

MAIDEN GLORY



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FOREWORD

Shall I unfix the stars and resurrect wraiths from times past? How can I begin this ode unsung? The Testament of Eld begins with the separation of heaven and sea and earth, writ upon papyrus scrolls. The Cycle of Kings begins with an epitaph for the poet, engraven upon tablets of clay. The Pancalliopiad begins with a catalogue of the heroes whose deeds and meeds are inscribed upon parchments of skin. I know not how to begin, I who am a lesser student of greater masters.

Shall I begin with the arrangement of the universe, the emanations of Time? Shall I sing of an age even before legend, when ettins and elves roamed formless lands? Shall I begin with the original language of Man, the most ancient rune carven into the bark of oak? Shall I begin with how the first cornerstone was laid upon the city of Urran? Shall I begin with how the Fire of Fires first sprang alive from meteors twain, one hot as plasm and one cold as aether? Shall I begin with the first solemn altar devoted unto the oracle of Dodelphis? Nay, such is not the compass of my small story.

I would form poems about the seven olden champions, Zhaal and Aphridon and Sphendiar and Theracles and Persophon and Jaxilleus and Sinoa, but there are already sublimer poems on that matter. I would write chronicles about the seven great metropolises, Noph and Jeriddo and Sard and Sparthena and Latillium and Tarshish and Phoezanthion, but there are already more honest chronicles on that theme. I would compose psalms for the seven splendid archangels, Eosis and Rhabaal and Thaos and Miaphael and Khorda and Wohuman and Trometan, yet poets more devout than I have composed psalms for them. I must rather sing a theme more modest.

Behold! My dimming eyes catch the distant glimmer of crystalline temples. I must sing a circular song about an encircled city. Listen the faint peals of cymbals and the mute thunder of gongs! I do not speak

the tongues of angels and I can but mutter the tongues of men.
Hearken not to me, a pale voice in the service of a greater chorus. My
story is a living creature that can speak and thus it begins with a
paeon unto a maiden goddess.

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.

INVOCATION

Sing, muse of discord! The tale you must now tell is somewhat black, somewhat white. Sing how gruesome Necessity and fickle Fortune heaped dole and sorrow upon the blessed people of Symarna. Sing how blood and sweat and tears ran like rivulets through the swirling current of Scamand, unto the shores of The Livid Sea. Sing how the happy fate of Symarna was tested with disasters of earth and sea and heaven. Sing of the ordeals and travails that befell Maiden Glory, the guardian spirit of our city. Sing of the crystal temples and painted streets of Symarna, in their direst hour of distress. Sing against the ill-crossed stars which burden unhappy mortals with finite pleasure and infinite suffering. And even if death is the doom of all things living, sing for those who would forget their own troubles until your ode is sung.

Sing of unforgotten feats, goddess of chaos! Sing of things high and low, great and small. Sing of kings and princes who play games of imperium, of knights and champions who perish for fame. Sing of noble houses and simple homes. Shrink from no subject, for nothing is too unholy for your voice. Sing of green envy and blue sorrow. Sing of cowards and traitors with no less delight than the best members of humankind. Sing of men arrogant and vengeant, highborn villains and common heroes. Sing of saints and vestal virgins, whores and sellswords. Sing of magic white and black, the curses of heaven and the miracles of hell. Sing of sardonic demigods who scorn hymns and sacrifices, amusing themselves with the toil of mortal toil.

When you tire of singing, seize the brush and paint the world in shades of rose and coal. Paint the dour horrors of war for our wary eyes. Paint the nameless thousands arranged upon battlefields, like grapes ripe for plucking. Paint sweet meadows red with sour blood. Paint beasts of war bedecked in warlike garments, trampling warriors and toppling like towers themselves. Paint the sky darkish with clouds of arrows. Paint shields that bend and spears that shatter,

bones that splinter and skulls that crack. Paint the ravenous wolves and the wolfish ravens that feast upon the fallen. Paint catapults that hurl festering corpses and thundering boulders. Paint the fairest palaces burning, the tallest ramparts crumbling. Paint insensate rape and senseless murder. Paint starving mothers who devour their babes. Sing until your brush is stiff with blood, until the wails of phantoms whelm your pale whisper.

THE RIDDLE OF SARD

“I am the commonest miracle. I am the measure of all things. I cannot move nor breathe, but I shine like a fallen star. I feed upon sweat and blood and tears. I make kings out of worms and I make worms out of kings. Empires devour me and I devour empires. Though I am incorrupt, I corrupt every tribe and nation. Though I am noble, I am of base birth. Though I am sprung of no soil, I breed all vermin and bane. I am no child of earth, yet my kingdom is of this world.” Thus runs the riddle of Sard. Even children and idiots know the answer to this popular riddle.

Gold. The alien metal. The most precious of all horrors. The ill that cures all ills. The bastard child of the Sun. The lifeblood of the world, circulating in veins of cobblestone and foam. The noblest of metals, though it be motherless and birthless: soft as wax, yet of imperishable essence. Though there are elements more uncommon, none is the object of such universal lust. Though gold itself knows neither disease nor age, an ounce of it will corrupt the meekest of saints. Kings and priests feed upon it like flies swarming upon rancid manna. All empires devour this living poison, which stays in their flesh long after they perish. Lust for gold is the most cosmopolitan religion and the original language of mankind.

Alchemists are the creators of all gold that has ever been. The Circle of Eld fashions gold out of base metals, quicksilver in particular: there are no natural gold veins upon this green sphere that we call home. The secret of creating gold is for the wise few, not the ignorant millions. They swear mute oaths to keep this arcane secret. Swine can only welter upon jewels, so it is better not to cast pearls before them.

There have been many crude ages before the rise of alchemy, when humans knew no gold. Yet the age we live in is their handwork, for their golden gloves have steered the ships of History against the tides and waves of Fate for ten thousand years.

The alchemist who first learned the three enigmata of God lived upon the high and untilled plains of Pard once, born unto a family of shepherds. Sarastro is his name, the first and greatest prophet of Azda. It is he who sang a million sacrosanct words into being: the Song of All. It is he who lit the Fire of Fires upon Zhamûrg with his own hands, with the fire of two meteors: one hot as plasm, one cold as aether. For ten thousand years he has been alive, without a wrinkle over his brow and a hoar hair upon his head. The black, spent stars of Heaven sing the harmony of the spheres unto his ears. Such is his gift in the music of speech that he can make withered flowers bloom anew with his voice.

Eosis, the highest seraph of Azda, revealed the three enigmata of God unto Sarastro as centuries passed: panacea, chrysopoeia, abiogenesis. The prophet learned from the crimson-winged archangel how to prepare the elixir of youth to prolong the lives of mortals, how to convert baser metals into gold, how to create likenesses of living beings within alembics and vats. And yet he would not even eat the flesh of animals, out of meekness. He would not scorn the most foolish disciple who came to hear him speak. He would not beteem so much as harsh winds to graze the cheeks of his lambs. All three enigmata required the use of an enchanted substance called lapis lapidorum and only Sarastro knew how to create more of it.

Sarastro gathered six great apostles and many lesser students unto himself. Some would call him Eosis in mortal cloak, out of awe and respect. Some whispered that Eosis so loved the world that he chose an innocent exile from heaven without committing any crimes against the honour of God just to help mortals. He shared the secrets of using lapis lapidorum with six chosen apostles, in the silver-glazen palaces of Sard. He would sometimes grant the elixir of youth unto lesser students, like Zosimon of Sard and Zyncephra of Shammon, for Eosis trusted his inerrant judgement in this matter. The Circle built obelisks of pure gold in Sard to show their mastery of the alembic unto the

greater world. Kings from faraway realms appeared barefoot and barehead to beg miracles of them. They stared like ignorant children at this new and alien metal, while trembling in awe as Time itself seemed incapable of shortening the lives of the Circle of Eld.

Such power, in the hands of a band so small! Kings who ruled over kings would bend the knee before them, and priests who ruled over priests would readily proclaim them to be living gods. For such is the power of the Circle, ruling over the great empires of the world from behind veiled shadows and thinning the herds of mortals like a pride of undying lions: not with claw and teeth but with words and deeds that shape history. For gold makes and unmakes kings these days, exiles and assembles nations. Yet in his infinite wisdom Azda sowed dissent amongst the Circle, for otherwise they would rule over this evergreen planet with a single fist of iron --- not with seven gloves of gold. Eosis taught a unique enigma unto each member of the Circle. They were given an empire each to rule over with undying wisdom. They each chose a bird and hoisted them as their banners.

Sarastro chose the phoenix, for it was hallowen unto Eosis. To him was given the power to enter living fire. Priests of all nations flocked to him like sparrows to the song of the nightingale, saving his wisdom in the form of runes and letters upon parchment and paper. He chose Phoezantion as his future home, to judge the three continents and the seas twain. He would rule with neither orb nor sceptre, for that was the domain of mundane monarchs, but from within a void pyramid of gold called Ophyridas. He was the man who taught Cyrander the Great, who himself smashed the ten thousand stolid idols of Jeriddo for the first time and captured Phoezanthion forever.

Adammon chose the dove, for it was hallowen unto Sophia. He was the apostle who sometimes even surpassed his master. To him was given the power to heal all diseases and walk upon water. Even today he is worshipped as a living god in the faith of Aion: the sole incarnation of the principle of Logos. While his original ministry was

unto Jehammities upon Aaro, he forechosed Latillium to build his Temple White in days to come. His alabaster church rose upon the crimson blood of martyrs. He promised a kingdom of peace but also came with a sword in the mouth to compel it. He lamented, ever aweep, an unhappy world where swords are not yet become sickles for the sake of an undying peace.

Jano chose the eagle, quick of talon and sharp of eye. To him was given the power to tame lightning, to capture it within veins of copper and lamps of crystal. Jano complained that his master Sarastro cast the best dice when he chose Phoezanthion, the greatest of all nations. The six apostles were given dice with six sides, yet Sarastro alone was given a die with seven faces. He forechosed Tarshish as his abode, the seat of a future empire that would orbit and oppose Phoezanthion's. He and his acolytes would unweave the rainbow, clip the wings of angels, conquer all mysteries by rule and line. He was a man of merit and science, banishing superstitious ghosts unto oblivion. Through his tireless work Tarshish would wax greater than even Phoezanthion, learning to encompass the Sea Eterne with iron-ribbed ships.

Uzza was the apostle who chose the falcon, for it roved the distant deserts of Nod free of leash and chain. His feat was to deconvert gold, making iron out of it. To him was given this art so that he could judge sellswords and princelings, destroy men of bleeding gold and golden blood. Ever he wandered amongst the iron chariots of Ninaddo, whose warlike citizens conquered eleven nations to root the fear of God in their hearts, inspiring men to obey no silent gods but Silence itself. His acolytes took vows of silence under circular mosques. His disciples cleared Jeriddo of idols a second time and ruled over the vast realms of Aqqamer from its azure ziggurats. He thus inspired and ever defended the Sigeian faith.

Letho chose the swan, the mute bird. To him was given the power of past and future sight, so that he could weep the past and succour the pain of things to come. With a sphere of crystal, he would observe

every corner of Wæold without favouring any empire. He chose Sard itself, even before the disbanding of the Circle, guarding the obelisks of gold from hands of greed and eyes of blasphemy. Pilgrims from every corner of Wæold, petty wizards and upstart stargazers, flocked unto Sard to study the lesser arts of magic under his watch. They say that he never fought in wars nor meddled in politics, except to curse Jeriddo and her ten thousand stolid idols. For the wayward king Sarpago sought to invade Sard once, to melt the obelisks and build a golden bull unto his false god Merodach. Eosis must have taken heed of his curse, for the city has been conquered twice since.

Fuxia chose the bird of paradise, for its coat was of many colours. He was the oldest apostle, who came from the eldest land: Zhoaxia. To him was given the power to diminish all diseases and ailments, that he might extend the lives of mortals through medicine. He established a college of herbalists and philosophers, teaching the princes and princelings of Zhoaxia the art of potion and poison. It was him who once said, "all poison is medicine if in measure." He never departed Zhoaxia, as immortal as the land he rooted upon. He passed from generation to generation like a man changing clothes.

Avaloq chose the kite, the quickest of birds. To him was given knowledge over all tongues: animals, Men, demons, voracious ghosts, faeries, titans, demigods. He rode a white elephant without swordlike tusks, a herald of peace unto Sinddha. Sinddha is a land riven by one river, rent by a thousand sects and cliques. He did not merge them into a single religion, nor forged a single empire out of such diverse clans. Yet he taught them the value of the Wheel of Duty, which can only be broken by absolute compassion. Let none say that the seven seraphs of Azda erred in adoring him. For they all blessed the avatar Avaloq, even more so than Sarastro, who renounced all power except conscience. He refused to cast the dice of Fate and rule over no empire except himself. For that was the noblest choice of all.

THREE EMPIRES OF FAITH

Love is worthless without hate. Drops of sweat and tears and blood are ugly for ourselves, perhaps, but God writes meaning into the universe using such ink.

“Let there be Love” was the first muttered sentence of Azda according to the Song of All. Yet the second verse runs thus: “Let there be Hate, for the sake of free will.” Upon every new scroll of history, archangels sprinkle sweat and tears and blood. No parchment begins truly blank even before we mortals become so many runes and letters upon it. Do they enjoy the spectacle, like we unhappy mortals admiring tragedies? If so, can we blame them — possessed of the same forgivable vice? Are there amphitheatres made of clouds in Heaven for swarms of singing angels, who laugh and weep at our common history as if the whole world were a stage? As they reckon our sins and good deeds, do they also drip with sweat and tears and blood?

There is a proverb attributed to Avaloq, the wise alchemist of the distant lands of Sinddha, an avatar and redeemer according to millions. He once compared the holy books of all Sinddhanese prophets, sages, wizards to so many different fountains springing from the same mud and mire. And if Sinddha is a land of many fountains, who are we to defame God by insisting that other realms would not spring and seethe with similar springs? And how about other mortals living upon other, stranger planets --- who but the author of all rain, Azda, can paint so many rainbows upon an otherwise dull sky?

Avaloq once said, according to Sinddhanese scripture, that religions become more and more tolerant of disagreement as they get older and older. Disciples who condemn infidels under the severest terms often belong to the youngest religions, like untame warhorses. True prophets tame them with their own hands for the ploughshare, while

false prophets subdue them with spur and whip to breed warhorses. All true religions have some semblance and brilliance of Truth within them. There is but one Wheel of Duty which yokes all chariots into a single axle, and this whirling Wheel can only be surpassed through absolute compassion. Thus sayeth Avaloq, whom millions adore as the eternal avatar of God.

The compass of my story is small, I must admit, and the magnet is aligned with the sunset. I must avert my eyes from the orange dawns of the East, rising over plains and towns of infinite detail, and seek comfort in the more familiar plots of the greying and reddish West. There are three great empires upon the western hemisphere of Wæold even as I sing these lines, three colours in the service of the one true religion. The faith of Azda is the oldest, while the faith of Sige is the youngest. They all practice true religion under God, yet three different colours of it. Azdaeans fight under crimson banners, for they worship fire as the symbol of the highest God. Aionites worship light as an uncreated principle, as they fight under the banners of Temple White. Sigeans worship silence, disciples arranged all mute during prayer --- and their banners are jet black. Fie! We must perhaps mourn a world where killing an infidel soldier is as easy as despising the wrong colour. The fountains of Truth are many, yet such is the appetite for religion in the hearts of Men that there is still not enough clean water to quench so many parched lips. We must dig ever deeper, sayeth Avaloq, instead of coveting neighbourly springs and polluting them with blood.

Azdaeans take pride in being the oldest true religion, who have exhausted their hot valour after millennia of struggle. Once they used to rule over the known world, but now they can but defend their shrinking borders. They abhor killing to such degree that it is impermissible to drown, bury alive, burn any living thing according to their writ: the Song of All. They even offer their dead brethren to tame vultures and eagles as an act of final kindness. They devote a week of mourning every year for the Fire of Fires, once burning upon

the temple-city of Zhamûrg under the wings of phoenixes. They weep, for their dear homeland Pard has fallen unto the Sigean foe. They also lost the azure ziggurats of Jeriddo, the cedar ships of Tyridon, the fir ships of Shammon, and the iron chariots of Ninaddo unto the same silent enemy. As for the West, it is now too strong to accept their sometimes gentle, sometimes tyrannical yoke. The brethren of Azda do not wage crusades against unbelievers. Nor do they maintain that the unconvert shall rot in Hell. They allow ignorant pagans to worship the seven archangels of Azda in association with their own false gods, hoping that they will abandon their heathenry out of their own accord. They reject slavery, no matter the colour or creed. They believe that Cyrander the Great, breaker of chains and anointed king, was given rule upon the known world so that he could end this vile practice.

Aionites are somewhat less ancient. In terms of doctrine, they worship a triune God: Aion the infinite, Logos for pure reason, Sophia as the redemptrix of the physical universe. It was during the reign of Caesatine the Great that their canon was fixed, their gospels proclaimed legitimate. They are of the belief that the greatest pleasure of being a saint is watching over the torment of sinful throngs. Theirs is an otherworldly faith, for they revile this fallen world as sinful mud and mudlike sin. They have waged many crusades in the past, not just against infidels but also against heretics who opposed the canons and synods of the Temple White. They believe that God is love, but their record for peace is not immaculate. They oppose slavery, but only if the slave is willing to convert. They reject distant pagans who worship false gods, yet they do not seek to slay them all.

Sigean clerics teach that all unbelievers are meant for Hell, in this world and the next. For theirs is the one true God alone. All other religions, they insist, wallow in sin and error. Their flock is the most numerous and the most violent, full of murder against the infidel and full of hate against the stranger. To them, slavery is not forbidden.

They only allow Azdaeans and Aionites to live under the shadow of their swords if they pay poll tax. Sigeans hate Aionites for dividing God into three persons, mock Azdaeans for worshipping seven archangels whose minds are independent of God. They ban all paganism under their creed and they shatter every icon, every idol they can find. Their conquerors spare no infidels during battle and take no prisoners from among the impious. Yet even they are not without soothsayers and bards who preach the doctrine of apocatastasis, that salvation is perhaps for all.

Perhaps faith alone cannot divide Men, for "God despises holy wars the most" --- according to the Song of All. Yet greed and pride are the two sins that not even the most stubborn priest can wipe out of the fickle minds of so many princelings and sellswords. Ever they hanker for war, like locusts that abandon withering meadows to invade well-plowen plains. War can eclipse Love in the heavens for a small hour only, but even that small hour is enough to drown our unhappy world in blood.

CAPITO MUNDI

What list, what catalogue is enough to express the marvels of Phoezanthion? A hundred heads each with a hundred tongues would fail to sing the praise of this omniversal city. Metaphors err and adjectives falter when describing *capito mundi*, but I must perforce provide some weak account.

Phoezanthion rises at the nexus of the three continents and at the conflux of oceans twain. She is a beating heart for all trade and traffic upon our evergreen sphere, pumping silver and golden blood into veins of foam and cobblestone. Were you a curious bird awing, you would witness how the livid waves of the West mingle with the green waves of the East in a swirl of foam below. This is where the icy waters of the Megaphor mix with the warm waters of the Antiphor, upon a strait called Aphrozeum. The two torrents create a permanent whirlpool, perilous enough to capsize and crush small boats. This is where the tan sailors of Xanadoo meet the pale sailors of Tarshish, bragging about their exploits with maidens and mermaidens. The tan sailors bring tea and silk from Zhoaxia, spice and rice from Sinddha, pearls and corals from Fûsong. The pale sailors bring cocoa from Meropis, giant undecaying fruit from Gargantis, coffee and orchids from Thurasil.

The metropolis covers both the northern and southern shores. Crescent walls encompass the twain halves, together forming a perfect circle. The narrow sea is sealed with walls also. There are two bridges of great craftsmanship crossing the strait, made of iron and stone. Below the bridges are portcullises, monstrous mechanisms in the shape of leviathan maws, allowing ships to pass between their iron teeth. Amidst all the kelp and jetsam, tame dolphins rear their small heads. The rocks are alive with scallops and oysters. The Sea Eterne teems with dragons and capricorns, sailors say. There are sharks aplenty within the Livid Sea, many whales within the Green Sea. Their skulls adorn the ships of Phoezanthion as figureheads.

Phoezanthion lies sprawling upon seven hills and upon each hill is a solemn monument. The Senate is like a forest of pillars upon a sea of marble, built in the proud Dionian style. Titanium is a gigantic amphitheatre for athletic games and knightly tournaments. The Library of All is a hexagonal sanctum unto knowledge, home unto thousands upon thousands of tomes and scrolls and tablets. The Black Ziggurat is where Azdaeans lay their corpses, so that the tame vultures and eagles that roost upon the roofs and towers of Phoezanthion can consume their profane flesh. The Cathedral of Sophia is a circular church upheld with buttress upon buttress and arch upon arch, with a golden cross gleaming above. Here, Aionites worship their goddess Sophia with anthems and requiems that vie with the harmony of the spheres.

Rising over the second highest peak is Ophyridas, a void pyramid covered in golden bricks and shingles, smouldering with volcanic fervour inside. It is upon the innermost chambers of this pyramid that the alchemists of Phoezanthion convert base metals into nobler elements, creating wealth out of thin air. The tallest hill is devoted unto Pyrapyrix, the divinest temple of Azda. Built upon a septagrammatic plinth, Pyrapyrix is a manmade mountain rising about three thousand feet above the sea. Seven spires mark seven corners, each with a smokeless lamp ablaze --- each in the favourite colour of an archangel of Azda. Inside there are two meteors, one cold as aether and one as hot as plasm, their swirling flames not mixing as if by the grace of God. They burn with avenging love, a testament to the crimson and indigo fires of Zhamûrg before the fell conqueror Qarnain razed the temple-city.

Of no lesser note is the abode of the Jupithomenid dynasty: The House of All. This is an island built in the likeness of the world itself. Symbolising the Sea Eterne is a deep lake, teeming with arm-thick eels instead of sea dragons. Upon it is an island of such artifice that every peak and vale, every plain and plateau upon the three continents has

its corresponding miniature here. The two seas become lakes of brine. Mountains become hillocks, tillen plains become kempt gardens. Lakes become fountains, rivers tiny brooks. Deserts are sown with sand and pebble, forests with trees and herbs of their own clime. Cages and caves hold wild beasts and chimerae that are native to the lands they represent. For every city there is a pavilion, built according to the traditions of that nation. And in the middle of this miniscule planet is a palatial version of Phoezantion itself, a world inside a world inside a world, with seven great halls and three hundred smaller rooms. This is the House of All, the greatest palace ever built.

Behold the ruddy morning and the twilight evening, when thousands of naphtha lamps disperse the dusk. Behold the fire temples of Eosis and the grottoes of Zoasiris, the churches of Aion and synagogues of Jehammon. Behold towering mansions and castellar apartments, lavish villae and quaint cottages. The streets spread like living veins, teeming with traffic. Tanks overflow with oil and wine, while fountains serve mead and nectar. There are well-spiced kitchens and bustling brothels that appeal to every appetite. Here are theatres for every play ever written and taverns for every ode ever sung. Here are gay markets where all things are bought and sold. Here are inns and bazaars teeming with every nation and tribe. Here are guilds and shops for every specialty, for this is the city where men master narrow professions. The farrier who fits coursers with horseshoes shall not fit palfreys, and the tailoress who repairs linen garments shall not touch wool.

If you will not avert your eyes, there are less pleasant sights to gaze upon. Behold glum warriors who man grim barracks, wearing necklaces of the teeth they broke in boxing matches. Behold the gravelike hospitals where you can find every manner of ailment and wound. Behold the quarries where unfed workers perish like fleas upon mice. Behold clouds of gnats and throngs of rats. Behold mirky prisons and dusky dungeons, crowded gallows and laden crucifixes. Behold heads and limbs rotting on spikes. Behold the fighting pits

where wild beasts tear apart the worst of all criminals. Behold
beshitten backstreets, mouldering ruins and heaps of garbage around.
Behold enough flotsam and waste to feed and adorn a less
vainglorious capital.

A HEAVY CROWN

Phoezanthion is an empress in decline, clad in pearls and fur and diamonds --- clawing at the orb and sceptre in mighty old age. She is surrounded by virile empires and handsome republics who covet her throne, but not her aging beauty. She is no less than five thousand years old as I sing these lines, counting from the year Xerxepthah the Architect last rebuilt the city. She is the daughter city of Megarinth, who is also the mother of Sparthena.

Time was that Phoezanthion could rule over the waving plains and the plain waves with alchemy, with swordsmanship, with tradecraft. Not a single bag of spice could pass from east to west, west to east without Phoezanthion's harpylike taxes. They say that every single golden coin that has ever circulated across this planet touched the hands of a citizen of Phoezanthion at least once. How can such majesty falter even in withersome age?

Ever she has two rivals, eastward Tarshish and southward Jeriddo. Tarshish was wont to practice the stern faith of Aion in olden times, but nowadays her rulers are worldlywise and worship Reason itself. Many notable princes in the West avow the fetters of faith altogether, even if the common folk still fear and love their Temple White: the highest cathedral in the service of their triune God. As for Jeriddo, she is the capital of the Sigeian faith --- even if the current Caleph prefers the swirling minaretttes and the endless gardens of Marconda. She was once the seat of ten thousand stolid idols before Qarnain shattered them all. Phoezanthion has thus been surpassed twice: once by an empire of Reason, once by an empire of Faith.

Tarshish began using paper money instead of golden coin about a millennium ago, which craft they learned from Zhoaxia, to earn their independence from the golden shackles of alchemy. As for Sigeians, they despise Phoezanthion's infinite usury so much that they use coins minted of iron. For such was the practice of olden Ninaddo, the

city-state that first proclaimed the one true faith under God. They won their wars against southern pagans with iron chariots and iron money. Sigean alchemists, learned in the arts of Uzza, deconvert all gold to iron upon seizing it. Their faithful is forbidden from so much as touching gold upon pain of death. Gold, as it were, has lost its unnatural appeal upon these two empires.

Tarshish has merged much of Vespera under her modern reign, under banners of dove and eagle --- the white wings of Temple White and the curling beaks of the great legions of Latillium. Phoezanthion still unfurls her banners of swan and phoenix, defiant yet tired with age and hunger. Tarshish has even compassed the great blue waves of the Sea Eterne, which engirdles the whole planet. They have learned the craft of building iron-ribbed ships from the giants of Gargantis. Let Megarinth boast of two children greater than herself. Tarshish boasts of a brood of perhaps one hundred smaller settlements --- all under the heel of this younger mother. She has attained power beyond measure through science, industry, oppresure. Let Phoezanthion rule over the livid and green waves, with hills of gold in her coffers. Tarshish now rules over seas of land and oceans of soil, boasting twice the people and thrice the ships.

What would you if you were such a wizening empress, hands tied, except to don your crown and wait for the beautiful rot of your queendom? She was a like placid whale, with sharklike kings free to peck at her fins and blubber. What good is such a lavish capital when attached to an ever-shrinking empire? Tributes were lesser than ever, taxes unpaid. In their darkest hours, the rulers of Phoezanthion drowned their sorrows with ambrosian wine and wondered how Time would pass judgement against them after their glory passed. Tarshish was bold enough to lay seetime siege unto them five times during the last three centuries. The centre of our evergreen sphere was perhaps Phoezanthion no more.

The walls needed repair and the warlike hosts were in disarray. Phoezanthion would have fallen long ago if not for the warcraft of her wizards. They defended walls upon land and sea with ignosphons and heliophores, spraying liquid fire upon enemy ships and incinerating them from afar with concentric mirrors.

Nor did all the gold hidden in the coffers of Phoezanthion give her respite. Hundalls hailing from the northern ice, blue of eye and blond of hair, coveted the blue waters and the blond gold of The Phoenix Empire. They were a hardy nation hailing from meadows of frosten grass, their berserkers a spectacle to behold in times of war. With their trunk-thick arms they could shoot arrows further than any other warlike race. With their spears they could impale a horse from side to side, killing the best of knights. Their knifelike ships were the fastest known to Man. They say that it takes five ordinary warriors to slay a single Hundall, and the Hundall demanded five times the gold to fight as campaigners and sellswords under the banners of princes and princelings.

Food was increasingly scant. The great realm of Aaro was in quiet rebellion, no more a cornucopia of bread for the Phoenix Empire. Phoezanthion had long secured the loyalty of the seven lesser metropolises upon her crown not with rare jewels but with common wheat. They now bore heavy upon her wilting neck and stooping shoulders, threatening independence and even defection unto the West. Let me rank them according to their grandeur: Sparthena, Ampheon, Noph, Megarinth, Symarna, Threna, Ephenope. Hunger stoked citizen revolts, loosening ancient bonds and raising new generations too unruly for the yoke. Gentlemen and gentlewomen hoarded food and gold, instead of paying war-time tax or sending their children to wars. The proud nation of Dion, never too happy to be under the yoke of Pard, was already wondering whether Tarshish was the better imperatrix after all. They had mouths to feed, hungry mouths full of rebellious gossip against the Phoenix Empire.

The fields of Aaro are immense of breadth, they say. The fields of Aaro are often fallow, they say, for it is not necessary to till all of the cornucopian silt. Now the hierophants and farmers of Aaro were in quiet rebellion, laying their fields ever more fallow and working upon them only to feed their own children. To kill them in droves was no answer. Yes, Phoezanthion was not immune to the temptations of tyranny. Yet the people of Aaro were as inerasurable as their own land.

PARTHENISSA

Symarna had a single vestal in the service of the Sun Fire, a crystalline temple devoted unto Azda. Parthenissa was her name. She was the sole child of the famous Pardissan marshall Miraxthor the Thunder, who had defeated the Sigeian horde in two great battles about three decades ago. Her mother, a well-admired matriarch of Symarna, had passed away in the welter and agony of childbirth. Too much wine and too much sorrow killed his father soon afterwards, who left behind a very small fortune but a very great fame. Even the former Caleph praised him after his battles, they say. Upon birth, she was chosen to become the next vestal in the service of the Sun Fire --- the highest office a woman can attain under the laws of Azda. To injure her provoked the death penalty. To defame her warranted prison. Vestal virgins could release prisoners, forgive sins, consult with kings and queens, attend all pomp and pageantry. Priests and knights bent the knee before them, while common people kissed the earth they walked upon. They were sworn as perpetual virgins from birth to death.

She was part of a small company despatched from Symarna unto Phoezanthion just as the eclipse of war was beginning to darken her beloved home. She had come to the capital to accompany the consul Perithemis, to beg for military aid against the upcoming Sigeian campaign. Yet the times were dire for all. Who was there to console Phoezanthion, the mother of seven rebellious children? Parthenissa had spent no more than a week here in the company of the alchemists and vestal virgins who maintain the fire temples. She was devout yet of a cosmopolitan mind, praying with them unto Azda for the salvation of all nations. For it did not seem proper to her to pray for the redemption of her home Symarna alone. She was indifferent towards the famous vendors and bards, athletes and gladiators of Phoezanthion. She played the lyre to appease curious senators and knights who were captivated by her godlike virtue, outstanding even by the strict standards of the vestal college. Her favourite piece was a

concerto about the fall of Tyridon unto Sigean hands, through violence and treason.

Perithemis and his companions pleaded the cause of Symarna before the senators and knights for seven days, yet did not receive the warm welcome they sought. The upcoming invasion caused an uproar amongst the brethren of Azda, yet many merchants in Phoezanthion were unwilling to stop trade with the Sigean empire because of the westward siege from Tarshish. As for princes and princelings, they knew that their mother-empress was no less desolate than poor Symarna. They lavished their money upon bards and courtesans, poets and whores. Thus they spent their time in vanity and luxury.

Help would not come. Perithemis hoped for at least some troops, not to win the war against the Caleph but to parley for better conditions when Symarna would soon surrender. Where his earthly words failed, perhaps the devout example of Parthenissa might garner just some more sympathy. For she was as elegant and helpless as Symarna herself in her great hour of need.

THE HOUSE OF ALL

The sun was in a gentle decline outside, the heat inoffensive. Parthenissa, however, was shivering from cold sweat. Her robes and cloak were of old, worm-eaten silk. Her circlet was carved of imperfect jewels. Fancy words were lining up in her dry throat. She had committed to memory the entire speech, yet she was clutching the scroll like a nervous oyster biting down upon her pearl.

The presence chamber was cubelike in shape, lacking not in awe and glory but granting no sense of peace unto visitors. The northern wall bore seven tapestries that depicted the seven great metropolises: Jeriddo with azure ziggurats and swirling gardens, Noph with omniplex pyramids and chalken mansions, Sard with obelisks of gold and mirror-halls of silver, Sparthena with forestlike pillars carved of marble, Latillium with dolven tombs and sky-piercing towers, Tarshish with colossal idols and its artificial sea. The seventh was Phoezanthion, the city that is beyond all metaphor and adjective.

The southern wall was a painting entire and depicted upon it were the deeds and meeds of seven legendary champions: Zhaal vanquishing hosts while bestride a phoenix, the seven travels of Aphridon, Sphendiar spreading the worship of fire, Theracles slaying the twelve monsters that each became a constellation, Persophon and his tragedy of errors, Jaxilleus in the thick whirl of battle, the wondrous voyages of Sinoa. The painting was of such detail that there were human figures upon it the size of ants, and it was so vivid and masterly that the images seemed frozen in living motion.

The floor inside was covered with glazen tiles, a vast mirror which shone with the likeness of what was above. The ceiling was a mosaic made of precious stones, depicting the two moons and the seven planets and the twelve constellations. A vortex of stars engirdled this jewelled universe. Hanging from the apex was a candelabrum

burning with seven golden lamps, representing the Central Fire from which all sprang.

Upon the eastern wall were seven tall windows, cruciform and prismatic. Each window bore the semblance of an archangel, with saints beneath their wings: Rhabaal rising from the sea, Thaos weeping to quench the coals of Hell, Miaphael healing lepers and the blind, Khorda riding lions unto victory, Wohuman separating the sheep from the goats, Trometan throned upon black vipers. The centremost window was devoted unto Eosis, the Crimson Lord, who spread three pairs of phoenix wings upon the monarch. For below this crimson panel there was a radiate throne, shaped like the sun itself, with a semicircular plinth and seven beams of solid gold. Upon the greater throne there was a smaller throne, carven of monolithic emerald. And seated upon this emerald throne was the pantocrator and emperor of Phoezantion: Xerxapollo, second of that name.

His circlet was cast of iridochalc, a meteoric metal agleam with every possible colour. Upon his left hand was a spherical diamond the size of a man's heart, shining like a fallen star. Upon his right hand was a sceptre carven of the tusk of a unicorn. Girt round his waist was the vorpal sword of Cyrander the Great, still sharp enough to cut a feather floating in the air. He wore garments of the finest spidersilk. Beneath his feet lay the dappled hide of an albedon panther the size of an ox.

His hair was as white as snow and likewise his beard, even though he was trapped between boy and man in terms of age. His eyes were ruddy purple, his skin wan as porcelain. The sinews in his limbs were strong and apparent. Within his blue veins ran the old blood of the Jupithomenids. Legends say that Zhaal was the first king of kings upon Pard. Zhaal saw the entire world astride a phoenix and the faith of Azda began during his reign. He was hoar of hair and amaranthine of eye at birth, with a seven-pointed star upon his shoulder --- as if marked by God for greatness. Ever by his side was Sarastro, the first

and greatest prophet of Azda, who lit the Fire of Fires upon the temple-city of Zhamûrg with the crimson fire of plasm and the indigo frost of aether.

Together they converted many nations unto the worship of Eosis, the Crimson Lord, the great archangel who fans the flames of heaven with his six wings. They did so not with bitter tyranny but sweet magnanimity, ruling by example instead of force. They say that Zhaal the Worldspanner defeated every tyrant alive at that time, with the help of their victims. He was a ruler who needed not rule. With the power of endless gold and the sympathy of millions of slaves, all power upon Wæold was given unto him. Zhaal scoured the whole world for fair albedon damsels and invited them unto his harem, siring multiple children from each. Cyrander The Great was born unto this great dynasty, who completed the conquest of The Old World and begat a new line yet unbroken. His descendants either trampled rival princelings underfoot or mixed with them by exchanging nymphlike brides. Their ancient blood thus mingling with fresh seed, Jupithomenids survived the rise and fall of the League of Dion and the Weal of Latillium --- two rival western empires. Only the aloof emperors of unchanging Fûsong, who have sat upon the same opalline throne for fifteen thousand years, are older than their lineage. Only the Havingian dynasty, mortals handpicked by the immortal alchemists Jano and Adammon, come close to matching their majesty in the West.

The summer was bright and fruitful, but not bright enough to lighten the cheerless nights that harrowed Xerxapollo: nor fruitful enough to stop the slow, merciless decay of Phoezanthion. He was an emperor trapped in pomp and circumstance. Right now he was as still as a man turned into stone. He was deep in thinking, gazing at a parchment map unfolding before him which represented our evergreen sphere. There were chess pieces splattered upon the map, representing castles and troops. His satraps and viziers, overseeing a small army of spies, whispered many things to his ears. There was much agreement:

Symarna was impossible to defend against the joint troops of the Calephate. To offend the Caleph would cause meaningless carnage.

Parthenissa carried a censer in her hands, alive with embers taken from the Sun Fire. Two companions to her left and right carried chalices full of arid earth and chill water, the traditional offering of fealty. A third companion behind brought an urn full of silver dust, a mere token compared to the four hundred talents of pure silver that Symarna offered as tribute every year: only a third of the amount due. Standing beside her was Perithemis, first consul of Symarna, named after the great statesman who once led the League of Dion to rare victory against Phoezanthion --- only to be defeated thanks to weaker counsel and his inconstant wife. His name was thus a testament to the freedom of Dion, but he was of Pardissan descent and in matters of politics he was a true Azdaean always. He was stately yet unassuming, wearing a garland of olive leaves and robes the colour of snowdrops. Standing behind them were twelve youths and twelve maidens, chosen by lot and dice to serve the elect houses of Phoezanthion.

Her companions touched their brows to the glazen floor. Since it was improper for a vestal virgin to prostrate herself before anything except sacrosanct fire, Parthenissa bent the knee instead. The tiles were of such polish that it seemed the supplicants were hovering upon an ocean of stars, gazing at their own mortal faces upon the thankless mirror. She cast a timid glance towards the Pantocrator, who was studying her with a baleful gaze.

“Speak.”

BROKEN BOUGH

“O Xerxapollo, second of that name! I am Parthenissa, the sole vestal in the service of our Sun Fire. I who am a mere mortal spend all my time thinking of saints and faeries, martyrs and angelkind. I am unlearned in the arts of politics. I come with an innocent heart and the imagination of a child, for the great prophet Adammon once said that only children and childlike hearts can enter the kingdom of heaven.

