

TRIBES Universe

FIRETRUCE Pak.rtf

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(with thanks to Nabterayl SOT and the DS)

July 21, 1999

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Purpose

The purpose of this document is to act as a template for forthcoming documents.

INTRODUCTION

Ah, now we approach a topic dear to my own heart, for it holds the hope — perhaps even the promise — of peace for the Tribes of Man. These old eyes will probably never see such a miraculous development, but I can pray that fortune will favor my granddaughter with an end to this war and tumult that threatens to overwhelm us all.

I shall examine now the famous custom of the Firetruce, begun centuries past by the Children of Phoenix. The reader will forgive, I hope, the gaps in my knowledge. Despite the rigors of my scholarship, some details are forever lost to time, or lie locked in the secret histories of the Four.

*Nivek ilac Azanti, Savant
Astrakhan, BIRA MARDUK
17 Lost Sword 3940*

What is the Firetruce?

Held twice per century, the Firetruce represents a singular tradition among the Tribes of Man, one modeled after the Olympic Games held on Old Earth millennia ago. The Firetruce began as an effort to promote tribal unification, a return to the days when all tribesfolk were of one tribe. Though that purpose ostensibly remains, the Firetruce has become a forum for competition among the Tribes of Man. Tribal delegates now view the Firetruce as a showcase for political grievances, an opportunity for intrigue, and a stage for humiliating rivals.

In The Beginning

At the outset of the 35th century, the explorers and settlers who roamed the fringes of the Empire called themselves "The Children of Phoenix." Though they sprang from diverse backgrounds, they had evolved a set of customs and a sense of kinship that they described as tribal.

In 3450, the Empire sent the Order of the Blood Eagle to subdue these frontier "tribes." The subsequent war shattered the unity of the Children as splinter groups fled the Blood Eagle or denounced the Children of Phoenix leadership for failing to protect them. By the end of the century, the Children had broken into many different tribes, but the Blood Eagle had become a "tribe" as well, and war continued unabated through the wilderzone.

By 3600, over 100 different tribes existed, the two largest being the Children of the Phoenix and the Blood Eagle, which made up over fifty percent of the total tribal population. The Starwolf were just beginning to emerge at this time, and the Diamond Sword had yet to form. At this time, tribal warfare began to subside. Chief among the new tribes was the Gorgon Killers, a group of ex-Children who had adopted the brutality of the Blood Eagle. Through the dominance of the Children of Phoenix, the Blood Eagle, and the Gorgon Killers, warfare had declined to small-scale raids and skirmishes. The Phoenix Prime dared to express hope that peace would come to the Tribes of Man.

In 3610, the Starwolf and the Blood Eagle fought over the planet Ganges III. At some point during the battle, ecocidal weaponry was used, leaving the planet a lifeless husk. Each side blamed the other, and so began the centuries-long hatred between these two tribes. The relative peace that had begun to blossom appeared ready to die like a candle in a windstorm.

THE FIRST FIRETRUCE (3641)

Bright Dream of Unity

By 3640, every tribe was again either at war or preparing for war. Desperate to find a solution that would head off another destructive conflict, Phoenix Prime Quinn Istvan y/-Harabec brought a bold proposal to his people. The Tribes of Man would have a temporary cease-fire, a truce between all the tribes that would open the way to the exploration of peaceful solutions.

At first, even the Children of Phoenix were skeptical, but Quinn Istvan y/-Harabec would not be denied.

"If we do not take this first step, who will?" the Phoenix Prime told his assembled generals. "Who will assume the responsibility? We must not look at the other tribes as blood enemies, but as rebellious children who have lost their way. They are all children of Blessed Harabec. Can we not dare to tame even the Blood Eagle or the Gorgon Killers? Can we not dare to risk ourselves for peace?" After considerable debate, the Phoenix elders agreed, and the Children opened their heartworld — then the planet Navaj Erath, famous for its canyons of windcarved sandstone spires — to a gathering of all the Tribes of Man.

Doing so entailed a great risk for the Children, as they made their heartworld vulnerable. However, Quinn Istvan, like many Phoenix Primes, was a scholar and a historian, one familiar with the ancient history of Terra. He held a particular interest in the Hellenic cradles of civilization. Thus, he crafted his cease-fire to mirror the flavor of the classical Olympic games.

Ultimately, every tribe agreed to attend. Some groups required more persuasion than others, but in the end, the Children of Phoenix prevailed. On the Month of the Seventh Sky, 3641, the Tribes of Man assembled on the heartworld of the Children; the first time they had assembled in peace since The Splintering. Originally called "The Gathering of Unity," the event quickly earned the name "Firetruce" after the great torch Quinn Istvan caused to be ignited by the leaders of the Three during the opening rite. The new name stuck, and the Phoenix Prime's original term fell into disuse and then into history.

