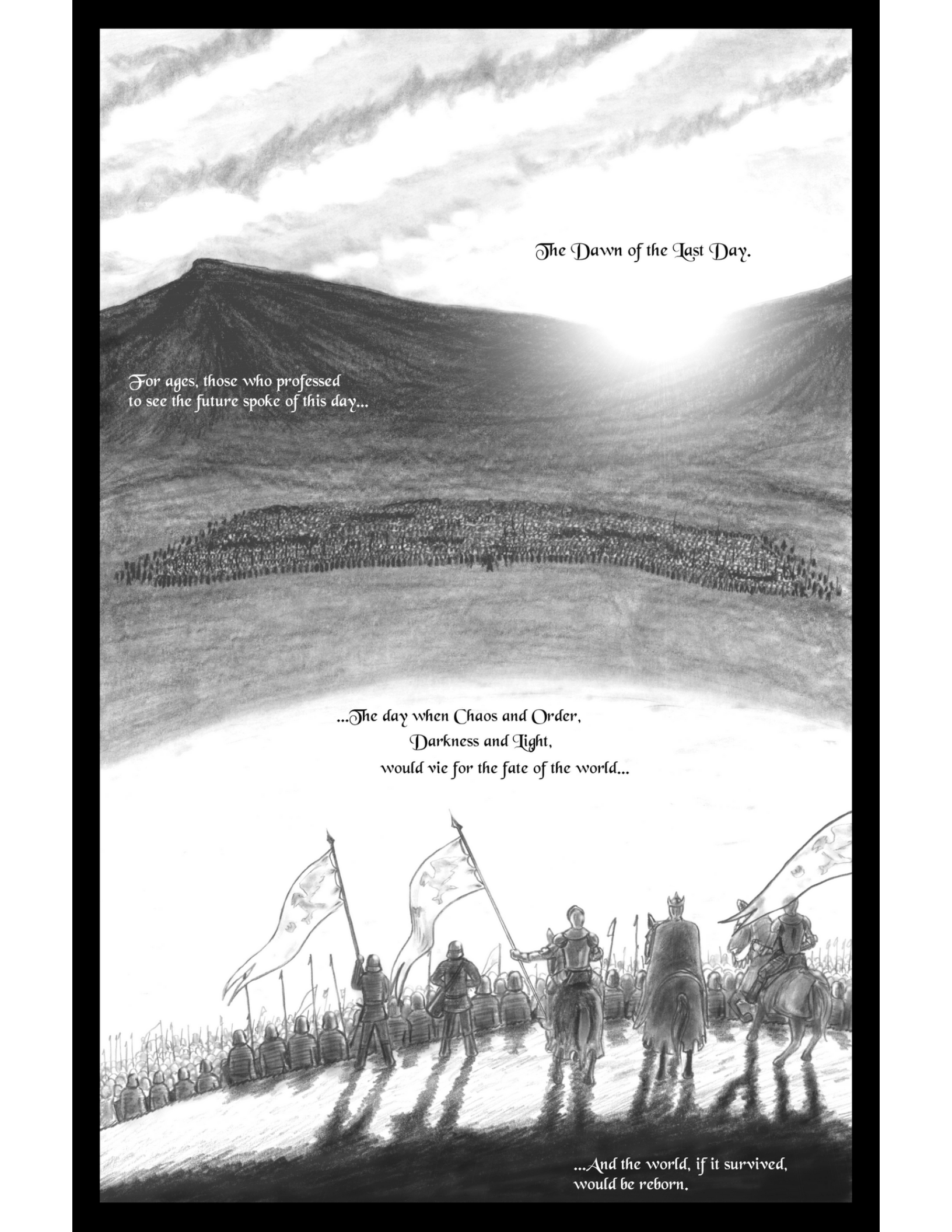


The following images are from the first issue of the comic book version of Cindra's story, entitled 'Passage', published in March 2005. Only three issues were printed, but five were drawn. It was determined that the story would be far too long and expensive to continue in this form, so I turned to novel writing and have never been happier with the results.

The first four pages comprise a prologue that I wrote but did not use for the novel, since the details of those events were not fully formed.

The narration is what one might call "a bit pretentious," but I was aiming for high art. LOL

-Mark Rude



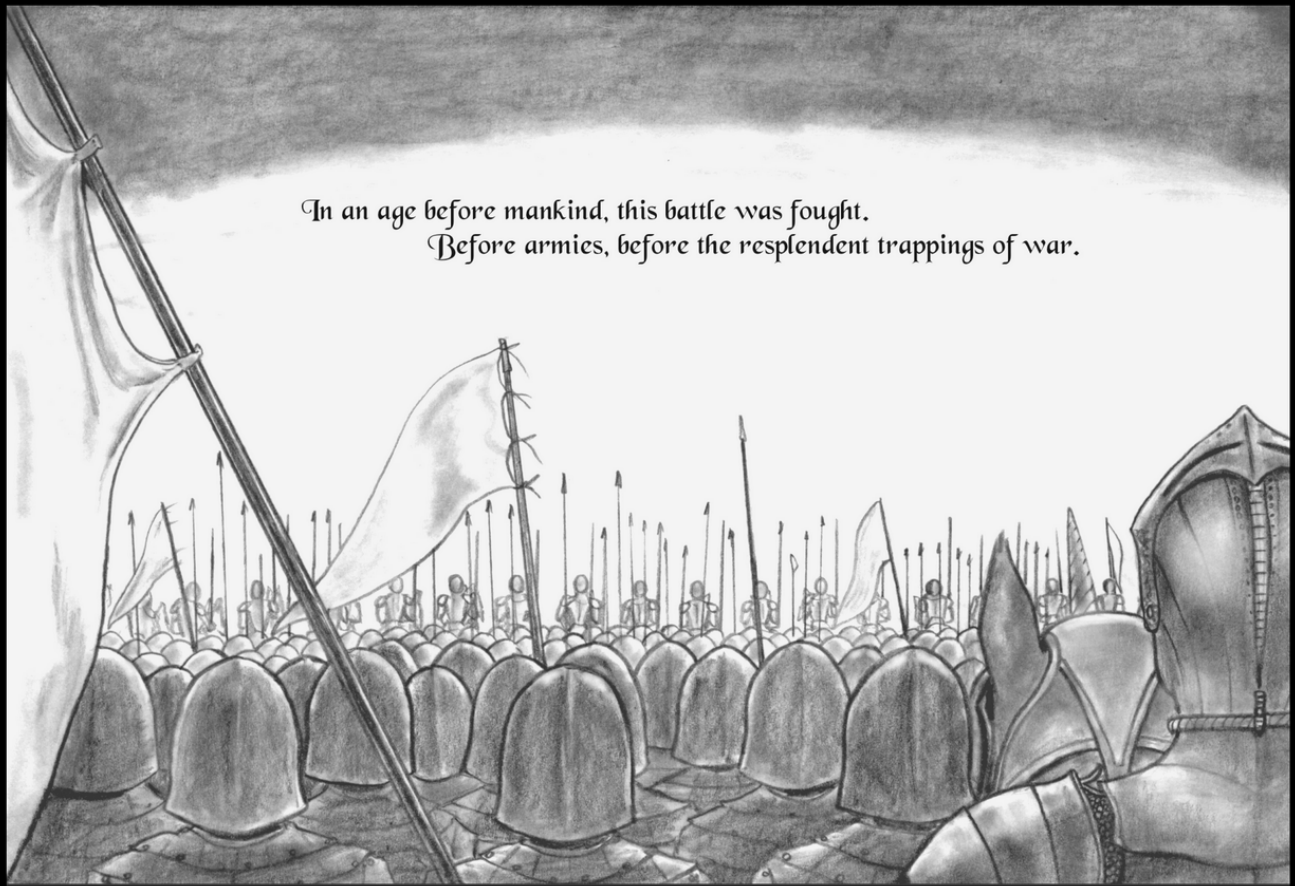
The Dawn of the Last Day.

*For ages, those who professed
to see the future spoke of this day...*

*...The day when Chaos and Order,
Darkness and Light,
would vie for the fate of the world...*

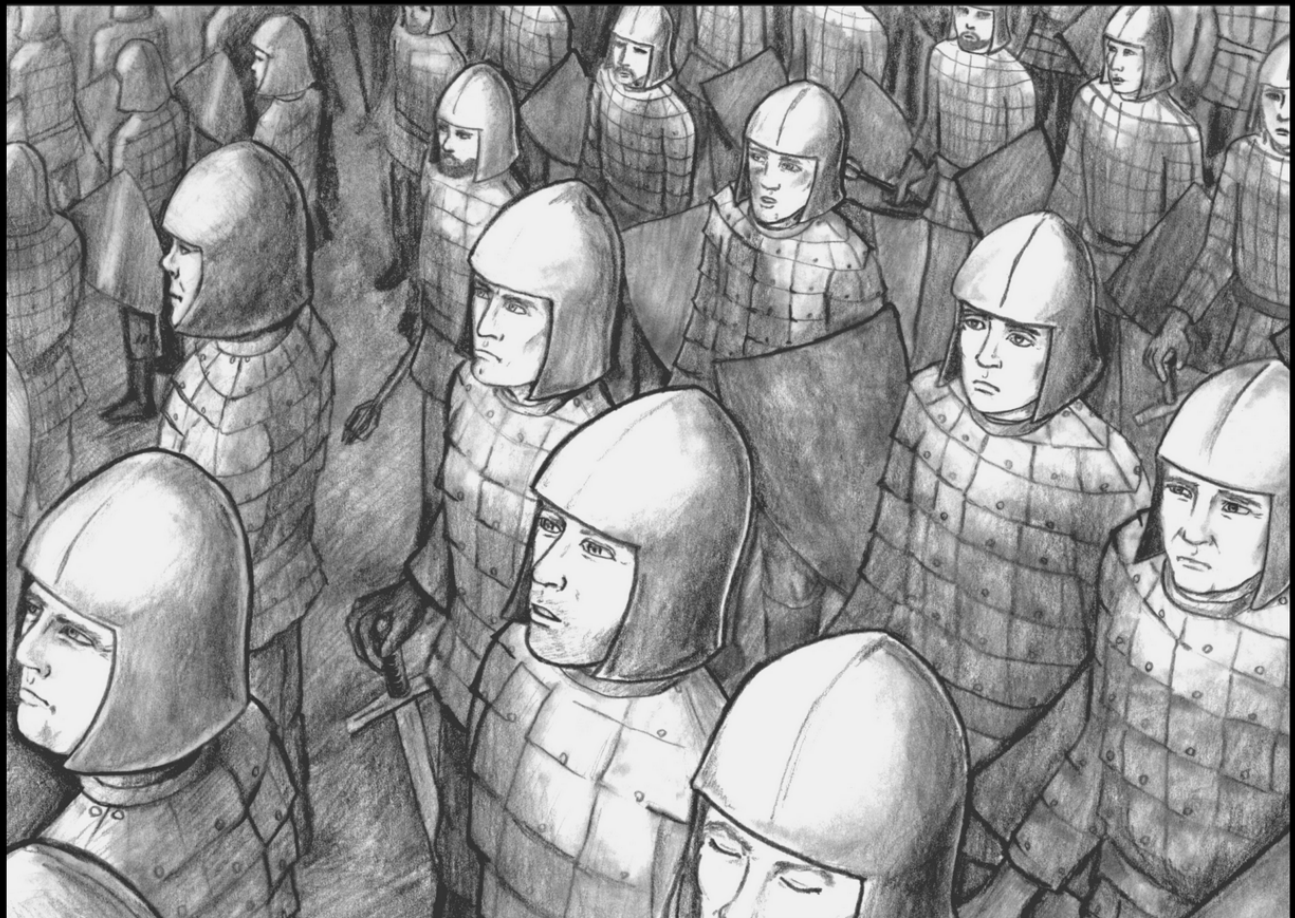
*...And the world, if it survived,
would be reborn.*

In an age before mankind, this battle was fought.
Before armies, before the resplendent trappings of war.



