

Seasons in Setessa

Ken Troop

From set *Born of the Gods*

“Better to kiss a snake than fight a Setessan.”

—Akroan saying

A Summer

Throughout the forest, the children came. Some came in large clumps—raucous groups that shrieked and ran, ignoring their adult shepherds. Others came in small groups of two or three, quieter, watchful, with no one to shepherd them but each other, and so they did. Still others came alone, with no one to watch out for them at all.

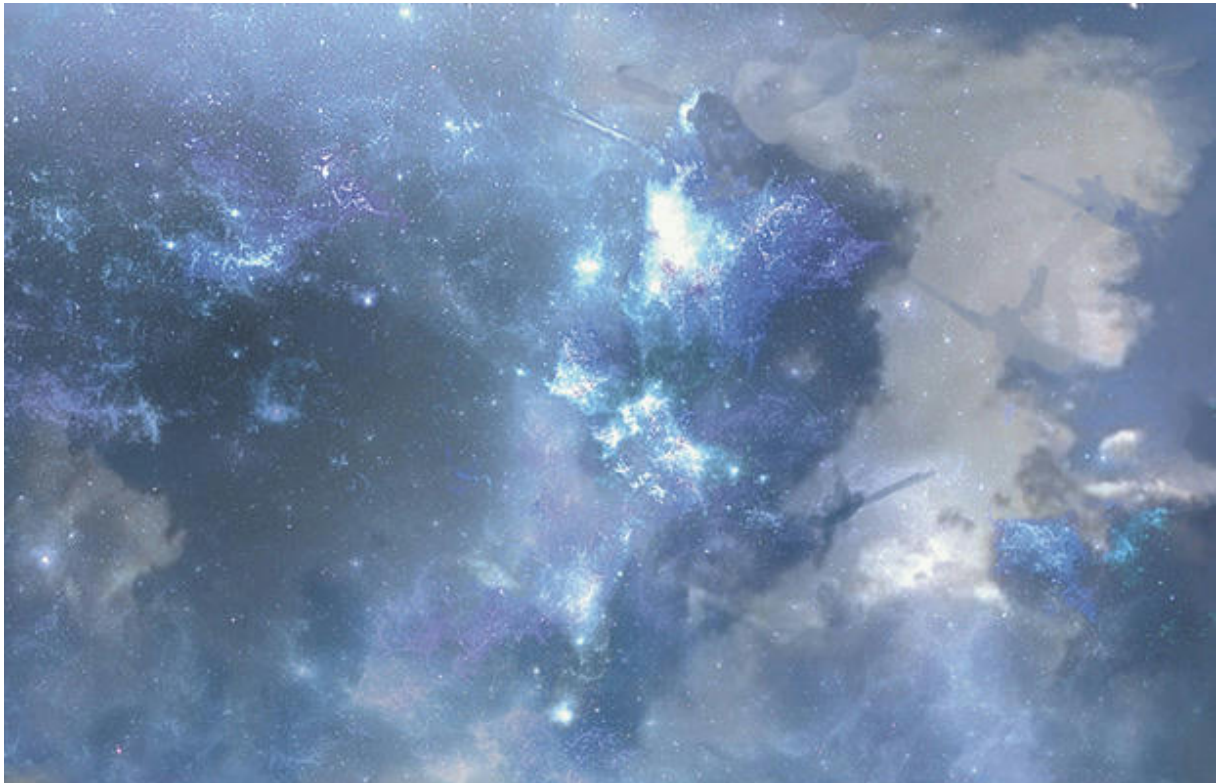
So many children. More than Cilissa had ever seen in one place. There had been one time, a few months before the attack, when she had played all day with the other village children during the planting festival. There had been seventeen children, a number Cilissa remembered with pride because she had been able to count them herself. The first thing she told her parents that night was not about the races she had won but how she had counted to seventeen.

She realized she was crying again, and she was very angry at herself. She was determined she would not cry again, that she was going to dry up all the tears in her body. It wasn't fair for her body to cry even though she wasn't thinking about crying. She forced the tears to go away, and she told herself, *no more tears. I mean it, body. No more crying.*

They were in a part of the forest Cilissa had never seen before. The normally dense forest was giving way to sparser olive trees, their thick and gnarled trunks showing how old they were. These olive trees were very, very old. Despite the thinning canopy, the forest was no lighter. A wispy mist floated among the trees, and when Cilissa looked up she could still not see the sun or the sky. Cilissa did not feel afraid, though. She had not felt afraid at any time since coming to Setessa a few days before. She thought perhaps she had used up all her fear during the attack and her wanderings afterward. *Maybe everyone can only feel afraid a certain amount of time in their life, and I used mine up already.* It made her happy to think she wouldn't feel afraid again.

The mist above thickened and spread. Overhead was all fog, although she could still see plenty of children around her. Ahead was a large circular clearing, enclosed by the thickest and largest olive trees Cilissa had ever seen. There must have been hundreds of children already sitting in the clearing, and yet they still only took up a fraction of the space. Many more children were streaming into the clearing, although as they entered they stopped and looked up at the forest ceiling.

As Cilissa walked through the ring of olive trees she immediately knew something was different even before she looked up. Her body and scalp tingled, like a pail of cold water being splashed over her. She looked up, expecting to see the same dense fog, but was instead confronted by a dense night sky with thousands of dots of tiny lights. It was beautiful. *Nyx.* The home of the gods.



