

Living Empires trilogy

Root Position

Chapter One



Layman Kingsford

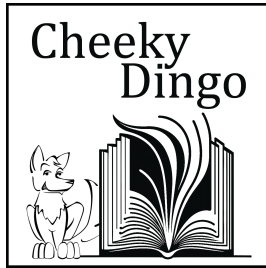


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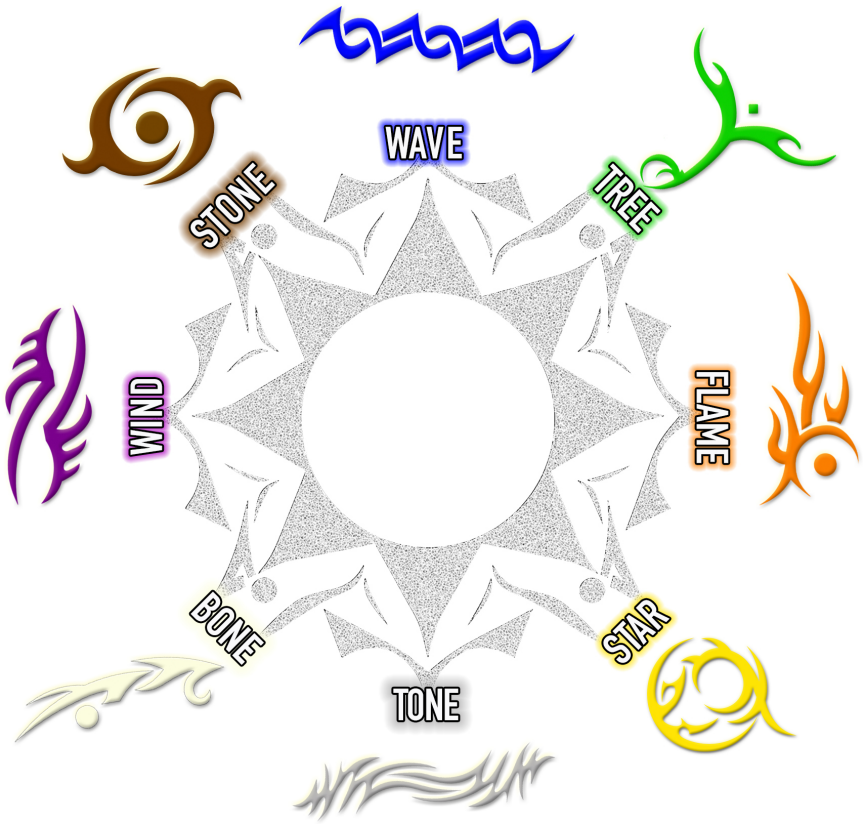
CHAPTER 1

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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 gender-neutral English pronouns throughout.

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

Persona Dramatis

Chinz'Areë Bohk

pronounced chinz•AH•ree BAH•h(u)k

The Salvo Saant, mercenary & wealthy socialite

Flame & Tone Sign, human

Viikawnt Leliinu

Milnoran Count (noble)

member of the Sitters of the Secret Flame

Flame Sign, troll

Beronet Merith

Milnoran socialite, minor noble

member of the Sitters of the Secret Flame

Flame Sign, elf

Laadee Gralaat

Milnoran socialite, married to an Ürl

member of the Sitters of the Secret Flame

Flame Sign, dwarf

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, who 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.



Chapter One

Wherein We Have Tea Spilt

There are people who believe the world is a living being, that it is sentient. Some of themz choose to see the poleCities, the two great metropolises on opposite sides of the planet, as the mouth and the mind of Evorstrom.

The two cities could not be more disparate. Anridoor, the East poleCity, is built in concentric rings plunging down into a yawning, bottomless crater in the earth. A perpetual breeze sighs - sometimes even screams - across the surrounding plains to be sucked into the chasm like an endless intake of breath. Winking, twinkling and wafting in that wind are tiny motes of light entirely ignorant of the rules of motion that should apply. Lastly, a churning cluster of millions of rattling bones swirls and hovers over the crevasse, a repository for the dead and the burial site of one monolithic petrified skeleton, an ancient winged reptile. Some say it was the first dragon.

