

Living Empires trilogy

Root Position

Chapter Two



Layman Kingsford

Living Empires Trilogy

ROOT POSITION

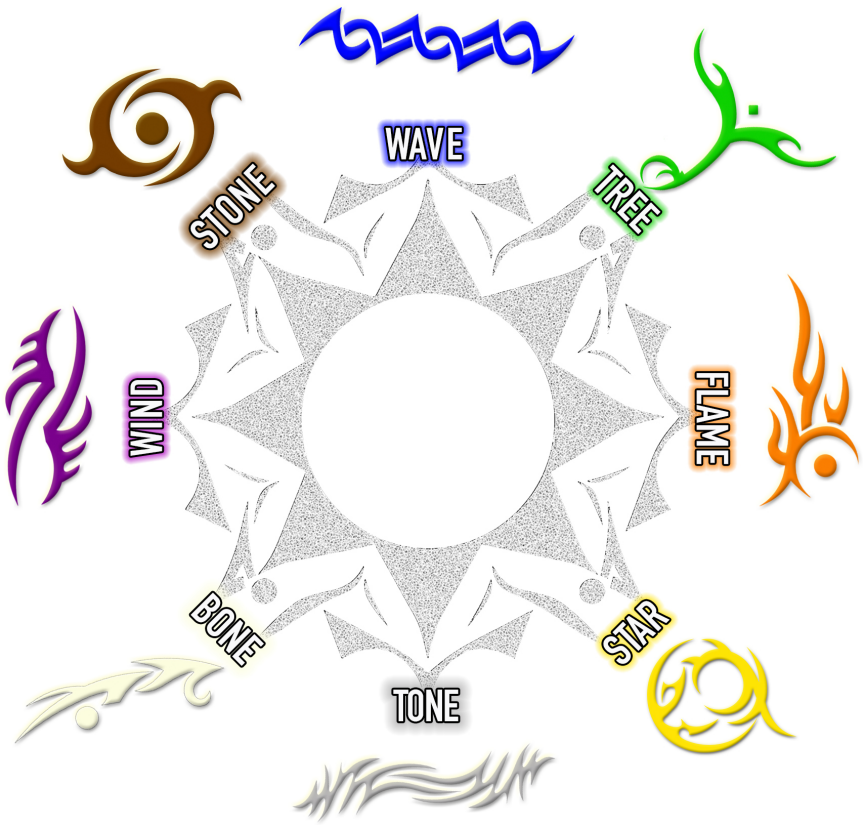
CHAPTER 2

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Pronoun Use

Within the world of Evorstrom's cultures there is no concept of gender. Therefore the author has chosen to use the following gender-neutral English (and newly-coined) pronouns throughout:

THEY • THEM • THEIR • YOU is always singular
THEYZ • THEMZ • THEIRZ • YOUZ is always plural

Persona Dramatis

Chinz'Aree Bohk

pronounced chinz•AH•ree BAH•h(u)k

The One True Saant

Flame & Tone Sign, human

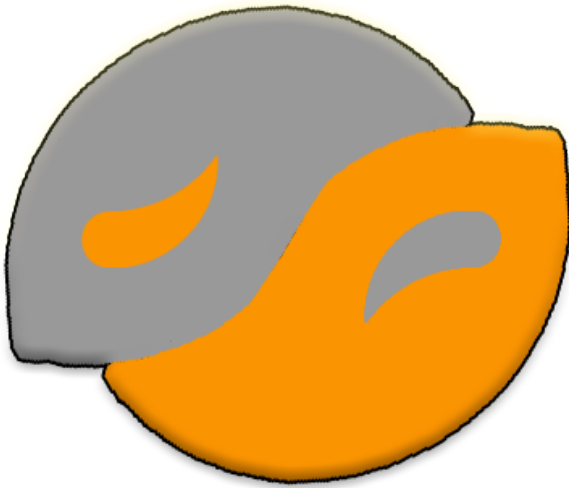
Itribyur

Milnoran Street Sweeper (commoner)

Flame Sign, ogre

Salvo Saant

Historically, the combination of **Flame** and **Tone** in a saant's *signMarks* has been a neutral one. No Salvo Saant has ever made much impression on the world aside from Nulaksee, a goblin from 750 years ago. Nulaksee earned the name “Eruptor” as their powers tended to congeal into bombastic explosions, a trend that kept them isolated from society at large. However, Nulaksee was a gifted musician whose compositions are still played to this day.



