

McCallister Chronicles

*Based on J.M. Harrison's
Carthim's Cross*

AP Schreckenberger

*Night Suite
Book 2 - Episode 17*

What the heck is this? The hardcover nipped Wing's digits as they rode over the roughened hide exterior. The title was written in a language that McCallister did not comprehend. Barren pages appeared as though a disgruntled author had plucked the billions of pinprick stars from the sky and joined the dots of light to create a limitless wasteland. It was anticlimactic to say the least, yet for some inexplicable reason, the paladin sensed a purpose. The clue – a dull tingle that meandered about his palms – tapped a subtle and familiar refrain. Sentiments buoyed by his other half – ones that survived the seasons to sculpt forever and for better – felt the same.

“Well?” Laura's lips curled. “What do you think about it?” Thrilling as it was to make once-upon-a-time daydreams of this moment, actually standing in her brother's presence proved to be far more enjoyable. Just like the book, he was an unwritten story that she could not put down. Ducking beneath his elbows, Laura latched onto the knight's torso and pressed her cheek into his vest. His bleeding heat enveloped her slender frame and left behind trails of red dye below her eyes. “You looked cold,” she announced quietly, not waiting for him to ask or answer.

Perplexed by the book, he had missed his sister's sly maneuver and corresponding excuse. The connection was seamless, timeless and boundless. Astonishingly, it was Lukainy's giggle that lassoed Wing's wandering attention and dragged the hero back to earth. Suddenly made aware of Laura's embrace, McCallister jolted, lifted his arms, and glanced into the dilated orbs that followed his every move.

“Leave him be Louise. No grown man wants a little squirt hanging off his chest, especially when his lady is in attendance.” Jack's words hit Wing's spine like an avalanche. The teen bit his tongue and suppressed the shudder that ensnared his nerves. The desire to tell his father off compromised the soldier's already-quivering composure. How could J.P. possibly know what he wanted? “Besides, I'd bet that the others have arrived.”

Laura whined and dug her face into Trigger's fabled hides. “But I haven't even told him about Rad and TK.” She pouted and anchored her nails into the small of Wing's back. “Can't you tell he misses Dai? He needs his blade to protect his princess!”

“There will be time for that later,” Jack replied. “The boys are still being shy anyways. You know that Adrian and I have to convene the members of the R.O.K. and approve any submitted battle strategy.”

“I am standing right here,” Wing interrupted. Pestered by the pair nonchalantly discussing his life, McCallister emphasized the ‘am’. “You could clue us in as to what you’re both talking about.” He lugged his sister over the gravel road and settled at Luka’s side. “In fact, I insist.”

Laura’s ears devoured the invitation. “I told you that we spent a long time apart because Raiga offered special training to the members of my crew!” Her mouth ran a mile a minute while she spewed her tale. “Once Raden and TK get over their natures, I’m sure they will happily introduce themselves. They had better do it soon because both of them were instructed to help you repair Daizer.” She chuckled. “Raiga saw it coming.”

“It’s not all that funny, kiddo,” Wing responded softly before resting his palm atop Laura’s crown. He exhaled and pre-emptively obliterated whatever brooding conclusions she could reach with the comfort of a smile. “I’m glad you’re here, and I can’t wait to revive Dai,” he affirmed before eyeing his father, “but it seems as though I may have other plans.”

“Did you hear that?” J.P. hollered into the shop. “We’ve got shit to do!” The elder knight ignored the particularly flat tone of Wing’s final clause and separated his offspring. “There are quite a few individuals that are excited to see you.” He gave his daughter an informative nod and continued, “Proceed as planned.” With that, Jack marshaled the parade of Cain, Reven and Wing to the keep.

“Not so fast,” Laura whispered upon intercepting the princess. “You can’t follow him just yet.” Intrigued, Luka froze. Of course, the royal felt obligated to accompany her hero, but the precocious youngster’s passion captivated Marrok. “Raiga has a gift for you as well.” From a tattered bag slung over her shoulder, L.L. retrieved a stunning artifact of Armistice. Dangling at the end of a thin chain, a brilliant key diverted the sun’s lingering rays. It was shaped in a manner similar to that of the caduceus, for a pair of golden phoenix wings spiraled about an argent, jewel-encrusted shaft and curved to craft the bow. “He said it would help you deal with Kouenza and that you would recognize its ultimate potential.