The Firetruce was wildly popular. The duels and competitions drew huge crowds, the largest ever seen in the wilderzone. The iconoclastic Children of Phoenix stringer called the "Space Monkey" won all the grav racing events, and Miroko Flannery of the Frost Queens took the dueling prize after a bloody final match with Tubman Slash of the Blood Eagle. The Children of Phoenix won the flag capture competition after turning back an unexpected challenge from the Starwolf.

As their people mingled and participated in the many festive events, leaders met behind closed doors. Quinn Istvan led discussions including Great Eagle Achilles Nagashima of the Blood Eagle, Geali Blood-Burns-Even-Steel of the Gorgon Killers, John Redbear, reluctant spokesman for the upstart Alliance of Starwolf Packs, and the famous Diezral Chen of the Starslayers. They and representatives of the other tribes codified the body of oral traditions called "The Tenets of Harabec." The Tenets became the closest the Tribes of Man had for laws. The Firetruce Assembly also agreed a Firetruce would be held every fifty years on a world of the Children's choosing.

The records kept of this meeting are lost now, but Quinn Istvan clearly accomplished the near impossible by convincing the Blood Eagle and Starwolf, as well as the many other tribes, to agree to these tenets. Tribal histories tell little about the life of Quinn Istvan other than that he was a charismatic and forceful leader who preferred to offer the hand, but was not afraid to use the shockwhip. He clearly recommitted his tribe to the cause of peace, to the point where much progress occurred because of "gifts" made by the Children to the other tribes. The extent of the Phoenix Prime's generosity is unknown, but the records suggest he strained the Children's considerable wealth. Shortly after the Firetruce, the Children transferred several disputed systems to the Blood Eagle, the Gorgon Killers received several new starships, and the struggling Starwolf gained access to much better weapons technology.

At the conclusion of the month-long festivities, Quinn Istvan may have examined his accomplishments and concluded that peace was at hand. Many tribes had rejoined the Children of Phoenix during the Firetruce, and the Starwolf and Blood Eagle had tentatively agreed to end their hostilities. The Phoenix Prime had every reason to hope that tribal unity was more than a mere possibility.

Quinn Istvan would not live to see the next Firetruce, however. He died in a hunting accident ten years later, and leadership of the Children passed to his young son, Quinn Andrei y/ Harabec.

SECOND FIRETRUCE (3691)

A Peaceful Step

The second Firetruce began in the Month of Jaguar's Hunt in 3691, on the silvery grasslands of the planet Ushasia. Nearly all the Tribes of Man came freely, the memories of the first Firetruce having sown the seeds of legend

throughout the wilderzone. The month passed successfully, with a general sense of good will permeating the events. The status quo was comfortable for most tribes, and they chose not to deviate from it. By this time, the Starwolf had risen nearly to a prominence sufficient to challenge the dominance of the Three. Still, the Starwolf penchant for riding the unexplored threads of the Hyperweb to settle new worlds meant that little territorial conflict ensued. It was a time of relative peace in the wilderzone.

Quinn Andrei was a reasonably capable leader, though not a great one. He lacked the charisma and decisiveness of his father, the intangibles that separated the good from the great. Though he lacked the vision of his lionized father, he nevertheless kept the Tribes of Man open to the potential for unification. The Second Firetruce was larger than the first and was considered a political and commercial success by the participants, even if it did not inspire the tribes to set aside their differences and rejoin the Children of Phoenix.

The Second Firetruce did mark the first recorded appearance of the Diamond Sword. An unknown quantity before the Firetruce, this newcomer tribe made its presence known by winning many of the competitions, particularly events requiring either knowledge of martial arts or precision of tactical coordination. By sweeping to victory in the prestigious Banner Coup Contest and reaching the finals of the Grand Duel, the Diamond Sword earned itself a formidable reputation virtually overnight.

The only other piece of notable drama that occurred was the arrival of a small but aggressive tribe whose leader claimed to be Harabec himself. These Winnowers of Fire departed in shock after Kral Rashad of the Gorgon Killers slew "Harabec" over a rumored gambling debt. Other Winnowers killed Rashad before Children of Phoenix guards intervened, so the truth about the debt was never uncovered; the Winnowers of Fire have never been seen since.

Though uneasy at the symbolism inherent in the death of a "Phoenix" — even a false one — Quinn Andrei and the Children of Phoenix celebrated the close of the Second Firetruce, for the event proved the Tribes of Man were willing to continue a discussion on the topic of unity. It showed hope was possible.

THIRD FIRETRUCE (3741)

Imperial Aftermath

The Third Firetruce was held on the world of Chalice, a lushly forested world chosen for its great beauty. But the years prior to the event were dark with the threat of invasion.

