I, Synesius

Chapter I

On your account alone, I think I should be capable of overlooking my city

1

Scholars have differing theories regarding my birth year. Crawford and Fitzgerald posit 360 AD, Clausen 365, and Volkmann surmises it was sometime between 365 and 370. Druon and Krabinger both aver it was 370, whilst Seek and Grützmacher suggest it was soon after, and Kraus proposes a range of 370 to 375. But, I confess, I find it a futile endeavour to pin down the birthdate of one who has lain entombed for sixteen centuries, a mere few centuries after the Christ child was born. In my youth, the Roman Emperor had already donned the mantle of Christianity. So, I shall narrate my tale in my own manner, and you may take it for what it's worth. The fragments of my verse, ideas, and epistles that have survived do scant justice to the man I truly was.

2

I hail from the mythohistorical lineage of Heracles' forebears, who settled in Sparta - not the Hollywood Hercules with Schwarzenegger's chiselled physique, but the Heracles of my hymn to Cyrene. Ah, Cyrene! It is here that I was born, and it is here that I behold the revered tombs of my ancestors. What Cyrene, O my genealogist, you who throw me back to the Herculeans! Here, unencumbered, I can lament amongst those well-versed in my family's distinction; our ancestors' names etched into the public consciousness. From Eurysthenes, who led his Dorian people to Laconia and founded Sparta, to my father, Euoptius the Elder, scion of the early Cyrenaic settlers, our lineage is steeped in history.

I speak of Heracles' eleventh labour, following Eurystheus' dictates, wherein he was tasked with retrieving the Three Apples from the gardens of the Hesperides. The Nymphs of the Evening - Aigle, Erytheia, and Hesperethusa - guarded the forbidden apple tree in a secluded location, a veritable secret within a desolate jungle, where the river Lethe springs from an oolitic cave. This river of oblivion would cause anyone who drank from its pure waters to forget their very identity, wandering aimlessly like a dervish, beset by the phantasms of Muses dancing

to Apollo's tunes, under the watchful gaze of the dragon Ladon, that most vigilant of sentinels. Yet Heracles fears nothing; passing through Egypt, he was captured by the Pharaohs and heavily shackled, only to break free and slay the myriad jailers, thus proceeding on his journey to the Hesperides in the land of the west. There, he wrestled the wound-proof dragon Ladon in many a battle, ultimately vanquishing it with his mighty club. The fate of the three nymphs remains a mystery. As for the Golden Apples, Heracles brought them to Eurystheus, who offered them to Hera, the Goddess of Marriage.

In my time, a few friends and I visited the Hesperides, seeking the mythical river, but found only a narrow valley with a shallow stream fringed by wild weeds and shrubs. The oolitic cave, however, was still there - a place of pilgrimage for the ancients, where the souls of the dead would bathe in the Lethe to purge their sins and forget their sorrows. We descended a rocky ladder to the entrance, which ended in a deep hole illuminated by a cramped pit. The distant sound of running water reached our ears, rippling into the depths. We cast a large rock into the abyss, and after a moment of piercing silence, a stone-onto-water thud echoed back. We debated the depth, with my estimate being around sixty-five feet. As spring bloomed around us, we strolled through a landscape devoid of apples, evening goddesses, and dragons.

3

As I emerged from adolescence, my burgeoning curiosity about my identity as a biracial and bilingual Cyrenaic blossomed into a fulfilling passion. I was raised in a noble Cyrenaic household, bearing the legacy of my mixed heritage. On my father's side, I descended from the Dorians, with ancestors like Eurysthenes, who led the Dorians to Spartan Laconia, and my father, Euoptius, whose lineage is etched in the public record. On my mother's side, I was connected to the Battus Adicran, leader of the Asbystae tribe, who gifted the highlands of Cyrene to the early Greek settlers. Her family ties also stretched to Jugurtha, a prominent figure among the Grecized Libyan clans, known for his influence with the Ptolemaic court under Roman rule.

I am Libyan at heart, untroubled by the allure of the Lotus that Homer describes in his Odyssey - a fruit that made aliens forget their homeland. Unlike the Libyans of old, who were said to be entranced by the Lotus wine, as Herodotus tells us, I was grateful for my Lotus-less Cyrene, even if it wasn't as fervently extolled as it once was. The city had seen better days, with philosophers and noble laureates long gone.

A calamitous earthquake struck, leaving an indelible mark on my young mind. I vividly recall the day, clinging to my Berber nanny Noumensa's giant hand as she rushed me out of the house, carrying my younger sister Taferrujt, while my small feet kicked the air. We met my parents and siblings outside, and spent the night under the stars. Though our house stood firm, the entrance cracked, and many nearby homes and storehouses crumbled. The sounds of barking dogs, bleating lambs, and neighing horses still echo in my mind. As I walked hand-in-hand with Noumensa, I saw people devastated, wandering around the ruins that had offered no resistance to the disaster. The quake's horror seeped into my soul, as if the world I knew had turned to dust. The land was further plagued by swarming locusts, destroying crops, and frequent Barbarian raids protesting Roman injustices. It was during this time that I would write to Hypatia, about whom I shall have much to say in this novel:

"My dear Hypatia, I am beset by the sufferings of my city, and utterly disheartened by its plight. Daily, I witness enemy forces rampaging, and men slaughtered like sacrificial victims on an altar. The air is heavy with the stench of decaying bodies. I wait in dread for the same fate to befall me, for how can one retain hope when the skies are darkened by the shadow of birds of prey? Yet, despite all this, my love for the land endures. Why, then, do I suffer thus? It is because I am a Libyan, born and bred here, and it is here that I behold the revered tombs of my ancestors. On your account alone, I think I should be capable of overlooking my city and seek a new abode, were I ever afforded the chance."

4

Libya: a continent stretching from the Nile in the east to the Pillars of Heracles in the west - or, as the Ancient Libyans called them, the Pillars of Heaven. Libya: the object of the Pharaohs' fantasy, born of the union between the sacred bull Apis, embodiment of virility, and either Memphis, the oldest and most fertile capital of Ancient Egypt, where Osiris met his demise by drowning, or Cassiopeia, Queen of Ethiopia and paragon of beauty.

One might seek a geopolitical interpretation of this Pharaonic fantasy. Beyond the mythological birth of Libya lies the reality of the Pharaonic Empire's African sphere of influence, extending westward to Libya, or Imentet, the Gate of the West, where the sun sets. This is the Land of Milk, as described in the Odyssey: a land where lambs are born with horns, ewes lamb three times a year, and no one goes hungry. Masters and peasants alike feast on abundant milk, meat, and cheese, for the cattle never dry up.

Yet, to the Greeks, Libya was also a dark world, where the mistresses of the gods lay buried, and the giant Antaeus slaughtered passersby to build temples to his father, Poseidon, the Libyan God of the Seven Seas, King of Tempests and Hurricanes, Earth-Shaker and Master of the Clouds. Before the Greeks arrived in Cyrene, Heracles paved the way for settlers by slaying the giant Antaeus, who drew strength from his mother, Gaia, the personification of Earth. Heracles held him aloft and crushed him with a bear hug, then took his wife, Tinjis, as his own.

5

By the Aegean Sea, on the volcanic island of Thera, my Dorian ancestors were fishing for geography with the nets of myth. Whatever they won in legend, they seized in reality. Libya had captured the imagination of the Greeks, and in their nets, she was personified as the daughter of Zeus and Io, married to Poseidon, and mother to Agenor, ancestor of the Egyptians, and Belus, ancestor of the

Phoenicians. Poseidon was also said to be married to the Libyan deity Gaia, Goddess of Nature and Earth, with whom he begat Tanit, whom the Greeks reimagined as Athena in a Libyan guise, holding the Aegis, as Herodotus recounts.

This is the Libya whose form was engraved by Greek settlers on Cyrenaic coins and modelled in clay with Libyan features, her plaits visible beneath her headscarf, accompanied by a gazelle. (You may find a statue of hers in the British Museum, where she stands crowning the nymph Cyrene, gently overpowering a lion.)

