindsight.

*Dainpdf*

It's the nature of villainy, isn't it? That you keep winning... Until you don't. Take black for example.

I do agree that setbacks are necessary... Losing Killian was something. Also hints at more principles than just "I want to stay human!"

*Metrux*

I see you have A LOT of misconceptions, but unfortunately I'm neither a native english speaker, nor a man of letters. So, to put it bluntly: There is a reason there exists common tropes. It's because they work. And this, this here? Even though it IS Cat's story, it is so much more about the tropes itself. We follow her story, to better get to see the world of these books, and the way it unfolds. Is it a common trope to refer to humanity? Yes, absolutely. But it isn't wring here, and neither is it "better" or "good". This humanity is what separates her from the mechanical thoughts of her teacher, and from the unnatural way of the fae, and she was approaching both of them. She was human before, and, technically, still is, so clinging to parts of who she was before all that, is clinging to her humanity, not in a general sense, but in her very own brand of humanity, that she has ALWAYS had. She isn't "backing out of going too far", she's taking who she is in her own two hands. So, my little rant over, just to make it clear another point: No matter what you think, you CAN'T change the story, it is the author's right to make as he sees fit, you liking or not, but we CAN influence him, and this kind of rant just makes people

sad, doubt themselves or full of anger. So please, stop trying to change things your way, enjoy the ride, if you can, and let erraticerrata give us this story, the way he saw it since the beginning.

*Letouriste*

I totally agree with you:) what erratic has already written should be enough for people to trust him about not destroying the interest in his novel.

*Dana*

See, I've just reconciled myself to the fact that Cat is the final villain of this story and we're getting it from her perspective. I have no sympathy for Cat at all & I root for her ultimate hero opponents (primarily Cordelia, but also White Knight). I relish any of Cat's losses but accept that at this stage of the story, they're few and far between. Adversity is for heroes – right up until the ending.

*nasiba*

Cat is the "hero" of this story so if you continued to read it, you are going to be disappointed. I find those few who read this series and insist they are rooting for "the heroes" to be just... weird. This isn't a story about Heroes, I mean, it's called the Practical Guide to Evil (doing wrong right). It's safe to assume that such a story is going to throw doubt on the very black and white absolutes that you cling to and question that very duality. Which it has done, repeatedly, so I can only imagine you are willfully ignoring it hoping that somehow the author is going to undo everything he has written so far and have the "Heroes punish the Villains". That isn't happening.

[Barthumphries](#)

I'm not the person you're responding to but Car herself has suggested that she might be the final villain and other villains have also suggested that.

*Saktiwijayarahman*

Fifteenth is so badass right now that if they got any cognomen less than Victrix or Rapax later, I'll be quite mad.

Can't wait for the next chapter!

[Nguyen Hong Hai](#)

15th Legion – The Godslayers

*Nairne .01*

That was very nice. I want more.

[reveen](#)

Took her long enough to figure it out. All Cat has accomplished in the end is helping set up the next big war, and possibly the one Callow or the world will never recover from, and neither she nor the Fifteenth are prepared for it. They've fought a whole bunch of minor wars and big flashy battles, but they haven't really experienced Capital W War. The kind that people don't go around shitting and giggling about how awesome it was afterwards.

*Dainpdf*

Well unless the really big players like the Gnomes, Dwarves, Elves, that sea empire etc get involved, it's still a minor skirmish on the global scale, no?

[reveen](#)

It's not about the scale of the war, but how long it lasts. All Cat's victories were in short flash in the pan slapfights where she wins when she kills all the other guys, she hasn't really experienced a prolonged large scale conflict. There's no fancy trick or tactic she can pull out of her ass that can deal with the realities of hunger, disease, refugees, attrition, and psychological trauma. She'll have to deal with the fact that sometimes just winning battle after battle isn't enough to win a war in the long term.

It may seem that she's some big badass Great Commander, but in comparison to what the world has in store for her she's still playing war games.

*Letouriste*

Sure you are right about that...but so what? She will struggle^^ and she will go even more in the deep end.i'm really curious about where this story will go and how

[chris S](#)

Is this a modified version of "Come out you Black and Tans"?

*Letouriste*

Yes,erratic said that in a up comment

*James, Mostly Harmless*

I have been thinking on Cat's reaction to first hearing "In Dread Crowned." Martin Luther must have had a similar reaction as the Reformation grew ...

## Switch

Fits pretty well when singing it to the tune of Come out Ye Black and Tans.

## *Unmaker*

The Named in Procer have always been about defiance – of Good, of other Named, of the ruler of the moment, of fate (e.g. Tyrant), of the natural order, of each other, etc. You name it, they have defied powerful forces. The Calamities have shown you could defy powers by being smart, not just by being powerful, but they are still the elite defying the elite.

Now Cat has taught and brought that same attitude down to the common man. She has taught them they can defy, too. Every ruler, noble, and Named on the damned continent should be getting cold sweats from this.

## Nguyen Hong Hai

Yeah weird with Black and Mally since they used to be dirt-poor but all their friends are in high places and they don't really connect with their old towns than the whole Praesi.

## *nipi*

But, but, but. What about the flaming goat skull?

## *edrey*

if i remenber correctly juniper was from the red moons no shields,  
well, my guess it's the diabolist would escape to another body, maybe with her mind broken; release the hell eggs of procer and boom with have new heroes and a reason for cordelia to make war, well a excuse

## *Cicero*

This chapter gave me the chills-

## *Engineer*

Summer shines bright.  
The Fifteenth is ready.  
Let Summer's curbstomp begin.

P.S. I do hope tomorrow's bonus chapter details the fight between Ranger and The Summer Queen. I REALLY WANNA SEE THAT!

## *Rlrader*

Would you consider putting previous/next buttons at the top also if it's not too much trouble?

### [BarthHumphries](#)

Ctrl+F didn't find the word "typo" so let's get this typo thread started already!

I kept to the colours, but by emblem was different.  
Change by to my

How easy it would have been to become like Black, utterly divorcing affection and necessity, if I'd not found a family in my companions.  
Change and to of

"I hate the orphanage, at the end," I quietly said. "It wasn't that they were out to get me, it was just..."  
Change hate to hated

The Diabolist had carved doom out of stone and sorcery, and she would not quietly into the night.  
Add "go" after "not"

The real legends, the heroes weren't bound to small stories like mine.  
Add "that" after "heroes"

Something I'd grown to appreciate, since Archer had joined by band.  
Change by to my

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

"You couldn't break open a dam and order the river."

I love this line, questionable grammar and all! The whole paragraph preceeding it was a nice bright spot in a chapter that doesn't really seem to go anywhere. I don't mean to criticize though, you can't have good chapters unless there are bad ones too xD

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Oh god, I just noticed the title. That...changes things.  
Apparently I was looking at it all wrong!

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Upon further reflection, this is an amazingly well written chapter. I totally didn't get it at first, but the way it contrasts with the rest of the chapters around it...bravo! I'm blown away at how awesome this is.

## [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

You know those pictures that look like a bunch of random dots until you look at it through a red filter, and then you can see it's a picture of a dolphin or something? This chapter is the random dots, and the title is the filter that shows you how you're supposed to look at it. I can't think of many authors who would even attempt something like this, let alone succeed so completely at it. That book Tom Robbins wrote entirely in 2nd person comes to mind (you're a middle age overweight hispanic woman, IIRC).

This chapter also reminds me of All The Pretty Horses for some reason (the book, not the movie). I haven't untangled why yet, but I'm pretty sure my subconscious does have a reason. It's late, maybe I'll know in the morning.

I'll come back later to read everybody else's comments, I wonder how much of the discussion is about how much of a fucking masterpiece this shit is xD

### [greatwyrmgold](#)

I keep thinking that Juniper seems like the best candidate for a third Named in the Fifteenth. I think I've even figured out a name that could fit; she's too divorced from the orcish tradition of war to be a new Warlord, never mind that the culture that birthed the name is a thousand years dead. But she's close enough for a War- name (other than Warlock) to fit. And given that Juniper's whole existence focuses on mastery over tactics, strategy, and logistics, I'd say Warlord would fit her like a glove. Better than any other Name I've thought of, for sure. (And like Adjutant, it implies a position running the army rather than as a warrior.)

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## **Chapter 40: Rising Action**

*"When approaching a siege, a general must draw distinction between tactical and strategic importance. The costs of a victory on the tactical theatre of a campaign may yield defeat on the strategic one."*

– "Considerations on Warfare", by Marshal Grem One-Eye

Most towns and cities in the south were lightly fortified, but Dormer was an exception. While it was true that since House Alban had united Callow there'd been relatively little war in the

south, the barony had roots than ran much further back than that. In the days when the Kingdom of Liesse had held sway over the south, clashing with a stubbornly independent Marchford and the encroaching Kingdom of Laure, Dormer had been made vassal to the rulers of the south by force of arms. That submission had never sat quite right with the rulers of the city, and they'd rebelled against the kings of Liesse several times. It all went back to the Wasaliti river and the island it flowed down to: Mercantis. The barons of Dormer had old ties to the City of Bought and Sold, and grown wealthy as the middlemen between it and the rest of Callow. Wealthy enough to afford tall walls, and later a fortress to overlook their demesne. There'd been little need to keep improving these after the unification of Callow, though, and revenue had been hurt by the tariffs set from Laure that had the coin going into the pockets of House Alban instead.

The city had grown beyond the ancient walls, with most of it now outside the grey stone and the fortress behind it. It was not a particularly large city, truth be told. At its peak after the Conquest there'd been perhaps fifteen thousand souls living there. Now there were more than twice that number of fae holding it, and no trace of the Callowans that should be there. A disquieting thing, that, but also a relief of sorts. If some of my countrymen had remained inside, I would have hesitated to use some of the more brutal tactics in my arsenal. Considering the opposition, that might have been costly. I'd beaten Summer once before, in Arcadia, but I'd done so relying on tricks and a story. I wouldn't have the benefit of either here, and that meant having to crush them the old fashioned way. I did, however, have some advantages on my side. The first was that this was a siege.

I'd grown up thinking of the Legions of Terror as a field army, but that was a somewhat false perception. It was true the Legions were most remembered for the Fields of Streges, when they'd near wiped out the armies of the kingdom, but most the battles in the Conquest had been sieges. The Blessed Isle, Summerholm and Laure. The campaign against Daoine in the north had not been so clear-cut, but it *had* involved taking the Wall. To understand the Legions as an institution, I'd come to realize, I had to keep in mind what Black had crafted them for: conquering Callow. Warfare in the kingdom had been deeply influenced by the nature of constant invasions, most of them Praesi. The cities of the west and the north were hard fortresses meant to resist Praes until House Fairfax could send an army to turn back the Legions, and so Callowans had grown adept at making fortresses. Our mages had learned protective magics and wards, passed down sorceries meant to banish devils and disrupt great rituals. Our armies fielded more heavy cavalry than any other on Calernia and around the professional core that had been the Royal Guard, massed volunteers had formed the bread and butter of Callow's hosts. All of it evolved to beat the large mage and villain-led hordes that used to be the staple of Praesi armies.

When the Conquest had begun, what House Fairfax faced was an entirely different beast. Orcs no longer used as meatshields for better-trained humans but armed in good steel and taught to stand in ranks. Goblins, once little more than expendables sent to die against walls or let loose on the countryside, instead turned into crossbowmen and sappers. Mages no longer standing at the back to unleash rituals but massed in the ranks to replace a few dangerous tricks by continuous deployable firepower. Summerholm, the famous Gate of the East, had fallen not to devils and flying fortresses but trebuchets and ballistas backed by full encirclement. The Legions of Terror had been built to take some of the most heavily-fortified cities on the face of the continent, and while the tight formations they used on the field were less effective in city streets, those narrow passages where were munitions and mage lines shone.

The second was that I was dealing with an enemy who knew little of this breed of warfare. The winner of the war between Summer and Winter was decided either behind closed doors or on a battlefield, not by borders and walls. The forces of the Count of Olden Oak had taught me a hard lesson when I'd taken the Gallowborne scouting in the grass, but when we'd assaulted his fortress his army had crumpled under the pressure. Summer was not meant to be on the defensive, and what I'd come to consider the greatest weakness of the fae was that they were not *adaptable* the way a mortal host would be. They would have learned from our clashes in Arcadia, of course. They weren't that crippled by their nature. But when faced with an unknown, something unprecedented, they tended to revert back to pattern. That made them predictable, to an extent, and the handful of monstrous tacticians I had on my side could make a lot out of the enemy being predictable.

I knew better than to think I knew all the cards the other side had to play. Even putting aside the fact that the Queen of Summer was on her way and she'd be a whole mess of her own, I'd glimpsed powers in the dream that had followed my becoming Duchess of Moonless Nights that I'd yet to see them deploy. They were out of princes and princesses to lead them, but there was at least one Duke left and they were not entities to take lightly. Summer, by now, would be desperate to take back the Princess of High Noon. They wouldn't be pulling any punches, and even though crossing into Creation would have weakened them this time I didn't have Winter to use as fodder on my flank. It'd be my armies that took the brunt of the losses, and like the Summer Queen I couldn't afford to take too many of those. Not when Diabolist was still on the loose, growing more dangerous by the day. On the other hand, I also couldn't afford to be overly cautious. If the fae in Dormer weren't in deep trouble by the time their Queen popped out, she wouldn't even consider treating with me. Which I really, *really* needed her to do. Actually taking her out was beyond my



capacity. The best Hierophant could do was delay, and when that failed it would swiftly begin going downhill for us.

It was Marshal Ranker that opened the dance.

After the first few fae patrols were repulsed by sheer numbers, Summer had retreated to the city. No sign of the Immortals yet, which we'd taken to mean they would be behind the walls. Thief and Archer were already gone to deal with that. Out in the streets and houses we'd could only see Summer regulars, and those were the first obstacle moving forward. Hard to gauge numbers on grounds like those, but there should be at least thirty thousand. Using the buildings as cover, they would turn Dormer into a butcher's yard if we advanced. *So we take away the cover.* The trebuchets let loose and the ballistas with them, ripping through the centre of the outskirts. Houses collapsed, a handful of fae crushed, and the sappers began their work. The ballistas were faster by a fair margin, but it was the trebuchets that did the heavy lifting. Stone after stone, they began reducing the outer city to rubble.

"And now we see if they take the bait," Hakram gravelled.

I hummed but did not reply. The Gallowborne had given the two of us wide berth, save for Tribune Farrier. He carried my banner, though he'd pass it when we entered the fray. Juniper had predicted that after we began smashing the outer city the fae would try to grab back the initiative by breaking our siege engines. For the average Legion of Terror, that would have been a problem. We were lighter on archers than most Calernian armies, since mage lines effectively served the same function. Wouldn't be the case for us, though. We had something the Empire had never fielded before: the army of Daoine. Flatly inferior to legionaries when it came to heavy infantry, save for the Watch, but when it came to archers? They'd used longbows to defend the Wall for centuries, and fae were nothing new to them. It might be greenskins that had tried their borders most of the time, but Praesi had made attempts too. There wasn't as much difference between winged devils and fae as the latter would like to think.

"And there they go," I muttered.

Ten thousand wings lit up and the Fair Folk rose into the sky. The height of the flight would be the most pressing issue, here. It wasn't like the Deoraithe could shoot halfway to the moon, while fae could just pour arrows downwards while staying out of range. That was our first trap. Hierophant wouldn't be taking the field for most of this battle because I needed him to control the three wards he'd prepared, and I watched the soldiers of Summer as they flew straight into the first of those. They didn't have time to ever fire a volley before a buzz so loud it was half a thunderclap filled the air. Their wings winked out for two heartbeats, then the buzz sounded again and they reappeared. Only

a handful fell, making it to the ground before being filled with arrows. An oscillation ward, Masego had called it. He'd essentially made a massive rectangle in the sky where ever two heartbeats the flow of sorcery would be disrupted. I'd asked him if he could just shut them down, but apparently that would have been too much of a drain to maintain. Even with the new Name he still had limits.

What it accomplished was make it exceedingly hard for the fae to just hover over the engines and leisurely set them on fire. If they wanted to make a dent, they'd have to descend into arrow range. Our little surprise spread chaos in their ranks. Half kept trying and failed repeatedly while the rest went down out of the ward's area and began to trade fire with the Deoraithe. They had the better of it, to my distaste. Kegan's soldiers were spread out, tight ranks would have been a written invitation to be hit with the fire arrows, but a loose formation was far from the equivalent of flying in the godsdamned sky. As soon as the situation steadied below, the fae who'd been struggling with the ward joined the others and I watched as five knots formed led by fae nobles. By the feel of them, nothing higher than a baron.

"That," I said, "is going to be trouble. Ritual?"

"Close enough," Hakram grunted. "No more than twenty in each formation. We'll hold."

We'd better. The battle was going to get a lot harder if we lost those trebuchets. All five knots formed large spears of flame easily the size of ten men in a line, and after a heartbeat they shot down at our five trebuchets. My fingers clenched as the projectiles fell, crackling loudly until they hit thin air. The shape of blue domes covering our engines shone as the fae sorcery tried to tear through, and though they shivered in the end they held. Close. Much too close for comfort. The entirety of the Fourth's mage contingent was feeding those shields and the fae had almost broken through anyway.

"If they keep pounding away at us with those I'm not sure we'll hold," I murmured.

"Hope Marshal Ranker read them correctly, then," Hakram replied.

The old goblin, when going over the battle plan, had made one prediction: *they will not be willing to get into a slugging match*. Whoever led the host of Summer would be trying to minimize casualties at all costs, and that meant backing away from tactics that were effective if they got too expensive. The Deoraithe continued to trade arrows, losing two men for every fae they took, and I grimaced. We couldn't afford to slug it out for too long either. Another volley of flame spears descended, and finally we have answer. The Fifteenth's mages had gone through the College same as any other legion's, with one major

difference: Masego. Who was occasionally willing to throw my mage lines a bone in the form of a ritual, if he was in the right mood for it. In Marchford, when it had become clear that our numbers in legionaries had far outgrown the quantity of mages that traditional legion structure dictated we should have to match it, Juniper and I had diverged from standard doctrine. We'd consolidated them under Kilian and drilled them in use of rituals. Now we'd see if that was going to pay off.

Two massive javelins of lightning formed above our shields and struck across the sky. The fae scattered around them even as the Fourth's mages desperately tried to keep the fae fire from reaching the siege engines. The javelins blew and streaks of lightning spread, killing scores of Summer soldiers but failing to disrupt any of the knots that forged the spears. *And so now we begin our staring contest, you Summer fucks.* There were only so many times the javelin ritual could be cast before my mages started burning out and dying. They knew that. I knew that. What they couldn't know was *how many* times they could. If they were lucky, they might shatter our shields and torch our siege engines before their losses got too high. Or we could trade blows for an hour as they racked up casualties they couldn't afford. Another wave of fire, lightning gave answer. My mages aimed at a knot this time, and killed a few. Useless, as it turned out. If the way a handful of fae from the ranks went back to fill the numbers was true indication, any of them could participate. It must be the barons that were the key.

Two more exchanges. On the last we lost a trebuchet, damn their stubborn hides. The moment the spear went through and touched wood the entire damn engine turned to ashes faster than I could blink. My mages weren't fools, though. On the first round they struck the sides with javelins, herding fae towards the centre, and when they struck there with the second they did real damage. After one success, the fae dug in. A mistake. At least a dozen of Ranker's mages must have died when the shield broke, but the rest went to reinforce the other shields. Another two exchanges where they failed to break through, and I smiled coldly. They'd blinked first. Of the ten thousand who'd come there must have been a little less than eight thousand left, a trade that had cost me at least two lines of mages and over two thousand Deoraithe archers. More of the Summer soldiers had died to the lightning ritual than the bows, by my count. We'd starkly underestimated their agility.

The fae did not retreat. They flew north, and landed on the plains behind us. That, we had seen coming. There were few things more dangerous to a besieging army than being hit in the back as they stormed the walls. I'd wanted to keep at least two out of the three wards Masego had judged he could handle to bolster our offensive, but Juniper had talked me out of it. There was no point in breaking through ahead if our back was collapsing, she'd said. Our second trap was in that very field where they'd landed.

The Fourth under Ranker and the Twelfth under General Afolabi stirred and began to march against the fae at our back. They numbers less than eight thousand, considering Ranker had a chunk of her sappers manning our engines and all her mages shielding them. The Fourth would be significantly weakened because of it. But the cognomen of Afolabi's Twelfth was *Holdfast*. Defence was their speciality, and that was what the two legions had been charged with. A holding action keeping the fae tied up. Masego abandoned the ward in the sky and activated the second one. Wind howled across the plains, surging forth from a line ahead of the two legions. Though it wouldn't kill anything, by our reckoning it should make flight all but impossible and for the fae to keep in tight ranks exceedingly difficult.

There was a drawback, of course. It needed Hierophant's full attention to keep active, and that meant it would cease when the Fifteenth made for the walls. That was the bet we'd made: by the time the engines had finished demolishing us a clear path to the walls, the fae at our back would be in bad enough a position that the two legions holding them would no longer need the help. Risky, Ranker had called it. If we were wrong we'd have to pull back some of the Deoraithe to bolster them, and there was chance if we did that we wouldn't have the numbers to punch through into the inner part of Dormer. It was coin flip. We could not, in the end, predict everything. For one, none of us had thought they'd sent fae nobles out this early. When we closed on the walls had been my own call, and that mistake had come mighty close to fucking us over. Even now, I winced at the notion that General Afolabi was going to have to deal with five barons. The ward could only help so much. If I hadn't sent out Archer already I would have told her to back him up, but the chalice had already been filled.

Even under bombardment by Summer, the engines had not paused. How long had passed, since the battle had begun? At least an hour, maybe more. The trebuchets had levelled us an avenue and cleaned fae out of it, but it would take hours longer yet. We should be done before nightfall, unless we were disrupted. Behind us the two Legions of Terror dug sixty feet behind the edge of the wards and let the fae come to them. It was bloody work. The Summer soldiers found that the empty space beyond the ward was a meat grinder of sharpeners and crossbow bolts leading straight into tight ranks of heavies, and hundreds died before they stopped rushing into the killzone. After that, though, they wised up. Masego's ward was a line that couldn't cover the entire plain. It couldn't even be a curve, since apparently for arcane reasons that would have been much harder to maintain. The fae began going around and the fight turned truly nasty. General Afolabi pulled back sappers and crossbowmen to back up the regulars he sent to block them, but that weakened his centre. Enough that two of the barons got a foothold.

Those were, to put it bluntly, beyond the ability of munitions to deal with. One of them lit up like a golden bonfire of gold and torched through a solid hundred heavies before being driven back by the Twelfth's mages. The other one screwed with the ward, bending the wind across a dozen feet of the line until it turned around and blew into the lines of the legion. Fae began pouring through immediately and it all went to the Hells after that. Twice, as the hours passed, I almost went to reinforce them. Both times Hakram held me back. We couldn't afford for me to start using my aspects yet. I would say this for Afolabi's legionaries, they stood their fucking ground. When the fae formed a beachhead and it looked like the centre was going to collapse, four lines of heavies went into the thick of it with lightning bolts clearing them a path. There were a few sappers behind their shields, and though half the heavies got wiped in a single stroke of the sword of the baron twisting the wind the goblins threw a dozen demolition charges at him and blew half his head off. Of that near one hundred legionaries that went in, less than twenty made it back to their lines. They'd bought General Afolabi the room he needed, though. The moment the ward returned to full effectiveness, he plugged the gap and forced back the other baron with concentrated spellfire.

An hour before Evening Bell night began to fall, and by then the field was littered with dead. But Ranker had accomplished what she'd set out to do. A straight line to the northern gate of Dormer had been carved out of rubble, the fae still in the outer city split on both sides of it.

"Our turn, now," I quietly told Hakram.

"Do or die," he said.

I gestured at the Gallowborne, and the Fifteenth stirred to march. To war, to Dormer, to doom. Whether it'd be theirs or ours, I could not yet tell.

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### [erraticerrata](#)

First update of the month, you know what that means. Extra chapter is titled "Background", from Hakram's POV. As always, it's in the Extra Chapters tab but here's the link for the lazy:

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/11/01/background/>

*danh3107*

Man that was exceedingly brutal, summer doesn't mess around.

[Robert Allaband](#)

Yes they did and that wasn't brutal and they are going to pay for it. Summer is planning their battle around the last Duke, which will be hidden inside of the city, expecting the Barons outside to hold the Named in place and then when they are worn down he strikes. They are counting on Catherine's old weakness, that while she has the title of a Duchess she only had the power of a Countess, and they won't find out different until it is too late because they are messing around out there instead of forcing the fight. They never should have stayed in the city and forced on open field battle, where they could have forced the pace. Never let your enemy pick the battlefield, Catherine wanted a siege where she was the sieger and got it. Brutal is what you are going to see what happens to the Fae after Catherine beats the Duke, that is what is going to force the Queen to negotiate.

*Dainpdf*

One would assume the fae would be able to feel her power level, no?

[Robert Allaband](#)

No, not unless they can get close and have th time to do an examination like Masego did or until she uses it, that is why she didn't intervene with the barons.

Her third aspect is tied to the power granted as the Duchess of Moonless Night and in the extra chapter Masego very bluntly states that the work he did on her made her more 10 X more powerful:

"I had it under control, before Masego did his heart shenanigans," she complained. "Now it's like I'm starting from scratch."

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/11/01/background/>

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Spoilers, Robert! You shouldn't go posting shit from future chapters here! What the fuck were you thinking!

[Cyryl Chołodowski](#)

but... there are no spoilers here? It's a quote from this, and previous (or the one before it) chapter.

*naturalnuke*

Thank you....

...so much.

I love this book.

*Wombat*

Oh no the next chapter is going to be on Monday 😞

*Wombat*

Also, I love the theme of the chapter names as names for parts of the classic story structure. Eg. Exposition, Rising Action.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

[benthelynx](#)

I doubt the answer to whose doom it will be is one or the other. Who's defeated might vary, but they were both doomed when the summer queen named the protagonists the woe. If not before then- depending on whether the summer queen just recognised what was always true or made it so.

[Robert Allaband](#)

The Summer Queen didn't name the group The Woe, Ranger did:

The Summer Queen uses woe as a curse, Ranger used it as a name and the way to tell is the capitalization of the word woe. Queen small w means it is not a name, Ranger capital W as you use in a proper noun that is a name.

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/09/18/chapter-32-close/>

Also Cat tells you straight out Ranger named them:

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/10/11/chapter-34-talks/>

*Unorginal*

I would still argue it was the summer queen who named the group as a whole. The calamities, for example, took their name from a similar speech by the chancellor of the time and considering how this is a world run off of plot-onium you can bet that things happened that way for a reason.

Mostly, this is an argument over semantics but I stand by my argument that ranger merely recognized them as the woe rather than dubbed them so.

*Jonnnney*

I might be alone on this, but there was way too much exposition and explanation for the amount of action we got. The history of Sieger tactics that we largely already know, the makeup of cities that aren't on the battlefield, 3 too many paragraphs about the wards, a good half the chapter was just mental masturbation on Catherine's part.

*Dana*

Agreed. I got bored and skimmed it.

*Barrendur*

@Jonnnney:

I agree with you; I, too, think this was one of the least substantive or significant updates we've had in some time, and found it disappointing, especially coupled with the soggy "Old Folks at Home"-style bonus chapter. However, balance between action and exposition is fiendishly difficult to achieve/maintain even in a conventional novel, and I can only imagine how much harder it is in serial form, with no editing, no rewrites and no take-backs possible... just an ongoing demand for timely updates.

Yeah, Chapter 40 and the Bonus Chapter were a disappointment this time, but it doesn't happen often and there are readily understandable reasons when it does. Let's thank Erraticerrata for the story, but still suggest he give his balance a nudge in the "significant" direction.

*narcoduck*

Agreed. I feel Erraticerrata was just trying to get through the boring opening salvo of the siege, and the tone suffered for it. For example, Dormer is a major city but I don't have a particularly vivid picture of it like I did for Leisse. And the commentary on the siege read as a particularly detailed outline of what to write.

If everything happening within this chapter is within Catherine's expectations, I think a writing style like Interlude:Commanders would have worked well, but instead of commanders, have the POV switch between the footsoldiers at each front: a goblin from Ranker's Fourth manning a trebuchet, a Soninke mage casting part of the ritual under Masego, an orc holding the line with Afolabi's Twelfth, maybe even a Gallowborne charging with his queen into a deathtrap.

Contrasting the New Praes's siege of Summer Fae holding a Callowan City vs the Summer Fae's siege of Old Praes's holding of a Callowan City (from Akua's chilling interlude) is a missed opportunity I think.



Just my two cents.

[reveen](#)

Well, trying to just get through a siege kind of misses the entire point of having a siege to begin with. Sieges are all about sitting there waiting for someone to break or make a move. I feels like we're trading the realistic implications of the situation the writer *chose* to put the characters in for the sake of spectacle. Which in turn is sacrificing tension for the sake of having characters do cool shit.

Narratively, sitting down for a siege would be a great way to actually build up the Far threat and allow for the coming explosion of conflict to boil, and there's no narrative benefit to skipping over all that aside from giving the audience the junk food of having the protagonists blow through loads of mooks.

*OldSchoolVillain*

The problem is that Cat doesn't have time for a regular siege. The Queen is arriving at Dawn, and if they don't have summer on the ropes, Cat's army is fucked. She explicitly states that in this chapter. Also, part of a siege is forcing the enemy to use up their supplies, which is impossible with Summer, because they can just open a portal to Arcadia for more rations, weapons, ammunition, etc.

[reveen](#)

Go away Watson. We're talking Doylist here.

The issue is that certain types of military actions fit into certain narrative purposed to direct the course of a story. For example, having the main characters get ambushed is a good way to introduce an upheaval to the story and shake up the readers expectation of the characters being safe. A classic example being the Uruk Hai attack that breaks up the fellowship in the Lord of the Rings. But in order for this to land you have to follow through with the logical consequences of the event. If the characters get ambushed but just kill all the bad guys and go skipping off in their merry way there's no point to it.

A siege is almost the opposite, it's something that bogs down the momentum of the story, and gives the opportunity to get some downtime, build the tension of the story, and let conflicts simmer until everything explodes into violent. This just skips right to the violence without having built tension beforehand to make it impactful.

I enjoyed the extra, but I agree this felt sort of without impact. Probably because the casualties weren't on the 15th so I felt sort of distanced from them all.

AVR

Typo time!

where were munitions  
were where munitions

the two of us wide berth,  
the two of us a wide berth,

ever two heartbeats  
every two heartbeats

and for the fae to keep in tight ranks exceedingly difficult.  
and exceedingly difficult for the fae to keep in tight ranks.  
(IMO)

It was coin flip.  
It was a coin flip.

[BarthHumphries](#)

Out in the streets and houses we'd could only see Summer  
regulars  
Change we'd to we

Another volley of flame spears descended, and finally we have  
answer.  
Change have to... I don't know, "had our", probably.

We'd consolidated them under Kilian and drilled them in use of  
rituals.  
Add "the" after "in"

They numbers less than eight thousand, considering Ranker had a  
chunk of her sappers ...  
Change numbers to numbered

Though it wouldn't kill anything, by our reckoning it should  
make flight all but impossible and for the fae to keep in tight  
ranks exceedingly difficult.  
Add a comma after "impossible" and "exceedingly difficult"  
directly after the comma.

and there was chance if we did that we wouldn't have the  
numbers to punch through into the inner part of Dormer.  
Add "a" after "was"

It was coin flip.  
Add "a" after "It"

There were a few sappers behind their shields, and though half the heavies got wiped in a single stroke of the sword of the baron twisting the wind the goblins threw a dozen demolition charges at him and blew half his head off.

""

That's a long sentence. I'd change "the sword of the baron" to "the baron's sword", and add a comma after "wind".

Of that near one hundred legionaries that went in, less than twenty made it back to their lines.  
Change the comma to a semicolon.

An hour before Evening Bell night began to fall, and by then the field was littered with dead.  
Move the comma to after "Bell".

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

This sentence doesn't seem to make sense. Can anyone guess what it was supposed to mean?

"Whoever led the host of Summer would be trying to minimize casualties at all costs, and that meant backing away from tactics that were effective if they got too expensive"

### [Barthumphries](#)

There's no point in achieving a Pyrrhic victory. Wikipedia says:

> A skilled commander, with a strong army fortified by war elephants (which the Romans were not experienced in facing), Pyrrhus enjoyed initial success against the Roman legions, but suffered heavy losses even in these victories. Plutarch wrote that Pyrrhus said after the second battle of the war, "If we are victorious in one more battle with the Romans, we shall be utterly ruined." He could not call up more men from home and his allies in Italy were becoming indifferent. The Romans, by contrast, had a very large pool of military manpower and could replenish their legions even if their forces were depleted in many battles. This has led to the expression Pyrrhic victory, a term for a victory that inflicts losses the victor cannot afford in the long term.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Thanks, I know what a Pyrrhic victory is, I just didn't get that from the sentence at first. It's structured oddly, like there's a misplaced modifier or something

### [Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

Knowing what we do about fae nobles, the fact that the Twelfth managed to take out a *Duke* with no help from a Named except for that wind wall is incredibly impressive. I really think that some of the stuff on this chapter lacked the oomph needed to make it truly memorable, because what actually happened was amazing.

### [BarthHumphries](#)

Well, that and hundreds and hundreds of soldiers dead. Let that be a lesson. Throw enough soldiers at someone and you can eventually kill them. Probably.

### *RandomFan*

As black's predecessor learned the hard way. As Black has made a point of teaching Cat. It's still impressive, because high ranking fae are on the levels of named. I suspect that it was stronger than a book one Lone Swordsman, for instance.

### *OldSchoolVillain*

It was a Baron, not a Duke. Still impressive, but a lesser power than, say, Catherine.

### *marine*

Prediction: the summer queen is dead. Ranger killed her. That's edgy you don't see the Immortals.

It's going to be very funny.

The only problem is if that's the case, who is holding the army together?

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## Chapter 41: Turning Point

*"Better behind a Tyrant than before them."*

– Praesi saying

The right to lead the vanguard, as always, belonged to Nauk.

The orc legate was not as clever as Juniper or careful as Hune, but when the time came to hammer in a door there was a reason he was the man we sent for. More than any other orc I knew, Nauk had no give in him. He was stubborn and aggressive and his men loved him – even the humans, which was no given for a greenskin commander. In Arcadia he'd lost three fourths of his jesha to

Summer regulars and the Immortals, and his men had stood their ground without flinching. How many hosts in all of Calernia would have done that, in the face of those kind of casualties? The Battle of Four Armies and One had effectively ended his command and we'd had to repurpose another jesha for him to lead, but he'd taken the reins swiftly. It helped that half the two thousand he now led had been under his nominal authority before I'd taken him north to Laure. Still, if it had been another officer I would have been wary of making them the tip of the spear when their forces were still unblooded and fresh to his command. Not with Nauk, though. What Summer did not kill today would become my vanguard in the wars to come.

My sword hissed against the sheath as it was bared, Hakram hefting his axe at my side. It would be the two of us, in the beginning, without the Gallowborne. The kind of fights I'd be seeking were not ones you took mortals into, however well-trained. Behind us the legionaries of the Fifteenth advanced in tight ranks, shields hefted. Heavies in the front with sappers behind them, about to find out if the tactics Juniper had crafted to deal with fae were effective or not. Our engines had demolished us a clear path to the walls and split the Summer regulars in two, but it would have been madness to assault the ramparts without a solid beachhead. That meant getting in the thick of it, for good or ill. The enemy was not slow in giving answer. Darkness had fallen, but for a heartbeat it felt as if day had come again: across the city flames bloomed and arrows rose into the sky. I was familiar with that trick by now, the fire-driven arrows that detonated upon impact. Watching them tear through the Gallowborne had made sure I would never forget.

Masego's third and last ward activated with a sound like a massive siphon. The arrows flew unabated, but the flames were whisked out of existence. Fire suppression ward. It would cripple our mages as well, prevent them from using fireballs, but Summer lost far more to this than we did. That Hierophant had triggered this one meant the legions at our back had lost their best defence, and all I could do was pray they'd thinned the fae enough they'd be able to hold without it. The dice were thrown, now, and there was no use giving it any further thought. Juniper would handle the rest. Arrows clattered against shields behind us, the testudo formation drilled into the legionaries sparing them from the worst of it. I heard Nauk scream for his men to pick up the pace and left him to it. Hakram and I had other duties before us: we were, it could be said, going *hunting*.

"Where to?" the orc gravelled.

I'd closed my eyes, letting Winter flow through my veins, and opened them only when I found an answer.

"West," I said. "Close to the river. Baron or unusually strong lord."

"It'll be good to shake the rust off before we take on the real threats," he drily said.

We left the road and took a corner around what smelled like an abandoned tannery. Wasn't surprised it was this far out. Most Callowan cities had laws forcing trades that produced fumes that dire to remain on the outskirts, no matter how useful. The streets out here were little more than dirt paths between wooden shacks, most not even broad enough for the two of us to pass through together. Though our entry had not gone opposed, Summer did not disappoint: by the time we reached the first broader street, we ran into our first ambush of the night. The only warning was arrows whistling, betraying the location of silhouettes standing over thatched roofs with bows in hand. I stepped to the side without missing a beat and Hakram had been moving before I'd even noticed. Archers on top, but there would be more. A dozen emerged from abandoned houses at our front and back, swords in hands, as the archers smoothly nocked their second volley.

"See Adjutant, they do love us," I mused. "There's a party and everything."

"Don't play with your food," the orc chided.

We split without needing to warn each other. Fighting with Hakram was like having a third arm, had been ever since he came into his Name. The archers were not amateurs: they aimed where we'd be, not where we were, and even adjusted for swiftness above that of mortals. Not well enough, though. I was quicker than I'd been before Masego had tinkered with my heart, and Adjutant had reflexes that were above even my own. He used his Name more efficiently than me, I'd come to suspect. Hakram barrelled into the fae swordsman, axe splitting open a skull before the arrows even struck ground. As for me, I glanced at a sidewall and made the wager it would survive my weight. A leap saw my foot land on the side of it, then another had me landing in the midst of the archers. They reacted smoothly, swords bared in the blink of an eye, but there were only six. My shield swung out to crush the skull of the one closest to me, and it might as well have been an eggshell. I turned a blade aside and carved open the fae's throat, spinning to turn the swing into another. They barely had time to raise their swords before three were dead.

The ease of it scared me. They had been difficult to deal with, once. Now I broke one's wrist with my shield, pierce into the second one's eye with the tip of my blade and the third made to retreat. A flick of the wrist and a blade of ice and shadow took her in the back of the neck, snuffed out instantly. The last fae did not even have time to curse before my shield smacked into his

face, breaking the chin and crushing the windpipe. Magic made flesh or not, there was no walking that off. Hakram was a whirlwind spinning amidst struggling fae, taking a life with every stroke, but I glimpsed arrowheads through a window at his back. They had, it seemed, kept back archers. I let out a long breath and pushed a sliver of power into my legs. The leap sent me sailing into the air, tearing through the wall and landing on my knees in a shower of shards. Three inside, I saw. One lost his wrist to the first flick and I spun. Second was thrown out the window with his skull crushed by a shield bash. Didn't even need to kill the third. I backed out of the house and let it collapse onto him. That'd been a load-bearing wall, apparently.

"Retreat," a musical voice called out.

I was watching the man it belonged to before he even spoke. The fae around Hakram scattered, though not before his axe harmstrung one's leg and his boot came down to crush her skull. The fae was the one I'd felt earlier, a tall pale man with grey hair that looked made of granite.

"How many titled nobles do you have in the city?" I asked.

"Enough to break you," the fae smiled. "Her Majesty will take your head personally."

Shame I didn't have the time to hack off that one's limbs and bring him back to Masego so the mage could dig out the information.

"Well," I said. "One less after this."

I didn't actually see the arrow coming, and that was telling. It was utterly silent, and all I managed was to have it strike my shoulder instead of my back. It punched straight through plate and I grimaced. He hadn't come alone, and no regular had done this. I broke off the shaft and ice spread over the wound, sealing it shut.

"I think," Hakram said calmly, "that there will be no need to seek them out."

On the outskirts of Dormer, five fae stood around us. One was on the rooftops, green-haired and from the looks of the longbow in his hand he was responsible for that friendly tap I'd just received. Two more in the streets, dark-skinned and wafting smoke. They looked liked twins, one a man and the other a woman, each armed with a short spear and a blade. The last one looked like a Yan Tei, honey-skinned and utterly hairless. She had a short sword in one hand, and a thin wheel of pale steel in the other.

"All right, so," I hummed. "Correct me if I'm wrong."

I pointed my blade at the twins.

"Baron and baroness," I said, then moved to the longbow man.  
"Count."

I mulled over the rest a heartbeat.

"Smug weaponless man's a jumped-up lord, and the one who brought a wheel to a swordfight's a countess, but one ahead of the curve," I finished.

"I am not jumped-up," the grey-haired fae hissed.

"That's exactly what you'd say if you were, though," I gently told him.

The smoking twins grinned, and Gods was I glad Archer wasn't there to make something of that. The one who'd looked at what made wagons move and thought 'I bet you could make a weapon out of that' offered a half bow.

"I am the Countess of Wrathful Skies," she said. "Second-in-command to this host. Should you surrender presently, I can guarantee you will not be tortured prior to execution."

"Ah, the Praesi gambit," I mused. "Always a crowd-pleaser. I'm going to have to reply with the famous words of the Duke of Violent Squalls."

Silence reigned for a moment.

"You have not said anything," the man with the bow said.

You had to love that about the fae, if nothing else: you could always count on them to feed you the line.

"Neither did he," I said. "*Because I killed his smug ass.*"

Now that the usual diplomatic niceties were done with, I imagined negotiations were about to break down. Best get ahead of that.

"Think you can handle the twins?" I called out to Hakram.

"Long enough you'll kill your way through the rest, at least," the orc agreed.

And then they tried to shoot him, because they were just *terrible* diplomats. I got a better look at the arrow, this time. Entirely wood, and wreathed in green light. Likely had to do with the Count's full title, whatever that was. In the heartbeat where Adjutant moved so the shot would skim his pauldron instead of tear through his shoulder, the rest of them moved. Grey hair called on something that had the ground around him denting and every stone in sight turning to dust. The Countess' wheel began



spinning and lightning gathered along the sides of it, growing larger by the instant. The smoke wafting from the twins thickened into a cloud that enveloped them entirely. I cracked my neck. This, I thought, was going to be a memorable ride. Best get it over with quickly, or we'd be too battered to handle whatever Duke actually ran this show.

I went for the archer first. If he was actually a Count it was dubious he'd be a pushover in close quarters, but neither Hakram nor I could afford to be watching for arrows at all times while dealing with the rest. Moving faster than anyone should be able to within the bounds of Creation, the green-haired fae had another arrow flying before I'd even made it to another roof. For a moment I thought he'd missed, but he'd never aimed for me at all: the house I was going to use as a stepping stone fell apart in a cloud of dust and I cursed. All right, so they weren't idiots. Which was a real shame. Idiocy was a trait I prized in people trying to kill me. Wrathful Skies attacked before I could change my course, landing at my side wreathed in lightning. When she struck, it was with two blades. One made of steel, going for my throat. The other, lagging slightly behind, was made of lightning. I made the mistake of parrying the short sword and in that instant the lightning connected with our weapons, coursing down my blade and sending down horrid pain and convulsions across my body.

First time I'd ever got hit by a lightning spell. I would not recommend the experience to anyone. I managed to duck the arrow the other fucker shot at my back, but when it struck ground instead green sorcery glimmered and it grew pins like a porcupine.

"Shit," I eloquently grunted, and threw myself to the ground.

A storm of arrows burst out and flew in every direction. A least five hit my plate, and if I hadn't gone down would have gone straight through the aketon into my flesh. I rolled to avoid the lightning wheel coming down on my head but that thing was trickier than it looked: when it touched the street a wave of lightning spread from the point of contact and had me convulsing again. This, I thought, was not going according to plan. Because all of this clearly just wasn't enough, stone powder coalesced above me and formed a massive obelisk that... dropped. *Lightning first*, I thought, gritting my teeth. I reached for Winter and frosted shadows formed an envelope around my body. They got burned through as swiftly as I willed them into being, but that bought me just long enough to scrabble out of the way of the obelisk. It turned to powder immediately, but I had other problems on my hands. I dropped my shield, since in the face of lightning it was just a liability, and grabbed the Countess of Wrathful Skies' wrist when she tried to swing down at me.

Steadying my footing, I rotated and threw her right into the trajectory of the arrow that was meant for the back of my neck.

A green shimmer and it was gone, because the bastards weren't going to make it that easy on me. Stone powder formed around me in the shape of a bubble. Containment, huh. At least they were taking me seriously. I released the shadow envelope and backed away, but the powder followed. Their first mistake of the night. He should have readjusted instead. The Countess had landed on her feet and her wheel rose up, gathering ever more lightning. Another arrow flew silently towards my chest, but I wasn't falling for that one twice. My wrist flicked with unearthly precision and I slapped it aside. When the smaller arrows burst out, it was too far for any of them to hit me. *He did not retire that trick. Might be he can't when it's already been loosed.* The stone had caught up to me, by now, and Wrathful Skies had a streak of lightning floating above the wheel that looked like it was going to sting. My opening.

**"Take,"** I said.

The Countess' eyes went wide as I claimed the sorcery above her head, for just one moment wresting it from her control and tossing it straight at the fae lord trying to contain me. Struck him right in the chest with dark satisfaction. I was moving before my most dangerous opponent could react, and the lack of arrow to duck had me surprised until I heard Hakram's hoarse grunt. *Shit.* I didn't have time to spare a look as I avoided stepping stones entirely and leapt straight at the archer. I got a boot in the helmet for it but caught it with my hand even as I began to fall, drawing on Name strength so even from that awkward position I managed to snatch him off his foot and swing him down behind me. Right into the face of the the Countess of Wrathful Skies, as she prepared to run me through. The two of them were smashed to the ground in a pile of sprawling limbs. I thinned my lips, well aware I couldn't afford to use Fall on these two even if it would be a near-guaranteed kill. I needed it for the Duke. Shot a spear of ice at them out of spite and immediately moved towards the lord.

He was back on his feet, in a narrow alley between two houses. The powder formed a wall in front of me but I sped up and went through before it solidified. Hastily he dragged it back to him and shot spears of stone at me, the first at feet height and then rising. Panting, I threw myself into a slide and narrowly went under the bottom stone. I landed in a crouch in front of him and even as his skin turned to stone my sword came up. Straight through the belly. He gasped and I rose as I withdrew the blade, cutting straight through his neck in the next swing. The head rolled on the floor, and there went the first of my opponents. The walls to my side groaned, and I cursed when I saw the arrows groaning from them. Fuck, could he pull that on *all* wood? Furious

at the waste, I dug into Winter and froze both walls before he could get the arrows flying. Another twist of will had the walls collapsing, and even as the houses followed I turned to face the other two remaining. The Countess kept her lightning wheel close, and not powerful enough to be worth stealing. She'd learned. Not that I'd Take it lightly, anyway.

I could get another two uses out of that aspect tonight at most, and every one I used on these was one less I could pull against the Duke.

"Yew," the Countess said. "Travel. She'll target you otherwise."

"I would never," I lied.

The possible count hesitated, but then lay hand on a wooden wall and disappeared. Well, fuck. That was going to be a pain to deal with. There was smoke in the distance where Hakram was fighting the others, and I could hear rhythmic singing in a dialect of Kharsum I was unfamiliar with. If he was well enough to sing, I decided, I could afford to be careful dealing with these two.

"You are Duchess of Moonless Nights in truth," the Countess said. "Reports of your power were greatly understated."

"I'm just putting my whole heart into it, this time," I sharply grinned. "So, have you distracted me long enough for him to line up his shot yet?"

"Why," the fae drily replied. "I would never."

What I'd meant to do was duck the arrow then kick it into the Countess' face to make me an opening. It started going wrong on the first part: while I avoided the arrow by a hair's breadth, it was already growing pins. I had to roll through a window into a house to avoid the storm, and Gods Below was that a mistake. Everything began growing spikes a heartbeat later.

"I have made better tactical decisions in the past," I conceded out loud.

I managed to tear through the door in time to avoid the worst of it, but worst was a relative term when even the bloody door was shooting arrows at me. About six of them stung their way straight into my back, through plate and aketon both. A lot more worryingly, Wrathful Skies was waiting for me in the street with the wheel raised. There wasn't so much sorcery there it would be worth stealing, and that moment of reluctance cost me. A dozen tendrils of lightning struck out and the better part of them managed to hit me. The *really* dangerous part, I managed to realize even as my body screamed, was that the spell was continuous. The other fae slid out of a wall to my side and nocked an arrow but let it gather green light. Ominous.

**"Take,"** I gasped.

The Countess immediately cut the lightning, but it wasn't her I was going for. For an instant I felt the green light and knew whom it belonged to: the Count of Green Yew. His title spoke to growth and wood, to- pain spiked my thoughts, scattering them. There was no fire in this, but it was still born of Summer. Anathema to what I had become. It had been enough anyway. The power I'd taken disappeared from the bow and I shoved it into the same door that had wounded me. Tendrils of wood rose and caught the lightning, freeing me. A heartbeat later the arrow struck where I would have still been, but I was already moving. The Countess' sword rose to parry my own, but it was only steel at this very moment and in a contest of strength, I trumped her outright. Her blade driven back she began to step back but I caught her throat with my bare hand. Lightning flickered as she called it back from her wheel into her body but it was much, much too late. My fingers clenched and a sickening crack resounded as I snapped her spine and pulped her throat. Before her body had dropped to the floor I was turning to the Count of Green Yew, but he was already gone.

Retreat? It would be hellish to go through this city with the fae popping out of every house to take a shot at us. No, can't be. *Summer doesn't retreat, not like that.* He could, however, have decided to kill Adjutant so the twins would be freed to act against me. Shit. Aside from the fact that if Hakram died I was going to murder every last one of them, from the first fucking regular to the Queen herself, fighting blind like the smoke-using fae must impose was one of the ways I most hated fighting. I'd grown too use to relying on my Name-sharpened senses. There was no time to dawdle. The smoke cloud was easy enough to find, and I legged it towards there. I kept a eye on my surroundings as I did, wary of an ambush, but I had forgotten one fact about fae: they *flew*. Three arrows landed in a triangle around me, and the pins grew a heartbeat later. Heart sinking, I froze them. I'd already used more than I'd wanted to, and I still had one other major draw to deal with before I got to the Duke. At this rate I'd be dead on my feet by the time I got there. On the other hand, at this rate by the end of this all that would be left of the Summer Court was going to be three guys and a graveyard.

Small comfort. The Count of Green Yew was flying half a mile above me and already nocking an arrow. Making my way up there was going to be tricky, against an opponent that specialized in range combat. The first house I chose to use as a stepping stone was collapsed before I even touched it and I had to resist the urge to flip him the finger. Discarding the fanciness, I created a circle of shadow in the air and leapt atop it. I was going to stab the bastard even if I had to claw my godsdamned way up. The second circle I made, even as I dismissed the first, was torn through by an arrow. I fell back to street level and took a deep

breath. That *fucker*. I was going to have to make multiple platforms every time, wasn't I? Drawing the power, I blinked at what I saw above. He *has* to see that, I thought. But the Count shot another arrow at me instead, and even even as I danced away I was laughing.

The lower edge of the trebuchet stone caught him at rib height.

I got a glimpse of red splatter and white bones before it got out of sight, and faintly made note to find out what goblin had made that shot so I could order them promoted. Hells, if I could accomplish that as vicequeen without burning too many bridges I was going to have them made *count*. They'd sure as Hells earned it. It was harder to find Hakram than I'd thought, after, because the smoke had dissipated. I found Adjutant panting and bloodied in a marketplace, his armour black as coal and his face bearing nasty wounds that were going to scar. His dead hand gleamed strangely, at least the parts of it I could see. Most of it had been shoved through the baroness' eye cavity. *Gods*. My second didn't fuck around, when he got serious. He ripped it out in a shower of gore and crouched, almost too exhausted for words.

"Had to use Rampage," he croaked. "Kept Stand. Think they were weak for barons."

I offered him my arm to grasp and helped him to his feet.

"Dipped a little too deep as well," I said. "Hopefully the others were more conservative, otherwise even if we take out the Duke we'll be wiped when the Queen comes through."

"Plan's not to fight her," he said.

"And those always go so well," I drily replied. "You up for a run? We need to catch up to Nauk."

"I'll live," he said. "No inner bleeding. Is it possible to bruise your kidney?"

"I think mine is permanently blue," I said amusedly.

We made our way back to the main path, and only had to stop twice for him to retch. There wasn't a lot of blood in it and Hakram was an orc, so I wasn't overly worried. His people were built resilient, and Named took that to an extreme. That part of the city had already been secured, though the vanguard was long gone. It was the Deoraithe that held it now and they made way for the both of us. Emptying his stomach had put Hakram back on his feet, more or less, so he was spared the indignity of my holding him up all the way to the front. Nauk found us before we found him. The fae, I saw, had razed a ring of houses around the city wall. There must have been a moat as well, once, because I saw a pit around even the gates that had been burned clean. It was empty

now. The Fifteenth had dug in their positions around the edge of the wall, trading sporadic crossbow fire with the fae above. No sign of the Immortals on the walls, which was relief and worry both.

"Cat," Nauk grinned. "Good hunting?"

"We cleaned house in the west," I said. "Can't answer for the rest."

"Whatever you did there, it collapsed their flank," the legate said. "We hold most of that side now. To the east we've got ten thousand holding a neighbourhood near the walls. Deoraithe failed to break through, but they're contained."

I raised an eyebrow.

"And the rest?"

That left ten thousand missing.

"They tried another run at the trebuchets," Nauk said. "We lost another two and half our ballistas, but they were beaten back. Saw them fly behind the walls."

I grimaced. That was a lot more fae in the inner city than I'd wanted to deal with.

"The Immortals?" I prompted.

"We think they hold the castle," the orc said. "To make sure the Queen has foothold when she crosses."

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"Doesn't matter," I finally said. "We break through now. What time is it?"

"Midnight Bell was an hour ago," Nauk replied.

Then we needed to hurry. Behind the walls would be an even uglier fight.

"Scry Masego," I ordered. "He's to dismiss his last ward and join us for the push."

The legate bared his fangs.

"Wade in their blood, Catherine Foundling," he said.

"Gods, I hope not," I replied. "Hakram spends long enough cleaning my armour as is."

The grin I got was worth the words, considering the casualties his advance must have caught. When I found Adjutant again the Gallowborne were already with him. Tribune Farrier saluted, and promptly handed me a shield. It had, I noted, my very fresh heraldry painted on it.

"Figured you might break your first one," the dark-haired man said.

I thanked him decided not to tell him it was actually fine and that it had just entirely slipped my mind to double back to pick it up. I rolled my shoulder and took a look at the walls. Those might take hours to breach, if we let the trebuchets do the heavy lifting. Even more now that we'd lost over half of them.

"Cluster tight around me," I ordered Farrier. "Shields up. They'll be aiming at us all the way."

"They always do," the Callowan smiled. "And yet, here we are."

I smiled back, though the affection was short-lived. There were a lot of new faces among the men, and I knew exactly why. I took the lead, Hakram at my side and the Gallowborne at my back. The fae on the walls only fired a few arrows at us, though that'd change if they saw we didn't retreat. I closed my eyes and let Winter loose. I took a step, and ice rose. One step after another, a stairway of ice rose in front and then above the gates of Dormer. It was, I knew, wide enough for three hundred men to go up. It was burning through my reserves, cooling my blood. It was also how my armies were going to take the city.

I advanced, and the Fifteenth advanced with me.

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*Metalshop*

Fantastic chapter.

*danh3107*

I don't think reading about Catherine killing people in awesome ways will ever get old.

*-Mech-*

Trebutchet to deal with flying enemies is a hilarious method, I'll admit, although whoever made that shot has some ridiculous aiming. I mean, how would you even adjust your aim that well lol

*Jordan*

Im starting to suspect that Robber is developing a name too, but it's already been pointed out that her goblins are extraordinary.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

You mean Pickler? Robber's the guy who steals shit and ganks people in alleys, Pickler is the genius builder.

*TideofKhatanga*

I'm convinced that both Robber and Ranker are Named already. We'll probably never know about any of it since goblins don't speak about that to non-goblin.

In fact, we have no confirmation that goblins even have Names but the shit Preserver is supposed to be and to do pretty much scream Name. With the way goblin treats names in general, I wouldn't be surprised if all of them turned out to be Named in some fashion.

[SpacyRicochet](#)

@TideofKhatanga

That's not likely to happen. They were subject to slavery and experiments for way too long under the Praesi before Black. If a lot of them were named, you could bet that the Praesi would've found out on the operating table.

Robber getting a name? Hopefully yes! Thief could use a right-hand and a jar of extra eyeballs.

*George*

A great deal of study and practice, a mind more suited to it than a human's is, and a story in your favor in a place where that matters.

[LaNuup](#)

I just think that once in a while even Cat side gets a lucky shot in. That one was probably not aimed at the Count

*Letouriste*

Who else? I don't think any other targets were nerby;)

[LaNuup](#)

I expect the legions to still bombard known summer locations and there was after all a whole eastern front to bombard.

*Dana*



Once in a while? Eh, Cat gets tons of narrative breaks going her way.

[Cpt. Obvious](#)

She cheats to win almost every one of them.

*Shequi*

"Do you know what we call flying soldiers on the battlefield?"

"Air Support?"

"Skeet."

<https://www.schlockmercenary.com/2011-05-28>

Flying targets can be more predictable than ones on the ground, especially if they just hover; they sacrifice cover, after all.

[beleester](#)

You're still targeting a man-sized target with a weapon meant to target *castles*. Even if you can predict exactly where they'll be (and that's a feat in itself, given that a trebuchet doesn't have a sight or rangefinder so all you can do is eyeball it), the machine itself needs to be precise enough to hit that location reliably.

*callmesteve*

Good choice of reference, there. Hope we don't get the one about friendly fire and close air support...

*Caine*

Hitting an airborne target with a trebuchet on purpose is simply not possible. It's either Name fuckery, magic, or coincidence.

*stevenneiman*

I think that might have been more story-driven than a matter of accuracy. Whoever made the shot might not have even been aiming for him. After all, it was really funny, won a fight that it was kind of inevitable they would win anyway, and this isn't the first time that we've seen some improbable ballistics to hilariously win a fight against a minor antagonist.

*callmesteve*

That goes up there with the crossbow bolt to the hero's throat during his monologue. Unconventional (for there) tactics are hilarious.

I would also like to see Pickler, Juniper, and Robber get Named. That would be both what they deserve and an even better underscoring of just what Foundling is able to do.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Bantering during a fight eh? Black would be displeased.

*sheer\_falacy*

He's fine with banter when there's a point to it. She knew the enemy was talking to get their ally time to attack and thought she could take advantage of the attack. She was wrong, but still.

*stevenneiman*

Dealing with inhuman abominations like Fae, Cat becomes the protagonist almost by default. Protagonists can get away with witty banter, especially when they're also the underdog, and even when they're outmatched Fae have enough arrogance to trick the story into identifying their enemies as underdogs.

*naturalnuke*

Phase 1 of the great goblin conspiracy is complete.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Soon the Goat shall rule all of the continent!

*Big Brother*

I thought phase 1 was the Goblin tribe wanting to move to Marchford.

*RoflCat*

They're also phase 1  
Just a different plan spun

Phase 2 is more free  
Since it's mostly murdering everybody

But there's no phase 3  
Because they're actually Valve employees

:v

*Gunslinger*

Damn the fight was great. She always has such nasty opponents.

[DroughtBringer](#)

"I'm just putting my whole heart into it, this time," I sharply grinned.

One of my favorite lines so far

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

The exchange culminating in "*Because I killed his smug ass* is a close contender to me.

*callmesteve*

I liked both. The second one is more of her trademark, though.

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

Whoever made that shot deserves *all* the promotions. Trebuchet to the *face*, motherfucker!

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

When sword and magic is not enough, throwing rocks will have to suffice...

...Extract from "The book of House Foundling: The Trial and Tribulation of the Squire"

*Big Brother*

Flying rocks\*

*Perihelion*

"The Countess immediately cut the lightning," "Tendrils of wood rose and caught the lightning, freeing me."  
Is the continuity kinda messed up here or am I just misunderstanding?

*Letouriste*

I want the goblin who made that shot to become named:) would be nice to have a new goblin in the story^^

Ps: by named I mean him coming back later in the story with a crafted personality

*callmesteve*

That'd work too. If he ever gets a Name as well, though, it should be something to do with ballistics. Artillerist, maybe? Something to be able to target anything with any or improvised weaponry would be hilarious. "Called shot to the face, with half a cow!"

*Urist*

I somehow feel like the basic idea behind the Gallowborne was lost at some point in the last months. They just seem like an elite unit and personal guard rather than a way to put criminals through the meat grinder. Why would they only be replenished after they suffered losses? Either there are criminals who are in need of punishment or there aren't

*Cpt. Obvious*

It started out that way. But when they proved that they were not going to break it changed not what they are but what they are seen to represent. They are still Gallowborne in that they owe their deaths to Cat. Not their lives, because those were left in the gallows. And now they've become known as the personal troupes of Catherine Foundling, (vice) Queen of Callow who has been clawing back control of Callow from the Tower. At least that's what a lot of Callowan believes.

So I bet most if not all the replacements are Callowans who specifically ask to be placed in the Gallowborne, swearing away their deaths even though they're not convicted to a death sentence.

That may be seen as the company losing its point, but it also means they have transitioned from being a punishment detail to an elite unit sworn to serve Cat in whatever role she needs, including dying to protect her and her plans. If they remain around long enough their story will grow to allow them extra weight in future battles.

Question is how long Cat can stand having people sign away their deaths this way.

*alegio*

Is it just me or is Hakram getting better at the whole "out of screen" fighting thing?

*stevenneiman*

His role is to deal with problems so Cat doesn't have to. It makes sense that he would be extremely dangerous any time Cat just leaves a fight to him so she can deal with someone else. Basically, it demotes them from being in the category of antagonists and major challenges to the category of paperwork and cleaning Cat's armor.

Though considering the kinds of stuff she's managed to get on it, cleaning Cat's armor is an accomplishment in itself.

*nipi*

Been pondering on the: "I will take the crown of seven mortals rulers and one, to lay them at the feet of the Prince of Nightfall,"

Not a native English speaker but couldn't Cat interpret it as laying the crowns at his feet and feet only?

*BumblingBehemoth*

By that logic she could just steal 7 crowns and lay them at his feet without having to first take their city/lands/throws.

*BumblingBehemoth*

Which I would actually be down for. That would be hilarious

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*thespaceinvader*

In the outskirts of Dormer, \*five\* fae stood around us. \*One\* was on the rooftops, green-haired and from the looks of the longbow in his hand he was responsible for that friendly tap I'd just received. \*Two\* more in the streets, dark-skinned and wafting smoke. They looked like twins, one a man and the other a woman, each armed with a short spear and a blade. \*The last one\* looked like a Yan Tei, honey-skinned and utterly hairless. She had a short sword in one hand, and a thin wheel of pale steel in the other.

You mention a group of five fae, but only actually describe four. The fifth could be assumed to be an unarmed and grey-haired man from the following paragraphs, but is not actually mentioned explicitly.

*TwiFire*

you did a word a few times

"I made the mistake of"  
made the mistake

"an opponent that specialized in range combat."  
in ranged combat.

"I thanked him decided not to"  
him and decided

*ArkCthuul*

So, from the lower.rungs of a lower power name to being able to.curbstomp far of the medium upper echelons.  
Cat is now officially one of the Powerful Named.

Also loved the.chapter.

[origamiflame](#)

Wait, did Cat just pull an Elsa (Frozen) with that ice staircase at the end,

Will Cat simply... Let it go?

*Max Scherer*

That Hakram uses his name better is not really surprising. Cat is still in a transitional name and the Name of Squire just doesnt fit her anymore. She leads a complete Army and has more strength than she should have + doesnt really do stuff a squire would do. So yeah her name isnt really fitting for her anymore. When she transitioned she will probabaly so much more powerful, because then her name is actually something thats fits her. I mean yeah she got the NAmE Squire with her own work and made it her own, but she just isnt a squire and i think this mindsets hampers the power of a Name. So yeah i am looking forward when she transitions. Probabaly around the time she beats Akua.

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## Chapter 42: Plateau

*"Ah, but every palace you destroy has to be rebuilt! You've single-handedly pulled the Empire out of a slump, hahaha. Once again sweet victory is mine."*

– Dread Emperor Irritant I, the Oddly Successful

The sappers strapped the demolition charges against the guildhall's wall and scuttled away as fast as their feet could take them. The moment they'd gotten clear, two apple-sized balls of flame bloomed and struck at the munitions. Stone shattered, though few shards went in our direction – the goblins had long mastered the art of shaping the direction of the blasts. Two dozen regulars charged into the rubble before the dust and smoke cloud had settled, running into stiff fae resistance. This far into Old Dormer they'd started to hole up in the larger buildings, turning them into strongholds they used to sally out at the Fifteenth when our lines drove past them. My eyes sharpened and I made out the silhouettes in the smoke. Less than

thirty, regulars one and all. The few set up on a balustrade were going to be costly to dislodge, but I couldn't afford to stick my nose into every fight. I let the crossbowmen have at them as my legionaries rammed their shield wall into the enemy on the ground floor.

I'd left Hakram behind when we'd taken the walls, and hadn't seen him in the better part of an hour. The fighting there had been brutal, especially with Masego's ward gone, but Nauk's vanguard had punched through and carved us a beachhead on top of the ramparts. It had been grim work after that, driving them back inch by inch until the enemy commander sounded a horn and they retreated into the inner city. The battle for Dormer was being fought on three theatres, now. Ranker and Afolabi held our backs, the Deoraithe infantry had resumed assaulting the fae dug in the east as soon as the siege engines had turned their fire there and now the Fifteenth was spilling into Old Dormer like a flood. The flood, unfortunately, had eventually run into dike. It would have been too much to hope for that the last stiff opposition we'd run into was the Immortals, holed up in their castle.

The most ancient part of Dormer was, I'd come to realize, built around a handful of low hills joining into a larger one. The baronial castle was atop that, overlooking the old city and the port, and just like Whitestone Quarter back in Laure the wealthy estates had clustered around the seat of power in the city. Weren't a lot of high nobles this far south, but there'd been wealthy merchants and those who'd once been landed knights before that status was burned out of the social fabric of Callow. The Fifteenth had overrun most of the lower level of Old Dormer in swift order, save for a few strongholds that were being bloodily taken piecemeal, but it had stopped cold in face of fae lines on two fronts: the port and the lesser hills. The fucking nobles had built walls around their estate, because naturally it wasn't enough to be rich you had to keep the rabble away from your statues and gardens too. Nauk had lost a full company trying the lowest hill, wiped out in a storm of flame faster than they could scream, before pulling back.

The port was crawling with fae, and I'd bet that was where the ten thousand who'd bailed from the second run at the engines had gone. Regulars alone the Fifteenth might have managed to drive into the river, but as it happened the rivers was swinging back. There was a Count in there who had water sorcery, and the prick had been cautious enough so far we hadn't been able to reach him. When I'd gone to lead the charge he'd surrounded the entire port in a wall of water twenty feet high, and while I could have probably forced my way through that I was unwilling to exhaust myself on a second stringer. I'd linked back with the meat of the Fifteenth under Legate Hune and scried Masego, diverting him in that direction. It'd take a while for him to get there, though, so I'd gone with Hune's boys to bring down the last few dug-in

fae around the port. I watched in silence as the legionaries finished clearing the guildhall, and nodded in approval at the light casualties. Only five dead, and with the mage line close by the wounded would be back on their feet soon enough. *Speaking of the devil*, I thought. A thickly-built Soninke with lieutenant stripes on her shoulder and the light armour of our mage contingent was making her way to me. I turned without needing to be hailed, and discomfort flickered across her face.

"Ma'am," she saluted. "Lord Hierophant had sent word he's near the port, preparing a ritual to make a path through the water."

I rolled my shoulder absent-mindedly.

"Then let's give him a hand," I mused. "Any word from Adjutant or Archer?"

"Last report has Lord Adjutant in pitched battle with a Summer baroness near the hills, ma'am," the mage replied. "Neither the Archer nor the Thief have been in touch."

It'd been over half a day now, I thought. Any longer and I was going to have to get concerned, though worrying for Archer was not unlike worrying for a forest fire at summer peak – it was usually wiser to worry *about* the fire than for it. As for Thief, well, of all the Named I'd come across she had the most splendid survival instinct. If Diabolist ended up breaking the world, Thief would be the last human alive to share it with rats and cockroaches.

"Tell Hune to back up Adjutant with whatever mages she can spare," I frowned, and looked around.

Hard to tell my way around an unfamiliar city, though the massive water wall in the distance was a bit of a hint as to where I should be headed.

"Should I send word to Lord Hierophant you will be reinforcing him, ma'am?" the mage called out as I began to walk away.

"Let it be a surprise," I said. "He loves those."

—

"You know I despise surprises," Masego said, glaring at me.

Impressive, considering he had no eyes. He was getting better at that. I clapped his shoulder, and even being careful nearly sent him tumbling to the ground.

"What happened to your spirit of adventure?" I replied.



"That's a myth," he said disdainfully, slapping away my hand. "Father's dissected several heroes and never found any trace of it."

Ah, Warlock. If I was the kind of girl to pray, I would that I never had to go digging through that man's basement. I had a feeling whatever I'd find there would give the Tower a run for its money in the 'horrors beyond understanding' department.

"It's a metaphor," I said. "I know you don't know what those are, but-"

I grinned at the deeply offended look on his face and barrelled on before he could interject.

"- I just don't have the time to educate you tonight. Your ritual is ready?"

"Yes," he glared.

"Go on, then," I said, vaguely gesturing. "Do the thing."

The water rampart loomed ahead of us, showing no sign of collapsing on its own. It bisected houses in some parts, and the legionaries had checked inside only to find out it had gone straight through stone and wood. I didn't have the heart to ask if any of my men had been in the way when it was made. Runes bloomed around Masego, and it was difficult for me to keep their image in my mind. High Arcana, then. A curtain of transparent power made a tunnel through the water across the length of the street as Hierophant's face creased in concentration. After a moment, he relaxed. Good enough for me.

"It's a figure of speech," he said.

"No idea what you're talking about," I airily replied.

A full cohort was already forming ranks in front of the tunnel and without missing a beat I took the lead. The commanding officer was a hawk-faced Taghreb, and like most my staff would have been too young for his rank in most other legions.

"Captain Fazil, Your Grace," he introduced himself when I glanced at him.

"Keep your ranks tight and your shields up, Captain," I said. "This is going to be a ride."

His lips quirked in that subtle Praesi way denoting polite amusement.

"Well," he said. "Can't be worse than Marchford."

"I hear that," I muttered.

I'd say this for the fae, while they were a pain to deal with at least they weren't godsdamned demons. I was really hoping Diabolist was out of those to call on, but stood ready for bitter disappointment.

"Shouldn't we be *behind* the shields?" Masego said after catching up to me. "That is what they're meant for."

"Chin up, Lord Hierophant," I said. "Make it look like we know what we're doing."

"I thought we knew what we were doing," he said.

He glanced at me worriedly and I whistled loudly.

"Catherine, *tell me we know what we're doing.*"

"FORWARD!" I screamed, unsheathing my sword.

"I could be in my tower," he complained. "My nice, comfortable tower. Fadila never takes me to battles, you know. She makes me tea. She keeps very tidy notes and lets me sleep in."

I didn't bother to suppressed my snort of laughter at that, letting out ring loud and clear. That must have left an impression on the fae awaiting us on the other side of the tunnel, because their line wavered at the sound. I felt the first volley before they let it loose, the blooming of power just out of sight. With trails of flame the arrows filled the tunnel with burning light that reflected eerily in the waters around us. Slow, compared to how they'd felt when I first encountered them. It was easy enough to pass under the curve when I picked up the pace, though most hadn't been aimed at me. The sound of sorcerous shields pinging told me Masego had seen to that, at least for now. I ripped into the frontline like storm, silhouettes flickering one after another as I immersed myself into the reflexes of my Name. One, two, three and what was the point in keeping count? They came and died. The flowed around me, after a while. Made room, and that was when I realized they'd known ranks would do nothing to stop me. I could see the long warehouses of the port in the distance, and atop them fae stood in knots. Spears of Summer flame were being formed, like the ones they used to pound at the siege engines.

If I actually got hit by one of those I wouldn't die, I didn't think, but I wouldn't be getting back up on me feet for a while either. They'd meant, evidently, to draw me in and keep me pinned. Arrows from all sides flew, and I had to conceded that if it'd been just me they might well have caught me with this. I wasn't, though. Alone. Sorcery slithered around me, shining blue, and began to spin blindingly fast. The arrows struck it first, and were drawn into the spin flawlessly. The spears struck one after another and flame filled my field of vision for long

moments – but, in the end, was drawn in as well. The spinning ended abruptly, and a forest of arrows clattered against stone as Masego made his way to my side.

“Reckless,” he chided.

“Kept them busy,” I replied.

I’d bought my legionaries their beachhead, and wasn’t going to hold their hand through the rest of this. The Count had been the problem here, and with Masego backing me we should be putting him down in short order.

“By the river,” Hierophant said. “I believe he’ll be releasing the wall soon.”

“That doesn’t sound like a good thing,” I grimaced.

“The sheer weight of water will crush anything near it,” he noted. “A shame we’ll be otherwise occupied; it would have been interesting to witness. It is quite rare for water sorcery of this scale to be used save by the Ashurans, you know.”

That would have been interesting enough a line to warrant encouragement if we were drinking in a tent, but we had other priorities at the moment. I took the lead and we advanced towards the river. It was different fighting with Masego than it was with Hakram. Hierophant had been with me since my first real campaign, true, but we’d only really began fighting together near the end of the Liesse Rebellion. It was in the months after that we’d developed the technique, and it hadn’t been truly tested yet. Tonight would see to that. The theory was simple: Masego was a fortress, and I was the garrison. Panes of solid light forming a rough sphere around us hung in the air as we moved forward, and I darted out of their protection to clear the way whenever we met opposition. Arrow fire petered out after the first two volleys did nothing to dent our defences and the fae came in close quarters instead. That was my part to deal with. My shield caught the edge of a swinging blade and forced it down, my sword point taking the fae in the throat before I lightly stepped back. Another filled the void before the movement was even finished.

“Clear,” I called out.

The panes flickered out of existence and as I stepped aside Masego finished murmuring an incantation, a burst of howling wind tearing into the mass of fae before us. Doubtful it’d killed anyone, but it *did* buy me room. I sallied out the moment the burst ended, blade high and carving through the fae that tried to plug the gap. Moments later I saw movement in the distance from the corner of my eye and calmly retreated just as Hierophant restored the panes of light, safely behind the walls as the arrows burned harmlessly. It was a slow way forward, but for foes

who'd never faced it before it was very, very hard to deal with. The two of us ploughed through fae lines even as my legion fought in the distance, clearing two streets in a row with only minimal exertion. The dark-skinned mage didn't even look winded. I could feel the bundle of power that was the Summer Count near the water, but frowned when I saw there was a row of back-to-back warehouses in the way. We'd have to go the long way around if we kept to the streets, and that was more time than I cared to give the enemy. Cutting through a fae's wrist and half-stepping back behind the panes, I spun the blade slowly to limber my wrist. There'd been a lot if killing tonight.

"Warehouse to the left," I said. "Burn."

Masego looked at the wooden walls and raised an eyebrow, red runes lighting up around him. The smell of sulphur spread thick in the air and even as the panes broke, a stream of black flame emerging from his hand and turning into a snake with gaping jaws open wide. The construct tore through the warehouse wall, the crates piled behind it, what looked like dried fish hanging from the ceiling and then the second wall before disappearing in a flash. The fae had been ready for us, this time, and arrows flew the moment the shields were gone. I stood vigil, blade scything through the first few in perfect arc and a twist of will flash-freezing the few that hadn't take care of. The panes were back before a fuller volley could be sent and we resumed our advance, going through the still-smouldering shortcut. The moment we saw the inside was empty of fae our pace went brisk, though Masego stilled before we left the warehouse and finally reached the docks.

"Now," he said. "Cat, he's not releasing it. He's repurposing it. Hid the intent from me by delaying 'til the last moment."

"He's going to smash us with it," I sighed.

I broke at a run immediately and the overweight mage followed as best he could. The Count stood at the edge of the docks, alone, and I thanked any Gods listening for the fae pathological need for melodramatic scenes. If he'd had an honour guard of Summer soldiers this would have been a lot harder. Turning too-large deep blue eyes on us, the fae smiled gently.

"Welcome, Duchess of Moonless Nights," he said. "Allow me to-"

By the time he'd gotten to the word 'Nights', I had the sharper out of my satchel and lit. The toss was a beautiful arc that would have the explosion happen right in his monologuing face. A tendril of water snaked out of the river and caught it before, though, the munitions never detonating.

"This is-" the Count began.

"I'll handle the water," Hierophant interrupted, tone interested as he looked behind us.

"Would you-"

"I've got him," I replied, and charged with my shield angled up.

The first tendril of water was caught on it and ricocheted upwards. I smoothly spun around the second and leapt over the third, landing in a roll at his feet. His hand whipped forward and there was a gargantuan groan but the distinct lack of downing that followed meant Hierophant was good as his word. My shield caught him on the shoulder and I felt bones break. He didn't even try to fight the impact, allowing it to throw him into the river. He landed on his feet, never actually going through.

"And now-"

I followed, letting Winter flare under my feet. It froze the water on touch just long enough for me to be able to make it from one stride to the next. I was on his chosen grounds now, though, and it showed. Instead of the handful of tendrils I got a full three dozen, coming in a flawless circle. Couldn't afford to slow down or I'd sink, so I'd have to time this *just* right. I picked the highest tendril and froze a smooth shard of it, then leapt atop the attack meant to kill me. Immediately the others adjusted course towards me, but while his sorcery was versatile it was too slow. I wasn't surprised Princess Sulia hadn't taken him to the Battle of Four Armies and One, the Winter fae would have eaten this one alive. My sword came down as I fell atop him, cutting straight through his shoulder and the pale blue mail that covered it. The Count screamed and before I could response I was thrown away by a waterspout, the back of my plate dragging along the length of the docks and ripping through the planks. Fuck, that hurt. I'd cut off the arrows the Count of Green Yew had shot in there, but there were still bits inside and they'd wiggled horridly into my back muscles. I got back on my feet slowly, keeping a sliver of attention on the presence in the back of my head. The fae was in the air, now, red and gold wings keeping him aloft.

"*Finally*," he hissed. "This is absurd. You have no respect for the proper courtesies, child. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"One day," I replied, "you guys are going to stop falling for this one."

Zombie the Third ploughed into him from the back, screeching loudly as his wings flapped and the hooves smashed into shoulder blades. My mounts must have weighed twice as much as he did, and fae or not that took a toll. The Count plunged into the docks headfirst with a broken back, and much to my amusement got stuck

between the planks I'd already ripped. I didn't waste time on anything fancy and just punched through the back of his neck with the tip of my sword.

"Godsdamnit, Catherine," Masego moaned.

Oh right, he still had all that water to deal with. I guided Zombie into landing at my side and dragged the Count's broken body off of the docks just in case leaving it close to river would heal it somehow. You never knew with fae. Hierophant's arms were held up and shaking as he dealt with what looked like a small lake of levitating water. That was a *lot* bigger than I'd thought it would be. I, uh, left him to that. It looked under control. He eventually managed to make an escapement that slowly emptied the water back into the Wasaliti, though he was panting by the end of it. I patted Zombie's back.

"Who's a good abomination to the laws of men and decency," I praised it. "You are."

It preened, blue eyes glittering.

"Are you indulging yourself?" Hierophant said, sounding like he was rolling his eyes.

No there was an image, but I didn't linger on it because I stood frozen.

"I, uh, didn't make him do that," I admitted quietly.

"Her," Masego corrected.

"How do you – never mind, I don't want to know," I muttered. "They don't usually do that."

"Your necromancy has grown different than Uncle Amadeus'," the blind mage mused. "That has interesting implications."

"This," I decided, "feels like an issue for Tomorrow Catherine to deal with. She'll bitch about it, no doubt, but *she* hasn't had to kill her way through a fucking army of murderous fairies so screw her and her whining mouth."

"Usually when villains started referring to themselves like this, it is before they go deeply and irrevocably mad," Masego informed me. "It is a well-documented phenomenon."

I could always count on this one for reassurances, couldn't I? I was picking my particular shade of scathing sarcasm when movement above stilled my tongue. To call what was happening there flying would have been somewhat generous, I decided. It was, if anything, falling at a slightly forward angle. I imagined the fae's ability to flap its wings was somewhat affected by the fact that Archer had sunk two knives in its back and was trying to

guide it with them. By their angle, they'd come from the castle. That was good. The way the fae died in mid-flight was slightly less so. Archer's lips moved in what was no doubt a vicious curse and she jumped after retrieving her knives, spreading her arms wide.

"She's aiming for us, I think," Masego said, frowning.

"Going to hit that warehouse instead," I noted. "Her ride died too early."

We began to stroll towards the likely end of her trajectory when Hierophant suddenly smacked a fist into a palm.

"I could ease her way down, like I did with you," he offered.

He had, huh. I gauged Archer's fall. Nowhere as bad as mine would have been, though she'd bruise for sure. And if I remembered correctly, after catching me the wench had *dropped* me.

"Nah," I smiled. "I'm sure she has it under control."

Twenty heartbeats later Archer crashed through a thatched roof in an explosion of straw and wood. Masego and I casually walked into the warehouse and found her lying sprawled on broken crates full of salmon. She moaned.

"You didn't catch me," she accused.

"My hands were full," I said.

"You could have sent your horse," she bit out.

"It's a sensitive soul," I defended. "Didn't want to risk hurting it."

"Ugh," she groaned. "You two are the worst."

I looked around and found no sight of her expected shadow.

"Where's Thief?" I asked.

"Last I saw her she was telling me I was a horrid idiot who didn't understand the meaning of stealth and that I deserved to die," Archer mused. "She was smiling when she said it, though. I think she's warming up to me."

I coughed to hide my laugh.

"I'm sure she is," I lied. "How much did you get done?"

"Right, report," Archer breathed, vaguely flapping a wrist at me instead of rising. "So, we stole a bunch of banners and planted the goblinfire but then we ran into these guys. So Thief was all

like 'Archer, you peerless beauty whose approval I secretly crave-"

"Sounds just like her," I said flatly.

"- we should run'. But then this guy was all like 'Yeah, you better run'. So, you know, I shot him in the eye. And I'm going to be honest with you here, Catherine, they didn't take well to that. *At all.*"

"You don't say," I murmured.

So that was why Black never took my reports unless he had a bottle of wine at hand.

"So anyways this other guy comes in and he's all 'I am a Duke, the Queen is going to kill you all', you know the usual stuff. So I tried to stab him but he threw me through a window and then set fire to the stables I landed in. Now," Archer firmly stated, "I could have taken him."

"Of course," I agreed, without the faintest hint of irony.

"But I know how worried you get and I'm a good friend, so I came back instead. Grabbed some fae, stabbed it to get its attention and now here I am."

She flapped her hand again.

"Report over," she cheerfully told me.

I ripped a salmon from its hook and threw at her head, ignoring the loud protests about respect due to those wounded in the line of duty.

"Masego," I said. "Please heal this idiot, then scry Hune's staff. Adjutant is to drop whatever he's doing and wait for us at the frontlines. It's time to end this."

The fae, I learned when he got in touch with Hune, apparently thought the same: the Immortals had come out.

It went downhill from there.

---

*danh3107*

So that was just level one huh, time for Catherine to light the bonfire and spend her souls.



*nineran*

But if she rests, the enemies respawn! :laugh:

*ArkhCthuul*

Hehe...Actually once our GM did exactly that.  
"This is no d and D dungeon, morons, be glad there are only twice as many now!" were his words, to be exact.  
Only one of us survived that dungeon...

*Letouriste*

That GM know his stuff:) must be fun

*Cpt. Obvious*

And more than four years later I finally got the joke.

*Big Brother*

I love Archer so much. How can I get that level of attitude in my life, as a friend or SO?

*nesquarx*

Be very careful what you wish for.

*Big Brother*

If this is the first time one of my wishes gets granted, I'm perfectly fine with that. If I can survive being hit by a bus and having a 400+ lb boulder roll over me, I might be able to survive Archer.

*Thenre*

Be the change you want to see in the world.

*Big Brother*

Oh, you don't want me to start acting like Archer. That's a recipe for chaos.

*Gunslinger*

Ohh this is brilliant. I had my lips wide grinning the entire time.

Ohh and vote for The Guide here <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*stevenneiman*

Thank you for the reminder. We're currently in fourth place, which is pretty cool.

[Robert Allaband](#)

We all knew a larger quantity of Goblin Fire was going to come in someplace and burn the city down. Now we know where.

*Saktiwijayarahman*

Ah, Catherine and her sense of humor never cease to amuse me. That last line sounds ominous, though. Can't wait for the next chapter.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Cat shot first!

[nextgidea](#)

Time for some verifiable predictions:

Book V is not going to be about Procer, or at least they will not be just about Procer. Big Bad would be certainly something much much higher tier. My Top predictions:

- \* Elves of Golden Bloom
- \* Golem Nation
- \* Dead King
- \* Calamities including Ranger Plus Malicia and Scribe

Book V would see some enemies turned friends. I think Diabolist and Wandering Bard are my top picks here. (and I believe that Tyrant would not be joining them – too different)

\*\*\*\*\*

In the short term, I am feeling really stupid, since I am guessing at this point I should have been able to guess what Cat has told Thief to do in this battle, but I have absolutely no idea.

*JK*

Thief was going to steal the standards that give the Immortals power.

*Morgenstern*

Yeah, that one was pretty obvious. Though there might have been a "side contract" not quite as revealed. 😊

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Also when will know how was the talk between Cat and Killian before the fight?

[Cpt. Obvious](#)

They were short and nonexistent.

Someone has a problem talking of her feelings, and someone else feels she's massively disappointed the other but can't really understand why...

*Sebastien*

I agree diabolist has a chance.  
But as more or less an eternal being for good, I am not sure I see how bard switches sides

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I like you and all, but calling yourself "an eternal being for good" is a bit extreme don't you think? XD

*Sebastien*

Perhaps an eternal being for passing fair?

*nipi*

Golem Nation? Where has that been mentioned?

I really doubt that Diabolist or that bard will become friends.

*Big Brother*

Think he meant Gnome Nation.

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Can't be gnome nation, the gnomes have powered flight and shit, they are an order of magnitude stronger than anyone else

*Sadpanda*

Don't the Gnomes literally destroy whole civilizations that get too powerful? I think they are way above any of the others.

*Dainpdf*

They destroy civilizations that get too technologically advanced. Whether they can take on stuff like the original elf nation, the kingdom under, the kingdom of the dead or the Hegemony easily remains to be seen.

*Snoogle*

I'm continuously in stitches over the interaction between our happy villains. The banter in this story is simply divine.

### *Pipiemman*

The thing I think I'm most curious about is Catherine's changing/changed necromancy. I don't know why, but my first inclination is that it's not just a quick but somehow name driven. (The current) Black may not have any special connection to his mount, but horses to be tied pretty closely with their knights. Maybe this is a precursor to Catherine getting a counter to White's Ride aspect?

Or maybe it's just nothing to do with that and the main focus should be on the necromancy itself, not the horse.

### *Keyen*

It has been a while we know Cat's Necromancy is special. Masego told her she shouldn't be able to use it on living limb (when she use it on herself). What happened here is actually the reverse. The limbs were something living which could be used as something dead, and the horse is something dead which has some living tendencies.

### *Big Brother*

Well, Cat's already drawn 2 new names into her group, Adjutant and Heirophant, maybe she's moving into a new one as well. This is gonna sound cheesy as a French social gathering, but maybe Death Knight? She does seem to have a tendency towards spreading Death and Chaos wherever she goes lately. Personality in undead constructs and self-necromancy are pretty useful in that regard.

### *Keyen*

I don't think the tendency she has lately (namely her obsession with crushing anyone named) is a good sign. One of the possible ending I see to the story would be a "lich ending" (alliance with the Dead King), where anyone is dead (so nobody can get a name anymore). Since she is using ice, shadow and necromancy, it would fit perfectly. She just need a very traumatic event (for instance, she loses her friends during the Crusade) and she can be rolling with that.

### *MetruX*

That... Actually sounds like something that could happen. I won't be betting on that, ohh no, but it is a possible outcome, with plenty foreshadowing... And one I would very much like more than Black Knight. I mean, she is all about breaking the classics, so staying in a classic Name sounds... Meh, it wouldn't be so fun. Still, with erraticerrata, you

never know, it might aswell be Black Knight in a way never seen xD

*mavant*

I'm crossing my fingers for Queen of Air and Darkness.

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Where in any Calernian culture do you find a "Death Knight"? That's where names come from generally, not from the Named themselves.

I don't understand where Heiropphant came from though

*Big Brother*

The Kingdom of the Dead?

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Ha! Nice try though xD

*TideofKhatanga*

I think the focus should be on neither. Black has described Catherine as "[Someone] who will use what she can't break and break what she can't use". Which is, I think, the most basic truth about her. Her first set of aspects were [Learn – Struggle – Seek] and the second is [Take, Break, Fall], which are basically aspect versions of the above description.

Her necromancy turning the useless living into the useful dead, and the unwilling dead into the willing un-living is another manifestation of that. I don't think it means anything precise about her next Name, besides that it will have some variation of "use" and "break" as aspects. But it does means that she's getting real close to her Name and might be transitioning soon.

*Matthew*

I thought this episode had a bit too much of casually used "thrilling heroics."

The Calamities became the Calamities by carefully rationing out the crazy name stuff they could do and not wasting time on useless banter. When they did banter, it was because they had planned accordingly

That Cat is so cavalier about "surprising" Masego didn't sit well with me. It just seemed like the kind "villains undone by their own villainy" BS that Black would have beaten out of Cat a long time ago.

*Letouriste*

Banter between friend keep the gods entertained so they have more chance to live long. black and the others have decades of villainy behind them so maybe the banter died down with age.

*Dainpdf*

I wouldn't call surprising Masego "villainy". And Cat has always straddled the line between Villain and Hero. Plus, it doesn't seem she's spent that much up to now. Only one aspect of hers, one winding of Masego, and one or two of Hakram's aspects. There's still plenty left to throw at the Duke.

[nineran](#)

This group uses the heroic tropes too, and they can because none of them have purely evil names – so the bantering will probably keep Archer alive through almost anything, since she is their current comic relief. Heirophant is their serious, straight man, and Cat is the tired leader, Adjutant is the herder of Cats, and Thief is the silent outsider.

As an aside, anyone else notice parallels to the White Knight's group?

I'm now really curious if Black will be able to deal with that group after all, especially now that losses of that hero/villain paired group are both at 1.

*Dainpdf*

My bet is he keeps winning battles and losing the war.

*ereshkigala*

The Calamities have less banter between them because they're, like, old fogeys whereas Cat and Co. are teenagers/young adults. I mean, typical teenagers in gangs do even more stupidly flashy stuff and there aren't even any names involved.

*Matthew*

But the way the world works according erratic is that Names push people to be more over the top. The Calamities worked because they fought against the push of their names to overreach and rely on the thrilling heroics. They used planning to defeat the Narrative.

This battle is incredibly important for Cat. Masego is one of their Trumps when it comes to hunting the Summer Queen. Cavalierly messing with him makes this battle not seem serious.

The problem with the way the group is running now is that they seem more like heirs to Lone Swordsman's old group rather than heirs to the Calamities.

*Adra*

I think this goes back to what someone pointed out when Ranger named them the Woe- no one in Cat's group has an inherently villainous name. The fact that Cat's thrilling heroics tend towards effect could be evidence that her group is going to straddle the line between hero and villain.

*Dainpdf*

The Lone Swordsman's group was dysfunctional. They didn't have banter in the way Cat's group does. As for carefully planned encounters, Cat does lack some of Black's careful approach, but she does prepare for encounters and arrange for tricks – just reread the encounter with the count, or the battle of four and one.

The Woe is heir to the Calamities, but they are still their own group. And, as has been pointed out repeatedly, they toe the line between hero and villain.

*Luis*

The thing is they are subverting the hero's party trope for evil ends. The calamities were similar, but they got through by using Black's intimate knowledge on the relationship of cause and effect on the current narrative and almost always knowing their place in it. Much like Bard does. Black and Malicia ended the self-destructive forms of evil for a more collaborative form that would be a precursor to the new party we are seeing now...

Catherine tries to make herself the hero for every story she is in...even if she is a villain, because while she may be a "villain" she can play a heroic one in certain circumstances.

Then on top of that she is villain who is currently defending her homeland which should give her all kinds of points.

Even as a villain she is still trying to do right by her people, and other folks in her tribe, she doesn't fully embrace the tower and its most egregious evils, while still submitting to its overall authority, she has astounding personal charisma and the ability to rally her troops. Native born callowans and presi alike.

So she is definitely doing something new.

*Dainpdf*

She seems to have some natural talent at the trickery aspect of things. I think one of the interludes showed that, with an outside perspective showing her to be quite good at diplomacy...

Well, the stabby kind at least.

She just waves over a lot of that, partly because it increases dramatic tension when we don't know her plans.

*Kelenas*

"Go on, then," I said, vaguely gesturing. "Do the thing."

Is it weird that I mentally read this line in Varrick's voice?

*Digitize27*

Did the exact same thing. Had an "Aw, Masego is Cat's Zhu Li!" moment.

*Denis*

Typo, etc. thread: a wall to hold in a flood is a dike, with an I.

*Dainpdf*

"we'd only really began fighting together"  
Begun.

*AVR*

More typos (etc.)

run into dike.  
run into a dike.

to suppressed my  
to suppress my

frontline like storm,  
frontline like a storm,

The flowed around  
They flowed around

a lot if killing  
a lot of killing

the munitions never detonating.  
the munition never detonating. (it's just the one sharper from the description earlier).

My mounts must  
My mount must

& it does seem odd that Catherine can't tell the sex of a winged horse. It's, um, not difficult when you're close, at least for the non-winged variety.



*Regret*

You'd think the winged variety is easier, what with the changed angle once it lifts off.

*Dainpdf*

Dammit, Archer.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*Thebes*

What does this sentence mean?

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It's basically the same as some idiot commenting "first!"  
Just talking for the sake of talking without having anything worth saying

[sengachi](#)

"So that was why Black never took my reports unless he had a bottle of wine at hand."

I laughed long and hard at this line.

*Poetically Psychotic*

Archer reminds me a bit of Hellsing Abridged's Alucard.

"So these chums come in and yell 'Get on your hands and knees!'  
To which I responded 'I'm not your mother last night!'"

\*Stunned/infuriated silence\*

"And they took exception to that," he finished.

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## Chapter 43: Cliff

*"Of course not, did you see the height of that drop? That is the last we've seen of the Shining Prince, I assure you."*

– Dread Empress Sinistra IV, the Erroneous

Historically speaking, villains leading assaults against a numerically inferior force situated atop a hill did not lead to the kind of outcome I would prefer. That was a problem. On the other hand, if I didn't lead an assault against those hills Summer would still have a decent chunk of its army left when the Queen arrived. That would be a *much* bigger problem. On the other hand, if I ended up with most my armies dead by the time we got a royal visit I would be fucked regardless. The Queen wouldn't negotiate with a host on its last gasps, even if hers was wrecked. It would also give a lot of power to my 'allies' in Arcadia I'd rather they didn't have, given that they were literally incapable of not being treacherous. Kind of like High Lords, really, only they were less smug about it.

"This is a dilemma," I noted, squinting ahead.

The Immortals had come out to play. Pouring out of the castle on shining wings, they'd propped up the regulars holding the ring of walled properties around it and by the sound of the horns that were now blaring they were about to begin a counterattack. I'd pit the Fifteenth against regulars any day, especially if we had dug in positions, but the golden fae were another story. By my reckoning, they were physically on par with what I'd been able to do when I'd still been fresh to my Name. There were, unfortunately, ten thousand of them. No, I corrected silently. Less than that. Both Masego and I must have taken out a chunk of their numbers in Arcadia and I could hardly believe they'd scythed through both Nauk's men and fought of the Watch simultaneously without taking some losses of their own. *Let's be generous*, I thought, and *assume nine thousand are left*. That felt a lot like saying it wasn't as bad to have a sword tearing into your lung rather than entirely through.

"We can't retreat," Hakram said.

Brawling with another titled noble fae had not done wonders for Adjutant, it was plain to see. He had a nasty cut across his cheek that was going to scar even after healing magic had been poured into it and he had a black eye already turning dark green. The fact that the pauldron on his armour was loose hadn't escaped my notice either. That likely meant his opponent had dislocated his shoulder so hard it had ripped out the steel bands. For all that, he was standing and steady. Couldn't ask more of him. His words only sunk in a moment later. He wasn't wrong, not exactly. If the Fifteenth gave ground now we were abandoning fortified positions in favour of a street fight with opponents that could fly. They were a lot better at skirmishing than we were, I had to admit. On the other hand, I'd put my hand to fire that after the first wave of regulars softening us up the second would be Immortals. Those would tear through walls like wet parchment.

"Masego," I said. "Scry me Juniper."

I'd gathered most of the Woe on a flat rooftop before we went on the offensive, in part to catch our breath and in part to try to find a weak point for us to break through. Masego had also taken the time to dig the arrows out of my back and heal the wounds, prompting the inevitable jokes about having been stuck with fae wood by Archer. It'd taken long to get everyone there, to my dismay. We must be past First Bell by now, and if the presence of so many fae hadn't warped the passing of time too much that meant we had only about two hours until dawn. At this time of the year, two hours before Morning Bell was when the sun started peeking through. Hierophant no longer needed his trinkets to scry, I saw. He drew a circle in the air that shimmered like water and heartbeats later one of the mages attached to Juniper's headquarters appeared on the other side. My general shouldered him aside before long, her face looking comically large in the circle.

"Catherine," she said. "What went wrong?"

If the situation was slightly less dire I would have made something of that, but I didn't have the time to spare. The fae were mobilizing.

"Immortals reinforced the outer ranks," I said. "They're preparing for a push, if I'm not mistaken."

The request for advice went unsaid, but she heard it anyway. The orc grunted in displeasure at the news.

"Begin Operation Candlelight immediately," she said. "And hit the walls before they sally. If we don't keep up the pressure we lose Old Dormer."

I grimaced. We both knew that would mean brutal casualties for the Fifteenth. I'd known this was not going to be a clean battle or an easy one, but sending so many of my men to die still left a bad taste in the mouth.

"What's the situation on the other fronts?" I asked.

"Deoraithe are getting fucked to the east," she bluntly said. "Fae drew them in and set the entire sector on fire. General Afolabi had scattered the host at our back, but they're still harassing. There'll be no reinforcements from the Twelfth or the Fourth."

"Shit," I said. "Kegan tried to send in the Watch, didn't she?"

"Had to threaten putting her in chains to shut that down," Juniper growled. "They're already headed your way, not that she's happy about it."

The Duchess of Daoine had always been the largest liability in this. There'd been a risk she'd scrap the entire operational plan if she thought she was losing too many men. We'd made a deal for her to help me with the fae in exchange for a crossing and backing against Diabolist, but she'd always put the interests of the Deoraithe above everything else. I had a feeling Juniper's threat had been a lot more colourful than just chains, and I was glad she'd lost her temper. If Kegan started acting out the delicate balancing act that was this battle could very well collapse on our heads.

"See you on the other side, Hellhound," I said.

"Don't die an idiot, Foundling," she dismissed, and the scrying link died.

"She's growing on me, I'll admit," Archer noted.

"You say that about everyone that insults me," I sighed.  
"Hakram?"

"I'll get this started," the orc replied.

I let him leave without comments. It was Legate Hune that had the scrying connections to Robber and his cohort of miscreants, though the orders about resuming the offensive would have to be carried to Nauk as well.

"So, candlelight. Are we romancing the fae now? Bold move," Archer mused.

"We're going to burn them out," I said. "Assaulting the castle was always going to be bloody as all Hells, so we planned to hem them in with goblinfire."

"Doesn't that burn uncontrollably?" Archer said.

"It can be delayed with ditches," Masego noted.

"Ditches dug through pavestone?" the woman mocked.

"It does," I broke in before that could degenerate further.  
"It'll be a race for us to break through the front before we're neck-deep in green death as well. To be honest I'd rather burn them out entirely, but Hierophant says we need to hold the beachhead to contain the Queen."

"Summer has prepared a crossing point," the mage said. "She'll still be able to cross without it, if after a delay, but then we would not know where. That complicates warding a great deal."

Archer cleared her throat.

"So, just to be sure, the plan is to set fire to a castle and then charge into it?" she said.

"That's oversimplifying a lot," I protested. "There are nuances."

"Your general's going to be pissed you disobeyed," she grinned.

Yeah, that battle was already lost. Better get out with as much dignity as I could manage. I strode to the edge of the roof and sharpened my vision. Hakram had waste no time, I saw. The Fifteenth was already forming ranks for the assault and moments later green bloomed in the distance. Then again. To the left and the right of the castle. There would be another foyer behind it, I knew, though the ramparts hid it away from me.

"All right, we move," I said. "We've got until dawn to kill us a duke."

—

At this point I wasn't holding a shield so much as an arrowcatch that occasionally got set on fire. I wiggled my fingers around the latest arrowhead, that had come a little too close to comfort to carving straight through my thumb. Goblin steel didn't do much to block those when there was that much sorcery behind them.

"Hierophant, if I become a godsdamned porcupine because you're being a perfectionist I will be *cross*," I snarled.

Archer, standing behind Hakram and the tower shield he'd claimed for the assault, put an arrow in the eye of the enterprising fae who'd come so close to lowering my amount of fingers. She was a vision, it had to be said. Movements perfectly smooth and fluid, she let loose a shot with every breath and I had yet to glimpse her fail to make a kill. She was clearing out the walls wherever she aimed as swiftly as the fae filled the gaps, quicker on the draw than even Pickler's repeating scoprions had been. Adjutant wasn't doing nearly as well, a dozen arrows stuck in his shield and one gone through his boot. Which he'd had to stomp around to put out the flames that had immediately spread, something I would have enjoyed watching if I wasn't busy standing around like Creation's angriest practice dummy.

"This is complicated work," Hierophant said.

"Gods Below, just burn our way through," I yelled.

The Soninke needed to hurry the Hells up. Around us the Fifteenth was assaulting the walls with ladders, and dying in droves as they did. It wasn't that the ramparts were difficult. They were garden walls, more or less. But the fae had gathered archers behind them and were shooting massed volleys down on my legionaries. Half the ladders had gone up in flames before

touching the walls and the fae on them were fighting furiously to keep us from establishing a beachhead. *And these are the fucking regulars*, I thought. *The Immortals withdrew deeper in*. The broad avenue that led straight to the castle passed through a fortified gate that Summer had closed and would laugh in the face of a ram: it had a heavy steel portcullis in front of it, protected by thick arches of stone. We'd need sorcery to punch through that, but Masego was dithering like a bloody milkmaid.

"Ah," Hierophant sighed. "Disappear."

I raised my shield to catch another arrow that would have taken him in the throat, glancing over the side. A wave of darkness had engulfed the gate and the rampart bordering it, solidifying for a moment before it disappeared. It left behind absolutely nothing. No stone, no wood, no steel. It was as if nothing had ever existed there at all. Gods. Had he annihilated everything? No, I could feel something at the edge of my senses that was not unlike Arcadia. He'd shunted the entire gate off in another dimension.

"FIFTEENTH," Nauk's voice roared from behind me. "TIGHTEN RANKS, YOU UGLY GRASS-LICKERS. FORWARD!"

The answering shout was deafening, thousands yelling and steel brought up. Woven inside, though, I could hear the soft buzz of arrows that still fell like rain.

"Into the breach," I shouted at the rest of the Woe, barely audible over the pandemonium.

Hakram moved to cover my left and Masego hunkered up behind us, runes of light blooming with but a gesture. Archer put one last arrow through a fae's open mouth before joining up and together we advanced. Our way through the absent gate was uncontested, but in the walled avenue it led into ranks of fae were awaiting us. Black had once compared leading Named into battle to leading a chorus, and as we struck I finally understood why. We were, as a group, greater than the sum of our individual skills. The grooves were already there for us to settle into, as if they'd been carved before we even begun. Archer opened the song. She did not waste her arrows on the rank and file, instead surgically putting down any fae that looked like an officer. Even as we tread the pavestones, they dropped with every heartbeat. Hierophant added his voice to the melody, whispers in the mage-tongue weaving rings of darkness in the fae ranks that bloomed and tore through mail and flesh. The chaos was our cue. Adjutant and I dug into it with relish, a storm of steel and strength that shattered and broke the straw men standing in our way.

My blood sang with the song, the heat of it something not even Winter could deny me. With every stroke and every stride we painted death across the face of Summer, Archer's long knives joining us in the steps without missing a beat. I could feel it

without ever laying eyes on it, the swing of Adjutant's axe I could duck under to overextend a screaming soldier and carve through his throat with a flick of the wrist. Hierophant's sorcery flashed across the melee like coils of ruin, passing so close I could feel the caress of the power unleashed without it ever touching me. I could not tell the passing of time, every sight flowing into the other by what could have been an hour or a heartbeat. I felt myself grinning, teeth bared as Summer gave. Fae let themselves die on my blade merely to slow it, others striking in that instant of killing but what did I care? I was not one blade but many, my body just a vessel for my will. Dust swallowed the dead man whole, the edge of the axe dug into the chest of the thing that would have slain me even as I spun and slit the throat of the fae to my side with inhuman precision. Not a drop of exertion wasted, as if slaughter could be measured and quantified.

The four of us stood surrounded by a field of corpses when I returned to myself, not a single living fae in sight. I was panting, though instead of exhaustion I felt invigorated. This, I thought, had been deeper a religious experience than anything I'd ever felt in any House of Light. The sensation ebbed and the absence of it was hollow. Sound returned, the fighting of legionaries behind us and the slow breathing of the Woe around me.

"Shit," Archer croaked softly. "That was... *Fuck.*"

Hierophants' eyes were bright, though his mind faraway. Adjutant looked oddly serene, shield resting on his shoulder as he leaned on the haft of his long axe.

"Yeah," I muttered, and speaking at all felt like I was whistling in a graveyard.

I shook myself out of it before long, and assessed our situation. Making a unified push into the upper city had always been a fantasy, I knew. There were avenues up here, made broad for carriages, but aside from the path that led straight up to the castle the rest was a maze writ by the whims of the powerful who'd once lived here. The Fifteenth had taken the outer walls as we'd been killing what I now grasped had been the reinforcements meant to drive my legionaries back. Now the knife fight began, my men having to spread through dozens of gardens and manors as Summer fought them for every inch.

"Castle's where we need to be," I said, pointing my sword at the faraway silhouette of the tall towers.

I could glimpse spreading green in the distance, a reminder that the fae were not the only enemy we had to beat. The goblinfire had made certain they would not be able to flank us, that they would be forced to fight us in a narrow corridor, but with every

hour that corridor became narrower for us as well. Resistance would become harsher the deeper we went in. Archer wiped her longknives on the cloak of a decapitated soldier before sheathing them, running her tongue against her lips. My eyes could not help but linger on the sight as I wondered what kissing her would feel like, and peeling that leather off her. Shit, fighting didn't usually get my blood up this way. It had just felt... intimate, more than killing ever should. I looked away before she could notice. Nauk came to the rescue, thank the Gods, leading up a cohort of legionaries with the Gallowborne at their head. The large orc whistled at the sight of the corpses strewn around us, Tribune Farrier coming to stand at his side.

"Not that looks like it was a proper fucking fight," the legate said. "See that, you wretched layabouts? That's the kind of work I expect from you."

There were a few barks of laughter.

"Legate, Tribune," I greeted, sheathing my sword as I took in the sight the two.

Nauk was grinning and splattered in blood. He'd been leading from the front again. Farrier's mail was scorched on the side, but aside from that he was in good health.

"We're making a push to the castle," I said. "I take it this is our reinforcements?"

"Hune's bastards are handling the flanks," Nauk replied. "Scraped up my only intact cohort and brought your reds and gold along to spice the wine."

"Your Grace," John Farrier said, offering a nod that bordered on a bow.

"Catherine," I sighed.

He'd become irritatingly formal since it had been made open knowledge I'd been named Vicequeen of Callow. It had taken me the better part of a year to wean him off that the first time, and I wasn't looking forward to fighting that war again.

"Keep your eyes open, boys and girls," I called out. "We've got their second line ahead and the Immortals behind that. You're in for a rough night."

"Hells, ain't that every night in this outfit?" someone called out from the ranks.

"Wouldn't be the Fifteenth if we didn't get proper fucked before sunup," someone else laughed.

Well, they weren't *wrong*.



"Gallowborne take the lead," I told Farrier. "If we run into the Duke, you run."

"Ma'am," the dark-haired man protested. "We're--"

"Ants, to a thing that powerful," I flatly said. "You have your orders."

He nodded, though he didn't seem pleased about it. Nauk was eyeing him approvingly. Loyalty didn't really count for orcs unless you were willing to die for it.

"We done braiding our hair?" Archer drawled. "I'm getting bored."

"There's nothing wrong with braids," Hierophant muttered, putting his own braids in order.

I wisely decided not to touch that and instead gestured for Nauk to call the march. It would have been much harder, I thought, without Archer. We were ambushed from rooftops twice on our way forwards, but between her bow and the line of sappers that was distressingly eager to wreck noble houses given half an excuse we weren't given a serious challenge. That was when I started to get worried. We should have, by now, run into either a barricade or another heavy knot of fae. I let my stride lapse.

"Something's wrong," I said.

Hakram nodded.

"I am no tactician," Masego said, "but it seems poor planning to allow your enemy to gain foothold on your walls. We might have simply spent the strength of Summer, Catherine. They might no longer have nobles to field against us."

I shook my head.

"Remember how many people there were, at the masquerade in Skade?" I said. "Summer should have at least that many."

"Duke hasn't come out, either," Archer frowned. "He didn't seem this shy when we tangled."

I closed my eyes and considered the battle as if I were not part of it. The front in the plains was effectively over, by Juniper's report. The fighting in the east had turned brutal, but given the numbers Duchess Kegan could field it was highly unlikely the fae there had turned the tide. Unless they had flown away, as they'd allegedly done earlier. *No, they can't do that quietly. Either one of us would have seen a few thousand glowing wings in the sky or Juniper would have scried Hune with a warning.* The forces left in play, then were the remaining regulars in the upper city and the Immortals. *And the Duke, followed by whatever nobles he's got left.* If I was a Duke of Summer, needing to keep a fortress at

all costs and three of sides around it already on fire, what would I do? Immortals would be my sharpest knife, so I couldn't waste them on attrition. So I'd put the regulars on the wall and send the nobles to bolster them.

*No, he can't do that. He already sent out three Counts and a handful of solid barons and we just tore through them in less than an hour. Sending nobles against the Woe would be trying to put out a bonfire with oil. Named couldn't advance alone, though, or at least not do so and expect to hold any grounds they took. Which he must suspect we needed to, with how hard we'd been going after the castle. So what he's aiming for is the soldiers. Then why not push harder to hold the walls? Why hadn't we had a rougher fight going in? I mind mind, I watched the Fifteenth die in droves to enter the upper city and then take the fight to the maze of walled and sprawling domains, harassed by a much more mobile enemy every step of the way. But giving ground. Juniper had said, earlier, that the fae to the east had drawn in the Deoraithe before setting fire to the city. They're doing the exact same thing here, I realized. Only they won't burn their own fortifications, they need those to scatter the legionaries. Once they reel us in...* In a line across the upper city, golden banners rose high in the sky.

In utter silence, the Immortals advanced.

---

*Gunslinger*

Holy shit that fight was epic. The battle as a group along with the musical metaphor reminded me of the book Kings of the Wyld.

Also the guide is now 4th place on topwebfiction.com. Do vote here to take it even higher <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*Euphoria\_fell*

Only five shy or taking third!

*Morgenstern*

Third now. 😊

*rangamal thenuwara*

Quick ranking gain is also probably in part thanks to your timely comments with the link. Keep up the good work.

*Dvo*

Its funny how whenever the votes require captchas, Practical Guide to Evil seems to do amazing. When they take down the captchas it seems to drop precipitously ;b

*Gunslinger*

I wonder what Masego's name entails exactly. Debunker of miracles is what we know, but it seems to be flexible in terms of what magic he can pull off.

I wonder if it's the analyze how magic works and recreate the miracles path.

*stevenneiman*

He can clearly control miracles an channel some degree of a godlike being's power without their consent. The Summer Queen's comments made it sound as though each new miracle he witnesses and each new god he interacts with (or vivisects) will increase his power, to at least a maximum high enough to pose a serious threat to even royal Fae, if there is an upper limit at all. I would assume that eventually he would have the power to usurp godhoods whole which is really going to mess with the underdog status that the Woe rely on. Of course, from his perspective it's all more like de-obfuscating and hacking the code gods are written in than anything else.

Aside from that it seems to provide a boost to raw power just like any other magic-based Name, with perhaps a special focus on meta-magical effects and divinations. That sorcery-disruption thing he did earlier seems like the most impressive new trick he's pulled out when he didn't have a god battery handy.

All in all, he is definitely someone to appreciate having on your side, now more than ever before.

*esryok*

Based on what Masego has said in the past ("power is a consequence of knowledge" + "the godhead is a trick of perspective"), my reckoning is his miracles are driven by his own strength. His Name helping him to achieve the necessary knowledge & perspective, rather than granting him the ability to steal divine power from existing deities.

*JankTankJoe*

Oh hell, the Immortals are going to have a field day with the fifteenth.

That said, awesome to see the Woe in action! Interesting to see

how they mesh as a group, now that they are part of a larger story.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

[DroughtBringer](#)

Wow. That was beautifully described.

Also, has anyone noticed that Cat's aspects just make her a bully?

She Takes your things, Breaks them, then makes you Fall...

[benthelynx](#)

Or she take your abuse, breaks you with it, but will still fall despite that.

*naturalnuke*

Oh...

Oh no...

*danh3107*

>I wondered what kissing her would feel like, and peeling that leather off her.

Finally

also, OH GOD

[blitzxs](#)

If Cat hooks up with Archer, then they're gonna mirror their teachers' relationship with each other.

*nipi*

Damn and I thought Archer had a thing for Masego.

*Thomas Verjans*

Archer has a thing for everyone. No, really. That's not exaggerated. *Everyone*.

*TideofKhatanga*

Catherine having a religious experience? Is she going to transition before the end of the book or was fighting as the Woes just that awesome?

That said, while her ability to killmurder people seems to improve by the hour, her grasp of general strategy doesn't really get better. That strikes me as a problem, considering the current bets on her next Name.

*rangamal thenuwara*

And that's a good thing, right? She has continuously admitted that although she is good at bullying (or in some cases even manipulating) people into doing what she wants them to do, Juniper and Black is better at strategy (Cat can rely on them). We don't want her to become an OP Mary Sue, right?

*Dana*

As long as Cat's strategic failures don't result in real and lasting setbacks (because her slavishly loyal friends will prop her up), doesn't stop her from becoming an OP Mary Sue.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I like Archer's plan of romancing the enemy better. They could have at least TRIED that first

*ALKATYN*

Assuming that battle thing isn't a fluke that implies there is some sort of name mindmelding thing available. Maybe the calamities could do the same in their prime but lost the ability when they lost Ranger.

We haven't so far seen a group of heroes with anywhere near the same level of coordination. But if the white knight, or whoever, finds his own appropriate temmates that could be trouble

*Nastybarsteward*

But the Woe weren't fighting as a group, no thief.

*Digitize27*

I'm still not sure what to think about the name 'The Woe'. Going on convention (As spiritual successors to the Calamities) shouldn't they be The Woes? If I remember right, the original impetus was the last Chancellor saying something like "You are a calamity on this world" (Paraphrasing) So if the Queen of Summer said "You will be Woe unto all you behold" (Paraphrasing again) Shouldn't it be The Woes?

And I understand why you didn't go with that, it just looks wrong on the page, but so does The Woe, to be honest. I feel like something else would have sounded better. The Terrors? The Nightmares? I feel something polysyllabic would have worked best.

*Leporello*

> Now the knife fight began, my men having to spread through dozens of gardens and manors as Summer fought them for every inch.

I'm reminding everyone that in chapter 32 it was stated that the remaining Duke is the Duke of Green Orchards. Looks like we're about to get a second set of fortifications, now that the first one is burning.

*Saktiwijayahman*

I wonder if The Woes could perform any better when Thief is present there. I know she isn't a fighting type unless she transcended to a new name, but still ...

*OldSchoolVillain*

I could see her transitioning to something like Rogue, but keeping in mind that Assassin doesn't do front lines either, I don't expect her to.

*nipi*

So the next chapter will be named Hanger?

[glassgirlceci](#)

That infinite moment of fighting was absolutely amazing.

*ArkhCthuul*

Ah, so there is a kind of battle song in the blood of the named. Makes sense, really.

*lehteyatamug*

I really ship Archer X Heiropant

*therealgridlock*

I've been hesitating to do any correcting because every chapter has had a dozen typos and I assumed you already had comments on them and either got most of them already or moved on and didn't care, but this I do want to point out:

There is no sinistral, fourth of their name, because you said yourself the highest any dread emperor got to was third, and then they and their entire bloodline were stabbed out of existence. So either you don't actually need to be related to the last one to inherit the name, or earlier you were incorrect.

I don't particularly care which you pick but catherine commented on it specifically because she said the emperor of praes isn't a

hereditary thing, because the highest anyone got to was three generations.

Just for your edification.

*braxen1*

That's already been addressed. In the extra chapter Reign, Malicia says:

"Do you know why I chose Malicia as my reigning name?" she asked. "Maleficent the Third was bandied around by many, before the coronation..."

Relation to a previous tyrant would have been a big deal and has never been brought up so we can assume easily she is not related to previous Maleficents and yet could have taken the name.

I always saw it as similar to when popes take new names in the Catholic Church.

Also I highly doubt the author reads comments on chapters from three years ago.

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## Chapter 44: Drop

*"The only thing more dangerous than being hated by a villain is to be loved by them."*

– Dread Empress Regalia II

That made it twice, that the Summer Court manoeuvred me into a situation where there was absolutely nothing I could do. The golden banners flew high, and with every moment they remained there my legionaries would be dying. In tight ranks, with sappers and crossbowmen at their backs, heavies might have a chance against the Immortals. But dispersed across a dozen different mansions, spread out in pursuit? It would be slaughter. And for once, we would be on the wrong side of it. A part of me already grieved the death of those soldiers, though I knew that even greater caution would have made no great difference. If I'd grasped the enemy's intent here, Juniper likely had an hour ago – and she'd still sent us in, because this battle was against dawn as much as against the fae. Another quieter, calmer part of me was already tallying how many losses the Fifteenth would incur

and assessing whether it would cripple us before the fight against Diabolist.

I didn't always like the woman I'd become. It was a damningly short walk from *we need this whatever the cost* to *one sin, one grace*. That my shade of ruthlessness was different from Black's was cold comfort. It sometimes occurred to me, in the dark of night, that if I got my and settled Callow I'd be the last monster remaining in it. It was an unsettling thought but remembering the girl I'd once been, the one who'd once thought that there was no need for monsters at all, brought as much disgust as it did rue. Keeping my hands clean clean wasn't going to stop armies marching, or fields unburnt. It wasn't going to do a single fucking thing except make myself feel more righteous. And still, once in a while, I couldn't help but wonder what it would have felt like to be proud of the tired woman that looked back when I stood before a mirror. I clenched my fingers and let out a long breath. Whining about the price I'd had to pay to get a seat at the table wasn't going to change anything.

Blood had been spilled, there was a foe ahead of me. They would break or I would, it was as simple as that.

"Combat formations," Nauk barked. "Time to earn your *ghelsin'in* pay, children."

Kharsum, that. Meant fuck, basically, though with the implication of going at it from behind. Wonderful language, Kharsum. Had more variations on 'fuck' and 'eat' than any other tongue I'd come across, which honestly said quite a bit about them as a people. There were no Immortals in sight yet, but a banner had risen ahead. Only a matter of time.

"Catherine," Adjutant said, coming to stand at my side. "We knew it'd be bloody. This changes nothing."

"Think about the tactic, Hakram," I said. "This isn't jaws clamping on our fingers, we lose a thumb and it's over. They'll drive us back to the walls, then the Immortals will retreat and the regulars fill the gap again. They're going to *harvest* us, one push at a time."

"That sounds bad," Archer whispered at Masego. "You've been in wars before, Zeze. This is bad, right?"

"Don't call me that, you horrid sweaty goblin. And she's Callowan," Hierophant whispered back. "They love farming, do it all over the country. It could be good."

"It's bad, Zeze," I sighed, ignoring Archer's delighted chortle. "The Duke of Green Orchards, if it's really him in charge, essentially turned the outskirts of this place into a meat grinder for the Fifteenth."



"What's the blades, in this tortured metaphor?" Archer asked.

"The Immortals," I replied.

"So we kill the Immortals," Archer mused. "There, problem solved."

"It does seem a fairly straightforward issue," Masego agreed.

Though I had some truly cutting sarcasm to grace them with, I held my tongue. Archer was, well, right might be a bit of a stretch and I definitely wasn't giving her the satisfaction of saying anything like that but there was a nugget of correctness hidden in that boulder of aggressive ignorance. To pull this off, the Duke would have to spread the Immortals in a thin line across the upper city. And if we broke through that, he was in trouble. The castle would be wide open, save possibly for him and a handful of other nobles. That meant either betting this battle on him crushing us, which was risky for him given our highly murderous track record against Summer, or pulling back the Immortals to get in our way. The Woe could, in my opinion, feasibly deal with either the Immortals or the Duke. Both would be beyond us.

"We punch through and he's on the backfoot," I said to Hakram.

"Even if all we manage is to keep the centre from collapsing," the orc replied, "it's a rallying point for the Fifteenth and a funnel for reinforcements. It would turn into a match of attrition he cannot afford."

Neither could we, we were both aware, but what other options did we have?

"Nauk," I called out.

"Warlord," he grinned. "We got a plan?"

"Smash through everything until we've won," I said honestly.

"Ah, the Foundling gambit," he gravelled. "It's never failed us before."

"Don't say that where people can hear, and that's an order," I hurriedly replied.

That kind of stuff had a way of spreading. Legion humour was, uh, more than a little dark. Four hundred men already standing in tight ranks across the breadth of the avenue began their advance after a few yells. The Woe took the lead and I sharpened my senses to watch for the likely ambush that awaited further down the road. Though darkness was hardly bar to my sight, the smoke that was spreading across the sky was. Balls of magelight hovered above the two cohorts, kept going by our mages, but I barely

noticed them: what was most visible in my eyes was the bevy of standards in the sky. Which was why, when one disappeared, I immediately noticed. *Far left*, I thought. Hadn't seen much of what was there, though I'd noticed trees from a distance. Had my legionaries managed to turn back the – ah, Thief was still on the prowl. And aiming to complete her collection, by the looks of it.

"Archer," I said. "How many of the standards did you two manage to take?"

"Half, maybe?" she shrugged. "After the first few they noticed and we had to be more careful, but there couldn't have been more than twenty in all."

And I was currently looking at eight still giving off that golden hue. Thief might not have been much of a fighter, but she was far from useless. I abandoned the train of thought without lingering, as moments later we'd finally come across the enemy. Ahead of us was a roundabout, though a fancier one than any I'd ever seen in Laure. It was wide as a plaza, the avenues circling the statue garden in the centre wide enough for two carriages to share it. Among the alabaster statues of what looked like past rulers of Dormer and a noticeably larger depiction of Eleanor Fairfax – though the sculptor had taken liberties there, since I doubted a knight of her calibre would have ever worn armour that left so much of her tits out in the open – the Immortals had formed a textbook perfect square. Even simply standing around, they were wrecking the greenery of the garden: the trees that weren't already outright on fire were all smouldering, and the grass looked like a mage training yard. The Summer Court's elite had not changed since I'd last seen them. Gold plate set with rubies glimmered under closed armet helmets of the same, heater shields so well-polished they could serve as mirrors filling one hand and ivory halberds the other. Facing them, my legionaries spread across the roundabout. The Gallowborne took the centre, Nauk's cohort split to cover the flanks.

"Summer Triumphant," an Immortal from the front ranks called out.

Two hundred halberds slammed down in perfect unison, flickers of flame spreading from where they touched the ground. The words had not been spoken in any language I knew, and hardly been words at all. They'd been the crackle of wildfires, the clash of steel and the spilling of blood on hungry earth. *Summer's the season of war*, Archer had once told me. Their words rang of that truth, a boast that rattled the night air.

"KILL THEM," Nauk screamed.

"TAKE THEIR STUFF," the Fifteenth screamed back.

We charged, wings enveloping their flanks as smoothly as if this was a practice battle. *Like sea against rocks*, I thought. The

halberds rose, the halberds fell, and there went the first rank of my legionaries. As streaks of lightning filled the air and sharpeners were thrown in long arcs, Adjutant and I rammed into the enemy. It was not like fighting the regulars. They did not give, when my sword struck their shields. And there was no slapping aside a strike of those halberds. No match for me in strength, perhaps, but not that far either. *No wonder they broke the Sword of Waning Day, when they fought.* Winter's sharpest blades were rusty knives compared to these. Hacking my way into their formation was like taking an axe to an oak. My first blow hit a shield without purchase and bounced off, the halberd taller than I was sweeping down to tear through my shoulder in answer. I had to stick close to the Immortal to avoid it, and doing that felt like rolling around in a pile of embers. They heat they gave out wouldn't melt my plate, maybe, but it would heat it until it scalded to the touch given long enough.

It took Adjutant and I working together to pry the line open. His shield got a halberd stuck and the tip of my sword pierced just over the tip of the enemy's, sliding into the opening between the helmet and the gorget. The blood that coated my blade when it withdrew was smoking, but the fae was dead. I kicked the enemy down and forced my way into the gap even as the Immortal behind that one advanced, trying to force me back with his shield. From the corner of my eye I saw Adjutant's knees give as the shaft of a halberd struck his shoulder and that distraction cost me. The side of my shield caught the halberd's point at the very last moment, hard enough to change the angle from my chest to my forearm. The ivory went through plate and I screamed as fire burned in my veins. I would have had to give ground, if Archer hadn't come to back me. Slithering around my shield she struck high, plunging a longknife in the Immortal's throat and spinning to throw herself at the man at his side. I ripped out the halberd the corpse still clutched and let Winter loose, the flame smothered by impossibly deep cold. I let the strength linger, and took full advantage of the room she'd carved me.

The Immortals were meant to fight in ranks, the enemy in front, and from the side they struggled. Not the most flexible of weapons, halberds. I slammed my shield in the flank of the Immortal to my left and when he turned snarling Adjutant's axe smashed through his helm and splattered blood. Now that my second was at my side, we began to widen the gap. One of us baited, the other struck. I learned at the cost of what was going to be a nasty scar under my eye that anything but a killing blow was useless on them – they did not seem to feel pain, and baldly ignored wounds. Being on the other side of that was a lot more infuriating than I'd thought it would be. With Archer weaving in and out of our side, knives always moving, we forged a wedge of corpses in the centre of the formation that the Gallowborne filled without prompting. The rest of my legionaries were not doing nearly as well, I saw when I got a rare moment of respite.

Hierophant had seen the flanks were failing badly in the face of the opposition and lent them a hand, but the two spells he was working simultaneously took up all of his concentration. A hovering ball of shadow had sprouted tendrils that struck like sledgehammers on the left, while to the right a panoply of small silver circles flew around and shot beams of pale sorcery that not even the shields of the Immortals could withstand without twisting.

We'd killed maybe a fourth of them, fighting tooth and nail for every corpse, and already taken over twice that in casualties. I grit my teeth and pressed on. Attrition would grow more to our advantage the fewer of them were left, and though only the wrecks of two cohorts would emerge from this fight we would emerge victorious nonetheless.

"Sons and daughters of Summer, stand deathless under the sun," a voice thundered.

Oh shit. Did that mean what I think it meant? Behind me, the dead Immortals proved the truth of the name. Great gouts of Summer flame poured out of the wounds, and they rose to their feet – most of them in the middle of the Gallowborne. A dozen of my retinue died in the first heartbeat and I screamed in fury.

"HIEROPHANT," I yelled. "KILL THAT STANDARD."

Before I'd even finished speaking a handful of runes formed just before my eyes, shining blue, and transmuted into a word: warded. Fuck. We weren't the only ones who could use those.

"BATTER IT DOWN," I screamed.

We were way past conserving power for the Duke of Green Orchards. At this rate we'd never even reach him. The detonation that followed rocked the entire plaza, statues flying in pieces and even Immortals being thrown to the ground. I widened my stance and was only blown back a few feet, though Hakram was thrown straight into two legionaries and had to extirpate himself from the mess of limbs and armour. To my horror, when I looked up, a globe golden light shone around the standard as it remained unharmed. Oh, this was bad. I ripped the halberd out of the grasp of an Immortal swinging at me, dropping my shield, and swung it around so that the edge of the blade tore into his skull. He dropped dead like a stingless puppet, but how long would he remain like that? The fae might not be able to pull that trick as often in Creation as they could in Arcadia, but how many times would that mean? Four, nine? My legionaries couldn't even afford for it to happen twice. I would have called out to Archer, asked her if she had anything in her quiver that could take care of that, but she was busy trying not to get skewered by a pair of very angry Immortals.

It was a shiver, or at least that was how it felt to see it. It spread from the left flank, slithering through the thick ranks of Immortals and only turning into something real when the silhouette emerged out of thin air. Thief put a foot on a shield meant to smash her down, using it as a foothold to move to the shoulder of another Immortal. The fae tried to shake her off but she was already moving, jumping off the helm of an Immortal and somersaulting in the air. She went through the golden globe like it wasn't there at all, hand snatching the standard at the apex of her leap and spiriting it away in a heartbeat. I felt the impact before she'd even begun to come down, the way every Immortal on the field flinched. I grinned, right up until the moment she was engulfed in apple-green flames and began screaming. Wings ablaze with eerie light, the Duke of Green Orchards stood atop the battlefield with mild disinterest writ on his face. A single hand held up, he kept Thief aloft and burning seemingly without effort.

I furiously tried to break through the Immortals ahead of me, but their ranks had tightened and the halberds were keeping me back. They weren't going for a kill, just delaying me. It was Hierophant that managed to step in.

A gust of wind blew out the flames and Thief's blackened body was dragged back behind the lines through the air. Gods, her entire hair was gone. She was scorched, but breathing and moaning in pain. Masego immediately began healing her, but she was done for the night. For more than that.

"Lady Foundling," the noble fae greeted me politely. "It appears this affair will come to close momentarily. *Perish.*"

The nightmare began. Before he'd finished speaking I'd leapt off my first ice platform and was about to land on my second, and Archer had sent her first arrow flying for his eye. The shot went through the silver flames that appeared when it got close, but it slowed enough the duke caught it with his hand, crushing the wooden shaft to powder. The other hand had lashed out with green flame, a small orb of it tumbling towards me. The size of an apple, and the exact colour. Fuck. I'd thought for sure he'd be more like the Count of Green Yew, and hoped the torched trees would mean he was limited in his power, but he obviously had a work around. That first hit on Thief had been nowhere as strong as what I'd seen some dukes and duchesses pull out, but it was still exceedingly dangerous. A twist of will had a platform to my side forming and I took a turn there to avoid the throw, frowning when I saw the apple kept tumbling down. Was he really unable to redirect those? *Oh Merciless Gods*, I realized. I lashed out with ice, trying to keep the explosion contained when it hit the Gallowborne, but it was too little and too late. Then dark globe of ice was torn through almost instantly, green flame pouring out

and consuming a full tenth. It moved from there, devouring men as the Duke calmly moved his hand to guide it.

Hierophant struck directly at him, a dozen spears of what looked like water-like shimmering iron getting stuck in the silver flames as they kept pushing at it. The fae grunted and the green fire gutted out. I should have advanced, but my eyes remained on the half-bare skull of Tribune John Farrier. Most his body was gone, even bones turned to ash. On all front of the melee the Fifteenth was giving ground, step by step as halberds tore through mail and plate. I'd known John for over a year now. Had fought by his side, bled with him and laughed with him. I'd liked him and relied on him. And he'd been swatted down carelessly, like a fucking insect.

Creation grew muted.

I could feel it all deeper now. Feel the night grow thicker, until the sight of the moon in the sky was obscured. Feel the beating from the shard of Winter that was my heart slow, and then cease entirely as I drew deeper from that well than I ever had before. My breath came out steaming and my plate crackled as frost spread over it. I peered at my anger, at my fear and calmly picked them out. I fed them to the cold, let them disappear into the flow until nothing was left at all. I'd always held back, I knew that deep down. I'd ripped the mantle of a god from its corpse and still acted the mortal. Wanted to be just Catherine Foundling. All these worries of humanity and remaining someone I could stand. *The whining of a petulant child*. I would be whoever I needed to be to keep my people alive, and damn me for flinching in the face of that truth. Beneath me the Immortals stirred and I felt the threads coming from them, those that had once bound them to the banner even in death but now lay inert. I reached out for them, two hundred threads growing into rivers as I forced the power of Winter through them. There were screams, there were curses and shaking and clawing at their armour. It made no difference to me. The Immortals died like flies, falling to the ground under the weight of my mantle.

"Rise," I ordered, and they did.

Blue eyes burning behind their visors, the pride of Summer gripping its weapons as wings of ice spread from their backs.

"Shit," Archer muttered, still among them. "That doesn't look good."

My gaze met the Duke of Green Orchards' and the man smiled.

"Ah," he said. "And now we finally meet, Duchess of Moonless Nights."

The trees in the garden below burst into green flames, apples forming by the dozens and dropping from the branches without missing a beat. I moved with four hundred wings, my snarl on the lips of every Immortal. A storm of green flame swallowed the world, and the battle began in earnest. For the first heartbeat, it was only the two of us. I could sense his will in the flames, shaping them as men and beasts to fight my Immortals. They rose into the sky, pursued by Summer wrath, and Hierophant struck again. I saw his will slip into the green, follow along that of a lesser god and learn its workings.

"Shape is intent," the blind man whispered. "Intent fractures."

Like picks in stone, the Hierophant's will struck at the sorcery and collapsed it. With a sound like a bell the flames reverted into apples, hanging harmlessly in the air, and my Immortals buried the Duke in a storm of blades. For a heartbeat all that could be seen was a pile of armour and ivory, until branches grew out. A globe of wood was spreading, swallowing the Immortals as it did, and I could feel them struggling against the crushing pressure inside. It would not save him. My will buried like a blade in the minds of the imprisoned corpses, forcing Winter into them until their bodies were overfilled vessels. One after another they burst, ice digging into the wood and tearing it from the inside. It groaned and broke, then the Duke burst out from the top in a shower of shards. Archer's arrow would have torn through his knee, if he hadn't caught it. He raised a mocking eyebrow.

Then it blew.

Hissing in pain, his fingers shredded, he seized the floating apples again. I ignored that, plaques of ice forming under my feet as I ran across the sky to him. The flames exploded as I felt Archer tap the back of one of the surviving Immortals. Without even glancing in her direction, I sent the corpse aflight with her hanging on the back. We reached the Duke at the same time. The fae pulled the fire to him, but through ears not my own I heard Hierophant speak.

"Burning is transmutation set by boundary," he said. "Boundaries are mutable."

His will rang like a bell and the fire intensified, beginning to burn even itself until all that was left was a single flame that guttered out. Archer and I leapt together as the enemy's face darkened and he allowed himself to fall, the burnt out husks that were the trees below us collapsing into a hunks of burning wood that gathered to him in a protective shield. I grabbed Archer by the arm and tossed her at it, leaping down from a platform to follow. Her blades dug into the shield to no avail, and so did my sword. Frost spread from where I'd struck, putting out the flames

but little else. A hand lightly touched the globe, Thief's scorched face grim as she leaning against Adjutant.

**"Steal,"** she coldly said, and the shield disappeared.

Beneath it the Duke of Green Orchard's eyes were wide. Seven wooden pillars formed around the fae, followed by four runes linked by pale light. The same binding Hierophant had used against the Princess of High Noon. The duke's body grew rigid and Archer's blades dug through his abdomen on both sides, straight into his lungs. I did not bother to speak. My blade ran straight through his neck, spider webs of ice spreading from the wound as life winked out of him. I panted, slowly, and felt the remaining Immortals collapse one after another. Nothing but corpses, now.

"Hierophant," I said. "Destroy the corpse."

He did not quibble. Hazy power devoured the remains, leaving nothing behind, and slowly I returned to myself. I'd taken four hundred men into battle. Sixty still lived, most of them wounded. All that remained of the roundabout was a smoking, broken wreck.

"Nauk," I croaked. *"Where is Nauk?"*

I strode through the ash and corpses, shouldering aside a legionary and glaring at the first officer I found. She paled, shivering.

"Where is your legate, lieutenant?" I seethed.

"Ma'am," she stammered, "he's..."

I saw the few remaining mages attending to the wounded as best they could, yellow light covering their palms. I could see Nauk among them. He was not moving, his breath faint. The left side of his face had been made a burnt eyeless husk, and the arm on the other side ended at the shoulder. They were not healing him. Fury spiked, the pavestones under me cracking.

"You," I said, hoisting the closest mage by the chest. "Why aren't you healing him?"

He only babbled uselessly, so I dropped him.

"There's nothing more they can do, Catherine," Masego said, passing me by as he knelt by the legate's side.

"Then craft me a fucking miracle, Hierophant," I hissed.

He frowned, then drew runes over Nauk. The frown deepened.

"I can keep him alive," he said. "Anything more is beyond me. Parts of his mind were shredded by the fire."



"Do it," I rasped. "Who? Who can heal him?"

Pinpricks of light formed above Nauk, sinking into the body as Masego murmured. The orc's breath grew steadier, but nothing more.

"Father," he said. "Possibly Diabolist. Or..."

He hesitated.

"Tell me," I said through clenched teeth.

"It was fae fire that did this," he said. "Fae sorcery could likely heal it."

I clenched my fingers into a fist.

"Catherine," Adjutant said.

I hadn't even noticed him approaching. Thief was further away, leaning on Archer. Neither of them met my gaze.

"Dawn is coming," he said. "We cannot linger."

I forced myself to grow calm.

"Can you do anything more?" I asked Hierophant.

He shook his head.

"They'd already stopped the bleeding from the stump," he said. "All I did was restore the organs."

"Then we go," I said, turning to the silhouette of the castle ahead. "Let's end this."

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*Kingbob12*

We get so used to Cat winning, that when she loses, it hurts all the more. And here comes the real test. Will Cat let Killian unleash her Fae power to save one of her own? Or hold fast to her principles.

*-Mech-*

She'll always place her principles over getting power, its been the theme of the story for a while. Yes, there's the statements about 'Justice is for the Just' and all that, but that only comes into play when she's engaging the 'Good' guys. (Like

seriously, why can't we have a single sympathetic good character) Otherwise, everything to do with dark magic is a no-no.

Okay, I'll admit I'm being a little, sorry, very obnoxiously prissy about this, but its getting a bit thick with the references about how literally every other faction is more cavalier about human lives.

*Gunslinger*

I'd say Cordelia is pretty sympathetic.

*OldSchoolVillain*

The band of heroes that Black is duking it out with is very much more caring about human lives, with the exception being the Bard. And it's implied that The Lone Swordsman was . . . irregular, in his approach to heroism. We just don't see much of other factions that care about collateral damage, is all, because we're seeing Cat's perspective and Cat's enemies.

*stevenneiman*

That's kind of the point. Black is trying to prove that Evil can meaningfully win, and Cat is trying to prove that people with some shred of compassion can.

*nipi*

I dont know the white knight seems like the kind of guy that would flip a coin on to decide the fate of countless lives and say "Heavens will be done".

[beleester](#)

But on the other hand, the coin seems like it actually *\*does\** reflect the will of heaven, to the point that Black got smacked down by an angel for trying to interfere with it. So listening to what the coin says isn't as crazy as it sounds.

*Abrakadabra*

It is crazy. You know, listening to unknowable aliens, and deniing responsibility for your actions...

*sheer\_falacy*

Except the Heavens are jerks.

On the other hand, I don't think the White Knight would do the coin thing to random people. He kind of knows that angels aren't nice.

Cpt. Obvious

True about Hanno not flipping the coin for everyone. His patrons are absolutists, so either you are innocent or you are guilty. And almost everyone is guilty of something. Ever been jealous of someone? Guilty! Lusted after someone in a relationship with someone else? Guilty! Kicked an apple from a tree on someone else's property without asking? Guilty!

I used classic Christian sins as an example. In the Guideverse these may or may not be considered sins, but a lot of other banal things will be sins. And those are all judged.

If Hanno were to flip the coin for everyone he saw he'd be cutting a wide swath of death wherever he went.

So he chooses for whom he will flip the coin of justice, and yet he claims he's not judging.

That's bullshit.

Cpt. Obvious

And the spellchecker strikes again!

Kicked an apple...

Should be:

Knicked an apple...

I'm sure there's more examples of spellchecker mayhem, but I'm too tired to go looking for them.

*Nastybarsteward*

Hmm, but there is also the greater question of whether good is right and evil wrong.

I think a few heroes, esp bard, have tip-toeing towards being more wrong than right, and Catherine has definitely been trying to do right with evil.

*Dainpdf*

I think \*Cat\* got too used to Cat winning.

*corrado alamanni*

Another step from humanity another reason less to care for people done to save them.

Another step towards black

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Your WildBow is showing, erraticerrata.  
P.s amazing chapter btw.

*esryok*

Yep, right about at "... through ears not my own I heard Hierophant speak" I had a "Queen Administrator would approve" moment.

*Gunslinger*

This hurts so bad. I must be a masochist cause I read it twice. Brilliant chapter and Ohh man the queen is up next.

*Big Brother*

Holy shit, I have been waiting for Cat to go Nuclear Winter for so long. Sucks that Farrier had to die to do it, I liked him. But Cat's Necromancy just took a massive step forward, using Winter to control the Cold of the Grave and raise all those Summer Immortals into her puppets.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

What was there to like about Farrier? He wasn't very fleshed out. I remember him mostly as a jerk. Wasn't he racist or something?

*esryok*

The Lone Swordsman was racist, but to me Farrier always embodied the Callow's "we'll even the score someday" theme. He held a grudge against greenskins because one killed his grandfather, scorned Procer because of its past transgressions, and hated the Empire because of the Conquest and its general moral bankruptcy.

He was also fairly collegial with Adjutant, and freely praised the competence of greenskins in the Fifteenth.

And of course was devoted to Cat, 'cause she's more or less the second coming of the Queen of Blades.

*stevenneiman*

He was raised racist, but I found him all the more sympathetic for the fact that he actually tried to not act like it, and he had the respect of a few of the orcs iirc. He hasn't really got much character development since the Gallowborne became a thing, at the Battle of Marchford.

*Dainpdf*

He wasn't as much a character as a type, overall. He was a symbol of those loyal to Cat, those who follow her unflinchingly into battle. Those who died in droves with every one of her battles.

He also represents those in Callow who see her as a new hope for the kingdom. Well, he and the knight guy.

His death represents how much, not Cat, but the kingdom, has paid for her decisions.

-Mech-

Rest in peace, Tribune. Your duty is done.

Its unfortunate that despite all these deaths, its still likely that Catherine's not going to be able to fight on the scale of the duke. Sure, she broke out the magic this time, but I fully expect that some contrived reason will pop out that she's powerless or drained.

I recognize the need for the protagonist to always be challenged, but it gets a bit stale when every army except the Dread Legions get to break out the special stuff. All they have is going to be sappers and siege weaponry, whilst Fae have super magic, Deoraithe super archers, even diabolist legions of demons. Sure, there's the whole mundane shtick going for them, but conventionally, they should be getting steamrolled by everyone they face. Except for the knights of course, they're special but kept in reserve like a Deus ex Machina.

Hopefully something other than the knights are in the hands of the Fifteenth, otherwise they're just a bunch of mooks that get murked every time Catherine needs to lose out somehow without sacrificing a named character. Yes, a hundred nameless scrubs got massacred here, or there, but it just seems to be overlooked so easily. Although I'll definitely admit, losing the Tribune was a nice touch to remove a named character, albeit a powerless one.

*Gunslinger*

The diabolist and the fae are outliers. The legion was designed to counter mortal armies, specifically Callowans.

-Mech-

Well, the whole this being a story thing means she's going to be fighting nothing but outliers, unless her enemies suddenly get depowered.

There's the Procerans to consider, I'll concede, but I'll bet that some super magical unknown army comes in specifically to get in Catherine's way. Cos she never gets a break.

*Cicero*

So in what direction would you take the story? I am not sure what direction you expected the story to take instead of this.

*me.me.here*

I dunno, Zombie the Third and company seem pretty special, and they'll probably be sticking around for at least a little while. Wouldn't that count?

*oldschoolvillain*

There's really no reason for Cat to be drained of her power, and nothing to really cause it. The challenges she's going into – the Queen of Summer, Diabolist, the incumbent Crusade – are going to be more than dangerous enough for her without somehow losing her power. Right now she's slugging at a power level somewhere between a Duchess and Princess, but all of the threats above are still a league above that. Diabolist took two Princes of Summer head on, and was willing to duke it out with Princess Sulia before Summer retreated. Procer's Crusade is implied to be backed by dozens of experienced and legendary Heroes who so far have considered Praes to be below their notice. And then there's the Queen of Summer, the Prince of Nightfall, and the King of Winter that Cat still has to deal with. She and the Woe have their hands plenty full as it is – somehow draining her of her power would be trite and meaningless other than to set the uphill battles she's looking at even steeper.

It's possible that a transition to a full Name will cut off her access to Winter – it's tied into her Name of Squire and her Fall aspect – but a final Name will bring whole new levels of power with it that should make up for the loss.

*nick012000*

Diabolist was about to be killed by the Summer Princes she was fighting; she'd already used all three of her Aspects and was relying heavily on their power, so if Cat had waited another five minutes before entering Arcadia, she would have lost.

*stevenneiman*

The point of the Legions is not to rely on anything crazy, and it works. With the way that Fate works they also have a distinct edge against previous Legions just for having a good reason to be there, because past Legions were clearly dredged forth by the narrative because Callow needed Legions to beat back. Of course, they have an advantage with Named on the field, because everyone has an advantage with Named on the field, if they're willing to accept the attendant risks. Also, remember that she's a Callowan beating back the most foreign of all invasion forces, which is an advantage in itself

even if not as much as it would have been before the Conquest. The fact that that invasion force relies on crazy bullshit is just icing on the cake, however frustrating it might be tactically.

### *Dainpdf*

As has been pointed out, not relying on flying fortresses and sentient tigers *\*is\** the point of the Legions. This allows them to standardize their maneuvers, have reliable performance, and most importantly not backfire crazily due to some “evil is hoist by its own petard” narrative.

### *Moginheden*

The super magic all of the other forces are relying on has been proven time and time again to backfire or disappear just when you need it most, (see Thief stealing the shield the duke relied on in this chapter.) This is not a matter of the underdog winning, or the story allowing the weaker force to win. This is a matter of how you define strength. The super-magic might make each of your forces worth 100 legion members... but when the legion outnumbers you 200:1, the legion still wins. It's not flashy, and it costs an enormous amount of human lives, (though less than the sacrifice-powered flying fortresses) but it works consistently.

As for Cat being de-powered in the future, that has already been setup in the narrative. It's not contrived. She has a huge power boost from winter, but to win the war against the fae she needs to get rid of ALL fae influence in creation. That includes her own fae title.

### *Gunslinger*

Regarding her well of power though wasn't she already using the max her body could take? She would freeze if she took more? Or has she transitioned into a fae body (extremely unlikely)

### *rangamal thenuwara*

I think the ritual Masego did helps.

### *nipi*

Well the problem for her was getting too chilled. Surely summer makin bonfires helps out a bit too.

### *oldschoolvillain*

She wasn't using the maximum she could draw on after Masego's ritual, but she was starting to feel tired after creating her army-sized Staircase of Doom. She still had an impressive well of power to draw on going into the final stretch of the siege.

Before Masego's ritual though, yeah, she'd have turned her blood to so much crimson ice by now.

*esryok*

Yeah, she explicitly mentioned her "heart" stopped beating. Sounds like she pushed her blood all the way to frozen, though apparently this isn't as fatal a problem as previously imagined.

Might end up relevant to her past worries about having to murder her way back into being human.

*Snoogle*

Maybe the problem used to be a fatal one, but the ritual Masego did made it so that her blood freezing isn't lethal anymore.

*pyrohawk21*

The Forge is ready, the Crucible has been Filled.

The Ore has just been put to the heat, will the Metal be what is needed?

And what shall the Ingot be made into, by the Smith and the Hammer waiting nearby?

*Sieral*

Oh noes, looks like Catherine will sacrifice some poor folks to use in a ritual to restore Nauk. Though it's entertaining seeing Catherine struggling with her already shaky morals, I'm a little sad Killian will return. It genuinely feels like some cheesy attempt at pandering to me when her and Cat's relationship woes gets trust in my face.

[K. Gamm](#)

In Chapter 42, we see that Cat's necromancy can preserve, or revive the personality of her thralls, like she did with the horse. Nauk isn't dead, but Masego speculates that the only accessible way to heal his mind is with Fae magic. We've also seen Cat use necromancy on her still living self to move when badly injured, so it doesn't need to be used on completely dead things. I bet that she uses it, in combination with her natural Fae magic, on Nauk to revive his mind. However, I don't think he will come back exactly the same. It IS a common trope for revived people to come back with their personalities warped, but Cat with her very own Orc whitewalker is too cool an idea to pass up 😊

*Panic*



God I hope not. The best thing to happen in this book so far is the two of them breaking up. I never liked them getting together to begin with and I did not feel their relationship bringing anything of value to the story at all. Not that Killian hasn't had a part to play but being lovers with Cat is not one I fancy.

*danh3107*

Man I don't know why it feels kinda shitty to say, but I'm in agreement.

*Ashen Shugar*

I get the feeling that the "story" would be pushing Cat and Archer towards each other (and other people away), seeing as Black and Ranger had been a couple. It's probably not a big push, seeing as this is like only the 2nd iteration of the story (though there may be some stories of hero parties that would kinda match to make a deeper groove for it to follow) but it might be enough that things "naturally" tend to go that way.

*Draighean*

If Killian turns into Fae wouldn't she be Summer? Wouldn't she become bound to a Story and loyal to the Queen? Shit could backfire hard.

*Shequi*

I don't think Killian has summer ancestry because her Fae ancestor was specifically mentioned as being part of the Wild Hunt and we've been told that doesn't exist when Summer does.

*nipi*

If shes going to sacrifice anyone then they are going to be fae.

*Dainpdf*

I got the distinct impression that it was more of a "probable chip in the Queen's table" thing, but you raise a good point. Cat specifically said she wouldn't sacrifice people for power itself, but for her friends she would. That's one short lived Chekov's gun.

*stevenneiman*

They had an enjoyable relationship that broke apart due to politics. It would be realistic for them to try and reconcile, but at the same time it would be realistic for them not to, especially since as was mentioned below Cat is drawing heavily

on a story which involved her and Archer's analogs falling in love.

Personally, I liked them as a couple but I feel like if they did come back I don't think the relationship could really work, since I feel like it would have to be something where either one of them won or they found a workaround and then pretended like it didn't matter anymore. I personally agree more with Kilian's attitude that if the justice system is thorough enough in making sure that they really are guilty of crimes serious enough to warrant death, getting some use out of killing criminals isn't any worse. On the other hand, Cat isn't entirely unreasonable in thinking that it creates a perverse incentive towards harsher criminal law that leads to more profitable executions.

[\*benthelynx\*](#)

I loved them as a couple it brought forth a different perspective and dynamic, which was a good change of pace. However this would be a terrible way to get them back together. Not a bad way to drive them further apart though. In the whole allied but with bitter feelings between them.

[\*DroughtBringer\*](#)

Just...

Wow.

Wow.

Wow.

*danh3107*

Jesus fuck...

Also, Fae aren't human so sacrificing them doesn't really seem like hypocrisy in my book. They're barely even sentient.

*nipi*

Technically its not human sacrifice. Well depending on how you define human.

*Dainpdf*

What Measure is a Non Human, anyways? If Diabolist does it, it's probably fine, morally speaking.

*Unorginal*

They seem very self-aware and capable of feeling, non-sentient would mean they aren't even capable of understanding concepts like pain or emotion, so I'll contest you there as they are clearly sapient if bound to patterns.

But you are right about the sacrifice bit... it isn't 'Human' sacrifice and they're immortal as well so does it really matter \*wink wink\*.

*Unorginal*

Ignore the spelling mistakes please, I typed and posted without spell-checking.

[benthelynx](#)

Sentient and sapient are two different things. And I'd agree that they have most of the makers of sentience: they are responsive to their senses and are (self)aware. Sapient is closer to wise and that's harder for me to pin down. However they are lacking one of the implied valuable traits we associate with sentience: the ability to make choices based their awareness. Apart from the winter king, it's been strongly implied that they lack that ability; that the decisions they make are closer to programmed reactions than true choices.

*Unorginal*

The amount of badass makes me need to check my blood sugar levels because holy fucking shit pyrrhic victory it may be but Catherine just doesn't stop kicking ass.

*Jabes*

Pyrrhic victory? I am seeing Cat sacrificing her personal retinue, including Ferrier and Naul, and a lot of power, to bring down what was going to mince most of her region. Why she gave up things/ people that are very important to her, I think they actually just saved thousands of Legionaires.

*Dainpdf*

Still a Pyrrhic victory. The cost of the battle, overall, has been huge. She spent a lot of power, Thief is basically done, Masego also spent a lot, Adjutant took a lot of hits, her retinue is fucked, and the Queen has a "heal Nauk" chip on her side of the table.

In the context of the overall war against the Fae, not good. In the context of facing Diabolist after this, still pretty terrible.

*kinigget*

That moment when the walls come down...

*quantum*

This chapter was chillingly good. It gave me shivers

*esryok*

Look, Adjutant! Archer and Thief are bonding!

*Cicero*

Woe onto all ! That is really going to hit home.

*Fanon*

Killian not adding anything to the story or relationship is exactly /why/ she broke up with Cat.

Unless Killian can stand on relatively even footing with Cat's named, she's only going to be known as Cat's lover.

If they get back together, it'd be because Killian is no longer absolutely useless and powerless in comparison to Cat. A more equal, balanced relationship.

I'd put decent odds into Cat letting the ritual take place, too. This story is all about principles and what you're willing to sacrifice those principles for in order to accomplish your goals, and what better temptation for corruption than human sacrifice in order to take back your lover and save your friend?

*Dainpdf*

I was pretty sure it was the fact that Cat couldn't countenance something she thought was obviously okay. You know, the culture clash.

Even if Cat allows the ritual now, they'd still need to resolve this very important difference.

*maresther23*

Wait... did Cat use the power of love to get a power boost (+motivation) and avenge her loved ones?

*George*

Well yeah, this is YA and story tropes have actual power IC. Though mostly she just drew further on the power than she would usually be willing to.

*Dainpdf*

Mostly she just pulled the stops and took full advantage of Hierophant's work.

*Skaven*

Not sure why everyone's assuming that Cat having Kilian go through with the ritual would involve them getting back together.

It was pretty much stated when they broke up that the values dissonance meant that whatever direction they went with regarding the ritual, they wouldn't be able to stand to remain together.

*Barrendur*

There's really nothing \*wrong\* with Killian as a character, but there's nothing \*right\* either. As readers, we wouldn't know, because Killian is the most ridiculously UNDEVELOPED significant character in the story!

It wouldn't even be fair to call Killian "underdeveloped"; no, she's a cypher, a silhouette, a shadow of a character whose only moment of development came when she broke things off with Catherine – and her reasons for doing so.

Killian's a cardboard figure, with a single promising splash of colour on her. No wonder readers don't like her; we know so LITTLE about Killian that Cat might as well just be masturbating when they go to bed together

*Shequi*

I wouldn't say she was undeveloped. We know that she has family she cares for, sending half her pay to them, we know some of her aims (& have done since way back in Rat Company), we know she gets a lot of racial discrimination as Duni and part Fae both.

*Letouriste*

You are exaggerating. like you said we know little about her but that's because we never got her POV and her personality has only being presented by ratface (in an interlude) and cat. and somehow ratface pov had more depth^^.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Wild exaggeration, so much so I can't really credit your original point anymore

*Letouriste*

...I'm speechless. i so didn't expect that outcome^^.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Nauk's injury/death has been foreshadowed for some time IIRC

*Dainpdf*

Orcs seem to have a tendency to just throw themselves headlong into battle, and Nauk has always been something of a berserker even among his kind.

Plus, it seems like people under his command die constantly, including that one guy who was a traitor. And whose name I forgot.

*Big Brother*

Nilin, I believe it was.

*Unmaker*

I can't say I predicted it consciously, but I have been cringing every time Catherine led Nauk into battle when the other troops were led by her and Adjutant, i.e. Named. She has essentially been asking for this by putting him too close to enemies that only Named can walk away from alive.

*dalek955*

Typo thread:

if I got my [wish] and settled Callow  
Keeping my hands [clean] wasn't going to stop armies marching, or  
[keep] fields unburnt  
ivory halberds [the] other  
had to [extricate] himself from the mass of limbs and armor  
dropped dead like a [stringless] puppet  
[he] kept Thief aloft and burning

*ishner*

Anyone want to bet the queen only has one eye when she shows up?  
Ranger could really do with a ring on the other hand.

*Dainpdf*

Or maybe the Queen has a new ring. Would be quite a Worf moment.  
...yeah, I know. I almost managed to keep my face straight while typing this.

[Reveen](#)

Wow, so the Immortals are basically the coolest motherfuckers in the entire series from an aesthetic standpoint huh?

Also, a soldiers job is to die Catherine. They are currency and your job is to spend them to achieve your strategic goals. Kinda sucks that you're running into this fact now, when it's ones you're personally connected to and not the shitloads who've already did their final duty up to this point.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

I think Cat's gonna let the Killian ritual go down. She won't make Nauk pay the price for her principles, IMHO. Before it was a

Killian-wants-it-done thing. Now it's a dear friend's life on the line. Cat may hate herself for it, but if all it takes to save someone she cares for a lot is a few bodies to drop, she's gonna drop them.

More power to her for it as well. There's no point in having power if you can't tell the rules to fuck off when it comes to the people who really matter to you.

Morals are COLDEST comfort beside a grave that didn't need to be filled.

*Dainpdf*

Oh shit.

Two things to say about this: one, Cat got too used to winning without sacrificing the people closest to her.

Two, wow. She's getting a bit on the self centered side. First, she talks about the sacrifices \*she\*had to make when she meant the sacrifices she forced on her homeland. Then she loses people whose name she knows and suddenly the loss is real...

Oh, and third: anyone else connect Sabah and Nauk? Two berserkers, sent into battle by their boss, both dead due to miscalculation. Both causing their bosses to deviate from their courses, in death.

Well, Nauk is still savable.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

I wouldn't really equate Nauk getting mangled with what happened to Captain. They all knew going up against the Duke after forcing their way past the Immortals was gonna be a horror show from the planning stages. It's not like Catherine flubbed a key decision that lead directly to Nauk getting fried, as Black missed the "All the wagoneers he sent the Monster after were Virgins" angle.

*Deft-Blade*

Man is it just me, or is Calernia just begging for some paper and pencil action? I feel like a homebrew set in this world would be so fun, the fact that self awareness of Story and Roles actually CONTRIBUTES to immersion is perfect. I feel like the only necessity would be trust between players and DM, as I feel that he/she would have a bit more plausible leeway in Calernia. Now I'm gonna spend the next two hours thinking up rules and structure before ultimately abandoning it, because I am forever alone in my dice rolling endeavors :-:

*Barrendur*

@Deft-Blade

You are NOT alone! I never thought I'd see pen-and-paper (and actual polyhedral dice!) roleplaying dwindle and diminish unto death in my gaming lifetime, but I'm not giving it up for lost... And yes, the world of the Practical Guide would make a phenomenal roleplaying setting. With Roles and Story, it would have the metafictional elements and sophistication that narrative RPGs once tried so hard to add White Wolf .

*Barrendur*

Sorry, that should have been... \_tried so hard to add (cough) White Wolf (cough)\_

*BroadAxe*

Is there some way to get an email when new chapters go up? 😊

*Roger W*

Errors:

"if I got my and settled"

"Keeping my hands clean clean wasn't "

*Roger W*

" embers. They heat they"

And there was another shortly after that I lost track of.

*arancaytar*

"I used to be a fae duke like you."

*arancaytar*

And damn it, I liked Farrier.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

I don't get all the hate for Killian. Yes, she didn't get enough individual screen time, and the lack of PoV text from her perspective hurts her developmentally as a character...but the fact Killian needs more fleshing out does in no wise invalidate the character conceptually. I found the idea of a half-Fae/half-Praesi mage, inspired to become more by close association with a determined Named she's developed feelings for to have significant potential. The culture clash over the human sacrifice issue was good story fodder, and realistic besides. Long-term relationships are challenging when both parties are simply working 9-5 jobs. Let alone facing life-or-death danger from enemies attacking your front, plus life-or-death danger of treachery attacking you from behind.



IMO, Cat would benefit enormously from a Named-equivalent permanent love interest. Black allowing his relationships to fade to the platonic level is a big part of how his emotional isolation began, and subsequently ossified. Without someone at her side, Cat's trodding down the same path whether she realizes it or not. Of everyone close to her sort of elevating her beyond them because she's always the crux of what they're doing, and the final authority regarding decision-making. Her after-hours talks with Adjutant aren't enough. Not by a long shot. Getting involved with Archer would just be a relatively meaningless fling. I mean good sex is great, but a few rounds of that is all that would EVER be.

For all Cat's vision of the future she's fighting to create, if she doesn't take steps to build a place for herself in it....I mean she's already having thoughts along the lines of "If I succeed, I'll be the last monster in Callow."

Altruistic sacrifice is well and good...but if you're all give and no take, you burn out and ultimately fall short of the contribution you could've made in a longer-term sense. At least that's my view.

*trailer*

Pissed. I spent weeks of days reading. I had no idea this was unfinished. Yes, I didn't look. Now waiting for an update. Squire with Archer fan club.

[Tal Morgan](#)

"Not the most flexible of weapons, halberds." The BALLS they aren't! Flexibility is the whole point of halberds.

Argh. I really like this story, but I keep running into these little annoying nuggets of bad history...

*Cloudlight*

Well they paired with shields after all. Handling a two handed weapon with one hand might make them cumbersome.

*Cloudlight*

Yeah pairing a halberd with a shield is just wrong. It is after all a vertical two-hand weapon and isn't ment to be wielded one-handed. I might be a bit biased as pretty big halberd fan.

*burguulkodar*

Masego's Hierophant abilities, I wonder which they are. We have seen none spoken outloud so far.

Thief has STEAL and HOLD, and the last one is obviously whatever she uses to bypass wards and sheath her in shadow. I wonder that verb that would be. Probably "Hide", but could be something more deep.

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## Chapter 45: Falling Action

*"And so Maleficent said: 'Though you be god I am Empress, crowned of dread, and by my hand comes your doom. Rage in vain, for from your bones will rise a great tower whose shadow will be cast upon all the world.'"*

– Extract from the Scroll of Chains, first of the Secret Histories of Praes

The fortress that lay at the heart of Dormer jutted out incongruously, great jaws of granite gaping down at a city that had known only peace for centuries. The seat of power of the barony had been built in tiers, an elegant ring of grey stone making the first. The was power here, and not young. Though no moat had been dug into the hill, the empty circle around the castle would been a shooting gallery to bleed an investing host were the walls manned at all. But there was not a soul in sight, the faint night breeze lazily winding through deserted bastions. No contest of our advance had been made as we approached, only flames in the distance betraying the truth that Summer had yet to surrender. The pace had been irritatingly slow due to Thief's hobbling, but I had mastered my anger before it could lash out. There were more deserving targets for my wrath than those who had fought and burned for me.

The gate was the sole concession the Barons of Dormer had made to concord, sculpted columns of marble and ivory built over the ancient rough gate and portcullis hidden away by the younger arch displaying the words and heraldry of House Kendall: *Honour Lies Immortal*, written along the curve of the wreath of ivy. I strode past the pale marble steps, the faces of the ancient rulers of the city staring back at me from the shadowed reliefs. Scenes of glory one and all, from the founding of Dormer to the first oaths sworn to House Alban when Callow was made a single kingdom. There were lies unspoken in this, victories made false by denial of failure. Winter pulsed in my veins, itching to take blade to the unsightliness. I breathed out mist and crushed the impulse. *You serve me*, I whispered at the cold. *Never the other way around*. The urges were more insidious than those my Name still caused, my own thoughts painted with a Winter brush.

The portcullis was closed, bands of steel tightly wedged into granite, and perhaps before I would have sought one of the servant entrances. But what did mere steel mean to me now? My gauntleted hands clasped around two bars, and the metal screamed as I ripped open a path. No more difficult than snapping a branch, and Winter murmured in delight at the destruction.

"That's one way to do it, I suppose," Archer said.

The first words spoken since we'd left the field where so many of my men lay dead. I did not glance back as I stepped into the courtyard. To the side I could see the smouldering ashes of what had once been stables built around the wall, but I had no interest in sightseeing. In the distance, at the heart of the fortress, I could feel a gate in the making. Not at all like mine, where my will was a knife used to cut through the boundary between Creation and Arcadia. Someone had built a canal on the other side, and was now carefully prying open the lock. The river would pour through unimpeded, when the time came, and sweep away everything that stood in its way. *A Queen is a god in the flesh*, I thought. *No creature so powerful can lightly cross boundaries.*

"There is a ward ahead," Hierophant said, studying a handful of shining runes. "Barring the inner reaches of the fortress."

"It will break," I said.

The hall we strode through was old as the walls, the raw stone made to look luxurious by tapestries and hanging drapes in the green of Kendall heraldry. The Proceran carpets under our boots had already been singed by the fae who'd once held the fortress, the edges of blackened and twisted. Stairs rose ahead into a balustrade, sculpted ivy leaves shaping the railing. We had not succeeding in getting our hands on plans of the fortress, before the battle, but I could feel the gate-to-be like the north of a compass. Further in, where the great hall where the Baroness of Dormer had once held justice and audience before the Tower stripped her of right and title both for her rebellion. How long had this castle stood, I wondered? There might be nothing left of it but rubble, when dawn came. I guided us through the corridors, the power wafting from me eagerly scattering the last wisps of Summer's presence in little tufts of hissing steam. The air grew cool and crisp wherever we passed, and more than once I felt Hierophant shiver.

We found the ward as we emerged from the corridor that would lead us to the great hall, its copper gates laying wide open behind it. A wall, though one of woven sunlight and shivering golden Summer flame. I could feel it spread beyond my sight, a great cage of power crafted to protect the arrival of the Queen of Summer.

"How long will it take you to open a way, Hierophant?" Adjutant asked.

My sword left its sheath with a quiet hiss before the blind man could reply. I struck out, boots leaving trails of ice behind as my blade rammed against the light. The walls shook around us, but the ward stood strong.

"Knocking at the door might take a while," Archer noted, sounding amused.

"I can walk through," Thief rasped. "If Hierophant tells me how to unmake it from the inside-"

"**Break,**" I hissed.

I opened the floodgates in full, let Winter pour through my veins and seep into the most destructive of my aspects. My blood was cold, I only now noticed. It had been for some time. Yet I felt no weaker for it, the frost instead lending a sharp clarity that it had once taken effort to reach. *Duchess*, I thought. My will found easier purchase when bending Creation to its will. Shade and ice flared along the edge of my sword as it struck the ward and for a heartbeat it felt like I was trading blows with the Duke of Green Orchards again. Then the ward broke, as I'd ordered it to. Stone around us shattered as well, the walls anchoring the sorcery torn through as the ward desperately scrabbled to remain coherent. There was a sliver of life in it, a will to guide it. Had they sacrificed a fae to forge this? No matter. Ice smothered that wisp of thought, blanketing the corridor. I resumed marching through the ruins surrounding us, the wide doors of copper held up only by a thin arc of granite as I passed through them. Adjutant caught up to me first, leaning close.

"Catherine," he murmured, though we both knew the others would be able to hear anyway. "Calm yourself, before you begin making mistakes."

"I am calm," I replied, and I was. "What I am is *out of patience*. If it gets in my way, it dies. We're past half-measures, Adjutant."

The orc looked as if he wanted to argue, but I was disinclined to allow it. The great hall lay spread out before us, a shabby thing compared to those I had walked in the Tower. Long tables on both sides flanked a supplicant's path leading to stone platform set against the back wall and the tall glass windows over it, the dying moon cloaking the simple bench of whitewood on it in a halo of light. *There*, I thought. The crossing would take place there. Let it not be said the Queen of Summer would ever settle for less than a throne, in any world she strode. Hierophant came to stand by my side as the others milled around the hall.

"Still the better part of an hour before dawn, by my calculations," the mage said.

"There's no need to wait that long," I said. "Implement the contingency."

Eyes of glass shifted to me under black cloth, a brow rising.

"You know my study of the sun is incomplete," Hierophant said. "Should I be forced to loose the arrow the Due would be comparable to that of the very event that named the concept. There will be no city left, no armies, and it is unlikely anything will grow of these grounds before Creation is unmade."

"One does not call a god to heel without risking calamity," I said.

He paused.

"I want to work a pathing spell on your mind," he said. "This is reckless even by your standards."