Early in the 38th century, Emperor Tashane Kellison Lewis made a renewed effort to impose the Gracious Rule on the denizens of the lawless wilderzone. The 37th, 39th, and 45th Legions established a base of operations in the Kepler system and began to push into Children of Phoenix holdings. Fighting was fierce as the Children refused to bow to the supremacy of Imperial law. Other tribes joined forces with the Children, and pitched battles were frequent. The Empire dispatched another pair of Legions in 3732; these drove into the territory of the Blood Eagle, who retaliated against the Imperial resort world of Sarabande Proxima II. The stage appeared set for an all-out civil war in the wilderzone. The superior Imperial weaponry was offset by tribal guerrilla tactics that targeted supply centers and made heavy use of sniping tactics against Imperial pilots and officer cadres.

By the time of the third Firetruce, however, the Imperial offensive had ceased, and the Legions withdrew except for a garrison force in the Kepler system. Information was sketchy, but rumors emerged of a revolution deep within the Empire, an uprising that had spawned a fearsome "Scourge" to threaten the Imperial Seat of Terra itself.

Phoenix Prime Manfred Gregor y/-Harabec was still a relatively young man at this time, having come to power in 3737 when the former Phoenix Prime was lost with a spindleship in a Hyperweb fluxstorm. High Captain Gregor had commanded a Pyre in the war with the Empire, and had earned a reputation as a competent officer. Nevertheless, the sweeping charisma he displayed at the Firetruce impressed even his detractors. Many leaders in history have grown into their offices. Manfred Gregor did more than grow; he exploded.

Though the Firetruce began with jubilant tribes arriving to celebrate the withdrawal of the Imperials, the Blood Eagle and the Gorgon Killers came with the intent of challenging the Children of Phoenix. The perception of Manfred Gregor as a young and inexperienced political leader perhaps contributed to the situation. The Blood Eagle in

particular sought the lion's share of credit for the Imperial retreat. At issue was the large number of independents who sought to join one of the Three, a reaction to the specter of another Imperial invasion.

The Phoenix Prime in particular welcomed this influx, as he believed unity was crucial for the Tribes of Man to remain free of Imperial tyranny. He also welcomed the challenge, as it gave him an opportunity to show his mettle. Manfred Gregor proceeded to charm his way through the Council negotiations with unprecedented flair. When an issue called for reason and diplomacy, he was unmatched. When the Great Eagle Brenthu Shirowara alluded to a possible intertribal war with the Children, the Phoenix Prime laughed and asked her if the Gorgon Killers would accept Blood Eagle supremacy. When the Chief of the Gorgon Killers emphatically answered that such a state of affairs would be intolerable, Manfred Gregor promised that such a war would greatly weaken the Blood Eagle, and that if war broke out, the Children would look for ways to strengthen the position of the Gorgon Killers. Shirowara smiled and conceded the point. Gregor's natural charisma made the exchange a smooth, even humorous, affair.

Ultimately, the Children absorbed the greatest part of the independents, though many joined the Blood Eagle as well. The Gorgon Killers fared less well, however. They made many boasts prior to the competitions, but enjoyed small success.

In the Firetruce events, the Diamond Sword once again won the team competitions. The Blood Eagle duelist Carve October defeated Magamort of the Gorgon Killers in a particularly bloody Grand Duel that left Magamort dead and Carve October with permanent neurological damage. The Phoenix Prime is said to have lamented the Firetruce concluding with such violence fresh in the minds of the tribes, but all accounts of the period called this Firetruce the most successful yet. A feeling of accomplishment and promise permeated the festivities, with even the Blood Eagle admitting grudging consideration of the Phoenix Prime's traditional call for unification.

FOURTH FIRETRUCE (3791)

Humbling the Eagle

Unlike the previous three Firetruces, the Fourth was fraught with tension.

In the decade prior to 3791, the Blood Eagle embarked on an ambitious and controversial series of offensives, seizing territory from what seemed almost every tribe. By the time of the Fourth Firetruce, the "butchers" had almost doubled their holdings, including capturing the key trading world of Bira Marduk from the Gorgon Killers in 3788. By the time of the Firetruce, the lesser tribes were dispirited. The Children of Phoenix and the Gorgon Killers seemed unable or unwilling to contain the Blood Eagle, and the leading independent tribes, the Starwolf and the Diamond Sword, kept their own counsel but did nothing.

Manfred Gregor still ruled as Phoenix Prime. He had become far more Machiavellian in his old age. The events of the Fourth Firetruce would be attributed to his wily leadership, although he took no responsibility whatsoever, though he would occasionally refer to it as the most successful step toward unity yet taken by the Tribes of Man.

The Firetruce was held on the volcanic world of Crucis Stigmata, in the spartan setting of an ash plain far from any established settlements. Crucis Stigmata was located close to the Blood Eagle's new conquests in the McCrae Lattice, and all tribal delegates came heavily armed and prepared for war. Only the maneuvering of the Phoenix Prime made the Firetruce possible in the first place, as several tribes called for its abandonment.