“The empire of Phoezanthion rises over all lands like an ancient tree that dwarfs mountains. The tree is ageless and not yet dry. Even her shadow roots fears within the minds of her many enemies. The tree has seven branches and seven fruits, and we the people of Symarna are one. To the south there are Sigeian infidels who seek to cut down our branch and immolate its helpless flowers upon the altar of war. Who can forget the tale of Qarnain, dishonest Sigeian tyrant, who conquered our homeland Pard with rank deceit? Who remembers how we became captives in our homeland, crushed beneath taxes for the freeman and chains for the slave --- until a hundred thousand Azdaeans had no choice but to abandon Pard and declare Phoezanthion as their last refuge during the great exile? Who remembers the tale of Circea, the last vestal of the east, who smuggled one azure and one scarlet meteor from the Fire of Fires in an ark? It was thanks to her miracle-example that Pyrapyrix was kindled anew here in our second home, Phoezanthion.”

Her voice was dry as tinder. No tears rolled down her cheeks, even if the story of Circea made her choke somewhat. Parthenissa was a young woman, only nineteen years old. Blame her unconcern upon her youth! She feared war somewhat, but she had never witnessed its boundless horror in person. One cannot acquire wisdom in statesmanship by reading faery romances and living by prayer.

“Succour us, Xerxapollo! I am a stranger to matters of war, but please terrify the Sigeian hosts with unbroken pledges before they launch a

campaign to demand absolute submission from Symarna. We much prefer the gentle yoke of Phoezanthion unto their dread fetters of Sigeans. I would fain burn my body as an immolated sacrifice unto Azda than return to the painted streets and glass temples of Symarna with empty hands. I would fain watch Symarna herself burn than see her fall into wrong hands. Succour us, Xerxapollo! Do not let the ungodlike Caleph extinguish the Sun Fire and add another link unto his long, serpentine chain of tyranny!"

Xerxapollo was in no awe of her speech. His hoar frown was an arc of displeasure as he spoke. His ruddy eyes gleamed with compassionate disdain.

"Innocent maiden! Your hands were made for sustaining divine fires, not for the less noble arts of statecraft. You come with a third of the tribute that I am due every year. The people of Symarna are peaceful and meek. Too peaceful and meek, perhaps, for they never send troops to defend faraway lands of mine. You should know better, as the sole child of Miraxthor the Thunder --- who would often complain about the overly timid citizens of Symarna in times of tumult. Your treasures overflow with gold and silver, yet ever you insult me by paying neither proper tribute nor due tax.

Why were the hosts of Symarna so lax when your great father defeated Sigeans before the gates of Ancora? Why did we defend fickle Symarna with our own footmen and knights when your people would rather surrender unto Ammoweh, tyrant of Ninaddo? Where were the oars and sea-hoplites of your wanton city when Miraxthor defended sister city Ephenope against the fir ships of Shammon for five years? Water and earth are my elements, not fire. Give me the arid earth and the chill water but return the embers of the Sun Fire unto your home. You are a childlike priestess, yet I am neither a child nor a priest. You offend me with the lack of tears upon your crystalline eyes, as even you must know that Symarna has more choices than I do now. If I vex the Caleph, he may end up cutting not

just one branch but more --- and perhaps even hew at our mountainlike tree. True bravery lies in saving innocent lives, not stoking the fires of war without good reason. If you were to rule the world for just one day, you would know that no man is wanted upon a throne these days if he prefers bold war to craven peace.

You come with a sword in your mouth already, while the Caleph may sue me for peace still. Yes, I am the king of this treelike empire. Yes, there are seven branches upon it. But I would rather cut off your branch, so that it can thrive as a sapling, than watch it burnt altogether like cheap tinder upon a profane bonfire. Your branch is now free: plant it anew under the shadow of Calephal spears instead of mine. To demand black war is easy when you have never seen its scarlet horrors. Have you ever seen war? I have seen more carnage than I should at this somewhat young age and I still curse the day I first saw a child hacked into pieces upon a battlefield. And if you are indeed so devoted to your cause, let a servant bring some oil so that you can immolate yourself at the marketplace. No, you say? You lower your head? Then it would seem that there are higher prices that even you are unwilling to pay."

Parthenissa was thus defeated in her plea, tears of shame rolling down her cheeks instead of tears of victory.

"You weep. Lucky woman! For an emperor like I must weep in secret to avoid the scorn and scold of princes and princelings. Write, scribe! I pledge unto Symarna nothing but a thousand wagons of flour and spice, so that they may endure the siege. The philosopher king of Tarshish is besieging the seawalls of Phoezanthion, the greatest siege ever in history according to honest chroniclers. May the one true God not curse my name for proclaiming Symarna an independent republic. Parthenissa! You said you would rather witness Symarna burn than submit, that your branch should rather break than bend. That ugly sentence, I want stricken off the record."

SUBMISSION

And so it came to pass that the people of Symarna, a permissive nation, were left with no choice but to sign an uneasy treaty with the Caleph: he who is known as the shadow of God upon the world.

Gad was the name of the Caleph, ancient of days and greatest of minds. He had three excellent sons: Wadd, Manaph, Amm. They ruled over the southern half of the Old World in fraternal harmony: Manaph over footmen, Amm over ships, Wadd over war animals. They had power over legions upon legions of infantry from every corner of the Calephate, whose march was like thunder upon earth. They also possessed horses that are loyal unto death, camels that were nimble and fierce, elephants with spearlike tusks. They ruled over the proud cedar-ships of Tyridon and the swift fir-ships of Shammon. Wadd was busy with the affairs of Aaro, sending missionaries to win converts amongst the stubborn peasants, while Amm was defending Tyridon against the iron-ribbed ships of Tarshish. The Caleph thus had no choice but to send Manaph unto Symarna, a stubborn zealot with a heart of passion.

Manaph was a young and unwise man, so the Caleph sent the wiser and older archvizier Talaab to bandy words and gifts with the famous orators of Symarna. Talaab whispered many words of compromise and tolerance unto Manaph's ears. Let Sigean saints and prophets denounce Symarna as a den of infidelity, where the one true religion was not supreme. The Caleph was of the mind that you cannot convert the unwilling without stepping into their shoes. He did not want the painted streets and the crystal temples of Symarna sullied with loot and war, so that his own poets and artists could enjoy the pristine city one day. His own queen enjoyed poems and paintings about Symarna, recommending even softer words.

The consul Perithemis exchanged many letters with the Caleph through raven and pigeon, finding him a reasonable man. The

Caleph demanded three hundred talents of silver for every year where Phoezanthion received four hundred. He wanted a tribute of arid earth and chill water, a universal symbol of surrender. He would allow Symarna to keep armies and spies, but only on condition that they would never side with his infidel enemies. He would not enslave the free citizens of Symarna, nor recruit them for the sake of jihad. He wanted the faith of Sige taught in schoolbooks, along with the scriptures of other religions, so that children could choose for themselves which faith to pursue. He wanted mosques built across their land, so that the new converts could pray with equal pride.

Yet the clerics of Sige demanded two conditions that heralded strife. Symarna was unique even among republics to allow women to fight amongst her ranks, in a college called Gynasium which housed perhaps a thousand such warmaidens. This was by and large a tradition of Symarna, even if there were smaller warmaiden colleges in Threna and Ephenope. They boosted morale in times of war, for which young soldier would not like his bleeding hands held by a valkyrie when peering across the gates of Death? When even women fight, which man would shy away from the final sacrifice? Now according to the ancient laws of Dion, a citizen could only vote in the parliament if and only if he was willing to fight in times of war. These damsels were thus treated as equals by citizenry under ancient law, which the Caleph disapproved. For women, according to the writ of Sige, belonged to hearth and home. Perithemis in vain wrote: "if you do not fear the meek men of Symarna in war, why fear our meeker women?" Yet the Caleph was adamant, and it was agreed that the college would be disbanded within a lifetime. Warmaidens would become housewives. This demand annoyed the women of Symarna, ever so proud and beautiful in their pride.

The second demand caused a tumult amongst the brethren of Azda: to douse the Sun Fire and forbid all worship there. This was a crystalline temple where immortal flames were lit anew every summer solstice with a concave mirror, ever in the keeping of a

vestal virgin. In exchange, the Caleph would allow smaller fire temples and impose no poll tax upon Azdaeans. Perithemis begged the Caleph to abandon this request and demand more tribute instead. He knew that the brethren of Azda would harbour much annoyance and vengeance over this matter. "Let us not throw away such an easy peace for the sake of a perilous symbol," he counselled. Yet this plea of his fell unto deaf ears. The Caleph was a man of faith after all, who understood the power of symbols all too well. The priests of Azda raised their voices in disagreement and sorrow, yet Phoezanthion was an aging empress whose hands were tied. After it became clear that help would not come from the Phoenix Empire, their tears came to a necessary end.

Perithemis arranged for a hundred elders and a hundred children meet Manaph before the gates of their mountain-carven fortress, Ancora, himself without weapon. There they met the Caleph's envoys and earned their trust. Even Manaph's overzealous heart was pleased at this sight, thinking that Symarna was won without violence. He sacrificed a hundred rams and ewes unto Sige, marking his own forehead with the blood to hail his silent God. All terms were accepted. Upon two white scrolls the scribes wrote two accords, one in the black ink of Nod and one in the golden ink of Pard. Perithemis kissed the wrist he could not bend, thought it be a younger man's hand. Manaph was granted right of passage to enter Symarna and accept their surrender. He roamed the painted streets and avoided the crystalline temples, earning the mixed trust of the people.

HEMLOCK WINE

Parthenissa sealed herself in the Sun Fire, rejecting all earthly counsel and even food, to protest her fate. Ever she would gaze upon the flames in despondent spirit, asking herself why Eosis would allow his temple to be violated thus. She would repeat the hundred names of Azda in muttered appeals, hoping for remedy. She wasted away for three weeks without food. The women of Symarna brought gold and myrrh and frankincense to her bed, while the men of Symarna saluted her with drawn swords. The brethren of Azda were already swearing vengeance before the war even began. Perithemis ordered sweetmeats and cakes brought unto the temple every day, which were left uneaten. But even her noble example was not enough to save the Sun Fire, for the princes and princelings of Symarna abhorred proud war and preferred cowardly peace. Manaph waxed wroth upon hearing her seditious protest.

Parthenissa summoned Xoanna, the headmistress of Gynasium, for a final plea before death. She wanted to defend the Sun Fire with lionlike warmaidens at a time when all men of Symarna were acting like affrighted lambs. But even Xoanna was of two minds, weighing her faith against common sense. The faith of Azda forbade risking hundreds of thousands of imperfect lives for the sake of a single saint. Their daily bread and drink were more important to them than the musings of long-gone prophets. Parthenissa curled upon like a wild cat upon the smothered altar, sprinkling her hair and garments with ashes.

To end her earthly misery, she drank enough hemlock wine to kill a tigress --- wishing to gaze upon the visage of archangel Eosis upon death. Xoanna held her cooling hand, with a warrior's grip and a mother's sorrow. Parthenissa slept for two days and three nights, yet her slow heartbeat did not stop. Such was her innocent sacrifice that the seven archangels discussed amongst themselves her baneful fate. Thaos wept to cool her ardour, Miaphael rose from the coralline

depths of the green sea, Rhabaal gave up tilling the fallow fields of Aaro, Trometan stopped writing history upon scrolls of white fire with black fire. Eosis folded his scarlet wings and bent the knee before Lord Azda to ask for the right path before revealing himself to Parthenissa. She now beheld the crimson archangel Eosis in deathlike torpor, yet even then Eosis hid his face with curling wings. For no mortal can behold his face and live.

“Child of mine! Lord Azda unsealed our lips, so that we may speak unto thee. We the seven archangels cannot decide whether your sacrifice is foolish or wise. Such is the blameless zeal of your spirit that we cannot snuff it here in Heaven. We foresee war if you return to Earth, for such is the doom of Azda. You have become a living symbol for your people. Would you live anew, knowing that you would burn alive one day? Would you choose agony and greatness instead of the bliss of heaven? Would you abandon the candlelit paradises of Heaven where you can roam amongst angels and faeries, saints and martyrs? Would you choose immolation over a profane bonfire to save thy temple? Behold these scales in my hand, somewhat black and somewhat white, weighing pain and valour in your mortal world against the bliss of eternal sleep. Free will is the greatest gift of Azda. We give thee freedom in this choice. Choose well, daughter of Miraxthor.”

Parthenissa chose pain and valour, renouncing the bliss of paradise for the sake of reviving the Sun Fire. Anon she woke up from her deathlike sleep. Xoanna marvelled at this, for the poison had been strong. She described this apparent miracle before the people arrayed upon their forum, before believers and unbelievers alike. Many refused to believe a miracle they did not witness with their own eyes, asking whether the poison was thinned with water, yet Xoanna was known for a lifetime of honest service.

Even as they were debating what happened, Parthenissa took affairs into her own hands. She wiped clean the ash-covered altar, with the

willpower of a mother wiping off the tears of a fatherless child. She arranged sandalwood and oil of spikenard upon the altar, which sprang anew thanks to her weak and faltering hands. Smokeless fire rose from the crystalline temple, lighting beacons of crystal that shone like fallen stars.

Manaph was drinking wine and making merriment when his eyes caught the glimmer of the Sun Fire smouldering anew. He waxed wroth upon this sight, cursing the people of Symarna for their fickleness. Had he seen the miracle of the hemlock wine with his own eyes, there would have been little difference. For he was the kind of man who believed that God was always by his side, even when he was in error. He gathered his personal guards the next day, three hundred in number, and rushed unto The Sun Fire to arrest this upstart witch. Xoanna chose her very best warriors and hid them in the temple, behind the solemn altar and the gleaming pillars, laying a trap for this cruel and handsome son of The Caleph.

THE FALL OF MANAPH

Manaph was a man cruel and handsome, notorious for his arrogant treatment of conquered nations. He approached the Sun Temple and found it desolate, for the warmaidens were in clever hiding. He dismissed some of his guards, asking them to bring sacks of dung from the marketplace with which to defile this infidel temple forever. For such was his drunken insult. In a moment of vanity he forgot the sensible counsel that even his father the Caleph whispered unto his ears: moderation. Parthenissa stood by herself before the roaring fire, as elegant and helpless as Symarna herself. Manaph drew his dagger and loomed ever closer like a black tiger.

“Wayward daughter of Symarna! They said that you drank enough hemlock wine to kill a tigress! Yet here you are, apparently deathless. But know that I am no lesser tiger. This temple is so unholy that only dung can cleanse it. Did we not sign a peace treaty, utter solemnest oaths under the one unique God? Did I not receive right of passage, mentioned in the oldest books of Man as inviolate? Did we not agree that this pagan temple would surrender unto Sige? Your womanish hands cannot stop me. Alas, I came here to destroy the Sun Fire. But looking upon your beauty, either God or the Devil is murmuring a darker deed unto my ears. Abandon this silly temple. Be mine! Why, you avert your eyes. I have three wives, but I promise you shall be my favourite anon. Break your oath of virginity and be a vestal no more! Who among womankind would not want to become a Calephal princess? I can promise a hundred slaves just to wash your sparrowlike feet alone. You bear a circlet of imperfect gems, but I can flood you with pearls from Fûsong and turquoise from Marconda. Your robes are of rotting silk, but I can dress you in the finest robes of Zhoaxia. Submit of your own accord, if you will --- or I shall violate you upon that very altar and douse the flames of your archdevil Eosis with sacks of dung. Serve me as my queen, not a mere concubine. Speak.”

Parthenissa did not speak but smiled a cold smile. She remembered the colder doom of Eosis, who foresaw that she would burn alive upon a bonfire in exchange for undying fame. Would she change her mind now? Yet who amongst us can change Fate once the trap is sprung, once a doom is sealed by the seal-ring of Eosis himself? Not a single word escaped her lips as Manaph came closer and closer, ready to tame this tigress, until she saw her own image reflected from his naked dagger and his lustful eyes.

Weak was her sigh as she beckoned unto Xoanna, who appeared from behind the altar and fixed Manaph in the knee with a sawtooth arrow. The proud prince fell, moaning curses at angels and devils alike. Xoanna picked up Manaph's bright dagger and gave it to Parthenissa, who slit his throat like a sacrificial ram with her weak hands. The vestal made sure that the blood would not spring upon the coals, for it was prohibited in the faith of Azda to pollute that purest of elements. Guards rushed in to save their arrogant prince. Xoanna and her band of warmaidens, armed with bows and crossbows, shed enough blood around the fire altar to appease the spirits of vengeance and send the remaining men in rout. For many of them had not even brought their knives and spears to this unlikely fight, fighting with bare hands: such was their trust in the peace accord. The survivors left Symarna in haste after the slaughter and sent their fastest ravens and pigeons unto the Caleph, who was celebrating the easy peace in the oasis-city of Marconda.

Parthenissa had just enough time to wash her hands of the blood, if not the crime, before her arrest. She was dragged to the Forum in chains, Xoanna in tow, to answer for charges of treason and breaking the holy covenants of hospitality known unto every nation. For even the simplest barbarians unlearned in the art of writing have similar laws for right of passage. Perithemis tore his hair when he learned of what happened. Yet he could not bring himself to condemn a young vestal he loved more than his own daughters.

THE FORUM

The people of Symarna gnashed their teeth and raised their voices when they heard that Manaph had fallen. With him died a very easy peace. War was forced upon them, despite their unanimous vote. If not for the wisdom of Perithemis and his fellow senators, Parthenissa and Xoanna would have been stoned unto death the next day. Yet the brethren of Azda were joyous for this act of vengeance, thinking of how Manaph was quick to insult their religion. The city was thus divided against itself.

For three days and two nights they discussed the affair. The consul of Symarna believed in the apparent miracle thanks the testimony of Xoanna, known for her simple honesty. Perithemis thus voted to save the lives of the vestal and the warmaiden. Now that even the phantom of the peace was dead, the praetors of Symarna were weighing profitable war in their minds. Yet not all citizens were on their side. Many took turns speaking, some asking for clemency on their behalf and some recommending death for condemning Symarna unto grim war. Yet after the first waves of rage passed, some began to find hidden wisdom in the foresight of their vengeance.

Perithemis spoke thus. "Gentle people of Symarna! I salute you for your wisdom in brokering peace, which as many admit was my work. Yet I now invite you to an even wiser war against the tyrant of Jeriddo. Do you know how Tyridon, the mother of proud cedar-ships, fell unto Sigean hands? They signed a similar pact with the Caleph two hundred years ago, which seemed amicable towards them. Over four generations the peace stood, until a stronger Caleph took Tyridon by sword and guile, violating the holy covenant of peace. What happened to the proud faithful of Tyridon when their city fell? Their rotting heads were put on pikes, their lips and eyes sewn shut. They were never avenged, for the people of Tyridon embraced their stern religion first out of fear. As time passed, they

became true Sigeans and forgot the religion of Azda. So deadly is the poison of slow treason when mixed with rapid fear. You say that the current Caleph was reasonable in his dealings with our gentle nation? If so reasonable, why would he send his most violent son unto Symarna? And if God was on his side, would he allow a vestal virgin to rise from the dead and slay this young oppressor with girlish hands? If the Caleph were strong enough to conquer Symarna at all, would he need such false deals first?"

Parthenissa spoke thus. "Behold my face! Do you see tears of shame, or tears of wrath? They are both. They say that Qarnain the Oppressor doused the Fire of Fires upon Zhamûrg with pure snow, for even he offered that much respect unto the people of Azda. Manaph swore to douse our Sun Fire with dung. Do you know why Manaph is now gone? He was a tyrant in the making, not unlike his father the Caleph. Many ears, both friend and foe unto him, heard from his very lips his rapacious curses. I am a sworn vestal virgin. This young and cruel oppressor said he would violate me upon the very altar of fire I am sworn to protect. I was like a widow weeping my husband, covered in ash and unkempt clothes. Yet he accosted me with a naked dagger, swearing he would defile the sole guardian of the Sun Fire. If Qarnain was a tyrant and enemy of Azda, what of this younger demon? Were these blasphemies allowed under your peace treaty? I think not.

I devote my life to you, people of Symarna! Break my neck if you deem me guilty, but I am guilty of nothing except loyalty unto Azda. I heard in my deathlike dream that I would have to suffer a painful death to redeem our lovely city. Pelt me with rocks if you want, the way Sigeans punish adulteresses. Burn me like Aionites burning witches! Am I a witch, or an adulteress? No, you say? You cheer the cause of independence? Sweet words in exchange for my bitter tears! That is the difference between the people of Azda and the liars who call themselves disciples of the one true faith under God. Our laws are better, you say? No law of hospitality was ever so lax. They say

that Qarnain took Jeriddo's azure ziggurats with enslaved armies and smashed the ten thousand stolid idols that stood upon them, repeating the exploits of Cyrandar the Great. What good is the end of idolatry without the end of tyranny? Were archangel Trometan to weigh our laws against theirs upon his snakelike scales, do you not know already that ours would prevail in merit? I defeated death so that I can deliver this speech."

Xoanna spoke thus. "I have seen with my own two eyes how Parthenissa drank enough hemlock wine to kill a tigress. Yet her heart did not stop beating and in three days, she came back to her senses. The archangel Eosis himself spoke unto her during her dream. Do not scan the heavens for vain omens of birds or false angels made of clouds when a miracle happens right before your eyes. When have I ever lied to you, people of Symarna? I am the one who avenged Manaph's impious insult with a sawtooth arrow across the knee. Blame me, not her, for the slaying. I was the one who set the trap with my womanish hands. You who are men, will you not fight the common enemy of mankind? If we declare war against the Caleph, will not millions of slaves rise against his seemingly invincible tyranny? Shall we not receive volunteers and sellswords from all over the world, for many are the enemies of Sigeans, not just empty palms clasped in prayer but sword-wielding hands ready for combat? Spare the life of Parthenissa and take mine instead. For my neck is as thin as a string of hair against the learned judgement of my elders. If I die not now, I who am childless shall fall in patriotic combat so that your children may yet live."

Parthenissa wept. Xoanna stood proud, the tallest and strongest woman in all of Symarna. Long and fierce were the civic debates. Some proposed breaking both their necks to renew the peace. Some proposed to send them as exiles unto the land of Nod, to be judged under Sigean law. Many senators saw impious arrogance against their democracy in their trap against Manaph, yet witnesses swore that Manaph indeed assailed the virgin with threats of rape. If only

Manaph had not spoken of dousing their holy fire with sacks of dung, perhaps the peace would have stood. Yet the brethren of Azda could not forgive Manaph for that vicious insult.

Women whispered words of compassion unto the ears of their men. Patriotic mood washed over the people for weeks and the two women were acquitted of charges of murder and treason. They received a stern warning that they should not undertake such great deeds without consulting the people of Symarna first, for Symarna was a rare republic in a time of kingdoms.

Pardissan zealots proposed repaying Manaph's insult by sending back his corpse in a casket full of dung. Older and wiser politicians balked at the idea. They put his corpse into a glass casket full of honey and spikenard, in princelike garments, so that the body would not decay. The sorceress known as Sephorah, the mother of Xoanna, paid off his wergild with two hundred talents of silver. As per ancient law, they sent a letter written in gold ink to explain that the people of Symarna found Manaph's slaying legitimate. For he had insulted the Sun Fire with rape and defilement.

Perithemis rightly feared vengeance from the silent hordes of Sige. He did his best to assuage the Caleph in a letter. "You swore an oath of respect towards our religion. We know that there was difference of policy between you and this cruel son of yours. Parthenissa returned from death to teach us a lesson in freedom, in the presence of witnesses who never lie. We must hereby proclaim independence under the wings of Eosis, yet we shall never support your enemies nor assail your allies. We can sign an accord newer and better, if you so desire. Your son annulled the peace with threats of rape and defilement. We can offer a greater tribute in silver and, knowing well that you lack nothing, we can collect for you rare and beautiful gifts from across our dominion. Forgive our rebellion, for cruel Fate compelled our hand. Pity the babes of old Symarna."

The letter was as moot as the treaty. The Caleph heard through ravens and pigeons what happened and did not even believe that his dear son would commit such sacrilege when drunk. Wadd, who commands a hundred thousand horses, promised to crush both women under his hooves. Amm, who commanded four thousand ships, swore that he would hack them into pieces and throw the offending pieces unto sea. The mother-queen bewailed herself in misery, burning the books and paintings of Symarna that she was so wont to admire. The three wives of Manaph became sirens lusting after war. The clerics of Sige bowed their heads, attributing what happened to devilry and excessive compassion towards the infidel. Who knows what the Caleph thought for an entire month, sorrow-stricken, as he sealed his lips and listened to a small army of spies under his satraps and viziers? He now rose from his turquoise throne and uttered his doom.

“You who murder my youngest son and defame his cold body with slander! You who dare bring up what happened in Tyridon so many generations ago, as if they did not commit enough treason to fill up the mouldering scrolls of history before their city fell! They are now proud converts of Sige, and every man there who once defied our God is long dead. Yet I will not show unto ye the scant mercy that Tyridon received ere it was rebuilt. For I shall build pyramids of corpses and cairns of skulls upon the ruins of Symarna. I shall bring down your walls like mountains and mountains like walls. I shall sow your wheaten fields with ash and salt. Your men are meek and weak during times of war, your women impure and defiant. This alone I owe you: vengeance without borders! Let he who would fight against the infidel nation of Symarna for the sake of earthly praise and endless paradise, now come forward! For I declare jihad as endless as the abyss, my banners as black as the infinite sorrow in this poor father’s heart!”

THE CALEPH'S CAMPAIGN

Let loose the cogs and wheels of Time, already sticky with blood, for three years. For in the meantime, the Caleph was mustering a great army from amongst all nations of Tethyssa to avenge Manaph with thousandfold injury and insult. The whole world heard of the valiant campaign. Many bent the knee before the Caleph, yet some pledged allegiance unto The Phoenix Empire even during decline. Wiser nations took no side, opening their mute ears wide to hear every detail.

The Phoenix Empire was groaning under the weight of a naval siege by Marcaulion, the philosopher king of Tarshish. Help would not come yonder. Marcaulion wanted to win the right to garner taxes over all trade that took place within the Old World. Aionites despised Sigeans perhaps even more than Azdaeans, yet did not think much of their distant tyranny. The people of Zhoaxia have a saying they attribute unto their prophet Fuxia: I would rather fight a less hateful enemy that is nearer home than a more hateful enemy that is far away. Tyridon alone gave them pause, for their cedar ships were guilty of much piracy in the name of Sige upon the livid waves of the West. Thus they laid siege unto Tyridon out of self-interest, easing Symarna's burden somewhat.

The people of Latillium were in league with Tarshish. Havingians, a swarming dynasty of princes and princelings, had brokered a difficult yet lasting peace between Latillium and Tarshish through marriage pacts and clever accords. No help would arrive yonder either, yet the thanes and earls of Tarshish hoped that Symarna's travails would allow them to expand their own reign upon that land. The people of Venalphi, who were also assisting the siege against Phoezanthion, felt some sympathy for Symarna in this dire hour: for there were only two true republics upon Wæold at that age, Venalphi and Symarna. They despised Phoezanthion as their greatest rival yet had a soft spot in their sealike hearts for the plight of Symarna.

The people of Dion, a race of hoplites and philosophers, were torn in terms of sympathy. They were a great people split and dispersed upon six great cities: Sparthena, Megarinth, Ephenope, Threna, Ampheon, Phoezanthion. They were the stark majority in Sparthena and Megarinth alone, where they were all but independent from the Phoenix Empire. The four other cities were under the sometimes gentle, sometimes ungentle yoke of Phoezanthion. For the people of Dion and Pard had been mixing in a crucible of love and hate for millennium after millennium. Many were called Diopardissans, speaking both tongues and proud of their joint legacy. To them Dion and Pard were like fellows and brothers, kith and kin. Many practiced either the Aionite or the Azdaean faith, such that even in the same house there could be joint prayers unto Eosis and Sophia. Yet Tarshish wanted to expand eastward, severing such ancient ties and rallying independent Dionians unto their own cause. Sparthena and Megarinth had lost some of their own compatriots to Sigean corsairs, even if to some the Caleph seemed the more distant and untroublesome rival. Patriots among them remembered with rancour how Cambodin the Clever defeated Perithemis and his League of Dion, how Phoezanthion was once a Dionian capital before the conquest of Cyrander. Their ears were keen to hear the praises of Tarshish, yet they would not rise in open revolt against Phoezanthion unless Tarshish won an unmistakable victory against the Phoenix Empire.

As for Hundalls who hail from frosten grass and frigid vales, they were willing to fight any enemy of any creed and colour so long as they were paid in bags of gold. Symarna was recruiting heroes and sellswords for their war effort, so the sailors of Venalphi ushered the very best of all Hundall chieftains unto Symarna in a painted ship. Solmithra was his name. His band was called the Brotherhood of Gild, of northern blood yet fighting with the ancient discipline of Sparthena: phalanx after phalanx, like rippling waves of molten iron. The people of Symarna, deeming this not enough, offered money and

food and land unto every tribe and band who would fight under their banners of purple cotton. Symarna had much gold and silver in her treasury and her fallow lands were as if painted by the hands of angels. Thus every adventurer and sellsword, every gang and band found their way into Symarna within the compass of three years.

The Caleph summoned every host from his trimesopotamian realm, where the azure ziggurats of Jeriddo rise. He mustered warriors from Nod whose battle-feats were the stuff of legend. Nod was the land where the Sigean faith first began, and all rulers of the Sigean realm spoke Noddic. The people of ancient Pardissa, who had long since converted unto the faith of Sige, sent their well-famed cataphracts. They say that in the chess of war a horseman is worth five footmen, but a cataphract is worth five horsemen. Even their horses wore dazzling armour, and their lances were so long and strong that they could kill other horsemen like fishermen hauling fish from a clear lake. Slaves came from Thamûd, their shoulders as wide as ox-horns from carving sandstone pillars under the merciless sun. Elephants with warlike tusks came from Sinddha and nimble camels came from Urran, patient and war-seasoned beasts. In Tyridon alone they possessed four thousand ships carven of cedar, manned by proud converts, their sails sewn with silken crescents. Yet these ships could not leave the harbour of Tyridon, for Tarshish besieged that city also. The wizards of Jeriddo brought catapults and trebuchets to rain stone and corpses upon Symarna.

The Caleph also summoned the hordes of the distant land of Tur in his hour of need, men who lived from birth to death upon their horses. People there did not practice the Sigean faith, praying to Heaven alone, yet the Caleph had been wise enough to wed his two daughters to the twin emperors of Tur to secure an alliance against the pagans of Zhoaxia.

No city could stand against such a siege forever, but no siege is eternal either: Symarna hoped to win by whittling away enemy

persistence upon the millstone of Time. Their walls were strong and in good repair. The ships of Symarna were the envy of the Old World, carven of scented wood and unfurling banners of purple cotton, seventeen hundred in number. There was a moat around Symarna linked with the sea, so they could summon help from across the Livid Sea even if they lost the landborne battle.

The clerics of Sige did not ban slavery, even if it was forbidden under the crimson banners of Azda. Cyrander the Great had conquered the known world with the help of slaves who redeemed themselves. Symarna had a small brood of citizens but since they forbade slavery, they were never vexed with slave uprisings. All citizens were thus free to fight during times of strife. The Caleph could not leave his unhappy slaves unattended for too long, lest they rise in righteous revolt.

And it was upon the day Qarnain the Conqueror doused the Fire of Fires in ancient Pardissa that the Caleph set the invasion into motion. Marking the day thus offended the brethren of Azda even more, with many in Phoezanthion questioning the wisdom of fighting the dove-and-eagle banners of Tarshish instead of the roving falcons of Sigeans. Yet the Pantocrator did not change his mind, for fear of offending the Caleph. He sent a soft epistle instead, urging conquest instead of destruction. Sea trade with western provinces was cut off and with Aaro in quiet rebellion, even bread had to be smuggled through cunning caravans into Phoezanthion. Hunger has such power over the commonfolk that it can sever ancient bonds of kinship and oaths of loyalty, topple men of golden blood and bleeding gold in the space of an hour.

SEPHORAH THE SORCERESS

There lived in Symarna the famous sorceress Sephorah, daughter of the witch Medorax who once healed a plague in Xanadoo. Her eyes were the colour of the abyss and her hair was as black as uncreated Night. She had learned her craft under the deathless alchemists of Phoezanthion, at the feet of Zosimon himself --- himself a wise student of Sarastro. She was not allowed to learn the three enigmata, converting base metals to gold or distilling the elixir of youth or creating a homunculus in an alembic. Yet she was taught in the art of herbs and roots, potion and poison. Childless women flocked unto her, not to mention princes and princelings ailing from rare and hopeless diseases. She read every book she could lay hands upon, from silly romances unto the grand works of philosophy. From her mother alone she had inherited a thousand talents of silver. She was thus the wealthiest widow of all Symarna. She lived in a subterranean palace called the House of Dusk, where lamps of naphtha burned bright to chase the shadows and clockwork birds sang upon trees made of chalcedony.

She had three fairylike daughters: Xoanna the warmaiden, Thailai the courtesan, Perpetua the saint. Xoanna was virginborn, a miracle which attracted much awe and worship across the world when it happened. Xoanna was the tallest and most fierce woman of all Symarna, spending her time in athletic pastimes and beating all but a few men alive in their own games. She was the headmistress of Gynasium, a college of warmaidens a thousand strong. Thailai was begotten by Adonice, a fallen angel of impossible beauty. She was the fairest woman in all of Symarna and a courtesan by trade. She won her bread and pearls not just by slaking the lust of princes and princelings but also amusing them with her matchless wit.

Her third daughter Perpetua was begotten from her wedding to Raarthur, once the second highest deacon of Temple White. He had been a warrior-poet from the frosten grass of Albaxon during his

youth. When Raarthur died upon the venomous blade of a Sigeian assassin, Sephorah cursed not just Sigeian zealots but her own immortal master --- who keeps the elixir of youth unto himself and allows mere mortals to perish like mayflies. A wandering knight by the name of Parcelot avenged his death after seeking out the assassin for years. Her daughter was baptised in the faith of her father and swore her oaths in the name of the triune God: Aion, Logos, Sophia. She preached the religion unto the peasants of Symarna, risking ridicule and scorn from Azdaean gentlemen and gentlewomen, always bringing sweetmeats for the children and spice-coated bread for the poor. Like his father, she would compose and sing poems. So sweet were her offertories that they were sung in The Cathedral of Sophia and indeed even in Temple White itself.

Like many lesser wizards, Sephorah ever desired to know the three great enigmata of God and unfix the unhappy stars of her mortal birth. The hemlock wine Parthenissa drank was her making and she had beholden that miracle with her own eyes. She knew that she was neither as innocent nor as magnanimous as Parthenissa. She had committed crimes tantamount to treason against God: concocting lust potions that ruined homes, helping women kill unpleasant children, offer the art of poison to tyrantlings far and wide. When she beheld miracles, she enjoyed the spectacle but not the lessons God taught thereby.

She knew much about the Circle of Eld, about how they steered the errant ships of History with their golden gloves. She hated the alchemist Uzza the most, that unmaker of gold, for he was the relentless prophet of the Sigeian faith. She feared that the painted streets of Symarna would fall one day like the cedar-ships of Tyridon and the endless gardens of Marconda. She had always defended the republic of Symarna with her wealth and wisdom, perhaps even with her crimes. For she had sent that colourless and scentless poison unto the jealous wife of Ammoweh of Ninaddo, years after his unsuccessful campaign to invade Symarna with chariots of cold iron.

Thus she avenged her beloved husband Raarthur in her mind, by killing a Sigean king. Her heart ached to meet her master Zosimon again, who himself learned magic from the immortal prophet Sarastro, to wash his feet with her tears one last time.

She now sacrificed a hundred ewes and rams unto Azda, shut herself fast in an elfin temple for months to intone the one million sacrosanct words of The Song of All. Priests say that an archangel appears to grant a wish every time a worthy mortal does so. Thus she fell into deep sleep. In her dreamlike state she saw archangel Wohuman playing with a throng of lambs with the teeth of lions. The archangel reminded her of her plentiful sins: every lamb there was the soul of an innocent person dead because of her potions and poisons. "Let them graze upon ever-growing grass for now! They await to feast upon your ever-growing flesh upon your death." Eosis himself sat upon the throne of Azda, face covered with curling wings, for he was the only archangel allowed to sit upon His throne when He was busy sculpting different universes.

"You sang the Song of All from beginning to end for the sake of a wish: to behold Zosimon again before your approaching death. God can read minds and hearts before you mortals so much as move your lips. Your wish I grant, even if your sins I cannot absolve. In two weeks yonder the day of the crimson eclipse shall occur. Zosimon is a wizard who is somewhat black and somewhat white, just like you. Seek him in the hidden grove in the heart of Symarna, where he shall appear. We send him as our sword and shield, to defend the name of Symarna."

NEMETON

Inside the heart of Symarna there was a hallowen place, where only priests and warmaidens could enter. This was Nemeton, a grove inside circular walls made of seamless and cyclopean rock. Inside there were weird and evergreen trees older than the Flood itself, their leaves winding like fern instead of blooming with leaves. Their giant fruit tasted like raw meat dripping with blood. Tame dragons with horned heads haunted this eerie garden, howling like wolves and roaring like panthers. Seafarers swore that they saw similar forests and beasts in Gargantis and Xanadoo only, where giants still dwell. At the center of the grove was Maiden Glory, the idol of a timeless goddess without eyes and ears, covered in rust and moss. None knew of the sculptor, for she seemed older than the mountains themselves.

The greater moon was eclipsing the smaller moon and the heavens were the colour of foaming blood. Xoanna the warmaiden would sometimes come here for solace, after reading romances about giants and alchemists and neutral angels. She was asleep and in her dream she saw a man sculpting birds out of clay, breathing life into the statuettes. She woke up anon, with trembling limbs despite the summer heat, only to see such a man just ahead. He was sculpting clay, surrounded by living birds. She knew at that moment that the man was immortal Zosimon. How can a mortal warmaiden even address an ever-young alchemist? Her voice cracked and quivered as she bent the knee before him.

“Hail thee, Zosimon! My mother is the sorceress Sephorah, once an acolyte of yours. She was a virgin when I was conceived. I am a child of miracle, yet I myself can perform none. I studied the exemplars of meek Azdaean saints when young, yet I have been trained to shed blood from a young age. Forgive the drying blood upon my flamelike sword. Have you come to comfort Symarna in her hour of need? I see

nothing but falling stars when I ask the heavens about Symarna's future."

