

THE ACADEMY CHALLENGE



The rulers admired Angora's fighting skill but doubted what Clifford could teach the greatest warriors of their kingdoms.



At dawn, Clifford stood before a training dummy while every dignitary watched.



He released his living lute and guided it forward with a sharp magical chord.



The instrument struck with enough force to tear the reinforced dummy from its foundation.



The demonstration proved that Clifford's music and living instrument could become weapons in their own right.



Angora invited every ruler to send one champion against their victorious tavern fighter.



If a foreign warrior won, nothing would change.



If that challenger lost, the fighter would remain at Clifford and Angora's academy as a student.



Warriors from distant kingdoms entered the arena one after another.



Their weapons, armor, and traditions were different, but their opponent's ancient strength remained overwhelming.



Nearly every foreign champion was defeated.



Each honorable loss brought another extraordinary student into the new school.



Soon the training yard held elite fighters from unfamiliar armies and faraway cultures.



Royal payments built barracks, libraries, practice halls, and workshops around the arena.



Clifford taught fighters to hear the rhythm of battle, while Angora trained them to focus power through the mind.



Their successful gladiator agency had become an international academy.



Some rulers feared that Clifford and Angora were collecting the world's strongest warriors for themselves.



Angora promised that every student would return home and teach everything learned at the academy.



Their purpose was to prepare an entire generation of fighters who could defend every nation together.

The dignitaries remained uncertain, so Clifford tried to show them the peaceful future their cooperation could create.



He sang of prosperous kingdoms, powerful armies, and nations protected from every threat.



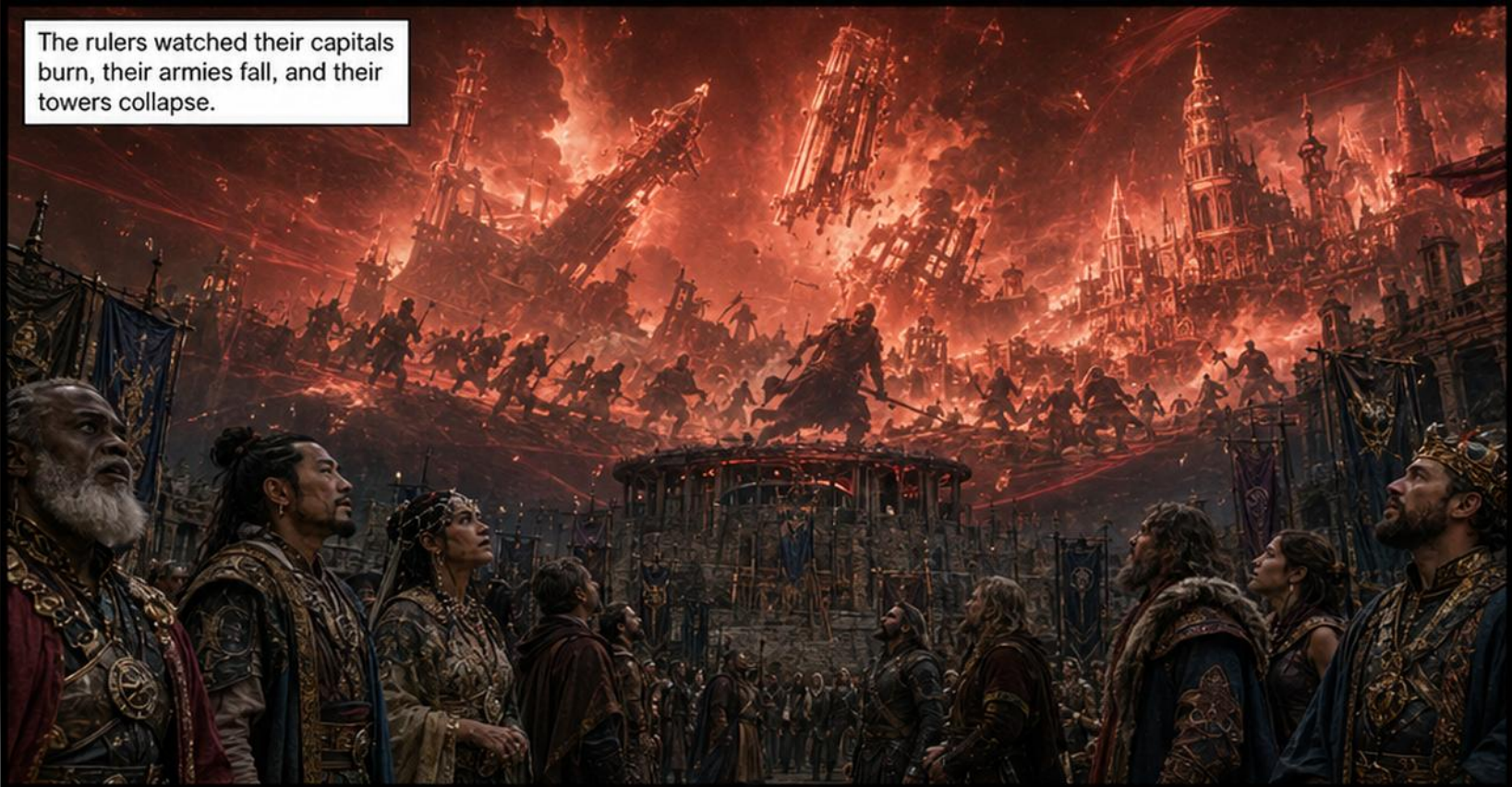
Green-gold holograms rose above the academy as rulers searched the visions for their homes.



