

Empires Rise: An Approach to Worldbuilding in Modern Fantasy Fiction

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By  
Anthony Rudd

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## ABSTRACT

Worldbuilding is a critical element to storytelling and involves much more than creating a setting for a narrative – it serves to establish a credible foundation on which authors give life to their creation. There are many great authors who have mastered the art of worldbuilding and their creations can serve as a primer for aspiring authors. This thesis explores critical elements of worldbuilding, provides examples from notable fantasy and science fiction authors such as Tolkien, Jordan, King, and others and explores my approach to incorporating those elements into my own writing.

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## DEDICATION

To my family who weathered my ambitions for yet another master's degree and put up with the constant clacking of the keyboard late into the night. I hope to write a story worthy of your faith in me.

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## ARTIST STATEMENT

### Background

I cut my teeth at an early age on the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis and have been inspired to attempt to humbly follow in their footsteps. My well-worn and dog-eared copies of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* stand in testament to my devotion to following not only the stories themselves but also in appreciation of the care and detail that they invested in creating the world their characters inhabit. As I have grown older, I have discovered numerous other authors whose careful worldbuilding have inspired me to attempt to craft my own world in which to set my stories, authors such as Stephen King, Robert Jordan, John Gwynne, and Brandon Sanderson being some of the most notable. For me, the worldbuilding has become an integral part of the storytelling process and more than a means to an end.

With regards to my current manuscript, I have been actively writing and rewriting some version of this story and creating the world since my mid-teens. I am now fifty and the most current version of the novel has coalesced within the last few years. Through careful planning and the development of numerous supporting documents cataloguing the world I have created, the story is now on a solid trajectory with a well-developed outline for not only this novel but a series of novels to follow set in the same world. Most of the introduced characters will see some sort of resolution in this novel but there is room for development of both those characters and others to be told in succeeding stories. Like Brandon Sanderson's Cosmere, I see the world that I am building as a fictional universe in which there are numerous potential stories to tell beyond the ones that I have mapped out so far. The time I spend worldbuilding, despite sometimes slowing the pace of my current novel will pay off later as I continue to develop the universe in which my characters live. With a fully built world in place, filled with a wealth of background

and detail will allow me to examine and express the themes that I want to share with my readers, seeking to both entertain and also to connect and share on a deeper level.

### Process

Despite being classified as fantasy, the genre itself still requires a sense of believability so that readers can bridge the gap from imaginary to reality. In other words, a story that defies many of the constructs that the real world is built around, often fall flat with readers. With this context in mind, I started not with the idea for a plot, but with the idea for a people to establish the plot around. Once I firmly established the group, I wanted to center my story around I looked not only to other authors but also to history and current events to inspire the conflict and the plot. From that perspective, I began to establish the rest of the world in which the story would be set, going so far as to build and catalog the world down to the fine details, using literary tradition, historical context, and the human condition as cornerstones to craft a world that could exist, even if only on paper. I then layered the fantastical elements over the top of a grounded base. In this endeavor I was most inspired by George R.R. Martin, whose fantastical elements in *A Song of Ice and Fire* take a back seat to the gritty realities of politics and conflict set in a medieval world.

I consider myself very well read within the genre so it has been important to use that as a basis for what works and what doesn't. Additionally, I used my expertise in history as a stepping off point to do research into those events and cultures that I used as models for the world I created, looking at combinations of cultures that were complimentary as a way to build something unique to my world yet still rooted in reality. For instance, my studies of Ottoman culture and history served as the model for one of the primary nations that make up the world I created. Along with my own studies, I discovered numerous online tools for map building, city demographics, character portraits, and heraldry that were instrumental in giving depth to the

world and its inhabitants. These online tools have been instrumental in building out the notes that I use to catalog the world that I have constructed but also to help keep my extensive notes straight. Another element that will present itself heavily in the novel is that of war and its effects. As a retired Army officer and war veteran, it is my intent to use my personal experiences to help craft this portion of the novel with as much realism and I can imbue regardless of the setting.

### Vision

Early on in my courses at Liberty University, I was asked whether I considered myself a plot-driven or character-driven writer. My almost immediate reaction to this question was to indicate the former and to lump myself in with the common perception that genres like science fiction and fantasy are almost exclusively plot-driven. As I started to map out my novel, I realized that while the plot was important to the completion of the novel and any sequels, what I was writing was more about character development. I feel that the growth of the characters in the story is the meaningful takeaway that I want for my readers. By the time the story is told, I want the readers to be able to engage with the characters on more than a surface level. I want them to be someone that the reader can empathize with, even if they disagree with their motivations. I originally started with a perspective that there is a clear-cut line between good and evil, antagonist and protagonist. Over the course of writing, I continued to ask myself about why a character would be motivated to do what they were doing and what they hoped to achieve through their actions and I also considered whether their actions were consistent with their character. Through this approach, I have discovered that there are shades of grey in my characters and I have attempted to seize on this fact to produce personalities that my readers can relate to. For instance, one of the characters that first appears in the story, Caeda Sangrey, was originally intended to be the main antagonist and has since transformed into a character whose



intentions cannot only be understood but also sympathized with - her arc is one of redemption and of actions taken for the right reasons with the wrong methods and outcomes. My ultimate vision for this work is to tell an entertaining story, set within a believable world, with a set of characters that the reader can relate to, whose arcs and development can be pulled directly from real life and thus leaving the reader with a sense that they have read something meaningful.

### Literary Context

The fantasy genre continues to grow, especially in light of the recent trend of turning science fiction and fantasy novels into television series and movies, many of which are dominating the theaters and streaming services, such as series adaptations of *The Wheel of Time* and two series following George R.R. Martin's books. This movement has caused a growing clamor for more novels that appeal to a wider audience by making use of themes that cross a broader demographic and can span across genres. The days of the simple slash and spell novels has been left behind and readers are looking for novels which combine a sense of fantasy with gritty reality. It is within this niche that my novel is projected and where I see my contributions to the genre.

When I consider the masters of the genre, the one thing about a particular author that I am most often drawn to is whether I think I could take the world they have created and fashion my own stories set within that world, adopting the boundaries they have set. This, to me, means that they have achieved the pinnacle in worldbuilding and that they have created a world rich enough to inspire the works of others. With this in mind, my aspiration is to build a world that is both believable and meaningful to the reader. In this regard, I find myself drawn more to current fantasy authors who inject the gritty truth of living into their works, authors such as Joe Abercrombie and the aforementioned George R.R. Martin who recognize that fantasy does not

mean that every character has a beneficial outcome but that when the current conflict ends that life continues and the possibility of living “happily ever after” is a rarity or only a temporary development over the course of one’s life.

From a literary perspective, my novel seeks to build upon the tradition of the greats of modern fantasy, using them as inspiration for the both in terms of style and substance. To this end there are a couple “Easter eggs” built in to pay homage to the greats such as the exodus of the elves in Tolkien’s works. Like many works in the fantasy genre, there is an element of magic and magical beings, unlike in some more traditional works of fantasy, these elements will be used more as a vehicle to resolve the conflict and to foster the development of the characters rather than taking a central role in the story.

### Significance

From a biblical standpoint, I feel that this work has significance mostly in terms of the redemptive arc that many of the characters will undertake throughout the story – the ability to find redemption and be forgiven for our transgressions is key to my novel. Caeda Sangrey will undertake a journey that takes her from thoughts of revenge for herself and her friends to realizing that her aim to free those that she views as subjugated to the will of others has been twisted into something that goes well beyond what she originally intended. I also plan on exploring the fragility of the human spirit and how it can be strengthened through faith and family. Garus, the leader of the Kantu, will be faced with the decision to ultimately repair the Bastion to close off magic to the world or whether he should allow the destruction of the Bastion and allow that with the bad, also comes the potential for a greater good. Along the way he will struggle with his own lack of magic and his feelings of failure. Another character, the Varlan, the half-brother of Garus, must come to grips with his own feelings of jealousy and will be faced

with the opportunity to betray his family in order to achieve his own ambitions and as a mask for his own failures and inadequacies. In all of these arcs, there are echoes of the stories contained within the Bible which serve as a blueprint for many of the stories found in modern fiction and follow the themes of faith, hope, and love.

Additionally, from a thematic perspective there are a number of things I hope to emphasize, many of which revolve around the clash of cultures, class, politics, and race. We do not live in a homogenous world and the interactions within our own cultural spheres and how we deal with differences is not only a timely topic but a significant one.

### Introduction to the Manuscript

*A Gathering of Titans* is a multiple point of view, epic fantasy novel set in a world where magic has been banished for so long that its existence is now a legend told to children. Over a thousand years prior, the known world was almost destroyed as magic wielders and their allies caused havoc in their quest for power. In an effort to bring peace to the continent, the combined kingdoms turned to a race of powerful magicians, known as the Kantu, to create a series of devices, collectively known as the Bastion, to prevent the use of magic on the continent. The device also created two zones, one that would hide the Kantu and their homeland, allowing them to live in a peaceful exile, and another that effectively created a prison for those magicians and magical creatures deemed too dangerous to be allowed to roam free, an area known as the Wild Lands. After falling out of memory and a thousand years of neglect, the Bastion is beginning to fail allowing magic to once again make its way onto the continent. Recognizing this, the Kantu dispatch their young chieftain and a small group to repair the damage and maintain the status quo. A character index follows which details some of the prominent characters, their backgrounds and some of the conflicts that they are involved in within the story. There are also a

number of supporting characters whose points of view are interjected throughout the story to introduce minor subplots that allow the story to progress, including that of the unseen force from the Wild Lands that appears to be pulling the strings behind the chaos that is gripping the world.

There are numerous themes that the novel attempts to tackle, the most pronounced being, *what happens when the cure is worse than the disease?* Another important theme is the clash of cultures which is exacerbated through the self-imposed exile of the Kantu and whether their exile is beneficial or whether it harms a population in the long-term. The novel also looks at the motivations of several of the prominent characters and examines whether the actions they take serves their ultimate goals or whether they act in direct opposition to them.

*A Gathering of Titans* Character Index

- Garus, chieftain of the Kantu and leader of the expedition to fix the Bastion. Garus harbors intense doubts about his ability to lead after witnessing the death of his father at the hands of raiders from the northern continent. Garus' inability to intervene haunts him and has caused a degree of post-traumatic stress disorder that he must deal with while simultaneously leading the expedition. Additionally, he has not yet exhibited the magical abilities inherent to his race. After his father's death Garus was raised as chieftain despite his apparent willingness to lead and a challenge to his leadership by his half-brother Varlan.
- Caeda Sangrey, once queen of X'orben, has been driven from her homeland and nearly killed by her husband, the king, for her inability to produce an heir. She escapes with her life and plots revenge for the transgressions against her and her friends. In her escape she rediscovers the history of the Bastion and the means to return magic to the world which she intends to use as a tool to aid in her revenge.
- Daeaton Daeneril, the nephew to the King of Arcadia, and whose family has been reduced to a mere shadow of what it once was through the scheming of his great uncle, Eoin Vandran. Daeaton suspects his uncle's hand in the fall of his family but has been unable to prove it. He and his mother and sister have been forced into exile and he lives in shame constantly looking for opportunities to repair his family's reputation and a chance for revenge.
- Eoin Vandran, chief advisor to the King of Arcadia whose greatest ambition is to become the sole ruler of the continent, resurrecting the ancient kingdom of Merwin, who will resort to any means to achieve his goal. Originally the third son of the King, Eoin

despises his station in life and plots to rise to the office that he believes he deserves by birth. Through his spies he learns of Caeda Sangrey's mission to return magic to the continent and schemes to use that knowledge to enhance his own station.

- Jalen Cater, a member of the Brotherhood of Estlan, an order of monks established as the original caretakers of the Bastion. The Brotherhood of Estlan have forgotten the reason for their existence and now serve as the beer brewers and distillers guild for the populace using the unique properties of the Bastion's Keystones to facilitate their craft, not knowing their real purpose. Jalen is the fourth son of a noble family who is determined to overcome the moniker of a "useless" fourth son.
- Keltara, a Kantu woman, who was part of the small contingent meant to guard the Anchor Stone, the portion of the Bastion that both obscured and locked down the Wild Lands. Her small contingent has all perished, leaving her to be taken in by pirates at an early age and unaware of her ancestry.

### Critical Paper

In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort (Tolkien 11).

With those two short sentences a world is born – one that has delighted readers for generations and that has inspired aspiring writers to follow in the footsteps of their legendary creator, J.R.R. Tolkien. For many, Tolkien created a world that lives and breathes, a world just on the other side of imagination and whose denizens continue to function and flourish if only in our minds. Tolkien’s creation, Middle-earth, stands as a paragon for worldbuilders in the fantasy genre. The width and depth of what Tolkien created verges beyond merely setting and backstory and includes languages, myths and the birth of an entirely new race, the hobbit. Within the fantasy genre, Tolkien does not stand alone, but what he created certainly stands as a model for others to emulate.

### Why Worldbuilding?

To a degree, all authors, even those who write “realistic” fiction engage in worldbuilding. Jeff Vandermeer, author of *Wonderbook: The Illustrated Guide to Creating Imaginative Fiction* takes this description a step further when he says:

Every setting of every piece of fiction ever written is by definition a product of someone’s imagination – and to some extent, therefore, phantasmagorical and, yes, fantastical, because it does not exist in our reality the way it does on the page,

no matter how we might try to provide an illusion of a one-to-one ratio.  
(Vandermeer 211).

Probably no other genre relies on worldbuilding to the degree that fantasy fiction does. So, if all authors engage in a degree of worldbuilding, then what makes it so special to the fantasy genre? Fantasy, by its very definition, is speculative fiction that relies on mystical and magical elements that do not exist in the real world. It therefore stands to reason, that if it does not exist in the real world, then a world must be created for it.

The world authors build serve not only as the backdrop of the story but in many cases, it embodies the mechanics that serve to propel the action. Would *The Lord of the Rings* exist without the magic that powers the rings of power? Would the story hold the same power if it were a group of accountants on their way to a shredder to destroy an erroneous tax return? Maybe a writer of such skill as Tolkien could have made such a tale work but it is hardly likely that the mundane of the everyday world would elicit the same response in the reader. Tolkien's careful creation of Middle-earth makes the story work on a level that it could not had it merely been set in the modern English countryside.

Looking at other notable authors in fantasy reveals much of the same – the worldbuilding elements that they introduce are key to building a sustainable narrative. But even more so the fantastical elements that they introduce instill a credibility to the tales they weave. Would George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (Game of Thrones) work if he did not first lay the groundwork for the political intrigue that pervades the kingdoms of Westeros? These elements had to be carefully conceived and crafted, their details allowing for the overlay of the fantastical atop the political narrative. Martin is not alone, other authors, such as Joe Abercrombie and John Gwynne have, to varying degrees, created nations and worlds with complex backstories and



histories for the sake of injecting the political intrigue necessary to fuel their narratives. The interplay between kingdoms and rulers is not happenstance and is done with careful consideration of both historical and sometimes mythological considerations.

Probably the greatest argument to be made for robust worldbuilding in the fantasy genre is the fact that it helps to bridge the gap between fantasy and reality. For instance, Robert Jordan created a complex magical system in his series *The Wheel of Time*, which is central to the story and pivotal to its eventual climax and conclusion. This complex system is believable because Jordan establishes rules that govern its use. These rules are akin to gravity and physics in the real world. We understand why we are able and not able to break them. This is the same with Jordan's magic, the main character cannot simply magic away the antagonist of the story, he is bound by the rules that Jordan created. Rules such as these establish boundaries and because the characters are forced to abide by them, they feel more real to the reader.

The best worldbuilders inject just enough of the real world to ground their creations within the conscious of the reader. There are many ways that worldbuilders accomplish this but the most common is that they borrow and model what they know. Tolkien relied heavily on literary traditions and myths from Norse mythology as well as his own experiences in World War I and growing up in England (Croft 6). Robert Jordan relied heavily on Tolkien and eastern myths to build his world (Livingston 44-47). S.A. Chakraborty's *The Daevabad* series is set in something akin to the real world and yet most of the action occurs in a space outside the real world -- her character Nahri, starts off in modern Cairo only to find herself in Daevastana, the mystical land of the djinn (Chakraborty 39). In this she is able to not only incorporate a known entity, modern Egypt, and the fantastical with just enough of the recognizable world that when

she shifts the setting the reader is not jarred by the change. The list of authors and influences is long but almost all worldbuilders start from a place they know and then deviate from there.

### The Elements of Worldbuilding

Building a world doesn't just happen. There must be careful consideration into what elements are important to the story that is being told. For instance, there is no sense in spending hours in creating a complex political system if politics plays no role in the story. One of the first things a potential worldbuilder must consider are what elements of the world are important to the characters or the plot. From there, scoping a world takes on a life of its own. Much like our own world, mystical settings can be just as complex and can take on many elements and sub-elements depending on the needs of the author. Here are just a few elements that a worldbuilder can consider: geography and climate, people and culture, economy and trade, politics, technology and magic, and history and myth. Each of these areas with examples from contemporary authors follow as well as how I chose to incorporate these elements into my novel, *A Gathering of Titans*.

### Geography

Probably no element brings to mind worldbuilding more so than geography. Fantasy novels and series are known for the complex maps that often adorn their pages and in this the greats are no exception; Tolkien was known to have spent many hours hand drawing the maps that adorn *The Lord of the Rings* series and *The Silmarillion*. A common trope in fantasy novels is a journey from one location to another, often a heroic quest and maps are used to help the reader to understand what must be undertaken. Mordor and Shayol Ghul could easily just be two nondescript places that Tolkien and Jordan describe within their novels but knowing where they

sit on their respective maps give them and the journey that their respective heroes must take credence – they set the scope of what is to be accomplished merely by their location in relation to the origin of the quest. Maps and geography are important in building a credible reality for the reader as well. *A Song of Ice and Fire* relies heavily on the geography of Westeros, especially in describing the political intrigue between the kingdoms various factions. Martin uses the vast wall of ice in the north as a backdrop for not only the impending invasion by the White Walkers but also as a tool to describe why the Starks are different in their mentality from the Lannisters who reside in the south of Westeros.

One key element when considering the geography of a world is that those that seem the most real tend to follow the rules of nature – sweltering deserts aren't often found next to arctic mountains, or if they are the author has spent careful time considering why that would be the case and can explain the deviation from what would be considered normal. Geography can also drive the occupations of the characters – those that live near the sea are more likely to be sailors and to rely on the water for trade and food whereas those that live in the mountains aren't often seafaring and knowledgeable about sailing. Here again the rules of earth and common sense should reign. People need water and food to live so the likelihood that settlements will exist near these elements make sense and deviations otherwise should be countered with well thought out reasons.

