

Setting

Physical

Magic

Most of this is from the books, though I am filling out some of the details where Green didn't give things a specific name or put them in a particular category.

Elemental-based magic system

- People are born with some level of talent/ability in an elemental aspect (e.g. Fire) or with the Guild ability (can identify/sense strength in all aspects)
 - Being born with no talent at all is considered a birth defect (applies to a small percentage of the population)
 - Elemental talent makes up about 85% of the Gandistran population. Thanks to the efforts of the Five, Spirit magic is about 6% of the population and increasing. Per Guild records, about 2-3% of five year olds are classified as nulls in each annual census. The rest (about 5% or so) are born as Guild talents.
- Strength is rated in three tiers: Low, Middle and High
 - There are further designations within each tier (weak/average/strong, with strong generally referred to as "third level", e.g. "third level High").
 - Low, Middle and High are arbitrary levels of accomplishment set by the Seated Blending.
- Raw magical strength is determined genetically
- Each aspect has four different abilities and it is normal for people to only be skilled in one of them. A strong skill in more than one area indicates Middle or High potential.

Using magic

- There's some sort of power that pervades the universe
 - People need to "open to/touch the power" in order to use their magical talent
 - Holding onto the power over time increases overall magical strength
 - Taking in more power provides a temporary boost of energy, which disappears once the power is released
 - Drawing on too much power can result in burn out - a minor consequence of burnout is loss of ability; in the worst case, you lose your mind and become a drooling vegetable
- Control over magic is achieved by weaving the power/talent into patterns
- All talents can affect things at range, but Water magic has the greatest practical direct range (they can reach ice/water in the clouds so 6 km/20000 feet). The practical direct range of Air and Fire magic about a quarter of that (1500m/5000 feet), while the practical

direct range of Earth and Spirit magic is about a quarter of that again (400m/1300 feet). Inverse square law applies to accuracy and intensity of the ranged affect.

Universal abilities

- Shielding
- Affecting the environment (aspect specific - e.g. Earth magic can manipulate soil)
- Affecting the self directly
- Affecting others directly

Linking

- Two or more magic users can link by reaching out to each other with the power.
 - Any combination of aspects is possible.
 - Each aspect brings a unique advantage to linking. For example, Spirit magic grants the link the ability to communicate mind to mind, greatly enhancing the link's ability to function as a cohesive unit.
 - Physical and emotional intimacy increases the strength of a link between two people.
- A link is only formed when every person in the link is connected to every other person.
 - Linking beyond six people is not done as past experiments have shown multiple link groups of smaller numbers outperform a larger link group with the same number of people. This is because the number of connections in the link grows at an increasing rate with each additional person.
- Linked magic users join together in a collective out-of-body shared consciousness that exists only for the duration of the link.
 - That means while the link can act using the pooled magical talents, the bodies of the linked users are left vulnerable.
 - Therefore, there are many situations where it is more advantageous to have practitioners functioning as individuals rather than link groups.
- Individual strength of will determines the extent to which a given magic user can direct the shared consciousness.
 - Strong-willed individuals will be able to proportionally direct more of the link.
 - Conflicting desires will result in the shared consciousness either doing nothing (mild to moderate disagreement) or dissolving (strong disagreement), which is dangerous in most situations that require linking (magical tasks that require great strength/concentration/skill).
 - Therefore, a link usually comprises three or five people for maximum effectiveness (since the uneven numbers generally prevent a stalemate from occurring), though two-person links are also common, so long as there is agreement in advance on who will direct the link.
 - Four or six person links are also possible, but the people involved must be very practiced at functioning as a single unit.

Blending

- Begins with linking but has a number of additional steps which cause the bonds within the link group to become permanent.
- Gandistra does not have anti-Blending laws that ban different aspects working in concert
- Knowledge of how to Blend is a secret
 - The only Gandistran people who know are the Seated Five (and technically Hestir, who is Astindan where Blending is common knowledge, but she's not talking). After the Five defeated the Four in the first competitions, they reverted to the second and third competitions being individual challenges rather than a challenge as a Blending.
 - Former High Master Lugal knows of the riddle but the Five never told him the solution or what the riddle's purpose was. There was only one copy of that particular Guild record, which Lugal gave to the Five, and it was destroyed in their battle against the Four. Lugal himself doesn't remember the words of the riddle.

Earth magic specific abilities (Green)

- Encouragement: make plants grow by directly supplying power
- Persuasion: control over animals and can bond with them
- Decay: Break down physical substances into smaller components (Green didn't name this ability so I did)
- Healing: enhance the body's natural healing processes by supplying and guiding power

Spirit magic specific abilities (Purple)

- Detect/affect emotions
- Calm/enhance existing physical things (Jovvi calmed a fireball in Book 1, Chapter 2 which I forgot about)
- Mind reading/control
- Telepathy

Fire magic specific abilities (Red)

- Summon light
- Summon heat
- Summon flame
- Detect heat

Can sense things through their flames, however if a Fire magic user is not actively using their talent to affect something, they get to rely on their eyes and other physical senses, like every other non-Earth magic talent.

Water magic specific abilities (Blue)

- Condense water from air vapor/freeze water (massive range - can teleport water/ice from clouds)
- Dehydrate objects
- Manipulate water-based liquids
- Weather sense (given range and abilities, in theory capable of minor weather working though we don't see this in Green's books)

They're not teleporting the water but they are grabbing it at such high speed that it seems like they are. Direct line of sight is not required, so long as the water has an unobstructed pathway between the source and the target. So being indoors with all windows and doors shut would mean Vallant can't pull ice down from the clouds, but if he wanted to, he could try and shove a thundercloud over the next town and cause it to rain on a street corner (though his chances of hitting a specific street corner as opposed to an area that's about the size of a street corner is very slim as the further away he goes, the lower his degree of accuracy). He can't evaporate water though, so if he decides to kill someone by desiccating them, he'll have to do something with the resultant water (near instantaneously returning it to the clouds if he's outdoors is the easiest).

Air magic specific abilities (Yellow)

- Hardened/thickened air
- Call wind
- Manipulate acoustics
- Light bend

Air magic can only feel things in contact with the parts of the air they are actively manipulating. Calling wind means they can feel everything the wind is blowing across, while using hardened air means they can only feel things in direct contact with the hardened air.

Sight magic specific abilities

- See probability of future events
- Block others from seeing future events

CULTURAL

Creation myth

(as taught by the Guild in Gandistra)

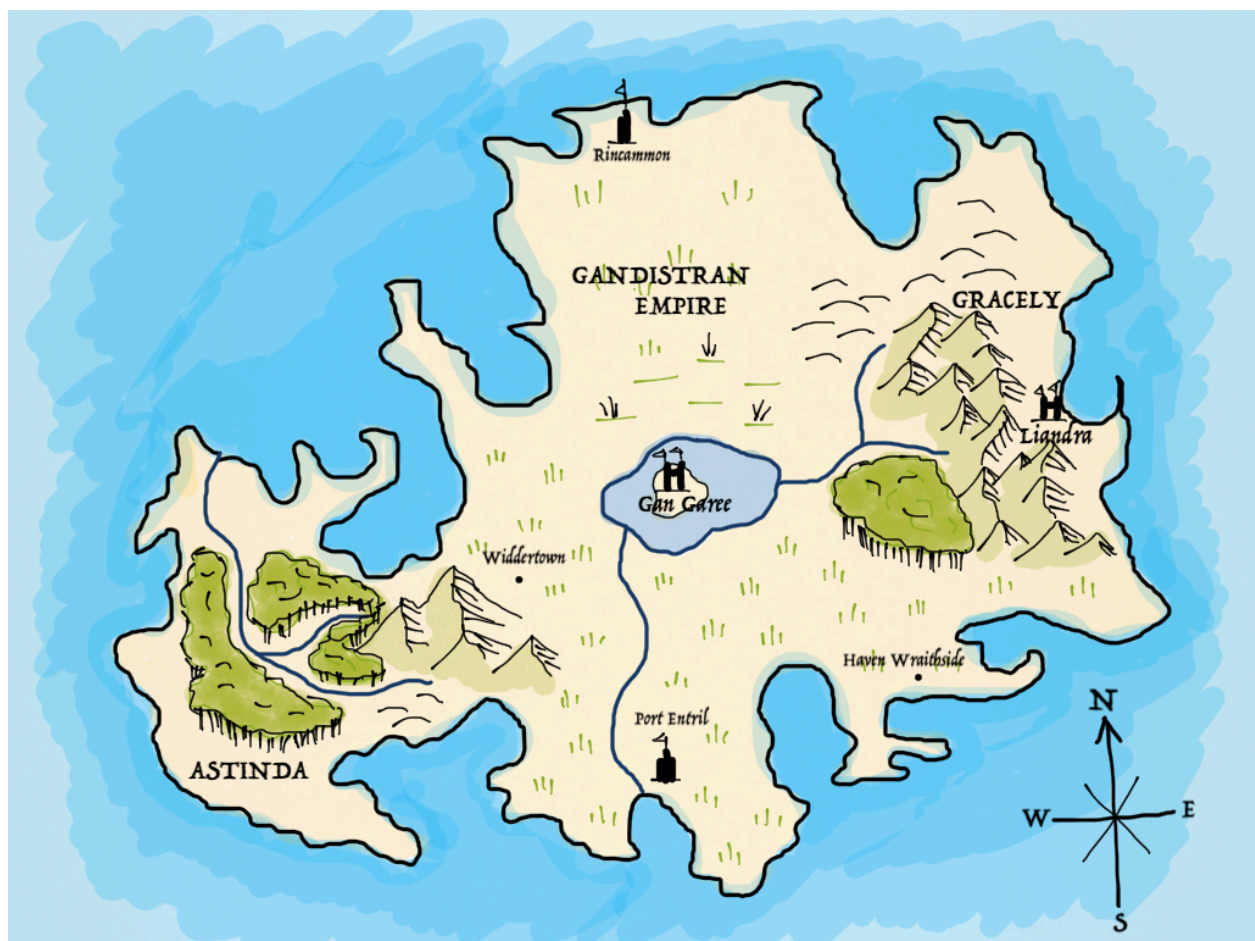
Long ago, the Prime Aspect carved our realm of existence from power, infusing our world with ordered manifestations of its aspects and holding back the void of Chaos in a perfect balance of

Fire, Water, Earth and Air. Yet as the inhabitants of the world moved without thought, according to their aspect, they were vulnerable to the insidious touch of Chaos. The Fates—in knowledge of all that was, that is and that will be—gave a portion of power unto the Prime Aspect, which did endow us each with our own Spirit.

