



♫ *A Tale of Crescendo* ♫



*A New World*

*Created by Bill Kurzenberger*





# A Tale of Crescendo



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# A Tale of Crescendo



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## CHAPTER ONE

### The Arrival

#### Year One

Eons ago as humankind evolved on the earth, a seafaring tribe of sixty men, women and children sailed the southern sea in search of a new homeland. Catching sight of an unknown landmass, the tribe's chief and captain steered the wooden ship towards its southern shore near the mouth of a mighty river.

Arriving in this uncertain world amid blustery climate, the iron and timber hull of *The Minuet* runs into underwater rock formations and sinks where the river meets the sea. The crew swims to the shorelines; of the sixty souls onboard, only forty are known to have survived. The captain, Arch **R'Nesto**, went down with the ship and drowned along with twenty of the tribe, including their elders and an infant who were unable to swim to land nearby.

Half of the survivors swim to the western shore, while the others paddle to the east. Tending to the injured, they mourn their kin who drowned in the shipwreck. From the banks of the river, they call and wave to each other but are unable to clearly see or hear across. Lost to the sea are all of their elders, along with all historic writings and first-hand knowledge of their previous home. After searching along the shores, the newborn child and its mother have not been rescued. On either side of the point where the river enters the sea lie twin trees in slow natural decay, along with rocks of various sizes and a single cardinal on a branch above.

While mourning at the river mouth, tribespeople spot a few belongings washed ashore from ship. After helping a sodden child who had swallowed water, the tribe's medicine woman comes across the galley kit containing basic fire-making tools, cutlery, herbs and spices along with the captain's log. On the western shore, R'Nesto's son **Aedan** locates his father's small cache of iron daggers between a pair of seaside rocks.

The castaways are now separated by a wide, impassable river which they come to call the Shendoa

River. Depending on which shore they had swum to, the branched tribe soon forms new social hierarchies with kin on their side. Dwelling within isolated caves and shrubs near shore the newcomers have only their apparel, their natural surroundings, fishing and hunting tools to ensure the remnant tribe survives this untamed land and its changing environment.

Tentative to travel at night, their first year is spent well beyond view of the river or the southern sea just a day's pace from their inception point. Separately settling on both sides while natural inhabitants distantly observe them under a divided sky, their tribe is now split into two with new leadership.

West of the river the title of Arch is handed down to Aedan - only child of departed R'Nesto and Arila - who soon takes **Ivera** as his bride-to-be. The neighboring tribe to the east nominates Arch **Dilian**, whose twin sister was lost to the sea with The Minuet along with their parents, the captain's advisors. Mourning his deceased family garbed in black and wearing a cloth fashioned over one hand, Dilian speaks fewer words than his fellow tribe and is often the first to depart the gathered circle after sunset. As the seasons pass, their healer softly guides them with the assistance of a sagacious tracker, and Dilian is seen less and less.

Atop a tall tree upriver, a native avian murmurs along to the sound of the flowing waters below.



World's oldest depiction of a stern-mounted steering rudded boat, circa 1420 B.C. - Theban Necropolis Tomb 69 (Wikimedia Commons)

## Year Two

Beginning life anew in this world absent the tribe's fallen fore-bearers, its occupants have experienced one full rotation of the earth around the solar globe which illuminates their lands. Following an inclement winter; tempestuous springtime; dry, torrid summer; and autumn of mild discontent; they can now approximate the seasons to come. From its most southernmost point, the land's newest occupants are guided and enchanted by the lunar and solar spheres which pursue each other from one side of the sky to the other.

During the sailors' voyage, the brightly-lit orbs had sporadically chased each other in a cosmic dance through hazy days and starry nights while R'Nesto's course varied accordingly. Now as they collect shards of wood and rock to roughly scratch upon, the two tribes approximate the cycles of the lunar and solar spheres to mark the end of their first year here.

As they celebrated the winter solstice along with her husband's annual day of birth, Ivera had drawn a vertical line on a small rock using another. After she drew nine more lines in as many days Aedan announces to the tribe that they had survived their first earth cycle, with no deaths within the tribe since their vessel had arrived and sank one year ago. Utilizing a larger sheet of rock slate on one side of the river and flat balsam wood on the other, the two tribes begin counting the days and nights anew in the forms of vertical lines scrawled onto their first calendars.

Unable to communicate with those on the other side of the river and shunning the waters, the two tribes soon flee their arrival point where the Shendoa River empties into the sea. Before setting their sights inland, they express gratitude for their elders and their sunken vessel. Remaining at Minuet Point as the twin trees have withered during winter are multicolored pebbles surrounding one tall stump, and a lit branch atop the other left by a solitary easterner.

Seasons change while the segregated tribes begin exploring the previously uninhabited and undiscovered country, finding shelter as the river advances amid a cold rain. The eastern tribe huddles under the first suitable tree while preparing fish over a small campfire and quizzing Dilian on how they should proceed. Meanwhile, Arch Aedan leads his tribe towards an isolated cave along their journey north by northwest. His budding hunters pursue critters for the tribe under the wolf moon, before preparing the carcasses over a flint-fed flame. Presenting their trophies to Aedan, he divides the meal among the tribe providing first for his kin with a second portion for Ivera.

As the warming weather provides, the two tribes venture further northwest and northeast respectively. Picking tropical fruits and fishing in a small tributary on one side and hunting for small creatures with rocks and their daggers on the other, sufficient food is provided for both tribes. Given the circumstances they form new traditions varying from their past principles, naturally and necessarily with the changing

seasons and environment. Nearing an array of limestone caves to the north and slippery slopes to their west, a huntress locates a rock bluff shelter which Aedan deems suited for the west side tribe to congregate from the developing rainstorm.

East of the river fresh fruit and wood-fired fish are provided for the tribe within the forest, as their plucky pickers and fishermen & women avoid small reptiles near their feet. Locating bountiful woods with foothills leading to a patch of mountains beyond, they settle between its two largest trees. A hushed raven observes them from atop a cypress overseeing the river, but does not answer when they call.

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*Raven In Pine Tree by Laura Iverson*

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Nethermore

At the base of the broadest redwood to the east, Dilian discovers a natural crack in the semi-hollowed wood which can only accommodate a few of his tribe, preferring instead to dwell under the nearest arbor. The other east-enders settle under the fruit-bearing trees between it and the big cypress towards the river, paying no mind to the rain-showers that feed the woods. Establishing appropriate home bases where they can retrieve fresh water and either fish, garden or hunt for food depending on choice, the segregated tribes begin to explore the previously uninhabited and undiscovered country.

In expeditions on both sides the Crescendants follow the Shendoa River north, as it is too wide and its current too strong to swim across. Out of respect for their elders lost at sea, both tribes have forbidden shipbuilding. Behind them lies the sea and the river mouth at Minuet Point, where the twin tree stumps are now accompanied by constructed rock totems to gratefully honor their dead and the vessel that brought them here.

With Aedan's tribe facing cliffs and caverns beyond them, and the east side tribe wary of the canyons beyond their new tree-town neither group can safely explore much further inland. As new flowers bloom under the moon taking their name, both tribes strain for sounds of the distant river while unaware of each other's progress over time.

After days of foot travel curving back towards the Shendoa upriver, the two bands of wayfarers reach peninsulas within sight of either side and their tribes just inland. For the first time, the two groups are able to visually communicate. While the raging river is too loud to hear across, they create a system of hand and arm motions to signal each other at the point on clear days. They come to call this discovered signaling span Lepe Point, then congregate there to mark the changing of seasons and compare their primitive calendars which are not quite in sync with the other.

Nearing summer both tribes mark their territory around their newfound shelters, roughly a kilometer inland from the signaling peninsulas. Staking his tribe's claim to lands on the west end of the river, Arch Aedan declares their home within the rock cavern to be named Wescenda. In the neighboring village in the wood, the east-siders naturally begin to construct platforms in climbable trees. Agreeing by consensus not to disturb the live arbors whose leaves whisper in the wind, they mindfully build along the tree trunks using stilts and branches that have recently fallen to the ground.

On the solstice, the two chiefs Aedan and Dilian meet at the established point of contact for the first time since their tribes' arrival here. By way of visual signals, they acknowledge each others' claim as Arch with the river betwixt. They each agree to send three of their most skilled pathfinders further

north along the great river in the hopes of reaching a connecting point between their lands of We'scend and E'scend. Wearing a glove over his injured hand, Dilian quickly retreats from the riverbed in fear of the waters which took his family.

Entering their second wintertime on Crescendo, the first newborns are joyfully welcomed to this new world. The twins - a boy and a girl - were born within the colossal redwood in the treetown now named Escenda to the tribe's medicine woman **Mila**, who was without spouse.



*40-year-old redwood tree by Dev Ahuja*

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### Year Three

After a year of hiking up the banks of the Shendoa River, fishing and camping along the way, the pathfinders on either side have reached an impasse. There is no junction to cross the river, and north of them lie a formidable mountain range which they come to call the Nethermores. They ascend deliberately into the mountains on both sides, making new paths as they go. As the trios slowly climb in altitude, they encounter snow which none from either tribe have ever seen before.

While the eastern trio attempts to cross a treacherous pass between the mountains, one of the tribesmen loses his footing and starts sliding downward. Another in their group quickly reaches to grab his arm and also slips on the icy hill. Losing their grips, they both slide downward and tumble off into a large precipice. The sole survivor of the three **Sho-lin** rushes to their aid and he too soon slides on the slippery ice, gripping a pine which saves him from certain death. Devastated, alone and unable to retrieve his two companions nor venture further into the mountains, he begins the long trip south towards home.

On the other side of the Shendoa River which runs from the northern peaks, the westerners cautiously ascend the Nethermore Mountains while making a switch-back path, as the eldest leads their path. On the way up they hear distant howls and notice animal prints in the snow, far larger than their own and the caribou they hunted for food along the way.

Halfway through the mountain pass, the pathfinders come upon a waterfall and arctic lake which feed the Shendoa River as well as their water satchels. Above the waterfall they cross the stream by way of the mountain spring which is its source at Crescendo's northernmost point. Just on the other side of the warm stream lies a snowy cavern in the mountainside, beyond which they can glimpse E'scend in the distance on the other side.

As the Wescendant trio lights their torches to illuminate the cave before entering it a towering, ferocious creature clambers from the cavernous crepuscule. Resembling a large polar bear, the beast swipes at one of the tribesmen amputating his leg. While his brother rushes to his aid, the tribeswoman lunges at it with the torch, burning its brawny paw.

Roaring, the baerre clamps and drags the fatally injured pathfinder into the cave. As his companions start into it to retrieve him, they hear a deafening roar not of one beast, but of several in unison.

As the surviving tribesman and tribeswoman grudgingly retreat, they find no alternative route into E'scend as the arctic lake is too deep and wide to swim across, with impassable slopes on all other sides. Defeated, they begin their long return journey to Wescenda.

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## Year Four

The two western pathfinders and solo eastern tracker trudge towards familiar ground. Along the way to Wescenda, the duo **Q'isann** and **Lyla** elope and consummate their relationship while huddling together for warmth under the wolf moon. On the other side, the surviving Sho-lin descends from the mountain pass and later encounters a recent rockslide blocking his return to Escenda. Alone and desperate without his fallen friends, Sho-lin makes his way down an untraveled animal path through the wood following a snow-covered hare and a butterfly, eventually locating his tribe after momentarily losing **track of time**.

Returning to their home villages after nearly two years, the pathfinders share with their tribes the results of their treks and their companions' demises in the treacherous mountains. While the easterner Sho-lin cannot recall part of his trip, he delivers his account to Arch Dilian and the tribe's healer Mila, along with a leafy herb he had found in a natural garden.

Within Wescenda village, Q'isann relays the news of his brother's demise to Arch Aedan who has expanded his family's designated area within the cavern. Though glad to see the pair of pathfinders returned safely, Ivera mostly blames her mate for sending their tribesman to his grisly doom. At the same time there is cause for celebration as the eloped pathfinders have returned with their newborn infant Q'yn, born in the wilderness during their year-long journey home. On both sides of the river, Arches Aedan and Dilian decree that no one from their tribes shall enter the Nethermore Mountains again.

Around the same time, a separate duo of trackers ventured along the beach of the Sythirin Sea on a scenic enterprise east along the shoreline. The following season the pair were found lain in a jungle next to a stout, burly tribesman with olive skin, all deceased. Their search party assumed their two kin and the unidentified tribesman from the west had encountered and slain the other.

As the would-be rescuers' returned to Escenda and reported the disturbing news, Dilian, Mila and wise Sho-lin dissuaded the tribe from attacking the Wescendants to avenge their assassinated kin. Inevitably there was no conclusive explanation or resolution to the issue, as the eastern tribe and its leaders could not come to consensus on how to proceed.



*Nether Mount – tallest peak in the Nethermore Mountains*

# CHAPTER THREE

## The West and The East

### Year Five

Restless, Arch Aedan still seeks answers about the beast that killed their tribesman in the mountains while his wife does not speak with him. Hoping to warn the easterners and to exchange information about the treks to the Nethermore, he makes his way alone to the only place to visually communicate across the Shendoa. However there is no one at its east bank, where the waypoint has been abandoned.