Cilissa took a step back out of the clearing. And she was again in the fog-shrouded daytime, nary a star or dark sky in sight. And a certain *presence* was gone as well. She stepped forward into the clearing, and there was the same tingle, and it was now the dark of night, although illuminated quite well by the starry field above. She realized the children around her were sitting, and so she sat as well.

Up ahead, a tall woman strode to the center of the clearing. She carried a bow slung over her back, with a small axe and long knife sheathed at her sides. And she held a long spear upright in one hand. Loosely armored in dark leather and cloth, she moved with a strength and precision Cilissa had never seen in anyone, warrior or no. Cilissa decided she wanted to move like that more than anything, more than anything else in the world, with only one exception. She slapped at her eyes before the tears could begin again. *I'm on to you, body. I know your tricks.*

The tall woman, her auburn hair tied up in a topknot, reached the center of the circle and waited. Although she spoke no words, somehow every laugh, every cry, every shout or whisper, all quieted to stillness. The children sat silently and waited.

The woman's voice carried loudly throughout the clearing, her voice amplified through some unknown means.

"Welcome, Little Ones. You are safe here."

Although she was sitting in a dark forest under a magical night sky surrounded by strangers, Cilissa believed her. Ever since arriving in Setessa, she had been treated with kindness. She had been fed, been washed, been touched by gentle hands. While no adult had taken charge of her, there was always one around, always female. There had been no orders, no chores, just food and sleeping and not-thinking. Cilissa had worked really hard on the not-thinking. That had been her life for the previous few days until that morning, when she saw the adults preparing to go somewhere, and she saw everyone else following, so she followed, too.

The woman's voice continued, "You are here from across the land. From cities and villages, from plains and hills, from battles and from slums and from worse."

Worse than a battle? Cilissa did not understand how that could be true. *No, body, no, I'm stronger than you.*

"But that is now behind you. You are here because your parents are gone. It does not matter why they are gone, but they are gone and they are not coming back."

The silence in the crowd broke. Sobs and cries and screams erupted in the night air. Cilissa was proud of herself that she did not join them. *I am done with tears. I am. I really am. I am six years old and I am too old for crying.*

The woman in the center of the circle did not speak. She did not shush nor point a finger. She didn't even look annoyed, the way some adults do when children are making noise. She just stood there. The stars above her head twinkled and some of them moved in various patterns and shapes, although the shapes quickly broke apart. No arrangement lasted for long, but the stars kept moving, and Cilissa felt strangely calm as she watched the stars dance.

Eventually, the cries and sobs subsided. When silence had resumed, the woman spoke again. "In Setessa, we call you *arkulli*, little bears. Like little bear cubs, now you are small. You need food, and shelter, and protection, and teaching. This we will give you. But one day, *arkulli*, one day you will be big. One day you will be mighty. One day you will not need Setessa's protection, but Setessa will need yours."

As the woman's voice resonated throughout the clearing, Cilissa looked up at the portal to Nyx, and the stars there took the shape of a large bear, tall and majestic and strong. Cilissa felt so *strong*, looking at the bear. If she was as mighty as that bear, she could have saved her village. She could have saved her parents. Cilissa was sure that bear had never felt afraid, had never cried.

"Welcome, *arkulli*. From now on, you are Setessan. Setessa welcomes you home. Karametra welcomes you home."

With the mention of the god's name, the stars shimmered, and the bear form above dissolved. In its place the stars moved into the shape of a face, a woman's face, the most wonderful face Cilissa had ever seen, the face of the god Karametra. Cilissa could not describe that face except she knew it was a face of warmth and love. The face was looking at her, and only her, and the god's eyes held Cilissa's eyes as the face seemed to grow out from the starfield above, grow out and down until that face enveloped the whole of the clearing, surrounding each and every child, but Cilissa most of all. *You are loved, child*, a voice whispered to her, as the face dissolved in a shimmering display of warm sparks that kissed her face and body like soft dandelions brushing against the skin.



Karametra, God of Harvests | Art by Eric Deschamps

Where the sparks fell to the ground and vanished, a small seedling sprouted from the earth and grew quickly. Within seconds, fibrous pods, thick-shelled husks about the size of Cilissa's fist, dotted the clearing. Each pod pulsed with a soft green glow. Cilissa picked up one of the pods and she felt the same warmth she had from the sparks. Memories rose, unbidden and unwanted. Her father falling to the first wave of Akroan attackers. His last shout becoming a scream. Her mother whispering at her, *Run, Cilissa, run, your fastest running. Go now my love, now*. And then her mother turned to rush at the soldiers, screaming. But Cilissa didn't see what happened to her mother, because she *ran*. She ran and ran, out of the village. She had always been so fast, and never faster than that day. She had run and left everything behind. Her village, her friends, her parents, everything but the crying. She couldn't leave the crying behind.

She was crying now, hugging the pod with its gentle green glow fiercely to her chest, hugging and rocking back and forth and sobbing. The pod felt so good, so gentle. Cilissa did not stop crying, thinking about her mother and her father and how much she loved them. But for the first time since the attack, she smiled. She smiled and cried all at the same time. She hugged the pod and was grateful to finally be home.

A Fall

Thwack, thwack, thwack bounced off the stone bricks of the tall limestone tower and rebounded through the courtyard below. The steady stream of *thwacks* created enough background noise to make conversation difficult, but no one in the courtyard was interested in conversation. They faced off against one another, their faces beaded with sweat and concentration on their opponents, the wooden staves in their hands whirling and lashing and *thwacking* against each other.