There were only two brothers,
fighting Darkness with Light,
fighting creation with destruction.
When humanity was born, we came to call them Gods.

But we their children, believing or not,
have inherited their endless war.
It is we who shall die for their causes.





*And so it will come to pass that on this day,
several thousand men will gather and fight against the
forces of Chaos.*

*A few will survive, but most will die.
Several thousand men....*



....And one woman.

Passage

Art and Story
by
Mark Rude



At least, that is one possibility...

The City of Portshia.

Jewel of the Red Coast.

One of the wealthiest and most influential cities in the Realm.

For decades, the Royal Family of Califon has held winter court here in the splendor of the Winter Palace.

It is the destination of traders from many lands:

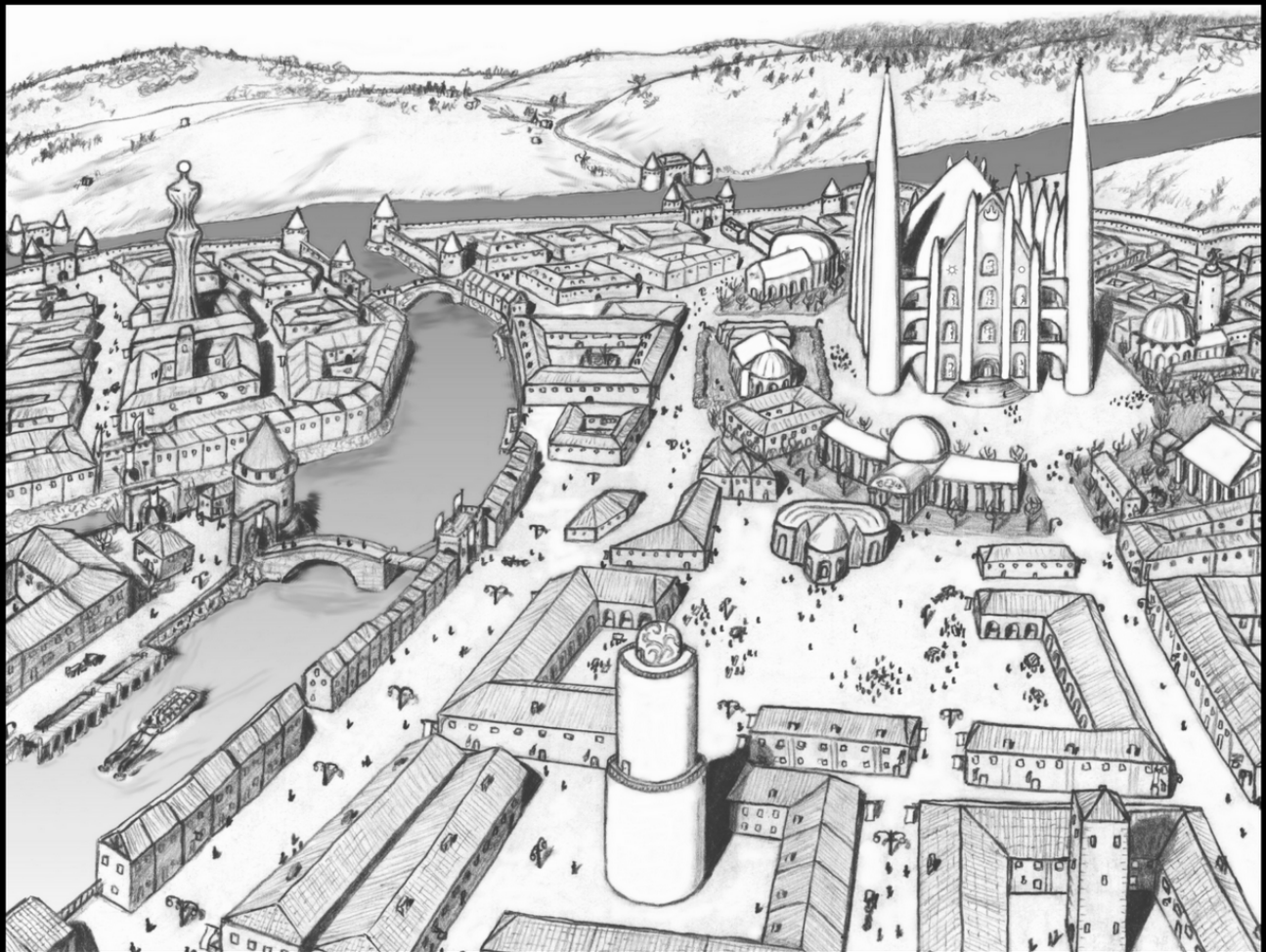
Wintners from Aurilon,

Silk merchants from Gozhia,

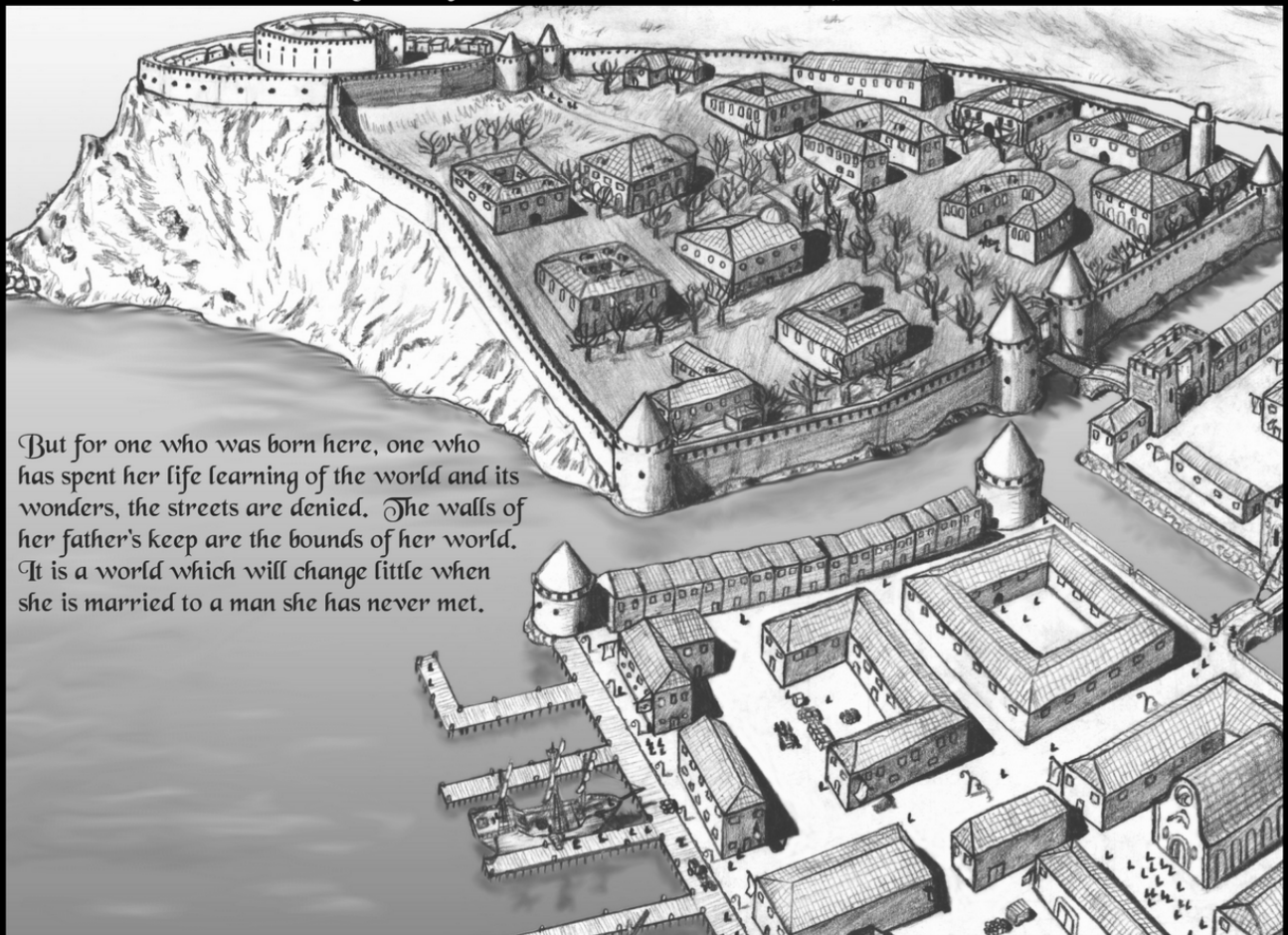
Spice-traders from Kathica,

And even dealers in exotic animals from Rasha and Rakaal.

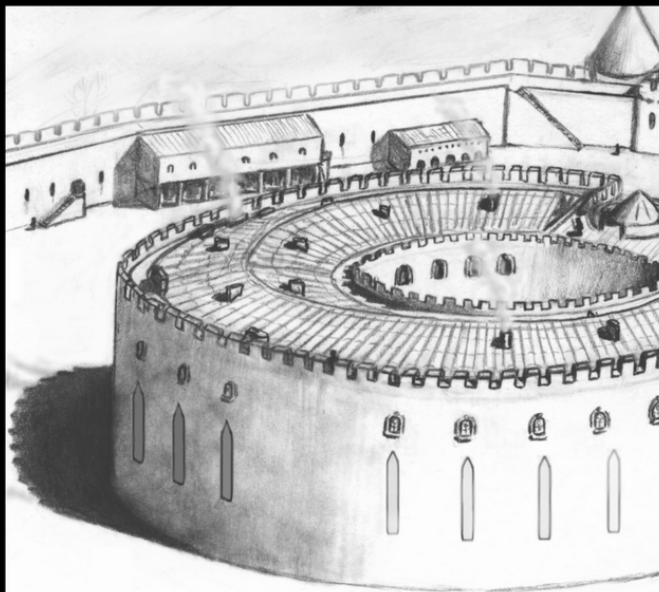




Pilgrims and scholars flock to its temples, seeking enlightenment, knowledge, and meaning. Others are drawn to the Grand Market, with its strange sights and sounds, all for sale. Others still seek to gaze at the mysterious towers that loom over the city, housing ancient secrets and those who keep them.