“Are you two done being cowards?” Laura abruptly changed the pace of the conversation and called for her two hiding companions. “How are you two going to assess him if you’re too afraid to come out from behind a cart?” She groaned and rolled her oculars before mumbling, “Stupid boys, don’t they sense it? Something amazing is about to happen.”

Father and son ascended one of the castle’s helical stairwells. Having pulled away from Hardin and Marrok, the reunited family members tiptoed about awkward, vacant notes that demanded interaction. “I want to know why,” Wing said as the duo reached the summit. His voice, stifled by the pressure produced in that invisible melody, carried little emotion. “You are going to tell me why I was left behind.”

“We tried,” J.P. answered. With his palms pressed against the cherry gates to the conference room, he paused. “The Cross forbade...”

“Why is that the copout for everything?” The exclamation suspended the clamor that had dribbled through the hardwood. “My life isn’t a conspiracy, and there is no reason for a book to keep me from you. What was The Cross going to do if I came? And if I couldn’t leave, what kept you from staying? Do you have any idea what it was like to grow up alone?”

“I told you! We tried,” Jack retorted. He pounded the carved slabs with clamped fists that transferred shreds of misery. “Two standing orders! Don’t you get it? That’s all Annie and I retained from that moment. We don’t remember where we hid The Cross! We can only speculate as to why it gave those commands. All we have now is hindsight, but that luxury doesn’t exist in the past. We were instructed to leave you with Kit and report to Raiga. We wanted to take you. We even brought you to the city limits and tried to escape destiny, but the town ignited as soon as you crossed the boundary. By staying with Christopher, you saved thousands of souls.”

“Fuck Aurora! I want reasons, preferably logical ones. Do you really expect me to believe a fairy tale that has no merit? Are you seriously trying to tell me that Cartheim burned because of me and not because of the fuckfest going on around it?” The teen pulled at his own locks, scowled, and descended into the depths of a psychotic rant. “Dammit Trigger, I don’t care if he’s your best friend! I need to fucking know!”

“I don’t expect you to forgive us, and I know that we can’t make up for the years that we missed. I’m afraid that there isn’t another story for me to tell. Whether you decide to accept it as truth is a choice only you can make. However, I do believe that The Cross has a plan for you. You became a hero when we left you with Carson, and if you hadn’t have been in Cartheim ten years later, then no one would have been there to save Lukainy. Armistice would not have gained a knight of the common man.”

The deflection was well placed, for Wing’s stoked fire quickly fizzled. *Smartass had to bring Luka into this.* He remained silent long enough for his father to break away from the argument and crack open the doors. Lethargically, the heavy lumber pivoted about squeaking iron hinges. Light burst from the gaping wound and carried the images of paladins and their transformed secondary soul-forges past McCallister’s recoiled irides. Sounds bled from the alder table around which warriors rediscovered their voices, and beasts acknowledged the arrival of an old general.

A jet of burgundy and gray rocketed a scurrying fox into the enclave. “Ishara!” it wailed, having selected the female member of the R.O.K. as its first target. “Has Guin been released yet?” The animal’s pitch was deceptively high, and its vivaciousness did not help Wing make up his mind. Ishara Valentine, on the other hand, appeared to be quite familiar with the enthusiastic pup. Endless midnight threads stretched from the lady’s crown to her lower back, and a no-nonsense expression greeted the fox as a set of dark-skinned digits clutched the creature’s ears.

“Not yet, Dagonet,” Valentine spoke. “You know she’s not a big fan of sunlight. Try to be patient. I’m sure she will play with you later. At the moment though, I’m afraid someone else holds both our curiosities.” The built vixen unleashed her slate annuli and siced McCallister’s frame. To say the least, Wing had never seen anyone quite like her. Tyrian purple hides tightly sheathed the woman’s unique, tanned complexion, and the hormonal vapor of strength that permeated the chamber practically condensed upon the curves of her fashioned brawn.

“Dammit Dag!” Reven called. He, Cain, and the evolved Kex finally reached the top of the staircase. “You didn’t have to go running off like that!” Having eyed his female counterpart, the lieutenant switched gears. “Ishara Valentine,” Marrok cooed with a womanizing tenor. “You’ve grown up to be quite the sex kitten, haven’t you?”