Milnor, the West poleCity, is every bit as bright and cheerful as Anridoor is eerie and wan. At its center is a lone, rock-sided mountain of stunning height from whose summit grows a monolithic green tree. The cragged sides of the mountain are replete with smoking pits of open flame and heavy rivulets of crystalline water, the latter of which flows unceasingly into the city to fill canals and neighborhood grottos. The tableau inspires visiting bards and artists from every pocket of civilization to sing, paint, sculpt and poeticize.

Roigan Longholm

excerpt from "Musings and Motifs"



HOVERING OVER THE POLE CITY, AS IF POISED TO
AMBUSH CIVILIZATION, HUNG A CITADEL OF
IMMEASURABLE PROPORTIONS. Chinz'Aree
wondered how much more social shock, technological
change, biological revelation and religious disquiet could
emerge from that one structure.

“Reverend Chinz'Aree.” Laadee Gralaat spoke in a deep
baritone voice sounding like leaden silk. “Have you been able
to obtain one of those new crystal gadgets?”

“Ha!” Viikawnt Leliinu nearly spat out their tea. The
Viikawnt surreptitiously checked their bosom to make sure
none of the hot liquid had actually dribbled down their front
to stain the blouse's sheer fabric. “Those winged freaks have
yet to sell anything to us or to you clergy.”

Chinz'Aree shook their head. “Honestly, I've been paying
so little attention to all this I'm not even sure what all is
going on.” An untrue statement, for sure. However, if people
insisted on believing the One True Saant was an emotionally-
distant and surly individual, Chinz'Aree found it difficult to
present any other sort of public demeanor. At least not
without inflaming whispers and rumors.

Meanwhile, Beronet Merith had yet to stop clinking each
gem-laden ring on one hand against their porcelain teacup. “I
still think it's a precursor to invasion. First one of these
floating behemoths appeared over Anridoor and now one
here. These... *aanjlons*,” the word dripped with disdain, “are
nothing but an affront to life as Divinity intends it.”

“I agree,” the Viikawnt said in a far squeakier voice than
one might expect from such a buxom, heavy-horned and

wide-shouldered figure. “It’s almost enough to make me believe in demons. Theyz look like some malignant chemist went and boiled a troll and an elf together in a gravy pot then glued a couple bird wings on the soggy result.”

Chinz’Aree shook their head but stopped before anyone might notice. They leaned against the railing of the plush tea house’s highest balcony to take in the vista. Milnor, the heart of civilization for half the world, was a wondrous place brimming with every color of vegetation. A central mountain crackling with fires and sparkling waterfalls rose from its center while the surrounding city bustled with all shapes and colors of people. Now there were even new winged people, the aanjlons, though theyz had mostly kept to themzelves in their sky fortress for the last two months. Perhaps that was proving to be a blessing as elections were soon to be held and it seemed much of the population was pushing to vote Chinz’Aree as Empiroorii.

Chinz’Aree’s musings ended abruptly as they realized their three companions had stopped gossiping to stare at them. “What?”

“You never answered the question,” Laadee Gralaat stated. “Have you gotten your hands on any *niinyTech* goods? One would think if anyone other than a commoner would be able to, it would be the Saant.”

“No, I have not, Gralaat,” Chinz’Aree replied, not bothering to use the noble’s title despite it being a something of a social gaff.

“Do you think you will get one?”

Chinz’Aree continued to gaze out over the city, taking in the cool spring air and reveling in the multitude of sounds coming from the busy street below. “I don’t really plan to, no.”

“Mmm, I suppose you, of all people, have never wondered what it’s like to steep magic of a different *sign*.”

Chinz’Aree turned a quizzical look to the dwarf. “You mean you have?”

Laadee Gralaat shrugged while stroking their mustache. Ample bosom threatened to spill out the top of their gossamer vest. Chinz’Aree wondered why these lazy nobles bothered to put clothes on at all. Maybe it was for the best as none of themz bothered to carry armaments around town like a proper defender of the realm. Not that much in the city needing defending.

Viikawnt Leliinu delicately stomped one hoof on the hardwood deck. “I’m not afraid to admit it. I would love to be able to conjure a cool breeze on a hot day like a *windAdept* or heal a cut like a *boneSculptor*.”

