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By the seventieth year of war, every nation and city and village, every order and guild, every creature that walked and talked, and some that didn't, across both the northern and southern continents of Emza, had been swept up in the bloodshed. Scant few even remembered how the war started – a river crossing disputed by the kingdoms of Infinzel and Orvesis, for those interested in trivia. A trifling, stupid thing, the bridge long since burned and the water poisoned. For most, life was a choice between fighting or fleeing, famine or pestilence. The entire world found itself entangled in rivalries and vendettas, petty crusades and endless sieges, unable to extract itself, suffocating on hatred without relief.

The gods suffered, too.

The ge'besa, gods of beasts, lamented the loss of their creations, animals driven to extinction for food to feed soldiers or weapons to arm them.

The ge'gala, gods of nature and close cousin to the ge'besa, dripped crimson wherever they traveled, so soaked was the soil with the blood of man. They mourned the forests burned and the mountains crumbled, and choked on the toxic clouds of magic that marred the skies.

The ge'oca, gods of the ocean, sat silent and stoic, swallowing up the bodies of the drowned, ever eager to rise and wipe away the offensive mortals.

The ge'chan, gods of magic, brokers of the bargain between mortals and the divine, felt how reality strained against the efforts of man. They warned the other gods that, without intervention, a reckoning would come and not even the gods would be safe.

The ge'ema, gods of those mortals who walked and talked and made endless war, had been slow to act. They found the dramas of their creations amusing. But, after seventy years, the complaints of their sibling gods had grown irksome. If the actions of unruly mortals threatened the pantheon, then

an extermination of these pests was the only possible response. The ge'oca seemed all too happy to oblige. An apocalypse was thrilling, but lasted only moments in the lifespan of gods. After that would be millennia of rebuilding. Millennia of boredom for the ge'ema in particular. Without the mortals, they would have nothing to do. The ge'ema would have to wait for beasts to rise from the mud, discover fire, learn to write poetry, and so forth. Thus, the ge'ema were faced with a decision between interminable dullness and reining in their creations.

They arrived at a solution that would preserve the world without limiting the mortals' capacity for entertainment.

The ge'ema asked the ge'gala and the ge'oca to raise an island at the center of the world. And they named that island Armistice.

To Armistice the gods gathered the rulers of every nation and city and order and guild, kings and queens, great warriors and scholar mages, and a handful of baffled village mayors. The gods saw no real difference between those who lorded over great armies and those who governed just a few wheat fields; all contained the potential to shake the world. Amongst the summoned, many were allies in the convoluted war that ravaged the continents. Many more were bitter enemies.

But in those first moments, hatreds were set aside as all cowered before the gods. At last, for a moment, there was peace. The rest of the pantheon sighed in relief while the ge'ema, always with a flair for the dramatic, prepared for their next act.

As the mortals watched, the ge'ema plucked a red feather from the tail of a phoenix. Then, the ge'ema plunged the smoldering tip of the quill into their own body, spilling out an Ink as black as the space between the stars.

“We mark each of you with your allegiance so your people will know you, and know each other, for we have marked them as well,” the ge’ema declared. “Your wars are over. Your killing is done. Except for here, in this place. For seven days, you will honor us with your brutal pursuits, away from the judgmental gaze of our siblings, the rest of the world preserved from your delightfully base inclinations. Instead of your hordes decimating the land, you will choose a party of four, and they will be your champions. They will wage war here, for us, and spare the rest of the world.”

The mortals watched as the Ink spread across their skin, staining them with symbols that they’d never seen yet somehow knew how to read.

“Those whose champions survive for seven days,” the ge’ema continued, “shall have a wish fit to change the world.”

--Record of the First Granting and Dawning of the Second Age

Lys Crodd, Scribe of the Dead Kingdom of Orvesis

--DRAMATIS PERSONAE--

Cortland Finiron, Hammer Master of the 12th Renown, Kingdom of Infinzel, in a vengeful mood

Laughing Monkey, Assassin of the 10th Renown, Brokerage of Blades, the subject of Cortland’s anger

Sleeping Kitty, Assassin of the 4th Renown, Brokerage of Blades, maimed

The 7th day of the 61st Granting, 60 AW (After War)

Armistice Island, Center Sea

The blue moon was up. That meant they were supposed to stop killing each other.

“Well,” Cortland Finiron said to himself. “Let’s hope there’s still time.”

He trudged through the moonlit forest, war hammer gripped in his meaty left hand. The air smelled strangely like cinnamon. Cortland realized the brittle red leaves that crunched under his boots emitted the spicy aroma. How had he not noticed that until now? Over the last week, there hadn’t been much time to take in the finer points of this year’s version of the island. The trees that dropped the leaves were pale and twisted things that looked like towers of campfire ash. The trunks were soft and came apart like spun sugar when struck, affording little cover when dodging crossbow bolts. He’d found that out the hard way. This part of the forest had been roughly used. At points, Cortland had to kick his way through knee-high drifts of disintegrated trees.

The gods made strange choices when it came to the nature on Armistice. Rejected ideas from the real world, Cortland thought. This forest of fragile trees and their aromatic leaves was better, at least, than the year when the Granting took place in a catacombs, damp and populated with menace. That had been Cortland’s first Granting. He would’ve stepped off a ledge into a bottomless chasm had it not been for the steadying hand of Ben Tuarez. Cortland still dreamt about dangling his foot into that nothingness. He woke up covered in sweat and grateful to Ben.

Ten years since that first time, he realized. Cortland had now survived ten of these contests.

He felt fresh Ink pooling on his chest, beneath his chromium-mesh armor. He’d reached his 12th level of renown. He sensed an alluring warmth and power in the new, shapeless Ink that now flowed against his torso. It whispered to him through his skin.

Your power has grown, Cortland Finiron. Do you desire a consultation with the symbologist?

“Not now,” Cortland barked, increasing his pace.

A rune must be chosen, Cortland Finiron.

“Give me more time, damn you. Here, on the island.”

Time manipulation is not within the purview of the Hammer Master.

“Piss off, then,” he snarled.

As you will.

The anger clouding his mind cleared for a moment and Cortland remembered his last visit with the symbologist. He had runes in mind. The woman he was after now, she preferred a hand-bow. He’d need to close with her fast.

“Bull Rush,” Cortland blurted. “Give me Bull Rush.”

Done.

Cortland felt the Ink slither into a new rune across his left pectoral. He could read the marks by feel, even this new and unfamiliar one. He could sense their meaning and knew instinctively what they would allow him to do. The swirls and slashes, the language of the ge’ema, would have looked like a complex tattoo to anyone who hadn’t been similarly marked, but to Cortland they read as simply as common words.

Cortland Finiron		Infinzel			12 th Renown	
Anvil’s Ring		Crevasse		Greater Shield		
		Destroy	Forge		Hammer Toss	
		Hammer Master			Weapon Return	
	Assess	Unmovable	Strength+	Bull Rush		

	Bolster	Will+		Recovery+		
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Cortland understood his new technique instinctively but would need to train with it more to understand all its possibilities. At least fresh Ink meant it was ready to use. He grimaced at how much of his other Ink had faded. A good night's sleep would restore him and he'd do that in his own bed, within the safety of Infinzel, where no one would try to cut his throat while he slept. He could turn back now and be home within the hour, teleported across the world by the will of the gods.

No. The blue moon might be up, but Ben Tuarez was dead. So, Cortland wasn't finished here.

"I know you're still listening," Cortland said. "Give me more time."

A breeze rustled the crimson leaves. The moon shone a little brighter.

He covered one nostril and blew out a snot glob. His fingers were caked with dried blood. His or someone else's? Didn't matter, really. His scalp and cheeks itched. He'd shaved his head and beard before the Granting like always, didn't want to give his enemies anything to grab if a fight got close. It'd been a week now and his thick, black hair was growing in on his cheeks, slower atop his head. Cortland had never been an attractive man, thickset and wide, and shorter than most men and many women. Vitt Secondson-Salvado said Cortland reminded him of a pit-dog whose owner had gotten drunk and shaved him as a joke. The comparison suited Cortland fine.

Cortland had invited Vitt along on this mission of vengeance. In fact, he had demanded Vitt come. He even gave a halting speech about what they owed to Ben Tuarez. But Vitt declined, saying there wasn't enough time before the blue moon to reach the Brokerage camp. And, anyway, what's done was done. They'd raise a drink for Ben back in Infinzel.

That smug royal-blood was just another burr on Cortland's asshole. Ben had saved that boy's life a time or two. Wasn't that worth more than a toast at some noble-level spirit compartment?

The fourth member of their party, Henry Blacksalve, had at least made a show of coming with Cortland. But the healer was spent, his Ink completely faded, and he'd been crying in unpredictable and abrupt jags since he'd failed to stop the blood spurting from Ben's neck. Cortland had patted the wispy healer on the shoulder hard enough to sit him down, then went off on his own.

Cortland's knuckles popped loud enough that he half bent into a crouch, thinking it was a crossbow bolt. He'd been squeezing the handle of his hammer.

Would the gods teleport the other two back to Infinzel without him? Under Ben's command, their party always left together. One of his rules was to never split up. Ben wouldn't have wanted Cortland to do this. *Not going to bring me back*, the older man would've said. *Your responsibility is to the king.*

Cortland pressed on, regardless. He had made note of where the Brokerage were camped when the island's map had been drafted, like he did with all the important players. He'd found it unusual that the Brokerage had chosen a location so close to Infinzel's own. His gut told him that was trouble and, sure enough, the assassins attacked on the third day.

Their camp came into view now, a small clearing amidst the ghostly trees that the Brokerage had made no attempt to secure because they never intended to stay put. Cortland picked up speed like a boulder rolling downhill.

A man lay sprawled in the grass wearing a painted wooden mask that resembled a drowsy cat. He had his right arm tucked up against his chest. Cortland could tell by the mess of blood and the sloppy

tourniquet that he'd lost a hand. Even so, Sleeping Kitty was alert enough to click his tongue at the woman leaning over him.

Laughing Monkey stood up and turned to face Cortland. He grunted. She was the one he wanted, the one who'd stuck an arrow in Ben Tuarez's eye and then a second in his neck. The grinning simian face painted on the woman's mask only made Cortland angrier. She was taller than him, slender and toned, wearing a high-necked suit of ward-weave silk in a light gray shade that matched the trees. He wondered how many outfits she'd brought with her to assure that kind of camouflage. She didn't look any worse for the week on the island, her shoulder-length dark hair nearly arranged around the infuriating mask, not a strand out of place.

"I wondered why we're still here," Laughing Monkey said, her voice airy and sweet. "The gods must owe you a favor, Cortland Finiron."

Cortland stopped thirty feet away. "You killed a good man," he said.

She scratched the top of her head like a confused chimp. "You'll have to be more specific."

"You know damn well...!" Cortland started at a shout, but knew he shouldn't let his temper get away from him. That was just what this woman expected. So, he chose his words with more care. "I'm here to bash your head in, cunt."

Laughing Monkey wiggled her fingers at the sky. "A little late for all these histrionics, isn't it? And besides, do you mean to tell me you haven't killed any good men on this island? After all these years?"

"I'd offer anyone who wants it the chance to settle scores."

"I'd do you the same courtesy, little man. But you showed up late."

Cortland eyed the Ink on the woman’s throat, the mark of her allegiance. A sideways dagger, curved like a smile, dripping coins instead of blood. On Cortland’s own neck, his Ink took the shape of a pyramid that resembled the city of Infinzel. His loyalty was to the pyramidal city; hers to murder for hire.

“How does a person like you get made?” Cortland asked. “A killer for coin. To have no higher calling than that.”

The behanded man in the Sleeping Kitty mask tittered. He and Laughing Monkey exchanged a glance. The leather grip on Cortland’s hammer squeaked as his grip tightened.

“Maybe one day you’ll be so lucky as to find out,” she replied.

Cortland activated **[Assess]**, felt the tingling sensation on his chest as his Ink went to work. A glow that was visible only to Cortland radiated off Laughing Monkey, letting him read the Ink symbols hidden by her silk.

Laughing Monkey		Brokerage of Blades			10 th Renown	
					Scattershot	
			Deadeye	Trajectory		
	Fear	Assassin			Shadow Step	
	Assess	Vision+	Agility+	Speed+		
	Immunity+			Body Control		Camouflage

The Ink that worried him most – the symbols that would let her make use of that hand-bow holstered at her hip – was faded. She would be fast and slippery, but Cortland sensed she was fatigued from the last week. Even her **[Speed+]** had faded, which meant she’d pushed too hard. The assassins were always busy on the island. Blue moon be damned, he might never get an opportunity like this

again. Her style was hiding and striking from a distance. Next time, now that he'd made his intentions known, she would see him coming and disappear, or else make a pincushion of his back.

With a grunt, Cortland started forward.

"Ah," Laughing Monkey said, "so you aren't all talk. I suppose a little dancing couldn't hurt. Either way it goes won't be satisfying for you."

Sleeping Kitty scooted backward in the dirt to give them space, moaning as he jostled his stump. Cortland pounded his hammer twice against the silver buckler he wore on his forearm, a combat superstition. He'd expected the assassin to take a shot at him before he closed the distance, but instead of the hand-bow she drew the delicately crafted rapier that swung from her other hip. She wasn't even taking this seriously enough to use her primary weapon.

"I've been training swordplay," she explained, as if reading his mind. "A girl must have a hobby."

With a dancer's grace, she hopped forward before Cortland could finish his approach. Her jab with the rapier was a lazy thing and Cortland swatted it aside with his buckler. He rumbled in closer, swinging his hammer down between the painted monkey's googly eyes. She brought her rapier around for some fancy duelist's parry, but Cortland's hammer smashed through. He heard her breath catch at the vibrations that ran up her arm.

Laughing Monkey backpedaled. "Get it out, then," she said. "You'll feel better when the anger's spent."

Cortland growled and swung again, but this time Laughing Monkey spun aside. She flicked her rapier and scratched him across the cheek when she just as easily could've had his eye.

"You play games with me," Cortland snapped, pounding his hammer against his buckler in frustration.

“Yes,” she replied, rolling her shoulders. “Isn’t that what we’re doing here?”

Cortland dropped his stance and reached for the new power etched across his chest. He activated **[Bull Rush]**. His compact body shot forward like he’d been loosed from a crossbow, his shoulder aimed right for Laughing Monkey’s sternum. Her rapier dragged across his side as they collided, the tip harmlessly gouging his armor. Cortland felt the wind leave her as they careened backward, into and through one of the powdery tree trunks, exploding to the ground on the other side in a cloud of dust and falling crimson leaves.

Laughing Monkey tried to twist out from under him, but Cortland had too much bulk. He straddled her midsection and brought his hammer down on her mask. Wood splintered and Cortland could see the woman’s wide green eye through the crack. Without hesitation, he plunged his hammer down again.

His arm felt like it was moving through quicksand. Instead of the satisfying crunch of a killing blow, the spiked head of Cortland’s hammer stalled inches from Laughing Monkey’s eye. No matter how much force he applied, Cortland couldn’t bring the weapon any closer. An invisible force rebuffed him.

The will of the gods. No killing was allowed between factions except during the Granting. And that had ended with the rising of the blue moon.

“Were you worried, sister?” Sleeping Kitty yelled, an edge of hysteria in his voice. Cortland barely heard the wounded man, the blood rushing through his ears was so loud.

“I won’t lie, I’m sweating a bit,” Laughing Monkey replied. She reached up and dabbed Cortland’s cut cheek, holding up her fingers so he could see the greenish-black substance that mixed with his blood. “My poison. Leaked right out from your wound. The gods protect us both, as ever.”

Cortland roared and buried the head of his hammer in the earth next to her head. Laughing Monkey didn't flinch. In fact, she writhed under him in a way that made Cortland uncomfortable. She reached up again, this time grabbing the back of his head and pulling him close.

"I love an uncurious man," she said. "So much pleasure to be had in setting their wheels to spinning."

"Let go of me," Cortland growled. Though he could have easily freed himself, he didn't.

"Your ageless king of the grand city Infinzel has no doubt made many enemies across his unnaturally long years," she continued. "Thus, you must assume that the contract was put out on him. That we were paid to weaken your liege's wish by killing one of his champions. That's what you think, yes?"

Cortland said nothing. It was Sleeping Kitty who spoke. "Sister, you say too much..."

"But perhaps, Cortland Finiron, our contract wasn't for your king at all," she continued. "Perhaps we were paid for your dear friend Ben Tuarez specifically. I wonder what you might do, were that the case."

Cortland's ridge of eyebrows buckled together. Ben was a hero of Infinzel. One of the kindest men he'd known.