Symbol of a Salvo Saant

Chapter Two

Wherein We Meet a Commoner

I get asked from time to time why we allowed, some claim 'engineered', the differentiation between classes? Many of these social distinctions still endure within contemporary civilization no matter how far-flung it has become.

In regard to Old Evorstrom, I purport that it was something of a necessity. With magical power at the finger tips of every living person, frequently even emanating dangerously from the very flora and fauna, it would have been irresponsible to leave the administration of magic at the whim of culture alone.

Clearly people needed protection, not just from peers acting malignantly, but also from the turbulent and often overwhelming forces of nature's magic - the term I believe popular in those days was 'dragons'. Hence the noble class was fashioned. People who owned the land but were not shackled with the need to toil for daily sustenance. Theirz primary purpose was to physically protect society.

Then there was the clergy. Theirz job was to provide education and health, both mundane and magical, and to make sure all people were trained in the use powers and were taught to be respectful of each other by arming themz with knowledge and compassion. That is not to say this segment of the system did not get corrupted by other esoteric notions that, while certainly misguided, proved effective as a control mechanism.

Roigan Longolhm

excerpt from "Musings and Motifs"

THE LONG RANGE *toneWhistle* SUMMONS FROM THE CATHEDRAL BECAME PIERCINGLY INSISTENT. At least Chinz'Aree imagined it did as their thick-soled boots clacked loudly on the smooth *stoneCrafted* cobblestones of the street. Striding confidently down the boulevard they pulled up their vest's hood hiding their head of silver hair from casual scrutiny.

To further dissuade street folk from approaching out of devout fervor or a desire to be witnessed interacting with the most famous person in the world, Chinz'Aree steeped the tiniest amount of *toneEssence* in their own natural sense of irritation - an emotion, if truth be told, perpetually lingering just under the surface of their personality. They began to emanate a subliminal hum just bothersome enough to the senses to keep most unwitting people from bodily coming close.

While not overly busy, especially for this time of day, Chinz'Aree was relieved to avoid engagement with strangers as they continued down the street. It had cost enough social energy to withstand tea time with the Sitters and thank Divinity Merith had been in attendance. The experience would have been insufferable without the elf's calming presence.

Chinz'Aree took note of the loose dirt, gravel, post-winter dried leaves and even the occasional papery scrap of garbage strewn across the pedestrian walkway. That street sweeper sure was botching their job. If anyone from the clergy, especially anyone working for this district's Osja'Sodu, noticed the shoddy work the flameOgre would likely get shorted on their week's allotment of absolution.

Chinz'Aree briefly considered activating their own *flamePower* to burn away the mess. After all, part of a Saant's duty was to labor as a commoner, but they were not in the mood and didn't want to call attention to themselves. Perhaps it would be kinder to catch up to the street sweeper and tell

them to go back and do the job over again with more focus on doing the job correctly less time spent testing magic gizmos.

Steeping a touch more *toneEssense*, this time in a tiny mix of their body's endurance and a hint of their sense of hearing, Chinz'Areë snapped two fingers sending an inaudible *Sound* though the air in exact opposition to the wavelength of the magical summons coming from the cathedral. The *toneCall* was immediately negated leaving Chinz'Areë's ears with a dull cottony sensation. They pictured a functionary in some window inside the *toneChurch's* monumental cathedral across the city suddenly clutching ringing ears as their spell was snuffed out. Chinz'Areë couldn't help but grin.

Far more interesting in this moment was the idea of catching up to the street sweeper to get a better sense of whatever *Wind* device they possessed. The conversation with the Sitters of the Secret Flame had raised more questions about these new magical gadgets than Chinz'Areë had expected. Would they be as strong with magic other than *Tone* and *Flame*? Perhaps they might convince this street sweeper to let them have a crack at willing holy purple magic.

Increasing their pace, they kept their head pulled as far back into their hood as possible, eyes constantly darting about hoping not to see that look of sudden recognition come across a stranger's face. If the One True Saant got noticed walking around like a normal person a crowd would surely gather.

Up ahead, the orange ogre came into view. Their long arms waving wildly as the air around them gusted and swirled. Chinz'Areë held their breath and squinted to keep the settling grit and dust from causing irritation. They could steep a bit more *toneEssence* to create a bubble of vibration to keep the particles away, but the effort did not feel necessary.