No one was interested in conversation, that is, except for the person across from Cilissa. Thora was tall, strong, and fast. She was one of the girls in their group who had recently turned ten, and immediately sprouted several inches. And she liked to talk. “You’re too slow.” *Thwack, thwack*. “Are you sure you even belong here?” *Thwack, thwack*. “You know we *are* here to fight, right?” *Thwack, thwack, thwack*.

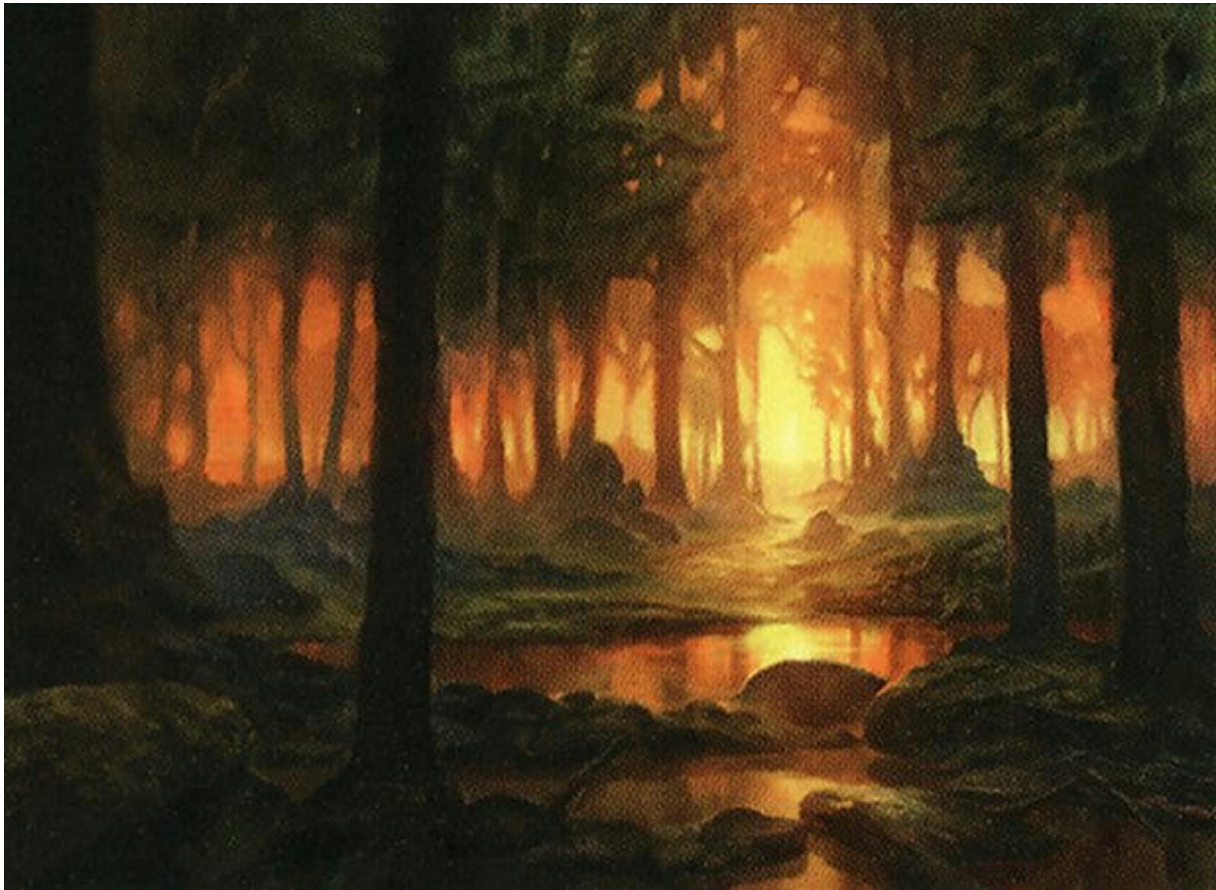
Cilissa stayed silent. The problem wasn’t that Thora was almost a full year older; everyone in their group was within a year of each other and they had been taught age was irrelevant in the respect accorded your peers. *Thwack, thwack*. And the problem wasn’t that Thora was right with her insults. Despite Thora’s height and strength, Cilissa was better and faster, and she, and Thora, and everyone else knew it. *Thwack, thwack*. Thora was no closer to landing a blow or tripping Cilissa’s legs than when they had started their sparring.

The problem was Cilissa was no closer to landing a blow, either. She met every swing from Thora, the staff feeling light and alive in her hands. But she took no opportunity to counter. And combatants were supposed to keep sparring until one landed a decisive blow. And if Thora couldn’t land a blow, and Cilissa wouldn’t, then they could be there a very long time.

“Are you afraid? Are you a coward?” *Thwack, thwack*. Cilissa’s lips thinned, but she still said nothing. Cilissa noticed Thora wasn’t even angry; she was breathing regularly, and her calm face and eyes belied her cruel words. She was being insulting as a *strategy*. This upset Cilissa in a way even Thora’s words had not, but she focused on meeting each swing and thrust. As focused on Thora’s staff as she was, she was unprepared when Thora rushed her, body to body, her larger body bulling Cilissa backwards. Cilissa tensed her legs, preparing a backwards flip, but Thora swung her staff low, clipping Cilissa between the knees and sending her sprawling to the ground.