The most important aspect, though, is that these decisions are not based on whim but exist for a reason that is important to the story being told. In my novel, *A Gathering of Titans*, the geography of the world in which my characters reside is key to the story. The main group of protagonists are undertaking a hero's journey to repair a magical artifact after over a century of seclusion from the rest of the world. The geography I created had to support this isolation and

also the reason for it to be broken. The very construct of the continent on which most of the action takes place also had to follow a few rules in order to make the magic of the story work (or in this case not work) where I wanted it to – the geography is used as a device to reign in and set the rules for the action that takes place.

For aspiring writers of fantasy there are so many tools available to create the geography of the world (and maps). One such tool that I found that was helpful is a free website called *Inkarnate* (<https://inkarnate.com>). Here is an example of the map I created for *A Gathering of Titans* using their free tool.

#### Cyrania World Map

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The geography of the world also allows for the creation of other factors which will drive the action such as the discovery and subsequent colonization of another continent which spurs both political and economic competition as a subplot to the novel. Other online tools and websites allow for the creation of city maps and even demographics based on the time period, race, and other factors. Here is one example of a city created using an online tool by the *Medieval Fantasy City Generator* used in *A Gathering of Titans* found at: <https://watabou.itch.io/medieval-fantasy-city-generator>

#### Sellenhall City Map

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## Climate

Climate is important in worldbuilding because, like geography, it helps establish that the created world follows the rules readers are accustomed to and it adds realism to the setting. Do the characters live where it often rains? Is it sunny all the time? Or is it more akin to earth with seasons and changing weather? Once again, the worldbuilder must consider the effects and what they hope to accomplish through their introduction.

In his *The First Law Trilogy*, Joe Abercrombie's use of weather, specifically cold, wet weather plays a significant role in the lives of his characters and more importantly in the hardships they endure. These reactions to the climate both hot and cold take on a life of their own in how they cause the characters to react to the situations they find themselves in, even becoming a driving force for the action. In the first novel of the series, *The Blade Itself*, Logen Ninefingers finds himself separated from his comrades in the rainy, wintry woods and must survive alone and wounded (Abercrombie 1-9). George R.R. Martin also uses the weather to great effect in his *A Song of Ice and Fire* with the weather playing a significant role on the action that happens in the north of Westeros.

This is another area where the careful study of earth's own weather and climate can come in handy. Many authors look at specific regions on the earth and set their own novels as a similar representation of a particular place or climate. For my novel, the climate is key to timing the movements of characters as they undertake the various actions in the novel. Following historical examples related to weather and the waging of war is particularly important to my novel – like earth in the Middle Ages (and some would argue even now as my own military experience in Afghanistan dictates) wars and battles were not often undertaken in the winter months but instead armies would wait for the spring when marching and surviving in the open was easier.

## People and Culture

Of all the elements of worldbuilding people (and races) are probably the most difficult to quantify. Jeff Vandermeer reminds us in his book that good worldbuilding reflects that we live in a multicultural world and that while it is possible to write about a homogeneous culture it is not likely. (Vandermeer 225-226) This is true especially when worldbuilding, even in a setting comprising no more than a mile square mile the chance that every character is the same isn't just inauthentic it is boring. Good worldbuilding takes what is different in society and builds upon it to some degree. In almost every fantasy series this holds true. Where would the *Lord of the Rings* be without the differences in the elves, men, and dwarves? Even in those novels and series made entirely of humans, we find differences both subtle and stark that adds character and depth. Jordan's *Wheel of Time* differentiates starkly between the people of the kingdoms that make up the world. They have distinct rulers, ways of dress and foods. Jordan describes in detail their differences in speech and mannerisms and in these differences, we experience the depth of his world reflected in its people. We understand why the cultural differences cause them to act a certain way. When added to both climate and geography we get agrarian societies and societies built on commerce and trade. These details create a tapestry for the characters to exist within and set the stage for conflict and resolution.

In *A Gathering of Titans* this element is probably the most developed. Since there are both political and economic conflicts within the story it was important for me to establish each region of the continent and what makes them different as well as the differences between the other races that inhabit the continent, the most predominant being the Kantu, a race of magic wielding people that I have modeled after a combination of Norse and Native American cultures. This, along with their self-imposed isolation from the rest of the world sets the stage for conflict

as the Kantu journey to the land of men. As I structured the Kantu, it was important that they not be so different from the humans that they are instantly targeted for their differences but that it is subtle enough to cause conflict without becoming the sole source of conflict.

### Economy and Trade

Is money important? In a well-developed world, it certainly is but again the worldbuilder must determine the balance that they need to achieve when looking at the overall story. In *The Hobbit*, the dwarves clearly value treasure but economies and trade are not as important whereas in Joe Abercrombie's *The First Law Trilogy* economies, trade, and banking take a prominent role in the development of the story. Like geography and climate, economy and trade often dictate the professions of the characters in fantasy, although barter systems tend to be more prevalent in many novels. Blacksmithing and soldiering are two professions that find themselves at the center of many novels in the genre.

In my own novel, the ironwood trade makes up a significant portion of the economies of the various countries on the continent as it is crucial to building and warfare. I have also introduced a guild that is responsible for the markets which control the price of ironwood and its trade. This trade union pulls many of the political strings that run under the surface and indirectly instigates much of the conflict between the nations in the story. The economy and the need to outpace neighboring kingdoms also drives the need for expansion which leads to colonization of other lands and thus more conflict in the novel. These economic underpinnings drive the requirement for a banking and monetary system that I needed to detail prior to diving into the writing of the novel.

## Politics

Many modern fantasy novels rely heavily on politics as a fuel for the narrative, with Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series being one of the most prominent examples. Political intrigue can be a great driver for conflict but it is also one of the areas that requires the most detail. Politics are complicated and the more nations and/or groups that are involved, the more area there is to flesh out and the more room there is to develop plot holes. Because there are levels of politics and they can occur at numerous levels it is important for prospective worldbuilders to carefully annotate alliances and conflicts down to the personal level. All character interactions are a version of politics so it is important to understand the motivations at each level – once this is established the rest often falls in line.

As already alluded to in a previous section, my novel relies heavily on politics as a backdrop for the conflict that drives the plot. In her drive to return magic fully to the continent, Caeda Sangrey, one of the principal antagonists, uses her political savvy to enlist the help of other political leaders to wage war as a vehicle to seize those nations who house portions of the Bastion, the artifact that prevents magic from returning to the continent. Because of this, I crafted a spreadsheet that show alliances between the factions and nations that make up the northern continent along with the motivations at each level. This chart helps me keep the various moving pieces straight. The method I use is akin to the method we used when I was in the Army to track all of the various tribes in Afghanistan and their insurgent networks (albeit this is a much simpler version). This is an area, like my study of history, where I am able to use my practical experience to help add realism in my worldbuilding and my novel. Here is an example of the spreadsheet I created:



Country	Arcadia	Tyren	Ceer	Xorben	Caerrock
Arcadia		T: Strong Trading Partner P: Allied - Mutual Defense	T: Moderate Trade P: Neutral	T: Moderate Trade P: Neutral	T: Limited Trade P: Neutral - Occasional Border Disputes
Tyren	T: Strong Trading Partner P: Allied - Mutual Defense		T: Strong Trading Partner P: Allied - Limited Defense	T: Moderate Trade P: Neutral	T: Moderate Trade P: Neutral
Ceer	T: Moderate Trade P: Neutral	T: Strong Trading Partner P: Allied - Limited Defense		T: Moderate Trade P: Limited Diplomatic Relations	T: Moderate Trade P: Limited Diplomatic Relations
Xorben	T: Moderate Trade P: Neutral	T: Moderate Trade P: Neutral	T: Moderate Trade P: Limited Diplomatic Relations		T: Strong Trading Partner P: Allied - Mutual Defense
Caerrock	T: Limited Trade P: Neutral - Occasional Border Disputes	T: Moderate Trade P: Neutral	T: Moderate Trade P: Limited Diplomatic Relations	T: Strong Trading Partner P: Allied - Mutual Defense	
Kyban	T: Limited Trade P: Limited Diplomatic Relations	T: Limited Trade P: Limited Diplomatic Relations	T: Limited Trade P: Limited Diplomatic Relations	T: Limited Trade P: Limited Diplomatic Relations	T: Limited Trade P: Neutral - Occasional Border Disputes

## Technology and Magic

For many prospective worldbuilders in the fantasy genre, this seems to be where they spend the most time as this is generally the most fantastical element outside of mystical creatures and races. The first consideration should be where does technology fit in to my narrative – does it have a place in the world that I am building? As series like Stephen King’s *The Dark Tower* illustrate, the two (technology and magic) do not have to be mutually exclusive. Guns and railroads play a significant role alongside magic throughout *The Dark Tower*. Once the level of technology is determined then the other pieces generally fall in place.

Most fantasy series seem to be set in or around the Middle Ages but this does not always have to be the case. This is another area where there should be a natural connection between the level of technology and the other elements that make up the world. For instance, if metal working has not been discovered then a story that makes heavy use of modern weapons seems

unlikely. Again, any deviations need to be explained to the reader – this is also an area where those connections can help build credibility with the reader. If it is a world where no electricity exists then having characters rely on torches and lamps makes sense.

Magic is an area that demands rules to prevent plot holes and unrealistic situations. If magicians are all powerful and have no limits on that power then what prevents them from ending the conflict with a wave of their hand? The reader doesn't have to be explicitly told the limitations but only needs to know that they exist and that they are followed by the characters. In *Writing Fantasy and Science Fiction* the authors remind us that "...because speculative fiction always differs from the knowable world, the reader is uncertain about what can and can't happen in the story *until* the writer has spelled out the rules. And you, as a writer, can't be certain of anything until *you* know the rules as well" (Card, et al. 36-37). One of the best examples of this is *The Lord of the Rings* -- we know that the One Ring is a powerful object but Tolkien only hints at the levels of its power in the hands of Frodo and instead leaves the reader to guess as to the extent of its powers should it fall into the wrong hands.

### Building a Successful World

Jeff Vandermeer outlines numerous considerations when it comes to worldbuilding, a few of which will be discussed here as they might be crucial to the successful creation of a world in support of a novel. Vandermeer devotes the entirety of Chapter 6 of his book *Wonderbook: The Illustrated Guide to Creating Imaginative Fiction* in which he describes the characteristics of a well realized setting:

it follows a coherent and consistent logic; uses cause and effect; provides specific details; has an impact on character's lives; provides depth and width; mirrors our

world and deviates from it; is in some way personal; provides sufficient mystery and unexplored vistas; reflects a consistent inconsistency; reflects that we live in a multicultural world; uses objects acting as extended literalized metaphors; its setting allows for several different operational realities; relies on a collective and individual memory; and miscommunications and moments of imperfect comprehension occur (211-244).

A few of these have been discussed already in the various worldbuilding sections but a few bear closer examination.

One of the most significant of Vandermeer's considerations is that the details should have a profound impact on a character's life (Vandermeer 222). A lot can go into worldbuilding, with creators spending countless hours and creative effort on developing details and backstory but this can also get overwhelming so Vandermeer's point is to examine whether the detail affects the story (or I would argue future stories). If it doesn't, is there utility in spending the time and effort to come up with the detail? Worldbuilding is important but at some point, the details can overwhelm the actual telling of the story.

Another important consideration that Vandermeer highlights is that the worldbuilding should both mirror our world and deviate from it (Vandermeer 224). As already discussed, the depth and width of a created world benefits the reader and writer alike by providing a connection between reality and fantasy. Vandermeer's point is that there is a fine line between too much difference and too little and that either extreme can lose the reader. Someone looking for a fantasy novel doesn't want to read a book set completely in a modern city with no elements that make it different than if someone were to travel there and experience it firsthand. Conversely,

they also generally do not want a world where every norm is turned on its head so that there is nothing left to ground the reader.

Finally, Vandermeer points out that successful worlds have points at which miscommunications and moments of imperfect comprehension occur. He describes this as being akin to everything in the setting being in balance rather than having its own levels of conflict. For instance, it stands to reason, that if a character has a conflict with another character due to their differences in upbringing / culture, then those cultures probably stand in equal conflict and it is not just at a personal level. These moments make for dynamic relationships rather than conflict at a solitary level (Vandermeer 231).

Vandermeer also hits on some notable pitfalls that he terms dangers and opportunities: the setting devours the characters; fantastical talismans dominate other details; and detail overwhelms other elements (Vandermeer 233-234). Vandermeer warns that it is possible for the world to overtake the characters and events in the story in which too many details drown out the reason for the details. There is a very fine line with creating the detail to support a world and including every last detail in the work itself.

In my novel, I have created backstories for most of the characters, to include some of the supporting characters. Mostly this was done in order to have a sense of who they are and what motivates them but also to stay consistent with details. In early drafts I found myself looking for opportunities to fit in a detail or two every time the character popped up, which led to numerous rewrites when I realized the detail adding nothing to the particular portion of the story.

Another pitfall is that fantastical elements can take on a life of their own and threaten to overtake the story rather than being a tool to move the story along. (Vandermeer 233-234) For

my novel, I created a series of magical devices that are used to prevent the use of magic on the northern continent and it is this device which drives the Kantu north to repair it. There is a danger that the device itself can become the story if I am not careful rather than story being the characters and their interaction with the device.

Finally, Vandermeer warns against the detail overwhelming the other elements of the story (Vandermeer 234). A classic example of this would be spending far too much time explaining the culture and politics of a country without spending the time to explain why the characters are in the location and what they are doing while there. A pitfall for any writer, in any genre, is finding that delicate balance between too much and too little and in worldbuilding this is true as well.

### Building a World: Cataloging and Note Taking

As authors like Tolkien, Jordan, and Martin have shown us, the complexity of these created worlds cannot only spawn additional works but can become an effort unto themselves. One notable example of this phenomenon is Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*, which constitutes notes, genealogies, myths, and stories that make up Middle-earth. Jordan's notes, charts, and artifacts while creating *The Wheel of Time* took up an entire floor of the former carriage house in which he made his office (Livingston 25) and his plotting notes and background materials numbered in the thousands of pages (Livingston 27). Martin's numerous artifacts and background materials have taken up permanent residence at Texas A&M's Cushing library and number well over a couple hundred boxes and unlike the previous two authors he still continues to write and generate notes and artifacts.

A complex world requires tools and record-keeping, ways to ensure that the continuity of details is not lost. For modern writers, there are numerous tools available to not only visualize certain aspects of a writer's world such as the aforementioned mapmaking tools. I have found that tools like spreadsheets and quick write-ups of various aspects have been beneficial and today's automated society allows for the quick update of these records to keep a dynamic world straight. My method for record keeping is often to use Microsoft PowerPoint. Below are examples of techniques that I use to catalog both character and countries central to my world as well as other aspects that I need to maintain notes on.

<p><b>TYREN</b>  Monarchy: King Danael Van Aeker (Age 37, 5yrs into reign)  Capitol: Sellenhall (23,222)</p> <p>Tyren Country Map  Removed to comply with copyright</p> <p>Tyren Crest  Removed to comply with copyright</p> <p>Sellenhall City Map  Removed to comply with copyright</p>		<p><b>HISTORY</b></p> <p>One of the original provinces that composed the Kingdom of Merwin. When Merwin split the Duke of Tyren formed his own kingdom. Once home to the Merwin Navy, Tyren retains its naval heritage. Additionally the country once boasted the largest militia on the continent should the Bastion fall. Most homes still proudly display their swords that were given by the government in their pursuit of having a fully armed populace – most families regard the sword as a writ of sorts from the government that they are true citizens of the realm. No longer do the heads of households train as a organized militia (<b>modeled off Switzerland</b>)</p>
<p><b>GEOGRAPHY / CLIMATE</b></p> <p>Temperate grassland with gentle rolling hills leading to broad beaches all along the coast. Highest elevation is on an island off the mainland which is sparsely inhabited. The seas off the eastern coast are considered very dangerous and are only navigated by the heartiest sailors. Most seafaring is done in the Bay of Tyren, and along the Tannenflow which are known for their abundant sea life.</p>		<p><b>ECONOMY</b></p> <p>Predominantly based on the sale of fish, livestock and grain due to its easy access to the Bay of Tyren. Also benefits from the being the location of the de facto capitol of the Brotherhood of Estlan, the continent's brewers/distillers.</p> <p><i>Their coin is known pejoratively as "Bellyachers" after their king whose portrait on the coin unfortunately looks like he is suffering from an ailment.</i></p>
<p><b>PEOPLE / CULTURE</b></p> <p>The people of Tyren tend to be either herdsmen, farmers or sailors/fishermen. Sellenhall is both the political and cultural capitol of the country. Its people are known to be a rugged folk used to hard living and scraping by on their own hard work. Similar to the people of the British Isles.</p>		<p><b>POLITICS</b></p> <p>Closely aligned with the Kingdom of Arcadia with whom it shares its only land border. Ceer its neighbor to the northeast across the Tannenflow is also on friendly terms. Dicamera to its south regularly tries to impress Tyrenian sailors into the Dicameran navy and seeks to use them to build up for what it sees as the upcoming holy war that will ensue when their god returns. As such Tyrenian vessels almost always travel with an armed escort.</p>
<p><b>IMPORTANCE</b></p> <p>Home of Jalen Cater and also the location of the monastery he is sent to when he joins the Brotherhood of Estlan. The Key Stone in Tyren will be the first to fail after the Anchor Stone in the Wild Lands fails. Will see the first sweep of magical creatures and magicians that sweep in from the Wild Lands.</p>		



Daeaton AI  
Generated Character  
Portrait

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# DAEATON DAENERIL

**Nephew of King Roderick XII of Arcadia. Father, Kaelan Daeneril was executed for treason and the family banished from Arcadia. Mother Rowan and sister Reagan. Raised side by side with Prince Tengar Arcadius.**

**Physical Description:** Approximately 6 ft tall, wiry build. Sandy blond hair and beard, blue eyes, fair skin. Agile and quick but not overly strong

- Role in Story:** Great Uncle Eoin Vandran has plotted to take the throne of Arcadia and turned King Reodrick against Daeaton's father. Eoin is allied with Caeda Sangrey and seeks to take over the entire continent. Daeaton suspects his uncle's hand in his family's downfall and he allies himself with the Kantu who have ventured to the continent to fix the Bastion.
- Occupation:** Soldier for hire after his family's banishment
- Personality:** Headstrong and eager to prove himself worthy of respect – perceives slights where none are present.
- Habits/Mannerisms:** Constantly practicing his swordcraft, hoping for the opportunity to challenge his uncle.
- Background:** Forced into life as a soldier for hire to support his mother and sister after they are banished
- Internal Conflicts:** Struggles with his pride and desperately needs to prove himself to others
- External Conflicts:** has sworn himself to prove that Eoin Vandran was responsible for his family's downfall.
- Notes:**

Daeaton's Personal  
Crest

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# THE BASTION

The Bastion is a complex set of magical devices devised to remove magic from the northern continent, to conceal the homeland of the Kantu (Drakor) and to both conceal and wall off the Wild Lands from the rest of the world.

The Access Stone is located in Caer Arcandus, the original capitol of the kingdom of Merwin. It has since been lost to time and stands in ruins. The Access Stone can be used to ascertain the health of the entire system and to control its components.

