

Standing Stones sometime during the Imperial era (3 May 2001) Lallinan makes a pilgrimage to claim her status as an adult. (Ainar III) (Lallinan)

Standing Stones

Surrounded on three sides by the cliff walls of a box canyon, this is the only city (more a town, really) known to the people of the scattered villages and settlements that occasionally make pilgrimages here for trade and for religious ceremonies. One of these ceremonies would be the Naming Festival, and floral arrangements and cloth banners add color to the otherwise dingy greys and browns of the buildings that lie in the shadows of the ancient, weather-worn stone figures that guard the cliff-faces. Spring is in full bloom, and the air is rich with the fragrances of the peach-colored dew-suckle blossoms dotting the trees lining the steep roadways leading up to the city gates.

A small procession of no more than twenty Ainarii villagers makes its way up the Pilgrim Road toward the city gates. They are much like any other Ainarii -- humanoid, covered in sand-colored fur, with sharply-pointed muzzles and triangular ears atop their heads -- though today they are decked out in brightly colored, recently-dyed costumes that have not yet had time to fade from the sun, and from the rains that have plagued much of the three-day journey from their village to reach the holy city.

Four elders guide the group and serve as chaperones, for the rest of the pilgrims consist of young adults who have come to the city to be presented to the Scholars, and to choose names for themselves -- should they be deemed ready for adulthood.

The tall, strangely elongated forms of the Ancients greet the pilgrims before they see the far more humble structures of the city itself -- Time-worn, the ancient statues are almost featureless, though they look vaguely humanoid and are strangely tall and thin in their proportions -- a style reflected in Ainarii art when depicting those who have Ascended, stepping outside of the endless cycle of death and rebirth that the Ainarii recognize as the way of mundane life.

The spirits of the pilgrims rise considerably upon sight of the city. Chimborines, bulbpipes, rattlescales and other simple instruments are brought out to play rhythm and melody, while the youths sing with untrained but enthusiastic voices the praises of spring and life. Far ahead, almost to the gates, another village's band of pilgrims can be faintly seen -- the boy at the fore of the procession waves his village's map-banner in greeting, and is rewarded as the colorful flag of the distant band is waved in reply.

All of the youths in this band of pilgrims have cub-names -- joined words that tell something of themselves from the perspective of a parent adoring a child: Soft-Eyes, Ruffle-Fur, Loud-Joy, and other such names that invoke images of tumbling cubs, rather than serious adults. Adults, on the other hand, have names with obscure meanings, their origins dating back to prehistoric times, and, according to the Scholars, distant worlds where other tongues were

once spoken -- names like Mitzuna, which is the appellation of the eldest of those accompanying these candidates for adulthood.

All of the youths still have cub-names ... save for one. She is accorded a position of prominence, just behind the map-banner boy, and beside Mitzuna, for the Elders have already determined that she is none other than Lallinan -- a rebirth of the greatest of the Eight Sages, of the one who commanded powers of healing, among other wonders. After all, six Sages are already known to live in this present age, so that leaves only Lallinan of the blessed Seven ... and no one would even dare speak of Kizun, the cursed Eighth.

By virtue of her demonstrated supernatural powers, well beyond what an ordinary Ainarii might attain by dedicated meditation and concentration, she has shown herself to be one of the blessed Sages -- one of those who had the power to become Ascended, but chose to remain in the cycle of life, so that in future incarnations they might help to guide their people along the path to enlightenment.

It's a flattering honor, to be certain, and an outsider might think it curious that Lallinan is distinctive from her peers in that she wears plain brown travelers' garb, rather than a garishly colored costume that signifies unnamed youth.

"It is not far, Lallinan," Mitzuna says in the holy tongue, which he has tutored Lallinan in ever since it was first suspected that she had powers out of the ordinary. It is this holy tongue that the languages of the Ainarii are all derived, the Scholars say, as over time they corrupted it with colloquialisms, slang, jargon and slurs -- and it is this holy tongue that any self-respecting Sage or Scholar would be well-versed in, and Mitzuna had once aspired to become a Scholar in his younger days, though he had ultimately been passed over for the honor.

"... and the skies are clear," he adds, looking up. They are not entirely clear, as a few stubborn clouds hover over the Forbidden Grounds of the Ancients, as they always do -- or so Lallinan had been taught, for she has never before seen this city herself -- but there is hope that the ceremonies will not be dampened by rain. (Ancestors know, these poor pilgrims have seen enough rain over the past three days.) If it rains anywhere, maybe it will rain only on the Forbidden Grounds, for no one would dare set foot there today regardless, for fear of being rendered ritually unclean.