Determined, Aedan camps along the river's west bank at Lepe Point, making a fire to signal the other side. Slumbering under the stars and new moon he is stirred by a ghost wind and an ariose voice emanating from the stilled river, melodious like a bird. Yet he sees no avians and no one at the other side.

In his riverbed, Aedan is awakened at sunrise by the same dulcet sound. Through the morning dew and fog, he barely peruses a vague figure. As the haze clears, on the river's other side he spots a feminine persona cloaked in white robes. He calls out to them, however the only response is an alluring chorale by an unseen flock of seagulls, enticing him to cross over.

With the Shendoa unusually calm, Aedan wades into its narrowest point and swims earnestly across. Halfway to the other side its current suddenly surges upstream, creating one giant wave which overwhelms him and takes him along with the river. For what seems like a day he is helplessly carried downstream, using driftwood to barely keep afloat. As he swallows water and nearly drowns, he loses consciousness and hears a siren's call drifting and dreaming down the river. Deprived of air, he imagines himself under her care under a large tree.

When Aedan fails to return to his village, the pathfinder Q'isann – now his trusted second-in-command – organizes a search party with Lyla to scour along the river. The following day, they find their Arch barely alive on the western riverbed towards the sea. While they return him to Wescenda for medical care, Aedan mumbles unintelligibly while clinging to life. Before falling into a coma, his only comprehensible words are “dark magick.”

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## Year Eleven

As they commemorate their first decade in this new world, the western cave-dwelling and eastern tree-faring tribes have established modest Iron Age civilizations and cultures on both side of the mighty Shendoa segregating them. As time has passed with minimal communication between, the branched tribes have been forced to adopt new traditions into their principles to survive their various harsh environments.

On the river's We'scend, their cave-dwelling warriors have been hardened by the murder of their pathfinder by the beast from the north. They hone their swordry and hunting skills while preparing to someday battle the abominable baerre. Their capital Wescenda, a cavernous village of trade, is built inside a natural network of caves with the Arch's royal fortress at its center. With only torches to light the gloomy cavern, the shade of the western tribe's complexion has gradually paled without melanin from natural sunlight.

Long awakened from his coma after being incapacitated in the sick bay for nine months, Aedan and Ivera reconciled and soon started a family. They now have three children, starting with a girl **Juna** born to a nearby birdsong. The following year her brother arrived, and another the next, already vying to someday succeed their father as Arch. Just to the north Q'yn, the hunters' child, is free-spirited and strong-willed spending much of her time with her parents in the forest hills where she was born.

On the other side of the river the Escendants persevere in their arbor village, building as they go to protect them from predatory mammals nearby. While they can defend themselves with bows and arrows they continue relying on fresh fish and crustaceans, farmed vegetable gardens, and tropical tree-borne fruits for food rather than hunting. As their skin naturally tans under the bright sunlight they congregate under arbors with the most foliage, applying juice and oil from fallen coconuts as lotion for their skin.

However all is not well in Escenda, as the reclusive Arch Dilian has not been seen for several seasons. Amongst the tribe there are whispers that he succumbed to a hidden injury, or has embarked in search of a natural cure to heal him. While the tribe gradually constructed a grassy mound meandering to the shape of a serpentine Shendoa tributary, the budding tree village became a leaderless commune showing signs of decay. Mila, the tribe's muse and medicine woman, has quietly been suggested as the next chief even as she mothers her eight-year-old twins.

One night, the Escenda villagers awaken to the sounds of screams and roars from the direction of the redwood. They discover that one or more pantheras had climbed into the tribeswoman's family home and shredded its contents. Mila and her twins are missing along with all signs of the pantheras, excepting a trail of paw prints leading into untamed canyons.

Sho-lin – the tribe’s surviving tracker from the Nethermore – sets out east in search of the mother and children, taking his young prodigy with him. However the seasons turn and as winter approaches, the trackers have not returned to the arbor village or settled areas.

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*Shenandoah River south fork, Virginia*



*The Great Serpent Mound, Peebles, Ohio*

## Year Thirteen

On the summer solstice in the shaken tree village, a chorale of ravens hearken the abrupt return of Dilian! Fully recovered during his two years in eastern mountains, the resilient chief returns with renewed vigor and an unexpected surprise. Traveling with him is his eight-year old son who was unknown by the tribe. The Arch introduces him as **Tilian** and shares his vision that one day his son and heir would rule the lands of both east and west of the Shendoa River as its future king.

In recent years the Escenda village had become aimless without its Arch, and interim leaders Mila and master Sho-lin. The peaceful easterners had been terrified of the panthera packs which now constantly encroach on their village from the canyons, and have never forgotten the kindred trackers presumably murdered by prowlers or western warriors. Arriving to deliver their salvation Arch Dilian promises to lead the frightened Escendants into a new era of strength and prosperity, and rescue their missing kin from the canyonlands.

Casting aside their communal traditions, the Arch instills in the tribe a warrior ethos. Now a resolute leader identified by a black glove on one hand, he pledges to defend them against predator tiges, baerres and wolves to the north, the lethal jungle towards the sea and territorial incursions from the west. As the villagers are overjoyed at the return of their chief, it goes unnoticed that the shape of his face and form have subtly changed in the years since they last lay sight of him.

Autumn arrives and Sho-lin's apprentice returns to Escenda with the missing twins, who are physically unharmed but traumatized and no longer speak. The prodigy **Pai-san** explains that he and the wise master tracked them to an otherwise empty panthera den in the eastern canyons, but without their mother. Sho-lin had continued searching in search of Mila, while sending Pai-san to return home with the children. As Arch Dilian takes the trembling twins **Zenn** and **Tai-cha** into his care they are now mute but can communicate non-verbally with each other, forming their own unique unspoken language over the years that follow.



*Canyonlands National Park, Utah*

## Year Twenty-Three

Another decade has passed, and it has been twenty-two years since the arrival of the Crescendants to the now-colonized lands. Over time both tribes have become militarized and aggressive, neither signaling nor feuding across the river. As the cave-dwelling warriors to the west have paled without natural sunlight, the eastern tribe has tanner complexions from the brightening sun while using coconut lotion and trees for shade. No longer resembling the tribespeople on the river's other side, trust and communication has withered. Distantly viewing the other's advancements in weaponry, both tribes have armed their trained warriors and fortified their lands in defense of a looming attack from the other side.

From a hidden compound on the outskirts of Escenda, the transformed Arch Dilian now rules with an iron fist while grooming his teenage son for future leadership. The tribes' attention turns to the first generation born on Crescendo approaching adulthood including Dilian's son and heir, and the telepathic twins who the Arch has raised as his own children. Now aged eighteen, Tilian is drawn westward to the river while resisting the pressure to follow in his father's footsteps as Arch-in-waiting and future would-be king.

Along the river's We'scend the twenty-year-old Q'yn lives with her pathfinder parents in a woodland hillside cranny – but not a filthy hole in the ground as one might expect. She often joins their expeditions, charting the unexplored reaches to the west. In its capital Wescenda, Aedan and Ivera's three offspring are now budding warriors of the age of seventeen, sixteen and fifteen pining to prove their qualities to their Archfather.

While the two brothers **Kaedan** and **Paedan** hone their warrior skills and compete for their father's favor, over the years their older sister Juna has formed a long-distanced friendship with Tilian from E'scend. On clear days they meet at Lepe Point, signaling across the river. As their tribes and Archfathers no longer communicate with each other, Juna and Tilian gradually rebuild the only bond between the two worlds.

Unbeknownst to them all, a mystic impetus gradually constitutes in the darkness and prepares to strike.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### *The First Crescendo*

#### Year Twenty-Four

As a year has passed Juna and Tilian continue to woo each other, only able to vaguely glimpse the other while visually signaling across the point. On its east side Tilian has built a small wooden catapult which he uses to launch satchels of cloth across to the west bank containing roses and ribbons for her hair, strawberries and tangerines, along with notes written on balsam wood to express his affection. At the western peninsula, eighteen-year-old Juna fashioned a slingshot to return the favor with sunflowers and prepared fish along with tender replies on the bark. Enamoured by each other's letters, the penpals notice that their tribes' written languages have deviated from the other over the two decades.

On the sunny solstice, Tilian spots a large shell-shaped driftwood washed ashore nearby. He contemplates using it and an oar-like stick to cross the river to finally meet Juna. However since their fateful arrival here, the Archfathers have forbidden ship-building and crossing the river. Using its few tributaries on either side for cleansing, fishing and fresh water the tribes dare not cross or swim in the Shendoa itself, lest they be swept out to sea with their elders by its mighty current.

Equally eager to meet Tilian face to face, Juna gestures to him at Lepe Point to cross the river using the driftwood shell. Torn by desire and his father's order, he sorrowfully declines and walks away from the shoreline after waving her goodbye.

Brokenhearted, Juna loudly calls out to Tilian in a wail. Subconsciously, she begins to imitate the ash gray and scarlet songbirds trilling outside their cavern home. Suddenly, Juna begins to sing!



*Rainbow River by Kel Verde*

For the first time the earth perceives the impassioned song of a human voice, and is momentarily in harmonic convergence. Resonating in the frequencies four three & two, the aria of the one mystically multiplies throughout the land. As all winged creatures join along, the chorale flows through the planet's atmosphere as an empathic wave.

Without being prompted, all of the children born on the continent over the past twenty years spontaneously sing in unison with Juna to conceive the first musical crescendo. Even the twins, who have not spoken in eleven years, suddenly sing along. The world momentarily stops on its axis, and time has no meaning as the resonation is broadcast through the solar system at the speed of sound.

The aria lasts for ten or twenty minutes, perhaps an hour during which the passage of time is temporarily non-linear. As their ears are awakened and eyes peer skyward, the effect on the Crescendant tribe is profound and their world is never the same thereafter.

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As the unprecedented hymn resounds through the land the harmonious wave ripples back to its operant at the convergence point. Juna is overwhelmed by the sudden aria she has conceived which was heard by all, and is stunned into silence. As the chorus of singing birds and children subsides to a quiet lull, the tribes are astonished having never heard a human song. Drawn to the source of this extraordinary sound the inland villagers on either side start to walk towards its origin at the river, which has receded during the resonation.

Back at Lepe Point, the two admirers try to comprehend what has occurred. Tilian was unable to sing and join the harmony, as the only native-born Crescendant who could not sing. As he groans to Juna, she is too startled to repeat her song. While the Shendoa has momentarily calmed, at this narrowest point it is now shallow enough to pass over in the driftwood shell.

As Juna reaches to him, Tilian crosses the dwindling river with ease. Finally, they meet after glimpsing and wooing each other from across it for years. As Tilian sets foot in We'scend and approaches her, Juna is suddenly shocked and aghast at the sight of him.

She recognizes that Tilian's face is that of her two younger brothers, Aedan's sons who unmistakably bear his and her grandpa R'Nesto's likeness. Juna cannot believe her eyes as she comes to understand that Tilian must be her brother as well, which cannot be. She shrieks and flees from him, while he cannot understand the cause for her sudden disdain. He follows after her as she pleads for him to leave her be.

As the first answering the crescendo's call to reach its origin point, Juna's brothers hear her cry and rush to her aid at the riverside. Paedan comforts his sister, while the older Kaedan confronts the swarthy

Tilian. As they begin to tussle they are both dumbfounded – they wear the same face! Although his skin is tanner than theirs, Tilian’s visage is nearly identical to Kaedan and his brother.

While the three young men aged nineteen, seventeen & sixteen gesture at each other quizzically, the villagers from both sides arrive at the shorelines. Arch Dilian emerges across the river with armed tribesmen, while Arch Aedan and Ivera arrive with the western tribe.

For the first time since their arrival over twenty years past, the tribes and its chiefs can clearly see and speak with each other while the diminished river lies still. As they view the Arches’ offspring standing together with their tribes on either side, they collectively gasp and fall silent.

Aedan approaches his sons and Dilian’s son and immediately recognizes his own heritage in the tanned Tilian, as do all summoned to attendance by the aria. As Aedan and Ivera have only three offspring together, and he was an only child there can be no other explanation for Tilian to bear his and R’Nesto’s likeness. Tilian is the son of Aedan, not the son of Dilian.

Speaking to Aedan for the first time, Tilian asks him if he is Aedan’s son and they are his brothers and sister. Aedan stares at him intently and hesitates before responding. “Yes.” Almost on cue, the villagers on either side reply nearly in unison. “Yes.”

“No-oooooooo!” snarls Arch Dilian in a primal scream from across the river. While the skies darken around them to the squawk of a descending raven, he glides across the receded river to retrieve his heir. Defending and stepping in front of his newfound son, Aedan confronts Dilian and they begin to skirmish. Following their Arches’ leads, the tribesmen begin to throw rocks at the opposing side in their first ever battle.

Attacking each other in fisticuffs, Aedan’s physical fighting prowess is somehow matched by slender Dilian’s slithery evasion. Despite being hammered by Aedan’s fists Dilian pounds him with an iron-crusted gauntlet, dazing him.