But for one who was born here, one who has spent her life learning of the world and its wonders, the streets are denied. The walls of her father's keep are the bounds of her world. It is a world which will change little when she is married to a man she has never met.

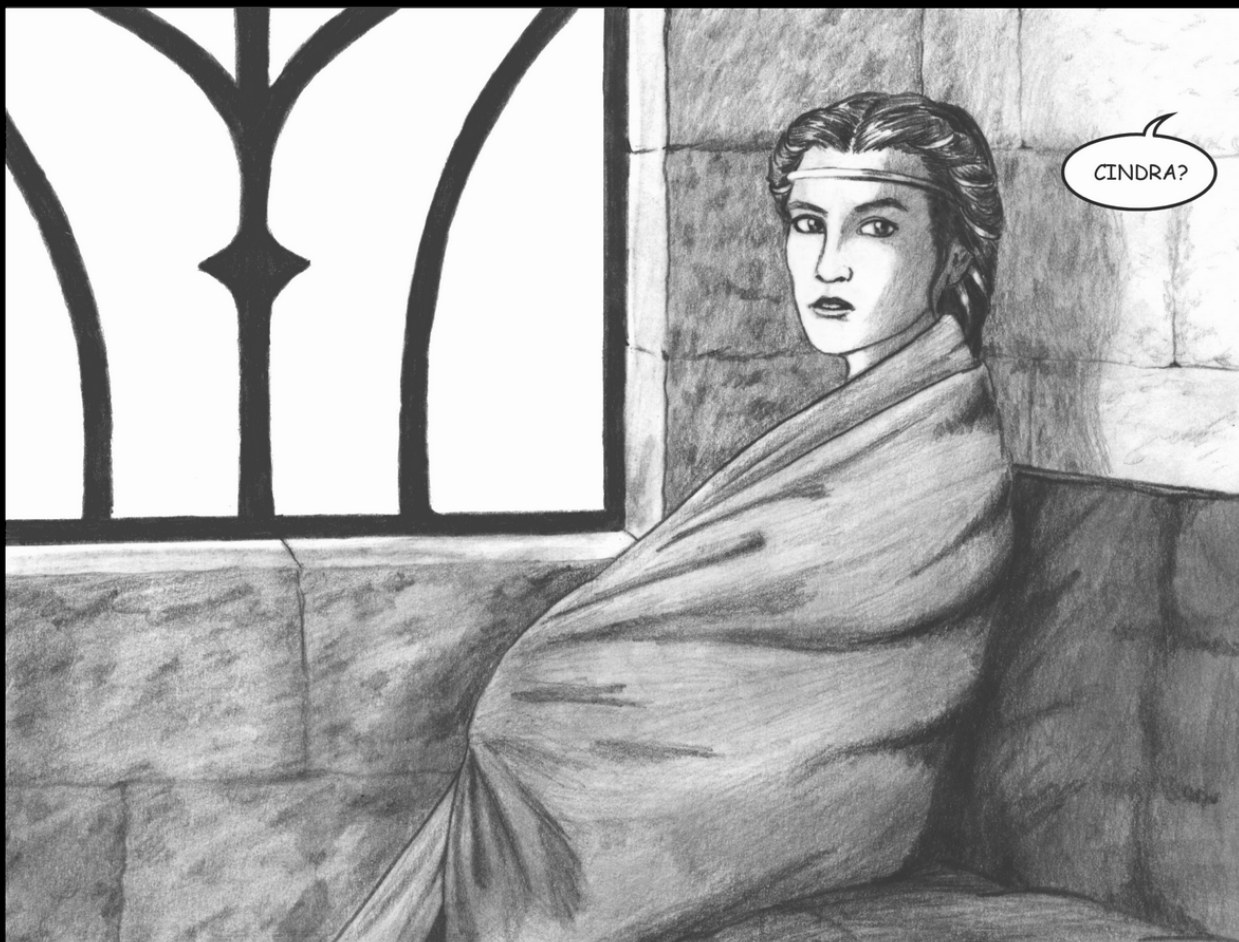


She looks to the horizon and sees her future, imagined for her by a quick and fertile mind.

Her future seems bleak. For all of her dreams, she is forced to live in reality, bound by her age, gender, and inheritance.



She is the Lady Cindra Corrina, daughter of the Count of Casselvane, and she turns fourteen today.





MOTHER.

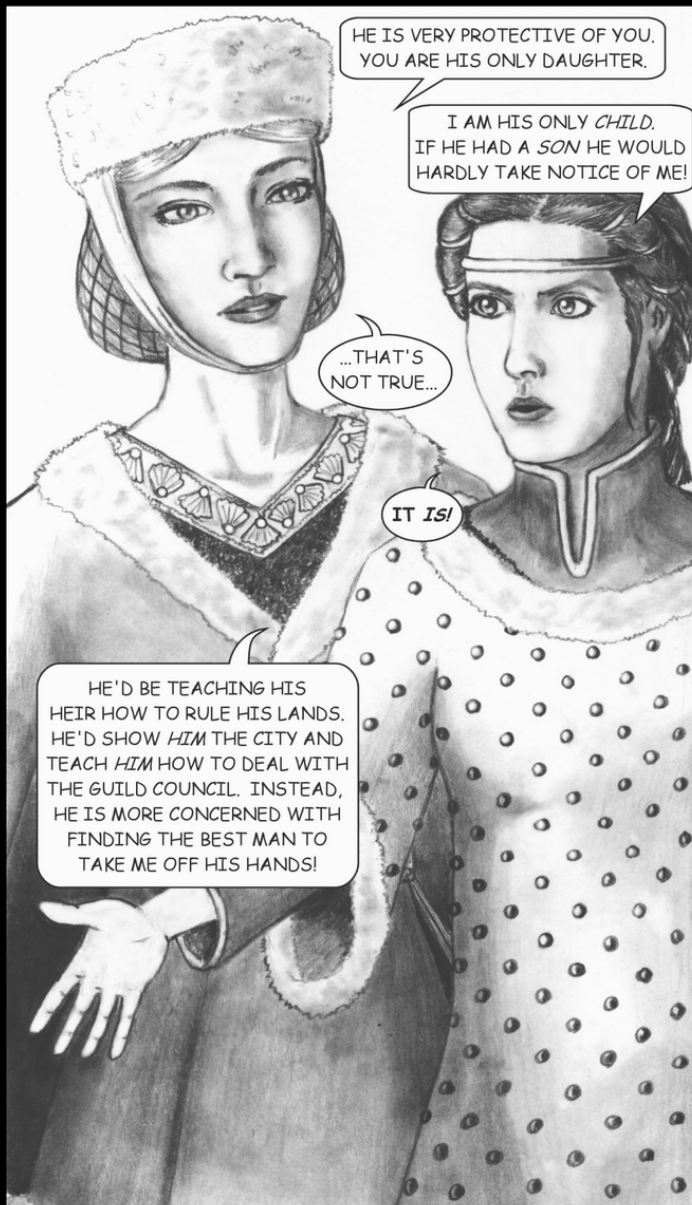


FATHER SAYS HE DOESN'T APPROVE OF MY STROLLS ALONG THE BATTLEMENTS.

YOU SPEND SO MUCH TIME AT THE WINDOW...

PERHAPS HE FEARS A SEAGULL WILL SNATCH YOU?

I COULD ONLY HOPE...



HE IS VERY PROTECTIVE OF YOU. YOU ARE HIS ONLY DAUGHTER.

I AM HIS ONLY CHILD. IF HE HAD A SON HE WOULD HARDLY TAKE NOTICE OF ME!

...THAT'S NOT TRUE...

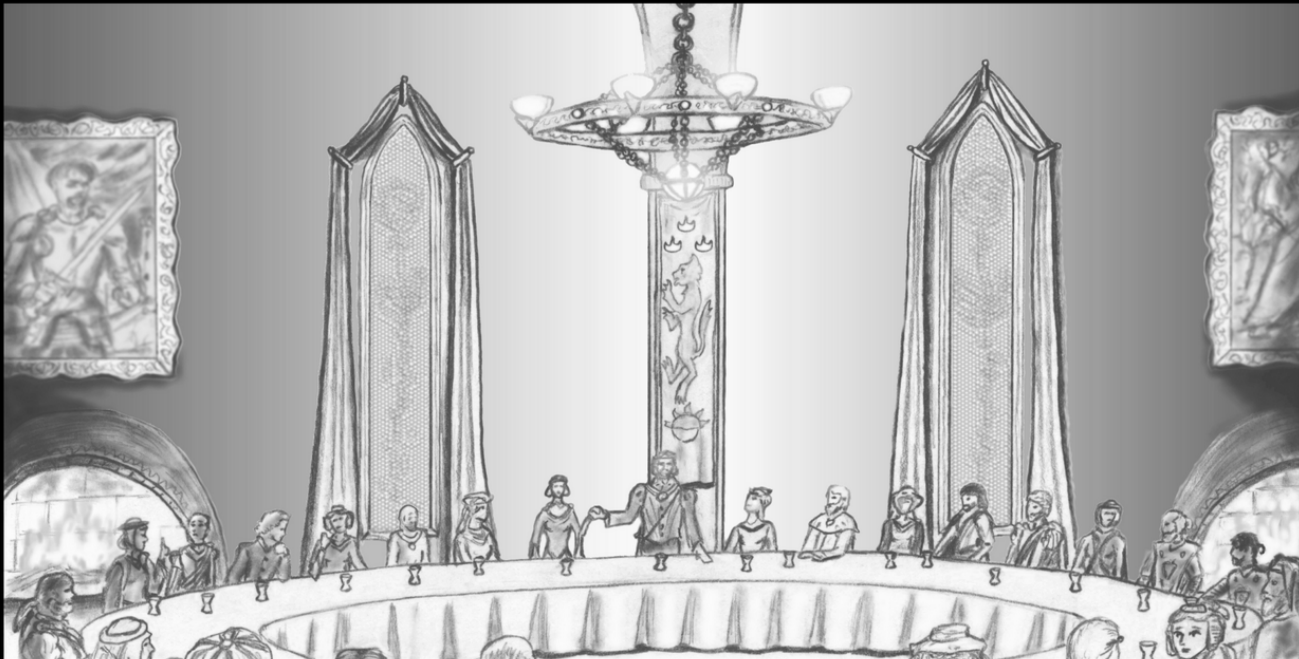
IT IS!

HE'D BE TEACHING HIS HEIR HOW TO RULE HIS LANDS. HE'D SHOW HIM THE CITY AND TEACH HIM HOW TO DEAL WITH THE GUILD COUNCIL. INSTEAD, HE IS MORE CONCERNED WITH FINDING THE BEST MAN TO TAKE ME OFF HIS HANDS!



