

*a Living Empires prequel*

# *Anacrusis*

*Trentun Fiikus*



*Layman Kingsford*

*A Living Empires Story*

# ANACRUSIS

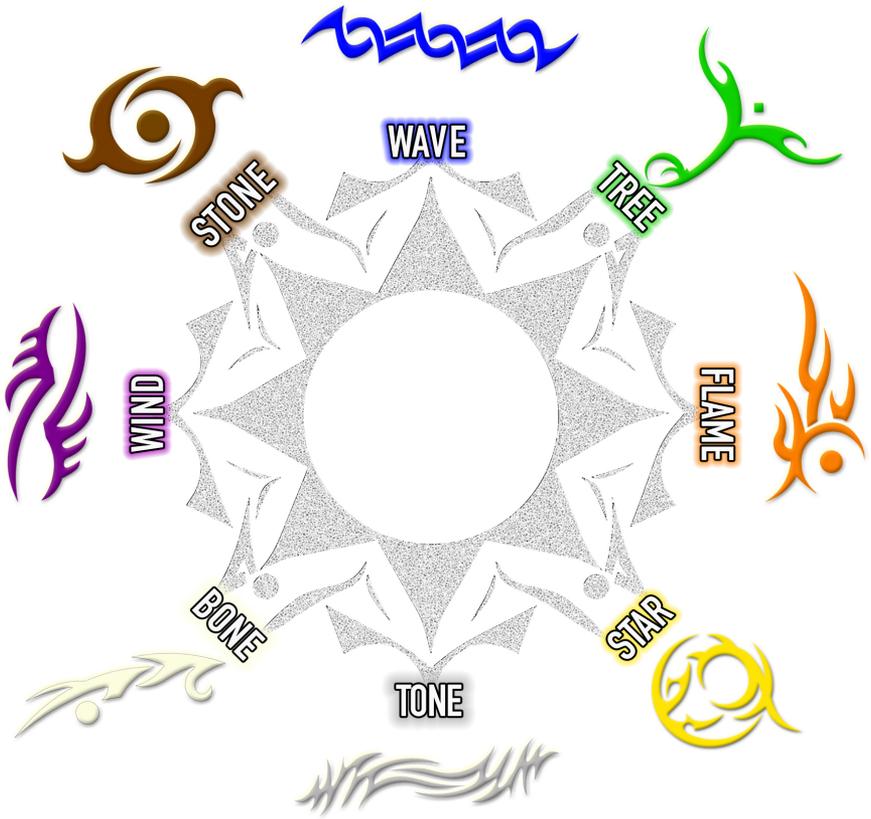
TRENTUN FIIKUS

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## Pronoun Use

Within this setting's cultures, the world of Evorstrom, there is no concept of gender. Therefore the author has chosen to use gender-neutral English pronouns throughout.

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

# *Persona Dramatis*

## **Bosmon Bostwik**

*Ring Master of the Pink Triangle Menagerie*

*Tree Sign, dwarf*

## **Moolg**

*Menagerie strongman and Bosmon's guard*

*Tree Sign, ogre*

*(inspired by a Larry Wells character)*

## **Trentun Fiikus**

*Menagerie actor and stagehand*

*Wind & Wave Sign (saant), troll*

## **Feris Broostru** “*the Mostly Magnificent*”

*Menagerie accountant and stage “magician”*

*unSigned, elf (triplet to Kwentin and Patrik)*

*(inspired by a Stephen Van Doren character)*

## **Kwentin Broostru** “*the Quite Sufficient*”

*Menagerie actor & hair/makeup artist*

*unSigned, elf (triplet to Feris and Patrik)*

*(inspired by a Jeff Gold character)*

## **Patrik Broostru** “*the Rather Stupendous*”

*Menagerie dancer, tumbler & hat-tricker*

*unSigned, elf (triplet to Kwentin and Feris)*

# Sail Saant

Historically, the combination of **Wind** and **Wave** in a person has proven to be a beneficent one. The deities of these two orders play well together, so it stands to reason theirz chosen avatar in the world would at least be a benign force. The same cannot be said for Sail Dragons. As with most beasts, the dual nature of combined signMarks inevitably leads to destruction, usually in watery locales.

# CHAPTER 1

## Trentun

WHEREIN WE MEET a SECRET SAANT

*“As both Flame and Wave may freeze a pond, so may innocence and understanding beget acceptance.”*

*Wendra - ancient Tone Sign philosopher*



**I**'M AFRAID I HAVE BAD NEWS FOR YOU. We're letting you and your siblings go.”

Feris leveled a bland gaze upon Bosmon Bostwik. “Go? You mean to top billing.” Feris gave their black-painted nails a casual once over. “I dare say it’s about time we are recognized as this menagerie’s main attraction.”