“Hah, I win.” Thora’s smile hurt most of all. It was drilled into the children that practice and learning were more important than winning, but they were also trained to be competitive. Thora lingered for a moment, body slightly leaning on her staff, looking down at Cilissa before picking up her staff to find another opponent. The other children stopped their sparring to look at Cilissa. She hadn’t lost a match in a long time.

Cilissa couldn’t meet the stares of the other children, so she looked down instead. Leaves covered the ground outside of the sparring area. The Nessian Wood often offered a full panoply of autumnal coloring, and this fall was no exception. Brilliant orange and rich brown leaves cloaked the trees and ground alike. Fall was one of her favorite times in Setessa, a combination of beautiful color and emerging stillness. Looking at the leaves was easier than looking anywhere else, so she continued to study them amid the steady background sounds of *thwack, thwack, thwack* until a pair of shoes blocked her sight.



Forest | Art by Adam Paquette

Cilissa followed the green shoes up to a pair of leather leggings, following up and up a body leading to a face. The face neither smiled nor frowned, but merely looked back at Cilissa. And although the woman's hair was succumbing to gray and her face held more wrinkles each time Cilissa saw her, it was normally a kind face, although at that moment it was hard to tell. It was the face of Niketa, weaponsmaster and archer, and the head trainer of their lessons at the time.

"Is it a game to you, Child?" Niketa's voice was clipped, although not harsh in the way she was when she thought a student was being particularly dense or obstinate.

Cilissa looked around and saw the other children resuming their sparring, although they gave wide clearance to Niketa and Cilissa. Thora was off in the distance, bruising a poor boy who did not have a chance.

"No," she said softly, looking at Niketa.

"Are you sure? You seemed content to play at the game of staves. Your turn, no, your turn, no, your turn."

Cilissa didn't know what to say to that, so she didn't say anything. She kept her eyes on Niketa.

"I have seen many warriors over the years, Cilissa. Many have been stronger than you. Few faster, but some. You do not bear special gifts from the gods. And warriors stronger than you, and faster than you, they have died. Died to mistakes, or died to opponents who were slower and weaker. Do you know why?"

Cilissa shook her head.

"Stand up with your staff."

Cilissa readied herself, as Niketa picked up a training staff. "Begin."

Cilissa waited for Niketa to make the first move. *Thwack, thwack*. "Thora is an aggressive combatant, one of the most aggressive in your group. It serves her well, mostly." As Niketa talked, the speed of her thrusts and swings increased, faster than Cilissa had yet fought against. She focused on meeting Niketa's staff, determined to be fast enough to ward off harm. *Thwack, thwack, thwack*. Niketa's staff had slipped through Cilissa's defense and only at the last possible moment had slowed to deliver no more than a stinging blow against Cilissa's shoulder.

"You will never be fast enough, child, to stop all blows. Fighting well is not a function of speed. Do you ever attack, Child?"

All of the embarrassment and hurt of the day came rushing up in Cilissa, unbidden. For so much of her sparring she held herself back, unwilling to hurt another child, another human being. With a cry, she lashed out at Niketa, her staff a blur. She pictured Thora, those lips curled up in a sneer, as she unleashed one furious blow after another at Niketa. Niketa met Cilissa's onslaught, but took a step back. And then another. And then a third. All the other children stopped their sparring and turned to watch.

Cilissa had never felt this much anger before, and it felt wonderful. It felt like freedom. The world seemed remarkably clear without care or consideration for the harm she could cause. She wanted to attack even faster. *Thwackthwackthwack*. It was only when Niketa's staff easily slipped past and knocked into her ribs that she realized how sloppy her defenses had become. She yelled out again and sought to regain her press.

Niketa continued to speak, calmly, conversationally. "What do you fight with, Child?" Cilissa could barely think, much less speak, but there was another blow from Niketa, and with it the same question. "What do you fight with, Child?"

"My staff! I fight with my staff!" Cilissa was breathing heavily now, and was no longer able to advance. There was another blow from Niketa. Each blow was light, but even a light blow from the staff hurt considerably. And the same awful question. "What do you fight with, Child?"

"My bow. I fight with my bow." Niketa was the head archer, perhaps that was the answer she was looking for. *Thwackthwackthwack*. The question again. "My body, I fight with my body." *Thwackthwackthwack*. The question again. What more could she say? Cilissa could barely stand, and the next time Niketa's staff hit her, she dropped to the ground.

"Your *mind*, Child. You do not fight with your staff or your bow or your body. You fight with your mind. Some philosophers think the purpose of battle training is so you don't have to think while fighting. They are wrong. We train so that in combat you are able to think about the right things. Such as recognizing when your opponent is goading you into losing your composure.

"Aggression serves Thora well, but not you, I think. That is fine. I know how to train smart warriors to be more aggressive. I do not know how to train aggressive warriors to be smart." Niketa leaned down and offered her hand to Cilissa. "You will learn, Child. But still, attack more, yes?" The two of them walked back to the tower amid orange and brown leaves, the crisp air, and the continued *thwack, thwack, thwack* of children fighting with their minds.

A Winter

A light white dust coated the bare branches and hard ground as Cilissa and Thora made their way on patrol through the southern edge of the forest. It had snowed no more than five times in all the years Cilissa had been in Setessa, and she found it delightful each time. While the snow wouldn't usually

last more than a day, she was always amazed at how completely it transformed the forest, as if they were walking in a strange and new country.