"What are you saying?" Cortland asked quietly. "Who hired you?"

"Come to the Beach of Blades, pin me down just like this, and perhaps I will tell you."

The air shifted, whooshing in to fill the space where Laughing Monkey had been. She was gone, teleported away from the island by the gods. Without her body beneath him, Cortland lost his balance

and pitched forward onto his hands. His fingers sifted through the soft debris of the tree they'd smashed through. He glanced over his shoulder, knowing before he did that Sleeping Kitty was gone too.

"You bastards love a dramatic exit," Cortland muttered.

Cortland stood up and brushed himself off. He took one last look around. Through the ghostly trees, the horizon appeared dark in a way that didn't quite make sense, as if a tide of shadow was rising up to consume the island. Cortland had never lingered this long after a Granting. All of this would be gone soon, wiped away like a chalk drawing and replaced in a year's time by some new wilderness of the bizarre.

"I hate this place," Cortland said, knowing the gods were listening.

When they did not respond, he trudged back toward his own camp, ready to be teleported home. He had a friend to bury.

The Ink spread across the world in the space of a breath. The gods had peered into the hearts of every creature that walked and talked, and pulled forth their truest allegiance. The mortals were thus marked with a symbol in Ink, positioned neatly across the throat. A warm sensation at the touch of the gods, there and gone, the Ink left behind.

Most found themselves marked by the symbol of a place. Loyalty to home and country, to the town where one was born, to the land one relied upon, to the army one fought for. A simple and clean allegiance. The warriors of Orvesis were marked with a blackbird, while their enemies in Infinzel were marked with a pyramid.

Some who had pledged their service to one of the world's great armies found their loyalty abruptly called into question. For how could one truly fight for Orvesis if marked by the symbol of the conquered cities of Ruchet or Noyega?

Others, like the oca'em who ruled over the oceans and the trolkin who prowled the northern tundra were marked all the same, ignoring the differences between pods and tribes. They were marked as a species, their greatest allegiance to their own kind, much in opposition to their more numerous and fractured human cousins.

On some, the Ink marked a person's loyalty not to a place, but to a guild. The gadgeteers of Crucifalia. The scholars of the Magelab. The breeders of Besaden.

Finally, there were those who found their Ink take shape in ways that didn't yet make sense, who were loyal to ideas not rooted in cities or passed through blood or organized into guilds. They would spend the years that followed in search of one another, trying to find those whose ways were similar to their own.

And then, rarest of all, were those whose true allegiance even the gods could not discern.

--Record of the First Granting and Dawning of the Second Age

Lyus Crodd, Scribe of the Dead Kingdom of Orvesis

--DRAMATIS PERSONAE--

Uicha de Orak, a young man of no renown, village of Ambergran, slightly too old to be considered an orphan

Johan Steadyhand, a man of no renown, village of Ambergran, manager of Uicha's farm

Tabitha Gentlerain, Quill of Ambergran, bearer of bad news

Wish Day, 1 New Summer, 61 AW.

The village of Ambergran, North Continent

300 days until the next Granting.

Uicha de Orak awoke to farmhands shouting outside his window. The Quill had reappeared that morning by her lonesome. That meant bad news. She'd summoned everyone in the village to the meeting house.

None of the farmhands bothered to knock on the door to tell Uicha. He hadn't left the main house in more than a week and hadn't ventured off the property in even longer than that. He'd hardly cleaned himself and ate only when the need became too powerful to ignore. At first, some of his

neighbors had brought by food – savory pies and loaves of bread, so that he wouldn't have to cook for himself. Those visits had long tailed off and lately Uicha had made a diet of stale bread, beans, and the occasional egg.

There was bad news, though. Bad news for someone else. Bad news for the town. That lit something in Uicha. The dark cloud that had been pressing down upon him these last weeks lifted ever so lightly.

Misery loved company.

Uicha washed up with cold water and pulled on some fresh clothes. He had to tighten his belt a notch. He'd always been gangly, but now his shirt felt extra loose in the sleeves.

Outside, the morning was clear and sunny. The farmstead was quiet. The dozen farmhands that ostensibly worked for Uicha had already headed into town. Uicha saddled his horse, Clipper, an easygoing roan pony. He'd never taken to riding, but Clipper was gentle and made things simple. He pranced happily once Uicha was atop him.

"Missed me?" Uicha asked, his voice scratchy.

Without waiting for Uicha to dig his heels in, Clipper cantered up the road toward town.

Wish Day was typically a time of celebration. A feast in the town square where every farmstead contributed something. Enough kegs of beer to keep the farmhands drunk all day. Fireworks if the town coffers could support them. Yet, as he rode into town, Uicha thought the streamers hung across the thoroughfare didn't seem as colorful this year, the decorations like an afterthought. Usually, the morning air on Wish Day would smell of fresh baked pies, but the ovens had been cold since dawn. It was as if the people of Ambergran had anticipated a failed Granting and, as one, decided not to bother.

The hitching posts outside the meeting house were full, so Uicha led Clipper around the side to tie him to a tree. That's where he found the Quill of Ambergran doubled over and puking into the dirt.

The village of Ambergran hadn't bothered electing a mayor or governor in decades, preferring instead to handle matters as a community. But only one could wield the Quill and represent the village at the Granting, so Tabitha Gentlerain had been chosen. She owned one of the largest farmsteads in the village and everyone agreed she had a good head on her shoulders. Along with Tabitha, they sent a party to the Granting comprised of two sword masters of middling renown, a decent archer, and the town's only healer. They were farmers in Ambergran, not fighters. But they played by the rules. Every year, they wished for nothing more elaborate than a bountiful harvest, as they'd been instructed to do by the Ministry of Sulk. To wish for a bountiful harvest was to avoid ruffling the feathers of any great power and it was supposed to assure the Ministry's protection on the island.

Uicha studiously ignored Tabitha and her puking as he tied up Clipper. When he turned back, the Quill had straightened up and was gazing at him with glass eyes.

"Morning," she said, wiping her mouth.

"Hello," Uicha replied.

Tabitha glanced up at the sun, like she was trying to determine the time. Then, she gestured to the building. "Suppose we better get started."

She doubled over again.

Uicha headed inside. His neighbors didn't pay him much attention. Looking around, he saw long, pale faces, tight-lipped mouths, and red-rimmed eyes. Toward the back of the room, Uicha recognized his own farmhands occupying a couple pews. Johan Steadyhand, central among them, raised a meaty hand and beckoned Uicha over. Sighing, Uicha squeezed in next to him.

“Good to see you out of bed, boss,” Johan said in a way that suggested otherwise. They sat shoulder-to-shoulder and it felt to Uicha like Johan was putting weight on him.

Muscular Johan with his thinning blonde hair and tobacco stained teeth. Although Johan was twice his age, Uicha was technically the man’s employer. Johan oversaw operations on Uicha’s farm, which Uicha had inherited two months back when his parents had died of the pink pox. He was mean and a drunk, but to Johan’s credit he kept the farm running while Uicha couldn’t be bothered. Uicha had overhead talk amongst the other hands that Johan intended to petition for ownership of Uicha’s land, citing the boy’s careless stewardship. Should the red-faced bully ever figure out the paperwork, Uicha had no notion of defending against his claim. He could have the gods damned place.

“I saw Tabitha throwing up outside,” Uicha said, feeling like he had to say something. “Any idea what’s happened?”

Johan grunted and gestured to the front rows, where a few families were already huddled together and crying. “Champions are dead,” he said. “All of them.”

Uicha blinked. That was worse than he’d even expected. In all his sixteen years, Uicha couldn’t remember Ambergran losing many people to the Granting. There were a few spread out across the years. Men who attempted to make a name for themselves as more than farmers dabbling at combat. Fools caught up in the crossfire of grander battles. Cautionary tales. Never all of them at once.

For a moment, Uicha felt an odd sense of gladness at the village’s collective grief, as if these people had finally joined him in mourning.

“What’re you smirking for?” Johan growled.

Uicha put his hands on his face, cheeks suddenly hot. “I didn’t realize I was.”

Tabitha finally entered, ascending the rickety stage at the meeting hall's front. They held votes for the yearly budget here and sometimes hosted traveling troupes of actors and musicians. There was also a Wish Day talent show. One year, Uicha's father had won for his demonstration of knife juggling.

"As I'm sure you've figured, the Granting did not go well for us," Tabitha began. Her shoulders drooped, but she forced herself to make eye contact with the wet eyes in the front row.

"There's a fucking understatement," Johan hissed in Uicha's ear.

"The Orvesian Witnesses declared a wish that... that is contrary to the life we've built here in Ambergran," Tabitha continued. "Our party... our friends and neighbors... they fought valiantly against them. But they were all lost."

A chill went through Uicha at the mention of the Witnesses and he could tell that he wasn't alone. They had set up camp on the southern border of Ambergran almost a year ago, shortly after the previous Granting. The fields they'd chosen were fallow and abandoned, outside of Ambergran's gods given territory. The drylands seemed to suit the Witnesses just fine. They were the remnants of a dead kingdom to the south. Lessons about Orvesis at Ambergran's schoolhouse were more like ghost stories than history, but Uicha understood that the Orvesians had nearly conquered the entire continent in the time before Grantings. Nowadays, they appeared collectively mired in perpetual mourning. The Witnesses coated their pale bodies with stripes of ash and wore elaborate costumes of black feathers and dark furs, even in the summer months. There were about 300 of them camped out there, but they hadn't done anything besides lurk around the edges of town like vacant-eyed blackbirds, so the official position of Ambergran had been to wait and see and hope they'd move on.

"What does that mean, Tabitha? Contrary to life?" someone shouted.

"Speak plainly, woman!" yelled someone else. "How was the party lost?"

“How were they lost?” Tabitha repeated the question, blinking as she did. It wasn’t like her to not speak plainly. Uicha sensed she’d been trying to break the news gently, but now something in her snapped. “How were they...? They were butchered, Marcus. Should I go into more detail here, in front of the mourning families and friends? Shall I describe how the Orvesians have a Quill who is also a champion? How he fights like a madman, with magic and blade? Would you hear how his weapon drained the life from our champions and made them old before my eyes? Shall I...?”

Tabitha trailed off as the room stilled, even the crying. Most looked down at their hands, or pulled a loved one closer. Uicha stared straight ahead, at least until Johan leaned over to him.

“They were weak sisters,” he whispered. “I knew I should’ve volunteered to take the Ink. I said as much to your father, but he convinced me to stay on. Said he wouldn’t be able to run the place without me.”

That was the first Uicha had heard of Johan taking the Ink. Sure, he was known to kick around some farmhands when he’d had too much to drink, but Johan had never impressed as more than an unskilled yet enthusiastic brawler. At the mention of his father, Uicha’s eyes filled with water and slipped out of focus.

In truth, Uicha always suspected that his mother and father were better fighters than anyone else in the village. They had been pirates with the Flamingo Islands Armada before they'd grown tired of the lifestyle and retired to Ambergran. Uicha couldn't imagine trading daring heists on the high seas for life on the farm, but his parents didn't seem to miss it. When he asked them once why they hadn't volunteered for Ambergran's party, his parents had shared a look. Then, his mother said, "well, they never asked."

How had a couple of Central Sea pirates even heard of Ambergran?

“Why, from a man we kidnapped,” his mother had told him. “He missed his home badly and told us such wonderful stories. After we ransomed him, we had to see it for ourselves.”

This man they’d ransomed had never come home to Ambergran to provide a recommendation, so his parents were greeted with skepticism when they’d sauntered into the village and bought up a farmstead at auction. The locals made noise about not honoring the contract. His parents spent months living out of the inn, negotiating clauses and parceling out bribes. Every sunset, his father walked the land barefoot, wiggling his toes in the dirt. Eventually their Ink changed, the marks on their necks one day morphing from the unlocked treasure chest of the Flamingo Islands to the wheat stalk of Ambergran. The gods had recognized this village as their home, and so there was nothing else the locals could do to hold up the sale.

“Farming is like stealing from the land,” his father liked to say. “And, my boy, this land has deep pockets.”

Uicha had the mark of Ambergran upon him too, although he’d tried walking around barefoot and only scraped the soles of his feet. He was long-limbed and umber-skinned in a place where all the other children were stout-bodied and sunburnt. His parents had each other and their precious farmstead. Uicha longed for something more.

They had never even taken Uicha to see the ocean. Uicha used to beg his parents for stories of their exploits, of the faraway places that they’d seen, even just to show him how to tie some complicated knots. Sometimes, they relented and told him of the lavish coastal castles of the fourteen merchant families, and how they invited the pirates of the islands to try their best to rob them during every solstice, made a game of the cat-and-mouse. Mostly, though, they told Uicha that stories would have to wait. There were chores to do.

There were always more chores to do.

And now they were gone, all those stories left untold. Taken by the pink pox, a disease that most children got young in Ambergran and so developed an immunity for. But it was lethal in adults and not something that got passed around on the islands. Uicha had been sick, too, but had recovered with just a network of oval scars across his back. His parents had died quick, itchy and feverish, not cracking any of their jokes, their jaws locked up so they couldn't even squeeze out goodbye. They might have survived had the healer not been away, part of Ambergran's party, off exploring the wilds to build his renown and increase his Ink.

A lot of good that had done when faced with the Witnesses. The man had failed Uicha as town healer and he had now failed all of Ambergran as one of the champions. That felt like a bit of justice to Uicha, but he grimaced as his own eyes cleared and he spotted the healer's small daughters sobbing in the front row. There was no fairness in that, Uicha decided.

"What about the Sulkies?" someone asked Tabitha. "They're supposed to protect us!"

"The Ministry tried to intervene on our behalf and did kill two of the Orvesians," Tabitha said. "But the Ministry suffered losses of their own and... well, we weren't their only priority."

Johan snorted. Uicha half-expected the man to declare that he'd once been offered knighthood with the Ministry of Sulk but had turned it down because he loved farming so much. This time, though, Johan kept his mouth shut. His knee bobbed aggressively, vibrating the pew under Uicha.

"If only two of the Witnesses survived, that means their wish is only half strength!" a woman near the front declared, her voice shaking with a desperate optimism.

"What are they after?" someone else asked. "If they want ownership of those southern plots, they didn't need to kill for them..."

Farmland. These people thought everything boiled down to farmland. Uicha leaned forward, sensing by the way the veins in Tabitha's forehead pulsed that she was finally going to deliver the news. It would be worse than anyone in here imagined and a small part of Uicha was glad for that.

"What was their wish, Tabitha?" a tired-sounding man asked. "Out with it, already."

"Annihilation," she said. Tabitha's hands trembled, so she put them behind her back. "They wished for our annihilation."

[3]

--DRAMATIS PERSONAE--

Uicha de Orak, a young man of no renown, village of Ambergran, facing one hell of a coin flip

Johan Steadyhand, a man of no renown, village of Ambergran, suddenly brave

Tabitha Gentlerain, Quill of Ambergran, with more news to come

Battar Crodd, Death Knight of the 13th Renown and Quill of the Orvesian Witnesses, a wish soon to be granted

Wish Day, 1 New Summer, 61 AW.

The village of Ambergran, North Continent

300 days until the next Granting.

There was screaming, of course, although less than Uicha might have expected. The farmers of Ambergran were a stolid people. Some immediately bolted from the meeting hall, parents hustling away with their young children. There would be a story later about a father who had tried slicing the mark of Ambergran off his wife and children with a paring knife, the whole family bleeding out before annihilation even came. But then, there would be a lot of grim tales about that day.

“How long do we have?” someone asked.

Tabitha shook her head ruefully. “Midday,” she said. “Or thereabouts.”

Uicha remembered the way Tabitha had looked up at the sun when he'd seen her before. Estimating the time until half the village was killed. He wondered if maybe she shouldn't have told them at all.

The shouting and wailing grew now, more people fleeing the meeting hall, as if putting a time to the wish made the thing more real. The people of Ambergran had only a couple hours left. Or thereabouts.

Uicha stayed planted with Johan and the farmhands. Johan breathed fiercely through his nose, like a storm was rising inside him. It didn't seem like much more needed to be said, but Tabitha raised her hands and shouted to be heard above the commotion.

"The Orvesian Quill said they'd accept volunteers! Anyone who would... well, anyone who would step forward to spare another... that option is open to you. The Orvesians will be waiting in the southern fields."

The odds were fifty-fifty. A coin flip for survival. Better odds than his parents got, anyway. Uicha flinched when Johan clapped a hand on his thin shoulder.

"I'm going back to the farm, boss," he said, the last word dripping with contempt. "And then I'm heading out to face those dirt-smear'd bastards. I'll give them a volunteer. Gods won't stop me."

