

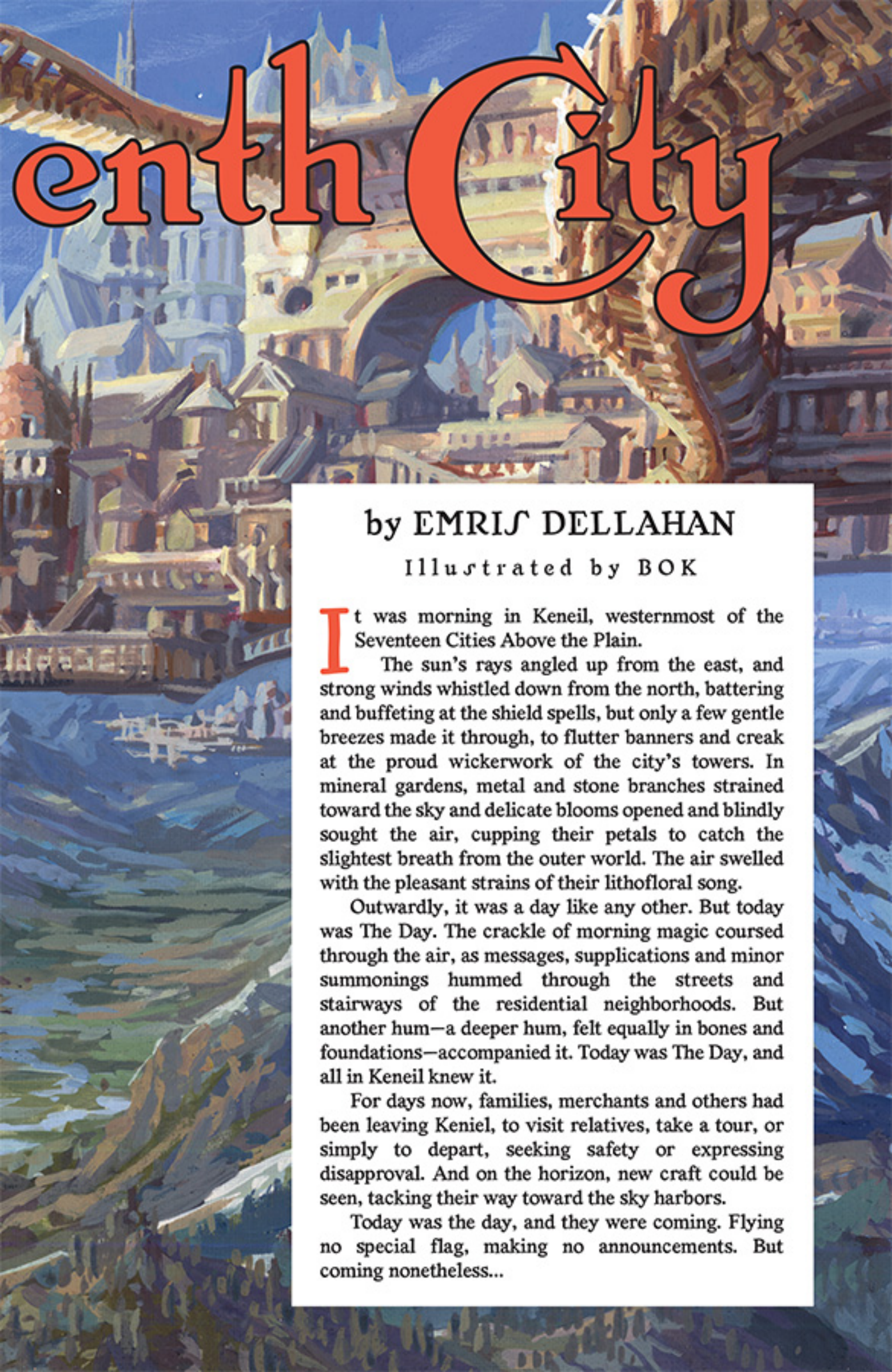






# In the Sevente





# enth City

by EMRIS DELLAHAN

Illustrated by BOK

**I**t was morning in Keneil, westernmost of the Seventeen Cities Above the Plain.

The sun's rays angled up from the east, and strong winds whistled down from the north, battering and buffeting at the shield spells, but only a few gentle breezes made it through, to flutter banners and creak at the proud wickerwork of the city's towers. In mineral gardens, metal and stone branches strained toward the sky and delicate blooms opened and blindly sought the air, cupping their petals to catch the slightest breath from the outer world. The air swelled with the pleasant strains of their lithofloral song.

