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EARTH ETERNAL

The History of Earth Eternal: Lost Ages to Age of Man

Note: There's an approximately 2000 year period between the end of this history and the game period. That history is forthcoming, as is a summary version of this history.

o | THE LOST AGES

Titans

When the Earth was young and even the Gods themselves were but an unrealized possibility, beings of power raw and roughly-formed held dominion over the land. The Titans, they were called, for they were the very definition of might. Kronos, the greatest of them, and Gaia, his wife, ruled them and in turn they were masters of all the Earth. Tethys, Bor, Themis, Atum, Hyperion, Oceanus, and many others made up the ranks of these Lords of the Lost Ages.

For time untold, Kronos and his fellows in power ruled unquestioned. A multitude of mainly-forgotten beings and creatures walked the lands, some created by the Titans themselves, and all paid homage to the unquestioned lords of the eternal Earth. Two amongst these races are of concern to us, for they were chief among the servants of the Titans and their influence persists even today, many Ages hence.

First, the Elemental Dragons. Winged creatures of fearsome and fundamental power, each of a type – Fire, Ice, Earth, and Air. Upon these ancient monstrosities the Titans rode to war against armies we know – the Shadow Legion foremost among them – and forces we know not even the rumor of legend.

Next, the diverse folk of the Faerie Folk. Noble and callow, beautiful and hideous. If the Elemental Dragons were steeds of the Titans, the Faerie were the stable masters and the sergeants, the priests and the princes. In all their forms, the Faerie were filled with the pure, chaotic potency that characterized those who managed to survive the wild, brutal Lost Ages. The Faerie differed greatly in both form and ability, and there was a roughly-enforced hierarchy among them with King Oberon and Queen Titania ruling their race and reporting directly to their Titan emperors, and the lowest of the Faerie, whom the rest deemed fit only to perform menial tasks, chief amongst these being the Cyclopes.

Beyond Oberon and Titania, though, lay one Faerie that exceeded them in power, and to whom all Faerie owed allegiance and perhaps eventual survival: Agalarna, the Spirit Mother. The Faerie had been created by Hyperion, and the first born to Hyperion's craft was Agalarna. Potent beyond any Faerie after, the Spirit Mother was nearly a God in her own right and though she did not exercise formal authority over her people, even the Faerie King and Queen treated her as an object of adoration and near-worship. From her, it seemed, the strength of the Faerie blood flowed, and for this reason Hyperion deemed

this first Faerie creation a mistake, for he saw that Agalarna might serve the Faerie as a symbol around which to rally and perhaps as inspiration to be more than servants to the Titans.

With time, the Faerie did indeed grow discontented with their state of servitude. “Why should we serve? They may be greater in power but we are far greater in number. It is time for the Folk to chart the course of our people.” Rumors of rebellion reached the ears of Hyperion, their ultimate father, who brought it to Kronos and all of his kin. They met in council, and debated the fate of their chief servants.

The Titans were nothing if not capricious and arbitrary in their power and they determined that the Faerie would best be punished for their impudence by sending their Spirit Mother away. They could not slay her, for her death would greatly diminish the power of their Faerie servants and perhaps even ruin them as a race. By exiling the beloved Agalarna, the greatest power among the Faerie would be safely removed from the influence of the others, and the strength in the blood of the Folk would be muted enough to serve as a harsh reprimand. Hyperion, taking the defiance of his creations more personally than did the other Titans, also demanded that one of every five Faeries be executed, to drive home their status as servants rather than free beings in control of their own destinies.

The Titans gathered the Faerie and informed them of their collective punishment. Dismay swept through the ranks of the Folk as well as an emotion new to them: Fear. On all the Earth, only the Titans exceeded them in power and only the Elemental Dragons rivaled them. The Faerie were servants, it is true, but they were first among the servants of the Titans and heretofore had never needed to be disciplined by their creator and masters. Those to be executed were taken and slain on the spot. The Faeries wailed in anguish and gnashed their teeth, but what could they do against the combined might of the Titans?

Despite losing one-fifth of their race minutes before, the cruelest blow was still to come. Kronos himself took the Agalarna, the Spirit Mother, and placed her on comet that was passing by Earth. He sent the comet off in space, on a straight line, such that it would never return to Earth. Agalarna would recede further and further away from her people with every passing moment, for eternity. The Faerie Folk felt a blow to themselves as they had not believed possible. With time, as the comet the Spirit Mother was on sped away from them, they felt the potency in their blood diminish somewhat and become muted. Though still fearsome in their strength, the Faerie knew they were now less than they had been, and that they would never be what they were when the world was still young. Never

again would they bask in the glory of Agalarna, the first of their kind, and forever would they languish in servitude to their cruel Titan masters.

The Titans celebrated their own wisdom and judgment, feeling they had done well. The Faerie Folk had been put in their place and the Spirit Mother would never serve as a rallying point for their servants again.

They were wrong. What Kronos and his fellows could not know is that they had erred, and erred greatly. It was not the plan of sending Agalarna into exile itself that would return to plague them; rather it was the execution. Despite their intention to send the comet on which Kronos had placed the Spirit Mother straight away from Earth, even Kronos, the Lord of the Titans, did not achieve perfection in this endeavor. He did not propel the comet in a straight line but in one that curved ever, ever so slightly, such that eventually the comet was destined to return in a loop and pass close by the Earth again. The Titans had sealed their fates, though it would be uncountable years before they would be haunted by the specter of their actions.

The Coming of Djall

Millennia beyond measure passed. Great wars between the unknown inhabitants of the Lost Ages raged. The Maar built their Orean Symmetry, imprisoning themselves in its time-warped influence. Nations with names our greatest scholars may have encountered only once in a lifetime of study rose and fell. Who among us today knows anything of the Rik'tul Horde or the Celestial Empire of the Sumar? Above all these reigned the Titans and the Faerie who served them, and for all this long time the Faerie were diminished by the absence of their Spirit Mother and made sorrowful by the thought of her alone in the empty void that lay beyond the boundaries of the Earth.

They were right to fear for Agalarna, but not because she was alone. Out there in the blackness and emptiness she had acquired a companion. This companion was unsought for and surely unwelcome, for he represented such concentrated evil as the Earth had not yet seen. Yes, the Titans could be cruel and capricious, and the mortal denizens of the Earth could be as good or terrible to each other as they are now, but no being of the Earth had previously encountered anything that had the kind of hideous malevolence that what hitched itself to the huge ball of compressed silt and ice Agalarna sat on possessed. It was a mind with a will to terrorize, use up, and consume the essence of all that was beautiful, hopeful, or bright about what was around it, and the Spirit Mother shone like a flame to it, cast against the uniform, empty background of the deep void as she was.

It was Djall, the Dark Lord, and while he didn't know where the comet was going, he knew that Agalarna was something powerful and beautiful, and that he must corrupt,

torture, and twist her until she was a husk and he had sated himself upon her essence. He is a parasite and a predator, feeding off the essence of those he conquers with his power. For dozens of millennia she was unable to escape his torments and predations, and bit by bit, the Spirit Mother was broken and sapped of a good deal of her power.

Eventually, inevitably, the comet we now know as Djall's Hammer returned to the vicinity of Earth, bearing with it the beaten and shattered Agalarna, who could not leave the comet, and Djall himself, who saw in the Earth a bounty of near-endless proportion on which to turn his crushing malice. He could no more have resisted the Earth than a starving wolf could resist steaming, fresh meat placed in front of it, and so he crossed the gap between himself and the Earth, leaving the Spirit Mother to fly off away from the Earth once again. But while Agalarna was close to Earth, the Faeries felt as if the strength in their blood had been renewed. They were stronger than they had been since the days before their Spirit Mother had been cast off into the great void, though now it faded again as Djall's Hammer flew once again away, away into the unknown.

Djall sensed immense power in some of the beings that called Earth home, and he fled to the interior of the planet, deep into its core, where even the Titans did not go for the presumption that there was nothing there. He watched. He learned. As he passed time within the depths, he discovered the entrance to Tartarus, a place lying outside of our reality. Peering in, he saw that this was an inhabited plane, but much poorer in life than the Earth he was hiding inside of. A race who called themselves Daemons lived within, still young and primitive as a people.

Though he could peer into Tartarus through this, the Tartarin Door, and see within, the door would not permit him through. It was as if this metaphysical door had a small viewing window built into it but the rest of the door was fully shut and locked. He struck the door, cast alien magics at it, and attempted to find widen the 'window' that permitted him to see what was on the other side, but to no avail. Then he noticed that in the center of the great door lay a small 'key' of pure power given physical form. Its aura was somehow muted and Djall could barely detect it, but nonetheless there it was. Manipulating it with his own power, for touching it physically would surely be a poor idea, he turned this key and opened the door.

Djall entered Tartarus to discover what he could. Within, he found an endless ruined landscape of blasted rock and grey ash, and Daemons picking a meager survival from what little else lived or grew there. There was, to Djall, but one notable thing about Tartarus. Far from its portal to the core of the Earth was something massive that radiated power as a God might. The Starscythe, it was called, for legend among the Daemons held

that it had come from the stars, falling through the sky like a flaming scythe cutting through cosmic wheat.

Djall traveled to the Starscythe, killing all in his path, and drew the great weapon from the ground. As he did so, he ripped a hole in reality with the planar-splitting edge of the Scythe while his hands began to smolder from the sheer power unleashed. Djall screamed a rolling wave of pain that blasted across all of Tartarus, and beyond, through the tear in reality that the Starscythe had created and into the realm of Hell, where Ur, the King of Demons, reigned.

Ur was a mighty force, supreme on the plane of Hell, but had not encountered planar rifts previously. When Djall's scream revealed to Ur that there were places the might of Ur had not yet been felt in, the infernal Demon King reached through the rift to see what he could see. He saw the masses of pitiful Daemons and noted with surprise that they bore a resemblance to many of the Demons. This raised the question of their origins, but it was a mystery to be pondered another day, for his attention was immediately drawn to Djall and the single most powerful object of power Ur had ever seen – the Starscythe – lying at Djall's feet while Djall continued to writhe in pain.

The Lord of Hell rushed forward and grabbed the Starscythe, for he feared neither fire nor flame. Raising it in triumph, he struck at Djall, thinking to kill him. Though wracked with pain, Djall possessed enough awareness to dodge the blow and flee back towards the Tartarin Door. Leaping through, he slammed the door shut, turned the key, and locked it, bringing Ur up short. Djall had escaped, but with knowledge that he felt sure no being of Earth had. He would use this for his dark purposes.

For centuries, Djall nursed his wounds and continued to watch and wait. The Titans were mighty beings indeed, but Djall had power of his own and had a major advantage: He knew of the Titans, but they did not know of him. For a thousand years, Djall managed to play his familiar parasitic role and leech potency bit by bit from the Titans, who did not notice, for they wasted their vast oceans of might as one does who feels that a resource is unlimited. He knew that it was but a matter of time until he was noticed, and laid his plans, to be hatched upon the eventuality of that time.

It was Gaia who discovered him, in the end, for among all the Titans she was most attuned to the subtle ebbs and flows of the natural world. Djall's alien, corrupting presence eventually flowed, however weakly, from deep within the Earth where he hid to the surface world, and eventually Gaia felt the tapestry of life become warped ever so lightly. Enlisting Kronos and the other Titans, they discovered Djall as he knew they would. He was prepared.

He allowed himself to be captured, and wove an enthralling tale of the power to be gained in Tartarus as represented by the Demon King Ur, and of the Starscythe itself. He showed the Titans his still terribly wounded hand and they believed, for they were a greedy race and they wished to believe. They were much tempted by the tales of Djall, and he struck a deal with the Titans to show them how to enter Tartarus in return for a place among them, as an equal. Djall, of course, had no intention of merely being an equal to these ancestors of our Gods. He intended to reign supreme and suck the essence out of the Earth and everything in it or on it. He would be far more than a Titan if his plans were realized.

Djall led the Titans to Tartarus, but for Gaia who did not trust Djall and said as much to her brothers, sisters, and husband. Though powerful even amongst such a worthy assemblage, the other Titans viewed Gaia as somewhat weak for her strong ties to life on Earth that they viewed as below them. They ignored her advice as over-cautious and followed Djall to the Tartarin Door.

Djall unlocked the Door, and first Kronos and then the other Titans rushed through, eager to gain advantage over the others by gathering power to himself or herself first. Djall merely waited until they had bulled past, shut the Door, and locked it. With a single stroke he had caused all but one of the greatest powers on Earth to be sequestered away into another reality. For all practical purposes, he had killed them. Nobody else on Earth knew the location of the Tartarin Door, and Djall was certainly not going to tell. It “locked” only from the Earth-side, and Djall managed to rip the key out, permanently shutting the Door.

He surveyed the Earth. He had leeches away enough power from the Titans to be at least the equal of Gaia, and he was ruthless. Dark of soul, and ruthless. He began to corrupt those of the Lost Ages, of whom no record survives, and his power increased. Within mere decades Djall, now the Dark Lord of the Earth, was worshipped by more than one nation and Gaia knew she had to move quickly. She mourned the loss of her husband Kronos, and her fellow Titans, but her first loyalty had grown to become the Earth itself and the beings of good will who inhabited it. She moved to counter Djall.

The Titans, especially Kronos, had many children, but Kronos, Hyperion, and the other eldest among the Titans were wise enough to know that the next generation might seek to supplant the previous one, and so they put their children in a place called the Nexus Void, where time does not exist. There, the nascent children of the Titans – beings we know as the Gods – rested there unconscious and unaging, held in stasis, for perhaps millions of years in the case of the first-born among them, such as Odin, Zeus, Hera, and Ra. There are dozens and dozens of these children of the Titans there in the Nexus Void,

and Gaia awoke them all. She was mother to many of them, and aunt to the rest. She awakened them with a purpose in mind: Drive back this new, alien force called Djall.

The Godwars

The newly-born but nearly fully-formed Gods swarmed out of the Nexus Void that had served as their cradle for so long, grateful to Gaia for their freedom but full of righteous anger at their interminable imprisonment. With the Titans locked away, there was only one target for their rage: Djall, who sought mastery of this world that they felt was now, by rights, theirs.

The Faerie Folk, who had been overjoyed by the disappearance of the Titans saw that one way or another, they were going to once again be relegated to the second tier, either as slaves to Djall or, at best, servants of these upstart Gods, provided they could even survive the budding war of the great powers of the Earth.

They fled to a place near to the Nexus Void, which was both of the Earth's reality and yet set apart from it, and of which they became aware only when the Gaia awoke the Gods. The Faerie settled on its outskirts where time was slow but yet flowed, and built a new realm for the Folk to dwell in and await the inevitable return of Djall's Hammer and the return of their Spirit Mother, that Faerie might may wax once again.

Their new home was a wonderland of the odd, for the Faerie are a diverse folk and they had diverse desires. Forests in deserts, areas built to be inhabited by giants, bizarre colors and discordant music. They called it the Otherworld, and from within its center, from the massive Elysian Court, Oberon and Titania ruled the people of the Faerie. The years outside flew by while the Faerie endured and multiplied.

The war between the Gods and Djall lasted for time untold. Gods fell and died, and Djall was wounded again and again by the Gods. Much life on Earth was scoured clean from the sheer power released in the clashes between the Gods and Djall. The Faerie had been wise to flee. The Elemental Dragons were co-opted by both the Gods and Djall, and nearly all perished in the endless conflict.

The Earth became quiet as the peoples of it fell, some as innocent bystanders, some while participating in the war, either fighting for the Dark Lord or against him.

