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Grade: 12

Story Title: Names in Stone

The first bell of the morning rings, shaking the stone of the underground city. I tug on a clean, ash-gray tunic, complete with golden embroideries to mark my status as a leader, with a yawn, climbing out of the niche I claim as a bed. Finger-combing my hair, I wrestle it into a braid and survey the Golden Hall.

The rest of the Hall begins to stir around me. Someone adds fuel to the near-dead fire in the corner of the room; someone else puts dagger to sharpening-stone. Tired faces poke out of the sleeping-holes in the wall. The sizzle of frying meat – a rare luxury – mingles with the scent of spices winding through the air. I pause. Spices. Taking a deep breath, I sift through the smells in the air. The stink of unwashed bodies and the metallic tang of blood mingles with the scent of herbs, but doesn't cover it.

One of the boys near me sniffs the air, and I can tell he smells the mixture too. I am on my feet before I even know what I'm doing. The quiet murmur of the waking city stills as the foreboding scent makes its way into everyone's nose. I stride quickly into the center of the city and falter as the crackle of flames meets my ears.

Fear creeps over me as I walk into the Red Hall. A statue of Erith, Lord of Death and Flame, dominates the cavernous room. At his feet lay the dead, wrapped in red cloths and sprinkled with the herbs I smell. A group of people in dark red robes stands next to them, giving the fallen their last ceremony. Their chant is ominous but peaceful, calling the god down, sending the dead away.

The prayer finishes. I step forward, an ash-and-sun outsider in this room of blood. The group of people turns as one, alerted by the fall of my foot. When they see me, they step back, away from the carefully-laid bodies. Only one of them steps forward. She yanks her hood down, revealing pale skin and paler hair. The girl storms toward me, fire in her eyes.

"Where were your people last night? You could have stopped this! You and yours could have saved them!" she hisses at me. "Is it suddenly the way of the Lady of War to kill the young?"

I am blindsided. I am more stringent with age restrictions than were the leaders before me, and even they did not lightly allow children into warfare. Shock morphs into anger, and I am toe-to-toe with the other girl, hissing back, "I lead Kyennin's people. We belong to the Lady of War as you belong to the Lord of Death. We would not – I would not – profane her by sending children to die. This was not our doing."

She kneels next to the nearest body and wordlessly folds the shroud from its face, staring at me. The boy's eyes are closed, but for all the feigned peace, a rictus of pain still contorts his face. The pale girl steps away from his body, inviting me closer. His throat is laid open, the blood washed away by rain. I place my fingers over the wound, covering the gruesome gap, and rest my forehead atop his.

When I pull myself away from the boy, I cover his face once more. Another piece breaks off of my heart with every child I see. I press my forehead to each one of theirs, taking the time to cover the death-wounds with my hand as I send up prayers, transferring their custody from Kyennin to Erith. There are six of them – three boys, three girls. Tears spring unbidden at the thought of who they might have been.

At the end of the row, I rise to see the leader of each god's faction. Numb with grief, I step forward and complete the circle. The pale girl who first accused me of being responsible for the deaths starts the song – a keening lament that echoes from the ceiling and turns into a mournful chorus. I know my part in this. War goes hand in hand with Death. My voice is the next to rise in pain.

When the final echoing notes fade away, I leave the room, tears streaming down my face. I cannot stay to watch the burning, cannot bear to see their souls committed to Erith's care. The pale girl catches me with a hand on my shoulder just before I step through the doorway.

"Here." She offers me a handful of small daggers. "They were yours. It falls to you to do the carving." It is the harshest of jabs, an unspoken accusation that it was preventable, that I could have stopped the slaughter by keeping them underground. The pale girl turns in a graceful sweep of red robes and storms back into her domain.

My fingers count the daggers numbly, skimming over the names engraved on the hilts. Six. Six dead bodies. Six dead children. Such a waste of life.

Climbing the staircase is endless. The darkness does not bother me, but the brightness of the square above does. The sun shines so cheerfully on the remnants of last night's rain, so happy to be out again. The stones have been peeled away in a corner of the square. I walk over, noting the six divots in the bare earth. They died here, cradled in dirt. I pick six stones and kneel in front of the first one, then start to scrape out the letters.

Carving the names of the dead in the city rocks is an old tradition. It is a permanent memory, a reminder to future generations of the sacrifices their predecessors have made. It is also the last use of the knife the dead one carried as a defense. Usually, the symbol of the god the person served is carved below their name – but these were too young to have chosen a calling. I place the empty circle, symbol of the undedicated, beneath each name.

