



## **Appendix A**

# **History and Mythology**

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This document (v1.0) was compiled in September 2003 by Cenadrak as a tribute to the Divine Lands of Achaea.



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## 16.1 The Mythology of Achaea

### Genesis

Past legend and lore, before memory and myth, Ayar, the Creator, willed into existence everything known and unknown. He saw fit to create not only diverse planets in this universe, but entirely separate planes, some with physical laws that differ radically from our own. At the last, he created the Elder Gods and the Aldar, to serve them. The Elder Gods he infused with a small, finite, portion of his own boundless power and gave them the gift of immortality. To the Aldar he gave great power exceeding that of virtually all beings save for the Gods.

Of the Elder Gods, there were a handful only: Aegis, the God of War. Thoth, whose realm is Death. Matsuhama, the skilled God of Combat. The calculating Prospero, God of Wealth. Vastar, Lord of the Skies. Aeon, who has some control over Time itself. Gaia, Goddess of Nature. Agatheis, God of the Elements. Shaitan, the feared Lord of Evil. Flighty Eros, patron of lovers everywhere. Gentle Scarlatti, God of the Arts. Caspian, who rules the Oceans. Miramar the Evenhanded, Goddess of Justice. Twilight, the mysterious God of Darkness. Lupus, the wild God of the Beasts. Lucretius, enigmatic God of Philosophy, Raclawice, patron Goddess of Rogues and Wanderers everywhere, and Valnurana, Goddess of Sleep and Dreaming. Taking no specific realm were Lorientan, Daedalus, and Khalas.

Though satisfied with the perfection of these expressions of his divine aspect, the Lord of Creation was haunted by a sense of emptiness. Over the aeons, he watched his creations interacting and experiencing the wonderful uncertainty of their lives. Ayar had none of this, for he was all that ever was and all that could be. There were no secrets for Ayar, no goals to be striven for. Ayar spent his time in endless contemplation of his own existence and, for reasons too foreign for we of limited existence to comprehend, grew bored.

He desired to experience his creation first-hand. He wanted to feel the soaring ecstasy and painful despair of those who possess something besides the certitude of total prescience. After a deep period of intense contemplation, Ayar split himself into two beings: Ayar and Proteus. Ayar intentionally limited the power of Proteus and was able to exclude Proteus' origins from the mighty God's mind. For the rest of the Elder Gods, he implanted false memories which deluded them into believing Proteus had always been their leader.

So it was that the Elder Gods were created to rule over creation and maintain order and balance. All were given power far beyond even that of the Aldar, but still, not infinite. Proteus was unquestioningly the most powerful of the Gods and ruled them by general consent. For his Queen and lover, Proteus took Lorientan, who was one of the most powerful Gods as well as being possessed of a devastating beauty and razor-sharp mind.

Thus, the ranks of Creation were complete. Ages came and went peacefully as the various planes developed. Some, like our own, grew to incredible size and complexity, while others remained small and relatively uniform. The Gods had the power of effortless planar travel while the Aldar were forced to exert considerable energy discovering and exploring these endless planes. The Gods spent their time exalting in their power and expanding their influence. The Aldar became masters of building and of magic and testaments to their ability may be found throughout the multiverse. It can be truthfully said, and I write this without any trace of heresy, but only a humble historian's drive for the truth, that the Gods grew complacent, while the Aldar did the work and learned about their surroundings.

### The Prophecy And The Races

Still, there were flashes of creativity in the otherwise Cyrenaic aeons after the Creation. Proteus and Phaestus began experimenting with creating life forms, while Agatheis explored the mysteries of matter and energy in their myriad manifestations. During this period, Proteus and Phaestus created many animals, birds, insects and types of vegetation, populating the innumerable planets with life. Finally, they hit upon the secret of consciousness and created the Tsol'aa. Tall and lithe, the Tsol'aa chose to dwell in the forests of the world of Achaea, on the continent of Sapience.

Eventually, Phaestus too created a race called the Dwarves. The Dwarves were short, stocky creatures fond of metal, gem, and all products of the earth. Much to the consternation of Phaestus, his beloved Dwarves seemed to lack any sort of free will. Unable to make decisions for themselves, they were not much more than very complex machinery. Phaestus eventually found a solution to this, but we will return and tell this story later.

Ages came and went with the Tso'aa building their forest homes, the dwarves, under the supervision of Phaestus building their mountain fortresses and the Gods and Aldar mastering more and more of Creation. Ayar looked down upon his work and was pleased. He enjoyed feeling the triumphs and travails of Proteus, with whom he was one and things were good.

After countless ages had passed, one single event took place that was to forever change Creation. As well as we may know, a being of incomprehensible structure entered Creation from somewhere outside and began wandering. Eventually, it encountered Maya, an Aldar of exceedingly pure and innocent soul. Horribly, it proceeded to rape Maya, who was residing on our planet, the favourite of the Aldar. Upon discovering her, lying prone in a state of shock, Dekalb, a prominent Aldar, began wailing in grief. A Goddess had been injured, something unheard of.

Ayar heard Dekalb's cries and grew angry. He struck out at this being, banishing it to places unknown to suffer in eternal torment for its sins. He erased all evidence that it had ever existed, save for its effect on Maya: she was pregnant with the child of this Unnamable Horror.

It was soon after this that the Aldar, Caymus, began to gain his current reputation as the greatest prophet in history. It was the Twin Prophecies (as they were later dubbed) that forever cemented his place in history. Caymus first predicted that at some point, Proteus would be overthrown as leader of the Gods and another would fill his place. Upon hearing this, many of the Gods called for his death, but Proteus declined, feeling that Caymus was simply expressing what he had seen with his gift, not advocating a rebellion. Caymus' second prophecy was that Maya would bear twins, and that these children would not be Aldar but would have the potential to someday rival them in power.

When Maya gave birth, it was indeed twins and they were distinctly not Aldar. Many of the Aldar and Gods, upon viewing these children, laughed and ridiculed Caymus, for they were pathetic, mewling, helpless things. Nevertheless, Proteus saw something special in them and ordered the Aldar to build for them a land called Ceylon, meaning 'Land of the Dawn.' Designed by the chief architect, Mantru and built with the sweat of many Aldar, Proteus then placed the city on the continent we now call Sapience and decreed that these 'humans' would inherit it. Further, he ordered that no Aldar was to exercise dominion over humanity without their consent. This upset many of the Aldar and made them resentful, as they considered this world theirs and the humans merely bastard children, fit only to serve.

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## The Seeds Of War

In response to these decrees by Proteus, three factions of Aldar emerged. One, led by Han-Silnar was distinctly xenophobic in its attitude. Another, led by Han-Silnar's brother, Han-Tolneth, was also xenophobic, but had great respect for the Gods in general and Proteus in particular and so resolved to support and respect Proteus' decision. A third was led by Dekalb, who was known for his loyalty and humble manner before the Gods. This faction always argued for backing the decision of Proteus, feeling that he was able to perceive factors hidden from the Aldar.

It was soon after the split among the Aldar that the Elder God Khalas, often called the Wanderer, encountered the great demon prince Pazuzu in a remote and inhospitable plane. Pazuzu ruled over all airborne demons and was one of the members of a loose oligarchy of demon princes, all of whom wielded as much power as the Gods themselves while in their home planes (collectively known as the Inferno). Ayar, when he created them, limited the demon princes' ability to travel between planes to prevent them from raging across the multiverse in a conquering orgy of blood and fire.

Pazuzu, with honey-coated words, implied to Khalas that he would welcome and support any attempt to overthrow the current dominion that Proteus and the rest of the Elder Gods held over Creation. Khalas, one of Lorientan's favorites, knew that Lorientan coveted the power that Proteus possessed and felt that Caymus' prophecy predicted a successful coup on her part. On his return from the Inferno, Khalas informed Lorientan of

the horrific yet boundless power of the demons that dwelt there. He saw an opportunity to harness the power of these new beings in an effort to throw off the tyrannical shackles of Proteus and his allies. Lorielan agreed, and they approached the third member of their eventual triumvirate, Agatheis.

Agatheis, who had not yet mastered elemental control, but was close, agreed to support their rebellion, but felt that more support was needed before they could muster the necessary forces to succeed. The three Elder Gods agreed to wait a few hundred years while they marshaled what forces they could.

Soon thereafter, Lorielan discovered the Crystal realms, inhabited by the Kx'Khrah. A race of crystalline beings,, they were highly organized and very disciplined. Though weak individually, they possessed the relatively unique power to merge into vast and intricate composite beings.. Through the control of wave resonance, these unique creatures were able to manipulate and harness the powers of sound and light.

Upon their first encounter with a other-planar being, Lorielan, they worshipped her immediately for they had never seen a being so soft and rounded. They could only conclude that the magnificent being before them was a God. Lorielan, as all Gods, had the ability to communicate with any intelligent or semi-intelligent being and was able to convince these diamond-edged people that a grave threat to the multiverse was approaching. She spoke to them of other planes both terrible and wonderful and of the fantastic diversity of Creation. She told them how the Creator, Ayar, created the universe with order in mind and that, perhaps, the Kx'Khrah represented the ultimate order and thus must carry out the will of Ayar, which she claimed to represent. With great eloquence, she bitterly spoke to them of the chaotic Proteus and how his tyranny threatened the very concept of an ordered universe. The Kx'Khrah were swayed by her words and were outraged by this Proteus, of whom they had never heard. They agreed that he must be stopped and began rallying for war, with Lorielan as their general and queen.

At about the same time, Agatheis had completed his experiments and had obtained the eagerly sought-after power of elemental control. Through this, he was able to contact the powerful leaders of the elements: Sllshya, the Great Ocean, Kkractle, the Eternal Fire, Whiirh, the Western Wind and Garash, the Immovable Mountain. These beings possessed completely foreign thought-patterns and their intentions and goals are to this day utterly unfathomable.. Despite this limitation, Agatheis was able to use his newfound control to force them into the Triumvirate's army. Though the Elemental Lords could not leave their respective planes, they were able collectively to increase Agatheis' power of elemental control to the point at which he could summon legions of elementals and command them to do his bidding.

Unbeknownst to Agatheis, Dekalb had also gained a certain degree of elemental control and was disturbed by the tremors he could perceive. It was clear to him - the stormclouds of rebellion were gathering. Approaching Daedalus, he cautiously told him what he knew and promised that the Aldar would always be known as true loyalists of the established order. Daedalus immediately opened contact with the other Elder Gods and informed them of Lorielan, Khalas, and Agatheis' approaching treachery. Some of the Gods, including Shaitan, Twilight, and Scarlatti did not care to involve themselves in a war, considering themselves above such petty conflict or, in the cases of Shaitan and Twilight, were unwilling to exert themselves for the sake of Gods who had often excluded them. Others, notably the warrior gods Aegis, Matsuhama and Thoth, were eager for the opportunities that a conflict of such epic proportions would inevitably bring. The general conclusion was that this unholy Triumvirate must be crushed lest all the realms of creations be torn asunder.

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## The Great Council

Though the Aldar were not as powerful as the Gods, there were many more of them and the Triumvirate knew that they must somehow gather Aldar support if their plan was to succeed. Khalas approached his student, Han-Silnar for support. The taste of resentment towards Proteus for giving Sapience to the humans still bitter in his mouth, Han-Silnar agreed to support his mentor. Han-Silnar assured the three Gods that he could convince the rest of the Aldar to support their side and called a Great Council; something only done twice before in history.

The gathering of the Aldar took seven years and was held in what is now called the Caves of Sorrow. During this time, there was much debate and it became evident that under no circumstances would Dekalb's faction participate in a rebellion and would, in fact, be likely to fight against one. Han-Tolneth's faction wanted nothing to do with either side in a rebellion and just wanted peace, to better continue their research and building. The arguments raged back and forth, waxing philosophic at times and descending to the level of base insult at

others.. Eventually however, Dekalb's virtue and moral certitude won the respect of all. Han-Silnar was forced to agree with Dekalb and vowed to support Proteus and the other Divinities.

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## The Triumverate Marshals

During the time of the Great Council, Agatheis, Khalas, and Lorientan continued to gather their forces. Agatheis, who was worshipped by the Rajamala, a race of tiger-people from the same plane but different planet as Sapience, joined with strike forces of fire and earth elementals to conquer and impress into service vast legions of the Nevaharr. Possessed of a humanoid upper-body and the lower body of a massive, six-legged lion, the Nevaharr resided on a planet in a plane much like ours and were very fearful of fire. The appearance of intelligent fire-beings, along with the Rajamala who made a practice of devouring their victims, surrendered quickly and unhappily joined with these strange Gods in their revolt.

Khalas meanwhile encountered the Underworld, a plane populated solely by undead beings. Prince Slith, whose father ruled over the Underworld, was eager to fight against the hated deathgod Thoth and promised vast undead legions in support. His father, King Ugrach, was mightily displeased and cast Slith and his followers out of the Underworld, wanting nothing to do with a war in which Thoth himself would be involved. Mighty are the Powers of the Underworld, but mightier still is Death himself.

So, the Triumvirate had marshaled its forces and the Elder Gods did not know the magnitude or the composition of them. We turn again to the Aldar.

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## The Great Betrayal

After the Great Council, Dekalb and Han-Silnar reconvened the Council as a council of war. Han-Tolneth and his faction did not attend, for they wished to distance themselves from any conflict.

Before the council of war began, Han-Silnar advised that an anti-magic field be erected, to inhibit any magical surveillance of their council. A side-effect of this field would be that no one would be able to enter or leave the Caves of Sorrow until the field was taken down from within. Dekalb agreed, thinking it a sensible and wise suggestion and together they sealed the entrance. As a prayer was being said to Aegis, God of War, the Aldar were betrayed. Lorientan had conspired to slip some merged Kx'Khrah into the council of war under the guise of Han-Silnar faction members. These master wielders of sound and light were able to pose as perfect imitations, the real faction members lying slain by Lorientan's hand.

The disguised Kx'Khrah struck with immensely powerful beams of light, striking down many of the Aldar in Dekalb's faction. Han-Silnar was dumbfounded. Never entirely persuaded by Dekalb's assurances, he faltered and turned traitor to the Aldar. Han-Silnar truly believed that Lorientan was right and simply wanted time to persuade Dekalb to see the light of 'reason.' He had agreed with Lorientan that the other Aldar should be subdued and restrained for the duration of the war. Afterwards, they would soon, so Lorientan said, see the wisdom of Han-Silnar's decision as Lorientan's rule brought Creation into a new and enlightened age.

When he witnessed the Kx'Khrah striking down the opposing Aldar, he immediately realized that he had been doubly betrayed. Not only were Lorientan's crystal-beings killing Aldar, but they must have already assassinated most of his faction in order to infiltrate the Cave of Sorrow disguised as his comrades.

Outrage filled his mind and he screamed to his battlemaster, Yen-Sorte, an Aldar of legendary skill, to slay the Kx'Khrah. Immediately, the voice of Lorientan filled his head, telling him that he must go on, or she would subject him to an eternity of pain and suffering. It was at this moment that Han-Silnar realized he was no longer master of his own fate and was simply a pawn in a game beyond his understanding. He had only wanted to regain the Aldar their position as favorite children of the Gods and eliminate the bastard humans.

Yet, Han-Silnar had no choice. He could not directly contest with a God and could not face the prospect of being singled out for punishment by Lorientan. So, he quickly ordered Yen-Sorte and the other Aldar that followed him to slay Dekalb and company. The Kx'Khrah were, by this time, being overwhelmed by Dekalb's faction, as they erected barriers to prevent the deadly focused light from reaching them. Then, like a crazed demon, Yen-Sorte struck. A whirling frenzy of death, he cut down a score of Aldar on his way to Dekalb. Dekalb knew he was

doomed, for all knew of Yen-Sorte's unparalleled ability. Nevertheless, Dekalb was also a fine fighter and few could match his prowess at sorcery. Conjuring a sword of pure piscine power, he bravely went to face Yen-Sorte. Within half a minute, Dekalb was bleeding from a myriad of wounds where Yen-Sorte's scimitar had sliced into him and suffering from a broken shoulder where Yen-Sorte's mace had smashed into it. It was over quickly after that and the rest of the Aldar, trying to escape, but prevented by the anti-magic field, were slaughtered like pigs. Daedalus, who felt the death of Dekalb but could not aid him due to the interference of Khalas and Agatheis wept, for the Great Betrayal (as it was so-named later) was also the first instance of murder among the Aldar.

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## The Gods March To War

The Gods were in dire straits at this point. They had counted on the support of the Aldar and they now realized that not only would they not have that support, but that the Triumvirate would have Aldar backing them instead. They also did not have much time, for the forces of the Triumvirate were already massing on a plane called Nishnatoba, which lies near to our own plane, in preparation for the destruction of the humans and the attack on Proteus and the other Elder Gods.

At this point, Proteus himself took a hand. Exercising his immense power, he transported all the varied forces of the Gods to Nishnatoba to meet the Triumvirate on the battlefield. This was a blow to the Triumvirate, for they felt their greatest advantage lay in the hundreds of years of preparation that the other Gods did not have.

Aegis was there with his legions of Horkval: well-trained insectoid warriors arranged in tight phalanxes, and armed with spears and shields. Prospero's merchant-lords had been out negotiating with the infamous mercenaries of Arn. Consisting of beings from many planes and planets, these forces were famous for their courage, their ferocity, and their absolute loyalty once paid for. The overlord of this army of mercenaries was an eight-foot tall powerful and craft warrior-lord of a previously unknown race, called Gruul. He traveled constantly surrounded by an elite guard called the Arcanians, composed solely of members of his race, none of whom spoke any language but their races' own.

Matsuhama brought the four-armed hordes of Scula. Thoth was there with his snake-like Quisalis assassins. Phaestus, bargaining with Proteus, agreed to pledge his eternal loyalty in exchange for giving his beloved dwarves a soul. Proteus agreed and the dwarves marched to war. Daedalus arrived with the Qui'anar, the army of the Tsol'aa, mounted on various breeds of giant arachnids, with whom they telepathically bonded at birth. Proteus himself brought a legion of unicorns, pure but deadly fighters, who were also possessed of many defensive magics.

So, after hundreds of years of preparation and intrigue, the War of Humanity had begun. Making up the core of the Triumvirate's forces were the Aldar and the Kx'Khrah. Flanking them on either side were the Rajamala, fighting with short sword and whip and the vast numbers of the Nevaharr, armed with bows and longswords. In the rear, and ready to wreak havoc among the Gods' divine forces, was Prince Slith and his undead liches, vampires, wights, and a host of twisted undead entities too warped by the forces of chaos to bear any common name.. Pazuzu and his enormous Inferno legions were held in reserve, unknown to the Elder Gods.

Aegis, supreme commander of the forces of the Elder Gods, ordered that his Horkval followers polish their shields to a shine and form into phalanxes to match the Kx'Khrah. The mercenaries of Prospero, equipped, naturally, with the best equipment that money could buy, including great catapults and other large missile weapons, were to first slaughter as many of the enemy from afar as possible and then, when the two armies clashed, to abandon the war machines and engage in close-quarters combat. The battle-ready hordes of Scula were to flank around the western side of the Triumvirate army, where the Rajamala were, and engage them there, while the legion of unicorns was to attempt to stay the stampeding destruction of the Nevaharr.

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## Clash Of The Titans

The forces thus laid out and prepared, battle commenced.

The war machines of the mercenaries of Arn caused much destruction amongst the opposing forces and were particularly deadly to the brittle Kx'Khrah. Nevertheless, the Kx'Khrah were present in uncountable numbers



and the overall damage was not particularly large. Proteus' unicorns charged under the aerial cover of a stinging insect swarm sent by Lupus to distract and hinder the Nevaharr.. The insects began stinging at the eyes of the Nevaharr and it looked like the eastern flank of the Triumvirate army might crumble as the unicorns began tearing into it. Agatheis, however, sent air elementals to blow away the insects and soon the vastly greater numbers of the Nevaharr began to prevail.

The phalanxes of the Horkval advanced towards the Kx'Khrah and sustained surprisingly little damage from the deadly lightbeams, due to their tight formation and polished shields. They were, unfortunately, countered by a group of Slith's ghosts that were sent in. The ghosts could pass through the shields and could paralyze with a touch. Furthermore, Agatheis was able to mar and scorch the shields of the Horkval with flame elementals, rendering them non-reflective and once again, vulnerable to the deadly lightbeams of the Kx'Khrah.

Seeing no advantage in retreat, Aegis ordered the legions of the Horkval and the hordes of Scrula to charge the enemy Kx'Khrah and Rajamala, feeling that the lightbeam long-range attacks of the Kx'Khrah would not be as useful close in. His strategy proved correct, as many of the melded Kx'Khrah were hacked apart into weaker pieces and quickly exterminated. The Rajamala were able to actually disarm many of the Scrula using their whips, but the Scrula were formidable in both armed and unarmed combat and it became apparent that this contest was evenly matched.

At this point, the Aldar, led by Han-Silnar and Yen-Sorte, took a hand and began weaving magic and skill in a pattern that began to systematically annihilate the Scrula and the Horkval.

Before more damage could be done, Aegis ordered all his forces to retreat and regroup. The Triumvirate did the same and as night fell, the first day of the War of Humanity drew to a close.

The days' battle had taken a much heavier toll on the Elder God's forces and things looked grim. The Horkval were greatly reduced as were the Scrula. The unicorns had managed to survive reasonably well as had the well-equipped mercenaries of Arn. The Qui'anar had suffered few casualties.

On the Triumvirate side, the Kx'Khrah were greatly weakened and considering total withdrawal, for they had not anticipated such massive losses. Many Nevaharr had been cut down by the unicorns and insects, but just as many unicorns, proportionately, had been cut down. The Scrula had suffered grave losses at the hands of the Rajamala, whose power had been dramatically magnified by the magical aid of the Aldar.

Many have wondered why the Elder Gods did not directly participate in the battle this first day despite the fact that their Triumvirate counterparts were taking a direct hand. The reason was simply that they were still trapped behind Lorientan and Khalas' magical field and had spent the entire day tearing down the barrier.

That night, Thoth's serpentine Quisalis assassins crept across the wastelands of Nishnatoba and performed their deadly trade upon the forces of the Triumvirate. In a triumph of stealth and deception, the massed forces of the Rajamala were murdered in their sleep.. This was their greatest hour, for death was their pleasure and this was truly an orgy of blood. However, sleepless vampire guards, set by Slith, detected the Quisalis killers and, arousing the rest of the undead forces, began to steal their life forces and turn the Quisalis into undead. The Quisalis were wiped out that night and became martyrs; slain while worshipping their beloved God of Death.

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## **False Hope**

Dawn came.

Freed from the constraints of the magical barrier, the Elder Gods rushed forth onto the battlefield. Proteus and Daedalus absented themselves to search for Khalas, whose absence was suspicious and disturbing. Aegis sent forth the war machines of the Arn mercenaries. The Scrula and unicorns were turned upon the Nevaharr while the Qui'anar, who had not participated in the previous day's battle, were sent to fight the undead. Aiding the Qui'anar was Thoth himself, who was overcome with rage and grief at the loss of his heroic assassins. He drew on his own divine essence to amplify the lifeforce of the few remaining Qui'anar, granting them near-eternal lifespans and powerful resistance to the parasitic magics of the undead.

So, the Qui'anar advanced upon the undead, the unicorns charged the remaining Nevaharr and the Scrula and Horkval engaged the Aldar and remaining Kx'Khrah. The mercenaries of Arn and the dwarves were held as a harrying force and they circled behind the enemy to weaken their rear flanks. Matsuhama and Vastar strode into battle to assist in countering the Aldar. Matsuhama turned his anger towards Yen-Sorte, who he felt had betrayed him. Though skilled beyond all mortals, even Yen-Sorte could not stand against Matsuhama and soon fell. Vastar began hurling lightning and meteors about him, wounding and killing many Aldar.

Han-Silnar, seeing some of the most powerful Aldar being slain by Gods, called upon Agatheis and Lorielan for assistance. Lorielan strode out to meet Vastar in battle and the two were soon occupied in battle. Agatheis sent out forces of earth and fire elementals to slay his enemies, but Gaia was able to counter these with earthquakes and localized rainstorms. The Qui'anar were slaughtering the undead forces and banishing them to final rest. Prince Slith saw defeat at hand and the rage-filled form of Thoth in the distance. He retreated with his forces into the Ether, quitting the battlefield and preferring to try to reconcile his differences with his father rather than face Thoth. The dwarves and the mercenaries of Arn joined the diminishing Scrula against the Nevaharr while Phaestus, the Smith picked up his newly-forged Hammer and began laying waste to the Kx'Khrah.

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## Legions Of The Inferno

Just as victory seemed assured for the Elder Gods, a portal opened high above the battlefield. In a blinding blast of azure light, out stepped Khalas, a triumphant look on his face, followed by the great winged Pazuzu and his flying Inferno legions. Stunned by these abominations the likes of which no mortal or God had imagined existed, Proteus, Daedalus, Aegis and the rest of the Gods ordered a retreat. As they were retreating, however, Pazuzu's legions swooped down for the attack. Flying nightmares of all kinds attacked the Qui'anar, the Horkval, the Scrula, the mercenaries of Arn, the dwarves, and the unicorns. Han-Silnar ordered his Aldar and the few remaining Nevaharr and Kx'Khrah forward while Agatheis and Lorielan combined their powers and brought legions of earth, air, fire, and water elementals to the battlefield. While Gaia, boosted by Vastar, who had retreated from the more powerful Lorielan, was able to counter many of these, she could not handle all of them.

The scene, then, was that the forces of the Elder Gods were retreating towards their massive encampment many miles away while the Kx'Khrah and Nevaharr that remained, along with Han-Silnar's remaining and still-powerful Aldar forces, legions of elementals controlled by Agatheis and the uncountable numbers of Pazuzu's demonic Inferno army attacked and began to decimate them.

Aegis ordered Prospero's still numerous mercenaries to hold the rear along with the Qui'anar and dwarves while the tired and weakened Scrula, Horkval and unicorns retreated. Proteus and Lucretius began to weave a barrier that would at least temporarily prevent the Triumvirate and Inferno forces from reaching them. However, as with the anti-magic field erected during the Aldar council of war, it also prevented the Gods themselves from leaving.

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## Twilight of the gods?

As the shimmering dome formed over their heads, the Gods gathered to decide what to do. Outside, Lorielan, Agatheis, Khalas, Pazuzu, and Han-Silnar held counsel and decided to attempt to break down the barrier. As the Gods debated, the enemy threw attack after attack onto the magical dome of protection. Proteus stationed his unicorns around the dome and with their powerful defensive magic, they were able to strengthen it. It was, however, only a matter of time until the enemy broke through and both sides knew it. Pazuzu arranged some Ideryc winged demons resembling upright bears with six, evenly spaced eyes about their head, to observe while the rest of his forces screeched, dove, and taunted the Gods and their forces.

Days passed and the Triumvirate, Pazuzu, and Han-Silnar slowly wore the Gods down. Even Proteus began to tire, as the energy he was expending on the shield was great even for his almighty essence. Despair overtook them and they began praying to Ayar for deliverance from their trials. Lorielan started to feel the ecstatic flush of victory while Pazuzu could be seen gloating with his arch-hierophant, the chaos lord Jy'Barrak Golgotha. Han-Silnar, though saddened by the murder of the other Aldar, was nevertheless feeling cautiously optimistic about his future, for Lorielan, Khalas, and Agatheis would doubtlessly elevate him above all other mortals for his role in the successful rebellion.

The prayers of the Gods continued, but there was no answer from Ayar. The demise of the Elder Gods seemed imminent as they lay impotent beneath the faltering dome barrier. The Triumvirate forces massed for one, final assault which they were sure would shatter the magical dome. Gigantic earth elementals began pounding on the dome, the few Kx'Khrah left massed into one being and focused on it a beam of pure light. The Aldar, Lorientan, and Khalas wove spells of disentanglement to weaken the dome. Pazuzu's Inferno army threw itself at the barrier, tearing apart the magical bindings that assured its cohesion. The unicorns that were massed around the interior perimeter began to fall to the ground, dead, one by one, as the force of the assault overwhelmed their defensive magics. The mortals within, the finest and bravest warriors in existence, began to break down into panic. It was not death they feared, for death was ever part of their daily existence, but the demon hordes of the Inferno, which were beyond any experience or expectation.

The dome was on the verge of collapse, and all within knew that within minutes the fabric of existence would be altered for eternity. Scarlatti began singing a sad lament, whilst Proteus thought about what had gone wrong. His grief was great for he felt that it was at least partially his fault that Creation was going to be destroyed. Further, his special relationship with Ayar (which he did not know the extent of) caused him to feel extremely guilty for he, as the leader of the Elder Gods, had failed the Creator. What was to become of them? Would this simply be the end of supposedly near-omnipotent beings? It is said that even the most courageous of the Gods wept that day, their reality almost over.

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## The Dragonmasters

Suddenly, an ear-shattering keening was heard over blood-stained Nishnatoba. All eyes turned skyward to witness a fantastic sight. Hundreds of huge winged serpents, what we now know as dragons, filled the sky. Of all colours and hues and varying in size from huge to enormous, they were the source of the keening. As they streaked towards the ground, it became apparent that upon each dragon's back was a rider. Both sides wondered what this event portended: their doom, their victory or a third, heretofore unknown group of contenders for the kingdom of Creation? As the dragon flight drew close, another detail became visible. The lead dragon, an incredible massive beast of opalescent white, was ridden by none other than Han-Tolneth. Every other dragon was ridden by one of Han-Tolneth's erstwhile faction of Aldar. Han-Tolneth had come at last. Fist raised, Han-Tolneth wheeled his dragon around and boomed a challenge to his brother, Han-Silnar.

The Gods, seeing their salvation at hand, quickly brought down the dome and attacked, concentrating first on Pazuzu's hordes. The dragons, their Aldar riders hurling magic and arrows, stormed at Han-Silnar's Aldar and unleashed their awesome weapons of firebreath and claws. The Horkval, Scrula, Qui'anar, Dwarves and mercenaries were filled with an incredible elation as their anticipated deaths were averted. Howling battlecries, they charged the Nevaharr and Kx'Khrah, quickly overrunning them and forcing them into a frenzied retreat. The Elder Gods were also furious at their humiliation and turned their anger on the Inferno hordes, and particularly Pazuzu. Matsuhama and Aegis raged out of the dome in a whirlwind of fury, decimating any foe that dared come near them. Gaia and Vastar threw their awesome energies at the elementals and Agatheis, forcing him into a retreat, while Proteus, Daedalus, Phaestus, Lupus, and Thoth went for Lorientan and Khalas. Prospero, Aeon, and Lucretius turned their attentions to assisting their mortal allies and they quickly exterminated every last Kx'Khrah and Nevaharr on the battlefield.

Soon, with all their mortal allies slain, most of the Aldar dead or dying, the Triumvirate was down to Agatheis, Lorientan, Khalas, and the still-massive forces of the Inferno. Matsuhama and Aegis had Pazuzu on the run, but he was not to get far. Some of the mounted Aldar cut off his escape and he set about fighting like a cornered rat, felling many dragons and Aldar before Matsuhama and Aegis could reach him and subdue him. Proteus, Daedalus, Lupus, and Thoth caught and beat Khalas to within an inch of his existence and Lorientan prudently surrendered under the threat of Phaestus' Hammer. Han-Silnar proved no match for his brother and he was on his knees, Han-Tolneth looking at him sadly. With the leaders of the rebellion captured and neutralized, it was an easy task to send the remaining demon hordes and Aldar to the beyond. Matsuhama and Thoth in particular set about this task with noteworthy enthusiasm.

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## The Tribunal

The rebellion was quashed and now certain questions had to be answered. A tribunal, headed by Miramar, the Evenhanded with Daedalus, Proteus, Phaestus and Han-Tolneth as members, was formed to decide the fates of

the traitors and Pazuzu. Proteus advised that Ayar had spoken to him and decreed that he did not wish the destruction of any of the leaders. Still, punishment was not out of the question, for these rogue Gods had almost succeeded in a plan which would have devastated the order of Creation itself. Proteus, who had loved the woman Lorientan once was, advised that Lorientan be banished to the plane of the Kx'Khrah, where she could rule over them, but be limited from ever leaving that plane. Miramar decided that it was fitting that Khalas and Agatheis be forced to forever serve Proteus, the main object of their rebellion, in whatever context he chose, while Daedalus and Han-Tolneth advised that a fitting punishment for Han-Silnar would be eternal servitude to Lorientan, who would no doubt release her frustrations on him frequently.

Thus it was that Lorientan, along with Han-Silnar, was forever banished to the Crystal plane, where she rules over it still as the Jade Empress. To replace the now extinct unicorns, Agatheis was refashioned as one and had the majority of his power and intelligence stripped. Khalas was not destroyed, but imprisoned in a statue and placed on the continent of Sapience to forever remind people of the folly of rebellion against Proteus.

Pazuzu presented a more interesting question, for he was a being that the Elder Gods had never before encountered. He simply smirked during the tribunal and would reveal nothing of his intentions in this, save for cryptic remarks about those he answered to. This puzzled the Gods, for Pazuzu was a being of nearly God-like power and anyone that he answered to must surely rival or surpass the Gods. Proteus in particular was sure that he would have long-ago detected any being that approached or exceeded his own power, and he had not.

In the end, it was decided that the Gods would appeal to Ayar to create a plane to banish Pazuzu to and, at the insistence of Thoth, Slith and his undead forces too. Ayar consented to hear their appeal and Proteus presented their case. Ayar agreed and created the Plane of Chaos for Pazuzu and the undead. He further removed all planar travel capabilities from the inhabitants, ensuring that they would not be able to break out and cause more havoc.

An interesting side-note to these events was the effective creation of a new race, the Trolls. After the mercenaries of Arn had finished their contract some, including Gruul, their leader, decided to stay on Sapience. Though they died off in their natural lifespans, Gruul and some of his massive Arcanian bodyguards mated with an adventurous human women and their offspring began the race of Trolls.

Thus ended the War of Humanity which, though starting with Aldar hatred of humans, almost ended with the death of many of the Gods. This most pivotal event since creation itself would have consequences far-reaching and never-ending. It seemed that, for now at least, the trials and tribulations were over.

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## Chaos Rising

They were not.

Soon after the War was over, strange reports began to filter in from the far corners of Creation. Beings that no one was capable of understanding were appearing. More disturbing still, many similarities could be found between the Nameless One of whom Maya had vivid memories, and these new beings. The reports came more and more frequently and became more and more disturbing, carrying tales of the edges of Creation unraveling through the power of these beings.

As this attack on Creation itself grew and spread, the Gods once again marshaled their forces. This time, however, they all participated. Han-Tolneth and his Aldar were there, mounted on their Great Dragons. Some Gods fought personally while others, like Eros, Raclawice, and Scarlatti, did what they could to aid in this fight against Chaos itself, for by then, it was clear that the enemy was not part of the order of Creation and originated from outside. Scarlatti, and his followers wove highly structured music to combat the discord. It is said that our greatest arias are simply an attempt to mimic the music that Scarlatti wove during this time. Shaitan and Glacius came with the shadowy and feared Dreadlords. Proteus, Daedalus, Thoth, Vastar, Gaia, Aegis, Phaustus and Matsuhama personally fought against the enemy, driving it back to the fringes of Creation. Raclawice created pathways and byways to assist in the movement of forces. Caspian fought in the depths of the oceans of the worlds of Creation, calming the excessive storms that this chaos caused and forcing the tides back to natural patterns.

Nothing, however, could prepare the Gods and the Aldar for what would happen next. As they were meeting to discuss this disturbing new phenomenon and their progress in battling it, a rip in the fabric of Creation opened

directly before them. All that could be seen through the rip were swirling lights and colours in no discernable pattern. Suddenly, two sections obtained the smallest sense of order, and immediately separated themselves from their surroundings. These beings we shall call Entropy and Discord, for they originate from a place where names have no meaning; where organized thought is not known and where the mortal mind would be rendered instantly insane were one unfortunate enough to experience it. Entropy and Discord came through the rip and immediately began an assault upon the Gods and Aldar, a vast collection of the most powerful beings known, outside the Creator.

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## Order From Entropy

Once again, the Gods themselves were under assault. This time, all of them, save for Lorielan, were present. As the Gods and the Aldar with their dragon steeds fought to force back the Chaos beings, the Chaos Lords redoubled their assault. The Aldar began to die as their minds were overwhelmed by forces alien to Creation. Soon, only a handful were left and the Gods were in very real danger once again. Entering the mind of Proteus, Discord screamed a challenge and there began a combat, not of physical proportions, but of mental. Though Proteus was able to stave off the impending insanity that Discord promised, he was unable to call for help and soon Entropy joined in.

Ayar, watching the battle while undetectable, realized that his creations, including Proteus who was, after all, part of Ayar himself, were about to be destroyed. Though omnipotent, even Ayar could not see the future with absolute accuracy. At the time of Creation, he created two realms. One, the realm we know, was filled with a multitude of planes and universes, each with its own set of physical and immutable laws. The other was a realm of pure chaos and was anathema to Creation. None save Ayar himself are certain why he created this unholy twin, but some of humanity's more unorthodox philosophers speculate that our realm's existence is somehow dependent on the other.

Nevertheless, his plan began to fail when, somehow, the Unnamable Horror broke through into our plane and raped Maya. Humanity, the children of Maya, are the only race of beings, then, that are born of both Order and Chaos. It is this that Caymus saw when he predicted humanity's future greatness. It is the spark of Chaos within us that allows us the creativity and drive we possess. When Discord entered the mind of Proteus, Proteus became aware of all of the Chaos Lords' plans. He realized why Pazuzu had so much power. Sadly, Khalas was simply a pawn of Pazuzu, who was in turn merely a manifestation of Entropy and Discord. It was the energies released during the rebellion of Lorielan, Khalas, and Agatheis that had allowed this chaos to creep into the world. The entire War of Humanity had simply been a way for Discord and Entropy to gain a foothold in our existence.

The result of this was that all the Gods were forced to expend massive energies to try and drive back the Chaos, unwittingly allowing more of it to enter our multi-planar existence. Finally, Entropy and Discord were able to enter, imperiling all that we know. Ayar knew that he had to act quickly, or his creations would be destroyed. Appearing to all, he commanded Entropy and Discord to cease their assault. Ignoring Ayar (as he knew they would), they continued to crush Proteus and the other Gods. So, he was forced to cause Entropy and Discord to disperse across Creation, adding chaos to it. Why Entropy and Discord didn't plan for this, we do not know. Perhaps they were unable to fathom the concept of loyalty or affection and thus didn't see any reason why Ayar might step in. The Plane of Chaos, where Pazuzu, his surviving demons, Slith, and his undead forces were banished, received most of the dispersal, but everywhere in Creation, chaos increased.

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## Sarapis

Ayar, not wanting something like this to happen again, revealed the secret of Proteus' origins to Proteus himself and the rest of the gods. Having successfully experienced the sensations of defeat and challenge, he decided to recombine himself and Proteus. Overwhelmed by this news, Proteus resisted at first, but after Ayar had taken him aside and showed him the wonder and beauty that could be his, Proteus agreed. Ayar and Proteus were joined that day, before the assembly of Gods and Aldar, into a new being called Sarapis. Taking on the title of Logos, which means the creative will behind everything, Sarapis now rules Creation as the synthesis of omnipotent Ayar and noble Proteus.

Sarapis' first act was to create a new god to be the patron of those would seek chaos: Babel. Further, seeing the furor that resulted from the newly created Humanity, he elevated Maya to Godhood, in order for her to have the power to better look after her beloved children.

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## The Aftermath

The repercussions of the War of Humanity and the Chaos Wars (actually the same war, but given separate names before the truth was understood by human scholars) were numerous and manifold. First and foremost, the Gods felt that Han-Tolneth and the surviving Aldar deserved much for their timely discovery of dragons and their rescue of the Gods. Han-Tolneth, however, felt nothing but guilt for, in truth, had he and his Aldar supported Dekalb from the beginning, both the War of Humanity and the Chaos Wars could likely have been averted. Han-Silnar would almost surely have realized that he would have no chance of winning against Dekalb and Han-Tolneth and without an Aldar contingent, the Triumvirate would have never rebelled.

Most of the few surviving Aldar simply wanted to live out their remaining lives in peace. Before this however, they exerted their greatest effort yet and built, for the Gods, the Garden. An area of unsurpassed beauty it contains Yggdrasil the World Tree by which the Gods and any they permit may travel to any plane in existence with ease. They built the great Amphitheatre, favoured gathering place of the immortals. These and many more wonders are reserved for immortal eyes only and the Garden is said to be the most beautiful and tranquil place in Creation.

For there many services, the Aldar were granted solace on a plane created specially for them and most were never seen again. Han-Tolneth however, felt that his debt to the Gods was not dispensed and he, along with a handful of Aldar, begged to be allowed to serve the Gods for eternity. Thus were the Celani created with Han-Tolneth, known forevermore as the dragonmaster, at their forefront. Immortal and possessing power beyond any mortal, yet not gods, the Celani are the companions and servants of the Gods. In time, they would come to be worshipped as virtual Gods by humanity and they do, in fact, serve as Gods in some ways. With the advent of the Chaos in Creation, the Gods saw that things would change and grow far more quickly than before and that they would need help in overseeing their realms. So Matsuhama, for example, took on a Celani to oversee weaponry and another to oversee honour. Gaia has one to look after forests, to watch over the mountains, and so on.

And so it was that the ranks of Creation had survived their greatest challenge ever. Chaos had entered Creation and had produced offspring, humanity. The Gods themselves survived their challenge and the planes of existence had a new master. Sarapis took on Daedalus and Phaestus as his top lieutenants for their roles in the War, and life progressed for humanity and the other mortal races. History of course did not end here, and indeed this marks the real beginning of history for the mortal races, as they were now allowed to progress relatively unhindered by powers greater than them. Dwarf, Tso'l'aa, Troll, Human, and a race we have not discussed, the Mhun, now will be the focus of history, but that, gentle reader, is another story for another time.

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## 16.2 The origin of the mortal races

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### Maya's Legacy

When Maya the Aldar was raped by the Unnamable Horror, the course of history was changed forever. War among the Gods broke out and eventually Ayar himself took a hand. After many years of gestation and a long, painful childbirth, Maya gave birth to two strange babies. Smaller by far than any Aldar babies, these 'humans' were also weaker and were born with a *tabula rasa*; a blank mind. Aldar children are born with inherited memories and skills and are immediately capable of caring for themselves. The Aldar laughed and mocked them, calling them weak and pitiful. When Proteus declared that the children would be the inheritors of the continent of Sapience on the world of Achaea, Aldar dissent grew and exploded across the cosmos into the Chaos Wars (see Mythology).

Maya loved and care for her two offspring, the male of which she called Callisto and the female, Sinope. As they developed and grew, the two human children were constant companions. As a natural outgrowth of this

closeness, and because they had been charged by Proteus to become the progenitors of a new race, they became lovers. We of the modern age, with our iron weapons, sophisticated warfare, and learned scholars may consider this evil, but let us not forget that times were different then. This was the age of legends, and we have no right to judge these heroic figures of antiquity with our modern morality. Sinope bore Callisto seven children, collectively known as the Offspring. Four of them - Pasiphae, Elara, Lysithea, Himalia - were female, while the other three - Carme, Anake, and Ledo - were male.

As Sinope and Callisto grew older, it became apparent that they were not aging. It seemed that they possessed the near-immortal lifespans of the Aldar and would never perish of natural causes. However, Lucretius, God of Knowledge, theorized that as the generations of humans came and went, each succeeding one would possess less and less of this long lifespan, until they were as other mortals. He went out to explain this as being a result of the interbreeding of pure Chaos, in the form of the Unnamable One, with Aldar. The entropic energy would cause the Aldar energy to dissipate over time, leading to lifespans more on par with the lifespans of the other mortal races.

Soon after the birth of the Offspring, Proteus, Phaestus, and Daedalus came to Achaea with the Sceptre of Divinity. They broke the sceptre into seven pieces and gave one to each of the Offspring, saying that whomever could unite these pieces into one would attain rewards beyond imagination. Sinope and Callisto were dismayed at this, for they did not wish to see their burgeoning race torn apart by strife. They had raised their children well though, and, taking the advice of their parents, the Offspring agreed never to strive for domination over the others. The Gods were pleased with this compact, and created a wondrous valley called Ceylon, which means Golden Land, for the humans to dwell in.

Soon after this, the battle on Nishnatoba took place, but the humans, with their limited perceptions, knew none of it. Never did they know, until later generations came and established close relationships with the Gods, how close they came to being exterminated, and what an impact their birth had upon all Creation.

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## Anake's Passion

Life went on for a century. Many children were produced by the Offspring, as they interbred. Sinope and Callisto kept to themselves, watching their loving creations grow and multiply. There was no stigma about interbreeding, for all were related anyhow. Sinope, however, refused to take another lover. Anake, who found his mother very fetching and her refusal to sleep with him vexing, plotted secretly and killed her one night as she slept. Callisto was out on a hunting trip with Ledo, Pasiphae, and Himalia at the time. Carme, upon stumbling onto his dead mother, cried out in dismay and quickly got Lysithea to gather the other Offspring while he went to bring back Callisto and the rest of the hunting party. Despite this, Anake almost got away with it, except that Maya herself came down and informed them that it was he, Anake, who had betrayed the mother of Humanity and killed her.

This announcement by Maya caused great outrage in Ceylon. Callisto sequestered himself, for he was too broken with grief to think of revenge or justice. Carme, Elara, Ledo and Himalia all counseled banishment from Ceylon for Anake. Pasiphae, the most beautiful and caring of them all, could not bear the thought of never seeing her brother again, but did not support him for she understood the rage the others felt. Only Lysithea would support her brother, arguing that they had all agreed never to seek domination over the others, and Anake had not technically broken that agreement since Callisto and Sinope were not part of it. The majority of the Offspring would not hear of it though, so outraged were they at the death of their mother, who was the most perfect human in history. All later humans are merely shades of their dead mother. Anake was banished and to the sorrow of the rest of the Offspring, Lysithea decided to go with him, for she and her brother had always been closest.

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## Blood Fueds

As they burned the body of Sinope, Callisto entered into a state of grief for the next 50 years and refused to speak or participate in any human activity. He was found often staring into the sky, mumbling to himself and weeping. One day, the Gods Shaitan and Thoth, sensing the potential in humanity that Caymus, the Aldar prophet, first did, and wishing to use them for their own purposes, appeared to Callisto and argued that Anake should suffer for his terrible deed. They conjured up vivid visions of beautiful Sinope, and Callisto became mad

with grief. Screaming out his rage, he left Ceylon, unseen by his children and grandchildren and spent fourteen years in the wilderness, tracking down Anake. When he finally found them, he was more animal than human. He rushed into the forest dwelling that Anake, Lysithea, and their only two children, Rukal and Lakspura inhabited, and brutally killed Anake while he slept. As he slit Anake's throat with a piece of sharp obsidian, Anake's blood splattered Callisto's face. Callisto, feeling the blood of his son flowing down his face in smooth rivulets, went irreparably insane.

Running and screaming, tears streaming down his face as he pleaded with Sarapis to end his miserable life, he was grabbed by a pair of hands from above. Quickly they wrapped a rope around his neck, dropped him, and hung him. As Callisto's neck snapped, Rukal and Lakspura looked at each other with satisfaction, having avenged their father's death at the hands of their grandfather.

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## Generations

Rukal and Lakspura mated and produced four children: Loki, Ekanel, Spiro, and Polyphamora. They lived among the animals and learned to disguise themselves from danger, and learned the language of the beasts. As chaos was still very strong in the blood of humans, their offspring had many mutations. Of the four, two, Loki and Ekanel, appeared slightly serpentine. During childhood, as the foursome was out hunting in the woods for small animals, Loki and Ekanel killed and ate Spiro and Polyphamora, much to the surprise of their parents. Anake and Lysithea, realizing that it was best for the strong and crafty to survive, never even commented on the deaths. Loki and Ekanel lived long and produced many offspring, some of which became the forebears of the modern Serpentlords.

All the Offspring had children, but some warrant particular attention. Elara and Carme had a great number of children, but the strongest two were Glanos and Sahart. They both, Sahart first, then Glanos, seduced and impregnated Enalia, daughter of Pasiphae and Balan, who was himself the son of Ledo and Himalia, two of Pasiphae's fellow Offspring. Of them, more will be said later, for the story of Glanos and Sahart and their descendants is the story of mankind.

Epitus, the sister of Enalia (daughter of Pasiphae and Balan) had a close relationship with the Gods. He was extremely pious and the Gods almost universally looked upon him with good will. His great-great-granddaughter, Imithia built the first formal temple and later the first church. The first rite held in the new Church was the Rite of Ending for Pasiphae, the last of the Offspring who was not either dead or missing.

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## Tales Of The Offspring

The tales of the seven Offspring are interesting ones and we shall expand upon them here.

Of Anake, you know. The first murderer, he slew his own mother after she refused his advances and was later slain by his father.

After the death of Anake, Lysithea yearned to bring him back. She was contacted by Lorielan, who now rules over the Kx'Khrah. Lorielan promised that she could bring Anake back to life if Lysithea would simply bring her the two pieces of the Divine Rod that she now had. Lysithea, knowing she could never again enter Ceylon to gain the other five anyhow, agreed and was brought to Lorielan by one of her Kx'Khrah agents. Lorielan had lied, as is her nature, and upon the arrival of Lysithea, the Offspring was forced to give up the pieces of the Rod to Lorielan, and, being stranded on a foreign plane with no way to return, was forced to serve Lorielan forever.

Ledo was always the silent recluse; the solitary hunter. During a hunting trip in the Vashnar mountains, he disappeared and never returned. It was later discovered that he had been attacked and eaten by a lesser dragon.

After the death of his mother and the resulting grief and then madness of his father, Carme took over leadership of the budding human race. He yearned to explore and was lost to Achaea when he ventured into the great northern wastelands, and never returned. The others mourned his loss greatly, for he was a natural leader of men. Over the centuries, however, legends have filtered back to the civilized portion of Sapience that a lone man has occasionally been seen, accompanied by humanoids that like very much like Tsol'aa, in the polar regions.



The mother of mankind's eternal fascination with the ocean, HIMALIA sailed off to the west in a small boat, by herself. Searching for lands rumoured to be on the other side of the world, she did not expect to return, and indeed, she did not. Her fate is unknown, though much speculated upon.

After Lysithea was lost to the Crystal Plane, Elara began searching for an entrance into it. As she was experimenting with opening doors to other planes, a great scaled hand reached out from a doorway. As HIMALIA and Ledo looked on, helpless to do anything, Elara was dragged screaming through the doorway and was never seen again.

Last of the Offspring to remain in Ceylon, Pasiphae died a natural death after many hundreds of years of life. Imithia delivered her eulogy at what is considered the first formal function of the Church.

A family tree of the first few generations of humanity may be found on the History section of Achaea's website, under the History of the Mortal Races section.

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## The Founders

The story of humanity is, as I have previously written, the story of the Glanos, Sahart, Enalia, and their offspring. Glanos and Sahart were brothers and possessed the irresistible charisma of their father, Carme. They both took Enalia as lover and both sired three children by her. Hopelessly in love with them both, she was unable to choose between them and so vacillated weakly, bearing each of them children. Though at first each professed not to care, their pride was too great for them to stand the thought of his lover sleeping with his greatest rival. Great friends initially, this jealousy ruined their friendship and, in lieu of coming to blows, they went from Ceylon and journeyed in different directions. Glanos settled finally in an area of plains near the Western Ocean and at the northern end of the Vashnar mountains, while Sahart came finally to the Peshwar delta near the Eastern Ocean and settled at the southern end of a great, lush valley. These two brothers, formerly virtual partners in everything, never saw each other again. With each came his children, grandchildren, and various allies amongst the other humans, until over half the humans had gone to rally around either Glanos or Sahart.

The places that Glanos and Sahart settled were, of course, eventually became known as Ashtan and Shallam, respectively. Time passed and though there were legends in each city of the other, there was no contact between the two for a millennia. When they finally did re-discover each other, it was with animosity in their hearts. Each searching for a source of precious metals without the risks of the perilous Vashnar mountain range, they met north of the Siroccian mountains, within which both had discovered significant mining potential. Initially only wary of each other, they quickly mustered arms to protect these new-found resources and began their legendary conflict.

Though the battles they fought and the campaigns against each other that they won and lost are too numerous to be described individually, the ebb and flow of the campaign took place in three distinct cycles.

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## A Tale Of Two Cities

In the first cycle, which lasted approximately 750 years, Shallam was able to control much of the explored mainland and with it, built itself into a city of legendary beauty. Covered in mother of pearl and gold leaf, its characteristic domes and spires glistened from horizon to horizon. Between the fanatical loyalty that the city inspired in its citizens, and the vast warchest it had with which to hire mercenaries, Shallam was able to invade and capture Ashtan itself. Under the leadership of Darius, a nephew of the Emperor, Shallam executed a two-pronged attack against Ashtan, captured the Royal complex there, and declared dominion over all of the continent of Sapience.

Cycle two begins merely a week after the capture of Ashtan. The Shallamese conquerors wisely showed did not look the city and instead began courting the citizens of Ashtan, hoping to win at least some of them over. It is ironic, however, that what would otherwise have been a wise course of action, in this case doomed their centuries-long conquest. Large groups of the Ashtan citizens began sneaking out of the city and organizing secretly in the Black Forest, south of the historically allied village of Thera. Under the leadership of a former Ashtanian noble named Zarathustra.

Organizing his followers into an army, and enlisting the aid of the Therans and mercenaries whom he promised to pay later, he marched into Ashtan, organized a general rebellion, and freed Ashtan. The main entrance to Ashtan was named in his honour and he went down as the greatest Ashtanian hero since the founder, Glanos.

For the next four hundred years, the legacy of Zarathustra's success enabled Ashtan to capture much of the land that Shallam had previously held, including the mines in the Siroccian mountains. In what perhaps would have been a repeat of the mistake made by Shallam, Ashtan began making plans to invade Shallam by water, sailing their fleet around the hitherto fairly unexplored southern half of the continent, and up the Peshwar delta right to the walls of Shallam itself. Unknown, however, to the Ashtan forces, the Shallamese emperor, Sulaiman, had prepared for them by sinking their old wrecks in the Delta, preventing passage through. Had the Ashtan fleet ever reached Shallam, it would have been sunk, and a full-scale land-war would have been the result, devastating the breadbasket plains and valleys that feed civilization. The Ashtan fleet had turned around, not because of any of these altruistic reasons, but because of the influence of the Church.

Cycle three of this seemingly eternal war of the city-states begins with the long and slow rise of the Church as a mediating force. This began when a Prelate of the Church, -- a Priest named Aquinas - gained wind of the imminent ocean-going invasion of Shallam. Journeying to Ashtan, he convinced the powerful, though generally thoughtful, King of Ashtan, Martin, of the probably consequences of another massive war. Martin ordered the cessation of hostilities for a time, but even a King cannot control the hatred of his citizens. Though a full-blown war had been averted, there were constant skirmishes and some large battles for the next two hundred years. Cropland was destroyed by passing armies, villages were burned to the ground, and mankind seemed intent on destroying itself before it could fulfill its massive potential.

Thus was the state of humanity until the birth of the man that would radically alter the course of affairs of not only mankind, but all five of the mortal races living in the continent of Sapience. His name was Nicator.

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## The Tsol'aa

The Tsol'aa were first of the mortal races that inhabit Sapience. Created by Sarapis (then split into Ayar and Proteus), they are a tall, slender, and graceful race, often living natural lives for a thousand years. Dwelling in a beautiful redwood forest by the Western Ocean, they developed various types of magic to a high degree, and some became fearful warriors, fighting back goblin hordes that occasionally poured down from the Vashnar mountain range. As a gift from Daedalus, God of Balance, some were given giant spiders as steeds and companions, which they used to augment their already formidable fighting capabilities.

During the Chaos Wars, Daedalus led some of the Tsol'aa, with their spiders, against the forces of the Triumvirate. During this war, however, the Tsol'aa who fought became corrupted by the killing and afterwards began to lust for power. The newly-born human race, they argued, could easily be made to serve the Tsol'aa. This power-hungry group of Tsol'aa began calling themselves the Tsol'teth. They left their racial homeland and settled underground, enslaving many of the weaker goblin races and setting themselves up as fearsome overseers of the violent underground cultures of Sapience.

With the Tsol'teth gone, the remaining Tsol'aa split into two further groups. One elected to remain in their homeland and continue living in the traditional way, studying and furthering their knowledge of both magic and nature. Another, the group that came to be known as the Tsol'dasi, decided that they did not care to be involved in mortal affairs any longer, and left for parts unknown. They have not been seen since.

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## Dwarves

Created by Phaestus and given a soul by Sarapis/Proteus/Ayar, the dwarves are primarily hill and mountain dwellers. Having a common hatred with the Tsol'aa of the goblin races, they have occasionally allied with the Tsol'aa against the goblin hordes, but for the most part the dwarves kept to themselves until the time of the Selucarian Empire. Little is known of their history until they began mixing with the human race a few hundred years ago.

## Trolls

Offspring of Gruul, the leader of Prospero's Arcanian mercenaries during the Chaos Wars, and a human woman, trolls made their home in the Mannaseh swamp. Though this sounds an awful place to live, trolls are well-adapted to such an environment, and built a city that was rumoured to be as civilized as any human city. Troll's did not leave the Mannaseh much, except for a few explorers who would venture out to the Savannah, or return with horror stories of the dry, arid Mhojave desert.

Life went on for the Troll race as it always had until, one year, a vast emigration of trolls to the surrounding plains took place. Until, as the Trollish senate was meeting to discuss routine issues of taxation, a being of unknown origin appeared to them and claimed to be their rightful God. This being demanded that the senate immediately disband and declare him, who called himself Taug. Now, the trolls are proud, willful race, and though they were not happy about Taug, they felt compelled to obey him, at least temporarily.

But, in a short time, the Trolls grew tired of meeting the often unreasonable demands of Taug and a pair of leaders arose. Schlasthan, a senator, and Alcibiades, a commoner, combined their efforts and mobilized the greatest sorcerers of the Trolls race. Between them, they were able to contain Taug in a magical prison. Unfortunately, Taug's essence had already polluted the Mannaseh swamp, and the trolls left, en masse, to seek new lives elsewhere.

Around the continent they spread, and eventually the Church took an interest in them. Molay, the Paladin guildmaster, recognized the potential of the troll strength of body and will, and recruited some for the Church. Thus, the Trolls were the first race to join humanity in civilization, and the first to join the Church.

MHUN Mhun are actually an offshoot of humanity, though this was not known until Nicator came across Moghedu (read more about this in the history of the Selucarian Empire). When Glanos and Sahart, and their followers, left Ceylon, they took more than half of the human population with them, including most of the best and brightest. Further devastating the Ceylonese was a terrible plague that hit a few years later. Those who survived the plague were forced to leave Ceylon forever, for fear of a repeat of this tragedy.