When the Blood Eagle landed, they made a great show of their arrival, complete with a military parade drill and martial music. At the end of their display, a company of riflemen fired a volley of laser fire over the heads — well over — of the Phoenix Prime and his entourage. Many tribals flinched, fearing in that instant a Blood Eagle coup was about to happen, but Gregor sat as though he was carved from stone and graciously welcomed the Blood Eagle contingent. Following the traditional call for unity and the opening speech by the Phoenix Prime, Great Eagle Hector Komaros openly boasted the Blood Eagle would hold the next Firetruce. These were blasphemous words when spoken to the face of the Phoenix Prime, but Manfred Gregor merely nodded his wrinkled face and replied, "We'll see what happens."

Fortune was not kind to the Blood Eagle. The butchers were defeated in every event they participated in, the other tribes offering them stiff competition, but seeming to cooperate among themselves. Wherever Blood Eagle warriors turned, they faced resistance and a determined unwillingness even to drink alongside them. Had that been the only tribulation the faced, the Blood Eagle surely would have persevered toward their larger goals.

During the negotiation phase of the Firetruce, however, the Starwolf, Diamond Sword, and a host of smaller tribes agreed to an alliance on an unprecedented scale, intending to form an army to strike at the Blood Eagle. The ranks of the Starwolf and the Diamond Sword had swelled in the last fifty years; together with a collection of independents, they constituted a serious threat to the Blood Eagle. If the Children of Phoenix and the Gorgon Killers joined, the Blood Eagle faced almost certain extinction. The Great Eagle accused Manfred Gregor of manipulating this development, but in the end conceded many of his tribe's recent conquests back to the vanquished parties. The Blood Eagle retained the world of Bira Marduk, however, as well as several other rich planets. As soon as Komarosu publicly swore his tribe would abide by the agreed-upon concessions, the alliance promptly dissolved.

The Blood Eagle left this Firetruce angry and embarrassed, but arguably wiser. Since that time, none of the Great Tribes have attempted to embark on large campaigns of conquest that would unite the others against a common foe, though some scholars of war have written that if any tribe were capable of defying the entire wilderzone, it would be the Children of Phoenix.

FIFTH FIRETRUCE (3841)

The Dream Falters

Asta Michaelis was a damp, mist-covered world, a suitably gloomy setting for the Fifth Firetruce. After several positive steps towards unification, the Fifth Firetruce marked a great step backwards. The Blood Eagle, in disarray after the assassination of Komarosu, did not send an official delegation at all, but was represented by belligerent splinter groups flirting with independence, notably the Wolfsbane, Excelsior and Shadow Stalker factions — which indeed declared independent status by the conclusion of the Firetruce.

These breakaway factions openly fought with other tribesmen, most notably the Starwolf. Tribal rivalries flared, and frequent quarrels marred the celebration. Even the Diamond Sword, noted for their desire to remain “above the fray,” were involved in several altercations, culminating in a fatal sword-and-tetrahook duel between the Sworder Enlightened Champion Senzu Pax and the Battlequeen of the Gorgon Killers, Rachel “Shargon” Andeles. Pax won the combat with a clinical style that left observers deeply impressed with Diamond Sword combat training. The blow to prestige was numbing for the Gorgon Killers, and many sub-factions abandoned the tribe. Coupled with the increased influence of the Diamond Sword and the surging Starwolf Alliance, only the Children of Phoenix retained the status of a leading tribe of the Three.

Yet even the Children of the Phoenix fared poorly here. Phoenix Prime Anachrussa Mari Menai y/-Harabec has not been looked upon kindly by history; her warnom was “Naginata” but a more common derisive nickname was “Scatterbrain.” A dispirited leader with a serious *trekohl* addiction, she did little to continue the positive progress made by her progenitors, almost causing an insurrection within the ranks of the Children — an unthinkable occurrence. She left a legacy of apathy that pervaded the Children for years after her reign, which ended in 3847 after a *trekohl* binge caused her to collapse and drown in her sanctuary's koi pond. She provided nothing of leadership during the Firetruce, and her faltering opening speech set the tone of the following events. Many observers concluded this Firetruce would be the last, a noble but failed experiment. The open contempt for the Children and for Unity shown by the departing tribes seemed to support this reasoning.