Zosimon spoke. "Hail thee, warmaiden of Azda! Arise, if you will. I am the best student of Sarastro and I came here to defend your beleaguered city. I may seem young, but I am ten thousand years old. I have heard of your legendary feats with the sword and the discus. To defend your home is no sin. Your mother spent sixteen years in Phoezanthion and was a student of mine once. I remember her heart as half white, half black. She is a selfless mother and citizen, yet she abused her knowledge of potion and poison too many times to join angelkind upon death. We alchemists are not above matters of state, for there are disagreements even amongst The Circle of Eld. Sarastro's immortal hands uphold the crimson banners of Eosis, while Jano and Adammon hoist the white-and-tawny banners of the West. As for Uzza, he is the unseen hand behind the Sigeian empire. Like chessmasters we play mortal men, knowing well that we too are chess pieces in the circular chess of God. I myself defend Azdaeans against accusing angels every day, knowing full well that no mortal is perfect. Neither am I, immortal though I am. Every nightingale prophet tends after his own flock of sparrows, and I am here to shepherd a parliament of birds otherwise lost."

Xoanna spoke. "To behold an immortal prophet face to face! You seem like an ordinary man, in shepherd's garb. Your cloak is made of camelhair, your cap of lamb-wool. Look upon these chirping birds, born of clay yet as lifelike as birds created by God! See how this sparrow pecks at my fingers? Ever am I your disciple. I desire no elixir of immortality, but I would embrace all warlike glory that you would foresee upon me. To defeat men in battle is my sole joy. My mother lives inside a cavernlike mansion, called the House of Dusk, all the better to practice her witchcraft without prying eyes about. She has prepared a feast fit for heroes for you. The siege is near, they say. I keep my flamberge sharp, my warhorn polished. I cannot ask for the liberty of Symarna, for I know that even you cannot compel

the hand of Fate to that degree all by yourself. All I ask for is warlike glory before I pass from this evergreen sphere.”

THE HOUSE OF DUSK

Sephorah was crazen with delight upon beholding her master Zosimon again, after forty years. She had learned many lesser arts from him, if not the three enigmata upon the Tablet of Fate, which set her like a demigoddess apart from the ignorant crowds.

She washed his feet in the presence of all guests and dressed him in a robe of purple cotton. She entertained him with clockwork birds singing like sirens upon branches of chalcedony, with automatons in the shape of butterflies fluttering their wings. There was even a sun of artifice in this cavernous palace, under whose false sunlight she raised and picked fresh flowers. She arranged a diadem of wild roses from this subterranean garden and planted it upon the broad brow of her master Zosimon. Ever she doted upon godlike Zosimon, who had been her master once. She leaned upon his arm and shoulder, whispering many sweet things, to stoke his sympathy and love again. Zosimon mourned for many centuries the death of his wife and his mortal offspring, they say, for he was immortal and they were not. His own master Sarastro believed in the rule of kindred minds above ties of blood. He forbade his apostles and students from marrying and siring children, for fear of creating dynasties immortal in tyranny. Yet they say that Zosimon had many companions across millennia, not immune to lust unlike his master Sarastro. Did he feel the stirrings of desire like any fallible man? Sephorah wondered whether love could soften his heart anew.

The feast was not just spectacular but unique. Sephorah roasted a pheasant inside a duck inside a goose inside a swan, dripping with savour and sauce. She served bream and shark-meat from the livid waves, shrimp and whale-steak from the green waves. There were olives the size of plums from Enkomi, rice from Sinddha and potatoes from Meropis. She poured wheaten wine and dewlike mead into cups of crystal. Zosimon opened a small jar and served

perishless manna from heaven, the taste of which no poet can put into writing.

Her three daughters were arrayed in sable and jewellery: Xoanna in goliath pearls, Thailai in a cape of golden fleece, Perpetua wearing rings opalline and coralline. Parthenissa was the guest of honour, more beautiful than ever in her circlet of imperfect jewels. She had seen Zosimon once before in Phoezanthion, who taught the archpriest who taught her how to sing anthems and requiems when she was a child of seven years. He looked even younger now. There were five more guests, three women and two men. Parcelot was a wandering knight from Tarshish, well beloved of Sephorah for killing the assassin of her erstwhile husband Raarthur. Aorang was the archpriest of Symarna, who had raised Parthenissa in his own home after the death of her mother and father. The three women hailed from lands still loyal unto the Azdaean cause. Sekkhamon was a priestess from Aaro, dressed in the green robes of the green god Zoasiris, with a chrysoberyl ankh around her neck. Leocupida was a warlike songstress from Ephenope and Piscaphae was a sirenlike warmaiden from Threna. They took turns playing the cithern and the syrinx, after which Perpetua sang a sweet lament about the siege of Symarna and Parthenissa played a triumphant dirge about the Sun Fire upon her lyre. Xoanna took her warhorn to her mouth and blew a single, deathlike note.

The mood was tomblike, for they knew that such earthly pleasures are not meant to last and that many innocents would perish during the siege of Symarna. The armies of the Caleph would be upon them within weeks. Sephorah served tea and coffee in cups of finest porcelain and proposed a story circle, where every guest would have to tell a captivating story to entertain the round table.

“Here we have an immortal guest. Let us tell a story each to spend his endless time. Let us alloy this iron age of ours with the golden

opium of fantasy. Let us mingle sweet fiction with cold truth, like this overly strong wine with cold water.”

MEDORAX THE WITCH

Sephorah began her story thus. "Once upon a time there was a witch called Medorax, whose father and mother are unknown: lost amongst the mouldering pages of legend. She lived in Xanadoo, the easternmost city upon the Green Sea, where ice-slurry waves break every year against the thunderclap of titanic oars. Know that Xanadoo is the city where dwarfs and men and giants prosper together. Things that may seem supernatural in faraway lands are their everyday fare.

Some whisper that the father of Medorax was a blood-eating giant from before the Flood, a race extinct for their crimes upon all lands except Gargantis and Xanadoo, who were spared for their more peacelike ways by the one unique God. They say that the giants of Gargantis survived by huddling around their tallest peaks, while the giants of Xanadoo survived by building gopherwood arks as gigantlike as themselves. Her mother was perhaps a nymph or a mermaid, perhaps a neutral angel who later lapsed unto evil. Yet others say that she came from a bloodline of ensorcelled women who gave virgin birth unto daughters alone, never needing men to procreate. She was wild and ugly in wizened age. Her younger days? None knew.

Medorax lived in an evergreen cave in Xanadoo for a hundred years and shunned all human company. Wild and strange she was, her wisdom understood by none. She was known for uttering strange things which would turn out to have the colour and semblance of truth soon, like the famous oracle of Dodelphis who keeps the solar calendar of Dion. She once killed a dun frog and boiled it in a pan, sent it unto the parliament of Xanadoo. Lo and behold, swarms of dun frogs pestered the streets of Xanadoo the next year. She once killed a lamb and collected its blood in a phial, hanging the bottle before her cave and warning of civil war. Soon there was civil war in Xanadoo, spilling the blood of children. Yet her claim to fame

happened when she healed a recalcitrant plague in Xanadoo. Many are the murrains of our unhappy orb, diseases that vex flesh. Memory keeps this plague alive, which happened but sixty years ago.

Medorax gave birth unto a child three years before the plague. None knew the father at her ancient age, speculating how a cavorting devil or a sardonic efreet must have been the sire of this dam. Behold how she changes after the miraculous child! She adorned the cavern with wild roses from meadows, begged for gilded toys from princelings. She grappled with delicious eels and oysters with her own hands, gathered berries blue and black from springtime heathers. She dressed her babe with linen and silk she stole from buried children. She lit bonfires for her babe during merciless winters, hewing the wood herself. For she was not only ugly and ancient but also poor.

Soon after the plague began, she came upon a queer cure either by art or by accident. Perhaps the archangel Trometan revealed the unseemly remedy from his throne of vipers. She gathered afflicted corpses and crushed their wound-crusts into a disgusting paste. She mixed the paste with aloe and mint, masking the cannibal taste. She fed this remedy unto unknowing parents and children, thus saving thousands upon thousands from the plague. Yet the cure was as dear as it was unholy. Medorax demanded a thousand talents of silver in payment.

Princes and princelings who were in awe of the cure waxed wroth upon hearing this. Such avarice was the unmissing mark of the Devil, they said. Some accused her of spreading the plague in the first place, some accused her of selling a false remedy. All were in unison that the price was too high. When the upstart witch began to pretend that she is a demigoddess, demanding lambs burnt upon altars unto her name, the people of Xanadoo went alive with rage. A witness came forward, recounting how Medorax fed them human flesh in violation of all law and custom. The ungrateful nation gave her a ship of

gopherwood instead for the sake of exile. She was clinging to her babe upon her bosom as the citizens pelted her with ship stones big and small.

All nations rejected her ship except Phoezanthion, where three wizards of Ophyridas put her on public trial. They bade the people of Xanadoo pay a thousand talents of silver, who paid that exact sum with no small hate in their hearts. The charges of spreading the plague and selling a false remedy, they dismissed. Yet cannibalism was a crime without pardon, not to mention her blasphemy against Azda when she demanded lambs burnt upon altars unto her name. Thus was their verdict: Medorax was to receive both her meed and her punishment. The praetors of Phoezanthion pelted her unto death with ingots of silver.

Her babe was innocent and lovely, capable of tears but not yet speech. As per law, the infant was the sole inheritress and became the wealthiest child of all Phoezanthion. A stargazer from the land of Chald adopted her out of compassion. Zosimon himself taught her lower magic, but never the higher arts of alchemy. When she came of age, the sorceress inherited every pound and ounce of that unhappy silver treasure and settled in happy Symarna. To honour the cave of Medorax, she had a cavernlike palace built. For I am that babe, name of Sephorah."

THE THREE WIZARDS

Next spoke Xoanna, sworn warmaiden from birth unto death. "I am Xoanna, this the tale of my virgin birth. My mother was an inviolate maiden when I was born and I was conceived upon the very day she set foot unto Symarna, disembarking from a ship of gopherwood upon the sands and shells of a pristine beach. Anon she fell into a deep sleep. The waves were touching her nimble feet and washing her black robe as she slept, the wind beteeming her cheek.

In her dream she saw Maiden Glory, the guardian spirit of Symarna. She rose above the city like a living tower, with unconquered battlements upon her crown. Eyes and ears she had none, but only a mouth to speak: perhaps because she would not witness the pleas of mortals in pain. She spoke with the voice of waves and peals of thunder. Her two arms were gargantuan trees, pressing against the blue roof of heaven. Upon the right arm there were millions of leaves, empty of fame upon the Tree of Long Life. Upon her left arm there was perhaps a thousand flowers, each for a person of legend, their deeds and meeds written upon the petals of the Tree of Fame.

"Choose, maiden mother! I shall bestow unto thee a daughter. She shall either live long and ever prosper as a housewife, or a warmaiden who shall live a short life for the sake undying fame."

My mother chose the Tree of Fame, as would I myself, perhaps hoping for a warlike pillar to defend her future home. The flower of Penthea dropped from the Tree of Fame and landed upon her chest: the greatest amazon to ever live. For she is mentioned in the Pancalliopiad as the only woman to stand her ground against Theracles, that mightiest of men, who thus won his heart. They say that when men and women of fame pass away, the angels of Fate weave their souls and deeds back into the tapestry of existence. Thus was I conceived, a second Penthea. For even my sworn enemies sing

of how true my tongue is, as is my bow. I never lie and I never miss the mark.

My mother woke up from that dream pregnant. Unkind lips dismissed this tale of virgin birth as nonsense, attributing it to a secret affair with a shameful father. Yet when she was heavy with child for nine months, three wizards from the land of Chald arrived to offer presents. For a new star had appeared upon the unchanging firmament at the hour of my birth. They measured this new star against the epicycles of the seven planets and calculated that I must have been born upon Symarna. The people were much amazed at this affair. The three wizards brought myrrh and frankincense and gold to honour the hour: myrrh to ease the pains of wounds, frankincense as a symbol of priestlikeness, gold for queenly glory. I was born with wheaten hair and black clot in my hands, which they interpreted as the blood of hundreds to rain upon ripe fields. They said that I would rise as a living legend to haunt future generations upon my death. I boast of having killed perhaps fifty men and I hope to slay another hundred ere the fall of Symarna.

The first wizard foresaw that I would be barren. I am indeed childless, for I do not bleed during the cycles of the moons. The second wizard foresaw that Symarna would stand unconquered as long as I lived, as if I am a palladium upon her innermost temple. The third wizard announced that I would fall not in old age but unkind battle. Some might think that foreknowledge of death would make me a coward. Such nonsense! I can already see the vivid hour of my fall: defending my homeland, perhaps fixed with an arrow across the knee or my head rolling off upon the unfeeling earth after an unlucky move. Ever do I sharpen my senses to avoid a simple, unglorious death.

My sword is a singing flamberge, a flamelike sword of thousand-beaten steel. There are waves upon it that make lesser metals scream while cutting through them like iron across wood. My winged helmet

was once worn by Penthea herself, cast not of iron but aurichalc, a kind of bronze more precious than gold yet more imperceant than steel. Every piece of armour I wear is a gift from the princes and princelings who heard about my virgin birth. The warhorn I use, carven of behemoth tusk, irks distant birds upon clouds and deafens ears nearby. I trained under three great masters, all of whom I beat in wrestling and archery and discus.

I am the headmistress of Gynasium, a college of warmaidens a thousand strong. They were lax and indecent maidens during my childhood, scouring the battlefields for injured men to succour them and warming the beds of lucky survivors. They were given unto drunken whoredom during times of peace, which I forbade. They were mocked as harlots and clowns by distant nations, for they were weak of arm and feeble of spirit then. I have trained them with the same passion that burns in my volcanic heart, such that many can now wield the heavy spears and the hard-to-master swords that our male warriors use. I taught them horsecraft and made she-knights out of them. I ordered a thousand arbalests from Sparthena to make up for their womanly weakness, for the string of that weapon is pitched with feet. Even our weakest warmaidens have become instruments of death now. Our worthy men rush to battle to match their example, spurred on by manly shame and patriotic love. I would boast that only the warrior-poets of Nod and the blond man-beasts of Hundall can match them in excellence. As for myself, my sole rival in terms of prowess is Dahacca. For he can uproot a tree and hurl rocks as if they were feathers. He is stronger by birth, I am faster by practice.

If only you could see how we slew the imperial guard of Manaph with our bows and crossbows, when they wanted to defile the Sun Fire with their unclean hands! Zeal was our only wine. Yet I see the face of Parthenissa blanching, so I will now stay quiet.”

DAUGHTER OF ADONICE

“I am Thailai, a courtesan by trade. A woman can only become a voting citizen in Symarna if she is a courtesan or a warmaiden. Xoanna was the warmaiden, so it befell my lot to become the courtesan for the sake of the vote. I see that even the tear-blurry eyes of Parthenissa are lighting up with smiles. Yes! Know that I am neither a vestal virgin who weeps before fire altars nor a grim warmaiden who drinks wine from skulls. Mirth, I say! This poor earth we all call home would run out of children quick enough if every woman were as cold as a vestal or as manlike as a warmaiden. Laughter, please! Leocupida and Piscaphae, play us merry songs upon the cithern of Ephenope and the syrinx of Threna!

I am a whore perhaps, but I would take offence if ever called so. Simpler women sell their bodies in the marketplace for common copper and uncommon silver. I accept either gold or words worth more. I am the prettiest woman in all of Symarna, yet I have heard this universal fact so many times from the trembling lips of untaught athletes that I would kick out any lover from my bed who uses such unpainted words. When a hopeful lover flatters me with rare and exciting metaphors, I write them upon a new leaf in my diary. The diary is already fifty pages long, yet if only I could write a hundred more!

Xoanna has mentioned how she is as fearsome as Penthea of legend. She is a huntress of men in times of war, but I prefer to hunt men in times of peace. Men! Are they not adorable beasts? I prefer to ride black-haired boars in winter and blond lions in summer. I know every handsome prince and princeling who rules over the Livid Sea by heart. My first lover was the famous sculptor Idaphis, himself so handsome that sculptresses would carve his likeness upon marble to earn his bed, who created a statue of me and displayed it in Sparthena. So lifelike is the statue that desperate men still pay him good silver just to caress my alabaster thighs and ivory breasts. If

only there were millions of women like me across the world! Men would stop all war to adore us and we would have a parliament of women ruling over the known world in perpetual peace. Yet alas, there is only I.

Why, if I am a goddess as the men who worship me would ever so proclaim, I must serve a greater god called Love myself. For the ancient philosophers of Dion knew that Love existed before all lesser gods, without which they were but unmoving statues. The Central Fire from which all stars sprang, they say, moves this universe by way of desire. So I heard from a handsome philosopher with broad shoulders and curly beard, who won my bed once with ten talents of gold.

I sell myself to captivate heads and hearts, out of coy boredom and not invincible lust. I am named after Thailai, the only courtesan even more famous than I am --- who wed Cambodin the Clever after abandoning the bed of the defeated Perithemis. Thailai, they say, burned down the summer palace of Cambodin with a torch and slew herself with a dagger when he wanted to take a second wife. Tragic, I must admit. Perithemis was a very fine gentleman according to his paintings and I heard from a keeper of books that Cambodin wielded an enormous spear between his legs. I too would wed such splendid husbands, yet why deny Cambodin the taste of younger maidens in advanced age? Let live and let love, as I say. Frown if you will, dear Parthenissa. The men of legends were men before they became legends. Keep in mind that only tyrants forbid laughter at their expense.

My father was Adonice, a man of such impossible beauty that princesses and princesslings would line up like nails before his hammer. He must have sired three dozen children, as we still exchange letters. God wasted so much beauty upon this male form, men would complain. Adonice multiplied that divine error by impressing his likeness upon many willing wombs. Jealous men

would whisper that he is an angel fallen from heaven, to appease his centaurlike lust upon throngs of women. Yet beware she-centaurs! I have heard of sculptresses who would carve him, only to smash their imperfect work upon completing it. He gathered as many gifts as the oracle of Dodelphis from his amorous conquests: bags of silver, a sword made of solid gold, pedigree horses, robes of purple silk, parakeets from Meropis, orchids from Thurasil, calamus and cinnamon from Caphria. He abandoned my mother after a visit to Tarshish, where he was an ambassador. There, a Havingian princess of high ranking fell sick with violent love for him. She wanted to slay herself twice, they say. Her helpless father threatened to break Adonice's fair limbs upon the wheel of torture unless he sought her hand in marriage. Thus he wrote in the letter divorcing my mother Sephorah.

Weep not, mother! In his last letter he admitted that he was happier under your yoke, for consent is the only rule upon the altars of Love. Smile, instead: you are now free of the yoke of his inconstant beauty. If I am the most beautiful woman alive, this would not have been possible without your partaking. From him I inherited carnal beauty, yet from you I inherited both beauty and wisdom as if I had read a thousand books. They say that men mint children like kings impressing their seals upon metal. Ever we groan under their dear weight. Yet I would say that our work is greater than theirs after all. For what coin is worth the mint upon it, rather than the metal underneath?"

PERPETUA THE GREATER

“I am Perpetua, third daughter of Sephorah. What an excellent metaphor, sister! If men mint coins upon our wombs, the coin must be meaningless without the metal. Yet I must condemn your libertine speech. Women are born golden, yet they can devolve into first dull silver and then rusting copper if they guard not their virtue. If my sister Xoanna is all ice and my sister Thailai all fire against the charms of the unfair sex, I occupy the lukewarm and golden mean between. For such is the intent of God for mortals, who capture a semblance of themselves by sculpting their children. I am betrothed unto a Havingian prince called Galahand, as was the dying wish of my father Raarthur. I hope to die when surrounded by the children of my children, buried with my holy books. I would reject the elixir of youth even if it was dribbled down my throat. God despises unnatural magic! You wax pale, mother. I do not bandy words when it comes to scolding you for your witchcraft.

My father was Raarthur, the second highest archdeacon in the service of Temple White, before a Sigeian assassin killed him with the prick of a venomous dirk. He was a warrior-poet during his youth, capable of battle like music and music like battle. He became a man of letters in older age, a man of wise might and mighten wisdom. He could hew wood like youngsters and throw the discus like adept athletes when he was sixty years old. He taught me philosophy, godless philosophy even, so that I can better argue against it. We buried him six years ago, when I was fifteen years old. My mother weeps upon his tomb-mound still.

His faith I embrace. I profess faith in the triune God: eternal Aion, incarnate Logos, Sophia the redemptrix. I much fear the Devil, Sophia’s misshapen child. You roll your eyes, Parthenissa. That is unbecoming of you. I know that the faith of Eosis is stronger than the faith of Sophia here in the Phoenix Empire. I deal with subtle scorn and open ridicule every day. I have even been accused of sending

spy letters unto Temple White, even if they are just my innocent scribblings. I seek to win converts from amongst peasants and workers, bearing spice-coated bread unto their wives and sweetmeats unto their children.

Yet I must now fall silent about myself, I whom the lesser Perpetua. I shall rather sing of the tragic story of the greater Perpetua, who is my namesake, an Aionite saint from Latillium ere the rise of Temple White. Let me hearken back unto those unhappy days, when the tyrant Tarro was persecuting our church. Temple White rises today upon the undrying blood of paragons like hers.

Tarro took over a well-joint empire from his predecessor, Tradomitor. He was ten times the tyrant, with none of Tradomitor's valour and might. Tradomitor had expanded the borders of Latillium from the white cliffs of Albaxon unto the black plains of Aaro, retaking twice-razed Thago. He crushed the warlike Hundall twice, who wanted to capture Latillium itself. He, too, was a persecutor of saints: he too banned the churches of Sophia and denied citizenship unto believers. Under his reign, no Aionite was free and happy: living like exiles in their own land, slain for clinging unto their holy books. Yet he would sometimes temper his tyranny with wisdom. His wife prayed unto the triune God in secret, counselling toleration when Aionites refused to worship him as a living god. For according to the customs and laws of Latillium, the emperor becomes a living god upon ascending to the throne.

Tarro was the kind of tyrant who can destroy the legacy of centuries within days. He banned worship of all gods except himself, offending even virtuous pagans. His violent heart found no solace in defending the glory of Latillium against barbarian hordes in legitimate battle but rather in persecuting citizens who refused to believe in his false apotheosis. From the first day of his rule unto his last he was a sworn enemy of the triune God. Not trusting his censors and spies, he would visit home after home to find Aionites in hiding

and impale them alive upon sharp stakes. He would crucify and immolate upstanding citizens over imaginary offences, playing the lyre as they screamed in agony. Ever he ruled without an empress, preferring the company of whores. Tarro would order the rape of Aionite virgins, only to have their necks broken after the deed. He would also choose promising Aionite youth and have them thrown unto wild animals upon the arena, mouths gagged and hands tied. He would feed them alive unto packs of cunning jackals and laughing hyenas. He would compel them to fight raging bulls, have them trampled under the feet of elephants. He would sometimes slay them upon the arena himself, emperor against gladiator --- but only if their arms were broken in advance.

Yet he is best known for burning Latillium at the peak of its splendour. They say that he wanted to torch the Aionite quarters only, ordering a small army of slaves to prepare one third of the city like a bonfire for his birthday. During the inferno he repeated many verses from godless philosophers, praising the universe as the work of insensate atoms and an unmoving Central Fire. Yet a southerly wind came, as if by the wrath of the triune God, spreading the inferno upon pagan quarters also. Thus was the patient and toilsome work of a millennium undone in a single night. Yet such was his invincible faith in his own apotheosis that instead of interpreting this wind as an omen from God, he spread false accusations of arson and treason against the faith of Sophia. Even pagans began to murmur against his bizarre tyranny, despite supporting him for years.

Tarro began to spy upon his own praetors afterwards, fearing a timely revolt. Thus from the lips of an accursed spy he heard about how Maximon, a good if boastful man whom he once called friend, was wont to praise the virtue and beauty of his wife Perpetua. Maximon himself was a virtuous pagan, while Perpetua practiced the faith of Sophia in secret. Her hair was as black as ebony from Caphria, her skin like living alabaster from Sparthena. When she blushed, veins of blood would appear upon her marble-carven

cheeks. Ever she would spindle tapestry, spinning lifelike themes from the many gospels. She would sing laments unto Sophia for every fallen saint, weep for every lost soul. She would care for the children of martyrs, keeping them alive with sweet bread and grapes from her own vineyard. Tarro was consumed with violent lust upon receiving this report. As man he desired his beauty, as tyrant he wanted to crush her devotion. He exiled Maximon, sending him unto a false mission to distant Thago. He sought out Perpetua in her modest villa the next day, the cold blood in his veins waxing hot with lawless passion. Forgive me, Parthenissa, for repeating his demoniac words.

“Perpetua! I have sent your husband away on a false mission and I am here to end your virtue. They say that you weep for every Aionite I kill. Now weep for yourself! Weep, for tears arouse me. Weep, or I shall spill your blood. Weep and accept me as the only living god. Spit upon your holy books and become my whore tonight, that I may perhaps spare your life.”

Perpetua blanched with terror yet would not surrender. She denied him the pleasure of tears and supplication as Tarro violated her upon her marriage bed. When the deed was done, Tarro slit her throat and laughed as the blood bubbled up like a fountain. He also killed a male slave and tossed his body upon the tainted sheets, so that he could claim he killed Perpetua for catching them unawares during adultery. He left her modest villa, now become an unhappy tomb, and spread this false rumour.

Maximon heard of Perpetua’s death from a friend of his who was a virtuous pagan, who sent him a pigeon before he left for Thago. He rushed back home and beheld Perpetua in the arms of the male slave, blood splattered everywhere. Pagan neighbours swore that Tarro’s account was true. Maximon became a madman, knowing not what to believe --- weighing the word of the emperor against her impeccable loyalty. Yet he saw something strange: a small daisy that Perpetua

had painted in blood right next to the pillows, with her pinkie. Perpetua and Maximon loved each other since childhood, for he had won her heart at the age of seven with a simple daisy. He collapsed in tears, understanding from this sign that Perpetua was innocent.

Maximon confessed what happened to a pagan priest, who summoned a conclave of archpriests to discuss the matter. The archpriests were already offended at Tarro for declaring himself to be the sole living god and for degenerating into a tyrant. They approached Maximon to hear his story from his own lips in a secret meeting. Maximon told everything from beginning unto end, for he was in their awe. Tears rolled down their wizened cheeks when Maximon spoke of how Perpetua painted a daisy with her own blood to protest her innocence. They understood his plight and asked him whether he would avenge Perpetua and end Tarro's bizarre reign of terror with his own hands. He said yes, for such was his civic duty as praetor and citizen and husband.

Maximon challenged Tarro unto manlike combat upon the arena the next day. Tarro blanched at hearing this, thinking of Perpetua. He ordered his men to break Maximon's limbs, so that he could kill the man unchallenged as was his wont. The archpriests now arranged a trap to depose of the tyrant. They killed the slaves who served Tarro and replaced them with their own. Maximon's arms were not broken, but the archpriests swore oaths unto Tarro that he was weak and bleeding already. Maximon limped towards the arena, feigning injury and covered in the blood of roosters. Tarro was much delighted upon this spectacle. He descended upon the arena with a drawn sword, mouthing prayers unto himself and raising his voice to demand cheers and applause from the crowds. The citizens thought Maximon was yet another Aionite apostate and cheered wildly for his death. Their protests stung Maximon's patriotic heart, who had always been a proud pagan. He accepted the triune God in his heart, thinking of Perpetua's example. Tarro circled around him like a tiger ready to sink his teeth unto a bleeding deer. When he was within

striking distance, Tarro leapt like a lion defending his home. He hacked Tarro from limb to limb, much to the horror of the faithless crowd. Some praetors were still loyal unto Tarro. They now leapt into the arena and surrounded Maximon. He did not resist as his body was pierced with no less than ten spears. He died with the name of Perpetua upon his lips.

The people were much amazed at what happened. Witnesses came forward, even pagan witnesses, who confirmed the innocence of Perpetua and the valour of Maximon. The fall of Tarro was touted as an example of the evils of unfettered emperors and Latillium became a republic again during the next generation. Tarro became an object of universal hate and many virtuous pagans embraced the triune God out of sympathy for martyrs. Tarro was punished with the damnation of his memory, his likeness excised from coins and his statues beheaded, his name struck off all records. Yet legends perpetuate themselves, be they good or ill, and I have read this story from a prayerbook from Latillium.

Perpetua and Maximon are considered great saints according to the canon of Temple White. They were buried beneath the same mound, where blood-splattered daisies sprout even today.”

THE VESTAL OF THE EAST

Parthenissa spoke thus. "Must I now speak? Perpetua's example has inspired me, though we belong to different religions. If only innocence was the universal language of mankind! Which story must I choose, immortal master Zosimon? You seem ageless, somewhat boy and somewhat man. The Song of All sayeth that immortal eyes are the saddest, for immortal hands have no choice but to bury mortal friends as they witness indifferent ages roll past.

Who am I to sing of glory in your presence, immortal alchemist? Perhaps you would hearken unto the tale of Zhaal the Worldspanner, the first king of kings upon Pard, yet you must have seen his snowlike hair and ruddy eyes yourself. Shall I tell the tale of Cyrander the Great, who defeated all nations and liberated all slaves to establish an empire without chains and borders, when you fought as captain amongst his troops? Shall I sing of Jehander the Just, who defeated the horses of Tur and the elephants of Sinddha when you were one his viziers --- even conquered the pagodas of Zhoaxia and lit holy fires within as you mixed the ciders with your immortal hands? Shall I remember Xerxeptah the Architect, who rebuilt Phoezanthion after an earthquake, when I know that you were there yourself to roll the rocks? Shall I remember Cambodin the Clever, who defeated Perithemis during the heyday of the League of Dion, when you were a charioteer amongst his ranks? Let me tell my favourite story instead: the example of Circea, a fair vestal throned in the East. Listen well, Xoanna, for this tale may raise your warlike mood during combat.

They say that before the rise of Qarnain, the people of Pardissa had fallen into rankest blasphemy. Nobles sealed themselves in their walled gardens, hunting the poor instead of gazelles and pheasants. Tyrants had restored the worst kinds of slavery and the corrupt priests were in error. For they preached faith in the neutral god Time, who was indifferent to evil and good alike. They taught that he was

androgynous and that he begat two androgynous gods out of himself, Azda for good and Jahriman for evil. Azda was made of pure light, passive and powerless. Jahriman was the black prince of this world and unto him active worship was due. God forbid! Men married painted boys and there was whoredom even in the fire temples of Lamussa, the rock-carven capital. Torture of innocents and seduction of children were deemed permissible.

To equivocate between good and evil thus was anathema to the good priests of Phoezanthion, where the true faith was burning bright under the lamp of Sarastro. The brethren of Azda favoured Circea, the vestal of Zhamûrg, against the accursed tyrants of Lamussa. She was a virtuous woman who condemned the heretics with a sharp tongue. Yet she was powerless against false lips and decaying hearts.

Qarnain the Conqueror had waged many southern campaigns and seized every corner of Aqqamer before turning his dread gaze upon northern lands. He was Noddite by descent, a student of the prophet Uzza. He admired Cyrandar the Great and like him, smashed the ten thousand stolid idols of Jeriddo upon taking it. Jeriddo has always been the largest nation upon Wæold, an empire unto itself, and Qarnain left them alone other than levying the poll tax upon idol-worshippers. Sigeans are thankless and fanatical in their attitude towards fallen enemies: Qarnain was no exception, even if Circea did not know it yet. Yet let none defame him by saying that he was a warlock and an idolater, as some Azdaeans romances portray this villain. Such was the opinion of the brethren of Azda that they preferred the Sigean yoke to the unspeakable horrors of Lamussa during those dim days.

She sent Qarnain a letter by dove. "The faith of Sige is young and untested. I who am an enemy of idols and sins see in you a bright and just conqueror. Succour us from the evils of the tyrants of Lamussa! They worship the Devil as the sole prince of this world and believe that their sins can be absolved with indulgences, unhappy

silver and tainted gold. Our princes kill poor citizens for sport, littering the streets with unburied corpses eaten by dogs. Men marry painted boys and rape young maidens who serve fire temples. Unhappy me, I who was born upon this horrible age! Let us extol the one unique God together, with fire temples and mosques side by side. You shall receive help if you turn your gaze yonder."

Qarnain wrote thus. "Fair vestal, throned in the East! Our faiths are kindred. In your hate towards fallen souls I catch a glimmer of the long-gone prophets of Nod, who denounced this world and waged jihad not for themselves but out of compassion towards their infidel enemies. If you accept the poll tax on behalf of your citizens, I shall arrive with a thousand elephants from Sinddha and ten thousand camels from Urran arrayed in warlike garments against the sixteen thousand cataphracts of Lamussa. I shall levy troops from all across Tethyssa to avenge their insults. Our unhappy age is rife with heretics and demoniacs: I am here to chase them unto Hell proper for unleashing hell upon earth. This world is a circular chess: may the hand of God ever win."

The true priests of Azda thus forbade opposition to the jihad. Tribes and families who maintained the old, pure faith left Lamussa to either hide in smaller towns or to join distant Phoezanthion through the fir ships of Shammon. Like rootless birds they left their rock-carven halls, taking their weapons and holy books alone. Circea wept for triumph before the Fire of Fires in Zhamûrg, counting the days and repeating the hundred names of Azda unto herself upon the rosary.

Qarnain arrived at Pardissa with his camels and elephants. The nation was torn against itself, for many knights and paladins of Pard fought under Qarnain's banners. Together they crushed the despairing tyrants of Lamussa, cutting through their proud cataphracts like swamp-reed and crushing their footmen like trodden grape under the feet of elephants. The heretics of Lamussa gathered

all the treasure they could lay their hands upon and burned it upon vain bonfires. They torched tillen plains and poisoned wells, so that none could eat simple bread and drink clean water after their final defeat. They fell upon their own blades rather than fall captive, for such was the proud creed of the Devil. Qarnain forbade their heretical sect anon and marched unto Lamussa, only to find it empty of spoils of war. His troops were in open mutiny already, for where were the silken carpets of Lamussa and the famous hazel eyes of Azdaean maidens? They wanted to shatter the idols of Lamassu, but they were so gigantic and monolithic that their swords lost their keen blades upon the attempt.

Now that the victory was complete, Qarnain attributed the triumph unto his own virtue and not at all to the help that came from the brethren of Azda. He was not pleased to find the nation in such desolation, for the heretics had burned the famous treasures of Pardissa and mangled the tillen plains. As for the brethren of Azda, they were only willing to pay the poll tax that was agreed upon. They wanted to keep their treasures and fields, as per the accord offered unto Circea. They had suffered much at the hands of the heretics and they wanted to rebuild their homeland. Qarnain waxed wroth upon hearing this and forgot his oath unto Circea.

He marched upon the temple-city of Zhamûrg, where the Fire of Fires has been burning unpolluted for eight thousand years. They say that Sarastro himself lit these fires with the inner ardour of two meteors fallen from uppermost heaven, receiving them from the very hands of Eosis. The faithful brethren of Azda sought refuge in Zhamûrg. There were hills of gold and silver in their vaults, horses of ancient pedigree and ten thousand books written in golden ink, ancient paintings that covered walls entire. Circea wept in wain as Qarnain broke his oath and pillaged Zhamûrg with wanton glee. Yet the archangel Eosis waxed so wroth upon this act of treason against God that he descended upon the frail body of Circea and bade her walk into the flames.

Qarnain sought the vestal everywhere, his heart wracked with guilt, until at last he appeared before the Fire of Fires. Circea was kneeling in prayer between the swirling pillars, unfrozen and unburnt. With her quivering hands she seized the twain meteors fallen from uppermost heaven, each the size of a childlike heart. She praised Qarnain for crushing the children of the Devil: God had made him a conqueror for that deed. Yet she also cursed him for breaking his divine oath and revealed that he would soon perish in dishonour. Qarnain was dumbstruck as Circea climbed upon the shoulders of the greatest phoenix, holding the meteors inside her childlike hands. Upon crimson wings she flew unto Phoezanthion, landing upon the tallest hill and soaking the black soil with tears. There she delivered her farewell speech, surrounded by many witnesses.

“The brethren of Azda! I have seen the end of the children of the Devil and the rise of the Sigean horde. Let none say that the vestal Circea was not true unto the faith of Azda during this dim age. Let us not trade a vile blasphemy for a seemingly lesser evil. Let no mosque ever be built upon Phoezanthion! Let no Sigean ever live upon your second homeland! Such is my dying will. For they break their solemnest oaths. They say that they worship the unique God with their lips, yet in their hands they come with instruments of violence and treason. I who am mortal must now die, for I have been deceived by mortal Qarnain. Weep not for me, but for our first home Pardissa! The wheels of Fate shall turn unto our favour one day, breaking the iron fetters of silence. Avenge the immortal fires of Zhamûrg, if not me! Thus passeth the glory of the Fire of Fires, for Zhamûrg has fallen. Behold my witherless hands, a meteor as hot as plasm and a meteor as cold as aether upon them. I neither freeze nor burn. I must now return unto the bosom of Azda. Build such a monument upon my tomb that none may ever forget the agony of losing our homeland!”

Such was her passion that it consumed her from within, her mortal body expiring upon a purple bonfire. The embers and cinders landed upon barren rock, where crimson amaranths and indigo lavenders sprouted anon. Eosis himself wept tears of molten gold for Circea, picking up the twain meteors and hiding them in The Tabernacle of Eld, an ark made of aurichalc from heaven. They say that within the tabernacle was also the Tablet of Fate, carven of empyrean emerald, upon which the three enigmata of God are written.

Qarnain himself died from a worm in his skull soon after the conquest, never enjoying the fruits of his perfidy. Yet even so, we Azdaeans lost our first and primordial homeland. Know that the cosmopolitan people of Phoezanthion admit all colours and creeds unto the capital of the world out of kindness. Yet even to this day Sigean mosques are banned there, to avenge the falsehood of Qarnain. There is still bad blood between the crimson banners of Azda and the black banners of Sige because of his deceit. Azdaeans devote a week every year to mourn the end of The Fire of Fires, sprinkling their hair and garments with ash and snow. For they say that Qarnain doused the Fire of Fires with ash and snow, three days before the winter solstice.

The free people of Phoezanthion toiled for generation after generation to create a manmade mountain upon the tomb of Circea, now known as Pyrapyrix, lighting each beacon with the favourite colour of an archangel. They arranged gardens of amaranth and lavender around Pyrapyrix, where maidens and children still weep. They say that Sarastro himself, together with three vestal virgins, lit anew Pyrapyrix after a century passed: a pillar of indigo as cold as aether swirling against a pillar of crimson as hot as plasm. They shall burn forever unless we repeat the mistakes of the past.”

THE CIRCLING OF THE WORLD

The priestess Sekkhamon spoke next. "I am a priestess from Aaro, who pledges loyalty unto the cause of Symarna. I have mastered some magic myself under the necromancers of the green god Zoasiris. Aaro is a land riven against itself these days. Some are loyal unto the Phoenix Empire, some unto the Eagle Empire. Some hanker for the cause of independence. Yet I am not here to discuss matters of state, nor bring up vain quarrels. Let me rather unveil the thick mists of history. Archollon, second of that name, was imperator and pantocrator over the Phoenix Empire eight centuries and twenty crowns ago. That was during the last noon of the Phoenix Empire, which now rolls ever onwards towards sunset. Now rises the star of Tarshish, bright enough to dim the sun of Phoezanthion.