Chinz’Aree scoffed aloud. “When was the last time you got a cut, Leliinu, unless it was from a cheese knife?” The thick troll probably hadn’t even touched their spear in years. They’d likely spent more time at the dinner table than in the arena.

Beronet Merith clucked softly. “Truud.”

“What was that, my dear?” hissed Leliinu, whipping their head to hurl a narrow-eyed glare at the bejeweled elf.

Merith hinted at a smile. “The Saant’s statement. True, but rude. Truud.”

“You can’t can’t gad about making up words, Merith.”

“Sure I can.” The elf leaned gracefully against the railing to survey the splendor of Milnor with their teacup held delicately between two long fingers. “We’re nobility. We can do whatever we want.”

“That’s not true at all,” the dwarf retorted, hotly. “It’s rude to believe that. Even more so to say it aloud.”

Eager to join the banter but completely missing the underlying tension, Leliinu piped, “Are you calling our dear Merith, ‘truud’?”

“That’s not how the word is used,” Merith said right as Chinz’Aree silently thought the exact same thing.

“Bah! No matter,” the dwarf spluttered. “I agree with Leliinu. I stayed in school longer than any of youz and I say you can’t make up words.”

Wisely, Baronet Merith chose silence as a response to the laadee’s declaration. The baronet’s merit suddenly rose a tad in Chinz’Aree’s estimation. The elf might look like a simpering, pampered, layabout without a cogent thought in their head, but Chinz’Aree had learned long ago not to judge a flower by its color. Just because *flameRoses* had orange stems and petals did not meet their bloom would match.

Chinz’Aree shifted closer to the elf baronet to lean both forearms against the railing, nearly touching forearms. Chinz’Aree was tall, for a human, but their shoulder still only came to the middle of Merith’s bicep. The two did share an almost identical bright orange skin tone, though Chinz’Aree’s silver hair made for a lovely contrast whereas Merith’s hair blended seamlessly as it was the same shade as their flesh. A most holy combination on the elf. A noticeably standout detail on Chinz’Aree.

“Ah. Will you look at that, Your Reverence,” Baronet Merith said pointing a long finger at an orange ogre down on the street. “That street sweeper isn’t using a broom or *fire*. They must be using a niinyTool to blow winter’s detritus out of the gutters.”

Sure enough, the *flameOgre* was gesticulating awkwardly with their massive, three-fingered hands stabbing pointed fingers now and again in the direction of the cobbled street’s

side gutters. Dust, twigs and dry leaves blew into the air to whirl about uncontrollably. Other pedestrians coughed and waved hands in irritation as their peaceful afternoon stroll was interrupted by the menial worker's inelegant efforts.

"I thought the street cleaners in this part of the city went round and softly burned the gunk away," Chinz'Are'e mused.

Merith nodded making their dangling crystalline earrings tinkle softly with the motion. "I know, they usually do. Commoners may not be potent with their *powers*, but at least theyz have learned to use theirz small allotment of *essence* to effective use."

It was Chinz'Are'e's turn to nod. Had that street sweeper been using innate *flameMagic*, they likely would be quietly smoldering the gutter junk away with nary a whiff of smoke. If they had any real talent or experience, that is. It was hard to say from this distance, but the ogre seemed young given the delight exhibited in their skipping gait as they blithely *windBlasted* stuff into the air letting it settle back on the street where someone else would have to come along and clean it up.

Baronet Merith took another delicate sip. "I think it's distasteful and is likely to bring the wroth of the Sky-Changer down on their little apostate head for using *windPower*." A soft chuckle followed as they took another look at the street sweeper. "Well, maybe *big* apostate head. Ogres don't have small anything."

Chinz'Are'e didn't disagree, though when was the last time anyone actually witnessed the displeasure of a deity in person? The street sweeper would probably never suffer divine displeasure. The only repercussion they might receive would be a smaller portion of food for the day's shoddy labor.

Merith turned a pleading look toward Chinz'Areë. "Please tell me you won't give in to this wild fad. It's bad enough the commonFolkz are aping your Saantly dual nature. The last thing we need is to have you stooping to theirz level and openly using magic outside your own *flame* and *toneMarks*."

Chinz'Areë sniffed. "I have enough trouble with the clergy as it is. I'm not about to start giving the Reverends of every faith more ammunition to chastise me with. Theyz already try to bend me to theirz petty whims. Imagine what it would be like if I started *steeping* every *sign*?"