SIXTH FIRETRUCE (3891)

Wresting Order from Chaos

The Children rebounded by the time of the Sixth Firetruce, however. Alvarada “Firespear” Mari Menai y/-Harabec, grandniece of Anachrussa, ruled the Children of the Phoenix with fiery passion and iron will. Like her ancestor, Quinn Istvan, she was a powerful, ambitious leader concerned about her place in history — and she refused to allow the Firetruce to die. Unlike every other Phoenix Prime to that point, Alvarada possessed a violent temper and little

patience for those who disagreed with her. Some contemporaries believed she struggled to clear her name of the taint left by her great aunt's legacy. Others joked (though not to her face) that she was switched with a Blood Eagle at birth. Regardless of her motivation, Alvarada commanded enormous respect among not only the Children, but the other tribes as well. It was whispered that she was the lover of Harabec — even that she was an incarnation of Harabec. Her martial prowess was legendary, her personal charisma nigh-irresistible. She represented the epitome of the tribal warrior-chief, and her fame swept through the wilderzone. Only thirty-two at the time of the Sixth Firetruce, Alvarada Mari Menai never married; neither did she have children. She was "born to war," she would reply when asked about producing an heir. And at the Firetruce she reached her prime.

Times were hard in the wilderzone in the years before the Firetruce. The Tribes of Man fought constantly. A mysterious blight had crippled agricultural output on scores of worlds. Raids and bloodfeuds were common, and the balance of power had shifted dramatically. The Children of Phoenix had lost a disturbing number of worlds prior to Alvarada's rule. The Diamond Sword and the Starwolf had ascended to challenge the Children and the Blood Eagle for dominance, whereas the Gorgon Killers had fallen into dissipation and decay hastened by the stark fact that their worlds were the most heavily damaged by the blight. Common consensus among the tribes held the Swords and Wolves as Great Tribes and dismissed the Gorgon Killers. Grievors and opportunistic independents attacked outlying worlds and slaughtered entire holdfasts.

Initially, few tribes expressed interest in reviving the "dead" Firetruce. Alvarada had to use all of her considerable charisma and power to convince the Tribes of Man to attend. First she offered Tycho Brahe IV, one of the jewels of the Children's holdings and perhaps the most beautiful planet in the entire galaxy, as the site for the Firetruce. Then, in a move calculated to draw attendance by its sheer audacity, she challenged the leaders of the Blood Eagle, the Diamond Sword, and the Starwolf to personal duels, wagering key star systems on the outcome.

With such drama behind it, the tribes came to the Firetruce in droves. This time, the Children of Phoenix kept the peace, with the "gracious assistance" of the other three Great Tribes. Alvarada's Unity speech was the shortest ever. Surveying the assembled warriors and holders, she simply said, "We shall see if you are worthy," and left the platform. Subsequent nonplussed speeches by the other tribal leaders were largely ignored. The Grand Duel was anticlimactic. The Starwolf champion defeated a Diamond Sword warrior, but everyone looked forward to what the harpers were calling "Firespear's Challenge," and the other events were afterthoughts.

Alvarada did not disappoint. On successive days, she defeated the crafty Starwolf leader Sekreh M'klannin, the enigmatic Diamond Sword Court of Blades champion Autumn Thunder, and Alvarada's warrior-queen contemporary, the Great Eagle Helena "Harridan" Konovalev. The awe Alvarada awakened in the spectators was infectious. When a limping Konovalev embraced her after their battle, the stunned silence exploded into a deafening roar of approval.

The rest of the Firetruce was a riotous celebration that tribal historians describe as one of the wildest parties of all time. Certainly the mood was jubilant. The goodwill from this event lasted for the next fifteen standard years, as many independents "returned" to the ranks of the Phoenix, the Blood Eagle put aside many of their feuds, and the severity of raids plummeted dramatically. The glory and promise of the Firetruces had been restored.

Unfortunately, the reign of the Firespear came to a sudden, bloody end in 3893, during a campaign against the Gehenna Shark tribe on the jungle world of Ashkelon III. A sniper round severely wounded Alvarada during a siege of the G-Shark base. Though the wound itself was not fatal, the local microbes caused an untreatable and fatal infection. Alvarada died three days later, naming her great-grandfather Alexi Stefanos as her successor. Though ancient, Alexi was still hale, and he possessed a keen mind and wealth of experience that served the Children well.

THE SEVENTH FIRETRUCE (coming in 3941)

Prophecy of Destruction

The upcoming Firetruce comes at a critical juncture in the history of the wilderzone. The falling out between Great Eagle Alexandre Konovalev and his Starwolf bride Freya Cloudchaser has deteriorated to all-out war. As the Blood Eagle and Starwolf tear at each other's throats, almost every smaller tribe has taken sides or tried to exploit the unrest. Even the Children of the Phoenix stand at the brink of civil war, as radical elements calling themselves the

Harbingers of Phoenix argue for a Crusade to force unity on the rest of the tribes. Phoenix Prime Renn Gistos y/-Harabec faces growing opposition to the path of peace. The Diamond Sword gather their forces into a defensive position, pulling back from their more vulnerable worlds. Dark Griever bands pick off fringe settlements, and refugees flood into the wilderzone from Imperial space, fleeing a reinvigorated Scourge. Fearful rumors circulate about the return of Gir Draxon and a massing of BioDerm Hordes for a new offensive against the beleaguered Imperials. Some alarmed voices among the tribes cry that the Scourge may even invade the wilderzone itself.