The Key Stones act as the linchpins for the system providing coverage across the continent and connections to the Anchor Stones. The loss of a single keystone means that the areas covered by the ley lines between stones is now uncovered. Magic can work outside of areas uncovered by the Bastion – so there are a few areas on the continent where magic can work. (Blood magic is one exemption to this fact).

The Anchor Stones not only hide the two locations but also compel people to avoid the areas. The barrier on the Wild Lands also keeps magic trapped within. The two Anchor Stones have been guarded by the Kantu.

The Sorcerer's Stone enables the holder to use the Access Stone and through willful effort allows magic within 50 feet of the holder. This device must be imbued within the holder and is not a carried item.

Cyranian World Map  
with Bastion

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Legend

Anchor Stones

Access Stone

Key Stones

Area affected by Anchor Stones

## What We Can Learn Through Worldbuilding

The masters of worldbuilding such as Tolkien, Lewis, Martin, Jordan, King, and others have left us with a blueprint of sorts to follow for the creation of the next great world of fantasy literature. Writers such as Jeff Vandermeer and Orson Scott Card have provided helpful templates and tools to aid in the creation of a well thought out world, providing readers and writers alike the keys to a world built with enough detail and realism to provide the backdrop to stories within the genre. Much more than just providing a template, the act of worldbuilding builds bridges between fantasy and reality and between the writer and the reader.

Vandermeer concludes with a few reminders as to the importance of worldbuilding:

- Anchoring your fiction correctly in place, situation and history enhances the emotional resonance.
- Landscape not invested with emotion or point of view is lifeless.
- The real world and personal experience feed into imaginary settings and are a vital part of worldbuilding.
- Approaches to setting and character should be multidirectional: organic and three-dimensional, with layers and depth.
- Throwaway settings are like throwaway characters: a missed opportunity (Vandermeer 244).

Worldbuilding is much more than building a setting: it is breathing life into a world of the authors imagination which enables them to share something much more than a story and like Middle-earth a place that continues to live in the conscious of people across the world.



A Gathering of Titans

By

Anthony Rudd

Cyrania World Map

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## CAEDA

Year 1305, New Arcadian Calendar

Caeda Valeins sat alone in a small room, brushing her waist length, nearly black hair. The deliberate movement of the comb served to calm her tattered nerves. The room's furnishings were sparse and of poor quality, suited to someone from a small village, where not much time was spent indoors but rather outside tending fields and livestock. There was a small wooden chair and table, adorned with a crude washbasin. Next to the table was a small bed, its mattress stuffed with feathers that had long ago lost any semblance of comfort. The floor and walls were bare stone, devoid of even a rug to help keep out the cold from below. The room was windowless and lit by a few small candles spread throughout on sconces, their dim light barely illuminating the room. If one were to guess it could easily be believed that these were the quarters of a prisoner - and in some ways they were.

She made up her mind that she would adapt to her surroundings despite the fact that they were a far cry from what she was used to. She had been raised in the courts and was accustomed to much finer environs. In fact, she had never been without the services of at least one maid who would have tended her hair as she did now. She took some solace in the fact that they had at least provided her a comb and water for the basin. She intended on making herself as presentable as possible.

She had been expecting this day for some time and now that it was here, she would face it with a silent courage that had been building in her for months. While she was uncertain of how the day's events would unfold and what would await her at the end, she knew that she could

control the most important thing: despite whatever happened to her today she would not let her demeanor fall – she would not give any of them the satisfaction of seeing her hurt.

A knock at the door broke her from her reverie, “Milady, the king awaits...” She rose, smoothed her dress, and pinned back her hair and in doing so highlighted the little bit of gray at her temples. She was ready.

As she opened her door, the guard standing outside nodded to her just enough to be considered respectful and gestured toward the hallway beyond where a female servant waited to escort her to the king’s audience hall. As she strode forward confidently, the servant was forced to fall in behind her, the woman’s short legs struggling to keep up.

The route they followed was one that was unfamiliar to Caeda. Normally, guests of the king and petitioners were escorted through the main hall and directly into the king’s audience chamber. Today, to add to the indignity that they had already shown her, Caeda was escorted through the back passageways, away from the prying eyes of those that would undoubtedly be funneling into the chamber to see her laid low. Most of the hallways she passed through were those only used by the servants as they hustled about their daily duties. Today they were noticeably empty. Her quick pace brought her quickly to the junction where the main halls joined with the servant’s hallways. Already she could hear the bustling of the assembled crowd ahead and the low murmur of many voices. This would be a public spectacle.

She turned the corner and was met by the grand doors to the chamber, closed, with guards present. The female servant, whose name she had not caught, arrived at her heels. She looked to the two guards standing at attention and motioned for them to open the doors. They hesitated, looking at each other.

“Milady,” the servant started, “We are supposed to wait for the Chamberlain to announce you.”

Caeda glanced over her shoulder in annoyance, “I know how this works...”

“Merlyse, milady, my name is Merlyse.”

“I know how this works, *Merlyse*. I am eager to be done with this farce.”

At that moment the doors opened and the Chamberlain stepped out. As the doors cracked open for that moment Caeda was startled to see that the audience hall was fuller than she had ever remembered seeing it. Nobles must have come from leagues away to see her fate.

The current Chamberlain was a man she was not well acquainted with as he had only risen to this new position in the last month after the death of the previous Chamberlain, a man who had been her friend and confidant. He was a short, stocky man with a nasally voice that failed to project much farther than his bullish face. She was not sure why the king had chosen him as, in her opinion, he had not done a very adequate job running the castle.

He looked her up and down and, seeming satisfied, turned to announce her presence in the court as the two guards once again opened the grand doors. Time seemed to slow for her as she steeled herself for what would happen next. She strode forward, neither hearing the chamberlain’s words or waiting for him to motion her forward. As she moved down the aisle to stand before the king, she did her best to look straight ahead and avoided the looks of the assembled lords and ladies arrayed on the sides of the chamber. She could hear snippets of conversation as she passed – it seemed that most in the audience hungered for her to be deposed and the word banishment was mentioned more than a few times.

Sunlight streamed into the chamber from the roundels above, flashing in her eyes as she walked the long colonnaded hall, striding from sunbeam to sunbeam, her footsteps seeming to

echo back at her in a staccato rhythm that reminded her of the finality of a ticking clock. Finally, she came to the end of the room, directly before the throne on which sat her husband, the king. She took note that her smaller throne, which had sat so casually beside his, was now gone.

She curtsied. It would not be said that she had forgotten her manners or decorum despite the situation before her.

The Chamberlain pulled up beside her and motioned for one of the court scribes to take notations before pulling forth a document and holding it before him.

“Your Majesty, the former queen appears before you, Caeda Valeins nee Sangrey. Here to answer for her crime of adultery.” He paused for dramatic affect. Some within the audience gasped aloud. Caeda stared straight ahead looking into the King’s eyes for some hint of her fate.

Despite his regal bearing he avoided looking directly into her eyes, instead settling for a point just above her head. He looked aged far beyond his years and though he was but a few years older than Caeda, he looked as if he was old enough to be her father, his once dark hair thinned and almost exclusively gray, lines crisscrossing his face. The inability to produce an heir had taken a toll on him and, coupled with the decline in trade, had rendered him a haggard shell of the strong man he had once been. He wore a golden circlet, adorned with eagles in flight at the temples, a sign of his station but she noticed, that like him, the crown didn’t gleam as brightly as it did when they had first met. In truth she had fallen out of love with him some time ago as he had clearly done with her.

“Do you have any remarks to make on your behalf?” The Chamberlain queried, looking up from the decree in his hands. She hesitated, unsure if there was anything she could say that wouldn’t make her situation worse. There had never been any infidelity on her part but she was sure the king could dredge up someone who would claim otherwise.

The Chamberlain lifted the decree and looked poised to start again until Caeda's pride finally got the best of her. "I know what you all think..." she started, her voice shaky, "...that you are all now my betters because you now see me laid low before you, but know this..." her voice growing in power and confidence, the anger evident in her eyes and the timbre of her voice, "...I will not go quietly. You can be sure that whatever salacious tidbits you think you know about my supposed crimes are nothing more than the words of a coward, spread by other cowards in a vain attempt to clear the way for a new bride and heir! So be it! I am as through with him as he is with me, but I won't have my family name drug through the muck. I am innocent of the charges against me and refute them unequivocally! If there is anyone with proof let them come forward!" She looked around, daring someone to step forward to face her. Seeing no one, she continued, "My King, since you cannot look into my eyes as you face me, maybe you can look inward and see yourself for what you truly are! Coward!" There were audible gasps throughout the gathered nobles.

The Chamberlain cut in, "Having been found guilty, you are sentenced..."

Caeda opened her mouth to again profess her innocence and to condemn those gathered there but the King beat her to the punch, "Enough! Silence her and have her removed from my sight, she is to be banished from the Kingdom and stripped of any titles and holdings. Woman, be glad I am benevolent in this matter. There are many who counseled for your death but I cannot overlook the fact that you were once queen and could have been mother to a future king. Get her out of here!" The guard just behind her reached forward and clasped a hand over her mouth and began to pull her from the room as she struggled to protest. Another guard rushed over and together they drug her from the hall and back to her chambers. Roughly pushing her inside and slamming, then locking, the door.

Back in her room she resisted the urge to sulk and instead focused on her current predicament and what her plan for her life outside the kingdom would be. She had no idea how much time she had before they would come to escort her from the castle. She also did not know how much she would be allowed to take with her. As it stood now, she only had a few meager possessions – surely, they would allow her access to her personal things.

There was a light knock at the door followed by a quickly whispered, “Milady”

Caeda moved closer to the door and turned her ear toward the sound, “Yes?”

“Milady, it is I, Merlyse, the one who escorted you to the audience hall,” the voice on the other side of the door sounded hesitant, yet sincere. “Not everyone shares with the crown that you should be banished. I would like to help you if I can.”

*Was this a trap?* Despite the fact that she truly did not know what else awaited her on the other side of the door, Caeda decided to trust the voice.

“Do you know how long before I am to be escorted from the Kingdom?”

“Milady, I fear far worse for you...” her voice dropped even lower, so low that Caeda had to strain to hear her next words, “I overheard some of the guards speaking with the Chamberlain. He told them to make sure that you find your end out on the southern road and for them to make it look as though you have been robbed and murdered by highwaymen.” Caeda’s heart began to beat harder in her chest. From their perspective it would be a tidy end to a nagging problem. Her mind began to race – the door was left unguarded, else Merlyse would not be there discussing her feelings for her former queen, “Can you get me out of here?”

“Where would you go? Every entrance and exit from the castle are guarded. Letting you out would only hasten your death.”



“There is a secret passage within the palace library to be used in an emergency that only the royal family and a few close advisors are aware of. I can get out of the castle through there and be on my way from the kingdom before they realize I am gone. Can you bring me a servant’s uniform?”

“I will be back in five minutes, Milady,” Caeda could hear her footfalls quickly fading as Merlyse quickly moved away.

Caeda looked around the room for anything that would be useful on her trek from the kingdom. Her quick assessment yielded nothing of use but the clothes on her back – she would have to pray that luck would be on her side and that there would be things that she could grab on her way from the castle or that fate would provide what she needed as she made her escape. Perhaps there would be others who felt as Merlyse did and would be willing to aid their escape. Not knowing who to trust would be her biggest hurdle. Her mind raced as she considered the many castle servants and nobles throughout the kingdom and which ones she thought she could trust. She decided that at this point it was better to keep her circle small lest she be betrayed.

Merlyse’s absence seemed to stretch for hours before Caeda finally heard a knock at her door, followed by the door quickly opening and Merlyse quickly shoving herself through. In her hands she held a basket of bedsheets. Quickly she dropped the basket and began to rummage through the items within, finally pulling forth the dull gray of a servant’s dress that matched the one that she wore. “Quickly, milady. Put this on.”

Caeda did as she was told and she quickly stuffed her own clothes into the basket and then covered them with the remaining bedsheets. She tied up her hair and covered it with a scarf in imitation of the one that Merlyse wore.

“Carry the basket and keep your head down. Walk a step or two behind me and I will do the talking if we encounter anyone.” Caeda nodded and Merlyse turned to open the door as Caeda made herself ready.

“Thank you, Merlyse. I am in your debt.”

“It’ll be all for naught if I don’t get us out alive. Remember to walk behind me and say nothing.”

They moved out slowly, yet deliberately, as if on errand, which, in a sense, they were. Caeda kept her eyes focused on the basket she carried but as she followed her mind focused on her predicament. No, she corrected herself, *their* predicament – Merlyse was now in as deep as her. They passed other servants on their way to the library, all of them focused on their own tasks. As they neared the library entrance, Merlyse pulled up abruptly just a corner away from the main entrance, her abruptness almost causing Caeda to walk her down from behind.

“See that vase across from the entrance, make as though you are dusting it while I make sure it is clear on the other side of the library door. Put your basket down beside you – should anyone come tell them you noticed it hadn’t been cleaned in some time and then hurry on your way down the hall. Wait a few minutes and then come back this way. It shouldn’t take me long.” Caeda moved to the vase as instructed as Merlyse quickly slid inside the door to the library.

Thus far, Merlyse’s thinking showed considerable poise. She had not given the young woman much credit earlier and now her actions were looking more and more like they’d lead to Caeda’s escape. She’d have to find a way to repay the young woman’s loyalty.

Merlyse's head popped out of the door and she hissed at Caeda and urged her quickly into the library. Once inside Caeda dropped the basket and moved to bar the door from the inside.

"What are you doing?" Merlyse asked reaching to take the bar from Caeda. "If they come and try the door, they'll know that something is amiss," Caeda paused and considered the young woman's statement and then let the bar go and bent to retrieve her clothing from the basket, knowing that she once again was right.

"This way," Caeda said, moving down a row of shelves crammed full of old volumes, most looking like they had not seen human hands in quite a long time. The library was immense, in all it held thousands of books, more than most of the other libraries in the known world. It was a source of pride in the kingdom, despite the fact that commoners were not allowed in the library nor could most of them read the books inside. Caeda had, as recent as the last year, spent many evenings deep in one of the books from these shelves as she and her husband grew apart. She paused and considered how much her life had changed in the last few years. None of that mattered now, Caeda steeled herself and began moving toward the means of their escape.

In the southwest corner there was a special set of shelves, behind which, was a tunnel descending down into a substructure beneath the castle proper. It was a separate set of tunnels not connected to any other of the structures that also ran below the castle such as the dungeons and storerooms. There were few that knew it existed and even fewer that knew the route that led to the forest beyond.

Caeda reached into a recessed nook at the far side and felt for a switch that would allow the bookcase to swing outward revealing the tunnel. She heard an audible click as the latch disengaged. "Follow me," she said as she swung open the secret entrance. They stepped into the

dark tunnel and Caeda swung the shelves closed and ensured the latch caught once again. As the door shut it plunged them into darkness. She then fumbled to her left for a torch, a piece of flint, and steel that she knew was lying on a nearby shelf. She lit the torch and began moving through the tunnel toward an intersection.

“There is an alcove down the left-hand side that has provisions, money, weapons, and clothing. From there we’ll head out of the castle proper and out into the forest just beyond the Kingsroad. It will take at least an hour to get out of these tunnels. There are a number of wrong turns and misleading passageways so stick close to me and we’ll be okay. Once we get out to Aryvven’s Forest we’ll skirt along the road until we reach Hamwer, the little village on the western edge of the forest. Once there we’ll buy horses and be on our way.”

They edged their way down the tunnel cautiously until they reached the alcove where Caeda quickly lit a lantern and began to take stock of what was available.

“Here, these should fit you, change quickly,” she said as she thrust a change of clothing towards Merlyse. She quickly disrobed herself, eager to be on her way. The clothing was nondescript and would serve them well as they would need to blend in with the people of the countryside.

“A king never knows when he might have to make a hasty exit and a good king prepares for those eventualities.”

Once changed she began to take stock of what else was available; there was a small purse that contained a small fortune in currency, a short dagger that she tucked into her wide belt, another pack contained hardtack, enough to sustain them for a few days, and yet another with supplies to make a small camp – this she handed to Merlyse to carry. She reached out to grab the lantern intending to move down the passage and be on their way when she noticed another small

bag tucked toward the back. She grabbed it to see what was inside, it was heavy and felt very substantial. A quick inspection revealed a large tome. *Why was this here?* Caeda thought a moment of tossing it aside then reconsidered and thrust it into the larger pack she was carrying. If it was left here with the valuable supplies, it must be important or at least useful to some degree.

“Let’s be on our way. Follow me. It will take some time and I don’t know how long before someone notices my absence and decides to investigate this route out of the palace.” Caeda began moving further down the passage, Merlyse following closely behind.

It took at least an hour of twisting and turning, ascending, and descending before they reached daylight in the form of a crack under a substantial door that marked the exit to the countryside. She knew from experience that it would be locked from the outside but should push open easily from the inside.

“Cover your eyes against the glare when I open the door. Once we are outside, we need to see if there is something that we can use to brace the door. At this point it will not matter if they have learned that we have used this passageway – now we must buy time.” Caeda stated while moving to push the door open.

She had a brief moment of panic when at first the door resisted her push but after doubling her effort the door pushed open and light spilled inside. Caeda shielded her eyes and quickly moved outside, followed closely by Merlyse. Once outside and clear, the two of them pushed the door shut.

From the outside the door was all but indistinguishable from the hill it was embedded in. A clever camouflage job to be sure that no unwanted guests tried to invade by this route. The two

women quickly located a fallen branch, substantial enough in size, to brace against the entrance. It wouldn't stop anyone from following, but it might slow them.

"The road is off to our left – we should stay just a bit off of it as we follow it to Hamwer, I don't relish the thought of encountering anyone before we can get horses and be further on our way. Anyone leaving the city via the King's Gate will have to travel at least a few hours by horse in order to head us off before we reach Hamwer. Let's hope that we got enough of a head start to save our hides for at least another day," Caeda stated as she started walking, Merlyse falling-in beside her. They said nothing for almost a half hour, both lost in their own thoughts and worried about what was ahead. Both were in good shape and they made good time as they worked their way west and away from the capitol.

As she walked, it struck Caeda at how peaceful the forest seemed, despite the chaos that raged in her mind. Sun broke through the branches of the tall trees overhead, highlighting the life all around her. Birds and small animals like squirrels, flitted about, going about their lives in blissful ignorance of what Caeda feared was coming their way. Had this been a joyful outing, Caeda would have described it as a peaceful trek through the woods.

Caeda finally broke the silence, her curiosity finally getting the best of her, "You've risked much to assist me and I can't remember ever meeting you before today...why? I find it hard to believe that it was a last-minute impulse."