DON'T DESPISE HIM, KITTEN. YOU KNOW HOW IMPORTANT THIS MARRIAGE IS TO YOUR FATHER.

I WANT TO BE IMPORTANT TO HIM.



Sky-blue ribbons adorn the city's door frames and lampposts, and banners hang at every street corner in celebration of the Lady Cindra's birthday. In the Great Hall of Casselvane Keep, the Count and Countess entertain their guests, who have come to hear a special announcement...

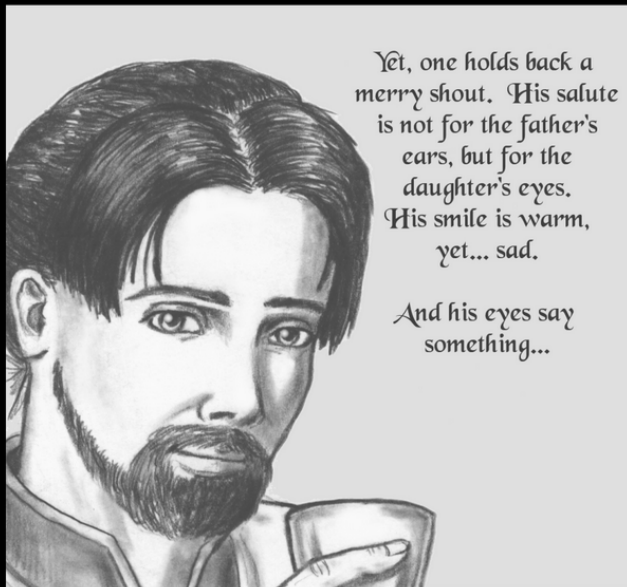
...AND SO, I AM HAPPY TO DECLARE THAT NEGOTIATIONS HAVE BEEN COMPLETED AND THE ARRANGEMENTS HAVE BEEN MADE.



MY DAUGHTER, LADY CINDRA CORRINA, SHALL MARRY HIS GRACE HAYNNYD SYN DeKAARD, DUKE OF KYSHMERYYK THREE MONTHS HENCE IN ROKVYNNAR.

The genteel cheers ring hollow in the young girl's ears. They are the practiced responses of court sycophants. "They would cheer so if my father told them that his favorite hound had puppies!" she thinks inwardly.



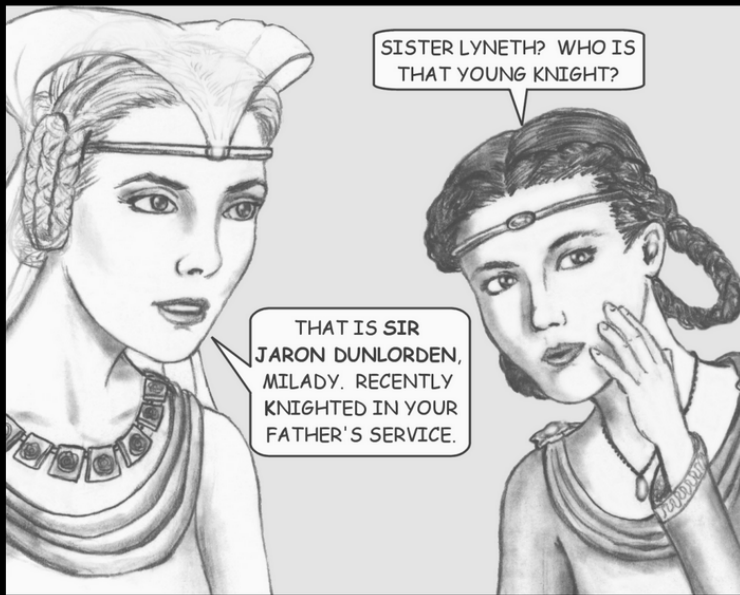


Yet, one holds back a merry shout. His salute is not for the father's ears, but for the daughter's eyes. His smile is warm, yet... sad.

And his eyes say something...

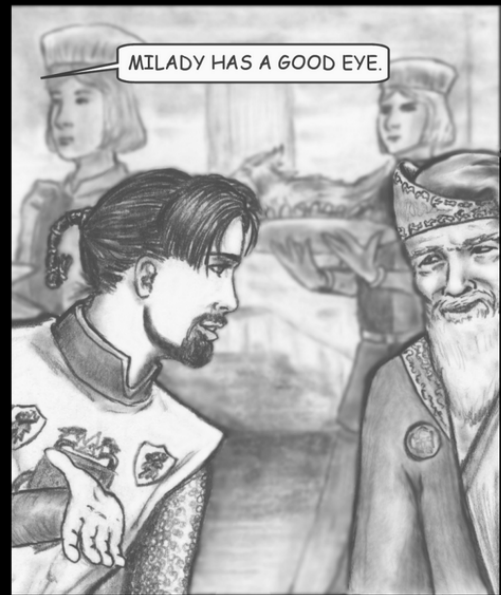


...Special...



SISTER LYNETH? WHO IS THAT YOUNG KNIGHT?

THAT IS SIR JARON DUNLORDEN, MILADY. RECENTLY KNIGHTED IN YOUR FATHER'S SERVICE.

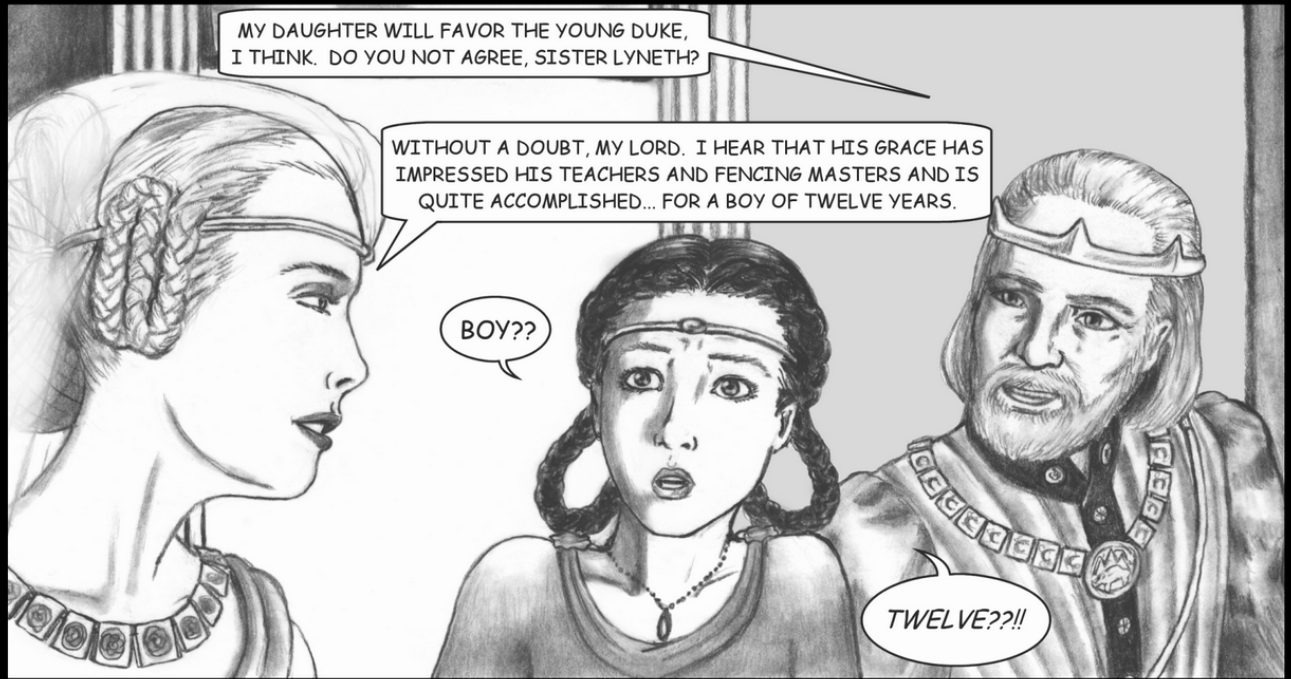


MILADY HAS A GOOD EYE.

Present to bless the engagement feast is a priestess of Selvina, Goddess of Love and Beauty. Agents of the heart and its desires, the Sisters of Selvina are known for their beauty, their advice, their influence...



...and their meddling.



MY DAUGHTER WILL FAVOR THE YOUNG DUKE, I THINK. DO YOU NOT AGREE, SISTER LYNETH?

WITHOUT A DOUBT, MY LORD. I HEAR THAT HIS GRACE HAS IMPRESSED HIS TEACHERS AND FENCING MASTERS AND IS QUITE ACCOMPLISHED... FOR A BOY OF TWELVE YEARS.

BOY??

TWELVE??!!



I THOUGHT THE DUKE WAS TWENTY-ONE!

WELL, ER... HE WAS. THE OLDER DUKE DIED THIS FALL, AND HIS YOUNGER BROTHER ASSUMED THE TITLE.

WILL MY HUSBAND BE PULLING MY HAIR AND THROWING STONES AT ME??

WILL I HAVE TO WIPE HIS NOSE FOR HIM?

OH, NO MILADY. HIS MOTHER THE DOWAGER DUCHESS CAN DO THAT FOR HIM.

OH, SPLENDID!



THAT WILL BE ENOUGH, SISTER!

YES, MY LORD COUNT.

WELL, DON'T JUST SIT THERE! SAY SOMETHING TO THE GIRL!

I TOLD YOU SHE'D BE UPSET.

WIPE YOUR MOUTH, DEAR.

THE PRINCES OF ROKVYNNAR ARE NOTORIOUSLY DIFFICULT TO NEGOTIATE WITH, ESPECIALLY WITHOUT AN ALLIANCE. TO A PROSPEROUS UNION FOR THE YOUNG LADY CINDRA! AND TO THE COUNT, HER WISE AND ADEPT FATHER, WHO HAS GAINED LEVERAGE FEW COULD HAVE HOPED FOR!



AND MORE, IT SENDS A MESSAGE TO THE DISSENER HOUSES, THE KING HAS HIS ADMIRERS AMONG THE ROKVYNAE NOBLES AND THIS WILL BOLSTER THEIR SUPPORT.