Chinz'Aree reached up to tap the ogre on the shoulder. "Excuse me, friend. I would have a word with you."

They ogre, not overly tall but still looming head and shoulders over Chinz'Aree, whirled around on one wide hoof, their loose, plain leather vest and half-pants flapping. The only adornment they wore was a glittering metal amulet about the size of an acorn adhered to their forehead just where the base of two curled horns met. The amulet featured a frag of purple *windCrystal* and a smaller chip of green *treeCrystal*, the purple portion glowing visibly even in the bright spring sunshine.

The magical breeze ceased instantly as the ogre recognized who had spoken to them. "Uh... Most Holy.... I mean Revered Saant! I didn't see you... uh, behind me."

Chinz'Aree resisted the urge to roll their eyes. What a ludicrous statement. No one can seen behind themselves. Maybe this youngster was a simpleton. The ogre began to bow, but changed their mind and switched to bending down on one reverse-articulated knee, but gasped and changed their mind once more and tried to bow again.

Letting out a small sigh of exasperation, Chinz'Aree held up one hand while quickly looking around to see if theyz were attracting attention. No one seemed to be paying themz any mind. "Please, friend. Don't bow or make a fuss. I just want to have a quiet conversation. A brief one, if I'm being honest."

The ogre's huge head darted from side to side, probably also wondering if theyz had been noticed. Likely for very different reasons, though.

"Uh... but of course. Anything you... uh, might want or need. I am nothing but your humble servant.'

"I don't know where you were raised, but no one is my servant. Please, contain yourself and have a modicum of dignity. I'm just a person, like you."

The ogre touched the aanjlon amulet on their forehead with one thick finger. "I'm nothing like you. You're blessed by two of the Divine. I am a mere adherent to Rongzuu, our great Fire Master. I'm, uh... just uh... pushing a little air around with this crystal." Their elephantine hooves scuffed the rocky street like a child expecting chastisement.

Pointing to the sloppily stitched emblem of Milnor's Gutter Guild on the ogre's vest, Chinz'Aree said, "And here I was thinking you were at work, doing your job of keeping our magnificent city clean."

The ogre's pink eyes widened. "But, I am," they declared defiantly. "I'm just not using my own power. For the first time in my life I'm getting a taste of what it's like to be special. Like you. Not cursed like, well, never mind."

Curious as to what the rest of that statement would have been, Chinz'Aree chose instead to gesture grandly at the pedestrian walk behind them and the slowly settling detritus from the *Wind*-abused air. "I think, perhaps, you would be better at your job if you stuck to the power you were born with and not one never meant for you." Chinz'Aree was careful to speak in a low voice as the polished metal facades on so many of the buildings in this *Flame* section of the city made sound bounce easily from ear to ear, especially *tonePowered* ears.

The ogre had the decency to look chagrined. "I'm sorry if I'm a disappointment. You should report me."

Rolling their eyes for sure this time, Chinz'Aree let out another sigh. "That's not at all my intention here. I have no desire to see your weeks' portion of holy absolution affected at worship, my friend."

The relief in the ogre's weirdly pale eyes was obvious. "Oh thank you, Your Reverence. I guess I'm just giddy at having been gifted this trinket. The flyingFolkz seem really nice. Theyz are truly generous."

Chinz'Aree sniffed as dust went up their nose. "The aanjlons just gave it to you? Did you have to do anything for themz in return?"

The ogre shook their head. "No, nothing. I was just out walking to worship services at my neighborhood chapel when three of themz dropped down out of the sky and started handing these out."

"Were theyz all the same, like your amulet?"

"No, though it was all small jewelry pieces. All the trinkets I saw people receive were of every color except *Orange*. I was extra lucky the one I got has two crystals in it. Most of the others only had one."

"And theyz just handed themz out to people on the street? How many? And just to commoners?"

The ogre shrugged. "Maybe twelve commonFolkz got one. I'm not too sure if there were more. I was kind of overwhelmed at getting a gift. Especially something as rare as this. I don't think I've ever really gotten a present in my entire life."

That sounded like self-pitying exaggeration. People got gifts all the time from parents or lovers or from folkz who wanted something from you. The Churches even gave everyone a gift of their own *signCrystal* on their Dedication day as a youth. Chinz'Aree thought about asking them where they grew up, but decided they didn't really care enough to bother.