Journeying to the great Mhojave desert, they spent a year there, with the idea that the great absence of moisture would purge the plague from anyone still carrying it. When they felt that the plague was likely gone from any of them, the ones that had survived it and the unfriendly conditions of the desert began looking for a place to settle. They quickly came upon a vast series of caves and caverns directly to the southwest of the Mhojave and in this place, which they named Moghedu.

Though Moghedu was a more hospitable place to live than the desert was, it was no paradise. Water and food were both scarce, though food, at least, could be obtained by venturing out and hunting desert creatures. Over the years and generations, the humans who had settled there began to evolve in response to their environment, becoming distinctly different from the rest of humanity. They took on a gaunt and leathery appearance due to the lack of moisture and generally did not grow to the same size that a normal human would. As the elders saw the younger generations growing further apart from humanity, they decided to call this new race of beings Mhun.

The Mhun did survive, and were able to eke out an existence once their biological changes were complete. They learned to raise and eat various underground creatures, and learned to capture moisture from the rocks themselves, though they still were often thirsty and water was considered the single most valuable possession. The discovered vast veins of precious metals in the deeper parts of their caverns and they mined these, though even gold and diamonds could not compare to the value of water.

Life for the Mhun was hard, and they became hard themselves. Having no time for pity, they often left the infirm to die, and it was expected that the elderly among them would journey into the desert to die, so as not to become a burden to their families. Time went on and little changed in Moghedu, until the day when Nicator discovered them, and everything changed. That, however, is a story for another time.

## 16.3 Seleucar

### Prophecy

"Final trust and final foundation,  
Final reconciliation of light and dark.  
Let there be a new justice,  
Let there be a third way.  
On the undiscovered shore,  
Let the epoch empire mend the twins' hatred,  
Let the age of peace reign,  
Let the surge of the deep be cast back in breaking waves."

Lehrinas' Prophecies, Chapter 14, Verse 45,  
as translated from high Tso'aa by Corrin Melithandes

### Historian's Notes

The art of the historian is to unify the events of the past under a single vision: the historian's own. The accuracy of the history is dependent largely upon the ability of the historian to correctly combine known facts, verifiable evidence, and the accounts of his predecessors into a comprehensible picture of the past.

I am not a historian. As a librarian, I study how knowledge is presented, not how knowledge is created or synthesized. Therefore, the text you hold in your hands is not my personal synthesis of the events of history, but a collection of excerpts from the works of the true masters, who I will not insult with my attempts at history. I can only hope that the varied perspectives of these men, along with the first-hand accounts and even fables that I have included, will permit the reader to make his own judgments. Now, in the words of those who have truly made this study their lives: the history of the Selucarian Empire.

Tancred Lasalle, Ashtan Royal Library, Head Librarian

### Nikolas

from Raeli Oliems, *The Two Prophets: Nicator Before the Empire*

Seleucar is inseparable in our minds from its founder, the legendary Nicator. But who was Nicator, truly?

The Church once held that he was a deluded man who claimed the blessing of Sarapis in order to conquer the world. However, the Chrysalis Basilica quickly realized that Nicator's new empire was proving far more peaceful and even more friendly to the Church than the previous regimes - and so they quietly revised their stance to fully support the new order. And when armies of Seleucar threw back the Black Wave in the War of the Deeps, Nicator was posthumously accorded the honor of Fire Saint, a warrior of righteousness.

According to the old Cactus Clans of Hashan and the Upper Urubamba, Nicator was a sehakii, a holy spirit sent by Gaia to preserve the world against the Corrupt Ones, the Tso'teth. As the Selucarian Empire continued its reign, it began to wither, exactly as a plant plucked from the ground withers.

And so who is Nicator? A heretic whose empire gradually came to prove good? Or an avatar whose empire gradually rotted?

The truth begins with a young man - a farm boy named Nikolas.

Nikolas lived on a farm far on the outer limits of the lands called Thera, almost in the wastes. Possibly through some agreement with the local brigands, his family was able to survive, even so far from the town proper. However, whatever immunity his family had from the local bandits, they had none from the armies of Ashtan and Shallam, which at the time were nothing more than militarized bandits themselves, wandering the lands looking for loot first and enemies second.

Nikolas lived 'a very boring, very typical life', as he put it, until the day his parents were killed. In the Sermon on the Rocks, he described the event:

When I was fifteen, war burst in through my front door. It killed my father with an offhand blow from an axe, and after having its brutal way with her, it killed my mother with a long-bladed spear. If I hadn't been too frightened to do more than hide, it would have killed me as well. And let me say that it was not soldiers who did this, nor was it the underlying conflicts that led to war... it was war itself, most monstrous of man's inventions, that hideous force that possesses man and his beliefs alike and turns them inside out.

After the deaths of his parents, Nikolas began what was known as the Time of Wandering...

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## Thirteenth Saga

from Torrin Ral'Kade, "Thirteenth Saga: Nicator" (unfinished)

From town to town, from life to life, he ranged.

Another orphan, fleeing strife, estranged.

Who would one day turn back the Wave of Night

Who would one day begin the Age of Light

Who did, those days, set foot in every land,

Turn his hand to every job, to understand

The people, his people, his new friends.

The long road took him to the lands of snow

And there he learned to shiver, chopping wood for heat.

The long road took him to the lands of fire

And there he learned to sweat, washing nobles' feet.

The long road took him to the lands of stone

And there he learned to build, smelting ore to steel.

The long road took him to the lands of lore

And there he learned to read, to speak, to write, to feel.

And after two fours of years had passed

The long road came full circle,

As long roads often do And the orphan came to Thera

To begin, forever, anew.

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## Severian

from Raeli Oliems, The Two Prophets: Nicator Before the Empire

Nicator's return to Thera was little remarked. In the eight years since his sudden departure, he had changed greatly. Older, harder, stronger, yet in a way gentler, more mature, a changed man. His years as a metalworker, a woodcutter, a shepherd, and all his other odd jobs throughout his self-imposed exile, had toughened him. His years as a servant to nobility and his treasured six months as a covert student under Hypathia of Shallam had awakened him, as well, to a world that none of the Theran peasants were aware of, with injustice and justice higher than that of violence or fair pay. It is no wonder that he was not recognized, this hard-bitten wanderer with the deep eyes.

But then he spoke. It began as an idle conversation outside the general store, about the state of the war and the condition of the world. Nikolas' exact words have been lost to history, but it is evident that he spoke of the same things he spoke of all throughout his life: the possibility of peace, the possibility of universal human love, the contempt for war, the essential goodness of all mankind, the necessity of uncovering that goodness and living it. And what began as an idle conversation became a public address, as more and more people began to gather to listen to this unorthodox rant. Although crackpot prophets occasionally wandered through town, often still wearing the tar and feathers they'd picked up in Ashtan, those half-crazed men always spoke of punishment and the fear of the gods, of personal penance and the need for divine absolution. But Nikolas spoke differently: he spoke of the ability of men to save themselves and others. He never mentioned the gods at all.

And he was heard. By the time he was done, a full third of the town was gathered in front of the general store, and Nikolas stood on an apple barrel to be heard and seen. And he finished his speech with a calm assurance that there was hope for mankind... and instantly one solid powerful voice sailed over the crowd.

"That's all very well, but what can we DO?"

Nikolas, by all accounts, was momentarily baffled by this question. The person called, more quietly, "I'm sure we all want to live in peace and happiness, no Ashtan or Shallam turning our wheatfields into battlefields, no wondering if your kids will live to take over the farm, no praying that the next batch of soldiers won't just kill you and take everything... I don't know about you, but I also wish I could fly like a bird into the heavens and swig down a tall pint with Daedalus! And I say that's a lot more likely!"

The crowd began to mutter uncertainly, some trying to shush the naysayer, others admitting he was right. And Nikolas stood, silent, deep in thought, a confused look on his face.

The heckler, a burly fieldhand about Nikolas' age, was urged up to the fore by the rest of the crowd. Not afraid to debate publicly, he spoke to the assembled people, as even more townsfolk arrived to see what the commotion was. "Peace! I know about peace, neighbors! I know this man, he grew up around here! I used to beat him up and take his lunch. Go ahead, you think I'm proud of that? But I didn't know a better way, and I was hungry, I was always hungry. And that's why there is no perfect world of peace, nowhere! Because there's always someone who'll be hungry! You all know how it feels, don't you? When you're eating the last of your bread slowly because the soldiers or taxmen took the rest? Or when you're up nights dreaming about the girl your worst enemy's going to marry? All types of hunger, life is hunger and pain, and we'll fight and we'll kill in order to be full, and there's no place where that's not true!"

And the crowd was half angry at the doomsayer for shouting what they all wished they could disbelieve, and half angry at Nikolas for making them believe, even for a moment, in a vision so clearly impossible... and then Nikolas spoke.

"There... there is a place."

"Where?"

"I... don't know yet. I need to find it. Come on... let's find it!"

And just like that, Nikolas started to walk away, due south. And half the crowd paced him, asking "Where are you going?"

"To look for it. The place from my dream."

"What dream?"

"I can't tell you."

"What is this place like?"

"I don't know."

"How will you know when you get there?"

"I'll know."

"What is it called?"

"... Seleucar."

"You're crazy!"

"I hope not."

By the time Nikolas had left the town limits, the only person still following him was the brawny youth who had argued against him. "Hey... I'm Severian."

"I know. I remember."

"I... I'm sorry I took your food all those times."

"Forget it. I was never that hungry anyway."

"I mean, all the reasons I gave, I made them up just today. I never really thought about it."

"You don't have to be hungry, even if you're not full. I learned that. Forget it. You helped me."

"As you wish... I'm going to have a good laugh when you can't find this 'Seleucar'."

"I'll only quit when I die. Will you still be following me then?"

"I'm not following you now. We're just going the same way."

"Where are you going, then?"

"Wherever I go. They say it's very nice this time of year."

Nikolas laughed, and kept walking.

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## The Sermon

From Kraid Icarus, *Accounts of the Sermons*

Nikolas was clearly inspired, whether by his own hopes or by the prophetic dreams he frequently alluded to but refused to fully explain. As Nikolas wandered the land with Severian, seeking clues to the location of his utopian "Seleucar", he spoke in every village he visited. In some places, word of his speech in Thera had spread, and people were eager to listen to him - in other places, he began just as he had in Thera, finding a public place and striking up a conversation about the war. And every time, Severian debated him fiercely.

Their now-legendary debates ranged from high-flown metaphysics to personal insult contests to crowd-pleasing topical anecdotes, but although the two began to fully develop their remarkable oratorical talent to great levels, in the end it was always Severian who won the majority of their debates, as in those days hope was not a plentiful

commodity. People chose to place their hope in their personal hoards of living supplies, praying to survive for another winter, rather than waste what little hope they could muster on something as unlikely as a lasting peace.

But word spread of the two, who came to be known more as prophets than as vagabonds (for in retelling, stories always grow larger). And crowds began to turn out to welcome them, to listen to their public speeches and arguments (and quite often they would already be arguing when they arrived at the city)... and gradually, others started to follow them around, other wanderers or rootless warriors or disinherited sons, to give them some company and help protect them against the lawless countryside.

And one day they came to Shallam. And half of that great city came out to the hills near the city, to a place where the rocks formed a natural amphitheater. This place, called the Theatron Sarapin, was home, in more peaceful times, to a joint Ashtan/Shallam theatre festival (for art was, at one time, perceived as transcending city-state barriers.)

And it was in this natural amphitheater that Nikolas and Severian had their most famous and final debate. Although they covered many topics and spoke for several hours, the climactic moments of the debate are transcribed below:

N: I'm kind of surprised that you're all so interested in what we have to say. We've been traveling all over Achaea, and we've been talking and arguing and trying to figure things out for a long time, but always on sort of a small level. There was that big debate in Hashan, I think they're calling it the "Sermon on the Rocks" now, although I don't know exactly what religious principle they think I was sermonizing... but mostly, we've just been kind of working out publicly the same sort of things that people always think about in private. Why is there good? Why is there evil? Why is the world sometimes unfair? And, most importantly, can it ever be different?

I can't answer most of these questions. I'm not a priest, I'm not a prophet, at least not your usual kind, anyway. I don't claim to know everything, or have direct information from one of the gods. But I do know this. The world is a cold place, and it's a harsh place, and it's a violent place, but it doesn't have to be. All the coldness and harshness and violence are human creations, and they can be overcome by human effort! With a simple agreement, we could change everything all by ourselves.

I know you're all smart people, so I'm going to skip a few pages here. We already know why you can't just turn your back on your cheating half-brother, or your local crooked merchant, or the outlaws in the woods, even though you wish they'd all be as pure inside as you are. It's because there are people who aren't good. People who might have been good, but who have been hurt, or misled, or who simply took the easy way out. People who, for one reason or another, have succumbed to the dark half of the human spirit.

It is said that in the halls of the Logos there are great murals, shown opposite each other, symbolizing the slow divergence between the roads of good and evil. And it is said, more importantly, that the potential for good and evil both reside in each human being. And this is the point which must not be forgotten!

If you were simply to choose to put aside your life-long garments of distrust and fear, and were to exchange them with clothing of love and sharing, you would surely be struck down by the intransigent ones, the hateful ones, the ones who have traveled farther than you down the road of corruption. This is why you are afraid to change for the better. But the fact you do not understand is that even those who are truly evil can change as well!

"Redemption" is not just a fairy story told by the Church to get a larger tithe. "Grace" is not a commodity that can be created only by the gods. The fact is that even the evil can change their ways.

Severian, I see you leaning back with that smirk of yours. You're fully prepared to rip me to shreds once your turn comes up, aren't you? Yes, I see you smiling! I know that grin! But rest easy, because this is only the half part of my plea!

People of Shallam, know this! You may say, and perhaps may even be correct, that the true predators of this world, the most twisted and corrupt of men, are utterly beyond any human effort of reformation. But can you claim that a wee baby, in the company of people who know what is right, and follow their beliefs, will ever grow into a monster? Can you claim that a child, having been raised in a close tradition of justice and caring, will lift a hand against his friends or family? Can you claim that a young man who has been trained all his life in the ways and means of harmonious living will ever destroy the land he has been trained to love? Can you claim



that a city leader who loves his land, and who is loved by the people who chose him, will ever betray the place he holds dear? Can you claim that an old man, nearing the end of a life of such joy and peace, will hoard his belongings, or use his greater experience to hinder rather than nurture his own children, the younger generations that will carry on the traditions he has lived in?

No! In a society where evil is scorned, lies are hated, malice is abhorred, how can the seeds of darkness ever flourish? In a society where two men are both raised to understand the importance of each other's feelings, how can they ever compete in hatred? In a society where soldiers are trained first and foremost to hate killing, how can they ever go to war for any but the most worthy of causes?

In the society we, yes we, my people, can create, how can there ever be the darkness, the strife, the starvation, the agony that infects the wounded, crippled, diseased nations of the shadowy present?

In a world created by good, what place is there for evil?

You have heard of this world before, if you have turned out in such numbers just to hear my companion and me speak. You have heard the name that was spoken in my dream. You have heard me speak of the land to which I am going, the land which, I now see, I will have to create on my own, create with help from every good soul that will follow me. The land of Seleucar.

S: The land of soap bubbles, doomed to shatter at a touch, Nikolas. The land of illusions, doomed to fade further into the distance the closer you seem to come. The land of evil, sleeping in the good, waiting its time to fester and explode. You spoke of "those who choose the easy way", the evil way. That is where your evil will come from, in Seleucar as in Ashtan, as in Shallam, as in Thera, as in Hashan, as in Delos, as everywhere in the whole vast land of Achaea.

A man who does not wish to sweat out his entire life to raise crops from the ground, a man who does not wish to help his neighbors simply because it is easier in the short and in the long run to ignore them, the man who sees the opportunity to take advantage and takes it: this is the man who will break your dream. And this man is all of us. Hate me for saying it, hate me for naming the shame that stains all of humanity. But mankind is weak!

You know the legends! We are all children of the Nameless Horror, we are all children of rape and violation, hatred and fear and uncaring are in our nature! We may try to say we are not inherently evil, we may speak in lofty slogans, we may try to claim that only other people are amoral deep in their hearts... and we may also try to drink the Pachacacha or carry Mt. Vashnar to the Mojhave one boulder at a time. The evidence is inescapable! The evidence is all around us! We know deep in our hearts that we are sinful and corrupt, no matter what we try to do! You all go to church every holy day, and you confess your sins while groveling on the floor, it's a matter of civic pride. And so you keep yourselves holy, and that's all well and good.

But even when you have your darker self in control, does your neighbor? What about his half-cousin from the slums downtown? What about those immoral Ashtanian scum? Will you try to forge a new reality with them? Ha! You'll embrace them as willingly as they'll embrace hypocritical legalistic swindling imperialist Shallamese! You wish to go to Seleucar? Then go hand in hand with your most hated enemies.

And you will all fail together.

N: We will all fall in together. Trust in a man, and he is likely to prove trustworthy.

S: A myth.

N: One that I would like to believe in. Look, we don't need to wrangle too much longer. This is the end of our first journey.

S: Huh?

N: We're done arguing. Now it's time to act.

S: How?

N: We're going to Seleucar. And we're taking everyone with us. Are you coming?

S: ...

N: Come on! You couldn't wait to prove me wrong! Come see me fail! Or, better, come see me succeed, and join me once and for all. Are you with me, Severian? You've got to be in all or nothing, you know.

S: Hah! All is nothing, for this fool's crusade. How will you travel to a place you've never even seen? Do you have a map that you've been hiding from me all this time?

N: I know the way. I feel it in my mind... I have seen the place in my dreams. I know where it is. I could find it in my sleep, for I have already done so. Across the mountains, across a great swamp... on banks of a mighty river...

S: On the other side of innumerable natural hazards? And how will we perform this cross-country trek without perishing in the wilds?

N: Do not rangers and pathfinders and hunstmen travel with us? Gentlemen, will you lead us, and keep us from danger?

(shouts of affirmation)

S: And how will we eat, dear Nikolas? Whose crops shall we uproot to take with us, to keep us from starving? Or do you plan to forage and hunt, feeding five hundred settlers on berries and rabbits?

N: Have we never passed through entire villages that have wished my vision was true? For every farmer who travels with us, we can surely take time to bring his crop in and store it in our wagons. This is the time of harvest, perfect for us to stock up for this journey; and yet it is early enough that we can be over the mountains before winter sets in.

S: And when we get there, how will we build this little "empire of dreams"? How will we become more than mere squatters living in huts?

N: Are there no Dwarves among us? Are there no Tsol'aa? Are there no skilled human architects and builders? How many artisans have followed us, and brought their tools with them? We do not have too few creators and thinkers, Severian... we almost have too many!

S: Then... then...

N: Are you out of objections yet, Severian?

S: Of course not! I'm... I'm just thinking, that's all.

N: Severian... are you truly so set against this dream? All your argument has helped to clarify my own thoughts. By attacking my dream, you have helped to create it. Severian, why will you not help me make our dream come true?

S: ...Nikolas... am I worthy?

N: All are worthy.

S: Then... although I'm sure I'll regret it later, I'll give it a shot. To Seleucar, then. May Sarapis have mercy on us.

(stunned silence from crowd, followed by wild cheering)

N: Severian, that's terrific! Okay, we're going! Who's coming with?

(more wild cheering)

S: It's settled then! To Seleucar

Severian's change of heart at the end of the debate was a shock to the entire globe. Everyone had heard the two go at it, or had heard the tales, and had come to view the two as opposing elemental principles. For Severian's eternal pessimism to give in to Nikolas' vision - this was an event that won Nikolas more followers than his words alone had ever done. Nikolas and Severian decided together that they would swing back through the main lands of Achaea, gathering followers until they reached Ashtan, then, with this group of "settlers", they would go to Seleucar, guided only by Nikolas' intuition.

Unfortunately, although many people followed them, most brought only a few days' or weeks' provisions, not realizing the long road that lay ahead... but then in other places, entire villages picked up to follow the Two Prophets, taking their full harvests with them. Nikolas' head was oft in the clouds; it was Severian's logistical skills that kept the ever-growing legions of so-called "Selucarians" from falling apart. And, as Severian made them realize that they could cooperate and co-exist (which was, after all, the dream they were chasing), the followers began to feel a true sense of community. It can be said, in a way, that Seleucar came into existence then, five months before Nikolas ever received his true calling from Sarapis.

(Editor's note: The defector Matic Ridley was the only lettered hobgoblin to survive the War of the Deeps; his inside knowledge has proven invaluable in telling the true story of the Tzol'teth and their slave races. This text was written shortly before his death, and is presented here for the first time, in its original form. Definitions of hobgoblin terms are offered parenthetically.)

It is truth that the Dar-tezlari-kanit (Great War for the Light) did begin long before the first of the tezlari-jio (Holes of Light) were opened and we did fight on the surface. The blinding light was the ending of the beginning for the Masters. It was the beginning of the ending for the Servants. But the beginning of the beginning happened many many years before the ending of the ending.

I was dulkurio-ma (Servant Who Thinks) to the Master Blue Dark, who called himself Agith'maal to humans. Master Blue Dark was leader of all the Masters, and god of all the servants. We did pray to him at the middle of every day. A day was sixteen aafra long, and each aafra was sixteen caril long. But Master Blue Dark did be the first Master to see Tezlari-tarin (The World of Light). My brother was the one who did hold for him the magic stone that he did cause to show the images from Tezlari-tarin. When Master Blue Dark was blinded by the horrible light of Tezlari-yumap (Piercing Spear of Light), my brother was amazed. Master Blue Dark did kill him because my brother did see Master Blue Dark frightened. But I did hide my eyes and did pretend that I had seen nothing, and so Master Blue Dark did spare my life. Tezlari-yumap is what you do call the sun. For us it is like a terrible spear of pain. To the Masters it is the calling of Thoth. To see it in the magic stone did nearly cost Master Blue Dark his sight, and so forever then he did command his servants to look into the stone instead of him.

When my brother died, I was named Sa-dulkurio-ma, greatest thinking servant to Master Blue Dark. And I did assist him in all his thinkings and plannings about Tezlari-tarin. He did study much of that world, and he did command that our world, Anzari-tarin (World of Darkness) should become like Tezlari-tarin. He did wish that we be hardened to light, and that we learn to live in the world of "day" and "night". Every day we did learn "hours" and "minutes", and our lights did change from being painful in brightness to being fearful in blackness.

Master Blue Dark had two other Masters almost as great as him. They were Master Blood Drinker, who called himself Terrin'ukia to humans, and Master Secret Hate, who called himself Gattan'lier to humans. The three Masters did study long about Tezlari-tarin, and did make plans to go there to kill everyone there. I never did know why they wished to do this. My duties were to write down what they said, and to think about small problems that they did not care much about. Once they did ask me what I thought, and I did say, "Almighty Masters, you are greater than the darkness and harder than the stones. It is impossible that you are wrong. But I do ask, since I do not understand, why we do go only to kill? Why do we not also go to take the riches of Tezlari-tarin, to take over the homes of the people there, and steal their secrets?" But the Masters did laugh at me and did tell me that I was too stupid to understand anything.

The Masters did work to marshal their slaves into armies, and did train them to fight in groups. In Anzari-tarin we did fight much against the kal-tai-vakha (Mighty Fang Racers), who the Masters did not choose to enslave. I think now that the kal-tai-vakha were too strong to be enslaved. They were quick and powerful, and they did have a great kingdom even further under the earth than the Masters. They were made of armor and fur and claws and teeth, and they did change their shapes quickly when they fought, and they did worship no god, not even the Masters. But even though we Hobgoblins and Goblins and Ogres and the cold Bug-Men did fight many times, Anzari-tarin is all tunnels and caves. The Masters did make us learn to fight on open ground. They did create huge caves that we did train in.

The Masters did learn much about Tezlari-tarin. They did summon up horrible creatures that knew the future, and they did make plans using what the creatures knew. Once they did drain the blood of two thousand Goblin babies into a great pot made of bones and skin. I did help to make the pot. The Masters did use the blood to call a great terrifying creature that they did call as "Pazuzu". The great Pazuzu was awful to look at, and I did hide my eyes. He was in the world for only a very short time. But he did say one word: "Seleucar." And then he did go away, and the Masters were angry at him for his not saying anything more.

But then the Masters did study for a long time, and did learn that the future did have a great army that would fight them. And that this army was from the place that was Seleucar. And that Seleucar did not exist, but would soon. And the Masters did learn that the man who would make Seleucar come to be was called Nikolas. And the Masters decided that they would hurl great curses at him and plague him, and try to kill him before he could do

anything to hurt them. They could not send armies to Tezlari-tarin to kill him, because they did not want Tezlari-tarin to know they did exist.

Long did I watch the human man Nikolas in the magic stone. He did lead a huge army, but less than a fourth part of the army was made of warriors. He did lead an army of people who carried food and other things. I did learn much of Tezlari-tarin in watching him. I did learn of "trees" and "wood" and other things. Master Blood Drinker did take me at times to speak to large groups of Hobgoblins and Goblins and Ogres to teach them what "trees" and "wood" and "clouds" and other things of Tezlari-tarin were. The Bug Men did speak a language only they did understand, and so other Masters did teach them through magic.

I did watch the human man Nikolas lead his people traveling sometimes this way, sometimes that way. More people did come with him when he did speak to them in cities. Cities did seem very strange to me, like clusters of artificial caves. I did explain "cities" to the Masters' armies, also. And Nikolas did finally go into a great place of rock dust called "sand", and did find a city of people the Masters did call "mhun".

The Masters did know that Nikolas could only go in one way from where he was. Mountains and jungles did bar his way. The Masters did use their magics to call up all the fierce beasts and monsters into the mountains to bar the path of Nikolas and his people. And when Nikolas did take his people into the mountains, the Masters did magically direct the monsters to attack wherever the people were weakest. The monsters and beasts did cause them to go more slowly, and the time of snow and cold came to the mountains, and many people did freeze and die. Before Nikolas could leave the mountains, one third of his people were killed.

Then Nikolas and his people did go into a place of jungles. And the Masters did work greater magic, and caused there to be deadly diseases in the air. And the lungs and hearts of Nikolas' people were afflicted, and they did suffer greatly and die. And before Nikolas could leave the jungle, half of the people who escaped the mountains were dead in the jungle. His "army" was only a third as big as it was before, and the Masters did rejoice.

But our own plans to make a great army did suffer, also. No matter what the Masters did do, the Goblins and Hobgoblins and Ogres could not withstand the horrible light of Tezlari-yumap. The Masters did work great magics upon me, to make me so that I could look upon Tezlari-yumap safely, but the Masters did find that those magics required precious materials that did not exist in great quantity. So the Masters did kill all their armies, who would otherwise have lived for two hundred years (for the creatures of Anzari-tarin suffer less from the "great rays of outer heaven", as the Masters do call it, and so we do live longer than those condemned to the burning hell that is Tezlari-tarin). The Masters did kill them all, and did take from them the "spiral ribbons of future creation" with which the Masters can create new life as they wish. And the Masters did create new Goblins and Hobgoblins and Ogres just like the ones before, but these new creatures were changed in their "spiral ribbons of future creation" so that they were not blinded by Tezlari-yumap, and so that they would be even greater warriors. But this great project did require all of the Masters' effort and knowledge for a full hundred years, and so only Master Blue Dark alone did spare himself from this effort to continue harriving Nikolas.

And I alone, being Sa-dulkario-ma, was let to live. And I did receive the task of leading all the Goblin and Hobgoblin and Ogre people into the funeral caves where they would all be killed by the magic of the Masters. And within my heart did grow a huge hatred and rebellion against the Masters. And I did resolve to destroy them in the end, if ever I could.

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## Sevarian's Notes

From Severian Marcella, Notes: Various

Rico,

Be sure that the building materials arrive here safely. There are still plenty of monsters in the mountain paths, so I'm relying on you and your Templars to guard the caravans carefully! Brother Valclevé and his men are working on building a series of shrines along the paths, so if you have any chance to assist him, please do so. If we can enforce the trade paths with the powers of the gods, it'll make shipping far easier.

Severian

PS: For the last time, the Occultists are NOT sacrificing babies. They just speak of the powers of darkness to get respect; the true scholars among them realize that "light" and "darkness" are irrelevant to Chaos. They're as Selucarian as you, so you had better learn to get along with them.

Eveline,

Thank you for your continued efforts in the building. Nikolas and I have sworn that our mud huts will be the last to be replaced with stone houses, which was pretty noble of us at the time. Nikolas doesn't seem to care, but personally, I'm getting tired of forever throwing frogs back outside in the middle of the night. If you need any supplies that you don't have, please tell me so I can push them through.

Severian

Omdoria,

Although I greatly appreciate your desire to help, it seems that most of our citizens are afraid to fly in a flaming chariot pulled by demonic goats. I can't for the life of me see what their trouble is, but I guess the flaming-goat concept just doesn't appeal to one and all. Please continue to provide light for the nighttime work crews, and battle against the jungle beasts, but try to keep a low profile when it comes to eating hearts and decaying your victims' living flesh... although I know full well you Occultists aren't pure evil, many of the other citizens seem to disagree.

Severian

Chief Grolmar Lightning-Hand, Lord Baron of Moghedu:

Our leader King Nikolas gratefully accepts your ceremonial gifts of statues and fine leathers, and humbly requests that you accept in return our minor offering of gold and carved mahogany from our new holdings. Although we are barely beginning to consolidate our new domain, we will not forget your help in establishing a trade route, and we look forward to generations of productive commerce. I regret to say that we cannot as yet assist you with your grievous drought, but once we have working wells we will be very glad to ship you as many barrels of water as we can spare.

Yours in Friendship,

Duke Severian Marcella, Right Hand of the King

Meggan,

I am sure that between the expertise of your Druidic dowsers and the technical skill of Creng's dwarven engineers, we will obtain a working well in no time, despite your recent difficulties. Please update me on your progress; our water-barrels are running low, and the frequent rainfall is not sufficient to meet our needs. The river water remains tainted with the same diseases that plagued our journey here; I fear that dark forces are at work, but we must struggle on regardless.

Severian

Nikolas,

For the love of the gods, will you take an interest? I know that you've got large matters to think on, but the day to day running of the realm is killing me. It's like you've lost your direction. Come on, Seleucar is what you always dreamed of creating, and now I've got so much paperwork I don't even have time to track you down and talk to you in person!

Swamped Severian

Guard Captain Ballan Fremont:

This could be a moment of national emergency, insofar as we have an emergent nation. Nikolas has disappeared. He stepped off into the jungle to take care of some business, and then he didn't come back. It's been four hours now, and I'm beyond worried. Try to keep this as low profile as possible, please, but use whatever means are necessary to find our erstwhile ruler.

Duke Severian

#### DIVINE ENCOUNTER

From Kraid Icarus, Accounts of the Sermons

When Nicator returned from the jungle, three days later, his eyes were alight with holy fire... as was the golden six-foot staff in his right hand. In his last sermon as a prophet, and his first speech as a true king, he said:

People of Seleucar, Sarapis sends his blessing.

Three days ago, I was at a crossroads, and so was this entire tiny kingdom. You were all busy building and trading and healing and fighting, and I was very proud of you and still am... the crossroads was mine, because there was a decision I had not made. The decision was this: What are we? Are we to be just a town on a river in a jungle near the sea? Are we to sweep forth and conquer the world? Are we to distinguish ourselves as artists? As craftsmen? As seafaring merchants? Simply put, in what direction do I lead Seleucar, this ideal kingdom of justice and virtue? I could not come to a conclusion, and I did not want to lead you astray. And what's more, I knew that Seleucar faced deadly problems: the jungle beasts, the disease, the lack of clean water. How could we even survive? Lacking answers, I feared to make matters worse by issuing random orders.

I wandered in the jungle for a full day. It was quite by accident; I stepped into the jungle to smell the flowers, and before I had gone fifteen feet the jungle closed in behind me, and I could not find my way back. As the sun went down, I realized that I would probably be killed by jungle predators... and I wondered if this was a divine judgment for my impossible dream.

Then I came across an altar, nestled between two moss-covered boulders in the middle of the jungle. It was tiny, made of wood, humble and weak, but unmistakably inscribed with the sigil of the Logos. Exhausted, I fell to my knees before it. The shrine was brand new, and so I assumed that it had been built by a zealous Priest of Seleucar. Although the shrine was carved of fine cedarwood, which does not grow in this jungle, I did not consider for a moment that the shrine itself might be of supernatural origin. Whoever the builder, I hoped that the holiness of the altar would protect me from the dangers of the jungle night. I didn't pray... I'm afraid that I've never been a terribly holy person in the past, even though I've been called a prophet.

It may sound strange, but even though I was tired, I didn't sleep that night. I stayed up by the shrine all night, staring into the implacable darkness of the deep jungle, thinking and wondering.

And the daylight came, and again I wandered around, trying to find my way back to Seleucar. But no matter which way I went, or how straight a path I took, I always came back to that same wooden altar. And by the time night fell, I realized that I was indeed at the mercy of the gods.

My entire life has been a story of self-reliance, and that has made my life difficult. The hardest choices are the ones a man makes for himself. The choice to be good, the choice to be evil, the choice to take a safe profession or a dangerous one, the choice to live or to die. I've never relied on the gods for my morality or ethics; I've always chosen my own path. But this once, I realized that I had no choice but to surrender.

So I prayed. At first it was difficult, because I was exercising a part of myself that I had never before used. I had never spoken with my spirit before, only with my mind and heart. The closest I ever came to spirit were my dreams of Seleucar. And after two sleepless days and nights of prayer, I came to realize that my dreams of Seleucar were sent by the gods, and that everything I had done in my life was by gift of Sarapis. And I was ashamed for ignoring him for so long. Although I was starving and thirsty, my greatest pain was the realization that I had achieved so much without ever paying tribute to the being who had given me the power to do so.

"Sarapis," I said at last, "I submit myself to you. From now, I will never act without your guidance. I beg of you now, now that my dreams of Seleucar are fulfilled, grant me another vision. Tell me what I must do next."

In the legends and myths, a god's appearance is always heralded with loud noises or flashes of light or mysterious portents. And even if the god appears quietly, he always projects a great aura of awe and mystery. Sarapis did none of this. He walked out from behind a tree, and his feet crunched in the undergrowth like any man's. He was dressed in a long gray cloak, and the cowl was drawn to hide his features. Except that he hid his face, there was nothing at all to distinguish him, but I knew him nonetheless. I cannot say how I was so sure, for he never even spoke his name, but it was Sarapis, and I am more sure of that than I am of my very existence.

He held a tall golden staff in his left hand, and a mossy black stone in his right. And he said, "Nikolas... I have what you seek. In my right hand I have survival. In the left, greatness. This stone is covered with a moss which I have created, called amar, which purifies the diseased waters of the air and chills them to the stone. Learn the secret of its growth, and your kingdom shall not perish.

"But survival is only the half of your question, is it not, Nikolas? You seek direction? You seek a vision? Then a vision you shall have!"

I saw a city on the shores of a great sea, and the city was full of white light, while the sea was pure blackness. And I saw the king of that city, holding the golden staff of Sarapis, and he held it high in the sky. And small lights traveled all along the ground toward the city, and I could see that each light on the ground was a soldier in armor. And as the lights traveled toward the city, the black sea rose higher and higher, and grew rougher and rougher. And finally, a great wave began to roll in from the sea, and the man with the golden staff commanded that all the lights of his city rise up to meet the wave and break it. The last thing I saw was the wave of darkness striking hard against the massed lights of the city. Did the city hold? I could not see.

"Nikolas. That city of light is Seleucar. The man with the golden staff is you, who will defend it. Will you gather the light? Will you build up Seleucar to stand against the Black Wave?"

"Yes, almighty Sarapis!" I replied. "What must I do?"

"Take this rock and this staff, for they hold your present and your future. With the rock, bring your people out of suffering, and establish them as noble landholders, freemen, creators of their own destiny. Teach them well in the ways of virtue. And with this staff, gather together a great army. All who see the staff and hear you speak will join with you; any who stand against you will lose their will to fight when they see you hold this staff aloft. You must gain dominion over all the land, Nikolas, and you must build the most powerful army the world has ever seen, for the Black Wave is even now rolling in toward the shore, and one hundred years from now it will strike, with a force you cannot imagine. Only your preparation can save the continent of Sapience. Will you do this? Will you conquer in my name?"

"I am not a conquerer..."

"Who is better suited to conquer wisely than one who does not wish conquest? Will you conquer in order to save this world?"

"If it is your will, I shall!"

"Then hear me clearly now, Nikolas! The man 'Nikolas' is no more! That young man who was prophet of no god but himself has done well, and now he goes to his rest. From this point onward, you have a new name, one worthy of a true emperor: You are Nicator! And understand well that although you serve me, you shall achieve your dominion of your own power. My staff shall aid you, but only through your own strength and will can you ever succeed. But I have seen that you have strength and will in you that will carry you well, if only you keep hope. Go, Nicator! Go and build; go and conquer!"

I was inspired, I was dazzled. And I went, as Sarapis had commanded, and here I am. So my people, listen well: the Logos is with us! Behold the staff that he has given us! With his words and our strong backs, we will overcome all the obstacles in our way... we will resist the Black Wave! Sarapis said that the threat would come in one hundred years; you and I may die before it comes, but our children will fight in our place! We will fight! We will fight and win! Who is with me? Who is with Seleucar?

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## Allies

From Severian Marcella, Notes: Various

Chief Grolmar Lightning-Hand, Lord Baron of Moghedu:

The black rock that carries Sarapis' immortal watery moss is the exact same type of rock that made up the ornamentation of that ceremonial statue you gifted us with! I make apology for the informality of this letter, but this is a very exciting discovery: by growing the amar moss on your unique obsidian, we can solve the water problems of both our communities. Please send an emissary with a quantity of that rock, and we will send him back with as much of the moss as we can grow on it. Yours in Friendship and Hope,

Duke Severian Marcella, Right Hand of the Emperor

Ralshev,

Congratulations on your recruiting and training efforts. Although we're all a bit unclear on the exact nature of this "Black Wave", and the conquest of Ashtan and Shallam both seems pretty unlikely, I'm as excited as anyone to have such a large project to embark upon. Keep bringing in the fighting men as quickly as we gain capacity to feed and house them.

Severian

Dear Mother,

No, "that ruffian Nikolas" has not lured me into bad influences against my will, and his name is Nicator now. Sarapis said so. And yes, I'm wearing the sweater you knitted me, and a very good sweater it is, too. Tell Father not to work so hard, and I'll be sure to visit you both when we conquer Thera.

Love,

Severian

Emre Nikain Ironhand, Supreme of the Mannaseh Trolls:

Mighty Supreme, I send greetings from Nicator, King of Seleucar and Conqueror of the World. He prays that you accept this gift: a two-handed cleaver of folded stainless carbon steel. Fight with this weapon, and you will find that it needs no gems or gold to prove its worth: as it was made using our special magic, it will cut through copper and bronze as if through old cheese, and it will not break as iron will. Its sharpness is absolute; no razor could hold an edge as well as this blade. This is the first such weapon we have made, but we can make many more; and we will give them to you and your people, if only you will help us fight against those who have oppressed you for so long, the arrogant humans of Ashtan and Shallam. My ruler graciously awaits your response.

Duke Severian Marcella, Right Hand of the Emperor

Ralshev,

Are you doing all right in integrating the Mhun and the Trolls into your formations? I'm still in shock over their response... first the Mhun pledge the loyal service of their entire race for two generations, then the Trolls pick up their entire tribe and march here to become citizens. If you have any troubles, let me know; I'll get Nicator to wave his staff around and turn everyone into bosom buddies.

Severian

Nicator:



Only two years settled and all is in readiness! I'll never believe you gathered so many people so quickly, even though I was the one administrating all the levies... it's amazing what kind of fighting men you find when you promise them a better life and make them believe it. All right, Nikolas... you know I've no talent for warfare, so I'll handle the logistics. Ralshev and Rico will command the troops. We move for Shallam on your orders, so I hope you get this note as soon as you get back from the temple.

Severian

PS: I'm actually quaking in my boots, but if you wave that staff at me I'll deck you. I'd rather piss myself than rely on a god's power to take away my fear.

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## Fall Of Shallam

From The Fall of Shallam (popular protest song)

With a crack and a whack did the White Wave strike

Shattering the armies with a golden pike

Nicator's Staff did cry our defeat

And we fought and we died in the day's full heat

Our prayers rang false and their aim was true

And as our front ranks fell, they attacked anew

Seleucar's pride dashed hard in the van

And our Templars countered, and so the fight ran

We could not lose!

But we could not win

Then death we choose!

But falsehood's a sin And ere the sun set we were kissing their hands,

Begging for the right to surrender our lands.

Sing hi, ho for Seleucar's glory!

Seleucar's victory, Seleucar's story!

The blades of Seleucar still drip blood

But we'll gladly walk in Seleucar mud!

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## Age Of Conquest

From Retsu Nienhalt, The Age of Conquest

Although there was much popular protest against Nicator and Seleucar in Shallam, the fact was incontrovertible: Seleucar's small force had demolished the mighty Shallamese army, and forced the city to unconditional surrender in a period of two hours.

The ease of the victory was due in part to the fact that Nicator's force was so small that it was not even perceived as an army until there was only a quarter of a mile to the main gate of the city. Shallam was forced to field its army with little preparation and no room to maneuver. Had the Shallamese thought to simply close the gate and wait for Nicator to leave, the Selucarian plans might have stopped right there, but Nicator and his strategists had planned it exactly: counting on Shallam's reluctance to close their shipping lanes, and the fact that Shallam had no inkling of Seleucar's existence up to now, they attacked with a force of a size calculated to bring only a half-hearted Shallamese response.

Meeting Shallam's army with great ferocity, the Selucarian army, only a thousand strong, defeated three thousand men in close combat right in front of the city's main gate. Selucarian Templars unhorsed Shallamese Knights; Selucarian trolls chopped Shallamese soldiers like weeds; and the Selucarian Occultists, many of whom had fled to Seleucar to escape Shallamese persecution, took great pleasure in using their flaming chariots to clear the parapets.

And in the end, the Emperor of Shallam took the field personally, struggling through the city gate on his noble charger, and a great cheer came up from his warriors... which turned to a great cry of dismay when Nicator froze him in a globe of golden light using the Staff of Nicator, and levitated him into the center of the Selucarian army. Entering the globe himself, Nicator held a long discussion with the Emperor, while the two armies battled furiously. When the discussion was over, the Emperor was given safe passage back to his army. The Emperor ordered his men to retreat into the city. Fifteen minutes later, white flags rose all over Shallam, to indicate the city's complete surrender.

When asked what he had talked about with the Emperor, Nicator simply replied, "I convinced him that Shallam would do better as part of Seleucar." It is widely believed that Nicator did not relate the full story.

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## Sister Lavaine

From Arisa Raviede, A Booke of Hystorickal Seraphs, or Angeles of Olde

(Editor's Note: I've rendered the original text into modern spelling, but kept the syntax of the High Speech. The High Speech is seldom used nowadays, but in the most formal books of the Selucarian Empire, it was much in evidence.)

Here followeth the recent tale of Lisanne, a most worshipful angel what cleaved unto Sister Lavaine, who was full made Priestess of Sarapis under his Imperial Majesty, Nicator of Seleucar. Short hard after the state of Shallam did give up resistance to Seleucar, did Sister Lavaine hear tidings of war. As the book saith, many were hearts glad that the lord called them to smite Ashtan, as many were their grievances and complaints against that black city, and yea, many were that city's offenses against them. And yet did Sister Lavaine make dole that she should ever fight against so great a city as Ashtan, for she hove from Ashtan, and despite that she had joined Seleucar and her lord Emperor Nicator, yet did she love Ashtan well. And her heart was full sore that she should go against Ashtan, and so too was that of her angel, Lisanne.

And in marching and prayer the days went, and many hymns and prayers did Sister Lavaine sing, and much trepidation had Lisanne, for fear that Sister Lavaine might needs fight her friends of old, from the city of Ashtan. But despite prayers did the day of battle come, and of rushing and fighting there was much. And Sister Lavaine took up a great mace, and did great deeds of arms, and her angel Lisanne with her, and together they traced and traversed, striking many sad strokes, and many hard brunts did Sister Lavaine take, and many did she heal, or other she had died. And she said, Sarapis may you have mercy on me, for that I might have the power to heal me of my wounds, or I shall die. And lo she did heal herself and was whole, so that all marveled, How can this priestess so straitly heal her wounds, that even an hundred knights all to-slashing cannot slay her cold? And likewise did all the priests and paladins on the field, that none might slay them, but instead that all their wounds might close as soon as they were suffered. And slowly did godless Ashtan lose the field, and then the king of Ashtan made great woe, and cried Sarapis! Woe that I ever demanded battle on these bloody plains, for now I shall die on these bloody plains! And then the king waxed wood wroth, and he spake, sithen I shall die, wit you well I shall bear many a noble knight to hell alongside, and too I shall destroy mine enemy Emperor of Seleucar!

And Sister Lavaine did see the king of Ashtan mount a great charge, so fierce that it were like unto the crashing mountain that comes of a tiny pebble's fall, and she did say unto Lisanne, Go forth, my holy angel, let give tidings to my lord of this charge, and warn him, that he may meet it, for an he meet it not, surely he shall be slain. And by no mean would I see my sweet lord be killed on these bloody plains. And so Lisanne cried, I would do as ye list, but that I fear ye shall die if I leave thee. Fear ye not ever for me, but go ye to save my lord, for my life is as wood, but his is as diamond. And Lisanne said, O Sarapis defend me, for an I do not this one thing, it were as well I had never left the Sacred World.

And straight Lisanne yede, and many strokes did she trade each for other with many dolorous knights of Ashtan, and twice nearly was she cut from the world by the dread scythe of the Chaos Spirit known only as Angelbane. And Lisanne reached Nicator as he encountered full hot with the black knights of Ashtan, heedless of the body of knights that charged full on him. And Lisanne cried, Turn around, noble emperor, for your death rushes up ahind thee! And then did Nicator wheel his horse, and did wit that his foe charged upon him with feutred spear, and then great effort did he make, and mustered his men to encounter upon both sides. And Emperor Nicator was sore pressed. Then did he raise up his golden staff, and cry, For Seleucar! For Sarapis! For Light! And then his men waxed wonderly mighty, and dealt strokes so fierce as if they were each five men, and the Ashtan knights were hard pressed on their side. And the king of Ashtan cried, Who are these knights that fight as they were five for each one?

And Lisanne said, For Seleucar do I battle! And of Seleucar and the Sacred World do I come! And Lisanne fought the knights of Ashtan as she had been a rock and they waves, for an ever they came nigh, she shattered them and kept them from the Emperor. And as the sun fell half down the sky, she fought ever on, and did many great deeds of arms, and slew many knights. And at length she encountered with the king of Ashtan, and then they thundered together with such a force that all men marveled, Look how the angel and the king strike sparks from swords! And they fought one against another, sometimes here, sometimes there, and each traveled the field and did great deeds of arms, but ever were they pressed back together. And Lisanne said, Wit you well, king of Ashtan, the fates have commanded our strife. And the king taunted back to her, Fair you speak, angel, but why hath your halo died out in the affray? And he made mock of her in diverse fashion. Then they fought hard together, ramping and scraping, and dealt such heavy blows that their blood rained on the ground, and dealt such loud strokes that all attended their battle with wonderment.

And in the final clash of the embroilment, Lisanne smote the king so hard that her sword did cut through his helmet and split his brain-pan, and he fell lifeless to the ground. And Lisanne fell too, for she was sore wounded, but Seleucar had won the field, and the army of Ashtan was in disarray, and they fled in rout. And Lisanne said, How is it that I bleed? For all know that angels bleed not. And priests came to her and said, Be quiet, pray to Sarapis for deliverance. And Lisanne said, How is it that my halo has died, for is not the halo the sign of the Sacred Realm? And the priests said to her, Be quiet, pray to Sarapis for deliverance. And Lisanne said, Where is Sister Lavaine, that I love, who I am sworn to protect? And the priests said, Be quiet, pray to Sarapis for deliverance, for Sister Lavaine has fallen in battle, and where to-fore thou would have returned to the Sacred World straightaway, for thy greater love of Sarapis and Seleucar thou hast been made human. And then Lisanne was torn between grief and rejoicing: grief for her lost Lavaine, grief for her lost holiness, rejoicing for that she might live and die in Seleucar, sovereign state of all Sapience, for which she gave up of her seraphic soul.

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## Nicator's Passing

From "Lucky" Lantis DeGage, *Fighting the Tide: A Memoir*

The important part of my story really begins at the end of Nicator's life. Of course, the Conquest Age of the Selucarian Empire was swirling all around us, but we didn't notice it; we were too busy making buildings to see the shape of the town, if you catch my meaning. I was one of the young breed of administrators, the appointed nobles who had attained power in the new regime of Seleucar. We were too young to care about the old hates between Ashtan and Shallam. We were just excited to be working on the greatest project we'd ever heard of: empire! Dynasty! Progress!

I was the proudest of all. As the Architect of Thera, I had charge of all the public works from the gates of Ashtan to Lake Vundamere. The Shunai Bridge was one of my designs, as was the Chapel of All Gods near Thera (now fallen in the Black Wave, and never rebuilt, sadly). And my position put me close to the great man himself, Emperor Nicator. I remember him clearly, even as I reach the twilight of my own life: although he was often distant, gazing into a future I could only imagine, he always had a word for me, always had an interest in all his people. At that time, humans and Tsof'aa were the only races with true social status in the realms, yet Emperor Nicator recognized the virtues of the other races, and gave many positions of power to his old allies the Trolls, the Mhun, and even Dwarves like me.

Some criticized the Emperor. They called him a lecher because he took many wives, ignoring the fact that his marriages and offspring brought his many provinces firmly into the new union. They called him a spendthrift because of the money he spent to aid the poor, ignoring the fact that many of them became productive members

of the only kingdom that had ever bothered to give them a chance. And they called him a madman, because he marshalled mighty armies and drilled them daily against a threat he could not name, a threat that never even materialized during his lifetime... and later they looked foolish indeed, biting their tongues as the great armies of Nicator did battle with the hideous monsters of the Black Wave.

My personal story is of interest to me, but no doubt of less interest to you; my autobiography tells it quite clearly, for any who greatly care. This memoir is of Nicator, and of his son Piraeus, and of the Black Wave. And it begins, for me, with Nicator's funeral. It was held in the Chrysalis Basilica, and it could have been the first and last time that the Basilica would ever be crammed with so diverse a group. Templars and Druids and Priests held company with Serpentlords and Occultists. The Templars wore armor specially discolored with soot, to indicate their estate of woe; the Priests dressed in mourning black; the Occultists and Serpentlords, normally secretive and clannish, stood shoulder to shoulder with their traditional rivals. Nicator's Theran wife, Petra, nobly led her small cadre of sister wives, each in the mourning array of their home cities, each hiding her grief with different degrees of success. Nicator's eldest son, Piraeus, the heir apparent to the throne, stood solemnly by his sister, Selicande, who held his hand gently, even as Nicator's other four children wept openly. And of officials and nobles there was a great sea, and beyond them outside the Basilica gates was an ocean of common folk, attentively listening for even the slightest murmurs of the great ceremony.

I cannot remember a word of the funeral service, nor do I remember the speeches given by the many nobles who eulogized the great man that day. What I remember is the face of the noble Princess Selicande as she comforted her brother the heir. What I remember is the strong yet tearful gaze of Queen Petra as she spoke of the love that had grown from her arranged marriage with her lord. I remember the tightly controlled grief on the face of Chancellor Severian as he poured out a libation to the gods in memory of his greatest friend. I remember the silent determination of young Prince Piraeus as he took the Imperial Crown at the sunset ceremony that same day. And I remembered the dark mutterings against the new Emperor, for even before his accession to the throne, he had declared his intent to continue to maintain the mighty host that his father had commanded. These were the sights and sounds of a great empire preparing to prove its worth... the sounds of a realm that would have to pass through greater travail before it could truly create the golden age it promised.

I remember events of the years after that, as well... the cheers and pomp and flash of spears as the youthful Emperor thrust his great armies into ever higher pitches of recruiting and training, and the strikes and protests and outcry as the ever higher cost of those armies threatened to break the coffers of the realm, and the common folk bore the price in full. I remember the stormy arguments between the Chancellor Severian, then an elderly but fiery man, and his youthful liege lord. "It may be that you have sold the chattels of the Imperial line to finance the muster of the troops, and you may well command the rest of the nobles to do the same, but in the end farmers shall starve for your useless armies, not kings!" And the young Emperor Piraeus, implacable, would bow his head in respect for his father's oldest friend, but would stand firm. "The Black Wave shall shatter on Seleucar. And if farmers must starve, I shall starve with them. Open the royal granaries and relieve those hit hard by the war tax. But the tax must hold." Chancellor Severian carried his exasperation with him to the grave, and then other naysayers took his place, and asked that the king lift the taxes. And the army's size increased, until the only ones who had enough to eat were the soldiers. It was only the size of the standing army that prevented insurrection... for who wished to challenge such a powerful military ruler as the cruel Emperor Piraeus? Only I and a few others fully believed in the "Black Wave" foretold in the vision Nicator had from Sarapis. And even we knew our doubts.

But twelve years after Nicator's death, just as the young Selucarian Empire was close to self-destruction under the weight of Piraeus' military host, the Black Wave struck, and from a direction none had expected: the depths of the earth.

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## **Matic's Bitterness**

From Blade Captain Matic Ridley, An Account of the Earliest Actions in the Dar-tezlari-kanit

And then the time was ripe, and Master Blood Drinker and Master Blue Dark and Master Secret Hate did all say unto me, "Sa-dulkurio-ma, serve us well! Now we don the Vestments of Blackness, and we rise into Tezlari-tarin! Command the hosts of Goblins and Hobgoblins and Ogres and Bug-Men, and follow us to Tezlari-tarin, to the hated cities of Seleucar, and kill everyone there!" And in their black eyes was a light, which I had thought always was the light of godhood, but then I did see that it was the light of madness. And I did think, "The

Masters are broken inside. They will kill us all. I must help to kill them instead. But I cannot escape from them while I am in Anzari-tarin... I shall go to Tezlari-tarin at the front of the army and I shall help the people who live there, even if the Masters torture me for a thousand years."

And I did travel with Master Blue Dark, who was to destroy Seleucar. Master Blood Drinker was to destroy Ashtan, and Master Secret Hate did claim the right to destroy Shallam. And each of the Masters did lead a great army through the tunnels to the tezlari-jio, the Holes of Light which they had made, that did magically open onto Tezlari-tarin, a hundred hundred feet above. The Vestments of Blackness which the Masters did wear prevented them from dying in the light of Tezlari-yumap. I was Sa-dulkurio-ma to Master Blue Dark, and so I did move all of his armies through the tezlari-jio of the Vashnar Mountains, and I did marshal them and set them to march southwest, toward the city of Seleucar. I did know from the great seeing crystal of Master Blue Dark that the humans in Seleucar were all warriors, to such number that the warriors there did outnumber the civilians. I did not know what plan Master Blue Dark had created to defeat a force so large, but I did not question him, for I hoped that he would fail, that I might gain revenge for my people who had all been killed.

The Goblins and Hobgoblins and Ogres and Bug-Men that the Masters did make from the "spiral ribbons of future creation" were not like the ones who I had lived and grown with. These ones that the Masters did create were without souls. They did live only to kill, and spoke of nothing but killing and eating and fornicating. When the Masters did change their "spiral ribbons of future creation", the Masters did make them stronger and harder and faster, but they did take away all that made me love my race. They did destroy the goodness and weakness of the Hobgoblin spirit. They did commit a crime so great that there is no word for it in any language: they did make the Goblins and Hobgoblins and Ogres and Bug-Men unredeemable. Where before, the Goblins did be the creators of tools and utensils, the diggers of caves, the builders of fires; now they did be creators of weapons, builders of siege towers, cannibals. Where before, the Hobgoblins did be mighty warriors, masters of honor and tactics, protectors of the lesser Goblins; now they did be wild berserkers, honorless slaughterers, and did delight in whipping the Goblins to make them move faster. Where before, the Ogres did temper their great strength and small minds with sensitivity; now they did delight in hurting those weaker than them, and all save the Masters were weaker. And where before, the Bug-Men were as a tribe of Tezlari-tarin's "bees", working to build for the good of all; now they were as "wasps", working to slay for the good of themselves alone. And all this did be the working of the Masters, and my resolve did harden to bitter crystal as I did consider how I might bring them down.

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## The Black Wave

From Gren Rafale, Telepathic Transmissions: A Reconstruction of the Black Wave

(Editor's note: These telepathic records were impounded for many years: it was only after the Fall of the Selucarian Empire that they were released into the public domain, and were compiled and edited by Gren Rafale. It was the custom of the Selucarian military at that time that each officer should be accompanied by a scribe with a Helm of Telepathy, so that the scribe could record all telepathic communications for later tactical analysis.)

10:31:46

(Seleucar): Emperor Piraeus, Ruler of Seleucar says, "Citizens of Seleucar, have no fear. The Black Wave comes, but what might have been an unbeatable army in normal times is less than half the size of our current glorious force. This army of monsters shall shatter on the spears of Selucarian soldiers!"

10:32:02

Emperor Piraeus, Ruler of Seleucar tells Warleader Lockwood, "Warleader, begin the operation."

10:33:56

Lia Tremalle, the Wind of Change tells Warleader Lockwood, "I can see them... by the Logos! They make the jungle black! They're clearing a path... the giant ones are in the front, uprooting trees and hurling them aside. The short ugly ones are the most numerous... they're led by muscular ones who look almost human, except for their tusks and eyes. The muscular ones look like a superior species of the short ones. The man-sized insects are in the rear... the insects have spears and some sort of small bladed weapon, maybe a throwing knife. So far, none of them have looked up, but I can't see well through the tree cover either, so I can't estimate their numbers. They're travelling through the heart of the groves, though."

10:34:05

(Military): Warleader Lockwood says, "Spotters have sighted the enemy in the jungle. ETA one half-hour. We won't wait for them to get to us, though. Hold position. We'll advance within a few minutes."

10:34:09

(Military): Warleader Lockwood says, "Unit commanders, report your status directly to me."

10:34:15

Master Chang, Sentaari Fist tells Warleader Lockwood, "My monks are all at maximum readiness. We're in formation. Condition green."

10:34:16

Adchachel, Black Lotus of Mystery tells Warleader Lockwood, "My brood is in readiness. Our entities flock the earth and skies. Condition green."

10:34:18

Sir Martio Lizardbane, Troll Templar tells Warleader Lockwood, "Condition uhh... green. We all ready."

10:34:20

Lord Raeman Nikkaido tells Warleader Lockwood, "My templars are ready. Condition green."