"Winter has nothing to do with this," I said. "But if it will make you feel better, by all means."

His touch against my forehead was surprisingly warm, as was the sorcery that seeped into my mind. I could feel it curling like smoke along my thoughts, until finally he withdrew.

"It is influencing you," he said.

"But," I said.

"No more than the mantle of your Name," he admitted. "Your mind is still your own."

I heard Archer let out a baited breath, behind me. Hierophant no longer quibbled after that. It was a wonder, watching him work. I'd seen him weave sorcery before, even High Arcana, but this went a step beyond. Eyes closed, heartbeat almost still, the blind man crafted me a miracle. It was not runes that he threaded together but echoes of things he had seen, flickers of great feats he had witnessed. I saw his father's silhouette standing before a tower that built itself turning into the Princess of High Noon with her hands raised, a pyramid of blood-streaked mud lying at the heart of a maze melding with a glimpse of a city rising into the sky. Pillars of translucent, shimmering power struck the ground in a perfect circle around him and I felt their reach rise through the ceiling into the night sky above. Eventually, he opened his eyes.

"Thief," he said. "Release the sun."

The burns on the heroine's face had peeled off, replaced by red and tender skin through healing magic, and so I read the hesitation on her face plainly.

"There is no need to be afraid," I said.

No, not us. Not today. She nodded slowly, and fingers found the pouch at her side.

"Here it goes," she said, and opened it.

The glare was blinding, for a heartbeat. Hierophant's unearthly ward caught it whole, drawing it to the pillars as even the coldness coming from my frame was swept away by the raging heat. And then it dimmed, as suddenly as it had come. The mage grunted in effort. It hurt my eyes to look at it, but I did not look away: I might never see such a sight again. The ceiling above us was not torn through so much as it evaporated, the fortress around us melting like butter in the heat. The sun of Summer rose into the sky, chasing night away, and with it came dawn. I turned my eyes to the dais as the lock gave and the Queen of Summer came, granted entry by our will. There was no gate. Between two moments, absence was filled a young girl. Golden curls streaming down her white robe, she still looked half a child and every inch a farmer's daughter. There was nothing unearthly about her tan and her dimples, or those brown eyes that could have belonged to any mortal. The left side of her body was touched with red, bandages peeking through the collar of her robe. Ranger had wounded her, at least.

"Oh, children," she sadly said. "You know not what you do."

It would have thought her mortal, if not for the hint of pressure behind her. Like she was the seal on a boundless ocean that could sweep over Creation at any time. Winter coiled inside me, frozen furious hatred that wanted to rip her small frame apart no matter the cost to me or anyone else. I ignored it.

"You have been summoned," I said, "to discuss terms of surrender."

"Come to me, my armies," the Queen said.

I did not need to look to know every fae in Dormer had taken to the sky, the words touching their minds. The city emptied in moments as wings flared and the tide of soldiers flowed towards us. Hierophant staggered as if hit in the guts, blood wetting his lips. The Princess of High Noon, I thought, had just been freed from her prison. Over the molten ruins of the fortress surrounding us ranks upon ranks of soldiers and pennants stood perched in silence, more arriving every heartbeat, and only then did the Queen turn her eyes to me.

"So many dead," she mourned. "You have earned him victory with your blood, Duchess. Yet Summer does not surrender. You know this. You have seen it with your own eyes."

"You have three duties," I said.

"She's trying for the sun," Hierophant said, tone alarmed.

"Destroy it, Masego," I said.

It was with vicious satisfaction that I saw surprise twist the Queen's face.

"A desperate lie," she said, but I felt her power still. "You would destroy us all. Break this land beyond mending."

It wasn't fear I saw in those eyes, not exactly. I wasn't sure she really could be afraid. But there was uncertainty. Hesitation. Three words, and I had stayed the hand of a god. My lips twitched, and strange joy bubble up in my chest. I laughed, loudly, and allowed a hard grin to split my face.

"If I can't win, you misbegotten thing, then we will all lose," I hissed. "Look into my eyes. Tell me again I'm lying."

I would have rocked back, had I not gone through the crucible of standing judgement before the Hashmallim. An entity infinitely greater than I enveloped everything that I was, will beyond comprehension taking sight of everything that I was and had been. The Beast coiled at my side and whispered back. *Whether they be gods or kings or all the armies in Creation.* The Queen of Summer flinched.

"Madness," she said, appalled.

"I am a villain," I laughed. "I stand before you the pupil of a madman, heiress to a thousand years of darkness and terror. Test me again and I will make this a wasteland to have even the Gods shudder."

"Summer does not retreat," the Queen said, and it rang like a thunderclap.

"Summer has *lost*," I replied unblinkingly. "As we speak the Prince of Nightfall breaches the walls of Aine, the city you are sworn to protect. Around you stands the butchered remnants of your host, awaiting doom at Winter's hand. And in my palm lies your Sun, three words away from destruction. The Laurel Crown has three duties, and in those three duties you have failed."

There was a moment of silence, before the Queen sighed.

"And so comes the dying of the light," she murmured. "The wheel spins, Catherine Foundling. To end is to begin. We will not go with a whimper."

My heart would have thundered, if I still had one.

"Or," I said. "I could give you exactly what you want. Aine safeguarded. Winter unmade. The Sun returned to your sky."

"You promise beyond your ability," she said.

"All I require from you is a word, and you will get your wish," I smiled. "And I ask a boon granted, for what I deliver to you."

She studied me again, tasted the truth of my words.

"This," she said, "has never happened before."

"And never will again," I said.

"I will hear the terms of the bargain offered," the Queen of Summer said.

It was no coincidence it happened the moment she spoke the words. The grooves carved into Creation would have ensured as much, smoothly turning truth to story. Coincidence that was anything but. At my side power coalesced, stealing the efforts of Summer to allow its ruler to cross as a path of its own. A circle left open closed, as with a sharp smile the King of Winter came into Creation to face his created opposite. Sleek and dark-skinned and crowned in dead wood seeping red, the fae breathed in the air of Creation with relish.

"Oh, what a beautiful morning," he said.

"Treachery," the Queen of Summer said, words ringing of steel and the death of men.

"Ever a favoured diversion," the King agreed. "Though I come for something... stranger."

He turned his eyes on me, the gaze of a teacher pleasantly surprised by a pupil. I itched to carve them out of his skull, and not using something sharp.

"With your permission, Duchess?" he said.

"According to the terms offered by Her Dread Majesty," I replied.

"You will have your boon, greedy one," he said. "Ah, but what a daughter of Winter you make. Is she not delightful, Ista?"

I grit my teeth to get through the pain of hearing the name of the Summer Queen spoken, feeling Masego go rigid as a board as he



did the same. Coat of black sweeping behind him, the man walked to his enemy and with a flourish he knelt.

"Ista of the Morning Star," he said. "Bearer of the Laurel Crown, Queen of Summer Triumphant. I ask your hand in marriage, to rule Arcadia an equal by my side."

He extended his own smoothly. One word, I'd told the Queen. She could still have it all, if she only said yes. The armies of Winter would end the assault of Aine, I would return the Sun and Winter would be undone. I watched the kneeling fae with cold, cold smile. I'd made an oath, once that I would unmake him. And I just had, with him having to thank me for it. *There will be no more Winter*, I thought. *Only a single court ruling Arcadia, neither and both*. The Empress had been right. The pivot was always going to be the Winter King, because he was the only entity that would see my preferred outcome as a victory. It had all hinged on him agreeing, because he was the oddity and he could make decisions that led outside the stories he despised. Summer would have to be forced, I'd known from the start, and I'd done exactly that. The Queen would agree, because she could not do otherwise. She was bound to seek to discharge her duties, and I'd put her in a corner with acceptance as the only way out. To refuse here would mean actively going against what she was, *and she could not physically do that*. Black had told me once that I'd kill Akua, one of these days, not because of my own power but because her nature would force her to make mistakes I would not. I wondered if he would proud, that I had used his lesson to destroy two gods without lifting a finger against either of them.

"I accept your offer," the Summer Queen said, taking his hand, and I could see the horror on her face.

She was fighting it, trying to take back the words. But she couldn't, just like the Rider of the Host I'd once forced to monologue by playing the hero. The change that followed the words was hard to describe. It wasn't something I saw or felt. Neither of them metamorphosed into something different. But it was no longer two separate entities that were before me. I'd heard a riddle once, in Laure. *When is a stone not as stone – when it is a wall*. Nothing changed, yet it was not the same. The king rose to his feet, and pressed a tender kiss on the cheek of the livid queen.

"And so the war comes to a close," the King of Arcadia said. "A realm cannot be at war with itself."

A shiver went through the host of fae around us, as is something had been torn out of them.

"The matter of boons remains," the Queen of Arcadia said, and the eyes she turned on me were burning. "Promises must be kept."

I stood before two gods and did not kneel. I would not, in this moment, pretend this was anything but my win. That I'd bled thousands on the field, caused the death of men dear to me for anything less but utter victory.

"Upon the granting, you will have discharged your duty to me," the King said. "And so will have earned the return of your heart. What do you request of us, Duchess of Moonless Nights?"

"Of you, I request release from vassalage forevermore," I told the fae.

"I am most saddened to grant this," the dark-skinned king said.

He did not seem surprised. I turned my eyes to the queen. I would have to tread carefully, here. If I fumbled the phrasing, she'd do her best to fuck me over. The temptations lay in the back of my mind, beckoning sweetly. To go back on my deal with the Empress and request that the whole of Arcadia come together to kill Diabolist. *But she's not wrong. They'll wreck the entire central plains to do it, and we'd be risking some fae influence remaining.* And there was another, young but no less demanding for it. I could ask them to heal Nauk. It would be a trifle, to them. But there might be other means to save my legate. And I would never get this chance again. A heroine, I thought, would have made the right choice. The only justifiable one. But I was not a heroine, and justifications only mattered to the just.

I spoke, and betrayed a man I called my friend.

"Of you I ask permanent right of passage through Arcadia for me and all I command, uncontested and unhindered," I said, voice hollow.

"I grant you this," the Queen replied curtly.

"And so peace is upon us," the King said. "Steel yourself, Catherine Foundling."

I felt the hand tear through my chest before I could even open my lips, and the world went dark.

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### [erraticerrata](#)

Quick reminder that I have not (and will not) authorize any ebook or PDF version of the Guide, since having one of those floating around the web would effectively kill any chance of publication.

So if whoever requested an ebook be made of it on "Mobilism" could take that down, it would be much appreciated.

*Snoogle*

If this ever gets published I would buy every book and volume.

*Snoogle*

\*buy

*Vortex*

Me too.

*Kartho*

I think this is something that people really do need to acknowledge in this day and age. Is it legal, no, not in most countries. Do people do it, yes, unfortunately they do. I think that the best one can do is to be vigilant, and make sure that people are aware. The entirety of the audience of your work is accessing this online, for free, in a pace that astounds me still. I believe, and desperately hope that they realize how damaging these "bootleg" copies can be, and that all of us agree that it is amazing and incredibly kind of you to allow us to not only see the working chapters, but be able to interact with you at all.

For all of the other readers out there;  
Please resist the urge to harm others for a minor convenience. Respect the wishes of the author, and don't create any kind of complete collection of the story we are lucky to be provided with.

*Omoizele Oz Okoawo*

As an author on royalroadl.com writing a story that I intend to put publish on kindle unlimited when it's finished, I'm curious: any particular reason you haven't published this independently yet?

[Jakku](#)

Have you thought of publishing an ebook on Amazon? With your current following I am sure it will get really good reviews and hit the charts rather quickly. It shouldn't hinder your ability to get it published in paper form either.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

Hot damn.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

For real, though, I very much disagree with the idea that Cat betrayed Nauk here. Nauk did exactly what Nauk was going to do, fight the wars of the Warlord until his death in battle. I hope Juniper talks some sense into her about this, but she'll always feel some sting from his death. And for the better, she will now always weigh her actions against the lives they'll take.

*RandomFan*

I disagree too, but Catherine has always set the bar for heroism higher than she should, and then been disappointed in herself for not approaching it. If she'd been a hero, she'd never be as gritty as William, but she'd always think she was as bad as William- assuming she lasted.

As a villain- she notices these failings more, and then shrugs them off again.

*thespaceinvader*

Let's not forget, Nauk ain't dead yet, and Catherine still has access to a powerful Fae sorceress... if she's willing to pay the cost.

*SQuid*

Do we even know that she's specifically referring to Nauk? I wouldn't at all be surprised if it turns out she meant someone else, because that's just the kind of slippery twisty story we're reading.

*goliath1303*

.... Yes, considering she specifically said his name.

"And there was another, young but no less demanding for it. I could ask them to heal Nauk. It would be a trifle, to them. But there might be other means to save my legate. And I would never get this chance again. A heroine, I thought, would have made the right choice. The only justifiable one. But I was not a heroine, and justifications only mattered to the just.

I spoke, and betrayed a man I called my friend."

*Kingbob12*

Motherfuck. Damn good thing they didn't actually have to fight, or else the story would have ended here. You can trick a god, but not even Cat can kill a god outright. Not yet.

*Metalshop*

This was a fantastic chapter. I'm getting chills seeing how far Catherine has come and how much she's starting to see herself as a villain.

*Gunslinger*

She has the most frightening mentor though. I meant Malicia

*Adarsh*

Ok, I did not see that coming. I still wonder what will happen if she completes her bargain with the Prince of Nightfall.

*stevenneiman*

I'd been figuring that it was something to permanently disrupt the balance of power in favor of Winter, but that's just been turned sideways anyway so I don't think balance really matters anymore.

What I'm wondering now is what this will do to the power of Summer and Winter, given that on one hand a united power should be more dangerous to outside forces than a divided one fighting its other half, but on the other hand both sides defined themselves by the conflict so they might be greatly reduced without it.

*oldschoolvillain*

Nothing said he has to be alive when she sets the crown's at his feet. And she's already defeated a Princess of Summer – breaking him will be a lovely little cool down from the rest of the war, especially since the fae may not be reborn any longer.

[nehemiahnewell](#)

Hmm, I wonder what will be left from her time as Moonless Night. Will she simply be freed of it, or will Moonless Night be left and independent Duchy?

*nick012000*

So, the Elves flee Creation by phasing their Kingdom into Arcadia, right? Wouldn't this boon granted to her mean that their greatest defense would become a liability instead, if Catherine were to ever decide to invade their kingdom?

*Gunslinger*

She'd need to massively upgrade her army before taking on elves though. Triumphant had a horde of dastardly demons.

*stevenneiman*

Yeah, it sounds like every elf is on the level of at least a minor hero and that some combine a hero's advantage of Fate with something dangerously close to the raw power of a villain.

*Shoddi*

\*presses knuckle to forehead\*  
May she never return.

*jonnney*

The Watch has a very old grudge with the elves. Once their godling is saved from Diabolist Catherine will have a powerful host with the backing of a thousand year old story that could never before come to fruition. She might also have allies in the north, the golden bloom isn't the only kingdom of elves on the continent.

The elves aren't a pressing concern though. Catherine's next war will likely be with Procer. Either defending against a Crusade or allied with the new united nation of the free cities to the south.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> She might also have allies in the north,

She will indeed, but best not to call the Drow "dark elves" in their hearing. They will point out (as in, knife-point) that unlike the elven interlopers, the Drow are native to Calernia.

*nick012000*

>Yeah, it sounds like every elf is on the level of at least a minor hero

So were the Fae, though, and look at what the Fifteenth just did to them.

*James, Mostly Harmless*

Considering how fast Kat is progressing in her power, I frequently wonder if she is Triumphant reincarnated ...

[Mental Mouse](#)

You're not the only one wondering that. Which will come around to haunt her....

*George*

Wow! Utter victory indeed!

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

So duty discharged, will Cat still be able to tap in Winter power?

*RandomFan*

I doubt it. I even expect she'll go back down to two aspects all over again. Diabolist's going to have fun with that.

*Gunslinger*

But then we'd never get to explore the mystery of her Fall aspect. All those hints of it being "more" would be wasted.

*stevenneiman*

I think that it overwrote one of her three Aspects, which will likely reassert itself once Fall is out of the way. If not, it might have just greatly empowered an Aspect she would have had anyway, in which case she would still have it but we'd have to wait and see if it's still worth having. If she does gain a new Aspect, I wonder if it's going to be Seek or something new we've never heard of.

@Gunslinger, what hints? We got a clear explanation of exactly how the power worked. A directly offensive Domain is unusual, but not too remarkable considering the unusual influence on her Name, and there was no indication that it was any more special than that.

*Gunslinger*

@stevenneiman Masego had made the observation that Cat's domain was quite different from a regular domain. I think the term more came right after the capture of Sulia when the Prince of Nightfall brought up its resemblance to his domain

*Gunslinger*

I suspect she'll still have winter related powers. That's not an effect that would simply vanish, at the very least influence her next aspect.

*ArkCthuul*

I hope she keeps winter powers, but I think the trend of breaking her down again will continue.

One of the parts I detested in worm as well, and I love both stories.

Ah well...

*sheer\_falacy*

It would be kind of hilarious if she asked for the boon of free travel through Arcadia and then lost the ability to open gates into Arcadia.

Also kind of curious how this is going to affect Fall and Spring. If it doesn't, then she'll only have free travel when summer is in charge. Though maybe if the war between summer and winter is never won (because there is no more war) there will be no season change?

*jonnnney*

It is entirely possible that there will no longer be a fall and spring. The story of Arcadia has been fundamentally changed:

"This," she said, "has never happened before."

"And never will again," I said.

[D. D. Webb](#)

It really reveals the core nature of this story that this is what constitutes a happy ending.

*Jordan*

Shouldn't you be writing?

jk, I'd skip writing so I could read this story too.

*esryok*

When Ranger was with the Calamities they broke a story old as dawn.

When Archer was with the Woe...

*pyrohawk21*

They broke a story older than Creation itself...

*IDKWhoitis*

Man, Ranger is going to be really pissed when there isn't an Wild Hunt to actually hunt anymore...

I wonder what Black will do when he hears Catherine bent two gods to her will. Will he throw a party? Will he just not shut up about it? Will he get kind of nervous about her rapid development?

*stevenneiman*



Nah, now she'll be able to antagonize the Happy Couple. Trying to get rid of her together, they might actually be even more of a challenge than anything that was there before. On the other hand, if the Seasons are locked she might be annoyed that she'll never have an excuse to go take the Prince of Nightfall's eye again.

*nipi*

If the seasons are locked do fae still get to be "reborn"?

*RandomFan*

I'd expect the turnover from Wild Hunt to "United Court" would still cause the swaps. At least, I'd imagine those don't happen in synch.

*Gunslinger*

Holy shit this was quite something. I wonder what will happen to her winter powers now that she's been released from vassalage. Her aspect has been permanently altered so fall will not change. And the winter powers will have etched grooves in her Name so I doubt they would be gone as well.

Also vote for the guide on topwebfiction.com if you can <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[ayon96](#)

Winter and Summer isn't here anymore. There is only a single court. Maybe her power will change accordingly!

*James, Mostly Harmless*

Winter and Summer no longer contest for rule of Arcadia, but that does not mean that they do not wax or wane or alternate in power. Now the transition between them is no longer overtly violent, although it may be covertly violent ...

[Hakurei06](#)

Bated breath

would be

*Dainpdf*

"Further in, where"  
– Further in was

*Komploding*

I wonder if this means Malicia will no longer be able to COMMAND Catherine's legion (against their will using her name) as Cat has been freed from vasselage, yes to the Fae court but to be freed by the King of the new court should have further reaching implications than what appears at a first glance.

*stevenneiman*

The wording might screw with the controls that Malicia used her Name to put in the legion if those ever would have come into play. Beyond that though, the Courts, including the new Sinter Court, don't really have the authority to mess with the command structure of the Praesi military.

[nehemiahnewell](#)

Things to remember

""

"He doesn't have a plan, I think," I said. "Or his plan was just to drag Callow into this mess and he doesn't really need to control what comes after that. He wants out, Malicia. I don't think how he gets out actually matters all that much. And that he thinks that way at all is scaring the other fae. I don't think he's supposed to."

"That," the Empress said quietly, "is worrying. Wekesa once told me that Arcadia is akin to a first draft of Creation, and mirrors it still. If Winter is meant to be the reflection of villainy, and yet bound to it, there are... implications."

""

This isn't an act without consequence. Even if Catherine dies tomorrow, it still is not without consequence. Arcadia and Creation are not completely separate, they mirror. So what's mirrored here, with this marriage?

*Bonesawer*

It seems evident that there can be an even closer mirror than the 'mirror feature' requires (and likely closer than we'll actually receive). Cat beats the forces of Good in such a got-them-by-the-balls way that they are forced by their very nature (desire to not have a facet of Good permanently destroyed leading to the everlasting victory of Evil or some such [sidenote: my greatest suspicion is something to do with the Due or otherwise Keter-related]) to accept a deal from Evil that combines them, forming one unified power. "A realm cannot be at war with itself".

*Nairne .01*

The Tower and the Kingdom of Callow?

### *TideofKhatanga*

Yes, this is a permanent alliance of Good and Evil. An early prototype of the Dread Empire that Catherine has been trying to build. And a permanent tear in the tissue of the story of Creation, like spitting in the faces of the Gods and them losing an eye for it.

### *Gunslinger*

In retrospect the mirroring shines pretty clearly doesn't it. Black's whole plan to kill Callowan heroes permanently is to make them accept Preasi rule. A realm cannot be at war with itself.

### *Engineer*

Hahaha, bent both gods over a barrel.

The First Prince will be shitting herself. Now CAT has free fast travel to any place in Creation and by extension the entire Legions of Terror iff Dread Empress Malcia gives her command of her entire legions. Remember, the deal was for her and all she COMMANDS. Summer won't pass up the opportunity to harass any AFFILIATED forces and the Queen has already proven with her Sky Fire Jutsu that she can incinerate an ENTIRE legion on a whim.

So if Malicia wants to take advantage of the free shortcut without suffering any unnecessary losses, she would have to give Cat command of the entire legions of terror, albeit temporarily while they are crossing Arcadia.

Another commentor said that with Cat losing her vassalage she wouldn't be able to open portals. This is not a problem since she has Hierophant there and I'm willing to bet an aspect he already figured out how to open portals and he has a full name now.

Her Name's abilities has already been changed by Winter's influence and she already underwent Masego's ritual. Winter and her name both are likened to voracious beasts. I really am willing to bet her powers will still be dark/cold based from here on out. PLUS, she still has a transitory name. She must still grow into a full one. I don't think it is black knight, however.

I believe the name will be DEATH KNIGHT.

### *Nairne .01*

That trick with necromancy she did sure suggests that she will not be a regular Black Knight. I wonder though will she become a Black Knight with just some extra power, or will she become Black Knight then transition again (something that might not

have happened before – erraticerrata could you comment on this hypothesis?) or will she skip the Black Knight role wholly.

*stevenneiman*

Black stated that his shadow play is unusually weak as non-Aspect supernatural powers go for a Black Knight. It would be entirely believable for Cat to get even more powerful necromancy in support of her other powers when she attains a full Name, whether that Name be Black Knight or not. I suspect that she will develop into a different Name than Black Knight, since Masego has already proven that subordinate transitional Names don't have to develop into the standard full Name, but I'm not going to speculate as to what kind of Name she's going to take. All I know is that EE has confirmed that Grey Knight is specifically not on the table.

*Keyen*

I'm more and more betting on the Lich Queen ending, therefore, her new name could be the Dead Queen (or the Queen of Deads?). With another happy marriage with the Dead King, governing a continent/world of deads and screw the gods 😊

*nipi*

Hmm... does goblinfire burn cold? Anyone care to test it for me?

*jonnnney*

The green fire that I use burns at a higher temperature but puts out less heat than traditional fire spinning fuel, so its cold for a given value of the term.

*Nairne .01*

I'm curious as to how will the Bard react. She was so adamant about the impossibility of changing the way things are. An interlude, pretty please.

*oldschoolvillain*

Oh the Bard is probably going to shit itself when it learns what happened while she was playing with Black. I'd say 'her' but I'm not sure something as old as the Bard needs an identifier.

*Unmaker*

A good point. How does a creature who is built of and uses stories react when something happens that has never happened before? Is this the start of a glorious new story, or is a fracture in the structure of Roles and Names themselves?

*Unnamed goblin*

reminds me of impending nuclear crisis negotiations

*nipi*

I was reminded of the MAD doctrine aswell.

*letouriste*

hum...so nauk will die or maybe be saved by killian? or warlock if he can survive until then.

nauk kabili is probably finished and cat lost her bodyguards(farrier was a nice guy)

i liked a lot the little tidbits you gave on the nauk followers so i hope some are still there!

[Ethesis](#)

Yep. Upgrade Killian and save Nauk—and her relationship.

*kellanved*

It's a bit ridiculous that she's still squire after all this, but I'm guessing she'll get the new name when dealing with Akua.

*Saktiwijayarahman*

Balance has come. If this is the time of her ascendancy, and if she is neither Black nor White Knight, then she will become the force that exist in between them.

Grey Knight!

*MagnaMalusLupus*

EE has explicitly stated that Gray Knight is not a thing, and will not happen.

*ereshkigala*

But he didn't say no to Dalmatian Knight!!!

[erraticerrata](#)

Well. No Dalmatian Knight.

[Hakurei06](#)

The Green Knight is a thing that exists in lore and in truth. And if she's no longer tied to a Winter Court..

*The Closer*

Greetings from the year 2019. I began reading this series of books in early summer based on the recommendation of a friend. Once again another extraordinary chapter in a wonderful story with an outcome that I did not even see coming. I really didn't start following the comments until somewhere in book 2 to help me understand better what was going on sometimes but the comments often times doubles my pleasure. Thank you to the author for these rich characters, incredibly complex and original sorcery imaginings, and excellent story lines. In my humble opinion, there are stories of Thrones and Rings out there that have got nothing on you! Let us know when Netflix or Prime leaves a message on your voicemail!

*James, Mostly Harmless*

Knight of Ghosts and Shadows?

*Engineer*

It's Death Knight.

Look at her powers:

Cold/frost: "The Cold of the Grave."

Darkness: "Death is usually likened to endless Darkness"

Necromancy: Control over dead things.

Now let's consider her aspects.

A living being FALLS and dies. Its body decomposes i.e BREAKS. The last aspect which would compete the trio is annihilate (scattered to the winds or ceases to exist).

Furthermore, a cultural pressure is required for a Name to come into being. Praes has a history seeped in violence and the culture within the 15th are also heavily biased toward killing as evidenced by their motto (KILL THEM and take their stuff) and Cat herself has personally killed a whole range of entities that she really had no business killing as just a Squire. So the pressures for the Name is present (If it is sufficient is up in the air)

I think the one of the reasons she hasn't transitioned yet is her own reluctance to embrace the villainous monster she is and will be.

*kinigget*

Holy fucking shit

Catherine certainly doesn't do anything by half. Not with how she fundamentally altered the very nature of Arcadia and all the Fae therein

This changes \*literally everything\*

[Euodiachloris](#)

Alter Acadia and you alter Creation, as well. We won't guess exactly how, because of the the whole mirror-foil aspect of the relationship isn't a perfect scan job. 😊

*James, Mostly Harmless*

Euodiachloris brought up a good point: Kat just fundamentally altered Creation. That had to have been felt by everyone with even a bit of power, and possibly ordinary people too. I hope that we get to see Bard's and Akua's reaction!

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Nothing says the former Winter King tearing into Cat's chest means she lost her Fae mojo. It might simply be required to sever the mystical ties to the King. She did get that magical chunk of pseudo-heart ice during her title investment ceremony.

The Sinter King is happy with Cat. I doubt he's inclined to screw her up too much at the moment. Plus, leaving her Fae mojo alone will undoubtedly continue creating thin spots in the Veil. Those, as we've seen, are quite useful to the Fae. An entity thinking in long-range terms would leave Cat's power alone, and let her continue building magic subway tunnels for him all over Calernia.

*Soronel Haetir*

Am I the only one who sees the Queen being injured but apparently whole as being bad news for Ranger? I think her (the Queen) appearance lends credence to the theory that Ranger's time was up.

*Dragrath*

Yeah I suspect that as well as much as I wish it wasn't true it seems very likely

*Solrac*

Great chapter. Thanks.

*edrey*

well, if the king really want a permanent change in arcadia, he would need to create something new no only a story that is likely no happening again, i should be something that link winter and summer, most likely a princess of both of them ( i really don't like the picture of the summer queen with a baby), so i was thinking cat taking the rule of both of them and sending the prince of nightfall to his dead in the battle with akua, so there

with have the prince graveyard battle, how she do it, i have no idea but i would be awesome, my point about all this its the king shouldn't have forgotten about the change of season and he would start with the same story again and again. so the most likely is he doing that

### [Ethesis](#)

Now. Princess would be an interesting title for her to replace squire with

### *Barrendur*

Cat becomes Callow's \_Queen of Air and Darkness\_?

### *colm*

Or maybe Dread Empress Foundling, The Exploder of Goats. After all, Cat is being mentored by Alicia now and Akua isn't Heiress anymore.

### *James, Mostly Harmless*

I have long thought that Black and Malicia were grooming Kat to replace Malicia as Empress. They may even hope that it will be the first peaceful, or at least planned, transition!

### *Sieral*

Loved the update Erratic! 😊

### *Dainpdf*

I thought she'd have asked for something else. Greater fae authority – it should be possible to merge in Summer power now. When I thought about it, though, I realized it would have been foolish. More fae influence can't be a good thing. I do wonder, though, how anything she builds will last when her armies will depend on her for mobility. Also, what about the promise to the prince of Nightfall? Bet that's going to come back and bite her.

### *Panacea*

Conqueror as her title? I would say Crusader as well but that might belong to the First Prince and her army.

### *Ethreal*

i suspect she will transit to a new name now.

### [nehemiahnewell](#)



I think it's dependent on whether or not she keeps her fae mojo. If she keeps it, she won't transition until late in the story; she already has a full names worth of power, and more than many. The Duchess of Moonless Night doesn't NEED more name power, actively. It would force her role in stories in ways that are disadvantageous. So we would keep seeing Squire for quite sometime.

If she loses it, she'll also lose Fall, and which means she has one more surprise save as Squire, discovering her last aspect, and thematically she has to have that moment before she transitions. Then she runs into the limits of Squire, and she's playing games against full names. So she would transition shortly after that.

*Nairne .01*

I wonder if this is where her being getting four aspects as another stab at creation could come to play.

*agumentic*

I just hope that we will see inner Cats again.

[Alex Straughan](#)

Surprised no one has asked one very important question?  
What does an Arcadia united do?

It doesn't seem like the Fae will just be content to stay in Arcadia now. Especially the Prince of Nightfall, i'm hoping we see more of him as Cat is still in his debt.

If I had to guess I'd say his ritual with the crowns would allow him to enter creation in the full of his power whenever he so chooses.

[benthelynx](#)

I particularly enjoyed this chapter.

*Unmaker*

erraticerrata, I would really like to see you write a mystery story. You keep managing to come up with twist endings that, in retrospect, were actually foreshadowed. That ability is great for any genre, but it is absolutely essential for a good mystery story.

*Pipiemman*

So did we essentially witness the birth of Titania and Oberon?

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Great chapter!

This sentence wins the latest “grammatically not a sentence but still awesome anyway” award: “Whether they be gods or kings or all the armies in Creation.”

*draxsiss*

I think it would be cool if the fey powers transitioned on squire not HER but her name. IE every new squire is going to get the winter powerfey stick... she transitions she loses it. The first time in history a name transition resulted in a power downgrade.

*draxsiss*

You know after having thought about it... This may end the cycle of war... if the weather patterns become permanent there will be no more abundance of food (with massive winter/summer cycles) no more extended crops at spring or fall, This will impact the world at large meaning that the places might over time no longer war the same since they don't have the food/wealth to do so. Remember that who agriculture/farming stuff Cat learned with black back in the first book?

[Mental Mouse](#)

It's been explicitly said in-text that the Arcadian Courts are not actually linked to the seasons of Creation.

DC

It occurred to me, reading this a second time, that of course it was Winter that started this: if Summer is the kingdom of war, then what can Winter be but the kingdom of peace?

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## Chapter 46: Denouement

*“Never wound a man you do not intend to kill.”*

– Extract from the personal journals of Dread Emperor Terribilis II

*It was a strange thing, to bury a man. Of the Praesi only the Soninke shared the custom, and even then only the highborn who boasted ancient labyrinth-mausoleums of baked mud to receive their own. Peasants and Taghreb burned their dead instead, save for those who had sold their remains to corpse-raisers while they*

still lived. There were no ancient mazes in the Green Stretch, and the dues to the dead were different for Duni. It was said that some of Amadeus' people still kept to the Gods Above in hidden places, conducting rituals even without priests to bless them, but his family had not been so twisted. Mother had proudly served in the Legions, after all, and thought little of the ornate boot-licking westerners called religion. Yet Duni buried their dead like Callowans did, the nature of that half-stolen custom changed by centuries upon centuries of Praesi rule and all that came with it. The Squire's shovel patted the surface of the freshly turned wet black earth, the last grave he would dig today.

There were four of them. Father, Clarent, Belladona and Valerius. He'd not spoken to any of them since deserting the Legions, and the first time in three years he'd laid eyes on his family had been to see them crucified by the burnt-out husk of the farm. The Heir had not needed to sign his work, for he had already boasted of it. Discipline, he'd called it, for a mudfoot who did not understand his place in the world. The Soninke had not well taken his defeat in Callow, the way Ranger's knowledge of the lay of the land had allowed Amadeus to lead the paladins to his enemy's camp instead of his own. Sabah had offered to help him dig, meaning kindness though the offer was ignorant. Wekesa had not, no more learned in Duni customs but instinctively knowing the offer would be crossing a boundary. It was Hye, in her own cold way, who had honoured his family. She'd stood vigil at his side in silence as he dug, a sacrifice of hours freely offered to people she had never met.

Amadeus wedged the shovel into the ground and stood by the unmarked graves he'd dug by the side of Mother's. Silently, he unsheathed a knife and split open his palm. Passing from grave to grave he trickled droplets of red the way he had been taught even as his companions stood behind him, still and quiet. There would be incomprehension on their faces, he knew. Praesi knew well the power of blood, but were wary of spilling their own. There were many rituals a skilled mage could work, with such a reagent. But there were no consecrated grounds in the Stretch, to prevent corpse-theft, and the Tower did not care to chastise necromancers that kept to the practice if their birth was high enough. The spilling of blood, to Duni, was an oath. 'They who marked that grave in red will seek redress, should this grave be disturbed.' He could have spoken the word, but he alone stood pale-skinned on this field. There would have been no meaning in it.

He had wept, taking them down from the crosses, but the tears had dried and left nothing behind. Amadeus did not recognize his own voice when he told the others to leave him to the vigil, to be stood until the moon rose. It was too raw a thing to be his, absent of calm and thought. They deferred, though before long

Ranger returned to his side. Hye knew no commands but her own desires.

"We'll kill him for this," she whispered, standing at his side.

The green-eyed man smiled.

"The Heir," he said, "meant to cloud my mind. Fill it with grief and anger. Unusually clever of him, truth be told. I lose much if I lose my distance from it all."

"It always turns on them, plots like this," the half-elf said. "They get more than they bargained for."

Amadeus studied the palm he had cut mere hours ago, finding it perfectly smooth. It would not scar. Wounds on Named rarely did, lest they were dire or meaningful. He wondered what kind of man it made him, that this was not meaningful to him. He wondered if he should grieve that he could not manage to care. Had he been this cold, before he became the Squire? It was hard to remember.

"He made a mistake," the Duni said. "Not the one you believe this. This is just... insufficient."

Ranger did not answer. She'd always had a talent for that, knowing when to fill silence and let it stand.

"I believed I loved them," Amadeus said. "But I killed them, Hye, the moment I claimed my Name. I always knew that. Stories require clean breaks. We cannot have homes to return to, however humble they may be."

"You absolve him for this act?" the honey-skinned woman asked.

"No, not that," the man murmured. "Never that. One must stand responsible for one's actions. But it would be unseemly, to blame solely his hand for this end. If not him, Creation would have seen to the matter otherwise. Paladins venturing deeper into the Stretch, perhaps. Or wisps of a faraway ritual poisoning them in agony. Foe would have been provided, Ranger. Evil ever grows through conflict."

"You could have fought it," she said.

"And lost," he replied. "Creation can be gamed. We have proved this. But it cannot be overturned. There are lessons to be learned from the Tyrants of old. Power is not earned with clean hands. Their mistake was only to think bloodying them anew will always bring gain."

He saw Ranger's lips quirk into a rueful smile.

"And now you debate philosophy over fresh graves," she said. "Your grief lasted as long as the tears."

*"I began grieving them the moment I became the Squire," Amadeus said. "This will not turn my path, Hye. A loss has been added to the tally, that's all. There will be many, many more."*

*"And love?" she said.*

*"A sweet thing, to be sure," the Squire said. "But love is not what I bared my blade for."*

*She laughed, quietly.*

*"You're not boring at all, are you?" she said. "The blood you spilled, what does it mean?"*

*"An oath," Amadeus said. "A warning."*

*Ranger's knife glinted silver in the dark as she cut her palm, joining her blood to his own on the dark earth. He met her eyes and wondered what was watching him back, that hard and blazing thing that had his heart skipping a beat.*

*"And now what, Squire?" she teased.*

*"I read a play once," Amadeus replied. "Forbidden by Imperial decree. There is a part I enjoyed, and it goes like this-"*

*His voice carried, without ever rising in tone.*

*"Be fearful now  
tremble; for  
my reach is long  
my wrath is great  
patient but  
unrivalled  
above or below."*

*Hye's answering smile was a thing of death and Amadeus looked away, staring up at the stars and letting his grief ebb to the sound of grinding wheels of steel.*

*I woke to a riot of light. I was naked, I promptly noticed, and on a bed of stone. I did not feel the cold in the slightest, which I did not take to mean much considering I similarly felt nothing of twin clamps and scalpel someone had shoved into my chest. Masego, unsurprisingly sitting at my bedside with his brow creased, idly dismissed a rune that had formed to the side of his head without looking away.*

*"Don't move," he ordered. "This is precision work."*

*"Good morning to you too," I croaked, forcing myself to remain still.*

*"It's past Noon Bell," he noted.*

It said a lot about my life these days that I was largely unmoved by the sight of a man sitting by my naked body elbow-deep in my chest without my say-so. His free hand reached for the scalpel, delicately set aside, and the fingers I couldn't see pivoted something inside my body. There was a click, felt though not heard, and I felt Winter bloom through my veins. The well, I realized with widened eyes, was not gone. The mantle was still laid upon my shoulders. Taking out something that looked like a torturer's tool out of me, Hierophant clicked his tongue in satisfaction. He prodded with a long rune-covered stick at what should have been my lungs, by the angle, and though my body felt nothing I could feel something pressing against Winter. With a nod, he set aside the stick and removed the clamps.

"It'll take at least a sennight to settle properly," he said. "But the working was successful."

"Now," I said, "would be a good time to explain what exactly you did."

I was a little amused that neither of us cared all that much about my nakedness, but set that aside in favour of actually learning what the Hells was going on.

"Neither your soul nor your body could support the title without the metaphysical stabilizer the king replaced your heart by," the blind man said. "Your power began destroying your body the moment he removed it, and the edges of your soul were fracturing."

"You predicted as much," I said. "Didn't you carve some sort of protection on my ribs when you tinkered with the moon?"

"My calculations were inaccurate," he said, and he sounded deeply pained. "The runes shattered within the first hour. You are the last titled entity of Winter, Catherine. That had unforeseen consequences."

I rose to a sitting position, and spied neatly-folded clothes on a chair to my right. *Ah, Hakram, you prince among men.* I put a shirt on, though I couldn't be bothered to hop around putting on trousers and underclothes before I got a full explanation out of Masego.

"So things got fucked," I summarized. "How'd that translate to 'get elbow-deep inside Catherine without even buying her a bottle first'?"

"I wish you would rephrase that," he sighed. "I created an artificial framework around your soul to support the power. To anchor it properly into you, there was need for some surgical work."

"So it's all good," I proposed.

"To an extent," he conceded. "The power is no longer entirely intrinsic."

"What do entrances have to do with this?" I said, grinning wretchedly and with full awareness of what I was doing.

He visibly twitched, to my delight.

"Intrinsic," he insisted. "Meaning-"

"We all know what entrances are, Masego," I interrupted smoothly. "What does that mean, practically speaking?"

"That the framework can be attacked," he said through gritted teeth. "Through sorcerous means. It can also only withstand the fullness of your power for some time, at least until I've put together a stronger array. That may take months, there is no precedent for this I am aware of."

"So you put scaffolding around my soul," I mused.

"An uneducated yokel might describe my work in such a manner, yes," he said.

"And mages can take an axe to the scaffolding if they know what to look for," I continued. "Which would be bad."

"Yes, Catherine, someone ripping out a working *attached to your very soul* would be 'bad'," he hissed. "How astutely deduced of you."

"Are we talking decked in the face by Captain bad, or 'oh shit I just mouthed off to the Hashmallim' bad?" I squinted.

"That is not a quantifiable scale," he began, but rallied valiantly. "Are you familiar with the concept of cascading failures?"

"The Wasaliti doesn't have falls on it, Masego," I told him helpfully. "You really should have paid closer attention when you studied geography."

The dark-skinned man opened his mouth, closed it, then rose to his feet.

"I wash my hands of this," he announced. "We'll finish this talk when you're capable of taking anything seriously."

"Don't be like that, Zeze," I grinned.

I put my hand over my heart in a solemn oath.

"I promise not to yank your chain anymore," I lied.

He studied me for a long moment.

"You always say that," he complained. "But you never do."

He was learning, I would give him that much. He promised to send in Hakram on his way out, after giving me long enough to get dressed so I would not offend Adjutant's delicate orcish sensibilities. I'd screwed with him mostly because it amused me, but there'd been the shadow of another intent in there. A little time alone to process the Name dream I still remembered with eerie clarity would not go amiss. There was a lot to parse there, aside from a few revelations I could have done without – namely that watching Black turn into the Carrion Lord had got Ranger going and that she probably saw taking out knives as foreplay. I was not overly surprised on either count. My Name had always been heavy-handed with the hints and I knew better than to always follow the vague advice the dreams carried with them, but this one had been particularly direct. My teacher had buried his family, and odds are before the day was done I'd have to light John Farrier's pyre. *A sweet thing, to be sure, but love is not what I bared my blade for.* Fresh on the back of my hesitating to ask Nauk's healing as a boon, that struck particularly close to home.

There were dangers to caring for my men, and considering setting aside a war-winning trump card for a single man to wake again made them stand out starkly. My Name was telling me to grow harsher. That the moment I'd let the Lone Swordsman go I'd begun a path that would be paved with the corpses of foes and friends alike. There was truth in that I could not deny. If what I set out to accomplish was greater than any of the myriad souls that made the whole, I should not flinch in the face of sacrificing any of them. To do otherwise would be crippling myself from the onset. The priests of the House of Light would have called that embarking on the path to damnation, but oh that ship had sailed long ago hadn't it? I found it hard to reconcile the smiling man I trusted with the man bathed in starlight speaking those quiet words, but they were one and the same. Neither false, perhaps, but if they ever came at odds I knew which would win. I had seen the Black Knight's face bared of the pretence of civility.

"You're telling me to let go," I murmured.

I'd never been particularly good at that. I wasn't sure I wanted to start. You could win wars, I knew, without thinking like him. Without tallying it all in my mind, staring at Creation through the prism of gain and loss. But I remembered the sight of the burnt skull of a man who'd trusted me, believed in me, and I could not help but wonder if I might have avoided that if... Some Empress or other had once said that the worst sin a villain could commit was hesitate. She'd not been wrong. Every moment I spared to gaze at my hands and ask whether there was too much blood on



them or not enough, my enemies were moving. Growing in strength as I stood still. *There is a point where continuing to ask a question makes it meaningless, because Creation has already passed you by.* Diabolist would not care for my qualms. Neither would the Empress, or the First Prince or whatever greater threat lurked behind them because wasn't there always something larger? I smiled bitterly. I was, in the end, a practical woman. It mattered more to live than to be someone I could live with.

I slipped on the rest of my clothes in silence, and was fitting my boots when Adjutant rapped his knuckles against the door. I called out for him to enter.

"Cat," he said, studying me closely. "How are you feeling?"

"Like the war's not over," I said bluntly. "Report."

"You were under for a day and a night," he said. "The Deoraithe are getting restless, you'll need to settle the Duchess soon. I've had Robber watch them, there's more to this than just wanting to strike at Diabolist. The Watch are acting oddly."

"Akua's making her move," I grunted. "I suppose I should be thankful she didn't show up in the middle of the battle to fuck everything up."

"She is no longer in a position where she can move quietly," Adjutant noted. "She must be very, very careful. If she slips now, even once, it will be the end of her."

"Fifteenth?" I asked, steeling myself.

"Casualties were significant," he grimaced, unknowingly baring fangs. "The fight for the upper ring bled us dry."

"Give me numbers," I said.

"Aisha's still tallying them," he said.

I frowned.

"You don't have to coddle me," I said flatly. "It's been more than a day. The captains will have handed in their reports."

"We had another situation to deal with that delayed matters," Hakram replied. "Diabolist sent envoys. They're currently awaiting audience with you outside the city."

I heard the leather rip as my fingers tightened around it. Fuck. One of these days I was going to be able to take a nap without waking to a fire urgently in need of putting out, but evidently it wouldn't be today.

"Get me another pair of boots," I sighed.

---

*SpeckofStardust*

You are the last titled entity of Winter, Catherine.  
Well that's important.

*Nastybarsteward*

She is now all of Winter.

*Engineer*

Creation will now seek to create her counterpart.

Who's willing to bet Akua will through some contrived turn of events become the last titled entity of Summer?

*Jonnnnz*

Huh, so this means her ex will be the final boss if she ever goes full fae?

*Isa Lumitus*

No. Remember how this war between Winter and Summer finally ended? If Killian goes full fae, Cat will have to marry her.

*Cloud\_Striker (Earth Mem Inhabitant)*

Oh no, what a terrible twist of fate.

*Ayenem*

\*Faet  
Come on it was right there.

*Cosmicus*

If you remember it's said that Kilian grandmother was part of the wild hunt, so either of Spring or Autumn

*Naeddyr*

So, Queen of Winter has to Let It Go? Ok.

*CabalCoyote*

Do you have no shame in your existence?

*ArkhCthuul*

Ideally Witz the soon last remaining summer entity....^^

So glad she kept her powers and can even go full for a time.

[ijustwanttoread573](#)

I wonder if Cat will be able to find her own balance between caring and practicality or if she'll continue to become more like Black

*Ed*

What does it say that Catherine's 'naps' are usually the result of massive injury or telling creation to go and do itself a mischief.... or both.

*Gunslinger*

Cat's Name is as subtle as she is. Not surprised she still has her winter powers but being the last titled winter fae seems like it would have other implications. And now onto the final boss of book 3.

Ohh and vote for the guide on topwebfiction.com if you can. It's dropping places quite rapidly

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

*danh3107*

Goddamn it that stupid song is in my head again

*Engineer*

No worries man, just let it go, let it go and don't give a shit anymore!

[Robert Allaband](#)

I guarantee that in Praes there is no saying of "do not kill the messenger", whoever Akua sent just got red shirted.

[Hakurei06](#)

When your envoys are probably hellspawn or possessed thereof, killing them is just self defence.

[Reveen](#)

The last thing Catherine wants to do when she's been severely weakened and her army mostly spent is to, to steal a term, "accidentally a war".

[tmeenaks](#)

There probably is, actually. Praes is a very Evil place and killing messengers usually does not end well for Evil people. Villains probably pick up fairly early that not doing that increases their survival odds infinitely

[nehemiahnewell](#)

Hmm, so with her keeping Winter, and possibly having upgraded her title to Princess or Queen (to mirror her Vice-Queen title), I predict she's going to remain squire until the 11th hour of the Webnovel.

*Oshi*

End of this book or climax of next. Honestly the whole soul is vulnerable thing keeps making me jittery. I hope she doesn't become a Death Knight...

*Keyen*

You wish. It's hinted so much through the books.

[nehemiahnewell](#)

Nah, she wouldn't have kept Winter if she was going to change soon. It's a demigods power, and puts her on the same level as mature heroes and villains. Her growth for a while will be in delving into what she already has.

She can't be allowed to actually transition into something stronger for a while. Honestly, even though he would make short work of her, I'm pretty sure in pure power Cat now outstrips Black.

[Hakurei06](#)

An undead knight doesn't have enough precedent to be an existing path to a name in it's own right (or it would have been mentioned) and is too close to the Black Knight's bailiwick to be breaking new ground.

My money remains on Green Knight.

*Nairne .01*

I keep seeing the Green Knight now and then, but I'm not really sure what that even is. Please explain.

*Naeddyr*

To Oshi: the Green Knight is an Arthurian myth about a knight who goes off to pick a fight with people, challenges them to a contest where you-hit-I-hit, so Sir Gawain cuts off his head and then the Green Knight picks it back and up tells Gawain

to meet him at the back of a church or something I'm just wikipeding here.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

No words on Nauk and Killian?

*Akim*

Hakram is holding back the info, so Cat does not kill the envoys on sight.

*James, Mostly Harmless*

Cat's Name dream could also be a warning for Bard, that her attempt to anger Black by killing Captain is also doomed. He had already resigned himself to losing those he loved again.

*Engineer*

That was more the Tyrant's aim- pissing Black off for what appears to be nothing short of gleeful insanity.

I don't think Black ever truly loved his companions. Remember; he has a plan to kill all of them should the need arise. We saw his thought processes in the aftermath of the Harshmallim bitch slapping him and finding out he apparently lost Captain. He shoved all the emotion in a box and kept his cool. Even showing restraint in using the last of his power to topple a house on White. Black simply does NOT lose his cool.

Ever.

*Oshi*

He's had decades to love and live with them. I doubt even a single member of the Calamities doesn't know where the end might come and love the life they have already had. Black has made his peace and so I'm sure has Captain.

*nasiba*

He does love them but knows he may have to kill them. He lamented that much to himself when he realized he didn't have long to live. He's capable of both, love and destruction but as the dream told, he didn't become the Black Knight out of love.

*Gunslinger*

With the loss of Captain though it wasn't just about hurting him through love but mostly shaking his pride. He got thoroughly outplayed and that is what the Bard suspects will make him err.

### *James, Mostly Harmless*

If Cat becomes the Winter Knight because she is "the last titled entity of Winter", will Jim Butcher beat EE about the head and shoulders?

### *Gunslinger*

She'll atleast have better winter powers than him

### *Engineer*

A magical scaffold weak to an accomplished Mage and her next enemy is the Diabolist herself.

Ever an uphill battle.

Though I wonder why Masego simply can't recreate the "Magical Stabilizer" the Winter King had. He obviously got a good look at it when he was diagnosing Cat in preparation for his ritual. The stabilizer worked well, allowing Cat to tap completely into the power of Winter with very good side effects (cold clarity, ruthlessness and a deep Well of Power and she wasn't as weak to outside magical influences as she is now).

Why not simply emulate that?

### *Oshi*

I'm guessing the King was able to craft and tie it into whatever well of power he has access to. Unfortunately Hierophant doesn't have that option...yet.

### *Muffin*

Her winter powers increased, by being the last noble of winter.

It's strange tho, she still owns some kings heads to that ex winter Prince, and if she's the last of winter what prevents the grinds of fate turning to autom/spring.

### *Atagan*

Im betting that she owns them to the title itself, and if it doesnt exist anymore she can loophole her way out of it.

### *MetruX*

Well, for starters because she has a heart now, and she was bound to the thing as much as it was to her, making her controlable by the king after the time limit. So, even if he could recreate it, it doesn't strike me as a good idea. It's better to have a weak point than a control point, after all =X

*Blobby oozes in*

I would like to see Hakram-esque people with Butler name, or would that be too much stepping on the toes of TGAB?

*Edrey*

Now, the god of the watch is going to get killed or not?  
On the other hand cat is the last noble of winter, how was it,  
the true of winter, all die alone, now lets pray liese dont fall  
from the sky after all is over

*Nairne .01*

I'd wager the god of the watch might be made into a well of  
power for the Diabolist, she always wanted a Greater Portal/  
Gateway (I can't remember the right word for it).  
Else, who knows, maybe the god is getting impatient with the  
watch for dilly-dallying with the fae and not addressing the  
issue.

*Roger W*

typo RUN covered stick (I assume RUNE)

*arancaytar*

Catherine: "Should I be awake for this?"

Masego: "Ahah... well, no. But as long as you are, could you hold  
your ribcage open a bit?"

*arancaytar*

You're having way too much fun with this, Catherine.

[Hakurei06](#)

A bit late, but if anyone's still here, I have the epigraph for  
Book 2, Chapter 36 – Madman:

"you call me villain  
cast the word as you  
would a stone;  
seek to bury under  
scorn of herded  
multitude, and yet  
forget my Name:

I am empress  
most dread,  
savage ruler of  
yet fiercer race;

did you expect  
meekness of me?

you call me villain  
speak it a curse  
as if Hells were  
grasping instead  
of grasped;  
as if I had knelt.

you dare?  
I am tyrant,  
bringer of calamity;  
crowned and  
crowning glory  
of mine empire

be fearful now  
tremble; for  
my reach is long  
my wrath is great  
patient but  
unrivalled  
above or below

and I will be  
Triumphant”

*John*

Could Catherine have gotten both the strategic military advantage AND a fix for Nauk (and probably a lot of others) by asking for safe passage bundled with hospitality or guest-right, in some way that explicitly included healing? Even if that means severely injured folks are off the board for months or years due to time shenanigans, at least they'd be coming back fighting fit at all – and not posing a logistical burden until then. Of course, the more complex deal would also have a greater attack surface for literal-genie exploits.

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## Chapter 47: Offers

*“Here is the truth of our dreadful crown: to claim it a declaration of war on banality, on mediocrity. The banner of the enemy is apathy, the slow grind of the inevitable. Victor or ruin, every Tyrant that ever lived bet their madness against the*



*bridle of the Heavens."*

– Dread Empress Regalia II

I wore plate, a suit of it untouched since it had left the Imperial forges of Ater. My own had been wrecked by combat, both my power and that of my enemies. It would be days before our smiths could make anything of it, and Akua Sahelian's envoys awaited me now. The goblin steel covered by the red tabard of the Legions had been forged for someone of broader build than I, and so the aketon I wore underneath was bolstered with more padding. The cloak I that streamed down my back had long ceased to be dark, strips of banners sown onto the length by Hakram's clever hands. I knew them well, those marks. The Silver Spears, the colours of House Talbot and Kendall, and now greater honours still. Cloth of wind for the Duke of Violent Squalls, a red tongue of heatless flame torn from the Princess of High Noon and now a golden ribbon ripped from one of the banners of the Immortals, the Queen of Summer's own. The black cloth that still looked like feathers in the right light was half-covered, by now, and in time there would be more. The collar of the cloak felt tight against my neck, worn in the Praesi style, but I wore it regardless. It was a statement. *All these were mighty, once. Now I bear them on my back. Think twice, before you take a swing.*

The envoys Diabolist had sent numbered twelve. Three times that number in Legion mages kept them under ward, but I was unconvinced it would be enough if they truly wanted to get up to something. My mages were hardened veterans, but most they knew of magic had been taught at the War College. They were no match for practitioners who'd inherited legacies old as the Kingdom of Callow, centuries of tricks and trumps that no one outside the Wasteland had more than glimpsed. Into the pavilion that lay at the epicentre of the heavy wards, I took only two people with me. Aisha, whose knowledge of Wasteland currents I may very well need to navigate that conversation, and Hakram. Him I trusted to see what I did not, and to keep me from making mistakes. I parted the cloth flaps and found only two of Diabolist's people were seated, the rest standing patiently behind them. One Taghreb, one Soninke. Both women I had never seen before, though that meant little. Akua and I drew talent from different pools. I'd inherited ties to the Legions from my teacher and links to Named besides, but my nemesis had the highborn of Praes at her disposal.

I had her beat in Named and armies, as far as I was concerned, but in most everything else we were either matched or she my better.

The two who'd been seated when I entered smoothly rose and bowed. I'd learned a bit since my first public humiliation at Court, in large part because of the very woman at my side, and so I was able to dissect the nuances. The angle was lower than that owed

to an Imperial Governor, yet higher than the one a ruling High Lord would expect. As with most things Sahelian, the gestured bordered between compliment and insult.

"Your Grace," the Soninke said in Lower Miezani. "This humble servant is Deka Wolde, *mfuasa* to Wolof since the Declaration. At my side stands Samiah of Fatimi, sworn to the Qara."

My eyes narrowed at the second name, flicking to the Taghreb. Fatimi was the name of the lordship Ratface's father ruled, the Supply Tribune's name before he'd taken another at the College having been Hasan Qara. He was, I remembered, a member in decent standing of the Truebloods. Whether he'd since joined with the Moderates I had no idea, but if he'd sent one of his own with Diabolist that seemed doubtful.

"Lady Sahelian sends strange envoys," Aisha drawled in Taghrebi. "Blood treats, sand shifts."

I forced myself not to raise an eyebrow. I knew what the saying meant, more or less. Praesi nobles usually only ever negotiated with other nobles, even though ruling lords and ladies rarely met face to face. It was a show of good faith to have a relative sitting at the table. When the Soninke had called herself *mfuasa*, it meant she was from one of the so-called 'servant blood'. Retainer families that, while not highborn, had been in the service of a High Lord's line for so long they were considered to have higher status than the rest of us peasants. Powerful mage lines usually fell into that, since it was always useful to have a few spares around to breed some talent into the blood. This Deka's family, if she was to be believed, had been in the service of the Miezans since the founding of the Empire. Still didn't make her noble, though. A statement could be read in that, considering I was now Lady of Marchford and a Duchess besides: *the highest of Praesi servants stand equal to foreign titles*. Ah, good ol' Akua. She never was one to pass a good slight when opportunity knocked.

"This humble servant offers manifold apologies," Deka said, bowing again. "The Lady Diabolist means no slight. It was understood that Vicequeen Foundling may not take kindly to one of the true blood."

I almost snorted. So Diabolist was worried if she sent an aristocrat all she'd get back was the head. Yeah, I could buy that.

"Sit," I said.

Deka bowed again.

"This humble servant dares not gainsay you, but must offer the word of her mistress," she said. "The Lady Diabolist requests that Lord Hierophant attend this conference."

"This isn't a place where Akua Sahelian gets to make requests," Hakram gravelled.

Another bow. Gods, her back was going to kill her by day's end. Unless they'd bred her family for the flexible spines, which horrifying enough might actually be the case. You never fucking knew with the Wasteland's old blood.

"It is as you say, Lord Adjutant," Dekka said.

I sighed.

"Aisha, have them send a runner," I told my Staff Tribune. "Make sure he knows it's not a suggestion on my part."

She nodded and saw to it. If that wasn't clear enough he might ignore the summons, and that would just be awkward. The envoys might take issue with grabbing a seat before Masego showed up, but I did not in the slightest. I took the seat appropriated from Summer a while back and leaned back against the cushion. I studied the ten standing in silence behind the envoys, now that I had the attention to spare. They were, I saw, what the soldiers of the Legions of Terror had been once upon a time. The true heart of the old hordes that had battered Callow's gates, not the greenskins tossed used to blunt charges and the levies sent to die storming walls. Soninke and Taghreb, dressed in ornate mail from head to toe that glimmered with sorcery. Their swords would be enchanted as well, every city weaving its preferred spells into the steel as they were forged. Helmets with curtains of mail on the sides and a descending prong of steel covering the nose revealed hard eyes, made to stand out by the colourful scarves tied around their necks. My people had fought men like these for centuries, until Black had replaced them with the legionaries I commanded. They were not to be underestimated, and it was their kind that would make up a great deal of Diabolist's host in Liesse. They were standing around what looked like a tightly bound rectangular package taller than I was, which brought questions considering the sorcery I could faintly feel coming from it. My men had already investigated and I'd gotten a report saying it was a mirror inside, which might mean scrying with Diabolist herself was in the cards.

There were no refreshments on the table, and I did not offer any. Aisha seated herself at my left, leaving the other side open for Hakram though he stood behind me instead. It was Masego that dropped into the chair, when he finally arrived. He looked irritated, though his brow rose in interest when he laid glass eyes on the two main envoys.

"Mages?" I asked.

"Above average talents," he said. "The Taghreb in particular. Drake blood, is it? I'd heard some families near the Eyries managed to bring it into the line."

"The compliment honours me greatly, Lord Hierophant," Samiah said, bowing even lower than she had for me. "This servant's ancestors knew fortunate encounters."

"Your ancestors managed not to turn themselves into scaled abominations when stealing properties from famously unstable lifeblood," Hierophant noted. "That takes skill as well as fortune. I confess curiosity. Is your blood thicker than that of a baseborn human? Your heart certainly beats slower."

"Masego, we don't ask people about their blood thickness at diplomatic conferences," I sighed. "Sit, you two. What does Akua want? Last I saw her I was one oath away from repeatedly shoving steel in her throat until she stopped twitching."

The two women bowed as smoothly as they had rise, seating themselves across us.

"An explanation for the mirror would be warranted, before beginning is had," Aisha said.

She spoke Lower Miezani, but the cadence of the words was all Taghrebi. The way she'd avoided using pronouns was as well. Aisha called it 'noble dialect', and every major Praesi language had a form of it. It was the kind of impersonal double-talk highborn used in negotiations with each other, conventions established ages ago that had become unspoken law. Formal diplomatic language that Akua had never bothered to use in her dealings with me before, or any highborn Praesi I'd met for that matter. That I was usually killing or coercing them at the time likely had something to do with it. Still, it was interesting she was dusting off the manners now. Whatever the envoys were after, Diabolist was willing to pretend she was taking me seriously for it. Funny how people suddenly became polite after you murdered a demigod.

"This humble servant brings word from the Lady Diabolist," Samiah said. "The tool is meant to provide sympathetic link for scrying. Authority to treat in the name of the Lady has not been granted, for the Lady would treat directly."

"Hierophant?" I prompted.

The dark-skinned mage leaned forward in his seat.

"Wolofite scrying array, the kind the Sahelians kept to themselves," he said. "A few hidden runes to record sound but--"

Light trickled between Masego's fingers and a hiss came from the hidden mirror, the acrid smell of smoke filling the pavilion.

"- they has been dealt with," he finished. "There will be no surprises. Provincial work, whoever carved these. The pathing spells to find double-bind runes have been known for decades."

If the envoys were miffed Hierophant had just casually marred what was probably an ancient and expensive heirloom belonging to their mistress, they showed no sign of it. Unlike Masego I had a decent read on the Diabolist, and I knew there was no way she'd have missed the fact that with him in the room there would be no sneaking those runes through. Odds were it was an old artefact, and he'd just casually burned a chunk of it because he disliked the quality. *Either she's showing off her wealth and what little she cares of it as a reminder of the resources she has at her disposal, or it was the artefact best suited for this conversation and she simply didn't care since our talk is important enough to warrant the loss. Either way, Akua, your point has been received*

"Proceed," I waved nonchalantly.

The envoys rose and bowed before delicately undoing the bindings around the cloth covering the mirror, setting it up so that it faced us to the height of a standing person. Fancy. The two women touched a palm to the silver surface they'd revealed, sorcery sinking into the metal before they stepped away and joined the soldiers. There was a ripple across the surface, and then I looked at Diabolist in the flesh. As usual, she'd dressed to make an impression. Red and gold, which I'd come to notice were favourites of hers, made up the silks of her long and perfectly fitted dress. I would have been able to appreciate the sight of that perfect hourglass figure and smooth long legs if the very sight of her didn't make me want to reach for my sword. I noticed, after a heartbeat, that she was seated on what appeared to be a throne. Some gaudy thing of gold and jewels, with arms that ended in the grinning faces of devils. I leaned towards Aisha.

"Isn't it illegal for anyone but the ruling Tyrant to sit on a throne?" I asked.

"Since the Declaration, yes," she replied faintly.

I snorted, turning my eyes back to Diabolist.

"Well, apparently you're done fucking around," I said. "There's a nice change of pace."

Akua's golden eyes studied me emotionlessly.

"It's is unfortunate," she said, "that someone gave you the impression your mannerisms are charming. Dekka?"

"This one feels power comparable in scale to a Prince of Summer," the Soninke said.

My hand rose and she began choking as her throat filled with ice, clawing at the skin desperately. Aisha stilled at my side. Not a single other person in the pavilion moved.

"Envoys are covered by law," I said. "Spies aren't."

Diabolist watched my actions with detached curiosity. *She wrote her off before ever sending her, I realized. Trading a fresh eye on me for a retainer's life.* I lowered my hand.

"Walk out," I said calmly. "Present yourself to the nearest legionary. You are now a prisoner of war."

The woman looked to Akua, who inclined her head by the barest fraction.

"This humble servant thanks you for your mercy, Your Grace," Dekka bowed to me.

"You're trying my patience," I noted calmly, and gave Hakram a glance.

Understanding passed without need for words. He'd see to it, and led her out.

"It was necessary," Diabolist said, "to understand who I was treating with before we began in earnest."

I smiled coldly.

"Where's all that nice flowery noble tongue gone to, Diabolist?" I asked. "Your people were being so sweet to me before."

The Soninke smiled like we were old friends. It never reached the eyes.

"This noble one will, of course, be glad to offer such courtesy should it be returned," she said.

"I'd have to stop cussing if we did, right?" I asked Aisha.

She nodded.

"Carry the fuck on," I told Diabolist with a winning smile.

I was being ornery mostly because I'd rather eat a bowl of knives than be civil to the monster on the other side of the mirror, but there was another intent behind it. Now and then I managed to get

under her skin, and that had a way of tripping her up. I'd never managed it before outside a death match, but there was no loss to me here even if it failed. Flipping the finger to Akua's noble sensibilities was reward in and of itself.

"You appear to have dealt with the fae invasion, Squire," Akua said. "I offer you congratulations."

"I don't think well deep enough in Creation to throw those down that would convey how little they mean to me," I cheerfully retorted.

"You have done great service to the Empire," Diabolist said, unruffled.

I supposed after actually trying to stab her verbal digs felt a little lacking from her side of the equation.

"You've abducted one of said Empire's cities," I said. "Don't suppose you'd care to give it back?"

"That could be arranged," she said. "My use for the city itself is permanent, but the inhabitants could be released."

"The two of us had a conversation on the Blessed Isle, once," I said. "You told me you'd put everyone inside my orphanage to the sword, if I didn't renounce my Name. Do you remember what I replied, that night?"

"That you would make a monument to ruin of me," Akua Sahelian said, and she sounded almost fond. "You refused me, naturally. Those, however, were forty lives. I hold over a hundred thousand of your countrymen in my palm now."

"You know that's not how that works," I serenely said. "I let one of your pack of vultures pull this on me once then every High Lord will threaten to start summoning demons in Callowan cities for leverage."

Diabolist cocked her head to the side.

"When we first met, you would have hesitated," she praised. "I must confess I rather enjoy the woman you've become, Catherine. You've been scoured of your former impurities."

"Spoken like someone I'm going to murder before the year is out," I said. "Is this the part where you tell me we're not so different, that we could work together? You burned that bridge when you let the demon loose, Akua."

"A blow meant to cripple you, that you dealt with in a way that demonstrated great aptitude," Diabolist said. "Had you not been able to weather the likes of it, we would not be speaking."

I blinked.

"You've never actually *admitted* to that before," I slowly said.

"There is a certain satisfaction in discarding the pretence," the dark-skinned beauty mused. "You should be aware by now I've never seriously attempted to take your life."

"You were never aiming to be Black's apprentice, I know," I flatly said. "Bit of a jump going from that to us being friendly, considering you did try to cripple me several times and are directly responsible for the death of both soldiers and innocents under my charge."

"The alternative to the posturing would have been standing against the Empress prematurely," she said. "We both know the outcome of such a trial. It was never personal, Catherine. While I do find you grating, you are not without redeeming qualities."

Aisha leaned it.

"She may very well mean what she says," the officer murmured. "While her actions are those of a foe by the customs of your people, to a Praesi allying with her would not be unthinkable should the rewards be sufficient."

I watched the Diabolist, that genuinely friendly visage she must have spent years perfecting. I was not looking at a person so much as a collection of cold ambitions that masqueraded as one.

"I'm being told you might mean that," I said. "But we understand each other, don't we Akua? You know what I think of your Great Game. You know better than to think I'm going to link hands with the likes of you, no matter what you offer."

I heard Adjutant silently return to the pavilion, coming to stand behind me.

"You speak so because you believe I am going to lose," Diabolist said. "That is not an unreasonable position."

"I *know* you're going to lose," I said. "You have a month before Liesse has to come down, or you have a hundred thousand rioters on your hands. And the moment you're grounded, I'll be leading the largest army since the Conquest to take your head."

"And so we touch upon the reason I requested the presence of the Hierophant," she said.

I glanced at Masego. He didn't react. I elbowed him.

"Is it over?" he asked.



"Pay attention," I chided. "She's got something she wants to say that concerns you."

He looked dubious, but his face turned to Akua.

"As the only son of Lord Warlock, I assume you are familiar with what the Calamities refer to as the 'Dark Day protocol'."

Masego frowned.

"I am," he said. "It's a classification for workings they use. The best way to describe them would be *kingdom-killers*. Uncle Amadeus has never lifted restriction on their use that I know of, though study is another matter."

"Twenty years ago," Diabolist said, "Lord Warlock comprehensively researched what I believe came to be called the Still Water project."

It was distressing the way Masego paused at that.

"That is under Imperial seal," he said. "Everyone involved was killed and their souls bound to prevent necromancy. Uncle said if it ever got out we could do that there would be a Crusade mobilized within the month."

"A trial was run," Akua said.

"In a closed pocket," Hierophant said and his voice shook. "You... You have a ritual that can – no a ritual would have been noticed. You have an *artefact* that allows you to scry other dimensions. Gods, the advances that could lead to. The Hells could be mapped with this. Arcadia, we *could learn the full boundaries of Creation*."

I'd never before seen him look hungry, desire twisting his features.

"It is currently in my possession," Diabolist said. "And could be made available for your study, should you choose neutrality in the coming conflict."

Yeah, I wasn't letting that go.

"It's yours after we kill her," I said. "Hierophant, focus. Still Water, what does it mean?"

"Father was trying to discover if necromantic state could be achieved almost entirely through alchemy with sorcery as only a trigger," Masego said. "After consuming sufficient amounts of a reagent humans can be turned into undead with a minor ritual, with exponential potential for number of affected as relative to expended power."

"That sounds like an undead plague," I frowned. "The Empire's used those on Callow before, they don't work. The House of Light always ends them in the crib."

"It is metamorphosis, Catherine, not a magical disease," he said impatiently. "Miraculous healing has limits. It can heal a sickness but not change the natural state of being of a human – reconnect a cut limb but not regrow it. The power of the priests would kill the undead, not cure them."

I breathed in sharply. Shit. If there was no cure and all that was needed was for people to imbibe the substance, then the only limit on that was the amount of reagents the Empire could afford – and Praes was very, very rich. *If they play it quiet enough, half of the Principate could be a shambling horde before they realize what's happening.* And Akua had implied she knew of this.

"The refugees," I said. "The people of Liesse. You fed them the substance."

"Our understanding of the process was incomplete," Diabolist conceded. "It took me several months instead of the theorized one to reach the ideal concentration. The process was accelerated when I held the only available source of water, of course. As you can see, it is temporary for you to have the largest army on the field. That can be remedied in the span of an hour should I wish it."

"I'm not sure I have the words to express how dire the consequences of that would be, for you," I quietly said.

"I would rather not employ these means myself," Akua easily said. "Yet you now understand I am not in nearly as desperate straits as you believed. Which is now I would now make you an offer."

My fingers clenched until the knuckles turned white.

"Would you like to rule Callow?" the Diabolist asked. "Truly rule it, I mean. Not whatever ramshackle arrangement the Empress promised you. You would be queen in truth."

"Under you," I said.

"Not a dishonourable state of affairs, as the rest of Calernia would be soon to follow," she said. "I do not care, Catherine, for the petty duties of running this continent so long as it bows to me. I understand, of course, that by the customs of your people I have caused personal offence. I would provide gift to even the balance. I am given to understand one of your companions, the Legate Nauk, was wounded beyond your means to heal. I will return him to fullness of health myself, as a gesture of good will. Truly, so long as you limit your ambitions

to the bounds of Callow is there is no reason the two of us cannot find accord. You would find me a most tolerant ruler."

I closed my eyes, sought calm and found only Winter. A frozen landscape without end, reflecting the ragged edges of my anger in a sprawling hall of mirrors. The air turned cool. The wards around us shivered. *How many times am I going to have to betray you, Nauk?* But I had not traded him for a boon, and I would not trade him for an empire. Eyes opened, and the envoys ahead flinched.

"Here is my own offer, Akua Sahelian," I said softly. "Set Liesse down. Abandon everything, flee to Ashur and sell what you must to buy passage across the Tyrian Sea. If you do that, spare me the horror of bringing down everything you've ever built on your head, you'll keep your life. This I call fair bargain, and more than you deserve."

"I had hoped," Diabolist said, "that I would not need to break you before we came to an arrangement. If you march against me, terms will not be offered when next we meet. They will be *given*."

"I give you oath, Diabolist," I said and I hardly recognized my voice for it was a thing of ice and iron. "If you do this, there is no place in Creation or beyond that will safeguard you from me. Not Heavens or Hells, not even if every lord in Arcadia swears to you. The doom I promise you will have men trembling in a thousand years when they speak of Akua's Folly and the woe that came from it."

The Diabolist smiled tenderly, as if I had confessed my love for her.

"Oh, Catherine," she murmured. "I almost regret it, that this ends with you kneeling."

Before she'd finished the last word I had flipped the table and crossed the pavilion, sword in hand and shoved to the hilt through the mirror. Ice spread through it and it broke with a deafening crack, shattering in a hundred pieces of shining silver. I did not bother to look at the remaining envoy or her escort.

"If any of them move," I told Adjutant, "kill them all. I want them shackled and in a dark hole before a quarter hour's passed."

He nodded slowly as I strode out of the tent. Hierophant followed, panting as he tried to catch up.

"Catherine," he gasped. "Wait."

I turned to him, forcing calm.

"The array on Liesse," Masego said. "It's too large. The power of the entity she bound does not make sense if Still Water is her intent. She could achieve it with something a hundredth the size and a dozen mages."

I froze.

"This isn't it," I croaked.

Hierophant shook his head.

"She has yet to reveal her weapon," he said.

A city floating in the sky, a god stolen and bound, a hundred thousand men turned undead. All of this, and it was only the opening of the waltz.

It was time, I thought, for hard measures.

---

*danh3107*

Man I'm running out of epithets and curses concerning christ and a whole bunch of other people. I must have ran through a dozen reading the last several paragraphs alone.

I need this series in print already, I'll be at the first book signing

*Gunslinger*

At the risk of being presumptuous if you're interested in supporting the author on patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/user?u=3523924>)

We're only 200 dollars away from three updates a week

[Adrian](#)

Can the author confirm this? sorry to sound paranoid but these days you can't never be sure

*NerfContessa*

Agreed, can't wait till they are in print and formally betaed and edited.

*Big Brother*

Oh, hard measures are gonna be so fun to see. Liesse might end up exploding like the Death Star, or Akua could find her soul

confined to the razor edges of the inside of Cat's blade. Hell, if Akua actually activates the Still Water protocol, Cat might be able to just take control of the new undead army. She already killed and raised an entire formation of Summer Immortals in an instant, who were probably a LOT tougher than some shambling ghoul made from mortals.

*Gunslinger*

I'm pretty sure they'd be tied it into some aspect of the diabolist. I do think Catherine will find it that easy.

[Adrian](#)

You just accidentally nailed one more reason why Cat could do it, remember what is her first new aspect?

*IDKWhoitis*

I was half expecting the magic mirror to have a curse or something.

Also, how many chapters are left in this book?

*Shequi*

Is breaking a mirror considered 7 years bad luck, in Callow?

*nipi*

Awww... Cat got baited.

*Naeddyr*

Man, Akua is growing on me, looking forward to seeing more of her in the far future where she definitely will still be around 😊

[Robert Allaband](#)

Hard to be around after Cat kills her.

*Nairne .01*

Not if her soul is bound to a piece of equipment and forced to serve.

*nipi*

Well we do know that her soul is definitely not in her body. Chances are Cat is going to kill Akua's body and her dad but her pissed off spirit will evade Cat for a while longer.

*Nairne .01*

Or one of the devils she has bound already knows where her soul is and becoming a disembodied spirit will equalize to an eternity of torment or something along those lines.

*SQuid*

She's a fantastic antagonist and just an utterly, utterly irredeemable person.

*Shequi*

Oh Akua, you really have surpassed all the worst that Praes has to offer.

I'm going to enjoy reading how Cat destroys everything you are.

*Nairne .01*

I second that. What are the hard measures she will employ? I can't wait to find out.

[DroughtBringer](#)

"I give you oath, Diabolist," I said and I hardly recognized my voice for it was a thing of ice and iron. "If you do this, there is no place in Creation or beyond that will safeguard you from me. Not Heavens or Hells, not even if every lord in Arcadia swears to you. The doom I promise you will have men trembling in a thousand years when they speak of Akua's Folly and the woe that came from it."

Stuff is about to get real!  
Amazing chapter! 11 out of 2!

*darkening*

As awesome as the speech is, I find myself wondering how she's going to live up to it. I mean, it feels more the Cat thing to do to just shove a sword through her and call it a day. I guess killing her father first would be a good start? Only thing she loves and all that.

*SQuid*

I could see Cat getting all Praesi on Akuas father in a fit of cold rage. More than likely though she'll just turn Akua over to Heirophant for a little while before a total execution.

*argentumArbiter*

I mean, she made an oath that sounded pretty heroic, and we all know how powerful the Story is in this universe. Considering the fact that, as Black said earlier, that the

heroes always win, Cat may get some help from fate along the way.

### *Terion*

Akua's Folly and the Woe that came from it. (capital W mine)

It seems to mean that – in a thousand years – people will tremble. Not so much at the depth of Akua's Folly compared to that of others, but at the Woe that it created. It seems to imply that the Woe will have effects reaching far beyond Akua's petty schemes. Already the Woe has wrought a fundamental change on Arcadia on a level that even beings like the Warlock have not done before and – assuming Catherine is speaking prophetically – will never happen again. I'm not sure whether there's a precedent for anyone successfully standing up to, and stealing from, an angelic choir.

It seems that every time Catherine speaks in some significant capacity, it is heavy with prophecy and foreshadowing. I wonder whether her penchant for prophecy and foreshadowing has a foundation in-universe, or is just because it works so well in the storytelling. Whereas Black seems to be miles ahead of Catherine when it comes to recognising stories and thereby trying to avoid their outcome, it seems Catherine will simply rewrite the story to her liking and force it into existence around her. An oddly bardic power, which lends some credence to the idea that Akua is in the end just a small foe, and ultimately Catherine has to go up against the Wandering Bard (as an agent of the gods above). She could become the opposing agent of the gods below. I wonder if she might transition to a very unusual Name from the Squire. Her Role seems to be more akin to a prophet. Ironically she would most likely be violently opposed to the very notion.

### *Rikel*

The Wandering Bard recounts every story which has ever been, holding them close and keeping them moving- raising heroes to serve.

Catherine would not agree to that. She would Tell a new story- Warp the fabric of reality to fit her tale, and Act as she felt she must to change all.

I look forward to seeing what the Storyteller might create.

### *ArkhCthuul*

Her Name will be Author.

And the Gods above and below will tremble.

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

Not to mention that Akua just threw down the gauntlet against Black and the Empress.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

So, mass poison as an opening move? I guess Akua end game would involve big honking WMD.

*nipi*

Nah! Seems like she plans to copy the Dead King.

*Engineer*

Oh, oh my.

This is getting interesting.

Akua has a dead army she can raise that Cat can potentially control and Cat has a magical scaffolding that would be weak to Diabolist's influence.

They symmetry is a thing of beauty...

*Nairne .01*

Hard to call it symmetry if it goes like this:

Akua raises the undead army.

Cat takes control

Akua brakes the scaffolding

Cat explodes / her soul withers away.

*nipi*

Why would Cat be able to control them? Cat can control the undead she raises not those of others. Heck when she was undead she admitted that staying undead would be a potential weakness as others are better at necromancy and could potentially take control of her.

*argentumArbiter*

She could Take control through her aspect and her penchant for necromancy, maybe not of all of them but a good amount

*Engineer*

Anybody care to guess what will happen should Cat use BREAK on that array keeping a god bound and chained?

I'm thinking all sorts of WIN.

The ensuing casualties would give Cat the necessary weight to become the DEATH KNIGHT.



*nick012000*

I'm almost certain that Malicia was aware that Akua was going to enact Still Water. It's possible that she even facilitated it. In the interlude where Akua's mother died, she mentioned that she was giving Akua under-the-table assistance gathering reagents, didn't she?

[nehemiahnewell](#)

Giving her resoruces, yes. But for the real weapon, not Still Water. She doesn't need Akua's help to use Still Water if she wanted to. Diabolist has some terror Malicia feels can be leveraged to make Praesi safe, once it's placed in her hands. A MAD weapon, which Still Water is not.

*letouriste*

exactly;)  
because the deoraithe god seems have been from the waning woods i'm thinking something destroying nature(plague? destruction of grounds and crops? something like that)

*nipi*

Malicia might be sending a message that its better to have her on the throne. Just look at what the alternative is.

*SpeckofStardust*

Whats cute to me is how it seems Akua seems to intend to let Catherine Live.

"Oh, Catherine," she murmured. "I almost regret it, that this ends with you kneeling."

*Nairne .01*

Oh, I'm willing to bet she wants her as a servant. Cat has proven herself very capable after all.

*letouriste*

well,for her cat is her playmate...a scary playmate

*MetruX*

Praesi see things differently, if Cat wasn't able to kill her, she wouldn't even consider her as a servant. Wich just means that it's more prestigious to have THIS degenerated mad dog under her than dead by her hands. Besides, she needs to know who the "next generation" of the Praesi Named will be, and with her she has a substitute for Amadeus.

*nipi*

Cat could still bow to her while turned undead. No need to assume her life would be spared.

### *Gunslinger*

Undead zombies, a potential gate to one of hells. The Dead King needs to sue for copyright infringement.

Cat going all Darth Vader on ice was pretty cool but the oath topped it. Akua's folly and the woe that comes from it, loved the call to Cat's group.

### *Gunslinger*

Typo list

to claim it a declaration: is missing

The cloak I that streamed : extra I

Soninke had caller herself mfuasa

not the greenskins tossed used to blunt

they has been dealt with," he

don't think deep enough in Creation to : mission holes?

Aisha leaned it. : in

out we could do that there would be a : comma after "that"

Which is now I would now make you an offer."

Callow is there is no reason

*nipi*

"I would have been able to appreciate the sight of that perfect hourglass figure and and smooth long legs if the very sight of her didn't make me want to reach for my sword."

Cat really needs to have a fling with someone. Now shes stuttering when seeing Diabolist.

*nipi*

Well her thoughts are stuttering.

### [Reveen](#)

Oooh! I will start actually loving Akua if she manages to kickstart the blood soaked carnival of carnage and death that this story has been playing chicken with for the last forty chapters.

Like, Still Waters is just ripe to spiral out of control and tear Callow and the Wasteland a new one. That's the only interesting option, the only other option is Catherine appropriating it as leverage and it becoming yet another excuse for the story to avoid having more interesting conflict.

*John Galt*

Akua's Folly. Notice the capitalization and the voice change. Akua is going to get rekt.

*Unnamed goblin*

And now the true test: Hold fast or expire.

*DocTao*

Cant wait for this to continue! You have well and truly caught me, I hope very much that you may continue to write and we may follow your works. Compliments once again.

*Ethereal*

Perhaps this is the joke. That in the end Akua WILL end up working alongside Catherine and the Woe in a horrifically effective combination of the old ways and the new, and the world will tremble to hear of it one thousand years later.

*Big Brother*

"To claim it a declaration" isn't actually improper grammar. It's an older style of English that doesn't see much use in modern writing. If it makes it easier, try reading it like "To claim it, a declaration"

*Big Brother*

This was meant to be a reply to Gunslinger, whoops.

*Sistema*

Catherine better be careful. We know that her world mirrors the fae on some level and she just forced the marriage of two sworn enemies. This could end up with her being forced to marry Akua in order to save Creation

*oldschoolvillain*

The marriage between the Fae courts was actually mirroring the forced union of Callow and Praes, rather than foreshadowing one with Cat, I think, given her rather vigorous refusal when political marriage was brought up by her cavalry grandmaster.

*Panic*

Hot. Just imagine the two of them hate fucking. I mean Akua is many things. Manipulative. Sociopathic. Evil. But she is not ugly!

MACKINTAC

What if Akua turns out to be to Cat as Malicia is to Black?

arancaitar

I don't think it'd work, but it *is* an interesting crack ship. 😊

Tab

I ship it.

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## Chapter 48: Interrogation

*"I was once told that character is what you are in the dark. I found, my dear Chancellor, that I was the dark."*

– Dread Emperor Sorcerous

"There," Hierophant said.

It had been a pleasant surprise to learn that Masego had not ignored the talks with Diabolist purely because the matters discussed bored him. He had, in fact, been tracking the other end of the scrying spell since its establishment. Though Akua had used relays to muddy the water, I doubted she'd seriously expected her work to fool the eyes of a Named mage. The implication there lay bare: it didn't matter if we knew where she was, because she was ready to pull the trigger at any time. On Still Water, and whatever else she had up her sleeve. The neatly ordered lines of light in the air formed a broad map of Callow, though it ignored cities for geographical features. Studying it, I picked one of the stones Juniper used when planning operations and set it down on the earthly map I'd sent for.

"This looks accurate to you?" I said.

The Soninke did not turn, and I got the eerie impression he was looking with his glass eyes through the back of his head.

"Half an inch upwards," he said.

I adjusted and grimaced as he dismissed the spell.

"No way to tell if she's set down, is there?" I asked.

"She will have to, to use her array," Hierophant said. "On a working of this scale, the slightest imprecision would have massive repercussion. I've never heard of a flying fortress capable of remaining entirely still in the sky."

So this, I thought, was going to be our battlefield. Akua had brought Liesse in the heartlands of Callow, precisely at the intersection of three cities: Vale, Ankou and Southpool. All cities that had gone largely untouched by the Liesse Rebellion and what men were already beginning to call the Arcadian War. On one hand, that brought her within marching distance of the legions under the command of Marshal Grem One-Eye. On the other hand, those legions were posted there because they were in spitting distance of the border with the Principate. There was, I knew, no realistic way to keep anything that would go down there quiet abroad. Diaobolist, as was her habit, had begun to fuck us over from the very beginning. Black and Malicia had spies under every rock in this land, but not even that would be enough to keep the method of necromancy used here under wraps.

It'd taken another sit down with Masego to understand how much of problem it would be if Still Water got out. I knew there was something called Keter's Due that was one of the limits of sorcery, the amount of power that got wasted with every spell and ritual, and apparently the Due one was one of the reasons why large rituals were only ever used if you didn't mind wrecking wherever they took place – like, infamously, the Kingdom of the Dead. Warlock's horror project was bad news in part because most the heavy lifting was done through alchemy, with only the trigger being sorcery. It could be used again and again without any great resource investment save the reagents. Calling it world-shaking innovation would be stretching a bit, in my opinion, since there were still obvious limits on how it could be employed. If people didn't imbibe enough of the reagents, the ritual wouldn't do much at all, and after the initial use other nations would certainly start keeping an eye out for it.

It was still a brutal weapon, one that had the potential to wreck large swaths of territory if employed properly – which it would be, if the Empress and Black were the ones plotting the use. Given that the First Prince was already itching for a Crusade, there would be consequences when it got out. The best I could hope for was to slow the spread of information and destroy the proof. I knew better than to hope that would lead to more than a delay. Diaobolist had just effectively ensured we'd be at war with the Principate within a few years, at a guess the moment they finished getting on war footing. Given the titanic size of Procer and what it would actually mean to have its full strength thrown at the Empire, I doubted Black would give them the time to gear up in peace. He'd strike first and strike hard, aiming to cripple

them before they mustered their armies properly. *If they don't start the war, we will.* Dark as the thought was, I would prefer the latter. Better to fight on Proceran soil than Callowan.

I reached for the bottle and topped up my glass. I had no idea how long Diabolist would need to finish her array, assuming she hadn't already, and that meant the time scale of this campaign was still in the dark. If I took a few months to gather reinforcement, was I going to have to deal with the sky raining fire? On the other hand, with the army that stood on the other side, could I afford *not* to? Unless she'd gotten reinforcements since her scrap with the Princess of High Noon, Diabolist had only six thousand proper soldiers but twice that in undead and devils. Then she'd get the entire population of Liesse, of course, and she still had one 'greater devil'. For something to qualify as greater in the eyes of a Princess of Summer meant it wasn't to be taken lightly, by my reckoning. It would mean nothing to hit fast if my armies failed to take the city. *There are still so many unknowns*, I thought, and glanced as Masego made to leave.

"Stay," I said. "I need you for the coming conversation."

"Though my judgement is laudable, I have not much exercised it in matters of war," Hierophant said.

"This one's not about war, not exactly," I said. "I sent for Duchess Kegan. I want to know exactly what Diabolist got her hands on that has her so worried and what the consequences of killing it would be."

The blindfold creased with his brow.

"Deoraithe are notoriously secretive," he said.

"And it'll be the three of us in the tent alone," I grunted. "I already am compromising. I'd rather have Hakram and Juniper in here as well."

"And you believe she will see it this way?" the blind man asked, genuinely curious.

"Let's hope she's reasonable," I said.

The mage looked amused at that, for some reason, but he grabbed the seat at the edge of the table. It was meant for over a dozen, the same I used for staff meetings, and looked rather strange so empty when I'd grown used to it being full. I drank from my cup as Hierophant summoned the bottle to him and poured himself one as well. I raised an eyebrow.

"Would it really have been that much of an effort to get up?" I said.

"You sound like Father," he muttered.

Whatever I would have made of that – and already I had *ideas* – had to be set aside for the moment, as Kegan graced us with her presence. It would be revisited though, the grin I sent Masego's way promised as much.

"Your Grace," the Duchess greeted me, then grudgingly inclined her head at Masego. "Lord Hierophant."

"Duchess Kegan," I replied over the rim of my cup. "Please, sit."

The courtesies on her part were stiff, and I knew exactly why. Twenty thousand Deoraithe had marched out of Daoine, a quarter of them Watch, and now only fourteen thousand remained. Her casualties had the Battle of Four Armies and One had been relatively light, but Dormer had been bloody business. Made worse, I knew, by the fact that Juniper had refused her use of the Watch when she struggled against the Summer regulars in the outer city. Instead they had been sent to fight the Immortals, and courted disaster there as well. I'd yet to get a spoke report, but the written one I'd gotten my hands on said the Watch had been getting brutalized before Thief came to their aid by snatching the standard on that flank. Half the Watch had been buried, either here or in Arcadia. It was the kind of losses that would take a generation to recover from, and we hadn't even come in sight of Liesse yet. Kegan took a seat distant from both mine and Masego's, to my dark amusement. It was almost childish, the three of us sharing a table meant for four times our number as if there was nothing odd in it.

"Your messenger did not specify the reason for your summons, only that the matter was urgent," the Duchess said.

She eyed the bottle, but did not reach for it. I had no intention of wasting Vale summer wine on the likes of her, and so did not offer.

"We know where the Diabolist is," I said, and gestured at the table.

She glanced at it, eyes lingering on the stone I'd placed.

"A blunder on her part," the Deoraithe said. "You could easily muster forces from the adjoining cities without even use of portals. Orders through scrying would allow you to gather and arm men in great numbers."

"I'm considering my options," I said.

I balked at the idea of sending half-trained civilians into the den of madness Akua would have prepared for them, but I was not unaware I might not have a choice. What we had left might not

be enough to deal with more than a hundred thousand undead, much less the horde of devils she was sure to have contracts for.

"That is why I called for you, as it happens," I continued. "The odds are already stark as is. We can't afford to go in blind."

The tan face of the aristocrat went blank.

"I have already shared with you what I can," she said.

I raised an eyebrow. She'd told me that whatever Akua had bound 'could be considered a deity of sort', which was actually less than what Masego had been able to tell me – and all *he* knew was second-hand from his father.

"Behavioural changes were observed in the Watch," Hierophant said. "Of this you have not spoken, or truly much at all."

Kegan's eyes went cold.

"Has your *esteemed* father not put enough of my people under the knife to discern some truths?" she said.

Ah, sarcasm. She should know better than to think that would work on Masego. He had a decent read on those he knew well, but strangers?

"No," Hierophant replied frankly. "He is under orders never to grab a member of the Watch without legal cause, which has been very difficult since the Conquest."

"How sad for him," Kegan replied blandly.

"That's very kind of you," Masego said, sounding surprised. "It has been very irritating to have such a fascinating mystery within reach but forbidden from study."

"Warlock's not the one asking you the question, Duchess," I said. "I am."

The woman's eyes returned to me.

"The terms of our treaty with the Tower place the affairs of internal rule within our sole purview," she said.

"And if the thing was still within your borders, I'd cheerfully pretend it didn't exist," I said. "It isn't. It's being used as fuel for whatever Diabolist means to throw at us, and I'm not taking a swing at that without a broad idea of what's waiting on the other side."

"The breach of terms was Praesi," Kegan stiffly said. "It is not for Daoine to pay the price for that treachery."



"Akua Sahelian has been attainted as rebel by the Empress," I sighed. "You know who stands for Praes, right now? *I* do. You know, the person trying to fix this fucking mess."

"A mess you have no small hand in making," the duchess coldly said. "Did you not personally petition the Court to have the Diabolist named governess of Liesse?"

"I was bound by oath to do as much," I reply, but it was a weak answer and I knew it.

It had occurred to me, of late, that it was hard to tell if I was the pillar propping up Callow or the stone around it's people's neck. I wasn't done losing sleep over that, but neither was I going to let it bind my hands when dealing with a woman actively refusing to inform me of a danger we both faced.

"And I am bound by duty not to speak of this matter," Kegan said.

I let out a long breath and calmly put my hand on the table. The other woman watched it, and her features loosened almost imperceptibly when she saw the wood had not fogged or frozen. She thought it meant I wasn't furious. *Wrong. It just means I've gotten back a sliver of control.*

"I've made a lot of oaths and promises, in the last few months," I calmly said. "Some pretty grandiose threats, too. I won't bother with that here, Kegan. I'll just put two truths in front of you. The first is this: to have a decent chance at victory, I need to know what I'm facing. The second is this: I do not need your consent to get an answer."

I could Speak, I could have Hierophant rip it out of her mind or half a dozen other ways. With ever month my arsenal grew, and I grew less reluctant to use it. I could use any of those tools and even make sure she wouldn't remember a bit of it when she left this tent. Masego had learned much from his work against fae in the south, when I sent him to use Summer against the Diabolist.

"You have made much of treating fairly," Kegan said, but I could see fear there.

"And I will again," I said. "I'll offer mercy whenever I can. Justice too, as much as it can be had -but never when the cost is defeat. That is my line in the sand. Cross it at your peril."

The duchess met my eyes, even afraid, and for that she won my respect. It would not stop me from asking Hierophant to carve open her mind, if I had to.

"A lesser evil is still an evil," she bitterly said.

"I prefer necessary to lesser," I said, "but will not quibble over the rest."

Kegan breathed out, and reached for the wine. She poured herself a glass and wet her lips before speaking.

"It is not a god in the way Praesi would know of it," she said. "It is a gestalt."

Masego gasped.

"Souls," he said.

Kegan nodded.

"Every single one of the People that have died since the elves took the Golden Bloom from us," she said. "Millions, by now."

"And the Watch is bound to them," I said.

"They borrow the strength of our ancestors, one day to take back our home," the duchess said.

"You forged a god," Hierophant said, and spoke with a touch of awe. "This might be the single greatest working of necromancy Creation has ever known. Unlike Keter it would *keep growing*. Every decade you can have more Watchmen, or stronger."

I had other worries.

"If Diabolist controls your... gestalt," I said. "Can she control the Watch through it?"

"The past rulers of Daoine had similar worries," Kegan said. "A degree of separation was created to prevent a Warlock from effecting this should they find out. It is one of the reasons the Watch has not been able to grow more numerous but not more powerful over the centuries. The number of oaths that can be taken is limited. The usurpation was still felt, however. It is quite unpleasant."

"You should have spoken of this to Father years ago," Hierophant began excitedly, "there are numerous theories that-"

I cut him off with a raised hand.

"Can it be destroyed?" I asked.

"Yes," she reluctantly said.

"And what would the consequences of that would be?" I pressed.

"I am unsure," she admitted, and I turned to Masego.

"You'd be destroying the gestalt, not the souls," Hierophant noted. "As individual entities they would go on existing, released from whatever binding kept them together."

I grimaced.

"That sounds bad," I said. "It would damage the surroundings, right?"

"Containing them in a location would be feasible, with the right set of wards," he said. "Otherwise, should they be unconstrained, I imagine over a third of Callow would be turned into a blasted, violently haunted wasteland. I'll need a direct look or more precise numbers to project the exact fallout."

"I have brought specialists to wrest back control from the Diabolist," the duchess said. "Preventing her from interfering with the process is the most salient issue."

Glass eyes turned to her.

"It find it unlikely," Hierophant said, "that Deoraithe mages could undo the work of a Named practitioner of Akua Sahelian's skill."

I drummed my fingers against the wood.

"Duchess, get your people talking with Hierophant," I ordered. "We'll see how feasible your way is. I'd much prefer it was. But if it isn't..."

I grimaced.

"Well, Diabolist put a sharper in the middle of her army," I said. "I'm not above lighting it to finish the war."

---

*danh3107*

WEW LAD WASN'T EXPECTING THAT

[DroughtBringer](#)

Woah.

Still another "slow chapter, but it doesn't stop me from loving it.

Thanks for the great story.

## *Big Brother*

Man, that is an amazing weapon. Natural or Artificial, a God is nothing to be sneezed at.

This actually reminds me of the Korean manhwa "The Gamer" and the new "God" ARC Company, forged from the collection of souls known as The Abyss Company and given sapience and spheres of influence.

## [nehemiahnewell](#)

Huh. I wasn't really taking the people thinking Death Knight as the name she grows into very seriously, but... if she saves or gains control of the gestalt that would be a great way path towards such a name.

## *RoflCat*

I vote Queen of Woe/Queen of the Frost Wraiths.

Because might as well go for an immortal ghost army if she want to cut down her losses (since I doubt any future enemy will be less threatening then what Diabolist will pull)

If Akua turn the citizens into undead, then maybe Cath can bound the soul of the Deoraithe to them, and take control of the army that way.

Which would makes her undead army

1. Callowan (body)
2. Deoraithe (soul)
3. Winter (since they're now under the last named entity of Winter)

Since Summer is gone they don't have obligation to fight as Winter.

As Callowan they basically are the Gallowborne++

So if Cath can go take back the Golden Bloom, she'd fulfill the Deoraithe's wish and probably can bargain for their servitude in return.

## *IDKWhoitis*

Imagine the international fallout. Hearing that Praes fought the elves, and won.

A mega crusade with external factors would be organized immediately.

## *Gunslinger*

Ohh boy, isn't bind one of Akua's aspects? Those millions of souls aren't going anywhere

## *soonnanandnaanssoon*

If she Binds, then Claims from the Deoraithe gestalt...I honestly think that's what she plans to do to channel the god's power into her array.

*boballab*

You forget that Cat has an aspect called Take and can rip them away if Akua binds them.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Of course, if Akua is half the villain she thinks she is, she has a contingency for her greatest rival using her first (or third/fourth, depending on how you count) Aspect.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Oh damn, and maybe even Call to work synergetically with the array and summon a God Below into Creation. What better a Diabolist than to summon, well, the most diabolical, highest level of Evil?

*nipi*

I very much doubt shed summon a God from Below. Just recall her paling when Cat proposed swearing their oath on the Gods Below.

She wants to rule all of creation not perhaps be second in command to its ruler.

*KageLupus*

Agreed. From a practical standpoint, Diabolist summoning a God from Below doesn't really make any sense. All of the hints of her plan that we have seen in her interlude suggest that her master plan is to escape her mother's plan for her to be the next Empress. She also wants to bring back the golden age of Villainy that she see Black and Malicia subverting. She also also was aiming to use a Hashmallim to fuel her ritual, and I feel like that kind of power wouldn't be strictly useful for summoning a God from Below.

If I had to really guess, I would say that Akhua's plan is to raise herself up to something like godhood, or at the very least to get on the same level as Triumphant. Maybe she wants to recreate the greater portal that caused the Kingdom of the Dead. Whatever the mechanism, I can see her trying to turn Callow into a kind of Neo Praes, opposed to the Tower and a bastion for the forces of Evil left in the world.

*RoflCat*

@KageLupus: Well, if she want to be deified, I think there's a good chance she'll eat a "Fall" for her pride (\*coughLucifercough\*)

would be interesting if it's a sort of repeat of the William fight, when Akua got blindsided for starting a monologue.

[shieldredblog](#)

Yes, but when she used it to bind a Prince of Summer it was only possible because he was from outside of creation and therefore fell under the specific skillset of her name. Necromancy is actually outside her name.

*JackbeThimble*

This makes it a little strange in retrospect that the Elves were trying to pre-emptively assassinate Heiress in the epilogue of book 2. Or were they not actually after her? Maybe the emerald blades were in Liesse to destroy this gestalt before it could threaten them.

*nipi*

I think the elves were worried that Akua might become the next equivalent of Triumphant. So they decided in favor of a preemptive strike instead of fleeing to Arcadia again.

*Shequi*

Oh boy, a theoretically Good nation utilising necromancy to empower its troops. I can definitely see why Kegan's house didn't want that getting out; nevermind the Warlocks, half of the Good nations would object.

Now, questions: Cat is half Deoraithe; Would she be sucked into this gestalt if she died? Is this gestalt the source of the power that "wanted" Cat to stay alive when Masego was resurrecting her during the battle for Liesse? Could Cat utilise the empowerment without the "degree of separation" Kegan speaks of?

*nipi*

Im thinking the Deoraithe willingly become a part of the gestalt. Just goes to show how deep their hate for the Golden Bloom and longing for their homeland runs.

Not the Golden Bloom isnt an oddity itself. Racist elves that drove people out of their homeland but consider themselves to be on the side of good. Only heroes are worthy of grudgingly speaking to in their carrion tongue.

[shieldredblog](#)

I don't find the elves odd at all.  
Good after all clearly doesn't mean humble or kind.  
Elves in this story are almost demigods as well (walking domains). Why would immortal demi gods devoted to the harsh Good of Creation be anything but Supremacist?

*Idan Dor*

I'm going to guess that Cat is going to take an Oath before this is over. She already has the arcadia fast travel = we are going to fight some elves soon enough. The only reason however, that Cat would want to fight the damned elves is if she has to. Therefore, an Oath is due.

It might even be useful and not just a trick so that she can win against Akua.

*nipi*

Im thinking the same. Well thats one crown for the prince of Nightfalls feet. The one that need not be a mortal rulers.

*Idan Dor*

I was under the impression that the Prince's crowns was about the free cities and the "one" being the hierarch. That should set up the fight with those guys, can't have some part of creation not burned to the ground in this quest.

*Trickster315*

I find it interesting that through cat's efforts to save Callow she's actually doing a ton of damage to the people and land that she loves. Certainly more than when the Presi were in charge.

*Dimensional*

Honestly my only prediction at this point is that one side has a flying fortress and the other has the aspect of FALL. – Just saying.

*sheer\_falacy*

That would be hilarious but she's probably landed it so that her ritual array can be stable.

*Akim*

So true.

But that rather sounds like the start of the battle than its end

*thespaceinvader*

Soooo what happens when you cram a gestalt of millions of ancient souls into a greater devil, again?

Or, what happens when you cram millions of ancient souls into hundreds of thousands of zombified Callowans?

*nick012000*

Wait, Catherine is Deoraithe, right? And she's died before – if she hadn't had her soul trapped in the amulet that Apprentice had made, her soul would have gone off to join the gestalt. So, she'd probably have a link to it.

And given that she's got Take as one of her Aspects, and her previously-demonstrated puissance with necromancy, I think there's a pretty significant chance that she might be able to hijack the whole ritual and hoist the Diabolist on her own petard, while getting her own Name transition into Death Knight.

*Letouriste*

You know, that's actually a really good point!

...  
But Diabolist know about that no? I doubt she would forget to put that in her plan when cat is bound to be an important factor in that battle

*nipi*

I don't think she knows about Cat's recent necromantic tricks.  
I mean her envoy needed to spell out how much power she gives off.

*beleester*

"Well, Diabolist put a sharper in the middle of her army," I said. "I'm not above lighting it to finish the war."

I wouldn't do that if I were you. This sounds a lot like one of those "Evil sowing the seeds of its own destruction" things.

(Of course, since Cat's an anti-hero, she might be able to get away with credibly threatening to blow up the array before revealing it was a bluff.)

[shieldredblog](#)

Like she bluffed the Summer Queen?  
No, bluffing against Evil is a bad idea.

*IDKWhoitis*

Bluffing with people who are okay with watching a continent burn is a surefire way to get a scorched Callow.



## *Keyen*

You guys are forgetting several important points:

-If when Cat die, she will go there is irrelevant. The interesting point is if Cat can access that (she could simply bully her way inside the watch, with an oath to help them kill the elves, and things like that).

-The other interesting point (I saw nobody mentionned it) is the fact the Deoraithe HAVE Named. So they are there aswell. So maybe Cat can have access to them.

-Why it is relevant? Because sooner or later, Cat will meet a new antagonist. The White Knight. And guess what is his weapon of choice? Recall. Somehow, I bet it will be VERY relevant.

## *Metrux*

The part about Named you can probably write off, they don't keep it on death. Your own powers, like sorcery and sword-skill? Yes. But not Names. That is the whole reason why a villain must die for another to get the Name, and Good Named even take theyr Names "off" before death, so I'm pretty sure there is no "Named Power" in that ball.

## *TheTime*

Name power? no. Name experience? hell yes.

## *Keyen*

The whole point of Recall is using dead Name power.

## [warriormonk](#)

There was an extra chapter from Ranger's perspectives that deals with dead Named (under the service of the Dead King), and I believe they held some vestiges of their aspects and Named powers.

## *RoflCat*

The Ranger's chapter with Dead King would imply otherwise.

## *Shequi*

The Revenant Undead that Ranger encountered in Keter still had access to a "ghost" of the Aspects they had in life. Just saying.

## *Jockster*

The White Knight depends too much on "Recall"(Black said he mastered this Aspect but not his own skills), but one use of "Take" and there goes his Aspect.( And I can already see Cat using Amadeus' style to fight him through "Recall" after a

“tragic loss of her teacher”)

The only two things that can save him are the healing shenanigans and the yet-to-be revealed third Aspect.

*Petya*

Welp, whatever happens next, you gotta give it to Aqua for sheer grandiosity of plans. I wonder, how exactly it will spectacularly backfire to her face.

*Thea*

Will it, though? Malicia has set Akua up to succeed with her trump card once before she gets taken out. And for Cat to keep climbing the tower, she needs to be at odds with Malicia...

[BarthHumphries](#)

Ctrl+F didn't find the word “typo” – come on, people, we always need a typo thread. Everyone makes mistakes.

chapter-43-cliff/

Hakram had waste no time, I saw.  
Change waste to wasted

—

chapter-44-drop/

a globe golden light shone around the standard  
Add “of” after “globe”

A single hand held up, her kept Thief aloft and burning seemingly without effort.  
Remove “her”

—

chapter-45-falling-action/

The Proceran carpets under our boots had already been singed by the fae who'd once held the fortress, the edges of blackened and twisted.  
Remove “of”

It would have thought her mortal, if not for the hint of pressure behind her.  
Change “It” to “I”

I wondered if he would proud  
Add “be” after “he”

Some of those might have been chapter 46

—

chapter-47-offers/

not the greenskins tossed used to blunt charges and the levies sent to die storming walls.

Either remove “used” or change it to “out”

I don’t think well deep enough in Creation to throw those down that would convey

Add “there’s a” after “think”

Aisha leaned it.

Change “it” to “in”

—

chapter-48-interrogation/

or the stone around it’s people’s neck

Remove the apostrophe in “it’s”

AVR

More typos (in this chapter, not previous)

Diaobolist,

Diabolist,

fuck us over form

fuck us over from

the Due one was one

the Due was one

for he moment,

for the moment,

Her casualties had the Battle

Her casualties at the Battle

had -but

had – but

It is one of the reasons the Watch has not been able to grow more numerous but not more powerful over the centuries.

(One of the ‘not’s should be deleted. I’m not sure which.)

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Is Cat really sure this crisis isn’t beyond the Woe? I think she should probably get Black & Team helping on this. Akua seems like a much greater threat than the White Knight, who is much more distractable.

[muffinfluffer](#)

Spelling error:

"It find it unlikely," Hierophant said, "that Deoraithe mages could undo the work of a Named practitioner of Akua Sahelian's skill."

Correction:

"I find it unlikely," Hierophant said, "that Deoraithe mages could undo the work of a Named practitioner of Akua Sahelian's skill."

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## Chapter 49: Hearsay

*"Truth is a lie grown old and beloved."*

– Soninke saying

The woman sitting in my tent I had fully expected, but the fragrant pot of tea set on the table I had not. Not for the first time I wondered how deep the rabbit hole went: how deeply had the Empress infiltrated the Fifteenth, that she could see water boiled and a tea set put down in my own godsdamned tent? As for Malicia herself, I offered her a nod before plopping down in the seat across from hers. The meat-puppet of the woman who ruled about a quarter of the continent poured me a cup of pale steaming tea, adding two blots of sugar and a silver spoon to the saucer before handing it to me. I was long past being surprised at her knowing details about me, but that she'd taken the time to learn how I took my tea was a nice touch.

"How was your day, darling?" Her Dread Majesty Malicia, First of Her Name, asked me with a sweet smile.

I winced, well aware that she was putting forward that very domestic image purely to screw with me for her own entertainment. As long as she didn't start massaging the back of my neck I'd cope.

"Well, this afternoon I pretty much scared the Duchess of Daoine into telling me a secret older than the Kingdom of Callow," I said. "I put it under the seal by your authority too. No one but Masego and I are ever going to know the details."

I stirred the tea before putting down the spoon on the table – which even with my botched etiquette lessons I knew was quite unmannerly – and took a sip. Huh, tasted different than the

Ashuran stuff. Closer to Aisha's brews, though the taste was clearer. The Empress smiled.

"Ah, hedging your bets," she said. "You do not want the knowledge in the Tower's records, lest it be misused decades from now."

Pretty much, yeah, though I refrained from agreeing out loud. I wasn't sure I'd trust Black with the knowledge that there was that kind of juicy leverage on Daoine up for grabs, much less whatever murderous clown might be succeeding the lot of us whenever our work inevitably caught up to us. Masego would keep quiet, I knew. He'd been raised to respect symbols like the Tower's seal and he wasn't exactly the gossiping type to start with. I doubted Kegan would trust the son of the Warlock to do anything at all, but she'd just have to deal with it. I'd needed Hierophant in the loop to have a chance of this not ending in the ruination of Callow. Which, in all fairness, it still might. One on one I'd bet on myself against Akua, but she'd had a long while to prepare. For a mage, especially one as powerful as her, that made a difference. Liesse was going to be the greatest slaughterhouse of my young but bloody tenure as the Squire.

"So," I said. "Not going to ask me what terms Diabolist offered?"

The Empress sipped at her own cup, taken plain.

"Shall I guess?" she said, amused. "The queenship of Callow, naturally. Anyone trying to turn you would begin with this. It would have to be paired with a threat that promises to either destroy this land or ruin it, lest you dismiss her from the onset."

Elegantly, Malicia tapped a finger against the table.

"She will have been serious in her attempt," the Empress assessed. "A personal touch as well, then. A full ritual to unshackle your former paramour, perhaps, or healing for your recently wounded legate. Her spies should be capable of sending word of that in time for the offer being made."

I drank deeper from the cup. She'd been right on the nose for all of it, not that I'd expected any less. Dread Empress Malicia had been doing what Akua was trying to for over forty years, better and against more dangerous opponents.

"She went for Nauk," I said. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised you know all about Kilian."

"Did you really think you would be able to wield so much power in my name without your weaknesses being thoroughly investigated first, my dear?" the Empress chided. "If there were means available to remedy her state that did not break your principles,

I would have seen it done already – if only to remove a way to pressure you.”

So, confirmation even someone with Malicia’s resources and frankly ludicrous sorcerous archives couldn’t find a way to help Kilian without ritual sacrifice. I’d been considering asking a favour there to sidestep the issue entirely, and was almost relieved it wouldn’t be possible. Owing a favour to the likes of the Empress was not something to undertake lightly. It left Warlock, maybe, but that wasn’t much better. *And if I must make bargain with the Sovereign of the Red Skies, Nauk comes first.*

“I did not come to speak of the Diabolist, though I expect we shall,” Malicia said. “I have news from the south.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Is Black finally done murdering his way to a settlement?” I asked. “The situation in Callow could use his special touch, I’ll admit.”

The Empress paused, and my eyes sharpened. I’d never seen her visibly choose her words before, but I was near certain that was happening before my eyes. *Shit. What went wrong?*

“Amadeus was defeated,” Malicia said. “Though Procer has not spread its influence to the League, that achievement was not his doing. A Hierarch was elected even as Nicae fell to the Tyrant of Helike’s armies.”

“He lost to the White Knight?” I said. “Fucking Hells, I thought he was green. How did he manage that?”

“I am given to understand there was betrayal on Helike’s part, but that the foremost architect was an old acquaintance of yours,” the Empress said. “The Wandering Bard, under a different name.”

I frowned.

“She was a pest,” I said. “And dangerous, I won’t say otherwise, but definitely not in the league you’re describing. A second-stringer like the Bumbling Conjurer, with a sharp grasp on her powers and limitations.”

“As of Amadeus’ last report, ‘Aoede of Nicae’ has made it on the Red List,” the Empress murmured. “You have not been introduced to it yet, I believe. It is a list of names circulated among the Eyes of the Empire, of individuals that must be assassinated whatever the cost should opportunity be presented. She shares the distinction only with Cordelia Hasenbach and Klaus Pappenheim, at the moment.”

My tea was cooling, so I gulped down a mouthful as I marshalled my thoughts. Black had been sent to the Free Cities to make sure nothing happening there gave Procer and excuse to start a Crusade, and it looked like that had been accomplished even if not by his hands. It was, unfortunately, made moot by the fact that Diabolist had a bucket of red in hand and was determined to paint a big target all over the Empire's face.

"He's all right, though," I stated, almost a question.

I refused to believe the Empress would have been so casual about this if my teacher was dead. I had only a vague grasp on the relationship between those two, but there was a great deal of trust and affection there. Frankly, I would have believed they were a couple if Malicia wasn't strictly interested in tits and Black pretty much indifferent to anyone not called Ranger.

"He was severely beaten, but not wounded," the meat-puppet said. "I would not call him 'all right', regardless. Captain was killed fighting a heroine."

I let out a sharp breath. Fuck. I'd always liked Sabah. She'd been the most reasonable of the Calamities in a lot of ways, and ever since the day I'd met her she'd acted like some sort of giant warrior aunt to me. *And I knew her for two years and change. The Calamities were together for over four decades.* I'd only rarely seen them together, but they'd been a family. They'd be grieving her for years.

"He must be wretched," I said.

"And coming north as quickly as he can as of a month ago, along with Warlock and Scribe," Malicia said. "Be warned, Catherine."

My fingers clenched.

"*Don't you fucking try that,*" I snarled. "He wouldn't hurt me. Not even at his worst."

The Empress looked at me, and for a heartbeat I forgot this was a body she possessed. The woman I'd seen on the throne that night had come again, cold empire made flesh.

"I love that man," Malicia said, and the calm of her voice could be called anything but savage, "in a way I doubt you will ever love anyone, Catherine Foundling. He has been part of my soul since we were children looking at the stars. Do not ever believe that whatever paltry affection you lay at his feet is but a pale shadow of mine."

I flinched.

"I have never seen him like this," the Empress said. "Whatever the Wandering Bard did, it wounded what is at the core of him. This goes deeper than pride or what he felt for Sabah – he is as a raw, bare nerve."

"So he'll go cold," I said. "I've seen him like that before. It's terrifying, but not dangerous to either of us."

"*Think*, Catherine," the Empress coldly said. "For all that he arms himself in logic, underneath still lives the sixteen-year-old boy who watched Nefarious flee and felt only disgust. If he'd never been at the Fields..."

She shook her head.

"It doesn't matter," she dismissed. "Every Named is crystallized from a single moment and that was his. What you should worry of is that his judgement has been impaired. He will serve the sword to anything in Callow that he deems to threaten Praesi hegemony."

"All that's left is Diabolist," I said. "And he's welcome to wield a sword there, if he gets to her first."

"Be warned," Malicia repeated quietly.

The tone was solemn, and had me doubting. I actually hated her a little bit in that moment, because no matter if this was true or not it remained that she had the ability to make me doubt one of the pillars my life relied on. That alone was enough to harden distrust, made worse by the awareness that I needed her. Her support and her help, so that what I meant for Callow was anything but failure.

"So there's a Hierarch," I said, bluntly changing the subject. "Is that going to be a problem?"

"The man bears it as a Name," the Empress said. "As did his sole predecessor. He is a career diplomat for Bellerophon, called Anaxares."

"Bellerophon's the easternmost city, right?" I frowned. "The one that elects its rulers."

Democracy, it was called. There was a part of that that appealed to me – letting people choose their own way – but I'd never really bought into the notion. People were dumb, broadly speaking, and mobs even dumber. For all that I'd acquired a distaste of nobility, filling a hall with drunk tradesmen and asking the lot of them to make laws was no way to rule a country. Someone had to hold the reins, or all you got was bickering and indecision. Just because I believe that place shouldn't be inherited didn't mean it should be carved up and handed off to a hundred thousand strangers out in the streets.



"The Hierarch was prisoner to the Tyrant of Helike since the beginning of the war in the south, and the Tyrant seems to have been instrumental in arranging his election," Malicia said.

"We've yet to acquire a full profile on him, since infiltrating Bellerophon has always been... difficult. What little we've seen of him is puzzling. He seems aggressively opposed to taking any action at all in his function as head of the League."

"He wouldn't participate in a Crusade, then," I said.

"It seems unlikely," the Empress said. "I would not commit to an answer without deeper study."

"Good," I grunted. "If we don't have to worry about an army sailing up the Hwaerte, then I just need to put down Diabolist quickly and lock down the Vales hard enough Procer thinks twice about invading."

If the First Prince managed to rope in the Thalassocracy it was possible they'd try to land armies in Praes, but I actually rather hoped they did. That land was death on invaders. Between the Wasteland and the Hungering Sands it was more or less impossible for an army to live off the land there, and every major Praesi city was filled to the brim with nasty surprises for anyone meaning to try their walls. Even at the peak of the crusader kingdoms, the authority of the kings had not held further than a few miles away from the cities they ruled. And even then they'd not conquered the whole of Praes. Wolof had badly broken the army trying to take it, and neither the Northern Steppes nor the Grey Eyries had ever come under crusader rule. If Cordelia Hasenbach tried to take Praes from the coast, she'd find the region a bottomless hole swallowing her men and coin. Crusades always ended when they got too costly, half a dozen failed runs at the Kingdom of the Dead had taught Calernia as much.

"And so we return to Akua Sahelian," the Empress said.

I grimaced.

"She got her hands on something called the Still Water project," I said. "I'm guessing you know what that is. I'll have a hard time ever forgetting."

Malicia sighed. It was, for her, an unusually human gesture.

"I told Wekesa the trials were a liability," she said. "But he was adamant. Argued it would revolutionize understanding of rituals."

"Did it?" I asked.

"In a manner of speaking," she conceded. "After I decreed the matter to be under seal, he largely abandoned the avenue of research. What he learned before that would allow us a fighting chance against the Dead King, should he ever wage war upon us."

I raised an eyebrow.

"And that's considered likely?"

"The Empire has been in conflict with the Kingdom of the Dead in past centuries," the Empress said.

"I'm pretty sure I'd remember that," I said. "That kind of mess would be worth a page in the history books."

"You will find almost no record of them," Malicia said ruefully. "An attentive historian can find a period of twenty-five years between the reigns of Dread Emperor Pernicious and Dread Empress Maleficent the Second that is unaccounted for. The three Secret Wars were waged through the Hells, a vanity project that was an attempt to seize the Dead King's infernal dominion. An invasion through a hellgate in Ater was so imminent after the third that the woman who would become Maleficent II called on a pair of demons to erase most of a Hell and the previous two decades with it."

I let out a low whistle. I disapproved of fucking with the fabric of Creation on a general basis, even the parts that smelled of brimstone, but I had to admit that Maleficent had gone above and beyond in getting rid of the mess on her hands.

"Setting aside a revelation that will be haunting my nightmares in months to come," I said. "I have to ask – how many of those other continent-shaking horrors do you have locked up in the Tower? Because, without being arrogant, I think I can put the fear of the Gods in the Principate. But if the shoes keep dropping, they won't care about how many people I've stabbed. They'll be in for a death match."

"Four," Malicia said. "None of which are in danger of being revealed, as they never made it past the theoretical stage. Two inherited, two of Wekesa's making and dependant on him being alive."

Well, fuck me. There'd been a lot of nights lately where I had that sliver of doubt about whether I'd made the right choice in working within the Empire instead of against it. Wondering if by choosing to be a villain I'd ensured all the ruin that had come to Callow since. That put most of the doubts to rest, because I knew better than to believe Black would not have pulled the trigger if he was facing a victorious rebellion with foreign backing. My teacher had picked a soft embrace for Callow because he'd thought it to be the way to bring it into the Empire that

would lead to the least resistance. I was not fool enough to delude myself into believing he would not turn to harsher means should it fail.

"I'll admit to some disquiet over that," I said. "It's not that Emperors as a rule are murderous pricks that would use those given half an excuse, but yes it is in fact exactly that."

"The resources involved are significant," the Empress said. "None of them are minor projects, and we both know how large developments such as these tend to end."

I didn't really consider 'don't worry about it, a hero would probably take care of that if it came down to it' to be a valid response, but I wasn't exactly in a position to pursue the subject at the moment. It might be worth bringing it with Black later. He had a bone-deep hatred of those kinds of weapons that might get my foot in the door as far as he was concerned, but that pragmatic streak cut both ways. He might want to keep those in the vault for a rainy day.

"There's going to be massive casualties," I told her after a moment. "She implied she can pull Still Water on the entirety of the people inside Liesse. That's at least a hundred thousand undead, and a battle won't clean all of those up. There'll be spill in the countryside."

"The Legions of Terror are versed in peacekeeping operations," the Empress noted. "And a visible common enemy has uses."

The Legions of Terror are versed in peacekeeping operations. Gods, there was a sentence to give a farmer the shivers.

"This is going to end up blamed on Praesi, Malicia," I bluntly said. "The Legions cleaning up afterwards won't win a lot of love when it comes from the massacre of a hundred thousand civilians at the hands of the Wasteland's favourite daughter."

"Public sentiment is already being prepared," the Empress said. "Your visibility of late is not without impact."

Ah. They were going to point at me and say here's the good girl, she beat the bad girl and would you look at that she's wearing our colours. Aren't you all glad the Tower's in charge? Lowered taxes for everyone. *I'm not sure that'll be enough, but if Procer comes knocking at the gate Callowans might just pick the devil they know. Especially if the devil just named one of their own vicequeen, with pretty knights riding at her back.* I was getting rather tired of the feeling my interlocutor had been three steps ahead of me the whole time, but I doubted it would end anytime soon.

"I have a hypothetical to speak of," I said.

"I am listening," Malicia said.

"Now, let's say there's this girl and she's not all that good at scheming," I said. "Hasn't got the knack for it. But she learned to read forces in movement, so to speak, and looking at the last year she noticed a few things."

The Empress studied me openly, and did not speak.

"The girl's been hacking away at moving targets this whole time and until recently never had time to breathe," I said. "But she does now, and trying to look at the year from a different seat she saw a few oddities."

I waved my wrist lazily to elaborate.

"Like Akua being able to amass the reagents for Still Water without calling down Hells on her head," I said. "Or importing so many little trinkets through southern Callow unimpeded. Now, this girl's people are green. No surprise they missed those things. But there's two people who should have been keeping an eye on the situation. One gets a pass, since he was away. The other, though? The other's absence of movement is *intriguing*."

"I am curious," Malicia said. "What do you believe this other would have to gain, by allowing the breadbasket of her empire to be devastated?"

"See, that's the part that got the girl at first," I said. "Then she thought, you know what's the problem with Callow? It's got all this farmland, but it's full of stubborn Callowans. It'd be much easier if a chunk of them were gone. You could have Praesi farm there instead."

The Empress said nothing.

"But then the girl thought that was too heavy-handed," I mused. "Measures like that could have been taken long ago and weren't. So what was to be gained, yeah? It occurred to her, then, that she was still thinking in the present. The wrong sort of game. Now, looking ahead, you know what might be useful for this other? Callow strong enough to fight the Principate, but too weak to make waves. And there's this image, too. Of the girl putting steel into Akua Sahelian's throat until she chokes on her blood, and how that'll make her popular with some people."

My eyes hardened.

"Puzzled her at first, since the other would lose a few feathers from the whole affair, but it makes a twisted sort of sense," I murmured. "If Callow's behind the girl and the girl is behind the Tower, well, all sort of troubles go away."

"And in this hypothetical, what would the girl say to the other?" Malicia asked.

"That now's not the time to bare knives," I said. "But that if anything like that was pulled again there would consequences, and that lately she'd gotten quite good at killing."

The Empress idly turned her cup.

"I believe this girl you speak misunderstands a few things of the other's methods," she said. "You see, unlike her fellow she does not believe a war with Procer is winnable. It is one of the few points on which they dissent, and she has gone to great lengths to delay and even attempt to prevent such a war from occurring."

*I wouldn't enable Diabolist if what she was cooking up brought a Crusade on our heads,* I took that to mean. Believable, though months of growing doubts weren't going to be quieted by a few offhand sentences spoken by one of the most skilful liars in Creation.

"That's a little worrying," I said. "Considering that war is around the corner."

"The man you spoke of spent a lifetime preparing for it," Malicia said. "It is, in his eyes, the culmination of everything he has ever done. To win it would validate all that he has fought for. One might say he is unable to envision this war *cannot* be won, for it would be contrary to who he is."

"And she thinks he's been blinded by that," I said. "I'm not sure it matters, at this point. The war's coming regardless."

"It's an interesting puzzle, isn't it?" she mused. "How does one win a war that one is fated to lose?"

"And there's an answer?" I asked.

Dread Empress Malicia smiled beautifully.

"Why, you never fight it at all."

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### [erraticerrata](#)

First update of the month, so extra chapter. Titled "Fledged", it's from the POV of Archer.

In the Extra Chapters tab as per usual, link for the lazy:

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/12/04/fledged/>

*JC*

Last piece of dialogue was extremely awkward.

Lots of errors in general.

Still, glad to see things are progressing.

*Kingbob12*

God damn, what a pair of chapters. Time with the Ranger and a soon to be Archer, and Cat and Malicia spend some time sharpening Iron. Fantastic.

*danh3107*

Never fight at all huh, Malicia you old spider.

*stevenneiman*

Nah, that's Tenebrous you're thinking of.

*Ruduen*

Just finished reading this one – solid chapter. It's good to see just how much more she's learned to try to follow the schemers by now.

*Engineer*

So much wow. Such win. Black is tilted.

I pray to the God Below and the God Above, his sovereign majesty EE who masterfully crafts worlds and characters with but a whim and a pen, That this book ends with the conclusion of the fight with Diabolist.

I don't think I'd be able to survive waiting a month for that fight.

*Dainpdf*

I hadn't thought of it in those terms, but that is the perfect term for it.

*maresther23*

I don't know why I find the "talking" chapter more terrifying than the action ones.

*Shequi*

Because Malicia is very very scary indeed.

*Shequi*

I wonder if Akua actually has the reagents she thinks she does, or if she just has something that appears to be them until the very last moment?

*Nafram*

And now I'm really worried about Amadeus. Damn you Wandering Piece of \*\*\*\*

I hope that he overcomes this, that Amadeus manages to settle the score with her and lives to see Evil truly win

*Engineer*

Sadly, Black is on the Way out. The Calamities will now die off one by one. There's no place in the Story for them anymore. Captain was the First to go. Ranger is M.I.A. Her death was the Pivot in the story of the Calamities. But there story has lost weight now. This is Cat's story. The Woe are the second generation of Calamities.

The Woe are a villainous group and in a preceding Chapter Quote it is stated that Villains don't get torches passed to them, they need to rip it from the corpses of their predecessors.

Every member of The Woe is an analogue of the Calamities.

If Black was still on his game, he had a chance of subverting this Fate. As it stands Amadeus of the Green Stretch is tilted. If Malicia says he's off his game. Then he's off his game. He's fate is sealed as are the Calamities.

*Letouriste*

malicia is also off the game buddy.we know her plan to not fight against procer will fail.

Black plan to kill his friend(including malicia?),indirectly or directly for helping cat toward greatness.

If someone isn't losing touch here,I bet this is malicia

*Letouriste*

is\*

*Porkman*

"You see, unlike her fellow does not believe a war with Procer is winnable".

This doesn't make sense grammatically.

*d\_o\_l*

I think I understand what Malicia's plan is. If it's Procer vs Praes, Praes is fated to lose. But if Malicia can instead frame it as Procer vs Callow, the entire story suddenly changes.

*maresther23*

I think she is going for MAD (which tells you a lot of her character and the situation that made her). Given the page quotes it will probably fail. The big question then is what the Hell is Bards plan and if Black and Malicia can craft a story using Catherine that destroys her narrative.

*MetruX*

It has been said in a previous chapter, I think a side chapter, actually. Her plan is simple: Akua has something so strong and vile that the principate would fear confronting it, and thus stay away after malicia takes it for herself. It think it will still fail, but that's her plan to not fight.

*Gunslinger*

Vote for the guide on topwebfiction.com if you can, let's take the top positions by storm

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

*Dainpdf*

Malicia is juggling with knives here. I don't think she'll go out too soon, since Cat hasn't had her as a mentor too long yet, but... She's bound to get herself cut sooner or later.

*Gunslinger*

The warning about Black is interesting, wonder what role he's going to play in the coming future. He's not going to side with the diabolist, but I wonder if he's going to provoke Procer. Give him a chance to win and regain his pride

*Engineer*

Things like Pride don't matter much for the Black Knight.

I have a sense that he will be far crueler against the Tyrant and The First Prince than he normally would be. We already glimpsed the Carrion Lord during the Hanging of Summerholm rebels.

I think he'll be like that for the remainder of his short life.

This will probably also set up the story where Cat will eventually be forced to put her Mentor down and take his Name. Black will be ruthless now. The dominoes are stacked, the Final



push needed for him to go off the Deep End is for Ista to have killed the Ranger. Which is very likely seeing as all the Calamities need to die for The Woe to truly take up the role of the Villains in the story.

*Letouriste*

I think he still control himself though.i think highly of him.i think everyone still underestimate him,both us readers and the characters.

*usernamebco*

Black is all about pride. Specifically, hubris. For evidence of that look at the chapters from his pov where he's all hung up on his superior perspective. He's trying to play heaven, and thinks he can beat them at their own game. For all that he's more enlightened than the previous generations of Stupid Evil he's still an old school villain at heart and hasn't grasped that the only way to win is to flip the board.

Like Cat basically holding Creation hostage to get the Summer Queen to capitulate.

*Shequi*

Slightly surprising that they don't bother to discuss Akua's claiming of a throne, which is essentially a declaration of rebellion against the Tower.

*Letouriste*

So? Her rebeling is not a surprise to either of them.that's important for the story but they know she will lose.

*Letouriste*

Hum...malicia want a weapon strong enough for avoiding war.We know though.we know that story is bond to happen because a war against procer will be epic and because we already got little hints about that in these aisha citation.Malicia is wrong and she has sacrificed 100000 people for that...actually what liesse is doing now will attract a war(still water near the frontier etc...) I struggle to understand her schemes here.i'm of black opinion here

*Letouriste*

Hum...what are the probabilities black is using his grief for bluffing malicia? Maybe he show more than he feel and use that for a plot,his agenda

*maresther23*

I don't think he is that kind of person. He is really very very loyal to his friends. I actually think that when he talks of hurting them is more in the "my absence will hurt you" than the classical Evil "I will betray you"

*MetruX*

Well, he already said he has everything planned for Cat to succeed him, even if his friends must die for it. Well, not said, it was he with himself, but still, a statement. He won't even see it as betrayal.

[shieldredblog](#)

First time I've seen hints of Malicia being on the way out. Reading this chapter I think it's possible we get a Dread Emperor Black. Not likely, but possible.

Because:

- 1) There is going to be a war with Procer so Malicia is wrong.
- 2) She straight up lied to Catherine about wanting to wound Callow with Diabolist's weapon and we know from Black that lying to junior Villains is a bad idea, it just feeds the story of them replacing you.
- 3) The only way for Black to survive his Fate or Catherine's rise is to stop being the Black Knight.

*Keyen*

You are wrong, the question was about Still Water and I think Malicia was sincere here. The thing Malicia was discussing with Black was the other "mega engine of Doom" which is still not revealed yet.

Anyway, still betting on Scribe = Assassin, still 0 mention of both of them in the same sentence by any of the Calamities/Malicia. We know Assassin was in the Free Cities, and yet nobody talks about him coming back.

*Burnsy*

In the Conspiracy bonus chapters Scribe refers to Assassin in a way that implies they have something of a rivalry about who can pull off the most sinister backstage murders. Also refers to Assassin as 'he'.

It's possible Scribe was obfuscating or there's some split personality shenanigans going on, but honestly in that case why bother even bringing Assassin up? There was no-one around worth playing for, so I'd say they're separate people.

Personally, I think Assassin's first appearance in story was the servant who was in Cat's room when she woke up from her first name dream. Based off the fact that she had to choose

to be a villain, she could have woken up a hero. In that case, he would have been there to determine if she'd chosen good and then murder her before she had a chance to escape and become the COLOSSAL pain in Black's ass that the hero version of Cat would have been.

*Fern*

iirc when malicia was referring to the mega engine of doom she was talking about whatever the hell akua is cooking up

*Keyen*

@Burnsy: You are not wrong, the only hole in my theory is the Conspiracy chapter remark.

Still, the whole Scribe business is way, way, way, way too suspect. I mean, she doesn't do anything which deserve the "Scribe" Name (no aspect related to it, etc), does things purely related to Assassin (can appear/disappear, can silent the noise around herself and other (how the fuck it relate to be a scribe), and the list is fucking huge).

The whole paperwork business is exactly the same Hakram is doing for Cat.

*Unmaker*

I don't think Scribe = Assassin. The author has said that Assassin already had screen time. In the earliest chapters, when Black Knight was sparring with Captain, there was a legionnaire who was rather chatty and somewhat helpful to Catherine. He's my bet as to the 'real' Assassin.

*Engineer*

Well the gender thing is easily explained away by the fact that Thief had difficulty discerning whether Assassin was male or female in her encounter with it.

Given the nature of Assassin's role, it wouldn't be farfetched to think that he could change his appearances.

The only major spanner in the works is that we don't know if a person can have two Names. But what if two different personalities inhabit the same body? Like something similar to possession, where two separate entities occupy the same body with a "bleeding effect" where both can make use of the other's powers to a certain extent. It would certainly explain why Scribe has ninja like abilities, capable of sneaking up on everybody with supernatural ease. Hell you wouldn't even notice her presence unless she WANTS you to. Which is the PERFECT aspect for an Assassin to have.

Like Harry said in HPMOR, real assassins don't look like Assassins; they look like Accountants (Scribes) before they kill you.

Double possession is a thing. Look at Captain's case. Sabah is separate from the Beast yet they inhabit the same body.

*Keyen*

Scribe doesn't have two Names. Scribe is not a Name to begin with. It's just Assassin doing paperwork, exactly like Hakram. Names come from a will of something, and I doubt Eudokia woke up a morning "Hey, I want to dedicate my life at doing Black paperwork, gimme a Name plz".

Honestly, I can't believe one second Assassin would be the Lt Abase or (seriously?) the servant when Cat woke up. I mean, it's not even a good cover. The other Black Guards would instantly know, and this kind of information can be extracted, and I doubt an Assassin can see himself as a soldier (the salute, etc). Scribe is an excellent cover, make perfect sense (seriously, give me ONE moment they talk to/of/ask Assassin to do something. Never. Not even once. Every single time Assassin is used, it was because Black asked Scribe.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

I think Malicia's "Let Diabolist use her Super-Weapon once, then steal it. For use as a Procer deterrent" plan is fundamentally flawed for a single reason.

Cordelia wouldn't still go to war because she was afraid of Malicia going all Triumphant and using the Super-Weapon to get conquest-happy. I think Cordelia is savvy enough to have a read on Malicia's "I'd rather rule Praes forever, than the continent for a year" mindset.

Cordelia would plunge the continent into war, whatever the cost of facing the Super-Weapon, because she KNOWS....sooner or later, it won't be Malicia on the throne anymore. When Cordelia asks herself "What would a flying-citadel-powered-by-child-sacrifice-type Dread Emperor/Empress do with such a Super Weapon?" That all the possible answers to that question are answers that make Cordelia want to strike while Procer and whatever allies they can bring to bear can win.

Deterrents only work if the thing you're using to deter is scarier than the consequences of not being deterred.

*Burnsy*

I find the chapter title interesting. Hearsay, firstly, is a legal term. And legal terms as chapter titles have primarily been used for the White Knights interludes. Considering all the implications about Amadeus being off his game and close to death, I'd say that's indicative of something. A meta way of saying: "the White Knight is coming".

Second, Hearsay is usually inadmissible in court because it's essentially "x says that y says", it relies on one person speaking for another. Here we have Malicia obliquely warning Cat that Black might decide that she's a threat and try to eliminate her.

But what evidence do we actually have. It could happen, sure. But Black doesn't seem to have given much of a shit what Cat does so long as she does it contributes towards his end goal. So what could cause him to turn on Cat.

Maybe because, when he shows up and learns what Cat's been up to, she's acting strangely. She's on edge. Tense. Keeping secrets. She seems ready for a fight. Why would she be acting like that unless she had something to hide? Unless she was working against him. And suddenly Malicia's words become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

*werafdsaew*

"She shares the distinction only with Cordelia Hasenbach and Klaus Pappenheim" Why isn't Augur on the list I wonder? Without her Assassin could have already gotten to Cordelia.

*Unmaker*

Good question. We know Named heroes are much harder to kill – it basically takes a counter-Story or major sorcery to do. So maybe Malicia doesn't give "assassinate a force of nature" assignments to anyone but other Named.

*Draeysine*

Probably because Augur will only speak to someone worth helping, and she is only a threat as long as someone like that is listening to her.

*Trickster315*

"Every Name is crystallized by a moment" Black's was watching the chancellor flee. I wonder what Cat's moment was, maybe killing the governor? Unmaking both fey courts at once or maybe she hasn't experienced it yet.

*stevenneiman*

Typo thread:

"Black had been sent to the Free Cities to make sure nothing happening there gave Procer and excuse to start a Crusade"  
"period of twenty-five years between the reigns of Dread Emperor Pernicious and Dread Empress Maleficent the Second that is unaccounted [four->for]"

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

It occurs to me that Akua wouldn't have revealed that she's in on the Still Water secret if she thought she'd ever actually use it. She has certainly improved on it in some way that preparing for her to use Still Water would be useless against whatever she's actually doing. Still Air, maybe, or using demons instead of alchemy to bypass the Due, or her Name somehow.

What are her three Aspects again?

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

"Because, without being arrogant, I think I can put the fear of the Gods in the Principate"

Oh Catherine, you are probably going to have to be arrogant to pull that off xD

### [vuthuha912](#)

Ah. This is the reason why Black is going to fail in his pursuit of a better Praes, he has no comrade who shares his priority, not really. He thinks that Malicia does and maybe she did at the beginning. However, playing with politic for so long or just being in the Tower have made her lose her sense of danger. She made riskier and riskier moves and one day it is going to backfire horribly for everyone on her side. Funding or tolerating Akua when you know she is planning something nefarious was beyond stupid. Incredibly irresponsible. Don't let a child have a knife. Akua is a horrible person to give any ounce of resource or authority. She is going to shoot everyone and herself with her stupidity.

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## **Chapter 50: Preparation**

*"Doubt is the mother of failure."*

– Dread Emperor Terribilis I, the Lawgiver

In the end, it took me three days to get eyes on Liesse. Marshal Grem One-Eye had sent out mages as soon as the city was glimpsed

over the horizon, and my own mage lines kept coordinated with his own until we had four scrying links covering the major angles of the Diabolist's lair. What I saw did not bode well. The city had gone up with its walls largely intact and significant portions of the grounds under it and lost neither as it went down. The surrounding territory had been worked over with magic so that Liesse now stood atop a steep hill. Thousands were digging trenches and traps in the plains around it, working day and night without pause because they needed none. They were Callowans, but they were also dead. Without fanfare or a cackle, without a sound at all, Akua Sahelian had killed more of my people in a night than Black had throughout the entire Conquest. Men, women and children. The young and the old – Still Water drew no difference, and neither had she.

I'd been a viciously dark mood since I'd gotten proof of it, and the mood had only gone darker when I'd seen what she was up to. Devil-summoning arrays had been carved on the walls, large siege weapons like those of the Legions placed onto bastions and additional wards were made every hour to fortify the city against magical interference. Hierophant had already confirmed I couldn't open a portal directly within the walls, not that I'd ever seriously thought there was a chance of it. The Summer fae would not have dithered attacking her for months if they'd had that as an available option, and I was still much less skilled than they at using fairy gates. I disliked wasting time in Dormer, but Juniper had flatly informed me that after a brutal battle like the last one the men needed time to recoup and recuperate.

It wasn't just a matter of dealing with the wounded, though there'd been a great many of those. Our supplies had been running thin, and it was only Ratface's promised river barges coming through the city harbour filled with steel and goblin munitions that had the Legions in proper fighting fit again. Aisha had been a little less blunt in reminding me I'd had our troops going through forced marches and battles one after another for months, but no less firm. Even if it gave Akua time to dig in, the truth was that the Fifteenth simply hadn't been in a state to take the fight to her right away. As I saw to my house, Ranker and Kegan saw to theirs. The duchess kept to herself, but I saw almost too much of the old goblin for my tastes. It was her that suggested we had siege weapons of our own prepared in Laure and Southpool rather than rely on only our own, and when she began approaching the problem that way the Hellhound followed with aplomb.

For one, there were three legions in Holden under her mother that were sitting ducks unless I intervened. General Istrid had been sent there at my own order to prevent the Summer court from making a beachhead other than Dormer, and discharged that duty perfectly. But her twelve thousand men were now months away from the actual fighting, with a supply line that was chancy at best. Even if she began marching north immediately, she wouldn't be

able to reach Liesse before the battle was weeks past. Could I afford to allow twelve thousand veteran legionaries to sit over a strategically useless position while I fought Akua? No, I could not. Not if the assault on the city was going to be as brutal as I suspected.

The only question then, was where I would transport them. The gates allowed me to significantly quicken the logistics of assembling a host that was spread throughout Callow, but they weren't a perfect solution. For one, I needed to be with the moving armies. And much more importantly, I couldn't actually use Arcadia as a staging ground. Whether the terms of my bargain with the fae court would protect my soldiers when they weren't actually travelling was irrelevant, since that wasn't how gates worked from my end: whenever I made an entrance, there was a corresponding exit. I couldn't actually get out of Arcadia by another place, as far as I knew, and our previous alternative of having Hierophant use fae nobles as portal-openers was no longer an option. Our prisoners had all been rather forcefully released by the Summer Queen when she still bore that name. And, last of all the weaknesses, going through Arcadia still took *time*. It as a shortcut, not fucking teleportation, which as probably for the best. Even with the mantle of a Duchess on my shoulders I was pretty sure attempting teleportation of any kind would flat-out kill me.

And so, sitting with Marshal Ranker and General Juniper, we planned out our little shell game. Akua had eyes on us, we on her. The side that would have the advantage when the battle began was the one who'd hide the knives better. Callow had already been put under martial law long before I went south, and as things stood I was both vicequeen and highest-ranked Named remaining of the region. I was also wielding my authority with the explicit backing of Her Dread Majesty – there was not a single in person in my home who had solid ground to stand on in refusing an order of mine. Would that I could enjoy that power even a little: I had wanted nothing more than to have it since the age of thirteen, when I'd made the decision to start saving up for the War College. I couldn't, not when the first order I gave was for immediate muster of the city guard in Southpool, Ankou and Vale. There was immediate pushback, argument from the Callowan governors I'd overseen the very appointment of that none of those men were trained soldiers.

I ordered for them to come anyway. Southpool was on the weak end of the scale, with only five thousand, but Ankou's city guard traditionally served as militia when Procer attacked the Vales and even though the city was smaller it boasted eight thousand and better equipped. Vale was the largest of the three, and though it put up only six thousand men I sent Grandmaster Talbot to squeeze blood out of that rock. Vale had always been the heart of central Callow, and though no great trade city as an



agricultural one there were few equals to it on Calernia. There was wealth there, and though second-rate compared to the real wealthy cities of Callow it had historically been enough to support a great many soldiers and knights – some of the earliest chivalric orders had been founded there, they said. I left Talbot work his patriotic sorcery on the powerful of the city and another three thousand came out of that, including about a hundred knights. Gods, it was like those had been hiding under every rock. It was pleasing, in a way, that the governors were willing to fight for the people under their care when I would order those people to the grinder.

A shame I was not in a position to entertain their worries.

The place of muster for the city guards was set a little to the east of halfway between Southpool and Vale, which meant the Ankouans would have to pass south of Diabolist's lair and lose at least a week to it. Wouldn't matter, since I'd be busy ferrying Legions meanwhile. My options there had been more limited than I would have liked. The legions under Marshal Grem, for one, weren't going anywhere. I'd approached the subject of peeling off at least one, but the reports I'd been given in return were... stark. There'd been increasing skirmishes with the border principalities over the last months and Procer was massing soldiers in Bayeux. The Marshal's assessment was that if there was any large troop movement on the Empire's side, the Principate would try an assault on the Red Flower Vales. Fucking First Prince. It didn't matter if she was bluffing us or not, since we couldn't afford to chance losing the narrow valleys that would give us a fighting chance against Proceran invasion. The Wasteland wasn't going to be any help either. Malicia's meat-puppet had made it clear the legions in her backyard needed to stay there, to keep the highborn in line and more importantly keep the fucking mess Akua's mother had made in Wolof contained.

Much as I would have liked another twelve thousand soldiers, I couldn't blame the Empress for not pulling them out when the alternative was devils spilling out in the Wasteland. The only reinforcements from the Legions at hand were the same I'd sent into Holden, and they were nothing to sneer at. I'd met all the generals in command there – Istrid, Sacker and Orim – and all three had been through the crucible that was the Conquest, but more importantly the civil war before it. Almost every one of my highest tier of commanders in this campaign would be familiar with Praesi war tactics of the kind Diabolist was likely to pull. That knowledge wasn't as reassuring to have on my side as another ten thousand soldiers, but it might end up saving more lives. Already I winced at the notion of sending guards into the kind of madness Akua would have prepared for them. There was no choice. The usual voice in the back of my head that insisted there had been and I had made it saw itself buried. I would allow myself doubt and grief when the wars was done. Until then, all they

would so was slow me down in what had very clearly become a race of sorts.

Either Akua Sahelian would finish her scheme and break the Empire, or I'd mass enough strength to put her down.

There was a part of me, the same that had been taught by Black, that kept to the iron-clad belief that she would fail in the end. That whatever she was juggling would backfire on her, either because she'd but off more than she could chew or because I'd break her stride. But as the days passed, I had to concede it was a possibility I might fail. I couldn't quite manage to believe I would, but then I doubted any of the rulers Triumphant had crushed had thought they'd end up a note in the margins of history either. I knew better than most how dangerous Diabolist was, and how disparate the forces I was bringing against her was. There was advantage in that bastard mixture of Deoraithe, Callowans and Praesi I was leading. But there was weakness too. I failed, Hells even if I won but died winning... Well, I would be leaving behind me a mess that might be beyond salvaging. In rising to prominence I'd crossed a lot of lines and ripped open quite a few old wounds. None of that would be undone in the wake of my death, but I'd no longer be there to even try to guide the currents.

I wondered if Black had that same sense of cold fear, when he looked at the Empire. The ugly realization that a lot of what you'd built was dependent on you to remain functional, and that if some farmboy with a magic sword put six inches of steel through your throat it would bring ruin on hundreds of thousands. Recklessness, for all that it often cost me, had seen me win one uphill battle after another. Never without some of my blood spilled on the ground, but I'd forged victory out of being the only person in a fight willing to cross the line. Whether it was allowing my own death to get out of a Heaven-mandated defeat or lying my way to the contraptions of godhood, audacity had allowed me pull through situations that should have seen me dead or broken. But I could, I was coming to realize, no longer operate this way. Before all it took was for one gamble to fail, and the whole house of cards I had built around myself would come tumbling down. I'd gone out of my way to make myself, if not essential, then as close as anyone could be in Malicia's empire. But that cut both ways. *If I get myself killed, everything I bound to me suffers.*

I'd bound quite a few things to me, by now. Armies and institutions, even the very hierarchy that now ruled Callow. When you became someone of consequence, if only followed that your death would have those same consequences.

I'd never been good with fear. I'd always pushed through it by heading into the breach repeatedly until I stopped flinching,

steeling myself by taking the weakness as a personal insult. But this... this was no longer dealing with a fear of heights by standing at a rooftop's edge the way I had when I was a girl. If I slipped and fell, Callow went up in flames. It wasn't a fear for my own death as much as fear of what it would mean, and I was finding it much harder to push down. That was the problem with learning the currents that guided an empire from behind the scenes – you could never *unsee* it, after. It was not a pleasant thing admit I knew no other way to fight. Black had once told me I needed to start thinking ahead if I did not forever want to be fighting to the tune of my opponents, and I liked to think I'd learned how. To an extent. But it was one thing to sit with the Empress and plan the unmaking of the Summer Court, another to plan the steps of a waltz with the Diabolist. Fae had rules they could not break. They were, in some ways, predictable.

All that Akua had binding her was having been raised with all the blind spots of the old breed of Praesi villainy, and those weaknesses were not meant for *villains* to exploit. One slip and it was all over. I'd long become used to gambling with my own life, and once when I had been younger and more ignorant even gambled with Callow's fate through my clash against the Lone Swordsman. I was older now, and if not wiser at least a great deal more aware. If I threw the dice and they came up wrong, then from Harrow to Dormer my people suffered for it. *If there is no Named to use to bind Callow to the Empire, they start to use harsher methods.* I hated the thought, and the hesitation it brought with it. One of the old monsters who'd held the Tower had once said that the worst sin a villain could commit was to hesitate. She'd been right. I had won and kept winning because I had made a blade of temerity and struck out at my enemies with it. After a year of trying to keep Callow together in the face of slaughter and invasion, I wasn't certain how long I could keep doing that.

The thought came, unbidden, that this was not a coincidence. That Her Dread Majesty had uses for a hunting hound, but only so long as it could be leashed. And hadn't she done exactly that, by giving me the very same authority I asked for? I did not allow myself to think if it too much, not right now. I could spend months trying to discern the intent of the likes of the Empress and still end up grievously, hilariously wrong in my conclusions. *But.* I would, one of these days, sit with Hakram over a bottle and ponder this. Because it would have been arrogant to believe that the Empress had spent decades trying to suborn Callow with soft methods but would never try tactics that had proved so effective on me as well.

The itinerary that was ultimately settled on was simple. I would take Legate Hune and a detachment of two thousand into Arcadia, taking a fairy gate to Holden where we'd link up with General Istrid and her three legions. From there we'd take another gate

to the muster point north of Vale where the guards from the adjoining cities had been ordered to gather. Then I'd make one last trip south, to hopefully shave off a few weeks from my host's march to the north to assemble with the rest. I'd always taken Nauk with me on journeys like this, and the Gallowborne as well. One was unconscious and more than halfway into the grave, and there remained only five of the cohort of two hundred that had once made up the other. Aisha had already suggested I disband them and assemble another retinue, but I'd refused. They'd died for me, John and his men. I would not spit on that by replacing them before the moon had even finished waxing.

"Senior Mage Kilian will have to remain with the Fifteenth," Juniper said, "but her second should go with you. I want our own mages on the ground, to keep scrying in our house."

"We have to assume Diabolist can listen in on all of those," I grunted. "The Empress certainly can."

"Ratface made his own codes that differ from Legion protocols," Aisha said. "I would think that our conversations, at least, will be hard for her people to decipher."

"She'll still be expecting most our troop movements," I said. "The Callowans I ordered to muster were warned she might make a sortie, but that only takes us so far."

"I am not certain she will," Juniper growled. "There would be obvious benefits to hitting our forces before they're gathered, but the heart of her strategy remains to defend Liesse until she can deploy her ritual. She might not want to take the risk, considering you can pop out of Arcadia at any time to hit the city."

"Assuming she can't track me when I leave Creation," I said. "We don't know that she can't."

"I would not plan strategy around the assumption," the Hellhound conceded. "But overestimating an opponent is just as dangerous as the opposite. If we are too careful to guard against means she does not have, we uselessly limit ourselves."

I sighed.

"Yeah, true enough," I said. "Pinpointing exactly what she can do has proved to be something of a problem, but at the end of the day it doesn't matter that much. If we're too slow we're fucked anyway."

Juniper rasped out a laugh.

"Won't be the first time we fight against the hours as well as the enemy," she said. "I doubt it will be the last. You leave with dawn?"

"That's the plan," I said, and turned to Hune. "Your people will be ready?"

"Orders were already given," the ogre replied.

I looked away quickly, knowing if I kept staring anger would well up again. I had axes to grind with Hune, though I'd forced myself to keep my mouth shut about it. She'd done nothing that was against regulations, or outside her authority. Didn't make me any happier about it.

"Dismissed, then," Juniper grunted. "Catherine, a word?"

This hadn't been an official staff meeting, and so there were only four of us in the command tent. Aisha gave my general a warning look before following the ogre out.

"I'm listening," I told the orc.

"What the fuck is your problem?" she bluntly said. "You've been treating Hune like she ate your horse ever since Dormer. If you have something to say, say it. I'm her commanding officer."

My eyes hardened.

"You don't want to knock on this door, Hellhound," I warned.

"I just did, Foundling," she growled. "Out with it."

I'd gained enough control that the wood under my fingers did not freeze, but not enough it didn't fog as the temperature cooled.

"We had two trump cards to play, when taking a swing at the upper city," I said flatly. "The Watch and the knights. She sent both to the flanks against the Immortals instead bolstering my own push."

Juniper eyed me in silence.

"I get one," I said. "The Immortals were taking their tool. But if the knights had backed me, Nauk would be awake right now."

The Hellhound's lips curled into a snarl.

"If you were an orc, you'd be on the floor bleeding from the mouth right now," Juniper said, tone eerily calm. "And if you say anything like that ever again, I'll resign my commission."

My fingers clenched.

"Explain," I said through gritted teeth.

"She made a call," the Hellhound said. "As commander on the field. She did not do it lightly, or with unsound reasons. Just because you're angry Nauk got wounded does not give you the right to treat her this way. She isn't your friend, Catherine. She is *an officer in the Legions of Terror*."

"I took four hundred men when I advanced," I said. "You know how many came back."

"And she saved twice that many by sending our heaviest hitters against the Immortals," Juniper barked. "She made a tactical decision. It was the *right* decision, and I would have made the same. You had four Named with you, one way or another you were getting through. The others were expendable."

Juniper rose to her feet and paused when she passed me by, laying a hand on my shoulder.

"It's good," she said gruffly. "That you care. The Empress wouldn't. But you need to harden the fuck up, Catherine. We'll both have a lot of dead friends before this is over."

She left me to ponder that in the silent tent, eyes closed. Callowans had a lot of songs about the glory and righteousness of sacrificing yourself for the kingdom. I knew quite a few. None of them spoke of sacrificing those you loved though.

As always, the songs were thin gilding over the ugly truths of what I'd have to do.

---

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Wise words there Juniper, curious that Black also have the same weakness.

*Engineer*

Man Still Water is useful. Create an army of dead people that don't need to eat or sleep and can work 24/7. No overtime, meddling unions, medical or pension funds; just a bunch of dead guys that can follow simple instructions effectively.

I can totally see why the Dead King made Keter. I would do the same. With an entire continent.

*BryceWilliam*

you would murder an entire continent?

*naturalnuke*

Logistically speaking it's sound.

Politically this is why crusades and coalitions happen.

*NerfContessa*

That's why you make sure to make the heroes undead.

*Big Brother*

Like Nuke said, it is incredibly sound logistically. Not to mention, feeding an undead populace is much easier during and after a battle.

This is personal headcanon, but the fleshy undead like zombies and ghouls probably consume the flesh of the living to fuel the necromantic spell keeping them animated. After all, what better way to provide the energy of Death than from being eaten alive?

[daegone823](#)

The only problem would be the heroes that would rise against you in this universe evil actions that cause tragedy often lead to heroes rising against you. go ahead with your continent plan but the ensuing hero shenanigans will cause your plan to fail as evil always loses. vicious cycle.

*stevenneiman*

Undead have advantages, but they also have pretty severe limitations, especially the zombies that Still Waters creates. They might not need rest, but they also don't have human-level intelligence and I don't think they're a match for decently trained soldiers. Perhaps most importantly, they don't replenish like living citizens do, which means that unless you can spike the water supplies of other countries with more Still Water reagents despite them being prepared against the plan every conflict is going to cost mean losing a lot of undead that you'll only be able to recoup if you win. Not to mention that something like that would attract heroes like flies to a corpse even if you only zombify your own populace, and unlike the Dead King you wouldn't have any of the cool undead to back up your cannon fodder zombies.

*Death Emperor Nihilus I*

@Steve

I don't need them to be human level intelligent. Just need them to be able to follow simple instructions.

You're right about the problems regarding the water vector. Which is why I'd try to develop a contagious airborne variant of Still Water. Call it Dead Air. Airborne pathogens infect much more easily than water based vectors. I'll also try to tweak it to not just infect humans but animals and bugs as well. Especially bugs like flies or ants. Within a month Calernia would a continent of the dead.

The heroes can come with their crusades. In fact I welcome it. Their crusades is made by and large by average blokes susceptible to Dead Air's effects. Assuming the Angels don't give them some kind of BS buffed out poison res stats, they too will join the ranks of the Dead.

Should they manage to defeat me My fall back plan is to enact a ritual of such magnitude that the Keter's due would tear apart everything and everyone within a 41km radius. Also, the ritual is to weaken the boundaries between Creation and Space, so I can manifest a giant vacuum right above my kingdom. Either I'm winning or everybody is dying.

That would be my final fuck you to Creation. Sure some of those peskier hero types would survive but NOBODY will call it a true victory.

Hail to the Death Emperor Nihilus I! Long may the Dead dance with Living!

Mwahahahahahahahahaha!!!!

*Levi Kalden*

Bit then why even bother? To what means would you need what then is nothing more than a charade.

*Shequi*

Curious. Why did Akua trigger Still Water? As long as she didn't do so she had a threat to level at Catherine to stay her hand. Now she's used it she no longer has it, and she gave away her diplomatic group, the destruction of the mirror and the existence of her dimensional scrying artefact for... What, exactly? Some hastily dug fortifications that Catherine will destroy in the first minutes of the battle?

There's something more going on here.

*TideofKhatanga*

There was no threat to level at Catherine. The Squire had made it clear that, zombie apocalypse or not, she was going to stab Diabolist. Akua spent some ressources trying to turn a very competent commander to her cause but that was a side goal



compared to the objective of grabbing the throne by force. When that failed, she went on with Plan A.

[poignardazur](#)

I'm pretty sure she didn't care a lot about her mirror or her diplomatic group.

I'm guessing she gave away her dimensional scryer because she wanted to hold the Liesse citizens hostage as leverage on Cat. Except Cat made it clear she wouldn't let herself be manipulated, so Akua went ahead and killed everyone to fortify as soon as possible.

*haihappen*

Still Water was a threat, Cat was not threatened, so Akua had no reason not to use Still Water. Using it strengthens her position, gets rid of the civilians that could prove a liability.

The only drawback is international political pushback, and she aims to be above that sort of thing anyway.

Remember, Akua and her breed have no lines they would not cross.

[asherino](#)

lots of typos today:

- I knew better than most how dangerous Diabolist was, and how disparate the forces I was bringing against her *\*was*
- It as a shortcut, not fucking teleportation, which *\*as* probably for the best.
- When you became someone of consequence, *\*if* only followed that your death would have those same consequences.
- The Immortals were taking their *\*tool*.
- As always, the songs were thin\* gilding over the ugly truths of what I'd have to do.

*stevenneiman*

"Until then, all they would {do} so was slow me down"

"because she'd [but->bit] off more than she could chew"

"how disparate the forces I was bringing against her [was->were]"

"{If} I failed, Hells even if I won but died winning"

"It was not a pleasant thing {to} admit I knew no other way to fight"

"I did not allow myself to think [if->of] it too much"

"She sent both to the flanks against the Immortals instead {of} bolstering my own push"

*AshSlanabrezgov*

>you'll need the harden the fuck up

I might be wrong(English is not my native language), but perhaps proper form would be

>you'll need to harden the fuck up

I've seen that form being used here:

*Cyrrix*

Critique ahead, be warned:

I feel like the Guide has progressively become worse and is currently at its all-time low in terms of writing quality. The fae arc overall felt kinda weak and more like a plot device which was only thinly tied into the overall story.

There has been too much unneeded pointless escalation (Gods below this! Gods below that!) without any room for characters to breathe. Chapters like the one with the bonfire stand out so much because they were so dearly needed.

But it was too little too late.

Character beats that ought to hit home and sell Cat's (and others') motivations fall flat. I as a reader simply do not care about the supporting cast – here are some examples of that:

1. I didn't give one iota about Farrier dying. I basically knew nothing personal about him. Why should I care? Why should Cat care? We are in her head all the time. Other than: "leads my personal retinue" and "is a sort of a plot device spokesperson for the 'normal' soldier" he had no personality. Even his crush on Cat got deliberately flanderized into: Yeah, many soldiers under her command crush on her. -> that took personality away from him and made him into a stand-in plot figure for the faceless soldiers. But not his own person.

2. Who gives a shit about Nauk? Thousands died but suddenly we were supposed to believe that Cat would trade kingdoms and all those losses for this dude she did not even speak with for a full page of written dialogue in the \*entire Guide\*? What the hell?

3. Killian? This whole romance was so unexplored – and instead of exploring it more it basically got axed and has become such a trivial roundabout straw-man of a moral dilemma which kinda shames the whole romance subplot and the characters involved.

4. Today there was this stupidly silly reaction of the Hellhound: I paraphrase how I couldn't help but read that dialogue: "I am a General and I don't like how my President frowns at one of the Lieutenants and thus I do the only sensible thing: I threaten to beat up my president and throw my resignation (discarding the

duty to the country, not just the president!) in as well! Because dang thats the sensible thing to do here! Can't have the President make frowny faces at some other officers." Sure, she's an Orc and I tried to read it as an orc-y thing – but dang that was an overly dramatic, flat and silly reaction. Comedic at best. I do not think it was intended to be comedic though, which is kinda sad.

Maybe the author tried to pack too much plot into the story and it squeezed out everything else? Fey incursions and shenanigans in the Free Cities and then some Akua too! Oh my.

...

I think at this point I will wait and see how the second confrontation with Akua will play out and if it continues in the current direction I think I will withdraw my support on Patreon. Not because I am a spiteful asshole, but because I care. I think that two updates a week did not do this story any favours.

### *MetruX*

I honestly can't agree with any point you made, which is truly surprising, since most of the critique I've seen here is well thought and not just personal opinion.

The whole POINT of this arc is this rushing head-along without breather time, the epic of epic struggle that make the books, not because of one battle, but because of the whole situation. Farrier wasn't seen much, yes, but we also didn't see all, since there are a lot of time skips, even if on small doses like days or weeks. He was always with her, he slept on the room on the side, trained with her, gave counsel... Honestly, how could she NOT care about him?

Nauk was, since the beginning, the most fanatically loyal to Cat. If she said for him to cut his own throat, he would. He was there at the beginning, supporting her when he got hurt in the war games, he was there through all her battles, the first to call her warlord, the support she had on the reunions in the beginning, he went through all. If you don't care about him, I can only see you as a very cold person.

Killian... I can't completely disagree with you, but I can't agree either. It wasn't a Big Romance, this isn't a romantic story, after all. She was a fling, that because of mutual stress and respect grew out of proportions, it was all very natural, and they didn't have time to truly know each other deeply, thus when she saw her paramour was different from something she could accept, it ended. It was a natural and common thing, even if it could've been better and I, particularly, always thought she needed someone else for romance.

About Hellhound... She was like this, always. She sees Cat looking funny to one member of their old retinue, and asks about. She didn't threaten to resign for the look, but for the

explanation. Cat saw someone important to her get hurt, and she was blaming a commander for it, because she made a tactical decision. Hellhound is all about the winning tactics, and thus she couldn't accept Cat's blame, even though she agreed that it's important to care.

I can't talk for the author, but honestly, making this kind of patreon withdrawal threat... i can only see it as spitefull and forcing the author's hand, even though I wouldn't call it an asshole act, it's a very blunt try at manipulation, especially since you could have told him your critiques in private, but you chose to do it here, for all readers to see.

*naturalnuke*

So I'm not really trying to argue but you brought up some points that I wanted to put my take on.

So far everything that's happened has been logically sound, with an escalation we learned would be happening well in advance. As for why the deaths of Farrier and the wounding of Nauk are supposed to matter. They are narratively unimportant characters after the Fae arc. But, they are characters who have fought for and next to Cat early, who's problems and short comings we've seen Cat have to deal with or help them overcome.

But think about all the narrative things we've done so far, and how it fits in in-universe.

Their deaths matter because they stopped mattering to Cat. They weren't Named, and so they are props. Remember that whole conversation with the Bard way back when, where she was talking about redundancy in the party, narratively how speaking it meant either she or the bumbling conjurer would die? So she made little sub-plots and kept herself interesting?

How long has it been since you even heard Nauk or Farrier mentioned?

They stopped being important to Cats story, and so they became expendable. The only weight their lives had was to die or get injured and sever some of the last remaining connections with the 'squishy mortals', and she sent them into battle anyways.

Kinda agree on Killian, and as for Hellhound; it's more than an orc thing, she's had several times where she's said stuff along the lines of "get your shit together, I refuse to work under you if you don't" it's used more as emphasis 'hey Cat stop being dumb and realize you don't have your shit together' than her actually saying she's gonna leave. And as for your analogy; if the General was worried the grudge would have the 'president' in that scenario start contradicting that Lieutenants orders and fucking up plans, I'd sure hope there would be a talk.

A point I agree on is that it is all feeling a bit compressed and bloated, makes it harder to stick with the plot if every subplot is moving a mile a minute, and makes it seem a awkwardly paced.

*naturalnuke*

Repressing something: it's not that it feels bloated from the subplots, it's more subplots no longer get time to develop. Like, logically sound that Cat would be mad at Hune, that's who she is. But we had a paragraph to learn about it, and another to explore it, and one more to tie it up. And it's happened a few times, too much stuff to fit in all at once already and then even this point that is logical to the plot and needed to happen feels a bit, rushed? Not rushed, just too fast, it doesn't feel like it was shoved in, just that it could have used more time to develop than what was given. Kinda rushed I guess.

*naturalnuke*

Rephrasing\*

[erraticerrata](#)

While I don't usually answer criticisms in the comments, I'll make an exception this once since it stepped out of the bounds of 'opinions on the text'. I'll be frank: Patreon is voluntary. You're not forced to donate, and if you don't want to you certainly don't have to. Bringing whatever donations you've been making into this is pointless and somewhat insulting – you're essentially implying I should allow the Patreon revenue to dictate what story I write. Criticisms I always read, and if they feel relevant usually run by some trusted people to see if there's something there. That last paragraph you wrote made the post something other than criticism, and it's pretty telling you felt the need to add a preemptive defence of your character in it.

Anyways, there's no need to make a scene over this. I'll be keeping an eye on the comment thread and will delete entirely if it turns into name-calling or a flame war – I'm not interested in either of those filling the section

*Cyrrix*

Thanks for your reply.

My point with patreon was that I thought the story was better when you had time for one chapter a week. That reaching those patreon goals was detrimental to the quality of the writing – thats the point I am trying to make here.

If you think I did dictate your writing at any point in my critique outside the bounds of what critique is (I don't like xy because of xy) I will apologize. This was not my intention.

*Nif*

I think you're missing a huge point, regarding Hellhound, here you should look into the terms they agreed on when Hellhound joined Cat. Cat agreed that Hellhound would be cats equal in the legions. Deals and oaths are incredibly important things in the story as they're binding on a whole other level than our world. So your analogy about a president and general doesn't hold water, in my opinion. And I don't think it's unlike Hellhound to call out Cat when she's wrong, or not in the right headspace. But I can agree on the fact, the Hune hate was sudden, and I didn't feel it was well explored either.

Farrier, as a reader fell flat when he died, but I can also see why his death would matter to Cat, they spent most of their time together, and we often saw them interacting and training together.