"How long did it take you to figure out how to manifest *Wind* powers? Surely you've had no training is such things."

The ogre grinned but their smile faded suddenly. "Um... I just, you know... sort of applied the same process I use for *Burning* things. So far I can only move a little bit of air around. Probably about the same amount of stuff I can do with fire, which isn't much. I'm not very talented."

Taking note of the ogre's thin stature, well, thin for an ogre at least, Chinz'Areë asked, "So you steeped your *essence* in muscle and you can just push air around. Easy as that?"

The ogre got that look again like they had something to say but didn't. The ogre simply nodded sheepishly.

"You wou~~n~~d't be lying to the Saant, would you?"

The ogre looked horrified at the prospect. "Never! I just, well... you wou~~n~~d't believe me."

"Believe what?"

The ogre shuffled their hooves again dropping their eyes to the walkway. "I sort of had a vision about it," they whispered.

Chinz'Areë actually spluttered. "You mean like a dream or do you mean like some sort of storybook prophecy?"

"The prophecy kind." The ogre's voice became so quiet Chinz'Areë nearly powered up their hearing to catch the next words over the general noise of cart traffic and conversation on the street. "I used to get themz all the time back home."

Now Chinz'Areë had to ask. "Where are you from that such rubbish is allowed?"

The ogre crossed their long arms, one three-fingered hand clenching a bicep tightly enough to make the orange flesh pale. "I grew up in an orphanage in Anridoor. We weren't allowed to go to church in my house, at least not regularly."

That explained a lot. The poor thing had likely been abandoned at birth for having parents with different *signMarks* than their own. Most orphanages were run by the Churches, but Itribyur's must have been run by some sort of cultish dissenter.

Struck with sudden empathy, Chinz'Areë reached out to put what they hoped was a comforting hand on the ogre's forearm. Finally taking the time to pay attention, the ogre didn't appear much older than 24 or 25 years. "I should apologize for accosting you so suddenly, my friend. I haven't even asked you your name."

A small amount of relief returned to the ogre's features, even the tusks jutting from their lower teeth seemed to relax a bit. "I'm Itribyur."

Chinz'Aree barged directly into a hard question. "Do you truly believe you had prophetic dreams? Surely you realize how ludicrous that is. No deity grants such power to us mere mortals."

Itribyur nervously looked about the street, this time perhaps wanting to make sure *no one* was watching. Or listening. "I know how crazy it sounds. How heretical. But I'm not either of those things. I'm as devoted to Rongzuu as any good *flameChild*. But all those dreams I used to have, every single one has come true."

"Like what?" Chinz'Aree failed to keep the skepticism from their voice.

Itribyur vigorously scrubbed their unkempt, light orange hair with all three fingernails of one hand and rubbed the tip of one curled ram horn with the other as their gaze examined the buildings up and down the boulevard. "Well, uh... meeting you here on the street is one."

"Ha! You dreamed about this very moment?"

Crossing their arms again, Itribyur shrugged. "Yes. Years and years ago. I was maybe 12 years old."

Quirking the corner of their mouth, Chinz'Aree tried not to laugh. "I suspect many a 12-year-old dreams of meeting the One True Saant. You're hardly special in that regard."

Itribyur's eyes widened. "No, no. Please don't misunderstand. I don't feel special at all. This is honestly the best day of my life. I recognized this street when I first got this job. I've been cleaning it and most of the neighborhood for three years now and have tried to be patient waiting for this to happen. We're destined to be important to each other. At least I think we are."

Chinz'Areë pressed their lips together. "You believe in *destiny*? Sounds more like you're just hedging bets on childish fantasies coming true."

Itribyur looked crestfallen. "I don't know what to say. I know I can't prove I had this dream or anything like that. I even dreamed that the ship I would take to get here to Milnor would be attacked at sea by a pink dragon. That happened too."

Now Chinz'Areë was convinced the young ogre was nothing but a deluded day dreamer. "You survived a dragon attack? At sea? On a travel barge?"

Itribyur nodded sheepishly. "Well, it wasn't a passenger barge. It was more of a mercenary frigate. But the dragon was bright pink and blue. It had *wavePowers* like I've never seen before. It looked rather like a shark but it breathed an icy pink mist from its mouth that put half the crew to sleep."

Mercenaries. Chinz'Areë was intrigued again. "I take it the mercs were well trained and there were at least a couple adepts on board."