Outwardly, it was a day like any other. But today was The Day. The crackle of morning magic coursed through the air, as messages, supplications and minor summonings hummed through the streets and stairways of the residential neighborhoods. But another hum—a deeper hum, felt equally in bones and foundations—accompanied it. Today was The Day, and all in Keneil knew it.

For days now, families, merchants and others had been leaving Keneil, to visit relatives, take a tour, or simply to depart, seeking safety or expressing disapproval. And on the horizon, new craft could be seen, tacking their way toward the sky harbors.

Today was the day, and they were coming. Flying no special flag, making no announcements. But coming nonetheless...



THAT MORNING, I DID THE THIRTY-TWO-AND-ONE DAILY OBEISANCES FOR MY FAMILY, AS WAS MY DUTY.



SWEET FRUIT FOR DILIDI-I, GODDESS OF HEALTH, EDUCATION AND WELFARE, WHO WATCHES OVER OUR BODIES, OUR MINDS.

AND TO IDENTE, THE ONE ABOVE ALL.



THE SMOKE OF INDUSTRY FOR THE SISTERS, THE TWO-HEADED GODDESS OF HOUSING, AND OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT.

AND FOR IDENTE, THE ONE ABOVE ALL.



PRAYERS TO TOFAR, ROUGH-HEWN UNDERGOD OF WILDLIFE AND FISHERIES. DANCE FOR PETOSH, GOD OF COMMERCE.

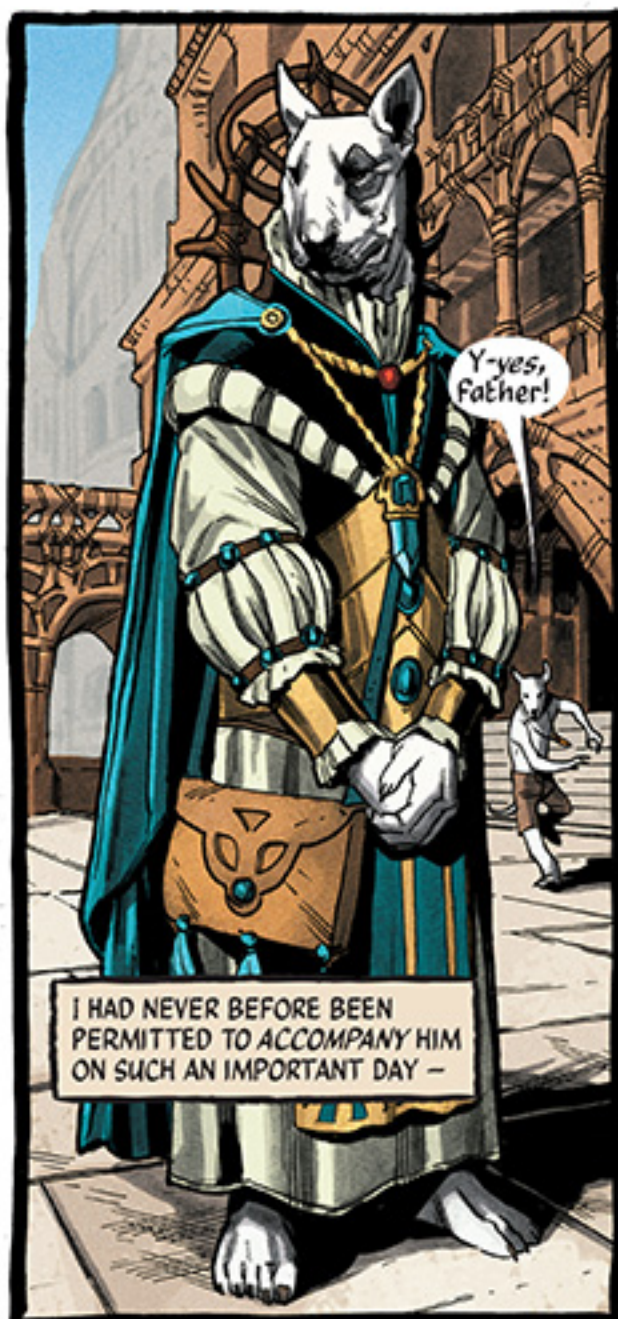


AND ALL THE OTHERS, AND IDENTE AS WELL.