Dilian grabs Tilian and half-draws him to the shoreline as he protests. Aedan pursues them with his sons closely behind, while a hard rain proceeds to fall around them. At Lepe Point the Arches struggle to claim Tilian, grabbing his arms. In the scuffle, he gets away and they pause.

Peering at his foe, Aedan comes to a shocking realization. He loudly proclaims to all in attendance that this is not Arch Dilian standing before him, it is a charlatan! Confounded by these conflicting events, the villagers on both sides stop clashing to scrutinize Dilian.

As the downpour soon turns to a thundering storm, Dilian emerges on his side of the river during a

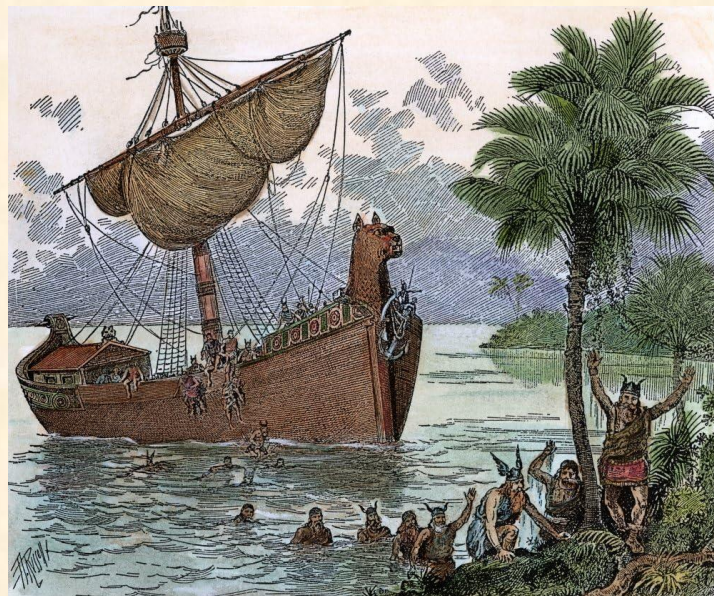
lightning flash while Tilian is nowhere to be seen. Furious, Aedan chases after the deceiver Dilian to the east. Using the driftwood shell beached on the riverbed, Aedan crosses the Shendoa towards E'scend to pursue the impostor.

Without warning, the river surges and roars from the north. Sudden raging waves rushing downstream overwhelm Aedan in the driftwood, sending him down the river uncontrollably towards the sea. Without thinking, his sons Kaedan and Paedan dive within in a valiant attempt to save him; however they too are quickly overcome by the waves.

As the three men desperately swim for the shore downstream towards Minuet Point, Arch Aedan has washed up on the opposite side. Kaedan has managed to paddle to the western shore; however his brother Paedan has been lost to the sea.

Kaedan and the royal guard rush to rescue their Arch from the other side in the driving thunderstorm, however the rising water level causes the Shendoa to be once again insurmountable. Aedan stands up on the E'scend shore for the first time, and is immediately captured by Dilian and his lieutenant who drag him off into the jungle.

Outraged as they clench their fists and avow vengeance, Kaedan and the Wescendant tribe rally all of their armed forces as they prepare to invade E'scend and liberate the Archfather. On both sides of the river the warriors steel themselves for battle, bellowing together to declare that this war between the tribes has begun.



*Landing of Leif Ericsson on Vinland CE 1000*

## CHAPTER FIVE

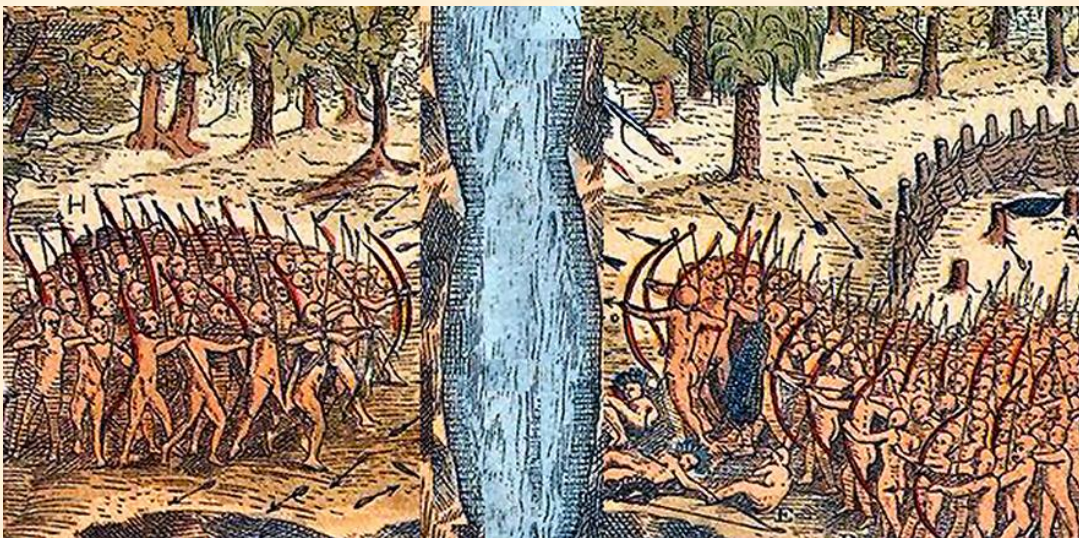
### The War Begins

#### Year Twenty-Five

It is a time of war. Nine months after the first crescendo and confrontation at the signaling point, the Wescendant and Escendant tribes continue bombarding the other's armed forces with losses on both sides of the river. The slingshot fashioned by Juna to volley care packages has been duplicated along the west bank and weaponized for hurling stones towards E'scend. In response, the catapult once built with good intent by Tilian is now used by Arch Dilian's cadre for fiery air attacks westward.

Inheriting the chieftain title of Arch of We'scend during his father's captivity, Kaedan has organized bands of his finest warriors to invade the Escenda capital and rescue his father, some overtly and others not. However following the battle at Lepe Point the river's water level has remained the highest in two decades, and is even more indomitable during the progressive storm.

During the dead of nights in an uninhabited area upriver, the western warriors have been stealthily building a rock bridge on which to cross the Shendoa. However as they reach the middle on the half-built catwalk they are fatally pierced by arrows from eastern archers hiding along the shore, preventing further incursions.



*The Beaver Wars and the Mourning Wars of the 1600s, Edited For Context*

Within the crimson woods to the east, the true architect of decades of dastardly mishaps oversees the war and begins to reveal themselves. Incarcerated within a rooted prison cell, Aedan has been tormented for nearly a year. A broken man, he has been visited only by three figures who physically and psychologically overwhelm his mind, body and soul with conflicting emotions.

Dilian appears dressed in black and offers orchard fruit, water and a libation made from the two as he attempts to reason with his opposing Arch. When Aedan requests to return home to Wescenda, the slender Dilian sarcastically replies that he already is home and leaves him be. Later, a stout dungeonmaster tortures him in stockades as Aedan curses at him. Occasionally in the dark he is cared for by a veiled mystic maiden, spurring his confused loins while offering wine mixed with eye of newt, absinthe, lead, and a hair plucked from Aedan's head.

On Dilian's birthday the summer solstice, he cheerily announces to Aedan that he will be permitted to return home to We'scend after one year. Wearing royal robes, a crocodile-skin chapeau and a Cheshire grin, Dilian presents a chalice and a smelly, salted herb to revive him in the dank cell. Before liberating his opponent, Dilian asks only one thing in return: that Aedan utter their name. Stumped and disoriented, his mind drifts to the past.

Through a mental fog, Aedan recollects his account to the Arch who has manipulated and gained his trust while offering freedom. When prompted he recalls his early encounter while estranged from Ivera with a cloaked seraph, beckoning him to cross the river with her siren's call. As his memory is stirred, he relives the first time he was swept downstream before being found by his tribe the following day.

At long last Aedan remembers the enigmatic enchantress, who cared for him for a day after he nearly drowned in the lilies. Sharing a pungent plant that eased him to sleep, he had hazily dreamt that the cloaked maiden philandered with him in the night. As the enchantment is lifted, he realizes that his firstborn was born as Aedan's child with the veiled temptress and speaks their son's name, "Tilian." Triumphant, his captor's robes drift to the ground and the pointed-hatted chameleon stands proudly bare before him. As the Arch metamorphoses before his captive eyes, he stares agape at the alluring female figure and now recognizes her.

She is the harpy who had twice lured him into the river and ensnared him. It was she who charmed him into a dream-like state and bore his first manchild without him knowing. Changing her appearance the pretender disguised as Dilian in his absence, assuming his identity to control the land. It was she whom he had sparred with at Lepe Point, not Dilian. Later masquerading as burly

dungeonmaster Fed`ryk, she had whipped him for hours until he stopped cursing her. This witchy woman was the same mountebank who nursed and aroused him with sour apple spirits sub-rosa during his year in bondage. Unbeknownst to both tribes it was an archess – not Arch Dilian – who had secretly orchestrated the tumultuous events throughout their lands.

The Archess is ecstatic and exultant as her true self is exposed to Aedan alone, along with long-hidden truths. Tapping his chin with the chalice, she repeats her taunting demand that he pronounce her given name. Although he now knows who she is, his weakened state of mind cannot recall her actual name after all these years. Cackling as she seductively redresses, she refuses to set Aedan free since he will not speak her name. She vows to keep him imprisoned in her subterranean stockade as long as he lives, while she rules the lands and obliterates R`Nesto`s bloodline and his tribe.

Caged within desolation row, Aedan is a dejected hostage of his own despair in the Archess` lair. He cannot reconcile nor declare what they had once called his peer while their voyage brought them here. In the depths of his fractured soul he identifies his tormentor, who has destroyed him and his family to avenge her own and take control of Crescendo. However he cannot remember her first name, nor even Ivera`s. Aedan is defeated, his distanced family and tribe decimated.



### Year Twenty-Six

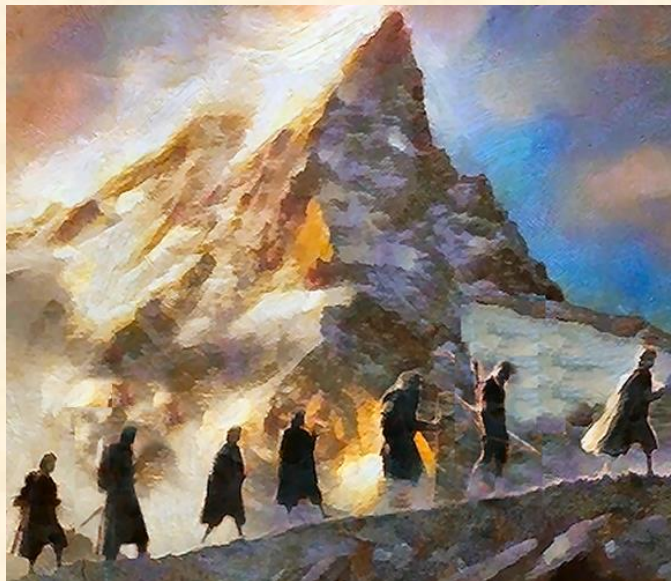
Two years after Juna`s spontaneous aria and the ensuing confrontation, the dreadful war continues while tribes are at a stalemate. Having improved the distance of their projectile attacks, neither side can approach the river amid aerial assaults from the other, and the fortified beachheads are now abandoned. Their platoons of warriors have been depleted with heavy losses on both sides, as the Wescendant tribe suffered greater casualties while attempting to enter E`scend to liberate Arch Aedan.

A world away to the north, a resolute troupe has been embarking on a secret crusade. After the western tribe's failed attempt to cross the river by way of the half-built rockbridge, Kaedan – now their Arch – has sent a guild of their seven most daring and skilled warriors on a covert mission to rescue his imprisoned father in the east.

Leading the quest is pathfinder Q'isann who was Aedan's second-in-command, along with his wife the huntress Lyla, and their adult daughter Q'yn who is their most skilled tracker. Joining them are four noble swordsmen who are distant kin of R'Nesto, steeled for any clash. Along their journey, the group is attacked by a feral pack of coyotes which they easily dispatch in self-defense. They are also harassed by a gigantic avian predator as large as any of them, repeatedly swooping upon them as they venture further north.

At the foothills of the northern mountains, the hiking group is besieged by a blizzard that storms and howls for a week, impeding their progress and chilling them to the bone. Before frostbite sets in, Q'yn quickly guides them into a small crevice constructed in the hillside like an igloo. As the seven ride out the storm, Lyla shares a secret and a smile with her daughter while cuddling and huddling with Q'isann for warmth, proud of her little eskimo who has saved the group from freezing to death.

As the hunter's moon signaled autumn, the team of seven reached the untamed Nethermore Mountains. The only Wescendants to have ever explored these perilous peaks and lived to tell about it, Lyla and Q'isann have prepared their companions of the dangers that await. Neither of them have ever forgotten the abominable baerre that killed his brother before their eyes twenty years past.



