

Poison Study Guide

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Plot Summary

"Poison" is the name of a sixteen year old girl living in a small village in the Black Marshes. When her baby sister Azalea is stolen by phaeries, she goes out into the world to look for her. Helped by a wraith-catcher called Bram, she finds the passing-place to the Realm of Phaerie. She faces the terrifying Bone Witch and helps a girl called Peppercorn escape from the house. All three, guided by Peppercorn's phaerie cat, venture into the Realm of Phaerie. They are sent to steal the Lady of Spiders' knife in return for Azalea, but the Phaerie Lord goes back on his word when they return. They escape to the Hierophant's Realm, where Poison learns that they are all fictional characters in a story written by the Hierophant. When the Hierophant is murdered, Poison uncovers the Phaerie Lord's plan to gain the power of the Hierophant. Poison foils this plan, and is chosen as the new Hierophant herself. She resolves to create a hero to liberate the Realm of Men from the phaeries.

When Poison's sister Azalea is stolen by phaeries on Soulswatch Eve, and a changeling left in her place, Poison decides she will go to the Phaerie Realm to get Azalea back. An old man called Fleet gives her advice, money, and supplies. Poison hitches a lift out of the swamps with a wraith-catcher called Bram.

Bram takes Poison to Shieldtown. Here he helps her to locate a man called Lamprey, who makes her gamble her life on a riddle. She answers correctly and he tells her that there is a passing-place to the Realm of Phaerie in the Bone Witch's house.

Bram takes Poison to the Bone Witch's house. She explores, but the night comes quicker than expected and the Bone Witch emerges. Poison is forced to run from her, and follows a strange cat up some stairs to a girl called Peppercorn's room. Peppercorn has lived here as long as she can remember, looking after the house in exchange for not being eaten. She helps Poison to hide, but when the Bone Witch has gone back downstairs she tells Poison that she cannot stay here. Poison goes to the cellar to hide, but the Bone Witch finds her and puts her in a cage in the kitchen.

To Poison's surprise, Bram appears and releases her from the cage. He says that the cat came out of the house to fetch him. Poison comes up with a plan, and with Bram's help they tip the witch's ingredients into the cauldron, then pull out some of the poisoned bones from the mixture. The Bone Witch's dogs eat these and die. They then skin the dogs and fool the Bone Witch into following them. She topples over the balcony, falls into her own cauldron, and dies.

Poison, Bram, Peppercorn and the cat, Andersen, leave the house into the Realm of Phaerie. They make it to the Phaerie Lord's palace, but Lord Aelthar will only let Azalea go if Poison steals a dagger for him from the Lady of Spiders. They all travel to the Realm of Spiders, where Poison manages to outsmart a giant spider and climbs into the palace. She steals the dagger and leaves.



Back in the Phaerie Lord's palace, Aelthar's secretary, Scriddle, takes the dagger and locks them in a room. With Andersen's help they escape, and then sneak to Aelthar's rooms. Aelthar is angry about something the Hierophant is doing, and is planning to visit him. Poison decides that if this Hierophant is Aelthar's enemy, then perhaps he will help them. They follow Aelthar into the Hierophant's realm.

Here they see Fleet, who explains that he is an Antiquarian, one of the Hierophant's workers who record stories. He shows Poison the Great Library where all the stories are kept. He then takes her to see the Hierophant, who tells her that she is just a fictional character in the story he is writing. At first Poison cannot cope with this, but Bram persuades her not to give up.

She goes to see the Hierophant again but he has been murdered, stabbed with the Lady of Spiders' dagger. Poison accuses Aelthar, and Aelthar is then murdered by the Lady of Spiders. Poison finds out that it was actually Scriddle who planned the murder. Scriddle almost kills her, but his accomplice Lady Pariasa stops him and heals Poison with her magic. This is because Poison has already been chosen as the new Hierophant, meaning that the world will dissolve if she dies.

Poison takes the position of Hierophant. She finds out that her sister Azalea was returned to the human realm long ago, as time passes differently in the Realm of Phaerie. Azalea lived happily with her father and stepmother until she turned twenty, then she set off into the world to look for Poison. Poison is sad about this but has found a substitute sister in Peppercorn. Poison decides to create a hero to liberate the Realm of Men from the phaeries.



'Soulswatch Eve' and 'The Scarecrow and the Changeling'

'Soulswatch Eve' and 'The Scarecrow and the Changeling' Summary

Poison, a girl from a tiny village in a marsh, ventures into the world to search for her baby sister Azalea, who has been stolen by the Phaeries. Poison hitches a ride with Bram, a wraithcatcher travelling through the marshes. Poison is nearly killed by the Bone Witch when trying to enter the Realm of Phaeries, but Bram saves her. Bram, a girl called Peppercorn, and an intelligent cat called Andersen accompany Poison into the Realm of Phaeries. They are given a task to steal a dagger from the Queen of Spiders. They accomplish this, but the Phaerie Lord Aelthar breaks his word and means to have them killed. They escape to the Hierophant's Realm, where Poison learns shocking truths about the reality of her world. She solves the mystery of the Hierophant's murder, finds out what became of her sister, and then becomes the new Hierophant.

Poison is a teenage girl living in a village called Gull, in the middle of the Black Marshes. Her mother died of swamp lung just after giving birth to Poison's younger sister Azalea. Now her father, Hew, has married a woman called Snapdragon from a nearby village. Poison does not get on with her stepmother, who remarks that she is like 'poison' to family's happiness. In defiance, Poison chooses this as her official name at her coming of age ceremony.

Two years pass and Poison is sixteen. On Soulswatch Eve, the villagers hang traps to lure marshwraiths, which are moving balls of ethereal light that emerge on this night every year. The villagers sell the trapped marshwraiths to the visiting wraith-catcher, who then sells them on for a much higher profit in the cities. Poison stays inside while the rest of the villagers celebrate, as she is feeling too depressed to join in. As she is lying in bed she hears an odd chiming sound, like a small bell, but is asleep before she can think about it.

She is woken by Snapdragon's screams, but finds herself falling asleep again straight away. She is covered in shimmering dust, and starts to shake it off. As she does, her head becomes clearer and she is no longer tired. She goes to the crib, where something that is not Azalea is sleeping. She rushes to her bookcase and opens it at a page with a scarecrow on it, a Phaerie creature that uses shimmering dust to make people sleep and then steals babies. As she stares at the page, the picture turns to look at her, and then the scarecrow walks towards the open page. It puts its hand on the book, like a window pane, and Poison feels its fingers brush her hand as they come out of the book.



The sound of the door slamming snaps her out of her trance and she hurls the book aside. It lands shut. Poison then realizes that Snapdragon has left with the baby creature. She runs after her into the marsh. Snapdragon wants to throw the thing into the well, but Poison warns her that if they want any chance of getting Azalea back they will have to keep this thing alive. Poison thinks that it is a changeling.

Poison takes the changeling to see Fleet, an old man who travels a lot and has told Poison many stories about the outside world and the phaeries. Fleet tells her that they will just have to wait, as sometimes phaeries send back the children they steal. Sometimes, however, they do not. This is just part of life. Poison is angry about this, saying that it is not just part of life and that she will go get her sister back. Fleet agrees to help her.

'Soulswatch Eve' and 'The Scarecrow and the Changeling' Analysis

The book begins with the words "once upon a time," instantly establishing a fairytale feel. This beginning line is very traditional for a fairytale, but other elements of this story are not. The main protagonist is a girl called Poison, an unusual name with negative associations. She has violet eyes, another unusual feature that is not typical of fairytales (whose female characters tend to have blue or green eyes). Poison does not have a warm, innocent or optimistic disposition as other fairytale heroines often do. She is often depressed, restless and bored, and dissatisfied with a quiet family life. In fairy stories, the main character usually longs for such a life but has to earn it through adventure, or finds her idyllic life shattered by an evil relative. Poison does have a stepmother who she does not get along with, but Snapdragon is hardly the vain, sadistic stepmother of other fairy stories. Snapdragon seems to actually want a good relationship with Poison, but Poison finds it impossible to accept a new mother figure. Poison even recognizes that she is being stubborn, and that it is she who has the problem. She sees that she is standing in the way of happy family life, and that both Snapdragon and her father would probably be happier without her around. This takes a typical fairytale trope, the wicked stepmother, and turns it on its head. The stepmother is responsible for making Poison unhappy, but she is not evil, and in fact it is Poison herself who is making the situation uncomfortable. This sets the tone for the book. The story will deal with typical fairytale ideas but will not necessarily come at them from the usual angle. It may be more realistic in its portrayal of people and their motivations, and it may twist common fairytale tropes. This will be a fairy story with a difference.

Just as the book may twist fairytale expectations, it will also explore the darker side of fairy stories. Fairytales have always had a dark side, some more so than others, but since the Victorian period they have been sanitized to make them 'more appropriate' for children. This book will re-examine the darkness of fairy stories, focusing on some of the more horrific and nastier elements of them. Poison is not a sweet girl; she is prickly and determined, and has a hard streak running through her. She lives in a marsh where life is brutal and difficult, rather than in a fairytale forest or castle. In her world animals are dangerous or deadly, not friendly. Phaeries are not benevolent, happy creatures, but



are malicious and spiteful beings who hate humans. They think nothing of stealing away babies and replacing them with changelings. This is actually more true to the older stories of fairies, in which they are frightening and unpredictable, and sometimes even vicious. In the old stories, faeries represented the wild, irrational side of nature. People believed in magic and devilry, and they believed that there were sinister, malevolent forces more powerful than them. Fairy stories were also a way of conveying to children certain lessons about life, and so it was necessary to show that the world can often be cruel and unfair. This dark, creepier side of fairytales is emphasized again by the terrifying scarecrow, and by the sinister changeling, which is referred to as a 'thing' rather than a baby, and which has inhuman eyes. In these first two chapters the author makes it clear that he is relating a fairy story in the style of a dark fantasy or horror. This will be scary and it will not sanitize anything.

The first two chapters also give the reader their first impression of the main character, Poison. She is restless and often depressed. She hates life in the marsh, and wishes that she could have adventures and see the world. She is unhappy with her family life, not because anyone is cruel to her, but simply because she cannot accept her stepmother as a new mother figure and so rebels against this. The one bright spot in her life is her sister Azalea, who she hopes will grow into a friend and confidante. Poison feels that no-one else in the village understands her. They are all content with a quiet life, and they never try to change anything for the better. This level of inactivity drives Poison mad. She is a very proactive person. When her sister is taken, she is more angry than upset. She cannot stand the idea of sitting around and waiting to see if the pheries return Azalea to them. Instead, she wants to search for Azalea herself. When Fleet tells her that this is just the way of life, Poison refuses to accept this. She does not believe in being this passive. She is brave and determined, and she will not be content until she feels that she is actually at least trying to do something. She is searching for something more from life, and her sister's kidnapping, though horrible, is the push she needs to get her to leave.



'The Wraith-Catcher' and 'Shieldtown'

'The Wraith-Catcher' and 'Shieldtown' Summary

Poison pays the wraith-catcher, a man called Bram who was collecting marshwraiths on Soulswatch Eve, to take her to Shieldtown, a city outside the Black Marshes. Fleet has given her money, food, a map, a knife and other essentials, and has also promised to break the news of her departure to her father.

Poison and Bram travel all day through the marshes. At first Poison is scared and a little sad, but then she begins to grow excited. They camp on a rocky outcrop above the marsh, and Bram tells her about the outside world. He explains that Phaeries are the worst creatures, which lurk in the old cities. There are trolls and dwarf in the deep places, and goblins in the mountains. Humans have been forced to hide away in the marshes and the forests. Once they ruled this realm, out in the open and on the plains, but now other creatures have come out of their own realms and taken over this one.

They travel through the marshes for about a week, then reach Shieldtown, a city located at the top of a cliff high above the marshes. They take a lift to the top of the cliff, and Poison realizes that Shieldtown is actually at normal height; it is the marshes that are sunken into a giant bowl. Poison is amazed by the crowds and colors of the city. Bram asks her what she will do now and she says that Fleet told her to find a man called Lamprey. Bram offers to help her for two sovereigns. She thinks he is swindling her, but she knows she needs his help, so she agrees.

They travel around the city selling the marshwraith lanterns while Bram asks for information. They meet a girl about Poison's age who is traveling to Gull. She looks lost and haunted. Poison asks her to tell Hew and Snapdragon that she is sorry. The girl agrees, and leaves. Bram tells Poison that he can take her to see Lamprey after dark.

'The Wraith-Catcher' and 'Shieldtown' Analysis

Poison is finally out of the marshes and seeing the world. This has happened under sad circumstances but it is actually what she has always wanted. As she leaves, she feels sad and intimidated at first, but then she begins to grow excited. She feels freer than ever before. It seems like Fleet may have been correct; Poison is not like the other villagers and was born for adventure. She is amazed by the world around her, by the size and colors and different people. She is thrilled by each new experience. When she goes up the lift to Shieldtown, rather than being daunted by the sight of the marshes spread out before her she is filled with wonder and excitement. She is very brave, determined and adventurous. These are typical traits of heroes in fairy tales. This is what sets Poison apart from other people. Fleet explained that real life is like a story, and that there are supporting characters as well as main characters. Poison is proving why she is the main character of this particular story. There is strong foreshadowing



here, as Poison will later learn that her whole life is indeed a story, and that stories hold a lot more significance than she had ever imagined.

Poison cannot help but feel sorry for the marshwraith lamps. This is perhaps because she sees a little of herself in them. They are trapped, their light and colors dimmed inside the lamps. Until recently Poison also felt trapped. She was stuck in life in the tiny village of Gull, not daring to leave and not wanting to upset her father or abandon her sister, but also not wanting to stay in this mundane place. She felt forced into a certain way of life by the expectations of the other villagers. She rebelled in little ways, such as choosing the name Poison. Now she has experienced what it is like to be truly free, to rely entirely on herself and to explore, and she realizes how wonderful and liberating it is. This is why she suddenly feels sorry for the imprisoned wraiths.

Poison has a strange encounter in Shieldtown. She meets an odd girl with a haunted look who wants to go to Gull. This is unusual in itself, as Gull is such an isolated and quiet place. Almost no-one ever leaves, and certainly very few people want to go there. Now two strange girls are defying these odds. Poison has left on an adventure, and this stranger is traveling to Gull, almost as though the world is providing a replacement for Poison, and so balancing out the disruption she has caused by stepping out of her role. Again, this is strong foreshadowing for later events. Poison will repeatedly show her determination to step out of the role that life seems to have set for her. She refuses to be controlled by fate or to give in and accept things. She changes so many things and so many lives around her with this behavior. This very small encounter will also become much more significant at the end of the book, when Poison discovers who the girl really is. This is the moment where Poison's quest becomes about her own growth and lessons, and less about the rescue of her sister, though Poison does not yet know this.



'Lamprey' and 'The House of the Bone Witch'

'Lamprey' and 'The House of the Bone Witch' Summary

Poison and Bram take the cart through the slums of Shieldtown to Lamprey's house. Bram tells Poison that one silver sovereign is what he earns in a year, so with two he could settle down somewhere and buy a farm. This is why he demanded two sovereigns for helping Poison. Poison now wonders where Fleet managed to get hold of such a fortune, as he gave her a whole bag of sovereigns.

As they go through the slums they are attacked by two thieves who hold a knife to Poison's throat. Bram tells them to take the cart but they want more. Poison realizes that they will kill them anyway, so she pretends that she is Lamprey's niece and that the marshwraith lamps in the back of the cart are for Lamprey. The men are not sure whether to believe this or not, but they are afraid of Lamprey so they let Poison and Bram go.