I'D GROWN SWIFT AT IT, WITHOUT UNSEEMLY HASTE, IN MY YEAR OF BEING HONORED WITH THE DUTY.

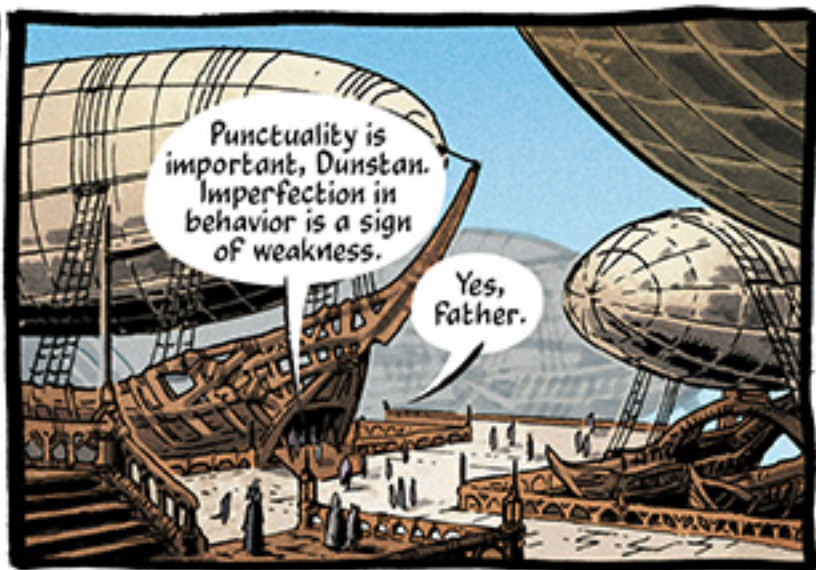
LASTLY THE CHANT TO ARDUNN, GOD OF HOMETLAND SECURITY, FOR OUR CONTINUED SAFETY AND STRENGTH. AND TO -

**DUNSTAN!**  
DON'T DRAG YOUR TAIL, LAD! WE'LL BE LATE!



Y-yes, Father!

I HAD NEVER BEFORE BEEN PERMITTED TO ACCOMPANY HIM ON SUCH AN IMPORTANT DAY —



Punctuality is important, Dunstan. Imperfection in behavior is a sign of weakness.

Yes, Father.



When dealing with the *lesser ones*, you must show no frailty, no error.

If you are to oversee trade one day, too, you must learn this.

Trade-master.

Trade-master.



DOWNWARD WE WENT, AND —



We are here.

Um —  
uh —

Calm, Dunstan. Controlled. Always.







You have done well, Seven-Scars.

We of the Cities Above shall speak your name kindly to the gods.

Tuk.



Your payment.