In addition to the threats of war from within and without the wilderzone, the Children now face an unexpected political challenge. In an effort to force some sanity into the increasingly bloody conflict, the Phoenix Prime declared the Seventh Firetruce would occur on Hepta Ourubis II, the world devastated in the last war between the Blood Eagle and the Starwolf. The other Great Tribes protested this choice, but Gistos remained firm, relying on the prestige of the last Firetruce and his own tribe's stature to support the decision. However, political problems have undermined his authority. The Diamond Sword Court of Blades, in an uncharacteristically radical move, has offered an alternative setting for the Firetruce on the Sworder world of Bella Omega, formerly known as Sahranon Xi IV. The Blood Eagle accepted immediately. Konovalev is known for his desire to topple Phoenix pre-eminence, and he may wish to demonstrate strength in the face of the rising popularity of Fury within his own ranks. The Starwolf, on the other hand, seem reluctant to relinquish the opportunity to remind the other tribes of Blood Eagle ecocidal crimes. One radical chieftain, Ursula DiVaragas, has even suggested the Diamond Sword are secretly in league with the Blood Eagle. Though respected as a leader, DiVaragas is known for an even greater hatred of the Blood Eagle than most members of her tribe, and so her opinion is discounted by cooler heads. The greater number of Starwolf chieftains seem willing to follow the Sworders' lead in hopes of securing support for the war with the Blood Eagle.

The Children's position is less clear. Renn Gistos has declared he is willing to change the location, an acquiescence that shocks those individuals accustomed to the sometimes haughty leadership of the First Tribe. One observer writes:

My personal belief is that Renn Gistos wishes to impress upon the Harbingers that he is not alone in his desire for tribal unity (although the Sworders' motives for this turn of events remain clouded at best). Perhaps the Phoenix Prime has finally realized the extent of the cancer which infects his tribe and is fishing for outside support. In fact, it was Renn who suggested that the body of the founder of the short-lived Diamond Sword Republic be interred under the primary meeting hall of the Firetruce. This rather obvious political move is perhaps meant to indicate some understanding between the two great intellectual tribes, though the fact that the Starwolf and Blood Eagle supported the idea makes it a symbol of changing political winds in the wilderzone.

***from "Fall from Grace: Commentaries," by Nabterayl,
Priestess of the Ko l'Yah***

The leader of the Harbingers, General Anton Malderi, warns that this "concession" constitutes an unacceptable loss of face for the tribe. The Harbingers have also condemned the writings of scholars such as Nabterayl, with some of the louder voices even threatening retaliation. The rumormongers of the wilderzone claim the Children of Phoenix have begun to disintegrate, though tribal stringers and merchants scoff at this idea. Other sources contend the Diamond Sword seeks to usurp the position of the Children and therefore issued its challenge at a time of great tension and confusion among the Tribes of Man. Regardless of the truth, the Phoenix Prime faces a serious dilemma within his own ranks as well as without.

In this ominous atmosphere, a new, highly disturbing rumor has emerged. Some say it originated in the fraytown slums of Bira Marduk, others ascribe it to Diamond Sword philosophers, the Ur-Shaman of the Starwolf, or even the Immortals themselves. Strange wanderers calling themselves "Fenicians" are circulating this rumor and other warnings through the wilderzone, but most tribals dismiss these individuals as frays and charlatans. Nevertheless, the rumor has taken on disquieting weight for many tribals, and it spreads swiftly. The "Fenecian prophecy" has many variations, but the most common version is:

The Tribes of Man shall be scattered like smoke, and the Four shall succumb to madness. The sword shall be drawn too late, the eagle shall bathe in its own blood, the wolf shall fall into its shadow, and the phoenix shall with two heads devour its children. A thousand worlds shall be rent with fire, and even the Immortals shall

tremble, for there will be no haven but the night, no safety without fury, no peace until the ashes grow cold.

The Seventh Firetruce comes at an unusual juncture. What will emerge from it is anyone's guess, but the tribes may never again be the same.

RITUAL AND COMPETITION

Preparation

An event such as the Firetruce requires intense preparation for months prior to the arrival of the tribal delegations. Emissaries from the major tribes meet with the Children of Phoenix to prepare the site. Though the Children maintain control over the site and oversee the work, the other Great Tribes and even some of the leading independents have opportunities to suggest changes or particular features.

Opening Rites

The official opening of the Firetruce comes with a lighting of the Truce Flame by a representative of the tribe that won the previous Firetruce's Grand Duel. The Children nurture the Flame in the years between Firetruces. Thereafter, the attending tribes present themselves to the Phoenix Prime and the other tribal leaders in an extended martial parade called the Salute.