They arrive at Lamprey's and Poison goes inside alone. Lamprey is terrifying, a living corpse kept alive with phaerie magic. He tells her that he was drowned by a kelpie, a kind of phaerie. He asks her a riddle, telling her that if she answers wrongly she will be hung on his walls with the other living-dead sea creatures he has put there. Thankfully, Poison easily solves the riddle and Lamprey tells her how to get to the Realm of Phaerie.

He tells her to go to the House of the Bone Witch, which is a passing-place into the Realm of Phaerie. She will have to enter on a full moon, then stay a whole day and leave the following night before midnight. Meanwhile, Maeb the Bone Witch and her dogs will kill her if they find her. Maeb is deaf and blind, and she sleeps during the day, but her dogs are not and they will be able to find her during the day too. If Poison leaves before midnight the following night, she will find herself between realms, where horrible creatures dwell.

Outside, she gives Bram another sovereign to take her to the passing-place that Lamprey mentioned, a creepy house that is twice the size of a normal house. She says goodbye to Bram and promises to find him when she returns. She enters the house through the coal chute and lands in a cellar. There are no places to hide down here, so she explores the first floor of the house. She walks along a corridor and sees a large room with a boiling cauldron. On the balcony above, there is a normal-sized cat scratching at the door leading into the second story of the house.

Poison suddenly realizes that it is night already and that time is passing more quickly than normal. It is too late, however, as Maeb, the Bone Witch, is already awake and



calls out that she can smell Poison. She hears Maeb moving down the stairs somewhere behind her in the house. She is not sure she has time to make it back to the cellar, so she runs up the steps onto the balcony and opens the door that the cat is scratching at. The cat bolts through and Poison runs after it.

'Lamprey' and 'The House of the Bone Witch' Analysis

In these chapters Poison begins to show what kind of heroine she is. She has always been brave and determined, but this is the first time she has actually been tested with real danger. She does not crumble in the face of it, or give up and go home, but faces it bravely and stoically. She knows that if she is going to rescue her sister, she is going to have to face things like this, and more. This is different from the dangers of living in her village. In her village people tried to avoid poisonous creatures and diseases, but they also accepted these things as part of life without trying to do anything about them. Poison hated this attitude. Now she is putting herself in even worse danger, but at least she is doing it on her own terms and is choosing to do so. She is in control. She proves that she is very capable in these kinds of situations. In Lamprey's house and in the Bone Witch's house she is very scared, but she keeps a level head and approaches the situation in the most sensible way she can think of. She answers Lamprey's riddle correctly, showing that she is clever and can think laterally, and she manages to bluff her way out of danger in the slums, showing that she is quick thinking and perceptive. She is already displaying a lot of the traits associated with fairytale heroes.

Poison's personality and perceptiveness go beyond the normal hero, however. She begins to see that things are happening to her as they would in the stories that Fleet told her. In the pherie stories, heroes will have to answer riddles before obtaining information and being allowed to proceed. The same thing happens to Poison at Lamprey's house, but Poison is not willing to just accept this. She questions why the riddle is necessary, as Lamprey could either just kill her or tell her the information. There is no reason for a riddle, as all the power is with Lamprey. Lamprey does not like being questioned in this way and skirts around the question. It seems that Lamprey, like the people in Poison's village, believes that this is simply how life is and how things work. He is supposed to ask the hero a riddle, and so he does so without thinking about why. This makes him seem like a mindless character in a story, who only exists to provide a challenge for the hero. This is an important bit of foreshadowing, as Poison will learn that this is indeed the case, and that in fact everyone in the world is simply playing a part in her story. This is one of many examples in this book of questioning, commenting on, and subverting the clichés of fairytales.

This also emphasizes Poison's most important character trait. She will not sit back and allow things to happen to her. She is extremely pro-active, displaying none of the passive attitude of her people. She is also not willing to accept that things are just the way they are without questioning why this is the case. She refuses to simply accept that Lamprey must ask her a riddle, just as she refuses to accept that pheries steal babies and that this is just how things are. Later, she will question other things about her world and about what happens to her. She does not like to be pushed around by the whims of



fate, preferring to think of herself as her own person, independent, who can guide and control her own destiny with her choices. This is important as it helps to explain why Poison reacts so badly to the Hierophant's revelations later in the story.



'Peppercorn and the Cat' and 'Skin and Bones'

'Peppercorn and the Cat' and 'Skin and Bones' Summary

Poison follows the cat to another door, and then up some stairs. At the top, there is a girl her age and normal size, holding a candle and beckoning her in. Inside there is a room with normal sized furniture. The girl tells Poison that she is called Peppercorn. She sprays Poison with foul smelling perfume, and then tells her to hide under the bed with the cat.

The Bone Witch comes in, sniffs, and tells Peppercorn off for using the nasty smelling perfume again. She says that she knows Peppercorn is hiding a girl here because she could smell her all the way up the stairs. She feels around the room and then starts groping under the bed. The cat darts out, scratches her nose, and then runs away down the stairs. The Witch shrieks and leaves the room.

Peppercorn tells Poison that she has lived here as long as she can remember. She takes care of the house for the witch and in return the witch does not eat her. She would like to leave but is too scared of what she will do outside and how she will cope. Poison tries to encourage her.

Peppercorn says Poison cannot stay in this room as Maeb will come back with the dogs, which will be able to see and hear Poison. Now that Maeb knows Poison is in the house, she will not stop looking for her. Poison creeps back downstairs towards the cellar. She hears a dog coming, so she slips inside the cellar and closes the door. She creeps down the steps in the pitch black and tries to find the coal chute, but then hears breathing behind her. The witch says that she can smell Poison, puts a sack over her head, bundles her up and carries her off.

Maeb puts Poison in a cage hanging over the cauldron, saying that she will eat her the following night. At dawn Maeb goes to bed, and one dog stays to keep watch. In the morning Peppercorn comes downstairs to tend the fire. She is looking for the cat, which she calls Andersen, but she cannot find him. Poison begs her to let her down from the cage, but then the cat appears and meows. The dog chases after the cat and Peppercorn quickly follows them.

Poison is about to despair when she hears Bram's voice. He has come into the house to save her. He says he was alerted by the cat, which came outside to fetch him. He knew Poison was in some kind of danger and could not bear to leave her. He lets her out of the cage and Poison has an idea. Together they manage to get down some of the kitchen jars and roll them up the stairs. On the balcony they tip the contents out into the



cauldron below. This creates a foul smelling mixture. They then drag some of the bones out of the cauldron and lay them on the floor.

Poison asks the cat, Andersen, if he can lure the dogs to the bones. Andersen does so, then manages to get away without the dogs seeing him. The dogs focus on the bones instead, begin gnawing on them, and are killed by the poison coating the bones. Poison and Bram cut the skins off the dogs and wrap them around their shoulders. When night comes they bang against the door to the second floor to get Maeb's attention, and then run away towards the balcony over the kitchen. Maeb smells the dog blood and thinks her pets are hurt, and comes running after them. Maeb feels that the vibrations are coming from two legs rather than four, and becomes angry, knowing that they have harmed her dogs. She races after them, crashes into the balcony rail and falls into the cauldron below. She dies.

Peppercorn, who had fainted when she saw them skinning the dogs, is still out cold. Poison considers leaving her, but Bram insists that they bring her along. They leave the house, and step outside into the Realm of Phaerie.

'Peppercorn and the Cat' and 'Skin and Bones' Analysis

Poison is forced to look at herself more closely in these chapters. She meets Peppercorn, a nervous girl her own age who stays in a horrible situation because she is too scared to leave. Poison tries to encourage her, and in doing so realizes that she was once just like her. She lived in Gull and scorned everyone who was happy to stay there, but she went along with this life she hated. She might never have left it were not for Azalea being stolen. She was all talk; she was unhappy but too scared to leave. Azalea's disappearance was the push she needed to get out, and now that she realizes how free she can be outside, she does not regret leaving. She now sees that when she is in a situation she does not like, she needs to at least try to do something about it rather than letting fear or uncertainty stop her. It was when she decided to take her life into her own hands and not simply accept the things that happen to her, that she finally became happy. She tries to explain this to Peppercorn on two occasions, but Peppercorn is clearly terrified. She is not as strong or confident as Poison.

Just when Poison is about to despair, Bram comes into the house to rescue her. He explains that the cat came out to fetch him, and that from this he knew that something was wrong. Bram could have simply taken his money, enough to start the dream life he wants, and left Poison to fend for herself. Instead, he feels a connection with her and a responsibility for her. He likes her, and will not let a friend down. Poison is surprised and moved by this. She has never had a friend before, so this demonstration of affection and self-sacrifice really touches her. Bram proves that he is brave and loyal, and a good person. He becoming a father figure for Poison now. She trusts him and feels safer when he is around, and he admires her and wants to protect her.



When Bram arrives, Poison instantly regains her old spark and determination. She comes up with a plan to kill the dogs and the Bone Witch. She makes the decision to take the fight to them rather than to run and hide. She is sick of hiding and letting things happen to her, as she explained to Peppercorn earlier. With the added confidence of having Bram by her side, Poison's pro-active nature comes to the fore again. She is now determined not to be the victim. She will face the Bone Witch on her own terms, and will ensure that the witch and her dogs can never be a danger to anyone again.

There is a theme relating to escape and home running through this book. Poison never felt at home in her old home, and longed to get away to explore the world. Bram, conversely, has had enough of exploring and adventure. He wants to settle down somewhere with a farm that he can turn into a comfortable home and not have to worry about venturing into the swamps again. In Shieldtown they encountered a girl who was traveling to the Black Marshes. She had a haunted look, so perhaps, like Bram, she had already had enough of adventure and now just wants a home. Later, this will prove to be the case; the girl was indeed looking for the lost home that she never had. Fleet's own adventuring and stories of the world is what sparked Poison's desire to get away. Like Poison, Fleet is not a character who is at home in the swamps. In the Bone Witch's house Peppercorn has a kind of home, but it is not comforting or homey, and she is not happy. She wants to leave, but she is too afraid. Poison tries to persuade her that this is not a good place to stay, and that she will be happier if she leaves. Poison herself is trying to escape the house. With its over-sized furniture, cauldron full of bones in the kitchen, giant dogs and monstrous witch, the house is like a mockery of everything a good home should be. Poison is determined to destroy the Bone Witch so that her house cannot trap anyone else again. This theme of good homes, bad homes and dream homes runs throughout the book. Poison and the other characters are trying to find and fight for the kind of life they want, and the kind of home they want, rather than just accepting things as they are.

The adventures in the Bone Witch's lair continue the fairytale theme by reflecting events from the fairy story of Hansel and Gretel. In Hansel and Gretel, the two children find a witch's house in the forest. The witch captures them and feeds up the boy, making him fat so that she can eat him. She makes Gretel serve her and look after the house. The children eventually escape by pushing the witch into her own oven. In this book, Peppercorn goes into the house of a witch, and like Hansel she is captured and trapped in a cage hung up in the kitchen. Here, Peppercorn takes on a similar role to Gretel. She is the witch's servant, and must look after the house or be killed. Like the witch in the fairy story, the Bone Witch likes to eat people. She has a similar end to the witch in the fairytale, as she falls into her own cauldron. This is another incident in which Poison's adventure seem suspiciously similar to a fairytale. As Poison encounters more and more things that Fleet has told her about in stories, she begins to wonder what is going on. Why is her life like a fairy story, even when this does not seem to make sense? Is Poison living in a story? Is someone toying with her? This foreshadows the revelations that will come in later chapters.



'The Fisher Sage' and 'Deal and Destinations'

'The Fisher Sage' and 'Deal and Destinations' Summary

The Realm of Phaerie is beautiful and peaceful. They wander for a bit and then wake up Peppercorn. Peppercorn believes Andersen is a Phaerie cat, so they ask him if he knows the way. He leads them to a pier where a strange frog-like creature is fishing. The creature, called Myrrk, tells them that he hasn't caught a fish in a hundred years but that he doesn't die of hunger. He seems to blame this on the oversight of a 'Hierophant.' They share food with him and ask him for information, but he refuses to answer any questions directly, telling Poison she must ask the Hierophant instead. He then summons a coach to take them to the Phaerie Lord.

The coach flies through the air to the palace. It is already daytime again, but they feel rested as though they have slept. Bram thinks this is a sign that time passes differently here. When they arrive at the palace a secretary called Scriddle meets them. He tells them that under Amrae's Law they have the right to a safe audience with the Lord, but after that all bets are off and the Lord can do what he likes with them.

They are taken before Aelthar, the Phaerie Lord. Poison tells him that she wants her sister back. He is impressed with her spirit so he transports them both to the top of a tower to make a private deal. He wants a magic dagger that belongs to the Lady of Spiders, who lives in the Realm of Spiders. If Poison can retrieve it, he will give Azalea back. He gives Poison a magic orb and tells her to break it when she has the dagger. Poison agrees.

The coachman takes them to the passing-place into the Realm of Spiders. Poison tells the others that they do not have to come, but they all want to help. They step inside the cobwebby cave.

'The Fisher Sage' and 'Deal and Destinations' Analysis

Poison, Bram and Peppercorn have made it to the Realm of Phaerie, which is a beautiful, peaceful place. Poison understands why the phaeries might not like humans wandering in here, but she reflects that it is their fault for stealing Azalea in the first place. She manages to maintain her anger and her determination in the face of the Phaerie Realm's superior beauty and elegance, and in the face of the intimidating phaerie folk. When they meet the fisher sage Poison remains completely focused on her task, insisting that they need to go to the Phaerie Lord's palace. At the palace, Poison holds her own against Aelthar, retaliating to his argument with ones of her own. He claims to admire her spirit, and so makes a deal with her. Phaeries are known for lies



and trickery, and Poison knows she cannot trust him, but this is her only chance to get Azalea back and so she has to take it. Poison never questions her quest or her duty. She is loyal to her sister, but she is also determined to succeed for herself, to prove that she cannot be pushed around by anyone.

Things begin to get even stranger in these chapters. They meet a frog-like creature called Myrrk, who is fishing on a pier next to a small house. Myrrk says that he has been fishing for a hundred years without catching a fish. He seems to blame this on a mysterious figure called the Hierophant, and he insinuates that his inability to catch fish is part of his character, making him more pathetic and ridiculous, and adding to his gloomy disposition. When the others ask him how he is still alive he says that it must be an oversight of the Hierophant. He refuses to explain any of this, simply telling Poison that she will have to put her questions to the Hierophant. She is frustrated with him, as she wants answers and he is being unhelpful. She questions why he puts up with this life when he is so clearly unhappy. He sits by this lake all day every day, waiting for people like them to come along so that he can give them information and guide them to the palace. He seems, like so many other people Poison has met, to just accept that this is his role and this is the way his life must be.

However, Myrrk warns Poison that he once had an attitude like hers. He asked too many questions and he tried to defy his role in life. He soon found that life became difficult and that his world unraveled, and he was forced back to his old position. He resents this, but there is nothing he can do about it. Is this Hierophant a master of fate, who insists that things go as he intends them? Myrrk warns Poison against too much arrogance, but Poison is not the kind of person who simply goes along with things. She has questioned everything she has been told or expected to do, refusing to ever just accept that 'this is how things are.' It seems unlikely that she will accept Myrrk's advice, which means sooner or later she will probably be coming up against this Hierophant figure.

Myrrk also mentions common fairytale tropes and clichés, such as the muscly warrior, beautiful sorceress and funny trickster. He asks Poison if she is a princess and seems pleased when she expresses distaste for this idea. He talks as if he has seen many adventurers like them before, and that it is getting boring because there is never anything original. He appears to be talking about actual stories coming to life. He seems to know that he is a character in a story, and he is criticizing poor storytelling within his own tale. His inability to catch fish is a plot hole, an oversight because there is no explanation for how he survives. This is weak writing, and Myrrk, as the character who has been written so thinly, resents this.