Nauk, to me feels like an other story, that hurt me right in the gut. And here I will give NaturalNuke points for a good explanation, and try to use the same point to go back on why it's important for Legate Hellhound to call Cat, out here on unjustified Hate against a non named will likely seal their fate.

As for Killian, I don't think it was an area that needed to be explored more and would be a liability, to the story as a whole, but that said I think it, also served for Cats as a way to better understand the effect she has on other people as a named, and how she impacts their lives. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe Killian described it as Cat was going places at a speed she couldn't hope to keep up with and all she could do is desperately cling on, and hope to not fall off on the way.

*Mytha*

I wouldn't say Farrier's Death was entirely without emotions but I agree that it could have been done better. Like more minor details about him and how he did these things for Cat. However it is nothing compared to Nauk.

Nauk feels nothing like a person and more like a prop if anything. His Death means nothing to me whatsoever. Captain's Death by far affected me more than his, sort of Death, did. As for the trading kingdoms for his, he healed? I think the Point being made is she would NOT do that. Consider it? Yes, but

never actually acting on it. Her showing willingness to sacrifice "Close" friends for the greater good or what not.

This expands into the overall problem, that may be intentional, that Named characters push out all normal mortal characters from storytime. People like Robber and Ratface, while mentioned, do not really make a noticable appearance. This in conjunction with Cat moving further and further up into her Name, leaving them behind. It does make story sense that they would slowly be phased out in favor of other Named whom she can relate to in a way she can not with regular people. However it does make it hard to sympathize with their Deaths and the like when they are already just about dead and gone storywise anyways.

Killian. I never really got this romance to begin with nor did I like it much. It did have it's moments in book 1 and 2 but it has been nothing but a boring drag in book 3 that takes up space better used for more important plot. Besides everyone knows Cat + Black = True

Hellhound. I agree that she formulated herself poorly and out of charactly from what she has before. Then again she did wait until it was just the two of them to behave in such a way not to mention they have grown a Little closer since the beginning so that may explain how she can say such things now when she could not Before. However the meaning behind her Words are VERY in character for her. She is mad at Cat for her resenting Hune for making the tactical decision she very likely would have made herself. If Cat is going to start resenting officers and leaders for doing their job then it becomes to much like Wasteland nobility with their own resentments and scheming and she does not want that. So she makes sure Cat knows this.

Then there is the fact that the whole thing is revealed, investigated and resolved in the span of a few paragraphs which is a entirely other thing. Like who here knew Cat resented Hune for this thing? Who expected it to be sort of resolved two minutes later?

All in all the plot is nice and full of action but at the cost of suffering characterization as Erretica tries to move in the full cast of Named in preparation for book 4 while still keeping side characters somewhat relevant. A move which in my opinion has failed.

*Jago*

"4. Today there was this stupidly silly reaction of the Hellhound: I paraphrase how I couldn't help but read that dialogue: "I am a General and I don't like how my President frowns at one of the Lieutenants and thus I do the only sensible thing: I threaten to beat up my president and throw my

resignation (discarding the duty to the country, not just the president!) in as well! Because dang thats the sensible thing to do here! Can't have the President make frowny faces at some other officers." Sure, she's an Orc and I tried to read it as an orc-y thing – but dang that was an overly dramatic, flat and silly reaction. Comedic at best. I do not think it was intended to be comedic though, which is kinda sad."

Hune is the second in command for the Fifteen. So it is an Army commander frowning at a vice commandant of a division in front of the division commander. The division commander will want to know why and will argue for his vice if there isn't a good reason to frown at him. The discussion will be kept private (as Juniper did) but it will happen. It isn't a good thing for an army to leave that kind of thing unresolved.

### *Cyrix*

\*The whole POINT of this arc is this rushing head-along without breather time,\*

That might be the point the author wants to bring across, but this is no excuse to forgo characterisation. Worm (which webserial readers might know) was very breathless too – but I did know and care more for the leading cast there after a lot less words. Never mind its myriad of side characters. Epic plot does not contradict characterdriven storytelling – or at least chapters with more characterdevelopment.

\*Honestly, how could she NOT care about him?\*

Show! Don't tell. Or in this case hint? We weren't even told most of the things you mentioned. That he slept in front of her tent can be asumed and what that ment for their bond can also be asumed? I guess? But we do not know and we certainly were not shown. Show don't tell is a fundamental writing principle.

\*If you don't care about him, I can only see you as a very cold person.\*

Yeah, except half the things you talk about are refering to Hakram, not Nauk. That you mix those two up so badly kinda highlights the problem, no?

\* It wasn't a Big Romance, this isn't a romantic story, afterall.\*

If you do romance do it proper – or do not do it at all. Again: I have no problem with the romance per se – or how it turned out. Thats all fine and good. I have problems with how it was done. I did not \*feel\* like Cat was in love. There were more words spent on cats armor being burned off or dented then on those two character saying something meaningfull/personal to each other.



\*About Hellhound... She was like this, always.\*

Hellhound imo – and of course you can disagree here – was and still is a stickler for the rules and proper course of action. Due process and thought out, grounded decisions based on facts. The right measure at the right time for a certain threat. Very, very professional in a nutshell.

Threatening to beat up your commanding officer and threatening her with a resignation right before the biggest battle of their lifetime is more than just unprofessional – It is totally out of character for the Hellhound. Especially over such a triviality as \*frowning\* at another officer.

\*i can only see it as spitefull and forcing the author's hand, even though I wouldn't call it an asshole act, it's a very blunt try at manipulation,\*

Except I am not manipulative – I did never claimore for specific changes. I did critique – I said where I thought the story was failing and why I thought it did.

I did never say: Write in this thing or I won't give you any money! I am sorry if you read it this way. I also stated I would continue supporting at least for a few more months till the situation with Akua got resolved. I will leave it up to the author if or how and what he wants to change. I am not pushing him in a certain direction – but I am allowed to say I dislike things and why.

If things till then continued in this direction I dislike – I will pull my patreon money. Which I think is a fair thing to do? I do not support things I do not enjoy reading after all. I do not think my few bucks a month will force the authors hand one way or another. Thats silly. But I am not above useing it to show that I am serious.

[simeraz](#)

The point was that , will the critique was interesting the threat of cutting off money was unnecessary and should have been made in private not public. By making it in public OTHER perceive it as YOU saying "Because i gave you money you have to do what i say" and not "I dislike your serie and shall not pay a subscription anymore"

*Cyrinx*

By not actually talking about the critique which you found interesting you are not actually leading this conversation in the right direction?

To be honest I do not give that much about what the public says – I wanted my critique public so others have a chance to join into the discussion. You are very welcome to do so!

About the money: If others think I push the author and what he should write into a certain direction that goes beyond what you could inherently interpret into any critique – they should read the arguments again and talk about them. You are welcome to do so too btw.

The main point you could and should take away from my patreon comment was actually the following: I thought that the Guide was a better read when there was one update a week.

I apologize for any insinuation with the patreon comment – it was not intended.

*Jonathan*

Cyril, bringing up the possibility of withdrawing Patreon support is inherently manipulative.

You never needed to threaten the author directly because it's implicit. Obviously the author would rather have your Patreon support. And just as obviously, addressing your critique would make you more likely to continue your Patreon support.

It's actually MORE manipulative to phrase it as an unrelated possibility rather than a blunt threat – you sound more reasonable, and more likely to get what you want – the author to change the story.

—

As for your critique itself – it feels like you've entirely forgotten the characterization of Nauk, Farrier, and Juniper received in the past. We haven't read recent scenes of Cat speaking with Nauk and Farrier, but that's because their characters were already firmly established, and it's reasonable for the readerbase to not forget that these people exist just because they don't get a few lines of dialogue every chapter.

Cat went through the War College and early battles with Nauk at her side, and he was mentioned often. As time went on, they separated in rank and Nauk was mentioned less, but that doesn't mean Cat stopped caring about him. It means that you forgot Nauk's emotional significance to Cat extends beyond what is shown on-screen.

Juniper was also at Cat's side from the start, and moreover their ranks mean they see each other quite often. They've been friends for a long time now. It's perfectly in character for Juniper to use their friendship to make Cat less emotionally compromised by the situation. It's a move made out of cold, calculated logic, and WOW that's what Juniper is known for!!

*Cyril*

Yes, I agree it was inherently manipulative – to a degree.

That addressing my critique would make me more likely to continue to support the author – thats actually a stretch. I support him if I like what he writes. I did not tell him what to write. Just what I thought didnt work in his current writing. This *\*IS\** a very big difference.

I told him some things didnt work for me: It is up to him to decide if and how he wants to address that. If he doesnt, he is likely to loose my support – but thats fine and more upfront instead of saying nothing and just taking the support away?

–

About the critique: I did not forget about the characterisation. But I would argue that it isnt enough to just establish characters without doing anything with them – And to then expect an emotional reaction from the audience if they are killed off. Or to expect the audience to understand why those deaths weigh so hard on the main character.

*\*It means that you forgot Nauk's emotional significance to Cat extends beyond what is shown on-screen.\**

I did not forget – but this is a bullshit argument (sorry for the language ^^) that only works on paper. Yeah no shit I dont care about someone– I dont care about? Or was not made to care about? I do not care about someone because 3 books ago I was kinda sorta told I should? This is not how storytelling works? Show don't tell.

*\*It's perfectly in character for Juniper to use their friendship to make Cat less emotionally compromised by the situation.\**

How does threatening to beat her up and leave her without a general play on cats friendship? She would leave her job, her duty behind. Not her friendship for cat? If anything the opposite to what you said is way easier to read into this? At least thats my take on the situation.

I would also argue that the Hellhound isnt known as a shrewd people manipulator the way Malicia is – from whom I would buy such a move.

In all honesty though the Guide so far does not strike me as the book that is that subtle with its characterbeats (which is totally fine btw! Different genres exist for this very reason) – and I honestly feel like you are reaching for straws with your interpretation.

*Blue Dragon*

Eh. It still seems like you're just a "spiteful asshole" from here, willfully misinterpreting or misunderstanding the story in order to complain.

*Cyrinx*

Thanks for your response. And thanks for telling me how to not interpretate a story (which are inherently subjective) and giving such a thought out and well formulated response.

People like you are the problem why authors have a hard time getting critique. I am not claiming mine is especially good or valuable – but I put a lot more thought into it then you did into your useless comment.

But be comforted by the fact that the hugbox of the author (this is not an insult to the author – it is just an apt description of the most devout followers) will descend upon me and support you. Because that will make your arguments (?) obviously better and correct.

[maelos61](#)

@Cyrinx : I totally agree with you on all points.i think it's, as you mentioned, a 'show don't tell'-problem. The counter-arguments to your critique are pretty much a bunch of things that we need to assume, but didn't specifically see. I mean, sure, I can totally understand why Cat would care about them, but the problem is that I don't and don't see why I should. If Hakram died, then yes, I'd actually think 'Oh no, not him.' because we see way more interaction between him and Cat. For Nauk and Farrier who are pretty much side-characters when it comes to amount of 'screen time'? Who cares. The romance was also totally useless, but I'm hoping it'll get better. The author could have literally inserted another 'morally questionable case' and just have never introduced the romance in the first place, so I'm assuming it'll have at least some unique use... hopefully. So yeah, you're not the only heartless bastard.

*Cyrinx*

Thank you for talking about the critique. 😊

Its nice that I am not the only one seeing those problems.

I think I agree with you that loosing Hakram would have been a much harder beat which would drive loss and possible recklessness on cats part home to the reader.

I am not advocating killing him off and I would argue that the story so far doesnt strike me as a grim and dark one? So I can understand why on a narrative sense one might shy away

from doing so even though that could have been potentially a better thing?

But the tradeoff is as you describe: I also do not care about Nauk or Farrier. I think for those intended beats to land we would need more characterisation for those side characters or just in general.

I am interested in hearing more opinions about that.

... you heartless bastard. 😏

*Berder*

So... does anyone still think Cat \*really\* won against Akua in the deal at the end of book 2? I predicted then it would result in some horrific ritual, and indeed it has with the release of Still Water.

Let me recap that deal (chapter 48 part II). Cat and Akua were both in a bubble dimension. Cat had the ability to kill Akua at that time. Akua did not have the ability to kill Cat. Cat probably did not have a way out of the dimension without Akua's consent (maybe Masego could have done it, maybe not). Akua definitely did not have a way out of the dimension without Cat's consent, because Cat would kill her. Cat was thus in a stronger negotiating position at the start.

Akua granted safe passage for Cat out of the dimension. In exchange, Akua got an agreement Cat would not kill her or shed her blood for three days and three nights. That's fair enough, Cat trading her own survival for Akua's survival, and both of them held each other's survival hostage at the start. The deal should have ended there, with a draw.

But then Cat agreed to let Akua have three of her associates in exchange for the three day truce extending to Cat and her command. Why on earth did Cat agree to that? Cat could have just killed all of Akua's associates, and it was shown shortly afterwards that Akua lacked the actual power to actually harm Cat. Cat was able to subdue her despite not being allowed to shed Akua's blood. Akua got something for nothing here.

And then, Cat agreed to support Akua for governorship of Liesse, a decision which directly led to Still Water and the death of more Callowans than Black killed in the invasion. Cat rationalized that in Liesse, Akua would be out of her element, away from allies and among a population that "hated her guts." And, Cat rationalized, Cat would have tools to keep her in line. These assumptions are now demonstrated false, as Akua has succeeded in doing more harm to Callow than anybody, and the fact that Callowans hated her guts is of no consequence now they are

undead. I predicted some awful ritual would arise from Akua's governorship, as indeed it has.

In exchange for this massive blunder, what did Cat get in return? Akua agreed to surrender the demon standard. Since Cat shortly afterwards proved she had physical dominance over Akua, this was again nothing in return, since Cat could have simply taken the standard against Akua's will. Akua got a huge basis for her power, a governorship that led to the deaths of vast numbers of Callowans, in exchange for nothing.

Akua was the clear winner of that deal, rule of threes notwithstanding.

*Mytha*

Well that deal was all kinds of bullshit, no one is arguing against that. Personally it feels like Erratic wrote itself into a corner and deus exed itself out of it. Like why not just "Escort" Akua for 3 Days and then have her murdered by the Escort or the like? Still the best of the 3 books but still.

But yes. Akua by FAR got the better of that deal and it I'd go so far as to claim that Cat is directly responsible for the Deaths of all those people Akua turned due to agreeing with the deal, among other things.

*lennymaster*

First, please excuse any mistakes, I am not a native speaker, which I usually do not cite as an excuse, but this post is somewhat emotionally loaded and so am I as I am writing this.

I have read over a thousand books till this day (I am not joking, my kindle library states it holds 1176 works, maybe a hundred short stories true, but most are novels), and quite a few webserials (Heretical Edge, Taint, Trials, Zombie Knight, Powered, The Gods are Bastards, Legion of Nothing, Mother of Learning, etc.), but few have managed to impress me quite as much as Guide has. It is one of the very few series that regularly manages to surprise me (despite the fact, that Guide is built on storytropes) and make shudders run down my spine (my main criteria for awesome). But this post is unfortunately not about the awesomeness that is Guide, but rather the incessant comparison of it to a in my opinion far lesser story. Something of a pioneer in this field maybe, but a far too overrated one in my opinion, just like Tolkien and Rowling.

I do not understand why Worm is considered to be the pinnacle of Webserialwriting. Yes it was not bad, and correct me if I am wrong, I did after all not read more than half of it (very unusual of me, I very rarely break a series of once I have gone beyond the second book or the equivalent), but it had plenty of glaring weaknesses.

Warning, spoilers ahead:

To the point where I stoped reading, Armsmaster was nothing but a thinly disguised plotdevice, the reason why she could not offically be a good guy. He was the worst kind of villian, not evil but rather petty and selfabsorbed, more like a schoolyard bully rather than a grown up enemy, but one with all the real power of a full-fledged adversary.

Furthermore I did not care the least bit about ANY of her "Teammates", considering that they were cardboardcutouts with a little twist to make it less obvious how very cliché they were. Her powers were a joke, just so her opponents could look even more dangerous and impressive for having kind of normal powers for a superhuman setting. People that should have wiped the floor with her on any given day, wich they did until they had to get out of the way of more serious opponents so the plot could move along and she was finally allowed to beat them by being clever and prepared (meaning ridiculously lucky, to the point of were I would have wondered if her real power was not luck, if not for the fact that her life was so utterly shitty in all other matters).

Last but not least I have to say that I did not get around the impression that she was either a victim trying to not be a victim, but perpetually failing, not necessarily because it was that way but rather because she saw herself that way. Or that she was a hero with an Anarchistic streak, a typical teenager, but with superpowers, though entirely lacking the grit to take what she wants. If she even had an idea of what she actually wants (revenge for her dead mother but no one to take revenge on, revenge for her fathers lost job but no one to blame for his joblessness other than hard times, revenge for herself, the only one she could actually get, but never made a move about getting it), perpetually differing with indecision about wether to do what little redeeming she had to do to be an official hero or to embrace villiany and for example taking her revenge on her former best friend, who bruttaly and callously betrayed her at the worst possible time for no reason at all (really, just like that?!). All Worm did was gloss over its myriad of weaknesses with an utterly grim-dark worldbuilding.

Characterdevelopment? Sure, but it does not matter that our heroine grew a spine, something came along in this dark, dark world and ruined everything she was starting to achieve anyways. Our heroine was terribly betrayed, but she does nothing about it and rather whines instead of going out to either take revenge or to forgive that traitor, because that would align people who are already aligned against her in this terribly unjust world, or actually require far more spine than she managed to grow, despite fighting several battles to the death against terrible odds and terrible enemies (where there was no or nearly no chance of the other one dieing) until then.

Spoiler end.

Is it it wrong to bash an authors story like that? Yes, probably so, but I am so sick of people criticising a dozen different things about any webserial I read and like, always using Worm as an example of how to do it right, oftentimes contradicting each other. Just because it is the first webserial they have read. Worm is mainstream (a little bit of something for everyone), that is not bad in and of itself, but considering that it is neigh the same thing one can find a hundredfold in mainstream media (amazon, 90 percent of anything with more than a thousand reviews), with sleight variations such as a darker world/cast/plot, however with no truly innovative, scandalous or outright crazy ideas. Like Mother of Learning, wich combines a magical world with a groundhogday scenario, or Everybody Loves Large Chest, with an outright psychopath, not sociopath, as a protagonist, to name two examples that are at least to my opinion the ballpark for modern webserial writing. Even Drew Hayes's Superpowereds differs in some essential points from regular mainstream, it it is one of the works in the top webfictionlist wich comes closest to that. Worm may have been far from mainstream one time in the past, however it has not been for a LONG time. Webserials these days is were authors go who do not fit in mainstream media, and comparing mainstream with stories that are just so outside of it like Guide is like comparing apples and peaches.

*Cyrrix*

Worm was used as an example because many here might know it – thats it.

Its popularity was used to illustrate an argument. This was never about Worm or about a comparison between Worm and the Guide.

I am honestly confused what set you off?

*lennymaster*

It was not your comment, though I do not disagree with it, it was the use of worm as a comparsion.

First do I not only consider it to be a middling good story at best, I also believe it to be vastly overated, akin to Tolkien an Rowling. Like them it was something of a pioneer in their respective stiles, wich has given it an undeserved amount of weight.

Second, my fazit, wich I might not have expressed clearly, mea culpa, was that it is mainstream, only differing from it in the darkness of the stories world, and not doing so sufficantly enough to actually stand out from it. Not like How to Survive on a Daily Basis for example does (not to my taste, wich however does not dipute my point). Worm is in fact so mainstream (to cite: "You are neither hot nor cold ...



" ) that it is neigh uncomparaple to most webserials. Thus not comparable in anithing but specifics.

Your comment was quite specific, namly characterisation, thus secondly does not apply to your comment, but firstly very much does.

So my critic to your critic goes only so far that I do not agree with you on the fact that anything in Worm is in any way better, much rather significantly worse in my opinion, then in Guide. Aside maybe from the end, on wich I cannot judge, for I did not read it, wich however does not matter since we are about as far along in Guide as I was in Worm when I stopped reading.

When you look back on any webserial on the topwebfictionlist that was even remotly similar to anything in the general mainstream, aside maybe from something as difficult to define as general genre, please tell me so. I would love to be proven wrong considering that I suffer perpetually from lack of high quality reading material, or at least something that differs sufficently from the mainstream that I can not tell at the very least the general plot from the first few chapters. The inability to do so is one of the points wich have drawn me to webserials.

### *Unmaker*

"Her powers were a joke, just so her opponents could look even more dangerous and impressive for having kind of normal powers for a superhuman setting."

The reason she kept beating people despite the apparent power discrepancy was a major reveal near the end, and the reveal also showed that this was planned from the beginning, not a later twist decided by the author. You missed this by not finishing the story.

I had my own problems with Worm, but I see things a little differently – to me, the reason Worm is a standard for comparison was consistent, high-volume, decent output. The majority of authors simply cannot reliably put out that kind of volume without it going completely to sh\*\*. I suspect the comparison of reliability versus other authors had a halo/horns effect: people like consistent output, so Worm looked better in comparison to stories by authors who could not produce as reliably. But that is highly IMO and therefore could easily be wrong.

### *Denimcurtain*

I have a completely different perspective.

Everybody Loves Large Chest is just crack fiction that has been done plenty. It usually isn't well liked because you don't empathize with the character at all. I wouldn't call it

innovative but I could accept that it isn't traditional (though I'd point you to the Watchmen comics for a very mainstream rendition of psychopaths as main characters).

The things you described about Mother of Learning seem like it would make it not innovative as well. Ground hog day spliced with isn't a new concept.

I like the Guide because it has a cool conceit and sets its characters up to have very cool moments. It shines when it plays with the tropes of good and evil and gives pragmatic reasons for taking excessively dramatic and cool actions. It slides a bit when it slips a bit too far into the tropes dictating the actions of characters we care about or fails to underline the tension between Cat as the protagonist and Cat as a villain.

I put that there because I don't know exactly how you can hold constant the problems you have with Worm about powersets with the idea that it is mainstream at the same time as you call all these other stories not mainstream. It does a great job of showing just how dangerous overlooked powersets can be. The traditional powersets SHOULD lose against someone who can guess correctly almost all the time or someone who can decide what timeline he's in. Its definitely not mainstream in its treatment of its main character. For better or for worse its much further away from the mainstream than any of your examples so far if you're looking for stories where the main character wins (Guide at least has the Pyrrhic victory thing going). It feels like you missed a lot of the story either because it was hard to follow or because you didn't finish it.

I could see not liking Worm but I can't really agree with almost any of your critique. My problems with worm would be that its a bit oppressive in its grim darkness at times and the pacing is a bit wonky at times. Like most webserials the quality of writing fluctuates more than you would get from a book. Its ok just not to like something but if you're really confused as to why people liked it, its because they likely don't agree with your understanding of what happened in worm.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Wanted to sidestep this shitstorm, but just gotta say: I could not be sicker of all things Worm. If I had it in my power, I would delete the damned thing from reality. Not for what it is, but for all the mindlessly derivative permutations of it that have been spawned.

If, at any time, the Guide were EVER to bear more resemblance to Worm than "both are examples of lines of text, written collectively in the form of paragraphs\* I would bail out without a 'chute as a fan.

This arc of the Guide HAS been different than what's come before, but that's to be expected as the main protagonist moves into plot-circles that have more dimensions. Everything from the moment the name Cordelia Hasenbauch(sp?) was first used (if not well before) has been tilting towards an acceleration of events. The Calamities went north to throw a wrench in that, and failed.

Cat's very Named-dreams have, repeatedly, borne out that Black's experiences contesting with the Heir bear a STRIKING resemblance to what we see happening here in the present. Social orders being overthrown, only for those victorious overthrowers to have to make too many decisions too rapidly for all of them to have been ideal. Leading to problems down the road.

EE has, at all times, done a great job of preserving the "The theme of events is cyclical, even if the variations on a theme differ markedly" ethos on which the Guide-verse pretty much rests.

Since I've neglected to do so before now: Thank you for the extra Chapters, EE. Finding time to juggle one's life and hold to a writing schedule is hard enough. Increasing your word-output is just choosing to put more stones in your backpack to hike with. It is appreciated.

*danh3107*

The uh, the calamities went South

*Denimcurtain*

What "mindlessly derivative permutations" are out there?

*danh3107*

I honestly liked this chapter up until the end, you need exposition sometimes. However the bit about disliking Hune wasn't even built up or foreshadowed in any of the previous chapters, it was brought up in one paragraph and solved a few lines down. It was pretty unnecessary

*MetruX*

I... Kind of agree. Hune being hated was a pretty surprise, and wasn't well seen. To make clear, before someone call me out on it: my defense before was about our general, not about this bit of Hune in the story. For Hellhound it was a natural response, even though Cat's hate wasn't well seen.

*grzecho2222*

I'm curious if Captain is even really dead, since this whole running back doesn't sound very much like Black Knight and it smells of some kind of ruse to draw Bard into trap. Also I've

been thinking evil might be balance for Bard and only entity that works like that that I've heard of is Licho.

*Fern*

Couple of thoughts:

I do think Farrier as a character was undeveloped, but as someone who reads this pretty consistently (whenever a chapter is released I usually read it 3-4 times) I liked him, and liked how you dealt with his death.

I love Nauk! I feel like his main character building stuff was all done during the war college arc, so I have no complaints there.

Other than that I only have two real criticisms: Hune and Black's coming breakdown.

As far as Hune goes it's even been pointed in story that Catherine doesn't really know her all that well, which made it a surprise when she suddenly lashed out her for a pretty weird reason (that Juniper explained).

With Black I think almost all of us were sure that Bard was just talking out of her ass, but it seems like with Malicia's comment (that Black is reverting back to his 16 year old mindset of undisguised loathing instead of the inhumanity that I think we all assumed was his, ah, "base mindset" I guess) of just coming back and assuming direct control of Praes.

Those are just minor though, the kind of thing I assume gets tuned up after finishing the story but before publishing. Big fan of the work man, love the story so far!

*narcoduck*

You know what I think could have helped alot? An interlude from the 15th Legion's rank and file after the end of the last arc. The narrative has been taken over by the Named to the point where it was unsurprising Nauk became unimportant to Fate, "expendable" as Juniper said.

Seeing how Robber, Ratface, Killian, and Pickler react to Nauk's injury could have been a neat chapter about how they're getting left behind in the battle of legends and by Catherine herself. Maybe even a POV from Hune so this development wasn't so rushed.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

E.E.-

The typos/autocorrect mistakes are getting so bad here that they're interfering with being able to understand the story. For example:

"lying my way to the contraptions of godhood"

Did you really mean contraptions? I don't think you did, because it doesn't make sense, but I also don't have any way of guessing what you DID mean! Commissions of godhood? Compensations? What? I could easily read over all the "ifs" that should be "ofs" and so forth, but some of them are actually hurting the story.

---

Brandon Sanderson is always telling fantasy writers that having your characters actually DO things is usually preferable to having them sit there contemplating.

It mostly works for you to have long stretches of Cat's inner monologue, more often than not. This world is so complicated you're never going to get completely away from that. But at the same time it would be nice to get to Cat DOING things 😊

*metals*hop

Reading this at 1am, too tired to leave a long comment so I'll be brief.

Story is good, slow thinky parts stand out well against big battle scenes. Stuff feels fast and strained because Cat is feeling strain from stuff going too fast.

A few more typos than usual this time, might be worth doing an extra proofread pass each chapter.

Mentioning the Patreon at the end of a negative review might not have been meant as a threat or manipulation but unfortunately it came off that way. Lesson learned for next time.

*LordMunchkin*

I think Farrier dying was more about what he symbolized to Cat rather than his character. He was one of the first Callowans to believe in Cat and he died fighting for her.

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## Chapter 51: Overlooked

*"It is ever the temptation of chroniclers to ascribe great failures to a single turning point, a flaw revealed or enemy virtue displayed. This simplification of history ignores the starker truth of all great enterprises, that in the end though all leaders are captains of a ship they rule neither wind nor tide. Failure and victory are the collection of choices small and great, shaped by perspectives of the myriad making them."*

-Extract from 'The Ruin of Empire, or, a Call to Reform of the Highest Assembly', by Princess Eliza of Salamans

The fairy gate had opened half a mile away from the outskirts of Dormer, and that was where the two thousand legionaries of the Fifteenth made camp. It had taken us a week of marching through Arcadia to cross what was essentially the full breadth of Callow, not a fae in sight. I was still only beginning to grasp the full implications of what the boon I'd obtained from the fae royals meant for warfare in Calernia. So far I'd only used the fairy gates to move quicker within the bounds of Callow, but that was a self-imposed limitation. With Hierophant to chart me a path, I could feasibly muster an army in Marchford and have it pop out in front of the Principate's capital bristling with steel. Keeping an army in the middle of enemy territory supplied without turning to banditry would be near impossible, but what did it matter? I could leave the same way I'd come when my foodstuffs ran out. If the Red Flower Vales could be kept in Imperial hands, I could strike at Proceran territory with impunity while the First Princes' army were stuck besieging one of the most heavily fortified borders on the continent.

It was enough to have me shiver. There was precedent for the kind of power I wielded as the last Duchess of Winter, villains and heroes alike that had shown a capacity for destruction just as great. The gates, though? I couldn't think of one.

The Fifteenth had returned midmorning to Creation and I'd wasted no time in arranging matters with General Istrid. Juniper's mother had always been my favourite of the Praesi commanders in Callow. Within moments of our first meeting, two years ago, she'd expressed the opinion that Governor Mazus had been in need of a good hanging. Always a way to get on my good side, that. She wasn't much like her daughter, aside from the rough manners that were so common with orcs. If anything, she reminded me of Nauk – or the other way around, since I'd become acquainted with her first. She rode out to meet me on one of the great wolves that her people used as mounts, meeting me halfway to Holden. She gave warm welcome, though not without some grousing.

"You sent us across the country from the real fight, Squire," she growled after clapping my back.

Before I'd stolen my mantle, Named or not it would have jostled me. The woman had ferocious strength still, for one in her fifties.

"Needed you to herd them towards me, general," I replied. "Otherwise the front would have spilled across the south, and there was no putting that genie back in the lamp when it got loose."

"Sacker says the same thing," General Istrid said, visibly disgruntled. "A real shame. I won't ever get a good crack at the fairies, with that peace you shoved down their throats. At least we get a turn in the dance with the Diabolist."

"I won't say she's more dangerous than a pair of literal gods," I said, "but we're in for a rough month. You heard about the necromantic ritual?"

The exact nature of Still Water was still under Imperial seal, so the official story was that Akua had used some kind of ancient ritual to turn the entire city into undead. Considering the trove of horrors that still lay dormant in the Wasteland no one had questioned it too much, but I was aware it was only a matter of time until the truth of it trickled out.

"They're supposed to be high-grade undead, right?" she growled. "That's fucked. Skeletons and zombies need a necromancer guiding them to be a threat, but a hundred thousand bloody ghouls aren't something to sneer at."

"My caster tells me they're closer to the kind of undead the Dead King uses for officers," I told her. "We're calling them wights."

"The highborn twit should have paid closer attention to her history lessons," the orc laughed. "We proved that dead men and household troops are no match for Legion steel when we put the Empress on the throne."

There was truth in that, I felt, but also dangerous assumption. As far as I knew there'd been no battle of the scale of the one looming ahead during the Praesi civil war. Akua would have at a hundred thousand wights and six thousand living under her command, by our estimates, and the forces I was gathering would be a little over sixty thousand. Even during the Conquest armies that size hadn't been fielded in the same theatre, and for good reason. It was going to evaporate at least half the Imperial treasury to keep that many people fed and armed, and the aftermath was likely to turn a chunk of the Empires' breadbasket into wasteland. Nations fought with smaller hosts for a reason, even when they could muster great ones. The ride to Holden was spent recounting the Arcadian campaign at the general's demand, until I stood in council with the other two generals in the city. Orim the Grim and General Sacker were significantly less friendly

in the manners, though never actually impolite. Sacker did have that sharp goblin sardonic turn of phrase, but refrained from verbally pulling my pigtails the way she had on our first meeting.

I'd risen in rank quite a bit since then.

General Istrid had begun preparations for a march the moment my mages had scried hers, and I was rather pleased to hear the twelve thousand legionaries would be ready to leave come dawn. There was a certain pleasure to working with veterans knowing their way around a war. The Fifteenth's officers were getting there, but my legion was not a well-oiled machine yet. Part of that was on me, I knew. Even after the brutal casualties we'd taken in Arcadia and Dormer, the Fifteenth was still twice the size of any other legion and severely lacking mages. It was a rare month I did not thank the Gods for granting me both Ratface and the inclination to not look too closely at how he kept us supplied. Even Juniper had ceased slapping his fingers when he bent the rules a little, using the fact I'd effectively suborned the Guild of Smugglers to him as an excuse to wash her hands of the matter. It was not the place of an Imperial general, she said, to meddle in civil affairs. A little rich of her to say considering Marshal Ranker used to run Denier through the governor, but in theory it was supposed to be true.

I rode back to camp a few hours before sundown, declining the offer of a roof over my head in the city in favour of sticking with my men. I was still chewing on the conversation I'd had with Juniper before leaving. That Hune had made the right call, even if it had seen one of the few people I considered a friend halfway to the grave. Even if it had led to the Gallowborne being all but wiped out. The ogre legate was the only one of my senior officers I'd never truly reached out to. I hadn't made a lot of mystery about that, it must be said. When I'd first crossed the Empress by resurrecting a knightly order, she'd not been one of the people I gathered to tell. The Hellhound had objected back then as well, though I'd dismissed her words by saying I did not trust her the way I did others. Nauk, I recalled grimly, had been the very example I used. It might have been a mistake, I now thought. By visibly keeping Hune out of my 'inner circle' even though she was the second highest officer in the Fifteenth, I was making a self-fulfilling prophecy. Trust freely granted, in my experience, had a way of making people trustworthy. Of making them want to live up to that trust. I'd never attempted that with the legate.

It might not be too late to rectify that mistake, though. I still didn't like the call she'd made, I admitted to myself. But it was a dislike that was borne of reasons personal. *I do not have a monopoly on ruthlessness employed to save lives.* I'd raised the Fifteenth out of people I knew, had shared struggles with, and



they had since the beginning been given a measure of my trust. Hakram, Nauk, Ratface, Pickler, Robber. Even Juniper and Aisha, who had been opponents in the College but ones I respected. Hune had been brought in at the Hellhound's word and so never fully welcomed into that fold. It was part of a larger flaw in the way I did things, one the Empress had already warned me against: I rarely gave power to those I did not personally know and like. It was telling, perhaps, that Anne Kendal and Juniper were respectively the effective ruler of Callow and the commander of the largest military force within its borders. But I could not continue along these lines if I wanted my homeland to ever climb out of the hole. No matter how skilled the few I fully trusted were, they were not enough to form the ruling class of an entire kingdom. I shook myself out of the thoughts and sought Hune instead of continuing down the spiral and of excuses and recriminations.

The ogre wasn't with her officers. I found her at the edge of the camp, tucked away between two low hills and kneeling on the ground. Even like that she still towered several feet above me. I remained at a distance, though when I saw her lips move I sharpened my hearing to listen in. I'd had a casual disregard for other people's privacy even before I began employing spies. Pouring wine into a wooden bowl, she murmured to herself.

"O Faceless Gods, I give you thanks," the legate said. "For crossing survived and refuge found, for the breaking of the chains of men."

Breaking a small loaf of black bread with fingers large as sausages, Hune crushed it into crumbs she dispersed next to the bowl. Crossing survived, huh. I knew ogres were not native to Calernia. They'd been brought over as slaves by the Miezans, and ended up joining the Dread Empire when the first Maleficent founded it in exchange for land to live on.

"Neither poor nor rich, neither free nor bound," she murmured. "For the promise made to our ancestors, I offer bread and wine."

My brows creased when I saw the crumbs rot and the wine turn to vinegar. Hune was not a mage. No ogres were, they could not be born with the gift. This was the closest to the miraculous powers wielded by priests I had seen on the Empire's side. I knew there were cults in the Empire that sacrificed to the Gods Below in exchange for powers, but I'd never actually seen the Hellgods extend their hand to Creation before. It was chilling to watch, light as their touch had been. *A reminder there's more than one side of the old war looking at us.* The ogre emptied the bowl onto the grass and brushed her hands clean, picking up the empty wineskin before rising back to her feet. She did not seem all that surprised to see me. Ogres, as far as I knew, did not have senses better than a human's. *She might just have been expecting*

me. Reaching me in a few strides, Hune lowered her massive torso in a bow.

"Lady Squire," she said.

"Legate," I replied. "Didn't take you for the pious type."

Her face did not react, neither irritated nor amused.

"I am not Praesi," she said. "My people have their own ways."

"So I see," I said. "I'll admit to some ignorance on the subject. Never found a lot of books written about ogres the way there are about orcs and goblins."

Hune studied me calmly.

"We are not numerous enough to merit scholarly attention," she said. "Are you seeking reports, ma'am? I gave instruction to my commanders to have them prepared, but I remember the details if you would prefer them spoken."

"No, your officers already have me in the loop," I awkwardly said. "They're, uh, quite thorough. The precision of it will shave a few hours off Ratface's workload when we link up."

"I am sure your words will please them," the ogre said. "How may I offer service?"

I was honestly unsure if she was politely putting me off or not. There'd been some people currying favour with me when the Fifteenth was founded, before Juniper had put her foot down. Even after, though, it was rare for people *not* to lean into an opportunity to talk with me when they could. I left matters of promotion to the Hellhound without meddling, but I was still arguably one of the ten most influential people within the Empire. I was a little at a loss at how to deal with whatever this was. I wondered if the Empress had felt the same, when she'd summoned me to the Tower for audience and I'd bluntly pushed through the small talk.

"Sit with me for a while," I finally said. "If you've no pressing duties."

"I can spare some time," Hune said, her tone hinting at neither displeasure nor expectation.

I ended up with my legs going down the slope, thinking of how ridiculous we must look from a distance. Even with my plate making me seem larger, it would take ten of me put together to even remotely rival the legate in mass. I ran a hand through my hair, wondering exactly how I should go about this. It'd been easier, with the others.

"Are we to revise the command decisions I made in Dormer, my lady?" the ogre broke in while I was still debating.

Ah. She'd picked up on that, had she. Hard to play coy about displeasure when mine literally lowered the temperature.

"No," I said. "It's been pointed out to me that my objections were personal. Childish, arguably. I apologize for how I acted."

"You were not impolite or unprofessional," the legate said. "Even if you had been, you are Named. It is your prerogative to speak as you wish."

"Doesn't mean I should," I replied. "So have the apology anyway."

"There is nothing to forgive," Hune said calmly. "Was there anything else?"

I turned to her and studied her face. There was something brutish about the ogres looked, the way their features were slightly broader than a human's would be if they were the same size. It made them look a little slow, but there was nothing dim about those deep and dark-set eyes meeting mine.

"You don't like me very much, do you Hune?" I asked.

The ogre's face shuttered.

"I am an officer in the Legions of Terror, under your command," she said. "If my demeanour offended you in any way, I apologize and stand willing for any punishment you deem fit."

*Catherine Foundling*, I thought ruefully, *charmer of the year*.

"It's not a crime to dislike me," I said. "And I'm not offended. I'm honestly surprised at how well along I've gotten with the people around me. I wasn't exactly the most popular girl at the orphanage."

"You are apprentice to the Carrion Lord, named Vicequeen of Callow by Her Dread Majesty," the ogre said woodenly. "Praises are your due."

"I'm not all that interested in praises," I said. "But I'd like to know what... this is about."

I waved my hand vaguely. There was a flicker of irritation in her eyes, but I couldn't call it a victory. It was too shallow. The kind of irritation you had for a fly buzzing in your ear, not something I could use to bridge a gap.

"Ma'am, I am your subordinate," Hune said. "This is unnecessary."

And that was the heart of it, wasn't it? I didn't consider my people to be subordinates, or at least not just that. They were the people I drank and laughed with, the people I shared a fire with. There'd been less of that since I'd begun gathering Named around me, it was true. But I'd not allowed those relationships to go fallow either.

"I ask more of my officers than others do of their own," I said. "I try to give more as well."

"We," the ogre said bluntly, "are not equals. You hold power of life and death over everyone in the Empire, save a hallowed few. This pretence, my lady, is tedious."

"So this is about power," I said.

The sigh the legate let out was cavernous. I was pretty sure a single one of her lungs was the size of my entire torso. *Should have done this when it was dark out*, I mused half-seriously. *Seems to work better that way.*

"Is this an order?" Hune asked.

I nodded. I would have preferred not to make it one, but evidently that wasn't an option.

"Then with your permission, I will speak frankly," the legate said. "You are *dangerous*."

"Usually when people call me that they mean it as a compliment," I said. "I'm getting the feeling that's not the case here."

"The treaty with the Tower that granted us the Hall of Skulls and adjacent lands comes with mandatory service in the Legions," the ogre said. "There has not been a war since the Declaration where my people did not fight and die."

"I'm not unfamiliar with being on the wrong side of Praesi rule," I said.

"With all due respect, ma'am, that is untrue," Hune said. "You were born in the wealthiest city of the Empire's breadbasket and raised by an institution whose education is on par with that of lesser nobility."

"The orphanage saw lean month toos, Hune," I said. "We had Governor Mazus running the city for years before he got the noose."

"Every month, one of my people is murdered and drained of blood after coming too close to a lord's border," Hune said. "When the Green Stretch has a bad year, families sign themselves into servitude to avoid shortages. The Reforms barely lowered the amount of warriors that must be provided for service. We are

strong enough to be of use and too few to be worth appeasing. Callowans hang when they rebel or resist, ma'am. We earn death by *existing*."

"That can be changed," I said. "Hune, none of this is set in stone. It's not inevitable. It only works as long as we *let it*."

"And speaking words such as these, you have raised a host that answers to you before the Tower," the ogre said. "You promised freedom to the greenskins, insurgence to the many colours of men. And yet two things you have brought in fact: ever greater titles to you, and war wherever you tread."

"Because it's working," I replied bluntly. "There's opposition because we're gaining ground. We push hard enough and it'll break. We're not going against infinite strength. At some point they have to bend or lose."

"That may be," Hune said. "Perhaps you will deliver all you have sworn. But you are not the first silvertongued monster birthed by Praes. We have seen them come and go, and what has changed? In the end all of them smile, and ask us to die in their wars."

"I'm not asking you to die," I said. "I'm asking you to fight. If not for me, then at least for something you want. To do more than just... linger."

"We fought heroes," the legate said. "Then devils. Then the courts of the fae. Now we march against a madwoman of the old way. What meaning have any of these to me? I took oath, and will serve in the Fifteenth until I die or my term ends. But you ask me to bleed for strangers and thank you for it. That is not the due of a soldier. It is the due of a servant."

"I don't want servants, Hune," I said sharply. "I want comrades."

"Servants are what you have, my lady," the ogre said. "Your causes are their causes. You are Named, and so this is only natural. But I took oath to the Legions of Terror and not the army of House Foundling."

"I'm not asking you to commit treason," I said.

"We are riding with knights," she replied bluntly. "Half the Fifteenth is Callowan. You strong-armed the Dread Empress into naming you ruler of this land. Do not misunderstand me, Lady Foundling, I wish you well in these ventures. The world may be better for your victory, should it come."

Her dark eyes narrowed.

"But I will not die for another woman's dream," Hune said.

Slowly, she rose to her feet.

"I apologize for any offence I have given," the ogre said. "May I be dismissed?"

I bit my tongue and nodded. I watched the legate stride away and passed a hand through my hair.

So much for mending that bridge.

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### *Gunslinger*

That conversation with Hune was great. It's nice to see that not everyone is pulled in the wake of Cat's story. Also I chuckled at this line

> Hard to play coy about displeasure when mine literally lowered the temperature.

Ohh and vote for the guide on topwebfiction.com if you can  
<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

### *Dainpdf*

She's likely one of the clearest eyed people in Cat's retinue. I hope Cat listens to her.

### *stevenneiman*

Named, especially Named whose Role or Aspects involve command, seem to have an effect similar to Girl Genius' Sparks, in that they bring out the minion side of others whenever they do something they need help with something. But, it seems that just like Sparks, not everyone has enough of that side to be affected that way.

### *Metalshop*

Ok, now I really want to hear more about the ogres. This little glimpse was fascinating.

### *naturalnuke*

Yeah...

(totally stealing this for my tabletop games.)

### *Soronel Haetir*

Well, if Hune is the remaining high traitor that we've had hints of I guess we better start calling her Actress.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

That is way too obvious, also nice to see our Squire from an outside perspective, especially from someone who is tired of all the fighting.

*Dainpdf*

From someone who is not caught up in her. Villains and heroes of her type (commander types, that is) seem to always gather retinue of, well, servants. Too often to be a coincidence.

*MetruX*

Actually, I think she literally spelled it out that she is not affiliated with Cat, but with the Tower... So... It wouldn't even be betrayal...

[poignardazur](#)

Conflict! Consequences!

*Engineer*

Ha! Those SW zombies are on par with The Dead King's officers! So my zombie army invasion plan IS feasible! Just need to figure out a way to make a volatile version of SW. Then I will reach my ultimate goal: THRILLER DANCE PARTY ON A CONTINENTAL SCALE! MUHUHAHAHAHAHA!!!

*NerfContessa*

You have my full support... As long as the outfits are clean and the zombies protected from rot.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Considering how Hune's weight to the story is (and has been) foreshadowed to be greater in the future, am I the only one who pronounces her name like June/dune? Or does everyone else pronounce it hoo-neh?

*thespaceinvader*

I hadn't really thought about it, but now that I do, I think I'd pronounce it 'Hewn'...

*limlimrevolution*

"Hewn" is what I defaulted to as well.

[taborask](#)

I hate to say it, but Hune makes a lot of good points. Catherine definitely has a sort of Taylor Hebert flavor to her in that she talks a really good game but her actions don't seem to actually show that. For everything she says about protecting her people from abuses of power, and building a world based on institutions and not Named everything she does ends up with dead Callowans and more power to herself and the Woe. Sure the argument can be made that she's doing positive political/bureaucratic stuff offscreen that's improving peoples lives or that she'll get to her long term goals once she's amassed enough power, but those both feel pretty thin

### *Daemion*

That's the problem when you try to change things through force. Anything gained by force requires an increasingly greater force to keep stable. You can't simply change people, they have to want it and even then it takes time. Generations, usually.

You can't sit two life long enemies at a table and tell them they are friends now.

So to even get a chance to change things, Cat had to use her Name, she had to apply force in various ways and now she has to keep doing it just to keep things on track. If she ever stops or if she dies, everything will fall apart and go back to the way it was before.

Her hope is that once she achieves her vaguely defined goal everyone will see that things are better and accept the change. This assumes people are rational and interested in the greater good over personal advantages.

Realistically, to make this work Cat needs to be a constant influence on the Empire for at least 2 generations and everything needs to happen as planned. Same as Black did before her.

It's only human to think that way. I think Cat realized her mistakes and her naivety. She knows she has to change the way she operates because right now it's not sustainable.

### *RoflCat*

Maybe she'll basically lose 'everything' she hold at one point.

Her power as a Named.  
Her status as vicequeen/Squire.  
Her allies in the Legion.

Like say if Bard pull whatever thing she did that made herself into the new person, but on Cat this time.  
So she'll become a nobody.



No Carrion Lord to take intrigue in her and gave her the shortcut to power.  
No Hellhound to make her army into the force it is.  
No Woe to assist her.

She will only have normal, every day people to work with.  
In a way it's a massive downgrade of her power, but on the other hand if she can change things while having no power, it'll be a testament to her will.

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

"But you ask me to bleed for strangers and thank you for it.  
That is not the due of a soldier. It is the due of a servant"

That captures so much.

*mordered*

I think that Cat's motives matter very little. The goal of a squire is to become greater and rise above the status. Amassing power is a part of her name. Cat's also not being honest with herself, it is not just what she can do with the power it is power itself that she enjoys. Having it makes her want more (which is the evil side of Squire playing its hand), she just justifies it all by saying it is for the greater good. Worst thing is is that she truly believes she is good.

*Dainpdf*

She has a lot of Taylor in her. They're both very good at telling themselves that, while the cost of their actions to others is great, they are for the greater good.  
Being Named seems to be halfway to being Fae: once one's Name has inroads, it's hard to get out of the grooves.

*nipi*

I wonder if Cats secrets will come to light at some point. I mean even if it was out of ignorance having taken a bad gamble with the souls of all in Callow is bound to cause some spectacular fallout should it come to light. I can see her going down a dark path to keep that secret. Then again only the Woes and fae were witness to that.

*Zach*

Catherine herself even realizes this to some extent; as she pointed out, none of this current conflict would have occurred if not for her voluntary decision to let Lone Swordsman live. So far the net result of her actions is a massive negative, and all her actions since that point have merely been mitigating the damage of events she set into action through a bad choice.

Basically she's acting under the assumption that her gaining power is intrinsically a result that will lead towards the greater good and must be pursued at nearly all costs. Your comparison with Taylor is very apt, because both characters are control freaks who are incapable of trusting anyone other than themselves (and the handful of people they trust) with power. You see this in her comments about Democracy a couple chapters back.

Honestly, I have trouble seeing Catherine ending up as a positive influence on the world unless she significantly changes the core of who she is (which is kinda unlikely due to the nature of Named, who – as Empress said – are basically snapshots of the people they were when they first transitioned into their Names).

*danh3107*

It must be rough being born to a race who has never known true freedom in their racial memory. They are mighty, and intelligent if Hune is a good example, but they're made to be subservient to men and women smaller than their arm.

Brilliantly conveyed erratic, brilliant

[cakeartistword](#)

I want to see someone with the [Baba Yaga] name.

*AshSlanabrezgov*

And I really don't.

It would be mindless cut-and-paste from Slavic folklore. And I like Erraticerratta's PGTE exactly because it is anything BUT mindless cut-and paste from anywhere.

Also this world doesn't look like it has requirements for Slavic culture – you need at least one Great river flowing between Easter-style culture and Western-style culture and lots of forests to produce one.

From geography and Eastern-style culture of Praes we can excule impossible combinations – and only place where we have something that could fit prerequisites is Callow and Marchford but although they have some shades in a cultural sence, we have Callow's language, tales, names and religion that doesn't fit.

So, Baba Yaga would be out of place. -\_- Also, in this setting you don't need her, really. You already have a lot of Heroes and Villains and Demigods and Gods who have the same specialisation.

*nipi*

So Akua has 100 000 officer class undead? Ok she doesnt have undead heroes. But still is the Dead King weak or something?

*Dainpdf*

I assume he has way over 100000 of them. He has an entire kingdom, after all. And then he has a bunch of devils, plus the tide of lower tier undead, and maybe some higher tier officers, even.

*nipi*

Id expect at least a 1 000 000 regular undead to a 100 000 officers. I just dont see anyone ever testing the Dead Kings domain if he has multiple millions of undead soldiers on top of all the other horrors. Hed be too powerful considering the sizes of the armies we have seen thus far.

*Dainpdf*

I don't think anyone really has, outside of a Crusade (multiple nations allied) and Ranger, who is Ranger.

*Skycom*

Hmm a difficult situation, but not impossible. My understanding is that Hune thinks that Catherine is acting as a chancellor amassing power to take the throne. The easiest way to clear up that misunderstanding would be to simply have Hune in the room the next time Catherine talks to the dread empress, to see how totally outclassed Catherine is as a manipulator.

Catherine is a reformer not a revolutionary, if only because Black and Malicia are so reasonable. With the high lords neutralized, there shouldn't be anything internally stopping Catherine, Malicia, Black from making those reforms. Except Blacks possible current insanity.

*Zach*

The problem with this point of view is that Black and Malicia only pursue reforms because they happen to be the best way to maintain power and ultimately defeat Procer in the future. They (or at least Black) have no desire to make life better for anyone, and they wouldn't be pursuing these reforms if the result wasn't in their interest.

Hune isn't necessarily doubting Catherine has good intentions, but she doubts that she will actually have a positive impact in the long run. And she isn't wrong to do so; Catherine's impact so far has been extremely negative for most people outside of her inner circle (and Hune is basically a view into this less biased perspective). The current conflict was only possible due

to Catherine's actions, as she herself admitted some chapters back. So there is no reason for Hune to have any faith that Catherine's actions are actually for the Greater Good, regardless of her intentions (and she's right to doubt the inspirational words of a Named).

I would be strongly mindful of a Taylor Hebert-esque unreliable narrator situation when it comes to viewing Catherine is a positive figure.

[vuthuha912](#)

But why would Black and Malicia want to defeat Procer? Isn't it because they want their country to survive? They conquered Callow because they want a reliable source of grain for their people. They make all the reforms to achieve their goal but the core reason for the Conquest is all about feeding their people. Black doesn't care about personal power because the ones who do care about it won't be so willing to die. If your wishes are selfish then victory doesn't mean anything if you aren't alive. He needs to be able to care more than himself to actually be willing to die for his goal. Besides, it is not like Black care for Evil as a whole. He cares for people who are on the Evil side – his friends, his country, his apprentice, etc but not for the philosophy and the methods of Evil. He hates the nobility, he hates the traditions, he hates all this nonsense of Stupid Evil. He just wants things to work properly. The dilemma he has to face would ultimately be between his friends and his country. Can he still love his country if everyone he cares about is dead? He said he will kill them if they harm Cat/his future plan but they have never really threatened the well-being of Callow. They are all living in Praes why would they blow up their backyard. They can run away if things go south but with Alaya and Wekesa being Sonnike, it can be difficult to live anywhere other than Praes.

Black hates heroes because heroes wreck Praes but never manage to do anything for it. Procer wants Praes to let Callow go but they won't be willing to sell grain to Praes (not directly). Praes can't produce enough foods to feed its own citizen just like Japan. The successful way to deal with Praes can be based on the way America treats Japan and Germany after WWII. Yet, Procer is not going to do it because of the conflict between Good and Evil.

At least with Catherine and sympathizers on top, Callow might be willing to open trade with Praes. The reason Black is so cool with Cat gaining tremendous power, it is because he already surrounds Cat with Praesi – the sympathetic one. Cat cares for these people, she is not going to let their families die of starvation. Not just Cat, the orphanages, the

taxes, the legionary, etc all contribute to lessening the hostility between the two nations. The Commonwealth irl is such an excellent idea that even when the British lose control of most of their territory, their former colonies are still willing to stick together.

Now, It would have worked even better if those highborn understand the necessity to appease others for their future benefits. But, they are incapable of viewing others' gains as their own. Either they benefit directly or it doesn't matter. Only when Praes see Callow not as an exploitable resource but as a possible ally and trade partner, can progress be made. Black is not fixing the core of the problem, the toxic culture of Praes. He tried to (killing the Trueblood who are actively keeping the culture alive) but Alaya presumably has a better way of dealing with culture reform. Now, his indecisiveness (Akua and the Trueblood) can bring everything he built tumbling down onto his head.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

And as bad as OGREKINDS get now, it used to be worse, really not understand how the old Praesi managed to do anything without causing mass rebellions or widespread famines.

*Dainpdf*

Who says they didn't? I assume that their mastery of Horrible Sorcery was way more effective at putting those down (since there were no Heroes involved) than at invading Callow.

*Letouriste*

Yeah, rebellion in a mage country where devils and blood ritual are widespread is bound to be horrible. you don't start that lightly

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

With the Truebloods pretty much extinct, once Diabolist is disposed of what exactly is stopping Black and Malicia from instituting all the things they wanted to, but couldn't get away with before? Diabolist seems like the last remaining bit of internal dissent in the Empire.

[taborask](#)

Not really related to anything in this chapter, but I've got a theory that Cat's going to have masego build an escapement into her Winter power. Since there's no way to reasonably stop Diabolist from Claiming it (we've seen her do it with fae royalty already) the best option seems like it would be to let her take

it, but have a spell woven in that makes it inherently unstable so it blows up in her face

### greatwyrmgold

Seems like planting a bomb inside your soul is a bad idea... especially since Catherine should be able to just Take it back. Or find a countermeasure that doesn't risk putting craters in her soul if something goes wrong.

### Adrian

I do think she advanced her relationship with Hune, i specially liked her line about dying for other people's dreams, but she got it wrong, is not that Cat is imposing her dream but rather she is making it so it fits inside or around other's.

AVR

Typos

of Imperial general,  
of an Imperial general,

ogrewasn't  
ogre wasn't

due of servant."  
due of a servant."

Do no misunderstand  
Do not misunderstand

### Barthumphries

Akua would have at a hundred thousand wights and six thousand living under her command  
Either remove "at" or change it to "about"

sought Hune instead of continuing down the spiral and of excuses and recriminations.  
Remove the second "and" (should be "down the spiral of excuses")

The orphanage saw lean month toos, Hune  
Change "month toos" to "months too"

### Perihelion

...without turning to banditry? You mean....foraging? Armies used to do that all the time. It's standard operating procedure. Except of course you call it plundering, which, as a military action was entirely legal, at least in the invading country.

In fact, armies didn't even bother with supply trains at all until late in the 16th century when they started to get so big (like, upwards of 100k big) that looting wasn't viable anymore.

I'm not sure why the \*Legions of Terror\* would bother with any kind of supply train at all to be entirely honest (with the exception of munitions I suppose). Unless they intend to mobilize an entire city or something.

[vuthuha912](#)

They can plunder and steal all they want, it will be a mess for the administration team that comes after them. They might not be crazy enough to mess with the people who are working on their salary and such.

Besides, I think that there should be a decree from the capitals demanding for the provinces to provide for the Legions during the duration of the fights and then receive compensation in terms of tax reductions and such later. However, as the Ruling Council created a big mess (thanks to the Praesi fuckwits), the country might not be running as smoothly.

*callmesteve*

She raises a point.

What part of her precautions and actions are truly helping, and which ones are mistakes and things she was forced into by her alleged allies?

Perhaps one day it will work, but as even she said, if anything happens to her, it all goes in the crapper. And she's the only one who cares.

[kensbey](#)

Should the 2nd paragraph say Holden instead of Dormer? Didn't they just leave dormer?

[greatwyrmgold](#)

I'm glad we finally get a glimpse of who Hune is; she's been just another face for quite a while. Shame the bridge between her and Catherine isn't mended, but at least Cat knows how wide the gap is.

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## Chapter 52: Tensile

*"What cannot bend is fated to break."*

– Taghreb saying

I wouldn't say aragh had grown on me, but it was the most common of the strong stuff that was peddled among legionaries. That had always been a source of wonder to me, that men and women who already carried so much weight over so many miles would still find it in them to slip a bottle of drink somewhere in there. Booze always found a way, didn't it? I hadn't asked Ratface to get me one, but it had magically appeared in my quarters after I'd gotten paring knives to stop disappearing from our supplies. My quartermaster was a tricky bastard with many an axe to grind, but it was little things like this that endeared him so much to me. Trust a Praesi to understand sometimes after a shit day you could need something a little stronger than wine. I poured myself a finger's worth in a silver goblet that Robber's men had 'found' back in Arcadia, aware I'd be going through at least a third of that bottle but unwilling to actually pour myself a full glass. It would have felt like to blunt an admission. I knocked it back and let out a groan at the the fire going down my throat, shaking my hair.

"Gods, that would outright kill a child," I rasped out. "Should I pour you one as well?"

Thief was pouting when she came into sight, going from not to there in a heartbeat's span. She sat astride the table, leather creaking on wood, and presented a golden chalice. I looked closer at it. Those were bells engraved on the side, weren't they? The heraldry of House Fairfax.

"Did you steal this in Laure?" I asked. "From my own treasury?"

"Stolen?" she said. "How dare you, sir. This was bestowed upon me by the Vicequeen of Callow herself, for services rendered."

"I paid upfront, actually," I grunted, but I poured and the aragh sloshed in her ill-gotten goods. "Orphanage never covered how to negotiate with thieves, which in retrospective is an oversight on Black's part."

Thief tried the liquor and grimaced, coughing.

"You drink this?" she croaked. "*On purpose?*"

"You get used to it," I lied.

The look she shot me was more than a little sceptical, but she got down her second swallow without her windpipe rebelling. I leaned back into my chair and granted myself a second finger's worth.



"How do you do it, anyway?" Thief asked. "Tell when I'm there. I was under cover of an aspect, and I've stood inches away from men in broad daylight without them batting an eye."

"I guess you could call it a Name trick," I said. "You never had a teacher, did you?"

"Not one Named," Thief frowned.

"Then I will share my hard-earned knowledge with you," I affably said. "You know how when you came into your Name there was this set of instincts just under your skin?"

The brown-haired woman cocked her head to the side.

"It felt more like a hand guiding mine," she said.

"Close enough," I said. "When you're about to get wounded or killed, you're going to get a tingle just like it."

She nodded slowly.

"I had no intention of striking you," she pointed out.

"Yeah, but you were looking at me," I said. "It does the same thing just... fainter. Black had people following for weeks back in Ater until I learned to pick up on it."

"Then if I moved without looking?" she said.

"Probably wouldn't be able to tell you're there at all," I said. "I didn't get the impression this was common knowledge, anyway. I doubt most Named we'll face will know the trick."

Thief finished her chalice and presented it for filling. Feeling magnanimous, I deigned to comply.

"Are you sure you should have told me that?" Thief asked suddenly. "If I turned on you, this could allow me to land my first strike unseen."

I took another mouthful of aragh, the roughness of the drink now beginning to be replaced by a vague sense of warmth across my chest. I waved lazily.

"Will you?" I asked instead of replying. "Turn on me?"

"If I deem it necessary," Thief said, and for all that she spoke nonchalantly her eyes were serious.

"You say that like it's a rare thing," I told her. "You think Masego obeys my every order? Gods, let's not even talk about Archer. Even my soldiers have lines in the sand they won't follow me past."

"You did not mention Adjutant," the other Callowan said.

"Hakram's the only person in this misbegotten world I trust unconditionally," I replied, perhaps too honestly. "If he turns on me, I'm fucked regardless. No point in worrying about it."

"He does more than you know," Thief said.

"That's what trust is," I said. "Not *needing* to know what he does. I'm guessing the two of you had an unpleasant conversation at some point. Is there anything you want to bring to me? I'll listen if there is."

She studied me for a while, then shook her head.

"Nothing I can't handle," she said.

I raised my cup in a toast, then polished off the remainder.

"So what do you have for me?" I asked.

"Less than you want," she shrugged. "There's twelve thousand of them, I only had time to have a look at the upper officers."

"And?" I prompted.

"Nothing out of the ordinary, as far as I can tell," Thief said. "If there are planted commands they are too subtle for my senses. I have difficulty feeling sorcery aside from wards, so it's possible."

"I hate dealing with Akua," I sighed. "The bag of tricks she inherited is a bitch to handle."

"I'm unsure why you would believe these legions would be her target," she said. "Did you not send them away from the front?"

"She had to know I'd be pulling together all the forces I can before taking a swing at her," I replied. "Istrid's legions are going to be the core of our offensive against Liesse. If they break halfway through the assault we'll be in deep trouble."

"The Fifteenth still seems a better opportunity," Thief noted. "It was raised recently and has a reputation for battlefield promotions."

"The Fifteenth has been under Masego's eyes for over a year," I said. "She tries to enchant one of my senior officers and Hierophant will catch it. These three legions have been out of my sight for months."

"And you believe she'll have agents somewhere in them?" Thief said.

"I *know* she does," I grunted. "That's not even up for debate, it's the base for half the plays I've seen her pull over the years."

I filled my cup again, then hers when she hinted at desire for a top-off.

"Diabolist has been too... open," I said. "She's a chip off the old tyrannical block, I won't deny that, but Akua's wheelhouse has always been the indirect. The massive army of undead, whatever traps she cooked up around Liesse – those are dangerous, but they're not the only arrows in her quiver. They're blunt instruments when she's a girl with a thing for daggers."

"She spent months preparing for the ritual in the city," Thief said. "I would look there for her sharpest blade."

I drank and grimaced, though this once not because of the aragh.

"That's been worrying me as well," I said. "I mean, I'd have to be insane not to worry about a fucking ritual involving centuries of accumulated souls, but there's more than that. Diabolist thinks what she's prepared is going to put her on top of the pecking order, and she may have blinders but she's not *stupid*."

"I don't follow," the dark-haired-woman admitted.

"Think of it this way," I said. "Akua has a large army and backers in the Wasteland, but not enough to handle the Empire at full tilt. Say we march up to Liesse, she pulls down the sky on our heads and our entire force is annihilated. She still loses, because she's fresh out of a god and the Empire's still standing. Weakened, sure, but there's other armies it can field and other commanders too. She's not winning, she's delaying a defeat."

Thief's eyes narrowed.

"You're implying she can use the ritual more than once," she said.

"Pretty much," I said. "This doesn't make sense otherwise. And isn't that the stuff of nightmares? Either the ritual works once but it has a permanent effect – but she didn't rant about ascending to godhood when we talked, so I don't like the odds – or whatever she can pull, she can several times. And it won't be just a few either. If I die she's up against Black, and he's not the kind of man who shies away from a long slugging match."

"Great sorcery always comes at a cost," Thief said, but there was unease on her face.

"She won't care, if she's not the one paying," I said. "We'll have to go into that fight facing the possibility she has both

her current armies and a deployable catastrophe in her pocket. We can't face that and win with traitors in the ranks, Thief. It'll be a razor's edge as is."

My fellow Callowan looked grim.

"I'll take a closer look as we march, extend it to your men as well," she said.

"Please do," I said, indolently toasting her. "And while we're on the subject, it's getting tiresome to call you Thief all the time. I assume you have a name?"

"Juliet," she replied without batting an eye.

I squinted at her.

"That was a lie," I said. "Your heartbeat quickened."

"Alas, you've seen through me," she drawled. "Samantha."

My squint deepened.

"Did you force your heartbeat to quicken just to sell this current lie?" I asked. "Because that's genuinely impressive."

"Did I? Vivienne," she said.

"Your heart went faster again," I sighed. "Now you're just screwing with me."

"I would never dare defy you, Your Grace," Thief said, sounding wounded.

"I'll call you Boris," I threatened. "Don't think I won't. Robber will have a song about it before the moon's turned and that's a promise."

She brushed back her bangs, seemingly amused.

"Vivienne Dartwick," she said.

Huh, that sounded highborn. Wouldn't have pegged her for one, though it wasn't impossible. There'd been a lot of former nobles who'd fallen on hard times after the Conquest.

"Had a feeling it was that one," I baldly lied.

My money had been on Juliet and I'd been coming pretty close to pretending I'd used a Name trick to know it was the truth. *And they said I'd never learn prudence.* I turned to offer an another refill but found only thin air. I waited for a long moment, but couldn't feel her eyes on me.

"I might have shot myself in the foot there," I admitted.

—

I ended up drifting from the path Masego had charted me. The fairy gate opened a few miles southwest of where I'd meant it to, though honesty compelled me to admit that might be on me more than Hierophant. Was I going to present it that way when we next spoke? No, absolutely not. Still, holding the destination in my mind when I opened the first gate was proving tricky when I'd never been there before. It was hardly a disaster, though. We'd have camp ready for sundown instead of Noon Bell, and a few hours of delay were hardly worth a second thought when I'd managed to lead fourteen thousand legionaries from Holden to central Callow in the span of a mere nine days. General Istrid was of the same opinion.

"That is a nasty trick you've got," the orc gravelled. "The Procerans are going to piss their pants the first time you appear in the middle of their fields without warning."

The two of us had gone with the vanguard, which for once was not made of my men. Istrid was riding a wolf the size of a pony, though noticeably broader. My own Zombie the Third had me standing taller than the orc, for once, since the great wolves stood closer to the ground. Mine also had wings, not that it was a competition. If it had been, though, hard to beat the flying undead horse. Her full contingent of wolf riders had preceded us, a horde of eight hundred that brought out old primal fears just to look upon. Beasts like those with riders just as green had been a plague on Callow for centuries, no match for the kingdom's knights on the field but able to ravage large swaths of territory and withdraw if they were not checked quickly enough. The reminder that they were on my side rang a little hollow when Istrid's own mount occasionally snapped at my own with fangs the size of daggers.

"Might not work out that cleanly," I said. "Black tells me they have a Named future-teller on their side. I figure there's decent odds there'll be an army waiting for me on the other side of the gate."

Neither of us bothered to pretend war with Procer wasn't around the corner.

"Then they have to pull off thousands from the border to wait for you," Istrid grinned savagely. "Their armies don't march so quick, Squire. You hop south, then you hop north and just like that their army's split in three – or the Fifteenth's torching their fields and poisoning their wells. Big place, Procer. Won't be easy to defend."

I hummed and did not disagree. I wasn't convinced, though. If Cordelia Hasenbach got her Crusade, that cause would attract more than armies. There'd be heroes too, and those had a knack for being in the right place at the right time to wreck the plans of people that worked on my side of the fence. The Fifteenth had been right behind the vanguard and I glimpsed Hune's tall silhouette, surrounded by a dozen smaller ones as she advanced. I must have let my gaze linger a little too long, because Istrid noticed.

"Thought you liked them smaller than that," the orc snorted.

"Wasn't that kind of look," I said.

The general wasn't exactly someone I wanted to discuss who I kept bed with, so I did not elaborate. Although, to be fair, the Istrid Knightsbane had been happily married for several decades so in that regard she was definitely doing better than me. The orc's very daughter had informed me that the word in Lower Miezan really was married and not 'mated', no matter what some Praesi books said. It wasn't an exact translation from the Kharsum term, which was closer to *bound-in-fortune*, but the meaning was the same even if the customs differed some.

"Oh, I see how it is," General Istrid grunted with amusement. "Got on your nerves, did she?"

I cast a steady look at the orc, who seemed rather unimpressed.

"We had something of a disagreement," I diplomatically said.

"She doesn't like you," the orc said, fairly bluntly.

I winced.

"That's a possible interpretation of it, yes," I said.

"You've been running with Named too long," the general said. "That sort of thing matters with a pack of villains, but she's an officer."

"I can work with people who don't like me," I said. "Hells, Juniper didn't when we started out."

"She's a sweet girl, my daughter," Istrid casually dismissed. "Ogres are harder to deal with."

I stared silently at the general. Juniper. Juniper, sweet? I'd seen her chew out a man so harshly over sloppy gear that he'd teared up. Even Robber tread lightly when she was in a bad mood, and the goblin regularly rode undead creatures I'd stuffed with explosives into active battlefields.

"The commander for my riders," the orc elaborated. "Finest one I ever got, leagues above the woman I had during the Conquest. I still want to break his teeth every time his smug lips open. Don't have to like him or trust him, though, because in the end we're both under the banner. Doesn't matter if you can't stand your legate, it's the Legions that come first – trust in that instead of the woman."

*Except my banner isn't exactly Malicia's, is it?* It stood on the same side, I'd made sure of that as much as I could. But our interests weren't all aligned. The ogre hadn't been wrong when she's said the Fifteenth was more likely to heed my orders than the Tower's, if it came down to it. That Hune probably wouldn't felt like a liability, but not one I could do much about. Setting aside the fact that the Hellhound would dig her heels in if tried to have the ogre transferred, I couldn't exactly use 'loyal to the Empire above me' as a reason to act. I wasn't sure I should, anyway. How likely was it that she was the only soldier in the Fifteenth who thought this way? We had a lot of Callowans these days but most my officers tribune rank and above were from the War College, and that meant greenskins and Praesi. I didn't like the thought of having a lightning rod for those who shared the belief, but there were risks to not giving those people voice at all. I clenched my fingers and unclenched them. It would have to wait after the war, anyway. Changing the second in command of the Fifteenth right before the largest battle it'd ever been in would have been sheer stupidity.

"I got a lesson in ogre opinions," I sighed. "Not a pleasant conversation, though it was worth having."

"Nim's never been accused of being too much of a laugh," Istrid contributed. "There's a reason she was assigned in the Wasteland. Mok's better."

Marshal Nim, that was who she referred to. The ogre that led the Seventh Legion and held overall command of every legion in Praes. The other was General Mok, commander of the Third and currently at the Proceran border under Grem One-Eye. The two most powerful ogres in the Empire, not that you'd know to hear Istrid speak of them.

"Surprised one made Marshal," I finally said. "I didn't get the feeling from Hune they particularly wanted to get involved with the rest of Praes."

"Oh, they talk a good talk," the general conceded. "But they like a good scrap as much as anyone. They can't farm for shit in their hills, anyway, so they have to bring in the food with coin."

"Thalassina's pretty close," I noted.

As the main trading port in the Wasteland, it was from there the grain imported from abroad poured through. There would be advantages to that, if trade was what kept the Hall of Skulls fed.

"Though that can't be pleasant all the time," I added after a moment.

The disadvantages of having a Praesi High Lord this close to your backyard rather spoke for themselves. Istrid snorted.

"They can talk when they share a border with Wolof," she said. "Or the fucking Wallerspawn."

A moment later she remembered my tan wasn't all from the sun, and cleared her throat.

"No offence meant," Istrid said.

I wasn't eager to get into an argument with an orc about who exactly was in the wrong when it came to centuries-old border wars that had occurred often enough Daoine had seen fit to build a giant wall, so I let that one go. Probably for the best, since we were interrupted not long after. One of my mages hurried at our side, bringing word from the latest scrying. Diabolist was on the move, undead had poured out of Liesse. They were going, I was told, south. Towards the eight thousand men Ankou had sent out at my order.

It looked like the Second Battle of Liesse was going to have an opening act.

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### *Big Brother*

Istrid is probably my favorite un-Named character, simply because of how blunt she is. I respect upfront honest words more than double speak and politics.

*stevenneiman*

Istrid's cool, but my favorite is definitely Robber. I have to respect Hune as well, just for his ability to not be swept along by Cat's charisma and story. But there are a lot of awesome characters, both Named and not.

*John Galt*

Robber all the way. \$10 says he ends up Named before all is said and done.



*jamesc9*

There are persistent rumours that Robber is already Named and that goblins keep it secret.

*satoshikyū*

Another \$10 says Robber will get an entirely new Name as well. Little Shit seems fitting.

*sol*

How about Cutthroat?

[Barthumphries](#)

A male Named goblin? No way the Matrons will stand for that.

*SpaceDorf*

Little Shit is not befitting for a Royal Lesser Footrest. There is poetry in his wretched soul.

Also that Squire Claimant outright said that a named Goblin would be special. So I don't think the Matrons are Named, just skilled like Cordelia Hasenbach

*Gunslinger*

Looks like it's about to start. I'm still not sure what measures Cat has in place for all of Akua's plans. Things are looking pretty dire.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Great chapter! Can't wait for Act I!

*Daemion*

Maybe this will be the first battle Cat truly loses.

[Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

It would be a horrifically costly one to lose. Tens, if not hundreds of thousands dead, part of Callow ruined forever and a PR *disaster*. If there's one battle in this entire story I don't want her to lose it's this one.

[shimizubad](#)

That's probable even if she wins, I don't want to know what would happen if she loses.

*Cicero*

You got it wrong. She is going to win, but at what price? thats the question you need to ask your self. Woe onto all they will be.

*Dainpdf*

I'm betting on "wins the battle, starts losing the war".

*letouriste*

really nice chapter:) the mood is heavy for the characters but strangely light overhaul.  
i needed this;)

*letouriste*

overall.of course this is overall^^  
my brain is weird sometimes

*letouriste*

uh wait, "I mean, I'd have to be insane not to worry about a fucking ritual involving centuries of accumulated souls, but there's more than that"  
thief does know about that? i thought that was only cat,masego,the top deoraithes and akua crew

*Metrux*

I think it's rather HARD to keep items away from thief, information more so. I mean, she could pass through any ward and just stay "invisible" there in the same room of the reunion, and only cat and masego would know. Do you think any of the two would've given her up for the deoraithes? But, I rather think this wasn't where she got to know, since Errat is fond of showing us these little snippets.

*Akim*

It would be rather stupid to keep such Information from your biggest spying asset.

She will find out anyway when spying but could look for more Details if she knew what she was looking for in tje first place.

[chris S](#)

I have a nervous niggling feeling that the fact that Cat has Daoine blood in her will be important regarding Diabolist's grand plan somehow. It's been brought up more than a few times.

*Nif*

I don't think will be the Daoine blood that will be the problem they're linked up to an entire different being. The problem will probably come from her Fay title as Akua have already proven she can manipulate them.

[Barthumphries](#)

typo thread

Although, to be fair, the Istrid Knightsbane had been happily married for several decades  
Remove "the"

We had a lot of Callowans these days but most my officers tribune rank and above were from the War College  
Add "of" before and after "my officers" (but most of my officers of tribune rank)

*Big Brother*

That second one isn't improper grammar. The "missing" ofs do make it easier to read, but they aren't actually required. EE seems to like occasionally slipping in some archaic English structuring.  
Or it could be accidental typos.

*Dainpdf*

Gotta love Cat-Vivienne interactions. So much fun!  
And I hope she doesn't get rid of Hune. She needs naysayers.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Yup kinda hard to get unbiased opinions when folks worship the ground you walk on. Even Black and Malicia disagreed on many things.

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## Chapter 53: Manoeuvring

*"War is a breed of conflict decided by the allocation of resources. Through better apportionment a lesser nation can defeat a greater, but never if decision-making is of equal standing on both sides."*

– Extract from "The Modern Legion", a treatise by Marshal Ranker

Come nightfall I held council. We'd ended the march two hours before sunset when the scouts found grounds suitable for a camp,

and the legionaries had taken to building it with veteran expertise. The Fifteenth's two thousand under Hune had raised palisades in the centre, with the camps of the other three legions forming a triad of spokes coming from it. Wide avenues were made for swift troop deployment, watches set before the wooden walls were even finished and scouting lines scattered around in case the enemy attempted to steal a march in the dark. I'd hesitated about the camp, but decided not to gainsay General Istrid when she suggested we should stop. Another two hours of marching wouldn't gain us much ground, but proper fortifications would make a real difference if the Diabolist's host tried a surprise offensive. That I'd call a war council was to be expected, given that the decision to march had been made that very morning and was a major departure from our previous operational plan. I'd spent the daylight in conference with mages and Thief, trying to get a better picture of the opposition, and I was glad I had. I would not have enjoyed looking like a reckless fool in front of these particular commanders, though there might be some grain of truth to that.

More reckless than fool, I liked to think, but that was the kind of judgement best passed on the dead.

I had three of the foremost Imperial officers in Callow facing me. General Istrid Knightsbane, commander of the Sixth Legion. *Ironsides*, their cognomen was. To orcs, perhaps the only one of their own that could top the reputation of Istrid's legion was Grem One-Eye's, for they'd earned that title breaking a charge of Callowan knights. General Orim – the Grim, his men fondly called him – led the Fifth Legion, cognomen *Exterminatus*. They'd earned that name during the Praesi civil war, executing near five thousand Praesi prisoners to ensure they wouldn't be slowed on the march. The third and last was General Sacker, commander of the Ninth Legion. Cognomen *Regicides*. Her goblins had been the ones to kill the Shining Prince when he'd ascended to the throne of Callow halfway through the Fields of Streges. The red paint on her throat was kept by all her men as well, a reminder they'd slit open the throat of royalty without flinching. Hune and myself were green, compared to that assembly. The Fifteenth had been founded only two years ago, and though it had a score of victories under its belt most of my men were still just a few months out of the training camps. The fights I'd put them through so far had hardened them, but it would be years before they had the wealth of experience of the three legions now with me.

I cleared my throat when all were seated, and one of Hune's aides provided scrolls to the three generals. Sacker seemed amused at the formality, Orim indifferent and I bit back a sigh when I saw Istrid was reading through hers too quickly for it to be anything but a glance.

"We've confirmed two things about the enemy," I said. "The first is that they number between twenty and twenty-five thousand, with two thousand at most being living."

"Always the way, with undead armies," Istrid grunted. "They keep enough necromancers to have a leash and a few elite troops but nothing more. If they mix the forces too much they'll start needing a supply train, and dispensing with those is one of the major advantages of raising the dead."

"I've had intelligence that Diabolist had no more than six thousand living in he entire forces as of five months ago," I said. "If we manage to wipe that two thousand, it'll cripple her army before we move on Liesse."

"I don't like the numbers," General Orim bluntly said. "If we were dealing with bones or shamblers we could handle two to one, but these 'wights' are supposed to be upper grade."

"We let this go unchallenged and they'll wipe the Ankou levies, Orim," General Sacker spoke, her voice a dry whisper. "Then raise them still fresh. No coincidence, that number of mages. If we do nothing they gain another eight thousand foot, already armed and armoured."

"Setting that aside, allowing a third of our Callowan reinforcements to be killed before the battle even begins will have stark effect on morale," I flatly reminded them.

Considering I'd ordered those city guards to march in the first place I balked at the idea of letting them get attacked without reinforcing for personal reasons as well, but there was no point in speaking of that to these three. All of them had been part of the Conquest, I doubted they had many qualms about spending Callowan lives.

"It was foolish of their commander to circle by the south," Hune said, the stone we'd dragged inside for her to sit on pushing into the ground. "They should have gone north and joined with the Southpool levies."

Even half-crouched, her head touched the ceiling of the tent.

"That one rests on my shoulders," I said. "I ordered them to muster as swiftly as possible, which is why the Southpool men were already on the move. Their commander took what she saw as the least risk-prone route, however incorrect her judgement."

"Can't expect too much of civilians in armour," Istrid said, which was not excuse but perhaps lessening of blame.

Disinclined to let the conversation linger here, I moved it along with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer.

"Second thing we've confirmed: the enemy commander is Lord Fasili Miremebe," I told them. "Formerly heir to Aksum. If someone can be considered the Diabolist's right hand, it's him."

"That crazy old witch Abreha disinherited him?" General Sacker croaked. "Breaking with the Truebloods in full then. Bold, for her. She usually hedges her bets."

"Don't you spoil this campaign with talk about bloody politics," General Istrid grunted. "I take it gating to their back isn't an option? I doubt we'd be treading the plains if it was."

It was my first instinct to keep them in the dark about my exact capacities, but I forced myself to ignore it. Paranoia had a place, but war councils wasn't it.

"I've never been in the region before," I said. "In those cases I need Hierophant at my side to chart a path through Arcadia. In theory I could try, but there's no telling how long we'd be in there or exactly where we'd come out."

"I can still be used to retreat, at least," General Orim growled. "Being able to leave beyond pursuit is already major advantage."

My brows rose. I'd never actually considered that. In part because I'd never lost a pitched battle, but also because I did tend to think on the offensive. General Sacker had been reading through the scroll carefully while we talked, and only spoke again when she'd finished.

"The Miremebe boy has only middling military record," she said. "One internal purge at his great-aunt's behest, held the left wing when Sahelian was manhandled during the Liesse Rebellion. Are we sure the information is correct?"

"It was supplied by Her Dread Majesty," I said. "I can't guarantee it, but I am disinclined to doubt."

I'd had my own people dig into Lord Fasili as well, of course. Aisha had connections in Praes and had called on them, but they'd not unearthed anything the Empress' spies had not and not everything they did. I had been worth the effort anyway, if only to confirm part of what I'd been given by the Tower. Blind trust had never been a virtue in my eyes, and was much worse than that if offered to a villain.

"Tutored by Asmund of the Dark Teeth Clan and Lady Taslima Ubid," General Orim said, frowning at his scroll. "I know one of these names."

General Istrid let out a noise of surprise.

"Asmund, the senior tribune from the Third?" she said. "Thought he was dead."

"Lost a hand and resigned his commission after they put him under the Quartermaster," the other orc told her.

"Taslima was on the general staff of the Eleventh," Sacker croaked. "Senior Mage."

"There's a reason I had that on the final report," I said. "Legate Hune?"

"Fasili Mirembe has studied the Legions," the ogre stated bluntly. "In depth, from officers that fought during the Conquest. He will be prepared for our tactics."

I inclined my head at the legate.

"I very much want him dead," I said, not bothering to phrase it delicately. "If we manage to off Diabolist's best general before the battle proper, her forces will be shaken when we assault. She's only got so much talent left to call on."

"It'll be tricky catching up to them in time," General Istrid said. "Their men don't get tired on the move, and it's not impossible for them to march through the night."

"Not often," General Orim said. "They can't let their necromancers get too tired or they'll lose hold of the undead."

I cleared my throat.

"We don't have the sorcery to scry through their wards on hand," I said. "But I *can* scry Hierophant, who most definitely can. From our current positions, if the pace remains the same, we should meet with the Ankou troops two days before they do. Our current guess at when battle would take place is nine days, barring the unexpected."

I watched rueful smiles bloom across the faces of the three greenskins facing me.

"Unexpected. Heh," General Sacker whispered.

"Ah, to be young again," Istrid mused.

—

I'd told Thief, not too long ago, that Akua had been too straightforward of late.

I learned how correct I'd been exactly one day too late, when I was scried in panic by the Fifteenth's mage lines in the south. Liesse had spewed out a second army in the middle of the night,

while we were encamped. After the ritual ended I remained alone for a long moment, and considered how badly I might have just fucked up. When I'd gone to collect the three legions before taking a fairy gate north I had tipped my hand. Diabolist now had an estimate of how long it would take me to ferry troops and she'd planned accordingly. As of now, the host under Fasili had kept the same pace and my own was only two days away from linking up with the Ankou troops. I closed my eyes and considered the parts in movement. If we kept marching west, we lost two days. Keeping in mind how long it would take me to pass through Arcadia if things went well, if we did this then Akua's second host of twenty thousand would very likely have time to attack the men coming down from Southpool. Four to one against mages and undead? They'd be shattered within an hour of the first sword being drawn. The rest of my forces were in southern Callow, and if I left now to try to get them on the field up here would be pointless. Both the Ankou troops and the Southpool ones would be wiped by Akua's armies before I even finished gating back to the rest of the Fifteenth.

I should have seen it coming, when I ordered the muster. Diabolist wasn't an attacker by nature, not exactly. She was an opportunist. She'd waited until she could get a read on how quickly I could move, then gone to pluck the low-hanging fruits. The worst of it was that there was no real way to warn either of the Callowan forces. They weren't Legions, they didn't have mage lines for me to contact. The colder part of me considered the decision to make even as the rest remained in shick. If this was to be purely about numbers, I knew what call I had to make. Southpool was sending five thousand men, Ankou eight thousand better trained and better equipped. *She didn't even need to do anything. She just waited for me to blunder, and I did.* There were advantages to being the swiftest player on the field, but costs as well. If you were the first to move then your actions were out in the open. But I hadn't thought it would matter. I'd believed, deep down, that Akua would remain holed up in her lair and let me come to her. Because that was what villains did, wasn't it? They raised the flying fortress and let the heroes knock at the gate. And now people were going to die because I hadn't been careful enough. I only realized I was crushing the goblet in my hand when the wine wet my fingers. I called for my commanders as soon as I was no longer frosting every surface in sight.

"We're losing one of those armies," General Istrid bluntly said.

There wasn't any hemming and hawing from the others. I could see in their eyes that the five thousand from Southpool had been written off before I was done speaking the sentence.

"Though her stratagem was a surprise, the deployments remain real," Hune noted.



I invited her to elaborate with a look.

"Fasili Mirembe is within reach," she said. "So are his necromancers. Their loss would still be a blow to her defences."

"Five thousand levies for a third of her mages or more," General Sacker croaked. "It is an acceptable trade."

"That's if we can decisively beat the boy," General Orim grunted. "If he retreats in good order after a cursory skirmish, we will have been fully duped."

"So we strike hard," General Istrid growled.

*Or is that what Diabolist wants? I thought. For us to commit here, where she knows we're coming and has time to deploy every manner of nasty trick?* The first time I'd ever seen Akua, when he'd spied on her conversation with Black, she'd called herself a skilled commander. I'd chalked that up to arrogance since, since she had no real victories to her name, but the arrogance might just have been mine. I'd never seen Akua Sahelian fighting an actual war before, had I? Before the battles had always been just a tool for positioning, a way for her to implement her plots. Now she'd bared her knife, and on our very first round she'd been the one to draw blood. As ever when dealing with Diabolist, the spiral of second-guessing and doubt was as dangerous as her actual actions. Whether Fasili and the mages were bait or not did not matter, in the end. Fighting him with the Ankou troops was still the best decision I could make. It niggled at the back of my mind that thinking about the best decision Juniper could make was exactly how I'd predicted her actions, during our war games, but was that alone enough to have me gate for the Southpool men instead? *No*, I admitted. It was almost presumptuous, to call joining up with Ankou reinforcements the best move. *All it is is the lesser mistake of the tow before me.*

"We keep going," I said, and the words felt like ashes in my mouth.

I did not ask any gods for forgiveness. The ones that would grant it were my foes, and the ones I worked for knew nothing of the word.

—

It was a close thing, and I only avoided disaster by leaning into my instincts. Two hours before sunset, on the day before we joined the Ankou troops, I passed down instructions not to make camp and to continue marching after dark. Guided by magelights and goblins, our host of fourteen thousand pressed on until midnight. The pace slowed in the dark, but I was feeling an itch on the back of my neck. A sense of danger not yet revealed. Three hours of rest were granted before we resumed the march, and so

narrowly avoided disaster. We found the Ankou city guard out in the field shortly before Morning Bell. We found the host of the dead as well, lines tirelessly advancing under the light of the rising sun.

"And that's why when a Named tells you to keep marching, you fucking do it," General Istrid said, and spat to the side. "This would have been a bad one, mark my words."

We were both mounted again, the orc remaining at my side as our legions spread out. My helmet kept under my arm, I gazed at the enemy host.

"They marched through the entire night," I said. "Gods, if you hadn't warned me they could..."

"Their necromancers will be tired," the Knightsbane said. "But our legionaries are as well. We'll have to be real careful with that shield wall, Squire. Formations are what lets us win this. If they break them we'll be in deep shit. Your countrymen can't be relied on, not with dead on the other side and numbers that high."

"You underestimate them," I replied. "This is Callow, general. We've seen the dead walk before. We've turned them back, again and again."

"From walls," the orc grunted. "This is open field, and I don't see no fucking knights. Just scared guards in cheap mail with spears they've only ever drilled with."

"That's why we spread Hune's men through them, to serve as a spine," I said.

I'd put the legate in charge of that entire division of the host, replacing the commander from Ankou. That ten thousand combined would serve as our centre, with the Fifth serving as the right wing and the Ninth as the left. Both legions had left a gap between themselves and the Callowans, bait for Fasili to send his wights through in an attempt to isolate our forces. Istrid's own Fourth we were keeping in reserve behind the rest, with her wolf riders as an independent command.

"Twenty-three thousand on their side, twenty-two thousand on ours," the Knightsbane growled. "We're in for a bloody day."

"If we can wipe their casters they fall apart," I said.

Without the necromancers controlling them the wights would lack organization. They'd still fight with the intelligence of living soldiers, more or less, but without officers or orders. Numbers mattered less when they belonged to a mob.

"They won't leave their mages unprotected," General Istrid said. "I'm guessing they'll go back to old Legions tactics from before the Reforms. They'll keep five thousand back in a square around the casters and come in a wave, then rely on sorcery to punch a hole and try to flip our lines."

"We don't have enough mages and sappers with the Fifteenth to break a wave," I murmured. "Hune'll keep the fireballs back until she has to plug a gap to avoid exhausting her mage lines."

"They'll have a ritual prepared," the orc laughed. "Those wily old Wasteland foxes always do. But I ain't worried, to tell you the truth."

I glanced at her, raising an eyebrow. General Istrid's lips split into a vicious grin, ivory fangs glinting in the morning sun.

"Whatever sorcery they're going to pull out, Squire, I doubt it's going to be worse than *you*."

---

*ruduen*

Time for the Squire to show what she's learned about warfare, and the role Named serve on the battlefield.

*AVR*

With Cat's Named instincts warning her I suspect there's some Named person with Akua's forces. No I don't know who.

Anyway, typos.

allocation or resources.  
allocation of resources.

will have stark effect  
will have a stark effect

not excuse  
not an excuse

"I can still be  
"It can still be

only middling military record,"  
only a middling military record,"

already major advantage."  
already a major advantage."

mistake of the tow  
mistake of the two

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

"Tutored by Asmund of the Dark Teeth Clan and Lady Taslima Ubid," General Orim said, frowning at his scroll. "I know one of these names."

I'm pretty sure that's supposed to be "NONE of those names." Doesn't make sense the way it's written. The typos are so bad they're seriously detracting from the story. I feel like I have to doubt every single sentence, because anything could be misspelled in ways that apparently make sense but are wrong, like this one.

Is E.E. a non-native English speaker? A lot of the bad spots read like they're poorly translated into English from a language that's structured differently.

*Kizuna*

"one of these names" makes sense.. They considering the following paragraph where Istrid then elaborates on one of them.

*AVR*

@Warren Peace: I think I saw a .fr email address for him somewhere, so probably yes. That would also explain why he uses UK spellings – the Brits are a lot closer to France than any other English speakers.

*Dainpdf*

Okay, that can be taken two ways. Either any damage the sorcery causes will be more than offset by the carnage Cat will make of the enemy, or no sorcery could harm the legions more than Cat's mistakes already have.

Also, well played, Akua. Well played. By the way, nIce army you have there. Would be a shame if something happened to them, out in the Cold... Cat will be glad to lend you a few palls for them, I'm sure.

*naturalnuke*

It's like playing chess, every choice you give them should both be bad, and either should advance your own goals,

*Gunslinger*

Can praesi mages usurp another necromancers control? I wouldn't be surprised if after centuries of undead warfare they have measures in place for dealing with them

*Engineer*

It's possible. Remember, Still Water is largely alchemy based, with magic only acting as a sort of "ignition" as I understand it. Usurping or disrupting that spark might just cause the entire army to fall apart.

Hierophant DEFINITELY could. But he's not there. Which begs the question where he could be and what he's doing.

*Engineer*

Hahahahahahaha!!!!!!

This is going to be sooo good...

*danh3107*

Hmm well played Akua, well played.

*JC*

Hune is the unidentified traitor, methinks.

*arancaytar*

I would think that a traitor would not be so open with their dislike for Cat, but admittedly anything a traitor would not do is also something a traitor *would* do to avoid suspicion. And so forth.

*Big Brother*

I say it's not Hune. I'm banking on Killian. All her actions appear normal, but there's some serious oddities when they pile up.

I can't remember exactly, but didn't Killian approach Cat first? If so, that's a little odd for an officer in the Legions, when they have such strict regulations about relationships in general. From there, Killian worked her way into Cat's bed AND confidence, while using seemingly innocent questions to get information that was somewhat above her rank. Not to mention, she's the mage commander, and they handle long distance comms when not in combat. What better place could there possibly be to place a spy than right next to the enemy, in a position where they control communications?

*firespier*

Don't think so

Akua said in epilogue of book 1 it's not someone from rat company

*Letouriste*

Actually if Killian is a traitor we would already know. akua said herself she didn't managed to bribe the officers and killian being senior mage is comprised. I don't think there is any traitor remaining in the officers, even the ones who have been promoted later. Also, the whole break up reason would not make sense if she planned to backstab cat.

*Sniggs44*

Logically I think Killian being the traitor makes sense, since she has both the means and plenty of opportunities. As you pointed out she's the head of the mages, and since Masego can't be bothered to keep an eye on her (unless explicitly ordered) she's in a great position to leak info and just generally cause havoc and get away with it. Plus, IIRC she and Niln (sp? Nauk's dead buddy) were close friends, and apparently he was tied up in some sort of treachery, so they could easily have been in cahoots. Then again, aside from being pissed at Squire for not letting her evolve into her final form or w/e I can't really pin down any compelling, long-term motive.

Narratively speaking her being the traitor is such a blatant trope (jilted lover and/or power hungry witch) that I'd halfway expect the author to use it as a bait and switch. On the other hand this universe kinda runs off such obvious narrative tropes, so maybe Killian's betrayal is inevitable since she's tied so closely to a Named. (Though you'd think Squire would have put closer eyes on her specifically to counter this...an angry ex working against you is up there with "determined teenager quickly becomes a major power player" when it comes to oft-used story conventions.)

*TideofKhatanga*

Doubt it. If the little we know of Ogres is true, Hune has no reason to prefer Akua to Cat. Or to side with any of them over Malicia. I'm seconding the theory that Killian is the traitor, or at least more than a little suspect. Remember, "Love ends with the kiss of the knife, Trust is the wager that takes your life."

*arancaytar*

No pressure!

*Eduardo*

Cat was outmaneuvered, all options left to her were bad. Staying put, saving one army, saving the other or not even calling these armies, to begin with.

The problem is that she has smaller numbers and lower quality of

troops. This allows the other side to do this divide and conquer tactics.

*Letouriste*

«lower quality of troops » you say^^

Ok a large part is levies but there still several legions there and I trust them better than a few necromancers

[Euodiachloris](#)

She does, however, have her own connections to both unconventional necromancy and Winter magic, both of which bounce off each other. These wights are closer to alchemical homunculi than to classic demonological undead. And, you can take and use a wizard's or witch's tools against them in Voudon with the right chemicals and knacks. You don't need anything big. Just well-placed counters and the right levers.

*Engineer*

Which Black will no doubt employ once he joins the theatre.

*Sniggs44*

"Grunted", "growled", "murmured", "croaked". Was it a war council or a conclave of barnyard animals?

Once in a while to set the tone is fine, but there's really nothing wrong with just repeatedly using "said". It may seem repetitive, but readers tend to mentally edit them out. Using other adjectives too often breaks up the flow of conversation. Not every statement needs to be paired with an action/description.

We know, for example, that Ranker has lots of disfiguring face/throat wounds, and that Istrid is an orc with a gravelly voice. No need to belabor the point once it's established.

*LM*

I'm curious why Cat didn't even consider an assault on the city. That's a huge opening, most of Arkua's forces are out in the open. Either a full military assault, or a named only assassination mission

*Engineer*

You're forgetting the thousand some odd demons and devils she has under control. The text made no mention of them so it's safe to assume they're occupying Liesse.

*Gryph*

Maybe I'm missing something, but I'm pretty sure there's a typo in the title of the chapter... "Maneuvering", instead of "Manoeuvering"

*mupi*

"Manoeuvering" is a more "traditional" (perhaps archaic) spelling:

<https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/manoeuver>

Vocabulary.com lists it as a "British" spelling; it's not inconsistent, IMO, with the "archaic" nature of warfare on Calernia.

[Euodiachloris](#)

There's nothing archaic about it. It's current throughout the Commonwealth, meaning it's the US what is weird. 🤪

*CrazyPenguin*

Nope, "Maneuvering" is the correct spelling in American English.

*Tibs*

Is anyone else annoyed that Akua doesn't really suffer whatsoever? Is it because she is playing the villain in this story? She just seems way too good at everything. Surely generals of this caliber would run circles around Akua.

Is it because she is a Named Villain? Or because she is facing another villainous character in Cat so she gets a boost of some sort.

I get this feeling that if a hero was going against Akua she'd go down super easy. I don't know. Some of this super-competency from Akua appears really odd.

*esryok*

Probably 'cause she's a Named Villain implementing the early stages of her plan.

An argument could be made that a hero would have had the climactic showdown earlier to try and stop Still Water. Suggests that her story's *\*actual\** climax is orders of magnitude worse, for the zombie army to still have "no rush 20" in effect.

*haihappen*

Black implemented the "Stop the rise of heroic names in Callow" plan, with Cat.

Generally, in stories with Villain versus Villain, Heroes do



not occur. Unless there is a Hero opposing both the villains. The Bard was instrumental on setting the current story up, but was occupied with the Free Cities fiasco, so maybe It has a follow-up plan or wanted to set the White Knight up as the overarching hero that defeats both villains? Whatever the current scenario is, it can be expected to be in the Bard's "script".

*Unmaker*

Zombies = no thermoregulation. Duchess of Winter. Let's hope for zombiecicles.

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## Interlude: Skirmish I

*"If I had an aurelius for every assassination attempt, I wouldn't have to keep raising taxes."*

– Dread Emperor Pernicious, the Imperiled

Commander Joan Ansel had feigned anger when the ogre took command, for that was what her men wanted from her, but deep down all she felt was pathetic relief. This was all far beyond her ability to deal with. She'd been Royal Guard, once upon a time, and fought in the Siege of Laure until one of the gates gave and the Praesi ran loose in the capital. That record had seen her appointed to lead the city guard of Ankou a decade down the line, but her men forgot she'd been a *captain* back then. What did she know of leading armies, of field tactics and the like? Her job had been the hold the fucking wall with the company of soldiers that answered to her, and that duty she'd discharged and well. It hadn't been her men that gave, when the Empire came knocking. This, though, this was all more than she could handle. The truth of how close they'd come to being wiped out by the enemy before the Legions ever caught sight of them still had fear running down her spine. Weeping Heavens, she'd still run if she could. Not that it was an option.

The fair-haired woman glanced back over the ranks and caught sight of that lone silhouette on horseback, a colourful cloak stirring in the wind behind it. The Black Queen herself had come to take charge, and she was said to have strong opinions on desertion. Joan hid a flinch under her helmet. They'd all heard how the Gallowborne had been snatched straight from the gallows and used 'til they were spent on foreign fields. The woman knew Her Grace had been named Vicequeen of Callow by the Tower, that she did not hold the throne in her own right as the Fairfaxes

had, but balls to that. It was open secret the Black Queen had slugged the Wasteland in the stomach until it spat out a crown for her to wear. *She's never lost a battle*, Joan told herself. *We won't die today*. She clutched that belief tight, watching the ranks of the dead advance. Thousands upon thousands, pale as the grave even in the morning sun. Their armaments weren't pretty like those of the Legions, no matching colours and smooth lines. Just pieces of armour slapped together over a marching corpse, blades and spears and every weapon that could be gotten cheaply in hand. They did not look fearsome, until you saw there was only death in those empty eyes.

Her men, at least, had decent mail and good spears. The city guard used clubs and knives within Ankou to keep the peace, but it was tradition old as the kingdom that all of them drill with the spear every month. The city was the last holdfast between Callow and the fucking Procerans, if the Vales fell. It was expected to be able to hold until the kingdom's armies arrived. *Ankou has walls*, she thought. *Here there is only barley and black earth*. Both would be stained red before long. Joan felt her hands shake with tremors they'd disdained when she was still young, but she'd been a dumb twat at twenty hadn't she? Thinking Laure could hold against the godsdamned Carrion Lord and his pack of monsters. Now she neared fifty and knew better. There was no winning against the Wasteland. *And the harder we fight, the harder we die*. The thought was dark, but Joan had not felt this powerless in decades. The Imperial Governor in Ankou had been content to wring taxes out of the people and ignore them otherwise, until his term ended last year. They'd all gone on with their lives with no one bothering with them.

Now Joan was back in the Tower's eye, sworn to die in its name.

"Commander Ansel," the mountain said. "Your men seem dispirited."

Joan swallowed and looked up at the ogre. Legate Hune, she'd said her name was. One of the Fifteenth's top officers though not one she'd ever heard of, like the Hellhound or Hakram Deadhand. The creature was large as a dozen men, and those eyes were studying her like she was some sort of insect one misstep away from being squashed. *Gods*, she thought, *why did I not retire?* Coin would have been tight, but better poor than dead.

"They'll hold, ma'am," she stiffly told the monster. "They know the stakes."

You didn't need to be some great general to see the Black Queen had put Joan's men in the centre because all she wanted from them was to hold. The wings on both sides were Legions, and it'd be them who decided the battle while Callowans died like dogs. *But if the centre collapses, this turns into slaughter*. The dead would split the Black Queen's army in two and overwhelm it in small bits. The fair-haired woman knew this, but she wasn't sure

her soldiers did. *And even if they do, are they going to give a shit when their faces are getting chewed off?* Joan shivered. It was easy to see the disaster this could turn into.

"They will," Legate Hune agreed calmly. "Pass this down to your officers: the legionaries of the Fifteenth are under instruction to kill any men fleeing the battlefield. Cowardice will not be tolerated."

Joan's eyes flicked to the Black Queen, still unmoving in the distance. Gods it was eerie how still she was.

"The Vicequeen will not gainsay that order, commander," the monster said coldly. "You will find no saving grace there. She has no patience for the yellow-bellied."

*Easy for you to call people that,* she thought. *You're a fucking battering ram unto yourself.*

"We'll hold," Joan said, and hated how weak it sounded.

She breathed in and out, kept her hands against her side to end the shaking.

"Down here in the mud, it's us who holds the line," she whispered, and that one had some iron to it.

The old song spoke about dying free, though, didn't it? She smiled bitterly. Well, songs were songs. Creation was never as pretty as they said.

—

Orim of the Tarred Dogs breathed in deeply. The air was crisp and clean out here, nothing like the squalid reek of Laure. He felt the part of him that was the general melt away, the chief he'd once been baring his fangs anew. Gods, it was good to be at war again. To have an enemy to chew up, an army to break and scatter and *crush underfoot*. It was the way orcs were meant to live, not playing fucking wet nurse to a mob of bleating Callowan cattle. Oh, he knew why Lord Black had garrisoned him in Laure. The day he'd spilled the lifeblood of five thousand Praesi on Wasteland grounds still rang in people's ear, a whisper of fear and death if he was crossed. It had kept the likes of Mazus in line and the local waste as well. But having to be patient and kind and all those hundred tedious little duties had worn away at him. Orim was fifty-three, now, but today he felt young again. It was going to be a good day, and all he regretted was that he had to fight under a green girl instead of Grem or the Carrion Lord. What Lord Black saw in the Wallerspaw was beyond him. She had a way with killing, but the Empire had no shortage of killers. Few of them were so irritatingly high-minded about getting the job done.

His general staff arrayed around him, Orim studied the rebel army. The wights would not be easy meat, but this was a battle that could be won. The Wastelander boy leading the other side had thickened his ranks before approaching, massing the dead to match the line of Callowan levies. Deeper lines, though. The mixed Fifteenth and levies numbered ten thousand in total, but the rebels must have closer to fourteen or fifteen thousand facing them. It was like Istrid had thought, Mireembe was aiming to break the centre and split them. There was more to enemy tactics than a single wave though. A chunk of three thousand wights had been split from the rest of the host and was heading towards Orim's own Fifth Legion. Behind the centre of the rebel army the living could be glimpsed, Praesi household troops and mages that couldn't be more than two thousand. There were another three thousand wights in a ring around them, which was a damned shame. Istrid's riders could have looped around to hit the Praesi if they hadn't kept those.

"General Sacker seems to have the lucky draw of the day," his Staff Tribune said.

Orim grunted in assent, though he didn't look at the Taghreb. Sacker's Ninth made up the left wing, and unlike his own legion there was no detached division heading for her. The orc licked his chops, the atrophied muscles of his face keeping his lips near-unmoving. A weakness he'd been born with, one that had seen him called Grim for how hard it was to smile. He'd been lucky it hadn't been obvious when he'd been a babe. Orcs born flawed didn't make it through long winters.

"Prepare to receive them," he ordered. "Staggered welcome."

His Senior Sapper snorted, then spoke to the flag-bearers. Twice red cloth rose, and it was fewer than thirty heartbeats before the scorpions began firing. Steel-tipped javelins tore through the first rank of the three thousand wights moving towards the Fifth like wet parchment. The undead were within three hundred feet, good killing range. The second volley flew twenty heartbeats later, this one angled to punch through more than one wight per projectile. The rebels had put cheap armour on their dead, but going through flesh and bone still took strength: it was a rare javelin that took more than two. The wights began to quicken their steps before the third volley launched, much as Orim had expected. If he'd had longer to prepare the chief would have made his sappers trap the advance, but the rebels had been too swift for that. No matter. Undead hordes had no skill to them, even the clever ones, and this one seemed to have no skirmishers to field. They'd bleed for that. The flags rose again and the Fifth's sapper lines shot forward across the field. They slowed right before the enemy entered range, the sharpeners thrown carving holes into the enemy ranks with loud cracks. The goblins

immediately began to withdraw at a measured pace, munitions detonating every ten heartbeats with disciplined precision.

"We'll have a more than a tenth of them gone before they reach our shield wall, at this rate," his Staff Tribune observed.

"Close up is where undead shine," Orim reminded her. "This won't last."

He'd learned that the hard way, when they'd marched on Okoro during the civil war. Skirmishers scythed through the first few ranks of enemy undead and he'd thought it was going to be a slaughter, but it had ended up so close a victory it might as well have been a draw. Undead did not tire, or break when they lost too many. You couldn't flip their line the way you did the living because they didn't panic and flee. They didn't stop unless you broke them all, or the necromancers holding their leash. Three thousand wights against the four thousand men of his Fifth seemed like throwing away bodies but it wasn't that. The boy on the other side knew whatever dead managed to reach their lines would keep Orim's legion too busy to redeploy for at least an hour. *He'd going to be hitting the centre's right side*, the orc thought. The wights sent against the Fifth had been meant to prevent it from reinforcing there: Mirembe was trying to create weakness for him to tear through. But that wouldn't be enough, not with Istrid's legion kept back to plug exactly that sort of gap. *So what are you truly up to, Wastelander?*

One hundred feet until the wights hit the shield wall. No crossbow fire had greeted them when they entered range, for that would have been a pointless waste of bolts. Nothing that light would put down the likes of them. Orim spat to the side and made his decision.

"Heavies to the front," he said. "Senior Mage Dolene."

"Sir?" the Soninke replied.

"No volleys," he ordered. "A Hook, then Lob until told otherwise."

Whatever the rebels were up to, it depended on him being pinned down. To unmake their design he must tear through the opposition as quickly as possible. The orc watched as the ranks of the Fifth smoothly redeployed, the sappers taking refuge as his men and orc in heavy plate came to the fore. They would tire swiftly, he knew, but regulars would not make as much of an impact. He would take the gamble. Mere moments before the wights smashed into his frontline fireballs bloomed, rising up at a sharp angle before being pulled down backwards into the first rank of the wights. *Hook*. Flame consumed the undead, intensely concentrated so it would bite hungrily into dead flesh. The horns sounded and his heavies let out a loud cry, shields raised as they charged into

the enemy. There was a thundering crash of steel on steel and the mage lines crafted flame again, tossing them into the roiling mass of wights far from the frontline. *Lob*, the doctrine called it. Meant to weaken the pressure of the enemy so it could be devoured in waves.

The glare of the sun glinting on his helm, Orim the Grim watched the struggle of steel against dead flesh and his lips half-twitched into a grotesque smile.

—

General Sacker watched from her raised platform as the line of Ankou men bent under the weight of the undead and frowned. Her missing eye itched, the urge of scratching the scarred tissue ever an effort to master. Either the enemy was blundering, or they had. The Callowans had thin blood and there could be no turnaround expected from them, but the centre was holding in the face of the wights. Legate Hune's legionaries steadied the parts of it that wavered, filling the gaps with red-painted steel and unflinching discipline. The Matron was almost impressed. Most of the Fifteenth was fresh out of the camps and of conquered stock to boot, which had seen her lower her expectations, but the men she saw fighting did so as proper legionaries. *It is not merely Names that won them the victories, then.* Something to consider. Any pack of goatherds could win a battle against an army if a demigod stood at their head, but the Squire had yet to act. This was the men of the Fifteenth alone and they were acquitting themselves more than passably. Had Sahelian's dogs made the same erroneous assumption she had, perhaps?

It seemed unlikely. The Diabolist had fought Lord Black's apprentice many a time, and seen the Fifteenth in action twice. Yet Fasili Mirembe's army was headed towards defeat, should matters continue to unfold as they now did. Sacker's men were cutting through the wights in front of them at a steady rate, sharpeners and demolition charges opening holes she saw broadened with mage fire. Her regulars were pushing back the enemy, slowly but surely. And when they found nothing but field in front of them, they would turn to flank the wights facing the Callowans. Sacker's remaining eye was not as sharp as it used to be when she'd been a young and red-handed Matron — alchemical concoctions could lengthen her lifespan, but not reverse the ravages of time — but she saw clearly enough. And what she saw was this: there were too few wights facing her Ninth. There'd been no need for Lord Mirembe to have fifteen thousand undead facing the ten thousand at the centre. Some of these now stood before her legionaries, but not enough to account for the numbers. Where had the rest gone?

When the battle had begun, there'd been a gap between Orim's Fifth and the centre. When the Fifth became tied down Legate Hune

had lengthened her line to avoid getting flanked through it. Studying the mass of silent yet writhing undead, Sacker found a current. *The ranks are thinner where the gap was*, the goblin thought. *They're massing wights in front of it to prepare for a push.* Mireembe on the other side had to know it would not win him the battle even if he broke through there. Istrid would charge into there fangs bared and stabilize the centre. *And after that?* Sacker pondered. The Praesi still had a ritual up their sleeve, this was a given. Superior sorcery was their greatest advantage. *They wait until Istrid is committed there. Orim won't be able to disengage from the wights after him, even if they're not a real threat to him.* The orc had engaged the three thousand sent towards him aggressively, she'd noted, using tactics that Legion doctrine usually preached should be used against levies. The picture, slowly, began to paint itself. With the Fourth filling the gap, the only uncommitted force on the field would be Istrid's riders. *And if the rebels hit the Fourth with their ritual, not only do they reopen the gap but they're costing us legionaries instead of Callowans.*

Wolf riders alone would not be able to turn back the wights pouring through. They were not meant for hard fights like those. What, then, would be sent to prevent Sacker's own legion from intervening? The old goblin's eyes turned to the Praesi holed up behind the battlefield. Household troops, around a thousand. Half that number of mages and officers. And four hundred men in Helikean scale armour, most likely mercenaries. By themselves, not a threat. But able to withstand eight hundred wolf riders if those attempted a charge on the mages. Which left the three thousand wights currently deployed in a ring around the Praesi free to tie down the Ninth Legion while the left flank collapsed. It was a pretty little strategy, she would admit. Neatly designed to exploit the weaknesses of their host. It did not, however, account for the Squire. *They cannot be so blind as to discount her*, she thought. *There is still an element missing.* Whether it could be found would decide the victor of the day.

—

Abigail screamed herself hoarse, smashing her shield in a dead man's face. The nose broke with a crack but the shit didn't care in the slightest, hacking at her from the side. Good legionary mail had the blade bouncing off but it would leave a bruise. Sweat pouring down her face, she rammed her sword in the wight's throat and felt the spine give to goblin steel. She hacked the head off while it continued wailing at her, her shield denting under the force of the blows. Even headless the wight kept on attacking, and something smashed into her helmet that had her vision swimming. She felt someone pull her back and a tall orc filled the empty space, forcing down the wight and letting the legionaries behind him hack it to pieces.

"Captain, you still with us?" a man's voice asked.

Abigail wiped the spittle and sweat off her lips, focusing on the person it belonged to. Sergeant Tadaaki, whose dark face was creased with worry. She clapped the Soninke's shoulder, feeling a wave of nausea coming over her.

"I'm f--"

She bent to the side to empty her stomach on the ground.

"Fine, sergeant," she moaned after. "I am fine."

No bleeding parts, so there was nothing to bother what few healers they had with. The disgusting taste lingering in her mouth, Abigail wiped her face and deeply regretted having tried her lieutenant's 'mystery stew'. Secret Taghreb recipe her fucking ass. Didn't look any better coming out than it had going in. *Never falling for that one again. That wasn't godsdamned rabbit floating in the stuff, no matter what he said.*

"Take a breather, ma'am," the sergeant said. "I'll handle the frontline."

"Don't get aggressive, Tadaaki," she said. "We can't afford the losses. Bloody militia's shaky enough as is."

"They're *your* people," the Soninke replied, flashing a grin.

Abigail spat the scum out of her mouth, hoping the man whose boot she'd dirtied hadn't noticed.

"They're Ankouans," Abigail argued. "They've got more in common with goats than a good Summerholm girl like me."

Everybody knew the people in Ankou were barely Callowan at all, what with all that breeding with Procerans. Sergeant Tadaaki left her to the sound of laughter. Good sort, that one, for a Wastelander anyway. Captain Abigail made her way to the back of the line and undid the straps of her helmet, taking it off long enough to let her sweat-soaked curls cool a little. *Gods Above*, she thought as she watched the melee ahead, *what a mess*. She could not believe she'd ever been drunk enough to think enrolling in the Legions was a good idea. Abigail had come within an inch of dying twice in the last year, and now held the dubious distinction of knowing what fae blood tasted like. Screaming while hacking at Summer warriors came with drawbacks when red flew. Well, it beat being a tanner at least. Her family home had gone up in green flames when the Black Queen tangled with the Lone Swordsman a while back and her uncle had made it clear that being allowed to live under his roof came at the price of going into his trade. Her two brothers had folded, but she'd decided



she wasn't going to smell like rotting corpse garbage for the rest of her life.

She was coming to reconsider that decision, but with three years left to her service that meant less than nothing. There wasn't anyone in the Fifteenth that was idiotic enough to think that *desertion* was an option. The captain rolled her shoulders, wishing she could take off her mail for even ten heartbeats. Her aketon was drenched, and now that she wasn't busy trying not to get killed she realized that her nipples itched something fierce. Ugh. She took a look at the melee to distract herself, knowing she'd have to go back before long. Tribune Ashan would report her otherwise, and Legate Hune was strict with disciplinary actions. The wights were chewing into the lines, but not as bad as she'd thought they would. The Ankouans were holding up pretty well, for a pack of hacks with spears. Probably helped they didn't let the dead get too close. Her own company rotated the lines often enough no one was dropping from exhaustion, though the enemy was hard on regulars like her. They swung harder than living men did, and if their armour had been any better they'd have been a hundred Hells to put down. Still, overall she called this better than Dormer – though 'less dangerous than fire-spitting immortals from a legend world' was a fairly low bar to set, now that she thought about it. At least she hadn't pissed herself this time, so there was that, though if the battle continued for another few hours there was no guarantee that would last.

It was because she was at the back of the line that she noticed it. She could see the rest of the army, compare where it stood to where her men did. Realize that her part of it was being pushed back, step by step. It wasn't some great turning of the tide or anything like that. Just... pressure. Slowly increasing. *And we're bending in front of it.*

"Shit," she said feelingly, and fumbled the clasp of her helmet after forcing it on. "Shitshitshit."

Tribune Ashan's cohort, of which her company made up half, was the anchor for right side of the centre. If they broke, then the wights had nothing to stop them and the swarm was going to be coming from all sides. Unsheathing her sword, Abigail went back cursing into the fray and really hoped that someone, anyone, was noticing how close to disaster they were edging.

I always enjoy the battle interludes with shifting perspectives. Though I am too sleepy at the moment to properly consider what the big problem at the end is. Any guesses?

Also let's vote the guide to the top on topwebfiction.com <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*JN*

If I remember correctly, the undead were created by having the citizens drink contaminated water which was then activated by a ritual. Perhaps the mystery stew was infected, and the center of the Callowan line is about to turn?

*Allafterme*

I gotta say I don't like that Chekhov's Stew not a single bit

*Thrillho*

Oooh, that would be baaaad. Just the kind of rotten twist you'd expect from Diabolist though

*nipi*

I doubt her spies managed to feed still water to all of them, but a number of their rank suddenly becoming the enemies ghouls is bound to cause chaos. Too bad for them that that's what Cat thrives in.

*stevenneiman*

It would be insanely difficult to try and poison any large group, but not impossible. The really scary thing is that they don't need to get it anything like uniform. Triggering a transformation in even one or two percent of any given force could throw it into disarray if the transformation is fast enough for them to strike without warning, which would cause it to buckle if that happened at the same time as they were trying to face another force of even remotely threatening strength, such as the main undead army. Not sure one way or the other if that's how it's going to go down, but it's not impossible.

*Engineer*

That would be a recipe for disaster.

Depending on how fast Still Water turns a human into a Wight, this could cause chaos in short order. Remember, most of the levies are already 'dispirited'. Seeing their fellow soldiers turning into Wights would evaporate morale and trust instantly since nobody knows who is infected

and who is not. With the attack of an outside force happening concurrently and Cat may just see her first real defeat here.

... You know unless she uses her Winter and Necromancy powers to usurp control of the undead and use them to beat the shit out of Akua's demons.

Also transition into the Name Death Knight while she is at it.

*warriormonk19*

I don't think so. Didn't the citizens need to drink copious amounts of the stuff? I doubt that a single meal would have been enough to pack all the necessary alchemical ingredients. I may be wrong, but I think it was simply a case of a bad cook.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> I think it was simply a case of a bad cook.

Also, she did just take a knock on the head.

*JN*

Replying to Warriormonk19.

I don't remember how much people have to drink or for how long. You may be right. However, I'm going to see your skepticism and raise you a catastrophe. Not only may she have been dosing these troops long enough to turn them, but who's to say how long she's been brewing the undead potion and how widely she has distributed it? Cat may find herself confronted with, "Kneel to me or there won't be a single living Callowan within a week." True, that would be a monumental undertaking, but she has had a flying city to work from while Cat has been busy with the Fae.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

The issue, and the benefit, is that Akua is playing the villain, and Cat is playing the hero. This reads entirely like a The Night Is Always Darkest scenario. Danger is foreboding, and disaster appears to be imminent. This is the point in the story where the good guys start to break, only to be saved by the hero.

Cat has set herself up incredibly favorably in this story, which is either the result of Akua getting pushed into her role by her transition to Diabolist, or Akua having some advantage planned for when this happens. Either way, she's stacked the deck \*too\* much here to win.

Which leads into an interesting idea I've had about the state of Cat's Name and why she doesn't transition yet. Squire, since it is a transitory Name, does not limit the decisions Cat makes. Her name only loses power when she goes against her Story. She can't go against the Tower, but she can go against people who go against Cat, so long as her interests stay with Evil. Whether consciously, or unconsciously with the Story, Cat doesn't transition because she's effectively stronger with a weaker Name, because she isn't limited by her choice of actions.

Akua is unable to set herself up in this scenario on this battlefield, because the Diabolist would never be in this scenario in this battlefield. The Diabolist is always the one with the army of the dead and demons, and the Squire, while Evil in this case, is not directly barred from this course of action. The Name itself does not drag her away from this action, and the Story she has built for herself allows her decisions. Or, the Story is arguably her decisions all put together, and this is just in line.

Of course, by putting herself in the hero role, she limits her abilities in combat, hence why she needs to have a good army and good tactics. She can't just Rambo this, she has to go in practically, because that's her story.

But it doesn't matter in the end, because she'll be the one to save the day.

[mclovin2016](#)

Squire isn't necessarily an Evil Name. Also, does Black Queen sound like a Name to anyone?

[boballab](#)

If you notice the first letters are capitalized which is what you do with a proper name and it would fit with how the whole Name thing works...You get the name first and fill the role second (Black called her Squire before she filled the role of Squire same with the Hierarch that the Tyrant pulled off). Also you are correct, the name Squire can lead to either Knight, White or Black.

*LostDeviljho*

Sounds more like a Carrion Lord type moniker to me, tbh.

*nipi*

Im thinking that having a transitional name allows her to grow stronger faster with aspects to that effect or not. Sure transitioning into a true name would grant her a large boost but at the expense of future growth.

*Anna*

"The Black Queen" I'm fucking screaming need a mo brb

*Engineer*

'Black Queen'. Is that a Name? I know it can't be Cat's Name since she's a squire and a squire can only transition into a Knight. But aside from that, does Black Queen have sufficient weight to indeed be a Name?

*nick012000*

Nah, she can transition to ruling Names as well. Remember that the fact she was a Squire played in her favor when she pulled the sword from the stone.

*Engineer*

Oh that does make sense that names could transcend but I think I recall somewhere in the text that someone said that a Squire must become a Knight. So her transitioning from a Knight name to a ruling Name would be plausible, expected even. I think if Black were to take the Throne his Name would become Dread Emperor.

Cat transcending from a Squire to a ruling Name feels wrong somehow. It's like an Intern being promoted to CEO without having been a Manager first.

Granted, the Angel could have made her a Queen but that's a direct intervention by an agent of the Gods above. Plus she had the narrative plot device of pulling the sword from a stone and being an orphan to ease the process. But I think the time frame wherein those actions carried weight enough for the transition is passed already.

I don't think it's possible for a Squire to 'naturally' transition to a ruling class name without outside intervention. So yeah, Black Queen in Cat's case seems to be a mantle like Duchess of Moonless Nights.

*naturalnuke*

Names can be transcended remember, just as the angel could make her a Queen, so to can all the Callowans calls ring her a Black Queen. Or so it seems.

*Jonnnney*

It has weight which could lead to a transition, but not into that specific name. Harm's deadhead moniker accelerated him becoming Adjutant. The orcs call her Warlord, the Callowans call her black queen, the fae call her duchess of moonless

nights, the gods below only know what Praesi call her, she is likely to gain some new mantle.

*Taichi22*

Yes, I do think that we're edging close to a name transition now, what with all the monikers Cat's gained. One (or all) of them will eventually stick, I think.

*Shoddi*

How do the Praesi legionaries refer to Cat? Do they have a moniker for her like the Callowans, orcs, and fae? What about the Procerians? I vaguely remember something about Procer declaring her some sort of abomination, but I'm not sure.

Also, it amuses me how Cat has NO idea how utterly, completely, nightmare-fuel terrifying she is to many of the people under her sphere of influence.

*IDKWhoitis*

If I remember correctly, in book two, the Angels tried to make her a Queen. Transition to one of the Knights may be easier, but it seems that it is not impossible to ascend further.

Also, Cat has broken Creation's "paths" and cycles before, foraging new possibilities where there should be none (I.E. The unmaking of Winter+Summer into something new.)

*Jonnnney*

Don't forget the fae aren't part of creation. She has found unique ways to mold a story using her role, but she has yet to break creation.

*esryok*

Seems like the Callowans have decided on their vote for Cat's next Name.

Black Queen, eh? I like it.

*Dainpdf*

Come on, Abigail. If you see something, say something! Too bad there is no one she can report this to in the mess of a battle.

*Sniggs44*

Diabolist's "this ends with you kneeling" statement might not have just been your standard villainous hyperbolic rhetoric. Maybe she was speaking literally, driven by that overwhelming

compulsion some villains have to foreshadow/reveal their evil plots.

I could see Catherine “kneeling” (i.e. submitting or subordinating herself) in one of two scenarios: Either Diabolist demands it or else she genocides all of Callow or something equally over the top (unlikely IMO, as Cat tends to be too stubborn to go for those kinds of deals), or Diabolist pulls some kind of magical fuckery with Squire’s “poorly-scaffolded” soul (Chekhov’s Gun!).

The latter plan could feasibly be pulled off in the coming battle. For the first time in a long time Squire is by herself, with none of her support network (IIRC she is the only one who took the most recent jaunt through Arcadia...no Hierophant to straight up no sell enemy magics, no Archer to just shoot people in the head from miles away to disrupt rituals, etc.).

The enemy force has dozens/hundreds of specialized mages, led by Diabolist’s second in command. Everyone on Cat’s side is expecting an enemy ritual, and several of her commanders have made fate-tempting statements to the effect of “this looks bad, but we’ve got Squire on our side!”. I could see the bad guys waiting for Cat to use some combination of her necromancy plus her Take (control) aspect in an attempt to counter the enemy undead – a capability they probably know she has by this point – then corrupting it via magical feedback or whatever in order to strike at her soul/Name directly.

On one hand this is a perfect time for Diabolist to get a debilitating blow in, but on the other Catherine may be protected by the narrative gods from such a setback until she actually confronts Diabolist herself.

(Also, goblinfire seems almost too perfect for fighting hordes of retarded flammable undead, which makes me think someone on the enemy team has developed a way to counter it. It’s not like there’s any real doubt Squire is going to use the stuff.)

*Engineer*

Cat might be kneeling but Akua will be the one reeling.

When All is said and Done.

*Simurgh*

Haven’t you guys been paying attention to the Black Knight?  
“We do not kneel.”

*PingleBerry*

“Mystery Stew”. “Rabbit.”

I have an awful feeling about what was in that pot, and I really don't like the implications.

### [Not\\_a\\_robot](#)

Let's hope she threw it up in time, in that case :p

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Strange Meats?

*nipi*

You just know that still water contained human flesh or something.

### [Mental Mouse](#)

Most likely rat, as we would expect in such a case. Remember, it was given her by a human cook. (Also, if it was human meat, it would be passed off as pork, not rabbit.)

*Stood Far Back When The Gravitas Was Handed Out*

Cat is a villain's apprentice who isn't actually considered heroic by any of the presented POV's and who doesn't have any established pattern with Akua.

It seems unlikely that her defending Callow is enough to move the story away from villains fighting each other.

As for the battle being stacked in Akua's favour- it seems the sides are pretty evenly matched. Either Akua hopes to defeat Cat here (unlikely) or she hopes to whittle down her forces to the point where she can't effectively siege.

*letouriste*

hum...i don't know at all where this is going:)

*PingleBerry*

I have an idea. I think Akua's spies put still waters in the food.

*letouriste*

but the girl ate the 15th food,i thought the 15th under hune was safe because they were on the move etc...poisoning the food would be really hard

### [Luxuria Tenebris](#)

The food she ate was her lieutenant's 'mystery stew', not the food from the 15th foodsupply



*sarssol*

Is anybody else getting the feeling that Akua might end up taking a leaf out of Catherine's book and send out undead with explosives inside?

*letouriste*

she doesn't have the amunition.she took mainly rocks and money with her.

liesse was not garnisoned so no goblin bags too.

only way would be magic but that would be really not cost-efficient right?

*nipi*

I hope the city guards have slashing spears. Dot going to do much against the wraiths with stabbing weapons it they can shrug off loosing their head.

And Im wondering how Callow ever managed to hold its own against armies of such "creatures" decked in full plate? Did the priests "turn undead" or something?

*Thrillho*

They almost certainly had their own clerics with anti-undead fuckery going on. Plus they had their own, albeit not as badass, version of Warlock with the Wizard. So while undead probably weren't great, it likely wasn't a total zombie-horde route. Not that that saved them in end anyway, obviously

[beleester](#)

Also, Hierophant said that the thing that made Still Water terrifying was that, unlike other undead plagues that had been used before, the transformation was permanent – the power of the priests would kill the wights, not cure them.

So presumably the typical "exponentially multiplying zombie plague" strategy just never gets off the ground – the priests are able to cure the plague before the horde gets too big to handle. And without any exponential growth, the only way to get a sizeable undead horde is by investing a shitload of magic into it, which probably means a Named magician who gets killed off by a Hero at the first opportunity. So it's probably a combination of Callowan clerics and the fact that you normally can't raise that big a horde in the first place.

[daegone823](#)

I think I might be the only one so far who thinks the horse with the black armor is a dummy and cat along with her crew of 5 is just doing a secret mission against the necromancers while the

rest are fighting it out. They said the key to victory would be a surgical strike against the enemy commander/ necromancer thus assassination is better than big battle in this instance. Plus people just need the image of Cat sitting on the horse to boost morale, not the real thing. Queen of Corpse reign supreme!!!!

*letouriste*

oh right! i wanted to see more of the normal soldiers pov.i guess my wish has been granted^^ abigail could grow on me;)

[Mental Mouse](#)

Oh, Abigail will be a treasure!

*JC*

Hune is the traitor!!!

*Shoddi*

If it comes down to a question of allegiance to the Legions vs. to "House Foundling", then Hune will come down squarely on the side of the Legions (until her term ends, at least). I'd imagine she'd fight against Cat if it came to that. But I don't see Hune outright betraying Cat to Akua (the enemy at hand) or Procer (the enemy on the horizon).

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Surprised I caught up.  
Can anyone tell me the release schedule?

*AVR*

Mondays and Weds, plus an additional chapter on the first Weds of each month. With another \$158 on the Patreon there'd be a Friday update as well apparently.

*mavant*

\$1351

*AVR*

Typos

a aurelius  
an aurelius

and well well.  
and done well.

It was open secret  
It was an open secret

gone one with  
gone on with

had not shortage  
had no shortage

rising up at sharp angle  
(either)  
rising up at a sharp angle  
(or)  
rising up at sharp angles

Sacker's eyes were not as sharp as they used to be  
(she's missing one eye, maybe:)  
Sacker's eye was not as sharp as it used to be

unmade the straps  
undid the straps

At lest she  
At least she

*stevenneiman*

"that duty she'd discharged [and well well->and discharged well]" alternatively, "that duty she'd discharged well"  
"but she'd been {a} dumb twat at twenty hadn't she?"  
"Most {of} the Fifteenth was fresh out of the camps"

*Unmaker*

The stew reference is indeed worrying, but I thought up another variation of the problem. Diabolist has her hooks into a necromantic gestalt that gives people powers based on oaths to the gestalt. What if she can bypass the oaths (or pervert them), then she can give those powers to the wights. Wights + necromantic deity powers = bad news.

*Engineer*

Idea.

15th turns into Zombies.  
Cat gets mad.  
Uses Winter+Necromancy to take control of her undead army (like in Worm).  
This then transitions her to the Name Death Knight.

*mavant*

THE BLACK QUEEN

(chants the funeral march, the cracked brass bells will ring)

*Barrendur*

I thought this chapter was very disjointed, and packed with detail about characters the readers have never encountered before and will probably never see again. I found it frustrating, pointless and generally tedious. Now I can understand how not revealing the plot too soon would require some fancy narrative footwork from the author, including use of several naive (or clueless) characters who can't give anything away because they don't know anything... but that's a dull and disconnected character to read about, and tempts the reader to skip ahead until a familiar character reappears. Writing serialised fiction clearly requires the author give a LOT of thought to the balance between disclosure and concealment, and dole out information at an appropriate rate... but I think your disclosure rate in this chapter was more like stalling – and it made for a boring, frustrating read and a strong sense of “So what?”

*Morgenstern*

I disliked the disclosure rate in this chapter, too, but I STILL found it anything BUT boring and nothing about those characters made me think “bah, we'll likely never see them again, anyway” and thus dislike them and their POVs. \*shrugs

*Idan Dor*

I believe we were hinted that the story that Catherine is gunning for is the old song of holding the line:

“Down here in the mud, it's us who holds the line,” she whispered, and that one had some iron to it.”.

We know, as with the faerie fight and the rebellion that Catherine uses stories for her fights. I believe she is using the Callowen song (here they come again) for holding the line for this fight.

*Nairne .01*

Thank you for the chapter.

*Fern*

The thing is, Sacker already called the fight pretty accurately. The Praesi square + 3k wights are staying back, and the current wave is trying to push through the gap between the Center and the right to force a break in the shield wall. What's important to note here is that 1 – the ritual's gonna have to either destabilize the center or affect the reserve, or else they won't be able to flip the line and 2 – the 9th is gonna be able to

maneuver if the rest of those wights don't commit on the left. Here's what might happen:

Ritual + tying up Cat: This chapter's quote is interesting, as an allusion to assassinations. The ritual blows a hole in the center once the Fourth reinforces, and the 3k wight wave is sent to stop Sacker's Ninth from intervening. At the same time, a small, highly mobile force not yet noticed (like, less than two dozen or so) is sent to kill Cat. Even though they are no match for Cat backed by Istrid's riders, they are able to tie her up long enough that she can't interfere in the fight. The center breaks, and the host is forced to retreat-in-good-order through a gate to prevent heavy losses. Diabolist wins, and keeps her pretty host to boot with only minimal losses.

Just ritual: As said before, line flips, Fourth reinforces, ritual triggers, Sacker's stuck. However, we know that the gods above and below Looooooooove that advantage ball, so Cat comes and reinforces the line and reinvigorates her troops (notice: all troops in the center are basically pledged to Cat, which I don't think is a mistake). Once the shield wall is reestablished it becomes a war of attrition that Fasili will lose, so he sends his Praesi troops as a last ditch effort to break the line, either sending the 1400 odd soldiers they have in reserve or moving the whole square up. Either way Istrid comes around and either kills the now-vulnerable mages/officers, or she attacks the back of the square. Diabolist still wins, because I guarantee you she didn't send anything she couldn't afford to lose to this fight aside from Fasili. Loses about 1/3 of her host for information on Cat and the Southpool host, a draw/slight win for Diabolist.

Ritual @ Cat: The ritual affects Cat instead of the line, so the line holds and the battle becomes simple. But this has strategic implications: without Cat the Woe loses weight in the story (of which they need as much as they can get.) Remember, for as much as this resembles the usual black and white tales this is an evil vs. evil fight; it's gonna come down to whoever has the most cards on the table at the end of the fight.

Interested to see if Cat can pull a victory out here. Love the story, keep it up EE!

*SpeckofStardust*

Considering it all, is it possible that the Diabolist from having research information Via Still waters and has other spells she could set up the same way? aka instead of an undead spell she could set up a demon summoning one? Cause that is both something she has all the forshadowing for a lot longer then suddenly undead, and wont be something that Cat can likely counter.

*SpeckofStardust*

Yep

"Weeping Heavens," I whispered. "What kind of a ritual is this?"

"She fed them, didn't she?" Masego said. "She gave them water and rations. Hers. And she just retrieved that gift."

"If it's retrieved, that means she got it back," I hissed. – chapter 41 Book 2

I say we should be more worried about suddenly demons.

[sengachi](#)

This was a fantastic set of alternative viewpoints to see the battlefield from. It really drove home how much Squire is missing in experience and what the ground-level of the battle looks like.

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## Interlude: Skirmish II

*"Mark my words, the Imperial banner will be flying above Summerholm by midsummer."*

– Dread Empress Regalia II, shortly before initiating the Sixty Years War

"Sound the horns," General Istrid said.

The Red Rage pulsed in the back of her head, the song of slaughter sweetly beckoning. She'd learned to ignore it, since she'd taken her oaths to the Legion all these years ago. Still the urge was always there, to let the howl loose and sink her fangs into one quarry after another until all was left of her was the joy and the blood. Orcs never really went tame, even when you drilled them and clad them in man's armour. Her warlord understood that, had never tried to make them anything but what they were. Instead he gave them enemies and taught them to be better killers, to wed savagery to discipline and something *greater* than themselves. Some of the younger greenskins nowadays thought that great thing was the Empire, but they'd been born in different times. Istrid of the Red Shields worshipped only at the altar of the Legions of Terror, the greatest killing machine Calernia had ever seen. What was Praes, to her? A pack of squabbling humans decked in silks and too much gold. Should she ever get the order, she would burn everything they had raised to ashes and salt the grounds of their ancestral homes.

It might just come to that. The Rage pounded her temples like a drum at the thought. Black's scrappy little apprentice had men singing of revolution these days, and even Her Dread Majesty was

getting her hands dirty in the Wasteland. After they dealt with this Sahelian girl, the old order was going to see *revisiting*. She savoured the killing yet to come, for many reasons. The Red Shields Clan was not unbroken lineage like the Howling Wolves or the Ivory Fangs, but the shamans still spoke histories from the dead clan that had birthed her own. Of the days when greenskin hordes sacked Wolof and Okoro as they wished, took tribute from the kneeling kings of Aksum and fought great battles against Deoraithe in the Golden Bloom. Even before the Miezens the strength of her people had been waning in the face of high walls and cunning sorceries, but Creation was a wheel ever spinning. Every dog had their day, if they were patient enough. Her people's felt like it was coming.

The Fourth did not use Praesi-made horns for their signalling. Istrid had her own crafted from the bones of the great drakes whose remains still littered the Steppes, great carved things that took an ogre to blow them. Their call was deep and shivering, the hollow cry of creatures long dead to this land. It was the promise of death, and Istrid's legionaries marched to it against the last gasps of the old order.

Squire's legate had done what she could but these Callowans were watchmen, not Royal Guard. When the wights pressed where the line was thinnest and the men of the Fifteenth started dying, the left side of the centre wavered. Istrid had ordered the horns sounded before it could collapse entirely, and watched as her legionaries steadied the front before edging the Callowans aside. Her Fourth had earned their cognomen at Black's own word, after the Fields, for turning back the mounted killers of the kingdom. *Ironsides*. It had a lot of people thinking she'd raised her legion for defence, for taking a hit and swinging back. Ignorance, that. Istrid Knightsbane had climbed her way to the heights where she now stood by massacring everything in her way, be it rivals chiefs or Wasteland lords or the chivalry of Callow. She'd raised her army in her image: brute force made host. She had fewer sappers than any other legion in service, only the requisite number of mages and the Fourth was the only Praesi host with more heavies than regulars on the rolls. There was a reason they paired her with Sacker, she knew. Her old friend would use finesse where she did not, temper her more belligerent instincts. But there would be no need for deep thinking, today.

In front of her dead men stood and she would shatter them. That was all there was to it.

The orc tightened the clasps of her helmet and licked her chops. Her personal guard clustered around her, as eager for the fight as she, and Istrid glanced at her seniormost legate.

"Bagram," she announced. "Command's yours."

"Wade in their blood, Knightsbane," the orc replied, flashing fangs.

Just a little too long in doing that for it to be entirely proper, but the old bastard had always been flirtatious. Istrid limbered her aging shoulders with a roll and unsheathed her blade. Ahead of her the lines impacted with a heady fracas and she picked up the pace. Legionaries moved aside for her until all that was ahead was the dead, a teeming mass of pale flesh and steel that came in silent waves. The orc stomped the ground and let out a hoarse yell. A hundred of the same gave reply, greenskins from steppes both Northern and Lesser. Berserkers like her. There were some who said there was no longer a place for the Red Rage, in this orderly little world the Tower was building. No place for the old dumb brutes from the north.

*"Bone and flesh torn asunder,"* she whispered in Kharsum, letting the old words wash over her.

Her father had spoken them, and his mother before her. All the way back to the Broken Antler Horde and the years where Creation had stood in awe of the orcs.

*"Caked in doom and mask of cinder  
Stand ye ever red in tooth and claw  
Like empty, great and gaping maw."*

The old rhyme eased her into it, the way it was meant to. Istrid's body shook with spasms as a scream not her own filled the air. Muscles tightened, bones creaked and the world turned to shades of crimson. The wight ahead of her struck, but so did she and her sword ripped through bone and flesh, bending steel and smashing it into another undead.

"FORWARD," she bellowed, laughing madly.

And so they went, doom upon all the world.

—

Abigail kept cursing even as the mage healed what was left of her eye. She could still feel the teeth going into her flesh, ripping and tearing as she struggled to get the wight off of her. It said a lot about the day that she was one of the lucky ones. Her entire line had been wiped out trying to steady the fucking Ankouans when it looked like they were going to rabbit: with the guards giving ground her twenty had been surrounded and torn through in moments. If a mage line hadn't burned her a path to retreat, she'd be in some wight's mouth like the rest of her soldiers.

"Cowardly shits," the captain spat. "I hope she hangs them all."



"Unlikely," Lieutenant Salome noted. "And if you continue speaking, I cannot promise you'll ever see again."

Abigail shut the Hells up, though she was starting to have *opinions* about Legion healers. They worked slower than the brothers and sisters at the House of Light and their bedside manner was a lot less pleasant. They weren't as good at healing, either. The lack of gentle persuasion about attending sermons more often wasn't enough of a trade-off for maybe losing half of her total eye supply.

"There," the solemn Taghreb said. "That should be enough. Keep in mind this is a patch job, Captain. Actual restoration would take hours of precision work, and will have to wait until this is no longer an active battlefield."

"I know the triage protocols," Abigail griped. "I sat through the fucking lectures."

The Legions had to be the only army in the world where they made you sit like a schoolgirl after the drills. It was a good thing she knew how to read, too, because it was a requisite if you ever wanted to make tribune. She had her eye on that promotion, as it happened. Officers of that rank weren't expected to be on the frontlines as often, which should do wonders for her life expectancy.

"Legate Hune left instructions for the soldiers that were in your section to present themselves for redeployment," the olive-skinned mage told her. "Try not to get killed, Captain Abigail. It would be a shame for my work to have been pointless."

"You're all heart, Salome," the dark-haired woman drily replied.

Much as she disliked the notion of going back into the thick of it, the Callowan had expected she'd be sent for. Half her company still lived but it wouldn't be headed back to where it had been bled – that space was now occupied by the Fourth, which had come out swinging. And screaming. Gods Above, so much screaming. It must have been an orc thing. The legionaries were turning around the situation there, at least. Their frontlines had been stacked with heavies and they'd slammed into the wights like a runaway cart, gaining back all the grounds that'd been lost in the span of a quarter bell. Now they were carving a wedge into the undead, which she assumed was the prelude to an all-out assault. Abigail made the rounds and collected the remains of her company from the tender attentions of the healers or the grounds where they'd dropped down exhausted before making her way to command. Senior Tribune Locks was the one who met with her, the reason for his ridiculous Legion-assumed name made clear by the dark curls going beyond his helmet.

"We're keeping you in reserve for now, captain," the Soninke told her. "Most likely you'll be joined with another company that took casualties and sent to steady the levies."

*Steadying the godsdamned Ankouans is how I lost half my company, you smug prick,* she thought.

"Looking forward to it," Abigail said, playing up her Summerholm accent so the sarcasm wouldn't register.

She spent half a bell after that standing behind the lines like she was on death row, but she couldn't complain. Better the wait than the fight. She was no tactician, but at the moment she'd wager the judgement that things were looking up for her side. The Fifth on the right flank was still stuck dealing with wights, but the undead were beginning to thin. The Ninth was going through the enemy slower but with fewer casualties, and the Fourth was digging into the undead like this was summer solstice and they hadn't eaten all week. It could be generously said that the centre was holding, though not much more than that. There'd been no glaring fuckups that would require her to be sent back into the mess, and she told herself she'd light a candle in a House for that. As long as it cost copper, anyway. She wasn't putting down silver for the folks Above, not unless she got a promotion and her hooks into a pretty boy that was supernaturally flexible in bed.

She was made to regret the blasphemy immediately.

There'd been a bunch of fancy Wastelanders looming behind the undead since the blades had come out and they'd finally stirred themselves to act. The move they made was on the Black Queen, and Abigail had to give them praise for the balls of it if nothing else. Catherine Foundling had a reputation for brutally murdering her way through problems, so it was pretty brave of them to so openly embrace that label. Blinding panels of light formed around the Squire in the distance, slowly spinning. Abigail would have looked closer but it hurt her eyes to, and not just because of the light. The shapes she could discern were hardly shapes at all, and even glancing was enough to have the beginnings of a migraine forming. To be honest, she wasn't too worried about this. Trapping the Black Queen was kind of like trying to put a bonfire in a box – it'd work for that short moment until the whole thing caught fire and then your hands were on fire as well and by then it was way, way too late to do anything about it. Unlike some of her dumber countrymen Abigail didn't think there was anything gloriously patriotic about trading a Praesi monster in charge for a Callowan one, but Heavens was she glad to be in the Fifteenth and not in the ranks of whatever poor fucking fools were fighting it.

There was something to be said for being on the winning side, and monster or not Foundling had a history of being the last woman standing on the field.

The thing was, the light panels stayed there. No howling blizzard tore them open. This, Abigail thought, did not bode well. The rest of the army must have agreed because a shiver went through the ranks. Not the old legionaries, they were made of sterner stuff, but the Ankouans were wavering. And the men of the Fifteenth were... It was hard to put into words. You didn't have to like the Black Queen to put your trust in the legend. In the stories about the girl who'd tricked resurrection out of angels and swept her way through armies and heroes alike. Abigail had seen her in Dormer, when she'd raised the stairs of ice and swept the Summer fae off the walls. It had been like watching a force of nature, not a person. Sometimes the captain still woke up with cold fingers even when she slept by the fire. You couldn't see something like that and not believe, even if only a little. *So why isn't she breaking out of the cage?* The Praesi took advantage, and if there'd ever been the history of Callow writ in a sentence that was it.

Abigail had heard stories about the Conquest. Every kid did, not matter where in the country they were raised. But those had been about battles and sieges, cunning ploys and foul deeds. *This isn't anything like that at all*, she thought. Darkness was made smoke above the chanting silhouettes of faraway mages, and that smoked moved. It slithered across the cloudless sky, spreading smoothly like ink in water, and it was only when it reached the army it clustered into a ball above it. Then it exploded again, into a hundred dark tendrils that swept through the centre of the host. Wherever the tendrils passed, men died. Choking and screaming, clawing at their throats as the smoke went into their bodies and poisoned something inside them. Black tears streaked down their faces, leaving ash-like trails. Abigail's blood ran cold, and in that moment she understood why old men called Praes *the Enemy*. This was not war, it was... She didn't know a word ugly enough for it.

How many had died, over these ten heartbeats? A thousand, at least. There was a gaping hole right in the middle of the army, and already the wights were pouring through. Abigail almost thought she heard a snap, when the morale of the Akouans broke. They were going to leg it, she thought. They guards were going to flee and they were all going to die. The smoke thinned and began to disperse, leaving only a field of corpses behind. That, and one soldier. That one survivor took off her helmet, shook free a ponytail, and the captain's heart caught in her throat.

"Rise," Catherine Foundling ordered, and the dead men obeyed.

The word had been spoken half a mile away, and still Abigail heard it like had been whispered into her ear. Akouans and legionaries rose to their feet, cold blue eyes shining, and the dead fell upon the dead. Something old and harsh rose up in the captain's veins, something she had thought herself beyond. It wasn't pride, because who could take pride in one of their own matching the Wasteland horror for horror? But it was something close to it, when she thought of the sneering mages on the other side who'd swatted down thousands likes insects. *Be afraid, she thought. Like we are, like we've always been. Be afraid of the monster coming for you all, because there is not a speck of pity or mercy in her.*

"Kill them all, Black Queen," Abigail whispered hoarsely, and meant every word of it.

—

Sacker watched frost spread across the ground, dead men claw at the dead, and felt her body shiver in a way that had nothing to do with the sudden cold. She'd seen Lord Black in the fullness of his power, turning the men behind him into a sword no army could withstand. This was something else. It was the madness and might of the Old Tyrants turned to sharp purpose, and the part of her that loved the Tribes above all else wept at the sight of it. *O Carrion Lord, what have you wrought?* The Squire was a host unto herself, a wrathful child who'd stolen the mantle of a lesser god and would wreck the world with it until it fit her vision of how things should be. The goblin was a true daughter of the Grey Eyries, daughter and great-daughter of Matrons, and she knew old histories and the dark truths they carried. No Empresses had been so terrifying as the ones that thought they were in the right. That thought they were doing the *necessary* thing. The Praesi knelt at the altar of Dread Empress Triumphant – may she never return – and named her the greatest Tyrant that ever was or would be. But she'd been a storm to be waited out, nothing more.

There would be no waiting out Catherine Foundling, she knew. The girl had been taught by the most patient of monsters, and surpassed his greatest weakness. Lack of power.

*Is this to be your legacy, Amadeus of the Green Stretch? Will you leave us with one last laugh at our expense, knowing the world will burn in your wake?* Sacker held more respect for the Black Knight than she'd ever thought she would give either a human or a male, but even so she did not think he deserved a pyre as great as the whole of Calernia. It was all made even more bitter brew by what what she knew, that the Squire would be needed in the wars to come. They needed the likes of her to turn back Procer, to smother the Tenth Crusade in the crib. *I hate you a little, old friend, for the knowledge that you shaped a situation where we would have no choice but to embrace her.* Every inch of Sacker

told her that she needed to kill this girl, kill her right now before she crossed a line they could not return from. But to follow her instincts would be to cripple the Empire and the Tribes with it on the eve of the greatest war they had seen in centuries.

The goblin let fear and grief hold her for a moment, before she wrested back her mind. There were orders to give. The rebels had played their hand and seen it fail. It was only a matter of time until Istrid and Orim broke through, and when they did the battle would be good as won. All that remained was to play out the rest of this.

"Raise the banners," General Sacker told her staff. "Heavies in front, mages are to Lob at will. Let's end this farce."

It should have felt like a victory, but all she could think about was what lay ahead. Her people kept to the Gods Below, as the Praesi did, but they had given the oldest face of these deities a name: the Gobbler. It was said, among the Tribes, that when the Creation was born the Gobbler had spewed out all the peoples of the world. The last and smallest of them, crawling from the open and exhausted maw, had been the goblins. It was whispered to the daughters of Matron lines that they had been the last to come and that they would be the last to go. That they would be spared the calamities of greater peoples, hidden away in their deep places.

Watching Winter spread through the dead, freezing and shattering everything in its path, for the first time since she'd been spawned Sacker doubted this truth.

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[erraticerrata](#)

Chapter's out early on account of Christmas and spotty internet where I am. Happy Holidays to everyone!

*WasabiCookie*

Merry Christmas (even though I am not christian I see nothing wrong with or offensive about saying that) Also thanks for the great chapter 😊

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

it was indeed a powerful chapter, made more so by the two chapters before.

*naturalnuke*

Thank you.

*Gunslinger*

Happy Holidays!! This chapter kicked ass

*Skraeling*

Merry christmas, or whatever event you choose to celebrate, and a happy new year. This is a great chapter.

*TheCount*

Happy Christmas and thanks for the chapter!

*stevenneiman*

Whatever you all celebrate, have a happy one.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

For xmas my neighbors gave us a box of "summer sausage." All I could think about was that it's obviously made of ground up summer fae! And no I didn't know how to explain what was so funny 😊

*Letouriste*

Merry Christmas:) that mini arc is pretty good! I'm really happy to see a lot of new povs

*ArkhCthuul*

Great Christmas Winter Wonderland. 😊

Ah yes, the inner surety of.seeing the greatest and most terrible of beings take.the.field.

No matter who you are, it.will.change you.

Shivers down spines in this one.

*Wombat*

...wow I live in a tropical climate where temperatures are always warm and I just got the shivers. Jeez.

*Nivek*

Happy Holiday and a large pile of corpses to you.

On another note it's kind of funny how Black hates losing so much that he'd willingly pull a "My Death is Just the Beginning"/"Load Bearing Boss" type gambit just to make sure that his death is not remembered as a defeat but instead as a tragedy for the entirety of the forces of Good. And that's provided that he doesn't make a

return as the Dead Knight or something equally undead and unholy.  
Or maybe conquer a Hell.

### *Darkening*

I could see him playing a bunch of demon princes against each other until they'd all killed each other off and he was in charge of a hell. Especially if he's drunk. It'd be one Hell of a show lol. Not sure exactly how the afterlife works in this setting, I know there's a heaven for people that follow the Gods Above, at least according to the house of light, but I doubt every faithful gets in, so where do the sinners go? The same underworld that's mentioned to be where followers of the gods below go to? Wonder if that's like the greek underworld where most people are kind of just there, a special few get special torture, and a very special few get to live in luxury, or if it's more its own thing. Hm.

*werafdsaew*

Load bearing boss? His stated reason for getting a Squire is to subvert that trope.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Who says that's what Black's doing? Well Sacker obviously, but her opinion here is opposed to Black's own, I think. Personally I believe that Sacker may be right in terms of her observations, but wrong about Black's motivations for settling things up this way. I don't think "forcing everyone to accept Catherine" was a goal here. It's like Malicia said, he's so focused on winning the Proceran war that he is unable to conceive of alternatives. And as Cat will help achieve that end, Black never stopped to think that she even needs to be forced on anyone on his side

### [benthelynx](#)

Happy Hogswatch.

AVR

This makes a good end to Christmas day down here in NZ. Thanks!

Typos

not unbroken lineage  
not an unbroken lineage

preludee  
prelude

that smoked moved.  
that smoke moved.

They guards were  
The guards were

thousands likes insects.  
thousands like insects.

that though they  
that thought they

all made even  
all made an even

by what what  
by what

seen it faul.  
seen it fail.

*stevenneiman*

"Every kid did, [not->no] matter where in the country they were raised" alternatively, "it mattered not where"

I found a couple more but AVR got them already.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Good job staying on top of the typos, E.E.!

It's not about being perfect—though typo perfection is definitely attainable, just ask D.D. Webb—it's about avoiding the kind of misspellings that detract from your understanding and enjoyment of the story. I've complained about that often enough, so I appreciate the improvement twice as much xD

*Pipiemman*

I know you're just teasing us with the Black Queen stuff and that it's unlikely to be Cat's new Name, but G-ddamn is it working. I want it so bad.

*stevenneiman*

Yeah, Names seem to be something that you either strive to become or suddenly snap into being. They don't seem to be things that someone gets called and then it becomes a Name eventually.  
All the same, Black Queen is pretty badass even for a nickname.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

[Names] don't seem to be things that someone gets called and then it becomes a Name eventually.



Actually I think that's exactly how it works, but "eventually" means "over the course of many generations"

*oldschoolvillain*

Actually, this sort of thing is exactly how Alia became Diabolist – Names are, ultimately, stories, so if you get a massive population telling this story about you, it could result in a new Name.

[jrayfield13](#)

I halfway agree I don't think that in a month or two she's going to just punch a god in the face and become the Black queen but I think what we ultimately seeing here is the start of a cultural legend being born and maybe the eventuality of a Name Black Queen. I mean Catherine's entire goal from the start has been to take the evil of the the empire and make it benefit Callow and all she has been doing since then has been not just doing that but creating a natural legend for Callow. I mean Callow was a historically "good" country right. If so technically speaking she is there first "evil" Named. There is probably a weight to that and if it continues I imagine her accomplishments could grow into the power of a name. I mean maybe not now but who's to say 50 years down the line some orphan girl doesn't take up the reign and become Black Queen. Stories and the Names have to come from somewhere and what better place to start of the new "evil" Callowian Named than with her

[NZPIEFACE](#)

That was... unsettling

*danh3107*

Feliz Navidad everyone, and Erratic of course.

What a great conclusion to a great part one.

*JackbeThimble*

Okay, I'll admit that I was starting to lose faith, but these last 2 chapters were as good as anything since book 2.

*Gunslinger*

I hope Captain Abigail becomes a regular character. She's awesome.

Merry Christmas to those who celebrate. Happy holidays to those who have them.

And spread the cheer granted by the Guide by voting for it

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

*Big Brother*

Maybe she'll be the new Farrier. That'd be nice.

[joanneeve](#)

Merry Christmas.

*Anon*

Merry Christmas!~~~

Hnggggg these last chapters have been fantastic!!

*Eduardo*

Feliz natal, Merry Christmas. Thank you for the excellent chapter. I was really afraid for a moment that the mages had subverted Cat.

*Blue*

Merry Xmas . What a triumphant turn that was by Cat!

[pietromoroni](#)

Wow. And merry christmas to you, too. 😊

*James, Mostly Harmless*

Seeing Sacker's thoughts crystalized something for me: does Akua realize that Cat sees her as a distraction, a sideshow, on her way to the REAL war? The Procerans and the Tenth Crusade are coming ...

[Reveen](#)

Turns out putting your trust in port-fascism and hero worship and allowing it's legacy to come to fruition is a bad idea, who'd thunk it?

Also love how neither Abigail or Sacker seem to see any real difference between Practical Evil as an ideology and just normal evil. Almost like they're normal people and not authoritarian weirdos.

*Evgeny*

Fascism works well if your country is encircled by enemies. Yes, it is inhuman and bloodthirsty, but it works.

[unoriginal](#)

A jingoistic war focused society would also work well in that situation. hell, any form of strong central leadership with

an eager nationalistic or otherwise motivated army works in the situation. So long as you don't bite off more than you can chew e.g. start a war with multiple neighbor-enemies at the same time. Because that it's all about efficient use of your limited resources by a strong government or ruler. The problem with fascism is, it isn't particularly efficient and while its democracies that get the bad rap for this generally a representative democracy is more efficient and streamlined than a dictatorship or fascist government.

A popular misconception, for example, is that in fascist Italy the trains ran on time. except they didn't that's propaganda encouraged to make the government of the time seem competent, but in reality, a dictatorship or any fascist state seen in human history is not too dissimilar from a royal court where powerful influence wielding individuals, all vying for power, clash with one another and the leader has to keep everyone in line and happy. Or as A practical guide to Evil puts it, the ruler holding power becomes a polite fiction (or something to that effect). And let us not get into the attendant bribery on every level and resources suddenly disappearing when corrupt officials think they can get away with it. (In many cases their bosses let them because it keeps them loyal to the power figure in the relationship just as that same power figure is kept happy/inline by the king/dictator/ruler/El Presidente/ supreme chancellor/emperor and etc.)

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Thank you. Fascism does not actually work. The misconception that it does needs to be killed already

[Reveen](#)

Ummm...

\*Looks at what happened to the Axis\*

No it didn't.

*Abrakadabra*

Yeah, it did. It took half the world to put it down, you know. It was efficient. The leaders tough, they were mad.

*Daemion*

So Cat was using a decoy on her mount and was hiding among the common soldiers herself? She's getting more sneaky.

Losing 1000+ soldiers has to hurt though, even if they win the battle. I wonder what the goal of Akua's side was? Trying to take out Cat early with a ritual? Gathering information?

### *Darkening*

Mostly the callow guards it looks like, so not as huge a loss as a thousand legionnaires, but I bet she's gonna be feeling guilty about it, even if turning them into zombies is what wins her the battle. Dunno how much of the fifteenth was mixed in with the section of guards that died.

---

The dummy Catherine has left to distract the mages left had me thinking, just as a crazy theory: how do we know that "lady Naibu" is Malicia's puppet and not Akua's?

First, all the evidence of Malicia being the one to send her isn't even her words – it's Catherine guessing and the puppet nodding. Malicia herself never bothered to send an envoy before, though a talk with the Squire might have been a good reason. While nothing says that Nefarious, being a sorcerer on par with Wizard of the West, couldn't have made a flesh puppet for subterfuge/satisfaction purposes, Akua has already demonstrated being capable to produce similar results – namely, extracting a soul out of her own body and remotely controlling it.

Next, how it could pass off as Malicia's deputy? Well, the only person who knew about it being the case was Catherine, who didn't question the assumption in the first place. While the news about the Calamities going to assault Delos and the tone of the conversation look rather authentic, it doesn't look like anything Akua wouldn't have been able to glean from the infiltration of the imperial spy network, or guess. The Calamities make obvious enough waves, and Akua understands Malicia's distaste for oldschool villain stupidity well enough, perhaps even well enough to emulate it.

The same way she could have pretended to be a usual representative to the rest of the council: Akua thought she had infiltrated all layers of Malicia's employees in Callow, including, obviously, the official bureaucratic apparatus. She could have either switched the representative in the course of the infiltration or extracted the soul before her arrival, and all the other members would see would be an unknown envoy from Her Majesty, who disappeared as soon as the news of Squire going into Arcadia reach the capital – instead of, say, staying to stabilize the situation or contacting the loyal members of the Council.

I admit that the later interactions point more to Malicia than to Akua – particularly the "you don't fight the crusade at all" line: for the Diabolist a Crusade seems to be either too far or

too insignificant a threat, so I'm not sure she would pay attention to that detail. Still, I would like to hear the arguments for/against the theory.

Tl;dr: Akua heard about Winter fae popping up at Marchford, used a prepared puppet to send Squire into a trap and hid it after verifying that she went through. Rebellion ensues, Diabolist gets to act independently and remove an adversary.

[testalacon2017](#)

Cant be for a multitude of reasons. The glaring ones would be the whole "planning chapter" with the general reprimand and the negociation with the king of winter. Diabolist couldn't have done that. Even if she did, backstabbing Cat there would have been much more effective.

*Evgeny*

SO! I think, winter is coming.

Seriously, Catherine. Do you REALLY want to challenge the Dead King ?

*Shoddi*

Once the Dead King hears about this, he'll splash on some Old Spite cologne, put on his best bone armor, pick a bouquet of corpse flowers and head to Callow to court Catherine.

He has to be lonely, and would love a queen to share his hell with him. He never gets anybody to come visit except Ranger, and she keeps breaking his stuff.

[tpdbooks](#)

How did Catherine use Rise? Since she got her new Name her Aspects have been Take, Break, and Fall, right?

*Darkening*

That's not an aspect, it's not bolded. She's just infusing the corpses with her name and Winter, and animating them like she does her horse, just on a greater scale now that she has so much more power. She could probably just command them with her mind, but spoke the command for them to rise verbally. Plus it's super dramatic and creepy and this universe runs on that.

*unoriginal*

Lets also not forget that rise was the first thing she took and even if she no longer holds that power it still have narrative importance and in a world that runs off of narritvium that means alot

*Adurna*

Great as always!

Now what aspects and consequences does the potential name of Black Queen bring to mind with you others? What would happen with the lands? How would her fae powers be twisted? I am REALLY looking forward to her transition.

*jhhhu*

Many people called this in the comments. It's awesome and frightening madness.

I really like how you start to see that Caterine is not a good thing and a woe upon creation. Yet I want her to continue, creation be damned, the story is just that great.

*mavant*

> Is this to be your legacy, Amadeus of the Green Stretch?

Legacy. What is a legacy? It's planting seeds in a garden you never get to see...

*oldschoolvillain*

Ah, quite fitting, considering what Amadeus was seeking to achieve with our little wildcat.

[mclovin2016](#)

Did when jist... steal Still Water? Holy Crap!!

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I don't really understand what you're saying, but no, I read it as Cat raising the dead the old fashioned way. The way she raises her horses

[mclovin2016](#)

I guess that would make more sense. The reason I thought till water was in effect was cause of the one person left in the middle, who I'm pretty sure was the one from last chapter who complained about the odd stew. I think she survives cause she threw it up. I think that when the ritual for still water was cast either cat's necromancy or the mage formally known as apprentice fucked with it, giving cat a chance to raise the dead and fill them with winter.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Huh that is way better reasoning than I expected, and I almost wish you were right! I read it as Cat herself being

the one standing though. And this is a small spoiler for the next chapter so in rot13:

V sriry yvxr gur arkg puncgre pbasvezf zl gnxr ba gur fvghngvba.

*satoshikyū*

I think my favorite chapters are the ones where we get to see Cat from someone else's perspective. Like when we're riding over her shoulder we get a front-row seat to her being boss and facing down armies and demigods, but at the same time we lose a bit of perspective. It's important to know how she appears in the eyes of those around her, specifically those who aren't caught up in her inner circle.

To the Fifteenth as a whole and her friends therein the Squire is both a driving force and a wrecking ball, pointing them in the direction of the enemy and leading the charge to obliterate it. To those not a part of that well-oiled if batshit crazy machine, those who are simply caught up in the wake of its passing, the very concept of what she represents must be absolutely terrifying. She's a living wave of change that seemingly cannot be stopped.

It's good to get that perspective every now and then.

[jayfield13](#)

I like the comment made about how the biggest thing that Catherine's has on her compared to a lot of the other names is power. I mean back when Akua was still Heiress she mentioned how lacking in power black is to his predecessor due to his separation from his Role. He lacks power and never really found a good way to gain more and made up for it with superior skill and a ton of meta knowledge. He gave that to Catherine and she maybe accidentally maybe subconscious took more power than she should have been possible to get. I wonder if even if she is a villain if the fact that she's Callowen who notoriously have good named heroic luck might slip in, especially when she denying her natural Role. I mean if Squire truly is just a traditional Name doesn't that mean that it has less power but whatever forces control what both good and evil get in terms of slight divineish intervention could get confused. I mean there is ambiguity with both the Name Squire and her Role in terms of where it eventually leads

[sengachi](#)

"And so they went, doom upon all the world."

And with that line, my terrified respect for the Legions of Terror grows.

Anonymous

All hail her highness Triumphant II for she has returned. For her name is Catherine Foundling.

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## Chapter 54: Wake

*"I imagine the High Lords would be inclined to protest the mind control, if I hadn't seized control of their minds, which just goes to show this was the right decision all along."*

– Dread Emperor Imperious

I'd believed, once, that the way Black thought was what made him different from his predecessors. The manner he tallied gains and losses, let the numbers guide his decisions instead of more sentimental inclinations. I'd thought it a strange thing, that a man born in Praes could think that way at all. But I'd understood, as I watched a thousand men die in a manner I tacitly allowed as part of an overarching strategy, that it'd been a false perception. Most Praesi thought that way already, when you dug a little deeper. That was the principle behind a sacrifice, wasn't it? Breaking something of worth so it would bring you something else you found of greater worth. A few thousand people for a flying fortress? Well, the Empire had a lot of people but few sorcerous war machines. Tendrils of something eldritch touching your mind for a demon summoning? Power was prized over sanity, when one intended to climb the Tower. My teacher had just taken a concept at the heart of everything Praesi and brought it to its logical, cold-eyed conclusion.

The House of Light said men could be worse than devils, for devils were driven to Evil by their nature and not by choice. That it was greater sin to turn away from the light than be born of the dark. Choice, that was the word the priests exalted above all others. That men had the right to make decisions granted by the Gods and that what they did with this right defined who they were. *For the Children of the Heavens sin is in action, not in birth.* I didn't believe that, not really. Malicia was a monster not because she'd fed a civil war that lasted decades and killed dozens of thousands, but because she was someone who had it in her to *make* that decision. Her sin, if I was to insist on such a word, was that she was a woman with that capacity. Even if she'd become a cloistered sister in southern Callow and never hurt a fly until she died, she would still have that bleak thing within her. Evil was not an act so much as it was a state of mind, a way



of thinking I had been raised to despise even against the best efforts of the Imperial orphanages.

But I had the bleakness in me too. It was almost pathetic it had taken me so long to admit to that fact, that it had taken writing off a thousand men under my protection as *bait* before I could no longer deny it, even deep down. I'd sacrificed the Ankouans, and men of the Fifteenth as well, to draw out the ritual Akua's hounds had up their sleeves. I'd have done the same with General Istrid's men or any other of the soldiers on this field, because that ugly bloodletting had seemed to me the path to victory. *Was this what you saw in me, Black? The same absence where better people have qualms.* The decision had been no different – no worse – than sending the vanguard into the jaws of Summer at Dormer or forcing a battle against the full might of the Court in Arcadia. But the selfishness of this one had been bare, beyond even my ability to paint over. It should have grieved me, but aside from dull shame the sight of the dying had done nothing to move me. *If I cannot be kind or just, then I will at least be victorious.*

I had sacrificed my last illusion of being a decent person for a win, and I could not even muster regret at the the thought of that. Maybe Diabolist had spoken truth, when she'd said I'd become like Praesi. The gap between them and me was not as wide or deep as I would have liked. I heard Hune approach through the silence, her heavy footsteps unlike any other, but did not turn to greet her.

"Legate," I simply said. "You have a report for me?"