It's a clear day, lit by warm sunshine, cooled by a gentle breeze, fragrant with dew-suckle and wildflowers. It's as glorious a day as anyone could hope for her Naming, even if she has a name chosen already. But for some reason, the sun seems not so bright as it should be, the shadows a little darker than they ought, the Ancients more ominous than protective. Something is going to happen today, the knot in Lallinan's stomach tells her. It doesn't tell her whether or not that something is going to be good or ill.

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Lallinan steps along the path quietly, looking at the scene in front of her, but seemingly lost in her thoughts. She turns to Mitzuna as he speaks, and nods a little, wordlessly.

Mitzuna nods back to Lallinan, and for the remainder of the journey up to the city of Standing Stones, he is content to leave her to quiet contemplation. After all, is it not fitting for one who

is the reincarnation of a sage -- Lallinan, even -- to be occupied with deep thoughts, rather than the childish merriment of her peers? If anything, he takes it as a sign that he and the other elders have judged her wisely. In due time, the pilgrims make their way up to the city, though the other processional has already passed through the gates by the time they reach them. Houses of adobe, brick, wood and more rarely stone blocks line the central, winding path, in no particular order, and the people of the city wave banners and flags from the rooftops. The Festival is already underway, and those pilgrims who were blessed enough to have arrived earlier today -- and gone through their Naming -- are already partaking.

The pilgrims are so caught up in the merriment that for a time, none of them even notice a man in the uniform of the Stone Guard running alongside them, waving for attention and calling out to halt, until finally he rather roughly grabs Lallinan by the arm. With a look blended of exasperation and ... concern? ... the guard demands, "You! Why have you no costume?" The pilgrims come to a stop, the singing dying down, though the youngest in the back still pat and shake their chimborines. Mitzuna gives the guard an indignant look, and opens his mouth to give a reproach.

Lallinan looks bewildered for a moment, startled out of her thoughts, and gently attempts to pull her arm away from the guard's grasp, hoping he will let it go. She notices Mitzuna about to speak and lets him do so, instead of saying anything herself.

"Unhand her!" Mitzuna says in a commanding voice, despite his advanced age. "Are you an uneducated weanling? Her name is already clearly chosen -- She is to take her place with the Sages!" His words are mixed as much with pride as anger, and the young guard relents, letting go of Lallinan.

"I ..." the guard stammers, and he cannot manage more than that. He bows his head. "Forgive me, Elder." And with that, he steps back with the look of one wishing to make himself smaller to avoid notice.

Sighing softly, Lallinan looks away, feeling slightly embarrassed.

Mitzuna lets out a relieved -- but triumphant -- breath, and pats Lallinan on the shoulder. "There, there. It is not every generation that sees the Sages returned -- even if in this generation, we have seen more than most." He smiles encouragingly, then waves to the others to let them know all is well. The youths are quick to respond to his all-clear to resume making noise and lots of it, and soon the procession is underway once more.

Lallinan speaks for the first time since the city has been in view. "I wasn't aware a costume was required."

The Elder looks to Lallinan. "Ah ... no ... no, actually, it's not. It's a tradition, but one that doesn't apply to the Sages. But ... required? Bah. If it were so, then if we were struck by a great flood that washed all our dyes away, and we had no costumes, our young people would never gain names!" He gives Lallinan an earnest smile, one that he obviously hopes will prove infectious.

Lallinan appears to wince slightly every time Mitzuna refers to her as one of the great Sages, but does put on a face that, if it isn't smiling, is better than it was before, at least.

Sadly, for all the insights Mitzuna has, he seems to be utterly oblivious to any discomfort Lallinan might have at being proclaimed a Sage ... either that, or he's enjoying too much the notion that he personally is escorting one to the Naming to allow himself to pay heed. The procession through the streets continues without any further interruptions, though Mitzuna finds several more occasions to refer to Lallinan as a Sage, quite often within earshot of well-dressed persons by the wayside -- perhaps people of import that Mitzuna knows and is all too eager to boast in front of.

At last, however, they reach the object of their quest -- the great Gathering Hall, the sort of hallowed building that other cultures might deem a temple, though the beings revered here are departed ancestors, rather than deities or concepts of the Force.

Though many of the buildings are adobe, brick or wood, the Gathering Hall is an old and well-weathered structure, solidly built from blocks of stone, moved by means that Lallinan can hardly fathom, perhaps even older than the city itself.

Lallinan looks at the scene ahead of her, suddenly feeling annoyed at the noisy children in the procession, wishing they would quiet as they draw near to this obviously very important place.

It seems a long time before they finally quiet down to show the reverence they really ought to, but as they actually start to pass through the gateway that leads into this large, cylindrical building, a hush at last falls upon the youths -- inspired by a few stern looks from the Elders where some are slower to catch the hint than others.

