

## The Other Choice

“You can trust no one in the Central Mass.” Jillevieve repeated these words in her head as the rain beat down the black soil beneath the thick treeline of the Green Crescent. She adjusted the wide hood protecting her dull blonde hair and shifted her position on the stout gray horse as she considered the task her superior, Raised Blade Cujo, had set before her.

“The slayer of Blade Agosto resides in the Green Chapel, five days’ travel into the Center. To murder a knight of the crown is the most damnable offense. You are to find her and end her errant life.” The prospect was simple enough. She had killed before. It was part of her job. Never a biped, of course, anything as crafty as a witch, but she imagined that they went down just the same. No, it was the words that followed which troubled her. “Trust no one. It is a witch land, and the only manner of a witch is to deceive.”

Jillevieve was a knight of the crown, and her blade was sworn to protect the lives of the people of all lands, not just her own, so this was exactly what gave her pause. The Raised Blade’s words were no different from what she had been taught. It was often said that the only thing more dangerous than the reptiles of the wildest Mass was the deception of a witch. She had trouble imagining it. Could there really be an entire group of individuals, let alone an entire continent of them, who were not worthy of her protection? Even being so untamed and unexplored, the Central Mass dwarfed the plateaus which surrounded it. She didn’t want it to bother her. After all, it was, as well, her duty to respect authority and life in equal parts. Still, she ruminated. “The only manner of a witch is to deceive.”

She tried her best not to think of if the Raised Blade might be wrong. As long as she knew him, since he was her pedagogue when she was a child, he had been stern and righteous.

Not that Jillevieve didn't think of herself as stern and righteous—but it was different with the Raised Blade. It wasn't wise, she had learned, to oppose his beliefs.

Tybalt, the horse, stopped then, letting a soft huff out through his nostrils, his breath creating a soft mist in the chilled darkness of the rainy Crescent. Jillevieve reached forward and patted his head with a light glove. It had been four days since they crossed the cavernous rift that separated the Masses from each other. One more, and she would be close to her witch.

They had reached a small clearing, which Jillevieve had never seen, though she knew it well all the same. A path stretched outwards to her left. Another continued ahead of her. And to her right, a third, smaller and less beaten than the others, although it was larger than she expected.

The clearing was part of a central scene in one of the Betrayals, stories of the women who had long ago failed their Goddesses, forever marking them as witches. In one, Scylla, a Maiden of the Goddess Naten, is exiled from the country of Stela. In most retellings, her crime is not specified, and no scholars have ever come to a conclusion as to what it may have been.

Travelling from Stela by way of the Crescent, she comes across a small clearing with two paths. The ideals of Naten, Diviner of Choice, were methodical and rigid, and it is agreed that Scylla, in this instance, had three choices: turn back to Stela and make an appeal to be allowed to return, turn left, towards the mountains of Shayle, or press forwards, towards the damp plains of Wheyco. Scylla did none of these things, and instead, with her terrible axe, carved her own path into the Crescent, deeper into the reptile-riddled wilds of the Central Mass. Anyone who had studied the writings of Naten, as Jillevieve had, being a devout follower of hers, knew that such a

reckless move was negligent at best, and was as good as making no choice at all. The finality of the last sentence always stuck with Jillevieve: “Scylla was never heard from in Stela again.”

How ironic that Jillevieve now found herself walking down the path which had so ired Naten, her patron Goddess. She placed one hand on the hilt which protruded from her belt, and let a sigh drift into the firm, crisp air of the woods. “May you honor my choice.” She tightened her grip on Tybalt’s reins and steered his head towards the narrow path. “On then, boy.”

Tybalt began a slow trot through the clearing, though as he approached the path, there seemed to be some consideration in his movement. He looked down at the ground and huffed, stopping just short of the exit. Jillevieve, in the short time she had known the horse, had always put stock in his judgments, but the nipping rain had put some irritation in her.

“Come now, Tybalt, what is it?” she said, looking down at the ground. It wasn’t entirely clear to her in the darkness, though she was able to make out Tybalt’s concern. In the ground were star-shaped imprints, about twice the size of the markings Tybalt had left in the clearing. They were footprints. In the rain, it was hard to tell just how recently they were made.