Finally, after endless aeons of Earth-scorching war, it was clear to Gaia that what life remained on the Earth was at risk, that she could lose everything she cared about. The Gods were weakened and even the mightiest of them had been worn down by battle after

unending battle. Djall had accounted himself mightily, fighting against the Gods and Gaia both, but he himself was exhausted from the struggle.

None know, and perhaps none will ever know, how Djall and Gaia came to some accord, but at some point the war simply ended. The enmity between them did not diminish, but open warfare directly between them, or directly between Djall and the Gods, ceased. Henceforth it appeared that the war would be conducted largely indirectly, through agents of one side or the other.

It bears mentioning that the White Priests of Atan believe that the Great Mother and Lord Djall are but servants or manifestations of powers even greater than themselves, known as the Creator and the Demiurge. We have multiple pieces of evidence to indicate that this may be the case. Certainly, many scholars believe that there must be powers greater than Gaia or Djall to whom they are beholden, but in matters of the great Powers it is difficult to ascertain truth.

1 | THE AGE OF LEGEND – BEGINNINGS

Many aeons ago, at the very beginning of the Age of Legend, Gaia perceived a threat and was possessed by a need. To sate her new desire, she caused the Amanita to awaken from their slumber in the shadows of the forests, and filled them with purpose. This we know from the Amanita themselves, whom we commonly call Shroomies today.

What none have ever discovered is what the purpose the Great Mother awoke the Shroomies for was. It remains an inscrutable first move in her renewed war with Djall. They appear to search for something, but the few Amanita that will even acknowledge our presence do not seem to understand the question when asked what it is they seek.

Precious little can be said with surety about anything between the awakening of the Amanita, and the awakening of the Treekin many thousands of years later except for one act whose influence continues to be felt today: The creation of Salamanzar, the Protolich, by Lord Djall, a seemingly much more powerful first move than Gaia's.

Salamanzar, the Protolich

The first of what we now know as the Undead was birthed by the darkest of powers in the time before the Beasts arose in the Age of Legend. Salamanzar. His very name inspires dread of the most primal kind, for he and his progeny have been a plague on this Earth since before our kind arose. A surviving fragment of an ancient history written by Al-Idrisi, one of the fabled eight Mystarchs, concerning Salamanzar's birth: *“And so it came to pass that Lord Djall saw the creations of the Earthmother, Gaia, and was displeased. He fell to brooding for many days, deep in thought as to what he should do in his dwelling below the surface, in the vast caverns and tunnels of the UnderRealm. The creation of the Amanita seemed a direct challenge to Djall's will to power. That something so momentous should happen outside of his control demanded answer.”*

As he thought upon what Gaia had done, he became wroth with anger. Thus possessed by rage, he clenched his teeth upon his mighty fist and bit down, rending the very flesh from his hand and spitting it aside. When his blood had cooled and the mad rage had passed, he gazed upon his discarded, still-quivering flesh and saw the answer to his problem. For the flesh had life without blood.

For many days and many nights he labored without pause and with singular purpose. At midnight on the seventh night, he stepped aside and gazed upon the product of his

energies. "Go forth," spoke Djall, "and do my bidding. You are he who shall cast this world into darkness in my name, and they shall know you and feel fear. I name thee Salamanzar, and command you thusly."

And the world knew Salamanzar. And the world knew fear.

The Treekin

Though Salamanzar now walked the halls of the UnderRealm with footsteps that would echo throughout time, he was yet young in his power, and the world above remained blissfully ignorant of the grave threat below. During this time of innocence, the Treekin, like their distant brethren the Amanita, awoke in the forests of the Earth. Children of Gaia more so than even the Shroomies, the Treekin have walked in the light since their birth, acting as powerful agents for the protection of the forests and jungles of the Earth – the greatest bastions of uncorrupted pure life that we know of.

Djall saw what Gaia created and laughed. The Amanita had done nothing but wander the Earth, appearing to search for something but never finding it. The Treekin mainly kept to the forested swaths of the land, and while they certainly had power, they did not have numbers, nor did they seem to possess the inclination to do aught but protect the forests. These were no match for the might of Salamanzar.

The Beasts

Many millennia after the forests first heard the arboreal voices of the Treekin our true history begins, for it is here that our earliest forebears awoke: the first Beasts. Intended as a wild card in the war against Djall, the Taurians, Atavians, Bandicoons, Felines, and all the rest were created by Gaia but granted a nature unlike that of the Shroomies or Treekin, whose fundamental natures are very similar among their kind. Gaia imbued Beasts with a strong will and a questioning nature. The Beasts were born loyal to Gaia but had the freedom to choose their own destinies.

It's unknown how many types of Beasts there were, but many did not survive the Age of Man, and are lost to us forever. No doubt many more are unknown to us, living in foreign lands that we may never see.

The Gods

And what of the Gods? There were many more Gods then, in the Age of Legend, than now, for so many fell just a few hundred years ago to the might of the God-killing Sphinxes. Odin, whose brothers Ve and Vili had perished in the fight against Djall, the leader of the northern Gods. Zeus and Hera, Ra, Marduk, Hades, Curnon, Aegir and many others among the elder Gods. Soon, they had children and multiplied, bringing forth such as Thor and his half-brother Loki. Apollo and his twin sister Artemis. Bast, SETHIS, Ares,

Nemesis, Danae, Anubis, Pan, and the many who are no longer with us, from Baldur and Freya to Hephaestus and Aphrodite, to Isis and Horus.

The Gods each gravitated to certain areas of the Earth and the Beasts who lived there began to worship them for the protection they offered from the forces of Djall who, in turn, vowed to work to twist what Gods and Beasts he could to serve his cause. He whispered in Salamazar's ear and set events in motion.

2 | THE UNDEAD GENESIS

The rise of the Beasts did not go unnoticed in the UnderRealm. In these new creatures, Salamanzar saw a future in which they could vex him as he carried out his Dark Lord's will, and was troubled. Our love, compassion, courage, and kindness were evident, but so also were our greed, hatred, violence, and fear. Here were beings that, unlike the Amanita, the Treekin, or Salamanzar himself, were possessed of both good and evil natures, something not seen before. Djall commanded Salamanzar and he, in turn, pledged that the Beasts, who quickly came to outnumber the Amanita or the Treekin, would either be brought to heel as his walking cattle or must be wiped out. Retreating to his abode, he dwelt for many years, communing with Lord Djall and preparing.

The Abyssian Locus

When he deemed himself ready, he descended into the deep places of the Earth and there sought out the Abyssian Locus, the very place where the hand of Djall was first felt. Only here would even Salamanzar, who was now the most powerful being to walk the Earth, be able to command the power necessary to set his plan in motion. Here, at the place on Earth where Djall's influence had longest been felt, Salamanzar was able to exert his immense might and create unlife, as his Lord had done to bring him into existence.

First formed was Abidan, which means "My father is judge" in the Old Tongue, and then Abiel, or "God is my father." These were the Archliches: dark beings of great arcane power whose loyalty to Salamanzar could not be questioned. Salamanzar looked upon what he had wrought, and deemed it good. There in the Abyssian Locus, he taught his cruel new captains how to form unlife, and commanded them to create an army with which to scour the sun-lit world of all those who may oppose him.

For centuries the undead lords practiced their art in secret, using the evil energy of the Abyssian Locus to craft foul beasts of great power and wicked intent. Many were the lesser liches formed in their image, and many abominations too terrible to name were birthed and chained in the black pits of the UnderRealm, awaiting Salamanzar's war.

Still, the armies of the UnderRealm were unprepared for a direct conflict with the sons and daughters of the Earth, the Beasts. Fearsome liches and great mindless fiends they had, but even the powerful magic of the Archliches could not conjure a host of unliving soldiers to match the sheer numbers they must face should the Beasts prove incorruptible, for the Beasts had truly multiplied quickly. For years Abidan and Abiel labored within the Locus, honing their skills and seeking a way to create a nigh-endless army of undead, while Salamanzar communed with Djall and sought even greater power.

How terribly ironic that it was the Beasts themselves which provided the solution to this problem. It was during these dark times that a small band of curious travelers stumbled across the entrance to the UnderRealm and cautiously began to explore it. Their names and origins have long since been lost to history, but their tale is timeless in its horror and depravity. All too quickly, the liches sensed the presence of intruders in their demesnes, and in a few short days the small band of intrepid Beasts found themselves caged in the very heart of those black caverns: The Abyssian Locus itself.

For ten long years these Beasts were subjected to trials best left undescribed as the Archliches sought ways to pervert and twist their very essence. In the end, none of them could endure the constant assault upon both flesh and spirit, and each Beast breathed his last breath in that dark pit.

Suten-Hamu

But the Archliches had learned what they needed, and discovered the secrets which would allow them to match the children of Gaia in battle. Two races of great evil, easily bred, were raised from the corpses of the beasts. From Abidan arose the Mummies, beings of great strength and great magic, corpses preserved by finely cured wrappings and dark incantations. Suten-Hamu, first raised, was named lord among them and given the secret of their further creation. In time, he and his high priests were to raise a great army of mummified warriors.

Vinga

From Abiel arose the vampires, wicked creatures long of tooth and fleet of foot, hearts burning with hatred and instilled with a ravenous desire to feast on the blood of the living. The first-formed was called Vinga, first Palatine of the vampires, and he ruled his Broods with an iron fist as they raided the living to increase their ever-swelling ranks.

Sheol

As time passed and the Beasts grew ever more numerous upon the face of the Earth, so too did the forces of darkness in the UnderRealm. Salamanzar saw great potential in the creations of his captains, and was pleased. By his command, the dark legions began construction of a massive city in Golgotha, the largest and deepest of the UnderRealm caverns. Here, near the Abyssian Locus, was to be the seat of undead power. After three centuries under the watchful and unwavering eyes of the Archliches, their labor was completed and the city was finished. Naming it Sheol, Salamanzar took the throne and continued in his preparations for war with the children of the Earth.

3 | THE EARLY BEASTS

Time has erased many of the events that transpired during the Age of Legends, but the early origins of the more numerous races have survived in the oral traditions passed down from our forefathers. As the diverse groups of Beasts arose and began to populate the Earth, the beginnings of civilization took root. The Ursines of Midgaard and the Felines of the Nile were the earliest to arise that we know of, and their cultures also ranked among the great of the Age of Legends. Soon after, tribes and communities of Beasts were to be found all over the known world, from the Frozen Wastes of the North to the harsh deserts of Africa.

Anura

The frog-like Anura are a singular exception among the races of Beast in that we know exactly how they came to be, and when. As told in the Mystarch Dominion section of the history, the Anura were created as slaves by the Mystarch Tarchon, and how they rebelled against him when the Beasts rose against the Mystarch rule.

When the Covenant was formed, the Anura were judged worthy by Gaia the Earthmother and were granted full Beasthood, after which they eagerly bound themselves to the Covenant. Since that time, so long ago, it has not been uncommon for some Anura to be almost fanatical in their devotion to Gaia and to the good of Beasts.

Though they never had a homeland, the Anura have, in recent times, begun the first steps in constructing a city of Anura and for Anura, in the Polissya Swamp, which they are calling Moonfall.

Atavians

The sharp-eyed and sharp-taloned Atavians can trace their ancestry back to the cool oceanic coasts of western Tartessian Peninsula. Here, their feathered forefathers made nests along the beaches and inland mountains, and spent their time fishing and trading with other primitive Beasts. While their primary diet consisted of fish, hunting parties also frequently scouted into the mainland and preyed upon the lesser animals. Their enemies knew them as swift and fearful foes, and their cunning was legendary. Many of their legends tell of Ariviir, who single-handedly felled great dire wolves from the north by feigning fearful chase and leading his pursuers into snares, whence the hunted became the hunter. It is often said that he and his tribe were the inspiration for the modern Cazadorians and their fight against the second Anubian invasion. Later, the descendants of Ariviir begat the nation of Tartessia, of which little is left today but the name, though it is known that it had contact with the Dog Soldiers of Amizeh across the narrow sea.

Bandicoons

East of the Great Forest, in the rolling hills and woods of the northern mainland, in the area we now know as the Blighted Wood, lies the ancestral home of the Bandicoons. In those days, of course, the taint of the Rotted had not been dreamt of yet, and the forests here were still the domain of the Beasts. The early Bandicoons were quiet, peaceful beings who loved learning the secret paths and many plants and trees of the woods and hills. Their children would often play with the Treekin to the west, who taught their kind the powerful druidic magic that has sustained the Beasts through many a hard time.

Though jovial and good-hearted, the ancient Bandicoons kept largely to themselves, preferring the simple comforts of hearth and home within their villages to the dangerous and noisy life of adventuring. Any foe wandering into their territory quickly learned the difference between peaceful and harmless, however, for though the earliest Bandicoons built no cities nor dreamed dreams of conquest and martial glory, they were and are cunning and fearless in defense of what is theirs.

The legend goes that these early Bandicoons were not dispersed from their homeland until the Bleakness, and even then resisted the rampaging Undead for decades through the power of an artifact claimed to be from the Lost Ages. Some stories call this artifact the Stygian Eye, some the Boncairn, and some the Trillium Shard. There's no agreement on what this magical relic did to protect the Bandicoons, but in the end, it was all for naught, as they succumbed to the Bleakness and scattered to the four winds like virtually all Beasts in those terrible times.

Bounders

The earliest of the Bounders awoke on the isle of Hibernia, far to the northwest. As the Emerald Isle was then devoid of threat, the Bounders' days were idyllic and filled with leisure, abundant food, and friendship among themselves and with the occasional Hart or Broccan visitor from the isle to the East. The Bounders had everything they needed readily available and had no need for leadership nor commerce. They affectionately referred to their king-less realm as the Emerald Kingdom. So things were on Hibernia, relatively untouched by events beyond their little world, until the vivacious Bounders were finally driven out of their Emerald Kingdom by the Primal Invasion, never to return.

Broccans

Famous in the stories for both their strength of arm and great courage, the warrior clans of the Broccans hail from the Scotian highlands. While many of the Broccans practiced farming and formed small communities there, the young warriors spent most of the year in small raiding parties organized by their individual clans and headed to the lowlands to hunt the wild cats and brown bears that could be found there.

Occasionally the clans would range far to the south and raid the settlements of the Whitestone Harts, but these rarely resulted in anything approaching open warfare. Honor was paramount within the warrior clans, and Curnon save the Beast that insulted that honor. Though the Broccan clans were not scholars and kept few records, modern Broccans claim that their early ancestors were the first to take up worship of Curnon, God of the Hunt and it is true that in modern times, the High Priest of Curnon has been a Broccan more often than any other race.

Capricans

High in the peaks of the Carpathian mountains, the goat-like Capricans carved their early homes out of the very rock and dirt of the mountainside. The conditions must have been harsh indeed, but the first of the Capricans were a hard people, known for their stubborn natures and strong will. An old saying, perhaps from as far back as this time says, "Better to try and squeeze blood from a stone than move a Caprican."

In fact, they lived quite happily in their mountain home. They spent their days growing what little food they could in the rocky soil and mining the caves of the Carpathians, in which they built towns and villages. When traders would visit, the Capricans managed to do quite well for themselves by trading gems and precious minerals for necessities they lacked and luxuries to make the stinging bite of the mountain winters more tolerable.

Though we know they built small cities in shallow cave systems to hide from the winter, none have survived the ravages of time, aside from one important exception. Two centuries ago, when Janus Redclaw and his band of vampire hunters found what they named the Warren, they found a ruined city that they were able to determine had been a city of the ancient Capricans named Kar Luthin.

Fangren

The Fangren history is largely shrouded due to the unfortunate events which eventually befell their people. The few scraps of legend which have survived trace the Fangren origins back to a small tribe led by two great warriors, Romulus and Remus. Stories say that they founded a glorious city in the heart of the Tiber Valley.