This is very bizarre. Does Myrrk know that he is in the story we are reading? Is this Hierophant actually the author, Chris Wooding? Or is Myrrk inside another story, one that Poison is also in, which exists inside the story we are reading? In other words, is the Hierophant a storyteller who is writing the lives of Myrrk and Poison, but does not know that he is also being written by Chris Wooding? This would create the feeling of a double layer of stories, confusing the reader as to what, if anything, is meant to be reality. If Poison is somehow inside a phairie story, like the ones Fleet used to tell her



about, then this would explain why everything she has encountered so far has seemed like a story. It would also explain why Myrrk, Lamprey, and various other people along the way have been so adamant that this is the way things are meant to happen, and why they feel that they cannot step outside their pre-set roles. Poison can become an adventurer and challenge others' beliefs because she is the hero of the tale, but perhaps she is not actually as free as she thinks she is. She thinks of herself as more pro-active than people like Myrrk, and she refuses to simply accept her circumstances without trying to change them, but perhaps this is just because her character was written this way.

This is the main clue and the main foreshadowing for what Poison finds out when she eventually speaks to the Hierophant. There have been hints in previous chapters; even before this Poison has begun to be suspicious of how similar to a story her adventure is turning out to be, but she has forged ahead anyway. Here, she is given another clue as to why other people seem not to want to challenge their set roles, but she is still critical of this and still believes that this fatalism does not apply to her. She will learn that even she is caught up in it. This is also where the reader begins to see that Poison's life is not only like a story, or a clever comment on fairytales; it actually is a fairytale. She is in a story, and not just the one that we are reading. More than this, there are characters who know that they are in a story, and they cannot do anything about it.

This allows the writer to comment on fairy stories and their characters, clichés and devices more directly and in relation to his own creation. This is called metafiction, when a work of fiction comments on its own construction, exposing the fact that it is illusion and sometimes deliberately blurring the line between reality and fiction. This book will go even further, blurring the line between the readers themselves and the fictional characters they are reading about. This chapter is the first stage of this process, in which the author begins to prove that none of what is happening to Poison is real. In the next stage he will question whether our own world and our own understanding of reality is any more real, forcing the reader to feel what Poison has felt. 'The Fisher Sage' is therefore a very important chapter and a significant turning point in the atmosphere and messages of the book.



'Spiders' and 'The Lady of Cobwebs'

'Spiders' and 'The Lady of Cobwebs' Summary

They arrive on a ledge on top of a cliff, in the Realm of Spiders. They are looking out over a forest at a palace in the middle of a mountain bowl ahead. A giant spiderweb is stretched over the chasm, with the palace in the middle and strands of the web going out to the cliffs all around. The forest below is also hung with cobwebs and Poison thinks it would be a bad idea to go through it. They would not be able to see what was coming, and if the spiders are as big as the cobwebs then they will easily kill Poison and her friends. They decide to sit and eat while they think of a plan.

While they watch, a moth flies down and is caught in the web. A giant spider runs out of a cave in the opposite cliff wall and cocoons the moth. It takes it back to its cave to eat. They are horrified by its speed, but it gives Poison an idea.

Together they grab one of the strands of the web and tug on it hard. The spider comes running, but they dash quickly back into the passing-place in the cliff. The spider is confused. It looks around, but goes back to its cave when it cannot find any prey. Poison and her friends come out of the passing-place and tug on the strand again, running back into the passing-place when the spider comes out. They repeat this many times, until the spider decides that whatever is moving the web is not prey, and no longer bothers to emerge when the strand is pulled. Poison then climbs out along the web towards the palace.

All is going well until one of the large moths sees her and comes to investigate. Poison knows it will give her away, so she grabs an apple and throws it at the moth. It goes through the moth's wing, causing the moth to fall to the web. The spider runs to it and bites it, but then it appears to sense Poison nearby, as if it can hear her heartbeat vibrating through the web. Bram and Peppercorn grab the end of the strand again and lure the spider to them, dashing back into the crevice as it runs at them. Poison knows this is her only chance, so she runs along the strand towards one of the palace windows. The spider feels the web shaking and scuttles after her, but she manages to dive through the window just as the spider crashes into the wall behind her. She hits the floor inside the palace and is knocked unconscious.

When she wakes up she is in a room with lots of little spiders everywhere but thankfully no dangerous ones. She wonders what they all eat, as there are no flies or other insects around. She explores the palace, which is huge and seems abandoned. Eventually she finds a room with a veiled and heavily pregnant woman's corpse sitting in a chair, and the dagger nearby. Poison takes the dagger and turns back, but the corpse has vanished. She looks around but doesn't see it, then trips over and falls on her back. The corpse lady is on the ceiling above her, her head bent round at an odd angle. The veil has slipped and Poison sees the same black eyes as the changeling watching her. This is obviously Asinastra, the Lady of Spiders.



Asinastra drops down on top of Poison. She asks why she wants the dagger and who sent her. Poison demands an audience according to Amrae's Law and Asinastra backs off. Poison then takes out the orb, but before she uses it she tells Asinastra that Aelthar sent her. She then breaks the orb and is surrounded by blackness. Asinastra quickly fades away.

'Spiders' and 'The Lady of Cobwebs' Analysis

Poison continues to show her bravery in these chapters, but it is Peppercorn's bravery that really shines, considering her timid nature. Peppercorn was an extremely nervous girl when Poison met her, too scared to leave the House of the Bone Witch because she did not know what to expect outside. When Poison tried to persuade her, Peppercorn obviously wanted to believe her and escape with her, but was still put off by fear. Since leaving, however, Peppercorn has faced the outside world bravely, and with just as much wonder as Poison did when she left Gull. Like Poison, Peppercorn thinks exploring is amazing, and she is anxious to see more. She is terrified of everything, particularly the Realm of Spiders, but she still refuses to be left behind or to abandon Poison. She is amazed and excited that she is finally having an adventure and she does not want to stop now. Like Poison, she is also discovering for the first time what it means to have friends, and she is determined not to let them down.

Poison was a little annoyed by Peppercorn's failure to help her when locked in the cage, and was irritated by Peppercorn's general meekness. However, Peppercorn is really starting to grow on Poison, and now Poison feels very affectionate towards her. Peppercorn is very similar to Poison in a lot of ways, and in her Poison can find a friend and a confidante, someone who understands her. Peppercorn's attitude is also very different from Poison's. She is sweet and sunny, and she faces everything with a child-like wonder. She is a lot more naive than Poison, which Poison finds endearing and pleasing. Whereas Poison is very cynical and practical, Peppercorn wants to believe the best about people, and she is always willing to be friendly. Poison enjoys having this contrast, as it helps to lighten the mood of the adventurers. Poison is also starting feel very sisterly towards Peppercorn, who needs looking after a lot more than Poison does. Poison has come on this quest to save and protect a little sister, and in Peppercorn she is finding a substitute little sister. She now feels very protective towards her, and feels extremely guilty that she could ever have considered leaving Peppercorn behind.



'The Trouble with Phaeries' and 'Storytelling'

'The Trouble with Phaeries' and 'Storytelling' Summary

Poison and her friends find themselves back at the Phaerie Lord's palace, in a waiting room. Scriddle comes in and asks for the dagger. Poison will not give it to him until he releases Azalea, but Scriddle is able to magically take the dagger from her. He tells them that Aelthar will see them later, and locks them in. Poison does not trust the phaeries and decides they need to get out and go look for Aelthar themselves. The door is locked, but there is a tiny ledge outside the window that spirals down the building. Andersen climbs out, walks down the ledge, and climbs in through another window. He comes to the other side of their door. They push the key through the lock using a candelabra spike, and Andersen then nudges the key under the door. They unlock the door and leave.

Andersen guides them to another door with a very thin walkway behind. Poison realizes that this must be the ventilation system of the palace. They see various rooms through grilles as they pass. At one, they see a beautiful phaerie woman and are entranced by her. Poison pulls Peppercorn away and they eventually come to Aelthar's rooms. They watch as Aelthar and Scriddle come in. Aelthar complains about the other Lords and Ladies squabbling, as they will not be able to face the Hierophant unless they unite against him. He is preparing to go see the Hierophant now. He tells Scriddle to kill Poison and her friends.

Poison is angry. She decides they need to go see this Hierophant, since he is obviously an enemy of Aelthar and so might be able to help them. They go to the library and hide. Aelthar and his guards come in and Aelthar reads from a book. The air feels strange, some kind of magic happens, and then everything is normal again. Aelthar leaves and Poison and her friends follow. Outside there is a dark stone corridor and the sound of rain and thunder. They are in the Hierophant's castle.

Fleet comes down the corridor and Poison runs to greet him. He takes them to a cozy room with a fire and gives them food. He explains that he is an Antiquarian, someone who works for the Hierophant by observing and collecting stories. There are many Antiquarians throughout the realms, remaining anonymous and simply watching. What they observe is then magically recorded in a book in the Great Library.

Fleet takes Poison to see the Great Library. He explains that it acts as a portal connecting all realms to the Hierophant's Realm. He says that Poison also has a story, but that it won't be written until it is complete. He was in Gull because he was observing her. He was allowed to give her a push, but was not allowed to directly influence or help



her too much. He was also not allowed to tell her any of this until she made her own way to the Hierophant's Realm.

'The Trouble with Phaeries' and 'Storytelling' Analysis

Fleet now explains to Poison what the Hierophant's role is, and this explains a lot of the things that have happened to her. He tells her that he is an Antiquarian, a person who works for the Hierophant observing and collecting stories, which are then magically recorded in books in the Great Library. He is not a historian, and so does not document everything. He focuses on individuals and their personal stories, the trials they face and how they behave. Not everyone has a story, but some people's actions are interesting or important enough to be recorded in this way. He shows Poison one such example. He explains that this story did not end with the hero's death because the story itself does not always continue when the person's life continues. Once they have achieved their main quest goal, then their story is done. Some people have more than one story.

Poison now finds out that she has a story, and that it is being observed. Fleet stayed in Gull and watched her because he sensed that she was the kind of person who would have an adventure. He could not interfere directly, but he did give her advice, encouragement, and the things she needed to begin her story. This explains why Fleet likes to wander, why he is so rich, and why he loves stories so much. It explains why he was in Gull even though he never seemed to fit in. It also explains why so much of Poison's life has seemed like a story. It actually is a story, and is being written as Poison lives it. The reason it seemed so similar to the phaerie stories Fleet told her is that those phaerie stories are also true, and by telling them Fleet was actually giving her advice about the world. For example, in one of the phaerie stories Fleet told her, a hero used the ventilation system of a palace to get around secretly. Poison does the exact same thing in the Phaerie Lord's palace. Fleet's story was clearly not just a story; it was preparation.

This reinforces the idea that has been running through this book that stories are extremely important, and that each person's life is like a story. People look at the world in terms of stories, and although history is important, it is the stories we draw from history that are really meaningful to us. This also highlights once again that the reader is reading metafiction. The author is making it quite clear that we are reading a story, and not just a story but a story about stories. In this story, the Hierophant and the Antiquarians are writing down the stories of the people who live in their world. The author forces the reader to wonder if the Antiquarians and the Hierophant also have stories written about them. In fact, could this be what we are reading right now? Are we reading Poison's story, or a story about Poison's story, or even a story about a story about Poison's story? This confuses matters so much that the line between the readers, the author and characters becomes blurred. So far this book has been playing with the idea of stories, of what they mean and how they are told, but now it is playing with the idea of reality and fiction as well. What is really real and how can we tell? The author is easing the reader into this idea before the next chapters take these questions even further.



Fleet's revelations are very odd for Poison, as it is strange to find out that she is the main character of her own story. Fleet's explanation is also very encouraging, however. He tells her that her book is not written yet as it still has no ending. Only when it has ended will they know what kind of person Poison was, whether she succeeds or not, whether the story is a horror, a romance or an adventure, or something else. In other words, Poison can still shape the story. She still has control over her own actions and can still influence what happens. The story writes itself only after she has lived it, so she still has free will. This also means that anything can happen. Poison could still save her sister, and since she is the main character of a story, and she was thought important enough to observe, there seems a good chance she will succeed. After all, it is rare for a hero to actually lose at the end of a fairy story. Now Poison has answers, has been reunited with an old friend, and has been given a confidence boost. She is in a friendly place and it is clear that the Hierophant is not antagonistic to humans. Poison still feels in control. This is the high before the low, as soon Poison will have her world turned upside down when she learns that stories go deeper than she thinks, and that she may not have any control over her own story after all.



'An Audience with Melcheron' and 'Malaise'

'An Audience with Melcheron' and 'Malaise' Summary

Poison and Fleet stand on the balcony of a great hall, watching Aelthar demand to see the Hierophant. There are many Lords and Ladies of the different realms present, but the stone gargoyle guarding the Hierophant's chambers will not let anyone in. Poison sees Asinastra on the balcony too, who glares at her, but Fleet assures Poison that she is safe while under the Hierophant's protection.

Fleet takes Poison through a back door to meet the Hierophant. Fleet leaves, and the Hierophant tells Poison that she is his creation, and that in fact everything is written by him; it is all fantasy. Some, like Aelthar, were written by previous Hierophants, but Melcheron himself was responsible for Poison, the Black Marshes and her quest. Not many people know this. Even the Antiquarians think that he only writes important stories, and that he only occasionally changes reality with his writing. They do not know how much he controls, or that he writes their lives too. The Hierophant is concerned about his own storytelling ability, thinking that it is getting weaker.

Poison is horrified by all this. She leaves the Hierophant's room feeling very depressed, and then simply gives up and lies in bed, refusing to eat. Her friends try to help her but none of them know the truth. This goes on for days and Poison is dying of hunger. She realizes that this is affecting everyone else too; her friends look like they are wasting away, and even the walls are beginning to fade. Reality is disintegrating. Fleet tells her that this malaise is affecting the whole castle.

Bram comes to her and persuades her that if everything is fading because of her, then the story must be about her. This is a form of power, and perhaps she can find some free will in it. She cannot know to what extent she is controlled, but it makes no sense to give up. Besides, all her friends want to live and she is killing them. Poison sees that he is right, and finally starts eating again.

Poison recovers in a few days and the whole castle goes back to normal. All the people are well again, and no-one can remember the strange malaise. Poison's friends simply think she has been recovering from flu. Poison does not tell them the truth. She starts thinking of ways she can beat the Hierophant at his own game, but then is shocked to find out that he has been murdered.

'An Audience with Melcheron' and 'Malaise' Analysis

Now Poison finds out just how much of her life is controlled by someone else. She is not living her life and making choices that will be written as a story later. She is living the life and making the choices that someone else is giving her, and her story is being written



now, constantly. Everything she does and says is written by the Hierophant and she does and says them because he writes them. This is horrific to her. She has always put a lot of importance on her ability to choose things for herself, and to be pro-active rather than letting things happen to her. This has been her driving characteristic throughout the story. She questions things, she acts, and she forces change, and she will not let her life be governed by anyone else. In fact, she looks down on those people who accept things for the way they are without wanting to change them. Now she finds out that she has never been this pro-active person; she has been acting in exactly the way the Hierophant has written her. She has no control over herself or her life. She is just like Lamprey, or Myrrk, or the people of Gull, because she is simply living the role that was given to her and has not been able to break away from it. She thought she had, but it has all been a lie. The Hierophant controls her and she feels as though she is only his puppet. It is easy to see how this revelation is intolerable and so destructive for a person like Poison. Poison can cope with any danger or difficulty thrown at her, but this is the worst thing she has ever had to face, and this is the one thing that could defeat her.