I thank, dweller in -

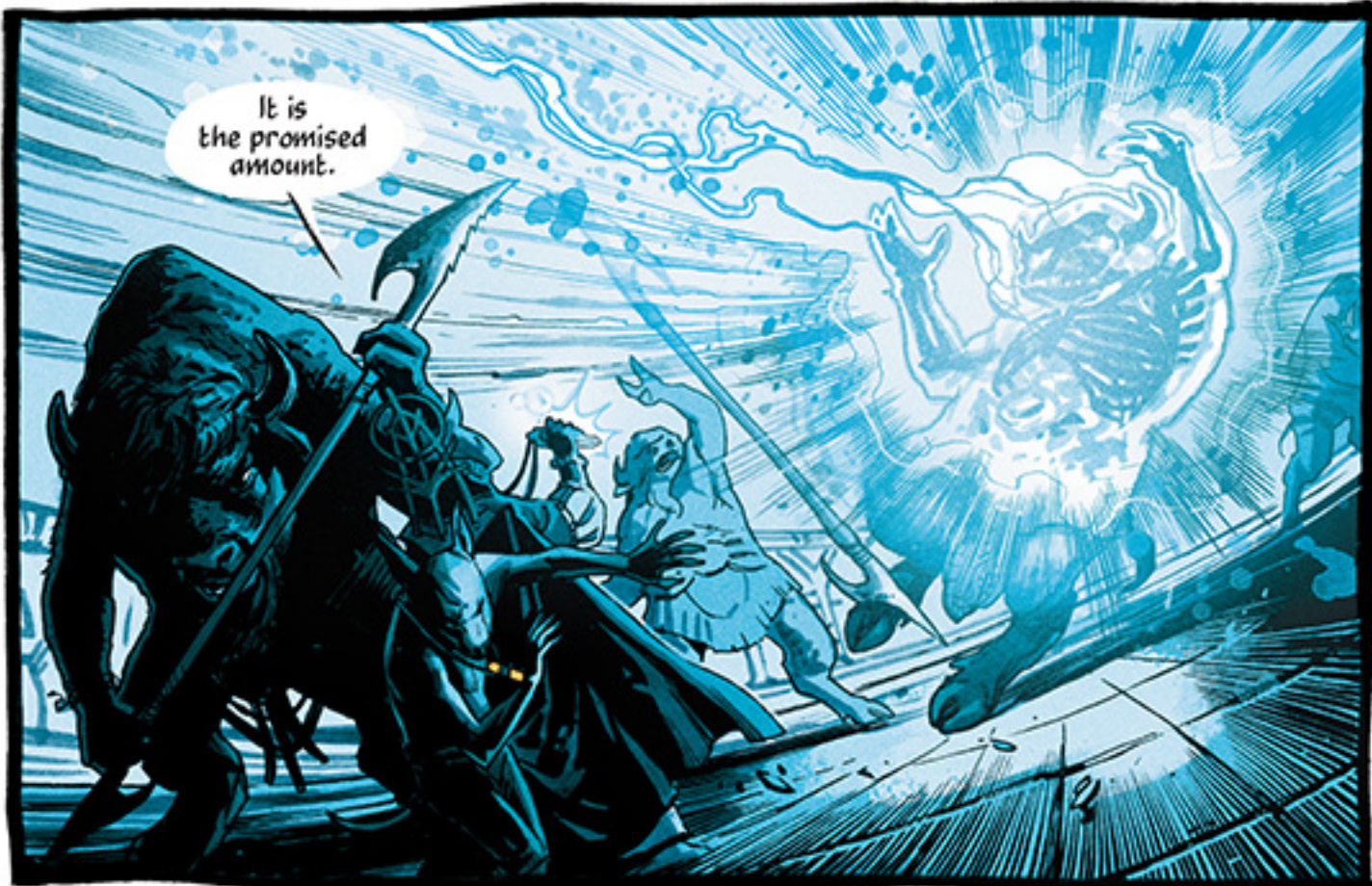


Hrn?  
This - not enough!