Although my mother's people, the Asbystae, had abandoned Poseidon, who would become a Greek god, they safeguarded the rituals of worshipping Amun, the Hidden King of Gods, the self-created creator-deity. A serpent shedding its skin to emerge anew is his token, and his identifying mark is the Shuti, the two-feather adornment atop his head. For he is Libyan, marked either with Shuti or the horns of the Libyan Barbary Ram – Aoudad, as named by the Asbystae. The Pharaohs fused him with Ra to become Amun-Ra, while the Phoenicians called him Baal-Amun, and the Greeks of Cyrene paired him with Zeus, building a majestic temple in his honour. Through them, he became renowned in the Greek metropoleis and was sung into the ears of Alexander of Macedon, who travelled hundreds of miles through the desert to reach his main temple in Siwa Oasis.

I visited this temple as a young man, accompanying my mother on a pilgrimage to the shrine of her greatest God. The oasis, surrounded by sand hills, offered springs of salty, fresh, cold, and hot water. A large Greek community from the island of Samos had lived there since ancient times, adopting the manners of the native Libyans, speaking Libyan and Egyptian, worshipping Amun, and performing the pilgrimage. I was grateful to sense the immemorial past of Alexander, fulfilling my long-held desire for a Sahara-crossing voyage with Libyan and Greek pilgrims.

I had little faith in anything but philosophy, yet participating in the pilgrimage brought me joy - from bathing in the hot and cold springs to purging sins in the sacred pond, and hoping for prayers to be heard. We then followed the

circumambulation of the Amun shrine, anointing our palms with the Black Stone at the entrance. It was unlike the huge rock I'd imagined, weighing as much as ten men; instead, four men could have lifted it. The pitch-black stone was smooth, like the belly of a pregnant woman carrying twins on a flat bottom - to me, it resembled a fallen meteor. Men of faith believed the Siroccos (Ghibli) had thrown it there, and a pond and palm trees sprang up, leading to its worship as a guardian of the oasis of the King of Gods, with the sacred Sirocco as its lethal weapon. For when the Achaemenid ruler of Egypt, Cambyses, launched a military expedition against the Amunians and destroyed their temple, the Siroccos sand-stormed the invading army, roaring like a raging sea and burying the assault.

And to the shrine of the two-horned Amun came Alexander, the young man who would himself become a two-horned figure after ending the Persian reign in Egypt, baptized as the son of the King of Gods, the hidden self-created creator-deity. In the capacious court of the temple, he was received by the oracle, accompanied by his loyal friends and guards. The servants erected a sumptuous pavilion for the emperor and his company to rest, as they had arrived late at night. As the sun rose, so did the procession, headed for the consecration rituals, circumambulating the temple. Eighty priests carried on their shoulders a three-masted boat with silver papers draped on its sides, and erected aboard was an idol of Amun, adorned neck and horns with gold necklaces and gemstones. The oracle's procession followed, with Alexander the Great carried on a golden Pharaonic litter, and behind him, the procession of chorus maidens chanted hymns in the Libyan tongue, praising the mighty god:

One and second to none, One and Creator of all/
The first to rise when none existed/
Men and beasts hath He created/
Father of all that was, Uncreated, Eternal, Immortal/
Hidden in darkness, the Only One/
Unknown and unknowable to all that of gods and men/
Unknown is His Name to man and unknowable/
Hidden in darkness is a name of His, and many are they/

He is Truth in all of Truth/
The King and Master of Truth/
Eternal He is and only by him man lives/
Blowing the breath of life/
The Father-Mother of all fathers and mothers/
He begets not, nor is He begotten/
The Uncreated, the Creator/
Self-created/
All that exists He is, forever permanent/
Creator of the Universe, of what was and is and will be/
He brings to light what is hidden/
He speaks the everlasting words/
First-born of gods, the Most Merciful/
Deliverer and Listener of the suppliant and the grateful.

And so, the circle closed, returning to where we started in the courtyard. The high priest led Alexander the Great into the Holy of Holies, a place no layman had ever dared to tread. Emerging thence, he bore the two horns of Aoudad atop his head, a symbol of his status as the Son-of-Amun, a demigod in the eyes of his followers. Surrounded by his loyal companions, his experience in the hermitage was met with curiosity. "I heard what I'd hoped for," he replied, leaving much to the imagination. Rumour had it that he had posed a question to his father, the god Amun, via the oracle: "Will I be the master of the world?" And the god had affirmed it, sealing Alexander's fate

6

My mother's people, the Asbystae, worshipped Tanit, the Goddess of Weaving and War, revered as the Lady of the West by the Pharaohs. Women had Her head figure tattooed on their legs, adorned with a shuttle, symbolizing weaving, while men had Her image tattooed on their arms, standing with armour and intercrossed arrows, embodying war.

As the Goddess of Fertility, she was believed to have begotten before being begotten. I recall being overwhelmed with wonder as a young boy, watching young maidens with braids, dressed in translucent white-linen frocks and red-dyed goatskin, dance in rhythmic circles. The sound of their bronze anklets still resonates in my mind as they chanted the Tanit song: "I am all that has existed – and all that is and that will be – and never has there been a soul to unveil me." In bygone rituals, maidens would hold an annual ceremony to venerate Tanit the Warrior, standing in two rows and pelting each other with stones or fighting with clubs. If anyone died, she was deemed non-virgin. By my time, the ritual had evolved, with participants pelting each other with snail shells, and the atmosphere was filled with laughter.

Incidentally, what happened to the statue of the nymph and gazelle in a small square in your capital, Tripoli? It depicted a naked woman holding a jar and caressing a gazelle's neck. The statue was vandalized by ISIS militants, who wrapped it in a black bin bag and bound it with rope. A crowd gathered, curious about the veiled nymph, and some took photos. A teenage boy even tried to remove the plastic, but was met with protests from photographers. Later, the statue was targeted with an RPG, leaving a hole in its bronze body. Eventually, it was uprooted, leaving the basin dry.

7

The version of my mother's folks attributes the name Cyrene to Korini, daughter of a Libu king in ancient times. A peerless huntress and archer, she roamed the wilderness of Irasa, slaying beasts with her magic arrows. When her father vowed to give his kingdom to whoever slew a mythical giant lion that terrorized the land, Korini answered the call and killed the beast. Yet, she declined the award, choosing instead to become a nymph, shaping the tales of the Libu grandmother centuries before the arrival of the Greeks. Alternatively, the name might be derived from the Kyre Spring, whose waters still flow through its oolitic cave, or from the Kura flower, whose white aster blooms fill the plateau with their scent.

In contrast, my settler ancestors wove a different narrative, where Korini became a nymph-maid to the goddess Libya, a design aimed at capturing the fantasized colony with a retrospective historiography. Given that the Phoenicians, descendants of the deified Libya and her husband Poseidon, had settled in Tripolis, it seemed fitting for the Greeks to found the Pentapolis in Eastern Libya, where Poseidon, brother of Zeus, reigned supreme. Thus, they constructed their narrative: Korini, or Kyrene, became a daughter of Hypseus, King of Thessaly, and was transformed by the gods into an immortal nymph. According to their tale, Apollo, god of the arts, rode his centaur through Greece until he chanced upon Korini wrestling a lion in the wilderness of Thessaly. Enchanted by her beauty and bravery, Apollo was instructed by his centaur that the Fates had led him to this valley for a purpose: to "carry Korini beyond the seas to Zeus' unmatched gardens and make her queen of the cities, uniting the people of Thera to live alongside the native inhabitants on a fertile plateau."

Apollo carried his maiden onto the back of his centaur and flew to the spring of Kyre, where he built her a golden palace. Their wedding took place on the Greeks' first night in Libya, and Apollo deflowered the nymph Cyrene in the palace, inaugurating a singular existence based on a philosophy of pleasure. This union was meant to protect a civilization from the evils of the world. Cyrene gave birth to Aristaeus, the patron god of cattle, wine, and olives, who discovered bees by sacrificing four fattened cows to the gods and leaving them for nine days. Later, swarms of bees erupted from the carcasses, dispersing and breeding.