There was a crown made of the purest jasperald within the possession of Archollon. Jasperald was only carven from a single cracked rock at the ocean haven of Sinonica, where the realm of Aaro meets the Sea Eterne. The gem was so unique that no sailor and no merchant had ever come across anything similar in their travels. Jasperald burns with blue fire under sunlight yet is of green hue when unlit. The pharaohs of Aaro and the pantocrators of Phoezanthion forbade the sale of jasperald, keeping them for their own jewelcraft alone. Archollon thus wore the crown with pride upon his hoar brow, to remind all that Aaro had been the dominion of the Phoenix Empire for no less than fifteen centuries.

Queen Berenix was the last independent ruler of Aaro. They say that her eyes gleamed blue under sunlight but green otherwise, just like her jasperald crown. She was a woman fair in her sorrow, for she knew well before the final hour of doom that the sun of Aaro was setting. Aaro was a land riven against itself, for such seems to be our fate during all ages. The necromancers of the green god Zoasiris preferred the yoke of Phoezanthion, while Berenix and her dynasty curried favour with Latillium. The last emperor of Latillium was an

accursed and moonstruck tyrant, Cassitus, who disbanded the beleaguered republic to become its final emperor. He married his own mother and lost every single battle, for which reason he was given alive unto jackals and hyenas upon the arena. Hermaat the Wise, whose reign was like unto the reign of Cyrander the Great in terms of splendour, lay siege unto Latillium itself. He wrangled the realm of Aaro from the despotic talons of the Eagle Empire after defeating five legions, breaking their phalanxes with the drum-march of his elephants. As for Berenix, a blameless queen whose only crime was defeat, the necromancers of Zoasiris bade her kill herself with a venomous asp upon her bosom and gave her unique crown unto Hermaat. Thus fell Aaro, never the empress and ever the servant. They say that the people of the Phoenix Empire doubled in number within a century after this conquest, for Aaro is known for its cornucopian wheat.

After the fall of Latillium, rivalry arose between the white standards of Tarshish and the crimson standards of Phoezanthion. Pantocrator after pantocrator wore the jasperald crown upon their brow, to remind Tarshish that Aaro was theirs alone. Sardonic priests sometimes say that God fixed the lottery when distributing glory unto the nations of the world, by making Phoezanthion empress over three continents and seas twain, at the very center of The Old World. Yet if Phoezanthion were a lioness who devoured lesser nations, Tarshish was a tigress who wanted no less meat. Ever they clashed upon the livid waves, to determine who would rule over the known world.

Tarshish was wont to send ships unto the Sea Eterne to discover new islands, perhaps to circumnavigate the world, for eastward expansion was impossible because of the Phoenix Empire. Yet the ships either sank or came without before making the journey. The immortal alchemist Jano, who lives upon Tarshish, took upon himself to build a ship that could encircle the world. There were capricorns and giant serpents in The Sea Eterne that smashed smaller ships, so

he built even bigger ships ribbed with iron. This craft he learned from the giants of Gargantis. There is a kind of wood-eating worm in The Sea Eterne that sinks ships by gnawing their hulls, so he ordered undecaying wood from the distant jungles of Bel. The journeys took so long that the teeth of sailors would come loose from scurvy, their gums rotting. Jano learned of a solution from the barbarians of Hundall: the rinds of lemons kept in ice and skin-fat from tusked seals.

The sea-princes of Tarshish at long last built a maiden ship with ribs of iron and sails of triple linen that could endure the journey. They chose Enzo, a man meek of bearing yet more cunning in seacraft than any men alive. Enzo travelled far and wide, emboldening other sailors of Tarshish to do likewise. Through his voyages he discovered three great islands upon the Sea Eterne: Thurasil and Meropis and Gargantis. Thurasil was an evergreen island speckled with steam-springs, famous for orchids and coffee. Meropis was a single volcano rising from the ocean, teeming with jungle and famous for cocoa. Gargantis was a colossal island, the dwelling of the giants who survived The Flood, famous for huge undecaying fruit. Yet he did not tarry much upon these islands, hoping to cross the Sea Eterne and reach Fûsong in distant east. With his best ship he set sail.

They say that the people of Fûsong live separate from all nations, despising sailors and not even partaking of trade. Yet when he arrived upon Fûsong from the eastern ocean, he was met with applause and wonder. They called him "Turtle Man," for his iron-ribbed ship was like the carapace of a turtle. Ohodon, the emperor of Fûsong, even allowed him to sit upon his own coralline throne for a day upon this marvel. Enzo brought unto Ohodon a circlet made of black pearls from Phûnt. Ohodon had never seen a black pearl before and he wanted to return this rare gift with something in kind. Yet he knew little about the ways of Tarshish. Enzo beheld a polished ring upon the hand of the emperor, gleaming somewhat blue and somewhat green upon his finger. Lo and behold, it was jasperald! He

told Ohodon the story of the jasperald crown, how the pantocrators of Phoezanthion wear it upon their brow to boast of the conquest of Aaro. Ohodon was amazed at the story, for jasperald was quite abundant in his own sequestered kingdom. He bade his jewellers choose the very best jasperalds and cut them into a scintillating crown ten times more spectacular than the crown of Berenix. Enzo left Fûsong and sailed home, carrying this new crown with him.

The marshalls of Phoezanthion heard about the circling of the world. The sailors of Phoezanthion refused to believe that any ship, iron-ribbed or not, could circumnavigate our old and unhappy sphere. Meroderic and Archollon, emperors of the Eagle Empire and the Phoenix Empire, exchanged letters and gifts as they fought over who would establish dominion upon Aaro. Meroderic won three battles and conquered Aaro during his lifetime, even if his successor would lose it again unto the Phoenix Empire thirty years after. For Archollon was the weaker ruler and Meroderic was a man of many wiles.

Meroderic boasted thus in a letter. "Let Phoezanthion rise over three continents and the seas twain! We have compassed and circled the Sea Eterne, so that we can conquer this evergreen sphere and unite it under our banners of eagle and dove. May you rule for another age upon the Old World! The New World shall be ours. Take this jasperald crown and vex my armies no more. You send me insipid gifts, thinking of yourself as the greater ruler. As the greater prince, I send you the greater gift. Behold, for we have circled the world and received a crown of matchless jasperalds as gift from distant Fûsong."

Archollon showed the crown unto the sailors of Phoezanthion, who swore that they had never seen jasperalds anywhere except upon the crown of Aaro. Thus they saw with their own eyes at last that the world had been encircled. Archollon smashed the old jasperald

crown in a moment of fury and sent back the new crown, which
adorns the brows of the philosopher kings of Tarshish even today.”

MEROPIS

“Is it my turn to speak? My name is Parcelot, a wandering knight loyal unto the religion of Aion. I studied under Raarthur’s lectern and psalter before his life came to an end. I am a warrior-poet, who arranges verses to honour my fallen enemies after defeating them. Thus do I offer a semblance of immortality unto the men whose lives I take in combat. I have slain fifteen such champions and composed fifteen such poems. I wonder who shall compose a poem unto me when or if I fall in battle. I am the one who ended the life of Raarthur’s assassin, by tracking him across nations and slaying him in his tent in distant Nod. The assassin was a man loyal unto the Sigeian religion and I waited for him to finish his prayer before slitting his throat. Sephorah offered me five hundred talents of silver for avenging her husband, but I told her that her tears of joy were enough payment.

I came to beautiful Symarna in order to defend it against Sigeian oppressors. Yet I find that the religion of the triune God is not always welcome here, for the people of Symarna seem unwilling to break their oaths unto Azda. We are treated with chivalry as long as we do not open our prayer books and preach unto unbelievers. Thus I hope to inspire faith in our religion by way of example. We all worship the one unique God, yet Aionites take offence at Azdaeans for worshipping seven archangels whose minds are independent --- while Azdaeans take offence at Aionites for believing in a triune God. The Song of All sayeth that God is offended the most when mortal men wage wars of religion. I have inscribed that line into my diary with red ink, even though I am an Aionite by creed.

I visited Meropis five years ago inside an iron-ribbed ship, where I heard the tale that I shall recount now. Know that Meropis is a single and massive volcano rising from the sea. Within the crater there is a lake, and within the lake there stands the accursed and rotting city of Milcomart. My tale begins with Moragant, a knight from Tarshish

who conquered Meropis, three centuries after Enzo the Turtle Man circumnavigated the world.

When gentleladies think of Meropis, all they know is that it is where cocoa comes from. Yet God knows the wickedness that ruled over Meropis before men came from Tarshish. I myself found the tales hard to believe before my visit. The city is built upon rafts of bamboo, with a dazzling marketplace and tall pyramids from which fell priests proclaimed their verdicts. These people, not unlike the heretical worshippers of Time who gave Circea trouble, worshipped the Devil: for they believed that the Devil was the sole author of our world. The innocent peasants who lived upon the skirts of the volcano worshipped in angels and neutral spirits, but the priests suppressed their religion. The people of Meropis were concupiscent and sired many children, yet the priests counted how many people lived upon the island: two hundred thousand in total. Whenever the people begat too many children, the priests would either immolate unwanted children inside a brazen bull or bid their princes bring peasants as sacrifice unto their stygian gods. They believed that the sun would not rise from the east unless a priest tortured and killed at least ten victims a day, sometimes plucking off the beating hearts and sometimes flaying them alive to wear their skins. Foul people! They lived in constant fear of their devil-worshipping priests, and virtue was thin amongst them.

Moragant was sent by the philosopher kings of Tarshish to investigate and conquer the island. The first natives he saw were truly innocent people, hunting oysters for pearls and seals for tusks. They lived amidst fruitful trees upon the skirts of the volcano and seemed to lack nothing. When he asked them who ruled over them, they pointed at the volcano and hushed as if from great fear. He learned the word "priest" from their lips, but was surprised to learn that it also meant "demon." Soon afterwards some warrior-priests came from the volcano to study the strangers. The priests were at first kind towards Moragant, concealing their vile practices and

offering him gifts of silver. The island had so much silver that the people would trade in seashells instead, coating their temples with shingles of silver and building idols of the same metal. They knew nothing about horses and beaten iron, using woolly donkeys and blades of polished brass instead. They gawked at the horses and the swords of the knights in the same way Moragant gawked at their idols made of pure silver. They invited the knights of Tarshish unto the hallowen city of Milcomart. Moragant accepted the offer and climbed towards the city, one thousand knights in tow.

Moragant grew more and more alarmed as he climbed up. He saw silvern idols covered in blood, yet the priests answered that it was the blood of animals. He saw dead heads embalmed, grinning upon pikes. The priests answered that the heads belonged to traitors. At long last they arrived at the crater where Milcomart is built. Moragant saw a pillar of dense smoke rising from the greatest pyramid. The wind was blowing in their direction, carrying with it the unmistakable stench of roasted human flesh. He harried the priests, who admitted that they sacrifice humans unto their gods. Moragant waxed wroth and killed every priest in their company.

More priests arrived from Milcomart to usher them unto their great pyramid. Moragant was curious about how deep their evil was and interrogated the priests. The priests admitted to plucking off still beating hearts and wearing the skins of flayed men, immolating children inside brazen bulls and violating women before hacking them into pieces. The priests did not understand the concept of compassion, for in their language the word did not exist, but they knew that these visitors were more powerful than themselves. The priests offered him the kingdom of Milcomart if only he drank a cup of human blood, for in their muddled imagination Moragant was also a god from hell with his insurmountable horse and weapons of beaten iron.

Moragant had read the Pancalliopiad, which deals with the theme of the ages of Man in its opening chapter. Men were once made of gold, living lives of perfect bliss. They later devolved into men of silver, who were quarrelsome and imperfect. After men of silver came men of bronze, so utterly corrupt that they destroyed themselves. Our own age is the reign of iron, men who are somewhat virtuous but also capable of rust. He thought to himself that if the age of iron was upon men across the Old World, these manlike creatures he saw were a remnant of the bronze age. Their mirrors and weapons were indeed made of bronze: instruments of vanity and violence.

Moragant made a pact with the innocent peasants who were unhappy under the yoke of the devil-worshipping priests. He distributed weapons of iron unto these men, so that they could fight by his side. He taught them how to speak the language of Tarshish and how to pray unto the triune God. They called themselves "feathered knights," for they learned to ride the horses of Tarshish while adorning themselves with feathers like rainbows. They climbed the volcano and fell upon Milcomart, vowing to slay every priest and raze every temple. Many priests fell upon their own bronze blades instead of putting up a fight, for according to their religion Time had come to an end. Moragant torched the wicked city, burning down every house made of wood and bamboo. But the pyramids where children were sacrificed were made of well-hewn stone and impossible to destroy, perhaps as indestructible as the Devil. He smashed every idol and melted down all the silver he can find.

The people of Tarshish learned about the silver idols of Meropis and wanted them melted down ingot by ingot and brought back unto Tarshish. They received reports of the great evil coming from their temples and judged them all by that standard, even those who were innocent of such crimes. Moragant soon learned that Tarshish wanted the destruction of every living thing upon Meropis. With a heavy heart, he killed every living soul upon Milcomart and piled up their corpses around the fell pyramids. He spared those who lived

upon the skirts of the volcano, innocent peasants who had been the victims of Meropian priests and even fought against them. Yet the verdict of Tarshish was absolute. Tarshish sent more warriors to enslave and exterminate all Meropians, even the innocent peasants who helped Moragant. The only survivors were the three hundred feathered knights, whom he brought unto Tarshish to prove that not all Meropians were given unto evil. Yet it was too late: knights less merciful than himself slew and enslaved the innocent peasants of Meropis.

They say that a great disease began in Meropis during the last days of its destruction, called the Red Death. Those afflicted would quake with tremors and sweat blood, falling dead hours after their flesh bloomed with red carbuncles. The disease spread far and wide in the Old World and struck Tarshish the hardest, as if God himself was punishing Tarshish for its silver-lust and immoderate violence. Aionite priests could not come up with a cure and prayer seemed useless. Wise men whispered that the plague was punishment against Tarshish for treating the innocent people of Meropis no different than their heretical priests.

The feathered knights, three hundred in number, became citizens of Tarshish on account of their valour and virtue. I am descended from their chieftain, name of Oroonoq, who married a princess of Tarshish after the plague.”

MAHZARIN THE WIDOW

“Is it my turn? I am Leocupida, a humble warmaiden from Ephenope. Please forgive my provincial accent as I speak. I hail from a college of warmaidens only one hundred strong. Our city is small, untouched by the great legends of yore as heroes rise and fall upon distant shores. Sad is the mood of our feast after Circea’s exemplar. Who am I even to wash Parthenissa’s divine hands with my tears? I am no great speechster and tragedy is not my element. Yet I recall a story I heard once. If it does not make you smile with its lesson, I am no Leocupida.

Ephenope is built upon an island, one thousand fathoms away from land, yet there are also settlements upon the mainland. They say that a veiled widow called Mahzarin once lived upon Ephenope. She was the wealthiest widow of the island, with a seaside villa made of precious mosaic entire. She rested her feet upon silken carpets and washed her hands in basins of crystal. She wept hypocritical tears for her dead husband for six years, fallen in battle. Many hoped to win her heart, for she was not only wealthy but also stately and well-proportioned in her ripening age. She refused lovers not out of respect for her dead husband but out of vanity and coldness. She let none touch him, falling in love with the paintings of distant princes and even more distant kings. Thus she offended every worthy suitor. Her one pleasure was to watch the razor-shaven warriors of Ephenope as they swam against the tide: for our nation is best known for feats of swimming. Ever she burned with private lust, like an ewe without a ram. She once confessed to her personal confessor, with much unrighteous shame, that she would marry a man if and only if he was like a bull in the bed and a dolphin in the sea. Every night she would gaze upon the stars, burning with unrequited love towards this or that prince.

One day, a handsome yet aging prince-marshall of the Phoenix Empire arrived from Phoezanthion to grace our quaint Ephenope.

His name was Jandall and he was much accomplished in the many arts of athletics. He rose like an oak in stature and his beard was as prickly as the pines of Pardissa. Mahzarin saw him and his homely yet devoted wife arrayed in imperial glory during the parade. What lawless fire burnt her bosom, what lawless fire! She was consumed with lust for days, writhing like a serpent strangling itself in bed. At long last she penned a letter to confess her desires. "O Jandall, whose virility not even unkind Time can tame! Take me like a sea dragon breaking a dam with his tail. If only you swim across these unruly waves once, my marshall and prince, I shall be yours: for one night if you desire, as your second wife if you accept. Your wife is a homely woman and while I would not question your taste, I can surround myself with nectarlike fruits even younger and sweeter than myself every night to quench your lust."

Jandall was a man not keen on adultery or whoredom, both of which are forbidden under the laws of Azda. The letter stoked his pride but her vainglory offended him. He showed the letter to his clever and loyal wife and consulted her opinion. Now, he was a marshall-prince known for tempering his sense of justice with humour. He summoned the personal confessor of Mahzarin, to understand her mind better. For only kings and marshalls and archpriests are allowed to discover the secrets of otherwise private confessions in the religion of Azda. Knowing thus her mind, he sent her a letter back when the tide was at its strongest and when the waves seemed as if they were churned by sea dragons. "You would dally with me? Undress in your home and rub scented oil upon your buxom thighs and breasts. Snuff out your lamps for the sake of our secret affair. I shall indeed cross the strait tonight and conquer thee in sweat and saltwater."

Mahzarin thanked her thankless stars when she read this letter. She snuffed out her lamps and undressed, save a diaphanous veil. She mixed every sweet oil in the house and bathed in them. Much to her wanton delight, she saw a broad-shouldered swimmer struggling

with the current emerge from the wild waves, wearing the mask of a horned bull. The moon was new, the night was dark and long. The man uttered no word as he mounted her with only whispered words too obscene to repeat in the presence of Parthenissa. Every time he kissed her with his pinelike beard, Mahzarin shook like an earthquake. She passed out towards dawn, from excess of pleasure under his bull-like weight.

When she woke up she found a letter pinned by her bedside with a dagger. "Mahzarin the widow, stately and comely in your best age! The author of this letter is I who am Jandall. The man who pleased you tonight is the poor warrior Tahomtan. You are the wealthiest matron of Ephenope, whereas he is an excellent swimmer from amongst our troops. His body is just like mine, albeit without the crown which dazzled thee. He is as tall as I am, of the same colour of skin and about the same build. Even our faces look alike, with prickly beards. If marshalls and princes were to wed every damsel and matron who adored crowns, the poor men of this already unjust world would rise up in revolt. You offended my wife with an offer of adultery, so we played a trick upon thee. You cannot bed me, I who am a righteous marshall, but you have bedded a man of no less might. You insulted my queen for being homely, but I have chosen her as my tomb-mate for her loyalty and wisdom. You once told your personal confessor that you can only love a dolphin in the sea and a bull in the bed. Tahomtan is that man. He is so poor that he only owns his garments and his sword, so that you can please his stalwart heart with your aging beauty and your abundant wealth. Prophets say that it is better to marry than to burn. He is henceforth your husband. Learn your lesson well and keep him happy with children, or my wife shall have your head rotting upon a pike."

Mahzarin thus devoted her life unto Tahomtan and gave birth unto five children despite her ripening age. They lived happily ever after and Mahzarin never dreamt of princes and marshalls ever again."

THE MAN OF THE WAVES

Next spoke Piscaphae. "I am a warmaiden from Threna, the city famous for sirenlike warmaidens and warlike songstresses. We have a college of warmaidens four hundred strong. In terms of discipline we are neither strict nor lax, treading the middle path. We hoist banners and standards during times of war, play lyres and syrinxes during the funerals of soldiers. I am in awe of the Gynasium here, for Xoanna's warmaidens excel in warfare as well as brawny men. I shall now tell a legend I heard once from a minor poet called Orphion, a namesake of the greater Orphion who could mesmerise women and enspell mermaids with his music.

Once upon a time there was a young man in Threna, whose name was Bereja. He was a simple, decent fisherman who loved to play the syrinx. There was also a siren who haunted Threna during those days, strangling sailors and capsizing boats, whose name was Charylla. She was a captivating woman from the waist above and a dappled serpent from the waist below. So sweet were his tunes with the syrinx that Charylla fell in love with him anon. She was two hundred years old, while Bereja was but fifteen.

Bereja wanted to hunt bigger fish. One day he borrowed a larger boat and aimed for unknown waters, hoping for a sailfish perhaps. Charylla steered the ship unto a small isle without him knowing it. Here there were coconuts and palms, dates and pineapples. He leapt off the boat to explore this virgin paradise. Chill water bubbled up from fountains. Parrots and seagulls swarmed upon branches ripe with fruit. Yet when he returned to his boat, he saw that it had been smashed into pieces. He was cursing his bad luck when he heard a woman weeping. The sound came from the sea itself. Charylla rose from the waves, displaying her naked beauty unto the young man.

"Man of the waves! I have been in love with you ever since I heard you breathing life unto the syrinx. Behold my eerie beauty. My hair is

as tawny as the sun itself. My eyes are as green as kelp from the Eastern Sea, my breasts as white as foam. Why, approach and look! I am Charylla, the very siren that has haunted the shores of Threna for two hundred years. I have strangled dozens of sailors and shattered hundreds of boats. Fear not, flee not! The love of a mortal man, yours, vexes my heart. Tame me with your love and I shall stop wreaking mayhem against Threna. I shall stop stalking sailors if only you lend me your quaking hand. I shall make thee beds made of pearls and prolong your life with weeds from the depths of the ocean. Yes, I am a dappled serpent from the waist below: but I am all woman above. I would cause thee no harm if you were to make me yours. Look how my breasts heave, for I fear refusal. If only I could wrap my tail around those freckle-covered shoulders of yours! If only I could kiss those youthful lips! They are blue with cold fear now, but I can redden them with lust. May the fixed stars above smite me dead if I ever harm thee."

Unlearned in lovemaking, Bereja succumbed to her violent kiss. Her fangs drew just some blood from his lips and she wrapped his legs with her coiling tail, lest he escape. He pinned her under his weight and impaled her virgin womb, spilling blood upon white sand. Such was their sun-soaked love that they swore under the stars the oath of marriage that night.

How happy was Charylla! She taught him to ride dolphins and sharks, to pick up pearls from teeming oysters, to teach the art of speech to parrots. She showed him how octopuses build gardens of coral and shell under the waves. She brought him rare and bizarre weeds from the abyss, swearing he would live two hundred years like herself if he swallowed them. When he cast his angler's rod, Charylla would attach mackerels and jackfish unto the hook. They would feast upon crab and lobster from the rocks, pineapple and coconut from the land. Bereja would light the bonfire by rubbing stick against stick, while Charylla would serve the catfish caught with her bare hands. Ever he played the syrinx when Charylla sang,

her voice as deep and mellow as the moonlit sea. Such was his love that he could not fall asleep unless she coiled his naked limbs with her serpentine tail.

Bereja grew into a taller and more handsome man in his prime under her exhaustless love, muscles taut from swimming against the tide during night and from picking up rocks during the day. Charylla knew that it was against the laws of God for mermaids and men to beget children. She begged unto God with all her heart for a babe to tie them forever, to break the laws of nature just once. Yet the archangel Rhabaal appeared unto her in a dream and denied her plea, for she had strangled many good sailors in the past.

Fifteen years passed. Fate is a goddess who revolves her wheel quick during times of bliss but slow during times of sorrow. Bereja became sullen and homesick, missing the company of his fellows and family in Threna. His love was exhausted, and he remembered how she won him with threats and force. Above all else he wanted offspring, to die in old bliss surrounded by his children. He knew that Charylla would rather keep him under her thrall, perhaps kill him outright if he sought freedom, so he came upon a clever ruse. He wanted a pearl as big as his fist from the Green Sea, her homeland. Charylla, ever spoiling her lover, did not turn down his request. Bereja leapt into the tide as soon as she left, swimming back unto Threna over the course of three days and nights. His lips were parched, his limbs weak when he finally clawed the shore. He kissed the earth of his homeland and told his uncanny story to sailors, who were much amazed at what happened. He won much fame for taming the beautiful siren and married the daughter of a minor prince.

Charylla returned from the Green Sea in a month, having picked up perhaps three thousand oysters until she indeed found a pearl as big as his fist. With smiling cheeks she crawled upon their island, upon the bed of leaves and pearls where Bereja always slept, awaiting nothing but a kiss in exchange for her labour. Yet he could not find

Bereja anywhere and assumed he must have perished at the hands of another sea monster. How she howled and wailed at his death! She foreswore all love, became a despondent serpent coiling upon herself. She sank her own fangs into her own tail out of red-hot pain. She wasted away for years, haunting the island like a phantom. Yet as the years passed her bloodlust was kindled anew and she began seeking innocent sailors to strangle and drown. She avoided Threna, sparing its sailors for the sake of the memory of Bereja.

Bereja had three sons from the maiden, the happiest man in Threna after escaping Charylla's cage of love. Their childish shouts were far sweeter than the siren song of Charylla unto his proud ears. Ever he shunned the sea, thanking the thankless stars for his escape. His wife doted upon him despite being a noblewoman. Fifteen more years passed. The boys were becoming men already. Bereja though the accursed siren was dead for good, for she would have been attacking the sailors of Threna otherwise. Perhaps she had strangled herself in despair, perhaps she had been impaled upon the spear of a daring sailor, perhaps a greater serpent had crushed her between his coils. He longed for the sea anew.

His wife knew his heart well. She would sometimes urge her husband to swim against the tide to prove his mettle unto the boastful swimmers of Threna. He accepted the challenge one day, with her wife climbing the seaward battlements to watch this brave feat from afar. Bereja swam for five hundred fathoms against the tide, his three sons in tow. Such was their agreement that his wife would light a bright torch once he defeated all rivals. The sun set and all swimmers returned to the safe shore, except his sons and himself. The king declared Bereja the winner and prepared a golden diadem for his brow, three medallions for the boys.

Curse ye, sardonic gods! Charylla was haunting her familiar lairs by Threna on that day, her old pledge forgotten. She saw the bright torch from afar and swam thither. To her amazement she saw Bereja,

her unfaithful husband, swimming back unto the seaward battlements of Threna. How she gnashed her fangs, drawing blood from her own lips! Vengeance added winged speed unto her slithering trail and she caught up with Bereja. She gouged out his eyes with her clawlike nails, her own eyes unblinking. He was wise enough not to call for his sons even in that hour of despair, even as his gouged eyes smarted with saltwater, hoping to spare their lives. Yet they shouted at him in fear, thus marking where they were between the waves. When Charylla heard the word "father" from their lips, her blind wrath waxed threefold. She killed his three sons like an anglerfish fishing for men, one after another, breaking their necks. Thus they died amongst the cold waves even as the people of Threna watched the slaughter in wonder and terror. Bereja died last, hearing the screams of his three sons. When their mother understood that no citizen would help out of fear, she threw herself down from the battlements.

Charylla knew no joy but bloodlust after her vile deed, defying all gods in heaven and sea and earth. Legends say that she became more and more wicked as the years passed, developing a taste for the flesh of children. The archangel Rhabaal heard of the loud wails of their mothers from heaven. He sent a great serpent from the Sea Eterne to crush her bones without killing her outright. She hit a beach upon Threna, weak and helpless. The people, not forgetting her sickening crimes, dragged her unto the marketplace with many curses and burned her alive upon a heap. Her scales sloughed off in the fire as she screamed in agony.

Thus ends the story I learned from Orphion. Sailors and bards swear that this story is true, even if I myself have seen neither siren nor mermaid during my own travels. Yet there is a shrine devoted unto Bereja and his family even today in Threna, which I visited many times. There is indeed a pearl as large as a man's fist upon that shrine --- amongst the hands of a skeleton which seems half woman, half serpent."

THE EXILE OF TISHDAR

“Bravo, ladies and gentlemen! We have heard many excellent stories tonight. Manlike tears rolled off my wizening cheeks as I listened to the stories of Parthenissa and Perpetua. I am archpriest Aorang, who maintains the crystalline fire temples of Azda upon this city. I shall tell you the story of how an angel fell from heaven after playing many cruel tricks against mankind.

They say that an angel called Tishdar once hated humanity and refused to succour them no matter what. He would often harry the heavenly court with his never-ending anger against Men, sometimes righteous and sometimes wanton. He would play the lyre when Men fought futile wars and he would sing anthems unto Azda when human saints drank the wine of martyrdom. He refused to work to improve their lives, drunk with heavenly wine and rapt with music, taking away bread from the poor and vexing princes by stealing their crowns and hoarding them in heaven.

Eosis was his creator, who now rebuked him. “Tishdar, wayward angel! Humans are below us and above animals in the great chain of being. You deal with humans like a wanton boy tormenting innocent birds. You shear off their feathers and cut off their bills, tie weights to their feet and gouge out their eyes. Do you think a mortal father who witnesses his son do these things would not beat a wanton boy like you? Let what is below be like unto what is above. I am now going to punish you, even if you shall shed many tears for it. I have consulted your wickedness with Azda, and we shall punish thee in a manner most becoming. I am taking away your wings, so that you can live as a mortal twice: once as a peasant and once as a prince.” Eosis touched his alabaster wings with the tip of his own crimson wings. Behold! Tishdar’s wings burnt up like cinders. Eosis hurled him into the cold wide world as a mortal soul.

Tishdar was born as a babe in a manger, his life difficult from the beginning. He struggled with fevers as a child, with chill winters and parching summer as a young man. His mortal father died in a battle, leaving his mother to take care of seven children. When he wanted to learn the alphabet, he struggled with it and he was mocked by fellow students for his slow wit. The trials of hunger, he found the worst: instead of consuming light and ambrosia, he had to beg for scraps of mouldering bread from wealthier peasants. Once a wealthy peasant gave him a whole loaf of bread, still warm from the oven. How happy he was! He received compassion from fellow men in his fallen state, moving him to tears every time. The headmistress of the school taught him the meaning of every letter, as stubborn as a mule. Families poorer than his own gave him bread and meat, so that he could grow muscles and become a warrior to escape his fate as a peasant. He learned how to use the spear and the sword, after a hundred trials and errors, and joined the army as soon as he sprouted a beard. He fell in love with the daughter of a peasant, yet was plucked from his home for the sake of war before he could so much as hold her hands once. In the army he was placed upon the foremost ranks. He saw war in its mute horror up close, albeit for a short time. There was no glory to be won there, only wickedness and death. He was skewered with arrows and screamed in measureless agony, with an enemy soldier gouging out his eyes and kicking in his teeth. The soldier cut off his head and placed it on a pike. Thus he perished while wearing the mortal garments of a peasant.

Next he was born as a prince, yet he did not find his second life worth living any more than his first. His mother died during childbirth, so he learned what it means to be an orphan amongst mortals. Without the queen to protect him, he was often taunted and beaten. The king had multiple children from different women, so his own half-brothers spread rumours that he was an illegitimate bastard out of spite. They spat him in the face and beat him with blunt swords and rough-end spears until his body was black and blue with bruises. He could never learn games of honour properly, so that even

the common folk mocked him. He could not shoot arrows with precision, nor ride the horse well. The king was a stern man, who felt nothing but scolding contempt for this urchin. He fell in love, a beautiful damsel of lowly stock: but he was not allowed to marry her for fear of mixing commoner blood into the royal family. He wanted to wed a princess instead, but the haughty princesses scorned his looks and broke his heart again and again. When the king died, his eldest half-brother became the king. He bade his executioners crush Tishdar's bones and skull, even the common people laughing during his execution. Tishdar thus died a second death in agony. They say that angels, who feel neither fear nor pain in heaven, suffer so much when they understand our sentiments that their bodies quake like cracking ice and their wings shrivel like dust.

Tishdar became a roaming spirit after his second death. He now understood the importance of compassion and became a helpful, familiar spirit. He helped midwives deliver healthy babies. He stole bread and berries from the tables of lordlings and gave them unto the poor. He helped sorcerors and witches prepare ointments and potions to cure diseases. He composed music to cheer talentless bards. He protected lonely boys beaten by bullies, forlorn maidens defamed by rejected lovers. He prevented husbands from beating their wives, wives from scolding their husbands. He protected kings from drinking poisoned liquor and he did his best to prevent wars, the greatest horror of all. Thus he lived for a hundred years, in the service of no master except his own conscience.

Eosis approached him. "Your punishment is complete. You may return unto the bosom of Azda and become an angel again, but keep your lessons in your mind well." Tishdar answered thus. "These mortals are seemingly made of iron, for I know not how they endure the toils of this mortal coil. We angels are made of weaker stuff, like foam and dust, compared to them. I have learned my lesson well and I shall sing of the glory of Men until the unmaking of this world.

Allow me to meander about this world as an errant spirit, so that I can keep helping them. Thus do I reject Heaven.”

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Zosimon was last to speak. "What theme should I speak of today? You have covered every corner of creation with your speeches, from the beaches of foul Meropis unto the distant shores of pearl-rich Fûsong, from the black soil of Aaro unto the high untilled plains of Pard. You left me no story to tell, but throughout your tales I have caught an echo of the same question over and over again: why is there evil in our unhappy world?"

Priests and poets ever disagree about the nature of God. They only agree upon the following: that it is blasphemy to imagine him in the form of Man. The ancient philosophers of Dion thought God was either pure love or pure reason. The priests of Jehammon and Sige take offence when God is portrayed like a man, yet our imagination falters otherwise. They even destroy statues and paintings that commit this offence.

Azda ever studies the universe from behind veils of clouds --- so sayeth the Song of All. I have never heard the voice of Azda, but I have consulted with the seven archangels in my dreams many times. I would think that God keeps himself occupied gazing at other universes and listening to the harmony of spheres. He sees all without being seen, like a transparent eye whose circumference is everywhere and whose centre is nowhere. Above the archangels there are aeons of pure reason, their bodies made of cold aether and hot plasm. They live in the abyss of heaven, each named after a name of God. They are so ancient that they survive one ekpyrosis from another, when God shatters the universe and sculpts it anew in a conflagration of fire and music.

Yet I must not veer far from my theme. Every prophet begins to wrestle with God after contemplating the problem of evil. The three great religions of our time have three answers to the age-old question.

Azdaeans attribute evil unto the freedom of the will. They say that the prophet Sarastro came upon this answer while weaning a lamb off an ewe. If Men were just animals without free will, there would be neither consciousness nor conscience amongst them. To slander God as the architect of a universe without free will is worse than godlessness, as Sarastro sayeth in the Song of All. God has created seven archangels to arrange the universe, making His own free will known thus. For they all possess difference of intent and spirit. These archangels dispute over the meaning of what is right and what is wrong every hour, which ungrateful mortals mistake as an additional cause of confusion and evil.

Aionites view the world in terms of a ceaseless war between good and evil, between spirit and matter. They also tremble before the Devil, Sophia's misshapen child, for he is still the master of this dungeon world. Evil thus comes from a principle no less awful than the triune God. This is blasphemy, Azdaeans and Sigeans say, for attributing so much power to the Devil diminishes the grace of God. The famous philosophress Pythaia once proclaimed thus: attributing the creation of our matchless universe unto the Devil is a mistake that even crude pagans wallowing in dung cannot make. An archdeacon of Temple White had her stoned to death for that clever blasphemy, during the height of the civil unrests in Ampheon.

Aionite zealots revile Azdaeans for worship of two archangels especially, Eosis and Thaos. They despise the story of Eosis, the warden of celestial fires in Heaven who chose to exile himself to this world out of love for mankind. Some even maintain that Eosis is none but the Devil proper ---- fallen from the heavens and the author of all chaos. They also despise the story of Thaos, another archangel who weeps snowen tears to douse the coals of Hell. This is slander against the saints who live their lives in tribulation, they say. For what purpose is a good life if sinners receive succour in Hell? Hell must be wide shut instead, they say.

As for Sigeans, they are the strictest in terms of devotion and observance. They recognise God alone, denying intercessant angels and vexing devils and neutral faeries. Aionites and Azdaeans are only somewhat better than pagans according to their view. They even prohibit speech during time of prayer, so that God alone can speak through signs. All evil comes from God to test the mettle of saints, according to their faith. God is free to commit evil, they say. God can hate, they say.”

THE EMERALD LAW

Thus spoke each guest in Sephorah's feast, each alloying iron truth with golden fantasy. The guests took turns kissing immortal Zosimon's hand and excusing themselves, for dawn was breaking. Parthenissa left the cavern to attend the flames of the Sun Fire, while Xoanna sought their leave to practice combat games in the Gynasium. Sekkhamon left to discuss matters of state with the praetors, with Piscaphae and Ephenope in tow. Parcelot left to attend morning prayers at an Aionite church and Aorang left the house to attend the crystalline temples of Azda. Perpetua grabbed her prayer book and Thailai excused herself for sleep. As for Zosimon, he was going to repair the war engines of Symarna and concoct a secret mixture for the ignosiphons. For the wizards of the Phoenix Empire know how to burn ships and siege towers from afar by spraying liquid fire upon them. Such is this smokeless mixture that pouring water upon it only makes the flames burn faster.

The sorceress was now alone with the alchemist. She was thinking of Death and his sardonic laughter, already taunting her ears. She was bemoaning inside her own mind how she was a lesser apostle at the feet of a greater master. She was thinking of the elixir of youth, how her master could rejuvenate him into a maiden if he so wished. The man before her was somewhat boy and somewhat man, yet he was ten thousand years old. The immortal alchemist read her mind like an open book.

"You are not the first mortal to think of this common question. Where is the elixir of youth to polish my dimming eyes, to erase the unsmiling lines upon my cheeks? I know that you desire everlasting life in your ripe age. You ask yourself, why him but not me? Let me ask instead: if you, why not all? Why would God bless only seven alchemists and their lucky students with renewing limbs and undecaying ichor, instead of all humankind? Why would Eosis not allow a new golden age where all people are deathless, where wealth

is free for all? Why am I below many angels yet above so many men in the great chain of being, a fetter of adamant which no devil has yet broken?

Let me forewarn you about the perils of alchemy, the use and the abuse. Were it possible to transmute all lesser metals, there would have been such an abundance of gold everywhere that all gold coin would have been as dirt. And if it were possible to extend the lives of all mortals, defeating old age and all ailment, there would have been so many creatures of immortal flesh upon this unhappy sphere that they would tear each other apart out of hunger.

Some may suppose that being an alchemist gives us free rein over mortals, as if we were a pride of immortal lions feasting upon mortal gazelles. We are rather like watchdogs, protecting the sheep. We are yoked unto greater beings ourselves, whose voice we hear awake and asleep. I can hear the harmony of the spheres even now. There are seven dread archangels counting our every blink and heartbeat upon this world, hearing every whispered word and reading every secret letter, watching over the Circle of Eld with ceaseless judgement just as we watch over mortals. Ever must we heed the Emerald Law, written upon the Tablet of Fate. The archangel Eosis would burn alive any alchemist who would so much as break a single letter of it. We may seem like living gods unto petty mortals, yet we are forbidden from demanding worship in our own name lest we offend our jealous God. We can but reveal what we know about God, our knowledge ever incomplete. We are forbidden from dispensing the elixir of youth unto mortals, even those who are dearest to our hearts.