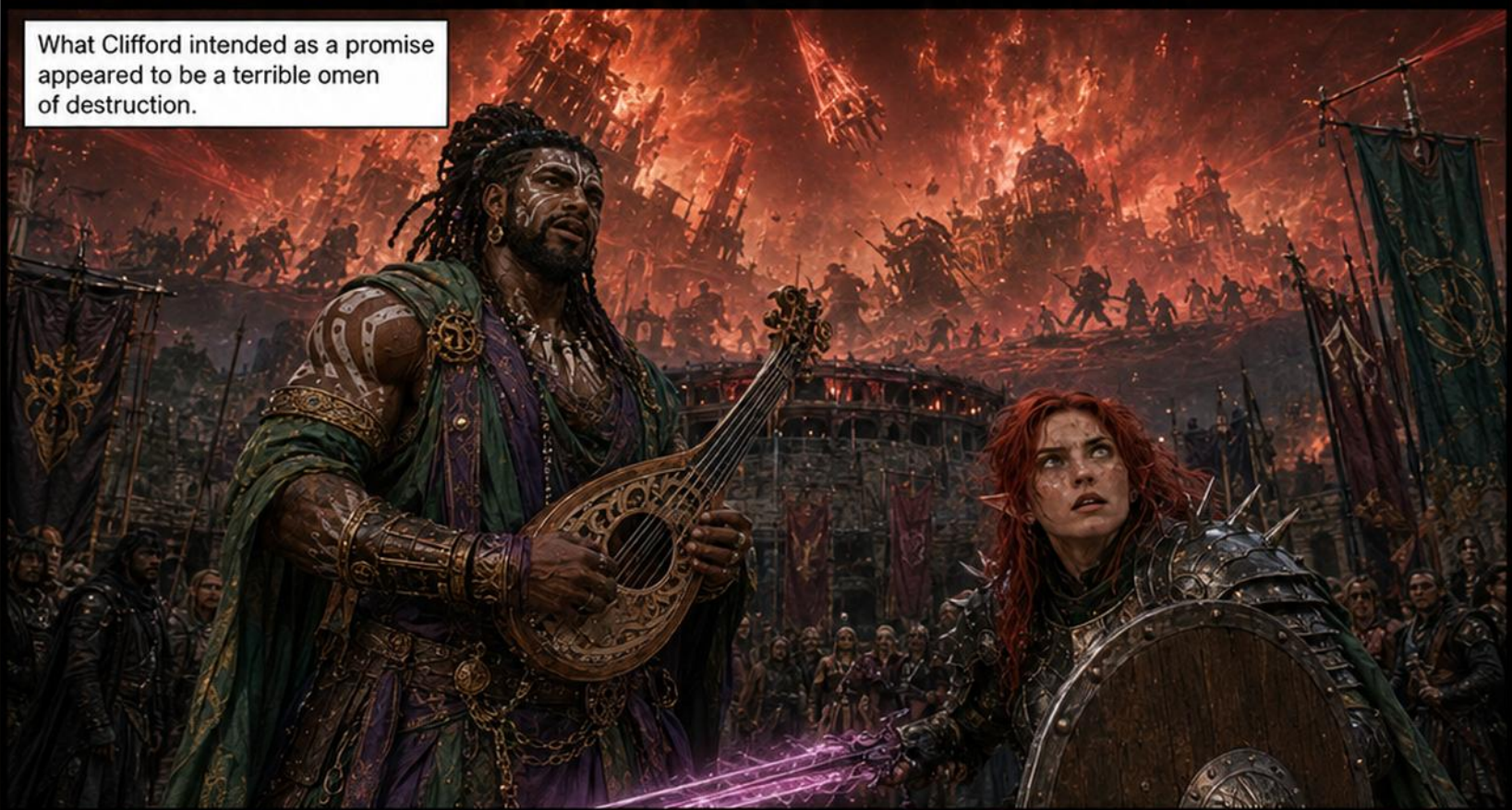
The images did not match Clifford's hopeful song.



The rulers watched their capitals burn, their armies fall, and their towers collapse.



What Clifford intended as a promise appeared to be a terrible omen of destruction.



Terrified dignitaries ordered their warriors home—and the academy's new alliance began to break apart.