It makes sense that Poison would be depressed and react badly to this, but Poison has never been the kind of person who just gives up. Now, however, giving up might be the only way to win. The Hierophant has written her as the kind of person who never gives up, so by giving up she is defying him and proving him wrong. It might seem bizarre, but the only way Poison can even attempt to exercise free will is to let herself die, and so to end her story and the Hierophant's purpose in writing it. Although she is destroying other people too, they are not real and never were. Poison thinks she is actually doing them a favor. However, what she has not considered, or perhaps does not want to consider, is that this, too, might be written by the Hierophant. In fact, if Poison only exists and acts because of him, then choosing to die must also be written by him. How does she know if she is defying him, when perhaps she is still playing along? There is really no way to win in this scenario, which means that throwing her life away is foolish. If she cannot win either way, then she may as well live and try to beat the Hierophant at his own game. She cannot defy him, as she has just proved, but she can continue to act out the role intended for her in her own way until she finds a way to get round the Hierophant's control. Perhaps she never will find this way, but she has to try. When Poison sees this, the old defiant and pro-active Poison comes back. For her, this has never been about giving up but about refusing to be controlled, and refusing to simply accept her fate.

This raises interesting questions about fate and free will. If there is such a thing as fate, or if there is an all-knowing, all-powerful God who has created everything, then how much free will do people really have? If God knows what you will do, or if fate has already decreed what you will do, then how can you choose otherwise? Your path has already been written. This is a question that many people ask when considering religion and fate. Poison's problem can be seen as analogous to this. If the Hierophant has created everything, including her, and has written what she will do, then how can she say that she did anything or chose any of it? She cannot be blamed for her actions, but she cannot take pride in them either. What is life without free will and choice? Bram also touches on the religious aspect of this when he tries to help Poison. He asks her if she believes in a god, and how this is any different. He points out that she is choosing to die



and that the world is fading because of it, meaning that she is important after all. He points out that she cannot know how much free will she has, but that perhaps she has more than she thinks. If Poison really has defied the Hierophant's wishes by choosing to starve herself, then this is certainly true. Most importantly, Bram points out that worrying too much about such philosophical issues actually helps no-one. In the end she can only go on what she feels and what she experiences, and she feels like she is free. She feels like a real person who makes real choices of her own. She feels like she has free will. There is no sense in giving up when she does not even know all the answers.

Interestingly, as soon as Poison decides to try to beat the Hierophant at his own game, the Hierophant is murdered. This seems to suggest that the Hierophant has a lot less power than he pretended to have. If he writes everything that everyone does, then why would he write someone murdering him? Perhaps people can make their own choices after all, and he controls the world and the people in it much more loosely than he explained to Poison. Perhaps the Hierophant really only controlled Poison's story. Perhaps the Hierophant stopped being in control when Poison learned the truth, decided to assert herself, and took control over her own story again. If this is the case, then anything could happen.



'Assassins' and 'The Ur-Lord'

'Assassins' and 'The Ur-Lord' Summary

The Hierophant, Melcheron, is dead with Asinastra's dagger in his back. A beautiful phaerie woman comes in, sees him, and starts crying. Fleet tells Poison that this is Pariasa, Melcheron's wife. Poison recognizes her as the phaerie woman she saw in Aelthar's palace and so is immediately suspicious. She thinks Aelthar must have planned the murder, and given Asinastra's dagger to Pariasa to actually carry out the deed. Pariasa is obviously still loyal to the phaeries, and she would have been able to access Melcheron's rooms easily.

Poison realizes that Aelthar will try to kill them now, as they are the only ones who know the truth about the dagger. Fleet thinks of the Hierophant's book, realizing that the murderer's name will be written in it if Melcheron saw who killed him. They run to the library, but the book has gone, most likely taken by the murderer. Just then Poison hears the bell of the scarecrow and realizes that Aelthar must have sent it against them. They run. Poison asks Fleet to open a portal to the Realm of Trolls, as Grugaroth is an enemy of Aelthar's and so might help them, but Fleet is panicking and cannot remember the way.

The scarecrow is now above them, and drops the phaerie sleeping dust onto them. They all succumb to sleep, and now Poison is the only one left awake. She sees the scarecrow is on their level now, coming towards her, but she is losing the battle against sleep. She thinks of Azalea and realizes she wants revenge, so she grabs a lantern and throws it at the scarecrow as she falls asleep. The scarecrow burns, its magic immediately wears off, and everyone wakes up.

They make it to the Realm of Trolls and Poison uses Amrae's Law to gain an audience with Grugaroth. She tells him that Aelthar must have murdered the Hierophant. Twelve hours later Grugaroth and his troll retinue return to the Hierophant's castle and Grugaroth calls a meeting of all the Lords and Ladies. Poison accuses Aelthar, and tells everyone about the dagger. She says the Pariasa must have known what the Hierophant was writing, and that it must have been bad for the phaeries, so together they planned the murder. She suggests that the Antiquarians search Aelthar and Pariasa's rooms for the missing book, which should prove who killed Melcheron.

While the Antiquarians are gone, Aelthar suggests his own candidate for the new Hierophant. He wants Scriddle to fill the position. A Hierophant has to have human blood, but Scriddle is half-human, half-phaerie, and so technically he counts. Poison realizes that Aelthar's plan is to wipe out humans, and that she cannot stop this if Scriddle becomes Hierophant. The Antiquarians then return and say that they found no sign of the Hierophant's book.



'Assassins' and 'The Ur-Lord' Analysis

The Hierophant is dead but the world still exists and people still continue to speak and act. More importantly, Poison continues to exist and to make choices. This seems to prove that the Hierophant did not have as much control over her as he suggested that he did. Although Poison still cannot know whether she is entirely free, at least this can give her some comfort and a little more confidence. Poison seems to actually be more important than the Hierophant. When she was dying, the world started to dissolve, but when he dies, everything continues as normal. This means that it is Poison's story, and that Poison is the one who is important. Melcheron was actually just a minor character in her tale. This is a little disconcerting for Poison, who wonders why she is so important, but it is also strangely comforting. She can now feel in control of her own life again.

This is aided by the fact that she has a very important task. What was once a quest to save her sister has suddenly become a quest to save all humanity. Now that Aelthar's plan has been revealed, Poison sees that there will be nothing to stop Scridde from writing whatever he wants when he is Hierophant, and that he will probably choose to exterminate humans. It is now absolutely vital that Poison stops Aelthar and Scridde, not just for herself and her sister, but for everyone. Poison already knows how difficult this will be, as Fleet has told her that the other Lords and Ladies cannot stand against Aelthar unless they stand together, which will never happen. If this is the case, what can one small human girl do? Poison is determined to find a way. Now her importance suddenly seems to make sense. Poison could not understand why she was so important, when all she was doing was trying to save her sister. Now, however, Poison's quest is much bigger, and the fact that this is her story only emphasizes how vital it is that she succeed.

While considering how much free will she has after all, Poison wonders if the Hierophant himself is being controlled by an even more important Hierophant. Perhaps his death, and everything else, was actually written by this person. In this case, it would be the author of this book, Chris Wooding, who is writing what happens. This suddenly breaks down the walls between reader and story. If the author is part of all this, then by extension so are the readers. If the author is just another Hierophant, then it is possible that the readers are just more characters in a fictional world. There could be another Hierophant writing the story of Chris Wooding writing this story, or a Hierophant writing the story of a person reading this Chris Wooding novel about Poison. By making Poison deal with this problem, the author is also forcing the readers to question their own lives and reality. This is disconcerting, and could even be quite frightening. In a book with many different horror encounters, this is perhaps the scariest, because if nothing is real then what is the point in anything? The author answers his own question, telling the reader that they can never know how free they really are, and that they can never know what concepts like 'reality' and 'free will' really mean anyway. All they can do is carry on, and accept the truth of what they experience and feel.



After breaking down the fourth wall in this way, the author also invites the reader to climb more deeply into his story, and afterwards Poison's struggles seem even more poignant and important. This has long ago stopped being a story about a girl looking for her sister, and has become a story about freedom, determination, and the fight to be allowed to shape one's own life.



'A Proposition of the Heart', 'Knives' and 'To End the Tale'

'A Proposition of the Heart', 'Knives' and 'To End the Tale' Summary

As Poison and her friends discuss what to do about Aelthar, Scriddle appears and tells Poison that Aelthar wants to see her. Poison goes to him, escorted by trolls for her safety. Aelthar says he did not plan the death of the Hierophant and in fact was never given the dagger. He says Scriddle must have taken the dagger and used it to kill the Hierophant with Lady Pariasa's help. Aelthar has been grooming Scriddle to be the next Hierophant for some time but Scriddle was too ambitious and impatient to wait. Pariasa helped him, intending to marry him and so hold on to her power.

He tells Poison that her sister Azalea was taken as part of the breeding program that spawned Scriddle. They have been trying to produce half-phaerie, half-humans who could be the next Hierophant. He says that Azalea is about Poison's age now, but has not yet been 'used.' He shows her a vision of Azalea, then promises to give Azalea back if Poison tells the other Lords and Ladies she was lying about the dagger. If she does not agree to this he will torture Azalea for the rest of her life. He sends Poison away to think about it.

Poison tells her friends, then goes to Fleet's study to think. Asinastra appears and tells Poison that she understands why she stole the dagger. She heard Poison accuse Aelthar and clear her name, and she knows Poison only committed the theft to save her sister. Asinastra says she understands family. She leaves without hurting Poison. Poison comes to a decision and goes to see Aelthar, but finds him dead, poisoned by Asinastra.

Poison hears Scriddle coming and quickly hides behind a curtain. Scriddle and Pariasa enter, find that Aelthar is dead, and begin discussing how this affects their plan. Sudden thunder makes Poison jump and Scriddle sees the curtain twitch. He grabs her and says that everything is her fault. Poison retorts that they should never have taken her sister. He laughs and says they sent Azalea back to the human realm before Poison even got to the phaerie realm. Poison realizes that Azalea must have been the girl she met in Shieldtown, who was on her way to Gull.

Scriddle wants to kill Poison but Pariasa warns him not to, then mentions the book. Poison realizes that Melcheron must have named her the new Hierophant, and that this is written in the book. Scriddle does not listen to Pariasa and stabs Poison. The walls begin to fade and Scriddle and Pariasa become weak. Scriddle goes to kill Poison, but Pariasa stabs him in the neck to stop him, then uses her phaerie magic to heal Poison.



Poison wakes up in bed, alive. She is told that Pariasa's magic saved her, but that Pariasa has fled and not been seen since. The book was found in Scriddle's chamber.

Poison begins training to be the new Hierophant. She sends the Antiquarians out to bring back news of her sister. Azalea made it back to Gull and lived happily with Hew and Snapdragon until her twentieth birthday. She then set off to search for her older sister, knowing that Poison went out to search for her. She has not been seen or heard of since. This worries Poison, but she has found a surrogate sister in Peppercorn and is happy. Bram leaves to buy the house in the mountains that he has always wanted, but Poison still has Peppercorn, Andersen and Fleet.

Eventually Poison goes into the Hierophant's room and writes in his book. She writes her own story, her own way, from the beginning to the end. When she has finished it becomes visible to everyone, and the title is 'Poison.'

'A Proposition of the Heart', 'Knives' and 'To End the Tale' Analysis

Poison finds out that her sister has actually made it home and has been there all along. Poison never needed to come save her, and her quest in that regard has been in vain. However, Poison's adventure was never really about Azalea. It was about Poison learning to be strong and determined, to face challenges and prove herself, and to understand why the phaeries are a threat. Most of all, it was about her journey to becoming the new Hierophant. This is why Poison has been so important all along, and why the world cannot exist without her. This is why Melcheron became so unimportant - because he had already passed his power to her. She has had much more power and free will than she realized, as she is actually the one who will have the power over everyone else. By understanding what it is like to suddenly think of oneself as fiction, Poison can now be a kinder and more understanding Hierophant. Perhaps Poison's life is still being written by a higher Hierophant (i.e. the author of this book), but this is beyond her concern now. All Poison's adventures have been about this, about shaping her and her imagination to be suited to this role.

Now that Poison realizes that this is what her story is about, she can rewrite it from her own point of view, and in her own way, proving that she can be the master and controller of her own fate after all. In fact, because Poison has written this and made it fact, it is actually she who has been writing her adventures all this time. When the book is finished, the writing becomes legible, showing that the story of how she became Hierophant is complete. Poison begins it with the first words of this book, bringing the story full circle and suggesting that this is what we have been reading all along. We have not been reading the words of some higher Hierophant, but of Poison herself. Perhaps the suggestion is that every single person is writing their own story, and that we are all masters of our own fate after all.

Poison is still worried about her sister, who has now set off to seek Poison, again bringing the story full circle. However, Poison has found a new family in Fleet and



Peppercorn, and she is surprised to find that she is happy. Poison learns that family does not have to be related by blood, and that home may not turn out to be what a person expects it to be. Happiness can be found anywhere. Happiness is what we make for ourselves.

Poison now intends to create a hero for the humans who can drive the phaeries and other creatures out of the Realm of Men, making it safe once more. Azalea is missing for now, but with Poison as the Hierophant it seems unlikely that she will be missing for long. Perhaps the two will be reunited soon, or perhaps Poison's hero for the Realm of Men will turn out to be Azalea herself, who has already shown herself willing to embrace adventure in the same manner as Poison. This is a very hopeful ending, and one that suggests there are many more stories to come.



Characters

Poison

Poison is the main character of this book. She is a sixteen year old girl who lives in a small village called Gull, in the Black Marshes. She used to be known as Foxglove, but when the time came for her to choose her adult name, she picked Poison. This was out of spite to her stepmother, Snapdragon, who told her that she is like poison to the happiness of the family. Poison resents Snapdragon because she thinks Snapdragon is trying to step into her mother's role. Poison knows that Snapdragon is not necessarily a bad person, but she cannot help being deliberately difficult. Poison knows that it is she who is causing most of the problem. She is capable of being fair to Snapdragon in her head, but she cannot bring herself to be nice. She is depressed by her life in the village; it is too small and quiet, and the people are too passive. There are many dangers, from poisonous creatures to diseases, but the people of Gull never try to change anything. They simply accept tragedy as part of life. This is also their reaction when Azalea is stolen by the phaeries. For Poison, this is the last straw. She cannot abide living in a place with this attitude. She decides to leave to look for her sister.

Poison is an incredibly determined and pro-active girl. She refuses to ever just accept things as the way of life, preferring to at least try to do something about the things she is unhappy with. When she leaves Gull she never looks back, and she never regrets her decision to leave home. Even though the main driving force was Azalea's kidnapping, she recognizes that she was never suited to life in the swamp, and that exploring the outside world has made her happier. She is amazed by everything she sees, but she takes it all in, not allowing anything to intimidate her. She never gives up on her sister, even when things get very dangerous and difficult, and she proves her bravery many times over. She is also very quick-thinking and clever; she can solve riddles and come up with resourceful ways out of trouble. She is a persuasive person who seems to have a gift for bringing people to her cause, for making friends and for inspiring respect and bravery in others. She is affectionate towards those she likes, and she proves that she is willing to die to save those she cares about.

Poison finds a substitute father figure in Bram, and later in Fleet. She comes to think of Peppercorn as a sister, enjoying protecting her and becoming better friends with her. Poison has never had friends before, and has always felt out of place in her own family. On her quest she learns that family can be whatever she makes it, and that sometimes those not related by blood can still be just as important to her. She also finds a home for herself in the Hierophant's castle, where she feels happy and content. She proves that home and family are not always found in expected places, but are what a person forges for themselves.

Poison's quest leads her to the Bone Witch's house, then to the Realm of Phaerie, to the Realm of Spiders to steal a dagger in exchange for her sister, and to the Hierophant's Realm to find answers. Poison grows to hate the phaeries deeply, as she



cannot stand being manipulated and lied to, and she resents the phaeries' superior attitude towards humans. As she struggles against Aelthar, the Phaerie Lord, she realizes that her quest has become more important than simply rescuing her sister. Humanity's future is at stake, as if Scriddle becomes the next Hierophant, Aelthar will be able to wipe out all humans. She is determined to stop him.