"You are astute in your observations, Milady. It is true that I have only worked in the palace a short time and our paths had not crossed before today, but I have been privy to your predicament for at least a month, maybe before you were aware of it yourself. My father is...was, the owner of a small shop just outside the palace gates, a fletcher by trade, in fact we made the King's arrows that were used on all his royal hunts. After my mother died, my father

married a younger woman, almost as young as me. It was clear to me that she only thought to inherit the feeble amount of money he had stored away, but she was beautiful and my father was convinced of her love for him. One day, a man entered the shop, he was cloaked and hooded. My step-mother inquired as to his requirements. I was at the back of the shop, out of view of both of them. The man dropped his hood and it was at this moment I realized it was the king. My father was out gathering supplies for another order, so he was not present in the shop. I watched as the two of them, my step-mother, and the king, made small talk before he leaned across and kissed her. It wasn't hesitant, it was the kiss of two who were well acquainted with each other. I must have gasped aloud because they both turned and the King swiftly left the shop. My step-mother tried to convince me that I had not seen what I thought but she could tell that she was not getting through to me. When my father returned hours later, I told him what I saw. Surprisingly, he was not shocked – he had seen the signs for a while. He told me that it was his intent to bring it before the magistrate and to have his marriage ended. He left the next day for the palace and I never saw him again. The city guard assumed that he ran afoul of bandits. My step-mother inherited the shop and I was put out on the streets. It was at this time I decided to apply for work in the castle to see if I could discover what happened to my father. I used my position and its relative anonymity to investigate – it was then that I overheard the king discussing your supposed crimes with the old Chamberlain. He devoutly protested your innocence and as you know, died shortly thereafter of a heart attack. I am quite sure that was not accidental. After that I decided that I would do what I could to help you as a measure of revenge for my father.”

Caeda carefully weighed Merlyse's words as they walked and wondered how many other lives had been affected by her husband's treachery. His power convinced him he could do anything he wanted, no matter the cost to those around him.

Travelling parallel to the road was taking them longer than she originally anticipated. She glanced at the sky through a break in the trees, the sun was well on the verge of setting and they were still miles from the small village where she hoped to procure horses.

“We aren’t going to make it to Hamwer before the sun sets. We should look for a place to make camp. Let’s venture further into the woods so that we can make a fire that won’t be seen from the road.” Without waiting Caeda turned farther into the forest, Merlyse trailed behind.

“There in the distance, do you see those downed trees? Maybe we could make our camp on the other side of that?” Merlyse pointed ahead.

“Yes, I think that will work. We will need to keep our fire small and let it burn for only a short time.” Caeda responded.

As they approached the fallen trees Caeda looked back to the road and gauged their distance. The road was barely visible and from behind the fallen trees they would be almost completely obscured. It wasn’t perfect but it would have to do.

They made their camp, first gathering fuel for their fire from the forest floor, then digging out a small hollow to house the fire, and a connected vent hole which would ensure that the light from the flame would be as inconspicuous as possible as well as serving to limit any smoke. The night was relatively warm so Caeda cautioned Merlyse that they would need to extinguish it once their food was cooked.

While Merlyse tended the fire, Caeda began to explore the bags that they grabbed as they left the castle. The first contained mostly hardtack, some dried beef and herbs but tucked deep was a small bag of *cokaf*, the bitter drink favored by many of her countryman for its stimulating qualities. The other bag had a couple blankets, a canvas tarp, some rope, as well as a small shovel and some short iron stakes – all the needed materials to make a hasty camp. Caeda



carefully stuffed the items back into the bag. “These will come in handy later, but tonight is about haste. I mean for us to be up and moving again well before first light. I suspect that any pursuit will not give up so easily.”

Merlyse nodded in agreement and then busied herself with the preparation of their meager rations, breaking the hardtack and attempting to make that and the dried beef into a sorry excuse for a stew.

Caeda paused in her examination of their packs and studied the young woman, admiring the efficiency with which she comported herself. She was young, Caeda judged her to be no more than twenty summers yet her demeanor showed a keen intellect. The more time Caeda spent with the young woman the more impressed she was with her and her abilities. Fate had brought them together and for that Caeda was thankful.

Merlyse noticed her watching her, “Milady?”

“That will be the last time I hear you use that term, Merlyse. It is just Caeda now, Caeda Sangrey. I am royalty no more. You have done more than most for me and I am thankful for your courage and loyalty and would count you amongst my friends.”

“Thank you...Caeda. The truth is that I admire you and your strength. I could not stand by while you were convicted of a crime you did not commit.”

They ate their meager stew in silence, both lost in thought, clearly considering the enormity of what laid before them.

“Why don’t you get some sleep. I am going to finish assessing our supplies before I extinguish the fire. I’ll wake you in a couple hours to take the watch.”

Merlyse settled down beside the fire, pulling the wool blanket they retrieved from their packs up around her shoulders, before long she was fast asleep.

Caeda pulled out the thick leather-bound tome that had been hidden amongst the supplies they pulled from below the castle. It was thick and covered with a spidery script Caeda did not immediately recognize. As she cracked the binding she felt a shudder creep across her spine – what old women used to describe as “someone walking across your grave.” Inside she found the book to be written in the common tongue, something for which she was grateful as it meant that she would be able to determine why the book had been among the important items readied in case of a hasty departure by the royal family. Inside the cover she found the following:

*Masen Baird, 3<sup>rd</sup> Baron of Upper Merwin*

*If you have found this book, I am either dead or prisoner.*

Caeda knew her history well, Merwin was the predecessor to present-day Arcadia and spanned most of the continent. The Barony of Upper Merwin encompassed both her husband’s kingdom, Xorben, and parts of the surrounding kingdoms. Her curiosity piqued, she continued reading. What she found chilled her to the bone. The first portion of the book described the thoughts of what surely must be a madman who was convinced that everyone around him was conspiring to see him dead. He wrote in detail about the injustices that he felt were levied against him and the people of Merwin. The second portion of the book described his plan to usurp the King of Merwin by raising an army of those opposed, numbering a few of the smaller kingdoms and the names of nobles that Caeda did not recognize from her studies. In the book, Masen Baird also included tales of fanciful creatures that he thought would join his cause. By this fact alone, Caeda began to suspect that the author was not living in reality. There were creatures straight out of legend that he discussed like they were as real as the ground beneath her feet.

She set the book down, the fire was guttering out and the darkness creeping in. She became aware of the noises of the forest growing in intensity.

*Ravings of a madman, surely. I wonder why this was so important that someone thought to include it in the supplies?*

Caeda considered putting out the fire but she was so tired and cold that she was hesitant to extinguish it lest she fall asleep. She rose and tossed a few smaller logs to keep it lit. She was convinced that they were still at least half a day ahead of their pursuers so she was not worried about their chances of being discovered, if she had been, she'd have likely pushed them to continue on despite the darkness around them. She picked the book back up figuring that it would at least keep her entertained while Merlyse slept.

The third section discussed the different schools of magic, of which Masen Baird considered himself a master; natural magic, learned magic and blood magic. He boasted of his skills and left margin notes throughout the book about how he had accomplished various feats to build his army and defeat his enemies. She flipped to the end of the book and found more of the spidery script that adorned the cover – upon more scrutiny she discovered that while complicated, it was also written in the common tongue, in fact, to her amazement, the spidery script detailed the ways that blood magic could be employed; including using small amounts of blood, human or animal, to curse enemies or to cause physical harm. She flipped further and found a spell that described turning an enemy into a ghostly servant. She shuddered again as she imagined the cruel fate of one cursed to serve in that way.

As she flipped through the book, a small slip of parchment slipped from between some of the pages. As she looked it over, the first thing she discerned was that it was not written by the original author of the book, the script and tone of the note were too starkly different.

*My King,*

*The Kantu have been successful - the Bastion is active. Their chief, Mer'lon, tells me that it will prevent magic from being used on the continent - in fact many of the magical beings that allied themselves to our cause have fled, enroute via ship to who knows where. I for one am not sad to see them go - ~~their magic~~, all magic is dangerous. The Kantu make to depart as well, they have left the care of the Bastion in the hands of the Brotherhood. Mer'lon, left two warnings: The Bastion must be protected at all costs - if it fails then there will be no stopping magic from returning. Also, that blood magic is immune from the effects of the Bastion - which is why I have gathered this tome and a few others and am entrusting them to our most trusted allies, contrary to your council. I am hesitant to destroy them for we might have to one day call on their power. Forgive me in this, my liege...*

*Your faithful servant,*

*Liam Sellen, Tenth Duke of Tyren*

Caeda stared at the note, wide-eyed. *Could all of this be true?* Her mind raced with the implications. *Magic is real?* There was much about the message that rang true: Tyren was once a duchy of Merwin, ruled by the Sellen family up until about two hundred years ago, and there are many tales of the War of Dissolution that broke up the Kingdom of Merwin, a fact not lost on anyone who knew that before the calendar was called the New Arcadian Calendar that dates were referred to as A.D. - After Dissolution. Still, other parts of the message confused her. *Who or what were the Kantu, Mer'lon and the Bastion?* She knew of only one Brotherhood that could possibly be that old and there was no way that that bunch of drunkards could be charged with anything important.

A thought occurred to her – there was one way to test whether the book held the truth or not. She would attempt a blood magic spell, something simple. She flipped through the book, settling on a spell that would only require a few drops of her blood. She pulled the dagger to her side and unsheathed it, the fire's light reflecting across its sharp edge as she drew it across her hand while saying the words written in the book. "*Stri-he'am fueris amarth!*"

At first nothing happened and Caeda's heart sank a little, it was too fanciful to be true, but as the blood dripped from her hand to the ground the small campfire flared, a small gout of flame shooting toward the sky before circling back down and striking the ground at her feet. Caeda jumped and Merlyse stirred slightly. If this was possible then there was no telling what else she could do with this knowledge – and what of the other forms of magic? She picked up the book and began devouring its contents.

A hand across her mouth and a weight on top of her roused her from her sleep. Her eyes flashed open, only to be met by harsh eyes staring back down at her. The fire had gone out and only the light of the moon lit the surrounding forest, across the small cleared out area she could hear Merlyse's whimpers and the grunts of another. She could not turn her head to find Merlyse so she instead concentrated on her own predicament. Both hands were pinned, one caught under her back and the other held by her captor.

"Greetings, my Queen." The man sneered, his spittle flying into her eyes. She could smell his fetid breath. "You thought you had escaped but alas we are much better at our jobs than you were at yours."

Merlyse yelped, she was not far from where she had gone to sleep. Caeda's mind raced running through all possible means of escape. She struggled, managing to get a hand free for just

a moment before her captor slammed it back down under his iron grip. He outweighed her by at least double.

“We are charged with seeing you to your next destination. Quit fidgeting and I’ll make sure your trip is a quick one. Who knows maybe we’ll find some enjoyment along the way. My mate and your young friend seem to be enjoying themselves.” She felt him reach across with his other hand attempting to remove her clothes. He rolled her onto her stomach presumably to make getting her clothes off easier, inadvertently freeing her other hand. She swept it out reaching for anything that could be useful, her hand closing on something solid and metal - the dagger. With him on her back her ability to use the knife was limited so she slid it down by her thigh, hoping that he would not notice. She felt her breeches slide over her backside and could feel him fumbling with his own clothes. She needed a distraction so she struggled with the arm he still held.

“Be still and this will all be over.” He flipped her back over onto her back, one hand still holding hers above her head, the other on her throat. “I want to look into your eyes...”

She swung her arm; the dagger was still sheathed but the pommel caught him across the temple. He crumpled on top of her, unconscious. She paused for a moment to catch her breath.

“Coryn, you almost done over there? This one seems to have lost her will to be an active participant. I bet her majesty is as sweet...”

Caeda pushed Coryn to the side and got up on all fours, the dagger, now unsheathed clasped in her hand.

“Coryn! You’ll pay for this, you bitch!” The other man pulled up his breeches while simultaneously drawing his sword, his face a mask of rage. “I’ll enjoy bringing your head back to the king.” He swung his sword forcing Caeda to take a step back.

Caeda was skilled with a blade, more than anyone would guess considering her station. She had insisted early on in her marriage in taking part of weekly sword training with her husband's War Chief, explaining that if the kingdom were to be overrun that they would all need to take part in any fighting. Still her adversary had her at a disadvantage with his weapon's superior reach. She sidestepped another wild swing and her foot bumped into her pack, spilling its contents, including the book.

"Merlyse!" She yelled, hoping that the woman, now free from her captor could get to her feet.

"You might as well forget her providing any help. She got a little too feisty so I slit her throat before I finished."

Caeda shrieked, a ragged sob issuing forth unbidden. *She did not deserve this!* She steeled herself and held up her hand and drew the dagger across her palm. The man looked at her, clearly confused. "*Stri-he'am fueris amarth!*" As her blood spilled from her palm and hit the dirt a small ember left from their campfire exploded into a raging flame and flew toward the man, hitting him in the chest and face. He screamed and hit the ground, attempting to roll the flame out. Caeda continued to let the blood flow from her hand as she willed the flame to grow in intensity. Eventually the man quit struggling as the flame continued to burn.

Caeda made her way over to Merlyse, walking wide around the burning man. The girl's neck was bent at an awkward angle, her clothes ripped to shreds, her blood spilled out on the ground around her. The light was gone from her eyes. Caeda bent down and grabbed the blanket that had once provided warmth and now would act as a funeral shroud.

"I am so sorry..." she whispered, her voice raw and ragged, tears sliding down her face.

The man that had pinned her stirred so Caeda quickly grabbed the rope from their packs and tied his hands and legs. Once he had fully awakened, he glared angrily at her as he struggled with his bonds.

“Untie me!” He yelled at her as he continued to jerk at the ropes holding him tight.

“Shut up! You are an animal and deserve to be tied! Your foul urges couldn’t be kept in check and now you’ll pay.” Caeda gathered up the book and flipped to the spell that had so unnerved her earlier. The spell seemed easy enough, the hardest part was the human sacrifice and he had presented himself so nicely. She would have revenge for what he had done to her and Merlyse. Before this night she might have hesitated to even consider this course of action – now her mind was set. Using the light from the still smoldering soldier she memorized the words of the spell.

*“Ne-kerastu, simlar, servest, antiquar!”* She intoned as she brought the dagger up before the man’s face.

“What are you doing?”

She saw genuine fear in his face as she drew the blade across his throat, his lifeblood spilling out, coating him and the ground in front of where he sat. Caeda expected something explosive to happen like with the flame but instead the man slumped and continued to bleed. She sat down, her back against a nearby tree and waited a few more minutes hoping that she had gotten the spell correct. After a few minutes more of waiting, she decided nothing was going to happen and she began gathering her belongings. Following that, she dragged the three bodies further into the depression. She would use the blood magic one last time to set the bodies ablaze before setting out again. The flames would probably call attention to the site but she figured she



owed Merlyse at least a proper funeral. She also wanted to leave a message for any of her husband's men that might still be on her trail.

Once the flame was roaring, Caeda gathered the two packs and began working her way toward the road.

"Master," a metallic voice issued forth from the other side of the fire. Caeda jumped.

"Who's there?"

"You summoned me. I am here to serve." The voice spoke flatly despite the metallic shriek of its voice.

Caeda caught sight of a ghostly black form just on the edge of the light provided by the funeral pyre. "Come closer," she commanded, "I want you to scout ahead so that I am not ambushed. Later we will talk about how you can fulfill your duties to me and the limitations of your power."

"Yes, my master. There are horses along the road. They clearly belonged to the two men you dispatched."

Caeda walked out to the road and added her packs to the men's and mounted one horse while leading the other, moving at a canter down the southern road.

## CAEDA

Year 1306, New Arcadian Calendar

Four Towns was the third stop after Caeda left Xorben and her husband's treachery behind. Her first stop had been at the manor of a distant cousin in the south of her husband's kingdom. Somehow word of what she had been accused of had flown faster than she could have imagined and she was quickly turned away without even a chance to refill her waterskins. Her cousin hid behind the troops at the city gate, refusing to even meet her eyes as his soldiers turned her away, her remonstrations falling on deaf ears. Other stops at former allies along the way to Four Towns had been met with the same reactions. None would even oblige themselves to even hear her side of the story. With each passing day her loneliness and feelings of being forsaken continued to grow. There had to be a way that she could escape her husband's influence and for her to find the answers she was seeking.

The immensity that was Four Towns, was technically just that, four towns only split by borders and The Channel, a waterway that originated at the base of nearby Dragonscale Mountain. In reality it was the largest city on the continent, dwarfing even the major cities of Arcadia and Pyradia, its streets an almost endless maze of buildings, neatly marked to remind inhabitants of which of the four towns, and the respective country they were walking through.

Despite the boroughs of Four Towns each being geographically situated in the separate countries of Caerrock, Guvolat, The Warren and North Daltigoth, none of them could claim to exert any real rule over their constituent towns regardless of the troops that patrolled each region. The soldiers were mostly for show and only as a counter to ensure that their neighbors didn't harbor any thoughts of annexation. In all honesty each of the four countries enjoyed the status

quo – it allowed for many of the things that happened in Four Towns to fly beneath the notice of the populace and was a source of income for all who benefitted in the nefarious undertakings of the city.

The slums of Four Towns were a dangerous place; a place where people went to disappear from everyday society. It was also a place where things that were lost sometimes turned up, often changed, and not always for the better. In each of the boroughs there were slums known for a particular vice. Caeda had arrived a month earlier and had ventured from district to district as she searched for information related to Masen Baird's book, the Dissolution or any of the other references she thought would help her. The slum that Caeda made her base of operations prided itself on providing ways to numb the mind – sex, drink and drugs being the most common. Other slums were homes to gambling, the trade in illegal goods and the trade in people.

She had rented a small windowless apartment that was nestled deep within the slums, surrounded on all sides by drug dens and taverns where the addicted would stumble in and out, their comings and goings often separated by days at a time. This meant that her movements were easily disguised and not likely to be tracked.

“Reveal yourself to me, servant.” She commanded, looking up from her book. She sat at a small rickety table; one shortened leg propped up on a stacked pile of mismatched wood. The room was barely lit both by a tallow candle on the table and the fire that burned in the hearth on the far end of the rectangular room. She was dressed to fit in amongst the clientele of the businesses around her, her clothes, drab yet functional would add to the illusion that she intended to portray to those around her.

From the shadows, near the hearth, a black shape coalesced, resembling a small man, fading in and out in time with the flicker of the flames. This was the first servant that she had summoned and the one that she relied on the most. The others had taken on other shapes, one resembling a wolf or large dog and the other a long-limbed humanoid that could not be mistaken for a man. The first had been a purposeful creation - the others had been as a result of her living in Four Towns, both cutpurses who had chosen the wrong victim. In both cases the first, who she still thought of as Coryn -though she refused to call him that, had assisted in the death of the others. She could not explain the difference in their appearance and Masen Baird's book provided very little in the way of answers. All that she knew of the Servants she learned either by observation or direct questioning – the Servants did not voluntarily reveal anything. The book was an enigma, it hinted at so much power and yet only the blood magic spells worked. It seems that the work done to erase magic from the continent over a century ago still held – what Liam Sellen referred to as the Bastion. Now she spent most of her time trying to ferret out anything she could learn about the mysterious artifact, its creators, the caretakers, or Masen Baird.