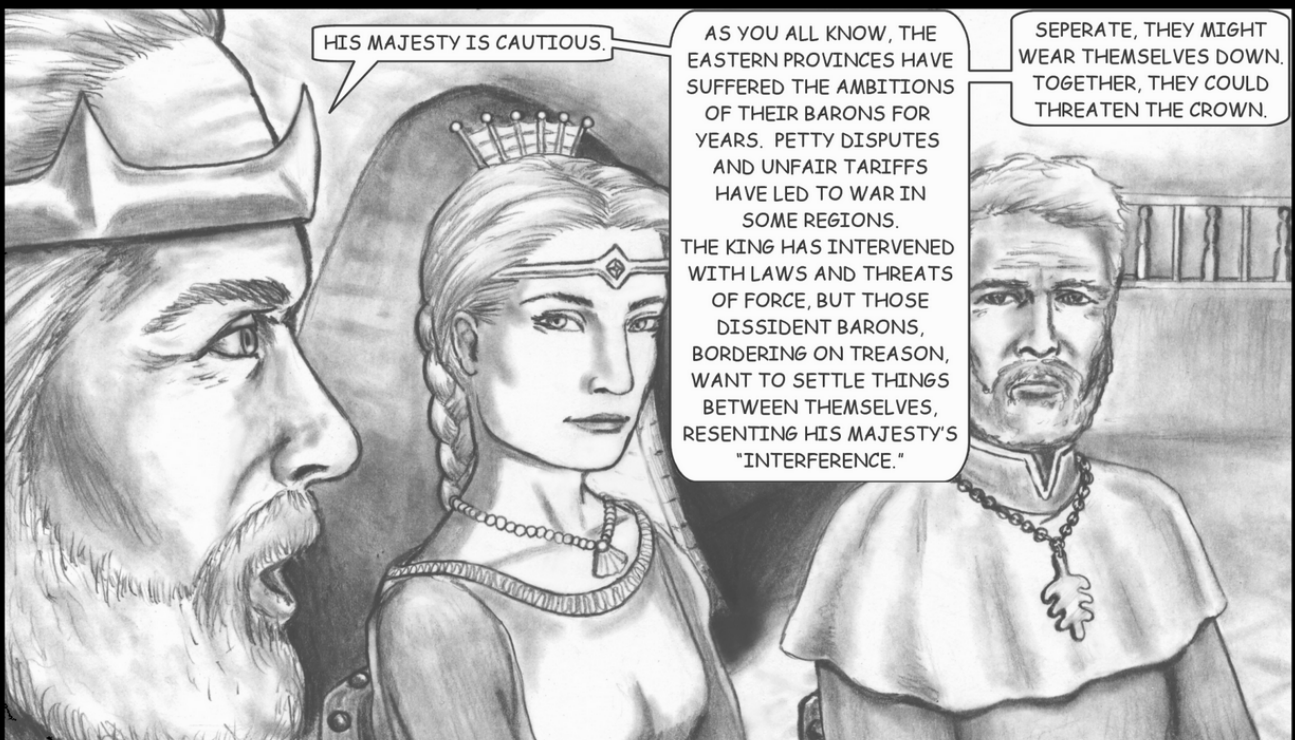
ARE THINGS TRULY SO... UNSTABLE MY LORD?



HIS MAJESTY IS CAUTIOUS.

AS YOU ALL KNOW, THE EASTERN PROVINCES HAVE SUFFERED THE AMBITIONS OF THEIR BARONS FOR YEARS. PETTY DISPUTES AND UNFAIR TARIFFS HAVE LED TO WAR IN SOME REGIONS. THE KING HAS INTERVENED WITH LAWS AND THREATS OF FORCE, BUT THOSE DISSIDENT BARONS, BORDERING ON TREASON, WANT TO SETTLE THINGS BETWEEN THEMSELVES, RESENTING HIS MAJESTY'S "INTERFERENCE."

SEPERATE, THEY MIGHT WEAR THEMSELVES DOWN. TOGETHER, THEY COULD THREATEN THE CROWN.



FOREIGN ALLIES ARE BECOMING SCARCE,
AND HIS MAJESTY HOPES THAT SUCH
UNIONS WILL FORGE USEFUL ALLIANCES
IN FUTURE TIMES OF NEED.

MY CHILD, YOU WED WITH THE
BLESSINGS OF THE KING HIMSELF,
AND WITH ALL OUR HOPES.
MAY YOUR BEAUTY AND
GRACE FOSTER PEACE.



But peace, like everything else worth having, comes with a price.



PEACE!
HE WANTS PEACE,
DOES HE?

MARRY ME TO A
TWELVE-YEAR-
OLD BOY!!

SEND ME TO LIVE
IN ROKVYNNAR!!

DUKE
KYSHYMUCK
HEINOUS SIN
DeKAARD!!

PLEASE,
MILADY!



I-IT'S...
sniff
IT'S NOT FAIR!

sniff
IT'S SO
FAR AWAY...

I DON'T EVEN
SPEAK ROK....

...AND I'LL BE
MARRIED BEFORE
I EVEN SEE
THE WORLD...

OH, NOW. FEW PEOPLE
TRULY SEE THE WORLD,
MILADY. EVEN YOUR OWN
FATHER RARELY TRAVELS
FAR FROM HIS LANDS.



MERCHANTS TRAVEL ALL ABOUT, BUT ONLY WHERE THEIR BUSINESS LEADS THEM. PILGRIMS JOURNEY TO TEMPLES AND HOLY SITES, BUT WITH THEIR HEADS BOWED AND THEIR EYES TURNED INWARD.

NO ONE REALLY TRAVELS JUST TO SEE THE WORLD.

AND SOLDIERS MARCH FOR MILES AND MILES, BUT GO WHERE THEY ARE TOLD AND HAVE DEATH AS A CONSTANT COMPANION.

THE GALINDRI GO WHERE THEY WANT. THEY LIVE UNDER THE SUN AND STARS, AND GO FROM VILLAGE TO VILLAGE, AND PROVINCE TO PROVINCE.



DOES MILADY WISH TO BECOME A GALINDRI?

NO... MY SKIN IS TOO LIGHT AND MY EYES AREN'T NEARLY GREEN ENOUGH.

NO ONE WOULD BE FOOLED FOR LONG...



MINETH!

THAT'S IT!



I'LL JUST BORROW SOME CLOTHES, AND A WARM COAT...

M-MILADY?

MILADY CINDRA? WHAT DO YOU --?

ESCAPE! JUST FOR THE NIGHT.

YOU COULD TAKE MY PLACE IN BED! I'LL SLIP OUT THROUGH THE FRONT GATE WITH THE GUESTS AS THEY LEAVE! IT'S PERFECT!



PERFECT??! MILADY IS MAD!
YOU'LL BE FOUND OUT! I'LL
BE FOUND OUT! YOUR FATHER
WILL BE FURIOUS, AND YOUR
POOR MOTHER... MILADY, YOU
MUSTN'T WORRY HER SO!

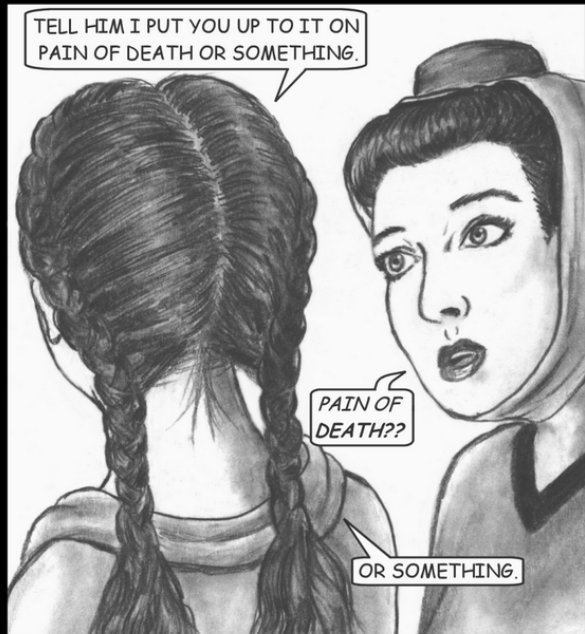
OH, STOP. I WON'T
GET CAUGHT. BY NOW
EVERYONE IS GOOD
AND DRUNK. THEY
WON'T BE LOOKING
FOR ME ANYWAY.

NOW WHERE DID
I PUT MY PURSE...?



BUT MILADY, WHAT ABOUT
ME? YOUR FATHER WON'T
BE SO FORGIVING...

WHERE DID I...
AHA! FOUND IT!



TELL HIM I PUT YOU UP TO IT ON
PAIN OF DEATH OR SOMETHING.

PAIN OF
DEATH??

OR SOMETHING.



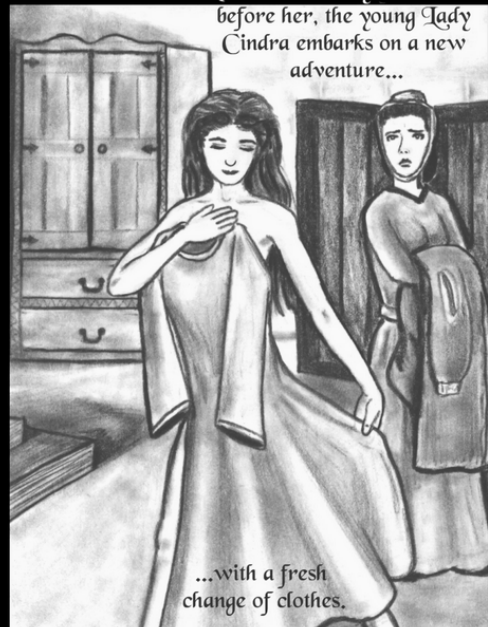
sputter B-B-BUT MILA-

MINETH! I HAVE
TO DO THIS, AND
SO DO YOU. NOW
LEND ME SOME
CLOTHES SO I
CAN BLEND IN.

AND MINETH,
TELL NO ONE!