In a later era, Arcesilaus IV, king of the Pentapolis, would proudly display a statue of the nymph Cyrene in Delphi, riding in a chariot and carrying the goddess Libya to crown the first settler king. This statue, a gift for winning the Pythian Games, now stands in the Pausania Temple in Delphi.

As for the events on Earth, the narrative of the early emigrants in Libya originated from the overpopulation of Thera during a time of drought and political turmoil. King Grinus tasked the adventurous seaman Aristoteles with leading a campaign to colonize the Libyan coast. Aristoteles accepted the challenge and handpicked the best sailors in Thera, leading them to the temple

of Apollo with a rich offering of fruits, lambs, pork, wine jars, and a bundle of money for the oracle. Apollo, god of colonies, conveyed revelations to those seeking his aid, and the oracle announced:

"Apollo demands that you sail for the rich pastures of Libya".

Aristoteles set sail with his crew of Therean seamen to Crete, the nearest Greek island to the Libyan coast, 250 kilometres away across the Libyan Sea – a name given to these waters by the Cretans themselves. For centuries, Libyans had migrated to Crete, settling across the land, particularly around the small harbour of Lebena, a town that still bears the same name today. At the port of Itanus in eastern Crete, seasoned sailors joined Aristoteles' campaign, but he still sought an expert mariner familiar with both shores. It was there that he heard of a celebrated navigator, renowned for his numerous voyages to the Libyan coast – a man known as Corobius. 'Corobius' wasn't a proper name, but rather a nickname that reflected his character and exploits: 'Hunter of Shells', a fitting moniker given the abundance of shells on the Libyan shores, as plentiful as grains of sand. Aristoteles' crew tracked him down to one of the port's taverns, where sailors often gather, and indeed, once a sailor, always a sailor – forever drawn to the sea, pubs, and whorehouses.

The Hunter of Shells consented to guide the adventurous sailors of Thera to the safest anchorage possible on the Libyan shore, provided they ceaselessly supplied wine, even if the voyage lasted a thousand years. He said so and asked for another glass. The crew consisted of 300 naval men, excluding Corobius. The number 300 seemed to echo Sparta's obsession with this particular figure, reminiscent of the legendary 300 Spartans who had once overpowered Persia's vast armies. In the famous Battle of Thermopylae, 300 Spartan soldiers had confronted a hundred-thousand Persians in a narrow mountain pass. Although the battle raged on for three days, the Persian armies ultimately retreated from invading Sparta after suffering heavy losses. As for the Spartan contingent, all but one soldier was slain. The lone survivor, wounded, managed to return to Sparta, bearing the weight of recounting the tale to dignitaries away from the royal court. In his final moments, he melodramatically implored: "Remember us."

Aristoteles' men set sail on two fifty-oared ships. Days later, they anchored at the rocky island of Platea, near the continental coast, where beaches were covered in shells cast by the tide, facilitating access to the land of Aziris. The early settlers resided in Aziris for six years, near a wellspring and dense palm trees. However, when they attempted to venture into the fertile pastures, they were confronted by shepherds of the Adyrmachidae tribe, who shared similarities with the Egyptians in tongue, traditions, and beliefs, although they wore Libyan attire. The Greeks retreated to their colony in Aziris.

According to my mother's version, confirmed by my father, her ancestor, Battus Adicran I, soon learned of the settlers in Aziris and their renown as exceptional warriors. When he needed allies to vanquish his opponents, the Giligamae in the east and the Auschisae in the west, over the seizure of the precious lands of Silphium, he sent a delegation offering a colony on fertile land for pasture and agriculture, as well as marriage with maidens among the tribe, in exchange for their aid against his enemies. Aristoteles welcomed the offer, despite most of his crew opting for a return home. They travelled to the promised land with the shell-hunter as an interpreter. As they approached the foot of the Irasa plateau, the guides demanded they rest until sunset, proceeding under the cover of night. The guides met Battus Adicran's demands, leading the strangers across the hills of Irasa at night, lest they glimpse the fertile lands of the Asbystae. At sunrise, they reached the plateau of Cyrene, where the chief guide stood, pointing to the celestial sphere, and said: “This is where you should settle, for there is a hole in the sky.”

As fate would have it, my adventurous three-hundred Dorian ancestors (assuming they survived) intermarried with Asbystae women, and Cyrene became a legitimate prize, boasting its verdant springs, lush pastures, and fertile arable lands. Aristoteles transformed into Battu, the First, or Battus in Greek parlance – "King" in the Libyan tongue.

Over time, legends intertwined, and the tasks of the gods, customs, attire, and cuisines of the guests and hosts merged. The Libyans, renowned for their equestrian prowess as described by Herodotus, schooled the Greek settlers in the art of navigating four-horse war chariots. Pindar would later immortalize

them as dolphins morphing into winged steeds on tempestuous horses. The Greeks learned the intricacies of extracting beehives from suspended caves and harnessing honey and wax from the combs. They also acquired knowledge of crafting cheese from curdled milk, pressing oil from olives, fermenting wine from Christ-Thorn, and concocting perfume from wild lilies. In a symbolic fusion, the Libyan-Greek deity coalesced into Zeus-Amun.

My paternal ancestors buried their dead, Libyan style, at the heart of the rocks, as my father's foremothers copied my mothers' cheek-slapping and clothes-tearing mourning rituals, and to boot, they copied the wearing of Libyan costume, exemplified by the goddess Athena, as well as the hailing of victory and jubilation, "Hallelujah!" as confirmed by my mother. And Libyans learned from the Greeks the veneration of Apollo and architecture and stone masonry and water wheeling and designing mosaics and the Olympics and Dorian Greek and philosophy...

Centuries unfolded, weaving a long history of prosperity and peace, punctuated by wars, revolutions, and recurring calamities – locust attacks and epidemics. The migrations from Greece continued, driven by promises of fertile lands and the Oracle of Delphi's exhortations: "Every Greek loitering by, not migrating to magical Libya, not laying claim to a plot of land, will certainly cry over spilt milk." The influx of migrants and subsequent displacement of native Libyans from Cyrene led Adicran III, the Battu of Asbystae, to perceive an existential threat to his people. Seeking aid, he turned to Apries, Egypt's Persian ruler, who coveted the western state for his Pharaonic colony. Apries led a military expedition to support the Libyans' mutiny, but the alliance crumbled as the Greeks emerged victorious at Irasa.

The Libyans' insurgent movements persisted, unfolding at alternating intervals. They formed alliances with the Persians in Egypt and later with Arcesilaus II's brothers, who had fled to the colony of Barce after a failed coup. The Libyans secured a decisive victory over Arcesilaus II's army at Leucon, and the defeated king met a tragic end at the hands of his brother, Learchus, who seized the throne belonging to Battus III, nicknamed The Lame. Learchus forced his

brother's widow into marriage, but she exacted a deadly revenge, stabbing him to death on their wedding night.

Years passed, and political turmoil continued until the arrival of Demonax, the Legislator of the People, from Mantineia in Peloponnese. Summoned by the brothers who had orchestrated the coup, Demonax crafted a democratic constitution aimed at stabilizing the state and preventing further unrest. After studying the country's politics and social dynamics, he devised a constitution that limited the king's secular and divine authority, vesting considerable power in the Gerousia (Council of Elders) and the Boulē (Advisory Council). He subdivided the population into three sections: the emigrant Dorians from Thera (including your ancestors), the emigrant Dorians from the Peloponnese and Crete, and the remaining Greeks – those from the Aegean Sea and the native Grecized Perioikoi who accompanied them.

Centuries passed, and the prized Silphium became as valuable as gold, its fame reaching the ancient Chinese, masters of herbal medicine. Its juice was touted as a cure-all for ailments ranging from wounds and bronchitis to toothaches, gout, and even alopecia.