"You...?" Uicha squinted. "You're going to try fighting them?"

"Don't suppose you want to join, eh?"

"What would be the point?" Uicha asked earnestly.

Johan snorted, then snapped to his feet with enough force to knock Uicha to the side. He and the farmhands stormed out, everyone leaving as a mass now, pushing and shoving at the doors. Uicha stayed fastened to his pew.

He could not believe that he was going to die in this place. He'd never even liked it here.

And then he was alone, except for Tabitha. The Quill shuffled around, resetting the pews that had been knocked over as their neighbors rushed out. She stopped in front of him.

"You keeping it together, Uicha?"

He was surprised that she knew his name. "I'd been thinking I might leave town," Uicha said, his mouth dry. "Just hadn't figured out where I would go. Maybe back to my parents' people. Don't suppose that's a possibility now, is it?"

"You might get there yet," Tabitha said. "There's a chance."

"They wouldn't know me, either," Uicha replied. He pushed a hand through the shock of unkempt hair atop his head, then looked down at the floor. There was that old darkness again. The same hopeless feeling that had kept him lingering around the farm like a ghost. Uicha was more than ready to sink back into that place. He'd already been annihilated.

"You could come with me to meet the Orvesians," Tabitha said, an odd warmth in her invitation. Uicha looked up at her, blinking. "You southerners believe that our souls join the gods when we die, right? You might be reunited with your parents that way. It would be an act of real heroism, Uicha."

Uicha said nothing. Tabitha had just suggested that he kill himself. As conversations with his elders went, this was at least an honest one. He understood clearly how the people of Ambergran viewed him. A broken boy, an outsider in his home, who could be sacrificed for someone more productive.

“We never believed in soul unification,” Uicha said at last. “That’s only Crucifalia. And I’m not a southerner. I was born here.”

“Of course. Yes, of course, I’m sorry,” Tabitha said. She shoved both her hands through her hair as if she might pull it out. “Don't listen to me. I'm already lost.”

Tabitha stumbled out of the meeting hall after that. From outside, Uicha could hear the clatter of wagon wheels and rumble of hooves. People were fleeing, as if they could somehow outrun a wish granted by the gods.

Uicha decided to go home. He'd lay in his bed and wait for the result of the coin flip. He hoped it would at least be quick.

On the way back, he kept Clipper to an easy trot. A few groups of farmers passed him in a rush, cursing at him to get off the road, but mostly Uicha was alone with the swaying fields of wheat. Whoever was left would need to harvest soon.

As the farmstead came into view, so did Johan and a handful of the other hands. Five of them, in total, ones who Uicha recognized as carousers and toughs, the ones without families. They were all on horseback, riding out hard, but at a raised hand from Johan they stopped in front of Uicha. They'd armed themselves with pitchforks and axes and crossbows.

“Last chance to become a man, boss,” Johan declared. “I don’t give a shit about the Granting or their gods damned wish. The Orvesians won’t have this place without a fight.”

“You won’t be able to hurt them, though,” Uicha replied. “The gods won’t allow it.”

“The gods pissed on Orvesis once, didn’t they? Why not again?” Johan replied with a ferocious grin. “We aren’t going to just curl up and take it, yeah? If we’re going out, it’ll be like the warriors of old. Isn’t that right, boys?”

Johan turned to receive a response from his followers that ranged from bloodthirsty to drunken to half-hearted. Uicha didn't care about this. He would've let them ride off into futility, except when Johan had turned in the saddle Uicha had noticed the scimitar strapped to his back, the sheath wrapped in ribbons of yellow and green silk.

"That's not your sword," Uicha said.

Johan's smile faded as he returned his gaze to Uicha. "A fine weapon like this isn't doing any good stashed away in a closet."

So, his head farmhand had been rummaging around in the main house. Vaguely, Uicha wondered how long that had been going on. "It's my mother's sword," Uicha said flatly. "Give it back."

Johan clicked his tongue and his horse moved closer, so that he was right alongside Uicha. He reached out and put a firm hand on Uicha's shoulder. "Before we ride off to battle, I have a confession," Johan said quietly. "I think often of your mother."

"Oh," Uicha said, taken aback by the sudden sentimentality. "So do I."

Some of the other hands snickered. Johan's mad grin returned, flaring across his face. "Not the way I do, boy," he said with a laugh. "Those swaying hips and those silk robes just a bit too short!" He made a sucking noise with his mouth that made Uicha's stomach twist. "Anyway."

And with that, his fingers dug into Uicha's shoulder. Johan easily hoisted him from his saddle and tossed him to the ground. Uicha hit the hard-packed dirt road with a crunch, the air flying from his lungs. He had the presence of mind to curl up and cover his head as the horses galloped around him.

"We'll sort out the property rights when I'm done saving the town!" Johan shouted over his shoulder.

The farmhands charged south. By the time Uicha regained his wind and dragged himself onto his knees, he could see only a dust cloud to mark their trail. Clipper had stayed close, staring down at Uicha sympathetically.

“Bastard...” Uicha said, the word tasting like bile. He felt a crushing sensation in his ribs and a loose, jangling pain in his shoulder. Despite that, he unsteadily climbed to his feet, leaning against Clipper for a moment to make sure nothing else hurt. If the Orvesians were going to annihilate him anyway, it didn’t much matter what condition his body was in. It didn’t much matter what happened to his mother’s sword, either, but Uicha couldn’t tolerate the disrespect from that fat-headed yokel Johan. This damned village had stolen so much from him already.

With a groan, he climbed back atop Clipper and gave chase.

Johan and the other farmhands outpaced him. When Uicha arrived at the southern edge of Ambergran, the confrontation with the Orvesians had already begun. The Witnesses weren’t a new sight to Uicha – they’d been lurking around the edges of Ambergran for the last year – but he pulled up short when he saw all of them massed. Some 300 Orvesian Witnesses stood in tight ranks across the burnt brown grass of the untended fields beyond Ambergran. In their feathers and furs, they clogged the road south. There would be no escape from Ambergran in this direction. The Orvesians were quiet, almost somber, as they gazed as one in the direction of the village.

One Witness stood apart from the rest. Like all the others, his head was shaved and patterned with stripes of ash. He was of average height but prodigiously muscled. He wore a loose fitting caftan, decorated in raven feathers and unbuttoned down the front, revealing the swirls and symbols of his Ink. The Orvesian had more Ink than Uicha had ever seen on an Ambergran champion. He suspected this must be the Quill who also fought as a champion, the one who had offered to accept volunteers for annihilation.

Johan had apparently made that deduction, too, because he stood with Uicha's mother's sword pressed to the Orvesian's throat. Yet, Johan was the one screaming.

Uicha dismounted and stumbled forward. Focused as he'd been on the Orvesians, he hadn't immediately noticed the small crowd of villagers gathered by the roadside. They were mostly older, grandfathers and grandmothers, although Uicha saw Tabitha among them. So these were the ones who would accept the Orvesian bargain and sacrifice themselves so their children might survive.

Tabitha noticed Uicha and sucked in a sharp breath. She tried to put herself in his way.

"Go home, Uicha," the Quill said. "I wasn't thinking before. You're so young. I never meant for you to—"

He brushed her aside. "Not here for that."

Uicha tried to walk straight and proud, but the pain in his ribs kept him hunched as he made a beeline for Johan and Orvesian. The farmhands that had ridden out with Johan passed him by Uicha, retreating in the other direction, none of them meeting his eye. Johan kept screaming, but the fight had apparently gone out of these others and now they seemed driven to get as far away as possible.

Sweat soaked the back of Johan's shirt. Veins popped on his neck and forearms. Uicha got close enough to see that the scimitar was stuck in the air just an inch from the Orvesian's neck. Try as he might, Johan couldn't bring the blade any closer. The gods protected the Orvesian and no amount of Johan's farmhand strength or foolhardy bluster would change that.

The Orvesian's eyes flicked to Uicha and the boy stopped a few feet away. He smiled faintly, then moved his head to regard Johan as if only just noticing him.

"Too sad by ten to see a man waste what might be his last moments in futile struggle," the Orvesian said. "Here. Allow me."

The Orvesian sidled forward just enough to drag his own throat across the scimitar, drawing a thin line of blood. Johan bellowed with renewed frustration. Even now, he couldn't truly bring the blade any closer to a fatal cut.

"There, there," said the Orvesian. "Now you can at least say you drew blood."

Uicha realized he had been stood there entranced. His mother had kept her blade surprisingly sharp and the edge shone in the midday sun. The sight of the Orvesian's blood dripping across the weapon disgusted him. He lunged forward and struck Johan on the elbow. The scimitar fell from his grip and sliced into the dirt between them.

Johan rounded on him, eyes wide with fury. He cocked his fist back and Uicha braced himself because, unlike the Orvesian, Johan would be able to hurt him as badly as he liked. But then, the farmhand hesitated.

"Boy," he growled, "what have you done to yourself?"

Uicha didn't understand the question and before he could muster a response, there was a shimmer in the air. A sizzling sensation like just before a stroke of lightning. A power so vast that it could be discerned only by how the rest of the world seemed to bend around it. Uicha and Johan both stumbled backward, although the Orvesian remained unmoved.

There was a god among them.

"Battar Crodd, you have wished for the annihilation of Ambergran."

To Uicha, the ge'ema's voice was like the tolling of bells. He had no doubt everyone nearby could hear just as clearly as him. The god's shape itself was impossible to grasp, a bending of light that Uicha's mind couldn't interpret. The god was more presence than anything else, like the sensation of heat rising up from a kettle.

“Yes,” Crodd replied, unfazed by this encounter with the impossible. “I would say a few words first.”

“You test our patience, Battar Crodd,” the god replied. Although the words sounded like a rebuke, Uicha thought he heard amusement in the sonorous voice, like a teacher forced to keep a straight face after a wisecrack from the class clown.

The Orvesian held up his hands. Unnecessary, as all eyes were already on him, or at least the barely perceptible entity at his side. “People of Ambergran, I have wished for your annihilation,” Crodd declared, like he was ordering stew at a tavern. “The gods allow this. They could stop me, but they choose not to. You few who have gathered here have come as brave sacrifices or foolish warriors, hoping to have some say in your fate. If not for the rules and whims of these blasted gods, you might even be able to stop me. Why do we honor the games of these invisible tyrants? A question for you survivors to ponder, in the year to come.”

“Survivors?” It was Tabitha who spoke up, coming forward haltingly, half-bent toward Crodd and the god. “You said... you said that we could give ourselves over...”

“Alas, Tabitha, that wasn’t part of my wish,” Crodd said. He tilted his head toward the gods. “And I’m not allowed mercy now, am I? Can I choose the half who die and the half who live? Could I take back my wish entirely? Having seen the bravery of Ambergran, I’ve actually changed my mind. Could we call the whole thing off?”

“No,” the god replied. “We cannot.”

“Well,” Crodd said with a shrug. “Get on with it then.”

Suddenly, there was dirt in Uicha’s eyes.

No, not dirt.

That was Johan.

He caught only the briefest glimpse of the farmhand in his last moments close to whole. It was as if someone had created a replica of Johan's body made from fine grains of sand. The details were amazing, right down to the frozen look of confused horror.

And then a gentle breeze blew across the field and Johan's head crumbled away.

Tabitha wailed, keening and loud and endlessly. She'd survived the coin flip. So had some of the others. And some were piles of dirt.

But it wasn't just the people. Half the trees, half the crops, half the buildings – half of all that once was Ambergran blew away on the wind. The day became prematurely dark. Uicha hadn't realized that his mouth was hanging open until he tasted bitter soot on his tongue. He wondered which of his neighbors that had been.

A hand clasped him on the shoulder. Battar Crodd.

"Yours, I assume," the Orvesian said.

Blinking, Uicha accepted his mother's scimitar from the Orvesian. He tried to turn away, but Battar held him.

"A timely trick you pulled," Crodd said.

"What do you mean?" Uicha managed to ask.

Crodd clapped his hand against the side of Uicha's neck. "Your Ink is gone, young man. Dropped your allegiance to this place, just in the nick of time."

Uicha swatted Crodd's hand away without thinking. "I didn't... I didn't mean to."

“Not many who can change what’s in their hearts. Even fewer yet who can go completely blank.” Crodd smiled at him, interest gleaming in what Uicha only now noticed were the man’s startling blue eyes. “I wonder what the bastard gods will write upon you next.”

[4]

Confronted by the gods themselves, King Mudt of Orvesis was the first of the mortals to recover his wits. He spied King Hectore of Infinzel kneeling in awe only ten feet away. Though their countries had been at war for decades, Mudt had never actually seen Hectore Salvado in the flesh. He'd heard rumors of the preposterous girth of Infinzel's king, who hid behind the walls of his pyramidal city while Mudt scoured the land beyond with his warbands, leading from the front, as a king should.

"You are fatter than I imagined!" Mudt bellowed. He drew his knife and flung himself at the wet-eyed King of Infinzel, who barely had time to tumble backward onto his prodigious backside.

And yet, Mudt found himself unable to strike what was a sure killing blow. His arm went numb as he stabbed against an invisible force that shielded King Hectore. If Mudt had been a more observant man, he would have noticed how King Hectore's eyes changed, fear hardening into something else as the fat king watched his lifelong nemesis try to knife him.

"There will be no killing between factions," the ge'ema declared. "If you must do murder, King Mudt, we allow you only to murder your own. But be forewarned, at the end of a knife, they may not stay yours for long."

--Record of the First Granting and Dawning of the Second Age

Lys Crodd, Scribe of the Dead Kingdom of Orvesis

--DRAMATIS PERSONAE--

Cortland Finiron, Hammer Master of the 12th Renown, Kingdom of Infinzel, up before the dawn

King Cizco Salvado, Quill of Infinzel, Kingdom of Infinzel, noticing some grays

An assortment of prospects of the Garrison

2 New Summer, 61 AW

The pyramidal city of Infinzel, North Continent

299 days until the next Granting.

The curtains were heavy and black, made from some fabric that swallowed light. The merchant who'd given them to Cortland guaranteed him no more sleepless nights. And yet, Cortland had only slept a few hours the night before, tossing and turning, dreaming of a slender woman in the mask of a monkey, and often murdering her.

So much for guarantees.

But then, he couldn't complain. The curtains had been free, like so much of the furniture in Cortland's apartment. Such were the perks of being one of Infinzel's champions. It was considered an honor to have a gift accepted by a champion and certainly a boon for business. The offerings had tailed off these last few years which was fine with Cortland, he had everything he needed and had grown gruff in his refusals of the latest vase, or painting, or decorative hammer.

Cortland thrust open the curtains to let in the damp morning air, scaring off the sparrows who nested on the window's ledge. His rooms were on the second highest tier of Infinzel, which put him nearly a mile above the ground. Only the king himself lived above Cortland, at the apex of the pyramidal city. The vast graystone structure straddled a river and stretched three miles corner to corner, the

impenetrable edifice built and maintained by magic and engineering that Cortland would never comprehend. A manmade mountain with a city hidden inside.

Although, the city had lately been spilling out from the pyramid. Ancillary structures and thoroughfares, entire districts, were now wedged between the base of Infinzel and the ring-wall that encircled the city. These were cluttered neighborhoods that lacked the meticulous planning of the pyramid's interior, but people had to live somewhere. In his grandfather's day, such outbuildings would have been suicidal with Infinzel under near constant bombardment from the Orvesians. But the siege had broken sixty years ago and, in the decades since, the population of Infinzel had only swelled. Every year, it became more and more difficult to earn a place within the pyramid.

Cortland's windows faced south, so he could see the curving path of the Troldep River where it flowed out from the lowest tier of Infinzel and into the unclaimed pastures beyond. Even more than a half-century removed from war, his people were still superstitious about the protection of the stone. If there wasn't space for everyone inside the pyramid, they would at least stay as close to the base as possible and certainly not venture beyond the ring-wall. Only in the district of Soldier's Rest had the ring-wall been smashed down and humanity spilled beyond. Cortland watched black smoke curl up from the dense thicket of rooftops. Probably a brothel on fire. There were always problems down in the Rest, but those were not problems for Cortland. He'd been born on Infinzel's lowest tier, the son of a fisherwoman and a blacksmith, and he'd risen all the way here.

The city was quiet at this early hour, although the last revels of Wish Day must have only just petered out. There would've been a parade around the pyramid's base and parties on every tier. The feasts were paid for by the king's own treasury. All day, people would raise toasts to the champions and then spontaneously bend to kiss the stone floors and thank Infinzel for its protection. As Wish Day wore on, and the ale flowed free, some of those revelers wouldn't get back up. Others would stumble home

to their apartments to kiss more than the walls. There were always a surfeit of babies born nine months after Wish Day.