10:34:25

Druidic Prophet Hollis tells Warleader Lockwood, "Our encircling maneuver is almost complete. The enemy is nearing optimum position. Request permission to initiate Operation Eclipse Phase One."

10:35:05

Warleader Lockwood tells Druidic Prophet Hollis, "Phase One, at will. Make them pay the toll."

10:35:10

(Military): Warleader Lockwood says, "All units, advance. Prepare to execute Attack Pattern A on my command."

10:38:42

Druidic Prophet Hollis tells Warleader Lockwood, "Phase One in progress. They're wishing they weren't in the jungle right now, Warleader... between the animals, the plants, and the lightning, they'll be lucky if a third of them escape alive."

10:38:48

Warleader Lockwood tells Druidic Prophet Hollis, "Excellent."

10:40:24

Warleader Lockwood tells Druidic Prophet Hollis, "That flash wasn't your lightning! Report status!"

10:40:30

Druidic Prophet Hollis tells Warleader Lockwood, "Fighting hold on."

10:40:31

Lia Tremalle, the Wind of Change tells Warleader Lockwood, "They did something that blasted all the stored light out of our groves at once! Hollis is fighting their leader. I don't know who it is, he looks like a Tsol'aa but it's like he's in a permanent shadow. I'm going down to help him."

10:40:46

Druidic Prophet Hollis has been slain by the might of Agith'maal, Tsol'teth Overlord.

(Editor's note: In military confrontations, it was customary that only the scribes would have death-sight; a running list of deaths was considered far too distracting for combatants in a true war. In Gren Rafale's transcript, only important death notices are listed. In actuality, of course, thousands died that day.)

10:40:59

Warleader Lockwood tells Lia Tremalle, the Wind of Change, "Call the Druids to fall back and prepare to flank the enemy on the field."

10:41:00

Lia Tremalle, the Wind of Change has been slain by the might of Agith'maal, Tsol'teth Overlord.

10:41:10

(Military): Warleader Lockwood says, "This army is led by a Tsol'teth who calls himself Agith'maal. He wields a powerful magic. Our champions will meet him on the field. Footmen, cavalry, concentrate firmly on the mass of the enemies, avoid confronting the leader! Attack Pattern A, execute!"

10:41:30

Emperor Piraeus, Ruler of Seleucar tells Warleader Lockwood, "The reserve priests are waiting inside the city gates. Do you need their holy power to combat this Tsol'teth?"

10:41:38

Warleader Lockwood tells Emperor Piraeus, Ruler of Seleucar, "Send them out. Phase One was far less effective than expected."

10:42:20

Sir Martio Lizardbane, Troll Templar tells Warleader Lockwood, "We engage enemy now."

10:43:16

(Military): Sir Martio Lizardbane, Troll Templar says, "These guys not so tough. We kill them easy after all! Look, they not like sunlight! Ha ha ha!"

10:43:20

Lord Raeman Nikkaido tells Warleader Lockwood, "Engaging enemy."

10:44:25

Sir Martio Lizardbane, Troll Templar has been slain by the might of Agith'maal, Tsol'teth Overlord.

10:44:41

Adchachel, Black Lotus of Mystery tells Warleader Lockwood, "We begin."

10:46:32

Warleader Lockwood tells Sir Emery Zokathra, "Merge your unit with Raeman's. Continue the attack."

10:46:35

Agith'maal, Tsol'teth Overlord intones, "Hwarak alshamar osang rach haahl! Kwarak alshamar osang rach haahl! In the name of the eternal darkness, you will all obey ME! Turn on your brethren! Turn on those you love! Slay them all! Hwarak alshamar osang rach haahl..."

10:46:36

Sir Emery Zokathra tells Warleader Lockwood, "I shall not obey you, Warleader. The Master's defeat of Martio proves to me that he is greater than you. I worship him now. Prepare to meet your end!"

10:47:50

Master Chang, Sentaari Fist tells Warleader Lockwood, "My monks are resisting Agith'maal's chant due to our telepathic training, but we're forced to defense! The footmen and cavalry and Templars are coming after us and the Occultists! They're possessed! I request orders!"

10:47:59

Adchachel, Black Lotus of Mystery tells Warleader Lockwood, "Our allies have turned to the dark side. Ironically, we're fighting them. Should I continue to kill our own men?"

10:48:06

(Military): Warleader Lockwood says, "All loyal troops, ordered retreat! Seek the city walls! Assume Defense Formation B, around the shrines, and wait for the priests to succor you!"

10:49:14

Emperor Piraeus, Ruler of Seleucar tells Raxis Snake-Eyes, "Send your best men into the field. And you are to personally go to the King's Tomb and bring me the Staff of Nicator. We need it."

10:49:16

(Military): Master Shun, Sentaari Loyalist says, "We're being shredded on the left flank! The possessed troops and the monsters are joining up against us! We can't hold on any longer! Taking losses!"

10:49:20

Raxis Snake-Eyes tells Emperor Piraeus, Ruler of Seleucar, "Sso it shall be done."

10:49:25

Raxis Snake-Eyes tells Warleader Lockwood, "I'm ssending you my loyal sserpentfolk. They will obey you well, unlesss they too are possessted by this demon Agith'maal."

Master Shun, Sentaari Loyalist has been slain by the might of a noble myrmidon of Seleucar.

10:50:26

Father Orlan, Bringer of Hope tells Warleader Lockwood, "Each of the shrines is manned by four priests. It seems that the possessed soldiers cannot set foot near the shrines, and the monsters that come too close are destroyed by the monks and Occultists. However, this is a purely defensive position, and I fear that the enemy will use more of his black magic before the day is done."

10:51:35

Master Chang, Sentaari Fist tells Warleader Lockwood, "I've got my men busy mindlocking the possessed soldiers and marching them into the auras of the shrines. The shrines remove the Tsol'teth mind control."

10:51:46

Warleader Lockwood tells Master Chang, Sentaari Fist, "Excellent! Recover all the troops as quickly as you can, and get them to shelter at the shrines."

10:51:50

Warleader Lockwood tells Slithering Syrax, Ashtan Exile, "See if you can hypnotize the possessed soldiers into walking back to the shrines."

10:53:42

Slithering Syrax, Ashtan Exile tells Warleader Lockwood, "It's working."

10:54:10

Slithering Syrax, Ashtan Exile tells Warleader Lockwood, "Damn! The monsters are attacking the possessed troops now! They're killing them before we can bring them in!"

10:55:13

Warleader Lockwood tells Adchachel, Black Lotus of Mystery, "Use your entities to screen off the returning soldiers! Keep the monsters from killing them!"

10:56:45

Raxis Snake-Eyes tells Emperor Piraeus, Ruler of Seleucar, "The Staff is gone from the tomb, your Majesty. The tomb was completely sealed, it couldn't have been grave robbers."

10:56:58

Emperor Piraeus, Ruler of Seleucar tells Raxis Snake-Eyes, "The Staff must have returned to its maker. Return at speed."

11:01:24

Emperor Piraeus, Ruler of Seleucar tells Warleader Lockwood, "Hold the defensive positions. We still outnumber them two to one; we can hold them off."

11:01:46

Warleader Lockwood tells Emperor Piraeus, Ruler of Seleucar, "I have an idea. From the city, send anything that could possibly be used as ear-plugs. If the men can't hear the Tsol'teth's chant of disloyalty, they can't be affected."

11:01:50

Agith'maal, Tsol'teth Overlord intones, "My brethren, the army of Seleucar hides at the shrines around the city, covering before our might!"

11:02:02

Terrin'ukia, Tsol'teth Destroyer intones, "The same is true in Shallam, my brother. We have slain many, and the slaughter continues whenever they venture out from their walls. We shall lay siege until the very city is dust!"

11:02:10

Gattan'lier, Tsol'teth Avenger intones, "Ashtan's army is broken already, all killed as a result of my incantations of disloyalty. Less than half their army survives within the city walls. We shall crack their bones!"

11:03:24

Warleader Lockwood tells Emperor Piraeus, Ruler of Seleucar, "This Agith'maal is coming out into the middle of the field. I'm still having a hard time believing that the Tsol'teth have returned, but the evidence is taunting us for the entire continent to hear."

11:03:38

Emperor Piraeus, Ruler of Seleucar tells Warleader Lockwood, "I don't think he plans to offer his surrender, but if we listen to him politely it'll just buy us time to get those earplugs out there. I wish I had the Staff of Nicator, but if it's the will of Sarapis that we win this battle, we'll win without it."

11:03:50

Warleader Lockwood tells Emperor Piraeus, Ruler of Seleucar, "We will win this battle, your Majesty. There is no alternative."

11:04:30

Agith'maal, Tsol'teth Overlord intones, "People of Seleucar! You have witnessed my might before! Now witness it again! Behold why I am the highest of all the Tsol'teth! Behold the feebleness of your pathetic gods!"

11:04:35

Father Orlan, Bringer of Hope tells Warleader Lockwood, "He's causing the shrines to explode! We can't hold our position like this! Do we attack or retreat?"

11:04:38

(Military): Warleader Lockwood says, "Defense Formation C! Retreat to the city!"

11:04:46

Agith'maal, Tsol'teth Overlord intones, "Ha ha ha ha hah! Now you see the futility of your struggles! I shall devour your souls, humans! I shall rip your innards! I shall-"

Agith'maal, Tsol'teth Overlord has been slain by the might of Blade Captain Matic Ridley.

11:04:48

(Military): Warleader Lockwood says, "SAVE THAT MONSTER!"

11:04:50

(Military): Adchachel, Black Lotus of Mystery says, "We'll provide cover. I request backup."

11:04:53

Raxis Snake-Eyes tells Emperor Piraeus, Ruler of Seleucar, "Did you see that, your Majesty? The tall goblin at the Tsol'teth's side ripped his cloak of darkness off and then stabbed him in the back!"



11:04:55

(Military): Lord Raeman Nikkaido says, "Unit Seventeen, advance! Cover the Occultists on the left flank! We were possessed once, we'll not fail again!"

11:05:01

Emperor Piraeus, Ruler of Seleucar, tells Raxis Snake-Eyes, "Amazing... without his cloak of shadow, the Tso'teth is vulnerable!"

11:05:09

Emperor Piraeus, Ruler of Seleucar, tells Warleader Lockwood, "Agith'maal is ours. Keep him from recovering his cloak."

11:05:10

Agith'maal, Tso'teth Overlord intones, "Fools! You can never defeat me as long as this heart beats within my chest! Now, die!"

11:05:27

(Military): Warleader Lockwood says, "Attack the Tso'teth! Prevent him from regaining that cloak! Kill him as many times as necessary!"

11:05:34

Lord Raeman Nikkaido has been slain by the might of Agith'maal, Tso'teth Overlord.

11:05:35

Master Chang, Sentaari Fist tells Warleader Lockwood, "He's much weaker after resurrecting once, but growing in strength. Even against ten champions, he's doing great damage!"

11:05:38

Sir Emery Zokathra has been slain by the might of Agith'maal, Tso'teth Overlord.

11:05:39

(Templars): Master Kendall, Axe-Wielding Maverick says, "Templars, rally round! Smite the Tso'teth! Keep him in sunlight!"

11:05:40

(Military): Warleader Lockwood says, "Resume Operation Eclipse! Phase Three execute! Keep Agith'maal busy!"

11:04:41

Father Orlan, Bringer of Hope tells Warleader Lockwood, "We've got the creature who killed Agith'maal at one of the shrines. He barely made it away from his own army. He speaks our language, sort of. He wants to talk to you. And we're trying to burn that cloak, but it won't catch."

11:04:45

Warleader Lockwood tells Father Orlan, Bringer of Hope, "If he has information that will help us win, tell me. Otherwise save it."

11:04:45

Master Chang, Sentaari Fist has been slain by the might of a shambling ogre.

11:04:48

(Sentaari): Iron Fist Tung says, "Sentaari, to me! Hold the monsters away from the fight! Agith'maal is weakening!"

11:05:00

Sir Francis Trabohn, Blade of the Just has been slain by the might of Agith'maal, Tso'teth Overlord.

11:05:01

Blade Captain Matic Ridley tells Warleader Lockwood, "You kill Master, burn heart. Heart make him live over and over. You not burn heart, Master rise again."

11:05:23

Agith'maal, Tso'teth Overlord, has been slain by the might of Master Kendall, Axe-Wielding Maverick.

Master Kendall, Axe-Wielding Maverick has been slain by the might of Agith'maal, Tso'teth Overlord.

11:05:26

(Military): Warleader Lockwood says, "Cut out Agith'maal's heart!"

11:05:29

(Military): Adchachel, Black Lotus of Mystery says, "I've done that."

11:05:34

(Military): Warleader Lockwood says, "Now, burn it!"

11:05:45

(Military): Adchachel, Black Lotus of Mystery says, "I hope eating it works well enough, because that's what I just did."

11:05:50

(Military): Warleader Lockwood says, "By the Logos... just keep fighting! Wipe the monsters from the field!"

11:05:54

Warleader Lockwood tells Blade Captain Matic Ridley, "What if my lieutenant just ATE Agith'maal's heart?"

11:06:04

Blade Captain Matic Ridley tells Warleader Lockwood, "He did eat it? He die, maybe. Turn evil, maybe. Turn into Agith'maal, maybe. Better he kill self, or you kill, burn his heart."

11:06:10

Gattan'lier, Tso'teth Avenger intones, "My brother! What has happened to you?"

11:06:23

Emperor Piraeus, Ruler of Seleucar yells, "He has been destroyed, as was his destiny from the day Nicator began preaching in Thera! And you two shall follow him abruptly!"

11:06:45

Emperor Piraeus, Ruler of Seleucar tells Warleader Lockwood, "I've spoken large words, and I rely on you to make them good in the field of battle. We'll reinforce Ashtan with a large force, as they're suffering in their lack of shrines, and Shallam with a weaker."

11:06:50

Warleader Lockwood tells Emperor Piraeus, Ruler of Seleucar, "I am at your command, my liege. But we must defeat this section of the black army first!"

11:07:12

Emperor Piraeus, Ruler of Seleucar tells Warleader Lockwood, "From the battlements, it looks as though Agith'maal's death has thrown the enemy into disarray. Cut off their retreat and wipe them out."

11:07:26

(Military): Warleader Lockwood says, "Attack Pattern E, execute. We've as good as won, men, but don't get sloppy! Let's finish them off by the book."

11:07:50

(Military): Apprentice Druid Snarry says, "Hey! There's this thing in the middle of my grove. It looks like a big door made out of iron, and there's just a shifting light in the middle of it. And... hey, a few monsters just walked out of it! Should I try to destroy it?"

11:07:59

(Military): Warleader Lockwood says, "Cut off access to your grove. That must be their portal; we'll demolish it as soon as we can."

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## Sapience Triumphant

From "Lucky" Lantis DeGage, *Fighting the Tide: A Memoir*

The situation grew more dire with every passing day. We citizens, huddled within the walls of Ashtan, held little hope. Although the Occultists had brought glad tidings of the defeat of the Tso'teth leader Agith'maal at Seleucar a week earlier, that defeat had not benefited us in the least. Instead, the Tso'teth general Gattan'lier had redoubled his own assault, using his black magic to batter at the city gates. If the Occultists had not devoted their life essence to countering the Tso'teth magic, we would have been destroyed in the very beginning.

The Black Wave brought out a new side of the mysterious Occultists. Before, they had been granted sanctuary in Ashtan simply because, even in the amnesty given them by the new Selucarian Empire, they felt more comfortable away from the Church-sympathetic city of Shallam. Although tolerated in Ashtan, they were never fully trusted even there, as stories proliferated of the atrocities they committed in their mysterious search for forbidden knowledge. Most Occultists preferred to hide behind secret identities, taking on common faces as grocers, or scribes, or even beggars.

When the Tso'teth magic threatened to destroy Ashtan's army outright, however, the many hidden Occultists who had not joined the military in the beginning revealed themselves. At the end of the first day, when more than half our own army stood on the side of Gattan'lier, firmly under the control of his black magic, more than one hundred Occultists joined ranks, using their mysterious monstrous assistants to cover the Ashtanian retreat into the city. And for the week after the siege began, the Occultists used their own life essence to prevent the Tso'teth's magic from demolishing the city walls. However, despite the vigilance of the Sentaari and Occultists, who watched to be sure that no citizens were possessed by the enemy, and the Serpentlords and soldiers, who guarded against incursions, some citizens still disappeared from their underground shelters.

By the time we saw the Selucarian relief army on the horizon, the Occultists were nearly exhausted. Gravin, the current Duke of Ashtan, had appointed me as the liaison with the Occult cabal. When I spoke to thank the Ashtanian Secretary of the Occultists, he shook his head wearily in demurral. "No thanks are necessary. As long as you don't investigate the recent string of disappearances too closely, none of us will have any problems." I was chilled, but there was little I could do. It was clear that the Occultists had killed our own citizens and devoured their energy, but they used that energy to save the entire city. Were they evil or good? I could not decide then, nor can I now. Adchachel, the Occultist Demiurge, was burned alive to stop his murderous rages after eating Agith'maal's heart. He had to be tracked to his own secret laboratory, where a close circle of his friends defended him to the death. Was their defense a matter of loyalty to their leader? Or had they gone to the dark side, following the twisted spirit of Agith'maal?

After communicating telepathically with the generals of the Selucarian army, the Duke of Ashtan commanded that all his remaining loyal warriors enter the field, with their ears plugged up against the Tso'l'teth's foul chant of disloyalty. The formation was to be spearheaded by Sentaari and Occultists, who could use their various powers to retake the minds of as many possessed soldiers as possible, while the relief army pursued a similar strategy. Once each monk and necromancer had commanded a possessed soldier back to the fold, our regular troops would advance, spearing toward the Tso'l'teth general Gattan'lier, clearing a path for the champions to engage him and strip away his cloak of darkness, so that the sunlight would cripple his powers and render him fully mortal.

Although I heard the plan in the council of war, I did not get to see how it played out. As an administrator and architect, my job was to reassure the frightened citizens of the city, and to oversee the city's defense against sappers and rams. During the week of siege, I'd already helped collapse five attempted tunnels, and we were all on the alert for more. During this battle, however, it was no tunnel that collapsed. Instead, there was an earthquake, one fierce enough to topple many buildings in Ashtan itself. One of the falling buildings was impolite enough to fall on me, and that's how I spent the glorious Battle of Ashtan: buried in rubble, with a ton of masonry on my legs.

I heard later that the earthquake was the dying strike of Gattan'lier, as dozens of heroes swarmed him, tearing at his cloak and striking him with sword and spell. None of the Tso'l'teth were slain cheaply in the War of the Deep; Gattan'lier's retributive earthquake claimed the lives of a third of those on the battlefield, on his side and ours.

As I oversaw the rebuilding of Ashtan from my wheelchair, I had occasion to speak with Seleucar's newest officer, our only specialist on the invading armies: Blade Captain Matic Ridley, the hobgoblin noble who had defected during the Battle of Seleucar. He struck me then as a deeply honorable and very brave being, and I mourned with him the corruption of his own race. Later on, we formed a lasting friendship, but at that time, he was hot to hurry on to Shallam to help finish off the last of his erstwhile Masters, the Tso'l'teth Terrin'ukia, or, as Matic called him, "Master Secret Hate".

And as I scanned the blueprints for the rebuilt Royal Compound, the city received notice that the Underrealm siege of Shallam had been broken by the combined powers of the Church, the Shallamese regulars, and the reinforcements from Seleucar. Again, the final Tso'l'teth had wreaked tremendous havoc before he could finally be killed; this time, it was the famed Warleader Lockwood of Seleucar who was slain, even as he killed the last of the Tso'l'teth with his curved sword.

As the last of the magical portals was destroyed and the last of the monster army was destroyed, the rulers of Seleucar spoke long and in depth with the hobgoblin defector Ridley. It became clear then that the Tso'l'teth had never even contemplated conquest, but planned to destroy the entire kingdom, and possibly the entire surface world. They came from a realm far underground, which they called "anzari-tarin", which meant "World of Darkness"; but the common folk came to refer to the Tso'l'teth domain as the Underrealm.

It was a year after the armies of Piraeus turned back the Black Wave from the Underrealm when the famed prophet Lehrinas, who had lived three hundred years to see his prophecy of the Selucarian Empire and the Black Wave come true, fell dead at his writing desk. Before him was a sheet of paper containing his last prophecy, which was unfinished...

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## Last Prophecy

From Lehrinas, Prophecies, Chapter 25, Verse 1-19 (unfinished), as translated from high Tsol'aa by Corrin Melithandes

The tide recedes, the centuries pass,  
The young grow old, time forgets.  
Silence listens, dark creates.  
The world itself's a looking glass,  
The numbers break from finite sets.  
Chance and will battle fate.  
The dark tide rises once again to slaughter all who dream of light  
And saints and sinners join their friends to war again against the night  
And Seleucar's redemption comes to those who fight the holy fight  
And all shall pay the freight of death to match their sins, however slight.  
The wave of dark shall strike again, and all shall bow in terror.  
The mad, cold ones who fought before  
Are Masters of the darkness still  
And never shall they find their rest  
Unless this power is invoked:  
First, the heroes must take heed  
And arm themselves full strong for war  
And then must venture nobly forth  
To find the Dark World's glowing door  
To save the soul of Sapience's light  
They must recover –

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## Aftermath

From Sherman Amon, An Encyclopedic History of the Cities and Empires of Sapience, Vol 2

Despite the sinister prophecy of Lehrinas, the Selucarian Empire entered a period of peace and prosperity that lasted for over four centuries. During this time, the Empire strengthened its trade relationships with every city and town on the continent, and the three major cities of Seleucar, Ashtan, and Shallam became even larger and more metropolitan than ever before.

Proud of having survived the Black Wave without the help of the Church, the city of Ashtan came to believe that personal human will was as important as the power of the gods, and that there was no need for an intermediary force such as the Church. The mysterious Occultists, although still distrusted and feared, came to occupy many positions of power in Ashtan, which caused the Church to issue formal statements against Ashtan. Although these statements were minor in comparison to the insults, threats, and outright warfare that would occur constantly after the fall of the Empire, it is clear that even during the height of the Selucarian Empire, Ashtan and Shallam never had a cordial relationship.

In contrast to Ashtan, Shallam embraced the Church even more firmly than it had before, due to the influence of the shrines in the defense of the city during the Black Wave. Whereas Ashtan's philosophers spoke of the power

of the individual human to change his own life and surroundings, the Shallamese philosophers averred that only by subjecting themselves to higher wisdom and serving the greater good could humans ever improve their lots permanently.

In Seleucar, the philosopher-king Artaius attempted to promulgate his own philosophy: that men and women of personal power and diverse backgrounds, working together to serve ideals mutually agreed upon, could make far more difference in the world than powerful but undisciplined individuals or static congregations of orderly followers. In essence, Emperor Artaius tried to reconcile the viewpoints of Ashtan and Shallam, but although his views were accepted publicly through his lifetime and for centuries afterward, the old conflicts between Ashtan and Shallam were always waiting below the surface.

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## **The Seleucarian Empire, Part 2: The Wars Of Succession**

Four hundred years after the founding of the glorious Seleucarian Empire, it encountered one of its greatest crises: the Wars of Succession. Although a time of great peril for Seleucar, and possibly the entire continent of Sapience, the Wars of Succession also gave rise to one of the most enduring stories of history—the legendary romance of Catarin deSangre and Lucaine Pyramides, its bitter result, and Catarin's meteoric rise to power from the deepest level of despair.

As before, I tell this story as a librarian, not as a historian: I call on the voices of literature to speak for me, for I myself have little skill for writing. If you have read my compilation detailing the founding of the Seleucarian Empire, you will notice that the following texts call less upon the abilities of historians (with the exception of the famed Meleus Travner, and my own scholarly nephew Orson), and more upon the personal writings of the principal figures themselves. How better to detail the love of Lucaine Pyramides than through his own poetry? How better to detail Catarin's uncertainty and hope than through her own letters? How better to show the breadth of Castomira's evil than through her own gloating journals?

After decades of research, this tome is complete. I welcome your commentary. Address your missives to Tancred Lasalle, 15 Stagira Blvd., Ashtan. The Great Library of Nicator was destroyed by divine wrath after one of my legendary delays in publication, or I would simply direct you to my offices there. With a bitter smile, I hope that in time I may be redeemed, through quality if not through diligence.

Tancred Lasalle, Exiled Librarian

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## **Leona Fontaine, Sentinel: The Murder Of Lucaine Pyramides**

There was a cold fog on the streets, but Deis was colder; he breathed in the dank as a child might smell deeply of fresh bread. His world revolved slowly in his oddly-angled mind: a world of deluded sleepers, where goodness was always a false and fleeting dream, and evil itself the lesser of two wrongs; and he the only wakeful soul, staring insomniac at the full moon. Forward he walked, ever forward, boots clicking on the cobbles like ratchet gears in a clock, moving ever forward to the time when the alarm would go off, jangling the dreaming world awake.

The night was nearing dawn, inevitably, but when Trenton Deis's mechanical footsteps halted the night halted, too. The night halted, as Trenton Deis entered the tiny apartment, coldly glared at the fragile flame of the single candle, coldly glared at the fragile-looking woman who sat motionless on the bed. Her hair, dark beyond night; her eyes, frozen beyond winter; her smile, warm as a heart. Her name was Castomira Brangwin, and she was not thought exceptional.

"Who?" Deis asked.

"Catarin," she replied.

"How?"

"Beyond hope of resurrection."

"She is well guarded."

"Eliminate the warrior first. His betrayal demands it."

"Five hundred thousand pieces of gold," he said.

"Done."

The night began again, and then the dawn began, and then Trenton Deis began.

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## **From Lina Stalfos, Stories of the Past, for Children**

Once upon a time, in the great Selucarian Empire, there was a great king called Valerias. Valerias was wise and strong, and he had a sport spot in his heart for his two children. Valerias's son was weak and foolish, even though he was a man, and Valerias's daughter was strong and clever, even though she was a woman. And Valerias often laughed, "Has any man ever had such unusual children?" The son was named Mycale, and the daughter was named Catarin, and King Valerias loved them both.

One day, King Valerias became very sick and died. And Mycale and Catarin were very sad. They were sad because their father was dead. They were sad because their mother joined the Church as a nun, and left them all alone. And they were sad because nobody knew which one of them should be the new ruler of the Empire. Mycale was a man, and usually men become king instead of women. But many people thought that Catarin was a better person than Mycale. They said that Catarin was smart and pretty, unlike Mycale who was foolish and ugly, and that Catarin did good things, while Mycale did bad things.

And they were right. But other people wanted Mycale to be king, because they thought that since he was foolish he would let them do anything they wanted. One of these people was named Lucius Errikale, and he was one of the snake-people, even though nobody knew it then. Lucius was the Duke of Seleucar, and so he was the highest of the lords, and so many of the other lords obeyed him, and helped Mycale. Another was named Castomira Brangwin. She was the Duchess of Aster Malik, which was a tiny province to the north of the city. Even though she did not have much power as a noble, she was secretly the leader of the people who wanted Mycale to be king. Duke Lucius was in love with her, and so was Prince Mycale, so they both did everything she told them to.

Catarin did not want to be a queen. But she knew that if Mycale were king, he would do small bad things, and the people who controlled him would do large bad things. So she got help from her father's prime minister, Orin Grandier, and she tried to convince all the other lords that she should be queen.

Lord Lucius told the other lords that if Catarin were queen, she'd keep them from doing what they wanted to. So some of the other lords called Catarin an outlaw, and threatened to have her killed, and not very many lords wanted to help her. It was very bad. The lords who wanted Mycale to be king moved to one side of the city of Seleucar, and the lords who wanted Catarin to be queen moved to the other, and they both gathered armies. Everyone thought that soon the two sides would fight.

And then a man named Lucaine Pyramides came suddenly to Catarin and drew out his sword.

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## **From The Sealed Files of Castomira Brangwin**

The poetry is gone.

When I was younger, I remember writing stanzas and quatrains, staves and verses. I channeled the blaze of my emotions into paper and ink. I wrote to make spirits soar, or sink. I wrote to free myself of the feelings that were too big for me . . . when I felt I would explode with joy, or with sadness, or with anger, I would write.

And now the poetry is gone. And soon I feel I will explode after all . . . with hatred.

There is something blocking the window of my soul, fouling the chapel of my memories. There is something that holds my hatred inside. Nobody can store this much emotion . . . can they? I can feel myself transforming, and I'm terrified. And my fear makes me hate her more.

Catarin. Perfect Catarin. Lovely Catarin. Brilliant Catarin. We were nearly sisters. We played together. We learned to dance together. We went to the same exclusive school, giggled over the same boys. And I would give anything, suffer anything, for the privilege of torturing her to death.

And I don't know why. That is what frightens me more than anything else. Logic is breaking; falling away into madness like a calving glacier. I'm changing.

I broke diamond today. I reached for my grandmother's ring, to put it on, and when I closed my fingers around the stone, it crumbled. I'm changing.

The noon light is growing painfully bright. I wear a broad hat and a dark veil. People ask if I'm in mourning. "The sun is very bright," I tell them. "It's raining," they reply. I'm changing.

Now that the king is dead, my chance is near. I can dominate Lucius so effortlessly that he doesn't realize I'm doing it. My will moves through him. And I dominate Mycale, as if that is difficult at all. In his quest for justice, Lucius will help me bring about the greatest evils I can imagine, and I relish both the irony and the prospect. I never even visited the Chamber of Deliberation until a year ago, and now I toy with the fate of the kingdom like a Carnialis idly twitching a puppet. I'm changing.

There is a man in Jaru named Lucaine Pyramides, who is said to have the most deadly sword on Sapience, and who will fight any battle for the right price. I have sent for him. I will order her head on a silver platter, with a silver cup to catch her blood. The thought of her clotted veins dangling below a stump of neck is delightful to me. I'm changing.

I hate Catarin. And I would put my hatred down in verse, create words with enough emotion to clear the emotion from my own heart, and be done with it. And I can't. I'm changing.

And I'm afraid that soon, I won't be scared of that anymore.

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## **Lucaine Pyramides, Catarin (Poem 1)**

A random encounter

A failure of fate

My cut has been countered,

My sword turned away.

I was a wolf.

Am I now a dog?

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## **Lord Damen Kephry, An Open Letter to the Guild of Knights**

Most noble compatriots, warriors of the Guild of Knights; most honored Nobility of Seleucar and its kingdoms; and all the diverse People of this great Empire;

It is with the greatest Concern and Sadness that I apprehend the current Events taking place within the walls of Seleucar. That we, the great Guild of Knights, who have for so long been an Example to both noble and commoner alike of Honor and Chivalry, should fall to such Depths that our inner differences should become matters of Public opinion is a disgrace of the highest order. Lord Drago, are your concerns truly of such Urgency that you felt compelled to distribute handbills throughout the Market Square detailing your grievances? And Lord Rani, despite Lord Drago's breach of Etiquette, is it truly needful to consider breaking the Guild's long-standing Friendship with the Church in such a Spectacular fashion?

The Guild of Knights has the most Noble origins of any private order. Where the Templars originated from the Church's need for self-defense in its earliest days, and where other warrior Organizations (such as the detestable Serpent-Lords) were established sheerly for Profit or Debauchery, or for purposes of individual Training and Meditation, the Guild was formed by Private Citizens for the inestimable goal of preserving the Empire, and forever defending the Honor of its Monarch. In the absence of a clearly-defined Monarch, are we to fall apart into warring Factions?

While the Templars incorporated the sacred Devotions into their martial discipline, we of the secular Knights mastered the arts of Falconry, and instructed the Templars in its use, to the great Benefit of the Common Folk. Are we to cut off all ties with the Church now, simply because it refuses to Involve itself in the Succession?

The founding Master-Smith of the Guild perfected the intricate power of Blade-Fire, which requires the most disciplined and exacting of Training. If we should collapse into Chaos, who shall carry on that Martial Tradition? Shall we allow it to die out, until it is merely a vague memory in the minds of our eldest citizens?

Lord Rani, your speech of Secession from the ways of the Church is convincing. As a Secular order, composed of private warriors, we should not bend so easily to the Requirements of the Church. I submit that the Church's goals should be as one with ours in this Time of Trouble, but your opinion has Merit. However, your treatise encouraging Knights to embark on Study of the Arts of Darkness is a true abomination. I pray that it does not influence the generations of Warriors who may come after us, for surely Evil's pull will be as strong five hundred years hence as it is now.

But this matter of moral alignment is Insignificant in light of our True Peril: we have succumbed, my brothers and sisters. We have Surrendered to Politics. Even now, some fear to enter the Guild Castle, for fear that a fist-fight will occur between supporters of the two honorable Claimants to the crown. Although I have a personal Preference in the matter, I will not air it. Instead, I must beg all of you: let us remain true to our Code! Let us defend the Empire, not help Destroy it! Until such time as open Civil War occurs, let us remain aloof. Let us not pour oil upon the Flames. For if open war becomes reality, and the Guild splits into warring camps, surely it will never recover.

Respectfully,  
Lord Damen Kephry

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## **Public Security Document #3551, Seleucar Imperial Guard**

Item 1. Lord Errikale has expressed a wish for more compassionate treatment of the serpent folk. In deference to his wish, which certainly must be based on wisdom higher than our own, I command that torture and decimation be used against serpent folk only in punishment for First Order offenses.

Item 2. Wartime demands more exacting standards of conduct. In order to better control the populace, all Third Order infractions will henceforth be punished as Second Order crimes; Second Order crimes will be punished as First Order crimes; and First Order crimes will be punished by death. The impartiality of the judicial system will in no means be compromised, however! All sentences MUST be countersigned by at least one other oath-bound member of the Imperial Armed Forces, or his nominated representative.

Item 3. Swordsman Lucaine Pyramides, though briefly attached to our forces as a mercenary, has betrayed King Mycale, and has joined Catarin's usurpers. Therefore, he has been enemied, and is to be attacked on sight whenever he sets foot in any lawful area of the city. This notice countermands any previous orders.

Item 4. I have made perfectly clear that I will tolerate no rumors among the men regarding the supposed private entertainments of King Mycale. Our ruler is a shining example of noble rectitude and propriety. The recent disappearance of local youths is due to the cannibalistic tendencies of the Catarin-led betrayers, and has absolutely no connection to King Mycale's frequent times of meditative solitude. Any talk to the contrary will henceforth be punished with public lashing and execution.

Item 5. A sortie into the Imperial Palace will commence at 4 am on Friday. Those of you who have been selected to volunteer will receive notice two hours before the mission.



That is all.  
Maxim Everhardt, Captain of the Guard

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### **Lucaine Pyramides, Catarin (Poem 9)**

A thousand lives I've cut like fragile thread  
And sent a thousand souls to last reward  
For when my sword is drawn I am the chooser of the dead.

Three Moons, whose strokes a thousand widows grieve  
Has drawn its sacred circle all my life  
Where all who enter perish, save they enter by my leave.

But once, I drew that circle in the air  
And what has been a sacred place of Thoth  
Became a ground of worship to azure eyes and golden hair.

Blade, idolatry of death, replaced  
By foolish love and foolish loyalty  
My bandit's honor, ruthless reputation, now disgraced.

For when I drew my sword to take her life  
I glanced into her eyes and saw a way  
To justify my anger, redeem my love of strife.

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### **From Leona Fontaine, Sentinel: The Murder of Lucaine Pyramides**

For Lucaine, a black fate: love without daring. He polished his poetry the same way he polished his sword, with endless precision and passion, consistent caution. But while his sword held his word, his words had no edge, he was certain. To show her a poem of his... to confess his feelings... to leave himself defenseless. And which carried his soul now? His sword or his pen? Though he fought for her in a hundred battles, his true war was with himself, over the course of a hundred poems.

For Lucaine, a black fate: fire without warmth, only burning. He knew her for one year. He wrote one hundred poems. He won her heart without believing it... he lost his last battle, lost in passion.

For Lucaine, a black fate: a hopeless dream, a helpless death.

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### **From Meleus Travner, Urban Tactical Confrontation Throughout History: Case Studies, vol. 2: Seleucar**

To call it the First War of Succession is historically apt, but technically inaccurate. War was never declared, as there was no formal monarch to declare it. Although Castomira pushed to have her puppet Mycale accede to the throne, the Church refused to bless the coronation before the gods, and even Castomira was not so reckless as to risk divine disfavor during her dangerous bid for power.

The war began by accident, as such conflicts often do. The perspective of history shows that when Castomira realized her assassin Pyramides had thrown in his lot with his onetime target Catarin, she pressed her consort Lord Errikale to move the Royal Guard more vigorously against Catarin's rebel faction. Although Lord Errikale gave the order only reluctantly, the fanatical Guard Captain Maxim Everhardt used the opportunity to place extreme pressure on the areas of the city held by Catarin.

The war could have been far bloodier than it was. The Seleucarian armies, although much smaller than they were at the time of the Black Wave, were still large enough to have reduced the city of Imperial Seleucar to a

wasteland if Castomira had been able to manipulate her faction into enlarging the conflict as much as she wished. Instead of being a contained urban conflict, the First War of Succession could have been even larger and more destructive than the Second. That it was not is due almost entirely to the peacemaking abilities of the two reluctant titular generals, Lucius Errikale and Orin Grandier.

Lucius Errikale is now considered one of history's most tragic victims, a noble idealist whose ideals were twisted to the service of Seleucar's greatest enemy since the Tsol'teth, the evil Castomira. The Duke of Seleucar, Lucius Errikale was the feudal leader of the duchy whose capitol was Imperial Seleucar, and therefore was considered first among the dukes. In theory, he was second in power only to the Prime Minister, Orin Grandier. In recent times, however, the office of Prime Minister had weakened relative to the Council of Lords, and so the political might of Lucius Errikale and Orin Grandier was roughly equal. Lucius Errikale gained his position by accident of birth, like all nobles; also by accident of birth, he was of the serpent folk. It is still poorly understood how a Serpentlord can be born of two normal human parents, or how ophidian traits can emerge in a person of any race even after years of seeming normality. Since Lord Errikale hid his serpent nature until minutes before his death, it's a matter of historical debate whether he was a serpent for his entire life, or whether he gained serpent attributes through study of the secret Serpentlord disciplines. What is known is that for much of his political career, he championed the cause of the Serpent people, despite public opposition. For seven years before the First War of Succession, he had spent a few weeks each year at a resort in far Hashan that is now known to have been a front for the brave but ineffective Coiled Cobra Cult, a pro-serpent terrorist group. It is there that he secretly learned his Serpentlord fighting skills. (The Coiled Cobra Cult was wiped out in a bloody series of crusades by Seleucarian Myrmidons a few years before the Seleucarian Empire's collapse; the cry "Let's go bash some CCCs!" is still used by warriors around the world to initiate morally ambiguous bloodshed in the name of personal gain.) Lord Errikale was called "The Man with No Smile" by many, and was considered humorless and cold. He never smiled for fear of revealing his serpent-like fangs.

Prime Minister Orin Grandier was Lord Errikale's friend for many years, until the First War of Succession forced them apart. A wise and intelligent man, he restored much of the power that the prime ministry had once held, but was unable to fully balance the great political power of the Council of Lords. Furthermore, he was the personal mentor of Princess Catarin, teaching her the political networks and backroom dealings that made the empire work. When the succession troubles began, Orin Grandier strove to hold the empire together, and had surprising success in convincing the empire at large that the succession troubles were a minor upheaval, involving only riots, instead of a major armed conflict. By the time the underkings of Ashtan and Shallam received word from the Church that a civil war was taking place within Seleucar's walls, the hostilities were already over, and the quest for the Staff had begun.

That Ashtan, Shallam, and the other city-states that composed the Seleucarian Empire did not involve themselves in the First War of Succession is due to the diplomatic phrasing, elegant reassurances, and outright lies of Orin Grandier. But the highly limited nature of the war within Imperial Seleucar itself is due to the cooperative effort of Orin Grandier and his opposite number Lucius Errikale. While Castomira and Catarin were bitter enemies, their generals were loath to fight, and loath to place the citizens of Seleucar at risk. All the time during the four weeks of warfare, Grandier and Errikale organized steady evacuations of their sectors of the city, loading the churches and poor-houses of the outlying villages and towns with refugees. Whether Grandier and Errikale were in direct communication is a matter of speculation, but it is certain that they held each other in high respect, and strove to oppose each other only in strictly military matters.

The fighting itself was unique at the time (previous urban combat had been between small groups; see Case Studies, vol 1). A war within a city requires tactics far different from those employed in the field. Only one battle of the war was fought between units any larger than a few hundred men each, and snipers, traps, and hit-and-fade tactics were deciding factors in the early successes of Castomira's faction, as Lord Errikale was exceptionally adept at such techniques. Using these tactics, soldiers loyal to Mycale were able to capture and hold the Imperial Palace for days at a time before being driven out by counter-sorties.

The emphasis each side placed on capturing the Imperial Palace is one of the ironies of the war. Originally designed for war by the visionary Nicator, and reinforced by his son Piraeus, the palace had been expanded and altered in peacetime until it was virtually indefensible from any position. Each door required extensive barricading to be secured; in many places, terraces and walkways made it impossible to shield a group of men from missile fire. Although control of the Palace was essential to the political meta-struggle, it was infeasible from a military standpoint, and heavy losses were inevitable on both sides.

The war began with its only large-scale confrontation, the Battle of the Parades.

## Varos Devlin, The Battle of the Parades

Darkness hung over the city, low clouds roamed  
 As civil war was preached in streets and homes,  
 Debated in courts, proven in maps of troops and arms,  
 That showed the loyal firmly in two camps,  
 A split city, partisan enmity brewing slow like ale,  
 Turning dark and potent in casks, intoxicating and poisoning  
 Friend against friend, lord against knight, might against might,  
 With no concern for wrong, no thought of right.  
 The two queens, true queens uncrowned,  
 Catarin and Castomira, fighting through will, beauty, glamour, glory,  
 Each seeking, and destined to find, a place in story, legend, history,  
 For one, infamy. For one, majesty. For a hundred others, death.

Success in succession is more than just lords' acclaim,  
 More than just law's color, more than martial fame.  
 Liege lords lacking loyalty fall from royalty by revolution,  
 The torches and pitchforks of the common choice, the people's voice,  
 Never long to be rejected. So wise suitors to crowns long to be respected,  
 And give that into the common weal they'll later take in taxes paid,  
 In fine parades they ride in state, their lordly manner on display,  
 Their knights beplumed, their soldiers trim, their wizards conjuring lights on high,  
 In hopes that show of sword and bow will prove their worth in doubting eyes.

A fine day dawned, a holy day, a day when Churchmen raised their songs  
 And poured out wine and poured out oil, entreating gods for fruitful soil,  
 Entreating gods for strength of breath, for long, full life, for peaceful death.  
 A fine day dawned, a day of rest, a day when children flocked the streets  
 And begged their parents for copper's shine to trade for peddlers' fresh-baked treats,  
 And revelers bought the vendors' wine and feasted well on roasted meats.  
 A fine day dawned, a day of parades; Lord Errikale decreed a march,  
 From Green Snake Way to the Beggars' Arch, all through the Royal Square.  
 And all unwitting, Lord Grandier did also sense the festive air  
 And called his men to polish shields, tighten drums,  
 Dress in richest martial wear and march around the Royal Square,  
 And hand out coins to beggars there, rich gold to match their lady's hair,  
 The flowing locks of Catarin deSangre, youngest noble heir.  
 A fine day dawned, a fateful day, a day when two parades of hope  
 Would clash in battle small in scope, large in implication;  
 A day when violent civil strife would slash the city, unkind knife,  
 Cut the bonds of brotherhood that formed the basis of the nation.

Through peaceful parks and sunlit streets Lord Lucius led one thousand men,  
 A hundred drummers and clarion-players, two hundred archers and bandit-slayers,  
 Three hundred pikemen, sturdy sons, four hundred swordsmen, hot to fight  
 To save the honor of their lord, Mycale, who rode in state that day,  
 Waving brightly to the crowd, giving no sign of his soul's decay.  
 Lord Errikale rode very nigh, to school his lord if by any sign  
 He showed the weakness Lucius feared and used, the idiot moral brain confused.  
 And Castomira Brangwin rode by Mycale's side, and whispered to him  
 Words of mother's love, sister's comfort, lover's bliss,  
 The cruel web she'd snared him in, the love his family never gave.  
 Cruel irony, that lack of love is grip for evil!

At Castomira's urging, Mycale spoke ill of Catarin,

Addressing crowds who cheered for him, his glassy eyes and wooden grin  
Took nothing from his eloquence, and nothing from the fire he roused;  
His words, poetry of honey and blood, sweet anger, cold ash,  
As he raved, his eyes did glint in spearheads' flash.  
He had the look that day of noble kings  
Who fight and die to keep their country dreaming  
Of warmth and bread, songs and crops,  
And take on themselves unwholesome scheming.  
But a cunning king Mycale was not, nor even sly...

As soldiers hot for loyal killing followed Mycale's royal train,  
So too did armsmen fresh and willing travel with brave Catarin.  
Her smile was bright as suns that day, her eyes diamonds,  
Unearthly and solid, enthralling all with sparks of grace.  
And people called out fealty: "Golden hair, steel polished soul,  
"Forever we support you, lady! Fight! And make our kingdom whole!"  
Swords and shields of hardened steel cast sunbeams into cheering crowds  
And in the streets and on the walks the people gathered by.

The flagstones of the Royal Square, like stove-lids, bent and warped the air.  
So fierce were summer's light and heat that hard-eyed archers flinched away  
From endless pinpoint suns and stars that shone from triply-polished arms.  
The people's cheers, an endless roar; and shimmering light, a blinding rain;  
Little wonder is it, then, that Catarin's troops met Mycale's men  
Before each high commander saw his nemesis approach.  
And full of patriotic verve, of noble thoughts, of warlike nerve,  
The frontmost soldiers took it as their destiny to fight.  
No warcries here, no trumpet-sound; the grisly painters worked the ground  
With harsh motifs of red on red, the living blood of newly dead.  
Errikale called retreat in vain, as soldiers vied to join the slain,  
Heedless of their training now, responding to their foremost vows,  
To stand and cut their foemen down to win their lord his rightful crown.

On the side of Catarin, as well, chaos reigned alone. Shouting to his regiment,  
Grandier struggled to defend his fore and flanks against the rage  
Of Castomira's bitter force (good men betrayed by evil words)  
And muster order, praying to remove his queen from battle's reach.  
The crowds of townsfolk churned like stormy seas,  
Some struggling to flee, some taking arms, some standing near to yell and jeer,  
And in an eyeblink, deadly havoc reigned among the common folk  
As surely as in soldiers' eyes, soldiers' arms and soldiers' minds.

By half past noon, the two commanders knew that they were even matched,  
And locked, unwilling, in a deadly combat, deadly game of chess;  
If only chess were played with dice, and loss meant instant butchery,  
For true war owes to table games what Tsol'teth owe to forest sprites.  
The noontime heat, sticky sweat and blood, cries of pain and fear  
Caused only greater hatred in these men who'd marched as one last year.

Twilight settled on scenes of woe: unspoken truce as families buried dead,  
Though stricken with partisan hate; soldiers vowing vengeance on their friends,  
For striking adverse blows in self-defense; Catarin and Castomira, blessing the dead,  
One with bitter sadness, one only with its semblance...  
And city boundaries drawn in bloody strokes: north for Mycale, south for Catarin.  
Morning's gay parades were now a funeral march,  
And warrior's dirges now rang half as strong,  
As stout-backed pipers dug their fellows' graves.  
Buried with their instruments, the proud marshals of the march  
Stared up through one man's height in dirt to sorrow at the sight of martial feet

Once locked in formal order, now trudging past the funeral fires.

---

## Lucaine Pyramides, Catarin (Poem 10)

Blue hope, her eyes, too true to deny--  
An order, her smile, too strong to defy--  
Her lips are a question; I dare not reply.

---

## Lord Damen Kephry, Collected Correspondence

My dearest Margaux,

Be assured, my love, that your concern for my well-being is matched only by my own. Though the fighting is fierce in this sector of the city, I am sure that we shall prevail, and place Prince Mycale on his rightful throne. I can only pray that once Mycale's coronation is complete, his noble sister will capitulate, and support her brother as is her duty. Even among the supporters of Mycale, the Princess is respected and loved, and it breaks our hearts to oppose her ill-conceived rebellion against the natural order of succession.

We lost possession of the Castle of Twelve today. Praise be to Sarapis, no member of the Guild of Knights struck a personal blow against another, but the fact remains that the Guild is broken now, perhaps forever, by this passing political feud. The supporters of Catarin believe that they are doing what is best for the Empire, as their guild oath demands, and I am certain that they believe they are right, so I cannot hate them. But when men under my command pulled Lord Kyralos from his horse and beheaded him, I was forced to commend them for putting the enemy temporarily to rout, even as I shed tears for my oldest friend.

This street-fighting is the worst sort of combat. Even my ventures in the swamps of Mannaseh and the mountains of Vashnar never prepared me for this hellish funhouse of sharp corners and rooftop snipers; and aside from physical peril, nothing is more taxing to sanity than to cut down one's own countrymen, in one's own neighborhood. Civil war is an abomination, and I pray daily to all the gods that they deliver us from it.

For us, the day started early. We were to depart the Castle of Twelve before dawn, hurrying through the side streets in a party of fifty, to blockade the Road of Snows and lay ambush for the party that Grandier would inevitably send against the Palace. Simply to walk the streets of Seleucar is torture in a time like this: to see the rows and rows of buildings, shuttered tight with fear. The few citizens out and about fled into alleys at the sound of marching feet. I understand the war is already hard on them; the "foresightful" hoarding by the few has caused food shortages for the many, and the soup kitchens seldom have enough to feed all. Soldiers ransack homes, with the noble goal of redistributing any hoards they find, but too often those hoards are redistributed only to the soldiers. Are you eating well? I can only hope our family's name is sufficient to keep you from hardship. It is well that our manor is in the far north of the city; Catarin's men are unlikely to penetrate there.

Near midday, we engaged an enemy element, perhaps a hundred men, as they advanced up the Road of Snows. Our plan was successful; fighting fiercely, then repeatedly falling back into alleys, we slowed the enemy advance long enough for Mycale's corresponding sortie to fortify the intersection between Royal Circle Road and the Road of Snows. Lord Errikale has shown an astonishing talent for such devious tactics; though he has no formal military rank, the man proves to be a cunning leader, walking a fine line between flexibility and treachery. Perhaps he has been consulting with our distasteful Serpentlord allies, although I've no clue how he might stomach their smell. Our mission complete, we returned to the Castle of Twelve... only to find it already under heavy assault.

Built a hundred years after the Black Wave, the Castle of Twelve is a ceremonial fortress, not a practical one. After all, the Guild of Knights was meant to defend the Empire through individual adventure and knight-errantry. We never considered that there might ever be fighting in the streets, as even the Tsol'teth were unable to breach the city walls. As a result, my allies were hard-pressed to defend the Castle and its many windows and doors, even with the aid of the barricades we'd cobbled together after the Battle of the Parades. Even so, we might easily have turned back the enemy, were it not for the presence of the infamous criminal, Lucaine Pyramides.

In accounts from his days as a mercenary bandit, the man has been described as a sort of incarnate demon, and now that I've seen him fight, I give those authors the benefit of the doubt. His fighting style wavers between madness and genius. Madness, for he spends half the battle with his sword in its sheath, avoiding blows through speed alone; genius, because when he draws his sword to fight, he turns that very act into a deadly blow. A warrior learns to detect a hundred movements of the blade, a hundred twitches of the body, and when he draws his blade, Pyramides reveals none of them. Even with his sword drawn, the man fights as if possessed. Though his sword clearly is not forged in Bladefire like that of a Knight, nevertheless it glows with arcane power, here setting men ablaze, there freezing them to the bone, there causing them to bleed their life away from a single cut. Each time he draws his blade, men around him die, giving him time to enchant his sword with some new witchery. Just as the Tsol'teth were said to practice some art of destruction unknown to mortal races, so too does this squire of hell, Pyramides. Draw what parallel you will. Mycale's indecent detractors hint that he is "unnatural." I submit that if anyone in this war is unnatural, it is that brigand monster Pyramides.

We fought to our utmost, but though the Avenue of Swords ran with the blood of our foe, it ran twice as deep with our own. When the order to retreat came, however, I was dismayed, for we had succeeded in separating Lucaine Pyramides from the rest of his allies. Surely, with just a little more time, we could have overwhelmed him, and damned be the cost to our own lives. So be it, though. I write this from the Selicande Lycaenum, where the remaining Knights in Mycale's camp have been given a warm welcome. Tomorrow I am to join a sally against the Marcella Library, in the company of Lord Errikale and Prince Mycale. As the Library itself is undefended by Catarin's men, we hope to break through their front and triumphantly invest the Library, thus winning a psychological victory. Pray for me, my love, as I pray every night for you.

Your loving husband,

Lord Damen Kephry,  
Artaius Angus Hall, Barracks 104,  
Selicande Lycaenum

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### **Lucaine Pyramides, Catarin (Poem 14)**

Gold and soft diamond and pearl--  
The crown is one with the soul, for her.  
Empress, goddess, overarching girl--  
The part is one with the whole, for her.  
My sword will defend her  
My sharp sword will keep her safe  
My true sword will keep her safe from harm  
I shall make her as immortal as my love.

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### **From Meleus Travner, Urban Tactical Confrontation Throughout History: Case Studies, vol. 2: Seleucar**

Following is a summary of the strategic progression of the First War of Succession, with accompanying figures. The subsequent twelve chapters will describe the tactical considerations of the war in exhaustive detail.

The First War of Succession can be divided into four major phases, typically referred to as "Weeks," as each phase lasted between six and eight days. For this section, I have followed that inexact convention; the later chapters will provide a more accurate chronology. The basic street map of Seleucar is Fig. 2.1.

In the first Week of confrontation, the Catarines and Mycalians (as supporters of the warring heirs were called) controlled roughly similar portions of Imperial Seleucar (Fig. 2.2). This was to change abruptly, as each side chose a different offensive focus. Naturally, both armies placed an emphasis on capturing the Palace itself, and as a result, the Palace was never fully occupied. Whenever one side overran the Palace, they built makeshift fortifications that the other side promptly destroyed in the next sortie. Aside from the attacks on the Palace, though, there were three other offensives of note in the first week (Fig 2.3). In the western portion of the city, the Guild of Serpentlords, long masked by a row of nondescript shops, finally made itself known, declaring

loyalty to Mycale and immediately deploying in force to clear the surrounding streets. Catarine soldiers, experienced in field maneuvers but inept at urban combat, were rapidly forced into retreat by the unconventional tactics of the Serpentlords, resulting in the loss of the entire western district. The Serpentlords, however, were unable to occupy further territory, due to their relatively small numbers, and so they satisfied themselves with patrolling their immediate surroundings, to an extent of three major city blocks.

Catarin and her military advisor, Orin Grandier, chose to concentrate their forces on the capture of the Castle of Twelve, stronghold of the Guild of Knights. They did not at that time fully appreciate that the Castle of Twelve was not carefully designed for war, and the Knights among them, untrained in urban combat, were equally unaware of the Castle's weakness. Catarin sent a large strike force against the Royal Palace, but had half that strike force split off to attack the Castle of Twelve in a surprise maneuver, while another force proceeded along the Avenue of Swords to attack the Castle from the west. As Mycalian forces were fully committed to their attack on the Royal Palace and on the Marcella Library, the garrison at the Castle of Twelve was reinforced only by a returning group led by Damen Kephry. Quickly, the Mycalians were routed.

Mycale, meanwhile, had committed the majority of his forces to an assault on the Marcella Library. (Be advised that when I say "Mycale" or "Catarin" in any sense referring to military command, I am in fact referring to the entire high command of that faction: Errikale and Castomira on one side, and Catarin and Grandier on the other. It is unlikely that Mycale had a personal hand in any of the stratagems used during the war.) Already in possession of the Selicande Lycaenum and the Castle of Twelve, Mycale sought to take control of yet another major building, to use it as a command post and mustering point. Since the Catarine forces were concentrated in and around the Amphitheatre Kelanium, Mycale anticipated an easy victory; it was necessary simply to break through the defenses at South Riverwalk and then march down White Owl Street and Red Stag Street, destroying any patrols encountered. To turn the assault into a political coup as well, Mycale personally led the strike force. This was certainly the idea of Castomira Brangwin, as Lord Errikale would have overruled anyone else who suggested endangering the prince.

After airborne Druidic spotters reported Mycale's offensive, Catarin sent heavy reinforcements to defend the library. The Catarine force engaged the Mycalians at the intersection of White Owl Street and Eastgate Road, fighting them to a standstill and preserving control of the Library. During this battle, Mycale was wounded by a stray arrow. History shows that this was part of Castomira's hideous plan, for she secluded herself with him for the next two days nursing him to health, and when he emerged, he was horribly changed.

Before, Mycale had been a cretin, physically and mentally unsound, and a pedophile, visitor of the city's most hidden and illegal pleasure-dens; now, he was perceptibly twisted, indulging desires even darker than before. Whether Castomira had unlocked his personal demons, or had implanted sinister suggestions of her own, Mycale began to exhibit a taste for pleasures that should not be indulged, and his closest supporters turned a blind eye as the young boys who habitually "visited" Mycale in his chambers began to disappear. They had refused to believe in Mycale's broken-minded pederasty; now, they refused to believe that his crippled evil might have deepened much further, to include torture and murder. That such voluntary blindness could exist in people who were otherwise honorable and good is unwelcome testament to the inflexibility of the human mind and spirit. Lord Errikale, Maxim Everhardt, and others all believed in the goodness and propriety of their prince, and so they put themselves under tremendous pressure by continuing in their belief. In the case of Maxim Everhardt, that pressure was to relieve itself in a nightmarish fashion. Some have suggested that the greatest tragedy of the war is that Mycale was never treated with the love and kindness that might have kept him innocent and good. Although this author would never lay claim to moral authority, pragmatism suggests that the greatest tragedy is that Mycale was not drowned as an infant, preventing the succession issue from arising at all.

It is clear, moreover, that Castomira was not simply corrupting Mycale for personal entertainment, but as part of her scheme for total domination of Seleucar. As youths disappeared within the depths of Mycale's rooms at Selicande Lycaenum, Mycale himself began to take on a powerful aura of majesty, such that wherever he took the field, the morale of his soldiers increased a hundredfold. And when he spoke, though he often broke into a form of half-witted glossolalia, the very sound of his voice filled his men with the strength of ten, and he invariably led his soldiers to resounding victory. Mycale's speeches were never transcribed, so it is impossible to perform a comparison, but given what later emerged regarding Castomira, it is well within the realm of possibility that she seeded Mycale's speech with a weakened version of the Tsol'teth Litany of Obedience, its arcane powers fueled by the lives of innocents.