Now Chaos did, in its eternal quest to return all of the Prime Aspect's creations to the void, seed its own disorder into that power and thus our realm. So it is that the Spirit of all humankind, children of the Prime Aspect, returns first to the void before our bodies return to the Prime Aspect, each one having lived their life according to the Fates.

So closely woven was the Chaos power that it could not be separated out from creation. Thus the Prime Aspect did sacrifice, dividing its own powers amongst humankind, blessing us with talent according to our Fates. And so each of us carries within ourselves a portion of the Prime Aspect, given to us to fight and control the hidden Chaos power within.

Nations



- Western mountain range between Astinda and Gandistra is known as Ofgin's Teeth
- Eastern mountain range between Gandistra and Gracely are the Tondron Peaks

Gandistran Empire

Overview and random trivia

- Lots of trade routes - overland (thanks to an impressive network of stone paved highways) and naval (thanks to various ports)
- High basic standard of living thanks to a government funded safety net
- Bathing practices varies according to which of the four original territories people are from. Mixed bathing is common practice in the north (where it's cold and therefore centrally heated communal bathing pools are the norm) and south (where it's tropical and people spend most of the year swimming in rivers/the ocean) but rare in the west (where families tend to bathe together but not whole communities) and frowned upon in the east (where traditionally men and women bathe separately). Gan Garee itself being a melting pot, private residences are designed according to each owner's taste while inns typically have a small communal mixed bathing pool with a number of private bathing stalls to cater. More exclusive inns eschew communal bathing facilities altogether and have in room bathing stalls.
- No restrictions on use of magic, other than use of magic to facilitate a crime. Given the Four's abuse of Puredan, there was a fundamental law passed by the Five requiring uncoerced consent for arrangements, results or information to be legally valid (applies to everything ranging from employment, marriage, property laws, etc).
 - The only exceptions are for prisoners of war (status must be determined by the Five) or individuals who do not have the mental capacity to give consent (e.g. people who are burned out).
 - Forcing consent is considered to be a crime. That means mind control by Spirit magic users (or by use of Puredan) is outlawed, though mind reading or affecting emotions is not (though deep mind reads and strong tampering with emotions without informed consent is socially frowned upon).
 - Use of elemental talents in a way that has the potential to result in serious injury or death to another person is also outlawed.
 - There are exceptions for Highs in training under the supervision of an Adept, High practitioners acting in the course of their assigned duties to the Empire and challengers for the Seated Blending during competition activities.
- Testing requires demonstration of both theoretical knowledge as well as practical application, rather than just raw magical strength.
 - There's no limitation on the number of High practitioners; in fact the Empire can't get enough of them. The economic incentives to become a High practitioner are very strong.
- Housing demand from applicants is constant as testing happens all year around. High applicants normally live at the Gan Garee Guild House, unless they are exceedingly rich or well connected in which case they might make other arrangements, like live in their family's townhouse in the city or stay at a very exclusive inn.
- Everyone is assigned a Guild identifier at age five, when they become old enough to be counted as part of the Guild's annual census.

Origins

- The continent of Gandistra consisted of a dozen provinces which, over time, consolidated themselves into six territories. While talents of all aspects could be found in every territory, each territory tended towards a dominant elemental aspect that allowed humans to live in balance with the land. Thus the cold Northern plains were home to nomadic tribes who were mostly Fire talents; the windswept alpine ranges of the East were inhabited by clans with mainly Air talents, and so on with the rivers and seas of the South and the fertile farmlands and forests of the West. Each territory was ruled by one whose title is 'the Highest', being the strongest practitioner of the predominant elemental aspect.
- People with the Guild talent were considered marked by the Prime Aspect as servants—as they had no talent to speak of, they were considered to be subordinate to the talented who each embodied an elemental aspect of the Prime Aspect. Nulls were considered to be cursed; as children who had been touched by Chaos in the womb, and thus would never gain any talent, nulls were outcast when they did not demonstrate any talent by age five.
- Spirit magic was a rare talent due to its mythological association with the Fates and being less practical due to its limited ability to affect the physical world. However, due to the advantage granted by having insight into the hearts and minds of others as well as other attributes, the Highests each eventually came to rely upon a Counsellor, whose Spirit magic was used to augment the abilities of their Highest.
- There came a time when the Counsellors urged the Highests to make a great treaty uniting all the territories. The Highest of Gracely (that territory being separated from the rest by the Tondron Peaks) declined, as did the Highest of forested Astinda, who saw no advantage to yoking their plentiful territory to the demands of the four in the center.
- The four remaining Highests agreed, each seeing the wisdom in the Counsellors' suggestion, and so the Gandistran Empire was established under the key terms:
 - all historical borders between territories were abolished and combined into a single Empire under Fourfold rule
 - a central seat of government would be established at heart of the four former territories
 - as additional insurance, the treaty would be sealed by the Highests becoming a Blending, which would permanently bond their spirits to each other
 - no Highest would be permitted to appoint their own successor, and all challenging candidates must publicly compete to become Seated so there is proof of their divine right to rule
- The Counsellors had proposed one of them be elevated to Highest and included in the treaty as an equal, but they were rejected by the Four. Concerned that their aspect would continue to be seen as below the other talents, the Counsellors attempted to take over the Four Highests and force them to agree. Alerted by loyalists, the Highests were prepared and the Counsellors proved to be no match for a Blending. The former Counsellors were publicly denounced as agents of Chaos and executed by the newly Seated Four, with the story repeated throughout the Empire until it became common knowledge from the smallest hamlet in the West to the most remote fishing village in the North.

The Fourfold Reign

- The Seated Four devoted much of their reign to the subjugation of Spirit magic users, determined to eliminate the risks of similar treachery in the future. Spirit magic was not outlawed, but became heavily regulated, with any Spirit magic users of Middle strength or higher being required to swear an oath of absolute loyalty and service to the Seated Four under Puredan. There weren't many, since most Spirit magic users of strength either fled to Astinda or Gracely or went into hiding when word of the Counsellors' betrayal spread.
- In exchange for the Guild pushing the Four's religious doctrine as their main form of control over the common population, the Four made the Guild powerful as a priesthood of sorts, giving them funds to open Guild schools throughout the Empire. Core Guild teachings include: putting a heavy emphasis on talent being an individual's manifestation of the Prime Aspect, how increased strength in talent meant an individual embodied more of the Prime Aspect and thus the Seated Blending personified the Prime Aspect, the tainted origins of Spirit magic from the Fates and how its practitioners are therefore more susceptible to being unwitting agents of Chaos.
- The wisdom of the treaty proved itself quickly, with the Empire growing in wealth and prosperity, as the combined talents and resources of the former territories resulted in increased crop yields, better health outcomes, improved infrastructure and extensive trade routes. The Four paid little attention to Astinda (which had fractured into a succession war upon the death of its Highest) or Gracely (there were few well travelled passes in the Tondron Peaks and a sea voyage took the better part of a year regardless of whether it began in Rincammon or Port Entril)
- The original treaty provided the ability for anyone to issue a formal challenge. There were no challengers in the first decade of Four's reign, and few in the second. In Four's third decade of rule, challenges appeared frequently (at least one or two each year) and three of Four came close to defeat. Having grown attached to their positions, the Four passed a law that formal competitions would be held every quarter century, on the pre-text that the constant challenges were a distraction from their duty of leading the Empire, and that it was inefficient and wasteful for the Four to personally face each challenger. Instead, all challengers would face each other to determine who would be worthy to face the Seated High.
- By this point, the natural synergies of the treaty had been realized, and the population explosion that had resulted from the treaty began to strain the Empire's existing resources.
 - In need of additional revenue but being unable to increase taxes further, the Four stopped subsidizing the free Guild schooling (now that the religious doctrine against Spirit magic was solidly entrenched in society), instead requiring citizens to pay for the cost of their own education.
 - Formal training programs (and categorizations of strength and potential) in the four elemental aspects were established as an attempt to increase the population's productivity.
 - No training program was established for Spirit magic. Instead, the Guild (and Puredan oathsworn Spirit magic Adepts) were tasked with locating, subduing and controlling any

Spirit magic users who demonstrated Middle potential or greater.

- Universities dedicated to the research of new applications of magic were also established, directly funded by the Four.

- Basic grounding (Low level) in an aspect became the baseline for employment, with critical disciplines and important posts mandating certification as a Middle, all citizens (except for those residing in the most remote locations) scrambled to pay for the Guild run schooling (the only Empire approved method of certification and training).