Cortland had partaken in none of that. Instead, he had spent the day with the widow Emelia Tuarez and the children. Well, they weren't exactly children anymore. Issa Firstdot-Tuarez was twenty-five now and a promising prospect in the Garrison. Benton Secondson-Tuarez, twenty and a man, was studying with the masons so that he could take over the family's stone-working concern when Emelia decided to retire.

"I'm sorry, Emelia," Cortland had told Ben's widow. "I should've brought him back alive."

"Don't ever let me hear you blaming yourself, Cortland Finiron," Emelia had replied coolly. She flipped her braid of gray hair over her shoulder, her eyes dry. "I told that old fool to take the wash. Get rid of that damned Ink. I practically begged him. Twenty-six Grantings, he did. More than anyone else. All his fellows dead or smart enough to retire. *Oh, next year, next year*, that was always his answer. Well, he ran out of next years, didn't he?" She'd put a hand on Cortland's clean shaven cheek. "It was kind of you to never marry, Cortland. Kind to spare some poor woman this life."

"Yeah," Cortland agreed, his throat scratchy. "Guess so."

Ben Tuarez was a beloved champion of Infinzel. There were already paintings of him going up throughout the pyramidal city and there was a grand funeral planned for the following week where the king himself would deliver the eulogy. But Ben's body wouldn't make it there. Emelia had wanted the internment done quietly and privately. So, while there were tearful toasts at festivities throughout the city and gaudy floats decorated in the man's honor, Cortland and Ben's family had taken a lift down to the foundation tier and lowered Ben's muslin-wrapped body into the soft stone of the mineral garden. Cortland's hands shook as he watched his friend and mentor sink into the bubbling gray soup. His bones would fortify the very walls of Infinzel.

He was embarrassed by the memory the next morning, but Cortland had been the only one to cry. The Tuarez family all had Ben's steely resolve.

The dawn was getting closer. It was time to get on with things. Ben would want tradition honored.

Cortland dressed quickly in plain pants and sleeves. He pulled on his boots that still smelled infuriatingly like cinnamon and strapped his war hammer to his hip. Finally, he maneuvered his squat bulk into the hallway, closing his door quietly because everyone on this tier was probably freshly asleep. The hallway was wide and stone, like all of Infinzel's interior chambers, although the walls were draped with luxurious tapestries to give the surroundings a warmer feel. Sconces glowed every few paces, their light low and orange, a magical approximation of firelight that never needed tending, provided to the city by the immortal King Cizco and his ward-work.

Down the hall, the floor grew sticky under Cortland's boots and the tang of sour cherries mixed with vomit filled the air. He came upon the broken wine bottle just a few paces from the door of Vitt Secondson-Salvado. Cortland glowered. He thought about pounding on the door and waking up the noble. It was Vitt's obligation as a champion to be a part of this tradition. But, in those early morning hours, Cortland couldn't quite summon the ire necessary to drag Vitt out of bed and lecture the younger man. And anyway, Cortland would have more say in the selection if Vitt wasn't around to bend his father's ear.

A few doors further down the hall was Henry Blacksalve's room. There were no signs of a party gone on too long there, but he also wasn't awake to greet Cortland. Let him sleep, Cortland figured. He'd not be able to rouse the drunken healer even if he wanted to.

Cortland reached the staircase alone. It needled him a bit that he was the only one awake to respect the tradition, but part of him was also glad to be without the others. He was the senior champion, now that Ben Tuarez was dead. The selection of Ben's replacement should fall to him.

Well, him and the Quill. King Cizco Salvado.

Cortland jogged up the staircase to the king's apartments. He could have taken the lift, but Cortland never turned down an opportunity for exercise. Small acts of endurance might one day be the difference between life and death.

There were never guards stationed outside the king's apartments. However, Cortland suspected he'd tripped a dozen or so wards on his way up that would warn Cizco of his approach. The king's magic was the only defense he needed. Cizco been a formidable champion – he'd reached the twentieth level of renown as an archmage, the records said. But, before Cortland was even born, it was decided that Cizco was too valuable to Infinzel to risk at the Granting. So, he became the Quill, took the wash, and spent decades rebuilding his power without Ink.

The lights were low as Cortland entered the king's apartments, so low that he at first wondered if Cizco had forgotten the tradition, too. Cortland stood awkwardly in the entry salon, ignoring the silk draped loungers arrayed in a semi-circle around him. The doorway to the king's bedchambers was open, but Cortland couldn't exactly go clomping back there. A shadowy form stretched and turned over behind the bed curtains. A shapely young woman, no doubt. Had the king married again? Or was he currently in one of his periods of bachelorhood? Cortland put little effort into tracking the king's love life. He was mostly grateful that the king had stopped bothering with royal weddings. Cizco had appetites, loved making children but not raising them, and tired of his wives quickly. There was an archivist whose sole purpose was to keep track of the ever-expanding Salvado family tree. The last Cortland had heard, the

king had fathered some forty children, not counting the bastards. They'd interred Cizco's eldest son last year, in fact. He'd died peacefully, in his sleep, at the age of seventy-one.

There was an oft-repeated joke about how King Cizco was so grateful for his immortality that he intended to thank every woman in Infinzel personally. Cortland always found that joke strange because it was him and the other champions who fought every year for the king's everlasting life. Not that he wanted to go to bed with the king.

As Cortland's sleep-deprived brain tripped down these bizarre pathways, the king strolled forth from the bedroom. Cizco Salvado looked not a day over thirty-five, even though he was over ninety. He was of average height, which made him considerably taller than Cortland, with a lean frame. His light brown hair was swept back into a loose ponytail, and his close-cropped beard lent him a certain rugged nobility. He was not a man who struggled to attract wives. He smiled as he approached Cortland, tucking a loose white shirt into his breeches.

"Just the two of us, then?" Cizco asked.

There was no bowing or kneeling expected with King Cizco. That had been tough for Cortland to learn when he first became a champion, but now he simply met the king's eyes and grunted.

"Apparently we're the only ones who bothered waking up."

"The secret, Finiron, is to not sleep to begin with." The king breezed by Cortland. "Let's hope they're more alert down in the garrison." When Cortland stayed rooted in place, the king stopped in the doorway and raised an eyebrow. "Are you coming?"

"You'll need the quill."

Cizco snorted and waved a hand through the air, muttering something that made Cortland's brain sizzle. A pocket dimension opened and Cizco produced the phoenix feather and golden inkwell.

“Your attention to detail never ceases to impress,” Cizco said.

They took a lift down to Infinzel’s base level. Cortland would’ve preferred the stairs. Perhaps it wasn’t just an opportunity to build his endurance, as Cortland always told himself, but an aversion to traveling the narrow stone tunnels on an enclosed platform. The lifts connected much of the pyramidal city top-to-bottom, with mechanized carts available to ferry people between districts on the same tier. Like the wall-sconces, they were another result of King Cizco’s arcane pursuits, a mixture of ward-work and advanced engineering.

“I didn’t see you at any of the parades yesterday,” Cizco remarked on the way down.

“No,” Cortland replied.

“Emelia wanted to get Ben in the stone, eh?”

Cortland nodded. “She’s angry with his ghost. Thinks being shut of him will make her feel better.”

“Maybe it will.” Cizco paused. “We haven’t had a chance to talk since our return, have we? I’m sorry about Ben. I’m sure you know that. He was a good man and I know you two went back.”

“He brought me on,” Cortland said.

“I brought you on,” the king corrected. “At Ben’s insistence.”

The lift door opened and they stepped into the stone honeycombs and archways that comprised the Garrison District. Before the war ended, this vast space would have housed Infinzel’s standing army, which the archivists said numbered close to ten thousand men and women. Now, only a few hundred lived and trained in the Garrison. The soldiering life didn’t offer the same appeal when the only enemies most of them could kill were each other. Sure, there were forays into the Underneath to occasionally get

the blood pumping, and the occasional riot in Soldier's Rest that needed quelling, but most of these soldiers acted as simple peacekeepers throughout the pyramidal city. If they were lucky, they'd get to accompany a merchant vessel downriver. Far from the glory of the old days, unless you were called upon to become a champion.

Most of the Garrison was given leave to partake in the Wish Day celebrations. No one was expected to train this morning. But there was a story about the first Granting that King Hectore Salvado had chosen his final champion from the soldiers who trained before dawn. According to King Cizco, the story was apocryphal nonsense and his older brother had never gotten up before dawn even while the city was getting smashed by Orvesian catapults. But still, the tradition persisted.

The air down here smelled like stale sweat and copper. Up ahead was the pit, an open field of sand where the members of the Garrison practiced their combat games. Cortland could hear the clang of steel and the rush of conjuring. He grinned. At least a handful were there to honor tradition.

"Do you see this, Finiron?" Cizco asked, stopping Cortland before he could rush forward.

"See what?"

The king leaned down so Cortland could get a good look at his temples.

"Greys," the king complained. "Those are new. Gods dammed Brokerage. Shaved a year off my life. Maybe more."

Cortland rubbed a hand over the short bristles on his own scalp. He was forty-one and had his own greys, not to mention the widow's peak forming where his hairline receded. The man next to him was ninety-five years old and only now looked like he was tiptoeing into middle age.

"Tragic, your highness," Cortland said flatly.

Salvado resumed walking at a languid pace, suggesting to Cortland there was more he wanted to discuss. "I would very much like to know who paid them. Is this an old grudge made new again? Something to do with that Orvesian madness in the south? We haven't had issues with anyone these last few years, except when those fools at the Ministry wrap us up in something I'm too kind to refuse. I'd like to know who wants me killed."

"Wasn't you they wanted dead," Cortland said.

"How's that?"

"One of the assassins, I beat some information out of her..." Cortland paused, his neck getting hot at the thought of Laughing Monkey. "Well, more like she gave it up after we scuffled. Said the Brokerage was paid to do Ben specifically."

"Ben? Who cared about Ben?" At a hard look from Cortland, King Cizco raised his hands. "I'm sorry, Cortland. Of course I didn't mean it like that. I loved Ben, just like you did. He wasn't one to make enemies. Tuarez is an old family, but they don't have rivals."

"You sure about that?"

"Noble rivalries breaking out between the districts, that's something for the playwrights to use in their tragedies of the war days. There's not so many noble families left and the ones still around want for nothing."

Cortland considered that. Tuarez was indeed one of the last noble names left in Infinzel. Over the last sixty years, many of the others had faded away or climbed into the ever expanding Salvado family tree.

"Suppose it doesn't make sense," Cortland said. "If it was someone from Infinzel, they could've just done it here."

“Contacting with the Brokerage doesn’t come cheap, either,” Cizco said. “Someone from the island, perhaps? He crossed swords with quite a few over the years. Some vengeance from business we’ve all forgotten?”

“Could be,” Cortland said. “I’ve sent a request to the archivist for a list of his kills.”

“And you trust this assassin wasn’t just playing games with you?”

Cortland bristled at that, though of course the thought had crossed his mind. “I intend to look into it.”

“Do,” the king replied. “Although you’ll have a champion to bring up to speed. Maybe two.”

“Two?”

The king sighed. “Blacksalve approached me during the feast last night. Said he wants to take the wash. Man was out of sorts.”

Cortland shook his head. “I won’t allow it. We can’t lose all that experience in one year. And I haven’t been impressed with the healers coming through the Garrison.”

“Well, it’s his choice,” the king said gently. “I told him what it was like, though. To lose the Ink. Not an easy thing. Certainly won’t improve his mood.”

“I’ll talk to him.”

At last, they reached the entrance to the training pit. Cizco put a hand on Cortland’s shoulder and peered down at him, his tone growing harder. For a moment, Cortland thought he caught a glimpse of the tough old man living within the young fop’s body.

“It’s not just some gray hair, Cortland,” the king said. “If my immortality is not maintained, I will weaken. And if I weaken...” The lights on the walls flickered. “...then Infinzel weakens with me.”

Cortland's jaw tightened. He was senior amongst the party now. Preserving the king and the city fell on his shoulders. "We won't fail you."

"A partial success isn't failure," Cizco said, his tone lightening. "Come. Let's see who answered the call."

[5]

Cortland Finiron, Hammer Master of the 12th Renown, Kingdom of Infinzel, choosing a champion

King Cizco Salvado, Quill of Infinzel, Kingdom of Infinzel, frequently dipping his quill

An assortment of prospects of the Garrison

2 New Summer, 61 AW

The pyramidal city of Infinzel, North Continent

299 days until the next Granting.

King Cizco led the way onto a balcony overlooking the training ground. The domed room was cooler than the hallway outside, ventilated by ducts that connected to the tunnel network running beneath Infinzel. Cortland gazed down on the field of sand and stone where a decade ago he had gotten up before the dawn to prove he was ready to join Infinzel's party. Back then, it would've been King Cizco and Ben Tuarez judging from this perch.

"Hammer is a workman's weapon," Ben had said to him that day.

"That's right," Cortland had replied. "You won't find me shy about rolling up my sleeves, sir."

There were ten hopefuls on the sand. All of them wielded different weapons or practiced different arts. Some sparred with each other, while others engaged with the targets and dummies arrayed around grounds. Cortland knew all of them by name. Champions partly oversaw the Garrison and so, at one point or another, he had trained with all of them. A ripple went through the men and women exerting themselves as they realized that the king and Cortland had arrived. None of them were so gauche as to look up and bow, but Cortland sensed movements sharpening and speed increasing.

“That’s one of mine, isn’t it?” Cizco asked.

Cortland grunted. Of course, the king’s eye had been drawn to the dead center of the field where Orryn es-Salvado shaved down a series of targets with his throwing knives.

“Your grandson, I think,” Cortland said.

“My grandson,” Cizco said, as if not quite believing it. “Ah, right. One of Ferdy’s children, isn’t he?”

“You’re asking me?”

King Cizco shrugged. “He’s handy with those knives.”

Even Cortland had to admit that Orryn’s aim was impressive and his movements precise. But, more interesting were how Orryn’s knives returned to him, scuttling across the sand.

Cizco leaned against the bannister. “What’s he got down there?”

“Rats,” Cortland replied.

It was difficult to see from their position, but Cortland knew well enough that a small squadron of trained rats dragged the weapons back to their master. There were always one or two of the little beasts hidden away in Orryn’s uniform.

“Rats?” The king shook his head. “Someone should have bought that boy a dog.”

“His doting grandfather, maybe.”

Cizco ignored the barb. “I didn’t know we trained animal bonding. Never studied that myself. You don’t see it much outside Besaden.”

“Something of an accident that,” Cortland said. “Ben and the quartermaster thought he was a bit jumped-up when he joined the Garrison.”

“A grandson of mine? Impossible.”

“They put him on rat duty,” Cortland continued. “He was supposed to be cleaning them out of the weapons cellar but instead he discovered an affinity.”

“I grow less disgusted and more fascinated with every word.” Cizco glanced at the hammer on Cortland’s hip. “Would it relieve some of your tension to have some furry friends carry that smasher around for you?”

Cortland flexed his fingers. “My hammer comes back on its own. I have Ink for that.”

“It was a joke, Finiron,” Cizco said.

“Orryn’s a gifted man in the Underneath,” Cortland admitted begrudgingly. “Those rats have saved lives.”

“How gallant of them.”

“If Vitt were here, that’s who he’d vote for.”

“Yes, well, Vitt isn’t here, is he?”

“Orynn would be a solid addition to the party. I could work with him.”

“You compliment him through your teeth.”

“Like you said, he’s one of yours.”

Orryn was indeed part of the royal bloodline, but he was an es-Salvado, which meant he carried no special distinction. He had not been elected First, Second, or Third among heirs. Cortland knew he

had thrown his support behind Vitt during the last election and was thus part of the reason why Vitt was now Secondson. The two were too close for Cortland's taste.

Cizco groaned and turned to regard Cortland. "Please, Finiron, spare me your attempts at tact. It's like a horse clomping around in slippers. I have scarves I know better than some of my grandchildren. Speak freely."

"He's vicious and of a dark temperament," Cortland said. "And that's not such a bad thing, except that Vitt and I have those roles well covered. Ben was our tactician. Our defender. We won't be able to replace his skills exactly, but we should at least vary our angles of attack."

The king nodded and gestured off to one side. "Well, you know what they say about apples and trees."