*Fellowship of the Ring by Decoraxis (edited for context)*

## CHAPTER SIX

### The Great Hall

Gawking up at Crescendo's tall turquoise peak Nether Mount, Q'isann takes pause as he recognizes the jagged path ahead. Recalling it had been his older kin who had led that trio's futile mission, the hunter avows revenge on his brother's bestial assassin. Carefully ascending up the mountainside, Q'isann leads the guild up the switchback path from their first expedition north.

Beneath the cold moon they revisit the arctic silver lake, waterfall and sparkling spring forming the Shendoa River to the south. Finally they reach the icy cavern leading directly into the highest mountain. This time, they are prepared. Two noble patrician swordsmen instigate and bait the baerre out of the cave using salted caribou meat.

As a hulking beast rumbles from the cavern towards them, Lyla the huntress recognizes its charred paw. She and Q'yn subdue it with netting from just above the cave opening while it thrashes at them. Q'isann and his partisans quickly attack it from all sides with their swords, axes and lit torches, slaying the brute and avenging his elder brother.

Approaching the mountain cave, a baerre pair from the same sloth clamber from within and assault the seven of them, smaller than the slain brute but still massive. The male swipes Q'isann with its claw and slashes him before the warriors bludgeon it to death. While Lyla tends to her injured husband, Q'yn and the avengers clash with the woolly ogres.

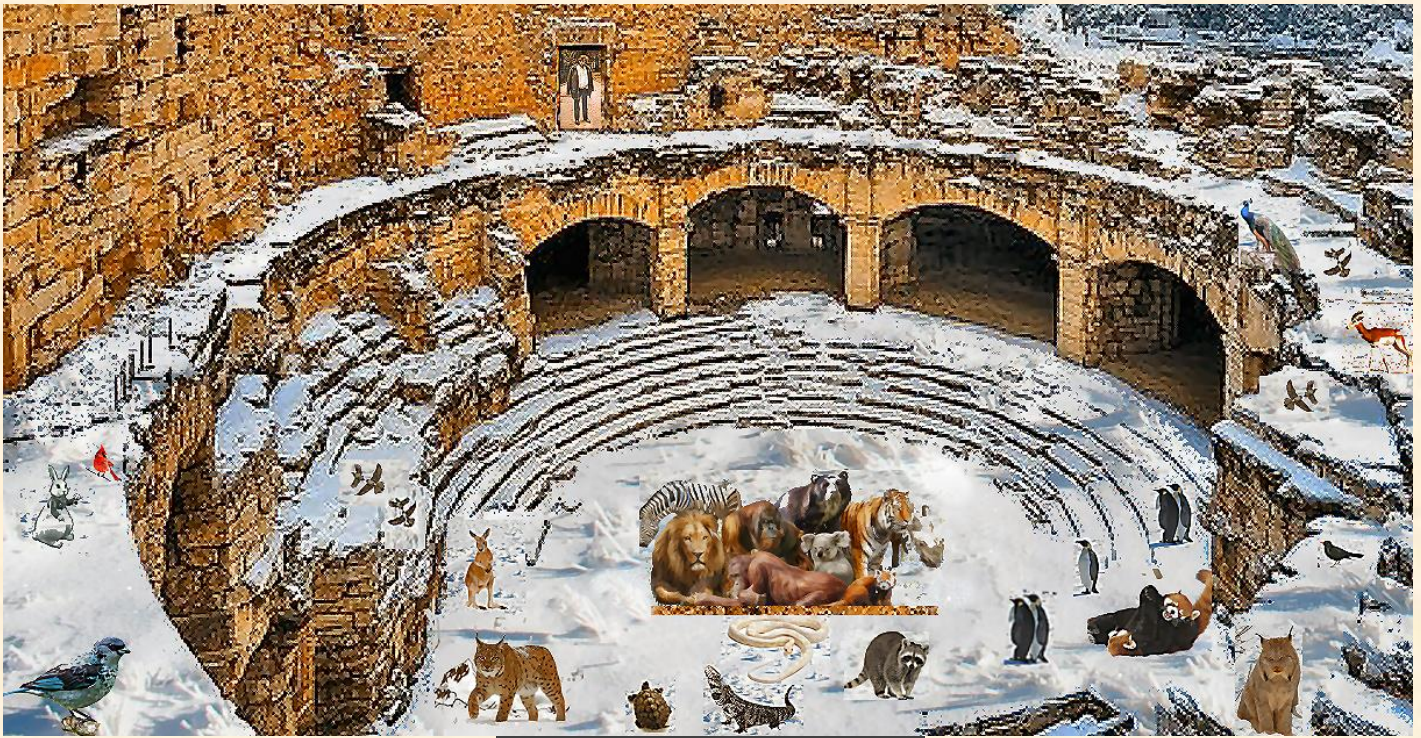
As they rush the encroaching creatures, the swordsmen are halted by a sudden sound. Behind them Q'yn's harmonic inflection rings out and with a jingle, she melodically implores to the female baerre to retreat. As it hesitates, she orders the swordsmen to lay down their arms and they comply. The group makes way for the ogress to pass the direction they came, soon followed by three fuzzy offspring they had been protecting within the cave.

Rushing to Q'isann's aid, they see that he has been critically injured. Although Lyla pleads to return her husband to Wescenda for medical care, it is a long journey home that he cannot withstand. Despite his severe gut wound, the noble hunter insists that for as long as he lives he will carry on his Arch's wishes and command. Downtrodden by Q'isann's demise, the champions are also impressed that Q'yn can sing as a soloist. Additionally as she matured in the wilderness during adolescence,

the hunters' daughter is learning to influence the creatures she encounters. They ask her how she is able to do so, however she and her mother do not speak of it.

Finally able to breach Nether Mount unabated the guild ventures inside and down a dim walkway lit by their torches, with Lyla and Q'yn assisting Q'isann to walk. Continuing on, the corridor opens up into a massive natural cathedral fifty meters high and several times that wide and long. To their amazement the splendid domed hall contains lush trees, vegetable gardens, and steamy waterpools. Dwelling within are an ebony bird, a tanager and falcons above; a wolfling and baerre cub scrapping freely; and a plethora of peculiar creatures resembling a bouscat hare, terrapin, racoon, antelop, zebra, kangera, penguin, tegu lizard, lynxes and nocturnal omnivores they cannot describe.

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*The Great Hall of Wynterlyn*

As the western warriors pass into the mountain hall apprehensively, their reactions resemble the butterflies around them. The feathered birds and furry beasts watch them intently, but are complacent and non-aggressive. From a raised platform above them, an acute voice rings out above them. Peering up at the dais, the group immediately recognizes the orator. It is Dilian in the flesh – not the conjuring impostor who dueled and captured Aedan – but the true Dilian, rightful Arch of E’scend.

“Welcome,” he nasally intones, his ivory hair and complexion resembling the snowy mountains. “I have been awaiting you.”

While Dilian makes their acquaintances Lyla interrupts him with a shout, as her husband has been maimed and is near death. Calling out to two others who join him on the dais, Dilian points them to pale Q’isann. As they provide sparkling water to drink from the Shendoa Spring, aloe plant leaves for his wound and an effluvious flower none of which they had ever seen, his injuries are slowly cured by his empathic assistants.

Directing him to mend in a warm whirlpool, Dilian offers the others to savor the plentiful surroundings. While offering them dinner served on a wooden table, the guild beseeches their host to explain himself. As he pauses to collect his thoughts, Dilian divulges his logic for disregarding his tribe and seeking solace in this zoo-like winter wonderland. As he treats the guild to their finest meal since leaving home, they are seated to dine in the hall named Wynterlyn and hear Dilian’s tale in poetic verse.

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In rooted cellars beneath a giant tree, the captive Aedan has lost himself in the passage of time having not seen the sun, the sky or the outside world for years. During the first year, the chameleon had tormented his mind, body and loins before shedding its skin and vanishing. Applying shades of blush and padded by layers of garments, the conjurer had altered its appearance to suit its sinister plans. However for the past year or perhaps two the dominatrix has not reappeared to him, and he has been in solitary confinement.

Broken, gaunt and sleeping for days on end, for a time he dreamt of his wife Ivera, daughter Juna, and sons Kaedan and Paedan as he desperately wished to reunite with them. With no knowledge of whether they are alive or dead, memories of Aedan’s family have faded as they no longer visit his infrequent dreams. Deeply regretting his forced estrangement from his spouse, he cries Ivera’s name until he is no longer able to. Enduring eternal seclusion, in time he forgets his own name. When he

awakens he occasionally finds fresh water and apples, left for him by an unseen benefactor.

After three-and-a-half years in the Archess' cell a radiant, beauteous belle materializes during the winter solstice and is now held prisoner with him. As she calls Aedan by name, he stands to face his cellmate and recognizes her as his first lover during their tribe's voyage to Crescendo. Appearing seraphic before him in ivory robes and long ebony hair, she beckons Aedan by name. Embracing beneath the trees under an arcane cold moon, the sweethearts are experiencing their first kiss whilst swiftly transported through time thirty years past to the starlit deck of The Minuet.

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As the stern-mounted ruddered boat carried the tribe's remnant band of sixty over the sea through a myriad of lunar and solar cycles, young Aedan and his rosette were engaged in their own primordial pursuit growing into adulthood. Endlessly tailing and pining after the other around the deck, they soundlessly hand-signaled each other when their mothers affably detached the two. After adolescence the incendiary dynamic dyad discovered each other under the stars in a furtive danse de l'amour on the ship's bow, worming for warmth under a brisk spring moon while their elders slept below...

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Back within the Archess's lair Aedan and his rosette are locked in embrace for days in their first Minuet sonata moondance, discovering l'amour together nearly three decades past. Appearing spritely to him as she once did, his ravenous paramour confesses that she has loved him all her life and nibbles his ear. Whispering to Aedan she reveals that the dyad of the two had been eternally pre-destined, and that they were always meant to be together. Starstruck and delusional, Aedan pledges to mate with her while slowly pronouncing her name.

*"Lily."*



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### The Flashback

*(Year 0 ~ Year 1)*

Commemorating their hundredth winter solstice on The Minuet, the voyaging tribe celebrated with seafood-stuffed paunches and much ado. During the festivities which also marked Aedan's twentieth year of birth, the unlikely lovers sought their parents' consent as Lily would turn the same age in six months. However as they had R'Nesto's trust and ear, Lily's parents forbade her from coupling with Aedan lest they lose favor with the Archfather, who viewed all this as a distraction.

Busily scouting ahead Arch R'Nesto sighted a flock of red and blue birds towards the sunrise signaling land, and bragged about conquering it to his three pages fishing for food for the tribe. Ten days later the ship reached the shores of Crescendo, ran aground and took its captain and their elders to watery graves within. Mourning the drowned, the divided tribes realized some of their missing kin had reached the river's other side but could not determine exactly who had survived the shipwreck.

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Swimming to shore as The Minuet ran aground and sank on arrival, Dilian's hand was bitten by a venomous king lizard hiding in the lily pads. Moaning his missing fingertip and the loss of his family, he shed no tears for Arch R'Nesto. While his mother had tended to his ailing sister below deck that morning, Dilian's father pleaded the Arch to turn the ship port or starboard. But arrogant R'Nesto insisted on entering at the raging rivermouth, and the captain crashed the damned ship causing their demise.

Cursing R'Nesto as the ship's mast sank below the sea with Dilian's family, he did not sense that they had survived. With the other half of the tribe too far away to communicate with, he howled until losing his voice as well. Consoled by the young medicine woman with bandages and an embrace, she bore the sad news that his twin sister and parents were not among the other eighteen survivors on their side of the river.

Nearing their first summer on this new world and his annual day of birth, Dilian set his sites on a smattering of snow-tipped peaks to rest and meditate peacefully. Under the new moon, he proposed to his muse and healer to join him on his adventure east. However Mila, now their medicine woman, reminded him that her doctoral skills and medicinal herbs were needed by their depleted tribe. Mila kissed his cheek and held his one good hand, which Dilian returned in kind while contemplating his path.

On his twentieth birthday Dilian approached the tribe wearing shaded spectacles shielding his eyes from the blinding solstitial sun, and a glove to hide his missing fingertip. Preparing to notify them of his decision to depart for eastern mountains where he may lay in, they announced their majority vote electing Dilian as Arch of their divided tribe. Knowing that the full tribe could not endure a mountainous trek, they settled instead under the largest trees within a fruit-bearing forest able to sustain the tribe.

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*(Year 3 ~ Year 4)*

Still nursing his wounded hand and confiding only with his two trusted advisors, Dilian lost the finger entirely. As the infection threatened his hand with gangrene, Mila's herbs and aloe leaves could not stop the spread. Later the tracker Sho-lin returned from the Nethermore alone minus his fallen pathfinders, and provided the medicine woman a piney flower. While it soothed the poison in Dilian's hand, the herb was too small in substance to heal him. Dilian and Mila prompted the sage to recount his journey home after his two companions had fallen within Nethermore.



*Joshua Tree National Park, California by Sean Russell*

With his return route cut off by a landslide and his companions lost to the mountains, Sho-lin forged a new path leaving Nether Mount behind. As he followed a bouscat hare into a fungal thicket, he was captivated by the singular charm of a butterfly. Hungering and slumbering in grass among blue morels, he tested their curious flavour. After he awakened he was unsure if a day had passed, or perhaps longer.