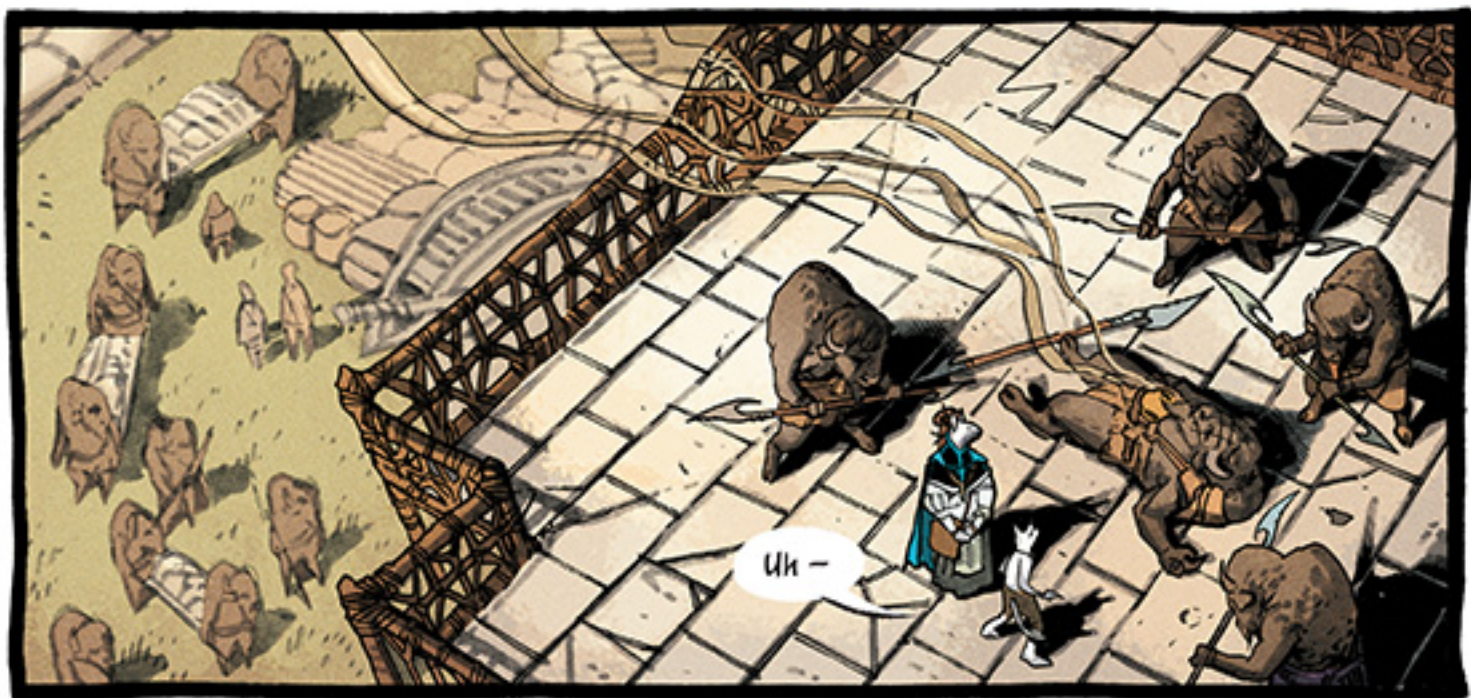


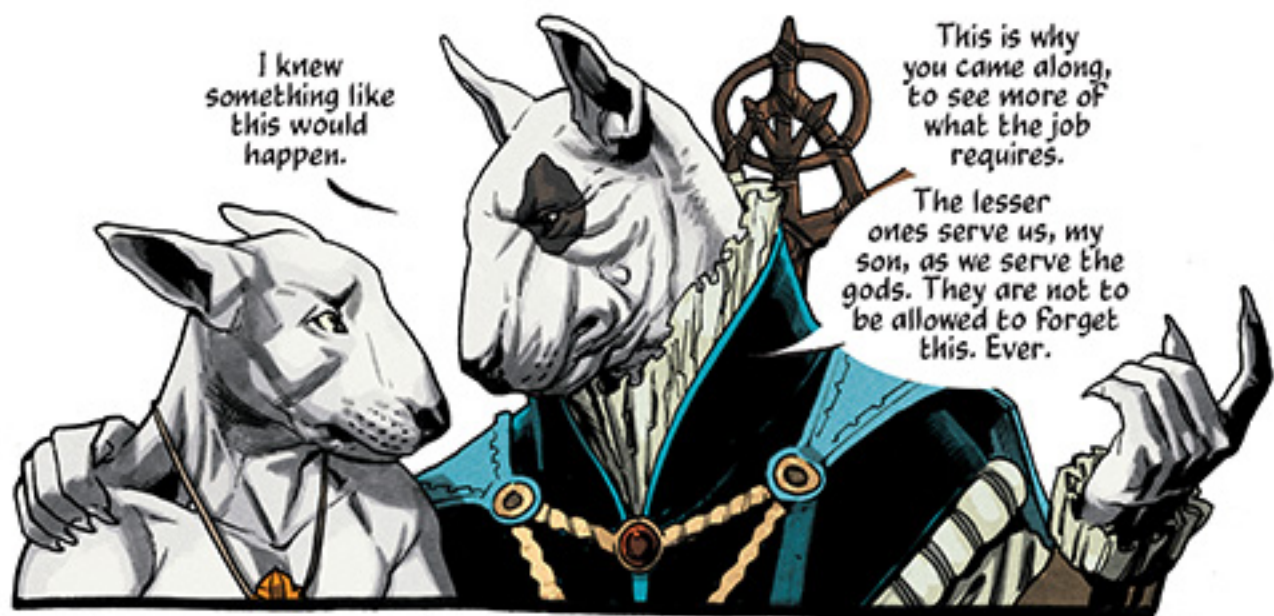
It is the promised amount. Enough magic for your healers, and for your warders to guard your -

Not enough!  
We work, sweat - thin herds! Three time what normally delivered! Three! And this - this -



It is the promised amount.





I knew something like this would happen.

This is why you came along, to see more of what the job requires.

The lesser ones serve us, my son, as we serve the gods. They are not to be allowed to forget this. Ever.



But — if it really is three times what we usually —

We're not made of magic, Dunstan. They seek to husband their takings, until they can rebel against us. This, we can never allow.

You understand?