“Can I throw him out now?” growled Moolg in their gravel-deep voice. Standing imposingly behind Bosmon Bostwik’s shoulder, the ogre crossed massive green arms over an equally massive green chest.

Bosmon Bostwik glanced with rolled eyes from the black-enshrouded elf seated in front of the desk up to the gargantuan ogre towering behind them. “No Moolg, I sincerely hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“Who’s cumming?” Moolg grunted, looking momentarily aroused.

“You’re doing great, Moolg. Just stand there and look monumental.”

Moolg let out a low rumble, recrossed their arms in the opposite configuration and took a slightly wider stance.

Bosmon Bostwik managed a slow, deep breath before turning back to the elf. “I think you misunderstood me, Feris. The other directors and I are relieving youz triplets of employment with the Pink Triangle Menagerie.”

Feris’s magenta eyes widened slightly with what Bosmon Bostwik assumed passed for excitement on the gloomy visage of the elf. “You mean you’re giving us a solo tour?” Feris immediately began to ramble laconically as if people sat to either side of them. “We’ll need entirely new choreography,” they said to the left. “And, of course, new costumes, shoes and a special new hat for Patrik,” they crowed quite jarringly to the right followed by a snap of their head and a flourish of jet-black hair.

Feris started speaking leftward again, this time in a restrained whisper. “I’m thinking the two songs I wrote last night are pure rubbish but I might be able to salvage a stanza or two. Surely a trumpestous fanfare can be written for our introduction. Accompanied, of course, by flashing displays of light in every color of the holy rainbow...”

Bosmon Bostwik dipped a writing quill in the inkpot and started signing paperwork from the sizable stack on their desk. They had long ago learned it was fruitless to try getting a word in when one of the off-kilter elf triplets got worked up in verbal detonations. It could be worse, at least it was only one of themz. Bosmon suspected the pale pink elves’ mental instability was caused by theirz lack of *signMarks*. Some branded theirz kind as heretics, but Bosmon just pitied themz.

Nearly five minutes of endless diatribe passed before Bosmon Bostwik began to wonder if Feris would actually suffocate from lack of inhalation. Moolg appeared completely

unaware that anything strange transpired. The hulking ogre stood there like a stone monolith.

“Who will be taking care of the menagerie’s books and accounting?” Feris suddenly asked in a placid tone, jolting Bosmon Bostwik out of reverie.

Bosmon calmly put the quill down on top of the large stack of now-signed work orders. “I’m glad you asked, Feris. Ever since you took over the bookkeeping, the menagerie has had greater and greater financial difficulties.”

The elf placed the fingertips of one hand daintily upon their chest with a small gasp.

“Oh, don’t worry, we’re not accusing you of embezzlement,” Bosmon was quick to add. “It’s just we think it best if we hire an outside professional to take care of that end of business. It was not a good idea for us, and by us I mean my predecessor, to entrust such burdensome work to one of our own... um, *entertainers*.”

“I am inclined to agree,” Feris agreed, sounding perfectly agreeable. “Despite my sharp mind for numbers and my keen organizational skills, not to mention my impeccable attention to detail, I *do* think my talents are best dedicated to the stage.”

“Quite right.” Bosmon Bostwik agreed. Placating the triplets’ baffling ego-centrism usually proved the quickest method to ending interactions with themz. “However, I still think you’ve not understood me entirely. To be clear, the Pink Triangle Menagerie will no longer be yourz employer. We are down-sizing our entertainment offerings. You and your siblings are simply sad casualties of a drooping economy in these rural *tree* townships, if you can even call themz that.”

“Riiiiight,” Feris whispered slowly. They glanced sharply to the back corner of the tent pavilion. “So.... we will be managing our own solo act. Fair enough. I can see you’ve been planning to unfetter us for quite some time Bosmon Bastidge, and rightly so. Our talents shouldn’t be impeded by

the weight of an ensemble as large as this menagerie. The spotlight should truly be placed upon *us*. We have clearly outgrown what this institution has to offer and we shall flourish as free agents!”

Feris stood up so suddenly their stool tipped over with a soft thump as it hit the thick rug covering the tent floor. The dark-haired elf turned side-on to the desk, sort of humped one shoulder higher than the other and delivered a bizarre stare with one raised eyebrow at Bosmon Bostwik.

Moolg shifted their stance in preparation to lunge.

“Bosmon Batwing, I thank you for all that you and the Pink Triangle Menagerie have done for me and my family. We were raised from infancy in these tents, fed a fine diet of song and dance, and have been provided a fabulous life entertaining masses of adoring fans!” Feris’ voice crescendoed. He stretched his arms high and wide as if to the vaulted peaks of a pavilion. “We embrace the new road you now show us. It is assuredly a path to greatness and uncalculated fame!”

