

# A challenging time

*Alessia leaned back, her arms raised over her head, stretching to the right and then to the left. She told folks that warming up was her secret weapon, but nobody believed her... A fool is a mark with too many rings as her brother liked to say.*

*"You feeling ok?" asked Luca, his voice betraying his nerves. He glanced in the direction of the two other competitors. One of them was a head taller than Alessia and he was clearly worrying about it.*

*"I got this - stop fretting" she responded and then bent forwards to touch her toes.*

*"He's taller than you. And I hear he's faster than you." he responded, rubbing his hands nervously.*

*"Yeah - and I hear he's dumber than you." she responded as she straightened up. She grinned at him to show she didn't mean it. "The race is up here" she said tapping her head, and then pointing at her feet "not down here".*

*"Then why aren't you stretching your head?" he demanded and then ducked as she swung a mock punch at his head.*

*She didn't mind him worrying too much, there was a lot riding on this. The leader of the Mudskippers was the fastest member of the gang. Nobody knew where the rule had come from, but it was the rule, and rules are rules. So every year there was a contest, one end of the Sarvos docks to the other and then back. What made it a real challenge was that the race was on Buskin's Day, one of the the busiest days of the year. The docks were bustling with Steviedores moving their cargo on and off the ships. Getting past them without getting clobbered was the real contest. It was risky too, last year, Giuseppina had ended up in the drink. The new boy might be tall, but he was about to*

*find out exactly why being small for your age was an advantage in this race...*

*"Whose that?" she said and pointed in the direction of a tall man who was now watching the gang intently as they prepared for the race. He was a curious sight, skin the colour of stone and strange runes on his face. "Ain't no lineage, I've ever seen."*

*"Maybe he's a daeva?" said Luca glancing at the newcomer.*

*"Don't talk daft!" she said and rolled her eyes. "Daeva's don't exist. They're like dragons and archmages and stuff. They're just myths."*

*She eyed the tall man suspiciously. It weren't good for grown-ups to be taking an interest in the Mudskippers. The Merchant Prince didn't like the race, claimed it was dangerous (like he cared!) and disrupted the Steviedores work (hah - much more likely). He'd tried to shut it down once and they'd had to fight a running battle for two weeks before their leader that year had agreed a truce. The Prince didn't interfere with the 'skippers anymore - and yet here was someone poking their nose into the gang's business.*

*The fellow realised he was being watched and threw Alessia a big beaming smile, which made her even more suspicious. "Go and find out what he wants... Then get rid of him." she said to her brother and went back to stretching her calves. Warming up was her secret weapon. Well that and the crown she'd paid Nunzio three hours ago to get him to block the main route on the return leg.*

*She told folks the race was all in your head but they never believed her...*

# Overview

For almost a year now, the Seneschal of the Road has been unable to respond to the ritual named for him, Challenge the Iron Duke. Determined not to neglect one of his favoured lands, the heralds of the Keeper of Challenges bring news of two great happenings at the upcoming Autumn Equinox - firstly, a grand melee to be fought between the absolute best the Empire has to offer the Summer realm, in quest of Pinnacle, a sword of unparalleled quality. And secondly, those from the nations of Dawn and Wintermark who have already bested the Iron Duke's challenge once are called forth to take on a second challenge, and finally answer a question long asked in the annals of Imperial history.

Finally, the Iron Duke has a request for the Archmage of Summer. The eternal is delighted by the many contests, competitions and challenges that are taking place within the Empire, and would like to patronize one. He hopes to create a suitable magic item to serve as a prize in the most appropriate contest and asks the Archmage's indulgence to identify for him the contest most fitting to bear the Traveller's patronage.

## The Archmage's Challenge

- As a temporary alternative to his ritual, the Reeve of the Summerlands asks the Archmage of Summer to help him reward those who are already competing with each other in Anvil
- The Master of Challenges offers to provide a single magical item as a prize for one contest each season
- The Imperial Conclave may pass a declaration of alignment to describe the contest they would like the eternal to patronise

- If the approach proves successful, the eternal will extend the offer for the coming year

Rather than accept a Challenge the Iron Duke, the Reeve of the Summerlands has asked the Archmage of Summer to help the eternal reward those who are competing with each other in Anvil. He asks the Archmage - or one of their attendants - to select an appropriate contest being arranged in Anvil for the following summit. The Iron Duke trusts the Archmage will select a single worthy contest, one that is genuinely competitive and which has dignity and grandeur. Whether that is skill at arms, or skill with words, or any contest, does not matter, the Iron Duke leaves that choice to the Archmage.

Once they have identified a suitable contest, the Archmage (or a grandmaster, or a rogue declaration ) can use a declaration of alignment to accept the boon by providing the Master of Challenges with the details of the competition. The Iron Duke would like to know a few details about the nature of the contest, who will be able to enter, and where it will take place. If the declaration passes the Conclave, then the Iron Duke will craft a single magical item to serve as a prize for the contest. The Iron Duke assumes that the organisers of the contest will grant the prize to the winner, but of course they may give the gift to a runner-up if they already have a grand prize of their own.