Before I became immortal, I had a shepherdess wife and several lamblike children. They are long gone now, their cubelike tombs near the golden obelisks of Sard. I have wept upon the graves of hundreds of fellows, like so many stars setting in the western sky. We are bidden to live amongst shadows like modest hermits, not haughty princes, for earthly glory and wealth is forbidden unto us also. We

are shepherds of kings and emperors instead, ruling from behind their thrones with wise counsel and works of miracle.

I judge all nations of the world together with my immortal master, Sarastro. We live inside a void pyramid of gold, Ophyridas, where we hear the petitions of supplicants and ambassadors from every corner of the planet. We judge, knowing that we are being judged. We weigh the three near empires upon three major scales: the bishops of Latillium, the clerics of Jeriddo, the necromancers of Aaro. We also weigh the three faraway empires upon three minor scales: the philosopher kings of Tarshish, the wizard-viziers of Zhoaxia, the gymnosophists of Sinddha. With the seventh scale we judge Phoezanthion, our home. There is a volcanic spring inside Ophyridas, bubbling with quicksilver. Thence I draw a cup of quicksilver and mix it with lapis lapidorum, boil the mixture upon lava. Thus do I distil a cup of molten gold every day, filling the chests of Phoezanthion as long as the people are just and virtuous. Yet the princes are thankless these days, always asking for more gold while despising the poor. Sarastro bids me stay my hand sometimes, so that I can terrify the princes into righteous surrender. If they do not throw feasts unto the poor, I deny them the harvest of gold.

Thus for the Emerald Law. But know that my heart grows as soft as wax when I look at you. I remember your girlish days, when you were a student at my feet. You loved me when you were young, but I dared not clasp your hand under the pitiless gaze of my master Sarastro. I sometimes curse my immortal days, for I have buried many friends and lovers as the centuries pass. Love is already sorrow for me, for I know the ending before the beginning: death."

Sephorah answered. "Love? I loved you during my spring and I would love you during my winter, if only you allowed me. Yes, I can feel love for you kindling in my veins and warming by aching bones: but I fear the all-consuming bonfire. I cannot deny in my heart that I

hope for a grain of lapis lapidorum to pass my lips, nothing more, so that I can become a young maiden again.”

Zosimon kissed her forehead and Sephorah wept vain tears. “If I ever were to break the Emerald Law and incur the wrath of Eosis upon me, it would be for your sake.”

LETTER UNTO ALL NATIONS

Perithemis knew that the fixed stars were not on the side of Symarna in the upcoming siege. The Caleph had the upper hand in numbers, perhaps even in cunning. Yet the greatest of men is he who unfixes the thankless stars and hurls them below from the battlements of Heaven. The moon of Fate is ever fickle, waxing and waning within a matter of days. She can disperse the greatest of hosts in an hour should she so please: sometimes by planting a spear in the hands of the lowliest man to unhorse an emperor, sometimes by whispering quarrelsome rumour between proud marshalls, sometimes by exhaling pestilent vapour upon troops. And above all else shines the unseen sun of God, as black as the abyss, who snuffs out the lamps of tyrants and the candles of false saints with tempests of invisible fire.

Perithemis needed all the help he could muster from amongst the nations of the world. He knew well that the hearts of men incline towards justice when a wide-horned bull charges at antherless deer. He thus grabbed the quill and sent wax-sealed letters unto all free tribes and cities of Wæold.

“The free people of the world! Know that Symarna is now a free republic. Xerxapollo set us free from his gentle yoke. I am the highest official in the charge of Symarna. May Eosis the archangel doom me forever if I misstep upon the rock-splattered road of justice. We shall take no side in the great war between the Eagle Empire and the Phoenix Empire. Let the scarlet phoenix claw at the eagle, the auburn eagle peck at the phoenix. Let white banners mix with crimson banners upon battlefields pinkish with blood. Our bird is the nightingale, which does not sing in a cage, which we sew unto banners of cotton as soft as the hands of our helpless children. Our fight is against the Caleph, the common enemy of mankind. He promised to build pyramids of corpses and cairns of skulls upon the smouldering ruins of Symarna. Those who flaunt the rules of fair war

deserve the wrath of all nations. If Symarna falls, weep not when you see more familiar faces upon such accursed heaps next.

We are a people known for being meek, yet our history is not without victory against Sigeans. We have defeated Sigeans three times during the last two centuries, even if we have never faced such well-jointed and crowded hosts before. The Caleph, ever the tyrant, compiles battalion upon battalion from amongst the nations of Tethyssa. My great ancestor Pharsakh marshalled the troops of Symarna unto victory once, against the iron chariots of Ninaddo, by breaking the wheels of his chariots with spears of iron. Miraxthor the Thunder, whom all nations hailed for his cunning and valour, defeated Sigeans twice. His wife was a daughter of Symarna. He defeated them once before the winged gates of Ancora in open battle, crushing armourless horsemen with imperceant cataphracts, and once during the seaborne siege of Ephenope, by holding fast unto the walls until the Sigean sailors ran out of food and patience.

If you would not send us your standing armies, for many are the wars that plague our world, send us your adept sellswords and hardened captives of war. Our treasure overflows with gold and silver. May it be yours rather than falling unto the hands The Caleph! Symarna is a goddess of wheaten hair, capable of supporting twice our population. The archangel Eosis painted our lands himself, with meadows of crimson lily as if to mark our martyrs and trees that sprout yellow leaf yearlong in permanent lament. If you fall in battle, we shall bury you into our own bosom and weep upon your tombs with thankful tears.

Let none say that our men are weak, for even our fair women seize the sword instead of the sickle during the harvest of war. Our warmaidens can shoot a man in the forehead fifty fathoms away with arbalests, man walls and ride horses with prowess equal to men. If even our women are like this in times of war, imagine our ferocious men during combat! Even the jealous poets of the Caleph extol the

beauty of our women, who shall be yours and not theirs if only you come here to fight for their sake. We shall proclaim your children citizens and plant garlands of olive leaves upon your brows, if only you fight for our just cause. Conquer us not from without but from within, mixing your blood with ours."

THE MARKETPLACE OF WAR

Perithemis marshalled every capable man of Symarna beneath purple banners sewn with nightingales: about one hundred thousand men. They lacked neither discipline nor mettle, but these men were not warriors by trade except perhaps thirty thousand hoplites. He knew that war is best fought through war-worn warriors whose only occupation is war itself, not with meek and innocent peasants who grab their scythes only to be harvested by Death in return.

Perithemis was a man of many wiles and many letters. He brokered a peace agreement with Tarshish, so that his city was no longer deemed part of the Phoenix Empire but independent. The worldlywise princes of Tarshish would help the city against the Caleph's campaign, massive and relentless it was, if and only if they surrendered their treasury in advance. The priests of Aion conditioned help upon converting unto the faith of the triune God and extinguishing their fire temples. The brethren of Azda were not willing to accept either condition, which were more exacting than the Caleph's. Yet there was some common ground, for they fought against the same enemy. Marcaulion, the philosopher king of Tarshish, was besieging Tyridon from the sea. Tyridon was the mother-city of Tarshish, which had fallen unto Sigeian hands generations ago. The ships of Tarshish would thus allow merchants and sellswords to pass the Livid Sea for the sake of helping against the siege. The pale sailors of Tarshish swore oaths that they would never attack any ship that bore the purple banners of Symarna.

Symarna received volunteers and sellswords from across the known world thanks to the penmanship of Perithemis. Thirty thousand men and five hundred warmaidens came from different provinces of the Phoenix Empire, faithful Azdaeans who wanted to avenge the insult against the Sun Fire. They brought their own shrouds unto Symarna, showing how willing they were to drink the wine of martyrdom in the name of Azda. They did so despite a formal agreement of peace

between the Caleph and the Pantocrator, disobeying their fickle monarch to heed the decrees of virtuous priests. Xerxapollo sent nothing except a thousand waggons of flour and spice. The merchant-princes of Venalphi offered stout ships manned with sea-worn sailors if Sigeans were to lay seetime siege unto Symarna. The beleaguered city even received help from a company called the Free Horde, ten thousand horsemen strong. They hailed from the distant land of Tur, known for horsemen who spend their lives upon the backs of horses from birth to death. Their chieftain was a man called Thode, an exiled prince who wanted to avenge the death of his magnanimous father: for a Sigean assassin had killed him with cowardly poison.

Symarna did not receive the open allegiance of any sovereign nation except Venalphi, out of fear of offending the Caleph, but there were excellent companies of sellswords who were willing to pledge their services in exchange for gold and silver. There were fifteen thousand talents of silver and one thousand talents of gold in the treasury of Symarna during those days. Perithemis now summoned the chieftains of several companies from across the world, so that they could persuade the praetors of Symarna as to who was the best. The chieftains of each company gathered in the marketplace to display their warlike feats, so that the praetors could judge their mettle.

Behold with your own eyes! The Thousand Giants hailed from Xanadoo, each eleven feet tall and armed with hooked spears with which they could unhorse a knight like a fisherman hauling fish. Their leader was a giant called Panurge, who picked up a horse and threw it from across his shoulders, breaking every bone of the unhappy beast. He demanded four thousand talents of silver and three hundred talents of gold. The Hell Slingers hailed from Thrazo, their homeland near enough to Phoezanthion, who used slings to hurl polished rocks that could kill even an imperceant cataphract with a blunt strike in the head. They were about ten thousand in number, many ruddy of hair and blue of eye. Their leader was a man

called Zalmox, famous for splitting helmeted skulls with his axe. From his sling he unloosed one such polished rock, destroying a giant pumpkin with such violence that it shattered into a hundred pieces. They demanded three thousand talents of silver and two hundred talents of gold. The Brethren of Snow hailed from northern Mergo, only surpassed by Hundalls in ferocity of war. Their company was fifteen thousand knights strong. Their leader was a man called Paroon, who proved his mettle by throwing a discus and felling a hardwood banner two hundred feet away. They were recent converts unto the faith of Aion. The Temple White permitted them to fight for the cause of Symarna if and only if they fought openly under the white banners of the triune God to impress possible converts. They demanded four thousand talents in silver and three hundred talents of gold. The Sons of Hate was a company that consisted of dispossessed bastards and redeemed captives of war from amongst all nations. They consisted of fifteen thousand footmen, war-worn and cunning men all. Their leader Noxate boxed with a black bear in the marketplace, killing him with nothing but his fists without suffering a single injury. They demanded four thousand talents of silver and three hundred talents of gold.

Last but not least was the Brotherhood of Gild. They were called thus because their weapons and armour were all coated in gold. They fought under their own yellow banners, sewn with kingfishers. They were of Hundall stock, those beastlike men who can skewer a horse with their spears from side to side and split a man from neck to crotch with their broadswords. They fought with the ancient discipline of the phalanxes of Dion, with shields like mountains and spears like forests. They were only ten thousand in number and they demanded in advance every talent of silver and gold within the treasury. The merchant-princes of Venalphi recommended their valour in a letter unto Perithemis, for the Brotherhood of Gild had destroyed three legions of Latillium two generations ago when Latillium wanted to conquer and end their republic. They even offered to transport them unto Symarna free of charge, in a spirit of

sympathy for their republican cause. Their leader was a man called Solmithra, named after the pagan sun god of ancient Latillium. He showed his mettle by challenging each chieftain unto combat, which they all refused out of fear. Thus it became clear unto the citizens of Symarna who was the most excellent. He was a living legend who had killed no less than two hundred men during his lifetime.

The people of Symarna gathered upon their forum to discuss whether they should recruit the Brotherhood of Gild or the four lesser companies. Some would cast their lot with the man-beasts of Hundall, reading aloud letters from Venalphi singing their praises and noting how other chieftains recoiled from fighting Solmithra. Yet to Perithemis it seemed that the wiser decision was to recruit multiple troupes instead, for he feared that the Brotherhood of Gild might wreak havoc from within once admitted inside for the sake of lifting the siege. He knew that multiple weaker pawns are sometimes better than a single unruly knight in the chess of war. To admit a single and mighty host of foreign origin inside the city walls seemed perilous, for Hundalls were known for their recklessness and wanton behaviour. What if they refused to obey orders out of arrogance, what if they pillaged Symarna from within to appease their bloodlust? Thus Perithemis would rather recruit multiple companies, so that their less arrogant chieftains would follow orders in humbler spirit and refrain from looting the city for fear of incurring the wrath of other chieftains. The people listened to his reasoning and voted for his choice.

Solmithra scoffed at Perithemis and his so-called wisdom. He stayed in the city of Symarna at the insistence of the prince-merchants of Venalphi, with a hundred choice guards, to watch the war.

SOLMITHRA & THAILAI

Symarna was now crowded with lonesome men from distant lands, their wives and companions far away. The brothels of Symarna had never been so busy before, for they say that the fires of war stoke the fires of lust also. Perithemis asked the five best courtesans of Symarna to bathe naked in a public fountain, to boost morale among citizens and aliens alike. He bade them seduce each chieftain, hoping to yoke them better unto the cause of Symarna with fetters of love. He invited Thailai to his villa and threw a feast there, asking this most beautiful of women to seduce Solmithra. She accepted the task with a wanton yet coy smile. Solmithra was the greatest of warriors and he was not unhandsome despite many wounds: a difficult quarry even for Thailai, the huntress of men.

The fountain was adorned with bright lamps under the inconstant Moon, with the courtesans wearing nothing but transparent robes. They dallied in the fountain, kissing and singing and dancing like sirens from the sea and dryads from oaken forests. Each courtesan placed a silver diadem upon the brow of a chieftain, sitting on their laps and winning them over not with coy smiles but wanton embraces. The last dance was Thailai's, who planted a golden diadem upon the brow of Solmithra and a coy kiss upon his lips. Solmithra kissed her like a lion sinking his fangs into a gazelle, yet whispered in her ears: "I know that Perithemis asked you to seduce me tonight, hoping to yoke me unto the cause of Symarna. I am no beast to be chained thus."

The ever-proud Thailai was much upset to hear such loveless words, turning as livid as the waves of the West. She ran away from his lap like a sparrow escaping an arrow from Love: the venomous dart missed her heart yet brushed against her feet. The moon waxed high and low once, and Thailai began to display the symptoms of the illness called love.

Let Solmithra boast that he was a lion amongst men! She vowed to pursue him like a pantheress. She was moonstruck with desire without knowing it, telling herself that she was only doing the bidding of Perithemis. For love begins thus, with the first stirrings of denial. Her courtesan friends were much amazed, wondering why the fairest women alive in Symarna must pursue some rude barbarian from the frigid vales of Hundall. They scolded her in vain, reminding her how she was surrounded by lovers far more handsome than Solmithra. To no avail!

Thailai now sent him a love letter, dismissing the love letters that she herself receives every day. "Tawny barbarian, from the frigid steppes of Hundall! They say that you can skewer a horse with a spear, but I can prick thee with invisible arrows. They say that your body is covered in wounds, yet you hide them from me not like a proud lion but a coy deer. If only I could kiss them all over! I ask not for your hand in marriage if you fear the fetters of wedlock, for I too am a soul of liberty. There is a cave under Symarna called Eronaox, worn with springwater and rain, where illicit lovers meet. If I cannot tempt thee just by myself, choose any maiden of Symarna to accompany me."

Solmithra read the letter, which stoked his pride and lust. Yet he knew well about the guile of Perithemis, how he used these courtesans as spies in order to yoke them unto the cause of war. Thus was his response. "Unhappy woman of war-torn Symarna! The people of Symarna cannot afford the Brotherhood of Gild. We win our wounds upon hateful battlefields, not toil-free beds. My own captains would forswear my rule if I succumbed unto thee, for they know that Perithemis wants to yoke our troops thus. You are surrounded by men who are more handsome than I, yet I could snap off their necks like twigs. Embrace those striplings, for I am a tree that not even Perithemis can bend."

Thailai did not abandon her task even after this letter. Solmithra spent much of his time in the Anthroparium, where the men of

Symarna exercise games of war. There was a veiled chamber in the center of Anthroparium, where the maidens and matrons of Symarna were allowed to spy upon their favourite matches without shame. She hid herself in this chamber now, watching this captive lion from afar from a mirror. He and his companions were lazing in the fountainous pool, wrestling buck naked. She saw his many wounds and loved him all the more for their sake. She became sick and sallowish with lust, sent him a second letter through a messenger.

“I am a courtesan who sells her body to men of golden blood. You are a sellsword who sells his body to men for the sake of bleeding gold. I am the mistress of love, you are the master of war. Even if you save not my nation, I am all yours. A curse upon Perithemis and his vile advice, which entangled me thus in your lion’s mane! I swear a solemn oath that I shall not spy upon you for the sake of matters of state. If you strangled Perithemis himself, I would bring the noose. If you burnt all of Symarna, I would hold the torch. Take me unto distant Hundall if you like. All I ask is for you to spend a night between my arms. Tarry not in this affair and be mine.”

Solmithra was much pleased to read this letter. He revealed the letter to his fellow captains, who urged him to bed Thailai: for the sake of glory if not love. Thus free of leash, he arranged for a meeting in that infamous cave called Eronaox, demanding no lesser beauty but Thailai alone. Behold how Thailai was shaking like vines in the wind, with passion and pride! She coiled her limbs around the treelike Solmithra like an ivy, cleaving unto him. She left no wound unkissed. They exchanged oaths of loyalty under a mighty oak, for such was the custom amongst Hundalls. Much to Thailai’s delight, Solmithra too succumbed to the pangs of love soon. For war, they say, stokes the fires of lust in the chests of men.

THE CHESS OF WAR

Time was the enemy of Symarna. The archangel Wohuman was counting every grain of sand passing through the throat of his hourglass, each grain a soldier in the armies of The Caleph. He rang the gongs of heaven when The Caleph had enough troops to lay siege unto Symarna, summoning angels and fairies and demigods to watch the carnage from the battlements of Heaven.

The Caleph was a frail and mortal man called Gad, even if Sigeans venerated him as the shadow of God upon earth. He suffered from gout and limping in his old age, preferring the endless gardens of Marconda to the thankless affairs of war. He now passed his opal crown to his oldest son Wadd, proclaiming him as the next Caleph and the supreme commander of his troops. Wadd was a stern zealot and an accomplished marshall.

Perithemis was much dismayed to learn from spies the full majesty of the Calephal army: two hundred thousand footmen from Aqqamer, fifty thousand horsemen from Tur, twenty thousand cataphracts from Pard, twenty thousand camels from Urran, a thousand elephants from Sinddha. Last but not least was the band of Hubaal from ancient Nod, the best warriors of the Old World, only three hundred strong --- yet each warrior capable of felling hundreds. He bewailed his fate and considered surrender in his mind, but he knew that Sigeans would show no mercy either to cowards or brave men during this war. Thus he chose the bravery of open battle. There would be no naval siege against Symarna, for Amm was busy defending Tyridon against the iron-ribbed ships of Tarshish.

Perithemis now summoned a war council with his chieftains and praetors. He was of the mind that they should attack Wadd before he gathered even more hosts from amongst the nations of Tethyssa, crushing Symarna through sheer numbers alone. Perithemis knew how to counter elephants with the giants of Xanadoo, who could

throw spears of iron from afar to impale the proud beasts in the head. He guessed that the cataphracts of Pard would not fight with full valour against the Sun Fire, for the faith of Azda still survived in the land of Pard. Against them he would line up the forty thousand zealots from the Phoenix Empire, half of whom were footmen and half of whom were horsemen, who were going to fight under the crimson banners of Azda. He would match the twenty thousand camels of Urran with ten thousand Hell Slingers, who could injure the beasts and topple their riders with missiles of polished rock.

The hordes of Tur gave him pause, for Symarna was not known for bravery upon the horse. They were under the joint command of Khulthagin and Gokthagin, the twin emperors, joining the war because they had married the two daughters of the Caleph. Perithemis would counter them with two columns, The Free Horde and The Knights of Snow. He hoped that the horsemen of Tur were not so keen to fight in this war involving strange nations. Perithemis considered ambushing the Calephal army upon the plain of Lud, countering Wadd's two hundred thousand footmen with the Sons of Hate and the citizen hoplites of Symarna. As for the great warriors of Nod, Perithemis would match them with Xoanna and her warmaidens. Perithemis knew that he had only one chance to rout the enemy for good, for the Caleph could always summon new hosts from his many dominions.

The troops of Symarna poured out of the city at midnight like ants leaving their hive. Perithemis matched the armies of Wadd upon the plain of Lud, countering pawn with pawn and knight with knight as if upon a table of chess.

THE BATTLE OF LUD

Who would and who should prevail? The seven archangels of Azda were torn about this question. The archangel Eosis weighed their peacetime virtue and wartime mettle in two separate scales and found them almost even. The Caleph was perhaps not in error in demanding vengeance for Manaph, for the rules of hospitality are universal. There were many innocent and honest men in his army, whose only crime was following orders. As for the people of Symarna, they were defending their home: always a just cause. If the people of Symarna were like a swarm of honeybees defending their hive, the warriors of Sige were like droves of wasps hellbent on vengeance. Throngs of lesser angels hovered above the plains of Lud, ready to judge each fallen soul.

Wild roosters were crowing and nightingales were singing when the citizens and sellswords of Symarna entered the plain of Lud. Perithemis was hoping to catch the enemy unawares, but there was a spy called Zohaqq who lived in Symarna who alerted Wadd about the designs of Perithemis. Wadd thus learned from ravens and pigeons that Perithemis and his chieftains were on their way. He marshalled his own troops anon, blowing horns and beating on drums to awaken them during the chill morning. Perithemis saw from afar that they were gathering upon the plain of Lud with bloodlust in their veins. He suspected treason and bewailed his fate, but it was too late to summon his troops back. Wadd climbed upon his tallest siege tower to command his troops, while Perithemis climbed a towering rock to do likewise. They seemed evenly matched in the chess of war, their pieces bestrewn upon the plain of Lud, sounding trumpets and waving banners to express their will.

The chess of war happened thus. The patriotic citizens of Symarna were numbered one hundred thousand, a circle with the relentless Sons of Hate in the middle. Within this greater circle there was a smaller circle for one thousand warmaidens, who raised the purple

banners of Symarna. They fought against the black banners of Aqqamer, two hundred thousand strong, littering the plain of Lud with fresh corpses from both sides. There was no easy victory. Yet the patriotic men of Symarna seemed to have the upper hand against the lesser zeal of the hosts of Aqqamer, for defending your homeland is perhaps a worthier cause than fighting for mere vengeance. Thus for the middle of the battlefield.

The Hell Slingers clashed with the camel-captains of Urran upon the southern flank. They maimed the beasts with volleys of polished rocks, only to fall themselves when pierced with javelins and skewered with spears. Many fell from both sides, with no clear victor. Also upon the southern flank were the cataphracts of Pard and the volunteers from the Phoenix Empire. The imperceant cataphracts were divided against themselves upon seeing the crimson banners of Azda, for many worshipped Azda and his seven archangels in secret temples. They stayed their hand somewhat during battle, sparing many volunteers who would have fallen otherwise. There would have been utter slaughter if not for their lack of zeal: for such was the excellence of the legendary cataphracts of Pard.

As for the horde of Tur, fifty thousand horsemen strong, they seemed evenly matched against The Free Horde and The Knights of Snow upon the northern flank. Many horsemen fell from both sides in valiant battle, but the twin emperors of Tur held back their full wrath rather than to fight an exiled prince of Tur: fearing the vengeance of Heaven if kin slew kin. As for the Brethren of Snow, they were fighting under the banners of Temple White. Khulthagin was a devout Sigeian by heart, while Gokthagin believed in the triune God. Tur was a cosmopolitan nation in terms of religion and the twin emperors feared uprisings from Azdaeans and Aionites if they seemed either too weak or too cruel. Thus they fought without their full valour, yet even then they seemed to prevail over The Free Horde and The Knights of Snow.

Xoanna and her warmaidens fought against Hubaal's band in the very thick of battle, both sides legendary for their prowess. The warmaidens were armed with arbalests, while the warriors of Nod were armed with thrice-strung longbows. If the footmen of each side were like flocks of birds, the warmaidens of Xoanna and the champions of Hubaal were like harpies loosed upon these helpless birds: darting their iron feathers into the soft bosoms of the enemy flock. Three hundred warmaidens and fifty Noddic champions fell during the battle, each felling dozens of lesser warriors before their own death.

The Thousand Giants clashed with the elephants of Sinddha towards the end of the battle, after Wadd and Perithemis blew their final trumpets. Wadd was hoping that the march of the elephants would crush the bulk of the army, which consisted of footmen. Yet the giants of Xanadoo formed a stalwart line with spears as tall as themselves against the elephants of Sinddha, killing and routing many beasts. Five hundred giants and three hundred elephants perished in the thick of battle. The elephants would have prevailed if only they had been war-seasoned beasts. Yet the rulers of Sinddha had sold the Caleph their youngest and naivest elephants, unskilled in war. They fled from the battlefield upon hearing the agony-screams of their fellow beasts.

Sing now, goddess of chaos! Sing how the patriots of Symarna fought the relentless footmen of Aqqamer, littering the plain of Lud with tens of thousands of fresh corpses. Sing how swords pierced hearts and axes split open skulls, heads rolling upon the dew-damp plain of Lud. Sing how tens of thousands of innocent men perished for the sake of a cause they did not understand. That innocent boy bearing a standard, do you see him with your unfair eyes? See how he stumbles and falls, trampled beneath a bleeding elephant. How about that young innocent peasant, his weak limbs shaking as he wields his sickle? Watch with glee how a horseman of Tur impales him with a

spear and lifts him up, only to dash his brains against a cracked rock. How about that old Azdaean warrior, his beard wet with tears and blood after falling from his horse and breaking his back? See how a sellsword tramples him to death beneath iron-shoed hooves. Watch a beardless boy from Jeriddo hacked into pieces, dying with a brave smile, before a giant from Xanadoo puts it on a pike and brandishes it from afar to terrify his fellows.

The battle raged until dusk and it seemed that Fate would declare no winner, crushing all beneath her wheels. Eosis blew his trumpet in heaven, declaring no victor and ordering peace. Perithemis and Wadd sounded trumpets of peace to halt the wanton carnage, both ordering retreat. Yet it seemed that The Caleph had more troops, so it was Perithemis who abandoned the plain of Lud and summoned his troops unto the safe battlements of Symarna. Wadd declined pursuit, knowing that fifty thousand more horses from Tur and one hundred thousand more footmen from Aqqamer would arrive by spring. He built pyramids of corpses and cairns of skulls with the bodies that Perithemis left behind, while burying his own troops with proper prayer and observance. To the eyes of Perithemis, the battle seemed more like defeat than victory.

Wadd laid a circular siege around the castle-mountain Ancora while waiting for more troops, attacking it with pitiless and tireless war engines. The castle had a garrison three thousand strong and perhaps two hundred men died every day upon the battlements, yet they seemed invincible. For there was a secret underpass between Ancora and Symarna, ever replenishing the garrison. Zohaqq the spy sent ravens and pigeons unto Wadd, telling him not to waste his troops and siege engines by attacking the ever-replenishing garrison of Ancora. So tall were the walls of Ancora that they had never fallen in times of war before. According to legend the castle was older than the Flood, being the handwork of blood-eating giants.

Wadd dismissed the siege of Ancora after two months, which the people of Symarna counted as a victory. They celebrated it with much wine and song behind city walls. Yet the goddess Fate is ever fickle and never allows a warrior to rest for too long before inventing new perils for him. Wadd waited until spring to renew his troops, receiving one hundred thousand more footmen from Aqqamer and fifty thousand more horsemen from Tur. When they arrived, he posted vigilant sentinels around untaken Ancora and marched towards Symarna itself.

THE SIEGE OF SYMARNA

Symarna was seated upon a lonesome island inside a deep moat connected to the Livid Sea, with stalwart walls around. She could thus rely upon aid from the sea at all times. Wadd laid siege unto Symarna now, his seemingly endless hosts like a pack of wild dogs surrounding a mermaid. Yet beware the mermaid's serpent tail and scorpion sting, taking the wild dogs by surprise!

Perithemis had never seen war before the battle of Lud, but he knew how his ancestors had defeated Ammoweh of Ninaddo three generations ago during a five-year siege. They did so through sheer persistence of will and saintly patience. Symarna had received a thousand waggons of flour and spice from Phoezanthion for the sake of the siege, which could feed the citizens and sellswords for two years. He now saw the wisdom of Phoezanthion, how Xerxapollo proclaimed Symarna as an independent republic to avoid jihad from Sigeans and crusades from Tarshish at the same time.

Wadd massacred any living soul he could lay hands upon for the sake of vengeance, even the simple farmers of Lud who live upon the berries and rabbits of the land, whose only crime was worshipping Azda. He torched the wheaten plains and the sandalwood forests of Symarna. He took no captives, killing them outright and adorning pikes with their heads. He assaulted the city with pitiless war engines: catapults and trebuchets, ballistae and harphagons. The walls cracked from the relentless assault and the barbicans groaned under the weight of battering rams. Yet the people of Symarna, burning with the zeal of defending their homeland, repaired the walls and the gates during night. Wadd hurled polished rocks and severed heads into the heart of the city, raining from the sky like accursed meteors, while the wizards of Symarna burned the enemy alive with ignosiphons and heliophores. Against weapons that hurl rock, they pit weapons that spit fire.

Perithemis could not lift the siege and Wadd could not conquer the city. Landward help kept arriving at Sigeans and seaward help arrived at Symarna, thus prolonging the siege. Fate, that fickle goddess, ground foe and friend alike into a bloody paste as if through a millstone. She weighed them and found both sides wanting, sometimes adding a feather unto a scale to create the impression of victory one day, only to add another feather upon the opposite scale the next day.

Perithemis and Wadd thus seemed evenly matched, with hundreds dying upon the battlements every day. Wadd observed that his siege towers were not tall enough for the mountainlike walls of Symarna: nor were his battering rams sturdy enough to break barbicans of cold iron. He sent fifty thousand men into the depths of the forests of Symarna, of timeless fir and pine, to build even more fearsome engines. Perithemis used this chance to send letters unto Sparthena and Tarshish, asking for succour.

“Ephods of Sparthena, philosopher king of Tarshish! We are encircled by the Sigean enemy like a child surrounded by wolves. Yet wolves themselves would howl their disagreement at the war tactics of Wadd. May the world never witness a tyrant as loathsome as him! Men who hoist black banners shall kill every man and woman of Symarna upon victory, perhaps immolate our well-beloved city as sacrifice unto their silent god. They torch our wheaten fields and our sandalwood forests, as if no generation of men shall ever live upon this land. Perhaps such is their violent will. Remember the old plight of Tyridon, where you now besiege Sigeans! I know that your eyes are set on the great prize, Phoezanthion, which you lay siege even now. May the ancient conflict between Dion and Pard end today! We are Diopardissans: the blood of Dion and Pard run with equal pride in our teeming veins. If you do not divert troops unto the cause of Symarna, The Caleph shall burn our city and bring people from distant Jeriddo to people our desolate homeland. We are all children of the same sea. We applaud the same songs, laugh at the same jokes.

Have we not lived upon these shores together with you for millennia? We are already brothers in blood, so let us become brothers in arms!"

The ephods of Sparthena wept manlike tears upon the letter and pledged twenty thousand hoplites and five hundred ships unto Symarna. For they, too, wanted freedom from both the white banners of Tarshish and the crimson banners of Phoezanthion. Yet the philosopher king of Tarshish, Marcaulion, was a man who was unmoved with the tears of supplicants. He did not lift the siege upon Phoezanthion but tightened it, so that Tarshish could rule over the Old World at long last. The priests of Latillium opposed despatching help unless the people of Symarna were to extinguish their fire temples and accept the triune God.

Perithemis also asked for parley with Wadd, in vain. Wadd feared the same treachery that befell Manaph and refused petitions of peace, instead sending him a wax-sealed letter upon an arrow.

"Forlorn consul of Symarna! I heard that the merchant-princes of Amalphi praise your sharp mind and your republican cause, while the ephods of Sparthena weep manlike tears for your plight. Republics are the Devil's work, for the flocks of this world ever need shepherds. You now behold the full might of Sige. Too late you tremble in fear. Is it not enough that you have killed Manaph that you now invite me and my guards into Symarna? Surrender unto me Parthenissa the witch and Xoanna the murderess, so that I can avenge my young brother. Have you not seen the pyramids of corpses and the cairns of skulls that I built upon the plain of Lud, fulfilling my oath? Do you not fear that your own accursed head will also adorn a pike some day? I may consider lifting the siege if and only if you surrender your weapons to become Sigean converts, extinguishing every fire temple within Symarna. Your soldiers die in droves every day. It seems the demons of fire that you worship

cannot save you from my wrath after all. Give me Xoanna and Parthenissa, and I may perhaps spare your people.”

Perithemis knew well that Wadd would slaughter every man and woman of Symarna if they were to lay down their weapons. He answered thus. “Unholier son of unholy Caleph! You would raze a city to avenge the life of a single knave? You claim to be a just ruler, yet where is justice in defiling tens of thousands of corpses to avenge a criminal brother? Xoanna is a woman virginborn and Parthenissa came back from the dead after drinking hemlock wine. Fear these miracles, if you fear not our mountainlike walls. To compel the hand of God to work greater miracles is a sin I shall never commit. There are Azdaean volunteers in our city who came here wearing their own shrouds. When they are so willing to embrace death, why hassle me with vain words of violence? Disband your troops upon the plain of Lud. Return to your old and limping father in the endless gardens of Marconda. Abandon the cause of war, for I have chosen freedom in the name of our future generations. If we all fall and become dust, may Eosis sculpt new generations from our soil itself.”

GAMES OF HONOUR

Games of honour were customary amongst all the nations of the world. Such was the tradition that whenever battle came to a standstill, each side would choose a champion from amongst champions by way of applause. Thus chosen, the two champions would be granted a great boon in exchange for laying down their lives. They would then fight unto death to see whose side carried favour with Fate, with the winner receiving fame and spoils of war and the dead buried with many honours.

The war was thus stopped for a day for the sake of games of honour. Perithemis and Wadd alike sounded their eerie trumpets, announcing ceasefire for a day. The champions gathered outside of city walls, by the shadow of the battlements, so that ally and enemy alike could watch the spectacle. Archers laid down their bows and the war engines stopped working.

Who was the best champion of Symarna? Paroon grabbed the discus and threw it upon the walls of Symarna, wedging the discus between two rocks from a hundred feet away. Zalmox grabbed his broadsword and split a mule in twain with two blows. Noxate grabbed his sling and shattered a tankard of beer from a hundred feet away. Xoanna grabbed her knife and threw it with such technique that it pierced the crest of the helmet of a young warrior, without injuring him. Last to vie was Dahacca, the undefeated champion of Symarna, who uprooted an olive tree all by himself. The people chose him as their champion with the thunder of applause. Dahacca asked for a great boon from Perithemis: if he won, he was to receive three hundred talents of silver and become a prince of Symarna. The praetors of Symarna agreed to this vainglorious boon, for they did not want to seem weak against the invaders.

Wadd watched the warriors of Symarna from his palanquin. He was pleased at what he saw, for fighting a weak enemy is neither manlike

nor imperial. He now summoned his own champions. Nabaal shot three arrows at the wooden buckler of a fellow soldier from a hundred feet, each arrow striking the exact centre. Abgall hurled his javelin at a horse from a hundred fathoms, hitting the beast right at the skull and killing it anon. Kahl displayed his mettle by jumping upon a wide-horned bull and cutting his throat with his long knife, staying upon the bull as he collapsed from loss of blood. Maan, the best wrestler on the Sigean side, made his fellows proud by lifting a rock twice his weight. Yet the greatest champion amongst the Sigeans was Hubaal, who thought the games of honour were below him. He stood as still as a lifeless statue when called upon, doing nothing as his warlike reputation spoke on his behalf. Sigeans clapped for him with tempestuous applause, choosing him as their champion despite his balking.

There was bad blood between Wadd and Hubaal. Hubaal was a proud idolater amongst the god-fearing warriors of Sige, tolerated by Sigean law as an exception for his sheer valour in combat. He was of ancient Noddite blood, like the Caleph and his dynasty. He despised the Sigean religion, yet fought to earn fame on behalf of his tribe and himself. Some whispered that he was the son of immortal alchemist Uzza, for his talents seemed beyond the compass of nature. He was discipline itself, uninterested in the spoils of war. He fought not for gold, nor perhaps even fame, but for the sake of war itself. Wadd summoned him from his palanquin, for it was customary to offer a boon to the champion of champions before he fought unto death.

“Speak, Hubaal! Ever you insult me with your heathenry. Yet you are the mightiest of all warriors in my service, for such is the will of the silent God. I endure your taunts because we are descended from the same bloodline, we who rule over Jeriddo and its azure ziggurats. Speak! What boon would you beg of me? Shall I make thee a greater prince, or spare five hundred talents of silver for your funeral? Would you prefer the olive yards of Shammon, or the grape gardens

of Tyridon? Would you wed my uncle's virgin daughter to become even closer kin, her beauty sung by the poets of Marconda? Speak."

Hubaal spoke thus. "I fight not for the sake of maidens and treasures. Weak men fight for bread. Stronger men fight for silver and gold. Even stronger men fight for the sake of fame. I fight for the sake of war alone. To me there is no pleasure save in hewing necks and breaking limbs. If you want me to fight as your champion in these games of honour, I have but one wish: bend the knee before me once."

Wadd bellowed with laughter. "You buffoon! Do you think of insulting The Caleph with such childish tricks? I know how many members of our tribe tremble with your fear. I know how you sow dissent amongst believers with your heathenry. God has made thee proud so that He can crush thee all the better in the end. So be it! You avoid all lesser sins to wallow in your pride. I shall bend the knee before you, but if and only if you can bring me the head of Dahacca."

Hubaal smiled his snow-cold smile and marched towards the battlements. Dahacca was amazed at this opponent, for he was an unseemly champion. He wore no armour of iron, bore no scars: his stature was unimposing, his limbs slender. He was without beard and crested helmet. His sole weapons were a long staff and a short spear. Dahacca shouted many boasts: "Behold, people of Symarna! Sigeans have run out of warlike men, so they are now sending an urchin to fight me. Does he not know that I am Dahacca, the greatest warrior to walk upon the earth? Does he not know that Symarna has defeated giants in the past, so who is this impling to defy me? I who can uproot trees shall also uproot this man and crush him between my arms, killing him without drawing my sword. Let his unclean blood sprinkle all over our black soil."

Hubaal boasted thus. "You are indeed the greatest warrior to walk under the battlements of Symarna. Yet people say that I am no

warrior, only an executioner in the service of the angels of death. If you so much as shed a single drop of blood from me, I shall lay down my life and victory shall be yours."