With a flourish of dark robe Feris spun on their heels and headed to the tent entrance never ceasing to deliver proclamations. “There shall be no limits set for me and my Broostrus as we plum the world for the Lost Chords of Harmony, search for the Forgotten Steps to the Shadow Dances and seek the unuttered words of mind-bending melodramas!”

Bosmon let out a sigh of relief before glancing back to the paperwork not realizing their next utterance was aloud. “I will never again have to proffer refunds to patrons after theyz have been forced to sit and watch those idiot elves. Gone are the days when I have to claim the crazy elves’ act from earlier was some intentional farce of high-brow aspiration only to be lost upon the plebeian minds of the commonFolkz.”

Bosmon Bostwik barely glanced up as Feris stepped out the management tents’ entrance flaps onto the grassy lane as

if curtains of a great stage rose before them. Feris announced to everyone nearby, “The Crazy Elves from Earlier are going solo!”

The entryway fabric dropped back into place cutting off the bright sunshine from outside occluding the elf from sight and, blessedly, from sound due to the fabric’s thickness. Bosmon Bostwik sighed. *Never has firing someone felt so satisfying*, they thought.

Without looking up from the desk they said to the ogre, “Moolg, please follow Feris and other two Broostrus to make sure theyz leave the menagerie for good.”

“Yes, Bosmon,” Moolg grunted through large protruding underTusks. Rolling their thick shoulders to shift the massive battle axe and harness on their back, Moolg stomped out of the tent on reverse-articulated legs, their wide hooves leaving deep impressions in the turf, even through the rugs.

*Maybe that’ll take care of the other firing of the day*, Bosmon Bostwik realized. *Moolg will likely take my instructions quite literally and if we’re lucky, we’ll never see them again either.*



**T**RENTUN LAY ON THE WORN COT memorizing lines for a play when Feris’ approach became audible. Without getting up from bed, Trentun glanced out the open front of the tent they shared with the triplets and caught sight of Feris’ swirling black robes and shining onyx hair all a-flutter in the sunny afternoon breeze.

“The day has arrived, my fellow performers,” the elf announced grandly to everyone in the thoroughfare accompanied by spastic gesticulations. No one on the grassy

avenue separating residency tents paid Feris any attention, a detail of which the elf seemed entirely unaware. “The Broostrus embark on theirz debut solo tour! We shall make all the world our fans as we provide entertainment never before seen, heard, felt or smelled. Tears shall overflow the dried river bed of Tunaska. Tumultuous cheers shall cause Milnor's volcano to erupt most violently. Every new child birthed shall be named after us! Such will be our fame and influence!”

Sometimes Trentun wondered if the triplets were truly ignorant of everything around themz or if theirz bizarre behavior was all part of some elaborate life-long performance. Maybe it was a mental side effect caused by not having a *signMark*?

As Feris drew near, Trentun noticed the menagerie's resident strong-arm was stumping along a short distance behind the elf. “Hey, Feris,” Trentun called out to their friend. “What's up with Moolg? Is the big booger following you?”

Feris spun about to grandly gesture at the hulking ogre. “Why, dear Moolg is simply falling into orbit around my stupendousness. I suspect they wants to apply to be the first of our new shrieking fans.”

Trentun chuckled. The thought of big old, taciturn, monosyllabic Moolg shrieking at anything was comical.

“Summon mine siblings, my good friend,” Feris ordered as they swirled to face Trentun with such verve they nearly fell off their high-heeled boots. “I must tell themz the news.”

“Theyz should be back any moment,” Trentun said as they glanced back to their script. “Theyz went to find Gram Gram Matrika, but that was about an hour ago. I think Patrik was feeling randy so Kwentin decided to help them pick flowers to gift to the old seer before bedding them.”

As if on cue, the rear flaps of the tent brushed open admitting two more lithe elf folkz. “Romantic success, yet again!” the bare-chested Patrik proclaimed joyously as they

grandiosely rolled a ridiculously large-brimmed hat down one arm into their four-fingered hand. Patrik pirouetted gracefully before taking a flourishing bow that swept their long, pink top-knot of hair across the floor.

Trentun smiled. They admired Patrik's tight, svelte musculature the elf so often kept on display. The pale skin, the well-defined pectorals, the rippling muscles along the spine. Trentun quickly pulled the blanket higher about their hips to hide the swelling in the crotch of their pants. "So Matrika liked the flowers? Did they finally agree to court you?" Trentun hoped to distract the elf with the question.

"Quite so," confirmed Patrik as they tossed the hat back on top of their head with the casual flip of the wrist.

"But..." interjected the other elf, Kwentin, "only after *I* provided them my famous *Side Eye of Love* glance."

"That is quite right," agreed Patrik who heartily patted their sibling on the back. One of Kwentin's drooping, green, false eyebrows came partially unglued at the impact to dangle like a *treeCaterpillar* in a noose. Kwentin absently patted it back into place.