The First Fivefold Blending

- As a precaution against the time of the first competitions, the Four became increasingly paranoid and began to demand Puredan oaths from anyone with Middle strength or greater, regardless of aspect.
- The pace of peaceful applications of magical innovation proved to be slow, so the Four cut research funding for projects that did not have potential combat applications.
- Using Puredan oathsworn practitioners who were armed with experimental magical techniques, the Four began working to expand the Empire's western border. Thus began the Astindan War, which ended only when the Puredan oathsworn annihilated the Astindan forces in a suicidal attack that laid waste to most of the farmland in western Gandistra, leading to famine across the Empire. Sensing an opportunity, the few hidden Spirit magic users who remained, stoked the simmering resentment of citizens and turning popular sentiment against the Four, who were due to defend the Fourfold Throne against challengers.
- Meanwhile, a young, newly elected High Master Lugal was horrified to discover the Four's use of the Guild to manipulate religious doctrine to oppress Spirit magic. He gets in contact with the hidden Spirit magic users and other rebellious factions, and they plan to send in a wave of challengers as part of the competitions. There aren't many candidates, since the majority of potential Highs had long been made into Puredan oathsworn and those had all perished in the Astindan War
- As part of Lugal's research, he had uncovered a strange riddle amongst the old Guild writings relating to Spirit magic. With help from the free Spirit magic users, they decipher the message. Written by one of the old Counsellors, it gave them the knowledge of Blending, the secret ability that was the key to the Four's strength
- At the competitions, the Seated Four surprises their challengers by appearing as a Blending rather than individuals. Thanks to solving the riddle, the challengers were prepared and faced the Four as the first Fivefold Blending. The ensuing magical battle turned the city into an enormous crater but saw the Five emerge victorious

The Fivefold Reign

- The Seated Five spent their rule undoing much of the harm the previous Four had done, including granting full rights to Spirit magic users, implementing strict controls around the use of Puredan, stabilizing the economy and nurturing the next generations of talents.
- While some of the previous structures and secrets were retained (e.g. Guild schools, competitions, universities and results of their research, the knowledge of Blending), others were disbanded in favor of new ones (e.g. Advisory Board)

- Unfortunately, most of their progress has been hampered by a decades long on/off war with Astinda, that has no end in sight as the Five's attempts at peace-making have been rebuffed repeatedly. Many of their protégés have perished one way or another while fighting Astinda
- Though the Five remain undefeated, their time is running out. They have been relying on an experimental technique to extend their lives and the price is taking a toll. They must find worthy successors in the next competitions, or the Empire they've dedicated their lives to will fall

Factions

The Seated Blending on the Fivefold Throne (the monarchs)

- Scope of authority: ultimate rulers of the Empire, responsible for Gandistra's defense (each of them individually and collectively as a Blending are weapons of mass destruction) and direction of government policy. The actual day to day administration of the Empire is delegated to the Advisory Board
- As the most powerful magic users, they are also the notional heads of magical research by the Universities (this will not be a big part of Rewritten Book 1, just mentioned), magical training by the Adepts and command the High practitioners for their aspect
- Mandate for rule: combination of sheer magical power and divine right as the closest personifications of the Prime Aspect, so their will/actions are considered to embody the law. New rulers are chosen via a single elimination tournament (heavily focused on magical combat) and each reign lasts for 25 years.
- The current Seated Blending have been the undefeated champions of the last 3 competitions. They rose to power by defeating the previous Fourfold Seated Blending 75 years ago. Their goal is to nurture the stability of the Empire

Adepts (effectively heads of the royal guard/army generals)

- High practitioners hand picked by the Seated Blending as their deputies, so their loyalties to the Seated Blending are close to absolute
- Main duties are to oversee the training of potential Highs and subsequent deployment of trained Highs

The Advisory Board/Nobility (basically stewards)

- Nobility is granted by the Seated Blending as a reward for exemplary service. Recipients are given grants of land along with the hereditary title of "Lord" or "Lady". The non-hereditary title of "High Lord" or "High Lady" is conferred for extraordinary service as an indication of high favor.
- Advisory Board is comprised of 5 Advisors who administer the Empire under delegated authority of the Seated Blending. They make decisions and pass judgement in matters that relate to established laws in their area, draft and implement new policies and laws at the direction of the Seated Blending, and may propose new policies/laws for the

consideration of the Seated Blending.

- Fire (mining and industry)
- Water (fishing, sea trade, sanitation)
- Earth (farming, healing, building)
- Air (overland transport, communications)
- Spirit (intelligence, law enforcement, diplomacy)
- Tend to excel in administration and logistics rather than in their aspect - though as with any governmental post, they must qualify as Middles at minimum. Some may have High potential but choose not to sit the High exam
- Technically appointed by the Seated Blending for life. The first Advisory Board was appointed by merit. By tradition, Advisors select and train their own successors (whose appointment is confirmed by the Seated Blending when the previous Advisor dies).
- Most Advisors were made eventually nobles by various Seated Blendings.
- Over time, noble lineage became an important part of the selection criteria, with many Advisors preparing their bloodline heirs to succeed them as Advisors (or if not, securing prestigious positions in an Advisor's staff)
- Current Advisors are of houses: Ruhl (Water), Noll (Spirit), Maylock (Fire), Moord (Earth), Razas (Air)

The Guild

A weird bureaucracy of priests, career advisors, recruiters and trackers.

- All members have the Guild talent, which is the ability to sense and rate the strength of anyone in any aspect whenever they are in contact with the power. In addition, Guild members are immune to direct attempts to affect them using any of the aspects (most useful in defending against Earth/Spirit/Water magic trying to directly affect their minds/bodies, whereas Air/Fire by nature tends to affect immediate environment which Guild members can't block)
- They maintain a register of the population, taking an annual census of everyone's magical powers and strengths
- The Guild's primary duty is to locate and foster the pipeline of Middle and High talent in service of the Empire - kind of like a bounty system (for each potential Middle or High they find and each Middle or High who passes)
- All members start with the rank of Initiate. Becoming skilled at performing a Search is required before promotion to Acolyte. Acolytes are sent to assist Adepts in finding and training Middle and High talents (also in locating those who misuse talents).
- Masters are assigned to individual towns to carry out the Guild's duty
- The Guild is led by the High Master, who is elected by the Masters, Adepts and the Seated Blending (each faction determines how they will vote according to their own rules)
- Being the only aspect neutral faction and its members being immune to being influenced by any aspect and in their role as a pseudo priesthood, the Guild also runs the competitions to become the Seated Blending every quarter century

Astinda

- Gandistra's western neighbor
- Made up of various warring clans, each with a leading Blending

Gracely

- Gandistra's eastern neighbor
- Governed by an Assembly of 15 Blendings. Each Assembly member is a High talent in their aspect (the rest of their Blending are Middles). All spots in an Assembly Blending are determined via magical competitions

Technology

Since magical talent is commonplace, things we would normally develop mechanical solutions for don't necessarily exist because people in this world simply use magic instead.

Technological solutions only exist when:

- 1) it takes too much magic to construct/maintain/pay for a magical solution; and/or
- 2) it's too complex to be easily handled with magic; and/or
- 3) economies of scale are required

Main characters

Lorand Coll (Earth magic)

Our protagonist. He's a farmboy born and bred in Widdertown, the second of six children. By tradition, the farm is passed down to the eldest. He used to be a dreamer, but when Lorand was ten, his older brother burned himself out defending the farm against raiders. With Mildon's death, the family struggled to survive on the farm, often needing to borrow money in order to continue sending Lorand and his younger siblings to the Guild-run school.

In his Earth magic classes, Lorand displayed an innate talent for Healing, particularly for animals. He also spent a year learning about cures and rare poisons from a travelling herbalist. There was talk of sending him to the nearest city to be apprenticed to a proper physician—sponsored by the Guild—but his father Camil refused as Lorand's ability to Encourage crops was the only thing keeping them ahead of their debt payments.

Since then, Lorand has dreamed of being able to save up enough silver to make up for his absence. He hopes to be able to get a physician's licence, find patronage from a local lord and clear the debt from the family farm.

He ends up winning a place as a challenger for the Fivefold Throne.

Talitha Riven (Earth magic)

She's Lorand's best friend and the third of five children. Her father, Phor Riven, owns the neighboring farm. She grew up listening to stories from her maternal grandmother (an outsider who was never quite accepted by Widdertown folk due to her different beliefs). Unlike her siblings, Talitha looks a lot like her grandmother; as a result, she was often bullied and excluded as a child.

Talitha has a vivid imagination and is known around town for her escapades. Most of the time, Lorand ends up taking the blame for the consequences of her ideas. Despite her strong Earth magic talent, her parents have been unable to find her a match, and no one is willing to take her as an apprentice, thanks to her reputation for being flighty.

Not that any of it matters to Talitha - she intends to leave Widdertown the day she comes of age. The only reason she hasn't left yet is because of her grandmother, who is dying from an illness no one recognizes.

She spends her time trying to find somewhere she'll fit in, and comes to realize that it's ok if she doesn't exactly fit in anywhere. Ends up making a life for herself as a high end courtesan in Gan Garee.

Secondary characters

Delin Moord (Earth magic)

Born into nobility, Delin is used to getting what he wants by virtue of his position, wealth, or charm. He spent the last three years at Regisard's most prestigious university and was recently expelled for misuse of talent. Thanks to his father's influence as a High Lord and the Earth Advisor, he evaded a sentence to the Deep Caverns and an official note on his Guild record.

Unfortunately, due to this incident, his father has refused to name Delin as his successor on the grounds that his temperament and abilities are unsuitable for an Advisor's position. He's got a year to change his father's mind, otherwise he'll be disowned for good.

He decides to make a try for the Fivefold Throne, figuring it would be a nice change to the status quo if his father had to bow down to Delin and obey his orders for life.