As the ages went by, Herodotus traversed Libya, later remarking with characteristic sarcasm about those who spoke of the land without witnessing it firsthand: "Oh, how I feasted my eyes upon seeing the rich lands of Libya. As for you, you haven't seen any of them. How then do you claim your knowledge exceeds mine? Oh, what knowledgeable men you are! It is the Libya of which we always witness oddities." Though some attribute these words to Aristotle, they aptly describe Libya's array of unusual plants and animals – the fastest racehorses, skilled war and chariot horses, mice that endure thirst but die upon drinking, and cows that graze backward due to their unwieldy horns. Libya's wonders also included ewes that lambed multiple times a year, an abundance of butter and milk, and a serpent whose deadly spittle was rumoured to have been used by Cleopatra in her suicide. The land was said to be home to dog-headed people, headless beings with eyes on their chests, and creatures where wolves mated with dogs. Swans were believed to ward off eagles with their songs or fly to their deaths, plunging into the sea with a mournful melody. The rich

lands yielded three harvests a year, with crops ripening at different times in the coastal, hill, and highland regions. (And the phrase would be co-opted by your philosophizing dictator as a propaganda tool to tout his unprecedented genius, replacing "Oddities" with "New" to create "Libya of which we always witness the new" – a rebranding that would've been beneath his colonel's genius if it had brought forth only oddities. For everything odd is equally mysterious and incomprehensible, whereas the Libyan-made New is as clear as the sun, as straightforward as “hens laying eggs” – not roosters – or “women menstruating” – not men. This notion, as outlined in the Green Book, purported to hold comprehensive solutions to all of humanity's problems, a claim that underscored the dictator's vision.).

And centuries passed, witnessing the birth of Aristippus of Cyrene, a pupil of Socrates. Following the master's execution by poison, Aristippus wandered Greece for years, until fate led him to the island of Rhodes, where his ship was wrecked on the shore.

After surviving a shipwreck on the island of Rhodes, Aristippus resided among the natives and imparted to them the value of arming themselves with knowledge that would serve them well in life's unpredictable circumstances. Years later, he returned to Cyrene, where he found the city thriving amidst the wealth generated by the lucrative export of Silphium. This prosperity seemed to embody the wisdom he had gleaned from his master, Socrates: "Happiness is the greatest virtue." Aristippus believed that all human endeavours are driven by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain.

In his view, pleasure is the ultimate good, and all other values are judged in relation to it, including philosophy and virtue. Our senses are the primary means of knowing the world, and wisdom is achieved through intuitive experience, whether pleasant or painful. Reason plays a crucial role in this pursuit, as it enables us to balance immediate gratification with long-term benefits. The present moment is all that truly exists, and the art of living involves skilfully navigating the transient nature of pleasures.

A true Epicurean, Aristippus argued, is one who enjoys pleasures without becoming enslaved to them. By cultivating reason and balance, individuals can

harness their emotions and master their desires, rather than being controlled by them. Virtuous wisdom lies in living a balanced life, unencumbered by unrealistic ideals or regrets. The wise individual is guided by wisdom and sagacity, refusing to be bound by external expectations or domination. Instead, they strive to maintain their autonomy, free from the roles of master or slave to others.

The wit of Aristippus shines through in his sarcastic remark to Dionysius of Syracuse: "I betook myself to Socrates in need of knowledge, and here I come to you in need of money".

The passage of time brought forth notable figures like Callimachus of Cyrene, the poet known for his epigrams, often written for paid epitaphs. His hyperbolic eulogies could elevate even the likes of Ptolemy II to super-Apollonian heights. He would later become responsible for producing a bibliographic survey based upon the contents of the Library, where he produced the Pinakes.

And years passed upon the first and second Jewish Revolts. Ptolemy I Soter had used captive Jews as mercenaries in his army that occupied Cyrene, annexing it to the Ptolemaic reign in Egypt. Jews were dispersed throughout the Pentapolis in garrisons. Migration waves followed, spreading Judaism among the natives and strengthening the Jewish position over time.

Their first revolt was against the Romans, who had destroyed Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. Led by the tailor Yohanan, the revolt was soon crushed by the Roman ruler. The tailor-leader was captured and offered to reveal the names of his co-conspirators in Cyrene, Alexandria, and Rome, in exchange for his freedom. Based on his confessions, the Romans expanded their list and added thousands of Jews who had no hand in the revolt, slaughtering them; three thousand alone were from Cyrene's high class. As for their leader, the tailor was taken to Rome, where he was publicly burned.

The Second Revolt occurred three decades later, led by Lukuas, who had appointed himself King of the Libyan Jews. The revolt soon spread to Aegyptus, Palestine, and Mesopotamia. Jewish rebels ravaged Cyrene, murdering twenty-thousand Greeks and Romans, according to Cassius Dio. They destroyed pagan

temples and public buildings, devastated crops, and buried wells. The rebels were unstoppable until Emperor Hadrian dispatched an armada of infantry and cavalry, joined by Greek and Libyan fighters seeking vengeance. Many found refuge in the mountains and the distant Sahara with Judaized Libyan tribes.

And it was there that the years passed, marked by the longest marathon in human history. We're told that to end the war between the Greeks in Eastern Libya and the Phoenicians in the West, the two sides agreed to establish borders of peace between the two empires. They approved a plan to demarcate the lines through an athletic contest, where each side would choose its best runners.

Time and place were determined by Greek and Phoenician experts, who escorted the competitors for hundreds of kilometres, marking their runs and breaks, until they reached a meeting point where a border would be drawn. The Phoenician runners, the Philaeni brothers from Sabratha (around sixty kilometres east of Oea), took off from their starting point. Meanwhile, the Greek pair started from Erythron (about the same distance west of Cyrene).

Each version of the story has its own ending, but they all share the fate of the Philaeni brothers. One account states that the Greeks of the Pentapolis believed the Phoenicians of Tripolis had covered more ground. The Greeks accused the Phoenicians of cheating, claiming they had exploited a time-zone difference between east and west. According to the accusation, the Phoenicians had bribed the Greek supervisors with luxuries, wine, and women, causing them to oversleep and start late, thus giving the Phoenicians an unfair advantage.

The Philaeni brothers denied the humiliating charges and, amidst national upheaval, offered to be buried alive at the meeting spot to redeem Carthage's honour. The Greeks accepted their plea. Alternatively, another version states that the brothers fell dead from exhaustion. The spot, still marked today in Macomedes, is where the brothers were buried alongside the road connecting east to west. The Phoenicians built a pair of shrines to honour their heroic sacrifice.

(In the time of the Italian occupation of your country, the New Romans, with their modernized identity of Fascism, built a couple of sandstone mausoleums

on which the brothers had long perished, and erected two large bronze statues flanking a marble triumphal arch with an inscription that read: "May you never look upon a city greater than Rome")

Centuries elapsed under Roman and Hellenistic Greek rule, during which the pre-Alexandrian Greeks of Libya faced denial of their Hellenism due to their mixed Libyan heritage. Approximately two centuries before my birth, an anonymous inscription from the era of Hadrian remarked, “The people of Cyrene assert their Hellenic identity, claiming acceptance among the Hellenes. However, their assumption of tracing their origins to the Achaeans is misguided. In reality, they are Libyans who have acquired Hellenism and citizenship through dubious and erroneous means.”

Upon reading the text in my early adolescence, it sparked introspection about my identity. Despite its anonymous origin, the inscription reflected Rome's stance on the matter after inheriting Cyrene from the Ptolemaic Kingdom and embracing the legacy of Hellenistic culture. This perspective relegated the Cyrenaics to second-class citizenship, while granting esteemed status to the ruling Romans and their Ptolemaic allies, who administered the colony as descendants of Alexander the Great

Concurrently, more Roman immigrants arrived in the Cyrenaica colonies, aiming to balance the population with the native Libyans and Cyrenaics of Achaean or Dorian descent. The inscription, written in a highly politicised tone and informed by an anthropological perspective, artfully articulated this agenda. The accusation of acquiring “Hellenism and citizenship through dubious and erroneous means” effectively branded the Cyrenaics as identity impostors, mere Libyans masquerading as Greeks – or Barbarians in the Greek view.