Feris took an exaggerated step further into the tent, flapping both arms to free themz from the heavy folds of their sleeves. "Broostrus, I have fabulous news."

"Tell us, Broostru" Kwentin and Patrik said in unison.

"Please, illuminate us as to our impending good fortune," clarified Trentun, thankful their erection was subsiding. They silently vowed not to look at Patrick until the elf was fully dressed.

Feris cleared their throat. "We are taking our act solo and shall commence to venture post haste."

Kwentin squealed while clapping hands together like a kid receiving their first plush toy. Patrik danced a jig while tossing their hat as if it could fly high into the air. The large floppy headpiece hit the ceiling of the tent a mere hands-width above and dropped to the floor with a soft whisper.

Patrik continued to gaze upward as if the hat had sailed majestically across the sky.

Trentun was taken aback. “So you’re leaving the menagerie?”

“Quite right,” crowed Feris. “Bosmon Blaspheme...”

“Bostwik...” Trentun corrected.

“... yes, the very same... has asked us to embark upon a well-deserved performance endeavor featuring us Broostrus as the headlining act entitled ‘The Crazy Elves From Earlier!’”

Trentun’s heart began to pound. Their forehead became warm to the point of perspiration. The triplets were their only friends in the menagerie and, like Trentun, the only other members not *treeSigned*. The thought of being left to fend on their own in the troupe was unexpectedly devastating.

“Would I be able to come with youz?” Trentun asked hesitantly. “I’ve been part of yourz act for a long time now, ever since I was like ten years old. I wouldn’t know what to do if I were left here. Alone.”

As one, all three siblings turned to face Trentun saying in unison, “But of course!”

“You are an honorary Broostru,” Feris stated as if it were universally understood to be true.

“Despite your violet complexion,” said Feris.

“And your overly-large ears,” added Patrik.

“Though at least they’re finely pointed,” noted Kwentin, academically.

“But I must say, if we elves had your digitigrade troll legs, I would be the finest leaper ever to have leaped upon the stage,” Patrik sighed longingly.

Trentun felt like crying. “So I can come with youz?”

“Assuredly,” Feris confirmed. “We would have it no other way.”

The delight and excitement sparking off the triplets was palpable in the tent’s close quarters. The triplets put theirz

foreheads together, draped arms about each others' shoulders and began to rotate in a circle with synchronized crab steps. Theyz raised theirz voices — in ragged three-part harmony — in a familiar drinking tune though the lyrics came out as gibberish. Trentun never ceased to be amazed at how the three elves worked in concert, even making up words on the fly. If telepathy were a real power granted by the deities, the Broostru siblings would have it.

Trentun wanted to join themz but knew from long experience when theyz got like this, there was no interrupting theirz antics. At least not with anything short of violence.

“Elves. Get going. Now!” came a rumbling bark from the tent entrance.

Trentun startled to see Moolg in a low crouch at the front of the tent. The ogre's gargantuan double-bladed axe was resting, head down, upon the green grass at their hooves.

The ogre's command was apparently disruptive enough for the triplets to break off theirz song and turn to look about theirz home.

“Right, right!” said Feris officiously, patting down the front of their black robes. “We must start packing right away. Our fans await!” At that, the elves bustled about pulling out travel bags, trunks and packs to start organizing theirz belongings.

Trentun let out a contented sigh. Despite the sudden decision to leave the only home they'd ever known, they was excited at the prospect of doing something adventurous. Theyz would be visiting new places and meeting new people. Theyz would probably even travel to places outside the *treeLands*. Hopefully Trentun could finally experience life in a place where their own *signMarks* would be amplified and respected.

*Perhaps I could talk themz into making our way toward the capitol city, Milnor. If we do, maybe I could meet Saant*

*Chinz'Areë! Wouldn't that be something? Being outed as Saant-Signed, like Chinz'Areë, was Trentun's greatest fear. They had spent their entire life keeping their waveMark hidden to avoid that outcome at all costs. Chinz'Areë might be the only other person in the world able to understand me, or at least answer my questions about being dual-signed.*



Trentun's hooves were coated in dirt. They was afraid theyz would start to get dry and cracked if the group had to travel too much further today. Trentun and the elf triplets had been on the road for a day and a half having left the menagerie encampment in the outskirts of Renclaw barony. Theyz had purchased a small cart and a draft horse to portage all theirz belongings. RoadWardens from the local *treeChurch* had been few and far between, but the highway, if one would deign to call it that, seemed well enough maintained.