They had been on their patrol for two hours. The southern edge of the Nessian Wood mostly consisted of scattered trees and hard rocky ground. Two days of travel farther south would bring one to the Despair Lands, a wasteland blighted by Erebos, but the southern border had been mostly quiet for many years—a good training ground for those new to patrolling.



Warriors' Lesson | Art by Steve Prescott

"There's nothing out here. This is just a waste of time." Thora had been irritable all day. Their whole group had been tense, though, with all the changes and moving taking place. They had known that had been coming for some time, but it was different to actually confront losing so many people they had known for years.

A branch snapped to the right and behind them, and Cilissa had an arrow nocked to her bow and aimed as Thora had a throwing axe in hand, the first smile on her face displayed all day. Both of them lowered their weapons as they saw the source of the sound. A strange look passed on Thora's face.

"Kelios," they said in unison, and Thora looked angrily at Cilissa, confusing Cilissa even more.

"We could have killed you," said Cilissa.

Thora interrupted with, "*I* could have killed you. I don't know what Cilissa would have done."

Kelios, tall and gangly, his coordination completely outmatched by his recent growth spurt, approached with an awkward smile on his face.

"I thought, I mean, I know you would be out this direction, and I'm, well, I wanted to say, well, I'm going, and..." Thora rushed over, dropping her axe and embracing Kelios in a hug.

"I'm going to miss you so much!" Thora exclaimed as she continued to hug Kelios.

Kelios said, "I'm going to miss you, too, Thora," but he looked at Cilissa the whole time he said it, that same strange smile on his face. Cilissa was aware she got more attention from people, especially boys, during the past year. It felt like overnight many boys stopped treating her as a friend and a fighting partner, and instead they just got... strange. Kelios was one of the more awkward ones. Cilissa tried to ignore the attention whenever possible.

Kelios freed himself from Thora's embrace and approached Cilissa. "I'm going to miss you, Cilissa."

Cilissa tried to smile warmly, but made no attempt to hug Kelios. She had pointed her bow down, but still had the arrow in her other hand. "You too, Kelios. Do you know where you'll be going?" Kelios looked down at his feet, doing a sort of awkward side-shuffle. Cilissa felt bad that everything Kelios did lately was awkward.

"No, not yet. They won't tell us until we begin our journey. It's all a little..." his voice trailed off and he didn't finish the sentence. When every boy turned fourteen, they were sent away on their peregrination, their journey into the outside world to find their path. Setessa believed strongly that whatever path helped turned young men into adults, that path did not include staying in Setessa. When Cilissa was young, she had barely noticed there were no adult men around longer than a day or two in Setessa, but for the previous year, as everyone approached their fourteenth birthday, the constant leave-taking of their male friends had obsessed nearly all of them. Cilissa was sad, but she was also glad to be rid of some of the awkwardness. Setessa's policy began to make sense to her.

"So I guess this is, um, goodbye, then?" As he said it, Kelios continued to look just at Cilissa, and Thora alternated between smiling at Kelios and glaring at Cilissa.

Cilissa just wanted to be back on patrol. She said, "Goodbye, Kelios. I wish you well in your travels. Be safe." She turned around and walked back to the outer edge of the forest. She just wanted Kelios to stop staring at her and Thora to stop glaring at her. She figured maybe leaving the two of them alone would make Thora happier.



Peregrination | Art by Jonas De Ro

Just a minute later, she heard the crunching of Thora's boots in the light snow. She turned, hoping her friend would be happier, but Thora's eyes and cheeks were red, far redder than the cold air warranted. "What's wrong?"

"Please, Cilissa, just stop it. Stop it." The tears were flowing again for Thora. Cilissa had never seen Thora cry like this.

"Thora, I... I didn't do anything wrong." Cilissa knew that would not help her friend, but she was so confused about Thora's anger toward her.

"No, of course not. Perfect Cilissa. Perfect, passive Cilissa. You never do anything wrong, do you? You never do anything at all." Still crying, Thora turned and stalked away.

"Wait!" Cilissa shouted, but Thora continued to walk off in the opposite direction, back toward their base camp. It was forbidden for patrol partners to leave each other alone except in the direst of emergencies, but Cilissa knew Thora would fight if she sought her out. She waited and watched as Thora's figure retreated into the wintry forest, hoping she'd change her mind and come back, but no change of mind occurred.

After a few more minutes of waiting, Cilissa turned and walked along the original path, thinking she might as well finish the patrol. She thought more about the peregrinations. When she first heard about them, she was horrified at the concept. She would have fought with all her being to avoid leaving. Eventually, she came to accept it was just something that happened to the boys; many girls used to joke that men were too weak to handle life in Setessa, but that seemed cruel to Cilissa when you actually had to say goodbye to your friends.

Then, though, as Cilissa walked, she wondered if it would be so bad to leave Setessa. She had been there nearly her whole life, and she loved it. Except when she hated it. Sometimes, the thought of being somewhere else, seeing new people and new things, was so exciting to her that it hurt.

Lost in thought, she almost didn't notice the large green husk off in the distance. She realized the husk had no snow on it, unlike every other thing in the forest. She approached it cautiously, and then realized it was one of Karametra's pods.

During Karametra's welcoming ceremony to new *arkulli*, sometimes new pods would grow afterwards. The pods started off as shells about the size of a fist, with a thick husk that emanated a green, pulsing glow. Cilissa hadn't known what the pods were when she was a child, and the adults refused to talk about them. Cilissa had a dim memory of her own welcoming ceremony, and there being hundreds of pods, but she couldn't say what happened to them. All she knew was in the years after, she would see fewer and fewer pods, and the ones she did see were larger and larger. This pod was about the size of a man lying down, and it had gnarled, fibrous growths dotting its husk.