The term 'Barbarian' itself originates from the Ancient Greek onomatopoeic 'Bar Bar,' signifying unintelligible speech, akin to 'Blah-Blah' in modern parlance. For the Romans, however, the term took on a different connotation, referring to those who defied their imperial authority and fiercely battled their legions, even breaching Rome's defences and contributing to the empire's downfall. Ironically, I would later find myself using the term “Barbarians” to

describe the Libyan tribes when stationed at the front trenches, fighting to repel their furious assaults on Cyrene – a city on the brink of chaos, with death and destruction looming large.

I hadn't commonly used the term Barbarian; my mother was a Berber, and my childhood was filled with warmth among her people. Yet, ironically, I would later wield my sword on the battlefield to fend off the Barbarian raids led by my own uncles – the Asbystae and their tribal allies from beyond Cyrene's borders.

My Dorians ancestors were also considered Barbarians by the Hellenistic Greeks, having descended from the mountains of Paikania to invade the heart of Greece, all the way to the Peloponnese peninsula. According to legend, the Heracleidae sought to reclaim their former glory, embarking on an epic journey known as the Return of the Heracleidae, which took place eighty years after the Trojan War. Though the tale was never fully written and its storytellers in Cyrene eventually disappeared, fragments of the myth remain, recounting the fierce battles fought with wrought-iron swords – a marked improvement over the brittle bronze used by the Achaeans who had settled in Greece before them. The Dorians' introduction of iron swords marked the beginning of the Age of Iron, a period dubbed a catastrophe by the Greek poet Hesiod in the seventh century B.C., as it brought desolation to their Aegean civilization.

This brings to mind the theory of Ibn Khaldun, the renowned historian who scrutinized history and saw that human society in all civilizations is shaped, in a historical essence, within a circle containing three eras: the era of the rise of human civilization; afterwards, the era of civilizational prosperity, and thereafter, the era of its decline. A new rise would ensue out of decline towards prosperity and decline, forever circulating. For those tall, round-headed, fishing-and-shepherding-sustained Barbarian boors would turn – subsequent to the ravaging of the Peloponnese civilization in Attica, Crete, Pylos, and Mycenae, and capturing the islands of Milos, Kos, Knidos, Karpathos, Rhodes, and the wide world of Doris – into the civilized society they were, agriculturally and commercially and militarily invincible in the time of their descendants.

In the region of Laconia, where the fertile plains flank the Eurotas River, the Dorians founded the powerful, wealthy, and prosperous city of Sparta. They

harnessed the strength of wrought-iron to craft unique tools for cutting and sculpting stones, and in doing so, invented the Doric architecture that reflected their rugged existence. Characterized by halls with columns rising straight from the ground, sans plinth, and open on every corner, this style embodied the Spartans' desire for immortality. Their culturally landlocked character, forged in the spirit of shepherds, predisposed them to incessant wars and the creation of superheroes. From a young age, Spartans were trained in the arts of war, with boys as young as seven being schooled in the discipline that would eventually produce legendary warriors, reminiscent of the 300 under Gerard Butler's command.

As for my Libyan ancestors, in the wake of the arrival of my Dorian ancestors, they lived as nomadic shepherds and formidable warriors, with a few engaging in settled farming. They constructed their homes using siris-covered arundo, which they would transport during their migrations. Two distinctive ostrich feathers adorning their locks signified kings and leaders, while one feather denoted dignitaries. Additionally, a pointed beard was a mark of virility among head-dressed warriors.

Tall and thin, they sported distinctive hairstyles, with comb-shaped plaits shaved on the sides, while some had a right-side shave with small braids dangling from the temples to the lower jawbone, resembling metrical necklaces. They wore loincloths that fell below the knee, adorned with intricate dappling and cinched at the waistline. In contrast, dignitaries and elites donned long, flowing gowns that covered their entire body, pinned at the shoulders. Their traditional garment, known as the Jarid, was made of linen in the summer and sheep's wool in the winter. Measuring approximately six ells in length and one and a half ells in width, the Jarid was draped elegantly around the body, with the two tips knotted at the left shoulder and the remaining fabric wrapped around to leave the right hand and shoulder free.

This versatile garment served not only as attire but also as a companion, providing shelter from the elements – a tent in the scorching summer and cold winter, a shield against rain and sandstorms, and a bed and blanket at all times. The Romans would later adopt a modified version of this garment from the

Greeks, wearing it as senators and referring to it as the Parakano, a term that would eventually evolve into "cabin".

Libyan women wore a similar garment, the Jarid, but with distinct differences. Theirs was shorter and slightly wider, made of burlap for common women and luxurious silk for prominent ladies. The Jarid wrapped around the body, covering the shoulders, and was secured with a fold at the waist. The corners of the cloth featured intricate dappling in the shape of the Tanit triangle, a symbol of great significance. Notably, Libyan women wore private undergarments, akin to modern-day underwear, consisting of a leather loincloth that hung down to the knees, fastened at the waistline with a belt. The women themselves displayed a diverse range of physical characteristics, with skin tones varying from light to dark, and some even having striking blue or green eyes and blonde hair.

My mother's hair had a warm, blondish hue, and her eyes shone with a faint green light. My father would often tease her, joking that she must have descended from her sailing ancestors who had braved the oceans without women by their side. She'd retort with a smile, her voice laced with defiance, that his half-naked ancestors had been far more awestruck by the sight of Libyan men covering their private parts with leather than they were by the teenage Asbystaes racing their three-horse chariots – a spectacle that seemed to pale in comparison to the novelty of garments that would have been a familiar comfort to his people, especially after witnessing the older generation lounging in siesta.

I'd often find myself pondering the origins of those blue-eyed, blonde Libyans, biting the dust in wonder. I pored over the writings of Herodotus, Pliny the Elder, Lucian, and Plutarch, seeking answers, but none seemed conclusive. Instead, I focused on their distinctive appearance: a blend of dark and blonde features, often with protruding foreheads, full lips, and short, straight noses. Their bodies were adorned with intricate tattoos – deity-shaped markings, animal-plant totems, and abstract genealogical symbols. The men wore tattoos on their arms, shoulders, chest, belly, legs, and temples, while the women wore them on their breasts, thighs, ankles, and above the pubic area.

When Taksilt reached puberty, she adorned her body with intricate tattoos: the Red Poppy on her left breast, the goddess Tanit with a weaving-shuttle on her ankle, and the horned viper's head around her pubis – a symbol believed to safeguard her virginity for her future husband, her Baal. Taksilt, meaning 'Tigress,' was the love of my youth, and our paths crossed again when I returned to visit the communes after years of absence. By then, I had grown into adolescence, my body bearing the signs of maturity – a moustache, wisps of hair around my chin, armpits, chest, and genital area. Taksilt, in contrast, radiated youthful energy, dressed in fine silk imported by the Greeks, fit for the goddess Athena. Our reunion was casual, with exchanged greetings and inquiries about our families. I suggested we take a walk to the old pond where we'd played as children, near the small spring and its gentle cascade. We strolled mostly in silence, occasionally breaking into nostalgic conversations about our childhood memories.

"I can't believe you've grown up too fast."

"What did you expect, should I remain the little girl you used to have snail-shell duels with?"

I was a little older than she was:

"We're too old for snail-shell duels. Let us have other duels."

She let out a mischievous laugh and darted ahead of me towards the pond. In our youth, we'd often slip naked into its waters for clandestine swims. At its deepest, it would swallow the shortest of us up to the neck.