“And you’ve grown up to be a babbling idiot. In case you missed it Reven, I used a statement, not a question.” Dagonet giggled at his master’s plight, hopped off the round

table, and rejoined his rejected companion. “Don’t start looking defeated already! I didn’t even mention that you were still hanging out with the biggest blowhard ever to be inducted into the R.O.K.”

Wing fanged his lower lip and struggled against a budding smile. The voluptuous officer had swept away the pair like discarded playthings, and while the attack on Reven was a tad unnecessary, the dis against Cain did not go unappreciated. The buzzcut behemoth and his pudgy onyx boar slid by the McCallisters and took their positions. Muttering a string of obscenities, Hardin repaid Ishara’s cockiness with a callous stare.

“Are you kids done yet?” Standing opposite from his father was another person that Wing despised. His weathered mien had changed a bit since the last time McCallister saw it, but the same ridiculous regalia graced his presence. Gold laces inscribed the Carson coat of arms onto maroon robes, and a broadsword strapped to the man’s back stayed at the ready. “Petty history can be settled some other time.”

“Ector,” J.P. said after drawing his revolver, “release.” Wing jumped when the shiny weapon morphed on command into a massive Siberian tiger that proudly roared. The furry feline sniffed and affixed his Triggerish orbs upon the startled soldier. He joyously prowled the teen and slowly narrowed the gap until he could plant his hefty paws on McCallister’s shoulders.

Wing gulped and fought to keep on his feet, but the cumbersome soul-forged simply shifted his hind legs and put the boy on his ass. “Jacky!” Ector exclaimed with an unusually thick highland accent. “He’s definitely the one. Laddy’s even got your scent, but it has been mixed with some other flavors.” The tiger dragged his rough tongue over the prey’s cheek while the downed paladin pushed his fingers through the animal’s coat. “I’ll claim him!” the magnum announced triumphantly.

“Ector!” Kit howled as soon as his eyes cleared the last step. It did not take much for the captain to feel his cadet’s swelling anger. “He doesn’t want to be pounced by a giant furball!”

“There’s another smell I recognize!” The cat reared his head and immediately jumped at Christopher. “You can’t get away from me, Kit-laddy! I’m going to pin your arse to the boards and make you squirm like an itty tyke.”

Adrian rubbed the wrinkles above his brow and grumbled. “We have a lot to do, so would you all stop fooling around, shut the doors, and take your damn seats?” Once his conditions were met, the king resumed his duties. “The Second Congress of the Knights of the Royal Order will now commence. Obviously, many who served in the First Congress have passed their titles onto descendants, so we should take a moment for formal introductions. I am King Adrian Carson of Carheim, and during the Great War, I was a general in Trigger’s Brigade.”

“I am Captain Alistair du Lac of Tistal,” the man directly to Adrian’s left proclaimed. His emerald oculars drifted to the eagle perched upon his bicep. “And this is Lancelot the Staff Scythe.” The cavalier was a scruffy blond in his early thirties who wore the traditional blues of a Tistalian soldier. Like Cain, du Lac was a towering human castle who could manipulate adversaries through intimidation, yet Alistair never attempted such a feat. He held firm to an often-abandoned precept that nobles were indebted to the rest of society.

Behind the third chair, a copper-coated lion sat as his master prepared to deliver an opening address. “My name is Michal Broderick, and my partner is Wyvern the Bow.”

The officer's gaze did not diverge from Wing's silhouette. "Today, I am an architect of Raiga's will, and loyally, I wear the colors of Tistal. However, I was once a member of the Hapsburg 7th. In fact, I am the one to blame for your scar."

McCallister stumbled from his corner and peered into the core of this shabby, redheaded hellion. "You aimed to kill Luky! Son of a bitch!" He instinctively moved his hand to where Daizer's hilt would normally rest and growled when he seized only air. "Is this shit a joke to you people? Why is this bastard even here?"

Once rowdy, the caucus hushed in anticipation of Michal's response. The thirty-nine-year-old's tabletop taps stabbed the delegates' ears and shoved Wing towards the brink. He was – for all metaphorical intents and purposes – a rabid wolf in need of a kill. "I will not hide from the terrible things that I did while under that spell, but I can only move forward. I am here because I am not satisfied with using magic as justification. I started by rescuing you from Rachael, and I will finish by saving Armistice from a band of devils."