Gralaat's deep voice interjected, "Do you think you'd be just as powerful with another *signEssence*?"

Chinz'Areë nearly startled having forgotten there were two other people on the balcony. Something about Merith's calm demeanor and gentle aura transfixed them; made them feel as if the world had shrunk down to quietly blanket the two of themz together. Alone.

Turning to face the dwarf, Chinz'Areë attempted not to look aggravated at the interruption. "I have no idea. Maybe. Wielding sound, fire and frigidity all comes easy enough to me." They did not share how difficult it was to maintain the mental damns required to regulate oceans-full of magic and keep it from bursting forth into the world. If Chinz'Areë ever lost control again, they might wreck the whole city killing more than just their family and a handful of neighbors.

Anger flashed unbidden to the surface. They suddenly had the desire to *flashBurn* the dwarf for making them relive horrific memories; fury, even, at having been reminded how tender life was and how tragic the power of a Saant could become. Every voice, footfall, hoof clatter on cobblestone, cart rattle and under-breath hum of melody from the street below could be weaponized to paste the dwarf's ruptured

carcass against the tea house wall if amplified by even a finger snap of Chinz'Are'e's *tonePower*.

Their ire must have been obvious as Baronet Merith put a calming hand on Chinz'Are'e's shoulder. "I can feel your essence *heating* up, Reverend. The day is far too pleasant to stoop to *steeping* anything other than more tea. It appears I am fresh out and could use a refill." They presented an empty teacup as evidence.

Merith gracefully hooked Chinz'Are'e's elbow as if to dance off the balcony and whisked themz back into the muffled and overstuffed sitting room inside. The other two shuffled along after.

It sounded forced, but Merith maintained a convivial tone as they ushered Chinz'Are'e back to the plush settee and circle of four chairs the group had occupied earlier. "Just imagine if regular people began thinking theyz could magic like a Saant. The world would tumble into chaos."

Merith picked up a heavy tea pot decorated with an overly busy floral pattern. The staff must have refilled it with water while theyz had been out on the balcony. Merith cupped the pot in both hands, their long fingers starting to glow with soft orange light. The results of Merith's *flamePower* came several breaths later as steam rose from the spout. Not everyone had the skill to so rapidly alter temperature. Though, to be fair, it was only a small container of water. Chinz'Are'e could have done the same thing to an entire lake if so inclined.

Chinz'Are'e crossed their legs, focused on slow calm breaths and waited for everyone to settle as Merith dropped a pouch of tea leaves into the pot to steep.

Laadee Gralaat plucked an orange grape from a platter next to the tea pot. While not naturally in season yet, this tea

house was known to employ a couple of skilled *treeGrowers* to tend the gardens and provide fresh fruit year-round.

Copying the dwarf, Leliinu took a handful of *flameGrapes* and dropped themz into their lap before yanking one off the stem to pop it into their mouth revealing large canine teeth, vestigial goblinoid tusks if one were being technical about it. In stark contrast to the careful, meticulous and lithe movements of the elfin baronet there was nothing graceful about the troll viikawnt. Chinz'Areë wondered how they measured up in others' eyes when compared to these three people; a short staid dwarf, a plump tittering troll and a tall statuesque elf.

Chinz'Areë discreetly glanced about the parlor. Heavy fabric wall hangings, thick carpet and lavishly upholstered furniture dampened noise in the room along with an outrageous number of pillows in every shape and size. The handful of other guests, almost all *flameMarked*, held hushed conversations of theirz own though many did a poor job of hiding attempts at getting a better view of the most holy Saant. The notoriety of their position brought far more attention than Chinz'Areë was comfortable receiving. That's why they spent most of their time training at home in the cathedral or out in the wilds hunting dragons. Social outings like this were rare, but Chinz'Areë undertook today's tea service in order to make use of the viikawnt's mercenary connections and to suss out how much momentum there might actually be among the nobility to elect Chinz as Empiroorii. So far, no one had brought that subject up.

"I think it would be fun to grow fruit and berries with my own magic," the viikawnt mumbled inelegantly around a mouthful of half-chewed grapes. "I really do think you should try acquiring an annjlon device, Chinz."