The eternal hopes that if this new approach is successful, they may extend the offer for the coming year. The Civil Service have confirmed that it is possible to use a declaration of alignment to accept a boon in this way, but only if the eternal in question does not have enmity.

## **The Victor's Challenge**

**Victors of Wintermark**

Artis Greyholm

Burnlin Drum-Heart

Victors of Gryphon's Watch

Lightning on the Ice

Liissá Sigeing

Odelia Nelda

Tarik of Ashenhall

Victors of The Icewalkers of Suaq

Victors of the Voices of the Unbound Storm

### **Victors of Dawn**

Aldwyn Wyldrose

Aletheia Wooder

Areloe Larmallevés

Dame Aurum de Castellán

Eadric de Rondell

Eadric of House du Froste

Victors of House Aurelius

Victors of House Tallstag

Rillian de Gauvain

Solene d'Alba

Tristan du Lac

Vasily Orzel

- Barien invites those from Dawn and Wintermark who have

previously been successful in his challenges to compete in a new challenge

- The challenge will be between the two nations and will be revealed by Barien at a ceremony
- Those who wish to attend should come to the Grove of the Thousand, Axmure, Semmerholm at 13:15 on the Saturday

As the Iron Duke ponders how to respond to challenges, the Lord of the Crossroads has deemed fit to set a grand challenge to the nations of the Empire who have shown him the most patronage over the recent years. And so he invites all those from the nations of Dawn and Wintermark to attend a special ceremony where this challenge between the two nations will be laid down. The exact nature of the task will be revealed to those invited at the event, but his heralds note it will be a year long challenge to be concluded at the Autumn summit of the next year.

This event will occur just after the normal rewarding ceremony for those who have completed their challenges, in the usual place of the Grove of the Thousand, Axmure, Semmerholm at 13:15 on the Saturday of the summit. The following folk are invited as a matter of public record - no others should be in attendance, for they have not earned the right in this case. The Lord of the Crossroads wishes to assure any victors who are unable to make the ceremony that they may still participate in the challenge, though they will have to get the details from their nationmates after the fact.

## **The Pinnacle Tourney**

- The Master of Challenges offers the sword Pinnacle as a reward for those who take part in a grand tourney

When the greatest smith in the Summer realm creates items of power and beauty, it leaves a certain problem - what do you do with them? When you are presented with the sharpest sword possibly in all of existence, that can cut through near any weapon or shield in a single stroke, beset with jewels and a blade the colour of porcelain, how do you determine who should win the right to carry it? The herald Revel has a predictable answer for anyone who knows them - a tourney, of course. But not just any tourney - for a prize as great as the sword Pinnacle, a tournament incorporating every hero of Anvil who wants to step up is necessary.

## **The Gathering of Favours**

- Any player who doesn't have an Imperial title who wishes to take part in the tourney can collect a favour before the summit begins
- Participants may legitimately challenge each other for favours on Friday and Saturday day
- Barien has asked several prominent citizens in Anvil to do what they can to ensure the contests remain fair

### Entering the Contest

To enter the contest you must come to the skirmish field between 5:30pm and 6:00pm on Friday before time-in. Members of our team will be there to meet you and will provide you with a single favour. You can only have a favour if you do not currently hold an Imperial title. After time in at 6:00pm it will not be possible to obtain a favour from Barien's heralds. In-character, you will have gained your favour from a Barien herald prior to the official start of the summit.

In order to participate a citizen will need to receive a single favour prior to the start of the summit. The heralds of the Iron

Duke will be present in the period running up to the summit offering a single favour to any citizen at Anvil who wishes to take them, provided they don't hold an Imperial title. The favour offers a chance to take part in the tourney itself.

To enter the tourney competitors must first win entry by collecting as many favours as possible from defeated rivals. From the start of the festival until the presentation of favours between 17:30 and 18:00 on the Saturday, competitors will need to fight for favours between themselves. Since this contest will be occurring in Anvil out of the sight of the heralds of the Iron Duke, they have put forward a number of rules to be followed;

- Favours should only be won and lost through competitive combat (duels, tourneys etc.) - no trading, purchasing or theft
- Competitors should not turn down a challenge from another competitor with a favour
- Before any combat competitors should determine how many favours are being wagered - any challenge should result in at least 1 favour being won/lost, but higher stakes can be agreed
- Competitors should not repeatedly challenge the same person; once a bout is concluded the challengers should fight others before challenging each other again
- Once a competitor has no favours remaining they cannot re-enter the competition and are effectively out of the running
- The contest is only open to citizens who don't hold an Imperial title at this time

Barien does not want his tourney to distract citizens who have important duties to attend to, so he has specified that entry is only available to those folk who do not hold an Imperial title. Those who currently hold a title cannot receive a favour and cannot enter the tourney.