At the beginning of Week Two, Catarin's control of the Castle of Twelve had cut off the Serpentlord territory from Mycale's main zone of control (see Fig. 2.4). Although they could still communicate through Tell magic, which was widespread in Achaea even then, the Catarine patrols along the Avenue of Heroes and their random sorties into Heroes' Park ensured that the Serpentlords could not receive tactical backup from their allies. And the Catarine tactical initiatives during this week (Fig 2.5) sealed the fate of the Serpentlords in Seleucar. Catarin sent a strong force against the Serpentlord-controlled neighborhoods, armed with hastily-prepared plans of urban combat and led by rangers with experience fighting Serpents. Although they did not directly defeat all the Serpentlords in the area, they killed many, and ransacked the hidden guildhouse, throwing the Serpentlords into disarray. As the Catarine forces advanced along rooftops and alleys in tandem, the Serpentlords were forced to evacuate their hiding places, although they left behind traps that claimed many a life. Finally, Catarine wizards destroyed the hidden wormhole located in the center of the neighborhood, just after the last Serpentlords fled through it. With the wormhole closed, the Serpentlords were unable to stage a counterattack to regain their control of the area.

Catarin's forces were not as successful elsewhere on the map. The Serpentlords, unused to battling large numbers of opponents, retreated in the face of a well-organized force of soldiers, and so they lived on, as they always have, despite adversity. Mycale's men, however, coming straight from the invigorating presence of their newly-charismatic ruler, were without fear, and eager to do battle. A large force made directly for the Royal Palace, and was met there by Catarin's men as they sallied from the Castle of Twelve and from the Amphitheatre Kelanium. A second force, composed of three hundred men, paralleled the Mnemosyne before splitting into two groups, one to attack the Castle of Twelve, and one to rush the Royal Palace from the north. The Castle assault group succeeded, capturing the Castle of Twelve after a brief but bloody fight.

The force from the north would have decided the Palace battle in Mycale's favor as well, but for the intervention of Lucaine Pyramides. As if launched from an arrow, Pyramides hurtled through the Palace and directly into the opposing force, intercepting them just as they passed through the main gate into the northern courtyard. Using this choke-point to his advantage, Lucaine killed the entire vanguard (drawing his sword and resheathing it for each kill, according to legend), then advanced northward, cutting down the entire invading group like a field of wheat, including several powerful commanders, masters of their respective fighting professions.

This was the first time Pyramides had revealed the full extent of his incredible powers, and it led to much speculation in both camps as to his true origin, be it demonic, divine, or simply alien. Pyramides never deviated from his story of being an escaped slave from a far-off land, student of a secret fighting art; however, dozens of very plausible theories give him a more arcane background. Only the monks seriously consider the possibility that Pyramides' powers were thoroughly explained by physical discipline alone, and even they consider him to have been a supreme master of the suspiciously magic-like Kaido. At any rate, it is clear that the abilities of Lucaine Pyramides were supernatural in the sense of having no counterpart in nature or the works of man.

During the havoc surrounding the Castle of Twelve and the Royal Palace, Lord Errikale sent a small group of rangers and Serpentlords to the Marcella Library, infiltrating the enemy line. Once in position, the infiltrators launched blinding fireworks along the main streets, diverting the Catarine lines long enough for Duke Errikale to lead an infantry charge down the side streets between White Owl Street and Red Stag Street. While Catarin's men had heavily guarded the larger intersections, these side streets held only token resistance, and Errikale was able to sweep through to the Library, occupying it completely. From there, he was able to solidify his control over the entire city sector.

Although the Catarines took control of the Royal Palace for the majority of the week, they realized that their position was untenable now that the Castle of Twelve and the Marcella Library had been captured. At the end of the week, they began an ordered withdrawal to the Halls of Justice, there to launch an assault on the Marcella Library, using the friendly Smiths' Guild as a staging point. So as not to prompt a rapid assault on the Amphitheatre, they chose to split their forces between the Amphitheatre and the Halls of Justice, with both attacking the Library only at the last possible hour. This way, the troops stationed in the Amphitheatre would move directly from there to the Library, hopefully just as Mycale committed his forces to an attack on the Amphitheatre.

In Week Three, after four days of tense waiting and occasional skirmishes, they executed that plan (Fig. 2.6), and it succeeded perfectly. Just as Mycale mounted an attack from the Castle of Twelve and the Royal Palace, both units of Catarines began to move. Orin Grandier led the defense of the Amphitheatre, fighting alongside his



men, waiting to be the very last person to exit the building before supervising the rear-guard action. Further battle consolidated each group's territory as Fig. 2.7: a considerable loss for Catarin's side.

Week Four saw little combat, but what did occur was highly significant. Hoping to lure the enemy into a bad tactical decision, Orin Grandier intentionally relaxed patrols along South Riverwalk near the Beggars' Arch while increasing the guards at the bridges, hinting that he did not expect an amphibious attack. Lord Errikale, who had been winning many battles so far by using unexpected tactics, assumed that Grandier's weakness was real, and immediately drew up plans for a simultaneous feint from all corners, masking an amphibious movement across the river between the Red Stag Street and Green Snake Way bridges (Fig. 2.8). This played directly into Grandier's plans. For days previous, under cover of night, divers had taken kegs of fuel oil weighted with heavy iron and left them at the bottom of the river, fashioned so that they could be ripped asunder by pulling on a chain leading up to shore. Upon hearing the first splash of soldiers diving into the Mnemosyne, Grandier's men pulled on their chains and emptied the contents of the barrels into the river. By the time Mycale's men had swum halfway across the river, the oil had risen to the surface, and a single hurled torch transformed the Mnemosyne into the Phlegeton, the mythical River of Fire. This was the beginning and the end of the so-called Battle of Beggars' Arch; the other Mycalian attacks proved toothless, as Errikale had committed his main forces to the water-borne attack, and now one-third were dead and two-thirds stared helplessly at the river of fire.

Such events are dramatic, but for the most part, the specifics of warfare interest only historians and military buffs. During this abortive "battle," however, an event occurred that would resound on the harp-strings of a hundred thousand bards. Trenton Deis attempted to kill Lucaine Pyramides, and was defeated, then spared.

This event occurred only slightly before the Church proclamation that would inspire Lucaine and Catarin's legendary cross-city dash (Fig 2.9)

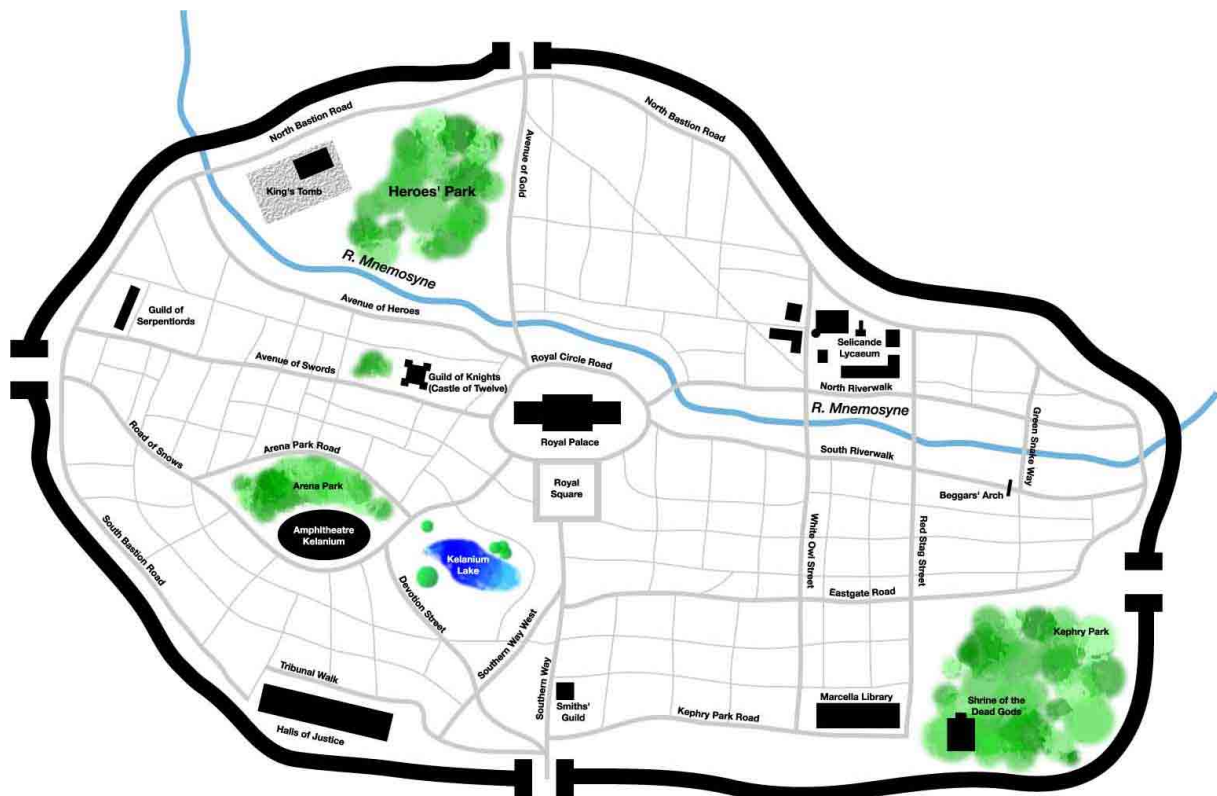


Fig 2.1

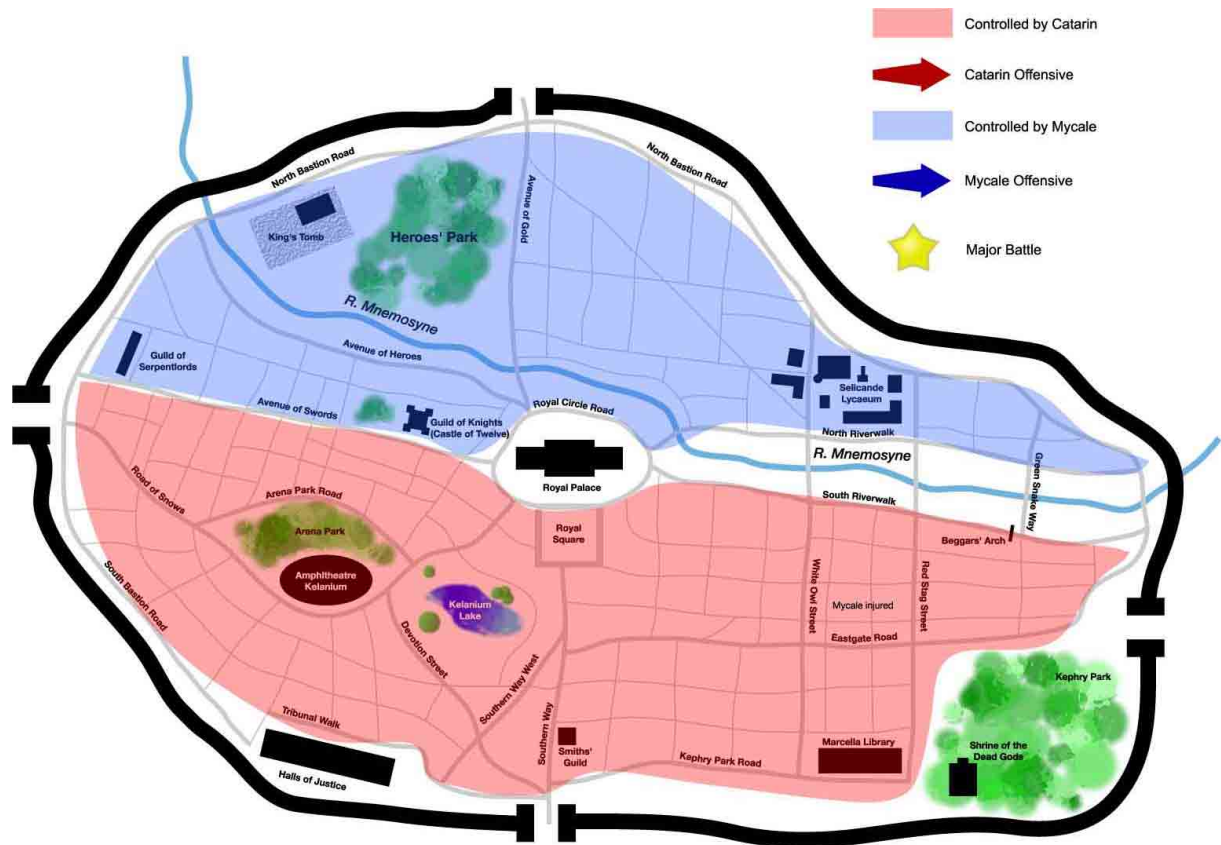


Fig 2.2

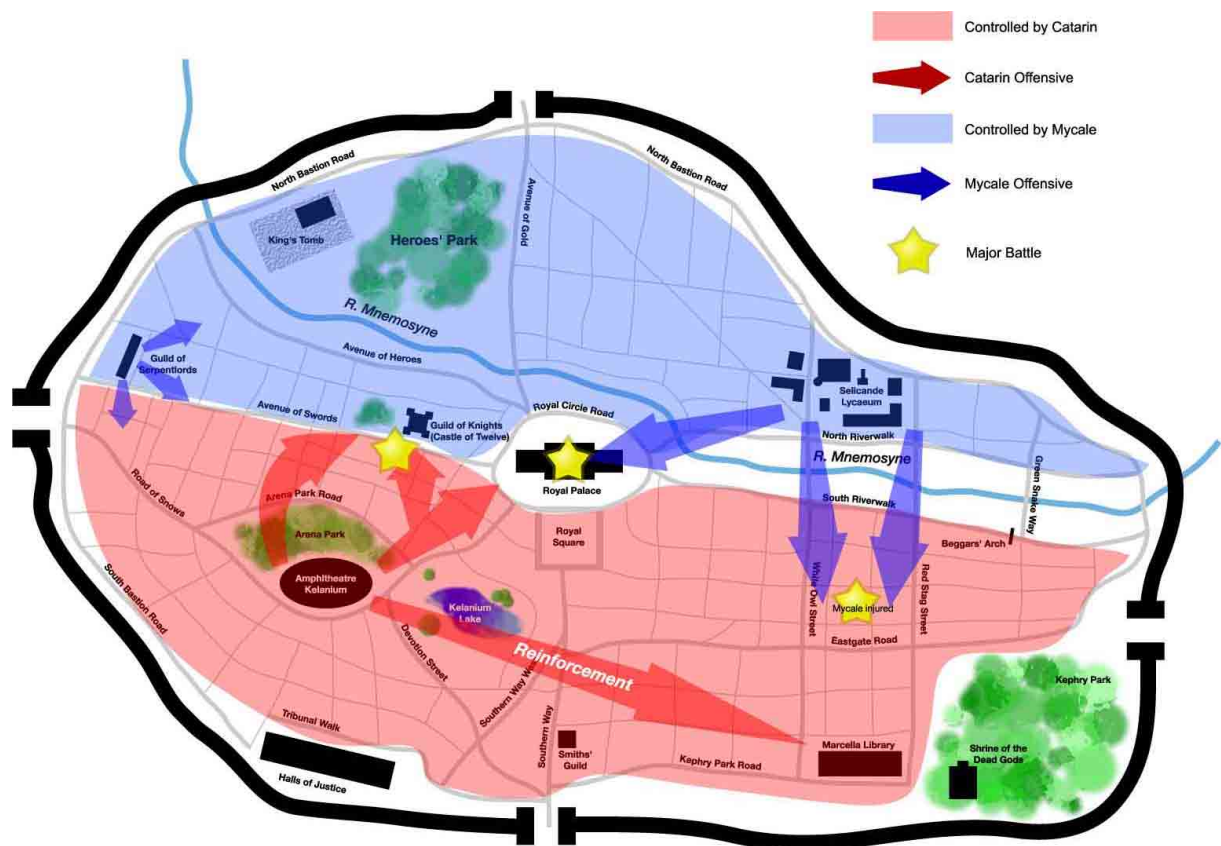


Fig 2.3

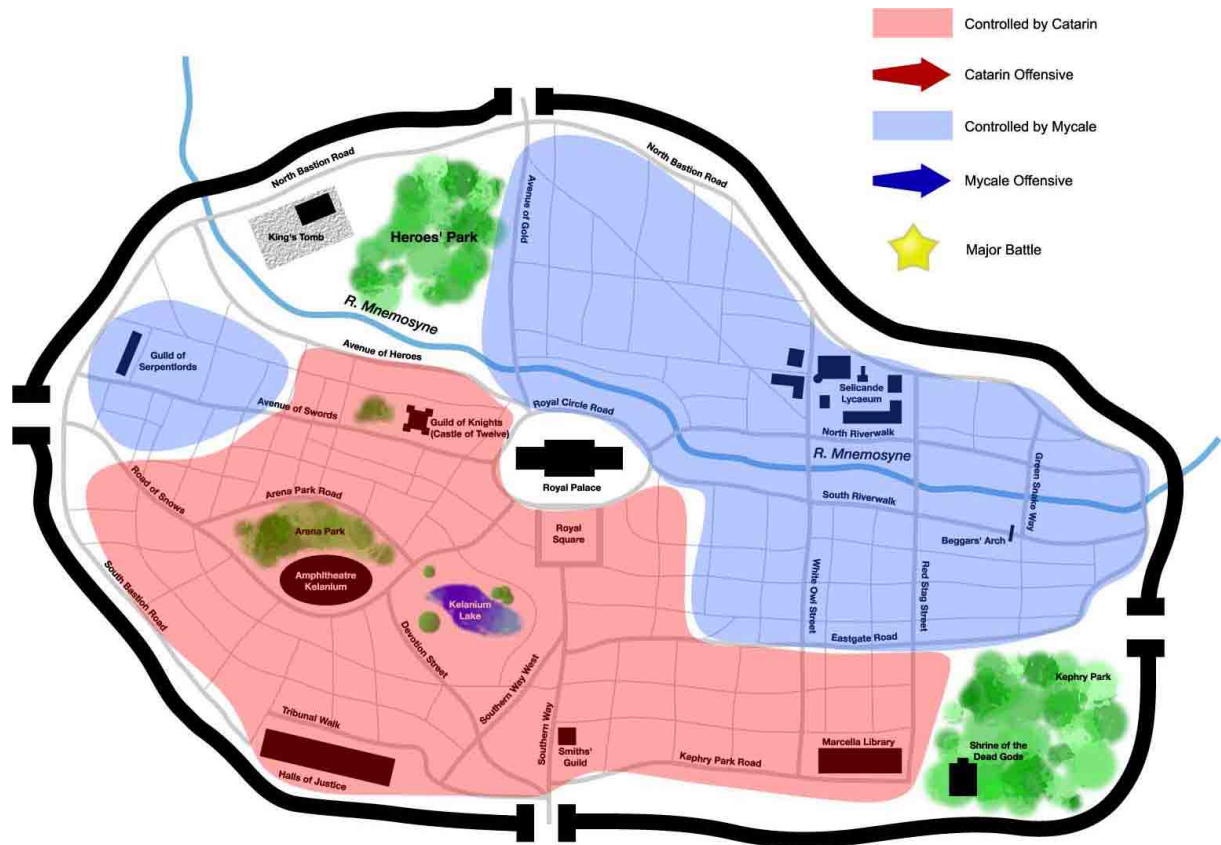


Fig 2.4

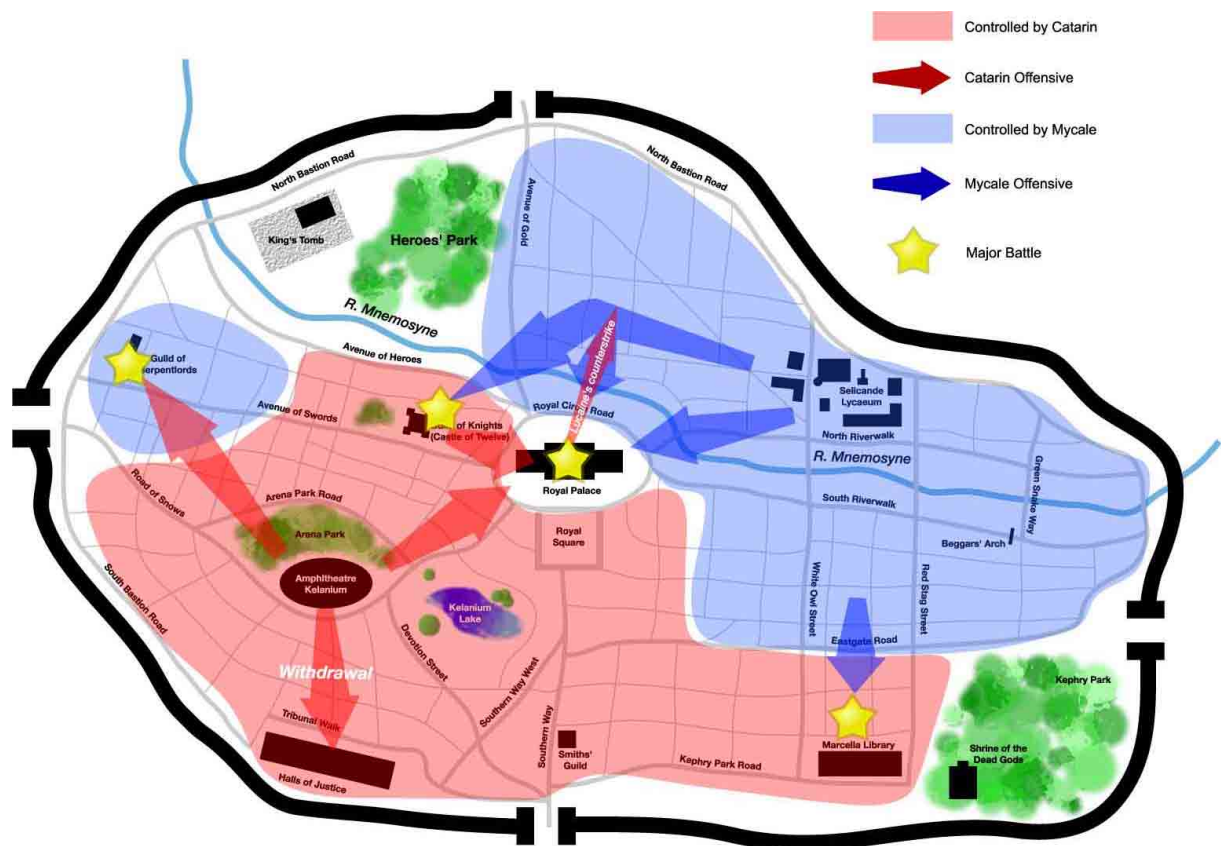


Fig 2.5

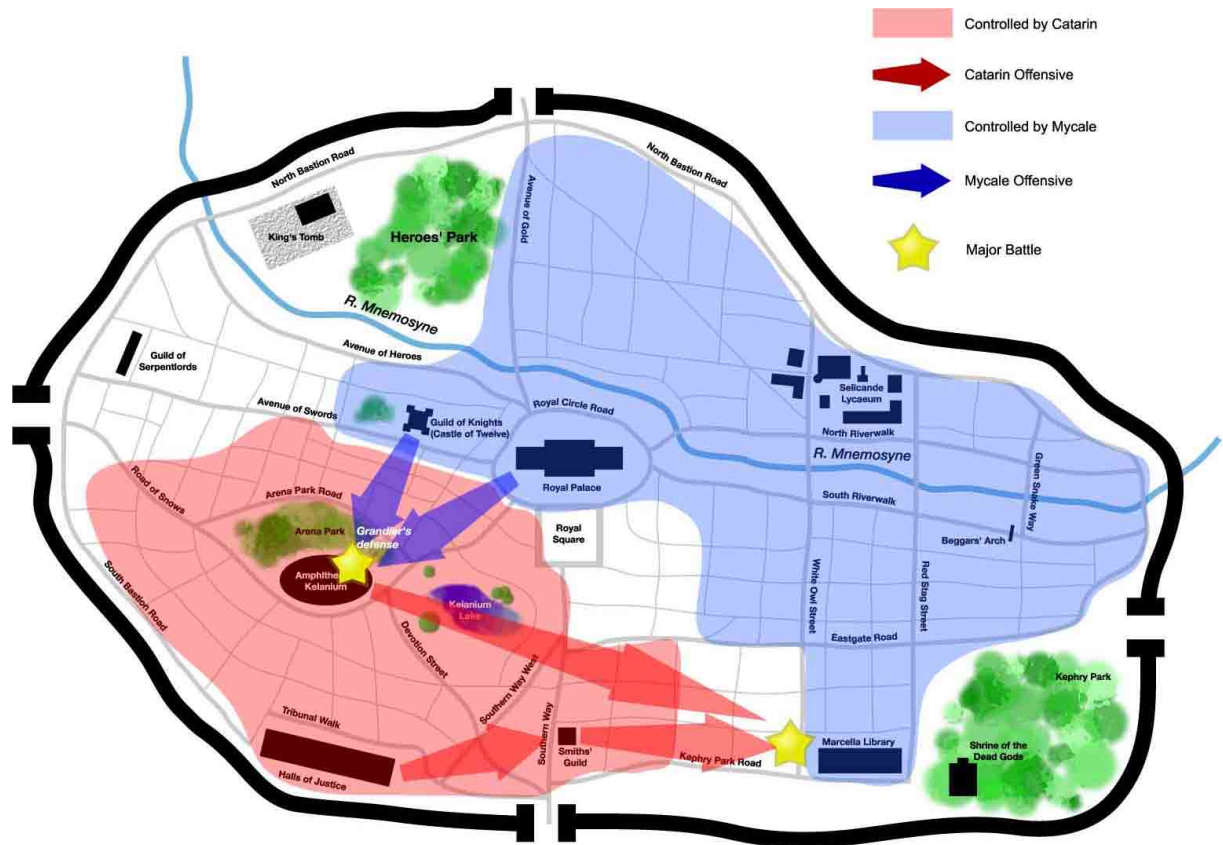


Fig 2.6

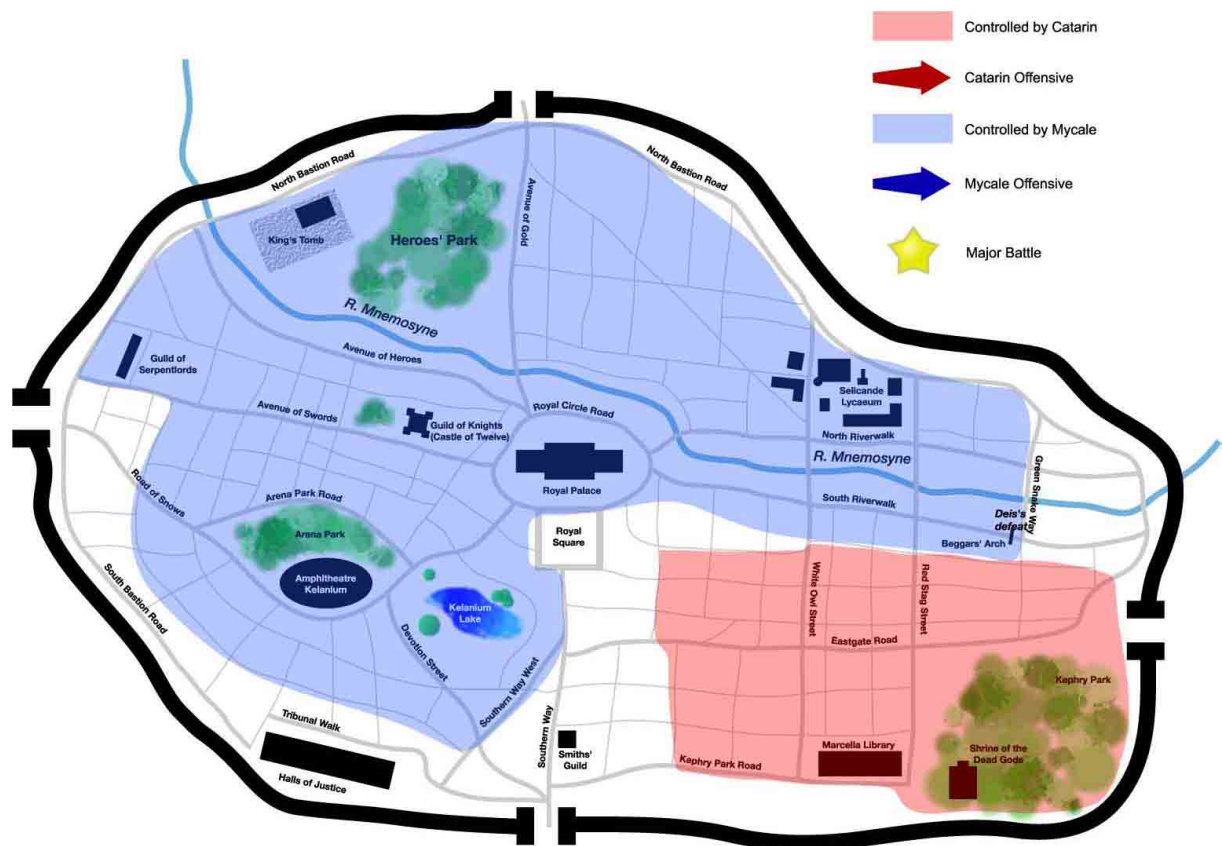


Fig 2.7

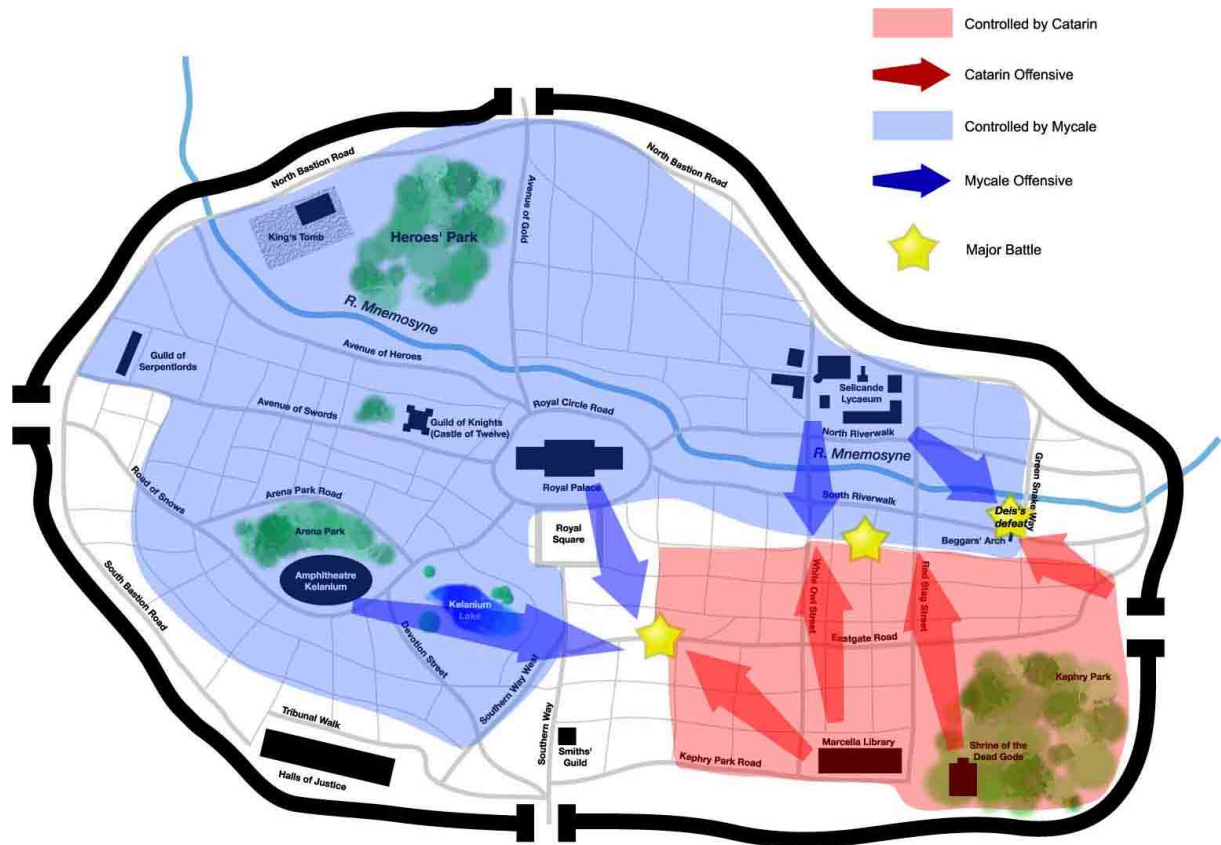


Fig 2.8

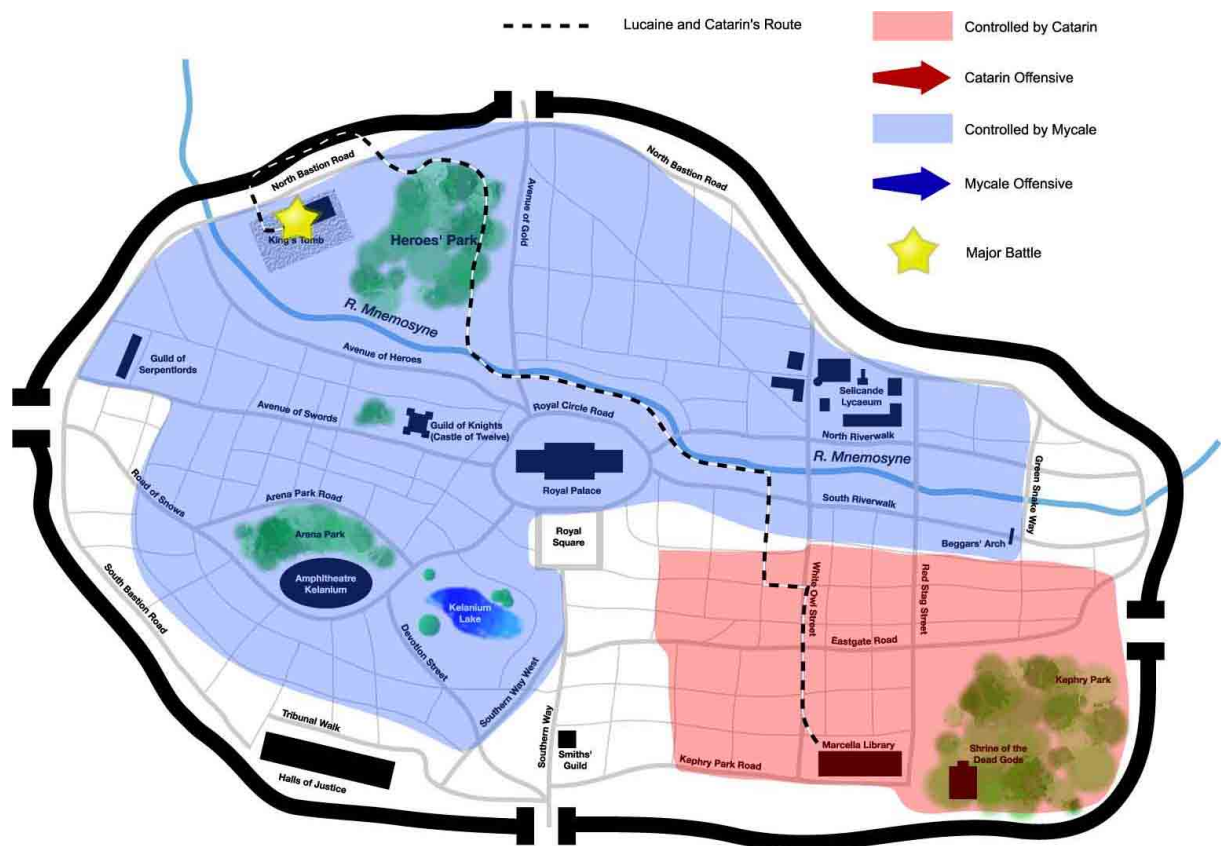


Fig 2.9

## From Leona Fontaine, *Sentinel: The Murder of Lucaine Pyramides*

(Editor's note: Fontaine's work is a historical novel, not a history, and as such, some of her assumptions are challenged by scientific historians. The physical events of the following passage, however, are upheld by eyewitness accounts. Other narrative elements, such as the specific thoughts and motivations of the principles, are plausible, but open to debate.)

In Seleucar, it rains only at night.

Mages say that local mysteries of air and temperature cause the clouds to release their sorrow only after dark. Priests make holy signs in the air, and thank the benevolent gods for their unwillingness to mar the endless sunny days of jungle-locked Seleucar's noble reign. The skies, indifferent, continue on as they always have; floating blue-white and aloof during Helios' circuit, then falling upon the city with the sound of a hundred rapids. During the season of summer rains, the city becomes a wetland for an hour each midnight. Bearing Catarin deSangre in his arms, Lucaine Pyramides crosses the rainscape like a phantom crane, a half-seen shadow blocking out reflected lamplight for a split-second at a time. By the time ripples spread from his footsteps, he is five yards hence; by the time the crashing rain tears those ripples apart, he is gone.

Trenton Deis knows nothing but the rain. The sun long ago became distasteful to him, a gauche reminder of the idiotic concept of "clarity." Sunlight is as naïve and mindless as innocence itself, and so Deis has come to embrace the Seleucarian night, and its summer downpour. To him, the night is home, and its varied thieves, gamblers, prostitutes, and drug-sellers are family. But he is apart even from them. Half-mad, he is called, but he is all too sane, crouching atop the Opera Hall, watching the silent progress of Lucaine Pyramides from beneath the broad brim of his pointed hat. And he thought back to the moment when his life had crystallized around him.

The flames, that day, were a wall of light arising from a well of blackness; nothing is so fearsomely contrary to nature as fire creeping across water. Trenton Deis took courage from it. The wheel of the law turns forever, and the wheel of fortune, and Trenton Deis lived from revolution to revolution, revolt hidden deep in his soul. Hidden in his cloak, a long straight sword, anointed with a single drop of the bitter blood of Castomira Brangwin, layered with poisons, enchanted with fell magics.

Pyramides stood alone, that day, gazing into the flames as if into a future of hopeless snows. Fearing his strangeness, his allies kept their distance. Driven by helpless desire, Lucaine's temper flared easily in those days, the days before he found his peace. To speak aloud his love to her was more than he could do, and so his aura of despair drew an empty circle around him as surely as Three Moons did in combat. And into that circle came Trenton Deis.

Trenton Deis was feared, for he was without fear. He met his victims face to face, killed them without ceremony of respect or concern for self-preservation, he left the scene at the same mechanical pace he approached it. Among his associates, he was called the "point-blank assassin," and was regarded as insane, or beloved of the gods . . . or both, each being an apt euphemism for the other.

Lucaine Pyramides was a jet-black icon silhouetted against a towering wall of flame, impossible to miss. Trenton Deis lurched forward, as if tripping, revealing his blade only at the last moment, aimed directly at Pyramides' back. With a hiss, his blade cut through the fabric of Lucaine's three-quarter coat . . . and into open air. Still staring into the ever-shifting flames, Lucaine Pyramides had avoided the opening blow by inches. Still staring into the flames, he swung his sheathed sword directly into Trenton's temple, felling him. "Don't give him a warrior's death. Let him hang at dawn," he said to the soldiers who rushed to subdue the stunned assassin.

As Deis's head cleared, the world resolved itself around him in a slow progression of images: his hands, bound in iron manacles; the roaring flames, waves of heat beating against his face as he approached the lonely swordsman; Castomira's dead eyes as she hired him for this ill-fated contract; the edge of Lucaine's jaw, a bare glint of flame off the oblique lens of his eye, as his peripheral vision targeted Trenton for the disabling blow. And as Trenton Deis's world resolved itself around him, within him arose a new emotion, one that he'd used to his great advantage but never before experienced: hatred.

And now, manacle-cuts still raw on his wrists, Trenton Deis is free, fugitive, hunted and hunter, tracking the rain-swept flight of Lucaine Pyramides and his noble charge. He will not even strike them tonight. His lifetime

of uncaring is behind him. No longer does he wish to "get it over with," to kill and stalk away, to attack without taunts or preamble. He can guess, now, what love is, because he knows what hatred is: it is an attraction, a cold fire, a desire to be known and recognized, a twisted desire for respect and acquiescence. For Trenton, it is not enough to kill . . . he will see Lucaine humbled. And for that to happen, he must first see Lucaine rise high.

On White Owl Street, a block from Riverwalk, Lucaine rose high, a single leap carrying him from cobblestone to rooftop, where he settled as quietly as a nesting owl, and set his princess gently on her feet. (Two blocks away, Trenton Deis folded his spyglass and descended a drainpipe, to track his prey from below.) "From here, we enter enemy territory, my lady. Are you certain of your vision?"

"I am certain, Lucaine. The Staff of Nicator has returned to the King's Tomb. And only I may retrieve it."

"Then prepare yourself, for we will move quickly from this point on."

"Quickly? The world was a blur all the way from the Library. Do you intend to move between the raindrops? Outrun the sound of thunder?"

"Yes, I do."

Catarin in his arms again, Lucaine moved. His words were not mere boast; at a dead run, he crossed rooftops, leapt across canyon streets, reading the wind and rain, and only one drop out of ten found its way to Catarin's skin. Whether through careful planning or blind instinct, the outlaw fencer found his way through Mycale's patrols, clearing one in a single stupendous bound that began in the darkness before their torches and ended in the darkness behind. And then they were on the riverbank, nostrils pinched against the lasting reek of expended oil, the legacy of Beggars' Arch. Without slowing pace, Lucaine ran along the very surface of the water, cutting tiny wakes in its rain-tormented surface. The darkness of the river was absolute. If Mycale's guards scanned it idly for silent riverboats, they did not mention the sight of a single swordsman, carrying a woman, running silently across the surface of the black water; for who wants to admit that he is mad, and seeing visions? Lucaine and Catarin passed unnoticed beneath the bridge of the Avenue of Gold, and then up the banks into the Heroes' Park.

"We've bought a lot of time. But they're going to know we're here as soon as I kill the guards outside the tomb. The enemy officers are certain to have Death sight."

"I know, Lucaine . . . I'll move quickly."

Scattering wet leaves in his wake, Lucaine rushed through the woods of the Heroes' Park, one arm cocked to shield Catarin's face from whip-like twigs. At lethal speed, Lucaine wove between tree-trunks, avoiding the few soldiers who patrolled the woods. As he broke into the open facing North Bastion Road, he picked up speed again, traveling as quickly as a diving hawk, feet barely touching the ground. Sighting an oncoming trio of guardsmen, Lucaine took flight, literally running up the city wall to attain the northern battlements. This time, he cursed his luck as he heard cries of alarm and disbelief, quickly left behind at ground level. Speed poured upon speed, Lucaine began to breathe heavily, as the continuous run began to tax him. Flitting along the parapet, he encountered another of Mycale's soldiers, fruitlessly attempting to shelter a tobacco-filled pipe from the rain. Lucaine sprinted past him, a moving blur in the darkness, and the startled guard slipped on the rain-slick stone and fell to his death on the ground below. Lucaine had eaten a skullcap mushroom that day, and the guard's death sounded in his consciousness; he knew that every military officer on duty must surely have experienced the same thing. He heard Catarin utter a quiet prayer for the man's soul, and echoed it. Then he whispered a prayer for himself, as well, for he knew he would kill more of Mycale's innocent loyalists before the night was done.

Lucaine dropped fifty feet to land gently back within the city. The entrance of the King's Tomb was brightly lit, and even from the other side of Bastion Road, Lucaine could tell that the guards had not yet been alerted.

"None of the guards have Death sight, it seems. Are you ready? As I take them, you run past me into the tomb. I'll cover you."

"Thank you. Good luck, Lucaine," Catarin whispered in his ear. Lucaine . . . her bold defender. Soon, every Mycalian soldier in the city would converge on the King's Tomb. She kissed him on the cheek, knowing she might never see him again save as a corpse. "Let's begin."

For weeks, fruitless battle had painted streets with blood, turned heart against mind, friend against friend. The Church deliberated long in crystal halls, and prayed for long hours. Church officials held closed Mass to beg the gods for guidance. Their neutrality was required by long tradition. The Seleucarian Empire existed by grace of Sarapis, not by grace of the Church, and so the Church held no sway in governance. But when it seemed that the Empire's fate might be decided by force of arms, the Church was divided as well. In spite of the continuous debate over shrine placement, the Church was known for impartiality: in many places, priests were called as judges, for their honor was above reproach. It was this honor that forced the Church to bitter dispute. Was it nobler to back Catarin, obviously the better ruler? Or to allow Mycale's victory by remaining neutral? For three weeks, the elders of the Church begged Sarapis for insight.

And insight they received, in mighty vision that caused the temple halls to ring with divine echoes for a full day afterward. The Staff of Nicator, thought lost during the Black Wave, was once again within the boundaries of Sapience. Whoever found the symbol of Nicator's reign would take on the patriarch's majesty as the indisputable monarch of Seleucar. The Church sent emissaries far and wide, to all the cities, proclaiming the news.

The news that the succession had led to warfare was a shock to Ashtan and Shallam alike. They had heard news of riots only, for Grandier and Errikale had shared in the work of hiding the civil strife, holding the peace of Seleucar far higher than personal victory. But the Church's vision was a message of peace, as well; breaking off all battle, supporters of each contender spread out into the countryside, searching for the legendary Staff.

The questers followed a hundred rumors, legends, bardic tales. At times they did come to blows; private museums were ransacked, castles looted, travelers searched at knife-point. But the Quest for the Staff, in all its turmoil, claimed no lives, caused little lasting damage. One week after the Church's proclamation, the Staff had not been found, and no one knew just where it might reside . . .

Except for Catarin deSangre, even now walking through the darkness of the tomb, past ranks of royal relatives sealed in gold-inlaid sarcophagi. Awakened by the presence of their sister, regal shades arose, saying "Catarin, my dear, go further on; what you seek is just a little ways away, down the Hall of Years, further in the past." Time moves differently within the Tomb of Kings; the centuries of Seleucar's blood tumble in upon one another. One who would reach the tomb of the First must stride backwards along the branches of history, must feel the kingdom's history unravel itself around her, until she stands in the center of a small city with a giant army, and sees the million lights collected against the Black Wave.

No Tsol'teth, Lucaine Pyramides was all too human, yet a thousand lights smashed and swirled around him. Despairingly human, he cut and slashed endlessly, deftly blocking the entrance to the tomb, but suffering a hundred minor wounds in the progress. His style relied on dodging blows, but here he could only stand his ground, ensuring that Mycale's frantic troops could not reach his only love. Twelve empty wooden vials were scattered at his feet, and only three remained clipped to his belt. His pouches of defensive herbs were slim, his pipes near empty. Soon, he would be forced to submit, even as the bodies of his foes piled up against the pillars of the tomb entrance.

The enemy fell back, and Lucaine sheathed his sword, breathing deep, ragged breaths. He drank another draft of healing elixir, then wiped blood from his brow where cuts had been a moment before. Mycale's troops looked at him with suspicious awe. A few brave souls moved in to drag away the bodies of their fallen friends, flirting with the edges of Lucaine's circle of death. To husband his energy, Lucaine let them do their work. When the corpses were cleared away, the soldiers yet hesitated. "He weakens. Look at him sweat! Look at him gasp! See how he hoards his healing, gauges his defenses! One more attack, and he will surely fall!" The voice was that of Duke Lucius Errikale.

"I knew you'd come after me, Errikale. Since you never smile, I had you pegged as a suicidal sort."

"Ironic words from one who stands in plain torchlight behind enemy lines! Don't you know that you're doomed?"



"When you count up how many of your men I've killed so far, tell me. It's either two hundred seventy-three or two hundred seventy-five, but there was this stretch where I was killing so many people at a stroke that I sort of lost count. Oh, wait, it doesn't matter, because I'm doomed. How silly of me!" Lucaine grinned amiably, desperately masking his exhaustion. Two more waves of enemies. He predicted he could handle only that many, perhaps another fifty men, and then he would finally succumb, dropping his guard for just the critical moment needed for them to split his skull. Every second he could rest before they swarmed him again was another second in which Catarin might return from the Tomb, Nicator's Staff blazing in her hand.

And swarm him they did, at Errikale's command. Lucaine killed four of them as he drew his blade, slashing in a great diagonal from sky to ground. Then, holding Three Moons before him with both hands, he summoned the power of fire to his blade, and his attackers fell back from the sudden furnace blast of heat. Three Moons shone like a tiny sun as Lucaine attacked, casting fiery rainbows in all directions, driving his opponents away from the doorway as a goodwife might shoo rats with a broom. But Mycale's men were enraged, and scented victory in Lucaine's trembling stance; they attacked again, tenacious as hunting dogs, giving their very lives to put a single nick in Pyramides' skin.

At every fresh attack, Lucaine caught an enemy stroke with his blade, snaked around it, and counter-attacked with a deadly blow. But during each capture and counter, three other attacks landed, and Lucaine suffered. But he did not die. Already, once, he had exchanged inner energy for physical health; he could not do this again. But he sustained himself through this battle on determination alone, and drank from his final elixir of healing like a man fresh from a desert.

Slashing in eight directions, he blessed the points of the compass with blood, and another Mycalian soldier fell . . . and Lucaine was, again, alone in the doorway of the royal crypt. "Is that all?" he asked, and was unable to banish irony from his tone of voice. He was very nearly dead. He raised his last elixir to his lips, and found it empty. "Here," he said, tossing it in the direction of Lucius Errikale. "Could you go get me a refill?" Conserving the last of his inner power, Lucaine allowed the flames of his sword to fade and die. Blood from unhealed wounds stained Lucaine's skin. The very beating of his heart was turned against him, as it forced precious blood out of his body and into hostile air.

"You are remarkably amusing, Pyramides," said Duke Errikale, stepping into the torch-lit circle before the Tomb. And for the first time in his life, Duke Lucius Errikale smiled. His venomous fangs glistened in the flickering light, and a murmur of shock ran through his loyal ranks. "I will regret killing you."

"I will regret dying," Lucaine said, with weary honesty.

Lucius produced a slim knife from within his clothing, a bone-white dirk that glowed faintly green even in the orange torchlight. "I am curious to see how your Three Moons fares against the Arsenic Fang. The holy weapons of two ancient traditions, pitted one against the other . . . it is poetic, is it not?"

"Do you have any last words, Lord Errikale? Since you've revealed yourself as a Serpentlord, you might want to make some pithy little statement before you die. You know, to sort of set your affairs in order."

"I'll write a whole memoir, Pyramides, after this is over."

"I'm sure that memoir will be a best-seller in Hell, then."

Lucaine Pyramides is a master of The Two Arts, a sword style surrounded with the utmost secrecy. Only once did he mention the name of one of his techniques: the Desperate Angel, the ultimate expression of defiance.

Drawing upon his deepest reserves of hope and fear, passion and regret, Lucaine took all his exhaustion, all his helpless rage, all his futile dreams, and sent them roaring into his blade. The silvery light of heaven, that beckons the dying as they cross death's threshold, suffused Lucaine's living features as his sword began to burn with pure silver. Realizing his peril too late, Lucius raised his dirk in feeble self-defense. He sensed even then that his gesture was worthless.

Lucaine's feet seemed not even to move, yet in an instant Lucaine was behind Errikale, then to one side, then the other, then behind him again. Three Moons left a brilliant trail that briefly formed a broken star, four stellar lines drawn sharp in the dim torchlight. Lucaine shook blood from his sword with a movement of his wrist. Duke

Lucius Errikale fell to the ground in pieces, and the Arsenic Fang, shattered by the first blow, sprayed poisonous acid over the body.

Lucaine slowly sheathed his sword, knowing that come what may, he had no strength to draw it again that night. His legs shook beneath him. As Three Moons came to rest in its sheath, Lucaine fell to his knees, then toppled face-forward onto the stones of the entryway of King's Tomb.

The last thing he saw before he blacked out was the pale blue slipper of Catarin deSangre, and the hem of her dress, lit from above by the Staff of Nicator, as if by a hundred suns.

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## **Public Security Document #3573, Seleucar Imperial Guard**

Item 1. Guard Captain Maxim Everhardt has been relieved of his duties. I am quite aware of the rumors, and wish to make this extremely clear: Prince Mycale did NOT engage in unnatural practices. Captain Everhardt murdered the prince due to temporary insanity of unknown cause, not on the basis of some fictitious "discovery" of the Prince's fictitious habits.

Item 2. The guards who carried out the "cleansing" of Prince Mycale's chamber after his death are not to discuss the circumstances of that assignment or the condition of the chamber. All guardsmen will receive an additional bonus contingent on their obedience to this directive.

Item 3. Should Captain Everhardt be convicted, his execution and burial are to be private, by command of Princess Catarin.

Item 4. Castomira Brangwin disappeared after Catarin's retrieval of the Staff of Nicator. As she has not made a formal surrender to our victorious forces, she has been declared a city enemy. Apprehend her alive if possible.

Item 5. Princess Catarin has chosen to spend a year in mourning for her brother, before formally taking the crown. However, she is the heir, and all guardsmen are to behave as if she were already Empress, in every respect. Infractions will be punished. The succession troubles are over now, and we must put them firmly behind us.

That is all.

Eteocles Tarraquene, Captain of the Guard

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## **From Queen Catarin I, Footnotes**

(Editor's Note: Footnotes is a queer book to begin with. Catarin intended it as her last word on many issues that had arisen during her reign, ranging from controversial tax reforms, to rebel uprisings, to her behavior at the funeral of Castomira Brangwin. The book is most important to historians as the only source of information on Lucaine Pyramides' past, and the mysterious country from which he came. The following eleven paragraphs are the only reliable account of Pyramides' history; the few other accounts come from mercenary acquaintances of Lucaine's, and are widely considered to be tall tales. This text also contains the only knowledge extant of the mysterious nation of Kashar.)

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## **Chapter XIV: The Past of Lucaine Pyramides, As He Told It to Me**

Lucaine Pyramides was born in the country of Kashar, far to the southwest, across a violent and dangerous ocean. His parents were slaves, themselves descendants of humans who had been shipwrecked on that continent perhaps a hundred years ago. Although Lucaine was largely of Sapience stock, his muddy hazel eyes and bronzed skin are evidence of several foreign ancestors. Even his direct father may have been one of the Kashari taskmasters who ruled the slave pits with whip and shout; among the slaves, there was no way to be assured of paternity, and no need.

Lucaine was sold away when he was very young, and raised as a house slave for a noble master. In this he was very lucky; many slaves were ill-used, and died in their prime, but if he served well, a house slave might live into old age, and when he could work no more he might ascend to heaven as a sacrifice to the gods.

As a small child, Lucaine had some chores, but was allowed to run free for much of his day. He was taught the basics of reading, writing, and maths, as shopping and contracting were to be a part of his duties. Watching the other slaves, he learned some of the essentials of gardening, and carpentry, and other crafts. But the most important thing that ever happened to him, the one thing that set him on the path that he would follow for the rest of his life, occurred when he was seven, and just about to become a full-time slave, with a full day's schedule of duties.

Even among the house slaves, life was often harsh. The stronger or more intelligent dominated the weak, taking the easiest work, or the lion's share of the mess. And although as children the bullying had been "good-natured", as Lucaine put it, when he was seven he was deemed "worthy" of the interest of one of the older slaves, a lad of thirteen years or more. Lucaine did not remember the exact cause of the fight, but he does remember being forced into a corner of the slaves' kitchen, shouting defiance even after receiving blow after blow. One of the adult slaves, the old guard captain, watched the fight impassively, making no move to rescue young Lucaine. Only when Lucaine picked up a carving knife and slashed his oppressor to the bone did the captain step in and stop the fight. Lucaine expected to be scourged, or maybe even executed, for using deadly force against an older and more valuable slave, but instead the captain began teaching him the secret Kashar sword style, a fighting system so covered in secrecy that it has no name other than "The Two Arts."

The noble house which owned Lucaine had needed a house slave, but they needed a new warrior slave even more. They accepted the captain's suggestion that Lucaine be promoted to the house guard, and that was when Lucaine was given his sword "Three Moons"; for in Kashar every sword has a name, even those given to slaves, and each is hand-crafted differently.

The Two Arts, Lucaine tells me, are the Draw Art and the Blade Art. If both are practiced to their utmost, it is easier to kill a man by drawing the blade from its sheath than by swinging it while it is naked. I would never have believed this if I had not seen him kill dozens of people in single motions, unsheathing his sword for only a second at a time. Furthermore, the Two Arts require a deep understanding of the inner rhythms and energies of the human body. To my ears, this resembled the Kai disciplines practiced by the Sentaari, and Lucaine admitted that I am probably correct.

When he was seventeen, Lucaine did the unheard-of: he fled his master's residence, killing his teacher in the process. As he tells it, he did not wish to fight his captain and instructor, but when he was caught in the act of escape, the captain forced Lucaine to fight for his life. And Lucaine is certain that his teacher allowed him to win. By pausing each deadly gambit just short of a killing blow, Lucaine's teacher silently gave away the last secrets of the style. Every time I saw Lucaine meditating and asked what was on his mind, he said, "My teacher's last battle."

There is nowhere in Kashar that an escaped slave can flee to. The nation is limited entirely by its natural boundaries: impassable mountains, rocky shoals, bottomless chasms, everlasting storms. Navigation is unknown there, so sailors rightly fear to leave sight of land. Lucaine dared, however. Reaching a northern port, with dogs and men hot on his trail, he boarded a ship and forced the sailors to embark, killing half of them before they surrendered to him. As they set out to sea, he was forced to kill even more of them, until he was sailing with only a skeleton crew. He didn't sleep or eat for three days, fearful of mutiny or poison; fortunately, his ship was overtaken by deep-sea pirates who used a form of celestial navigation to hide outside view of shore and prey on the coastal sea-lanes. When the pirates boarded Lucaine's ship, Lucaine immediately challenged and killed their captain in single combat, and forced their ship to sail northeastward, on the promise of rich spoils should they reach Lucaine's rumored ancestral homeland.

In the end, the pirates did make land on those shores of Sapience furthest from human habitation; and as they made their final harbor, their ship, weakened by storms, struck a reef and sank. The pirates who escaped drowning turned on Lucaine, demanding that he lead them to the "rich cities and defenseless mansions" he had promised them. Upon realizing that he'd been lying to them from the start, they rushed at him, and he killed them to the man.

Thus Lucaine Pyramides was left alone and friendless in the barest wilds of Sapience. Eventually he made his way inland, and learned the language of our continent, and became a common mercenary of most uncommon ability; and there his more well-known history begins.

From Morlana ni'Choya, *Convergence: Annotated Letters of Catarin I*

This letter, written in the first month after Catarin's discovery of the Staff of Nicator, is the first recorded instance of her feelings for Lucaine Pyramides. Although of course Leona Fontaine's famous novel describes Catarin as being attracted to him at first sight, Catarin's own words hint at a somewhat later starting point for her emotions.