Uh — I think so —



Good. Then go watch the arrivals. I know you've been panting to.

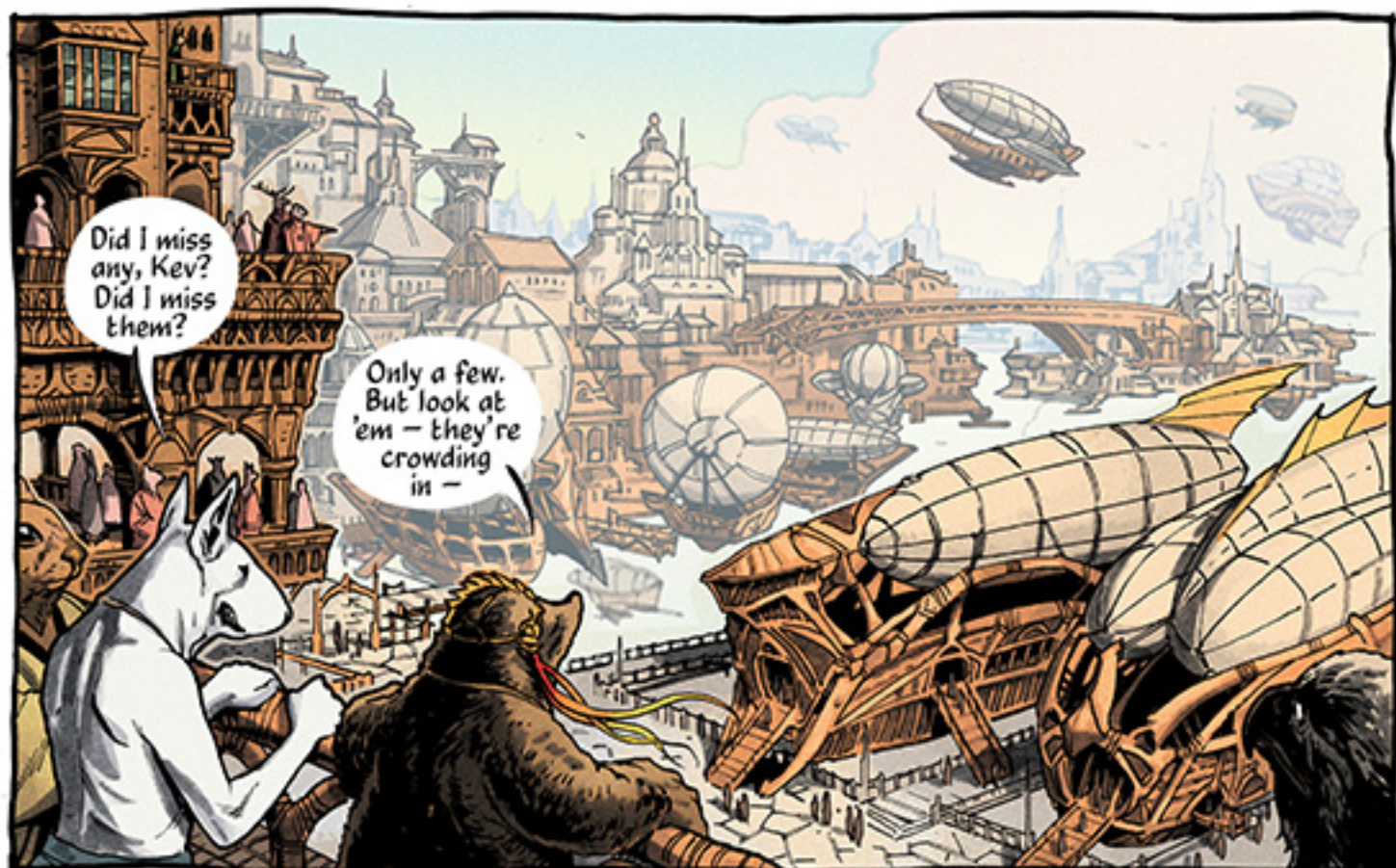


Heh. Pups.



Look, **LOOK!**

There! No, there — from *Santara*, I'd bet on it —



Did I miss any, Kev?  
Did I miss them?

Only a few.  
But look at 'em — they're crowding in —



THEY CAME FROM ALL THE OTHER CITIES. NO ONE WAS FLYING THEIR COLORS. THEY DIDN'T WANT THEIR *PRESENCE* KNOWN.