Solthia Noll (Spirit magic)

At fourteen, Solthia is a prodigy of Spirit magic—just like her common born mother Bensia who narrowly missed out on a place in the last round of competitions. The daughter of Lord Sembrin Noll (chief secretary to his brother, Spirit Advisor High Lord Ephaim Noll) is the pride of House

Noll, pre-eminent amongst all noble houses, and their hope for a Noll seated on the Fivefold Throne.

Now that Solthia is about to come of age, old and scandalous rumors about the circumstances of her parents' marriage are the talk of Gan Garee again. And after twenty years of playing dutiful wife and mother, it might be Bensia who's ready for a second chance at being the Seated High in Spirit magic.

Caught between her family's expectations and her mother's shadow, Solthia discovers that she doesn't want the life of power she has been born into.

Minor characters

Camil Coll (Earth magic)

Lorand's father and a family man. Camil is a potential Middle who never took the exams. He has a strong talent in Persuasion but his skill in Encouragement is so weak that Low talents with an affinity for Encouragement can do better. His dream was to explore the Gandistran Empire, by running a travelling menagerie of exotic performing animals.

As the youngest, Camil was never meant to inherit the farm, however his elder brother and sister had such strong High potential that the Guild sent them to Gan Garee, and they both became High practitioners. Things were good for a few years and Camil got to travel around with his menagerie—he almost made it as far as Haven Wraithside—until the elder Coll siblings died defending the border against Astindan marauders thirty years back.

Camil gave up his Bonded animals, and returned to Widdertown to run the farm and look after his aging parents (as was his duty). He married his wife mainly because she was a local girl with a strong skill in Encouragement to keep the farm going. Lots of late night heavy drinking (when he thinks his wife and children are asleep), resigned to never being able to leave Widdertown again.

Grami Riven

Talitha's maternal grandmother. She's an outcast from Astinda who somehow survived the climb through Ofgin's Teeth—alone, in winter—and found refuge and love at one of the smaller farms in Widdertown. Her eldest daughter inherited the farm while her younger children sought their fortunes elsewhere in the Empire. When her eldest daughter married Phor Riven, their farm became part of the larger Riven farm.

Her eldest daughter died in childbirth and now she lives with her son-in-law Phor Riven and her grandchildren. With her husband and eldest dead, and other children gone, no one left in Widdertown remembers her real name. Most people call her Grami Riven (even though she's no

Riven by blood or marriage) and think she's an eccentric recluse due to her worship of the Fates rather than the Prime Aspect.

Elmin Ofgin (Earth magic)

A member of the Seated Blending, one of the rulers seated on the Fivefold Throne. Their battle with the previous Seated Blending on the Fourfold Throne was just the first legend in a body of mythology. It is rumoured that the unnaturally long and youthful lifespan of the Seated Blending was due to his talent—according to Guild records, all members of the current Seated Blending have at least a century of years, yet they appear no older than four or five decades at most.

Elmin's strength in Earth magic is second to none, proven not just in the arena every quarter-century but every few years whenever the Astindans grow bold and come raiding at the western border. The small mountain range between Astinda and the western border of Gandistra (about a day's travel by foot from Widdertown) is known in Gandistra as Ofgin's Teeth as they were supposedly created by Elmin's power—the few historical accounts from that time period and some academic treatises assert Elmin and his Blendingmates worked as Blending to augment the pre-existing terrain.

Adept Hestir (Earth magic)

Known as Elmin Ofgin's Shadow, first amongst the five Earth magic Adepts. Despite only being in her fourth decade, she's a battle-scarred veteran of two wars—one fought by Elmin's side and one against him, as a member of an Astindan Blending. People in Gan Garee learned long ago to keep their thoughts about her ultimate loyalties and her exact relationship with the Seated High in Earth magic buried so deep that a High in Spirit magic couldn't dig it out of their minds.

Hestir is rarely seen in Gan Garee, as she and her group of elite Highs spend most of the year travelling around the Empire to carry out the will of their Seated High. Occasionally, a group of particularly promising Highs in training are permitted to join Hestir's band.

Master Lugal (Guild member for Widdertown)

A former High Master, Lugal took an early retirement of sorts to Widdertown twenty-five years ago, after thirty years of loyal service in Gan Garee. While he no longer leads the Guild, he is still held in high respect by Adepts, other Masters and the Seated Blending. Most of his time is spent running the Widdertown school, teaching children aged five through fifteen about the Prime Aspect, history, geography and basic magical theory.

Plot

A young man leaves home to become a powerful magician in an attempt to save his family's farm from being seized by a corrupt agent of the nobility. He discovers that the seeds of

corruption are widespread across the Empire and vows to change that by becoming part of the next Seated Blending.

Act 1: Leaving Widdertown

Act 2: Becoming a High practitioner

Act 3: Winning a place in the competitions

Character Plot: Lorand overcomes his fear of his own potential

- **Young Lorand:** has always been naturally strong in Earth magic for his age and was constantly showing off.
- **Mildon's burnout and death:** Lorand feels like it was his fault that Mildon died (because he had been doing some typical showing off which attracted the attention of some Astinda raiders).
- **Testing for Middle:** Talitha pushed him into this because her grandma got sick and she was hoping Lorand could heal her
- **Audit:** he knows his bribe only bought his family a year or so and that the corrupt local agent of the nobility has been steadily increasing the number of bribes demanded. It all compounds his guilt, he decides that since he was responsible for Mildon's death which sent them spiraling into debt, he's got to be the one to save them. Lugal and Talitha convince him that trying to qualify for High practitioner is better than his original plan of apprenticing to a small town physician - especially since High practitioners get specialized training beyond what any small town physician would be able to give him and the Empire guarantees their income - to the point where he might be able to buy out the family farm in a few years
- **Qualifying:** something happens during his initial qualifying test that triggers memories of what happened to Mildon, he fails the first two attempts and scrapes through on the third. It's a turning point.
- ~~**Testing for High:** he's feeling confident in himself and his abilities. Talitha's failure hits him pretty hard. He feels extremely guilty for achieving her dream.~~
- ~~**Training:** Lorand notices a lot of corruption in the nobility, similar to what he had experienced. He gets mixed reactions from his group and ends up pretty fired up to win a place in the competitions so he can try to change things.~~
- **Return to Widdertown:** he manages to sneak a visit to the corrupt agent, threatening retribution if said agent tries to blackmail his father again.

Milieu Plot: Leaving Widdertown

- **Testing for Middle:** The in-world equivalent of the high school graduation exam. The exam is optional, but a passing grade is required for many occupations - healers/physicians and governmental posts included. He passes. Master Lugal, the local Guild representative, is so impressed by Lorand's results that he comes to the Coll farm with an offer of an early apprenticeship, all expenses paid by the Guild. Since Lorand hasn't hit his majority and the Colls are still up to their ears in debt, Camil refuses to give

him leave. Lorand decides to find a way to save enough silver to make up for his absence from the farm

- **A traveling herbalist:** It's harder to earn money in Widdertown than Lorand thought. He can't heal without a licence, every farm already has a few Encouragers of their own (and besides Camil disapproves of him using his magic to help another farmer when he could help his own family), most of the animals have been domesticated for generations and are easily managed by anyone with the slightest ability in Earth magic, and Decay is viewed as dangerous (not that he's any match for Talitha in that skill anyway). A chance encounter with a traveling herbalist gives him an opportunity to earn some extra silver.
- **Audit:** By the time he turns fifteen, Lorand's finally saved enough silver. He spends all day trying to work up the courage to broach the subject with his father. That afternoon, the local lord's agent visits their farm for an annual audit of their taxes, apparently the official records show that the Colls are short (due to the agent skimming off the top). Lorand gives up his silver to bribe the agent into correcting the records—this time.
- **The Guild:** Lorand goes to Master Lugal to check if the scholarship is still on the table. Unfortunately, it is not—it was given to Talitha instead. Lorand begs to be allowed to go along and train with her, promising he'll earn his own way.

Event Plot: Becoming a High Practitioner

- **Testing for Middle:** two components - a theory component that covers all four abilities relating to their aspect and a practical component (they can choose which ability to demonstrate). Tests are held twice a year. The first test is free for everyone, but people who want to test again are charged a fee.
- **Training period:** All potential Highs have to go through a mandatory training program, which involves them going around the Empire doing things for the benefit of the Empire, in order to discover where they would best serve the Empire.
- **Testing for High:** Similar to the test for Middle, the first three attempts are free, but subsequent attempts are self-funded. The qualification test changes every quarter. Aspirants are given a set time limit to complete a complex task, which requires demonstration of basic competence in all 4 Earth magic abilities (at a Middle level), and advanced aptitude (beyond Middle level) in at least 2 of the abilities. If/when they pass, they get the option to enlist and take an official position as a High, serving under an Adept of their aspect. All High practitioners draw wages from the Empire, who reserves the right to deploy them wherever.

Relationship Plot: Lorand and Delin

- **Instant dislike:** Lorand's used to being the pride of Widdertown, the genius of his generation with the brightest future. Delin makes him feel like a ignorant country hick and his three years at university means he outclasses Lorand all the time
- **Delin is jealous:** Despite Delin being better-looking, more accomplished, richer and with more influence, Lorand is more popular than him and he can't stand it.