We paused at the rocky edge and exchanged a glance. She had unbraided her hair as she ran to the bank, her arms flung wide to greet the breeze, which teased the surface of the water into a gentle tremble. Her full lips, poised like a seasoned snare; her small, straight nose—warm, familiar, adored; and her honey-hued eyes, the very distillation of every comb.

I wanted to take her then and there. But I approached with caution—she was a tigress, after all.

She met my gaze with quiet intent. Then, guiding my hands to her awakened breasts, she gently pressed me away and said:

“This is not how I wish you to claim what my body holds for you.”

“Then take me as you will.”

“You shall accompany me, after the Harvest Festival, to the temple of Lasamisis.”

“Even unto the ends of the earth.”

“There, we shall spend the night—and hunt.”

“Or remain there forever.”

“Very well. Bring your bow, your jarid, and your water-skin. We meet here at dawn.”

I was accompanied on my visit to the tribe by my mother and my brother, Anastasius, to attend the Harvest Festival—an exceptional one that year. It was held every five or ten years, though at times postponed for as long as twenty, depending on the prophecy of the oracles’ council, whose members were required to have married and borne children.

Nature served as the herald, dispatching signs to mark the time of the rare festival: when cats would mate in February, and March would bring torrential rains; when the flatlands would erupt with uncommon weeds and shrubs; when golden wheatears would rise on the horizon, their heads bowed beneath the weight of their grains; and when the livestock would birth abundantly, each offspring robust and thriving.

Thenceforth, they would celebrate the event on the eve of the Pleiades sinking behind the moon. The oil candlewicks were extinguished, leaving only the surrounding fire to carve its path through towering flames and smoke that ascended into the heart of the heavens. Firewood was heaped upon the mound, encircled by the arriving revellers—drinking wine and feasting on the roasted flesh of newborn lambs, cooked over side-shovelled hearth embers.

Senior herdsmen would offer gifts, as would elder farmers, bringing wheat flour for porridge and bread. Viticulturists arrived with wine-flasks, and all strove to contribute baskets brimming with fruit.

It was no orgiastic Dionysia—no satyrs blowing horns, no public debauchery. Instead, a dance welcomed all: husbands and wives, lovers and beloveds, swaying to the rhythms of double-sided drums, double-reed pipes, and the ululations of the women's choir.

The married would return to their homes and families, while lovers—young and old—retired to the woods, where the moans of pleasure hovered on the brink of piercing the blue.

As dawn broke, I waited for her beside my horse. Soon she appeared, astride her steed, a full quiver strikingly visible upon her back. She was clad in a red-dyed, goat-skin aegis, fashioned in the style of the legendary Libyan huntresses—its hems adorned with leather knots in place of the serpents worn by the Amazons.

She had saddled her horse with a soft woollen cover—it would serve as our bed. Mine bore the folded Jarid—it would be our blanket.

I had brought my bow, along with two skins—one of water, the other of wine. She carried a water-skin, rock salt, and a blend of silphium spices mixed with sage and Christ's Thorn.

And so we rode into that radiant summer aurora.

As soon as we passed through the plaited thickets of the wood, we loosed the horses, letting them charge at full speed into the open expanse—like a pair of gleeful children.

She outrode me like a spear when my horse balked. She halted as she turned her head smirking, and when I almost reached her, she tapped the steed and flew. I over-cursed my horse of whose speed I had always boasted and whom I had named Usem, which means "Lightning" in Libyan. Little had I known he was a dull mule as opposed to her mare that she'd named Massilia, "Swift".

By midday, we reached the temple of Lasamisis, standing at the foot of a hill that cradled the south-facing grottos—where the haunted Ghibli wind is said to carry sacred spirits.

The grottos teemed with horned vipers, slithering in and out. Small though they were, their venomous bite could fell even the stoutest of horses or bulls.

It was the talk of the town that Cleopatra had used one to end her life.

She jested, “How about we make love in here—naked, with snakebites?”

I sneered, “Thanks for the deadly invitation.”

Then I followed her, head bowed, sword in hand. She walked ahead, gripping a long stick shaped like a slingshot.

Over the rocky vestibules, we entered the domain of the venerated Asp. Statues of worshippers lined the path, hands raised, food baskets balanced atop their heads in solemn offering.

We stood before the colossal rock serpent—its body cleaving the world in two: east from west, the upper realm from the underworld.

At its summit, two massive heads crowned with curly hair gazed skyward. Below, three more heads emerged, flanked by a gazelle and a dog.

And there, alone, stood a woman draped in a long-creased cloak, beside a crocodile poised to strike a helpless calf.

It was an abandoned temple from sunken centuries, rarely visited and long forgotten. Taksilt said she had chosen to come here because, once—on a dawn long past—she awoke to find a small asp curled beside her. She did not panic. Instead, she gently caressed its head with her finger, and it slipped away in silence. But then she felt a moist sensation on her calf. Her covers were stained. She screamed in horror, as though stung. Her handmaid rushed in and, seeing the marks, declared that she was now ready for coitus.

And there I knelt beside her, facing the sacred, open-mouthed Asp—devouring the head of a dead man and excreting him by the tail, to be revived anew. At the foot of the idol stood a pagan altar, encircled by four wild boar heads. Narrow

channels ran between them, guiding the sacrificial blood into a jar, which was then carried outside the temple for disposal.

Sunlight streamed through the open-roofed rock vestibules, casting shifting patterns across the stone. Pork had long been forbidden—both for consumption and sacrifice—deemed impure by ancient decree. As for me, I loved its roasted ribs, as did my father. My mother, however, refused even to sit at the table when it was served. In time, the boars vanished, and lambs took their place—becoming the lifeblood of shepherds and the new offering of choice. Yet the ultimate sacrifice to the Asp, guardian of ancestral bliss in their eternal departure, was the Barbary ram—the Aoudad.

"If you catch it first, you'll take me as you please. But if I have it first, you'll yield to my terms," said Taksilt.

I replied, "How could I ever outshine the heiress of Kyrene—the huntress herself?"

I consented without condition. Either way, we would fornicate. I had no terms of my own, and hers—whatever they were—could do me no harm. We rode in opposite directions, each in pursuit of the damned ram. He was within reach, yet elusive—a weasel of a beast, leaping across treacherous mountain rock, vanishing with every stretch of the bow.

I had once hunted one with my father and brother—dawn to dusk, and failed. And now, here I was with Taksilt, chasing a lamb that danced across the rocky slopes like a butterfly. I would draw my bow when it stood still, but the moment my arrow took flight, it would leap to a higher ledge. Most of my arrows shattered against the stone. It perched high on the hill, while I gasped for breath far below. Then I heard the steady trot of her steed at the foot of the slope. She lay reclined upon its back; the Aoudad draped across her like a trophy. I loosed my final arrow into the blue.

We returned to the temple as the sun began to set. I carried the stricken ewe, its neck pierced by a poisoned arrow—still breathing, but fading. Taksilt handed me her knife. I drew the blade from ear to ear. Its legs trembled briefly, then fell still. The hot blood coursed through the narrow channels, filling the jar drop by

drop until the last. She beckoned me to kneel beside her before the altar. I obeyed. She turned toward me, took my palm into hers, and said:

“Look into my eyes—by your very soul—and tell me what you feel, at once.”

I did, sincerely. And what I felt was the wish for the moment to freeze, to stretch into eternity.

She said, “I’d like you to take me—on one condition: that you promise, here at the altar, we will live together until my belly swells.”

I replied, “What if I take you tonight and vanish by morning? I don’t believe in myths and legends.”

She smiled. “It doesn’t matter when you promise. Your eyes won’t lie.”

We took refuge in a small cave near the temple. Taksilt lit a fire just outside, while I skinned the Aoudad. I buried its head and bowels in a distant patch of earth—to ward off wolves, jackals, hyenas, and horned vipers. Taksilt seasoned the innards with herbs. We fashioned a rotisserie. I tended the turning, and between each rotation, we shared fragments of childhood—evoking joy from memory, catching the fleeting moments that once made us laugh.