Just being around one of the pods made Cilissa happier, although she didn't know why. She had another dim memory of Karametra's voice so many years before, but she had shared that memory with others early on, and they had always laughed at her or teased her. Her teachers were clear Karametra rarely talked directly with Setessans, and Cilissa had dropped the matter, thinking she had just imagined it. But even so, she felt lighter and happier as she reached out to touch the pod.

It felt warm to the touch, but not hot, and a soft green glow began to pulse from the pod. Cilissa realized she was tired, and she sat down next to pod, lying across it, grateful for the warmth after such a long, cold day. She thought about her parents, which was strange because she hadn't thought about them in many years. She could barely remember the face of either, and there were times she had tried so hard to recall their faces that afterwards she couldn't remember them at all, like she had destroyed their memory by even trying to remember, which had terrified her. Instead of faces, she could sometimes remember certain feelings. The safety and happiness she felt looking up at her tall, tall father. The feel of her mother's hand on her hair as she would comb it, over and over, before bed.

She wished she was still a young child, held safe and loved, without any other care in the world. She wished she was an adult, long gone from there, living her own life away from teachers and trainers and awkward boys and crazy friends. She lay on the thick, rough husk and thought about the joys of lives different from hers as she soaked in the pod's warmth on the cold, wintry day.

A Spring

"Archers, ready!" Niketa's voice from above cut through the quiet of the forest. It was strange for the forest in early bloom to be so silent, the normal background hum of chirping and scrabbling completely absent. Cilissa looked over at Thora, Natasa, and Delia. Cilissa knew Thora was ready, and while she hadn't fought with Natasa before, she could tell the warrior was calm and prepared. Delia, on the other hand, was only sixteen and facing her first battle. She had readied her bow at Niketa's command, and Cilissa tried to be kind.

"She meant the archers in the trees. Put your bow away. We need to be ready to face a ground charge." Kind, but her voice was clipped. She didn't want to see Delia killed in the first rush. Or at all. But there was no guarantee of survival for any of them.



Defend the Hearth | Art by Raymond Swanland

Reports of the attacks had reached them days before. Bad enough to suffer the Silence a few months before, but then, when the gods were gone, reports began of large numbers of Nyxborn appearing everywhere in the land and, worse, attacking all mortals they came across. Some Setessans wondered whether the Nyxborn were attacking because the gods were no longer there to control them. Others wondered whether the gods were causing the attacks themselves to punish mortals, although for what crime they could not say. Who could guess the ways of the gods? All Setessans believed Karametra had no hand in the attacks, though. At least any Setessan with sense.

What was not under dispute was that thousands of Nyxborn had invaded Setessa from the north and the west. Greener warriors had shepherded the young and the old to the better-defended interior, while units like Cilissa's had been sent to stop the invaders or, at worst, slow them down and gather vital intelligence. It was a sign of how stretched they were that warriors as inexperienced as Delia were with them. Cilissa and Thora had been blooded warriors for the past two years; they were eighteen and hardened veterans, and Cilissa wished there were more there like themselves.

Crouched as they were in the sparse underbrush, they could not see the approaching forces, but they could hear the sound of many feet trampling through the forest, and then they heard the first release of arrows above. Hundreds of archers lined thick branches and makeshift forts in the trees, and with the sound of release, Cilissa and the other three around her got into position, as did several other groups of four within eyesight.

Delia gasped with fear, and although Cilissa wouldn't say it, she understood. The forest in front of them had been taken over by Nyxborn. They were shaped in recognizable forms—humans, centaurs, minotaurs, and others—but their bodies seemed made out of the night sky, their very skin and muscle

alive with the twinkling of stars. There were hundreds of them, perhaps thousands. They didn't run in any order or pattern, they just came in relentless waves.



Fated Intervention | Art by Svetlin Velinov

The arrows from above descended into the hordes and many Nyxborn fell to the initial onslaught. Cilissa had time to think, *at least they can die*, and then the Nyxborn were upon them. Cilissa and Thora were set with long spears, with Natasa and Delia guarding their flanks with axe and knife. A centaur charged into Cilissa's spear, and any remaining doubts about the reality of the Nyxborn faded as the answering thud rang through her arms and legs. The spear took the centaur full in the chest, his starry eyes dimming before his raised cudgel could land. A mixture of blood and viscous night sky leaked out of his chest.

The massive weight of the falling centaur took her spear with it, but she picked up her spare short spear and began fending off the attacks of a humanoid swordsman that had leapt over the body of the centaur. The swordsman did not say a word as it fought, and Cilissa did not know what was more disconcerting, that the Nyxborn displayed no emotion as it fought, or that it fought well. But even fighting well, Cilissa had not faced a swordfighter yet that was a match for her with a spear. Several flicks and jabs had the Nyxborn bleeding, and although he did not seem in pain, he slowed as moments went by, and failed to parry Cilissa's closing thrust through his eye. With a sideways glance, Cilissa saw Thora handling her opponent before seeing a massive form rush in from her left.