Jillevieve weighed her options. The rain coming down as it did, she couldn’t exactly turn back the way she came. Shayle and Wheyco were no closer to her than her destination. She considered praying to Naten for guidance, but no, there really was no choice in a situation like this.

“We’ll just have to proceed with caution,” she said, tapping the right side of Tybalt’s snout with her fingertips. The steed snorted in disapproval, but pressed forward with his slow gait. She focused again on looking ahead of her, listening for a sound other than Tybalt’s careful steps. As he advanced, the brush on either side of the narrow path resisted him just slightly, so

that as they went, there was a slow, rhythmic swishing beneath the rain that Jillevieve found almost soothing.

She found it soothing, that is, until Tybalt let out another low whicker and stopped in his tracks. The swishing, Jillevieve noticed, did not stop. Nor was it in the same rhythm that it had been just moments ago. They were not alone, she thought, and judging by the branch that cracked just a few taps away, their grim company was getting closer by the second.

“Tybalt,” she whispered, leaning forward, “run.” Tybalt broke into a run almost immediately. Jillevieve fought to maintain her grip on his reins as she turned her head slightly to check for their pursuer—behind them was a black and yellow striped salamander the size of Tybalt, keeping up with the horse with ease, even with its short, unwieldy legs. As she looked back ahead of her, Jillevieve could hear the creature’s tail sweeping away the brush behind it. They had barely been running for thirty seconds when their efforts proved ineffective. Jillevieve felt a powerful force knock her to the left, sending her barrelling into the mud. She pushed past the sharp pain that pulsed through her body and rolled to see Tybalt running further down the path, leaving her far behind. She called out to him through gritted teeth, but his figure continued to grow more distant. Meanwhile, behind her, there was a heavy trodding on the soil. She lifted herself up to a sitting position to face the overgrown amphibian, which was pacing towards her with a slow and systemic stride. She pulled herself back slightly, but with the blunt pain in her legs, there was no getting away from the creature.

“Stay back!” she said to the salamander, reaching for her sword. It was then that something bizarre happened: the salamander did stay back. It stopped in its tracks and widened its wet black eyes, as if it had just seen something that truly frightened it. Giving Jillevieve

barely a second to process what was happening, the creature turned and scurried its awkward legs in the other direction, as quickly as it had pursued her moments ago. Jillevieve turned, then, expecting to see some new threat, a larger creature to concern herself with. Instead, she saw a hooded figure, only slightly taller than herself. From beneath the dark brown cloak came a young woman's voice.

“The Green Crescent at night... is a dangerous place to be, knight.” The voice seemed to coo, but it was not mocking. Jillevieve almost thought it sounded sweet. Almost.

Jillevieve shifted her position again to look up at the stranger.

“A knight's task often calls her to dangerous places,” she said.

“And yours has called you to our wood,” the hooded girl said. “Let me help you stand.” She reached out a hand in the murky darkness.

Jillevieve felt herself tense up. You can trust no one on the Central Mass.

“I can stand myself,” she said, putting one hand behind her and grunting as she tried to pick herself up. The blaring pain coursed through her and blurred her vision, and she dropped right back to the ground.

The hooded figure did not retract her hand.

What else was there to do? Naten, Jillevieve thought, lend me your wisdom and honor my choice.

She grabbed the figure's hand, immediately tensing up at the sensation that greeted her. The stranger's hand felt covered in an abnormal amount of hair. Or rather...

“You are a—”

“—cat, yes,” the woman finished for her. Jillevieve was no stranger to psuedofauna, the animal-like bipeds that populated the Masses, of course. There were, after all, small populations in Stela. She had not considered, however, that there were any in the Central Mass. Though she supposed she had no idea of the kind of person who would want to live on the Central Mass.

The two hands gripped each other and the stranger slowly helped Jillevieve up to her feet. The sudden twinge of pain in her legs suddenly caused her to fall forward, directly into the stranger’s arms. She caught Jillevieve readily, offering her left shoulder for support. Jillevieve accepted, and leaned herself on the charitable figure, cursing herself for being found in such a helpless position.