"Ishara Valentine," the Fourth Seat intruded, "along with Guinevere the Deadsoul." The lieutenant gestured for Wing to return to his post. Even though she sympathized with the boy's zeal, Ishara accepted Broderick's answer and proceeded with the formalities.

"Jack McCallister of Trigger's Brigade," J.P. professed in conjunction with a tip of his cap. "I'm puzzled as to why Annie isn't here to join us, but any acquaintance of my wife will realize that she is the definition of her own nickname. Just like the frost, she comes and goes as she pleases."

After Cain and Reven sped through their introductions, the Eighth Chair coughed and spoke. Possessing a finely chiseled countenance, combed brown tufts and sparkling teal irides, the 5'11" Garland du Lac was arguably the most handsome of the group. The older brother of Alistair had inherited Galahad the Chain Scythe from his extraordinarily lucky father. With the country on the verge of war, du Lac graciously donned the R.O.K. mantle, summoned his versatile raven, and set out for the capital.

Adrian's amber orbs centered upon the well-known visage that hovered behind J.P.'s seat. "Chris, I think it would be best if you update everyone on current affairs before we move into other urgent matters."

"Yes, Father," the younger Carson replied. The burnt orange and brown plates of his Cartheim-issued armor glistened as the prince approached his king. "For those who are unaware, Defy's innocence has been confirmed. Near the end of the Great War, Trigger suspected that an outside influence dictated his brother's actions. However, he died before the investigation was completed, and with the temporary disappearance of flame users, leads evaporated.

"Now, we have multiple witnesses that can attest to the existence of other wielders. One in particular, Conrad Wolfe von Ende der Nacht, reportedly has powers like Defy. This individual has been charged with precipitating the Great War and sabotaging the House of Marrok."

Broderick chimed into the discussion. "That somewhat explains things. When I started with the Hapsburg 7th, we were a paramilitary organization that cooperated with Tistalian forces. Our orders came directly from Defy, but Rachael Wolfe received intelligence from a center headquartered inside Hapsburg itself. After the conflict ended, the ties with Tistal were broken, but we still received covert operation assignments."

Curious, Garland asked, “Where is Defy at this moment? Shouldn’t he be here to answer for all that has happened?”

Christopher swiftly suppressed the noise that wrapped about the round table. “He and Kouenza are on their way back from Mahina. D had a hunch that Conrad was interested in artifacts sealed within the shrine and wanted to test his hypothesis.”

“Is he still a threat to our kingdoms?” Adrian questioned his son. The royal’s icy demeanor disturbed Wing’s nerves and put the cadet back on edge. The bureaucracy of the whole engagement was bothersome, and the interjections from strangers and figurative benchwarmers were irritating at best.

“No, he is not. Wing severed the control link that Conrad had established.” Kit promptly dispatched the notion and advanced to the second point on his agenda. “It is expected that Hapsburg will launch an attack on Carheim or Tistal once warmer weather arrives. Considering the recent tragedies, we were concerned that Ende der Nacht would make a move before winter, but our reconnaissance suggests that Hapsburg has not yet assembled a standing army.

“That being said, we need to take advantage of our resources and make sure that we are ready before the thaw. Shopkeepers have been notified of the situation and are willing to boost production and limit needless expenditure. Harmony has taken the throne and will act as temporary monarch until Princess Lukainy has had sufficient time to settle. The call has been made to all able members of noble houses to report for duty as soon as possible.

“In addition, the students at this school have passed a referendum that will forever alter our society and the scope of the battles to come. As the new headmaster, I approved the unanimous decision to abandon restrictions that deny admittance to commoners. This organization really has no right to reverse the outcome, but Ashton Hunter put it best, ‘In case of complaints, Wing is all the proof you need.’”

Adrian stood, drew Uther the Pendragon, and scrutinized the meter-long secondary blade. “I am an old man,” he said after placing the broadsword on the table and stroking his trimmed beard. “You’ve become wise while serving your country. It is time for you to take your place in the R.O.K.”

Outside the chamber, a congregation of allies gathered to eavesdrop. An impish sibling, two curious boys, an adored princess, and even a nomadic mother attached an ear to the cherry doors while the hopes of hearing the workings the Second Congress intensified.

“Forget it!” Wing shouted. “I’m not taking your spot, and I am not taking Ector.” Once more, the warrior’s rage had emerged to hunt down the elder McCallister, who – after following Adrian’s lead – had moved to abdicate and transfer his assignment. “I already rejected Kouenza, so why the hell would I take your piece? I cannot make it any clearer; Dai is my partner!”