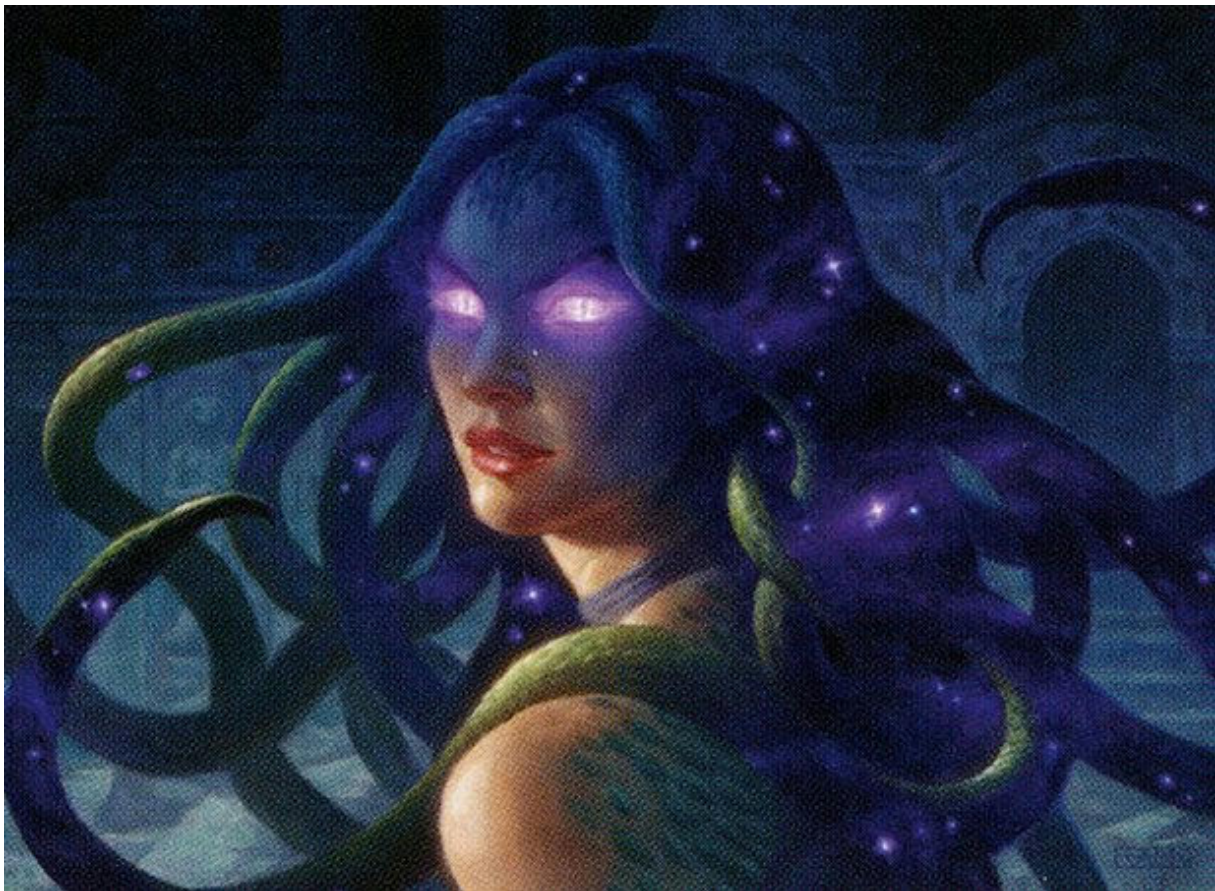
Delia had no time to scream as the minotaur's huge axe cut her midsection in two. The minotaur roared as Cilissa thrust her spear at his chest. The spear glanced off weakly at a bad angle, but Cilissa ducked under the beast's huge legs, dropping her spear and pulling out her hand axe. She used two hands to swing her axe at the minotaur's back leg, severing tendon and muscle and then finished the work on

its other leg. The minotaur fell to the ground in front of her and she leapt on its back and plunged her axe deep into its skull. The minotaur continued to roar and convulse, weaker each time.

Cilissa looked up as the carnage around her continued. Arrows and magic flowed from the trees down to the Nyxborn, but the Nyxborn had mages of their own firing spells back. Nyxborn harpies also were up in the trees attacking and bringing down archers, and the steady stream of arrows from above slowed. Thora and Natasa were still up and looked fine, but many other groups had lost two or three people, and many of the ones remaining were hurt, some grievously.

There was no time for thought as three more Nyxborn with swords charged in, with other humanoids behind them. Natasa ducked under one attacker, neatly slicing its throat as she fought through to deal with the additional reinforcements behind. Cilissa and Thora each took on the attackers in front of them, Cilissa with her axe and Thora with two long knives. the swordsman pressed Cilissa hard, giving her no space to mount an offense, or even draw her long knife. She focused on staying alive, parrying each of the Nyxborn's attacks. With a cry of triumph, Thora plunged both of her knives into the back of Cilissa's assailant, and Cilissa knew Thora's joyous smile was due to being the one to rescue Cilissa, instead of the reverse.

The only warning they had was a hiss. Thora turned around in surprise, and Cilissa, shielded from the enemy by Thora's body, heard a loud, crackling sound, and saw Thora's body turn a pale shade of chalk-gray. A gorgon. With a cry, Cilissa turned away from her dead friend and sprinted in the opposite direction from the gorgon. She heard the gorgon following, slithering along the forest floor, easily keeping pace with Cilissa's mad dash.



Archetype of Finality | Art by Chris Rahn

Ahead of her, a flash of green caught her eye, and she veered off in the direction of a large rock that pulsed a soft, green glow, the gorgon a step behind. Cilissa still had her axe in hand, and she leapt onto

the rock in front of her and sprung off, closing her eyes and twisting back as she hurled the axe to where she pictured the gorgon's head would be.