The legend states that their city was built on the western bank of the river Tiber, but once completed, a quarrel erupted as to who would be the leader. Remus was said to be the wiser brother, but Romulus the stronger, and also the firstborn. Their debate raged for days, but the city's people began to lean towards the eloquent Remus. Acting quickly to protect his birthright, Romulus sent assassins to slay his brother.

Warned of the coming treachery by a spy Remus had placed in Romulus's household, Remus fled to the eastern bank and quickly gathered his forces to him. Some say that

there is no bad blood such as that between those of the same blood, and this proved sadly true. They warred for half a score years, brother against brother, Fangren against Fangren, until at least Remus was forced to flee, and disappeared from even legend. Romulus, victorious, built his city of Roma into one of great wealth and power.

The early Fangren were said to be a noble and courageous people despite their tumultuous beginnings, and great warriors besides, widely respected for their strength and wisdom both. They loved life, and honed their minds as well as their bodies. This makes their destiny all the more tragic, for these same qualities were what ultimately attracted the vampires to them, to decimate the Fangren and birth the Ferals. Their people thirsted for blood no more than a common sword does, and yet the cruel hands that twisted and wielded them bathed them in it for centuries.

Felines

Felines first arose on the banks of the Nile long ago, among the rushes and reeds. There, along the life-giving river, they formed the Badarian Dynasty - perhaps the earliest real nation of Beasts known to us, though the Ursines of Midgaard would take issue with that claim and it's uncertain as to who takes pride of place. Half-remembered stories and legends make cryptic references that some have interpreted as indicating a true Feline civilization very early in the history of the Beasts, but none can place a name to any Beast before Beowulf of the Ursines. It's likely the matter of which came first - Midgaard or Badaria - will never be decided, for the deeds of those days have washed away in the storm of time.

The Badari grew, for their time, rich in culture, and began to master the magical arts, which Felines seem naturally well-adapted to. They took up the worship of Ra, the Sun God, and basked in the light of his glory. They grew rich and powerful, and inspired envy in the Beasts around them, and they became arrogant, and decadent.

Though it's not certain how the war started, the Badarians and the Dog Soldiers of Amazih, to the West, went to war. Perhaps they warred over some great wrong one side committed against the other, or perhaps it was simply the natural evolution of a civilization grown wealthy enough to attract the attention of its neighbors, or perhaps they simply didn't like each other.

Whatever the cause, the Badari and the Dog Soldiers warred for nine generations before the Felines were swept from the Nile. The surviving Badari fled and after a long journey which cost many lives, they arrived in a land far to the north of their former home, sandwiched between two giant inland seas. They named their new home Hayasa and settled there, resolving to live humbler lives and avoid the attention of potential enemies.

It's often opined among historians that this choice of location represents, through no fault of the Felines, one of the most unfortunate decisions in the history of Beastdom, for

Hayasa is strategically situated, and is directly in the path of any southern movement by the hosts of the People of the Skull. The history of the Felines is largely one of sorrow as a result of this decision, though the last one hundred years or so represents a happy exception.

Foxen

The kingdom of the Foxen is remembered more as an idea than a history now. It is said, and passionately felt among many of the Foxen, that the Border Holds, so-called as they lay the furthest east of friendly Beast nations known to those of the time, were among the most civilized of Beasts, skilled in the arts of war, art, commerce, and lordship. Located where the Ranger Kingdoms are today, the citizen-soldiers of the Border Holds were apparently widely known as great hunters and travelers who ranged near and far, gathering a unique culture to them that drew upon the influences of all around them.

Unfortunately, little more is known about these early Beasts. All we know of them comes from third-party accounts in the stories of other nations of that time, though they were one of the few nations of Beasts to survive the Bleakness. Their civilization was scoured from the land by an invasion of the People of the Skull sometime in the latter part of the Age of Legend and the infamous citizen-soldiers of the Border Holds disappeared from history. Modern Foxen honor their memory in the Ranger Kingdoms, but do not claim to be anything other than the spiritual successor to the Border Holds.

Harts

Travelers to the southern coast of Anglorum often stand in awe of the majestic and unique cliffs which line the beaches and inland valleys of the region, known for their strange and mysterious color: white as new-fallen snow. It was here, in the forests near these cliffs, that the ancestors of the proud Harts first revealed themselves to the pages of history.

Taking their name from these same cliffs, the Whitestone Harts quickly spread across much of the great island and formed small communities where they lived in relative peace, aside from fighting off occasional small raids by the Scotian clans of Broccans to the north. Legend tells us that when the Treekin first approached the Harts, they were astonished by the natural aptitude of the beasts for such magic. Druidic rites and rituals gained great popularity throughout Whitestone and were taught to the young Harts from an early age so the most skilled could be chosen as village leaders. The Whitestone Harts gained wide renown during the Age of Legends for their great skill in healing, second only to the Treekin themselves, and even erected a large stone ring on the south tip of the isle called Stonehenge, to aid and focus their druidic magic.

Longtails

Though many stories are told of the wandering Longtails, much of what is said is fiction and hearsay. No one knows for sure where the first Longtails arose, but they roamed through central Europe for much of the Age of Legends, never staying in one spot for long. They earned their bread by performing shows where they exhibited great acrobatic feats and clever sleight of hand, and doing odd jobs like mending pots or chopping wood for villages they would stop near. At night they built enormous fires and gathered around them to tell stories, play music, and dance by the hypnotic firelight.

Because of their nomadic lifestyle, they were often blamed when something would go wrong in a community. Invariably, if they were not outright accused of theft or violence, the mutterings and whispers would start and they would move on before any real trouble could occur, for the early Longtails had no love for fighting and combat.

It's quite ironic then, considering the ill reputation of the Longtails, that much of what we know of the Age of Legends and the origins of the other races comes directly from the stories passed down verbally from parent to child around those iconic campfires. It's precisely due to their nomadic nature and oral tradition that we have even the scraps of knowledge of our history before the Bleakness.

Noctari

The early Noctari were a people both hearty and wise, living in the land of Hellena, at the base of mighty Mount Olympus, near the Aegean Sea. Though their nation was not so ancient as Badaria or Midgaard, Hellena arose soon after those ancient nations. Unlike either the Felines or the Ursines, though, the Noctari were not governed by a central authority, instead preferring to live in distinct settlements that were loosely allied with each other.

Early on, the Noctari worshipped the Gods of Mount Olympus, and each of their villages would typically adopt a patron God or Goddess. It's known that the Noctari occasionally warred against each other under the influence of competing Gods, for although they were a people who valued knowledge and good judgement, they were also a proud people, and quick to anger when they felt their local God had been insulted. The exception to this rule was Zeus the Father, who was respected and honored among all Noctari of Hellena, except perhaps by the Priestesses of Hera, whose devotion to Hera and Hera alone was legendary.

Hellena prospered greatly, and its cities grew strong, resisting even the Bleakness as well as any nation had, and was one of the few civilizations to survive more or less intact until the Age of Man. Our great debt to these ancient Noctari, as modern Beasts, is the library they built in the heart of Mount Olympus, which survived, in secret, even through the Age of Man. Though most of what we know of early Beast history comes from the

Longtails, it was through the knowledge gained from the great Library of Athena that the Beasts of Europe were able to reestablish civilization relatively quickly after the fall of Man. Philosophy, politics, the study of the trees, rivers, and animals, the secrets of curing disease: All these have their roots in the knowledge we gained from the re-discovery of the Library of Athena.

Taurians

Of early Taurians, little is known, for they kept few records. They have always been renowned as great hunters, even then, and what records have been found of the early Taurians do not tell us much about them save how many Hill Goliaths this Taurian slew, or how many captives that Taurian took in his last raid against a neighboring tribe. It's believed that they first arose in the southwestern portion of Taurania, in the Taurus mountains, for when mighty Sargon first makes his mark upon history many thousands of years later, the Taurians had not yet expanded beyond the mountains of their racial youth.

Tuskens

The Tuskens originated in the woodlands that covered the foothills of the eastern Carpathian mountains. Warriors they were, but not barbarians. Though they left few records and were no scholars or artists they had an iron discipline. They called their homeland 'Eremantus' which expresses the idea, in the Old Tongue that, "In discipline lies freedom." The ancient Tuskens spent their days training in the arts of battle and serving as mercenaries for causes just or not. They themselves sought no territory and did not demand or take great shares of treasure, serving in trade for raw iron, cloth, food, and other necessities but primarily motivated by the glory of battle.

There the Tuskens stayed, living simply in forested Eremantus until the Vampires came and drove them out of the Carpathians so that they could establish their Blood Kingdom.

Ursines

It is debatable whether Ursines or Felines formed the first true nations among the Beasts, but there is no doubt that the first Beast whose name we know was an Ursine: Beowulf, fabled first King of Midgaard. Though little is known for certain, and much is no doubt exaggerated about this semi-mythical figure, it is accepted that Beowulf was a real Ursine, likely a young chieftain of one of the tribes of Ursine before forging that race of Beasts into a nation. The legends say that when Beowulf was a chieftain, a great monster known as Grendel roamed the countryside, despoiled the forests, and drove off or consumed the moose that the Ursines hunted for food. Beowulf, resolving to slay the foul creature, ventured forth, found where it lay at night, and slew it in a great battle full of thunder and

fury. When Beowulf returned, all hailed him as a great hero, and soon he was held first in esteem among tribal chieftains.

Three moons later, another, even greater monster appeared, despoiling the forests, driving away the moose, and even raiding villages of Ursine to sate its hunger. Once again, Beowulf went forth to hunt the monstrosity, finding the cave within which it dwelt. Though the creature was not there, Beowulf found within it the rotted corpse of Grendel, and realized that the monster he hunted now was Grendel's mother. She had retrieved her child's corpse and brought it back to her lair. Beowulf gathered up the corpse of the Grendel, climbed up the hill within which the cave mouth opened, and there hung the corpse over the opening.

When Grendel's mother returned from feasting on a moose, she saw the corpse hanging over the cave mouth and grew possessed with the greatest of rages. Charging forward, she roared her fury at the defilement of her son, and fell into a great pit which Beowulf had dug. She was howling with rage as Beowulf, hidden on the hill above the cave mouth, pushed boulders off the ledge he rested on, crushing Grendel's mother in the pit below.

Beowulf climbed into the pit, hacked off one of the creature's horns, and brought it back to his people as proof of his victory, after which they hailed him as a conquering hero and proclaimed him the first King of Midgaard, and Lord of the North. For half a dozen years, Beowulf ruled the Ursines of Midgaard wisely and well, and the nation prospered. Few spoke a word against him and those chieftains who challenged his right to rule were quickly taught otherwise, for Beowulf was ever a mighty warrior, and was quick to swing his mighty axe, which was called Frostfang, and whose handle was forged of the horn he took from Grendel's mother.

It was then, as the Ursine's sun was just beginning to rise that the Dvergar first struck, rolling like a wave over northern Midgaard, crushing and burning all in their path. Beowulf led his people in many battles against the Dvergar, but here history becomes unknowable in a jumble of war and chaos. It is said that Beowulf fell in battle, a ring of Dvergar bodies lying around him, but no knowledge remains of where he fell or indeed, of Midgaard at all for almost a century after.

4 | SIGMUND OF MIDGAARD

Two generations after the death of Beowulf, Midgaard still suffered the frequent predations of the vicious Dvergar of Nidavellir. A new hero arose called Sigmund, and soon he was King. Many adventures did he have, and trials did he endure in to find some source of power to defeat the enemies of the Ursines, but they were in vain.

One night, during a full moon, while wandering the forests of Midgaard, Sigmund encountered a crippled beggar who asked him for food. Sigmund agreed, and shared his jerked meat with the beggar. The beggar, who named himself Tinian, proceeded to ask Sigmund to help him uncover the treasure he had buried long ago. Sigmund agreed, and set about digging a hole twice as high as he was before the beggar Tinian proclaimed that he had misremembered the location of the hole.

Sigmund was wroth with anger at this clear deception, but held his tongue, for he pitied the beggar and his station in life. He said, "Friend Tinian, I have fed you, and helped you amuse yourself for honor's sake, but do not trifle with me again for I am no saint possessed of patience unending."

The beggar chuckled madly and replied, "King of snow, noble lord of the North, I know you, but you do not know me, and why would you? I am nobody. But do me another trifle."

Sigmund replied, "I will do you one more favor, friend Tinian, but pray do not make a fool of me."

"I would not think of it, my lord," said the beggar.

"Then be on with it, and ask of me what you will," said Sigmund.

The beggar asked, "If it please you then, there is an axe mired in the very rock of a cave a day's journey north of here. I have not the strength to draw it out, but I see that you are mighty of sinew. Will you come with me, and draw the axe I have discovered out for me?"

Stormbringer

Sigmund pondered it and decided that there was little harm in taking a day to help Tinian, who was a pitiable being at best. After a day's journey, they arrived at the cave which Tinian had described, and there the axe lay, stuck in the uneven rock wall. Sigmund grasped the haft of the axe, and pulled hard, but it would not come loose. He braced himself and pulled with all his might, but the axe still would not loosen.

Despairing, he leaned on the axe and it suddenly slipped loose. Astounded, Sigmund wielded the axe and looked to Tinian, only find that Tinian was no longer with him.

One instant there was Tinian, and the next there was a godly being with one good eye and two ravens on his shoulders. Mighty and waxing in his might, he proclaimed to Sigmund that he was Odin, called the Allfather, and that he could offer Sigmund power over the enemies of Midgaard.

Odin

"You have proven yourself worthy, Sigmund," said the Allfather. "That you are a mighty king and warrior is known to all, but you showed yourself good-hearted when you fed me. You showed yourself patient when you did not seek to slay me for my prank with the hole, and you showed yourself trustworthy in agreeing to come with me to this cave. Only those who can give trust are worthy of receiving it in kind."

"Pledge your fealty to Asgard," proclaimed Odin, "and my kin and I will deign to cast our favor upon you. Stormbringer, that axe is called, and with it you will serve victory to your enemies."

Sigmund eagerly agreed, and took the axe he withdrew from the cave wall into battle, whence he proceeded to cut down the Dvergar like butter before a hot blade. Rallying behind their fearsome warrior-King, the Ursines of Midgaard began to push the forces of Nidavellir back, until they had reclaimed almost half of what the Dvergar had conquered in the previous decades. Sigurd's pledge of loyalty to Odin and his brothers and sisters had been justified, and his people proclaimed him the equal of Beowulf, feting him for a full month in feast and celebration.

As with all great warrior-Kings though, Sigmund's fate was not to die in a bed, doddering with age and decay. He fell on the field of battle in the prime of his manhood, driving the Dvergar back to the frozen hell from which they come. As he died he summoned forth his remaining strength and delivered blow after blow to the Dvergar around him, until he lay surrounded by Dvergar who proceeded him in his departure to the afterlife. When the saddened but victorious Ursines found his body after the battle, Sigmund's mighty axe, Stormbringer, lay broken in pieces around him, losing its life as its King lost his.

5 | SIGURD OF MIDGAARD

Sigmund had fathered many children, as was proper for a King, and the eldest of these was called Sigurd. A hero in the Dvergjar wars in his own right, Sigurd was among those who found his father's body lying broken on the battlefield. It was he who gathered the pieces of Stormbringer and brought them to Regnin, greatest blacksmith of Midgard, and asks him to reforge the blade of Stormbringer into a warhammer, for that was the weapon favored by Sigurd.