“Yes Master,” he answered, his voice a grating metallic screech, reminiscent of metal scraping across stone. Like his form, his voice ebbed and flowed in strength according to the intensity of the fire. This was one of the things she had learned about the Servants, they required both a light source and shadows in order to manifest and they were strongest when the light source was a natural flame enabling them to take on a physical presence for short periods of time – something that had saved her on more than one occasion. Because of the need for a source of flame, when Caeda ventured forth, it was only at night and despite the lantern lit streets she carried her own lantern so she could call them forth at a moment's notice.

“What did you and the others find?”

“We have covered much of this borough and have found many books though none with the subjects you are looking for, Master.”

Caeda grunted in frustration. Her search thus far had been fruitless and this was the last of the boroughs that she had to search. She had expected to at least find volumes covering the ancient history of Merwin, especially those that discussed the War of Dissolution but it seems that most had not survived the nearly thirteen hundred years since its occurrence. Once Caeda had determined that the curious message from the Duke of Tyren, found within the pages of Masen Baird’s book, carried at least a semblance of truth, she had ventured to Four Towns, figuring that an area known for trading in the obscure would be her best bet. So far, she was wrong.

“Where are the others?”

“They are searching the magistrate’s residence and surrounding homes.”

“Call them back. It is time that we go to Tyren and track down that lead. Our time in Four Towns is drawing to a close.” Caeda uttered, waving her hand to dismiss the servant.

The Servants were useful but if she were to realize her plans of revenge against her husband and those that had spurned her, she would need human allies – it was time to start building her following – then when she unlocked the secret of the magic promised within Masen Baird’s book, she would see the continent remade as a place where she and those like her would be no longer under the oppressive thumb of those that would use her.

## CAEDA

Year 1307, New Arcadian Calendar

In Sellenhall, Caeda learns more about the Bastion, including where to find the answers she needs about the caretakers and at least one of the Key Stones. Despite building a small following, she realizes that she will need allies that wield more power and influence. She formulates a plan to use one of the Servants to plant the seeds to usurp the power structure of one of the most powerful kingdoms on the continent, Arcadia. In doing so she believes that she will be able to start the slow process of uniting the kingdom under a single ruler.

## EOIN

Year 1307, New Arcadian Calendar

Eoin Vandran climbed the broad stone stairs as he had done so many times before, his boots echoing through the grand hall and into the upper recesses of the grand stairwell. This time however his pace was much faster than the leisurely way that he had ascended so many times before – there was an anger evident in the way his boots pounded on the stones and had anyone dared to venture a look at his face they would see it colored crimson. Many would assume it was exertion from climbing the many stairs; still others, those who had heard the news, would assume it was out of grief for his stricken older brother. No one but him would guess the real reason.

As he neared the landing that included his personal rooms, he avoided the stares and courtesies offered by the staff as he forcefully pushed open the heavy oaken doors to his chambers, causing a heavy tapestry hung near the door to buffet.

A few startled staff flinched as he entered the room. They were busy setting the room to rights after the previous night's events. He was known throughout the kingdom to keep peculiar tastes and he did nothing to quell any rumors that might arise from his many wild nights. He delighted in the thought that the staff feared him and used that fear to keep everyone at arm's length.

"Out!" he snarled, throwing his arm toward the doorway. The liveried servants fled through the door. They knew when he was of temper and had no designs on being caught in his angry wake. The last one closed the door, leaving him to his dark thoughts.

He threw himself upon the half-made four-poster bed that dominated the center of the room and covered his face with his hands. Nearby, a copper brazier crackled, providing both warmth and light but not quite illuminating the large space, causing shadows to ebb and flow at the corners of the room. No natural light entered as the small lead-paned windows were completely covered by thick curtains that hung from ceiling to floor in an attempt to keep the cold air of winter at bay and as it was nearly night there was little but moonlight and the last dying rays of light outside.

“A few years older and the crown could have been mine instead of falling into the lap of my half-wit older brother!” He punched the bed with a balled-up fist. “He will undo all that has been done to restore the kingdom to its former glory. The House of Arcadius should be treated as Kings among kings – not merely another kingdom to barter with! If I were Regent, I would make the kingdom eclipse that even of ancient Merwin...”

He caught movement from the corner of his eye. Was there a shape in the shadows near the door? He launched to his feet, “Who is there? Come forward!”

The shape receded into the corner, seeming to retreat, and become part of the darkness itself, insubstantial one moment and solid the next. It wasn’t very tall and resembled the shape of an exceedingly small man. His anger doubled at the thought that he was both overheard and disobeyed.

“Come forward, damn you!” the shape stopped moving, to his eyes it was definitely more substantial. Were his eyes playing tricks? “Why are you here? I am not to be disturbed! Don’t you know that my brother has perished and that I am in mourning?”



The shape bowed its head. “Yes, milord. I know of *a* king’s death.” The voiced that issued forth appeared to come from every corner of the room; a cold, rasping sound, like slowly drawn steel.

The hair on his arms stood straight on end. “Who are you? You are no servant,” he backed away, peering to either side of the room for something that could be used as a weapon beyond the small knife he kept tucked into the top of his boot.

“I am a servant, though no servant of yours,” the shape moved toward him, its solidity increasing as it entered into the light. The voice becoming stronger, less raspy. It appeared to be wearing the livery of the castle, all save its head which appeared hooded, its features tucked safely in the shadows of the hood. “My true master has asked me to deliver a gift to you, and a promise. A kingdom.”

“My brother is dead, and though just eight, his son will be raised king, and my older brother will be made Regent until the boy is of age. I will be what I have always been – the forgotten younger brother and now merely uncle to the king. You are clearly mistaken.” His head hung as he said the words, the pain and regret evident in the cracking timbre of his voice.

“What I speak of will be the truth...if you accept what I have brought you.”

“And what is that?”

“Means. The chance to grasp what is yours.”

“What are you offering me?” he asked venturing closer to the shadow. It again retreated to the shadows, seeming once again to become as the shadow itself.

The voice again issued out from all around, the metal sound returning and with it a dull hum that seemed to reach into his brain, “The Regency and a future. Were Lord Stepan to die, who then would be selected Regent? Who would the win the noble’s support?”

“I am next in line as the oldest uncle to the new king - the nobles would have no choice but to accept my claim.” The hum in his head changed to a soothing purr. “But what you speak is treason! My brother is not ill nor is he likely to meet with a timely accident. No matter how much I might want what you say, I’ll not be implicated in any plots. I would be immediately taken to the gallows.”

The hum increased, becoming a grating sound that seemed to vibrate his very bones. The specter coalesced for a moment, then shifted back into shadow, “My master can grant you what you want - I only need your agreement that the deed must be done,” it hissed.

“What will it cost me?”

“Only that you remember the favor my master has granted you as you build the kingdom of Arcadia into something to rival the ancient kingdom of Merwin. She expects that you will follow what is in your heart. That what is yours to command will grow and become strong and ready when the need arises.”

“What need?”

“Who am I to know? I am only a servant and not privy to all my master has planned. She gives direction and I follow. Today my master asks that I give you the means you need and I obey.” The soothing hum returned as the flickering lights from the brazier alternated the shadows, the servant seeming to move with them.

“How will it be done?”

“That is not your concern - remain in your room and call for your servants to attend you. It will be done. I’ll not return unless my master bids it. Do you agree?” With the utterance of those last words the servant’s eyes blazed from within a face of shadows like twin pools of violet fire. The words hung menacingly in the air.

“I agree.” And with his words the brazier flared, fully lighting the corner of the room, and showing empty space. The presence was gone so fast that Eoin Vandran wondered if it had only been a figment of his imagination.

Eoin woke suddenly and launched from the bed. Hadn't he been standing only just a moment before, confronting a thing of shadow? It must have been a dream. The room appeared as he remembered it; the brazier still burned but so low that it provided little warmth or light. He had little idea how much time had passed but he felt refreshed as if he had slept for hours. His stomach growled; with all of the events of the day it was no wonder that he had forgotten to eat. He walked to the door of his quarters and stuck his head out, locking eyes with a servant who was rushing by with linens in hand.

“You, see that food is brought immediately!” The servant looked down at his hands as if to say that he was already occupied with a task, then noticing Eoin's glare, bowed his head and started toward the kitchens, with a quickly uttered, “Yes, milord.”

“Also send someone to clean my quarters. This room is atrocious!”

Within minutes a handful of servants appeared with new linens. He allowed them entrance to the quarters while he scrutinized their every move.

A scream issued from down the hall, from the direction of his brother's apartments, followed by cries for the physician, “Send help! Lord Stepan is not breathing! Send help!” A small smile creased the mouth of Eoin Vandran before he quickly masked his growing elation with a look of concern for his brother. Dream or not, things were changing for the better.

## EOIN

Year 1318, New Arcadian Calendar

Years of careful planning and maneuvering had led him to this day, and while he was not entirely happy, he was content in the knowledge that he had secured the backing of at least half the noble houses. They would follow his lead despite what the new king might decide and the other half would carefully consider any move that might be contrary to what he might propose - although he could not be certain that they would not oppose him given the right opportunity. Of course, all the careful mentoring he had invested in his young nephew would also go a long way in ensuring that, while not visibly in power, that he would remain firmly behind the scenes pulling the levers that made the kingdom run.

He strode purposefully through the corridors that led to the grand throne room, ignoring the bustling servants scurrying to and fro to put the final touches on decorations for the ceremony. Today's ceremony would recognize his young nephew, barely a man, as King in his own right, able to make proclamations on his own, without his Regent to guide him. As he worked his way to the two-story doors of the throne room, he remembered poignantly the day his brother Tyrick ascended the throne as Reodrick XI. He remembered thinking how glorious it would have been to have been standing in his brother's shoes as the crown was lowered onto his head. Now he would watch as that same crown would be conferred upon another, while his regency would be just a footnote in the annals of history. He would have to find a way to ensure that did not happen.

As he walked into the grand throne room, Maarten caught his eyes and quickly strode over. He cut a striking figure, bedecked in finery, and standing taller than anyone else in the room. The

Kingdom of Arcadia would rise again to prominence with Maarten as the figurehead and Eoin as the driving force behind the king.

“Uncle, come see what the scribes have written for me to say. They told me I am to memorize this but I say it is too long. Why can’t I just say what is in my heart and speak freely to those who will be gathered to see my coronation?” he said as he cut a path to his uncle, his voice echoing across the broad expanse of the room.

“What is written has been said by every king since the Dissolution of Merwin and the creation of the Kingdom that carries your family name – it is tradition. More importantly among those in the audience will be the kings of other lands, emissaries, bankers, and important tradesman – not to mention lords from your own kingdom. You cannot falter. You must say the words as they are written. Were you not given them weeks ago to memorize?” Eoin replied, the irritation barely concealed in his voice.

“I was...” Maarten stated, abashedly. Eoin cut him off with a quick wave of his hand.

“Then it should be no problem for someone such as you. You were born to be King. This is an important day and will set the tone for your rule and for how you are treated by those that will follow you. You must show that you will be a strong, confident leader.”

“If you get nervous just look for me in the crowd, I’ll make sure your head doesn’t get too big to say the words,” said a young man striding up to join them. He looked a younger version of the King, down to almost the slightest detail, but despite being six years the King’s junior it was clear that his younger brother, Kaelan, was destined to dwarf his older brother in stature.

“You have your own part to play, young lord, and need to be prepared yourself – as your brother is not yet married you are heir to the kingdom should anything befall your brother and as such, you will be installed as the heir in the ceremony that follows.” Eoin remarked.

“We both know that won’t last, Uncle Eoin. There will be little time before Maarten is married and even less before my nephews are running all over the place. Then I can go back to being just another Lord of the kingdom.”

“We all pray that it is so...” Eoin remarked under his breath but apparently loud enough for Kaelan and Maarten, drawing a quizzical look from them both.

“My Lord Regent...” a man wearing the king’s livery stated from across the room - Scanlon, his secretary.

“What is it, Scanlon?” Eoin asked moving towards the man.

“Milord, I need to discuss with you the seating for this evening’s events. The delegation from Frienth has made comment regarding their placement at the banquet.”

“I need to take care of this, my King. Please excuse me. And go about your memorization, lest you make a fool of yourself,” he chided. Eoin moved off without waiting for the King to acknowledge his request and sparing no time whatsoever for Kaelan.

“Will I still be able to call you Maarten? I know all Arcadian Kings are called Reodrick but it doesn’t seem natural to call someone something all their life and then change just because they become King.”

“In private little brother, I will always be Maarten. Mother used to call Father Ty when they were alone.”

“I wish I remembered what Father was like...” Kaelan said wistfully, “Mother too...”

Eoin bristled at the impertinence of some of the guests and their demands. It was one thing to ensure that the delegations from two warring nations were separated but quite another when

one of the delegations decided it was more important than another based on who wasn't attending.

"What is the issue now Scanlon?" he hissed, his annoyance evident in both his countenance and his tone.

"The emissary from Frienth believes he should be afforded the place his King would have been afforded had he deemed to attend. This would displace the Prince of Caerrock, Prince Henri Merwin. I find it disconcerting that we would place a Lord of Frienth over a Prince but that is what he demands."

"Or else what?" Eoin asked incredulously.

"He says that the King will look upon it as a slight and will choose to withhold access to the Ihr Forest and the all-important Ironwood lumber trade."

Eoin considered for a moment. This would be disastrous for the new king but maybe there was a way to turn this to his advantage, "Where is this emissary? I would like to meet him."

"I can arrange for a meeting in your audience chamber, milord"

"Tell him I will meet him in an hour and then as soon as he arrives usher him in immediately as if he is late. Offer no refreshments and show him in alone,"

Scanlon departed with a quick nod as he set out to make the preparations.

Eoin arrived ten minutes before his scheduled meeting with the emissary from Frienth via the back door to his audience chamber. Scanlon was already waiting for him.

"Is everything arranged as I have asked?" Eoin asked as he settled into the large chair that he used to receive visitors. It sat facing the door through which the emissary would enter, the man would then be forced to advance nearly thirty feet under the watchful eye of Eoin before

finding that he would be forced to stand to address the regent. The room was cold, yet well-lit by tall windows whose shutters had been thrown wide open. Again, Eoin would be at an advantage as the sunlight would hit the emissary directly in the face while he would sit in the shadows. Everything was arranged to make those that wished an audience with the regent as uncomfortable as possible. He would take every little advantage that he could.

“Make sure that you infer that he is late when he arrives and bring him in directly,” he said reminding Scanlon of his directive from earlier.

Scanlon nodded and turned to await the emissary in the anteroom.

Eoin pulled a small notebook from his pocket and opened to a list of names. He was meticulous at recording notes on the people around him, he liked to observe small facts about a person that he could use later, a particular like for instance, such as a preferred wine or meal, or something about a clothing preference or mannerism. Every detail he recorded he regarded as a potential score in a greater game. He made a new notation for the emissary where he would hopefully record some interesting details from the meeting he was about to undertake.

The door swung open, admitting Scanlon with the obviously harried emissary standing behind him. Good, Scanlon had followed his instructions to the letter, it was readily apparent that the emissary had expected a few moments to compose himself and a chance to prod Scanlon for information before he entered into negotiations.

“May I present the honorable Emissary of Frienth, Lord Pheltan of the Wilmot Hills,” Scanlon intoned.

“Thank you, Scanlon. Please come forward Lord Pheltan, I would like to discuss some items with you. I believe there are things of consequence between our two kingdoms that could be beneficial to us both.”



Lord Pheltan strode forward purposefully. He was dressed in the fashion of his kingdom, high waisted deep green cotton breeches, green hose, a cream tunic with a deep green cloak, fastened by a golden brooch at his left shoulder. His thinning hair was cut short and he was clean shaven. Eoin noticed the sweat beading his upper lip and forehead. The kind thing to do would be to offer refreshments and perhaps a washbasin for his guest. He offered neither. Pheltan looked quickly for a place to sit, seeing none his gaze settled on Eoin's chair and the look on his face registered a slight annoyance before he quickly recovered. Scanlon took his place at Eoin's side, book in hand ready to record the minutes of the meeting and to draw up any agreement that might be made between the two.

"On behalf of my future king, may I extend our warmest welcome to you. It is unfortunate that your king could not attend. I trust all is well at home?"

"Thank you for your graciousness. My king is well but he expects an heir soon and did not wish to leave the side of his queen. He has entrusted me to attend in his stead," Pheltan explained, shifting slightly, trying to avoid looking directly into the sun, to gauge the reaction of his host.

"I understand there is something that you wish to discuss regarding the coronation?" They both knew the reason for the emissary's petition but Eoin would force him to say it. Pheltan shifted subconsciously from one foot to the other, clearly dismayed at having to explain himself.

"We have always been a stalwart ally of Arcadia and have supported its kings since the Dissolution and we feel it would be a slight if I were to be seated after the Prince of Caerrock, considering the recent history of turmoil between your two kingdoms..."

“I don’t disagree, however...” Eoin interrupted, “as you know there have been treaties that I negotiated between the kingdoms of Caerrock and Arcadia, and he is a prince...” Eoin let his words trail off, trying to gauge Pheltan’s response.

“It is true that I am not a prince, but I am one of the most powerful of my king’s many retainers and my lands border those of your kingdom, including the main road through which all ironwood flows from Frienth to Arcadia” he answered. The opening that Eoin had envisioned had finally presented itself. Here was a man that had true ambition, such as himself, and clearly if he was to be seen as having raised his position amongst the many guests it would elevate him both at home and across the continent. Also, it was true that despite the new treaty with Caerrock, the relationship was still strained and it was of little consequence in his mind if Caerrock was offended. The ironwood trade was vital to both countries but maybe there was also another route he could take the negotiations.

“I am sure that we could come to an agreement and I am sure that my king would welcome a friendly face on his border,” He paused, hand on chin as if pondering a deep unspoken question before starting again, “Your wife is sister to your queen is she not?”

“She is.”

“So, your daughter is the niece of your King and Queen. It would be wise if we could possibly tie our two families and two kingdoms together, don’t you think? How old is she?”

“Fourteen.”

“That will do nicely, I have been trying to find a suitable bride for my nephew,”

The emissary squinted up at Eoin, a smile creasing his face as he realized the opportunity presented to him – something far greater than what he had originally hoped for, “I think that something could certainly be arranged.”

“Scanlon, there has been a change to the seating arrangements. Please be sure that the father of the King’s betrothed is seated as close to the King as possible.”

## EOIN

Year 1322, New Arcadian Calendar

This chapter tells of the discovery of the new continent – plans for colonization. Eoin plots to send Kaelan but cannot. Sends another noble to establish a foothold and clears out some of Reodrick's loyal followers and troops as a result. Sets the stage for the later push by Eoin to negate Prince Tengar's influence over the king by sending him abroad. Starts the race to colonize the new continent and sets many of the neighboring countries at odds as they all scramble to gain a foothold. The new tension across the continent adds to the contention and aids Caeda and Eoin in their quests to usurp the status-quo.