The sun was bright, spring freshness was in the air and green *treeFlowers* bloomed everywhere thanks to the daily rains. Renclaw barony Trentun's favorite portion of the *TreeLands*. All the lush variety of leafy foliage made the troll feel rejuvenated. Trentun imagined their skin and clothes absorbed all the wondrous scents and partook of the moisture shared by the plants. There were many days they wished to be *treeSigned* like everyone else. Everyone except the triplets.

They knew knew the group was reaching the edge of the barony as patches and groves of bright orange *flameFoliage* became more frequently interspersed in the landscape. *FlameSigned* plants felt drastically less natural to Trentun's senses, including the rancid smell some gave off. *FlameFood*

tasted bitter, but so much of their upbringing had been inside *treeLands* they sometimes forgot how uncomfortable *flameLands* could be.

Trentun glanced back down the road. *Yep, still there.* Moolg easily kept pace with themz about four hundred paces behind the cart. The *treeOgre's* green head was down. *I wonder how long they'll follow us? The goob didn't even pack any gear or water or food. All they've got is that giant axe. I guess they'll get hungry sooner or later and either turn back or ask us for a meal.*

“Broostrus, behold! An audience of thousands await,” Feris pronounced pointing ahead and to the left of the road. Theyz had not seen any other travelers for hours, but there appeared to be a large group encamped on the roadside in a space cleared for travelers to settle for a night.

Patrik lifted the front brim of their hat to get a clearer look. “Theyz certainly have a large bonfire going. I wonder why theyz need that in the middle of such a fine day?”

“Clearly theyz want to make sure we have the proper backdrop for our new dance number — Raging Foot Inferno,” Feris explained.

Something felt off to Trentun, other than Feris' inability to count. There were maybe a dozen and a half people at the campsite. Trentun's *windSense* tingled with aggravation, an impression that only *flameMagic* could engender, the sensation increased the more they focused on that bonfire and the dozen or so folkz around it. *There must be a flameAdept in that group.*

The triplets had come to a stop to avidly discuss the order in which to present various song-and-dance routines. Trentun slowly brought the horse and cart to a halt. They were still far enough away from the encampment to make out many details, but most of the people milling about the bonfire looked to be goblins, judging by theirz short stature and

large, pointed ears. Theyz moved with the typical strut of reverse-legged folk.

As the triplets continued theirz discussion, Moolg thumped to a stop on the other side of the cart from Trentun. The hefty ogre peered intently at the campsite down the road while absently rubbing one of the large curled horns atop their head.

“Theyz be bad people,” the ogre grunted. Moolg’s gaze shifted from the goblins down the road to the three elves a few paces ahead.

“How can you tell?” Trentun asked.

“Elves should leave road.” Moolg turned to Trentun, “And you, too.”

“Good luck convincing the Broostrus to do *that*,” Trentun chuckled. “Once theyz get in a performance mind set, theyz don’t get distracted easily.”

As if on cue, the triplets linked arms and began monkey-walking theirz way down the road toward the encampment. Moolg grunted before unslinging the war axe from their back. The ogre’s posture became dangerous as they rolled their shoulders to loosen stiff muscles.

Moolg burst into motion with reverse-articulated legs propelling them forward in long, powerful strides to pursue the elves.

For some reason Trentun appreciated the goblinoid legs on mighty ogres and speedy little goblins more than on themself and other trolls. *Perhaps I emulate elves too much, they mused. I do wish I had smaller ears and front-bending legs, though.*

Trentun was jerked from their reverie at the sound of hoots and hollers coming from the goblin encampment. The triplets looked to have attempted a grand entrance only to be met with jeers. Moolg was nearly there, though it was unclear whether the ogre actually planned to attack or not.

The wind shifted wafting hints of smoke from the bonfire up the road. The smell of charring meat became distinct, not dissimilar to rancid bacon. *What is on that fire?*

Trentun pulled on the reigns of the draft horse and started the cart moving forward. It appeared the elves were, perhaps, getting an audience after all. Most of the goblins started to gather near the tall elves. Theyz looked rather like children circling up for story time around lanky, willowy parents.

*Wait! Why is Moolg starting to swing their axe?* It was then that Trentun noticed the glint of sunlight off blades and spears in the hands of the goblins.

“By D’Raan’s leafy grace!” Trentun looked around desperately. *What am I doing? There’s no one here to help!* The dense foliage of this arboreal region had been cut back twenty paces on either side of the hard-packed dirt road. Theyz were probably a good ten hours away from the *flameBarony* of Mekwurth and any help the constables there could provide.

Trentun dropped the reigns of the horse letting the green *tree* beast and cart placidly come to a stop. They started to jog toward their friends as dread tightened their chest. Trentun had no weapons and certainly was no fighter. They had no desire to hurt anyone. *Please don’t make me use magic. Please don’t make me use magic*, they chanted inwardly over and over as they got closer.