Ahead of us were the remains of the day. My little necromantic trick, turned from dagger to sword by Winter's mantle, had turned the tide at exactly the right time. While I led my own dead smashing the wights, the legions on the flanks had begun breaking through. Istrid's Fourth had been the first among them, but closely followed by General Orim and the Fifth. Ranker's legion had not been far behind them, a quarter bell at most, and the moment the Ninth was free move the battle had been over. With four breaches in the enemy line their formation had collapsed and then the rebels had grown desperate. They'd fled, of course. Dying for the cause was not a Wasteland virtue. To prevent pursuit Lord Fasili had thinned his centre and thrown everything he could at the marching veteran legions while he and his fellow living escaped. It hadn't been enough. Orim had sent a division of one thousand to delay the wights meant to block him and pursued, only backing down when Fasili threw his last reserve of three thousand wights at the Fifth. Akua's general had brought twenty-three thousand soldiers south and fled with barely two thousand when the Battle of Dead Dawn ended.

To my fury, I'd been unable to engage in pursuit. With the necromancers gone the wights had gone wild, turning on each other

as well as my soldiers, but their numbers had not dwindled swiftly enough. I could have followed on foot, or with a confiscated horse. But I'd weighed the gains and losses. If I pursued, there was a chance I could kill Akua's best general. It was not a given I'd be able to, though, since he had hundreds of mages and at least one ward he believed could trap me. If I remained, I could significantly lower casualties on my side by carving my way through the disorganized wights with my procession of dead soldiers. Uncertain greater gain or certain lesser one. A year ago I would have pursued, but I'd been taught the price of recklessness since then. Powerful as they might be, villains who faced armies on their own died to them more often than not.

"Two hundred and thirty-three fatalities from the Fifteenth," Hune said, delicately handing me a scroll. "Twice that many wounded. Numbers are still coming from the other three legions and the Callowans lack even basic registries, but I am projecting at least two thousand dead Ankouans from the debriefs."

A quarter of the initial Ankouan force gone before Afternoon Bell even rang. The colder part of me assessed that, even with the five thousand men from Southpool sure to have been lost, this battle had still seen me come out ahead in the grim arithmetic of war. On the surface, at least. Diabolist could afford to lose more troops than I could. At this rate of exchange, I'd be the last woman standing in my army and she'd still have over a third of hers. Or what we thought was hers, anyway. Inside the walls of Liesse was barred to scrying and trying to guess the amount of people there'd been in the city when it rose into the sky was a logistical nightmare. Refugees didn't exactly declare their intent to travel, nor fae offer casualty reports.

"Then we've decisively proven the Legions can beat wights when the armies field similar numbers," I said after a long moment.

"I would mitigate that statement," the ogre said. "A third of our number were Ankou watchmen. That said, Liesse is a fortified city. The nature of the engagement there will be different."

"You're worried about her mages," I said, hazarding a guess.

It wasn't a stretch to do so. They had me worried as well.

"They will have had months to prepare the grounds," Hune said. "Superior spellpower and numerical advantage will weigh heavily against us, ma'am."

"Superior spellpower," I smiled wanly. "Not something they can claim, I think, so long as we have Hierophant."

"One man," she said.

"One *Named*," I replied.

"They have one of those as well, Your Grace," the ogre reminded me. "Had I not been informed there are temporal concerns at work, I would have advised for a protracted siege instead of an assault."

Temporal concerns, huh. A roundabout way of saying everybody was worried about what Akua Sahelian would be able to cook up if we didn't kick down her front door quickly enough. The ogre's notion wouldn't have been wrong on a tactical level, if we set aside Diabolist. But it would have been a mistake on a strategic one. The longer it took us to put the rebels down, the higher the chances Procer would attack while half the legions were tied up around Liesse. The ogre wasn't high enough up the ranks to be in the know for that, though I'd wager she'd heard some rumours. They were cropping up often of late and I doubted it was a coincidence. The Empress, I suspected, was preparing public opinion for the wars to come. Even if she had a plan in the works that involved never fighting those at all. Malicia was not the kind of woman inclined to leave any of the angles uncovered. I had no intention of discussing any of that with the ogre, though, so I changed the subject.

"Fasili Mirembe," I said. "Your opinion on him?"

"Skilled," the legate immediately replied. "Clearly studied Legion doctrine in depth. He accurately gauged how long it would take the legions to deal with the wights set against them. His tactical judgement is solid as well. The Ankouans were the correct target for his ritual."

"Terror tactics," I murmured. "He was banking on a Callowan rout to win this."

"They have evidently made plans to limit your ability to act on the battlefield, ma'am," Hune said. "I am somewhat at a loss as to how they were fooled by a decoy."

"That was Thief," I said. "Keep quiet a Name's power and it can be hard to differentiate between them, from a distance. It won't work twice, but it shouldn't need to. Using wards against Masego is like trying to drown a fish."

"I confess a degree of wariness over how heavily we rely on Named for for our tactics," the ogre noted.

She sounded, I thought, almost like my teacher. *Never rely on an artefact or a power for victory. They will always fail you. There is no such thing as being invincible, but lack of glaringly exploitable crutches will do wonders for your lifespan.* There was truth in that, but the number of Named on my side was my main advantage. I would be a fool not to exploit it to the fullest.

"We'll meet him again in Liesse," I said, winding the conversation back to Lord Fasili.

"I would rank him as inferior to most Imperial generals, General Juniper among them," the ogre said. "Though battles are rarely so clear-cut as to allow such gaps in ability to be a deciding factor."

She was right about that. On open grounds with identical armies, it would change quite a bit. But in a massive pitched battle around Liesse? That was a different story. I had faith in the Hellhound, but I did not think she would be better at leading a traditional Wasteland army than an intelligent man who'd been raised to do that very thing. *We still come out ahead by miles when it comes to experienced officers. They'll be dependent on magic to control the wights, and that'll make it hard to manoeuvre quickly.* Juniper had been crafting a plan of attack for Liesse for quite some time now, refining and improving it every day. I would trust in her, as she trusted in me. I silently watched the legionaries piling up corpses all over the field, preparing the pyres that would be lit before nightfall. Wights broke after they were damaged enough, whatever sorcery animated them ceasing to function, but some of the corpses still struggled as they were dragged away. They would burn anyway.

"Do you think you're a good person, Hune?" I suddenly asked.

"That's a human way of looking at the world," the ogre said. "Drawing lines and saying that standing before or past them defines who you are."

"Then how do ogres think of it?" I said, glancing at her.

The legate smiled thinly, fat lips tightening in a line.

"We are what Creation lets us be," she said. "That we get to decide is the first and oldest lie."

"I was taught differently," I said.

"And how much control did you have over that?" she asked.

She shook her head before I could reply.

"I must return to my duties, Your Grace," she continued. "I leave you to your musings."

I inclined my head in dismissal, not eager to keep her around. I had another conversation ahead of me, after all. As she strode away I sought the six hundred and forty-nine remaining undead I had raised, a writhing bundle in the back of my mind. I could see through their eyes, guide their hands and feet, but there was... danger in that. There were too many, more than I could truly

handle. Orders that were more thought than word could direct them as a pack, but if I went any deeper I was certain there would be consequences. A god, perhaps, would not have been troubled by those. But stealing one's mantle had not raised me to godhood: all it had done was allow me to claim some of that power as my own. Safety lay in shallowness. It was my instinct to release the dead from service now that the battle was over, but I thought twice of it. I'd proved in the past that I could go a great deal of damage by filling dead animals with munitions. Six hundred purely expendable troops were too useful of a tool to dismiss without good reason.

"I know you're around," I said.

Thief clucked her tongue, and appeared ahead of me. She was sitting on a dead man's back, though from this angle I could not tell whether it'd been one of mine or a wight. She pulled at a waterskin, looking somewhat ill.

"I'll never get used to the smell," Vivienne Dartwick said. "The reek clings to you, somehow."

"I thought the same after my first real battle," I said. "I barely notice it now, to tell you the truth."

Thief's answering smile was sharp.

"And that doesn't worry you?"

"Not only villains fight battles," I said. "Or have noses, for that matter."

She didn't press the subject, nor I had not expected her to. Talking with Vivienne, I thought, was much like sparring. All deft footwork and probing for weaknesses, a game where victory and defeat were ever moving targets for both players.

"A great victory," Thief drawled. "Should I offer you congratulations?"

"A skirmish," I said.

"Forty thousand men fought on this field," Vivienne said.

"Not even a third of either real armies," I said. "Minor parts of the whole. That makes it a skirmish, no matter how large of one."

"If this was just a skirmish," Vivienne said. "Then why did Diabolist risk her best general?"

My fingers clenched, then unclenched.

"I," I murmured, "have been wondering about the same thing."

Looking at all of this, there were parts that weren't adding up. I could generously assume that I'd lost five thousand men today. Diabolist, on the other hand, had lost twenty thousand. Even with the five thousand Southpooleans she would kill and raise, I'd come out of this round ahead by ten thousand souls. It wasn't a horrible trade, for her. The more troops I lost the fewer I had to assault her walls with. *But she sent Fasili, and hundreds of mages. Knowing she could lose them.* Akua never did anything with only one intention in mind.

"The wards they tried to pen me in with," Thief said. "I could have strolled out at any time. They weren't *keyed* to me, if you get my drift."

"You think she wanted to find out if she could put me in a box at will," I said.

"I'm no general," the dark-haired woman said. "But I get the impression that, army for army, she has you beat. What you've got over her is a bunch of Named, and arguably you're the most powerful of them."

I wasn't so sure of that, to be honest. When it came to killing single opponents, maybe, and Named in particular. But Hierophant could wipe a company from the face of Creation without losing his breath, these days. And Archer was, well... Hard to contain, for lack of better term. She was the living incarnation of the proverbial grain of sand in the machinery. Adjutant wasn't overwhelming by himself, but that wasn't his Role in the first place. He was supposed to empower another Named, and though he worked best with me he could serve that function with others as well.

"It would be reckless of her, to risk so many mages just to answer that question," I said.

"If you'd been stuck behind the wards," Thief said, "would this battle have been won?"

I grimaced. Maybe. But then, maybe not. And if Diabolist had wiped three legions and a contingent of the Fifteenth right before our last battle, well, there went my chances of taking Liesse. This campaign could survive the loss of the Ankou city guard. Fourteen thousand legionaries were another story.

"There's too much we don't know for sure," I finally said. "Guesswork and schemes are her bread and butter, we won't be coming out on top if we keep playing this her way."

Thief was silent for a long moment, staring at me.

"You want me to go to Liesse," she said.

I slowly nodded.

"Not to fight," I clarified. "But I need eyes in the city before attacking it. I've tried to seize the initiative repeatedly, Vivienne, but she's always been a step ahead of us."

"It won't be like my last visit there," Thief said. "She knows I'm part of your little band of miscreants. She will have measures in place."

"I know," I said quietly. "I'm asking anyway."

"This is the part," she said, "where you use your eloquence to talk me into this."

I looked up at the blue sky and smiled bitterly. I could manipulate her, I thought. I'd glimpsed levers to pull in our past conversations. I had a grasp on the kind of threats and pressures that would make her cave. But this, the urge to *bend her to my will* that I was feeling in my bones? That was how villains forged the same blade that'd kill them. I didn't know if that sharp instinct was from my Name or Winter, or more distressingly neither of them at all. But I would not give in to it.

"Do you think you're a good person, Vivienne?" I asked instead.

"Good is irrelevant," Thief said. "There are debts, paid and not. The rest is garnish."

"A hundred thousand Callowans," I said. "Killed and made servants. That, I think, may be the debt of our lifetime. Help me settle it. *Please*."

Vivienne said nothing at all, and drank from the water skin. She wiped her lips and chuckled darkly.

"I used to think there wouldn't be a need for idiotic heroics, on this side of the fence," she said. "How I miss that assumption."

I didn't push any further. It had, in the end, to be her decision. Anything else and there would be a cost, sooner or later. *I do not want servants*, I thought, the conversation I'd had with Hune on a hill still fresh in my mind. But some part of me whispered that kindness was as much a leash as fear, in its own way, and that what I wanted mattered a great deal less than what I actually did.

"Don't dawdle south," Thief said. "I'll be cautious, and retreat if the danger's too great."

"That's all I can ask," I said, and the matter was settled.

By nightfall, the pyres were burning. A hundred candles of cooking flesh in the night. Thief went north, to the enemy's lair. I had the three legions under General Istrid escort the Ankouans to our mustering grounds, and returned south with the remained of my men. To the Fifteenth, to Juniper and Hierophant and the plans that would make or break Callow.

And, I found out, to Black.

---

*danh3107*

And the master is reunited with his apprentice, interesting.

*Edward Conway*

YES!!!! 1st

good chapter man, bloody cliffhanger endings

[\*taborask\*](#)

how long has it been since they met in person?

[\*wirelessgrapes\*](#)

Oooh, "There will be measures in place?" Sounds like the beginning to a dramatic stealth sequence. I think the double chapter will be Thief sneaking into Liesse and whatever she finds inside.

*Big Brother*

Man, Black is gonna have a field day with this. But he is a Broken Machine, with each Cog's rotation grinding the Mechanisms beyond repair. His emotional are going to get the better of him on this field.

I give him to the final confrontation with Diabolist, with his end sparking the Frostfire of Cat's new Name, be it Black Knight or Black Queen.

[\*NZPIEFACE\*](#)

That name actually got me thinking, does King Arthur count as a Knight?

[\*boballab\*](#)

Yes. The King in Arthurian legend was a knight first and remember Arthur sat at the Round Table which was only for



knights. We already have a lot of Arthurian imagery in this story: Avalon, The Lady of the Lake and if you notice she carries two swords which also appears in most Arthurian tales (The Sword of Rule that Arthur pulled from the stone and Excalibur given to him by the Lady of the Lake), Black has been a father to Cat in most ways and she is supposed to be fated to kill him and in Arthurian legend Mordred was Arthur's son and mortally wounds him at the battle of Camlan using the Sword of Rule. Be interesting if Ranger shows up with a special sword to give to Cat...

*Letouriste*

I have a lot more trust in black than you apparently^^  
I don't think he will bit the dust anytime soon

*ArkhCthuul*

And we're back in black, yes. Baaaack in Blaaaack....  
Now that was something...

*Gunslinger*

Black is back. Things should be interesting, especially considering he's supposed to be broken now.

*Letouriste*

Really? I didn't get that impression from the last chapter we seen him. only malicia comment said so and she probably try to separate cat and black so her sentence can not be trusted

*Engineer*

By the Gods Below EE, WHY DID YOU END THE CHAPTER THERE!? Now I have to wait till Next year to read that conversation. This must be what Hell is like. If it existed, you know.

*LM*

A late Merry Christmas to you! The last two weeks of chapters have been sport on, thank you for writing them.

And congratulations on finally passing Worm on topwebfiction!

*Keyen*

The passage on choices made me think of the Wheel of Time. "To Choose is our fate. If you have no choice, then you aren't a man at all. You are a puppet."

Very good chapter, once again, but Thief will be in a deeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep shit.

Stephen R. Marsh

I've really enjoyed the Ogre mindset parts. They make a nice counterpoint.

*Sniggs44*

I really liked this chapter, largely because of the big philosophical conundrum it started with. Generals "sacrifice" (the term is a little loaded, but it kinda fits) soldiers in war as a matter of course – is what Cat did here fundamentally different from what IRL generals have done for thousands of years? My visceral response was a resounding yes, but I'm having a hard time putting my finger on why exactly I feel that way, which in my book is a sign that a good question was raised.

I guess I feel the way I do because there exists (I would hope...) an implicit contract between generals and the people they lead. Yeah they're going to be sent to die, but the person in charge will(/should) make every effort to minimize deaths in pursuance of the goal. My concern is that Cat was handed a super effective tool that basically trades this contract in favor of better odds at victory, and how she treats her soldiers (and/or approaches battles in general) from here on out may fundamentally change as a result. I see sending folks to die to take a beachhead or w/e as totally different than sending them to die because once they do they'll be fodder for a ritual that will itself take said beachhead. But like I said I'm not sure if this distinction really exists outside my knee-jerk intuition.

On the bright side, Killian should now be one step closer to evolving into her final form, assuming Cat isn't going to be inconsistent about the whole sacrifice dealy.

I'm leery about Thief's odds of success. IIRC it's been stated several times that the only Named that get a free pass when undertaking these kinds of infiltration (i.e. suicide) missions are heroes. Yeah, maybe Cat's side of the conflict is relatively heroic when compared to Diabolist's, but betting on tricking the narrative gods by being "technically heroic" doesn't strike me as a good plan.

And from a purely practical standpoint, sending a covert agent back into an enemy stronghold after they've been found out once already just seems like a really bad idea. Like, "returning to the scene of the crime" bad. Things like that become IRL tropes because they've lead to disaster often enough that they're just plain good rules of thumb to abide by, no narrative shenanigans needed.

The attacker/infiltrator has an advantage over the defender because it's fundamentally harder to defend – you've got to spread your people out, "waste" resources countering potential

threats that may never materialize, and be downright smart enough to imagine all the possible vectors by which attacks could come in the first place. But once these things become known quantities the defender has a decided advantage in pretty much everything other than the "when". And if Thief is to Assassin as Squire is to Knight and Archer is to Ranger, then Vivienne is going to be way out of her league if Diabolist is ready for her.

Sending poor Thief into a fair fight...why Cat? Are you still salty over the Hakram incident?

*Ashen Shugar*

The idea I vaguely recall reading in one book, is that that good commanders don't send people out to die. They send them out to succeed at a mission. Some may die in the process, but the plan shouldn't assume they're all going to die. You make contingency plans sure, but you plan to win.

Though as with everything, nothing is 100% except the few things that are.

[beleester](#)

Being "technically heroic" has always worked for Cat so far, so I don't see a problem there. But good call on her having already visited the city once. I forgot about that.

I can definitely see Thief getting captured and then rescued when Cat confronts Heiress, that's a very traditional way for the infiltrator to rejoin the party. Usually comes with a quip along the lines of "Good news: I found Heiress!"

But on the other hand, it *is* about time that we finally find out what Heiress's evil plan is, so I'm betting that she'll instead come back as a stakes-raising moment. "Hey, I know you're all busy with the giant undead army, but I just found out that Heiress's Evil Superweapon of Doom will come online in exactly five minutes, so we've got to hurry."

Or perhaps succeed and then fail to escape, so that she can provide the critical information after she's been rescued.

*MetruX*

I kind of agree, but guys... She's not a covert, she's a Thief. She will enter, try not to be found, steal the info, and be gone. It will be hard? A lot. Heiress doesn't know if she will come, or what she really does, she just knows her Name, and that she is part of Cat's band, so she will have some measures in place, not perfect ones, but knowing her, lots of options. Still, this IS her role. She isn't a front-line fighter, neither a distraction or a helper... She's a

Specialist, and her specialty is stealing. Have a little faith in the girl 😊

### Taltos Dreamer

I thought Diabolist was testing her ability to sneak the special stew into use and then convert the enemy army into undead on the fly?

If Catherine hadn't raised them, I expected step 2 to be the enemy mages doing so.

AVR

Sometimes a soup is just a soup. Or maybe her spies haven't served it to enough people yet and they won't be using the final sorcery until they have.

AVR

Typos

was free move

was free to move

of either real

of either of the real

I do no want

I do not want

the remained of my men.

the remainder of my men.

BTW ErraticErrata, is it useful to have typo checking done? I don't remember hearing whether you use these posts at all.

### Barthumphries

I think, if the typos are posted within a day or so of the main post, they get noticed and fixed. Any later, and they don't get corrected. Still, though...

Trapping the Black Queen was kind of line trying  
Change line to like

over how heavily we rely on Named for for our tactics  
Remove the second "for" or the first one, whichever 😊

and returned south with the remained of my men  
Change "the" to "what"

*mavant*

Notwithstanding the whole "Legions of Terror, bolstered by the restless dead" thing, Squire's camp is all morally ambiguous, right? At least in the hero vs villain sense. Whereas Diabolist, like the Tyrant of Helike, is a cackling villain of the old school. And Thief has just undertake a suicide mission that puts her alone in an enemy camp, surrounded by, well, elite mooks. Doesn't the theory of narrative causality basically demand that this be a skin-of-our-teeth success for Thief?

*H.*

Yep. Squire can be the prequel-name to White Knight just as easily as Black. We know Thief can be part of a party of heroes, as can Ranger's apprentices. For all that's it's based off a Legions rank, there's nothing villainous about being an Adjutant, or about any of the aspects we've seen. Hierophant is, I think, a new Name, or at least an old or uncommon one.

The entire party is ambiguous and could easily be a heroic band. No Assassin, Black, or Warlock here. Especially when opposing an oldschool cackling villain like Diabolist.

*Nairne .01*

Hierophant is the opposite of a priestess (I believe it was said a few chapters before when he transitioned). A priestess asks for divine help and treats the power she is blessed with as a sacred thing not to be abused. The Hierophant literally does the opposite. He takes the miracle he sees and makes it an on-demand spell.

If we factor the Gods Above and Below into the sides of Good and Evil then just with Hierophant's addition to the party, it's dyed in the Evil colors.

*stevenneiman*

Thief is still Heroic enough to pull that off against someone as blatantly and totally Evil as Akua, Heirophant is a Name that I don't think CAN be defeated with the kinds of things that Akua knows how to do, Ranger is just really badass, Cat thrives on playing between the extremes of Good and Evil and coming out on top against both (recall the conversation about power), and Adjutant follows whatever Cat does. Between them, that's nobody that Akua is really well-suited to defeat with her cackling villainy.

*Shequi*

"If I cannot be kind or just, then I will at least be victorious."

If that's not foreshadowing I don't know what it is.

All hail Dread Empress Victorious, first and only of her name.

*Engineer*

Hail Dread Empress Victorious! Mugger of Angels, And exploder of Goats!

*Shoddi*

All Hail Dread Empress Victorious! Unmaker of Fae, Wielder of Goblinfire!

Under whom there are no DNR\* directives. May we serve her well in life and death!

(\*Do Not Re-animate)

*H.*

I was thinking that Victorious or Victoria would be a good Dread Empress name if Cat ever takes the throne. It puts me in mind of Triumphant, and is mostly in line with Cat's actions and philosophy.

*Keyen*

I agree, I bet on Triumphant, second of her name.

With the irony ++ of Triumph being the third aspect of the Lone Swordsman.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

"One sin! One grace!"

[benthelynx](#)

May she never return.

*Axel Rafael*

You called it dude... The community Will Forever remember 🍷

*Letouriste*

That meeting with black is bound to be interesting:)

Why I feel like we will have the first prince pov next chapter?^^

*Nairne .01*

Would be one hell of a way to strengthen the cliffhanger.

*Engineer*

Please don't give EE ideas like that. I really, really, REALLY want to see that conversation and...

... It's too late, isn't it?

*trailer*

We need an extra chapter here. BTW, Cat and Archer. It writes it's self.

*Blue*

So what's the likelihood of bites or wounds from undead turning people? Was it foreshadowing that Abigail could feel the pull of Rise after she got bitten?

*Nairne .01*

Half-dead captain of Cat's new retinue? :>

[Reveen](#)

Sooo... what we're establishing here is that Catherine doesn't give a fuck about anything aside from battlefield dick measuring contests?

Why is she the protagonist again instead of Thief or Hone or that older Ankouan lady?

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

"The House of Light said men could be worse than devils, for devils were driven to Evil by their nature and not by choice"

The House of Light is wrong. People are products of our environment. People born rich love to look down on the people born poor who, as a result of their circumstances, do things like drugs and petty crime. But the truth is, those rich people aren't any better. Remember the Stanford Prison Experiment, among many others. We are, in very large part, who our circumstances make us.

*danh3107*

They aren't though, the act of "looking down on the people born poor" and the act of committing petty crime are by definition choices. You choose who you want to be, every time. Regardless of circumstances choice is never taken away. People who commit evil acts are making the choice to do so, I'm not saying they're actively choosing to /be/ evil as opposed to committing evil. As this story shows us people aren't truly black and white.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

No, sorry, but YOU would probably commit petty crimes or become a drug addict too if you were born into a bad situation. You're not any different from those people

*danh3107*

It'd be my choice still. Choice is never gone from the equation, I would choose to do those things and shape my life that way. Who said I was any different, we're all the same in that we have the ability to make choices, for every person born into a bad situation who chooses to not get out of it, there's another who works hard to get themselves out of it. Same for people in good situations. The quote you took offense to was merely explaining the fundamental truth that human beings have the power of choice, and that shapes our destiny.

*MetruX*

People are products of their environment is actually a part cut through without context, the same as Machiavelli's famous saying, the true meaning is not the same. The truth, as seen by modern psychology (damn, hard to hard those stuff in other languages...) is that you choose who you are, one choice at a time, each small choice making the final image, and that the younger the choice the stronger the image. BUT, which choices are given to you, and which you are more likely to follow, are environmental and genetical, in order. And, actually, it's more common for rich people to do drugs than poor ones, strangely enough.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

It sounds like we're on the same page mostly, but what does Machiavelli's satire have to do with this? Nothing he wrote in the Prince can be taken at face value, or at any value at all really, since it wasn't a serious book.

[kaerie](#)

Oh my goddddd I can't wait for the next chapter you're killing me here. It's very out of character for Black and Catherine to like run into each other's arms and hug but I so want them to do it. I need some father and daughter moments y'all. They've been through so much. So much that I have been rereading Book One to see Catherine and Black again.

But that won't probably happen. It's crazy but I feel like somehow Black will attack Catherine?

Or maybe you know, they just act chill.

Excited!!!



tkarantes

If I can offer some criticism?

This chapter's opening is the third or fourth time (maybe more) that we've seen Cat thinking about how she's not as decent a person as she thought. It's getting rather old, and seeing her come to the same realization over and over again without ever actually learning anything really does make her look stupid.

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## Chapter 55: Reunion

*"The heart of succession is always murder. The new cannot grow where the old remains."*

– Theodore Langman, Wizard of the West

Four Calamities had gone south, and Scribe with them, but only two awaited on the other side of the fairy gate. I'd not expected to see Assassin, but looking at Warlock and Black standing side by side my heart broke a little. It was the way they stood: slightly apart, as if they expected a larger person to be behind and leaning over their shoulders. Captain had left a gaping hole behind her in more ways than one. Out in the open our greetings were polite, friendly even, but distant for all that. None of us were inclined to emotional theatrics in front of so many watching eyes. Warlock made himself scarce without bothering to explain, hard eyes lingering on me even as his handsome face smiled without a speck of sincerity, and my teacher silently led me to a tent in the heart of the Fifteenth's camp. Before I even came in sight of it I could feel the wards pulsing, a least two dozen woven together that reeked of coiled and contained violence. Not Masego's work, this. There was a depth and sophistication to it Hierophant had yet to reach.

It was where my teacher had been sleeping, I saw with a start. The inside was sparse and austere, functional Legion furnishings surrounding a standard issue cot. A handful of scrying tools could be glimpsed in a corner, glinting softly in magelight, and the short folding table that stood to the side was flanked by two rickety stools. The second most powerful person in the Empire slept here, and I could have bought everything in the tent with a mere month's salary. I'd never been too inclined to luxuries myself, but Black took it a step further. The tent's flap closed behind us with a quiet swish, leaving the two of us standing in the soft sorcerous glow. I was taller than him now, I realized. By a little more than an inch. How long had it been, since we'd

last seen each other? A year, or close. He was still pale in that way that was more corpselike than Callowan, all the life in him gathered into those eerie green eyes. Named did not get tired the way normal men did, did not feel that burden as acutely, but in the lines of his face I read something like exhaustion.

The silence stretched on for a long time, me looking at him and him looking at me. If we were different people, I thought, he would be embracing me. But that wasn't who we were, so instead his fingers fleetingly touched my shoulder, using the excuse of brushing off lint that did not exist, and I forced myself not to lean into the touch. Those were the lines we lived between, even now.

"I'm so sorry," I said, "about Sabah."

For what couldn't even have been the full span of a heartbeat something like raw anguish flickered across the man's face, before it was whisked away into the void.

"So am I," he said, and there was something almost tired in his voice. "So am I."

I couldn't remember moving but found myself on a stool as Black claimed his own, watching as he broke the clay seal over a roughly-hewn bottle. He poured himself a cup of the red liquor within, and looked askance at me. I nodded and was handed cup of my own.

"Those who leave are met again," he said quietly, the words cadenced and formulaic. "Be it Above or Below."

Our cups clinked dimly and we downed the drinks. It tasted like wine, I thought, if someone had dumped half a bottle of hard liquor in a bad red vintage. I kept myself from grimacing.

"What happened?" I asked. "Last I heard the situation south was under control."

He poured himself another cup.

"I have grown arrogant," he said, and it was not a recrimination so much as a statement of fact. "I was caught up in my own cleverness, convinced I understood the nature of the opposition. So blind a nascent Name escaped my attention, that I failed to realize I was facing perhaps the most dangerous opponent of my long career."

"The Wandering Bard," I said.

Almorava of Smyrna, though now she went by a different name and face. I'd thought her a nuisance and not a threat, when I'd

fought against her, a meddler that could help along defeat but never cause it. It appeared I'd been very, very wrong about that.

"You will face her too, in time," Black said. "Do not make the same mistakes I did. No matter how powerful the heroes she will align herself with, she is the greatest threat among the opposition. If she is not contained, she will make you rue that failing."

I studied him silently. The Empress had called him a *raw, bare nerve*. I'd hoped that she was wrong, but there was a shadow in the man across from me that gave me pause. It wasn't the dark spiral of doubt and recriminations I knew best, but something... colder. As if he'd cut away the human parts of him, deemed them useless and to be set aside until the current messes could be fixed.

"It's all right to grieve her," I said. "I do, and I never knew her the way you did."

The dark-haired man's smile was mirthless.

"I will grieve her properly when affairs here allow it," he said. "There will be a funeral in Ater, in a few months. I expect you to be there."

I nodded slowly. He drank from his cup, fingers steady yet somehow fragile.

"I will have to tell her family," he said softly. "I haven't yet. It feels like less than her due to scry her husband for that conversation."

He closed his eyes, finished his drink and the sliver of vulnerability there'd been on his face was gone when the green stare returned.

"I've been spending the last few days reading reports," he said. "You've done well here, Catherine. There are few people that could have so deftly handled the fae."

"The Empress helped me clean up the mess," I replied honestly. "Couldn't have done it without her."

"Another pleasant development," he noted. "I was glad to hear of your cooperation. You will need to rely on her in the future, and she on you."

"You talk," I said, "like you're going to die."

He laughed cuttingly, but the edge did not feel like it was directed at me. Or at him. It was the laugh of a man who looked up at the Heavens with only contempt.

"Oh there's still a few years left in this hide, if I avoid the right mistakes," he said. "There will be dangers in facing Diabolist, to be sure, but I am aware of the stories I must sidestep."

Gods but I was glad to hear that. Because there was a picture that could be painted in Liesse, one that involved my mentor and my rival and the bloody succession that had been the way of villains since the First Dawn. I wasn't... Fuck, I knew Black was a risk. That as long as he lived there would always be limits to how far I could push things with the Tower. But I wasn't ready for him to die. I wasn't sure that I would ever be. It wasn't even just that I felt safer with him, the hazy memory of a warm cloak around my shoulders threaded with the bone-deep certainty there was not a line he wouldn't cross to keep me alive. I worried my lip. It'd been easy to tell Grandmaster Talbot that the monster in front of me was the closest thing I'd ever have to a father, when he was so very far away. It was harder to do it now that he was here with me. It would have been breaking a pane of glass we'd always been careful to keep there, even if sometimes our hands pressed against that divide close enough to feel the other's warmth. *The hard girl with a distant father figure*, I thought mockingly. *When did I become such a hackneyed banality?*

"Be careful," I said, voice rough. "You're still useful to me."

Something like a smile quirked his lips and he nodded. I poured myself another cup to avoid looking at him even if the liquor had tasted like bad decisions, and felt a sliver of gratitude when he changed the subject.

"Diabolist must be dealt with before summer's end," he said. "We had a conversation, you and I, while I was in the Free Cities. About changes that must be had in the Empire."

"I'm not sure the Empress will agree to the kind of changes I want," I said. "I've made promises, Black. I thought I had it under control, but..."

"In Dread Crowned," he said, lips curving around the name of the song my legionaries and thousands more had sung. "A lovely tune. Almost lovely enough one cannot hear the clamour for war under the words."

"I made a deal with her for the vicequeenship of Callow, like you said I should," I told him. "But the Wasteland is sick, Black. There's centuries of rot set in. We can't build anything that'll last without clearing it away first."

Because, much as I'd come to like Malicia, I could not help to think that our deal would not survive her. That all it took was a knife in the back by some ambitious High Lord and the armies

would march, because the Empress was a creature of pragmatic reason but she was the exception and not the rule. If we were to really, truly make this work then the cabals of scheming highborn had to go. Or it was just a matter of time until another version of the coup in Laure took place, and we'd come too far now for that to lead to anything but rebellion. I hadn't forgotten it wasn't the Truebloods that'd made a grab for power in the capital, when I'd disappeared for a few months. It had been the Empress' own allies, supposedly mine as well. To trust men like them was like throwing tea in the sea and expecting it to turn brown.

"And so, summer's end," Black said calmly. "Procer will not begin their campaign in autumn, not if it means taking the risk of fighting through the winter in foreign lands. We will have until the first pangs of spring to do what must be done."

The tone had been serene, measured. Cold as the Winter running through my veins, and I was not ashamed to admit it scared me.

"And what exactly is that?" I asked.

"Praes," he said mildly, "will be purged. From Court to gutter. I will not allow knives to be bared at our back as we prepare for the greatest war the Empire has seen in half a millennium."

I looked into those pale green eyes and glimpsed the house of steel behind them, grinding wheels of steel that knew no pity or pause. There had been weight to those words.

"The Empress has already broken the Truebloods," I said. "Most of them call themselves the Moderates now, and the rest is on the run."

"Twenty years, I have kept my tongue as Alaya ruled Praes her way," Black said. "She has done much with that time. Won a civil war without ever mustering a single army, and so much more I could never have done in her place. *But it is not enough.*"

His fingers clenched.

"I look west and I see the chosen daughter of the old ways, sitting atop a throne of death and sorcery in naked challenge to the Tower," he hissed. "I look east and I see the remains of the same fools that fought us decades ago, defeated but not yet defanged. Those that kneel may be spared, Catherine. There is still use for them. The rest will burn, and from those ashes we will fashion an Empire that can turn back Hasenbach's crusade."

Strange, how fear could make a moment grow crystal-clear.

"That means going against the Empress," I said. "Is that your intention? Rebellion?"

The cold intensity that had wrought the man's frame went out like a smothered candle and he passed a hand through his hair. It was, I thought, one of the most human gestures I'd ever seen him make. More than his power or his words, the complete control Black held himself with had always been what made him feel unearthly. That made it thrice I'd seen the control slip tonight. It had my stomach clenching.

"No," Black said. "Never that. Alaya rules. But she must understand that the time for long games is past. Praes now faces an existential threat. Compromise is no longer an option."

"And what happens to Callow, in that path of no compromise?" I asked.

"You have a crown," my teacher said. "Let us dispense with the bastard fig leaf that is putting vice in front of your title. Your people already call you the Black Queen, Catherine. Take Callow in hand. Deal out justice and authority as you see fit, so long as the kingdom is ready for war."

My blood thrummed. I'd heard that title whispered, by legionaries and sundry soldiers. I'd been very careful not to claim it though. There were implications to it that would undo some very delicate balances that had been struck. But if Black was going to break those anyway... I did not look forward to it, what it would mean to be queen. The tedious matters of statecraft, the never-ending petitions and burdens on my hours. But who else would I trust to take the throne? I would leave the ruling in hands better fit for it than mine. But I would wear the crown and command the armies. And when peace was finally bought by enough death, I would put down my sword and make ploughshare of it. Find a successor that had the talents of peace I so damnably lacked.

"They won't go quietly," I warned him. "The last of the old breed. There will be blood."

"They should have been put down like rabid dogs forty years ago," Black said coldly. "Their mages conscripted into the ranks, the rebel holdings confiscated and their treasuries used to raise additional legions. For centuries they have hoarded secrets and rituals to use as knives in their bids to power. Let those be used on our enemies instead: the days were dissent could be tolerated are over. All of Praes will fight for the Empire."

*And whatever parts of it refuse will be destroyed,* he did not say. He did not need to.

"You want to turn the Empire into a great war machine," I said. "And it's a tempting thing, I'll admit. Legions boots over ever smug highborn throat. But what happens to it, after the war? If you make a Praes that is all forges and army camps, then it's not

going to put down the swords after we win. It'll start looking for another conquest."

I did not mention the possibility that, even after all that, we might still lose. There was no point in having that conversation at all. *Except I'll have to take precautions, I thought. Prepare Callow for the possibility, so that it would survive the defeat.* I missed Hakram like a godsdamned limb.

"I imagine I will be dead, by then," Black said. "But Alaya will rule, and you will have learned to do the same. The two of you can make the Empire what it should be. In this I have no regrets."

"Cut out that fucking talk," I sharply said. "You're not dying so easily. If you're helping me make this mess, you're helping me clean it afterwards. There's too much I don't know, Black. Too many gaps in need of filling."

He smiled, suddenly, and for the first time I'd seen him today he felt as young as he looked. His hand hesitantly extended over the table and patted my own before withdrawing. It felt awkward. I wished he'd kept it there longer.

"Do not try to become me," he said. "I was a tool that served a purpose, and that purpose is coming to an end. This Empire will outgrow me and so will you. To linger beyond that would be to become a crutch, and do disservice to us all."

"You don't get to quit halfway through," I said through gritted teeth.

I hated that my voice broke just a little.

"Oh, child," he said, almost tenderly, and took my hand in his. "Do not grieve this. You will surpass me, Catherine. I saw that in you the moment we first met, that glint in your eyes that was the best of me without the worst."

"This isn't about surpassing anyone," I hoarsely said.

"It always is," he whispered. "I will gracefully leave the stage, when the time comes, and leave it proud of what will come after me. I knew this to be the outcome the moment I began."

I squeezed his fingers and closed my eyes. *No, I thought. This is just a story, Black.*

And I'd already proved I could break those, if I was willing to pay the price.

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### [erraticerrata](#)

Early chapters today, and a happy New Year to everyone!  
Extra chapter is titled "Prodigy" and from the POV of a young Masego.  
(<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/12/31/prodigy/>)

#### *Komploding*

Thank you, I truly enjoyed these, have a fantastic new year, make it the best!

#### *Letouriste*

Damn, I should have checked yesterday^^  
Happy new year to you too

#### *Unexpectedly Polite Cultist*

Woe is me, that I have found the last of the published chapters on this day!

But I shall despair not. Your story has intrigued me deeply. Deeply enough that in three days I have burned through it. Oh, the highs and lows, the glory, the pitfalls of despair. Truly, a rodeo of emotion.

\*Show me more.\*

#### *Naeddyr*

Two excellent chapters to start a new year with! Thank you, and have a good one!

#### *naturalnuke*

Happy almost New Years!

#### *Anna*

Happy New Year, but damn, I'm practically in tears. I don't want Black to go, and this talk is unnerving:/

### [Euodiachloris](#)

Um... Cat... Saving a Beloved Papa From an Existential Illness isn't really a Villain tale. 😞

#### *desu*

Depending of the ways, methods and consequences.



*Byzantine*

It's not like she's limited herself to those before.

*Zourath*

What are you talking about? That sort of thing is villain origin story 101. Ends justifies the means, do everything in their power to save/bring back friends or family, consequences and collateral damage be damned? Definitely villain territory. Those stories usually never end well for anyone though.

[Euodiachloris](#)

She's a little beyond the origin story use-by date. 😊 Even Daddy's Little Villain usually winds up with some annoying High Heal Face Turn arc if said Daddy needs help – because, never forget that the Heroes have the narrative pull Villains don't (especially with the Wandering Booze Cabinet on the case). I don't think putting up with the White Hats less ambiguous than Thief for six weeks of plot is really Cat's style. 😊

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Origin stories always end in tragedy, whether it's Batman losing his parents or Mr. Freeze never getting his wife back. That's why there are stories after their origin.

*Keyen*

It's okay, if Catherine doesn't want to deal with the paperwork, she doesn't have to get the crown. I'm sure Hakram would do a nice Black Queen too.

More seriously, i'm surprised that Black would go against Alaya this frankly (even if he doesn't want to rebel), and into the same direction than Cat concerning the Praes nobility.

So, I guess we won't see the combinaison, Black will die on Liesse and Cat will clean the Praesi mess alone.

Happy new year!

*Nairne .01*

"I'm sure Hakram would do a nice Black Queen too."

I laughed.

*Anastas*

I dunno, do you think Hakram has the gams for the requisite suggestive yet tasteful gowns?

*ArkCthuul*

Queen has the right song for her title.  
Listen to it and you'll understand...OR Not.

Aside from that, she could always bring him back as a vampire or something...would fit the villain theme, his looks, and be horrible enough..;)

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Happy New Year!

[Nehemiah Newell](#)

The interlude was sort of sweet, kids being kids. The chapter was sad and worrying, which I'm pretty sure is the intention. How exactly is Cat planning on breaking that story, I wonder.

*Sniggs44*

So if I'm not reading too deeply into things, it looks like Black's "broken machine" illness is going to manifest itself as his self control eroding, and him deciding on actions based less on logic and more on emotion.

His stated plan to wipe out the Truebloods seems reminiscent of bucket list talk...like he's basically saying fuck it, and doing what he's always wanted to do despite how consequences may tip such an action into net loss territory. Is it that he doesn't care as much about the consequences? Or is the machine so broken that he's no longer able to evaluate situations with pure logic and find/pursue the optimal solutions? His instability ultimately sparking a civil war with the Empress would be an outcome Bard would love, I'd imagine.

I liked the overall tone of chapter, it was quite emotional. Reminded me of dealing with family members with terminal illnesses, in a way. Though there may be disastrous consequences if Cat ends up going through the classical stages of grief as a response to Black's situation. She's kinda in denial right now, which isn't too bad, but there are some pretty scary implications for what someone in the bargaining stage would be capable of in this sort of universe. Devils with which to make deals actually exist, for one.

*Shequi*

It's more that he sees the need for the Short-Term Gain, even if there's a Long-Term Pain.

[vuthuha912](#)

What good are mages going to do if they were kept in a safe and used to backstab you at your weakest moment? The nobility, even the ones on Malicia's side, is too treacherous. Remember, two c\*nts on the Ruling Councils who butchered the chance to create goodwill and cooperation between Praes and Callow. During the war, high lords could hold back on the support, keep their force intact, let our people die then overthrow us after the Crusade was over. Does matter that it will likely weaken Praes? What goods is Praes if it wasn't under their feet?

They may even sell their leader out to Procer and happily accept their new Procer's overlord then secretly plan to backstab them and take the country back later. As long as their position at the top remains, Praes can burn to the ground for all they care. They will help Praes recover to a suitable degree and then enjoy the benefits. It is very common for real-world nobles to do something like that. Chinese history is littered with plays like that.

Praes as a culture is sick to the core. It actively hindered cooperation, order, trust, and unity. They are the cornerstone of any long-lasting empire. That is why Black is going to fail in his mission to better Praes. Too many elements are working against him and too few allies who share his views. The Praesi don't understand him, Callowan don't care about Praesi. He is too lenient on the high lords. You give them 40 years to change sides and provide them with food, and money, even write political pamphlets explaining your long-term plans for the country which will benefit everyone. If they want to change, they would already have. The only thing they ever see is the chance to gain more at the expense of everybody else.

Even with the Crusade coming, they still want to fuck around with their own buffer state. My gosh, can you even be more inept?

The fight is about survival and a chance for Praes to permanently escape the starvation cycle. It needs to succeed or thing is going to return to the day of stealing weather, turning the entire country into a wasteland and human-sacrificed to keep everyone fed.

*danh3107*

It's like he's got Alzheimers or something, the person you know is there but hidden...

Also, I wonder if one of Sabah's kids will become the new cursed.

*Shequi*

Wait, won't Sabah's family already know she's dead? After all, the Curse was explicitly described as a "Bloodline Curse" way back in the extra chapter "Beast".

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2016/12/07/beast/>

"She's not a lycanthrope," ((Wekesa)) said. "As far as I can tell, a Warlock put a curse on her bloodline a few centuries back. And this, kids, is why you put an escapement when you cast a blood ritual."

This would mean that one of Sabah's children has become The Cursed, and could mean some horrible things for the rest of the family...

*B*

I don't think her children will. Remember, she wasn't just cursed, she was the Cursed. It was a Name that was passed along bloodlines. However, she probably broke that name by killing a small god and gaining the control necessary to change her Name to the Captain.

If nothing else, she's had decades for Warlock to magic up a way to keep the curse from spreading to her children.

*H.*

If there *\*must\** be a Cursed, then shouldn't it have moved on when she became Captain? I don't think she was carrying the curse anymore, even if she could still draw on the transformation.

At least, I hope that's the case, because her kid might struggle to find another old Orc god to kill.

*Ward*

Thanks for the chapter 😊

*alegio*

I REALLY hope that black will survive. He is probably one of my favorite characters ever, but as the story goes on its extremely unlikely. 😞

Happy nice year and thanks for everything!

*Engineer*

\*clears throat and wipes eye (what? I had dust in them)\*

So, uh, argh, anyway, uh did Cat just enter the beginning phases of a transition or what?

*Gunslinger*

Happy new Year everyone. And extra special wishes to erraticerrata for giving us not one but 2 chapters on New year's eve.

By the way we're only ~ a 100 dollars short of getting 3 CHAPTERS A WEEK. If you would be interested in helping speed that up you could consider supporting the author on patreon at <https://www.patreon.com/user?u=3523924>

[kaerie](#)

Oh my goddddddd I need more Daddy Black

*Engineer*

I wonder what those consequences will be...

I wonder how Black will deal with the Calamities.

I wonder why the Sovereign of the Red Skies is so pissed off at Cat.

Dramatic Tension is on point.

Now I am waiting for the Father-Daughter tag team bonanza. Ubua The Diabolist, oh you done fucked up now...

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

I don't think Black is as unthinking about this as some might think. Remember, when he and Cat had their scrying conversation after she created the Knightly Order, Black was already talking about cleaning house with fire and sword in Praes when he returned.

I think Sabah's loss has simply made him hyper-aware that his time is running out, and he can't keep delaying doing what he knows what needs to be done because it will tweak Alaya's loss-of-control neurosis acquired during her time as abused object in the previous Dread Emperor's seraglio.

The other thing: Black has been maneuvering to leave Malicia no choice but to treat with Cat as a partner rather than an elite minion. He knows that Malicia has been saved from the fate of countless Dread Emperors/Empresses before her by her peer-partner relationship with him, and he knows Malicia's nature is untenable without a peer of a more knock head to solve problems mentality.

Malicia likes to believe every problem has a chessboard solution. Many do...but the critical problem is that every so often a problem crops up that APPEARS like you can solve it with clever maneuvering...when just going out and cutting its head off is

really the better solution. Now, faced with a problem that gives every indication it can be overcome EITHER by Malicia's favored tactics, or Black's...without Black around, which option do you think Malicia would choose?

I also believe that Black is trying to make good on the essence of the promise he made Cat. That if she doesn't break, and doesn't shy away from doing what's needful to fight fate and make things turn out for Callow the way Cat wants, that she'll have the tools to keep Malicia from deciding to prioritize Praes over Callow at some point and screw Callow over. Black knows that kind of move leads back to pre-Conquest madness. Best to avoid the problem by keeping that temptation away from Malicia.

*knockoffnikolai*

Registering a guess: based on thematics, and Cat's whole "slippery slope to evil" thing, I think that Black is going to die, and that the end of Cat's journey to the dark side will be marked by her taking up the mantle of Black Knight.

*Keyen*

Honestly, it would be too conventional. I think the way Black will die will make Cat understand what Vivienne said to William in Book 2:

"Here's the thing about Evil, though – they've used those methods for a lot longer than you. They're better at them. If you want to make a better world, maybe you should act like someone who deserves to live in it."

I think the way Black will die will break the link between Catherine and Malicia (Maybe because she could avoid the whole mess), and thus, Cat will forsake the Dark Path and embrace the Chaotic Neutral.

*Shequi*

Well, drinking has often been this Series motif for descent into evil, and Black is now onto (badly) fortified wine. It's only so long before he's drinking spirits at breakfast.

*Blue*

There is no way Malicia hasn't planned for this. That's why she preemptively talked to Cat and Cat is already wary about how Black is approaching this. Black and Malicia are both right. Cat just needs to find a way to feed the Praesi to the First Prince and solve it that way.

*quaelegit*

I'm just reading this story for the first time now so no idea what happens after this chapter but you just gave me a hilarious/terrifyingly stupid idea: Cat can route the Tenth Crusade through Arcadia to Praes directly so Callow doesn't become the fighting grounds!

*WhoEvenKnows*

I wonder how many more instances of hardening Catherine needs before she realises the depth of her hypocrisy and allows Kilian to have her full power.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb

*stevenneiman*

Nothing in there that was actually a surprise, but you sure know how to craft a heavy moment, EE. I doubt that Cat will be able to save Black in the long run, but I just hope he gets to have an awesome moment as he does leave the stage.

[glassgirlceci](#)

Fuck, I'm tearing up. I don't want Black to die, he and Catherine are closer than ever 😞

[Barthumphries](#)

Typo

the days were dissent could be tolerated are over  
Change were to where

[sengachi](#)

"Our cups clinked dimly and we downed the drinks. It tasted like wine, I thought, if someone had dumped half a bottle of hard liquor in a bad red vintage. I kept myself from grimacing."

I just reread this chapter, after having read through the rest of the story so far. And the rest of the story so far includes Amadeus and Alaya drinking terrible, awful wine from Alaya's home because of it's sentimental value. And I just realized that this must be that wine. Amadeus is drinking this wine because it feels like home and he needs the comfort after losing his friend.

Oh fuck I'm gonna cry. Yup. I'm crying now.

*Monadologist*

Damn it. Now I'm crying.

morroian

Posting from 2022 reading this for the first time I liked the chapter but it made me more annoyed that we didn't get more of what actually happened to Sabah.

[vuthuha912](#)

Oh, Black is really going to have to choose between his friends and his country, isn't it? Malicia or Praes. The Trueblood can't stay. They are too selfish and dangerous. They said that immoral people are dangerous but smart immoral people are even more stupid. Black cares for Praes and he has been fostering patriotism in the military. Yet, the upper crust of Praes still misses the lesson. Well, 40 years is a long time to change your mind. If it is still not enough then it might never be enough. Time to cut the rope.

If people say that Malicia is going to go crazy after he dies, he might reconsider. Or, he can argue that Malicia is too smart to let grief consume her.

\*sigh\* Amadeus, Amadeus – the love of god, you really don't get it don't you. Love is why Malicia works with you. Love is what keeps the Calamities. You are not a tool to any of them – you are someone that they love dearly. Emotions always get in the way. We can't help it. We are human after all.

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## Chapter 56: Recess

*"And on your grave we shall have inscribed: he was witty all the way into the tiger pit."*

– Dread Emperor Vindictive

Nauk had a whole tent to himself, unlike the rest of our wounded remaining with the host. Unconscious or not he kept his rank. His Senior Tribune had been temporarily granted full legate authority, but no one had ever dared to talk of actual promotion in front of me. All those that could speak of the matter knew me better than that. There was no lit candle inside, but that hadn't made a difference to me in years. I dragged the lone stool in the corner across the dirt and sat on it, eyes stuck on the orc's inanimate form. His breath still rose and fell faintly and the wounds had begun to heal, but there was nothing pretty about it. His left eye was gone, taken by Summer flame along with ear and cheek and a chunk of his dark hair. It looked like a bonfire had



devoured half his face, and though the burns were no longer a horror of charred skin they had scabbed green and peeling. This, I knew, he would be able to live with. That kind of scarring was almost a point of honour to orcs. My eyes shifted to the side and lingered on the stump that ended at his shoulder. The loss of his fighting arm would be harder blow.

Prosthetics could be made, I knew. The Warlock had made a hand for Hakram, after Summerholm, and I did not doubt Masego would be able to make something even more functional now that he had transitioned into Hierophant. But Nauk would forever be a cripple in the eyes of his own, without a Name to make up for his defect. There was much to love in orcs, be it the bone-deep loyalty or the fierceness in the face of peril, but the Clans were not known to be kind to failures – and that was what they would call him for this, I had no doubt.

“I never should have taken you into that fight,” I murmured, brushing back an errant strand of hair. “Neither you nor the Gallowborne. It was arrogant, to think I was powerful to keep you alive.”

I was, in the end, a villain. My power was not meant to be a shield for those I loved. *All I can do is kill the enemy before they kill you*, I thought. But that too would fail in time, like Black had failed Captain. Death could only be cheated for so long no matter how cunning and ruthless and strong you thought you were.

“I’ve been told Pickler visits you every night, after her hours are done,” I told the orc. “The others came too, even Robber. You haven’t been forgotten.”

There were no wards around the tent but there were guards, and when I heard them give way without comment my mind ran down the list of the few people with that authority. Wouldn’t be Juniper or any of the general staff – most of them had ordered a bonfire made away from prying eyes and begun showing up with bottles when Evening Bell rang. I meant to join them, eventually, but I’d come to visit my mistake first. Not Black, either. He’d been scrying generals and court officials all day, and likely would continue until we left for Liesse. That left only three. Hakram, but the approaching steps were too light. Archer wouldn’t have come here at all. And that meant...

“Lord Warlock,” I said calmly, hand withdrawing from Nauk’s forehead.

The Sovereign of the Red Skies was no more bothered by the darkness than me. He strolled casually to my legate’s side, leaving the body between us, and frowned at the unconscious orc. I studied the villain in silence, eyes tracing the sculpted face and fit form that was made plain by his tailored tunic. There’d

always been traces of silver in the man's short hair, and salt as well as pepper in his beard, but I fancied I saw a little more of both now. He was still, I thought, perhaps one of the most handsome men I'd ever seen. An older man, certainly, but that only added to the allure: there was nothing boyish about him at all. The admission was set aside earlier than it used to be, the way I could dismiss Akua's looks. Some part of me considered the Warlock an enemy, and enemies were not to be blushed over. He did not reply to my greeting, or call on sorcery. All he did was stand there and look.

"I'm sorry," I said. "About Sabah."

Dark eyes finally turned to me.

"Your sympathy is a shallow thing of little meaning, Squire," he replied. "You knew her for scarcely three years, perhaps a month in all of shared presence. Your grief is pale imitation of ours."

"And yet I still grieve her," I said.

His face twitched, sorrow and hatred mingled. In my veins Winter flowed, the darkness in the room thickening. My mantle craved the strife like a parched man craved water.

"She was always the best of us," Warlock said. "All she wanted was for us to be alive and happy. It made her so very easy to love."

I did not reply. *Tread lightly here, Catherine. Winter had caught the scent of war, and in this it is so very rarely wrong.* The tall man continued to watch me, the silence growing tenser every heartbeat.

"I am trying," the Sovereign of the Red Skies said, "to think of a reason not to kill you right here and now."

"You might not find that so easily achieved," I calmly replied.

I'd come too far to flinch in the face of even a man like this. A slow smirk split the Soninke's face.

"You speak to me of trouble when your soul is one spell away from turning on itself," he said. "Proud little Squire, having learned all the wrong lessons. Did you really think a mantle was so easily claimed? That there would not be *consequences* to usurping a demigod?"

My eyes flicked to Nauk's silent form.

"I am sharply aware of my limitations," I said.

"You are an altar raised to your own ambition, child, and the foundations are *shaking*," he jeered. "You have lied and murdered

your way through affairs beyond your understanding. Can you even still suffer the touch of cold iron?"

He laughed sharply, teeth like ivory showing in the dark.

"Perhaps it is too early for that still," he said. "But thresholds must already be growing difficult, yes? Wards stand stone where they were once parchment, your power mercurial where it was once firmly grasped. You are not more than human, Catherine Foundling, merely *other*."

My fingers twitched, hidden under Nauk's cot by the angle. I felt like reaching for my sword even as the words winded their way into my head. There was an unfortunate stench of truth about them. The edges being turned on me did not cut deep, but my patience was running thin in the face of a berating I had not earned. Or, at the very least, not from *him*.

"You once warned me about lines I shouldn't cross," I coldly said. "I've kept to those terms. And yet here you are, knife on your fucking tongue. Act like even half the man you pretend to be, Warlock."

Power flooded the tent. Not as a spell or an attack – the Sovereign of the Red Skies had simply ceased hiding the sorcery always roiling inside him. Just by standing there, just by being, he was a storm made flesh. My Name's hackles rose in answer, frost touching my shoulders and my shadow deepening into an endless pit. *I stood in front of Hashmallim unbowed, Wastelander. You will not scare me into lowering my head with cheap theatrics.*

"Lines," the Warlock hissed. "You dare speak to me of lines when just by existing you bring death to Amadeus? You stand before me reeking of bargain incomplete, a thing stitched together by blood and ignorance, and pretend you are safe for even a single soul in this wretched world?"

Something bubbled up inside me, and against my will a laugh escaped my lips.

"You blustering fucking hypocrite," I said. "Who are you to cast stones, Sovereign? You're more abattoir than man. Have you ever accomplished a single damned thing by means other than cutting up men? All I can put to your name is death and horror. I have been civil because Masego is family and for some godforsaken reason Black forgives what you are, but do not mistake that for fear, not for a single moment. You think your record cows me? I've bled for it, Warlock, but I have *beaten gods*. All you are is an aging bag of curses."

The cloth of the tent around us withered until it was threadbare and blackened, Winter baring its fangs through my open snarl. The

Warlock's eyes dilated, red bleeding into them as the smell of brimstone spread through cold air.

"Hye should have killed you when she had the chance," he said. "He would have forgiven her, eventually. Damn her for having looked only at the hunt."

My fingers clasped around the hilt of my sword.

"Talk is meaningless," I said. "Either act or shut the Hells up."

The Soninke's shoulders twitched and for a moment I thought it would come to violence, my sword already halfway out the scabbard, but in the end the monster stayed his hand.

"My son asked for the life of this tin soldier of yours," he said, tone emotionless. "Have it back, and count the debt of protecting Masego through his transition paid. Watch your step, Squire. If slaying you keeps him alive, you will not live to see winter."

I forced myself to leave, because if I stayed there would be blood. Terror was writ plain on the faces of the two legionaries standing guard outside, and any notion they hadn't heard the argument was dead the moment I glimpsed it. My sword slid back fully into the sheath and I took a deep breath, wrestling down fury I knew to be not entirely my own. My temper was worsening. *Like all the rest*, I thought darkly.

"Everything you heard here is under the Tower's seal," I told the guards.

I lingered long enough to receive stammering assurances from them, then left. Part of me wanted nothing with the bonfire and comrades awaiting, but disappearing into my tent to stew over this wasn't going to improve anything about my night. Even if the mood was gone, I would show up. *Other*, the Warlock had called me. Other than human. Maybe I needed all the company I could get.

—

"You're having another," Hakram bluntly ordered. "It's a little early for morning dew, so I can hazard a guess why you have wet shoulders."

I grimaced but offered up my cup to the orc.

"Could we at least drink something that doesn't taste of burnt orange?" I complained.

I got a few smiles for that, though no laughter. No one was quite drunk enough yet to have reached that place where everything was funny.

"Dhahab is an acquired taste," Aisha conceded.

"*Acquired* is the right word," Ratface drawled. "That bottle is worth twice its weight in gold."

There were ten of us around the crackling flames, and though some of the faces had changed it had reminded me so much of evenings in the War College that I'd ached. Simpler times, though back then they'd felt anything but. These days whatever didn't involve half a river's worth of blood felt innocent.

"They served this at receptions in Ater," Masego noted. "Though it tasted different then."

"Milkweed extract," Aisha explained, her cheeks rosy. "It's the traditional paired poison."

My Taghreb staff tribune had begun hitting the bottle early tonight and already abandoned the flat stone that had been her seat in favour of lying against the large trunk we were using as a bench. Having traded a cotton shirt and slender trousers for her usual uniform, I got a good glimpse of why Ratface had been stuck on her for so long every time she stretched. The toned curves were hard to notice under the aketon, but now they were in full display. I didn't allow my eyes to linger, though, and the reason why spoke up right after.

"We're roughing it like proper peasants, then," Kilian smiled, cheeks dimpling. "How appropriate."

I expected Archer to make something out of that, but when I looked she was busy trying to discreetly tie Masego's braids in a knot. He kept slapping away her hands, so evidently not a great success.

"Frosted another table talking with Kegan?" Juniper asked, seizing Aisha's cup and watering down her liquor even as she pouted.

"I wish," I grunted. "Got into an argument with the Warlock."

"Were you asking about his s-" Robber started, but Pickler pushed him off his seat with the ease of long practice.

It did not escape my notice he half-leaned into the touch before allowing himself to be toppled. That infatuation had yet to disappear, then.

"Really?" Masego said, coil of lightning forming around his finger just in time for him to shock away Archer from her latest attempt with a flick. "Father doesn't lose his temper often. As far as I know, the last argument he got into was before I was born."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Huh," I eloquently said, nursing the liquor. "Who with?"

I wasn't actually all that curious, but steering the talk away from the fact that I'd drawn steel on one of the Calamities in the middle of my own war camp seemed a solid notion. Even if he'd been fucking asking for it.

"Uncle Amadeus," Masego said. "Uncle wanted him to open an academy for mages, after the Conquest."

"There already is," Ratface pointed out. "There's a track for mages at the College."

Hierophant rolled his glass eyes under the cloth.

"A *real* academy," he said. "He refused, of course. Father had no interest in teaching squalling Wasteland brats."

"The War College has a limited curriculum, it's true," Pickler said, and I noticed a subtle slur to her words. "The Eyries have entire volumes on engineering and alchemy that will never see light of day."

"The spell scrolls at the College are very narrow in scope," Kilian agreed. "And all the more sophisticated treatises are theory, not practical."

"Praesi hoard spells like dragons do gold," Juniper said. "That's always been the way."

I downed the rest of dhahab and reached for an open bottle of wine before Hakram could fill my cup with that sin against tastebuds a third time. I poured too quick, red spilling over the rim, and unthinkingly licked my fingers clean. Feeling eyes on me I turned, and found Kilian watching. I cleared my throat, in a hurry for a distraction.

"That may change," I said. "I've had a talk with Black."

There was a heartbeat of silence, my teacher's name falling like a shroud on the previously light mood.

"Lord Black," Juniper insisted, breaking the silence.

I snorted into my cup and saw a few smiles bloom. I hesitated to call anything about the Hellhound girlish, but the way she got so coquettishly proper about Black came pretty close.

"I call him sir about once a year, that should be enough formality to meet the quota," I said. "Regardless, there's going to be changes in the Wasteland after we clean up the Sahelian mess."

Stillness hung in the air like fog, the fire crackling loudly around us. The quiet was pregnant with words none of us dared say.

"That sounds like murder talk," Archer cheerfully said. "Doesn't that sound like murder talk?"

"It does," Robber said, grinning hungrily in the dark. "And with official sanction, no less. That is going to be a *ride*."

Hakram cleared his throat.

"Enough blade-talk for he night," Adjutant announced. "War will still be looming tomorrow, but then we'll have to be sober."

"Cheers to that," I said, raising my cup.

"A toast," Ratface shouted. "To liquor, obtained by entirely legal means!"

"To victory, fickle bitch that she is," Aisha added just as loudly.

She handed her cup to Juniper long enough to pass the bottle to Pickler, never noticing that the orc poured half of it to the ground.

"To stabbing Diabolist in the face," Archer said. "Like, at least twice."

"To claiming her personal possessions afterwards," Masego contributed.

"If you keep that up, warlock's get, I'll have to adopt you into my tribe," Robber said, placing his hand over his heart.

"That's illegal, they'll have you killed," Pickler noted.

"Then I'll make my own tribe," Robber said.

"Also illegal, will also get you killed," Pickler replied without missing a beat.

"Boss," Robber said, turning to me, "you need to make your own tribe so I can abuse that power most sorely."

My brows rose.

"Congratulations, Special Tribune Robber," I ceremoniously said. "You are the first and only member of the Lesser Lesser Footrest Tribe, by my authority as Vicefuckingqueen of Callow."

"You said I'd go back to just lesser if I behaved," the goblin whined.

"Which you did not," Pickler said, sounding amused.

"Goblins," Juniper sighed, then raised her cup. "To the Fifteenth."

"Boring," Archer catcalled from the side, obnoxiously drawing out the word.

"To making it this far," Kilian said, bringing up her cup before a squabble could erupt.

"To us," Hakram said, and with that sentimental finish we all drank.

The drinks kept flowing after that, and as the hours passed the stillness returned bearing staid tiredness instead of nervous anticipation. We did not speak of plans or war or the deaths to come, however close they may be. We talked like the friends I'd wished to have, back at the orphanage, and that I had found in this strange place along that winding path my life had taken. That the path also took me to dark and ugly places, I could not deny, but once in a while it led to golden nights like this as well – and they almost made up for the rest. When talk finally died down half my friends were asleep, Aisha draped over Juniper's side and softly snoring as the general fondly looked down at her. Hierophant was having a quiet conversation with Pickler as Robber interjected less than helpfully, Archer passed out over the mage's lap. For all that they bickered constantly, it had become plain for anyone to see how close the two of them were. He'd tightened her cloak around her shoulders, earlier, gentle in a way I'd never Masego be with anything but books. I was gazing at the scene, something between happiness and contentment having found me, when Hakram nudged my rib. He inclined his head to the side and I followed the direction, finding Kilian worrying her lip. She rose when she noticed my gaze and I closed my eyes. An overdue conversation, this. I rose to my feet as well, clapping Adjutant on the shoulder, and offered the redhead my arm.

"Let's go for a walk," I whispered.

---

*nick012000*

>"Congratulations, Special Tribune Robber," I ceremoniously said. "You are the first and only member of the Lesser Lesser Footrest Tribe, by my authority as Vicefuckingqueen of Callow."



Why do I feel like this is a statement with consequences that will come back to bit her later?

*Ward*

It's the gun on the wall.

*naturalnuke*

Chekhov is that you?

*callmesteve*

And you have no idea how much I look forward to it.  
And who bets the Nauk gets a Name too?

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Because Robber is exactly the kind of person who'd keep that detail in mind in case it let him complain at senior officers better, and approximately the kind who'd find some way to use it to get his boss out of a pinch. Also because Catherine is sitting on permission to, IIRC, start a goblin tribe.

*JC*

Confirmation that Hye is alive. Nice.

Warlock's words are really interesting. Hopefully Catherine can (once again) subvert her way to victory before she is locked in to any one story or other. I wonder if her being tied down to the fae was a ploy by the Wandering Bard, as if to shackle Black's legacy of stirring the narrative pot and to force it to obey convention.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Was Ranger's status of "still alive" in doubt somehow? I don't remember there being a question about it

*Ninith settler*

I mean, she did fight a God

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

And that was Tuesday for Ranger

*Gunslinger*

Umm wow, Warlock is scary as fuck, but Cat did well to call him on his hypocrisy. I wasn't entirely convinced about the reasons for his anger. Why is he still so sure Cat will kill Black? His own son transitioned without having to kill him after all.

The Killian talk is long overdue and Cat will have to own up to her own hypocrisy regarding the sacrifices.

Ohh and do vote for the Guide on topwebfiction <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>.

*Engineer*

Probably because to Warlock, it seems that Black is forcing the bloody succession story. He's still raw over Sabah's death and here he sees that his oldest and best friend is soon to die to. That would make anyone be a little on edge.

[taborask](#)

Maybe, but his hate for her seemed to be really personal – as if it was her fault. For example why did he threaten her over Masego's life? She's never given Warlock any reason to think she'd be a threat to Hierophant, it seems like there's a story going on that's forcing them into conflict over very tenuous reasons.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

It looks more like Papa Warlock gets defensive here since there's a good chance Masego will be killed if he hang out with Cat.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Warlock was acting completely irrationally here, and that doesn't make sense. Why would he lash out at a target like Cat? The catalyst for this is obviously Sabah's death, but that's not a REASON. There's something else, and I feel like we don't have enough information to understand. I hope this will be cleared up Monday

*Zach*

Squires succeeding Black Knights by killing them is apparently A Thing that almost always happens, so it's not entirely unreasonable for Warlock to view Cat as being the person who is very likely to murder Amadeus at some point.

*IDKWhoitis*

I think Warlock is angry at Cat for what she represents in the meta-narrative. She may not kill him with her own hands, but she is adding weight for the universe to kill Black.

Also, Warlock is in a very, very, agitated state. He's as sensitive and enraged as Black is, but doesn't have the cold machine like personality that Black has adopted following

Captain's death. Add that to the fact that Cat has a damned combative attitude, willing to argue with gods and monsters.

*Ward*

Because squire traditionally transforms into either black or white knight and since she isn't a hero she should become the new black. Traditionally being the key here.

[boballab](#)

His son didn't transition into the new Warlock, which would have meant the old Warlock had expired. By the rules of the Named, The Squire is fated to kill The Black Knight to become the new Black Knight, just like how Amadeus killed the previous Black Knight when he was the Squire.

Also in the scary as fuck scale Warlock doesn't even crack the Top 5 Catherine has faced and in a couple of cases beat.

1. An Angel that Catherine beat with her wits to be reborn.
2. The Summer Court including the Queen which are Demi Gods and in the Queens case basically a God, through wits and combat.
3. Hye, The Lady of the Lake, The Ranger. Of the Calamities she is far and away the most deadly and scariest and Cat for about 30 secs stood up to her and almost lost her head for it. Hye could kill Warlock and it wouldn't be that much of a challenge to her after fighting immortal being such as the Undead King and the Courts.
4. The Empress. She doesn't seem that scary but keep in mind if she wanted Warlock dead, he would probably be dead and he would never see it coming. For all of his intelligence the Warlock has a big blind spot when it comes to scheming and planning which is the Empresses wheelhouse. Also remember she knew what Cat was going to do even before Cat did, if Cat ever sits on the Praesi Throne it will be because Malicia plotted her own overthrow and picked her.
5. Black himself. There was and is a reason that Black lead the Calamities even though his actual power was less than the other four, Without him all but Hye would have died long ago because they would fall back into the rut their Name and Roles provide to them. If Warlock thinks to go after Cat, more than likely Black will have Assassin kill him because he will not let Warlock ruin the goal of getting Cat prepared for Procer, especially since doing so would mean Captians death would have been in vain.

Right now Warlock is letting his emotions run away with him and start righting checks his ass can't cash, if he doesn't watch out the last thing he will see before he dies is Cat standing over him sword in hand and him realizing just how she is making the gods bow down.

*Ben*

Amadeus didn't kill the previous Black Knight, and I don't think the Squire is fated to kill either of the knights—but she is fated to succeed them, so I guess her existence is like a constant tug on the narrative towards a story where one of the knights dies, and no one in the story right now sees that being the White Knight.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Except... The old Black Knight was dead when Black claimed Squire.

*Engineer*

All points are valid save 5. I don't think Assassin would agree to that. He'd be putting down a fellow member of his band.

More likely Black would get Hye to do the job. Of all the Calamities she strikes me as the one who would and could do that relatively easily.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

No, Cat is absolutely NOT fated to kill the Black Knight. Black took pains to ensure this in book one. He explains it explicitly not long after they meet

*ArkhCthuul*

I agree.

But he still came across really scary, just not on the Cat scale 😊

*Anastas*

He's so sure Cat will kill Black because she WILL, directly or indirectly. That's the way the Story goes. Our wide-eyed Squire is discovered by their White/Black Knight, (s)he trains under him/her, grows to love (for Heroes)/hate (for Villains) their mentor, then the Knight gets killed by a Villain (heroes) or by the Squire him/herself, thus providing the motivation to step up to the plate and continue their master's work.

True, Cat probably isn't going to kill Black herself, but there IS a climactic battle approaching right as the beloved mentor approaches, which is the perfect time for Fate to cause some confusion or a dramatic twist that ends with Black's blood on her blade, and even if they manage to avoid that, that just means Fate gets to switch to the lesser-used but still possible

tracks of the Black Knight being killed by someone else, or even old age or a sufficiently dramatic magic disease or curse.

Point is, from the moment Black picked a Squire at the very least, Black started on the downswing of his arc, and with it his life. Now that he HAS a replacement, he must soon die and BE replaced, and I'm sure Warlock realizes that to some degree. So, at least in theory, Cat's death would slow Black's hourglass again, at least a little. Of course, villains don't live forever, successor or no, and Cat dying would surely make Black angry, but at this point I don't think Warlock cares. With Sabah's passing cutting through his accomplished-villain-arrogance and reminding him of the Calamities' ultimate mortality, and Black's death plainly on the horizon, all he wants is a little more time, no matter how much that might tangle up the Grand Plan they've been working over forty years for.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

See, you're working with the assumption that Warlock was acting rationally, in his own best interests. I don't see any reason to assume that. I'm afraid this is going to be a common theme in the rest of the comments for this chapter, so this comment is really for all the others that I'm not going to read as much as for you so don't take it personal 😊

*Fern*

As far as I can tell, it's less that Cat's gonna kill Black and more that Warlock is deathly afraid that she's not thinking about what flags she's placing in the story. The reason Bard got a win on Black in the first place could be traced to Cat, after all; Bard is a character in Cat's story, after all, I imagine she was fated to get a win to prove how serious of a threat she is. The fact that Black managed to severely wound White is probably the only reason only Captain died, and this went from a Pragmatic Evil Wins story to a Evil Always Reverts to Stupid Evil story.

Beyond that, I can see several ways how Cat's actions – if she isn't very careful – could lead to death flags being placed on Black and several members of her own Demesne. This plot thread could turn out very interesting indeed.

EE I'm really liking some of the character work you've been doing recently. Characters that are Allied but not Friendly to our protagonist add a lot of depth to this story, keep it up man.

*oldschoolvillain*

You're making us wait the long gap on THAT? Gah, it was a glorious chapter with some proper villain vs villain smacktalk, but Gah give me Killikatherine stat!

Anyhoo, just had to get that out of my system. The chat around the campfire was wonderful, as so many character building things are, but the real glory of this chapter was Katherine's . . . 'talk', with the Sovereign of the Red Skies. Even with all she's done, all the power she's gathered, even though she could probably meet Warlock blow for blow in a straight fight, she's still head and shoulders below the old school of villains and seeing that after so many chapters of her steamrolling one problem after another was great. Well done.

*PhDEevee*

He hates her because she is Black's successor, and for Evil succession always means death (see the quote atop the previous chapter). This is often the case for Good as well, but not always.

*danh3107*

OH BOY RELATIONSHIP TALKS

what we all need in our youth fiction novels.

The warlock scene was radical

*georgeoswalddannyson*

"An overdue conversation, this."

That's a bit of an understatement

*Engineer*

This chapter reminded me strongly of the kind of shit Monkey D. Luffy usually pulls in One Piece.

Excellent chapter, EE. One of the best.

*Big Brother*

I get the feeling Warlock is weaving a fail-safe into Nauk so that if Black dies, Nauk will use Cat's trust in him to try and kill her. That's what I'd do in that situation, were I an immensely powerful Named faced with losing a dear friend.

[boballab](#)

Good way to get Cat to kill him. Warlock is letting his grief and arrogance talk and not thinking because if he did he would not want to piss off the girl that made Demi-Gods and Gods do her bidding.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*Shadowxhunter*

Sniff... she came so far. I remember her first meeting with warlock. She couldn't even speak well. Now she was even ready to fight him to death.

Frnkly i don't want her to transition as the black knight. It doesn't suit her. Her raw power already surpassed all black knight ever born. Right now she is even stronger than black. And the way warlock acted show that she reached a level where even the calamity have to be wary of her.

*lostdeviljho*

"Her raw power already surpassed all black knight ever born."

That is a /bit/ of a big statement there. She's stronger than Amadeus, yeah, but the /traditional/ role of the Black Knight is to be the Empire's "big stick". Saying she's stronger than any Black Knight ever born is... well I don't want to say it's /the/ height of arrogance but it's eye the spot with intent, if you take my meaning.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Black said the previous Black Knight was able to topple towers with a flick of his wrist...

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

I keep wondering just what archetypes are available besides the black knight.

Warrior, Winter Knight, Strategist, Breaker (there are other breakers than the trickster), Captain, Gladiator. The problem is finding one that fits Cat's personality.

Come Woes, let us reason together on how to break this story  
...

That said, I'm glad she is going to resolve things with her lover.

So much in this, so much. No idea where it is going to go. Wish I did.

[LaNuup](#)

I am not sure that she is more powerful than any Black Knight. Black said that his predecessor could topple a tower with a single blow and that he himself is a weak villain powerwise.

I'm also not so sure that Cat could defeat Warlock. Maybe with her power as duchess she could possibly nearly match him powerwise, but he is not a brute force tool, but a highly experienced and intelligent wizzard, who almost certainly has a way to deal with powerfull fae or fae like opponents, if he knows their weaknesses.

*Letouriste*

Her soul, he would target her soul. her soul was already damaged after the run against the demon and now that seems there is an opening there since her winter evolution

*Bruce Chesborough*

The way Warlock acted? He acted like a Marine drillmaster faced with a skinhead nephew daring him to start something.

"I could wipe out this arrogant little shit in a heartbeat any number of ways, but my brother would be SO pissed... but what if it's worth all the bad feelings to keep him from having from having to deal with all the consequences of letting this worthless waste of space run free? Damnit, it's too close to call!"

*SomeKindOfName*

Full circle back to that earlier fireside interlude.

*Engineer*

New idea for Cat's next Name. WOG already said Grey Knight is out of question but what do you guys think of Catherine Foundling, the Other Knight?

*Vortex*

Personally her kit right now suggests to me the Winter Knight since so much of it is tangled with the fae.

That being said, I am still hoping for death knight. She had shown a remarkable affinity for necromancy (her mount, her mount in the last battle, and even her own body).

Plus it would be a great way for ErraticErrata to show more of the Dead Kingdom and the Dead King, which we only got to see once in Ranger's interlude. Death Knight ftw!

*Gingerbreasd\_man*

Still clinging to Warlord. I don't care if you're meant to be an Ork to get that Name, it's just way too appropriate. Winter Knight is a good contender for second favourite though.



## *Engineer*

Yeah, I'm with you on that all the way. Death Knight would be pretty badass and it would sidestep the Story of Cat killing Black to become his successor quite nicely. Since Nobody ever said that a Squire MUST become EITHER a Black or White Knight. The Squire must just become a Knight. And besides, I remember White accessing a Name called the Knight Errant, so Black and White Knights aren't the ONLY Knight Names. It's just the role/story that Cat is caught in right now seems to be railroading her to take Black's Name. Taking another Knight name will subvert that story.

And that kind of subversion is precisely what Cat is known for if she's willing to bear the consequences.

Thought: The Soul Construct breaks. Cat is totally consumed by her Fae powers. She dies. The Story between her and Black Breaks/concludes. She rises again, with the help of the Hierophant and takes the Name Death Knight. Hell Masego could probably even hijack Abua's ritual array to do this ala Dead King style.

Don't worry about weight. Her legion is large and her dying and rising again will solidify the notion in their minds that she is a Knight that not even Death can claim.

Black is no longer forced to die and he has a chance to live happily ever after with Ranger or something. Warlock no longer has to be The Sovereign of the Red Jackasses and Cat doesn't have to cross swords with Ranger. Or maybe she does, Rangers is kind of messed up in the head and Cat taking that Name would DEFINITELY make her a viable hunt.

Masego already brought her back once when he was just an Apprentice. Him being the Hierophant with intimate knowledge of Cat's soul would probably allow him to do a better and complete reconstruction.

Then when she's The Death Knight she could easily claim the Name Black Queen when she becomes ruler of Callow in truth, setting up Book 5 where the Dead King takes center stage and Triumphant returns to battle her.

Apologies for the Wall of text, but the ideas just kept flowing.

## *AshSlanabrezgov*

I don't like theme of Death. Catty is all about struggle and breaking, dying but mending. Death is stillness and rot. Cat is not.

She is closer to Nightmare if you excuse me my pun. I mean when Black Night fell over your eyes and a Beast is lurking in the dead Winter forest kind of nightmare.

By the way – she was given a name Black Queen by soldiers. I think folk tales and beliefs shape names – so maybe her new name would have not Knightish theme but Dread Queenish? Eh. Warlord or Brawler would suit her best though. Pity that first is orks only and Brawler is starting to feel not awesome enough.

*cburschka*

I know I already guessed the same thing with “Warlord”, but maybe it’s going to be related to her latest epithet (“Black Queen”).

(But another growing hypothesis is that she simply won’t transition at all. The sheer power and mileage she’s gotten out of Squire already show that she doesn’t really need it badly.)

*MetruX*

The problem here is that this is BORROWED power, the same thing Black always said to avoid. Sure, it’s part of her and she is the Last of Winter, but it can still be subverted. Unless she transitions into something that makes the Winter true part of her, she will have a glaring flaw to be exploited.

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

Warlord fits some of the flavor text in earlier posts that talk about this campaign being a seminal one in her career. She has a lot more battles to come.

Would also be fund.

*Engineer*

MetruX, she didn’t borrow the power; she earned it through the story she enacted with that Winter Duke to become the Duchess of Moonless Nights. According to the story she weaved the power is hers in truth and notice that all of the Summer Royals refer to her by her title. In their eyes she’s the Duchess through and through and now being the last Noble of Winter that consequently makes her a Princess. That power is hers. The only issue is her body is not capable of using the full power effectively without the frozen heart of the Winter King. Masego needs to get his ass in gear on that front.

[Tohron](#)

I'm thinking Catherine will just transition directly to Dread Empress. Catherine and Akua are almost certainly in a competition to decide the direction of the Dread Empire – and Akua is clearly aiming for Malicia's spot. That bit about Catherine hearing the "Girl Who Climbed the Tower" song in her head was a pretty clear indication of where she's headed eventually.

*Letouriste*

That's bit of a long shot. I don't expect her to give a shot at the tower before a few years...maybe just before the war with procer if malicia continue to prevent and slow the forming of that crusade

*Panic*

I really, REALLY hope they are not getting back together now. It would feel so cheap.

*Letouriste*

Why? They obviously still have feelings for each other;) I guess that will depend of how that next chapter will go. EE must have a lot of pressure on that, this conversation will not be easy to write right

*Sniggs44*

Ok, so a few things.

First, Cat needs to learn when to shut the fuck up. Seriously, it's gone way past "scrappy underdog facing down the man" and is now approaching "compulsive contrarian" territory. Warlock was obviously grieving, which means he wasn't thinking rationally. You don't play games with people when your carefully constructed mental model of them is so out of whack that you have no idea how they'll react. She didn't bravely face down a threat, she needlessly rolled some dice and got a 20. Stupid, stupid, pointless risk.

Also, Warlock is a special flavor of the classical psychopath, in that he has empathy for a few select people in the world and treats the rest like furniture. Cat doesn't fall into the first category, so she needs to be really fucking careful about how she approaches the guy who could disintegrate her with a gesture and then teleport away with no lasting consequences. Her puffing up when facing down the angel made sense, because it was necessary to get her in the right mindset to resist its mind control and win. Her mouthing off here only increased the odds that Warlock would snap and put that tiny bit of extra weight into the "Amadeus will forgive me" column. If the guy is searching for a reason to end you don't go out of your way to hand him one.

Second, now I'm worried that it may not be Black that goes off the rails due to Bard's SAN attack, but the rest of the Calamities once he bites it. If he's the only one they're loyal to what's guaranteeing their "good" behavior once he's gone?

### *Darkening*

It was mentioned during her meeting with the Winter King that she pretty literally can't help herself because of the way Names amplify personality traits, so her backing down in the face of a threat isn't really in the cards, even if it would be smart. As for the calamities going nuts, yeah, that's pretty likely. Captain's dead, so no vicious werewolf running around slaughtering people, but something needs to happen with Warlock, especially after this chapter. Ranger should probably get taken out too, not just because she'll probably take Black's death poorly, but because she's way too much an overpowered wild card in the story. Assassin and Scribe are more muted and less likely to cause mass death and destruction, but they might take it in their heads to kill off Catherine, I know seeing a second meeting between Assassin and Thief would be interesting.

### *Fulmi*

Can't we just focus on Masego and Archer, and the possibility of a cute romance born between them? You know, putting aside all the blood and the inevitable tragedies for a moment?

### *Keyen*

Man, when someone starts a conversation with "I struggle to find a reason to keep you alive", it's hard to stay civil. Not really Cat fault here.

### *Engineer*

Darkening and Keyen are right. Cat's Name has always been likened to a voracious Beast and her Winter title is described similarly. Both of these traits were already present in pre Name Cat and now having them amplified by A Name and a Fae Winter title (Fae are notorious for being almost UNABLE to change their Nature) all but ensures Cat holding her tongue is about as easy as water spontaneously flowing uphill. After she left the tent she even said that the fury she felt wasn't entirely her own.

Sniggs, your assessment is valid for a regular mook with no Name. But Cat is Named and they shape Creation through their will. Look at Ranger, would you say her behaviour is any way sane? Look at Triumphant too, would you also say that her behavior is sane? Look at the successes those two have under

their belt. In this world, like in One Piece, willpower is key to accomplishing great things and Cat has that in spades.

And her assessment of Warlock was correct. He's powerful, but he's human, not a capital God. Weight is on Cat's side in that fight, the Calamities' time on the Stage is nearing its conclusion. It's time for them to step down.

*MetruX*

The part about her mouthing off has been explained nicely by the others, so i'll just adress the statement of disintegrating her with a gesture. First things first, she's WAY more powerfull than before, more powerfull than any Squire has a right to be, and the story is on her side. If things last a while, which they would, given the low difference in raw power, Black would come, and we all already know which side he'd take. So, yeah, in a direct one on one fight Warlock is likely to kill her, not only defeat, but not fast and this would never be a straight and direct one on one, even the others of Cat's band could come and get involved, I just don't know if Masego would side with his father or Cat, especially because Archer would be with Cat... If this fight broke out, alot of common people would die in the fight, and Akua would probably see, but it would end with Warlock dead, not her.

*cburschka*

Must not start shipping...

*Gunslinger*

This chapter was actually confirmation of two ships for me.

*unoriginal*

It's too late, wayyyyy too late. The S.S. Junisha has been sailing since book 1.

I mean I haven't been the only shipping them right?

Right?

[erraticerrata](#)

At least one my friends does, so you're definitely not alone.

*Taichi22*

Lemme just say, OTP of Archer and Hierophant.  
Too cute yo.

*Thea*

I simply love Last Supper-style scenes like this. Last Barbecue. Whatever. So beautiful and strong. The next arc is going to be brutal, isn't it?

By the way... Doesn't Cat have a nice, little pattern of three going with the Warlock? First time she couldn't look him in the eyes. This time they parted equally exchanging threats. Next time... Time for Cat to Break Warlock in some manner?

*Engineer*

Holy shit you're right.

And it fits too with the theme that the Calamities are on the way out too.

Still all that can be avoided if Cat simply takes another Knight Name. Doesn't succeed Black rather sidesteps and surpasses him. That's the key to resolving this mess with all parties concerned more or less happy.

[HappyNap](#)

It would fit... except that, theres been signs that you can't be in more than one "pattern" at a time, and it was hinted at that Kat is in some kind of pattern with the White Knight... so I don't think it works out

*Gunslinger*

@HappyNap she was in a pattern with both Akua and William at the same time

[Reveen](#)

It strikes me that Warlock really isn't that far off from the standard villain mold at all. He's a dangerous vindictive maniac who doesn't really care about the Empire on a practical level like Black does. The only thing distinguishing him from other old guard Praesi is having a bit more sense, not caring about politics, and being loyal to the ur-protagonist.

So considering that Black is planning to do away with that old order completely, Warlock might find that when the time comes he ends up the first to be purged.

*Engineer*

Black definitely wouldn't want to live anymore after he completed that plan. He'd be killing everyone he held dear to pave the way for Cat. Yeah, we saw how he was after Sabah died which was not entirely his own fault. Him having a direct hand in orchestrating the deaths of his friends would destroy the Black Knight completely. He'd be less than even a Monster after

that is concluded. There's simply no way he's NOT swinging from the rafters (if he doesn't get killed first) when all is said and done. He even said it himself, to prolong his existence after that would make him a crutch to Cat. That would be pretty fucking dark.

*Morgenstern*

It's been hinted at enough in Black's own inner monologues, to be sure... How many of his friends will he have to kill off to ensure his desired end comes around, indeed...

..unless, of course, Cat becomes the grain in the machinery and DOES find another way out 😊 I'm really, really hoping for this. Though I, too, somehow feel and have felt for quite some time, that Warlock should be on the list to go at least BEFORE she can find a way out (though I really, really hope she does and this is NOT a "mentor must get lost first", traditions-bullshit story in this aspect, after all; I like Black WAY too much – and as others have said here again: she is STILL not ready to be a replacement. Yeah, she's become more awesome. Doesn't quite nail it YET, at least, though – and frankly, I'm simply tired of this killing off the mentor bullshit, instead of finding their own way by OTHER means, e.g. by DISAGREEING with the mentor BEFORE he finds some peaceful end after some happy-ever-after TIME at least, instead of dropping him in the middle of the story, because somehow that's how stories supposedly go. Drop dead, Bard. Fanclub Black wants to keep Black just as much as Cat does.. Let her succeed. Black Queen ftw!)

*Morgenstern*

Somehow it would feel kinda unexpected-but-unexpectedly-appropriate to me, if Wekesa would find himself doing some "throwing HIMSELF in front of his friend to save him from certain death"-move instead of the traditional "that is only for heroes, villains only ever get revenge"... this is supposed to be an UNtraditional story, right? 😊 Let him do something less than expected, while still fitting in character.. do the same for other plots that everyone seems to feel-know "have to be" simply because "that's how stories usually go, can't be any other way"... Pretty please? -o.0'



*MetruX*

I... Think Black won't want to stay, even if she does sidestep and no one else dies. He's broken and sacrificed too much for the objective, after this is done, he will have nothing to live for. He has, already, nothing else to live for, even his "family", counting the Calamities, Malicia and Cat, are all

things he needed to make it happen. If he does survive until the end, he will end up a depressed philosophical machine, cold and bare on the inside. I'd rather see him die than live like that...

*Mike E.*

I feel bad for those two guards...knowing what we know from 1-7 about how violent two Named can be, they probably needed a change of underwear after hearing Cat and Warlock threatening each other.

""The last time they had a spar without holding back, Captain knocked down a tower and Lord Black threw a whole statue at her," he informed me cheerfully. "Hilarious at the time, of course, but the local baron was less than pleased.""

*Shoddi*

"To stabbing Diabolist in the face," Archer said. "Like, at least twice."

"To claiming her personal possessions afterwards," Masego contributed.

Hahaha!! That's the most hilariously formal rendition of "Kill Them, Take Their Stuff" I've seen. How did Robber miss that?

*Engineer*

He didn't. Remember he offered Hierophant a spot in his tribe right after that. Or at least said if Masego continued on that trend he would. He didn't miss it.

[Hakurei06](#)  
[Cold Cyberia](#)

Holy shit, this seems bang on right. Either she gets stabbed next chapter or the info Killian is leaking will lead to her downfall. I really want to know the rest of the song now.

*Green I Guess*

I think that Killian is the traitor in the camp. Akua could have tempted her after she broke up with Cat and Killian was refused (by Cat) her ascension. Akua has all sorts of nasty old sorcery secrets she could have given Killian in order to have the legion mage send information unnoticed. It seemed a little coincidental that we were reminded this chapter about all those old Praesi magic hoards again, to me at least.

*Addicted*

ROBBER!!!!!!  
Your back!!!!



Gods and Devils be praised!!  
I miss that murdering stealing lovable scamp.

*Blue*

Black is currently the thing keeping monstrosities like Warlock in check. And Warlock is a monster. He takes people apart just to figure out how they work and Heirophant is no less of a psychopath just colder. They are evil in the true sense with nothing noble driving their actions. Cat at least has the motivation to free Callow behind what she is doing. What Cat is going to have to come to terms with is how to keep them in check. She's ok to kill Warlock since she can see him for the monster he is, without it being clouded by being his friend like she is with Hierophant.

And that brings us to Killian. I wonder if Cat is finally seeing her hypocrisy when it comes to how she reacted with Killian. Maybe she didn't like the mirror being held up to show that she loves people who are capable of doing terrible things to make them more powerful. Some part of Cat does not like being reminded that she is the villain and she took it all out in Killian. They can get past this but Cat will need to start treating Killian like an equal, or maybe Killian can make her see her as such. I mean who's to say that Summers mantle is not available for someone to step up to take.

*clmineith*

Squire could become the Black Queen, as a Name.  
But maybe it's Black who will get a new Name. He could become Warlock, for example.

*nigeltheoutlaw*

As much as I love some good violence and story, you seriously do dialogue and companionship very well. I'd love to see more chapters like this (especially with Robber) even if it means less action.

Good shit as always, you're in my top three web serials around.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

First,  
I know I'm bucking the consensus here. Yet I really want Cat and Killian to reconcile. What Killian lacked was the screen time and the circumstances to grant her the kind of depth we see in the other members of Cat's inner circle. (Which by no means are all Named. Juniper, Aisha, Ratface, Robber and Pickler are all significant to Cat as well.)

Cat recognizing the hypocrisy in her refusal of Killian's need would be a great start. I'd love to see Cat showing her support,

despite her distaste, by doing the manual scut-work to set up Masego's ritual for Killian. That all this ruminating on death and mortality, and her regrets about Nauk and the Gallowborne being where they could get hurt and exterminated respectively due to her call has allowed Cat to recognize that what she potentially has with Killian shouldn't be discarded because of a principle she already tramples on regularly. I think if we get to see more of Killian in-depth, in addition to her relevance being increased due to an increase in her power, perhaps Killian might win over some of her detractors here.

Second, as other have said, Cat ruminated on the fact that just like Masego's obsession with accuracy was amplified by his being Named, Cat's inability to hold her tongue even when common sense dictates is her amplified behavior...all the way back during her endowment as a Duchess of Winter.

Third, for those in the camp of "Squire is enough of a Name for Cat" I say: Masego's patch-job on Cat's soul is fairly flimsy. Not only is that patch-job vulnerable to external attack (And as we saw when Summer assaulted Liesse, Diabolist's Aspects aren't so much Devil/Demon-focused, as focused on entities and powers foreign to Creation. Diabolist has just the kind of Name to give her the tools to turn Cat's Winter power against her. Why do you think she sacrificed a mage minion as a spy during her attempted parley with Cat to get an in-person read on Cat's Fae Power Level. Better than almost anyone else, Akua is likely to understand the implications of a mortal being invested with X, Y or Z amount of Fae Power.)

So there's the glaring external attack probability. Masego ALSO said, however, that Cat's very use of her power now that she's the Last of Winter is breaking down his patch-job...and any major uses of that power accelerates the erosion of his patching. Warlock wasn't just blowing smoke. He's an expert in soul architecture and BOUNDARIES. Look at the precision assessment of his Watch-member prisoner via the blood-ritual. That was without even knowing anything substantive about the source of the Watch's power. The Fae he understands far, far better.

Cat is going to need to make a metaphysical change of some sort. Warlock's assessment that her foundations are shaking isn't empty. Masego constructing the array he said would take months of tinkering to manage to more comprehensively shore up Cat's soul isn't really a viable alternative. She'd essentially be undergoing months of in-patient care. Even if the actual array wouldn't take months to implement, Cat would almost certainly have to be present for Masego to continually study as he worked out how to create this lasting, one-of-a-kind long-term working.

Even if Cat's dance card wasn't absolutely full to the brim with aiding Black with the Praes purge and getting it ready to beat

back the Crusade, she has the ongoing stability of Callow to contend with. Then coming up and enacting those measures she considers necessary to create as insurance for Callow's survival should Praes be defeated in the Crusade. Followed by actually helping fight against the Crusade for however long it lasts. Plus whatever else the "Uncivil War\*S\*" entail. Even if it weren't for all that, Masego said even if he did all that work, she'd still be vulnerable, because her Winter power is no longer INTRINSIC.

Either the Winter Power has to go (I think that ship has sailed. It seems from the text bound up in more than one way with the Beast of her Name)...or something has to happen to make that power once more Intrinsic to Cat. Name mechanics are the only thing that would allow such a radical integration IMHO.

I've always felt the Winter Knight talk misses the mark...but I think it's correct in its implications that a Name Change is necessary to incorporate what Cat's become into something more naturally her. Something that say, fuses the shadow-stuff of Squire with that Winter ice.

A lateral transition from the assume White Knight/Black Knight inevitability does seem the only option.

Apologies for the text wall. Hope it didn't trigger a tl;dr.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

This is a very good comment, thanks for writing it! I think you have a solid grasp on the magic system in play here. I especially like your portratal of the powers of Warlock and Diabolist, as being focused on boundaries and noncreational powers respectively (I know noncreational isn't right word, but I haven't read the pigdragon chapter where Masego explains this stuff in a long time).

I'm going to have to review that chapter as well as the one with Warlock and the watch member you cite.

I'm just curious, but how long have you been following the story? I have a theory that the later you get here (ie, the more chapters you get to binge at once), the more likely you are to understand it deeply. A little time for reflection is good, but too much time and you're going to start talking yourself into nonsense. I know I have before. xD

### [George Smith](#)

Anyone else think cat will kill black because diabolist magic ward isn't for cat but for black and it controls minds. Random thought at 3 am on a workday. That's how good a story this is.

*John Galt*

Typo:

He'd tightened her cloak around her shoulders, earlier, gentle in a way I'd never [seen] Masego be with anything but books.

*Blinks*

Best part of that for me was those two soldiers outside the tent.

I mean, if there was anywhere they'd less likely want to be at that moment...

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

@Warren Peace NFL Report:

Glad you liked it, and TY for your kind words 😊 Umm...I'd say I've been here since around the time when Cat was discovering her Name wasn't working right after she'd joined the War College (because it'd been damaged by her allowing William to escape in Summerholm)...so, quite awhile.

On the other hand, I'm part of an active discussion on at least two forums where people discuss the Guide in-depth. (The better, but less active, discussion is definitely on Spacebattles.) So, I spend a lot of time analyzing and re-reviewing Guide chapters to connect the dots.

I really, truly believe the big takeaway from everything going on is that the Cat-as-semi-permanent Squire" theory has been shot all to hell with her Winter power turning non-Intrinsic ever since she a) Got her real heart back, but more because b) The fae are now Swinter instead of Summer/Winter.

So long as she's got that glaring "My soul architecture is a house of cards, waiting for either the appropriate practitioner to reach in and wreck it, or a sufficiently dire situation causes me to draw so deeply on my Winter powers I shatter Masego's patch-job" weakness...Cat is profoundly unfit to move beyond the Diabolist fight.

Truthfully, I see the things Warlock said as prophetic FOR the Diabolist fight. Her struggling with wards, being vulnerable to Diabolist because she's now "Other" etc etc.

If I was pinned down and forced to make a prediction, I'd say that the climax of her conflict with Akua is also likely to be where the Name Mechanics change for Cat...to address this Winter Vulnerability that's been mentioned directly about twelve times now.

*Jason Ipswitch*

Delurking to share my theory on what could happen:

Diabolist uses Claim on Cat's winter power. Cat responds by Taking Claim, then Cat using Claim on herself to ascend to her new Name.

[vuthuha912](#)

For your question, Cat, Black loves Warlock because he has no one left in his family. Wasteland is not overflowing with decent people during the time Black rise up. Warlock and Black might start out as only using each other then shenanigans happen and they become good friends. See how useful it is to have Masego with you, Black needs Warlock to even attempt to change his country. Warlock might even be normal at the beginning, he just changes afterward. Black's family is dead, he only has the Calamities and Malicia left. That might push it from 'good friends' to 'brothers'.

The answer is in his name – Amadeus – the love of god. Love is a very important part of Amadeus. Love his country, his friends, and Cat. He didn't intend to love Cat when taking her on. Care for her and be nice so she will follow his plan. Yet, he does come to love her. She just grows on him. And she comes to love him back enough to think that he would never hurt her even at his worst. He is a very easy person to love. Amadeus received love from other more powerful people and he loves them back. It is so cheesy and sweet.

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## Chapter 57: Revolve

*"Men make swords, Heavens the sheath."*  
– Callowan saying

The moon was out in full, and though part of me still grew irritated at the sight of the pale orb I'd learned to ignore it. I'd wondered once or twice at why the Winter King had granted me the title of Duchess of Moonless Nights, when his court had such a close association with the same celestial sphere. I still remembered the dream that had followed the usurpation, doubted I would ever forget even a single detail of it, and in it it'd been Summer that wanted to break the moon. *Was that the intent from the beginning? To have it in my very mantle that I would seek to destroy you?* Now and then I had to wonder who had really played who, when I'd tangled with the Deadwood Crown. If my every desperate gambit had been foreseen by the immortal thing that now ruled the whole of Arcadia, turned to his purposes. I could have lingered on that line of thought, and wanted to, but the feel of

Kilian's arm under mine was a reminder of why I'd begun this walk. I would not suffer cowardice from myself, not even in this.

Southern Callow took well to autumn, even at night. Though the shades of orange and gold some godly brush had painted across fields and trees could not be glimpsed after dark, there was an undercurrent of serenity to the country. Of peace, more than anywhere else in my homeland, for these parts had seen less of war than any of the rest. The last two years had been eager in attempting to make up that disparity, though even the worst of Summer was no match for centuries of Praesi invasion. I caught myself sidestepping the heart of this again, and clenched my fingers. The two of us moved in silence, away from the bonfire and closer to a small pond bordering wheat fields. The muddy banks were covered with footsteps from the soldiers who'd come here to fill canteens and barrels, but at this time of the night we were entirely alone. *Except for the frogs*, I thought, sharp ears catching echo of their song. We found a pair of carved stones by the shore, polished by what must have been decades of wind and rain, and sat there without a word.

The wind brushed the reeds ahead of us, and as I watched them I realized I had no idea what to say. A glance at Kilian told me her face was hesitant as well, though the reasons for it were her own. Some part of me thought there should be a physical weight to this, given how serious it all felt, but I found none on my shoulders. Something like a quiet laugh escaped my lips. *Look at us, grim-faced as if the fate of the world rests in the balance of this conversation. Like this isn't two girls of not even twenty summers settling a dispute of absolutely no import to Creation.*

"Would you care to share the jest?" Kilian asked.

For a heartbeat I'd expected her to take my laugh as mockery, but that had been doing her disservice. She was not offended, merely curious. She'd never been the prickly one between us.

"I was considering matters of perspective," I said.

I finally gave in to the urge I'd avoided all night and looked at her properly. She'd trimmed her hair. Last time we'd spoken it had been at the edge of what regulations allowed, but now it was in a clean pixie cut like when we'd first met. She was still, I thought, heartbreakingly lovely. Porcelain and flame framed hazelnut eyes, and the body I knew so intimately radiated a warmth I knew was completely imagined. Winter had seen to that. The mantle had done a great deal more, though. I'd been months since I needed to look at her to know she was there, ever aware of the measure of fae blood she carried in her veins, but as my power had grown so had that awareness. I was a Duchess, and she unsworn to any of the lords of the fae. There was a whisper in the back of my mind that spoke of mastery, of needing only to

reach out and *will* it for her to kneel at my feet. The disgust that welled up in me at that spoiled what enjoyment I'd had of the peace and quiet.

"Great things," Kilian said, "are made up of myriad smaller ones. I do not think import and magnitude necessarily walk hand in hand."

A few sentences traded, and what I saw was our relationship made plain. I stepped away from it, making mixture of retreat and reason, while she stepped forward to bridge the gap at the cost of making herself the vulnerable one. There was, perhaps, expectation I would follow suit. But never demand. Time and distance had allowed me to see the boundaries we'd set more clearly, and the shred of shame I felt over them was well-deserved. There had never been anything equal about this, in what was given or received. The question that had hung in the air for the last few months was whether or not something that had never been balanced could be made so. Speaking with Hakram had broadened my outlook, but little else. I bared the blade first because in the end that was my nature, wasn't it?

"Were you happy?" I asked. "Before."

The redhead smiled, somewhat ruefully.

"You have a trick to tell when people lie, don't you?" she said. "That does seem a mite unfair, going into this conversation."

I looked away, gazing at the pond and the small ripple I could see a fish making as it swam.

"Of all the things that are unfair in this," I said, "I would consider that a lesser measure."

She sighed.

"The point of this," she said, "was never for you to take lash to your back like an Ashuran supplicant. What has blame ever done to mend the world?"

"Ignoring fault is how tyrants are made," I said.

"You are hardly that, Catherine," she said, and without looking I felt her hand rise.

It hesitated, then went down again. I was uncertain whether or not to be glad.

"I was," Kilian finally said. "Sometimes. Others not. We had our conversation because I feared one side would grow at the expense of the other."

It had been kind of her to phrase it so delicately but the meaning was clear enough. Whatever had been good about it, for her, had been giving way to the bad. And I'd hardly noticed, my mind on a hundred other matters. The thing was, I did not have it in me to apologize for that. I wasn't even sure she wanted me to. At the end of the day, my life didn't come first. Neither did the people I shared it with. The lines I was willing to cross to ensure both of those were preserved had only grown in number, but that part of the matter remained unchanged. *Because there's a difference between important and important to me.*

"You did most the talking, last time," I said. "So I'll get the wheel moving tonight."

I itched to pick up a stone and toss it into the pond, anything to break the damned stillness that smothered the air around us, but I'd done quite enough running for the night.

"It was hypocritical of me to hold you up to standards that I break myself," I admitted. "Standards I don't even hold up everyone close to me to."

Kilian brushed back her bangs, face wearing an expression I could not quite read.

"You thought well of me," she said. "And so you thought I kept to the same principles as you. That's not a crime, Catherine. It was just..."

"Presumptuous?" I suggested, a mirthless smile stretching my lips. "I placed expectations on you, then grew angry when you didn't meet them. That's on my head and no one else's."

Ferreting out exactly why I'd had those in the first place had been more delicate, the kind of introspection I was always reluctant to delve in. It hadn't been that I cared for her, or at least not just that, because I cared for other people too. If Masego had spoken of a ritual fuelled by human sacrifice, would I have been angry? Yes, absolutely. But it would not have felt like a betrayal, the way it had with Kilian.

"I used you," I said, tongue stumbling on the ugly word, "as a refuge. From all the dark shit that goes on in my life. And that meant I wanted you to keep your hands clean regardless of what you actually want. Or need."

I felt her eyes lingering on me but did not meet them.

"I hadn't thought you would actually admit that," she said.

The faint surprise in her voice was probably the deepest cut she could have made, because she hadn't meant it to be one at all.



"You once told me one of my virtues is recognizing when I'm wrong," I said. "It's fallen a bit to the wayside, lately, but it's not gone."

I'd made a lot mistakes, in the last two years. Won great victories too, but one did not excuse the other. I'd make more, because I had talents but also flaws and no matter what Warlock said in the end I was only human. But at least I could stop making them out of wilful ignorance. It wasn't as much as I wished it could be. But it was what I could do. Power alone was never enough.

"I was not blameless, if we have to speak of it that way," she said. "We did not have a conversation, last time. I'd made the decision before we ever spoke, and that was unfair to you."

I nodded slowly. Silence followed, until I pushed forward.

"So what do you want, Kilian?" I asked quietly.

A lot could have been avoided, I thought, by asking that question a few years ago.

"Catherine, *look at me*," she hissed.

Her emotions were roiling. I could feel that with my sense that wasn't quite a sense. But it was in her voice I read the anger, and it surprised me enough I obeyed. She was, I realized, genuinely furious.

"Don't do you fucking do this," she said.

Irritation flared up.

"Do what?" I bit out, exasperated. "Amends? Gods, Kilian, I'm *trying*. What more do you want?"

Her cheeks were flushed red, and for a moment I felt like kissing her. It passed.

"You're not trying," she said. "You're treating me like someone you have to bind to you. I'm not Hakram, Cat. Or Aisha. I *know* you. And this is what you do when you bring someone into the fold. You're acting like I'm the enemy, not the girl who shared your godsdamned bed for two years."

"I know a lot less about that girl than I thought I did," I flatly replied. "I'm-"

I bit down on my tongue, took a deep breath.

"No," Kilian said, eyes hard. "We're not doing it like this. Like I'm a horse you have to soothe or a hound you have to feed. I'm

not interested in the Squire, Cat. She has no place in this conversation."

"I don't know what you want from me, Kilian" I hissed. "I just tried asking and you bit my fucking head off."

She met my gaze, the demand that I not look away laying bare.

"Do you really need that badly to be in control, even for this?" she asked. "Gods Below, Cat, there's no one else here. Would it cost you that much to allow yourself to be a person for an hour?"

"Yes," I said, and I was surprised by the fury in my own voice. "Because people *break*. People have limits. I can't have that anymore, Kilian, not when I'm making pacts with the Empress and planning wars with Black. *Legends don't blink*, and if I'm anything less than that we are *fucked*. Because they're stronger and they have decades on me and Weeping Heavens, this entire Empire is a house of cards and everybody's tugging at it. I am in over my head, I always was, and it is *this* close to catching up with me and everyone I've dragged into this."

The only sound in the silence that followed was my panting breath, paired with the unpleasant realization I'd begun to speak furious and ended up pleading. I passed a hand through my hair, exhausted in a way my body no longer allowed me to be.

"I can't do this, Kilian," I whispered. "There are no good choices anymore, just a spread with different shades of horror that I'm forced to pick from. Every time I think it's coming together another thing drops and I have to become a little worse to deal with it. By the time I finish what I set out to do, I'll be more poisonous than what I wanted to break. And I can't back out because the alternative is *every single one of you dead*. And you know what's the part that actually grieves me? I did this. I got us here in this mess, and I would do it again. Because this is bigger than me or you or the others, and if that's not ritual sacrifice by another name then I don't know what is."

All hail the Black Queen, I thought bitterly. I'd already put thousands to the sword to get here, what were a few thousand more for the pile? Blood was the grease in the wheels of Creation, and whose it was they cared not. Kilian reached over and slid her fingers through mine. I let her, though I knew I'd regret it.

"You are not alone," she said.

Of course I was. *Because at the end of the day I have the power, I have the authority, and no amount of love can fit two people on a single throne*. I parted our hands and rose to my feet, brushing off my knees.

"Your ritual," I said.

"Tonight doesn't have to be about that," Kilian said.

"It already is," I replied steadily. "I have no grounds, as either the Squire or the Vicequeen of Callow, to tell you not to do it."

The redhead frowned.

"And yet you still find the very notion repulsive," she said.

"This isn't about me," I said. "That was the mistake from the start, thinking that it was. I will, one day, grind that practice into nonexistence. Because it offends me, because it is a blight on Creation and the way of thinking it spawns is my enemy. But until then, it is against no law or regulation. Do what you deem best."

Her face went blank.

"That sounds," she said, "like goodbye."

"I love you," I said. "I've never said it before, not like this, but I do. It didn't really sink in until I saw the amount of principles I was willing to break to keep you."

A shiver went through her frame.

"Is that supposed to make this better?" she said, voice raw.

"It was due, regardless," I said. "You were always the one that reached out. But this was about being equals, wasn't it? I don't think that means power, or titles, or authority. It's about neither of us being expected to bend our knees to the other's beliefs."

My hand rose, going for her cheek, but she shook her head.

"Don't," Kilian said. "Not if you're going to excise me out of your life. It would be crueller than just walking away."

"I'll still care for you," I said quietly. "That's not going away. We are friends."

The redhead smiled bitterly.

"You bloody fool," she said. "Do you really think *friends* is what I want from you? Getting just a part of someone after having had all of them can't be counted anything but a loss."

I almost took it back, right there and then. I could still do it, I thought. Salvage something out of this mess. But I didn't. I felt like weeping for what I was giving up on, but it'd been a long time since I'd been in tears and I wasn't sure I still could. My mantle and my Name woke, intertwined beyond separation,

and I could have shunted all this... tangle off into them. Let the cold clear it all away. But I was not yet so far gone, and so my hand came down instead. I did not say goodbye. It was too cheap and end for this. Instead I bowed my head, and left. Grace had never been my strength, and there'd been precious little of that on display tonight. I found my feet taking me back to camp instead of the bonfire, where I knew Hakram would be. I had no taste for the conversation that awaited there, would not for a long time. Instead I found a tent, still lit with magelight even at this hour, and let the wards wash over me as I entered. Black was seated on one of his rickety stools, his thin shirt for only armour as he poured over papers arrayed before him. He took one look at me, then let out a breath that was almost a sigh.

He leant back to claim a cup from his bedside and filled it with the wine at his table, pressing it into my hands. I could have sat across from him, but instead I went on his bed. I folded my knees against my chest and cradled the cup. I barely remembered what it had felt like, to be a child, but it must have been something like this. He did not speak, but neither did his eyes return to the papers.

"I met Ranger," I heard myself say. "She almost killed me, in Arcadia."

"So I've heard," Black said. "She is... difficult at the best of times."

It was not an apology, nor had I expected one. The Black Knight did not apologize for himself, much less others.

"But you love her," I said.

He inclined his head in agreement.

"I have, on occasion, thought of it as a singular obsession," he said. "But perhaps that is merely as close to love as I can manage, given what I am. It is enough for the both of us."

"Why?" I asked. "Why do you love her?"

He smiled faintly.

"I have wondered the same for many years," he said. "I have loved – still love – others, but never quite in that manner. In the end, I think it is because she does not need me."

I drank from the cup, a bitter Wasteland red that lingered on the tongue. I was glad of it, in no mood for sweetness.

"Does it get easier?" I asked. "Carving away pieces?"

Pale green eyes met mine.

"Yes," he said.

It was a lie. We both knew that. But I loved him a little, for saying it anyway.

The last part I remembered of that night was my father's hands putting a blanket over me.

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### *Metalshop*

Oh shit. She thinks of him as her father now...  
He's doomed for sure.

### *sheer\_falacy*

Everyone thinks he's doomed, including himself. But a key part of this story is figuring out how to defeat the tropes – how to twist them, how to bring a different and contradictory trope into play, how to forge your own story without violating the overall story "rules". Black isn't even going to try to do that here – he's content with a couple more years. I wonder if Cat will figure out how to beat it.

### *Daniel*

He's done cause the story requires it. The story that we are reading requires the mentor to die so the student can progress like obi-one Kenobi

It's a step in the heroe's journey

### *stevenneiman*

I think he really is doomed. What he's about has never been breaking the stories, just twisting them in a way that allows him to get what he wants. The only story that doesn't end in a mentor figure like Black dying would be one in which he betrays Cat, or in which Cat betrays the cause to save him, neither of which would accomplish the things he's worked so hard and sacrificed so much for already. As a result, he's decided that in the long term he doesn't need to survive to get what he wants.

Besides, one thing that's always been a heroic ideal is that there comes a time for the old to exit the stage to make way for the young. It would be a fitting end for someone like him to steal death from the forces of Good and leave behind the agent of their ruin.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

It's one thing to save someone who feels like the forces arrayed against them are too overwhelming to defeat. It's another to save someone who's accepted that fate.

*Jeffery Wells*

The other key part of this story is that a Story always wins, in the end. That's how Cat usually wins now, by making a better story, and it's how Bard beat Black – she knew stories he didn't and manipulated them to damage him.

*TideofKhatanga*

I thought this situation was going to turn out okay, until that last line. This is most definitely not okay.

*danh3107*

At a loss of words again...

It's becoming common reading this, I think

*ArkhCthuul*

Indeed.

*Engineer*

Good. You're one step closer to becoming what you need to be, Squire.

*Stormblessed*

These last three chapters have been really good.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Where do you find the time to read, Kal? With Roshar in the state it is

*DNucleicA*

He used to have Shallan read to him, but now he doesn't even have that...

*Aeon*

Beautiful chapter, just like basically everything here. That talk went about how I was expecting it, but I'm still hoping for a happy end for the relationship. I like Killian... Thanks for the awesome update.

[Hakurei06](#)

This chapter hurts like a stab wound.  
I trusted you, Erratic.

### *Big Brother*

A stab wound from a scalpel to remove the shrapnel in your chest, maybe. This was one of the last steps Cat had to take before she's truly ready to move on to her next Name, in my opinion. Without her relationship with Killian holding her back, all that's left is Black dying. That'll do to Cat what Frieza killing Krillen did to Goku.

### *Engineer*

Super Saiyan Squire.

### *Big Brother*

Instead of physical energy, she'll project a massive blizzard infused with necromantic energy that raises the dead without any conscious effort on her part. And her hair will go bone white from the Necrotic Winter flowing from her.

### *Engineer*

Oh that will be a treat to see.

Nice idea for an omake.

### *therealgridlock*

I'm thinking perfect cell vs gohan, and black is the android.

"I'd say he was in a better place, but we all know he never had a soul"

\*Unmei no hi begins\*

"...wait why am I hearing boss music?"

\*\*\*Unmei no hi intensifies\*\*\*

### *Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

### *soonnandnaanssoon*

True love's kiss ends with a knife..  
To cut all these damn onions I'm cutting now.

### *mumlock*

So it's you who's cutting onions 'round here, you... dammit.

## *Gunslinger*

Man, Cat's character development in this was fantastic, one that's been foreshadowed quite brilliantly across this book. I wish Cat wasn't so dramatic though, she could still be with Killian even if their dynamic changed.

## *Nguyen Hong Hai*

That feels like a half-measure cop-out though, being hardcore villain like Black means there's no room for everyone else.

## *unoriginal*

Uhhhh. Not really at all.

We've already had proof that the trope even evil has loved ones is in play here. Namely Akua and her Father and the quote from one of the Good Kings in another chapter. The most obvious example of the trope, however, is Black. Namely from his POV and even from the view of those around him we see that he does intensely care for his adopted pseudo-family.

Black as much as he denies feeling anything feels quite a bit. Hells, even wandering bard points this out to the Tyrant of Helinke.

## *letouriste*

oooooh snap.

the introspection on your characters is amazing:o how do you do this? how old are you? i can't go as deep no matter how i try...and you manage to post several times a week too. battle plan,extensive universe,sub plots everywhere,multiple characters and most have a lot of layers...layers really evolving with time:o seriously if you don't manage to get your work published i will scream.i read a lot of books of all kinds and most are not as interesting,even amongst big names.i'm serious

## *Engineer*

The man is Named. That's how. EE is... The Writer.

## *Nairne .01*

I really agree with your opinion. The degree of expression in EE's novel is on a whole another level. I sometimes wonder whether EE has multiple personalities writing this so he can switch between characters.

## *Keyen*

Hum, just though of something. You guys remember Cat lost her Name for a moment during Book 2 because the goblin usurped the



Name, right? Remember where it happened? In ... Liesse, "the place where you can bind or usurp a Name".

What if Black and/or Cat have no intention of the Black Knight dying, but instead Cat simply takes his Name from him? I'm pretty sure they can manage to do it without killing him (they can use Hierophant and/or Warlock to do it), and this way, he can avoid his doom, while staying alive so he can keep teaching Cat and still serve the Empire. Warlock is happy because Amadeus doesn't die, Amadeus is not the #1 target anymore and has no "FATE reason" to die anymore, and so on.

The only problem is to convince him, and I'm pretty sure they can manage if she talk to him about retirement after Sabah death.

### *Buya*

She has died in order to lose her Name. And has taken resurrection from Hashmalim. I don't think they can repeat that.

### *Mindsword*

Take that path and he dies. Creation has no room for ties when it comes to Names. Look back at the chapter where he buried his family and see that Cat would have to bury him before the year is out if he took that path.

There is a chance down that path though. Acquire a different Name for him and then do the swap. Perhaps the Warlord will survive where the Black Knight would have died... yet I feel his death is a part of this story now.

### *Keyen*

The problem is how Black's death is anticipated by everyone, characters and readers. I can't believe the only question is the how when the "are we sure it will be the case?" is still hanging.

If something like I described happens, it will be obviously going with Black faking his death (Since Cat will be the new Black Knight and nobody will be able to believe she got the position with Black still alive).

Concerning what he could be doing during his retirement -> Going to Refuge once he is done with teaching Cat.

### *Mental Mouse*

Note that all of that is derived from his own calculations, in fact it's inferred from a single fact: He didn't get a Pattern of Three with White Knight. From that narrow point he's leaped directly to "I'm gonna die, better finish

everything up real quick.". And he *thinks* he's realized his own arrogance, but he really has no idea... yet.

*Draeysine*

Yeah sorry but I don't see Black taking well to retirement. What would he do all day? Drink and talk to Cat. He'd be a liability without his name to give him power and would still be a target considering how much Cat doesn't want him to die. Perfect hostage material, and something he would rather avoid being a possibility. Just by existing he poses a threat to everybody regardless of name because of the information he holds and the people who would trade to save his life.

*edrey*

no, i think the story of black and cat will be after the purge in praes, i was thinking of cat repeating the resurretion trick, there is a serafin for sacrifice, the trick of the inmortals and lots of undeads, it should be possible, the problem is the calamities who are crazy

[Hakurei06](#)

If he was Good, then the mentor surrendering his mantle of power to pass on the torch would be valid, and there'd be no real narrative reason to kill him. He isn't, there's no rest for the wicked and giving up his power doesn't get rid of his enemies, just his ability to fend them off. That aside, everything we know about him says that he'd never give up the agency his name gives him even if it extended his lifespan, because it wouldn't be an even trade. He doesn't care about his lifespan but for the things he can achieve during it.

As for him acquiring a new name, Warlord is out. I'm led to believe it is an orc exclusive Name. It'd probably break something irreparably between him and Alaya to have Maddie take on the role of Chancellor and the same can be said of Dread Emperor for obvious reasons.

*MetruX*

A part not sayd by the others yet, can he even survive without his Name? Villains are effectively imortal, and he has being a Villains for a VERY long time... What would happen if he suddenly isn't Named anymore? Would he age in few moments what was stopped for decades? Would he start aging from them on? Would his body still function without the Name keeping it all together? Of course, we can be sure that he wouldn't like it, and probably would drive him a little crazy not having the machine anymore, but even his body may sufer from it.

*letouriste*

he would probably go completely insane.

asylum insane.

at this point most of his personality is tied to his name too deeply for his mind to survive an extraction in my opinion.

in the first place removing a Name kill the host. we know that since the battle of liesse n°1.

also, old age is ok so long you still have family/friends/ someone/a goal, here his only purpose without Name would be to observe. even his advices would not have much impact anymore because he would be out of the loop

*goliath1303*

I don't think he's that old though... The Conquest was 20 years ago and it's been implied that they started that war shortly after/ before getting their names. The catalyst for the civil war was Emperor Nefarious's death and the Conquest happened almost immediately after that.

*Thenre*

I've had relationships end pretty much this exact way (with less superpowers). Gods Below that stings. On the plus side pain is just fuel for making the world bend and break.

*alegio*

"my father's hands putting a blanket over me." Damn that just hit me in a place I didn't even know, and makes me feel even more bad about all the "Black is gonna die" vibes.

*nigeltheoutlaw*

I have to say, this is consistently one of the best Web novels I have ever had the pleasure of reading. On par with worm even. Keep it up.

*letouriste*

i never understood why worm is considered the best^^ even just looking to topwebfiction contestants, mother of learning is better.

that's not the same kind of story though and the writing style is practically opposed, so i guess this is debatable.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Cat's already made the choice that SHE'S fucked, instead of the people around her. If your thought processes are so far gone down the paths of control that thoughts like "No amount of love in the world can make two people fit on one throne" are coming to you when you're barely out of your twenties... Cat is absolutely, 100% right. By the time she accomplishes what she's set out to

accomplish, she'll be more evil and toxic than anything presently in Creation.

The powerful have been making unequal power-dynamic relationships work for THOUSANDS of years. Madame Pompadour as the Uncrowned Queen of France. Nothing but the King's mistress..whom he loved.

Elizabeth I and Raleigh (admittedly quite a bit bumpier, but the relationship had stamina).

Hell, even Genghis Khan had a favored wife, who by the laws of his people wasn't as valuable as a prize mare once her womb punched out some sons for him.

Cat wasn't even able to take in the fact that Killian absolutely, 110% does-not-give-a-shit about the power imbalance between them.

I have GRAVE fears for Cat, so long as she continues grasping this "I need to be the Legend 24/7" mindset. Even Malicia takes time off just to be Alaya with Amadeus.

Name powers or not...nothing that began as a human being can sustain that sort of drive each and every moment of each and every day. Most days, sure...but there has to be time (Admittedly in the heart of your power, where you can trust to your defenses to guard you while you let your hair down) to just take deep breaths and be a human being.

Otherwise the Name becomes a Noose. Slowly strangling everything out of you, until you don't even care whether you win or lose anymore.

*Sniggs44*

I agree with the general thrust of this post. Cat's behavior in this chapter seemed wrong headed. She kind of arbitrarily went from "self sacrificing" to "self flagellating".

Taking steps towards turning herself into an emotionless robot a la Black is just one (bad) possibility when it comes to becoming someone who can accomplish her goals. Another possibility is to be, you know, a well-adjusted human being whose values align with said goals. And if this turns out to be impossible, maybe take it as a warning that your goals are the things that need adjusting.

Yeah we can theorize about how the whole magical aspect plays into things, but without any solid proof one way or another it seems like her maintaining a balanced, healthy psyche would be the best way to go. Since that's generally the best way to go in pretty much any other endeavor, tbh.

That's why the "hard (wo)men making hard decisions" trope is such nonsense, because those two things aren't necessarily linked at all. She doesn't need to become a sociopath in order to be capable of making difficult decisions. You can totally cultivate a mental state that allows for, for example, being a general that regularly sends troops to their deaths while still being a morally/mentally good person. Just take the time to ensure you're doing the right thing and then align your values accordingly. It may be tough, but correcting your way of thinking usually is.

If she has niggling doubts about what she's doing, she needs to confront those thoughts and brainstorm on them, not paper them over with half measures and nonthinking. Her ditching Killian strikes me as a step in the complete wrong direction: she's become so used to feeling like crap about what she's doing that she's come to believe that it's the correct mind state someone in her position should maintain. She's trained herself to pursue being unhappy/lonely, because she falsely equates it with being effective.

Her entire outlook is skewed and frankly quite toxic, but I guess that's to be expected with this universe's dubious parental figures and lack of therapists. Still, she should really work on adjusting her outlook/though processes before resorting to this "peel away the weaknesses rahrrr" penitence stuff. (And also maybe ask for advice, since she's barely out of her teenage years. There have to be some leaders out there who have learned to manage their work/life balance.)

### *Keyen*

It's obvious she is heading to a breaking point sooner or later. But I think it's perfectly anticipated by EE.

The said breaking point will be a renewal, either to a more neutral Role, or at least, she will manage to let go.

Somehow, I think Cat is very similar to Rand (from WoT). He think he has to be hard, unbreakable, unbendable, and it nearly destroy him in the end. Funny thing, it got solved by nearly killing his father (if you get what I mean :D)

### *MetruX*

I actually think this just wouldn't work, not while she is a Villain. She employs morals and ways fo heroes, yes, but in the end her center is that of a Villain, ust what Black saw right there at the beggining: Heroes change for a better world, Villains change the world for a better view. She won't change her objectives, no matter how far she has to go, because that is what binds her to her mantle of Villain. If/ when she transitions to a more Neutral Name, then she can do

this, and I really think she will, unless this is, in the end, a tragedy =X

### Reveen

It's almost like having a quasi-fascist meat robot for a father figure would fuck someone up. Who'da thunk it.

### Cold Cyberia

I don't think real life examples are applicable in this case – especially if you just list the names like that. It's one thing to have a confidant and a lover when you're at the height of your power and another altogether when you're a small fish in a very big pond.

Cat's main concern is as follows: she's much weaker than all of her enemies (the nobility, Malicia, Akua – the establishment basically) so she can't afford to have any extra weaknesses, which is what Kilian would amount to. I agree that overall the view is self destructive but it's also right – Kilian is exactly the sort of leverage Malicia would use. Cat needs to be more than she is if she wants to change the world, at least temporarily.

You don't climb the Tower by smelling daisies – you do it by becoming the scariest monster there is.

### *usernamesbco*

I forget exactly where, but way back Cat admitted that she didn't see herself living more than two more decades. So she plans to be dead before she's forty.

### *Arbitrary screaming*

Thanks for the chapter! \*sniff\* good day for the hard feels i guess.

### Adrian

I have no idea how but i bet Cat will find some middle ground to save him, like sure his role will be over but instead of dying he will retire or something and get a "happy" ending along with Ranger.

PD: I say happy because i really doubt it will be a normal happy with these 2 crazy bastards xD

### *Nobody*

Is it just me who wants Cat and Archer together? 😊  
Archer is way better than Killian...

*Keyen*

The ship with Hierophant has already sailed, sorry.

*Big Brother*

I feel Archer and Hierophant will make a better pair than Cat and Archer. Cat and Thief though, that could work.

*Yitzi*

One "editorial" correction: "Poured over" should be "pored over".

*Gerion*

Help! This socially blind person here needs someone to lead him through this chapter step by step. I feel there are so many things going on between the lines I simply don't get. For example why Killian suddenly gets angry or whether or not Cat had planned to clutter their ties from the beginning.

*Gerion*

"cut her ties"  
Stupid auto correct.

*oldschoolvillain*

Killian and Cat love each other, but they've been fighting. So, when this talk comes along, a nice Moonlit stroll through the woods, I think Killian was expecting to make up. Instead, Cat treated her just like another member of the gang who just needed to be understood and brought into the fold, rather than a lover. So that didn't help.

And yes, Cat did plan to cut the tie from the beginning, because they're perhaps a year away from the biggest war that this generation will ever see. In that war, Cat and the Woe will be drawing a LOT of fire from heroes, and Cat doesn't want Killian to be caught up in those kinds of fights. If they make it through the war with Proper, she might try to reevaluate the relationship and see if it can be rekindled. Overall, there wasn't enough communication between them to avoid something like this, where they both got angry. If either of them had been more considerate with their words, this might have been avoided, but honestly this needed to happen. Killian being too considerate and Cat not being considerate enough is what led to this, so Killian had nothing more to give and Catherine has forgotten how to give back. It's a salvageable relationship, I think, once Killian is a full-blooded Fae, but not until they're both powerful enough to go toe-to-toe with the likes of Warlock and the Heroes that Procer will bring down on them.

Adurna

Wow.

That's all. These last few have packed quite the punch.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

What the hell does "godly brush" mean? Is that a typo? UNGodly brush would have worked fine, in an odd yet intriguing sort of way. But the phrase "godly brush" does not parse in the English language. I'm really hesitant to call it a typo though; because of the story's subject matter, that could well be important symbolism. I mean, a character is named HEIROPHANT. There's no way that phrase isn't significant, maybe extremely so.

THIS IS WHY TYPOS MATTER!!!!!!!!!! HOW THE FUCK AM I SUPPOSED TO UNDERSTAND THIS???????

Roland

Godly, an adjective which can mean coming from God; divine.

Godly Brush, meaning a divine brush. As in a painting instrument used by a god. This is poetic language.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Right, I understand that it's an adjective, I even understand the connection to the root word that it's a form of. I can see that you didn't know what to make of it either, so you threw "it's poetic!" out there as a last-godly-ditch defense. Hell, maybe it really is poetic, who can say? But being "poetic" doesn't help clarify anything. It's more excuse than explanation really.

If you're wondering, yes, the godly ditch is filled with a beatific bosage and a row of heavenly hedges. 😊

### [Barthumphries](#)

Speaking of a typo:

padding across the ground to reach for the carafe of water  
someone – Hakram, most likely – I had left on my bedside table  
Remove "I"

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Well, looks like Cat made a new enemy. I have nothing in the text to point to to back this up, but somehow I see Killian getting a Name after all...a Hero Name from the Gods Above ;P

### [Reveen](#)



That was a whole lot of dumb, self-absorbed, wannabe-Nietzsche shit coming out of Cat's mouth. Proto-fascism is a helluva drug, but the comedown is brutal.

*stevenneiman*

Type thread:

"his thin shirt [for->his] only armour as he [poured->pored] over papers arrayed before him"

[BarthHumphries](#)

I accidentally went to <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2016/03/23/chapter-17-aplomb/> instead of this chapter and thought for a while that I must be in a dream chapter, perhaps something that Warlock started in the tent and that she'd been living in for a while. :p

*Jeremy Cliff Armstrong*

God damnit. God fucking damnit. I really wanted Kilian and Catherine to reconcile.

*nasiba*

Wow, I am really at odds with a lot of the comments here. Although it was sad and Killian had very good points I completely understand where Cat is coming from and I think everyone is forgetting a lot. The girl has gone from one war to the next almost without break, against impossible enemies and situations, dealing with the deaths of thousands while constantly having her very soul changed over and over. Learning by the worst trials by fire and oh, btw, the fate of the Empire and the entire reason she is doing all this, for Callow, now pretty much determined by \*her\* actions. Also facing the War of the Millenium in a few months. And the death of her father figure. But she is supposed to have time so somehow deal with her first real adult relationship and all the delicacy entails at the same time? People with boring nine to five jobs often can't pull that one off. And they don't have to think that their actions might get their beloved killed on top of everything else. Get off her back, she is dealing with this the best she can.

*Jeremy Cliff Armstrong*

Honestly, I agree with you. I really wanted Cat and Killian to work it out. But I don't really fault either of them for it not working out. It just makes me QQ.

Another thing people seem to be forgetting... Cat is now a member of the Winter Court... Killian is an obvious decedent of a Summer fae. Remember how Cat instantly, irrationally hated the realm of

Summer the moment she laid eyes on it? They are doomed to be at odds with each other by their very natures.

It makes me cry... but that changes nothing.

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## Chapter 58: Hard Measures

*"And so Subira of the Sahelians slew Maleficent and said: 'Emperor am I now, Sinister of name and deed. Let this be the truth of our empire, that iron ever sharpens iron 'til the last cut is made.'"*

– Extract from the Scroll of Thrones, second of the Secret Histories of Praes

There was a House of Light standing at the heart of the largest Praesi army in a century. The irony had amused me more than it should, and the sharp taste of it on my tongue had driven me to make the temple my headquarters for the night. There'd been no one to contest my decision: the lone sister remaining of the priests who'd once tended to the village now swallowed up by tents and palisades was out. Among the legionaries, I was told, tending to the wounded and the sick. I could admire the dedication, though she'd find few soldiers willing to allow her ministrations save for those of my Fifteenth. Praesi had a deep abiding distrust of anything that claimed it came without strings attached. Misplaced wariness here, but common sense in the Wasteland.

"By the pulpit, please," I told the legionaries.

A pair of broad-shouldered orcs set down my gloriously comfortable fae seat before the low wooden frame, casting uncomfortable looks at their surrounding. There was hardly anything to look at, this village being too small to even warrant mention on most maps. The House had been built in the style of the central plains anyway, instead of the more ornate Liessen ways. Walls of wood and clay, a single window in the back that was nothing more than a hole bare of glass or shutters. There wasn't even an adjoining backroom for the priests to sleep in – only a house more hut than cottage huddled up against the wall outside. A third legionary, this one bearing captain stripes on her shoulders, lingered by the pulpit with my writing tools in her hands.

"You can set those down," I said. "I don't believe we've met before. You're one of Hune's, right?"

"My cohort serves under Legate Hune, yes," she agreed, the thick Summerholm accent making it plain where she was from.

She grimaced.

"Ma'am, are you sure you wouldn't prefer your tent?" she asked.

*They know where my tent is, I thought. They'll be watching it.*

"Captain," I began.

"Abigail, ma'am," the woman provided.

"That will be all, Captain Abigail," I said gently. "You may go."

The Callown sharply saluted, half her face rosy in that way flesh tended to be after protracted mage healing. All the way up to the eye, I noted. She must have fought in the skirmish against Fasili and his wights. The pair of orcs followed her after dismissal, joining the contingent of guards that would be outside, and I let myself fall into the cushioned seat. Out of habit I pushed the inkpot and quill to the right side the way they'd taught me at the orphanage, reaching for a sheath of parchment and unrolling it. The soft calf skin had seen use before, though without Name sight I would never have noticed the hints of words that remained on it – whoever scraped the skin had done thorough work. Calmly, I opened the buttons of my shirt and reached for the three documents I had been keeping on me ever since receiving them. One was from Malicia, though not of her handwriting. The second bore Thief's hasty scrawl and the third was a hand I knew more than passingly, Ratface's. All of them bore names. Setting the three ahead of my own parchment I inked my quill and began to write. Two columns, the first for those that were in more than one document and the other for the single mentions. I blew carefully on the ink after finishing, and only then paused. Seven names from the first column were given a mark. Those I let dry on their own, settling into the seat and waiting for Hakram. Adjutant, ever a prince among men, did not make me wait for long.

"Masego says it's all ready," the orc told me without bothering with niceties.

I approved. This was not going to be a good night for those.

"And he's certain it won't be detected?" I asked.

The tall greenskin snorted.

"He thought you'd ask that," he said. "Should I give you the answer he prepared?"

"I assume it's very condescending," I said.

"Almost poetically so," Hakram grinned.

The flash of fang he bared was low, close to the lips and paired with eye contact. That, I had learned, usually meant amusement in an orc. Though not all of them, to my irritation. The clans from the Lesser Steppes kept to their own strange customs. He lingered after, and I drummed my fingers against the pulpit.

"Out with it," I said. "Do you need more men? Because there's only so many I would count trustworthy, and I don't want to dip into the Broken Bells for that."

"Forty is plenty," he replied. "Truth be told, I want to keep the second line you gave me after the business is over, if it can be done. I have too many irons in the fire these days for the number of hands I can command."

"I'll talk to Juniper," I said. "But Nauk's command was gutted in Dormer and Senior Tribune Jwahir is low on veterans, so I wouldn't count on it for a few months."

I raised an eyebrow after that. Another line under his command was very clearly not what he'd wanted to talk about. My mood turned sour when I remembered another matter I'd recently slid under his purview.

"Wait, is this about Nauk?" I said. "I thought that was going fine."

He shook his head.

"Hierophant took a look, like you asked," the orc said. "He'll be awake in a week, up and about in a month. You can leave that to me, Cat. I'm just worrying about our... timing."

"It had to be tonight," I reminded him. "The assault starts come morning. If we'd done this earlier she would have had breathing room."

"There are officers on that list," Hakram said, and it was not a question.

"Highest is a tribune," I replied.

Confirmation from Thief and Malicia. That one had stung more than I'd thought it would, given that he'd enrolled back in Ater.

"I dislike what this'll do to our chain of command," he bluntly said. "On the eve of the largest battle we've ever fought, no less."

"You can't seriously be suggesting we just leave them there," I said, appalled.

He sighed.

"No, not that," he said. "I just wish we'd done this early enough the replacements would be settled. Before you begin, I understand why we didn't."

"The wager's that we'll gain more than we lose from this," I said. "I stand by it."

The orc looked away, the thoughtful look I caught first eminently strange on a greenskin's face.

"It's been a long time coming," he finally said.

"I wish it was a masterstroke," I admitted. "It's why we delayed so much. But even now it's just spring cleaning, isn't it? We won't be getting all of them."

"I doubt there's a single army in the world that could boast *that*," he ruefully said. "Perfect is foe to functional."

A saying translated from Kharsum, that, though there was one much like it in Callow. Still, I silently admired the fact he'd managed to put alliteration in there through a language barrier.

"It won't be pleasant work," I said.

As close to an apology as I could offer him.

"Pleasant's herding aurochs back home," Hakram said. "We chose different lives, you and I."

I inclined my head.

"Good hunting, Adjutant," I simply said.

What his lips bared was not a smile so much as a row of knives. He left me to my thoughts, and though my mind was spinning it never lingered on any single thread. There were too many moving parts ahead, though thorough planning should see to the worst of it. It began in truth when Grandmaster Talbot was ushered through the door, an hour before Midnight Bell. The nobleman – as a knight he still qualified as that, even though his family's ancestral holdings were now my own demesne – was impeccably arranged even this late, dark locks combed and his beard without a single hair out of order. The cloak on his shoulders I nearly raised an eyebrow at, though the black and bronze I saw were the colours of the Order and not of House Talbot. It still looked more decorative than truly useful, but wasn't that always the way of highborn? He knelt smoothly before the pulpit, and if he'd taken any offense to a villain using holy site for writing desk there'd been no trace of it on his face.

"Your Grace," he said. "I come as summoned."

"On your feet, Talbot," I said. "I've never had much fondness for kneeling, mine or otherwise. I have work for you."

He rose as elegantly as he'd gone on his knees, but now I saw sharp attention in his eyes where before there'd only been curiosity.

"It was my understanding that the assault would begin with Morning Bell," he said.

"It will," I said. "That's not what I want you for. Or the Order, to be more precise."

"We are ever at your disposal, Your Grace," Brandon Talbot said.

Noblespeak for having not fucking idea what I was talking about, and I was glad of it. If they saw me coming... I'd kept my preparations light and quiet, but Akua had always been the better hand at this game.

"I have a list of names for you," I said. "When you return to the Order's encampment, you will rouse your men and proceed through the Fifteenth to arrest everyone on it."

The man's eyes widened.

"You have found traitors in the legion," he said.

"Most of these I've known about for months, if not years," I said calmly. "I've had Adjutant hunting for them since before he even had his Name. The intent was to watch who they came in contact with, but Diabolist has been very careful. In the end I had to rely on other eyes."

"And now you would purge them before engaging the Wastelander," Talbot murmured.

It wouldn't be all of them, of course. She'd have more, carefully hidden under instructions to lay low. But by killing what I hoped was the majority of her agents when she had no time to replace them I'd be either crippling or ending whatever scheme she had prepared. It took more than a handful of spies to carry out a plan, no matter how well-placed. I folded the parchment I'd written on and held out my hand. He hesitated before coming forward and taking it, eyes lingering on my fingers. I smiled discretely. I remembered enough of my etiquette lessons to know nobles weren't supposed to taken anything directly from the crowned head of Callow, and it was almost charming he kept to that even now. Grandmaster Talbot opened the parchment and read through, expression growing grimmer the longer he did.

"There are more than I would have believed," he said. "And Callowans among them."

"I doubt they knew who they were selling the information to," I noted. "She'll have used Callowan or Duni intermediaries. The names in the second column gave intelligence, but should not be considered agents. Just treasonous."

"Tribune Katlego," he said, eyebrows rising in surprise as he studied the first column closer. "Second in rank among Legate Hune's officers, I believe."

"I'm told hostages were taken," I said.

The Empress had written as much. But he'd folded instead of going to me, and so on the list he went.

"That is the reason there is no mark by his name," I added after a moment.

"And those have meaning, I take it," the man said.

"Those seven officers," I said mildly, "are going to resist arrest. They will, unfortunately, die in the struggle."

The knight's face went still and he studied me silently.

"Trial would be inconvenient, even with a military tribunal," he said.

"They have relatives in the Legion," I said. "Or connections at court. This will make fewer waves."

"This is murder," he said.

There was no condemnation in his voice. It was easy to forget, sometimes that while the nobles of the kingdom had been no High Lords they'd been far from being babes in the woods. Callow was no stranger to knives in the dark. His words had not been question but statement of fact, and I did not deny them.

"So it is," I agreed. "See it done promptly. Supply Tribune Ratface has a man outside, awaiting you with details on the location of everyone on the list."

Brandon Talbot folded the parchment and slid it inside his doublet before putting his palm over his heart and bowing.

"By your leave, my queen," the Grandmaster said.

I met his eyes, and did not correct him. I had few advantages over my enemies, I thought as I watched him leave, but the Order of Broken Bells was one of them. Callowan loyalists who'd been in hiding until a few months ago, and had hardly left my sight since. They were near certain to be free of infiltration and unlikely to balk at the killing of Praesi. It would not be entirely quiet work, of course. The knights mobilizing after dark

would draw attention. I was counting on it, because there were very few mages on that list. Not nearly enough to explain how quickly Akua was made aware of my movements. Which meant there were more hidden, and like good spies they would report the ongoing purge to their mistress. At which point their locations would be caught by Maesgo's ward, and Adjutant would take them. A scheme, I had been taught, should always have more than one payoff. *I was slow in learning, Akua, but I have learned.* The lists I had received from others I put to the flame. I sent for legionaries and had my seat and affairs removed after, though I did not leave the House. I sat on a wooden bench close to the entrance, little more than a carved log, and waited.

As the hours passed I received reports, some more pleasing than others. The Broken Bells had killed twelve, not seven as I had ordered. Whether Talbot had taken this occasion to settle some scores with an excuse or whether those had been genuine accidents, I would have Hakram find out tomorrow. Adjutant caught two mages trying to reach Diabolist, one a lieutenant and Duni as well. *We found the sloppy and the scared,* I thought. *The truly dangerous ones did nothing at all.* I had considered, when planning this, snatching the lot of them from the gallows as I had once done with deserters in Summerholm. But I still remembered flames and Summer's wrath, the soldiers who'd died screaming for me, and found I did not have it in me to do it. Whatever the Gallowborne had begun as, they had been *mine* in the end. I would not forge them anew out of dross like this. It was near First Bell when the reports trailed off, and in the wake of that end I dismissed my guards. Returning to my tent felt like a chore, and so I simply rested my head against the wall in the corner of the House. I knew, closing my eyes, that Adjutant would have people close by. It was enough.

I closed my eyes, and sleep found me. An eternity later, I woke to a soft hand on my shoulder.

"Dawn approaches, my friend," a woman's voice told me. "The Legions have sounded assembly."

I'd been entirely awake from the moment I was touched, and drew back the hand that had gone for my sword out of habit. There was a woman standing at my side, barely out of girlhood. Her fair hair was kept in a thick braid, and her robes were simple. *The sister,* I thought. I was surprised they'd let her in at all, with me asleep. From the corner of my eye I glimpsed a legionary sitting in another corner, and while the sister turned away I dismissed him with a nod. One of Hakram's? Most likely.

"There's time yet," I said.

The woman laughed softly.



"I did not think the Legions so lenient," she said. "You must be an officer."

*She doesn't know who I am*, I realized. I was not wearing armour, and my clothes were well-made but nothing ostentatious. My blade was a longsword, not standard issue, but a priestess might not have noticed that.

"I am," I replied amusedly. "It's going to be a long day, regardless. A few moments of respite will not be begrudged."

"May I sit?" the sister asked.

"It's your House," I shrugged.

"Not mine in the slightest," she said, though she sat at my side regardless. "I was glad to hear the Fifteenth does not forbid worship of the Gods Above. Places such as these should be refuge to all, no matter their oaths."

"The Empire's never been heavy-handed with the priests," I said. "No reason General Juniper should be different."

"Or the Black Queen, I suppose," the sister mused. "We do live in interesting times."

I snorted.

"No denying that," I said. "Maybe a little less troublesome, after today. With the Diabolist gone the work of fixing this country can begin."

The priestess smiled to take away from the bite, but shook her head in disagreement.

"Will it?" she asked. "Evil warring on Evil cannot result in Good."

I laid back against the wall, eyeing the light peering through the hole ahead. I had at least an hour left, long enough to wash and eat before muster.

"I was told never to argue philosophy with the sisters, when I was a kid," I said. "But that seems too dismissive by half."

"I care little for arguments," the sister said. "But discussion is one of the tools the Gods granted us to make the world a little brighter."

"Shall we discuss then, Sister?" I teased.

Her face grew serious.

"Saving one soul is saving all of Creation," she said.

From the Book of All Things, that. One of the more sentimental quotes, and not one I put much stock in. Even if Malicia embraced the Heavens tomorrow, the Empire wouldn't change in the slightest – save maybe with the addition of her blood on the floor.

"Ah," I mused. "Hard to have a discussion with that premise, isn't it? I don't really think we believe Evil to be the same thing, when it comes down to it."

"Then teach me," she said. "I would not close my ears to the truth."

"You know, I was raised on the same stories as you," I said. "I used to believe that Evil was mostly about a good ol' rousing round of hangings and sundry blood magic."

The blond priestess smiled gently.

"But you don't anymore?"

"You could say I've had the benefit of an extensive education on the subject," I replied. "The way I see it, Sister, Evil is about refusing to play by the rules of the game."

She frowned. It was a pretty look on her, as I imagined most were. It would have been a lie I didn't find something attractive about purity, though power had always been what I preferred.

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow," she admitted.

"It think starts with asking *why*," I said. "Why should I forgive? Why should I not kill? Why should I obey? And eventually you realize that there's all these rules handed down to you and then you get to the real question – why shouldn't I just do whatever the Hells I want?"

I chuckled, the sound of it resonating in the near-empty House of Light.

"That's when you realize the answer's pretty simple: because someone thinks I shouldn't, and will stop me if I do."

I let out a long breath.

"Most people stop there and become a minor league sort of evil. That one jackass in every village that always talks shit, the merchant that short-changes you or another corrupt judge."

My fingers idly closed around the pommel of my sword, thumb rubbing the leather wrap around the handle.

"But once in a while, you get someone who doesn't flinch. Who decides it's not enough, and replies: try me. And then they pick up a sword."

I met her eyes and offered her a half-smile.

"That's Evil, I think – walking past the line in the sand and refusing to apologize for it."

The look on the Sister's face was unreadable.

"You sound proud."

I shrugged.

"Proud is a strong word," I said. "But it's been some time since I was ashamed of it."

"Strange," she said softly. "You did not strike me as someone who would embrace fear."

It was my turn to frown.

"I think you might have missed my point."

She shook her head.

"The way of thinking you just described assumes that the world around you is your enemy. That is not courage, it is *fear*."

I laughed.

"Look around you, Sister. The Diabolist is stealing cities, the Principate is marauding near the borders and just two years ago the south was in open rebellion. The world is full of enemies."

"Because you treat them like one," she told me seriously. "If you solve all your problems with swords, swords are the only reply you will ever get."

"That's a nice sentiment," I replied, "but it'll be cold comfort when the Procerans invade."

She sighed.

"Ah, borders. I've never quite understood why they matter so much to people. You draw imaginary lines on the land and tell people to remain on one side, as if ink and parchment could make you its owner."

I had quite a few scathing things to reply to that, but since she'd been polite enough to let me speak uninterrupted I supposed I should afford her the same courtesy.

"Do you know why the House of Light does not preach rebellion against the Empire? Because it doesn't really matter, whether we have a king or an empress. Rulers come and go, but what really matters doesn't."

I raised an eyebrow.

"And what would that be, exactly?"

"Trying to be better," she told me, and passion shone in her eyes. "No one is born Good. It's something you have to work for every day, and sometimes it can seem like more trouble than it is worth – but what else is there?"

She leaned forward.

"So many of us see life as a race and will do anything to pull ahead, but that is the conceit of a child. If we all cross the same finish line the only thing that matters, the only thing that can matter, is *how* we get there."

I grinned, but it was more a show of teeth than mirth.

"Sentiment like that is how they get you every time, Sister. So what if we all cross the same finish line? Down here in the mud is what really matters. What we make of it. And if I only have so much time kicking around Creation, then I'm the one who's going to decide how it's spent. Not the Gods, not whoever's got a crown, *me*. I own my life, and damn anyone telling me I need to live it abiding rules that are just a key to the other side."

She met my eyes, unafraid.

"Life is what you share with others," she said. "Hoard it and you will die all the poorer for it."

I ran a hand through my hair, frustrated that she just wouldn't see what I saw.

"You don't even get to set the rules you live by," I said. "You're a leaf spun in the wind deluding itself into thinking as long as it behaves it'll land somewhere nice."

She smiled, eyes gentle and sad. The kind of eyes you gave someone who was so far lost they didn't even remember what the path looked like. Her pity burned me harder than Summer's flame ever had.

"And you think your way will let you choose where you land?"

My mantle roiled under my skin, the weight of all the choices I had made and would make, the sum of what I was and would be.

"That's where you're wrong, Sister," I told her, "I don't want to be the leaf – *I want to be the storm.*"

She laid a gentle hand on my wrist.

"In the end," she murmured. "I choose to believe that being Good matters more than being strong."

"In the end," I replied clearly, "I would rather be wrong than be cowed."

And what more was there to say, after that? I rose, letting her hand fall away.

"Be safe," she said. "There are great dangers about."

I smiled, feeling a sliver of grief for all that this was.

"Oh, Sister," I said. "All those dangerous people? I'm the one they answer to."

---

### *Stormblessed*

I'll say impasse hoping for a reaction of the priestess finding out this was the black queen she was talking to, but it was a good discussion nonetheless.

*stevenneiman*

I suspect that at some point during the conversation she figured out who she was talking to Cat wasn't exactly being subtle. I'm genuinely curious whether she was somebody important or if she was just an unremarkable priest of the Gods Above.

*corrado alamanni*

Funny how for all her talk about wanting to be free cat is evermore bound by every evil act she feels is necessary

### *Gunslinger*

Cat's been taking a lot of lessons from Heisenberg, what with all those badass lines.

Ohh and do vote for The Guide on topwebfiction (<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>). Ward might be hard to top, but we can definitely get more votes than Worm.

*The Quietist*

Oh shit wildbow stared the second parahumans series?

*Idan Dor*

We are three arcs in not including the prequel arc of GlowWorm. So far so good.

*therealgridlock*

It's already over and I cried, I needed more.

*Fulmi*

To be honest, i love the sister's perception of what being "good" entails.

*Ninith settler*

It's the other way around. Worm > Ward.

*Darkening*

I really can't tell if the sister doesn't know who Cat is for this whole conversation or not. Hm. Nice to see Thief showing her usefulness as spymaster for the Woe, nice to have sources that aren't reliant on Black and Malicia for information.

*stevenneiman*

Nah, she's just a spy and either Aisha or Hakram (I forget which) is the spymaster. She's a Named spy and useful for other reasons besides, but she's not in charge of other spies.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Great chapter. It was enjoyable to see the sister's point of view.

*ArkhCthuul*

Agreed.

And as many wondering if this is not much more than a simple sister.

*Engineer*

Bad. Ass.

*Big Brother*

I actually enjoy the glimpse of the "Good" side not focused by the Hashmallim, but through the eyes of one who follows willingly, un-Named.

So far we've only had fanatical points of view on "Good" from both sides; William, Black, White, Bard, Contrition, I believe there was a small rant by Warlock, correct me if I'm wrong there,

Good Name-vision Cat, Evil Name-vision Cat, Malicia, and the First Prince. This Sister marks the first person I can remember willing to discuss the opposing views of Good and Evil rationally and calmly with Cat. Good for her.

[taborask](#)

Yeah, there is surprisingly little argument on the Good/Evil question from the light side of the aisle, given the subject matter of this series. Which makes sense, given all the protagonists are Evil but still

*Decius*

Why do you think that the one who spoke to the Black/Death Knight about Good and Evil would remain unNamed?

*Big Brother*

Not everyone Cat talks to /has/ to get a name. Some characters can just be throwaway characters. A conversation with a merchant doesn't mean that merchant becomes an Essential NPC. Why should a discussion of Good and Evil with a priest give her a Name.

*letouriste*

hum...i don't know what make of this talk.that looks a lot like the ones i have with my parents:/

[taborask](#)

I've created a subreddit for general discussion, if anyone wants to be a mod or has suggestions let me know (I've never made a subreddit so I probably made some party fouls in the rules/descriptions)

<https://www.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/>

*Keyen*

Funny to see Car is the position where she is the one "who doesn't get it", especially since she doesn't realize that and think the sister is missing the point entirely.

Nice chapter BTW, liked the reference to the famous quote: "If the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail."

*SentenRainen*

So, I see Cat has now met the Wandering Bard.

[SpacyRicochet](#)

Yup, that's what I initially thought as well. Though I'm not sure how much body-swapping is allowed for the Wandering Bard. I have the feeling she might be stuck in her current one for the moment.

The nun is suspicious though. Undoubtedly good, and maybe even Good.

*Vortex*

She was way too sincere and reverent to be the wandering bard. All of the bard's incarnations have been drunken and sarcastic. The bard also understands Black and Cat's brand of practical evil very well, while the sister needed some explaining.

Personally I hope the sister gets a Name in the upcoming battle, I would like to see Cat interacting with a genuinely good hero in a non-hostile manner. I am not sure Thief counts exactly.

*Thea*

Getting along with unquestionable heroes is... difficult. It would go directly against her Name, which is depowering or lethal, as we saw when she let the Lone Swordsman go. Maybe it works if they're not in conflict or in different stories, but... difficult.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

What's your rationale for that? If you're just wishful guessing you might want to mention that somewhere

*Ward*

Cat at the end.





[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Huh?

*Jonsensical*

Hahaha

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Oooohh this is my prediction. Cat kills the spies. Diabolist smirks and thinks she has the upper hand since the spies did their job and fed some of the Fifteenth Still Water reagents. Battle begins, Cat gets a bit of the upper hand, Diabolist converts them to zombies. Cat converts them to Winter zombies.

Then all hells get unleashed. Perhaps literally for one or two Hells

### Tohron

Interesting, I was thinking along a similar line, with Cat interrupting the zombie ritual to make them into a group of intelligent Winter zombies, to replace the Gallowborne with Abigail leading them.

### *Thea*

Have we had a chapter like this before? Where Cat isn't recognized at first and has a discussion similar to this? Maybe even in a church? Maybe Marchford before the devil n demon assault? The overall flow feels very familiar, even if the details clearly are not.

Wonder if this is a Name thing, reflection scenes, chances to change your ways... Looking forward to the third one since I liked these so far.

### *narcoduck*

Book 2: Chapter 28: Prelude

She talks to an innkeeper and her daughter, incognito.

### *Keyen*

Book 2, Chapter 28 (Prelude), she was talking to a innkeeper. But it was quite different.

### *Rustndusty*

It occurs to me that Cat's attitude in this ties back a little to last chapter: love means allowing someone else authority over you, and that isn't something she can do anymore.

### *Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

### Cold Cyberia

It would be cool if the Nun became part of Cat's group, sort of like how Scribe is an unofficial Calamity. It's not very likely, however people bitching about how mages aren't as good at healing for three books makes me hope we will see priests incorporated into the Fifteenth.

### *LM*

The most important thing I took from this chapter is that Catherine has forgotten why she fights. It doesn't seem like she has real purpose, the direction that makes a name more than just a walking natural disaster. The purpose was what made her strong before. Both via narrative and through her will. But now she just seems angry. A mad dog cornered and biting

*Dana*

Isn't that kind of purpose-decay inevitable? Since Catherine's putative goal – making Callow a better place – doesn't seem to be the consequence of her activities.

*Ninith settler*

Cat = August confirmed. She doesn't fight for good, and she doesn't fight for evil. She just fights!

*Riri*

The most important thing I took from this chapter is to be reminded why commenters and reviewers aren't actual writers or authors. Because they have no idea what makes a good story or interesting characters. They just want things to happen because "it would be cool". They want things to happen because it suits their world view or because of bias towards or against a specific character. For all they say they do they don't seem to care about the actual narrative anywhere near as much as they claim, it's all entirely "in the moment" thinking and I can't help but think that if they were given the opportunity to take over the plot or to influence the story in any real way that it would definitely suffer for it in both the short and long term. It's something that I've read before and agreed with before but reading these reviews has reminded me of this fiercely. Let's just see what the future and proven author will bring us, instead of short paragraphs by those who can barely see in front of their noses.

~Riri

[Isi Arnott-Campbell](#)

"The most important thing I took from this chapter is to be reminded why commenters and reviewers aren't actual writers or authors."

You say that like there's some sort of strict separation between the world's reviewers and its authors. Reality couldn't be further from that. That being said, your comment is, on the whole, mostly truth-y, but that opening statement seems to betray an ironic incomprehension: for in truth there are many skilled authors who are also reviewers, and it's no-one's fault that they're not here reviewing this particular work.

Just a little reminder of something you likely knew.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Heh, I've made this exact observation before. I called it fanboyism, and it really does ruin the comment section for intelligent conversation. Who knows how much we're missing about the story because smart readers are discouraged from collaborating?

But I guess lots of readers here are small children, I mean who else would clamor for an obvious one-time throwaway character to become a Named all of a sudden for no reason? And then they do it all over again when next week's minor characters are their favorites ever. I've had dogs that were more discerning.

The worst part is that it's self-perpetuating. It fuels itself as all the fanboys click "like" on each other's inane wordvomit, further encouraging that kind of thing.

The worst part is there's no good solution to the problem. We could try discussing elsewhere, but the extra effort going to reddit or spacebattles is a real barrier. And obviously no one wants the story to have less readers. All we can really do is sit back and hope the education system is doing its job...

Aaahhhh-hahahahaha 😊 😊 😊 😊 😊

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

The worst part is if it ever happens that some rando does get a Name, they'll all have "called it," and from there it's a slippery slope to rock bottom: everyone posing from a dumb phone.

Eh. The worst part is trying to think of new jokes at 4am

*Thenre*

Holy shit I just realized Catherine started a sword in the Stone story and got made a queen. Now she's getting called a Queen. That story isn't over, it's still influencing events and that's fucking incredible.

### [Reveen](#)

Pffft... yeah okay kid.

The idea of owning your own life doesn't really work when you spend your life chasing threats, fighting the next baddie, dealing with political bullshit. The Legion, Callow, Black, Malicia all basically own her at least a little bit. Your choices and how you can live your life are inherently limited by your

environment, your responsibilities, and who you are as a person. True freedom and self-ownership are impossible.

*danh3107*

Not to mention gods eh, I think that's what Evil (big E and from the perspective of the choice versus gods giving us rules narrative presented in the story) is all about. Trying to achieve true freedom and self ownership, hence Black trying to break the story, to win just to say he had.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I can't help but wonder if this entire chapter is built as a vehicle for the one line, "I want to be the storm." And it IS a badass line, but it reminds me of something I read long ago. Some advice for aspiring writers was to find your favorite line and to delete it. Otherwise you'll end up bending backwards, trying to restructure everything else to preserve that one line.

This chapter is called "Hard Measures." I don't see how that ties in to anything either

### [Cold Cyberia](#)

The "Hard Measure" is the ordering of execution of more than two dozen men under Cat's command.

I don't think that one line was all there was to this chapter. The whole point was to show that Cat was tempted by Good but ultimately refused and fully committed to being Evil, right before the big battle too. It's classic storytelling.

*AVR*

Committed to being Evil? Talbot didn't blink an eye about capturing spies and killing some. It's a hard measure... but a Good leader might have done the same.

### *PracticalFanboi*

Loved this chapter. This sounds like a really good place to end the series. I feel this shows that Catherine is pretty much too far gone at this point and a complete mutual defeat against Akua would be a beautiful conclusion

*green*

...okay then. I'm putting a mental bookmark on this chapter; I Strongly Suspect it will turn out to have been Important later on. There were... a couple of pivots here.

### [Jakku](#)



I feel like Cat is too attached to absolutes. Good and Evil are things the gods have set. Cat breaks stories and patterns, as seen with the Fae. Cat needs to realize that she can choose a path that is neither villain nor hero. She doesn't need to take on the mantle of White Knight or Black Knight, if she doesn't want to.

Would be amazing to see Cat forge a new story and emerge as something like a Gray Knight, which I think will help her forge a new path for Praes and Callow.

*morroian*

Great character interaction but the fact that none of the traitors are well known means the cleaning house lacks impact.

[vuthuha912](#)

She is not wrong you know. The priestess makes an excellent point, if everyone is a little better, we are all better. Yet, it is so fragile, isn't it? Progress can be subverted. Homosexuality was completely normal in most of the Ancient world. It was completely normal in any places that don't have the influence of Christianity. However, some people said that it was a sin and people died for it. Women's rights go from the Tang dynasty to the Song dynasty. The ambitious, the lazy, and the greedy drive society forward as much as the goods. Who would invent the plowing machine if he was content with doing it the hard way? Every single ruler in the past is a terrible mass murderer. Both the good and the bad. They murdered their former friends, their family, and other people. But they also build and nurture. They put people down and get them in line to do some massive good for the rest of society. Their achievement lasted a lot longer than their reign. We just need to have a limit so that these little evils won't destroy the rest. We need laws and institutions that last longer than one man's life. We need education so that the next generation is better than the last.

That is why your father is going to fail. He keeps trying and trying but he is the only one doing it. He is still trying but he is tired. The rest of his comrade settles down and stops trying. They are making small compromises that slowly undermine everything he built. They try to smother the one he nurtures while the enemies are getting larger by day. None of them understand anything about building. They are there to destroy because the good of others means less good for them. Or, they can't separate the good bits from the bad bits and choose to stomp on everything. Or, some of them are just stupid. You are the one who is going to keep trying where he failed. You have people working with you who won't stop trying.

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## Chapter 59: Anacrusis

*"Peace is a fine thing, but war is the crucible of crowns."*

– Queen Elizabeth Alban of Callow

There was something oddly intimate about being dressed, even if it was with steel instead of skirts. It began with the grieves, Hakram kneeling at my feet to tighten the straps. He was tall enough there was need of stool to put my foot on, since even kneeling he still reached near my chin. He had clever fingers, belying their size, and though he was not gentle he was quite meticulous. Then the *pua*, the long thigh and lower leg piece with an articulation at the knee. Over my aketon I put on a shirt of mail in the legion style, six interlocked rings spreading into a thick cover, and as he reached out for the vambraces I set the breastplate over the mail myself. The straps were hardened leather, reinforced with iron, and they creaked as I tightened them. I held out my arms for him to fit with the vambraces, watching his face crease with concentration. Pauldrons followed, marked only with the Miezian numerals of the Fifteenth instead of the heraldry and titles that were gathering to me like flies to honey. Armguards were adjusted to my comfort and articulated gauntlets finished the portrait. The fingerbends looked like fins, I'd always thought. There were usually stained red by the end of a fight, with either my blood or my opponent's. The gorget clasped tight around my throat, and though uncomfortable I knew better than to whine. I'd killed enough people through the throat to know leaving it open was sheer stupidity.

I'd expected to be presented with my old open-faced helmet as the last of steel to bear, but what I was offered was different. This one was not of Legion make, with hinged cheeks and a flat noseguard in front. It had a long tail to cover the back of my neck, true, but there was a flap in the back through which my ponytail was meant to go. The cheeks were fully covered, going into a long angled mouthguard crafted so it would rest against my gorget. The strip of steel that served as noseguard was shorter than I was used to, and above it was a ridge of steel meant to prevent blades sliding down into my exposed face. What had been forged above the ridge was what had me frowning: it was crown. Black iron set into the helmet, not jutting, but a crown nonetheless. My eyes flicked to Adjutant.

"You know I do not wear ornate armour," I said.

"I know your teacher does not," the orc said, and pressed my palm against the steel. "It is not him we follow."

*This isn't a squire's armour*, I thought. *It is a queen's, and her crown is black.* For all that I had avoided the regalia of my rising rank, it seemed it had finally caught up to me.

"Vicequeen," I reminded the orc.

"For how long?" he asked quietly.

I winced. Months, perhaps a year. But Black was not one to go back on his word, and he'd given it. A crown for me, so long as I readied Callow for war. Maybe he was right. Maybe it was time to get rid of the fig leaf. Past a certain point reticence was more arrogance than humility. Or, even more to my distaste, a form of fear. I lowered my head and let Hakram set it down on my brow. The cold touch of steel was no burden, but the promise it bore was different story.

"It is fitting, I think," I murmured, and Hakram's eyes met mine. "That you would be the one to crown me."

His face twitched at that, a flinch only half-swallowed. My gauntleted hand reach for his arm and squeeze him comfortingly.

"I have relied on you for so many things, since you were my sergeant," I said.

"I did what I could," Adjutant replied gruffly.

He looked away, and were he anyone else I would have thought him abashed.

"We made a deal once, under moonlight," I said.

"That was no deal, Catherine," the orc said. "That was an oath and I stand by it. I called you Warlord then, and I don't regret it. I don't keep to the old ways, not like Nauk, but it is no empty word. I haven't used it since because it—"

He scowled, unsure of himself for once.

"It's not the right title, not for the two of us," he finally said. "Too shallow in the wrong places. We are more than war."

It was times like these I understood how peculiar Hakram truly was, compared to others of his kind. It wasn't his temperament, or his way with people. There was an underlying threat to the way orcs like Nauk and Juniper and every other orc I'd met saw the world, and in Adjutant it was absent. I thought much of the Hellhound, but never would I imagine her saying *we are more than war*. It would go against her nature. To my general peace was the wait between campaigns, rule a necessary evil best left to the hands of others. Since he'd come in my service, Hakram had acted in myriad ways: diplomat, steward, tactician and warrior. A confidant, too, and how many times would my temper have led my



astray if not for his calming influence? It'd been my Name that gathered the Woe, but it was Adjutant who was keeping them together. That much was becoming undeniable as the weeks passed. It would have been easy to dismiss this as part of his Name, becoming whatever I needed him to be, but Names did not come from nothing. There had to be will behind them, an intent to fill the gaps I left without ever realizing it. There were a great many victories to my name, nowadays, but few of them would have been possible without the tall orc quietly going behind me and doing the labour I never even considered needed to be done.

I wondered if this was what Scribe felt like to Black: a limb whose absence left you a cripple in all the worst of ways. I'd made much of my feelings for Kilian, lately, and the ever-complicated knot that was my relationship with my teacher, but if I had to name the person I loved most in the world it was the orc standing in front of me. Because he'd chosen to trust me when he had nothing to gain, long before a Name came into it. Because he was a decent man and he still believed in what we did – and as long as I had that, that shining truth tucked away in the back of my mind, it did not matter what horrors I hitched my course to. Hakram was perhaps my closest friend in the world, but more than that he was compass. Without him I would be lost in more ways than one.

"Oaths bind both ways," I said. "The part that is mine to uphold, do you judge it upheld?"

He laughed quietly.

"You've always kept your eyes on the horizon," he said. "On the next task, the next enemy, the next war. Look down, Catherine Foundling. See where you are."

In his deep-set eyes there was something feverish, the fire he always kept under lock and key let loose for my sake.

"We're winning," he said. "Just by standing here, we're winning. Because they only rule us only as long as we let them, and the moment that truth bleeds it dies. They can kill every last one of us and it won't matter, because as long as the banner's been raised once someone will rise to carry it again."