## KELTARA

Year 1328, New Arcadian Calendar

Keltara was up with her father before the rising sun, as was their custom. Finite resources on their small island meant that they would often have to venture out into the sea for sustenance beyond what their small garden could provide. Every morning they either fished or worked their small field. Today was a fishing day.

Her father had no sons and his wife had passed two years back, so she accompanied him everywhere. They were the only two left of the small contingent that had settled the outpost many generations before. His wife was the most recent death, the others had come almost a decade earlier, before Keltara was born. Life on the outpost was hard and now there was not even anyone left who could venture out to gather recruits to come and help continue their mission. She had never seen another person outside of her mother and father, nor evidence that proved that they were not the only two people left in the world, nothing beyond the few stories her father told her of their people.

They made their way to the small boat that served as their fishing vessel and set about making preparations to put out to sea. Sea life near the island was becoming scarce and it seemed that they had to venture further and further to find the fish that was the principal part of their diet. It was likely that today's trip would end long after the sun reached its zenith and then there would still be many chores to do upon their return.

She looked up at her father, and wondered what would happen to her when he was gone.

"Heavy thoughts this morning, my little eagle? You look worried." He sighed and looked down at her, forcing a smile. "The fish will surely bite this morning and we will be back before

you know it. Once the fish are cleaned, we will find time to go up to the waterfall. I think an afternoon off will serve us both well. What say you?"

She couldn't suppress the giggle that issued forth with the thought of splashing about in the small pool at the base of the mountain and the small waterfall that plunged down from the small stream above. Their fight for subsistence all but ensured that days of play were few and far between and with no other children on the island her father was her only playmate.

"Pull the net over here and set it at the prow. Did you remember the water skin?"

"I did, father."

"And what about the Anchor Stone? Did you check that its light still shines?"

"Yes, father."

"Then it appears we are ready to ship out. Hop in and I will push the boat out. Make sure you grab the tiller."

He shoved the boat off the sand. It was a small craft equipped with a single sail and took both of them to manage. There were a pair of oars that could be used if the wind failed them, which it often did. As they made their way out of the little cove that they called home the sun was just beginning its rise over the horizon,

"I think we will sail southwest this morning," he said with a smile.

They had been out for almost two hours and the fishing was not going as well as they had hoped. Her father continued to allow the small boat to drift with the currents hoping that the warmer waters would bring more fish. At some point soon they would have to make the determination that there would be no fish this day and that it would be time to head for home.

“It has been an hour since we set the net. Let’s pull it in and see what we have caught,” he said trying to sound positive. “If there is nothing in the net there is still time for me to try my hand at spear fishing.”

She began to pull with all her might, her small hands tugging at the heavy net. Despite her young age her muscles were corded with strength, amassed from days tilling the small field behind their tiny house. Pulling in the net took just a few minutes.

She looked over disappointedly as she hauled in the last of the net, there were only a few small fish, most hardly worth the effort it would take to skin and debone.

“I guess this decides it. Hand me the end of the rope. I will tie it to my ankle so that I do not stray too far from the boat while I am underwater,” he said stripping down to his small clothes. “Never fear little eagle, I am a strong swimmer and an expert hunter. I will be bringing up fish in no time.”

He finished tying the rope to his ankle and grabbed one of the short spears they used in the cove before the fish dried up. With a wink and a smile, he dove over the side. She double-checked that the other end of the rope was tied to the small mast and then she waited. She knew that her father was capable of spending a long time under water. She did not worry as the minutes began to stretch beyond the limit of normal human endurance, instead, she busied herself with gutting the fish they had caught and prepping them for the smoking chamber, this way there was still a possibility that they might make it to the waterfall after all.

As she labored, she began to hum to herself, a small tune that her mother used to put her to sleep. She became lost in her work. Finally, her father surfaced with a gasp. He quickly threw a large fish, still on the end of his spear, onto the floor of the boat and attempted to haul himself on board.

“Keltara, we’ve got to move! Grab the tiller! A ship approaches!”

She turned just as the sun seemed to fade as if obscured by clouds. Her eyes grew wide as she realized that it wasn’t clouds but a sailing ship with three masts close enough to blot out the sun which still sat low on the horizon. She scrambled for the tiller and tried to steer away as the ship came alongside, its wake tossing the smaller ship back and forth. Shouts rang out from above her and then her father screamed, arrows sprouting from his chest, hip, and thigh, one of the small oars still gripped in his hands. Something thudded beside her. She caught a quick image of a fist and then all went dark.

She came-to laying on the deck, surrounded by a number of men with no idea of how long she had been out. She propped herself up on her elbows and squinted up into their faces, the side of her face aching and her head still swimming from the blow she had received. Her father was nowhere to be seen.

“Who...” she stammered; her voice a small croak from a lack of water.

The men looked at her quizzically, not understanding. One of them answered in a language she didn’t comprehend and handed her a ladle of water. She grasped the vessel and drank greedily. A couple of the men appeared to be arguing before being cut off by a sharp yell by the one that handed her the water, he then scooped her up and took her to a living area at the back of the ship and laid her gently in a small hammock before turning back out the door and pulling it closed behind him. She slept on and off for the rest of the next day.

When she finally woke, she ventured out on to the deck, intent on understanding her surroundings and getting answers. She was on the deck for no more than a few minutes before she quickly learned to stay out of the way as more than one sailor either growled at her in their



coarse language or attempted to cuff her over the head. One particularly angry sailor attempted to take her head off as she bumped into him while avoiding another with an evil looking hooked harpoon in his hand. She ducked and, in a flash, scurried up the rope attached to the mizzenmast. She was atop the yardarm, leaving the crew below bewildered with the speed that she moved. They yelled at her, probably out of fear that she would do harm to the sails more than out of fear for her safety. She refused to come down until the man that had given her water coaxed her down with a gentle voice.

## KELTARA

Year 1334, New Arcadian Calendar

“What do you see?” came the yell from below, barely heard above the noise of the waves crashing against the prow.

Keltara glanced out over the water, shielding her eyes with a hand against the harsh sun. From her perch on the mainmast, she could see for miles around. She adjusted the bit of rope that held her fast against the mast so that she could swing around to take in views from all directions. There wasn't a true crow's nest so she made do with what she had.

“All clear out to the horizon, Captain, ‘though I suspect we’ll soon be seeing signs of storms from the southwest!” she answered.

“Aye, Little Eagle! Keep the watch!” Came the answer from below.

Keltara loved her perch up above the ship, tucked in amongst the sails and rigging. From the very first days aboard the ship, she had preferred to live out her time aboard *The Prestige* above the deck rather than on it. The pirates below respected her for her ability to traverse the rigging without effort and her keen eyes had helped them to avoid trouble on more than one occasion.

By her reckoning she had been a part of the crew for nearly six years. *The Prestige's* crew were a band of cutthroats and there were few that she trusted to have her back if it came down to them or her, but for the most part they treated her with a grudging respect.

Over the course of her first few months, she learned their language and in time she came to understand why the crew had attacked her and her father. *The Prestige* had been pushed off course by foul winds into an area known as the Mer'mort or Sea of Death, when they spotted her

out in waters where only evil spirits were thought to dwell. There was nearly a mutiny when the captain decided that they would investigate. The crew got spooked when her father shot up out of the water and fired without thought. Her father went back over the side of the small boat in a hail of arrows and never resurfaced. Keltara was clubbed over the head and brought aboard the ship. Once the crew realized that she was just a girl the captain decided to spare her life, turns out that he had left behind a daughter her age when he turned to piracy and could not bear to leave her to the mercy of the sea.

There was a part of Keltara that still didn't understand the implications of the captain's story. She had lived in that area all her life and not once had seen or heard anything about evil spirits. Her father never referred to the waters around their home as the Sea of Death. He had often told her stories of how her people had been tasked with guarding the Anchor Stone that sat in what was left of their tiny village and that the rest of her tribe lived far away. She wondered what would happen if no one tended the Anchor Stone. She wasn't even sure if she could find her way back home and doubted that there was anything to return home to. What's more she quickly realized that the crew were a very different people than her, and it wasn't just the difference in language.

Most of the crew of twenty hailed from the continent, a few were from the Daltigoth Isle, and none of them looked like her. Where they were fair complected, Keltara tended toward a deep sienna and her hair was jet black compared to their lighter hues. The captain, judging her by her features and the strange language she had spoken had once told her that he thought she might be of Aariil stock. Now, knowing what she knew of the world she doubted that very seriously. Encounters with the mysterious Aariil were few and far between.

She remembered asking what an Aariil looked like.

“Well, nothing like you that’s for sure. When I told you that after we first brought you on board, I had no idea what an Aariil looked like. After our last trip to Haven Cay where we saw the captured Aariil, I am now convinced that you are something else. Something I’ve never before encountered.” He paused as if considering his next words carefully. “Does it matter what you are? Nations are places, whose names and rulers change like the winds we sail upon. That is why I took up this trade. I was tired of bowing down to rulers whose intentions were all about increasing their hold on power with no thought to me and mine. This crew is our family and family are what is important – not kings and banners.”

Keltara scanned the horizon, seeing nothing but open sea in every direction. Despite the clear skies overhead, she couldn’t shake the feeling that there would be a storm soon - and it would be a bad one. The crew relied on her to provide ample warning so that they could sail around any dangers that they might encounter.

Her days aboard *The Prestige* were not without challenges. Being the only girl in the company of men had conditioned her to be hyperaware of her surroundings – months of time at sea tended to scramble men’s minds and she seemed such an easy target. The last man that had tried her found out the hard way that she was not without the ability to protect herself. Prior to being thrown overboard for his crime, he had lost an eye and sported a few punctures in his nether regions thanks to the blade she kept tucked into the belt at her waist. The captain made it

clear that the same fate would befall any other who dared assault her as he tossed him screaming over the starboard side.

When she wasn't riding atop one of the three ship masts, or on the deck assisting with various chores, she spent time in a small converted closet just outside the captain's quarters. He had fashioned it with a bar to lock it from the inside, just in case. It wouldn't keep her from all harm, but it was enough to impede most and her skills with her knife were enough to scare off the rest. It also contained a hidden cubby that she could hide in should the boat be overtaken. It might not save her life but it gave her peace of mind.

Inside her small quarters she kept copies of the captain's journals and maps that she laboriously transcribed, spending at least an hour every night learning about navigation and the places that *The Prestige* had found anchorage. Some of her curiosity was inherent, some born of her desire to learn all she could about the seafaring trade, but mostly it was about learning more about where she came from. So far, the captain's resources had turned up little of value.

In a few days the ship was due to pull into Haven Cay, a small island where pirates congregated to refit, swap tales and enjoy some well-needed recreation. Haven Cay was a dangerous place and on a previous trip, Keltara had stayed aboard *The Prestige*, forbidden from even walking out on deck, lest she be seen. This time the captain had promised her a short excursion, under his careful eye, to see if anyone had encountered someone like her. She hoped to get answers about her origins.

While Haven Cay was known as a place of general debauchery it also followed a special code, enforced by its ruler, Stellen Deepsea, and his band of cutthroats. When they docked the captain would offer a tribute and if acceptable, they would be invited to dock. Receiving this invitation meant that they would be free to take part in all the island had to offer. It also carried a

promise that any trouble would be dealt with quickly. Pirates that visited Haven Cay were expected to leave their grudges behind while on island or else their grudge would be taken up by the Deepsea crew. In order to ensure that the odds would be in the island's favor weapons were to be left aboard ship – anyone caught carrying could consider their invitation forfeit which often meant quite a different route off the island.

That night, after her shift atop the mizzenmast ended, Keltara decided to approach the captain yet again about the trip to Haven Cay. She carried one of the books she had borrowed as a pretense to approach him. He was becoming tired of her constant questions about what to expect when they finally reached the small pirate isle. She raised her hand to knock on the captain's door, hesitated, then steeled herself and rapped soundly on the door.

“Enter!”

The captain was seated at a small table, just finishing up a light meal. He often ate in his quarters as he poured over some book or another. The captain's quarters were the largest room on the ship, other than the cargo holds and the mess hall, still an overabundance of furniture and books stacked on every surface, made the room feel small and cozy. A small lamp burned on the table next to him, shedding a warm glow throughout the chamber. He looked down at her hands, noticing the book she carried.

“Come to swap out for another one? The way you are breezing through these books lead me to wonder if you ever sleep.” He chuckled to himself. “You aren't just looking at the pictures, are you?” he teased.

“No captain, I've read every word. Care to quiz me?”

“Oh, no. I know far better than to try you, little eagle. Medwick tells me you spotted another storm more than thirty minutes before anyone else could see sign of it. I used to think

your abilities stemmed from your youth but sometimes I wonder. Either way you likely saved us from having to weather it out here on the open ocean. Looks like we'll be headed to Haven Cay a little sooner than expected. We should reach the island in just a few days."

"About that..." she started

"Oh, here it comes," he interrupted, "I knew by the look on your face when you entered that there was more to this visit."

Keltara looked abashed, expecting to be shooed away.

"Pull that chair over. You have to promise me though, that what I tell you, you'll take to heart. Haven Cay is no place for a child - hell, it's hardly a place for anyone respectable at all."

Keltara spent the next two hours plying the captain about what to expect before finally being ushered out the door. They discussed what was off limits for her and where she should go to get the information she needed. Most importantly he made her promise to only venture onto the island with either himself or Medwick by her side. He trusted no one else to keep her safe.

She was up in her perch, atop the mizzenmast, when she spotted the island known as Haven Cay. From a distance it did not look nearly as impressive as the stories made it out to be. The last time she had not even been allowed to keep the watch as they approached.

"Land ho!" she called out to the steersman, Sim. "Due West!"

As they came nearer, most of the crew came up on deck, she could see their eagerness to cut loose once they were set upon the island.

"Last time I was here there was the sweetest young lady..." Keltara tuned out the stories from below as they quickly turned into graphic descriptions of drinking and fornicating. After months at sea the crew had only one thing on their minds. The captain had said that the plan was

to spend no more than three nights on the island – mostly because it was all the tribute the ship could afford, but mainly because the captain did not share the appetites of most of the men.

“Get to your stations, men!” the captain roared, striding out on the deck wearing his finest. “Prepare the pinnacle for going ashore. Medwick, please have the tribute loaded. Sim pull us up just short of arrow range and weigh anchor. Tallam and Will, you’ll come with me for the negotiations. Everyone else stand fast until we return.”

Keltara could only see two other ships at the docks, which looked as though they could only accommodate just a few more ships and none of any great size. The island was much smaller than she expected. The docks were set into a small cove with sheer cliffs on all sides. She could see a staircase cut into the cliff face leading to the island above. At the top of the cliffs, she caught sight of a few small buildings that she had missed before. As she scrutinized the cliffs a little more closely, she noticed a few carefully concealed perches with bowmen stationed with arrows at the ready.

“Captain!” She said as she began her descent down to the deck.

“Yes, Keltara?”

“There are bowmen, stationed there, there and there.” She said pointing out each in turn.

“I know. They are there to ensure nothing happens during the negotiations. This is why we remain out of bowshot while we take our tribute ashore.” He turned to face her, and grabbed her by the shoulders. “I want you to go to your secure place until I come to fetch you. Deepsea is untrustful and untrustworthy. There is a good chance we will be boarded to see what we are carrying. Go!” He gave her a light shove toward her closet.



## KELTARA

Year 1334, New Arcadian Calendar

Keltara is granted her opportunity to visit Haven Cay under the watchful eye of the captain. While most of the crew takes advantage of what the island has to offer, Keltara and the captain are invited to a dinner with Stellen Deepsea, the Pirate King. During the dinner Keltara gets very few answers to her inquiries as to her potential background. Deepsea confirms that she is not an Aariil but will not answer how he knows she is not. After dinner Keltara overhears Deepsea give instructions that the captain and his crew are not to leave the island. Keltara lets the captain in on what she has heard and he is unsurprised. He advises her to quietly depart and to head back to *The Prestige* and inform the remaining crew to make ready to depart. Things go awry and the captain and others from the crew are either slain or captured. Keltara makes her way back to the ship, chased by the pirate king's minions and unleashes magic, that she didn't know she had, to escape. The crew departs under a hail of arrows and ballistae with Keltara at the helm and a stowaway that knows what she is (Selin Waros).

## EOIN

Year 1341, New Arcadian Calendar

“Sire, your wife’s uncle sends word yet again asking you to send troops to help defend his border with Daltigoth,” Eoin stated, looking down at the missive that had just been delivered via horse and rider.

“I’ve told him that I’ll not be drawn into the Daltigoth Civil War. I warned him too many times to shore up his borders and now he looks to me once again to provide help. Why can he not heed my words?!” King Reodrick curled his fist in anger, feeling caught between two competing demands. “How many troops does he request?”

“A column’s worth at a minimum, to be held in reserve should the Daltigoth troops spill over into Frienth territory.” Eoin answered. “Sire, if the ironwood trade is disrupted, the consequences could be dire...”

“I understand all too well what will happen...I am also well aware of what will happen to that trade and all others should we become embroiled in the Daltigoth’s war.” His anger threatened to spill over, “What do you suggest?”

Seizing upon an opportunity he did not expect, Eoin answered, “We could send your brother. He could lead the column and ensure that the troops are kept well away from the border and do not engage the Daltigoths.”

He could see the king pondering his suggestion, weighing the pros and cons in his mind. He was so predictable that it hurt Eoin to think of the possibilities someone other than him would have in influencing the king. Should he agree, it would also remove Eoin’s principal rival for the King’s ear and confidence. Now if he could find some way to make the absence more permanent.

“I cannot see another way to guarantee both our alliance and that trade does not falter. Give word to start preparing the column and ask Kaelan to attend to me at once. I want to make sure that he understands his instructions so I will give them to him personally.”

“Sire, if I may be so bold...”

Sensing the question about to be asked, “Yes, of course you can attend...”

## KAELAN

Year 1341, New Arcadian Calendar

Kaelan paused as the courier relayed his brother's summons, the letter he had been working on in his hand forgotten. He stood behind the desk in the apartments he shared with his young family within the castle walls, yet set apart from the castle itself. The sun poured through the open window behind him spilling across a desk littered with maps and unopened letters from the commanders below him. Most of them offered congratulations at his newly achieved rank of Commander of All the King's Armies. He was scarcely prepared for an official summons having just returned from the practice yard where he drilled with his troops, his leather armor and tunic only just removed.

"Tell me man, what was the King's mood when he handed you this? Am I to hurry or is there time for me to wash before I answer his summons?"

"Milord the summons was handed to me by Lord Vandran. I was not able to gauge the immediacy with which you should respond."

"So be it then," Kaelan said as he began drawing back on his leather armor, "don't just stand there, help me with this"

As he entered the King's audience chamber, Kaelan had a sense of foreboding. His brother had not been acting himself lately. Declining trade, the demands of Frienth on their Southeastern border, the Daltigoth civil war, now in its fifth year, and the race to settle the newly discovered continent had the entire kingdom abuzz and it seemed that the King was feeling the pressure.

