

## MAIDEN GLORY

Over the gravid plain and the livid sea towers the city called Symarna, sundered from less fortunate kingdoms by walls like mountains and mountains like walls. Her hands reach far into the foam of the western sea and the dust of the eastern wasteland. She rests her feet in the southern fenland and washes her hair in the swirling waves of the river Scamand. Her breasts are veiled with snow, her thighs with sand. Ten thousand kinds of flower seeds grow on her green skin. Her fingertips flutter upon salt-perfumed streets and her eyes scan the livid sea for ships laden with gifts. Her martial throne is an unconquered citadel carven into a sole mountain, called Ancora, but she slumbers in peace upon a bed of dew and cotton. Her dominion covers a circle of no less than a hundred parasangs, though once it covered thrice the area.

She is a maiden always in good company, a nation well beloved of virile empires and handsome republics. She herself is a rare republic in a time of many kingdoms. Has there ever been a lack of kingly suitors at her doorstep? Wealthy conquerors woo her with golden blood, crowned merchants with bleeding gold. Wized archpriests whose lips judge multitudes are filled with lawless lust in her presence. What glory is there in winning her warm, myrrh-sprinkled bed! Sometimes they gently tap her doors, trying to seduce her with donations: sometimes they assault her barbicans with battering rams. All the devilry and mischief that is known to the sons of man, they practice on this lukewarm maiden --- whether it be for wedlock or rapine. Symarna is a wise damsel, however, and knows how to secure her own freedom. She sets suitor against suitor with subtle policy and recruits warlike hosts from afar to ward off the lecherous throng. A cunning queen, she sacrifices the children of strangers to defend her hearth. Thus her fingertips seldom touch cold iron. When submit she must, she does so with serene grace and on her own terms. She is indeed the softest and gentlest of queens in times of peace, though myriads have fallen for her sake in more warlike times. Marauders

and pirates, ruffians and vagabonds all alike perish before her bolted gates and feed her realm with their wealth and flesh. Thus her treasury teems with vibrant jewels, her gardens with lush fruit.

Which city is like unto Symarna? Which city has been chosen for such natural glory, such toil-free bliss? She is neither the greatest nor the most populous, capital of no empire and queen of no people save her own brood. She is no Phoezanthion, empress over twain seas and three continents. She is no Tarshish to compass and conquer the outer oceans. She is no Jeriddo, home to five imperious thrones and ten thousand stolid idols. She is no Megarinth, mother of colonies greater than herself. She is indeed childless, despite six lecherous husbands and lovers innumerable.

Yet wise men say that the fate of Symarna is the most enviable among all nations. She is a bastion of good fortune, untouched by the troubles of the greater universe. The sea at her doors is friendly, the wind always mellow: she knows neither rude gale nor wild wave. No thunderstorm floods her painted streets, no earthquake shatters her temples of glass. Hunger is a word strange to her tongue, thanks to wheaten plains that stretch from horizon to horizon. Her cisterns overflow with snow and wine. The black plague is a temperate fever under her roof and the scarlet pox fears to spoil her lovely form, leaving behind only a beauty mark. Locusts that invade her meadows fall dead and wolves that enter her realm tame themselves. Wasps and bees weave honey in the same hive and the leopard watches over the fatling. Her gardens have never been sown with ash and salt: Symarna has never known the abomination of desolation. For this is the city where Ninaddites drew their westernmost borders with iron chariots, where the frost-roaming Hundall forgot their bloodlust. This is where Sigeans fell by the score, even if they were more ice than the axes of the Hundall and more iron than the chariots of Ninaddo. Here, our story must needs begin.

Poets who sing of earthly paradises abandon their caprices when they behold Symarna. Philosophers who have roamed the world restless, dreaming of vain utopias, find the solace of sleep here.