Cortland winced as Cizco forced him to acknowledge the presence of Issa Firstdot-Tuarez. She hadn't mentioned trying to fill her father's role in the party when Cortland saw her yesterday, but then she'd have been a fool to bring that up in front of her mother. Issa favored a tall shield, nearly as big as her, and a spear. They were the same armaments her father had favored. She moved well, advancing methodically into a barrage of rocks and bolts fired by a couple of other candidates. Her movements were so smooth that it took Cortland a moment to notice that she was stabbing some of the projectiles right out of the air.

"She's young still," Cortland said.

"Young just means more time for the Ink to spread," Cizco countered. "She clearly knows what she's doing."

"Her mother would kill me."

“Now there’s an honest reason,” Cizco said. “I won’t have her go into a Granting with revenge on her mind, anyway. Not a productive state of mind.”

Cortland said nothing to that. He suspected he would have revenge on his mind for entirety of the next year.

“Who else?” Cizco asked. “Don’t tell me you came down here without someone in mind.”

“It should be Arris, sir.”

Unlike the others who demonstrated their skills with various weaponry, Arris Stonetender’s hands were empty. She was a sturdily built middle-aged woman who kept her hair shorn, as befitted an elementalist of her particular speciality. As Cortland and Cizco turned to watch her, two snakes of fire sprang from her palms and scorched their way across the training ground.

“Arris, I see,” the king said. “I’ve always found her casting to lack a certain delicacy.”

As if in response, Arris’s twin fire snakes grew into a wall of flame nearly ten feet high. The heat of the inferno sent some of the other prospects into retreat, including Orryn. Although she’d been a young woman then, Arris had demonstrated her skills alongside Cortland ten years ago when he’d been elevated to the party. She had tried again three years later when Henry Blacksalve had been chosen, and again two years ago when Vitt Secondson-Salvado had been selected. Approaching forty now, she was the oldest prospect on the sand. Cortland suspected she’d keep trying until the magic at last burned her out.

“I don’t fuck with delicacy,” Cortland told the king. “I want somebody that will burn a bastard alive.”

Cizco nodded sympathetically. “Do you understand anything about the state of the magical arts?”

“Polite of you to ask as if you don’t know the answer.”

“There’s a *bargain* that must be made to make a change to the world. Something must be given. Skilled practitioners can get away with giving less, but there’s always a trade. Arris wears the scars of her bargains. You’ve seen them on her arms and I’m sure that’s only the beginning.”

Cortland nodded. It was true, the woman’s flesh was a ridged mess of pink welts and scar tissue. Cortland had always assumed those were simply the drawbacks of training with fire.

“The Ink changed things for those of us who practice the traditional way,” Cizco continued. “The Ink asks nothing of its users. You call upon its power and the gods answer. There’s no bargain. No cost.”

“Aside from the yearly fight to the death,” Cortland said.

“Fair enough,” Cizco said. “Regardless, outside the Magelab, I am perhaps the only man left alive who knows how generous the gods used to be. Their bargains have grown harsher since the Ink. Arris has been under strain for so long, I wonder what’s truly left of her.”

Cortland considered all this for a moment, rubbing a hand across his stubbly cheek. “Wouldn’t letting her have the Ink be a mercy, then? Let her draw upon the Ink for power.”

“In a way, yes,” Cizco replied. “Until the day she wants to take the wash. That might kill her.”

Emelia Tuarez had told Cortland how often she begged Ben to retire, but in all their time together Ben had never once mentioned taking the wash to Cortland. “Not all of us plan to quit one day,” Cortland said. “Some of us understand better than others that we’ll meet our end on the island.”

Cizco breathed out through his nose. “Heroic deaths do nothing for me, Finiron. I send you four there to survive so that Infinzel continues to work.”

“And Arris will help us survive more than any of these others,” Cortland replied. “She’s experienced. The Ink will probably reveal her to be at least fifth renown. I’ve trained with her. So has Henry. The combination works. Ben was our shield, she can be our wall. Our wall of fire.”

Cortland left out the other reason why he wanted to add Arris to the party. Like Cortland, she wasn’t married and never had any children. Unlike Cortland, she had a woman that she was close with, but they were more off than on these days. Her family had been miners and they were mostly dead. In short, Arris didn’t have many attachments. After yesterday, Cortland didn’t think he could stomach comforting another grieving family.

“You make a convincing case,” Cizco said. “Shall we make it official?”

Cortland nodded, and leaned out over the railing. “Arris Stonetender! Get up here!”

The elementalist immediately extinguished her barricade of flames and jogged to the staircase that led to the overlook. Some of the oomph went out of the other prospects after Cortland’s shout, although some of the first time applicants went on practicing in the hopes that Arris had been summoned to stand before King Cizco for reasons unrelated to the party. Orryn es-Salavado sheathed his knives and left the field entirely, trailed by his legion of rats. Cortland sensed Issa Suarez trying to catch his eye, but he pretended not to notice her.

Arris arrived smelling of sweat and smoke. She dropped to a knee before King Cizco.

“Oh, stand up,” Cizco said. “Otherwise, I’ll have to crouch.”

“Arris Stonetender, to whom do you swear allegiance?” Cortland barked, reciting the words that Ben Tuarez had once said to him.

There were tears in the woman’s eyes. “I swear allegiance to Infinzel, the pyramidal city, whose walls protect its loyal citizens, and to the immortal king whose power is our foundation.”

“As the Quill of Infinzel, I put my faith in you, Arris Stonetender,” the king said. “We have chosen you to wear the Ink. Do you stand before us with a full understanding of the responsibilities of this honor? Will you lay down your life for Infinzel?”

“I do,” Arris said. “I will.” She was already unbuttoning the top of her shirt so that Cizco would have access to her neck. Beads of sweat formed on the pyramid symbol tattooed on her throat. That Ink wouldn’t be lonely for long.

“Then let the Ink reveal what you are, and what you might yet become.”

With that, Cizco drew the phoenix feather from its golden inkwell.

Cortland remembered what it felt like when the Ink first touched his skin, the warm sensation as it spread across his neck and chest. He remembered his first encounter with the strange creature called the symbologist. He remembered how his mind had unlocked to the language of the gods, how he could read his Ink simply from feeling the marks against the skin. All of it happened so fast, from the first touch of the Quill to the gods guiding Cizco’s hand as he sketched out the Ink. There was something intimate and profound in the process, even if it meant death in the end. He edged around Cizco’s shoulder to watch how it happened with Arris.

Oddly, the king’s hand was still. And even though he had touched the quill to Arris’ neck, it had left no mark. Her eyes did not go far away; she was not called to join the symbologist. There was nothing but a dry scratching sound.

“Ah,” Cizco said. “That’s unexpected.”

“What’s wrong?” Cortland asked.

“The inkwell is dry.” Cizco stepped back awkwardly, returning the feather to its well. “Truly sorry, Arris. This is something of a rarity. A blessing, supposedly, although it surely doesn’t feel that way for you.”

Arris was doing all she could to keep herself from breaking down at the feet of the king, but tears nonetheless streamed down her sooty cheeks. To come so close and have it snatched away... Cortland felt for the woman. But, his prevailing feeling in that moment, was confusion.

“What do you mean it’s dry?” he asked Cizco. “We only have three in the party.”

“No, Cortland, we have four. Somewhere, out in the world, is our new champion,” the king replied. “My inkwell is dry because the gods have chosen them for us.”

[6]

“As the Quill, you shall choose four champions,” the gods explained. “They will represent your people at the Granting. Mark them with the Ink. Once a champion is chosen, their Ink cannot be removed except by their choice or their death. Choose carefully, as the fate of your people will depend upon these four.”

And though he couldn't remember doing it and would have never made such a pathetic, supplicating gesture on his own accord, an inkwell of gold and a phoenix's feather nonetheless appeared in the cupped hands of King Mudt. He snorted and glanced from side to side, observing how each of his fellow power brokers had been bestowed a similar quill. Mudt's lips curled back at the awestruck expression on the quivering King of Infinzel. He sneered at the pyramid shape that had appeared on King Hectore's neck. King Mudt wanted nothing more than an opportunity to carve that Ink from his rival's throat, a siege in miniature to satisfy him until the larger one was completed.

Mudt puffed out his chest and turned to the gods. “I am king of my people because my sword arm is strongest and my hands are washed in the blood of my enemies,” he declared. “None shall fight in my stead.”

“You may take the Ink yourself,” the gods replied. “Should you die, the people of Orvesis shall choose another to wield the Quill.”

King Mudt snorted at the notion of his own death. At his throat, he had already been marked with the flying blackbird of Orvesis. Without hesitation, he dipped his quill in the pitch black Ink and touched the tip to the hollow in his neck beneath the bird's tail feathers.

Thus, he found himself in the presence of the worm.

--Record of the First Granting and Dawning of the Second Age

Lys Crodd, Scribe of the Dead Kingdom of Orvesis

--DRAMATIS PERSONAE--

Red Tide, an oca'em woman of no renown but significant infamy, The Reef, imprisoned

Turtle Jaw, Quill of The Reef, her warden

4 New Summer, 61 AW

The Grotto, Central Sea

296 days until the next Granting.

There were ways to drown a man that wouldn't cause the gods to intervene. Red Tide had discovered them herself.

The harp never failed her.

The sailors of Merchant's Bay passed down tales of the oca'em. Stories about how, if you heard an oca'em playing the harp and tracked her down, she would grant your heart's desire. It was said that some of the high families of Merchant's Bay had risen to their present station because they'd followed the music to fortune. In the age of wishes, that didn't seem so implausible. However, in Red Tide's experience, there weren't many sailors on the water with grand designs on power.

Most of them just wanted to fuck.

Red Tide assumed that was how the other legends about her people spread. Salacious dockside tavern tales that told how an oca'em only strummed the harp when they were in heat. The music was

part invitation and part challenge. The story went that if you could please an oca'em carnally, the reward was a sapphire the size of a lusty sailor's member.

Red Tide wondered how her people had developed such a reputation for gift-giving. Perhaps, it was because the land-walkers had taken so much from them, and so the dirty little fables soothed their conscience. They could tell themselves that they'd earned the spoils of the ocean with their fast wooden boats and perky little cocks.

Although she was only twenty-three years old, Red Tide knew her history as well as she did the silly land-walkers legends. She knew that the Reef was once four times the size as it was now, with glittering palaces of coral that rose from the ocean's depths and plunged deep below the surface. She knew that the oca'em had once controlled the sea, aided by their pet leviathans, and that no ship dared travel the waters without permission from the Queen of the Coralline Throne.

But then the fourteen families of Merchant's Bay and their accomplices had wished that all away.

There were still remnants of the old coral cities floating disconnected from what remained of the Reef. Grasping pillars of salt-hardened sponge, tangles of coral like brambles, embedded with the razor sharp teeth of the extinct leviathans. These fractured reefs were crystalline blue, like the water, virtually impossible to see with land-walker eyes.

Red Tide knew just where to find the most hazardous of these places.

So, because of the stories, the harp worked almost every time. Red Tide would float on her back with the instrument rested across her midsection, breasts just above the surface. She would stroke the strings with her long, sharp fingers. Her shiny gray skin shimmered as she rode the waves, the white patch over her right eye giving the impression that she was perpetually winking. When she played the

harp, she wore her black hair loose and spread out and impractical rather than gathered in braids and beaded, because that was how the sailors liked it. Red Tide could play for hours. She made nice music, it turned out. A natural talent. She'd float just a bit off course along one of the Merchant Bay's shipping currents, those favorable tides that the merchants had wished into existence. They never considered what consequences altering the movement of the ocean might have. But, it was that lack of consideration for consequences that provided Red Tide her advantage.

Red Tide could always feel when a spyglass picked her out. A prickliness went through her and, knowing she was being watched, she made sure to writhe with the music, as if her plucking had stirred something deep within her. The crew would pass around the spyglass and have an ogle. If they had an old salt on board, or a sensible woman with some authority, they would maintain course, enjoying the view without taking the bait. Because there were those amongst the fourteen merchant families who had heard of Red Tide's tricks and were wise enough to stay away.

But another boat filled with dumber land-walkers always turned up eventually.

Most often, they'd drop anchor and send out a dinghy with a handful of sailors meant to check on her. They hailed her with shouts, admiring her music, complimenting her markings, asking where she hid the sapphires. She never encouraged them, just kept on with her playing.

It had to be their decision to row their boat into the tangle of coral. The sailors had to choose to crack their hulls against the sharpened ocean-glass. They had to slip overboard via their own clumsy eagerness. They had to choose to dive in after their companions, or swim back for their home ship, only to be snagged by the hooks of coral.

Red Tide just had to keep on playing and ignore them. The gods made it impossible to kill, but they did not compel assistance.

She had watched a few dozen men cut to ribbons in the coral. Red Tide liked to sink down with them, as the blood from their wounds blossomed free like jellyfish. She swam next to them and watched, flaring her gills to breathe. Some tried to cling to her. She could see the fear in their eyes, the way they opened their mouths to the ocean in an attempt to plead with her.

Red Tide learned from experience not to let them touch her. If she was forced to shrug off a drowning sailor, then suddenly they could breathe in the water as easily as she did. The gods intervened and they would be saved to warn their companions.

It was a delicate thing, maneuvering around the gods. Red Tide had no illusions that her trickery would do any lasting damage to the merchant families. But she was young, and bored, and without a pod. These games were an amusing way to pass the time.

At least until Captain Juseph Grice-Russi came upon her playing the harp.

Red Tide would learn later that Juseph was a *conducti* between two of the merchant families. She didn't care about the politics of the fourteen families or their stupid system of arranged marriages. The land-walkers of Merchant's Bay were all the same to her. Thieves and despoilers. But this Juseph, he was particularly important as a genealogical bridge between two of the families and also particularly stupid. A dandy and a show-off. He hadn't sent out one of the lifeboats to capture Red Tide. He'd steered his entire *gellezza* into her trap. A multilevel merchant vessel with a crew of sixty-eight. Red Tide has balked at the size of the ship and swam away to avoid its wake. She assumed the hidden coral would simply snap against the ship's armored hull.

However, fate worked at odd angles. A few lances of coral penetrated between the plates of the ship's hull. They speared into the ship's hold. The damage wasn't severe enough to sink the *gellezza*. An inconvenience, really. Under normal circumstances, the sailors could've spent a few hours baling and patching, and the ship would've limped into port damaged and delayed, but mostly intact.

However, Joseph Grice-Russi had been entrusted with a load of chanic. The substance had been discovered in the Gen'Bi deserts a decade ago. A dark red and viscous sludge, some claimed that it was the blood of the ge'chan themselves, the gods of magic, spilled at the end of the Final War. The fourteen families of Merchant's Bay were obsessed with the stuff.

Red Tide had no reason to know any of this. In fact, she only learned of chanic's existence during her short and swift trial by the Queen of the Coralline Throne. It was highly unstable and required a warded compartment, which the coral lances had damaged. The chanic erupted in a column of fire, incinerating the ship and all aboard, and creating a blight of dark red magma atop the ocean. Red Tide's back had been badly burned as she tried to swim away.

Red Tide did not regret the dead merchants. She would've drowned each of them with her own hands, if the gods allowed it. But she did regret leaving a scar upon the ocean. Although that, too, she blamed upon her enemies, who had extracted what wasn't meant to be extracted and transported it across waters where they didn't belong.

So, yes, Red Tide considered herself mostly innocent.

The Queen of the Coralline Throne had disagreed. She was a fearful old woman who hadn't been the queen when the Reef was first decimated, but who had risen into what was left of the oca'em's power on a policy of appeasement. She was terribly worried what the merchants might do in retaliation.

"Fuck yourself," had been Red Tide's defense, "with the land-walkers' charred bones."

She was declared guilty of murder and despoilment and endangerment of the Reefdom.

Her sentence was indefinite.

Thus, Red Tide found herself in a cavern cell of the Grotto prison. A lifeless island northeast of the Reef, nothing could survive atop the Grotto's jagged surface. However, within the island was a honeycomb of tunnels, accessible by only one underwater entrance. The oca'em had used the blasted place as a prison for centuries.

By Red Tide's best guess, she'd been stuck in this limestone cavern for almost a year. They kept her legs shackled with a piece of metal that forced her feet apart, preventing her from hooking together the bones that protruded from every oca'em's ankles. Her people called that 'making the tail.' Not that she'd have anywhere to swim. Her cell contained only a shallow bath, barely enough water to sink her ass into. She hadn't been fully submerged since they'd stashed her here. Oca'em went mad in the Grotto, unable to swim, subsisting on mushrooms, kept apart from the other prisoners. Red Tide had only kept it together by remembering the faces of the land-walkers she'd killed, and imagining the ones she'd get next. That, and because the warden had taken an interest in her.