The Firetruce typically lasts ninety standard days. Since the event occurs so infrequently, the Children have traditionally set aside a large bloc of time for it.

Unity Speech

The Phoenix Prime offers the first speech of the Firetruce, speaking to the assembled hosts with the Firetruce Council arrayed behind him/her. The speech describes the common history of the tribes and argues point by point for a new unity in the wilderzone. This speech often highlights the personal charisma of the Phoenix Prime and also offers the Children a unique forum for their views. Political subcontext usually riddles the Unity Speech, such that other tribes pay close attention, as the focus of the speech heralds the tone for the rest of the event.

Other Speeches

Following the Phoenix Prime, delegates sent by the other Great Tribes each offer a speech. There is also a speech by a leader purportedly selected by the independents, but more often than not, this individual only speaks for a dozen or so of the smaller tribes. On occasions when the Imperial legate attends, he or she may offer a short speech on behalf of the Empire. The legate has attended the Fifth and Sixth Firetruces.

THE COUNCIL

Without doubt, the heart of the Firetruce is the Council, a collection of tribal representatives, principally from the Great Tribes, that meets to discuss the prospects for unity, negotiate over holdings, settle grievances, and make adjustments to the Tenets of Harabec. Each tribe sends a delegation made up of leading officers and other influential figures important in tribal politics. The Phoenix Prime always attends, and occasionally the Great Eagle and a member of the Diamond Sword Triad will make an appearance. The independents have a small group, easily outnumbered by the representatives of the Great Tribes. The Imperial Legate may also attend, either in person or through an agent, though the Imperial is not allowed to vote and may be excluded from deliberations through a simple vote.

Much political maneuvering goes on during the Council, often accompanied by a range of clandestine effort to influence the voting blocs for various issues. Economic concessions and political threats are the most common means of affecting votes, though blackmail, personal threats, and even slander are not uncommon (though unsanctioned). Much intra-tribal power-brokering goes on during these Councils, with only the Children showing much unity. The Diamond Sword are not immune to such struggles, though their politics are a cipher to outsiders.

THE CONTESTS

These are the true draw for the average tribal, and competitions of all varieties rage throughout the Firetruce, from races, duels, and contests of strength and technical proficiency to gambling, drinking, and art. The prizes for victors range from custom weaponry to cases of Imperial cognac. Incredible gambling accompanies the contests, and intrigues aimed at manipulating results are common. The tribes are particularly vindictive toward anyone caught trying to blackmail or unfairly influence the outcomes of contests. Nevertheless, these efforts continue.

The Phoenix Prime behind the First Firetruce, Quinn Istvan, was well aware of the warrior culture of the tribes, and he refused to try to change it. “Unity,” he reportedly said, “does not require us to forget who we are, or how our ancestors fought their way to triumph during the Cybrid Wars. The Blessed Harabec is a soldier, and he has died countless times in battle for us. We must not forget, and so although some say the Grand Duel is barbaric, I say it is a celebration.”

Races

Races range from unassisted footraces to armor races to vehicle contests. Some races are purely speed and maneuvering, such as the Snake Race, whereas others such as Morningstar’s Run require participants to move through a gauntlet of obstacles and even live weapons fire.

Combats

Again, drawing parallels to the ancient Olympics, contests of martial and physical prowess are a highlight of this festival. Hand-to-hand combat is most popular, as are competitions involving marksmanship. “Traditional” events, such as feats of strength and displays of agility are supplemented with competitions as to who can reassemble a chaingun the fastest.

Team events, such as “capture the flag,” are very popular and last the entire month of the Firetruce — though they do not use real weaponry for fear of igniting blood feuds and disruptive battles in the midst of the Firetruce. Instead, low-powered weapons with links to a central computer are used to simulate a true battle. Some versions use no weapons but permit virtually unlimited physical contact. The tribe that wins the overall team competition gains great glory and enhances their combat reputation tremendously.

The duels are the most popular event, however, as well as the most frowned upon by tribal peacemakers. Although duels also use low-powered weaponry and computer-linked judging, the intensity of the average duelist leads to incredibly violent competition. The Grand Duel, for example, is close combat, typically unarmed (though some Grand Duels have involved knives or even plasmafax). Nevertheless, the Grand Duel is invariably the most violent officially-sanctioned event of the Firetruce, with several deaths among the contestants a regular occurrence. It is also the most popular and the most prestigious, so the Children believe it serves a cathartic function, even for their own warriors.