“My home isn’t far,” the cat said.

“Your home? Stranger, I cannot.”

“And why is that?” she said.

“I cannot go to the home of someone I” *cannot trust*, is how the thought finished in Jillevieve’s mind, but she thought better of it. It was probably best not to insult this witch’s character while in such a vulnerable state. “... someone I do not know.”

The stranger was silent for a moment. The rain tapped its damp hooves on the leaves of the silent woods.

“I understand your reservation, knight,” she said, “but here are your circumstances: you find yourself alone in a land which must seem vast and strange to you. You are injured, soaked. You are horseless. What else will you do? By Naten’s wisdom, it seems to me that accepting help, even from someone you do not know, is your only choice.”

Jillevieve flinched at the mention of Naten. Why did this witch know the Goddess's teachings? She furrowed her brow, still considering. She felt awkward leaning on this woman's shoulder for so long, and tried to shift her weight off her. The hooded cat spoke again.

“If I wanted to harm you, I would have done so already.”

Jillevieve looked down, let out a sharp breath, and nodded finally.

Without another word, the two of them began to trudge through the mud, still being barraged with rain. After about two minutes, Jillevieve saw a faint light through the branches of the trees—a sizable windowed hut. A revelation struck her.

“You... live in this wood?” she said between pained breaths.

“I do. It is a peaceful place if you know how to handle yourself.”

Jillevieve did not know how to respond to this. She left it alone for now.

They arrived at the door of the hut, and the stranger turned the handle with her right hand, pushing the door open. No key. The house was much brighter than the forest outside, lit generously by a few lanterns hung throughout—enchanted, Jillevieve supposed. The area in front of the door was open, with what looked to be a parlor lined with two gray-cushioned seats by a fireplace sitting opposite a small kitchen. Further ahead was a short hall lined with a handful of white doors. The hooded woman guided Jillevieve across the wooden floor and to a resting position on one of the seats. Jillevieve slumped down as her host walked into one of the rooms in the hall. She felt as if her body had been hit by a drawn carriage. More accurately, it felt as if she had been slammed off of a horse by a large lizard. She thought of Tybalt, then. Foolish horse. She hoped he would be okay.

The woman returned, then, and Jillevieve got her first good look at her. She had black fur and deep, olive eyes. She removed the brown cloak she had been wearing in the rain, and was clad in a thin green tunic that covered her down to her knees. At her neck was a small necklace shaped like a sharp tooth. Around her waist was a brown belt with several clear bottles affixed to it, brimming with a fine gray liquid. She was a caster, then.

“Okay, lady knight. Show me your wounds.” The cat sat down in the seat next to Jillevieve as the knight removed her jacket and loosened her gambeson. In a moment, Jillevieve’s upper body was bare except for the thin white linen garment that covered her chest and stomach. On Jillevieve’s left arm was a bruise, deep and purple with red streaks. She flinched upon looking at it, and looked away as the woman placed her hands on her skin, creating a faint orange glow in the air around her.

“Why are you helping me, cat?” Jillevieve said, still not facing her host.

“It wouldn’t exactly be proper of me to leave a woman in need to die of exposure so close to my home. You and that salamander made quite a din. Not many pass through these woods these days.” There was a pause, and then “What is your name?”

“Blade Jillevieve. And you, cat?”

“I am called Masha,” she said. “What brings a knight of the Stelan crown to the Central Mass, Blade Jillevieve?”

“You know I am from Stela,” Jillevieve said.

“Yes,” said Masha, “your jacket. I noticed the crest.” There was a pause. Masha removed her hands from Jillevieve’s arm, the skin restored to its natural brown. She moved it about. It was less stiff, but there was a still a dull pain.



“It still hurts,” she said.

Masha chuckled at this. “Somewhat. The Goddesses taught us to heal injury, but they gave no easy way to alleviate pain as a whole. Perhaps to keep us ever mindful of the reason behind our actions. Though I suppose there’s alcohol to negate both. The pain and the reason, that is. May I see your legs?”