The rusted gate of her cell screeched against stone. Speak of the devil. Turtle Jaw ducked his head to enter. The warden of the Grotto was a big man, with square features and sturdy shoulders. Red Tide wouldn't have minded if he'd ever decided to take advantage of his position, but that wasn't really the thrust of Turtle Jaw's interest. His oca'em name had vibrations of honor and nobility when sung underwater, unlike Red Tide whose oca'em name only invoked the way she'd ripped her way out of her mother. In the early days of her imprisonment, Turtle Jaw had begun taking the occasional meal in Red Tide's cell and she got the impression that he was as bored with this assignment as she was with being here.

"Are you here to set me free at last?" Red Tide asked. "Ready to swim away together? Proper outlaws...?" She trailed off, tilting her head. She made similar jokes whenever Turtle Jaw showed up, but this time he'd come without food.

He carried something else instead.

"In a way, I am here for that," Turtle Jaw said solemnly. "Yes."

Red Tide stood up, the stone cool against her scarred back. "Clemency for me already, Turtle Jaw?"

"I'd hardly call it that, Red."

"That's what the Queen says, isn't it?"

"Do I look like the Queen to you?"

Red Tide swallowed. She eyed the gold inkwell and its feather, held delicately in Turtle Jaw's thick hands. Her stomach turned over. Was that excitement or dread?

"I'm here to make you the offer," he said. "You know how it works?"

"I know other places see that gunk in your hands like an honor," she replied. "Merchant land-walkers spend fortunes to get their pink sons and daughters a little color. Not how it works for us, though, is it?"

"Maybe back in the day. Before my time."

Red Tide rubbed a hand over her tight braids. "I didn't even realize the year had changed."

"Four days gone."

"How many came back from the last one?"

"None came back. All killed."

"And the one before that?"

"All killed."

"And...?"

Turtle Jaw sighed. "We haven't had a survivor going on ten years, alright? And she got herself killed the year after."

Red Tide scoffed. "Some dumb bitch went *back*? I thought this was supposed to be a one-time deal."

"She caught a case of patriotism," Turtle Jaw said. "Thought she was going to restore the Reef's dominion over the sea."

"Yeah? That what you wished for?"

Turtle Jaw grimaced for a moment, but quickly made his expression neutral. "The Queen of the Coralline's Throne's instruction is that we wish only for a bountiful harvest."

Red Tide gathered spit in her mouth with a sucking noise, then let it dribble out in a long string onto the cavern floor. "Dumbest shit I ever heard."

"The Ministry of Sulk—"

"Who the fuck are they?"

Turtle Jaw rolled his eyes. "Knights from the south. They say anyone who wishes for only a bountiful harvest fall under their protection and should be left alone."

"So how come we keep getting killed?"

"Because the merchants like to hunt us," Turtle Jaw said flatly. "Because the queen agreed to only send our worst, so it's no loss to the Reef when they don't come back."

"You wouldn't consider me a loss, Turtle Jaw?"

The warden looked away. "I'll miss your company either way. You don't have to go." He turned as if to leave. "There are others I'm supposed to ask..."

Red Tide hopped across the cavern as fast as her manacled legs could carry her. She stood in front of Turtle Jaw and lifted her chin, slapping the Ink symbol of a dolphin that marked her allegiance to the Reef. "Don't be hasty now."

"This is the offer, let me lay it out right," Turtle Jaw intoned. "You will take the Ink and represent the Reef at the next Granting. If you survive, you will be granted clemency for your crimes. If you want, you can remove the Ink then. However, you'll probably be dead."

"Probably isn't definitely," Red Tide said. "I accept."

Turtle Jaw smiled. Red Tide could tell that he was happy she'd accepted, and not because he wanted to free up her cell. There were some out in the Reef who enjoyed the stories of Red Tide and her harp. She suspected Turtle Jaw might be one of them.

Turtle Jaw dipped his quill in the Ink and touched it lightly to Red Tide's chest.

"You're about to have a very strange experience," he said.

She felt a whisper against her skin. The gods spoke to her through the Ink.

You have been chosen as a champion, Red Tide, the voice said. Do you desire a consultation with the symbologist?

"Huh?" she replied.

"Say yes," Turtle Jaw said.

Red Tide grinned. Certain death or not, pretty soon she'd be free. Out in the water again. Once there, anything could happen.

“Fuck yes,” she declared.

And everything went black as Ink.

[7]

Red Tide, an [undecided] of [unknown] renown, The Reef, paroled for bad behavior

The Symbologist, attendant of the gods, keeper of the symbols, a worm

Turtle Jaw, Quill of The Reef, putting together a squad

4 New Summer, 61 AW

Armistice Island, Central Sea

296 days until the next Granting.

Without understanding how she came to be there, Red Tide found herself submerged in sea water. The depths were dark and peaceful, the temperature as warm as the southern currents. Red Tide's entire being uncoiled, the kinks of a year's imprisonment smoothed out in the weightless tumble. She sensed something vast moving beneath her, a shadowy behemoth with a sea-song that made her bones vibrate and tears spring to her eyes.

Ge'oca. Gods of the sea. They honored her.

And then, the waters receded and so did Red Tide's fierce grin. Grimacing as she was forced to walk instead of swim, she waded onto a white sand beach. Looking down at her ankles, she noticed that her manacles were gone. She couldn't remember Turtle Jaw taking them off. She only recalled the touch of his quill and some slithering voice inside her head.

"Did he drug me?" Red Tide asked aloud. She smirked. "A rascal, after all."

“Your Quill’s intentions are pure,” a raspy voice answered. “Although I sense that disappoints you.”

Up ahead, a tattered creature waited for her, seated behind an ornate desk that had been plunked down right at the edge of the surf.

“Greetings, Red Tide of the Reef,” the thing said in a voice that sounded like shuffling papers. “I am the symbologist.”

Red Tide eyed the little beast. The thing reminded her of a sea slug that had somehow burrowed its way into a pile of natty brown fabric. There were stubby legs that dangled off its chair and stubby arms that terminated in ten-fingered hands and then maybe more limbs writhing like a millipede beneath its cloak. The symbologist kept its hood up, but Red Tide got the sense that its face was flat and featureless. Without a mouth, the thing somehow spoke directly into her head. Of course, Red Tide immediately assessed the creature for weak points and soft spots. They weren’t hard to find. The symbologist looked to be all underbelly. Easy enough to squash, although Red Tide didn’t sense there would be a need for that.

“The fuck are you supposed to be?” Red Tide asked.

“As I said, I am the symbologist,” the creature answered through a pulsing patch of peach-colored flesh where a mouth might conceivably fit.

Red Tide made a face. “That don't answer my question.”

“Ah. I am a creation of the gods. I exist solely to provide guidance on the use of your Ink.”

“Cruel,” Red Tide said. “Cruel of them to make you look like that.”

“I believe the goal was to achieve a non-threatening appearance that would also be sufficiently alienating to prevent any attempts at fraternization,” the symbologist replied. “Now, shall we begin?”

“Begin what?”

“Your marking.”

Red Tide squinted. Instead of answering, she did a slow turn to take in her surroundings. The scenery beyond the symbologist and its desk seemed oddly blurry.

“What island is this?” Red Tide asked. “How far are we from the Grotto?”

“Your body hasn't left the Grotto. I am communicating with you telepathically.”

“Nah.” Red Tide shook her head. “I swam here.”

“That was an intervention from your gods.” Red Tide heard something strange enter the creature's dry tone - fear, perhaps, or awe. “They favor you and wished to reward you. Apparently, you have sent them many bodies.”

Red Tide puffed out her chest and turned to speak to the ocean. “More to come on that. I promise.”

“As for the island, we are on an approximation of Armistice,” the symbologist continued.

“Although the island is never the same from one Granting to the next.”

“So this is where it happens?” Red Tide crouched to drag her fingers through the sand. She expected to maybe unearth some bones, but there weren't even sea shells or stones. Too pure to be the real thing. “Pretty enough place to die.”

“Indeed. Shall we begin?” The symbologist asked again. “If you do not wish to choose your Ink, I am capable of doing it for you.”

“You got somewhere else to be, slug? My small talk not holding your attention?” Red Tide plunked backward and crisscrossed her legs, like she remembered from her two years in school. “Fine. How does this work?”

When Red Tide looked up, she found a wall had appeared behind the symbologist. Overlapping stone plates, each the size of a shield, rose up from the sand. Each stone was perfectly round and smooth, clean, the color of pearl. As the symbologist began to speak, dark Ink spread across the stones. Unfamiliar runes formed, slashes and twists and whorls, yet somehow Red Tide could understand them.

“First, you must choose your class,” the Symbologist explained. “This will form the centerpiece of your Ink and should complement your existing skills. I have chosen three options that would seem to suit you.”

Red Tide cocked her head. “What do you know about my skills, slug?”

“If you are displeased with my choices, we can discuss further options,” the symbologist replied evenly.

“Well, let me read them, at least, before you go crying through your skin.”

Three runes had become more prominent on the plates behind the symbologist. They meant nothing to Red Tide – slashes and squiggles that made even less sense than what the land-walkers used for language – and yet she could interpret their meaning exactly.

[Skulker] – *You are adept at hiding and striking from advantageous positions. You excel at close-fighting with bladed weapons. Your agility and speed are above average.*

[Hunter] – *You are capable of tracking your prey through supernatural means. You are highly observant and aware of your surroundings. You are a versatile fighter capable of adapting to an array of weapons.*

[Enchantress] – *You are an adept manipulator of human emotions. You are highly observant and capable of picking up signals that others might not. You inflict harm in unique and subtle ways.*

Red Tide clinked her fingernails against her teeth. “All three,” she said. “I will take all three, slug.”

“You may only choose one,” the symbologist replied. “Although, if there are elements of an unchosen class that interest you, they can likely be achieved through further Ink.”

“Rules, rules, rules,” Red Tide said, waving her hand. “Your game is too complicated.”

When the symbologist made no reply, she examined the runes once again. Although she still hadn’t quite come to terms with her new role as a champion, Red Tide at least understood that when she next visited the material world version of this island she would be hunted for sport by land-walkers who saw her as barely more than an animal. The objective of the Reef’s party wasn’t to secure a wish; the Queen of the Coralline Throne was too cowardly for that. They were criminals sent off to die. Red Tide’s goal would simply be to survive.

Since that was the case, Red Tide didn’t picture herself doing much hunting of her own. **[Hunter]** was out.

[Skulker] seemed like the practical choice, but the meaning within the symbol irritated Red Tide. Hiding and sneaking and dodging about, like a minnow flitting through the teeth of a shark.

[Enchantress], meanwhile, felt like the right choice but not necessarily the smart one. What was she going to do? Talk some merchant duelist out of flaying her?

Red Tide sighed. “What do most people pick, slug?”

“No two champions are the same,” the symbologist replied unhelpfully.

“What were the last four champions that represented the Reef? Can you tell me that?”

“A healer, a trident master, and two skulkers.”

Red Tide snorted. “Guess they didn’t skulk hard enough.” She paused. “Does the island see a lot of enchantresses, slug?”

“There is only one other, at present,” the symbologist replied.

“Huh.” Now, there was an advantage. Give the merchants something that they hadn’t dealt with before. “Fine. I’ll take that one.”

“Enchantress,” the symbologist confirmed. “We move on.”

The other runes faded away while the one for Enchantress shifted to a more central position on the wall. As Red Tide watched, dozens of new runes spread out in rings from the Enchantress symbol. The symbols in the three rings closest to the central Enchantress marking were all in vivid black Ink, while the symbols on the further rings were faded. **[Sleep]**, **[Hypnotic Object]**, **[Command]**, **[Fear]**, **[Charm Beast]**, **[Poisonous]** -- Red Tide scanned the tiles hungrily, reading power in every slash and swirl.

“Based on your existing prowess, the gods have deemed you to be of the third renown,” the symbologist said. “Thus, you may choose three pieces of Ink.”

Red Tide noticed two other smaller constellations of symbols that had appeared at angles to the array of Enchantress choices. The central symbol of the first read **[Mortal]** while the other was the same dolphin symbol that every **[Oca’em]** wore on their throat. She jerked her chin in that direction.

“What are those ones?”

“The first are abilities available to every champion,” the symbologist explained. “The others are abilities unique to the oca’em.”

The options surrounding the **[Mortal]** symbol seemed simple enough. Choices like **[Strength+]**, **[Speed+]**, and **[Endurance+]** that would augment her body’s natural abilities, and then more esoteric concepts like **[Focus+]**, **[Will+]**, and **[Insight+]** that Red Tide couldn’t imagine finding use for in a fight to the death. There seemed to be no end to possible ways of improving the mortal body. If Red Tide had wanted to be taller, she was sure the symbologist had a tile for that.

The **[Oca’em]** options interested her more. These were the ways of her people; the magic of the coral guard and the sea sages, many of whom had been killed over the years and their knowledge lost as the Reef shriveled to its current size. **[Water Knife]**, **[Control Liquid]**, **[Coral Tender]** – her eyes flicked across each of these, but settled eventually on one faded symbol in particular.

[Summon Leviathan] – *You summon a leviathan to your aid.*

“The leviathans are all dead,” Red Tide said.

“Through the Ink, many things are possible,” the symbologist answered.

Red Tide’s eyes widened as she imagined riding one of the great hulks of the sea, clinging to the spikes across her pet leviathan’s back as it gobbled her enemies down whole. She shivered with delight.

“I choose that one,” she said.

“Unfortunately, no,” the symbologist replied. “That ability is above your present renown, as are all the faded symbols you see.”

“Why even put them up there?” Red Tide snapped.

“To allow you to plan your future Ink.”

Future Ink. Red Tide snorted. Maybe land-walker champions had that luxury, but Red Tide's participation was essentially a death sentence.

"What renown do I have to get to?"

"Fifteen."

Red Tide slapped the sand. "How am I supposed to do that, slug?"

"You may earn renown by performing well in the Granting. The gods also provide opportunities in the time between. Your Quill will know more." The symbologist flicked its little hand toward the wall. "If beastly allies interest you, perhaps you might begin with **[Summon Sharks]** or **[Summon Seahorse]**? These skills are available to you."

"You dangle leviathans in front of me and then try to give me a seahorse?" Red Tide's gaze shifted away from the wall of symbols, to the fuzzy details of the island beyond. "What good is all this ocean shit, anyway? The gods make us fight the land-walkers in the dirt."

"The gods show no favoritism," the symbologist replied. "There is always water available in each version of the island."

Red Tide rolled her eyes. She took another look at the **[Oca'em]** options, specifically **[Coral Tender]** which read, *you may create and manipulate segments of coral*. Before Red Tide was born, the Reef used to have dozens of Coral Tenders who saw to its growth and expansion. Now, with the merchant families demanding the Reef stay within certain boundaries and enforcing those restrictions through wishes, most of the coral tenders had disappeared or died off.

"And what would I do with that?" Red Tide asked aloud. "You says there's water on this island, but is there coral? Useless."

“Perhaps, a demonstration...” the symbologist said.

Red Tide made a noise of disgust as the symbologist shuffled out from behind its desk with the sound of dry elbows rubbing together. The creature dug around in the billowing sleeves of its robe, then sprinkled glittering shards of purple coral into the sand at its feet.

“What else are you hiding in there?” Red Tide asked with a raised eyebrow.

“A bit of everything,” the symbologist replied. “Now, observe.”

Each chunk of coral was small enough to fit in Red Tide’s palm but, as she watched, with a noise like cracking ice the coral suddenly expanded. The coral coiled together into a solid shin-high wall. A moment later, a spike shot forth from the coral, stopping just short of where Red Tide’s eye would’ve been had she not rolled backward in the sand.

Laughing, Red Tide brushed her fingers against the sharpened point of coral. “I could do that?”

As Red Tide toyed with the coral, the symbologist scuttled back to its desk. “With practice. Just as others bring their weapons, you would bring coral with you to the island.”

Red Tide grinned. Of course the symbologist would nudge her in this direction. Even this beastly little bookkeeper knew of her reputation as a hunter of sailors. She was already imagining the grisly possibilities of growing coral of her own design.

“I’ll take it,” Red Tide said.

“Done. Two abilities remain unchosen.”

Her attention drifted back to the rings of **[Enchantress]** abilities. Now, she truly understood what the gods had to offer. They would make her a more efficient killer. She would focus on what she was already best at.

[Hypnotic Object] – You possess an object capable of bending minds to your will. The strong-willed may resist and any hypnosis will be broken should contact with the object cease.

“Do I choose the object?” Red Tide asked.

“Indeed. So long as you or your Quill are capable of acquiring it.”

“A harp,” Red Tide said. “I want it to be a harp.”