- **Lorand catches up:** Delin gives some sort of wrong answer in training. Lorand answers correctly and Delin fumes and feels even more insecure
- **Delin beats him up:** Unfortunately for Lorand, they move onto individual combat training and Delin is way better. He overhears Delin's father tearing him a new one and ends up feeling sorry for Delin
- **Lorand saves Delin's life:** From an accident or something. Delin's extremely confused about it
- **Delin decides he owes Lorand a debt:** he finds out about the agent's extortion of Lorand's family and takes care of it by doing something horrifying to the agent.
- **Lorand finds out:** Lorand returns to Widdertown, with the aim of paying off the agent and making a few threats so the agent will stop the extortion. However, Delin's done such a thorough job of messing up the agent to the point that Lorand can't Heal him. Lorand returns to Widdertown to confront Delin, who shrugs and says they're even now. This, on top of all the other issues with the nobility Lorand's witnessed during his time in training, makes him decide to compete in the next round of competitions.

Relationship Plot: Lorand and Talitha

- **Testing for Middle:** She also passes, the second strongest talent after Lorand (he's first, by a wide margin, mainly because Talitha didn't show up for the theory portion of her exam). There's only so many scholarships to go around though; she's both jealous and upset that Lorand gets a ticket out of Widdertown but he can't take it. She would have been next in line...if she had done her exam properly.
- **Trying again:** Talitha persuades Master Lugal to let her take the exam again. This time, she beats Lorand's previous result and secures the scholarship. She has no interest or talent in healing though; she wants to be sent to the capitol to test for High. Master Lugal is unconvinced, but when Lorand begs to join her, Lugal changes his mind (he thinks Lorand's got High potential). He can sponsor them a one way ticket to the capitol and one week of lodging at the Gan Garee Guild House; beyond that, it's up to them.
- **Qualifying:** Talitha passes easily, but Lorand struggles. He squeaks past, barely.
- ~~**Testing for High:** The tables are turned. He passes, she fails on the theory component. She tries to talk Adept Hestir into letting her have another chance and is turned down. Talitha leaves and try as he might, Lorand can't find her.~~
- **Return to Widdertown:** Lorand's supervising Adept takes his group of Highs in training to the western border, passing through Widdertown en route. There's no sign of Talitha; she never came home. He manages to heal her grandmother though, who gives him a message and keepsake of some sort for Talitha.
- **Finding Talitha:** Lorand's group returns to Gan Garee, goes out to celebrate their official status as High practitioners, no longer in training. Based on the clues her grandmother gave him, Lorand tracks Talitha down in Gan Garee. Turns out she decided to stay in Gan Garee and work for Jovvi, since she needed the money to pay a High practitioner to travel all the way to Widdertown to heal her grandmother, and being a courtesan is the fastest and most lucrative method left now that she's failed her High exams. That gives

Lorand plenty of scope to put foot in mouth by first saying "I healed her" and then being "no woman of good repute would do this" judgemental, etc in the way that recalls how other Widdertown kids used to judge Talitha in the past for how she looked, etc. It ends in a massive, massive fight.

- **Reconciliation:** Lorand gets over himself, apologizes, convinces Talitha to join him in the competitions

Assuming this all happens by way of Lorand partaking in a drunken "woo, we all passed the High exams, now let's go get blind drunk and get laid" outing, I could even keep the spirit of the only decent sequence (the tavern visit) in canon Book 1 and give Jovvi, Rion and Naran cameos.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter	Plot points	Timeline
1	Establish: ● Widdertown, near Gandistra's western border with Astinda ● Lorand is a precocious showoff ● Talitha's great at getting into trouble ● Mildon is idolized by Lorand ● People think Grami Riven is weird ● Mildon's burnout ● Saved by Elmin? Or Hestir?	Summer, 3 years ago; Lorand's tenth birthday
2	Testing for Middle ● Talitha's absence from the exam room ● Lorand working his way through the exam ● Practical exam—Talitha's skill with Decay, Lorand's skill with Healing ● Lorand's scholarship, Camil's refusal	Spring; Lorand is thirteen (almost fourteen) and Talitha is about to turn fifteen
3	A ticket out of Widdertown ● Saving money over the summer with a traveling herbalist ● Grami Riven's sickness ● The audit ● Convincing Lugal to let him tag along with Talitha ● Lugal sends along a letter <u>Detailed scene by scene outline</u> 3.1: Talitha in Widdertown ● Another time skip, she's almost 15 now ● Open with Grami, a story? ● She's thinking about Lorand's scholarship, nervous about her plan ● She goes into town, to see Lugal	Early autumn; Lorand is fourteen and Talitha has probably just turned fifteen

	• Passes tavern and its occupants 3.2: Lorand, Camil and the agent • He's somewhere out far out of town, collecting herbs for money • Lorand goes home and finds the agent collecting rent from his father • The rent doesn't add up to what they harvested • Do they collect in coin or in produce? 3.3: Lugal • Talitha gets a high enough score to get the scholarship • She tries to him to sponsor her to Gan Garee • Lorand runs in to beg to join her • He agrees and sends a letter along with them	
4	Gan Garee • Registering for training • Exploring the Guild House • Delin and Solthia make an appearance • Rion cameo? • Exploring Gan Garee • Jovvi cameo 4.1: Lugal • He contemplates a letter from the Seated Blending (? or the current High Master?), his own death, legacy and the future of the Guild and the Empire. Camil's words hit him harder than he let on. • Talitha shows up to hassle him about her results—her score is a high enough score to get the scholarship • She tries to convince him to sponsor her to Gan Garee • Lorand runs in to beg to join her • He agrees and sends a (sealed?) letter in reply (? along with them) 4.2: The Guild House • They travel by public coach (they have to work part of the fare or something?) • The capital city makes a stunning first impression. It's a mish-mash of old and new, divided into five concentric rings, connected by radial paths and gates. Each has a dedicated defensive or other purpose with one aspect dominating each ring: Water (the lake), Fire (continually burning bonfires on the watch towers), Air (a very high ringed walkway?), Earth (massive fortifications) and Spirit (contains the palace, a miniature microcosm of the aspects with five point symmetry) at the centre • They find their rooms in the Guild House and drop their gear • They get lost while trying to find the dining hall and stumble into somewhere they're not supposed to be and overhear/see something they're not supposed to see.	Begins the day after Chapter 3, takes place over 4 weeks (by caravan) and 3 days (by boat)

	Something related to the competitions and the possibility of them being called early? • Hestir/Elmin encounter? • They beat a quick retreat and go out to explore the city 4.3: Gan Garee • They got in late, so they go to explore the entertainment quarter. • Contrast what they've heard from the guardsmen passing through Widdertown to what they see. Reality is both more amazing and less amazing than they expected • Spirit magic in action, somehow. Bubbles of influence? • What kind of experimental practical applications of magic work	
5	Training—overview of their schedule • Entering Gan Garee and finding the Guild House • Registering for training • Delin and Solthia make an appearance • Rion cameo? • Jovvi cameo • Group training on universal abilities • Aspect specific training • Combat training 5.1: The Guild House • The capital city makes a stunning first impression. It's a mish mash of old and new, divided into five concentric rings, connected by radial paths and gates. Each has a dedicated defensive or other purpose with one aspect dominating each ring: Water (the lake), Fire (continually burning bonfires on the watch towers), Air (a very high ringed walkway?), Earth (massive fortifications) and Spirit (contains the palace, a miniature microcosm of the aspects with five-point symmetry) at the centre • They find their rooms in the Guild House and drop their gear • They get lost while trying to find the dining hall and stumble into somewhere they're not supposed to be and overhear/see something they're not supposed to see. Something related to the competitions and the possibility of them being called early? • Hestir/Elmin encounter? • They beat a quick retreat and go out to explore the city 5.2: Gan Garee • They got in late, so they go to explore the entertainment quarter. • Contrast what they've heard from the guardsmen passing through Widdertown to what they see. Reality is both more	Begins immediately after Chapter 4

	amazing and less amazing than they expected • Spirit magic in action, somehow. Bubbles of influence? • What kind of experimental/practical applications of magic work 5.3: First week of training	
6	Training—overview of their schedule • Delin and Solthia make an appearance • Rion cameo? • Group training on universal abilities • Aspect specific training • Combat training Slice of life • Talitha's in theoretical lectures and hating it • Solthia's doing well, but subdued • Lorand is embarrassed • Talitha and Solthia go out, they invite Lorand but he says no • Lorand writes a letter home 6.1: Lorand • Talitha's already left her room, he presumes that she's gone early for breakfast (in truth she went to go investigate the address Jovvi gave her) • He bites the bullet, tries to apologize to Delin about damaging his furniture • Delin spends the whole time making fun of Lorand for being a country hick • Lorand gets mad and throws what he heard about Delin not being a Lord—maybe some stuff about the worldbuilding on how nobility works here? • Delin's a much better player at this game than Lorand is, so he comes out of the exchange the winner • Solthia catches the tail end of it and uses the opportunity to build rapport with Lorand on their way to class 6.2: Establish social dynamics in their intake • Rion is their instructor! He's on a temporary home assignment after a turn at the Astindan front. He's adopted and Delin makes sure that everyone knows it. • Unfortunately for Delin, he's no match for Rion in any regard. He takes it out on Lorand instead • Lorand and Delin are both kind of upset at how Talitha and Solthia are into Rion • Irritatingly, the only classes they have are combat classes which are almost free for alls—the education on magical theory they got as Middles is supposed to be sufficient for them to start researching their own thing	Day after Chapter 5