Drifting southeast he lay in a bath of crystallized sand which devoured him in brown mud. Vowing not to return to the sandpit, Sho-lin flattened a fallen papyrus stalk and dipped his finger in a puddle of porcupine ink. Using the ink and paper he inscribed about his excursion, drawing a horizontal line to remember not to revisit the quicksand. Below, he scrawled vertical and horizontal lines combined to denote the plus and minus sides of sampling various fungi.

As a cold rain and snow pushed him eastward and further from home, Sho-lin traveled on foot through cloudy months with no sun nor moon to guide him. Above, the flight paths of a royal blue bird and a scarlet bird converged together near a spiky plant in the desert ahead. Having run out of water, Sho-lin sipped from the spiny dahlia. As the cardinal and bluebird joined him, the avian dyad molded into one with combined colors. During the next three days Sho-lin communicated with the tanager bird, consuming the purple cactus for nourishment.

The first of the tribes to observe this natural color and communicate with birds, Sho-lin followed the tanager east to a crooked wood of bonsai trees. With only room to crawl inside, he discovered an unlikely sanctuary. Seeking solace in this spiritual den, the sage reclined aside eggplants and a giving tree.



*Reflections of a Psychedelic Desert by Pantporium*

Under a purplish panorama he observed violet mist of atmospheric auroras beyond the realm of birds and fog, and furthermore cosmic clouds of indigo where the stars sparkle within. Inside the nebulous betelgeuse a pair of titian and oceanic planets were locked in cosmogonic conflict mirroring the cycles of our lunar and solar spheres. Between them, a shooting star and distant darkstar crashed in a galactic game, twinkling in colliding flashes of blue and red. As the periwinkle star blinked through the borealis, the wizened sage noticed a pattern in its intermittency.



Having never contemplated this cosmic connection Sho-lin absorbed this wisdom within the nexus of earth and space, and blinked back in kind. With porcupine ink he scrawled the sequence of three round dots, three horizontal lines, and another trio of dots unto the other side of the thin papyrus. Meanwhile its only other occupant the chirpy tanager cautioned him to not divulge this serene place, except to those few as wise as he. Responding with an “om” Sho-lin pledged not to reveal the sublime sanctum and universal unrest he perceived.

Bowing to the avian, the giving tree and celestial entities above, he expressed gratitude while crawling out on all fours the way he came. No longer perceiving the sanctuary and the purpureus haze, he silently named the shrine after the snowy rabbit setting him down the road less traveled. Glimpsing the lagomorph as it bounded into the night, Sho-lin meditated to the sound of nearby waves.

At dawn the next day, the sage’s eyes were opened as the sun rose over an uncertain sea. With the Bousca sanctum nowhere in sight, Sho-lin discerned sight of an undiscovered ocean and followed its coastline south for perhaps a week. Passing a deserted log pyramid still smoldering, the thru-hiker was turnt to the right into the canyons with no design on the pyre along the shore.

Treading through prowlers’ lands, a nightcrawler slithered through the stormy night towards the sage. Confronted by a spotted feline, Sho-lin abated the jaguaro nonviolently using a jugular mantra and a meter-long hiking stick. Approaching the Shendoa River valley, he found himself on the other side of the rockslide sending him on this solitary road. Above, a peregrine dropped a pungent pine herb from its talons to the ground at his feet which he later sampled.

Tracking the falcon's flight path behind him to the highest peak as it soared into a crevice within, Sho-lin could now track a new circuitous path to Nether Mount. Finally returning to Escenda, he jotted a map of all the landmarks from his year-long trip home – excepting the sanctum. Sho-lin revealed his map and visionquest only to Dilian and Mila, merely whispering to the muse about the stellar sanctuary.



*Supernova GRB 250314A (ESA/NASA artist's rendition)*

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### *(Year 10 ~ Year 11)*

With Dilian's infected hand fully immobilized from the king lizard's venom, he secretly embarked to the Nethermore alone with the sage's map. Referring to Sho-lin as a wise master and leaving him and Mila the muse to manage E'scend in his stead, he kissed Mila and their eight-year old twins goodbye and estimated his return within a year or two. As he left the redwood and tribe's village in the dead of night under a cold new moon, he told only his partner and their twins along with the master.

Sho-lin gave him the map and his blessing, pointing Dilian northeast to the fungal garden then northwest along the falcons' flight path to the tryptan blue mountain. Using the map and deductive reasoning while scrawling poetically on another payprus, Dilian peered at the sequence of dots and dashes on the back of the map and forged his own path.

Arriving into Nether Mount he discovered this splendid hall along with its temperate climate, herb gardens, hot whirlpools and the sparkling natural spring. Over several years these combined treatments healed him, other than his missing finger. Various animal predators including wolves and baerres had encroached on him from below his elevated perch. In time as he cohabited with the wild animals, Dilian learned to innately communicate with them as long as his intentions remain pure. Although he does not control the creatures, he can dissuade their demeanor as well as see their point of view.

Once Dilian had recovered and was able to venture outside of the mountain, he prepared to return home to his tribe. However, a pack of mountain lions beyond his control had chased him back inside each time he attempted to leave. He later found the other two eastern trackers encased in ice on a precipice ledge. Carrying them one by one into Wynterlyn, he placed the pair into the hot waterpools where they were soon revived by Shendoa springwater and the healing herb which he called smylia.

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*(Present = Year 26)*

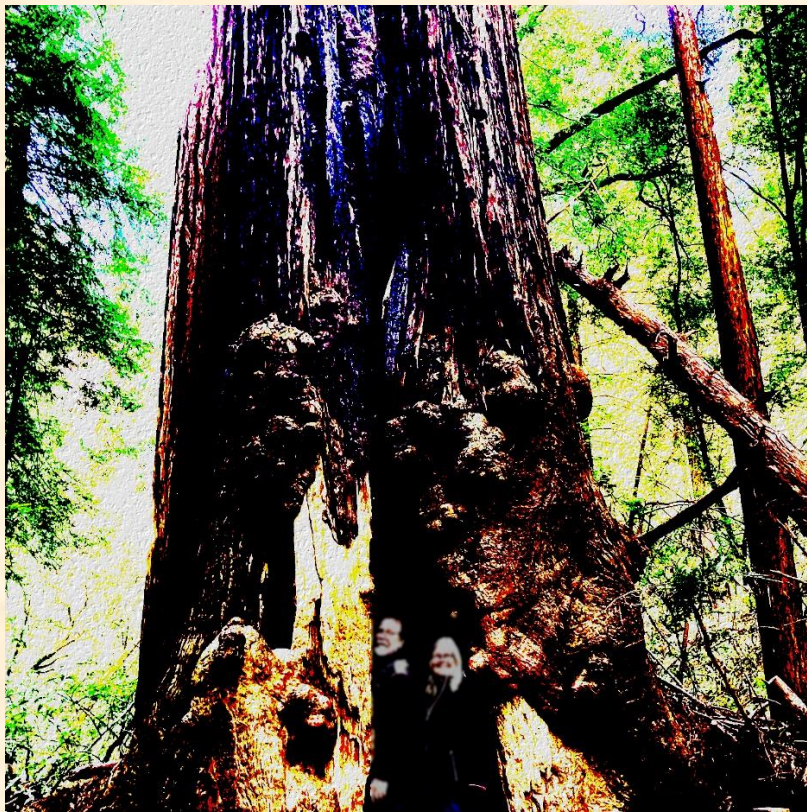
Exhaling in sooty subterranean air approaching the new day, the dyad of lovers bask in the afterglow of their Minuet sonata and forbidden lunar lambada. Spotting a skeleton key on the oubliette floor, Lily unlocks the rooted cell imprisoning them both. As she leads Aedan up a curved stairwell into the furnished base of a broad tree, he finds them within a giant redwood.

Following his rosette into its largest chamber, he glimpses sunlight for the first time in years. Turning to face him, Lily casts aside her gowns and beseeches him to couple with her. As he approaches her wooden bedside, a sudden wail emits from an adjoining room. He halts and turns towards the sound which is clearly an infant's cry. Exhaling while she redresses, he interrogates if Lily is with child. As she opens the door, she reveals a swaddled bambino in a cradle.

She has named her **Lolabi**, daughter of Lily and Aedan. Astounded, Aedan gingerly holds his newfound baby in his arms for the first time and she stops crying. Arriving in the nursery are adult twins who do not speak, and a young man with a face resembling his own. Delighted by this abrupt familial reunion, Aedan inquires if he is his son Kaedan, or Paedan? His name is Tilian, he corrects his father, firstborn of Aedan and Lily. Recalling their initial meeting during the Aria and Battle at Lepe Point, Aedan nods and acknowledges Tilian as their son.

As he turns to Lily she showers him with affection, nursing her infant. She announces that Tilian turns twenty-one years old today – the winter solstice – which is Aedan’s own forty-sixth birthday. Showing him with affection and fanfare, Lily demonstrates that they already have a family consisting of their children Tilian and baby Lolabi, and the adopted twins. With their tribes and lands at their command, the two can fulfill their destiny together as the royal Dyad of Crescendo.

For the first time in as long as he can remember, Aedan experiences joy. As there is no need to leave their splendid redwood hideaway and memory of his former life fading, he pledges to be Lily’s husband and father to their family within the wood under the full wolf moon.



*Redwood in Muir Woods, California by Amy & Louis Schocken*

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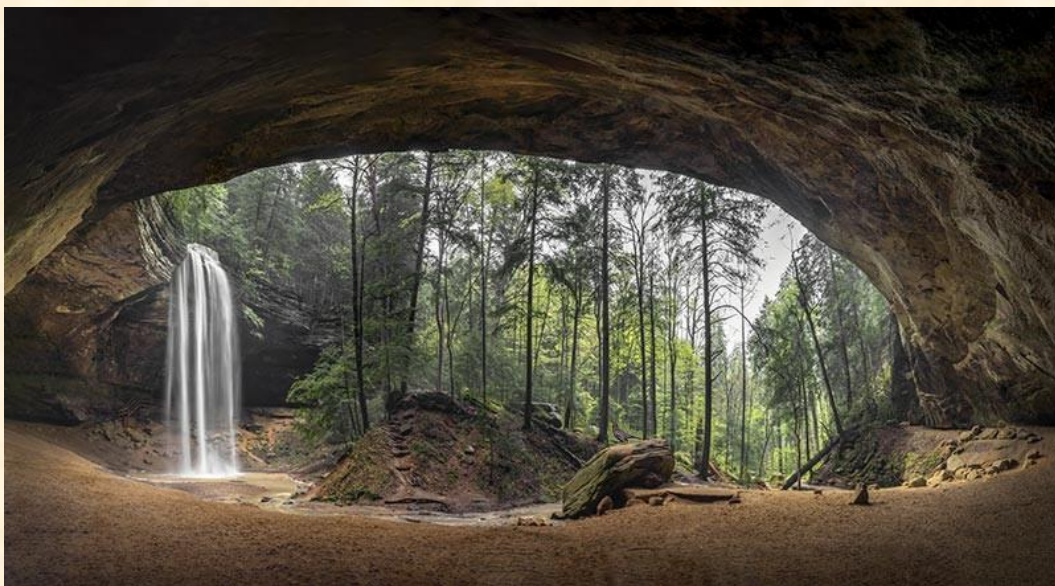
A single snowy moonbeam ceases shining through the crevice in Nether Mount, signaling midnight on the Wynterlyn sundial. Their abdomens full as Q’isann’s paunch wound recovers, the guild is astonished by Dilian’s tale (which included all of his and Sho-lin’s separate solo quests except for the Bousca sanctum under the stars).

Revealing his missing finger, the graying Dilian finishes by introducing his empathic companions **Su-rin** and **Xo-nan**. He identifies them as Sho-lin's fellow pathfinders who Dilian had encountered and rescued from their cryogenic iceboxes years ago just east of here. Xo-nan and non-binary Su-rin now used the same methods plus aloe on knitted cloth to heal Q'isann's baerre claw wound.

Through the eyes of the peregrine falcon soaring above E'scend, Dilian has distantly viewed the tumult. Shocked by this charlatan who usurped him in his absence, he wishes to return to Escenda to set things right and restore peace. However with knowledge of a mystical dark magick far beneath, his conjuring opponent dominates the enchanted tribe. Even if the true Dilian were to return to Escenda, the deceiver and their army are too powerful and they had numbered only three...

But in the here and now they are ten – Q'isann corrects him using his fingers to count – ten of Crescendo's preeminent warriors with special skills and abilities. If they were to band together, with their combined might they could penetrate the Arch's domain and rescue Aedan as the seven Wescendants have avowed. If he can confront the chameleon impersonating him with these sworn avengers at his back, Dilian supposes they can impeach these masters of war and halt the bloodshed between the tribes.

There is consensus. They are now a tenfold guild, unified on their mission to depose the impostor Arch, liberate Aedan and restore peace to the land of Crescendo. Resolved and determined, Dilian and the band of pathfinders and paladins embark at dawn on the first day of the new year towards the fateful clash of their time.