Riana Galford was the second daughter of the Earl of Jaru, one of Catarin's most dedicated supporters. However, Catarin's friendship with her dates from the three years they roomed together at the Lesser Shrine of Vastar, a nunnery that also housed an exclusive girls' academy. Although Catarin made friends easily, and tended to keep them even after years of separation, Riana Galford is one of only three with whom she shared her feelings about Lucaine.

Like all nobles of that or any other time, Catarin had an ingrained habit of circumspection. Although she speaks in detail about her feelings, she never names names, lest the letter surface and cause embarrassment. This habit was inflexible and nearly subconscious. The consequences of indiscretion are known all too well; she never thought for a moment that her obliqueness might in itself cause pain.

Dear Riana,

I'm sorry my letters have been so serious lately. Affairs of state press hard on me. Even with all of Lord Grandier's help, I don't feel truly fit to take the throne. I've been using this time as much to prepare for rulership as to grieve for my poor brother. Since Mycale was so sickly as a child, Father made sure I learned some statesmanship in case Mycale should succumb to some childhood illness . . . but he never taught me exactly how complex and brutal politics can be. The people who backed Mycale are still stubborn about me. I wish I could pass on this burden to someone else, but it is mine alone to bear. The Staff chose me.

That's something I'm worried about. I'm sworn never to relate the visions that came to me in the King's Tomb, but I can say that for the first few hours after I received the Staff, it glowed with all its storied radiance. I was told that "the true blood of Nicator, who was born on the Sangre Plains and whose parents were slain there; the child of the regal blood will unlock the power of the Staff in time of greatest need, and of greatest strength and defiance." And the Staff did shine, and all bowed before it, but soon after I'd secured the reluctant fealty of the opposing armies, the Staff flickered out and grew cold. Where Nicator used its divine glow as a constant reminder of his foreordained dominion, I can rely only on myself and my allies. I fear that perhaps I lack the strength that my ancestors had. I can only pray to the gods for guidance.

And I thank the gods that I have good friends to rely on. Lord Grandier has proven as true a friend to me as he was to my father. He's helped me negotiate the minefields of court, to such extent that I'm beginning to feel like the ruler I know I must become. Moreover, he's taken most of the responsibilities on himself, dealing with the Council of Lords and the Hall of Patricians, clearing the way for my coronation. Ashtan and Shallam have dithered over whether to acknowledge me formally. There has never been a female ruler of Seleucar. There's not even really a word for such a person; Lord Grandier has coined the word "empress," but it's much more likely that history will remember me as a queen, even though it remembers my ancestors as emperors.

Lord Grandier has been a solid stone in the past month's quicksand, but I've got another person to rely on, too. I don't want to say too much . . . there might be a man in my life before long. Remember the boys we swooned over when we were fifteen? They were nothing before this man. Every time I acknowledge his bow, I'm amazed that he's sworn service to me, when he is clearly without peer. I fear to commit too much to paper, for I know too well that these feelings can quickly prove empty, or be destroyed by some sudden revelation. Remember my brief affair with that dashing young nobleman? The one who sent me the lilies? The sting of that foolishness still resides in my heart.

Historical perspective reveals this "dashing young nobleman" to be the future Earl of Tomaque, Zoltan deChalce. His journal entries suggest that he courted Catarin for his personal advancement, but unwittingly led her to overestimate the depth of his feelings for her. Given the extremely rigid rules of social conduct that

pertained at that level of society, it is unlikely that any physical impropriety took place. Nonetheless, when Zoltan broke off the affair, Catarin was heartbroken. Details such as this have been glossed over in formal histories, but the real Catarin was far more interesting and human than the storybook heroine.

I will tell you more as I become more sure of my feelings, and the worthiness of their object. Wish me luck!

Yours,  
Catarin deSangre

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## Lucaine Pyramides, Catarin (Poem 21)

"The sword shines death . . . without mercy . . . kill!"  
(warrior chant of Kashar)

My only poetry is my sword:  
Strike and counter, thrust, riposte,  
Direct, sinister, heavenly.  
From earth to sky I draw my blade,  
Watch it glitter in the light;  
Beauty lives from fight to fight—  
All is one; the fight is all.  
Yet Catarin wakes poetry in me  
That needs no streak of blood to earn its pay  
And Catarin wakes poetry in me  
That melds my words with yearning, learns the way  
To soar up skyward, freer than my sword,  
Freer than my earthbound soul:  
For Catarin wakes heresy in me.  
My soul was dead for years, pledged for years to a dead god,  
My every deed a burnt offering to Combat, Matsuhama.  
And now my faith is shaken by this girl I could not kill.  
For once, for love, for a moment or two, my dancing blade is still.

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## From Morlana ni'Choya, Convergence: Annotated Letters of Catarin I

Dear Alkiera,

I'm becoming more and more convinced that this man is the one for me. In my position, I must give my heart only with greatest caution, so I must still hold back until I am absolutely certain; but sometimes I'm nearly overwhelmed. Even at fifteen, glancing across a ballroom floor at my momentary crush, I never felt so completely . . . idiotic? Yes, and wonderful!

When infatuation is a cart of bricks barreling downhill, reason makes a poor handbrake. When we took that walk through Kephry Park last month, I whispered in your ear who I loved. You met him at the ball, didn't you? Do you understand how I feel? Do you think he's as wonderful as I do? I hope not, for then I would have to exile you out of jealousy.

The ball Catarin mentions is the crowning event in the annual Festival of the Gates in Imperial Seleucar. The four gates of the city, each believed sacred to a different god, are blessed in rituals throughout the day, then two parades march through the city, one from east to west and one from north to south, intersecting at the Royal Square in an elaborate rehearsed interchange. That year, the parades' routes had been changed, as the traditional meeting at the Royal Square might have been considered tasteless. The ball, however, was held at the Palace as usual, and even the socially awkward Lucaine Pyramides was in attendance. Though he politely danced with the many women who sought his attention, and did so with exceptional grace (being a quick study of complex physical movements), he spoke no more than five words at a time. In her own diaries, Lady Alkiera described him as "silent, verging on sullen . . . unexceptional except perhaps in dexterity," and was astonished to learn of Catarin's attraction to him.

The rebuilding of the national polity proceeds apace. My preliminary visits to Ashtan and Shallam suggest that a great deal of bridge-building must occur before they are prepared to fully accept me as sovereign. Lord Grandier still insists that I should "expedite coronation," but I feel in my heart that if I assume the throne now, without the express support of all my countrymen, I will be little more than an usurper. To win the loyalty of the underkings under such a circumstance would be thrice as difficult. I will carry out the rest of my year of mourning for Mycale; that, at least, is an honest reason for my delay, if not the only one. Please give your father and mother my love, but save some for yourself. I miss you, and will surely arrange to visit you the next time I travel to Tasur'ke.

Yours,  
Catarin deSangre

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### Lucaine Pyramides, Catarin (Poem 32)

Floating lilies cross the marble floor  
White dress petals shine with sequin dew  
Reed-strong men, broken, quick to heal  
The water is brackish with plots and dreams.

Floating lilies swirl in gossip's wake  
Dashing men, like reeds at water's edge  
I dare the current: move me if you can.  
I walk the surface of the lake of schemes.

Floating lilies look to me for love  
Swaying reeds envision my defeat  
Their words are fabrication, water silk  
But if lies are fabric, I can see the seams.

I walk the surface of the lake, unaware  
Catarin walks the bottom, as if water were air.  
Once, for a moment, we dance;  
We speak of knights and strangers, plots and danger...  
This lake drowns romance.

From Alain, One Thousand Haiku, Five with Names

Castomira

Rain mist is brilliance  
Omen bird fulfills itself  
In full emptiness

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### From The Sealed Files of Castomira Brangwin

It's been six months since I went into hiding. Mycale is dead, killed by his most trusted servant, just as I planned. While I was in the city, I layered Everhardt in enchantments of blindness. As soon as I left, Everhardt understood what had been happening in Mycale's rooms all along, and he conveniently killed the only person who could link Mycale's evil to my own.

To the lords who supported Mycale, I'm still a hero. Mycale was a monster, Lucius was a Serpentlord, but they have no such label for sweet, brave Castomira. I'm their mascot, as Catarin was to her side. Men love to have a defenseless woman to protect. They fight harder. Most of the lords outside Seleucar are willing to fight on my side. A hundred thousand men await my call to muster. I've been reading history. The speeches of Nicator are

unintentionally hilarious. He speaks of a nation without internal conflict or war, existing only to fight evil. It seems he has failed, for now the evil is within.

I expected a challenge, but Catarin has simply given me the opportunity I need. She hasn't ascended to the throne! Out of mourning for Mycale, yet! Even I could not have cut her throat as beautifully as she's done for herself. In six months, she will rise to become Empress of Seleucar. But I am already six months pregnant, and before Catarin can lay a finger on the crown, I will lodge the claim of Mycale's son. My powers have assured that the baby will be male.

Many supported Mycale, for he was a man, while Catarin most evidently was not. And Mycale was ill-formed and useless! How many more will support my darling baby Parni, whom they can mold to their own will as he grows up? And they must come to me, for it is I who will control the child. Finally, I will have what I have sought for so long: Seleucar in the palm of my hand, and Catarin's throat beneath my heel.

Deis failed at Beggar's Arch, but I have spoken to him at length since then. Our plans are well-laid. Trenton has many associates, and the right amount of gold can orchestrate any number of assassins, like a conductor's baton. Tune your ears: there will be a symphony of death.

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## From Morlana ni'Choya, *Convergence: Annotated Letters of Catarin I*

Dear Alkiera,

It is final. I have fallen firmly in love. Perhaps my emotion will prove to be the utmost foolishness, but I care not a bit: it is true, and it will last. When first he presented me his sword, I did not suspect what power he would come to have over my heart. But through the battles that followed, physical and spiritual, he remained at my side. He guarded me, took fierce wounds for me, listened to me when I thought aloud, sympathized with my causes, supported me in my angers, commiserated with me in my moments of sadness. And I must come to admit that I love him for it, more than mere infatuation can explain. It is too perfect, and too tragic . . . I the princess, he the noble knight, casting longing glances at each other across a crowded room.

How can you understand my emotion now, though? You are newly wed, married scarce a year, and you and your husband knew as children that you were made for one another. Your story is so perfectly charming that no bard could ever make more than a cinquain of it. But I am lost and burning, weighted with destiny as with heavy stones, and until my true love speaks his mind and heart aloud, I cannot be free. Perhaps I shall die of a broken heart, and when historians view these letters, perhaps my love, by then gray-haired and dour, will read these words and cry, seeing at last that it truly was him that I loved, and for his own sake I could not be the first to voice my emotions. But I can at least let you know. There is one man who has served me better than any other, and he deserves my love more than any man alive.

Your loving friend,  
Catarin deSangre

P.S. Here is the locket you lent me those many months ago. I'm sorry for the delay in returning it.

This letter describes no one but Lucaine Pyramides. Although Catarin never for a moment lacked ardent suitors, she showed none of them even a fifth of the favor that she showed Lucaine, and none of the suitors, in their turn, served Catarin even a twentieth as well as he. Lucaine was named head of her personal bodyguard. Off-duty, Lucaine was invited to every function Catarin attended. Lucaine and Catarin often conversed in private, behind closed doors: a practice that might have been considered scandalous if the recent wars had not birthed an atmosphere of daring and romance.

The common folk assumed that the two were lovers already. The court was close enough to the princess to know that matters were not so clear-cut; but those who claimed to be in the know, whether they claimed the princess a virgin or a vixen, were unconvincing. In any case, this fact is indisputable: if the princess proclaimed her love for "the one man who has served me better than any other," that man could only be Lucaine. But if Catarin had only understood just how unworthy Lucaine considered himself, she might have made her phrasing even more explicit.

Dear Alkiera,

I struggle to avoid the sin of pride. My royal blood and upbringing guarantees that no matter what I do, I will always have an overtone of haughtiness. In recognizing this, I strive to minimize it. Even an empress should not be imperious, in defiance of all logic.

Catarin's best attempts at humility only made her look condescending, in truth. Fortunately, it was not long before she learned that it is possible, even preferable, for a queen to be gracious and compassionate without being polite or approachable.

But peasants and princesses alike must sometimes boast, and this time I believe I've truly trounced my troubles. Surely, my knightly beloved must express his feelings to me now!

For so long, he has been silent, yet I can see in his eyes and his stance that he loves me. I'm almost positive. But I can't quite be sure... and it would be improper for me to speak to him of love before he has broached the topic. Not only would it be unladylike, but my position as heiress would place him under pressure to submit to me even if he did not love me in his heart. I would never know for certain that he truly loved me back! And yet, surely he is silent only because he fears rejection? I try to encourage him in small ways, but men are sometimes blind and stubborn in matters of the heart.

So I have outflanked his self-imposed ignorance. My knight had business to attend to in Tasur'ke, and so I gave him a note to take to you. Surely you've already received it, for none can travel overland as swiftly as he. In that note, I declare my love for him in the most unmistakable of terms. And, as you've already noticed, the envelope was not sealed. An "oversight" on my part. You got your locket back? It was folded into the letter in such a way that the weight of the locket would pull the note out of the envelope, causing it to flutter open. A tiny enchantment purchased from a local wizard should have drawn his eye inescapably to the sentence, "I have fallen firmly in love." And, reading that, if he truly loves me, he would be unable to avoid reading the rest of the letter, regardless of my privacy. Surely he must know now that I love him . . . I can only hope I am correct, and he loves me back. I will tell you more when I hear it.

Your devoted friend,  
Catarin deSangre

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### Lucaine Pyramides, Catarin (Poem 36)

Twenty years of darkness made my eyes sharp  
I sought the single sun among myriad stars  
As I killed for shining gold, I sought the true light.  
True light of  
    Dreams that I  
        could not deny.

Twenty years of darkness; never to love,  
Never to touch solid stone; never to breathe.  
The more evil I became, the greater my need  
For redemption,  
    perfection,  
        an end to deceit.

Twenty years of self-deceit: Catarin, the truth.  
In her name I hear the words "Lucaine, your soul is clear."  
And I am bound to her with golden wire, sick with desire  
For her, and I know  
    all too well  
        that she cannot be mine.

Twenty years of darkness.



How many more in light?  
 The sinner Pyramides lurks in darkness  
 Hound of justice, strong right hand . . .  
 She should not stoop to pick me up.  
 I leave her to her "noble knight"  
 And dream that I am happy,  
 That I rest within the light.

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## From Morlana ni'Choya, *Convergence: Annotated Letters of Catarin I*

Dear Portia,

I told you before of my stratagem with the note. Alkiera had a psychometrist examine the note, when I requested it, and she reports that my guardian did read it, and reacted to it with strong emotions. And he has responded only with subtle rejections, one after another, in response to all of my subtle invitations. It is clear that although he has received my message, he does not share my feelings.

"Psychometry" was the art, now lost to all but the most learned psychics, of reading the past and future of a material object. Emotions and events connected to the object could be divined by an experienced mystic. But in the case of the strongest emotions—hatred, thwarted love, desperation—only the presence of emotion could be detected, not its exact nature.

Forgive my emotionless prose. Know that I feel loss, and anger, and desire. But should I use a more expressive style in this letter, I would blur the ink with tears. I am visiting Nicopolis soon. I can cry on your shoulder then. And perhaps in time, I'll quit loving him after all. I have many responsibilities. I can't spend too much time staring out the window like a lovesick girl . . . lovesick girl though I may be.

Yours in despair,  
 Catarin deSangre

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## Lucaine Pyramides, *Catarin (Poem 37)*

She looked at me today and asked to know the pain I hold inside  
 "I know you're strong, but not from pride—what do you hide?"  
 With sword in hand I never doubt, but here . . .  
 I cannot let my feelings out. "Nothing . . ."  
 . . .dear.

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## From Lord Damen Kephry, *Collected Correspondence*

My dearest Margaux,

It seems that the danger has not fully passed. Only when Catarin is crowned will I feel comfortable having you in the city. For now, please remain at our family estates in Aster Malik, and know that my thoughts are forever with you. Within Seleucar, you may yet be at risk; but in remote Aster Malik, you are out of the way of whatever battles may still await.

Why do I speak of battles, even ten months after the bloody War of Succession? I hold no bitterness as to the war's outcome. I realize now that Catarin truly was the better successor, and although I do not regret my support of Mycale, I am willing to embrace Catarin as my queen and give her my undying loyalty. Unfortunately, Catarin's period of grieving, however appropriate and fitting, has allowed for unsettling portents. The underkings of Ashtan and Shallam refuse to formally recognize Catarin's authority until she is crowned. They bow only grudgingly to the diplomatic soothing of Prime Minister Orin Grandier. Leophine Errikale, the new Duke of Seleucar, has gone to great lengths to disassociate himself from his elder brother, the late Lucius Errikale, but Leophine has not gone so far as to formally align himself with Catarin. As a former supporter of

Mycale, and as a highly-respected veteran of the now-dissolved Guild of Knights, I have been privy to frequent rumors: that Castomira Brangwin, although a wanted outlaw, has been visiting the homes of various noblemen, those who were most interested in using Prince Mycale for their own ends. Although I have sometimes been accused of using my sword-arm before using my brain, even I can guess that Castomira is planning further mischief.

When he opposed me, I spoke of Lucaine Pyramides as a demon in human form. However, in these past months, I have come to respect him, if not to know him. He is a difficult man to come to know. The only person to whom he speaks on a regular basis is Catarin herself, and he receives his orders only from her. He is so well-behaved and silent, now, that it is hard to believe he was once the most amoral and mercenary brigand on Sapience. He spends all of his free time alone. He practices his sword arts in a locked cellar of the palace, where none may learn by observing him. I agree with this practice, as I would cheerfully retire from the business of combat upon learning that there were two warriors in the world like Lucaine Pyramides (farming being greatly preferable to death). When he is not training, however, he is locked in his own room, doing what, only the gods know. The word among the palace staff is that he writes; the soft sounds of a fountain pen can be heard from behind his door, day or night, and his fireplace is filled with the gray dust of burned paper. Perhaps he records the secrets of his swordsmanship, to pass on to descendants. Perhaps he writes his memoir. He might as easily be writing a cookbook, but speculation runs wild.

Lucaine Pyramides is easily the object of half the rumors in Sapience at this moment, and his very reticence makes him all the more intriguing . . . even, I admit, to me. But my attempts to engage him in conversation have all been met with intense awkwardness. He is not a social person, and although I can tell that he is quite intelligent, he has no talent for speaking the right words at the right moment. And after all, his areas of expertise are not good topics for idle chit-chat. I can't ask him about his fighting style. I don't wish to talk to him about the best ways to ambush travelers and take their valuables. And discussing the strengths and weaknesses of Catarin's personal guard, of whom Lucaine has assumed command, would likely be misinterpreted. I wonder what Lucaine himself thinks of his newfound estate. Is it strange for him, to have changed so quickly from dreaded brigand to honored champion? What could possibly have motivated him? A persistent rumor suggests that he has fallen in love with the princess, but surely a man of his bravery would have confessed his love to her by now, and been either accepted or rejected.

I have been quite busy myself, as you already know. The rebuilding of the Castle of Twelve has been progressing quite well. I hope to re-establish the Guild of Knights, although it seems that the stars are against such an endeavor. Failing that, perhaps I will join the Templars; they have already said that they would welcome me as an instructor, to further introduce the skills of the Knights into their practice. I'm not certain that a life of unending worship appeals to me, however. There is a continuous covert struggle in progress between Ashtan and Shallam. Even in this time of peace, they are constantly bickering over the boundaries formed by Shallam's shrines. Do I really want to spend every waking hour sacrificing goats over the Shallamese shrines to strengthen them against some hypothetical Ashtanian incursion?

I think I can spend my time more productively at home with you. I will try to arrange a visit to Aster Malik soon. Until then, my love, hold tight, and do not forget me. Give my love to the children.

Your loving husband,  
Lord Damen Kephry

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### Lucaine Pyramides, Catarin (Poem 51)

I would remember the wilds by howling at the moon . . .  
But it would wake her.

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### Lucaine Pyramides, Catarin (Poem 79)

if at this very point she were to tell me she loved me what then would i be able to say that i've always loved her back or would she be shocked scared compassionate that i'd so long been lost on her lost for her lost to her lost in her

a lost soul her dog warrior killing to help her bring life from death sending life to death in ironic alchemy a chimerical marriage of steel and heart blood

and i know i could kiss her and die the next day

but if she said that she loved me then what would i say

my blood is still red but my heart has turned gray

and although i can kill i don't know how to pray for her to stay with me and if she said she loved me i might die

because what if we love and our love dies quick abrupt like killing a man on icy plains to watch his last breath ghost away and turn to fight the next in battle last man living wins

but if this love dies under swords of fate or failure then there are no more foes to fight there's no more light

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### **From Leona Fontaine, *Sentinel: The Murder of Lucaine Pyramides***

Of late, he had tried to be as quiet and undemanding as possible. Her every glance had come to be a form of torture. He could accept that she had secretly given her heart to one of her many noble suitors, but he could come to no accommodation with the gas-flame blue of her eyes. He wanted to avoid her, to be free to dream of her in peace, to be with her every moment, and the paradox slowly bore down upon his mind like a heavy weight.

"Your Highness." He knocked softly at the open door of Catarin's study, where she sat penning a letter.

"Lucaine. Thank you for coming to see me before you leave. Please, be seated." Her smile was sincere. It touched Lucaine's heart like a thorn.

"I would never leave without your blessing." Lucaine was grave.

"You've been so serious lately, Lucaine. I assumed this would be a vacation for you. You've never even been to Ashtan proper, have you? There's a lot to see."

"The Tournament of Blades sounds like fun," Lucaine said drably. "And if a show of personal power is what it'll take to make Ashtan's nobility respect you, then I'll be glad to provide one."

"Then why so sad, Lucaine? You've been unhappy for the past five months, despite my best attempts to cheer you. I know better than to throw you a ball. But it's been weeks since you rode with me, and you didn't attend the joust at all. I thought it would interest you."

"You held that joust on my account?"

"Well, I hinted that you might want to go. I kept a seat free in the royal box."

"I'm sorry. If you had asked outright, I would have attended."

"But then it would be a command, Lucaine, and I would never wish to command you."

"But Catarin . . . I am at your command." Lucaine held her gaze for a long moment, during which Catarin's heart began to pound.

She looked away, suddenly. Lucaine interpreted her motion as reticence, and stood straighter. "At any rate, I must depart soon if I am to reach Ashtan by nightfall. Will you bless my sword?"

"Yes," she said. Lucaine placed the sword upon the desk. Catarin placed her hand upon the lacquered sheath. "Lucaine?"

"Your Highness?"

Catarin was silent for long seconds. Lucaine searched her face as if memorizing it, as if he had not already done so long ago.

"Lucaine. What would you do if I told you that I loved you?"

A million daydreams froze and shattered in Lucaine's mind. He did not pause to think.

"I asked myself that, only two weeks ago."

Catarin waited for him to go on, but saw with apprehension that he was lost in thought, staring at a point somewhere beyond her.

"What . . . what did you decide?"

Lucaine focused on her, suddenly, with an intensity, a ferocity, that nearly made her flinch. "First, tell me."

"Tell you . . . oh." Suddenly, for some reason, Catarin was more afraid than she had ever been. Afraid that in reaching for him, she would lose him. Afraid that he might gain total power over her. Afraid of the sound of her own voice.

Catarin started to speak, but choked on her own words. She swallowed hard. Took a breath. "Yes," she managed at last. "I love you. I have loved you ever since King's Tomb."

Lucaine stood upright as suddenly as if gravity had been reversed, so explosively that he actually hung in the air for a second before landing on his feet. Fine dust exploded from the bookshelves as Lucaine's inner power surged as if for battle. In a blur, Lucaine moved himself to the balcony outside the study. There, he gripped the rail so hard that his fingers crushed marks in the wood.

It seemed as though he'd longed for Catarin his entire life, and now he could not conceivably express the full scope of his feelings; could not belittle her uniqueness with commonplace words of love. The realization of all his dreams left him electrified, and like a man being electrocuted, he could not move, for every nerve was on fire. Catarin stared, wide-eyed, uncertain what she'd unleashed.

Five minutes passed. Lucaine's inner turmoil paralyzed him, and Catarin was frozen, afraid to disturb his reverie. Then the study clock chimed the quarter-hour, and Lucaine was distracted from his paralysis. "Catarin," he said, as if the word were a wish.

"Lucaine?" she said, disaster and desire writ double on her face.

"I'm going to Ashtan."

Catarin blinked in anticipation of tears, stricken.

"Catarin, there's nothing I can say right now that is . . . that is worthy of you. When I get back . . ." Lucaine trailed off, completely helpless. She must read his poems. But first, he had to write the last one, the perfect one, the one that would express once and for all the depth of his love. The one that would make her love him back just as much. The one . . . "Please promise you'll wait for me. I don't want you to be hurt." And with those completely ambiguous comments, Lucaine Pyramides left Catarin, to set out on the long road to Ashtan, to compete in the Tournament of Blades.

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## Lucaine Pyramides, Catarin (Poem 99)

She just told me she loved me. And my words have failed me . . . utterly.

Trenton Deis, Last Will and Testament

Some hold that "good" and "evil" are realities higher and more substantial than human actions. However, the merit of this view is directly linked to the optimistic belief that the attributes of mortal actions (e.g., bravery, foolishness, goodness, cruelty) are somehow capable of being considered independent of mortal actions. I do not share this belief.

Some will hold that since Lucaine Pyramides spared me at the Battle of Beggar's Arch, it will be an act of "evil" to kill him today. Let them think as they wish. It is being noised that he freed me out of compassion; this is propaganda. He did not kill me on the spot, but sent me to the gallows. The jailers being less competent than Pyramides, I escaped them. Small wonder that Catarin now speaks of "the mercy of Lucaine Pyramides." The weakness of mercy is far more noble than weak guardsmen, and a lie at the right time is not so "evil" as one might think.

So be it: as Mycale's men rode into the trap at Beggar's Arch, I tried to kill Lucaine Pyramides and was defeated. Now Catarin has won her first war . . . and Lucaine Pyramides rides into my own trap. And I will kill him.

This I, Trenton Deis, do attest.

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### **From Leona Fontaine, *Sentinel: The Murder of Lucaine Pyramides***

Editor's note: The following account is pure conjecture on the part of the novelist. Although it is based on historical supposition, no reliable record exists, only a forest of competing hypotheses.

Shredded by leaves, the noontide sun cast mosaic shadows on the notepad of Lucaine Pyramides, as he sat against a tree by the roadside. Hastily, intently, his fountain pen skated and glided across the coarse paper, filling the page with his dense yet haphazard handwriting. Three Moons lay forgotten to his side as he wrote, gripped by a soul-wracking inspiration, the strongest emotion he'd ever committed to paper. Catarin loved him. That love was deadly and elating, like the energy singing between the earth and the moon, like bonds of pure sunlight, like fifty lightning bolts forged into a sword. With this, his final poem, he could capture that energy forever . . . he could prove to her that his love was strong enough to last beyond life. He could say to her, in ink on paper, what he could not say to her using the flawed and impermanent canvas of expression and voice. His mind was a thousand miles above the ground, his body tingled and grew numb, his clenched hand could not even cramp due to its furious motion, and his immortal soul passed entirely into his pen, its salvation absolutely dependent on the perfection of his written words.

He wrote the final word. His breath left his lungs in a great sigh. His head came to rest against the rough bark. Carefully, he blew on the paper to dry it, then capped his pen and returned it to its case. Then, about to stand, he reached for his sword, and touched only grass.

"A fine blade indeed, Pyramides."

Lucaine's senses were alive again, belatedly. Through minute signs, he detected a dozen men hidden in the forest around him, all within easy sprinting distance. He turned slowly, and with absolute assurance, to confront Trenton Deis. Clad in a cloak the color of aged bone, the assassin drew Lucaine's sword and stared coldly at its delicate curve and fine grain.

"You haven't the skill to use it," Lucaine said, and began to walk towards his nemesis with a steady and confident pace.

"I don't plan to use this sword, Pyramides." Deis took a deep breath, then swung Three Moons, backhand, at a mighty oak. The blade sank two feet deep into the wood, cutting halfway through the trunk. "You've said time and again that your sword is your word." Placing both hands on the hilt, Deis pushed downward with all his might, bending the fragile steel beyond until it hummed with tension. The blade broke with a sound like a spike being driven into a wooden block. "What words do you have for that?"

Without words, Lucaine broke into a run, but Trenton Deis flitted back away from him, as if carried on the breeze. No master swordsman, no Serpentlord, Trenton Deis nonetheless carried deadly knowledge with him; he could move as abruptly as a lizard, strike without giving warning of his intent, scale buildings, spot motion at a mile's distance, blend into his surroundings as if he'd been there since the Creation. And even without the secrets

of poison or magic, he had powerful cards to play; as he fell back from his hated adversary, he drew a small waxed envelope from his sleeve, and flung its mixture of pepper oil and lye in Lucaine's face.

Though he flung up his hands, still the vile melange found Lucaine's eyes. Blinded and agonized, Lucaine did not so much as twitch; he calmed his breathing, cast forth his senses, and prepared to fight, unarmed, by sound and feel. He summoned the power of fire to his hands, as Trenton Deis's hired jackals encircled him. As his flesh began to scorch and burn, they attacked.

Lucaine struck, lashing out to every side with blows worthy of a master monk, setting men ablaze with every strike. But without his sword, he could not kill with every stroke. His blows brought cries of pain and anger, and the assault redoubled. By instinct, he dodged blows, but for every one he dodged, another struck home. Spears pierced his flesh, pinning him in place. He reached for a healing elixir, but his hands set the pinewood vial afire. He struggled, but only drove the barbs deeper into his body. His power was in speed and spirit, not in physical strength, and he could not win free.

With a supreme effort, he brought fire to his entire body, and pushed it outward in a mighty wave, an exploding hurricane of blazing heat, and his enemies fell back, screaming. Lucaine choked back a scream himself, as he felt his skin wither and crack in the blast. He was almost dead. With an effort, he calmed his spirit, and began to invoke the power of ice, trying to quench the flames that fed on his body.

"Pyramides. You're entirely amazing, you know that, don't you? I'd meant to make you suffer, and now you've burned yourself alive just for my entertainment." Lucaine's seared ears couldn't make out the direction of Deis's voice, but he knew the assassin was close. "I'm sorry to cut this short, but I seem to hear a royal patrol approaching. I'll leave them a special present."

Lucaine brought to his blistered face a semblance of his devil's grin, and began to rip spears from his flesh and hurl them in random directions. Perhaps one would strike true. All his powers were expended, leaving him only defiance.

And the long straight sword of Trenton Deis slid gently, almost lovingly, under his breastbone and through his heart. As the final drops of Lucaine's blood began to strike the ground, storm clouds knotted like a fist above the site of his death.

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## From Alain, One Thousand Haiku, Five with Names

Spine-weary sadness  
Endless rain revives earth's dust  
But Lucaine's, never.

Crowned by a symbol  
She reigns in death's fell shadow  
Her foe is patient.

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## Lucaine Pyramides, Catarin (Final)

Driven low by driving rain, it's easy to be born again, cracking like a fallen leaf that falls before its time is done, and now I know my time has come 'cause there's an iceberg on my tongue, melting slow in driving rain whose echoes form the dim refrain — Bind yourself and you can be the one soul who is truly free and if your eyes won't let you see then trust your pulse and follow me — Driving blind in blinding rain that turns to hail and back again I'm driven by the driving rain, I am the winter's melting dream, the final human carved of ice that turns to steam, carved of ice that shatters sunrays peeking through the parting clouds, shatters sun to rainbow shackles, binding me to final heaven, lightning calling to me saying — Bind yourself and you can be the one soul who is one with me and if your mind won't let you see then trust your feet and walk with me — Thunderheads embrace the world like battle flags that flow and swirl and snap when sending men to war to fight and fall and hope to rise with silent glory bleeding off them, shining like the falling rain that sweeps the lake with rippling waves, shining like the dancing eyes that sparkle as she dances free, dances spirals 'cross the waves, her rain-dark dress a battle flag that flies the colors of my hope, flies the letters of belief, spells the words that keep me trying,

fighting free of slowly dying, spells the words she whispered to me — Bind yourself in love to me and maybe then we'll both be free and if your mask won't let you see then trust your lips and come to me —

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## **From Morlana ni'Choya, Convergence: Annotated Letters of Catarin deSangre**

Dear Riana,

I write this in the dim hope that you will receive it safely. Castomira's so-called "Royal Elites" are rapidly becoming a hazard for couriers. I've hired an independent, a Serpentlord named Caprian Zyle, to bear this message quickly to Jaru. I have instructions for your father; they're enclosed.

The situation in Imperial Seleucar is desperate. Leophine Errikale continues to express a pious neutrality, but he must eventually be swayed by the weight of Castomira's supporters. I'm sure you're up to date on the news? Castomira bore a son by Mycale, and named him Parni. The child's claim is weakened by illegitimacy only as much as my claim is weakened by my gender. Law and tradition interact torturously, but in the end, the empire must follow whomever is crowned, and in my absence, Castomira might crown the child within a few months. Her legal status as a war criminal does not affect Parni's personal claim, but it does hinder Castomira in advancing it; that small mercy is the only thing that gives me hope.

I'm traveling from manor to manor, trying to gain support, trying to learn who my friends are. Orin Grandier taught me much, and introduced me to a great many people, before he was assassinated, but with Imperial Seleucar in Castomira's grip, under martial law, most of the lords who would have supported me are reluctant to make a commitment. Many have joined Castomira's cause, and they send levies of soldiers to the city. An army is slowly amassing, to forestall any military move I might make. That, too, makes it difficult for me to gain material assistance from lords who once backed me wholeheartedly, even though I hear a waterfall of empty words.

My political position is growing closer to hopeless each day, and execution or exile are distinct possibilities. But I might welcome failure, for my heart has been broken in a hundred places. Lucaine Pyramides is dead.

I was the first to find him, since I fled the palace to follow his route. The assassinations at the palace must have been timed to coincide with Lucaine's murder, robbing me of all my closest supporters. They . . . they burned him alive, before stabbing him to death. I can't imagine by what treachery they overpowered him. At the scene of the murder, they left his sword, in two pieces. The end of the blade is buried in an ancient oak, and the tree will surely grow around it, preserving it forever. The hilt and the other half of the blade are with me, along a notebook full of poems, written on bloodstained paper. Now tearstained, as well. I read it every day, and every day I waver between suicide and revenge. It will have to be one or the other.

I never knew how much he loved me. And now that I know, I don't think that I can ever love again. He wrote one hundred poems, and in them I can track the progress of a love I never got a chance to return. It's been raining for weeks now. I feel certain that the skies themselves mourn, as I do. The jewels in the Staff of Nicator have changed from white diamond to smoky quartz. Does this mean that the Staff shares my grief, as well? Is the Staff causing the rain? Or is the Staff weakening, along with my inner resolve, warping along with my soul?

Pray for my victory, for I will need the help of all the gods.

Yours,  
Catarin

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## **From Lord Damen Kephry, Collected Correspondence**

My dearest Margaux,

My astonishment is complete, but my loyalties are not so baffled. A Second War of Succession is inevitable now, and I cannot wait to fight for my rightful ruler! But this story does not merit a haphazard telling, and so I must begin at the beginning.

I'd been invited to take command of the newly-formed Royal Elites. Leophine Errikale had created the Elites as a peacekeeping force, and intended it to be a fully neutral one. However, in the wake of the assassinations of Catarin's key supporters, the Royal Elites "coincidentally" came to be commanded entirely by officers who had fought on Mycale's side in the recent War of Succession. Leophine Errikale might have wished to distance himself from his late brother, but he also held a keen knowledge of which way the wind was blowing.

As I'd been a vocal supporter of Mycale during the War, and since my reputation is one of integrity and courage, the new Duke of Seleucar was only too eager to have me as Knight-Commander of the Royal Elites: a figurehead position, no doubt, but still one that interested me. Perhaps as official leader of the Royal Elites, I could take steps to make them truly neutral, instead of simply puppets to Castomira's hidden will. For there could be no doubt who was behind the recent assassinations, and Catarin's flight from the city. The other lords, greedy though they might be, were also craven. Only Castomira had both the ruthlessness and the bravery to unleash such a concerted attack.

Remembering that fell night, I am tremendously glad that I asked you to stay at our country home with the children. Assassination is always a fear among prominent nobles, but for seventeen to die in a single night is unheard-of. Some were poisoned. Some fell prey to convincing "accidents." Some were killed by stealth, some were killed openly by masked mercenaries, and one was even killed by the suspicious explosion of his alchemical laboratory. Lord Orin Grandier, Catarin's strong voice in the circles of power, was found hanged in his bedchamber, with spikes driven through his eyes. Early that morning, Catarin fled the city with a tiny retinue, and even she barely escaped an assassin's knife. Only the alertness of her personal guard saved her from the black-clad Serpentlords who attempted to infiltrate her room by night. I understand her bodyguards were hand-picked by Lucaine Pyramides. He chose well. I was aggrieved to learn of his death. He was a good man, in the end.

The new turmoil in the city is tragic. I'd been certain that Catarin would quietly assume the throne, and so I'd never declared personal loyalty to her, thinking my support unnecessary. Perhaps if I, and others in my situation, had lent Catarin the legitimacy she needed, Castomira would never have dared to carry out her vengeful plot. However, since the former Mycale supporters assumed that I would support the infant Parni against his noble aunt, I found myself in a position to subvert Castomira's faction from within. In resorting to assassination, Castomira had proven herself without honor. The Code of Knights requires that honesty be met with honesty, deceit with deceit; honor with honor, treachery with treachery. Those without honor must be extinguished without mercy. I resolved to attain a high position within Castomira's evil alliance, that I might bring it down around her ears.

So it was that I found myself at the provincial mansion of Count Xenius Kyra, a former supporter of Catarin, now eagerly on what he perceived to be the winning side. So it was that I found myself sitting to a seven-course meal with none other than Castomira Brangwin herself! I'd met her before, during my service to Mycale. Where before, her face had been pleasant enough, if not pretty, and her eyes had been cool, but not cold, now her face was as perfectly beautiful as a marble statue, but her eyes were as emotionless and as fixed as those of a corpse. The table was set for ten, yet only nine were present: Count Xenius, at the head; myself, to his left hand; Castomira, to his right; one of Castomira's henchmen, a joyless sort with a beak nose and a permanent scowl; and five minor nobles, vassals of the Count. The seat to my right, across from Castomira's henchman (introduced to me as one Trenton Deis), was empty, and had no place-card.

I had little time to wonder about the empty seat, however, for no sooner had we exchanged pleasantries than a footman announced the arrival of Princess Catarin deSangre. I was astonished. Surely the princess would not have come to this mansion knowing who guested there? Or had Catarin come to plead for peace? Castomira's expression betrayed little, but there was no peace in it.

Catarin's shock as she surveyed the guests was quickly stifled by her courtly training, but it was clear to me that she had not expected to see Castomira Brangwin dining there that night. Then there was only one possibility: she had walked into a trap. I was prepared for anything, even outright murder at the dinner table. I had set aside my sword, but I was prepared to fight for my rightful queen, even if only with a butter knife. But I had to wait for the trap to spring shut. I had to await my moment.



Catarin played her part well. She sat, she spread a napkin on her lap, she traded polite greetings with all present. She complimented the wine. She casually inquired as to the reason for Castomira's visit to Count Xenius's lands.

"Ah, Count Xenius was just about to formally announce his support for my pet cause. You know, the coronation of the rightful heir, Parni?" Castomira was the very image of calm. I felt cold just watching her.

Catarin turned to the Count. "Then, Count Xenius, you believe that Lady Brangwin will be a suitable regent for the child?"

A smile oozed across the Count's face. "Surely, your Highness, when a new Prime Minister is appointed . . ."

". . . surely the new Prime Minister will be hand-picked by Castomira. Do you doubt that?"

"Regardless, your Highness, I've chosen to back Prince Parni with my life, if need be."

"The need may well arise, Xenius," Catarin said, in an admirable, if ill-advised, display of defiance.

Then the hammer fell. I shall describe each event in exact sequence, and see if you are not suitably amazed! If you are reading this to the children, you may wish to read ahead and then decide whether it is fit for their ears.

Like a black sun coming from behind frozen clouds, Castomira smiled, and such was the unrepentant evil in that smile that the wine I'd just sipped lost all its flavor. "Dear Catarin," she said with consummately false sweetness, "what possible reason might we have to fear you? You believe that your personal bodyguard stands outside waiting for your voice, holding the Staff of Nicator safe for your return. But in fact, they are poisoned to death as of this very moment, and the Staff shall be my son's sigil of office. For after all, my sweet, my alliance with the Guild of Serpentlords persists. And my dear friend Trenton Deis is a master of assassins himself. After all, did he not succeed in slaying your lovely knight, Pyramides?"

Catarin's hands trembled as she folded her napkin and placed it on the table before her, as if readying to excuse herself. "I cannot believe that he was overcome by anything less than a regiment of dragons. Certainly not by a single despondent ruffian."

The scowling one, Trenton Deis, at last spoke, a faint smile on his lips. "In his defense, my lady, he was distracted. I believe he was . . . writing something that was very important to him."

A half-second later, Catarin's hands stopped trembling. As a warrior, I knew what that meant, and I shifted my weight so that I could quickly spring to her defense. Deis, master assassin though he might be, either did not notice this sign, or he discounted it. And so he was astonished, and I was not, when Catarin threw herself across the dinner table, sending food and drink flying in all directions, diving full-length across the tablecloth to plunge her dessert fork into Trenton Deis's throat and through one of the arteries in his neck.

Bursting to my feet, I swatted Count Xenius to the ground with my left hand. Then, chivalry be damned, I grabbed for Castomira, intending to hold her hostage against Catarin's safe escape. But Castomira's skin was like stone, and her body was literally immovable. To my amazement, she pushed me aside as if I were a small child, and then, as an afterthought, knocked me to the ground with a magical explosion of dark thunder. I'd never known she was a sorceress. I feared for Catarin's life.

As I struggled to regain my feet amidst a wave of dizziness, I saw Catarin on the floor as well, repeatedly stabbing the lifeless body of Trenton Deis, face and white dress flecked with blood. I've seen that happen, on the battlefield, among those who have never killed: the pent-up hatreds and angers of a lifetime focus on one target, and then death is simply not enough for them. And especially if, as I suspected, Catarin had loved Lucaine after all, I could understand her blind rage. But there was no time for that. No time at all.

"Catarin!" I yelled. Too late. Castomira moved her hands as if caressing an imaginary ball, and where her hands moved, a sphere of black lightning formed. As Catarin came to herself, and suddenly grasped the horror of the bloody justice she'd done, Castomira sent the energy forth. It struck Catarin like a battering ram, and threw her up helpless against the far wall. Castomira advanced slowly, hatred and killing lust written upon her face. The

Count and his vassals fled the room, terrified, willing to let the witch and the princess settle their fate unassisted. I ran to the door as well, under a bright and overwhelming inspiration.

"The Staff!" I yelled to the outer hall. "Castomira requires the Staff! Nicator's blood rebels against her power!" I hoped that Castomira's assassins had not seen my actions in the dining hall. I hoped that they would accept my "authority" as nominated commander of the Royal Elites. I hoped that Castomira was too busy luxuriating in her victory to decipher my intent.

Castomira's Serpentlords were well-trained. One appeared before me almost instantly, holding the Staff of Nicator in leather-gloved hands. Before he could speak, I wrenched the Staff from his grip and immediately hurled it in Catarin's direction. And prayed to Sarapis as devoutly as Nicator must have when he first received the Staff . . . if not at such great length.

I kept my attention on the Serpentlord, and my attention was rewarded when he lurched forward with a poisonous bite. But as I struck at him with my bare hands, time seemed to slow. The very air around me took on a syrupy quality, and the high-pitched hiss of my attacker shifted eerily to a low drawn-out rasp. From behind me, a brilliant light shone forth, drenching the world in white and black. The Serpentlord threw up his hand to shield his eyes, but his motion was slow, and slowing by the second. Then there was nothing but white and black, and then there was nothing but white. And then there was a great sense of movement.

When I regained my sight, I was outside, in the rain, the same rain that had fallen ever since the night of the assassinations. The mansion of Count Xenius was before me: five ruined walls, several shattered fireplaces, and great mounds of rubble. Debris had been flung in all directions. The air was alive with dust, slowly settling in the driving rain. The dust itself glowed like the clouds of heaven, lit from within by some impossible radiance, swirling with a powerful vibration. Like a foul omen, a panicked raven flew out from the settling dust, trailing black feathers. But when I blinked, I saw that the raven was actually a white-skinned woman in a tattered black dress, and the black feathers were shreds of some dark residue, that melted away to nothing before they touched the ground. Castomira Brangwin had fled. And Catarin deSangre slowly approached me from the wreckage of the mansion, Staff held aloft, shining, hair plastered against the sides of her face, and her shoulders, by the downpour. She appeared to me as a vision; she appeared to me as she must have appeared to Lucaine Pyramides, when he, too, lay half-dead, outside the King's Tomb. But whereas then Catarin had been the picture of triumph, now she was at the lowest level of defeat, for the Staff of Nicator was her only crutch, and I her only retainer.

"My Queen," I said. I did not need to kneel, for I was still on hands and knees, where I'd been thrown by the silent destruction of the manor house. I swore my oath of fealty to her there, and then I could speak no more, for the Staff had, once more, gone dead and dark, and the rain was cold, and Catarin's face held nothing but empty sorrow, and I could not meet her eyes.

I touched my forehead to the ground, and then she crouched over me, and put her hand upon my head, and said, "The Seleucarian Empire begins again, here."

My love, I cannot tell you where we are going, and I cannot tell you when we will be back. Know that even if I die in the service of my queen, I will always love you. Know that even though my vows of service, and my life as a Knight, require me to fight against all the odds, nonetheless it is my wife and children that will keep me alive. The desperation I face only makes me love you the more.

I have but one wish before I go incommunicado: quickly sell what possessions you can, and then move with the family to Delos. Stay with cousin Kale. Surely no danger will reach there, and if it does, the impenetrable sanctuary of the Chrysalis Basilica is nearby.

Your loving husband,  
Lord Damen Kephry

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## **From Ashtan Journal of Warcraft and Tactics, Valnuary I Edition**

The yearly of Blades is always an event of high drama and high stakes, but this year's tourney was historically monumental. City gossip has already woven a hundred different descriptions of the events of the tourney, but this journal's readership is surely dissatisfied with the uneducated yarns of non-fighters. You wish to know what

styles were used, how the battles progressed, and what decisive blows were struck. Be assured, the Journal was there, and every detail was carefully recorded. The routine list of tournament standings is published toward the end of this issue, as it is every month. This special segment contains a first-hand account of Princess Catarin deSangre's part in the most recent Tournament, exactly as it happened, from tournament correspondent Callisto Vereth.

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## Princess Issues Challenge in Tournament of Blades

ASHTAN - The opening ceremonies had ended. Jesters and clowns had finished their mock battles. Fighting masters had demonstrated their might in a crescendo of broken barrels, slashed straw dummies, shattered tiles, and punctured bullseyes. Cavalrymen had unhorsed each other in a series of jousts. It was time for the true business of the Tournament of Blades: the duels.

As the crowd slowly became quiet, the master of ceremonies bellowed his traditional invitation: "All ye who may wish to challenge, an ye are not yet inscribed upon the register, speak ye now! Who will test himself against the mightiest blades of Ashtan and beyond?"

With a sound like ringing crystal, a blinding light appeared in the air at the center of the great arena. The light slowly dimmed as it settled earthward, and as our vision returned we could see that it came from the tip of a golden staff, held aloft by a stately woman in a voluminous white robe. She faced the royal box with a stare of such intensity that even the king allowed his eyes to drop. "I will be tested, but not for your prize of gold and fame, men of Ashtan. I am Catarin deSangre, right Empress of Seleucar, I intend to crush the false rebellion caused by Castomira Brangwin, and when I win this tourney, King Tephicles, my prize shall not be gold or fame, but an army."

While the king reflected upon this unprecedented demand, one of his guests moved to the fore of the royal box. It was Lord Odysseus Rani, a supporter of Mycale who had fled to Ashtan in the wake of Catarin's original victory at King's Tomb. As a famed fighter, he had found favor in the king's court. And as a fighter, his favor was dependent solely upon his personal might, requiring him to continually assert his skill. "Your Imperial Highness," he called out to Catarin, "please accept my apology, for I cannot recognize you as my Empress. You have not been crowned. All your supporters are dead. And as you have entered the Tournament of Blades, where death duels are commonplace, I believe that you may shortly join them." With that, Lord Rani leaped from the royal box to the arena floor just below. He was not dressed in his battle armor, but his great broadsword was very much in evidence.

The master of ceremonies looked to the king for guidance, and at the king's small nod, cried out, "People of Ashtan! A special match! Between Lord Odysseus Rani of King's Field and Princess Catarin, of the Imperial House deSangre!" Raucous cheers rose from the massed spectators. Ashtan values nothing more than personal strength. Our readers are not all of Ashtan, and so I should explain what went unsaid that day: Should Catarin win against such a mighty foe, Ashtan would surely follow her to the ends of the earth. Should she fail, then surely she could not be worthy to rule at all. Such reasoning may sound foolish to philosophers, yet it is the Ashtanian way: a group is only as strong as its leader.

Lord Rani slowly advanced, without drawing his sword. As he strolled, he taunted the princess, saying, "It must be true that royal bloodlines gradually run to cretinism. You seem to have lost your native wit, your Highness. You are lost and helpless. You are without followers. Even if you fled in exile to Hashan, you would eventually be beheaded for your crimes."

"Crimes?" Catarin asked, half-horrified, half-amused.

"Every royal soul has crimes. The deaths of a thousand Seleucarian men can be laid at your hands, for your part in the city war."

"Not on Castomira's?"

Lord Rani stopped a scant three feet away from his delicate foe. "Castomira has won."

Catarin smiled sweetly, and swung the Staff of Nicator at Lord Rani's head. The ex-Knight batted it away with one gloved hand, but Catarin instantly followed his motion and bounced the other end off his kneecap, then struck him sharply in the forehead with the jeweled top of the Staff. The warrior reeled for a moment.

Catarin spun the staff in alternating circles, two to the right, one to the left, two to the right, then down to a ready position. The pattern was unmistakable to one of my experience: Sentaari staff style, Grove of Winds variant, Tykonos form. "Castomira faces a different challenge than the fragile butterfly who fled the city two months ago. I am Catarin deSangre of the Grove of Winds, Initiate of the Sentaari monks, and I will defeat her if I must shed my last drop of blood to do it!"

Lord Rani began to open his mouth, but Catarin cut him off. "I know, I know. 'You're about to.' Right? I've said what I need to." And with that, Catarin launched herself bodily at her opponent, spinning the Staff of Nicator in an alternate version of Willows Shaken by the Wind.

Editor's Note: For much of their history, the peaceful Sentaari monks used a number of edgeless weapons, including the staff and the cane. These weapons allowed them to defend themselves against attackers without killing them, while still letting them strike mighty blows in the defense of humanity, as during the Black Wave. However, during Castomira's occupation of Seleucar, her Royal Elites confiscated all weapons in the area of Imperial Seleucar, including those held by the monks of Judgment Mountain, then the headquarters of the Sentaari order. While his guildsmen were held under martial law, the Grandmaster of Flowers meditated for a month, then unveiled the unarmed art of Tekura, vowing that the Sentaari monks would never again be made helpless against evil. Combining Tekura with his pre-existing mastery of Kaido and Telepathy, the Grandmaster drove the Royal Elites from the area around the monastery. After the war, he disseminated the art to all the other monasteries. Within ten years, the armed arts had fallen into disuse. Within a hundred, they had been largely forgotten.

Drawing his sword, Lord Rani countered with a series of vertical ascending blocks. "Now we know where you disappeared to these past months. You were presumed dead. Are you aware that the succession has already been formally decided against you?"

As Lord Rani refused to back away from her attack, Catarin assumed a deep stance and went to the third level of the Grove of Winds style, "Willows in Rain Storm," striking rapid blows from above and below. Though he clearly meant to toy with her, Lord Rani took painful hits, and was forced to regain initiative with an artless but brutal swing of his sword. Catarin blocked the attack, but was driven backwards. At that point, I got a good look at her face, and realized that for all her brave words, she was teetering on the edge of panic. I suspect that she had never before fought for her life. The noise of the crowd was deafening.

"The child cannot be crowned until he is five years old! Tradition and law demand it. And until that happens, any decision can be reversed!"

Lord Rani assumed the fighting stance of the Eternal Capital style, unique to the Guild of Knights, and rolled up his sleeves to reveal his magical tattoos: a tower shield and a smith's hammer. "Make ready then."

Catarin threw off her robe, revealing the light and flexible summer war garb of the Sentaari monks. The shield and hammer were tattooed prominently on her arms as well. She touched the shield, invoking a sparkling aura of protection, and then planted the Staff of Nicator firmly on the ground. Her posture was similar to that of the Blue Dragon Prayer, from the Judgment Mountain Revised style, and I assumed the motion had the same purpose: to focus Kai energy and bring it to the limbs and chest, invigorating her for the battle to come.

Lord Rani used the classic opening attack. Touching his hammer tattoo briefly, he destroyed Catarin's protective shield, then struck out at chest level with his sword, hoping to run her through. Catarin blocked, then countered with the Tykonos form. The Sentaari staff forms are like chess openings: every possible counterattack is accounted for in the study of the form. Lord Rani was too experienced to be hit by the simplistic attacks of the low-level form, but seemingly could not penetrate its solid defensive motions. For a full minute, Catarin fought Lord Rani to a standstill with the traditional Tykonos form, until the warrior laughed and knocked her to the ground with a single mighty blow. The attack was so heavy that even blocked, it sent Catarin sprawling. "Bah!" he cried. "I should have expected no better from a barely-trained Sentaari initiate. How foolish of me to hope for a challenge."

The ex-Knight strode forward, intending to crush Catarin's guard with another stroke, but his blade was deflected by a rapidly erected magical shield. As Lord Rani broke the shield with a blast from his hammer tattoo, Catarin lunged through the harmless mystic sparks and jabbed the Staff of Nicator into Lord Rani's throat, forestalling his next attack. Immediately, she used another distinctive attack pattern, True Strike of the Live Oak, stabbing the Staff into the center of his chest. Slightly winded, Lord Rani brought his blade up to the defensive.

At the beginning of the fight, Catarin had been somewhat unsteady, wavering between too hesitant and too fierce a strategy. As Lord Rani threw up the famed "Seleucar hard defense," however, she seemed to gain her footing. I now know that Catarin learned to fight the Eternal Capital style while sparring with Damen Kephry, but at the time it was startling to watch her slip her staff into every seam in Lord Rani's defenses, scoring minor hit after minor hit. As Lord Rani's powerful defense began to fall apart, Catarin smoothly transitioned into the fifth form of the Grove of Winds variant, Gaital. Clearly Lord Rani had never seen that beautifully deceptive form, as his every counterattack simply led him to take another blow from the Staff of Nicator.

Even though she was not using the magical powers of the Staff of Nicator, it was clearly as heavy as steel, and its blows commensurately damaging. Its head, studded with divinely unbreakable gems, must have had the effect of a mace. As Catarin tired from the effort of spinning and swinging the Staff, her opponent showed the pain of a dozen bruises, and all his efforts at a deadly final blow had earned him only a single blood-red line along Catarin's pale forearm. This time it was Lord Rani who touched his shield tattoo, gaining a second of precious breathing time.

As Catarin smashed the shield with her own hammer tattoo, Lord Rani advanced on her, sword arm held behind him. Catarin moved in with another attack, aiming at the side of Lord Rani's neck. If successful, the strike might temporarily paralyze one side of his body. Lord Rani was too quick for her, however, and dodged the blow, then clamped his free hand around Catarin's neck and lifted her into the air.

Before Catarin could react, Lord Rani yelled aloud a spellword, and suddenly Catarin's face filled with agony. The thin cut on her forearm suddenly paled to white, as if her blood were being drawn back into her body, and a low hum filled the air with unnerving harmonies. The Staff of Nicator dropped from her hands as they involuntarily twitched in pain.

Almost all eyes, including those of this journalist, were riveted to the combat. However, reliable reports say that the king stood up at this point, with a troubled look on his face. He is rumored to have mouthed, "Necromancy?" One of his advisors, a prominent Occultist, spoke in his ear for a moment, and the king retook his seat, still unhappy.

For a long moment, the princess struggled to twist free of Lord Rani's rigid grip. At length, though her movements seemed to be growing weaker, she reached with one hand to her belt, withdrew a long knife, and plunged it into her captor's wrist once, then twice. At the second stab, Lord Rani violently wrenched his hand away, the knife stuck in his wrist. Immediately he swung his sword, intending to quickly decapitate his unarmed opponent. But Catarin was not moving away from him. Instead, she put one foot on his flexed knee and physically scrambled up his body, grabbing his head from behind and driving her forehead forcefully into his nose. Yet again, the warrior was sent staggering by the unexpected tenacity of his slender opponent.

Catarin herself staggered, and collapsed to her hands and knees atop the Staff of Nicator, rising to her feet only slowly with Staff in hand. And still she did not invoke the Staff's holy power, even though she had clearly demonstrated her mastery of it. Lord Rani, sensing a clear advantage, decided to make the kill, without mercy. He pointed his off-hand at Catarin, disregarding the knife that still protruded from his wrist. Dark magic swirled, and suddenly Catarin's legs were encased in separate blocks of ice, and the rest of her body sealed in a thick sheath of frost. Then, at last, he launched his final attack, the Eternal Capital technique known as Knight's Honor. After gathering power for seven seconds, the blow would penetrate any defense to behead its target . . . and Catarin was immobilized by the icy sheath.

Astonishingly, Lord Rani had underestimated his opponent yet again. Exhausted, beaten, drained of vital essence, and chilled to the bone, Catarin deSangre broke her upper body free of the ice with a mighty effort. By this time, the huge crowds were cheering only for her. For his use of evil magic, Lord Odysseus Rani had been condemned by the spectators; ironic, considering that many Occultists have grown to be well-loved competitors in the Tournament. Many thousands of voices shouted as one for Catarin to use the Staff of Nicator to seal her enemy away in a golden sphere, as Nicator had done to the King of Shallam four centuries ago.

As Lord Rani advanced, swinging his sword in advancing spirals, working up to the deadly and unblockable Knight's Honor, Catarin struck at the ice block around her legs. She succeeded only in splitting it in two. I felt despair. With each leg encased in solid ice, she could not possibly dodge Lord Rani's fatal blow. And then I was amazed. She simply stood in the path of Lord Rani's attack for three more seconds, watching the path of his blade, judging its motion . . . did she mean to use timing to deflect the critical strike? I'd seen the move before, and knew that the final blow would come too quickly to see, and would simply cleave through any weapon or shield held up to block it.