Jillevieve bit the inside of her lip and began removing her rough brown trousers. There was a large bruise on her left thigh, as well, and something felt as if it was out of place. Masha nodded, and placed her hands on the leg. Jillevieve watched this time as the gray liquid in the bottles on Masha’s belt slowly drained. A few sharp cracks emanated from her leg, and Jillevieve flinched.

“You did not answer my question, Blade Jillevieve,” said Masha. “What business might you have in the Central Mass?”

“I’ve a matter to attend to,” Jillevieve said. “A debt to settle with another witch. You need not concern yourself with the details.”

“*Another* witch,” mused Masha. “Do you think me a witch, then?”

“Are you not one?” said Jillevieve.

“I am afraid you must refresh me on these principles, lady knight. What makes one a witch?”

“A witch,” Jillevieve began, “defies the will of the Goddesses. It is not a single choice one makes, but... a life one leads.”

“I see,” said Masha. “And I defy the Goddesses.”

“You live on the Central Mass. This alone is unnatural,” said Jillevieve.

“Ah,” said Masha, “I nearly forgot how the people of the Outer Masses fear this one so.” She removed her hands from Jilleveive’s thigh. Just like the arm, there was still a dull pain, but she could at least move it without wincing.

“We do not stay away out of fear, but out of reason. The Center is unmapped, untamed. There is no reason for us to risk life and limb when the Outer Masses are perfectly suitable to our lives.”

“Maybe so. But does this warrant hating the ones who live here? To call us witches with no understanding of the way that we live our lives?”

“What—hah! What talk,” Jilleveive scoffed. “People do not leave the Outer Masses because they are innocent. There are stories dating back centuries of criminals fleeing to the Central Mass to invent new lives for themselves.”

“Perhaps, Blade Jilleveive,” Masha said, closing her eyes. “What of your witch, then? This debt... you seek retribution for some crime?”

“She is a murderer of the worst sort. She slayed a fellow knight of mine. Blade Agosto. He... was a good man.”

Masha nodded at this. “I am sorry to hear of your grief, Blade Jilleveive.”

Jilleveive decided to press the issue that had been bothering her.

“And you? What sort of criminal are you, cat? What sort of background must you come from to defend these witches as you do?”

Masha stood, looking down at the floor. “I was born here, Blade Jilleveive.” She began to walk towards the kitchen.

Jilleveive stopped, and then took in a sharp breath with her nose. “What?”

Masha opened two adjacent cabinets and pulled out a glass and a bottle of a golden brown liquid. “Would you like a drink, lady knight?”

“I—you—well, yes, but... you were *born* here?”

Masha pulled another short glass from the cabinet and poured. “Yes, Blade Jillevieve. I have lived in the Central Mass all of my life.” She took both of the glasses back to her seat, and set Jillevieve’s down on a wooden stand next to her. “My mother had me here. She raised me. Here. She died here, too, O’dea bless her heart. I did not know another parent, if ever they were here with us.” She took a sip of her drink.

“Masha,” Jillevieve said, “I don’t know what to say. I am sorry.”

“Why are you sorry, lady knight?”

“It must have been hard to grow up in a place like this.”

“Mm. Thank you, but it is like I said. It is not so bad once you know how. Not bad at all. In any case, it is all I have ever known.” The silence that followed seemed to make the rain tapping the roof louder. “Drink, knight. It really will help your pain.”

Jillevieve obeyed. The drink was bitter, with a light and sweet aftertaste. After a few more seconds of the lull in conversation, she asked a question. “So. You know my profession. What is it that you do, wi—Masha?”

“I am something of a freelancer, I suppose. Me and a couple of other girls, we... take jobs from the locals. Nothing complicated, mind you. We protect people, you might say. Not so much unlike you.”

Freelance knights. Unbelievable. Jillevieve considered pursuing an argument, but decided against it.

“There are others who live here, then?” said Jillevieve.

Masha nodded. “There is a village further down the path, yes. I live just far enough. I like the quiet.”

A village. Jillevieve registered this information, thinking of her task.

“If I may ask a question, Blade Jillevieve,” said Masha, “where do you plan on finding this witch of yours? The slayer of your Blade Agosto.”