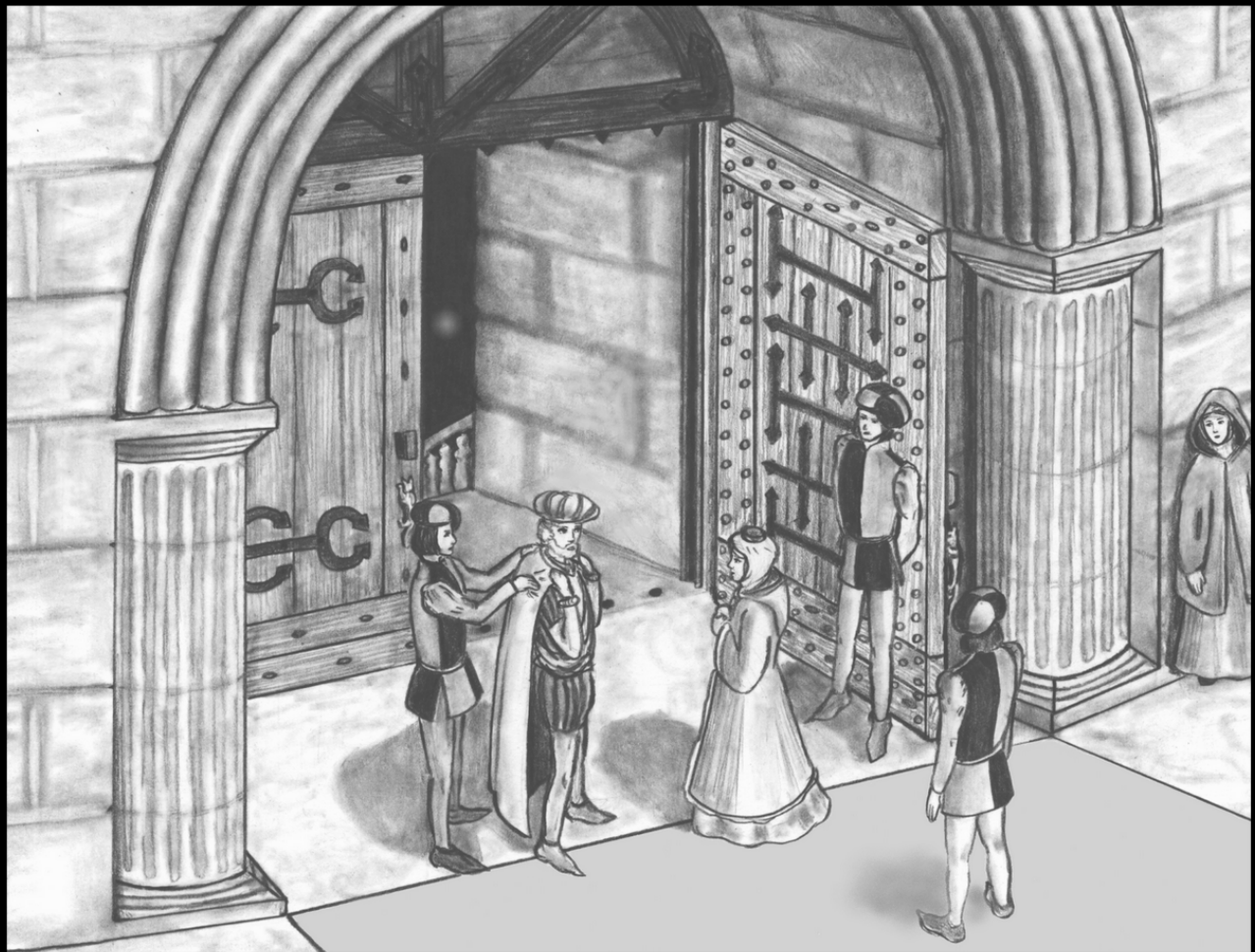
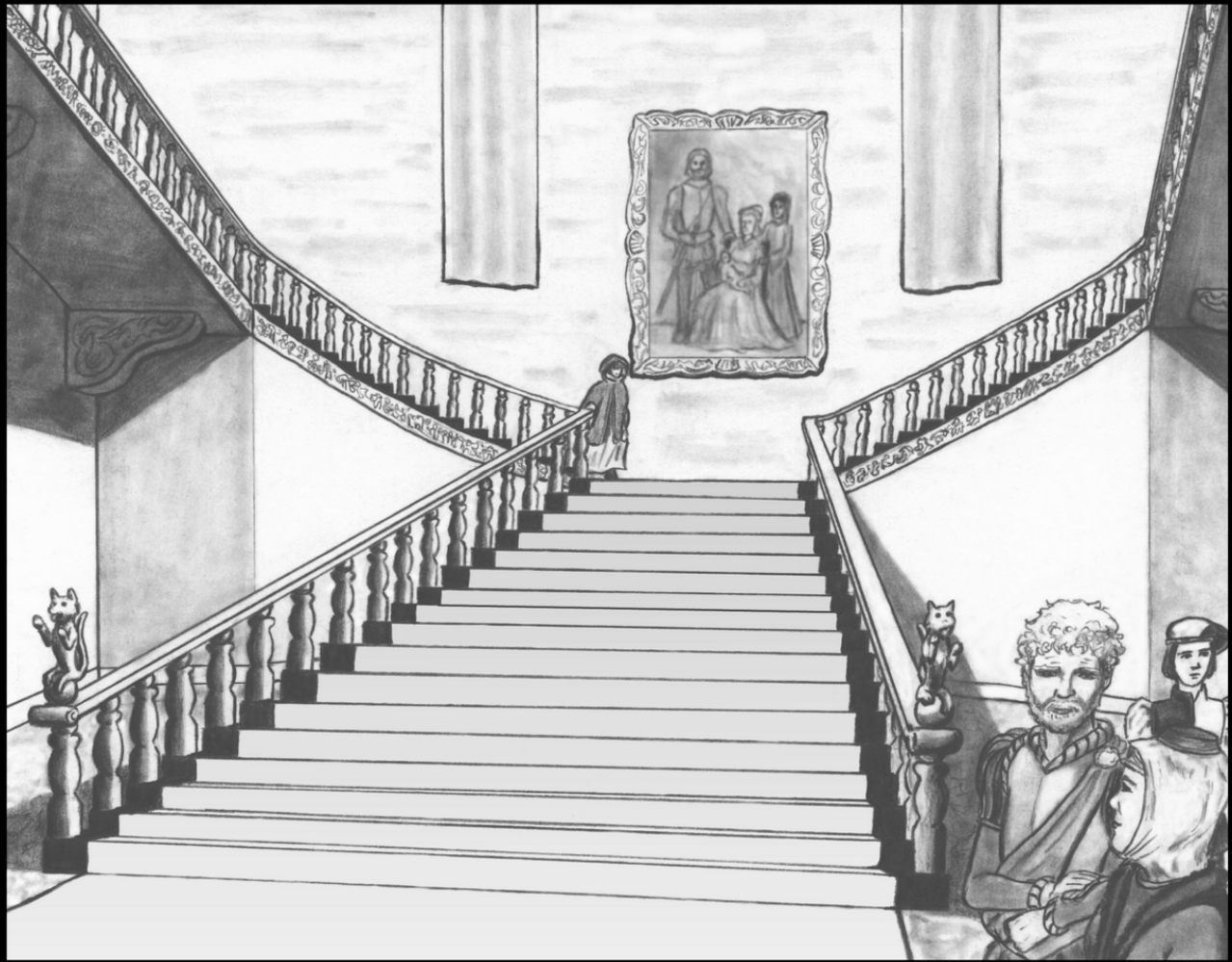
...ON PAIN OF
DEATH, MILADY?

OR SOMETHING...




And so, like many brave souls
before her, the young Lady
Cindra embarks on a new
adventure...


...with a fresh
change of clothes.







THIS IS QUITE AN OPPORTUNITY!
I'LL LEAVE TOMORROW ON A PACKET
BOUND FOR DeKAARD, AND TRY TO
FEEL OUT THE SITUATION. NO
DOUBT THEIR MERCHANTS WILL
HAVE HEARD THE NEWS AS WELL!

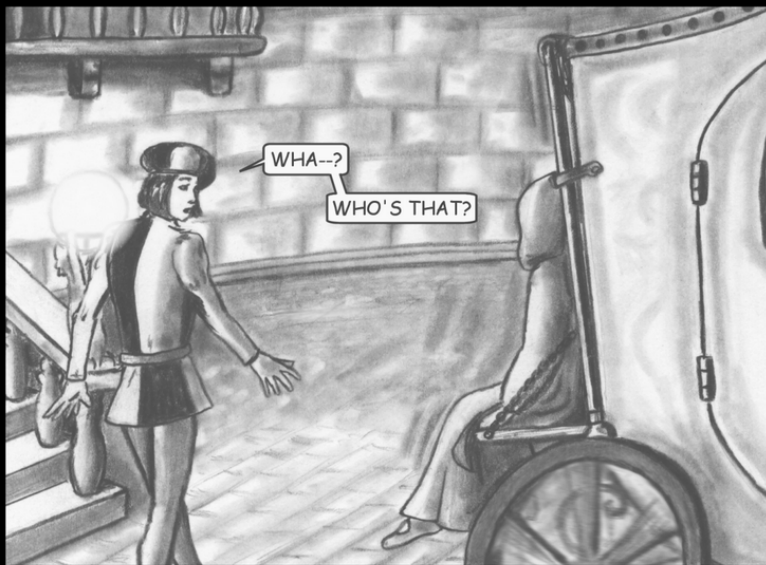


BUT DO YOU NOT THINK IT IS
TOO EARLY? THE WEDDING IS
NOT FOR A FEW MONTHS...

NONSENSE! IT'S NEVER TOO EARLY
TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF A GOOD
THING. I DON'T PLAN TO SIGN ANY
DEALS, BUT I CAN MAKE INQUIRIES
AND DEVELOP SOME NEW CONTACTS.

YES. WELL, THAT POOR
GIRL DIDN'T SEEM VERY
HAPPY ABOUT IT, DID SHE?

HMM? WHAT POOR GIRL?





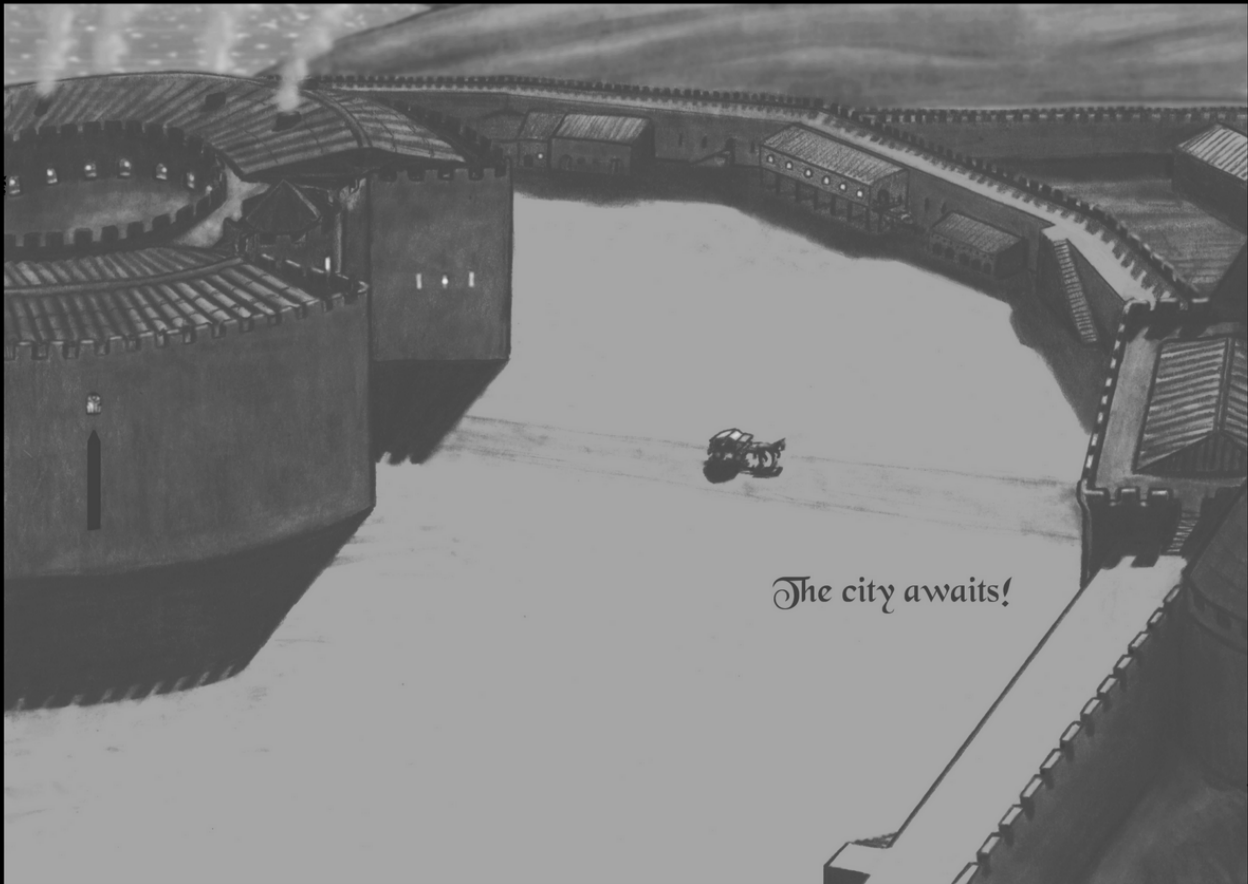
YOU CAN'T BE... UH...