— AND SOME LIKE THEY WERE SCARED SOMEONE *WOULD*.

SOME LOOKED *FIERCE*, AS IF CHALLENGING ANYONE TO STOP THEM —

BUT WE ALL *KNEW* WHY THEY WERE THERE.



ANYONE WITH WIZARD PARENTS, OR UNCLES, OR ANYTHING — ANYONE WHO'D OVERHEARD *KNEW*. IT WAS ONLY WEEKS AGO, AT THE *GRAND COLLOQUY*...



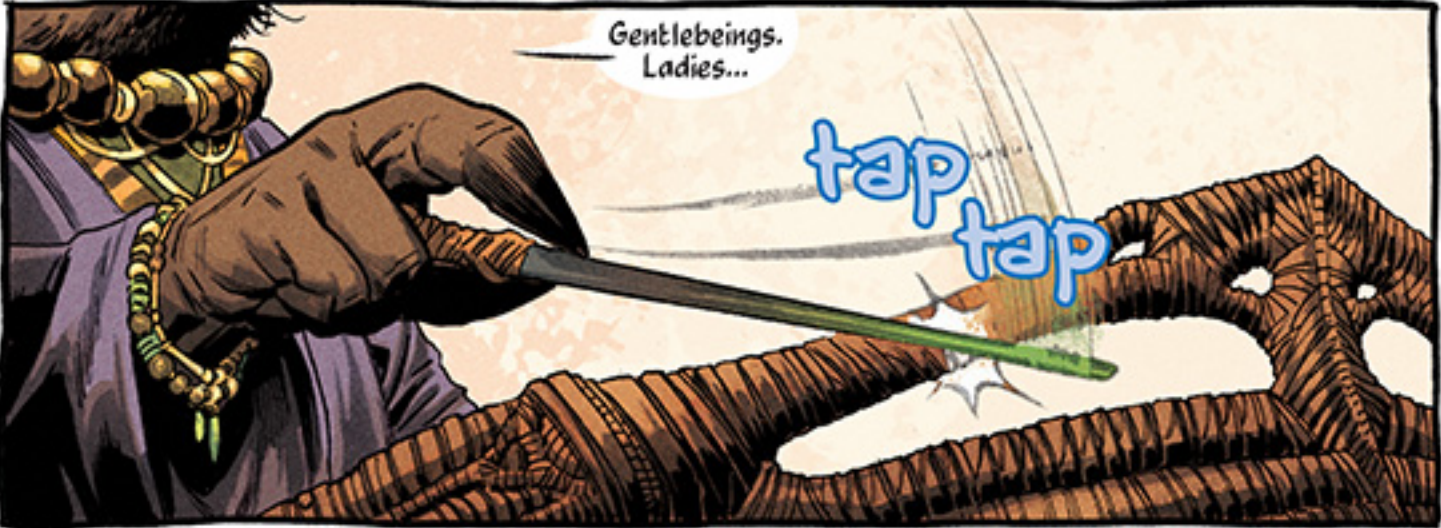
AT THE GRAND  
CITY, APALIS —

— WHERE WIZARDS CAME, NOT  
ONLY FROM THE CITIES, BUT  
FROM ALL AROUND THE WORLD,  
TO MEET, TO DISCUSS NEW  
DISCOVERIES, DEVELOPMENTS —

— TO DEMONSTRATE AND DISPLAY GREAT  
WONDERS, AND CREATE GREATER STILL —

— TO TALK OF ALL THAT MATTERED  
TO MAGIC, AND ALL THAT HAD BEEN  
HAPPENING, FROM THE SEA NATIONS  
TO THE FROZEN LANDS —

— EVEN FROM THE CRYSTAL  
ARCHIPELAGO, WHERE NONE  
BUT THE BRAVEST VENTURED,  
AND FEWER STILL RETURNED —



Gentlebeings.  
Ladies...

tap  
tap



I apologize for interrupting this delightful luncheon.

But the Colloquy was unable to find room in the schedule for me to speak, so I must make some time.

I am *Gharta of Daiir*, known as *The Seeker*. You all know me, or know of me. I am...not of a retiring nature.



And you all know why we are here.



We may talk of refinements to *VanDahl's Illumination*, or tricks to use the *Lesser Rune of Lengthy Sustenance* more efficiently.

Or a millionfold of other trinkets of no import.



But under it all we all have the same thoughts. The same fear.

**MAGIC IS FAILING.**