Regnin accepted the charge solemnly, for he had been the personal blacksmith of Sigmund, and if he hadn't forged Stormbringer, he had forged the weapons of all of Sigmund's lieutenants. This was to be his greatest moment; his monument to the finest man he had ever known.

Firing his forge, he set to work, but was soon caught in despair as he found himself unable to work the metal. No fire he could bank would so much as mar the metal, much less melt it. Regnin sought out Sigurd and told him of his failure. Together, Regnin and Sigurd, who was by then King, approached Thor, son of the Allfather and God of Thunder, and begged his help for the sake of their people. Thor agreed to help Regnin learn the secret of forging Stormbringer's metal in return for a favor that he would request from Sigurd at some future time.

Dragonsteel

The God of Thunder told Regnin that the metal Odin forged Stormbringer from is called 'dragonsteel' and that is formed from the powdered ash of dragon bones. He told Regnin that once forged, dragonsteel is nigh-impossible to break and that Stormbringer shattered was evidence of some alteration to the weapon made by Odin in tying Stormbringer's life to Sigmund's life. Reforging a weapon from the pieces of Stormbringer could be done in only one place that Thor knew of, and that place was not of this world.

The son of Odin led Regnin deep underground looking for a particular part of Yggdrasil, the World Tree whose myriad branches are entire worlds, and whose roots stretch through all realities. Finding the root he sought, Thor uttered something Regnin did not understand, and the two of them – God and mortal – were whisked from this world to a place of smoke, flame, and brimstone.

Hell

Barely able to breathe in the noxious environment, and suffering singed fur from the overwhelming heat, Regnin had no choice but to trust in the Lord of Thunder, who appeared unaffected by this inhospitable place.

“My lord, pray tell me, to what place have you taken me?” asked Regnin through his strangled coughing.

“Whether the devils that populate this place have a name for it, I do not know, but my lord Father simply calls it Hell,” replied Thor. “Be watchful, for the masters of Hell are mighty enough to test the mettle of the Lord of Thunder, and even their lesser lieutenants would make short work of you.”

“We must seek out the Pit of Neraka, the source of the very fires of Hell,” said Thor, “and there I will teach you the secrets of dragonsteel.”

To the great Pit they journeyed, across a land that belched fire and spit flame, and in which the air seared even as it barely sustained life. Twice they came across hunting packs of Izariel demons with Woe Jackals at their side, but they proved no match for Thor’s anger, and were quickly dispatched. Once they encountered a traveling pair of Knights of Hell, with their Greater Demon foot soldiers: a trio of the magic-using Rum’el and a pair of the monstrous Reavers favored as shocktroops by the Knights. These proved somewhat more troublesome, but while Regnin was able to dispatch two of the Rum’el, it was Thor’s irresistible might that drove their demonic assailants back, and took their cursed lives as they fled. A son of Odin is not one to trifle with.

The Pit of Neraka

Arriving at the Pit, Thor revealed, as promised, the secret of forging dragonsteel to Regnin. Setting to work while Thor stood guard, Regnin sweated and pounded, pouring his heart and soul into this monument to his beloved dead King. When he finished, he had produced the greatest work of his lifetime, and surely the finest weapon any Beast had ever held. Even the mighty Thor stood silent, in awe of the perfection of the hammer.

“You must bestow a new name upon this weapon,” said Thor, “for it is Stormbringer no longer.”

“I name it Mjolnir, my Lord.” declared Regnin.

Thor pounded Regnin on the back and said, “A fine choice! ‘Lightning’ in the old tongue. It is fitting that Stormbringer should spawn such progeny.” Thor and Regnin journeyed back to the root of Yggdrasil which they had traveled along to arrive in Hell, and once again Thor uttered words in an unknown tongue, and they were whisked away back to Earth, deep underground from which they came.

Thor’s Request

Returning to Sigurd, Thor prepared to return to Asgard. As he was to set off, a sly look crossed his face and he said to Sigurd,

“Have you forgotten that you are promised me a favor, young King of Midgaard?”

“No my Lord of Storms,” replied Sigurd. “The honor of my father is mine as well, and I hold true to my word. Name your wish. I am yours to command.”

“I would have Mjolnir,” said Thor flatly. “Stormbringer was ever my desire, but my Father gifted it to your father. It should have been mine, and now its child shall be mine. The Lord of Thunder will wield lightning made dragonsteel, and the enemies of Asgard shall despair.”

Sigurd’s Plea

Sigurd paused, but knew that he was honor bound to obey. With a longing glance at Regnin’s memorial to his great father Sigmund, he handed the weapon to Thor and said, “My lord, know that my people and I are ever loyal to the Gods of Asgard, and would dishonor ourselves before we would you, but are we to lose the power of Mjolnir-once-Stormbringer that my father used to drive back the Dvergar? Are we to lose the symbol that has propelled us, if not to victory yet, then halfway down that road?” “My lord,” pleaded Sigurd, “would you abandon us in our time of peril, when our gains stand on the razor’s edge? You have taken our mightiest weapon. Is there no help you can give in return?”

Thor sighed, for he had no patience for speeches and parley. “I am forbidden from doing battle on the Earth, friend Sigurd. What would you have me do to help you?” “Though forged by Odin, Stormbringer-now-Mjolnir is dragonsteel. It was dragonsteel that put fear into the eyes of the Dvergar. Dragonsteel could do that again,” said Sigurd cautiously.

“Do you know what you ask, little mortal? Do you know what you ask? The armory of Asgard itself contains but five score such weapons,” replied Thor impatiently.

Sigurd’s Pledge

Sigurd thought but a brief moment before kneeling and proclaiming, “Great God of the Storm, of Thunder, and of Lightning, wielder of Mjolnir, and son of the Allfather, if you but find a way to help us in this manner, my people will praise your name above all your brothers and sisters, holding only Odin Himself above you in our esteem. We shall be your people, mighty God. The Ursines of Midgaard will be the Northern Storm moved by the hand of Thor.”

Thor laughed and boomed, “That is well and good, Sigurd, and I will be happy to accept your people’s fealty, but I will require one more personal favor from you. Grant me this promise and I will bring Regnin enough dragon bone ash to forge many weapons of dragonsteel with which to battle the denizens of Nidavellir.”

“Lord Thor,” gasped Sigurd, still kneeling, “what you ask is yours. My people will be forever grateful, and yours to command, and you need only call on me and I will give you the favor that is yours.”

“Then rise, my Storm King, and go to your people. I will return with what I have promised.” With that, Thor was gone.

A month passed, and the territorial gains that Sigmund had made against the Dvergjar hordes began to crumble. Sigurd led his army valiantly, and was wounded many times, but without the power of the Odin-blessed Stormbringer, the Dvergjar did not fear him the way they feared Sigmund. Slowly, the armies of Nidavellir advanced once again.

The Forging of the Three

Finally, Thor returned, bringing with him great bags of dragon bone ash. He would not speak of how he had acquired it, but the lingering gashes and burns that laced his body told their own story. As forging dragonsteel from the bone ash does not require a journey to the Pit of Neraka, Thor was able to show Regnin how to create it in a huge forge the Ursines built at Thor’s direction, the better to withstand the enormous heat required.

Once more, Regnin sweated and pounded, forging three mighty weapons that are certainly among the finest weapons ever crafted by Beasts. First forged was an enormous axe, which he called Soulreaver. The axe head was said to be black as night, and wreathed in blue flame.

Next forged by Regnin was a longsword, bright of blade and sure of hilt. This he named Calaburn which means “slices steel” in the old language.

Finally, Regnin forged another warhammer as sister to Mjolnir. This hammer he named Torand or "Thunder", to Mjolnir’s Lightning.

Presenting Soulreaver, Calaburn, and Torand to Sigurd, Regnin declared that the forging of Mjolnir and these other weapons had placed a weight on his soul; a great weariness that he could not shake. Though there was yet dragon bone ash with which to forge new weapons, Regnin could do no more, and no other smith had the skill necessary to work the dragonsteel.

Midgaard Advances

Resolving that if his father could push back the Dvergjar with just Stormbringer, blessed by Odin though it was, he could similarly advance with the force of the trio of dragonsteel weapons Regnin had poured his soul into. Arming himself with Torand, and his chief lieutenants with Soulreaver and Calaburn, Sigurd led his army forth to sweep the Dvergjar

from Midgaard. Once again, the foul creatures knew fear as their hordes were cut apart by the huge Ursines armed with dragonsteel.

After a year of great victories, Sigurd's wife bore him a son, Hakon, and a year after that, a daughter named Sigrun. In battle after battle, Sigurd fought victoriously for his people, and for the future of his children. Time after time, he personally led the attacks until he had taken back all the territory that Midgaard had held at the apex of Beowulf's reign. Sigurd and his generals began planning to go further, to invade Nidavellir itself and rid themselves of the threat of the Dvergar once and for all.

Sigurd's Choice

As they made their plans, letting their armies build up their strength, Thor returned to Midgaard in person once again, telling Sigurd that he had come to claim his favor. Sigurd readily agreed, prepared to sacrifice something personally valuable to him, but wholly unprepared for Thor's request.

"Storm King, you have done well and you have pleased me," said Thor, "but now it is time to grant me my due. I would have one of your children. Make your choice, and say your goodbyes, for you will never see the child you choose again."

Sigurd wept, for this was a hard, hard thing Thor asked of him. Though fearsome on the battlefield, he loved his children greatly. Nevertheless, he knew he had no choice. Hakon was to be King as first-born male. As his wife wailed and clutched at Sigrun, Sigurd took his baby daughter from his wife's arms and, still weeping, handed her to Thor.

"I know not why you ask this thing of me, my Lord of Thunder, but I do not do it gladly, even for you, to whom I and my people owe much. I know not what you will do with my daughter, but I pray you keep her safe," said Sigurd with sorrow. "Goodbye, my daughter."

"It is not for you to know why I do this," replied Thor, "but know that none of what I do is needless." And with that, Thor departed for Asgard, taking Sigrun, the infant daughter of the Storm King, with him.

Sigurd was taken with sorrow over the loss of his daughter, and his taste for war dimmed. Though he still planned to invade Nidavellir, he told his generals that the time was not right yet, that they must wait for Regnin to recover his strength so that they may forge more of the great dragonsteel weapons. His generals muttered quietly among themselves, believing that now was the time to strike, with the Dvergar on the run, and that their king had lost his nerve.

Epilogue

And then...tragedy. Regnin, still trying to overcome the weary burden his soul felt, fell in his own home to the blade of a Dvergar assassin, sent to ensure Soulreaver, Calaburn, and

Torand were the only weapons of dragonsteel that would cut them down in the event of an invasion by Midgaard. With the loss of his Regnin, the last link to his father Sigmund, and the only source of dragonsteel for the Ursines, Sigurd cancelled his plans to invade Nidavellir. He had managed to take back and hold onto all of Midgaard's territory, which was in itself a great victory, but his spirit never truly recovered from the loss of Sigrun and the murder of Regnin.

The Dvergar retreated unharried back to Nidavellir, and Sigurd lived out the rest of his life never able to forget his baby daughter's smile. Here, good readers, we leave the story of Midgaard for many years, for though Sigurd's son Hakon became king after Sigurd, history records no great deeds done by him, and the line of Sigmund passes into obscurity.

6 | THE RISE OF THE MYSTARCHS, PART 1

As the years passed, the nations of the Beasts grew in power and grandeur. They practiced the arts of war and healing, of great magic and clever political machinations. Armies were raised, border wars fought, boundaries shifted, and the many were the great deeds of courage and skill performed as the Beasts explored the lands of the Earth. Despite this, the times were largely peaceful for the Beast Kingdoms. It was a golden age of learning and discovery.

In those days, druidic magic was old, of the Treetin, but the mystical energies of arcane magic were still new to the Beasts. The earliest recorded mages were Treetin-trained druids who sensed alternate sources of mystical energy to tap. These early druids successfully harnessed the latent energy they found, and became the first of the Beast mages.

As this new style of magic gained popularity among the growing nations, arcane universities were established to teach young mages the mystic arts. Like druidic magic, arcane energy required no inherent talent to use beyond a keen mind and stalwart spirit. Anyone with the knowledge of its workings was able to become a mage, with enough practice. As such, many young mages went out into the world seeking more knowledge to increase their own power and the power and prestige of their kingdom.

The Mysterium Primordial

Many of the relics from earlier ages had been ignored by the Beasts until this point in history, when it became clear that some of them could provide insight into the use of arcane energy. With this discovery, great effort was put into searching for such items, and those Beasts who had acquired them as oddities grew quite rich by selling them to power-hungry mages. It was during the wandering and questing of these early mages that the first pages of the Mysterium Primordial were discovered.

Legend tells us that it was a young Badarian Feline who found the first scroll. His name has been lost to us, but we know that he was an unskilled mage who had barely passed his arcane tests to earn the coveted title. While out walking in the hills near his city one afternoon, he stumbled and fell into a deep ravine. His imperfect mastery of magic probably saved his life, but he was not powerful enough to lift himself out. Traveling along the ravine floor, he came across a mysterious cave, which was sealed by a large rock covered in strange symbols.

As he drew near to it, intrigued by the symbols, the rock started glowing and pulsing. He sensed his own life force pulsating in unison with it and grew very frightened, but was entranced and could not pull away. Closer and closer he came, until finally the stone surface was mere inches from his outstretched hand. As he reached out and gently caressed the central symbol on the design, the world exploded around him in bright light and he fell to the ground, unconscious.

When he awoke, the rock was shattered and pieces of it were strewn about the ground. He stepped into the cave, fearful and curious, and saw a few musty scrolls. Opening them revealed nothing, as they seemed to be gibberish. Disappointed, he gathered them up and returned to his simple quarters at the mage guild to ponder what had happened and study them further.

The Mysterium Translated

Several months passed, and tales started to spread to the other kingdoms of a surprisingly powerful young mage whose talent outstripped anything seen before, and whose teachers had badly misjudged him. He was performing feats of magic that were only theoretical at that time, and sharing his secrets with the other Felines of Badaria.

The other universities pressed the Badarians to reveal the secret of their great leaps in magical prowess, and it was revealed that the translated scrolls were pages of the Mysterium Primordial, an immensely powerful book of great magic that was written in the a very old dialect of the old tongue by unknown beings from the Lost Ages. The information within those pages was incredibly difficult to translate, and even harder for the Beasts to understand and apply, but the little they could grasp was enough to grant them enormous arcane power. Furthermore, it soon became clear that these were only a few pages of the complete text.

With that discovery, the universities and powerful mages of the lands began to search in earnest for the pages of the Mysterium Primordial. Ignoring whatever reasoning had caused the tome to be divided and sealed away to begin with, they sought similarly warded caves throughout the land. The hunt for the power of the Lost Ages had begun.

7 | THE RISE OF THE MYSTARCHS, PART 2

The power of the mages grew greatly with each new page of the Mysterium Primordial that was uncovered. Although only small bits of each page could be translated, these fragments provided the foundation of the arcane universities that would produce some of the most influential and powerful Beasts in the known world. Where once they could bring forth a few sparks, now they could conjure a raging storm of fire. Where once they could chill the skin at a touch, now they could cover a city in ice. To be taught the secrets of the Mysterium Primordial was the greatest honor, and the universities overflowed with students of the highest caliber.

The most powerful and most knowledgeable of the mages were those wandering souls who sought the pages of the Mysterium Primordial itself. Funding their travels by tossing the universities scraps of information gleaned from translated scrolls, they searched across the world for these pages, leaving no stone unturned. In time, eight great mages emerged from the searchers who proved to be the wisest, the most capable, and the most powerful mages of their generation, and perhaps any generation, though many would take issue with such an extreme claim.