The audience chamber looked as it had most days since his brother assumed the throne, gone was the single throne set up at the far end of the room, Reodrick had it moved forward and now petitioners were no longer forced to stare into the sun when addressing their king. Behind the throne, he had placed a meeting table so that he could discuss things with his various advisors. It was at the head of this massive wooden table that he now sat, awaiting Kaelan's entrance with maps spread out before him, Lord Vandran was, of course, seated directly to his left.

"Kaelan, come, we have things to discuss. I have a mission for you."

"My king, I am at your disposal," Kaelan noticed that his brother seemed to have aged greatly in the past few years, though only six years apart, a casual observer might confuse them for father and son. Where Kaelan was youthful and strong, Reodrick's shoulders slumped and he seemed haggard, lines of worry crossing his face. Eoin Vandran, in retrospect, looked much as he had years earlier with only a touch of more gray hair evident around his temples.

"Uncle," Kaelan nodded as he sat down at the chair to his brother's right-hand side.

"King Giffard, requests troops to protect his border lest the Daltigoth Civil War spill into his country..."

"I can have a garrison of troops ready in less than a week..." Kaelan started.

"I have decided that you will lead them," Reodrick cut in. Kaelan's face registered shock. Unless it was at the head of the King's Armies, leading a smaller contingent was beneath his new station and unusual for the head of the second house of Arcadius. Also, there was the impending birth of his new child. His wife was due in only a few months with their third child, a protracted deployment to the Frienth countryside would mean he would not be there for the birth.

"Surely, there is someone else that could lead..."

“It has to be you. I need someone that won’t fold before King Giffard’s pressure and that can negotiate through the political and military challenges that will surely present themselves. I need someone to represent *me*.” Kaelan could see the conviction in the King’s eyes as he expressed his concern. There would be no changing his mind. How would he break the news to Rowan?

“I understand. If it is OK, I must be off to ready my troops. I trust there will be time to go over the details of where and when at a later time?” Kaelan said standing, the resignation evident in his voice, “I will alert my second in command, Alaric Sevrysten to take charge while I am gone.”

“No need. I am sending him with the prince on an expedition to our new colonies in the East. It is time we extend our reach and influence and to shore up our holdings there. Uncle Vandran has someone else in mind to lead while you are away. I have decided to accept his recommendation.”

“If I may be so bold, who will lead the Armies while I am away?” Kaelan asked, the skepticism evident in his voice. Eoin raised his head from the map he had been pretending to study; Kaelan knew that there was not a map that his uncle hadn’t already conferred to memory.

“I recommended Duke Darriclese, his family has always been steadfast in their support of the crown and he is a brilliant military mind, well versed in the ways of war.”

Kaelan could not argue with his uncle’s recommendation, the duke was a good tactician and was loyal to the king, still something did not seem right with all the arrangements. He nodded his head in acquiescence and began making his way to the door.

“Kaelan, one more thing; This mission cannot fail, the future of our kingdom depends on your success and your ability to keep us out of the damned civil war while still supporting our allies in Frienth.”

Kaelan looked back to his brother, “I promise my best to you, my King, I shall not falter in my duties.”

His brother looked back at Lord Vandran and the maps on the table and quietly yet with great conviction he uttered “I know little brother, you always have.”

His thoughts were clouded as he made his way back to his quarters, not only would he leave a wife about to give birth, but also a teenage son, newly promoted within the Kingsguard and young daughter that his wife constantly reminded him needed more of their father’s presence in their lives. She chided him constantly about the amount of time he spent drilling and inspecting his troops. He knew that her admonitions were out of both concern for him and her children. Her own life before she was married to him had been hard as her father saw his three daughters as only a means to increase his family’s influence through marriage. Attention was only paid to her when it came to her potential worth to suitors – she did not want the same for their daughter. His own marriage was one of political convenience at the beginning but had quickly turned to love once they were forced to spend time together.

There were so many reasons not to go but he could not, would not, shirk his duty to the King.

## EOIN

Year 1341, New Arcadian Calendar

Eoin enlists the aid of his mysterious benefactor to sabotage the mission of his nephew, Kaelan. He uses one of the Servants to guarantee that the column that Kaelan leads crosses the border between Frienth and West Daltigoth and is attacked by a column of Daltigoth soldiers by creating the illusion that they are on Frienth land rather than a mile into West Daltigoth. Eoin is able to watch all that transpires through the eyes of the Servant that he commands. Unable to pull back, Kaelan's column is routed and few survivors remain. The resulting aftermath ensures that both Frienth and Arcadia are accused of aiding the other Daltigoth armies. Kaelan survives but is tried for treason against the king. This causes the King to fall further under the sway of Eoin and coupled with the subsequent banishment of Kaelan's family and the absence of the crown prince allows Eoin to exert more control over the kingdom.



## DAEATON

Year 1341, New Arcadian Calendar

He ran his hands down the front of his black silk doublet, attempting to smooth wrinkles that weren't there; it was at least the thousandth time he had done so since he rose this morning. He looked over at his mother. She was the epitome of grace. She stood composed and seemingly at peace, though he knew that she likely raged inside. The loss of her husband and unborn child had to be weighing heavily on her mind. Out of the corner of his eye he caught his younger sister fidgeting. He could hear her snuffle from underneath the black lace veil that covered her face. His mother moved gracefully in her direction.

"Reagan, now is not the time for emotion. They will not see us wilt before them. You are of House Daeneril and though they might have stripped us of everything we hold dear, we will not show it," she said quietly as she readjusted her daughter's veil.

"Yes mother," Reagan whispered.

He tried to not look in the direction of the cart that was directly before him and the two coffins that he knew were there, a tiny one set next to a much larger one. Instead, he looked over at the attendants that would accompany the cart; four of the Kingsguard and the man that would lead the horse that pulled the cart. Among the Kingsguard were two men he knew well; he had been their commander until the week prior. The man holding the leads of the gelding that would pull the cart was unknown to him, his face barely visible beneath the cowl of his black robes.

His mother whispered in his direction, "It is nearly time." Despite the whisper her voice still carried the strength that he had always known her for - she would not be cowed regardless of

their current predicament. He steeled himself for the walk ahead. He needed to be strong for his family.

The two doors, large enough to allow two carts to enter side by side, began to open, letting in the sights and sounds of the grounds just outside the castle. He wasn't sure what to expect. He had ridden out of this gate many times before but this morning was different. He half expected to see more Kingsguard, instead he was met with a lone guard who waved the procession through. He reached out and offered his arms to both his mother and sister. The cart lurched forward and out into the early morning sun and they began to follow, heads held high. He noticed rain clouds a little further out, an omen for the day to come.

The procession exited the castle from one of the side doors most often used for shipments of grain, rather than the main door at the front of the castle proper, before turning toward the main thoroughfare and through the heart of the city. Once outside the castle walls, the hard part would begin. He wasn't sure how they'd be received by the populace, but based on the stories that had been circulating the Kingsguard he could only guess as to the lurid rumors that pervaded the city.

As they entered the city, he could feel eyes upon him so he concentrated on taking each step with his head held high, focused on the coffins, covered in a black silk cloth. There were no markings visible to designate the name or station of the deceased as it rolled ahead of him – his father and younger brother were not afforded that privilege, although he would bet that there was not a person around who did not know who the cart carried. They followed stoically behind the cart and despite the Kingsguard's occasional urging, they refused to increase their pace instead causing the driver to repeatedly rein in the horse to slow its gait so as to not leave the family behind.

His mother carried herself proudly, an air of confidence and authority that the enormity of this situation could not subdue. Across her face she wore a veil of black lace, like her daughter, presumably to hide her grief as custom would dictate. Her daughter was dressed similarly and did her best to imitate her mother, despite her young age. He tried to keep his expression neutral as they walked down the broad avenue, refusing to acknowledge his inner turmoil, his expressions threatening to alternate between anger and disappointment directed at the accompanying soldiers. The fact that he was not allowed to wear the rank he earned caused him anguish, almost as much as not being allowed to wear his own family's livery. The guards who trailed behind them were dressed in the livery of the Kingsguard of Arcadia; two white eagles on a field of midnight blue. He glanced to his two former comrades. Over the last month he had reprimanded both numerous times for various infractions – the fact that they had been assigned this duty was yet another slight that he would not soon forget.

“Eyes forward, traitor,” the one on the right, Darent, growled.

He felt his mother squeeze his arm, “Steady,” she whispered.

The procession continued despite the early morning and now overcast skies, twisting its way through the crowded streets. Smoke twisted lazily above the majority of the wood and brick buildings that lined the cobblestone streets. Thousands had turned out and, in every doorway, stood men and women, gathered for a look at the horse drawn funeral cart, some with looks of compassion in their eyes. Still others looked on with open contempt and many spat upon the ground as the procession continued by, their disdain for the family evident for all to see, an emotion that months before would have been thought impossible amongst the citizenry of Caer Aerith.

The family's walk of shame carried them through the heart of the city and was designed to publicly humiliate them and ensure that their family's crime, and its punishment, was observed by all. It seemed that their sentence had caused the entire city to turn out, the only notable exception, the man that sentenced them to their fate, who sat comfortably in the throne room of the castle.

The procession continued until at last the town, and its inhabitants with their accusatory eyes, were left far behind. For he and his family, the trek seemed to take an eternity. Along the rest of the way, the cart and its attendants maintained their silence, the only sound the creak of the cart's wheels and an occasional sniffle by his sister. The procession approached a small fenced area with graves marked by tattered headstones, the names upon them no longer legible. He had passed this way many times before on his way out of the city, usually on patrol. It was a cemetery belonging to the commoners of the city and a far cry from where his ancestors and those of the confined man, his father, were currently laid to rest.

A priest awaited them next to an open grave, the absence of a marker at its head a further testament to how far they'd fallen. Off to the side two grave diggers stood, doing their best to remain out of view. Other than the family and the attendants, the cemetery was empty; soldiers had been by earlier in the day and posted warnings to avoid the area on pain of death until after the ceremony had ended.

The priest looked to the woman and her children, a lack of compassion in his eyes as he spoke, "Come stand next to me so that we may get this over with." He turned to the soldiers, "Get the casket down and bring it over here."

The soldiers moved quickly to obey. The two nearest the cart grabbed one end of the coffin and it slid forward much easier than they expected. The other two soldiers rushed forward

to keep the coffin from dropping to the ground. The second, small coffin was pulled off the cart and carried by a single soldier.

The cowled attendant moved closer to the family and the priest, "Hurry up lads. The wind is changing direction and this weather will likely get worse before it gets any better. We'd best be on our way."

The priest started the service, a hurried chant, and a few brisk words to send the bodies on their way and then the caskets were lowered into the ground. His mother stood resolute; her children's hands clasped in each of hers. The audible noise of his father's casket, as it settled in the grave, causing a small twitch in her face. Once both caskets were in the ground the soldiers and the cowled man moved off to the side as the grave diggers stepped forward and began hurriedly throwing dirt on the grave. His mother turned from the priest and began to walk from the gravesite, pulling him and his sister back out toward the road.

"Madam," the priest called after her, "I must read the king's decree. Please hold for a minute." He trotted in her direction as he pulled a parchment from beneath his black robes. "As the king's emissary, I am directed to read this decree."

She turned, hate clearly visible in her eyes, "Must you subject my children to this?!"

"I must." he answered, the softer timbre in his voice betraying the compassion he tried to hide, "For the crime of High Treason and by order of his majesty, King Reodrick XII, all titles and lands belonging to the family Daeneril are to be seized and the remaining family exiled beyond the border of Arcadia, never to return. May the White Lion standard of House Daeneril never fly again."

"Are you finished?" She did not wait for his reply and again started for the road; her children's hands clasped firmly in her own.

Again, he called after her, softly, "I am sorry, Madam. It was not my wish to do this."

Without turning she replied, "Save your pity."

The priest watched for a while as she and her children disappeared down the road back toward town where a carriage waited to take her and her children out of the kingdom.

## CAEDA

Year 1341, New Arcadian Calendar

Caeda enlists Nyraeve, Empress of Pyradia to join her cause. Caeda sees Nyraeve as an ideal candidate to carry forth her war to transform the continent. Pyradia is a wealthy empire with a vast navy, endless coffers, and a leader eager to expand her empire. Caeda plays on Nyraeve's vanity and feelings of inferiority amongst the other rulers on the continent. Caeda will use her new found ally to move on the neighboring kingdoms while also looking to expand her colonies. Despite the Bastion still negating most of her magic, Caeda convinces Nyraeve of her power and her ability to turn any stalemate into an Pyradian advantage.

## GARUS

Year 1342, New Arcadian Calendar

Garus tore blindly through the forest, branches swiping at him as he bound over exposed roots and small bushes, small clouds of sandy soil thrown up with each frenetic step. Sweat and tears stung his eyes as he raced forward, the path before him finally opening up to a very short expanse of grass, the sea visible ahead on the horizon. Suddenly the ground gave way to nothingness and he felt a short sensation of weightlessness before he plunged out of sight.

He sat nestled in a cleft in the rocky cliff face that overlooked the cove, below him was a small sandy beach, secluded and serene except for the gentle crashing of the waves upon the shore. The sun was high in the sky, just past its zenith and the cool breezes from the ocean hit him full in the face, their salty tang heavy in the air. The little ledge on which he perched was his place, his refuge, and only one other knew its location. To reach it he had to drop, sight unseen, onto a shelf below the steep cliffs that flanked the western side of the island. He had come upon this place most unexpectedly and now it was where he came when he needed to be alone. The rhythmic motion of the waves upon the beach below and the cries of the seagulls eased his mind and gentled the voices in his head.

*Why do they insist that I lead them? I'm no leader. I'm chief only through accident of birth, a fraud.* He could feel the tension building across his shoulders, the pounding in his head threatening to overwhelm him. He grasped at a sapling that grew from a small crack on the cliff wall and began tearing at its roots. Sometimes small destructions would settle him. The cycle of rage and fear plagued him again, setting his heart racing, clouding his mind. He yanked at the



roots of the sapling so hard that when they finally pulled free, he almost found himself flung from the cliffs to the beach below.

The surge of adrenaline steadied him, if only for a moment.

Fear either shut him down or propelled him - most often it rendered him nearly catatonic, but sometimes it was just enough to quiet his mind so that he could think. The voices ceased and he settled back down, wedged between the rocks. On the beach below he caught sight of a small crab struggling to carry a fish caught in one of the many tidepools to a place where it could devour its prize free from the seagulls flapping above it, waiting for the right opportunity to sweep in and relieve it of his meal. Minutes passed; his whole world wrapped up in watching the struggle below. Finally, the crab disappeared from view down the beach.

*They've called another council and they'll want me to render a decision. I can't put it off any longer. I'm not strong enough for this. I would send another, but the elders say it has to be me.* His preoccupation with the crab had bought him moments of respite, a fleeting reprieve. He pressed his hands to his eyes and let out a small groan.

He sat for a while as the sun began to set on the horizon, casting reds and oranges across the blue green water. He rubbed his hands across his bare arms in an effort to warm them. The sun seemed to be pulling all the heat with it as it started to sink even with the ocean before him.

He stood, slightly bowed, as the crevice would only allow him so much room to stretch and reached out for the strand of rope, he had positioned on one of his other trips. He began to haul himself up, hand over hand, his bare feet finding purchase on the rocky wall. After a few minutes he pulled himself over the top and on to the grass that blanketed the ground above. He rolled over and rested a bit, staring at the canopy of trees overhead. Stars were now visible above, but it was a moonless night and soon the darkness would overtake the island.

“I knew I’d find you here.”

Startled, Garus rolled over and settled on his knees. Khereg, his best friend, leaned against a pine just a few feet from where he had ascended, his broad arms across his chest, a pose that could easily be mistaken for anger. Khereg’s red-brown skin blended in with the darkness except for a small tattoo dimly but visibly glowing on his forearm that represented his spirit animal, the bull. He wore a cudgel at his side and was dressed as was common to the tribe, a short leather kilt made from the aurochs that grazed at the southern end of the island, his long black hair tied back away from his face. He showed no signs of suffering from the chill that had begun to grip Garus as the sun had set. He struck an imposing figure and had Garus not known him all his life he might be intimidated, instead he smiled up at his friend. “Just clearing my head.”

“It’s almost time for the council. You ready?”

“Not really,” he said, grimacing at the thought. “I don’t think I’m cut out for this.”

“You’ll do fine,” Khereg said reaching out a hand to help Garus to his feet. “Besides, I’ll be with you every step of the way.”

Standing side by side the two could not be more different. Khereg stood almost six and a half feet tall, at least a full foot taller than Garus, and was almost twice as broad. Both shared the coloring common to their tribe, deep reddish-brown skin, and jet-black hair. Khereg’s eyes glowed brightly, reflecting the low amount of light as night had fully descended - a trait missing from Garus’s eyes.

“It’s pretty dark. I’ll lead us back, and you can tell me what you plan to say to the elders,” Khereg said.

After a long walk through the woods, the two approached the village cautiously, Garus stumbling along beside Khereg until they reached the center of the village. A circle of torches had been lit near the entrance to the longhouse which served as the seat of government for the small island nation. There was smoke curling above the central chimney signifying that the communal fire had been lit. A few of the other tribe members could be seen trickling into the entrance.

“Whatever your decision, I’m with you.” Khereg said, trying to sound reassuring. Garus smiled weakly.

They entered the longhouse and Garus was immediately struck by both the warmth of the building and also by the scent of sage, which the elders burned prior to every ceremony. Inside, the longhouse was well lit, torches and the large central fire casting light on every corner of the building. Khereg reached over and patted Garus on the back and then nodded his head toward where he intended to sit during the ceremony.

Garus looked about the large room, noticing that many of the village were already seated. In all, the longhouse could hold almost five hundred people, a majority of the tribe. In the center, near the stone firepit sat stout wooden chairs, seven on one side and a single one opposite, the chieftain’s chair – his chair. The other chairs belonged to the council of elders, six of which were already occupied. He looked the elders each in the face, offered a nod of respect, before walking around to his own chair and sitting. The seven represented not only the oldest members of the tribe but also the wisest and most learned. Each had a specialty amongst the tribe: the healer, the historian, the blacksmith, the politician, the artist, the mapmaker, and the architect. Just beyond them and to one side sat their apprentices, men, and women most already much older than Garus. He noticed that Nairius, the historian was the missing elder and paused a moment to wonder why

he was not present. A quick look at the apprentices showed that the historian's apprentice was missing as well.