She made no attempt at deflection. Instead, a half-second before the end of the technique, she twisted her entire body into a knee-level kick, bringing twenty pounds of solid ice into direct contact with Lord Rani's knee. The ice shattered, almost masking the audible twisting crack of the knight's bones breaking and ligaments tearing. Lord Rani was master of his own body. Giving no sign of pain, he completed the Knight's Honor, sending his sword lightning-fast at the princess's neck. His ruined knee betrayed him, and the blade flashed high and wide of its target, severing only a lock of hair, which floated on the wind like a summer cloud.

Instantly, Catarin countered, desperation and innovation combining in an unheard-of stratagem. With the end of the Staff of Nicator, she struck Lord Rani's off-arm from below, snapping it up to shoulder height. In the same motion, she spun the Staff and struck the hilt of her knife where it jutted from Lord Rani's wrist, driving the point clean through his hand and into his throat.

With his hand pinned to his neck by Catarin's astounding attack, the dark knight stepped back, shock and horror in his eyes. His damaged knee buckled under his weight, and he twisted to the ground. When he instinctively threw out his hands to catch himself, he pulled the knife from his throat, bringing a pulsing spray of blood. Lord Odysseus Rani, oathbound to Castomira Brangwin and once of the Guild of Knights, spasmed, choked loudly on his own blood, and was still.

Then, and only then, did Catarin summon light and warmth from the Staff of Nicator. For a second, the Staff outshone the sun, and when the light faded, she was whole and strong again. And the King of Ashtan, Tephicles I, vaulted out of the royal box to bow before his imperial princess.

"Vitem et sanguinem," he cried, the legendary oath of eternal fealty. "Our blood and lives."

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## From Orson Lasalle, *The Second War of Succession: A History*

Editor's note: Within the ranks of the Ashtan intelligentsia, Orson Lasalle has become the most respected current chronicler of the Second War of Succession and the Catarine Dominion. Therefore, his two most general and popular works are used as primary sources for this section of history. If pressed, this librarian must admit nepotism as a secondary and justified motivation.

While Catarin trained with the Sentaari, Castomira made clear her plans for her son's empire. Seemingly in defiance of all wisdom, she proposed herself as Parni's regent, a suggestion that was met with surprisingly little resistance. Although custom rebelled against a female monarch, there were numerous precedents for a female regent. And Castomira's propositions were very influential: her paper, "Seven Intentions for a More Transparent Monarchy," detailed a revised imperial system in which local lords would gain more power and independence, imperial taxes would be reduced, Piraeus's ancient but troublesome Act for the Preservation of Integral Human Dignities would be abridged, and various restrictions on resource exploitation would be eliminated. In exchange for these limitations on day-to-day imperial authority, the Emperor would gain certain "emergency powers" allowing him to "unite" the Empire in case of "national turmoil." Cool heads pointed out that Castomira could quite easily use those "emergency powers" along with her rapidly-growing Royal Elites to take direct and personal control of most of the Seleucarian Empire. But despite being on the losing side of the First War of Succession, or perhaps because of her previous defeat, Castomira was viewed by many as a sort of pro-nobility folk hero. After all, she had never committed any public crime. She had managed to side-step responsibility for the assassinations of Catarin's supporters, using several of her underlings as scapegoats. And so her proposals gained wide support in the capital, especially as lords loyal to Catarin slowly began to leave the province, heading across the Vashnar Range to the more sympathetic city of Shallam.

Although the Church had sent mediators to all three great cities, their efforts to preserve unity in the face of Castomira's divisive political actions had been futile. The Ashtanians had, for the most part, supported Castomira's political platform of oligarchic indulgence and martial empowerment, even as they angled to ensure a new era of Ashtanian autonomy. Castomira had attained a level of influence with Ashtan's King Tephicles that only an act of incredible daring and determination could override. With her reckless open challenge at the Tournament of Blades, and her one-in-a-million victory, Catarin provided that act, and won the loyalty and adoration of the city-state of Ashtan.

Winning the approval of iconoclastic Ashtan was Catarin's greatest obstacle. Shallam's King Dalles VI had been watching developments in Imperial Seleucar with growing concern, and had already mobilized his military in hopes of discouraging an opportunistic invasion by either of the major cities. Although technically loyal to the imperial throne, King Dalles had said, in an acclaimed public address, "We are part of the Seleucar that Nicator and Piraeus created. We are part of the Seleucar of King Valerias. But in the name of the Logos, we are not part of the Seleucar of Castomira Brangwin! The essential doctrines of human dignity and just rulership shall not be overturned within our shining walls." When Catarin and a delegation of Ashtanian nobles arrived at gates of Shallam to plead for Shallam's assistance, King Dalles was overjoyed to unite with them.

But Catarin had information of the direst import, information that had won her the whole-hearted support of even the most intransigent of the Ashtanian lords. While in boarding school with Castomira, as children, Catarin had heard Castomira hint vaguely at a portentous ancestry. In the Great Library of Nicator, Catarin studied the records of noble births and deaths, and followed a paper trail from there to the sealed archives of the Guild of Occultists, to find out a horrible and revealing truth: Castomira Brangwin was a direct descendant of Adchachel, called "the Rose of Pain." Adchachel, a former Demiurge of the Guild of Occultists. Adchachel, who had gone mad after eating the heart and absorbing the spiritual essence of the Tsol'teth Master Agith'maal. Adchachel had been killed, but only after four years in which his insanity slowly grew apparent . . . and during which time he sired a son, whose descendants had eventually risen into the nobility. Castomira Brangwin was tainted by the black power of the Tsol'teth, passed down by bloodline for hundreds of years. Castomira's magical duel with Catarin at the manor of Count Xenius was all the confirmation Catarin needed: Castomira, willing or not, was carrying out the long-delayed revenge of the Tsol'teth, who had been repelled by the Seleucarian Empire so long ago.

Catarin's plan was simple: ride at the head of the full Shallamese army toward the capital, claiming right of proper succession. Law and tradition agreed: unless directly denounced by the ruling monarch, any direct heir to the throne was permitted safe passage through all the lands ruled by Seleucar, as long as their honor guard was not "exceeding the amount required by their station, or the requirements of the imperial heir's personal safety." Catarin judged that to ensure her personal safety, she'd have to bring at least ten thousand heavily armed soldiers. If the presence of the Shallamese army was met with resistance, that would mean that Imperial Seleucar, not Shallam, had assumed a hostile stance. The fact that Catarin's army was approaching at a quick march, in attack formation, was technically irrelevant. In fact, to follow the very letter of the law, Catarin was in the right even if her men struck the first blow. A poorly-worded paragraph, originally intended to expedite the destruction of bandits, allowed soldiers under command of the royal blood to "terminate armed elements at their full discretion" within any Seleucarian territory, regardless of jurisdiction. Since none of Castomira's own troops were directly commanded by a member of the royal family, she had no legal standing to halt Catarin's advancing army.

In practice, of course, issues of law and tradition were strictly rhetorical. Catarin's march was a power play, pure and simple, and since Castomira's Royal Elites were at the core of every Seleucarian division, there was no chance that the defending armies would defer to Catarin's royal banner. The march on the capital was certain to be a full-scale war from the very beginning, and all Catarin's troops were ordered to engage at the first sign of hostility. For that reason, Catarin ordered the full army of Ashtan to begin an advance on Imperial Seleucar two days later, in hopes of securing the city while the main Seleucarian forces were occupied with the Shallamese. Using the Staff of Nicator, Catarin could transport herself into the presence of either of the two kings, or their children, and so she should take command of either army at will.

The powers of the Staff of Nicator have manifested differently for every person who has taken control of it, from the first Emperor of Seleucar to the last. For Nicator himself, its powers were designed for conquest: it inspired tremendous loyalty in his followers, it increased the fighting power of entire divisions of troops at once, it could heal large numbers of people instantly, and it had once been used to capture the King of Shallam out from the center of his army. For Catarin, its powers were different, though no less impressive: she could move

herself instantly to any person of royal blood, she could open giant wormholes large enough to transport armies, she could heal herself of any wound, and in the presence of Tsol'teth power, the Staff became a mighty magical weapon.

Catarin feared that aspect of the power of the Staff. The last time she faced Castomira, she had destroyed an entire building with a single motion. In an extended battle, what havoc might her uncontrolled power wreak? For that reason, Catarin dared not use Parni's royal blood to teleport herself to the Imperial Palace and confront Castomira directly. A war might cost twenty thousand lives, lives of soldiers who had chosen to live on borrowed time. But Imperial Seleucar held more than two hundred thousand souls, who Catarin could not sacrifice.

Throughout history, this decision has been disputed: who was to say that Castomira would not attempt to destroy the city on her own if her bid for power was thwarted? Who was to say that it might not become necessary for Catarin to fight Castomira in the end? In the end, Catarin was forced into single combat against her nemesis, and during that battle, the Staff's power did prove uncontrollable. The arguments for and against Catarin's military approach have been discussed in depth; for more information, refer to the later works of Ashtar von Muir and Talena Leiden, and to Catarin's own secret journal, recently declassified. Whether correct or not, Catarin weighed her options, and chose to invade.

During the Seleucarian Empire, the Vashnar Range had two major passes, which had been enlarged and deepened and paved until they allowed easy trade between Seleucar and its subject nations of Ashtan and Shallam. These passes were large enough for an army to pass in a single column, but that army would be entirely vulnerable to attack from above during its passage, and would be at a huge disadvantage against the guarding forces Castomira had deployed at the Seleucarian mouth of each pass. Catarin's solution was to use the Staff of Nicator to create mighty portals across the mountains, letting her troops leapfrog directly into Imperial Seleucar. Just as Sarapis had required Nicator to win his empire by great effort, the Staff's power was limited in range. Catarin was forced to bridge the mountain range at its narrowest points: the two passes. Although the advantage of surprise was hers, there would still be a violent battle. However, Catarin's plans were well-formed; through a minor deception, and a major innovation, she intended to take the initiative in the most decisive fashion possible.

From General Norij Gaston, Personal Journal

And so the plan has been revealed. I always knew the woman was mad. And brilliant.

Still, the plan may work. I'm Ashtanian born and bred, so I've a life's experience with remorseless cunning. Catarin's plan is as twisted, deceitful, underhanded, and unexpected as anything I've yet seen in my life, and even more impressive because of the scale of it all. And that witch in Seleucar has no idea it's coming.

I've spoken with Lord Kephry, and, while I am impressed with his skill, I must say he worries me somewhat, especially since his story of Castomira's display of power. He was her lapdog for far too long for my own comfort, and I wonder if Catarin, or any of us, can truly trust his motives.

But none of that will matter tomorrow. Tomorrow Catarin opens the Portal, and the First Ashtanian Cavalry will begin its assault. I must admit, I am excited to be spilling Seleucarian blood, though I would never admit that to Catarin or her followers. Their sparkling Myrmidons will prove no match for Ashtanian swords.

The Pass of Shadow's Mourning . . . I would never have thought to see it as a military commander in my lifetime. A trap devised by the gods themselves. Narrow, rocky, twisting. An army could be decimated by anyone coming through there. And yet it is the only navigable pass of requisite size to reach Imperial Seleucar. And Castomira's troops must know that. We've already received reports of their scouts near our lines, running like cowards when someone approaches.

But with the Staff of Nicator . . . It may be possible. I only hope the Shallamese play their part without a fumble.

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**From Josiah Lasalle, elements of seleucarian history, in verse (unfinished)**

Vashnar Crossing (fragment)



The holy staff, a bar of lightning-tortured reality  
Fantastically, Imperial rapture shatters the galaxy  
The air smashes like shimmering windowpanes  
It's as though winter came  
And turned the air to breakable ice  
And the mountains creak and groan  
Like iron under a vise  
We run through the portal: colors swirling in rage  
We prepare to engage; this is the staging point of an age:  
We've got blood to spill,  
We've got a murderous will,  
And you couldn't find a soul among us frightened to kill.  
We trust this justice, time to fight, right hand  
Clenched around our weapons, we're secure in our might.  
Our leader yells the orders, we break into a run,  
And then we dash into the portal as it glows like the sun.  
As we emerge and surge forward, there's blood on the ground,  
Distant trumpets sound, men are down and dying.  
The cry and tumult of battle, our brave banneret flying  
Is the rally point. We were appointed by fate  
And now it's time to start a sprint toward the heavenly gate.  
We know we're going to die, but we've no need for tears,  
We're an engine of redemption, we're not men, we're gears,  
We lower our spears, grinning, we quiet our fears,  
And then we sprint from mortal life into the pages of years.  
Blood flows like tears as steel strikes our foes,  
And blood energy fills me from my head to my toes.  
Most of us have never killed, but weak-willed we're not:  
Without a second thought we leave our foemen to rot.  
We draw sparks from armor with swords like deadly flints,  
We turn shields to splinters, we turn spears to scraps  
We turn men to corpses, there's no going back after that,  
Lo, you kill one man, then you can put it in the past,  
But if you kill one more, then you're a killer to the last.  
For the banner of deSangre we will give up our soul.  
To save the queen, we'll gladly be consumed like coal.

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## **From Orson Lasalle, *Blood and Roses: New Theories Regarding the Wars of Succession***

Editor's note: This volume, a companion to Lasalle's *The Second War of Succession: A History*, comprises source material and analysis that has emerged within the past fifteen years. Unlike the *History*, many sections are hypothetical, and cannot be taken as undisputed historical truth.

The Ashtanian forces poured from the portal Catarin deSangre had opened, taking the waiting Royal Elites completely by surprise. Accounts say that the unit was killed to the last man, but later journals speak of information gathered from a captured soldier from that first battle. It is unclear as to which version is truth, or if there are simply errors in the interpretation of the archaic texts.

This battle would later be called the Battle of Mourning, and not only because it was fought at the mouth of the Pass of Shadow's Mourning. This was the first of many battles during which Catarin wielded the broken sword, Three Moons, as her scepter of command. The symbolism was explicit: Catarin blamed Castomira for the murder of Lucaine Pyramides, and she intended to deliver the harshest possible justice.

Recent research into the family lines of Lord Damen Kephry has revealed this fragment, part of a first draft of one of the last letters he would write to his wife. The absolute authenticity of this document has not yet been established (see endnotes).

". . . kneeling in the blood-soaked grass. I'm not sure if what I saw was real or not, but my eyes have rarely deceived me.

"The Staff lay next to her, seemingly forgotten, and she held Three Moons in both hands before her as if was an anchor in the midst of some terrible storm. She was whispering, and her shoulders shook, so I approached cautiously, afraid that the strain had taken its toll.

"It's begun, Lucaine,' I heard her say. 'I've started what I promised. And we'll win. Please, tell me you see. Let me know you're still there...'

"My darling, I have ever been a man of pragmatism in most things. Where gods and the like are concerned, I give my tithe, and leave the rest up the Priests and Templars. But what I saw next makes me wonder if I might not be better off living a more pious life.

"The Staff, with its clouded gems, seemed to glow from where it lay at her side, surrounding her in a pearlescent aura. I had seen such before, but was still surprised to see it now, especially without her hand on the Staff.

"But then Three Moons began to glow, and I swear that the blade suddenly seemed whole again. It was translucent, ghostly, but whole nonetheless. Catarin gasped in surprise and lifted the blade up to look at it. I stepped around to the side slightly, and I saw a look of such wonder in her eyes that I felt my own breath freeze.

"Her hair flowed back from her face as if in a brisk wind, though the air was still around me. And then, almost on the edge of hearing, I heard a scratching noise, like that of quill on coarse paper. Her eyes widened, and then the glow, the wind, all of it ceased as if it had never been.

"I left her there, not wanting her to know that I saw the tears that followed."

This account lends credence to the idea that Catarin's right to rule was favored by the gods, as only a deity would have allowed her such a moment. Whatever the case, the Battle of Mourning marks not only the first battle of the Second War of Succession, but also the first indication that Catarin's struggle was to resound in every dimension: political, social, physical, emotional, and spiritual.

From General Norij Gaston, Personal Journal

These first few battles have gone well, I would say. The Elites are not as dangerous as I had thought they would be, but that may be because we consistently attack them from unexpected directions. And, as far as I can tell, they still believe that Catarin's forces are small and spread thin.

Every three days, we advance the main force by Portal, leaving token units behind to help convince the majority of the Seleucarian army that we don't have the capability of winning this campaign. And after that token unit has been "routed," Catarin brings them in via another, smaller Portal.

We could perhaps move faster, using larger Portals to cover more distance, but Catarin insists that Castomira would then know what we are doing. I sense that she fears to attract Castomira's direct intervention. Does she fear that the Staff of Nicator lacks the power to quash the witch? If so, then either the fairy tales give the Staff too much credit, or the witch Castomira is as strong as hellfire. She walks a fine line, the princess does. We must move quickly if we are to win, yet too quickly and all our plans become useless. And she must also take the time to speak with the Shallamese, though I have little word from her on their progress.

It is their portion of the plan that I wonder about. They have the boats, and the necessary sailors, but no one has ever attempted a full-scale attack by sea since Ashtan's abortive invasion of Shallam. If this gambit works, the city will fall almost overnight. But if it doesn't, we will lose half our army almost instantly, and the rest of us will be left to fight a retreat back to Ashtan.

Who knows how it will happen?

## From Jorin Hornblade, *Tactics and Diplomacy: Seleucarian Art*

Editor's note: The following is a fictionalized account based strongly on journals, letters, and other historical documents. There is a minimum of authorial speculation. Although considered "historical fiction," Hornblade's work is correct and substantiated in a way that Leona Fontaine's novel, for example, is not.

General Argan deSoral pounded his fist into the table. "There is no way this will work!"

Catarin stood at the end of the map table, her eyes cool as she stared at the general, her mouth in a slight frown. Argan glanced at Kephry, who stood by her side, but saw no support there, just as he saw none from the others around the table.

"Are you all mad?" he asked incredulously. "You want me to take my Lancers onto a boat, sail around most of the continent, come into Ralshev's Bay under cover of night, never mind the reefs and shoals, and attack the city from the harbor?"

"Yes," was Catarin's only reply.

"It won't work!" Argan said again. "Our horses will be in holds for days, and we'd need time to prepare them to fight after that kind of confinement. Supplies will have to be rationed, which means my men won't be at full fighting strength when we finally get there. Not to mention what happens if anyone in the city figures out what's going on! We'll be slaughtered!"

"Are you afraid?" Kephry said, silencing the General. "What about Shallamese courage? You will be supported, by Catarin and by Ashtan."

"You haven't convinced me of Ashtan's reliability," Argan said. "And I am in command of this army. We—"

"Listen," Catarin said, and the whispered word seemed to echo for miles. Argan's mouth moved, but no sound emerged, and he froze in shock.

"You are wrong on several accounts," she said. "This will work. They will never see this coming. I will provide full rations for your men, and fresh mounts just before the attack. And I am in command of this army, General deSoral, not you. If this is a problem, I will replace you. Your own king has given me full authority."

Argan stared at her for a long moment, and then slowly nodded. He spoke softly, surprised his words were audible again. "I understand, your highness."

"I have others to speak with. Good day, General. And make sure your men are on those ships by nightfall. There shall be no further delay."

With those words, she turned and left the tent.

From Orson Lasalle, *The Second War of Succession: A History*

It wasn't until after the war that Catarin's use of the Staff was made public. She had indeed been using it to move the Ashtanian forces forward much faster than Castomira could predict, and, combined with her use of feints and false battles, she had convinced the Seleucarian generals that her own forces were weak, scattered, and ineffective.

But, unknown to many even on Catarin's side, two separate Shallamese forces were also on the march. One was a ground force comprised of main-line units, such as foot soldiers and cavalry, along with two platoons of the elite Shallamese Lancers. It was discovered that not only had Catarin been moving the Ashtanian army via Portal, she had been doing the same for the much smaller Shallamese forces.

But it is the second force that deserves close attention. Shallam had commandeered a dozen private merchant ships in the name of the imperial crown. These ships were then loaded with the remaining bulk of the Lancers, totaling nearly six hundred soldiers. This left Shallam itself woefully open to attack, but, as Catarin said, "If

Castomira is not stopped now, then no city is safe, no matter how well-defended. Given the regency, she would conquer by law, not by arms."

As the two-pronged attack from land came closer to the Imperial City, these dozen ships, masquerading as members of various merchant houses, came to dock in the Imperial Harbor. As Castomira had placed an moratorium on unsanctioned trade during the conflict, these ships were told to stay in port, and not to offload their goods until they had passed a formal inspection. It is interesting to note, however, that not one Seleucarian inspector ever set foot on the boats to verify their contents. Catarin still had a thin network of supporters within the city, despite Castomira's purges, and the Imperial Harbormaster was one of them.

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### **From Jorin Hornblade, Tactics and Diplomacy: Seleucarian Art**

Jerold slid his blade into its sheath as he stood up, stretching his stiff muscles. He, along with his fellow Lancers, had been in the hold of the Magenta Spray for nearly two weeks now, and he worried that he was beginning to lose his fighting edge to boredom. He no longer noticed the sway of the ship, and the occasional bump against the dock no longer sent him to his feet in alarm.

But the waiting was nearly over. When Catarin's Portal had last opened (and what a stir that had caused the first time it happened), a message had come through with the supplies. Catarin's forces were near Imperial Seleucar, and the true size of her attack force had not been discovered.

General Argan, who was on the Iridescent Moon, had issued the order to prepare for battle. Short bows, swords, and armor had been broken out, and, under threat of "keel-hauling," whatever that was, they had made sure to clean and repair their equipment with extreme quiet.

"Tonight," Jerold said softly. "Tonight we take back our Empire."

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### **From General Norij Gaston, Personal Journal**

I've never heard of such an audacious, outrageous, doomed-to-failure plan working so well before. None of the Seleucarian military seem to have any idea of where we are, or even how numerous we are. Tomorrow, Catarin will close the vise on the Imperial City, and let the hammer pound its Royal Elites flat.

A day worth living for, I suppose. Although some of us, especially Damen Kephry, would disagree. I was there when he heard about his wife and family. I must admit, as much as I dislike the man, now I have every reason to trust him. It was Caprian Zyle who brought the message, and that's one Serpentlord I have reason to trust a great deal.

To think, Castomira would sink so low. And to commit such atrocity in the very shadow of the Chrysalis Basilica! I wonder how many of her supporters know of this. It would have been better had she killed them outright, but to do what she did . . . I am amazed that Kephry's response was so calm. I don't know what mine would have been under similar circumstances.

The Church had declared that all refugees in Delos would be under divine protection. The destruction of Lord Kephry's family has enraged them. The last I heard, every Templar on Sapience was moving to reinforce us. They're not privy to our true plans, and they don't know that we've been leapfrogging Castomira's armies . . . they're in for a nasty shock when they try to follow in our path. I can't feel too bad for the Churchies, but I hope they deal a few good blows to those Seleucarian scum. One batch of prigs smiting another, as far as I'm concerned, but for once I'd rather the Templars win out in the end. And as long as the Templars are fighting the Royal Elites in the east, the enemy won't be able to fall on us from behind when we hit the capital.

Catarin is calling. Time for the battle to begin. I pray I live through this day, at least long enough to spit Castomira and her goons with my sword.

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## From Lord Damen Kephry, Collected Correspondence

Catarin,

I thank you for your heart-felt condolences, but yet again I feel I must refuse your offer to become First General in your army. The reunification of Guild of Knights is my one dream, though I know it to be a foolish one. After this war is done, and your rule established, I shall endeavor to make that dream a reality.

I do wish you would spend less time with the Ashtanian forces, or allow me to accompany you more often, instead of relying on these letters. Still, I understand your reasons, though I am not overly fond of them. Do keep yourself safe, and watch your back.

I have received word from Judgment Mountain, and you will be pleased to know that the Sentaari are free. Even though they were stripped of their weapons by Castomira's occupying forces, they launched an incredible attack against their oppressors, defeating seasoned swordsmen with their bare hands. For my part, I do not know how this can be, but if they can indeed stand unarmed and unarmored against Royal Elites, then clearly they will make potent allies. And allies they are, for they have sworn to aid you in your crusade against Castomira. I've learned that Prince Remeer of Ashtan, fifth son of King Tephicles, is present in the monastery; you may wish to use the Staff to visit Judgment Mountain and speak with the monks there.

As to your other request . . . while I am honored beyond words, I would rather my family be buried in our family plot. There can be no true solution for my grief at this time, but nonetheless

I've just received word that a contingent of infantry, led by Royal Elites, is advancing upon our position. I will send this off and hope you receive it soon. We may need the help.

Vitem et sanguinem,  
Lord Damen Kephry

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## From Jorin Hornblade, Tactics and Diplomacy: Seleucarian Art

"CHARGE!"

With those words, the magick that had cloaked them from sight fell, and the Ashtanian army boiled up from the ground like liquid magma, its heat searing away the Seleucarian forces before them. At the forefront rode Catarin, her hair held under a small leather cap, wearing only the monk's travelling clothes she'd worn during the Tournament of Blades. With each foot of ground gained, she left another dead soldier behind her, her staff rising and falling with mechanical, deadly efficiency.

Castomira's army included wielders of magic, as well, but as soon as they began to direct their spells against Catarin, she burned them to ash with reactive lightning from the Staff, and reflected their magic into their own troops.

And, at the same time, Lord Damen Kephry led his own charge against the city's smaller eastern gate. His forces, having barely defeated the surprise attack less than an hour before, were weakened, but not even the infamous Royal Elites would stop him. His great sword, which would one day be known as Bringer of Tears, slew countless of the enemy, leading his forces to push them back against their own walls.

And there the city stood, caught between two halves of the mill, slowly being ground down. But this did not bother the great Castomira, who had foreseen such an attack, and had prepared for it.

She stood at the balcony of her private rooms, and looked out at the walls, smiling. She turned to the man standing behind her, and whispered softly.

"They chose to attack at night, the fools. Are you ready?"

The man, whose name to this day is still unknown, nodded and stepped forward. Castomira drew forth a black dagger from its sheath and held it over the man's heart.

"Life's blood freely given is a powerful thing," she whispered to the man, who shivered in excitement. "I shall show Catarin the true power that one can wield if she is willing."

She plunged the dagger home.

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### **From Orson Lasalle, *Blood and Roses: New Theories Regarding the Wars of Succession***

While clearly Castomira Brangwin was a force for evil, her efforts during the Second War of Succession led to considerable progress for the Seleucarian Empire. In order to form a powerful coalition army, she set new standards for strategic unification of infantry, cavalry, and bowmen. Her Royal Elites were rightly feared; in only a few months, she took the top ten percent of the standing armies, and formed them into combined-arms units of exceptional training and coherence, under her seven High Commanders. After the war, scattered former Royal Elites contributed to an overall improvement in the quality of the imperial armed forces, guaranteeing a long period of peace and security.

Furthermore, Castomira's rapid military expansion within the province of Seleucar required extensive logistical support. By emptying the coffers of her supporters, Castomira turned Seleucar's somewhat haphazard infrastructure into a streamlined transport and staging system. Although the lords who financed her went bankrupt, merchants of the next few decades received an economic boost from the rapid improvements Castomira had pushed through.

Catarin's reign came to be known as a golden age, most especially for its military security and its economic prosperity . . . boons which were the direct result of Castomira's ruthless bid for power. Had Castomira's threat never arisen, Catarin's reign might have been entirely unexceptional. In particular, the renaissance of culture initiated by Catarin's extravagant Imperial Bardic Endowment might never have occurred, nor the expansion of Tasur'ke, nor the construction of the lost and legendary Floating Temples of Shar'ilian.

However, was the price of such peace and prosperity worth the loss of life? This author does not know.

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### **From General Norij Gaston, *Personal Journal***

We were winning when it happened. The sky went from clear to stormy in the course of five minutes, and thunderbolts flickered within the gathering clouds. The battle lost intensity as more and more men backed away, spooked by the unnatural display. I ordered my division to engage, but soldiers are a superstitious lot: even in this age of magic, many will not dare to challenge the unearthly.

And suddenly, lightning fell to the ground in sheets, ripping through Seleucarian and Ashtanian alike. The storm of lightning ignited waves of fire that tore across the ground; spot tornadoes hurled men and horses to the afterlife; hailstones the size of billiard balls pummeled men to death. In the space of ten breaths, I watched a thousand people die, and even my battle-hardened senses felt the first stirrings of terror. As the destruction slowly began to focus on our side of the battleground, it became clear that this was a battle we could not win by force of arms.

And then I saw Catarin urge her horse to a gallop, knocking her own men aside as she raced to the front line. A hundred bolts of lightning struck at her, and all were repelled by a dome of golden light, one that grew larger with each attack it deflected. At her side was Damen Kephry, swinging his mighty sword to clear her path through the broken Seleucarian lines. As I watched, Catarin raised the Staff of Nicator above her head with one hand, and Three Moons with the other. Her skull cap had fallen in her headlong gallop, leaving her hair free in the wind, and I swear she was the most beautiful sight I have ever seen. By the time she neared the center of the Seleucarian force, the golden shield was large enough to cover the entire battlefield, and the mystic storm overhead raged uselessly.

"See how the witch Castomira would spend your lives to win this battle!" Catarin yelled out to the Seleucarian armies that surrounded her. "Decide for yourselves whether her cause is your own!" The Seleucarian soldiers at the front line, already unsure of themselves, seemed as though they might be receptive to her outcry, but the Royal Elites at the center of the Seleucarian division fanned out to surround her and Lord Kephry. "You are the citizens of the city of Nicator and Piraeus! But this time, the Black Wave comes from the center of the city. Know this! Castomira Brangwin holds the evil of the Tso'teth within her, and now you see its fruit! The choice is yours, but know that if you side with Castomira, you will share her fate."

The storm front had reached each horizon, and in every quarter, death reigned. Catarin's dome of protection covered only a small portion of the dark storm's ravage. Even as the Royal Elites closed in, and Lord Kephry prepared to make a valiant stand, Catarin visibly came to a decision. She said something to Kephry, then both of them disappeared in a brilliant flash of white. The golden dome of light remained, as Ashtanian and Seleucarian troops engaged the Royal Elites. In this area, at least, the battle could be won. But my spyglass showed Ashtanian and Shallamese armies crushed to bits, and Royal Elites chasing the stragglers through a hellish playground of fire and ice.

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### **From The Sealed Files of Castomira Brangwin**

Win or lose, history will cast me as a villain. Even if I reign for a thousand years, and my empire reveres me for ten thousand more, all things must topple, and when the pendulum of dominion swings back to good and light and happiness, my name will be remembered with hatred and fear.

This prospect fills me with satisfaction.

It's only been a year and a half that I've held these dreams of destruction and domination, and yet I must concentrate to remember how my dark wishes evolved. At first, I wanted only to kill Catarin. Then, I thought to destroy the entire nation of Seleucar. And now, I've hit upon a combination that seems perfect to me: kill Catarin, and then rule over Seleucar with such unrelenting cruelty that even in Heaven, Catarin and all her ancestors will feel the agony of loss. Perhaps I shall hold seances solely that I might gloat. Perhaps I shall invade the sacrosanct Tomb of Kings and raise them all as zombies to do my bidding. My son Parni is partly of their blood. That means that in his hands, the Staff of Nicator will take on royal power. But if his soul is black enough, that power will be twisted and vile to match. Perhaps I can spit in the eyes of the gods themselves, for it is said that what is made by the Logos cannot be unmade.

My son. I truly do have a mother's instincts. I want to protect him, nurture him, raise him to be as powerful and fearless as he can be. I want to mold him in my image, make of him what I wish that I could be. Might a human mother cringe to think that I wish to raise Parni as a monster? He is of my blood, he has drunk my milk. Already his soul is a dark shade of gray. I am hard as diamond, dyed in evil, fed richly on souls and heartbreak. With my power and the blood of holy kings, what might Parni become? The nemesis of a thousand states. The murderer of a thousand dreams.

I no longer think of myself as human. Word has it that Catarin claims I've inherited the evil power of the Tso'teth. I've no reason to doubt her; I've never researched my own lineage. Perhaps I am an unwitting pawn to the Dark Masters, long after their deaths. If so, then they have crafted a perfect tool, for I feel nothing but joy at the imminent fruition of my plans.

Yet I feel fear, as well. For now, Catarin still holds the Staff. If I can place it in Parni's infant hands, Catarin's bond with it will be broken; but until then, she is a very real threat to me. I must keep Parni near me, to steal the Staff from Catarin. But that means that Catarin can find me in an eyeblink, if she uses the Staff to travel to Parni. It is a measured risk I take. And in this journal, no braggadocio: this may be my final entry. To kill Trenton Deis was far more than I expected of her. Have I underestimated Catarin yet again?

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### **From The Sealed Files of Catarin the Just**

Editor's note: This single text, written on the first few pages of an otherwise blank journal, was found embedded in the cornerstone of the Second Imperial Palace after it was demolished by the Sapience League. It was

contained in a box, along with a slip of parchment lettered "To be read after the fall of the Empire." Under the circumstances, it was deemed appropriate to open it on the spot.

The light faded. We were in the Palace. I could tell that she was near. At the last second, she had knocked me aside, preventing me from reaching her son directly. I knew that she was gathering her power. I could feel it in the stones around me. The entire Palace throbbed with ill, like an infected cut pulsing pain. Damen felt it, but could not sense its full scope. I could. The scars of battle left by the first war had been hastily repaired, but the violent wrong possessing the palace now would not be so easily erased.

"A very interesting way of getting into the Palace," Damen said quietly.

"The only way. I did not mean to bring you with me. You should escape to the streets. You won't have a chance against Castomira."

Damen nodded. "I remember the last time. Listen. I can hear fighting out there. Castomira hasn't aimed that storm at the city yet. If you can defeat her, we might win, even with our main forces crippled."

I remember how he looked at that moment, hopeful, the first to truly believe in me since Lucaine died. All the others had bowed to my force of will, or my threats, or my reasoning, but only Damen Kephry had truly given me his fealty. I had begun to understand why his wife had loved him so. But he and I were far too wrapped up in our personal griefs ever to consider letting them go, for years yet, perhaps. "Perhaps" is the best I can say, for at that moment Castomira killed him.

As the violent crackle of her spell faded, Damen slumped to the ground. Steam rose from the gruesome hole in his back. The air shifted slightly, and Castomira Brangwin was no longer invisible. She held a tiny babe in one arm, and her other hand still rippled with the sinuous afterglow of her magic.

"Catarin, my dear. Ah, there should be a special word, a word for someone you hate so much that it's stronger than love. Were we lovers, I could say, 'Catarin, my love,' and perhaps your heart would leap with anticipation. But there's nothing I can say like that right now."

For just a moment, I was drawn in by her posturing. Foolishly, I started to reply. "Why not say, 'Goodbye?' Because—" but this battle was not to follow bardic conventions, and there was to be no lengthy exchange of threats. My mistake. The moment I became distracted with speech, Castomira lunged toward me, arm out, almost too quickly to see. Only my Sentaari training allowed me to pivot around her, reaching out blindly to swing the Staff at her throat. My blow struck home. There was a blinding flash, and she flew backwards into a pillar, striking it so hard that it cracked. The infant flew from her grasp, falling head-first toward the floor.

Again, I could only react on instinct. I dove toward the child, both arms out, letting the Staff fall to the ground. I hit the ground hard, but I managed to catch the baby. Was I foolish to preserve his life? He was the heir of the Tsol'teth. But I could not let an infant die, and claim to be in the right.

As I struggled to my feet, I saw without surprise that Castomira had claimed the Staff.

"Interesting," Castomira said, gesturing with the Staff. "I had thought it would refuse me. Destroy me even. Yet here I stand, untouched."

"The Staff does as I will," I said softly. "This is your final chance to repent. The Tsol'teth power might still be cleansed."

"What will you do? Kill my child? He makes a poor hostage for you, Catarin. Why not return him to his mother?"

I stood there for a long moment, looking at the woman who had once been my friend, someone with whom I had shared my childhood secrets, someone I had once called sister in my heart. And all that was left was a walking ruin of a woman, an intelligent monster twisted out of shape by a cruel and ancient power. "Your evil was an accident of birth. I hope to save him from the same."



"Brainless wench, you cannot raise him in the light when your soul is damned in darkness!" Castomira clenched her fist, and chaotic vapors steamed forth from it, and began to glow. But before she could unleash her magic, the Staff of Nicator shone with a tremendous brilliance, far greater than anything I had seen before. I was later told that the light shone directly through rock, and even hundreds of miles away over the horizon it was visible as a bright spot on the ground itself. My eyes were not harmed, although after the war the Church had to spend months magically restoring the vision of every person within twenty miles of Seleucar.

I had willed the Staff, "Destroy Castomira." But its manifestation of power was beyond my intent or, indeed, my imagination. From the Staff, a beam of light reached up and down, boring into the ceiling and the floor, then widened to a pillar ten feet across. After a long moment, the beam collapsed . . . and Castomira laughed in the middle of it, floating in the air, unhurt.

"I am stronger than the Staff! Look how its power bathes me in light!" And indeed, the residual glow that rippled along Castomira's ebony gown seemed like a ghastly extension of her evil power. In my arms, the baby gurgled contentedly, utterly unaffected by the chaos surrounding him.

Then hell truly broke loose. From the unimaginable depths of the earth, flaming liquid rock spewed up in a geyser. The Staff of Nicator had made a cut miles deep, and the very blood of the earth was jetting forth. With reactions faster than any human's, Castomira instantly summoned arctic cold to freeze the spurting magma in place as quickly as it flowed, but she was not fast enough to stem the eruption, and she found herself scrambling up a growing mound of steaming volcanic rock, spraying lethal cold from her hands in all directions.

If I left her to fight the rage of the earth alone, however, she might prevail. But if I commanded the Staff again to destroy her, what havoc might it wreak? I could not control the Staff of Nicator.

I had one option left. One that felt insanely foolish, yet perfectly right. I charged. I had heard a hundred times in the last month, "Vitem et sanguinem." Blood and lives, indeed. For Seleucar, at last, my blood and life . . . or Castomira's.

Every time Castomira froze the magma beneath her, another section of the rising volcanic mass would explode into flaming shrapnel and liquid rock, defying her every attempt to leap down from the igneous hill she was creating. It was only by luck that I hadn't already been killed by flying rock. But now, after setting my helpless nephew on the ground behind the scant protection of a marble column, I scrambled up toward Castomira, leaping over rivulets of lava, ignoring the flying rocks that whizzed closely past my head.

Castomira's face was pale white and glowing. Spots of darkness moved around her skin, like shifting leaf-shadows. Even as she froze another spray of magma in midair with one hand, she raised the other to meet my advance. But the hand she raised to me was the one that held the Staff, and when she tried to channel her evil magic through it, the Staff pulsed white, once, and blew her hand off. Castomira stared with disbelief at the stump of her wrist, and she still wore that expression when the broken blade of Three Moons took off her head. The Staff of Nicator fell, and with my free hand I snatched it out of the air. Castomira's blood was as red and bright as anyone's. For the last time, Three Moons had drawn its sacred circle of death.

Immediately the Staff quieted the roaring earth, and the lava flow ceased. The Staff's power was mine again, and I used it to bring my nephew back into my arms. I thought it was over. And then Castomira's severed head began to speak, softly and weakly at first, but transforming at the last into an inhuman, demonic shriek.

"This Empire will stretch out for hundreds of years more, hated blood of Nicator. But when the Staff of Nicator comes into Parni's grip, it will end once and for all time. Pray now, for in the end, all that you have fought for is damned. Run now, for in moments, the heart of your city will be consumed! As long as there are humans, our hatred can never die . . . Tezlari'tarin shall be destroyed, despite every human effort! The Tsol'teth will not be denied!"

For all my reign, I have claimed that the bright light and the opening of the magma well were the result of Castomira's magic. May the gods forgive this small untruth. I write this to set the record straight; I write this in hope that whoever seeks to revive the Empire will realize that the Staff is more than just an artifact for personal aggrandizement, more than just a prize for earning credit with the gods, more than just a trophy of personal might: it is a mystery, subject only to the will of Sarapis. I fear the role it may play in the future of the Empire. I

do not doubt Castomira's final prophecy for a moment, although I've sought to delay it. I hope that this may serve as a warning to whoever comes to wield the Staff in the far future.

Castomira's corpse exploded into an acidic wave of black light that consumed the entire Palace, leaving a pitted and uneven crater half a mile across. At its bottom was the geometrically smooth hole that the Staff had burned into the center of the earth. I have always said that the Staff was lost in the battle. It was. In order to avoid the fulfillment of Castomira's prophecy, I dropped the Staff into the hole. I would rather it rest forever in the depths.

The palace was rebuilt in the crater, and the hole was covered by masonry at my request. I've heard them talking behind my back about building a special shrine there after my death, to commemorate the battle. They're calling it the Well of Fire. I can't explain to them why I wanted it sealed. Parni is a moody boy, and rebellious, and although he's never shown a glimmer of hatred or cruelty, I won't risk giving him any ideas that he is destined to destroy the Empire. True or false, it's simply not the sort of thing a thirteen-year-old needs to know.

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## **From Shigen Galuade, *A Thousand Happy Endings: The Unexplored Tragedies of the Second War of Succession***

Therefore, it becomes clear that Prince Parni showed no resentment whatsoever for the deaths of his mother or his father, having been raised, like all children of the time, in the afterglow of Catarin's glorious victory. Every memory that he had was of his foster parents, who showed him nothing but love and devotion. And he had been raised as a prince, potentially an heir to the imperial throne, and was given an education commensurate with this responsibility. Certainly he could not have felt abandoned. How, then, to explain his disappearance?

Historians have provided a dozen theories, but only a few carry any weight. Consider the facts, sparse though they may be: he went with a group of huntsmen and retainers on a routine game outing in an imperial preserve. He did not return after dark. A search party was sent out the next day, expecting simply to find that the hunting party had camped for the night. Instead, the searchers found the prince's companions scattered through the woods, each ripped limb from limb. Of the prince, there was nothing to be found, then or ever.

There are only four plausible explanations. First, something killed the hunting party and kidnapped the prince. Second, something killed the hunting party and destroyed the prince entirely. Third, something killed the hunting party, and the prince escaped, and has either been unable or unwilling to return to the known areas of Sapience. Fourth, the prince himself killed the hunting party, then disappeared or went undercover.

I am a historian, not a detective. I refuse to endorse one theory over another. However, among less exacting scholars, the prevailing opinion is that Parni's past caught up with him . . . one way or another.

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## **From *The Sealed Files of Catarin the Just***

So, for better or for worse, this is it: the real story. I've marked this journal to be opened only after the end of the Empire. If my instructions have been followed, and the Empire has already fallen, then tell me: was it worthwhile for me to preserve it?

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## **Last Words of the Librarian**

From our viewpoint, the fall of the Seleucarian Empire happened impossibly long ago, and its Wars of Succession are more like an ancient myth than a real event. In these fast-moving times, memories rarely last longer than a few decades, and history is written haphazardly, and seldom preserved. In all honesty, it's a bad time to be a librarian. But this account that I have assembled of the Second War of Succession is, I believe, the best and most complete that you will find anywhere on Sapience. I hope it proves both useful and educational.

I did not include a summary of the events of the Catarine Dominion, on the flawed assumption that all readers would be familiar with this period of history. Allow me to briefly redress my error. Catarin eventually married Prince Evander Christin, of the royal line of Shallam, and bore two sons and a daughter. Catarin was, indeed, remembered by history as a "Queen," even though her son became the next Emperor. Catarin used Three Moons

as her scepter of office, and after her death it was enshrined at the entrance to King's Tomb, to guard her eternal soul. The Catarine Dominion, which is the common name for her period of rule, was considered a golden age, during which the Seleucarian Empire reached a new level of peace, prosperity, and cooperation. Some of Catarin's policies held the seeds of decay, but these seeds did not reach fruition until hundreds of years later. And, finally, there is the famed disappearance of Castomira's son Parni; although if you know anything at all about the Seleucarian Empire, you quite likely know of that, and his spectacular later reappearance.

Long ago, longer than the memories of most now living, I received a divine commission to gather these histories. My commission is not fully discharged, for the final fate of the Seleucarian Empire remains untold. My nephews have sworn to take up this work; I trust that they will perform admirably. For myself, my days grow short. Soon I will Transcend for the last time. Wish me well.

It is incumbent upon me to offer thanks to those who have assisted in the gathering and editing of these sources. My heartfelt thanks go to Sarapis the Logos, without whom nothing is possible; Vail Mayonet; Saracen, Krizzik, Xander, and Etakk; Morlana ni'Choya; my nephews, Orson and Josiah; Alain; all deLeons, but particularly Ariel; Averroes the Prophet; Eregast; Steel Heaven; Daine of Michael; Hermit; Blade; Ander Kurtzweil; and especially, more than anyone, my beloved Lucrecia. Rest in peace, Lucrecia. And I'll see you soon.

## 16.4 The history of the Church

The Church was founded before written history by Imithia, great-great-great-granddaughter of the Offspring Pasiphae. Last of the sons and daughters of Sinope and Callisto, Pasiphae had lived many hundreds of years and was beloved by many of the gentler humans. To commemorate her life and mourn her passing, Imithia held a ceremony in some forgotten place called the Rite of Passing. If such a complex organization as the Church has a beginning, this could be said to be it. It should be pointed out, however, that the Church of Imithia consisted of nothing more than some devout friends gathering to give thanks to the Gods for a soul as pure and beautiful as Pasiphae.

In time, the Church grew to represent the forces of Goodness, Light, and Order and fought to push back what they viewed as the ever-growing chaos and evil in an increasingly complicated and modern world. To this end, the Church built the Chrysalis Basilica on the isle of Delos, which sits in the middle of the Zaphar river south of the Ithmia forests and founded two orders with which to spread their belief system. The Church also vowed to support the Divine Orders of the Gods that would favour them and who represent the forces of order rather than chaos.

The first order, the Priests, were founded to be scholars and healers. It was they who would go amongst the peasants to recruit for the Church and build goodwill amongst the populace of Sapience. The second order, the Paladins, were to be the enforcement arm of the Church. They would be on the front-lines in the battle against the chaotic forces of the land. With the healing abilities of the Priests to support them, the Paladins became the most effective fighting force in the land. Their discipline and cohesion as a fighting unit were and are unparalleled, though their numbers have always been small.

Soon after this, the Archprelate Raphael I embarked upon one of the most expensive and forward-looking ventures in Achaean history. Under his direction, the Church began construction of a series of highways crossing the land. Raphael had a number of reasons for doing this. First was that the Church needed revenue and by charging tolls on the use of the highways, and specifically on the bridges they built across the mighty rivers of Sapience, it could bring in a steady stream of money. Second, the Church needed the highways to extend its influence and power more effectively into the growing cities of Shalaam and Ashtan, the two most powerful and ancient political and economic entities on the continent.

The citizens of Shalaam and Ashtan were very grateful for these highways, as they knew that more and more products would flow into the cities, feeding their lust for new and exotic items. So, when Raphael I requested permission to build Church outposts in the cities, the leaders readily agreed. The Church's budding influence was sealed and Raphael I went down as the greatest Archprelate of the pre-modern age.

Today, the Church is not much changed from the rule of Raphael, over nine hundred years ago. It is still a force for order but has developed enemies committed to bringing its influence and power to an end. One important difference, however, is that the Church began, about five hundred years ago, to allow non-humans to be members and there is no distinction by race made within the Church today.

Although the Church is not officially committed to any particular God, as various Paladins and Priests rise to power within it, the amount of attention it might give to any single God waxes and wanes with the attention the members Paladins and Priests individually give. Naturally there are some Gods who are utterly opposed to the Church and who direct their mortal forces to seek its destruction. The Church is a very wealthy organization and has been accused of corruption by its enemies, though as with everything, the source of the accusation must be taken into account. Though many dislike the Church, many others consider it one of the greatest institutions ever formed for the benefit of mortalkind.

In more recent times, the Church leadership petitioned Sarapis to move the Crysalis Basilica from Delos to Shallam, and Sarapis consented.

See also: **PRELATES, CHURCH**

## 16.5 The history of modern achaea

All events are listed in years after the fall (AF) of the Seleucarian Empire.

### 16th of Aeguary, 172 AF:

Modern Age of Achaea begins.

### Other notable events in 172 AF:

Erebus becomes first mortal to enter Achaea.  
Modern guilds are founded:

Guild	Modern Founder
Paladins	Gawain
Serpentlords	Crotalus
Druids	Haidion
Occultists	Harlequin
Sentaari	Kothlun
Kharon	Changcoix

Gawain becomes the first player to kill another, dealing out righteous justice to the chaotic Harlequin.

### 174 AF:

Rurin, the Crafter, opens the first of his many shops in Ashtan.  
The philosopher Epicurus begins taking students.

### 175 AF:

Haidion, the Wanderer, discovers the plainspeople village of Tomacula.

### 176 AF:

Servelan de Vermiis opens her infamous Loving Heart's Orphanage, at which lost children may be enrolled. Some start to suspect that the orphanage has a more nefarious purpose than formally stated.  
The Buckawns and Dryads clash, leading to deadly animosity between them.

### 177 AF:

The druids Portis and Buckthorn open their Crystal Leaf Inn.

Servelan de Vermiis becomes Secretary of the Occultists guild.

**178 AF:**

The modern Priest guild is founded by Father Odysseus.  
Thoth, the Deathgod, reveals himself to mortal eyes.

**182 AF:**

Sarapis, the Logos, reveals to all that the Loving Heart's Orphanage is, as many suspected, guilty of murdering the orphans it claimed to protect.

**184 AF:**

The Kharon Empire is formed. The Overlords of the Empire are Servelan de Vermiis, Grandmaster Laergon, Uldrais the Masked Assailant. The Sentaari, led by Aeschylus, form a temporary alliance with the Church to fight it.

**185 AF:**

Servelan de Vermiis becomes the first person of the modern age to attain the rank of guildmaster, known in the Occultists as The Demiurge.

**186 AF:**

Tarkun, a rogue Kharon, and Isildur and Mausolus, two Occultists, begin to sow the seeds of dissent in the Empire with continual in-fighting.

Cactus weed is discovered to be a euphoria-inducing substance, and becomes popular among some of the Druids and Serpentlords.

**187 AF:**

Morpheus, of the Endless, is thrown out of the Occultists by Servelan de Vermiis after he attacked her. The Kharon guild defends him and lets him into their ranks. These are the final nails in the coffin of the Kharon Empire, and it dissolves due to internal strife.

**189 AF:**

The de Vermiis art gallery opens in Ashtan. Public opinion is positive, though it has some art which depicts the Church in a rather unfair light.

**190 AF:**

Journals written by Servelan de Vermiis, detailing experiments involving the organs from the brains of children are discovered.

The Arboretum of Enlightenment is opened by Servelan.

Servelan completes an intricate, magical experiment involving the Loving Hearts Orphanage, the de Vermiis gallery, and the Arboretum of Enlightenment. She summons and merges with the Unnamable Horror and is reborn into Eris, Goddess of Chaos.

Azhrarn, a young Serpentlord, discovers the ancient, underground library of the Lorewardens, now overrun by goblins and the minions of Lachesis, the Spider Queen, in the Dakhota hills.

Galadriel, a Druid, gives her life to re-awaken Gaia, the Earthmother, in order to defend the realm from the chaos released by the Ascension of Eris.

Sir Gawain opens his Halfway house in Ashtan, in order to provide an alternative to the murderous de Vermiis orphanage.

**191 AF:**

During an attempt to repeat Eris' experiment, Mordyval, an Occultist, unleashes the Spawn of the Unnamable Horror.

Haidion, the Wanderer, finds passage through the western Vashnar mountains, and discovers the redwood Aalen forest, in which lies the long-forgotten racial homeland of the Tsol'aa race.

**193 AF:**

The Gods grant the gift of Divine Grace to mortal-kind.

The Celani Hermes wins a bet with Raclawice, Goddess of Rogues and Gamblers, and gains her power to become the god Hermes, the Messenger.

The God of Justice, Dunamis, is able to escape his imprisonment on another plane through the sacrifice of Tassad Barsalan. He is renamed Deucalion, God of Justice.

The Mahtsuhama Arena opens on the Isle of Delos.

**196 AF:**

Sarapis throws a now-legendary party in the Crystal Leaf Inn. Drakhen drinks himself to death, and in a strangely romantic gesture, Zandramas and Lufton intentionally drink to death in each others arms.

Cobra, formerly a Serpentlord, leads a group of former Serpentlords to Ashtan and founds the Shadowsnake guild in the newly-rediscovered, magically-preserved, sunken ship of Calliope and Sinope.

The first wedding in Achaea's modern age takes place. Changcoix and Morlana are married in the Wedding Chamber of Maya, in the Chrysalis Basilica.

**198 AF:**

Sarapis, the Logos creates Aeyr, God of Magic.

Twilight, God of Darkness, emerges from the shadows to once again participate in the intrigues He so loves.

**200 AF:**

The Kharon monks, led by Morpheus, declare the Kharon Empire, and claim dominion over Sapience.

The skill of magical tattooing is discovered. Isildur is the first to master it.

The Sentaari, led by Laergon, foment rebellion against the Kharon.

A tournament of games and contests of skills is held in memory of the Fall of the Selucarian Empire, 200 years before. Isildur triumphs, and wins the Staff of Nicator.

The Kharon are forced to dissolve their Empire, due mainly to an inability to be taken seriously.

**201 AF:**

Sarapis, the Logos, holds a poetry competition, and Tancred Lasalle emerges as the shining star of the Sapience literary scene with his epic, "Final Resting for Travian Shea."

**202 AF:**

Treant leads some of the more aggressive Druids to form a new guild, the Sentinels, in Shallam. They master new metamorphosis forms, including Icewyrm, Gorilla, and Elephant.

Ashtan and Shallam both convert to limited democracies, and free elections take place for the positions of Archon and Vizier.

**203 AF:**

Sarapis, seeing a growing trend towards excessive violence, creates Oneiros, God of Peace.

**206 AF:**

Oneiros opens his temple in the village of Shastan, near the ocean.

**208 AF:**

The Coming of the Morning Star. A massive pit in space called Abaddon collides with a gigantic star. Abaddon cannot contain the star, and the two explode. All life on Sapience, save for some Mhun living in the bottom levels of Moghedu, and one mortal human named Clark, perishes in an instant. Two new Gods are created: Aurora, Goddess of Light, and Apollyon, the Malefactor. Vastar, God of the Skies, who has been long absent from mortal affairs returns and cleans the lingering radiation from the skies.

The Flame of Yggdrasil is rediscovered.

**209 AF:**

Gaia, gone half-mad, infected by a demon of chaos, slays Twilight, God of Darkness, breaking an aeons-old oath not to directly harm another God. Twilight, with the assistance of Eris, Aurora, and Oneiros, bind Gaia, and imprison her in the Gaian Tree as punishment.

The Kharon start yet another Empire which dissolves as quickly as it began.

**211 AF:**

Achaea's first polygamous wedding. Gijan, Snow, and Anniara marry each other.

Gijan, guildmaster of the Kharon, is cast out of Ashtan and begins a personal war on Ashtan. Although he initially has some triumphs, he is soon overwhelmed by Ashtan's superior numbers and draws in some of his inner circle in the Kharon to help him. Ashtan declares war on the the Kharon.

**212 AF:**

Eris gives Her support to Twilight, who brings darkness to the forests of Achaea. His revenge over Gaia, now called Oathbreaker, is complete.

Aurora, discovering that Gaia had been corrupted by a seed of insanity, informs the mortals that she, Hermes, and Oneiros will assist them in releasing Gaia. After much work by Gaia's loyal followers, she is freed. The energy that is released upon this event causes the lower depths of the dungeon of Azdun to be once more accessible. The Vampire Lord Zsarachnor makes himself known as the ruler of the lower depths.

The Kharon, recognizing the futility of their position, return to Ashtan and pledge their support to it.

**213 AF:**

The Vampire Lord Zsarachnor demands the removal of all shrines from Azdun.

Ashtan tears down the benevolent Halfway House for orphans, preferring that its orphans be taken to the de Vermiis orphanage to be killed.

**214 AF:**

Zsarachnor posts vampire guards in the Chrysalis Basilica to slay members of the Church. Some various Shallamese citizens, led by Rezzo, a priest, slay them. Zsarachnor warns that there will be reprisals.

Sarapis unveils the game of freeze tag, played in the Matsuhama Arena.

**216 AF:**

Elsdragon, leader of the Sentaari, wins a series of six competitions held by the Gods. His prize is a tower, built with divine assistance.

**217 AF:**

Ashtan declares war on the Church, claiming that the shrines the Church erects are weapons of mass destruction. Ashtan demands the removal of all shrines outside of a limited area around Shallam.

In order to provide a safe place for orphans subsequent to the tearing down of the Halfway House by Ashtan, Aurora, Goddess of Light, organizes a choir in the Chrysalis Basilica, where orphans may lead safe, happy lives.

Banks open in Shallam and Ashtan.

**218 AF:**

The war widens as Shallam declares that an attack on members of the Church is an attack on Shallam. Darthus, the powerful leader of the unaligned Serpentlords, declares his support for Shallam.

Ashtan and Shallam, being in states of war, employ archers to assist in the slaying of invading city enemies.

**219 AF:**

Shin, Maran, and Dalamar, speaking for the Church in place of the absent Archprelate, Isildur, negotiate with Nimos and Gijan, representatives of Ashtan, in order to gain peace. They are successful, though the Church is forced to accept limitations on where it may place its shrines.

**221 AF:**

Hashan begins to grow, as it begins accepting new citizens.

**222 AF:**

Sartan, Lord of Evil announces His existence to mortalkind. Previously known as Shaitan, he had attacked, slain, and absorbed the power of the new God, Apollyon.

**223 AF:**

Sartan Releases the Seven Truths of Evil, which champion strength and might as right.

**224 AF:**

Gambling parlours open in both Ashtan and Shallam, and for a time, roulette is all the rage in the monied set.

**227 AF:**

Gaia, Goddess of nature forms The Council of Oakstone to combat the city of Hashan. She calls for all citizens of Hashan to quit Hashan, claiming that they are being duped by Twilight, God of Darkness. Plans for the expansion of Hashan into a city on par with Ashtan and Shallam begin.



**228 AF:**

The War of Achaea ends, with Ashtan conquering much of the land, and marching its troops into Shallam. Sarapis commands that all hostilities must cease, and orders all troops to stand down.

**229 AF:**

Shallam begins taxation of shops inside of its walls. It causes commotion, but little else.

**230 AF:**

Sartan opens the Infernals, whose first Guildmaster is Sinistar.

Workmen of Hashan begin to cut trees down in the Ithmia to make room for its expansion.

Gaia, outraged at the betrayal of the forests by Firefox and other Druid or Sentinel members of Hashan's government, declares Firefox an enemy of the forests. She calls on Lupus, wild God of the Beasts for aid, and he unleashes a plague of werewolves to terrorize Hashan. Twilight and Hashan quickly pacify Lupus and the expansion goes on as planned.