At the Hierophant's castle, Poison finds out that she is actually a fictional character in someone else's story. This devastates her. It is not a matter of ego, but of control. Poison is pro-active and strong-minded. Standing up to bullies or acting when she does not like something has always been her way, and she hates the attitude of simply accepting one's role in life. Now she finds out that she has been acting the role the Hierophant gave her, and that all her choices and all her pro-active decisions were not actually hers but the Hierophant's. She is just his puppet. This enrages and depresses her. She reacts how she always does, wanting to thwart him and refusing to be used. However, the only way she can think to do this is to give up. This might seem contrary to Poison's character, but she is actually acting as defiantly as she always has. She is deliberately trying to do the opposite of what the Hierophant intends. Bram points out how nonsensical this is, as she can never know whether she is acting of her own free will, even in this. She sees his point, and resolves to beat the Hierophant at his own game instead. The ability to control her own life has been her driving concern throughout all this.

At the end of the book, Poison finds out that she is to be the next Hierophant. This confirms that she has always been a lot more powerful and important than she realized. When she writes her own story in the Hierophant's book, it is suggested that she actually has been in control of her life all along. She is not sure whether she wants to be Hierophant at first, but then realizes that she has already decided she will stay. The castle feels like home, and she has her friends around her. She loves stories, and she now understands the importance of the Hierophant's work. She is determined to liberate the Realm of Men by creating a hero for them, and all her adventures have given her the drive to do this. She is perceptive, clever and imaginative, and it seems likely that she will do a better job than the previous Hierophant. She also understands what it is like to feel powerless and used, and so she will likely be a more responsible and kinder Hierophant too. She will not take away people's free will without good reason, and she understands that having the power to control others does not necessarily mean that she should.

Poison's name is very meaningful. She has been a poison to her family, making life difficult for Snapdragon and her father, and spoiling their happiness. She has been a poison to many of the bad people and creatures she has met. She solved Lamprey's riddle easily, killed the Bone Witch and her dogs, foiled Scriddle and Pariasa's plans, and got Aelthar killed. Even though she did not kill Aelthar himself, ironically he was killed by poison. Poison has also almost destroyed the whole world by giving up and starving herself. As the new Hierophant she will create a champion for the humans, and so she will be poison to the phaeries, and perhaps to the other creatures of the other realms as well. Poison's name is ironic, however, as she is only a poison to those who are trying to kill her or to harm others. To her friends, Poison is a protector and a hero.



To the human race, she is a savior. Poison will make life better for the Realm of Men; she is the cure to their troubles, not the poison. Poison's name was an act of defiance to her stepmother. It became a badge, a statement that she will not be pushed around by anyone, and that she is proud to be different.

Bram

Bram is a wraith-catcher, a man who captures the marshwraiths in the Black Marshes, traps them in colored balls, and sells them as lamps to the rich people in the cities. He is saving money to buy a farm in the mountains where he can live peacefully and enjoy his old age without having to risk his life in the swamps anymore. Poison sees him when he visits her village on Soulswatch Eve to buy captured marshwraiths from the villagers, and she hitches a ride with him when he leaves. He takes her to Shieldtown, and then offers to help her for more of her silver sovereigns. Later he admits that two of those coins are more than he earns in a year.

Bram quickly warms to Poison and admires her, finding her brave, inspirational and charming. He becomes quite protective of her, treating her first as a friend and then as a surrogate daughter. He feels vaguely guilty for taking her money, and keeps agreeing to help her at each stage of her quest. He does not go into the Bone Witch's house with her, but he clearly feels anxious about her and unsure of his decision, as he waits outside the house after she has left. When Andersen comes outside to fetch him, he needs very little prompting to go inside after Poison. He releases her from the cage and then follows her plan to kill the Bone Witch. Poison is touched by his bravery, and he proves himself many times again, following her into the Realm of Spiders and then into the Hierophant's Realm, even though her quest is nothing to do with him. He cares about her deeply, and she sees him as a father figure.

Bram is gruff but kind, often quiet but with some strong opinions about things. He detests phaeries, and he constantly warns Poison not to trust them. He is very loyal and more inclined to noble behavior than Poison. He insists on bringing Peppercorn with them when Poison would have left her behind, something that Poison is very grateful for later. He trusts Poison a great deal and is always willing to follow her plans, no matter how crazy they sound. However, he is also very practical, and when Poison is threatening them all by giving up while in the Hierophant's castle, he is not afraid to tell her that she is acting foolishly. He points out the logic of simply trusting what she feels and experiences, since she can never actually know how free she really is. Although he does not believe that they are all fictional characters, he does seem to have some kind of belief in God or fate. He is happy to accept that these things could exist without limiting human free will. This is the voice of reason and the telling-off that Poison needs to break her out of her depression. Once again she has reason to be grateful for Bram's loyalty and good sense.

At the end of the story Bram decides to leave the Hierophant's castle to go back into the Realm of Men. He wants to build the farm he has dreamed of and live in peace and quiet. Poison has found a home in the Hierophant's castle, but Bram is still looking and



working for his home. He will miss Poison and Peppercorn, and they will miss him, but now that they are safe and happy he is ready to leave to pursue his own goal. Whereas this may have been only a pipe dream before, with Poison's help, and the inspiration her determination provides, Bram can now make this a reality.

Peppercorn

Peppercorn is a girl about Poison's age who Poison meets in the Bone Witch's house. Peppercorn does not know how she came to live there, and she has been there as long as she can remember. She does not like it, and she hates the cruelty of the Bone Witch, but she is too afraid to leave. She knows nothing of the outside world, and although the Bone Witch's house is not an ideal home, at least it is familiar. Peppercorn saves Poison from the Bone Witch by hiding her in her room, but she cannot help her beyond that and she refuses to leave with her. Poison tries to persuade her that she will be happier if she leaves, but Peppercorn is still unsure. When Poison is caught and put in a cage, she begs Peppercorn to help her get out, but Peppercorn is terrified of what the witch will do. She is obviously wavering, but still too scared and uncertain to trust Poison.

In the end the decision is made for her, as Poison and Bram kill the Bone Witch and Bram insists on taking Peppercorn along with them. Poison is reluctant to do this at first, as Peppercorn is meek and uncertain and will only slow them down, and Poison slightly resents Bram's concern for her. She is also annoyed that Peppercorn let her down while she was in the cage. However, later she is glad that Bram insisted on bringing Peppercorn along, and she is ashamed that she would have even considered abandoning Peppercorn when the girl obviously needed their help. Poison comes to really like Peppercorn, considers her a friend, and later a substitute little sister. She enjoys protecting her and looking after her. In return, Peppercorn looks up to Poison and lets her take care of her, and she shows a great amount of loyalty by accompanying her on dangerous tasks despite her fear. Peppercorn proves that, with the right examples and inspiration, she can be very brave after all.

Peppercorn is Poison's opposite in almost every way. She is uncertain, naive and sunny, whereas Poison is capable, cynical and can be a little prickly. Poison is proactive, and refuses to simply accept hardship, whereas Peppercorn needs help to be able to stand up for herself and for what she wants. Peppercorn is more likely to be trusting or to see the bright side of a situation, and she never really feels hatred for anyone, even the Bone Witch or the Phaerie Lord. Poison likes this about her, as Peppercorn provides a pleasant contrast to her own personality. She enjoys having a different point of view along with her on her quest, and she finds Peppercorn genuinely delightful to be around. Poison is also a little envious, as she sometimes wishes that she could be such a happy, trusting and bright person.

At the end of the story Peppercorn chooses to stay with Poison in the Hierophant's castle, along with her cat Anderson, who she is very attached to. She has come to think of Poison as a good friend and an older sister, and she has found her home here with her. This is where Peppercorn can be happy and free.



Andersen

Andersen is Peppercorn's cat, living with her in the Bone Witch's house. He is very independent and is clearly his own master, but he seems to love being fussed over and given extreme amounts of affection by Peppercorn. He appears to be staying in the Bone Witch's house purely to watch over her, despite the danger to himself. When Poison comes in, he tries to help her out, guiding her to Peppercorn's room and so to a temporary hiding place. Later, when Poison is captured and put in a cage, Andersen goes outside to fetch Bram. Poison asks Andersen if he can lure the dogs to the poisoned bones, which he does easily. In the Phaerie Realm he leads them to Myrrk, who sends them to the Phaerie palace. Later he helps them when they are trapped in the palace, and leads them to the ventilation system where they can get around in secret.

He is obviously a very intelligent cat and seems to know exactly what is going on at all times. Bram says several times that he is no natural cat. Peppercorn says that he came out of the Phaerie Realm into the house one day, and so they conclude that he is a phaerie cat. He cannot speak, so he cannot answer any of these questions himself. It is unclear whether he helps them because he likes them and believes in their quest, or whether he helps them because they are Peppercorn's best hope for freedom and protection.

Fleet

At first Fleet appears to be an old man who lives in Gull. He likes to travel, which makes the other villagers suspicious of him. Poison, however, is not put off. She loves Fleet's stories about the outside world, and she enjoys listening to the phaerie stories he tells her too. He lends her books and encourages her interest in things outside of the village. When her sister is stolen, she takes the changeling to Fleet, who explains what will happen. He suggests that Poison should stay in the village and wait to see if her sister is returned, but Poison is determined to go search for Azalea herself. This seems to please Fleet, who admires her spirit and tells her that she is more like him: an adventurer not made for a quiet life. He gives her various things for her trip and tells her to seek out Lamprey in Shieldtown. He also gives her a bag of money, which she later finds out constitutes a large fortune. She wonders how Fleet, an adventurous but normal man living in Gull, could have amassed such wealth.

Later, Poison's question is answered. When she reaches the Hierophant's castle, Fleet is there. He explains that he is one of the Antiquarians, people who work for the Hierophant by going out into the various realms and recording stories. Fleet was in Gull because he was watching Poison, knowing that she was the kind of person who would be likely to have an adventure and an interesting story to record. Fleet encouraged her and gave her a little help, but he was not allowed to interfere beyond that. Fleet seems to genuinely care about Poison and is very sorry that he could not make her quest



easier. He feels guilty for sending her to Lamprey and assures her that he would have warned her if he'd known how dangerous Lamprey would be.

Fleet cares about his role as an Antiquarian a great deal and is proud of what he does. He has a lot of confidence in the Hierophant and in the way things work here, but he does not actually know the whole truth. He does not know that the Hierophant is constantly writing people's lives, and assumes that the Hierophant's ability to shape reality is only used sparingly. When Poison tells him that nothing is real and everything is fiction, he does not understand, and then refuses to believe her. When she stops starving herself and the world goes back to normal, Fleet's memories of this vanish along with everyone else's. Fleet is capable of seeing the world as stories, but he cannot expand his mind to see what Poison sees, to see that their lives might also be a story, and that the Hierophant himself is probably only another story being written in another world. It is this inability to think beyond what he knows that means Fleet will never be Hierophant material. This is why Poison is chosen.

Fleet is protective of Poison and tries to help her with her quest, even though he does not have to. When she is chosen as Hierophant he is very proud of her, and he begins training her for the role. He becomes a tutor for her, and, along with Bram, something of a substitute father figure.

Aelthar, the Phaerie Lord

Aelthar is the Lord of the Phaeries, the ruler of the Realm of Phaerie. He was created by a previous Hierophant and has been around for a very long time. He is tall and beautiful, with bright red hair, but he is very cold, arrogant and cruel. He hates humans and would love to exterminate them. He and his kind have invaded the Realm of Men and made life miserable for humans. He sees it as his right to steal human babies and generally torment them whenever he likes. He has gone to war with the trolls, killed one of the previous Troll Lords, and stolen the current Troll Lord's sword. He is generally hated, feared or treated with suspicion by the Lords and Ladies of the other realms. He shows very little respect or regard for anyone who is not a phaerie.

Poison confronts Aelthar when she reaches his palace, asking for her sister to be returned. Aelthar pretends to admire her spirit and makes a deal with her. He will return Azalea if Poison goes into the Realm of Spiders and steals a dagger for him. He actually has no intention of giving Azalea back and only sent Poison and her friends to the Realm of Spiders in the hopes they would die horribly there.

Aelthar hates the Hierophant because the Hierophant is human and because he is capable of giving humans more power. When the Hierophant is murdered, Poison accuses Aelthar of killing him, as Melcheron was stabbed in the back with the dagger she retrieved for Aelthar. Aelthar tells her, truthfully, that he did not know she returned with the dagger and that Scridde must have kept it. It was Scridde who planned the murder. Even though Aelthar did not kill the Hierophant, he has been breeding half-phaerie, half-human babies in the hopes of putting his own candidate in place to be the



next Hierophant. He fully intends to grab as much power as possible and make the humans suffer for it. Even though he denies the intent, Poison is sure he means to wipe out all humans. Later, she finds out that Aelthar rejected Azalea from his breeding program a long time ago and that she has already been returned to the human realm. He has been lying about this in order to manipulate Poison. He is very dangerous and cannot be trusted.

Aelthar is killed by Asinastra, who hates him for stealing her dagger, and who thinks he has deliberately set her up to take the fall for the murder of the Hierophant.

Scriddle

Scriddle is the half-phaerie, half-human secretary of Aelthar. Poison and her friends meet him when they arrive at Aelthar's palace. He tells them about Amrae's Law and then lets them in to see the Lord. Later, he takes the dagger Poison brought back from the Realm of Spiders and locks them in a waiting room, intending to kill them. He plans the murder of the Hierophant and gives the dagger to Pariasa to carry out the killing. Scriddle has been groomed to be the next Hierophant by Aelthar, who wants someone he can trust in this powerful role. Scriddle's human blood makes him eligible for the position, and his half-phaerie side makes him hate humans. Scriddle possibly hates humans even more than Aelthar, as he appears to be deeply ashamed of his human side. It is likely that he would use his new power to wipe out all humans.

Scriddle is stabbed in the neck by Pariasa when he attempts to kill Poison. This is because Pariasa knows the world will dissolve if Poison dies.

Lady Asinastra

Lady Asinastra is the Lady of Spiders, the ruler of the Realm of Spiders. She is a heavily pregnant, corpse-like woman wearing a wedding dress and veil. She has black beady eyes like the changeling baby, and she can paralyze with her stare. She can put her head and appendages at unnatural angles and climb walls and ceilings like a spider. The giant spider guarding her castle is her husband, and the child she is carrying is theirs.

She is furious when Poison steals her dagger and she is clearly feeling vengeful. Poison is terrified of her, especially when she sees Asinastra watching her at the Hierophant's castle. When the Hierophant is murdered with Asinastra's dagger, Poison tells the other Lords and Ladies that the dagger was stolen by her on behalf of Aelthar, in exchange for her sister. Later, Asinastra visits Poison, but to her surprise she does not hurt her. She tells Poison that she was surprised when Poison cleared her name by accusing Aelthar, and that she knows Poison only stole the dagger to help her sister. Asinastra puts a hand on her pregnant belly and says that she understands family, then lets Poison go. Later, Poison discovers that Asinastra has killed Aelthar.



Azalea

Azalea is Poison's baby sister. Their mother died shortly after giving birth to her. Poison sees Azalea as her only bright spot in the depressing village of Gull. Poison does not get along with her stepmother and feels like she is in the way of her father's happiness too. She hopes that Azalea will grow to be a friend and confidante, the only person who can truly understand Poison. However, on Soulswatch Eve Azalea is stolen by the phaeries. Poison's father and stepmother are distraught, but Poison is just angry. She is determined to get Azalea back, which is what drives her quest.