They called themselves the Mystarchs and sought each other out to work together to seek out the coveted scrolls. Through skill, persistence, and even trickery and bribery, they managed to gather large parts of the Mysterium Primordial, hoarding them to themselves and outpacing their former peers to become masters to their students. They were well known and greatly respected in their time for the magical arts were the popular fashion.

Al-Idrisi

Each of the Mystarchs had a particular specialization of which they were typically the greatest practitioner in the known world, which, to be fair, encompassed a smaller area than we're familiar with today. They considered themselves equals, yet there existed among them an unspoken acknowledgement that Al-Idrisi, a commanding Atavian noble whose word was highly respected, was the greatest of them. He cared little for the more destructive aspects of the arcane arts, and instead focused his efforts on teleportation and travel magic. Many of the advances that we take for granted today come from his work.

Heraclitus and Macha

Next was Heraclitus, a Noctari who was said to be a great master of the burning art of fire magic. He and the Hart Macha, known for her prowess with battle magic, would

frequently travel together in search of the Mysterium Primordial pages, seeking them out in the perilous regions of the Earth.

Jezebel

From the southern lands of the Dog Soldiers came Jezebel, skilled in the mystic arts of planar magic. She was able to see beyond what normal mortal eyes could see, and her divination skills were legendary. She often journeyed and worked with Al-Idrisi, and many accounts of history claim that he loved her deeply, although she did not return his love.

Tarchon

The Bandicoon Tarchon was the master of enchantment, and was known for weaving beautiful gardens of illusionary flowers and charming the young maidens of his homelands whenever he had the opportunity. With equal ease however, he was able to teach his enemies that phantasms of little substance can burn the mind and change the purpose of armies.

Jarnsaxa and Zahaak

Jarnsaxa, an Ursine, and Zahaak, a Taurian, frequented the far regions of the north that the other Mystarchs found too inhospitable. Jarnsaxa combined her great powers of the cold with Zahaak's mastery of the air to ward off the numbing cold and icy winds of the barren reaches. Their searches proved to be most fruitful, as they went where others would not or could not go.

Nefritari

Finally, Nefritari was a Feline who studied the magic of death. She traveled alone in her journeys, and while her fellow Mystarchs respected her wisdom, she was quietly feared. In many circles, and never in her hearing, she was called the Mistress of Death, although she did not consider herself evil. These eight Mystarchs used their collective power to construct a great stronghold in the Alpine Mountains where they could plan their travels and study the Mysterium Primordial in peace. Through the aid of their considerable powers, they were able to locate and obtain nearly all of the pages belonging to the great tome within two decades.

THE ENIGMA

With the blessing of the arcane universities, the Mystarchs began the work of translating the complete Mysterium Primordial in earnest, applying what they learned to their studies. As they labored, it soon became clear that the tome was intended to be used in a certain, specific way. There was, for lack of a better word, a code that they needed to

unlock the true potential of the Mysterium. They began to call this code the Enigma Primal, and bent all their efforts and will to discerning it. All advances they'd made so far had been, while impressive, apparently trivial to the lost authors of the Mysterium. It was, as they believed, with the inevitable discovery of the Enigma, that they would take their deserved places as lords of the Earth, bringing Beasts into a new Age of Paradise.

8 | THE MYSTARCHS AND THE SHADOW LEGION

The years flowed on. Winters followed summers and passed again to winter, and the Enigma Primal did not present itself. Despite their dedicated effort, some of the Mystarchs began to fear that they would never realize the full potential of the Mysterium Primordial. In time, they began to return to their previous pursuits and studies. The translation of the full tome provided many new insights for them to work with, even if it could not be used as intended.

While the other Mystarchs remained largely sequestered in their personal chambers and laboratories, Al-Idrisi's interests had always been inclined towards his travels. He grew restless in the Alpine Mountains, and he longed to see new sights and explore new lands. Jarnsaxa's tales of the Ursine histories had always intrigued him; in particular the ones involving Yggdrasil, the World Tree. Were there truly other worlds? If so, might an older, wiser race know more of the Mysterium Primordial?

Yggdrasil

Al-Idrisi resolved to find out for himself. Jezebel had spoken at times of glimpsing other worlds in her divinations, but she knew not whether they were true sight or past visions of this world. Still, he told her of his plans and she agreed to accompany him again on this journey. Through her second sight, they found the entrance to the deep parts of the earth, where the roots of Yggdrasil wind their way through soil and stone with equal ease. For two months, Al-Idrisi studied them and experimented carefully with all he knew of traveling magic.

Finally, he thought he saw how to use the roots to access the branches of Yggdrasil, which are all worlds in all universes. Uttering the words of magic over a selected root, Al-Idrisi saw a portal open before him. He found himself looking at a mirror image of himself, which grinned and waved back at him. Overcome by surprise and triumph, he closed the portal and slumped back, lost in thoughts of power.

He understood the secret of planar travel now. Over the next months, he and Jezebel journeyed through the reaches of the UnderRealm, avoiding or battling the denizens of the darkness as they could. They sought roots of Yggdrasil that might lead them to branch-worlds that differ greatly from Earth and they found many. Some branches were worlds nearly exactly like our own, and some were so different as to be utterly alien and hostile to life as we know it.

In one world, they encountered the mighty Sphinxes, although these future Godslayers knew nothing of the Mysterium Primordial. In another, the very air seared their eyes and sulfur assaulted their nostrils while in yet another no sound could be heard nor made, but an inhuman wailing pervaded all. As they explored, Jezebel began to sense a pattern in the arrangement of roots and which worlds were accessible to them as a result. She was soon able to guide them towards specific ones, and they decided to narrow their search to those worlds where they might receive assistance in locating the Enigma Primal.

On and on they traveled, through many realities and worlds until they came to a group of worlds that were, for lack of a better term, on branches of Yggdrasil that are “close” to each other. Something was wrong, though. Jezebel had begun to sense an evil presence, and with each new world her uneasiness increased. They began to see signs of corruption in the worlds they were visiting. The people, the landscapes, were... wrong. Twisted. They traveled more quickly through each new world, no longer sure if they were seeking the Enigma Primal or the source of whatever power it was that seemed to be perverting whole worlds.

Finally, they arrived in a plane where the air was thick with the smell of rot, and half-imagined voices whispered terrible things in their ears. All was bleak and the barren landscape hung forever on the edge of twilight. No beings were to be found here, but Jezebel immediately sensed the presence of the Enigma Primal – the key to the Mysterium that they had long searched for.

The Enigma Primal

She and Al-Idrisi gathered their courage and ventured out of their portal. Jezebel guided them far from the root of Yggdrasil that anchored their portal, and took them to an ancient ruin of crumbled and broken stone. In the center of the ruin, on a pedestal and guarded by wards, stood what they had crossed worlds and planar boundaries to find: the Enigma Primal, index to the Mysterium Primordial.

As Al-Idrisi stepped forth into the ruin to claim the prize, the half-heard whispers intensified to encompass agonizing shrieking and mad laughter. In between the babble, one word could be heard echoed over and over: “Shadow...shadow...shadow.”

Visibly shaken, Al-Idrisi reached up and used his arts to dispel the wards. Grasping the Enigma Primal to his chest, he and Jezebel turned to leave as quickly as they could. Flowing essence, black as the darkest night, began pouring out of the cracks of the ruins and bubbling up from the ground around them. The half-heard whispers were half-heard no longer, and the shrieks and laughter pierced their ears. Snatches of the insane mutterings could now be made out: “...such power...masters will be pleased...it begins anew...follow...follow...shadow”

Pursuit

Al-Idrisi and Jezebel stared in horror as the blackness began to form shapes around them, mirror images of their own two bodies but black as pitch and reflecting no light. As the shapes lurched towards them, Al-Idrisi and Jezebel remembered that they were hardly defenseless and began lashing out with the most terrible and destructive magic they knew. The shadow beings fell back before their might, screaming and shrieking, but more of the fiends poured over their fallen brethren and the defeated shadows merely reformed themselves to continue the assault.

The two intrepid Mystarchs steadily retreated from the ever growing army, and finally Jezebel used most of her strength to call up a blazing wall of fire, temporarily separating them from the creatures. She collapsed, unconscious, and Al-Idrisi took her and fled in terror back towards the root of Yggdrasil from which they had come.

Arriving at the root, he hastily opened a portal and leapt through it, still bearing the unconscious Jezebel. Turning back, he saw thousands upon thousands of the shadow forms, leaping and rolling over one another like great waves in a sea of darkness, quickly closing the gap between them. Seized by terror, Al-Idrisi closed the portal and collapsed to the ground in exhaustion.

Awakening some hours later, though greatly relieved that they had escaped with their lives and the Enigma Primal both, Al-Idrisi and the recovered Jezebel were freshly horrified to see thin, weedy tendrils of solid shadow reaching out from the root through which they had come. They immediately set off for the fortress in which dwelt their fellow Mystarchs, in the Alpine Mountains, determined to use the Enigma Primal to unlock the full potential of the Mysterium Primordial and combat this new threat.

The Mystarch Council

Soon enough, the eight Mystarchs were gathered in the heart of their Alpine fortress with the Enigma Primal and the Mysterium Primordial spread out before them. Al-Idrisi and Jezebel talked to them of the Shadow they had encountered, and of the finding of the Enigma. As Al-Idrisi opened the Enigma for the first time, there among the greatest Beast minds of their time, there was a collective gasp of dismay, for though most of it was blessedly intact, the first page, the key to the key, as it were, was missing. In fact, it had clearly been torn away willfully. The Enigma was thus worse than useless to the Mystarchs, for attempting to read it without the key would risk insanity and worse for the reader.

The frightening conclusion was inescapable: The Enigma had been a trap, placed there by the shadow beings, whom the Mystarchs began to collectively refer to as the Shadow, or the Shadow Legion. Even more terrifying was the theory proposed by Tarchon: the Shadow had set the trap not to capture whoever found it, but to follow the seekers back to their home world, presumably to take it for their own. Jezebel and Al-Idrisi confirmed

for their fellows that they had encountered worlds 'near' to the one on which they had found the Enigma that showed evidence of wholesale corruption by the Shadow.

The Mystarchs debated and argued for days as to the proper course of action, and eventually came to consensus that they lacked sufficient knowledge of the Shadow. Resolving to learn more, Al-Idrisi and Jezebel agreed to seek out the Shadow once again, this time with all of the Mystarchs backing them up save Zahhak, who felt someone should stay behind and seek a way to recreate the missing first page of the Enigma.

The Mystarchs set off to seek knowledge of the Shadow Legion, and while much could be written of the trials and travails they endured in their search, they eventually found the knowledge they sought.

The Dark Lords

On a forgotten world far on the fringes of Yggdrasil, beings of Shadow arose. Whether this was long ago or yet sometime in the future is not known, for the Shadow does not move through the currents of time as we do. The Mystarchs were able to discover only that the first of the Shadow Legion to arise grew mighty and dominated the others of their kind.

These masters of the Shadow were and are called the Darklords and though their ultimate goals are not known, it became clear to the Mystarchs that Tarchon's frightening theory was correct. The Shadow was looking for a way to a new series of worlds to conquer, and the Enigma had been set out as a trap for any beings capable of crossing the boundaries between the worlds. Al-Idrisi and Jezebel did not truly escape after all. They were permitted to leave, and the Shadow followed them to Earth, though imperfectly.

The trail that Al-Idrisi and Jezebel left was not...wide enough...for lack of a better expression, for the Shadow to come through in true strength yet but there was little doubt among the Mystarchs that the Darklords would be bending their will to expand the channel that Al-Idrisi and Jezebel had inadvertently created between our world and the worlds of the Shadow Legion.

Returning to their Alpine fortress, the Mystarchs found a scene of nightmare. Bodies, torn in half, lined the fortress walls and pools of blood dotted the courtyard. Inside was even worse, and in the center of the nightmare stood Zahhak, cackling insanely.

Though the other seven Mystarchs were able to subdue Zahhak, they found him possessed of a wild mystical strength he had not previously exhibited. Imprisoning him underneath their fortress and placing warding spells on him to prevent him from using magic they began to question him. Through his incessant cackling they were able to learn that while they were gone, he had made significant headway in recreating the key to the

Enigma Primal, but was never able to complete it. Believing that his partial key would suffice, Zahhak had attempted to read the Enigma, to the doom of his mind. It revealed to him the true scope of the Shadow and drove him mad in the process.

Zahhak had begun to kidnap Beasts from the surrounding area to perform what he called his experiments on them. In his now-twisted mind he believed he was trying to learn some great secrets that would serve as weapons against the Shadow. Score upon score of Beasts met their demise at his hands while the other Mystarchs journeyed the reaches of Yggdrasil searching for the truth of the Darklords and the Shadow.

The Mystarchs knew little of the mind and had no method by which to reverse the damage done to Zahhak. They resolved that they must keep him imprisoned until such time as they could find a way to cure him, but given that they now felt they must devote themselves to the coming threat of the Shadow Legion, it seemed likely that Zahhak would live out the rest of his days as a madman in a cell.

A year went by, and then another and the only sign of the Shadow were the tendrils still reaching out from the root by which Al- Idrisi and Jezebel had brought back the Enigma Primal. A decade passed, and while the Mystarchs grew in power, no new signs of the Shadow made themselves known. Perhaps the Darklords had turned their will elsewhere and no longer sought this world?

9 | THE MYSTARCH DOMINION

The years had not been kind to Zahhak. Imprisoned beneath the Mystarch fortress for over a decade, his mind had broken down further and further. Eventually, most of the other Mystarchs gave up attempting to help him and even stopped visiting him. Only Jezebel was willing to see him, out of pity and guilt. She felt responsible for his miserable condition. If only she and Al-Idrisi had not gone searching for the Enigma Primal they would not have found the Shadow and therefore not needed the others to search for information. Perhaps Zahhak would not have been driven mad with someone to stay and help him resist the temptation of power.

And all was for naught, anyway. In all these years, the Dark Lords had done nothing. No threats had been made. No Shadow Fiends walked the Earth. The Mystarchs had only their own fear and failure to contend with, and Zahhak was the constant reminder of that. So each year Jezebel would descend into their dungeons, hoping to see some trace of sanity restored to his tortured eyes.

Zahhak's Recovery

Fifteen years had passed while Zahhak rotted in his chains. At the start of the sixteenth year, Jezebel made her annual, mournful visit. But what she encountered was not at all what she had expected. Instead of his usual cowering, slaving, pitiful self, Zahhak was calmly sitting cross-legged on the floor, watching her enter. His eyes were lucid.

He explained to Jezebel that he had been visited by an otherworldly being of great power. Calling itself a Dor'kana, it had healed his troubled psyche and taught him the secrets of a new kind of magic— that of the mind. The Dor'kana had come bearing this knowledge for one reason: The Shadow was coming to Earth, and soon. He charged Zahhak with preparing the Earth for the coming battle, and taught him to manipulate minds.

The sad reality was that Zahhak was only slightly less mad as a result of the Dor'kana's ministrations, and that Zahhak had employed this new mind magic, which was not taken into account by the warding spells the Mystarchs had placed on his cell, to convince Jezebel that he was sane again.

She freed him and they went to speak to the other Mystarchs. Only Tarchon and Macha were at the Mystarch stronghold at that time, but when the rest returned they found Tarchon, Macha, and Jezebel supporting Zahhak and agreeing to his demands without question. Zahhak claimed that they must first unite the known world against the Shadow, by force if necessary, and then finish what he had started 15 years before: decode the Enigma Primal.