**234 AF:**

Ironounge and the occultists declare war on the Church. Shortly there after, the government of Ashtan declares that it will not honour the old treaty, and declares war.

After a period of intense hostilities, both sides agree to re-open treaty negotiations. They meet in the temple of Peace.

**235 AF:**

Cronono becomes a Celani and Chronicler of Achaea.

A cease-fire is called in the great Ashtan-Shallam war.

Disputes over the subsequent treaty quickly arise.

Tylin betrays Shallam, and the Order of Light, and joins Ashtan, significantly altering the balance of power for a time. He suffers greatly under the wrath of Aurora, patron of Shallam.

**236 AF:**

In what surely be one of the most epochal events to take place since the Day of Creation, Sarapis decides that the long-imprisoned Lorielan has truly reformed, and releases the Jade Empress from her prison on the Crystal Plane of the Kx'khras. Nearly at the same time, Aegis, who had long journeyed the most remote plains spreading war to the further corners of Creation, returns His attention to Sapience.

Lotash brings news that Bearnath and the cultists are trying to summon the Beastlord to this plane of existence.

**237 AF:**

Cynne Ravenwind organizes a Festival of Thanksgiving to the Logos.

**238 AF:**

Cynne organizes another festival, this time in honour of Lupus.

Hashan formally withdraws from the treaty, citing blatant disregard for it by other signatories as the reason.

**239 AF :**

Ashtan formally withdraws from the treaty, essentially ending it. Oakstone offers to mediate a new treaty.

#### **240 AF :**

Hashan formally posts a complete Canon of its laws for all to see, composed mainly by Elentari, the Seneschal of Hashan. Ashtan and Shallam rush to copy her work.

Through the offering of the Spawn of the Unnamable Horror, Eris is awakened into the land after a twenty year slumber.

In return for Gaia's slaying of the Spawn, Eris removes the Unicorn's horn. Mandrake Diamante, Druidess Esther and Ithan, with aid from Nita Le'Murzen, are able to scavenge the proper ingredients for creating the metacure elixir, which they use to restore the horn to the Unicorn.

Dead sparrows and robins are found littering the land, their hearts burst from their bodies. An insane old man is found roaming the land, raving about 'Death's Heart' and a prophecy that begins with the death of the children of air.

Dead geese and swans are found, their hearts similarly burst from their chests.

All orphans in the land disappear. The old man claims that the disappearance of the lost children is the second part of the Death's Heart prophecy.

Meetings are called among the various factions of the land, and it is decided that the threat the old man speaks of is the return of the Tso'l'teth. They are wrong.

Strange chantings are heard, carried on the wind, from the Shamtota hills, and a bright white light, and an image of a temple projected onto the clouds, is seen far to the north.

Pryla'ka, a Tso'l'dasi priestess of Life appears in a Temple to the north. She is the first Tso'l'dasi to reveal itself since the dawn of mankind. She claims that someone called the Quisalar is gathering death energy for an unknown purpose, and that in order to stop him, the corpses of the dead sparrows, robins, swans, and geese must be brought, so that she may utilize the latent death energies in them to combat the Quisalar and his Quisalis cultists. The Quisalar makes similar demands, and when Maran, Sultan of Shallam tells him they will not assist the Quisalar in his plan to bring back Thoth, the Quisalar attacks, saying that either all will join him, or they will serve him in their deaths.

Unable to discover the location of the Temple, the Great Mhunna, leader of Moghedu, and a famous campaigner as a young Mhun, volunteers to assist, and an expedition consisting of the Mhunna, Warmaster, Cooper, Aringar, Fuu, Perseon, Thorgon, Armelia, Thalen, and Jem set out to discover it, and succeed.

People supporting Pryla'ka or the Quisalar begin working hard to collect the dead birds, laden with lingering death magic, and bring them to the Priestess of Life or the Quisalar.

#### **241 AF :**

Achaea is largely polarized over Death's Heart. On one side is Shallam and some of the more nature-loving Druids and Sentinels. The other side is led by Twilight and His Order, with support made up of various citizens of Ashtan and Hashan.

Though the Shallamese and the others opposing the Quisalar make a strong effort, those backing the Quisalar manage to bring him enough death energy to complete the construction of Death's Heart. Twilight and His Order have manipulated most into believing that the purpose of Death's Heart is to awaken Thoth from His slumber, though this is not the case. Immediately upon the construction of the Heart, a battle of epic proportions takes place, with Maran, Sultan of Shallam, leading the attack against Twilight's Order. Death abounds on both sides.

Soon after near-total war breaks out over the Heart, another issue nearly disrupts the alliances formed over the Heart. A rogue Serpentlord, Nuitari, gets very heavy pressure from Twilight and the Serpentlords to come back

to the fold, as they wish to ensure that the two serpent guilds can effectively control the distribution of the so-called "illegal" venoms. Nuitari balks and is persecuted, greatly upsetting his patron, Aegis, God of War.

In order to strike back at Twilight's order, Aegis allies his with the Order of Light, but soon Twilight makes a deal with Aegis. Under the terms of the deal, Dalamar, Nuitari, and Cooper have to make restitution to the Infernals, whose influence Twilight was courting, for robbing their store, and Dalamar has to make restitution to Elentari's Hashan. Partially due to Twilight's influence, Sinistar, guildmaster of the Infernals, soon chooses Aegis, God of War, as Patron, displacing the apparently uncaring Sartan, Lord of Evil.

The fight over Death's Heart waxes and wanes, but hostility is high. Many are unsure of the motives of the Quisalar, and those of Pryla'ka. Initially out-numbered, the Shallamese organize under the leadership of Maran, Echo, and the Archprelate of the Church, Isildur. They gain the upper hand initially but soon the discipline and power of those in the Order of Darkness such as Napoloen, the Grand Shadow, Overseer of Ashtan, overwhelm them and the Heart grows.

#### **242 AF :**

However, soon, Sinistar converses with the Quisalar, and, discovering that he opposes undeath, the powers of which the Infernals use, decides to withdraw his support, and this, along with increased intervention by Druids and Sentinels like Galdrion Longshanks, tips the balance in favour of Shallam and its allies. Despite a massive last-ditch attack led by Napoloen, the Shallamese manage to nearly destroy the Heart.

Deucalion announces that it is over, that the impending doom that would have been caused by the Quisalar's victory has been averted. It is revealed that the Quisalar was working for Twilight the full time. Their plan was to dupe people who wouldn't normally support Twilight into unwittingly supporting him. The Heart would be caused to grow, and finally explode, releasing massive quantities of death. This would cause a chain reaction, as each dying being added to the total quantity of energy. Using the remains of the Heart, Twilight hoped to focus this astronomical amount of energy at the slumbering Thoth, slay him, and add Thoth's essence to His own, greatly increasing His power. In the process though, all life on Sapience would have perished.

Sensing victory, Pryla'ka travelled to the Heart, and challenged the Quisalar. The Quisalar, no longer powerful enough to have a hope of defeating a Tsol'dasi Priestess of Life, made a last desperate rush at Pryla'ka, but failed. She banished him to eternal sleep.

Pryla'ka begins attempting to safely dismantle what is left of Death's Heart, essentially a powerful bomb of death energy now. She fails, becoming overloaded with energy, and screaming that she cannot hold it. Some mortals, among them Khaseem and Cynne, refuse to leave the scene, and die upon the explosion of the Heart. So powerful is the explosion that life for a hundred miles around looks likely to perish in a flash, until, with unexpected, total sacrifice, Deucalion, God of Righteousness, attempts to contain the blast. So powerful is it, even in its much-weakened state, that he cannot contain the energy, and his essence is dispersed across Creation. In a final gesture of compassion, he manages to grant all mortalkind the ability to reincarnate and wipe clean their moral slate. Sarapis permits their souls to choose from five new races: Groom, Xoran, Rajamala, Horkval, and Atavian. Choruses of cheers erupt from around the land, as total disaster is averted. Shallam and its Druidic and Sentinel allies receive formal congratulations from representatives of many of the leaders of the land, such as the Great Mhunna and the mayor of Thera.

In a gesture of peace, Shallam and the Church offer formal pardons for any crimes committed during Death's Heart. Darkness and its allies brood, but begin hatching new plans immediately. Peace will not last long.

On a somewhat less serious note, Kona Diamante and Lemon Ni'Choya spent much of the year battling it out in an undeclared war of poetry.

#### **243 AF:**

Gijan undergoes a conversion, betrays the Order of Twilight, leaves the Kharon and styles himself "Healer of Shallam." He becomes one of the staunchest defenders of his former nemesis, although many suspect that treachery still lurks within his heart and that he merely bides his time before betraying the Jewel of the East.

The Sentinels Guild, citing philosophical differences with the Divine Patron of Hashan, sue for permission to leave the city and are granted such leave, although many of the guild's members remain citizens.

**244 AF:**

The perennial battles of swords and words between the Church and its sworn enemies continue to rage. Citizens of the city-states become more concerned with the defenses of their respective domains as the hostilities become more heated and war breaks out between the Church of Shallam and the Infernals of Ashtan.

Entering the fray on a philosophical and theological level are those, including the Druids, who debate whether the ecclesiastical practice of sanctifying shrines through the blood of sacrificed creatures, and the use of demonic entities are much different from certain practices of the Infernals.

In a stunning act of betrayal, Borknagar, Treasurer of Shallam, empties the city's treasury and flees to Ashtan, having funneled tens of thousands of gold pieces to Ashtan's coffers and leaving Shallam penniless and ridiculed by her ancient foe. Borknagar reveals that he has been an agent of Ashtan, on a secret mission for Mistral, Guildmistress of the Shadowsnakes, all along. Although most of the Divinities of Achaea are publicly silent on the matter, Miramar and Loriean express their rage at his treachery in no uncertain terms.

**245 AF:**

Mical Selvaetiim becomes the first mortal in the history of Sapience to reach the eightieth Circle of Enlightenment and is honoured by Sarapis with the title of Logosian.

Dingo ignites a fierce debate on the shape of Achaea. Many claim to know that it takes the shape of a sphere. Others insist that it is flat. Eventually Sarapis, the Logos, deigns to answer the question concerning His creation but mortal minds prove incapable of comprehending this boon. Many are driven mad in their attempts to unravel His answer, their subsequent words unintelligible rantings. Some are shocked into catatonic silence, but the debate continues.

In an attempt to protect what they perceive as a sacred birthright, the Serpent guilds of Sapience move to declare certain venoms "illegal" for non-Serpents to possess. The Infernals of Ashtan offer to become the enforcement arm of this new policy.

**246 AF:**

A long-simmering feud between Twilight and Miramar erupts into open hostility as their respective Divine Orders go to war with one another. Eventually the heavens erupt in fire and fury, and mortals cower in utter dread as the two deities declare open warfare on one another, and their priests and supernatural agents meet to do battle upon the mortal plane. The divine battle ends in a rather anti-climactic stalemate, and the two sides agree to withdraw from conflict for the nonce, although hostilities continue.

During the battle between the two deities and their minions, several notice a blazing object fall from the heavens landing, it is discovered, at the site of an old altar to Deucalion. Concurrently, a vision of a fading spectral image appears in the skies over Sapience. Thakren is beset by visions about the object, which proves to be a statuette, and the Druids and Sentinels hear ominous whisperings of ill portent in the forests, filled with references to the Morningstar. Sapience fairly hums with gossip and speculation about the significance of these omens, ranging from the dark machinations of Twilight, to the reappearance of Deucalion or Thoth. Many wonder if the very Gods themselves have abandoned mortalkind.

**247 AF:**

Ashtan and Hashan move to declare war upon Shallam as a result of acts of provocation, in the form of shrines, placed within their walls. As preparations for war, and numerous deaths as the result of preliminary skirmishes, reach a fever pitch Twilight offers Miramar a cessation of hostilities. Miramar accepts. Subsequently, both Hashan and Ashtan stand down from the war effort against the Jewel of the East.

Ashtan, the Bastion of the North, erupts in chaos as conflict between Sinistar and devotees of Twilight within the Infernals jockey for power within the guild. Sinistar is enemied and cast out of the city, for alleged use of

“illegal” venoms. Many believe that Sinistar has been framed as a result of plots hatched by the Order of Darkness. Others avow that arrogance and self-preservation have motivated Sinistar’s actions.

Elentari of Hashan and the Council of Regents vote to reiterate their support of the venom ban, and pass legislation requiring that offenders be outlawed from the city.

**248 AF:**

Sinistar regains control of the Infernals, but dies, only to enter a state he terms “unlife,” neither truly corporeal nor truly discarnate. Debate ensues over this is the result of necromantic adeptness, as Sinistar lays claim, or merely smoke and mirror illusions, yet to be revealed.

**249 AF:**

Lady Elentari Lokelinde-Danial, Seneschal of Hashan and Guildmistress of the Serpentlords, becomes the second mortal in the history of Achaea to ascend to the Garden of the Gods and become immortal, transformed into Ourania, Goddess of the Moon.

Sartan, God of Evil, angered by the claims of the Church that its shrines represent all of the Gods, rejects any connection of the shrines with Himself, and brings into manifestation a shrine of His own creation within the one of the most sacred enclosures of the Chrysalis Basilica itself. The reactions of the Church and Shallam, and the subsequent arguments arising therefrom, once again place the Church on the defensive as it is peppered with taunts of hypocrisy. Rumours of the imminent formation of a “splinter” or “dark” Church fly about the land. In retaliation, Aurora, Goddess of Light, places an altar in the Infernals guildhall. The altar placed in the Wedding Chamber of Maya by Sartan opens a rift to a demonic plane whence stream deadly demons, wreaking havoc on the populace of Shallam.

Throughout the year, the followers of Oneiros, God of Peace, find themselves assailed publicly as to the true nature of peace and whether or not they invite accusations of hypocrisy by certain of their actions.

**251 AF:**

Sinistar resigns as Guildmaster of the Infernals.

**252 AF:**

Shallam follows in the footsteps of Hashan, binding its resident guilds to the city by making them signatory to the Guild Charter of Shallam.

**254 AF:**

While searching for irid moss, Taranis discovers a mysterious crystal. He receives arcane knowledge of elemental forces and becomes the first of the Magi. He forms a guild in Shallam and dedicates it to the battle against the forces of evil, darkness and chaos.

Drazik attains knowledge of the elemental powers and forms the Sorcerers Guild in Hashan. Eschewing the dogmatic bent of the Magi, the guild chooses to align itself neutrally.

**257 AF:**

Aegis, God of War, chooses to once more walk the grim battlefields of Sapience.

Napoloen forms the Warlocks Guild in Ashtan. Although he champions no politically based direction, as have the Magi and the Sorcerers, it is widely believed that the new guild will follow the philosophical bent of Ashtan.

**258 AF:**

Prince Tu'eras of the Tsol'aa frantically informs the public that vile criminals of unknown origin have attacked the Tsol'aa people in their ancestral village in the dead of night and that although he has escaped, he knows not the whereabouts or condition of his parents. He tells of fires being set and the Forest of Aalen in flames.

Many Druids and Magi mobilize to quench the flames. When the smoke clears and investigations begin, it is discovered that the King of the Tsol'aa has been cruelly murdered by one calling himself Kroul, and that Queen Celaabi has been raped. Although Celaabi, who refuses to leave the home of her ancestors, is safe and has been granted sanctuary by the Druidess Cynne, Tu'eras and the surviving Tsol'aa cannot be found.

Vexlore rants publicly of his belief that Tu'eras is a coward and weakling for remaining in hiding with his people. He vows that he shall slay the Prince himself, and mocks the misery and suffering of the gentle Tsol'aa people.

The Great Mhunna, while expressing sympathy for the plight of the people of the Aalen, cites appearances of Orcs skulking about the land to support his decision to seal the great gate of Moghedu until he deems it safe for his people to do otherwise.

Orcs, claiming to be simply "touring" the land are sighted roaming the land. However, they are soon seen setting forest fires and speaking loudly of their "Lord," Kroul. Many of them begin to enter the cities, expressing desires to see the fabled Master Crystals of the magi guilds.

Maran of Shallam offers the Tsol'aa aid and succor. The other city-states, Oakstone, and the guilds and clans of Sapience eventually offer like assistance. In an amazing show of solidarity, ancient enemies join one another in common cause against the perceived threat on the horizon. Patrols are organized and guard set.

Queen Celaabi is found murdered along with her unborn children. A group of Orc knights, assassins and huntresses makes a raid upon the hiding place of Prince Tu'eras and his band in hiding. They are repelled, but not before one of the assassins manages to kill the Elder Druid, Thaa'lis.

Vexlore publicly boasts that he is a mercenary agent of Kroul, an Ogre High Priest. He reveals Kroul's plans to seize the master crystals and open a portal into this world through which his legions shall pour, decimating all before them. Kroul, realizing that he must proceed openly now, and that the usefulness of his traitorous stooge is at an end, slays Vexlore cruelly, laughing at his gullibility.

The Orcs launch raids upon the city-states, kidnapping Hakhim, Liirup and Ratman. The citizens fear that their economies shall collapse without these prime sources of revenue. The whereabouts of the three are eventually discovered, but during the attempt to rescue them, the Orcs seize the Master Crystal of the Warlocks. Thus empowered, they find the crystals of the Sorcerers and the Magi to be easily obtained.

Sapience launches a massive assault on the stronghold of Kroul, in the recently rediscovered Dun Valley, defeating him, and discovering that Kroul is, himself, only the mercenary for Zh'risia, a Tsol'teth wishing to prove his prowess to his kin, who has been skulking within the Dun fortress the murder of his master by Baron Vukub Ysin'zhu.

Sapience rejoices at the victory, but with sorrow as Tu'eras takes the mantle of kingship while mourning his dead parents and kin.

## **261 AF:**

In an attempt to resurrect the essence of the vanished Deucalion, Maran sacrifices his mortal coil. Although his sacrifice is in vain, the Pantheon honours him for his selflessness, and his soul ascends to the Garden of the Gods to be reborn as Pentharian, God of Righteousness.

Raajin Lucoster and various of his followers breaks with the Infernals over philosophical differences with Sartan, God of Evil and Infernal Patron. Although Khejian, his comrade-in-arms and close friend is to follow him, Khejian betrays Raajin's Exodus Battallion at the last moment and chooses to remain with Ashtan and Sartan. The Exodus Battallion goes into exile, and take up residence as guests of Hashan. Although Raajin and his Battallion garner the support of many throughout Sapience, the Infernals and Ashtan persecute them

continually. Eventually Raajin is abducted and is not heard from again. The Exodus Battallion eventually falls into obscurity.

**262 AF:**

The Goddess Tarah appears to bid farewell to Achaea and disappears.

**264 AF:**

Polyargos is discovered.

**266 AF:**

Mysterious new "landmarks" appear in the lands. The Landmarks and their changing aspects are immediately recognized as having metaphysical import, and the essence using guilds and their allies take opposing sides in their approaches to the maintenance of the Landmarks and the sites and structures, engendering fresh and bloody new conflicts in Sapience.

**267 AF:**

Noxalar, the notorious purveyor of venoms to one and all is slain and, being without heirs, his shop closed. The Serpent guilds, seeing the futility of their former draconian desires to control the product, take a mercantile approach and declare all venoms legal to possess. Arguments break out over charges of price-fixing. Weapon forgers, purveyors of enchantments and dealers in herbs and other healing substances enter the fray.

**271 AF:**

A mysterious jade statuette with the ability to move from person to person of its own volition appears. Those who hold retain the object for any length of time are plagued by visions, dreams and nightmares. Madness, murder and suicide follow in the wake of these visions.

Researches into the icon reveal that it appears to missing a shard, leaving a break through which pours a "cold" energy of some sort. The missing shard is recovered, and with the aid of a cleric of a mysterious group known as the Obeah Ecstasia the icon is resealed, narrowly averting further mayhem. The cleric reveals that the icon is an ancient artifact of the forgotten Goddess Valnurana, Mistress of Sleep and Dreams, who long ago placed inside of it four horrific nightmare spirits in order to protect mortal kind from their somnolent ravagings. The Obeah Ecstasia are revealed to be an ancient line of dream scholars to whom the icon was originally entrusted by the Goddess. Emese, the cleric, returns to her home, the icon once more safely within the hands of the Obeah Ecstasia.

Vixen, guild tutor to the Sentinels, falls deathly ill. In a herculean effort to save her, some of the Sentinels perform a rite which intentionally decimates their groves. Although Vixen is saved, all Sentinels lose their Groves ability. The Sentinels are grief-stricken as the forest, so long both their charge and their sustainer, no longer communicates with them on any level. Eventually the Sentinels find the long lost village of Eleusis, where they make their new home and are granted the gift of the Woodlore skill.

**275 AF:**

Four years after the events surrounding the Jade Icon, the collective dreams of Sapience are once again disturbed. The resident tutors of the city states begin to be troubled by strange dreams. Much of the populace complains of a prevailing enervation and vivid dreams of ill import. Irritability assails some, brought on by fatigue and lack of restful sleep, while others sink into despondency and aimless wandering brought on by these conditions. More suddenly than they appeared, the dream disturbances cease.

Epicurus, Ashtan's resident teacher, has resorted to a potion in order to sleep, but has fallen into a deep unnatural slumber, beset by violent nightmares, from which it appears he will never wake.

Hashan calls upon Sharbrena, high Cleric of its Patron Twilight and beseeches her to summon Esemé once more. The cleric arrives and enters the dreams of Epicurus in an attempt to discern the nature of his malady. She

is shocked to discover that during the repair of the Jade Icon, four years earlier, one of the nightmare spirits had been inadvertently sealed outside it, and the spirit's bond to the statuette broken. The Icon itself has disappeared from the keeping of the Obeah Ecstasia again.

The nightmare spirit, Erinyes by name, kidnaps Epicurus and plans to use him to complete her plans, begun with her quest for sufficient power by gorging upon mortal dreams and planned to culminate in the destruction of her ancient prisoner. Epicurus, still besotted with unnatural sleep, is unable to aid Erinyes. Instead, the Jade Icon is broken by Gelphend, a mortal who has fallen under her sway. The remaining three nightmare entities are freed and great harm is loosed upon the mortal planes as both sleeping and waking nightmares consume the populace, driving many into insanity and loosing mayhem throughout the continent.

Without warning the hellish visions cease. Valnurana, Goddess of Sleep and Dreams has found Her own divine slumber disturbed by the unnatural flux and disruption in the dream patterns of the mortal world. She awakens and with Her power calls the nightmare spirits to Her, binding them and thus ending their reign of terror and once more taking Her place among the manifest Pantheon.

#### **276 AF:**

Sartan, Lord of Evil, after wreaking fearful havoc upon the world, declares that He intends to extinguish the last bit of power left by Aurora, Goddess of Light, before She left this plane for unknown destinations and for an unspecified length of time. He extinguishes Her Flame of Light, destroying Her links to the mortal world. Thus denying Her future return. However, deep within the keep of the Vampire Queen, Belladonna, Dawn, the Keeper of Light has long guarded one of Aurora's most potent artifacts, the Prism of Light. The Prism yet provides the Lightbringer a portal into this plane.

Sartan discovers the existence of the Prism and shatters it as well. Breaking it into three pieces, He gives two into the safekeeping of dire dragons, and a third to one of his most trusted adherents.

Through the heroics of many of Her faithful, through pain and hardship, and culminating in a great show of power, the pieces are eventually united and Aurora, Goddess of Light, sheds Her glow upon mortal kind once more.

In a stunning turn of events Caerid, Guildmaster of the Paladins, chooses Sartan, God of Evil, as Patron and is excommunicated and cast out of the city. Caerid ingratiates himself with the Order of Sartan and, heady with power, turns on his former allies while unleashing a storm of murder and foul acts upon them. Eventually he is removed from the guild by force of arms. The reparation received by Caerid and his wife, Malia, for their service to the Lord of Evil was amazing. Believing that they were to be rewarded with the highest ranks within the spiritual hierarchy of the Order of Evil and granted temporal power over a new city-state, the pair stood proudly at the Shrine of Ascension before Sartan and much of Sapience. With the dark voice of the Evil One intoning their deeds, Caerid and Malia were stripped naked, beaten without mercy, humiliated and made to grovel. Sartan thanked them, then cast them from his Order and thrown to His pack of followers to be slain.

#### **277 AF:**

In the culmination of an old prophecy, first uttered by Choirmaster Handel of the Chrysalis Basilica, the essence of Aurora, Goddess of Light, is dispersed. Pentharian, God of Righteousness, takes Her mantle upon Himself and becomes God of Righteousness and Light.

#### **278 AF:**

Following new bridge construction on the Isle of Delos, and underwater city called Riparium is discovered. One of its inhabitants reveals that a specific herbal element will allow air breathers to visit there and many do.

For the first time in history, the government of a city wields power over a resident guild when Dresden, Sultanness of Shallam, replaces the leadership of the Dawnstriders after a long-running conflict between the guild leadership and the Shallamese Viziers.

#### **279 AF:**



The Forest and the dwellers therein rejoice at the reawakening of Gaia, Goddess of Nature. A number of Druids and other devotees of the ancient Goddess meet to perform a Rite of Prayer in honour of the nature Deity. Although they do so with scant hope, their hopes and prayers are answered as Gaia once more walks among the millenia old trees of Sapience.

Several individuals attempt a rite to restore the essence of the Goddess Tarah. They fail.

Sartan, God of Evil, performs an act of extermination within the sacred confines of the Temple of Gaia. In retaliation He is enemied to the Forest. His minions, The Order of Evil, begin to decimate and burn the forests of Sapience. The Sentinels and Druids react by banning the sale or gift of all herbs, ointments, and elixirs to all Sapience. The Sorcerers Guild bans all enchantments using kola in a gesture of support for the forest folk and their cause.

Orina, Guildmistress of the Druids, joins with Xandor Sheolan, Grand Shadow of the Order of Twilight, in the performance of a rite known as the Darkenwood Ritual. For the second time in history the forests of Sapience are shrouded in shadow. This time, however, the intent is ostensibly to merge the essences of Gaia and Twilight in a shield against the minions of Evil. Orina is roundly castigated by many for what is perceived as her treachery. Some, recalling the Death's Heart episode, believe that in her desperation to save the forests, she has been duped by the machinations of the Order of Darkness.

Gaia refuses to intervene although many beseech Her for aid and succor. Many of the traditional allies of Nature refuse to be tainted by Darkness and refuse their aid as well. What is worse, for all Xandor's words, it seems that the Children of Darkness have no true intent of helping the Forest. Orina changes her mind and seeks to undo that which she has done. The Children of Nature and their faithful perform a rite to rid the forests of Darkness, and the Darkenwood Rite is never completed. They succeed for the most part, but Gaia remains withdrawn and impatient and it is obvious that something abhorrent to Nature yet troubles the lands beneath the trees.

The Children of Nature resort to oracles for assistance, but do not see that an imbalance has been created that they must right, preferring to place blame outside themselves rather than heed the words of wisdom given to them.

Strange creatures appear in the forests, harmed by sunlight and the places inhabited by the known races and their works. Calling themselves Arachnoi, and appearing in the form of humanoid spiders, they claim that Xandor and Orina are their grandparents and that they have been sent by their mother to plead with their grandparents to complete the Darkenwood Ritual by which their mother had been created. They are creatures with no natural habitat within the existing mansions of Nature, and they are dying as a result.

The rite is completed but Istishia, mother of the Arachnoi, is killed by a Shallamese contingent.

The Arachnoi now reside in the newly created Darkenwood. Having little reason to trust the Children of Sarapis, they are rarely seen by mortals and prefer that that state of affairs remain. Balance has been returned to the forests for now, and all seems well.

#### **281 AF:**

The people of Sapience begin to erect shrines to their chosen deities, dedicated to individual Gods and Goddesses, breaking the ancient monopoly of the Church on these devotional structures.

#### **282 AF:**

The war between the Order of Evil and the Forests continues. Eventually Sartan presents His terms for "peace" to the Forest entities. Gaia and the Oakstone Council reject his offer. Subsequently, Gaia presents Her own terms and both sides declare victory, bringing an uneasy peace to the forest, which yet require great healing.

#### **285 AF:**

A clan of professional Assassins forms. Though feared and secretive, these contract killers have yet to make much of a mark on Achaean society.

Rejecting what they see as the soiling of honour and justice by their more mercenary brethren, some Assassins form a new clan, calling themselves Champions. They accept no fees for their work and claim to exist solely to mete out justice for its own sake.

A blazing star appears in the heavens and plummets to ground. Soon it is discovered that the object is no star but is the Hammer of Phaestus. Fern, the Sentinel who discovers it, is visited by strange visions involving the image of a unicorn and great stones.

An attempt is made to unravel the mystery by a group of Magi and Sorcerers, gathering at the monoliths in the Temple of Gaia and focusing upon the unicorn known to contain the essence of the ancient traitor-God Agatheis, but nothing is revealed.

A second attempt is made, but is aborted when an Ashtanite Occultist makes away with the Hammer, taking it to Ashtan. A third attempt is made, and yet another Ashtanite steals the Hammer. After The Magi and Sorcerers agree to allow the Ashtanite Warlocks to participate in the Hammer is returned and the exercise proceeds.

The gathered magic users focus their energies upon the unicorn, who touches his horn to the Hammer releasing Phaestus.

For his selflessness in aiding the return of Phaestus, Sarapis pardons Agatheis for his role in the traitorous Triumvirate of ages past and releases His soul from the unicorn, restoring Him to the Pantheon.

#### **287-288 AF:**

Syvelium, guild tutor of the Paladins goes missing. When questioned about the disappearance, Pentharian and the other Gods deny that such an entity has ever even existed. Mortals begin to whisper among themselves that the Gods seem to have gone mad, and tremble in fear of what this means to the world. Soon the fabric of sanity begins to unravel throughout the continent. Mortalkind remember events and personages the existence of which are denied by the Deities. The madness moves throughout the populace and soon none are sure of life, memory, family or position. Or, indeed, are sure of things that cannot possibly be or never were. Many regress into infantile states or claim ancestries, histories or associations that go beyond the outlandish. Firefox of Hashan loses his Serpentlord abilities and finds that in their place he has attained a mystical knowledge previously unknown in the world. He calls himself a "Shaman" and forms a guild in Hashan. Events continue to spiral out of control.

The Order of Valnurana is given a revelation of an entity that brings to mind the "Other," spoken of by Phaestus at his release. Soon the Other reveals Himself to the world. He begins to use His powers slay Achaeans in a random and capricious manner. He changes the race of others to beings thereafter known as Satyrs and Sirens.

During a great meteorological cataclysm, a gilded chest plummets from the sky to land in the Aureliana Forest. Kaisar La'Seir discovers the chest and reads upon it dire words of prophecy, warning that to open it will lead to horror and mayhem.

It is discovered that the Great Mhunna, Lord of Moghedu holds what is likely the key to the chest. In his wisdom, and heeding the counsel of his ministers, he decides to keep the key where it may do no harm. Ashtan, Bastion of the North, eventually succeeds in murdering the Mhunna and gaining control of the key. Once the key is outside of Moghedu, it becomes apparent that it is of such nature that none may hold it for long. Eventually, Shakti Devi succeeds in opening the chest.

At the opening of the chest a massive arrow of flame strikes at the very heart of Shallam, utterly destroying the Chrysalis Basilica, leaving a massive crater in its wake. As this happens, a second and larger chest falls to ground in the Pash Valley. Even though this object is inscribed with even more clear and dire warnings than the first, Charlotte Voivre of Shallam manages to open it. As she does so, flames fly heavenward incinerating all in the vicinity. In the city of Hashan, many of the populace has gathered at Crossroads of the city, seeking safety from the flaming vortex that has moved to hover over the city. They are annihilated by the phenomenon.

Once Hashan has been destroyed the Other reveals His name to be Varian and vows to make all Creation His. As Achaea reels in the horror at His pronouncements that He is ruler of all, Sarapis, the Logos, reveals that He has all along been unaffected by the madness which has infected the other Gods, merely playing a waiting game

to size up this almost-equal entity from outside His Creation. The Logos is unable to destroy Varian, but has the power to create a mirror image of Achaea and expel the Other from Achaea and into the duplicate world. Sarapis calls this new sphere of Creation “Aetolia” and dubs it the Midnight Age. He then severs its connection with Achaea and sets it on a course of its own.

The Divine Logos removes the flaming vortex from Hashan, but such is the destruction to the Chrysalis Basilica that He decides to leave it as it is, for reasons of His own. Slowly the atmospheric and meteorological disturbances fade away and normalcy, if such it can be truly called after such events, returns to the skies of Achaea.

In the aftermath of the coming of Varian, an Ashuran monk, Revelation Azon, discovers a long lost Human city called Cyrene. The citizens of Cyrene petition Czanthria Zuiho\_sho to become the leader of their city and she accepts. She founds the guild of Runewardens.

Epilogue to the Aetolian Saga:

It is certain that the changes wrought by the appearance of the Other will shake the foundations of Achaea for many years. New races, new classes, new guilds, and new cities will provide opportunity for power to shift, for alliances to formed, and broken.

What will become of this heretofore secluded city of Cyrene? Will it grow to rival Ashtan, Shallam, and Hashan as a fourth power on Sapience? How will it feel about Ashtan and Shallam particularly? (For it was founded thousands of years ago, in the times before Nicator founded Seleucar, in response to the endless Ashtan/Shallam wars.) Perhaps not even the Logos knows.

And what will happen to the mortals who brought this destruction upon their fellows, Shakti and Charlotte? The calls have already begun to hunt them for the rest of their existence for their crimes against humanity, and certainly it is difficult to avoid the opinion, given the warnings provided, that they knowingly brought destruction on innocents. Will Achaeans have the moral courage and the will to impose justice? Only time will tell.

#### **289 AF:**

For the first time in decades, the Spawn of the Unnamable Horror is unleashed on the land, by Lemon Ni'Choya and Khalid Yusef.

#### **290 AF:**

A mysterious wisp of flame is observed by many, flitting about the lands and performing odd, but harmless, acts of magic such as changing the colours and shapes of clothing. Khalid Yusef, a Druid, is intrigued by these antics and commissions a shrine to the entity. When the shrine is completed, Eris, Goddess of Chaos, arises from Her long sleep to take Her place in the Garden once more. This same year, the Occultists, overjoyed at the return of their ancient Patroness, embrace Her patronage once again.

Pentharian, God of Righteousness disbands His Divine Order.

#### **291 AF:**

Ousting Sartan, Lord of Evil, Eris replaces Him as Patron of the city-state of Ashtan.

#### **292 AF:**

Many of the more neutrally aligned Orders banded together in a first-of-its-kind alliance, to combat the depredations of the Order of Sartan upon their shrines. Participating Orders included Caspian's, Phaestus', Lupus', Aegis', and Ourania's.

#### **293 AF:**

In a shocking historical precedent, Tigrayne Lena, Guildmistress of the Druids, removes Gaia as Patroness of the guild, which position Gaia has retained from the guild's beginnings. She replaces the Goddess of Nature with Lupus, God of the Hunt. This action is preceded by the many of Tigrayne's supporters placing guild disfavours upon the Lady of the Forests before their final castigation of Her. Gaia, however remains Patron of Oakstone. Throughout the year fierce battles of words and recrimination are hurled back and forth among the Druids and the Gaian faithful. The central issue appears to be Gaia's desire that the Druids and Her followers adopt a more neutrally aligned position regarding the affairs of the world in accordance with the rhythms of nature. Many of the Druids reject this philosophy, maintaining that it is an infringement on their individual freedoms to choose their moral path.

The Sentinels end their ban on the sale of herbs and medicinal substances to the city-state of Ashtan.

Sartan and His minions continue their harassment of the populace of Sapience. Argument and debate regarding the nature of and philosophy of Evil dominate the public news boards.

Hashan remains angry and at a state of declared war with Shallam over the firestorm incident. Adding fuel to Hashan's deep anger and grief is the fact that Charlotte, seen as the chief perpetrator of the crime against the City has been appointed to a government ministry position in Shallam. Shallam offers Hashan 50,000 pieces of gold and a public apology as recompense for its losses. Hashan's government, explodes in stunned and insulted rage. Calla and Kryvar take the battle public, with eloquent and impassioned rhetoric upon the public news boards. Hashan breaks off all talks with Shallam following this perceived insult.

#### **295 AF:**

Pentharian reinstates His Divine Order.

Sartan's followers continue to anger, frighten, and frustrate the populace at large. Their desecration of shrines to other deities, and their seemingly arbitrary acts of violence against others weighs heavily on the life of Sapience.

Many of Sartan's followers continue to chafe under the ouster of their Lord by the Goddess of Chaos.

Citing years of unresolved conflict, Lady Deven Lucoster, Overseer of Ashtan, publicly addresses Hwolf, leader of the Infernals, on matters of contention between the Bastion of the North and the Iron Citadel. In response to an ultimatum dictated to Ashtan by Malaclypse, on Hwolf's behalf, Ashtan's ruling council offers the Infernals the promise that they may leave Ashtan, if it be their desire. Ashtan points out, however, that the permitted exodus of the Infernals bears no guarantees that the Iron Citadel itself shall be moved. Ashtan further warns that it shall take action to protect itself if the leadership of the Infernals continues to encourage its members to work against the City's interests.

#### **296 AF:**

Oakstone declares that the Darkenwood belongs to the realm of Darkness.

Massive conflagrations break out in the Wilderness areas of the Northreach and Darkenwood Forests. In a credit to their ability to come together for the common good, people of ordinarily antithetical and inimical backgrounds and paths join in common cause to fight the inferno.

The first Sapience-wide Monk Tournament is held. First, second and third place winners in the Transcendent School are Tranquility of the Ashura, Koralin, and Elgha, both of the Sentaari. For the Meditational School the winners are Zeto of the Ashura, Rangor of the Kharon, and Shylmysten of the Ashura. The Physical School winners are Buhawi and Laxarn, of the Kharon, and Hakuin, of the Sentaari. Prizes are also awarded for the most remarkable win, given to Zeto; the most improved monk: Ciries of the Kharon, Elgha of the Sentaari, and Dragoth of the Ashura; and highest ranked monk, achieved by Rangor of the Kharon, Koralin of the Sentaari, and Tranquility of the Ashura.

History is made as Eris and Aegis declare their commitment to one another and are allowed by the Logos to plight their troth. A truly spectacular wedding ceremony, presided over and officiated by Sarapis, culminates in a reception for the divine couple during which mortals are allowed to tread upon the ground the Garden of the

Gods for the first time ever. Even amid the joy and celebration, there are many who wonder what this union between War and Chaos presages for the world at large.

### **297 AF:**

The war of words between Ashtan and the Iron Citadel continues. Tensions rise in tenor as Ashtan casts out and enemies the entire Infernal leadership. The Infernals accuse the Archons of Ashtan of attempting to dictate their spiritual direction by forcing them to accept Aegis, God of War, as Patron. Ashtan, for its part, accuses the Infernals of sedition and treachery against the City. Hwulf launches a tirade against Eris that earns him the disfavour of Eris, Aegis and Phaestus for his disrespect.

### **298 AF:**

Lorielan, the Enlightened, Goddess of Knowledge, returns to Sapience from a sojourn on the Crystal Plane.

The Sentinels again enact an herb ban against the city-state of Ashtan.

Hashan declares an end to its war with Shallam over the Firestorm and events of 288. The Crown of the Ithmia also declares an end to any negotiations with the Jewel of the East over the issue. Hashan, however, reports that although she will not hold the citizens of Shallam, as a whole, responsible for the misdeeds of a few, those individuals she does consider responsible shall ever bear her ill will and undying animosity. In retaliation for Shallam's refusal to unenemy four Hashani citizens for alleged war-related crimes, Hashan refuses to ally all of the Shallamese currently enemied, save on.

Eris, Goddess of Chaos, in Her travels through time before returning to the Prime Material Plane, inadvertently unleashed a timequake. In the course of attempting to discover the effects of this phenomenon upon the Material Plane, Feliss, Firefox and Deonymus uncover evidence that leads them to believe that it might be possible to raise Kasmarkin, the dead and lost capitol of a once powerful empire of Trollish origin that existed before the Selucarian Empire. Many receive grim visions portending dire consequences should the attempt be made, but Andelas Ikari, a Troll of the Iron Citadel, is visited by visions and dreams counter to those received by others, and promising a much different outcome. He becomes obsessed with the idea that by raising the city he can aid his race in regaining their ancient glory. Pitched battles rage, at the site of a statue discovered in the Mannaseh Swamp, between Andelas and his supporters, chief among them his Infernal brethren, and those opposed to any salvaging of the ancient metropolis. Andelas, frustrated by his inability to ferret out the secrets he desires, turns to the Occultists in a desperate bid to learn that which he desires. His persistence is rewarded as Shakti and Silverstorm of the Occultists at last succeed in learning the magical keys necessary to make his dream a reality. As Kasmarkin comes once more into existence from the depths of the swamp, spectral voices warn all and sundry to depart lest death be their lot. Andelas however, now totally besotted with his dreams of glory seemingly just out of reach, leads a contingent of Infernals into the heart of the once-great city in a brazen attempt to wrest its secrets for their own. They are rewarded with the discovery of an odd magical artifact. Andelas realizes that the artifact lacks some essential element and sets about finding a way to make it complete and whole. Meanwhile, Shakti and Silverstorm discover that the source of power granted to the extinct Trollish was the gift of an ancient force, trapped in Kasmarkin. Their gift was two-edged, for in granting power it also gained power over the Trolls, bending their will to its own in time. Unraveling the tale, the Occultist scholars realize that a group of Troll Magi sought to restrain and subdue the ancient intelligence by constructing an artifact that would bind it to their will and end its growing power over their race and their Empire. Too late they were, for the intelligence destroyed Kasmarkin before their work on the artifact had reached completion. The two scholars seek to warn Andelas that in completing the artifact he is dashing his dreams, not realizing them. However, fate is not with them. Andelas completes his restoration of the artifact and, once activated, it binds the ancient force. The energies used to raise Kasmarkin do not sustain it indefinitely and it sinks once more into the mire of the Mannaseh. Shakti, her curiosity unassuaged, again raises the city and this time releases the ancient intelligence bound therein. Still, her power is not enough to keep Kasmarkin afloat and it sinks into the murky morass once again. Ill content to leave well enough alone, Shakti raises the city yet a third time, and this time is successful in controlling the ancient power residing in Kasmarkin. She enjoys her new found power over the entity, a giant, winged and befanged monstrosity, as it slays her enemies, until it turns upon her as well, much as it must have betrayed its ancient masters. None know what triggered the events that followed, but some say that it was the spirits of those long dead Trollkind whose voices soon rose from the ruins of Kasmarkin reborn, chanting in sonorous tones of power until, screaming its rage against its imprisonment, the entity was bound once more and Kasmarkin drawn down again to its murky, eternal grave.

**299 AF:**

During the timequake caused by the Goddess of Chaos, a man who calls himself Silvestri Carnivalis is brought into our time from 600 years in the past. He claims, to the skepticism of many, that he is the personal jester of Queen Catarin de Sangre, who once ruled Selucar. He wanders the land confused and dismayed by the changes wrought by six centuries of passing time. His anguish grows when he learns that his line, once comprised of the most renowned entertainers in the Imperium, is extinct and that the art of Jesting has been lost, forgotten ages ago. He is, however, delighted to learn that one of the ancillary arts, that of Tarot, an art taught by his ancestors to the Occultists, has survived and evolved in ways not even imagined in his time. Heartened by this and refusing to grieve further, Silvestri decides that it is his destiny to return Jesting to its former rightful place among the arts and sciences. To this end, he intends to open a school of Jesting in Cyrene. His delight soon turns again to dismay when he learns of Cyrene's intended restrictions on who may or may not be a student of his school, based on their political, social and religious affiliations. Silvestri courts other city-states, but soon realizes that all of them indulge in the political intricacies so alien to him, who wishes only to teach and to entertain. He therefore decides that he will form his school on the Isle of Delos. After forming his school, aided by Llewellyn, Tay, and Ralph, Silvestri proceeds apace to begin his transmission of his ancient knowledge, offering it to all that desire to learn, without consideration of race, origin, or politics. Shakti, as Guildmistress of the Occultists, demands of Silvestri that he vow to keep the knowledge of Tarot secret from all but the Jesters. Silvestri, raised in the courts of Imperial Selucar, and unused to being treated so disrespectfully, takes umbrage at her, to his mind, crude and ungracious bullying. Subsequently, he is kidnapped by Shakti, Silverstorm, Mephisto and Mordyval. They torture him, breaking his limbs repeatedly and visiting foul torments upon the unfortunate jester until, in hopes of sparing torment to young jesters to come at the hands of the necromancers, he vows on behalf of the Jesters to abide by their demand. The experience leaves him broken hearted, bereft of joy, and despairing of our Modern Age. Silvestri, after placing his beloved school in the hands of Llewellyn, takes his leave, stating that he intends to wander, seeking what he may find of his beloved, lost Selucar. Despite these cruel events, both the Occultists and the fledgling Jesters Guild issue statements of intent to dwell together in harmony, and the Jesters reiterate Silvestri's pledge of secrecy. It may be that the Occultists may one day yet rue their arrogance and lack of compassion toward a man out of place and time and be called to answer for their biting of the hand that fed.

Eris becomes Divine Patron of the Jesters.

On the eve of year 300, Malaclypse becomes leader of the Infernals. Deven Lucoster, Overseer of Ashtan accuses him of seeking to overthrow the government of Ashtan. The war of words between the Iron Citadel and the Bastion of the North threatens to burst forth into physical manifestation.

Tancred LaSalle, renowned as the greatest living historian of Achaea, publishes the second part of his planned trilogy on the history of the Selucarian Empire. All Sapience is abuzz with talk of interesting tidbits revealed in his treatise. It appears that there is something here for everyone, suiting all tastes from serious scholar to neighborhood gossipmonger.

Most of Sapience busies itself preparing for the celebrations surrounding the Year 300.

**300 AF:**

Three hundred years after the Fall of the Selucarian Empire, all of Sapience celebrates the new century with a rousing set of festivities. As the New Year dawns, a brilliant, massive display of colourful fireworks explodes over the continent, awing the populace with never before seen pyrotechnic delights. The following months are filled with celebratory activities. There are continual banquets and parties replete with feasting and revelry. Most agree that this is the social event of the year. In the Garden of the Gods, the Pantheon joins in the celebration as the Divine Logos sponsors a series of contests to test the mettle of all who desire to participate. Opening with an intellectual exercise, Sarapis stages a Quiz on Achaean history and related subjects. Shakti wins first place, followed by Jerle and Saruman. A fervent Egg Hunt sees Shakti win again, followed by Brinn and Jerle. A rollicking Tumble Race is won by Rick in first place, followed by Yeshua and Vand. A Triplets Combat session ends with Andelas, Zero and Rivalyn placing first. They share the glory with Shakti, Estach and Jarik in second place, and Fostrow, Stee and Kail in third. In honour of the newly formed Jesters Guild a contest of Jokes is held. From the subtle to the crude, from the metaphysical to the ribald and profane, the jokes fly fast and furious from the contestants. All Achaea delights in this amusement and occasional laughter is even heard from the

heavens, as the gods themselves are drawn into the rampant mirth fest. At the end of the hilarity, Jarik, Shakti and Deonymus garner first, second and third places respectively. The Jokes Contest is followed by a Costume Ball. Among those most delighting the judges with their inventive garb are Bambi, Saruman, and Idempotent. Aringar, Tylin, and Yeshua win the top three prizes for their prowess in gaining the fruits of the hunt with their bashing skills. A game of Capture the Flag is led by Oakstone, followed by Ashtan and Shallam. All of Achaea waits with bated breath as Sarapis tallies the collective results of the various contests and announces an overall winner. That winner is Shakti. And for her prowess she is granted the thousand-year-old, legendary Staff of Nicator, created by the Logos Himself for Nicator and last awarded to Isildur.

The minions of Sartan, God of Evil, continue their desecration of the shrines of many of the other deities. Nettled past hope of restraint, Aegis issues a clarion call to the Alliance and their followers to go to war with the Evil One and His minions. Although Sartan has been noticeably absent from the Material Plane, His followers obstinately refuse the conditions of the Divine Alliance for cessation of hostilities and continue to badger the public news boards with their stubborn, loyalist rantings.

For the first time in the known history of the world, a guild declares war against its patron city-state, when the Infernals throw down the gauntlet, publicly, before the government of Ashtan. Shocked and scandalized by this treasonous breach of protocol, Ashtan's reaction is quick and powerful. The Archons look upon the events that follow with amazement as the collective fury of the Ashtanite citizenry explodes against the traitors. Crowds pour spontaneously into the streets and shouts demanding blood and retribution of the traitorous guild fill the air. Eventually the mob coalesces around Epicurus and the Dowager Montaganet who lead the angry mass of citizenry to the Iron Citadel. They breach the walls of the once proud fortress and drag forth Dacian, the Martial Master of the Iron Keep. Spitting his defiance and cursing Ashtan, Dacian is thrown to his knees and his vituperation is finally silenced as the blade of Ashtan's Lord High Executioner separates his head from his body. The Executioner tosses the bloodied, staring head, with its stump of neck, into the crowd, where children from the Orphanage delight in the new found "toy" and promptly begin a game of kick-the-ball with it. Some onlookers later say that they could still see the lips moving impotently as the eyes glared with unsated rage. Acting as with a single mind, the mob erupts in an orgy of destruction as they raze the Citadel to its foundations, setting it and all within to the torch. When it is done, the crowd stands in mute witness. No sound but the crackling of flames and the occasional collapse of rubble is heard as the thick, oily smoke of the conflagration rises over the City. A breeze springs up, dissipating the dark cloud and as it disperses, some say they hear a low moaning upon the wind. Some say that is merely the wind itself, whistling about the stones of the now ruined battlements. Later, some occultic scholars say that what was heard was the dying of the very Oversoul of the Infernals. For in their haste, obstinacy and arrogance, the lords of the Iron Citadel had committed a kind of suicide, not being aware of the psychic and metaphysical bonds that tie a guild to its genius loci. Without guildhall or teachers, without history even, given the dependence on written records, with no city to even call their own, the Oversoul of the Infernals could not be sustained, and so died, and with it thus died the once proud and strong Guild of the Infernals.

The leadership of the Infernals claim to be unbowed by their fate of their guild. They regroup and form what they call the Interim Battalion, a name reminiscent of Raajin's now defunct Exodus Battalion. Unlike the case with Raajin's band though, there is no city-state willing to grant succor to the disgraced former Infernals. Some of the Battalion now have second thoughts and claim that their leaders have misled them. Such is their grief and disappointment that they renounce the Infernals, the Battalion, and Sartan, suing for the forgiveness and mercy of those they have wronged.

Sartan, feeling the perturbations in the ether caused by the dissolution of His chosen guild, reenters the Physical Plane and seeks revenge the erstwhile Infernals by sending hordes of skeletal warriors, dragons and demons against Ashtan, the city He once Patroned. His machinations are for naught as the Bastion of the North defeats each of these measures. Undeterred by these setbacks, the proud Prince of Evil humbles Himself to ask Valnurana, Goddess of Sleep and Dreams, to aid him in achieving peace between Himself and the Divine Alliance. Once alone with Her though, he uses His power to place Her in a deep trance and begins a rite of His own devising designed to usurp Her power over the Dream Realm. Sartan seeks to bring the nightmares of the mortal kindreds into physical manifestation in Achaea, threatening both Gods and men. The Evil One is, however, unable to bring His ritual to completion. Angered, he gouges out the eyes of Valnurana, vampirizes Her essence and tosses Her immortal form at the base of the Pillars of Heaven.

As Sartan worked His vile magics, nightmares had indeed begun to increase in frequency and intensity throughout the world. Many had their sleep plagued by intense dreams filled with unspeakably obscene images

of dread, decay and destruction. Eris, suspecting that all is not well, seeks out Valnurana for an explanation. What She finds makes Her divine blood run cold. Bearing Valnurana's body to the River Temple, the Goddess of Chaos is able to heal the Lady of Sleep and Dreams enough for Valnurana to reveal what has happened to Her. Outraged, Eris calls out across the heavens in challenge to Sartan who laughs and insults Her and attempts attack. The clamour is heard in the Garden and the Alliance rises up, enraged, against Sartan for His desecration of the gentle Valnurana and the past misdeeds of His minions. Even Ourania, ordinarily choosing to eschew the squabbles of the Divine and keeping Her own counsel, erupts in fury. Caspian, Aegis, Eris, Lupus, Phaestus, Agatheis, and Ourania march upon the malevolent One. Achaeans cower in fear or gape in wonder as the sights and sounds of godly battle fill the skies. With a concerted effort the Alliance captures and binds Sartan, hurling Him into the Sea before Aegis and Lupus wrench a mountain from the Vashnar range and trap the Lord of Evil beneath it. Even victorious though, the seven deities give a collective shudder as they watch the mountain reform into an island, warped by the very essence of the immortal trapped beneath.

### **301 AF:**

Valnurana, healed although still bereft of Her former divine voice and sight, and feeling unwarranted shame at Her inadvertent and unintended aid to Sartan, retreats into the Dream Realm, wounded in spirit. Dreamseer begs Agatheis, the Elemental Lord, to aid his Lady. Enrinyes, daughter of the Goddess, likewise pleads with Phaestus. Enduring great travail, the Orders of Phaestus and Valnurana, as well as other volunteers to who hold the her dear, follow the instructions of Phaestus, who is eventually able to craft for Her a pair of sapphire eyes. Returning Her voice proves more difficult, but the Elemental Lord, in concert with Vand and members of the Magi, Warlocks and Priests guilds, hoping against all hope and persevering against seeming failure, is at last able to succeed in conducting a rite that allows the divine voice of Valnurana to be heard in the land once again.

Pentharian, God of Righteousness, and Lorielelan, Goddess of Knowledge reveal a newly constructed Chrysalis Basilica, built outside the Material Plane. As onlookers gape, a rift opens in the heavens, and with great decorum and ceremony, the two deities direct the placement of the rebuilt holy place upon the crater bearing the ruins of its predecessor.

### **302 AF:**

The island beneath which Sartan lies imprisoned becomes the scene of mysterious and disturbing manifestations. Chief among these phenomena is a stalagmite, located inside the island's mountain. Sartan's followers begin, like lemmings, to repeatedly impale themselves upon the object, their purpose unknown until some few reveal that they have been told that thus may they purchase the release of the Evil One from His bonds, with their blood and life essence. Others, through divine trickery, are told that impaling themselves upon the thing is a way of ensuring His continued imprisonment. Those who do not believe the lie, led by the Church and Oakstone work to prevent the continuous serial impalements, but their efforts are largely fruitless. Soon a miasmatic, roiling, blood red fog begins to spread about the island, consuming vegetative life. Eventually the fog, growing in power and evincing an eerie quasi intelligence begins to spread to the continent, belching forth foul demons who terrify the populace of Sapience. Gaia, the Earthmother, becomes alarmed and, seeking to stem the horrific tide, causes an earthquake with which She hopes to sink the island, apparent source of the evil haze. Alas, the fog only spreads with renewed vigour. Adding insult to injury, the event seems to crush the bonds of Sartan, allowing Him release from His prison, whereupon he sets forth forming a new body from the now plentiful supply of demonic fog. His new body is a horror to behold, mutilated, scarred, as though the evil once held deep within His heart, was now worn upon His face and form. Rejoicing in His newfound fortune, Sartan proclaims Himself Sartan the Malevolent. He takes control of the island that was once His jailer, imbuing its very stones with His essence. In an act that promises dire fortune at some point in the future, the Malevolent One calls His faithful unto him, brings into manifestation a monstrous edifice called the Baelgrim Fortress, and endows an organization calling itself the Maldaathi Knights upon the former, humiliated Infernals. Kaelin is appointed as leader of this new guild.

With most of Achaea now at peace for the nonce, discussion and debate on the natures of so-called Good and Evil once again dominate the public news boards ad nauseam. Lately, debaters on the subject of the true nature of Chaos, oxymoronic as such a subject must perforce be, have also entered the fray. Achaea abides.

### **Snapshots of life in Achaea at particular times:**

All times are in years after the fall of the Seleucarian Empire (AF).



**5th of Sarapin, 191 AF:**

Achaea is still in flux from the recent appearance of Eris, Goddess of Chaos, and Gaia, the Earthmother. Rumours abound that Haidion, the Wanderer, may have finally located the long-lost racial home of the Tsol'aa race, and that there is still a civilization there. Since the discovery of the Azdun complex by Azhrarn, many have attempted to rid the world of the fell Lachesis, the Spider Queen, but all have fallen before her might.

Cercamon is the Secretary of the Sentaari, and they have no guildmaster. Grandmaster Morpheus is the Secretary of the Kharon but they too, have no guildmaster. With Galadriel's recent demise, the Druids have no secretary, but Lord Buckthorn reigns as the Druid guildmaster, titled the Lord of Nature. Gawain has recently attained the guildmaster rank in the Templars, titled Grand Champion of the Innocent, while Sir Agamemnon is the secretary of that guild. Alanna, Queen of the Desert is the secretary of the Serpentlords, but they have no guildmaster. Luthius, Prince of Decay, is the secretary of the Occultists guild, but with Servelan's recent Ascension, there are none that have attained the rank of guildmaster in the Occultists. Father Odysseus is the guild secretary for the Priests and they too, have no guildmaster.

**23rd of Lupar, 218 AF:**

Achaea is in turmoil, dominated by a war between Ashtan and Shallam over Church placement of shrines in territory that Ashtan calls its own, as well as in Ashtan itself. Strange sightings of undead have been sighted far to the northeast, well away from the only previously known source of undead: Azdun.

The city-state of Ashtan is led primarily by Nimos, Mordyval, and Mausolus, with Morlana playing a supporting role as a relative pacifist. The fifth Archon, Changcoix, is often absent and his authority and ability to competently perform his job has been questioned much of late. Ashtan seems to have a mission, and that mission is domination.

Shallam, as a city-state, is much less organized than Ashtan at the moment, as its Viziers are not as active as they could be. The Viziers of Shallam are Isildur, Agamemnon, Elsdragon, Mical, and Treant. Shallam is starting to organize itself, defensively at least, but has a long road ahead of it. The Viziers rarely communicate, and seem to act individually rather than as a unit.

The Sentaari monks are led by Grandmaster Elsdragon, who recently, with the aid of Daedalus, moved the guild from the mouth of the Zaphar river to inside the walls of Shallam. Treant leads the Sentinels, but has been rather ineffective lately. Though Grandmaster Mesmer is guildmaster of the Kharon monks, Gijan and Laergon seem to be the dominant forces within them. Though the Druids have recently been through a period of turmoil in its leadership, Charnley seems to have stabilized things for now, at least, and may grow into a strong leader. Isildur has recently regained leadership of the Templars, and has vowed to give them a more militaristic bent. Darthus leads the Serpentlords, though as a guild, the Serpentlords seem to have no goals except the freedom for their members to do as they wish. This is best illustrated by the fact that Darthus supports Shallam in the war, while his guild secretary, Angelo, supports Ashtan. Mordyval leads the Occultists, despite challenges from Mausolus. Topaz is guildmistress of the Priests, and seems to encourage them to stay in the background as healers. Finally, Nimos leads the Shadowsnakes, who are located in Ashtan, and support Ashtan in political matters.