	• Explain some stuff about what the written component is—it's part civic duty part academic research thesis. Collaboration is permitted but comes with its own risks • Lorand decides to use what he learned from Eslinna and research how to heal or prevent burnout • Talitha is super frustrated because while Decay is her thing, its applications are typically boring and straightforward, or involve killing a lot of people. The texts in the Guild library are very dense and obscure and the only one who can make any sense of them is Delin, and he isn't helping anyone • Build in something about Drowd's model of power and talent or one of the Five Fundamental Theorems	
7	Training—overview of their schedule • Group training on universal abilities • Aspect specific training Slice of life • Talitha's in theoretical lectures and hating it • Talitha and Solthia go out, they invite Lorand but he says no • Lorand writes a letter home Specialized training—Healing clinic • Meets Driffin, who is very impressed by Lorand, asks if he wants to earn extra silver in additional after hours shifts • He finds out as much as possible about Grami's illness • Talitha's spending a lot of late nights away from the Guild House 7.1: Lorand writes a letter home • It's addressed to his mother, care of Master Lugal, but written for both the Coll and Riven families. It's the only thing he can send them, because he still doesn't have money, and the only reason he can afford to send the letter is because he's sending it with the Guild's normal dispatches to Master Lugal so it didn't cost him anything. • He gives a quick overview of what they've been doing: basic combat training with staffs in the first month, progressing to spears in the second month and the last month has been bringing in magic into the mix, but restricted from using their aspect-specific skills. • They're learning to fight mostly one to one, he doesn't mention that Delin keeps beating the crap out of him • Next month they're supposed to start aspect specific training, and he's sad about that, because Solthia won't be there and she's the only one who can really rein Delin in • He asks after news of Grami's health, sends some information he's researched in the library, mentions he'll be doing a placement in a clinic from next month	Midwinter, a few months after Chapter 6 Talitha has turned sixteen

	• He includes some words of advice to Jeris. He wants to ask his father about whether Ravis is holding up his end of the bargain but decides against putting it into writing because it could make things worse • He ends by saying that he misses them all and he'll try and come home as soon as he can, he just doesn't know when. • He goes all judgemental on Talitha about a few flings she had with some of the other aspirants 7.2: Talitha in the Healing Clinic • They're in the main clinic in the Air district, and Driffin is giving them a tour of the facilities • The other three are super interested, she had expected that Solthia would be doing something else but it turns out that Driffin is doing some experiments with mental healing and Solthia is there training under another High in Spirit magic	
8	Slice of life • Talitha's in theoretical lectures and hating it • Talitha and Solthia go out, they invite Lorand but he says no Preparing for the Trials: • Driffin is so impressed with Lorand that he offers him a job after hours at the clinic, because they always need help. Lorand accepts and decides to start immediately • Delin's disappeared off somewhere so that leaves Solthia and Talitha. Frustrated at not having any money and no idea what to do about her Trial, Talitha wants to be anywhere other than the Guild House. • Solthia takes her for a girls night out somewhere unexpected and they have a Deep And Meaningful Talk • They talk about Lorand and the Trials, two topics that Talitha wants to avoid. • Talitha is super frustrated and worried about her Trial of Duty, which is the written component: part civic duty part academic research thesis. Collaboration is permitted but comes with its own risks. While Decay is her thing, its applications are typically boring and straightforward, or involve killing a lot of people. The texts in the Guild library are very dense and obscure and the only one who can make any sense of them is Delin, and he isn't helping anyone • Solthia gives Talitha some advice about Drowd's model of power and talent or one of the Five Fundamental Theorems • Talitha brings up Delin and what she overheard Solthia's mother saying on the night before the first day of classes. • Solthia confesses that she hates the role she has to live up to; she just wants to be a Healer but her family won't have it • At the end of the night, Solthia goes back to the Guild House and Talitha goes to find Jovvi	

	Specialized training—excursion to the western border? Deep Gaverns? • Lorand decides to use what he learned from Eslinna and research how to heal or prevent burnout • Lorand hates it • There's an accident of some sort; he saves Delin's life	
9	Qualifying—first attempt • Magical spectacle! It's a crazy maze • Talitha passes • Lorand fails Qualifying—Lorand's last attempt • Overcomes his fear of burnout • Finally passes • Runs into Solthia instead; they have a deep and meaningful conversation • Turns out Talitha's a working girl at Jovvi's exclusive high end pleasure house! • Massive, massive fight 9.1: Lorand • Spring is here, and they've finished their aspect specific training. Lorand basically stuck with the clinic after a few other day excursions elsewhere and has submitted his paper, though he's still waiting for news from the Seated Five • The rest of his intake tried other stuff: Talitha weirdly went to work in the Treasury, hunting down counterfeit coinage—as far as Lorand knows, she still hasn't started on her Trial but she's been very tight lipped about her plans, Delin passed his Trial of Duty early on the strength of whatever research he did, and Solthia went into law enforcement with her uncle and also passed her Trial of Duty. • He notices that Solthia has been acting differently towards Delin, and Delin himself has been tormenting him less and less because he's developing some sort of fascination with Solthia • He's thinking about all of this on his way to meet Mardimill at the very top of Gan Garee to be taken to the Trial of Mastery • As he passes through the palace, he inadvertently takes a wrong turn which takes him to the Earth Advisor's office. He overhears a conversation between Delin and his father, who warns him to remain in control to not risk another scandal. Delin's father is cold, manipulative and horrible to Delin to the point where he finally gains some empathy for him 9.2: Talitha • Mardimill flies them there—this time the Trial is located near	Spring, Lorand is fifteen

an abandoned section of the Deep Caverns, a network of caves underneath the Tondron Peaks

- Legends say all sorts of things about the Deep Caverns: that the Four used to do all sorts of horrible experiments down here and they stumbled into unknown magic that corrupted them, that the Five thought they had killed the Four in the uprising but the Four were protected by some evil power and their still living bodies were entombed somewhere in the Deep Caverns
- It's a gigantic 3D maze where the walls are thirty feet high and made of different elements. The top is sealed off after the Aspirants are dropped in at random points. They have five hours to attain two goals: 1) find the center and 2) collect 2 keys along the way
- Basic competence in all 4 abilities (at a Middle level) plus combat is required for survival in the maze
- Advanced aptitude (beyond Middle level) in at least 2 of the abilities is required to get 2 of the keys. You can keep whatever keys you earn through multiple attempts but you always have to start from the edge of the maze.
- Like the tests for Middle, cheating (either via linking or cooperation) is prohibited. Interference is not (since it's too easy for accidents to happen), but it is frowned upon and if determined to be deliberate, carries a heavy penalty
- They swear an oath under Spirit magic to maintain secrecy

9.3: Lorand

- He tries to use his Earth senses to navigate, but the maze is shielded, and there are so many people and things using magic that it's kind of blinding.
- His strategy is to rely mainly on Healing and Encouragement, his two strongest skills, especially after honing them in the clinic for weeks, which means stealth mostly.
- He's not as good at shielding as Talitha, but she's been coaching him: he layers on three shields - one against Earth magic in general, the most familiar and the most solid, one against mental attacks and a general shield made of power, which won't entirely protect against the other elements but should weaken their attacks
- The hardened Air on top has blurred out the sky so he can't navigate using the sun. He picks a direction at random, trusting that he'll be able to use enough Decay to blast through obstacles
- The first one he runs across is an artificial infinite river. Turns out it's sentient and tries to engulf him. He gets out by churning up all the dirt and turning it into a sludgy mud pit and filling it with plant life, then growing himself some ropes to climb out. When he finally does, a wall that looked like a cliff parts and sends him into the next part of the maze and

	drops a key • There's a chime that lets him know the first hour is up. He runs deeper into the maze 9.4: Lorand • There's an hour left to go. He still doesn't have his second key. He begins thinking that trying to rely on Healing was a bad choice—just like it was for the first exam—and can't solve the puzzle for how he demonstrates it. • He had made it to the inner part of the maze by following first Talitha and then Solthia. Talitha had basically wrapped herself in shields and brute forced her way through the maze, basically blasting through or disintegrating every single wall she came across in a straight line to the center. The last he'd seen, she was trying to fight a sandstorm, at which point he decided to backtrack and find another way. • Halfway through the allotted time, the maze itself shifted and he lost his sense of direction. But he glimpsed Solthia riding past on a massive ice dragon that breathed ice around to shatter things in its path—it was animated by a combination of all five aspects and she had taken control of it. He follows them but gets attacked by a ravenous pack of flaming wolves that were setting everything on fire as they chased him. He tries Persuasion on them but can't manage the split concentration to do it, and managed to use his combat skills to fend them off enough to escape • He follows a trail of destruction. At the end of it is Delin, losing his fight against a rock golem, right before the final gate. It crushes him and stomps off somewhere else. Lorand rushes over and he's somehow still alive. There's not enough time left to Heal Delin and get to the center of the maze, but he decides that he won't leave Delin behind like he left his brother. He finishes the Healing the moment before time runs out. It's enough to get him the second key but he's failed.	
10	Qualifying—Lorand's last attempt • Overcomes his fear of burnout • Finally passes • Runs into Solthia instead; they have a deep and meaningful conversation • Turns out Talitha's a working girl at Jovvi's exclusive high end pleasure house! • Massive, massive fight Return to Widdertown • Discovers Delin's done something to the agent • Lorand visits Grami Riven, heals her, discovers Talitha's not here	Late Spring, like two months later

- Conversation with Lugal/his father?