“Because a useless, cracked katana can help you, right?” Cain countered and fueled the volatile Wing. “To even hear you say that you denied ownership of the most legendary weapon in history makes my blood boil. You shouldn’t even be in this room with us, yet you stubbornly and disgracefully deny the honor of assuming your dad’s post.”

“Shut up! Why would I even address a windbag like you? I was speaking to the deadbeat that just showed up and pretended to care. Old man, if you knew anything about me, then you would know that Kit, Dai and Luky are the sole constants in my life. Nothing you or anyone else says will ever change that.”

Luka’s cheeks flushed from Wing’s tirade. His words gnawed at the dirt that had tarnished her soul, but the relief was marred with regret. Wondering how Frost was coping with her son’s statements, Marrok smiled sheepishly at the woman. “Don’t concern yourself with that,” Anne breathed. “Your energy ought to be focused elsewhere. I’m just happy that he has someone to look after him. McCallister men tend to be a bit rash.”

“Enough!” Adrian bellowed. “Wing, you have to think about more than three people. Whether you like it or not, you are the Battle Flame. You’re not responsible for just the princess anymore. Your duties extend to all of Armistice. An R.O.K. position merely represents the tip of the iceberg. Since you are Trigger, you are also the rightful heir to Cartheim’s throne. The kingdom will need that strength if it is to survive through another terrible conflict.”

Sputtering laughs parted Wing’s lips as the knight made his way back to the table. “I’m not fucking Trigger, and I don’t give a flying fuck about your throne,” he quipped and pointed to the emblem that defined his fist. “Maybe, with all of your years, you forgot that I was branded a slave, or perhaps, you chose to neglect the first ten years of my life when compiling your script. Allow me to remind you that I survived thanks to the generosity of your son, not because you or the kingdom gave a rat’s ass.

“It only started to care when this asshole put an arrowhead in my back, and even then, from the stories that I’ve heard, Lukainy and Kit had to do a whole lot of convincing just to keep me alive. And now, you guys walk into the Marrok house and expect me to abandon my soul-forge, take your jobs, and save you from the hell-on-earth to come?”

“What kind of bullshit show is this?” McCallister turned to Jack and glared. “You’re my father, yet even you’re a part of this charade. Do you really want me to inherit Ector and run off to become exactly what I despise? You can’t just appear out of thin air and expect to control my life. It doesn’t belong to you.

“I don’t give a damn about your ranks, riches or titles. Your traditions and expectations can suck my fucking nuts because the only things I have gotten from anyone in this room are excuses or insults. If you really want me as an ally, then reverse course and start acting like friends.

“Until then, I’ll spell it out for each and every one of you. I never took an oath to a kingdom. I never took an oath to the people. I took an oath to one, and she is the only one that means anything. There is no way that I will accept any task that pulls me away from her after she lost her family. My actions can never again bring tears to her face. However, I will bring Conrad the Spineless Fuck to justice, and if that mission necessitates that I place an inkling of trust in this council, then I will.

“Regardless, Lukainy will always come first.” Her entire body tingled from the message supplied by his fervent verses. In a single blow, he had defied a king and the noblest natives of Armistice. He had abandoned the wealth of Cartheim just to keep her sorrows at bay, and that devotion delivered all of the medicine required. She bolted down the staircase as conviction annexed every vein, bone and fiber. If he was going to crush Conrad, then she would be at his side.

I'm going to fuck him hard, she thought. I'll shower him with the most brutal appreciation imaginable until the world knows just how helpless I really am. Luky slammed the soles of her shoes into the stone floor and picked up her pace as she sought out the one girl who could actually fabricate her fanciful reverie. And if Kouenza still doesn't think that I am worthy, then he is just going to have to train me until I am the master he desires.

Upstairs, Raden reached a decision based upon Wing's testimony. The black-haired boy did not predict that McCallister would fulfill his hero-adventurer criteria, but the paladin met every mark. He already lived Winchester's dream, placed his companions' wishes above his own wants, and possessed the guts to combat whoever challenged his creed. Braving the shocked members of the Second Congress, Rad threw open the gates and revealed himself to the keeper of the Battle Flame. "I've heard enough," he proclaimed while motioning to the cadet. "You're definitely suitable. Let's go repair that soul-forge of yours."