Hi, I’m Elizabeth May, and I am one half the team that wrote *Seven Devils*. My other half is Laura Lam. And *Seven Devils* is about seven resistance fighters trained to bring down an empire where loyalty is coded from birth.

So, today, I will be reading a passage from *Seven Devils*. It takes place ten years in the past, because *Seven Devils* is a nonlinear storytelling book, and we wanted to show some of the background situations for each of our seven devils. 

So, this is Princess Discordia’s chapter, and it takes place ten years ago.

The training academy on Myndalia was a prison made of gold and glass.

“*Up!*”

A slap across the face jolted Discordia awake. She shook her head to clear it. “Sorry, Mistress Heraia.”

The papers blurred in front of her eyes. She had been awake for four days in this room, with its single desk surrounded by the glass walls of the training academy.

It overlooked the clouds, tinged pink and orange with the rise of the twin suns. Sometimes, Discordia wished she could open these windows, spread a pair of wings, and fly.

Mistress Heraia snatched the book off the desk. “Recite chapter five for me. Precisely.”

Tholosian history—the reign of the fifth Archon. He had expanded his Empire well beyond the Tholosian solar system, ruthlessly conquering planet after planet. It was his idea to engineer a cohort of royal children, each with the potential of becoming his successor. Natural-born male Heirs were too risky. All it took was one spoiled lackwit with more bluster than sense to lose control over the Empire he’d built.

No, the fifth Archon decided his royal cohort should be engineered to his exact specifications, trained up to his brutal standards, and forced to compete for the throne until only two were left standing. One to be Heir of the galaxy. To lead the charge against the Evoli threat and defeat their enemy once and for all. The other the trusted right hand, still royalty, but no Archon. The Spare.
That had been the tradition for hundreds of years, down to Discordia’s own father. The tenth Archon.

After more than one hundred years as ruler, Discordia’s father began growing his potential successor. The first three batches of one hundred were failures. The first two never made it out of the vats. The third survived and grew to age sixteen. They began dueling as they should, for the title. An Heir and Spare were named, but they killed each other less than a year later. It was not supposed to happen—they were meant to respect the final decision, to set aside their bloodlust and work together.

Discordia was part of the fourth cohort. One hundred children had been grown in vats—fifty assigned male at birth and fifty female, just like all the others. Only fifty-one had survived through childhood.

Discordia was the only female left.

Mistress Heraia, as cruel as she was, had placed her bet on Discordia precisely because she was the only female to make it past age six. She instructed Discordia in all areas—intellectual, physical, and emotional—that would lead to her becoming the best candidate. The strongest. The fastest.

The one who lived.

Discordia shut her eyes and recited the chapter verbatim.

Her prefect didn’t smile. She didn’t congratulate her. Mistress Heraia gathered her bag and digital tablet before saying, “Come with me.”

“Where?” Discordia just wanted to sleep.

“Where else?” Mistress Heraia raised an eyebrow. “To the gymnasium.”

Discordia pressed her teeth together against the urge to beg for sleep. “Practice?”

“To start.” The prefect’s gaze sharpened. “Combat training this morning. History and philosophy this afternoon. And this evening, you run.”

“When can I—” Discordia pressed her lips together. She hadn’t meant to ask aloud, to betray how vulnerable she was.

“Sleep?” Mistress Heraia finished. Her eyes narrowed and she pressed her fingers to the desk. “There will be no rest in war, Discordia. Every soldier will depend on you to keep your mind sharp when you’re most exhausted. So, you will run until I tell you to stop. And when your breath threatens to choke you, you will recite chapter five for me again. Then, once I’m satisfied, I’ll consider letting you sleep.”
Discordia ran until the suns reached their zenith in the Myndalian sky. They shone through the windows of the gymnasium and the trees planted to create the illusion of an outside.

Not once did Discordia fall. Not once did she pause and give Mistress Heraia the opportunity to thrash her for her failure. Not like her siblings; all of them had, at some point during their training, allowed their prefects to beat them into unconsciousness. Just for sleep.

Every sibling except for Damocles.

After Discordia recited the chapter through her hard, heavy breathing, she looked up at the raised observation deck. She knew Damocles would be there. Every child of the Archon was encouraged to watch each other train in the small amount of free time they were given. First, to find each other’s weaknesses. Then, eventually, to exploit them. Though they were not permitted to kill each other at the academy, it was where the royal cohort began viewing one another as competition.

And as potential victims.

Their eyes met. Damocles nodded once and held up one finger, then another. A message passed down from the Archon to all of his potentials.

Damocles wanted to form an alliance.

He came to Discordia’s room later, after another grueling day of training. Mistress Heraia had finally allowed her to eat and then sleep. Discordia opened the door shortly after dinner. She froze when she saw him. Though still a fourteen-year-old growing into his gangly limbs, he towered over her. His gaze was penetrating, a beam sharper than any Mors laser. He constantly measured the people around him. Whether they were a danger, or—more likely—how quickly he could kill them.

She scanned the hallway and ushered him inside. “Hurry.”

“You were awake for five days,” he said as she closed the door. He sounded almost accusatory. “How did you do that?”

Discordia kept her voice cool. “Sheer force of will.”

Damocles scanned her room—clean, white, and sterile as a prison cell. The only personal object she kept in her room was the round zatrikon board on the desk, still in the same positions that she and Mistress Heraia had left them. The prefect always played the King, and Discordia the Queen. It was a game of strategy, of careful calculation meant to reproduce the moves one might make in war. She had another twelve hours to make her decision. If she won, she ate again. If she didn’t, she starved. This was how they played, and Mistress Heraia was a master at it.

“Do you play?” Discordia asked, noting how he studied each piece.
“Not often.” Accusatory again. “It seems my prefect is useless.”

Every prefect was a former member of the royal guard, all trained to be the best soldiers in the Empire. Each one had picked their trainee among the royal cohort—and those who had first pick always went with the male children. A woman had never been Archon. A woman had never been Archon. A woman had never made it through training without dying.

But soldiers all had vulnerabilities and strengths. Some prefects emphasized battle. Some emphasized strategy. Mistress Heraia was determined to teach Discordia everything—and if she ended up dying, then she wasn’t strong enough to begin with.

“You indicated you wanted to form an alliance,” Discordia said, impatient. “Did you mean it?”

“Would I be here if I didn’t?”

“Then who would be the Heir?” Her unasked question was just as important: *Who would be the Spare?* The other was lucky enough to live, but they would never be as valued, never as vital, never as recognized.

Damocles shrugged, as if it didn’t matter. Didn’t fool her. “Whoever was better.”

He kept staring at the zatrikion board, never at her. Finally, she grew impatient. “Do you want to play?”

“Yes. Yes, I do.”

They sat there afternoon after afternoon between their own training—often exhausted—strategizing and figuring out each other’s weaknesses.

She learned that Damocles didn’t like losing. She learned that he considered it a weakness. She learned that he grew impatient easily, and that when he sensed he wouldn’t win, he made stupid mistakes.

And she learned that he hated hearing her say the same words when she won every game.

*Regina regem necat.* Queen kills King.

[Author speaking]

And that is a small bit from *Seven Devils*, which is in bookshops now. Thank you.