I offer a prayer to Erith when I finish, sitting back on my heels. Piling the dulled, scratched knives into my arms, I descend back into the city. It seems impossible that life could continue as normal, but it does; people move through the city, talking and working. The only thing absent is laughter.

Something feels wrong about this; it is more than a tragedy, but I do not know how. I stop at the Red Hall reluctantly, unwilling to face the naked hate of the girl again but left with no other option. There is something I have to know. As I linger uncomfortably in the doorway, she notices me. Storming up with a scowl, she mutters, "What do you want?"

My voice trembles. "Was it – was it quick?"

Something in her eyes softens at the question. "Very. No healer could have helped them."

I stumble back, nodding my thanks. It is good to know that the children did not suffer. Something about her words nudges at my mind – I release my thoughts and let them wander where they will.

The idea in the corner of my head centers itself in my thoughts with a sudden clarity.

The cavern that forms the center of our city is dominated by statues of all six gods. They stand in a circle, facing outward, with an inscription at the base of their feet and a seventh sentence in the center. Read together, the inscriptions form an ancient prophecy. I stand in front of Kyennin's statue.

The Warrior forsook them.

Erith.

The Guide embraced them.

Ria.

The Healer could not help them.

Kaenin.

The Scholar spoke of them.

Htrae.

The Farmer held them.

Kael.

The Sailor washed them.

And in the center –

One for a god, one for a goddess, six for the group.

Six children are dead, and the gods are coming back.

I call a meeting of the leaders of our people.

When all six gather – the same six who sang the lament – I stand to signal the beginning of the meeting. “I am the voice of War, representative of Sun, herald of the Warrior.” The ritual words fall easily from my tongue. “I come before you today to speak of an ancient prophecy. The Warrior forsook them. The Guide embraced them. The Healer could not help them. The Scholar spoke of them. The Farmer held them. The River washed them. One for a god, one for a goddess, six for the group.”

The leader of Htrae sits there with a blank expression on his face. “Kyennin, Erith, Ria, Kaenin, Htrae, Kael. We were raised with this prophecy. There is nothing new to speak of, nothing new to find.”

The pale girl, leader of Erith’s devotees, raises a hand to stop him. “Let her talk.” She nods to me. “If only to learn how she has managed to rationalize killing children.”

I ignore the barb and continue. “Kyennin is the protector of children. We mourn those she withdrew her protection from, even as we recognize that this fulfills the first tenet of the prophecy – the Warrior forsook them.”

Kael’s leader plants his hands on the table. “This is senseless. That prophecy has remained unfulfilled for generations!”

I address my next words directly to him. “What prevents it from being fulfilled now?”

He falls silent. I present my next piece of evidence. “Erith is the guide of the dead. We commit our dead to him as we did this morning, praying he will guide them to the next life. And so the second tenet comes true. The Guide embraced them.” I sneak a look at the pale girl. The anger has left her face, and she is clearly thinking, turning over words and events in her head. “Ria is the healer of all wounds. Those children could not have been helped by any healer – not even a divine one. Here is the third statement completed: The Healer could not help them.” Ria’s leader is nodding. He has seen too many incurable wounds to doubt my words.

“It was Kaenin herself who left us with the prophecy. Who would doubt that the goddess of knowledge speaks truth?” I ask, looking around the circle. No one responds. “The Scholar spoke of them.” The leader of Kaenin’s people inclines her head. She is best acquainted with the writings and works of the Scholar – her agreement fills me with an additional confidence. “It fell to me to complete the carvings due to the dead. The place of death was clearly marked by six impressions in bare earth. Htrae cradled them in their final heartbeats. The Farmer held them.”

Steady and even like the god he serves, the leader of Htrae meets my eyes. I see skepticism there, but also a willingness to believe. “And finally, Kael. The rains came last night. I saw blood —” I choke on my words “— blood soaked into dirt, blood staining knives, but no blood on the bodies. The Sailor washed them.” My evidence is used up. I spread my hands, inviting comment, and sit down.

The table erupts in fierce conversation. I have spoken already, though, and am barred by ritual from speaking again until asked to.

Eventually, Kaenin’s leader stands up. “I am the voice of Wisdom, representative of Moon, herald of the Scholar. I speak for the leaders of our people and for the people themselves.” She pauses, draws a deep breath in, and says in a strong voice, “We have agreed that the prophecy is come. We have agreed that the gods draw upon hosts. And so we must agree that the gods are soon to return.”

The next line is mine – the closing of the council. “We vow to spread our news among the people. We vow to make our actions today known. I am the voice of War, representative of Sun, herald of the Warrior. Speak so none doubt you. Represent your chosen god. Herald their return!