Huge Moolg, towering nearly thrice the height of the goblins, stood with legs spread wide taking wide swings with their double-bladed axe among the diminutive, orange-toned goblins. At least four already lay prone at Moolg’s hooves while four more pranced adroitly to keep out of the ogre’s long reach. However, theyz did look about ready to swarm.

As Trentun got close they could see Kwentin appeared to be having a staring contest with a goblin dressed in once-fine rags. The goblin stood frozen and slack-jawed, with a short-bladed sword laying in the dirt at their tiny hooves.

Black-robed Feris and bare-chested Patrik stood back to back trying desperately to look threatening as three spear-wielding goblins surrounded themz shouting *markist* insults at the elves.

More goblins were arriving from down the road where the curvature of the path had obscured theirz presence. All of the new ones were armed, wore dirty clothing and many had painted theirz faces and exposed flesh with jagged, white tribal markings. Trentun could feel an increase in *flameMagic* pulsing from the roaring bonfire. What they had originally assumed to be large logs now looked more like bodies. *That would explain the charnel odor.*

Trentun was unable to distinguish which of the goblins might be the *flameAdept*, but the bonfire started to whip out tendrils as if it were a burning octopus. Trentun, twenty or thirty paces from the fight, had yet to attract the attention of any of the bandits. *It's totally up to me to deal with the Fire. No one else has any magic skills. I don't dare tap into my windMagic. I'd likely scatter that fire all over and set the treeForest ablaze to boot. But I can't have the triplets see me use any waveMagic.*

A screech pierced the air. Trentun saw Patrik grasping their pale side as red blood flowed from between their four fingers. One of the goblins must have stabbed them.

Two flaming tendrils from the bonfire licked out at Moolg like crackling whips to strike the ogre across their broad back. Trentun was too far away and there was too much noise from the chattering goblins and the roaring bonfire, but they imagined the ogre barely grunted. Moolg continued to methodically fell opponents like cord wood.

*We're all going to die if I don't do something, there's more bandits coming down the road!* Trentun eyed the crowd of new goblins arriving on the scene screeching with vicious abandon.

Trentun took a deep breath and closed their eyes. They was plenty strong enough to douse that bonfire if they could summon enough water from the environment. Trentun felt a tingle from the *waveMark* stigma hidden under a decorative metallic band on their inner left ankle as dormant power awoke.

Steeping the *waveEssence* in a cocktail of physical stamina, mobility and strength drawn from their body, it grew into what felt like a warm blue glow, building like a magical thirst until they felt like they could drink all the waters of a lake.

Trentun sharpened their attention on the bonfire so as not to be washed away in a reverie of arcane pleasure. They sucked in a breath and felt tiny droplets of water coalesce in the air as they brought forth all the soaked-in rain from the ground and from among the roots of the plants.

Trentun marveled at their efforts. They added the barest hint of *windPower*, steeped in a bit more strength and mobility, to push the suspended water droplets toward the bonfire and continued to feed moisture into it from all around. The droplets turned into globules, then grew into fist-sized blobs before finally coalescing into a steady stream while closing in on the fire.

With a startling jolt, Trentun felt as if a furnace had slapped them in the face. The bonfire roared with such intensity all Trentun's magicked water instantly evaporated before vanquishing the blaze. A goblin *flameAdept* had clearly become aware of Trentun's efforts and worked to prevent interference.

Trentun gasped as sweat beaded on their forehead. Their *waveMagic* fizzled. They looked around but still could not decipher who the other magicUser was.

*I guess my power has never been opposed before. I was totally unprepared for that.* Even though they suspected they was stronger than any wayward *flame* practitioner, Trentun

was too scared to try again in case this *flamer* had actual training.

Trentun noticed Feris had been captured by four of the new goblins. The elf's arms were being tied behind their back while the captors took turns beating the dark-cloaked elf with the butts of their spears.

Kwentin had three bodies standing rigid like statues around them which seemed to give pause to the other bandits. There was, however, one bandit who backed away to reach for a bow laying on the ground near Patrik who was on their knees holding their wound, their bare neck encircled by a lassoStick held by two more goblins.

Moolg roared like a rabid *tree* bear and every bandit nearby backed away, probably hoping to let the fire deal with the hulking brute.

It had been months since they last measurably accessed *waveMagic*, but Trentun was quite used to using minimal amounts of *windMagic* during menagerie shows. They took a calming breath and closed their eyes. The *windMark* stigma on their inner right thigh tingled before issuing a cooling sensation throughout their body. They extended *windEssence* steeped in a small dose of their stage charisma, out toward the fire to feel the inferno's breath as it used the very air to burn the wood and the bodies stacked inside its writhing flames.

Trentun took command of all the air surrounding the bonfire and pushed it away from the flames, letting it starve. They could feel the efforts of the *flameAdept* struggling to make the wood burn hotter, to what end Trentun could not guess. The conflagration rapidly consumed all its fuel and turned to ash. The heat dissipated in moments as the breeze wafted it away.