Baronet Merith prepared to pour the tea and gave the troll a sidelong glance of disapproval. “Leliinu, it has already been established that our most holy Saant would never disrespect the Divine by doing anything so crass.”

Viikawnt Leliinu shrugged, one side of their blouse drooped down to their elbow nearly exposing everything underneath. “I don’t see what the big problem is. All the underFolkz are getting themz. Just because we’re nobles doesn’t mean we should be barred from having niinyTech. Imagine how much better we would be at defending the realm if we weren’t limited to hunting with only our own powers?”

“When was the last time you last went hunting?” Merith asked pointedly before pouring the troll’s tea.

“Probably the last time Gralaat skipped a meal,” Chinz’Aree noted. Leliinu might secretly consort with mercenaries, but only to support their beloved spouse on dragon hunting trips. The viikawnt themself probably hadn’t been out of the city in years.

“I missed breakfast this morning,” Gralaat said with all seriousness, but subtly defensive at having been accused of gluttony. Chinz’Aree only now realized the attempt at humorous deflection had been misinterpreted by the dwarf.

Merith sniffed lightly. Even that mannerism seemed elegant coming from the elf. Chinz’Aree watched attentively as Merith finished filling everyone’s cups.

“Perhaps my comment lacked accuracy,” Chinz’Aree admitted. “However, I will repeat that I have no desire to dabble in heretical powers. Lately, I’ve been starting to think the clergy are trying to prepare me to move against these winged invaders and their baffling flying city.” Hopefully the change of subject, though at risk of exposing Church secrets,

would be enough to get themz off the topic of niinyTech and maybe onto the election.

Leliinu gasped nearly choking on a grape. “You mean, like you’ll have to attack themz?”

Merith’s dark amber eyes looked shocked. “Surely theyz have made no hostile overtures, have theyz?” The elf carefully returned the tea pot to the platter never taking their gaze off Chinz’Aree.

“No, no, no. Nothing like that.” Chinz’Aree casually waved one hand in the air. “At least I hope not. Lately I’ve been politely coerced into daily training with the paladin corps. There’s got to be some reason for that.”

Gralaat grunted. “The Churches can’t make you fight the invaders. You’re the Saant.”

Chinz’Aree nodded. “True. My position is technically above every authority, religious or worldly, but I am expected to serve at the whims of the Divine like all clergy, defend the realm like the nobility and utilize my talents for servitude like commoners. My time is never truly my own.”

Merith’s expression fell, or maybe saddened a bit. Or maybe it was Chinz’Aree’s imagination. “Even today? Is this precious time with us no more than scheduled duty for you?” The elf’s hands were clasped tightly in their lap.

Why they suddenly felt the need to explain themself, Chinz’Aree didn’t know. “No. Of course not. I can always do what I want. I’m not a slave.” They should have added something about valuing this time with themz, but that definitely felt too personal. And maybe not true. Or maybe too true? Chinz’Aree waited to see if Merith would unclasp their hands.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Merith said, softly. Perhaps the remark was whispered but it was clearly audible to Chinz’Aree’s ears.

A focused and silent-to-others bell tone wafted in through the open balcony doors from far across the city. The frequency and pitch of that secret sound crafted only for the Saant's *toneSense*.

Chinz’Aree sighed. “I am sorry to say my second cup of tea will have to wait for another time.”

“It won’t be your second then,” Gralaat pointed out. “It’ll be your first but on a different day.

Chinz’Aree forced a smile as they stood. “I am being summoned back to the cathedral. I guess it turns out I’m more duty-bound than free on this day. I bid youz all a good afternoon and I thank youz for yourz company.”

The three nobles bowed their heads in respect as the world’s one true Saant left the room. Chinz’Aree let out a long sigh of relief as they took the five flights of stairs down to the street. Not one of their compatriots had brought up the election. Perhaps the mystery of the winged aanjlons and theirz new magicTech would be enough to draw focus away from electing Chinz as the head of both Church, State and Populace.

The last thing Chinz’Aree *heard* as they exited the tea house was Baronet Merith whispering, “I wish you safe journeys and gentle sleep.” Had the elf guessed Chinz’Aree was still *listening*?

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 (2009 US Champion). He has undertaken stints as a professional trombone player and also as Brock N. Alnite, a drag performer and cofounder of Haus Alnite.

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*)