“My superior told me I would find her in a place called the Green Chapel,” said Jillevieve.

“Mm.” Masha took a sip of her drink. “I happen to know the place.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, there are... some women who often meet there. I could guide you to your witch, Blade Jillevieve.”

Jillevieve considered this for a moment. “Why would you help me?”

“I have no reason not to,” said Masha. “As I said, both of our interests lie in helping others. If you say this woman has killed a good knight, then I feel strongly that leading you to her is the right thing to do.”

Jillevieve paused again. Of course, she had no reason to believe that Masha was deceiving her. She was told to trust no one in the Central Mass. And yet.

Naten, lend me your wisdom and honor my choice.

“I would be happy to accept your assistance, Masha,” she said. “Thank you.”

“It would be my honor, Blade Jillevieve,” Masha said. “We’ll leave in the morning, when the rain has let up.” She smiled, and for some reason, it made Jillevieve feel warm. Probably just the alcohol.

The two women went through another round of drinks. Then two more rounds. Masha showed her a card game that they played in the Central Mass, and Jillevieve told her of a Stelan game with similar rules. They played for a bit, bickering a few times about the rules of the game, before one of them realized that the rule they were thinking of applied only to the version they were familiar with.

Her company is certainly strange, but it is not unwelcome, they each thought individually.

At some point, they fell asleep. When Masha awoke, she was on the floor, her head resting on Jillevieve’s chest, and she apologized profusely. Jillevieve assured her it was fine, laughing the matter off. She found it charming, but did not admit this out loud.

For breakfast, Masha offered her a roll, and in return Jillevieve shared with her some of the cured meat that she brought with her on her journey. Masha explained that they did not have cattle, or many warm-blooded animals at all, what with the giant reptiles roaming around. After eating, the pair departed for the Green Chapel.

As they stepped outside, Jillevieve saw Masha place the white, tooth-like necklace around her neck between her lips and blow, as if it were a small whistle. No sound came out.

“What is that?” said Jillevieve.

“The hollowed tooth of a Scale-tyrant. King of lizards, they say.” Masha said. “Keeps the reptiles away. I told you the Mass is peaceful if you know how to handle yourself. Come, let’s go.”

They found their way back to the path leading towards the village and started down it. The walk was quiet, and the tone was in stark contrast to the end of their night before. Over the course of the trip, there seemed to be a kind of steely hardness that came over Jillevieve. She was so close to her goal. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Masha fiddle with her necklace. Masha spoke, then.

“Jille—Blade Jillevieve, may I ask you something?”

“You may,” said Jillevieve.

“Do you know the story of the Green Crescent? The story of Scylla, that is.”

Jillevieve glanced at Masha, who was clutching her necklace now.

“One of the Betrayals, yes. Scylla abandoned Naten when she made the choice to travel deeper into the Central Mass. She chose death. Never seen in her home kingdom again.”

Masha drew in a breath. “It may not surprise you, Blade Jillevieve, that we in the Central Mass have a very different outlook on that story. It is our belief that Scylla did not... betray her Goddess. No. She exemplified her wisdom.”

Jillevieve wrinkled her nose. “And how is that?”

“Scylla followed the methods of Naten, laying out those choices that most would see when she reasoned her next move. But in doing so, she saw more choices. She made the decision to carve out her own path—deeper into the Mass. She carved out her own path. To us, it represents the infinite nature of our choices. There are never so few as we see at first. Scylla did not defy Naten,” Masha emphasized. “She embodied her.”

There was a viscous, momentary silence then.

“That is our belief. Here is my knowledge: the Maiden Scylla did not choose death.”

Jillevieve drew in a puzzled breath.

“Masha, what—”

“You will know for yourself.”

Masha sped up, walking ahead of Jillevieve as the trees began to thin out. Outside of the woods, there was a vast field stretching out, deeper into the Central Mass. Hills of varying sizes dotted the landscape in front of them. Jillevieve could make out the figures of a few sizable reptiles in the distance. The path, now a clear dirt road, branched out once more—one straightforward, and the other to the left at a right angle.