THREE SILVER CALIMARKS!



'S ABOUT THREE DAYS' WAGES...

WELL, WHEN YOU NEED A RIDE, YOU NEED A RIDE...



The city awaits!

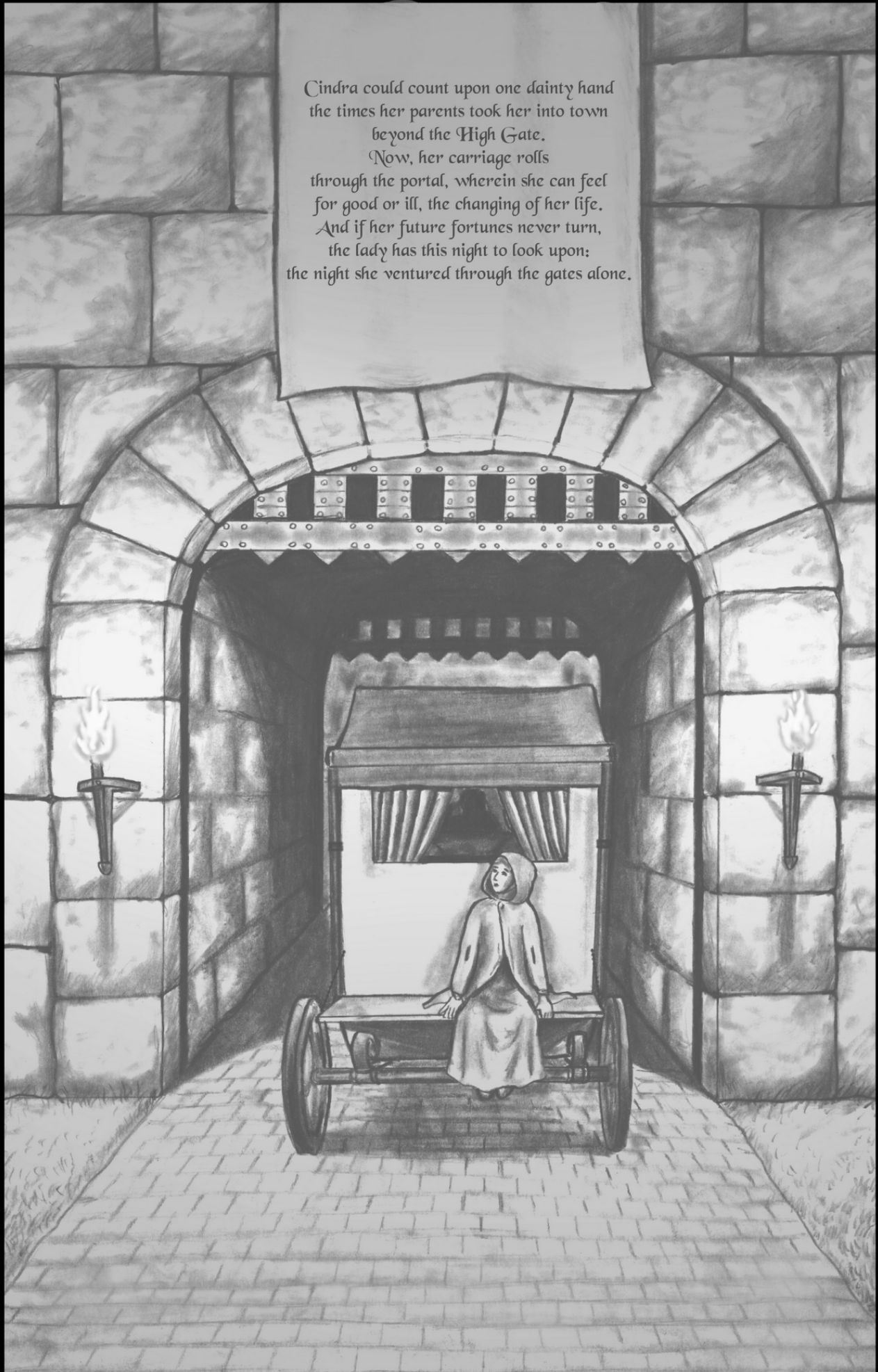
Portshia has been called the City of Life.
To one who's hardly ventured past the walls
around the noble villas and estates,
the city's life beckons to the soul.

Along the gilded Peer District streets,
where high-born lords and ladies choose to dwell
in luxury above the common throng,
the Casting Guild sends its wizard-fings
to light the lamps and sweep the cobbled streets
with arcane powers they barely understand.



Cindra could count upon one dainty hand
the times her parents took her into town
beyond the High Gate.

Now, her carriage rolls
through the portal, wherein she can feel
for good or ill, the changing of her life.
And if her future fortunes never turn,
the lady has this night to look upon:
the night she ventured through the gates alone.