Baring fangs, he met my eyes.

"They wouldn't let us have a seat at the table, so we *broke* it," Hakram said, and there was a savage satisfaction to him. "That will not go quietly into the night, no matter what happens today."

"It's going to get worse," I said quietly. "After Diabolist. We know her kind, what it can do: rise tall and fall just as hard."

It's the people behind her we need to end, and they've owned the Wasteland since before it had that name."

*"How tall the spears, and great the host," he spoke in Kharsum, cadenced and low, "This empire's bier, of graven ghosts."*

His smile grew sharp, and there was not a thimble of mercy to be found in it.

"They say the last of the Warlords spoke that verse, after the Miezens destroyed the holy grounds of the Broken Antlers," Hakram said. "We were great, in those days, great as any power birthed since."

The Beast stirred under my skin, coiling lazily as it tasted the stench of death in the air – death past, and death yet to come.

"That's the thing with eras, Catherine," Adjutant said, hard-eyed and proud. "They come to an end. So let's bury it together, the two of us – this fucking Age of Wonders they built on our backs."

I clasped the arm he offered, and it felt like an oath.

—

Liesse looked like the gates of some godforsaken hell. The walls of sun-kissed stone had covered in great runes and the pale blocks had withered like fruit on the vine. Atop them stood unmoving thousands facing us, and though this was a fortified city and not a fortress they were tall ramparts and well-built. Behind them the labyrinth of alleys and shops would be crawling with wards and undead: we'd bleed for every street. I'd taken this city once before, fought my way through the Lone Swordsman and his army, but this was a different kind of threat. This was Akua Sahelian, and though I bore her no small hatred I would not deny she was cunning, ruthless and powerful. The Diabolist had called the last of the Truebloods to her side, gathered sorcerers and warlocks and every breed of practitioner the Wasteland could boast. The elements unleashed was the least of what I could expect. There would be devils, and perhaps even demons. She'd gone too far to flinch at the notions of what might come if she failed. What made Akua dangerous beyond all that, though, was displayed before the city.

Thirty thousand undead stood, but not in simple ranks. As I marshalled armies from every corner of Callow, Diabolist had prepared her grounds to receive me. A ditch had been dug and palisade raised behind it, wights with spears massed behind. Three bastions of rough stone had been raised behind, filled with mages and what few siege engines she had. No great fortifications, these, but our own trebuchets and scorpions would be lower on the ground and would have to be brought into range as hers awaited. To the sides of the ditch stakes had been hammered

into the ground with broad depths, a clear deterrent for my knights. The nature of my forces was not unknown to her, and she knew that between the two of us it was me who was pressed for time. There'd been talk of assaulting the other walls, since this front was so deeply fortified, but though there would be such an attempt the main thrust would have to be through this direction. It was where the gates were, the weak point in the defensive wards. The fortifications facing Procer were the newest, since that side had once been facing Lake Hengest and had lacked any fortifications, but since then she'd raised walls atop a sharp slope of beaten earth and anchored wards in them. The stretch between those walls and the Ducal Palace had been made into a killing field worthy of Summerholm.

It was the most direct way to the heart of her ritual, but the casualties we'd taken forcing our way through there would be... staggering. That knowledge, about the anchor of her ritual, had come without any need for spying. Above Liesse, Akua Sahelian's madness was laid bare for all of Creation to witness. Pillars of darkness rose from the roof of the palace half a dozen leagues into the sky, where their true nature was revealed: a cage. Like claws the darkness clasped a gargantuan orb of roiling smoke, ever-moving and testing the confine. Only a handful of people on the field knew the true nature of it for sure, though I suspected the Warlock would divine it after a closer look. He'd helped design the containment wards about to be activated around the city, after all. The souls of the Deoraithe cast a heavy shadow on the morning sky, becoming more a stormy dusk the closer one came to the city. Millions upon millions, accumulated since before Praes stood a single nation or the Miezan so much as caught sight of Calernia's shores. It was, I thought, almost as deep a desecration as Akua's casual slaughter of a hundred thousand innocents. Almost.

"Not impressed," Archer volunteered. "Now if she'd set the sky on fire that would be something, but this is just decorative."

"Shut your fucking mouth," Juniper spat. "Lord Black is about to speak, and if I miss a single word because you're whining you'll regret it."

The Fifteenth, for once, would not take the vanguard of the fight. That would be the duty of the veteran legions, with my men serving as a mobile reserve to be deployed when the city was breached. The field outside was not ours to take. I'd gathered most my people regardless, since the Woe would have duties before it came to the fighting in the streets. Thief was the most glaring absence, come to camp only for a few hours when we'd first arrived and then disappearing into Liesse again. She'd given me priceless information, though, and though she would not be fighting there was one last task ahead of her. Hierophant was clearly bored out of his skull, impatient with anything that did

not involve toying with the wards he'd spent several weeks designing, and Archer was even worse. She'd gotten restless the moment she saw the armies arranged, spoiling for a fight. Juniper's general staff stood with her and as usual Hakram was the lone isle of serenity to be had. As for Robber and his cohort, they were my knife in the night. What I had in mind for them did not involve being out in the open.

"Archer, don't assault my general," I said absent-mindedly. "I don't have a spare."

Juniper sneered in my direction, but did not comment. She'd been telling everyone to be silent for a half hour now, long before Black was even close to making an appearance. He was out now, though. Atop his dead horse barded in steel, in bare plate from head to toe and black cloak streaming behind him. He'd offered me the right to make the address, but I'd declined. Speeches had never been my strength – I worked best with small numbers. I would have to learn the skill, eventually, but this was too important a battle for fumbling. Horse passing before the armoured ranks of the Legions, my teacher slowed his mount and came to rest. When he spoke, it was with sorcery behind his voice: there was not a soul in our host that would not hear him.

"We have fought this war before," he said, and his words washed over us like a wave.

There was pause, but not long enough for stillness to set in. I could admire the skill of it – his fame as an orator was not unearned.

"Forty years ago, we fought it from the Steppes to the Hungering Sands," he said. "Twenty years before that it was fought as well, and again and again all the way back to the days of the Declaration. A thousand battles spanning a thousand years."

The Black Knight's power filled the air like a haze, and even where I stood I could feel it whispering to me.

"*Legionaries*," he called, a bone-deep shiver giving answer. "Look atop those walls and know you face a millennium of blood and arrogance staring down at you. You know that banner. Your fathers and mothers fought under it, against it. Under that standard Callow was bled a hundred times. Under that standard, Praes tore itself apart at the whims of the mad and the vicious. Are you not tired? I am."

He laughed, a thing of dark and bitter anger.

"I have fought this war since I was a boy," he said. "And so have you, in every shop and field and pit there is to be found in this empire. There is no peace with this foe, only struggle from dawn to dusk."

His voice rose.

"Legionaries," he called. "You of Praes and Callow, of Steppes and Eyries, you have fought this war before and *won it*. Forty years ago, we broke the spine of the High Lords. Yet here they stand before us, fangs bared. Will you let this challenge go unanswered?"

It was the orcs that begun. Feet stamped the ground, swords were hammered against shields. It came and went like a summer storm, deafening in sudden fury and sudden absence.

"I will not tell you our cause is just, for justice does not win wars," he said. "I will not tell you victory is deserved or assured, for Creation owes nothing. If the world refuses you your due, then *declare war upon all the world*."

His sword cleared the scabbard, the sound of sharpness and steel a call to war.

"On this field, on this day, two truths rule," he said. "There is only one sin."

"DEFEAT," sixty thousand voices screamed back.

"There is only one grace."

"VICTORY."

Shields rose, swords unsheathed, horns sounded and with that last word filling the air the Second Battle of Liesse began.

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[DroughtBringer](#)

Amazing chapter!

I wonder how much power Black used for that speech...

*Leor*

None. Warlock does the voice spell.

[joanneeve](#)

Black and other named can put power from their names into their words. It is not just a thing Warlock does.

*Cloud\_Striker (Earth Mem Inhabitant)*

But he didn't do that. Merely making your voice sound over long distances is very different from Speaking.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Doesn't mean Names can't do other things with voices. Given how important clear speech is for ~~dramatic moments~~ fulfilling most Roles, I'd be shocked if there wasn't some Name trick for vocal amplification.

*Jeffery Wells*

It said in one of the early chapter that Warlock does the enchantment for his speeches. Black could probably do something that would work, but it would be 100x easier and more effective for Warlock to do it.

*BryceWilliam*

its like D&D, monologging/banter is a free action. In terms of power cost, prince mc arrow throat proved it isn't a free action fight wise.

but the gods love a good story, and what good story doesn't have a power speech right before a battle? id be surprised if that speech cost him anything at all.

[stevenneiman](#)

It was amplified by sorcery, not Name shenanigans. And I would assume that the effectiveness of the speech didn't rely all that much on active use of Name power. It was a combination of good speechwriting, sincerity, and the powerful emotions that he tapped into, with maybe a bit of people subtly picking up on the fact that he was about to start unleashing all three Aspects.

*danh3107*

First some more poetic Kharsum, a verse Tolkien couldn't have made any better, and then a speech that could pale any comparison from high fantasy.

Awesome

*Big Brother*

One Sin, One Grace is actually a statement I live by now. It perfectly reflects my opinion on how everything should work. Oh, and Black giving a "Heroic" inspirational speech just before the big engagement to the entire assembled force atop his horse? Yeah, I'm all in on him dying in this fight now. Were he a Hero, he'd make it out to his "Happy Ever After", but as a Villain, he just popped all the Red Flags.

*Simurgh*

"One Sin, One Grace is actually a statement I live by now. It perfectly reflects my opinion on how everything should work."

That's... pretty concerning, tbh.

*Big Brother*

My thought process has always been morally "questionable", but recent events in my personal life, as well as global events, have tilted it to the point of being clearly Evil. An Eye for an Eye, 100 Fold is perfectly fine. Someone intentionally trips you, knock 'em down some stairs. Breaks your phone, break their arm.

Make it clear they shouldn't screw with you unless they're ready for the consequences. After all, there are billions of us. A couple thousand gone won't really make a difference, from a statistical standpoint.

*samshadar*

It certainly would quickly lead to a very polite society.

*Gunslinger*

When even the Simurgh finds it concerning...

*therealgridlock*

Do you hear screaming? I swear I can hear screaming

*Letouriste*

Stop calling everything heroic^^

Giving a speech is also normal for armies of villain and minions and the content is brutal. a hero would have said something about the massacre of liessen people or the souls tormented in the sky, or the demons or anything he/she see like atrocity fitting to face. black basically said he doesn't care about all that, he only care about winning.

*Nobody*

You really should not get influenced this much by fiction, we are not living in the same world as Catherine. With this mindset, it's only a matter of time until you find some troubles for your life...

Well, it's not like you'll take my words seriously, but I tried.

[stevenneiman](#)

Being influenced by fiction isn't a problem inherently, the problem is in making poor choices about which parts of which fiction to be influenced by, and how. For example, one could argue that the lesson of Genocide Man is that the ends justify the means, but it could also be that it's easy to convince yourself that you're doing the right thing.

*wehrmacht*

Someone's being chuunibyou...

*Big Brother*

Congratulations, you made me use Google. It's not just "being edgy". I'm a polite and decent person unless/until provoked. I simply don't have the patience to put up with people getting in my way.

*amc*

but – remember that in this mini-arc – black and cat \*are\* the heros. they're fighting against someone who raises devils 😊 and we know that subtle distinctions count in the story here...

*JC*

"I have fought this war since I was a boy," he said. "And so have you, in every shop and field and pit there is to be found in this empire. There is no peace with this foe, only struggle from dawn to dusk."

This is a good story.

"Legionaries," he called. "You of Praes and Callow, of Steppes and Eyries, you have fought this war before and won it. Forty years ago, we broke the spine of the High Lords. Yet here they stand before us, fangs bared. Will you let this challenge go unanswered?"

THIS IS A BAD STORY.

*Engineer*

So Bad it's G00000DDDDDD

*soonnandnaanssoon*

Let's all prepare the popcorn, tissues, wine and chocolate we all need for the next few weeks.

*Engineer*

Thank Cthulhu it's NOT Wednesday.



*haihappen*

May his blessed tentacles reach your dreams,  
his wrath befall your enemies,  
and the madness awake the slumbering gods.  
F'tagn.

*glassgirlceci*

First update since I caught up! I love this story so much...  
I'm so happy we got to see one of Black's speeches. I can imagine  
Juniper fangirling madly inside, and that definitely lived up to  
the hype. On the other hand, just another death flag for him 😞

But I just have to say, thank you so much for writing this. I  
love it 😊

*Letouriste*

You caught up at just the right time^^ that battle is bound to  
be interesting

*Metalshop*

Holy shit. That was such a good chapter.

As I was reading it, I thought I was going to put my favorite  
quote from Hackram, but then I realized that I'd need to quote  
basically all his lines from the chapter, and then I got to the  
Carrion Lord's speech and it knocked them all right out of my  
head.

There's been a couple times where you've made me really  
viscerally feel what makes him the central threat of the empire  
and this one is honestly the best.

*ArkhCthuul*

Indeed.

This whole chapter is eminently quotable.

And amazing. Really, top notch.

*Valkyria*

Can't wait for the big battle to finally start... I bet Cat has  
some nasty badass plans prepared to finish Diabolist – with style

[taborask](#)

A reminder we've got a subreddit now:

<https://www.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/>

So there's a place to discuss general story stuff that isn't specific to particular chapter

*haihappen*

Did I just read that correctly? Cat is giving in to the Crown and attached Name!? Or is planning to, at least. Or is she slowly giving up fighting it?

*Engineer*

Mantle at the moment, but I think Mantles have the potential to become Names in truth.

*George*

I'm pretty sure mantels are just for stuff like far titles that are directly attached to some sort of magical power. The crown is 'just' an element in a story.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Two of the most important questions are still left unanswered. Is Zombie the Third around? What happened to Cat's cloak made from the banners of her fallen enemies? Because if they were destroyed in the skirmish then... well, some victories aren't worth the cost Cat. That cloak was badass.

*oldschoolvillain*

That cloak is more ceremonial than functional – it'll have Akua's colors stitched into it before the end of the book, mark my words, but it has little place in a battle.

*goliath1303*

You don't think there's a place in battle for a cloak that was enchanted to resist magic? Plus, who knows what is deal is now. It seems like something passed from mentor to student, worn by the preeminent current villain, and adorned by the banners of enemies that span from regular humans – corruption twisted cataphracts – the Winter and Summer Courts might become more important than the sum of its parts in a story like this. Even if all that is wrong though, there's definitely a place for a cloak that protects you from magic when going up against The Diabolist and her host of horrors.

[kdreyes09](#)

Oh my god Erraticerata I had such a shitty day and this chapter made it. Thank you.

*Drd*

I'm sure I'll be corrected if I'm wrong, but if Cat transitions straight to the Black Queen, does the Black Knight really have to die..?

I know all the death flags are out on parade, but could we be getting played here?

Could Black become highly injured, in a manner not fixable (this is the Diabolist), and go on to become Cat's highest adviser maybe?

Can you imagine the state the poor hell hound would be in every time Cat calls for her general staff!

*Engineer*

No, this battle is definitely Black's swansong.

*Nostradamus*

"In music, an anacrusis (also known as a pickup, or fractional pick-up) is a note or sequence of notes, a motif, which precedes the first downbeat in a bar in a musical phrase."

The next chapter is gonna suck for Cat.

*Gunslinger*

From the opening, almost erotic description of armor wearing to the final speech by Black, it was quite fantastic prose. Brilliant stuff.

[kdreyes09](#)

Oh no i commented earlier saying: "Omg eraticeratta i had such a shitty day and this chapter made it. Thank you."

I realize this may seem like i was saying this chapter made my day shitty and I was coming off as a sarcastic ass. Sorry, sorry! Didn't mean to.

APGTE is what I look forward to every week, I was just particularly tired today and was in a rush while typing.

Apologies, again. Another amazing chapter. Love Nauk and Cat.

[kdreyes09](#)

\*Hakram

*Decius*

I must have missed it when it came up... but what in Liesse is worth the damage being done to the legions? Can't The Sovereign of Red Skies use that trick again?

Or soften the fortifications with goblinfire, if the catapults can't deliver it to wherever Akua is.

### *Engineer*

I think I figured it out how Diabolist is going to make Cat "kneel".

First up facts:

- a) Warlock said Cat is becoming more Fae (other) than human.
- b) Diabolist's Role is control of all beings foreign to creation not just demons.
- c) Diabolist has an aspect called Claim which gives her sovereign control of all foreign denizens.
- d) Claim was shown to be powerful enough to control a Prince of Summer.
- e) Cat is about on par in terms of power as a Princess and has a patchwork structure around her soul that Warlock (another soul expert) said is "one spell away from coming undone".

There's no way in the Hells Diabolist doesn't mind control Cat and forces her to kill either herself, the Woe and/or Black. That's probably why she sent that mage envoy, to gauge how much Fae Cat has become. To see if Claim will work on her.

Yeah, Cat should really stay the Hells away from Diabolist.

### *Engineer*

Edit\* The aspect is Bind. But Cat has Break.

Bind vs Break.

Patchwork on Cat's soul tips the scales in Akua's favor.

... Damn.

### *Big Brother*

Ah, but if Black Queen is actually a Name that Cat transitions to, then she should, by Right of Name, become a stable vessel for the power of Winter inside her, seeing as she's the only member of the Winter Court since the Winter King and Summer Queen got hitched and merged the two Courts into a new one.

Not to mention, that Winter power is bound to her soul, and will likely make the transition to her next Name as well. Shifting into a new Name with power like that might cause changes in the Named to stabilize the power into a base to build even more power on top of. You don't build a house on a foundation of loosely stacked logs after all.

This is purely speculation on my part however, and I look forward to being wrong with this like most of my guesses are.

*Sol Invictus*

in this universe, being at a disadvantage is favorable. Cat has never won a battle that was not against overwhelming odds. except that one time the enemy just fled before she got there

### *Cold Cyberia*

Cat's biggest advantage is having a group of Named. I'm pretty sure that when it comes down to it Masego can help her out or maybe they've already prepared some contingencies.

In fact, I would be surprised if they haven't. This is Cat's biggest weakness and it's been brought up several times now – not addressing it would be dumb. Akua might be a step ahead though, you're right in that.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*arancaytar*

> I'd killed enough people through the throat to know leaving it open was sheer stupidity.

Plus, getting ironically shot in an unprotected throat is one of the very few ways Named villains can permanently die to random NPCs.

*Mike E.*

I believe once Hakram was in a bad spot, then tore out the throat of his attacker with his teeth, making a comment along the lines of "that is why you should always wear a gorget". Plus there was a of the badass hero who took a chance arrow(?) to the throat in the middle of a Heroic speech.

*Misterspokes*

The Shining Prince (Tyrant's Brother) wore enchanted armor that diverted projectiles, which killed him because he was a vain idiot and didn't wear the helmet, forcing an arrow that would have plinked him in the breastplate to lodge itself in his throat.

*frondred*

tryrants nephew

*Sol Invictus*

if cat takes Black Queen as her name, then the Black Knight does not need to be killed off. kind of funny that they became chess pieces.

*Decius*

“Heirophant” is a close enough match to “black bishop”, leaving room for a corvid companion.

*Moginheden*

“The straps were hardened leather, reinforced with iron” hardened leather is very similar consistency to wood, (it shatters rather than bending) then you added metal so it’s even less likely to bend... the straps on armour need to bend in order to be able to fit through the buckles. The rest of the armour description was good, but that line threw me off, (thick unhardened leather does creak when you tighten straps made of it.) maybe try “The thick leather straps” instead?

[crowlute](#)

A great speech, which left me saying “oh fuck” quietly when it was over. I’m loving catching up

*Levi Kalden*



Is the most similar thing I could find to the description

*Levi Kalden*

Without the crest of course

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## Villainous Interlude: Crescendo

*"Then let us be wicked,  
Let us be reddest ruin  
Rent, broken, crooked  
Black hearted and cruel*

*Then let us be doom,  
To both friend and foe  
Fly banner of gloom  
We lowest of the low*

*Rise, rise all ye villains  
You rogues and madmen  
Proudly claim the stage,  
Of this wondrous age*

*We are not kind or just  
Deserving of any victory  
We are a thing of dust  
Promised only misery*

*So smile, Tyrants,  
And let us be wicked"*

– Final monologue of "The Many Deaths of Traitorous", a play on the reign of the Dread Emperor Traitorous

In the depths of the city of Liesse, beyond layers upon layers of wards and traps, there was a room. For more than a year it had been slowly crafted to perfection, and for years before that had Akua Sahelian spent days and nights refining its design. Removing impurities and inefficiencies, balancing ease of use and breadth of effect so that only a single soul in all of Creation could use it as it was meant to be used. Should she live for a hundred thousand years she would never make anything half so great, for it was the culmination of everything that she was. All that she loved and hated, all that had made and fought her. There had been a child, once, who looked upon pyramids of mud and blood and felt awe. At the skill, at the scope, at the *power* that still dwelled within – and though Tasia Sahelian had toiled greatly to make a hollow husk of that girl, a mere receptacle for her ambitions, that spark of wonder had never been snuffed out. It had grown into flame, and that sacred burn coursed through her veins today. And it whispered of *triumph*.

Diabolist felt the city pulse like a living creature, arrays of sorcery spread across it like arteries all leading back to the heart that was her. In this moment, she knew, she was half a god. How easy it would have been to grow drunk on that might, had she been of a lesser line. But she was a Sahelian, the blood of the original murder. The killers of the first empress, who'd writ the



truth of Praes in blood and treachery. Her forbears had been kings and queens, and Tyrants more than once. Rule, the ownership of power however fleeting it may be, was nothing less than her birth right. Walls of carved stone around her were as a pond, and on those reflective facades she saw the Legions of Terror standing with a man before them. The Black Knight, she thought, spoke well. Yet it was wrong, for him to be the speaker. It should have been Catherine Foundling, her match and mirror. Her red right hand in the making. Once she had thought too little of the Squire, believed her to be nothing more than tool and obstacle, but how she had learned since. Fasili had once remarked it was a shame Foundling was not born Praesi, for she had the seeds of greatness in her, but Akua knew better.

It had to be this way. It was the fire, the righteous indignation that made Squire who she was – a burn no lesser than Diabolist's own. If she'd never been crushed underfoot, she would never have risen from it fangs bared. The Soninke closed her eyes and smiled. She could glimpse the ending of their story already, grasp the edges of its shape with her fingers. Akua would break Catherine Foundling, shatter her beyond repair, and the creature of jagged edges and hatred that remained after would kneel at her feet. And what a fearsome monster she would be, upon emerging from that crucible. She would sweep through Diabolist's foes with fire and sword, a woe on all she faced worthy of the name bestowed upon her. It made Akua shiver in pleasure just to think of it. The Diabolist opened her eyes and let the words of the Carrion Lord burrow into her ears. The only distraction was her father's shuffling at her side, for there was only one seat in this room and it would not tolerate the sitting of any but her.

"He's not wrong, Mpanzi," Dumisai of Aksum said. "They say nowadays that the legions won that civil war, the orcs and the goblins, but I remember it still. The Calamities owned it body and soul: it defined them as much as their Names. Better not to fight them at all."

Spoken, she thought, as a man who could have been the Warlock but chose obscurity over the uncertainty of struggle. The odds, she knew, would not have been in her father's favour. The Sovereign of the Red Skies had begun to earn his title when he was still the Apprentice, and though claimants gained powers when embracing their claim Lord Wekesa would have had the full might of his old Name behind him. Yet it was never a certainty, that an Apprentice would become the Warlock. Praesi Names were never easily won. Akua loved her father, but she would not deny that in the face of offered greatness he had flinched.

"I do not hate them," Diabolist said. "Nor the Empress. For all their flaws, they sought to make our people rise. I am not Mother, Papa – I do not despise what they are. It is a mistake made in good faith, and killing them was never the point of this."

I am *surpassing* them. If that must involve taking their lives, then so be it."

And how long had she dreamed of this, of escaping the shackles? The Carrion Lord had been right, in part. They could not win the war by repeating the same defeat with a hundred different fresh faces. But the pair that ruled Praes had abandoned everything that the peoples of the Wasteland were to avoid another disgrace, and that was a betrayal greater than mere failure. They could win and still be Praesi, Akua knew. *Go to your grave gladly, Black Knight, having learned the truth of that – you were, for all your weaknesses, a patriot.* She would not deny the fearsome depth of that loyalty, however twisted it was. The man's words ended in the tired adage of the Legions, screamed back by the soldiers, and Diabolist rose to her feet.

"Go," she told her father. "And stay safe. You are worth more to me than petty victories."

His arms wrapped around her and for a heartbeat she was a child again, his chin nestled atop her head.

"Live," he whispered. "Whatever the cost, whatever the consequences. Live. Nothing else matters."

"Believe in me," she asked.

"'til my last breath and beyond," he promised.

No empty words, coming from a sorcerer who knew the mysteries he did. He left after that, the passing warmth of him lingering behind. Diabolist stood before the rune-inscribed walls and laid a single finger on them. They lit up like a starry sky, reaching for a hundred different arrays spread across houses and bastions and pits. The Carrion Lord had spoken for the ruling order, for the woman who held the Tower. She would speak, then, for the Wasteland. For the Empire that was and would be, for the greatness that was not yet forgot. Akua Sahelia stood proud, for there was more to her than mere ambition.

"We are," she said quietly, "the last of the Praesi."

They would hear her, her words carried by sorcery worn and ancient. They would hear her and know they might be wicked but they were not wrong.

"The Tower," Akua said, "is in the hands of a woman who would rule us forever. Before us stand her legions of dupes, led by her most loyal hound. You heard them speak of dues, and so know they deny the oldest truth of our empire: *there are no equals.*"

It was like drinking spring water, to speak words she truly meant instead of whatever must be said to gain. Relief, that after years of scuttling in the dark she could raise her true banner.

"There are the rulers and the ruled," she said. "The greater and the lesser. To deny this is to deny the Gods themselves, for that is how they made us. And now our Empress bows and scrapes to a conquered people, ignoring the reality that saw them conquered."

She let silence ring loudly.

"Power," she hissed.

There were others in foreign lands that would call this ugly truth, but she spoke to Praesi: the people of altars and pacts, of naked ruthless ambition. What she offered them now was the song of their ancestors, sung anew with fresh promise.

"Twenty years ago, we were more powerful than the people of Callow," she continued. "Twenty years ago we were *better* than them, for beyond all the lies and stories that is the bare truth of Creation: the powerful own the world."

A laugh escaped her lips, sharply mocking.

"They call themselves a different breed, these hypocrites, but what is arrayed before you? Mere force of arms."

And her people knew steel, that old friend of ambition. How many of their ancestors had claimed the Tower wielding it?

"In the end, all they are is another movement in the Great Game. The enemy might be powerful, but that should bring you no fear."

She leaned forward, hard-eyed.

"Iron sharpens iron, and when we emerge victorious we will be so sharp a blade as to make the world tremble."

Akua smiled, a display that should have been beneath her but at this last pivot of her life was not.

"Glory in this day, sons and daughters of Praes," she said. "The Age of Wonders is upon you, and though it is great and terrible to behold, let Creation remember this – *so are we*."

And in the wake of her words, as the Legions advanced and flanking forces sallied, sorcery bloomed. No wild cheers, from the people of the Wasteland. Acclaim came in the form of death unleashed. A thousand mages stirred to action, and when they struck it was with the wrath of a people cheated their destiny. How long had it been, since Calernia last saw the finest of Praes moved to war? Too long. With every streak of lightning and storm of flame that balance was redressed, and in the face of steel a

rolling wave of power was sent forth. It would have swept the legionaries aside like kindling, had it touched them.

It did not, because the Sovereign of the Red Skies had taken the field.

High above a star was born, and it came into the world with a keening cry. It pulled the sorcery like a withdrawing tide, swept it upwards until it was filled and a ring of raging sorcery detonated across the sky with a sound like thunder. The mage lines of the Legions, these half-mages minted and spent like cheap copper, gave answer. A dozen rituals burned and massive lances of flame were sent at Akua's bastions, but what did she care? These were but pale imitations, and the original stood arrayed against them. Half the lances dispersed within a heartbeat of being thrown, the formulas torn apart like the half-baked jokes they were, and the rest were turned against their own side. The fires changed from lances to beasts, lions and snakes and tigers, and with dull roars they attacked the advancing legionaries. Dozens died incinerated within moments, before the Carrion Lord lent the weight of his aspects to the men and led them through the inferno. *Lead*, Akua thought. *Conquer*. Not tools for the killing of heroes but for the leading of armies, and as the Black Knight's mantled came upon them the legionaries became *more*. Swifter, stronger, indifferent to the raging flames.

The Diabolist did not strike as the Sixth Legion followed the Carrion Lord in his sweeping advance, turning her eyes to the sky instead. There a single silhouette rode a winged steed stolen from Arcadia, cloak of many colours streaming behind her. An artefact in the making, gathering weight with every fallen army stitched onto the rest. Already Akua suspected sorcery would slide over like water off a duck's back, and it was still nascent to its true form. Squire would strike at the heart of the enemy, for that was her nature. Not through aspects, it was too early for that, but Catherine Foundling had another signature. The winged steed passed over the ranks of dead manning the entrenched palisades, deftly avoiding spellfire from the bastions as a simple knife cut down what appeared to be sacks tied to the sides of the mount. When the first arrow took flight from impossibly far, flames coating it, Diabolist almost laughed. There it was. One, two, three – eight in whole. Every single sack of goblinfire was ignited while still dropping, and fell like green rain over the wights. Some reached the bastions filled with mages and engines, but there were panes of force awaiting. The goblinfire burned into them, but they were thrown aside and her sorcerers left untouched. Her general's careful experimentation with the most dangerous tools of the Legions had paid fruit.

Diabolist returned to her seat, settling against the wooden frame as her eyes remained fixed on the unfolding battle. Soon. She would have preferred to let the Legions overcommit, but the

Warlock would soon go on the offensive and he was not to be taken lightly. The Fifteenth, she saw, was not part of the assault. A reserve, likely kept for when the walls were breached. It would serve other purpose, but Akua was not displeased. They would be tied up regardless, removed from the equation. That was how her enemies would lose, in the end. Dispersed to deal with half a dozen threats, they would fall one by one. The Sixth Legion reached the outer field of traps, and Akua's mages triggered their arrays. Within three heartbeats what had been an empty field was filled with howling lesser devils.

And then they died.

Diabolist froze, blood going cold. Every single devil summoned by the arrays had turned into red dust before so much as striking a blow. The Warlock's doing, it could only be him, but how had he known? He'd have needed to begin casting before the triggers, which meant... *Someone has studied the lay of our defences*, she realized. And done so with a great deal of precision. Akua's fingers tightened around the arms of her chair. It might be assumed that the devils in the secondary arrays would meet the same fate, and without them serving as a slowing mechanism for the advance of the Legions then soon her palisades would be under assault. And with the goblinfire already thinning the ranks of the dead, they would break. Now. It had to be now.

The Diabolist breathed out and her mind stilled. It'd been seven years now, since she had separated her soul from her earthly flesh. It had spared her ugly end in this very city, once, and from that it was likely her foes had come to assume it was a measure meant for her preservation. To ensure that even if her body was destroyed, she could invest another and continue her plans. As it happened, that had merely been a fortunate consequence. Akua had removed her soul in preparation for something... greater. In the depths of the Ducal Palace, where the anchor of her great working awaited, a small cylinder of pure obsidian covered in runes lit up. Inside it was bound her soul, but it was no mere phylactery. It was a key. Her soul touched the untold millions of dead Deoraithe she had caged, connecting to the greater weave. All over Liesse runes burned bright, the glare alone melting stone and shattering wood around them as the greatest ritual Praes had seen since the days of Triumphant began.

Runic letters formed in front of her, a contract written, and then she gave the sorcery shape.

On the plains to the flank of the encroaching legions, a dot of yellow flame formed. In it the contract she had written shone, and the flame grew. An empty circle was forged, the diameter half a mile wide, and the yellow flame solidified. Creation *screamed*, screamed in protest as it was ripped apart forcefully and the

Hellgate opened. Not a Lesser Breach, but a Greater. The first since the fall of Keter, and unlike the Dead King she would not be forbidden a second. The souls of the Deoraithe were not spent, merely thinned, and would coalesce again in a matter of days. It would take her even longer to stabilize her own, but the true terror of her work was the scale. Distance meant nothing, to sufficient power. She could open a gate in the heartlands of the Principate without moving ,if she so wished. Akua Sahelian's army was the entirety of all the Hells, and as the first devil crossed her gate, the binding she had written in the flame leashing it to her will, she laughed. The host at her disposal was without end, and she had crafted this ritual so it could only ever answer to her. The array was part of her, as much as any limb or drop of blood.

Waves of wasted power coursed into the escapements she had designed so very carefully, empowering wards that would have taken hundreds of mages to use and just like that Liesse... disappeared. Forced half a step out of Creation. There had been a reason that she had chosen the southern city out of all the governorships she could have secured. The corpse of the angel, though left behind, had ensured that Liesse was always slightly *askew* from Creation. Easier to move, and given clear boundary by the ancient wards surrounding it. And so now the city was out of reach, save for one entrance she had crafted herself. It lay at the heart of her fortifications on the plains, and the enemy would bleed themselves dry trying to take it. All that planning from the clever generals on the other side yet here they stood now, the forces meant to assault the walls on the sides utterly useless and the exposed flank of the army facing endless onslaught.

Hell began pouring out of the Breach, and the Diabolist smiled the smile of a woman who was going to conquer the world.

---

### [DroughtBringer](#)

Woah...

No more words.

*NerfContessa*

Rereading.

And at a second reading, I still can't find enough info to have seen this coming.

One can hate Ubua, but she is brilliant.

*therealgridlock*

It was mentioned a few times the difference between a lesser breach and a greater breach, it was even mentioned that she constructed her breaches with bindings built in so the ensuing hordes followed her rule,

It was really as simple as assembling a puzzle.

When you give a diabolist an enormous amount of power and a way to permanently harness an endless amount of demons, what do you get?

A greater breach.

It's almost obvious enough that it should have been obvious to the protagonists but I don't think they knew about the bindings ubua had been practicing, only that she was a diabolist with insane power. I'm the kind of paranoid that "diabolist with insane power" would make me prepare for an infinite horde of demons anyway, but I don't know if these characters are that kind of paranoid.

*danh3107*

Huh, and endless supply of fodder a nearly unassailable castle, that's fucking brilliant.

*WCN*

Holy shit

*JC*

" The host at her disposal was without end, and she had crafted this ritual so it could only ever answer to her."

Sorry Malicia.

The disappearance of Liesse... does that mean Cat rules over part of the Hells now?

*Darkening*

Well, there's always mindraping her with Speaking, assuming she's correct about it being unusable by anyone else. I doubt Malicia would care too much about having to turn someone into a brainwashed puppet to use her weapon. That does assume Akua survives the day, which Black and Cat are hilariously unlikely to allow if they can possibly avoid it.

*Joebojoe*

That's what Thief and Squire are for. I'm sure that the Immortals were designed to not conceivably run on Winter either.

*Vhostym*

The principle of sorcery is usurpation. Also, since Akua is a villain, the mere claim that it is unusable by someone else is the assurance that it will be used by someone else.

Still though, a very nice setup for a climactic showdown. And I'm hoping that this is what Malicia intended when she referenced using Akua, because otherwise that likely means she had something else up her sleeves.

[stevenneiman](#)

I think she forgot about the part where she earned her name summoning demons and devils and then having Cat beat her up and steal them. I'm just wondering whether she'll keep the breach open or close it after she deals with Akua. Probably close it, devils are a pain to deal with even if you do control them.

*RoflCat*

>She could glimpse the ending of their story already, grasp the edges of its shape with her fingers. Akua would break Catherine Foundling, shatter her beyond repair, and the creature of jagged edges and hatred that remained after would kneel at her feet. And what a fearsome monster she would be, upon emerging from that crucible. She would sweep through Diabolist's foes with fire and sword, a woe on all she faced worthy of the name bestowed upon her.

So...Akua's plan is possibly binding Cat's soul or something after crushing her, to make her a forever loyal minion?

...Somehow I get a feeling that's a terrible idea given all the tidbits of Callowan revenges we've heard about.

Or rather, considering that while Akua have shown she can do necromancy, Cat is the one who made her Winter-zombies army, so if this Story is going to end with one of them crushing the other and force them into submission, my bet is on the one whose whole reputation is crushing any fuckers who try to crush her.

*Dainpdf*

Cat has a whole \*thing\* with the undead. She has used them as bombs, steeds, armies... She's even been undead herself.

*Erfling*

Whispers abound through creation:

Squire died once already.



Squire uses corpses as weapons.

Squire raises armies of the dead to fight for her.

A Squire must become a knight, but who says it has to be only Black or White?

*Dainpdf*

Nice catch. Death Knight incoming?

*usernamesbco*

I can't see it.

Catherine always had greater ambitions than a mere knight. She told Hakram she intended to be queen. Not just any kind of queen either, or else she would have accepted the deal from Contrition. That had too many strings attached.

I'm not sure what her final metamorphosis will be, if she even makes it that far. I kinda want to see her curb stomp the Gods on both sides for making Creation just to settle a stupid bet, and only giving everyone in it two equally crappy choices. "Live life your way and perpetually lose no matter what" versus "Submit to the will of Heaven and you'll win no matter what" are not good choices. Especially with Name shenanigans admittedly warping the minds and personalities of people on both sides.

*Big Brother*

This is why I love Akua's perspective. Honestly, she's had just as much, if not more, growth than Cat throughout this story. And the ability to open multiple Greater Hellgates wasn't even close to what I thought her superweapon would be.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

It's more than just opening a Greater Breach. Liesse is a mobile fortress. Imagine a flying castle landing near you, opening a hellgate and then phasing out of creation so you can't damage it while a swarm of devils and potentially demons assault you. It's simultaneously a long-term offense and a short-term defense given mobility and reproducibility. I'm honestly impressed.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Edit: I misread the distance part. The ability to spawn a devil spawning point is from anywhere in Creation is strategically terrifying.

*sheer\_falacy*

It's stronger than that – it doesn't need to land near you. She believes she can open a greater hellgate anywhere in the world. She just opened this one nearby because of the enemy armies.

*Apathy-Peeves*

Actually, slightly wrong here. Akua could open a Greater Hellgate anywhere on the continent without moving. She just opened it where it currently is because well, that's where she need it.

*Tolack*

I have a hope that I can't see happening, but hope I shall. I want to see Akua "live, no matter the consequences" be subjugated by Cathrine. I just can't see a better nemesis for Cat other than Akua, and I wonder just what it'd look like to have Akua work for Cathrines goals. Bloody good writing.

*Big Brother*

Heh, maybe Cat can Break Akua of her bad habits?

*Vortex*

Also consider that a greater hellgate is what created the first Dead Kingdom and that little area is one of the scariest places on the continent. The Dead King has his own collection of dead heroes he has amassed over the years.

[stevenneiman](#)

Honestly, I don't think she's really gotten any character development. She's only acknowledged half of one truth since the story started (that Cat is important to her story, but not that Cat has any real chance of beating her despite being blatantly set up as the protagonist and having surprised Akua with her success every time they've clashed). She's had a lot of character *\*revelation\**, especially in this chapter, but that's very different from character *\*growth\**.

And yeah, her superweapon is utterly terrifying. I wonder how it's going to end up broken/deactivated/turned against her.

*me.me.here*

My bet is that her body will be killed. She's turned her soul into the key to using the superweapon, but that just means Cat will have Hierophant usurp her autonomy and have her spend the rest of eternity as a lynchpin for the Woe's use of the Greater Breach Generator.

*ArkCthuul*

I agree meme.  
That would be.hilariously village.

Also, that is a much smarter and less directly kablooy  
superweapon than expected, well.done!

*Engineer*

Cthulhudamnit its WEDNESDAY!!!!!!

... Eh heh, that was positively delicious!

*werafdsaew*

Taking out her trump card so soon? Tactically it is sound, but narratively it is stupid, as it ensures that the enemy has all the initiative, leaving you with nothing to counter whatever surprises the enemy has to offer. Contrast this with Black Knight's fight against the White Knight, where he avoided using his last aspect until the White Knight used his.

*Gunslinger*

Yeah but she realizes that thief did leak all of her plans and traps meaning the warlock would have planned for them ahead of time. This is why pure magic build is a dumb idea Akua

[NZPIEFACE](#)

A pure magician build that was a hybrid of trap and summoning.

Great idea to get a city and use a year to set it up.  
Shitty of her to forget thief.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

Yup, her plan lies solely on her superweapon, rather than on her ability to plan around what the enemy is doing. She left them with a (nearly) full bag of tricks. Hell, Cat hasn't even used a freaking aspect yet. The Fae we're arguably a tougher enemy, even though this will be Cat's defining victory of the Book.

*amc*

Isn't part of cat's legend her unpredictability? there was some quote early on about boxing cat in and how she'd take the box and beat you with it...

it's probably a good idea for any opponent of cat's to realize they can't out-weird her, and just not try...

*Thanatos*

Yes but that's half the point. Diabolist hates that Black fights in such a strategic, calculated manner and using only the force necessary to win. It doesn't matter to her that it works and this chapter exemplifies that mindset and why it made some of the Tyrants so terrifying.

Here Diabolist has riled up her enemy and seen them defeat what they believed to be one of her trump cards (her bound devils) and the moment they thought they were winning she showed that all there efforts were wasted against her. That sort grandstanding victory is far more important to Diabolist's character than any advantage that hiding her trump cards could give her.

### *Gunslinger*

Bloody hell this was brilliant. Right from the poetry at the start. That Akua was going to open a greater breach was expected, but the ability to open any number, across any distance, without fear of Keter's due is scary.

On a side note I am not sure what the passage describing Cat means. Is it the cloak turning into an artefact that deflects magic, or is it Cat that would simply deflect magic. The latter would be the logical option but the passage does not make it clear. Also I wonder if the Diabolist knows how thinly Cat's soul is bound and is planning on "binding" it under her service. Either usurp the protection Masego added or force Cat to renounce her humanity, turning into full fae and then some secret part of her bind aspect would allow her to control her.

### *Darkening*

She refers to sorcery sliding off the surface of 'it', so I assume it's the cloak that she's saying would repel sorcery. Interesting to see objects can take on power just by being in proximity to a named and being part of their narrative. It certainly makes sense, and is a fun idea. Wonder if Ranger's swords are special in a similar way? Hm.

---

Well, this is the cloak Cat has been given by Black, and she already mentioned during the fight with the Duke of Violent Squalls that it could already resist magic. The main property of the artifact would be something else.

### *TheCount*

i like the idea as well, its certainly good to give major characters a signature item, even more so if they can grow with them. There is the pure awesomness and heartwarming when

a normal item you started with from the begining stays with you and becomes a mighty artifact as you go on:D

i dont think its only ranger's sword that are like this, probably her cloak as well.

now, we can guess what the if and what the other named's items are like this:D

(i think the legion is Black's 😞 )

### NZPIEFACE

Following on what Count said:

Hakram – hand  
Hierophant – eyes  
Archer – bow  
Thief – pouch  
Squire – cloack

*naturalnuke*

Swords that can cut anything because they have a long history of cutting everything? That sounds like and rangeresque artifact

*Author Unknown*

Forged in Goblin's Fire,  
Quenched in Winter's Chill.  
This Mantle,  
This Mantle of Woe.

Proof against sorcerous ire,  
And naked steel.  
This Mantle,  
This Mantle of Woe.

Stitched by an undead hand,  
A band for every foe.  
This Mantle,  
This Mantle of Woe.

*naturalnuke*

I love you, and the name you gave the cloak.

*Engineer*

Chills.

Damn, EE is gonna have a hars time topping that.

*TheCount*

Nice one, would listen to the other parts of the song too...  
its just me, or its similar to the ring's story from LOTR?

*narcoduck*

It's interesting that Malicia plans to usurp Akua's superweapon, a mobile fortress that can open the gates of Hell, while Cordelia has her own superweapon termed 'the Stairway' (Heroic Interlude: Riposte). Can anyone say MAD?

*Dainpdf*

The problem with MAD is that they would have a pretty stark cold war going... With the difference that Cordelia could never depose Malicia because whoever came after her would probably press the button, consequences be damned.

*Oshi*

Malicia uses her own enemies to insure her eternal rule and the safety of The Wasteland. Pretty fucking evil in my book and perfect for whos she is.

*jor*

"Her red right hand in the making" whats it mean??

*Nostradamus*

Akua wants to conquer Cat as much as she does Calernia. She means for Catherine to become her soulbound Black Knight and serve as her right hand, likely steeped in blood.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

:lenny:

*Nafram*

Well, now I know for certain that, even should Akua win this day with seemingly impossible odds on her favor (a nearly impregnable fortress and a virtually inexhaustible supply of troops with her enemy likely caught off guard), then she wouldn't survive much longer. Sure, she would likely become a second Triumphant, but the whole "Open portals to hell anywhere and control all demons that come out of it" thing is too much Hero bait. She would be flooded by every single hero in the world, and eventually, one would succeed. Should humans fail, then the Dwarfs and every other Superpower out there would be out for her blood once she started expanding out

[Euodiachloris](#)

And, she's created herself a Bond Villain fortress OF DOOM! To the right Hero, it might as well be putting out a Welcome mat with the key to the control room under it. I can see why TWB doesn't really mind Akua all that much: she's got a limited shelf-life. <\_<

Any bets on trapdoors/shoots somewhere to dump people into? Maybe a small hellgate? No? 😊

[NZPIEFACE](#)

TWB? Whats that?

[Cold Cyberia](#)

@NZPIEFACE

TWB – The Wondering Bard, if I'm not mistaken.

*Dainpdf*

Yeah, that's the problem with her superweapon. How long before an anti demon hero appears? Exorcist, Inquisitor, Templar or something like that?

*Petya*

He may appear right now. You never expect the inquisition...

*Porkman*

The dwarves seem like they wouldn't put up with this.

Like seriously, what is the depth of said gate to hell?

*beleester*

When the Dead King created his breach, the Dwarves said "Nope" and sealed up every tunnel that got near his domain. I imagine they'd do the same here. They're strong, but they're not *\*that\** strong.

(Plus, they're Dwarves. They know what happens if they dig too deep and uncover demons from Hell.)

[stevenneiman](#)

Gotta agree with you. The way I see it, there are two possibilities: Either her powers really are beyond anything else in Calernia or they aren't. If they aren't, then everyone will band together to defeat her, and if they are, the gnomes will probably make an exception to their "only stomp on nonmagical technology" rule.

*oldschoolvillain*

Oh gods, Triumphant (may she never return).  
Remember what Robber said, way back when? "When she croaked it, several of her legions went down with her. Odds are they ended up in the same place. Old girl conquered more with less."  
Triumphant has been brought up a couple times already this book, and EE has shown that they can set up long term Chekhov's guns. What if Dread Empress Triumphant is about to return?

*amc*

terrifying!

*d\_o\_l*

Alright, place your bets on who's dying:

Diabolist 3:1

Black 3:2

At least one of the generals 1:1

Warlock 1:3

At least one of Cat's crew 1:4

Killian 1:5

Hakram 1:6

Thief 1:8

Hierophant 1:10

Archer 1:15

Malicia (cause fuck it, why not?) 1:50

*PhDEevee*

I'd put good money on Warlock dying, actually. Why? 1) Akua is playing with boundaries, which is Warlock's strong point, which means he'll probably do something. 2) Black seems to have started a story arc where all of the Calamities die (and I bet he or Ranger will be the last. 3) Warlock's son has come into his own name (it's no longer relevant to teach Apprentice). And 4) Warlock's already shown signs of coming apart at the seams.

*Zayits*

Yup, and don't forget the claimant to the Name of Warlock she currently has in the city.

*Halinn*

I'm going to go with an option not on the list: at least one entire Legion.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Istrid dies and Juniper more than takes up her mantle.  
Diabolist dies, but not to her own machinations, and not to any



other sorcery. She dies a clean death under the blade of Squire.

Black dies at the same time as Diabolist. The death of the two fuel her ascent into a Name greater than that of a Knight.

Everyone else is fine, Lillian maybe not so.

5 is a magic number for groups.

*Letouriste*

Black will not die before a long time, he is still too plot relevant and his dying now would lead to Malicia killing Cat so 100% unlikely. 99%?

I think one or two generals could die + Diabolist and her father for sure.

Warlock should not die here, I think Black still needs him narratively and I doubt that guy could die easily anyway, too intelligent. The others should be safe, injuries at most.

*MetruX*

Actually, Malicia is only helping Cat because she wants Cat on her side AFTER Black's death. There on the beginning, when she first sent for Cat to come speak with her, she said that Squire is to succeed a Knight, and that she thought that is why Black chose her. So if Black dies, Malicia just stays the same with Cat.

*werafdsaw*

Black still needs to purge the Wastelands, and he himself said that he has a few more years to live.

*letouriste*

@metruX: yes but that was BEFORE she pretty much proclaimed herself queen and gained all that strength. She is useful but really hard to contain and I doubt Malicia would hesitate much to kill Cat if her plan to delay or even stop the crusade succeeds.

From what I understand about Malicia, all her plans have several benefits. She helped Cat against the fae and at the same time she enforced her control on her. She made Cat doubt Black etc...

She hopes Cat will not threaten her position that way...but she also is ready to kill her if that is judged necessary. She is not close to Cat emotionally and she is probably ready to fight her close friends if they are not useful anyway;)

[stevenneiman](#)

To be clear, do they have to stay dead to win?

*amc*

add to the list:

cat (later resurrected through name-shenanigans) 2:1

(she's done it before, after-all.,,)

---

So, I take it that Akua doesn't know yet that Catherine had recruited the Thief, nor that she probably entered the city before the fighting even started? The only reason why Squire wouldn't use the same trick as from the skirmish with Fasili would be getting to the phylactery to Take over the army or the ritual, and Akua had left her only one entrance.

Also, depending on how thoroughly Vivienne had studied the escapement system, Warlock might be able to Imbricate the city back. I mean, Hedge Wizard already did something similar in their fight (only she phased into Arcadia, and the Diabolist knows enough about Squire's powers to not go there; she'll probably use the same dimension from Triumphant she moved the church in the second book to).

*Shoddi*

\*presses knuckle to forehead\*  
May she never return...

...however, with a brand-spanking-new, half-mile wide Greater Breach that just opened up, that Praesi oath might not hold up much longer...

*blarg2429*

I've long felt that "may she never return" is a phrase which, due to the rules of Creation, makes Triumphant's eventual return likelier each time it's uttered.

It really seems like one part possible foreshadowing (out-of-story) and two parts tempting Fate (and due to tempting Fate, also serves as foreshadowing in-story).

[Euodiachloris](#)

Good point well made. Also, I bet Triumphant could always find a use for a summoning soulstone pendant after a teensy little necromantic surgery to ensure complete obedience...

[glassgirlceci](#)

Holy freaking hell, that was beautiful. Maybe all the chapters have been this way, and I just haven't noticed because I've been

binging until now, but I feel like this chapter is up there as one of the best written. The language in the first half of the chapter was especially poetic, but the battle was also chilling and awe-inspiring, goodness.

You paint a terrifying picture of Cat as Akua's red right hand...I... kind of want to see it? But not in any serious way – Akua has earned her place as one of the most infuriatingly competent and well-written antagonists ever. She needs to end 😊

### NZPIEFACE

Yes, all the villains in this story are their own artistic form of batshit insane.

The Dead King seems to have taken to a grave form of caricature as humor, a solice in his solitude.

The Tyrant is nothing more than candle burning brighter than the stars, blinding and blinded.

The Diabolist is ambitiously grand, so much so that her machinations are greater than the one before.

The Black Knight is cold and callous, a figure whose eyes are colder than his steel.

The Dread Empress wishes for nothing more than change, to do so she needs not to be greater than all before her, but better.

The Squire whose passion burns hotter than goblinfire and her steel sharper than her tongue, a woman who tries to right a wrong that was never not.

### *Letouriste*

Nah, some chapters written before were a lot better;)

### *TheCount*

Damn, i love what she did with the city, the summoning on the other hand not really my personal favorite... (im into gadgets be they magical or not rather than sheer power) but damn, its impressive.

Let us see what she had cooked up to welcome the legion of terror!:D

### *Setback*

I'm not entirely sure that Diabolist's plan to keep her city in another dimension is the best idea. After all both Warlock and Heiropphant specialize in dimensional magic. It isn't that far fetched to imagine them either seeking her in there or collapsing the pocket dimension he is in.

---

Depending on how thoroughly Thief had inspected the escapement for the Warlock (or did the Assassin do that?), he may be able to Imbricate it back into reality.

*Fern*

Akua and Catherine, by drawing on the Hells and Arcadia respectively, have accessed a strategic power that no one else on Calernia could match. It's already been mentioned once, but as long as the Black Queen (and maybe even Black, if he can live through Liesse) can watch their blind spots regarding heroes, they can they can absolutely fucking trounce the forces of the Principiate. After that, what can the rest of Calernia do to answer? The forces of Good will lie in disarray without the Principiate serving as a center, and our protagonist has become too especially good at squashing Old Evil to be stopped by the likes of the Dead King, not even mentioning the tatters of the Chains of Hunger or the Drow in the north. All that's left then are the elves, and through them the entire planet.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

You forgot Tyrant down south along with his trusty aide.

And Tyrant is damn fucking good at the meta-game, plus it seems he'll stop at nothing to ruin the day of every other character.

*unoriginal*

Remember that the Empire isn't even a footnote. You've got the Dwarves in the Kingdom Below as a regional power and this is the Kingdom Below that refuses to recognize the right of humans to own property and gets away with it because they can sink the cities of those that piss them off. And all land on the continent below a certain depth is owned by them.

Then you've got an entire empire of Elves who are not on the decline and hopelessly racist like the Golden Bloom, The Chinses, and Indian equivalent empires and did I mention the fucking gnomes? because the screaming flying machines sound like jet-aircraft to me and they have Sheild Style flying ships.

Sooooooooooooo, no.

The Empire is not ready to play in the big leagues until it consolidates its power.

*Engineer*

Those damn sentient lawn ornaments probably have nuclear weapons too. The fact that the sun and plant life exists on

this planet is proof that nuclear reactions are possible in this world.

Just imagine the advances that could be had in this world if a mage of considerable talent is introduced to the scientific method. However said mage would probably get blasted to oblivion as soon as he/she made any significant discoveries. Godsdamned lawn ornaments...

### Cold Cyberia

At last! Both the cloak and Zombie the Third are intact. I suspect Cat will end up kneeling to Diabolist as Squire, with her will and soul bound. I expect she will break the binding upon becoming Black Knight and recalling Black's iconic phrase – "We do not kneel".

*Nairne .01*

I hope not. Even a short period of that would "suck" very much so to speak.

*Vhostym*

I doubt it. For one, the whole "we do not kneel" idea was already tried in book 2 when it was much more thematically relevant, and it was found wanting. Also Cat is more breaking in a new mold rather than retreading an old one.

But more importantly, that would require the diabolist to succeed, at least initially, and really that just isn't going to happen. Diabolist's plan sounds good, because it's written from her perspective, but if you reread it with a critical eye it becomes obvious she has no idea how to wage war or make strategies. Her descriptions are filled with assumptions, like assuming that the armies will choose to follow her laid out path, or that there aren't already agents within Liesse. She really has no chance in the end.

At this point I'm of the mind that Diabolist exists to fuel Masego's growth, since as the hierophant he grows with the number of miracles witnessed. And creating a hellgate like this by channeling a near godlike mass of souls is most certainly a miracle from a sorcery perspective.

### Cold Cyberia

It's a bit silly to say Diabolist doesn't know how to wage war when she outmaneuvered Cat to lose one of the Callowan reinforcements several chapters ago. Her assumptions are well founded: it's been mentioned Liesse is warded to a point where Cat can't get to it through Arcadia and Diabolist is well versed in sorcery – if she's confident there's only one

way through I'm inclined to believe her. I will grant you that she probably doesn't expect her city to be infiltrated but it might be that she does, and simply doesn't think on it in her moment of triumph.

I think you're vastly underestimating the kind of power she now commands. She has eighty thousand undead and an inexhaustible amount of devils at her disposal, in a heavily fortified, difficult to get to and magically protected position. I think the story dictates she will be defeated but it's not unreasonable of her to think she could conquer the world from where she stands.

It's a lot more than just a way to learn some sorcery for Masego – this is the biggest conflict in the story so far – against Cat's nemesis from the beginning no less.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

In addition to Cold Cyberia's answer, Akua has shown willingness to adopt some Legionary doctrine and war tactics with Fasili strategizing and laying out the tactics for her. I think her main weakness is how strongly she believes in her ruling-ruled ideology itself; it's biasing how she views the Story she's in, and I think she's on the track to lose just like Black did to the TWB. Akua overconfidence isn't unjustifiable given her many strengths and resources, but Narratively she isn't that good at stacking Stories on her side.

*Vhostym*

I see where you're coming from, and your examples are accurate, but just don't seem to ring true for this case. You're right that Diabolist outmaneuvered Cat a few chapters ago, but I'd argue that a truly one-sided war almost never occurs, and Cat's ability to mitigate the consequences is about as telling as Diabolist's (or Fasili's, more likely) ability to outmaneuver her.

In this chapter I think that Diabolist is leaning strongly towards the Emperors and Empresses of old Praes, where she creates crazy and wondrous inventions, but relies on others to properly implement them, as opposed to the new Empress who leaves that to others and concentrates on ruling. At this point we, as the audience, know that Malicia herself was funding a lot of this, so while it's possible that she didn't tell Black or otherwise let him and Warlock learn of Diabolist's plan, she is confident in their success regardless.

You've mentioned Akua being knowledgeable about sorcery and that if she says there's only one way to attack her fortress

she's probably correct. I'm not so confident, though you could be entirely correct. Since we know most things from Cat's perspective we really don't know much about sorcery or loopholes that the 'heroes' could abuse here, but generally I'm reluctant to rely on absolutes here, especially as the Hierophant's type of sorcery seems to be somewhat distinct from what normal Praesi are capable of. Either way I suspect that her statement about their options is either incorrect due to her understanding of their abilities, or due to her understanding of what they need to do to win.

Regarding her army, you're probably right about the power of the Hellgate, since we don't know much about how they work, and it seems highly unlikely that they can shut down such a powerful trump without huge amounts of effort (barring possible prior informing from Malicia). The 80,000 undead though? I suspect they're a non-factor now since Cat and Masego are well known to be good at necromancy and usurpation, and Akua knows this. I think the undead were more of a bait than expected to be an actual factor in this.

You're right that I was pretty flippant in my earlier comment, and the actual battle is likely to be great and wonderful and touch and go at some points. Nonetheless, I think the result is a bit of a foregone conclusion unless she has significantly more up her sleeve, not even considering the lack of narrative/story weight on her end. And really, she's basically set herself up to lead the doomed old ways in the face of the new, story wise. And that never ends well.

*Nairne .01*

EE, You really know how to ruin the rest of my week. How am I supposed to wait until Monday just to see how Cat screws Aqua's plans? Really this interlude should have been posted on a Monday. Damn authors who belong to the S part of the universe. Whats a fellow S like me supposed to do?!

Jokes aside. Thanks for the chapter 😊

*Engineer*

Aqua?

\*smirks\* I think you mean "Ubua"...

*Nairne .01*

Right.

\*returns an evil grin\*

*TideofKhatanga*

From Chapter 33:

>"At least Procer hasn't invaded," I said, trying for a bright side. "And no one's unleashed a demon in a year."

>"High Lady Tasia did, in Wolof," the orc reminded me.

>"I can't believe I have to lower my standards lower than they already are," I complained. "Well, nobody's opened a permanent portal into the Hells. There. I refused to go any lower."

>"Give it time," Juniper grinned, ivory fangs flaring.

He told you, Catherine. He told you about taunting Creation. But nooooo, you had to jinx it and ruin everything for everyone.

*Engineer*

Black was also guilty of this in the epilogue of Book 2.

Then he got bitch slapped by the Judgment Choir and he lost one of his best friends.

Yeah, I long for the rise of Dread Emperor Boringus. He who never ever gloated or taunted Creation and followed the Evil Overlord list religiously.

*Shoddi*

What about Dread Emperor Irritant, the Oddly-Successful? Sound like he followed the E0 list pretty well.

*Engineer*

Indeed, Irritant was oddly successful during his tenure.

*haihappen*

Does anyone else see Thief strolling in there and Take the soul stone?

Its a classic villain plan: Brilliant, Great in Dimension, and with a single piece of failure that any Band of Heroes would inevitably exploit.

Essentially all the tropes in play here usually have the antagonist facing a set of heroes, not villains (eh, sorry, I meant "Individuals of questionable morality"). Is Akua relying on that fact not to suffer "I would have gotten away with it if it hadn't been for You Meddling Kids, and that dog too."

And thinking about it: What is the Bard's end game here? Akua failing, but with the knowledge of Still Water or Remote Hellgate getting out, triggering an Instant Crusade?

Or, since Liesse is now a bridge between Dimension, maybe she



wants something from there to cross over, an Angel, for example. Whatever it is, it is safe to assume it is part of a greater end game scenario in which "The Greater Good" wins. Or the Bard can finally die.

### [Euodiachloris](#)

The right kind of Hero to take on a Bond Villain secure in their fortress/weapon airship of might... is the classy, quipping, sneaky Rogue-type. Every time. 😊

### [Cold Cyberia](#)

I imagine Bard's endgame with Akua is to eliminate Cat, much like what she tried to do in Book 2. Even if the Diabolist conquered the entire continent, she would still be an old fashioned villain that would inevitably be overthrown by heroes.

In contrast, she's mentioned several times now that the villains who think they are doing what's necessary are the really dangerous ones. Cat not only thinks she's doing the right thing, she's got the right combination of old villainy (amassing tons of power) and new villainy (metagaming the story).

*unoriginal*

Meta-gaming the story isn't a new concept it's just the Neo-Evil and the pragmatism embraced by the Calamities is just the concept executed right. We've gotten hints of how much larger the world is outside of the backwater continent this is all based on and with how the entire universe seems to run on the power of narrative, it would be silly for the Empire to have thought of meta-gaming the story first.

### [stevenneiman](#)

Pretty sure that Bard's goal is still to ensure that a kind of Evil that Good can defeat comes out on top here. What exactly her plan is to accomplish that remains to be seen, but I'm certain that Black coming home angry and down a friend is part of it. On the other hand, she's not infallible, as proven by the fact that she gave her own gloating villain speech to Black. Considering that she pretty much only exists when she's on-screen, I doubt that she's going to get away with that. And the reason she won't get away with it probably involves Cat's band of meddling kids.

*werafdsaew*

It looks to me the Wandering Bard can only act by attaching herself to a Heroic band, and currently there's none around, so she cannot act.

*Shequi*

Two thoughts:

Akua doesn't know that Masego is now Heiropant, does she?

Thief is now sealed inside Liesse with Akua.

*Jangri*

She does. See chapter 47

*Gunslinger*

She knows, mentions him as Lord Heiropant when she sends her ambassador

*Shequi*

Hmmm. In that case she's deliberately put a Greater Breach somewhere that our friendly local reality-unweaver can get at it.

That's *\*spectacularly\** stupid of her.

*Letouriste*

She crafted that really well, I guess she is confident he can't do anything to that. she used a lot of energy for powering the thing and crafted that in years. if masego could destroy that in a jiffy that would be unfair^^

*Metrux*

AS unfair as that would be, isn't that just the villain's thing? Justice is for the just, Fairness is for the fair. Hierophant's not any of them :B

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I've seen people talking about a Death Knight in the comments before, so I had a little idea.

If King Arthur could be a King and a Knight, why can't Cat be that too? Queen of Knights (Nights) or something, with the Name Black Knight to accompany it. And all she'd have to do after Amadeus is dead, is to raise his corpse and anoint him as the Death Knight.

Food for thought?

*Ane*

I'd never thought of that before, but I really like the idea of Cat ressurecting Black. Black still dies to the immense narrative weight demanding he dies, and allows the Squire Cat to ascend to a new Name at the same time. In reviving Black, Cat also continues to subvert the story.

However, it makes more sense for Cat to become Death Knight, since Black is only being brought back, and Cat is the one asserting control over the domain of death.

### NZPIEFACE

Eh, I always kind of thought that Death Knight kind of applied to someone dead that also controlled dead people. He'd be a necromancer otherwise? Kind of like how Dread Emperor Sorcerous become the Dead King.

### Cold Cyberia

This is actually somewhat supported by the story. I believe Zombie the Third preened at Cat when she was fighting against fae in Dormer, which implies her necromantic constructs retain some personality or sentience. If I recall correctly, Masego even remarked that this "has interesting implications" so it could be possible Black would be more or less himself.

### Luxuria Tenebris

I thought of a fun way to stop the Hellgate, just put a portal to Arcadia in front of it, let the Fae deal with them 😊

### *Lunariz*

I have a feeling that would permanently ruin relations with the Fae... And the Fae could make Cat's life way more difficult in the future if she ever wants to use Fae portals fast travel in the future.

### *Engineer*

They can't touch her when she's traveling through Arcadia. That was the deal. All bets are off when she's back in Creation though.

### *cookiehunter*

well so much for Cat setting her standards (chapter 33: "Well, nobody's opened a permanent portal into the Hells. There. I refused to go any lower.")

### *Red Letter Enthusiast*

Theif has a portable pocket dimension that smuggle a fleet of ships, and has infiltrated Lisse. Cat has a large supply of goblinfire, and a reputatuon for burning down cities. Also, goblinfire can eat magic. I suspect that the spy mission from a few chapters ago was also the setup for a large explosion in the middle of Akua's victory monolounge

*Red Letter Enthusiast*

^ that \*can\* smuggle

*Vhostym*

That would make a lot of sense. And now thanks to your mention I'm terrified by what would be possible if there ever is a person with the name Saboteur, because that goblinfire tactic combined with aspects moderately more suited to its use than hold (which is already pretty darn well suited) would be absolutely terrifying.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

When the Thief wasn't part of the Woe, Saboteur was one of the Names one reader proposed in a discussion for Robber lol. Since the Thief is a Woe, I find it hard for sufficient narrative weight to be given to Robber getting a Name but EE has proven me wrong lots of time haha.

*Tibstrike*

I really love seeing Black in his element. Leading armies and crushing opponents armies. His Aspects make so much more sense in that situation which just makes him all the more dangerous.

He's gone through decades of life as the pre-eminent villain using Aspects that aren't really all that suitable to single combat. They are, but they clearly shine in large-scale warfare.

And now we have his apprentice who is essentially a lv1 specialist who he has molded to fight as a strategic general and ruler.

It's fantastic.

*Draeysine*

Not sure anyone's mentioned it yet but um... what about the Gnomes? Pretty sure this is red letter material. They might just show up and wipe the whole continent off the map to make sure the threat is gone

*narcoduck*

It's actually interesting to note that the Gnomes don't seem to be interested in these old sorceries as a threat. The sunken city of Kerguel was not destroyed because of their mighty magics but because they were interesting "natural physics". The Dead King and his Hellgate is unmolested by the Gnomes. The Empire didn't receive Red Letters because of their demons or devils or doomsday weapons. They got Red Letters for a farming machine and playing with powders.

Maybe the Age of Wonders is over because it's archaic and ultimately not a threat. After all, the Wandering Bard knew perfectly well what Akua was doing (going as far as deterring the Elves), and she still thinks Malicia/Black/Cat are the real Evil that must be stopped.

*Argentorum*

Gnomes seem to be interested only in technological advancement. Praes didn't get a letter for Triumphant's (may she never return) Flying Fortress. None of the characters, likewise, are worried about any level of Praesi sorcery earning a Red Letter.

*OmniscientQ*

This isn't Red Letter material. The gnomes don't care if you make nuclear weapons, so long as you make them out of magic. If you started trying to refine fissile material so you could make one that ran on entirely non-magical physics, however, they would care.

The gnomes exist purely to enforce Medieval Stasis on Creation.

*Engineer*

To what end, I wonder...

EE, will the Gnomes make an appearance in the books to come?

[erraticerrata](#)

If they did, I wouldn't spoiler it in comments.

[stevenneiman](#)

@Engineer I think that real tech, especially tech effectively married with magic, just has a lot more potential than the crazy shenanigans you can get up to with magic alone. The gnomes have power because they've realized that potential, and they're taking steps to make sure that that power doesn't become available to anyone else. At the same time, they can't make themselves a generalized existential threat because that would trigger heroic stories about saving the day against these super-powerful invaders and even the gnomes aren't

powerful enough to feel confident against that degree of Fate.

*Engineer*

@EE, thanks for confirming. The fact that you didn't deny it outright means that they will make an appearance and become plot central in the future books. If not, well there would be no harm in denying it, now would there? 😊

@stevenneiman that hypothesis explains their observed behavior and likely motivations extremely well.

*RandomFan*

@Engineer No it doesn't. EE could have not wanted to spoil that they wouldn't show up- which would also result in this comment. in which case, the post would have pulled off the intended result on you.

*Engineer*

@Randomfan yes, that too is a likely explanation of EE's comment.

However, a commentator in a previous chapter (or book, not sure atm) asked about the continent across the seas where the elves interbreed with humans and EE replied and said that they weren't going to be present in the story. So EE is fine with telling details that are not plot relevant to the story.

Therefore, his dodging of the question regarding the gnomes appearance in the books to come is evidence for their appearance and their plot relevance because like I said; if they weren't going to appear or be plot relevant then there's no harm in saying so, no?

*Gorgoroth*

You know, I see people mentioning Cat ascending to Death Knight as her next name, but I don't think she will. Her soul is a Squire, but that's not all she is anymore, and we know the right conditions would let her become more than just a Knight.

Catherine Foundling is the Squire of Praes, but she is also the Duchess of Moonless Nights, last of the Winter Fae nobility. She is the Black Queen, crowned ruler of Callow. She has a history of using necromancy to her own ends, and aspirations of subverting story-mandated deaths (Black, Nauk, Herself, etc.)

I think her next name is going to be Lich Queen.

*Letouriste*

Liches are dead sorcerer you know? Expert in dark magic etc... I get she can move corpse but she doesn't know what she is doing, that's all her Name shenanigans. she is no mage. also, I don't think she plan to kill herself again:D

[stevenneiman](#)

I don't think so. Death is somewhere Cat has been forced to visit a couple of times, but I doubt that she's ever going to end up living there. I expect her next Name to simply be Queen of Callow, or some corrupted version thereof.

*Engineer*

If Akua succeeds in binding her soul it's highly likely she would transition into that Name if Black is still kicking when that happens. Akua's description of her as her Knight is an apt description of how the role of a Death Knight.

*AshSlanabrezgov*

Akua's passion feels so... shallow. It feels pale compared to Black's intense creed, his SPITE.

Everything has a price. But I find that when she pays her price for power, her bid is shallow and not pleasing. She doesn't suffer herself, no, she sell souls of other people. So clean, so tidy.

Where in this is a worthy and interesting price?

You could compare her to price which Black and Cat pay. Now, that's exquisite and weighty.

As I read Akua's thoughts, I witnessed her misunderstanding of Callow, and the importance of it to hungry Praes. Where Black had a plan to fuck Good for good – I mean really in a way that matters – by grabbing a food source for Praes and capable allies, she is playing Wonderwaffe card.

Those Wonderweapons never cut it.

Overall she doesn't feel like the most world-wracking villain out there. I also question if forces she plays with are playing with her.

Will Hell strip from her proper price?

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Akua's sole goal is to become Empress for a few seconds. She kind of gives fuck all afterwards.

[stevenneiman](#)

I think that the old creed just don't understand that it's more ambitious to try for something that might succeed than to beat your head against a wall you know will never break. The old school villains convince themselves that they expect to win, but the truth is that they're afraid to try in a way that might succeed, because if they do they'll have to admit that they had a real chance and they blew it. The mad schemes they can always claim didn't work out because Fate screwed them over and ensured they were doomed from the outset (which it probably did, but that's no excuse), but a plan that turns even Fate into a gear in the machine would leave nothing to blame but your own failure.

*Decius*

So, about that coming Crusade that was going to be against Praes...

*WuseMajor*

When we first met them, Cat was brutally straightforward and Akua couldn't do anything without having half a dozen hidden machinations behind it. Ever since, Cat has been learning duplicity and Akua has been clawing her way free of her mother's influence. Now Cat has surprised her with a secret plan (with more to follow) and Akua's finally spoken from her true heart and revealed her final trump card.

Very very nice.

*Addicted*

Does anyone else thing that the Thief will steal a Key in the coming chapters?

*Letouriste*

A thief stealing a soul jar? Yes please yes!

*Engineer*

Thief is no mage and getting past the wards of the room where the phylactery is held would definitely not be easy.

If Hierophant tagged along most definitely but those wards were woven by a highly skilled fully realized NAMED sorcerer, with MONTHS of tweaking and refinement with the aid of The First Mage. A man who passed up the chance to become a Warlock not because of magical ineptitude, but because of his personality.

I really don't see how she could feasibly enter a room like that.

Assassin however...



*AshSlanabrezgov*

Thief is not a mage, indeed.  
But a Hero she is still, yes?  
Who already used to steal at least something as outrageous as the Sun and succeeded?  
And this is Unassailable Fortress Of Evil, with Artifact Of Inescapable Destruction ready to commit genocide of country full of innocents?  
And Thief might be trying to steal The Only Weak Point Of Evil Sorcerer?

I don't know exact chances, but I think it might work. If that's the plan.

*Engineer*

In most stories where that is in play said character usually dies after successfully weakening the evil overlord so the hero can deliver the final strike.

But this is a fight between two villains and calling Thief a hero is a stretch. She's neutral at best. The sun stealing is different because said sun was not inside a heavily warded room that is keyed to the very Named sorcerer that created it.

*AshSlanabrezgov*

Thief being a Hero is a stretch, yes, but stretch like this is exploitable.

Methinks it could be the story about two villains. But if framed right it would be a story of saving Callow from villain. Or another favorable story.

Black knows how to frame stories. Cat has some talent and practice with inhabitants of Arcadia.

Seems doable?

*Engineer*

Phrased like that very likely.

*Letouriste*

errr I get she think that plan of her can deal with villains and their armies but that fortress look totally hero bait^^  
I seriously doubt she can face procer like that,I mean they even have an oracle saying where she will teleport in advance.

*Shikome Kido Mi*

"Heri to... [t]he killers of the first empress, who'd writ the truth of Praes in blood and treachery. "

Yeah, but from a certain point of view, those are the people who fucked everything up and stopped Praes from every attaining it's true potential.

[stevenneiman](#)

Normally when Akua shows up the situation goes straight to hell. It's a nice change of pace for Hell to come to the situation this time.

[chris S](#)

So Diabolist has a gateway to one of the Hells, a highly fortified Liesse, innumerable devils and demons, and all signs are pointing to Black dying in this battle? And she thinks there's no way the other side can win?

Akua, you poor, silly girl. You've just made some basic Villainous Mastermind rookie mistakes. Let me break it down for everyone.

Error numero uno: You're attacking the Legions... and that means the 15th. Which has a chapel/temple of House of Light in their camp, which is presumably now right in the path of the Hellgate. The hopelessly outnumbered defenders, in their homeland, with a symbol of the Heavens in the middle of their camp, fighting against the forces of Hell (literally in this case). You've written your army's own defeat here.

Error the second: Small band of Named attacking a Evil Villain's Impregnable Fortress of Doom, which holds the source of power for the Ultimate Superweapon of Doom? You may as well open the main gates and throw a party for Cat with a Plot line that tempts Creation like that.

Error number three: The father figure to the Rightful Queen of Callow (in pretty much all of her men and most of Callow's eyes), slain by the machinations of the wannabe usurper Evil Empress? I just hope you're not stupid enough to give them a double boost by trying to knock of Hierophant's father too.

Final error: "Diabolist smiled the smile of a woman who was going to conquer the world." You're gloating. The instant you utter anything along the lines of "I am Unstoppable!" as a villain, Creation raises a pimp hand to bitch slap you with a dose of Hubris – often via Ironic Critical Existence Failure.

It's a shame her parent's never bought her the Evil Overlord's Handbook to help avoid all these tropes.

*Engineer*

Hehehehe ah that was a good read.

All those tropes you mentioned however are only really applicable if this was a heroic party assaulting the Evil Wannabe Overlord's fortress.

The gloating one is spot on though, as both Cat and Black can attest. Bare your fangs in arrogance at Creation and buy a nice set of dentures for the aftermath.

*werafdsaew*

I don't think you need to have a Heroic Name to trigger Heroic tropes. After all Catherine was able to trigger the sword-in-stone story despite being a Villain, and Diabolist said that what is important is not the Name, but the Roles in the "Villainous Interlude: Chiaroscuro" chapter. The Book of All Things also claims that Roles came first, and Names are gifted to Roles, not the other way around.

*Engineer*

She DID do that. Huh, that narrative seems probable now... We'll have to wait and see.

[\*Euodiachloris\*](#)

James Bond often assaults Evil Fortresses of Doom... in a group comprised of people he's blackmailed, cajoled, tricked, charmed or leaned on to get there. Many of them Bad Guys (but not E is for Evil Big Bad kind of bonkers Bad). Sure, he always goes off and does his solo thing, but they dramatically enter to save his bacon most of the time. Or bring the Good Guys (for the current pilot's definition of "Good" and "Guys" – actual goodness and guyness may vary).

Thief is living a Bond tale right now. 😊 Sure, she's working with Bad Guys to get her job (save the world, daring-do, rescue relative innocents, take the info and loot) done. But, she's been combating Really Nasty, Cuckoo, Out-to-Lunch Big Bads with Pragmatic Evil. That's 007's whole thing: our Hero.

I'm just wondering who her Bond Guy/Girl is. XD

*Ward*

Love from a dumb

*He-Who-Must-Be-Named*

Haven't read through all the comments, so I apologize if this has been noted, but...

"And it whispered of /triumph/"

...

Anyone else thing Triumphant (may she never return) has...returned?  
In some reincarnated form?

*AshSlanabrezgov*

I had suspicions but never voiced them. Title 'triumphante'  
means, well, triumphs, winning conflicts consistently.

But also, as God she might have a child – with a mortal or with  
an unknown winter fairy lord.

It all inconclusive, however. Even a family of farmer managed  
to give birth to Amadeus. You don't need to be reincarnation or  
relative of Triumphante to become a Catastrophe.

---

You know, Akua has called Black Knight a patriot in this charter,  
and this, combined with another passage from her speech here has  
reminded me of another mistake nobody mentions, and the reason I  
never could understand the concept of patriotism.

> "Twenty years ago, we were more powerful than the people of  
Callow," she continued. "Twenty years ago we were better than  
them, for beyond all the lies and stories that is the bare truth  
of Creation: the powerful own the world."

What kind of "we" are you talking about here? It's not "I and all  
of you", because twenty years ago you were nothing but your  
mother's scheme, the one she denied your father the support to  
his claim to the Name of Warlock for. But it's not "we, the  
peoples of Praes" either! Even if we ignore the fact that you  
didn't contribute anything to that victory, the peoples of the  
Praes are on the other side of those walls. You and your army  
represent the Praesi nobility, the small part of those peoples,  
the very same part that the people besieging your fortress had to  
subjugate first in a far more brutal civil war. Your mother  
probably didn't assist the Conquest in any way other than the  
average amount of taxes she owed to the Tower anyway, and maybe  
sponsoring a few promising officers to become her spies in the  
Legions.

This kind of demagoguery puzzles me. How can people think that  
slapping a "we" on other people's accomplishments somehow makes  
them stronger? It's a faulty way of thinking even in a universe  
that literally runs on this kind of magical thinking!

*Sous*

I have just caught up. At probably the greatest cliffhanger of them all, my poor luck.

But regardless I have to express my respect for the author. The Guide is written very well, and the world-building is subtle and thorough at the same time, which takes mastery. I am hoping so badly that it gets published, since such a work needs to become rooted deeper in our culture.

*Engineer*

If the guide gets picked up for a tv series by directors that know how to deal with fantasy (like the staff of GoT) then the guide stands a goddamn good chance of usurping GoT in terms of popularity.

*letouriste*

i don't think so.the system of Names and Roles etc... is kinda complicated to explain,i have troubles to see that on screen. i remember to be confused by some of the turning points in this novel like the angel church fight in liesse etc... that was already hard to follow written,i don't see how adapt that;)

i expect a screen adaptation would be bad or really heavily modified and simplified:/

also,the fight scenes would not be easy to do with actors,i think an animation adaptation would be better.actually,a manga adaptation could totally work no?:0

*Engineer*

What was left unsaid was that EE should take an active part in the production of the series. He shouldn't be sidelined for any of the decisions regarding the production of the tv series. That's the only way we'll be sure that the series we get is on par with the books.

With the cg that's capable today I really don't think we'll have troubles with the fights in all their glorious detail. Sure the first season's fights would be bad quality but that's only because the first season is the testing season, to get more people watching the show and thus generate more revenue for the remaining seasons.

I agree with you regarding the Anime adaption being the better choice, however. You can show a whole lot more quality scenes in an Anime than what you could in a live action but you'd have fewer viewers than you'd get for a tv series (most idiots still believe that anime is purely cartoons for kids).

It's up in the air is what I'm saying.

*Tolack*

I can actually see Akua surviving this, and not eating Cat's steel. If Thief got ahold of Akua's soulstone, then Cat will have her life in her hands, and if Akua listens to her papa dearest then she'll submit.

*Hammerman*

I can see a certain blind magic user enjoying powering the sworn knights of a Duchess, especially if it allows him to vivisect a living soul stone owner.

*letouriste*

nah, cat promised her that next time would be the last back in the first liesse battle.  
she also said one day she would find and destroy what akua care the most about...and by now she probably suspect that would be akua father...or would kill him anyway and see the result on akua face.

*Big Brother*

This is really a random thought, but didn't the Choir of Contrition show Cat a vision of her leading the next Crusade as Queen with her Red Right Hand? And now we've seen Cat assemble the largest military force since the Conquest, which contains a mix of a few nations (Praes, Callow, and the Deoraithe), to assault the center of power of the "Icon" of Old Evil, all while Cat is slowly accepting the fact that Callow sees her as the Black Queen.

And then here we see Akua make a passing remark about turning Cat into her Red Right Hand.

This might be a coincidence, but I feel an Evil subversion of the Heroic Crusade story at work right now.

*amc*

and in the previous chapter, cat more-or-less acknowledged hakram as her red-right-hand... 😊

foreshadowing where we least expect it! amazing, ee!

*letouriste*

the angels wanted her to be an hero, they can't physicaly accept her to be a black queen even if her role would be the same at the end.

for them only the side you stand on count. they are driven by absolute.

*Big Brother*

I understand this. I'm just saying what she's doing now is quite similar to what the Choir wanted her to do. Lead a massive army against the bastion of evil in Callow as Queen, which she's now doing on her own.

*Jerden*

In terms of Names for Cat, I feel like "Black Queen" is the most likely. She rejected the Name of Queen at the end of the last book, but seems to have been slowly filling the role anyway, so it would make sense to assume a corrupted version of the Good Name, and it would fit the successor to the Black Knight. It would also re-enforce the tension between her and the Empress, just in time for the fight against Procer.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I'm calling it now: Akua is going to win.

She won't win cleanly. But Black will be dead, the legions broken, Warlock I don't even know, but he won't last much longer... And Cat will have a tough choice to make: stay behind a weakened Malicia, or take Aisha's hint and back Akua when her offer is good enough.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

The only part I'm not seeing is where the Principate fits in to this scenario. Cordelia and Klaus have had too much development and screen time to be red herrings in the end

*Max Scherer*

Well i thought Akua is smart, but no she is actually pretty dumb. Her plans seems pretty good, but that can only fail. First she should at least know some stuff about Masego and that his specialization is pretty much what lays beyond creature, as Arcadia and the Hells. He cant possibly influence it, but he can see how it works and maybe find a way to destroy it with his father. Than there is Ranger she pretty much kills gods as a sport and when Amadeus should truly perish against Akua, she will find her and kill the cruelst way possible... And lets not forget that she cant break Cat. That is just one of Cats core principles. yeah she may compromise a little(but really dislikes it) but she will never break. An Angel tried it and it didnt work... So yeah she her plan is really stupid and she is really illusional in my opinion... But nontheless will this be now pretty bloody and i really want to see death, i hate Akua just way too much...

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## Chapter 60: Opening

*"Victory is transient. To seek it is to remain so. I have seen the face of that which is eternal, and it stands beyond struggle."*

– Translation of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely attributed to the young Dead King

Flight was markedly less exhilarating when people kept trying to kill me during, I decided as I guided Zombie the Third into a sharp dive to avoid a bolt of black lightning. Half a league up in the sky, the wind howling around me, I watched disaster unfold on the field below. The order of battle agreed upon had been fairly simple: the first wave would be the Legions. The Fifth, the Sixth and Twelfth would strike the initial blow, as the Fourth and the Ninth moved to the sides of Liesse bolstered by Callowan levies. The Deoraithe bowmen would move behind the centre, followed by the men-at-arms, and the Fifteenth would remain as a reserve. I was to soften up the enemy fortifications with Archer's help and a goblinfire trick, and until the aftermath of the green rain everything had been going to plan.

Then Akua had opened a fucking Hellgate and Liesse had just... disappeared. Gone into thin air.

She'd chosen the place for the gate perfectly, I had to admit. Behind the Fourth's advance, though the gate was oriented towards the Deoraithe second line. There were only a few devils coming out of the woodworks right now, but if that trickle turned into a flood our armies were going to break. The Fourth would be cut off and overwhelmed, the back of our centre up to its neck in hellspawn from behind and fortified casters from the front. The entire host would be splintered, and of the only two forces still in play – the Fifteenth under Juniper and Ninth with half the levies – the Ninth was positioned on the opposite side of the field where it needed to be. With out entire centre in the way. In the span of a single heartbeat, Akua had fucked both our left flank and centre while making our right wing useless. I would have admired that a little, if I wasn't too busy being furious. Zombie responded to my spurs as a living beast would, though I could still command its undead flesh regardless of its own will, and we arced down gracefully.

The staff officers of the Fifteenth parted for me in haste and I reined in the winged horse before someone could get trampled. Juniper, leaning over a table, ignored my entrance. Her brows were creased in thought. I cleared my throat.

"I heard you coming, Foundling," she said. "Now shut up. I'm thinking."



Yeah, that was about par for the course. I sighed and dismounted, Hakram appearing just in in time to be handed the reins. Hierophant and Archer were still out of sight, but I could feel them approaching. No, *feel* was perhaps the wrong term. It was an instinct, like the the one that warned me of danger, whispering that they were coming close. Whatever we'd done in Dormer, when all of us save Thief had fought as one, it had left a mark. The implications of that worried me.

"The Carrion Lord's advance has not slowed," Adjutant said.

"I saw," I grunted back.

There was danger in that, though I knew better than to assume Black wasn't aware of it. With the legionaries he had under the mantle of his Name advancing so much more swiftly, what had once been a wave was turning into a sloppy wedge. If he got too far ahead... He wouldn't, I told myself. Black had been winning battles before I was even a look in my mother's eyes.

"Senior Mage, report," Juniper growled.

I almost jumped. I hadn't noticed Kilian was there at all. Red hair free, she'd had her eyes closed and a loose chord of interlocked runes clutched between her fingers. After a moment she flinched in pain and opened her eyes.

"The Hellgate is beyond my ability to understand," she announced. "As for Liesse, I have some notion. The city is not gone, merely phased a step out of Creation. There is still a point of access to it."

The Hellhound made room at the table, hairless brow raised.

"Here," Kilian said, pointing down at the map.

I leaned over to see and winced. That was behind the palisade and trench, in open space overlooked by all three bastions and currently filled with wights. This one was on us, I thought. We'd all been so convinced the field fortifications were a battle measure none of us had taken the time to inspect them for anything like this. Not when we'd barely scratched the surface of understanding the kind of wards covering the walls. Juniper did not reply, brow creasing deeper. Archer and Hierophant passed the ring of legionaries exactly when I knew they would, the brown-skinned woman the only one smiling of the two.

"Masego," I called out. "I need an opinion."

"My preliminary analysis is over," he replied. "This is a Greater Breach, Catherine."

Kilian sucked in a sharp breath, but everyone else seemed as confused as I was. I assumed bad. Very bad, even. Usually the best bet to make when it came to Diabolist.

"A stable Hellgate," Hierophant added when he noticed the lack of understanding.

He sounded a touch irritated. I sucked my lip. If this had just been a play to pull out reinforcements like Akua had done at Liesse, the gate would have eventually closed on its own even if we didn't manage to shut it first. A major danger, but something that could be handled. This was different. There was a hole in the fabric of Creation in the middle of Callow and on the other side was a literally endless horde that wanted to devour everything in existence. At least I assumed. I didn't know much about the lay of the Realms Below or the beings that dwelled inside, but I doubted Diabolist had reached for Hell that was all about weaving straw baskets.

"Withdrawal is not feasible," Juniper said, calm tone cutting through the silence that had followed Masego's words. "The god bound above the Palace is not gone, and regardless time plays in her her favour more than ours."

"Hierophant, can you close this?" I asked.

He snorted, then realized I'd been serious.

"Catherine, a Greater Breach cannot be closed by definition. It is a permanent bridge between layers of existence," he said.

I grimaced.

"Can you just pop a cork in the hole, then?" I pressed.

"Theoretically," he agreed. "It would be temporary, however. And require power superior to that employed in the original breaching."

"He means no," Archer cheerfully said.

I kind of wanted to hit her in the face for that.

"If we shut down her ritual, does the gate close?" I pressed.

"You do not seem to grasp the principles involved," Hierophant said flatly. "The ritual is done. The gate is there. The Breach was made. There is no *unmaking* this."

I turned my eyes to Kilian, who raised up her palms in surrender.

"Diabolism is not a field of study covered in the College," she said. "I know nothing of this."

"Juniper?" I tried, grasping at straws.

The orc's hands left the table and she folded them behind her back.

"If we do not contain the Hellgate within a half-hour, the battle is lost," she said. "And so will be all of Callow west of Summerholm and south of Daoine, within a month."

The weight of that announcement rang like a bell. How many people was that? Most major cities fell within those borders. Vale, Southpool, Laure, Denier and even Ankou. I couldn't quite remember the exact numbers from the last Imperial census at the moment, but Laure alone was almost half a million souls. I spat to the side.

"Then get your blades out, people," I said. "We're going for a walk."

Whatever answer I might have gotten to that was drowned out by the sound of neighing and crackling flame, followed by the pungent smell of brimstone. The chariot landed with a crash, pulled by two pitch-black winged horses, and in it stood a man decked entirely in scarlet: the Sovereign of Red Skies, dressed in his full glory of war.

"Belay that," he said, and there was nothing lazy or amused in his voice.

That had me even warier. He was not a man to take the situation seriously unless he had to, in my experience. With a flourish of the wrist the Warlock produced a small flat stone and tossed it at me. I caught it without missing a beat, raising an eyebrow.

"Into your mouth, Squire," he said. "Welcome to the Link."

My eyes flicked to Masego, who nodded absent-mindedly. Safe enough, then. Gingerly I put the stone in my mouth and shuddered in discomfort when I felt it move on its own, fusing with the flesh beneath my lower teeth. A heartbeat later sorcery gently flared and I heard the sound of flesh being run through directly in my ears.

"Catherine," Black said. "Good."

"Black," I murmured. "We're in deep shit."

"Perhaps less than it seems," he replied, and on the other side something screamed and died. "You are to join me on the front along with Adjutant and Archer. The bastions must fall, and quickly."

"The Hellgate?" I asked.

"Wekesa has a theory," Black replied.

"That leaves Masego free," I frowned.

"He's going to-"

My teacher was interrupted by a sound I'd heard once before. A faint scream, rising higher and higher in pitch. Then another. Then another. Oh Gods. Had she really? Even for Akua this was playing with fire. The 'Link' cut out, before I heard Warlock grunt and sound returned as suddenly as it had gone.

"Hurry," Black ordered. "The Fifteenth is to accompany Wekesa against the Hellgate. Overall command is ceded to Marshal Ranker as of now."

Silence returned to my ears and I turned to face my officers. Several of them had gone pale, hands shaking.

"Demons," I said.

"It was a given they would be used here," Warlock said conversationally. "Not even Sahelians are so mad as to call on the Unmakers within a closed realm. Masego, you are to contain them."

Hierophant's glass eyes did not move under the cloth, but I could feel his attention move across the field and find the unfolding catastrophes.

"Madness," the dark-skinned mage said. "Apathy. And..."

He hesitated.

"Order," the Warlock finished. "That one seems to be the oldest. It might be Shango's Doom itself, the contract is still unaccounted for. Begin with Madness nonetheless, before we lose half our men to the spread. They devour grounds unlike any other breed."

Hierophant nodded, not bothering to reply, and strode ahead without paying attention to any of us. So much for planning together. I forced myself to focus even as in the back of my head threefold song began to be sung. How much worse, I thought, did it have to be close to them? Unless my sight betrayed me, the rebels had brought forth the madness right in front of the centre of their outer palisade.

"General Juniper," I said. "We have our orders."

The orc's eyes flicked to the most powerful mage in the Empire.

"We are meant to escort you," she deduce. "Am I to take this as meaning the Hellgate may be closed?"

The Warlock smiled.

"Oh, that clever child's work is not so easily undone," the man said. "The gate will remain. Destruction, though, is the tool of the uncreative. I have other means."

That cleared up very little. Was is something that came with the magic, the urge to be a mysterious jackass? The dark-skinned man rolled his shoulder to limber it and cast a wary eye to the looming Hellgate in the distance.

"Well, no time dawdle," he sighed. "General, I will need your men to establish a solid beachhead on the other side of the gate. Do be quick about it. I'll limit the spill until you arrive on the scene."

The reins came down like a lash and the winged horses neighed, the very sound unnatural. Within moments he was tearing through the sky again. My fingers clenched, then unclenched.

"Juniper," I said, turning to meet my general's gaze. "Can you do it?"

There was a heartbeat of silence, then the Hellhound chuckled and her lips split into a grin that was nasty little piece of work.

"I am," she said calmly, "a general of the Legions of Terror, anointed and sworn under sacred standard. If a Hell wages war upon the Empire, then I will invade that Hell."

Her voice did not rise, or her intonation shift. It was, as she said, as simple statement of fact. There was something in her eyes when she spoke that wasn't quite a Name – she did not have the weight behind her for that, likely never would – but was just as fearsome in its own way. It was cold, absolute and merciless certainty. The stare of a woman who had killed the enemy a hundred times in her mind already, and knew all that remained was acting out the movements. The tremors left the limbs of her officers, straight-backed pride flowing to fill the gap. Named did not have a monopoly on greatness, I thought. Sometimes all that was needed was the unshakeable will of one who never even considered defeat a possibility.

"Then hear my order, General," I said, and my mantle stirred at the shape of this. "Even if it is impossible, even if all that rules Above and Below stands arrayed against you – *win*. I will allow nothing less from you."

"Warlord," she said, chops bared and head bowed.

I left it at that, because between the two of us nothing more needed to be said. There might be a day where Juniper failed in the face of ruin, because in the end did we not all fail? No

matter how clever or powerful, an ending always came. But, I thought, it would not be today. Not against this. Adjutant stood at my side, loosening the leather ring holding his axe, and I found Archer staring at me with a pleased smile.

"Zeze's playing with the hellspawn and Fury Green's got her own battle to win," Archer drawled. "So what do you have for us, Cat?"

My eyes found the distant silhouettes of the bastions, flickering with sorcery and siege engines.

"String your bow, Archer," I said. "The three of us are taking down the strongholds with Black."

Had the day not been so dire, I might have been unsettled by how feral the grin I got in response was. Today, though? I was counting on it.

—

Zombie the Third got us near the front, but that was all I would ask of it. Three people were too much to have any room to manoeuvre, and twice we were nearly torched on our flight forward. We made a slow, fat target for any mage with a little juice to send out. I sent back the undead horse behind the lines and took a deep breath. *Shit, steel and blood.* The scent of battlefields. I'd landed us close to General Orim's Fifth Legion, which currently made up the left side of assault. He trailed behind Black still, even though my teacher had abandoned the centre for the right, but he'd caught up some since I'd last had a look. Black had run into some heavy resistance at the palisade, and had yet to pierce through the enemy centre. That wasn't the part of this battlefield that worried me.

Hierophant's lid on the demons unleashed was paper-thin, it was obvious to see. Not only had he been ordered to maintain three sets of wards against demons simultaneously, but he was facing constant pressure by the mages in the bastions trying to undo his work. It was worthy of a little awe, I thought, how he was still managing to keep his head slightly above the water for all that. I could not even see the demons, save for the occasional heartbeat-lasting glance, since they were surrounded by smooth globes of ivory-like solid sorcery. Around those wards sticks of incense floated, slowly burning out only to be engulfed in ivory flames at the last moment and from ashes born anew and full. The strength of the wards? It made sense. I'd seen some sticks burn much more quickly when the ovals came under fire. Regardless, those few moments where the demons were not completely contained were enough to twist their immediate surroundings. I saw legionaries but also wights, things that should have no soul of their own, begin howling and tear at themselves and everything

close to them. Others simply... ceased. Fell down, dead for their hearts no longer beat.

The creepiest was the work of the third. What it touched of Creation became... *unwoven*, in some fundamental way. Air was breathed, but gave no breath. Flesh remained fixed even as men moved, sliding off like oil. Ground became like the sea, and I even caught sight of a man who took a ball of flame to the face rise and walk back, flesh mending, only to advance as he first had and be struck by the very same spell. It was not that the demons ran amok. If they did, the Legions would have broken already. But just by being contained in front of the first palisade protecting the bastions, they created a rampart of death that could not be passed. The legionaries had to go around them, and not come too close, which took them straight into the enemy fire. Tough the goblinfire still burned and had thinned the ranks some, the wights were still thousands and bitterly contested the palisades. Most of the killing, though, came from the bastions. Sorcery lashed out in never-ending waves, trebuchets and scorpions that were the deadly work of goblin engineering carving bloody streaks in the advancing men. Already at least a thousand dead carpeted the field, and dozens more died every heartbeat.

I breathed out and unsheathed my sword, gathering power. Archer idly nocked an arrow and Adjutan's grip tightened against the shaft of his axe with a crisp leathery sound.

"All right," I said. "Let's get this started."

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[nehemiahnewell](#)

Order demon, huh? Not quite what I was expecting from the name.

*Zayits*

Looks like it makes matter/states constant at random. Before I read the third description, I honestly thought it was the "instant death" one.

Given the effect it has on magic, I wonder whether Akua's plan is to have it eventually plug the entrance to Liesse. She seems to pick the demons so they would affect her mages the least, but the Order one stands out. Bad idea, regardless, when you look on how the Madness and goblinfire (nice typo in the beginning, btw) spread the chaos on the battlefield, which arguably benefits Cat and Amadeus more than Akua.

[Un-Metaphorical Grapevine](#)

The proper name of an order demon is, "Your Honour."

*danh3107*

Blueballed until Wednesday huh, damn. Still a pretty good set up chapter.

[DroughtBringer](#)

\*Grumble grumble\*

Why do you have to stop there?

Also, I feel like this section will have tons of interludes, going to be nice afterwards to see what everyone is doing, but before that... having to wait a few days for each chapter is going to kill me.

*Gunslinger*

Well shit, things are properly dire now. I suppose it was too much to expect that the Fifteenth could chill in the rear and not have to constantly fight demons/demigods. Speaking of demons, I wonder if the whole tainted by the Chaos demon thread would come up again now that Masego is facing 3 others.

Can't wait till Wednesday but in the meanwhile vote for the guide on topwebfiction.com if you can <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*HandyCapped*

Demon of corruption.

*Idan Dor*

The following comment was written before I read the chapter so there is a chance I'm already wrong.

I have thought for a few days about how the Calamties will die. It is obvious that now that the Woe exist, the Calamties are redundant to the setting and with what the Bard started, they have already started to "leave it". This comment is mostly my predictions, I'm at least somewhat placing this out here so I can see where I was wrong/right later.

English is also not my first language so I apologize in advance if things are grammarly incorrect or confusing. This has also turned out to be rather long, I have tried to split it a bit so hopefully it is readable.

Let's start with the death we already observed and diagnose it, The Captain, Sabah. Her death already happened, but I would like to mention a few things notable things in it. First, it was a very thematic death, the Monster brought down by a Hero, a



Champion. Second, Captain was killed doing what she does best, all out fighting. I'm bringing both of these points up because they are going to be repeated in the deaths of the rest of the Calamities and to contrast it with the Exiled Prince's death. In his death, he did not die melee fighting or leading, he died "alone". It would be as if Captain was killed by a spell like the Tyrant attempted. No, instead she got to fight all out, 1 against 1 melee combat. Naturally, with this being a story in which the characters know about themes, precedent and lore I fully expect it to be inverted or evaded by at least one of the calamities.

Alright, with that in mind let us go back to the present where I predict (as do others) that Warlock will fall. Now, Warlock is not your typical evil sorcerer. He is not out there to terrorize and take over the world, he does not seem to use demons or devils a lot and as his states himself, he is bored with politics and just wants to do magic. With that in mind, look at what Diabolist has turned out to be basically his exact opposite. She wants to rule the world, terrorize it to submission and she will do whatever warlockly things are required to do this (undeading people, summoning devils, releasing demons).

Now, usually evil sorcerers fall to their own summons/creations/subjects but Warlock does not fit that mold. He instead relies on his skills, knowledge, research and power to get done what a more standard "warlock" like Diabolist will do with sacrifice/demons and blasphemy. I believe he will be defeated and killed by Diabolist in a battle of skill (Malicia claimed she would have been a match for him had he been younger) due to the army of devils she has under her control. His "thing" is also boundaries which Diabolist very much just broke so I believe it will be a very fitting death.

Guessing the other Calamities deaths' is harder because we don't particularly know much about them, but I'm going to start with Ranger. Ranger is a half elf obsessed with hunting those worth hunting, she has also been described as someone unbeatable and has considerable amounts of experience and skill under her belt.

She is also technically retired so I'm not quite sure if she still needs to die, but if she does my guess is that she is going to be killed by her opposites: the Elves of the Golden Bloom. She is the diametric opposite of them in quite a few ways, she is a half elf while they "will remain forever unmarred". They think themselves above the affairs of mortals while she does "meddle" (if only for sport). We also know from her chapter that the Emerald Swords occasionally trying to purge her. Overall, they pretty much are the only thing that can actually kill her, it will be a fitting death and because something needs to drag them to the uncivil war (like the rest of the continent) and this seems like a good premise.

Next, Scribe. She is technically not a Calamity but she is affiliated and she must die before Black does so she gets on this list. So what do we know about her? Not much really. She is from the free cities, her name is Eudokia and she is a scribe. We also got a few start of chapter quotes by a "Eudokia, the Oft-Abducted, Basilea of Nicae" which I can only assume is the same person as Scribe and that everyone but me noticed the connection even though I haven't seen it mentioned.

If she is the same person it is very interesting as it means that she is royalty in Nicae while her Name of Scribe is most likely related to the city of Delos, the city with huge bureaucracy where "the will of the Heavens and the will of the aseketis of the Secretariat were considered to be the same thing". This also seems to imply that Scribe is supposed to be an heroic name because Delos is on the side of Good. With the Oft-Abducted part of her name though and her quotes, I can only assume that she experienced a lot of Free Cities politics and was deeply hurt by it.

This, while very interesting, does not give me too much to speculate on, so I can only assume she will die in the Free Cities by the hands of the Hierarch who lived his life as a diplomat and then was abducted by Tyrant. This feels right but is not much as we still don't know enough about her. It is also, like with Ranger and the Elves, a great way to drag the free cities to this mess.

I have pondered quite a bit about Assassin. We know that he has been on screen before but we have no idea who he is. Some have speculated that Scribe and Assassin are the same person while the writer mentioned that some people in story don't believe he even exists but simply think Black has a lot of talented assassins in his use (at least I remember such a comment). We only really know he has an "interesting" sense of humor, a bit mentioned by Black about him being raised in a school of hired killers and whatever can be learned of his appearance in Thief's chapter. We don't know his ethnicity, origins (though he was not mentioned as not Praesi by Warlock so it makes sense that he is Praesi) and even if he is a "he".

As a completely wild speculation I'm going to guess he is actually Ime (Malicia's helper) due to Assassin knowing how Thief was (something Black didn't seem to), being a woman (from what I have seen the author refers to Assassin without gendered pronouns) and because we don't know anything about that her. Anyhow, the only being I could think of which can actually beat this whimsical pile of murder at his own game is the Dead King. I find it to be very fitting but I'm kinda speculating over nothing at all here.

And finally, the one which must be the last Calamity to die, Amadeus, Lord Black himself. About him we know a lot, we know how loyal people (and entire armies) are to him and how loyal he is to them. He is very much a leader and we know he will be the last to go due to all others (except Assassin) saying how they will avenge him. His kit is mostly about leading armies and groups to battle so I will not expect him to fall quietly.

The most obvious way he can die is Catherine stabbing him in the back. However, she has repeatedly shown no wish to do so. Unless he loses it completely, which is a road he somewhat started, I don't expect this to happen. It is merely "too standard" for Black Knights to be killed by their Squires.

Option two: The White Knight kills him. The White Knight could beat him at his army leading game (with a bit more experience and some luck) but his fight is supposed to be killing Catherine not Black.

Option Three and most fun (and very wild prediction): Malicia kills him. admittedly it is a very out there theory but I very much like it. Conflict between Malicia and Black has been "hinted" for a very long while and Malicia has been whispering betrayal for a while and craves control, so what happens when someone starts becoming a loose cannon and losing his perspective? It is very possible that Malicia will not kill him directly but merely orchestrate his death at the hand of someone else.

Option four, which a few people seem to believe in, he simply does not die. To quite a few commenters it seems like Black's death has been hinted too much and that it will simply averted.

I'm not sure I buy that, but it does bring me to what seems the most likely to me, option five: he dies and then Catherine necros him up. We have known that her necromancy is different then regular (Masego comments on this somewhere around chapter 40) and her connection with death has been direct with her using necromancy all the time and even dieing herself. I think this is the most likely as patterns can't be beaten but they can be transcended and this will be a very clean transcension of "the Calamities dieing" and will even allow Black his "real" victory/ happy ending.

I have seen some comments suggesting that Triumphant (may she never return) is going to pop out of the hell Diabolist has opened. If she does pop out, she will be a very fitting leader to beat Black at his own game. I'm just not very certain she is going to be back, though admittedly it will be very awesome.

TLDR – Warlock dies to diabolist, Ranger to the Elves of the Golden Bloom, Eudokia to Hierarch, Assassin to the Dead King and Black dies but is necroed to life by Catherine.

Thank you for reading. Now to read the chapter.

*Ed*

Nah sorry I disagree.

Your work up there is logical and makes sense but I really do think that Black will die in a way that is squarely pointed at Cat even though she didn't do it... so then the other Calamities all die at her hand.

Eventually... after severely mauling her and Cat having to arse pull victories as she does 😊

*Shequi*

Option: Black gets corrupted by one of the Demons on the field, and Cat has to put him down for both his own good and the good of the Empire.

*Idan Dor*

It has been hinted at before so it makes sense:

"It was a reasonable precaution," he said. "Arrangements like it aren't uncommon among villains. I know Uncle Amadeus has a way to kill Father should he ever be corrupted, and he himself has an arrangement with Assassin to be executed should he ever become a threat to the Empire."

Though I stick to my reasoning that Warlock will be the one to die here not Black. If someone gets corrupted by the demons then it is going to be Warlock who will be killed by Black. I remember Black thinking "and he wondered how many of the people he loved he would have to kill, before it was all over." and we already know he is supposed to have contingency against Warlock.

*Duckie*

I have to agree. I am leaning more towards Warlock being taken by demons and killed by Black then Black being taken by demons or killed by Akua. For one Blacks story does not cross in anyway with Akua's or enough so that it results in her killing him.

It is far more likely Warlock is corrupted, killed by Black. Black who is already suffering the loss of one friend, snaps after being forced to kill another. Decides enough is enough and tries to do what he hinted a few chapters ago. Make Cat attack the empire, he thus becomes a threat to the Empire. Which in turn sets the plan he made for Assassin to kill him if he becomes a threat, in motion. Which makes Cat even

angrier and gives her a justification for waging war on the Empress, revenge.

*MetruX*

My own take on this: Assassin dies off-screen, and we never know who he or she is. Ranger, if she must die, will die hunting, maybe even Cat herself. Black, on the other hand? I can see two options. He finally snaps, but in the wrong direction, and dies protecting his daughter in all but blood, Cat; or, option two, he kills himself in some manner (even if just by letting something happen instead of stopping it) so Cat can follow her way.

*Engineer*

Remember Black is not losing his mind. The only person who said that was Malicia and her reasoning for that is because he plans to murder the entire nobles and destroy their bloodlines, something Malicia doesn't approve of. But look at the shit that's happening now, you've got a Noble that has opened a permanent gate to hell. If Alaya had listened to Black and allowed him to murder all of them back at the end of the Conquest they wouldn't be in this situation now.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I like your guess about Assassin's identity, that seems fairly likely.

I'm still sticking with my guess that it was the one member of the Blackguard who spoke with her, way back in the beginning 😊

*Letouriste*

I honestly expected them to already have counters against all kind of demonic things given that's what akua is known for. I thought her trump card would be something different from demons and devils flooding^^.

*Soronel Haetir*

I don't see Ranger needing to die, also with the way she is I am not certain she would not withdraw from a fight she is losing. She does what she does because otherwise she is bored, not because she is actually interested in whatever good or ill she achieves.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*soonnandnaanssoon*

Did anyone pick up on the change of relation with Killian? I remembered Cat being able to feel her presence before, but now she doesn't even notice Killian around anymore. My bet is either some Akua fudgery is going on with Killian or there was some Role development that was ongoing when they were together that stopped when they split. Regardless, I think this is gonna bite Kat in the ass. Unpleasurably, coming from Killian.

*MetruX*

It's more that she could feel the Fae Blood and since she's a noble fae she got the feeling she should dominate her. But, with the final choice of full break, there is no compulsion anymore.

[Alyxe](#)

Yay, thank you for the chapter. Two quick typo note with the corrections in square brackets []:

"[Though] the goblinfire still burned and had thinned the ranks some, the wights were still thousands and bitterly contested the palisades."

"I breathed out and unsheathed my sword, gathering power. Archer idly nocked an arrow and [Adjutant]'s grip tightened against the shaft of his axe with a crisp leathery sound."

*Edrey*

I dont think black would die, lossing his name maybe because cat would break the story and they are in the city where they can steal names

*Nobody*

Warlock is definitely going to die before Black. He would freak out if Black died and Catherine would be the first one to be blamed and killed by him. Maybe he will be forced to sacrifice himself to save Black...

*Author Unknown*

This fits perfectly with Diabolist's character, holding the world hostage. Again and again, the orphanage, the city, the chapel, she had taken hostages to try and control others. In fact, the chapel bears a considerable resemblance to her current stronghold. A dimension she controls. Where at the chapel she threatened to collapse the dimension and kill them all, who knows what she will do with this little pocket when faced with losing. I certainly don't think all of her spellwork is going to quietly unravel if she dies.

*Myself*

"It was a given they would be used here," Warlock said conversationally. "Not even Sahelians are so mad as to call on the Unmakers within a closed realm. Masego, you are to contain them."

Well don't be so sure about it, Ubua nearly summoned a freaking corruption demon inside a closed realm back in Book 2

*Edrey*

Now that i re-read the chapter i found something interesting, how kilian scaped cat's senses when she can literally feel her fae blood, is a ward or a name? Now that is something

*Engineer*

Time for my regularly scheduled fanfueled erroneous prediction. Without further ado, let's get to it. Ok so FIRSTLY, I know nothing.

That is all.

Chapter was great, except for the blue balling at the end. But all is forgiven since it was Monday and we can get our sweet "release" tomorrow.

Go Team Woe, Go!

*Redlaw*

No that i think about it the woe are really like the calamity. Squire = Black; warlock=masego ; adjutant= scribe ; thief = assassin ; ranger = archer. Now we only need someone to equal captain.

*Engineer*

Adjutant is both Captain AND Scribe's counterpart.

*narcoduck*

I think Nauk was Captain's counterpart. The big brute who resolves to control their inner fury and utterly loyal. But due to their leaders' arrogance, they're brought into fights where they're lost.

[Un-Metaphorical Grapevine](#)

it took you that long to figure that out?

Next Time on Puzzling the Puzzle With RedLaw: "The Sky is red, grass is red, and everything is on fire."

*satoshikyū*

"I can't believe I have to lower my standards lower than they already are," I complained. "Well, nobody's opened a permanent portal into the Hells. There. I refused to go any lower."

"Give it time," Juniper grinned, ivory fangs flaring.

From chapter 33. WELP. She asked for it.

*arancahtar*

There are Demons of Order? That seems counter-intuitive.

*arancahtar*

Forget closing that gate; use it to stage an invasion of hell. Because fuck it!

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## Chapter 61: Tempo

*"It is true, Chancellor, that a house divided cannot stand. Why do you think mine is the only one I left standing?"*

– Dread Emperor Callous

Legionaries were dying like flies. I'd never seen infantry assault a dug-in position held by mages and engines before, and now that I had I could only say it was ugly work. The enemy had been trained in counter-siege tactics, that much was obvious. The first killing grounds were the trench, deep and wide and filled with stakes at the bottom. The men of the Fifth set down planks to bridge it, but planks were mere wood and wood was no match for the sorcery being flung at it. The bridges rarely lasted longer than twenty heartbeats, forcing the legionaries to come at the palisade in clumps instead of a single overwhelming wave. The palisade itself was nothing special – tall and well-built, but lacking wards or anything arcane – but behind it stood an awaiting sea of wights. Goblin munitions made half a dozen breaches along the length of the fortification, but the legionaries were failing repeatedly to push back the undead behind the openings. This, I thought, would be where we began.

Men scattered around the three of us, as much because they knew what we could do as because of some animalistic instinct that screamed *Named, move aside while you still can*. I could have leapt the trench easily enough, but that would be defeating the purpose. My sword arced along the ground and thick, dark ice formed in a bridge large enough for ranks of ten to pass.



Retaliation was immediate. The fluid, silvery spell that flowed towards my chest I cleaved through without missing a beat and felt the sorcery coming apart at the seams. The five scorpion bolts were a touch more difficult to deal with. My Name pulsed and I let the world slow around me, Winter coursing through my veins. The first bolt froze and shattered with but a twist of will and the two behind it followed suit effortlessly, but the trajectory of the other two was angled too far. Clucking my tongue I ducked under the shots, but the sound of screaming and flesh being pierced behind me told me the men of the Fifth had not been so quick on their feet.

They were not the first legionaries to die today, nor would they be the last.

"Archer," I said. "Silence those engines. Leftmost bastion."

The arrow she nocked was more javelin than anything else, not even fletched – given the ridiculous size of her bow, though, it still fit. Golden stripes ran down the side of the wood, glinting with something like power. Not a spell, I thought, but power inherent. That was much more dangerous.

"Cover your ears, my darlings," she drawled.

Thunder sounded with the loosened string. The javelin roiled with lightning before it was even released, and it flew in a crisp trajectory. Panes of power lit up above the bastion's ramparts like fireworks in shades of blue but the arrow sailed right through them. Lightning tore through a scorpion's wooden frame, shattering it like it'd been swatted by some irritated titan. I didn't know how many of those fancy arrows she had, but I'd leave her to it. This alone had been enough to panic the mages in the bastion, though I knew better than to think it would last.

"Adjutant," I said, idly spinning my blade to limber my wrist. "Let's make the Fifth a beachhead."

I heard Archer cackle behind me as I strode across the ice bridge, followed by the sound of spells tearing into the ground where she'd previously stood. Hakram and I advanced shields raised and found nothing but palisade ahead – the legionaries pouring in behind us were already making for the sides where breaches had been made instead of remaining here.

"Hold," I barked.

Just wood, I thought, and almost snorted. There'd been a time where that would have been enough to slow me down, but I'd left that behind me years ago. My shield whipped into the palisade and there was a loud splintering sound. I'd felt the braces on the other side shake and so I struck again. Again, again, five times in whole before the entire section collapsed ahead of me. There

was a heartbeat where the palisade fell back and that was all within my sight, but then the wights raged forward and the fight began. In the distance thunder struck again, Archer's laugh like the ring of doom, and then I rammed into the enemy ranks. There was no place for elegance or subtlety, here. It was just a slog through mud, blood and steel. The kind of graceless fight that had first seen me rise, back in Laure and the Pit. It was almost like coming home and there was a beat to it, a song of crushed skulls and scattered men, and as I sunk deep within myself I embraced it. Adjutant's blurring axe was another of my limbs, moving in accord to a will that was not entirely my own but still mine to shape.

The howling corpses of my people came for my head and they were swept aside. My shield smacked a wight into a spreading pool of green fire as my body pivoted to turn a sword-blow into a wasted swing, Hakram's axe tearing straight through the neck of the undead who'd swung it. Like a whirlwind we advanced, and the hordes of the dead were no match for two Named at the peak of their transient power. The Fifth Legion followed behind, rows of red shields streaked with mud, and what ground we gained was not given back. It wasn't enough, I thought. I went deeper, let the beat guide my hands and feet. Swifter, sharper, until they were just wheat before the sickle. The cold part of my mind knew this was dangerous, remaining in this place where all that existed in Creation was blades in motion, but victory did not come to those who hesitated. What ended it was the song, because it had refrain to it I'd not first heard. Threefold it crooned, feeding me whispers of destruction unending, and when I realized where it came from my blood ran cold. I tore myself out of the trance, limbs trembling, and prayed to any deity listening that it had not been too late.

"Hakram," I croaked, "stop. *Now*. The demons..."

He let out a hiss that reeked of fear.

"Hierophant should be containing them," he said.

"Can you really contain something like that?" I muttered.

The thing that had been coursing through our veins was gone, and though we still stood strong before the tide our advanced had stopped cold. I didn't want to use an aspect, not out here before I'd even caught glimpse of Akua and the reckoning that lay between us, but the Fifth alone would not be enough to break through the wights. Thunder struck again, Archer a weapon in my arsenal not even the Praesi had answer for. The stone in my mouth warmed with sorcery, and Black's voice cut through the racket of battle.

"Squire," he said. "Leave the Fifth on its own. Move on the left bastion. I need you to draw fire if you can."

My eyes flicked to the right flank, and I finally noticed I had not been the only one to punch through the palisade. Black was on foot now, leading the Fourth's heavies, and where he went death followed. Tendrils of shadow punctured the ground with impossible precision, triggering one array of defensive wards after another while tight ranks of shields drove back the dead. Before long he would be at the foot of the bastion, though the only way up for the legionaries would be the ramp descending from the back of it. It was no mystery why he'd asked me to draw fire: the mages from the two closest bastions were filling the air with sorcery, and though the legionaries under his mantle were not so easily killed the spells still tore smoking holes in his formation every few moments. Casualties were mounting, faster than he could afford.

"Understood," I said. "The demons are proving an issue, Black."

"Purge protocols will be put in place after the battle," he simply replied, and the sound cut.

Joy. That was going to be a glorious aftermath, herding together men who'd fought for us through literal Hells and torching anyone even remotely contaminated. Still, if the alternative was letting soldiers touched by demons back into the wild... There was no winning when it came to dealing with demons, only limiting the damage as much as possible.

"Hakram," I said. "Go back for Archer. We're hitting the left bastion in full force. Tell her... tell I don't care how she gets there, as long as it's fast."

I was going to regret that, I suspected. The orc nodded.

"And you?" he asked.

"I'm going to remind Akua's minions why she keeps running when we fight," I grimly said.

Slogging through the wights barring the path to the bastion would take too long, I decided. But I had option. A platform of ice and shadow formed before me and I leapt atop it, beginning my trek to the enemy.

—

There was a very important difference, I mused, between fighting one angry demigod in the sky and fighting a hundred mortal mages at range. The mages didn't hit nearly as hard, sure, but they hit a *lot*. That was proving to be something of a problem, given how gravity kept being a bit insistent about the whole falling thing. The orb of spinning black light hit me in the chest and knocked me straight off the platform — I smashed my shield into it but the steel began to boil, so instead I let myself drop half a dozen feet before making another platform. Under me the sea of

wights grasped upwards, some clever enough to begin piling up to reach me. Right, upper grade undead. Fucking Praesi and their endless magical bullshit parade of horrors. My shield was dripping liquid steel but I froze it back into a semblance of usefulness, part of my mind already forming another platform as I did. I'd learned pretty early on that picking up the pace was the most important part of this game.

I was halfway there, but this close they were having an easier time pushing me back. I could see their faces from here, behind the glowing panes, and there was as much terror to behold as there was sneering. The way I kept stubbornly not dying was probably the reason for the former. Two leaps before I got my shoulder clipped again, and that had me slipping long enough for a lash of lightning to crack down at my head. I hurriedly hid under my cloak and the sorcery washed past, but then the fuckers shattered the platform under me and I dropped down onto the wights. I landed on one's head and even as a hundred hands and blades went for me I coiled my legs and jumped back up. The pane of ice I made at an angle, immediately leaping off it and ending up already in flight when the mage volley came calling. *Steady, Catherine, I told myself. Steady and careful is how we get there.* I faked a forming platform to the right then veered to the left on another, lips quirking at how eagerly they fell for it.

I heard a hoarse yell, and my brow rose as I saw a trebuchet stone hit the wights ahead. The Legions had finally set up their engines in range, looked like. Then a silhouette rose slowly from atop the stone, resetting a broken arm with a scream, and Adjutant tossed his crumpled up shield at a wight's head. Had he just... That had *worked*? I knew he was tougher now that he was Named, but this was ridiculous. He got hit by a fireball right in the chest and thrown off the stone so I hurriedly made a series of platforms and reached him before he could get his idiot ass killed. I leaned over the hoist the orc by the scruff of the neck, smacking aside a smoky-looking spell, and resisted the urge to chew him out in the middle of an active battlefield.

"Where's Archer?" I asked instead.

"Fire," he replied, eyes going wide.

I cursed and dragged him through another jump – less than a hundred feet now, they were getting quicker.

"She said something about 'stealing your stuff'," he got out.

"She would," I bitterly complained.

I focused on the little bundle in the back of my mind and found Zombie the Third in flight, Archer on his back and whooping joyfully. Her tone was not any less obnoxious heard through a

necromantic abomination's ears, apparently. I'd learned something today.

"This is going to hurt," I told Adjutant.

"Catherine, don't-"

I threw him, right at the bastion. My armour creaked under the strain but the orc flew and smacked right into the blue panes of light. Ah, they'd adjusted for physical stuff after Archer kept destroying their engines. That was unfortunate. On the bright side, they were now panicking so another two platforms had me landing atop the bastion while they did their level best to incinerate Hakram with hellflame. Break was on the edge of my lips, just waiting to be brought out and shatter their little protections, but I pushed down the urge. Not an aspect, not against second-stringers like these. My sword dug into the shield and my Name flared, sorcery impossibly turning into ice and cracking beneath the force. It shattered, and their protections must have been tied because the whole thing gave as one. I landed in a crouch, my frost-tinged armour glinting even in the shade, and let out a steamy breath. Hakram dropped down like a stone a heartbeat later, crashing without even the pretence of control and cursing loudly in Kharsum all the while.

Bastion, I thought as I placed it all in my mind's eye, was the right word for this. From the outside it looked like a broad tower of hewn stone, but up here it was revealed for what it was: a large fortified platform, for the use mages and engines. Fewer than a hundred mages left – attrition had taken its toll – and maybe thrice that in household troops and men who worked the engines. Actually taking the bastion, I thought, was perhaps not within my means. Wrecking it, though, absolutely was. It would have to do. The Fifth was lagging too far behind to be counted on for this.

"Though I be a speck of dust, I-" a man began incanting, and without blinking I raised my hand.

His throat filled with ice, his eyes froze over and just like that he died.

"Oh Merciless Gods," a woman whispered, then gathered herself. "WARDS."

Too late for that, I thought. Adjutant was back on his feet, though given his armour always looked like it had been put to the torch it was hard to tell whether the earlier flames had hurt him or not. He was moving fine, though. That would be enough: all I needed him to be was a target. The buzz of sorcery filled the air and the household troops advanced, but I ignored them entirely. I'd not come to kill rank and file, however pretty the armour. I dashed forward and lowered myself under a man's swing then

slipped past him, shield coming up to swat aside the man behind and then I was through, past their forming defensive line. There were shouts behind but I paid them no attention, running to the mages. I carved through the first man's chest before he could even finish making a ball of flame, moving to the next before his corpse had even dropped. Taghreb and Soninke all of them, in rich robes and jewellery. The finest of the Wasteland. They died, one after another. Once I might have thought there would be something cathartic about scything through the very kind of people who'd plundered my homeland for decades, but I'd been wrong. All I felt was sickened.

This wasn't a fight, it was a massacre.

They formed their first ward before I'd slaughtered my way through the first dozen but it had been done in haste. I let Winter flow my veins and it broke under two swings, a pair of mages falling to their knees bleeding out of their eyes and nose when it shattered. I flicked my sword and a spear of ice went straight through a Taghreb's stomach even as I broke a man's skull with a smash of my shield. They were terrified, and the Beast was drinking it in like fine wine even as bile rose in my throat. A few of them banded together and managed to bind my shield with lightning, convulsions running up my arm, so I dropped it immediately. Before a heartbeat had passed I was elbow deep in a man's ribcage, flesh parting like mud under gauntlet and Name strength.

"Monster," a sorcerer hissed.

"Amateurs," I judged them.

I withdrew my hand from the dead man, dripping red, and conceded the stranger might have something of a point. I stepped around the ten bolts of shadow he threw at me and ran him through anyway, because it was too late to flinch now. Not when I was surrounded by an army made up of my dead countrymen, lashed to these people's will. That I had blood on my hands did not make these mages better in some nebulous way: all it meant was that we were sharing similar gutters. The household troops were trying to get at my back, but they'd run into a problem called Adjutant. By the way he was moving, swifter and stronger with every swing, he'd called on his first aspect of the day. Rampage, I thought, would be enough to keep those out of the way for a while. I danced around another volley of spells, too quick for any of them to handle this close up, and Archer joining the fight was heralded by the loud crack of shattering wood. Zombie whinnied as he crashed into a trebuchet, his rider fluidly leaping down before impact, and my lips thinned. If Archer had broken my flying horse I was going to be *cross*. It wasn't like I could just waltz back into Arcadia to get another one.

"Sorry I'm late, had to make a detour," Archer called out.

"Mages first," I replied, in no mood for banter. "Then the engines."

It was poor form, I supposed, to tell the enemy or plan before it was carried out. I'd have hesitated if they actually stood a chance of stopping us. It'd been bad enough when I was the only fox in the henhouse, but with Archer having her knives out the mages were finished. After she cut the first one's throat any semblance of coordination went out the window and from there on it was just... work. Red labour, moving from one soon-to-be-dead man to another. Cut through the half-summoned devil, go around the spell, and then another corpse hit the ground. Dimly I realized I felt like throwing up. I pressed on anyway. After the last mage was dead Archer went to back Hakram and I turned to the engines. Seven trebuchets, twice as many scorpions. There'd been a few more of each before, but Archer had taken her toll earlier. I'd anticipated some fighting before breaking them, but apparently there'd be no need: all the people operating them had fled down the ramp while I whet my blade. Scorpions were easily dealt with, finicky things that they were: rip out the string, shatter the frame. The trebuchets were hulking masses I only vaguely understood the working of, so I kept it simple. There was a thick beam connecting the sling to the counterweight, going through the pivot above. I put my hand to the part of the beam next to the string and froze the wood, then shattered it with the pommel of my sword. It should be enough to take them out of the battle. I turned to the still-ongoing scrap with the household troops and my brow rose.

They were still keeping in formation, to their honour. But Archer kept killing their officers whenever one spoke, so what had likely been meant as an orderly retreat down the ramp and into the wights was turning into a rout. Adjutant, I saw, was beginning to wind down. His Name thought the fight was spent, so the aspect was petering out. That could be dangerous, if he was still surrounded by soldiers. There was a mass of wights below the ramp in the back, but they'd not engaged. They were... fighting? But there were no legionaries down there. *Ah, I realized. We killed the mages guiding them. Now they're just tearing at anything in sight.* Some pockets still seemed to be orderly, and my guess at the culprit for that was the mages on the central bastion. The battle wasn't done because we'd softened up the left flank, though now the Fifth would have a much easier time punching through. I looked at the other strongholds, and saw the one on the right had already fallen. The Sixth's banner flew above it, now, and unlike me Black had been followed by legionaries. He'd not destroyed the engines: he'd ordered them turned on the undead. Of him I saw no trace, but in truth I didn't look for long.

The Twelfth, I saw, had followed behind the Sixth. They were fighting their way to the central bastion, though advance was

slow and costly. How long had all of this taken? An hour, in whole? *And Akua must have prepared this field for months.* Even without the other Calamities, Black was a weight on the balance unlike any other. I went to reinforce Archer and Adjutant, and that was the last straw. The household troops fled into the clawing field of wights, judging all too accurately that they had better chances of survival down there than against the three of us. There was a heartbeat of silence, the three of us panting atop a stronghold surrounded by corpses, and I closed my eyes. I willed a sliver of my Name into the Link, finding it highly receptive. I had no fondness for Masego's father but he knew his way around enchantments.

"Black," I said. "My bastion's done."

There was the sound of steel against steel on the other side.

"Can you see the way into Liesse?" my teacher asked.

I squinted in the distance, towards where Kilian had pointed on the map earlier. There was, I saw, a pit. I couldn't see what was in it and it was surrounded by wights, but it was the only thing close to a gate I could find.

"I think so," I said. "Hole in the ground?"

"I will arrive momentarily," he said. "Have your Named join with the Twelfth for the assault on the last bastion. You and I will proceed into the city."

"I don't like the shape of that," I admitted.

"It has been taken into consideration," he replied. "Do not dawdle. Resistance is intensifying close to the pit, I will not be able to wait for long."

The sound cut and I frowned, trying to look for him on the field. There was a single man on a horse, swiftly cutting his way through the wights. Huh. He wasn't even fighting them, not really. He trampled exactly as many as he needed to go forward and ignored the rest. *And he's getting close,* I thought. Time to go.

"We've got orders," I said.

Archer snorted.

"Because I'm so fond of those," she said.

"They involve a lot of killing," I said.

"You have my attention," the wretch grinned.



"The two of you are going with the Twelfth to hit the last stronghold," I said. "Follow into the city after if you can, but that might not be feasible."

Hakram frowned.

"You're going on without us?" he said.

"Bonding time with Black," I said. "I assume some form of murder will be involved, possibly also a chilling speech on the nature of power. As prelude to further murdering."

"You have the weirdest relationships with people," Archer muttered.

Archer. *Archer* had said that. I did not dignify it with a response. I whistled sharply and Zombie rose from the trebuchet wreckage where he'd been lazing about this whole time, trotting up to me. I slipped a foot in the stirrup and mounted the saddle.

"Try not to bite off more than you can chew," I said. "I have a hard time believing *this* is the best Diabolist could do with months of preparation."

"I'll keep her out of trouble," Adjutant said.

Yeah, from that look on her face that wasn't happening. Ah, well. So long as neither of them died I'd live with it. Sheathing my sword, I spurred on my mount and after a gallop to the edge of the bastion his wings unfolded and we took flight. Black, I saw, was already at the edge of the pit. He'd either dismounted or lost his horse, but didn't seem all that hindered for it. I winced as I saw his shadow and blade move simultaneously, tendrils severing three spines and sword sending a head flying over the span of the same heartbeat. I used more power making a platform than he had using his shadow right then – he'd be able to keep this up for hours, no matter that he'd told me to hurry. Still, I guided Zombie in a low pass and threw myself down. I landed at his side, legs bending, and watched a dead hand flop the ground neatly severed. Charming. Zombie flew off and I straightened my back. Green eyes took in the state of me, then returned to the enemy.

"So is there a secret knock to get in?" I asked, glancing at the pit.

All I saw inside was darkness, and not even a kind my Name sight could see through.

"We're going to jump," he said.

"You're enjoying this," I accused.

"Am I?" he hummed, and pushed me.

I said some very unkind things about his ancestry in Taghreb as I dropped, and didn't stop even when he started falling at my side.

"You've considerably improved your vocabulary," he noted.

I sighed. Around us was only darkness, anchored by the sensation of falling. Considering this place was out of phase with Creation, I was wary of the fact that this felt like so long a drop. Akua had already shown she could meddle with the span of time in her little horror bubbles. After half an eternity our fall slowed and we landed softly on what felt like stone. Nice touch, that. She wasn't even going to pretend she'd not expected company. There was a tunnel ahead, its boundaries not marked by solid so much as absence. I could see again, at least. And what I saw was a large and looming silhouette at the end of it, ram horns sprouting from its head.

"A gatekeeper," Black said. "Quaint."

"She's a real traditional girl, our Akua," I drawled. "Twenty denarii she yammers at us through a runic array when get in."

"Twenty more she compares herself to Triumphant," Black replied amusedly. "They always do, Catherine. I've heard three dozen variations on that speech by now."

He paused.

"They quote the play," he said, pained. "Every time. I know the entire third act by rote."

"I'll take that," I mused. "She probably thinks she's above name-dropping, like this isn't basically a glorified flying fortress."

I raised my voice.

"That's right, Diabolist, I went there," I catcalled. "Your whole plan is so last millennium, and I bet you actually call your lair a lair when talking to other people."

I didn't look, but I got the impression Black's lips were twitching. Heavy footsteps sounded ahead, followed by the cloying smell of brimstone wafting up to us.

Two blades left their scabbard as one, and we advanced.

Alright, the banter and action made Monday's blueballing more than worth it.

*Engineer*

The blueballing is not yet over. In fact one might say it has transitioned into purpleballing with this chapter.

Fucking Wednesdays man, damn!

[Matthew Avant](#)

Hey, we're only \$61 on Patreon away from thrice-weekly updates. I'll up my pledge if you up yours.

*Engineer*

Indeed I would.

Financial constraints make that impossible though. You know, being a starving final year engineering student, neck deep in student debt in a third world country. Oh joy!

*Gunslinger*

I know this is supposed to be a dangerous situation and all but I was laughing throughout.

"We've got orders," I said.

Archer snorted.

"Because I'm so fond of those," she said.

"They involve a lot of killing," I said.

"You have my attention," the wretch grinned.

Gods below, I love Archer.

[nehemiahnewell](#)

Yeah, but I'm pretty sure she's going to die. Not necessarily soon. I suspect she'll die to heroes. Her whole funny dynamic sets her up to die to show things have stopped being funny. Well, either her or Hakram to show Cat can't truly have anyone at her back. Or both, for the gut punch.

Like, Hierophant is more powerful, but Hakram is the one she really cares about.

*Decius*

No, Archer is going to gradually grow to like the people she hangs out with, and when they need to buy time for a retreat she will make a last stand behind them.

After being presumed dead long enough for her friends to avenge her, she'll turn up in a bar, maimed, and mostly retire from the fighting life.

That's how the story should treat neutral characters, anyway.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

@Decius

- 1) Last stands are for good guys.
- 2) I'm pretty sure you cant just stop being a Named

*RoflCat*

Wasn't one of the pre-chapter's quote something about sending in the Fools first because the Gods won't let you be rid of them so easily?

If anything, her death will be the 'glorious' kind, because that's the kind of life she plan to live, and even in death she will not be denied.

*Jonnnney*

She is the only comic relief that's plot armor not a flag.

*Metrux*

Actually, I don't think she's going to die or retire, just leave the group, even if she still likes them, because it's a time of relative peace and she needs to fry bigger fish. And about last stand being for heroes... She's not a villain. She's not trully a hero, either, but she has got none of the villainous trademarks. Think about it, can't you just picture her in a heroes party? That's why I don't think she's going to bite it anyway. Hakram, on the other hand... I see him dying for Cat close to the end of the story.

*RoflCat*

I had similar reactions.

>They were still keeping in formation, to their honour. But Archer kept killing their officers whenever one spoke

It's almost like she's got instinctual hatred of commands that isn't about murder.

>"We've got orders," I said.

>Archer snorted.

>"Because I'm so fond of those," she said.

>"They involve a lot of killing," I said.

>"You have my attention," the wretch grinned.

....Oh

*maresther23*

Don't be shy Black, you also quoted that play to your murder happy girlfriend as you swore vengeance.

*naturalnuke*

Omg you're right XD

I love consciously melodramatic Black.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

For all you who didn't get it,

Book 3 Chapter 46: Denouement (During a Name flashback, Amadeus to Hye)

"I read a play once," Amadeus replied. "Forbidden by Imperial decree. There is a part I enjoyed, and it goes like this-"

His voice carried, without ever rising in tone.

"Be fearful now  
tremble; for  
my reach is long  
my wrath is great  
patient but  
unrivalled  
above or below."

It's a part of the play "I, Triumphant", author unknown, banned by decree of the Tower under Terribilis II. The whole extract can be found in the quote of the day in Book 2, Chapter 36: Madman.

*Shequi*

Presumably Terribilis II also hated having Praesi nobles quote it at him in dramatic fashion.

*ArkhCthuul*

Probably because he was terribly unsuited to witty retorts.

Still, chilly quote.  
Good chapter.

*Valkyria*

Black, trying to hide bad habits xD

[Hakurei06](#)

Cat knows since she saw it in a name dream.

### DroughtBringer

Why do we have to wait till next Monday? Can someone just donate 300\$? 😊

*No Fuckin Way*

Seriously. I'll even throw in my 2 cents.

*maresther23*

If I had the money...

Meanwhile vote for PGtE! More readers, more donations. We might get Fridays updates by next year.

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

### MurkyTruths

Im honestly debating it....

*Goldenroot*

We are actually only \$60 away not 300.

*taovkool*

I have just finished the binge read, and lo and behold, a new chapter have arrived, all hail the Black Queen!

By the way, with a name like Triumphant, I would not be surprised if there's going to be a chapter called a Triumphant's Return where, well, the Triumphant returns. With what I've seen so far of erraticerrata it seems like what the Name was leading up to.

*Jonnnney*

That's a fair point. Triumphant went to one of the hells when she died I wonder if it's the same one where the breach is connected.

*Scratch*

Another great chapter. I wonder how long now before Cat doesn't even get sick by tearing people viscerally apart with her hands.

*jormungand*

i got bad feeling about the two of em, i afraid diabolist will force her way to cath killing black. the rest of the calamities will not like that....

*Engineer*

The Black Knight and the Squire.

This shit is beautiful san.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

It's practically screaming Black's death though. I won't be surprised if Black is secretly carrying a huge red banner with the word "MENTOR OCCUPATIONAL HAZARD" written across it.

[Euodiachloris](#)

It's not all *that* big. And, the letters are quite tastefully calligraphic in style. The stitching, incidentally, took months.

*Engineer*

Oh Black is definitely planning on dying here. He's enacting his succession plan.

Why else would he instruct Squire to leave Adjutant and Archer behind while he and Squire assault Liesse alone? Having two extra Named at your side when assaulting a fortress is NEVER a bad thing. The only other explanation is that he's carrying the idiot ball but the priors for that are way too low. He's planning something.

[Matthew Avant](#)

His last wish will be for Cat to use it as a lampshade.

*Darkening*

Man, Black and Cat have such a fun dynamic at the end there, can't wait to see more of it. I'm surprised Black's not being more wary of going into battle with her though, given that dying in front of your protege is the leading cause of mentor deaths.

*Valkyria*

Can't help it but after Cat's last taunt I'm just imagining some royals back at court:

-Uh, Diabolist is sooo last millenium.

-Totally! To think I ever was trying to get her attention, bah.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*Keyen*

During the first read, I was a bit dumbfounded about the multiple reference of how the fight is making her sick.

Then, I realized it was her first battle against humans "in the thick of it".

- Three hills: She just went to kill the Page, nobody else.
- Marchford: Non-Humans
- Liesse: Devils only, she didn't fight the humans
- Then it was Fae only
- Even the battle against Fasili, she fought only undead, not human beings.

So, I quite understand how it feels different for her (and I like the eye for detail, good job on it).

*Engineer*

Thanks for clearing that up. I thought her reaction to killing was annoying but it's completely expected when you're cutting down humans and you're not a sociopath. Good catch.

*cookiehunter*

technically not correct, at 3 hills she killed a number of soldiers as well  
just not that many

*Keyen*

You are correct (I forgot about that), but even then:  
"It had been some time since I'd fought men without a Name, and never before had I taken the fight to them without my own power being hamstrung. The experience was... enlightening. I burrowed into their line like an arrow into flesh, too horrified to smile."

Same horror about it ^^

*Mike E.*

God I love this dynamic (and the snark):

"You and I will proceed into the city."

"I don't like the shape of that," I admitted.

"It has been taken into consideration," he replied

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

"Twenty more she compares herself to Triumphant,"

During Akua's POV interlude, I kept thinking "I don't think you understand what 'may she never return' means." I'd think it was a meta-trap put there to induce Black to put her into a "type" to make him underestimate her, if I didn't already know she believes



all the hype. Maybe it still is a trap, it's so like her to use the truth to tell lies

Matthew Avant

Hey fellow fans and patrons: We're only \$61 on Patreon away from 3x-a-week! I know we can make it. Can twelve of us get together and all pledge another \$5 apiece? I'm in if y'all are.

*Letouriste*

Black said he is prepared against the whole mentor dying before his apprentice after they fought together a common enemy so I will believe him. he still have plans for the after, a lot of plans....he can't let cat deal with his friends rage after all. their rage would be SO big if they learn he died when only cat was there and she didn't prevent that

*Drd*

"Bonding time with Black," I said. "I assume some form of murder will be involved, possibly also a chilling speech on the nature of power. As prelude to further murdering."

"You have the weirdest relationships with people," Archer muttered.

This had me in stitches. XD  
Personal time with Daddy Black has never sounded as fitting to Cat's current situation!

*Author Unknown*

I don't know about everyone else, but I am really hoping Cat finds and kills Akua's dad first. Just so she can keep her promise/threat she made oh so long ago: to find something that Akua cares about and destroy it.

I think that would be Akua's undoing, as it isn't something a Hero would do and Akua keeps trying to cast Cat in the role of a Hero, denoted by her plans to turn Cat to the dark side and have Cat serve as her right hand.

*Gunslinger*

While I would love 3 chapters a week, I worry how much of a strain it would be though for the author. We wouldn't want them to burnout

*nigeltheoutlaw*

God, I can not wait for Catherine to gut that cunt Akua. Also nice chapter, good to see some banter between Black and Catherine again.

*ICSM*

Well, Black just donned the Red Shirt. My 20 denarii say he won't come out of the hole.

*Goldenroot*

We just reached the 3 a week goal on patreon a little while ago.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Oh wow. Thrice-weekly updates have been reached on Patreon. I feel kinda excited but kinda worried as well? EE if you feel burnt out and need a break from thrice-weekly updates I think most of us would understand and be ok with 1-2 weeks of backlog, so do voice out if you need more rest or something.

*whyy*

hi! I just went on your Patreon and saw the goal for 3 posts a week was reached!! Congrats to you and thank god for us getting another chapter each week 😊

*Rogthnor*

Finally caught up, and I just want to say I ship Akua/Catherine. I think Akua really likes her inner own twisted way, her plan to make cat server her forever screams villainous love. I hope cat ends up binding her soul to service when this is over.

*burdi*

i think aqua want to trap cat in hell, make her fight all devils and demons...fighting so many will make her super tired but she will never bow down, so she will keep fighting until she broke..became madness incarnation and she will seek the gate to get out...but aqua sorcery already waiting in the gate to bind anything that pass the gate to her will. of course thats not gonna happen, cat will came to her new shining name, black queen, or winter knight and brute force her way out somehow..just like her trademark

*nick012000*

>calling Akua Aqua

Hey, now, Akua might not be the brightest bulb in the factory, but she's still not that stupid!

*alegio*

I love how Black makes fun about people referencing that play when he referenced it himself AND Cat saw that in a name dream.

Oh, and also this: "Fucking Praesi and their endless magical bullshit parade of horrors." It perfectly describes Praesi culture.

*maresther23*

I read this article and I couldn't help thinking about PGtE:  
<https://aeon.co/essays/why-is-pop-culture-obsessed-with-battles-between-good-and-evil>

"The ostensibly moral face-off between good and evil is a recent invention that evolved in concert with modern nationalism – and, ultimately, it gives voice to a political vision not an ethical one."

Erraticerrata, you obviously spend a lot of time thinking about history, politics, and human nature, do you have reading recommendations?

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Recommended based on the above comment:

Mother of Learning  
The Gods are Bastards  
Everything by Brandon Sanderson  
maybe Unsong?

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

And Worm of course, if you haven't read it already.

[BarthHumphries](#)

How do people leave this many comments and not use the word "typo"?

watched a dead hand flop the ground neatly severed  
Add "to" after "flop"

she yammers at us through a runic array when get in.  
Add "we" after "when"

*Exec*

Isn't this their first Father-Daughter slaughter together? Never quite fought as equals together on the field... How lovely.

Sure hope it isn't the last though.

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## Chapter 62: Verse

*"One hundred and eighty-seven: should one of your trusted companions be taken hostage at knife-point, check for the following features – cliff, moat, or any kind of sharp drop. Should one be nearby, you may assume the situation will solve itself momentarily."*

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

Heavy footsteps and the scent of Hell, yet no ominous breathing. I got to see the reason for the absence the moment our opponent came into sight. The devil, for there was no denying it was that, stood a good twenty feet tall. Broad as cart, if not more, it had a shape almost human if humans could be of that size. It wore no clothes, its sculpted body made of something neither stone nor metal but evoking both, and in its hands it held a long mace that looked like a massive rib. Granite? Hard to tell, in the dark. Still, it was the head that drew attention or more precisely the lack thereof. Atop the devil's neck was only a polished surface, like someone had ripped off the head of a marble statue, and from the sides sprouted the ram horns I'd glimpsed earlier. Well, there went my usual plan. Decapitation did the trick with most everything, if you were thorough enough. For all that the devil lacked eyes it had no trouble keeping track of us, and for something its size it was damnably nimble. Also strong, I thought with a wince as the rib-mace smashed against the ground with a deafening sound.

Yeah, I wasn't getting hit by that if I could help it. I no longer had the Lone Swordsman's hero juice that would allow me to get back up afterwards.

It should have been, I thought, a difficult scrap. But it wasn't, because the two of us were moving seamlessly. It wasn't like with Adjutant, who was a limb of my own, or the way it had when the Woe had... come together in Dormer. Black was just always in the right place, like he had a supernatural sense telling him where that was. The devil leaned forward to smash down the mace on me and my teacher was right behind, edge of his sword flashing with shadow as he carved a scar on the thing's back. It screamed mouthlessly and turned, swinging wildly, but he was exactly half a step out of the arc. Its free hand reach for Black, fingers creaking as they moved, but then I was free to act and my blade went into the back of its knee. Not, sadly, deep enough to push through. But enough it turned screaming again, and when it did Black hacked halfway through its mace-wielding wrist. The devil went wild and the both of us backed away smoothly, one behind it and one before, neither of us out even slightly out of breath.

There was a game of shatranj being played here, with every step and every swing, and the devil was losing it. Much as I would have liked to say I was a player unto myself, I wasn't. I was

just... part of the dance. Another moving part my teacher worked with as he orchestrated the death of a creature that could easily have torn its way through a full company of heavies without taking a wound. Sometimes I forgot that, for all that I'd mostly seen Black scheme and lead men, his Name was that of a killer of heroes. To be the Black Knight was to be the right hand of the Dread Emperor, the slayer of the anointed champions of the Heavens. There was no searing light or shouted righteousness, down here, but there was death. Being painted on a canvas of flesh, one stroke at a time. I enjoyed being part of that as much as I hated it. Following the lead of a professional was... soothing, and the victory being arranged would be sweet. But it'd been some time since I'd had anyone above me in the pecking order on the battlefield. The feel of it was like fly that wouldn't quit buzzing around me.

When the devil emerged from the wild frenzy that had seize it, we advanced again. It leapt back, over my head, but nimble or not it was *heavy*. A twist of will had a spear of frost ramming into its side, doing little but breaking skin but slamming it against the side of the corridor. Absence, that was what the boundary looked like, but whatever it was it was not lightly shaken: the devil smashed against it and fell scrabbling to its feet. Neither of us intended to give it the breathing room. The rib-mace skidded against the ground, moving so blindingly fast it was a blur, but I leaned into my instincts – I felt the breath of death under my feet, cloak rustling, but already I was rolling forward and beneath its guard. There was a sound like stone breaking and the devil half-collapsed forward. I stepped to the side of the falling torso and hacked at its sides, for lack of better target, frost touching the wounds I made and never leaving. I smelled a kill.

"Withdraw," Black said.

I moved without hesitation. The creature did not attack, and I got a look at why: while I'd been distracting it in the front, my teacher had slipped behind and deepened the wound in the back of the knee until the entirely limb was cut off. The devil, struggling to keep us at bay with its mace, roughly tried to force back its severed parts together. To my distaste, I saw the unearthly material began to mend itself. Of course Akua had some kind of self-healing abomination, which also shrugged off my power in anything but strong concentration and who was fucking twenty feet tall as a gatekeeper. Her ego probably didn't allow her to be any random asshole, she had to be Queen Asshole, reigning queen of all the assholes in the world.

"Now," Black said, when the stitch job was half-done.

The devil screamed again, and I was close enough to feel the sound coming from its entire body. It was the thing itself

screaming, and the act that nothing to do with mouth or throat. I pressed forward without flinching. I realized what my teacher's intent had been a moment before it bore fruit. The devil attempted to rise to its feet to fight us but the stitching was not yet complete: the moment it put weight on the limb, the healing broke and it fell down again. Typical Black, I thought. I might have been the kill the thing brawling up close, but it in his eyes the uncertainty was not worth the risk. Instead we'd withdrawn to create another occasion, one for a clean kill. It was the fighting style of a man who'd spent his entire life killing heroes. Knowing the dice would always favour the other side, he'd learned to remove chance from the equation entirely. It was an alien way of killing to me, who tended to double down when things got risky instead. *But there's a reason he's lived this long when heroes keep taking a swing at his neck, and I'm looking at it.*

Frost swept up my sword and I drove the blade into the back of the devil fallen at my feet. From the corner I could see Black cutting through the back of its mace-wielding elbow, motions fluid and not a single one wasted. The devil screamed but it was done. With a last attempt at taking me in hand it tried to rally, but from where my blade had sunk into its flesh ice was spreading inside. The hand never reached me, the limb itself frozen and I kept pouring Winter's power into its frame. From the beginning to the end, the fight could not have lasted longer than a quarter hour. Neither of us had taken a single hit, or been in any great danger of dying. There'd be a grand total of two words spoken throughout, no quips or taunts – the absence had been heavy it would have felt like whistling during a sermon to start. I spat to the side, out of breath more for use of my mantle than because of physical tiredness.

There'd been a lot of talk since I became the Squire about the similarities between us, but this... execution had just laid the differences bare for all to see. We both used chaos, but the manner was different. The dark-haired man would wait patiently, put himself in the correct position, and then set fire to the field. He'd then ruthlessly capitalized on those weaknesses, using chaos as just another tool in his arsenal. Me, though? Chaos followed wherever I went, so I'd made it my home grounds. Learned to drink and breathe that kind of mess, so that when it hit the field I was the only one unhindered. It'd gotten me through two messes in Arcadia, Marchford and Summerholm, but never without a price. On the surface his way of doing things was flatly superior and I still intended to learn from it, but I wasn't Black. I didn't have that kind of calculation in me. And though Akua had been full of shit when she'd called him a rat in a maze of traps, she'd touched something true: my teacher's way only worked so long as he was prepared. It was, in a word, *fragile*.

I could learn from him without turning in a shoddier version of who he was. I had to, or the fights ahead would cost me a lot more than Nauk.

*"Mongowa-umun,"* Black said in Mtethwa. "It was a greater devil, though not a famous one. Likely an old Sahelian contract kept secret for a rainy day."

"She only had one of those left, according to my sources," I replied. "I expected it to be deeper in the city, to be honest."

"There will be worse," Black said, shaking his head. "A host, yes, but that will not be the thrust of her defence. The old breed has always preferred sorcery to armies, in the end. Sorcery comes from a single will, armies have to share victory."

"Wards," I said. "But we have a layout of those. Thief saw to that."

"Two things must you face, when breaking a High Lord," Black murmured, quoting from one of Terribilis II's treatises. "Tall and ancient walls, manned by wrath. Then the seat of power, where old devils lie."

"This isn't a Wasteland city," I said. "She didn't have ten centuries to fill her vaults with every different shade of madness she could think of."

"It is a manner of thinking, Catherine," he replied. "Her seat of power, the Ducal Palace, will be where she has invested greatest effort."

"Frontal assault's not an option, then," I grimaced. "Not that I'd seriously considered, given the army in the city and whatnot."

Pale eyes glanced at me and he nodded.

"Your little surprises," he said. "Do you have way to contact them?"

"There's a mage along," I admitted. "But it's not like either of us can scry. Akua bailing out of Creation wasn't part of the plan. Instructions were given before the operation began."

"I am uncertain what that would result in, if currently carried out," Black said. "There is a need to account for that liability."

"You want me to find them?" I said. "I never liked the metaphor, but needle and haystack. And in this case the needle is both murderous and actively hiding."

"Think, Catherine," he softly said, "about the fight ahead of us. The shape of it. In the process of that confrontation, can we afford to have a sudden tipping point of unknown timing and effect?"

I grimaced. If this were just me, I'd say yes. I was confident that, whatever came of it, I'd be better at dealing with it than Diabolist. I didn't care about what actually happened as much as I did what I could make *from* that. But that wasn't the way Black worked, and considering he was the mentor in this little jaunt of ours maybe sticking to the safe side was the better notion. I was still wary that he'd told me to leave Adjutant and Archer behind. There were a lot of stories that could spring from the two of us hitting Diabolist's lair alone, and few ended well for him.

"So I look for them," I said. "In the trapped horror-city swarming with undead and mages. Gods, you always take me to the worst places."

"No," he said. "I have... a notion for their use. Make your way to the Ducal Palace and prepare an approach. *Quietly.*"

My fingers clenched. I studied his face and found it as inscrutable as ever, pale and calm and seemingly in control.

"You know I'm not great at the courtesies, so you'll have to forgive if I'm being too blunt," I said. "Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

He cocked his head to the side but did not reply. He didn't seem offended, but then he didn't seem much of anything at all – I was well aware that the only reason I saw mild curiosity on his face was because he was letting me.

"I went along with this because I thought you had a plan," I said. "Something that doesn't end up with you taking a spell for me or dying to free me from some trap. But I have to ask, Black, are you actually *trying* to die? Because us going off on our own before we pick a fight with Diabolist reeks of you being there in chains when I enter her throne room."

My tone turned harsh.

"I don't care if you think you've reached the end of the rope," I bit out. "I'm not going to help you go out in a blaze of futility. Gods Below, this is *Akua*. She has a magic weapon and a fortress of doom, but you've taught me since the moment I became a claimant that the story she began only ends one way. This isn't just foolish, it's actively detrimental to the Empire. I don't care if you're Named, we're on the eve of war with the Principate – now is not the time to start sacrificing our best generals."



I was panting by the end of it, fear and anger having bled out into my voice. I hated how vulnerable I'd sounded, even if I'd scrupulously avoided making this personal.

"If you are quite finished?" Black calmly asked, and I grunted in agreement. "Good. You misunderstand me. I've no intention of dying today, Catherine, though it is certainly possible regardless. You have not seen my full hand, so to speak."

"You know better than that," I said. "Tricks going against the current don't *stick*. It makes it seem like you have a chance for the moment, but then Creation fucks you anyway because it's a very large machine and you're a very small grain of sand."

"Of this," he replied, "I am aware. And yet I would proceed."

It was tempting to ask him what had him so sure he'd make it out, but even if there'd been a guarantee Akua wasn't listening in – which there wasn't – I didn't believe he would have told me. Black was more pile of secrets than man, sometimes, and he did not share those without good reason. My fear, even for him, did not qualify.

"This is what you'd say," I murmured, "if you were trying to force a succession on me."

"Yes," he acknowledged serenely.

"And you know how to fool the Name tricks for lying," I said.

He'd been the one to teach them to me, after all.

"I do," he agreed.

"But you want me to believe you anyway," I finished.

He inclined his head, conceding the point.

"A leap of faith," the Black Knight said, and for some reason he sounded amused.

I'd learned to recognize pivots, to feel the weight of their touch on my life. I'd come a long way since first hearing the word, Juniper telling me of it under the stars months after I'd made my first choice that mattered. Not a Choice, no, not the way the Book of All Things spoke of it, but perhaps something touching the facet of that greater concept. In the collection of decisions and acts that made up a Name, the *stuff* of it, some mattered more than others. This? This was not one. I breathed out and sharpened my mind but there was no fulcrum to be found. No sense that scales could be shifted. Was it because he was being truthful, that my wariness was unfounded? *Or is it because he has already made a choice of his own, and it has long been out of my*

*hands?* I could not keep a man who sought death from it, I knew. Much less one as able as my teacher.

The part of me that was Catherine Foundling yet not, the girl I was and had been but seen through the darkened ice that was Winter and my Name, crept up my spine inexorably. It told me that if this was unacceptable, I should force my will upon it. Brand his soul with a queen's decree, that he would struggle for life whatever the costs. But that whispering thing met pale green eyes, so calm and measured, and it faltered. It would be fair, it insisted. Once, in Summerholm, he had robbed me of my own will before swinging nooses. Though that debt had grown muddled by the ways we had intertwined since, it would stand so long as it was not repaid. I was Callowan, after all, even now. We were a people of long grudges. I forced the set of ugly instincts down. Warlock had not been wrong, to call me *other*. I wondered if all the villains I'd jeered at in the old stories, called fools for not thinking it through, had started out like me. Bargain after bargain, one desperate compromise after another until you hardly recognized the creature looking back at you in the mirror. Damnation never felt like damnation until it was too late, did it? I forced myself to be Catherine Foundling and no one else, the coldness in my veins slowly receding.

"You told me once, that you thought of martyrdom as an act of cowardice," I said. "Symbolic vanity."

"And I stand by those words," Black said.

I closed my eyes and breathed out.

"Don't you dare make me grieve you," I whispered.

The sentiment passed, and my eyes opened. I found his matching mine, brown and green and neither giving ground.

"Into the breach we go, Black Knight," I said.

"Into the breach, Squire," he softly agreed.

---

*Nobody*

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*ForgottenToupee*

After this chapter, I think it's pretty much for sure that Cat will transition into the Black Queen instead of the Black Knight.

Also, I thought Black Speaking to Cat happened in Summerholm.

*satoshikyū*

This is my thought as well. My other consideration was something like Winter Queen, though to my mind that's less of a transition than it is her sort of shrugging into a name that is technically already hers by right. She's the last titled noble of Winter, so in my eyes that means she's Queen.

But yeah that bit about the queen's decree is either yet another masterful distraction for us or it's a tell. After all, we know from experience that Liesse is a place where Names can be stolen. Who's to say it isn't also a place where Names can be relinquished and new ones forged in their place?

*Jeffery Wells*

It will be difficult, Squire isn't a transition name for Queen. It would have to be a strong story akin to King Arthur pulling Excalibur from the stone and being named King. She has the back story for it, but you also need a powerful inheritance to claim, and we've seen no sign of that.

[Barthumphries](#)

Things may or may not have changed. Come catch up to where the story is now. 😊

*Ashley Scott*

uh spoilers wtf

[Barthumphries](#)

I can neither confirm nor deny that there may or may not have been spoilers and that changes may or may not have occurred. 😊

Seriously, come catch up. 😊

*usernamesbco*

I thought they already hashed out the powerful inheritance thing. Remember, with the angel?

She could also probably claim right of conquest, especially after she thrashes Akua.

*Vitruvius*

Book 2, chapter 47:

>"I have three things," I said. "A kingdom, an enemy and a claim."

>William snorted.

>"A claim?" he said. "You-"

>"I am the heiress to the King of Callow," I interrupted calmly.

>"There is no King of Callow," the Lone Swordsman said.

>"Yet a man rules it, and I am his chosen successor," I said.

Then she pulled a sword out of a stone.

*narcoduck*

"It would be fair, it insisted. Once, in Marchford, he had robbed me of my own will before swinging noosee."

I believe this was in Summerholm.

*danh3107*

Man Cat had to fight down every instinct she had for that one, impressive.

Also we all already knew that Akua was the queen of assholes.

[taborask](#)

arg, that was such a short chapter

*Unexpectedly Polite Cultist*

He' said like 700% dead, isn't he?

*JC*

Lots of typos.

[Barthumphries](#)

Dude, you have to post them if you want them fixed. :p

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*Big Brother*

Aw, Cat's really starting to transition into Black Queen. That's awesome. Almost issuing a Queen's Command to the Black Knight.

*Big Brother*

Queen's decree\*

*Gunslinger*

>Brand his soul with a queen's decree, that he would struggle for life whatever the costs.

Cat's been watching too much Code Geass

[nehemiahnewell](#)

Yeah, there are entirely too many ways for that to get horribly wrong.

*Decius*

Never give an order to be carried out "at all costs" unless you really mean that you are actually happy if everyone involved in executing that order is captured, killed, raised as an undead, and then has two-thirds of their soul burned in an unspeakable ritual to bolster your enemies, so long as the mission objective is completed.

[Euodiachloris](#)

... Sure, I trust Amadeus when he says he's fine. Dandy. Not trying to die.. About as far as I can throw him when fully kitted out.



*stevenneiman*

Hopefully he realizes what Wekesa will do if he has any suspicion that Cat was in any way party to his death. He's a guy who once mutilated someone's soul just for giving him bad news about Black, imagine how much worse things will get when Black is counting on the person Wekesa holds responsible for his death. Best case scenario is that Cat kills Wekesa before he finds out, worse case scenario he sets off at least one Dark Day protocol.

*werafdsaew*

Which is why I don't think Black will die, since he has too many things left to do.

*Digitize27*

This chapter was weirdly sloppy. A lot more mistakes than usual.

[benthelynx](#)

Might be the adaptation to three chapters a week.

*Keyen*

Just so you know, we won't get 3 chapters this week.

## [NZPIEFACE](#)

Wait what? Since when and what's the new schedule?

*Shovah*

Typo: "Damnation never like like damnation"

*SpeckofStardust*

"It makes it seem like you have a chance for the moment, but then Creation fucks you anyway because it's a very large machine and you're a very small grain of sand."

That most likely hit very close to home considering that's basically why the Bard was able to out-play him. After all he knows so little of the totality of creation.

*Blue*

Didn't Killian need some sort of sacrifice to access her full power? Seems to me that Akua is handing that to her on a platter. Pretty sure she and Thief are hanging out somewhere inside.

*blando*

"Black was more pile of secrets than man"

I'm not sure why, but this pop culture reference in a dark fantasy fiction irks me.

*Letouriste*

Ref to what?

*blando*

In Castlevania: Symphony of the Night, Dracula gives a speech about man being nothing but a miserable little pile of secrets.

*burguulkodar*

Yeah, I caught that quote as well. I thought it was funny, and wondered if anyone else noticed. Good to know I'm not the only one who loved that talking in the game.

## [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Reference to you, maybe. To me it was just a line. And I'd hardly call a genre video game "pop culture"

[greatwyrmgold](#)

It makes me want to correct Cat about leaving "miserable" out. But it's far from the only pop culture reference in the story; strange, for a story about stories.

*Rogthnor*

He's dead

*Engineer*

Hail Amadeus of the Green Stretch! Dead Knight of the Black Queen of Callow.

... Too many "ofs" in that heraldry.

*Sous*

A part of me screams that Black is sooo dead. The other, though, believes that the story will unfold differently. His plot is about subversion of tropes, outplaying the player, thus the outcome of twisting creation's rules and overcoming death by Black would be also on point.

*Engineer*

Huh, "Little Surprises"? Plural. Thief is the only other Cat aligned entity in Liesse.

What could the other surprises be?

She mentioned one was a mage but Masego and Killian are outside, dealing with the Demons. Who could this mage be? Who is Cat going to meet up with to plan the assault?

*lennymaster*

Robber and his gang.  
Really hope he still gets a Name.

*Letouriste*

I think only females goblins can get Names.  
There is no cultural background for a male goblin Named so that can't happen before the goblins change a lot.all the goblins

*stevenneiman*

@Letouriste we really know too little about goblin Names to be speculating. All we know is that some people suspect that goblins HAVE names, and even that isn't a 100% certainty. And just because goblins are led by vicious, crafty, female connivers doesn't mean that there aren't male names, they'd just probably never have any kind of leadership component to

them. None of this is confirming that there ARE names accessible to male goblins, but there's no reason to be too sure there aren't.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

@stevenneiman you mean, we know too little to be passing off speculation as certainty or even probability. We can and should speculate about whatever we want. We just gotta keep it real

*Shemetz*

"Black was more pile of secrets than man, sometimes"

A miserable little pile of secrets!

*Letouriste*

Nothing about black is miserable

*burguulkodar*

But enough talk, have at you!

\*shatters glass in the floor\*

*Shequi*

So if Cat transitions into the Name of the Black Queen, I'd guess Decree would be her first Aspect?

That would make sense for a rulership type name.

*stevenneiman*

I feel like she's missed the chance to make a Name of being the Black Queen. Names seem to come in a sudden and appropriate moment, and that moment has already passed since Cat was acknowledged both formally and publicly as the queen of callow without changing her Name. She also gained the nickname of Black Queen without transitioning, which makes me fairly certain that it isn't going to be her final Name. Hell, she might just become the next Black Knight. It's the boring option, but half the point of this whole story is how Boring But Practical can have an awesomeness factor all its own.

*room*

i agree with you, seems like cat going to become knight..black or winter, or another knight because squire is transitional name to knight

*Big Brother*



Took Hakram a while of being Cat's adjutant to become Adjutant.

### NZPIEFACE

But she's never been coronated.

Just off Akua's head here, take the throne, and be coronated by Black.

### *AshSlanabrezgov*

Slopy chaeptr si whnen strory sukcs, tyopos cnan't maek chaeptr slopy. In my opinion, that si.

(My smartphone's autocorrection feature fought hard against unholy acts I was committing against English language in this comment. 7 browser reboots later, I want to commend it. I always had a soft spot for persistent bastards.)

### *Bell Towers*

About Cat's potential new Name, fellow enthusiasts. Remember back when the Bard (I think?) said to TLS that there were really only three villains that mattered, the Empress, the Knight, and the Squire?

So maybe Cat, the Squire, transitions into a Knight bc that's what squires do, and then later ultimately becomes the Empress. No idea how EE would swing it but I bet it'd be AMAZING

### Barthumphries

Typo thread:

Broad as cart, if not more  
Add "a" after "as"

The feel of it was like fly that wouldn't quit buzzing around me.  
Add "a" after "like"

When the devil emerged from the wild frenzy that had seize it,  
Change "seize" to "seized"

until the entirely limb was cut off  
Move "entirely" to after "was"

There'd be a grand total of two words spoken throughout, no quips or taunts – the absence had been heavy it would have felt like whistling during a sermon to start. I spat to the side, out of breath more for use of my mantle than because of physical tiredness.

Two or three things: change "be" to "been", add "enough" after "heavy", maybe add "the" after "for"

On the surface his was of doing things  
Change "was" to "way"

Do you have way to contact them?  
Add "a" after "have"

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## Interlude: Liesse I

*"Do not ever speak of victory before the last foe is dead."*  
– Queen Elizabeth Alban of Callow

Juniper of the Red Shields spat to the side. This was going to be messy business, and she told Aisha as much.

"The Lord Warlock should be able to hold the gate until we arrive," her old friend replied.

The Named had mustered up a storm of green acid in front of the opening, and for now nothing was coming out but already the spell was thinning.

"The Lord Fucking Warlock wants us to establish a beachhead on the other side," the general said. "He better pull his godsdamned weight if he wants it done."

Spellcasters, always a finicky lot. Orcs as a rule put little stock in them. The Miezens has slaughtered the old shaman lines wholesale and what remained after was little more than bone-tellers and mystics. They made ceremonies worth bearing with, but in a fight they were decoration. The Clans lived and died on steel. Praesi were made for them, though, meddled with all kinds of nasty shit in the blood to get better with the 'Gift'. No wonder the whole breed was half-mad. Mages had their place in the modern legions, as field artillery and field healers, but something like the Sovereign of Red Skies could only make her uneasy. You couldn't have that kind of power without it costing you somewhere else. Even Catherine had changed, since she'd killed her way to a fae title, and not just that her temper froze tables now. She only had one foot on the ground now with the rest of them, now. Juniper could live with it. Foundling's mind had always been like a bag of rabid badgers, as long as she kept that pointed at the enemy it wasn't too much of an issue.

She'd ordered the Fifteenth to begin reorienting before she ever got the order from Lord Black, reading the lay of the battlefield. Someone needed to plug the gap, else the Fourth

would be cut off from the rest of the army, and only her legion was in the right place. The Deoraithe were technically closer, but they were a fucking mess at the moment. When Sahelian's people had brought out the demons, aside with screwing with Legion scrying it had also made an impassable wall in the enemy centre. The three legions sent in as the first wave had moved around smoothly, the Fifth taking to the left and the Sixth to the right with the Twelfth behind it, but Kegan's soldiers weren't legionaries. Most of them hadn't seen combat except with the Fifteenth, gone soft now that the Clans no longer raided the Marches. The grinder that had been the Summer Campaign had already cut away the worst of the chaff, but getting blooded didn't make them any better trained. The Duchy of Daoine didn't usually go on the offensive, and it was showing badly today.