All the fighting stopped. Goblins, elves and Moolg all stared at Trentun who stood perfectly still on the road focusing on nothing more than breathing. Hoping they had

not withdrawn a noticeable amount of their body's physical reserves, Trentun felt they should say something before taking a step anywhere.

Still no one moved. "Ummm....stop?" Trentun mewed, fearing they sounded like a timid *stoneMouse*.

A few of the goblins shuffled about awkwardly while some of the others glanced into the fire pit where the once-burning bodies were now completely gone, even the bones. The *FlameAdept* was now easily identifiable as a slightly taller goblin with bright orange hair and dark ochre skin that still emitted traces of orange essenceSmoke. The adept held an elaborately carved torch in each hand.

"Kill the ogre and the troll! Forget the elves!" The adept shrieked at their cohorts. The goblin bandits howled back into action brandishing blades and spears.

Moolg roared and met the teeming horde with axe raised high. One arcing sweep chopped three goblins clean in half. Patrik chose that moment to pass out with an elegant face-planting into the mud. Feris was unconscious and bound while Kwentin was left standing alone with no one paying them any attention as they attempted to re-adhere a false, blue mustache to their upper lip.

Six goblins charged Trentun. They noted another bandit, standing beside the *flameAdept*, was drawing a bow with its arrow pointed at them. The *magiUser* ignited the tip of the arrow with a snap of their fingers.

Without thinking, Trentun focused an intense blast of *windPower* toward themz steeping it in agility and strength. The burst sheared the bow out of the archer's hands and sent the adept stumbling. The sudden rush of air grew fierce and continued past the fighting into the forest shaking the trees like a storm. Clouds of healthy leaves were torn from everything, orange *flameTrees* and green *treeFoliage* alike.

*We're all going to die! We're all going to die!* was the only thought running in Trentun's head. The next thought popping

into mind was something they had read in an adventure story about Saant Ha'Rak Na'Ruth. Gram Gram Matrika, who had been a parent to them after Trenton's birther died, had kept the troll occupied with an unending supply of fiction. How the old *treeSeer* got their hands upon so many of the periodicals in these remote baronies, Trentun had never learned.

*Tone-* and *WaveSigned* Ha'Rak Na'Ruth was one of the ignominious saants of history. Whether the fiction held any amount of truth, Trentun did not know, but in this story Ha'Rak Na'Ruth had faced an army of a thousand soldiers sent to subdue the saant's magic-fueled rampage across the continent. It told of how Ha'Rak Na'Ruth confronted the oncoming soldiers with calm aplomb as they casually placed their own fingers around their neck. Within moments, every person in the attacking army had dropped to theirz knees gasping and choking for breath as theyz drowned in spit arising from inside theirz own bodies.

It was that scene that popped into Trentun's mind as the dozen or so remaining bandits worked to kill them and the triplets. Trentun had never tried it before, but they released the cool tingle of *wavePower* to steep it with awareness before letting the flow of the liquid inside each of the goblins' bodies become apparent to their mind. Trentun could feel the liquid, like thread-thin rivulets coursing through tunnels and avenues in the goblins' anatomy.

Trentun grasped the newly-found liquid with *waveEssence* guiding the fluid up into the lungs of each bandit steeping the power in even more of their body's agility. Trentun was afraid to move for real now, fearing they had been made clumsy.

Almost immediately the hooting and caterwauling ceased. Trentun opened their eyes, not realizing theyz had been closed, to see each of the small orange-colored people spluttering and gasping for breath. Trentun was horrified.

After a moment, a couple bandits even had eyes bulging from theirz heads. The ground had become damp and soggy as even more moisture seeped up from deep below.

*Save my friends. Save my friends. Save my friends.* Trentun retained awareness and focus despite the growing abhorrence felt and the pity they had for the magic's victims.

Moolg glanced about, blinking with incomprehension. Kwentin had rushed to Patrik's side to simultaneously pull the lasso from their wounded sibling's neck while trying to help staunch the wound in Patrik's abdomen. Neither effort proved at all beneficial.

The clearing by the road had become eerily quiet. The pile embers hissed softly as theyz cooled in the former bonfire pit. The ground was littered with nearly two score dead bandits, theirz small bodies looking childlike in the bright sunshine. Not one of the goblin people remained alive.

Trentun breathed heavily feeling on the verge of retching, not from only from exertion — the magic unleashed had felt remarkably easy — but more from revulsion. They bent over and vomited, glad not to fall over despite the amount of dexterity consumed by their magical effects.