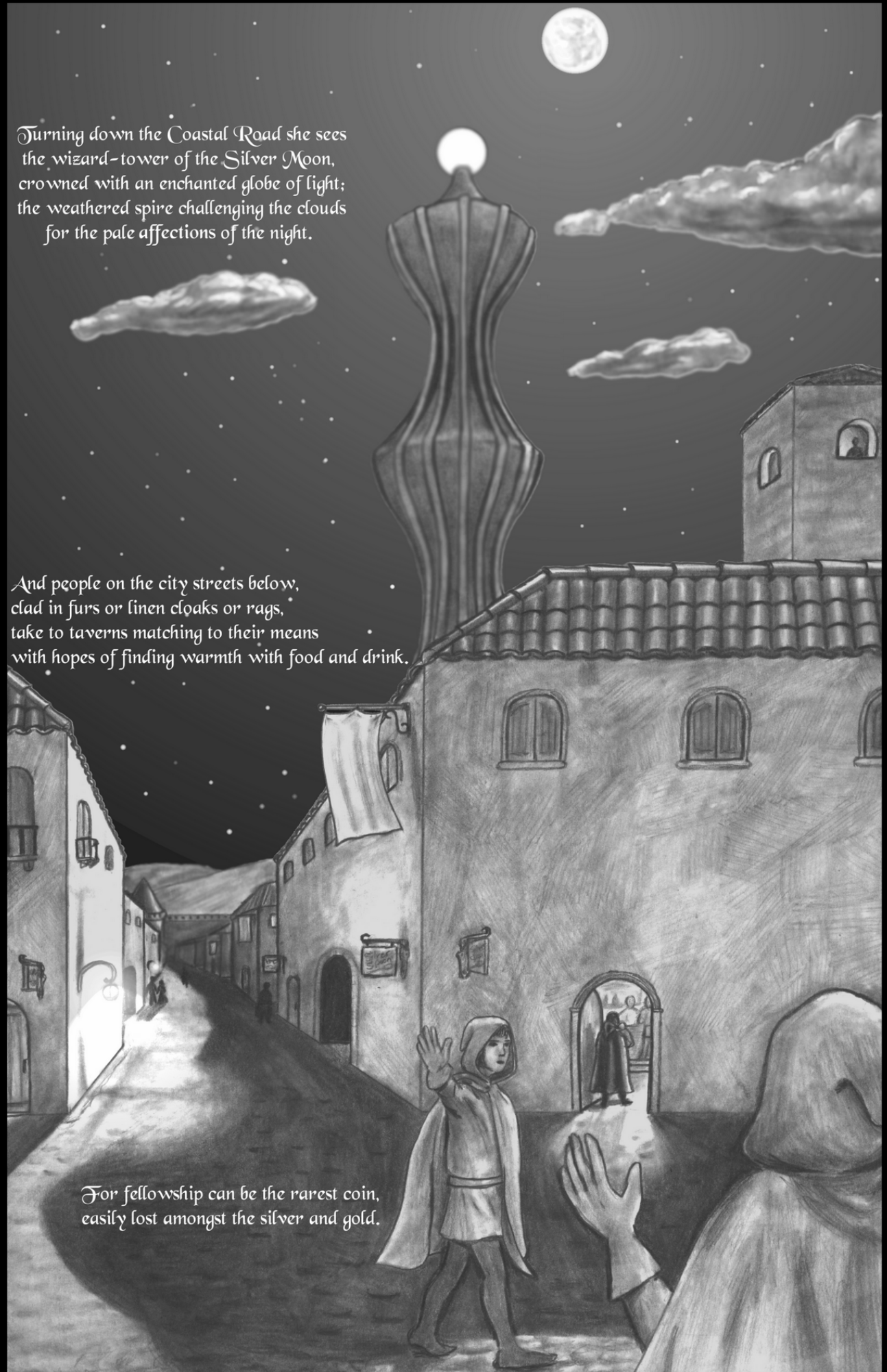


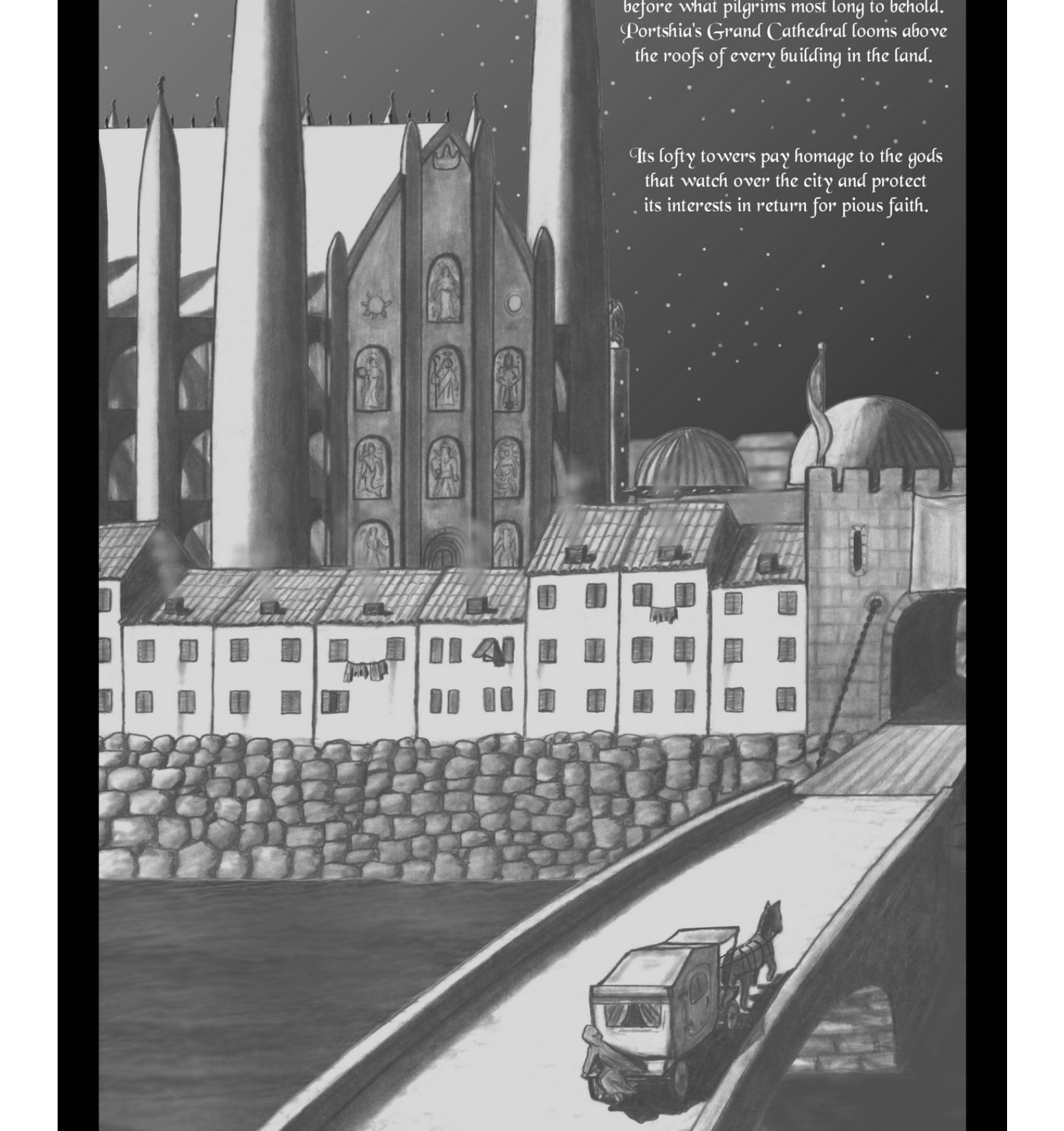


Turning down the Coastal Road she sees
the wizard-tower of the Silver Moon,
crowned with an enchanted globe of light;
the weathered spire challenging the clouds
for the pale affections of the night.

And people on the city streets below,
clad in furs or linen cloaks or rags,
take to taverns matching to their means
with hopes of finding warmth with food and drink.

For fellowship can be the rarest coin,
easily lost amongst the silver and gold.

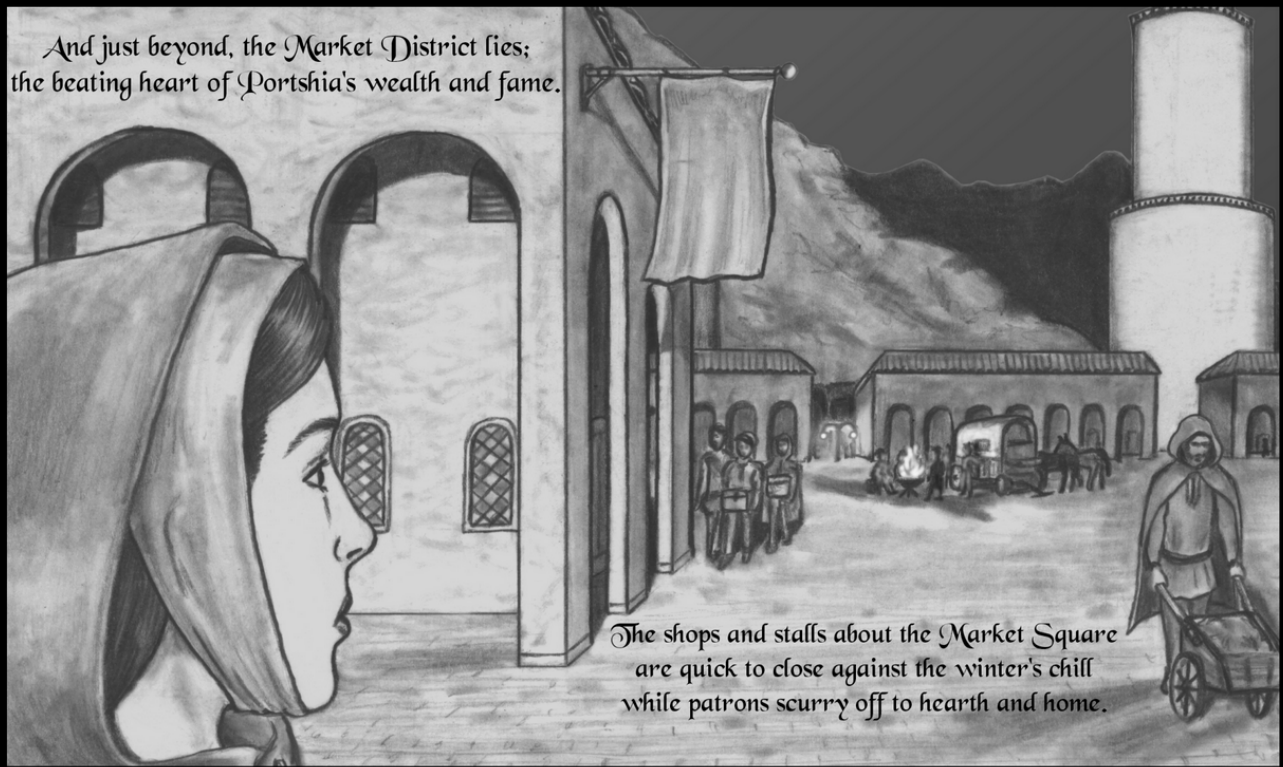




The carriage takes her deeper into town,
before what pilgrims most long to behold.
Portshia's Grand Cathedral looms above
the roofs of every building in the land.

Its lofty towers pay homage to the gods
that watch over the city and protect
its interests in return for pious faith.

And just beyond, the Market District lies;
the beating heart of Portshia's wealth and fame.



The shops and stalls about the Market Square
are quick to close against the winter's chill
while patrons scurry off to hearth and home.





But for some, the stars are welcomed friends,
and fires beside their wagons warm the night.

Now only traveling traders, players and bards,
they used to be the stewards of this land.



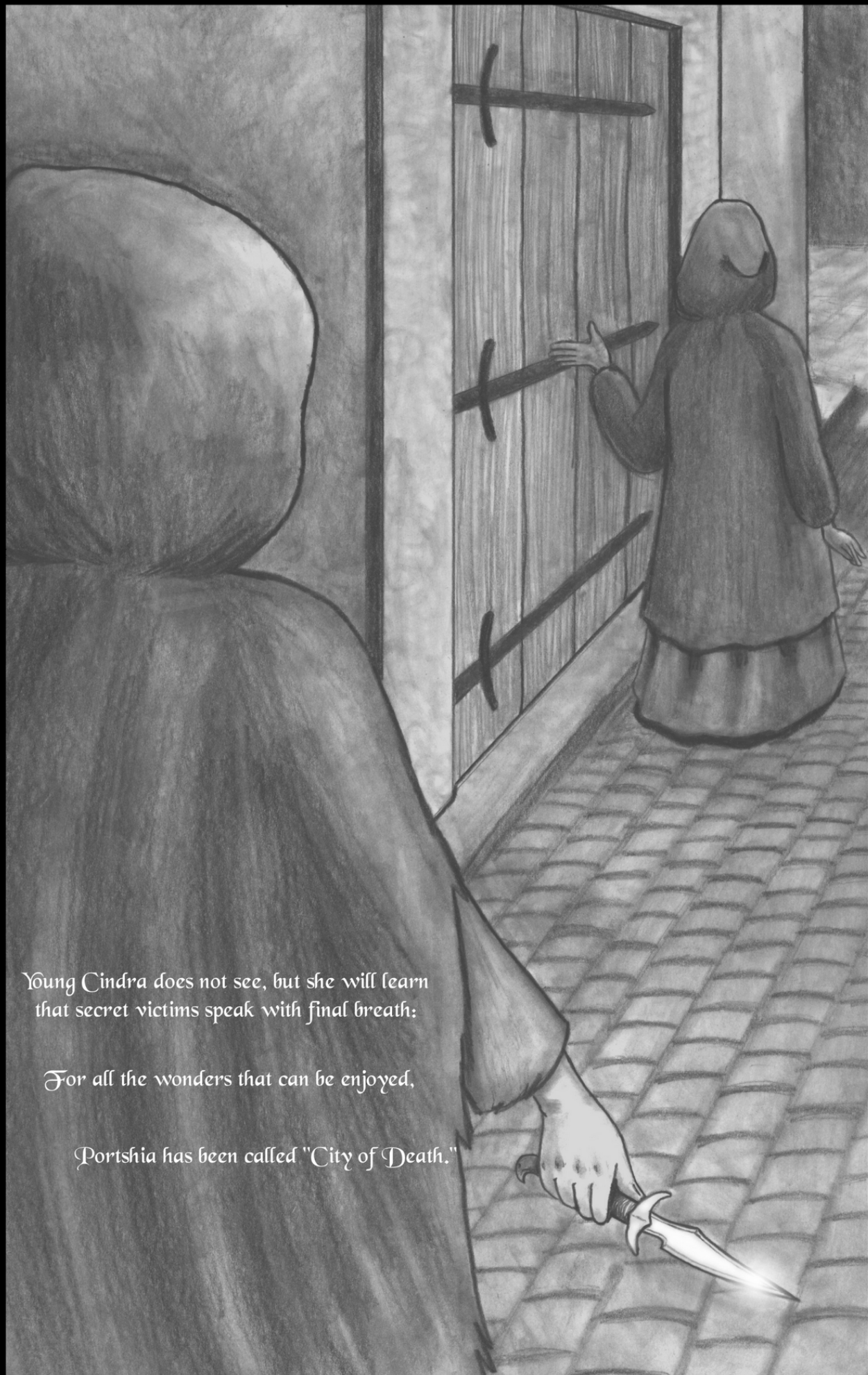




The Lady Cindra walks along the lane,
gazing into shops and tavern doors,
her head awash with sights and sounds and smells
of places only dreamed about before.

An extra shadow slips along her path
as she strolls, enraptured with the night.
It moves in closer, quickening its pace,
a silver dagger glittering in the light...





Young Cindra does not see, but she will learn
that secret victims speak with final breath:

For all the wonders that can be enjoyed,

Portshia has been called "City of Death."