Dahacca charged towards this vainglorious man with his spear, but alas! Victory was not going to be his. If he were a rowdy rooster, Hubaal was the quiet eagle. When Dahacca hurled his iron spear with great force, Hubaal avoided the blow by tumbling to the side. He took to the air like a falcon by leaning on his staff, leaping with the speed of wind and landing behind Dahacca. Dahacca had barely the chance to turn around and face his attacker when Hubaal impaled him in the throat with his own shorter spear, felling him like an olive tree. Dahacca collapsed where he stood, his blood spurting like a fountain. The people of Symarna bewailed their misery while Sigeans clapped and yelled taunts. Hubaal walked towards the pond of blood like a wild cat, not even pausing for a final boast before hacking off Dahacca's head with his falchion. He left his headless corpse upon the field, so that the people of Symarna can weep and bury him upon a hapless mound --- so that they could remember him forever as the destroyer of Dahacca. Sigeans carried him upon their own shoulders and brought him unto Wadd's palanquin, where he hurled the severed head at The Caleph's feet.

Wadd was of two minds. He wanted to punish Hubaal for his arrogance and heathenry, yet the Sigean host was chanting his name with such fervour that he succumbed to the popular will. He embraced Hubaal, his pagan kin, and bent the knee before him. He even allowed the champion to sit upon his throne for a day, wearing his own opal crown and pearl-sewn cape. Hubaal smiled his cold smile, a man whose only sin was pride.

ABDUCTION

Six months passed, hundreds of warriors falling from both sides with each passing day. The people of Symarna began to murmur that their plight was caused by Parthenissa, who did nothing but weep before the Sun Fire. They taunted her sometimes, asking when help would arrive from the burning heavens. Ever she prayed unto the Sun Fire, arranging rosaries to commemorate the name of each warrior fallen in battle. She swept the altar clean with the patience of a mother bathing her babe, carried sandalwood and incense to keep the fire burning with the endurance of a father bringing food home. None could defame her for fear of incurring the wrath of the brethren of Azda, yet the people murmured that she had broken the laws of their republic by taking justice unto her own hands and bringing this doom upon their homeland.

Thus she wrote in her last letter to the vestals of Phoezanthion. "Sisters! Fate may seem unkind to our cause, but do not lose faith in the sole god Azda and his archangel Eosis. You fight against the white banners of Aion, while we fight against the black banners of Sige. The crimson banners of Azda rise ever proud, yet the men defending them seem dwindling. I hear of men of faith dying every day, with the name of God on their lips. I add the names of every martyr to the rosaries I assemble, ensuring that every fallen warrior receives a prayer before the Sun Fire. Thankless task, to watch innocent men perish thus in the fires of war! If only God were to take my life already! If only doves and doves alone were sewn unto warlike banners, for the sake of an endless peace! I extol the intercessant saints of heaven and I even weep for damned souls. May archangel Thaos weep cold tears to douse the coals of Hell, lightening their suffering! If only God were to send a new conqueror to unite all lands under His worship! If only an archangel were to appear from amongst the flames and counsel us in living flesh! If only the Sun Fire came alive and rose like a living goddess, defending her own hearth! Yet I spend all day waiting for signs and

omens, beholding angels made of clouds and interpreting the speech of birds. Our independent republic is tested with the travails of an unhappy age, but there are many citizens in Symarna who would rather deem Phoezanthion our queen. Will no help come from Phoezanthion as Tarshish assails you for the sake of levying taxes and tributes? Shall the city of Symarna fall for such a mundane reason, after thousands of years of common kinship and faith? I would rather walk into the flames and burn up like wilted leaves before I watch Symarna burn at the hands of Wadd. Pity the babes of Symarna, for The Caleph is the common enemy of mankind. He shall dash their brains against rocks and extinguish our people if the walls do not hold."

The spy Zohaqq lived in the city of Symarna, sending many treasonous letters unto Wadd through raven and pigeon. Wadd offered him five hundred talents of silver if he could kidnap Parthenissa and bring her unto him, so that she could stand trial for breaking the covenants of hospitality and murdering his brother Manaph. Zohaqq gathered unto himself five ruffians who would split the silver, so that they could enter the Sun Fire after midnight and kidnap the hapless maiden. They swore on oath of blood with bleeding hands, binding them unto the same crime.

Parthenissa was deep asleep that night. The archangel Eosis appeared unto Parthenissa in a dream, asking her from behind a veil of clouds whether she was still willing to earn eternal fame in exchange for a martyrdom of agony. Parthenissa said "yes" with trembling lips and quaking limbs. She woke up and found her bed surrounded by the five ruffians. She would shout for help out of instinct, but irresolution stayed her hand instead. She knew that Wadd might spare the city if he wrought his vengeance upon herself, sparing perhaps at least the babes of Symarna. The ruffians bound her hand and foot, gagging her with a piece of cloth and covering her body with a shroud. They placed her in a coffin and abducted her out of the city.

Now it was the custom after midnight for the men of Symarna to return the corpses of Sigean soldiers who died upon the battlements in coffins and dump them before their bolted barbicans. Parthenissa might have alerted the city guards with muffled screams and violent threshing perhaps, but she chose not to do so. The five ruffians surrendered Parthenissa unto the enemy in a coffin that was marked with black paint. Sigean scouts grabbed their prize and brought him before Wadd, who was wide awake to celebrate his vengeance. He bade his soldiers remove the cloth that gagged her mouth. The Caleph slapped her across the face, reddening her lips with blood.

“Unholy harlot! You brought this ill destiny upon yourself, when you lay a trap for my godlike brother Manaph together with that painted clown called Xoanna. You broke the timeless covenants of hospitality, for Manaph was granted the right of passage unto Symarna. Have you seen the pyramids of corpses upon the plain of Lud? Have you seen the wheaten plains of Symarna burn, which I hope to sow with ash and salt before this war is over? Have you seen the sandalwood forests of Symarna go up in flames, their smell wafting up like incense to appease God’s own wrath? Speak!” Parthenissa did not speak but only weep, in her mind ready to drink the wine of martyrdom. Yet when she wept, it was as if her tears were like spring rain dripping from snowdrops. She was such a meek and beautiful damsel that Wadd chose not to execute her on that night, instead ordering her to stand trial for her crimes.

The brethren of Azda brought simple and lovely flowers unto the Sun Fire the next morning, as was their wont. Parthenissa was nowhere to be seen, which surprised the worshippers. The more devout Azdaeans whispered that she had been taken unto heaven, while more mundane citizens feared treason and kidnapping. Wadd bade his trumpeters blow notes of fear and dismay, awakening the sentinels of Symarna earlier than ever. The people of Symarna bewailed their fate when they saw Parthenissa in a cage. There was a

great uproar in the city and many feared this bad omen. Perithemis ordered a civic investigation to find who was culpable. Wadd did not attack them during that day, allowing them to wail and weep instead.

Perithemis asked many citizens to swear oaths of truth in the Forum. One of the abductors was so wrecked with guilt that he confessed his crime, naming each criminal. Perithemis bade his citizens bury them all alive in coffins, except for the man who confessed his crime: he received a simple and painless death by having his neck broken. As for Zohaqq the spy, whose many crimes were discovered thus, Perithemis had him covered in honey and buried waist deep near the wasp hives of Lud. The wasps gnawed at his flesh, ever inward, yet Zohaqq could not speak. For his lips and eyes were sewn shut.

XOANNA'S CHALLENGE

Xoanna tore at her wheaten hair and wept many tears upon hearing of Parthenissa's plight. For Xoanna was not only a devout worshipper of Azda but loved Parthenissa like her own sister. The same unfaithful crowd that murmured against Parthenissa found blame with her also, accusing her of starting the war. She wanted to avenge her good name and perhaps redeem Parthenissa by challenging Wadd's champion to personal combat. Her mother Sephorah wept to no avail, afraid of losing her virginborn daughter to windlike Hubaal. Xoanna did not budge despite her complaints, her veins aflame with righteous rage.

"Mother! You conceived me without a father, yet even you have no say in how and when I should die. Perhaps Hubaal shall break my neck like the tempest, perhaps I shall reap his head like the whirlwind. Stay your tears! I shall earn glory whether I win or lose: if I die, Wadd may lift the siege and spare the babes of Symarna. If I win, I shall win Parthenissa's liberty and avenge Dahacca. I once heard from a pale sailor a strange tale. The natives of Meropis believe, he said, that afterlife is won not through the deeds of life but through the manner of your death. Who knows? A life of virtue is meaningless without a great ending. Perhaps paradise is indeed like a sempiternal yellow rose under the never-setting sun of God, as I read from a poet of Latillium who once wrote thus. Perhaps there are two petals reserved for you and I there, with angels buzzing about like honeybees. Perhaps I shall be reborn after death according to the Wheel of Duty, as the gymnosophists of Sinddha believe. But believe me when I say that if I were a soul waiting rebirth in heaven before drinking from the river of forgetfulness, I would again choose the fate of a warmaiden fighting Sigeans. For I have seen with my own eyes how Wadd is a tyrant, how our cause is just. Perhaps the faith of Azda is right after all and, after crossing a bridge as thin as hair and as sharp as razor, I shall be admitted unto the crystalline temples of paradise. If I were to enter the heaven of Eosis, I would still hanker

for rebirth so that I can become a woman like Xoanna anew, so that I can fight the very same enemy upon the very same battlements of our fair homeland, Symarna."

Sephorah spoke thus. "Life is sweet and I am old, but you would dismiss the pleasures of this life and disdain the wisdom of this old sorceress. I would ask you to live for the sake of your sisters of blood, Thailai and Perpetua, who shall have to deal with wolves amongst men if you lose. I know that some slanderous mouths have blamed you for the invasion of Symarna, yet do you think Wadd will stop after impaling your head upon a pike? Think of your sisters if blood, Thailai and Perpetua, who are unlearned in the ways of war. Would you let them perish in the upcoming conflict? But I know that the cause of your sister in spirit, Parthenissa, burns strong in your chest now. My words cannot move you and I know that Parthenissa is in grave peril. Let me give you a small dirk so venomous that even the slightest prick can kill an ox. Hide it upon your right thigh and smite Hubaal with that dagger. After drawing so much as a single drop of blood, return to my safe embrace. And lest you die, give me a single lock from your manelike hair so that I can cling unto it as a keepsake." Xoanna removed her divine helmet and let loose her hair to cut a wheaten braid, giving it to her mother.

Xoanna sought audience with the consul of Symarna to consult him about vengeance. Perithemis judged the circumstances. He knew that Wadd desired vengeance against Parthenissa and Xoanna in his letters, yet he was also cunning enough to guess that their deaths would not suffice to lift the siege. Xoanna herself saw glory in defeat and even greater glory in victory. He embraced Xoanna as if he was embracing his own daughter and sacrificed a rooster unto Eosis, the archangel of resurrection. He spoke thus. "You choose a better death than many, Xoanna. No matter what happens, I shall not allow the people of Symarna to slander your name in victory or defeat. Your memory shall survive amongst the poets and the priests, even if your wheaten hair and your earth-hazel eyes become dust."

He bade his trumpeters blow the notes that mark the games of honour. It was evening time and there was a crimson sunset, as if Symarna herself was bleeding. The citizens opened wide a barbican and she walked unto the shadows of the battlements, where the people were already thronging to watch the fight.

Xoanna blew her horn: a single deathlike note. She shouted thus. "Cowards! With treason you have won Parthenissa, whom I shall avenge with my honest sword. Where is your champion of champions? May the demons of hell mark these words: I stand fearless against your heroes. Treason! We have already crushed Zohaqq and his gang. I propose an oath under the setting sun. If I prevail against Hubaal, may the Caleph himself return Parthenissa unto the Sun Fire. You owe your enemy this much justice after your treason."

Wadd pondered the challenge for some time, weighing upon inward scales the cause of personal vengeance against the cause of universal justice. Yes, Parthenissa had been won through treason. The other nations of Wæold were already judging him for being too cruel and too arrogant. His cause had been deemed just at first by many nations because Symarna had broken the covenants of hospitality. The yearlong siege had not broken the will of the people. He had hoped for an easy victory when the Phoenix Empire declared the independence of Symarna, as if Symarna were a lame lamb amongst his wolves. Yet the lamb had the horns of a bull and the teeth of a dragon. When the whelp cried, leopards arrived to defend him. The merchant-princes of Venalphi and the ephods of Sparthena had already pledged support for Symarna. Wadd knew that he could not conquer the West with brute force alone, without softening their hearts first. In his heart he despised Hubaal, that man of cold smile whose mind is impossible to read. He needed time for his engineers to build taller siege towers and more violent war engines. He raised his right hand and uttered his doom.

“Painted clown! No woman should fight a man’s battle. Your hands would serve you better were you a housewife, as is the will of God. Yet we who defeat the men of Symarna shall not cower before an unseemly woman now. Who am I to deny you death? True, we won Parthenissa through treason. Yet have you not slain my brother Manaph through treason? Fie on me for imitating your tactics! Know that I shall not kill Parthenissa today but ensure that she receives judgement. If you win, take Parthenissa back unto the accursed Sun Fire. If you lose, I shall note your valour and give you a proper burial.” Tears of joy rolled down Parthenissa’s cheeks, praying for Xoanna’s victory.

Hubaal was not pleased at this task, for he did not want his good fame sullied by association with treason. Yet he could not oppose the Caleph in such a request. He walked towards Xoanna, who towered above him like an oak above an olive tree.

“Unhappy woman! We have met before, during the battle of Lud. I saw how you slew my fellow warriors like a sickle mowing down wild oats. Go away! Return to the battlements of Symarna, for I shall spare your life today. To kill a warmaiden is considered bad luck amongst the princes of Nod, for I read thus in the Pancalliopiad once. Behold! I shall not draw my sword.”

Hubaal sheathed his sword and held up his shield. Xoanna was like a woman possessed, hacking at his shield many times --- sometimes landing a blow and sometimes missing the mark. The spectators taunted and whistled at them, wishing to see a real fight. Hubaal’s supporters cheered for him, while the battlements of Symarna were silent.

Xoanna wanted victory above all else. After a successful blow that bent Hubaal’s shield, she reached for the venomous dagger upon her right thigh. She hurled it towards Hubaal’s forehead, but alas!

Hubaal was a man as swift as the wind. He tumbled to the side to avoid the blow. He cast one quick glance at the small dagger lying on the sand and knew at once that the blade was coated with venom.

This changed his disposition. "Poison!" he yelled. He picked up three rocks anon and smote Xoanna in the head thrice. Blood ran down her nostrils like water from a spring. She now wanted escape, but it was too late to save her dear life. Hubaal leapt upon her like a leopard leaping from a tree upon a gazelle, crushing her ribs beneath his feet. He grabbed her hair and severed her head with his falchion, carrying the head and the venom-coated dagger towards Wadd and his war council.

Wadd was delighted to see his champion prevail again, yet in his heart kept cursing him for being an arrogant pagan and not a devout Sigeian like himself. Hubaal hurled the severed head and the venomous dagger at his feet. Wadd rose from his throne and spoke thus. "The people of Symarna broke yet another universal law: for poison is forbidden in games of honour. You see, my viziers and satraps, how righteous our campaign is after all. This city shall be ours within a year. This accursed nation must disappear! I shall bring meek peasants from Aqqamer to people the ruins of this city. Hubaal, we shall wed thee unto a maiden of Calephal stock if you convert to the Sigeian faith. If not, five hundred talents of silver will be yours."

Hubaal bent the knee and spoke thus. "The blood I shed is service enough, and I ask for nothing in return. Give the five hundred talents of silver unto the poor. I request but one favour after witnessing their treachery. Burn Xoanna's mangled corpse upon a heap of dung and embalm the head, so that it can adorn a pike. Let all see the fear upon her dead visage and let no champion of Symarna challenge me unto these games of honour ever again."

Wadd bade Xoanna's hacked corpse burnt upon a pile of dung. Her sword and armour were returned to her family, for Wadd would

honour that custom. There was anger against Sephorah amongst the citizens for equipping her daughter with a venomous dagger, thus breaking the rules of the games of honour. Perithemis bade his praetors arrest Sephorah and lock her up in a dungeon. Yet she redeemed herself with a hundred talents of silver as bail, with many citizens pitying her sacrifice and praising her wile against windlike Hubaal.

Wadd judged the circumstances and declared a ceasefire for a hundred days, so that he could bid his engineers build more fearsome war engines and finally crack the proud walls of Symarna.

THE GOLDEN STATUE

It was right after the beginning of the ceasefire that Zosimon the immortal summoned Perithemis with a letter. The consul brought in tow ten old priests and ten young children, so that he could move the ageless man through mercy. Also with him was Niodusa, a warmaiden: a worldly-wise woman who believed in neither magic nor miracles.

Zosimon lived in a small cave within the holy grove of Nemeton, keeping himself busy with his potions and philtres. It was the most witching hour of the night, with giant serpents writhing around and trees from before the Flood rustling their leaves despite no wind. The two moons were in the wane. There were torches and candles burning all around Maiden Glory, the statue of the guardian spirit of Symarna, gazing upon them with orbless eyes. Zosimon had a great staff in his hands and a simple robe upon him.

Perithemis began thus. "Man of immortal days! I know not how to address you, for you are greater than men who wear golden crowns and men who hoard bleeding gold. If I deemed you a priest and clasped the hem of your robe, I would fear that this would cause offence. If I bent the knee before you like a king, I would think it not enough. You create gold with your hands yet you scorn it. I come not for my own weal but for the sake of the babes and the elders Symarna, who shall be dashed against rocks if Wadd wins this war. Behold them tremble before you! Men who fall from an unjust cause do not stop weeping in their graves: so sayeth the Song of All. Let their laments rise unto the throne of Azda! I am a man of faith, yet I have never seen a living prophet before. We have broken the covenants of hospitality, yet in what book of God is it considered just to raze an entire city for the death of a single knave? We have sought to kill Hubaal with poison, yet in which tablet of heaven is it considered impious to defend your city? I would willingly lay down my own life to redeem Symarna, but I fear that one man's sacrifice

would not be enough to tilt the scales of heaven in our favour. Bethink our young men, who fall in battle without knowing the warm kisses of maidens. Bethink our warriors, who would rather till wheaten plains than man our battlements.”

Niodussa whispered thus unto the ears of Perithemis. “I pity this young man, for he seems to be a charlatan. How can he be ten thousand years old? Have you seen with your own eyes proof of his immortality? Have you seen him transmute baser metals into gold? Demand proof, or let us be gone from this accursed grove.”

Zosimon heard Niodusa’s challenge with his sharp ears. “I am indeed an immortal alchemist, a student of godlike Sarastro himself. You shall see proof with your own eyes now, even if that will be the last thing you shall see tonight.” He grabbed his dagger and cut open his own right hand. Golden ichor dripped from the wound, not crimson blood. He then held up his hand to a torch, and behold! The wound healed from the fire and the ichor that dripped unto the earth became drops of molten gold. Perithemis and the priests kissed the earth he walked upon. As for Niodussa, she saw her world dim and darken after witnessing the miracle: for she was smitten with blindness. Legends do not speak of her again, except to note that Zosimon healed her eyes in three days after her repentance. She became a priestess in the service of Azda afterwards, laying aside her weapons.

Zosimon addressed the consul thus. “You come at a time when the fixed stars themselves weep for succour for Symarna. I have defended the cause of Symarna before the great spheres of heaven, made of hot plasm and cold aether, who rule over our universe through pure reason and the harmony of the spheres. I have consulted the seven archangels about your plight in the heavenly court. Trometan accused your people of impiousness and arrogance, while Khorda defended you for defending your homeland. Rhabaal accused your people of breaking your covenants, while Wohuman

stood by you for standing against Wadd the tyrant. Yet it was archangel Eosis who tipped the scales in the end. Behold this ancient statue in the heart of the grove, Maiden Glory. None knows its sculptor and it seems devoid of glitter. Just like your city, it is made of stone yet gleaming with hidden virtue inside. In my dream I saw Eosis touching this idol with the tip of his wing, whispering unto me that it is made of pure gold inside. Behold!”

The alchemist smote Maiden Glory with his staff and the great statue cracked in the middle --- revealing veins of gold inside. Zosimon spoke thus. “This grove belongs to the people of Symarna as a public temple. Under your laws, two thirds of it belong to the treasury of Symarna and one third belongs to me. Smelt this gold, ingot by ingot, under your own watchful eyes. Proclaim that none shall spend this gold except for the defence of Symarna. Let no lesser hand seize so much as a single grain. Thus your immortal master Zosimon divides the loot.”

The people of Symarna heard about this miracle the next morning. They flocked unto Nemeton, their eyes bulging in disbelief when they saw the veins of gold jutting out of the broken idol. They brought garlands of flowers and cups of frankincense to Zosimon’s cave, proclaiming him a living god. The brethren of Azda even offered to disband their republic and crown him king. How sweet that offer rang in Zosimon’s ears!

He answered thus. “People of Symarna! Leave me alone in my cave, so that I may study the roots of earth and the stars of heaven in silence. Gods and beasts prefer solace and know that I am no beast. Know that even I cannot promise you an easy victory against the Caleph, who fights not for the sake of gold but vengeance. Smelt the gold and use two thirds of it for the cause of war. Keep one third, for I shall build a temple unto myself with the remainder.”

THE THIRD ENIGMA

Sephorah wept vain tears in the House of Dusk, her daughters Perpetua and Thailai dressed in blue sorrow and sprinkling their hair with ash. She prepared a shrine unto Xoanna, arranging her sword and armour upon an altar adorned with votive lamps and kissing her lock of wheaten hair every day. For ten days she wept without touching food, in her mind swearing vengeance against Hubaal.

When she heard about the miracle of Zosimon, she sought out the alchemist upon the sacred grove of Nemeton. She entered his cave with trembling hands and teary eyes, bringing a cup of frankincense and the lock of wheaten hair. Zosimon spoke first. "Unhappy sorceress! It was a tactless decision to poison the games of honour. You now think that your warlike daughter fell for nothing. Speak your mind."

Sephorah spoke thus. "Immortal master! You read my heart and perhaps even the remedy that will heal it. How easy that word "immortal" rolls off the tongue, as if it were a small thing! I know that you shall never bestow the elixir of youth unto me for my many crimes. I have poisoned men and women for the sake of silver. I am no saint, nor perhaps counted amongst the simple honest folk of Azda. Yet was not my daughter guileless and blameless in death? Was she not a true daughter of Symarna to lay down her life thus? I can offer you neither silver nor gold, for I know that you need nothing. I came here to plead vengeance for the sake of my daughter Xoanna. Unmake my mistake, master Zosimon! Give me an instrument of vengeance with which to destroy Hubaal! Give me a weapon of liberty that shall skewer his heart! Bring my daughter back from the dead, so that I may kiss her hands once again!"

Zosimon answered thus. "Fie, sorceress! Your words strike my heart across like a sawtooth arrow. I saw with my own eyes how Xoanna's hacked corpse was defiled upon a heap of dung, for I was upon the

blood-black battlements that day. My blood boils at Wadd's wanton blasphemy. Hubaal is a star-kissed man and only a star-chosen avenger can kill him. Bend the knee and listen, for I may break the Emerald Law to grant your plea.

For ten thousand years I have been alive, ever a lesser student of greater masters. I was never given an empire to of my own: Sarastro told me perhaps a thousand times as the centuries rolled past that it was my fate to serve mortals, not rule over them. How I resent it now! Why, I wish to serve no master and I would rather be worshipped as a living god for a season than endure everlasting toil. I know that I shall be killed for breaking the Emerald Law, but I tire of living anyway. We alchemists know about the three enigmata of God: elixir of youth, lapis lapidorum, abiogenesis. I can distil the elixir of youth and transform quicksilver into gold, but the third enigma is for our grandmaster Sarastro alone. He can create likenesses of living beings inside the alembic from so much as a single drop of blood or a single string of hair.

Do you see this wide scar across my chest? Do you see these star-shaped wounds across my palms? I lived in the realm of Sard about ten thousand years ago, where I had a shepherdess wife and three splendid sons. The ties of kinship are forbidden unto The Circle of Eld, but I broke that law. My youngest son was only twelve years old when he drowned to save the life of a lamb. Curse upon all magic when you cannot even cheat Fate once! I was grief-stricken and I defied all gods of heaven and earth and sea to bring him back. I sneaked into the Fire of Fires upon Zhamûrg like a wise serpent during midnight, where I beheld the Tabernacle in its majesty. My hands burned as I removed the aurichalc lid and gazed upon the Tablet of Fate, thus learning the third enigma. I created a living likeness of my son in the alembic, mixing sulphur with lapis lapidorum. The archangel Eosis caught me while teaching him the art of speech. Cruel seraph! May God tear asunder his wings! He smote me with a thunderbolt across the chest. Eosis told me that my son

was dead, his atoms having dispersed unto the universe upon death. True resurrection was beyond the powers of even the Circle: we could but create likenesses of the dead.

I was dragged before Sarastro in chains, where I was judged for vainglory and for breaking the laws of nature. Beneath the pyramid Ophyridas there is a dungeon without sunlight, where I spent a hundred years. As for the likeness of my child, Eosis put him into deep sleep with a lullaby and killed him by stopping his heart. How I resent it all now! A lesser alchemist, ever the servant and never the master! Let me taste the forbidden wine of godhood just once! I shall resurrect your daughter, even if this means my own death after ten thousand years of service. Like every story, I must have a beginning and an end. I shall not pass from this mortal coil without redeeming Symarna. I shall rule over this city, even if it But know that Eosis is a jealous archangel and will punish us both with certain death for reviving Xoanna. Make your choice.”

Sephorah chose death thus. “Immortal master! May your fame live forever, if not your body! We shall worship you as a living god upon our altars and Symarna herself will be yours to rule if you so much as utter that sentence, “I am your king.” I am old and my aging bones shall not serve me well in afterlife. May Xoanna live anew at my expense, even if it be a mere likeness! May Eosis destroy my soul and disperse my atoms should he so please, but I choose Xoanna’s life above mine.”

Zosimon asked for a remnant of Xoanna’s body. Sephorah gave him the lock of wheaten hair shorn by Xoanna herself. Zosimon dismissed her, telling her to enjoy the last days of her life however she would please until the vengeance of the archangels caught up with them. Sephorah prayed every day to appease crimson-winged Eosis. “Dread archangel! Even if you shall smite me with a thunderbolt, please stay your hand long enough for me to wash Xoanna’s hands with my tears again. I am not the author of the laws of nature, but I

have seen many strange things under the sun. Why would God allow manmade miracles according to the covenants of heaven if they are forbidden thus upon earth? I do not understand this mystery.”

Zosimon melted the lock of hair inside a bottle of alkahest and mixed it with lapis lapidorum. The next day, there were corpuscles teeming inside the alembic like fish eggs. He seized a corpuscle with pincers and inserted it into a swan’s egg with a needle. He poured quicksilver upon the egg and threw it into a vat of sulphurous water, where the corpuscle grew for ten days until it reached the size of a babe. When the swan’s egg cracked, Zosimon unearthed an overgrown mandrake and buried the mute child inside the roots. In seventy days the mandrake sprouted like a tree, with a trunk in the shape of a living woman. When seventy days was complete, Zosimon cut open the anthropoidal tree with a saw. Green juice and crimson blood spurted from the gash. Inside the trunk was a woman in the likeness of Xoanna, as if she had never been dead.

They say that Perpetua abhorred this magic and abandoned her mother to marry her betrothed princeling, while Thailai was already cleaving unto Solmithra as his wife. Thus Sephorah was left alone to teach her twice-born daughter the art of speech in the House of Dusk. Xoanna asked for her sword before asking her own name. “Vengeance” was the first word she was taught.

THE JUDGEMENT OF PARTHENISSA

The destruction of Xoanna pleased Wadd, yet the true victim of his vengeance was Parthenissa: the woman who hatched the plot against Manaph. He was a glutton for vengeance, like a lion already fat from eating deer who stalks a lamb as his final prize.

For ten days, Parthenissa was displayed to his troops in a cage. The guards mistreated her, giving her unclean water and food teeming with worms. She did not touch the food but quenched her thirst with the unclean water. She was given a peasant's garb to wear and a black veil to hide her face. For ten days she languished in the cage, with warriors tossing thistles and thorns at her instead of flowers. In her mind she was already a martyr, but how slowly Fate spins her wheel during days of torment! She prayed every moment for the salvation of Symarna, pleading before the phoenix chariot of Eosis and the viper throne of Trometan in her dreams.

On the eleventh day, she was dragged into Wadd's palacelike tent. How unseemly she seemed amongst all the princes arrayed in splendour! The Caleph sat upon his turquoise throne, wearing his opal crown and his pearl-sewn cape. He wore three rings of emerald and sapphire and diamond, representing power over earth and sea and heaven. His satraps and viziers were arranged around him like falcons around an eagle. With him were two erudite clerics, Mahuqqim and Jalsad, to judge the vestal virgin under universal laws.

The Caleph began thus. "Is this the frail witch who arranged Manaph's death? You seem so innocent for someone so deadly. Yet if I have ever learned a lesson from years of politics, it is this: beauty is seldom innocent in women. Cunning serpent! Our law is harsh against all who offend the Caleph, I who am the shadow of God upon this earth. Yet I shall put you on trial under more universal laws: for breaking the ancient covenants of hospitality that are sacred

unto all nations. You even broke the laws of your own people, for I know that they put you on trial in Symarna. That sorceress of yours even paid off his wergild. Two hundred talents of silver for Manaph! Your senators and praetors seem incapable of judging the Caleph's wrath in earnest. You have not seen the pyramids of corpses and cairns of skulls that I built upon the plain of Lud --- so that I can even the scales and show the whole wide world that Calephal blood is worth thousandfold compared to your calculations. Tell me how you killed Manaph, sparing no detail. For I do not believe that he would threaten a vestal virgin with rape even when drunk, even if he was sometimes immodest. Place your hand upon Azdaean writ, for I suspect that you will not lie if you do so. It has reached even my ears that some kings in the West call me a tyrant for what happened upon the fields of Lud. We shall have nothing but justice in this matter."

Parthenissa bent her head and told her story from beginning to end. Two famous clerics, Mahuqqim and Jalsad, listened to her story with keen ears. Two guards who had accompanied Manaph unto the Sun Fire confirmed the truth of her words. Wadd was displeased, yet even he knew that Manaph was sometimes violent and impious. She even told them about the vision of Eosis, how the archangel asked her twice whether she would accept the agony of martyrdom for the sake of defending her city.

Mahuqqim spoke first. "This woman is so honest that some might take her for a fool. Yet saints of wrong religions are sometimes like this. This woman seems to have learned about the world from her faery romances. Blame the books, if not her. Fear the judgement of God, O Caleph, and let her live as a simple woman after marrying her off to one of your soldiers. Perhaps she shall see the beauty of our faith and convert to the one true religion as the years pass. She is too young for understanding the wiles of this world and I fear that she spoke the truth from beginning unto end. Look how she weeps! This kind of devotion unto God cannot be feigned. I saw how her lips were moving with prayer when she was in that cage, from morning

unto evening. God inspires our warriors to spread our religion with the sword and the mouth, judging necessary violence against the scales of peacetime charity. Let not the pampered princes of the West sully your empire with accusations of treason and impiousness. If you burn her alive, the war will linger forever and the people of Phoezanthion may break your peace treaty with them in a moment of revolt. I would even send her back unto Symarna for defending her chastity against Manaph's violent words, but she admits herself that she sprung a trap against Manaph before he uttered words that shame our religion. This is ungodly behaviour worthy of punishment. I have studied all religions and laws known unto man and I have never come across so much as a primitive tribe that does not honour the laws of hospitality. Yet for a woman who seems so devoted unto the wrong cause, martyrdom may seem like a prize. Spare her life and let her suffer a commoner's exile."

Jalsad spoke next. "O Caleph! You are the scourge of God, painting this world in blood that must be spilled. If we show mercy unto this witch whose hands are tainted with blasphemous ashes and murderous blood, think of how God's red-hot wrath may descend upon your troops! False mercy against the unbeliever is forbidden under Sigean law. You ask me to judge her under universal laws. Why do we Sigeans fight at all if our aim is not to establish Sigean law in the known world and beyond? What universal law did the people of Symarna obey by by springing a trap in advance against a Calephal prince? Did they not taunt you with a wergild of two hundred talents of silver, heaping insult upon injury? The war fares well, despite the ill tidings of this witch. As for her vision, that dream either came from God or from evil spirits. If it was indeed God who spoke to her when she drank the hemlock wine, she herself admits that an archangel of God wanted her death upon a bonfire. If it was an evil spirit, no more words from me: she must burn like the witch and murderess that she is. She set this war into motion against her own people with false zeal and even the people of Symarna shall be

relieved of the burden of supplicating a false angel before their altars of fire.”

Wadd judged their words and spoke thus. “Choose now, maiden! Mahuqqim wants you to live a life of exile, as a commoner and a member of the Sigeian faith. Jalsad wants you burning upon a pyre like a witch. But I know your choice already, for no living soul can be so devoted to the cause of its own destruction. I am no tyrant and I shall honour your wish if you choose Mahuqqim’s judgement.”

Parthenissa spoke. “O Caleph! I choose Jalsad’s verdict, even as I reject his judgement. I was raised as a saint and I shall die as a saint. I would not accept the Sigeian faith even if you offered your own crown and sceptre unto me. How sweet is the agony of martyrdom compared to a life in obscure exile! I know that I shall not live long enough to behold the people of Phoezanthion rise up in revolt to provide succour unto Symarna. Even now I walk amidst the gardens of paradise in my mind, with faeries and angels singing hymns unto God. The time has come for me to join their chorus. Yet know that I have wept for the innocent fallen of all nations in past prayers. I prayed many times for the souls of innocent Sigeian warriors fallen in battle. I prayed even for their safe return unto their homes. I once sung a litany for the sake of a young man of the Sigeian faith, fallen in battle at only seventeen years old, to lift him unto God’s paradise. For the sake of that litany, please kill me with a quick blow instead of burning me alive. That is my sole wish.”

Wadd waxed wroth upon hearing Parthenissa’s defiant speech. “Foolish witch, incapable of understanding godlike mercy even when it is offered unto you upon a golden platter! For choosing Jalsad’s verdict above Mahuqqim’s, I shall give you the worst of both their verdicts. You shall burn alive, yet you shall not die a virgin. I shall choose an unseemly soldier and marry you off to him, so that you can spend a night between his arms. The next day you shall burn alive.”

None stirred at this verdict except Pharr, the marshall of Pardissan cataphracts. He spoke thus. "O Caleph! My hands tremble as I address you in your great wrath. There are many cataphracts and paladins under my watch who would abandon the war efforts if you were to pass so stern a judgement against Parthenissa. For we are of Pardissan stock, many practicing Azdaean customs in secret. No inquisition has been successful in stamping out their heresy, for the Fire of Fires was burning upon Zhamûrg long before the Sigeian religion. They may take offence if a compatriot of theirs dies such a tragic death. Break her neck and dispose of the body according to Azdaean custom, giving her corpse unto the birds as a final act of kindness. In her mind she is already dead. We cannot risk rebellions in Pardissa over this matter."

Wadd spoke thus. "My verdict is final and complete, just as our religion is the most final and the most complete. Marry her tonight unto the ugliest of soldiers, so that she dies not as a virgin. Decide the man through lottery. He who takes her tonight will become my champion and I shall give unto him two hundred talents of silver, the wergild of Manaph. Burn her alive tomorrow."

Parthenissa was married to a soldier that very night. Pharr, the marshall of the cataphracts of Pard, fixed the lottery and made sure that she was married to a secret Azdaean known for his own saintliness. He was a simple and good man indeed, who refused to touch her in his tent. Towards dawn, he cut himself in the thigh and painted the sheets with his own blood instead of taking it upon himself to sully a vestal virgin. She wrote a letter during the night, which the marshall Pharr sent unto the secret worshippers of Azda in the land of Pard through raven and pigeon.

"The brethren of Azda! I write this letter on the eve of my death. I have been put on trial by thankless Wadd. Forgive me for recommending foul war instead of fair peace, but know that the

Sigean enemy will stop at nothing until the whole world accepts their reign by sword. You who keep the secret faith alive, remember my name! I am Parthenissa, the sole vestal of the Sun Fire and the sole daughter of Miraxthor the Thunder. I know from my father's exploits in life that Sigeans are not invincible. Know that I am innocent concerning the affair of Manaph, for the knave threatened me and my altar with impious and violent words. I shall die tomorrow. Remember my name, for I bequeath nothing else unto the world before my passing. Pray for the Sun Fire from afar, which burns even today thanks to my zeal. Every time you hear the story of Circea, the last vestal of Pard, remember my name also."

Wadd spent the night debating whether his cause was just with the clerics Jalsad and Mahuqqim. Jalsad wanted her to confess her witchcraft during torture, while Mahuqqim wanted her to die a simple and clean death. Wadd ordered her to drink hemlock wine before being burnt alive, lest the manner of her death offend Xerxapollo. Parthenissa was given enough hemlock wine to poison a tigress and fell into a deep sleep from which there was no waking this time. She was burnt alive upon a pyre, without feeling the sting of the flames. What happened to her soul upon death, even I cannot know. Yet she died with a warm smile upon her lips. In her dreams she was already walking upon the gardens of Heaven, in the company of faeries and saints.

A HUNDRED DAYS

Wadd had proclaimed a ceasefire for a hundred days, in order to build taller siege towers and more fearsome war machines. He heard about the miracle of Zosimon but was of good cheer despite it. "Let these blasphemous alchemists cheapen the value of gold until even children and idiots forswear their alien metal. We buy and sell using honest iron." More troops poured unto the battlefield from the vast plains of Tethyssa to defend the Sigeon cause.

Zosimon was given a crown of gold by the people of Symarna, which he openly wore in defiance of The Emerald Law. He ordered his acolytes to unearth the grave of the last king of Symarna, seizing his sapphire sceptre and emerald orb and wearing them with pride. The people offered him cups of incense and garlands of flowers every day, touching their brows unto the earth he walked upon. If his master Sarastro could rule over Phoezanthion from the shadows, why not him over Symarna? After ten thousand years of meek service, why not taste the sweet fruit of kingship once? He knew that vengeful Eosis would strike him dead sooner or later. Until then, he wanted his long life to end with pomp and spectacle.

He threw a festival unto himself upon his birthday, wishing to rule over all affairs of state by himself. Lambs were burnt upon altars to hail him as a living god. He fed the poor with spice-coated bread and hauls of fish from the livid waves. The crowds hailed him as a redeemer, yet many wondered whether he was indeed a member of the Circle of Eld. Would he bleed crimson gold or golden ichor when he was cut? Did he strike a warmaiden with blindness for denying his immortality? Did he have power over the living and the dead? They whispered in secret, some believing the witnesses and some choosing inward silence. Some were even of the mind that his miracles were sacrilege unto Eosis, even if they helped their city. Perithemis dissented against his rule in his heart and clung to the

republican cause: Symarna had two rulers now, a popular alchemist king and a consul chosen by the people.