*Ash Cave, Hocking Hills, Ohio*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### The Black Bird

#### Year Twenty-Seven

In We'scend the tribe is continually restless and discontent, as their noble leader Aedan has now been held captive in E'scend for four years. Officially becoming Arch of the tribe on his twentieth birthday the previous year, few had survived the deadly war to attend and applaud his chiefdom. Hearing no word from the guild Kaedan has given up hope of saving the Archfather, with no hint whether or not he still lives.

Distraught that his paternal lineage is broken, Kaedan sulks in his royal cave having failed at every venture. His younger brother Paedan is gone, lost to the sea. An androgynous Arch now largely controls Crescendo with his own tribe largely defeated and family splintered. Arch Kaedan stands as his paternal grandpa R'Nesto's and father Aedan's only male heir to their enduring legacy.

Seeking his mother's counsel, she advises him wisely but sternly. The tribe matriarch's distinguished demeanor never betrays her conflicted emotions about her husband's supposed captivity. Ivera and Kaedan do not speak of Aedan's illegitimate son with the nameless jezebel, but she silently remembers the other vixen Lily who caught his eye before Ivera on The Minuet. Frowning, she cannot help but wonder if he has rekindled his moonlit fling with the sibling of the eastern Arch. Speaking none of this to tribe nor her adult children, she settles on the Wescenda outskirts in a morose cavern shell grotto matching her mood to protect from the elements and the sweltering sun. Naming it Lound'a where she gathers the children to soothe and tutor them, Ivera does not trust the black bird outside that reminds her of the nameless Archess.

Her eldest child, who has never taken a mate during the war, visits the matriarch at the new Lound'a school. Juna embraces her mother and shares with the children a musical lesson set to a cardinal's birdsong, while Ivera prefers the bluebird's tune. The singalong settles the hyperactive teens, including several whose elders never returned from the atrocities along the river. As the adolescent lads and damsels join in, they hum "la's" "li's" and "da's" while composing new songs in the process. Juna and couturier Me`lyn fiddle to construct a wooden lute, while two yutes chase the other around in circles and soon twirl and dance.



*Dancing Deadheads in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, CA – August 2025*

## Year Twenty-Eight

In the uncharted lands to the northeast, the guild has secretly infiltrated E'scend. Boldly venturing into the bellicose eastern continent over the past year, they gradually near its capital village. Led by noble Q'isann and greybeard Dilian the ten knight-errants are endeavored to liberate Aedan, confront the impostor and re-seat Dilian as Arch. However, the deceiver 'Dilian' has fortified the forests surrounding the capital. Rock slides and giant redwood logs now block all possible paths from the Nevermore. They are prevented from entering Escenda from the north, and they cannot travel along the eastern bank of the Shendoa without being ambushed by archers on constant watch. Instead, the troupe has taken a longer route southeast from the mountains to slowly enter Escenda from the opposite end unseen.

In this traveling tenfold band with two leaders, the most capable and learned warriors and trackers from the west and east have coalesced in a unified cause for the first time since their arrival in this land. Their kin avenged, the Wescendant pathfinder family and four Paladins follow Q'isann's lead, while the Escendant trackers are loyal to Dilian as their rightful Arch. However, there is no argument between them as the two leaders are in agreement at every turn.

Charting the guild's daring route a few meters ahead are the ruddish-faced Xo-nan, and close-shorn Su-rin who chooses not to be labeled by gender. They are followed by Dilian with a pair of lynxes on either side, and Q'yn whose new wolfling pet has not left her side since Wynterlyn. Dilian has formed a friendship with the younger, shy pathfinder, who previously only ever spoke with her parents behind them. As he shows Q'yn how to control her timber wolf's aggressive tendencies, Q'yn has taught Dilian how to sing - which is unprecedented as until now only those born on Crescendo are able to. At times during their journey, they quietly sing together as the group rests under a lean-to bungalo.



*A mutual musical lesson  
Quinn & Bill at Bedford Springs*

Dilian's peregrine falcon is his eyes in the skies scanning for dangers ahead, joined at times by an ebony bird. Following he and Q'yn are her parents Lyla and Q'isann, debating how best to approach and rescue their tribe's Arch from his captor. Presenting four fingers to convey as many years have

passed since Aedan's arrest, the huntress suggests that if he still breaths, Aedan may not be still imprisoned. However Q'isann dismisses that possibility and submits a brute-force plan of attack.

Following a few meters behind the bickering couple are the four noble swordsmen whose elders were cousins to R'Nesto and drowned along with him on the sunken Minuet. Obeying Q'isann and Lyla as the group's eldest Wescendants their swordsman of highest rank is Pah'lud, ensuring they are not pursued by predators as he holds up the rear. Hiking single-file to conceal their numbers, the guild travels purposefully around E'scend's outlying lands. Along the way they are confronted by undisciplined baerres, a rabid pack of coyotes and the gigantic swooping hawk that had divebombed them in We'scend the year before.

Turning their compass from east to south the travelers near a garden of wild honey with bees, a raccoon and antelop resting within, leaving them undisturbed considering their plentiful rations of food and sparkling water. Nearing autumn the tenfold troupe approaches vast canyonlands, previously explored only by a few eastern trackers including Xo-nen and Su-rin. Cautioning the group of the dangerous terrain and prowlers ahead, they proceed guardedly before being attacked by a jaguaro pack.

The vicious, agile felines assail the travelers, fatally mauling one of the paladins. During the bloody fracas the huntress and swordsmen joust with the jaguaros aided by Dilian's lynxes and Qyn's wolf, slaying several until the rest run off. However the youngest paladin is dead, and Lyla and Xo-nen were badly scratched by the felines' sharp claws. Dilian shares a canteen of Shendoa spring water while Su-rin applies her aloe on a cloth, which combined stop the bleeding and prevent infection. As the group mourns and buries their Paladin in a funeral dirge, they steel for battle and forge towards Escenda as a guild numbering nine.

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At the Wescendant tribe's most desperate hour, a birdsong unexpectedly brightens Juna's doorstep at dawn. The chirpy nightbird musically transmits a pertinent message, which only she can comprehend through its rapid warbling. Her nearby mother declining to join her, Juna rushes to the capital village with the avian dispatch. Arriving at the Arch's domicile deep within the Wescenda cavern, she relays to her brother Kaedan the airborne transmission received from Q'isann.

After three years of navigating around Crescendo, their pathfinders and elite warriors have infiltrated E'scend through the Nethermore as ordered by Kaedan. Although one paladin is dead, the

others are secretly nearing Escenda to liberate it and return Aedan home. Along the way in Nether Mount they encountered the true Arch Dilian and his benevolent trackers, who have joined them on their quest to Escenda.

However, they only number nine. Numbering nine prudent and armed, the soldiers would be no match for the fifty well-armed Escendant warriors and the conjurer of dark magick awaiting them. The group requires the military support of the Wescendant tribe to somehow penetrate Escenda from the river, engage and distract their forces while they advance from the east.

Juna, having spent much time along the impenetrable Shendoa, suggests to her brother Kaedan a strategy to cross it. As the Arch assembles the royal guard outside the cavern complex and prepares to implement her plan, he instructs her to spread the word. By way of song, Juna vocalizes the Arch's directive only to the tribe west of the river. As if by command, her blackbird and all birds west of the great river join her and trill the message across We'scend.

Hearing Juna's opera, a small flock of falcons who had flown from E'scend arrive above outside the cavern capital upon hearing the blackbird's call. From their clutches, they drop branches of unfamiliar plants into the tribe's hands before settling next to Juna. Kaedan and the tribe have never seen these esoteric herbs, however Juna recognizes their medicinal properties. As the Wescendants arm their platoon and prepare to penetrate the fortified beachhead, they now have the means to heal themselves while liberating E'scend and Aedan.



*Eurasian blackbird (by Le poidesans)*

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Far across the river in E'scend while all are unawares, Aedan has become Lily's husband and father to their two children together. Contented as his bride provides for the family he never leaves their lavish compound within the redwood tree, having forgotten his captivity and previous life with Ivera as Arch of We'scend. He dotes on his wedded lily and first love, who appears virtuous and devout to him.

Outside of the serene redwood the Archess continues her totalitarian dominion of the lands, using an iron glove adorned with splinters from the Minuet. As she rules the Escendants they obey her commands under enchantment, no longer modifying her appearance to resemble Dilian as her long hair grows proportionally to her dark magick. The raven guiding her path communicates with her, permitting it to see through its eyes. In time, the Archess uses this power to influence the birds and predatory mammals to do her bidding.

With the eyes of the giant hawk, she is well aware that a guild of Wescendant warriors has infiltrated her homeland to overthrow and depose her. However, she has lost sight of them in the canyonlands and can no longer track their clandestine approach. She orders her trusted lieutenant Pai-san to closely guard her family within the redwood compound.

A kilometer eastward, the guild numbering nine has covertly made their way through the unbridled canyonlands. Approaching the western edge while hiding out of sight, they can now view the capital Escenda in the distance. As they prepare to charge the treetop village at speed, they are halted by a voice imploring them not to pass. From a hidden gap in the canyon emerge the master Sho-lin and healer Mila. Reuniting with his companion trackers Su-rin and Xo-nan after two decades, Sho-lin is gratified that they had not perished during their fall in the Nethermore Mountains after all and the three sages chant an “om.”

Dilian rushes jubilantly to his muse Mila. Embracing elatedly, he asks her if their children are safe. Mila and Sho-lin reply that he and his apprentice Pai-san found the pair in a panthera den after the impostor ‘Dilian’ kidnapped Mila and her twins long ago. While Pai-san returned the duo safely home, Sho-lin had tracked and scoured for their mother. Killing the panthera that had trapped her, he was mauled in the process. After she healed him with aloe they planned to return to Escenda, reveal and depose the deceiver. However bolstered by dark magick through the years and the now-enchanted armed tribe, the Arch had grown too powerful for the two of them to face...

But now they go to eleven Q’isann interjects running out of fingers to count, while Dilian introduces the band to master Sho-lin and medicine woman Mila. Scouting the area ahead using a hollow branch with glass on either end, the tracker spots the conjurer within a large tree. Xo-nan tells the troupe that Dilian’s impostor is not dwelling in the main Escenda treetown, but within the broadest redwood in sight between the arbor village and the canyonlands. They are very close to their destination and await the absence of moonlight to advance; however, they cannot continue without being ambushed by treetop archers protecting the redwood compound.

## CHAPTER NINE

### The Clash

On the west bank of the Shendoa River on the darkest night and last new moon of spring, the Wescendant tribe commences Juna's plan to cross it and rescue their Arch. From the beachhead they begin rolling large logs into the river in an uninhabited area downstream between Lepe Point and its terminus at the southern sea. As the logs roll into the river afloat, the warriors rush down the beach and leap onto the logs having connected them with rope. With the logs straightened in a line across the river, the western warriors balance across them and breach the eastern bank, setting foot in E'scend for the first time.

The crusaders are immediately attacked by archers on the night watch with speeding arrows, sharp and narrow. The Wescendants find that the aloe plant heals their warriors shot by arrows, however those pierced by poisonous darts succumb to their injuries. Slaying the archers and securing the eastern beachhead the intruders roll more logs into the river, partially damming it and forming a bridge between the two lands. Primed for battle, the western tribe's full compliment of forces crosses the river. Under the cover of darkness, Kaedan leads the platoon of forty warriors towards Escenda to liberate it and their forefather Aedan.

At the culmination of the four-year war between their tribes, the Wescendants and Escendants commence the colossal clash to determine the control and future of their lands. As daybreak nears with the solstice approaching, the crusaders have lost their element of surprise. From a hightower atop Escenda's tallest cypress tree, a budding bowman issues a war cry by way of song using an elk horn, alerting the eastern tribe of the invasion along with an ear-piercing raven. Reaching the capital village at sunrise, the western intruders engage in combat with Escendant archers and massive gladiators trained in secret. Arch Kaedan capably leads the platoon in close quarter combat; however, they are outclassed by the eastern titans and well-fortified bowmen.

*The Battle of Cunaxa,  
Babylonia along the  
Euphrates River  
September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 401 B.C.*



Hearing the war cry from the nearby redwood compound, Aedan demands its meaning. His sweet lily-pad pleads to her husband that their enemies the Wescendants have invaded their homeland, with intents to eradicate their tribe and bloodline. Steeling himself, Aedan promises to defend Lily and their children against any threats at home or abroad. Aedan and Lily assign their eldest Tilian to guard their infant and adopted twins, armed with a dagger. As Lily hands Aedan a sword he joins the Archess' loyal lieutenant Pai-san outside the fortified redwood compound, guarding it against the advancing invaders. Atop the arbor capital's cypress, the Archess and her avian summon the raven's dark magick to call upon baelles and coyotes from the mountains, and pantheras and jaguaros from the canyonlands. Possessing the mammalian predators and the giant hawk she directs them to the Escenda village, while commanding arctic wolves to ambush the Wescendant children hiding in caves across the river.