The ogre nodded vigorously. "Not just adepts, there was an actual *starMaster* on the crew. They practically took that dragon down single-handedly by calling more lightning at once from the sky than I think I've seen in the rest of my life put together. The dragon was nothing but a smoldering stain on the waves after that!"

"What was the mercenary outfit? What was the name of the ship?"

Itribyur had to think for a moment before answering. "The ship was named something like *The Electric Revenge* or *The Electric Reprise*. The crew was mostly mostly *Star* and *Tone*."

Despite having more than a decade's experience secretly working with innumerable mercenary troupes, Chinz'Areë had not heard of that vessel. Though, to be fair, they had only been out to sea once in their life.

The steady clang of metal-heeled soldier boots came tromping into Chinz'Areë's hearing from way down the street. The specific pitch of the boots identified the incomers as Paladins from the Tone Cathedral. Chinz'Areë's free time was about at an end.

"Well, Itribyur. It seems that I will need to take my leave as duty is calling."

The young ogre slumped slightly. "Oh. I understand. I thank Your Reverence for taking the time to talk to me. I am truly honored and blessed to have had this dream come true."

Chinz'Areë awkwardly patted Itribyur on the arm once more. "You seem to be... happy here, my friend. If I were you I would keep to using your natural-born powers, at least to do your public work. There are forces at Church and in the government that don't approve of the impious powers the winged folk are tossing about."

Itribyur smiled. "Well, you have always had my vote for Emperoorii. Maybe you'll make it safe for us to use these gifts."

Chinz'Areë shook their head slowly. "Don't vote for me, friend. It'll do me no favors getting in that position. You should also keep your so-called prophecy dreams and notions of destiny to yourself. And your story of unholy pink sea monsters."

Itribyur appeared unable to respond to that.

The troop of Tone Paladins arrived sparing the ogre from further commentary.

Chinz'Areë gave a quick once over of the little grey goblin wearing a captain's insignia on their shining chain and plate surcoat. The officer was unknown to them.

Gesturing vaguely to the now not-so-bustling street, Chinz'Areë smiled placatingly. "Captain, I'm glad you're here. I was in need of official escort to the cathedral to keep the riff riff at bay. This young ogre was doing me the courtesy of

conversation and keeping my identity quiet, though it appears no one is paying us any heed still.”

The little goblin, no taller than Chinz’Aree’s sternum - not counting their antlers - carried themselves as if they towered as mightily as an ogre. A condescending air of authority dripped from their voice. “Revered Saant, it appears the call for your presence was missed. I am sure you have been thoroughly distracted by this... commoner. As we approached, I do believe I *Overheard* something about ‘pink monsters’ and ‘prophecy dreams’? Did my power misconstrue something or would the young ogre care to share something with me?”

Fear blazoned in Itribyur’s pale red eyes. Eyes some might call ‘unholy pink’ if they were being technical. Chinz’Aree immediately realized the full weight of the captain’s accusation and tried to subtly shake their head for the ogre to keep silent.

Itribyur dipped their head. “No, Captain. You *Heard* correct. I was telling some private things to Their Reverence. I shouldn’t have said anything. I apologize and humbly present myself to the Church for reprimand.”

Chinz’Aree groaned inwardly. This would not end well for the young ogre.

The goblin captain snapped for two of the other Paladins, one ogre and one elf, to shackle Itribyur with restraints the Paladins carried at their belts.

“Very good,” the captain said officiously. “We shall escort the Saant back to the Tone Cathedral where a vimeeree can hear your case and decide how best to proceed given your clearly heretical leanings.” The goblin peered intently at Itribyur’s eyes. They cleared their throat with a critical and disappointed timbre. “I am not in a position to say so, but it would appear you are not the most holy of people.”

Chinz’Aree *Heard* the captain mutter softly as the entourage proceeded down the street, “Yetch, pink.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Layman Kingsford grew up in New Mexico and now lives in Denver, Colorado. He has a BFA in music and creative writing but spent much of his adult life as a professional ballroom dancer. He has undertaken stints as a professional trombone player and still serves as hired host and emcee for public and private events.

He currently spends his time writing Living Saga stories while designing/publishing tabletop games - some of which are also related to Living Saga (*RANKaree*, *7 Sign Circle*, *Starship Crewpers*, and *Break Away Empire*)