Moolg started cleaning blood from their axe with fabric torn from a dead goblin. Patrik appeared to be alright for the moment and sat cross-legged with Kwentin's short cape wrapped around their wound. Kwentin had turned their efforts to gently reviving Feris who still lay in the mud like a puddle of loose, black cloth.

Trentun did not want to face their friends and be forced to answer awkward questions about what theyz just witnessed. In shock at the deaths they had wrought, Trentun decided to shuffle back down the road to fetch the horse and wagon. They would be able to scrounge better wound-care supplies from the belongings on the cart anyway.

By the time they made it back to the scene, the triplets sat together on a log while Moolg tossed goblin carcasses into

the extinguished fire pit. Trentun led the horse and wagon up to the elves.

“Let me find some clean cloth to make a better bandage for you, Patrik,” Trentun said, not daring to make eye contact with any of themz.

“Banner idea,” Patrik said in a raspy voice. “I feel as if I’ve been run through.”

“You have been run through, Broostru,” Kwentin confirmed. “The bleeding nearly proves it.”

“I should also like one of my spare hats, perhaps the maroon one,” Patrik said. “The one I was wearing before we were so rudely booed...”

“Ungrateful ruffians,” interjected Feris, whose pale face was already swelling with red and purple lumps.

“The hat I had on has been trampled into the mud,” finished Patrik. The elf glanced forlornly at the crumpled headwear laying in the blood-damp dirt.

Trentun rummaged around for a clean towel and handed it to the bare-chested, blood-smeared dancer. “We’ll want to find a phsyiker when we get to the next town.”

“Most assuredly,” Feris agreed. “There is already a deep throbbing all over my body. I’m not sure how much walking I have left in me today.”

“Nor do I have the energy for a long travail,” Patrik said. They unbound the blood-soaked cape with Kwentin’s help. Winding the clean towel over the wound, Patrick let out a sigh. “I should like to put on fresh pants as well, but I fear I have not the mobility to do so.”

“I don’t think we should linger here much longer,” Trentun suggested. “Maybe we can ask Moolg to carry some of our gear in order to make a bit of room for the two of you to sit in the back of the wagon.”

“I suspect we can purchase the ogre’s help if we offer them some food,” Kwentin said.

“What should we do about all this?” Trentun asked gesturing about the clearing. The ground was trampled and muddy and littered with weapons. The bonfire pit now overflowed with small orange bodies.

“The Roadwardens can deal with the mess,” Feris said. “It is of no concern to us. We are the victims here.”

“The nearest authorities are ahead in Merwurth, a day or so away,” Trentun stated.

Kwentin stood to dust off their frilly outfit. “No matter, Broostrus. It looks as if Mork is done tossing bodies on the fire. Let us be on our way.” Trentun was not the least tempted to correct Kwentin’s mis-naming of the ogre nor point out there no longer were any actual flames.

Feris and Patrik both groaned in unison as theyz stood up. Feris looked to their troll friend. “Perhaps we should be so good as to relight the fire? That way the we might get some credit with the constables for cleaning up should we ever be questioned as to what happened here.”

Trentun shook their head. “I think it’s all too damp, Feris. Too much water seeped into the pit to light it back up.” They called for Moolg to join themz and the group of former menagerie performers set off once again.

Before theyz rounded the bend in the road, Trentun took one last look back at the pile of bodies in the soupy fire pit. *I don’t even know how I should feel right now. Should I be sick? Angry? Quivering? Will I get arrested?*

Moolg turned out to be perfectly willing to heft a large trunk of belongings from the cart onto each shoulder after Kwentin said they would hand-feed the ogre strips of dried meat as they walked.

Feris and Patrik sat gingerly on the back of the wagon, long legs dangling close to the dirt, while Trentun kept the horse moving by gently pulling on the reins. No one else looked back at the carnage.

Feris' voice carried over the sound of wagon wheels on the dirt road after theyz had passed out of view of the clearing. "Trentun, you never told us you're a Saant."

Trentun gulped, expecting fear, rejection, accusations or worse.

"Forsooth," Kwentin agreed. "To think we could have been using *waveTricks* in our show all this time."

Patrik added their thoughts. "I already have an idea for a water dance set beneath cascading rivulets of colored mist that swirls gently into the audience on a delicate breeze, bathing themz in coolness to assuage the summer heat."

Trentun let go of held breath. The elf triplets were taking this development with the same childlike acceptance with which theyz viewed everything. Trentun afforded themself a smile.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Layman Kingsford grew up in New Mexico and now lives in Denver, Colorado. He has a BFA in music and creative writing but spent much of his adult life as a professional ballroom dancer (one-time US Champion). He has undertaken stints as a professional trombone player and also as Brock N. Alnite, a drag performer and cofounder of Haus Alnite.

He currently spends his time writing Living Saga stories and novels while designing/publishing tabletop games - some of which are also related to Living Saga.