The first wave of archers, right behind the three legions, had split in two. One half heading for either side, circling around the demon grounds. But they were shit at it. They'd lost all cohesion, their formation turning into some kind of wavy column instead of the tightly packed ranks they should have been. The entire left half had slowed to a crawl the moment the Hellgate opened, afraid of being flanked but opening themselves to it just by milling around like scared herd animals. The infantry behind them was worse, in a way. They'd kept to the long rectangle formation they'd been sent forward as, but they fucking idiots kept advancing. When the front ranks realized they were about to either hit the tail ends of both archer contingents or tread too close to the demon grounds they'd tried to stop, but the officers in the back hadn't cottoned on yet. There was nothing quite like watching over ten thousand Deoraithe warriors trip all over themselves to make a woman wonder how exactly these fucks had managed to hold the Wall in the face of her people for over a millennium.

Marshal Ranker was now in command of the army and she was trying to clean up the mess before it got them all killed, but scrying was still touch and go even with the warlock's get putting the demons in some kind of egg bubble. At least they weren't running rampant – if Hierophant managed to keep that up until the battle ended, she'd kiss him full on the bloody mouth. Wouldn't even complain about his ugly soft cow teeth. According to protocol the Legions had gone back to flag and horn signalling, but the Deoraithe weren't familiar with most of those. Trying to order them around like that would only add to the chaos. Juniper had managed to get one of Marshal Ranker's staff officers in a scrying link and gotten authority over the Deoraithe for the moment, but she'd already sent messengers on foot to Duchess Kegan by then. It rankled to break the line of command like this, but it was her men going into the breach now. She wasn't taking any chances, even if it ruffled feathers. Juniper watched the battle unfold in front of her, splayed out for her to see, and then closed her eyes. She breathed out, and let the pieces move.

The Fifth under General Orim had managed to take the leftmost bastion after Catherine slaughtered her way through the mages there, but it was having trouble to pierce further in. Her mother's Sixth had the rightmost bastion, but they'd gained too much ground under the Black Knight: they wouldn't be able to go back on the offensive until they'd consolidated their lines. General Afolabi's Twelfth was getting ripped apart taking a swing at the last remaining bastion, but they'd earned their cognomen the hard way. *Holdfast*. They'd proved the truth of that at Dormer against Summer nobles and they were showing it again: losses were heavy, but they were going forward and they weren't flinching in the slightest. Gods, the Twelfth would be a skeleton of a legion by nightfall. The Ninth under General Sacker hadn't even tried to swing around the entire army to get at the Hellgate, they were headed straight for the fields of stakes making up the flanks beyond the right palisade. If she got there quick enough, she could smash into the wights from the side and take the pressure off the Sixth.

Good. The front wasn't in danger of collapsing, so long as General Orim remained cautious and Hierophant didn't drop the ball. The Fourth under Marshal Ranker had made a well-oiled turnabout and was now headed for the Hellgate from behind, but that'd take most an hour if she didn't want her men dead on their feet when they got there. The only arrows in Juniper's quiver were the Fifteenth and whatever Deoraithe she could scrape up. Eight thousand under her direct command five thousand legionaries and a half. Two thousand and a half heavy horse, though. Callowan knights. There was much that could be done with that, at least on this side of the gate. She had no intelligence on what lay on the other side, so initial approach would have to be centred around advance and containment. The breach would have to wait until she had area secured, and she was not looking forward to sending men into that. Much as she hated to even think it, she was missing Nauk. The man was an unseemly emotional brute without finesse, but if you had to send a vanguard into Hell he was the breed of officers you wanted at the head of it. Senior Tribune Jwahir was steadier than the legate had been, but she didn't have the same bite.

"Juniper," Aisha said. "The storm's broken. I don't know how many they gathered on the other side, but it's not a trickle coming out. Full battalions and – *shit*. *Akalibsa*. Those are *are akalibsa*."

Taghreb loan word. The orc's mind spun back to the lessons at the College until she found where she'd heard it before. Imperial civil war, Battle of the Black Grounds. Summoned by the Warlock of the time to bolster the usurping Chancellor's expedition into the Steppes.

"Dog-devils," Juniper said.

Incarnations of blind hatred. An old favourite of Taghreb mages, much like the *walin-falme* for the Soninke. No wings, but swift on their feet and they bore their own arms and armour. It had long endeared them to the desert tribes, who in ancient times had lacked the means to provide these to their war-summoned devils. The general opened her eyes, and watched the flood pour out.

"Aisha, sound the horns," she said, baring her teeth. "The horse is to peel to the left and await my signal to charge. The Fifteenth is to stagger as follows: right forward, then centre, then left."

Her friend's slender face creased, but she nodded. Juniper watched her legion move and waited. The waltz had begun.

—

Hierophant cocked his head to the side.

He was a mile away from his foes, but that little mattered nowadays. His eyes had been touched by Summer sun in the fullness of its glory, and little that was under the sky lay hidden to them. What had once been sight of sorcery's shaping granted by the enchantments Father had laid upon his spectacles was now part of him, and fae flame had filed that working down to sharp point. The press of sweating and bleeding soldiers between himself and his quarry were ignored, gone from his vision with but a thought, and all that remained was foe. Threefold summon had brought them into Creation, an oddity he would have enjoyed discussed with his father had there been time. He'd believed the concept to have been discredited, for while in theory the overlapping of Dues helped lower the power required in practice the fine tuning required made it too risky for the benefits. No mage fool enough to take chances when summoning a demon lived long, much less three.

Admittedly, it had been something of a challenge to contain all of them simultaneously. It had to be a single working, for three different wards of that magnitude were beyond his ability to maintain and if he'd attempted to split between a ward covering to and the other one the imbalance of power would have been... difficult to deal with. Overall efficiency was lowered by containing such different entities with the same spell, but this way lowered the risks of calamitous failure. Still, the amount of bleed displeased him greatly. It was the demon of Order that was hardest to handle, as Father had suspected he might. Whether the Beast of Hierarchy truly was the old monster that shattered the city of Shango and ripped it from Creation he could not be certain, but it was proving rather troublesome. By their nature the breed was difficult to contain, though thankfully much less prone to fast-spreading infection than the likes of Madness and Corruption. The issue was that the demon's effect on Creation was... selective, for a lack of better term.

Beasts of Hierarchy took creational laws, the hierarchy of the world as set by the Gods, and replaced them with something superficially similar but at cross-purposes. Air still existed, yet could not be breathed. Solid was as liquid, friction added where there should be none. Points became fixed without rhyme or reason, and so many other weavings: there were as many ways for the demon of Order to act as there were creational laws, if not more. There'd been reports that – ah, perhaps another time. Masego frowned as the demon of Apathy ceased its attempts to bleed through the Ivory Globe, instead gathering its essence into itself. Clever thing. Demons were not truly sentient, of course, or at least not in a way mortals could understand. At best they could imitate such intelligence. But they could solve problems, regardless, and this demon was attempting to turn its own corruption onto the very ward containing it. Apathy, this kind had been given as a title, but it ran deeper. It slowed and ended the movement of all forces, physical and metaphysical. The trick at work was an attempt to make his ward cease to flow, becoming so brittle it would shatter.

Runes forming under his fingers, the braided mage hummed. The globe of cleansing ivory light shattered and the demon moved without hesitation – indeed, it was incapable of such a thing – but Hierophant was not longer a green boy. He had seen wonders and horrors, had them seared into his soul so deeply they had changed his very nature.

"Glint on glass, stolen yet earned," he murmured. "Passing jewel, foe's crown: *dawn*."

For a single glorious moment, he saw all of it again. The sun of Summer in all its furious implacable might. Even the mere remembrance the ground scorched for thirty feet around him in a perfect circle. It was no kinder to the demon. Scathing light burned the envelope of thick murky skin around the core of it, ripping it to black shreds as the creature let out a sound that was neither pain nor anything at all – there mere excretion of it was a burden upon Creation wherever it sounded, a slowing of all it touched. The demon folded upon itself, surrendering its outer essence, and as the dawn passed Masego formed the Ivory Glow anew around it. It had gone, he saw, twenty feet forward. Another forty and it would be close enough to affect nearby soldiery, who would have panicked had they enough of their mind left to do so. The touch of Apathy would fade after a few more moments, but never entirely leave them. There would always be that empty space within, sapping away at all they were.

The Beast of Hierarchy had changed law while he'd been distracted, and with a downturn of the lips Masego adjusted the Ivory Globe's frequency. Too much went through anyway. Keeping the demon fixed in its current position, he mused, would not be the issue. It could not apply its essence to the Ivory Globe

itself, for Hierophant had usurped the properties of the divine in crafting them. His study of the angel's corpse near Liesse had borne fruit in this regard. Yet their struggle was, ultimately, one of repertoire. So long as Masego could grasp the creational law being substituted and knew of a working to remedy this, its grasp outside the ward would be highly limited. The moment he failed on either counts, however, the spread would begin to work its way through the battlefield. The demon of Madness was proving difficult enough already, concerning that. Though in no danger of escaping, at the very moment his ward ebbed low a sliver of the creature's essence pushed through. With Order and Apathy, this was regrettable but of no great concern. Madness was another story.

Its effect lingered, accumulated and spread. Already for twenty feet around it the fabric of Creation was irremediably tainted and would have to be purified beyond recognition, lest anyone wandering these grounds from here to the end of time be taken by red madness. Though not the most dangerous of breeds to fight, the true ability of their kind was in the spread. The longer it remained, the more dangerous it became. It was no wonder that when Triumphant had come upon Liesse, though she had myriad demons of all Hells it was a demon of Madness she had sent to the city. Half a night had been enough to destroy the entire city, and the taint would have spread to the entire region if left unchecked much longer. Even as Masego adjusted the Globe again to check the Beast of Hierarchy, it occurred to him that he was but a single man trying to contain a flood with his bare hands. He would, in time, fail. He'd been reliably informed by Archer that some performers in Levant walked tightropes tall in the air for the entertainment of screaming peasantry, and perhaps this was an apt metaphor. The dark-skinned mage could, in fact, walk the metaphorical rope.

He could not, however, keep doing it for hours without slipping.

Adjusting the Globe again – the Beast was becoming swifter in recognizing when it failed to wade through, which was worrying – Hierophant turned his eyes to that tall platform of stone that still remained in rebel hands. There was a technical name for it, he mused, but he could not remember. Flat, low tower? Fat, short stronghold? The lack of precision was like an itch he couldn't scratch, but he forced himself to move on. Sorcery was being woven there, of no small scale. Were they to resume assaulting his wards? That had been deeply unpleasant. Unable to strike directly at them he'd had to pour power to fix the holes being made, which would have exhausted him into sloppiness if they'd kept it up for much longer. He simply could not abide sloppiness. The glass eyes took a broader view of the threads of sorcery being braided, but after a moment he dismissed it. Necromancy, which was none of his concern. His sight returned to the demons. Brushing back a braid Masego thought of a conversation he'd once

had with Catherine, years ago. They'd been speaking of the hero Hunter, then still among the living, and she'd uttered the strange saying that when that kind of man smiled you called what he showed *arrow-catchers*.

He'd naturally informed her that even for a Named, attempting to catch an arrow with one's teeth would likely result in either shattered teeth or an arrow going through the roof of the mouth. She'd looked at him with that tolerantly amused look of hers, and explained that that was the joke. A very poor one, in his opinion, but it had to be said most things to come out of Callow were hopelessly shabby. Still, the little talk had stuck with him. He looked at the demons and traced runes, High Arcana one and all. The Ivory Globes winked out.

Hierophant bared his teeth, and tried to catch an arrow.

—

"Bless that child," Marshal Ranker said quietly, watching the Fifteenth move. "She inherited the best of both her parents."

The goblin was not a withered old witch like the Matrons in the Eyries, obsessed with bloodlines. It was true that goblins of matron lines were larger and stronger, cleverer and even lived longer – but Ranker had learned the reason for it when she became Matron, and wondered if the price for it was not too steep. Her people had done ugly things to survive on the surface, after losing their ancient underground kingdom to the dwarves. Yet, for all that she put less stock in breeding, it could not be denied that few girls had been better bred for war than Juniper of the Red Shields. Istrid Knightsbane was living legend, earned on the Fields of Streges, and the girl's father had been worth stories in his own days. Oguz Sharphand was the reason Grem One-Eye was called such, and few champions had been more acclaimed among the Clans until his legs were crippled. No, General Juniper was worthy of her rank regardless of youth. She'd begun sending the Fifteenth forward before the orders ever came, and now as Ranker watched the legion stagger as the cavalry peeled off she felt a sharp grin split her face. She knew that formation from reading her histories. The Callowans had used one much the same, when they'd crushed Dread Emperor Nefarious at the Fields of Streges.

Few of her own officers would have thought of using the old kingdom's tactics, even with knights under their command. For all that Legion doctrine was flexible and comprehensive, it encouraged one to think within a certain box of tools. Some of the sharpest tools on Calernia, yes, and they had proved their worth again and again. Yet for a commander to ever be considered for marshal, they had to prove they were able to think beyond that box. Istrid's daughter had that steel in her, though it was not yet properly tempered. *Grem is come again*, she thought. The torch had hands worthy of being passed to. The Fourth was heavier



on sappers than most legions, and so turning it around after the Hellgate opened had not been so slow as it should have been. The regulars would lag slightly behind, but if General Juniper succeeded in seizing this side of the gate then sappers would be useful in keeping it even alone. There was need to hurry, regardless. The Sahelian chit had pulled a fast one on them with that gate, deploying it just after Ranker's legion was too far gone to pull back in time.

Orim was getting the short end of the stick, much like he had after the Conquest when he'd been sent to watch over Liesse and a pack of squabbling Callowans. The Squire had fallen onto that flank like an avalanche of death and ripped straight through the bastion, but she was gone now and the Fifth had to stand its ground against foes that outnumbered it brutally. The wights without necromancers guiding them were not as much as a threat, however, and in truth the lot of them had not impressed Ranker overmuch. If the Dead King's host was of this make, then the Procerans must be even more shit soldiers than she'd thought. Any nation that warred so much had no business being so bad at it, though she wouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth considering the fights ahead. Her Fourth was halfway to the Hellgate, when she felt the ripple. *Felt* it, like a physical thing. Rheumy eyes turned back to the battle behind, and what she saw had her blood run cold.

The rebels were raising the dead. This, they had expected. It was an old Wasteland trick to have the enemy's own dead turn against them halfway into the battle. The Legions had followed protocol, keeping sappers near corpse-piles when feasible. But it was more than that. The wights, it was the wights that had been the true intent. They'd thought that killing the mages meant they could no longer be controlled, that more casters were needed, but now the tide turned on the overextended legions as one. And they were no longer mindless. The undead stood in ranks now, in formations instead of an unruly mass. They moved and killed with purpose. Marshal Ranker had seen more battles than nearly anyone alive in the Empire. This, she realized in moment of perfect clarity, had been a trap. Since the beginning. From the positioning of the demons in the centre to split their forces to ground being given, all to draw them in as deep as possible with reinforcements split and too far behind. The rebels had sacrificed hundreds of their own mages, the favourite sons and daughters of Praes, to set up this very moment where the jaws closed in on the Legions of Terror. They'd been too used to winning, Ranker understood with anguish. We didn't think they'd *learned*.

Mind spinning, she unfolded what was going to happen. The Fifth, too far deep, was about to be overwhelmed. Afolabi's Twelfth Legion would be ground into the Sixth's flank until it collapsed, weakened as it was. And though the right flank would hold, Orim would break and the wights would spill through. Either they'd

swing around and hit Istrid, or they'd ram into the back of the Fifteenth while it attempted to contain the gate. If the Fifth was scattered, the battle was lost.

"Sound the horns," Ranker ordered hoarsely. "We're reinforcing Orim. Now, at *running speed*."

Then the wards keeping the demons contained winked out and screams beyond mortal understanding sounded across shadowed sky.

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### [\*erraticerrata\*](#)

First update of the month, extra chapter. Titled "Hierarchy" from the POV of Anaxares after the Free Cities plotline of this book. In the tab of the same name.

We've also reached tier three on Patreon, which now means three updates a week! Mostly this means Book III will end even quicker than I'd anticipated. Thanks to everyone for the support. First new weekly update will be on the 9th.

JC

oh

Type

Well... shit

*Valkyria*

Perfectly said.

*Shequi*

Heh, I wondered if today would feature an extra update instead of the next time.

So... What the hell (if you'll pardon the expression) is Masego playing at?

*Adra*

From the sounds of things, he knew that if he continued to hold the demons in place with Operation: Eggshells, he'd eventually give enough ground that the demons would get their taint all up in the legion anyways.

Given the nature of his powers so far, my best guess is he's going to use an Aspect to play the demons off each other, or off the remaining Praesi.

Though, being Masego, he's not going to bother telling any of the muggles first.

*Big Brother*

If my mind isn't screwing with me, I think Demons are little gods like the Fae King and Queen were. Maybe he's going for another Miracle.

I mean, the Demons show influence upon Creation similar to a divine being, in that it's restricted to a certain method, much like a domain or sphere of influence most gods have.

Not to mention Demons and Angels are a (sort of) equal-opposite balance, and if Angels can grant Miracles to believers, it only stands that a Demon might be capable of performing them as well.

*jonnney*

Demons aren't at the same level of power of Fae royalty and they aren't pure power backed by a supreme intellect and a strict set of rules. They have the ability to effect one aspect of creation to an extreme degree and their sole purpose is to propagate that effect. The strength of the heavens and the hells are equal, but angels are finite while devils and demons are endless. The method that Angels and Demons use to effect creation is similar even if the magnitude of the effect is vastly different.

*Big Brother*

I never said they were on the same level as fae royalty, nor that they were pure power. I said that they might be gods, which can have varying levels of power from each other, and might have their own version of Miracles for Masego to learn. And I even had a parenthetical "sort of" before I said they were equal-opposites of angels. Never said they were exactly even.

[erraticerrata](#)

Shit. I misread the date again, didn't I? I can't believe this keeps happening, that's like three times now.

[taborask](#)

It's not like we're complaining about getting it early!

*Shequi*

I was wondering if you were in Australia or something.

*jonnney*

I would guess that he is trying to usurp control of their bindings and direct them to attack either the Rebels, each other, or some combination there of. In his first battle against rebels in Liesse it took him roughly an hour to take control of a few thousand devils by changing their bindings. He has now gained immense power and understanding and is back in Liesse with stronger hell denizens to contend with. He also has a demon of corruption from Triumphant's time bound to a standard, but I'd be surprised if he tried to use it.

*Byzantine*

Masego has decided his job is utterly impossible.

So he's decided he might as well do something else impossible. He's going to stop the Demons. For good.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Great chapter! I just want to know what Masego is doing...

*Decius*

That's a relief. Now that it's hopeless we know how it's going to end.

*Letouriste*

of course they will win but the question was about the losses.i'm concerned about if they will manage to muster enough troops for the procer war:/ most of the soldiers will be unblooded at this rate.

*Mike E.*

OK, massive props to being able to write multiple characters with unique voices so well.

And I always get chills reading your battle chapters.

*Petya*

> when that kind of man smiled you called what he showed arrow-catchers.

Can u plz explain that one to me? Either I'm daft, or there's a typo.

*kagelupus*

If I read it right, Cat was making the joke that Hunter is the kind of guy to put himself into almost certainly fatal situations, and do so happily.

Masego thinks about that phrase before deciding to something incredibly dangerous and almost certainly fatal. Either his plan will work and he will have "caught an arrow with his teeth" or it won't and trying will have killed him

*Byzantine*

Pretty much, and he came to this decision because hes already in a position that he cannot possibly win, and eventually will lose. So he figured if he has to do something impossible he might as well make it be something that counts.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

Some silly typos, somewhere you typed in 'cottoned' instead of 'caught on.'

'They' in one place should be 'the,' you do this a lot, a lot of chapters in book three feature this typo that went uncorrected. INCONCEIVABLE!

*Shequi*

"Cottoned On" is a well known colloquialism in British English.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

It is in American English too

[quoice](#)

Was the opening line supposed to have two "speak"s?

"Do not speak ever speak of victory before the last foe is dead."

[taborask](#)

I know it's silly to complain about the chapter break on a end-of-the-month extra chapter day but HOT DANG is that a cliffhanger. There's currently a metric ton of feces teetering above the metaphorical fan

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*Roger W*

Next page link is going back to hierarchy instead of to Liesse II

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## Interlude: Liesse II

*"There's not a lot of difference between court and a swamp. Colourful things are poisonous, lots of buried corpses, crocodiles are often involved."*

– Dread Empress Prudence the First, the 'Frequently Vanquished'

Masego had forged his first dimensional pocket at the age of fourteen, the gruelling work of six months resulting in accessible space no larger than a cramped closet. Though the access and retrieval patterns had been flawless, the result was ultimately flawed: nearly half the power invested by ritual had gone to waste despite his best efforts. Father had refused him another attempt until he further improved his craft, as the costs of such an undertaking were... prohibitive. It was only in the days after the Liesse Rebellion, when he had a mage's tower of his own, that he'd returned to the chalkboard and tried again. The power of his Name had granted him perception and control beyond that of any mortal mage, and though Masego had always disdained relying on those powers he'd hated the thought of an imperfect product even more. He'd come within razor's breadth of the Due, and with a weaving of High Arcana made a full room only he could access. He'd considered it a worthy effort, then, though still short of the perfection he aspired to. His horizons had expanded since.

He had tread the grounds of Arcadia since, Winter and Summer and the hinterlands between. He'd laid naked eye on the silent line between Creation and other realms, shaped and breached it according to his whims. His path to understanding High Arcana did not lay in the study of boundaries, not like his father's, yet he had learned. One could not witness the seams of what the Gods had sown together without deriving insight from the act. The boy he'd been, who watched the world end, stepping into the silhouette of the man he now was and understanding that, in the end, it was all a lie. An agreement, a lending of form and function that was by definition temporary. In time, all this would end. That which was beheld was moulded by the shape of the beholder, and as runes whirled around him in patterns the Hierophant smiled. The sun had burned sight from him and so he had made the sun his sight, carving open the stuff of miracles for his due.

No throne was so great it could not be toppled by madman's writ.

Creation sang under his guiding hand, melody woven and folding unto itself. The fabric of the world wrapped itself around the demons before they could flee his reach, forcing them into a realm that was Creation and yet not. Foam on the wave, for a fleeting instant made a realm into itself. An instant was all

that Hierophant was need, for so long as the unit existed the span was his to fashion. Masego stepped forward into the pocket he had wrested from nothing, his lie made truth by will imposed, and found the realm stretching as far as the eye could see. To bring strife to demons inside a closed realm, Father always said, was madness. Yet here he was, watching a shifting maze of smoke and mirrors, and in his bones he could feel the essences of his foes spreading. The Beast of Hierarchy wielded its own as a hammer, attempting to shatter the frame, but it was in a cage beyond its understanding. The realm broke, but all that did was set an ending. When that ending came was in the hands of the Hierophant, and he was not yet done done with his creation.

Madness whispered song sweet and insidious, echoing across haze and empty spaces, but found no purchase. The strife it sought to sow reflected upon itself, parted smoke without ruination. It was Apathy that sunk its claws into the realm, the scars it left wherever it tread beyond even his mending. No furrows in matter, no, simply... inertness. Matter made so still in all incarnations it might as well have been void. It had become the most dangerous of the three, yet this was not beyond Hierophant's prediction. Apathy was the oldest foe of wonder, and wonder was now the lens he perceived the world through. To destroy his enemy had always been where the trick of this would lay, Masego knew. It was the Heavens that granted their own the power to unmake even foreign essence through burning indignation, for in their stale eyes there was no place for such contamination in the orderly world that was to be built. The Gods Below granted no such boon, and had taught their own different lesson. *Though we all lose in this summoning, what does it matter so long as the foe loses more?*

To Evil, victory mattered more than the aftermath of that glorious moment.

Akua Sahelian's cohorts had learned this well, bringing their arsenal of ruin into the world. The flickering bindings he could see shackling the beasts spoke not of control, but of direction. A plague unleashed with the understanding that it would bring ruin to all it touched until fear pulled the leash and ripped them from Creation. It would have been child's play in this realm, for Hierophant to sharpen his will and rip through the runes. Yet in doing so he would sunder the means of recall. Summoning made into true presence, no longer contingent on the consent of mortal men. To catch the light of the Heavens and shine it a lantern upon this place would have done well, but Hierophant had seen too little. Glimpses of Contrition, before he knew how to watch, and stood witness to the corpse of an angel of which only white dry bones were left. There was no miracle for him to vivisect and assemble to his will, not even the shadow of one. He could not dismiss or destroy, and so only one path remained Hierophant.

"To borrow the fang of the beast, and strike the beast with it," Masego sighed. "How very crude."

Runes flared around his hand and the skin bubbled like water, until it parted bloodlessly and a drop of ichor flew from it. It had remained there since Marchford, so weak as to be cauterized and contained yet never entirely gone. Corruption. A perfect drop of it. The dark-skinned man turned to the maze of his own making, and felt the weight of his foes' attention bearing down on him.

"Let us play a game, creatures," he said mildly. "I call it 'burning down the house with everyone in it'."

The drop of ichor sunk into the ground and Hierophant began.

—

Brandon Talbot, Grandmaster of the Order of the Broken Bell, leaned forward on his mount. Heliotrope's flanks were covered with sweat under the armour, but the Liessen charger was still far from exhausted. They were a hardy breed, raised for war. Once the favoured mounts of many chivalric orders, when their kind had still been the pride of Callow instead of the last remnant. But that remnant still stood, under its own banner if one suborned to the Tower through complicated ties of rule and authority. That was worthy of pride, if only a little, and today the last scion of House Talbot allowed himself to feel it. This, he thought, was the kind of battles he'd been born for. That they had all been born for. Not bitter struggles with fae or the petty butchering of traitors in his liege's own camp. Though the foot at the side of his knights was Legion instead of Royal Guard, against them both was arrayed the old enemy. Hellspawn garbed in stone, with the fangs and faces of rabid dogs baying for the death of all men. There was purity to this moment that he'd sorely missed from his days as a rebel vagrant in the south, a beautiful clarity. One side rode knights, to protect the people of Callow. On the other stood devils and sorcerers, spawn of the vicious East. It was the manner of battles his ancestors had fought, and there was honour to be found in this.

The painting was marred by the truth that his comrades were often greenskins and Wastelanders, but Brandon had been taught patience by the woe the Liesse Rebellion had brought to the cause. A lesson his aunt had once known, but discarded when she began to believe she would not live to see the kingdom of her youth forged anew – save if she struck deal with the Procerans, a bargain with the devils to the west who preached fellowship yet warred as much as the Praesi. Brandon was not so old as to grow desperate, not yet, and so he had looked to the lay of the kingdom and made his choice. Better a tyrant born of Callow than the Empress' own leash at their throat. And he'd been right, he knew that now. Already so many of the Fifteenth were Callowans, and the further Queen Catherine broke with the Tower the more she would grow to



rely on her own people. Not rebellion, no, not in the Grandmaster's day. But there *would* be a day. Where Callow would be kingdom in truth even if the Wasteland denied it the name. Where a great and fierce army having learned from the victors of the Conquest would give the Tower pause should it seek to overstep again.

He would play the long game, and win.

But for that scheme to bear fruit, Brandon mused, he first had to survive this day. The Order had sallied out at the order of that scowling orc general, the one they called the Hellhound, and at first the Talbot had thought it foolishness. A young girl's blunder, for General Juniper was said to have seen barely twenty summers. The Grandmaster had once been heir to Marchford and Elizabeth Talbot, once held to be the greatest commander of the Kingdom of Callow when that name was more than a dream. He had fought in no wars before the Arcadian Campaign but he had been taught strategy and war-making, to lead men in battle as his forbears had for centuries. He'd thought it best to have his knights stay at the flank of the legionaries, ready to swoop on the enemy when they engaged the infantry. Yet the Hellhound had oddly staggered her foot and sent him out into the wilderness to await signal for a charge. It had seemed an ever-worsening blunder as he obeyed and impotently watched the devils spill out from the gate and spread along the length of this oblique formation of the general's. Oblique. That had been the word that led him to understand.

His aunt had once spoken it to him when he'd been a boy, in her solar at Talbot Manor as she sat him in a chair and placed iron figurines on a drawn map. The Fields of Streges, she'd been showing him. It would have been a lie to call them the first ones, for that stretch of field had seen a hundred battles between Callow and Praes, but the battle she showed him had been the one before the Carrion's Lord massacre on that plain. When Dread Emperor Nefarious, fresh to his throne and cocksure of his might, had attempted an invasion. Good King Robert had met the old legions and their hordes of greenskin auxiliaries on flat grounds, and staggered his advance much like this. Even as the Wizard of the West fought the Emperor, the Black Knight of those days had ordered greenskins to pour down the staggered side and sweep it aside. It'd been a bloodbath, though not the one the Wastelanders wished for. And now Brandon stood in the place of the old knightly orders, under banner of bronze and black, ready to unleash death at the end of a thousand lances.

The stage General Juniper had crafted them went like this: at the back lay the Hellgate. From it flood of devil still poured, but that flow was slowed for lack of space. In the face of the approaching Fifteenth the dog-devils had formed ranks, at least in part. The Fifteenth was staggered in three sections. The

rightmost was most ahead, followed after beat by the centre and a beat after by the left. The hellspawn stood steady before the right tip of that oblique line, but they were pouring unheeding down the left. Without line or formation, without even the semblance of orders. From where his horse stood, Brandon could see the shape of it as a long diagonal line. At the bottom of which was the Order of the Broken Bell. Before the the Hellhound ever sounded the horns, the aristocrat prepared his knights in three wedges. Three blades ready to plunge in the enemy's flank. The Grandmaster raised his lance, and within ten heartbeats all the knights had gone silent at the sight as he cantered ahead of his riders.

"Knights of Callow," he said, voice pitched and clear across the field.

*Truth's not the point of a battle-address, Brandon, Aunt Elizabeth had taught him. Put fire in the bellies for the fight ahead.*

"You all know it was Her Grace, who named us," he said.

Silence, to heighten what was to come.

"The Order of the Broken Bell," the Grandmaster said slowly, enunciating precisely. "Long have I pondered the sense of this, for our queen is a woman of few words and deep meanings."

He raised his lance high, steel tip shining bright even under this shadowed sun.

"It was no slight, my knights," he said. "It was a reminder, that in years past we *failed*. The fracture across our banner is warning, remembrance of that dark day where our weakness broke Callow."

There was murmur across the lines, but no denial. They had all been raised to the truth of this, that for all the might of the old kingdom the might of the Praesi had been greater still.

"But there is still a bell on our standard," he shouted. "We have a people still, if no kingdom. And now before you stride forth the hordes of Hell, to destroy even that."

He raised his voice.

"Knights of Callow," he said. "Will you fail them today? Or will you redeem the truth of your standard?"

Lances struck shields, a thunder crafted by the souls and hands of men. *No*, the shouts came. *Redemption in steel*, the calls went. Once, twice, thrice the horns sounded. *All knights charge*, the call old as the soul of this ancient land. Lances lowered,

shields rose and horses swept across the field as the last knights of Callow went forth to meet their ancient enemy. Brandon Talbot laughed the laugh of a man who had finally found his place in the world.

—

Istrid smashed the head of a boy who'd been one of her own until moments ago. One of the fucking wights ran him through, and within a heartbeat of hitting the ground dead he'd risen as one of the enemy. The rebels had pulled a new trick. Raising legion dead was no great innovation: they'd done the same half a dozen times, during the civil war. But back then it'd been a ritual, one sweep and done. Enough for the protocols to be amended with sappers watching corpse-piles, but no great worry. The orc had thought this to be the same old trick, and one wasted — her goblins had munitions breaking her dead within moments of them rising. But the ritual had not ceased. The wights had turned savage, and now every legionary they killed rose. It was grinding at her frontlines brutally, every death twice as costly. The Sixth had gotten its shit together after Black went to murder his way to an ending, consolidated the grounds and brought the sappers to bear, but now the tide was against them. If this were a raid, Istrid would have called for a retreat. But it'd been a long time since she'd gone out to kill her kind for cattle and glory, and this was a battlefield. Retreat here would mean casualties in the thousands as they tried to disengage from the undead horde.

So her men stood, fought and died.

It was worse for the others. Afolabi's legion had taken rough beatings in the Arcadian Campaign and even worse making a go at the central bastion, and the sudden turn had found them bloodied and overextended. Now they were being torn apart company by company, every break hastening the next. Sacker and her Ninth were giving pitched battle over the fields of stakes north of this mess, but no amount of sharpeners would allow her boys to break through in time. The Ninth was too light on the offense, they weren't built for a hard brawl. It took off the pressure some, wights moving there to ward them off, but not enough to pull them out of this mess. The Fifth Legion, she could see even from where she stood, had it even worse than the Twelfth. Orim was retreating back to the palisades he'd taken as Marshal Ranker hurried to his aid, but she was too far and the wights were in close pursuit. How much of the Fifth would be left, by the time they had the palisades protecting them? Half, maybe less. Unlike the Twelfth, they had no other legion to hold one of their flanks.

Istrid spat phlegm on blood-sodden ground and left the frontlines, legionaries filling the gap she'd left. She needed

better vantage before making a decision, or better yet Bagram's take. Her legate would have been watching the whole time. Making her way through closely-pressed ranks took too long for her tastes, though it was no fault of her men's. The more the wights pressed around them, the tighter the shield wall became to compensate. She felt the current of it as she moved, the way ground was being lost inch by inch. The Sixth was no longer fighting forward, it was trying to hold its grounds – and *failing*.

"General," Bagram saluted when she found him, arriving blood-streaked and tired.

"Legate," she rasped. "The Twelfth. How long do they have?"

"Every legionary will be dead within an hour," he said, not mincing words. "General Afolabi's own standard went down not long ago. He may very well be dead."

Fuck, Istrid thought. She had no love for the arrogant Soninke, but commanders of his calibre didn't grown on fucking trees. There were few better generals to hold a fortress than him, and they were going to *need* men like that when Procer came knocking. She turned to watch the battlefield, and her lips tightened when she watched another of the Twelfth's companies shatter then rise howling at their comrades. The only good news, as far as she could tell, was that the godsdamned demons were gone. They'd just popped out of existence after the warlock's get let them out. The Deoraithe were marching forward to fill the void, or at least some of them. Their army was a fucking mess, the left half of the foot and and bowmen being pulled down to the Hellgate. Where her own daughter was trying to face down an entire Hell with less than ten thousand men and no help from Ranker. Gods, this had all turned into a fuckup faster than you could blink. The entire army was falling to pieces, and no one was in a position to do anything about it than her.

"I'm taking our reserves," she told her legate. "We're backing the Twelfth, then withdrawing behind the palisades."

Bagram grimaced.

"We'll be thinly spread, general," he said. "If the wights punch through our lines the entire formation will collapse – we'll have no men to plug the gap."

"We'll be surrounded on three sides if Afolabi's boys break," she growled. "Better bloody than buried."

And so she went, near a thousand with her. Heavies and regulars, sweeping through the dead at her command. Advance was slow, slower than she would have liked or the Twelfth could truly afford, but what choice did she have? If she hurried she was

handing her men to the enemy as fresh fodder to spend against her own. They hammered into the wights pressing down on the other legion, buying enough time for them to retreat with a semblance of order. *Holdfast*, a cognomen earned. Even with half the Twelfth gone terror did not rule its ranks. The sorcerers guiding the undead struck back at the reverse, the horde turning on them like a pack of hounds. Her Sixth was made of sterner stuff, but the centre of the Twelfth crumpled like wet parchment when wights threw themselves over the shields and Istrid had to lead berserkers to prevent the whole formation coming down on her head. Howls filled the air as Red Rage held back the tide where Legion discipline had failed, and she screamed until the Twelfth fell back in line and the retreat was shored up. Elbowing men aside, Istrid of the Red Shields moved like flame through the ranks and hardened resistance. She was tiring, she knew, but far from done. Neither was this battle, if she had anything to say about it.

Tumbling through a knot of legionaries too slow to withdraw she slapped a man upside the head and swatted down a wight too eager for the kill with a backhand, barking order for them to pick up the pace. She'd taken wounds, she felt as the red haze ebbed low, but nothing that would kill her. More scars with stories for the telling. Yet one stung. She passed a steel-clad hand over the throb and her gauntlet came back with yellow as well as red. Istrid blinked, and twisted to look at the cut on her flank. Shallow little thing, she thought as her heartbeat slowed. Just deep enough to get the poison in. Istrid Knightsbane fell to her knees, but her last thoughts were not of her husband or daughter. Goblin steel, she rasped as the world went dark.

Goblin steel had made that cut.

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*PingleBerry*

Did... did Robber just murder the Knightsbane? Or was it someone else?

*sheer\_falacy*

Pretty sure Robber is busy doing something in Liesse, and has absolutely no reason to kill Istrid with poison. Probably someone Akua controls, or possibly Procer though that seems much less likely.

*Jeffery Wells*

Goblin steel is the high quality weaponry crafted by the legion's forges. It is wielded by pretty much all of the legionnaires. The person who stabbed Istrid was a legionnaire, not necessarily a goblin, and there is absolutely no reason to think it was Robber of all people.

*lucnation*

Because he never stabs people

*JC*

Treachery abounds! Who did it?!

It does suck that she died within the span of two paragraphs. Would've liked to see more.

[nehemiahnewell](#)

Treachery? Treachery!

*maresther23*

Of course, Akua has a plan: decapitate the Legions!

*danh3107*

Rest in Peace Istrid of the Red Shields, rest in peace.

*oldschoolvillain*

She can't – her corpse is about to step back up as a Red Raging Wight.

*NerfContessa*

Ah, but it's the truth.

As much as one might despise her methods, she Is Doing the old ways at their best.

*Swordmastersaur*

How dare you dishonor her memory with such a sentiment!

*Big Brother*

Oh shit, the Hellhound is gonna unleash the Hounds of Hell to find whoever killed her mother. This will not be pretty at all.

*naturalnuke*

Plot Twist, the Callowan Coup begins!

*naturalnuke*

Can't wait for wednesday.

*Big Brother*

And Friday. The Choir of Mercy has taken pity on us!

*Ane*

You mean Tuesday night~

*Darkening*

Well, looks like the Hellhound is going to end up a marshal sooner than we thought. Also, I enjoy the hell out of Masego's plan to mix corruption into the demons and make the mage's holding them hit the GTF0 button before they get corrupted themselves. It's pretty great. Nice to see Talbot's perspective here, he's an interesting fellow.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

I hope somebody can create some artwork of a poor fellow being stabbed by a murder of goblins with wicked knives and turn it into a t-shirt.

"stab em in the kidney!"

"Take their stuff!"

just an idea~

P.S. Is it time perhaps, for a Reddit page?

*sheer\_falacy*

There is a reddit: <https://www.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/>

[Inay](#)

There's a subreddit already ( <https://www.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/>), few folks on it, but it exist.

*Sean*

There's pretty large comment threads on /r/rational

*maresther23*

Masego was contaminated by corruption? That puts into perspective the end of Book 2.

*Letouriste*

Not contaminated.the blood was under masego control.i guess he purposely left that there^^

*nipi*

You sure thats not the corruption talking?

*Nairne .01*

Thats an interesting thing. I mean he is not a raving monster of flesh, tentacles, countless eyes and mouths right? 😊

*Gunslinger*

Bloody hell that ending. Juniper is going to roast Akua on an open flame for that. The perpetrator can't be Cat and so by extension can't be Robber.

Akua is the obvious answer, but could it be Assassin?

[Euodiachloris](#)

Not his style. This isn't an embarrassingly ironic death of ignominious proportions.

It's very probably Akua overplaying her hand and causing a bigger explosive backlash than she realised was possible. 😬

*RoflCat*

Probably one of Akua's spies.

We know she has spies everywhere, hence Cat's purge before this battle (she knew Akua would use this sort of trick)

So there's a pretty good chance one of her plan is to have the spies poison as many key figures as they can, to turn them into stronger than typical Wights AND break chain of commands at the same time.

Doing so to someone in protected location like Ranker might be hard/others will immediately kill their wight-ed victims, but in the field? Nobody would realize a thing and there's a horde of them to make it harder to kill off the victim.

*Engineer*

Yo did Masego just gank three Demons? Unholy shit dude (0\_o)

In other news, Istrid was poisoned by a Goblin Steel sword. Now, before we get our trusty pitchforks and torches to burn the little green bastards, let's stop and think for a second.

Goblin steel is standard issue for the higher ups in the Legions. Squire herself has a goblin steel sword. Therefore the fact that it was a goblin steel sword does not mean it was a goblin that committed the act.



"To fathom a strange plot look at the outcome and assume that was the intended result."

Who benefits from Istrid Knightsbane dying here?

*oldschoolvillain*

Akua, obviously, is the immediate answer. But Cat just ran a purge of the legions under her command, which at the time included Istrid's. Second, Akua's Trump was the hell gate and the demons – if murdering officers was her plan, she could have initiated it before destabilizing her soul to turn the tide. Less immediately, Cordelia Hasenbach, clearing out the champions of the Conquest and the Reforms, thus cracking the spine of the legions before her precious crusade.

*werafdsaew*

I doubt Cat purged any legions except her own. How would she have known whom to purge outside of the 15th? And she doesn't have the authority to do that anyways. It's definitely Akua's play.

*Letouriste*

you forgot than thief spied on all the legions in this fight. she also had the queen spies report and a few others like ratface (which has access to unusual people). Also, these armies were all under her command until black showed. she outranked ranker^^

*nipi*

Cat herself admitted that some spies likely remained. Im guessing its Akua.

Or perhaps the Empress if she believes that Black and by extension those loyal to him are about to become a liability. We did get some foreshadowing about Blacks instability and the differing opinions on how to deal with the Procer problem.

*Decius*

Kat benefits, although she loses more, but the Empress loses more than Kat does. Maybe the Empress is playing a very long game, and sees benefit to weakening the Legions before Kat the Black Knight tries to take over.

Akua benefits, and could plausibly have planted a sleeper agent that wasn't detected.

Everyone who gets field promotions afterward benefits, but I doubt that backstabbing is common in the Legions of Terror,

mostly because Black would have set a precedent for stabbing people who sought promotions that way in the back. of the neck. with a large axe.

The Callowan nationalist movement probably thinks they benefit, possibly enough to try, but they aren't nearly smart enough to get a spy into position on that timeframe without Scribe noticing.

Thief could have done it, but I don't see enough of a motive. The Wandering Bard likewise could have caused pretty much anybody to have delivered the blow.

And it's also possible that it was an enemy combatant. Akua had legion equipment, access to goblin steel, poison, a history of solving problems using poison, and expendable assets on the field.

*Mike E.*

Isn't Thief inside Liesse? Along with Robber and his minions.

*Nightlurker8*

Black sent all loyal to him legions in meatgrinder. He is too experienced and savvy to accidentally overextend his forces. Based on this I think he sent assassin after all his generals. So in the end empress would be forced to rely on kat.

*Letouriste*

and then cat has to deal with procer without good generals at her side?

No that doesn't fit. futhermore istrid liked cat so i'm not sure she would hate cat too much. for me black plan to kill Named friends and not many

*Letouriste*

Two generals killed just before a major war? I think procer or Tyrant would be responsible. could also be a plot from the matrons goblins but I strongly doubt that. Akua is also likely, confident like she is of her big weapon of mass destruction.

Poison is not the way a general should die!!! Dammit

*oldschoolvillain*

In a manner that further cripples the Legions of Terror just before Hasenbach's crusade. This is right up her alley.

*Drd*

Everyone seems to think it was a traitor from within who did this, but every soldier dying is being instantly raised as undead, just as I think Istrid is in the process of becoming.

Akua could be sticking to Warlock's method using reagents to instantly turn the legions to wights, that she used to turn the living inhabitants of Liesse into wights, then the swords (goblin steel swords) the wights have could be coated in the reagents like a poison.

*nipi*

We did have that little bit about the strange stew.

*oldschoolvillain*

The issue here is that it requires the legions to have gone into this battle planning to use poisoned swords against undead. While expecting at least some of their dead to rise as enemies. That's a pretty naive move for anyone as experienced as Ranker, Black, or Istrid to make.

*Drd*

I meant the undead were using poisoned swords against the living legions to turn them undead.  
I am assuming that as the wights are higher level of undead, that they're armed, and that Akua had access to legion goblin steel weaponry to arm them with.

*Nostradamus*

Every Legionnaire that dies is raised back up as an undead. This deep in the battle, how many of the undead are fallen legionnaires? Are they being equipped with poison swords too? That'd be a logistical nightmare. It's much more fiscally and strategically responsible for it to just be some manner of sorcery.

Meaning the poison is probably just run-of-the-mill poison and not wight-making poison. This was an assassination not just a casualty of war.

[benthelynx](#)

The opening quote clearly relates but I'm too tired to work out how that narrows it down.

*Engineer*

Huh, so Istrid falls here and rises as an undead Berserker. Well that will simply destroy all morale in her company. Plus there's no Named nearby to step in so if she goes Red (Black?) Rage she

will do some serious damage to her legion likely leading to a total rout.

I do believe the legions are fucked. Only a Named can save them now.

*Nairne .01*

Couldn't this be an entry point for a story for Juniper? But I mean she has shown so much potential and got compared to some of the greatest commanders the last few decades had seen in this chapter. I don't know what name it could be though, still, I'd love to see her get a Name. There is also the Hellgate and she has the moniker Hellhound...who knows what could happen.

*nipi*

I like how she called them devil... dogs like they are unworthy of being called hellhounds. I guess shes about to show who the alpha female is.

*KZA*

So I have a theory about what Black is up to now, on thought.

Liesse is a place where names can be taken- see Chidder last time.

The Black Knight may only pass their name on death... usually.

Black has literally every death flag in the world pointed right at his head, and he \*knows it.\*

Black is here to \*hand Catherine the title willingly, using Liesse as the medium.\*

This accomplishes all of his short term goals in one swoop-

1. Survive the next year.
2. Consolidate Catherine's power.
3. Prevent his friends and loyalists from going wild at his death.
4. Put him back in a position to affect the "narrative-" the Nameless but wise mentor figure to our up and coming Queen.
5. And most importantly, stick a finger right into the eye of narrative inevitability.

After all, he's always been said to not particularly exert his power directly. Losing it wouldn't cripple him like it would say, Warlock.

This also sets up possibly the most embarrassing and therefore probable possible future:

\*Lord Chancellor Black.\*

TeK

It was done on Hierarchs orders.

Ward

Love from a dumb

Ward

Love from a dumb phone

[tornadominds](#)

The legions of terror were not ruled by terror? Haha.

Lokesh

Tyrant, First Prince, even black himself. So many suspected for one blade...

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## Interlude: Liesse III

*"Oh, woe is me, you've destroyed my army... Hahaha, you fell for it again! I haven't paid them in a year, they were about to depose me. Once more, Irritant triumphs against all odds!"*

– Dread Emperor Irritant I, the Oddly Successful

Orim was dead.

Ranker had hoped otherwise even after seeing his standard go down, but now that Wekesa's boy had disappeared the demons scrying links were stable again and confirmation followed swiftly. The Fifth's mages had commanded that his senior legate was now in command. Even worse, the bloody havoc was not singular to the left flank. Istrid was gone, allegedly to sorcery, and Afolabi had been hacked to pieces by his own dead men. It'd been a long time since the goblin had seen one of her own kind fearful, much less one of matron blood, but when Sacker had contacted her there'd been that recognizable ugly glint in the other woman's eyes. The reformed command structure of the Legions of Terror had been born of long conversations around fires she'd had with Black and Grem back in the days when they had been rebels on the run, and so Ranker knew the legions would not be taken out of the battle by the death of their generals. To blunt

that old weakness of Praesi armies, who had once collapsed the moment the Black Knight or the Emperor was slain, had been one of their first reforms. Yet it would have been wilful blindness to say morale would not be butchered by the sudden deaths of old and beloved commanders.

Reputation always cut both ways.

The chain for supreme mastery of the host now ran three deep: herself, Sacker and then young Juniper. Istrid's daughter was making sweeping advance against the devils but was too far to be of true use. Sacker was on the wrong side of the battlefield, and fresh in engaging the wights through the field of stakes. After them legate seniority would be the rule of law, but Ranker trusted no career second with a battle like this. It would have to be her. Salvaging the remains of the Fifth had been her first manoeuvre, and to achieve this she had not been shy in spending the lives of the Callowan levies. They came back undead, true enough, but better guards arisen than legionaries. She was willing to trade three Callowan for every proper soldier pulled out, if not four. Some tried to run, after the first bloody clash. She had crossbows tear through the deserters, and calls made that the same fate awaited all cowards. It put spine in them, long enough for it to matter. Less than two thousand of the Fifth Legion pulled back behind the barricades, losses utterly disastrous. *A year would not be long enough to train replacements for that*, she thought. *And Procer will not even give us that much.*

The ditch that had once been meant to hinder Legion advance had now become its very line of defence, shield wall clustered tight behind it as sappers turned the thin space between ditch and palisade in a storm of munitions. The Fifth's siege engines were trained on the horde of wights, and her own hastily assembled to join them. The left flank steadied, slowly but surely, and the danger of complete and utter rout passed. For now. Legate Bagram had led the Sixth and Twelfth into similar retreat on the other flank, his giving ground made easier by the Ninth swinging at the wights from the side. The rebels in the last bastion saw opening in that, and took it. The moment the Ninth stood alone the wights turned towards it as one, to break the solitary legion, but they were not dealing with an orc. Sacker was a cunning old fox, and she'd prepared the grounds: the undead tumbled through a field of buried munitions and razor wires with mass casualties as Sacker retreated at her own pace, long gone by the time the undead had broken through her traps. The Ninth marched down to anchor the side of the bloodied Sixth and Twelfth, and Marshal Ranker had that side's combined command officially ceded to the only general there.

They would hold long enough for the Deoraithe advancing to prop them up. cursory reading of the field would have one think that

would allow their side to turn the tide, begin a counterattack backed by Daoine bowmen and fresh infantry, but the old goblin had been watching more than troops movements with her rheumy eyes. Numbers. It was always about the numbers, and if nothing changed Marshal Ranker knew this battle was lost. Casualties were starkly heavier on the side of the rebels now that the Legions had a proper position, but that moment of overextension had been too costly. They'd been weakened, and now the rebels were grinding away at them with their own dead. A Legion of Terror was a complex and carefully crafted engine, meant to serve multiple purposes and consequently involving a great many specialized parts. There was a truth underlying that Ranker had never put to ink in any of her treatises, and neither had the other two architects of the Legions: there were a series of lines in the sand that dictated the combat efficiency of a legion. Lines defined by casualties and supply expenditures. Not simple ones, as a legion was made of too many parts for that. But the two most salient points of failure were dead regulars and lack of goblin munitions. One of these lines crossed would cripple a legion. Two ended it as a fighting force.

On both flanks, the numbers were teetering dangerously closed to both red lines for most the legions on the field. Her Fourth and Sacker's Ninth were fresh in comparison, but also the most fragile of the legions: they had higher proportion of sappers and engineers, and lower proportions of heavies. There was a reason the Ninth was high-always paired with the Sixth, the largest heavy infantry force in the Empire. Her own legion was not quite so delicate, but it was still far from the heavy assault force she needed now. Good for holding grounds, as it currently did. But breaching the barricade anew would cost her more dead regulars than she could afford, or this entire army for that matter. Marshal Ranker's eyes studied the enemy lines, and the rate at which the dead rose. Her lips tightened. It would take until nightfall, she thought. Several hours yet. But when the sun came down, the largest army assembled by the Dread Empire in over twenty years would effectively be ended as a fighting force.

The Fifteenth, if taken from the Hellgate, could perhaps tip the balance. Wekesa had implied it could be dealt with, and so Ranker grit her teeth and sent near half the forces of Daoine to hurry that fight along. The Watch, even, though it could have been used elsewhere to great effect. It was too much like rolling the dice for her taste, but she was short on alternatives. A miracle was what they needed. Answer came, to that unspoken prayer. A miracle of sorts. It was not great sorcery or a clever trick, a Calamity unleashed or strategy revealed at the last moment. It was a screaming fool riding a flying horse, dragging an orc by the neck as they crashed into the central bastion.

Which then exploded.

—

Wekesa was unused to feeling admiration for others. It was a sentiment usually reserved for Alaya or Amadeus, whose aptitudes shone brightest in areas of no real interest to him. Dumisai of Aksum, the father of the girl currently giving them some trouble, had occasionally earned a sliver of respect for his research as well: though not ground-breaking work by any means, the man's enlightened refinement of old Wasteland rituals was often worth a second glance. But even the insights of the man who might have once contested his Name were ultimately the work of a second-rate sorcery. Dumisai was to sorcery what goblins were to engineering – a skilled craftsman, but very rarely the herald of true innovation. He improved but did not *create*. His daughter, it seemed, was of a different breed. The Warlock silently studied what appeared to be a perfectly stable Greater Breach and inclined his head in genuine respect at the other mage's achievement. This was match for any work of his that fell under the Dark Day protocol, and truthfully above most his own devices.

The core of the work was hopelessly Praesi, of course. Pure Trismegistan design, from the set of secondary stabilizing arrays to the the displacement of the energy source to the sky in order to limit the effects of the bleed on the immediate surroundings. Yet Akua Sahelian had starkly surpassed ever single preceding effort ascribed to that branch of magical theory with her magnificent use of escapements to ensure even Keter's Due did not go to waste. It was, he would concede, a masterful thing. The precision involved was mind-boggling, likely the result of years of calculations, and the sheer variety of arrays involved was worthy of praise. Liesse had runic base for flight, for planar displacement and for repeated Breach ritual use. This might be the single most variable magical weapon in the history of Praes. It would be delight and the occupation of entire decades to study her work, after the Diabolist was killed. Still, reproduction was not possible. This much he'd already determined. The Greater Breach before him was... simplistic. There'd been a binding inscribed in the heart of the Hellgate that bound any devil crossing it, along with a mild compulsion to cross for any who looked upon it, but the binding itself could only be called incomplete. To function properly, it required one with the Name of Diabolist to be the one initiating the ritual.

This city-artefact was tailored so that only one soul in all of Creation could use its full potential, the very same villain who'd built it.

In his estimation, with the right modifications part of the functionality could be maintained without Sahelian. A Greater Breach would still be possible to open, though with nowhere as large of breadth of range and precision. But the devils pouring through that Breach would be so loosely bound as to be



effectively independent. At best, given six months, Warlock could ensure they were barred from a specific territory. Any modifications more extensive would require years of research and a complete redesign of all major arrays: everything was interlinked. The slightest change would unbalance every other system. It was no wonder, he thought, that Diabolist had chosen displacement as a protective measure. Devices this sophisticated had a dangerous tendency towards fragility, one of the many reasons Wekesa himself preferred to rely on imbricated forces rather than runic arrays. Amadeus and his liability of an apprentice were currently traipsing the belly of the beast, and he was glad to have impressed on his old friend the dangers of meddling with such delicate arrangements. He would know better than start breaking every array in sight, and though the girl was an ignorant thug who did not she would be reined in by her teacher's orders.

Gaze leaving the Breach, Warlock considered the soldiers fighting before it. The Fifteenth was making short work of the devils – *akalibsa*, of all things, how very provincial of Sahelian. Some things were not so easily outgrown, it seemed. The Knightsbane's daughter, by the looks of it, had arranged some sort of tactical trap and torn apart the devils with the same horsemen her mother was famous for breaking. The irony was not quite worth a chuckle, but close. Annihilation did not seem to be the intent here, curiously enough. A path of retreat had been left open to the *akalibsa* and the devils were fleeing through it, simultaneously destroying the last of their formation and preventing more devils passing through the Breach by their panicked stampede. Within moments a mass of shield-locking legionaries had the opening secured, and sappers lined up behind them. A killing field in the making, Wekesa thought. Clever girl. This was, he decided, nearly sufficient preparation for him to begin intervening. Lashing the the shapeshifted devils that dragged his chariot, the Sovereign of the Red Skies began his descent.

—

Masego had always deeply disliked when scholars spoke of sorcery as an art, for it was anything but. Mages were often compared to painters and singers, spellcrafting termed as a piece instead of the precise formulas they truly were. It was only the ignorant who found more beauty in such subjective matters than in the perfect arithmetic of imposing one's will upon Creation. There was greater splendour in one flawlessly balanced formula than in all the statues and painting of the world. It was why Hierophant had become who he was, the reason for his love of witnessing that which was previously unknown: to fit and explain what was once a mystery within the greater frame of sorcery was the most genuine act of grace possible to one of mortal flesh. Every such truth brought into the light of day expanded the span of Creation as a whole, perhaps the only action that could ever accurately be

called selfless. After all, beyond the petty squabbles of Above and Below lay a deeper truth. *We are rats in a cage, one and all, and the choice spoken of in the Book of All Things is but a trick. The true choice is this: to claw at the other rats, or seek the edge of the cage.*

Masego, like his father before him, had chosen purpose beyond the largely pointless vagaries of transient existence.

It was unfortunate in some ways that the insights he had gained following that purpose would not be used in the very kind of squabble he would rather avoid entirely, but on occasions concessions must be made for the ones we loved. Besides, he would gain much from victory today. The Sahelian artefact that allowed one to scry beyond Creation, for one, and unrestricted study of the Diabolist's own sorcerous efforts. Of course, victory had to be obtained first. This was proving more tedious than he would have liked. It was a noted fact that demons, for reasons not yet understood, did not affect each other. When two different such entities attempted to contaminate with their essence the same portion of Creation, one saturated the fabric of reality first and the other's effect simply washed over it. The phenomenon had not been studied in great depth, sadly, or rather it had but that research had not been preserved. Practitioners who kept extensive notes on matters demonic tended to be... affected by the very keeping. Their immediate surroundings as well. Even too much knowledge of such entities had its costs, and it was not false archetype to consider diabolists as particular prone to derangement. If not worse.

Still, it was quite fascinating to watch the spreading corruption of Hierophant's own creation check the efforts of the three demons that were attempting to destroy him. Like ink in water the drop of ichor he had inserted in the thread of the dimension had spread, but unlike ink had not thinned in the spreading. It had, if anything, strengthened. This had proved problematic in some ways – he now had to regularly craft a secondary control spell for his guidance and transfer the reins to it lest the corruption reach him directly – the effectiveness could not be denied. Already he had smothered Madness in a globe of corruption it was completely failing to breach in any way. There was, as far as he could tell, not so much as a single mote of bleed.

"Fascinating," Hierophant murmured, cocking his head to the side.

The Beast of Hierarchy was proving more difficult to restrain. Abandoning what could be considered 'offensive action' for its kind, it had instead replaced a law regarding space that Masego had yet to grasp. Even within this closed realm, where the boundaries and rules had been defined by his will alone, it managed to escape his sorcery effortlessly. He'd been reduced to using a defensive screen of corruption to prevent the demon of

Order falling upon him, which was little different from setting fire to his own garden so thieves could not get at the cabbage. Apathy was something of a mixed bag. Though once the largest threat it was no longer, yet to consider it contained would be something of a stretch. While immobile, it was so because its essence had forged an envelope of inertness around it. Corruption could not breach it, and it kept disrupting efforts to wrap fully around its envelope. Frustrating, this. Anything less than perfect containment was no containment at all, with creatures such as these. Still, this was only preparation. The attempts at containment had been purely to sate his curiosity, the true thrust of his offensive would begin – ah, now. Sufficient corruption had been spread. Hierophant extended his hand, and from his pocket dimension a long shaft of wood fell.

A gift from Catherine, who truly could be a good and understanding friend when she tried. The old standard was long rid of any cloth but the runes were what truly mattered, carved into the old wood, and with a subtle shiver they responded to his will. The same demon of Corruption he'd once fought in Liesse came out screaming into his realm, leashed to his will. Within moments, not that time had much meaning here, it cornered the Beast of Hierarchy. With the others stationary, he could finally act. Trying to kill demon with demon would, of course, be as attempting to drown a fish. But it was not the demons he sought to affect. Corruption crept down the bindings the rebel mages placed upon their arsenal of ruin, sliding down the sympathetic links like thick oil. Masego smiled, and without ever leaving his realm found himself looking into the terrified eyes of mages hidden behind layers and layers of ward.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," he said.

The demons struggled and screamed. For a moment he pondered offering a pithy line to send them off with, but he did not have a knack for such matters.

"Try not to scream," he suggested. "It only makes it worse."

Corruption surged. They did not listen.

—

Juniper watched the devils scatter like rabbits before her legion and felt only visceral satisfaction at the sight. Minimal casualties. The three wedges of Callowan cavalry had struck the dog-devils like a falling hammer. Collapse complete and immediate, thousands of bodies friend and foe moving according to her will in perfect harmony. The Hellhound had never enjoyed a roll in the hay half so much as she did this single moment. It must have been the way Pickler felt, she thought, when some device she'd made worked perfectly. That instant where the cogs turned and the chord snapped and the perfect suddenly *clarity* it

brought. She felt flushed and feverish, and beyond that hungry for more. Another battle, another moment where the arrow loosed by her mind found the target and hit the bullseye with that palpably pleasurable thump. Gods, she had been blessed to be born in these years of the Empire. With war after war tumbling towards her like a drunken lover, offering the bounty of one field of steel after another with open arms.

Juniper felt Aisha's stare lingering on her, and so wiped away the unseemliness on her face before the Taghreb decided to comment on it. Teasing would only detract from the glorious lightness now running through her veins, no matter whose mouth it came from. Besides, she knew Aisha had touched this feeling as well. The orc remembered the war games of the College, the bright eyes shining on Aisha Bishara's face when Wolf Company tore into the flank of some astonished company of fools with fire and sword. Her Staff Tribune saw more parchment than steel, these days, but it was inside her still. The desert tribes of the Taghreb had been raiders as famed as her own people, in the olden days before the Miezans came. The Empire liked to paint a veneer of civilization over its peoples, nowadays, but blood always ran red. No one could escape the truth of that.

"The Deoraithe," Juniper said, gathering herself together. "Report."

Aisha's face bobbed down, though not deep enough to hide the smirk on her lips.

"Lord Hierophant's removal of the demons further muddled their deployment," the Staff Tribune said. "But we have three thousand archers and the same in foot headed our way. Duchess Kegan has, reluctantly, ceded operational command over them."

"And the Watch?" Juniper gravelled.

"Marshal Ranker has granted us use of it," she replied, cheeks dimpling. "The Lord Warlock's statement that the gate could yet be ended has her... invested."

The battle's other front was too far for the Hellhound to have a good look at what was happening, but the situation did seem dire from what she could see. Both flanks had fallen back behind the palisades and ditches they'd once taken, and the Deoraithe in the centre were rushing too slowly to fill the void left by the demons. If the Hellgate could be taken care of quickly enough, the Fifteenth could move up to reinforce the flagging legions. Swiftness was of the essence, more than ever.

"The Order of the Broken Bell is to pursue the fleeing devils," Juniper said. "Prepare fresh lines for a push into the Breach. I'll want the Watch to back them as soon as possible, too. But

before that... The Warlock said he needs us to clear a space. So we'll clear him a fucking space."

General Juniper of the Fifteenth Legion bared her fangs.

"Tell Pickler her moment's come – *engines free*."

—

Senior Sapper Pickler of the High Ridge tribe hopped from one foot to the other, feeling like the young girl she'd never before been. Finally, *finally* the Hellhound had let her off the leash. All this talk of strategic surprise, of comparative advantages and blah blah blah. Gobbler be witness, the orc could prattle on like an old raider sometimes. A depression in the grounds had one of her engines bumping as the oxen tore it free and the goblin turned on the legionary driving the beast.

"You," she hissed. "If there's a single cog askew, I swear on all the Gods I will flay you piece by piece and *make you eat it*."

The goblin paled and started babbling excuses, but she cared little for his inanities. She crept to her lovely scorpion and stroked the rough wood, checking the beauty for damages. Nothing. Good. Not that she'd take back her words. Pickler was not her mother and despised all she stood for, but she was matron-blood nonetheless. Punishments as unusual as they were cruel were her birth right.

"I'm watching you," she barked at the legionary. "If you don't have any use for your eyes, you despicable little vandal, maybe Robber should have them instead."

Satisfied the ignorant masses had been sufficiently cowed, she stalked forward to the gate. Juniper was fronting heavies with sappers behind them, breaking up the devils that had begun pouring out again with sharpeners and then letting them wash up against the shield wall, but that was just a temporary arrangement. They needed to pierce through, since the Warlock apparently had some kind of scheme to close the gate. Not her concern, and she'd not asked for further information. Instead she made her way to the front and began haranguing the legionaries to prepare themselves for a parting when her precious ones arrived, which would be soon though if the oxen-drivers hurried and messed up her engines there was going to be a rousing bout of crucifixions following shortly. And not the nice kind. She'd find the rusty nails herself, if she had to. Ten scorpions of her own design were set down as she hovered, and two of the never-before unveiled Spitters. Getting Ratface to sign off on the logistics of providing ammunition for her two latest wonders had been like pulling a bald dragon's teeth, but she'd gone above his head and arranged for the Squire to stamp her seal of approval. It had

been an easy sell, given the other woman's love affair with all forms of wanton destruction.

That the half-blood Deoraithe had immediately suggested goblinfire be used as ammunition as well was one of the things that helped Pickler believe there might be worth in following her.

Ratface had later redeemed himself of his sins by using his 'talents' to ensure her childhood dream came true. Before her, delicately being set down on the ground and deployed, were the first ten built examples of the gloriously-named Pickler Model of the Imperial Artillery Templates. The Supply Tribune had managed to push the official acceptance of the design in Ater with only three separate instance of blackmail and bribery, a splendid navigation of the maze of squabbling and obstructionism that was the Imperial bureaucracy. Fast-tracking the review had not even required a murder! The Taghreb would truly have made a halfway-decent consort to a Matron, had he been born of her people. Not a breeding partner, of course, or even a first consort – those were expected to be properly demure and covered in scars – but perhaps a fourth or even third.

The scorpions she ordered set in a straight line, with some room between them, and the sappers taught to handle them eagerly began field preparations. The two Spitters were set at an interval behind, the munition carts behind them very carefully unloaded. Even with cloth-filled crates carrying them on wheels had been risky business, but if that much had not been possible the Hellhound would have never allowed them to be deployed. She had no appreciation for real engineering, their general. Pickler did not usually hold battlefield command, save in case of sieges, but in this particular instance she had left behind the general staff to personally supervise. She'd told the others it was to keep an eye on finicky machines, but that was an ugly lie. Her designs were flawless. She just wanted to seem them unveiled for the first time from up close. Sauntering ahead, the Senior Sapper gauged the wind and distance before ordering a last series of adjustments. Then she screamed for the legionaries ahead to part, and glory unfolded before her very eyes.

Ten bolts sprang forward, steel-tipped, and shattered their way through the first three ranks of stone-garbed devils. Before the killing was even over, the strings on her scorpions loosened and with a mere pulling of the lever reset. The wooden store above the scorpion's length unclenched and another bolt dropped. *Chak*, and death flew. Lever, drop. *Chak*, and death flew. A manic grin split the goblin's face as she watched the poetry of the world in motion, the work of her mind and hands unleashed. This, she thought, was worth every strapping she'd received for stealing chalk and drawing designs on den walls. Worth every bleeding she'd suffered through for tinkering with her own hands,

disgracing her line by doing man's work. It was worth her mother smilingly telling her she'd slit her throat and leave her body to the buzzards if she ever tried to return to the tribe. The Pickler Models scythed their way through the devils, until the six shots in the stores were emptied and the wooden boxes had to be changed. In that heartbeat, as the devils surged again, the Spitters fired. It pained Pickler to say it, but these were not her sole work. The engines were, of course, but not the ammunition.

Alchemy – the use of it of course, not the production as that secret would never leave the Eyries – had never been a true interest of hers. She had designed the clay projectiles, but within the concoction that awaited was Robber's own recipe. Three sappers had gone blind in the experimental process and twice that many deaf, but as she saw the Seedlings fly she thought it had been entirely worth it. Only one per Spitter, who as machines were almost more a long sling than anything resembling a scorpion. Flat but angled upwards, kept as close to the ground as possible to limit the shaking. They were not yet able to be fired from behind a shield wall, though already she was planning a second model that would remedy that weakness. The Seedlings, each half as large as trebuchet stone, arced up and then fell among the throng of devils. What ensued was sheer artistry. First an explosion, for sharpeners had been used to make much of the substance, but then spread a blinding white flame spilling from that blast. The devils screamed, screamed as the fire seared flesh and stone and cooked them alive. After seventeen heartbeats the flame went out, the longest Robber had been able to maintain the burn when exposed to open air.

When the flames winked out, the scorpions had been pushed forward five feet. The stores began their mechanical work as the Spitters were advanced five feet as well then loaded anew. And so began the push forward, heavies closing on the sides of the gate and forcing the devils into a hall where only death awaited. Senior Sapper Pickler of the High Ridge tribe cackled, and paid no attention to the weak-bellied legionaries around her that flinched at the sound.

Screams filled the air as firing resumed, and it was the song of *progress*.

---

*Alivaril*

I really hope the gnomes don't keep them from having nice things.

*Adra*

"Screams filled the air as firing resumed, and it was the song of progress."

Yup, that sounds like a paddlin' from the gnomes.

*Ane*

Wait, Alivaril? The real Alivaril?

*agumentic*

It's still medieval-ish, so they should be okay with it.

*John Galt*

Keep the gnomes at bay! Vote.

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

[\*Euodiachloris\*](#)

A whole new meaning to "red letter day". 😊

*nipi*

Was the third letter still a warning? Or did that come with the flying fleet?

*Ezreon*

With fleet

*JC*

Oh Archer. Taking after her mentor in so many ways.

Also, Masego is amazing. Innocently terrifying.

*ALKATYN*

Pickler is absolutely beautiful and terrifying.

*AshSlanabrezgov*

I don't like Pickler, but I love her engines.

[\*DroughtBringer\*](#)

Goblin fire... but not?

Awesome chapter! I can't wait for the first Friday chapter!

*rangamal thenuwara*



Hell yeah. Nice time to get the Friday updates. I just hope the author does not get burned out.

*IDKWhoitis*

Pretty sure that's White Phosphorus (Or it's magical equivalent), given that it blinds and burns.

[shieldredblog](#)

Corruption is the real hero of this story.  
I hope the fleshy rag doll demon becomes a main character.

*Alivaril*

Personally, I'm extremely worried about Masego right now. Book 2, chapter 48:

"Are you telling me you just tried to summon a demon of Corruption in a dimension you bound to yourself? That'd be a special brand of crazy even for you."

I cleared my throat.

"And by crazy I mean stupid. So very, very stupid."

*JC*

I could show you the runes proving this if you weren't magically illiterate.

*letouriste*

i doubt masego bound that dimension to himself...still he personally weld corruption blood and experimented on that^^

*maresther23*

And this, boys and girls, is why we call them the Legions of  
TERROR!

*danh3107*

Greenskins are all mad, all of them. From Juniper's battle lust, to Pickler's joy of seeing her creations do what they intended and even Hakram's ability to sharpen his deadliness through verse and song.

All of them bloody mad,

AND I LOVE IT!

*Ane*

What Pickler /really/ needs to build is an engine that can hurl Hakram's.

Sure, there might only be one shot.

But the ammo is reusable.

*Big Brother*

Heck, launch him on a Seedling. He'll Stand through it, and Rampage in the aftermath.

*Gunslinger*

For a moment he pondered offering a pithy line to send them off with, but he did not have a knack for such matters.

"Try not to scream," he suggested. "It only makes it worse

Masego my boy, surely you underestimate yourself.

This chapter was fucking awesome. I've read it multiple times already. It's also tragic how much of a beating the legion has taken. I wonder if this is still within Malicia's estimate or if she would regret underestimating the Diabolist.

*Gunslinger*

On a related note, Traitorous and Irritant are my favorite dread emperors.

*Big Brother*

Oh easily. I kinda hope Irritant was the one who Traitorous killed to become Dread Emperor.

*RandomFan*

I hope they weren't, because both of them are more awesome if they decided to do this without following in the other's footsteps. Still, it wouldn't surprise me if they were.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Indeed. It's hard to say who between those two is most awesome. \*nods\*

[chris S](#)

If Cat ever climbs the Tower, I can kin of see her becoming Dread Empress Irritant II, The Even More Oddly Successful.

"You thought you had the upper hand when you chopped my sword arm off, but with it detached from my body, I was able to

reanimate it with necromancy and pull the switch to activate the goblinfire explosives beneath you without you noticing!"

*Engineer*

Ok, so uh why is Archer dragging Adjutant by the neck? And uh, why did she kamikaze the central bastion? With Zombie The Third no less.

*JC*

Always have a first step going.

*samshadar*

Because such use of Zombie The Third irritates our dear Squire to no end? 😊

*rangamal thenuwara*

I think Archer just threw Hakram first which caused the explosion. Then landed on the destroyed bastion.

*maresther23*

Do you remember how Adjutant said he would keep Archer away from problems. Well, she resents that remark.

I love the comparisons between "unleashing the Calamities" and "a fool with an orc by the neck". The Calamities are elegant weapons of mass destruction carefully deployed by Black. The Woe are unpredictable weapons of mass destruction vaguely pointed in the direction they will cause more chaos by Cat.

[Euodiachloris](#)

You have to ask? With one act, she royally trolls both Adjunct and Squire by doing something they can't say isn't helpful. XD

*Byzantine*

Huh, when did Patreon reach almost \$800?

*Gunslinger*

About 10 days ago which means we don't have to wait till monday.

*Allafterme*

Looks like if old Praes is going down, it will go down hard and take the old guard with it. Cat's succession seem more and more plausible with each chapter

*letouriste*

hum...so if i understood correctly there is a chapter tomorrow? i didn't even donate a cent/pennie yet:/ damn me and my lack of funds.

anyway, the presentation page still says Monday and Wednesday so i'm not sure.

great chapter:) things are looking up everywhere and with so many characters dying in the prior one i fear less a possible soon to be death of black...i didn't really believe in this anyway given all the plot foreshadowing of his future actions (elves?, transition to cat in the blood, war on the trueblood etc...) and he didn't seem suicidal to me.

*rangamal thenuwara*

Next chapter on Friday. Author confirmed on reddit.

*letouriste*

great:)

thanks, i missed that.

is there several reddit for this story? i'm on this one:

<https://www.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/>

*letouriste*

errr, forget that. i found it^^

*AshSlanabrezgov*

I am sad. Never thought that Hierophant would be so... mathematical and so hateful for sculpture and dance. I expected him be somewhat exoteric, mystical, otherworldly, arcane and perhaps a bit eldritch. I mean, look at his name. I expected wonder, dry engineering. Never expected him to be a raging atheist slash maths geek.

*AshSlanabrezgov*

\*i expected wonder, ZEN-ISH WISDOM, NOT dry engineering.

*Mike E.*

He strikes me as being written as someone in the autism spectrum...non-social as a kid, knack for figuring out technical things, doesn't understand jokes/satire, physical contact annoys him, has a need to factually correct people (which Cat uses to troll him endlessly). Him being mathematical and precise is exactly what I expect.

*AshSlanabrezgov*

Autism... Hm. Might be, didn't think about it. Might be, yet I didn't see exact symptoms of autism? I'd rather define him as 'focused'. 'Too focused' even. In a sense of too focused on studies, perhaps he was shaped and encouraged by his dad and inborn properties of his brain. Too focused on studies means his experience and mental tools and interests are skewed.

*stevenneiman*

The whole point of his new Name is that he applies reductionism to what seems wondrous to others. He is, to use a real-world analogy, the stage magician who heckles spoon-benders and faith healers, with a bit of Richard Feynman and the Mythbusters thrown in. And he never had any interest in art or showmanship, even before he gained his first Name. All he cares about is the underlying principles and how to apply them; he regards showmanship as merely a barrier to the understanding of those principles, and art as the same except without anything he finds profound or interesting on the other side of that barrier. He doesn't even have much of his father's patience for other things, nor any real interests outside of magic, sarcasm, and a little bit of interest in friendship.

In short, it would be blatant character derailment if he did regard anything he did as being fundamentally special. Masterful and brilliant, maybe, but not special.

*AshSlanabrezgov*

There was ambiguity about how his name will take on 'dissecting divine'. Him being overly pedantic was influence of Apprentice Name. After getting new name Hierophant, High Priest, and new eyes, it seemed like his personality changed. He started to spout awesomely mind boggling and philosophical and poetic sh\*t. I was trilled by his scenes until now. I thought he dropped the shackles of Apprentice and morphed to something new.

And now after all this time it feels like 180 degree turn when his insight is shown so... mundane. So casual. So simple. So grey. It could be more. His inner world could be more. Such a wasted possibility. -\_-

*knockoffnikolai*

This comment is also partly in response to your reply to Mike E.

If you take a second look at his inner monologue, you'll see that Masego is very much driven by his wonder and curiosity. But it's a wonder and curiosity that's located in a view of the world that's very different than everyone around him. The perspectives of everyone around him seem like hazy and

imprecise flailings at the true nature of reality, hence his disdain as he steps forward to unravel the mysteries before him. For Masego, there is no wonder in an unsolvable mystery. A mystery is like a wrapped present. It is fun to tear off the wrapper, but what you reveal in the process holds the lasting value. If there is any mysticism in the process (and he'll deny that there is), it's in the way that he is able to truly become himself while seeking after the hidden secrets of reality.

I work with autistic individuals, and the ones who go into research typically aren't quite that flowery, but the above paragraph is a good approximation of their perspective. (I tried to modulate it for your communication style, but that's always a tricky game.) I've worked with a fellow whose field of choice is nutritional research, because "I want to examine the basic components of this thing we call life." It's very much the same attitude on display with Masego here. Autism presents differently with each individual, but to my view, Masego is a pretty faithful depiction of a person on the spectrum.

*AshSlanabrezgov*

2knockoffnicolai – After all said above about autism, I think I might be misunderstanding the meaning of this term. (I thought 'autism' is severe mental condition that disrupts persons so bad that he/she is incapable of any work) Gonna look into it.

*nipi*

"If there's a single cog askew, I swear on all the Gods I will flay you piece by piece and make you eat it."

I thought wastlanders didnt swear on the Gods. The ones above not being theirs and the ones below. Well there was that little bit where Cat suggested swearing on them and Akua went very very pale.

*Big Brother*

Well, there are the Gods Above and Below who are the "top" of the divine food chain, then regional gods, like the Orcish God that Captain ate to control the Curse. Below that could be the fae royals, who embody points in time (Waning Day, Moonless Nights, etc).

*Jonnnney*

I believe the wastelands are not in the same location as the same as the Grey Erieks

*stevenneiman*

At first, I was thinking it seemed weird for Robber to be doing alchemy when he might not get to see the results. Thinking it over, I realize that it would be uncharacteristic for him to miss an opportunity to wreak havoc on a battlefield just because he isn't there.

Also, considering how things are going I've got a bad feeling about that chapter quote.

Steve

"Try not to scream. It only makes it worse."  
Bad at pithy one-liners my ass. XD

Ward

Love from a dumb phone

wdc543

Hey does anyone know where I can find the description of goblinfire?

[Inay](#)

I like that we learn a bit more about the matrons-bloodline. What's make them so special and scare the Elder? I wanna know! (One day not right now now)

*knockoffnikolai*

We know two things: One, the goblins are ruthless, clever, and pragmatic. Two, they are extremely protective of their culture and way of life. They do not permit cultural bleed one way or the other.

Put those together, and I'm thinking the Matron lines descend from interbreeding with orcs. Unspeakably taboo for goblins (re: fact 2), but it gives their bloodlines a decisive advantage over other goblins (re: fact 1).

*Ldwllms*

Just did a binge reading from book one in like three days.... And I love it. To think I stumbled upon this by mistake and boredom. But then maybe it was just creation guiding my browser. 🙌  
I was hoping I wouldn't catch up with the writing and that it would be all done before I got to the end. Sigh. Now I'm having a serious case of blueballs.

*oldschoolvillain*

You joined at the right time – just a week ago you would have had to wait until Monday for the next update, rather than getting it Friday.

*Isa Lumitus*

Yes! Pickler gets it! She understands the beauty of automated slaughter.

Somehow, I know what would happen to me if I was stuck in this story... I'd probably accidentally kill myself trying to figure out goblin munitions. Or I'd succeed and get assassinated.

*Cloud\_Striker (Earth Mem Inhabitant)*

The situation has been only made worse by the addition of yet more demons!

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## **Interlude: Liesse IV**

*"Rulers must exercise restraint. Every action ripples across Creation, bringing three unintended consequences for every one anticipated."*

– Extract from the personal journals of Dread Emperor Terribilis II

"Well, I'm not getting close to that," Archer announced.

Their arrival on the bastion had been somewhat haphazard, Hakram thought, yet the fight had managed to go sharply downhill within moments. Before they even got their bearings fully half a dozen wards had blown up and mages had begun screaming, their flesh boiling and twisting violently. The orc calmly considered the sight even as he rose to his feet, eyes moving from one roiling shape to another. This was not, he decided, sorcery. Or not just that. The effects were too varied. Some rebels were growing spores on their skin, others had bones protruding from their skin in a crown of spikes and yet more had... stranger outcomes. A woman's silk robes turned into a carapace, her the ruby set in her thick golden necklace blinking like an eye. He had seen the likes of this before, in Marchford. When a warband of young Named had picked a fight beyond their understanding, and come so very close to annihilation for that arrogance. The rest of the dots connected themselves without effort. Diabolist had surrendered the demon she'd unleashed there as part of the terms of



settlement in Liesse, and the custody of it had been granted to Masego.

Adjutant felt like shivering. It was one thing, he thought, for Catherine to fight fire with oil. Quite another for Hierophant to do the same. The consequences of Masego making a mistake would be graver in many ways. It occurred to him for the first time, then, that they had perhaps learned the recklessness of the woman they followed too well. *We are no Calamities*, the orc thought. *The crucible of our forging was one of desperation, and we have learned both the best and the worst of that.* Victory against all odds, victory snatched from the jaws of defeat, could never be gained without a cost. Habit had taught them to disregard that, because behind them more steady hands always swept away the mess. But those steady hands were dying now. If they did not learn to check this recklessness, it would bury them. Or worse, the orc thought as he watched the corruption take hold of the mages. In the distance a sound like a thousand sharpeners sounded and Hierophant returned to Creation in a storm of power. The orc's eyes flicked, and his face grew grim.

The Deoraithe had advanced where the demons once stood before Masego spirited them away, and now that the blind sorcerer had returned he'd come back among them. Tendrils of power washed over the heart of the bowmen, corruption spreading with them. They had traded three great catastrophes for two lesser ones. Hakram seized serenity, let it sink through his mind and wash away doubts and fears. Clarity took the scales from his eyes, and he assessed the situation on the bastion. Corrupted mages, more than a hundred. It was no longer spreading actively, but the taint had taken them whole. Praesi household troops were hesitating, split between the duty to clear out the two Named who'd just dropped down among them and the dim realization that the mages they sought to protect might no longer be on their side. On anyone's. Could he and Archer take care of both forces alone? No, he assessed. Their intention here had been to disrupt, and Hierophant had achieved that without them. They must now contain instead, and the two of them were not enough. Without hesitation, he made his decision.

"Who is in command among you?" he called out to the soldiers.

"Shut your fucking mouth, greens-"

Archer had put an arrow through the roof of the woman's mouth before she was done speaking and was already nocking a second.

"Not the answer we were looking for, my darlings," she smiled.

"Your sorcerers are corrupted," Hakram said. "They must be cleared out before we all die."

Power began to feel the air, so heavy he could taste it, but it was wrong. Like stagnant water.

"Listen to me," Adjutant barked, and his Name flared.

Like quill being dipped in an inkwell, void filled for purpose. It was not Speaking, not quite. He was not Catherine, able to bridge the gap of a Name too young and thin by sheer stubborn will. But he was the Adjutant, and they were soldiers. That mattered, in the eyes of Creation. They turned to him, and there was a glint in their eyes that spoke of orders awaited. Just a glint, but it would be enough.

"About turn," he ordered. "Rapid advance, watch your formation. Strike before they can start rituals."

There was heartbeat of stillness, then the world pivoted. They moved.

"Archer," he began, turning to the other Named.

"Disrupt anything big," she sighed. "I know how this goes. Gods, you take all the fun out of this. It could have been a real messy scrap but you've gone and made it all orderly."

Adjutant hefted up his axe and joined the ranks of the men he'd been about to kill mere moments ago. Sorcery lashed forward and he bared his fangs in answer.

—

Wekesa had always considered the works of goblins with fond but distinct contempt. Short-lived creatures that they were, their kind always strove to leave behind a legacy of steel and chords to pull curtain over the tragic frailty of their existence. There were occasional sparks of brilliance in the dross, but in the end even the very best of engines only ever managed to match a single trick of the many a properly trained mage had in their arsenal. It was one thing for Amadeus, who had the preoccupations of an entire empire on his shoulders, to find worth in this. Sorcerers truly worth the name were few, and even fewer were willing to have anything to do with the Legions. But for him? The toys of children were rarely worth a second glance, and those that were worth more than that tended to attract... untoward attention. Warlock was confident he could survive the carnage that would follow the reception of a third Red Letter, but the same could not be said for the Empire. Still, for all that the little engines under him were proving to have some use in clearing out the devils they should not warrant anything of the sort.

It was hard to grasp exactly what incurred the wrath of the gnomes, but they'd tolerated the existence of both scorpions and goblin munitions for centuries. Greater efficiency in the

employment of both should pass without making any waves being made.

The Fifteenth did swift work of taking the creational side of the gate, and afterwards swept forward through the Breach in an orderly manner. The Warlock's chariot tumbled through the air above the advancing ranks, passing a boundary that few alive would be able to sense. The Hell that awaited him on the side had amusingly mundane scenery, by the standards of such things. Endless yellow sands spread in every direction, shifting dunes and scorching winds. The sky was deep crimson and bereft of any celestial orbs – a hint in the location of this particular Hell among the lay of them. Though his people swore by Below, when they swore at all, this was broadly mistaken. The Hells were, as much as direction could apply to them, somewhat to the left of Creation. Attempting to map them was a fool's errand, of course. Emperors and Empresses and ruined Praes dozens of times attempting to do as much, only for it to become undeniable the labyrinth of hellscapes was constantly shifting. It was a pit of writhing snakes, moving with every heartbeat. It was said that as soon as a mortal mind thought of a Hell that did not exist, it would come into being. Wekesa had never managed to conclusively prove or disprove that adage, but he *had* reliably established that the Hells were in constant expansion. That had forced him to reconsider some theories as to the nature of Creation.

Wekesa had long suspected that the reason for the existence of angels and devils was that the Gods could not intervene directly in Creation or any of its adjacent realms. Not, like the Book of All Things stated, because a wager forbade it – but because the Gods *were* Creation. That their power had been made into the world all mortals inhabited and could not be withdrawn without unravelling the entire edifice. Hence the establishment of catspaws defined as opposite, but ultimately serving the same purpose: advancing the experiment. It was beautiful work, he'd thought. Well-deserving of the word divine. Yet if the Gods were invested in the making of Creation, what power fed the expansion of the Hells? The Heavens and their Choirs, after all, did not grow. But neither did they lessen, which was perhaps a hint. Angels had been slain or made to fall in the past, but no Choir had ever been measurably weakened. His current theory was that there was fixed quantity of power behind Heavens and Hells, and that Above had chosen fixed figure where Below had preferred endless mutability – at the risk of thinning the brew. Few devils could withstand even the gaze of an angel, after all.

Ah, so much to study and yet he had to settle these irritating distractions before returning to what mattered. Wekesa traced a handful of runes and a line of darkness scythed through the first few ranks of the devils clustering before the Breach, allowing the struggling legionaries to establish a solid foothold. The chariot rose into the sky again and his gaze swept to the

distance. The devils here seemed endless in number, though it was not so. Still, two dozen columns slithering along the dunes like giant snakes of soldiers were trudging forward towards the Breach. Tedious, this. Warlock could have begun the work of slaughtering them, but he could not spare such expense of power if he was to build upon the work of the Sahelian girl. Crafting a lasting effect from scratch was already stretching the limits of what he was capable of doing without burning himself out. Much as he disliked the thought, he would have to rely on the Squire's men. His nose wrinkled in distaste even as he guided the chariot downwards. Wheels spun wildly against sand, splashing yellow hands around as he reined in the devil-horses, and Wekesa lightly leapt down to the ground.

Eyes sweeping from someone of high enough rank to be worth addressing, he found a woman with the markings of a Senior Tribune on her shoulders. It would do.

"You," he drawled. "I'll need a space cleared to work. A circle with a diameter of seventy feet, and add another dozen around that where your soldiery is not to step. Precision will be required."

The woman paled.

"Sir, this may take time," she said. "Resistance is proving stiff, even with your help, and the engines must-"

"I've not interest in the practicalities," Wekesa said flatly. "See it done. Now. I'll mark the boundaries visibly as a courtesy to your general, but do not expect any legionaries crossing it to survive the experience."

He truly did miss working with the likes of Ranker and Istrid. Their officers knew better than to question his orders. Warlock had no taste for grovelling, but he did believe that the occasional bout of terror would do a great deal to temper these youngbloods. As promised, he began by setting a boundary: dots of red light formed around the area he claimed for his own, legionaries hastily getting out of the way before consequences could ensure. With that dealt with, the true casting could begin. First, an outer ward. Circular, diameter of seventy-three feet. Little more than a filter to prevent the elements touching his work. Wekesa snapped his wrist and three red flames formed, burning bright, and began moving. His brow created and guided them with his mind, burning the sand to glass in the form of a perfect circle. Even as they began elaborating on that initial pattern he stepped forward into the circle and knelt in the centre, every lesser rune added as he moved leading towards him. The Warlock closed his eyes and let time ebb away. The flames wove in intricate patterns across the sand, arrays and runes he bolstered by drawing foci from his treasury dimension.

Amethysts taken from lifeless grounds first, clarity touched by death to prevent the bleed from cascading. Chalcedony from a riverbed, to nurture the currents of sorcery without them struggling against each other. Branches of still-living alder for precision, lead ripped straight from the earth to draw the impurities. Lesser reagents, but he did not dare bring materials with inherent properties into this ritual. Aspect sorcery was difficult enough to shape without additional variables being brought into the formula. How long the work took him, he did not know. But eventually his eyes opened and around him an intricate series of interlocking runic arrays marked the grounds of Hell. Wekesa looked for imperfections carefully, ignoring the sound of fighting ahead and to the sides. None he could see, and he forced himself to go over the calculations one last time. He'd done workings of a similar nature in the past, but never one exactly the same. It would suffice, he decided. Leave him all but burned out, but not so much he was unable to defend himself if needed.

"I do apologize," he murmured, words meant for the Sahelian girl who would never hear them. "It is beautiful work, truly, and to meddle with it is unseemly. But you have made yourself an obstacle."

**Imbricate**, his mind spoke, and the aspect shivered across this realm. Closing the Greater Breach was, of course, impossible. The ritual lit up around him, lights to blind all the world, and the Sovereign of the Red Skies turned his will on the span of the gate. Usurpation had even been the essence of sorcery. What could not be closed could be *redirected*. Power drained out of him at an alarming rate, but Wekesa seized that thin boundary and attached the work of his aspect to it. What had once been a Breach leading to Creation now led to another Hell, and his veins burned with the effort of weaving that addition into the heart of the Hellgate's nature. If he did any less, he was only delaying the inevitable. Panting softly, the greatest living sorcerer of the age rose to his feet. It was done. The sound of the panicking legionaries washed over him, the buzz of flies. Wekesa looked upon them, wondering at the numbers. A few hundred, a whole thousand? There were even a few Deoraithe he could see. Without the Breach at their back, the soldiers were already being surrounded. They were stranded, after all.

He was not.

Dusting off his robes, the Warlock stepped onto his chariot and set the horses to flight. He was not inclined to linger here, and it would be a long way back to Creation.

—

Ranker's people had a saying, about miracles: sudden dawns blind. It lost nearly all its nuances when translated in Lower Miezan. The usual word for dawn in goblintongue meant first-light-after-

dark, but in this case the implied context was Light instead of light and raider-night for dark. Light for the the searing hatred wielded by heroes, and the meaning of strife that had been associated with the many defeats of the Legions since the subjugation of the Tribes. It was a reminder that sudden upsets always fucked goblinkind, one way or another. Like most goblin sayings, it had a completely different meaning in matrontongue. The word for sudden was narrow-vision-of-swiftness and for blind to-miss-in-wilful-ignorance. Matrons were not warned of the harsh hand of the Heavens. They were warned of seeking momentary salvation at the price of a later great cost. The old Marshal watched the Second Battle of Liesse unfold around her, and found that both meanings had grounds.

The explosion on the bastion must have been the work of the Hierophant, because that first sorcerous detonation had been followed by a shitshow of demonic corruption. There was a vicious fight going up there even as she looked, between two of the Woe and the handiwork of another. If those two hadn't been up there... She turned to Kolo, her balding and ever-nervous Senior Mage.

"You're sure the control array still stands?" she asked, for the third time.

The Soninke licked his lips and nodded.

"It's not in use, the mages are no longer guiding the wights – they must be going according to the last instructions – but it still exists," he confirmed. "They could take back control if they tried."

Burning, bloody Hells, they were lucky that demon-juice tended to turn the affected dumb if the demon wasn't around to guide them. But there was still potential disaster looming. If the corrupted mages spread that corruption down the sorcery that allowed them to control the undead... That was the kind of catastrophe that broke cities. Kingdoms, even, if it wasn't checked in time. And there was no telling if one of the rebels would wise up before they were cleared out and start pissing in the proverbial pond. And that wasn't even the worst of it.

"Scry him again," Ranker said. "Brute force it if you have to."

"Ma'am, we could have half our mage lines behind that ritual it would change nothing," Kolo said. "Trying to touch the Hierophant is... He must have something of Summer inside him, because even looking too close evaporates the entire scrying bowl."

He grimaced.

"Including the stone, ma'am," he added. "The damned *stone*."

Wekesa's only son had emerged from whatever sorcerous madness he'd been up to right in the middle of the advancing Deoraithe bowmen. That had been bad enough – at least a hundred had died just for being in the wrong place when he returned – but the poison in the wine had been the fact he'd apparently come back in the middle of a godsdamned storm of corruption. It'd splashed all over half a dozen companies. The boy had immediately started scouring the area with flame, which was the right decision to make. But it also meant he was now torching his way through the middle of the first wave troops headed to prop up the centre, killing dozens with every heartbeat. The infantry coming behind the archers had no idea he was killing only corrupted – they thought this was treachery, and now the entire front had gone to shit. Kegan was barking up about betrayal over the scrying links, and even after being told what was truly happening she was threatening to pull back her troops entirely. Ranker had told her if she did there'd be a court-martial and execution before the day was over, but there would be no putting this fruit back on the branch. Daoine was going to holler for blood after this, take it all the way up to the court if they had to. *And we lost too many men today to be able to afford a rebellion in the north.* All that, and the most dangerous question had yet to be asked.

Had the Hierophant been corrupted?

Ranker had seen him emerge in a godsdamned whirlpool of demon essence. That wasn't something she could just ignore. A Named that obviously powerful with a demon whispering in his ears was not something the Empire could afford. Or Calernia, for that fucking matter. There was a very real chance the boy would need to be put down, and *now*. But she didn't have the means to carry out that decision if she made it, and what would come of it was... Warlock would kill them all, even if they were right. Not even Black would be able to stay his hand, not when it came to family. And Foundling had made Hierophant one of her little band of roving disasters. The goblin had it on good authority the girl had lost her shit over one of her legates getting torched by the Summer Court so badly it had broken half of Old Dormer. What kind of a tantrum would she throw over losing a Named?

The only saving grace in this entire blunder of a battle was that Wekesa had come through and the Hellgate was closed. Or something like that, anyway. Her mage lines couldn't give her a straight answer, but they agreed that the way the gate had become see-through meant nothing would come out of it anymore. The troops that had gone through had yet to come back, though, and Ranker suspected they would never. She'd ordered for the Fifteenth to prop up the centre anyway and they were on the move – the sight of those legionaries marching towards her people had gone a long way in making Kegan shut up. With the wights rudderless, for now, the flanks were holding steady. This battle, the Marshal thought, could still be turned around. If they were careful and lucky and

there were no great upsets. The old goblin's eyes turned to the Hierophant standing alone in a storm of flame, surrounded by charred corpses, and she whet her lips. Her Senior Mage stayed at her side in silence, knowing better than to speak.

There was a decision to be made, and Marshal Ranker made it.

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### [DroughtBringer](#)

Awesome first Friday chapter!

*Shequi*

I expected Wekesa to abandon the Legionaires inside the opened Hell. I didn't quite expect how he'd manage to neutralise the gate, though. The unattached gate outside Liesse is going to be a nightmare to deal with though; a gate like that is bound to be easier to reopen at a critical juncture.

What Ranker's decision to do with Masego is is a much more critical matter. Masego may make the point moot, one way or another.

*Big Brother*

I'm gonna say, judging by the fact that Masego has had a good long while to examine the Beast of Corruption as well as the drop of Corruption in himself, he's able to use his Name to neutralize the effect it has on himself, but not others yet. He is, after all, the Heiropgant, Revealer of Secrets. And what greater secret than Immunity to Demonic Influence at the moment?

*werafdsaew*

There's a simple narrative reason why Hierophant is not corrupted: he is part of the Woes, and the Woes are the chosen successor to the Calamities, the same way that the Squire is the chosen successor to the Black Knight. So until the succession happens, and the Calamities are replaced by the Woes, they have plot armor and cannot be weakened.

*JackbeThimble*

werafdsaew Demons don't care about Plot Armor.

*Big Brother*

What the heck is that first word? Some kind of acronym?



*Cotillion*

Demon of Corruption got him, too. See, author told us this shit was dangerous

*overtcasts*

*underrated*

*goliath1303*

Big Brother.... I would guess that it's probably either that, or it's the name of the person that JackbeThimble was replying to. 😊

*warriormonk19*

Wekesa did abandon the Legionaires inside the opened Hell. I agree with you though that the unattached gate may still play a role in the unfolding story. Perhaps Warlock, Hierophant, or even Catherine could make use of it to more easily rip portals to Arcadia or other planes? It'll be interesting to see the aftermath of this battle.

*warriormonk19*

On the second read, I realize that you do indeed know that Warlock abandoned the Legionaires. My bad. Damn, Masego is kind of clueless, but Warlock is straight up vicious.

*edrey*

ranker decision should be something like scrying someone close of masego to tell him that he should take the control of the undeads and give it to her tribune, it's a gamble but if she doesn't the corrupted mages would do it and all goes downhill , and moreover she doesn't have the means to kill masego even if she wants to.

*JC*

It seems there's still some sort of saving grace in the methods of the Calamities, after all. Poor 15th though. Getting trapped in a Hell like that.

I was worried that the story would prop up the Woe's methods as a bastion of reason for far too long, but here we see some of those consequences made clear. I do hope Masego makes it out ok.

*Decius*

Poor 15h? Poor hells, getting trapped in there with the 15th.

*Gunslinger*

Holy shit that ending is ominous. Hopefully it's something like trust Masego.

Also fascinating character that he may be I've grown to truly despise Warlock. Such an arrogant prick.

Lastly three chapters a week can't be easy for the author. If you have the capacity any support on the authors patreon would go a long way to assist them [patreon.com/user?u=3523924](https://www.patreon.com/user?u=3523924)

*Gunslinger*

<https://www.patreon.com/user/posts?u=3523924>

*oldschoolvillain*

Ranker can't afford not to trust masego – it'd be an easy matter to have a goblin slip a knife between his ribs or have a Watch snipe him from two hundred yards, but the consequence would be absolute obliteration from Warlock and Catherine. And Ranker kind of needs to be alive and have an army to deal with Procer.

*lennymaster*

I very much doubt that anyone but Archer could snipe Masego from any distance. And not just because of a Name, Names do not die to one-shot attacks, even from other Named. The combination of Archer and her inherently magical arrows might do it, though I doubt it would be more than a crippling wound, not an outright deadly one.

And no Named worth their salt would ever allow a Goblin within stabbing distance without being aware of their presence.

*B*

@lennymaster

> Names do not die to one-shot attacks, even from other Named.

Not true. The Exiled Prince got himself good and dead from a single crossbow bolt from an unnamed. It's unusual for sure, but it can definitely happen.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> The Exiled Prince got himself good and dead from a single crossbow bolt from an unnamed.

Not exactly – the Exiled Prince was set up by the Wandering Bard to expose himself stupidly – that enabled Cat to kill him through her troops.

## [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

It can happen, sure, but it's not the "easy matter" the OP claims.

### *Valkyria*

Warlock really is a prick. He doesn't care for people at all, they are just things for him... sending thousands of them to death.

I mean, maybe it was necessary... but he does not care. As if being a Named would alter him to non-human. I mean, he's calling Cat an abomination, so he somewhere is considering himself human, right? And yet it's like he is not connected to the species more than to a distant relative. He might be an interesting character and adds to the story very well, but I can't really get myself to like him. Unlike Hierophant who is similar to his father, but yet has some traits that just make him funny and likable. The more screentime Warlock gets, the more irritating I come find him.

### *Mike E.*

And it also seems like he has grabbed the attention of the gnomes twice, if that is what the Red Letters refer too, so his experiments have crossed the border of being something gnomes would eradicate from human knowledge at any cost. (He infers he could survive the wrath of the gnomes if he crossed the line again, but the collateral damage to the rest of the world would be insane).

### *goliath1303*

I just want to expand on what @oldschoolvillain said. The Empire has received 3 Red Letters since its inception, none of which were because of Warlock. The first one they received was sent during the reign of a previous Dread Emperor in response to some sort of farming machine. The second was, obviously, received relatively recently (If I had one critique of this story, it would be that it can be hard at times to know what the time scale is. Sometimes what I think is a months, or even weeks, is actually years. It also happens the opposite direction, just less often.) and it was sent due to a goblin tribes experimentation with some form of alchemy (I believe it was alchemy, but I'm not 100% sure though. I do know the rest is correct. Black going to deal with that is what led Catherine to join Rest Company at the War College. When he got there though the other Matrons had eradicated that tribe already.).

To me, it doesn't seem like offensive tech bothers them. They don't mind if humans get better at killing each other, what seems to bother Gnomes is technology and inventions

that could propel society forward, as well as drive population growth significantly. If I'm remembering correctly, we don't know what the purpose of the Goblins research was, but the farming machine could have been a precursor to an industrial revolution of some kind. I think that the Gnomes don't want any more "Real" players in world politics. Remember, when Black heard about that letter, called the Empire something like "a provincial backwater" and talked about the "real world powers". I'm assuming that means the Gnomes, Dwarves, Elves on the other continent, and maybe some other, currently unknown to us, societies.

*oldschoolvillain*

To Mike E. – Warlock wasn't the one receiving the Red Letters, the Empire was. One for some farming machine a few emperors back, one recently for messing with 'powders' if I recall correctly. Warlock is just comfortably certain that he can ride out the cataclysm that comes with angering the Gnomes by hopping away to a pocket dimension with Masego and Tikoloshe. Probably right, too, considering his aspects.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Who says you're supposed to like him?

*Valkyria*

Well nobody. But comments are for stating opinions, right?

*Engineer*

Just focus on destroying the control array. That's the main point of contention at the moment if Masego doesn't do it during his "rampage". But don't move on a Named, especially one who has a "whirlpool of corruption" at his behest. There's no way that does not end in catastrophic failure for all parties involved.

*Mr. Nobody*

Looks like our dear Ranker will be the next general to be killed. Maybe an arrow through her neck by Archer. She won't even survive to actually manage to kill Masego, let alone see the reaction of Warlock or Catherine for that matter.

*Engineer*

All of the commanders of the Conquest are dying by the dozen. Ranker should consider getting life insurance and making me the beneficiary.

*Hahahha*

Hah! Warlock just signed his death warrant, hahahaha ... ha... haha ... ha. He always was the closest of the calamities to the old breed of idiot praesi villains and this move really illustrates it.

Speaking of warlock, has anyone else found him singularly unimpressive as a "great mage" so far?

*Engineer*

Not me.

Though the impact was probably lost in the text I got the distinct impression that redirecting a permanent portal into Creation from one of the Hells, a portal keyed on a fundamental level to the magical signature of a NAMED Diabolist, is a feat worthy of a capital S Sorcerer.

I agree though that The Warlock will not see the end of the Second Battle of Liesse, the way things are going now. For one he and Cat share no love for one another and he did just screw over a sizable portion of Cat's legion. There's no way Squire's Name and Mantle can let that slight go unanswered and remember it was Warlock who backed down during their standoff in the tent.

If the Warlock does not meet his end here, he and Cat are destined to clash. And only one those two have a power greater than any Name: Plot Armour.

*TeK*

I for once do not think< that they will clash. First of all, judging by how the story goes, Cat will have much bigger problems to deal with after Liesse. Second, it will take some time to fly from hells to creation, and noone really knows, how the gates were closed, and, honestly, thousand casualties ain't that big of a price for that. Just containing an open portal would cost much more, not to mention that the whole battle could be lost beacuse of it. So in conclusion, Cat will be to busy, to ask, what had happened in Hell, and Warlock will not see fit to tell her first.

*IDKWhoitis*

Warlock isn't impressive in the amount of absolute power he can unleash. For example, we see that his predecessor had a much higher output. However, to gain power, there are costs, some short term (a soul or bargaining chip) some long term (having too many pacts or modifications to the Soul can't be good for your health).

Warlock is impressive in the sense that he is able to do huge things without the large power reserves of those who came

before him. He understands magic and knows the in and outs of a wide breath of magic schools. Few non-Named mages could hope to understand a single school of magic, or be able to glance at a runic array and derive it's use and failure points. Hell, even the Hedge Wizard had trouble truly deciphering what Warlock was doing while he was murdering her one spell of at a time.

Warlock is in a league of his own due to the wide and deep scale of knowledge he holds, and the ability to pull all of those tricks off without some blood sacrifices or expending himself completely.

Also, I don't think he's dead, he is just "MIA" for the foreseeable future.

*heh*

Dead in the sense of "Cathrine gonna end that fool"

*Reveen*

One of the best ways to end up remembered as a great general, scientist, sorcerer is to become famous for one thing no one else is doing, steal credit for whatever you can, and make sure there's no one around to say otherwise.

Also, buying into your own hype helps.

*'Ladi Williams*

"they were stranded afterall.

He wasn't"

I can't bliv he left then behind... But then I guess it's in character for him to not give a shit about mere legionaries. Squire is going to have his heart for dinner when she's done with Diabolist.

Masego had better not die or ranker (tho I care very much less about her).

Can't wait for the next interlude tho I know the writer is going to keep us hanging and switch to cat and black. 😞

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

What's not to believe? What other outcome did you expect?

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*agumentic*

I wonder if those stranded legionaries will come back in some way. Heh, maybe Triumphant's gonna add them to her army.

### *Shoddi*

Triumphant: Oh, how lovely! Company come to call. Quickly, my minions, and fetch them. It's been so long since I've heard news from outside.

### *Letouriste*

Warlock that shitbag grrr.

He could at least allow a large part of the legionaries to go back through the gate before activating the ritual: /

masego is totally badass in this chapter^^

I really hope ranker don't screw up and follow her fears here. the empire can't have a marshal dying now, that would be disastrous. her concerns are sane but this is a matter better left to a Named to judge... or at least she could wait for him to do something damning. i know that would be too late but she can't kill him easily anyway

### *Draeysine*

Man what a read. Ranker may just have to take that L where Masego is concerned, his death above all others would unite Warlock AND Cat for wanton destruction.

As for Warlocks actions... justified, though not showing any hint of remorse makes it look worse than it is. I actually like Warlock a lot even if he is prickish I think he is doing what he can with the cards dealt with. Legionaries to him are replaceable, and sacrificing a few like that might have ensured the time it took to make his spell. It be no different in his eyes than that many legionaries dying to hold a position until reinforcements arrived.

I doubt he did it out of malice it was pure calculation.

And also Hakram definitely suspects or knows Masego is corrupted (albeit slightly) now. Good on him for realizing the pros and cons to the Woes standard "fuck it all up no regrets " policy.

### *Thrillho*

What an absolute clusterfuck of a battle. I mean, the campaign against Summer was bad. Dealing with a well-aged demon of Corruption was probably nightmare fuel.

But this is on a whole 'nother scale. Multiple, /multiple/ seasoned veteran generals and commanders getting torn to shreds, both Black /and/ Warlock pushed to their limits, severe fallout from dealing with /multiple/ demons of various types resulting in heavy friendly fire. A permanent rift in Creation, the likes of

which only the Calernian version of the Lich King could open previously.

New siege engines being developed, the face of military politics being seriously altered, I don't even want to think of the butchers bill on this one.

The Second Battle of Liesse is absolutely insane, and I'm on the edge of my seat to see how it ends. It's going to take a /long/ time for our protags to recover from this one.

*Letouriste*

WAIT A SEC! Pickler was in the hell side of the gate no? Her engines should have been there:o

Is there any named character exept Jwahir left there?

Maybe the hellhound sensed something and made some officers coming back?

Anyway,that should have been nauk job by juniper admission...I can't believe i'm glad he has been burned:o

We don't know much about jwahir.is she the woman kicking nauk in the first battle of the rat company? probably not given she was probably not even sergeant.

*oldschoolvillain*

No, Warlock was studying Pickler's engines before he crossed the boundary. The scorpions and seeders were meant to open the path, not breach the gate itself.

*oldschoolvillain*

There's a lot of discussion about how this chapter ended Warlock as a likeable character, but just gotta remind people – the soldiers who went into that hell gate knew it was a one-way trip. They were the sacrifice to save the battle and the several legions still fighting. Could Warlock have saved them? Frankly, no, he couldn't have. The time it would have taken for almost a thousand troops to retreat back through the hell gate would have obliterated Warlocks carefully set ritual, thus ending any chance of redirecting the hell gate and rendering the entire thing moot. In sacrificing a thousand he immediately saved thousands more and, in the long term, probably millions, because now there's no longer a hell gate feeding straight into Callow. Which, frankly, is hella impressive, because Warlock just took the ritual that Diabolist spent years preparing for and fuelled with millions of souls and pretty much turned it inside out in, what, an hour? Less? Screw the Red Skies – this wasn't flashy blow-it-all-up magic, but this was the most impressive magical feat we've seen in the story, to me, perhaps short of Diabolist actually creating the Hellgate



*letouriste*

well everyone already known that guy was horrible.this chapter just reinforced the idea^^  
this is not the action he did which is revolting,more like the way he did that.

*oldschoolvillain*

\*shrug\* One thing that everyone might have been forgetting about the Sovereign of Red Skies, then, is that he's a Villain. I'd pin him as either Lawful Evil or Neutral Evil, but he's still Evil. And has always been, I think, the closest of the Calamities to what exactly that actually means. He is powerful, and holds the accompanying responsibility, but ultimately his only motivation is progressing his own agenda. No morals are required and, in some cases – such as this one – could cause a hesitation at a crucial moment and ruin everything the 15th spent their lives buying. For that reason, I actually really like Warlock.

*Decius*

There's really only a couple ways this can go.

Black orders Heirophant destroyed for being corrupted. Warlock kills Black. Scribe kills Warlock. The half-gateway in creation is connected to the fae realms.

Diabloist tries to surrender/ to the new Black Knight, but Kat blames her for the loyalty cascade and Killian uses her in a blood sacrifice to purge the corruption from Heirophant. If that kills Wekasa, Killian becomes Thaumaturge.doe

Kat fails to get the personal loyalty of the Legions of Terror as a whole, and cannot use them to purge the wasteland nobility. She instead uses their institutional loyalty to ready them against Procer, and the wasteland nobility takes advantage of their absence to depose Empress. While they are fighting over succession, Procer invades Callow, does a lot of damage, and is barely driven back.

Kat then uses the Callowan army, blooded on two wars, to kill everyone in the Wasteland trying to claim the tower, and finally institutes some moderate reforms that prevent imperial governors from having the Stupid Greedy alignment, like she was trying to do at the beginning.

*Reveen*

Or her purge of the wasteland escalates into mass genocide and a multi-year quagmire, Callow gets sick of the constant war and starts rebelling again, and the hellgate slowly unravels everything around.

I fully expect this story to end with Cat climbing the tower to sit on the throne to rule over a nation sized graveyard.

*letouriste*

nobody will die beside maybe ranker.i doubt hierophant would die like that.black has a sure way to kill warlock (said in the second book when cat and masego talked about the bomb in his hair).

the rest is impossible,that doesn't fit to their personality and the narrative so far

*satoshikyu*

It's like he started off with the chapter we just read and then threw random ideas at the wall to see what might stick. Nothing beyond the first sentence has even the slightest basis in the story we're reading. Not one reasonable thing in the whole comment. That's almost impressive.

*'Ladi Williams*

I totally agree with you. Started well and then just took a major right turn.

*Decius*

Black has a way to kill Warlock.  
Warlock has a way to kill Black.

Somehow I don't think that even Black would consider that Heiropant might be corrupted and instantly implement his plan to kill Warlock. But I can believe that Warlock would see the corruption, know that Black isn't going to let his son live, and implement his plan.

Scribe kills whoever kills Black- that's obvious. What happens to her afterwards is as unclear as her current location.

The Legions are already as a whole not loyal to Cat. Without Black giving orders the nobles would be able to convince them that the purges are treasonous and that being loyal to the Empress is better, and the Empress thinks she can manage the nobles well enough and can't order summary executions of them without losing political power.

Procer is already established as being ready to invade Callow.

There are other ways it could turn out, but the biggest way is that either Heiropant isn't corrupted , or Black never suspects that he is.

## Mental Mouse

Consider that Masego's "droplet" of corruption was probably why Warlock hesitated when he was vetting his son after Marchford. Implied was a quick back-channel discussion: "Just how well contained is that, son?" "Look at the bindings, I've got this one, Dad." "Okay, but you know what happens if that gets loose".

### *Letouriste*

No you don't understand: black had a SURE way to kill warlock. they devised that together in case he get too destructive and crazy. you can't kill a Named as experienced as black easily but the reverse is possible because of their agreement.

The contingency against black is in the hands of Assassin (said in the end of arc 2 too).

The rest is just conjectures. Scribe lack the raw power to kill Warlock anyway. i don't think she can.

Also, these two guys are really really close, i think black is more important than masego to Warlock eyes... not by much probably and i can be wrong

### *nipi*

I was expecting the gate to be shifted to another plane. Meh! Close enough.

And Im guessing the gnomes aren't all that concerned with military applications of technology. Sure you're a bit better at killing people but the amount of killers you can field stays about the same both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of your population. Make something to increase productiveness on the other hand and... And the greater concern might be that it allows you to have more researchers too.

### *Alex Walters*

Save that if you grind far enough up the military tree you can casually smush people who didn't grind up the tree even if they have say 100000x the troop numbers.

The Gnomes have apparently LITERALLY wiped nations off the map from above without anyone being able to so much as target the attacker.

That sounds an awful lot like high altitude bombers with nuke explosives.

### *nipi*

Im guessing there wasnt enough time to position the siege engines to bombard Hell from the other side of the gate. Now when will Cat get her chance to make Hell freeze over?

*Decius*

If they launched goblinfire through the portals, could they set Hell on fire?

*Cicero*

looks like gamble of the empress failed in the worst possible, multiple of the legions have received heavy losses, at least 2 of her generals are dead and the super weapon she aimed to gain will very likely be useless

*letouriste*

yep,i don't see how she could gain from all that mess.still,this is probably worth the death of the trueblood and her rival.a war with procer will be hard,a war with procer with strong enemies in her side is doomed.

*oldschoolvillain*

Wekesa did mention that he can mostly replicate the effects, given six or so months. And the purpose of Magicka enabling Heiress' weapon was Terror. Procer doesn't know that the ritual can only be used by a Diabolist, so the intent behind it works perfectly for Marluxia until Wekesa can get a Hellgate gun of their own working.

*oldschoolvillain*

First, please see my comment to Legitimate above. And second, remember that this is only, four legions? This is still only a fraction of the army that Malicia could call up in case of a proceran invasion. There are about ten others sitting elsewhere that can't be here for various reasons, mostly distance, I suspect.

*lennymaster*

Remember that you also have to keep some troops back. She can not put all her available troops at the border and leave the Preasi and Callowan coast and heartland undefended. Raiding armies, shipfleets, other empires, like the Titanomachy, Levant and the Free Cities still exist, and an empire distracted by war makes for a great raiding target, even when, often especially when far away. And in this world there are portals, disidents with magic that could disrupt or directly attack for a variety of reasons piece and order in the country.

All that means, is that she will have to keep several legions each for Callow and Preasi back to ensure her citizens safety (yes, even Evil empires have to do that for arms, food and troop production purposes) as well as secure peace, order and last but not least supply lines.

So say three to four Legions just to be able to respond to several incidents at the same time for Preasi and Callow each out of sixteen as the last I heard makes eight to ten of which three maybe four, depending on the fifteenth's losses are gutted leaves four to five intact legions.

Five thousand men each leaves twenty, twentyfive thousand men to secure an entire border, on which the enemy as the attacker can focus all of their not to defense committed army at one point.

Add in that it has been stated several times that Procer has a significantly larger population than Preas AND Callow and thus a, while less well trained and equipped but far larger army, makes for a bleak result.

[kdreyes09](#)

Man I miss Cathy the murder baby

*letouriste*

probably next chapter^^

*Reveen*

Oh my god. This is delicious! *Finally* things start going to shit for the Empire. I just hope it sticks.

*oldschoolvillain*

. . . Uh, what? You realize that the Empire is the closest thing we currently have to good guys in this story, right? Given the protagonist, at least? Things going to shit for the Empire means things going to shit for Cat.

*Reveen*

Hehe yeah.

Let me put it this way, the concept of good guys bad guys is basically moot in this story. The conflict as it is now is just a pissing match between different forms of awful, and I don't see the appeal of choosing sides.

I don't care who wins the football game, I just want to see the riot that will inevitably happen either way.

*Decius*

The Empire is pretty clearly Evil. The protagonist has been Evil at least since the time that she raised herself as a mostly undead puppet and told a hero to start a war.

The story is just about Evil protagonists.

*oldschoolvillain*

Oh, absolutely. It's just that in the crap sack world we're seeing, Good and Evil aren't always equal to Nice and Horrible. The 'Good' nations are equally willing to engage in murder and duplicity as the Dread Empress Malicia, Long May She Reign, they just desperately cling to a veneer of 'goodness' to justify their actions.

*Reveen*

The Good nations don't actually need to cling to a veneer of goodness. Because while, barring magic nonsense, they are no worse than real world pre-modern nations, maybe even a little better, Praes in it's entirety is self-evidently worse. We have in one corner a bunch of crazy, magic spewing lunatics, on the other the "practical" side of a proto-fascist, monomaniacal war machine based on personality cult that exists for no other reason than endless grinding war. Both of them are pretty much identical in their nihilism and naked power worship, and the world would be better off if they wiped eachother out.

So Good doesn't even need to be really good, it can be as unfair and hierarchical as it wants, it just needs to point to whats happening to Callow and say "*Doesn't that look like the lesser evil to you?*"

[vuthuha912](#)

It is a little wrong to say that the Practical side is fascist since they don't blame their shortcoming on racial minorities. They don't even blame the Callow for their problem with food. They invade for the grain of Callow and keep it as a colony so their people can have a secure food source

=> British Empire or America would be closer to Praes

War is inevitable due to the lack of diplomatic options which hinges on the nature of the Good and Evil conflict and on the nature of Praes itself (the stupid Evil). Praes has been preparing for war because it is impossible to solve the issue with diplomacy. If this is the real world then we have several non-violent options on how to proceed. Yet, the nature of Creation demand that both sides fight each other. And it is not like Praes doesn't try other options: they enact the whole 'Art of War' on Procer: bribery, political

assassinations, proxy war, espionage, etc. It is impressive how closely they follow the methods mentioned in the book. (even when I think that it is risky just fanning the civil war instead of backing some pacifists or some cowardly princes, I do understand the importance of bleeding the enemies' resources before the war)

Praes is fighting for survival – long-term survival. Of course, they should be prepared. War is a serious business and every preparation gives them a higher chance of surviving. Procer leadership is treating this way too lightly. A political war to unite the nation sounds nice but you should only fight when: A – you think you can win and B – you are fighting for survival. The country just went through a civil war, they have a short amount of time for preparation and they are still plagued by infighting. It is not a great condition to be fighting another enemy. At least wait a few more years for the food production to recover and the fighting population replenishes.

Honestly, it would have been a lot better if Black just purge the nobility. They are the one who is actively sabotaging the country. Their duplicity makes it nigh-impossible to trust Praes thus closing the door for trade. Their shortsightedness compels them to always shoot their side on the foot. Their extravagance squanders the country's much need resources. Their entire philosophy is living for the moment and living for yourself. If a lasting change can happen, he needs to change the culture of Praes.

I usually visualize Black plans for Praes as planting trees (fitting for a sone of a farmer). He prepares the 'ground' first – the factor that contributes to the shortsightedness of Praes is the sense of no matter what you do, you are never going to end well so might as well bring everyone down with you (the fairy tales of Praes is mostly tragedy). Thus, to remedy this condition, he decides to provide them with a reliable food source and show them that long-term victory can be achieved. The Conquest killed 2 birds with one stone. The fertilizer is the military reforms and the orphanages. These institutions are spreading long-term thinking throughout the lower and middle classes. It also provides them with a social ladder so they can grow.

His reforms have planted the seed but the force that is trying to stomp on it is still there. He thinks that internal threats can be dealt with through political maneuvering a.k.a Malicia while the external force is the war with Procer which he will handle. He has no idea that Malicia falls in love with the game and she has set a fire to his entire garden.

## *Alivaril*

With the gargantuan casualties resulting from this unholy mess, I'm no longer willing to give Dread Empress Malicia the benefit of the doubt. As far as I can tell, her plan with the hellgate superweapon involves the promise of mutually assured destruction and/or devastation should Procer invade. Toward this end, she spent assets on cultivating an enemy, allowed that enemy to grow in power, and is currently undergoing heavy casualties in the battle to claim said weapon.

Certainly, she's devastating many of the remaining Truebloods/ Nobles in the process, but the Legions are also experiencing horrifying losses. The Calamities may very well cease to be a viable group, Cat is going to be pissed to no end if a previous offscreen conversation didn't give her excellent justifications, diplomatic relations are poor, diplomatic relations will turn into open rebellion if the Watch-Mass continues to be used as a power source, Masego may have been corrupted, and Cat's transition into what appears to be a ruling name may very well undo Malicia's Rule-assisted control over every member of the Legions of Terror. Admittedly, Cat's transition may have been part of the plan; I can definitely see Malicia assigning agents to spread the nickname "The Black Queen" with appropriately associated stories.

All that may be relatively fine if blood, steel, and magic were the only variables. Malicia intends to rule forever and a weapon capable of (theoretically) indefinitely preventing invasion is invaluable with that in mind. But although it's rationalized literally to Hell and back, this is not the sort of plan that Creation respects, historically speaking. This is asking, practically begging, for the Heroes to show up, godmode their way through all attackers, and destroy the weapon in the nick of time. In fact, even a sneaky hero like Thief could gum up the whole works, no godmode required. WMG: And that's assuming one of the portals doesn't open up to whatever Hell Dread Empress Triumphant (May She Never Return) may have conquered. Those sorts of unintended consequences seem like something Creation would love to force.

This may pay off in the end, but I'm leaning heavily against that being a likely possibility anymore.

## *Kel the Seer*

So, are we taking bets on whether Triumphant or the Dead King will be the one as the using that redirected Hellgate as a staging point at a highly inopportune moment in the future? While Triumphant would resonate better with the foreshadowing, I'd say the Dead King would love a bypass around Procer. If it didn't open to a realm he already controls he will definitely



want to find it once he hears of its existence. Beck, that possibility alone may end up being Procer's cassus belli.

*Draconius Sinister*

Why not both? I'm sure we'd love a three way war cropping up right in the middle of Procer's invasion. Gives us a reason to root for Cordelia instead of against her, and opens up Cat's options for crowns to give to the Fae Prince.

*Reveen*

Why do we need a reason to root for Cordelia? Wanting to kill every Praesi in the world is reason enough.

*Draco*

This story is so good I finally figured out what an rss feed is so I could get updates. Gods below, I can't wait to find out what Cat and Black are up to

*Keyen*

Man, it's quite easy to remember, it's only the Monday/wednesday/friday, everytime. I don't think he missed a chapter in quite a long time. You don't need RSS to remember that^^

*Letouriste*

The hour isn't also pretty consistent.he always post around 6 a.m for me

*Draconius Sinister*

Uhhhh... Aisha's with Juniper, right? She isn't the poor Tribune stuck commanding those poor fools back in the Hells, is she?

*aran*

Starting to have the sneaking suspicion that Wekesa is actually kind of an asshole.

But hey. Villain.

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## Chapter 63: Bridge

*"A dilemma is no such thing if it is flammable."*

– Dread Empress Sulphurous, the 'Technically Correct'

Liesse looked like it'd spent a few years rolling around in nightmare juice, but at least the result's old floor plan still more or less held up. I'd taken this city once before, and though this time I'd come knocking without an army at my back I still knew my way around. The new occupants, though, were something of a problem. For one they were all dead, which was not a desired quality in the inhabitants of what had been one of the most thriving cities in Callow, and the entire place had gone to Hell. Literally. Akua's idea of a garrison apparently involved a generous helping of devils let loose in the streets. Which, hey, not a problem if I stuck to the rooftops. But the devils with wings were, and the penumbra that hung over Liesse like a veil wasn't quite enough on its own to hide me. The inevitable long periods spent huddled under whatever was available to hide allowed me to stew in anger that was growing sharper by the moment. It wasn't enough that Diabolist had slaughtered everyone within these walls, the population of the second largest city in Callow and all the refugees from the south that'd been fleeing the fae. No, she had to wreck the actual city as well.

There would be no salvaging Liesse after this. Setting aside the madwoman's little helpers currently having the run of the streets, the entire place had been turned into some fucking Praesi ritual tool. There were runes everywhere, wards I could feel buzzing when I came too close and even the lay of the streets had been fucked with. Akua or one of her minions had ordered the already messy sprawl of Liessen streets to be turned into a maze of collapsed dead-ends and barricades. This was no longer a liveable city. It might become one again eventually, but that'd take years of highly dangerous and professional work as well as what I could only qualify as a prodigious amount of money. Which, even if I did have – which I didn't, because rebuilding a twice war-torn nation and my own ravaged demesne wasn't exactly cheap work – I wouldn't be able to spare. Because, once again fuck you Akua, this little murderous tantrum was the call for every godsdamned nation on Calernia that could spare an army to march for the Red Flower Vales. At best I'd be able to put wards around this wreck of a city and forbid entrance by Imperial decree.

Every speck of coin I'd be able to spare would be going to fortifying Callow and ensuring its people didn't starve through this winter, or the seasons after that. I somehow doubted the Tenth Crusade would be over in a year. It was going to be a long and brutal slugging match between the most powerful nations on the continent, and my people were troublingly unprepared for it.

My advance was slow, but it was still an advance. The deeper I got into the city, sticking to shadows and hiding places, the thicker the patrols became. I'd half-expected Diabolist to send an army of ten thousand wights just outside the tunnel that Black and I entered the city through, but there'd been no one in sight when we did. Just a set of hidden runic arrays that my teacher promptly tore apart with his shadow before we made a run for it. That had me wary. Diabolist was of the old breed but she wasn't stupid. I kept having to repeat that, these days, but that made it no less true. Just because we'd torn apart her vanguard outside Liesse didn't mean she was done: if anything, that probably meant the heart of her plan was in here. What that plan actually was, I still couldn't tell. Sure, she'd opened a Greater Breach in the worst place possible at the worst time possible for our army. She'd followed up that disaster by tossing three demons at us, which meant both Warlock and Hierophant had their hands tied with damage control. But how long did she expect that to last, really? At some point one of those two threats would give, and then the Named that was freed up would turn to cleaning up the remaining wights.

Black and I had come into the city ahead of the rest, but I fully expected that before too long we'd be followed by the Legions. I wouldn't even be surprised if the Watch had already begun landing at the bottom of the pit. Was that her plan, then? Forcing an engagement in a narrow tunnel that couldn't really be bypassed? Once more that might work for a while, but we had two sorcerers on par with if not outright superior to her outside and I really doubted her little get-out-of-Creation trick was impervious to the Warlock's entire bag of tricks. Right now, I couldn't see a way for her to get out of this alive. She'd last a while, there was no denying that. She'd even cost us a horrible butcher's bill before it was all said and done. But tonight or in a week, even without Black and I lifting a hand, this path led to her head on a pike. Or the Hall of Screams, if the Empress was feeling vindictive. Which meant I was missing something, because Diabolist only ever planned for defeat when it got her something she wanted and she was too fucking arrogant to care for something that sprang from her death. Akua Sahelian's cause was herself: everything else was, ultimately, expendable. It wasn't the kind of thinking that led to a woman martyring herself for some kind of philosophical point.

Not that it would succeed, anyway. Black had already made it clear that the aftermath of Second Liesse was going to be one long thorough purge of everything and everyone even remotely associated to the Truebloods. *And she has to know that*, I thought. *That she gave him the excuse he'd been waiting on for decades.* There was a way, in Diabolist's eyes, where today ended up with her on top and beyond reprisal. I was going to have to find what that way was and shove blades into it until it stopped twitching.

The first step towards that was getting eyes on the Ducal Palace, which was where Diabolist was bound to be holed up. Probably on an overly ornate throne, drinking expensive wine. I just knew her armour would be nicer than mine, too. Shame about all that blood that I was going get all over it. I ended up on a rooftop overlooking the outside of the palace, and grimaced when I took a closer look. I'd grilled Robber after he'd infiltrated the place a few months back then Thief after she did the same a great deal more recently, and they'd not been wrong to call it a fortress. They'd both mentioned that the area in front of the outer walls was open field, with space once occupied by shops and mansions torn down and cleared out to make it even harder to approach unnoticed. That part had changed, I saw. It was now entirely filled with tight ranks of perfectly still wights in full arms and armour. How many did that make? Thousands, at least. This was easily larger than the biggest marketplace in Laure, and it could fit that many people during festivals. Behind the walls I saw runes and stalking devils, and even clusters of mages she'd kept back.

Frontal assault wasn't looking all that feasible, but there weren't any obvious backdoors to exploit. It'd been a little too much to hope for that there would be: it wasn't like Diabolist lacked the manpower to cover ever nook and cranny. A distraction, maybe? Something loud enough she'd send men to quell the mess, making an opening for us to sneak through. *But she'll be expecting that*, I thought. *She knows we're in the city*. It might be that patience was our only real option. Waiting until the Legions made landfall and she had to shift her forces to hold them back, then going for the head of the snake. And even then, it wouldn't be a sure thing. I did hate it when my opponents were competent, it complicated everything. I waited under cover for what must have been at least half an hour, watching patrols and unmoving sentinels, but no opening ever emerged. At this rate Black would join me and I'd have no plan to suggest.

The explosion took me by surprise.

Not because there was an explosion at all – that'd pretty much been made a certainty the moment I'd sent Robber's cohort into the city through the path Thief had found me – but because it sounded wrong. It wasn't the kind of detonation that came from goblin munitions. It got worse when I quietly shifted rooftops to have a look at where the noise came from: one of the wings of the Ducal Palace was half-collapsed and smoke was trailing into the sky. *Shit*, I thought. If that was what I thought it was...

"A good plan," Diabolist said. "Or rather it was, the first time you used it."

My blade was out before she finished the first word and I twisted around only to find Akua Sahelian in all her glory leaning

against the edge of the rooftop, looking down at her assembly of wights. I'd been incorrect in assuming she would put on armour. Instead she had draped over her full curves a complicated robe of red and gold with snow white silk borders. The back of her neck was covered by a low-hanging veil set with patterns of precious stones, and the oblique cut of her skirt revealed legs covered by form-fitting soft leather trousers. Even her boots, I thought, looked like they cost a year's salary. My first thought was: well, *that's twenty denarii*. My second thought was really more of a response, namely forming a spear of shadow and tossing it through her throat. It made a hole in the silhouette that glowed around the edges but almost immediately closed. An illusion. Diabolist raised an eyebrow.

"How uncouth," she chided. "As I was saying, there was some cleverness to the thought. Sending Thief after the keystone of my ritual while my eyes were on you and the Carrion Lord."

"Some cleverness," I replied flatly, keeping eye on the wights below. "How kind of you to concede that."

They weren't moving, at least not those I could see. That was little comfort, given where I was currently standing.

"Dearest Catherine," Diabolist drawled, sounding amused. "You employed this same trick to steal the very sun of Summer. Did you truly think that would go unnoticed? Of course I prepared for the eventuality."

"It was a trap," I sighed.

This entire city was, I'd known that going in, but I'd thought that my little contingencies might be snuck past her.

"Just because the keystone needed to be there once does not mean it needed to *remain* there," Akua languidly said. "Even if your little burglar survives my precautions, she will find nothing there to steal."

I frowned at her.

"So is this a back-patting session, Akua?" I asked. "Because I'm kind of busy. You know, working out the logistics of killing you."

She waved away my words airily. It really was shame I'd only be able to brutally murder her the once. I felt kind of cheated by that fact.

"I am in no hurry," she said. "You are. After all, your army is losing the battle outside quite spectacularly."

I went still. She could be lying, of course. Very likely she was. When I'd left two thirds of her mages on the field were dead, Masego had her demons imprisoned and the wights were collapsing on two fronts. Juniper was headed out to contain her Hellgate with the Warlock at her back, and so while I wouldn't consider that situation under control it should at least not be outright fucking us over for the foreseeable future. On the other hand, I'd thought since the beginning that this was going *too* well considering the amount of time she'd had to prepare her defences. There was a chance, however slight, she wasn't lying through her teeth.

"Istrid Knightsbane is dead," Diabolist said. "General Orim and General Afolabi are as well. Their legions were gutted around them, then rose in my service. The remaining commanders are hanging on by a thread, and that thread is thinning with every heartbeat. Even if they manage to retreat, this cannot be called anything but a defeat."

My fingers clenched.

"If it's true, that's a mess that's going to cost us badly," I said. "But it doesn't really matter, does it? The moment you used your ritual you made this about Named. Even if you wipe out my whole army your side collapses the moment you die."

"Can you?" Diabolist asked, and she sounded genuinely curious. "Put aside your pride and your hatred, for a moment. Do you truly believe that even if you came to stand before me, you would come out the victor of that confrontation?"

"I've killed more terrifying things than you, Akua Sahelian," I hissed.

She laughed, and gracefully arced her arm to display our surroundings.

"No," the Soninke smiled. "No you have not. I am not a fettered god you can trick or a petty tool hollowed out by the Heavens. I am heiress crowned by inheritance, in the fullness of her might. That I bother with these ramparts between us is a mere mark of respect – I could break you with a word, Catherine. You have risen too swiftly. It has made you *fragile*."

"I think I'm supposed to pity you," I said. "For being so far gone that you can't even understand what a repulsive creature you are and how it's going to get you killed. The worst part of it, Akua, is that you have all these *gifts*. You're so fucking capable, and I have had enough a need for capable people I might actually have ignored what a monster you are if you'd not proven again and again you're poison to everything you touch. But you just had to cross those lines, the ones that mean I have to put you down whatever the cost."

Diabolist sighed.

"Must you still bother with the pretence of righteousness, even at this late hour?" she said. "It has grown increasingly quite tedious."

"Is this the part where you trying telling me we're not so different?" I said. "Fuck you and the flying murder fortress you rode in on, Sahelian. I've done some nasty stuff, but you? You don't have *limits*. It's worse than a sickness of the mind, because you chose to be like this. You glorify it."

She seemed amused, and in that expression I saw a lot I'd rather I hadn't. I saw the Empress weaving plots that bound me ever tighter to her reign, I saw Black imparting a lesson that was always as brutal as it was practical. We'd both been raised in the shadows of the same monsters. It had left marks on both of us, and the knowledge of that shared brand had bitter taste in my mouth.

"Tell me, old friend," Akua said fondly. "What *are* your principles, exactly? I keep hearing of these lines and the way I cross them yet you never elaborate. I have murdered for my ambitions, this is true. But then, so have you. Is it simply the scale of the killing that is your objection?"

"Friend? Gods, when people say your kind gets drunk in power I didn't think it was quite that literal. You've loosed devils on innocents, Akua," I said coldly. "You summon demons to make use of them in war. You're racist, backstabbing and utterly amoral. *You murdered a hundred thousand of my countrymen in cold blood to make a fucking point.*"

"Nearly all these acts have been committed by those you call allies as well," Diabolist mildly said. "Your own teacher has methodically butchered Callowans for decades to cow them. Perhaps never a hundred thousand at once, this I'll grant. But between the Conquest and the occupation? My dear, I broke a city. He broke a *nation*, and kept it so. I daresay the sum of corpses to his name is a few graveyards ahead of mine."

She stretched lazily.

"You've yourself made pacts with entities that are hostile to Creation," she continued. "And even now bear their mantle, a diabolist in frost instead of brimstone. You've consistently put Callowan lives above those of Praesi and greenskins, which indicates a certain... disregard. In matters of treachery, shall we revisit the inception of the Liesse Rebellion?"

She laughed, the sound of it rich and almost enchanting enough the urge to kill her didn't have my hand tightening into a fist.

"As for the same moral fibre you so often chide me for lacking," she said, and met my eyes calmly. "Catherine, when have you ever displayed it yourself? I was under the impression that to be righteous one needed to do more than merely commit lesser sins instead of great."

"The difference," I replied coldly, "is that killing is something I'm driven to, while it's your starting point."

"What difference is truly there," Diabolist asked, "if we both come to kill? Does hemming and hawing over bloodying your blade somehow exempt you from the nature of your actions?"

"The difference is that at some point I stop, Akua," I said. "I have an end. You don't. It's one massacre after another until someone puts you down. The payoff for all the ugly things done at my hands or my orders is peace. Real, lasting peace. A way out of the loop that's fucked over both our peoples since the First Dawn. What's your payoff, Diabolist? Progressively greater atrocities, until you finally run into someone stronger than you?"

"That," Akua said smilingly, "sounds like a justification."

I flinched, because it was just true enough to cut.

"Did you ever wonder why all these renowned villains displayed such immediate fondness for you?" Diabolist said. "Or did you merely assumed you were unfathomably charming? You have always been a threat to the very order they've spent a lifetime building, even when you set out to serve their purpose."

"I'm aware I'm being used," I replied flatly. "I can live with that, so long as I'm using them as well."

The Soninke clicked her tongue against the roof her mouth disapprovingly.

"Sentiment is a blinder, Catherine," she said. "Consider the facts. From the moment you've become the Squire, Callow has been graced with one bloody reaping after another. Did you ever stop to consider this was no accident but the actual intent?"

She leaned forward.

"Did you ever consider that Callow cannot rebel if it too busy *burning*?" she said. "That the ashes of a kingdom are easier to subjugate in full than a resurgent nation under your hand?"

"I know exactly what they're after," I flatly replied.

"You 'know' what two of the most exquisitely manipulative villains alive have told you," Diabolist corrected. "Is a few scraps of affection all it takes to bind you?"



"Did you think a clever speech would be all that was needed to sway me?" I said. "I know what you are, Akua. It's what I would be, if I believed in nothing. If I thought I was the only thing that mattered on Creation."

"You will hate me," Diabolist said. "That is as it should be. But I know you as well, Catherine Foundling. And there is a truth you have flinched from looking in the eye, for it is distasteful to you: the Empress and the Carrion Lord, though you may be fond of them, have a plan for Callow. Me?"

She shrugged.

"Its existence is a matter of indifference to me, so long as tribute is paid," Akua said. "And so now I ask – is there truly a bridge you will not burn, if it means better outcome for your people?"

Her smile was thin and sharp, a slice of ivory between red lips.

"Let us find out," she said. "We will begin, I think, by severing the ties holding you back."

She looked towards the Ducal Palace, the very picture of nonchalance.

"Do hurry, Catherine. I have the Black Knight."

My blood ran cold, even as the illusion dispersed and the undead below began to move. A reminder, those, that no matter how convincing she could be I was still mere feet away from thousands of my people she had murdered and enslaved. There were some things that could not be painted over by eloquence. The wisps of sorcery that Diabolist had left behind spun again, and even as I prepared to forcefully disrupt them a silhouette formed and my hand was stayed. Exactly one sentence was spoken to me, and then the silhouette was gone before I could so much as open my mouth. Loudly, I swallowed. My fingers clenched and then unclenched as I watched the wights beginning the climb towards me. In the distance mages wove sorcery and devils took flight, the full muster of Diabolist's madness finally taking the field. I closed my eyes, breathed out and stilled my mind. I opened them to sight of a corpse-like hand grasping the edge of the roof.

"**Fall,**" I said, and darkness obeyed.

Was it his plan to get captured i wonder? I wouldn't put it past him and yet...

*Letouriste*

He is too smart for falling to an obvious trap like that.that's part of his plan or akua don't have him at all.

I expect a bluff actually

*letouriste*

err let's pretend i said nothing.we don't even know the details of akua plan so that could be extra clever^^ still think black would not fall for any trap she could do though

*Jeffery Wells*

Akua isn't bluffing. It would be extremely foolish to bluff and then have Black meet back up with Cat, totally fine. Something like that would destroy everything she is doing to snag the Squire as a subordinate.

Now whether Black allowed himself to be caught it not is an entirely different question. My guess is he knows this isn't his story, so he needs to set up a story where Cat successfully rescues him and kills Diabolist.

*maresther23*

And so the gambit pileup begins. Who will win?

*werafdsaew*

The Unspoken Plan Guarantee so far heavily favors Black (and Assassin) and Thief.

*maresther23*

And whatever the Empress is planing.

*Zarquon*

... I am hoping she's lying about having captured the Black Knight but huh. Huh. 0\_0

*werafdsaew*

On the one hand Akua has lied about such things before. On the other hand defeating another Named is all about maneuvering yourself into a narrative that favors you, and I can see Black allowing himself to be captured as part of that, especially since he has the Unspoken Plan Guarantee.

*Kindly*

Relying on the Unspoken Plan Guarantee for protection is not a foolproof strategy. You never know when the author will write an interlude from your point of view and spill the beans – and of course, that will be the cue for everything to go wrong.

[DroughtBringer](#)

That ending is exciting.  
First time we get to see Fall in all of its glory.

*naturalnuke*

hype

ALKATYN

Akua is enough of an old style villain to monologue and speak about how they are Not So Different, but smart enough to do it from far away via an illusion. I love it.

What she said reminds me of the parallel a lot of people have made between Cat and Taylor in worm. There's only so long you can do bad things and work with bad people while saying that its different if you do it. Much as she like to quote about justifications only mattering too the just Cat still needs to believe she is in the right at a deep level.

[taborask](#)

And just like Taylor I think both of them are kinda wrong. When it comes right down to it Cat ISNT much better than Diabolist, not really. They both murder tons of people are consort with alien entities for the sake of saving their culture. The fact that we are more similar to Cat's culture than Akua's doesn't make one superior to the other in any real objective sense.

Which is good, I think. There's a reason this story isn't called "A Practical Guide to Being An Asshole Who's Actually Good Deep Down"

[vamair](#)

> The fact that we are more similar to Cat's culture than Akua's doesn't make one superior to the other in any real objective sense.

Doesn't it, though? I'd argue Cat's culture is still better than Akua's in some objective sense. The justice of your cause doesn't make you a better person by itself, but caring about being a better person at heart is something that Cat

seems to going to grow out of. Justifications only matter to the just, all that.

[poignardazur](#)

I feel like the culture that is based on Darwinist murder of everyone you can get away with murdering and "it's not breaking the law if you bribe the guy in charge" rules is the inferior one in a real objective sense.

*nipi*

Id argue that Callowan culture is objectively superior because when shit hits the fan they arent still backstabbing each other like the wastelanders

[shieldredblog](#)

Verified Gods and afterlives kinda change the nature of morality enough that i'm not sure you can compare morality in Creation to the real world anyway.

*laguz24*

The point is that if both Auka and Cat were left a kingdom with their own devices Auka would have still built the fortress Cat would have not. Cat is more reactive while Auka doesn't stop.

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All right, the silhouette in the last paragraph sounds like someone giving Catherine a signal that Akua wouldn't notice while departing. Given that the sentence wasn't told to us, it looks like a last second addition to the plan.

What other possibilities are there for it? Akua showing her the captured Black Knight as a proof, and him saying some cryptic reference to help Cat?

[DroughtBringer](#)

It's either that or Thief, both  
I'meaning towards Thief, as Blacks action probably would have been described as a Shadow, not a silhouette.

*Morgenstern*

Sounded like Thief coming out of hiding for just a moment, to me. I kinda hate that asspull-trick of not telling the reader a sentence has been said, but not showing the sentence, though, what with POV of the one effing HEARING that very sentence being applied here. It's kinda more fine if you have a 3rd person perspective or the POV of someone who canNOT hear that

sentence either, only SAW that something short was said. But the POV of the very person who HEARS that sentence? Ass-pull and a big fat tongue stuck out at the reader. Meh. (Yeah, I get it's for suspense reasons, but really, it just feels like there are better/nicer ways to do it.)

Ane

Ward, I'm curious, are you a guy or a girl?

[wirelessgrapes](#)

Akua brings up an interesting point. Why is Cat better than her, or the Empress, or Black? Her 'phrase', "justifications only matter to the just" is pretty damning in itself, and she's committed atrocities herself. She's spent her men like copper, gambled them and lost heavily. Though she came out on top, Callow is arguably worse off than it was before she came. The lands are burning, demons are corrupting the cities, the Fae attacked Marchford, and the coin purses are running dry. So, why is Cat better? Is it because she's the main character? Is the point of the story that you \*can't\* be Practically Evil?

I don't think so.

Fantasy characters are defined by their goals. Frodo has to deliver the Ring to Mordor. Harry Potter has to defeat Voldemort. The Pevensie kids have to put the lion on his rightful throne.

Cat's goal is to be better. Her goal is to be better than the villains that exist. Her goal is to crush any and all opposition in order to rebuild her home better than it was. And that's what makes her better. In the same way that William was bound to fighting Cat, Cat is bound to fighting for Callow. No matter the price, no matter the pain, she will fight for what she believes is good for Callow.

Because, at the end of the day, what the fantasy genre ignores, the people are the most important part. That's what I believe the story is all about. The world after the battles are over is the important part. What's the point of saving the world if you can't keep it that way?

So, why's Cat better than Akua? Because Akua intends to break the world. Why is Cat better than the heroes? Because, if the heroes win, there will always be another villain.

There's the old adage, about asking if the means justify the ends. In this story, Cat couldn't give a fuck about the means justifying the ends, all that matters is the end. And her end is the best for the people. Because fantasy worlds suck for everyone else.

## wirelessgrapes

And Cat will definitely end up fighting the Empress and Black, if they don't die, because nothing else can happen. The Story won't allow it. So long as Callow answers to someone who isn't Cat, she will fight for it to be hers.

## NZPIEFACE

You know, Cat's literal defining trait so far has been fighting for a better Callow by burning it.

### *Keyen*

I believe the discussion between Archer and Apprentice back in their scouting mission is pretty much revealing of that: "Foundling wouldn't want all the people inside butchered right?"

"I think not," Apprentice said. "She gets irritated about people killing Callowans unless it's her doing it."

## NZPIEFACE

Maybe she's a vampire and every time she kills a Callowan she lives for a year longer?

Wait, wrong Queen. And she's immortal already.

### *werafdsaew*

> Callow is arguably worse off than it was before she came  
Is it though? In the counterfactual timeline where Catherine never took the mantle of the Squire, or died in her first fight against Williams, would Callow really be better off? The rebellion was going to happen sooner or later, Akua was going to be Akua, and the Winter King was going to be the Winter King. Catherine isn't really responsible for anything except moving the schedule up. And considering that Black and Malicia had 20 years to plan for the Crusade, it's not like a few more years is going to make a big difference in the grand scheme of things.

### *beleester*

Catherine caused the first Liesse rebellion, which Akua used for her first schemes at Marchford and Liesse. Then she literally handed control of Liesse to Akua. Sure, Akua was always going to do \*something\*, but that something would have been a lot less dangerous without Catherine providing opportunities. Or at the very least, she could have done it somewhere in the Wasteland rather than in the middle of Callow.

Moving the schedule up for the Crusade probably didn't make too much difference, but making all the events happen \*at the same time\* probably did. They planned for a Crusade, sure, but I don't think they planned for a crusade and a rebellion and a civil war and a Fae incursion and a Greater Breach, one after another with no time to replenish the legions.

(This is also why I think Akua is wrong about this being a plan to keep Callow too busy to rebel – no rebellion would have caused as much damage as the current situation is.)

*Reveen*

Man, what are you talking about? This is a massive sweeping generalization of a genre based on only the most stock stereotypes about it. And this story and general has about as much insight and nuance on the subject as a political cartoon.

Meanwhile Catherine's resistance to the conventions of both her world and the genre are skin deep. She is acting in opposition to good vs evil dichotomy but falls fully into the core ideological construct of the Great Man doing Great Things. She wants to help Callow, but she's dead set on the only way to help Callow by her hand and by her hand alone, beating the country into the shape she wants it. Using force to get her way and convinced of her right to do so by virtue of being the Protagonist of her own little story.

It's not a big rejection of fantasy, quite the opposite, it's the same Great Man Theory that extolls the strength and agency of the Special people above the unwashed masses of plebs who need to be led to greatness. It's the same ideological underpinning of both the heroes and the villains, the only difference being that Catherine thinks herself so goddamn special as to be above both of those concepts due to some vague and philosophically empty set of personal ideals that she can't even debate with some teenage nun without tripping over herself.

And it is not an ideology that will lead to lasting peace or a better future for her people. It's an ideology that leads to people plowing forward convinced of their own rightness or rationality and failing to see the big picture. Catherine has just brushed off the fact that she's a pawn several times now, because she's wrapped up in her own ego that she thinks she'll just be able to overcome it.

I also think that if the time came when she came face to face with another path for a better Callow, she would reject it and fight against it because it is not *hers*.

*werafdsaew*

Given that the Gods are doling out Names, and Names are basically people who can shape creation to their will, I think the great man theory is 100% correct. At the very least, if your opponents have Names, and you don't, you loose.

*Joey Wheel*

Suddenly I have the feeling Cat will lose this fight. Cat's soul will be used against her at the final moment, Black will die, and Cat will be rescued by her party at the last second, unconscious and nearly dead.

Diabolist will go on to fight against the Crusade using her Breaches to great effect.

Cat will gain her name as she awakens a year or two later to a ravaged and burning Callow.

That's just my crack prediction.

*Engineer*

Which begs the question why Akua didn't simply undo the working on Cat's soul.

The only probable reason I can come to is that she couldn't use her aspects through her illusion. Because Cat is stuck in her domain a good deal far away from anyone that could conceivably apply magical first aid so this is the optimum time to exploit that weakness in her soul if I was the Diabolist.

*Shequi*

Akua wants Cat as her Black Knight.

*Taichi22*

Of all the ways I can see this ending, your prediction is my favorite.

Why? Because Cat has been actively losing her grasp upon the narrative. Both she and her close compatriots know that their way of doing things is untenable – set off bombs to prevent nukes, but never long enough to actually build anything. And they know this – I'm fairly sure that every member of the Woe has admitted this at some point.

We also see Cat losing her grip on her ideals and what makes her right. Her moral justifications are... mediocre, at best. We see her utterly unable to debate with the nun, winning through sheer 'Might makes right.' arguments. And when she isn't mightier than her foe, she is unable to debate them in terms of moral justice. 'Justification matters only to the just' may be one of Cat's defining lines, but the crux of the matter is that



she does believe herself to *\*be\** just, and as such, her principles just aren't good enough. As it stands, even if she were to get a name, it wouldn't suit her, because her morals and her stance isn't solidified. Who she is, isn't solidified enough. There are too many cracks in the foundation for her to become a Black Knight, or any other kind of knight, as this chapter has revealed. She doesn't have anything of a 'method' or a 'way', but rather is just going about as best she can to put out fires. And that's not good enough for a full name.

The prediction that you've made is a 'reset' upon the story. Cat's way is burned down, Black dies the way he wants to go out, and Cat is forced to take a long, hard look at her morals, principles, and methods.

And *\*then\** we'd watch her get her name.

### *Engineer*

Akua is correct in her assessment. Murder is murder, whatever your justifications and for a person that supposedly believes "Justifications matter only to the Just" Squire sure has a lot of them.

Just kick this holier than thou bullshit you have going on Cat and embrace the truth that all your actions merely boil down to "I don't like you, so I'll kill you."

And there is NO shame in that.

That is the essence of all Named, to see their will imposed on Creation and as a wise 11 year old Wizard once said "To impose your will on someone, you need to beat them first."

And she said at some point she'll STOP? Ludicrous, there will ever be someone that opposes her will. In a species as complex and diverse as humanity you will always have an individual or group of individuals that disagree with the status quo. So you will ALWAYS be killing.

So, short of mind controlling everyone like that Dread Emperor from yesteryear did, she will never achieve her goal of a lasting peace.

So embrace the Way of the Blade Squire.

### *LM*

Let's split this into two arguments, morality and practicality.

You say that there is no difference in a kill made by a soldier versus one made by a serial killer. That's just not the case. Murder can be justified, even in civilized societies, if it's committed in defense of the people as a whole. Killing an

attempted rapist or band robber, for example. Many countries have "castle doctrine", where reasonable actions taken to defend yourself in your home can NOT be used to prosecute you. The key word here is reasonable.

Katherine may be repeating that dumb "Justifications may only matter to the just" quip, but her entire method of governance is to attempt to be fair and reasonable. She's must successful when she's fighting against those with no justification for their actions. She's not committing mass genocide, she's fighting those who slaughter her people. She's not starting wars, she's ending them. The only example of her starting a war was letting the lone swordsman escape. She nearly lost her damn mantle because of it, not in my opinion because of some white/black conflict, but because it went directly against her principles.

### *Engineer*

Yes, however both cases still leaves you with a corpse at your feet. Your post implies that murder is alright under certain circumstances but who decides what circumstances are right or wrong? Furthermore what the hell gives them the authority to decide that?

In fact, justifications do not exist outside human societies. The universe at large does not care why or how you killed that person. It just outputs a dead body. The point I am trying to make is that justifications are only there to soothe your own conscious and are not required for you internally. They are only required to prevent you from going to prison, but this is only necessary because you as an individual is weak compared to the entire police force which exist to enforce laws that only have effect so long as society believes they do and are enforced.

But if you were Named, capable of murdering 10 000 police officers singlehandedly without breaking a sweat like Catherine can, why the hell would you care about justifying yourself to ANYBODY including yourself? That's what annoys me; she's still trying to justify herself to some stupid "authority" or moral principle to believe she's a "good" person doing "bad" things for the "right" reasons. This is an unnecessary source of mental anguish and unfitting of The Last Noble of the Fae and the future Black Queen of Callow.

Just do what you want. If people have a problem with that destroy them.

Remember what Black said to her on that balcony, after she had her ass handed to her by the then Heiress, "If people get in your way, step on them."

I end this with one fundamental truth of Calernia and ours:  
"Might makes."

*Dan*

I think the issue with Cat's moral standpoint is that there is no peaceful option. She is but one named among many. Luckily for her health, her plan is backed by other named.

What critics of her methods are avoiding is that the will of the people makes the future. The Black knight knew he needed a force for change greater than a named. So he created a unified idea of one grace one sin. Now the new generation of praesi are a mix of cultures they can rid their world of the old way of thinking. As we see, though, the black knight and malicia have been unable to convert the naysayers by peaceful negotiation.

So as we see different forces slaughter each other the only way to come to a conclusion which benefits the people as a whole is a force (the legions) defeat or assimilate their enemies. The country and region are not unified, but by gathering diverse forces under cat's banner, she gives power to the common people.

Ultimately, each named in history has been defeated by another named. The legacy of the named has thus been snuffed out from the top. I believe that The squire and the black knight have been the first named to keep the common people "in the loop" to some degree, regarding the grand plan.

Whereas dread emperors/empresses have ruled from the top with personal goals, cat's goal resonates with the people she fights with. In the beginning she had a small force, and did great things \*personally\* with their welfare in mind. Now she has simply grown her set of like minded followers, to the extent that she has created a new named out of her trusted advisor.

If names are handed down (or up) then her crusade? Has been tacitly endorsed by one or more gods. So while she spends lives, she is also visibly working in the interests of the people she leads, AND their audience.

The people fighting against the empire are selfishly pursuing what is ultimately a narrow seat of power, which they intend to usurp. Now, for the first time, the empire is being lead from the top, with support all the way from the bottom. So while there is only one way to make changes in the empire (killing) akua and the other forces are still aiming for a narrow seat of power.

\*\*\*\*\*

I think the true meaning of cat's justifications only matter to the just is that to justify ones actions there must be a range of effective options.

What Cat has learnt (the hard way, from essentially, her birth) is that for countrywide reform there is only one course of action. Demonstrate that she can lead, and survive \*as one of them\* fighting beside them and \*for\* them.

*Dylan Tullos*

Engineer:

The Black Knight before Amadeus believed that he could impose his will on Creation through raw power. He subscribed to the simple school of thought that "Might makes", and he had the strength to bring down a tower with a flick of his wrist. In his mind, that made him strong enough to do as he liked.

The last Black Knight was far more powerful than Amadeus, but he didn't understand how to use that strength. At Flandres, he slaughtered his way through more than a hundred men when some random soldier cut his throat. There was no dramatic duel, no final confrontation with a great enemy, just a Named who forgot that all powers have limits and paid the price.

A Named who thinks that they can do whatever they want and step on whoever gets in their way will inevitably be killed by their own arrogance. Even if we ignore morality completely, other people are real, and they have their own goals and motives. Black understands this, so he created institutions that offered the lower ranks of Praesi society a chance to gain wealth, power, and social status by serving him.

The Legions Amadeus created triumphed on the Field of Flandres because they fought as a team. The old Black Knight died on the Field of Flandres because he thought he was a God. Rather than seeking to use his raw power effectively, he simply bulldozed everyone in his path until he was so exhausted that a random peasant could slit his throat.

If Catherine could kill ten thousand, she'll face an enemy who bring ten thousand and one. If she destroys everyone who dares to question her and terrifies her underlings into obedience, she'll be surrounded by cowardly, resentful subordinates who will betray or abandon her at a critical moment. The history of Praes is full of Villainous Named who thought that their power gave them the right to ignore "lesser" peoples; Black and Malicia's success comes from the fact that they understand and motivate their subordinates rather than just beating them into line.

Catherine's team has saved her life on several occasions, but their loyalty has a price. Cat has to understand what they want, and show them that they can accomplish their goals by supporting her. She may be in charge of Callow, but she's more likely to stay in charge if she behaves like a harsh but well-meaning ruler rather than a deranged Nietzsche-worshipping lunatic.

Calernia, like the real world, is a place where leaders need to put time and effort into justifying themselves to their followers. No matter how powerful Named are, there are always going to be other powerful Named looking to bring them down. The best way to survive as a Named is through teamwork, strong alliances, and good people skills, not monologuing about how you will crush anyone who gets in your way.

### NZPIEFACE

Yeah... Cat's going to team up with Aqua, isn't she.

You know, the only reason Black and Dread Empress came so far is because they were equals. I'm starting to believe Cat needs one too.

*Andrei*

Honestly I kindof hope this happens. I really like what Akua brings to the story and having her die soon is a little sad.

*Letouriste*

No.just no.i can't see that happening at all for a lot of reasons:

- akua is doomed to lose at some point
- akua trampled on what cat want defend
- cat is callowan and she has a big grudge
- there is no trust at all between them.don't belittle the relation between black and malicia.
- etc...

### NZPIEFACE

Half the story is about subverting tropes, whats the harm in some crazy speculation that goes against convention?

### Kotawa

Ugh, did Cat get another dosage of heroic morals from somewhere? This whole thing seems fishy.

*werafdsaew*

Cat has always been a hero with the mantle of a Villain

*Reveen*

"Do you feel like a hero with the mantle of a Villain yet?"

*lavos*

That seems to be the case yes. Perhaps that is Black's doing since the way Akua went about things pretty much guarantees she will lose to the first half-decent hero that comes around? Or Akua is twisting things to trigger a Face Heel Turn?

*Gunslinger*

Fuck you and the flying murder fortress you rode in on, Sahelian.

That line is pure gold.

I suppose Cat's the first one to use an aspect between the two, she'll win eventually but it doesn't bode well in the interim. Black seems to be the most likely candidate for the silhouette but it really could be anyone. Even the scribe

*Unexpectedly Polite Cultist*

Or assassin.

[TheAtomicOption](#)

Worrying that she's using an aspect right off. It seems like each aspect trumps the next, so first to use one loses. 🙄

[shieldredblog](#)

Yes but only in a straight up duel. There are also plenty of non aspect trump cards like the hellgates or buried explosives.

*Adra*

If this ends up being the fight where Cat levels up, she's playing with >3 aspects. Having her start one down on Akua, only to gain the aspects of her new name is a good way to upset that audience assumption that first to use an aspect is going to lose.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

Mhm, I hope Akua wins and takes her revenge. The Black Knight dies, the woe scattered because Catherine held them together,

mhmmhmMm. Then Cat will re-revenge? Something has to be gained from a loss like that to advance the story.

*Letouriste*

Lol no way.black can't die here narratively...i'm pretty sure of that.

The woe would not scatter:/ how do you expect that to even be possible? you would need cat to die

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

or disappear and the others wouldn't know what happened to her.

*letouriste*

then they would unit in searching for her etc...or dealing with her job in her stead(hakram would and thief too,masego and archer would just temporary go back home but that's nothing narratively)

*Ashen Shugar*

So Akua thinks Thief got blown up trying to steal the keystone. But since it seems like it might actually have been Robber's job to do, then Thief is probably still around to steal Black back from Akua as part of a cascade of errors she's made starting from assuming that it was just Thief lurking out the town.

Maybe.

*SpeckofStardust*

"silhouette formed and my hand was stayed. Exactly one sentence was spoken to me,"

That was likely Thief giving information/message.

*Letouriste*

Hum...now you said that...yep that's likely because she clearly only care about Named.she would not consider robber as something other than an annoying pawn

*TheCount*

"There was a way, in Diabolist's eyes, where today ended up with her on top and beyond reprisal. I was going to have to find what that way was and shove blades into it until it stopped twitching."

SUICIDE IS NOT THE ANSWER!!!

i mean, if cat would know that Aqua's goal is her...would she stabb herself?:o

That aside... im... suprised.

not about the any of the plans, but me liking aqua...

Sure, she is immoral and all that murder and schemming.... but... she

is honest to herself... that, is something i value a lot.... not to mention the wards and other tools she crafted, even despite what (or who) she used to make them.....

*lupus7*

old-blood are hypocrite, they winner war again callow, when was black's legion, they racist and liar to other and them self, they call then self villains, only see poor crazy nihilist. sorry for my English i am speaker Spanish.

*narcoduck*

I don't think the last image was Thief at all. I think it was Malicia, co-opting (and hiding in) Akua's fading illusion spell to give Cat a nudge in the right direction. After all, she knew what Akua was planning this entire time. No reason why she wouldn't have a personal touch in the outcome.

[Eli London](#)

I'm looking forward to Cat's realisation that she kinda isn't any better than Akua and i think it's at that point that we'll truly see her true character because it's the point at which she'd no longer lying to herself. By no longer lying to herself, i think it'll enable her to push herself further than she ever has which will help and prepare her for the war that is about to happen after this.

[Eli London](#)

Grammar connections

i think it's at that point

she'd no longer be lying to herself

[Eli London](#)

Lol, corrections

*Letouriste*

i understood that last bit as akua saying that sentence threat she talked about...am I wrong?

*Alex Walters*

Akua has lied about having your friend/mentor/whatever before, when she said some generic ghoul was Killian at the climax of book 2.

Also, I must say that while Callow is worse off than before Cat got going, it would be much worse if she hadn't. Only the Lone



Swordsman's stuff can be even arguably traced to her, and it would have happened eventually anyway. Cat's been running damage control on the rest.

I do agree that "Justifications only matter to the just" is a stupid phrase that Cat doesn't really believe, at least in the modern sense of justification. In the archaic sense that "x action is righteous", yes. But Cat very clearly cares a lot about whether she's doing the correct thing by her own standards, and thus does justification in the modern sense. It's just that her own standards are a proto-utilitarianism 99% of the time and thus completely outside the bounds of conventional Good/Evil.

I cannot see Cat teaming up with Akua for any scenario, because most of the threats that Cat might deem bad enough that she'd call a truce with Akua to stop are ones Akua would want to harness and Cat would want gone.

*werafdsaew*

Without Cat triggering the rebellion early, it would have happened at the same time as the Crusade, and then the Empire definitely would have lost. And on their way out, the Empire would burn Callow to the ground, according to Cat's estimations. Of course this is better for an eventual free and independent Callow, but it wouldn't be good for the people actually living in it, and Cat has always cared about the latter while not caring about the former.

*RandomFan*

Don't forget, Cat may describe the other emperors as jokes, but they were dangerous. we might blame all this conflict on the empire, it might even be true- but Callow has had to war with their neighbors before, and to war with the empire as well. They might have remained free, but there's a long walk between free and good.

Even that's assuming that the throne actually was good for the people. If not, as long as pragmatic villiany persists, it's better for callow under the thumb of evil than under the thumb of good. Plus, if Cat carves a large enough hole, she'll make Callow part of the empire, which could make it a better place in general, especially after the Nobility has a large portion cut to ribbons.

*Reveen*

The idea that Callow would be a better place to live under the Empire only works under the assumption that the Empire isn't a nightmare dystopia, which it is. Even under "Practical" Evil it's not going to stop being a dystopia, just a more ordered one. And that dystopianess is going to

bleed into Callow over time, especially if the country ends up torn to pieces by the end of things.

*letouriste*

hey,i just realised nobody commented on the possible death of robber.seems like nobody even want think about that or believe that is a possibility.

robber is dealing with a Named and trap made for Named...he could really die in this battle (even if i don't think he will)

he is crazy funny and lucky but what make him a great character is his rebel side.narratively his future growth could be really interesting and go in a lot of ways but he could also be used for reinforcing cat character at some point...like by dying in battle:(

*Nethermore*

First of all, I agree with Masego that in Creation the most righteous cause is to seek to escape the cage. I find the divine experiment beyond disgusting, the worst exposures we've seen having been angel mass brainwashing and the Praesi not being allowed to try and survive on the foos they can grow. Somehow I wouldn't be surprised if agricultural science was sabotaged. The gnomes are almost certainly divinely influenced to keep the rest of Calernia from ever outgrowing the cage.

Akua has basically drunk all of the Evil rats' kool-aid and wants nothing more than to scratch and bite all the other rats until they're so crippled they can't resist her making a bed of them. Catherine originally just wanted a better lot in the struggle for her extended rat family and believed the best or only way to achieve it was to join the Evil rats, but when she was shown the cage and told of how some of the Evil rats wanted to bite the hand of their jailer (who also kept sneaking the Good rats treat, and magic swords), she was sympathetic and has become more so after seeing the story-driven patterns of Creation at work.

Also, Akua's "join me" speech was pretty weak, but then we already know her plan is to break Cat before turning her so I guess this was just a primer. Literally the only argument in favor of joining her

Akua managed to bring forth was that she doesn't have specific designs on Callow. Pretty shoddy considering that she's a untrustworthy, sees 0 value in anything but her personal power, appearance, and father, clearly wants to war against the whole world until she croaks which is way more dangerous for all her "allies" than Praes just trying to keep hold of Callow, has Triumphant's "if I can't have it, then Creation is better off burned" attitude, ...

Meanwhile Cat has friends on the Empire's side, knows that the Empress's and Black's plan for the Empire and Callow is less dangerous than aggressive world war, has actually worked to shut otherworldly creatures (Fae) OUT of Callow when they forced her to deal with them, ...

TeK

Well, this sure spawned a plethora of comments, so let me put my two cents.

TL;DR: She is not so different from Aqua. In fact, the only difference between them is that Aqua is honest with herself, while Catherine is not.

I'm so sick and tired of Cat's bullshit. She is a hypocrit and a coward, and either too blind or too stupid to understand this. She needs to utterly divorce the idea that she can do "wrong" things for "right" reasons, and that having "right" reasons gives her a moral highground and makes her better. She whines about justifications, but the fact is, she can't fucking function without seeking justifications and "right" reasons for her actions. Yes, I'm committing atrocities, but at least it's for idea. Yes, I'm striking deals with devils, but at least it's for Callow. Yes, I'm killing people, but at least it's not Callowans. Fuck her and fuck her reasons. She is a hypocrit and a coward, and here's why.

First, let's start with sweet-sweet hypocrisy, the true mortar of the Tower. She considers her better because she has lines she do not cross, and because she not doing things for herself but for Callow. Let me break it down to ya. Her having "lines she wouldn't cross" is shaky, because it's a made up sentiment. Aqua too has those lines, though they are different. She will not do something that does not bring her any short or long term benefit, she would not do something that is not in her interests, and not caring for her survival is too unspeakable measure for her. Saying that there are things you would not do, therefore you are better is like saying that you breath, therefore you are better. Everyone has things they will never do, it's just the matter of where your goals lie. For Aqua it's her benefit and profit, for Cat it's to have reasons to believe that she is not "too bad", so her lines are set up accordingly. Everyone have equal right to judge right from wrong, which, depending on your opinion, either means that noone has that right, or everyone. Or only you, because of course you do.