The others were unconvinced at first. Al-Idrisi spoke most vehemently against forcing the Beast nations to unite, arguing that to do so would not only be impractical but would make them illegitimate kings and queens. Jarnsaxa thought it foolish to delve back into the Enigma Primal, which had driven Zahhak mad. But in the end, the unwavering conviction of four of their peers won them over. What good would a free world be if it could not stand against a threat to its existence? What good was sanity if they lacked the power to defeat the Shadow and defend the lives of everyone they cared about?

With great reservations, the Mystarchs voted unanimously to prepare the known world for the coming battle. Then, Al-Idrisi revealed his news: In his latest travels, he had found a civilization far to the east, in mountains much greater and older than the Alpines, called Kathmand. Their people spoke of an ancient prophecy, pulled from the caverns beneath their home, which was eerily similar to the parts of the Enigma Primal that were comprehensible.

The Kathmandi claim that it had been written by no Beast, and dated to a Lost Age. It seemed that the key to the Enigma Primal might have been hidden on Earth after all. Al-Idrisi left with Jarnsaxa and Nefritari, and journeyed east back to investigate it further while the others prepared to unite the Beasts. The Beasts of Europe were initially resistant to the message of the Mystarchs, but in time, most acquiesced. Some kingdoms agreed to unite out of fear of the Shadow, and some out of respect for the obvious power and wisdom of the Mystarchs.

Resistance

Some, however, were not willing to hand over their self-determination so easily. Several kingdoms acknowledged the threat of the Shadow and pledged their assistance when the time for battle came, but were not as willing to submit to Mystarch control as the other nations. In particular, the Taurians of Taurania, the Bounders of the Emerald Kingdom, the Dog Soldiers of Amizeh, and the Broccan clans in the Scotian Highlands were resistant to external rule.

This resistance angered Zahhak and sent him into fits of rage but he was unable to sway his fellows. Having shared the secrets learned from their early studies of the Mysterium Primordial, the Mystarchs faced in the mages of Europe a combined force that could outmatch them, without even considering the armies of the nations of Beasts that would stand against these would-be overlords.

Meanwhile, in the east, Al-Idrisi and his companions had returned to Kathmand and discovered the ancient caverns which were said to contain the prophecy. They entered with great trepidation but found precisely what they were seeking. Finally, the key to the Enigma Primal, and thus the Mysterium Primordial, was theirs!

It appeared that it had been written by a long-lost civilization as a kind of super-weapon to be used at last resort against imminent defeat. Perhaps the enemy was the Shadow. Perhaps the long-lost civilization would have been an enemy. The Mystarchs did not know, but in a few months time they had studied it and copied it, and then returned to the other Mystarchs in the Alpine Fortress.

We may never discover the true extent of the glorious powers the Mystarchs discovered when the full potential of the Mysterium Primordial was unlocked, for they did not share their secrets with the other Beasts this time. We know their power was immense, and no Beast before or after them has been capable of wielding such raw energy. Bound by their previous resolution to use force if necessary, the Mystarchs brought the last of the resisting Beast nations under their control. A few displays of their newfound power were enough to cow the stragglers and cement their dominion over their fellow Beasts.

The Mystarchs now had political power to match their mystical power, but all was not well, for Zahhak's madness festered, unseen by his fellow Mystarchs but all-too-apparent to the ambassadors from the subjugated Beast Nations, whom Zahhak saw as beneath him and thus saw no need to bedevil them with his mind magic. Why ensorcel the peasants when you control the Kings and Queens?

One use that the Mystarchs put the unlocked Mysterium to bears mentioning. The Mystarch Tarchon felt that with his newfound power it would be fitting to have suitable servants to attend to him. Why not a new race of Beasts? Tarchon, now mighty in his puissance, deemed himself fit to emulate the task of Gods and journeyed to the eastern end of the Mystarch empire, to the Polissya Swamp and gathered creatures of the murk.

Many were his failures with some of the more exotic of the swamp creatures, and finally he exerted his mystical will upon a breed of large frogs living in the Polissya. This time, the result was not a hideously deformed freak or simply a dead animal, but upright creatures that resembled a true Beast though were not quite that. Tarchon named them the Anura and set them to the most demeaning and most odious tasks of manual labor.

Tarchon, feeling that as the creator of the Anura he was their God, further demanded that the Anura worship him, and sacrifice one of their own every fortnight and burn the body on a pyre, in offering to him. Though they were brought into the world by Tarchon, the Anura were as any other thinking creature and resented their lowly status as well as their cruel master and creator. They had no allies though, for none cared for the Anura and few Beasts were even aware they existed. For now, the Anura had no choice but to permit themselves to be abused lest Tarchon decide to simply wipe out their budding people.

The last pocket of resistance to Mystarch rule in Europe were the Treekin, who were impervious to Zahhak's mental trickery. For the first time in history, Beast and Treekin battled and incredibly, even the Treekin fell back before the combined might of the Mystarchs. While once the Treekin lived in enclaves spread across Europe, now the

Treekin retreated to the Great Forest along the Western end of Europe and gathered there, concentrating their ancient arboreal power to bar the forest to those they sadly looked upon as enemies now.

Zahhak was determined to penetrate the Great Forest, believing that none should stand against his will to save the world from the Shadow, and that those who would must be convinced of the error of their ways. Yet, though the Mystarchs threw their full might at the Great Forest, the defenses held. Attack after attack was repelled, and armies broke upon the walls of the forest, struck down by the trees themselves, it is said. The spells of the Mystarchs were for naught, for they were simply absorbed by the forest. Even Al-Idrisi, the master of travel magics, was unable to use his magic to move within the Great Forest of the Treekin.

Finally, recognizing that while he could not prevail over the combined Treekin but that the Treekin were now confined to the Great Forest, Zahhak and the Mystarchs called off the attack. Meeting in their Alpine Stronghold, it was agreed that each Mystarch must rule a section of their empire and prepare it for the coming of the Shadow.

10 | THE FALL OF THE MYSTARCHS

The new kingdom was divided into seven sections and each Mystarch took control of the region nearest to his or her own people, but for Zahhak who ruled over the others from their Alpine fortress. Despite this return to the lands of their youth, the Mystarchs found no welcome homecoming upon their arrival in their appointed regions. Word of Zahhak's cruel and dismissive rule had spread throughout all of Europe and the Mystarchs, once widely viewed as noble protectors of the land and people, were now seen as the vassals of a mad overlord. Still, the nations were obedient, if grudgingly, for they had experienced the power of the Mystarchs in the noon sun of their power.

With each passing month, Zahhak's demands became stricter and more absurd. By law, all public talk by state officials was ordered to be of the upcoming "War with the Shadow." Each Beast was asked to sacrifice his freedom and happiness for the safety of the world, and told that not doing so was a crime against all Beasts everywhere. Secret tribunals and private enforcer squads were formed, and anyone suspected of being a dissident to the new order simply vanished or worse. The smiths and forges worked around the clock to produce weapons and machines of war for the upcoming war, which even the opponents of the Mystarch rule granted was of grave concern.

All Beasts without a trade to benefit the war effort were forcibly drafted into Zahhak's private armies and sent far from their homes for rigorous, and often fatal, training. Females of childbearing age were expected to be pregnant with new young for the war effort as often as possible, and those who spoke out against such demands were brutally shown the error of their ways.

Appeals to the other Mystarchs fell on deaf ears, for they were firmly in Zahhak's grasp. Emissaries from the people, lamenting the plight of their fellow Beasts were ignored or imprisoned. The once-great reputation of the Mystarchs had become a distant memory. Eventually, many gave up hope of reasoning with them. Mutterings of revolt and violent revolution were heard in the night, and in the back rooms of taverns. Zahhak's private enforcers redoubled their efforts to root out any dissension but a righteous idea is hard to extinguish and all love their freedom. The rule of the Mystarchs had become worse than the threat of the Shadow in the minds of so many Beasts.

Soon, talk gave way to action. The Dog Soldiers of Amizeh, Jezebel's territory and homeland, erupted into revolution, striking down those of Zahhak's army that had oppressed them. Their victory was short-lived. Zahhak's orders to Jezebel were swift and merciless. He sent a contingent of his private army to Amizeh, and with their assistance Jezebel made an example of her fellow Dog Soldiers, brutally crushing the rebellion and putting one in two to death.

This atrocity did not have its intended effect, however. Instead, it unleashed a pent-up torrent of anti-Mystarch sentiment that had been largely hidden and suppressed until now. If their lives were to be miserable, short, and ended for speaking out, why should they fight for the world? What joy in living was there to be found in Zahhak's kingdom?

Revolution Re-Ignited

Two years after the first Dog Soldier rebellion, Amizeh flamed into revolution once again, but this time they did not stand alone. The proud Tauranians, ashamed that Zahhak was one of their race, joined the Dog Soldiers as did the wild Broccan clans of the Scotian Highlands and, surprising all with their fierce resolve, the Bounders of the Emerald Kingdom.

Acting swiftly before Zahhak might be alerted, squads of Bounders made the short trip by boat to the Scotian Highlands and there rendezvoused with war parties from the Broccan clans. Replete with mages and druids as well as warriors, they journeyed south with all speed and soon tracked down and subdued Macha. Many died, for even a lone Mystarch was nearly a force of nature, but the Beasts had nothing to lose now. They fought like ones possessed, incensed by years of brutal domination.

The Tauranians attacked the Feline capital of Hayasa, and similarly captured Nefritari. Finally, the Dog Soldiers used trickery to surprise the unsuspecting Jezebel in her sleep and took their vengeance for their slaughtered friends and family. She survived the night as a valuable political prisoner, but bore the scars of her punishment until she was lost to history.

With three of the seemingly all-powerful Mystarchs in the hands of friendly Beasts, the other regions were spurred into action. The whole of Europe rose up in defiance of the Mystarchs' rule, starting with the Anura whose sudden defiance took Tarchon by surprise, and caused him to be the next to fall.

Zahhak Subdued

Chaos reigned supreme, and in the ensuing confusion a strong and purposeful army from several nations struck into the heart of Europe. In a decisive and bloody battle, they defeated the private Mystarch army and captured Zahhak. With his mystical power blocked by arcane shields, Zahhak's control on the minds of the other Mystarchs was lifted.

They were sick with guilt over what they had done. Al-Idrisi, realizing that he could never live amongst the Beasts again, used his arts to leave the known world and disappear. The next morning, Jezebel's cell was found empty. Most Beasts believe that Al-Idrisi had finally mastered boundless teleportation, and used it to rescue Jezebel and escape.

The Trial of the Mystarchs

With Europe in turmoil, Jezebel and Al-Idrisi vanished, three of their number still captured, and the full guilt of their actions weighing upon them, the remaining Mystarchs surrendered and gave themselves up to the Beasts, hoping for mercy. They were given communal trials by a committee made of representatives from all the Beast nations, and led by the legendary Solomon, a Hart.

For three months, evidence was presented and the charges were examined. The Mystarchs were each allowed to speak in their own defense. Most sat sullenly and said nothing, though Zahhak seethed and spat obscenities when his turn came. Jarnsaxa was the only Mystarch who spoke at length, and told the tale of the Dor'kana and Zahhak's mind magic. In the end, there were two classes of punishments handed out: Tarchon and Macha would be executed for their initial support of Zahhak's plan, along with Zahhak himself. Nefritari, Jarnsaxa, and Heraclitus would be exiled to the ends of Earth, with death as the punishment for their return.

The exiled trio took their leave the same day, and left the lands of the Beast Kingdoms separately under guarded escort, to wander the Earth. Many swore the stink of their shame could still be smelled days later.

The morning of the scheduled executions was a grim one. The sky was overcast, and both Tarchon and Macha sat in their separate cells, contemplating the fate that awaited them. Zahhak, as ever, was mumbling and cursing softly to himself.

Execution Interrupted

As the guards escorted them to the platform where they were to be hung, a low buzzing could be heard and an energy began to crackle in the air around them. With no more warning, a rectangular portal of light slid open next to the prisoners. Macha and Tarchon watched mutely as a trio of Dor'kana leapt out of the portal, slew the guards holding Zahhak, grabbed him, and vanished back into the portal, which snapped closed. Zahhak was lost to them.

The Beasts were outraged that their most sadistic and most hated prisoner had escaped their justice, but there was nothing to be done. The executions of Macha and Tarchon proceeded as planned.

Questions...

The era of the Mystarchs had come to an end, but questions remained. What were these Dor'kana, and what was their purpose? Were they related to the threat of the Shadow? Why had they assisted Zahhak both by teaching him the mind magic and by rescuing him from execution? What was to be done with the Mysterium Primeval and the Enigma

Primal now? Would the Beast Kingdoms remain as one or go their separate way as disparate nations?

11 | THE COVENANT AND SOLOMON'S LINE

With the fall of the Mystarchs, the Beasts were faced with a difficult choice: Where to go from there? While the rule of the Mystarchs had been harsh and terrible, the Beasts had suffered together during these times and grown accustomed to thinking of themselves almost as one people, one nation. The idea of splitting themselves back into disparate states was not an attractive proposal, especially with the threat of the Shadow still looming over the known world. And for what purposes had the Dor'kana taken Zahhak? Would they find Zahhak leading an army of vengeance backed with the strange Dor'kana at their doorsteps when the sun rose tomorrow? With so much unknown, it was urgent that the Beasts prepare for the worst.

The Overking

A great council convened to discuss these issues, with the wise and powerful from all the diverse nations that had been subjugated by the Mystarchs attending. The Treekin, now living in the Great Forest, sent a delegation, and even the Anura, pseudo-Beasts that they were came en masse, for they had nowhere else to go. Finally, a consensus was reached: The Empire must be preserved for the sake of the common defense. It was agreed that Solomon, who had wisely presided over the trial of the Mystarchs and had been universally acclaimed for it, be declared the first Overking of a new Beast Empire which would encompass the all of the former Mystarch-controlled territory. The Treekin would be valuable allies but would, of course, remain independent.

Solomon agreed to take this burden upon himself, and named advisors from each of the regions to aid him in restoring order and justice to the Kingdom. Solomon's first act as Overking was to gather the High Druids together and declare a holy Covenant prohibiting any Beast from spilling the blood of his fellows. With the High Druids, he prayed for days to the Earthmother, begging her to sanctify the Covenant and grant it power. He had despised the suffering and violence that had been visited on his people by Zahhak the Mad and intended to at least ensure that his people would need fear only those not of the Covenant.

Though we do not know the mind of one such as Gaia, we know that in the instant before she sanctified the Covenant and bound the Beasts to it, two historic events occurred. First, the Outcasts – Beasts who did not wish to join the Covenant – were formed. We surmise now that these types of Beasts, which included the Carrionites and the Stone Lions among others, were simply not of a nature to join the Covenant and so were not made part of it. Perhaps Gaia could not change their natures enough. Perhaps she did not wish to. Perhaps they did not wish to be changed. Regardless, the paths of the Outcasts and those of the Beast Empire split in this fateful moment, never to meet as brothers again.

The second momentous event that took place in the moments before the sanctification of the Covenant concerns the Anura. As they were created by Tarchon they were not true Beasts. Yet, few could deny that they walked, talked, and often acted like Beasts, and had they not brought down a Mystarch? Gaia probed their hearts and knew them to be true and worthy but lacking...something. Some final spark of life that even a Mystarch armed with the Mysterium Primordial was not able to imbue was missing.

The Earthmother forever endeared herself to the Anura in this moment for she filled the missing piece in the essence of the Anura, changing them from pseudo-Beasts to full Beasts, right and true. The Anura rejoiced and eagerly agreed to join the Covenant, enormously proud to be counted among the ranks of Beasts.