“Done,” the symbologist replied. “And your final piece?”

Red Tide stepped over the low coral wall and approached the symbologist’s desk with her hands on her hips. She took her time studying the various Ink runes and the symbologist did not press her.

“That one,” she said finally, pointing. “For when things get close.”

“Done,” the symbologist said. “Best of luck to you in the Granting, Red Tide of the Reef.”

“Thank you, slu—”

Red Tide blinked her eyes and the world was suddenly much darker and the air far damper. She was returned to her cell in the Grotto with Turtle Jaw standing over her, the tip of his quill pressed just below her collar. All the aches of a year in captivity returned to her and she winced at the cold manacles chafing her ankles. She felt like only a few seconds had passed since she’d agreed to visit the symbologist.

“Done already?” Turtle Jaw remarked.

His hand jerked into motion, not entirely under his control. The quill dragged across Red Tide’s skin, sketching out the choices she had made with the symbologist. While Turtle Jaw made the outline himself, the Ink moved across Red Tide’s skin of its own volition, filling in shapes and adding delicate inflections to the runes. A complicated nest of swirls and angles soon took shape across Red Tide’s

sternum. She could feel the meaning inside herself, knew instinctively what power the Ink granted her. Turtle Jaw could read the symbols, too, and he flinched back ever so slightly as the final marking took shape.

[Poisonous] – You may secrete a deadly poison from your skin at will.

She tilted her chin down to get a look at the final result.

Red Tide, Enchantress		3rd Renown	The Reef	
Awareness+	Charm+	Coral Tender		Cutting Words
Hypnotic Object	Poisonous			

Smiling, Red Tide dragged her nails across Turtle Jaw's cheek. "Don't worry, that poison's not for you," she said. "So long as you get me one beautiful fucking harp."

King Mudt returned from his consultation with the symbologist snarling and spitting, raging at the gods even as his hand sketched fresh designs of power across his chest.

“Your rancid worm says I’m only the fifth renown!” King Mudt bellowed. “There are many numbers higher but only four lower! How can this be when I stand above so many?”

“No mortal reaches beyond the fifth renown without our intervention,” the ge’ema answered patiently. “You should be proud, King Mudt. We have gazed upon your vast army and found only one other worthy of the fifth renown.”

All had turned to watch King Mudt draw upon his chest and this attention mollified him for a time. Mudt’s hand moved in broad strokes and swipes beneath the blackbird of Orvesis, movements he could barely control. He did not know this language, this writing of the gods, and could hardly even see what he was doing. Yet, he understood. They all understood the meaning of the symbols.

King Mudt had spent his life distrustful of magic and those who could wield it. However, he had to admit that this felt right and good. The Ink spread beyond the reach of Mudt’s quill, under his armor and across his chest and shoulders, great whorls and twists, power like he’d never known before.

He was marked as a Blade Master. The others gathered could read the Ink where it was visible and they saw the boons Mudt had chosen – strength and endurance beyond human possibility, a body that would heal itself, and a blade that no armor could thwart. King Mudt and his legions already struck fear across the north and south continents. While the legions now seemed useless under the gods’ new laws, King Mudt was more formidable than ever.

“The Ink shows what you are,” the gods said. “And it will aid those who wear it in becoming more.”

More. King Mudt liked the sound of that. He spun to face the King of Infinzel, whose brow was still damp from when Mudt had tried to murder him, and who now studied Mudt's complicated Ink with something like envy. Mudt stretched out his arms invitingly.

"Come, pig bitch," said the great King Mudt to his corpulent rival. "Mark yourself as well so we might all see what you're made of, and so the two of us can one day meet on this game board of the gods."

And King Hectore cleared his throat, noting how all eyes were now upon him.

"No, thank you," he said. "I don't think that I will."

--Record of the First Granting and Dawning of the Second Age

Lys Crodd, Scribe of the Dead Kingdom of Orvesis

--DRAMATIS PERSONAE--

Uicha de Orak, a young man of no renown or loyalty

Battar Crodd, Death Knight of the 13th Renown and Quill of the Orvesian Witnesses, he only wants to help

7 New Summer, 61 AW.

The village of Ambergran, North Continent

293 days until the next Granting.

Every day for a week, Uicha told himself that he would leave in the morning. And every morning, he found himself unable to make good on his promise from the night before.

The farmhouse still stood. So did the tree that Uicha had buried his parents beneath. The wheat fields were intact, too. Nothing that belonged to Uicha had been annihilated. He'd won every coin flip. Or else, the blank space on his neck that declared him without allegiance had protected his property from the Orvesian wish. It was Ambergran's destruction they'd wished for, after all, and he was no longer considered part of Ambergran.

Uicha thought that the birds were quieter now. Once upon a time, his father had referred to their land as serene. Now, the silence felt heavy and grim. At night, Uicha found himself flinching when the floorboards creaked under his feet.

How did the gods decide what belonged to him and what belonged to Ambergran? Or had he simply gotten lucky? And why would the gods kill the birds? Surely, the birds couldn't tell the difference between Ambergran and Orvesis. Just like Uicha, they didn't have any allegiance.

Uicha pondered these questions as he walked the fields. He wore his mother's sword now, the blade sheathed and slung over his shoulder. His ribs were still sore from when Johan had knocked him off his horse, but the bruises were fading. There was nothing keeping him from leaving.

On the farm, Uicha could pretend that nothing had even happened. He even let himself imagine that his parents had just gone into the village. Everyone would be back soon.

Except they wouldn't. Instead, reminders of the old Ambergran were carried in on the wind. Bits of particulate that used to be his neighbors.

Uicha started to thoroughly brush himself off before going inside. He kept the windows shut at all times.

There was very little green left on the wheat stalks. Brown and dry meant it was time for harvesting.

None of the hands had come back after the wish. Uicha had seen Johan disintegrate up close. He couldn't be sure if the rest were dead or just run off. Either way, it would be pointless to go looking.

What was keeping him there? He could pack a small bag and leave with Clipper, follow the river road north to Infinzel or head southeast to Ruchet. His parents had some money and jewelry hidden away in a strongbox behind a false wall in the closet. He hadn't been able to bring himself to open it yet. It felt like robbery.

Uicha understood that he'd been in a state after his parents died. A griever's depression. But this lack of inertia was different from the dark cloud that had pressed down on him through those weeks. Now, he felt as if there was something unfinished here in Ambergran. Despite his lack of connection to the town, there was something here that hooked him. Something he needed to witness.

He winced at the word.

Although he felt stupid doing it, Uicha started practicing with his mother's sword in the yard. He'd never had any lessons in swordsmanship. Uicha tried to imitate the slashes and footwork he'd caught glimpses of over the years. Some of it he'd picked up from watching the champions of Ambergran train. Other maneuvers he copied from the stage-fighting of an acting troupe that came through town every Harvesend. He gritted his teeth through the jangling pain in his ribs. He dueled invisible enemies until his back was damp with sweat and his arms were sore.

It passed the time, at least.

At night, by candlelight, he began to go through his parents' papers. He found the deed to the land and the records of the last two decades of harvests. The farm was quite profitable, it turned out,

even accounting for the inflated salaries his father paid Johan and the other hands. Uicha suspected that overpaying was his father's way of keeping these men loyal, of taking the sting off working for a family from the islands.

Amongst the papers, Uicha found maps. So many maps. Some of them were fine things that depicted the entirety of Emza, and Uicha wondered whether his parents had commissioned these or stolen them. Others were maps drawn in his father's steady hand. A hobby that he'd taken up and set aside. It appeared he'd been halfway through an overly detailed map of their farmland. Circles marked the map, like his father had been planning to dig a well but couldn't settle on the right location.

And then there were the letters. Although he wanted to read them all at once, Uicha forced himself to go through them slowly. They were his only form of entertainment. Most of them were addressed to Uicha's father, sent all the way from the Flamingo Islands by a man named Bric. There were references to Uicha in the letters. *Uicha sounds like a promising boy*, said one. *Tell him to keep his chin up*, said another. Uicha wished that he could've known what his father had written about him to this stranger.

I would welcome the three of you back, said another letter. *I would love to go sailing with my grandson, before I'm too old to work the knots*.

Bric de Orak of the Flamingo Islands. His father's father. A man who had never been mentioned, but existed here in ink and parchment.

Uicha sat back, his heart beating faster. He had a grandfather. Perhaps this was the discovery he'd been waiting around for.

He returned to the maps. What was the quickest way to the Flamingo Islands? He could travel to Ruchet and find a ship to take him, although he'd heard the town was rough and the waters troubled by dangers born in the ruins of Orvesis.

There were dangers born from Orvesis here, though. How bad could Ruchet really be?

Uicha had never even been outside of Ambergran. It was a plan, at least. Somewhere to go.

The night he settled on finding his grandfather, Uicha at last rifled through his parents' strongbox. A small fortune in standard gold, some of it in the triangular tokens of Infinzel, some in the round coins favored in the Merchant Cities. Jewels and trinkets. A few pieces probably of value, the rest sentimental. Receipts of deposit at Ambergran's local vault. There would be no one to honor those certificates now, if the vault even still stood. But the rest...

Uicha found himself suddenly quite rich.

And then there was the key. Cold, sturdy chromium, with a dozen grooved teeth. A key to what must have been a very complex lock. The key was stamped with the gear-shaped symbol of Beacon's Gadgeteers. That meant it was a masterwork, incredibly expensive. Uicha had no idea what the key might open. His parents had left no explanation behind. Had they found this key during their pirating days and held onto it, in hopes of one day discovering the lock? Another story of theirs that he'd never know.

Uicha put that melancholy thought aside. He was bound for the Flamingo Islands. He would need supplies for the journey, though. In his week of isolation, Uicha had eaten his way through most of the food.

The next day, Uicha finally ventured into town. He rode Clipper, who balked and tossed his head every few yards, unused to the strange scenery. Farmsteads that he'd once used as landmarks were

gone. Fields that should've been as ripe as his own were flattened, so that the horizon seemed wider and empty. A landscape of arbitrary destruction. Carts blocked the road in places, loaded with supplies, but abandoned. Someone who had been in the process of fleeing Ambergran during the annihilation. Whole families gone just like that, all their things left untouched in the road as if they might return to claim them.

Uicha wondered when someone might get around to clearing the roads. Would it be the survivors of Ambergran? Or would it be the others?

The Orvesian Witnesses were everywhere. They stooped in the remnants of fields or in the remains of farmsteads, scooping shovels of ash into pouches. Collecting the remnants of the dead so that they could mix the ash with water and their strange chemicals, creating the paint for the stripes they wore across their faces. Some of them stopped what they were doing when Uicha passed. They stood up, and waved.

Uicha had to stop himself from waving back. His instinctive politeness was a hazard.

Were these freaks his neighbors now? When did this land stop belonging to Ambergran and become part of Orvesis? Had it already happened?

Uicha breathed a sigh of relief when he reached the town center. Here were faces he actually recognized. The survivors of Ambergran were attempting to rebuild. They were carting lumber from abandoned farmsteads into town, then distributing it to the families who had survived but lost their homes. When Uicha rode close, he felt cold eyes upon him. His neighbors didn't say anything to him, but he could see the resentment in their eyes. Farmhands spit in the dirt as he passed.

They stared at the blank space on his neck. The wheat-stalk tattoo was all he'd ever had in common with these people and even that was gone now.

Uicha gently coaxed Clipper past the pile of timber and approached the town's bulletin board. There was an informal census taking place there. His neighbors were signing their names and writing in what supplies they could spare. There were also descriptions of the missing. There was some mystery about who had disintegrated and who had simply run off. Uicha debating adding the names of his farmhands to the missing, but decided he didn't much care if they were found or not.

"Excuse me," a voice said from behind him.

Uicha shuddered involuntarily as he turned to find an Orvesian Witness holding a basket of blankets. She was actually pretty, despite her shaved head and ash markings, with big eyes and dimples.

"Do you need anything?" the Witness asked him.

"Do I...?" The question baffled him.

"Food? Blankets? I have both."

"No, thank you," Uicha said, and then cringed. He'd spoken too kindly and hoped no one overheard.

The Orvesian flashed him a smile, then moved on. He noticed other Witnesses circulating with baskets, making similar offers to the shocked survivors of Ambergran. Shoving and shouting broke out near the timber. A farmer ripped a basket away from an Orvesian and chucked it across the road. Uicha didn't think it coincidence that the basket was aimed in his direction. Loaves of bread scattered at his feet.

He abandoned his plans to visit the general store. There would be places to buy supplies on the road. He had money. He could figure things out, even if it meant a few nights on an empty stomach.

"To hell with you all," Uicha said quietly, the comment aimed at both his old neighbors and the new. "I'm getting out of this shit town. First thing in the morning."

Uicha rode hard for home, surprising Clipper with how he dug his heels in. The anger came on in a rush and it didn't fade when Uicha was back on his farm, so he took out his mother's sword and went to work. He imagined painted Orvesians and sneering farmers, all of them quailing before his might.

His heartbeat was so loud in his ears that Uicha didn't hear them approach.

"It's a sincere performance. Someone that's never used a blade might actually think you know what you're doing."

Battar Crodd stood at the edge of the wheat field, his sharp blue eyes smiling at Uicha. The black stripes across his face had been freshly reapplied. A breeze rustled the black feathers that decorated his robes. Much to Uicha's bafflement, the Orvesian had a sleeping puppy draped over his forearm. He gently stroked the wrinkled back of the dog's neck with his index finger. A tremor passed through Uicha's sword arm that he knew didn't go unobserved.

"If you're interested in really learning, I could give you lessons," Crodd said eventually, when it became clear Uicha would only gape at him. "I was a teacher once, amongst my people. History. Not swordplay. But you'd find I have the temperament for education."

"What do you want?" Uicha finally managed to ask.

Crodd took a few steps closer, squinting his eyes. "Still no mark on you. I'd hoped to see a blackbird."

Uicha clasped a hand over his throat, but realizing that was a pointless gesture, he let it drop.

"I'm no Orvesian," he said. "Go play in someone else's dirt."

Crodd chuckled and strolled closer still. Uicha stood his ground. This man couldn't hurt him. But then, a dozen more Witnesses emerged from the wheat, carrying tools and pulling carts. At the sight of them, Uicha stumbled backward.

"Your fields are overdue and your staff is gone," Crodd said. "We're here to help with the harvest."

"You're here to help..." Uicha murmured.

"It'll all be properly accounted. We have people good with numbers. We'll carve out a fair share for you," Crodd explained. "However, the bulk of what we earn from your fields will be put back into the town. We need to help these people get back on their feet."

"You're helping them? Handing out blankets, doing chores..." Uicha laughed, embarrassed by how hysterical it sounded. "You just killed half of them!"

Crodd stopped a few yards away. "The gods killed them, Uicha. Not me."

"You *told* them to do it. You *wished* for it."

Crodd made a face. He gently maneuvered the puppy off his arm, holding it out belly up toward Uicha. The dog's small tail flopped lazily.

"I wish you would kill this dog," Crodd stated. "I wish you would slice it in half with your pirate's sword."

"What?" Uicha took a step back. "No."

"You dare to deny me my wish?" Crodd exclaimed. "Why, young man, you must be more powerful than the gods themselves." He set the puppy down and it scrambled over to sniff at Uicha's ankles. "I find the annihilation of Ambergran repugnant," Crodd continued. "What sort of gods would

permit it? What sort of gods would encourage it? A boy playing swords in his fields has more wisdom than these creatures we're forced to worship."

Uicha bent down to scoop up the puppy, juggling the runt awkwardly while still keeping his sword drawn. "Do you carry around small animals just to make this point?"

Crodd smiled and shook his head. "I found him and thought of you. The unmarked boy. All alone. I thought you might benefit from a companion."

The other Witnesses had already begun work in the fields. A burly Orvesian stripped to the waist took a scythe to the rows of wheat with mechanical rhythm. Two others trailed behind him, gathering the stalks into bundles and depositing them in a cart. Uicha raised an eyebrow. There were a handful of Orvesians behind Crodd who didn't carry farming implements. Instead, they brandished shovels and pickaxes. This bunch stood by idly while Uicha spoke with Crodd, almost like they were waiting for him to leave.

"I'll keep the dog," Uicha decided in an instant. "But I don't want you here."

Crodd cocked his head. "You would deny your neighbors the bounty of a harvest in their time of need?"

"You aren't my neighbors," he responded. "If someone from Ambergran wants to harvest my fields, they're welcome to it. But I won't have you murderers on my land."

Uicha had never really referred to it as his land before. The phrase tasted strange in his mouth. He hadn't suddenly developed some attachment to this forsaken land and the stupid town it abutted. He just wanted the Orvesians gone. He wanted very badly to say no to someone.