Unfortunately, what Poison does not realize is that she actually met Azalea in Shieldtown, at the very beginning of her journey. Azalea was a quiet, haunted-looking girl her own age, and so Poison naturally did not even think of the possibility that this could be her baby sister. Later, Poison finds out that time moves differently in the Realm of Phaerie, so Azalea aged to Poison's age in the week or so that it took Poison to leave Gull and journey to Shieldtown. Azalea was rejected by the phaeries because she was not suited to the Hierophant breeding program. Aelthar assures Poison that Azalea was released before she was 'used' but it is possible that Aelthar is lying. Not much is seen of Azalea, and it is hard to say how her time with the phaeries affected her.

Poison does learn that Azalea returned safely to Gull, and that she lived with Hew and Snapdragon until she was twenty. She then set out in search of Poison, unable to forget the sister who went out looking for her and never came home. After this, Azalea is not seen or heard of again. Her whereabouts are a mystery at the end of the novel, but it is possible that she will be reunited with her sister again one day.

Hew

Hew is Poison and Azalea's father. He lives in the village of Gull in the Black Marshes and seems content with his quiet life there. When his wife dies shortly after giving birth to Azalea, he is upset, but he does move on and marry again. This seems to be the way in the Black Marshes; life is short, so people move on from tragedy quickly and accept it as the way of life. Poison cannot do this. She hates the quiet life, cannot accept the dangers of the village without wanting to do something about them, and resents her new stepmother. She makes life difficult for her father by refusing to get along with Snapdragon, his new wife. Hew is a patient and kind man, but it is clear that the bickering between Poison and Snapdragon makes him extremely uncomfortable. When Poison leaves, she knows that this will upset her father, but she also knows that life will be easier for him without her around.

Snapdragon

Snapdragon is Hew's new wife, and Poison's stepmother. She is a young, beautiful woman from a nearby village. Poison refuses to accept her because she resents the fact that Snapdragon is trying to step into her dead mother's role. Snapdragon can see



that Poison is being deliberately difficult and this annoys her, though she tries to be patient and to get along with Poison for Hew's sake. Snapdragon might seem a little insensitive to Poison at times, but she is not a bad person. She is certainly not the wicked stepmother character that is common to fairytales. Although the reader sees her from Poison's slightly skewed point of view, Snapdragon still seems like a good person. Her relationship with Poison is more realistic, reflecting what this situation might actually be like in real life. Neither of them is to blame; they simply find it hard to accept one another. Poison even admits that she is making Snapdragon's life difficult, but she still refuses to be nice.

Although Snapdragon does not get along with Poison, she does appear to love Azalea. She is protective of her, and distraught when she is taken. Snapdragon also seems genuinely concerned for Hew's happiness. Like Hew she wants a quiet family life, which is so opposite from what Poison wants. Snapdragon is also still young, however, and likes to dream of magic and romance. Poison finds this irritating as she thinks Snapdragon is being hypocritical when she pretends to think stories are silly. Poison finds romantic stories of princes and princesses unrealistic and frustrating. She prefers the stories of adventure and danger. When she leaves, she knows that Snapdragon will be able to keep her father happy. Poison knows that she is unsuited to their life and that Snapdragon and Hew would be better off without her.

Lamprey

Lamprey is a criminal leader in the slums of Shieldtown. Poison is sent to him by Fleet, who tells her that Lamprey will have information about how to reach the Realm of Phaerie. The other criminals are all afraid of Lamprey, and Poison soon finds out why. Lamprey is a living corpse, cursed by phaerie magic. One day he tried to make a kelpie, a beautiful water phaerie, become his wife, by challenging her to a riddle match. He lost and she drowned him. She kept him prisoner under the water until her attention was drawn by another challenger and he managed to escape.

Lamprey challenges Poison to answer a riddle, telling her that he will give her the information she wants if she answers correctly, but will make her a living corpse and hang her on his wall with his other trophies if she guesses wrongly. Poison questions the need for the riddle, but Lamprey is not willing to answer her question. He seems to be stuck in the role he was meant to play, and insists on asking a riddle because this is just what should be done in this situation. This makes Lamprey seem less like a real person and more like a character simply acting out his role in Poison's story. Later Poison will find out that this is actually the case. Lamprey is the first clue that Poison's life is not really what it seems, that it is suspiciously a little too like a phaerie story.

Maeb, the Bone Witch

Maeb is the Bone Witch who guards the passing-place between the Realm of Men and the Realm of Phaerie. This is to stop any unwanted humans from entering, and to



prevent prisoners or stolen children from leaving. She is twice the size of a normal person and likes to eat the humans she captures in her house. She boils off the skin and then eats their bones. She is deaf and blind but has an extremely long nose and a very good sense of smell. She uses this sense of smell to sniff out intruders, then captures them with the help of her two vicious dogs. The only human she tolerates is Peppercorn, a young girl who cannot remember how she came to live here. Peppercorn looks after the house and in return Maeb does not eat her, but Maeb also does not seem to have any affection for the girl.

Maeb is killed when Poison and Bram lure her to the balcony and she falls into her own cauldron.

Myrrk, The Fisher Sage

The fisher sage is a frog-like phaerie called Myrrk, who calls a coach for them to reach the palace of the Phaerie Lord. Myrrk sits on the pier outside his house all day, fishing but never actually catching anything. He appears to exist simply to guide adventurers to the palace and to give them any necessary information. He clearly resents this, but he feels that he cannot do anything about it. He tells Poison that he once stepped outside his role and it made things very difficult, and that he was forced to return. He warns her against similar behavior and against showing too much arrogance. He also warns her that she will be expected to go through trials before she can rescue her sister, as this is the way things are done. He strongly hints that they are all part of a story written by the Hierophant.

Later Poison finds out that this is actually the case. The Hierophant has written them all, including Myrrk. Because the Hierophant is old and is losing his touch at writing, the things he creates are becoming less believable or exhibiting more holes. Myrrk is a good example, as he fishes all day, never catches anything, but also never dies of hunger. Poison also comes to understand Myrrk's warning about stepping out of her role. When she tries to do a similar thing, refusing to go along with the story, the world begins to disintegrate around her. She is also forced to return to her set path, though she is determined to do so on her own terms and not to end up like the fisher sage.

Amrae

Amrae was one of the previous Hierophants, who wrote a law to give humans a better chance when in the other realms. His law is that every human is entitled to a safe audience with the Lord or Lady of the realm, but after that all bets are off and their safety cannot be ensured. Many of the Lords and Ladies resent Amrae for this law, but they cannot disobey it because anything the Hierophant writes becomes absolute fact.



Lord Grugaroth

Lord Grugaroth is the Ur-King, the Lord of the Trolls. He hates Aelthar because Aelthar killed his half-brother and took his sword Myghognimar after beating the trolls in a war. Poison goes to Grugaroth with her suspicion that Aelthar murdered the Hierophant, hoping that Grugaroth will treat her as a friend because she is the enemy of his enemy. Grugaroth agrees to help her, provides trolls for her protection, and calls a meeting so that she can accuse Aelthar.

The Umbilicus

The Umbilicus is the mouthpiece of the Spirit Lord, who cannot take on physical form. The Umbilicus is a corpse-like being that hangs in mid-air as if suspended from a hook, and is surrounded by an ethereal green glow.

Melcheron, The Hierophant

Melcheron is the current Hierophant. He tells Poison the truth about her reality, that she is fiction created by him, and so is everything else. He tries to persuade Poison to go along with it, but she is too horrified. He has chosen Poison as his successor, realizing that he is too old and tired now to write characters and situations without holes or clichés. He does not get the chance to explain this to Poison, or to train her, however, as he is murdered by his wife to make way for a Hierophant of the phaeries' choosing. Although he is in control of all the stories, he does not appear to be in control enough to prevent his own death. This may be because he is not as omnipotent as he leads Poison to believe, or it may be because when he began writing Poison as the new Hierophant, he was no longer the main character of the story, meaning that the story is now revolving around Poison. It is also possible that Melcheron wrote his own death, knowing that Poison would need this strong reason to step into his place. Melcheron's plan all along seems to have been to put Poison through a series of adventures to show her how bad phaeries are, then give her the power to create a human hero to rise against them.

Pariasa, Mistress of the Aeriads

Pariasa is a beautiful but cold phaerie woman and the wife of the current Hierophant, Melcheron. Her loyalty still seems to be with the phaeries, however, as she reports back to Aelthar on what Melcheron is up to. Poison and Peppercorn see her in Aelthar's palace while they are walking through the ventilation area, and this is how Poison knows that Pariasa must have something to do with the murder of the Hierophant. Poison guessed correctly. Pariasa and Scriddle have plotted together to kill Melcheron and to put Scriddle in his place. Aelthar has been grooming Scriddle for this role, but Scriddle and Pariasa could not wait. Pariasa, who can easily access Melcheron's



chambers, killed him and stole his book. She intends to marry Scriddle so that she can keep her position of power.

When Poison hears them talking about the murder, Scriddle tries to kill Poison. Pariasa knows that this will destroy them and their world so begs him to stop. He does not listen to her, so she is forced to stab him in the neck to stop him from killing Poison. She then uses her phaerie magic to heal Poison and runs away before any of the other Lords and Ladies can catch her.



Objects/Places

Changeling

A changeling is a Phaerie baby that is placed in a human baby's place when a human baby is stolen by the Phaeries. When Azalea is taken by the Scarecrow, a changeling is left in her place. It looks similar to Azalea, but it has inhuman black eyes and weighs more than a real baby should. It also does not cry or act like a normal baby, but instead stares at Poison in a sinister manner. If the human parents want any hope of their child being returned safely one day, they have to look after the changeling and keep it safe.

The Black Marshes

The Black Marshes is a huge area of swampland, sunk into a giant bowl in the land. It is a place of damp, disease, and poisonous creatures. Living there can be very hard, but there are people who manage, building villages raised on stilts above the marsh.

Gull

Gull is a small village in the Black Marshes where Poison, her father, her stepmother and her baby sister live. The houses are large, round huts, built on stilts that raise them above the swamp. Life can be hard and short, as there are many poisonous animals, diseases such as swamp lung, and other dangers. Poison finds it a depressing place.

Marshwraiths

Marshwraiths are ethereal wispy creatures that live in the Black Marshes. They come out on Soulswatch Eve every year to fly around in a kind of dance. They glow with a strange light, and so when trapped in a colored ball they can be used as a colored lamp. These wraith lamps are very popular among the rich people in the cities outside the Black Marshes, so wraith-hunters venture into the swamps to catch them. On Soulswatch Eve all the villages in the swamps set traps for the wraiths, then sell them to the visiting wraith-catchers. Some people think the wraiths are intelligent beings, and that on Soulswatch Eve they are participating in some kind of mating dance. Others think they are the souls of the dead. Bram wonders if they might be Phaerie creatures. Poison feels a little sorry for the captured wraiths, as she knows what it is like to feel trapped.

Soulswatch Eve

Soulswatch Eve is a celebration held every year in the villages in the Black Marshes. On this night the marsh-wraiths come out to dance and fly around the villages. The



name 'Soulswatch' suggests that this might be a time of year for remembering the dead. This is probably because the wraiths are thought by some to be the spirits of the dead. It is on Soulswatch Eve, while everyone is outside celebrating, that Poison's baby sister Azalea is stolen by the Phaeries.

Phaeries

Phaeries are magical beings from a different realm. They are more elegant and beautiful than humans, but they are also cruel, vindictive and arrogant. They believe that humans are inferior and that they can do what they like to them. Aelthar, the Lord of the Phaeries, would happily wipe out all humans. Phaeries will often play tricks on or harm humans, including stealing human babies and replacing them with changelings. Poison finds out that this is because Aelthar is trying to breed the perfect half-phaerie, half-human to become the next hierophant. When human children are found unsuitable for this, they are sent home. Others are never returned.

The phaeries have also invaded the Realm of Men, making it dangerous for humans to live out in the open. This is why humans have had to retreat to the swamps and the mountains, living in the harsher places of the world. Humans resent phaeries for this, and Bram in particular talks of them with absolute hatred. Poison soon comes to hate the phaeries too, and learns that she can never trust what they say.

Trolls

Trolls are creatures that live in another realm, but like the phaeries have begun to move into the Realm of Men, threatening humans. They like to live in the mountains and the deep places. The Realm of Trolls includes trolls, ogres, and dwarf (dwarves). Grugaroth is the Lord of the Trolls.

Shieldtown

Shieldtown is a city situated just outside the Black Marshes. It is perched on top of the cliffs that surround the sunken land bowl that the Black Marshes fill. When approached from the marshes, it is reached by a lift that pulls travelers, animals and carts up the cliff wall. Poison is amazed by the amount of people she sees, and the different colors and sights that she has never experienced before. It is like a different world from life in the Black Marshes. It is also a very dangerous place after dark. This is where Lamprey lives, the man whom Fleet sends Poison to seek information from.

Passing-Places

Passing-places are places in which people can pass from one realm to another. The house of the Bone Witch is a passing-place between the Realm of Men and the Realm of Phaerie. The spider-filled cave is a passing-place between the Realm of Phaerie and



the Realm of Spiders. The Hierophant's Realm can be reached by passing through a library, and the Great Library in the Hierophant's castle will connect with any library in any other realm.

The House of the Bone Witch

Maeb, the Bone Witch, is twice the size of a normal human and so her house is also twice the size of a normal house. It is a passing-place between the Realm of Men and the Realm of Phaerie, and so Poison must enter it in order to reach the Realm of Phaerie. She must enter on the full moon and leave the following night before midnight. During this time a strange fog comes up around the house as the house moves between the realms.

Poison enters the house through the coal chute and lands in the cellar. There is nowhere to hide there so she explores the first floor, finding a large room with a bubbling cauldron. In it, the Bone Witch boils the skin off the bones of the people she has killed. There are stairs and a balcony above this room, and stairs further back in the house too. Maeb sleeps during the day in a room on the second floor. Up another flight of steps is an attic room with normal sized furniture in it. Here Peppercorn lives. She looks after the house for the Bone Witch in exchange for not being eaten.

The Bone Witch's Dogs

The Bone Witch is blind and deaf, but her dogs are not. They can see, hear and smell visitors, and they are just as vicious as their master. They can also walk around the house during the day when Maeb cannot, meaning that Poison is never safe. Thankfully, they have the intelligence of normal dogs, so Poison is able to trick them into eating poisoned bones.

The Bone Witch's Cauldron

There is a large cauldron in the kitchen of the Bone Witch's House, used to boil the skin and meat off the bones of the people she kills. When Poison is captured she is hung in a cage over the cauldron. When Bram rescues her, Poison comes up with a plan. They manage to roll the witch's huge jars of noxious ingredients up to the balcony, and then tip them into the cauldron. When all mixed together, they create a horrible poison. Poison and Bram then drag the bones out of the cauldron and lure the dogs to them. The dogs gnaw on the bones and die. When Maeb wakes up she is furious that her dogs are dead, and Poison and Bram are easily able to lure her to the balcony, where she falls into the cauldron and is killed.



The Realm of Phaerie

The Realm of Phaerie is a separate realm from that inhabited by men. It is more beautiful and elegant, and time runs differently there. This is where phaeries dwell, though phaeries have also invaded the Realm of Men. The Realm of Phaerie can be accessed only through certain passing-places that connect their realm with the Realm of Men.

The Giant Spider

In the Realm of Spiders, the Lady of Spiders' palace is guarded by a giant spider whose web stretches across the mountain bowl that the palace is situated in. The giant spider lives in a cave in the cliff wall and runs out when something is caught in its web. Poison and her friends manage to fool it by constantly tugging on its web until it assumes that whatever is moving the thread is not prey. Poison can then walk across the web safely. However, a trapped moth draws the spider's attention and Poison only just makes it to the palace without being eaten.