**5th of Lupar, 240 AF:**

Achaea is currently in a rare period of peace, following the end of the Death's Heart saga (see the chronological history starting at the year 240 AF). Regardless, tensions pervade. The Council of Oakstone worries about Hashan's discussions regarding occupying the forest around their city. The Serpentlords and Shadowsnakes are at odds over the selling of illegal venoms, and religious tensions between the followers of the various Gods always threaten to disrupt internal guild or city unity.

Currently, the Sentaari are led by Mical Selvaetiim, and patroned by Daedalus. They seem unable to find their place, and though Mical would like to sever relations with Shallam, following Maran, Sultan of Shallam's, decision that all guilds residing within Shallam and thus being protected by Shallam be bound to Shallam by treaty, the guild as a whole has indicated no mandate to sever relations. The Sentinels have largely broken their vow of loyalty to Shallam and moved to Hashan. They are led by Blackleaf and patroned by Vastar. The Kharon have moved from Ashtan to Hashan and Element now leads them. Lupus is their patron. The Druids had finally

found a strong leader in Sog, but the pressures of office caused him to soon step down. Mandrake, a well-respected Druid, has replaced him, and of course, Gaia is their patron. Zaklin has recently replaced an inactive Pierce as guildmaster of the Paladins, and Aurora still patrons them. Likewise, she is patron of the Priests, which has been led by Maran for some time. The Serpentlords are led by Elentari and patroned by Twilight while the Shadowsnakes are led by Misral and patroned by Eris. The new Infernals guild is led by Sinistar and newly patroned by Aegis, but so far has been unable to fulfill its threat or promise of domination over the (in their view) weak people of the light. The Occultists are led by Morlana and patroned by Eris.

Perhaps the most capable leader of a city-state currently is Elentari, the Seneschal of Hashan. Her constitution for Hashan, called the Canon, is widely regarded by the intelligensia as the finest document of its kind yet written. It was Hashan, under Elentari's leadership, that began the trend of formally binding guilds to cities. Elentari is assisted in her management of Hashan by the other Regents, Blackleaf, Drakul, Othello Amara, and Frogg Kaer-Leigh, who is probably the most financially successful individual in Achaea currently, and seems intent on driving Rurin the Crafter out of business. Twilight, the patron of Hashan, is an active part of its government, often guiding it personally through its governors. Hashan is probably the best organized of the city-states.

Ashtan rejoiced recently with the return of its former patron Eris, and the Overseer, Napoloen, immediately replaced Lupus with Eris as patron. Napoloen is assisted in his leadership by Mistral Blue, Malaclypse Thorn, Skarash, and Irontounge Diamante. Without question, Ashtan remains the most aggressive of the three city-states, as is fitting considering that the three guilds which call Ashtan home are perhaps the three darkest guilds in Achaea. Ashtan currently is under a bit of a siege mentality due to the power of convocation wielded by the Church.

Shallam is led by its Sultan, Maran and patroned by Aurora, though she appears to be less involved in the government than Eris or Twilight are with their cities. Maran is assisted by Zaklin, Echo l'Altro di Rienzi, Willin Askani, and Cardinal Thalen. Shallam suffers from internal strife that Maran has been unable to solve. The Sentaari often refuse to involve themselves with city matters, and often feel marginalized by the Church, whom the Sentaari have a difficult time seeing as citizens as well as members of a guild that is involved with the Church. For Shallam to survive another war, it will need to unify itself internally, a goal towards which Maran appears to be steadily working.

In other matters, the Council of Oakstone is, of course, patroned by Gaia, and its Hierophants are Mandrake Diamante, Mysti, Galdrion Longshanks, WarMaster, and Pinth Vandras. Oakstone worries about Hashan's potential occupation of the forest, and preserving the plantlife in the land from those who would overharvest its bounty for personal profit.

In terms of experience, no one has yet reached the highest level attainable (80), or level 79, though 4 have reached the level of Transmortal (78): Mical Selvaetiim, who is currently ranked #1, Perseon Longshanks, and Naiad.

In the future, this historian expects to see the further solidification of the legal codes in city-states, and further, that once the recently returned Lorientan and Aegis have attracted more followers, there will be intensified competition among the various religious orders for control of the various guilds and city-states. I would also expect that when the cities begin to another phase of military expansion, Oakstone will assert its control over the forest considerably more strenuously than previously.

## 16.6 The Spawn of the Unnamable Horror

Still to be written.

## 16.7 The year 200 celebrations

What follows is an announcement, penned by Sarapis, of Achaea's year 200 celebrations, and the reason for it.

In a matter of a handful of months, a major milestone in modern Achaean history will take place: The 200th anniversary of the fall of the Selucarian Empire. This Empire, founded by the man of almost mythical importance, Nicator, ruled the Sapience continent for nigh on 800 years. By the end though, it had become

corrupt, and when the representatives of Ashtan, Shallam, Hashan, Bagwar's Copse, Thera, Jaru, Moghedu and all the other cities and provinces east of the North-South Vashnar range came to the capital city of Seleucar, located south of the Vashnar range and demanded that the corrupt and tyrannical Imperial regime reform, they were rebuffed by the arrogant Emperor and his princelings, who could not imagine that the 'backwater' provinces could ever pose a threat to Imperial Seleucar.

On the 21st of Ero that year, the forces of the Sapient League tore down a section of the wall surrounding the Imperial compound, marched in, and executed the Emperor and his relatives, sparing not even the children.

This day is remembered for a number of reasons. First, and foremost, it was the formal end of a once welcomed Imperium which had then been corrupted. Second, it represented the first time in known history that the two foremost cities north of the Vashnars (Ashtan and Shallam) had fully cooperated, outside of Imperium rule, ever. Finally, it is remembered, especially by the Shallamese, who are a gentler people than the Ashtanites, for the executions of the Emperor and his family. Many amoral debate has raged over whether it was proper to kill the children in the Emperor's family, but in truth, there was no choice. To leave them alive would only lead, as the leaders of the Sapient League understood, to claims to the Imperial throne and a third War of Succession.

Although I am Deity and Creator, I honour this day, for on it I witnessed the climax of a story 800 years old, and the beginning of the next. It was an emotion-laden day, and most of you owe your present freedom to the men and women who became heroes that fateful day.

In honour of the 200th anniversary of that day, I hereby declare that we will have a festival the likes of which have not been yet seen on this world. There shall be contests of skill and wit, feasting, and drinking. And at the end of the day, I will present the winner of the contests with a special prize, befitting this occasion. I have taken the Staff of Nicator from its lost resting place in the southern jungles, and I will present it to the winner. What its power is, I will not say, for it will fall to the bearer of it to reveal its grandeur to mortality.

Penned by the power of Sarapis on the 17th of Miraman, in the year 199 AF.

On the day of the celebration, there was much competition, including a Grand Quiz, a hunt for eggs, and a Tournament of Achaea's greatest combatants. A close battle, it was, but in the end, Isildur, the Iceman, was triumphant, pulling out a close victory over Morpheus, despite being defeated by him in the final round of the Tournament.

## 16.8 The coming of the morning star

On the 13th of Lupar, 208 years after the fall of the Empire, the single greatest catastrophe in the history of our world took place. It was an event that was to have far-reaching consequences for Achaea, and one whose effect lingers on even today.

It was a day in late summer much like any other. The sun was shining brightly and the birds were twittering their songs of love. But there was a note of unrest, and perhaps the first tastes of fear in the air. For during the previous night, Averroes, the Prophet of Shallam, had dreamed a dream of cosmic destruction; of an event so catastrophic that it would alter the balance of power in the heavens themselves. His warnings were largely ignored, however, and he was mocked by some of the more foolish in the land. When the flash of light came, however, trickles of belief broke through the walls of ignorance in the minds of the populace.

"We looked to the sky, and there was a star shining so brightly it could be seen in the full of the afternoon sunlight! Just about all I could see was the sun and that star, because that first flash of light nearly blinded me." -  
-An unnamed citizen of Ashtan

"Horribly, the beautiful star began to, well, LEAK, like it was going down some sort of drain. There was a lot of panic, and the pixies were running about in sheer terror, screaming something about the Morning Star." --Vellis, the butterfly collector of Minia

Then came the second flash, and pain, and death. All the plantlife on the planet died, and much of the animal life, when Aeon, God of Time intervened. Though a strange God with stranger motivations, he apparently sought to prevent the countless deaths that were about to occur. Stopping, and then reversing time, he turned

events backwards. But to his horror, he found that he was unable to prevent events from proceeding just as they had the first time.

This is the story of the Coming of the Morning Star.

Far away, though not far enough, there was a sun, but not like the sun that illuminates Sapience and provides succor to the cold, and that is the source of all life. No, this sun was far larger than your own, and far more powerful.

But the heavens have their celestial dance, and as this sun danced its slow, stately dance across the palette upon which I have painted, it encountered a bottomless pit, called Abaddon, destroyer of worlds. Not sentient, it nevertheless was compelled by its very nature to attack and absorb all into itself. Like a mindless, sightless behemoth, it lumbered and sloughed, consuming all within its path.

Until it met with this sun, this shining epitomy of light. Then it had met its match. Attacking it, it began to gorge itself as never before, but the sun was too much. After some of its energy had been eaten away, the sun exploded, as it lacked the energy to hold itself together.

Abaddon, the pit, tried to consume this massive outpouring of energy, but failed. It had gorged itself past its limit, and it too exploded, carrying with it energy that was to the first explosion as an ocean is to a drop of water.

The energy from this explosion, the winds of the stars, streaked across the heavens, instantly obliterating all in its path. But like all things aside from the Logos, this wind of the stars was finite, and its power began to dim. The world that Sapience is on, however, lay too close. While the world itself was not destroyed, the intense energy killed nearly everything alive on the continent, which happened to be the side of the planet facing the explosion when the star winds arrived. The forests were scourged, the seas purged of life, and the cities became heaped with dead rats and people.

The sole survivors were the Mhun who live and work in the lower levels of Moghedu, including the Great Mhunna and his bodyguards. They were deep enough within the earth to survive, while those in Azdun, such as Lachesis, did not fare so well. Strangely, one mortal man, with a strange, foreign-sounding name survived. It is unknown why, but Averroes has theorized that this man was so pure of spirit that somehow the same protections that exist for Gods protected him too. This is, of course, just a theory.

Sarapis, the Logos, explained:

"To understand this event, mortals, you must first try to grasp the magnitude of it. This was an event of such power that one of the Elder Gods, Aeon, was not able to prevent it. Such a thing has not been seen since the days of the Chaos Wars. The unnamed sun was one of the largest and most powerful in existence, but even its power was dwarfed by the amount of energy contained in Abaddon. When the sun exploded, causing Abaddon to explode, the power was such that the fabric of reality was wrinkled, twisted, torn, and eventually it found its outlet in the creation of two new sentient beings who embody the forces contained in these explosions: Aurora, Goddess of Light, and Apollyon, the Malefactor."

After the apocalyptic wave of deaths that followed in the wake of the star winds, a God not seen since the Chaos Wars appeared, apparently awakened from His slumber by the great energies unleashed in the explosions. He, Vastar, the Skylord, saw his realm polluted by lingering killing energy. Drawing it out of the atmosphere in the same way that water condensences, he drew it all into a shimmering ball of energy high above the continent.

"Oh child, 'twas like nothin' these ole eyes have ever seen. I saw the hand of God! I did! It reached out, and it snuffed that deadly energy right out, like it was just slappin' a firefly."--A wandering gypsy woman.

Soon after this, Oneiros, God of Peace, and an Elder God, in an effort that must surely have been a sacrifice even for one of his power, restored life to the forests, and grasslands of Achaea. The mortals were, of course, resurrected by Sarapis, after praying extensively to him for succor.

What are the lasting results of this, you ask? We are, as of yet, unsure. Perhaps the Logos and the other Divinities have a plan, or perhaps not. We do not and cannot know, unless the Gods choose to tell us, or unless

we are blessed with prophetic visions, if the remains of Abaddon and the unnamed sun will plague us in the future.

Yet, this historian cannot help but feeling that though our world was blasted and death enveloped her as never before, it is yet a day to be celebrated. For today, we have experienced new communion with the Divine. Though in the future, there is no doubt that some of us will suffer as a result of Aurora or Apollyon's actions and decisions, such is our lot as mortals. We must find joy in the Divine, for it is only through the eyes of God that we can truly see ourselves. Whether our souls sing in harmony with Aurora's goodness, or resonate darkly with the sombre strains of Apollyon's music, we are richer for knowing them.

We must also celebrate the return of one who has seen and done so much, Vastar, the Skylord. God of old, he was one of the first created by Ayar-now-Sarapis, and his return is an occasion for celebration by itself. With the new Divinities, and His return, we cannot help but be joyous, and forget about the suffering that our world sustained today. Blessed are we and glory be to the Dwellers of the Garden!

## 16.9 The first guildmasters of the guilds of modern achaea

Occultists	Harlequin
Druids	Haidion
Paladins	Gawain
Serpentlords	Crotalus
Priests	Odysseus
Kharon	Changoix
Sentaari	Kothlun
Shadowsnakes	Cobra
Sentinels	Treant
Infernals	Sinistar
Magi	Taranis
Sorcerers	Drazik
Warlocks	Napoloen
Dawnstriders	Nis
Ashura	Tranquility
Shamans	Firefox
Runewardens	Czanthria
Mojushai	Muorshai
Jesters	Silvestri
Arcanists	Cree
Naga	Yig

## 16.10 Notable Achaeans

as of 22nd Miraman, 281 AF.

A \* before a name indicates that that player was one of the very first generation of players.

### \* Agamemnon

A Templar/Paladin since the early days, he has been one of the most militant and capable Paladins. He was once Guild Master of the Paladins and Vizier of Shallam.

### \* Aife

An early Serpentlord who left to join her eventual husband, Cobra, in his then-new Shadowsnakes guild. She led the guild for a time. She later left her long time home in Ashtan to become a rogue and spend a great deal of time in Shallam.

### \* Alanna

A controversial former Guild Master of the Serpentlords who once wielded considerable influence. She was much despised by the early Shadowsnakes.

f

At one time a Guild Master of the Paladins. Widely known for her great organizational skills, she is credited with transforming the Paladin guild from a state of chaos into a fine working peaceful organization for a time. After a period of disagreement with the Church, she is back and is currently Guildmaster of the Paladins.

#### **Amicus**

A former leader in the Priests guild, he later left it to become a Sentinel. It is rumored a bout of insanity drove him to the forest.

#### **Andelas**

In order to escape the strict code of the Infernals, Andelas left the guild to lead a life of a honorless rogue. He later became a part of a notorious Legion of the Damned and a member of the Order of War, where he battled the forces of the Church for many years, but is now a citizen of Ashtan.

#### **Angelo**

A former leader of the Serpentlords and in Ashtan, where he was an Archon, Angelo was one of the less hostile voices on the Ashtan council.

#### **Azhrarn**

A Serpentlord with the distinction of having discovered the Azdun dungeon. He returned to civilization with reports that few believed at first.

#### **Bakhu**

At one time a feared and powerful Occultist, Bakhu's conscience eventually dictated that he become a Paladin and defend the innocent.

#### **Bambi**

A one time Sentaari, she was later ousted from the guild for purported treasonous acts. She has since become well versed in the many quests of the realm and now is working as a leader of Hashan in the name of Oneiros, her long-time Patron.

#### **Blackleaf**

The second Sentinel Guild Master, Blackleaf lead the guild for over 22 years. He guided the guild through their turmoil years, relocating the guild from the city of Shallam and later Hashan in search of a place the guild could call home. Blackleaf held the position of Hierophant in Oakstone during its birth, and also was Regent of Hashan for many years. Following his wild instincts, he was the first to join the Order of Lupus and has since disappeared from the land.

#### **Borknagar**

A one-time Druid, Borknagar left his guild and became a citizen of Shallam. During his time as a citizen, he rose to the position of steward and single-handedly engineered the greatest theft in Achaean history by stealing all the gold in Shallam's coffers and giving it to Ashtan.

#### **Brigit**

A former Guild Mistress of the Priest, she was also one of the longest standing Viziers of Shallam, holding the position for over 20 years. Just recently she stepped down as GM to take the position of Arch Prelate of the Church, making her the first Priest and female to hold the position.

#### **\* Buckthorn**

At one time he was the most powerful Druid and undisputed leader of the guild. Together with Portis, he built the Crystal Leaf Inn which to this day is still a favored drinking place of many.

#### **Caerid**

While known for his temper and rough manner of dealing with situations, Caerid is perhaps more widely held in infamy for his lack of loyalty. He has flip-flopped between being a member of the Paladins and Church and a rogue, and, after many failed attempts, was finally elected into the position of Paladin Guild Master after Seosamh stepped down. Corrupted by promises of fame and power, Caerid betrayed the Paladins and Church by

turning over the patronage to Sartan, Lord of Evil. Once Caerid lost control of the Paladins guild, Sartan promptly cast the disgraced knight. Caerid is now a member of the Warlocks guild and of Ashtan.

**Caleth**

A long-time member of Hashan's government, Caleth reigns as Guildmaster of the sorcerers and an influential Hashanite official.

**Calhoun**

A former Kharon and fabled warrior, Calhoun has since repented and joined the Sentaari and Shallam to atone for his actions against them.

**Cecil**

A Druid and follower of the Goddess of Nature, Cecil was the first mortal to attain the level of Arch mortal through non-violent means.

**\* Changcoix**

Leaving the Sentaari after a dispute with its Grandmaster, he formed the Kharon monks. He then returned to the Sentaari, left them again for the Kharon, and is now a member of the Ashuran monks.

**Claryssa**

A one time Priest and later a Druid, she finally settled on life as a rouge. Claryssa is most well known for her strong beliefs in the God of Peace, Oneiros. She has been a very vocal advocate of the teachings of peace and mediated over many peace summits between Shallam and Ashtan.

**\* Cobra**

Early on in life, a prominent and powerful Serpentlord, he left to form the Shadowsnakes in Ashtan. He later fell into a slump in life, becoming a drunkard and finally going into seclusion.

**Cooper**

One of the first Infernals to walk the land, Cooper holds the distinct honor of being the first to betray the Infernals by leaving their ranks, robbing the guild, its guild-run store and defecting to Shallam and the Paladins. Holding true to form, Cooper later betrayed the Paladins and Shallam and left to lead a life as a rogue. He is now possibly the most famous or some say infamous rogue within the realm; he has on multiple times been hunted by the three major cities of Sapience and numerous guilds and orders.

**Covenant**

A powerful Sentinel Guild Master, Covenant has led the Sentinels into a new age of glory, abandoning the groves to learn how to use traps along with the aid of their animal friends to become protectors of the forests. The Sentinels have, under his leadership, formed into one of the most disciplined, interesting, and organized guilds in Achaea.

**Crius**

A one-time Sentaari Guild master and Vizier of Shallam, Crius is most notably known for his defeat of the long standing Sentaari Guild Master, Mical and his signing of the Guild-City Charter on behalf of the Sentaari with Shallam.

**\* Crotalus**

The founder of the Serpentlords guild, Crotalus was one of the early citizens of Hashan.

**Cynne**

Daughter of Selaana, the Tsol'aa adventuress, Cynne has lived most of her life as a rogue Druidess and protector of the Aalen. She offered comfort to the Tsol'aa Queen Celaabi after King La'ramhis was slain by Kroul. Cynne was also instrumental in organizing the cities to patrol various areas of the world to deal with the rash of fires caused by the orcs.

**Cyre**

A former Sultan of Shallam, Cyre betrayed the city and church when he left to join Ashtan in their quest to see the downfall of those he once served.

**Czanthria**

A former Paladin, Czantharia is known for her fiery attitude and strict adherence to her beliefs. At one time she served as a Vizier for the city of Shallam.

**Dalamar**

A highly controversial Paladin, Dalamar quit the Paladins several times while remaining loyal to Aurora. He later betrayed the Church and Aurora by abandoning all his beliefs to join the Occultists.

**\* Damascas**

Though he was Guild Master of the Kharon for a time, he was considered by most to be a coward and a buffoon.

**Darthus**

Once the Guild Master of the Serpentlords and the first Seneschal of Hashan, Darthus had a change of heart and moved to Shallam to help defend it from those who would see it destroyed. As Guild Master of the Serpentlords, he had a strict policy of neutrality that allowed his members to align themselves as they pleased.

**\* Dern**

One of the Serpentlords who assisted Cobra in setting up the Shadowsnakes guild, he is known for a sarcastic sense of humour.

**Dessa**

Formerly a Sentinel, Dessa has since joined the Sorcerers guild. Dessa is a loyal citizen of Hashan where she has attained the position of Regent. She was one of the founders of the famous Longshanks family.

**Dingo**

An elder priestess who was known for her quick wit and even quicker temper. Dingo was rumored to be one of the favored children of the god Deucalion and the mentor of Maran, the former Sultan of Shallam.

**Doomhammer**

An Ashtanite Shadowsnake and former Guild Master. Doomhammer is the highest ranking player in terms of experience.

**Drakul**

Once a feared Occultist, infamous for his loyalty to Lord Twilight and distaste for the Church and her allies, he later joined the Serpentlords and briefly was Seneschal of Hashan after the ascension of Elentari into Ourania. He still helps lead that city. He later joined the Sorcerers where he served as a secretary, but has since returned to his roots as an Occultist.

**Drazik**

At one time a prominent Druid, he left the guild to lead a life as a citizen of Hashan. He later founded the Sorcerers guild, which he eventually left along with Hashan to live his life as a Sentaari monk.

**Dresden**

A Priestess and Sultanness of Shallam, Dresden shocked the world when she was announced as the successor to Kyasha. She has since lead the city through many ordeals and conflicts.

**Elanta**

A female Kharon monk who was a part of the inner circle of leadership there for quite some time, she is especially good with children, and has four of them.

**Element**

A one-time Sentaari monk and later Kharon Guild Master, Element left Shallam and its ways after a dispute with a citizen and the leadership. He later succeeded Gijan as the Kharon GM and lead them into a new era with his teachings of spirituality and oneness with the body. He has also stood as a Regent of Hashan and is known as one that will always speak his mind about the issues at hand.

**Elentari**

One of the shining lights of the modern age, Elentari was a Hashanite who rose quickly to respectability in the city. She became known for her eloquence, intelligence, and level-headedness, and rose through the ranks to



become the Seneschal of Hashan. As Seneschal, she was unequalled as a city leader, and wrote the first comprehensive city charter yet seen in Achaea. Eventually, the Garden determined her worthy of Ascension, and she Ascended into Ourania, Goddess of the Moon, joining Servelan and Maran La'Saen as the only mortals to achieve that great honour.

**Elric**

An elder Shadowsnake Elric has served as a secretary on several occasions. Elric is probably best known for his proficiency in the defiling of shrines as well as his diligent efforts on landmarks.

**Elsdragon**

At one time most influential of the Sentaari monks, he was also a popular Vizier of Shallam. He once achieved victory, by a large margin, in a multi-day series of competitions held by the Logos himself, resulting in a divine gift of a tower.

**\* Erebus**

Achaea's first mortal.

**Fetzer**

A formerly prominent Druid and member of Oakstone, Fetzer left the city and the guild over a dispute regarding over-harvesting. Since Sinistar kidnapped Fetzer's wife as leverage, he was forced to assist Sinistar in his ceremony to become undead. He is considered a prophet by some, merely eccentric by others. He was later named as head of the order of light.

**Firefox**

A Druid, who during the expansion of Hashan into a full-fledged city, sided with the city over the forest, provoking the outrage of the Druids and the newly-formed Oakstone. In more recent times he has remained loyal to Hashan while forming the clan of rogues known as The Garden of the Lost.

**Frogg**

At one time Frogg had the largest network of shops in Achaea and assisted in running Hashan.

**Gabriella**

A level-headed Priestess who was the first Achaean to achieve Transcendence in all of her skills.

**Galadriel**

Galadriel sacrificed her own life in order to wake Gaia from her eon-long slumber.

**Galdrion**

Once guildmaster of the Sentinels, Galdrion was one of the founding trio of the Longshanks family and was its initial driving force. Galdrion was instrumental in the defeat of Lord Twilight's plot during the Death's heart ordeal, being one of the first Sentinels to ally with Shallam.

**\* Gawain**

Gawain founded the Templars, now known as the Paladins. He became the first mortal to kill another when he slew Harlequin. Gawain built the Halfway House in Ashtan to rescue the orphans from the experiments performed on them in Servelan's de Vermiis orphanage. Later in life, he became a fairly notorious drunk.

**Gelphend**

A former guildmaster of the Shadowsnakes and Dawnstriders, Gelphend is known for being part of the coup that disrupted Dawnstrider relations between that guild and Shallam.

**Gijan**

Formerly known as Rancid, Gijan was the leader of the Kharon guild for a fair amount of time. He led a short-lived attempt to create a Kharon Empire, and he married Snow and Anniara in Achaea's first three-way wedding. He has also been influential in Ashtan and served there as an Archon. Gijan eventually switched sides entirely and joined the Priests, but has since left the Priests to return to his monk heritage joining the Sentaari.

**Grellek**

A Hashanite and Serpentlord who has long been active in leadership positions within the guild and city. He served Hashan as a respected and patriotic Seneschal for numerous years.

**Grind**

A Serpentlord who has led the guild, he was once the Seneschal of Hashan.

**Grok**

A long-time citizen of Hashan and Serpentlord, Grok has held the position of Guild Master. Grok has also aided in the leadership of Hashan and is said to be the father of a number of Sapience's inhabitants.

**Gunthar**

A one time prominent Druid with ambitions of power, Gunthar held the position of Guild Master for less than a year and then left the to join the Sorcerers.

**Gwenhwyfar**

Daughter of Aife and Cobra, Gwenhwyfar is a prominent Occultist. She was a member of the First Gathering.

**\* Haidion**

Known as the Wanderer, he discovered the village of Tomacula as well as a passage through the western Vashnar mountains leading to the long-forgotten racial home of the Tso'aa. Haidion is famous for mating with the natives that he meets and fathering children with them.

**Halo**

A former Paladin who went rogue and eventually joined the Infernals. Halo is known for being one that has always tried to remain honorable and is one of the many Infernals that followed Raajin from Ashtan to found the Exodus Battalion.

**\* Harlequin**

Founder of the Occultists guild.

**Imlorien**

A formerly influential Druidess with a nasty temper, Imlorien eventually suffered severe punishment by Gaia. She married Kelayra in Achaea's first lesbian wedding.

**Irontounge**

A complicated personality, Irontounge has changed guilds and classes many times. Starting his life as a powerful Occultist he soon grew weary of the dark arts and took up life as a forestall protector in the Sentinels guild for a short period and later spent a short stint as a Khron monk. Eventually he joined up with the Paladins where he attained the position of secretary.

**\* Isildur**

One of the most influential of Achaean players, Isildur was a renowned Occultist before giving up his evil ways for the life of a Paladin. He won the Staff of Nicator, symbol of rulership over the Selucarian Empire, before its fall hundreds of years ago. He eventually became the first Archprelate of the Church in the modern age, and has been Guild Master of the Paladins, and a Vizier of Shallam as well as Shallam's first Sultan. Isildur is now the richest mortal in Achaean history.

**Israfel**

At one time an influential Priest and former Vizier of Shallam. Israfel was known and respected as warrior and a zealot. He was fanatical in his desire to bring the Church back to its former glory and was considered by many to be a zealot.

**Istavan**

Once a prominent Druid, Istavan left the guild, but has returned and now rules the Guild as Guildmaster. He is known for his militant and highly aggressive (very atypical for Druids) manner.

**Jack**

A prominent Warlock and Guild Master. Jack began his life in the forests as a Druid but gave up his calling to nature for his dreams of power.

**Jarik**

Originally a Sentinel, Jarik left the forests to join the Warlocks where he replaced the founder Napoloen as Guild Master through highly questionable means. He has since left the Warlocks to join Shallam and the Dawnstriders.

**Khaseem**

Once one of Achaea's most despised players, Khaseem was nevertheless a competent though not outstanding Serpentlord combatant. Little respected and a born law-breaker, he was turned into a shrubbery by Sarapis. The Logos eventually took pity and restored Khaseem, who remains a thorn in the side of many, though he has gained some of the respect he lacked before.

**Khejian**

One of the most powerful Infernal Knights to ever walk Sapience, Khejian is a former Guild Master of that guild and a one-time follower of Lupus. He has since denounced his ties to the God of the Hunt and now stands as one of the more prominent members of the Lord of Evil's order.

**Korr**

Known as the Pretty Pink Tulip. HELP KORR will shed more light ... maybe.

**\* Kothlun**

First Guild Master of the modern Sentaari.

**\* Krissandra**

A Druidess of long experience. She was a short time Guild Mistress of the Druids. However, she ended up leaving the guild after disagreements with other guild members. She has since rejoined the Druids.

**Kyasha**

Formerly a well-respected Paladin, Kyasha later joined the Magi where she held the position of Guildmistress. As a former Sultan of Shallam, she led the city through a trying conflict with the Dawnstrider guild which for a time resulted in the Strider guildhall being locked and the Striders finding haven in Hashan. She has since joined the Sentinels and now leads a solitary life in the forest.

**\* Laergon**

A key member of the Kharon in the past, he at one time betrayed them to join the Sentaari and then betrayed the Sentaari to rejoin the Kharon, where he remains still. A central figure in the attempts at Empire by the Kharon. Has been Guild Master of the Sentaari, and has been accused more than once of infidelity to his loyal wife, Elanta.

**Liberater**

A former leader in the Sentaari guild and a former Vizier of Shallam. Liberater has in recent times given up his ways as a monk to take up the swords of a Paladin.

**Likon**

A prominent Sentaari monk who has held the position of Guild Master on multiple occasions.

**\* Luthius**

One of the most powerful Occultists, he was the highest ranked player for quite a long time. He was also Guild Master of the Occultists for a long time.

**Malaclypse**

A noted Infernal and Sartan's first follower, Malaclypse was one of Sinistar's early aides after the founding of the guild and he later rose to the position of Guild Master.

**Mandrake**

One of the most prominent Druids of recent times. Mandrake is one of the founders of Oakstone and until he stepped down was the Guild Master of the Druids. He has also held the position of Gaia's mortal voice.

**Maran**

A legend among the mortals of Achaea, Maran is considered by many to be the most influential mortal of his time. He led Shallam as Sultan, essentially unchallenged in his leadership for well over 20 years. He stood as guildmaster of the Priests as well and for many years led both guild and city. Maran was one of the rare mortals that was accepted into the divine order of the Logos himself and held the highest rank within his order. In a failed attempt to resurrect the god, Deucalion, Maran sacrificed himself but was rewarded by the Logos and the other gods of the garden with immortality for his noble gesture. By combining his essence with that of Deucalion, the gods formed the god Pentharion, who joined Servelan and Elentari as the first male to Ascend.

**\* Mausolus**

A powerful Occultist and one of its most powerful combatants ever. He has had his turn at helping to govern Ashtan. At one time he left after a dispute with the city over a treaty with Shallam that he felt was too easy on the Shallamese.

**Merka**

A former Guild Mistress of the Serpentlords and loyal citizen of Hashan. She is well known within Hashan for her selfless acts to help any in need of assistance.

**Mesmer**

A one-time Paladin who left the guild to join the Kharon, he eventually assumed some leadership duties in the Kharon. He is currently following the path of the Sentinels.

**Mical**

A long time Sentaari monk, he held the position of Guild Master on several occasions until disagreements within the guild prompted him to become a rogue. Mical has also been a Vizier and Sultan of the city of Shallam.

**Mistral**

An exceptionally successful Shadowsnake and perhaps Achaea's most active player, Mistral has led the Shadowsnakes and helped run the government of Ashtan serving as Archon and Overseer. During the first military engagement between Ashtan and Shallam, her tireless efforts nearly ensured Ashtan's victory.

**\* Mordicarnon**

A loyal Kharon monk from the early days.

**Mordyval**

Long-time Guild Master of the Occultists and the first Prince of Ashtan, Mordyval was once turned into a shrub upon incurring the wrath of the Logos. After being released from his punishment, he has taken a low-key role within the Occultists and his city. Mordyval was also the first to summon the Spawn of the Unnameable Horror, in a failed attempt to repeat the experiment that allowed Servelan to Ascend to Immortality.

**Morlana**

An Occultist who generally disdains violence, she is an influential and extremely loyal member of that guild. She married Changcoix in Achaea's first formal wedding and ruled the Occultist guild for many years until her retirement.

**\* Mymla**

Undoubtedly one of Achaea's most unique personalities, she represents the bubbly side of chaos. Essentially incomprehensible to much of Achaea, she nevertheless occasionally writes news articles that baffle everybody.

**Mysti**

A very popular Druidess who shares guild leadership duties, Mysti has served as secretary under at least twelve Guild Masters. Her rabbit, Dandelion, is always nearby.

**Naiad**

A Sentinel from the earliest days of the guild, she helped Treant build the guild. Naiad has since left the sentinels guild to live her life as a reclusive rogue.

**Napoloen**

History will mark Napoloen as one of the greatest Occultists. At the pinnacle of his life Napoloen stood as the Grand Shadow of the Order of Darkness and the Overseer of Ashtan. He led the city through many disputes with Shallam and during the battles that caused the discovery of Dun Valley. His accomplishments include an

alliance with Shallam and Hashan which was critical in defeating the forces of the Tsoł'teth. He later left the Occultist to found the Warlocks and was kicked out due to inner guild disputes.

**Neokove**

Served as a controversial Seneschal of Hashan for years including during one of the more tumultuous periods of the city's history, the time of the extradition treaty with Ashtan. The treaty led to significant friction with the Kharon leadership at the time and was eventually dissolved after Neokove welcomed the largely Ashtan-enemied Exodus Battalion into the city.

**Nightcrawler**

A long-time member and Guildmaster of the Occultists.

**Nimos**

The greatest Serpent of his time, he was once the most powerful member of Ashtan, where he ruled as Overseer. He was known for his fierce loyalty to the Shadowsnakes and enforced a ban on the sale of certain restricted venoms. Nimos was also a strong protector of the Druids especially his sister, Mysti.

**Nis**

A leading Serpentlord known for his hissing. Nis left the Serpentlords to found his own serpent guild in Shallam known as the Dawnstriders. He later found himself removed from the guild he founded.

**\* Odysseus**

The founder of the Priests guild, Odysseus underwent a radical shift in focus to become Achaea's pre-eminent merchant for a time.

**Orina**

A long time Guild Mistress of the Druids guild, Orina has helped lead the guild through many rough times.

**Othello**

A once prominent Sentinel follower of Twilight, Othello is a leading citizen of Hashan and now a Kharon monk.

**Perseon**

A former Guild Master of the Sentinels guild. Perseon stepped down to pursue his studies. His clan is dedicated to the path of Lorientan, Goddess of Knowledge.

**Perseus**

Formerly known as Meep, he was a prominent Shadowsnake who changed his name upon leaving them to join Shallam and the Paladins. He served many years as a guild official of the Paladins and finally took the guildmaster seat. Upon his retirement of the guildmaster position, Perseus left the Paladins and joined the Magis where he again became a guild official. In his final years he has decided to retire from all political seats and simply advise his guild.

**Pierce**

A former Guild Master of the Paladins, Pierce is renowned for avenging the deaths of his fellow Paladins. He has lived his life by a strict code of honour and has always expected his guild to follow in his stead.

**\* Portis**

A Druidess of Ashtan, she founded the Crystal Leaf Inn with her partner, Buckthorn. Lately she seems to be focusing on expanding her business, having opened shops both in Ashtan and Shallam. The ownership of the Crystal Leaf has since passed onto other hands.

**Raajin**

A former Infernal Guildmaster and founder of the Exodus Battalion, Raajin gained fame through his words and actions. Known for his respectable tone and unmatched honor, Raajin led a number of Infernals from Ashtan when the city momentarily turned against him and put him on trial. Raajin was also known for his well written missives and his opinions on many matters. So it came as a shock to many when he was punished by being transformed into a shrub for plagiarism during a Bardic contest.

**\* Ragnorak**

An old Druid who once served as Guildmaster.

**Reznor**

A former Shadowsnakes Guildmaster, Reznor was a very influential part of Ashtan and its government for quite some time.

**Rezzo**

A former guildmaster of the Priests, Rezzo was one of the few in his time to be known as a Priest warrior. Rezzo later left the Priests when Taranis founded the Magi, but later returned to his roots with the Church and the Priests.

**\* Roubel**

A powerful Occultist from the early days.

**Ryvern**

While not always participating in the affairs of Achaea, when he has chosen to, Ryvern has been a valuable Paladin and ally of Shallam. In recent times, he betrayed Shallam and joined Ashtan as an Infernal Knight. Retracing his steps, he left Ashtan, rejoined Shallam and now stands as a powerful Magi.

**Saul**

A once prominent Shadowsnake, Saul also served as Archon in Ashtan.

**\* Servelan**

Servelan de Vermiis was the greatest of the Occultists and perhaps the greatest mortal in modern Achaea. She was an immensely skilled manipulator and was able to so manipulate those around her that she rarely needed to use physical methods to achieve her ends. She was the Overlord of Ashtan and was nearly universally respected, if not liked. She built the now notorious de Vermiis orphanage, in order to extract fluids from the pineal glands of children and perform arcane experiments with them. She also founded the de Vermiis art gallery and the de Vermiis arboretum. It was in the later, in the presence of Isildur, that she performed the seminal experiment that would merge her with the Unnamable Horror, father of Humanity, and thus become the first mortal to achieve Ascension. She is now known as Eris, Goddess of Chaos.

**Silvaria**

A fiery and controversial Sentinel, she had a very public falling out with her former patron, Twilight. Taken in by Aurora she joined the Paladins whom she served for many years. She has since moved out of Shallam to join the Ashura monks in Ashtan.

**Sinistar**

Founder of the Infernals and former Guildmaster, Sinistar was a highly-respected knight. He recently achieved his life-long ambition of becoming undead with the completed construction of his mausoleum near North of Thera. He was reputed to be a completely inept teller of jokes. He was a member of the First Gathering.

**Skarash**

A former Guild Master of the Kharon monks and regent of Hashan. Leaving the Kharon and Hashan behind, he has since returned to his true home in the city of Ashtan where he serves as a secretary to the newly formed Ashura monks.

**Sog**

An influential Druid and former Guild Master, Sog is the keeper of the famed Hammer of the Dwarves. His famous pet, Boorabee the Koala, is much-loved by the forest-dwellers.

**Swordman**

A former Infernal and the first to ever be released from the guild without being hunted, Swordman is most notable for his work against the Church and its shrines, and his status as a self-proclaimed coward. He single-handedly destroyed numerous shrines for years, crippling the Church's advancements at every opportunity.

**Taranis**

A notable Druid who later left the guild and became a prominent member of Shallam, serving as advisor to the Sultan. Taranis later came to find the crystal cavern, rediscovered knowledge of the Magi, and as a result founded the first Magi guild of the realm in Shallam.

**\* Tarkun**

An early Kharon monk, Tarkun was looked upon as a puppet of either Isildur or Mausolus.

**Thakren**

An early Templar and one of the first Viziers of Shallam, Thakren was outguiled for building shrines in Ashtan. Thakren then moved to the city of Hashan where he helped develop the city into its current form. Thakren is most famous for his unique, if not successful get-rich-quick schemes, and for a short time ran a newspaper known for dubious and outrageous news stories.

**Topaz**

A long time Priestess and the fourth GM of the guild, Topaz was known for her warm heart and peaceful nature. Respected by many, she was the first mortal to receive a Lysaran Lyre as a gift from the Logos.

**Tranquility**

A member of the First Gathering. He is known as one of Achaea's most feared combatants of all time. At one time Guild Master of the Kharon monks, he subsequently left the Kharon to-found the Ashuran Monks and in doing so brought the monks back to Ashtan where he has served as Archon on multiple occasions, and Overseer.

**Treant**

The founder of the Sentinels guild and a former Vizier of Shallam, Treant has been plagued by inconsistent behavior which has undermined others' trust in him. He eventually left Shallam and the Sentinels to follow a solitary path.

**Tylin**

A powerful Paladin, Tylin betrayed Shallam for Ashtan and subsequently left Ashtan to go back to Shallam and the Paladins. Upon his return, he rose to power once again and serves as a Vizier currently.

**\* Urza**

A Kharon from their glory days, he was loyal to the Kharon and only to the Kharon.

**Valor**

Once considered one of the most respected Infernals, his honourable behavior earned him a position as one of the original secretaries.

**Vertigo**

A long time citizen of Shallam and former Sentinel. Vertigo is infamous among those in Ashtan for preying upon the young and old alike. Vertigo played instrumental roles in many battles between Shallam and Ashtan. During these battles he would pluck his enemies unknowingly from the safety of their city and drop them within the waiting hands of his allies.

**Vexlore**

A Paladin in the past, Vexlore was cast out of the Church for his worship of Darkness. He subsequently joined the Infernals and eventually attained the position of secretary.

**\* Viper**

One of the early Serpentlords, he discovered the hallucinogenic cactus weed.

**\* Vivien**

A Druidess from the early days, she is known mainly as the mate of Buckthorn.

**Warloc**

An Occultist and long-time loyal follower of the perpetually absent Eris. He has since left the Occultists guild, joined the Warlocks, become a guild master and finally relinquished this position.

**WarMaster**

A former Paladin Guild Master, WarMaster has also held the position of Hierophant in the council of Oakstone. He is also a long time devout follower of Gaia.

**Xandor**

Once a powerful Shadowsnake assassin, Xandor served as Guild Master until he left Ashtan and the Shadowsnakes to join the Dawnstriders in Shallam. Through devious means, he quickly attained the position of Guild Master of the Dawnstriders.

**Xianty**

A dedicated follower of Peace, Xianty for many years stood as the most vocal of all the followers of the God of Peace. He stood as a Vizier of Shallam and a member of the Priest guild for many years before leaving first the Priests and then finally Shallam. Recently, he left Oneiros' order after a failed takeover attempt of Shastaan. He now champions evil.

**Yeshua**

A former highly controversial Paladin Guild Master due to his ties to Twilight. Yeshua has since gone into retirement.

**Zandramas**

A favorite of Gaia, he was once known as the Herald of Nature. Zandramas briefly led the Druids guild while enduring much criticism.

**Zaklin**

An enthusiastic Paladin and former Guild Master. Zaklin has long stood by his beliefs as one of Aurora's Dragons of Light.

**Zbniebniz**

A prominent Shadowsnake and former Guild Master. He is well known for founding the racial clan of Mhun called the 'Mhuns of Moghedu'.

**Zero**

A one-time Paladin, Infernal, Warlock, and Archon of Ashtan, Zero has walked within the light and dark, but his true calling was that of the dark and evil. Zero is known for his volatile mood. Zero's name is infamous across the realm in part due to reports that he was the grandson of the Dowager Mogtanet and his founding of a clan that terrorized the realm.

## 16.11 The History Of Dun Valley

This tale begins on the first day of a new year: the 1st of Sarapin in the year 258 AF, in the redwood Aalen forest, ancestral home of the Tso'aa. Two Druids, Istavan and Cev were roaming the forest, when they were shocked to find most of the Tso'aa missing. Two guards were hanging, dead, from trees, and King La'ramhis had been skewered by his own ripped-out sternum. Stuck onto the end of the sternum was a note from someone named 'Kroul', claiming authorship of this act of brutality. They also discovered that the forest has been set afire, and was burning quickly. Quickly, Istavan and Cev summoned help. Many responded, and Kazin Frostpaw organized the Druids, Magi, and others to put out the forest fires.

Once the chaos of the fires and the initial commotion over the missing Tso'aa subsided, a thorough inventory of the Tso'aa population was taken. It was discovered that Prince Tu'eras and many of the Tso'aa were missing, Kaanan the Outcast was also missing, and Queen Celaabi was wandering the forest, sobbing at the ruins of her home and the death of her husband.

Upon being questioned, it became clear that the distraught Queen had been raped, and that because of the smoke from the forest fires, she could see nothing of her attackers, save that some of them were very large. She apparently felt that her life was over and that she was dishonoured beyond tolerance. She would not leave the forest, despite the obvious danger that her attackers might return to finish the job they had begun.

Though the Queen shunned any contact with men and anyone not Tso'aa, she did respond to the tender ministrations of Cynne Ravenwind, the daughter of the Tso'aa huntress, Selaana. Cynne convinced Queen Celaabi to make her temporary home in Cynne's grove in the Aalen, where she would be guarded and safer than anywhere else in the Aalen.



Soon after this, Tu'eras alerted the world to the fact that he had led many of his people to safety. Vowing revenge on whoever Kroul was, he also solicited the help of all those sympathetic to the plight of his people. In response, Vexlore, a rogue Paladin, wrote an article condemning, in no uncertain terms, what he perceived as the cowardly actions of Tu'eras. He felt that if the Tso'aa would not immediately go out and fight, they were cowardly. Vexlore also affirmed his respect for the attackers of the Tso'aa. As it was not long before the allies of the Tso'aa began to rally around them, their hiding spot in the Western Ithmia forest was soon discovered. Traveling there, Vexlore was slain by those he condemned.

Because the Tso'aa's hiding spot was no longer secret, Maran La'Saen, the Sultan of Shallam, offered them solace in Shallam, but as the Tso'aa did not wish to be surrounded by those they do not know, they chose to stay in the Western Ithmia. At this point, there were many theories about who was responsible for this, with mutterings of the return of the Black Wave being one of the most popular.

It was not long after this that some rather inquisitive orcs began appearing in the cities of Sapience. They seemed to like to look around, chat with the citizens, and were generally quite amiable, particularly for orcs. Eventually though, all of them seemed to show a particular interest in the people who bought dead rats (the Ratman, Hakhim, and Liirup), and an even stronger interest in seeing large crystals such as the Master Crystals of the Warlocks, Sorcerers, and the Magi. While nearly everyone refused to show these orcs the Master Crystals, Dalamar was willing to take one to the Warlock's Master Crystal, to the great delight of the orc scout he showed it to.

As people questioned the orc scouts, the orcs occasionally let slip word of their Master, but then immediately denied having one. As orcs are not possessed of great wit, it was inevitable that those of greater wit would trick information out of them, but just as the orcs seemed on the verge of revealing information of substance about their mission, a deadly grey fog would envelop them and they would turn to dust.

Unfortunately, as it was becoming obvious that there was a threat to the land, the Great Mhunna, leader of the Mhun in Moghedu, decided to close the Great Gate of Moghedu against the threat. This had the effect of cutting off most of the silver trade, the implications of which were dire: cessation of sigil production by the magi guilds.

A few days later, Phainein Bambi was roaming the Black Forest when she discovered an orc soldier setting fires in the forest. Subsequently, the orc starts the Aureliana forest on fire too. Unfortunately for the forest-lovers of Sapience, it was quite a windy day, and the fires soon spread to envelop nearly the entire Savannah, imperiling the Tomaculans and their livestock. As he was walking along the highway, Darktalon Tiercel discovered the guilty orc, and began to question it but before he got too far, Tarlin Vor'dkan charged in and began to attack the orc, who fled the battle and escaped.

Because of the rash of fires, and the threat of more, Cynne Ravenwind organized the cities to regularly patrol the various sections of the land. Assigned to Ashtan were: The Savannah, the Mhojave, the Dakhota hills, Azdun, El'Jazira, Thera, and Tomacula. Shallam was assigned: Shastaan, Jaru, Delos, the Siroccians, the Shamutot, and the Pash Valley. Hashan was assigned Tasur'ke, the Northern and Western Ithmian forests, and the environs of Belladonna's keep. Oakstone itself pledged to watch all the forests, the Vashnars, and the Mannaseh swamp.

It was around this time that Kroul, revealed to be an Ogre High Priest contacted Vexlore, and offered to assist Vexlore in achieving his vow of revenge against the Tso'aa. Vexlore quickly turned it around and began demanding money from Kroul for his assistance. As Kroul wanted to attack the Tso'aa only as a distraction anyway, he was quick to promise Vexlore whatever he asked for, as Kroul had no intention of every paying him anyway. An agreement had been struck for Kroul to loan Vexlore some ogre knights, and to assassinate some of the Tso'aa in advance, to make things easier for Vexlore.

Unfortunately, Vexlore immediately bragged to his Ordermates about being chosen to help Kroul, and Kroul's assassination team of orc assassins, ogre knights, and ogre huntresses was intercepted near the Tso'aa hiding spot. Engaging in battle with Santos, Cynne Ravenwind, Grandmaster Sunrise, Grandmaster Rejlil, Orina Lighthawk-Foehammer, Oswald Snowmantle (of Northgrove), Fuu Ta'sa-Le'Murzen, Thaipan Silverwisp, and Scavenger Nusiki, they were decimated. During the fury of battle however, one orc assassin managed to slip through, and slay some of the Tso'aa. Luckily, before he could slay the the Prince, he was put out of his misery by Silverwisp. Kroul, furious at Vexlore's inability to keep his mouth shut, ordered a hit on Vexlore, who was quickly tracked down and slain.

During the chaos in the Western Ithmia, which was designed by Kroul simply to provide a distraction, strike teams of ogres and orcs snuck into Ashtan, Shallam, and Hashan to kidnap the important rat-buyers: The Ratman, Hakhim, and Liirup. Hashan nearly organized quickly enough to prevent the kidnapping of Liirup, but missed by a hair. After these rash actions, Tu'eras accepts sanctuary for his people in the palace in Shallam.

During patrols of the land, Myrkul discovers that the rat buyers are being sequestered in a hut in the Mannaseh swamp. After backup arrives the rescuers are ambushed by Kroul's forces, hid deeper in the swamp. The rescuers prove victorious, despite heavy losses, and are able to return the rat buyers to their respective cities (to the great relief of many).

Unfortunately for the cities, Kroul had once again out-witted them, and was using the kidnapping of the rat buyers as merely another distraction towards his real goal: the taking of the Master Crystals. During the battle in the Mannaseh, strike forces had once again entered Ashtan, and taken the Warlocks' Master Crystal that had been so handily showed to them by Dalamar. Once they had that, it was easy to use it to locate the Sorcerers' and the Magi, and they quickly moved their forces to break into those guilds, and steal their crystals. Though they were opposed at each guild, none of the defending forces were organized enough to stop the ogres and orcs.

Kroul gloated about his victory. He seemed unable to resist trumpeting his strategical triumphs. And then came a surprise none had been expecting. While a group of people were gathered North of Thera to discuss the happenings, out of nowhere, vibrations began appearing, stealing people's equilibrium, slowing their passage through time, inflicting plague after plague, dragging flying Druids and Magi from the skies, and causing small heart attacks in all those nearby. Most puzzling of all was that the vibrations seemed to have been sent by someone known as Zh'risia, the Dark Lord. The vibrations were eventually destroyed, but this highlighted the danger that the combined missing Master Crystals potentially posed to the land.

Now, it is during this time that an interesting side-story begins to develop. Because of the crisis, the guildmasters of the Paladins and Infernal Knights, Aldair d'Vast and Raajin Lucoster, have decided that their guilds should cooperate in the common defence of the land. To facilitate inter-guild cooperation, they exchanged guild officers: The Paladins got Blademaster Khejian, Deven, and Karkus, while the Paladins got Cyre Elseth, Shenna Weltsdown, and Tarlin Vor'dkan.

As each guild was considering the officers of the other to be as members, both knightly guilds felt obligated to protect the officers on loan as if they were guildmates. This policy, however, was not without its opponents, particularly in Ashtan, home of the Infernal's Iron Citadel. Some, including Mordyval Danarrii, an Archon of Ashtan, felt that it was outrageous to be protecting the sworn enemies of Ashtan, regardless of reason. He warned Raajin that the loaned officers would be attacked if they set foot in Ashtan.

Raajin, of course, entered Ashtan with Cyre and Shenna in tow. Mordyval immediately travelled to their location, and attacked Cyre. Raajin then slew Mordyval, causing the Archon to cast him from the city, and brand him traitor. The Master of the Iron Citadel, son of the founder of the guild, had been run out of his home city. Shallam accepted Raajin's temporary presence, though not all were happy with this state of affairs. Still, Maran La'Saen supported the action, and few could resist the Sultan's influence.

Because many felt that a large-scale invasion was imminent, Shallam proposed that the Church erect tactically located shrines to assist in the defence of the land. Many non-Shallamese were outraged by this, as shrines have, historically, been a matter of great contention and striving, and, indeed, war itself. The wisdom and potential usefulness of the shrines could not be denied, though, so it was proposed that the Church be allowed to erect tactical shrines provided they destroy them after the crisis was over.

The Church responded that it did not seem fair that they would have to work to erect shrines for the common benefit only to have to destroy that work afterwards. Raajin felt that this was eminently reasonable, so he offered to help sanctify the shrines to golden in return for the Church's assistance in dismantling them later. This was truly unheard of. The Infernals had been among the loudest and hardest-working opponents of shrines.

Sartan, the Lord of Evil and Patron of the Infernal Knights took notice of Raajin's doings, and was furious at Raajin's behavior. Withdrawing his Patronage of the Iron Citadel, he demanded that the Infernal Knights vote out their Guildmaster in order to regain his Patronage. Raajin's former citymates, if not friends, then began to attack him, perhaps glad at the chance to strike at the stiff-backed Guildmaster. The first to reach and slay him

were Khalid, an Occultist, and Lakissa Storm, a Kharon. Soon, Raajin's Shallamese allies were defending him against their enemies in Ashtan.

Not long after this, the results of some diplomatic work by Yeshua ben Choshech, a Paladin, and Rivalyn, a Magi, paid off, in that the Mhunna was persuaded that by ensuring the steady flow of silver to Rurin the Crafter who could then sell it via his network of shops, the war effort would be strengthened due to the resultant production of sigils, and the Mhun themselves would be safer.

There was now a period of general quiet for nearly two months, broken only by an attack by a single, apparently crazed, but very powerful, warmage, who, after exacting a heavy toll, was finally slain by Grand Father Tranquility. But finally, Druid scouts soaring in Eagle morph discovered that increasing number of orc and ogre regiments were massing in the Vashnars. The forces of Sapience began to mass themselves in the Vashnars, with some waiting in reserve for the now nearly-inevitable attack on their homelands.

When the attack came, it came swiftly, and it came in force. There were ogre warlords directing ogre knights, orc assassins with their poisons, ogre warmages with their powerful magical arsenals, and orc warriors. The first to bear the brunt of the attack were Rivalyn, Archidal Saer'rac, Profanus Magus, and Warloc Merre, who quickly called for backup. Jack Moonflair, arriving quickly, was the first to fall to the ogre-led forces.

Mass chaos ensued.

It wasn't long before ogre-led forces pushed past the Vashnar foothills to travel towards the population centers of the continent. Meeting weak resistance, they slaughtered all they came across, until they entered the cities to loot and burn. But though many citizens of Sapience fell, they exacted a steep toll on Kroul's forces. Kroul's confidence begins to waver. His bravado only increases, of course, but it is clear that the free cities are pushing the Ogre forces back into the previously-hidden valley from which they emerged.

Directly after this came a revelation. A heretofore unknown Ogre, Vukub Ysin'zhu, announced as the Baron of Dun Valley, trumpeted his fury to the world. He tells that he took possession of the Dun fortress and its surrounding villages of Thalagor and Garnok by slaying is former evil Tsol'teth master. Unbeknownst to him, the Tsol'teth had an apprentice, one Zh'risia, who hid, increasing his power, and exerting his influence over Kroul. It seemed that all along it was Zh'risia who was directing the invasion, manipulating Kroul.

Invading the Dun Valley, the citizens of Sapience found the fortress, only to find that apparently Zh'risia has locked its great gates, keeping them out, and Kroul, Vukub, and the other ogres in. Vukub orders the ogre forces to retreat, and they do, albeit with some skirmishes on the way.

Exploring the extensive wildlands of the Dun, Firefox the Druid then discovered a cave behind a waterfall, in which hid Kaanan, the Outcast of the Tsol'aa, missing since the invasion, and thought to be working in alliance with Kroul and Zh'risia. With scorn, Kaanan confirmed his role before attacking what was then a group with Firefox. Armelia, Jerle Minara, and Scavenger Nusiki battled Kaanan, and Scavenger slew him.

Finding that Kaanan was guarding the key to the fortress, word was spread, and an incredible force was assembled for the attack. It is likely that it was the largest force seen in Achaea for over 250 years, since the final destruction of Imperial Seleucar by the Sapience League.

Invading the Dun Fortress, Kroul and Vukub are quickly located. Kroul began to simper and beg for his life, while Vexlore asked Vukub to assist them in finding and bringing Zh'risia to justice. Vukub agreed, and the hunt is on. Though the fortress is large, and Zh'risia was well-hidden, Aldair d'Vast, leading Silverlock Moonflair, Provos Weltsdown and Kerish Toreiil, eventually found the foul Tsol'teth. As they fled for their lives, they summoned reinforcements, and soon the backbone of Sapience was allied for the attack. Though some fell to Zh'risia's black magic, the force proved to be too overwhelming even for one who was nearly a Tsol'teth Master, and he breathed his last, slain by Dirgmal Relkatha, an Occultist.

Kroul, seeing that it would not be long before they came for him, fled and hid in a rude hut in Thalagor. Deciding that Kroul must not be allowed to hide behind the manipulations of Zh'risia. Groups of vigilantes set out to bring the Ogre High Priest to justice. A group of Dalamar, Lavender, Santos, Blademaster Khejian, and Cynne Ravenwind eventually located the tainted High Priest, and attacked him with the fury of the righteous. Fittingly, Cynne Ravenwind, protector of she who Kroul himself raped, avenged her Queen by personally slaying Kroul.

And so the threat to Sapience was ended. There was, of course, some mop-up work to be done, as not all ogres and orcs obeyed Vukub's orders to withdraw, and continued to maraude across the land. In the main though, the 8 months of uncertainty and tension were over, and there only remained the funeral of King La'ramhis and the crowning of Prince Tu'eras.

In a moving ceremony that Sarapis Himself personally participated in, the elder Tsol'aa, Thaa'lis, gave the funeral address, after a number of Sapience citizens spoke, and asked the Logos to bury the great king of the Tsol'aa.

At the conclusion of this sad event was the crowning of Tu'eras. Though the only king most of the Tsol'aa have known is dead, Tu'eras already a mature man, promises to be a wise, strong leader. The respect his leadership garnered in the aftermath of the devastating attack on the Aalen has won him many supporters, and he rules with the loving consent of his people.