“This way,” said Masha, leading Jillevieve down the left path.

Ahead of them, Jillevieve saw the ground seem to dip downwards. As they got closer, she could make out what was below: at the bottom of the grassy hill was a square stone building that had been painted white. It looked something like the accountants’ office back in Stela, Jillevieve thought.

“Is that—”

“—the Green Chapel, yes,” Masha finished. She said nothing else as she continued down the hill.

What a thought. The Green Chapel, Jillevieve noted, was neither green nor a chapel. An example of the kind of deception one could expect from a witch, she supposed. Her breath caught, however, when she saw the plaque next to the door. “The Green Chapel — Dedicated to Its Founder, the Maiden Scylla.”

Masha dug into the pocket of her tunic and pulled out what looked like a small key, then pressed it into the door of the building, entering.

“Masha?” Jillevieve said, glancing between the open doorway and the plaque before following suit. She caught up with Masha just in time to follow her into the Chapel. There were a few desks throughout the room, and the walls were lined with shelves and cabinets. Masha waved her hand to a few lanterns, turning them on. “Masha, what is the meaning of this? What is this place? Why did you have that key?”

“You are not simple, Jillevieve. Work it out.” Masha walked over to a desk, opened the top drawer, and began to rummage through it.

Jillevieve took a deep breath, but her words felt stuck in her throat. “You—you are—aren’t—”

“I am the witch you seek. Yes.” Masha was looking up at Jillevieve now, her dark green eyes glowing slightly in the dim light. She pulled a folder from the drawer and pushed it shut.

Jillevieve’s expression passed from shock to confusion to anger, then to a mixture of all three. Had she made the wrong choice? “You lied to me,” she said.

“I did no such thing, Jillevieve,” said Masha. “I am only trying to help you.”

“Help me? How dare you? How could you possibly—”

“Enough,” said Masha, placing the file on the desk in front of her. “Please. Look.”

Jillevieve approached, keeping her eyes locked on Masha. She picked up the file and her breath caught at the writing on the tab.

BLADE AGOSTO R. — CHARGES

“Why do you—”

“Open it, please, Jillevieve.”



Jillevieve obeyed, opening the file with a shaky hand. She felt her stomach drop as she scanned the pages.

“This...” she huffed, “this is not real. This is one of your lies. Why would you have a file like this?”

“It is real. Real and covered for by your very own Raised Blade Cujo,” Masha said, making eye contact with Jillevieve. “We do not only receive jobs from the locals of this place, Jillevieve. Many come to the Central Mass with favors they cannot get in the Outer ones. This was brought to us by one of your archivists. It is as I said. We protect.”

Jillevieve looked away from Masha, taking deep, uneven breaths.

“What will you do, then, lady knight? The witch you came to slay is only guilty of keeping a vile man from doing more harm.”

And what could she do? Here she was, a knight of the crown, tasked with a simple goal. Witch’s blood for hero’s blood. There was no room for moral ambiguity—there *should* have been none. But what did she find? A witch who helps strangers in her wood, who commits no crimes but in the name of protecting others. Or so she said, so she claimed. There was still the chance that she was being deceived. But then, why would Masha help her, allow her to spend the night, just to lead her here? Deceive her for what?

And what of her crime? Does murder not remain murder, regardless of the cause? But then, wasn’t Jillevieve the same, here, being so appointed and willing to murder? And if the crimes of Blade Agosto were true...

Jillevieve leaned over the desk, covering her mouth with one hand. What could she do? She took her right hand, still shaking, and placed it on the hilt of her sword. She pulled it back again, staring at her quivering fingertips.

Naten, lend me your wisdom and honor my choice.

Yes, choice. Naten's wisdom. One must lay their choices out mindfully, let their tranquility guide them. Jillevieve saw only two choices: kill Masha and return to Stela, or return to Stela without the witch's head and plead for forgiveness. Two paths to take. Could there have been another? Jillevieve shifted her eyes to Masha, who was watching her with patience. She glanced at her sword. And then at her empty right hand. She closed her eyes.

Jillevieve was never heard from in Stela again.