As the deadly battle for the fate of Crescendo rages on in the capital for days, both factions have been cut in half by the other in close combat. Their tribes' numbers are now down to twenty on either side. On the morning of the solstice, with a mighty roar the jaguaros and hulking baelles attack the western warriors, killing five more. As the crusaders are outmatched, they are forced to retreat west towards the Shendoa River. Fleeing to the river at Lepe Point well north of the new log bridge across, they are cornered on three sides by the remaining Escendant gladiators and the predator beasts. A warrior couple wades into the river towards home, and the pair is immediately washed away downstream. As Arch Kaedan orders the remaining warriors to stand their ground, the Wescendants' futile attempt has failed and their entire tribe now faces imminent annihilation.

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The earnest Eleven to the east have reached the redwood compound, after the treetop archers impeding their path joined the ensuing conflict. They see Aedan standing freely outside the redwood and presume his captors answered the war cry as well. Believing they have succeeded in rescuing their rightful Arch, Q'isann calls Aedan's name who does not recognize his own nor these interlopers. Waving at him, Q'isann and Lyla approach Aedan and announce they have come to rescue him while he shoos them away.

With Lyla at his side Q'isann falls to his knees before Aedan his once-and-future Arch, and says he has come to take him home to We'scend. With no memory of his former life there, Aedan no longer recalls his former second-in-command. He is outraged that Q'isann and his armed guild have invaded his home, and demands that they leave his homeland at once. Just on the redwood's other side, Sho-lin faces his old prodigy Pai-san. Sho-lin implores his former apprentice to join their guild

and defeat the Archess. However, Pai-san has been under her spell for as long as he can remember. He attacks Sho-lin, and the two engage in combat with their swords.

Mila and Dilian rush inside the redwood and find their twin offspring. Tilian – Aedan’s firstborn son with Lily – defends the adult twins and starts to assault unarmed Dilian with his dagger, but the twins melodically chant together for Tilian to not harm their father. With the crooked chameleon nowhere to be found in the wood Dilian, Mila and their twins reunite for the first time as a family. Assuring they are safe inside the redwood, Dilian runs out to locate the deceiver. He joins Q’isann and Lyla at their side, facing Aedan. As the original chiefs of the two tribes stand face to face for the first time, Dilian recognizes the pain in Aedan’s eyes and offers his good hand to Aedan in a sign of peace.

The former prisoner’s eyes are widened as he recognizes his nemesis. He must be the conjurer who arrested him after the first aria, imprisoning and beating him under the redwood for years. He kidnapped Aedan’s lily, and according to her account treated her poorly. Now, this villain has raided the house where his wife, son and adopted twins live, wearing the face of Aedan’s lily to torment him. Not remembering Dilian’s name after four years, he stammers the first words that come to his fractured mind. “You... you...”

“Judas!” He snarls at Dilian, lunging at him with his sword. As Aedan swings for his head, Q’yn uses her spear to defend Dilian and engages Aedan in combat. The trio of paladins stand behind Aedan, sworn to rescue and defend their rightful Arch, as the younger two swordsmen encroach on Q’yn. Stopping them from attacking her, the eldest Pah-lud orders them not to interfere with the duel between their guildswoman and Arch, while Lyla stands between them and the trio of paladins. The two trackers restrain the raging Aedan as they defend Dilian.



*Bob Dylan  
May 17<sup>th</sup>, 1966  
Free Trade Hall,  
Manchester, England*

On the other side of the towering redwood, scornful Pai-san continues attacking his former master who parries his blows and implores him to cease. Given no alternative, Sho-lin swings his sword at Pai-san's feet and slices off part of his foot to disable him. Pai-san screams and falls onto the grass bleeding profusely, while Sho-lin runs around the tree to re-join the guild. Restrained once again by Dilian and his accomplices, Aedan growls and lets out a primal scream silencing the birds in the wood. Sho-lin advises them all to lower their swords, as Xo-nan and Su-rin loosen their grip on Aedan on Dilian's request. Breaking down, Aedan begs his demand that they leave him and his family alone. Dilian states that that he is not the one who has taken Aedan's family and his dreams away from him.

Dilian explains he and Aedan have only ever met once, from across the river twenty-six years ago today. He is certain of the date because he was his own twenty-first birthday, and recalls first trying apple wine with Mila that night beneath their new redwood home. Dilian regrets that half of his life and his families' lives have passed since then while estranged from her, escaping his responsibilities to write poems within the lonely mountain. Having not fully considered the weight of his actions and needs of his muse, their twin children and tribe, Dilian snickers and hangs his head while realizing this catastrophe is largely his own fault.

Dilian senses his impostor commanding the great battle just west of them at the capital village, and asserts that he must challenge the chameleon at once to stop the bloodshed. Sho-lin affirms and says he and Mila will protect the children and maintain peace at the redwood. Humbled, Aedan now joins Dilian and the band of nine westward towards the fatal clash.

As Dilian, Aedan, Q'isann and the guild enter the capital treetown Escenda, it is largely destroyed in the ongoing battle. The possessed beasts attack the guild, killing the lynxes and Qyn's dire wolf. At the shoreline Arch Kaedan, Juna and ten surviving Wescendants face certain death by the eastern titans, baerres and prowling felines under a murky mystic spell. High above the clash, its overlord stands atop a lone cypress tree with an archer and a raven perched in the impenetrable hightower.

Viewing the approaching guild below, the Archess commands her beasts and orders the gladiators to eradicate the troupe and their depleted platoon immediately. As the titans rush the western warriors at the shore, the predatory brutes suddenly raise their heads with their ears perked. Approaching them at the point Dilian and Q'yn abruptly engage in song together, persuading the beasts to desist.

Trapped at the shoreline with her brother Kaedan, Juna joins the duo in singing. As they can only

subdue the animals with pure intent, they cannot command them to attack the Escendants. Instead they convince the baerres and coyotes to return to their hillside caves, and the jaguars and pantheras to the canyonlands. Across the river, the wolfpack hounding the children's hideaway hears the song and retreats north to the mountains.

Unable to control her mammalian army, the Archess and her raven concoct a deafening maelstrom unto them from the cypress treetower above. Thunderclaps ring out as the skies darken around them, and lightning bolts strike two Wescendants dead at the river shore. The earth around them starts to tremble, as the combatants fall off their feet. Without warning, from the north a single gigantic wave roars down the Shendoa River towards them.

As the remaining eastern titans and western warriors flee the shoreline, half of them make it to the village and half of them from both sides are washed downstream by the tsunami. Of the Wescendant tribe only Arch Kaedan, Q'isann, Lyla, Q'yn and two paladins remain; the others including Juna have been lost to the river. Only four gladiators and the archer protecting the Archess remain of the Escendant army, and they quickly resume clashing with the crusaders in the village.

As the tribes duel to death with swords and axes Q'yn defends her Arch Kaedan against a gladiatorial assault, and he returns the favor while slaying another. In the melee, the noble warrior Q'isann is smothered to death by a towering titan. Using their combined skill and might, Q'yn, Lyla, Kaedan and the duo of paladins defeat the last three gladiators together, however both remaining paladins are slain in combat.

Arch Kaedan, Q'yn and Lyla are now all that remains of their tribe, along with Kaedan's parents nearby. As they peer up at the cypress hightower in anger, Aedan approaches the concluded clash with Tilian pursuing from a distance. Kaedan finally reunites with his father while Q'yn is inconsolable over the lifeless body of hers, as is Lyla as her gallant husband lies dead.

*"Bloody Storm"*

*by Janka Lateckova*

*depicting J.R.R. Tolkien's  
Wars of Beleriand*

*(courtesy TolkienGateway)*



Concurrently across the river in Wescenda, Ivera alone had defended the tribe's children at a downcast shelter she had called Lound'a, holding the possessed werewolves at bay until the pack abated. Just after the roaring river's deluge, she hears an urgent melodic call that she immediately recognizes as her daughter's. Rushing to the Shendoa, she finds that it has completely depleted and is now merely a stream. Viewing from a distance her kin Kaedan, Aedan and the concluding clash on the other side, she heads to the log bridge built just before the prolonged battle of Escenda.

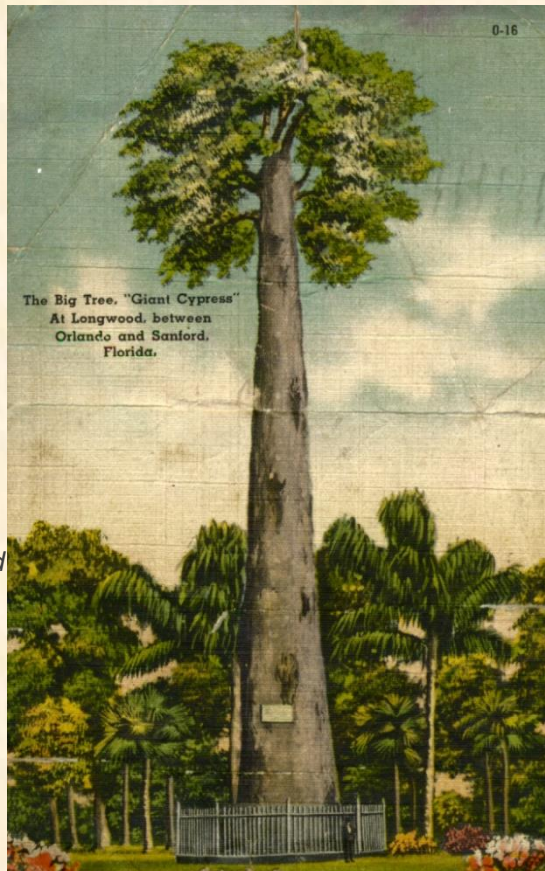
At the new bridge she finds her daughter Juna alive along with a noble swordsmen Pah-lud, a Wescendant couple, and a few eastern archers. They had been carried downstream by the tsunami, until the logjam stopped some of them from washing out to sea. After aiding each other from drowning with help from Ivera, they were pacified and ceased their feud. A sole Escendant gladiator also survived the flood, but soon lumbered off into the jungle. Ivera, Juna and the few others make their way to the eastern capital to reunite with their remaining kin and put an end to this debacle once and for all.

Atop Escenda's towering cypress, Dilian has carefully climbed to its treetop where the conjurer awaits him. Sneaking up on the archer and pushing him off the tree, Dilian is attacked not by the perched raven but a giant hawk. After nearly falling from the treetop himself while evading it, his flock of falcons quickly come to his aid harassing the hawk and disabling its wings. Dilian enters the hightower to confront his impostor at last.

*"Giant Cypress"*

*The world's oldest cypress tree  
Longwood, Florida*

*approximate age > 2,000 years old*



## CHAPTER TEN

### *The Reckoning*

At the ravaged capital amid smoke and ruin, Dilian enters the hightower and stands face to face with the impostor bearing his likeness. Turning to face him she does not speak, nor does he as they both take a moment to size up their antagonist. Dilian stands in baerre-skin leather from the beast that killed Q'isann's brother, who Q'isann has now joined in death. Pale as a ghost, Dilian's skin, beard and shoulder-length hair are as ivory as the snowy mountains.

The Archess before him is both a formidable nemesis and a vulnerable natural beauty, rife with conflict. Radiating brightly and appearing as a solar seraph, her primal inner toil has been summoned, saved and transformed by the shining sun above. Adorned in long, flowing ebony robes and ravenous hair reaching her torso, her face and skin have been burned and blotched by years of sunburn.

Aside from their faces the Archess and Dilian are of the same height, around the same weight and perhaps close to the same age. Despite their contrasting skin tones and appearance, they unquestionably come from the same tribe. This is no indigenous chameleon nor subterranean demon standing before him; this woman arrived on Crescendo on the same ship that he and his family had. The Archess sees past her adversary's white skin, beard and hair, and recognizes her own face staring back at her.



*The Sahara Desert "Caravan To Infinity" by Smoke Ring Days*

On the day that she lost her family and tribe, Lily's parents had insisted that her own turmoil not disrupt the captain while he steered towards their new homeland. Moaning in anguish, the pangs in her womb had been dismissed by nearly all onboard. While her father pleaded with deaf R'Nesto to turn the damned ship, she was unable to speak or signal with the love of her life. As Lily's cries were joined by those of a newborn infant below deck, only her mother provided consolation until the ship suddenly crashed and sank.

Washed ashore east of the rivermouth and shipwreck, Lily was segregated from her tribe by a fierce panthera which chased her into the desert. Dehydrated with no food, water, shade nor shelter, she faced certain death. However like her family, death never arrived to claim her, as the bright sunlight improbably nourished her. Indefatigable, Lily was able to survive in the harshest weather and environment by drawing the light, her scorn as scalding as the solar sphere above. Drawing deep within the ground from the earth's magnetic attraction to the star it revolves on, Lily concentrated the sun's energy towards her and Escenda. Harnessing natural nuclear fusion from the core of Earth's yellow dwarf star, its temperature thousands of degrees above countable range, matching and fueling her rage.



*"Magicians Engaged In Mystical Duel" by Dzmitri Auramchik*

Reddening as she recognizes Dilian, she begins to utter his name but has lost her voice amid the thundering din she has created below. Taking a step towards the other, the two foes peer beneath their opposite appearances.