Statement that she is not working for herself but for Callow (which is to what most of her rebuttals come to) is a nationalism. I struggle so hard to not bring Nazis into this, but they are "obvious" villains and showcase my point. People identify themselves as a part of their nation and or country, and in turn, identify nation or country as part of themselves. Working

for a nation is ultimately working for yourself, it's just as selfish as is Aquas strife for power. She is dividing all people into to categories "my tribe" and "others". And others are expandable when it comes to her tribe. She's using the made up things that do not exist outside her mind to divide humanity on good and bad guys, which is just like racism, sexism, religious conflicts, class wars, and all other bullshit that keeps humanity occupied throught it's existence. She cares for Callow and Callowans, cause she was born in Callow as a fucking Callowan. Just as Aqua was born in Praes as a goddamn Praesi nobility, so she naturally protects "their way", which is "kill everyone who is a threat to you and use everyone else", so she does not care that much about Praesi, but point still stands. Everyone doing things for their benefit, and their only, fight me.

Now, let's look at cowardness, and since my post already too goddamn long, I would try to be short. Cat stubbornly refuses to face and admit the truth, even when it's fucking rubbed in her face. She runs away and hides behind platitudes, instead of accepting the reality. She is a goddamn coward and need to grow up.

P.S.

Everything I wrote equally applies to me, yada-yada-yada.

*Abrakadabra*

You are Just plain wrong, and full of justifications. Ironic, since You are clearly not Just.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*JackbeThimble*

Has Cat ever killed someone that wasn't either an Enemy, a Criminal or some kind of immediate threat (like the demon-corrupted soldiers)? She's sacrificed her troops but that was always against enemies that were clearly worth the sacrifice. The only case I can think of where she voluntarily killed allies or innocents purely for her own benefit or to advance her own goals was letting the Lone Swordsman go.

*Isa Lumitus*

You know, it occurs to me that Cat might have a way to SERIOUSLY delay the upcoming war with Procer. All she needs is the tool Akua made: Liesse.

Liesse isn't a mere floating castle. It's an entire godsdamned city, the second biggest in Callow. That is a whole lot of earth

and stone, attached to an enchantment to move it wherever needed. So if they can get it into the air again, why not land it in the middle of a choke-point in Red Flower Vale to plug Procer's only real entry point?

Even if there are ways around the landed city, Akua worked really hard to turn that into a giant fortress. Why not invest it with a garrison? I also doubt that Cat's team is going to kill all 100K wights. If she can seize the control spells, they could help defend the pass.

Procer might find a way to invade eventually, such as by conquering the Free Cities and entering from the South. I bet that would take several years, though.

*Max Scherer*

Im not really sure he got captured and more he let himself being captured to steer Cat in the 'right' Path and gods i hope he doesnt die here. I know at some point he probably will, but at this point in the story it would be just sooo predictable.

*Stayer*

Honestly for all we commend Cat she hasn't really accomplished any victory they were all mostly guided into by some other force and at best you could call them the best loss she could have gotten. For all the breaking the mould and outside the box she has never really surpassed her opponents in any meaningful way they all mostly got what they wanted, you can say she beat the Lone Swordsman but that really didnt bring her shit except more troubles. Honestly from my perspective the only one that truly understands whats going on is the Tyrant by simply not giving a shit, when in the end the whole struggle is mostly pointless might as well have fun with it.

[vuthuha912](#)

What are you talking about Akua? Of course, Cat is different from you. You are butchering your own people so you can have your 5 minutes Empire. Cat is fighting to stop you from fucking everybody over. She is protecting her country from a madwoman determined to ruin them. Black is fighting to give his people a chance to be more in life, to be more than just a monster in the story. He killed and cower Callow but he also build and nurture. You wouldn't even have the thoughts of lowering taxes during a bad harvest or funding the orphanages or letting the House of Light survive so that the public can access free healthcare. If you ever do any of these things, it is used to fuck somebody else over.

Cat and Black truly love their country. You love yourself first and foremost. To have 5 minutes of glory, you killed over 100,000

people. The one who is justifying the whole thing is you. You justified the butchering as iron shapes iron and bringing the old tradition back to Praes but you aren't even planning to survive, leaving Praes in the hand of its enemies. It isn't good enough. The philosophy that required people to be the best backstabbers is inferior to the one of protecting growth from greater threats. In the end, if the pile of bodies is the same then the philosophy will be the one to determine everything. The French Revolution killed thousands of people but can you say that the ideas they spread across the continent of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity aren't ideals that are worth fighting for. If they don't rise up would the idea that people are important even enter the minds of those ignorant aristocrats or will the party go on while the country starved to death. Let's French revolution this bitch Akua.

Ideas matter. The nun from the previous chapter is right but she is looking at this from such a small optimistic point of view. Human nature is not all good. Bad things happen and bad people exist. She is the lamb waiting to be slaughtered without Catherine protecting her. When people are hungry, how much would they be willing to be good? Human nature is not built to be tested. If they are pushed into the corner, they lie, they cheat and they kill. You need to be able to survive before you become a human. Human dignity only goes as far as their condition allows.

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## Chapter 64: Solo

*"Food riots, is it? Well, I do enjoy when a problem is its own solution."*

– Dread Empress Sanguinia I, the Gourmet

It was a funny thing, hate. Before a sword through the chest set me on the path to becoming the Squire, I'd thought I was beyond it. That learning to see beyond the grudges and the anger was what set me apart from the heroes that died like flies as I grew up. I'd thought that by setting aside the hate I would be able to act with my hands unfettered, to bring lasting change instead of raging against the Tower for half a year and getting my throat slit in my sleep. It'd been a peculiar kind of arrogance, but arrogance nonetheless. None of us could ever be clear as spring water, not even Black. His brand of vainglory was just shrewder than most – because could you really call one man setting himself against the entire Heavens anything but arrogance? People could step on ants without even noticing it, no matter how clever the ant. Oh, when Named spoke to each other we didn't call it

arrogance. It was will, or madness, or half a dozen other little euphemisms that allowed us to feel slightly better about what we were doing. But that the end of the day, one truth always came out: to be Named was to believe, bone deep, that Creation should be a certain way. Beyond that it was just quibbling about the means you used to make sure it did.

It was conceit to believe I could be more than I was, some pure instrumentality of outcome or ideal. When I'd fought the greatest monsters of Arcadia, we'd called them gods. Lesser gods, of course – even in hushed whispers, deference must be afforded to the prickly holders of the penultimate thrones – but gods nonetheless. I should have understood it properly then, because what were even the most powerful of the fae but Named with the weight of millennia behind them? It was why they'd lost. Because when they'd come down to Creation, to this messy battlefield of ours, they'd been forced to fashion themselves into people. In Arcadia, they were perfect: not in the sense of flawlessness, no, but in the way that a cog in a machine fit exactly the form and purpose it was meant for. A god made to masquerade as a mortal had the fatal flaw of perfection removed from the perfect. But us Named? Oh, we were different breed. Mortals made gods, or at least clawing at the foot of that golden pedestal. Born of a fractured thing we took up those sharp edges and wielded them like blades to cut at each other. An aspect was not a reward in some arcane lottery arranged by the Gods, it was a wound. A hurt, a disappointment, a rage made into knife.

And in matters of self-mutilation I had few rivals.

So I seized my hatreds and accepted them for what they were: the foundations of my power. I'd been told once that a Name could not spring from void, but that'd been untrue. It was Roles that were shaped by the currents of Creation, left glittering and polished stones at the bottom of the riverbed. Names were something more... intimate. A collection of sharp moments before and ahead of you. Huddling hungry under covers, after the price of bread had risen. Blood in my mouth as I fought a man too large and strong to beat, defeat crawling ever closer. It was a lesson on the nature of stories, learned by burned shores. It was a faceless tribunal whose verdict I had refused. I'd tried for so long to make something of all this, to weave together a tale that did not have bile rising in my throat. But there was nothing sacred about baring your blade, nothing laudable about telling the world it must bend or break. If I disdained the lay of Creation as ordained by the Gods, the banners of black and white, then I must either make my own or find myself nothing but a butcher among butchers. And so I took those vivid moments and made them a blade, and that blade I bared once more. It could begin here, under cover of moonless night.

It would.

The darkness did not spread, it fell. There was a sky above but not one that could be touched. It was not a boundary, a ceiling. It was a pit above, a biting void of nothingness that could not be filled. In front of me the hand of the wight froze with a snapping sound and my boot came down, shattering flesh and bone. I leapt down onto the street and found myself among a host of silent statues. Stillness alone reigned as I tread forward, leather creaking softly against the frosted ground. The Diabolist had set an army before me, one a Squire could not hope to scatter. But it had been some time since I was only that, and where Catherine Foundling would have been checked the Duchess of Moonless Nights strode unimpeded. I was not truly doing any of this, I thought as I walked through the ranks and passed a wight that simply... fell apart when my cloak brushed its frame. This was not a spell, sorcery as I understood it. It was, as Masego had said, a domain. The old and merciless cold of this place was as much a part of it as the unbroken black of the sky. My own kingdom of winter and night, and in this place all but me were guests. I wondered what it said of me, that this was the shape my own soul made realm had come to take.

Nothing pleasant, I suspected.

The silhouettes and edifices were juxtaposed, I instinctively knew, not fully drawn into the domain. They had existence both inside and outside of it, and so did I. *A domain, not merely a weapon*, I mused. There was more to this than an eldritch killing blow. The gate to the Ducal Palace was closed and had once been warded. But this was Winter, the land of soft silent deaths and unending hunger. The cold devoured it all, stripping it bare until a flick of my fingers had the gates falling from the hinges and even the last wisps of sorcery died. Beyond the gate awaited men and devils, and these were not so empty as the wights. There were still specks of warmth at the heart of them, like trembling candles. An indifferent glance was enough to smother them, like pinching the wick with a thumb and a finger. I climbed the steps that paved the way to the hall even in this silent world of mine, watching wards and wights flicker out around me. There was something ahead, I could feel it. A boundary to this place that should have none. I went through stairs and galleries, treading the graveyard of my own making until ahead of me hateful warmth gleamed before my eyes. Light red and yellow, a circle slowly turning with images I could not truly see inscribed inside.

A ward, one meant to check fae. *Thresholds must already be growing difficult, yes?* Warlock's voice whispered in my ear. I let out a breath cold as the air around me and rolled my shoulder to limber it, then struck at the ward as hard as I could. Something shattered, but it was not Akua's magic. Like a broken mirror the world around me cracked and crumbled, colour and heat rushing back around me. I stood in the same hallway than before, every surface covered in ice and steaming. All things came to an



end, it seemed. Not merely the good. I was tempted to unsheath my blade and try to force my way through the ward again, now looking like an innocuous door of oak, but I was not a rat running through Akua's maze. I would not spend my strength against walls she had tailored to hold me back. Instead I closed my eyes and sharpened my senses, sinking deeper into my Name. I'd slaughtered my way into here, but I'd not been that thorough in the killing. There would be remains to find. After ten long breaths I finally heard heartbeats and footsteps, but not to the sides. There was only the silence of the grave there. Above. Threading my will into the ice covering the ceiling I thickened it, sunk its claws into the stone until it cracked. Then, without further ceremony, I crouched and leapt upwards.

Stone shattered around me and I emerged in a rain of shards, landing on a gutted carpet. There were three men in the room, and a crawling shape that was not anything of the sort. They screamed, unsurprisingly, and I noted with distant amusement that the walls and only door of the room had been covered in wards akin to the one Akua had set below.

"An amateur mistake," I told them. "Not covering every surface."

The creature of pink and bloated flesh on the ground opened a maw that was like a lizard's, if the scales had been ripped away, and a long black tongue extended. On it a triad of red eyes were set, and as they glared at me I felt lethargy seep into my frame. I let Winter flood my veins and the assault dissipated like morning mist. My sword left the scabbard and in one smooth movement spun around my hand so I could nail the devil's head to the floor. The men, Soninke all three of them, were mages. Panic remained but bled into sorcery, hasty incantations barked. A spear of purple flame sizzled to my side as I stepped around the spell, pivoting fluidly to avoid the stream of dark tar-like fluid shot by another mage. The third, to my amusement, did not even attempt a blow. He disappeared into thin air, veiled behind an illusion. I moved forward, sword carving through the fire-wielders' chest then taking him by the shoulder and spinning the dying man around so he could shield me from the shower of white sparks the other one cast. Flesh melted under them, eaten away cleanly, but that did not prevent the mage from being bowled over by his comrade's corpse when I tossed it at him. Sharpening my ears I waited for the sound of footsteps and found the last one attempting to flee by the door.

"Predictable," I chided.

I flicked my wrist and a spear of shadow tore through the illusion, going straight through the man's stomach but splashing harmlessly against the warded wall. I did not spare another glance for the corpse, instead turning to the only survivor. He managed to push the corpse I'd thrown at him to the side, only to

find the tip of my sword resting on his throat. He swallowed, the lump in his throat moving as he did.

"Mercy, High One," he croaked. "I surrender."

"I thought about it," I said. "Having one of you still breathing guide me through the mess. But there's always the risk you'll lie, you see."

"I would never," he swore.

"You won't," I agreed, and the sword point flicked down to plunge into his heart.

He twitched, gurgled and even as life began to leave him I poured Winter inside his frame. When I tore out my sword, his eyes were already blue.

"Get up," I told my newest helper. "I haven't damaged your throat, so you should be able to talk."

He rose, but said nothing. I sighed. Undead.

"Say something," I ordered.

"Something," the corpse said.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. I, it had to be said, had literally asked for that.

"Tell me everything you know about the defences the Diabolist built in the palace," I ordered. "We can begin with that ward down below, and how I can get past it."

Dead men, as it turned out, did tell tales.

—

To absolutely no one's surprise, Diabolist redefined the meanings of 'overly complicated' and 'cripplingly paranoid'. The Ducal Palace was essentially a labyrinth of wards and traps that no one but her knew the full lay of. Akua was rumoured – but not confirmed – to have a metaphorical skeleton key that would let her pass through everything unharmed but her many minions had to make do with being keyed in on at most a handful of wards. My talkative corpse couldn't even get me through the one I'd failed to quite literally punch through earlier. He did know how to get past the equivalent on the second floor, but not how to go any further than that. Neither he nor his buddies had been high enough the pecking order for that. This was something of a problem, especially after I confirmed that the first contingency following the palace being attacked was every soldier within ten blocks rushing to secure it. I was going to be up in my neck in enemies if I didn't hurry, and this entire place was designed to

make hurrying more or less impossible. I'd freely admit that puzzles weren't something I particularly enjoyed, so the notion of spending a few hours being swarmed by wights while trying to figure out how Diabolist's mind worked was not high on my list of priorities.

So I'd taken another angle.

The newly-renamed First Volunteer, after being squeezed for every drop of information he knew on the palace defences, was told to guide me to the next knot of mages that were holed up. Diabolist had crafted this ridiculously complicated maze for me to run through? Fine. I could deal with that. I just needed to kill and raise mages until I had enough around to figure out the way through to her. It still took me the better part of an hour before I saw real progress. With seven dead mages trailing behind me I finally go to a window on the edge of the west wing overlooking the central courtyard. Behind it I could see the centre of the palace, where they all agreed the throne room would be. I turned towards my panoply of undead and cleared my throat.

"Should Have Ducked," I said. "That section of the palace, does it have more of the threshold wards?"

A man with most his cheek missing watched me with blue eyes.

"It does not," he replied.

I glanced at my most recent acquisitions, A Dress Is Not Armour and Surprisingly A Bleeder, who were standing impossibly still.

"Either of you ever been in there?" I probed.

I got twins shake of the head in reply. Diabolist had restricted access to that part of her lair to her inner circle, apparently, none of which I'd managed to get my hands on. I wasn't eager to enter there blind, but I'd already had to abandon one way through because the wights had caught up and it was only a matter of time before they got to here as well. Breaking the window and making my way on foot was, according to these fellows, enough for me to enter. That reeked of trap, but not one I could afford to avoidk. If Diabolist really did have Black, leaving her the time to cook up a ritual was the worst thing I could do. I'd had my Named ripped out in this very city once, and though I wasn't sure whether the alignment that had allowed that to happen still existed it was not a risk I wanted to take. I was not unaware I might not be the target this time, if she pulled that ritual again. For a moment I considered taking the dead mages with me, but just as quickly I dismissed the notion. Taking corpses in a fight with a Praesi sorcerer was just asking to get fucked with.

"You are to destroy each other with fire," I ordered. "The last remaining mage is to destroy themselves using the same."

They bowed and I raised an eyebrow. I hadn't ordered that. The longer I kept them around, the smarter they were getting. I was breaking the glass with the pommel of my sword when the first flash of fire erupted behind me, but I didn't look back. I landed in the courtyard in a crouch and wasted no time out in the open. A good thing, too. Streaks of flame immediately began to bloom above, lashing down in my direction. Stone blew up behind me as I ran and more streaks formed ahead. Best not to get hit by that, I mused. I'd probably walk away still alive, but not without some damage I could ill afford. There was servant's entrance up ahead but also two other flame arrays lighting up so I swerved to the side and went straight for the wall instead. There was sorcery in it, but it did not feel like the wards that'd blocked me. My perception wasn't sharp enough to get more than that. Name flaring, I rolled out of the way of fire that left smoking trails in the stone where I'd been a heartbeat ago and came out standing right in front of the wall. Sending the power to my fist, I swung against the stone. Triumphant I felt the stone give, but what followed was less pleasant.

The closest description I could put into words was that it was like swinging at a spinning wheel. The stone gave for a moment, but then force came back at me and blew me off my feet. Flame came down from the side and I formed a pane of ice at the last moment but the fire evaporated it and thundered through. I angled myself so that my cloak would catch the worst of it and still half my pauldron was torn off, leaving behind a smoking mess. *Fuck*, I eloquently thought as I legged it before I could be turned into a smoking crater by the next volley. I did not fancy my chances with the servant entrance, either. Even if I made it there unharmed I could not seriously believe Diabolist wouldn't cover the obvious way in. She lived in there, so there had to be a convenient path inside for her inevitable servants and attendants, but that didn't mean she had to leave it there when fighting an invasion. That left... I glanced to the side. A long way around, into what looked like a ripped up garden. Mostly open ground. I leapt away from another strike and slid across the stone, noticing as I did that the first hit was followed by another two immediately. Were the arrays focusing? Shit. Yeah, garden was out. I looked at the wall I'd failed to break and bit my lip. *All right, Catherine, what do we do when we can't go through?* I cocked my head to the side, then frowned. Well, it could hardly be worse than the garden path. Probably.

I ran back for the wall, ducking another volley by the skin of my teeth. Diabolist's ward had punched back, but only when I'd tried to go *through*. So there was a chance this would work. Also that I would die, but that came around as a possible outcome with depressing regularity. A twist of will had a handhold of ice forming on the surface. I'd seen the Watch do something similar once – wait, no, I was going about this wrong. I threw myself off the wall as fire struck the surface and, damnably, was almost

immediately spat out mere inches away from where I was. No matter. I landed on a platform of shadow and began working my way up. *Much* easier. Going upwards instead of sideways was trickier, but as it turned out a much shorter path. Four passes had me leaping through a window that had felt absent of wards and I rolled through the wood and glass shards to rise smoothly to my feet. The window had felt like an oversight. It had not been, I learned almost immediately. All the surrounding surfaces were warded, more discreetly, and behind me I heard the sound of flame lashing out through the opening.

"I can't believe I fell for that," I admitted.

Definitely should have kept going up all the way to the roof, I mused. I managed to throw myself out of the way before the array torched me, at which point the situation cheerfully continued proceeding downhill. I really should have known: Praesi never turned down the opportunity to fuck you over twice when it was on the table. Around me were the same spinning wards as outside: when the streaks of fire hit the wall, they started to ricochet wildly in every direction. Too quickly for me to avoid. I hid under my cape but the impact was still enough to smash me into the wall, which fucking smashed me back because of course it would. Then another array shot fire into the room, and at that point there was more flame than empty space in this place. I was about to reluctantly try to use an aspect to force my way out when there was another explosion. The door flew off the hinges, smacking me in the side. I took it in stride, flipping the wooden surface to reflect another streak of fire, and then from the corner of my eye I saw a green, ugly mug pop out of the door frame.

"So," Robber grinned, "about that promotion."

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[wirelessgrapes](#)

Wait, when was the last time we saw Robber? Has he been in Liesse this whole time?

ALKATYN

I think so yes. She talked about having agents in Leisse before, not sure if it was explicitly named as Robber, but pretty obvious given his absence at the battle.

Relatedly, since he seems to have managed to bypass the various wards does this mean he now has a name aspect or something?

*werafdsaew*

Not just Robber, but his entire goblin cohorts. See Chapter 59: Anacrusis; "As for Robber and his cohort ... What I had in mind for them did not involve being out in the open."

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

First Volunteer, Should Have Ducked, A Dress is Not Armour and Surprisingly a Bleeder. Such glorious names for undead servants of the Black Queen. And not forgetting the newly formed Lesser Footrest Tribe.

*naturalnuke*

"By my authority as Queen of fucking Callow..."

*ALKATYN*

The Ice Zombies seem ridiculously powerful. Pretty sure all zombies we've seen so far were totally non-sentient. Hers seem to fully remember their past and be capable of obeying instructions intelligently. (Were they using magic to set each other on fire at the end there? If so serious game breaker.)

Also I love that we now have Blue Eyed Ice Zombies and Wights in the same battle. We just need a few dragons to finish it off

*nick012000*

>All the zombies we've seen thus far were totally non-sentient.

The wights aren't.

*nipi*

And we have been shown some of the Dead Kings undead Heroes.

*stevenneiman*

The ice zombies also lead to a rather terrifying possibility: Once the final member of the team (Don't Fuck With My People) joins, Cat can have her explain all kinds of interesting things to Masego. He deserves a reward for dealing with those demons and mages, after all.

*CipherJ*

Lesser lesser footrest tribe

*Gunslinger*

We get to see Fall in it's full glory and such a joy it is. The highlight though are the zombie names, such a talent. Also the fact that her winter zombies were becoming smarter will totally not be relevant later. Totally.

Ohh and vote for The Guide on topwebfiction if you can <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

At this rate, I won't be surprised if the Sixteenth Legion or its equivalent will all be Winter Zombies. Cognomen? Coldhearted.

*Mr. Nobody*

She could use zombies as her new personal guard. Use deserters or enemies to make them.

*Decius*

Deserters, enemies, or the Gallowborne.

"I didn't say that your service stopped when you died."

*TotesOlive*

I feel like Cat is on the fast track to a Villain turned Anti Hero/Neutral Force to be Reckoned with like Ranger.

*nick012000*

>"So," Robber grinned, "about that promotion."

And here I thought Providence was a benefit that Heroes were supposed to get. I guess that she's filling that Role here, though?

*stevenneiman*

He might get as high as Senior Footrest.

I consider it very much an outside chance, but it would have me rolling on the floor laughing if any rank of Footrest actually grew into a Name.

*Draco*

If Cat makes it something story worthy and the position stays for awhile (doing the same sort of job) it would actually become a name. If I remember from book 1 correctly names are made because similar stories keep repeating themselves within Creation and after awhile the name arises to continue that story happening.

## *Engineer*

Awesome. So if Cat can transition during this venture she will probably have enough power to basically raise every single legionary that died during this shit show and then have 2 extra legions in addition to her own. Under her sovereign control.

Now THAT'S how you answer Procer's challenge.

## *Gunslinger*

Black Queen? Zombie Knight? Or maybe Cat's aspect of Black Knight (it black relinquishes his name)

## *Laberlampe*

Damn that was a good chapter. The beginning was just...awesome and then the zombies were cracking me up. Thanks for the chapter.

## *ALKATYN*

This also seems to be the first time we've seen her fully embrace her title as Duchess of Moonless Nights. Previously she has just been using standard winter powers of ice and cold, but she now seems to be controlling her Domain in the same way as an aspect.

## *Valkyria*

Well but there's also a downside. Since it's a fae title it means she now is even more fae when she accepts it. Before that she distanced herself from it because it meant giving into another title/role, especially since she is the last Duchess of Winter now. That sure has a weight to it.

## *werafdsaew*

So how does Robber gets in when the palace warded to hell and back?

## *Devin 0*

Probably with Thief's help, she's got a power that lets her bypass wards.

## *boballab*

Yep and that earlier explosion where Akua stated she had that trap for Thief because of how they stole Summer's Sun was probably Robber setting off a bomb to make Akua think that. You just have to keep the intro paragraph from Interlude: Commanders in mind when it comes to Cat an battle plans:

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



Akua is making the biggest mistake of all: She thinks she knows what Cat will do and plan looking at the past and she is overlooking what happened before in that same city when she did that same thing. Last time she lost the chance to trap an Angel this time it will cost her, her life. I wonder if Cat would raise her as a Zombie and name her Too Big For Her Britches.

*RandomFan*

An interesting thought: If Cat's zombies are-or-become people with wills of their own, it might be possible for named zombies to retain or reacquire names. Of course, this is probably completely impossible and is prone to backfiring in the worst possible way, but if you merely wanted to cause havoc with no care to the cost, letting lose even a half-dozen truly named undead is probably better than invisible tigers- even if they're all heroes and betray you immediately, the political consequences of undead heroes are horrifying.

[Ethesis](#)

Boballab's comment is the one I've had in mind.

One side note is that Diabolist has to survive this with enough power left to challenge the Empress.

Cat doesn't.

[TheAtomicOption](#)

I love Robber so much. I hope he's next to get a Name.

*Halinn*

Are you saying that Lesser Footrest is not a Name?

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Merely a title.  
Give it some time.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*Joey Wheel*

Beautiful chapter!!!

Death Knight becoming all the more likey.

Robber might just get a name at this rate—this much personal influence is maybe good enough for a Story.

Thanks~~~

*Panic*

On a completely unrelated note. What ever did happen to the plot point of Goblins wanting to settle just outside of Marchford?

[ayon96](#)

I think we'll see more of it in the epilogue of this book

*Keyen*

Not really a concern when the country burns. Priorities. We are not even sure they still want to do that since there is a portal to arcadia in the middle of the marketplace, now.

*Adurna*

Is that not the perfect opportunity for an enterprising goblin tribe?

*Keyen*

It's not world of warcraft, they don't give a shit about money.

*Adurna*

I was thinking amassing power and favors rather than money. If there is a group that could successfully play that off over time I believe it would be the goblins. They might still not want to of course, but it could very well be an opportunity, not to mention that not being an attractive place might let them be left more alone than otherwise.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

Ah Dungeon Crawling against evil sorceresses, gotta keep up the traditions.

*Ben*

So, the transition has officially started now, right?

This chapter seemed really heavy on her transcending the title of Squire.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Examples? How was is heavily suggesting that?

*alegio*

So... is Robber getting promoted to from lesser footrest to simply footrest? Or some kind of more advanced footrest?

[Euodiachloris](#)

The dizzying heights of "Piano Stool" await! 😊

*nigeltheoutlaw*

Great chapter as always. Really looking forward to seeing Catherine gut Akua and hang her by her own intestines.

*Drd*

Now there's an image that makes me feel all warm and fuzzy on the inside. 😊

[Ethesis](#)

We've seen Warlock (and that line about keeping enough power to defend himself worries me) but Black's other companions are still in hidden play.

Loved the end of this chapter.

*nipi*

Typo:

"That reeked of trap, but not one I could afford to avoidk."  
avoidk -> avoid

*nipi*

"Praesi never turned down the opportunity to fuck you over twice when it was on the table."

I sense a double meaning. Im sure Cat knows what she is talking about.

[Aidan Dearlove](#)

"Greater Footstool to the Queen of Callow"

[kanadaj](#)

Now that I think about it, what are Hierophant's aspects?

*Darkening*

He's pretty new to the name, I dunno if he's been stressed enough or had enough time to even develop any? Hm. I don't believe we've seen him use any on screen at least.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Akua unlocked all her Demonist aspects in like a day, so Masego almost certainly did too, we just don't know what they are

*Keyen*

It's currently unknown

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## Chapter 65: Elision

*"A hero should not confuse striking at Evil and doing Good, lest their Good become the act of striking."*

– Theodore Langman, Wizard of the West

I slumped against the wall, catching my breath, and resisted the urge to deck Robber in the face. He looked like he was enjoying this way too much for it to be healthy. That'd been a close call, inside the room. At this point I was unsure whether Diabolist was actually out to kill me or not – she'd been hinting pretty heavily she wanted me to be the Black to her second-rate Malicia – but just letting me get hammered by those arrays until I was burnt pulp would have been enough to get me captured even if it didn't get me dead. Dead might be the better outcome of the two, if it came to that. Assuming it even stuck.

"How the fuck did you all get in here?" I panted.

Robber alone, I could have bought. He was tricky that way. But there was a full line skulking around the corridor. Some were wounded, I noted, and not just by blades: there were tell-tale marks of spellfire on some of their gear. They'd been in a scrap before getting here, but I'd assume not even the Special Tribune's pack of marauders had been audacious enough to assault this horror of a palace. Goblins were a blade best used in the dark or in the enemy's back. There was a reason they weren't put in shield walls.

"Special Tribune Robber, ready to report," the wretch said, sparkling with insolence.

I was going to regret this, I suspected. But at least odds were good I'd be able to sift out a few useful nuggets out of the mixture of lies and blatant exaggerations he would offer.

"Proceed," I sighed.

That he saluted with the wrong hand before beginning to speak, I thought, was likely emblematic of what was about to follow.

"So," Robber said, "we were just walking around, staying out of trouble."

"Were you," I flatly said.

"I'm a great believer in the sanctity of law and order," Robber said, putting hand over his chest.

It was, I noticed as a splitting headache dawned, over the wrong side to be covering his heart. Idly I glanced up and chalked up the lack of thunder following that audacious blasphemy as yet another sign the Gods Above were washing their hands clean of this whole mess.

"Then wights started swarming over the arrays we were supposed to blow up, which was all right," the goblin told me. "But *then* mages showed up, and the key places got locked up real tight. So then Captain Borer – that's him right there, a repeat troublemaker I've had to report him several times--"

I glanced at the side where he was pointing and found a smaller goblin, with dark green skin tinted even darker over where his eyebrows would be if his kind weren't hairless. It made it look like he was perpetually frowning. He looked pained, but also reluctant to outright contradict a superior officer.

"We should make trouble, is what Borer said," the Special Tribune blithely continued. "It's pathologic with him, I've been looking into getting him a mind healer."

"I imagine they'd take a single look at you and run screaming," I mused.

"That's racist, Boss," Robber informed me, trying to give me what I assumed to be doe eyes but ended up looking like a goblin wearing some poor doe's skin and batting his eyes through the horrifying flesh mask. "Anyway, as the qualified voice of reason I put my foot down. Was about to look for some important people to help have some falls down the stairs when we ran into Lord Black."

My eyes sharpened and I leaned forward. This was the first I'd heard of my teacher since we'd parted ways, unless you counted Diabolist boasting she'd captured him.

"He's not with you anymore?" I pressed.

"No," Captain Borer said, before I could be strung around some more.

"That's another gold star of shame for you, Captain," Robber told him with a leering grin. "I expect you to wear all twenty-three of them on your chest when we return to camp."

"You don't have to do that," I told the poor bastard. "Robber, stop fucking around. I don't have the time to spare. Where's Black?"

The goblin turned serious, or at least as much as close as he could ever get.

"He took us to visit an old friend," he replied. "General Fasili Mirembe. The Carrion Lord figured he wasn't outside with the vanguard, you see. He had to be in a room somewhere he could command from without risking his very expensive blood."

"Why target *him*?" I frowned. "Diabolist is the head of the snake. Fasili getting the axe wouldn't actually change much."

"That's exactly what Borer said," Robber baldly lied. "Only much less respectful. The Black Knight did that weird smile thing – I see where you get it from now, it was kind of uncomfortable seeing it on another face – and told us that if you want to learn how to bury a villain, the first person to hit up is always their second."

My fingers clenched.

"He was after something that Fasili would have," I said.

"Skeleton key," the goblin said. "There's only supposed to be one, but you can't stab your warchief in the back if you can't get to her."

"That's how you got in here," I deduced. "But your people look like they've fought. There was resistance?"

"There was a whole garrison of dead around him," Robber acknowledged. "We couldn't handle that much, not even going in quiet. So Lord Black made a distraction."

I closed my eyes and silently cursed. *Fucking Hells, Black*. A dangerous gamble at the darkest hour that would allow extremely important information to reach me in my moment of need? That explained why Robber had gotten here exactly when I needed him to – my teacher had effectively twisted Creation's arm into ensuring as much. At the price, it seemed, of getting overwhelmed by Akua's minions and taken prisoner. He was playing shatranj with us all and treating himself a piece like any other. I spat to the side and turned my gaze onto Robber.

"If it went down this way, you'll have gotten more than a key," I said.

That large a sacrifice would have impact. It would get me an edge of some sort.

"He told me to pass along a message," the goblin said, and this time there was no humour in his voice. "It went 'Only one strike. Make it count.'"

And there it was. The way out of the coming trap that Diabolist would have laid for me. I grit my teeth. We would have *words* about this, if he survived the day.

"How much of your cohort is left?" I asked Robber.

"A bare hundred," the Special Tribune replied. "Dug-in mages are tricky to handle."

Considering that meant half his men were gone, that was something of an understatement. I rose to my feet and rolled my shoulder. Those fire arrays had *stung*, cloak or not.

"All right," I said. "Here's what you're going to do."

I spoke, and as I did his grin got a whole lot nastier.

—

I'd been taught that, while assaulting the stronghold of a villain, there were three things to watch out for.

The first was the monster. It wasn't always a greater devil or a demon, though admittedly that was the traditional Wasteland playbook. Some entity, usually difficult to handle, would be leashed somewhere in the lair to be used as a way to beat down an enemy too powerful for the villain themselves to handle. It was too much to hope that in this case it would be the greater devil we'd shanked before entering Liesse — that'd been a gatekeeper, and while it would have been difficult to handle on my own it wasn't the kind of brutal counterstroke that someone with Diabolist's resources would be able to keep around. I had a fight ahead of me, and it wasn't going to be a pleasant one. My advantage here was that even by villainous standards, Akua was *massively* arrogant. She wanted me for her attack dog, apparently, so she wouldn't open the game by sending whatever her monster was after me. She'd want the personal touch, at least until I backed her in a corner and those kinds of considerations went out the window. Considering I'd had to hack my way through both fae courts over the last year to varying degrees, my bet was on something related to Arcadia. I'd even had Masego and Archer send Summer after her neck a few months ago, so it made sense that I'd be made to pay for that one way or another.

The second was the trial, because there was more to killing a villain than just running them through. There was always a cost,

a crucible you had to go through to earn that kill. The peasant boy that ended up slaying the dragon didn't just pick up the magic sword in a rubbish heap, he had to *bleed* first. What made a hero a hero wasn't the fancy weapon or the birth right, it was the courage. Or whatever other trite and actually fairly common quality they'd had in them all along. The shade that had once owned the sword would force a test, or the devil guarding the phylactery whisper some sweet temptation. I was of the opinion that lacking that kind of trial was why the Lone Swordsman hadn't gone out in the blaze of glory, just two stomps to the back of the neck. We'd been opposed, yes. But there'd been little personal about it except for mutual dislike. To me he'd been a means and then a liability. To him I'd been a symbol of everything he wanted to destroy. Behind that, neither of us had thought of the other as more than a stepping stone towards the real fight. Diabolist wasn't a lit sharper tossed at me by the Hashmallim, though. The higher the both of us rose, the clearer it had become that the story could only end with one of us dead or kneeling. I was partial to dead. That wouldn't come without a price.

The third was the pivot. Fight between Named were never as simple as who pulled out their aspects first or who was better with spell and sword. While an animated corpse without a single aspect and a shaky mantle, I'd been able to beat a still-fresh Heiress and Lone Swordsman in Liesse because while they went for blood I'd gone for the story. It'd felt like a complicated thing to juggle at the time, but in retrospect it'd been fairly straightforward. Here, now that we'd returned to the very city where I'd once died, there were a dazzling amount of moving parts. Black. Warlock and the Woe. The Empress. And Diabolist herself. That last thread, in my eyes, was what would make or break this day. There was a moment ahead where the weight of Creation's attention would be on both our shoulders, and when that moment came the one of us who made the choice first was going to be the one who got to walk away. There was a lot of danger to that. Spinning that wheel with William had been one thing because the Lone Swordsman, for all his many flaws, had principles. He had lines he hesitated to cross even for a win, if only a few. Diabolist did not. Her principle, ironically enough, was the same that the Legions had chanted outside her gate. Victory mattered, everything else was dross. If I wanted to win, I had to go into that room ready to cut down something I loved.

She had Black. I did not like the forming shape of this.

My sword was already bared when I found the heart of the palace. The Dukes of Liesse had been kings, once, and their ancestral seat still looked the part. The flight of steps before me had not been built to be lightly ascended. The granite was rough, the steps too tall for more than one at a time to be climbed. What began as a broad procession grew narrow as it rose, leading to



tall gates of bronze that now stood sealed. Behind them, I knew, awaited the woman I had come to kill. Sorcery permeated the air here, so thick that every movement felt like I was stirring unseen wisps. So thick I could not tell if there was an array hidden, which meant there was one. The very trap, I thought, that Black had let himself be taken to help me beat.

I took a step forward and *split*.

—

Catherine Foundling found herself tired, after a hard bout in the Pit, and slept at the Rat's Nest. She never stumbled across a man raping a girl, or what came of it.

—

Catherine Foundling bet on herself in the Pit and lost, without having meant to. Her savings thinned. She never earned enough to go to the College.

—

Catherine Foundling had watch sergeant's a hand around her throat, choking the life out of her. The man began to speak, but through his belly emerged a sword that keened.

—

My boot touched the stone. I was myself, across three lives I had never lived and one I was living. I began the climb in utter silence.

—

Catherine stood in the crowd when they hung Governor Mazus. It was vindication, sealed by the choked cries of the man that was just another Wasteland leech. But the Rat's Nest would not pay for her her tuition in Ater, not anymore, so she sought Booker and made a deal. In the months that followed she no longer came on the nights where bruises were what men paid for. She earned gold with a sword in hand, catering to the howls a mob that would settle for nothing less than death. The coin she earned was drenched in blood, but blood was the trade she had chosen and she made her peace with that truth. Catherine did not know blades well, when she began, and her opponents did. She learned, but when she stood among the crowd of cadets awaiting placement in a company she had only one eye and more scars than a girl her age should have.

—

Coin was what killed the dream, not the schemes of foes she would never meet. Catherine found her savings disappearing like smoke,

and Harrion telling her the Rat's Nest could not longer afford her was the final nail in the coffin. It was a bitter truth, and the bitterness seeped into her bones. The orphanage had taught her enough for a position as a tutor or tradeswoman, but the thought of it had her choking in anger. Impotence cut deepest of all. When Governor Mazus hung she was not in the crowd: her brawl with a guard that had hands prone to wandering had ended with the woman's neck snapped. Marked for the gaol, barred from the Pit by Booker, she took the offer when it came. Better the Smugglers than the Assassins or the Thieves, she decided.

—

Catherine did not believe in heroes, but she believed in debts. When two monsters cloaked in black arrived in the alley and struck at her saviour over the cooling corpses of her would-be murderers, she chose her side. They survived only by the skin of their teeth, the Lone Swordsman losing a hand to a moving shadow as a large woman turned into twisted abomination. They fled the alley, the city, the region. It was doomed, she knew. The monsters always won here. But for the first time since she'd been born Catherine Foundling breathed free air, and it was intoxicating. William learned to listen to her, after she opened the throat of the first Eye of the Empire after them. It was in Summerholm that her Name found her. *Squire*, the Heavens whispered. She knew whose death was needed to become more.

—

The War College taught Catherine her limits. She was good. Swift with a sword, clever with her mind and with a talent for the unexpected. Tiger Company fostered her skills, seeing in her lieutenant or captain in the making, and for a time she was sergeant under the cold-eyed ogre they called Hune. It was not the already-famous Hellhound that put blood in her mouth. It was Lizard Company, Morok's brutes shattering her tenth and leaving her broken on the ground. One of the orcs stomped her wrist twice, calling her *Waller spawn*, and it never healed properly. She never forgave their kind for that, not the wound but the blind ugly hate she glimpsed in the orc's eye. Goblins were tribe of their own, regardless of company, and the better Praesi pretended she did not exist. The worst made sport of her, and settling that with teeth on the ground made her as feared as she was alone. She had the talent to make captain, but was never elected by the others. Sergeant was the highest she ever rose at the College.

—

Catherine could afford the tuition now – and she could ten times over, because she was good with a lie and even better with a knife – but she no longer wanted to go. She'd had a glimpse of the true face of her people, beyond the well-worn stories of the Old Kingdom. Every night she rubbed elbows with murderers and

thieves, not one of them Wastelander. What was there to save? Within two years there were only two above her in Liesse who belonged to the Guild of Smugglers, and only one after gold and whispers were traded. She left the title to the other, but the reins were her own. The quotas imposed by the Tower rankled, but she knew better than provoke that beast. It was the rest of the gutter she turned to, the forgotten and the ignored. The Hedge Guild folded first, after their most dangerous mage was found strung up downtown. The King of Thieves stole two shipments from Mercantis as a warning against great ambitions, so when she got her hands on him she melted down his pretty crown and poured it down his throat. The Assassins offered truce. She told them to kneel. Blood followed.

—

They killed their first Calamity the day before she turned eighteen. The Warlock was a monster, but a monster who loved his son. That was the death of him, and half Summerholm as well. The Penitent's Blade beheaded the sorcerer among the ashes of his tower and Squire mustered enough kindness to have the Apprentice's corpse left by his side for the Praesi to bury. They were growing. Thief, Bumbling Conjuror, Hunter and Bard. William found them and bound them, but it was Catherine who made a sword of them all, that wielded it against the Empire. The scent of rebellion was in the air. They ghosted across the land of her birth, followed by a thousand spies, and wherever they went governors and generals died. The Empress sent more. The Black Knight drew them into Liesse and burned the city around them but they were gone, gone through the corpse of an angel and back to haunt him soon enough. Procer sent coin and promises but both were spurned. They had sworn to see Callow free, whatever the cost. One foreign master would not be traded for another, and as the flames burned higher and the graveyards grew full.

—

She was twenty-three when rebellion came to Callow. Long past the College, Captain Foundling had seen luck good and ill. The Fourteenth Legion, raised in the year after her graduation, had offered better opportunity to rise than the old legions already thick with veterans. But peace, oh peace was her trouble. It took three years to go from lieutenant to captain, and the tribunes above her were all young and hale. Her company was obedient and well-drilled, but loved her little. Most were Praesi, and her reputation in Ater had followed her to the camp. The droplet that tipped over the cup was that the Fourteenth never fought. It was sent to garrison Summerholm as the other Legions fought, dispersing riots and patrolling empty streets as her desperate countrymen died in droves in the south. Vindication, that the Empire could not be fought and beaten. Vindication but no hope. It had been long since Captain Foundling was last kind, not since

she'd killed men for gold in the Pit, and so her conscience went untroubled when she slipped poison in her superior officer's ale.

That was the game, in the Wasteland, and if it must be played she would. She would rise whatever the cost, to her or anyone else. After that it was only a matter of patience and skill. Staff Tribune Foundling was twenty-nine, when civil war erupted, and through chaos she rose higher still.

—

The Guild of Assassins cost her a hand and a permanent limp, before they were broken over her knee. From blood-filled gutters Catherine Foundling fashioned her crown. There was only one throne in the Empire, this she knew, but come night from Harrow to Dormer her will was the writ of law. The Tolltaker they called her now, for there was no sin under Callowan sky she did not get a cut from. A woman with ink-stained hands came one morning and presented her two scrolls. One held a seal, the Tower's own. The other a list of quotas. It was not a negotiation, and neither of them pretended otherwise. She thought of that, when the heroes came and asked for a way to enter Summerholm unseen. They were going to kill the Black Knight, they promised. She smiled and said she would arrange it. The coin she got from selling their location to the Praesi was spent on a beautiful mansion in Whitestone, where the nobles of Laure still huddled and pretended relevance. After the heroes were all killed, she put it to the torch. Because she could. Because she had no reason not to. To remind the soft-bellied aristocrats living there of what fear tasted like. She watched the flames and wondered when it had all stopped mattering.

—

My boot scuffed the last step and I stood before the gate. Closed, but kept so by sorcery. It parted without a sound when I pushed and before me the throne room stretched. Tapestries hung from the rafters like columns, each an old triumph of the Empire presented in colourful cloth. The contrast to the bare stone of the floor was stark. Runes shone on the walls and balls of blue flame lit up the darkness bright as day. My gaze moved to the back, where the Diabolist awaited. Languidly sprawled on the old throne of the kings of the south, Akua Sahelian watched me with bright eyes. There was no sign of Black. She wasn't keeping him here, then.

"Swiftness, Catherine," she smiled, "has ever been your unmaking. You never learned patience."

"**Break**," I replied coldly.

The throne shattered like a cheap bauble and the wall behind it too. Diabolist fell prone, laughing, and I had no intention of

allowing her to cast. Frost formed at the edge of my sword as I shot forward, granite cracking under the force.

"What your Hierophant has wrought, I claim," Akua said.

The last word reverberated. Aspect, I thought. Then it felt like a hand around my throat, and I screamed. There was a vice around me, and as my Name desperately clawed at it I found myself stumbling while Diabolist rose.

"I told you, didn't I?" the dark-skinned woman said. "That this ends with you kneeling. What I have claimed, I bind. It is *mine*."

I fought it. My knee shook and slowly began to bend, so I wrested my hand from her control and stabbed my blade into the leg. Pain flooded my mind and I embraced it.

"Kneel, Catherine Foundling," Akua Sahelian ordered. "And rise my Black Knight."

"Fuck you," I gasped. "He's-"

"Dead," Diabolist said. "He was not the kind of man easily kept prisoner. Why take the risk?"

I buckled, and one knee touched the floor.

—

Rebellion spread across Callow like a wildfire. Liesse first, but then the south rose up and wherever they went spears were dug out from fields and cellars, ploughshares hammered into swords. Old banners were dusted off, and when the knights of Callow knelt before her the whole kingdom boiled over. It was a bloodletting unlike any Catherine had ever seen. Garrisons swarmed by angry mobs, mages killed with stones and knives and clubs. The Empress gave answer with a hard hand. The day after Summerholm was liberated, Legions surrounded the city and torched it with goblinfire. The rebellion flinched. Assassin dogged them every step, even slit Hunter's throat, and though she killed him twice with William's help he always came back. The fought the Praesi near Marchford, a pitched battle, and they would have won had some orc commander not disobeyed her general's orders and attacked instead of retreated. In the wake of the defeat madness spread. There had gone their last chance to keep any of this contained. It was no longer a war but a hundred smaller ones, and wherever they went they won but they could not be everywhere. The south held, nonetheless, and though the central burned the fight was far from lost.

Then Procer invaded, seizing the Red Flower Vales.

The Praesi had been ready for it, unlike Squire. They retreated to the ashes of Summerholm, destroying everything as they went. Fields salted, villages torched and wells fouled. If they could not have Callow, it would be as much a Wasteland as their home. The banner of the kingdom grew ragged, but still the people rallied to it. Every man and woman who could hold a sword took one up, and though the levies died by the thousands the tide was turned back. The Lone Swordsman hung seven princes and one and the Conjurer, long grown beyond the bumbling, brought down the mountains on the Vales. Shut, for good. The host marched to the ruins of Summerholm, the last foothold of Praes in the kingdom, and there the Black Knight awaited. Three days and three nights the battle went. The Hwaerte ran red with blood. But in the end Catherine Foundling rammed her sword through the back of the Black Knight's neck and from that death rose Knight as well, decked in white. The monster's bag of tricks had finally run out but oh, the cost. Callow was not a kingdom, it was a graveyard and an army. The Fields of Streges were taken back, and through those lands Callow reborn marched to reclaim the Blessed Isle. Whispers awaited them there. Dread Empress Malicia was dead, murdered in the Tower.

Dread Empress Magnificent, First of Her Name, awaited them as well. With a host the likes of which had not been seen since the days of Triumphant: demons and fortresses aflight, swarms of devils and every greenskin not buried in Callowan fields.

"Kneel," Akua Sahelian ordered, crowned in dread.

—

General Foundling had struck a deal with the devil. The Empress had been losing her grasp for years now, and High Lady Tasia Sahelian might be a viper but she was a viper on the rise. She swore the damning oaths, and over the corpse of every other senior officer in the Fourteenth rose a general. It was on the fields of Callow she fought her part of the war. The nests of rebellion that sprang up all over the Old Kingdom when the Praesi turned their knives on each other were carefully brought into the fold of her legion, promised the settling of old grudges against the same generals that had crushed Callow in the Conquest. Even the knights came to her banner, after High Lady Tasia's mages broke the right minds and reformed them into something more flexible. One occupying legion after another shattered even as the war became a thing of horror in the Wasteland, and from that destruction General Foundling made herself a force to reckon with. The Knightsbane, drawn and quarried by Liessen chargers. General Sacker given a true red throat instead of one her legion affected. Orim the Grim, a smile carved on his lips as he bled out. Marshal Ranker burned alive, save for the black hand that was her old boast. Wherever she went, legends died.

Nearly every cadet that had gone through the College in her days was dead, either at her hand or that of Sahelian assassins. It was Grem One-Eye and his second, the one they called the Hellhound, that broke her siege of Summerholm and pushed her back in the heartlands of Callow. With but a handful of ragged legions they beat her again at Denier and smashed her one last time near Marchford. It didn't matter. The High Lords had risen one and all in the backing of a villain for the Tower, one going by the Name of Heiress. Tasia's own daughter, it was said. And if One-Eye was fighting General Foundling in Callow, he was not winning the war for Malicia in the Wasteland. Word trickled that Heiress levelled half of Ater winning a duel against the Warlock, that the Black Knight had retreated to the Steppes to raise another army with the Empress. Marshal Grem and the Hellhound retreated to Summerholm and Callow was Catherine's, finally. The Imperial governors were seized and executed, even those allied to the Sahelians, and General Foundling refused a crown but prepared for the next part of the war. It never came, the embers smothered when a Hellgate was opened in the heart of Summerholm. The last true stronghold of loyalist resistance, wiped out in a single night. Before dawn, precisely a hundred Callowans died for every governor she had killed.

A warning that did not go unheard.

Procer seized the Red Flower Vales, declaring the Tenth Crusade and forming a coalition that spanned half of Calernia. General Foundling began talks with the First Prince, but they ended when a ziggurat of stone large as Laure cast its long shadow over the very city. Dread Empress Magnificent, First of Her Name, had come to remind her of oaths taken.

"Kneel," Akua Sahelian ordered, crowned in dread.

—

The Praesi were at each other's throats, but what did the Tolltaker care? The quotas would not change no matter who held the Tower. But then, oh wonder of wonders, months passed and the war continued. Then the first two legions were pulled out of Callow to reinforce the Wasteland, and that was just the scent of opportunity wasn't it? Catherine Foundling had left behind the illusion that there was something remarkable about her people along with her girlhood years, but she was Callowan still. For small slights long prices, and there had been so *many* slights offered since the Conquest. The Tolltaker mustered her empire of ghosts and crooks, and began a waltz with the many devils claiming the floor. It was a long and bloody night, when every Imperial governor in the old kingdom found death knocking at their door. The nobles, feckless wastes that they were, gathered in hidden rooms and plotted a nation born anew. She had no interest in dead dreams, and so the right whispers fhad Eyes of

the Empire rounding them up for treason. They were looking for her as well, of course, and the Legions with them. They found nothing, for her kingdom was not made of castles but of a hundred ugly pacts made in the dark. Those could not be besieged, could not be fought on the field.

There was blood in the water, and so the west stirred. Procer marched into the Vales, filling every nook and cranny with their dead before the Legions could be dislodged. A host of Procerans marched into the central plains, claiming that they had come to put Gaston of Liesse on his rightful throne. So the Tolltaker had him killed, right in the middle of his precious little army. She had never enjoyed anything half so much as watching sixty thousand foreigners milling about, trying to think of justification for their invasion. They spoke of liberating Callow, in the end, and as they tangled with the remaining legions Catherine found her own amusements. The pot of rebellion was already boiling, so she helped it along. Weapons from the Kingdom Below, acquired through Mercantis, reached the hands of mobs. The Assassin came for her but she set the warehouse aflame with stolen goblinfire and whatever the creature had been, it did not crawl out. She learned to live with a hole through the lung, her breath always rasping. One by one the last aristocrats of Callow found knife in the back or poison in the cup, even as knights emerged from the south and fought both Procerans and Praesi for rule of the land.

There was no great plan, no matter what her lieutenants believed. There was only the dance, and every day she lasted against the monsters was yet another victory. The rebel in the Wasteland won, though that part of Creation had come to deserve the name twice over in that making, and after claiming the Tower she moved west with all her strength. Hellgates bloomed across the land and Procer retreated back behind the Vales before calling for a crusade no one else wanted. The knights fought against the tide, valiantly, and equally valiantly they died. In the wreckage of it all Dread Empress Magnificent, First of Her Name, came to Laure. The call came and the Tolltaker went, for someone who cared for nothing had nothing to lose. In the throne room of ancient Fairfax kings, a Praesi stood and looked down at her.

"Kneel," Akua Sahelian ordered, crowned in dread.

—

Across three lives I had never lived and one I was living, I knelt. A face as beautiful as it was terrible allowed a smile of triumph to flicker.

—

*Only one strike. Make it count.*



—  
I/General Foundling/the Tolltaker/the White Knight rose, and shoved steel through her throat.  
—

My boot touched the stone. I looked up to doors of bronze wide open and began the climb, humming the tune to a song I had never heard.

---

[glassgirlceci](#)

Holy shit I loved this. I have nothing meaningful to add, everyone has pretty much said it already. I just had to say this was amazing.

*Bell Towers*

I love it! It was so much fun seeing a Cat who fights for the Kingdom, a Cat who fights for herself, and a Cat who “came out to attack people and is honestly having such a good time right now.”

I wonder if using an aspect in an illusion counts and even if it does, Bind is the one that’s most dangerous to Cat right? So that’s gonna be interesting.

*morrogin*

now, as awesome as this chapter is, let us not let it be overshadowed by WHEN it was posted

is this going to be a regular thing now or once off?

[KBako](#)

oh shit, is that “The Girl Who Climbed the Tower”?

*naturalnuke*

Yuuuup.

*ArkCthuul*

That was Magnificent.

*NerfContessa*

Rereading it.

Still one of the best meta chapters and fluff chapters in one.

*The Quietist*

Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuck.

Also Akua killed by her smug doesn't she know "We do no kneel.".

*spencer*

Awesome. I was a little confused by the fact that the White Knight had one fewer section than the General and the Tolltaker. I was expecting the lives to progress at the same rate.

*jeray2000*

This was an amazing chapter. I hope at some point you do an interlude or something in this format for other characters like Lone Swordsman or Akua. They're dead now, but this format is so wonderful a bonus chapter of alternate universes would be great.

*Al*

Godfuckingdammit

[\*sengachi\*](#)

"A hero should not confuse striking at Evil and doing Good, lest their Good become the act of striking."  
– Theodore Langman, Wizard of the West

I'm gonna glare angrily at every hero in this entire story, okay?  
\*glares\*

*Ninith settler*

Best chapter so far. This was diamonds.

[\*aran\*](#)

Really wonder what happened to Hanno in that timeline.

*arcwraith*

With Catherine as (White) Squire, Hanno probably got stuck as Squire as well. Both of them claimants to the final name. In the end, Catherine won, Hanno would've transitioned to something else.

*Interius*

Probably killed by black sometime somewhere mabe callow since bard stayed in callow and didn't switch idendities

## Rueful Respite

I love all of this and loved seeing the other possible lives Catherine could have lived. One line in particular makes me so curious though:

“...The Conjurer, long grown beyond the bumbling, brought down the mountains on the Vales. Shut, for good.”

I am so curious about the Conjurer now and who they were and what they could have been.

[crowlute](#)

Incredible. I've always been thinking “what if...”, and I loved seeing how that played out here.

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## Chapter 66: Refrain

*“On the third month of the year I found myself on the outskirts of the city of Okoro, and stumbled upon one of the famous Praesi field rituals. The throats of ten and three men were slit on dusty ground, and from the lifeblood spilled the earth turned from yellow to black. Granted audience with the lord presiding, I asked him the meaning of the ceremony. ‘Everywhere men bleed,’ he told me. ‘In Praes we get the full worth of it.’”*

– Extract from “Horrors and Wonders”, famed travelogue of Anabas the Ashuran

The Diabolist was lounging on a Callowan throne when I stepped into the hall, and wasn't that just the image of my people's lot since the Conquest? The Praesi had crawled into the country in the wake of Black's victories and claimed every seat and symbol of power, masquerading as rulers when all they'd been were thieves. Not, I thought damningly, even particularly skilful ones. I'd once thought that the Imperial governors with better reputations than Mazus reflected a certain restraint in the wave of highborn that had been appointed as petty kings over Callow. I knew better now. It'd been fear that kept them in line, fear of Malicia's deep schemes and Black's sharp sword. That'd always been the weakness of their reforms, when it came down to it. The aristocracy of the Wasteland, the people that really held power in the Empire, had never bought into the ideologies they peddled. They only saw a knife taken to old rights and privileges, and no amount of victory would ever reach them over that. No matter. I'd

put fear in them as well, if that was what it took, and forging that fear would start with Akua Sahelian's death.

She looked the same as she had in the dream, I noted, save for one detail. Around her neck hung a necklace, the centrepiece of which was a small cylinder of obsidian. My eyes lingered on it, my Name sniffing out the soul that lay within. *Trap*, I decided. She'd been clever enough so far to keep her soul out of anyone's grasp, she wouldn't risk it here and now. Likely it was meant to bait out an aspect from me, but a liar lost power when you knew them as one. The hall was empty and echoing as I strode forward, the tapestries hanging from the rafters stirred by some invisible current. The whole room was thick with sorcery, more than my senses could parse. She had prepared her grounds, and that was a mark on the right side of my earlier assumption: Diabolist intended to get her hands dirty. Maybe not with a blade – I couldn't see one on her and she wasn't wearing proper armour, but neither of those things meant much – but she intended on fighting me herself. At least in the beginning. I disliked it, that I wasn't able to tell where she'd pull her monster from. It put an itch between my shoulder blades.

Against that calibre of opponent, one mistake was all it took.

"You were forewarned," Diabolist said.

"Was I?" I drawled. "Please, do elaborate."

I could read it on her face, no matter how blank she kept it. The urge to tell me what that trap in the stairs had been, to expound on her own cleverness. I'd been struck with it a few times as well, that need to tell your opponent exactly how you'd screwed them over, but it was different in her. More intense, and not just because she ran deeper to the source of villainy than I did. It occurred to me, in that moment, how lonely a person Akua must really be. Unable to trust anyone, to do so much as offer a genuine laugh. It was no way to live. The highborn of the Wasteland were inhuman as much because of their history as because they denied themselves the basic trappings of humanity. If all you were was artifice, what was there left? But I had no pity to spare for the likes of Diabolist, and the only reason I refrained from further mockery was that her extolling her own virtues would be useful to me.

"Hypocrite," Akua chided me. "You cast disdain at my feet for the occasional exegesis, yet how many of your little... diatribes have you indulged in, since you became the Squire?"

"If I cast anything at you, Diabolist, you can rest assured it won't be the feet. Still, I don't actually know what that word means," I grinned. "You know, on account of being a mudfoot peasant."

"Monologue," she sighed. "Your fixation on your origins is unseemly, Catherine. The promise of the Tower is that anyone can rise, regardless of birth."

"See," I mused, "the way you felt the need to add *regardless* kind of defeats your point."

"Should I be ashamed of what I am?" Akua asked, amused.

"I mean, I could give you a list of reasons why but that'd take a while," I said. "It's a pretty long list. In essence, *Gods* yes."

"Barring assassination, I will live at least three decades older than a baseborn," Diabolist said. "My natural capacity for sorcery is beyond even that of your Hierophant. I know more, can accomplish more, I am *objectively* more than others. Why should I apologize for this?"

"Got not issue with the whole Wasteland breeding program," I began, then adjusted. "No, that's a lie. I think it's disturbing as Hells, but not all that worse than the usual marriage alliances everybody else does. I don't take issue with your talents, Akua. Just what you do with them."

"It was too much to hope for that the Fourfold Crossing would rid you of the attitude, I suppose," Diabolist said. "Particularly given that you cheated your way out of it. I'll admit to some curiosity as to how you accomplished that."

"Come closer," I smiled. "I can show you."

Her nose wrinkled.

"Violence," she said. "The Carrion Lord's doing, then. He does like to keep you in the dark, doesn't he?"

I raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, Black helped me out of that trap you laid for me," I deadpanned. "Treachery. Ach, what betrayal. I will never forgive him."

"It was more than a trap," Akua sharply said. "It was refinement. The clearing of impurities. Or it would have been, without his meddling. As always, he sees defeat in you where he found his own."

"Was I supposed to derive some kind of lesson from that?" I snorted. "'cause I came in ready to stab you in throat. Not much was learned there."

The mention of defeat pricked my ears, though. Black had never been shy about teaching me through examples of when he'd screwed up in the past, but it was the first time I was hearing about

this Fourfold Crossing. The part I disliked the most about dealing with people like Akua was that they could read me like a book, unless I made a conscious effort not to. She found the hint of interest in me, and expanded. I let her. Usually I'd go in sword swinging to prevent her from making any preparations, but at the moment I could see both her hands I really doubted she was going to pull out anything throughout this conversation she hadn't managed to prepare while I was getting smacked around by her defences outside.

"Three months, he remained under," Diabolist said. "He might have stayed forever, had the Apprentice not pulled him out."

I was the opposite of an expert on magic, but if this wasn't High Arcana I'd eat my own toes and High Arcana did tend to operate through a kind of logic I could make sense of. Black had sent me in with a warning I'd only be able to strike once. That meant there would have been consequences, if I hadn't gone after Akua in all four lives. That this was the detail he'd warn me about told me something about how his own go at it had unfolded – he didn't tend to warn me about specific things unless it was something that'd tripped him up in the past, preferring to offer general knowledge and let me figure out my own way from it. So he'd fucked up in one of his lives. I wasn't surprised. It was a nasty kind of trap to spring on anyone, if they didn't go in knowing the key, and for all his cleverness Black had never learned how to lose. He'd won, where it mattered, when his story mattered. He would have stubbornly kept on until he got a victory out of it, even if the game was rigged and he knew it was. That was, in a way, his defining trait.

"He still alive?" I casually asked.

"For now," Akua said.

I huffed out a laugh.

"Amused, Catherine?" she probed.

"You're dead," I said. "You already were, but now? It's just a matter of how it happens."

"I warred and won against six legions and the muster of Callow," Diabolist said. "Against your collection of woes and the most dangerous of the Calamities as well, *alone* – and still you underestimate me."

I smiled viciously.

"You think I'm short-changing you," I said. "I'm not, Akua. What offends you is the lack of respect, but there's nothing about... this I can respect."

"I-"

"-lose," I interrupted. "You always lose. That's your outcome. You use methods that lead to defeat, because every time you win you make another dozen enemies fitted just for you. I just happen to be the one closest at hand."

"It only takes once, to change everything," Diabolist said.

"The refrain of every Empress before you," I said. "It's time that was buried. I have axes to grind with the new way, but the old one is in dire need of a grave. Do resist. I've been looking forward to the screaming."

The dark-skinned woman rose to her feet elegantly, brushing her shoulder.

"Well then," Akua Sahelian said, "shall we begin?"

"That's your first mistake," I said. "Thinking I'm only now beginning."

Thing was, she wasn't the only one around here who claimed an inheritance – and the way I'd come into mine was a lot more intimate than hers. Black was known for using his shadow, and while I couldn't mould mine the way he did I was not without tricks. The balls of blue flame that lit up the hall had my silhouette splayed against a tapestry and from there, out of her sight, lines of frost had spread up to the ceiling. Robber was right, I mused. Humans so rarely looked up, Praesi least of all – their Gods dwelled below. I wouldn't call what I'd crafted an array. I did not have the know-how to make one, and my power was of a different breed besides. But I'd accumulated power in four dots on the ceiling above Diabolist as she spoke, and in that moment I let them loose. Ice shot downwards in four thick pillars, headed straight for her, and the dance began.

That she would survive the first strike was a given. I'd approached the formula that was killing her with that in mind. If I couldn't get a kill – or even a grave wound – out of the first attack, what *could* I get? Tying her down. That was the most that was feasible, and so I opened the waltz with something she'd need to be stationary to deal with. That was how mages died, even Named. Lack of mobility. The whirlwind of flame that formed around her reeked of Summer, unsurprisingly, but even as it shattered the pillars of ice I kept pouring power into them. Could I win, if this fight became about reserves? On open field, I'd say yes. But not in here, not in the seat of her power. Letting a caster dig in always led to ugliness, and she'd had months to prepare this room. Sending the Summer Court after her had been a tactical necessity but a strategic mistake, I decided. Keeping her busy had been needed. But anything that didn't kill Diabolist would be ripped apart and repurposed by her, and now

she'd shrugged off my initial blow as a consequence. I doubted it'd be the last time I paid for that.

I'd passed long evenings with Masego, preparing for this fight. Discussing not the theory of sorcery but the practicalities of using it, the limits. The conclusion I'd arrived to was that if I wanted to win, I had to do so within the first ten exchanges. Any longer than that, and her bag of devilries would outshine mine. I'd be stuck on the defensive, and that was the beginning of the crawl to defeat. One exchange had passed. My cloak fluttered behind me as I ran, ten steps passing before she recognized the danger of it. The whirlwind of fire thickened then blew up, forcing back the ice for a precious single heartbeat, and among the pillar of flame was revealed to be nothing at all. Second exchange: she was buying distance, with an illusion. A year ago, that would have been a problem but I had ways to deal with that, now. And the power to spare to use them. My foot stomped against the ground and ice spread from the touch, spreading like a tide. I wasn't much, not even enough to slip on. But it spread quickly and the silhouette of two boots was revealed.

"There you are," I said.

Diabolist dismissed her illusion and reappeared with runes hovering in the air before her. High Arcana. Third exchange then. Now she would attempt to hobble me, knowing if she didn't my sword would find her throat. Lightning spun, first a bolt but then weaving itself into a cage. I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth. Her lack of experience fighting against Named was showing – it would have been good against a mortal, but not the likes of me. My body convulsed in pain as I forced my way through the crackling tendrils, but my body was a vessel to my will. I had will enough that pain was just discomfort, something that could be set aside as a distraction if necessity called for it. I was on her within three heartbeats, my own ice no hindrance to me at all. Her wrist snapped, rings of darkness forming around it as the shape of a sword was forged in black. The stance she fell into before I struck was one I recognized. There were half a dozen schools of Soninke swordsmanship and this one I recognized on sight. *Koanguka Moko*, the Hand-in-Falling. Best used for duelling. I knew how to pick out the weaknesses of that form, how to bait it into a killing stroke, but that was playing her game. Giving her the time to cast again.

*You were taught this*, I thought. *As a child, when your mother decided you must have the skill of a duellist to settle the affairs of the blade between Named.* But this wasn't a duel, and I wasn't a swordswoman. So when her sword came up perfectly angled to have mine glance off I didn't fight it – instead I punched her in the belly, and the fourth exchange began. I'd struck hard enough to wreck steel, to powder stone. I would have pulped a legionary with that blow. Akua was blown off her feet by it, but



a subtle ripple shivered across her robes and there was no gratifying feel of guts and bone giving under my hand. I let the world slow around me as I sunk into my Name, the sight of Diabolist flying into one of her banners burning itself into my eyes. If I made a mistake here, all the momentum I'd accumulated was gone. It would be hard to recover from that. I needed... I needed to interrupt that rune she was forming and control where she landed, at the same time. My eyes flecked to the tapestry and my hand followed, dark ice forming on the contraption of metal keeping it hung from the rafters and shattering it. When Akua hit the tapestry it folded under her but I got a glimpse of her face, of the small quirk of the lips that betrayed triumph. Trade, I decided, gritting my teeth. The Summer flame hit my shoulder even as I swept the edges of the tapestry, biting down on a scream as I wrapped Diabolist in a very expensive sack and pivoted to smash her into the ground.

The fifth exchange began with me trying and failing to put out the fire burning into my side. I forced Winter into it but Winter always lost, when fighting Summer. I could, if I took a moment, sharpen my will and drown it out. But it would take time I did not have, and this wasn't my sword arm. I'd wait until I was in danger of losing the arm. Diabolist spoke in the mage tongue, flailing on the ground, and though the words were alien to me the feel of the spell was not. She'd used something similar the last time we fought in Liesse. Even as the floor beneath me roiled with sorcery I leapt, boots landing sideways on a platform of shade as the ground turned to liquid save for a circle around her. I leapt off and came upon her just as she forced aside the tapestry over her, sword point crisp and clear. I rammed it into her chest, an inch away to the left of her heart. Angle would've been awkward otherwise, and given her protections I wasn't taking the risk of it glancing off entirely. Akua's lips thinned with pain and she lay her hand on my good shoulder even as I twisted the blade to worsen the wound. Too late for me to the dodge, I assessed.

The force that came from her hand blew me off my feet, but I took it in stride. I had, after all, won two victories going into the sixth exchange. The first was that she'd had to dismiss her liquefying spell to cast this one. The second was that, while she rose to her feet and healed her wound with a pale face, I rose to mine and finally had the time to smother the Summer flame without losing the tempo. My shoulder was a ruin of melted steel and burnt flesh, but the cold ended the distraction of the pain and I'd fought through worse in the past. I could almost run my finger along the length of the coming four exchanges, as if they were written in the air, and what I saw there had me smiling. She would notice it soon enough. The moment she reached for one of her arrays and found nothing, she was clever enough she'd put it together. Why I'd encouraged her to keep talking, why I'd not tried to take the fight out of a room she'd carefully crafted

into her sanctum. It would have been more madness than gambit, if not for one single thing: just because I'd never used that trick in a fight didn't mean I *couldn't*.

The seventh exchange began when I shot forward. She'd learned from our earlier bout, and this time she didn't go for lightning. Panes of red light formed behind me, four of them, and when I struck at the one before me the other span and smacked me to the side. I slid across stone and found another set before me when I tried to turn. Ah. Problematic. Unless. I formed a spear of ice and tossed it at the first set, getting it spinning, and carefully adjusted my angle running into the one before me. It jostled my bad arm painfully even through the cold when I was thrown, right into the first set – and from there straight at Diabolist, whose face was amusingly flabbergasted.

I crouched low, sword swinging upwards, and that was the eight exchange opening. The black sword formed again to parry my blade, but she was a second-rate swordswoman at best: I spun on myself, breaking her footing, and even as she fell I flipped my sword and the pommel came down on her pretty white teeth with a deeply satisfying shattering sound. There was nothing graceful or elegant about this: I rolled over her and sat on her body, punching hard enough her sorcerous shield shivered once more and the ground cracked beneath her. She'd had to have felt that, enchantment or not. Threads of light bloomed behind her, tying around her body and ripping her out from under me. I got up to my feet before she could, though the threads hoisted up her a heartbeat later.

The ninth exchange happened when she flicked her wrist at me and nothing happened at all. Her face went blank. I began gathering power into myself, shaping it. Behind us, slowly, the bronze gates collapsed. They were burning green.

"You set fire to your own path of retreat," Diabolist said, sorcery flaring around her as her teeth healed.

"Wrong again," I replied. "I set fire to *everything*."

In one of those little quirks of Creation, an entire pane of the wall to our side collapsed the moment I finished speaking. Behind it lay a hellscape of goblinfire unleashed. Robber hadn't skipped on the stuff, I noted. I wouldn't be surprised if this entire section of the palace was melted stone by the time the fire went out.

"Is this the sum of you, Catherine Foundling?" Akua said. "Were you so disbelieving of victory you decided to burn us both?"

"Do you ever get tired?" I smiled rudely. "You know, of being wrong all the time."

For the tenth exchange, I opened a gate into Arcadia and stepped through it.

---

*Zarquon*

FIRST! And an EXCELLENT fight.

*ruduen*

Ah, yes – that would be what would get Robber smiling.

*JC*

Very Black-like in her fight.

I like it.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Oooh. Forgot about her gates, honestly.

[jaysenton](#)

HAH! DEAL WITH IT, AKUA!

*Ane*

Thanks for chapter!! I'm highly surprised Cat's soul is still unharmed through all of this.

Isn't Akua something akin to a lich at this point? With her actual soul in a protected phylactery somewhere else. Would killing Akua's body be that helpful?

*Byzantine*

Unlike a Lich she doesn't automatically get a new body eventually if hers is destroyed, from what we know. So killing her will be insufficient to get rid of her entirely, but it leaves her in a very bad position.

*Dainpdf*

Plus goblinfire burns magic, no? Who knows whether it can harm her soul from there...

*Adarsh*

Alright, this may seem smart, but experience tells me that unless you can confirm that the villain is dead with your own two eyes,

then they aren't dead. So I'm betting that Diabolist lives through this.

*Zarquon*

This is true. She probably lives.

*NerfContessa*

Sure.

But she'll be called Ubua for the rest of her existence,. By at least 2 named.

*sheer\_falacy*

Diabolist definitely won't die from this. That said, it does pretty thoroughly ruin Liesse and may free the Deoraithe souls (or destroy them, which would piss off Kegan but still work).

It's actually kind of an odd move to take – destroying the villain's hideout but leaving them able to rebuild later would have fit earlier in the story, but at this point things have to end with Akua dead. So I guess the fight will continue in some way.

*Dainpdf*

She did get a pretty good victory, though. Gotta where where this takes them, but this basically killed all the momentum Akua had – her whole “unbeatable villain” narrative is done with this humiliation. Because that's what it was. She got schooled.

*Byzantine*

Cat knows that. She didn't enter that exchange to kill Diabolist with that. She did that to destroy her seat of power, bait out the Monster, and leave Diabolist reeling going into the next series of exchanges.

[Ethesis](#)

Especially if she really has her soul in a phail around her neck.

*dusting*

going down that route would end up with her mentor dead, so she made sure it wouldn't, craft a different route, like in liesse before. And in liesse again.

*dusting*

though now that i read what i wrote. I suddenly realize the repetition. Creation wouldn't allow something massively important to happen twice without a third incoming sometime soon.

*Levi Kalden*

She has a separate soul of course she lives

*Metalshop*

That was incredibly satisfying to read.

[D. D. Webb](#)

I dearly hope Cat doesn't think that's a finisher. Villains don't get to stick an enemy in a trap and walk away, not if they want to be sure the enemy dies. Surely our Squire is too genre savvy by now to make that blunder?

[nehemiahnewell](#)

She hasn't beat Akua's champion yet, and she knows that has to happen before she can win. So yes, she's certainly knows she's still alive.

*danh3107*

Man there's no way it's going to be that easy. Akua is going to find a way to follow or something like that.

*Draeysine*

This was the plan all along. Cat was never going to win in 10 exchanges with Akua, but she could reset the whole thing if she took the fight somewhere else. I think the plan is to fight in Arcadia not whatever trap infested inner sanctum that Akua made. As everyone's said. Don't let a mags dig in. This is Cat digging Akua out to an open field where she controls things.

*Jonnnnz*

Cat is a Duchess of Winter, fighting in Arcadia rather than the seat of Akua's power is a significant upgrade.

*JackbeThimble*

Ugh. I really hope this is the end of Akua Sahelian though somehow I doubt it.

*Type*

GG WP

*BroadAxe*

Leaving a villain in a trap would not be a likely finisher, but maybe akua follows her through the gate into arcadia, there foundling will have the advantage as the duchess of moonless nights, her homeground so to speak :3

*BroadAxe*

Or, she might reason that leaving her body in the trap will work because her soul is somewhere else, so it wont kill her anyways? :3

*Haihappen*

My speculation goes toward her Akua's father saving her soulstone, and binding it to a new body, or she goes full-on lich.

For that unconnected major breach out there... that has the potential of going even more critical than anything else. Like, for example, it being highjacked by a specific entity in one of the hells that everyone prays may never return.

*BroadAxe*

Also, she has a soul that obviously isn't her own around her neck, and the black night lives "for now" maybe the soul around her neck is his? Catherine might end up killing him on accident by smashing the necklace or burning it? :3

*Ketura*

Personally I think it's just a nobody's soul so that Cat detects it as a soul container. Bait her into destroying it where it releases the bait and captures Cat's.

[Ethesis](#)

Quote:

"Around her neck hung a necklace, the centrepiece of which was a small cylinder of obsidian. My eyes lingered on it, my Name sniffing out the soul that lay within. Trap, I decided. She'd been clever enough so far to keep her soul out of anyone's grasp, she wouldn't risk it here and now. Likely it was meant to bait out an aspect from me, but a liar lost power when you knew them as one. "

Still reflecting on that.

*Drd*

Or, as she is the Diabolist, and likes using others to power her spells, she either simply uses Black's soul as a straight

up hostage, or more likely she uses it to power (a hell of a lot of power too) an attempt at a deciding blow.  
But yes, I think it's Black's soul too.

*Nate9799*

But there was no body, so she might live.

*jor*

madwahman!!!! so crazy and end with gracefulness

*soonnandnaanssoon*

Burn baby burn.

*Soronel Haetir*

She lives but her weapon (the room she has spent so much time preparing) has been wrecked.

*name*

Not sure that was The Weapon. I mean Akuas soul is the key that makes it work not her body.

[boballab](#)

She is baiting Akua into Arcadia where Cat has free passage but Akua doesn't. On top of that Akua has no set arrays there and the cherry on top: she is using stolen SUMMER power. Think that might get the Queen's attention?

*lennymaster*

The Summer Queen is no more. She is just the Queen now. Cat is the very last being with a season associated fea noble title.

*RoflCat*

Imagine, if Robber were there on the other side.

I can totally see him give a last "Bye have a great time" wave before the gate close.

*Pipiemman*

I feel like it's hard for there to be a surprise in this story when it comes to ending. I love it, but because the story is semi-self aware, ending don't occur without the proper weight, which generally I feel like the reader can feel.

*sheer\_falacy*

That's true, but honestly it's true in other stories too. This story is self aware that it follows story tropes, but they're story tropes because they're used in most stories.

*letouriste*

of which ending are you taking about? the autor did a good job in each ending until now,that's the beginnings i find somewhat weaker.

i expect a good conclusion to that fight

*letouriste*

the whole interest of this story is in "how far cat will go and what kind of success she will met at the end"

she could won at the end but she lost everything on the way,even herself.

she could redefine definitions.

she could have a pyrrhic victor or a total victory coming to some cost etc...

this story is really open on paths for the mc to grow

[Hakurei06](#)

I'm not sure this was about killing her necessarily, more along the lines of crippling her and forcing her from her seat of power. Akua can't stay in her burning foothold, carving a new one in the Hells without the time and resources is probably a no-go, Arcadia is right out, and her chances in creation seem... iffy, at best.

[Hakurei06](#)

Hells, it didn't actually say that she closed the gate after passing through.

*letouriste*

yep exactly,now the grounds are cat's to set so that's a minor win for her.akua is steadily going out of her confort zone and she seems cumulating minor errors now and then.now this is a matter of Aces and this is predicted she will make a big mistake at some point.

right now akua has more power left and more aces but her general plan is a wreak and she is walking on cat grounds... cat have probably secured akua father somehow and plan to use him...i'm not sure this is possible given the guy is Named now but this too important a factor in this fight for otherwise. there is probably a lot happening in the background(Thief,robber,akua father,black which is bound to



free himself easily if he even has been captured in the first place and who know who else)

### *Darkening*

Akua's father isn't named, she just gave him the first mage title that fell out of use when warlocks started coming into being.

....

Typos I noticed

- "Got **\*\*not\*\*** issue with the whole Wasteland breeding program,"
- " **\*\*\*I\*\*** wasn't much, not even enough to slip on."
- "Her wrist **\*\*snapped,\*\*** rings of darkness forming around it as the shape of a sword was forged in black. "- Should that be "snapped up"? Snapped on its own makes me think of bones breaking which I don't think was the intended reading.

....

- The point about Akua being lonely as a result of the insane competitiveness of her upbringing was interesting. You can almost treat her as a tragic figure, emotionally stunted and grasping for the only way she knows of to get approval, power and respect. Makes me think of those kids who are trained from five to be athletes, dancers or piano prodigies. They end up kinda messed up in the head. It seems like her mother raised her a similar way but with power and magic as the focus. Even her father who seems to have an almost normal relationship of love and affection with her mainly related to her by teaching magic.
- The idea of the "Fourfold Crossing" test as being cleansing also gives us a hint of how she thinks. Seems like a lot of her ideology is a kind of refined self interest. Where being true to yourself means not having contradictions, even if that means being 100% evil its still being true to who you are. Cat regardless of her circumstances made the same choice in all the scenarios. Seemingly black didn't in his?
- ""That's your first mistake," I said. "Thinking I'm only now beginning."" Reminds me of a certain famous moment in Watchmen.
- Nice to see Cat actually having prepared for a fight by thinking about tactics and benefitting from that. Makes a nice contrast to what was alluded to earlier about her habit of recklessness. Only really works because Akua is so predictable though. Against a smarter enemy it wouldn't. Akua always thinks of herself as the only clever one.

*Mike E.*

Watchmen quote:

"Dan, I'm not a Republic Serial villain. Do you seriously think I'd explain my master-stroke if there remained the slightest

chance of you affecting its outcome? I did it thirty-five minutes ago."

*SpeckofStardust*

I think She is heading outside to where the battle is happening, in order to ensure that the real fight isn't lost, Considering it all she disengaged because she decided she couldn't kill her if she continued the current 1 on 1. Also neither one of them used any of their name powers in full.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*maresther23*

I fear there is a spell that prohibits me from missing an update. I went to sleep early thinking I would read the chapter in the morning. Then the seismic alarm sounded at the witching hour and well... great chapter!

*Engineer*

Of course it ends there. I hope this won't be the trend moving forward. Because I feel now like usually feel at the conclusion of a chapter of Mother of Learning. Only benefit is that it's just a day's wait before I get my fix.

*Ryan DD Durnell*

Getting caught up on this story is the worst.

I want it all NOW.

Your work is awesome. Very few missteps, and some of those might be intentional for future story telling. I love this serial. Unlike some, I highly doubt this is Cat ending the fight. Round two!

Thanks sincerely.

*Berder*

No doubt Akua has some means of magical flight to escape as the flames close in. But she just lost her base of operations and perhaps her ability to open more Hellgates.

I observe that Cat was speaking like a stereotypical villain here. Particularly when she said "That's your first mistake..." and when she said "there you are" when uncovering Akua's hiding place. If she said those things while fighting a hero, she'd be doomed. Against Akua, who knows?

*nick012000*

Guile Heroes say those sorts of things too, though.

*Alicia*

I have to admit these last few chapters have made me start to dislike Cat. Where she seems to always pull something out of her ass. Where she seems to learn nothing. Where she doesn't even need to learn because everything goes her way in the end.

Hell her first thoughts on walking into the throne room weren't even about Akua or what's going on. Instead they were some shitty boring Monologue on how Praesi are all thieves sitting on Callow thrones. As if she's any better than them at this point. And it annoys me to no end how Cat has become such a complete and massive hypocrite. If this story was written for Akua, I have little to no doubt we would all find Cat the kind of Villain who we would cheer as she fell. Just due to how self-righteous and blind she is to her own actions while being able to always come away with an undeserved victory. A great fight scene doesn't change the fact that Cat these last few chapters has been able to display just how much plot armor, hypocrisy and pure contrivance makes up herself and her story. Where even after living three other lives she doesn't learn nor need to learn a single lesson. Where in the end... She's obviously the Hero. And the Hero wins even if they don't deserve it or aren't any better than the Villains they lambast with self-righteous sneering.

*werafdsaew*

Her point about the Wasteland nobles being thieves is that they weren't the ones who conquered Callow; the Calamities and the Legions did, so the nobles had no right to it. Remember Cat's discussion with Brandon Talbot back in c34? Cat has to bleed and fight for every bit of power she now holds, and so dislike the notion that someone can just inherit it.

*Dany*

My theory of this whole serial: Cat isn't the hero. She's IS the villain. The hero is Cordelia, the unnamed queen. We just happen to be following the villain's rise to power before the villain gets cut down, instead of vice-versa.

But I say that as someone who has loathed Cat and her plot armor for a while now.

*MetruX*

You do notice that the only person she acts against in a self-righteous way is Akua (sorry, Abua), right? She is somewhat hypocrite, but she lies to herself so that she can keep going towards her objectives. Not the most healthy thing to do, but that's what you get when there is a true villain as protagonist. She's not supposed to be the right guy or the better guy, she is no Hero. About the plot armor, honestly, any

Named has it, only in different situations, and she learned since the beginning to pick apart those situations. Hells, it's been a couple of weeks where the updates see her seeing Akua's plan as a pure defeat, simply because of the narrative. If the narrative empowers certain stories, doesn't it look like plot armor? I disagree with you, mostly, on a single point: I like her. She's not nice, not perfect, and not truly cool, but I like her. And yet I wouldn't want to meet her for nothing, even if on the same side.

*lennymaster*

You are one of those people that still somehow think this should end in some kind of redemption. I know next to nothing about how this story will turn out (props to erratica for that), but I am entirely convinced that Cat will do her thing till the bitter end, be it victory or defeat. After all, in 58 Hard Measures her worldview was clearly stated in her conversation with the priestess:

““In the end,” she murmured. “I choose to believe that being Good matters more than being strong.”

“In the end,” I replied clearly, “I would rather be wrong than be cowed.””

And to be Named IS TO HAVE PLOT ARMOUR. THAT IS THE WHOLE POINT OF NAMED.

They are greater than life and their deaths will always be epic, or a lesson/motivation for other Named.

[LaNuup](#)

The interesting question is what happened to Black. He is after all either in a burning palace or his soul is bound by Diabolist. Cat also only has one exchange with Diabolist left to defeat her, before it grows problematic for her.

*James, Mostly Harmless*

Cat's line “Do you ever get tired?” I smiled rudely. “You know, of being wrong all the time.” reminds me of Luke's line in Last Jedi “Every word in that sentence was wrong.”

*Rogthnor*

I'm still holding out hope Akua joins the team somehow, probably by Cat using necromancy on the phylactery

*Engineer*

Ten Denari says that the soul bound around Akua's neck is Black's. Any takers?

*Draighean Erland*

Could the Diabolist follow Cat into Arcadia? Would be funny to watch Akua fight a Goddess in her realm.

*Talmora*

I have expected the Black Queen/Knight Name she will enter into will have one aspect being about burn or incinerate due to the stories of her setting fire to pretty much any city or battlefield she fights on on fire with goblinfire...

*Zarax*

That soul around Aku's neck being Black's is just too obvious... I may have missed it but has there been any mention of Kilian in the last few chapters?

[chris S](#)

"The ninth exchange happened when she flicked her wrist at me and nothing happened at all. Her face went blank. "

Something tells me a certain half-incubus mage prepared some protection for Cat and Akua was expecting to shatter the magic framework holding Cat's soul/heart together there.

[Walter](#)

I think she tried to call on a spell array that the goblinsfire had burned up.

*werafdsaew*

More like the goblin fire burned up whatever magical array she was depending on.

[Isi Arnott-Campbell](#)

Half-incubus? Masego is adopted, actually.

*nigeltheoutlaw*

Damn, burning her in goblinfire? Brutal. Highly doubt it worked though, Akua is too slippery for something weak like that to do her in.

*Edrey*

Well, warlock won be happy with this

I was hopping a fire monster to counter this after all she always use fire but who knows

One question. Can cat take the magic capacity of akua? Is in her body or soul?

*chaos\_ex\_machina*

So, what's Thief up to? Stealing Akua's soul?

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

One hopes. There was Robber pretending to be Thief. I'm looking forward to Thief pulling out something entertaining.

[kdreyes09](#)

The chapter had very good action scenes. I had no trouble picturing the fight at all. Erra, you are amazing. I'm happy to see that even if you're getting 3 chapters out per week, the quality doesn't suffer at all. You're amazing!

*Alivaril*

Hey, just here to say I really enjoyed the last few chapters, especially this one. The book two "opening gambit involves DYING" climax chapters were some of my favorites overall, above even Cat Struggling and animating her own body. Thief stealing a fleet of ships and subsequently dumping them to block the gates is also up there. I really hope she and Masego are okay.

Anyway, this chapter felt similar in tone to those fine days and if this revival sticks, I will be extremely happy. There's a marked difference between "stealing the box and pummeling her enemies with it" and just "stabbing her enemies," the latter of which just isn't as fun as this sort of measured planning.

*aran*

"I set fire to everything."

Yes, Cat; yes you certainly do.

*aran*

In other news: Oh goodness me, we certainly won't have to worry about Akua anymore. There's no way she could have surv- ah shoot.

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## Chapter 67: Middle Eight

*"Change, my friend, is the admission that one falls short of perfection. A plebeian sort of doubt, best reserved for rulers*

*who don't make their enemies eat their own hands."*

– Dread Emperor Revenant

I'd picked my battlefield to stack the game as much in my favour as she had in hers when I'd engaged in the throne room. Much as it irritated me to admit it, there was no real chance my little fire snare would actually kill Diabolist: it was a death trap I hadn't seen through to the end. Even between villains, there was only one way that kind of play could end. That was fine, since the point hadn't been to put her down. Gods, I wish it could be that easy. What I'd accomplished was put the hurt on her before putting the torch to whatever nasty surprises she'd prepared just for me. It'd always been made abundantly clear to me that taking a swing at a well prepared mage was a Bad Idea, and I'd venture that warning counted twice as much if the mage in question was Named. Here, though? We were on *my* chosen grounds. And when the time came to make that choice, I'd picked somewhere I had spilled blood before: the Fields of Wend. I honestly couldn't think of a better place to kill Akua than a mile-wide stretch of shifting and uneven glaciers in the heart of what had once been Winter.

I'd come out on the edge of the glacier the fae called the Wending Heart, the tallest of them all and topped by a perfectly round platform, and moved away swiftly. Had I mouthed off at the Duke of Violent Squalls here once? It felt like I had. Admittedly when it came to assumptions about my diplomatic proceedings 'gave insult' tended to be the right bet. The only downside I could figure was that there might be fae interested in our little scrap who came calling, but even when it came to that I had the advantage. I was still a titled Duchess, and earlier Akua had been throwing around Summer flame. Exactly how it had all come together after the wedding between the King and Queen of Arcadia was still a mystery to me, but I assumed using what could only be violently stolen power wouldn't exactly please that crowd. And, unlike me, she had no oath from the royals to guarantee her safety. This was as much as I'd be able to tilt the balance my way before it came to a head, short of having the Woe at my back.

I left the fairy gate wide open. Getting Diabolist here was half the point of this in the first place, and besides I wasn't going to bet on my being better at manipulating that power than her if I tried to close it and she tried to keep it open. Call me sentimental, but if hubris had to get me killed I'd at least require a kind not quite so blatant. Akua strolled through indifferently, casting a look of mild curiosity around her.

"Ah, Catherine," she laughed throatily. "Your particular mixture of cleverness and ignorance never ceases to injure, does it?"

I studied her carefully. She was moving too slowly. Taking in her surroundings but not really assessing them the way she had earlier – she wasn't finding good space to stand or noting places

to avoid. That meant her attention was elsewhere. I sharpened my senses, but all I could hear was the loud rumble of glaciers smashing into each other. If there were fae, I thought, I should be able to at least make out the edges of their presence. What was she looking for, then? Whatever it was, I suspected letting her have it would lead to no good. With a twist of will, I closed the gate.

**"Claim,"** Diabolist said, tone casual, and ownership of it was ripped from me.

All that remained was a hole in the air too small to even crawl through, but she'd just thrown away an aspect on taking it. I swallowed a breath. It looked like I had a problem on my hands: Akua never did anything without at least three reasons. I let Winter flood my veins and found it still answered unhindered to my will. Then what – no, that was the wrong way to go about this. I was getting sucked into her tempo, and the moment that happened I was done for. It was nearly always better to disrupt than to respond. I charged forward. The sooner I got the both of us off this platform the better.

"The courtesy is late in the giving," Akua said, "but must be afforded nonetheless."

I got within three feet of her before the entire Heart spun, and that threw me off my stride long enough for a streak of darkness to strike at my chest and send me sliding back. The tendril of black remained around Diabolist, coiled like a loyal and eager snake. How the fuck had she done that? The spinning, not the pale imitation of my teacher's trick. This was a fae place of power, she should have no sway here.

"Thank you, Catherine Foundling, for the valuable lessons you taught me in Liesse," Diabolist said.

I wasted no breath on a reply, but my blood ran cold. This was an echo to words I'd spoke to her at the Blessed Isle, once, and to Barika Unonti right before I put a crossbow bolt into her eye. Not something to be lightly spoken. Akua was beginning a monologue, though, and that was my chance. I was warier in my approach the second time. I tested her defences with a flick of my blade and when the tendril of darkness struck out I bent under it and stepped behind her guard. My blade whistled as I carved through her throat but *fuck*, I'd lost the tempo and she was one step ahead of me – all I cut was a shade, an illusion, and Akua shivered back into sight at the opposite edge of the Heart. I pivoted without hesitation and returned on the offensive.

"On that night where you broke my bones," the dark-skinned woman said. "The two of us began a conversation about power that went unfinished. Shall we resume it?"



I breathed out and sought calm. Splashing around like a fool trying to catch a fish barehanded wasn't going to get my anywhere. Method was how I turned this around. First, finding out if what I saw was real. I touched Winter, the howling desolation made even thicker here in the very place where I had earned my mantle, and ice formed around Diabolist's feet. She did not even spare it a glance before it began melting, but it was confirmation. I moved then, quick as wink.

"There are weaknesses to my ways," the villain acknowledged. "Repeated conflict with you has made this clear. But you seem under the impression that means they are without worth. A dangerous assumption."

I expected the blow to come the moment I was within a foot of coming in striking range, and she did not disappoint. I only caught sight of the thin transparent wedges that cut silently through the air by sharpening my eyes, and though that allowed me to avoid them it also cost me. A ball of dazzling lights formed in front of my face and erupted instantly, searing a dozen colours into my vision. I struck blindly at where she'd been but my sword bounced off something solid and something else caught my ankle and tossed me away. Even as I fell on back in the ice and rolled, I grit my teeth. She was toying with me. She could have done some real damage right then, if she'd been so inclined.

"I've told you this before: a Name is not a mere tool," Akua said. "It has *meaning*. It is the choosing of a side, of a Role. To borrow its power while denying the Role is to willingly cripple yourself."

Even as I considered a different angle of attack, a part of me wondered if this might be the wrong way to go about it. She'd never had such an easy time handling me before, which smelled of a pattern or trick I didn't know. Talking so much should have seen me put a sword in her throat by now. *Unless it's not the right moment*, I frowned. Was Creation, even here, putting a finger on the scales until it had received proper theatrics? It wouldn't need to do much, I thought. Not even weaken me. Just make Diabolist a little luckier, nudge her instincts a little. Keep her dice rolling sixes and her hand full of trumps.

"Ah," Akua said. "You begin to understand. You are only half a villain. It is not your fault, my dear. You were taught incorrectly by a man who believes power derives from methodology, from philosophy."

Should I let her keep her talking? If I got stubborn about striking a blow when it was all set against me, I might make a hard mistake and take a wound that would prevent me from actually taking advantage of the opening. If there was an opening at all, which was already an assumption. If she got to finish her speech, though, I suspected I was fucked.

"Power," Diabolist said. "That *is* our philosophy. The only philosophy. The rest we craft in the wake of seizing, in a vain attempt to justify what was never just – for justice is as much an invention as the rest, a trinket built by the hands of men."

"It's an empty world you peddle," I told her. "That's why you get stabbed at the end, Akua. No one wants to live in it but you."

"Shall I tell you a secret, Catherine?" she smiled. "The true altar before which every man and woman in the Empire kneels is not dedicated to the Gods Below. It is the Tower, that nameless god that wears ever-changing faces anointed in the blood of the last. The Empress is dead, so the Empress rules."

"Backstabbing isn't a fucking *virtue*, Diabolist," I bit out. "It's why Praes fails all the time. Why even with all its power it lost to Callow again and again for over a millennium."

"Not a virtue, no," she said. "A liturgy, worship sincerer than any pact made in the dark through ancient prayers."

"See, there's no point in having a conversation with you," I said. "Because you're not being impartial about this, it's your religion. And your religion is godsdamned poison. Even when given a real functioning alternative, you'd rather throw a tangible victory away than consider you might have been wrong."

"Ah," Diabolist smiled. "But am I?"

"It always comes back to the same thing with you, doesn't it?" I grimly said. "Until the very moment someone put a knife in you, you'll pretend just the fact you're breathing means you're right. And it's not just you. Malicia was wrong. There should have been a fucking culling, after the civil war. You can't negotiate with people who see negotiation as a sin."

"You mistake me," Akua said. "I ask if *you* truly believe I am wrong? You stand before me bearing a mantle won through theft and murder, the old sacraments of our kind. Having assembled a host that would follow you against the Empress, having seduced into your service talents slighted by the old order. Protest all you like, the path you tread is old and well-worn."

"I'm not you," I hissed.

"No," Diabolist agreed. "You lack that purity of purpose, dulled by those who should have sharpened you. I will cure you of this, Catherine."

"I used to think there was the remains of a person in you," I said. "Something left of the child that was beaten into becoming this. But there isn't, is there? You can't even understand what affection is anymore."

I could not let myself be drawn too deeply into this. Slowly, quietly, I gathered power to myself. It would all ride on that single opening. If I managed to overpower her then, I could turn this into the kind of brawl she was utterly unfit to fight.

"Why so shy?" Akua laughed. "Use the word you truly meant. Love. And that is where they robbed you, Catherine. It is the leash they use to keep you in line. And so you stand before me a Squire instead of a Knight, expecting to win when you have no *weight*. What story carries you in this place? What Squire could possibly stand where you do?"

"I'm a little more than that," I said, and that was my one chance.

I struck. Every speck of power I'd managed to draw in, a deafening clap sounding as I filled the world with ice. Half the Heart was made a jagged thing of frost and I already I was moving. *Merciless Gods*, I thought as the ice shivered, *she can't possibly*- The strength of Winter sagged, the ice broke and along the lines I had struck thin ropes of sorcery came back to me. I struggled against them but they were like draining ditches, the power flooding through them and going nowhere. The bindings began to tighten and there was only one way out of this.

"**Break**," I said.

The ropes shattered, and in that very moment I felt Akua smile as she strode through shards of ice.

"Finally," she said. "**Bind**."

I'd felt something like this before, mere feet away from where I now stood, and the irony of it was cloying. Alone of all the things in the world, I was trapped in amber. Sweat slowly trickled down my cheek, leaving a salty trail behind, and even as the first drop fell with a soft sound on my armour I felt Winter go still. Not all of it. Around me the glaciers still creaked and broke in their ceaseless dance, but the mantle I had claimed from the Duke of Violent Squall sat like an obedient dog who did not even dare to breathe. No, more than that. Warlock had warned me, that I was not entirely human anymore. The fae title had been woven into my Name, its domain becoming an aspect, and so when Diabolist bound Winter she bound my Name as well. I felt my mind scrabbling against a wall of glass, reaching desperately for my last aspect – which even if unsuited would do something, anything – but there was no purchase. I no longer ruled my Name, my mantle or even my own body. I was appalled, then, at the arrogance I'd had in trying to kill this woman with the very instrument she could use to crush me. Akua slowly circled around me, her long dark hair made shining by melted frost.

"It would have been a fight," she said. "If you were not merely dwelling in the penumbra of villainy instead of embracing your better nature. A Black Knight anointed the last of Winter would have been... difficult to call to heel. I would have preferred it, nonetheless. They cheated the both of us our true iron."

Instead all she'd had to do was talk, and bait out my only aspect that might feasibly break her hold. For all that Diabolist had pretended to be absorbed in her words, she'd had me dancing to her tune since the moment she stepped into Arcadia. Akua's hand strayed to my face and she wiped away the sweat almost tenderly. It felt like a violation, however fleeting the touch, and one made even worse by the pretence of warmth.

"You will never like me," she told me. "But you will learn to love me, eventually. We will do great things, you and I. As we were always meant to."

She smiled, like a young girl sharing a secret with another in the dark.

"It is petty, but I am glad you have Deoraithe blood. Even if only in part," she confided. "They are a greater kind than the rest of Callowans. Nearly Praesi in their settling of grudges."

I was not a person in her eyes, I realized. Just cattle to be inspected for good teeth and lustrous coat. I'd ceased being someone to her, if I'd ever been, the moment she decided she had a use for me. Her hand withdrew from my face, instead adjusting my cloak around my neck.

"The throne room would have seen you lose as well," she mused. "But here? Oh, the mistake that was. *Diabolist*, dearest. Strange vistas such as these are not foreign to me. You took us to a place of usurpation and murder, and though you have learned of those ways you are yet young to that learning and came late to it besides."

Her lips quirked and she stepped away.

"You will already be thinking of ways to cross me," she said. "So let me disabuse you of that possibility."

I should have been, I thought. But I was stuck in a quagmire of my own horror, beginning to realize how badly I'd fucked up and how it might destroy everything. Even if Black somehow got me out of this, I knew what the price to that would be. There were no longer good outcomes to this. This fight was a disaster there would be no recovering from. Entire legions shattered on the eve of a great war, an entire city of Callowans lost and made to serve beyond death, and beyond all that someone was going to have to die over this. Me or Black, or – and the possibility was one that for all my previous confidence I could no longer deny – I

might just lose. Completely, utterly, beyond denial. *It only takes once to change everything*, Diabolist had said earlier. I'd crawled from victory to victory these last few years, leaving burning wrecks behind me but still coming out ahead. There'd been nights where I wondered if some of those could be called victories at all, but now that I met the eyes of an actual defeat I knew the answer. I had my skin crawling, the crystal-clear understanding of exactly how fragile all I'd built was. How *one bad day* would be all it took to unmake it entirely.

"You will kill the Black Knight with your own hands, and in doing so become my second," Akua said, bringing me back to there and then. "Because there is no going back from that, you see. The Calamities will hunt you regardless of whether or not your own will guided the blow. The Empress, given the choice of keeping them or you, will choose them. And so your only salvation will lie in my service."

Would she? Would Malicia really? If it meant losing the Woe maybe not but then she might not really be losing them. Hakram would stay by my side, but Masego had been raised with Black as an uncle and Archer's teacher was his lover. Where their loyalties would lie I couldn't be sure. Thief might bail before it ever came to that, she had a history of doing it. And if one side had both Hierophant and Warlock on it, and Scribe as well? The Empress couldn't afford not to choose it, not if she was facing a rebellion from Diabolist. Spies and powerful mages would be what she needed most of all in the days to come, if Black died.

"That was always your side's conceit," Diabolist fondly said. "Thinking that being clever and quick enough, you could have the power without paying the price."

The dark-skinned woman inclined her head and without my prompting my hand rose, tearing open a portal back into Liesse. Not, I grasped, blindly aiming. Going through Arcadia was like threading a needle. And in owning both the place where the needle had first passed and the place where it would come out, Diabolist had been able to control *exactly* where that fairy gate would lead.

"There's always a price, Catherine," Akua chided me.

She went through the portal, and I followed. Behind it Black awaited.

Sweet. I figured Cat would be Bound in Arcadia. Brilliant move, taking the Diabolist to a realm not Reality, where her power would be greatest.

*stevenneiman*

Cat's mistake was recognizing that Akua had chosen to doom herself, then extrapolating beyond the data to assume that she was a total idiot incapable of making good plans. Also, she threw away the real advantage she could have had by leaving her own controlled battlefield rather than attaining victory there and then leaving at the last minute. It would have been a classic heroic story to defeat the mad sorceress, destroy her fortress of doom and then leave just before the whole place collapsed around her but she chose to leave after gaining the upper hand rather than the proper course of action which would have been to punt Akua through the goblinfire, pin her to the floor with a sword, let off a catchy one liner, and then leave through her hidden escape route.

On the other hand, I suspect I know how this is going to end. Black is going to Destroy the Binding and allow Cat to kill Akua, but do it dramatically just after Cat has delivered a mortal wound to him. She's already using her Bind aspect against Cat, and she used Claim earlier, and I don't see any way that she could use Call to restrain the likes of a Named, so all that's left is mere high arcana, which is never a sure thing when you're counting on it.

*Stayer*

Cat rarely wins because of herself, it's mostly others engineering everything and her getting lucky enough.

*danh3107*

Yeah I saw this coming, bet anyone ten dollars the next chapter or the chapter after cat's going to kill black and break free of Akua's control that way. Or you know, break free without doing it, I doubt this will be permanent.

*Byzantine*

I get the feeling she is going to violently transition to a new (in every sense) Name the moment before the killing blow is struck. Akua was right – the Squire could never have won that battle. And Cat's been on the edge of a new name for some time. It's just not going to be what anyone expects – she is not going to transition to a Knight, because that is what Squires do. And Cat subverts and changes the story by her very nature.

*SlumberyStorm*

Well she has TAKE and there is a Name for the TAKING.

*Rook*

I'm going to make a specific prediction here, Cat kills Akua by spearing the necklace she's wearing around her neck and impaling her neck with the sword in the process. She does become a knight, but possibly not a black one.

Cat's supposed to lose something she loves. Black is a surrogate father she has admitting to loving like a parent/mentor, just a tiny bit. Akua has a necklace with a soul in it, but Cat is pretty sure it isn't Akua's own.

I mean, whose soul would it realistically be? Akua doesn't do anything without a reason. For all her flaws she takes clear steps toward a goal and makes every move with intention. Ain't some random soul lying around there for no reason.

Pretty easy guess? It's Black's soul. She's an old school villain, the exact type to engage in monologues and to hold a loved one hostage with a trinket.

Thing is an old school villain is also the type of villain who is very prone to snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. Say, by doing something like telling the Squire to kill the Black Knight (which she admitted she'll make Cat do), while wearing Black's soul around her neck. Bonus points if she makes Cat kneel to rub the victory in her face first, putting her in a perfect position to kill her instantly by following her orders to the letter – stabbing upwards at the necklace Akua is wearing instead of Black's body. Mirror image of the fourfold crossing.

I'd say that's probably the big decision Cat has to make, when she realizes what she has to do and has to make the choice to pull the trigger or not, unwillingly killing her mentor and her biggest pillar of support with her own hands.

At that point, if she chooses to go through with it, it's going to strike true. The sword is going to get guided by fate like water down a well-worn path, no real chance to miss or go badly. Creation will dictate it so; it's such a well defined trope against such a classic villain in such a classic setting, with a method that suits her strength – improvising and pulling through with a clever and often self-harming gambit at the last moment.

On top of that it segues pretty well into the next possible conflict. The Big Bad Calamities, at least three of which have explicitly promised to come for her head if she ever hurt Black.

The twist will probably be if she didn't become the Black Knight after killing Amadeus, or if Akua survives her neck spearing and transitions to a big boss from a mid boss, to mirror Cat transitioning from a protagonist in training to The Protagonist.

*letouriste*

twenty on black having planned cat defeat and next chapter killing akua or at least weakening her enough for cat killing blow.

he is black after all,i can't see how that would not be planned.

we didn't get an accurate sense of what is happening in the background,we don't know what black is thinking and why cat didn't use Take yet.

i think black see all that battle like a training opportunity for cat.

the taste of defeat will strengthen her

*Rook*

Akua already lost. 100%. This is a story that uses stories and story tropes as plot devices. On top of that, Black isn't someone who uses plain tactics. He breaks the fourth wall, he uses story elements.

The fourfold crossing wasn't just a Trap, it was a Story. What happens when a squire is traditionally knighted? They kneel before a ruler before being knighted and rising with the mantle.

The fourfold crossing. Cat knelt before Akua, crowned in dread. She rose, fully titled and shoving steel through her throat. Her one strike, that she needs to make count, it came after kneeling.

What just happened? Cat knelt, before Akua, crowned in dread. The one strike cat has a window for, the one Black opened the window for, hasn't happened yet. It comes after the kneeling.

Black just screwed Akua over and beat all her grand designs by walking in, getting himself savagely beaten, and being held captive for most of the action. Of course foreshadowing points to him meeting a Terrible Fate, but I'm not sure he cares about that much, so soon after losing Captain.

*nipi*

Cats probably going to kill Black and then gets her moment to skewer Akua. All according to Blacks plan. And Batman, sorry



I mean Black has surely left behind failsafes to eliminate all the soon to be out of control Calamities.

### *SpeckofStardust*

So...  
Cat's the monster

### *Byzantine*

Funny thing is Akua is completely correct about the story and the Squire not being enough.

But... she's making a mistake there. A mistake as bad as the one Cat just made. The story says a squire must become a knight. But Cat? Cat changes stories. She's going to become something else entirely.

### *Book*

I'd put money on Black meeting a Terrible Fate, and Cat earning her knighthood. The foreshadowing is written all over the place

Black vs Heir was a Character Defining Moment, and this was basically stated outright to be a parallel crucible for Cat. He lost his parents, something he loved. Surprise, closest thing she ever had to a parent is in arms reach and is the only nearby character that she gives a big hoot about.

On top of that, you'll notice how the last few chapter titles for the mini arc have all even musical terms? Elision in music is when you use the ending of one song as the beginning of another. In that one you also got the symbology of a Knight-to-be kneeling, before being knighted and rising bearing the mantle.

This is the end, Loss that's got a significantly different tune than the rest of the song. She's lost and knelt. Now all roads lead to a Rise, while shoving steel through someone's throat, if elision was any indication. Knighted by Akua, crowned in dread, bearing some sort of title that definitely is not the Squire. Only question is whether Akua survives the knighting and what Cat loses/changes into – Name and Character wise.

### *Byzantine*

I fully expect Black to die.

I fully expect it will not be by Cat's hand.

### *Engineer*

Yes, there was no other way that exchange could have gone.

However, are you guys also seeing the rule of 3 at play here?

Squire dominated Diabolist in her seat of power, then Diabolist dominated Squire in her seat of power (sort of).

All that remains is for Squire to dominate and win in the final exchange.

Likely after the Black Knight is dead.

*RoflCat*

A part of me think a self-stabbing + another self-necromancy for another set of fresh aspect/Name is in order.

*Type*

Creation does not do repeat performances, It has been mentioned before that their pattern of three is done and that there will not be another.

*soonnandnaanssoon*

The only loophole I can think of for the pattern of three is about the Names tbh. A Pattern of Three between the Squire and the Heiress is done and dusted, but a Pattern of Three between the Squire and Diabolist hasn't yet been established. Admittedly, it's kinda weak and the Story and Role don't carry much weight. I think the way out of the Diabolist lies around the Role of Diabolist; to hold power over creatures foreign to the world.

Anyway, it'll be fun if the Tyrant appeared here with the White Knight or something. It'll just be a little backstabbing and treachery with the Wandering Bard's goals.

*nipi*

Cant remember if Cat reset her name before or after the pattern of three was completed? Might be another factor.

*Anna*

D:

*edrey*

danmit, i see it coming but this is really bad, the only way out i can see is cat changing her name, the pivot is next, then is the monster.

*TMP*

The idea that "the only salvation will lie in her service" ... I doubt it can work. Cat likes stabbing her in the throat over kneeling.

That's also why I can't quite see the story behind Cat killing Black. She wouldn't follow Akua, and anything else would (usually) see her killed by Ranger.

Thief didn't really play a role yet though, so my money would be on her saving the day. Stealing the binding or something like that.

But I guess, as usual, I'll be wrong.

*AshSlanabrezgov*

Yeah, I can't see Cat following Akua after Bind wears thin. Even if Akua made her do something unforgivable regarding Empire, Cat is too spiteful.

[tyizor](#)

Sooo. The title is middle 8. "Middle 8. A middle 8 is so called because it is a section in a song that tends to happen towards the middle of the song, and tends to be eight bars in length. The purpose of this section is to break up the simple repetition of a verse/chorus/verse/chorus structure by introducing new elements into the song." Fuck.

[tyizor](#)

There's a good chance that the chorus is Catherine's constant wins against the Akula. This promises some kind of change to the pattern (though not necessarily throwing the chorus out entirely).

*Morgenstern*

Constant wins against Akua? o0 Always so far AKUA was the one to get something out of those "defeats"... NOT Cat... Cat actually lost while "winning"...

*Shequi*

I am in no way encouraged by the motif of these chapter titles being about music; it hints that the Wandering Bard may be about to take a hand in matters.

*letouriste*

no way cat kill black next chapter,i can't see that happen at all.

-black has been too low key in this battle,he has something prepared.i think he planned cat defeat for training.i'm sure he had planned to be captured but we also know he has plans for the futur;)

-cat still has Take,that one aspect which could rivalise Fall in efficacy if used at the right time.she can't use that under akua control but black probably can do something about that.

-the whole chapter feels like akua dooming herself instead of cat...i don't know why i feel that way^^ maybe her overconfidence or her not having any apparent real troubles to perform her plan (victory in story is never so clean cut,there is a hole somewhere in her plan and i think that's her underestimating black).

-the chapter title.

-we didn't see at all akua father yet since the start of the battle,Thief too,Assassin too but he didn't seem the kind to participate during the action.

blablabla i just want the next chapter!:D thanks for the release

*nipi*

Black has been sensing his end nearing. Might be a self fulfilling prophesy in which Black tries to leave the stage in a manner that benefits Cat and the Empire the most.

Indeed, what has Thief been up to?

If someone doesnt drag Akuas papa into this then he is probably going to end up as an opponent with a grudge for Cat.

*MetruX*

Actually I see he watching his daughter die and wonder aloud why she couldn't just accept things as they are, like he did when he didn't challenge the Name of Warlock.

*Gorgoroth*

Catherine never used TAKE. I expect that the use of that aspect will be how she escaped this debacle. And hopefully she'll actually try thinking a little harder next time she gets into a duel with someone every inch her equal.

*Burnsy*

I suspect Cat is going to either be forced to kill Black, but transition into an entirely new name, or use Take to take the name of Black Knight without having to kill Black.

*Nguyen Hong Hai*

"It's over Catherine, I have the high ground!"

*thespaceinvader*

But is Cat Obi Wan in this situation, or is she Anakin.

Or is she Maul?

*PhDEevee*

I'm somewhat nervous about the Batman reference (specifically, The Killing Joke, One Bad Day) in a story filled with Black (or Dark) Knights.

[oldschoolvillainOldSchoolVillain](#)

Black still has Destroy. Obliterating Akua's Bindings over Cat wouldn't be an issue for that Aspect – the question remains whether he can call on it or not.

*Captain Amazing*

The "there's always a price" line suggests to me that Cat's gonna do the martyr thing. Mentor that loves her and wants her to kill him so she can save herself? Taking the selfish option leading her nemesis to destroy everything she's built and kill all those she loves? A track record of killing tyrants and defying authority? Yeah, she's killing herself. No idea how she'll get out of it; my personal hope is for the wights to become people with her becoming one.

*Naeddyr*

I'm gonna throw a curve-ball here:

If Catherine is so 'weak' because she doesn't synch up with her Role or Name as well as she could because damn her if she ever will, shouldn't the control her Name or Role have on her also be... weaker?

We already saw a Name-reset in the fight between the gates with Chider before, so that won't happen. Honestly, before that happened I was expecting to Catherine to lose her Name and become a normal person and kick some ass regardless (then regain her Name or some Name), but that boat has probably sailed.

*TheTime*

"Love. And that is where they robbed you"

Black has her father. He let himself be captured as a distraction so Assassin and Thief would take Diabolist's father as a hostage.

*Joen*

My god I'd totally forgotten this, good call.

However, Akua would choose herself over her father anyways.

*nipi*

Probably but it would make her flinch for one moment.

*Engineer*

Black said "you'll only have one chance." That millisecond where Diabolist flinches upon seeing her father in danger might just be opening Squire needs.

Remember, at this juncture Cat could be considered Akua's monster and villains are ever killed by their pet monsters due to mistreatment. It all works out nicely. The only question now is whether this will happen before she kills Black or after.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*Book*

So it's pretty blindingly obvious by now that a victory should be coming very soon, and Black is almost certainly going to die or have something Terrible happen to him, capital T. The obvious bit is that it was pretty heavily foreshadowed that heir was something of a crucible to Black, and that Heiress/Diabolist would be the same for Catherine. A victory in the end, coupled with major loss (parents in Blacks case), but more importantly a turning point that made him what he is now. Cat doesn't know of any parents to lose like Black did, but he is the closest thing to a father she has and is the only character she gives a lot of shits about within arms reach as a major player in the climax.

The less obvious bits are the chapter titles, which are thematic and pretty telling as a result. Considering this is a story about breaking the fourth wall and using story tropes as a plot mechanism, you can't exactly ignore thematic chapter titles for what's looking to be the climax and conclusion for a major arc.

The bridge and solo are pretty self explanatory, in music they generally lead up to the climax, with the solo setting up the focal point. This isn't about fleshing out side characters, world building, or a buildup arc in the shadow of the bigger picture. This song – this arc – is specifically for the Main Character, a climax at the end of a very long song building up to it.

Elision is a bit more oblique, to put it simply, an overlap where the end of one phrase is used as the beginning of another phrase. An Ending and a Beginning all at once. It's pretty easy to make a strong argument for it being foreshadowing of the overarching

plot. The end of the Squire – ending with a Loss, and the beginning of the next part of the story – beginning with a Rise. Maybe not as a black knight, but as the rise of something though, something that most likely isn't the squire.

Refrain is fairly self explanatory too. A repeated line. Same old conflict against recurring big-bad Akua. Same old conflict against her as the end of an arc. First in the bet with her for the final mock battle. Second more directly in a three way with ol willy. Third face to face.

Middle eight is generally a part of a song with a very significantly different melody that helps develop the song by a good contrast. It's intentionally not in tune with the rest of the story – it gets back on the rails afterwards. This is her Loss, after winning and winning as a Main Character. It's also very arguably the End of the major plot section. She's Lost and knelt. All roads now point to a Beginning, starting with a rise and putting steel through someone's throat.

Also, generally knights-to-be generally kneel before the ruler during their knighting, before rising and bearing the formal title. If you want to take the easy way out with the symbology. More than likely Akua, crowned in dread, ends of being the one to knight Cat, whether the outcome is in her favor or not.

*Engineer*

Fucking brilliantly said.

*BroadAxe*

All these people saying they saw this coming, yet not a single person suggested it in the previous chapter comments... Anyways, my guess is that killing black will make her able to break the bindings, that or being forced to do it alllows her to break them right before having to do it. But we have seen so much foreshadowing of her necromancy and how it's special that i think she will kill him, break the bindings and then black will rise as the death knight.

That's my guess anyways 😊

*BroadAxe*

Also, akua talking about the tower as a deity elluds alot to how cathrine has been talking about named beings gods, and hinting at becoming one herself sorta.

"If I disdained the lay of Creation as ordained by the Gods, the banners of black and white, then I must either make my own or find myself nothing but a butcher among butchers."

This chapter also match up to her saying the part where she beat the small god that was arcadia by taking it out of arcadia where it is no longer perfect like cogs in machines. Except here it was the opposit, she a thing of chaotic victory went into arcadia and lost because there, everything must make complete narative sense 😊

*Joen*

Black would just rise as the Black Knight again.

Him transitioning to a new name would leave the Role of Black Knight open again unnecessarily, since Cat won't be the new Black Knight either.

*werafdsaew*

Akua controlling Cat using Bind has been heavily foreshadowed, and many commentators have picked up on that. The exact detail on how that could happen is, of course, not known beforehand.

*Gunslinger*

I think I mentioned this when Akua brought up the aspect Claim that maybe she could claim her as a fae. Didn't think it would happen at the heart of winter though.

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

Sorry, I didn't see this coming. But there are lots of things in this I don't see coming. I'd play a heroquest differently than Cat does. Everything goes differently than I would do it, which makes the entire series so delightful to me.

*burdi*

it was in the Fourfold Crossing. Akua always ordered cat to kneel and cat always kneel, before shoved steel through akua throat. Cat has to loose at the beginning before she can kill akua or..... cat became akua slave for the rest of crussade

*Joen*

You know, I can't really see how Akua expects things to play out.

Akua enslaves Cat, has her kill Black, and then kills Malicia and takes over the Tower? Killing her way through Scribe, Assassin, Warlock, and Ranger (who will want revenge) just to reach Malicia?

Akua could flee after Black dies, but her mind is set on becoming Dread Empress—she wouldn't be content with sitting in a corner while things blow over.



## *Byzantine*

Akua is intelligent but she does not understand Cat at all. If she did she would have killed her the moment Bind took hold.

## [\*knockoffnikolai\*](#)

Remember, Akua's just as genre-savvy as the other major players. She's banking on the fact that staying more in tune with her villainy gives her more of a narrative advantage.

## *Nafram*

I choose to believe, in Catherine, in that she will find a way to not only defeat Akua but to save Amadeus and prevent Praes from basically imploding.

And, well, everyone seems to forget that Liesse is the one place where a Name can be usurped. Perhaps Black and Cat could find a way to use that to make Cat transition without killing Black and breaking Akua's hold over her

## *Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

It feels good having predicted what would happen, like peeling a banana, or flaying yourself in the middle of the street.

Typo Thread!

the quote in the beginning

"best reserved rulers who don't make their enemies eat their own hands."

^

for

## *Nethermore*

100% certain Black has planned for this. 70% certain Cat will get a new name out of it, the missing 30% are to account for how long it's been teased already. I don't quite trust the author not to blueball us ;). If Black dies, she definitely gets a new name, but if he lives (and I believe that he planned with his death as a cost he'd be willing to pay, but ideally wouldn't have to) then it might get delayed at least until she returns from the fight to claim it while putting down all the undead at once or something.

## [\*taborask\*](#)

Honestly I'm just ashamed Cat didn't see this coming. She knew Diabolists power, knew she relied on Fae power, and just...hoped it would work out? I had all sorts of theories about how she was going to get around such an obvious weakness and am kinda let down that she just didn't think of it

*1shot4living*

Oh... No, please tell me that I'm not right... For the love of all that is holy, please have Cat kill Black... And then become the Black Panther XD

### [TheAtomicOption](#)

Interesting to see people speculating about Cat getting a new name. It would be fun to see what she gets with 3 new aspects again. But what names could she even get? She already rejected Queen. Black Knight would require killing Amadeus, so here's hoping that's not the one. White Knight isn't really her style. Chancellor? outlawed and also not her style. Maybe a completely new one? It will be interesting to see. If I had to bet, I'd still predict she becomes Black Knight somehow. But maybe she can save Black and pull out a new one like Cavalier or Black Queen instead.

*kagelupus*

Cat rejected the title of Queen as thrust upon her by the Angels of Judgement, since it came with strings attached. But I don't think that necessarily bars her from ever getting a royal Name. She was the orphaned Squire that pulled the Sword from the Stone, after all.

Personally I think that the Angels just offered her the wrong name. Cat is a pragmatic villain who wants to rule because she is the only person who will do it the right way. She was never going to be the type of ruler who sits back and rests on her laurels because the entire world is fucked and out to get her people. Luckily there is already precedence for a Queen of Callow who uses martial might to lift her subjects up and stop them from just being a stomping ground between other nations.

My money is on Catherine Foundling, Queen of Blades.

### [HappyNap](#)

Correct me if im wrong... but Cat used three different stories while in Arcadia to give weight to her fight with the Duke of violent squalls... Wasn't one of them her father dying?

*Metalshop*

With the implication that it's by her hands, no less.

*narcoduck*

To me, there are still three factors at play before this Book must come to a close.

1. Malicia's answer at the end of Chapter 49: Hearsay. We know that she knew perfectly well what Akua's weapon was, and perhaps even expected Cat to be Bound by Akua. Now that the High Lords are done for, what could she focusing her time on now?

2. Thief and Akua's father are both missing. There's the beginning of Akua's Folly.

3. The mysterious message at the end of Chapter 63: Bridge. Message from Thief? Black? Malicia? Hells, the Tyrant?

From reading the comments, it seems that everyone believes Catherine's time as Squire is at an end, and Black is fated to die for the transition of his Name. But is death really the end for villains? A line struck me on a reread; three years ago in Book 1:Chapter 6: Aspect, the very first thing that Black ever truly taught Cat was Necromancy. He helped her through it, guiding her nascent power through the motions. And the word he used there was curious. It wasn't that she was too fresh into her Name; it was that she was too fresh into her Role.

I wonder what the Dead King would think of that.

*Zarax*

So a question... can Cat use Take on Claim and Claim and aspect of Aku for herself?

*Phil*

Many expect a tragic end for Black, and in a normal Story that would probably be what happens. But we need to remember that a big part of what Cat does is twist and subvert Stories. Granted, she's on the defensive now and her plans have been shredded, but there's still Black to consider. He's all about twisting Stories, too, and right now things are presumably going more or less according to his plans.

Which is not to say that he'll necessary get out of this in one piece. Not everything can be subverted because Stories are the physics of this world. One of the rules seems to be that great accomplishments require great sacrifice. Akua wants Cat to sacrifice Black in order to rise higher, which really means helping Akua rise higher. Black and Cat will want to twist that to their advantage, but no amount of twisting will eliminate the fact that a sacrifice will be needed.

Kiling Akua would be a sacrifice in one sense of the word (like the sacrifices the Praesi practice all the time), but would it be the right sort for this little dance to play out? Perhaps not, in which case something important to Cat and/or Black will have to be given up in order for Akua to be defeated.

This fight is fundamental to this story. Black is living the idea that Roles and Stories can and should be subverted for the sake of larger goals. Akua is living the idea of sticking to one's Role in the Story – that there are no “larger goals” outside of living one's Role. For Black, being Evil is largely a means to an end; for Akua, being Evil is the end in itself.

The winner in this fight is obvious, given what this story is. But how and at what cost are open questions. It's a mark of a good writer that they can let the end of a fight be so obvious, yet leave open enough questions that they still manage to maintain tension and interest.

Many have thought that Cat would eventually take on the Role of Black Knight. It seems obvious and is part of her Name, and that's part of why I'm sure it won't happen (or at least she won't stop there). She'll never play second-fiddle to anyone, and that's what the Black Knight ultimately is. Unless Cat is able to forge a completely new Name and Role, there's only one place she's going: Empress.

It would fit with Black's plans, after all. He wants a stable Empire and believes that a union with Callow will allow that. The Callowans will never truly accept being ruled by the Empire, though they are on their way. Having a Callowan Squire is helping. Cat as a sort of Vice-Queen helps more, even if it's unofficial. But Cat as Empress? That would solidify Callow's place in the Empire and against everyone else.

*Ed*

No matter which way this falls Akua loses. She Bound SQUIRE not The Black Knight so even if Cat does transition to The Black Knight as intended, Akua is kinda fucked.

So either Cat gets free somehow and fucks her up as Squire, unlikely or Cat transitions to Black Knight either with Black dead or not and she fucks her up as the unbound Black Knight or Cat transitions to something completely new and fucks her up then.

Just a matter of how hard Akua is going to get fucked.

*maresther23*

I have this ridiculous image of Black going “all according to keikaku”

*Decius*

“Squire” can refer to either the shield-bearer/knight's apprentice, or to a village leader or justice of the peace or similar dignitary.

Cat could transition to a different name. Death Knight is out because there isn't room for another Knight. But something like Viceroy could come from (e)Squire. Or, with one aspect of Squire left, she could subvert the story Akua is telling, TAKE the title of Black Knight from Amadeus, then stab Akua in the throat,

Either way, the payoff for "We do not kneel" is approaching.

[Shawn Panzegraf](#)

Everyone's forgetting something:

During the Chapter where Cat argued with Black, suspecting he was setting this up as a suicide mission for himself to transition her. There was foreshadowing, a moment where Cat thought to herself she could bind Black as a Queen does a Knight not to get himself killed. Instead Cat chose to trust Black.

That passage very HEAVILY hints/foreshadows that Cat is on the edge of Black Queen as a Name. I don't think it a coincidence that Black jumped her about "dispensing with the bastard fig leaf" that was calling herself "Vicequeen of Callow."

All the elements are there. While the Squire had no weight versus the Apocalyptic Villainous Evil threatening the Kingdom, a "villainous Queen of Blades-type Name" (Ie: Black Queen) would be just the sort of Name with the weight to throw off Akua's binding and contest with Diabolist on (more than) equal footing.

*nigeltheoutlaw*

I feel like Cat is going to be getting a new name instead of becoming the Black Knight. She's already become so much more than a Squire, and it'd feel almost anticlimactic for her only to be the Black knight. Maybe she can be the Black Queen in Name.

Then again, this is the type of story that seems to have a hard on for tragedy and bad ends, so maybe shit will blow up and she'll kill her surrogate father after all.

*Anon*

So...Cat's plan that she spent a bunch of time developing was to get Diabolist into the realm where rules, stories, and Names become much more relevant, AFTER Akua already warned her in a previous chapter, "what I claim, I bind" (of which the claim presumably allowed Akua to set up the initial bindings that led Cat to wasting break), and used summer fire to beat cats ice...and this was the best plan she and Masego could come up with?

Either this is all a plan of blacks (especially with that sentence from the shadow we couldn't hear somehow a few chapters back) or this feels really dumb. Even though it likely isn't

going to end here, and I know Akuas role means she needs to be a schemer, this feels a little bit out there.

Granted, cat has other elements in play even without black, but if it's a black plot, there is the risk of the cool reveal feeling cheap, unless black mind whammied cat to forget, in order to make the twist more believable from a narrative standpoint

Side note, don't the aspects have a cool down of sorts? Cat just used break during the 4fold path illusion. And on that note, Akua seems to imply that cat could attempt to break free later, in that bind may be limited? (She's also massively misconstruing cats character if she thinks cat would ever work for her after the lesson of the crossing failed – she'd need to continually bind her and/or keep her in Arcadia, or swear she would murder every Callowan alive if cat tries to get out from her yoke.

### *Gutters*

I think that Cat is due for a name change, but in this case, it will be a logical progression of subtle clues we have seen. If I had to buy my lottery ticket, I'd pick something like "Black Queen" being her new name, because with it, she can become a Queen of Callow (as she has already been heading in that direction), she can maintain her association with dark powers, but also, it gives her a chance to recruit Black to her side. After all, every queen needs her knight in shining armor, and this would allow her to keep him.

### *Shawn Panzegraf*

Akua's biggest problem with long-term binding Cat is she's applying her own outlook to anticipation of what Cat would do if faced with the Calamities hunting her for killing Black. AKUA would do whatever was necessary to survive, so she assumes Cat would/will do the same.

Diabolist is unable to process the thinking that could allow (even if everyone were right about Cat becoming the new Black Knight) Cat to rise as the Black Knight, and then turn on Akua anyways despite knowing it'd mean her own end at the hands of the remaining Calamities.

Diabolist would die with a look of shocked incomprehension on her face...

### *The Verbiage Ecstatic*

I'm surprised Akua thinks that Cat will become the new Black Knight if she forces Cat to kill Black against her will. Yes, the Squire killing the Knight and ascending to his place is part of the Name, but if it's involuntary, will it have the weight to stick? Names are all about will, and it seems like a pretty weak-

sauce act of will to kill your predecessor because someone else is running you like a puppet. Why wouldn't it just leave the Name open for anyone to claim? Akua makes the point that the Calamities won't care whether Cat kills of her own volition, and from what we know of them, that seems accurate, but Creation does seem to value intent.

*naturalnuke*

And then Scribe wrote a letter.

And the Diabolist lost power.

*Cestarian*

Black will not die, student killing teacher is a trope, and this story is about resisting tropes.

I think black's plan is to renounce his name before she can kill him, that is the only way Catherine won't just get squashed by warlock, scribe, assassin and possibly ranger after this ordeal. If he lives but she gets his mantle anyways. He does not need to die, if he steps down voluntarily, and I don't believe for a second that he doesn't see how he would just be a liability after this, after the purge, he has no real place as the black knight after that. Not even for the war with procer.

So in offering his name to Catherine without dying, she will get an opportunity to strike.

*Captain Amazing*

Not being able to renounce his name is kinda like the Hierarch's entire thing so I don't think it's just that easy. On further thought, that would be a plausible way out if they get it to work; Akua bound the name of Squire. On the other hand, isn't she banking on a transition once he's dead anyway and would have planned for this?

*Thenre*

So we've had a lot of foreshadowing that something is going to go down with the kingdom of the dead. That plus the foreshadowing of the death of Black makes me think this story is going to go one way (which means I'm almost certainly wrong).

- 1) Akua makes Cat kill Black
- 2) As the sword is swinging down Black uses Break on the Binding
- 3) Because Black waited so Cat would have to finish the blow and kill him she does
- 4) Akua begins another monologue about how she is the Empress and will knight her and blah blah blah
- 5) Cat says something to the tune of "You may be the Empress, but

you'll never make a Queen kneel" and then stabs her through the throat (claiming the Black Queen Name in the process as alluded)

- 6) Using her new power as the Black Queen Cat raises Black from the dead and knights him as the Death Knight
- 7) In 3 more books (after spanking both Procer and Malicia) they end up at war with the Kingdom of the Dead or whatever it's called
- 8) The Death Knight is turned against the Black Queen
- 9) Cat finally destroys Black once and for all and then pretty much everything including herself in her grief.
- 10) We get an epilogue where Masego has a Harem of Heroes where Archer gets him the bodies of magical creatures in exchange for his "love" and thief steals him magical artifacts for the same.

### *Vagrant*

I like the idea of black using break at the last moment possible thus enforcing his plan of dying and freeing cat. However, is his aspect not known to Akua? I don't remember whether he managed to keep an aspect hidden over his long career. He is awesome like that, so it might be. It just seems pretty... If Akua does not know his aspects, she should still be aware of the list of possible aspects and therefore be prepared for such a standard use of it. But I like the timing idea. Maybe it will happen but not yet be the final sequence of this fight

### Tohron

Just to note – in case anyone missed it, in the Exeunt interlude we found out that Diabolist's remaining aspect is Call, which lets her control & see through the creatures she summons. Most likely it'll be used to bring in the monster.

### *Vagrant*

Hello everybody, there are loads of theories in the comments. This story is very engaging to me too. So I, normally being a quiet lurker, want to share my two cents as well. 😊

Cat has been warned about her Fey nature being used against her, so she will have anticipated getting smacked in that weakness by one of akuad aspects. Masego and her have planned together after all. So why does she seem to be surprised now? If my assumption is correct, it can only be explained by her somehow having messed up her memories/ thought process on purpose. Maybe for the sake of playing out a believable Real narrative of being losing right now to creation. Whatever creation is exactly.. Or to fool akuad, as Cat is aware of not being an actor akuad would be unable to see through. Also, I agree that in the narrative cat expects I this chapter she herself has now become the monster of akua. It certainly has a personal touch 😊



zout

I love this story, but it is becoming so tedious...  
This fight for Liesse has lasted more than 10 chapters at this point (long ones too). There are fully fledged books shorter than this. Some serious editing would do this story wonders

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## Chapter 68: Coda

*"Here, have a butter knife. Let it not be said I do not tend to the needs of my beloved subjects."*

– Dread Emperor Revenant, having dinner with an enemy

It was a pretty room, for an abattoir. As usual, Diabolist had indulged in a décor that was halfway between an overly ornate brothel and a cult's secret altar. The walls were pure bas-relief of pale grey marble, and even as my body obeyed instructions not my own I caught glimpses of what they displayed. Hells, twenty-one layers of them forming progressively smaller circles centred around the pedestal in the centre of I tall. Braziers of blood-red flame cast flickering shadows that seemed to make the reliefs of the devils move just out of sight, but my attention rested squarely on the man hanging in the air. Above a raised pedestal Black was held up by golden bindings on his wrists and ankles that had him spread-eagle and incapable of moving anything but his neck, which he craned at an angle to watch us coming in.

"You're late," he told me, bluntly ignoring Akua.

Diabolist tittered amusedly. She was like a cat playing with a mouse, savouring the struggle before the inevitable kill.

"You may speak, Catherine," she said, flicking her wrist.

I licked my lips, a rush of pleasure at getting back control of even just a part of my face spoiled only by the knowledge that she could take it back at a whim.

"She bound my Name," I said. "I don't control my body."

Black had lost his helmet, at some point, and his face was bruised. His armour had been stripped as well, and that sight was foreign to me. Beyond the cuts and scrapes I knew mattered nothing to a villain as old and set in his self-image as my teacher – they would be gone soon enough, leaving not even scars – it was seeing him without the shell of steel that discomfited

me. It made him look vulnerable. But his eyes were sharp as ever, and his pale green gaze turned to study Diabolist with disdain.

"Temporary enslavement, truly?" he said. "I expected better of Tasia Sahelian's daughter."

That drew blood, I saw with a smirk. There was a heartbeat of frozen fury in Akua's eyes before she schooled herself into a blank mask.

"You killed barely a tenth of the soldiers I assigned to your capture, Lord Black," Diabolist replied. "Today is a day for disappointments, it seems."

Black seemed amused, and utterly unconcerned about the fact that he was trussed up like a pig for me to slaughter. That would have given me hope if I didn't know for a fact he would behave exactly like this even if he had no last card up his sleeve.

"Arcadia was a mistake," he told me, returning to ignoring Akua. "You won a greater comparative advantage in capacity, but in Arcadia narrative matters most of all. You lacked the necessary weight to win, Catherine. In the future, consult further than Hierophant. His lack of interest in stories is a glaring weakness."

If I could frown at that, I would have. He knew for a sure I'd consulted others when planning this out: he'd been one of them.

"This is almost touching," Diabolist drawled. "Fatherly Amadeus, advising his pupil to the end. Mother made you out to be much less sentimental."

My teacher raised an eyebrow.

"Adults are talking," he told her. "We can return to your wasteful little tantrum afterwards."

"Perhaps a reminder of your current situation is in order," Akua mildly said.

Her wrist flicked and the bindings stretched out. A series of sharp pops signalled his joints had given under the pressure.

"I've had worse sparring with Sabah," he noted, face betraying not so much as a flicker of discomfort.

"It's already a cloudy day, Black," I said. "Stop trying to make it rain."

Green eyes turned to me.

"There is wisdom in moderation," he conceded.

Shit, there went my sudden hope. He'd given the correct answer to our identity key. Cloudy and rain were an inquiry, wisdom and moderation a confirmation. There shouldn't be anyone else who knew the key. I tried to look at Diabolist but found I could not, my movement restricted. As good as an assurance she'd been looking at me.

"Why so quiet, Akua?" Black said. "Come now, if there is moment to gloat now is it."

Diabolist slowly crossed the room until she stood by his side, her face remaining in a pleasant façade.

"This is not personal, Carrion Lord," she said.

"Of course it is," the pale-skinned man smiled. "You've sold your people the lie this is about the old ways and the new, but we both know otherwise. You're not a mere reactionary. I stand for the order that has been keeping you contained for decades, and through my death you gain clear skies."

"You have served Praes well," Diabolist said. "And in this final act will serve it still. You may leave the stage knowing your labour will not go to waste."

"You," Black said, "are the *incarnation* of waste. Of every destructive instinct that must be carved out or repurposed lest we ever reach old ends through old means. Your accolades are as worthless as every single thing you've ever said and done. They will pass, and be forgotten. We will all be better for it."

"Empty defiance," Akua said. "A lesser end than you deserve, but that choice was not mine to make. Ill-done nonetheless. I will spare you further disgrace."

My hand moved and unsheathed my sword, the sound of steel bared ringing too loudly in the room.

"Do you still believe it," I asked suddenly. "That it's cowardice?"

His gaze moved back to me, and what I saw there had my blood pounding against my ears. There was no fight in him.

"Proceed, child," he told Diabolist. "Play out this farce to the end."

She hesitated, in that moment. With her attention flagging I got the opportunity to watch her, and what I saw had my lips quirking. She was hesitating because she could not believe, deep down, that anyone would be unafraid of death. *Because you are*, I thought. *So very, very afraid*. Some ancient Alban king had once said that a man only began to live when he had something worthy

dying for. I'd never really believed that, myself. If you really believed in something, you owed that belief that it be seen through to the bitter end. But Akua? Akua believed only in herself. She could not conceive of any victory that did not involve her breathing at the end, and applying that belief to Black she was being shaken by his indifference. Wondering if he had some last trick to save his own hide. The hesitation passed after she looked at the walls around us, at the runes hidden in the bas-relief, and reminded herself of the strength of her defences.

"Farewell, Carrion Lord," Akua said. "Die knowing that the torch you now pass will cast a shadow on all of Creation."

"Uninspired," Black judged.

The sword went through his stomach. I'd not guided the blow, and it seemed his words had irked Diabolist enough she'd chosen to give him a slow death instead of a quick one. He gurgled and twitched as the dark-skinned woman stalked at my side. Laying a hand on my shoulder she leaned close to my ear.

"How does it feel," she asked in a murmur, "to reach the dawn of what you were meant to be?"

I wasn't the one to answer. A laugh came ripping out of a throat that was patched together from half a dozen voices, hoarse and soft but all whispering.

"Akua Sahelian," the thing kept in bindings said, "Diabolist."

Even as it bled out, slowly crawling to death, its skin was flaking off. Beneath the appearance of my teacher was a middle-aged Soninke of the same build. Then it was a young Taghreb woman. Every blink had a different face to it, and the longer I watched the less I could remember about any of them. Akua stepped away from me like she'd been burned.

"Assassin," she said. "No, a fake. You are in Procer, I know it. The Prince of Orne died choking on his own correspondence."

Ah, I thought as an old detail finally clicked into place. It'd always niggled at me, that Black's favourite executioner would have a signature. His little ironic deaths. Wasn't half the point of having a skilled assassin that the enemy never knew you'd killed one of their own at all? The point of a signature, I grasped, was that people recognized it. Watched out for it. *It's like the Eyes of the Empire*, I thought. The deadly hidden in the obvious. *How many people has Assassin killed over the years that had perfectly natural accidents no one ever thought to question?* Then it sunk in that the fucking Assassin knew the identity key I shared with Black, and my blood ran cold. Even knowing it had been a measured risk on his part, the fact that at any time in

the last year I might have been talking with this monster instead of mine and never known it was sobering.

"You die nonetheless," Diabolist sneered.

"A hundred times before," Assassin said in that voice was not a voice. "A hundred times more."

Akua's hand whipped up, a spear of black flames formed and tearing through the other's villains guts in moments.

"Where is your father, child?" the Assassin said. "The Carrion Lord sends his regards."

And then it laughed, laughed until there was too little left of it for even that. Ashes fell in clumps on the ground until the hellflame devoured even that. Diabolist was shaken, I saw. That I could see it at all was telling, because I could now move my neck. And wiggled the fingers of my free hand, however slightly. The binding was not perfect.

"Did you know?" she hissed, wheeling on me.

I rasped out a laugh.

"All according to plan," I lied.

Or perhaps not. Just not *my* plan. Diabolist mastered her anger but there was more than that I saw in her eyes. Fear, fear spreading with every pump of her heart. The realization that she was no longer in control. I relished it, fed on it. She strode to the wall and slapped down her palm on it, the reliefs shifting to leave a smoothly polished circle as she spoke in the mage tongue. The cadence I recognized, if not the words. She was scrying. The surface of the stone rippled and lights swam into focus until an image was formed, and at the heart of the circle pale green eyes met Akua's gaze.

"Good evening, Diabolist," the Black Knight said, and cut off her father's ear.

I'd never seen the man before, though I knew his name from intelligence reports. Dumisai of Aksum. He'd apparently abandoned her mother's side to join her shortly after she became governess of Liesse. The scrying stone shifted, revealing a windowless room filled with hacked corpses and my teacher standing in the middle of it with Dumisai kneeling at his feet. Hands bound, his body a collection of swelling bruises. He screamed when Black's sword cut through his ear, shaking as blood spewed. Akua let out a raw sound, before she went cold.

"A hostage," Diabolist said. "You should know better."

Black, not bothering to reply, flicked his wrist and cut off the remaining ear. The man screamed again, louder.

"Mpanzi," he hoarsely said. "Do not flinch, this is—"

Akua's breath was steady, her face still as a pond when she interrupted. She looked at Black.

"You intend to negotiate, evidently," she stated.

"Still alive, Catherine?" my teacher asked.

"Feeling cautiously optimistic about it too," I replied. "No thanks to you."

"He is *bleeding*, Black Knight," Akua said coldly. "He is of no use to you dead. Your trick won you a small victory, but do not overplay your hand."

The pale man's lips quirked ever so slightly.

"I cannot claim that trick to be mine," he demurred. "The Wandering Bard taught me a hard lesson in Nicae, about weight and the shifting of it. I expect she will rue that, before my days are done."

"Your demands?" Diabolist asked.

"Three questions, answered truly," Black said. "If this is done, I will spare your father. At even the suspicion of a lie, I will kill him immediately."

I had to force myself not to glare. Questions? *Really?* Now of all times?

"And what guarantee do I have you will hold up your part of the bargain?" Akua said.

"You'll have no oath from me, child," he said. "I give you my word. Take it or leave it."

My hands rose and I felt the cold touch of steel against my neck.

"I could kill your apprentice with a single word," Diabolist said.

"That has been attempted before," Black said. "To the woe of all involved. By all means, see where it takes you. It's been a long day, I could use a laugh."

Though I appreciated the pat on the back, I was currently lacking a fucking angel to swindle so I really wished he hadn't just said that. Akua felt desperate, at the edge of the precipice. That was a dangerous place for her kind of villain to be.

"Three questions," Diabolist said. "Answered truly."

My hand came down and the blade with it, but that meant nothing. She could do the same without lifting a finger at any time.

"You acquired a great many ritual objects to build this device," Black said. "Were any bought through the Closed Circle in Mercantis?"

Diabolist looked at him for a long time.

"Yes," she said.

For a second my teacher looked very, very old. Exhausted down to his bones. But it was gone as quick as it had come, leaving me to wonder if I'd imagined the whole thing.

"What contact have you had with the Wandering Bard, envoys thereof or affiliates bearing messages for her?" Black asked.

*That* got my attention. I'd been under the impression that the Bard had been meddling down south, too busy to put her hand to the chaos in Callow. That he would even ask this implied he was not so certain as that as I'd believed.

"We had a single conversation in the hills beyond Marchford," Akua said. "That was our only point of contact, to my knowledge."

If anything, that reply seem to had him get warier. Shit. Another thing to watch out for, though. I couldn't see an angle for her to play in this mess, but that was always what fucked you wasn't it? The knife you didn't see coming.

"The cylinder around your throat has a soul bound within," Black said. "Whose is it?"

Diabolist's lips thinned and she hesitated. Cold steel tightened against the back of her father's neck. I felt it on my back, between my shoulder blades. Discretely I made a thumbs down, and tapped the side of my leg once. Then a thumb up, and tapped the side of my leg twice. It was gone. Then it came back once, twice. Another piece fell into place. Soon, now.

"A newborn child's," she finally said.

He turned to me.

"Her contingency, Catherine," he told me. "A blank slate with her mind woven in, meant to eventually possess that same child's body if she dies. You will have to destroy it."

"I'm a little tied up at the moment, Black," I said irritated, then winced at the accidental pun.

"Your questions were answered," Diabolist said. "You gave you word."

"So I did," Black agreed, and the blade left the man's neck. "Move along, Dumisai."

It swung down but no blood was spilled: the bindings on the mages's hands were cut instead. There was a flicker of surprise in the eyes of both father and daughter, and in that moment of surprise the binding slackened further. *Patience, Cat*, I cautioned myself. The mage trembling got to his feet and my teacher sheathed his sword.

"Do you know why grand designs like yours always fail?" he asked Akua.

"You have lost your leverage, Carrion Lord," she coldly replied. "Your life will soon follow."

"Because they're *loud*," he continued. "You light a beacon that no one can miss. The lasting victories are always the quiet ones. Farewell, Akua Sahelian. You were warned."

Dumisai of Aksum opened a door, and the moment freedom was open to him a volley of crossbow bolts thudded into his face. Black's word had been kept, to the letter. He'd spared the man. No promise had been made about any sappers that might be waiting outside. I felt the blow ripple through her, through the binding, and finally I tapped the side of my leg twice.

"*You*," Diabolist screamed, the hatred in her eyes was poison but she was looking in the wrong direction and she had been made to play the wrong game since she first scried.

It was going to cost her.

"Surprise," Thief rasped, and stole the binding.

She came into sight, wounded and burned but gloriously still alive, and the world slowed as the sequence I'd been awaiting began. Diabolist turned and barked in the mage tongue in the same movement. Vivienne recoiled as if she'd been slapped, gritting her teeth. I closed my eyes, part of me knowing exactly what was about to unfold. Akua would wrest the binding back from her and seek to shackle me again, to kill Thief and then Black. Even as I ran my finger down that line the rest of me turned inwards, to the scaffolding Hierophant had fashioned around my soul. It was meant to prevent from collapsing on myself because of the power I'd stolen from Winter, I knew. The best effort of a once-in-a-century brilliant mind to keep me alive and whole. That'd been the mistake. It was, as he'd warned me, the leash Diabolist used to bind me. But the error ran deeper, because for all the horrors at his fingertips Masego was a fundamentally kind boy. He'd tried



to keep me unbroken. Shield me from pain, from hunger, from the many prices the decisions I'd made had laid at my feet but had since gone unpaid. There it was, I thought. My pivot. I'd awaited some dilemma that would have my conscience or my heart bleeding, but oh that wasn't the kind of story I'd made was it?

No. For all that I'd lashed myself with guilt when the mood took me, it had always been others paying the price. My people, my soldiers, my friends. My teachers. Again and again they bled so that I would not, and the arrogance of that had seeped into my bones as over that sea of corpses I set my throne. It had made me believe I was owed victory, deep down. Perhaps even that I deserved it. And now Creation was forcing my eyes open and making me watch what I had wrought, whispering that I had a choice. I could roll the dice once more, with a laugh in my throat and a sneer on my lips, throw my challenge and my pride in the face of Diabolist and bet on a victory that heaped yet another ruin to the pile. There was a chance of triumph, glinting at the end of that path. I had Thief and years of treading the knife's edge, hatred enough to surpass Akua's own. If I risked it all in the moment before she bound me again, I could avoid the reckoning once more. Or I could give answer. I had stood before a tribunal of merciless angels once, but this judgement was a deeper thing. It was a settling of accounts in full, the surrender of all the safeties I'd been given without earning them. Just my choices and their consequences, whatever those might be. It would not be pretty. It would not be as easily set aside as a doubt in the dark of night or a death snatched back by trickery. All I had to do was to... lean in.

A single heartbeat passed. Thief lost the binding, and I made my choice. In matters of self-mutilation, I had few rivals. In my mind's eye I looked up the scaffolding Hierophant had built and I *ripped it off*.

Diabolist's binding found me but there was no purchase, because Winter was no longer a thing tamed. It ran wild through my veins, through my Name, and a scream ripped its way out of me. My blood was red ice, my bones snapped and beyond it all my heart beat once – and ceased. There was a world within that I owned, and it was bereft of stars and moon because in the depths of that darkness even those had been smothered by frost. It did not kill me. No, in a way that would have been a mercy and my mantle knew no such thing. What I had of life was a last gasp, the desperate clawing of death's rattle as the whole world was buried around me. Bleak. That was the word, and now I understood the meaning of it in full. Winter had taken it all and left nothing behind that would warm me, no refuge to reassure me that I was still Catherine Foundling. Even my Name was stripped bare, its power dimmed and dull. I had no aspect left but one, and that one was gone far beyond what an aspect should be. Squire, I thought, but

the name rang hollow. Tied to me only by the barest thread. Transition loomed ahead, patiently awaiting the right fulcrum.

"Oh *fuck*," Thief whispered.

I turned to watch Diabolist, feeling the warmth and fear wafting off her fragile frame. So very mortal, for all her arrogance.

"Your trial I have cheated," I said. "And suffered defeat for that crooked passing."

"**Call**," Akua Sahelian said.

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

"Vivienne," I said, and when I spoke her name she shivered.

I did not, though the sheer act of voicing it had felt like I was stroking her cheek. A true name, freely given. There was power in this.

"Stand aside," I said. "It is time for me to end this."

She mutely nodded, backing away as Diabolist wreathed herself in Summer flame. Cold crept across the room, the air going still and the stone growing cool. I did not need to will it. It happened.

"The pivot I snatched from your grasp," I told Akua. "And so you no longer have hold over me."

I felt her will scrabbling against my own, trying to seize the threads of Winter, but all she could touch was the summit of the glacier. It was beyond her ability to move.

"What are you?" Akua Sahelian gasped.

"The monster," I said. "The one you should have bound *tighter*."

I limped slightly as I advanced, an old wound once erased but now made anew. The Gods did enjoy their little ironies. I read it in the way she moved, that shifted. How she was going to wield the fire. It only took the slightest of adjustments to let it pass me. Was this how it felt, to have the weight of Creation behind you? How novel. Diabolist backed a way but I touched her chest over her heart, ever so slightly, and there was a quiet snap. Her expression went still, and I buried my arm through her chest up to the elbow.

"I'll be seeing you soon," I told her as she died. "I still have an oath to keep."

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*therealgridlock*

I finally get what you said when assassin has been on screen in every book.

Assassin has literally pretended to be every character at some point, hasn't he?

[crowlute](#)

And we wouldn't even know.... What a perfect reveal!!!

*Kai Wingless*

Sounds like something Assassin would say!

[vuthuha912](#)

It must have feel depressing – knowing that you are the only one who is fighting while the rest of your comrade have given up. Sometimes, it is easier to let the currents takes you away. But giving up is not what you are, you will fight till the end. You rather be a broken jade than an unbroken stone.

Cat is turning herself into a monster. See what is wrong here Black? You want her to not become you but you put her in situation where becoming you is the options she need to take. You are shit at this parenting business. I know you are doing your best and is doing what you think will help her but seriously, you need someone to talk about this parenting thing. Someone who has a functional family – Sabah. Please tell me you talk with her about this before she died. You didn't, did you?

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## Chapter 69: Swan Song

*"Thus the Gods granted us the first boon: as we live we will die, and in dying be granted our just deserts."*

– The Book of All Things, fourth verse of the second hymn

I knelt and ripped the necklace from Akua's neck, silver links giving easily. The obsidian was warm to the touch and my fingers clasped around it. Black had told me to destroy it. He was not

the kind of man to be troubled over the death of a newborn child, if that child served as a tool for his enemies. It was tempting to do as he'd asked, to just tighten my grasp ever so slightly and watch it shatter. But the Empress had spoken a sentence to me, and that gave me pause. It was too early, I thought, to begin closing avenues. I rose and tossed the cylinder to Thief, who caught it without missing a beat.

"Foundling," she said. "Are you..."

Words failed her after that. I supposed there was no delicate way to ask someone if they were still sane.

"Close enough," I said. "Stash it. Unless I tell you to admit otherwise, it was destroyed."

The other woman's eyes narrowed. She wasn't like the others, I thought. Adjutant and Hierophant, even Archer, they would speak their minds to me but almost never refuse an order. Thief and I had ties of a different nature. She had only come under my banner when she made a bet on me as the only actor on the stage interested in keeping Callow from being devastated. The moment that was no longer my path, she would turn on me. I could taste the truth of that in the air.

"One hundred thousand," Vivienne Dartwick said. "At least. Maybe half that again, with the refugees. She massacred and enslaved them, Catherine. Denied them even a proper burial. And you want to keep this?"

I studied her closely, my eyes sharper than they should have been. I no longer needed to force a sliver of my Name into them to better my vision. Claiming the mantle in full had brought consequences more than metaphysical. In the cool air of the room I could feel the warmth of her, a bundle of life that had me disgustingly *hungry*. Winter did not make, it took. Until nothing was left. Thief had not come out of the day's butchery untouched, for all her liveliness. Her short dark hair had been licked by fire on the side of her head, leaving the whole of it looking unbalanced, and under the frayed locks I could glimpse skin burnt and blackened. The left side of her leathers was flecked with blood, and close to her leg entirely drenched. I could still see the holes in her clothes where shards of stone and metal had torn apart her flesh. It would pass. Within the month she would be the same as she'd been, her Name smoothing away the wrinkles to her appearance. She was in no shape to fight right now but then fighting had never been what her Name was about.

"Do you know why my arm keeps getting twisted?" I said.

"Leverage, Thief. That is what I lack the most. They all have things I want or need, and I have precious little of the same. That little piece is a kind leverage. It may be that I never use it, and that within the month I'll shatter it. But there's a knot

of choices right ahead of me, and I will not go into it having robbed myself of a card to play.”

“She doesn’t get to come back, Foundling,” Vivienne said. “Not after *this*. That’s a line.”

Part of me, the same that had eyes turned to the transition ahead, balked at being dictated terms by one subordinate to me. I breathed in and out, then forced that cold anger to the side. It was of no use to me. Anger was a blinder and I already had too many of those.

“Agreed,” I said.

Thief nodded slowly, and with a flourish of the wrist she had the cylinder disappearing into that place where all her loot was kept. It was an aspect, she’d intimated to me more than once. That should be beyond the reach of anyone so long as she lived, and Thief was very good at remaining alive.

“Now what?” Vivienne asked. “I suppose we’ve won but this doesn’t feel like a victory.”

“It’s not over yet,” I said, and looked down at the Diabolist’s corpse.

I could raise it from the dead, I knew. Without the soul lingering she’d be an empty vessel, but a very powerful one. That could have its uses in the wars to come. Another temptation, this. The first of many to come: power obtained always wanted to be used.

“There should be a part of the city on fire,” I said.

“I’m familiar with the Foundling Gambit, yes,” Thief snorted.

Given how often goblinfire was my solution to a thorny situation, I supposed I could no longer deny that name. It irked me anyway, that my signature would be green flames devouring friend and foe alike.

“Toss her corpse into it,” I said. “I need to find Black. He’ll be at the centre of the mess.”

“And when you find him?” Vivienne said.

“Offers are made,” I replied. “And then a choice.”

Gods forgive me, but I hoped I’d make the right one.

—

Liesse had been twice claimed by death. First when Diabolist murdered and raised anew the people that dwelled within its wall,

making it a house of undeath beneath her throne. And now, as the Ducal Palace burned like a green candle in the penumbra, the city had been made a necropolis in full. No one ruled here now. Not me, not Black, not the Empress. Wights only half-leashed owned the streets as the last of the living rebels huddled in their strongholds, hoping they would be spared the sword of the Tower or the teeth of their own creations. I was not inclined to mercy in this. Examples would be made, would *have* to be made if I was to keep Callow in hand in the aftermath. This brutal a massacre could not go unanswered. Even if the thought of letting it go had not been repulsive to me, such an obvious and blatant injustice would be the fodder of a rebellion neither Calow nor Praes could afford. It might even make heroes, sent by the Heavens to put down the last of the Calamities. Or me. The days were I could argue my methods were anything but an evil – and perhaps not even the lesser one, I thought as I walked the ruins of what had once been the heart of the south – were long gone. I was not guilty of the butchery Diabolist and her ilk had made, but it had happened under my watch. Not guilty, perhaps, but a part of responsibility could not be denied.

There would be a reckoning for that, in time. Praesi liked to say that the Tower always got its due, but the Heavens were even less often cheated of theirs.

I could feel the centre of the array in the distance, pulsing like a living thing, and I let my feet take me there. It was beginning to sink in, the depth of what Diabolist had done here as mere means to obtain expendable foot soldiers. Liesse had once been a sprawling festival of basilicas and trade, the first destination of the wealth that came pouring out of Mercantis through Dormer. It'd been the largest city in Callow after Laure, and the beating heart of southern culture. Its destruction gutted the entire south. One hundred thousand people. It'd been easier to live with when it was just a number of soldiers Diabolist could field, but now that she'd been slain I was forced to face the truth that a significant chunk of my people was... gone. Irremediably. Men and women and children, the old and the young. Not soldiers but people, the part of this country that actually *mattered*. It was one thing for the struggles to scythe through soldiers and conscripts, but this? It was something else. It was not to be forgiven, or forgotten. When I'd been a young girl – what an arrogant thought, I mocked myself, for someone not even twenty to have – I'd chosen to put together enough coin for the War College because reformation was the path of least death. Of least damage. A part of what had led me to that decision had been fear, I could admit to myself. I'd been raised to tales of the Conquest, of the overwhelming victories of the Legions, and thought that Praes could not be beaten.

It was now quite clear that it *could*.

Had Akua meant to sow the seeds of doubt, with her Fourfold Crossing? I was not sure how much I could trust the visions, if they were shaped illusion or truth, but in one of those lives I had driven Praes out of my homeland. At great a cost. Dream-like visions of countless slaughters flickered in the back of my head. But looking at Liesse, knowing the Principate was mustering its armies, I had to wonder if the massacres of that liberation would be worse than what had already taken place and yet would. The Empire was fragile, that could no longer be denied. For all that my teacher had sought to make it a nation that relied on men and institutions instead of Named, that new order was being enforced by the cudgel that was the Calamities. And behind them, the many quiet cullings of Dread Empress Malicia. But that desired metamorphosis was not complete. It had run into old money and old power, and though the Truebloods had been the visible and despicable face of that I no longer believed they were the whole of it. It had been Malicia's own allies that double-crossed me in Laure, when I went into Arcadia. That she'd either not been able to prevent that or had not bothered to spoke volumes: her grip on the Wasteland was not nearly as tight as she would have us believe.

She'd effectively purged the Truebloods, for now, and muzzled their successors. But that struck me as a nothing more than ripples atop the pond. The High Lords were sill wealthy as a dozen kings, sitting atop fortified strongholds and centuries of accumulated sorcery. They were, for now, obedient. That did not mean they would remain so, and when they did I had to wonder – which Callowan city would get the axe next? This hadn't been a Callowan war, it'd been a pissing match over ownership of the Tower. But it'd still been one of our cities that got wiped out, a hundred thousand Liessen that got turned into abominations not even as the outcome but as *part of a Praesi's plan*. I'd been willing to back the imperial occupation so long as it was the lesser evil, and even now I believed Callow as a client kingdom under the Tower with me keeping the peace would be better off than as Proceran protectorate. But what did it matter that the taxes were lesser and the administration more efficient, if every decade or so a city was wiped off the map in a succession struggle? I couldn't write this off as an outlier or an exception, not so long as the High Lords remained powerful.

As long as they existed an influential entity, sooner or later the next Akua Sahelian would be born. And the next one would be a little smarter, a little more careful in her rise to power. Worse, while awaiting that I would have to fight tooth and claw with the same people who'd back that coming Heiress to make sure my people were not murdered and robbed for the profit of foreign highborn. I was getting tired, these days, of begging and scraping for the bare essentials of my people's survivals from people who it was becoming evident *needed* me to remain in power. It could be that Malicia would reform the Wasteland, one ploy at

a time. That the institutions Black had built would overtake the old nobility in power and influence. But banking on that was a gamble, and I was running out of reasons to make it. I'd grasped, over the last year, that the way to finally leave that endless cycle of war between Callow and Praes was if one side finally won. With the Empire already occupying my homeland, working within those boundaries had struck me as the better choice. But now it was having to consider the costs of that position, and they were not light. Even if Praes was tamed, as much as such a place ever could be, there would be war with the Principate. And that war would be fought on Callowan borders.

Procer alone, I believed we could beat. The Red Flower Vales could be defended even against the massive armies the First Prince could field, and the Principate could not afford long and costly wars. It had borders to the north that could not go undefended, and sooner or later the princes would start squabbling again. For now, the memory of their recent and vicious civil war kept the peace. But that wouldn't last forever, and keeping a few border principalities at bay was no impossible task. But if the Principate came knocking again and again as the heart of a crusading host, that was an entirely different game. I had no guarantees that Cordelia Hasenbach's successor wouldn't continue pursuing her policies of making war abroad to keep peace at home. Crusades had never been kind to Callow, even when it stood on the side of Good. I'd sworn my oaths to the Tower to keep my homeland from being made a battlefield every few decades, but I was not having to consider I might just have changed the face of the invader – without even sparing Callow massacres at the hands of Wastelanders. None of this could continue as it now lay.

I loved Black, for all the horrors I knew he'd committed. The Woe as well, and the family I had found in the Fifteenth. But I had not begun treading this path for love, and I would not remain on it for sentiment. The Empress had spoken a sentence to me, sorcery riding the wave of Diabolist's workings. She had earned the right to make that offer, for the favours she had done me. That did not mean I would take it. I'd told Hakram once that I had not been chosen, that I instead I *chose*. Yet for all the power I now had at my fingertips, I was no closer to seeing what I'd chosen come to life. The echo of the final defeat I'd almost been dealt at Akua's hands still lingered in me, the realization of *fragility*. I could be wrong, just like anyone else. I might be the worst thing to happen to Callow yet, the very thing I was trying to kill one ruinous battle at a time. And if that was the case... Choices needed to be made and pride had no place in the making of them.

Even as that thought touched me, I found the heart of Diabolist's grand design. Deep in the palace behind arrays that welcomed me: I had the key Fasili had made and Robber taken from him. How



Black had entered I did not know, but suspected his imprisonment of Akua's father had opened doors for him. He was not above bleeding men for answers. This was the core, I thought, but not the room from which she would have controlled it all. That would be hidden elsewhere. But it was the keystone, were her own soul had once been the tool she used to rip apart Creation before she'd hidden that as well. It'd been a courtyard, before, walled in but spacious. Now runes carved into stone covered everything, power trickling towards the empty array in the centre like tributaries to a river. Transparent panes of force jutted upwards high in the sky, up to the distant place where the souls of centuries of Deoraithe roiled under containment. There was an altar of obsidian among a circle of carved stones, and at the edge of that circle I found Black standing in silence. I knew, objectively, that I was now taller than him. Yet as I watched his lone figure, decked in plain steel and threadbare black cloak, I felt as if he was the one who towered over me. His hand rose to acknowledge my arrival, though he did not turn. I came to stand at his side, the two of us watching the core of the device that had caused so much death.

"Another rival dead," he said. "Though you paid a dear price for it. You reek of Winter, Catherine."

"She wasn't my rival," I said, disinclined to discuss the other issue for now. "Not truly. Her story never had much to do with Callow, did it? And that is where mine lies."

After a moment of silence, Black lowered his head in acknowledgement.

"She should have been killed years ago," he softly said. "I regret that I did not proceed regardless of permission. A few months of madness uprooted decades of work. What an utter waste. The south will take decades to recover."

I had not expected him to express grief over the death of my people save in matters where they affected his own designs, and so was not disappointed by the nature of the sentiment expressed. Love was a fine thing, I thought, but it did not blind me to the nature of this man. It had not been coyness or affection, when I'd called a monster the night we first met. It was the truth of him. Charming at times and so easy to love, but a monster nonetheless.

"It ends now," I said.

"So it does," Dread Empress Malicia softly agreed.

There had been changes in me, and that I saw through the illusion she had come to us through was a herald of them. Whatever trick the Empress had employed to turn Diabolist's own device to her purposes was but a pale imitation of what glamour could do, and

even as I thought this I suddenly knew I could use glamour as well as any fae. My fingers clenched. Mantles never leant power without a price.

"Malicia," Black said. "Your presence is no longer unexpected."

"Amadeus-" she began.

"The Closed Circle, Alaya," he said calmly. "You cannot possibly have missed that. You own two of the members."

I turned to watch the illusion. It was no meat-puppet, this time: this was the Empress in her full glory come to grace us with her presence. Even through sorcery she was lovely beyond compare. Tall and sculpted and more perfect than any mortal could truly be, her favoured colours of green and gold silk dipping into a low neckline it was hard not to glance at. The most beautiful woman in the world, many called her. Any other time, I would have allowed myself a guilty moment taking in the sight. But right now words had been spoken that forbid me such distractions.

"That's why you asked," I said. "Because you realized Diabolist wouldn't have pulled all this off without being noticed."

"That she unearthed Still Waters was beyond my predictions," the Empress said. "It blindsided me as much as you."

"That's not a fucking excuse," I hissed. "That's what the two of you are supposed to *do*. Keep the Wasteland under control while I keep Callow willingly in the fold. Black was in the Free Cities most of the year and I'm not even giving him a pass here because Scribe's people should have picked up on this. The two of you have spy networks that cover half the godsdamned continent. This goes beyond mere failure. I've kept my part of the bargain. You haven't."

Black was watching Malicia, and something passed between them wordlessly. My fury spiked.

"No, this doesn't get swept up under the rug," I said through gritted teeth. "The two of you don't get to settle this with each other behind closed doors. *A hundred thousand people died*. A major city was made into a tomb, and now I'm learning this was part of a plan? There is no part of this that's acceptable. I've gone along with everything because you're supposed to be the reasonable ones, the kind of people who nip this shit in the bud. Fucking Hells, I didn't declare war on Diabolist a year ago because there was an understanding that she would be contained. My sympathy to your 'political concerns' doesn't extend to allowing your troublesome elements to commit fucking *genocide*."

Black's face was grim.

"There is no excuse," he admitted. "In this I have failed you utterly."

If he'd said anything else, even pretended he actually cared about the dead, I might have struck him. But that flat admission of failure took the wind out of my sails for heartbeat. My heated gaze turned to Malicia instead. Black and I could settle our own accounts after the rest of this was addressed.

"You're not in charge," I said. "She is. And she seems like she knew what was going on more than you."

"I failed to grasp the full scope of the matter," the Empress said.

"You think?" I growled.

"How we came to current situation is regrettable, and for this I will make appropriate redress," Malicia said. "It does not change the choices that must now be made."

It was a practical way of thinking, that. At least on the surface. The truth of it was less pretty.

"But it does," I said. "All this, the oaths and the compromises? It works because I can trust you. To keep the Reforms going, to keep the highborn in check, to not tacitly allow an old breed villain to mass murder and turn Callowan cities into magical gate-making weapons. Did this really sound pragmatic, up in the Tower? Because looking around me, I see six legions all but gutted on the eve of a crusade and a story that's the best rallying cry for rebellion I've heard since the godsdamned Conquest. Now, I've fucked up quite a few times since being put in charge of Callow. I'll own that. But I have to say, I've yet to manage to fuck up quite this *badly*."