Gathering Hall

There is much symbolism contained in the structure of this chamber, though Lallinan's education allows her to appreciate only a fraction of it. It concerns such things as the number of stone columns lining the western hemisphere of the domed hall, the number of elevated stone stepping blocks one must navigate to reach the central dais, how the path of the blocks describes the path of the Cobalt River, the half-circle of elevated thrones of the Scholars echo the box canyon housing the city, and the statues of the Ascended behind them represent how the statues of the Ancients atop the canyon walls are supposed to have once looked. Torch sconces on the walls illuminate the "camps" where elders from the villages sit along the walls and watch the proceedings, and sunbeams pierce holes in the dome that correspond to the positions that the major stars will be in at midnight on this holy occasion.

The pilgrims pass through the tunnel that leads through the very thick outer wall, and stop as they reach the landing just inside the main inner sanctum, back-lit by the sunlight filtering through the entrance. Steps lead down to the right and left, down to the level of the shadowed "camps" of the Elders from previous groups who have unloaded their pilgrims -- but those are not paths for the pilgrims themselves to take.

Rather, the path to be taken -- and only one pilgrim at a time -- lies ahead.

Lallinan blinks, looking to Mitzuna suddenly for some kind of indication or affirmation of what she is supposed to do...

Mitzuna nods, and quietly leads Lallinan to one side. If circumstances were different, Lallinan, by virtue of being the oldest of the pilgrims, would be allowed to take her name first, but instead she has to wait at the entry gate. The others, one by one, step or hop their way across the tops of the elevated blocks that trace their way to the central dais. There, under the watchful gaze of the Scholars on their elevated thrones, and the Elders, each one declaring just who he or she is a reincarnation of, choosing a name -- all names of heroes of old, master craftsmen, or otherwise distinguished relatives. It would seem dull, boring fellows never come back to live again.

Picking a name that's already used by someone else in the village is a major faux pas, but one that is avoided today. It's virtually a myth that anyone actually chooses a name at the time of the Naming, as much coaching goes on beforehand. (Lallinan is certainly no stranger to this fact.) Nonetheless, every village has a Kellas and a Mystune, and as soon as one dies, one can be certain that another will be proclaimed at the next Naming. It's a flaw in the system that only cubs are naive enough to point out.

It's all carried out with considerable pomp, and far more seriousness than shown outside ... though -- thankfully -- not drawn out so much as it could be. After all, there is the festival to enjoy, and one can't enjoy that without a name. At long last, time comes for Lallinan to step forward, onto the raised dais, standing before the half-circle of the seated Scholars on their elevated thrones, and the statues of the Ascended rising to the ceiling behind them, in an echo of the canyon the city stands in.

Lallinan takes a deep breath, quite nervous now, even for all the preparation she has done for this moment. Is she really Lallinan...? Carefully, she makes her way forwards, standing before the Scholars, looking up at them boldly.

Aged eyes glitter in the firelight, and greyed muzzles rest on folds of elaborately woven but faded cloth of their ritual costumes. Her people have a sense of the dramatic, and the announcement of the rebirth of Lallinan is as dramatic as events get in the city of stone. A hush falls upon the chamber. Her name hasn't been announced yet, after all. "Tell us your name," is all she is asked, and by which of the Scholars, it is impossible for her to tell for certain.

After a brief pause for her to swallow, she speaks... not too loudly, she hopes, but not too softly either. "My name is Lallinan."

There is some murmuring among the Elders' camps, though the Scholars are as stone-faced as the statues behind them. The chamber quiets again, and a eldest of the Scholars, a matron by the name of Ansessa, speaks. "You are mistaken," she says, surely the worst words that anyone on this dais could hope to hear.

"Lallinan was revealed to us this morning," she continues. "There is but one Sage presently living and not yet Named -- and that is Kizun."

Kizun. Kizun's name is invoked as a bogeyman, in the sorts of stories used to frighten children ... and, judging from the startled reactions of the Elders, adults as well.

Lallinan's breath increases, almost to an audible level, as her heart races. No, this can't be right... this is not how it is supposed to be! Abandoning decorum, she addresses Ansessa, almost rudely. "How do you know?" she demands.

If there was any pity in Ansessa's eyes, they seem to have shed the look entirely. "This rudeness is only the first proof," she declares, heedless of Lallinan's turmoil.

Lallinan repeats, a little more calmly this time, but obviously determined to get an answer. "How do you know?"

"It is as it has always been," Ansessa declares. "The one who is reborn tells us her name, and the one who is Lallinan has revealed herself to us. You cannot be Lallinan. Only Kizun, the liar, is left."