With the blessing of Gaia herself, the Covenant was woven into the very blood of the Beasts of the Beast Empire, binding them and their progeny to it. To attempt to harm another Beast of the Covenant would be as to cut off one's own paw needlessly. It was now against the most fundamental nature of these Beasts to visit injury upon each other willfully.

Solomon's second act was to outlaw the use or teaching of any arcane magic, punishable by lifelong exile. All Mages in the kingdom were invited to join the ranks of the Druids, and all but a few gladly gave up their use of the arcane arts. Magic was now much feared and it was widely agreed that this decree would prevent another Mystarch-like reign of magically-enforced terror. The Mysterium Primordial, the Enigma Primal, and the Index, with their terrible power, were hidden by Solomon himself to prevent any from laying hands or eyes upon it.

The Solomnic Age

With a wise and just King, the Covenant in place, and magic outlawed the Beast Empire was revitalized. Solomon built his great capital city of Oromar on the Plains of Parvia, south of the central Alpine Mountains. After years of oppression and tyranny at Zahhak's cruel hands, the people were free to live as they wished and to prosper. In time, the old generation gave way to the new.

The Shadow, the uncertainty surrounding the disappearance of Zahhak and the Dor'kana, and the legacy of the Mystarchs slowly faded into history where most were all too happy to leave them. Solomon's reign was celebrated yearly throughout the land and gave way to a new age of prosperity, widely called the Solomnic Age, though of course it was only a relatively small part of the Age of Legend.

After a long and happy life, Solomon died in his sleep and was succeeded by his son, Lysander. It is known that before his death he revealed the location of the Mysterium

Primordial to Lysander, charging him to pass the location only onto his own heir when the time came, that it may remain safe and hidden away from all.

Lysander was a ruler in his father's image, and greatly respected by the people. He continued the work that Solomon had begun, and worked throughout his life to bring peace and justice to the Beasts. Under his rule, Oromar grew into the grandest city in the Empire, which entered a wonderful age of culture and accomplishment by the Beasts. Great wonders of stone and marble were constructed, and the fine arts flourished. Arcane magic had been virtually forgotten, though Druidic magic was widely practiced and highly honored. Beasts of all races made their home in Oromar and all faiths were welcome.

Temples to Gods and Goddesses ranging from Apollo, the Noctari God of the Sun to Curnon, the Anglorum God of the Hunt to Sif, the Ursine Goddess of Battle were erected, but none were larger than the grand temple to the Earthmother, and all paid her homage.

When Lysander eventually joined his father in the afterlife, he too was succeeded by his son, and Solomon's line continued through many generations of the glorious Beast Empire. The 23rd ruler of Solomon's blood was named Tammam, meaning strength and perfection, and his glorious kingdom stretched across all of Europe, Taurania, and even most of the territories we now know as the Anubian Empire. It was a shining testament to the glory of the united Beasts of the Empire but, their eyes blinded by that very glory and the hundreds of years of peace and prosperity that they had enjoyed, the Beasts forgot why Solomon had been made Overking and why Tammam was now Overking: The threat of foreign invasion, whether by the Dor'kana, the Darklords of the Shadow, or more terrestrial enemies.

12 | THE PRIMAL WAR

During the 8th year of Tammam's reign, barbarous invaders arrived by ship, raiding and pillaging the Emerald Kingdom first, then the Scotian Highlands and Anglorum, driving almost all Beasts from those shores. Indeed, the invaders completely depopulated the Emerald Kingdom, forever displacing the Bounders who once called it home, and despoiled much of Anglorum before landing their fleet on the mainland across the narrow water, near the Great Forest.

Reports from the fleeing survivors of Anglorum and the Emerald Kingdom had already begun to trickle inland, but now they came in a flood - tales of powerful Beasts like none seen before, in great numbers, advancing forcefully into the Beast Empire. Tammam, who had personally led skirmishes against the Outcasts that had occasionally harried the Beasts of the Covenant, resolved to lead a small expeditionary force against the invaders directly, to take their measure and halt their advance.

What they found when they arrived near the shores of Europe shocked and disturbed them. Here were sentient Beasts, like they... but different. These Beasts were larger, savage, and exceedingly violent. Bound by no Covenant, they killed with impunity and took few prisoners. Tammam's records of the invaders describe monstrous twisted wolf-Beasts, larger and darker than the Fangren, reptilian Beasts with razor-sharp teeth and wicked spines on their heads, and strange cat-like Beasts with fangs as long as daggers.

Naming these creatures "Primals," Tammam engaged them in a poorly planned skirmish in which he was decisively defeated and routed. Retreating back into central Europe, he made plans to raise a real army for the first time since the Beasts united against the Mystarchs, twenty-three generations earlier. He, Tammam, Overking of the Beast Empire and heir to Solomon himself, would drive back these Primals to wherever they had come from.

After this, little is known. The lists of battles and much of the history of the Primal War has been lost to us. It was a time of great chaos, and the records from this period are incomplete at best. What is known is that the Primals savaged much of Western and Southern Europe for a period of some years before eventually withdrawing without a clear reason as to why. It is also fairly certain that Tammam was slain by a Primal arrow, not long before the end of the war.

The Primal Withdrawal

Soon after Tammam's death, it appears that the Primals simply decided to leave and return from whence they had come. Why? We do not know. Certainly, the Second Alliance of Treekin and Beasts was proving stiffer opposition than the Primals had

previously faced but history does not indicate that the Alliance was doing more than holding its own against the invaders.

What we do know is that Tammam's only heir, the seven year-old former Prince, now Overking, Ir'asa simply vanished. Many have speculated that he was somehow captured by the Primals during their withdrawal, as he was with his father's company learning the art of strategic warfare.

The easy answer is that they were after one of the two Beasts who might know the location of the Mysterium Primordial (though we cannot be sure that the knowledge wasn't lost long before Tammam's time), but as the records do not speak of the Primals using magic at all, and as there's no mention at all of contact with the Primals previous to this, it is hard to see how they might know of the Mysterium or why they would want or need it.

Agalarna's Return

We now know the truth, however, related to us by some of the Cyclops that served the Faerie.

The first place the Primals landed was the Emerald Isle and during the Primal War the comet upon which Agalarna, the Spirit Mother of the Faeries returned to the vicinity of Earth for the first time since Djall first came to this planet. Whether this went unnoticed to the Beasts of the time or not is unknown. There was enough chaos with the war against the Primals that it may have simply gone uncommented upon.

The Faerie certainly noticed and felt it coming for years in advance. From their Otherland home, at the edge of time, they watched the Earth. They saw the coming of the Primals, and they saw the kidnapping of Ir'asa, who knew of the location of the Mysterium Primordial. They witnessed the Primals taking Ir'asa to the Emerald Isle and sequestering him away there to begin the search for the Mysterium.

Even in the time of the Titans, the origins of the Mysterium were unknown. In the most ancient myths of the Faerie Folk, the Mysterium was whispered of, and was already old beyond legend. They didn't know where it had come from but their Titan masters had coveted it and had tantalized the Faerie with the secrets held within.

When their Spirit Mother was as close to the Earth as possible and the power of the Faerie was waxing higher than it had since the Lost Ages they broke through the thin membrane that separated Otherland from the Earth. They stormed over the Primals on the Emerald Isle, killed them all, and took Ir'asa for their own, disappearing back to the Otherland.

The leadership, such as it was, of the Primals had been decimated by the Faerie attack, and, spooked by these unknown beings and dismayed at the loss of Ir'asa, who was their goal, they retreated. All this went completely unnoticed to the Beasts at the time, who were mystified by the withdrawal of the Primals.

With the loss of Solomon's bloodline Europe was plunged into chaos. Confused and conflicting accounts of this time period exist as the Beasts of Europe entered a Dark Age of which very little is known. The Primal War had destroyed cities, displaced entire populations, and ruined the greatest Empire the Beasts had ever known. Though the Gaia-blessed Covenant still held strong, the Solomnic Age was over, never to return.

13 | THE VAMPIRE REVOLUTION

Though the history of the Beasts from the early days of the Mystarchs through the bloody war with the Primals stretched out interminably in the minds of mortals, the eternal beings of the UnderRealm took only passing notice of such events. Time has little importance when one does not face inevitable death, and the undead had had better things to do than pay attention to the squabbles of beings whom they saw as little more than armed vermin or livestock with claws.

For thousands of years the undead armies had been massing throughout the UnderRealm. The Vampires and Mummies had quietly culled the living Beasts throughout their history and taken just enough of them to keep the ranks of their wicked armies steadily growing while remaining on the fringe of the Beasts' awareness. They existed in the mortals' minds as a legend, a bedtime tale to scare children.

The skill and strength of these ancient and lifeless armies was no mere tale, however. While the Beasts had alternating periods of peace and war, and the warriors of one generation gave rise to the artists and scholars of the next, Abidan and Abiel had been working tirelessly to spawn new and horrible creations and hone their undying horde towards a single razor-sharp purpose: war and destruction. No natural death after a mere century of training awaited an undead soldier. Each passing year brought the warriors and death-mages of the UnderRealm more power, more skill, more knowledge and more bloodlust.

Vinga's Ambition

Vinga, Palatine of the Vampires, had been particularly relentless in his pursuit of greater and greater power. He sought out the darkest corners of the UnderRealm to ferret out secrets of the old world of the Lost Ages, put innumerable captured Beasts to the question to learn all he could of their brand of power, and built a great army composed solely of Vampires who were loyal first and foremost to him. He grew in cunning, and he grew in strength for he was driven by a call to glory that he alone of the creations of the Archliches seemed to hear.

While Abiel and Abidan focused most of their efforts on the creation of new undead at the Abyssian Locus, Vinga was focused only on his own advancement. In time, his power and armies began to rival that of his creator, Abiel, though none of them could match the power of Salamanzar, father to them all.

With such strength at his command, Vinga began to writhe under the constraints imposed by the Archliches. Why was he not allowed to prey on the Beasts more fully? Why did the Undead hide in the dark reaches of the UnderRealm, like worms, while the children of Gaia roamed freely on the surface, blissfully unaware of their presence? Abiel

and Abidan's endless admonishments to remain patient, continue training, and wait for their armies to grow further before the inevitable battle with the Beasts began to sound hollow in the ears of the Palatine. He had honed his strength for thousands of years. He nearly rivaled his own creator in power. And now he was told to wait, like a faithful dog, when all of Europe was in chaos in the wake of the Primal War and the Beasts were more vulnerable than they had been at nearly any time since they first awoke?

Treachery

Vinga decided at that moment to become the master of his own destiny. No longer would the Vampires serve the Archliches. They would strike out at the Beasts in force and perhaps Vinga would show Salamanzar that it was time for the new generation to supplant the old. He, great Palatine of the Vampires, would in this single bloody stroke, show the father of all Undead that the old ways of Abidan and Abiel made them weak, and that Vinga, not the Archliches, should serve as chief Lord of Salamanzar's Hosts.

When the time came for Abiel to make his ten-year visit to observe the vampires' progress and preparation for the war, Vinga struck. He and his strongest lieutenants confronted Abiel in Vinga's personal chambers and there slew the Archlich who had created them by treachery. Powerful indeed were Vinga and his army of Vampires but they could not stand against the combined strength of the UnderRealm, and all, regardless of station, feared the Protolich.

The Vampires left the UnderRealm by the same tunnels which they had historically used for their raids upon the Beasts. Vinga had long planned for this day. He immediately set out for the Carpathian Mountains, recognizing them as a very defensible location to found his new empire, the Blood Kingdom, and to make his plans to enslave or destroy the Beasts. Upon arriving in the Carpathians, the Vampires set about terrorizing and slaughtering the native Tusken of Eremantus and the Capricans who dwelt in the high places of the Carpathians. Displacing the Tusken and Capricans was merely an enjoyable perquisite of the necessary work that would be done by the Vampires to establish their Blood Kingdom and would serve to swell the ranks of the Vampire army at the same time.

Meanwhile, in the UnderRealm, Abidan was just then receiving word of the coup against Abiel. The death of his Lich-Brother was viewed as an unimportant detail which merely served to secure his position at the right hand of Salamanzar, but the disobedience displayed by Vinga could not go unpunished. However, Abidan's power did not yet extend to the lands surrounding the Blood Kingdom. He resolved to establish his own base of Undead power on the surface of the world from whence he could carefully watch Vinga's progress in the Carpathians and move against him when the time was right.

Suten-Hamu, the Mummy King, was sent by Abidan with a legion of his cloth-wrapped undead to the lands of Abydos, in Egypt, where they rose from the dry desert sands to slay the Dog Soldiers which had settled there. The few survivors of the initial attack fled

to their ancestral home in Amizeh to escape the brutal conquest, and Suten-Hamu quickly established himself as the ruler of now-empty Egypt.

From there, Abidan kept a watchful eye upon Vinga through the reports of Suten-Hamu, who gathered his intelligence from the poor Beasts that fled to the south to escape the terror of the newly established Blood Kingdom, and traded one tragic fate for another.

14 | THE UNDEAD WAR, PART 1

For over a century, Vinga and his legion of Vampires built their Blood Kingdom free from any opposition or significant resistance. Now that they lived upon the surface of the Earth, they were able to make regular raids on the communities of Beasts living near the Carpathians. Their numbers grew exponentially along with their reputation as ruthless and powerful killers. The Carpathian Mountains themselves were now known far and wide as the exclusive domain of the Vampires.

With a free hand in their own destiny and a steady supply of Beasts to practice on, the Vampires developed many new “tricks” based on Abiel’s original technique for vampiric creation. They learned how to feed upon the Beasts without killing them, and how to make several forms of lesser Vampires; simple, mindless servants which obeyed unquestioningly and hunted with blind instinct and savage intent. Any Beast brave or foolish enough to venture into their demesnes was quickly made a slave to the elder Bloodkin.

Few Vampires were made in the traditional way during this time, and Abiel’s method for new creations soon became known as the Old Way. Only Beasts of great skill or strength were turned using the Old Way, to prevent the weak from ascending to true power.

Despite these advances, Salamanzar was displeased by Vinga’s actions. He had not yet ordered Abidan to strike against Vinga, curious to see if the Vampires would prove their strength and earn their newly acquired independence by swiftly conquering Europe for him. Instead, in his view, the Vampires cowered in the Carpathians while word of the new foes and intruders upon the surface spread slowly among the Beasts. Salamanzar knew that given time to organize, the Beasts might well drive back the Undead horde. He had not wished to reveal their presence so quickly without a decisive strike. Vinga’s impatience and arrogance had now put his own plans in jeopardy.

Salamanzar decided that Vinga’s rebellion could no longer be tolerated. He ordered Abidan to put an end to the charade and remind the Vampires who their masters were. Abidan had not sat idly by while Vinga built upon the surface. Hearing of Vinga’s new creations, Abidan too had bent his will to creating new kinds of Undead. His experiments had produced two new types of creatures, the skeletons and the zombies, which were easily and quickly raised from the fallen bodies of foes. While the strength of these creations was not remarkable, they served well as shock troops which could easily be thrown at an enemy in wave after wave.

Abidan had been building an army of these troops in secret, and was now prepared to strike out. Suten-Hamu and his Mummies were called from Egypt and returned to the UnderRealm. There, they combined forces with the skeletons and zombies to form an army created to do one thing: Dominate the sunlit world above. Preferring to remain in

the UnderRealm himself, Abidan named his greatest lich-general, Shabaka, as the commander of the army and sent them up and out of the UnderRealm through a cave system in the lower Alps to prepare for their attack upon the Vampires.

While making these preparations, Shabaka began to receive reports from his lieutenants about frequent skirmishes with what were described as “strange Beast-like creatures,” covered in hair and very strong. He immediately sent a scouting party of Undead further up into the Alps to investigate these claims. The scouts never returned, but three days later Shabaka’s army came under heavy assault by the native denizens of the Alps: the Yeti. We speculate that these fierce creatures were perhaps created as the result of one of Zahhak’s experiments but in truth, none know.