Confrontation with Delin

- Set up next book for competitions

10.1: Lorand

- Advanced aptitude (beyond Middle level) in at least 2 of the abilities is required to get 2 of the keys. You can keep whatever keys you earn through multiple attempts but you always have to start from the edge of the maze.
- He decides last time he got too bogged down in fighting everything, so he goes for speed this time and copies Solthia's tactic of finding a mount—a massive hunting cat made of air. It can't fly but it can phase from solid to gas quickly and do insane jumps
- Mounted on the cat, he can basically outrun most things in the maze. It becomes a navigational challenge and he came prepared. Instead of heading through the dimmest parts of the maze to avoid trouble, he aims for the brightest parts, because that's where other aspirants are fighting to get through. He dodges past everything on the cat and gets to the center, presenting his two keys
- The last challenge is a Spirit magic challenge. He walks through the gate into mists and emerges into a familiar cornfield, alone. He's wearing his brother's clothes and boots and he's hiding from the Astindans. He tries to avoid them, shielding, but he has to attack them. They're too tightly shielded for him to affect them directly, so he has to go for a quake. When he does that, he breaks their link and they circle him. He sees a snake in the cornfield—it's a poisonous one—and the Water magic talent doesn't have a shield against physical harm so he gets the snake to strike, paralyzing them. The Fire talent starts lighting up the crops to burn him out. The Air magic talent senses him though, so he ends up fighting them for the ability to breathe. He doesn't have enough to stop himself from being strangled but the Air magic talent has dropped their shield to focus on strangling him. So he takes in more power and stops their heart—hoping that Lorand will have found help. He can't control the power though, so it burns him out.
- Lorand returns to himself and finds that he's made it out of the maze. Adept Hestir is there to give him his master's bracelet—his other essay was accepted by the Seated Five. Fresh out of the vision, he asked her what really happened that night, whether what he saw was what happened. She tells him that the parts that mattered were true and welcomes him as a High.

10.2: Lorand

- After he passed as High, he got assigned new living

	quarters. Delin and Solthia both went back to live with their families. Talitha came to say goodbye when he packed his things—he assumed she was going back to Widdertown but she's not, and she's disappeared. She asks if he can bring Grami to the clinic • After collecting his first pay, he takes a flight with Mardimill out to Widdertown (Mardimill is passing through on his way to Quellin) • First things first, he goes to Heal Grami, using what he learned from Eslinna's experiments and his own experiences at the clinic. It works but not as well as he hoped; her cough and symptoms are gone, but she's weaker than ever. • Next he goes to find his father, tells him he's going to find Ravis and make him give the deed to the farm to his father. He says that he's decided to stay and work as a Healer in the Gan Garee clinic, not at the battlefield, as per his Duty. He promises to come visit periodically and help with the farm as needed. Camil passes the word on that Ravis has been unwell • He shows up at Ravis's house and finds Ravis bound, gagged and bleeding. Of course Delin turns up, tosses him the deed to the farm and says they're even • Lorand threatens to report him and Delin laughs, gloats about the fact that Lorand made it through the Mastery on sheer luck and he's not actually stronger than Delin, and good luck stopping him when he becomes the Seated High upon winning the competitions next year. He's discovered what he needs to know with Ravis anyway, and he walks out, saying that he's not going to bother to Heal Ravis now since he knows Lorand will do it. • Lorand decides he needs to enter the competitions next year so he can stop Delin.	
11	Qualifying—Lorand's last attempt • Overcomes his fear of burnout • Finally passes • Runs into Solthia instead; they have a deep and meaningful conversation • Turns out Talitha's a working girl at Jovvi's exclusive high end pleasure house! • Massive, massive fight	
12	Confrontation with Delin • Set up next book for competitions	

Revision

Overall

- Some chapters feel overstuffed (Chapter 1, very long and a lot happens)
- Some chapters feel like they meander (conflict is missing)
- Double check for important turning points which are summarized/narrated or implied/skipped, when they should be shown
- Expand on things that were foreshadowed but handwaved off screen/cut:
 - Lorand and Talitha overhearing Hestir/Elmin discussing something related to the current Seated Blending that they're not supposed to hear
 - The seed of rebellion that Lugal heard about and the missing Guild High Master
 - Entire Trial of Duty subplot: going more into what it is, what each of them were submitting, some of the magic system mechanics that got seeded in Chapter 2, more hints of what Delin was researching
 - Eslinna's subplot around the yellow lichen and the cure all potion
 - The Deep Caverns and whatever weird business is going on there
 - More of the training sequence, particularly around Lorand and Delin's interactions, some of the group fight scenarios alluded, showing what linking looks like from the other end
 - A deep and meaningful character moment between Solthia and Lorand to round out that relationship
 - Would have been nice to get a bit more of "slice of life" in how Lorand's intake interacts with other intakes and the wider dynamic in the aspirant group
- Lorand: need to build in more of the fear of burnout post Mildon's death

Trilogy high level outline

Book 1: Challenges

Will Lorand be able to save his farm? (Answer: yes)

Requirements:

- Pass the Trial of Mastery

- Training sequence
 - Basic physical combat
 - Basic magical defense - shielding
 - Basic magical combat - individual
 - Basic magical combat - link group
 - Basic magical combat - vs another intake
- Must overcome fear of burnout, rooted in his brother's death
- Pass the Trial of Duty
 - Lorand working in the clinic, he treats a number of patients with respiratory issues
 - Lorand gets a first hand look at someone who has suffered mild burnout; he notices something odd compared to Grami, he tries something on the patient via linking (a talent graft??)
 - Lorand goes to the library to research stuff about Grami's illness, given what Driffin has said: he runs across a number of dead ends until Eslinna points him in the right direction
 - His patient has improved and is sort of redeveloping some part of their talent
 - He submits a paper on potentially Healing burnout; but he comes too close to a secret that the Seated Five doesn't want made public (it's part of the Blending process)

New chapter breakdowns

These will get inserted at some point between the existing chapters 6-8, at which point chapter 7 might get cut (or most likely, revised), since it's a summary chapter. Chapter 8 might need some juggling around so I can get Lorand to the clinic sooner.

Chapter	Plot points	Timeline
6.3	Afternoon training (shielding/magical combat) ● Mardimill covers the basic principles of creating a shield - both aspect specific and general (also talent vs power) ● Link in control exercises from Middle test ● Everybody demonstrates their shields - there is an animated training dummy ● They talk about ways to disable a shield ● Talitha is not paying attention (because she already knows all of this), is busy thinking about her visit to Jovvi's residence in the morning ● Solthia is trying to attract Delin's attention (and failing)	

	• Lorand is trying to keep up with everybody (he was never too good with shields, because Talitha was always around) • Delin is still seething and embarrassed from the morning (and taking out his anger on everybody else) • 3 rounds: ○ Talitha vs Delin (it's a draw) ○ Solthia vs Lorand (she wins) ○ Delin vs Solthia (he wins, mainly because she lets him)	
6.4	Dining hall	
6.5	Evening studies (library)	
6.6	Linking exercises (road repairs)	
6.7	Group combat exercises	
8.3	Library research on Trial of Duty	
8.4	Clinic time	
8.5	Library time (Trial of Duty paper)	
9.5	Lorand camping out near the Trial of Mastery	

Book 2: Competitions

Who will be the next rulers of the Empire? (Answer: TBD, honestly idk, I see arguments either way)

Requirements:

- Survive the political intrigue
- Win the tournament

Characters:

- Rion
 - House Mardimill isn't of the high nobility, but his adoptive mother (Hallina) is well-connected - she's related to three of the Seated Five and a Ruhl by birth - so she gets treated like high nobility. Her estate is in Haven Wraithside
 - His adoptive father died in the Astindan war. It was a typical noble arranged marriage; house Ruhl traded her to gain control over some sort of strategic asset in their overall land holdings, or something similar. No kids from the marriage.
 - His birth mother was a maidservant to his adoptive mother; the two were very close. She died during childbirth, so Hallina adopted Rion.
 - Nobody knows who Rion's birth father is and people (read: rest of the nobility) give him crap about it all the time (and especially because his mother never remarried, which is not what the nobility usually do).
 - As a High in Air magic, he splits his time between Fort Quellin and Gan Garee.
 - He met Naran during a rare trip back to Haven Wraithside while she was working the upstairs rooms at an inn; he wants to marry her but can't for societal reasons
 - Convinced by Lorand to enter and recruit a team for the competitions (if he wins, he can do whatever and marry Naran)
- Naran
 - Met Jovvi in Allestine's residence in Rincammon
 - Left for Haven Wraithside because she had some creepy stalkers
 - Met Rion in Haven Wraithside; genuinely loves him and wants to marry him, but knows she can't for societal reasons
 - Creepy stalkers find her again; she decides to go to Gan Garee because both Jovvi and Rion are there
- Jovvi
 - Grew up as a thief on the streets of Rincammon; used her talent and looks to get off the streets and into a high end courtesan residence
 - Allestine, her sponsor, was a mother figure to Jovvi until the two had a falling out over...something (idk what, related to Allestine's pride maybe). Jovvi leaves for Gan Garee
 - Naran is both her lover and business partner (they knew each other from back in Rincammon). They have a VERY profitable matchmaking service, in addition to the normal courtesan business
 - Is an agent for the Seated High in Spirit magic and has ties to the underground
- Tamrissa
 - Friends with Jovvi
 - Owns her own business (she owns the shop that sells the glass figurines Talitha was staring at)
 - Her father is a business associate of Advisor Maylock