The Giant Spider-Web

The giant spider-web in the Realm of Spiders stretches across the chasm in which the palace is built. The palace is at its centre, and the strands attach to the cliff walls all around. A giant spider watches over its web from a cave in the cliff. Poison crosses the web to reach the palace, fooling the spider by tugging on the web constantly until it ignores the movements. The web is sticky but not dangerously so, and it is strong and wide enough for Poison to walk across.

Lady Asinastra's Dagger

Poison is sent by Aelthar to steal Lady Asinastra's dagger, in return for the release of Azalea. The dagger sits by Asinastra in her throne room, and when Poison takes it Asinastra wakes. Poison gets away using the orb Aelthar gave her. Scriddle takes the dagger from her and locks them in a waiting room, but Poison and her friends manage to escape. Later, the Hierophant is killed with Asinastra's dagger. Poison immediately suspects Aelthar, but it turns out that it was Scriddle, who never actually gave Aelthar the dagger. Poison exposes the lie, and Asinastra is grateful that Poison has cleared her name. She takes the dagger back from Poison but lets her live, telling Poison that she understands that Poison only stole it to help her sister.

The Phaerie Lord's Orb

Aelthar gives Poison a magic orb when he sends her to the Realm of Spiders. She is to break it only if she gets the dagger, and he refuses to tell her what the orb will actually



do. When Poison gets the dagger she breaks it and a cloud of darkness surrounds her. She and all her friends are then transported back to the palace. Aelthar claims that he sent them to the Realm of Spiders to die, but if this is the case he would not have given them the orb to escape with. This indicates that he did actually want the dagger, and that he was hoping Poison might at least have a chance of succeeding. This makes it seem likely that Aelthar was plotting something after all, and that perhaps he might have killed the Hierophant himself if Scriddle had not beaten him to it.

The Ventilation System in the Phaerie Lord's Palace

When Poison and her friends escape from the locked waiting room, Andersen leads them to a narrow corridor behind a door. Poison realizes that this is the ventilation system for the palace. They can walk around the whole castle this way, unseen, and spy into the rooms through the grates. They use this ventilation corridor to go to Aelthar's chambers and listen in on him, which is how they know to go to the Hierophant's castle for help.

Poison recognizes the ventilation system because she has read about a similar space in a phaerie story in which the hero used it to move about the castle secretly. Now Poison uses this ventilation system for the exact same purposes. This is another reminder of how much Poison's adventures are like a phaerie story. This is explained later when Fleet reveals that he is an Antiquarian who has been watching Poison and encouraging her, hoping to write down her story. He told her phaerie stories as a kind of preparation for her own adventures. Poison's adventures resemble a phaerie story because in fact all phaerie stories are true, written by the Hierophant.

The Hierophant's Castle

The Hierophant's castle is where the Hierophant lives and keeps records of all the stories. It has comfortable rooms, chambers for visitors, chambers for the Antiquarians, the Hierophant's own rooms, and the Great Library where all the books of stories are kept. Outside the castle it is constantly raining and thundering. This appears to give the dramatic atmosphere needed for the creation and documentation of good stories.

The Great Library

The Great Library is a library in the Hierophant's castle where all the books of stories are kept. The books magically write themselves as the Antiquarians observe stories taking place, but they only become visible once the story has finished, as it is only then that they know what kind of story is being told. A portal can be opened from this library into a library in any other realm.



The Hierophant's Book

The Hierophant's book seems to be a special book in which the Hierophant writes, and whatever he or she writes must come true. Melcheron was using it to write the story of Poison when he died, and because he saw Pariasa kill him, her name is written in the book. This is why Pariasa steals the book and hides it in Scriddle's room. When it is found, they discover that the Hierophant has announced that Poison will be the next Hierophant. When Poison becomes Hierophant her first act is to write in the book, telling her own story her own way. When she is finished, the writing becomes visible, and her story is complete.

Antiquarians

Antiquarians are people of any race and species who work for the Hierophant, observing and recording stories. They go out into the various realms, anonymously, to look for interesting people with interesting stories to tell. Fleet is an Antiquarian who was staying in Gull in order to observe Poison. The Antiquarians live in the Hierophant's castle when they are not out in the world.

The Hierophant

The Hierophant is the master storyteller, the man or woman in charge of the Antiquarians. The Hierophant controls all stories, changing reality with his or her writing. It is never exactly clear just how much power the Hierophant has, or how much free will his or her creations can exercise. Previous Hierophants have written laws that became unshakeable fact, or have created characters, creatures and new places. Poison intends to create a hero to help the Realm of Men liberate itself from the phaeries and other creatures. The Hierophant must have human blood, but it seems that he or she does not necessarily have to be neutral in the conflicts between the different realms.

Myghognimar

Myghognimar is a troll sword, made by the dwarf, which Aelthar stole in a war with the trolls. Aelthar carries it with him to deliberately mock and anger Grugaroth, the Troll Lord. Grugaroth hates Aelthar, longing for revenge and for the return of his sword.

The Scarecrow

The scarecrow is a phaerie creature that can make people sleep with his phaerie dust. He snatches human babies while their parents are asleep, replacing them with phaerie changelings. He is a very frightening figure, with a mostly hidden face and glowing eyes. He rings a bell when he is coming. Poison sees him twice, once at the beginning of the story when he steals Azalea and appears to be coming out of the book towards her, and

once towards the end of the book when he is sent to kill Poison and her friends. Poison manages to destroy him by throwing a lamp at him and setting him on fire.



Themes

Reality and Fiction

The book begins with the words "Once upon a time", immediately giving it a traditional fairytale feel. It quickly becomes clear that this will be a fairy story, but one with a difference. It will stay true to the darker side of fairy stories, in which fairies (called phaeries here) are malicious and cruel, and there are many monsters trying to kill the hero. It will also explore typical fairytale themes and clichés, but either subvert them or make them more realistic. For example, the evil stepmother is a common staple of fairytales. In this story Poison does not get on with her stepmother, but it is not because her stepmother is evil. Poison finds it impossible to accept a substitute mother figure, and Snapdragon, her stepmother, finds it hard to deal with Poison when she is being deliberately difficult. Snapdragon does not come across as the most patient or understanding woman, but she is hardly evil either. Poison even admits that the problem is largely caused by herself, and that her father and stepmother's lives would be easier without Poison in them. This is a much more realistic look at why heroines and stepmothers might commonly have problems with each other, and how no-one is really to blame in this circumstance.

As the book continues, other fairytale tropes are explored and subverted too. Poison herself is a different kind of hero. She is brave and determined, as all fairy story heroes are, but she is also perceptive and pro-active. She will not accept that things happen simply because this is how life works, and she will not accept that she must behave in a certain way to fit her role. Poison regularly questions people who seem to be behaving like cardboard characters from a story. Lamprey tells her that she must answer a riddle before he will give her information, and if she answers wrongly he will kill her. This is a typical element of an adventure story, but to Poison it does not make sense in real life. Why should Lamprey ask her a riddle, when he could either just give her the information or kill her? He has all the power. How does asking a riddle benefit him in any way? Lamprey cannot answer, and just skirts around the question instead.

Other characters display similar attitudes. The people in Gull continue with their difficult lives in the swamp without trying to change anything. In the Lady of Spiders' palace, Poison wonders how all the little spiders survive when there are no flies around. Myrrk notes that he has been fishing for a hundred years and never caught a fish, but never died of hunger either. He says this is an oversight on the part of the Hierophant, who seems to be writing his story. He also observes that the most common adventurers are burly warriors, sexy sorceresses and funny tricksters, and that this is getting boring. These are all comments on fairy stories and fantasy stories, on the way they are written and some of the clichés or plot holes that litter them. By telling a fairy story that comments on fairy stories, in which various characters appear to be aware that they are in a story, the author is very clearly putting his book into the category of metafiction.



The book does not just comment on fairytales in this way; it also breaks down the barriers between reality and fiction. Poison soon becomes aware that she is living in a phairie tale. The things she encounters are all typical elements from the phairie stories that Fleet told her. She has to answer riddles for information, faces a human-eating witch, meets a strange phairie creature that gives her help, goes to the Phairie Lord's palace, faces a giant spider, and hides the ventilation system at the Phairie Lord's palace, which is an incident found in one of her favorite childhood phairie stories. She finds out that this is because she actually is living in a phairie story. All phairie stories are true, and all stories are recorded in books in the Great Library in the Hierophant's Realm. Poison's story is also being written. Stories are more important than Poison could have imagined. This idea of being inside a story is foreshadowed from the very beginning, when the book starts with the words 'once upon a time.' A second piece of early foreshadowing happens when the scarecrow comes out of the book at the beginning of the story. This seems to represent stories coming to life and interacting in the real world. This hints at the things Poison will find out in the Hierophant's Realm. It turns out that stories really are a part of real life.

This goes even further when Poison finds out that she has been created by a master storyteller, the Hierophant, and that it is he who is controlling all her actions and decisions. She is merely a fictional character in a made-up world, one which the readers are reading about right now. This breaks down the walls between the readers and the characters. Just as the scarecrow came out of the book into Poison's reality, now Poison seems to be coming out of the book into our own reality. She is looking out and seeing the readers who are following her story, and seeing the higher Hierophant who is creating all this. She sees stories within stories, without beginning or end. The inference is that if Poison thought she was real, but then found out that she is a character, so the readers could actually be characters in someone else's fictional universe. The author, Chris Wooding, is breaking down the pretence that the story he is telling is not a story. He reminds the reader that this is fiction, but points out that everything we know could also be fiction. No-one can ever know what the truth is.

In the end, Poison becomes the new Hierophant and decides to write her own story, her own way, taking ownership of it and so regaining control of her life. This suggests that she might actually have been the one in control of herself all along, especially as she seems to have been able to defy the Hierophant's will, and she must have acted independently after his death. As she writes her own story, she begins with 'once upon a time,' bringing the story full circle, back to the beginning of the book. When she has finished, the book is complete, and the title becomes visible: Poison. The suggestion is that we are reading this very book, the one that was written by Poison herself. Now the walls between fiction and reality have been fully dismantled, as the author seems to be telling us that Poison is a real person and we are reading her book.

Free Will

The revelations about the Hierophant and his control over Poison's and everyone else's lives creates questions about how much free will anyone really has. This is what really



upsets Poison when she hears the Hierophant's explanation. He has created her, her home, and her quest. He has written what each person will do and say, and has given her challenges to face. Worse, he has written her too, and everything the Hierophant writes comes true. This means that she has only said and done things because he wrote them. He has been controlling her, making her think she has been making free choices when in fact she has just been his puppet, fulfilling the role he has set for her. For Poison, a pro-active person who believes in trying to change her fate, who refuses to simply accept things as the way of life, this is truly terrible. It means that she is not even really a person; she is just fiction, and not a free-thinking mind.

Poison's reaction is to attempt to reassert her free will in the only way she thinks she can. The Hierophant wants Poison to play the role of hero, and to keep going on her quest. He has written her as a pro-active, determined girl who never gives up. Poison therefore thinks that the best way to thwart him is to deliberately do what he does not want, to act unlike herself, and to give up. She stays in bed and refuses to interact with the world, and she begins to starve herself. If she dies, then she can no longer be the Hierophant's hero, and so has defied him with her death. It is easy to see why Poison might feel this way, and it makes sense that she would want to try to thwart the Hierophant. However, if she is written by the Hierophant, and only does what he says, then if she is choosing to stay in bed and starve herself, it is because the Hierophant has written this. If she chooses to fight him, it will be because he wrote this, and if she continues with her quest it is because he chose for her to do this. Whatever she does she cannot win. She has no way of knowing whether the Hierophant wrote her depression and the malaise. When she changes her mind, she may have changed her mind because the Hierophant decided it. When Bram persuades her to eat again, this could be the Hierophant's guiding hand at work too.

However, it is possible that the Hierophant has much less control than he made it seem. If Poison really is defying him by letting herself die, then clearly he cannot just write that she eats and stops defying him. He cannot make her act against her will. This is suggested by the fact that the world is starting dissolve as Poison gets weaker. This is indeed proof that fiction and reality are more blurred than Poison had imagined, but it also means that Poison is incredibly important. It means that this must be her story, as she is the only one that is vital. Without her, the story and the world cease to be. If the Hierophant is really in control of everything then the world would fade when he dies, not when Poison dies. This suggests that Poison has more power than the Hierophant and that she probably has more free will than she imagines. This idea is backed up by the fact that the world continues to exist after the Hierophant is murdered, and Poison continues to act and to think even when the Hierophant is not writing her actions and thoughts. Perhaps the Hierophant was never dictating Poison's life, but has simply been recording it all along. When Poison becomes the new Hierophant she writes her own story in the Hierophant's book, suggesting that it is actually she who has been controlling the story all along. It seems likely that she has had a great amount of free will all this time.

The same cannot be said for Myrrk, for Lamprey, for the people of Gull, and perhaps for everyone else in the world. Even Poison's friends cannot think outside of their roles, and



cannot understand how they could be just fiction. Poison is the main character of the story; she is the one who is important and in control. Everyone else exists simply as characters in her story. When Poison becomes Hierophant, she will need to remember how she felt when she thought she was powerless, so that she does not abuse her power as Hierophant. The previous Hierophant, Melcheron, has obviously meddled with people's lives in ways that make them miserable or that are unfair. Myrrk wants to abandon his role, for example. Hopefully Poison will be able to fix these issues and give a certain amount of free will back to the people from whom it has been robbed. This is an important lesson that Poison has learned through her adventures: just because someone can control another person does not mean that they should.

Poison also wonders whether there might be a higher storyteller or Hierophant controlling the Hierophant of her world, and an even higher Hierophant controlling them, and so on into infinity. Perhaps there is no such thing as reality after all; perhaps everything is fiction. Perhaps free will does not mean what anyone thinks it does. It is possible that no-one, anywhere, is ever really in control or free. Because Poison cannot know any of this, it makes no sense to give up and to starve herself. If she does, she may not even be defying the Hierophant. All she can do is to keep going, to trust what she feels and to keep fighting for what she believes to be her own choices. She will never know if she has any free will, or how much, so it is actually not worth worrying about.

This message extends beyond the story in this book. The question of free will and control extends to ideas of fate and God, as Bram points out when he asks Poison if she believes in a god. If God created the world, and knows exactly what will happen at all times, then how do any creatures within it really have free will? If there is a force of fate governing all people's actions, then does anyone ever really choose anything for themselves, or were their choices and actions decided for them? Just as Poison can never know the truth about her own life and world, so the reader can never know the truth about theirs. They might be fictional characters in someone else's story, or their free will might be reduced by God or fate. Conversely, they could be completely free and in control of themselves at all times. It is also possible that God or fate exists and people still possess free will, as freedom may not be exactly what we think it is. Just as it is pointless for Poison to worry about these things, so it is pointless for the reader to get depressed about any such questions. All Poison and the readers can do is to face reality as they experience it, and to trust how they feel.

Friendship and Family

Poison sets out on her quest in order to save and bring back her little sister Azalea. This is what drives her to leave the village, though she has actually wanted to go adventuring and exploring for a long time now. Azalea's disappearance is the push she needs, but she soon finds that she is actually enjoying being free of her old life, and she would not go back now. However, she does not become lost in these wonderful new experiences and feelings, and never loses focus on what her mission is. She loves Azalea and is determined to rescue her. She is angry that anyone would think they can take her little



sister from her. She has also pinned a lot of hope onto Azalea, wanting her to grow to be a true friend and confidante. She is determined not to lose this. This drives her through some terrible dangers and difficult tasks. At all times Poison is driven by her need to not let her little sister down.