"No!" Mitzuna cries out, heedless of such a transgression he is committing by doing so. "She heals! She has the power to heal! I have seen it with my own eyes!"

Lallinan turns to quiet Mitzuna. "Please," she says to him softly. "Let me speak..."

Mitzuna looks as if he shall have enough of a challenge just to catch his next breath, let alone saying anything more. He gives Lallinan a more concerned look than she has ever seen in his aged eyes, and closes his mouth.

Lallinan levels her eyes at Ansessa. "How do you know this morning's Lallinan is not Kizun, the liar? If he should lie, perhaps that is exactly what he has done. I submit that a test be conducted to determine the true Lallinan."

It is as reasonable a request as any could be made, and Lallinan's demand is not without precedent in the history of her people, by any stretch of the imagination. What is it, that could have hardened the hearts of the Scholars so? But nonetheless, Ansessa's gaze is cold upon Lallinan. "We will not give quarter to your trickery, Kizun. Leave this place."

Lallinan stands her ground. "I feel my request is reasonable."

"If you do not leave now," Ansessa says, "you will be struck down before your seed of evil can find fertile soil in the hearts of those newly-Named who might be swayed into believing you..." She looks coldly at Mitzuna. "After all, it is already clear that you have clouded the minds of Elders. How much more so the youth?"

Lallinan looks to the other Scholars, attempting to determine if they all seem to agree with Ansessa's proclamations.

None of the other eyes meet hers -- conspicuous, at that. Though a few might be more convincing than others, Lallinan is filled with the sense that they are going along with Ansessa ... and that perhaps even Ansessa herself might be acting in the interests of someone else. For a long, disillusioning moment, they hardly seem the moral authorities that Lallinan was raised to believe them to be.

Lallinan bites her lip softly, and, as inconspicuously as possible, attempts to reach out with her mind, to soothe the bitterness in Ansessa's soul.

GM Notes: Friendship (Cha), Force Skill, page 86 -- Vitality Point Cost: 1 -- "You can use the Force to calm a hostile person or animal." Works like Diplomacy to change a target's attitude, except that you don't need to communicate with the target.

Lallinan has 1 rank in Friendship, and +2 for her high Charisma. Total bonus to roll, +3.

Lallinan's player rolls 1d20+3 and gets 19 for a result of 22.

Ansessa makes an opposed Wisdom test, with applicable modifiers:

GM rolls 1d20+6 and gets 16 for a result of 22.

Technically, Lallinan has to BEAT the defender's score, and can't try again for another 24 hours. Uh oh.

Ansessa frowns, and for a moment, it seems as if her expression might be softening ... but then it hardens again, with a slightly irritated look.

Lallinan attempts to reach out again, this time trying to sway Ansessa's mind with a suggestion, to the same end.

GM Notes: Affect Mind (Cha), page 84 -- Roll Affect Mind. The result of an Affect Mind check sets the DC for the target's Will save. Range for Affect Mind is 10 meters -- in range, in this case. Vitality Point Cost: 2 for Alter Perceptions, 4 for Suggestion. In this case, it would be Suggestion, unless Lallinan wants to say, "Look! A three-headed monkey!" and run.

GM Notes: Lallinan has only one rank in Affect Mind. As per before, she gets to roll 1d20+3, thanks to her Charisma.

Lallinan's player rolls 1d20+3 and gets 5 for a result of 8.

GM Notes: According to the chart, this sets Ansessa's DC for a Will Saving Throw at 15. And Lallinan's down a total of 5 Vitality Points. She has 3 left.

GM rolls 1d20+4 and gets 2 for a result of 6.

Lallinan wants to suggest that Ansessa should listen to this young woman, who seems very headstrong and unlikely to be easily dismissed.

Ansessa looks as if her patience has been taxed, and she's about to call for someone to forcibly take Lallinan away ... but then she pauses, as her eyes take on a blank look for just a moment. She is quiet for a moment, regarding the young woman, who seems very headstrong and unlikely to be easily dismissed.

Lallinan says, "I ask you to please hear my request."

Ansessa shakes her head, blinking. "What request was that?" She seems a little too distracted. Someone might become suspicious, but it's better than guards being ordered to strike her down for her insolence, or whatever it is that a Scholar this far gone would do in her position.

Lallinan responds, "A test to determine the real Lallinan."

An uncertain look crosses Ansessa's face, as if there were something nagging at her as to why she shouldn't permit such a thing, but it seems that the thought fades away. "A test, then, but no trickery!" she sternly warns the young woman, oblivious to any irony in her admonition.

Lallinan bows respectfully. "Thank you, Scholar Ansessa."