The fire waned. With our fingertips, we picked at well-done morsels and drank wine from the skin. We lit a second fire—to cast light into the cave and ward off predators. Then, suddenly, we were flesh-on-flesh, like a raging sea with rolling waves. In the midst of it, she winced—a sharp pinch beneath her back from a rogue stone. She pushed me aside and rose. “Clean the floor,” she said, heading out to retrieve the old saddle wool cover from her steed. By the time she returned, I had cleared the space of every stone and laid down a bed of butum branches. She spread the wool cover over it and turned to me. “Bring your Jarid,” she said. I fetched it from the back of my horse. She lay bare beneath the Jarid. I undressed and slipped beside her, the cave still flickering with firelight. Gently, I drew back the cover—just enough to see her in the glow of the flames.

My brother once led me through the dusk of the Agora’s red-light quarter, after I’d confided in him about a strange, buttermilky stirring that had once roused me from sleep. He entrusted me to a woman not much taller than I was—her

presence quiet, assured. She taught me the choreography of desire: how lips awaken longing, how the body responds in slow, deliberate waves. I learned to irrigate the nipples until they stood firm, to trace the belly with reverence, pausing at the navel as if listening for breath, then returning mouth-to-mouth. And when the moment came, she cradled my penis with her fingertips and laid me into the fire.

I did not first kiss Taksilt on the mouth. I began with the Poppy—pressing my lips to her breast, voluptuously licking the nipple while overlooking the other. Then I descended swiftly, kiss-licking the shuttle-bearing Tanit on her ankle, before returning to her mouth. And so she laid my penis into the fire. We repeated the ritual in countless variations, letting our bodies discover new paths until sleep claimed us. I would never have forsaken such pleasure—one that stirred both body and soul. We lived in my mother's Greek-style summer house, nestled at the heel of the pond overlooking the vast pastures. I brought with me all the books I had longed to read from my father's library, and devoted my days to them, as Taksilt's belly began to swell.

8

Let me then sing the praises of my mother's face. I remember her always merry, never weary of teasing my father. "Your father regards my ancestors as mere guests of his people, who happened to seize Cyrene—as though his forebears had sailed from Crete bearing a fully prepared Cyrene, complete with its buildings, mountains, and hills."

It is as though I see my father now, silent, wearing that sly smile. I did not fully grasp what my mother meant. Yet here I am, summoning the memory of her sarcasm, and recalling the lineage from her side. Etched in my mind is the tale she told of my grandfather—her great ancestor. For at the very moment the Dorians were founding Sparta, Shoshenq the Libyan declared himself Pharaoh over the Egyptians, laying the foundation for the twenty-second dynasty, which ruled those lands for nearly two centuries.

She had long spoken his full name: Shoshenq, son of Nimlot, son of Shoshenq, son of Paihuty, son of Nabnasi, son of Mawasen, son of Buyuwawa. He was, she said, the father of all Libus—including the great tribe of Meshwesh, whose men spread across Eastern Libya and Western Egypt. A young man who had once dominated the western reaches of Egypt with his vast and formidable troops.

Pharaoh Psusennes II was panic-stricken, and thus came to an accord with the Battu Shoshenq: the Egyptian Meshwesh troops would serve under his command, and in return, they would be granted plots of land—so many, in fact, that the majority of the soldiers became Libyans. Shoshenq would later be appointed Commander of the Pharaoh's Guard, following his marriage to Psusennes II's daughter, and would succeed him upon his death.

To the conspiracy-minded, he might be accused of plotting the murder of his father-in-law—though history records it as a natural death. Yet the crowning ceremonies of the first Libyan Pharaoh bore the unmistakable signs of a calculated coup d'état. For immediately upon ascending the throne, his first edict was to appoint his son, Iuput, as High Priest of the composite Libyan-Egyptian god, Amun-Ra—an act designed to seize, through the heir, the priests' commanding influence over the minds and imaginations of his subjects.

Seizing the reins of absolute rule, he led campaigns and defended the walls. Fortunate were your times, when the French scholar Champollion deciphered the hieroglyphs of the Rosetta Stone—unveiling what my mother's great ancestor had inscribed upon the walls of Karnak Temple: exploits chronicling the defeat of the Israelites in Palestine, and the annexation of Syria, Libya, and Sudan into his dominion.

According to the tales of my mother—and her kin as well—Shoshenq stood over twenty metres tall. His breakfast was a roasted lamb and a cask of goat's milk; his lunch, a young calf; and his supper, a full-grown Aoudad. They claimed he lived to the age of one thousand, without a single white hair or wrinkle.

Wild imagination they had!

Little did they know that the French scholar Pierre Montet, in the throes of the Second World War's madness, would unearth the intact tomb of Shoshenq II.

It was laden with silver; and so, Mother, they would come to call your great ancestor the Silver Pharaoh—as opposed to Tutankhamun, the Golden. And oh, the shock they would have suffered had they witnessed the scientists examining their progenitor! They would have discovered he stood merely 1.66 metres tall. Though he possessed a firm physique and a grand skull, he was encased in a modest frame. With the precision of modern science, they found his right eye slightly higher than the left, noted the loss of many teeth, and observed a fracture in his upper seventh vertebra—later set. The probable cause of death: soft-tissue rheumatism of the spine. Granted, he died at eighty, in an age when life expectancy offered no more than thirty-five years. It is as though I see my maternal noblemen now, shaking their heads in disbelief, refusing to accept that this frail, decayed, mummified carcass belonged to their great ancestor.

Mother would say, "Eat what your great-grandfather ate," as she laid upon my plate the roasted ribs of a young lamb, winking at me with a smile. Father would often smile at her teasing, though he mostly kept silent. He was sharp—like a sword drawn against evil—and ever the sober man when the talk turned to intellect or national affairs. She, by contrast, was warm as a brook springing from the Kyre, and as straight and sudden as a waterfall bursting from Naustathamos.

My mother's kitchen was a confluence of Greek and Libyan traditions. We dined on roasts from each school. The Libyans, having learned from the Greeks, adopted the use of sea salt in place of rock salt; while the Greeks, in turn, borrowed from the Libyans the art of seasoning meat with drops of silphium essence, sage, and thyme. I cherished her *Asida*, served with carob syrup and honey, or with butter and colostrum cream.

I had pecked at the words of my mother's mother-tongue in childhood, as she teased my youngest self with playful phrases. I came to master the language through long hours spent at the tribe's hold. She was a virtuoso of storytelling—reciting the Iliad and the Odyssey with the same ease and reverence as she did her people's fables. For countless nights, I listened to her grandmothers' bedtime stories.

My father had taught me his tongue before I was formally tutored. He was an army General, bearing an obsolete Spartan *Geist*, and had inherited a colossal library frequented by the city's intellectuals. I was an avid reader, with a consuming appetite to devour every scroll within reach from the moment I'd learned to decode words. That library was both mine and my brother Euoptius' school. He was proficient in arithmetic and languages, but half a dunce when it came to philosophy.

Our tutor was Anastasius, the most prominent figure of the Cyrene Academy—and the last of its philosophers. I would become a close friend of his, and once delivered his letter to Hypatia. He never committed his ideas to paper, save for what he wrote in long letters to his friends. At the Academy, they called him *The Summarizer*. He was well-known to the public, greeted by name wherever he walked: "Greetings, Grandmaster!" He earned his living tutoring the sons and daughters of the wealthy, but gave lessons pro bono publico at the Agora during the weekly market.

I remember once challenging one of his lectures with something I'd read in Plato, speaking as though I were his peer. He gave me a sweeping look—from my feet to my head, and beyond, to where the ceiling hung. He smiled, admiring yet patronising my arrogance, and said, "You have good arguments. But they're childish."

I now recall my father, manically consumed by the belief that he could cultivate silphium with intensive care. He would plunge into agricultural experiments in the front garden, armed with whatever he'd heard about growing the plant by hand. His mornings and afternoons were filled with weeding, aided by the servants, using specially fertilised soils—manures of various kinds and colluvia gathered from washed valleys, all saturated in the sacred waters of Apollo Spring.