Blood Feuds and the Sandtraps

Though dedicated to peace, the Firetruce does not escape the tribal predilection for feuding. Old feuds and new feuds alike lead to numerous encounters during the various events, most of which are broken up by tribal peacekeepers. Nevertheless, persistent warriors can find an outlet in the underworld that springs up like mushrooms around each Firetruce. These “sandtraps,” named for their traditional sandy floors, are clandestine arenas that permit betting and live weapons for duelists. They are mostly used by the bloodthirsty, the desperate, or the vengeance-oriented. To keep the peacekeepers quiet, heavy weapons are not used. Most sandtraps allow the use of melee weapons and powered armors. Some of the better-concealed locations may even permit blaster use. Betting on sandtrap duels is fierce, the more so if a genuine blood feud is involved. The winners receive a healthy share of the purse, and the word spreads. Performance in the sandtraps can either boost or kill a warrior’s reputation.

The Grand Duel

The centerpiece of the Firetruce competitions, the Grand Duel is a one-on-one close-combat contest that culminates on the last week of the Firetruce. It is the most popular event of the Firetruce, and tales of the finals become legend for many years after.

The rules are single-elimination, with the contestants fighting until one drops or yields. The warrior who wins the Grand Duel earns lifelong fame, as well as bragging rights for his or her tribe. Grand Duels often become personality contests by the final rounds, and grudge matches between participants are common.

At times, depending on the contestants and the whims of the judges, blades or plasmafax are permitted the contestants. Usually, such weapons are only demanded where the fighters have declared blood feud against each other. These bloodmatches are usually short, brutal, and even more well-attended.

The Jewel of Glory

The winner of the Grand Duel receives as prize the Jewel of Glory, a singular artifact crafted for each Firetruce by the finest crafters in the Children of Phoenix. Each jewel has a unique name and setting, and families that wear a Jewel to the Firetruce are treated like celebrities, though they are expected to be able to tell the tale of how their ancestor won the Jewel — and tell it well.

Kailoh Plays and Street Theater

Entertainment is an important part of the Firetruce. The Children of Phoenix have troupes putting on plays that detail the rich history of the Tribes of Man, especially the deeds of the Immortals. These plays are called “Kailoh Plays,” after the stylized masks used by the actors. It is an old style dating from the 31st century, and very popular among the tribes, especially the Children of Phoenix, who consider Kailoh a mark of culture. Imperial visitors, however, consider tribal versions quaint and unsophisticated.

The fraytown that always grows around a Firetruce offers a counterpoint to the formal styles of the Kailoh. Various street shows bubble up amid the bazaar and in the taverns and around the tribal cantonments. Some shows are more artistic, whereas others are burlesque or satirical. The shows of the Fourth Firetruce were noted for their biting attacks on the Blood Eagle.

The Great Bazaar

The Firetruces are also well known for substantial trade markets that spring up around arenas and amphitheaters. Tribes circulate and trade. “Weaponsmith” tribes such as the Forge of Hephaestus or the Blood Eagle's Sabot-Styx are very popular.

Everything is for sale at the Bazaar: weapons, neosilks, thralls, light tattoos, food, art, music, exotic drugs, and secrets. Minstrels play the latest ballads, mercenaries solicit contracts, and itinerant grieverers sell salvage and read fortunes. Imperial merchants descend on the Firetruce in great numbers, and occasionally bring advanced devices with unusual capabilities. Anything is for sale here.

Parties and Celebrations

Tribal intermarriages are also common at this time. Younger tribesmen and women often indulge in bacchanalian activities and these lead to the founding of long-term relationships. Liasons between members of rival tribes, however, tend to be fleeting at best. Still, even the Eagle can lie down with the Wolf, so to speak, though the results may prove disastrous.

Konovalev and Cloudchaser

The Sixth Firetruce marked the first meeting of Alexandre Konovalev and Freya Cloudchaser. Konovalev was a young Blood Eagle prodigy, said to be a brilliant tactician and determined warrior. He had risen to the rank of Talon Prime in the Incarnate Vengeance Talon of the Marathon Pennant. Cloudchaser was a renowned duelist from the Starwolf's Girru Bandai Pack, daughter of the Pack High Chieftain. The two are said to have met while on opposite sides of a tribal brawl. Another story says they met while fighting one another in a sandtrap, and later slipped away to share a bottle of Tirnathian froth brandy. Whatever the truth, the attraction between the two was clear, and they began a liason that continued beyond the Firetruce itself.

When Alexandre became Great Eagle in 3904, he proposed marriage to Freya as a way of bringing peace to the two rival tribes. The records of Alexandre's communications leave no doubt as to his love of Freya, but they also hint at the madness that would later consume their relationship. Ironically, this gesture of reconciliation would provide the

fuel for an even more terrible conflict between the Blood Eagle and the Starwolf. Had Konovalev not married Cloudchaser, it is possible the Children's efforts to mediate would have succeeded, and the fate of the wilderzone would not have rested in the hearts of star-crossed lovers.