Perithemis bade his goldsmiths smelt the statue of Maiden Glory ingot by ingot. The people thus obtained seven thousand talents of gold. Symarna was still a weak republic, hoping to win the endless war against the Caleph by currying favour with stronger empires. The praetors sent five hundred talents unto the merchant-princes of Venalphi, five hundred talents unto the ephods of Sparthena, one thousand talents unto the philosopher king of Tarshish, one thousand talents unto the pantocrator of Phoezanthion. They offered two thousand talents of gold unto The Brotherhood of Gild, the best sellswords of Wæold. Zosimon kept two thousand talents for himself, to build a temple of marble devoted unto himself after the war. Thus was all the miraculous gold spent.

Solmithra sent word to his troops, who were stationed near the mountains north of Venalphi, to join the war efforts. The man-beasts of Hundall arrived at Symarna, much to the delight of the people. They were greeted as liberators, their gilded armour shining like an ocean of molten gold. Thailai was the happiest woman alive, cleaving unto Solmithra as wife. Solmithra assured the people thus: "we come in peace for all nations except Sigeans, the common enemy of all mankind." Under an oak tree he swore solemn oaths unto God, in the presence of Zosimon and Perithemis, that he would fight as a child of Symarna.

Parthenissa's trial was heard far and wide, like ripples upon a pond, with many Azdaeans moved by her example. The cataphracts and paladins of Pard vowed never to fight against the Sun Fire again, remembering their Azdaean roots. The marshall Pharr withdrew from the battle and returned to the realm of Pard, citing civil unrest as pretext. There were many protests in Phoezanthion and Lamussa devoted unto her memory. Witch or saint, her memory was etched

into the imagination of Sigeon believers and the brethren of Azda alike as if by letters of living fire.

TYRIDON

Tyridon is the oldest haven upon Wæold, where ships were first built, known for its cedar forests and stubborn people. Tyridon was the first seetime empire known unto Man, scouring the sea and building daughter cities all across the livid waves long before the rise of Dion. They are known for inventing glass and books, waxing great in their vanity and learning no wisdom from their books.

The city changed many hands after the waning of its stars. No less than four conquerors seized it in known history: Cyramer of Pard, Perithemis of Dion, Traesar of Latillium, Almaqah of Ninaddo. The great king Qarnain died from a worm in his skull before he could conquer it in the name of Sigeans, but Almaqah of Ninaddo wrestled it from the hands of Phoezanthion centuries later. The people proved to be rebellious against Sigean rule, whereupon the Caleph razed the city and killed many citizens in wanton slaughter: even bringing his own people from Aqqamer to change the hue of the native population. Thus was the Caleph's reputation first established amongst the people of the West: men who break the rules of just war, the universal enemy of mankind. They say that the Caleph slew thousands upon thousands of rebellious men, throwing their corpses into the sea. They say that even the sharks of the Western Sea could not devour all of these corpses, which hit the beaches again and again as if the Sea itself was unhappy with this macabre feast. Tyridon taught the West that no city is immortal and inviolate. Those who had survived the massacre, the original dwellers of the land, lived in constant fear of the Sigean sword. They felled mighty cedars and built stout ships for their new overlords. Tyridon boasted a navy four thousand ships strong under the Calephate.

Why did the men of the West allow Tyridon's destruction? The people of Tyridon would often take unto piracy, killing and enslaving innocent souls. For that reason Azdaeans and Aionites alike allowed Sigeans to destroy the people of Tyridon, seeing them

as the lesser evil. Yet the foul practice continued under Sigean banners. Perithemis knew the story of Tyridon well, which weighed heavily in his heart. They say that the people of Symarna fought with much valour and zeal against the Sigeans in order not to suffer the fate of Tyridon.

Amm was the Calephal prince who is in charge of Sigean warships. He was a permissive man when it came to affairs of religion, unlike Wadd and Manaph. He was chivalrous towards captives of war, entertaining them in his own court. He was relentless against those who refused to convert unto the Sigean faith, yes, but he always tempered his faith with universal justice. And when it came to matters of peace, Amm followed the creed of hedonist and sceptic philosophers: much to the dismay of his father, Gad. The Caleph had beaten him many times as a young man for reading blasphemous books and consorting with harlots, but Amm never abandoned his lewd ways. He loved the pomp and circumstance of empire, seducing a different maiden every night. He sired fifteen bastard children until Gad threatened to excommunicate him for his concupiscence. Yet he never married, fearing the snare of women and seducing harlots instead.

Marcaulion, the stern philosopher of king of Tarshish, was laying siege unto Tyridon and Phoezanthion at the same time. Amm defended his ships by hiding his navy inside the walled harbour of Tyridon and drawing a great chain across its mouth. With harphagons and ballistae, he sank the ships that came too near. Marcaulion demanded from Tyridon one third of all gold in their treasury and one third of all tax that they levy from seetime trade before raising the siege.

Many princes of Tarshish saw Marcaulion's dilemma: the Eagle Empire had no choice but to abandon the siege of either Tyridon or Phoezanthion, for even with seven thousand ships they could not conquer both. The iron-ribbed ships of Tarshish could ram the

weaker ships of Phoezanthion in open battle. Yet when they assailed the seaward walls, the wizards of Phoezanthion burned the ships with smokeless fire and great bronze mirrors. Marcaulion was of the mind that both cities would surrender after seaward trade routes were cut off for years, yet both Phoezanthion and Tyridon received trade caravans from the land. Food was aplenty in Tyridon, for if not Phoezanthion. Marcaulion knew that Phoezanthion was the greater prize, so he considered a ceasefire with Amm in order to double the number of ships assailing Phoezanthion.

Thus he wrote. "Man of Nod! You have come from distant lands to defend Tyridon against me. Your people are novices when it comes to seacraft. With four thousand ships you hide in the brine-bosom of Tyridon, cowering before me in open battle. Unfurl the chain across the mouth of your harbour, for I am abandoning the siege of Tyridon. When phoenixes and eagles clash like titans, the smaller falcons can only watch. Return to your homeland Nod and leave the princes of the West. And if you would hearken my voice, abandon the company of poets and whores. For it is not just women who pass from virginal gold unto dull silver, from dull silver unto rusting copper. Princes who sire so many bastard children should know that their children are strangled after the death of the father, for such is the custom amongst Sigeans. True kings raise their whelps like dolphins in the open sea: they do not spawn thousand of eggs like fish."

Amm wrote back thus. "Philosopher king of Tarshish! I myself have read some philosophy during my earlier days. I learned that all is void except faith in God and the delights of this world. History shall remember you as the greater man for avoiding lust, but I have no interest in fame before or after death. It was love of fame which drove my brother Manaph unto the viselike trap laid by the people of Symarna. If only I had an empire as great as yours! I would proclaim myself ruler of the known world and beyond, trample princes and princelings underneath my heel. You are greater than I am. Yet I bow before no king except my father, the Caleph."

Marcaulion wrote thus. "If only I could proclaim myself the ruler known of the world and beyond, you say. If only I could trample princes and princelings underneath my heel, you say. These words prove that you are no great emperor but a tyrant in the making. True emperors live like modest men and give their greatest gifts unto wanton princes and princelings, allowing them their share of majesty so that they can rule over them like unbent iron. I am withdrawing my ships. If I were in your shoes, I would not dabble in the affairs of the West and use my ships for the defence of Tyridon only. Yet I suspect that you shall not heed my warning."

Marcaulion thus withdrew his ships from the bay of Tyridon to strengthen the siege against Phoezanthion. Amm heard about the deaths of Xoanna and Parthenissa, questioning in his heart whether their slander against Manaph was true: for Manaph was known for his cruel ways. He celebrated the lifting of the siege with wine and women, but he was more drunk with the lust for conquest. He bethought himself how Manaph had fallen in the city of Symarna. Violence seized his blood like fever. He ordered his navy to attack all ships that were providing help unto Symarna.

Symarna had only seventeen hundred ships, their purple banners sewn with nightingales. Five hundred ships from Sparthena were also on their side, with their owl-sewn banners. When they clashed, it was like the black sun of Sige eclipsing the two white moons. The clash was violent: the waves devoured man and bird alike. Amm emerged victorious thanks to superior numbers and Symarna's liberty sank beneath the waves after the defeat. The city was now under the viselike grip of Wadd's troops from the land and Amm's ships from the sea.

CIRCULAR CHESS

Symarna's hour of need caused an uproar in Phoezanthion. The people took unto the streets to protest the death of Parthenissa, sprinkling their hair with ash and snow. The brethren of Azda urged action, even though they themselves were under siege by the ships of Tarshish. When the calendar showed the week of mourning for the Fire of Fires in Zhamûrg, the people of Phoezanthion encircled the House of All and lifted the crimson banners of Azda all around. "War!" they chanted, "holy war!"

Xerxapollo was sitting upon his seven-beamed throne on that day, playing circular chess with his vizier Arzang. Sindocq, the chief vestal of Pyrapyrix, was also there. They were discussing matters of state and religion.

Sindocq began thus. "O Xerxapollo, second of that name! You are the chosen prince of prophet Sarastro, whose faith in the land of Pard was suppressed because of Sigeian treason. The people are roaring at the streets for holy war against Sigeans, yet you spend your time doing nothing but honouring the false Caleph. What good is a peace treaty with that serpent Wadd, when his ancestors won Tyridon through treason generations ago? I know that the siege of our city is as endless as it is thankless. Five years have passed during the siege, yet the ships of Tarshish seem as inexhaustible as rats during famine. To succour Symarna, you must change the player instead of challenging their pawns upon the board. I remember the speech that Parthenissa gave here. We the brethren of Azda are a living tree with seven branches. True, the tree is now sickly and withering. If so much as a single branch is set flame, the whole tree will burn together. I saw the ravens and pigeons coming from Symarna, whose feathers they mark with human blood. Succour the city, O Xerxapollo! Remember how Parthenissa sang about the fall of Tyridon upon her lyre. You told Parthenissa to soak herself in oil and burn herself at the marketplace if she were so devoted to her cause.

Fie on your cold words! She was indeed burnt upon a pyre after drinking hemlock wine, for perhaps even Wadd treated her better than you did. If you do not succour Symarna, me and my fellow vestals shall kill ourselves by drinking hemlock wine and follow Parthenissa's example."

Next spoke Arzang, his highest vizier. "Xerxapollo, king of kings! I know well how the iron-ribbed ships of Tarshish are stacked against our own ships, how the battlements upon our seawalls are black with burnt blood. I know how you signed a treaty of peace with the Caleph, black though his banners are. The time has come to annul that peace treaty. The war between the Phoenix Empire and the Eagle Empire has endured for centuries. To what end? Why not seek peace with Tarshish instead, perhaps proposing an alliance against the Calephate? True, they demand tax and tithe over all trade that occurs between the eastern and western seas. Yet the siege endures forever, strangling not just all trade with the West but preventing us from garnering tributes from our vassals. Our people have grown thin and sickly, for they need food from the cornucopian realm of Aaro. Even when you play chess, you sacrifice your pawns all too easily. Without pawns and castles to protect you, the war would come to a short ending. I recommend that you side with the philosopher kings of Tarshish instead of the Caleph, to lift the siege and succour Symarna."

Xerxapollo bowed his head. What changed his mind? Was it the fire-sacrifice of Parthenissa, or the cold speech of Sindocq? Was it the burning uproar in Phoezanthion, or the chill words of Arzang? "You read my thoughts, Sindocq. You speak my will, Arzang. Parthenissa, poor maiden! To burn upon a pyre for the crime of defending her home! "Regret always comes too late, always strikes home" --- thus it sayeth in the Song of All. Let us build a temple of marble to honour her memory: architects and stonemasons are cheaper than warriors these days. Yet I can hear her voice in my ears even now: "build no temple for me, but keep The Sun Fire alive." As king of kings, I have

done all that I can in order to defeat the iron-ribbed ships of Tarshish. I can beat any land empire in a game of chess, but there are no ships in this game. The Phoenix Empire shall fall apart unless we succumb unto the demands of Tarshish. They cannot take the city but we cannot lift the siege. Bring me a quill and a scroll, for I will send a letter unto Marcaulion the philosopher king. Let us offer him tax and tithe anon, if only to redeem Symarna in time. Mark the hour! For thus passeth the glory of Phoezanthion. I know that historians and poets shall not be kind unto my memory, even as they will write faery romances for Parthenissa. May they remember that I did all I could to stop the decline of our empire, like an imperfect rock grating against the millstone of Fate."

TARSHISH

I have sung of the glory of Phoezanthion before. I shall not sing of the glory of Tarshish with the same passion, lest my mistress Phoezanthion feels the stings of jealousy. Yet all men know that Tarshish surpassed Phoezanthion in the compass of her empire long ago. If Phoezanthion is like a crone surrounded by older and unheeding children, Tarshish is like a matron with many younger children still under her heel. Tarshish and Phoezanthion have been clashing like two she-giants for ages, trampling unhappy men beneath their feet.

The people of Tarshish carved a manmade harbour between Sea Eterne and the Western Sea thirteen centuries ago, tying the outer ocean unto the livid waves of the West. There are two colossal idols rising over this harbour. The Colossus of the East frowns, for the Old World belongs to Phoezanthion. The Colossus of the West smiles, for the New World belongs to Tarshish. Tarshish is the capital of the Eagle Empire, having yoked Latillium unto its greater will: an empire stronger than the League of Dion or the Weal of Latillium ever was. The city is ruled over by philosopher kings, who choose their successors not from amongst their own children but men of greatest mettle. Tarshish has ten thousand iron-ribbed ships as I write these words, enough to besiege both Phoezanthion and Tyridon.

Xerxapollo wrote unto the philosopher king Marcaulion, asking him to lift the siege of Phoezanthion in exchange for surrender.

“Philosopher king, who rules over both realms and books! We have started this war between ourselves out of our great pride. I called you buffoon and tyrant, you repaid the insults. What began as a war of words became a war of swords soon enough. May we now hanker for peace! I withdraw all insults and bend the knee before you. May you prosper during life and may you sleep forever in the bosom of Azda upon death. You have besieged great Phoezanthion and we see now with opened eyes that Tarshish is the greater city. For five years

you have boarded the seawalls of Phoezanthion, where we burn your ships with smokeless fire and bronze mirrors. Your catapults, fitted unto your ships, have been raining death and misery unto our great city from above. You now bring five thousand more ships at my doorstep. We lack not jewels and gold but food to feed our people. Before laying the siege, you wanted one quarter of all tax that we levy upon trade between the green waves of the East and the livid waves of the West. You also wanted one quarter of all gold that we generate through alchemy. We shall surrender the silver and gold you want, ingot by ingot. My hand is heavy as I write these lines, but I would rather kiss the wrist that I cannot bend. If you trust not my dealings, consult the merchant-princes of Venalphi, for they know that I Xerxapollo never break my word. May our empires prosper like two equal trees whose branches scratch the roof of heaven: an ancient and wizening tree entwined with a tree ripe with glory.”

Marcaulion answered thus. “Phoezanthion is too powerful a queen to suffer under my yoke, but not an empress powerful enough to rule the Old World all by herself. I see the wisdom of your words. Great pantocrator and imperator of Phoezanthion! I have already chosen my successor and I want him to marry a Jupithomenid. Send us a worthy bride hoar of hair and amaranthine of eye, so that her children can rule over Tarshish. In exchange I want your oldest son to marry a woman of my choosing, a wise Havingian princess who is loyal unto our cause. Let us also exchange crowns, as if we were brothers. I shall send you my crown of rainbow diamonds so that you can wear it, in exchange for your own iridochalc circlet. Let us not just prevent war and bloodshed between our great empires but forge a new empire to rule over the rest of the world. Remember the wars between the Weal of Latillium and Tarshish, which raged for centuries when we were allies against the same enemy. Remember the civil wars of Dion and Latillium, accomplishing nothing except slaughter. We have ended these wars through exchanging brides and swearing solemn pacts. My dream is a single Western empire that unites the whole wide world, shining like two suns in the firmament:

with the greater sun never eclipsing the lesser. Let us defeat the Sigean enemy together, for they are tyrannical in their might and they break laws universal unto Man. A world-spanning empire with two capitals! I saw this vision in my dreams many times. Let us conquer together the jungles of Bel and the fallow fields of Aaro, the frosten meadows of Hundall and the distant Fûsong. Let even distant Zhoaxia and Sinddha shudder when they hear the birth-cries of our new empire. I once read a faery romance about how a phoenix and an eagle raised an orphaned griffin together in their nest, which later became the steed of the mighty hero Aphridon. The griffin is a beast as quick as lightning and as fearsome as the Devil. May our new empire thus be called, The Griffin Empire."

Xerxapollo answered thus. "You offer me a vision far exceeding my own. I am happy to send you a bride, and I am happy to accept a Havingian princess for my oldest son when the time is ripe. Let the Havingians rule over many kingdoms of land as the Jupithomenids rule over the seas of the Old World. Your vision is not new: Cyrander the Great conquered the known world. I shall hail you as a new Cyrander when I see your bold plans in action. Such mighty alliances require centuries of trust. I am preoccupied with the affairs of Symarna: a blameless vestal virgin called Parthenissa was burned alive by Sigeans for the crime of defending her homeland. The people are in uproar for fear of losing beautiful Symarna forever, because Wadd promised to burn down the city and people it anew with peasants from Aqqamer. We must not repeat the mistakes of the past. Remember what happened to Tyridon generations ago, when their corsairs accepted to fight under the black banners of Sige. They refused to submit unto Sigeans after admitting them into their city, when it was too late. Tyridon was lost through treason and the Caleph burned down their glorious city, your mother city, when he could not bend them unto his will. I proclaimed Symarna an independent republic when you laid siege unto Phoezanthion. When you lifted the siege against Tyridon, their cedar ships rammed and burned down the sandalwood ships of Symarna. They even sank

ships from Sparthena and Venalphi, for they were our allies. Symarna is now encircled from both sea and land. Withdraw your ships from Phoezanthion, so that I may succour Symarna at long last. If we are to merge into a single Griffin Empire, let our first joint task be the salvation of Symarna. Steer your ships alongside mine if you will, so that we can save the city. I shall bend the knee before you when we meet. You shall become richer than ever with the tribute you collect from Phoezanthion. Let the nightingales of Symarna sing of their thankfulness under banners of griffins."

Marcaulion was much pleased to read this letter. "I have indeed allowed Amm to depart Tyridon with his cedar ships. Foolish boy! I counselled him to either withdraw from our lands or to use his navy to defend Tyridon. He even sank the ships of Sparthena and Venalphi in his godless stupidity, alienating the princes of the West. His cedar ships are now moored against Symarna, a thousand and five hundred left. Let us teach this arrant knave a lesson he shall never forget. Let us prepare a ruse together against this unfaithful child of the Caleph. You have my permission to fall down upon Amm with the power of your ships and destroy him utterly. Why, when we unite our forces under the joint banners of griffins, Tyridon itself will be ours for the taking. May we conquer the wide world together. May our empires not just bloom anew like two ancient trees, but merge anew root and branch into a single tree!"

THE BROTHERHOOD OF GILD

The Brotherhood of Gild was now quartered in Symarna, which was surrounded from both land and sea. Solmithra was of the mind that attacking Wadd upon an open plain was better than biding his days behind the battlements. For his soldiers were trained to fight as a phalanx, in the ancient style of Dion. Perithemis agreed to battle, for rations were growing thin in Symarna and the city would not hold forever against Wadd's war engines.

Solmithra blew his horn and bade his troops leave the walls of Symarna on the last day of the ceasefire. His soldiers poured out of the barbicans like a swarm of golden ants and formed a phalanx upon the plain of Lud as impenetrable as a diamond. All other sellsword companies were assigned to the northern flank: Sons of Hate as footmen, The Thousand Giants with their long spears, The Knights of Snow as horsemen, Hell Slingers as skirmishers. The citizen-hoplites and warmaidens of Symarna fought in the middle column, together with The Brotherhood of Gild. Volunteering zealots from fellow nations were assigned to the southern column, their crimson banners sewn with phoenixes, together with the hoplites sent from Sparthena.

Wadd saw their approach upon the plain of Lud. Thus he spoke unto his viziers and satraps. "I have two hundred thousand footmen from Aqqamer and one hundred thousand knights from Tur. I have siege engines that can crack their walls. I command camels and elephants that can topple horses. Is this man-beast called Solmithra so devoted unto the cause of his destruction that he would seek to fight me again? He desires death, which I shall deliver unto him." He bade his trumpeters blow the notes marking war and his army assembled with great speed. He divided the horsemen of Tur and the camel-riders of Urran and the elephant-captains of Sinddha into two columns, bidding them to fight both on his northern and southern flanks. His middle flank consisted of two hundred thousand warriors

from Aqqamer. The champions of Hubaal were in the very middle of the middle flank, protecting Wadd and other princes.

Solmithra addressed his troops thus. "Men of Hundall! They do not call you lions of war for nothing, strangling wolflike footmen and leopard-dappled knights alike. Sigeans are known as the common enemy of mankind. Let poor men fight for bread, common sellswords fight for silver. We fight for golden fame! Look upon the face of the enemy without fear, for the legions of Wadd are peasants and craftsmen from Aqqamer wearing unseemly swords. Look how the swords tremble in their hands as they see us approach! You are neither peasants nor craftsmen, but warriors by trade! War is your worship! Do not sully the good name of the Brotherhood and fight unto death. Swear an oath with me that you shall pray unto no god but Death during this battle. Death, hear our voices! We are your angels and evangels today, spilling blood for your holy cause! Death, you shall glut yourself with the blood and flesh of dead men before dusk sets upon the plain of Lud."

Perithemis commanded the army, Solmithra his own troops. His phalanx marched like a golden square drawn by the unerring hand of God: so perfect was their arrangement. Their weapons shone under the scorching summer sun. Solmithra's sellswords marched like an avalanche, as cold as snow and as fast as wind. Their phalanx smote the men of Aqqamer like a hammer of iron beating upon an anvil of flesh. Skulls cracked and bones succumbed to the blows. For every fallen comrade of Solmithra, perhaps five men from Aqqamer perished.

Abandon earth and behold everything from the sky! For angels and archangels were watching again. Eosis was in an unforgiving mood that day, scorning prayer and even refusing to hear the last words of the fallen. Lesser angels watched with indifferent judgement as blood spilled like rivulets upon the plain, as if their only care was to make the infertile plain of Lud bloom with flowers and wild wheat next

summer. Two hundred thousand men from Aqqamer, crawling upon earth like so many ants! Even Solmithra's chosen warriors were like warrior ants the colour of gold. Behold cavalry, riding to and fro like honeybees! Behold camels the size of wasps, elephants marching like beetles! Even archangel Thaos, who weeps snowlike tears to succour Hell, spent his tears on that day. And what would happen if the men below raised their eyes to the sky and behold these angels? Why, nothing --- they, too, would only see ants and wasps made of clouds. The angels were overwhelmed as they counted the dead, as mortal men perished in great numbers below. There was no victor except Death himself. He alone ruled the day with his sardonic glee, hurling all spirits to his dusky limbo without judgement --- for there was not enough time for the lesser angels to judge this torrent of souls.

Perithemis watched the carnage from a high hill. Towards noon he blew the trumpets of retreat, thinking Solmithra was too deep in enemy territory. Even when he was surrounded by the men of Aqqamer from four corners, Solmithra did not stop pushing forward: so proud a marshall he was. He wanted to end the war by killing Wadd and his princes. This foolish move gave Wadd enough time to send elephants to the thick of battle, trampling down the invincible phalanx. They were young and naïve beasts perhaps, but Wadd had tamed them as well as he could during the ceasefire with fear of fire and spear. The Brotherhood killed perhaps three hundred elephants and routed about as many. Solmithra heeded the trumpets at long last and withdrew from the battle, leaving behind one hundred thousand corpses from both sides upon the battlefield. The inerrant diamond of his phalanx was broken. The hoplites of Sparthena marched forward with the fury of sympathy to save their Hundall brothers. The yellow banners of Hundall met the teal banners of Sparthena in the middle of battle: kingfishers versus owls. The owls took the kingfishers under their wings and they escaped the chaos of war together.

THE PRINCE & THE SELLSWORD

The people of Symarna did not know how to interpret this battle, whether it had been victory or defeat. The troops returned home, but there were no flowers and songs to mark their bravery. Many citizens flocked to their alchemist king Zosimon, already demanding more gold to support the war efforts. Zosimon refused, citing the Emerald Law: if he were to produce gold so quickly, gold itself would become worthless.

Solmithra returned to Thailai's lavish bed, who calmed down her lion with many kisses and caresses. She knew through her mother Sephorah's sorcery that she was pregnant with twins, two boys to perpetuate his fame and line. She announced the upcoming birth of the twins unto Solmithra. Solmithra wept upon her bosom, thinking how the children would be dashed against rocks if he lost the war. He was torn between the heavy duty of warrior and the heavier duty of a father.

"Unhappy wife! My spirits should be rising when you mention the children, two boys to perpetuate our line and fame. May they prosper after I die! I ask this of you, in the name of our great love. Never remarry and raise these children with the duty of a pantheress raising lambs. If only I could unmake the present and return to the past! If only we could return to the frozen meadows of Hundall, where I would hunt tusked seals and antlered deer. You would roast the flesh over a meek fire and weave tapestry from the fleece of wild goats in our igloo. Our children would learn to hunt animals instead of men, untroubled by the great happenings of our time. How I yearn for the simple life of my parents! I was taken by the Brotherhood of Gild when I was five years old. All my life was spent practicing for a moment of glory, yet fickle glory eluded me today. I was rash and overly proud, for I moved the phalanx too deep into enemy territory in order to take Wadd's life. My master once taught me that excessive bravery is worse than cowardice in battle. I see no easy way to end

this war other than spilling Wadd's blood. I do not want the good people of Symarna to sully my good name, so I intend to challenge Wadd unto a game of honour tomorrow. If he falls, may his troops abandon the cause of his vengeance. If I fall, may Symarna likewise fall." Thailai wept many tears to change Solmithra's mind, telling him that a father's duty is truer and heavier than a warrior's, but it was all for nothing.

Solmithra confided to Perithemis his plan: he would challenge Wadd to a duel unto death. If Wadd fell, that would be the end of their travails. If he himself fell, Symarna would fall with him. Perithemis grimaced at this great gamble, yet consulted his praetors about what to do.

He began thus. "Solmithra is such a great warrior that we all live in constant fear of his shadow. It is only a matter of time before our city falls, besieged from land and sea. He approached me today, asking for a duel unto death between himself and Wadd. Sigeans believe that their Caleph is the shadow of God upon earth and I believe they will disperse like ants without a king should he fall. Our people are growing thin and sickly from lack of bread, while Sigeans have their fill of choice meats every day. We cannot fight forever, so let this great man-beast challenge Wadd. Let us force the hand of Fate for a final throw of her dice. For I fear that commoners will open the gates themselves when they run out of food." The praetors had no choice but to agree, for it seemed that Symarna could not withstand the siege for too long.

Solmithra sent a letter unto Wadd. "Wadd, the proud son of prouder Gad! I am Solmithra, the captain of the Brotherhood of Gild. You have seen my mettle upon the battlefield yesterday and I have seen yours. I challenge thee to a duel unto death. If you prevail, we shall open the gates of Symarna so that you can walk in unharmed. If I prevail, you shall leave the plain of Lud and never disturb the peace of Symarna ever again. Armies are best ruled over by men who can

fight. I saw you commanding troops from a siege tower, but I have not yet seen you fight. The plain of Lud had its fill of commoner blood. Let our own blood spill this time instead of the blood of our men. Let Death decide whose blood is sweeter. If you refuse my offer, may the gods above mark thee forever as a coward. You boast that you are God's shadow upon this earth --- come and fight me under the sun."

Wadd read the letter. He was torn with indecision and he did not want to seem like a coward before his satraps and viziers. He knew through his spies that there were ill tidings coming from the West, perhaps even a peace treaty between Phoezanthion and Tarshish, in order to succour the siege of Symarna. In his heart he regretted building pyramids of corpses and cairns of skulls upon the plain of Lud, for the people of the West were murmuring that he was a tyrant and the enemy of all mankind.

At length he spoke. "My father, The Caleph, sent me to invade Symarna no matter what happens under the sky. I am as ready to drink the wine of martyrdom as any warrior fighting under my banners. If I fall, do not honour the treaty and attack Symarna by inventing a ruse. If I win, we shall see whether they are really willing to open wide the gates of Symarna after all. Keep this counsel secret, for I shall have the city no matter what. Bring me my falchion, so that I can slay this lily-livered sellsword!" He bade his trumpeters ring the notes that marked the games of honour.

Hubaal spoke next. "I know that you despise me in your heart as a pagan, but I am also your kin. Know that Solmithra's left arm is weaker than his right arm, for I watched him from afar yesterday. Feign a parry with your right arm and strike him with your left arm. This way, you may kill him." Wadd embraced Hubaal and bade his chieftains give him five hundred talents of silver for killing Xoanna. "I know you reject this prize, but distribute it not amongst the

thankless common folk but amongst the princes and princelings of Nod, so that they can hail you for your generosity.”

Solmithra rode to the shadow of the battlements riding a white stallion and brandishing a pike as tall as a warrior, for it was evening time. He wore iron coated with gold from head to toe, like a cataphract of Pard. There was dread silence, both from Symarna and the Sigean side: the people were exhausted with war and loss. Wadd appeared at long last, his troops parting like two great waves to let him pass, riding a black courser and brandishing a shorter spear.

Solmithra taunted him. “This wide world is not wide enough to contain two peacocks like us. Let lesser birds watch our fight today. It is not a common sight for peacocks to fight when they both command parliaments of birds.”

Wadd answered thus. “You are of good cheer, man of Hundall. For now, until my blade strikes thee! You are a mere sellsword, while I was born a Calephal prince. Just because I deign to fight you does not mean that we are equals. Know that only the silent God can determine the victor at this hour. I am matchless when it comes to games of honour upon the horse.”

Solmithra charged at him, thinking him easy prey. He heaved his lance and impaled Wadd’s horse right between the eyes, where the beast’s armour was weak. The lance shattered like forked lightning. Wadd hurled his shorter spear with demonic speed at the same moment, smiting Solmithra’s helmet. Wadd’s arm was so strong that Solmithra’s helmet bent out of shape and split his brow. Blood ran down like a small fountain, muddying his sight. Wadd’s horse was so loyal unto his rider that he collapsed where he stood, allowing the prince to dismount without injury. Wadd soothed his loyal beast and found enough time to kiss his dying head.

Solmithra opened his visor and threw aside his helmet. The praetors bewailed themselves as they saw their champion bleeding in the head. They were already thinking of reneging on the pact and defending the city against triumphant Sigeans. He considered charging at Wadd in his mind, yet weighed against it when he saw him uttering words of love to his loyal horse.

It is customary during games of honour for one side to dismount his horse when the other side is fighting barefoot. Solmithra stopped his white stallion and dismounted him, which drew cheers from both Sigeans and the people of Symarna. Wadd drew his falchion and met Solmithra's sword with his iron shield. How they parried blows! If the archangels above were watching, they were clearly not taking sides that day. Solmithra smote him thrice, bending Wadd's shield every time with his mace. Shame and pride drove his arm. Wadd remembered Hubaal's advice and feigned an attack towards Solmithra's right flank, only to change course at the last moment and attack him from the left. Solmithra was caught unawares and stumbled somewhat, allowing Wadd the chance to slash across his throat: cutting open his jugular vein. The prince considered himself the victor and took down his guard in a moment of relief. Yet that sense of relief proved his undoing. Solmithra raised his mace, up high in the air, and smashed Wadd's helmet and skull into many pieces with a final and bitter blow. Wadd collapsed where he stood, already dead. Solmithra walked towards him and broke his ribcage with his stomping feet, himself already faint from blood loss.

Solmithra tried to staunch his sliced throat from bleeding, but to no avail. What a weak work of piece is man, when God allows even the greatest of champions to die so easily! Blood splattered all over his golden armour, which lost its sheen. Thailai screamed as if in the throes of death herself and rushed towards the battlefield. Solmithra's body was already cold when she clasped his hand. She vowed to raise his sons not as warriors but men of peace, not knowing that War seeks out men --- not vice versa.

SECOND DEATH

After the deaths of Wadd and Solmithra, three days of ceasefire were announced so that both sides could mourn their fallen champions. Solmithra's corpse was burned upon a pyre, together with his weapons and armour, in keeping with Hundall customs. Wadd's corpse was embalmed with honey and spice, so that he could be buried within the mausoleums of Jeriddo. The cleric Mahuqqim interpreted the death of both champions as God's will that he favours neither side. Jalsad preached one final jihad against Symarna, to break the walls and capture the city forever.

Sephorah had taught the art of speech to the likeness of Xoanna, who was remembering more and more of her past life as the days passed. She was crazen with delight, feeding her twice-born daughter sweetmeats like a child and whispering dainty tales unto her ear. Yet the woman thought nothing of her mother and woke up every morning with the word "vengeance" upon her lips. Sephorah even loved her unblinking eyes and her hollow voice, as if it was coming from beyond the grave.

The time had come for Zosimon to reveal his greatest miracle unto the people. He had Xoanna brought unto the Forum in a public gathering, wearing a veil that covered her whole body. She stood as still as a statue until Zosimon spoke, as if his words suffused her cold limbs with the breath of life. "Behold, people of Symarna! Not only do my hands produce infinite gold, but I also have power over life and death. Reveal thyself Xoanna, twice-born warmaiden!"

The homunculus cast aside her veil. The people blanched with fear, for the woman before their eyes was indeed Xoanna. Mothers shielded the eyes of their children, who stared at the miracle with bulging eyes. Even the bravest of men felt the cold chill of fear in their marrow. Some whispered that she might be different warmaiden who was wearing her armour, but Xoanna raised her

visor and dispelled every doubt. Many remembered her wheaten hair and earth-hazel eyes. Those who had seen her hacked into pieces testified that this was indeed Xoanna.

There was much uproar in Symarna the next day. Amongst the brethren of Azda some thought it was a praiseworthy wonder, while sombre priests thought it was sacrilege to bring back the dead thus. The people felt the chill of terror because of her unblinking eyes and hollow voice, as if it was coming from beyond the grave. The news spread far and wide and the people hung their crimson banners aloft, hoping their city would not fall after this miracle. The common people chanted for Zosimon to be their king forever.

“All hail Zosimon, our immortal king! All hail Zosimon, destroyer of death! Zosimon, who can produce infinite gold from his hands! Alchemist king! May you rule forever upon a city as everlasting as yourself.” Perithemis felt the stings of inward hate as he heard these boasts, for Symarna was a republic and he had seen enough sorcery in his life to know that cheating death once was not enough to become king over his beloved Symarna forever. Let Zosimon wear his crown of gold, brandish his sapphire sceptre and emerald orb! The people still listened to the voice of reason who was Perithemis.

The command of the Sigean host now fell upon the shoulders of Talaab, the archvizier. Sigeans laid siege unto the city on the fourth day, bringing taller siege towers and more fearsome war engines with them. They boarded the battlements and fought upon the walls of Symarna, which grew black with the blood of the fallen. They smashed down the main gate of Symarna with a battering ram in the shape of a horse. In vain the defenders hurled arrows and spears unto the battering ram, prickling it like a porcupine. For five days Sigean troops poured in, killing the defenders like wasps inside a honeybee hive. Xoanna joined the war efforts, her sword drinking blood. She was even more warlike than before her death and the people of Symarna were amazed at this miracle, every man fighting

with thrice the zeal upon seeing her. Many warriors assumed they, too, would be resurrected upon death: fighting with reckless abandon, pressing back against the seemingly infinite Sigean host. "Immortal Zosimon, resurrect me after I fall in battle!" Thus they prayed unto their newfound god Zosimon.

Mist as thick as curdled milk descended upon the city twelve days after the strife began anew. Talaab thought of a ruse that would end the war. He bade Hubaal and his best champions enter the city under cover of the misten night, wearing black from head to toe. Hubaal and his band were to capture Symarna's parliament and take the praetors and senators captive. They would topple the high banners of Symarna, so that the people would quit fighting and surrender. Talaab would have vengeance against the city thus.

The archangel Eosis appeared unto Xoanna when she was dreaming. "Hail thee, twice-born maiden! Know that your resurrection breaks the laws of nature. Your mother once chose a life of eternal fame at the expense of agony for you, as opposed to the long and quiet life of a housewife. Would you make that choice yourself anew? If you would choose a long and uneventful life now, bury your weapons and exile yourself to live unto ripe age in a realm where people are strangers. If you choose a second death to win eternal fame, know that Hubaal has treachery in mind. He is marching through the mists even now, his feet as quick and silent as the wind. Kill him and end this war! Yet know that you are not long for this world, for I have no choice but to take your own life after the battle. If you choose to save your people and earn eternal fame thus, you shall not survive the night."

Xoanna spoke thus. "The sages of distant Sinddha say that the dead forget their memories after death. I remember neither heaven nor hell after my death and before my rebirth, only a cold black whirlpool where atoms were merging and breaking apart. I know that I have shed much blood, yet I am a warrior by trade. Perhaps I was not

deemed worthy of paradise. I saw the celestial spheres that rule over even archangels, made of hot plasm and cold aether. I can hear the harmony of the spheres even as I speak unto you. The sages of Sinddha say that it is our fate to be reborn as a new being after death: animal, Man, demon, voracious ghost, faery, titan, demigod. The Wheel of Duty ever turns like a millstone, crushing wheat and chaff alike. Know that even if I had ten lives, I would still choose to be reborn as Xoanna again and again, for I am nothing but the sum of my choices. Give me a quick and painful death, so that I can live forever not as a living god but an imperishable wraith amidst scrolls and books!" She awoke from her dream anon and raised the alarm bell in Gynasium.

Hubaal and his band trampled the holy earth of the Forum with their feet. The mist was so thick that it was impossible to see any face five feet beyond. They huddled inside the Pantheon of Symarna, right next to the parliament, waiting for the mists to clear after the break of dawn to start their rampage. Too late would they realise that they were walking into a trap set by archangel Eosis himself. Strong winds blew from the east and the mists cleared somewhat underneath the waxing moons. Behold! Xoanna saw tame vultures and ravens flying above the Forum, as if they were awaiting fresh corpses. She understood from this omen that the enemy was inside the Pantheon, the only building where they can hide. She bade her six hundred warmaidens encircle the Pantheon, equipped with arbalests. Hubaal blanched with fear, and not just because he was surrounded by enemies: because he saw that the likeness of Xoanna was walking anew amongst them.

Xoanna climbed the stairs of the Pantheon and addressed him thus. "Hubaal, who killed me once! I defy you anew under the twin moons and the fixed stars. May they testify against me in hell if I tremble against you ever again. Let neither your warriors nor my warmaidens get involved in this game of honour. I have returned

from the dead, like a titan rising from the murky abyss to strangle a god. Meet me upon the hallowed earth of the Forum!"