Upon taking his seat the crowd settled and talking ceased. The crackling of the fire was the only sound, save for a stray cough. The elder seated in the center of the seven chairs, Lemnus the politician, rose and held up a hand. Despite his aged appearance his voice rang out true and clear. "Greetings to all. We have gathered for the benefit of the tribe and to discuss things of importance, before one and all, so that all may hear what is said and what judgements are rendered." He paused, looking across all assembled, to see if all were paying attention before continuing. "As many of you know we have seen ships off our coast, many times over the past two years, signaling a weakening of the Anchor Stone that obscures our island from those not of our tribe. Just a summer ago we even had a landing of raiders that we repulsed only after many of our people were killed, to include our beloved chief."

Garus winced at the mention of the death of his father, he could feel the walls start to close in as the memory of that day threatened to overtake him. His hands moved to the arms of the chair, knuckles turning white as he clamped down. He breathed deliberately trying to calm himself.

"Weeks ago, we attempted to contact the outpost at the other Anchor Stone and received no reply. It is clear that the Bastion itself is starting to fail and we must assume that the Anchor stone there is either about to fail or already has, potentially unleashing those imprisoned in the Wild Lands. The situation is dire, and it is time that we fulfill the ancient covenant and dispatch an expedition to ascertain the health of the Bastion and repair what needs to be fixed. That mission should naturally fall to our Chief, the Vessel for the Sorcerer's Stone." He looked to Garus as he spoke the last, his gaze almost daring Garus to dispute his assertion. At his words

Nairius, the historian entered and took his seat, his apprentice moving quickly behind him to his own place nearby.

Garus attempted to push himself up out of his chair to address the council but before he could Nairius sprang to his feet.

“I apologize for my lateness. I have been studying the histories and must agree with Lemnus,” he paused seemingly for affect, “without the Bastion in place it is all but certain that not only will our solace be broken, but that there is a real danger that war will again grip the northern continent, spilling over to our lands again. We cannot trust that the *A’Haaole* up north won’t destroy us all should they gain the ability to again wield magic – not to mention the havoc that will ensue if the creatures of magic return to their shores. We created the Bastion, and we are responsible to ensure that it does not fail. We must use the Sorcerer’s Stone and repair what is broken. That responsibility falls to you, Garus. I know you have reservations, but the histories are clear on what will happen if we don’t intervene.”

A voice erupted from the back of the longhouse, “I will lead the expedition!” Garus could see his stepbrother, Varlan, working his way to the firepit to stand before the elders, he tossed Garus a sneer as he approached. “If Garus will not lead than I am ready to step forward, just as I was the day our father died protecting us all. Garus is not fit to be Chief, nor is he fit to lead this expedition! He has not even passed his trials so even the ancestors doubt his worthiness!”

Several members of the tribe jumped to their feet. A cacophony of yells erupted throughout the longhouse. Cries both in agreement and against could be heard within the room. Garus looked about while simultaneously shrinking down in his chair, his eyes darting back and forth, the room threatening to close in on him.

From somewhere behind him Khereg stepped forth swinging a staff hard against the rocks that made up the firepit, the crack of the hard wood on the stone causing all sound to cease. “Enough! Are we children? Garus is our chief - the decision is his!” Khereg’s voice, no doubt augmented by magic, reverberated throughout the enclosure.

Khereg’s words shocked him into action and Garus stood, he could feel all eyes upon him. “Some of what Varlan has said is true. I have not been tested. I have no magic and yes, I have doubts about the urgency of this mission, but the elder’s voices ring true. I will lead an expedition to the north and Fenter will lead the tribe while I am away.”

There were a few murmurs and nods of approval from throughout the chamber at the last, Fenter was a wise choice and had the perfect temperament for leadership plus he was no threat to Garus. He could be trusted no matter the outcome. This was something that he and Khereg had discussed on their way back from the beach. Fenter stood and bowed his head. “I will serve.”

“I will take a crew of seven with me. Khereg, Lys, Mysik, Zynder, Quilam, Galen and Varlan, prepare yourselves for the journey.” Garus noted the shock in the eyes of his stepbrother as he was added to the list. “We will leave in two days. Between now and then I will meet with each of the elders to gain their further counsel. Tomorrow evening, we will commence the ritual to imbue me with the Sorcerer’s Stone so that I may fix the Bastion. Is there other business that we need to discuss this evening?” Silence. “Then let us go from this house in peace, until called again. For the benefit of the tribe.”

“For the benefit of the tribe!” Echoed all in attendance.

The room quickly began to empty as his people left and returned to their own dwellings.

Khereg clasped Garus' shoulder. "That went well," he grumbled under his breath so that only Garus could hear. "I thought Varlan would have a heart-attack when you announced he'd be joining us."

"'Keep your enemies closest' – isn't that the what the elders always tell us? He is too dangerous to be left here. The ancients know what harm he could cause while we are gone. I'm not enthused about leading this endeavor, but I am even less enthused with the thought of leaving him behind – there might not be a tribe to return to. Do you remember how he pushed to go to war after the last incursion? He had almost half the island in agreement." Garus shook his head as he remembered the events of the previous summer.

"What about the others you named? Mysik and Quilam I understand, they are both skilled warriors and sailors but the others..."

"Zynder's skill with healing is unsurpassed, she will be a great addition and Galen is an expert tracker and forager."

"Those choices make sense but what of Lys? She doesn't seem like a logical choice – she is neither a warrior, sailor nor healer." Khereg looked at Garus quizzically.

"Lys was recommended to me by Harmin; besides, she is entertaining. If I am to be on the road for a long trek her antics will keep us amused. Harmin claims that she will be key to our mission."

"What does Harmin know? I don't see much for those of the architecture persuasion to be useful in this mission."

Garus thought back to his brief meeting with Harmin, the architect, earlier that morning. He was the least approachable of the elders and it was certainly strange to see him come walking

up while he was talking with Quilam the day before. Admittedly the entire exchange had left him dumbfounded.

*“A word, my Chief?” he had asked and then not waiting for an answer grabbed Garus gently by the elbow and led him away. “I am sure Quilam can find you again later.” They walked away leaving Quilam behind, a troubled look on his face at being dismissed so casually. “I know you are still weighing the decision to lead the expedition to fix the Bastion. I would like you to take Lys with you.”*

*“Lys, why?” Garus had asked.*

*“You will need her. Give me your word that she will be included.”*

*“I will think on it.”*

*“Good enough,” Harmin winked at Garus and then wandered away, likely back to his own home.*

Garus woke with the sun, eager to start the day's events. The feelings of doubt that had plagued him now felt far away after the conclusion of the council meeting the night before. The fact that a decision had been rendered seem to calm his fears and the voices of doubt that often clouded his mind. A few moments of uncluttered thoughts would be welcome.

His hut sat on the outskirts of the village. It was small and unassuming; many argued that it did not befit his station. Upon taking the mantle of chief he had been urged to move into the hut that had once belonged to his parents at the center of town. He couldn't bring himself to displace his mother, despite her insistence that he take over the dwelling, but more so because he could feel his father's presence, judging him for his failures every time he stepped inside.



His home was sparsely furnished consisting of a small bed, a table and two chairs. Several shelves held his meager possessions; spare clothes, a few trinkets, and items from his childhood. Many of the tribe spent long hours crafting items to enhance their lives; one look at Garus's home showed that he had not felt the need.

He readied for the meetings with each of the elders by breaking his fast with a small meal of porridge cooked over the small hearth at the center of the room. A central chimney caught most of the smoke as it circled up and out of the building. Garus stared at the fire and smoke, becoming temporarily lost in the shapes formed by the flames.

A knock at the door snapped him from his reverie.

"Come," he yelled towards the door as he swept his dark black hair away from his face tying it back with a strip of leather.

The door faced the east and as it opened the rising sun obscured the shape at the door. The shape stepped forward, just into the doorway, the shadows revealing a face that Garus had not expected this early in the morning.

"Elder Baerst, please, come in. I had not expected to see you until later this morning and had intended on coming to you." Garus gathered the remnants of the morning meal from his small table and set the bowl and utensils aside and swept the chair out so that Baerst could take a seat at the table. "Please have a seat – though if you prefer, we could have our discussion elsewhere."

"Let's do that. Come outside and into the light. I would talk maps and the voyage with you, eh."

Baerst was easily the most ancient of all the elders, yet she moved with a grace belying her age. Across her back she carried leather tubes filled with maps, far more than the couple that

she usually carried - he judged that she had at least six or seven. She wore long leather skirts and her steel-gray hair was tied back from her face. She turned quickly back out his front door and walked to a small tropical spruce nearby and settled among its cast-off needles. She began fumbling with a tube pulling forth a map. Garus dropped to his knees beside her and helped her to unroll the rather large map.

“My apprentice and I have spent the last few days making copies of the maps you will need for your journey. The first, here, shows the route for your journey. It is fairly straight forward. As long as you sail northwest, you’ll reach the northern continent. That’s the easy part, eh?” She cackled to herself, enjoying her little joke before continuing, “The hard part is arriving at a location that does you any good.”

Garus pondered the map in front of him. His knowledge of the northern continent was very basic, it was the land of the *A’Haaole* and a place the Kantu had spent generations trying to avoid.

“Nairius will discuss what we know about what has changed up north. They fight endlessly over land and resources and so it is more than likely that the lines that mark the borders on the map aren’t worth the ink I used to copy them. What is important is the coastlines and other geographical features I have depicted here. Honestly, there is a good chance that the cities on this map still stand as they are often tied to those same features,” she paused and looked Garus in the face, her green eyes catching his, “Are you following?” Without waiting for an answer, she continued, “These are all important things but not so important as this,” she reached over her shoulder pulling forth another tube.

Garus reached forward to assist her, but she quickly snatched the tube away from his reach. “Don’t be too eager, young chief. You are about to see the enormity of the task before

you. I know some of my fellow elders have made this seem like a simple thing, but they are mistaken.” She began unrolling the new map.

Garus bent over to study the new map once Baerst had it unrolled and noticed right away that it was meant to overlay on the previous one, small holes were cut in the papyrus and lined up with various points on the underlying map.

“These are the locations of the eight Keystones that ring the continent, here in the center is the Access Stone and the two Anchor stones. I’m sure you recognize the one here in our village, the other is, or rather was, tended by others of our tribe. Based on what we know we are sure that one has failed. We have no way of knowing how many of the others are compromised. You could spend years traversing the continent to fix the others. The Access stone is the key; from there you can get a sense of which ones are damaged.”

Following his discussion with Baerst, Garus spent time in turn with Tel, the Artist, Zennon, the Healer and Malek, the Blacksmith. All three discussions offered little insight for the journey ahead, although Garus did appreciate their words of encouragement. He now traveled across the expanse of the village to the home of Harmin, the Architect, offering waves and salutations to villagers along the way. He loved his home, the village, while small, represented the heart of his culture. It was situated on a plateau at the center of the island and completely ringed by the tropical forest that surrounded it. For the most part, the buildings which made up the center of the small city were one-story structures made of natural materials, mostly wood but also mud and stone. The largest of the structures was the longhouse and most of the others represented homes of various sizes and a few communal structures such as the market.

Arriving at his hut, Garus marveled at the work Harmin had put in to make the place unique amongst the other dwellings in the village. His home was two stories, in fact other than the watchtower on the far side of the island and the Temple of the Ancients it was the only multi-story building on the island. Garus paused before the door to the building, apprehensive for the conversation ahead. Harmin was, at his best, difficult to connect with on any level, at his worst he could be downright infuriating. Garus thought back to his conversation the previous day where he all but insisted the Lys accompany the expedition. Garus hoped for insight as to his reasoning but deep down expected none.

He reached up to knock on the door and before he could do so was met with a loud “Enter!”

Garus pushed the door inward and was instantly caught off guard by the brightness inside Harmin’s home. He looked up and noticed that there were skylights built into the structure and mirrors, a rarity in the village, were situated to reflect the light throughout the room.

“I need a lot of light to work. Sunlight is best don’t you think? Flickering torchlight gives me headaches,” Harmin said as he strode into the room, noticing Garus’ attention on the skylights overhead. He wore robes rather than the leather kilts favored by most of the other Kantu; between that and the fact that he wore his jet-black hair short made him different in appearance as much as his mannerisms did. He pointed to a chair and motioned Garus to have a seat.

“Elder Harmin, I wish to speak to you about the expedition --” Garus started, settling into the chair.

“Not much to offer there, I’m afraid,” he interrupted. “Have you considered my request to take Lys?” Harmin continued to bustle about the room as he talked, not making eye contact.

“She was informed this morning that she will be sailing with us. She seemed surprised. I was under the impression that you had talked with her before recommending she travel with us.”

“Oh, no, no. I have not talked with her in many weeks. She just seems cut out for this type of mission.” Harmin leafed through some books on a worktable across the room, his attention more on the items in front of him than on Garus.

“How so?” Garus asked.

Harmin seemed lost in thought. Garus could see him frowning at the book in front of him as he waited on an answer.

“What? Oh. Who?”

“Lys. Why did you say that she seemed cut out for this kind of mission?”

“She is a thinker. Besides the ancients told me that she should go.” Harmin said, turning back toward Garus with a smile on his face.

Garus looked askance at the elder. “The ancients?”

“Oh...yes. We commune from time to time. You know I was nearly your age when I underwent my trial. Many thought me strange...many still do. Maybe that is why the ancients still speak to me.”

Garus knew that everyone who had undergone their trials claimed to have a vision from the ancients, some even claimed to have talked with them, but only during the trials and never after. Most Kantu had their trials when they reached puberty, confirmed by a visit from by one of the ancients in the form of a spirit animal, the same animal that they would adopt as their own and would herald the nature of their magic. When he was younger, Garus yearned to see the signs and would travel throughout the island hoping to catch sight of his spirit. After years of

searching, he began to wonder if he was one of the *Shi'hael*, those that would never touch magic. After his father was killed, he quit wondering and silently accepted his fate.

Harmin winked. "Time to be on your way. No doubt Nairius and Lemnus are waiting impatiently to take up the rest of your day." With that Harmin turned and began tinkering with a model bridge on his workbench, peering back and forth between it and the book he was looking at earlier, clearly expecting Garus to see himself out. Garus rose and wandered out the door.

As he made his way through the village en route to the dwelling of Nairius, Garus couldn't help feeling buoyed by his discussion with Harmin. The man had said little, yet somehow Garus felt better about his own predicament with regard to his magic. There was still hope that he might see the spirit that would beckon the trials. He found himself stealing glances to the tree line as he walked the path through the center of the village. The sun was high in the sky and a cool breeze was blowing across the island, causing the scattered pine and tropical spruce trees within the village to sway. It was a beautiful day and things were coming together.

"Garus!" A voice called out. Garus looked over his shoulder and spotted Khereg jogging his way, the large man almost colliding with two younger girls in his haste to catch up with him. The girls shot him a look, frowning after him as he passed.

"I'm on my way to see Nairius," Garus remarked, noting that Khereg, despite his run, showed no effects of his quick jog.

"That's why I am here to catch you. He and Lemnus are together, and they have asked to speak with all of us, together. They are down by the docks."

"Have the others been told?"

“They are already there, waiting for us. No doubt getting an earful from Nairius - he loves a captive audience. They are probably knee deep in a history of the year-to-year exports of Arcadia.” He smiled, clearly amused with his joke as they both turned and began heading in the direction of the docks. “By the way, how did your talk with Harmin go?”

“If you’re asking whether he provided any insights for the journey ahead, then no, it wasn’t helpful at all. Every time I talk to him it’s like he knows something but doesn’t want to flat out say it. Frustrating, for sure. He said the ancients told him that we should take Lys. Not sure if I believe it but I can’t see any harm in her coming along.”

The path that led to the docks on the east side of the island wound its way through a stretch of the tropical forest before spilling out to a short strand of beach that ended in a rocky outcropping. This side of the island was much deeper than the west side and allowed for moderate sized ships to dock. The tribe had a small fishing fleet, mostly oared vessels with only a few of the ships sporting a single mainmast. They would be using the largest of those ships for their journey, their crew of eight and associated supplies maxing out the available space on board.

As Garus and Khereg neared the docks they caught sight of the two elders and the rest of their crew arranged around a small fire built on the beach about a hundred yards from the docks. The two men were standing on one side of the fire, appearing to be lecturing the others who sat facing them.

“Your assumption was right, my friend. Looks like school is in session.”

“Garus, Khereg, please sit. We are discussing what we know about the Bastion, and the caretakers.” Nairius said as they sat amongst the others.

“Caretakers? I thought we were the caretakers,” Quilam asked. He was the oldest of the expedition, despite only being a few years older than Garus. He was a warrior and a sailor by trade, probably the most skilled in the entire tribe, his face was weathered by the sea and his red-brown skin a shade darker than most of the others darkened by his time on the water.

“We are the architects and builders of the Bastion and are responsible for the Sorcerer’s Stone and the two Anchor Stones, but care of the Keystones and Access Stone were given over to a religious order of monks known as the Brotherhood of Estlan. Upon arriving on the continent your first task should be to find them, assuming they still exist. The records say that each Keystone was housed within the confines of their monasteries. Remember though that what we know is more than a thousand years old.” Nairius said, slipping into the tone of one used to giving lectures on various topics.

“Okay, I’m a bit confused. Why can’t they fix whatever’s wrong?” Lys asked in a tiny voice, as if surprised by her own question. Many of the Kantu embodied the mannerisms of the spirit animal they adopted after their trials, Lys was no exception, she was as tentative as the fawn that adorned her arm.

“Their role was only to protect the stones. It requires magic to both access the system and to repair any damage that has been done - magic that the Bastion prevents. It was believed that if they were left with the capability to turn off the Bastion that it would be only a matter of time before someone used that power to their own advantage, hence the creation of the Sorcerer’s Stone and its care residing with us.”

“How does it work?” Garus asked.



“It allows for the use of magic within 100 feet of its holder. The holder must consciously control that access. It also allows the holder to interact with the Access Stone and to a lesser degree the Keystones themselves.” Lemnus interjected.

“It sounds powerful in the wrong hands. What is to stop someone from taking it and doing what they want with it?” Galen asked. Garus liked Galen, after Khereg, Galen was probably his closest friend. He was endlessly inquisitive and rarely missed the details that escaped others. Galen’s spirit animal was the lynx and it showed in his demeanor.

“The stone isn’t a talisman that you carry with you. It is an artifact that is imbued within you. You, Garus, will essentially become the stone. That is the ceremony that we will perform tonight.”

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Joe Abercrombie is the bestselling author of numerous fantasy series and is highly regarded for his worldbuilding and the grittiness of his characters and plots. *The Blade Itself* is the first installment in Abercrombie's *First Law Trilogy* which also spawned two related trilogies. Abercrombie is particularly masterful in the way that he incorporates political intrigue, at both the micro and macro levels, and his works can serve as a primer on how to integrate those elements into a fantasy novel.

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Vandermeer's book explores methods and provides tips and techniques for aspiring authors in speculative fiction. The book is illustrated and provides useful anecdotes from other prominent authors on various topics germane to the craft. One of his most useful chapters provides extensive guidelines and items to consider when worldbuilding including checklists for authors to guarantee that what they are writing carries a sense of believability. Vandermeer is a noted author in his own right and much of what he explores has been used in his own writing.