- Vallant
 - Regular patron at Jovvi's residence - he's Talitha's client
 - His father has agreed to support Advisor Ruhl in exchange for permanent tariff reductions (or some other ridiculously good economic incentive)
 - Was supposed to marry Mirra Agran (daughter of the other major shipping family) but they had a falling out because he didn't want a promotion from captaining a ship to his father's trading office
- Delin
 - Has been researching ways to separate somebody's talent from them and trying to capture it in an object and transplant to another person
 - His Trial of Duty was a highly theoretical paper on how Earth magic could be used to perform the transplant operation (precision use of Healing with a heavy mix of Decay thrown in, which is basically against all Healing principles)
 - It was a well researched paper - he's been doing some very esoteric research into the world's creation myth and cross referencing against archaeological and medical records
 - His hypothesis is that if you can catch a person at the right moment (i.e. right at the brink of death), you can pull out and capture their talent BEFORE it returns to the Prime Aspect
 - Hence trauma ward and all the messed up stuff, he was trying to figure out where it had to be actual death, or whether various degrees of pain would loosen up someone's talent enough for him to grab hold of it, and whether it would work on the Guild talent, etc (but also he did enjoy the process because he is one sick sadistic dude)
 - What he secretly wants to do is to succeed on his experiments, and be able to transplant ALL of the other aspects into himself, becoming a one man Blending, at which point he thinks he would be more powerful than anybody else (except the Seated Five) but he wouldn't have the disadvantages of Blending. He's missing something crucial and it's not working, forcing him to go with his backup plan - i.e. play along with his father's orders but find a way to defer the wedding long enough that he doesn't have to go through with it, hoping to become one of the Seated Five, but that involves competing in a link group with other people, including Solthia
- Solthia
 - Trying to stay alive and sane, while stuck in this crappy contract engagement/marriage to Delin
 - Now that she's a High, she's working for her uncle, in intelligence
 - Her task is to try and locate the missing High Master, who has disappeared at a very inconvenient time, considering that the competitions are about to be held
 - She notices something weird happening across the population, linked to the rumours of rebellion and a prophecy

- Lorand
 - Has been working on the cure all with Eslinna and trying early versions on Grami, to no avail
 - Hestir has been keeping a close eye on him, because of what he originally submitted for his Trial of Duty
 - Investigates what Delin's been up to, pieces it together, is horrified
 - Extra combat training with Hestir, to prepare for the competitions
 - Gets Rion to help him recruit a team for the competitions
- Talitha
 - Has been enjoying the cruisy, boozy cushy style life of a high end courtesan in Jovvi's residence
 - Regularly visits Grami at the clinic
 - Everybody tries to get her to do something: Lorand tries to convince her to compete for the Fivefold Throne (no way), Solthia tries to convince her to help investigate the rebellion (still nope), finally gets a direct order from the Seated High in Spirit Magic (via Jovvi) to go deep undercover in Astinda to find a way to end the war once and for all (at which point she'll disappear from Book 2 and won't show up until Book 3)

Factions:

Advisors are trying to turn the Fivefold Throne into hereditary seats of power for their own houses

- Noll/Moord alliance - playing a long game to establish dynastic rule within the next few generations. They want to do what the original Seated Four couldn't; unite the entire continent under Gandistran rule (i.e. end the war with Astinda AND take over Gracely).
- Ruhl/Maylock alliance - merchants houses that were recently ennobled. All of their wealth is in trade. They agree with the goal of expanding the Empire to the entire continent, but don't want war, because it's expensive (they'd rather use trade and economic policies, taxes, etc). Lots of experimentation with technology.
- Razas - literally the only one that thinks the Empire should mind its own business. Wants to end the war with Astinda due to the loss of life on both sides. Generally casts the deciding vote in a deadlock.

Seated Five are trying to hang on to life long enough to pass their rule to worthy successors

- Every time they think they've trained up some promising talents, Astinda goes and ruins it all by starting another fresh conflict in the on/off war that kills off their proteges
- Their life extending technique is barely working and soon will fail, so they start putting in contingency measures in case they don't make it

- Their picks out of the current candidates: Rion and team (mainly because they know Rion, they know Jovvi and they've been keeping a close eye on Lorand via Hestir, ever since his Trial of Duty)
- Elmin has a conversation with Lorand - notices Grami, puts a few things together that Lorand couldn't, Heals her, takes her back to see the rest of the Seated Five
- A Significant Discussion happens and they have flashbacks to a riddle they solved in order to defeat the Seated Four
- Sight magic reveal - tie in with rumoured prophecies
- They die, before passing on the secret of Blending

Plots:

- Political intrigue: Everybody is trying to manipulate the outcome of the next competitions
 - End of Solthia/Delin relationship arc is a late game upset during the tournament arc (at the semis? Or the quarter? Are the semis too late?)
- Relationship plot: Jovvi/Lorand
 - He has an unrequited massive crush on her (she thinks he's a sweet naive farmboy and not really her type)
 - Jovvi/Naran/Rion already in a polycule relationship; Lorand has issues with this because it doesn't fit his preconceived notions
 - Lorand does something to convince Jovvi that he's interesting enough for her to want a relationship with (I literally have no idea what this would be)
 - Lorand has massive insecurities about Jovvi's profession
 - Somehow they get to a point where they're equals in a relationship (no idea how)
- Relationship plot: Solthia/Delin
 - They get married
 - Solthia does some real, sneaky Spirit magic stuff to protect herself. The legalities are borderline.
 - Delin discovers that she's done a number on his head. He's pissed. REALLY pissed. Actual worse-than-murder plotting pissed.
 - They have an actual, all-out magical battle: Solthia wins, but Delin uses the results of his research to horrific effect
- Event plot: tournament (magical Olympics, basically), run by the Guild
 - This takes place in a Spirit magic simulation (because unlike the original canon, the Empire considers it to be a gigantic waste of life and talent to select their future rulers via deathmatches because that literally results in cannibalizing all of your best magic users)
 - Theoretically participating in the competition itself should be safe; but the political games around it make it not safe if you stand a chance to win

- ARGH this Spirit magic simulation thing is causing another plot hole
- What kind of format?
 - Use a triathlon format? Multiple events that showcase different tests of supposed governing ability? Except the mythos is that strength makes right because strength = more embodiment of the Prime Aspect ∴ strongest person around is also the most divine
 - Qualifying round (32 teams), then single elimination across 5 rounds - 1st round (32), 2nd round (16), quarter finals (8), semi finals (4), finals (2) to determine winning team
 - Like aspect contests only or mixed aspects?
 - Competing as individuals or as Blendings?
 - Probably as individuals, because Blending is a state secret.
 - Does that mean the winners don't get to choose who they Blend with?
 - Actually, what if they have to compete as link groups? Because Blending is one step beyond a link group. Okay I'm gonna go with this.
- Plot hole that needs to be fixed:
 - nobody knows how to Blend, other than the Seated Blending. What would stop them from passing on the secret?
 - Maybe need to change backstory on the destruction of the riddle (or turn the riddle into part of the contest, or maybe they leave some sort of magical legacy for their successors)
 - In case of total failure to come up with an idea, I will handwave this and just be like, the transition of power was planned! The Seated Blending have confirmed they are retiring once and for all, so upped stakes for the competitions, since everybody's like, I just have to defeat people like me, not living legends
- Other plot hole that needs to be fixed:
 - OK the Guild is running it and they are magic immune but if it's a Spirit magic simulation then wtf who are these Spirit magic users powerful enough to do this and why aren't they competing?
 - Maybe it's the Adepts providing the power? Or maybe it's a different Guild ability that's not in canon?

Book 3: Convergence

Can they save the Empire? (Answer: yes)

Requirements:

- Defeat the Evil

Book 1 Feedback summary by chapter

Chapter	Worldbuilding	Character	Plot	Tone/Other	Planned revisions
1	• More descriptive detail • What is someone actually doing when using magic? • Fivefold Throne confusion	• Double check for stray POV shift • How does Lorand see when he has his eyes closed? • Scale back Grami's comment • Clarify Lorand guilt	• Adept Hestir/tavern sequence clarification during scene with Phor • Action sequence - clarify how much time Lorand spent running	• Opening paras felt like "thriller" - clarify stakes up front • Check dialogue tags are clear • Pacing - last part feels rushed • Check line level crits	
2	• Check economy makes sense • Guild talent protection from misuse confusion • Clarify Healing limitations	• Clarify Willowbloom confusion • Tone in Lugal/Camil dialogue - bit OTT?	• Healing exam shown offscreen		
3	•	• More subtext in Talitha/Lugal	• Eslinna/Lorand scene is	• Outlier in terms of tone	

		exchange • Big character moment for Lorand to kill the rabbit	boring • Not seeing Lorand kill the rabbit onscreen		
4	•	•	•	•	
5	• Lots of description of Gan Garee that eventually goes nowhere	• Missing seeing the other intakes/aspirants • Talitha info dumping dialogue seems OOC	• Check timeline issue	•	
6	•	• Lorand needs to follow up on what happened to the Acolyte	• Fix plot hole with Lorand/Solthi a scene	•	
7	•	•	•	•	
8	• Clarify fundamental laws of consent	• Talitha's infodumping dialogue seems OOC	•	•	
9	• Encouragement and use in Healing context (Lorand vs Mildon comparison) • Marriage	• Talitha's Decay ability - haven't seen much of this earlier?	• Pacing feels rushed	•	

	contract clarifications				
10	• Clarify attempts with the Trial of Mastery • Need more clarity on overall stakes at the end	• Make clear Delin passed on second attempt • Show Lorand checking on Ravis	• Pacing feels rushed • Trial of Duty subplot needs to happen	•	

Scrapped ideas

Event Plot: The Competitions

- **Competitions:** The Seated Blending are desperate to find worthy successors but they're running out of time. They decide to call the competition a year early. To compensate for the lack of notice, they make some changes to how people become eligible challengers
- **Talitha and Lorand are both eligible:** Lorand races to find her, beg forgiveness and convinces her to enter
- **Teamwork/alliances, but not linking, is allowed:** Talitha tells him that the two of them on their own won't be enough. They recruit a few others via Talitha's newly established network
- **Capture the flag:** Everyone who makes it past the finish line with a flag earns a place in competition.