Hubaal answered thus. "I know not how you discovered our plot, nor how you are alive again. Yet I have seen enough sorcery during my lifetime not to tremble against what I see with my own eyes now. If you are an unfirm ghost, I shall slice you like this thick mist and banish you back unto hell. If you are of flesh and blood, I will know that you can still bleed and die."

Xoanna charged at Hubaal. Hubaal was as swift as the wind and even after her resurrection Xoanna could not overcome him with ease. Thrice she hacked at his shield, bending it each time. Hubaal tumbled to the ground during her fourth blow and smote her in the right thigh with his spear, where she once carried the venomous dagger to cheat the games of honour. Hot blood dripped unto her iron boots, fuming in the cold midnight weather. She was stumbling, but she was cunning enough to feign an injury greater than she sustained.

Hubaal addressed her thus. "You bleed and stumble? Even if you are a titan rising from the abyss to strangle me, I would bind thee hand and foot and hurl you back into hell. Remember how you would poison me with a dagger? There is no escape from infamy after all, even after death and resurrection. The gods must have restored you unto life to grant me an even greater glory. Would you not agree, painted clown? I hacked you limb by limb for your treachery and I shall do so again! Know that a great wizard blessed the day I was born, that I would never fall as long as the stars are fixed."

Xoanna lifted his visor and behold! Hubaal saw wheaten hair and earth-hazel eyes as deep as hell itself. He blanched with fear and let down his guard for a single heartbeat, wavering in his own mind and making the wrong move. Unhappy Hubaal, to doubt himself thus! Xoanna impaled him across the throat with her long spear.

“Unhappy wizard to deceive you thus! For I am here to unfix your stars. May you be reborn as Hubaal in hell, with me as the demon tormenting you, so that I can strangle you again and again for every warrior of Symarna you have felled with your sword.” She waved her hand and her warmaidens unleashed volley after volley of arrows into enemy chests, killing many warriors loyal unto Hubaal. Many warmaidens fell themselves when the warriors of Nod unleashed volley after volley from their longbows. Xoanna kept fighting despite her injured thigh, not heeding the blood dripping like wax from a dying candle. It was only after the last assassin perished that she collapsed where she stood, her face wan from loss of blood.

Thus were her last words. “My dear warmaidens, whom I loved better than my own sisters! Let poets and priests sing how I cheated death to vindicate the honour of Symarna at long last. Build no temple upon my tomb, for I would rather live forever in song and psalm. Feed my flesh unto the vultures and eagles of Symarna as a final act of kindness. Bury my bones under the cobblestones of this Forum, beneath the feet of the senators and praetors whose lives I saved today, so that they can invoke my example every time a child of Symarna shows cowardice. Sacrifice no animals after me, for I have shed enough blood. Embalm Hubaal’s head and place it upon a pike, right next to my tomb as a keepsake. Let praetors and senators tread upon my tomb, remembering with every remorseful step how I killed oath-breaker Manaph and witchlike Hubaal.”

SWANS & PHOENIXES

Xoanna was buried according to her last words. Sephorah was of a bittersweet mind, thinking how her daughter achieved vengeance against the greatest champion of the Sigeans before her second death. Priests sang at her funeral, comparing her to a serene swan and a free nightingale: yet no phoenix rose from the ashes this time.

Zosimon bade his warriors display the embalmed head of Hubaal to praetors and senators. The wizards of Symarna hurled the corpses of the black-clad assassins with catapults back onto the besieging army, boasting of their triumph. Talaab thus learned that his ruse did not work, fearing God's hand at work. He kept besieging the city with tall siege towers and fearsome engines of war, cracking the walls here and there and boarding battlements already black with blood.

On the eleventh morning, the people of Symarna woke up to the sight of a great fire rising upon the western sea. The royal ships of Phoezanthion had arrived at long last, with phoenixes and swans upon their standards. The ships of Tarshish, with doves and eagles upon their banners, accompanied them. Xerxapollo had secured a peace treaty with Tarshish, at the expense of paying tithe and tax over all trade between the two mediterranean seas. Tarshish had dismissed the siege against Phoezanthion --- so that Phoezanthion can lift the siege against Symarna in turn.

They say that Amm, brother of Wadd and Manaph, fought with unmatched valour even in defeat by boarding the enemy ships with planks and shedding much blood. Yet the ships of Phoezanthion were equipped with ignosiphons and heliophores, burning the cedar ships of Tyridon with liquid fire from afar. When noon came, a great heliophore burned Amm's own ship by deflecting a crimson beam. The ship became a living torch and Amm threw himself into the sea, preferring cold death to the chains of captivity. The ships of Tyridon left the bay of Symarna in utter rout, with many cedar-ships burning

under the pitiless gaze of the sun. Amm did not drown but was caught by a sailor of Phoezanthion who recognised him from a painting. He was held for the sake of ransom.

Talaab saw the ships of Tyridon burning from afar and bewailed this turn of events when victory seemed so nigh. For he recognized the swan-and-phoenix banners of Azda and the eagle-and-dove banners of Aion, learning soon from his spies that Tarshish and Phoezanthion had sworn sacred oaths for the sake of succouring Symarna. He also learned that The Caleph's last living son, Amm, was being held for ransom. Perithemis wrote him thus in a letter.

“Unhappy archvizier, to seize command of the Sigean hosts under these foul circumstances! Victory is ours at long last, for Phoezanthion is a tree whose shadow is mighty with age. We were like a sapling cut off for a season, yet we shall flourish by merging with the tree root and leaf again. Tell this unto the aging Caleph: we shall strangle Amm, his last living child, unless you lift the siege and leave us in peace. His ransom is nothing less than our freedom. Choose wisely.”

Talaab cursed his ill-crossed stars and ordered the lifting of the siege. Sigeans worship their God in silence. The free people of Symarna threw a great feast to celebrate their victory with music. The sound of lyres and syrinxes, harps and oboes wafted up unto heaven --- more pleasing than any incense and sacrifice unto Eosis, the Crimson Lord. I was there to hear it, with the crowds chanting my name. My own time grows short now, for Eosis the archangel shall end my life when this story is complete. Already he hovers upon my shoulder, waiting for the end. I grow tired and weak with each passing day.

AMM

Legends say that Symarna was never troubled with the Sigean jihad again. The ships of Phoezanthion and Tarshish, flying banners sewn with griffins, conquered Tyridon to expel Sigean pirates from the livid waves of the Western Sea. They say that the Calephate fell into turmoil after the thankless siege against Symarna. The people of Pard refused to join new jihads under Sigean banners, remembering the tale of Parthenissa and their own Azdaean roots. Many nations refused to bow before the Caleph, thinking how God had spoken upon the battlefield. The slaves of Aqqamer heard how the great army of Sige had been defeated and rose against the tyranny of the Caleph. The revolts failed perhaps, but every free man in Aqqamer had to think twice before smiting a slave across the face afterwards.

Amm, the only living Calephal prince, was taken unto Phoezanthion to stand trial: not for bravery in just war but for encouraging piracy to enslave the free people of the world and attack ships that waved banners of peace during his rule in Tyridon. He defended himself thus before the seven-beamed throne of Xerxapollo.

“Xerxapollo, great pantocrator! You put me under trial based on your unique laws, which you mistake for universal laws. Slavery is permitted in most of the world. There are slaves and captives of war in ancient Zhoaxia, minions and pariahs in changeless Sinddha. The old people of Aqqamer practiced slavery long before the rise of the religions that give worship unto God. If we Sigeans allow slaves, we are in good and ancient company. Behold your own Phoezanthion, where the poor are allowed rations far less generous than what slaves eat in the Sigean empire. How sickly and wan they are! Our own slaves toil under the sun all day perhaps, yet they eat like lions. I suspect that you put me on trial for attempting to invade Symarna, but I have never broken the rules of just war. You, however, broke the rules: first by killing Manaph when he was granted the right of passage, then by poisoning the games of honour by giving a

venomous dagger unto the hands of a warmaiden. You have used the hands of women for both deeds, unmanlike and cowardly though that be, thinking our wrath would diminish at the sight of their teary eyes and shaking hands. We make no such mistake. I know that both Xoanna and Parthenissa are dead: thus the vengeance of my father the Caleph is complete."

Xerxapollo spoke thus. "There is some merit in your answer, but not as much as you think. Know that the rules of just war do not prevent you staying as our captive here upon Phoezanthion, perhaps even unto death in old age. You have harassed ships bearing the banners of Phoezanthion for five years, taking captives and enslaving people who should have remained free according to our sacred laws. Our law is the law under which you shall be judged, for God has found it meet for you to fall captive during the siege of Symarna. Who can forget the pyramids of corpses and cairns of skulls that Wadd built upon the plain of Lud, denying proper burial unto thousands upon thousands of good men? Yet the laws of Azda prevent us from judging you for the crimes of your brother, Wadd. He is now dead at the hands of Solmithra, a prince slain by a sellsword. Wise men say that history is the law of God. What does this tell you about God's judgement?"

Amm spoke thus. "You have captured me in just war, but under the laws of just war you cannot kill me. I must abide by your laws as a captive of war, yes. I would ask you to break my neck instead and end my misery, for I would rather die like a lion in an open battlefield than suffer in a gilded cage. I know that you shall display me like a captive beast unto all princes of this world. I know you shall spy upon me and use me as a pawn in your never-ending chess against Jeriddo and Tarshish. Yet know that I repent the errors of Wadd, for I would have allowed proper burial of the dead if I were him. I repent the errors of Manaph, for witnesses say that he meant violence against that poor vestal and her religion. I am not my brother's keeper, nor am I some tyrant in the making as Marcaulion

once called me in an epistle of his. Break my neck without any pain: for such is my wish. If not, I shall bend the knee before you and call you my emperor in the presence of guests from faraway lands. Yet know that in my heart I shall always crave independence and vengeance.”

Xerxapollo spoke thus. “You are still young, and all those whores and poets you have consorted with have filled your head with much dung. You are also very honest, which is a rare virtue amongst the princes of this world. I shall treat you with chivalry, for you are more chivalrous than your brothers Wadd and Manaph. I know that you are the sole child of the Caleph and even in defeat the Calephate remains strong. Can I muster armies from amongst the cities I rule to topple his rule in distant Aqqamer? Can I muster iron-ribbed ships to conquer distant Talmûn and paint your black ziggurats in crimson hue? I think not. Yet know that I cannot offer you anything but a life of exile in my palace, the House of All, where you can live unto old age. Even if the Caleph were to offer me every ingot and gem in his treasury, I cannot redeem you. You shall be treated like a guest of honour while you stay here and I forbid you from falling upon your own blade. “Life is sweeter than death: the dead agree all the more” --- so sayeth the Song of All. Marcaulion rebuked thee for consorting with poets and whores, whose company is only a rank above the company of cavorting devils and ill spirits. I shall find you a tutor to teach you philosophy, for I know that you have read the ancient tomes of bygone philosophers. You shall grow old in my palace unless you make a great mistake and offend me. I even allow you to send letters unto your father Gad, but we shall read your epistles. I command an army of ears and eyes: every living soul upon Phoezanthion is law-bound to reveal what they know with me, I who am the pantocrator of this world.”

Amm bent the knee before Xerxapollo, yet behold! There were shining tears in his eyes. He was a young man still, honest if cruel. Xerxapollo ordered him to rise and embraced him like an older

brother, acquitting him of charges of piracy and giving him the highest tower in the House of All, from which he could see the waves of the Western Sea. For the love of sea is impossible to extinguish in the bosoms of sailors.

Amm wrote a letter unto his father, the Caleph. "Dread father, Caleph of the whole wide world! I know that you wanted Wadd to bear your opal crown and sit upon your turquoise throne. I am now a captive in the city of Phoezanthion. How I long to win glory for you still! I have wept many manlike tears for my brothers Manaph and Wadd, whose cause of vengeance still burns strong in my heart. Yet our holy writ says that all suffering comes from God, so I shall abide my days as an exiled prince. I am surrounded by jewels and paintings in a palace that reeks of death for me. I asked Xerxapollo to end my life, yet he stayed his hand and granted me a warm welcome."

Gad wrote thus to Amm. "You know that I always favoured Wadd and Manaph over you. Not for nothing! They were true warriors in the cause of Sige, while your faith has always been wanting. If only God took you instead of brave Manaph and wise Wadd! Now that you are a captive for life, know that your name shall forever be accursed upon the ziggurats of Jeriddo and the endless gardens of Marconda. Slay yourself and end your captivity! You have sullied the good name of the Calephate by consorting with poets and whores, studying godless philosophy and befriending infidels. Your life shall hang upon mine like a drawn sword as long as you live, for the kings of Phoezanthion hold thee for ransom: hoping that we shall never lay siege unto the havens of the West to spare your life. It is because of the inner turmoil within the Calephate that we can no longer declare jihad, not for fear of losing you. Begone from my sight. Let me be buried as an old man, for I have been sick with fever ever since I heard Wadd's death."

Amm wept and beat himself so loudly in the head that princess Ruxamis, who was also a guest in the House of All, knocked on his door to offer him solace. They had never met each other before, but behold! "Love burns swifter than any fire and can outrun lightning when he wants" --- so sayeth the Song of All. He rubbed his weeping eyes and beheld the Jupithomenid princess, with snowlike hair and ruddy of eyes, her beauty clawing into his heart with harpylike talons. Ruxamis saw his doe-hazel eyes, his eyelashes shining with tears, and felt the stings of compassionate love.

Ruxamis spoke thus. "Stranger prince! You must have lived a life of bravery and justice if Xerxapollo spares your life thus. Stay your manly tears and tell me what happened, for I would listen." Amm poured his heart into hers. Ruxamis felt the stings of love soon, but she dared not bring up holy wedlock --- for it was impermissible for an Azdaean maiden to marry a Sigeian man under the laws of Phoezanthion. Yet his young heart was hardened against his father Gad and he questioned the wisdom of serving a Caleph who renounced him as both son and warrior.

One day, Ruxamis was praying unto Azda when she heard the door knock. Amm walked in and without saying a word, knelt before the altar in her room. Their hands clasped as Amm recited the divine creed of Azdaeans: "I believe in the sole God and his seven archangels: Sarastro is their godlike prophet." Ruxamis taught him the Azdaean religion as they knelt before the altar. Together they lit a sacred fire together, with cinnamon and sandalwood, with Amm burning a votive lamp around the altar and wishing for a life of happiness with princess Ruxamis. Amm kissed her forehead and asked Xerxapollo for her hand in marriage, for her father was a marshall who perished in a battle.

Xerxapollo blessed them thus. "Captain of the waves! You marry a princess whose father was an accomplished marshall. You convert

unto the Azdaean religion, either out of love or out of genuine admiration for our creed. Yet it is not my position to judge a convert's heart. Sparing your life was the right choice: I am now vindicated before my satraps and viziers. Ruxamis shall be yours forever, for I can see that you shall become tomb-mates one day. May your children and the children of your children live unto old and happy age, and may you never stray from the true path of Azda."

The Caleph, Gad, died from fever and sorrow years later. The archvizier Talaab sent Amm a letter. "Captain of the waves! Your father is dead and his legacy shall fall into ruins unless you return to Jeriddo and wear the opal crown upon your brow. We shall compile your redemption money, five thousand talents of silver if necessary, if only you are willing to return. We know that you converted unto the religion of Azda, yet we suspect that you did so not out of genuine belief but to save your life. Doing so is permitted according to the laws of Sige. Return to Jeriddo and save your father's empire from falling into ruin."

Amm answered thus. "I am now a different man. If I were to return, you would accuse me of dallying with infidels and place my head upon a pike. I have converted unto the Azdaean faith and wedded a high-ranking princess here in Phoezanthion, the empress of the known world. If you were to invade Phoezanthion and drag me unto the ziggurats of Jeriddo to place the crown upon my head, I would still die with the name of Azda and his seven archangels upon my lips. My father disowned me and I disown him."

Xerxapollo was so pleased with this answer that he made Amm a free man again, so that he could serve in the army of Phoezanthion as a captain of ships. He was made a prince of Phoezanthion by Xerxapollo's decree. Gad's line thus came to an end. A rival family from Nod conquered Jeriddo and proclaimed a new Calephate, preaching kindness unto strangers and infidels alike. There was

peace afterwards for many decades, with wine flowing free instead of blood.

PERPETUA & GALAHALD

They say that Perpetua renounced the magic of her mother and left Symarna in a ship of sandalwood soon after Xoanna's resurrection, in order to wed a knight of princely blood called Galahald. Sephorah wanted to teach her how to prepare love potions, in case her husband became besotten with the love of other women.

"Sweet daughter, too sweet for this cruel world! You have read many knightly romances, where a handsome knight asks for the hand of a fair damsel and they live happily ever after. You are unlearned in the arts of love and I fear that this knight who has bewitched your heart may not remain true to a woman from faraway lands. You are marrying a prince of Tarshish, yet men of high rank from Tarshish are not known for their loyalty towards women. Heed my advice and learn the art of love potions from me, perhaps even poison to weed out your rivals. Men are unruly creatures and cannot be tamed with tears and supplications alone."

Perpetua answered thus. "Unkind mother! I must renounce you for your magic, even if ties of kinship hold us fast. If only Nature herself could sever the ties between you and me! I wish I were born out of foam like the goddess Ladonna, instead of a lowly and cunning sorceress like yourself! I have no time for your heathenish ways. The time has come for me to abandon your witchcraft and pursue a life in the rising West. I must cleave unto my husband Galahald, but I will send you paintings of my children. Many times you have sang to me about the beauty of Phoezanthion, but my destination is Tarshish --- the city that rules over the world now. Farewell!" They both wept tears at their parting, but Sephorah's sorrow was deeper. Perpetua left together with her guardian Parcelot, for there were many pirates upon the Western Sea.

Perpetua spent her days in the ship praying and dreaming. She was already giddy with a life yet un-lived, thinking in her mind how she

would happily grow unto old age with her husband Galahand. Yet her guardian Parcelot was suffering from a hidden illness: love towards Perpetua. She knew that Parcelot was the man who avenged her father Raarthur, for which reason she loved him like a father. Parcelot confided his heart during the voyage, yet to avail.

“Words so improper from a knight! I cannot return your love, Parcelot. You are the man who killed my father’s assassin, and I must forever thank you for that deed. As for love, I cannot answer your tearful pleas. Abandon your thoughts about me! I love you like a father: for my sake, please do not disturb the love that shall bloom between me and Galahand.” Parcelot was so despondent upon hearing this that he cut his own arm and rubbed salt upon the wound. He spoke thus. “This wound hurts less than your unkind words, but I am oath-bound to protect you. The Song of All sayeth that hearts are like altars unto wild gods, for they burn with lawless fires. Do not blame me for my love: blame the fixed stars instead.”

Their ship arrived at the artificial harbour that ties Sea Eterne with the livid waves of the Western Sea. She beheld the Colossus of the East, frowning at the glory of the Old World. They disembarked from the ship, and behold! Perpetua was like a dolphin that leaves the ocean to crawl upon the earth. The people did not speak the language of Pard and those who spoke Dionic looked down upon her provincial accent. Tarshish was seven times greater than Symarna, the streets crowded and unpleasant. If Symarna is a paradise for golden generations, she finally met a world of iron in Tarshish. The people were rude and boorish, showing nothing but contempt for strangers from faraway lands. For the people of Tarshish are vainglorious, knowing well their empire is the greatest known to man.

Perpetua was taken to small palace encircled with gardens, where Galahand was waiting for her. He was even more handsome than his paintings. Perpetua trembled with joy, hoping for a lifetime of

happiness. She spoke first. "Husband! What a sweet word! I promise now and evermore to be your woman, to wipe away your tears with my own hands and to bear you children in your image. I have come from distant Symarna to add glory unto your house. My father Raarthur was once the second highest archdeacon of Temple White. Perhaps you have heard the offertories I compose for our triune God."

Galahand was a worldlywise man, who answered thus. "We indeed belong to the faith of Aion, but know that the princes of Tarshish look down upon excessive religion as a fault. I shall marry no priestess! Remove your veil and show your beauty." Perpetua removed her veil and what Galahand saw pierced his chest with love.

The wedding was like a fairy tale. They married in a cathedral of Aion, Galahand wearing robes dyed blue with indigo leaves and Perpetua wearing a dress dyed yellow with saffron. The priests sprinkled rose petals over the couple as young boys sang about the glory of Logos and Sophia, who rule over our universe as king and queen. Perpetua picked up the lyre and sang a song about the siege of Symarna, which drew applause from the crowd. She kissed the hands of Galahand's father and mother, who had been good allies of her own father Raarthur before his death. The feast was a spectacle, with oysters and lobsters from the sea and deer and antelopes from the land, wine from the grapes of Tarshish and mead from the honey of Phoezanthion. Galahand taught her foreign bride how to dance, slow and cool like the waves first and fast and passionate like the wind next. When he asked her whether she had kissed any man before, Perpetua lowered her eyes. He raised her chin with his hand and gave her a kiss, upon which Perpetua broke into tears of joy. Galahand took her to a rainworn cave, for she had heard that Perpetua lived in a cavern palace all her life. They consummated their love in the light of votive lamps burning all around. Galahand

prayed for sons to continue his lineage, while Perpetua prayed for love eternal.

They were happy together, perhaps for years. Perpetua was heavy with child when Galahand's love began to lose its keen ardour. She fell homesick and began to miss Symarna, with its crystalline temples and painted streets, so much unlike the hustle and bustle of Tarshish. Galahand refused to make love unto his pregnant wife and began to consort with courtesans and buxom widows. He complained to his friends and family thus. "She is like a priestess in bed! I feel guilt every time I approach her, for she scolds me that excessive lust is a sin. She spends her time weaving tapestries and playing music, womanlike arts that captivate me no more. I am a lion sharp of tooth and claw. I have pursued and pinned down this gazelle, but did not find her blood and flesh to my liking. Why should I gnaw upon her dry bones when the forests of the world teem with living prey?"

Perpetua was no fool. Galahand was seeking the company of other women, sometimes coming home drunk with the sickening perfumes of harlots hanging about him. She bewailed in her own mind how she refused to learn the art of love potions from her mother, yet in her foolish pride she did not think of asking for help from Sephorah. Who can save a soul when the fixed stars foretell suffering as they shine above, as thankless as they are eternal? She confessed her pain to a priestess, but to no avail: the priestess recommended forbearance and nothing else. At long last she sought out the company of witches and sorceresses, and none was as accomplished in witchcraft in all of Tarshish as a crone called Circate. Perpetua sought her counsel, not knowing that she was a sworn enemy of her mother Sephorah. Her mother had mentioned her several times as a lesser rival, but had never warned her against her treachery. They say that Circate learned her magic from the immortal master Zosimon, her bosom burning with his love. She was jealous of the love that Zosimon felt for Sephorah, always his favourite and now a companion to warm

his bed. Circate never stopped feeling the stings of jealous vengeance for that offence.

Circate welcomed Perpetua to her magic shop, arrayed with vats and alembics holding strange creatures within. There were floating eyes and embalmed hands inside vats, with bubbling quicksilver and hot sulphur inside flasks, for Circate long sought after the higher secrets of alchemy without ever being successful. Perpetua asked for a love potion from her, her hands trembling and her eyes gleaming with tears. Circate was amazed to discover that the daughter of Sephorah was on her doorstep, begging a boon. She was an old and bitter harpy who nursed a broken heart. She had once fallen in love with Zosimon, who had instead chosen Sephorah for being younger, more cunning, and more beautiful. She concocted an evil design in her mind and gave her poison instead of a love potion, so that she could ruin Perpetua's happy youth. She feigned a coy smile, and behold! Perpetua was so blameless herself that she did not see the evil lurking in Circate's heart.

"Daughter of Symarna! You seek me out for an illness that many women suffer from: infidelity of husband. You have come to the right place, for I am matchless when it comes to mixing philtres and potions. Take this scentless and tasteless potion and mix it with Galahand's evening meal. I would charge fifty talents of silver for my service, but I visited your homeland Symarna once. For the sake of your painted streets and your beautiful face, I give this potion unto you for free." Perpetua thanked her stars, for she had little silver and even less gold.

She mixed the potion with Galahand's evening meal, pouring ten drops into his stew. She fixed her gaze upon her husband, waiting for him to show the symptoms of the illness called love again. Yet her husband grimaced as he ate of the stew, soon his fever rising. Blood ran down his nostrils and dripped down unto his lion-pelt jacket. He choked as if struggling with an invisible demon and soon could not

breathe. Perpetua summoned help, but it was too late: Galahand was dead the next morning. His family summoned a physician to understand what happened, who knew immediately that Galahand was poisoned. Perpetua tore at her hair and beat her bosom, understanding the evil that Circate wrought without knowing why. She confessed everything to Galahand's tearful mother, who blamed her for his death: for she thought that Perpetua was lying, that she had bought the poison willingly to avenge his infidelity. They beat Perpetua even though she was heavy with child and sent her away to a dank, lightless dungeon.

None visited her in the dungeon save Parcelot, who heard from her innocent lips the whole affair. "You rejected my love, but I am a man of honour who pursued Raarthur's assassin for years. I know where Circate lives and I swear an oath upon my own manhood that I shall avenge this crime." He grabbed his sword and sought out the sorceress Circate. He sneaked into her mosaic-covered villa at night and killed her slave-guards. He grabbed her by the hair to ask her why she would poison innocent Perpetua's life thus.

Circate was an evil crone who loved to brag about her crimes. She struggled against Parcelot's wrist, yet he was as strong as an ox despite his advanced age. Thus she spoke. "You ask a crone like me why I poisoned Galahand? I am old and bitter because my days are about to end. I have spent my days looking for the elixir of youth, yet the alchemists of Phoezanthion denied me their enigmata. What else is left to live for in this old age, save old quarrels and bitter vengeance? Yes, I plucked gentle Perpetua from the black soil of her happiness and planted her into a graveyard. For she is the daughter of Sephorah, who stole immortal master Zosimon from me when she was young and cunning and beautiful. I am ancient now, but my heart never forgave that insult. If I cannot avenge myself against the mother, I thus avenge myself against the daughter."

Parcelot took justice in his own hands. He broke every limb of Circate and cut off her head. Perpetua was put on trial before Marcaulion for the murder of Galahand. Parcelot came to the palace of Marcaulion, still covered in blood, to offer a testimony in Perpetua's defence. He hurled the head of dead Circate at his feet and bade him listen.

"Philosopher king of Tarshish! Perpetua is a woman as white as snow, as blameless as a fawn. I heard from the dying lips of Circate herself that she has been a victim of deceit and slander. Behold the severed head of the witch --- if only she could speak! All that Perpetua wanted was a love potion to make Galahand hers again, yet the witch gave her poison instead. The oaths of hospitality are universal across all religions and nations. Have we gone so far in our hate towards strangers that we would blame this poor stranger, pregnant with the child of Galahand, for his murder? Is she so devoid of reason that she would seek to murder her husband, knowing well that this would also be the cause of her own destruction? Wise king Marcaulion, please spare her life. Take mine instead, for I have slain Circate the witch for her foul deed."

The philosopher king of Tarshish judged the circumstances and sided with Parcelot, ordering the release of Perpetua from the dungeon. He ordered his praetors to seize the wealth of Circate and give it unto the family of Galahand as wergild. Despite the verdict, his family hated Perpetua and harassed her for years with slander. Perpetua wept for her dead husband for three years, composing songs and weaving tapestries to make a living. When she gave birth, her child was taken away from her by Galahand's family. No gentlemen of Tarshish would marry Perpetua afterwards, for fear of offending the family of Galahand. Who was left to wed her but loyal Parcelot? Parcelot took her unto his own simple cottage. Perpetua swore to live the life of a widow at first, but she owed her life to Parcelot, who had also avenged her father. Thankfulness became love and they became husband and wife as the years passed. Perpetua burned her chivalric romances, after learning that our unhappy world was nothing alike.

THE FORLORN MOTHER

What is left for me to sing about Symarna, except the death of its most famous woman? Sephorah was a bitter woman after the death of Xoanna and the departure of Perpetua. She doted on her last daughter Thailai, who was heavy with child. She wanted to see her grandsons alive and well before the vengeance of Eosis caught up with her. She knitted socks for them, bought every toy for sale in the marketplace of Symarna. Every day she prayed unto Eosis, hoping to escape his crimson wrath by supplicating him with prayer and tears.

The love between Zosimon and Sephorah was kindled anew. Zosimon knew that there was no escaping the wrath of Eosis, after breaking the Emerald Law and declaring himself a living god. For ten thousand years he had been alive, burying thousands of friends as the indifferent ages rolled past. He had seen everything under the sun and did not fear the end of his days: for death was a final adventure for him. He was well beloved and worshipped in earnest for three years, for the people of Symarna admired the work he had done to redeem their city. Zosimon prepared an elixir of youth with the last grains of lapis lapidorum left in his keeping and shared the elixir with Sephorah as a wedding gift. How she trembled with tears of joy! She drank the elixir and youth returned to her renewed limbs. Her eyes shone with glamour and the thankless wrinkles upon her brow disappeared. They married in Nemeton, under the shadow of giant ferns and in the company of hissing dragons. They knew that they were marked for death both, so they loved each other with fury and abandon.

Sephorah soon learned that rejuvenating into a young maiden was not the end of her troubles. The women of Symarna displayed their jealous hate openly after she became young again. Women who would gladly strangle their own children for a single sip from the elixir of youth condemned her for impiety and for breaking the laws of nature. Her friends and allies abandoned her. Only gods and

monsters live by themselves, they said: Sephorah was no goddess in their eyes. She was no longer welcome in feasts and temples, as if she were a disgraced efreet. Ignorant children pelted her with stones, calling her an accursed hag.

It was around this time that Thailai died in the weltering agony of childbirth. Sephorah tried every herb, every potion she knew to sustain the flicker of her daughter's life. All was in vain. She suspected that the death was the handwork of archangel Eosis, for her fever was as hot as the coals of Hell. Thailai addressed her mother thus before her eyes were closed to this world. "Mother! Do not weep after me. I have lived as a libertine and enjoyed every hour of my life, but I die as a true mother like you. You have always been a fierce mother, like a pantheress watching over lambs. My last wish is that my two boys should never know war. Look how they babble and smile, innocent of the ways of this world! Do not send them to faraway cities, be it Tarshish or Venalphi. Do not let them become sellswords, despite promises of glory. Let them grow old in Symarna, our beautiful home. This world is a stage and the time has come for me to enjoy the applause, having played my part."

Thus she lost her final daughter. She gave the two boys to archpriest Aorang, reminding him of Thailai's last wish. For she had heard that the Circle of Eld was summoning her to Phoezanthion to answer for her crimes against the Emerald Law. She kissed Zosimon one last time, thanking him for the elixir. She chose to end her own life with hemlock wine instead of facing disgrace in Phoezanthion before the same immortal judges who once doomed her mother Medorax. She died with a crown of wild roses upon her head. Those who buried her were surprised at how young she seemed. When they laid her body in the earth, she looked not like a woman who had borne daughters, but like a bride waiting for her groom.

Sephorah had spent her lifetime questing after the elixir of youth. What a vain quest it was, when even the elixir of youth was

incapable of altering her fate! But there is no escape from the crimes of the past. She was buried in Nemeton, inside a glass casket. Zosimon wept many tears over her body and promised that her body would never decay. All that she left behind was a beautiful, undecaying corpse and many legends about her life.

SARASTRO'S JUDGEMENT

Thus my story comes to an end and my own life with it. Symarna became a dominion of Phoezanthion again, which became a dominion of Tarshish. Three vestals disembarked from the holiest ship to consecrate the Sun Fire anew: for the flames had gone cold in Parthenissa's absence. Only vestals were allowed to touch the sacrosanct fire and the city had none. The three vestals chose a young and noble girl free of blemish and named her the Vestal of the Sun, counselling her not to follow the tragic example of Parthenissa in her zeal for martyrdom but to enjoy the fruits of a long and hard-won peace.

Zosimon enjoyed his kingdom for three years. The people cheered him as their saviour at first, burning lambs unto him upon altars and hailing him as a living god. He had been a servant of the Circle of Eld for ten thousand years, living a quiet life in the shadows. He enjoyed being a god, at least at first. Peasants brought bundles of wheat unto him, asking for his blessing. Priests invoked him in their prayers to Eosis, the very archangel who was going to destroy him. Babes were named in his honour. When maidens wept tears before fire altars, their prayers rose like wafting incense and reached his ears. Men and women flocked to Nemeton to offer him gifts and flowers. Yet what they demanded from him was always in excess of what they offered. "God alone has everything to give, without taking anything" --- so sayeth the Song of All. He ordered a pyramidal temple built for himself with the two thousand talents of gold in the treasury, from which he would rule over Symarna for as long as he could. He laid down the foundation stone himself.

Yet as Zosimon was about to discover, being a god was neither his calling nor his mettle. The pride wore off all too quickly. The people of Symarna always prayed for the same things: love, long life, glory, children. The priests and the devout folk swarmed at the gates of Nemeton, always hoping for newer and greater miracles. The people

began to murmur against this upstart godling soon. The citizens wanted ever more gold from him, to rebuild their city in greater glory and perhaps even expand into an empire. Yet Zosimon had no lapis lapidorum left in his keeping, with which to transmute base metals into gold or resurrect the fallen. Every mother who lost a son approached him to beg the boon of resurrection, gnashing their teeth and cursing their gifts when Zosimon turned down their tearful pleas. Public mood soured against him, word by word and whisper by whisper.

Perithemis and other democrats saw impiety at work in his hands, for he had set himself up like a tyrant upon a republic. He bade the praetors refer all matters of state to him, which vexed the senators of Symarna. Perithemis wrote a letter unto the pantocrator of Phoezanthion. "Proud emperor! It has reached my ears that Tarshish shall eclipse Phoezanthion like the moon occluding the sun, that you consider the redemption of Symarna the first joint accomplishment of the Griffin Empire. We are dealing with a wizard turned tyrant, who answers prayers and accepts sacrifices as if he is a living god. Many mumble and gossip against him. I have seen his miracles with my own eyes: how he resurrected Xoanna, discovered the gold hidden within Nemeton, rejuvenated his mistress Sephorah. Yet he seems incapable of any more magic and the people are unhappy with his yoke. Consult this matter with your alchemists and archpriests. It would be impious for us to judge the redeemer of Symarna ourselves, but you can and should do so."

Perithemis tempted the people thus. "People of Symarna, children of the republic! This impostor cannot create any more gold, nor resurrect the fallen. He resurrected Xoanna, but for what? So that the warmaiden can die a second death soon. Is this not proof that the one and true God hates his work? What manner of living god falters thus when it comes to answering prayers? He is either withholding the power to make us great, or he is truly powerless. If he is a living god still, he does not care about the glory of our city and deserves no

worship. If he is powerless, seize his sceptre and orb so that Symarna can become a republic again!"

Zosimon was aware that public mood was souring against him. He was so desperate that he sent a letter unto his master Sarastro.

"Eternal master, first alchemist! I know that I am forbidden from ruling over nations according to the Emerald Law, yet I have broken that principle. I have done good work to defend the good name of Symarna against Sigean oppressors. Without me, Symarna would have fallen unto the Caleph and her babes would have been dashed against rocks. For the sake of my victory, please send me some lapis lapidorum, so that I can appease the demands of the mob and keep ruling Symarna under the yoke of Phoezanthion."

Sarastro answered thus. "To create gold out of nothingness is infinite usury. I do not rule over Phoezanthion: the mortals of Phoezanthion rule over themselves. You are lucky that archangel Eosis has not smitten thee with a thunderbolt yet, for you have broken the Emerald Law and you were stupid enough to reveal the likeness of Xoanna unto all people of Symarna as proof of your godhood. Without lapis lapidorum, the secret of which only I know, you are just a frail mortal. Your hands were exact in judging the suffering of Symarna, yet inexact when it came to measuring your own glory. You have broken the principle of equivalence by giving free gold unto this thankless people. You have broken the rule that immortal alchemists should not set themselves up as eternal tyrants over their mortal flock. You have broken the rule that the dead should stay dead. Even I must consult the dread archangel Eosis before resurrecting a mortal. Yet even with the power of resurrection in my hands, do you think I would answer every plea? How many kings and champions have I seen pass from this world unto the next, only to reject the call of the people to bring them back? If we were to revive every man thus, our groaning earth would sink beneath the weight of immortals. No prophet to work miracles has done so day after day, hour after hour: for miracles that are repeated every day become common things,

despised by the simplest of people. "Kings cannot rule through miracles" --- thus I said in The Song of All. We alchemists rule from the shadows for a good reason. When you cast pearls before swine, do not be surprised when their thankless tusks gore you in the end. If you so enjoyed the thankless gift of kingship, know that you shall not rule more than three years. I have no lapis lapidorum to give unto a man, now a mortal man, who thinks of himself as a living god. Come unto Phoezanthion, so that you can stand trial for breaking the Emerald Law."

Sarastro also sent a letter unto Perithemis. "The wizard Zosimon did good work in terms of defending Symarna against the enemy. Yet he has broken the Emerald Law by performing miracles without our permission. He declared himself a living god, wherefore we excommunicate him. He resurrected Xoanna and but was unable to change her fate. Arrest him and drag him unto Phoezanthion in chains. This is the will of Eosis, greatest amongst archangels."

Zosimon's fame thus withered away. Many priests whispered that resurrection was for God's hand alone. They were also offended by his proclamations that he was a living god. Perithemis read aloud the letter of immortal prophet Sarastro to his followers. The people turned against him even more. Forgive his folly! At long last they asked Zosimon to exile himself or face public judgement. Zosimon had devoted two thousand talents of gold for the sake of building a pyramid of marble unto himself. After he was humbled by Sarastro, he spent that gold not to complete the pyramid but to repair the walls and temples of Symarna and succour the poor with loaves of spiced bread. He returned his crown of gold unto Perithemis, who melted it down out of rancour. He returned his sapphire sceptre and emerald orb unto the tomb of the last king of Symarna, whereupon Symarna became a republic again.

Zosimon fled back unto Phoezanthion at long last, like a wounded pigeon returning to its roost, fearing the vengeance of mothers whose

sons he could not resurrect. There he stood trial before the Circle of Eld. He was granted eternal fame for redeeming Symarna, death for proclaiming himself a living god. He was taken unto the unlit dungeons beneath Ophyridas, the void pyramid of gold. And here I bide my time until I cease to exist as a mere mortal.

For I am Zosimon, who told you this circular tale. I have gone blind and my hands tremble as I recite these final lines. My guardians denied me the elixir of youth and I waxed older, much older within the space of a year. Tomorrow I shall drink molten gold and perish, my testimony complete. I have drunk of the forbidden wine of godhood once before ending my hapless days. No god reigns forever, let alone man. Remember my masterpiece, if not me! I have unfixed the stars and redeemed Symarna, for which I die a proud man.