Poison's relationship with the rest of her family is not so good. Her mother died of swamp lung shortly after giving birth to Azalea, and her father married again. Her stepmother is a young, pretty woman called Snapdragon. Snapdragon is not a cruel stepmother, but Poison cannot accept her as a mother replacement. She resents Snapdragon and so is deliberately difficult with her. Poison knows that it is she who is causing the problem, and that Snapdragon is not a bad person, but she cannot help behaving in this way. She loves her father, and she does not want to make things difficult for him, but she cannot stand to play happy families when she is so depressed. She longs to leave, as she hates the swamp and does not feel that it is home. She knows her father will miss her for a while, but recognizes that he will actually be happier without her in the end. At the end of the story Poison finds out that her father and Snapdragon had a long and happy life together, and she is very happy for them. She never regrets leaving, and she does not really want to return. They may be her biological family, but Poison has never fit in with them.

Poison meets people along the way who become firm friends. There is Bram, the wraith-catcher, who becomes something of a father figure to her. He is a little gruff, but kind, and he admires Poison and likes her. He feels protective of her, as well as proud of her when she does something brave or clever. Poison finds another substitute father in Fleet, the old man who told her stories in Gull, and who turns out to be an Antiquarian in the Hierophant's castle. When Poison becomes the next Hierophant, Fleet trains her and helps her, and she treats him like a new father. The Hierophant's castle also quickly becomes home to her, a place where she fits in much better than she did in Gull, where she can feel happy and actually want to stay.

At first Poison does not like Peppercorn, who is weak and too scared to let Poison out of the cage in the Bone Witch's house. However, as Poison gets to know Peppercorn, she sees that she is a sweet, kind and affectionate girl who sees the world in a different, and more optimistic, way. She is naive, but also more open and friendly. Poison likes the contrast Peppercorn gives to her own cynical and sometimes prickly nature. Poison comes to see Peppercorn as a substitute sister, feeling protective of her in the same way she would with Azalea. Peppercorn is also a good friend and a pleasant person to be around, and Poison realizes that she has found in her the confidante that she always hoped Azalea would be. In this way, Poison gathers a new family, not related by blood but just as important to her. She shows that family and home are what a person makes of them, and that they can sometimes be found in unexpected places.

Other characters also emphasize the importance of family. Azalea takes after Poison, as when she reaches the age of twenty she goes out into the world to search for Poison. Despite her being only a baby when she last saw Poison, the sisterly bond cannot be broken and Azalea is determined to find Poison again. Peppercorn, like Poison, seems to be searching for family and for home, but she tries to convince herself that the house



of the Bone Witch is it, and she is too scared to leave. The Bone Witch's house seems like a mockery of everything a good home should be, and the Bone Witch herself is a terrible substitute mother. When Poison helps Peppercorn to leave, Peppercorn becomes much happier and is able to search for a better home, just as Poison is doing. She decides to stay at the Hierophant's castle with Poison. She is another example of a person who has to find her true home by leaving the place where she has grown up, and by searching for what is meaningful to her. Finally, the Lady of Spiders also highlights the importance of family when she tells Poison that she understands why she stole her dagger. Asinastra is pregnant, and so knows what it is like to have family to protect. She can therefore forgive Poison's actions because of her motivations. In this way, love for family actually saves Poison's life.



Style

Point of View

'Poison' is told in third person from the point of view of Poison, the main character. This allows the reader to know her thoughts and feelings, which makes her a more accessible and sympathetic character. Poison is a very headstrong and determined girl, so when she sees problems she naturally starts to see ways to combat them. She is also very thoughtful and perceptive, offering the reader greater insight into her world and the things that motivate her. She also points out inconsistencies or things that do not seem quite right, drawing the reader's attention to these clues that her story is not all that it seems. She is brave, determined to save her sister, loyal and a good friend. She is therefore a very easy character to like, despite her cynical attitude and sometimes prickly nature.

The author of 'Poison' sometimes inserts himself into the story, drawing attention to his existence and to the fact that this is a work of fiction. He never speaks directly to the reader, and so he is seen through Poison's imagination. She wonders if there is a higher Hierophant than the one in her world, writing about the Hierophant and creating everything that happens. She knows that she is a character in a fictional world. She is so perceptive here that she almost looks out of the book at the author and the reader, a feeling that is foreshadowed right at the beginning of the story when the scarecrow tries to come out of Poison's book. This is slightly disconcerting for the reader, as it breaks down the walls between fiction and reality. This is sometimes known as 'breaking the fourth wall.'

Setting

'Poison' appears at first to be set in a fantasy world not unlike our own but set in a kind of fairytale past. Later, it seems to be a generic fairytale world where all fairy stories are actually true, and all exist alongside each other. In this world there are different realms, the Realm of Men where humans live, the Realm of Phaerie where the phaeries dwell, the Realm of Trolls where trolls, ogres and dwarrow live, the Realm of Spiders, the Realm of Daemons, and so on. These different realms exist in a different form of reality from each other. Different rules may be true in them, and time passes differently in each one. Azalea is stolen as a baby in the Realm of Men, taken to the Realm of Phaerie where she grows twelve years, and then sent back to the Realm of Men where only a week or so has passed.

Poison enters the Realm of Phaerie while looking for Azalea. She goes to the Phaerie Lord's palace to demand the return of her sister. The Realm of Phaerie and the palace within are beautiful and graceful places, where the arrogant and often cruel phaeries live. Poison and her friends are sent from here to the Realm of Spiders, to steal the Lady of Spiders' dagger in return for Azalea's freedom. The Realm of Spiders is a



creepy place full of spiders and cobwebs. A giant spider web stretches across the chasm that the palace sits in, with a giant spider guarding it. Inside, the palace seems abandoned and empty. It appears that the only things that live here are the Lady of Spiders and lots of little spiders, without any flies or food to eat. Poison thinks this is strange. This reminds her of Myrrk, a phaerie creature in the Realm of Phaerie who spends all his time fishing but never catches fish, and yet does not die of hunger. These are all oversights on the part of the Hierophant, and are proof that his writing is becoming sloppy. Through these inconsistencies, the author also points out how stories can often include such unlikely things because the author is more concerned with plot or characterization than with realism, particularly in fantasy fiction.

The Hierophant's Realm is possibly the most important realm as it is where everything is created and controlled. The Hierophant lives here, and everything he or she writes becomes fact. This is where the Great Library is located, where all the stories are collected and housed. The Great Library is also a passing-place from which all the other realms can be reached. The Hierophant's Realm appears to consist of the Hierophant's castle and not much else. It is constantly raining and thundering outside, as if to provide the perfect dramatic atmosphere for the creation of stories. It has comfortable rooms and chambers for visitors. This is also where the Antiquarians, the story-collectors, live. When Poison becomes the new Hierophant, she is happy to stay here and call this place home.

Although the story initially appears to be set in a separate fantasy universe, it is possible that it is meant to be our own world. The Realm of Men was once powerful and belonged solely to humans, but things have changed a lot since the phaeries and other creatures invaded. This is possibly as a result of there being too many stories, and of these leaking into the Realm of Men. This might also explain why the Hierophant has to have human blood; perhaps none of the other creatures even existed until humans began to imagine them into existence. There are some clues that suggest the world of this story could be our own world. At first the world seems to be set in a fantasy past, but fairly modern things such as mascara and chocolate coffee are introduced without any of the characters finding them strange.

Language and Meaning

The language of the book is fairly simple but is written in a style that evokes fairytales, such as the opening words 'once upon a time.' Some of the words and phrases used sound a little archaic, again conjuring up a fantasy and fairytale feel. The author uses common ideas and fairytale tropes, but twists them or changes the spelling to make them seem a little more unique and quirky. For example, 'fairies' is written as 'phaeries', and 'goblins' is written as 'ghoblins.'

The author uses very descriptive language when introducing new ideas and locations, particularly the different realms. This gives the story a very rich, magical and vibrant feel. Horrific language is used when Poison faces danger, exploring the dark fantasy and horror side of fairytales. The Bone Witch and the scarecrow are described in



horrifying detail, as is Maeb's cauldron full of bones. The giant spider is described in monstrous terms, with grotesque words such as "mandibles" and "bulbous" leaving the reader with no doubt of what Poison is facing. This is very effective in creating a creepy, sinister atmosphere.

Symbolism in the story is subverted, reminding the reader that fairytales will be turned on their head in this book, and that things are not always what they seem. Traditionally evil images, such as spiders, turn out to be more fair and honest than the beautiful phaeries. The Lord of the Phaeries, with his graceful, handsome looks and bright hair, is actually extremely malicious and manipulative. Poison, a word usually associated with evil and death, turns out to be good. In fact, Poison is not only a hero; she is the savior of humanity.

Structure

The book is structured in a very episodic manner. Each chapter covers a significant event or challenge that Poison has to face. Many of these could easily be an individual fairy story on their own, emphasizing the fairytale feel and themes. The first half of the book feels very different from the last half, as Poison seems to be wandering through a fairly standard fantasy world and following the same quest with absolute determination. When she reaches the Hierophant's Realm, however, everything begins to unravel. Poison learns that she is a fictional character in the Hierophant's story, which suddenly explains everything that has gone before.

This information is given to the reader in several stages, preparing them for the next revelation. First the author suggests that Poison's life is like a fairytale, then he shows that some fairytales are in fact real. He introduces the suggestion that a master storyteller might be guiding events. He then reveals who the Antiquarians are and that all stories are in fact real and are recorded in the Great Library. Finally he reveals the whole truth, that there is no such thing as 'reality.' Everything is fiction, and the Hierophant controls it all. This suddenly casts the first half of the book in a very new light. Poison spends a chapter recovering from her shock and coming to terms with this idea, after which she focuses on the mystery of who killed the Hierophant. Her quest soon stops being about her sister and becomes about saving all humanity.

The last part of the book is about getting answers and tying up loose ends, with Poison finally finding out why she has been brought here. The plot twists and turns a great deal in this section, and could become quite confusing to the reader. The structure abandons its episodic feel, spending more time on explanations and conclusions. When Poison finally takes the role of Hierophant, her story ends. The book ends as Poison finishes writing her story in the Hierophant's book. As she begins her story with the same first line of the book, the story comes full circle and feels complete.



Quotes

"Here in the Black Marshes, life was a precarious thing, and the only truly solid ground was that which you built yourself." Soulswatch Eve. P2

"Real life is a story, too, only much more complicated. It's still got a beginning, a middle, and an end. Everyone follows the same rules, you know... It's just that there are more of them. Everyone has chapters and cliffhangers. Everyone has their journey to make." - Fleet. Soulswatch Eve, p14

"The world is a library, young Poison, and you'll never get to read the same book twice." - Fleet. Soulswatch Eve, p14

"This is not part of the way of things, it is not part of life. Someone came and kidnapped my sister!" - Poison refusing to simply accept things. The Scarecrow and the Changeling. P27

"With the realization that there was no way back came the knowledge that the only way was forward. Wasn't she free now? Hadn't she begun what she had always dreamed of beginning?" The Wraith-Catcher. P33

"I dreamed of faraway places, and I scorned everybody for being stuck in that horrible swamp and never wanting to leave. But I was trapped, just like them, and for all that I talked about it, I might never have gone away if it weren't for my sister being kidnapped. I might have stayed there, always meaning to go but always putting it off, and every year something would come along that made it harder for me to leave until one day I would realize that I was old, and I couldn't leave anymore." - Poison. Peppercorn and the Cat. P89

"Do you think the Phaerie Lord will just give you your sister back? No, there have to be tests, trials, a struggle, setbacks, twists, revelations. You have to earn your sister. You haven't met half the cast yet! Mark me, you've still a long way to go." - Myrrk. The Fisher Sage. P115

"Everyone has their own way to tread, their own little part to play. And if you stop doing what you're supposed to, it starts messing up everyone else's part. Everything's a chain, see?" - Myrrk. The Fisher Sage. P119-120

"The Realm of Phaerie was gluttoned with perfection and beauty, and these humans who came sweating and stinking into their land of harmony were an insult to them." Deals and Destinations. P126

"Humans are merely animals to us, albeit possessed of an extreme sense of self-importance. I take or destroy as I choose." - Aelthar. Deals and Destinations. P129

"Yet she found that it was not so much the thought of her baby sister that kept her going but something else - a sense of something started that she had not finished. She had to



keep going forward, because that was the only way left. On that day when she had chosen to leave Gull behind, she had set herself in motion, and nothing could stop her now, not even herself." Spiders. P145

"She and Peppercorn were complete opposites; where Peppercorn was helpless and sweet and painfully naive, Poison was hard-edged and suspicious and capable. Yet she felt an almost sisterly protectiveness towards the blonde girl." The Trouble with Phaeries. P163

"We are storytellers, Poison, working for the Hierophant, who is the master storyteller. Storytellers do not include details unless they are necessary. We leave the boring work to the historians." - Fleet. Storytelling. P183

"You never know what's going to happen next. When the tale is ended, then the writing will be visible to your eyes; until then, it is unwritten." - Fleet. Storytelling. P184

"Everything is a story," Fleet replied. "I told you that before. It just depends on your point of view." Storytelling. P185

"None of it was real. None of it. She was living in a phaerie tale, and she was just a puppet of the story, like they all were. All the choices she had made, all the effort and heartache she had suffered, all were just an illusion of free will. None of it had been her. She had simply been following the story." Malaise. P199

"What use was anything if she was dancing to someone else's tune? How could she ever make another decision without questioning whether she was simply doing the will of the author, that she only thought she was choosing for herself?" Malaise. P199

"And what about the Hierophant, the author of her world? Was he merely a creation of someone else, unaware? Wouldn't that be a fine joke! Like two mirrors placed opposite each other, endlessly reflecting, worlds within worlds with no beginning or end." Malaise. P200

"It was the one choice she had made for herself, and if she could only thwart the Hierophant by her death, then that is what it would have to take. It was his fault for making her such a contrary character. The harder she was pushed, the harder she pushed back." Malaise. P204

"We're all alive, Poison. By any definition you have, we're alive. Even if you think we've been given life by someone else. We all have dreams and ambitions, we all have plans and wishes, and you're taking them all away from us." - Bram. Malaise. P205

"How does anyone know anything? There's never any true answers, Poison. Everything is uncertain. That's life. We can only deal with the world as we are presented with it." - Bram. Malaise. P206



"Didn't everyone feel at one time or another that they were the only one who was truly alive, and that everyone else was an actor in a play put on for their benefit? Was there ever any way of telling?" Malaise. P207

"She would not resist the Hierophant with her death; she would resist him with her life. She would not thwart him, she would beat him at his own game. There would be a way, somehow, there would be a way." Malaise. P208

"In the search for one sister, Poison had accidentally found another, for she thought of Peppercorn as a sister in all but blood now. In losing Azalea, she had gained Peppercorn. Perhaps, in the eyes of some, it was a fair trade." To End the Tale. P271



Topics for Discussion

How does the author evoke a fairytale feel while telling this story, particularly in the first half of the novel?

Describe Poison's character. Is she a good hero? What makes her succeed and why? How is she different from the other people of her world?

In what ways does the author subvert typical fairytale ideas and symbolism? Why does he do this?

Discuss the theme of reality and fiction in this story. Could this book be described as metafiction, and why?

Discuss the theme of free will in this novel. Is there such a thing as free will, and if so, who has it? Whose free will is limited and why?

Why does it disturb Poison so much to learn that the Hierophant is controlling her life? Why does she attempt to combat this by giving up? Do you think that she behaved badly, or do her actions make sense?

What did you think was the scariest part of the story and why? How did the author manage to make this frightening?

Discuss friendship, family and home in this novel. What does family and home mean for the different characters? How do newfound friendships affect them?

If you were the Hierophant, what would you write to help the world and characters of this story? Would you interfere, or would you let people make their own decisions? Would you punish the pharises? How would you make sure you do not eliminate people's free will?