"We cannot," the Empress said, "weather a crusade."

"Praes cannot," I corrected coldly. "Convince me that Callow shouldn't open the godsdamned Vales to the Principate because, right now? I'm thinking it might actually be the lesser evil. How many of your own legions would stick with you, if it gets out you willingly allowed the Diabolist to rise? I come out of this room promising to hang every High Lord and make peace with the Principate, and I'm guessing no legion west of the Blessed Isle stays with the Tower."

"If you do this, Callow ends as a nation," Malicia said. "There is no ruling class left in this region, only the dregs of previous nobility. The First Prince will arrange marriages to these in order to bind her new border protectorate to Procer and station all her dispossessed fantassins in Callow as a garrison force. As a villain, you will naturally be killed or exiled. Your

home will be ruled by royal second sons and daughters from then on, as permanent a battlefield as the northern principalities. Within three generations Callowan culture will remain mostly as some local quirks, while in every other matter Proceran law will apply. Callow will be fresh principalities in all but name, until even that is disallowed."

My fingers clenched until the bones turned white. So that was a blow against rolling over for Cordelia Hasenbach. My own fate was ultimately a side note: if I had to go for Callow to finally stop bleeding, then I'd pull that trigger without hesitation. I'd had a good teacher when it came to the lesson of not getting in your own way. But trading Praesi occupation for Proceran annexation wasn't what I'd signed up for. It did not escape me that Malicia was responsible for a lot of what she predicted – she and Black had been the ones to shave away Callowan nobility one assassination at a time, and it was them who'd ensured there would be restless former soldiers in Procer by feeding the flames of civil war. But responsibility wasn't how any of this got solved, much as I despised the notion of cleaning up a mess not of my own making.

"That might be true," I said. "It still doesn't make sticking with you shine in comparison. Callow still gets fucked under the Tower, even with me in between. The Principate are pricks, but at least they don't turn cities into graveyards. 'Low taxes but the occasional spot of genocide' is a pretty low bid to beat."

"There will be no second instance," the Empress said. "It was an extraordinary occurrence – and mistake – allowed to meet an extraordinary threat."

"The High Lords-"

"Are broken for a generation, now that you killed Akua Sahelian," Malicia said. "A generation is more than I need to ensure they never rise again."

"And what happens when the next extraordinary threat comes around?" I pushed. "Does Vale get it next?"

"Ah, you misunderstand me," the Empress smiled. "There is no next threat. So long as we are no longer the aggressor, which can be ensured in way satisfactory to you, we have the deterrent to effectively smother in the crib any call for a crusade. The weapon does not need to be used, Catherine. It just needs to exist."

That was what she'd said, just after Diabolist spoke to me. Her one sentence. *Take this city without destroying it, and there will be no more wars.* And she might be right, I thought. If any mobilizing invading army was immediately sanctioned by a Hellgate opening in that nation's heartlands, it would put a hard damper

on the calls to go crusading. And if she never gave them a banner to rally around by attacking neighbouring countries, how many rulers were really going to be willing to risk that mess for a point of principle? It wouldn't be the pretty peace I'd envisioned, but thinking this could be done cleanly has brought nothing but disaster at my feet. And yet.

"Reparations," I said. "If you're really serious about this, everything that got wrecked in a Praesi war gets rebuilt on Praesi coin. And we're done with compromise within the borders. Callowan law as decreed by the crown is paramount. No more legions garrisoning our cities or Praesi ruling them. Callow is now sanctioned to raise its own army, answerable directly to me."

The Empress studied me.

"You ask for an independent nation under nominal Tower authority," she finally said.

"Diabolist took a ride on the crazy side," I said, "but she was right about one thing: there's always a cost. You want me to keep Callow in the fold? Fine. Here's my price."

"I will require Liesse to be under direct Imperial control," Malicia said, and it tasted like triumph.

"I'll want soldiers in the city as well," I bluntly replied, mastering myself. "Your people already pulled that trigger once. It's not happening again without my permission."

"You can't be serious," Black said, and he sounded genuinely appalled.

I turned to him, but his eyes were entirely on Malicia.

"Catherine is young, and so I forgive the impulse of seeking easy solution," he said. "But you, Alaya? We built this empire on the bones of men who make fortresses like this. *We have seen them fail.*"

"We have seen them *use* those weapons and fail, Amadeus," the Empress said, and it was like I wasn't even in the room. "This is different. We avoid the conflict entirely."

"This is a clarion call for every hero on the fucking continent," Black harshly said.

I almost flinched, even now. It was rare to hear him curse, much less in a tone that icy.

"Think beyond your precious war, Amadeus," the Empress bit out. "It cannot be won. It cannot even be fought or we risk everything."

"*This* risks everything," he spat. "Let's not even talk about how it will look to keep a weapon built on Callowan corpses – this is foolish, in and of itself. It would have us dependant on a device not of our own making we barely control, and the dependence alone is enough to bury us."

"It will draw heroes," Malicia said. "I will not deny that. But we have killed heroes before, a great many of them. And now they will lack rulers backing them. A hero without a kingdom's backing is just a dangerous vagrant, Amadeus. A lesser threat than a full crusade, by any objective measure."

"It will not be green boys and scrappy orphans who come calling, Malicia," Black said. "Every old monster hidden in some faraway corner will crawl out of the woodworks to end us. You think the *White Knight* is the sharpest blade the Heavens have to bare?"

"You speak of beating back half the continent and tell me this is the threat?" Malicia replied, tone growing sharp. "Set aside your bloody pride for a moment and *think*. We did not build this empire so you could throw it all away because you want to bloody the eye of the Heavens over some philosophical point."

"We did not build this empire so you could bet its fate on a *magic trick* instead of preparations forty years in the making," he said, tone just as sharp and twice as contemptuous.

"Your way has Callow a battlefield for the fourth time in three years, Black," I said, and from the way both of them twitched I saw they'd entirely forgotten I was there. "I can't accept that. You can't *ask* me to accept that, looking at what's around us and who's responsible for it. It's... enough. Too much has already been done. If the heroes come, we'll kill them. Hells, the fortress doesn't have to stay here. We can fly it halfway into the Tyrian Sea and sink their boats as they come. The heroes will come with the crusade anyway. What do we actually lose by doing this? If the weapon is broken, well, the armies haven't gone anywhere have they?"

"Your own apprentice agrees with me," Malicia said. "It is not your way, but what does that matter if it *works*?"

Black closed his eyes. I could feel the weight of this settle onto both our shoulders, the pivot of this empire.

"Maddie," the illusion softly said. "Trust me. One last time. One last leap."

He flinched like she'd struck him, and it felt wrong for me to see this at all. Like I was looking at them stripped of their skins, of all the many layers of deception and protection they had accumulated since they were young as I was. But the gears at work were greater than any of us. With the pivot came more. My

mantle stirred. Queenship would be granted to me by the Tower, by Name and by right. But not like the rulers of the Old Kingdom, no. Mine would not be so pristine a reign. If I was to be queen, it would be a queen cloaked in black with hands bloodied red. Though young and half-formed, the Name was taking shape. Beckoning. Behind my teacher and the Empress, I glimpsed a silhouette leaning against the wall in the back. A woman, with long dark curls and sloppily stained leathers. She had a silver flask in hand, and was taking a long pull from it. She met my eyes while wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. *I know you*, I thought. *Not this face, but I know you*. She winked, and just like that she was gone. I saw Black had opened his eyes, and that his hand was raised.

"I am done," the Black Knight said, "with half-measures."

I moved, Malicia spoke, but we were both too late.

"**Destroy**," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said, and his Name pulsed.

The array broke and the souls of the dead swept us all like a tide.

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*alegio*

I... Dont see why Cat would side against the BK. He is right about everything he says, to use that thing would be to make the same errors as the old villains and the plan of Malicia is bound to go wrong story-wise.

Black is thinking long term here, why the heck Cat is not is something I dont get. 😊

*raudhbjorn*

I have to wonder if she's not trying a spot of reverse psychology or perhaps she's attempting to sever the connection between Black and Empress. The two together are an exponentially more dangerous for than either of them alone.

*CipherJ*

I'm with the Dread Empress on this one

The weapon is not meant to be used. It's meant to be Deterrence.

Mutually Assured Destruction is what's keeping our world from erupting into WW3

*caoimhinh*

Malicia is just using that as an excuse, she did this to weaken Black's influence on the Legions and strengthen her own hold of the Empire.

If she is the one controlling the weapon of massive destruction then she has greater authority, it has been shown already that she is afraid that the armies of Praes obey Black more than her, so all this was just so she could lessen his influence and enhance her own, very petty and stupid, as she should know better than to distrust the man who put her on the throne in the first place.

Catherine's observation that fewer Callowans means more people from the Empire manning the fields is also probable. So all this was a scheme with many advantages to her and with only the risk of angering Amadeus but if she could use the excuse of "we can use this deterrent so there will be peace" she thought Catherine would go along with the plan and Black would reluctantly accept her decision.

She underestimated how determined he was on not going to the old ways of Evil; she said it herself that he was now "like a raw nerve", he is in no mood for this shit anymore.

*luminiousblu*

You can't build the Death Star and not expect Luke to come and smash it. She's thinking about this politically, but a band of heroes old and young come together to take what is right and just into their own hands and crush the growing evil, when the king is cowardly and the princess polishes her nails – that's a guaranteed victory. Hell, that's basically Lord of the Rings.

*Miles*

MAD only works when it's mutual. Procer would need something equally destructive and both would need to be a lot slower and more obvious than liesse is

[greatwyrmgold](#)

The way Cat sees it, armies plus potential superweapon use is better than armies without emergency destructive option. I don't see why anyone would see keeping a dangerous tool in her arsenal that could easily do more harm than good as out of character for Catherine, since that's practically her M0.

*usernamesbco*



I think the weapon is redundant, and a blatant Stupid Evil style power grab on Malicia's part.

If Callow remains tied to the Empire don't they have Catherine's ability to gate a legion into the heart of whatever country is calling a crusade? Hard to focus on invading another country when your own is on fire.

It's also incentive for the Empire to play nice and not alienate Cat, and to keep her alive and in power. With a villainous Name it's not like she's going to die of old age.

Not that Malicia would have accepted that as an alternative. That would be power in someone else's hands. Her way lets her keep the weapon, with the implied threat she could find a way to use it on Callow if they got uppity.

The best play for Cat would be to destroy the weapon and keep her trump card to herself. She should have sided with Black.

*Jeffery Wells*

She's siding with the Empress because if the crusades are fought it's Callow they got first. They've been in war after war, had one of their greatest cities ruined and all its people killed, it's too much.

She knows Black is right, but she needs the bleeding to stop now, that's more important to her. Then, when heroes come to end the weapon (and all the villains) it won't be on the back of a crusade, and Callow doesn't bleed for it.

That's what matters to her most.

*Zachary*

I actually think it makes sense; Catherine has been manipulated by Malicia for a while now (remember how she was gradually coming to like and rely on her as she became more helpful?), specifically with the intentions of getting her to not oppose her when she unavoidably ran into conflict with Black over this idea. And Catherine hasn't spoken much with Black during this same time period, allowing to Malicia to "get her claws in her," so to speak. Malicia's mistake was believing that Black would ultimately back down after she pleaded for him to trust her and his apprentice sided with her (it echoes the situation in an earlier interlude where Black asks her about the resources going into Liesse and she just asks him to trust her).

Part of what makes this web serial good is that the author is one of the few (particularly in a genre like fantasy) who is

actually capable of writing smart characters, like Malicia and Black.

*Zachary*

To be clear, Black is totally 100% correct. As we find out later, there are absolutely heroes who can wreck someone like him, and they'd have the weight of a story behind them if they decided to destroy the Liesse weapon. But it makes sense for Catherine to not agree at this point in time, before she has encountered those heroes. It also makes sense for Malicia to make this mistake, since Malicia has not been involved in conflict with heroes like Black has.

I actually kinda feel bad for Black during this whole situation, because he's totally correct and doing what is unquestionably the right thing, but Catherine doesn't understand and holds a strong grudge over it.

*Levi Kalden*

Two reasons.

1. It would be more of a coldwar Szenario where the weapon ideally isn't used.

2. she doesn't want more war on callowen ground

If this was reality it would be a ound decision.

But black is the one who is actually right storie wise such a weapon will always bite you in the but. Furthermore there is always the risk of someone else becoming dread emperor and using the weapon

*Isa Lumitus*

Damn it, Black! Couldn't you have put the giant chunk of floating rock into Red Flower Vale before you smashed it!?

I agree that keeping the weapon around is a Bad Idea, but at least try and get some benefit out of Destroying it!

*ArkhCthuul*

Well, I did not expect Black to act in haste in.... well any time.

But this thing IS too dangerous, even assuming they could control it well enough....

And Bard saluting the Black Queen?

Play Queens Fight for the Black Queen maybe? 😊

*Aotrs Commander*

Hmm. Problem with becoming full fae is... You become full fae. And I'm not sure that doesn't make Cat oh-so-much-more vulnerable to being twisted by the story.

The fact bard showed up practically confirms t.

*Tab*

Reading this a second time, after the latest chapter (Swan Song Redux), I think I understand it better. Cat and Malicia would have compromised if the weapon was not destroyed by Amadeus, and they would not be enemies. I used to completely agree with Black's stance, but now I see that he is blinded by his convictions, much like Saint. Good stuff.

*ninegardens*

Also re-reading after Redux.

... Personally I still agree with Black here... BUT the decision doesn't have to be made NOW. All sides can afford to wait, and think, and discuss, and plan a little. Black can afford to sit down and convince Cat. There is no time pressure.

I still think Black is RIGHT to be paranoid about stories... but I also don't think he needed to act in this particular instant.

*Zachary*

It's hard to blame him, though. This is a pretty huge betrayal of him on Malicia's part. And if they waited, it would likely make the "international" response even more negative than immediately destroying it.

Also, any explanation he gave would be countered by Malicia's manipulations, and she is far better at that than Black is. Even during this chapter, she successfully manipulated Catherine.

*TeK*

Been rereading after the end of Book 6, and seeing the kind of shit Heroes can pull off, I am absolutely on the Black's side. This is basically attempting to hold a continent hostage, and we saw how well that went with Triumphant.

*Poetically Psychotic*

While this could be disastrous in the short term, I'm inclined to agree with Black here. Having a 'win button' like a Hell Gate opening ritual is a) unsustainable in a narratively driven world, and b) removes any incentive to fixing the problems at the heart of the Empire. No need for reforms to increase efficiency or morality when no one can punish you either way.

[vuthuha912](#)

This is not Cold-War-style MAD. This is fantasy Kim Jong Un.

What the hell is Malicia smoking there? There is no way a WMD is going to go well. You are never going to use it. Ha ha. Try to prove that to the rest of the world. Your predecessors prove otherwise. They are all way going to assume that you are going to use it. It can deter people short term but it is not sustainable. What this weapon is gonna do is boost your enemy's morals. If they think that they are going to die sooner or later, they can be pushed to the extra mile. And you are going to be a push to make that decision.

If they push and you still don't use it. The weapon is still there, they are going to keep pushing, trying to destroy it before you decide to use it.

If you retaliate, well, that just proves their suspicion and throw gasoline into the fire. They double down on their efforts as now they have justifications, solid moral high ground, and all the other things.

Not to mention keeping the things can backfire horribly on you. Remember Chernobyl or Fukushima nuclear disaster? – this is a real-world example. The chance of this backfired on you is 10 times more in Creations, especially if you are a Villain.

Orchestrating the biggest hostage situation in recent memory is not the brightest idea. What if they are willing to take risks to deal with you? What if they are willing to sacrifice people to deal with you? Are you going to end the entire world if they do not comply? Russia threw 10 million lives at the German for their country. Vietnam was willing to throw 3 million lives at America just to get their independence. They were willing to throw more lives if the war continued. Wanna bet on how many lives the rest of the world is going to throw at you if you follow throw with your threat?

Sure, the Crusade is unavoidable, but the people fighting the Crusade can lose purpose and morale. It is a storm that can be weather if you play your card right. They are fighting in foreign lands, they just come out of a civil war, and most of their soldiers are not benefiting directly from the Crusade. There is this quote that I think can sum up the mindset of commoners "The closer to reality you are, the lesser the word of saints will mean". It is so hard to care about Good or Evil when you are hungry or homesick or tired. The Vietnam War proves that morale is key to any victory. Your enemies are not going to outlast you in your own country. Your will to protect is a lot stronger than their will to do what exactly – exterminating Evils, killing your best rulers in decades, killing your countrymen, and robbing your land of her resources?? How many commoners understand enough

about the situation to care about fighting Malicia? To them, she is evil but just someone distant. She did not invade Procer. She was out of sight, out of mind. The war feels unjustified and can be portrayed as such.

Now, Malicia just hands the reason for the Crusade on a silver plate. If there is oppression, there is a will to oppose it. Continuing to oppress people, even more, is not going to make them stop rebelling.

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## Chapter 70: Reverb

*"Six wars I fought since my coronation, so hear me when I say this: war may be fought for righteous reasons, but no war can ever deserve that epithet."*

-King Jehan the Wise, apocryphal last words

It was a cork forced into a leaking barrel, not a long-term solution. I hesitated to call this luck, because Black was nothing if not calculated even at his worst, but the damage had been limited. Destroying the array had freed the souls of the Deoraithe but there'd been an interval between that unleashing and the city smashing back into Creation. The wards Masego had promised held, keeping the dead shades from turning a third of central Callow into a haunted wasteland, but Liesse itself was beyond salvaging. The wights inside had gone wild, tearing apart everything that wasn't nailed down and quite a bit that was. Thrice a ruin now, the old heart of the south. There was nothing inside left alive, not even the rebel forces who'd been dug in. That close to the flood of souls their protection had been about as useful a parchment shield. As far as my people could tell, the few that'd survived the initial onslaught had been killed by the rampaging wights. I'd been cheated out of my hangings, but it had been an execution nonetheless. Besides, there were survivors from the battle outside the city. I would settle my scores with Akua's lot one way or another.

"It remains a major strategic liability so long as we leave it like this," the Hellhound said.

I was avoiding the camp and the decisions that awaited me there, at the moment, but there was no getting away from Juniper. My general's face was calm, but there was a subtle hunch to her frame she had once lacked. Like she was trying to fold into herself. Her mother had died, I'd been told, while trying to hold the right flank. Her risen corpse had been hacked to pieces by her

own legionaries and she'd had to be brought to the pyre in full armour to hide the marks. Juniper had put the torch herself, Adjutant said, while I lay half-conscious in a tent after crawling out of the ruins of Liesse. I might have died in there, if Thief had not come back for me. Black certainly would have, the backlash of his stand having put him in a coma he'd yet to wake from. Seated on an upturned stone, I watched the wreck of a once-great city and bit into mutton jerky. I offered the Hellhound a bite but got only a quelling glare for answer. Her loss.

"I'll be putting Hierophant to work," I finally said. "He believes the remaining wights can be brought under control."

"That leaves the shades," Juniper grunted. "I'm less than comfortable with having a jug of goblinfire in the middle of the supply line for the Vales. Much less camping by it. Those wards break, Catherine, and up goes two thirds of the remaining imperial forces in Callow. And you damn well know Duchess Kegan's been making noise. Ignoring her won't work forever."

The necromantic nature of the powers backing the Watch was out of the bag for good, to no one's pleasure. Procer would make something of that, no doubt. There were too many people on the plains who were seeing what was undeniably the souls of the dead for containment to be even remotely feasible, not that it was my secret to keep in the first place. And since the moment the dust settled the Duchess of Daoine had been loudly demanding her wizards be given access to the wards and the city so they could begin the work of weaving the souls back together into a gestalt. I'd had Adjutant's people take a look at her forces: the Watch was powerless at the moment. Nothing more than well-trained soldiers. I'd refused to meet with Kegan until Hierophant could have a better look at Liesse, but around dawn today he'd given me his verdict: the weapon was broken. Not for good, but it would take several years and massive resources to bring it back to even superficial functionality and I could afford the costs in neither time nor coin. One word, that was all it'd taken, and just like that Black had smothered the last hope for my homeland being spared the Tenth Crusade.

"The souls go back to Daoine," I told Juniper with a sigh. "They're no use to anyone here, and I'll need the Watch to take the field before long."

"A start," the Hellhound conceded. "Frankly, I believe we should torch the whole city with goblinfire. You've heard the reports."

Soldiers near the wards said they glimpsed dead loved ones speaking to them from behind the boundary, begging to be let out. Some of the mages keeping Hierophant's wards powered came back trembling and talking of whispers in their ears. Others lost track of time entirely for hours on end. I'd had to order the

northernmost camps to be demolished and rebuilt south because the legionaries inside them were plagued with vivid and persistent nightmares. You couldn't kill that many people in a place without there being *consequences* to it, and killing was only the first of horrors that'd been visited upon Liesse.

"I'm not committing to that until I get assurances it won't worsen the situation," I said. "But as soon as I get back to Laure I'll make it an official decree that the area as far as two miles outwards is forbidden territory. Markers will be placed."

"There'll be adventurers heading in there even then," Juniper said. "Looters with more balls than sense."

"My options are limited, Juniper," I told the orc flatly. "I will not compound ruin with disaster. Ratface has a blade to the throat of half the Dark Guilds and Thief has her own people – I'll have to count on them to keep the situation as much under control as it can be."

"Heroes-" she began.

"Are coming," I interrupted. "I know. Marshal Grem still holds the Vales, that should ward off the worst of it, but I've already ordered a watch on the Hwaerte. The Smugglers will know if anyone tries to sail up the river. If we're lucky the first wave will only hit us with the crusade and we'll have winter to prepare unhindered."

"When have we ever been that lucky?" Juniper bitterly said.

The death of Istrid Knightsbane had changed her, I thought. Tempered her in some ways, but as in all things at a price. She'd always been sombre but her mother's passing had put out some ineffable light in her. It'd cut close to home in a way the rest of our campaigns had not, I supposed. More than once I'd thought of reaching out, but her grief was not something I could truly understand. I was an orphan, after all. Aisha would pick up what pieces she could. I scarfed down the last of the jerky and licked my fingers clean.

"There are going to be changes," I said.

She looked at me for a long time, then sighed. She gestured for me to move and I made room on the stone. The orc sat by my side, over a head taller and twice as broad. I studied her face and was surprised at how young she looked, even after all this. The Hellhound was such a force of nature it was easy to forget she was only a year older than me.

"What happened in the city, Catherine?" she asked.

No one had who'd not been in that room knew exactly what had gone down, not even Thief. There had been no order to arrest Black while he was unconscious forthcoming from the Tower, but I knew better than to believe the matter was at an end. I suspected the Empress would have tried it, if there wasn't a real risk the legions around Liesse would have refused and raised banner of rebellion around my teacher's sleeping form. That I could see no move on her part did not mean they were not being made.

"Lines were drawn," I said. "I'm still deciding on which side I'm falling."

"Are we rebelling?" she bluntly asked.

After a heartbeat of hesitation, I shook my head.

"Not for now, anyway," I admitted. "But we can no longer be dependant on the Tower for protection. Right now the situation is... fluid."

A year ago, I thought, I would have backed Black against the Empress without hesitation. Maybe even a fortnight ago. But not after today, not when he'd consigned thousands of my countrymen to death for a point of pride.

"We can't afford a civil war with Procer at the gates," Juniper growled.

"I doubt it'll come to that," I said. "But there was a break. The blades might be sheathed until the outside threat is dealt with but they'll come out eventually. I will not allow Callow to be the field where that struggle is settled, and that means an army giving them all pause."

"You want me to head it," the Hellhound said.

"You already *are* heading it," I replied. "Your responsibilities will just expand."

"Raising an army without the Tower's permission is treason," Juniper reluctantly said.

"I have permission," I said. "Or had. I will proceed regardless of whether that's confirmed. Like you said, the Empire cannot afford a civil war. Much less one fought against me."

"Callowan recruits, I assume," she said.

"I'd grab every legionary in the country if I could," I said. "As it is I've had Adjutant working on the Fifth and the Twelfth. The orc now in interim command of the Fifth has been... open to overtures."

"But not the Sixth," Juniper said, dark eyes studying me.



Her mother's legion. No, I'd not crossed that line. I would have liked to say I'd made that choice out of consideration for the feelings of a dear friend, but the truth was not as pretty. I'd refrained because Juniper in command of Callow's army was worth more to me than a chance of pulling into my orbit the remains of the Sixth.

"No," I agreed. "Not the Sixth."

She closed her eyes.

"I'll talk to Legate Bagram," the Hellhound whispered. "I know him well."

"I'm not asking you to," I told her, wanting to be exceedingly clear about that.

"I have already chosen the side I fall on, Warlord," Juniper replied, eyes opening and flashing with anger. "My words were not lightly spoken. Do not bring dishonour to us both by *coddling* me."

Only an orc, I thought, would find offense in someone respecting their grief. Best not to linger on this, and as it happened I had no lack of distractions to offer.

"The Fourth and the Ninth are the real wildcards," I said. "Precarious as their position is."

It had not escaped anyone's attention that the only senior commanders to survive the battle were both goblins and Matrons. Rumours of betrayal were already sweeping through the camps and in truth I'd done nothing to stamp them out. Adjutant had given me a report by voice only that I'd ordered him to never repeat: Istrid Knightsbane had been killed by poison, not sorcery or undead. He'd told me the cut that killed her was too clean to have been made with anything but goblin steel, and that raised *questions*. All legionary weapons were made with the stuff, straight out of the Imperial forges of Foramen, and the High Lords had definitely gotten their hands on some of it. Yet I very much doubted this was Diabolist's handiwork. The timing was off, and I suspected she would have gloated about it when we fought if it was her doing. If only to make it plain she had more support among Praesi than I believed, even in the Legions. It shouldn't be Black's either – General Istrid had been one of his most vocal loyalists. That left three likely culprits in my eyes, the ones who had the most to gain from that death.

First was the Empress, who'd had to know when considering her scheme that Black would stand opposed to it. Had she begun cleaning the upper ranks of his most loyal before the insurrection was over? It was unlikely she'd get an opportunity to make a kill this quiet for years. She was not to be dismissed

as to practical for this, not after the flying murder fortress gambit she'd tacitly allowed. The second was the First Prince. Assassinating senior and famous commanders before an invasion was right up her wheelhouse, from what I'd heard of her. I found it hard to believe she'd managed to place an agent in the legions without the Eyes noticing it, but then she had shut down major imperial operations in Procer before. With the home front settled, she might be looking outwards. The last I hesitated to even think, because if it was true the Empire was done and this entire house of cards was going to fall down on my head.

It might be the Matrons. Isolationist as they were said to be, Robber had told me enough about the crones ruling his people I knew taking a few scalps to better position commanders of their own kind was not something they'd think twice about doing – if they thought they could get away with it. And if it was them... Suddenly it no longer felt like a coincidence I'd been offered desperately needed coin in exchange for a goblin settlement in Marchford. It felt like a calculated move to secure an ally before an uprising could be started. It might be I was being paranoid in thinking this, but in Praes the question was never if you were being paranoid or not. It was if you were being paranoid *enough*.

"General Sacker would not have a hand in my mother's death, no matter the rumours," Juniper sneered. "They were like sisters, Catherine. Their bond was decades in the making."

"I don't believe it either," I replied, only saying half the truth.

Goblins just didn't think the way humans or even orcs did. To them betrayal in the name of advancement was no betrayal at all. Still, I suspected that if there'd been an agent of the Matrons at work here it would be Marshal Ranker. She was the one who'd been left the senior commander here by the deaths, and though the rumours were impugning her reputation no one was daring to question her authority. Not even me, as she'd stepped lightly knowing that a Named outranked even a marshal in the eyes of the Tower if push came to shove. But neither had I helped her any with my not inconsiderable clout: as long as her reputation was in the gutter, I had an in with anyone who bought the rumours. And I needed the men, needed them badly if I was to give any of the jackals fighting over Callow's bleeding body any reason to be wary. The Fifteenth wasn't enough for that, not with the nearly one thousand men the fucking Warlock had left stranded on the wrong side of the Hellgate. If the villain had been here to deal with, we would have had *words* on the subject. The legionaries going in had known it was a possibility they would never come back, but the blow was still being felt and I doubted the bastard had done anything to try to save them.

"They may retreat to Summerholm," Juniper finally said. "Without Lord Black to mediate or the Tower ordering otherwise, that is the safest hold for them to wait out the mess."

"It's not happening," I told her flatly. "The don't get to garrison one of my fucking cities anymore. If they want to go east, let them go all the way to the Blessed Isle. The Empire can supply them there, because it sure as Hells won't be my granaries coughing out the goods."

The Hellhound stared at me, frowning.

"You are establishing borders," she said.

"I am," I acknowledged.

"That is too large a territory to cover for a single host," Juniper stated. "You mean to raise several armies, then, and that is beyond the writ of a general's authority. My command extends only to the Fifteenth."

"You would need to be a marshal," I agreed.

I'd had Hakram take care of the physical aspect of that last night. A marshal's baton was traditionally made of wood from the Wasteland, usually ebony, but I didn't have any on hand. The elongated stick I took out from under my cloak and handed to Juniper was stone, rough granite. It'd been sculpted, but where was no mandate from the Tower in formal Mthethwa to be read. Among the traditional relief of legionaries in arms was set my own heraldry, the scales with the sword and the crown. The detail did not escape the orc's considering eyes.

"They will never promote you to marshal," I said. "You've been with me for too long, your loyalties are suspect."

"Then this is a mere bauble," she said.

"It is the regalia of the Marshal of Callow," I smiled thinly. "It's not actually illegal for a serving commander to have other titles, you see. I had Aisha look into the legalities."

It wasn't nearly that clean-cut, no matter what I said. Lords and ladies of Praesi who served in the Legions had to renounce their claim to any noble title for the duration of their service. But that was landed titles, and what I was granting her was not. There was even a precedent, though a distant one: Dread Empress Maleficent II had showered her successful commander in the Free Cities with local honours, since those were much less expensive than rewards at home. As a client state under the Tower, Callow currently fell in the same areas as the subjugated territories down south the ancient empress had taken. It was a fairly thin excuse and the High Lords were bound to howl, but Malicia had a

lot more to prove than I did at the moment. If she couldn't even finagle her way through this, what point was there in backing her? Juniper's thick fingers clasped around the stone.

"I dreamt of holding a baton, as a girl," she said. "But not like this."

*Isn't that Praes in a sentence?* I thought. *Everything you want, just not the way you want it.*

"You're now the highest commander in this kingdom," I told her. "Your rank of general is irrelevant. The Fifteenth, while remaining a legion, is also the first division of the army of Callow. Congratulations, Juniper. You're the youngest marshal in the history of this empire."

"I am not," she said darkly, "an imperial marshal. I can live with that disappointment, if I hold the command regardless. But if I am to be your second, Catherine, I will need my hands unbound. There will be conscription, even if limited. I will need forges to make what the Imperial ones in Foramen will no longer provide, and granaries to feed the soldiers."

"And you'll have them," I promised. "I will have this country ready for war, when it comes."

The Hellhound suddenly snorted.

"I suppose I should kneel," she said. "Are there no ceremonies to be observed? Should a blade not be laid on my shoulders?"

"That's for knighting," I told her. "It would also involve me slapping you across the face as hard as I can, and no offense but I'm not sure you would survive that."

"Then we do this the way of my own people," Juniper said, and rose to her feet.

She unsheathed her sword and bared her arm, cutting across leathery flesh. I rose and did the same under her expectant gaze.

"Under the gaze of That Which Lurks Below, I make these oaths," the Hellhound said, tone heavy. "I will make war for you, and be true in the shedding of blood. In lean seasons I will offer meat from my table, and in bountiful days be granted the same from yours. Your foe is my foe, your kin is my kin. I swear this by iron and salt, by grass and wind and the death of men. In ruin and glory, our threads are bound. Let they who would sunder this pact be devoured 'til not even bones remain."

She offered her bleeding arm and I met it with mine, crimson trails staining us both. I did not know her people's customs, but I knew those of mine. Not from teaching, for etiquette lessons

had never covered the likes of this, but from old stories. From days when this land of mine had still be a true kingdom.

"Gods be my witness, and strike me down should I break this solemn oath," I said. "Honour granted will be kept, homage rewarded by sanctuary unbroken. To she who is faithful and true I will be the same. She who loves me I will love, and shun all that she shuns. No injury or slight shall go unavenged, be they the work of the great or the small."

"I name you Warlord," Juniper grinned sharply. "Willing and hungry."

"I name you Marshal of Callow," I replied, "and in my own blood anoint you."

The baton was touched with red, when she took it, the both of us having shed droplets. Fitting, I thought.

There would be more to come.

---

*burdi*

cat is not Squire anymore and no new name too..so she is now a no Name

*Decius*

I would not call the Duchess of Moonless Nights and Vicequeen of Callow a no-Name. Not to her face.

[intermediarywebserial](#)

Regardless, it looks like Marshal Juniper is a Name-in-the-making.

*SlumberryStorm*

I Think it is coming, just not here yet.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Are you sure she's not presently Squire? She explicitly outranks a Marshall on the weight of her name, and she would have said "because they *think* I have a name," or "because I'll soon have one," if that were the case. She might not be in the full of her power as Squire, but I can't imagine her without any Name at all

*RoflCat*

My guess is she's in the middle of a pivot right now.

Her Name will depend on whether she sides with Black or Malicia.

But until she make her decision, she can just work on making the Fifteenth into her proper army, and for that we have her promoting Juniper in this chapter.

*Decius*

Why would her name depend on whether Black or Empress side with her?

*sidereus*

She still has claim on the Name of Squire, even if all that remains is an infinitesimal sliver beneath Winter. There cannot be any other Squire or claimants, because even if she only has the smallest modicum of the Name in her it is still the full fledged Name and bound to her.

*stevenneiman*

Unless they lose their Name and then get another one in a separate event, Transitional Names stay with their holder right up until they upgrade to a keeper Name. Take Masego for an example. He went from Apprentice to Heiropant in an instant once the conditions for the new Name were met, and there certainly wasn't a transitional period where he was just Masego before he was ready to start dissecting miracles.

*Jeffery Wells*

She's still Squire, but it is very weak, tenuous. Her mantle of Winter has helped out the Name and filled it with her Far aspect, making it a shell.

I think it's very unlikely she'll become Knight if Black dies, at this point. If Black hadn't broken the Array it looked like she was going to transition into a new Queen Name.

*maresther23*

Now we pick up the pieces

[glassgirlceci](#)

Fantastic, as always. I didn't expect the skip to the aftermath, but it makes sense. It seems we'll have to continue holding our breath for Catherine's name! D:

## *Stormblessed*

A nice interlude and piece of falling action after the harrowing events of last chapter. I was almost afraid to read this chapter because I was scared of what happened to our villains. I just really want Cat to point out that Bard was there watching Black and to suggest this is all Bard's plot to sow division amongst the villains.

Also Juniper remains extremely awesome. I'm glad she can still talk openly with not-Squire (maybe-Squire?). I'm also super excited for her to be taken off the reins and leash and given more authority. I want to see what she does with it. Can a character with Juniper (or some other legion general) get a name? Or is what she does as a general so unname-like that she can't get one? Would Juniper receiving a named be a bad thing character wise? As in, lessen how awesome her character is/be a cheap way to provide character drama/character development?

*B*

I don't think Juniper will get a Name, simply because it would be *\*too\** good for Cat. Hakram being the first orc to get a Name since their race was conquered shows how much of a badass he is. A *\*second\** orc getting a Name that *\*also\** serves under Cat shifts the focus away from Hakram being a badass to Cat being a granter of Names to Orcs. It cheapens Hakram & Juniper's exploits while elevating Cat to essentially being a God of the Orcs.

*soonnanandnaanssoon*

Yeap, agreed with your point about it being too good for Cat. Also, I don't know if it's a foreshadowing or a Chekhov's Gun but one of the Quote of the Day was a commentary by Juniper of the Red Shields, but was not preceded by any Name. Might be a hint that Juniper doesn't have a Name.

## [DroughtBringer](#)

Buildup.....

Gah! I love it but it's not Friday yet... 😊

*Engineer*

Marshal of Callow sounds like a Name...

## [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Huh? How is a rank that's only existed for a day going to be a Name? I'm not sure you understand the fundamentals of how this works.

*Engineer*

Keyword in my sentence was “sounds”.

The weight of the scene, the oaths spoken and the fact that the Ruler of Callow in all but Name just promoted Juniper to the highest rank in her army (basically Callow’s answer to the dynamic between the Black Knight and the Dread Emperor/ess) makes it easy to think Juniper just got Named.

*cloudy*

A Name in the making, like Adjutant perhaps?

*BryceWilliam*

if she was going to have gotten a name, it have been now. the narrative weight of this moment is one of the strongest turns in the 2’s relationship. Jun just swore to follow cat before the tower, she already was, but there is weight in oaths. extra so when replied to with “I name you..”

no, jun’s shot at a name has passed, this being her best bet.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

Huh? Adjutant isn’t a “Name in the making”, it’s a bona fide Name and has been for a long time now.

Reading these comments is making me dumber 😊

*Aeon*

I’m expecting Cat’s new Name to be the Black Queen or something. Maybe something a bit more specific than that, but I definitely expect her to become a Queen, rather than a Knight. Her goals and motivations are too different from Knighthood.

In other words, keep up the good work. I love this story.

*Big Brother*

Honestly, I DON’T want Juniper to get a Name. Like B said, it would cheapen everything she’s done. She’s made a name for herself as a brilliant commander despite being un-Named.

*Drd*

She doesn’t need a Name to be awesome, as she already is.

[taliesinskye](#)

Oh man, the wording of those oaths was so good. Chills.

*Felix Joseph Baumann*



Does nobody else here in the comments notice the insanity of Cat as a currently unnamed villain swearing to the Gods (above), while her Marshall swears to those below? I can not even fathom the possible consequences of such an unorthodox oath, but I assume them to be quite cataclymic.

*werafdsaew*

Cat swore to the Gods, so above Above or Below?

*werafdsaew*

\*both\* Above and Below

*Naeddyr*

CAT-aclysms ahoy!

*Thenre*

I think she swore to both Above and Below, maybe hinting more towards a neutral Name and place in Creation. I mean the whole reason she's a Villain is the inability to accept the helplessness of leaving your fate in the God's hands, and that includes the manipulations of the Gods Below and Fate.

[onedollargum](#)

In Chapter 13:Forgery, she set herself against both sides rather fantastically:

"When heroes and villains come knocking in the name of fate," I spoke, tone calm and measured. "When they try to drag us back to where we were by force with a Choir behind them or the host of some howling Hell – I'll kill them all. Every last one of them."\*

She's thwarted the host of a howling Hell. After weathering a crusade we'll see if she can establish a neutral zone.

*Nairne .01*

I'd love to see a thriving neutral zone to be honest.

*burdi*

i just realise maybe cat will have no Name at all, she already got Winter power which super strong...she killed akua soo easily, without a Name means she is not evil nor good...a new path.

*satoshikyu*

So what exactly IS Cat's Name now? Like it seems fairly clear she's broken free of Squire, but no actual Name has been given.

She's embraced Winter, so is she Winter Queen? Gotta get an actual Name at some point, the guessing game is ridiculous.

### NZPIEFACE

Tinfoil theory:

Author doesn't know and he wrote himself into a hole.

Now he's dragging this out to see the comments.

*Nairne .01*

Lets hope not.

*Anastas*

"Squire" is hanging on by a thread; it's firmly on the way out, I'd say, but I don't think Cat's firmly grasped or formed a replacement yet.

*Ed*

Damn dude you have several chapters that are a fantastic story but just a fantastic story then you hit chapters like this and remind me there is POWER in your writing, excellent thank you.

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

Typo thread!

some 'the' and 'her' are missing their first letter.

Also, sometimes during action scenes in previous chapters, I have to scroll back up and figure out what had happened. For example, when Akua's necklace with the phylactery was removed I didn't realize she had died. Also, during the throne room scene, I thought Cat was planning her attack with the ice not actually doing it.

*Vortex*

One thing I love about this chapter is it highlights the contradictions and parallels of this story.

Although Cat was originally an orphan with heroic tendencies, she became a power hungry, ruthless villain.

Although Juniper is an orc, she is one of the most honorable and intelligent characters in the story, and is far more principled and outspoken than Cat.

Although Juniper's oath is savage and bloodthirsty, while Cat's oath is formal and righteous, they are saying the same things deep down inside. It gives me chills down my spine how perfect this is.

*lennymaster*

Yes, it struck me too how the essence of their oaths is the same despite the difference in wording.

"Under the gaze of That Which Lurks Below, I make these oaths, I will make war for you, and be true in the shedding of blood."  
"Gods be my witness, and strike me down should I break this solemn oath, honour granted will be kept, homage rewarded by sanctuary unbroken."

"In lean seasons I will offer meat from my table, and in bountiful days be granted the same from yours."

"To she who is faithful and true I will be the same."

"Your foe is my foe, your kin is my kin."

"She who loves me I will love, and shun all that she shuns."

"In ruin and glory, our threads are bound. Let they who would sunder this pact be devoured 'til not even bones remain."

"No injury or slight shall go unavenged, be they the work of the great or the small."

The only part that has no direct equivalent is: "I swear this by iron and salt, by grass and wind and the death of men. In ruin and glory, our threads are bound.". And that part is probably more decorative after having already sworn on the Gods Below.

*werafdsaew*

Cat being ruthless? More than before, but still less than the likes of Diabolist or Black.

Cat being power hungry? Maybe she will be in the future, and maybe that's how she'll fall, but right now no at all. Her goal since book 1 has been to get power, and use it to fix Callow, and she hasn't deviated from that yet.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

*Letouriste*

I...I don't follow:o cat is already making moves like all politicians do but she doesn't know if black and malicia will really fight each other or just make up.sure black was pretty decisive there,i expect him to crush the trueblood and malicia to try to reinforce her position...but isn't a little too soon for mustering what is pretty much a rebellious army? she doesn't plan to fight that out but the message that give to people can't be good

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Name can't just "make up". What makes them a named is their strong ideals of the world and the fact they reinforce them. When two ideals clash and you can't get a compromise... you get a story.

*Seabornia*

I utterly want Cat's new Name to be connected to Apocalyptic myths in one way or another. It would be fitting to story narrative to sidestep Good vs Evil confrontation. Probably Black will transcend his name too, as currently his powers backlashed on him.

*thespaceinvader*

Anyone else feeling Cat getting the Name of Warlord?

It wouldn't be what's been teased recently, but I believe it's been mentioned as a historic Orc Name, and it would fit her better than a LOT of other names at the moment, especially as the events of last chapter seem to have closed off Black Queen which was a name in the rising until Black Knight Destroyed the array.

*Gunslinger*

It's been stated that Warlord is strictly an orcish name. Cats not going to be that.

*grzecho2222*

Not that I don't agree with you, but a lot of people said to Cat what she can't do

*Gunslinger*

@grecho Haha that's a good point to remember but this was stated by the author themself

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Names are mired in history.

What defines a name is what people think of it and the traditions that follow it.

An orcish Name given only to the chief of all clans will only be given to an orc.

*werafdsaew*

According to Black in Chapter 15: Company, Warlords are "mostly known for their propensity to put entire villages to the torch and take back their inhabitants to the Steppes as thralls."  
Does this sound like Cat? No.

*Jerick*

The assassinations were the work of the Empress I'm sure, yet I don't think they were aimed at reducing Black's hold on the legions. I suspect instead they were aimed at removing high ranking officers that would refuse to side with Cat if she were to ever rebel against the tower.

Now that seems insane but it was when Cat brought back the orders of knights that it clicked just what it was that the Empress wanted, what her endgame was; Suppressing Callowan culture simply will not work long term. For as long as competent leaders are there to guide desired cultural changes and suppress undesired ones Callow will stay under the rule of the tower. But that needs an broken string of very capable rulers which is impossible. Ineffective rulers are an inevitability and it just takes one taxing Callow to the bone, one allowing them to die in droves, one being a mad Tyrant to stoke the fires of rebellion and start the wheels of story moving towards a free Callow. Cultural suppression is purely a short term solution and both Black and Malica sought a true long term victory.

But how to do that? Well there is one idea that holds the diverse Empire together. One idea that keeps it functioning when backstabbing and self interest should make it fail. The quest for the tower. If they could imbue the Callowan people with the quest for the tower then it would shift their response to being oppressed by a poor ruler from pulling away and freeing Callow to climbing the tower themselves to replace the ruler. If Black and Malica could do that Callow would remain part of the empire for countless generations. But in order to create that cultural shift they need a Callowan to climb the tower, they need a Callowan Dread Empress.

Cat's banner projects a message she never intended and I sense Malica's subtle hand in that. The rumors and talk by Callowan people about Cat standing up to the tower quite possible is something the Empress is seeding and encouraging. In the end Malica will give Cat everything she wants, just not in the way she wants it.

However the Wandering Bard has managed to successfully throw a wrench in the plans and the rest of the world is not sitting by while the Empire does its thing.

### Ethesis

That is an interesting theory.

I'm wondering if Cat becoming the Queen of Winter (the only one of winter left) supersedes her name.

I don't think the upper fae get names.

There is too much speculation about Cat shedding the name of squire and not getting a new name, or that her fae powers somehow prevent a name. She said that she is close to getting a new one, but not just yet, she is in the middle of a transition.

Also, Cat is not fae, not really. Sure she might have a lot of fae power behind her, but she didn't become fae. She is a warlock said something else, neither human nor fae.

*werafdsaew*

I agree, except I think it's more likely that Black Knight is the one pulling the string. His desired outcome from chapter 55 is for Cat to replace him and work with Malicia, so he needs to ensure that his followers would side with Cat when he's gone. Since Istrid has no personal loyalty to Cat, she might decide to side with Malicia rather than Cat when Black's gone, and that is why she has to go.

*Decius*

And Assassin was in the area.

*Gunslinger*

Things are really looking bad. A crusade on Callowan soil will devastate the country so badly there won't be much for Cat to rule once everything is done.

Not to mention Black is gonna be leading a crusade of his own against the high lords and Cat's going to be against him (maybe)

Then there's the wildcard Tyrant with his puppet Hierarch. Ohh boy are we in for a ride.

Finally considering Cat didn't talk about it and from her assuming the role like she still had Malicia's authority means she's still going to be the Black Queen. I'm assuming her actual transition will happen during the coronation or something

*Riaan Theunissen*

Don't forget Thief.

She's plainly stated there's somethings she won't stand for. Her current view of Black and Malicia hasn't been given yet, but it must be... interesting, was done, revealed and hinted at in the last few chapters regarding the two of them.

*Anastas*

I wouldn't call Hierarch a "puppet", exactly. He's refusing to do anything out of principle while the Tyrant uses his silence

and the other Cities' respect for the Name and their inability to understand the Hierarch's zealous egalitarian democratic qualms in order to push his own designs through what passes for the League's decision making body.

I'd say Anaxares is more like a paperweight. He doesn't really \*do\* ANYTHING, but getting actual work done would be \*so\* much harder without him to hold it all together.

*Thenre*

Impatiently awaiting the Black Queen.

*lupus7*

hey what happen with dark elf that akua have for mercenary?

*Nairne .01*

What dark elf? Am I missing something?

*Nairne .01*

EE, you really know how to wind up our engines and then make us wait for the transition.

*naturalnuke*

An oath sworn to the gods above for Callowan tradition to match the oath said to the gods below in the orcish way.

As William once said, "that has a shape to it"

*Snowfire1224*

I'm not sure who Cat should side with, Malicia or Black. I get bad vibes from Malicia, although I'm not sure why, but I can see where it would be good story wise to have Cat fight black.

*Raider*

Anyone else notice that Cat's personality has pretty much gone back to how its always been? I thought winter was supposed to changing her?

*Nairne .01*

Supposedly, but really just supposedly, she has always been winter-like. Even the Winter King said that "its like she was born of winter" (the wording might have been different, but I hope you get my meaning). So what changed is probably the winter-like hunger urges got stronger, but for now, she is not visibly succumbing to them.

*Decius*

Well, after her antics at Winter Court, her heritage received an in-universe retcon to be part fey.

*Dawn*

Was Black's plan to eventually replace Malicia with Cat? Cos now I think she's more likely to side with Malicia given what he did. I mean what was his plan doing that? If Thief hasn't saved Cat, then they'd both be dead. Sounds like he's completely lost it.

*Thea*

Black knows Cat knows The Song. We know basically nothing about the ramifications of knowing The Song in person, neither requirements nor consequences, but chances are it puts Cat's path at odds with Malicia's life... and Black still supported Cat.

*Shequi*

Cat's logic in thinking Ranker might have been responsible for Istrid's death is... off.

Ranker was already the senior officer of the Legions. Istrid's death doesn't benefit her seniority among the Legions at all – only Grem and Nim equal her, and only the Named outrank her.

*Nairne .01*

Except it might have been to make herself (Ranker) indispensable as Marshal for Cat, you know the upcoming Crusade and what not. That seems a little weak though, so maybe you are right. I would not bet on it though as we have too little information.

*alegio*

So... Cat will side with Malicia and then after Malicia dies/gets betrayed she will become Dread Empress? If this happens AND Black survives to become Cat's Black knight I will be Happy.

*Random Internet User (tm)*

Cat totally has a name! *Protagonist*.

It's just that noone from any side dares mention it, or else they'll be the next to get steamrolled. :>

"Oh, hey look- it's the protagonist. Let's kill 'er!" Then the weight of the story comes and squishes them flat, muahaha.

Lovely chapter, by the way.



## [Barthumphries](#)

I'm late reading this, but just wanted to point out that I've been calling her Warlord Catherine for a long time, even over Word of God (author)'s postulation that she wasn't fit to become Warlord.

Warlord Catherine the Squire, Queen of Callow, Duchess of Moonlit Night.

*Rabblrouser*

This chapter gave me goose pimples.

## [vuthuha912](#)

Um... Cat... I don't think Black was being prideful when he destroyed the flying castle. He is trying to save both of you from the guaranteed death by the story and making a disastrous decision in terms of ... everything.

It is not just the story that is the matter, it is common sense. Set aside the logistic of controlling, maintaining, and fueling the fortress, you are literally using your own people's souls to fuel the thing. It is like digging their ancestor's graves up, desecrating their corpses then parading them in front of their families faces. Your subjects will think of you as nothing but a puppet for the Tower and sold them out for power. They will rebel even before the Crusade comes or worse rebel and join the Crusade. Like Tyrion said it can be hard ruling over people who want you dead.

Aside from that, the fortress would be too strategically important if it were to be used as a deterrent. By relying on it, you will be caught flatfooted when it is destroyed later. I mean not everyone is rational and such you know. They might even call Malicia or you Triumphant reborn, determined to conquer the entire world with a flying fortress. If such an idea were to spread, well, maybe losing a few thousand people taking the Tower is not so bad after all.

Black knows that he won't be able to protect both of you if heroes like Hanno were coming by a dozen at the same time. The Bard obviously can outplay him. Cat is too young and Malicia is too ignorant of the world outside of the Tower. Sabah is dead because of his carelessness. And now, to see a story trap so obvious, you know he is not going to stand there and let it kills both of you. He is doing it out of love or worry or paranoia but he is

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## Chapter 71: Reprise

*"It is easiest to win a game when no one else knows you're playing."*

– Dread Empress Maleficent II

I was no longer capable of staying in a fully warded tent for more than a few moments before I got this *itch*. It always began on my palms, small pricks that I would have thought were drying sweat if I still sweated. Then it was the bottom of my feet, and from there it was only a matter of time before I felt like scratching out my own skin. I had, the first time, and hadn't realized what I was doing until there were long gouges in my arm scored by my own nails. They'd bled, and when Masego had seen to the wound his face had creased in surprise. It was not inexact, he'd said, to call what ran through my veins blood. But it was more than just that, now. It was as useful a reagent as fae blood, he mused, and perhaps more in some ways. That it was no longer warm was something of a hint in that regard, but his current theory was that the liquid in my body was Winter. I dimly remembered my veins freezing solid, when I'd ripped apart his work. That had not been a metaphor, or a passing thing. He'd insisted on a full study of my body after that, not that I'd protested much. Even naked I no longer felt the cold, save as some sort of strange perception – warmth and frost were like... colours, more than anything else. That my skin could feel colours should have worried me, but the worry never really came.

It had been dimmed. This entire fucking world felt dim, and I had to force myself to work up anger at that.

The results of his exploratory spells had been illuminating in all the worst of ways. My bones were no longer bone. They had shattered, he told me, then been made anew in ivory. I'd been under the impression that ivory was a sort of bone, but I'd take Masego's word on the contrary. He'd muttered something about pores and marrow before telling me he'd need several months of invasive regular procedures to get a clear idea of how my body now functioned. He'd then absent-mindedly added that my while my heart still beat that seemed to have nothing to do with moving around blood, which was just the latest horrific episode in the shit I'd been putting my body through since becoming the Squire. I'd naturally told him that his proposed studies weren't really feasible, and we'd settled on him having a look whenever the both us had the time to spare – which was, admittedly, pretty rare. The two three-hour sessions we'd done since had seen him grow more and more interested, which usually when a boy was looking at my naked body had different connotations.

Two facts I would have almost preferred not to know came out. First, he told me my body should no longer actually be considered a body. It was, objectively speaking, a 'construct'. I'd pretended I knew what that meant and gone through the usual dance of inviting him to elaborate to I could figure it out from context. *There is nothing natural about a construct*, was the part that struck me hardest. *It is made, not born, and so does not function as truly living thing would*. He'd refused to outright state it, since he was still lacking proof, but I'd gotten out of him that the 'flesh' and 'blood' I now wore had precious little to do with what had been those same things before Liesse. I had been born anew, in a way. Not a pleasant one. It was also why my limp was back even though the Hashmallim had healed it. Beyond what he told me, I glimpsed something that managed to bring back the taste of fear to my mouth even if only faintly. Fae were known for illusions most of all. Was I just wearing a trick of light, a deception of Creation? Could I be *dismissed*, the way fairies and devils could be? That wards were now anathema to me might be a hint in that direction.

The second fact had been shrouded in inscrutable magetalk babble when he started expounding about it, as he told me about something called 'Principle Alienation'. One of the limits of sorcery, apparently, and also the reason diabolism was such a popular branch of it. I got him to talk in actual Lower Miezan after a while, and the basics of it were this: any mortal individual trying to use power was shackled by the limited mortal understanding of Creation and its many layers. A mage could not use the powers of a demon, at least in part, because they could not perceive the fabric of the world the way a demon did. Hence why Praesi were so fond of binding otherworldly creatures into their service, gaining access to powers they themselves would not be able to use. I was no summoner, and told him as much, but his reply ran along different lines than expected. I was wielding powers a mortal could not, so it followed that whenever I used them I became *less mortal*.

I'd not felt all that different, after coming back from Liesse, and some part of me had kept to the wild hope that the consequences would not be as dire as I had foreseen. His verdict finally disabused me of the notion. The moment I began calling on Winter my mind would move along similar lines as a fae's. My thoughts, my perceptions, my desires: everything I considered to be *me* would become a pale mirror of themselves. I'd not cheated my way out of the ramifications of being fae, I'd just made myself a... different breed of the species. The deeper I drew on Winter the more I would become some creature wearing my own face, and though that creature would keep all that I was it would not truly believe in them. My beliefs would just become duties enshrined in ice, as binding and unmoving as those that had doomed the Queen of Summer. I could be fluid and powerless, or unbending and powerful. I spent the rest of that night in my tent

getting as drunk as I could and neglecting a dozen urgent duties, wishing my hands could still shake at the terror I felt. I'd always treated my body as a tool, a vessel to get me where I needed to be. Now that it had become exactly that I was realizing the deep divide between saying something and living it.

Yet I had no time to spare for my own troubles, not with the catastrophes laying just beyond the horizon. And so after I sobered up, the following morning I sent for Duchess Kegan of House Ismail. Hierophant as well, and him before the other. He had an axe to grin I wanted settled before going into the other conversation. I poured myself a cup of wine as Masego sat himself at my left, wetting my lips on the Vale summer wine and finding the taste of it almost sour. Some part of me wondered if it was a consequence of the changes I'd gone through or just another cost for the mantle I had claimed in full. Winter took everything. Maybe even the smallest of pleasures. I offered the blind mage a cup but he shook his head.

"It's barely past Morning Bell," he said. "Did you even break your fast?"

I had not. Eating, while still pleasurable in some ways, did not seem to be something I needed any longer. The hungers I still felt had nothing to do with food.

"Ranker," I said, deciding to change the line of inquiry.

"Ah," Masego said, glass eyes shifting under his cloth to look at me. "Is it finally time for sanctions? I would have thought she would be in the tent for this."

"I've had Hakram look into your complaint," I said.

His brow rose.

"Three mage lines attempted to stick me inside a ward in broad daylight before the better part of a hundred thousand soldiers," he said. "How much investigation can possibly have been needed?"

If the situation in the camps wasn't such a mess, the fact that he'd actually lodged a formal complaint with the Legions would have carried a lot of weight. Especially given who his father was. But the lines of command were shaky at the moment. Ranker was both the senior commander here and the subject of the complaint, and while I outranked her as both Named and Vicequeen of Callow that authority was half a fiction. Her legion would stick with her whatever happened, and likely General Sacker's as well. I couldn't just bury this, of course. Not only did I owe Masego better than that, she had turned on an ally in the middle of a fucking battle. The problem was that she'd had reasons for that, and not bad ones.

"As I understand it, the ward wasn't actually meant to harm you," I said.

He scoffed.

"It would have left me bereft of sorcery in the midst of men attempting to kill me, had it succeeded," he said. "Murder with a borrowed knife."

I didn't disagree, but the old Matron had been careful to cover her back before acting. She had, before witnesses, cried Duchess Kegan to order that Hierophant not be harmed. Which practically speaking would have done nothing – entire parts of Kegan's host had just seen dozens of their own incinerated without warning, they would have attacked whatever she said – but it *did* give Ranker plausible deniability. Combined with officially stated worries about Hierophant being corrupted by demons, she'd not technically done anything I could punish her for. And pushing the matter regardless when the situation was so volatile was a recipe for a fight breaking out.

"I can't actually punish a marshal, Masego," I admitted. "With the Empress being silent and Black unconscious in theory I'm the supreme authority here, but I don't have the support in the Legions to force the matter. What I can offer is a compromise."

"An attempt was made on my life, Catherine," Hierophant said, cocking his head to the side. "Support is irrelevant. Give me two lines of mages and I will turn her camp into a crater with a bare half day of preparation."

"That's exactly what I'm trying to avoid," I said. "You're right to be angry. Furious, even. But you can't wipe out a few thousand people for one woman's decision."

"I can," Masego disagreed, "if they shield her from retribution."

"I'm not asking you to just let this go," I said. "Hakram's been in talks. The mage lines involved will be punished."

It was a good thing Adjutant needed so little sleep, because since my return I had been running him ragged. This was arguably the most delicate negotiation I'd sent him on yet, given what could come of a failure. I felt Hierophant's stare on me though neither his eyes nor his body moved, the subtle weight of his attention.

"Executed?" he asked, and his voice was hard to read.

"Demoted back to the ranks," I said. "All pending transfer to another legion, pay docked for a year's worth."

"A slap on the wrist," he said. "This is not even symbolic. No, rather it is symbolic of them *getting away with it*."

I'd thought he would say that. I'd not blamed Adjutant when he'd come back with those terms, though I'd been less than pleased. Marshal Ranker was not the kind of goblin easily talked into bending the neck, much less when she believed herself to be in the right. The days where I had considered the Legions my teacher's domain and therefore sacrosanct were over, though. And the Praesi were not the only ones with hired killers at their disposal.

"I had Adjutant push for the Legions they transfer to being posted in the Wasteland," I said.

"Out of sight is not evening of the scale," Masego said.

"No," I agreed. "But Ratface's staff now has a representative from the Guild of Assassins attached. Those mages will be heading back to Praes through cities I control."

Masego frowned for a moment, then his expression brightened.

"Ah," he said, beaming. "You're implying you'll have them killed before they reach the Wasteland."

I could have done without it being stated that bluntly but yes, that was exactly what I was implying. It was a waste of no doubt competent mages, but Ranker should have fucking thought twice before taking a swing at one of mine.

"You need me to be 'satisfied justice had been done' in front of everyone else," Masego continued, sounding pleased even as tried to wink before remembering halfway through he no longer had eyelids.

The sight of that was a little distressing, but I'd cope.

"Pretty much, yeah," I said. "No need to rub elbows with the goblin that tried to take you out, but try no longer to be publicly out for blood."

"I never get to scheme," Hierophant mused, appearing rather chuffed. "It's rather pleasant to be involved in your plots."

"I'll take that as a yes," I said.

He nodded.

"Good," I grimly said. "Because you're not going to enjoy our talk with Kegan nearly this much."

His expression soured, but before he could begin to speak I raised my own voice and ordered the legionaries outside to let in

the Duchess. I'd hear her arrive a little while back, but this needed to be wrapped up before she got involved. Masego would be easier to talk into things after being mollified. Some part of me wondered what kind of person it made me to be manipulating one of my closest friends without hesitation, but the voice wasn't as loud as it used to be. Or nearly as persuasive. The Duchess of Daoine parted the flaps of the tent with her hand and sketched half a bow in my direction. The stare she gave Hierophant was distinctly less than friendly.

"Your Grace," she greeted me. "I am pleased your *strenuous duties* have finally allowed time for audience."

Yeah, I'd kind of deserved that. Even at the kingdom's peak there been nobody but the royal family higher in rank than the head of the House of Ismail – she likely wasn't used to being given a brush-off, much less one as blatant as one I'd repeatedly given her.

"Take a seat, Duchess," I said. "I'm told you have grievances to bring forward."

"An understatement if there ever was one," Kegan sneered, and pointedly sat herself across the table from the both of us. "My men were murdered, and the very murderer sits at your side. Not an auspicious beginning."

Hierophant opened his mouth, but I raised my hand.

"Let her lay it out first," I said. "You can give answer afterwards. Duchess, the floor is yours."

"Seventy-three dead, without even ashes to bury," Kegan said. "Thirty-nine wounded permanently. Do I need to call witnesses forward? This entire host saw the killings."

"Your men attempted to kill Hierophant as well," I said, and her face turned dark with fury.

"Is the defences of one's life now a crime in the eyes of the Empire?" she barked.

"The Empress isn't here," I said calmly. "I am. And I am not condemning their actions, only establishing the full facts. Do you have anything to add?"

"Murder of Deoraithe is a breach of our treaty with the Tower," Kegan coldly said. "And I believe that under the regulations of your own legions, the wanton killing of allied soldiers qualifies as *treason*."

"So it does," I agreed, and was more than a little glad I sat down with Aisha before this. "'Wanton killing' being defined as 'killing without just pretext' under the same regulations."

"Are you implying there was anything just about this?" the Deoraithe said, and her tone could have frozen oil.

"I think this was a tragedy," I said. "But also a largely accidental one. Masego, if you would explain yourself?"

His glass eyes were fixing the duchess with a stare as unfriendly as her own.

"I was not aware I needed to explain my actions to *aristocrats*," Hierophant said, the disdain he put into the word ironically reminding me of the same highborn he was looking down on.

"I'm asking you to clarify why you did what you did," I said. "Lest your actions be interpreted inaccurately."

That, more than anything else, jolted him into talking. Throwing around rank here would have been completely useless.

"Upon returning from the dimensional fold in which I battled the three demons," Masego said, "My sudden juxtaposition to Creation brought back with it a large quantity of demonic essence. That essence having corrupted soldiers, I purged the location before it could further contaminate. Any further killing was made in my own defence."

"The killing of corrupted individuals regardless of Praesi citizenship is legal under purge protocols," I clarified for Kegan. "Which the Black Knight declared the moment the rebels called forward their demons. Hierophant hasn't broken Tower law by doing this, and killing men that were attacking him is similarly legal."

"I could have killed twice as many," Hierophant flatly said. "You should be thanking me for my restraint."

I almost winced. I really, really wished he hadn't said that. Reading a room had never been one of Masego's talent, but even by his standards this was a blunder. Predictably, Kegan's face was a mask of bitter and poisonous fury.

"You feed my people to demons, murder them and then those trying to protect them," she hissed. "And you require *thanks* for it?"

"The Lord Hierophant misspoke in an attempt to hide his deep regret at the tragic necessity of his actions," I lied. "Please forgive his lack of manners."

"I am the Duchess of Daoine," Kegan of House Ismail softly replied. "I do not forget. I do not *forgive*."



It was rather sad this wasn't even the worst I'd anticipated this conversation could go. Masego looked about to speak again but the look I sent him smothered that in the crib.

*"Deep regret,"* I stressed.

"I did not mean to harm them," Hierophant sighed, sounding his age for once.

It was rare for him to have to face consequences for the collateral damage that followed in our wake. Most the time, it was our foes that got the worst of it. That sentence was probably as good as I could hope for, though Kegan understandably seemed less than appeased.

"Before you speak again," I interrupted. "He could not know your men would be where he reappeared."

I didn't know if that was true and frankly didn't care what the truth was. She would be in no position to gainsay me anyway: the mages could understand what Hierophant had pulled on the field in the whole of Calernia could probably be counted on one hand.

"And he was not the one who ordered your soldiers forward," I continued. "That would be Marshal Ranker."

It was unfair of me to throw her under the chariot here, to be honest. It was Masego who hadn't kept anyone in the loop when he'd done... whatever it was he'd actually done. I knew how he got when he had a puzzle in front of him, everything else fell by the wayside. It was something I would have to change in him, the going off without a word. Trying to fix the moral compass of a man raised by a monster and also an incubus was far beyond my ability, but I could at least fashion a facsimile of one through practicality. As long as he understood discussions like this would keep happening if he didn't change his ways, he should be willing to adjust in order to avoid the tediousness. That aside, Ranker had given orders according to what she believed to be the lay of the battlefield and her mistake had ultimately been understandable. By my reading of the reports she'd believed the entire army would collapse if the centre wasn't reinforced, so she'd merely taken what she saw as the lesser risk. But Kegan hated Ranker deeply, had for decades. And the marshal wasn't one of mine, quite the opposite. If doing her disservice was what kept the peace, she could go hang.

"Regardless of orders, there is fault," the Deoraithe said, but there'd been a noticeable thaw in the poison. "My men were killed at the Lord Hierophant's hand."

*Ah, Black. Even now your lessons are useful.* People always preferred blaming an old enemy if you gave them the chance.

"And for that there will be redress," I said. "Though there was no ill-intent, the deaths cannot be ignored. To start, Hierophant will help your mages reform the gestalt in Liesse."

Masego turned to me, displeasure visible on his face, but that was the least of the concessions I could and would make. Kegan set aside her anger for a moment, more interested in the prize I'd put on the table: confirmation that no one would contest the souls of her people. Keeping her wizards at bay had, in an unexpected way, made what must have once seem as a given feel like it was now a concession. I'd count my blessings in that.

"Full access to the city will be granted?" she pressed.

"Under supervision," I said, and before she could argue I raised a hand. "Not out of distrust, Duchess. That city is a nightmare made stone and my people are the ones who've been keeping an eye on it. I do this to avoid you losing a few of your practitioners in the bargain."

"It would not be necessary if access had been granted since the beginning," Kegan said, but did not disagree any further.

"Hierophant," I continued, "will also put his considerable prowess in sorcery at your disposal in order to help your practitioners ensure the gestalt cannot be stolen like this again. After which he will never speak a word of those measures to anyone, by royal decree."

"Catherine-" he began.

"We fuck up, we pay up," I bluntly told him. "This isn't Praes, Masego. We don't get a pass because we're Named or powerful. If the laws protect you, they protect them too."

He turned sullen at that, and that was the very reason I'd not warned him of this in advance. *Look at me, Kegan, I thought. I'm going against one of my closest and most powerful supporters to set things right with you. Keep that in mind before deciding I'm an enemy.* I knew the blind man's irritation would pass after he dug into the thick of the sorcery that was involved in what had been promised. There was a reason I'd chosen that out of all the possible avenues of making reparations. The Duchess would see one of the foremost Named in the Empire put to the service of her people, while Hierophant would forget this was a punishment at all after the first month. And if this required going to Daoine for a while, it just so happened that would keep Masego out of the reach of the Empress and the Calamities for while. That also had its uses. But I'd have to give more, for what I wanted out of Daoine. Masego had no part of that, though, and it would be better if he wasn't there at all.

"Hierophant's actions took place while he was under my command," I told Kegan. "Therefore the responsibility is mine in part. In my function as Vicequeen of Callow I'll offer further reparations, but I believe my comrade's part in this is done."

Masego mostly looked pleased he wouldn't have to keep being involved in this, but it wasn't him I was watching out for. It was the Duchess. In her eyes I could see the struggle: make a play for further punishment and risk whatever other indemnities I would offer, or show goodwill she didn't think he deserved and bank on that adding to the honeypot? Greed won, as I thought it would. The Duchess was about to have some lean years, if my suspicions about the costs of replacing the Watch's casualties were true. She'd want to hit me up for coin more than try and likely fail to have Hierophant further punished.

"That part of the grievance is considered settled," she conceded.

Good. Masego didn't bother with courtesies when he left the tent as quickly as he could, but the two of us had cats to skin of greater import.

"A moment," I said, and my heartbeat stilled.

The air in the tent cooled. Once that would have seen every surface in sight frost over, but I'd gained more than just power when I'd claimed my full mantle. Winter hung thickly in the air, a barely visible pale mist. No one would be able to scry through that, and my perceptions were extended far enough no one would be able to come and listen in without my knowing it. I felt the legionaries outside shuffle at the sudden drop, the two as visible to me as if I was standing before them, and I raised my voice to send the pair away. When I turned my eyes back to Kegan she had gone pale. Fear, I noted. It wafted off her like a scent. I breathed it in and smiled. It would be easy to get what I wanted from her. All that was needed was to weave myself into mind like a quiet whisper, slithering into her brains until terror ruled her and my words were her only relief. She would *beg* me to serve. If I twisted her just right, set a sliver of darkness and ice deep inside, I could have her plagued with nightmares that would keep her on my leash forever. My fingers clenched. *Callowan*, I told myself. *She is Callowan*. The urge lessened. It still lurked, but the power was no longer waiting to lash out.

"Gods," the Duchess said. "Your eyes, they... It is true, then. You are no longer human."

My eyes? I raised an eyebrow and a light tap of the finger on the table had it frost. I looked upon my reflection and found nothing amiss, fixing the Deoraithe with a quizzical look.

"Like frozen ponds," she whispered.

Useful, I thought, if they were truly this disquieting. The part of me that should be finching was utterly silent.

"We will not be overheard," I said. "Would you be entirely opposed to some honesty between us, Duchess? It should limit the tediousness."

She shivered at my voice, or perhaps the cold.

"I am not disagreeable," she managed with laudable composure.

"There is a war coming," I said. "I would like to know where Daoine will stand, and before it reaches our doorstep."

"The terms of our treaty with the Tower require a host of no less than ten thousand soldiers be provided in case of foreign invasion," she said cautiously.

"If I was here on behalf of the Empress, this tent would be warmer," I said.

She stared at me for a long time.

"You speak of rebellion," she said.

"Nothing quite so... turbulent," I replied.

"Then what, exactly?" she pressed.

I smiled, broad and sharp.

"Do you play shatranj, Duchess?" I asked, voice echoing strangely.

This time I knew why she shivered.

"I do," she said.

"To have a game, you see, you need an unspoken assumption," I murmured. "That all the pieces will *obey*."

She stayed. She listened.

And after, she made a deal.

First update of the month, which means extra chapter in the usual tab. This one is titled "Prosecution I", the first of a two-parter from the POV of Hanno (the White Knight).

*TameCurtsy*

This story has seriously fallen off. I'm not really talking about the plot, that's great. Same with the characters. And the dialogue. And the worldbuilding. What really has gone downhill has been your first of the month comments.

You used to include the link to the bonus story. But now you don't? I just don't understand why you would do this to your audience. This link: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/03/02/prosecution-i/>

If you want to make it up to us, a surprise bonus chapter part ii in the middle of march will do nicely, thanks in advance.

*Big Brother*

Tame, you're an ass. Quit being lazy and just scroll a little bit further.

*Morgenstern*

You don't even have to scroll. Just look at the two "previous" right under the chapter. And there IS what you were searching for. Just have to click it...

*Morgenstern*

\*ahem\* >> "previous" and "next" tabs << that should have said. Though "previous" is the one where "Prosecution I" stands out in bold letters.

*Gunslinger*

Is this supposed to be a joke? Even then it comes off really bad, especially when you've replied straight to the author.

*TameCurtsy*

"Hey author, your story is great, but [ridiculously superficial criticism]. Why oh why would you do that to us. [Shameless attempt for an early extra chapter]"

Sorry you guys didn't like my comment! Rereading that first paragraph, I could've made the joke more obvious/balanced, my bad.

*Jonnnney*

We get an extra chapter at the beginning of the month. Are you incapable of reading a calendar?

[5th Holy Sheeprabbit, Kilimanjaro Estelion Sharlulu Asheel  
Vinchance Celenalia di ef Falufiluu'Luufilaafee \(The 35th\) da  
ne!](#)

If it's any consolation, I laughed. I just hope it didn't upset EE.

*Big Brother*

Hot damn. Cat is getting really good at her Role.

*Gunslinger*

She played poor Masego like a fiddle

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

What's the problem with manipulating him in the way that Cat did? It seems like she manipulated him into an outcome that's going to be good for him that he'll also enjoy. I'm not really seeing a problem with keeping Named beholden to some fair-ish standard of conduct.

[aurabolt1](#)

Because it is hypocrisy. Because as someone with similar social abilities to Mesego, he defended himself-arrows are still pretty able to kill Named mages as they are with anything else-and he's getting manipulated and punished for it.

He doesn't manipulate Cat. To do the same to him is wrong, when he trusts you as much as someone with his upbringing can.

*Gunslinger*

Once again Cat gets more power but with greater costs. The worst thing is that whatever happened to her will most likely not subside with the coming of her new name. I wish she'd get a break for once but this will be a lesser work then.

Ohh and if you you can do support the author on patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/user?u=3523924>)

Contributions there are why we get 4 chapters this week.

*matbag248*

Too bad there's no goal of 5 chapters a week, or even 7 chapters. We can only dream.

*Gunslinger*

Honestly more chapters would be highly unlikely even if we can allow the author to do this full time.

But I suspect reducing the financial burden would allow them to work on editing the previous books for publication

*werafdsaew*

I suspect more chapters would simply lead to shorter chapters.

*Vortex*

I am very happy with the quality of the chapters now. If more chapters equals shorter or lower quality chapters then I would rather we stay at the current setup.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Subside? It's more likely to strengthen man.

*Gunslinger*

Sadly yeah, Winter is not going to be solved by a second Resurrection

*Aeon*

Building up her powerbase, huh? I suspect that the Winter effects will be somewhat permanent, but that at least some of it will be alleviated. Can't have Cat lose her humanity completely. We're getting there. Still can't wait to see her new Name.

*Rook*

I'm actually hoping all these changes and drawbacks stay permanent and significant. Part of playing the narrative, which is where the real power is in this setting lies, is understanding how your weaknesses and strengths fit into place in a story.

Physical or magical drawbacks aren't really drawbacks here, and strengths aren't necessarily strengths. Black is a rather small man of at best average physical capability among named, and has weak named abilities to boot. Despite this he's one of the most dangerous characters around by several orders of magnitude. Captain was insanely strong and was crushingly dominant after transformation, but she got killed by a Hero that wasn't particularly noteworthy – almost solely because she was on the wrong side of the narrative.

Similarly, Cats new Fae qualities being SO heavily dependant on the story being told means they're a ridiculously sharp double-edged sword. She could be bound and beaten by ants because of her characteristics the way the Summer Queen was; or just as easily manipulate the story so those exact same characteristics make her utterly unstoppable instead, potentially surmounting even Black in this sense. Being so distinctly polarized means you have a lot more \*weight\* that can be shifted against or in favour of you.

To me this is super interesting, since the idea of the protagonist earning her victories via cleverly wielding her weaknesses as a weapon – along the lines of her currently comatose mentor – is way more appealing than just a bog standard Named bulldozer with lots of strength built in.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

What makes you think Cat can't lose her humanity completely? Remember the battle early on where she zombified her half-dead self? Foreshadowing, man. Without the "halfway" part this time.

### [ayon96](#)

Think in the future in another pivot she will get back some of her humanity!

*Engineer*

I like...

*Un-Metaphorical Grapevine*

This is just chapter after chapter of blue-balling, I missed it when I didn't have to wait for chapters, they were just magically there! Crazy, right?

spotted one typo where two words were fused together, 'her' and some other word~

### [glassgirlceci](#)

This is one of those things where, cognitively, I know it's awful to lose parts of yourself, lose your humanity bit by bit in a Faustian bargain for power. I'm thankful I don't have to live if myself, and I do feel sorry for Cat, but...this is just so \*cool\*. Seeing her badass and terrifying and manipulative... Whatever happens in the future, that was amazing, I love it so much!

*Sniggs44*

I like how Cat manipulated Masego. The best kind on constructive manipulation, where you get someone to do something they are disinclined to, but they'll ultimately benefit from/enjoy. If



she's going to be an evil chessmaster then this is the best kind she could be, it bodes well.

The commentary about how she has to "inflexibly solidify her values or lose power" (or w/e) was fascinating. Brought to mind scifi artificial intelligences, which have their core values inalterably enshrined in their coding. If she's really transitioning into some sort of inhuman intelligence, these early days are the most important in terms of ensuring she's not going to deviate from her core human principles. "Protect Callow(ans)", "don't needlessly commit genocides", "minimize suffering", etc are all good prime directives to set in stone while she still has control over how her new mind is being formed.

Here's hoping she can reconstruct her psyche in a non-psychotic way before the next big disaster hits. Still being a blank slate in the midst of the upcoming conflict wouldn't be conducive to her coming out the other end a well adjusted human being.

*Decius*

There are no safe, stateable directives for a sufficiently powerful being to mindlessly implement.

What would have been great for Cat to do before she became Winter would have been to establish internally consistent / values/.

*lavos*

Considering most people, if not in fact everyone, don't have truly consistent values that would be pretty hard.

*Daemion*

We need another chapter from another perspective soon, to see how everyone else thinks about Cat now. Maybe Nauk will wake up soon and provide that insight? I really liked his part in Commanders.

*Ward*

Love from a dumb phone

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I've been wondering, what's so dumb about your phone?

*Shoddi*

My Silly Theory: Ward is in truth, not a name but a statement of condition. The "dumb phone" itself is a technological "ward" preventing them from electronically scrying more in-depth comments. Thus, they are limited to a five-word expression of approval.

Or it's just Ward's bit. I've no problem with it. Carry on.

*Gunslinger*

I've always assumed this was the work of a strange bot

*AshSlanabrezgov*

Modern mobile handheld spell arrays with touchscreen which operate on daemon-infested OS like Android, or iOS, are termed as smart phones. Eldritch mobile handheld spell arrays from the yore or modern simpler ones are named dumb-phones.

There are things, unholy things that operate under Windows-to-hell Mobile but let those sleep in the dark and never be named.

[The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

@Ash but a pre-"smart" phone isn't going to be able to display a webpage, let alone comment.

I don't have a "problem" with "Ward" here, but since we need a different opinion represented: what the fuck is the point of leaving a comment that doesn't say anything? It's self-important bullshit cluttering up the comment section for everyone else. It's just like a middle schooler commenting "First!" It's pointless and really kind of rude.

*goliath1303*

You must be young enough that you probably never had a phone that wasn't "smart". You 100% could get online with the old flip phones, blackberries, etc. Now, just because you *could* do so, definitely does not mean most people *did*. It was hellish nightmare to be quite honest. If I remember right you would have additional charges added onto your bill(That's right, this feature existed even back when almost everybody was still locked into a contract, which was a while nother headache.) based on either pages viewed or time spent online. I really don't remember how the billing worked because I almost never used it due to how much it sucked. I remember I had a girlfriend that would always use it on her blackberry(Which used to be considered a pretty good phone.) to check her social media.

All in all, using mobile internet back in the pre smartphone era was a miserable experience and one I, as well as most people I knew, avoided using in order to retain our composure and sanity. The ability to view websites and comment was absolutely a thing though.

As to the rest of your comment, I have to agree that these comments are unnecessary and slightly annoying. Like usual though, you are unable to communicate with others in a civil manner. That, unfortunately, detracts from any valid points you make. My knee-jerk reaction is actually to disagree with whatever you're saying when you post rude, out of proportion, criticisms like this, attacking somebody over a simple comment. The worst/best part of your comment though, is how unself-aware you are. You actually ended that overblown rant by calling Ward rude! The irony of that is just mind boggling.

*AshSlanabrezgov*

I think that most important question which must be solved by Cat fast is this – “To be powerful but rigid, or to be weak but flexible?”.

And fk the existential crisis aside – it is price she has to live with. It might be painful but what sold is sold.

Back to the main question. To be successful villain, here are abstract paths that can lead to her achieving her goals.

1. Become fairy and use brute force granted by title of Dutchess to achieve her coming goals, while embracing shackles of fairies – shackles of stories. Problem here lies in that brute force might be enough to defeat some of Named idiots or rulers who want Callow be used and eradicated, she is villain. Villain Fairy against Bard who knows lots of stories, which sounds bad. And against Gods Above too, who give heroes unfair advantages against powerful foes.

Let's assume she becomes successful as a ruler of Callow. A rigid monster of frozen Order might be a curse to lands she governs.

2. Become fairy, become monster, but leash herself and give leash to someone with flexibility and her vision of future for Callow. Problem here is that she is too unique. There is no one who can fit a role of incorruptible and driven savior of Callow. Maybe give leash to Thief? She is somehow weak. - - Maybe use Masego and clone Cat's soul or split it to two different entities – one “Diabolist” and another “Bound Demon”? Or maybe it's possible to establish were-fairy procedure where she changes from flexible Cat to rigid Cat by some trigger.

3. Shackle herself from using Winter power to try and remain somewhat flexible. Maybe search for ways to evolve her Name into something that allows flexibility.

*Thenre*

Impatiently awaiting Cat's new name

*Porkman*

I don't really want Cat to rebel.

I want Black and Cat and Malicia to patch up their differences and then chew the Principate up through the methods of Rationality.

*Reveen*

Looks like the methods of Rationality is getting it's ass dunked on, boy.

*Dylan Tullos*

Porkman:

The last section hasn't been going well for the "methods of Rationality". There are a hundred thousand dead people who think Cat isn't doing a great job, and there about to be a lot more once the Crusade begins.

There's a really good quote from a wonderful book called The Traitor Baru Cormorant: "Your error is fundamental to the human psyche: you have allowed yourself to believe that others are mechanisms, static and solvable, whereas you are an agent."

Other people have their own plans, and they're as capable of reasoning out solutions as Team Practical Evil. It's important to remember that no plan survives contact with the enemy.

*Porkman*

@Dylan Tullos

The central caveat of this story is that Malicia and Black have read the "Evil Overlord List" and are actually working against it.

The way the story has been running and the world has been working has essentially been... "the universe will put its hands on the scale, but it needs a villain to mess up and make themselves vulnerable through a violation of the Evil Overlord List first." Black's whole thing has been to avoid list violations and watch the story and avoid situations where a dramatic reversal could happen.

That is his modus operandi.

The story says he destroyed the array out of pride (or at least that's how Cat sees it) and that isn't right.

He destroyed it because he knew that the demon array was a cursed sword which was guaranteed to fail at the most story critical point and destroy Praes.

That wasn't pride... that was seeing the world the way it is.

His disappointment is with Malicia for being seduced by the same "shiny evil superweapon" which have always been the undoing of Praesi rulers.

But he wasn't wrong.

The story has now changed from "The heroic Principate launching a crusade against the Empire of Praes who threatens to bathe the world in hellfire." to "The Principate attacking the beleaguered empire of Praes which has been devastated by a civil war with nothing to show for it but ashes."

Praes/Callow now has an underdog effect. Black, by destroying the Array, has given them a better chance. Because the array was an automatic win... for Praes's enemies.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I want them to fight the First Prince, then kiss 😊

### [kdreyes09](#)

I need more Blackkk when will he wake up? Is he fine? I need more Robber too. And Hakram.

I think Cat needs a new love interest even if Killian was great.

I ship Psychotic Merchant Prince and Cat. Mmmm.

Neeeeeed

*Ward*

She went from bumbling thug to master manipulator and master baiter( ~ 3 °) in 1 chapter. Must have been one helluva class change.

*limlimrevolution*

Typo thread!

If the situation in the camps wasn't such a mess, the fact that he'd actually lodged a formal complain with the Legions would have carried a lot of weight.

– a formal complain(t)

Combined with officially stated worries about Hierophant being corrupted by demons, she'd not technically done anything I could punish her for.

– anything I could punish her for.

I felt Hierophant's stare on me though neither his eyes nor his body moved, the subtle weight of his attention.

– the subtle weight (o)f his attention.

I'd hear her arrive a little while back, but this needed to be wrapped up before she got involved.

– I'd hear(d) her arrive a little while back,

"Is the defences of one's life now a crime in the eyes of the Empire?" she barked.

– "Is the defence() of one's life now a crime in the eyes of the Empire?" she barked.

"Upon returning from the dimensional fold in which I battled the three demons," Masego said, "My sudden juxtaposition to Creation brought back with it a large quantity of demonic essence.

– Masego said, "(m)y sudden juxtaposition to Creation brought back with it a large quantity of demonic essence.

All that was needed was to weave myself into mind like a quiet whisper, slithering into her brains until terror ruled her and my words were her only relief.

– All that was needed was to weave myself into (her) mind

*Drd*

So when Cat transitions, she becomes The Winter Queen, yeah? 😊

*Glow*

Look at Cat go. Making deals like a real fae and all. Interesting about her body now being a construct. Is it now a mirror reflecting her role in the story?

I also wonder what's happening to balance her presence as Winter. There has to be something going on to bring Summer back...where's Killian again??

*Hvitserkr*

It's a bit disconcerting to see Cat having no second thoughts about assassinating three mage lines. They were just following orders after all.

## *Draconius Sinister*

Hey @Eraticerrata, sorry to be a bother, but could we have a hard and fast definition of how command structures in the Legions generally go, who's in charge of what, and how things are different in the Fifteenth? Sorry if this is a weird/out there request, just kind of want to know how things break down! Also, great chapter, can't wait for the next one! Totally Not a Villain,  
Draconius Sinister

## *Hvitserkr*

[http://abridged-guide-to-evil.wikia.com/wiki/Legions\\_of\\_Terror](http://abridged-guide-to-evil.wikia.com/wiki/Legions_of_Terror)

The Fifteenth had eight thousand soldiers before the Arcadian campaign (the size of two standard legions; understaffed on the mages and sappers) + three thousand Callowan knights (even the Thirteenth Legion only has a thousand riders; Grandmaster Talbot is a commander, but is counted as member of the general staff, and has three times more men than a commander usually does)

Also, iirc there were no official Kachera Tribune in the Fifteenth (there were Aisha and Ratface to make up for that, and now there's Thief as well)

## *Poetically Psychotic*

Seems like she's going full on Khepri.

## [\*vuthuha912\*](#)

Um... Cat... The mage lines are good soldiers, they are risking their lives to fight for you and others. The order they were given was logical and understandable. Hopefully, you are not actually assassinating them and just harassing them on their way to Praes.

Manipulating people for their own good, you are truly Black's successor.

Ranker can probably take a few minor symbolic punishments, Cat should make a show of it. Ranker may take it to protect people under her. Still, Keagan is truly a cunt, isn't she? If Callow collapsed, it will affect everyone under it. She can say she is an isolationist all she wants, the enemies won't be keen on all the nuances of Callow politics.

Cat can probably come up with some rewards or compensations for Keagan to smooth the whole thing over. A public funeral, some honors for the families member of the deceased, jobs and education for their children, land, money, tax granted, etc.

Now that Black is in open rebellion, there is no way of letting this slide. Malicia can't afford to be weak but she can't also just punish Black when she is the one who just gutted 6 of his legions and cost him 3 of his veteran generals. Still, a symbolic punishment is enough, strip him of some money or power and put him under house arrest for a bit. A poke on the wrist.

Honestly, she lets all sorts of thing slide, from those two cunts on the Ruling Councils to Akua Rebellion to various other highborns' insubordinations. Punishing the one person who is actually defying her for her own good while other unreliable fucks get a pass is ... not great.

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## Chapter 72: Curtains

*"Tall your tower may be, but what was raised by the hands of men can by those same hands be torn down."*

– Queen Eleanor Fairfax of Callow

The moon had come and gone, chased away by the approach of dawn. I still had the better part of a bell left until the sun rose, but I sat patiently. It would make the fourth time Archer went into the city now, and she'd come close enough the last I could reasonably expect her to succeed on this trip. I'd come to regret not bringing a folding chair for my vigil, but the log I was leaning against was comfortable enough apathy had seen me decline going out to get one. I enjoyed the silence, to be honest. The reprieve from everything. Out here I could allow even my thoughts to go still, though I never let myself to sink into sleep. I still could, I'd found out. Much like eating it was no longer something I needed to do, and when I did it was... less than restful. I always dreamt, and the dreams were not the pleasant kind. Winter devouring a world whole, until all that was left was ice and darkness. My eyes lingered on the ward setting the boundary around Liesse, and I found the same silhouettes from earlier had yet to retreat. Shades of the dead standing a vigil of their own. I could feel their eyes on me, fixed and unblinking.

There was hunger in them, but it was lesser than my own and that had them attracted to my presence like moths to a flame. Had I truly become the Black Queen, I thought, had my teacher not broken that transition as recklessly as he had the city, they would have been mine to rule. To shape and order as I wished, wresting true ownership of the weapon Akua had made from the Empire's hands. The shape of that was still seductive. It would



have been a gamble, it was true, but then so was any other path. And it had been the only outcome presented to me I'd found even slightly acceptable. Peace in my time, huh. The freedom to rebuild Callow as it should be, safe and prosperous. That path led to a place where I was no longer needed, but that might be better for all involved. What salvation I'd tried to bring to my people had bled them as starkly as ruin, and would yet unless I found a way out. Keeping the damages to a minimum had failed, that much was obvious. It'd only ever been a mitigating measure anyway, not a plan. One of those was taking shape in my mind, even as I gathered more and more soldiers to my banner, but oh the *risk* of it.

Gamble was too light a word, but if every other path led to a land of graveyards it was a risk that must be taken.

Archer's presence was heralded by the retreating of the shades. Even through the translucent wall of the ward I could see her tying a rope atop the rampart and shimmying down smoothly. Some curious shade wandered too close and was immediately carved through in a silver blur, the other woman's longknife wounding it as if it was a thing of flesh. The others scattered immediately in a chorus of whispers I was careful not to listen too closely to. The sooner Hierophant bound those souls again the better for all involved. Archer tugged down the rope after landing and sheathed her blade, striding towards me unhurriedly. The ward pushed back her hair and clothes when she crossed it, but from the swagger to her step I knew she'd finally managed what I'd asked of her. A cold smile stretched my lips. Good. It was not the kind of thread I could allow to be left hanging.

"So if Zeze told you shit was under control in there, he was *gravely* mistaken," Archer told me with a shit-eating grin. "Get it? As in grave-"

"You've just ensured we will never sleep together," I told her frankly. "Your being an ass I can live with, but *puns*? I do have standards."

"Spoken like the Ice Queen of legend," the Named replied cheerfully.

She plopped herself down at my side, sprawling over twice the amount of space I'd occupied and elbowing me out of my comfortable stance. I threw back her hand in her own face and she yelped, more out of outrage than pain.

"Is that any way to treat your beloved minion?" she complained.

"Almost half of that was true," I noted. "That's a record for you."

"Ugh," she grunted. "You're such a joyless thing. I thought villains were supposed to be the fun ones."

"You've been part of two wars and several killings that will go into legend since linking up with me," I pointed out.

"Maybe, but I haven't gotten laid in like a year," she whined. "I'm *this* close to just dragging your pretty officer into a tent for the night."

I glanced at her. That could mean any number of people, given that her tastes did not discriminate between genders.

"The one with the funny name," she elaborated.

I raised an eyebrow.

"Ratface?" I tried.

"That's the one," she cheered. "Aisha gets real chatty after a drinks, and she had nothing but compliments for--"

"And this part of the conversation just came at an end," I announced firmly.

"You never gossip with me," Archer told me, displeased.

"I've delegated all gossiping duties to Hakram," I said, swiftly throwing my closest friend under the chariot. "And if you're being this much of a pest, you have something for me."

"Say please," she grinned.

"Please stop trying my patience," I sweetly replied.

I was rewarded by Archer rustling through her knapsack and dropping a cylinder of obsidian in my lap. I ran a finger down the length of it, and the soul bound within shivered. *Oh*, I thought. *So you know who I am. That's an unexpected pleasure.*

"Kind of wanted to stab her a few times," the brown-skinned woman told me in a conversational tone. "You know, for Hunter."

"I tore out her heart while she was still alive to feel it," I informed Archer.

The other woman blinked at me, then let out a whistle.

"Well shit," she said. "That's a way to get your displeasure across, I guess. Old school of you, Cat."

"She had a way of bringing that out in me," I muttered, eyes on the soul container. "I lost my temper when she sent an envoy."

Made an oath, even. Not the kind of thing I can back out of nowadays."

*If you do this, there is no place in Creation or beyond that will safeguard you from me, I'd sworn. Not Heavens or Hells, not even if every lord in Arcadia swears to you. The doom I promise you will have men trembling in a thousand years when they speak of Akua's Folly and the woe that came from it. I could feel what I had spoken binding me as surely as if I'd sworn on the Gods Below.*

"I thought about sending her to the Tower," I admitted. "She'd have a place waiting for her in the Hall of Screams."

"But that wouldn't be quite *your* vengeance then, would it?" Archer knowingly said.

That, and I no longer trusted the Empress with possession of Akua's soul. Not when I could no longer be certain another city wouldn't go up in flames for a weapon to be forged. It was one thing to use that weapon after it was already made, another to enable Malicia to commit mass murder if she got desperate enough. Even if it was Praesi who got the axe this time, which I couldn't be sure of. There was a part of me that was urging me to just destroy the soul. To make sure the possible liability was ended for good. But as reasonable as I knew that action would be, I couldn't quite bring myself to take it. I wasn't sure whether it was genuine hatred that had me stay my hand, or if I simply *couldn't* break the oath. Both were worrying liabilities.

"I have a cloak," I finally said.

"The murder cloak, yeah," Archer mused. "Called thus because you murdered someone for every piece you add to it."

I forced myself not to sigh. It would only encourage her.

"Haven't added her banner to it yet," I said. "I was thinking maybe something more pointed was in order."

Archer eyed me sideways.

"*Shit*," she said. "Her own soul, really?"

"It can be done," I said. "I've heard the Warlock bound someone's soul to a chamber pot once, Masego should be able to do something similar."

"I can't decide whether that's better or worse than skinning someone and making a cloak out of that," she mused.

"Past a certain point the nuances don't matter much, I think," I said.

"That's where you're wrong," Archer said, face turning up to stare at the sky. "They never do. We just tell ourselves otherwise so we can think someone else is worse."

"Never took you for the philosophical kind of girl," I said, head leaning back next to hers.

"That's because it's pointless to dig to deep," she shrugged. "How long are we going to live, either of us? Not long enough to see more than the smallest bit of Creation. If that's my limit, I want to sample as much of that bit as I can instead of just getting miserable about all this Good and Evil twaddle. Ain't no settling that, no matter how hard you try. If you get involved you just get chewed up like all the others before you, and I don't owe anybody that."

"Hate to break it to you," I said, "but you *are* involved. What do you think we've been doing for the last year?"

"I have no idea," she admitted, sounding pleased at the notion. "But you're a pretty shit villain and you gave the Choir of Contrition the finger, so I'm looking forward to finding out."

I wouldn't get a better opening than that, I thought, so I might as well speak up now.

"You got a letter," I said. "From Refuge."

"Huh," she grunted. "What's in it?"

"Are you implying I'd read your personal correspondence?" I said.

"Haven't you?" she snorted.

"Of course not," I said, and let a beat pass. "I have people for that."

"I can't believe you're half-assing even your spying on me," she sighed. "Was it from the Lady?"

I hummed in agreement.

"She says the debt Refuge owed the Tower is settled," I told her. "That your mandated service as my fae specialist is at an end. Didn't actually summon you back, though."

"She wouldn't," Archer said. "It's not how Refuge works. The Lady of the Lake's not a queen, Cat, she's just... the woman with the biggest stick, I guess. We learned from her, but we're not like an army or anything. We do whatever we want."

I made a noise of understanding, not willing to comment on any of it given my continued sharp dislike for Ranger.

"So what are you going to do?" I asked.

"Don't be thick, you chump," she sighed. "I'm staying. You should know that by now. But you should also know I'm going to leave eventually."

I *had* known that, deep down. Of all the Woe she was the one least bound to me. Adjutant and Hierophant had attachment to the Empire, and Thief to Callow. But Archer? Archer had come for reasons entirely her own, and would leave when she tired of them.

"To where?" I asked.

"I don't know," she laughed. "But there's so much I haven't seen. The Everdark, the Titanomachy. And you must have been told this entire continent is a nowhere. There's nations on the other side of the Tyrian Sea that are larger than all of Calernia. Hells, we don't even know what's to the west."

"No one's ever found anything in the Skiron ocean," I reminded her. "Except sea snakes that were a tad unfriendly, and not the small kind."

"Doesn't mean there's not," Archer murmured. "Wouldn't that be something, Cat? Being the first Calernian to walk an unknown shore?"

"It would be," I admitted.

I'd be something untainted, too, and there were few of those left in my life.

"Maybe I'll go with you, Archer," I said. "Gods, there's bound to be a day where I'm done. Where I can finally just leave."

My tone was tired, but it was not kind of tired sleep could cure. Archer stirred.

"Indrani," she said. "Call me Indrani."

We stayed there until dawn, laughing and talking of places so very far away.

—

It was always odd to see Adjutant loaded with parchment instead of weapons, but not a bad sort of odd. It wasn't unfitting, just different from what I was used to seeing. This time, though, the look I gave the scroll he handed me was harsh. It contained names, thirty-four of them. Mages taken prisoner after the Second Battle of Liesse.

"And they're currently in containment?" I asked.

"Under ward and guard," the orc said. "Both our own. The Fifteenth took custody of all prisoners."

"I'm not recognizing a lot of those names," I told him. "I expected highborn."

"They're all *mfuasa*," Hakram informed me. "The Truebloods weren't willing to gamble on Diabolist with kin, at least not important ones."

Servant lines, huh. Old retainer families of the High Lords who'd been in their service for so long they were above peasants in the Praesi pecking order. Akua had sent the same to me as expendable envoys when we'd had our little chat before the battle. I shoved the scroll under my arm and unfolded the other one he'd handed me.

"Nearly two thousand," I said, raising an eyebrow. "I knew you'd grabbed a few, Hakram, but not *that* many."

"They're not all Praesi," he said. "There's some Helikean mercenaries and even seven drows."

"Exiles?" I asked.

"Soldiers don't go to Mercantis when they've still got a home," he said.

I wiggled my elbow at the scroll he still held in hand.

"And what's on that?"

"The names of the highborn within the household troops," he said. "I've had Aisha look into them, to add notes regarding their background and what could reasonably be asked for ransom."

"Ransom," I repeated softly.

"I know," he said. "Not what you want. But it's not a small sum, Catherine. And the moment you start raising armies and rebuilding the country, our coffers are going to bleed like a stuck pig."

"The Tower is meant to pay reparations," I said.

"The Tower's gone silent," Hakram growled. "That is not a good sign."

That was too true for me to deny. I'd expected Malicia to begin talks with me the moment the dust settled, and that she'd so far made no attempt was raising my hackles. Something was afoot. I needed the coin, that much was true. And yet. I handed Adutant the mage scroll back, and refused the one with highborn names.

"The closest road," I said. "It's between Ankou and Southpool, correct?"

"Closest paved road," he corrected. "There's dirt ones all over the region."

It was half a bell past dawn, and that meant matters were in need of settling. The prisoners first among them, since they were beginning to be a noticeable drain on our supplies. I looked north, where the road we'd spoken of would lay.

"We'll begin on the outskirts of Ankou," I said. "One every mile."

"One what?" the orc asked.

"Do you remember what Black did, after the Liesse Rebellion?" I said.

Adjutant had never been slow to understanding.

"The Countess Marchford and the Marchioness Vale," he said.

"Nailed to the gates of their own manors," I mused. "I have a lack of those at hand, so the side of the road will have to do. One every mile, Hakram. *Crucified.*"

They wanted to make a fucking statement with their rebellion, did they? I could make one as well. *You come here and you murder Callowans? This is what happens. This will always be what happens.* Let them think of that every time they passed a corpse left to the crows.

"You still have a list in hand," Adjutant finally said.

"Take care of the other two," I said. "And throw in the mercenaries. I've no mercy left for those. Then you can assemble what's left."

"Should I have gallows raised?" he asked.

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them. Necessity and dues. Always the hardest balance to strike.

"Do," I finally said.

The orc studied me closely.

"Will they be used?" he said.

"That'll be on them," I said. "They're going to get the only thing any of us ever get. A choice."

I waited in my tent with a bottle of aragh and the latest reports while he saw to it. The Taghreb liquor was already tasteless, and it had a kick. It was one of the few drinks I could still enjoy. By Noon Bell my sappers had raised the gallows and the remaining prisoners were herded out of their camp and onto the plains. Four companies of heavies stood around them, and as many regulars kept them moving in good order. They looked haggard, I saw when I left the tent. Not tortured or beaten, but kept on the least amount of rations possible and in chains even when they slept. A far cry from the resplendent soldiers they'd once been, decked in the Wasteland's finest arms and armour. Adjutant was at my side when I stood before them, his looming presence a weight additional to my own. I gave him a nod and he barked orders, legionaries using the flat of their blades to silence the quiet talk of the prisoners.

"You know who I am," I said.

One of the prisoners in the back called out something and there was a splash of laughter.

"Adjutant," I said.

He went himself. Even those who'd laughed went utterly silent at the sight of the man being dragged to the gallows by his hair, kicking and screaming. The goblins slipped the noose around his neck and the lever was pulled. The sharp *snap* sounded like the crack of thunder across the eerily quiet assembly. Feet hanging above the deck, the corpse moved with the breeze.

"You know who I am," I repeated, and this time no one spoke. "I would be within my rights to hang every last one of you. It would, in all honesty, *make my day*."

I sighed.

"But I am not a wasteful woman," I said. "You are dead, make no mistake about that. Tribunals have been convened and a verdict passed."

I'd stood before soldiers, once and spoken words like this to deserters. I'd come to care for them, in the end, but that had never been what was *meant* to happen was it? It had been a weakness on my part to get attached. One I was in no danger of repeating with this lot.

"The manner and time of this end is at my discretion," I said. "*I own your deaths*. And I would rather spend them than throw them away. The last time I made such an offer, there was the promise of release and amnesty at the end of service."

My tone went cold.



"You get no such mercy from me," I said. "You are rebels and murderers, the willing tool of a madwoman who met her deserved end. You will die fighting for this land you butchered, be it tomorrow or in ten years."

I flicked my wrist and Hakram gestured at an officer, who brought forward a standard and plunged it into dark earth. Gold on red, the cloth was. A golden noose set against crimson, with the words of dead men written beneath. *Gallowborne. The best of the worst.*

"You can refuse," I said. "Where that leads you is behind me. Or you can kneel, and make an oath."

In the end, they knelt.

—

Thief found me right before Evening Bell, as I was beginning to consider going out to look for her myself. She didn't bother to sneak in this time, striding straight into my tent and dropping into her seat with a grunt. Vivienne took the bottle of aragh on the table and pulled directly at it without asking, setting it down after with a loud thump.

"It could be worse," Thief finally said.

"I didn't expect your report to be pleasure reading," I said. "Not that you ever bother to write those."

"Get used to it," she said "I'm not leaving a parchment trail for the Eyes to get their hands on."

Fair enough, I conceded. I knew better than to put stock in the delusion there weren't informants in the Tower's pay remaining in my own legion, much less all the other ones camped by Liesse.

"Start with the worst," I said.

"Southpool," she grimaced. "Eldermen and former nobility are meeting. The whole city's incensed about their levies being wiped out."

"Rebellion?" I asked.

"Nothing overt," Thief said, "but if they want to get their hands on weapons, the nobles are the ones to talk to. It's not a good sign they're involved."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"Get the names to Ratface," I said.

Her face blanked.

"I'm told he has an envoy from the Assassins in his staff," she said.

The implied question was quiet clear.

"Not unless they force me to," I said. "They get a warning first. I've seen enough dead Callowans for several lifetimes. But if they actually rebel, Vivienne, it'll be more than a handful of old men who end up killed. That I won't allow."

She slowly nodded. Whether or not that had convinced her I couldn't tell.

"The south is a mess, but uprising's the last thing on their mind," she told me. "With Dormer and Holden emptied and Liesse... well, I'm not sure there's a word for what happened to Liesse. Refugees are trickling back to the other two, but with Liesse gone everything in sight of Hengest Lake is lawless. There's bandit packs forming to claim what food is left, and village militias aren't above looting other villages to keep their families fed through winter either."

"I'll send a detachment south," I grimaced. "It'll take a while to get supplies in place, though. Isn't the governor in Vale doing anything?"

"He's driving back any refugees camping in his lands with the last of the city guard," Vivienne darkly said. "City's under martial law and he's started rationing."

Another mess to deal with. There was always another one waiting around the corner.

"Laure?" I pressed.

"The Governess-General has kept order," Thief said. "My people had some quiet talks with those who wanted to start riots for a spot of looting. Summerholm and Denier are steady too, word's still only trickling in. Expect trouble when it's no longer rumours."

"Ankou?"

"Marshal Grem sent in a garrison force," she said. "Quiet for now, orcs in armour marching through the streets have a way of making people think twice about throwing stones. And before you ask, the north barely even noticed the rest of Callow is on fire. The Baron of Hedges has been heard saying the chaos to the south is a Praesi issue, not his people's, and he won't send even a copper down in aid."

Those isolationist pricks. Even during the Conquest they'd barely sent any men to fight the Empire. As far as the sheep-fuckers

were concerned they were a kingdom of their own, whatever the maps said. Southpooleans might be backwards mud-lickers but at least they pulled their godsdamned weight when catastrophe came calling.

"We'll see about that," I muttered. "They'll be sent an invitation to Laure soon enough."

Thief hummed.

"A little closer to home, did you know-"

"I know," I quietly said. "I have him a bell out of courtesy. If he doesn't come to me after that, I go to him. And I won't be polite."

"So long as you know," Vivienne said.

I leaned back into my chair.

"I need you to do something for me," I said. "Quietly."

Blue-grey eyes faced me.

"How quiet are we speaking?" she asked.

"I'll glamour you a body double and keep her out of sight," I said.

Thief let out a sharp breath.

"Why?"

I reached for the aragh and filled my cup.

"Not that long ago," I said, "I was given a choice where none of the outcomes were really a *victory*. Just a different kind of ugly compromise."

I knocked back the glass, allowing it to hit the table with a satisfying clang.

"So I had to ask myself – am I really playing the right game?"

I smiled grimly.

"Let's find out."

—

The Blackguards had made their own little camp within the camps. They'd raised palisades, had sentinels posted at all times and allowed no one in. It didn't matter. I'd had Adjutant send people to keep an eye on them, and the ripple that had gone through the soldiers earlier could only have one reason for it. Black was

awake. He was awake and his four hours had run out. By now Scribe would have filled him in on everything going on – that she knew about, at least. That was as far as courtesy would take me. I went directly for the gate, which was little more than a moveable part of the palisade. It opened, but that was as far as I was allowed. A dozen Blackguards blocked the opening behind and one went forward to speak to me. I cocked my head to the side, inhaling the scent of him. I knew this one.

“Lieutenant Abase,” I greeted him.

He pushed up his visor, but his hand never left the pommel of his sword.

“Ma’am,” he said. “It’s actually captain now.”

The Blackguards wore no insignias when on campaign, as my teacher disliked the notion of leaving the enemy the capacity to easily pick out his retinue’s officers.

“Congratulations,” I said. “I know he’s awake. Move your men aside.”

The Soninke grimaced.

“I’m under orders not to let anyone in,” he said.

“His orders?” I asked. “Or Scribe’s?”

“Orders,” he replied. “That’s all that matters.”

My eyes flicked to the men behind him. Fear, I sensed. In him and the others both. I wondered if it should be considered some kind of accolade, to be capable of causing that in soldiers who had fought at the side of the Calamities for decades.

“You were kind to me,” I said quietly. “Whenever you could. So I’m going to give you one chance, to reconsider being the man who’s in my way.”

“Duty has no end,” he said in Mtethwa.

It had the cadence of a saying, I thought.

“My patience does,” I replied in the same.

Winter flared but I did not weave the same kind of brutish applications I’d once used to crush throats or shatter bodies. It was closer to a glamour, really. The man’s eyes went wide and he screamed, clawing at his plate as he felt hungry shadows tear into his flesh. The sound of swords unsheathed was heard ahead and I fixed the soldiers with a measured stare. Little bundles of life and warmth they were, huddled inside their steel shells. So

very fragile, and what had they done to earn restraint from me? They were not in my keeping. They were obstacles. My hand rose.

"Enough," Scribe's voice rang out.

I looked at her. There was no sign of fear on her, no scent. Impatience at most.

"Clear them," I said, voice ringing with the cracking of ice.

"Stand down," the villain ordered.

I watched them sheathe their blades, and only then withdrew the weaving inside Abase. I strode past him without a second look, feeling myself slowly begin to thaw. I'd expected guilt, however slight. It never came.

"He is recovering," Scribe told me flatly. "You could have waited until tomorrow."

"That you would presume to dictate that even now," I said, "is why a decent man was just screaming. I've given you a bell. You have no right to expect more of me, not after what happened in Liesse."

"What happened is that he saved your life, child," Scribe coldly said. "A sentiment you grow less deserving of by the moment."

"Loyalty's a fine thing," I said. "Until it starts to blind you. Look around you, Scribe. Does it seem to you like anything was *saved*?"

"You have no notion of the sacrifices that were made for your sake," the woman said.

"You have no notion of the sacrifices I was forced to make," I replied. "This entire conversation is unnecessary. If I wanted him dead do you really think you could have *stopped* me?"

"Careful now," Scribe softly said. "That sounded like a threat."

"I assure you," I said just as softly. "If I ever threaten you, there'll be no doubt about what I'm doing. Get out of my way or take me to him, I don't care. But I'm going. Now."

I was past being scared of her, no matter the ice in her eyes. What I smelled off her in that moment was resentment, and just like that the pieces clicked. I laughed.

"He's ordered you to let me in, hasn't he?" I said.

"His judgement is impaired," she said.

"No," I said. "It really isn't. He just knows me a lot better than you."

I brushed past her and she did not try to block me. She kept pace in silence as I went deeper in, absently noting that the camp's layout was different from legion doctrine. His tent should have been in the centre but it was further back. I did not need a guide to feel that much. He was seated when I came in, Scribe at my heels. Plain trousers and a loose white shirt, leaning back on his seat before a table. No armour, no weapons save the knife at his hip.

"Catherine," he greeted me. "That will be all, Eudokia."

I felt her stiffen without turning.

"I am staying," she said.

"No," he gently replied. "You are not."

"I will not let you kill yourself on some orphan girl's sword, *do you hear me?*" she hissed. "We are better than this. *You* are better than this."

"I knew the likely consequences before acting," he said, smiling at her. "Go. Do not mourn me too long, if it comes to that."

"This is not how we end," Scribe insisted. "You promised, Amadeus, you-"

"Until the last step," he murmured. "I remember. We do not always get to choose where it happens, old friend."

He rose to his feet, slowly, and pulled her close. She did not struggle, and I was uncomfortable watching how closely she moulded herself against him as he embraced her. Black withdrew after a moment and kissed her brow.

"Everything ends," he whispered gently. "We have always known this."

He spoke something in a tongue I did not know and she replied in the same. The look she shot me before leaving was a thing of hatred, but she left regardless. I stayed silent and standing as Black seated himself again. After a moment, he unsheathed the knife at his hip and set it down on the table. Slowly, he turned the handle towards me.

"If that is the intent," he said, "let us not waste time."

He tugged at his collar, of all things, baring his neck. I sat across from him. I did not take the knife in hand, but neither did I tell him to sheathe it.

"I will ask questions," I said. "You will answer."

His lips quirked in amusement, and I felt like breaking his teeth.

"A trial," he mused. "Fitting, I suppose. Ask."

"When we planned my fight against Diabolist," I said. "I mentioned drawing her into Arcadia. You knew what would happen if I did."

*And you didn't warn me,* I left unsaid.

"Of three things you must be watchful, when assaulting the stronghold of a villain," he said. "A pivot, a trial..."

"And a monster," I completed. "So that really was your intention from the beginning. Getting me close and bound, so I'd get a clean shot at killing her when she flinched. It's why you went after her father from the onset."

"I was not confident in our breaching her defences otherwise," Black said. "Not without significant sorcerous support it was dubious would be available. Even getting you in that position was difficult."

"Our," I repeated. "That's the first untruth you spoke to me tonight. There was no *our*. You made a decision, and took a gamble that would have seen me enslaved or worse if it failed."

"I did," he admitted, without any frills. "And did so knowing you would see it as a breach of trust. Had you not pieced it together yourself, I would have told you afterwards."

His heartbeat did not change, but with him that meant less than nothing: he was the one who'd taught me to both use and fool that trick. He was also, I knew, one of the finest liars I had ever met. I'd once put quite a bit of faith in his old promise he would never lie to me, but that faith was running ragged these days. Would he lie, right now? There were ways more pleasing to me to frame his actions, if that was his intention. That he would have revealed his breach of trust to me after didn't change the fact that it had happened, and he'd know damn well how little of a difference it would mean to me. I was making me furious, having to look for deception in every sentence of a man I'd once been able to trust implicitly. He had robbed us both of that trust.

"You let me believe she took you prisoner," I said. "You had the means to warn me you weren't. Why didn't you?"

"In part because I was not certain you would be able to deceive her," he said. "In part because of the story you used to become Duchess of Moonless Nights. It was my understanding that if you

slew Assassin while believing he was me, it would prevent the eventuality of a... repetition of pattern."

Patricide, he'd danced around saying. Even now neither of us were comfortable with the implications of the word.

"You shot yourself in the foot," I said. "No, not just that – you emptied a full godsdamned quiver. If you'd spoken to me about it, we might have found a different way to take care of that. But you didn't *trust* me, Black, and so here now we fucking are. The two of us with a knife between, and me having genuine reason to kill you."

"I believed at the time that it was an elegant solution," he said. "The arrogance of an old man, in retrospect. Cheating Creation is never quite so simple as one would prefer."

"There's a lot I can forgive you for," I said. "And did, though I shouldn't have. I even let go of the fact that you Spoke to me in Summerholm the once, after a few years. Made excuses for it, that I was under influence myself and making what could have been a costly mistake. But this... It's actually worse, you know. Before the battle even began, you were already treating me like a tool. Not an equal, not even an apprentice. A fucking *tool*."

"That is who I am," he told me honestly. "In the face of conflict, that will always be how I act. I will reduce all individuals involved to instruments, and seek what I consider the best outcome. I will not spare myself a distinction, though I do not consider this to improve the principle of the behaviour in the slightest."

And it didn't, I thought. It made no difference. I used to think it did, but there was nothing laudable about not particularly valuing your own life long with everyone else's. That just meant he was one of his own many victims. It was a sort of madness that seemed principled on the surface, until you saw it in action. Saw what it cost everyone around the madman. What admiration I'd once given this had just been fool's gold, the shine leant by an unbroken line of victories. Now that the break had come, only the ugliness of what it truly was remained. Black was, I could not longer deny, a fundamentally evil man. That he used practical and sometimes beneficial means to pursue his objectives in no way redeemed that. I was ashamed that this disappointed me, deep down, that I had expected *more* when he had been so honest about what he was from the beginning. Because to me, he had been charming. Kind, even loving in his own way. Yet a monster still. It was an effort not to reach for the knife.

"You disregarded every word I said, before wrecking the array," I said, tone surprisingly calm. "I made – Gods, you could almost call it a plea. To end the bleeding. To spare my people another war. You didn't even bother to answer."



He inclined his head in disagreement.

"I weighed it," he replied. "It did not tip the balance. I believed then, as I do now, that keeping the weapon was certain to ensure the destruction of the Empire at the hand of heroes. I still believe it a miscalculation on Malicia's part to assess that having it, even unused, would not lead to a crusade. It would not only ensure it but begin a story that makes victory effectively impossible. She did not account, you see, for the Bard. Without her existence, perhaps a peace would be feasible. With her being given this thread to use, however, I would think it likely we would all die within two years."

"You didn't either," I said. "Account for the Bard. She was there, right before you used your aspect. And she was *smiling*."

Of all I had to consider, that was maybe the only mark in his favour. That he was human, and he'd been wounded like a fox being hunted so he could be herded in the right trap at the right time. That he'd run into someone better at this than him, and we were all being made to pay the price for it.

"That," he said mildly, "is quite worrying. I did not think her capable of operating independently of a heroic band or Name. I have journals that include notes from my time in the Free Cities, as well as several other matters. They will be given to you."

"No," I said quietly. "I don't think so."

"I assure you," he said, "the contents are both accurate and useful."

I pushed back the chair and rose to my feet.

"The most arrogant thing you've said tonight, you didn't even bother to speak," I told him. "It's the assumption that I'm still your *successor*."

Black was not, for all his flaws, an unintelligent man.

"You are no longer the Squire," he said.

"There's not enough of the Name left for me to qualify," I said.

"Then," he began, and on his face surprise and fascination warred.

"I don't know yet," I smiled. "But I breathe easier knowing it's not something you anticipated. Because I *know* you. If I walk out of this room after slitting your throat, it's still part of your plan. I'd still be playing a part you set out for me."

Contingencies, I imagined, would see to the death of the Calamites. And I would left in an uneasy partnership with the Empress, preserving the legacy he had sought to build.

"There's a part of me right now that just wants to let you go," I said. "To call our slate clean. Debts paid for sparing your life. But that's now who I am. I'm not you either, tough, and I don't *want* to be."

I snatched the knife and lunged over the table, driving it into his belly. He let out a soft gasp, and then I twisted the blade.

"You'll live," I said. "But it'll scar. And whenever you look at that scar, I want you to remember tonight. The choice I'm giving you. Gods forgive me, but monster that you are I still love you."

I looked into his eyes, that pale green gaze that was always so unsettling.

"I am," I said, "going to build a *better* world. Even if I have to drag everyone into it kicking and screaming. So there's your choice, Black: either you make yourself into a man that deserves to live in that world, or you're just another corpse I step over on my way there."

I left the knife in him, stepped away, and paused by the edge of the tent on my way out.

"This should go without saying," I said. "But if you're still in my lands by the moon's turn, I'll put your fucking head on a pike."

A heartbeat passed and I smiled, the burden of years leaving my shoulders.

"Take care. I'll see you when the war comes."

I left and did not look back.

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*Foxfire710*

i have this theory that Black and the calamities were the instrument of the change and current form of the empire and Praesi but not it's true representative just the instigator of the change. Akua was the avatar of the old Stories and culture in an attempt to reassert power over the new empire. With these two things in mind now that the avatar of the old Praesi Akua has failed the power of the old ways has weakened and the new has proved its superiority. And with black the closest thing to a

representative of the new stories is dying and with and a horde of powerful heroes gathering I believe a new named will appear with aspects that provide strength by following ways of the new empire and not like the named of old. I highly doubt it would be Catherine she has all but severed herself from the empire and did not share blacks ideals

### [greatwyrmgold](#)

Akua is the thesis. Amadeus is the antithesis. Catherine, we hope, is the synthesis.

### [vexingvision](#)

I really hope the final book in Cat's saga consists of her and her jolly band of adventurers traveling to new shores, fighting sea serpents and being mysterious.

Not going to happen, I know, but I hope she finds the glorious smart-arsed humanity inside of her again eventually.

That, or the final book is all about Robber. I'd be cool with that, too.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

But has she actually lost that glorious smart-arsed humanity of hers? Just a chapter ago she was bantering with Archer, remember. She's *\*in danger\** of losing it, sure. I can imagine a day where puns are "pun"ishable by death 😊

But you don't need to go find something you already have.

*Nethermore*

Aah, I see now. I was kind of miffed over the last few chapters over Cat not getting a new name already. I interpreted it as the author being a tease, but ultimately the Blavk Queen was too predictable for Catherine Foundling to become. It all makes sense now.

### [Devin 0](#)

Say, does anybody else think that A Practical Guide to Evil could be a kick ass setting for a tabletop RPG game? The natural small groups of characters with great ability to influence events around them seems like a natural fit for a tabletop group. Plus the way the universe naturally tries to adhere to narrative stories is very interesting and well suited to storytelling.

*Thaddeus K*

Yeah, I think so too. I've thought about the system for such a thing, and keep coming back to FATE.

*Kizuna*

Gee, you think? Lol.

I mean, it's basically ripped straight from FATE. The basic concept, at least.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

"Tall your tower may be, but what was raised by the hands of men can by those same hands be torn down."  
– Queen Eleanor Fairfax of Callow

It sounds like a likely fatal error to assume the "hands of men" built much of the Tower

### [Devin 0](#)

Have there been any varieties of devils yet that might make decent stone masons? I didn't really get that impression from any of them, they seemed to feral.

### [The Warren Peace NFL Report](#)

I wasn't necessarily thinking of devils specifically, but I don't see why that wouldn't work. Some devils can build and maintain their own weaponry, after all, so clearly there's a spectrum of ability.

### *Perihelion*

But was Bard smiling because of the castle? Or because of the wedge it would drive between Black and Cat?

### [Barthumphries](#)

Don't think anyone else has mentioned this, but she did just kill her father. Her mentor, the one who chose her, guided her, set her up with everything, she's now cut ties with.

### [ayew](#)

just reread this and want to point out that i ship cat and archer platonically so hard. its the cutest/3rd scariest friendship of all time.

### *Isa Lumitus*

You know, I kind of like the narrative symmetry here. Black stabbed Cat, and gave her his old Name. Now Cat stabbed Black and refused his current Name.

### [Mental Mouse](#)

And this will have effects on Black as well...

*Kizuna*

Phew. That was a tough read. Not because of quality, just what happened.

*Kizuna*

Also, what's the deal with Archer obtaining the Cylinder from Liesse? Didn't Thief already get that and "stow" it?

[Arfoire](#)

It is a facade created by Cat and Vivienne to fool the rest that Cat didn't retrieve Akua's soul from her body.

*Christian Oaks*

No the soul she took first was that of a newborn baby which was akua's contingency plan.

*Aotrs Commander*

\*facepalm\*

\*sigh\*

Well. It was most fun while it lasted, but this third book, was, I felt, not as good as first two. (I mean, considering how much I was loving those, that's not a hugely damning statement, but true nonetheless.) I fear at this rate, all Cat will manage in the end is to become the next Dread Empress in everything but name, and anything she achieves will be undone the moment she stops.

Since it pretty much seems at this point, she's not gaining any new allies, just fear or leverage controlled minions (because that's not absolutely typical Old Evil standards...), while slowly but systematically burning through her her current allies.

Bard and the Gods Above must be laughing SO DAMN HARD about now.

So, let's see how things go from here...

*ninegardens*

So... did Cat just Brand Black... because this looks a hell of a lot like how she branded William, and that worked pretty much exactly as stated...

[aran](#)

Black, knowing that by renouncing him as her mentor Catherine just canceled his death flag: *Just. As. Planned.*

[308924810a](#)

Sooo @erraticerrata What the heck happened to these new ex-praesides Gallowborne?

As far as I can figure out the unit isn't mentioned again after this point.

*Christian Oaks*

Presumably spent in her many wars kept distanced from herself so she would not grow to care for them

[vuthuha912](#)

Despite thinking that Black's decision in the throne room is a good decision and thinking that his plan is a good plan, he not telling Cat about it and using her like a tool, even if it is for her benefit (he fed her the victory), is still a break of trust and the reason why I don't really subscribe to the end justifies the mean thing. If you use the philosophy to the extreme, it will erode trust and cooperation between everybody in society and society will collapse. There are times for harsh and ruthless measures but one should never be too willing to use them while other better options to achieve the same result are on the table. Obviously, it will be difficult to decide when it is time to use it.

In Black POV, Cat is his subordinate and apprentice and while he is still capable of trusting his subordinate and he will when it is their specialties, in this case, he might not think that it is necessary to get her opinion. I mean this is Akua – an obvious Stupid Evil and plans involving taking her down are meant to succeed. His other friend trusts him enough to know that he won't put them in danger, they let him do the planning and they follow his plan blindly. He is treating her the same way he treats the Calamities. He should be treating her like how he treats Malicia.

I do believe that a great ruler needs to be willing to dirty his hands to actually achieve anything worthwhile but they should also be one who can inspire, nurture, forgive, and be just. The base of a nation should always be good and good actions should be encouraged if it wants to last more than a decade. Morals and good are not something useless, they are meant to keep society moving. It is hard to dip your toes in evil but don't let it submerge you and Black obviously falls to it, not completely but more than needed.

It is interesting, isn't it? Black is quite charming and lovable but he is not really good at understanding emotions. He misses how much his death affects the Calamities, he misses how much all his friends love him, and most damagingly, he misses how much Cat loves him. If she didn't love him, she might even let the whole thing go since she won't be expecting him to care for her

opinions (she did ultimately benefits from his decisions and he never tried to harm her) or she might just kill him. But she does love him, and that is why the betrayals of trust hurt so much, she wants to trust him and she wants him to trust her. Even after the betrayal of trust, she still forgives him and finds a way to save his life. He must think that after that break of trust, she will kill him. Is it because he is a Villain and a Praes that it never occurs to him that other people's love for him is more than skin deep and they are willing to do a lot of things to keep him alive? He loves them but never thinks that they love him back just as deeply? \*Sigh~~~\* Quite selfless of him.

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## Epilogue

*"You who pass this gate, know yourself beyond hope."*

– Written above the gates of Keter, earthly seat of the Dead King

He would not speak to her until he was no longer in a vulnerable position. Alaya had known this because she knew the man, how his mind functioned. Amadeus did not treat from position of weakness. Her Black Knight arrived a few days earlier than anticipated at the Red Flower Vales, taking refuge with the loyal legions that garrisoned it in the face of Procer. The empress had found a degree of dark amusement in the way that Catherine Foundling's armies now lay between the armed forces most loyal to the two most powerful villains of Praes. Almost like a matron breaking up a childish squabble between her wards. As always, the girl thought the worst of them. A civil war would not have been an acceptable outcome even if had a crusade not been in the making. The coming struggle would be steep enough without wasting soldiers in settling a matter best addressed privately. The current assessment of the younger villain's loyalties was growing clearer with every movement she made in the absence of instructions from the Tower, and the picture painted was not promising.

The remains of two legions had been suborned to the insolently named Army of Callow, followed by the announcement of large-scale recruitment across the kingdom. The girl's return to Laure had been followed by an energetic centralization of power around the yet-unbestowed crown, though it seemed she had learned from her previous blunder. A bureaucracy was forcefully being assembled by drafting any remotely competent Callowan and withdrawing talents from the Fifteenth. Given the girl's propensity for charging at the first battlefield in sight, the power would effectively be wielded by Baroness Anne Kendal over the next few years. A former

rebel with close ties to the House of Light and the last remnants of Callowan aristocracy. In the optic of consolidation of power within the kingdom, it was not a blunder. From the greater understanding of Callow within the Empire, it was a warning sign. A cohesive power bloc capable of ruling was being formed in Laure, one with bone-deep enmity towards the East.

That the Duchy of Daoine seemed to have turned into one of the crown's backers was also worth a second look. It was a well-positioned source of manpower with hard borders and a history of resisting Praesi rule. The girl would need to squeeze the northern baronies for coin, however, or risk leaving the upset south in the lurch. An angle to use, if necessary. If it came to rebellion, further partition of Callow was now a feasible solution. When the south had been bound together by noble rule and marriage alliances it would have been a misstep, the seed of a rebellious Kingdom of Liesse being sown, but now that the city was wrecked and the aristocracy decapitated matters had changed. A southern vassal state dependent on Tower subsidies to recover would remain largely tranquil. It was what had once been the calm centre of Callow that was now trouble, the cities built by the shores of the Silver Lake. Large urban populations, strategic trade location and now a fledgling bureaucracy indebted to the crown made them the beating heart of Catherine's power within Callow. Alaya had stayed her hand, for the moment. Killing the girl would ignite country-wide rebellion and besides she had yet to overstep the tentative terms reached in Liesse. Pressure could be applied through the promised reparations and the precarious western border.

Which was not in the empress's hand at the moment, strictly speaking, but in those of her Black Knight. One of several matters in need of settling. Alaya thought of the raised hand, the word spoken that had undone over a decade of careful planning, and grew cold. Dread Empress Malicia set the unnecessary emotional spasm aside. A mistake had been made, in placing blind trust. The extent that leaning should ever be indulged was in trusting individuals to act according to their nature. Anything more than that was asinine sentiment, a weakness on her part. When the mirror flickered with life, she was awaiting it. Dressed blood red, a sprawling dress with long sleeves and a neckline that was more suggestive than revealing. The golden circlet on her brow was almost an unnecessary touch – the dress alone would be enough for Amadeus to understand that it was the Dread Empress of Praes that had given audience, not Alaya. The silver mirror revealed the sight of a man unarmoured. A loose white shirt did not quite cover the sight of bandages covering his abdomen, but the pale green eyes were as sharp as she had ever seen them. Alaya felt a surge of fury. It was the Empress that had given audience, but it was Amadeus that had come.



"You are wounded," she said, smoothing away the emotion.

"So I am," the man agreed, tone almost amused. "It has been a year of sharp lessons, and this one sharper than most."

"The girl," Malicia said, and it was not a question.

Even now, after it all, the fury returned. Not directed at him but at the arrogant child who dared believe she had even the shadow of a claim on her Black Knight's life. In this, she had *overstepped*. Catherine Foundling had never been properly taught the precarity of her position.

"A point," Black said, "on the nature of trust. How that blade cuts both ways."

"She has earned no trust," Malicia coldly said. "The ability to kill is the grace of a killer, not a qualification to rule. Whatever measures she now takes are no erasure of past failures."

"Yet I wonder," the man mused. "Regardless, she is not the reason for this audience. The matter is best set aside for now."

"Is it?" the Empress said, voice smooth as silk. "Your wayward apprentice raises armies and appoints officials loyal to only her. The matter is not to be dismissed as a mere detail. It is a pressing reality, and a liability in the making."

"I had hoped," Black said, "to avoid the losing game that is the attribution of fault. That line of conversation would ensure otherwise."

The unspoken read thus: *her loyalties were shaken by the Diabolist's massacre, and it was your inaction that allowed this to unfold.*

"I have always known fault to be as much a matter of nature as opportunity," Malicia replied.

The unspoken read thus: *you gifted great power to a nobody and never bothered to instil loyalty more than skin deep, this was inevitable.*

Black sighed.

"Do you not find it tiresome?" he said. "To leave so much within the margins?"

Malicia's face was a frozen mask of disdain.

"You have lost the right to make that request," Alaya said.

"Shall we speak of trust, then, my Empress?" Black softly replied. "I am not without words to offer on that subject."

Guilt never came. She would not apologize for taking measures preventing him from throwing away his life in a hopeless war, however slighted he felt by the truth that he had become a foe to his own survival. That was on his own head. Not even love would make her neck if she was in the right.

"Warlock agrees that the weapon should have been kept untouched," Malicia said, and there was a part of her that enjoyed the flicker of dismay on Black's face.

"Wekesa would eat every child in Callow if it allowed him to research without interruptions," he replied. "That endorsement rings empty."

It was also first blood. He was not, she knew, plotting to seize the Tower from her. But the knowledge that if he had the Warlock would not have stood at his side was a crack in the certainty that lay at the heart of him. What she need break to salvage even shards of what they had once been.

"And who whispers agreement in your ear, Black?" the Empress asked. "*Scribe*? If you slit her own throat she would assume you had reason. She has made a virtue of being a tool."

It was not a mistake to have spoken that, though Alaya regretted the sharpness of the words. But Malicia knew that the cruelty was necessary to lower the worth of the unconditional support in his eyes. The Duni's face grew cold, the first stirrings of anger.

"You speak of matters you understand precious little," he said. "There is no part of you that does not come with *condition*."

Malicia met his eyes with equanimity. Alaya flinched at the old whisper spoken aloud. Black tiredly passed a hand through his air.

"I should not have said that," he said, the threshold of an apology.

"You rarely speak without meaning," the Empress said, refusing the crossing.

Something passed in the man's eyes she could not put a word to, and that was a rare thing.

"We were better than this, once," Amadeus said.

"Were we?" Malicia wondered. "Forty years, and never once did we cease dancing around that single truth."

Her eyes went hooded.

"There is only one throne in this empire," the Empress said. "You are not sitting on it. There is a *reason* for that."

"Emperesses who thought crown meant right have often reigned, in Praes," the Black Knight said. "Rarely, I remember, for long. A mould unbroken ever only makes one thing."

"Don't you speak to me of making," Alaya hissed. "Twenty years you made Callow your playground, only ever returning to take lives and let me clean up the messes while you gallivanted back. You only ever remember the necessities of rule when they get in the way of your games. You make plans without ever bothering with the actual people, writing them off as liabilities to dispose of if they do not immediately obey. Praes is not an essay. You cannot unmake everything of it because it strikes you as inconvenient."

"It is worse than inconvenient," Black said. "It is flawed. The Wasteland has made a religion out of mutilating itself. *We speak of it with pride*. Gods, iron sharpens iron? We have grown so enamoured with bleeding our own we have sayings about it. Centuries ago, field sacrifices were a way to fend off starvation. Now they are a staple of our way of life, so deeply ingrained we cling to them given alternative. Alaya, we consistently blunder so badly we need to rely on demons to stay off destruction. We would rather *irreparably damage the fabric of Creation* than admit we can be wrong. There is nothing holy about our culture, it needs to be ripped out root and stem as matter of *bare survival*. Forty years I have been trying to prove success can be achieved without utter raving madness, and what comes at the end?"

His tone grew harsh.

"The only person I ever thought actually *understood* this put her seal to the destruction of two decades of gruelling work to acquire a fucking magic fortress," he hissed. "Some godsdamned throwback from the Age of Wonders that will go down in flames and take the Empire with it."

"Your way," Malicia coldly said, "is *insufficient*."

Now that he'd opened his wound, she could bare her own.

"The Legions will fail," she said. "The Calamities will fail. Your ramshackle effort at successors will fail. Did you think that just because you were clever, just because it was hard, it would be enough? We took Callow, Black. We put chalk to the slate. The Heavens will throw crusade after crusade at us until the mark made is erased, because *we are not allowed to win that fight*. The only way to survive is not to fight at all, and for that I needed a tool."

Malicia stood ramrod straight.

"A hundred thousand dead?" she said. "I would bleed thrice that number without batting an eye, because without the tool we lose. We break, we end, we come at an end. I warned you off Akua Sahelian because she provided what I needed: a strong enough deterrent to keep the wolves at bay. And I did this behind your back, because if I did not you would have gotten in my way. Because you have fallen in love with your own legend. The Black Knight, undefeated. How far is that from invincible, Amadeus? Shall we talk *history* on that subject?"

"This makes us a leech," Black replied coldly. "And that is exactly how we lose. If we are a net drain, we are removed. That is a *fact*. There is no keeping Callow if by the sheer act of keeping it we foster constant rebellion. And if we lose Callow, it all comes down on our heads."

"We have already lost Callow," Malicia replied harshly, "and three legions with it, all thrown into the lap of some fucking orphan girl because you thought you could be cleverer than Fate. Do you truly not realize that the terms of the occupation both failed to pacify Callowans and fostered unrest in the Wasteland? One does not conquer an entire kingdom to grant it effective independence twenty years down the line, Black. We were meant to profit from it."

"They were meant to profit from it, were they?" he said. "After fighting tooth and nail against every measure that made is possible, they still deserve spoils because – what, they were born to that privilege? That they were even spared was a concession. But they were allowed to grow fat off a conquest they *actively hindered*. I held my tongue because you used their rapaciousness for your own purposes, but oh what a mistake that was. The point isn't to make Callow a pack of plundered provinces, it has never been that. It's to ensure we never again destroy ourselves invading that country. Are we so enamoured with that kingdom's crown we cannot allow anyone else to wear it? We win by slipping the noose, not moving the border. By breaking the pattern that has whipped us ever since Maleficent made an empire out of Praes. *It is irrelevant who actually rules Callow so long as we no longer need to invade to avoid starving*. From that moment on, we start to grow. To change. To be anything but a snake cursed to eat its own tail and choke. Anything less than that is defeat. Anything more than that is expendable."

He was panting, after. A sac of venom decades in the swelling finally emptied.

"There have been bad nights, since I took the throne," Alaya said. "Nights where I wondered if it would not have been better had you become Emperor and I your Chancellor. You have laid those fear to rest. This, this is why you cannot rule. Because you're not interested in ruling Praes, only in securing a war camp for

your pissing match with the Heavens. You cannot *butcher* your way into having a different homeland, Black. It's a pretty plan you laid out. But you are not the only living man in Praes, and so it *fails*. Because the Empire is not an instrument, it is a nation and that nation wants things. It will not docilely wait until your point is made."

"Enough," Black said. "Gods, enough. There comes a time where the wound is no lanced, just bled."

"Agreed," Malicia said. "There will be no further argument. You have made a mess, and as always I will clean it up. You remain in command as my Black Knight. You will hold the border as best you can, and rein in your apprentice as necessary. As for me, I will take the measures necessary for survival. You will not approve of them. I no longer care."

The Empress would have ended it there, but Alaya could not.

"We will survive," she said. "And when the danger has passed, as much as it ever can, you will come home. I will not throw you away, Maddie. We are not beyond mending."

He smiled, ruefully.

"Can you feel it, Allie?" he asked.

The Empress frowned.

"It's quiet," he said. "Subtle. I suppose it always starts out that way, when one loses control."

"The Tower will not fall," Malicia said.

"It may not," he said. "I genuinely don't know. For the first time in decades, Alaya, *I don't know*."

He laughed.

"It's strangely invigorating," he said. "To have every plan you ever made ripped apart. Do you remember what it was like, when we were young? When we still felt wonder?"

"Black, you are worrying me," she said.

"Your terms are accepted," Amadeus said. "Not that there was any doubt. I will come home, in the end.""

He looked away, and strangely smiled.

"I wonder what it would look like," he murmured. "A better world."

The mirror darkened. Alaya went still, something like grief but deeper than the word could ever mean taking hold of her. Dread Empress Malicia rose to her feet.

There was no rest, the old saying went, for the wicked.

—

Brandon Talbot had only stood in the throne room once before as a child, when King Robert still ruled and his aunt had introduced him to the royal court. He'd been so young he barely remembered any of it, and in those days he had been of precious little import. Aunt Elizabeth was to be engaged to the Shining Prince, so he'd warranted an official introduction but nothing else. In those days there had been no talk of him ever becoming Count of Marchford. The union of Elizabeth Talbot and King Robert's eldest son had been expected to be fruitful, leaving him only the head of a cadet branch meant for knighthood and little else. How strangely the world spun, that he now stood at the side of the Queen of Callow instead of kneeling with the guests. Those he had to share that distinction with were, admittedly, something of a mixed bag. None could deny that Baroness Anne Kendall was a patriot and a woman of great wisdom, and though her surrender in the wake of the Liesse Rebellion had lowered her esteem in the eyes of some he did not share those misgivings. The Governess-General, he knew, was nearly as influential as the queen in some parts. If not more. *Chancellor in all but Name*, men whispered. Queen Catherine's open fondness for the baroness had been taken by many a sign she was not determined to wage war to the bitter end on the aristocracy.

At the baroness' side stood the argument for the opposite belief, the newly-appointed Marshal of Callow. The title left him a strange taste in the mouth. There had never been any man or woman titled such in the history of the kingdom, as supreme command of the hosts was always held by the royal family or the paladins of the White Hand. It was a Praesi title and not even an old one, created during the Reforms. That a greenskin not even twenty-five was now second only to the queen in the command of Callow's armies had been oft commented upon, and openly mocked in the north. Popular sentiment, though, had not been incensed. The 'Hellhound' had no small place in the legends already being peddled of the Arcadian War and Akua's Folly. The orc was seen as the second coming of the still-feared Grem One-Eye, and one that had proved it would protect the innocent even in the face of the hordes of Hell. Brandon was no fool, and so had never tried to speak against the appointment. The heart of the Army of Callow was still the Fifteenth, and it would be months before any of his countrymen rose to true positions of influence in those massively expanded ranks.

To the queen's right was the same man as always, that tower of burnt steel and fangs that was Hakram Deadhand. The Adjutant. Even when the old crowd spoke of the unseemly predominance of orcs in Queen Catherine's court over cups of brandy, there were few who dared slight this one. The skeletal hand of the Named was said to snatch the life out of fae and mortals alike, the steel of his axe gone stark red for all the blood he'd spilled with it. Grandmaster Talbot had spoken with him occasionally while on campaign and more often now that precarious peace was restored, and found him both personable and polite. More dangerously, he was also very attentive to details the queen was known to have little patience for – though in truth Brandon had judged her not nearly as disinterested as the rumours implied. The Deadhand had taken to building the kingdom's court with the same savage enthusiasm his forebears had displayed raiding Callowan farmland: the new offices overseeing the nation's granaries and treasury had been highly unpopular with the aristocracy at first, but their undeniable efficiency in mending the south had done much to quiet the grumbling. The Grandmaster was one of the few of his people high enough in rank to understand what was being built, though. A war machine unlike any he had ever seen. Callow was being put on war footing long before the first blade left the sheath.

There was a reason the Order of the Broken Bell had been charged with recruiting every youth in the kingdom that could swing a blade and ride a horse.

The last man to share the queen's side was the only he could muster true dislike for. Hasan Qara, who for some godforsaken reason insisted on being called *Ratface*, had been named Lord Treasurer of Callow after resigning his commission from the Fifteenth Legion. The Taghreb was said to be some Wasteland lordling's bastard, though bastardy was considered a lesser taint in the East. He was also, as far as Grandmaster Talbot was concerned, a crook and a criminal. His lordly title remained a pure courtesy one, at least, without any lands attached. It was still a bloody disgrace that a Peer of the Realm would meet with the likes of smugglers and hedges mages in broad daylight. The Bastard Lord, as some already called him, had begun what he termed a 'much-needed reform of the hellish nightmare that is Callowan tax collection'. That governors no longer paid taxes directly to the Tower or even the short-lived Ruling Council had thrown the old system into disarray, every governor and noble trying to short-change the crown whenever they could. Lord Qara's taxmen and their Legion escorts were already a dreaded sight, and the complicated maze of exemptions and tariffs he'd had the queen put her seal to always seemed to have her allies come out wealthier and her enemies poorer. He was clever, Brandon disdainfully thought, but in the way Taghreb usurers so often were.

As the admittedly tedious ceremony chugged on towards the moment of proper coronation, Brandon turned his eyes to the crowd that stood witness. Baron Darlington of Hedges and Baroness Morley of Harrow were of the highest rank among those, surrounded by kin and lickspittles. Both, he'd been told, had declined the queen's invitation to her coronation by telling her envoys their health would not allow them the journey. The second envoys she had sent came with a minstrel, and as the tune of the *Lord's Lament* played in their halls the nobles had reconsidered their refusal. The pointed reminder that Queen Catherine was not above having even royalty shot when it suited her had struck true. The last landed nobles of Callow had faces too solemn to be truly pleased of being in attendance, but rumours of the crown's young reforms had seen them hurry south so they would not be made to feel the sting of disobedience through their coffers. As far as nobility went, the only others worth the note were the envoys of Duchess Kegan of Daoine.

That the ruler of the last duchy in Callow had sent her own eldest son and high-ranking officer of the Watch to attend had rightly been seen by many as endorsement of the queen's reign by the Deoraithe. Ties had been made there, Grandmaster Talbot thought, that he knew little about. Inquiries were in order. The queen had yet to appoint a Chamberlain for her household or a Keeper of the Seals to have her decrees upheld and her courts of law put to order, after all. It was no certainty that Queen Catherine the First would keep all the seats of the old King's Council, but if she did Brandon intended on seeing the remaining seats filled with proper Callowans, not Daoine interlopers. Neither did it escape his notice that Kegan's son was a handsome lad, not much older than the still-unmarried queen. Another matter to ensure never came to fruition, though he could hardly blame her for trying. He had himself ensured that his representatives at court were well-bred young men and women of comely appearance, merely to have that avenue... open, should it take the queen's fancy.

The rest of the guests in attendance were the representatives of governors and guilds, as well as every elderman in Laure. Brandon had expected trouble when their ancient prerogatives inside the city began being taken over by the crown, but the Deadhand was a clever sort. They'd been offered appointments in the new offices, and with enough accepting their influence came to benefit the reforms instead of being plied against them. They stood there with awe befitting commoners being allowed to witness the birth of a dynasty, however fragile its line of succession. As the sister sent by the House of Light finally ended her droning and recitation of old phrases, Queen Catherine bent her head to accept her crown – though, in all honesty, given her height she had not strictly speaking needed to do so. Eyes flicking to the crown, Brandon grimly smiled. No gold or jewels in this one. It was a jagged circlet of iron that sat heavy on her brow. A



warlike crown for a warlike queen. The old regalia of House Fairfax would not see use again, the cloak of black and patchwork that Queen Catherine wore a dark replacement for the old ermine-bordered mantle of the Fairfaxes. Rumours had spread that Akua Sahelian's own soul had been added to the banners of the defeated, that the Wastelander witch could be heard screaming in torment if one listened closely enough.

A saying was born of it that had Grandmaster Talbot shivering every time he heard the words: *crowned by dread and cloaked by woe*.

"Before you stands the ordained Queen of Callow," the sister said. "Kneel."

One after another, they did. Only standing by the throne like him were spared that, as Catherine Foundling slowly sat the ancient throne of the kingdom. Brandon was not the first to notice – he first saw when he followed the queen's gaze, the raised eyebrow on her cold face. It was difficult to tell how many there were. A few dozens? Less than a hundred, surely. Brandon had fought their like before, but their garments were no longer the same. On unearthly steeds of every shade the fae rode through the hall, the Fair Folk as terrible and beautiful as they'd always been. Brandon found he could not look away from the fae at their head. Riding a horse of ebony, the man was soberly dressed for his kind. A simple tunic, though the buttons seemed made of shade, and over a pale and narrow face a black silken blindfold covered an eye. There was a sword at his hip, without a sheath, and even looking at it hurt the knight's eyes. It was that one the queen addresses.

"The Prince of Nightfall," she drawled. "An unexpected... well, *pleasure's* a strong word."

The procession of fae ended when the prince reined in his mount before the queen, inclining his head in respectful greeting.

"Prince no longer," the fae smiled. "I have abdicated my title, as have all with me. The Hunt claims no lord amongst its hunters."

Brandon's breath hitched. The Hunt. Was he speaking of the *Wild Hunt*? The rapacious fairies that made sport of mortals fools enough to wander into the Waning Woods, or walk ancient mounds under pale moonlight.

"Should I call you Larat, then?" the Queen mused, and her voice echoed with something eldritch when she spoke the name. "Why do you darken my hall, Nightfall?"

"Do we not stand before a queen, forged of Winter?" the fae asked.

"I paid the price for that, thrice over," Catherine Foundling said. "If you think the mantle can be taken back, we're about to have a conversation on the subject of fatal mistakes."

The fae laughed, and it was like the tinkle of silver bells.

"You mistake me," he said, and his sword rose.

It clattered against the stone, laid at the feet of the queen. One after another the fae passed and threw their own blade, a pile of death rising. Brandon Talbot was living a fever dream, witness to a scene ripped straight from legend. It was all too vivid to be real.

"We swear to your service, Queen of the Hunt," the fae said. "Queen of Air and Darkness, Sovereign of Moonless Nights. We swear 'til the day of last ruin, 'til all debts are paid. We would ride beneath your banner, in this world and every other."

The Queen of Callow rose to her feet, as bright and terrible as any of them, and softly laughed.

"What clever foxes you are," she said. "Your oaths I accept, in the spirit they were given."

Her sword hissed as it left the sheath, and she stood before the fae.

"Kneel, and rise in my service."

The Hunt knelt, the Hunt rose, and Brandon Talbot knew he would never forget the sight of this so long as he lived.

—

A crusade, Cordelia Hasenbach thought, should be decided in a manner grander than this. There would be speeches in the coming months, every herald in Procer and beyond speaking the writ of the Mandate of Heaven handed down to the children of the Gods. Spreading the call to the Tenth Crusade wherever there were ears to hear it. The First Prince herself would address the Highest Assembly on the morrow's eve, giving an oration she had first prepared years ago. The motion would not warrant a vote from the Assembly, though she knew it would pass should it presented. By tradition only the highest office in the Principate could call for a crusade, though it would be an empty thing if no other nation joined their voice to it. Procer had fought crusades alone before, but every one a disaster. She would not repeat that mistake. The young woman had dedicated the span of her life to ensuring it would never be made again. For all the pageantry that was to come, the Tenth Crusade was born in one of the lesser halls of the palace in Salia, with barely a dozen people seated at the table.

For Procer, only she and Uncle Klaus were present. The Prince of Hannover had not been granted seat as a prince but as the future commander of Procer's armies in the campaign to come. The grizzled old soldiers had spent more time drinking mead than speaking, so far, save when matters military were raised. Assurances had been needed that the Principate's armies were readied for war, no matter how righteous the cause or urgent the need. The Thalassocracy of Ashur had sent three representatives only, members in good standing of their foremost War Committee. Citizens of the Fourth tier one and all, most of which would take command of Ashur's fleets when the hostilities began. Their very presence had been leverage for Cordelia to use, a gift from Magon Hadast. The only citizen of the Second tier in all of Ashur had not sent diplomats but soldiers, the agreement to join the crusade implicit to that decision. The envoys, after all, would not have leave to negotiate diplomatic matters. Only those pertaining to war.

The Dominion of Levant had sent the most envoys, in her judgement a consequence of its ever-fractious people. The current Seljun, the figurehead ruler of the Dominion, had officially deferred the decision of whether or not to join the Tenth Crusade to the Majilis. Though literature often drew comparison between the Highest Assembly and the Majilis, for they were both councils composed of the highest nobility in their respective nations, Cordelia had never found much similarity beyond the surface trappings. The Levantine council was a toothless and ineffectual beast, with every lord and lady among it having right of veto and every interest in ensuring power was never centralized within the Dominion lest their own privileges be curbed. Princess Eliza of Salamans had fought two wars and died an attainted traitor to ensure the Highest Assembly would never be such a plague on Procer, or the First Prince relegated to being little more than a first among equals. As it was, the entire Majilis had come to Salia to treat with her. The five lords and ladies of Levant, all descended from heroes. Cordelia's agents suspected every one of them had applied veto if a smaller delegation did not involve them personally, and she was inclined to believe it.

They only ever ceased their squabbles when they perceived her to be high-handed, the old and well-deserved hatred of her people the true mortar that kept their nation together. They had been the most difficult to speak with, ever looking for slight or arrogance in every sentence of hers. It was for the best Uncle Klaus had spoken little, given his mild contempt for a nation he liked to say existed only because the Thalassocracy willed it so. This was, to an extent, true. Some of Cordelia's predecessors would have waged war upon war to claim the lands, had Ashuran fleets not made seaborne invasion of Procer's old principalities a fool's errand to attempt. It was still less than courteous to say as much, and the Levantines had easily ruffled feathers when the hands involved were Proceran. Invitations had been sent to

the Titanomachy through the Dominion, as the Gigantes killed on sight even diplomats of Procer, but the giants had declined to send even an observer. Their borders would remain closed, it seemed, no matter how dire the threats to the east. Cordelia had ruled for too long to be disappointed by the confirmation of her fatalism. That bridge had been burned too thoroughly to be rebuilt, even several centuries after the betrayal known as the Humbling of Titans.

The Gigantes had long memories.

The elves of the Golden Bloom greeted visitors with arrows if they were not heroes, and were said to have removed their domain from Creation besides. Even were it otherwise, Cordelia would not have sought them out. They had never joined their number to any of the crusades, and their inclusion in the Tenth would have had stark diplomatic consequences when it came to dealing with the Duchy of Daoine. Entrenching opposition in Callow would be needlessly costly for what the Hasenbach desired to be a war fought mostly in Praes itself. Popular sentiment in Callow was rather difficult to read, these days, but they were a people of long grudges who had never quite forgiven their occupation by the Principate. Should foreign soldiers fight over their fields for too long, there was no telling if the Callowans would turn on the crusaders.

Still, it was the League of Free Cities that troubled Cordelia. She'd come so very close to securing a truce and south-eastern border with it, until the Tyrant of Helike began his war. Even that had been an acceptable outcome, if she was to be honest. After the initial victory of Helikean forces over Atalante and the brutally effective Praesi intervention that took Penthes out of the war, heroes had created a deadlock over the siege of Delos without easy resolution. Though the loss of life involved was regrettable, it had given Cordelia opportunity to exhaust the strength of a dangerous element outside her borders by funding and arming Nicae. She'd even lightened the burden of restless soldiery within her realm by sending a few thousand into the war. She had believed Helike triumphant and ruling the League to be the worst possible outcome, and so when the forces of the Tyrant and the Magisterium moved against Nicae she had considered direct intervention. That a Hierarch would be elected in the wake of the city's fall had been beyond her predictions, and more worryingly the Augur's as well. Now no ruler in the region would treat with her, even privately, as usurping the Hierarch's prerogative might see the rest of the League turn on them.

Attempts to begin diplomatic correspondence with the man himself had been utterly ineffective. That her agents reported Anaxares of Bellerophon to be a long-serving diplomat, even if one in the service of an Evil polity, had been a promising beginning. Yet the man had put every missive she sent to the flame, and had

reportedly been personally offended when her envoys tried to speak with him in person. Whether or not the Hierarch was the puppet of the ruler of Helike had yet to be determined, but the head of the League seemed disinclined to rein his member-states. Or even speak of the matter. Perhaps the only redemption of the situation there was to be had was that the Hierarch had not spoken in the favour of war, and his absence of a grip on the cities meant it was unlikely a unified League would march against her. It was still a liability. Her uncle had made it plain that at least twenty thousand men would have to be left south to discourage incursions from the Free Cities while the crusade was being fought. A loss, she would admit, but not a crippling one. Ashur and Levant would both contribute much larger hosts to the war when they gathered their strength.

"Late spring at the earliest," Lady Itima of Vaccei announced. "But we will march, First Prince. All of us. There can be no other choice."

Set on the table before all the representatives were two reports from her agents in Callow, speaking of the same city. Liesse, though it had been ripped from its ancient grounds and dragged across the kingdom. The first report detailed what sparse information she had been able to gather about these strange undead the Diabolist had been able to make. *Wights*, the Praesi called them. One had even been obtained and smuggled across the border, and examinations by wizards had established the alchemical nature of the transition into undeath. The Empire had unveiled two weapons through their civil war, and though this was the subtlest of the two it was perhaps also the most terrifying. If all the Empire needed to sow undeath was access to a city's cisterns, none of them were safe. The Empress' reputation for having a large and extremely effective web of spies had cost her dearly in this. A less demonstrably far-reaching ruler would not have seemed so immediate a threat. The other report held mostly technical notes, but it was the sheet of parchment with the drawing that had truly stuck a blow. The sight of the city of Liesse with a mass of dead above it, and the Greater Breach the weapon had opened on a Callowan field.

A Hellgate, and not a passing one. Gods, Cordelia had known there was great madness waiting in the east but even she had underestimated the depth. No crusade had ever managed to land even a glancing blow on the Hellgate that lay within the depths of Keter. It alone had been enough to maintain the terrible grip of the Dead King for untold centuries even with entire battalions of heroes failing to end him. The thought of the Tower with the ability to create Hellgates at will was enough to put a shiver up anyone's spine. She'd been open about the weapon being either damaged or destroyed during the civil war, the truth of that was still uncertain, but she'd not even had to raise the notion of it being possible to repair herself. The Levantines had done so

without prompting, and pressed for a dismantling of the Empire to ensure it would never be capable of making the likes of it again.

"As for the charter you proposed, we are in agreement as well," the lord of Tartessos said. "It will require the signature of the Seljun to be binding, but the Majilis can provisionally ratify it. Your... appreciation of our concerns has been noted, and does you honour."

Cordelia was very careful not to let the triumph show in her eyes. This was the true victory she had won today, the founding of her Grand Alliance. Though it had been presented as a council of nations participating in the Tenth Crusade that could adjudicate internal disputes, there was no clause forcing the alliance to end after Praes was laid low. Years of diplomacy had finally borne fruit. The treaties would prevent Procer from attempting to expand into the Dominion again long after she died, and with this foundation she could forge ever closer ties over the length of her reign. With the three great powers of the west so aligned, the Principate's attention could be turned to the true enemies. The Chain of Hunger. The Kingdom of the Dead. The Everdark. The treaties were not even a pale shadow of those that bound together the League of Free Cities, but they could be built on. They *would* be.

Cordelia knew she would not see the continent know true peace in her lifetime, but she could lay the foundations for those that would come after her.

The envoys were entertained for refreshments after the negotiations closed, yet the First Prince did not linger overlong. She had spoken to the Augur, last night, and been given prophecy. *Fortune comes to you unannounced*, her cousin had whispered. *You may yet grasp it*. Some of the White Knight's band had survived the struggle against the Calamities in the Free Cities, and were said to be heading for Salia with the man himself. Crusades, Cordelia knew, were a call few heroes let pass them by. Though no formal declaration had yet been made, the ways of Named were not easily understood. The Heavens may have whispered secrets in their ears, as they did the Augur. The flaxen-haired prince dismissed her attendants after retiring to her rooms, unweaving her braid herself. She was not unaware that it softened her features when unbound, and though she knew she was no great beauty she could sometimes pass as one with the right ministrations. She did not hear the window open, and was frowning at letter from the Princess of Tenerife when someone cleared their throat.

Cordelia froze. It was a woman. Short of hair, pale of skin with blue-grey eyes. Her leathers were loose over a slender frame. *Callowan*, the First Prince thought. *She has the look*.

"Would you like a drink?" Cordelia Hasenbach asked.

The woman snorted.

"I wish," she said. "But getting into this place was hard enough sober. Have you ever tripped into a moat? It's honestly the worst."

The First Prince smiled pleasantly.

"I will take your word on it," she said. "I would be remiss if I did not ask who you are, of course."

The stranger plopped down onto a seat across from her.

"I am a halfway decent thief," the woman said. "A patriot, when I can afford to be. But, most importantly—"

She sharply smiled.

"— I am an envoy from the Queen of Callow."

"Are you now?" Cordelia said. "I believe I will be having that drink, myself. We have much to talk about."

—

The Hierarch saw many things, close and faraway. Deals being struck behind closed doors in this very city, armies mustered and betrayals paid for. In a cold room of black stone, he watched the most beautiful woman he'd ever glimpsed wipe away a tear and clench her teeth. By the crackling hearth of an inn he saw a knight and a champion clasp arms with older heroes, whispering of Heaven's Mandate. He saw a young girl on an ill-fitting throne, lost but unwilling to retreat. He saw the fields of a Hell tilled and strewn with villages, its people never having known a blue sky. He saw knives bared beneath the earth, north and south, skins of black and green ghosting through tunnels. He saw a green-eyed man grinning in the face of havoc, alone with well-worn maps. He saw... a silent young girl, her skin pale as porcelain. Her blue dress was light and her hair cut in a short bob. Her eyes met his, impossibly.

"Curious," the Augur said. "You were not within the sparrows."

"The People have decreed omens to be ignorant superstition," Anaxares told her.

"Ah," Agnes Hasenbach murmured "You too. No star left uncharted."

Hierarch woke in a dirty alley, huddled under a threadbare blanket. It had been the clink of coppers being dropped in his begging bowl that woke him. Anaxares was not alone. At his side, leaning back against the husk of a wall, a woman sat with her knees gathered to her chest. She smelled of liquor and sweat, though the black curls he could see framing her face were

pristine. The stranger drank loudly from a silver flask before turning to him, and when he saw her face he recognized her. Aoede of Nicae. The Wandering Bard. The heroine offered him the flask, wiggling it in a farce of temptation.

"It's the good stuff, for once," the Bard grinned. "Don't skip, doesn't happen often."

The Hierarch of the League of Free Cities, anointed temporal ruler of a hundreds of thousands of souls, tightened his blanket around his frame. He looked aside and pretended the woman did not exist. He had gained much practice in this skill of late, with envoys from the Free Cities and beyond.

"You know, when the second wave of Baalite settles came to Ashur they brought animals from home with them," the woman said. "One of them was a large flightless bird, called an ostrich. Odd creatures. Liked to bury their heads in the ground, a feeling I can empathize with. When the first famine came, though, the big fat ostriches were slaughtered like poultry. Even though their heads were in the sand."

Anaxares stared ahead, silent.

"Tough crowd, huh," the Bard mused. "It's too late to stay out of it, Hierarch. You're Named, now. Means you're fair game."

"I did not choose this," Anaxares said.

"So I've heard," the Bard said. "Kairos has that thing villains often do, where they confuse symmetry with humour. Probably got a giggle out of waving an old mistake in my face."

The diplomat eyed the woman, who was drinking again. After so long not being able to afford wine, the sight of the liquor being guzzled had his body feeling pangs.

"None of this was meant for you," he finally said.

"Oh, that touch was probably just a drop of arsenic in the wine," Aoede shrugged. "But I *made* your Name, sweetcakes. Back in the days before I knew better."

"Prokopia Lakene was rightfully elected," the Hierarch frowned.

"Right's a pretty broad word, when it comes down to it," the Bard said. "She was silvertongued like you wouldn't believe, true, but that's where I went wrong. The moment the tongue was gone, so was the Name."

"The League survived her," he said.

"The League's skin deep," the Bard said. "None of the forces behind moved any differently after it was formed."



The heroine offered the flask again, and this time Anaxares took it. The liquor within was sweet and tangy, tasting of apples. Much stronger than wine, or anything he'd ever drank before.

"Or it was, anyway," Aoede said. "But now here you are. And you've got a lot of – well, *people* is a bit of stretch but you get my drift – puzzled. Both upstairs and down. So here I am too, welcoming you to the neighbourhood. Instead of fresh bread and a bottle of wine, you get overly personal questions and maybe a dollop of sinister threats. Depending on how it all pans out. Have another pull, diplomat. It's the sweetest thing either of us will taste for a while."

Anaxares did, before handing it back.

"I abstain," he said.

The woman sighed.

"That's not how it works," she told him, as if he were a witless child. "Right now you're sucking at the teat but you're not swallowing. There's always a side picked, Anaxares. Always."

The Bard waved her flask enthusiastically.

"See, that's where you're raising questions," she said. "'cause Kairos forged you, and Kairos is in deep with the folks Below. But you let the White Knight and the Champion go, sparing me a deal that would have been... *costly*. Your people like a bit of sulphur on the altar, it's true, but their idea of worship does little more than keep those in a fresh coat of red. And I'm sorry to say, but you're what we call a mumbler. You speak the words when the right stars are out but there's no real *meat* to the faith, you get me?"

The Bard leaned closer.

"It's fine if you want to fuck around like a raft on the tide for a while, Hierarch, but keep in mind sooner or later you're going to hit shore," she said.

*That*, Anaxares thought, *or drown*.

"What," he asked patiently, "do you want from me?"

"I want you to stop taking a nap in the middle of the board," the Wandering Bard said. "Stepping around you is already getting tedious, and Kairos is better at it. I don't mind having a few layabouts around, sweetcakes, but only when I *put* them there. You're no work of mine."

Anaxares studied the woman for a long moment then shook his head.

"I do not answer to your Gods," he said. "They drew no lots and hold no appointment."

Something like surprise flickered across the woman's face.

"You're Named," she reminded him.

"I am citizen of the Republic of Bellerophon," he replied.

"You were created with purpose," the Bard said flatly. "Fulfil it."

"This purpose was not voted upon by the People," Anaxares said. "I do not recognize it. Forcing it upon me is unlawful."

"Look, the puppet show in your backwater dump is good for the occasional laugh," Aoede patiently said. "But you've been sent up a rung, Hierarch. That's not the game you're playing anymore."

The Hierarch smiled.

"I know you," he said.

"We've met before," the Wandering Bard agreed warily. "Had tea and everything."

"No," Anaxares said. "I *know* you, old thing. You are the sound of the lash, the deal in the dark. You are the servant of stillness. I deny all you peddle."

"You are mad," the Bard said. "And putting a knife to your own throat. They will *take you apart*."

"If the Heavens seek to impose their will, they will be made to stand before a tribunal of the People," the Hierarch serenely said.

"Your own fucking Gods will bleed you like a pig," the Wandering Bard hissed.

"Then they, too, will be hanged," Anaxares noted. "As honorary citizens of the Republic, they are subject to its laws."

"You-"

"Aoede of Nicae, I charge you with treason," he said, rising to his feet. "Collaboration with foreign oligarchs and agitation in the name of wretched tyrants."

"You can't be *serious*," the Bard said.

"Should you fail to be present at your trial," the Hierarch continued calmly, inexorably, "you will be tried and convicted in

absentia. As per League law, you may petition the Basileus of Nicae to request amnesty on your behalf."

He looked down at the woman.

"It will be denied," he told her. "But to petition is your right."

Eyes wide, the Wandering Bard opened her mouth to reply but between two heartbeats' span she... disappeared. As if she had never been there at all.

"This," the Hierarch of the Free Cities said, "will be added to the record as an indication of guilt."

He left the alley, the quarter, the city until he found the boy awaiting him. Kairos Theodosian took one look at him and laughed, his red eye burning.

"Now there," the Tyrant grinned, "is the madman I was waiting for. We are going to have such *fun*, you and I."

—

In the depths of a Hell that had long lost its name and number, a monster opened his eyes. In Keter, a stone that was an old and treasured gift shone red. It had not done this since the days of Dread Empress Triumphant. The Dead King laughed.

"*Finally.*"

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*Kenshin135*

Doesn't Cat still owe Night some debt? like 7 rulers and 1 at his feet or something? Her talk with the summer captive made fulfilling that seem like a pretty bad idea, especially when "... 'til all debts are paid." is included in his allegiance. Doesn't even seem all that unlikely to accidentally fulfill; there's plenty of rulers/princes around and he'll inevitably be one of her sharpest swords to cut them down.

[Barthumphries](#)

I can't comment. Spoilers. 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well... I can say that the "seven crowns and one" will be a long wait, but totally worth it. And the sequence fulfilling

it will involve some of the weirdest and most spectacular battles and other shenanigans in the Guide, even counting the ones that just wrapped.

*Jeffery Wells*

Yes, seven crowns of mortal men, and she will probably fulfill it in large part by destroying every kingdom involved in the crusades.

[Barthumphries](#)

Things may or may not have changed. Spoilers. Catch up to the latest posts. 😊

This is a great story.

*eireknight*

I hope the dead king gets involved

*slendyllovespie*

He will. I think that's what Hierarch saw Malicia doing.

*Shaequil*

I love this novel, webseries, or work of beautiful fiction. Whatever it is I love it and I love reading the Bellerophon's part because his words speaking of the Laws and Beliefs he holds true and self-evident sound so hard-boiled and I enjoy the sound of them spoken aloud. I'm glad he made the Bard eat the People's Law.

*hue hue*

The isekai comrade is my favorite character of the Guide. I hope he gets a happy end

[Barthumphries](#)

The what? Who?

*dudemcguy*

Holy. Shit. Just caught up to this point and it is. Going. Down. Anaraxes is starting to really become a badass in his own right, and the fae swearing fealty to Cat gave me chills. I love this story!!

*Kai Wingless*

That point where he goes from Anaxares to The Heirarch just gives me goosebumps.

[vuthuha912](#)

Oh yes, he can't rule because he doesn't care for its culture and people. Sure, he totally was doing all of this thing for his benefit and not your power. He takes on Cat for you and your reign. He was preparing to die fighting so that you could live. You just have 2 jobs – hold the leash on Praesi and make Cat like you.

Then you try to commit a story of suicide by building a Death Star. He knows his shit. He lost Sabah for underestimating the power of story. You, the one who never leaves her ivory tower, never deals with heroes, and never risks her life doing any of his jobs, decided that you can do his job better than him. Girl, when the guy who deals with heroes, tells you he can't win against so many heroes to save your life, you should probably listen to him, you idiota ~~.

Malicia ... how is invading Callow to stop Praesi from starving and having to pay a ruinous price for foods from smugglers equated to not caring???? He fucking cares, okay. Not for the benefit of an individual like any Praesi Highborn because he needs their political support but for the collective benefit of the whole country.

Honestly, I have lost my patience with Praesi ruling class, not because they are evil or shit but because they can't even be evil right. If they just looked at their action for once, they would never try to mess with Callow – their food supplier while the entire South is under attack. You don't, do that. You help the country get on its track so you can get sustainable benefits later. Sure, you lose some money in the short term but letting the tree grows so you can eat fruits every year is objectively better than cutting the entire orchard down for woods. It is like they relish the fact that they need to pay nearly 3 times the amount of money needed for their own survival, not getting taxes and great political power. Just by promising to prioritize food exports to certain provinces for a set amount of years, they can probably get a lot more. Monopoly is a thing. Moreover, if you are not doing it too overtly and making a deal with Black & Malicia on the limit, you can probably hold that power for a long time. Didn't Marzus get killed because he was being too obvious?

As I said before, if 40 years of more taxes, money and stability do no change their mind, they probably should step out of the way.

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