As she landed, she opened her eyes. If the axe hit she'd soon be dead if she kept her eyes closed, and if the axe didn't hit she'd soon be dead regardless. She saw the sprawled corpse of the gorgon, the axe embedded in its face. She allowed herself a deep breath, and then she took in the bloodshed around her. Everywhere she looked she saw dead and dying Setessans, as the inexorable tides of Nyxborn had overrun most of her friends. She looked in the distance and saw the gray statues of Thora and Natasa. She choked back the tears that threatened to overwhelm her. She had launched herself off of one of Karametra's pods, the largest she had ever seen, easily three times her size laid end-to-end, its thick husk as tough as iron. The green glow that emanated from it, usually soft and gentle, was now harsh and insistent. It was hard not to look at the husk and see it as evidence of Karametra's betrayal. What good was a remnant of a god when all her friends were dead?

Still more Nyxborn came on, more humanoids with swords. Cilissa had only her two long knives left and took on two, three, more, until she lost count. She lost herself in the whirling dance of parry and cut and slash, and with each Nyxborn felled she thought of Thora's last smile as she had saved Cilissa's life. *You do not fight with your body. You fight with your mind.* Faster and faster she whirled, faster than she had ever fought, and still Niketa's words rose up. *You will never be fast enough, Child. You fight with your mind.* But what good was her mind when her friends were dead and her god was gone? Karametra's husk continued to glow, its green nimbus pulsing strongly.

You are loved, Child. That was what the god had whispered to her so many years ago. *Karametra is gone*, she told herself. She saw numerous Nyxborn bodies littering the ground in front of her. Had she killed them all? No, still more Nyxborn than she could count were entering the forest, while others finished their slaughter of the Setessans. She spotted a minotaur at the same time it saw her, and it charged.

Only as she threw herself to the side, avoiding the charge, did she realize she was bleeding in several places. She had not escaped her dance unscathed. They were mostly cuts on her arms, although she saw one thigh suffused with red. She was going to die there. But she would take this minotaur with her. *You fight with your mind.* Another voice whispered, *You are loved, Child.*

"What do you want from me?" she screamed into the forest. Nothing changed, no Nyxborn stopped its killing, no god appeared. The minotaur circled around for another charge. The pod continued to pulse. *Karametra's pod.* With another scream she brought one of her knives in a large overhand swing down onto the pod. It clanged off as if striking the hardest iron. Again, she brought her knife down and it was like trying to cut through steel with a spoon. She hurled herself to the side to avoid the minotaur's charge, and the pain of her wounds blossomed fresh. She was not strong enough to open the pod. She wasn't even sure what opening the pod would do, but she needed to try.

The minotaur approached with its axe, the blade ripe with blood from some other slain Setessan. *I fight with my mind. I hope so, because my body is about to give out.* She stood in front of the pod, both knives bared, a snarl on her face. The minotaur raised his axe and brought it up in a vicious two-handed swing to split Cilissa in two. At the last possible second she did an awkward, ugly somersault backwards, anything to get out of the way of the descending blade, and the minotaur's axe hit the pod squarely in the center, splitting it open from top to bottom.

A rush of sounds and green light filled the forest. The sound of a forest stream burbling, the sound of birds chirping in their mating dance, the sound of golden leaves swirling in the wind. The minotaur stood there, transfixed, as the green light framed its body. The Nyxborn slowly dissolved into nothingness. Everywhere Cilissa looked, the Nyxborn were surrounded by a green nimbus that triggered their slow dissolve into oblivion. Within seconds, there was no Nyxborn in sight.



Revoke Existence | Art by Adam Paquette

A tranquil silence followed the breaking of the pod, only to be replaced by the sounds of the dying. Cilissa was on her back, struggling to breathe, her leg throbbing with pain and leaking blood with each throb. *That is a lot of blood*, Cilissa noticed. She turned over to her front and crawled over to the broken pod.

The pod was a lifeless husk, a thick rind of fibrous wood. She put her hand on it, but there was no warmth, no green glow, no feeling of the god or her touch. Still, the pod had saved her. If only she had known. If only someone had known. She had to tell someone. There were still pods scattered throughout the forest; not many, but enough. She began crawling on the forest floor. *I have to tell someone. I have to stop bleeding. I have to rest.* She was very tired.

As she was passing out, she thought she heard the crunch of footsteps approaching. She prayed they were the footsteps of a friend, and then she sunk into oblivion.

A Summer

It was a beautiful and warm summer day. Even the mists that usually clung to the borders of the clearing were wispy and translucent. Cilissa looked out at the gathered circles of children in the clearing. They were so *young*. Had she ever been that young? Some of those faces looked openly scared, others made sure to display how tough and unafraid they were, still others seemed in shock, unable to feel at all. Cilissa knew the looks on those faces well. She gazed up from the edge of the clearing, still finding marvel in the portal to Nyx above their heads. The stars continued to move and shimmer, patterns endlessly forming and dissolving and dancing.

She strode out to the center of the clearing, focusing on not limping, which she could do for short periods of time. She reached the center, and stood there, waiting. She saw the fear in the faces of the

children, but she also saw hope. And love. She saw love most of all. She let her voice be infused by the presence of the god, and it boomed out across the clearing.

“Welcome, Little Ones. You are safe here. You are home.”