That infuriating twinkle of amusement never left Battar Crodd's blue eyes. "You know, in the days of my grandfather, you might have used that to protect your domain," he said, nodding toward Uicha. "The sword, I mean. Not the puppy."

Uicha's hand was sweaty on the hilt. He halfheartedly raised the blade toward Crodd, but only an inch. He knew it was a pointless gesture.

"Of course, I have a sword, too." Crodd reached up to tap the handle of the longsword strapped to his back. "There are many formidable warriors among my people. Without the gods protection, we could've swept through this place like fire. But, without the gods interference, we wouldn't have needed to be here in the first place. It's all a conundrum, isn't it?"

His words went in circles. Uicha found his gaze drifting to the man's chest, where spirals of Ink marked his renown.

"So, you're unable to exert your will with brute force, pointless as that would be for you against me," Crodd continued. "The only option really left to you is the laws of gods. The Quills have special magic to rid unwanted visitors from the lands where they aren't welcome. Unfortunate for you that Tabitha Gentlerain has disappeared. I think she may have gone a bit mad." Crodd stroked his square jaw, as if something had just occurred to him. "Might be interesting to see, actually, what would happen to an unmarked boy should a Quill work a banishment upon the land. I have a quill of my own, you know." Crodd patted a pouch strung across his chest, mostly hidden by black feathers. "Experimentation is how we learn the limits of our world. Perhaps this land now belongs to Orvesis and it's you who needs banishment. Should we find out?"

"This is my land," Uicha repeated. "If you won't leave..." He trailed off, hunting for a threat.

“You should come to one of my sermons,” Crodd continued over him. “Witness with us, and you might better understand your predicament.”

“I’m not joining your fucking cult.” The words came with a harshness that made the puppy squirm in his arms. “I’ll burn the fields! I’ll—”

Uicha saw the way Crodd's face changed. Was it the word ‘cult’ or was it his threat to burn the fields? Either way, Crodd’s blue eyes went dull and the amused quirk of his mouth flattened. And then, in the blink of an eye, the Orvesian stood directly before him. Uicha hadn’t even seen the man move. A coldness radiated out from Crodd and prickled against Uicha’s skin. Uicha saw the Ink on the Orvesian’s chest shift and fade. He felt chilled all over, the will leaking out of him. The man’s closeness felt the same way as falling in a dream. It was a nightmare come to life.

“Don’t say something I’ll make you regret, boy,” Crodd warned, his voice like boots crunching over ice. “Now, go inside and let us carry on our business undisturbed by petulance.”

Just like that, Uicha was back inside the farmhouse, the door slammed and bolted behind him. His body had taken over and he had fled for safety. His heartbeat pounded in his ears. He shuddered and his breath came out as mist. Outside, he could hear the Orvesians chatting and laughing. His arm was wet with dog piss.

He set the puppy down shakily but gently, then screamed and flung his mother's sword across the room. It clattered against the wall, putting a long slash through a tapestry depicting a sunset over the Flamingo Islands.

Get out of this place. Take only what he could carry. Go find his grandfather or don't. Just get away. Just—

Uicha noticed a glint of metal peeking through the shredded wall hanging. Half in a daze, he walked forward and yanked the artwork down.

There was a keyhole in the wall. Tracing his fingers across the wood, Uicha felt the outline of a hidden panel, so subtly installed that he could barely see it in the daylight. There was no place to insert a pry-bar, hardly any gap in the wood at all. To open the panel, you'd need the key or you'd need to take an axe to the entire wall. Knocking on the wood, Uicha thought he heard the reverberation of more metal underneath – so maybe even an axe wouldn't be enough.

Instantly, Uicha knew that the key he'd found in his parents' lockbox would open this panel. And, somehow, he also knew that what was hidden inside had a hold of him. This mysterious lock and its contents, not the undiscovered knowledge of his far flung grand-father, was what had kept him from fleeing Ambergran straight away. Something in there called to him. Something in their made the blank skin of Uicha's throat tingle.

What had his parents been hiding from him?

“As Quills, we have made other skills available to you,” the ge’ema said. “Just as you may now read our language, so will you know how to use these abilities. They are innate within you so long as you are Quills.”

Indeed, King Mudt could feel these new ideas tickling his brain. They all could. Runes he could inscribe to communicate with his champions across great distances or banish interlopers from his land. The sort of magical foolishness that King Mudt had never indulged in. These gods wanted him for a plaything and in exchange they delivered tattoos and tricks. Mudt scoffed, but the gods did not notice.

“We give you a year to gather your champions to you,” the ge’ema concluded. “After that, you will be returned here, and the Granting will commence. Until then, luxuriate in the new peace we have given you.”

Peace. The word stabbed through King Mudt like a javelin. What was he to do with peace?

There was a sour taste in Mudt’s mouth as the gods began to pull away from them. New abilities and new laws of nature, yet something else nagged at the great conqueror.

“Wait!” King Mudt bellowed. “You said there was another as renowned as me amongst my army. This must be a lie!”

“Indeed, no, it is the truth,” the gods replied. Those who were present swore they heard an edge of laughter within the melodic voice of the gods. King Mudt, of course, did not notice. “Surely, you will want her as your champion,” the gods continued. “We have marked her for you.”

--Record of the First Granting and Dawning of the Second Age

Lyus Crodd, Scribe of the Dead Kingdom of Orvesis

--DRAMATIS PERSONAE--

Carina Goldstone, Kingdom of Infinzel, shall be revealed in good time

Ahmed Roh, Archmage of the 15th Renown, the Magelab, an unpleasant traveling companion

Orryn es-Salvado, a garrison prospect of no renown, Kingdom of Infinzel, the guy with the rats

20 New Summer, 61 AW.

Outside of Infinzel, North Continent

280 days until the next Granting.

After almost three weeks on the road, Infinzel at last appeared on the horizon. A bruise-colored triangle at this distance, a lonely mountain rising up without its range. Carina Goldstone smiled. She was almost home.

“Today will be the day we part ways,” she said to the archmage’s back. He had a habit of getting his horse out in front of hers, sometimes by miles. It had become something of a game for Carina to keep pace with the old prick, even on the days when he left camp before she woke up. “Will you miss my company, Master Roh?”

“No,” he replied.

“We’ll see each other again soon enough, though, won’t we?”

Ahmed Roh ignored her, turning a page in his book. Carina couldn't understand how he read in the saddle like that; the motion would've made her sick. She studied the archmage's scrawny back. Roh was in his fifties but could've passed for double that. Like most of the masters of the Magelab, the magic had eaten away at him. He was gaunt and sunken, with a gnarled beard of bitter gray and an unkempt halo of brittle hair around a pockmarked bald spot. Roh had a taste for fine clothes in shades of red wine that weren't at all suited to travel, yet he'd kept his silks clean over these weeks through some petty spellcraft. Before they set out, Carina had seen Roh only a few times around the Magelab, usually as one face among many glaring at her from an upraised dais. She thought he had mean eyes.

While they had left the Magelab at the same time, they weren't traveling together. Roh had made that abundantly clear as night after night he insisted on setting his camp on the opposite side of the road. He never turned away a plate of food cooked over Carina's fire, though. It was as if he expected that kind of tribute from her.

Carina was twenty-five years old, though small and narrow in a way that many still mistook her for a girl. At least Roh's nearby presence had staved off any other uncomfortable encounters on the road. Otherwise, Carina found him to be a miserable companion. However, she was curious. It was strange that one of the champions of the Magelab had set out alone without the usual retinue of apprentices and advisors. She wanted to know where he was going and what he planned to do there, not because that information had any particular bearing on Carina's own plans, but because the knowledge was withheld from her. She couldn't stand that.

They came to a crossroads. The route heading directly west was wide and well-trod, whereas the route leading southwest was rough and a bit overgrown. Without looking up from his book, Roh turned his horse southwest. Carina followed and she watched as the mage's shoulders tightened. He snapped his book closed and scowled over his shoulder.

“Turn back,” he said. “You missed the Continental Highway.”

“No, I didn’t,” she replied. “The Continental would have me arrive through Soldier’s Rest. Could end up unseemly for a woman traveling alone.”

Roh eyed her. “If you say so.”

“I do say so, Master Roh. Just a few more miles with me, sir. This path connects to the River Road. That’s the one for me.”

Of course, he was right that the Continental Highway would be most direct and Carina actually had no fear at all of Soldier’s Rest. She’d basically grown up there, which meant there would be too many familiar faces. She’s wasn’t ready to see anyone yet. They would have questions and her answers weren’t yet ready.

There would be other interrogations to get through before she could even think of visiting Soldier’s Rest.

She considered Roh’s own path. Over the last couple weeks, there were times that she worried he was heading to Infinzel too. Wouldn’t that have been ironic? He’d be a nuisance for her there like she had been for him on the road. But no, Ahmed Roh was headed south via the Troldep. She didn’t take him for a gambler or a debtor, which ruled out Noyega. If he was bound for further south, for swampy Rouchet or dead Orvesis, he likely would’ve brought some assistance. Even a champion of his renown wouldn’t brave those places alone. What else would interest an archmage to the south...?

“You’re going to Ambergran,” Carina said.

Roh said nothing, but Carina thought she heard his jaw click from clenched teeth.

“Is it true what they’re saying, then?” Carina asked, not expecting a response. “Annihilation? That’s an ugly thing. But you had your chance to stop it, didn’t you? Why go now? A case of too little and too late, isn’t it?”

As Carina unloaded her questions, Roh brought his horse to a stop and waited for her to pull level. He fixed her with a stony glare that probably sent his apprentices scurrying under their beds, but the Magelab was far behind them and Carina only smiled.

“I have always found you to be the vilest of interlopers, Ms. Goldstone,” the old mage pronounced. “As you say, we will be together again soon, but you should hope we don’t cross paths.”

Carina batted her eyes. “Why’s that, *Ahmed*?”

Before he could respond, Carina put her heels into her horse and took off down the path. It was the first time in weeks that she’d ridden ahead of Roh. Carina laughed as she went. She’d learned what she wanted and now she could be rid of the mage and his baleful presence.

Besides, her presence was urgently needed in Infinzel.

“My regrets to the immortal king!” Roh screamed at her back.

Carina slowed her horse once they reached the Troldep and hooked back north along the River Road. She tilted her head back and enjoyed the cool mist that blew off the water, ignoring the butterflies that had begun to flutter so chaotically in her stomach. The pyramidal city drew closer.

On the day of her return, Carina had her dark hair wrapped in scarves, her shirt buttoned to the collar despite the spring warmth. Her skin was clean. She’d made a point of washing off the dirt that morning.

Barges laden with stone harvested from Infinzel's mineral gardens traveled south on the river. Watching them, Carina ran calculations in her mind without even realizing she was doing it. Based on how fast the boats moved and how low they rode in the water, she could make a guess at what kind of stone each vessel carried, how much each shipment was worth, and whether the boats could've handled more. She made a game of keeping score of which captains would have the most lucrative voyage.

She noticed one barge that was already listing to one side and calculated that what was surely a shipment of sandstone hadn't been properly distributed throughout the hold. Carina waved to catch the attention of a sailor smoking a pipe on the deck, but before she could shout a warning the man made a 'V' with his fingers and flicked his tongue through it. She dropped her hand.

"Junnaro Company," she said to herself. A couple of merchants and their cart had been riding level with Carina for the last mile. She caught their attention and pointed out the boat. "That ship is going to capsize."

The merchant holding the reins raised an eyebrow at her. "Piss off, girly," he said. "I'm not getting taken in by another fortune teller."

"Fortune, sir, is no substitute for good planning," Carina said.

"No, really, piss off."

Carina dug her heels into her horse and surged ahead of the rude merchant. People were always telling Carina to piss off, in one way or another. She'd stopped taking it too personally. It was the burden of always being right.

The pyramidal city rose up before her, a monument to the ingenuity of mankind. She'd been born within those walls and then done her growing up in their shadows. Carina's face hurt, and she realized it was from smiling. She hadn't been back to Infinzel in almost eight years, and she'd dreamed

about this day for all that time. To Carina, it felt like gears were clicking into place in her heart. At last, she was back where she belonged. And she returned exactly the way she'd planned.

The road widened as she neared the city and then rode through the river gate. She found a public hitching post for her horse before the streets turned to cobbles, and proceeded on foot into the traffic of the Underbridge.

Here, the Troldep River passed directly under and through Infinzel. On her left, docking berths spanned the riverside, while to her right were merchant stalls, outbuildings, and warehouses. The Underbridge was one of the busiest ports in the world, all that commerce taking place beneath the cavernous ceiling of the pyramidal city. There were windows carved into the stone above her, though they were too high for Carina to see into. Apartments overlooking the Underbridge were one of the most sought after quarters within Infinzel.

And there, above Carina, was the vast mural of King Cizco Salavado, the immortal ruler of Infinzel. Although, Carina knew, he was less immortal now than he had been a few weeks ago. The mural wasn't made from paints but instead composed of the colorful mosses and molds that grew on the Underbridge. Some magic of King Cizco's animated and colored them, creating the appearance of a gently smiling Salavado welcoming boats into the pyramidal city's underbelly.

"Maintenance can't be worth the cost in arcane energy," Carina said quietly.

Turning from the mural, Carina dodged through carts and wagons bound for the docks and hustled between merchant stalls. She knew exactly which entrance into the pyramidal city she was looking for. While she hadn't been home to Infinzel in years, she carried maps and blueprints of the place in her mind. She'd spent hours memorizing the twists and turns of the enormous structure. She knew every hallway and antechamber, from the king's quarters at the top to the mining sectors around the base.

The door she wanted was wrought iron, recessed into the stone. A young man stood guard there. He wore the uniform of the Garrison - a smart jacket and slacks in the same slate gray as Infinzel's stone, a sash of purple around his waist, and a short sword. Carina could tell by his features that he was a Salvado, although she couldn't exactly say which branch of the vast family tree. It gave her pause for only a moment that the man held a rat cupped in his hands and appeared to be whispering to the little creature.

He glanced up as she approached and the rat crawled up his sleeve.

"Can't cut through this way," he told her, and jerked his chin further on. "Entrance to the interior markets are back that way."

"I'm here for the Garrison," she told him. "And to see the king."

He snorted. "Sure. Let me check the appointment book. See if he has any openings."

"Your father—"

"Grandfather," he corrected. The young man drew himself up in a way that might have been impressive if not for the rat squirming beneath his uniform. "You speak to Orryn es-Salvado, girl. Be mindful of that."

"Ah, I mistook you for second generation," Carina said. "You have the jawline."

"Sweet of you to say."

"Your *grandfather* sent me an invitation," Carina said.

She reached into her satchel and produced a hand mirror. She'd been studying her new Ink in its reflection when the Quill of Infinzel had contacted her. His elegant, kingly penmanship stretched across the glass. It was a trick possessed by all the Quills, Carina knew, should they need to communicate with

one of their champions. King Cizco wrote the message in Ink and spoke an incantation, and his message appeared wherever she happened to be looking. Carina was grateful the king had only ruined a mirror she'd purchased in a secondhand shop and not one of her books or maps.

Dear whoever you are, the message read. Present yourself to the Garrison immediately. I'm eager to meet my gift from the gods. Yours, C.

Orryn's mouth hung open. Carina could tell he didn't quite believe her, so she pushed aside her scarves and unbuttoned the top of her shirt, revealing first the pyramid-shaped insignia of Infinzel, and then the fresh whorls of her Ink.

Carina Goldstone		Infinzel			2nd Renown	
	Enthralled Defender					
			Alert			
		Logician				
			Awareness+			
				Future Sight		

Orryn couldn't read the symbols, but they looked like the real thing.

"You...?" He shook his head. "Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"You kept everyone waiting."

"I was out of town."

Orryn rubbed the back of his neck. "Fuck me. They were going to put a bounty out on you if you didn't show soon. Wonder if that went through, actually..."

Carina reached out to squeeze his arm conspiratorially, mindful not to crush any rodents that might have been hiding in his jacket. "I'll tell them you found me, if we wrap up this conversation and you show me inside."

Orryn snorted, then led her into the warm, copper-smelling halls of the Garrison. He grabbed the first other guard they encountered and told him to alert the king and the champions. The guard's eyes widened in disbelief as he sized up Carina. She pretended not to notice.

"Come on," Orryn said. "They'll want to meet you in the Battle Library."

"Lead the way," she replied.

Just as Orryn wasn't capable of reading the Ink, he was also too unfamiliar with the substance to notice the crimson flecks that floated in Carina's markings.