To his shock he recognizes her as **Lilian**, his twin sister not seen since she was lost in the shipwreck twenty-seven years past. Observing her brother for the first time Lilian's ruthless years and tears of rage start to wash away, with her empire laid to waste. Overcome with emotion, she breaks down as does Dilian. The twin siblings comfort each other, and they finally embrace as one.

Beneath them in the ruined treetown Tilian, master Sho-lin and muse Mila arrive from the redwood with her and Dilian's adult twins. Except for Pai-san and the hulking gladiator, the calamity's few survivors converge at Escenda as Dilian and the Archess descend the hightower together.

The near-extinct Wescendant and Escendant remnant tribes stand and stare at the snow-maned Dilian and his raven-haired impostor, and collectively grasp that she is his sister Lilian who survived the shipwreck unbeknownst to all. Finally free from her enchantment, they comprehend that it was she who had impersonated her twin brother, ensnared Arch Aedan, and assumed reign of E'scend before taking control of the entire land. With the Crescendants forgathered as one, they collectively demand that Lilian face judgment before them.

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The longest day has ended as the sun sets on the summer solstice, and the great clash for Crescendo has been resolved. At the ruined arbor village, Archess Lilian faces corporal punishment for her dastardly atrocities that nearly extinguished their tribes. Of the surviving Escendant adults only Dilian, Mila, their twins, Master Sho-lin, the pair of trackers and three archers remain, as the hobbled Pai-san and sole gladiator are not seen again.

Aedan stands and weeps, not with Lilian but with Ivera and their offspring. As Lilian's treachery is revealed, Ivera accepts that his transgressions were the result of the Archess's enchantment. Reunited as a family, Aedan, Ivera, Kaedan and Juna accept Aedan's illegitimate son Tilian as their kin. As they count the survivors, all that remain of the Wescendant tribe are Lyla, Q'yn, two wedded warriors, and a sole paladin Pah-lud who takes the name P'Al-aedan in honor of their rescued Arch. As Juna and her half-brother Tilian embrace for the first time near Lepe Point where they first met so long ago, they understand that their attraction that set these events in motion was

not romantic but familial love.

It is time for the unifying tribe – now numbering only twenty – to hold the Archess accountable for the souls of all those slain in the Great War. As the ten Wescendants call for Lilian’s head, Mila cautions them against executing her. The deposed Archess is held in restraints by the trackers and does not speak, nor does Aedan as he stands with his family nearby. The tribe starts to argue amongst themselves, and they soon scuffle.

Declaring that they be silent, Dilian climbs a tree stump and calls for their attention. He begins to croon an operetta, the likes of which he has never sung before. The tribe falls quiet and they all listen intently. In poetic meter and lyrical form, Dilian recounts all that has transpired. He tells them of the venomous lizard that bit him, being saved by his muse and the wise master, his journey to Wynterlyn with a blackbird and snow-covered hare, and how he healed himself and the tracker duo with the natural spring and smylia herb. He relays to them the guild’s quest that brought him back to E’scend and returned him to his family.

As he continues ambling verse after verse while Lilian stands silent, his remnant band join in his song – first Q’yn then Lyla, Mila, Sho-lin, the trackers and the paladin. Soon, Juna and all in the tribe sing with them along with the young children safe in their shelters afar. Even Tilian and all the others who were unable to sing can now join in the aria.

For the first time in all the land, its surviving inhabitants sing together in unison in an unprecedented, magnificent crescendo. The world stops for a moment, and all is in convergence. As the harmonic wave ripples back to its origin in the Escenda ruin, Lilian ultimately joins in their epic chorale.



*Tree, swing, bird & rainbow sky*

*by Patricia Stanley Kurzenberger*

*Skytop Lodge, PA art workshop*

After singing together in harmony, the tribe has spoken and come to consensus. Lilian will not be harmed, as they forbid executions and far too much blood was spilt during the war. No longer able to enchant the tribe, she is destined to spend her days within the redwood compound alone with her infant daughter and is never to leave. If Lilian does not comply, she will be incarcerated in the rooted cellar below where she once imprisoned Aedan.

Forever casting aside the title of Arch, a role he never desired, Dilian appoints Master Sho-lin to oversee the lands east of the river. The Shendoa river itself, once mighty and impassable but now spent, is now merely a stream that no longer divides the land in two, and the Crescendants are now one tribe and one people.

Dilian and Mila soon elope without ado and make their home together in the rebuilt treetown with their twins residing nearby. Escenda becomes an artistic commune again and on the stump where he had stood, others now sing out in turn to the gathered tribe using lutes fashioned from wood.

West of the Shendoa Stream, Arch Kaedan and Q'yn wed in a royal ceremony and start a family together in Wescenda. Aedan, who at advanced age declined to resume the role of Arch after his ordeal, lives with Ivera in retirement. Juna soon settles along the seashore with a tracker from the east, occasionally visiting her brothers Tilian and Kaedan and their aging elders to the north. At the rivermouth at Minuet Point, Juna and members of the unified tribe often visit the ascending rock totems constructed in memoriam at the shoreline, to the song of a lively cardinal.



*Maypole traditions, Brighton, United Kingdom*

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*Encore...*



*slight return*

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# A Tale of Crescendo



## ÉPILOGUE



### CHAPTER ELEVEN

#### The Spheres And The Sea

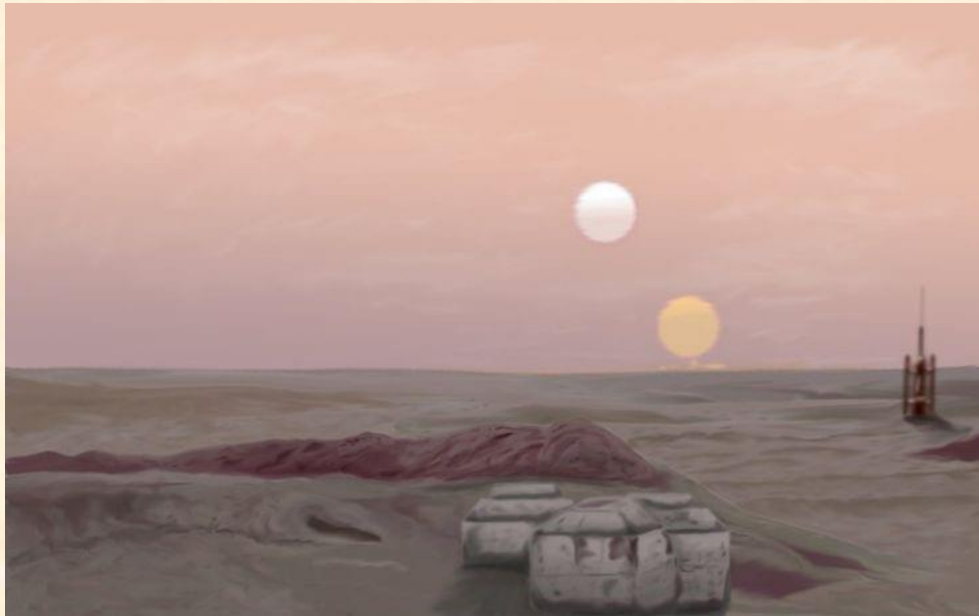
##### Year 29

Thee hands of time and the tribe have counted one year since the calamitous clash of Crescendo. For the past year the land remains at peace and harmony, with its inhabitants reunited as one tribe after three decades of segregation. As their elders gracefully fade, the next generation rebuilds the world anew, never to take up arms against each other again. The children born on this world – many of them orphaned – now outnumber the adults who survived the Great War. As Arch Kaedan and Q'yn welcome Crescendo's first grandchild to a peaceful planet with much ado, the circle of life begins anew.

On the winter solstice, the unified Crescendant tribe had exchanged gifts on the newly built bridges across the Shendoa. For the next ten days, they solemnly observed their traditions and their elders in reverence. As the tribe gathered around the cypress maypole on the new year's first day, Masters Sho-lin and Mila stood atop the tree stump soapbox stage to tell their distant origin story.

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Eons ago in a faraway land, their ancestors prospered in harmony for centuries, communicating with each other melodiously by way of song. Sho-lin explains that one millennium ago, the tribespeople witnessed the simultaneous collision of their two moons, two neighboring planets, and a duo of distant stars.



*"Binary Stars" by Zacic Volkshed*

As a sign of distress, their astronomers broadcast multi-directional solar flashes of light in a series of dots and dashes. Divided into two tribes who decided to flee or face their impending doom, multiple vessels containing the voyaging Ascendant tribe departed their lands. After seven years a single starlit ship, named after their dialect's word for 'Interpret,' reached a vibrant world with a breathable atmosphere and endless land and water.

Sho-lin explains that as their tribe originated from afar, their ancestral lineage exists not simply within their blood but through providence and good fortune. No individuals in the tribe are divinely chosen for nobility; yet together with goodwill and perseverance, each and every one of them are.

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Mila, who retrieved Captain R'Nesto's log from the shoreline one hour after it sank, reveals its contents to the tribe as the only person who has read it.

One hundred years ago, the ancestors of their tribe fled their homeland on a sinking archipelago. Although the disaster occurred naturally and gradually, the divided tribe had been preoccupied by a conflict between two royal families. The civil war was initiated by the joining of a combustible dyad of Brilian born on the summer solstice, and Maedan born on the winter solstice. As the land the tribe had called home for centuries sank into the ocean, several ships set sail with only The Minuet and its seafarers known to survive.

Mila concludes by commenting that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it, lamenting not sharing this precious knowledge until now.

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*“The Fleet of Zhèng Shì” by Brenda van Vugt*

The unified tribe will soon mark thirty years since The Minuet first brought the tribe to the land of Crescendo, led by Arch R'Nesto and their gallant forebearers. Attending the birth of her granddaughter **Q'isa** in the royal clinic, the guild's doyenne huntress Lyla and trackers Su-rin and Xo-nan prepare to set out on a new quest to circumnavigate the continent. While endeavoring to chart the remote edges of the undiscovered country, they also hope to locate Pai-san and the missing gladiator during their expedition.

Celebrating the first new year of their Aquarian age of peace, the musically inclined remnant band including new mother Q'yn, Lyla, Xo-nan, Juna and her beau gathered at the rocks at Minuet Point. Conveying their gratitude by way of songs based on Dilian's poems, new groups are formed, taking their names from the silver beetles nesting in the tree stumps and the immovable stones nearby.

At the southern shore, Juna contemplates her aria and her role in the events that set the clash in motion. Reminiscing about her young brother, lost to the river as the war began, she often pays her respects to Paedan with songs to the whispering wind. From time to time her blackbird visits her and a stationary cardinal while sending news to and from afar, along with half-brother Tilian. The beeping blackbird R'To and the chirpy cardinal Nest-o – both named after her grandfather – rest on her shoulders, trilling new songs together.

Over the past year Juna, aged twenty-three, has wed an Escendant pathfinder in a ceremony of the free tribe, with music and dancing along a Shendoa tributary valley between blue ridged mountains and the southern sea. The couple will soon welcome their first child; finally a grandchild for Ivera and Aedan, first great-grandchild of forefather R'Nesto. As her unborn child (*Zefra* if it's a girl, *Zefram* if it's a boy) nudges from within, Juna peers at the Sythirin Sea through a looking glass once fashioned from a hollow branch and pieces of volcanic glass. Hoping together they can one day build a new sailing vessel, on clear days she barely glimpses the edge of a remote island in the distance.

Across the river in Escenda, Lilian abides by her solitary confinement within the giant redwood, a prisoner of her own demise. She has not left the bedside of her daughter Lolabi, spoken nor slept in the year since her day of reckoning. She can no longer conjure dark magick nor enchant the Crescendants, and no longer desires to. Visited twice by her troubadour brother, they shared only a glance as he quietly sang to her and her baby in the cradle.

Silently she perpetually mourns her ill-fated firstborn with Aedan, born below deck on *The Minuet* as it crashed ashore, presumably lost to the sea. Having never spoken of her first daughter **Loria** who was unknown to the tribe, Lilian now shields her two-year-old baby girl Lolabi within the wood to remain forevermore, sleeplessly awaiting each day's rising sun.



Nearing summertime, the graybeard Dilian hearkens throughout the land to organize a tribute to all of their dead slain in the clash, whose souls are grateful to be memorialized. Starting a new tradition, he beckons the tribe to join him for an annual gathering within Nether Mount, now safely accessible using established footpaths undisturbed by bærres and wolves.

As the exodus completes the first annual pilgrimage north to the mountains on the first day of summer, they stand in awe in the great hall of Wynterlyn with its menagerie and natural splendor. On the solstice and day of jubilation, the tribe celebrates their fallen forebearers with a grand banquet, and a symphonic concert overseen by Dilian that lasts until dawn.



*"The Last Waltz" The Band, Bob Dylan & guests 11/25/1976 Winterland Music Hall  
(Courtesy David Gans, WYSO, Wikimedia Commons)*

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*The End*

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# § *A Tale of Crescendo* §

*Written by William M. Kurzenberger*

*December 2025*

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*Julie Rearick Kurzenberger*

*"As they sing under the treetown, they often chant in a Crescendo."*