As the heralds cannot be present to adjudicate all of this, they are entrusting enforcement to some prominent Imperial citizens who hold title related to the Summer realm. In return, they will be given invitations to the Pinnacle Tourney that they can bestow on another of their choosing, and a small payment from Barien as thanks. These people will be contacted via letter with further instructions at the summit, but those who receive the letter are under no obligation to take part - however if they decline to assist the Iron Duke in this they will not receive an invite. Those who take up the offer will be identified by a token from an Iron Duke, in the form of a blue owl on a white background. Those participating should treat them as speaking with the authority of Barien's heralds in the run up to the tourney.

## **The Proclamation of Competitors**

- Those who wish to compete need to present their favours at the Civil Service Hub between 17:30 and 18:00 when the successful competitors will be announced
- Anyone who arrives after 18:00 will not be able to take part in the next stage of the tourney

Competitors may give their name and surrender the favours they have won to the heralds of Barien at the civil service hub on the Saturday between 17:30 and 18:00. Once a competitor hands over their favours they cannot add any more to their tally. The proclamation will end at 18:00, and no further competitors will be accepted after this time. The heralds will announce the successful competitors shortly afterwards. Any competitors who have direct invitations should present these at this time also. There are 24 slots available in total for the tourney to those who have an invitation or who have won the most favours. A paper list will be left in the civil service hub to be referred to.

The successful competitors should then prepare themselves for the tourney itself, which will begin in 30 minutes at 18:30.

## **The Pinnacle Tourney**

- Revel, herald of Barien will be hosting The Pinnacle Tourney at 18:30 at a chamber at GoldenOak Circle, Serenael, Miaren
- Any spectators who wish to come are welcome

The Pinnacle Tourney will take place off Anvil via conjunction to GoldenOak Circle, Serenael, Miaren, in order to give the most space possible for the event to take place in all its majesty. The conjunction is sufficient to allow any spectator who wishes to attend (people may bring seating if they wish).

At the tourney field the competitors should present themselves to the heralds for inspection. For this tourney there are several rules about what competitors may enter the ring with;

- Competitors can wear any armour they wish, magical or not.
- Competitors may be enchanted and may have taken a tonic prior to the tourney.
- Competitors may only bring a single one handed weapon or rod which must be non-magical with them, and as many thrown weapons and daggers and/or wands as they wish.
- Competitors may not bring any buckler, great weapon, polearm, pike, staff or shield.
- Competitors may not take any consumable with them into the tourney - no potions, mana, herbs or other such item. Talismans with a limited number of uses are acceptable.
- No bows or crossbows will be permitted in the tourney.
- Fighters may use any magic or heroic resolve they have

access to but may not receive any outside assistance from spectators once the tourney begins.

- Fighters may heal, cast spells etc. on each other if they wish.

The tourney ring will be a large circle with 24 positions equidistant around the edge where competitors will start spaced out. At the centre will be a cache of materials for the fighters to use - additional weapons and potions will be stored here for the fighter's use and can be grabbed by anyone with the appropriate skills. Revel wishes to remind the mortals that though this is a free for all grand melee, the spectacle is just as important as the competition and outcome - excessive backstabbing and ganging up will be considered poor form and the heralds may intervene to ensure the proper fighting spirit is maintained. Discovery that any of the rules have been broken will be considered a very serious breach indeed by the Iron Duke, whose heralds reserve the right to disqualify any fighter so caught.

Once a fighter is down for the count and will not be able to return to the fight, they can call upon the Barien heralds to heal them and should leave the arena. The fight is to the last person standing, who will be crowned the Pinnacle Swordbearer and presented with the prize.

To avoid the unfortunate situation where a fighter loses their only one handed weapon to a shatter, the observing heralds can Mend by request - but only if otherwise the fighter would only be left with daggers or wands.

The illustrious winner will earn the sword Pinnacle and the right to bear it until they die or until such time that they receive an Imperial title. If that happens, then the Iron Duke asks that the holder let his heralds know, so that they can make arrangements to hold a new contest to find a new champion. That is likely to take time, and the bearer is welcome to keep the sword until a new contest is completed. (OOC note: the

sword-bearer should email us if they gain an Imperial title to indicate they have let Barien's heralds know).

## **Rules Update**

- It remains impossible to cast Challenge the Iron Duke at this time

At present the Summer ritual Challenge the Iron Duke cannot be cast. Any attempt to cast the ritual will fail, without expending mana crystals.

## **Reasoning**

When Empire was first created we hoped we might have as many as fifteen hundred players. Challenge the Iron Duke has always been a difficult ritual to support, because of the need to create individual plot for each challenge. Those difficulties have multiplied over the years, to the point where we cannot support the ritual in its current form when we have 3500 players. Sadly therefore we have deactivated the ritual for the time-being. We are going to devote time this winter to seeing if we can alter the ritual in some way to make it easier to support and then roll out any changes ready for next year.

## **IC Justification**

Barien is currently unable to respond to any casting of this ritual due to an ongoing conjunction.