As a child, I was made aware of the blight that swept silphium from the face of the earth before it could bloom—a deadly epidemic that contaminated the plant's very essence. As soon as it broke the surface, it withered prematurely and perished, an omen of irrevocable catastrophe. A few rare plants,

mysteriously, survived. Then the oracle at Apollo's Temple in Cyrene—Cassandra, breaking her solitude—declared that Cyrene too would wither and vanish, as silphium had. I remember my father flinging the wooden pitchfork aside in despair, abruptly ending his cultural experiments. "To hell with it! To hell with Cyrene! Let it wither and die!" he cried. Then he would pluck a decayed silphium tubercle from the soil and show it to me. "You see what your shepherding Barbarian uncles did? They spoil the roots to avoid taxes!"

I did not say unto him what I now say: Pardon me, father—O scion of the super Spartans—for addressing you from where I stand today. My shepherding Barbarian uncles bear no blame for the extinction of silphium, which once grew in abundance across the vast lands of the Pentapolis, centuries before your ancestors—my ancestors—ever arrived. The cattle grazed upon its leaves, its flowers, and its hollow, thick stems, their saliva's acids serving as fertiliser, coaxing it to rise again each spring. The Libyans extracted the pith from its dense tubercle for culinary delights, and they made economic use of its juice for manifold medicinal purposes.

Our ancestors, father—those who deemed silphium a windfall from Aristaeus, son of Apollo and Kyrene—were the very ones who oversold its juices and essences, and who too often harvested its tubercle before its time. You could not have known, O father, what I now understand. You retreated, shaken by the horrific prophecy of Apollo's oracle, to Matea—the mother of all mothers—the Asbystae oracle of Cyrene. She was revered by the Greeks more than by her own people, so much so that the King gifted her a palace at the edge of Cyrene's flatlands, overlooking the mountain cliffs by the Apollonian Sea. It was she who tended to his ten-year-old son, brother to five elder daughters, curing him of nosebleeds and fever within a week. She spent long hours at his side, performing her spiritual rites, feeding him a soup infused with silphium essence, saturated marjoram, and Arbutus unedo honey. And on the fifth day, he rose—a young Heracles. She never lived in the palace, and it remained uninhabited long after the boy's death, and hers, in the wearied years that followed.

And down the foggy lane of memory, I see myself as a child, accompanying my mother to visit her. I remember her placing a mythical hand upon my head, murmuring softly, and offering me the most delicious drink. Then she drew me onto her lap, caressing my hair as she conversed with my mother—and I surrendered to an ineffable satisfaction. As we departed, my mother spoke words I cannot now recall. Years later, I would ask her why she had taken me there. She said I had been wetting the bed and that it stopped directly after the visit.

As for my father, he visited her in her centenarian hour, seeking answers about the extinction of silphium and what the future might hold. He said he'd brought a bone-in shoulder chop of a kid, as she had requested. She boiled the parcel in a broth of mixed vegetables, deboned it, and tossed the meat to her ever-present cats. She examined the clean shoulder bone and said, "You have come too late to ask for the future of what is already happening." Then, responding to my father's words, she added, "A city that builds its greatness on ephemera is itself ephemeral. I see the times of other people's dawning."

And silphium continued to grow in restricted, far-flung circles beyond Cyrene, where tribes battled over the meagre crops. Since the day he left Matea's tent, mine was a new father.

He withdrew from attending or hosting the royal pageants. He abandoned his meetings with military, political, and intellectual companions, choosing instead to immerse himself—at all hours—in the glories of the Hellenes past.

I remember him once, when my younger brother Anastasius and I returned home after spending a year in a Spartan-style military camp outside Cyrene, deep in the woods of the Green Mountain. It was his wish—to rid us of what he saw as the laxity of an overly comfortable life. I found a quiet satisfaction in the solitary rigour of military life, alongside the wealthy youth of Cyrene. Many were sent home, unable to endure the hardships of the task. But my brother and I had not been raised within the pinks of life.

My father was a stern Spartan. He made us bathe in gelid ponds in the heart of winter, and summoned us to tame wild horses with bare hands. At night, he led

us to the caves of hystrixes, armed only with clubs and guided by the Libyan Sherniko hounds—guardians of the Pharaohs' tombs. When the beasts fled their caves, spurred by the hounds, my father would shout, "Strike! Strike!" And one of us would club the creature on its back, thick with sunken thorns it would dart in defence.

Three months later, we passed the drills with excellence, earning letters of recommendation to the Royal Guard. We rode through thickets of butum, fennel, and juniper, until the cypress vista came into sight—our path home. In my mind, the kitchen table is still painted: carved from mythical woods that even Heracles would not shake. There, my mother, with sweet magic, devoted herself to feeding us her mixed Asbystae-Dorian dishes.

By the time our horses had reached the doorstep, he was already there—standing like a god, sword in hand. As we dismounted, almost in unison, we heard his voice. He called for his private servant, Iuput, as far as I can recall, who darted out holding a pair of swords. My father ordered him to fix them into the ground between us. Then he said, "Pick them up… defend yourselves."

We stood dumbfounded. How could we challenge this human beast—clearly intoxicated, his voice thick with drink?

My younger brother stepped back, pleading. "You know we can't afford to stand against you. Why trap us in a challenge we can't win? Besides, you're drunk."

Then he cried out, "You must know—your fate is drawn by the sword. Cyrene herself has her fate drawn by the sword. By the sword alone shall we determine who is to live."

Then he cried, "Draw your swords, weaklings! No one enters this house unless he keeps his sword at hand. Now I'm going to attack." And he did—ferociously, without regard for how frail we were beside his celebrated stature, or the simple fact that we were his sons.

We faced him, gripping our sheaths with firm hands. I felt no fear that he might kill me or my brother—he would not. My anxiety lay in the thought of him striking my sword aside, mocking my ineptitude. I exchanged a swift glance

with Anastasius. I sensed we were aligned: we would wear him out. We devised a tactic—dodging his strikes once, attacking twice; one from the front, one from behind, one from the right, one from the left. We were no longer the greens we had been. We manoeuvred around him, repelling his assaults with precision and art. He fell once. Proudly, he rose and attacked again. We joined forces and drove his sword away. He walked to where his great blade had fallen, picked it up, and planted it into the ground between his legs. Smiling, he said, "Welcome home." And so we both fixed our swords into the same spot, between his legs.

My mother stood by the door, quietly observing, wholly drawn into the scene. Yet never again would I love my father as I did that day—when he acknowledged defeat like a noble knight, and in that surrender, became a loving father. He led us in as we embraced our way to the dining table, as if he were hosting his dearest companions. He entertained us with warmth, setting my mother at the head of the table, and poured into our glasses the magic essence of Silphium wine from the bottom of the final cask. "Drink," he said. "This is your special day."

In the years that followed, my two sisters married eminent generals of the Ptolemaic upper class. I entered my twenties with a quiet resolve; my father was convinced of my desire to study in Alexandria. My older brother, Euoptius the Younger, became one of the wealthiest figures in Alexandria and married an Egyptian Lady of the Ptolemaic nobility.

And here I am, one century after another, above that "Charming Libya," as the oracles at Delphi once named her. Of her charm, I cheer my heart of Cyrene—whose sacred name was sung in abundance, and who is now poor, miserable, and blown into saddening desolation. Desolation along the long pathway that crosses the Necropolis, the largest cemetery of the ancient world; among the scattered ruins of her palaces, temples, walls, pillars, and statues—headless, mutilated figures. Only the water remains, flowing from the Spring of Kyrene, as named by native Libyans, and the Spring of Apollo, as named by Greek settlers—indifferent to the rise and fall of civilizations, keeping the fresh stream of its cold and sweet pleasures, endless despite the end of all bygone centuries.

And here I am, with the Silphium long gone; concerned now with Christian salvation, as though it were the Silphium.