Furiously territorial, the Yeti had guarded their Alpine home jealously for centuries and were beside themselves with rage to find an alien army boiling up from beneath the surface and camping in their hunting grounds.

The ruling Yeti Matrons (for their females are larger and stronger than their males) gathered the tribes together and together they fell upon the Undead army, taking it unawares. The strength of sinew and the savage rage of the Yeti combined to roll over Shabaka’s legions that first day of battle, but the Yeti suffered terrible losses in doing so.

Though they are mountain warriors of fearsome power, the Yeti were ultimately no match for the Undead horde, which sported great lich-mages among its numbers, against whom these relatively primitive snow creatures had no counter.

The Hunters Become the Hunted

The Yeti attack was broken on the third day, and Shabaka, furious at the delay and the lost soldiers, ordered the Yeti punished for their actions. The Undead proceeded to hunt down the fierce snow creatures and slaughter every last one they could find. Though known for an almost total lack of fear, the Yeti now knew fear. They ran, higher and higher in the mountains until finally the surviving remnants of the once-flourishing tribes of Yeti had escaped into the topmost reaches of the Alps and hid there in the snow and ice.

Satisfied that he had suitably demonstrated his displeasure, Shabaka completed his preparations and ordered his newly-blooded army to march to the Carpathians, there to take the Blood Kingdom and discipline the rebellious vampires. As he marched out of the Alps, the Outcast Beasts who made their home there in the lower elevations- Carrionites and Stone Cats - fled from the army’s path. Word had reached them of the decimation of the Yeti people and they knew they could not face this horde. The Undead army marched on, despoiling a path from the Alps to the Carpathians three miles wide, and slaying all Beasts unfortunate enough to have remained in its path.

15 | THE UNDEAD WAR, PART 2

The delay caused by the Yeti had cost Shabaka the element of surprise. During the weeks that the Undead horde had spent tarrying in the Alps hunting Yeti, Vampire scouts had discovered their presence. The Vampire Palatine, Vinga, immediately understood the significance of an Undead army so near to his domain and launched his own preparations for war.

When Shabaka arrived at the foot of the Carpathians he found that his task would be significantly more difficult than he had anticipated. Vinga had collapsed the lower passes, making ascension into the mountains a treacherous task, fortified the many towers and keeps of the Blood Kingdom, established key choke points manned by his most trusted officers, and roused all of the Bloodkin to aid in the defense. Besieging the Vampires was simply not an option. The area was too wide to adequately cover, the Vampires had ample captive Beasts to feed upon, and every day lost served only to annoy Salamanzar further. The Vampires had to be brought to heel quickly. Shabaka's only choice was to use his superior numbers in a direct assault on the very foundation of the Blood Kingdom, the great Citadel of Vinga called the Heartsbane, regardless of the losses incurred.

For two months the skeletons and zombies of Shabaka's horde worked to clear the passes. The vampires assaulted them ceaselessly, but Undead horde was vast and there was always another to replace each one that fell. Once the forces of the UnderRealm could advance into the higher plateaus and valleys of the Blood Kingdom, the Undead War began in earnest.

Even the weaker kindred of the Vampires were stronger than the skeletons and zombies, and the magic of the elder Bloodkin was more powerful than that of the Mummies, but Shabaka's army had greater numbers. The UnderRealm forces also had another significant advantage: Shabaka himself led most of the attacks on the Vampires, aided by a contingent of his lichbrothers.

Only Vinga and his eleven "sons" (the first eleven vampires created by Vinga with the Old Way) were powerful enough to face them directly. At each choke point the Vampires fought savagely against the invaders, but were ultimately driven deeper into the Blood Kingdom by sheer force of numbers. Finally, after months of relentless advancement into Vinga's territory, Shabaka's army arrived at the Deadshale plateau near the Heartsbane where they would face the full force of the Vampire legions with Lord Palatine Vinga at the lead, resplendent in his blood-soaked glory.

An Offer of Redemption

As these two great armies prepared for a final, epic confrontation, Shabaka sent one of his liches to Vinga with an offer of peace. Vinga's might was greatly respected throughout the

UnderRealm. Though he would still be punished, he could surrender now and return to Sheol in the UnderRealm to assume Abiel's former position as hand of Salamanzar. The Beasts' memories of the undead would fade to a mere legend, given time, and Salamanzar could continue his preparations for conquest away from the eyes of Gaia's children. Vinga carefully considered his options. Defeat now could mean the end of the Vampires... forever. But victory would be a decisive blow to the UnderRealm and would serve to sever the Vampires' ties to the mighty Salamanzar permanently.

Once, he had coveted Abiel's position as the right-hand of their Lich-Father, Salamanzar. But now he saw the potential for a new age of conquest, where the Vampires would walk among the denizens of the Earth and be feared as dark gods, answerable to none but themselves.

...Refused

Vinga's answer to the offer came that evening. As dusk approached, two of Vinga's sons dragged a large wooden stake out in plain view of Shabaka's army. As it was raised, a dark shape was visible upon it. Shabaka's messenger had been slain and impaled upon the stake. As the sun slipped below the horizon, the forces of the UnderRealm crashed against one another in a storm of unholy armies and searing magic.

The battle raged for many hours, and the Vampires were still outnumbered nearly two to one. Shabaka and his liches seemed to be everywhere at once, cutting down their foes one after another, using both arcane and physical might. The Vampires were inflicting great losses upon Shabaka's legions, but superior numbers and Shabaka's disciplined leadership were slowly grinding the Bloodkin down.

Sometime after midnight, Vinga momentarily retreated from the front line and called his sons to meet him.

He quickly explained his plans. They would strike straight for Shabaka as one force to either behead the opposing army in one swift and precise cut or perish trying. Either way, the war would end tonight. Victory or destruction.

With that, Vinga and his eleven sons, all elder Vampires of great and terrible power, pushed straight through the front lines and hacked their way to Shabaka and his liches. The unexpected direct assault caught Shabaka momentarily off guard, and a vicious, wild struggle ensued. The most powerful warrior-mages of the UnderRealm barring Salamanzar and Abidan were hell-bent on destroying each other, and the outcome of this single skirmish amidst the chaos of the Undead War would likely determine the ebb and flow of history for centuries to come.

The fight went on for hours, and those around Shabaka and Vinga fell. Finally however, Vinga, wounded, saw an opening, for Shabaka had also not escaped unharmed thus far. The Palatine leapt into the air and poured all his enmity into a final furious attack that

ended as Vinga thrust his sword into Shabaka's unprotected neck. A moment later he reached out and ripped Shabaka's head from his body.

Holding the head of Shabaka high above him, Vinga took in the scene around him. The rest of the liches had all been slain, along with four of his eleven sons. A high price to pay, but victory is worth much. With Shabaka's death and the absence of a lichbrother to take command, the Undead army rapidly fell into disorder and confusion. The Vampires surged forward, rallied by Vinga's cries.

Within days, the armies raised by Abidan were routed and driven from the Carpathians. Those that were not cut down by the Vampires scattered like leaves in the wind. Some found their way back to the shelter of the UnderRealm while others wandered Europe, preying on Beasts and anything else they could find.

The legendary Palatine had led his Blood Kingdom to victory and the Undead War was over.

16 | THE PROTOlich IN HELL

A great shadow fell upon the Earth with the victory of the Bloodkin. The remnants of Shabaka's forces fled in all directions, sowing chaos, death, and discord amongst any Beasts they crossed paths with in their mad flight, Vinga began making plans to establish himself as a veritable god on Earth. He sent the strongest and swiftest of the Elder Bloodkin to hunt down the remaining Undead that had escaped his wrath; meanwhile, the lesser vampires were turned loose upon Europe. They gorged themselves on the Beasts of the forests and villages. Only those Beasts in the cities that escaped destruction during the Primal War were safe from the Vampiric predations, and even there people whispered of shadows in the night and dark terrors who stole away any who ventured away from the light.

Soon enough, the Archlich Abidan had learned of Shabaka's defeat. His rage was deep, but so was his fear, for he knew that if he had not been too proud to sully himself with battle and face Vinga himself, the outcome may have been quite different. In truth though, Abidan had grown quite fearful of Vinga. Having slain Abdiel with the aid of his sons and Shabaka in single combat, it was possible that Vinga rivaled his own power now. He feared the consequences of reporting failure to his master, Salamanzar.

Abidan resolved to make a final attempt on Vinga's life. He would convince Salamanzar himself to lead the remaining armies of Sheol against the Blood Kingdom. No matter Vinga's power, none who walked the earth were a match for the might of the Protolich.

When Abidan approached Salamanzar with his plan, the Protolich scorned him for his failure. Salamanzar would not lead Abidan's quest for revenge. Abidan gnashed his teeth in frustration and begged for an explanation. Salamanzar, it seemed, had been busy for centuries exploring the UnderRealm and making preparations for a great undertaking. He had long since sensed the presence of another realm of great power, and intended to find it and harness whatever power he might find there. He hoped to use the additional strength to ensure that when he moved against the Overworld, there would be little question as to his swift and sure victory.

Recently, in the deepest places of the Earth, where even the darkest and strongest spawn of evil hesitate to tread, Salamanzar had found what he sought: An ancient portal from the Lost Ages, leading to the realm he had sensed. He would leave very soon to explore this new realm and enslave whatever powers he could find there. Abidan was to remain behind and begin raising another army. The recent events had depleted the population of the UnderRealm, having first lost the Vampires and then broken their remaining forces in the war that followed.

With that, Salamanzar set out accompanied by a small contingent of liches. They ventured through the curious and ominous portal to discover whatever they would on the

other side. Upon arriving within the new realm, they found themselves on a high plateau and were immediately assaulted by the smell of sulfur and brimstone. Lakes of fire and mountains of ash belching molten rock surrounded them, and the sky was black with roiling clouds of smoke.

Many strange and terrible beasts were to be seen in the plains and valleys rolling with fire, and they were attacked frequently. Salamanzar and his lich-sons destroyed rabid packs of Woe Jackals, and the Beast-like Izariel. They destroyed four-armed hulking monstrous Reavers and fought against magic-using demons called the Rum'el. They learned that they were in the realm called Hell, ruled by great powers that served no one but themselves.

Salamanzar in his pride could never have imagined that the Beasts had been here first when the Thunder God Thor led the smith Regnin here to learn the secret of forging dragonsteel. He learned of Dagon, King of Hell, who ruled from his Inferno Fortress and of the great Princes and Dukes under him.

Salamanzar rejoiced, for his creator, the Dark God Djall, had whispered to him of this place, and there was indeed great power to be found there. The power of Dagon and the Lords of Hell must be added to that of the Protolich's.

The Demon Prince

Finally, after Salamanzar had journeyed for many days he came upon a great pavilion near a lake of fire. Seated on a throne of black rock was a giant, terrible fiend with skin the color of burned flesh and eyes that smoldered like rotting embers. Perhaps it would be the most powerful victim Salamanzar had yet destroyed in this realm of Hell. The creature slowly raised his eyes to Salamanzar, as though waking from a deep sleep, and the red embers seemed wary and confused for a moment.

When he spoke, his voice was soft as death's whisper: "You find yourself in foreign lands, spawn of Djall. I am Mammon, a prince of this realm, and you were foolish to have come here. If you are seeking power, you have found it."

Salamanzar laughed the laugh of one whom has never known his better and replied, "My Dark Lord told me of this place. He has foreseen my conquest of your brethren, that you may serve him through the power your destruction will grant me."

Mammon merely gazed at Salamanzar with his burning eyes and replied, "We too once knew the hand of Djall, but my Lord Father Dagon freed us to follow Him instead. Your God will fall, and Dagon will take his place."

With that, Mammon raised himself up off of his ashen throne, and brandished a great blade of fire-made-solid. He held it almost casually, and awaited the Protolich's approach.

Salamanzar faced him without fear, for he had never been given cause to feel it except in the presence of his Dark God. Perhaps fear may have saved him.

The two titans rushed at each other in a flurry of strength and magic, but it was Salamanzar who fell that day in Hell. Though he was perhaps Mammon's equal elsewhere, in Hell itself this Demon Prince overmatched him. In Hell, the blood of Dagon is magnified as the rays of sun through a lens and all who oppose it must despair.

Thus was the end of Salamanzar, first child of Djall on Earth and father of the Undead.

Time passed. Abidan awaited some word from Salamanzar and kept a close watch on the strange portal but no message was forthcoming. After a time, Abidan began to fear the worst. Had his creator met an even stronger being that had killed or enslaved him? It seemed unthinkable that any could match the Protolich in power save the Gods themselves.

Soon, small groups of Woe Jackals began wandering through the portal. These were unintelligent beasts, but dangerous, and Abidan quickly put them down. With each passing day more and more found their way through. Abidan suspected that someone was trying to test the strength of those across the portal. Having had no word yet from the Protolich and rapidly losing hope, Abidan decided to seal the portal. Better to anger Salamanzar than risk the invasion of a powerful enemy with the UnderRealm in its weakened state.

Abidan summoned the greatest wizards among his lich-brothers and together they closed the strange portal, caused a collapse of the tunnels leading to the depths of the UnderRealm and declared that Salamanzar was gone, never to return. He then named himself Metalich and seized control of all Undead remaining in the UnderRealm. Though he tried to make contact with Djall, he did not know how Salamanzar spoke to Djall, nor had he ever had direct contact with the God. His insistent pleas simply echoed off the cavern walls of Golgotha and for a great deal of time, the Undead of the UnderRealm disappear from all knowledge.

17 | THE CARPATHIAN WARS, PART 1

But what of Vinga? The Bloodkin Palatine had used these months well. Most of Shabaka's lieutenants had been hunted down and slaughtered. The Vampires now turned their efforts to subduing the Beasts of Europe and celebrating their great victory. When lesser undead were found, they were killed, but the Vampires had clearly emerged as the dominant force in the known world of the time. They felt no fear, and no hand save that of the Treekin held them back. Many Beasts during this time fled to the Great Forest to seek refuge amongst the branches of Gaia's stronger children, but soon, too many refugees were present for the Treekin to accept them all. With heavy hearts, as during the war with the Mystarchs, they shielded the few that they could and closed the borders of the Great Forest to all, Beast or Undead alike.

There was still fire in the hearts of the Beasts of the Covenant though, lest one think they meekly fell to the brutal Blood Kingdom. For a hundred years the Beasts fought what we now call the Carpathian Wars against Vinga and his Bloodkin, desperately trying to contain this threat in their midst, hoping that the Undead War had weakened the Blood Kingdom enough. In reality, there were three major wars during that period and near-constant border

The Eremanthian Insurgency

The first war was the Eremanthian Insurgency, in which the Tusken and Capricans, both of whom had made their homes in the Carpathians before the arrival of the blood-drinkers, allied to take back the Tusken homeland of Eremanthus and from there, the mountain dwellings of the Capricans, foremost of which the city of Kar Luthin. The Tusken and Caprican forces infiltrated into the Carpathians via the East and attacked an outlying Blood Keep – one of the regional centers of Vampire power in that the Blood Keeps each contain a Sanctum Sanguis in which elder Bloodkin must periodically rest to maintain their strength. The forces of the insurgents were too small, however, and soon they driven off or captured to be put to death, fed on, or turned.

Locnen's Folly

Twenty-odd years later saw the Bandicoons, Foxen, and Anura unite for an attack simultaneously from the north and east into the Carpathians called simply Locnen's Folly. Locnen was the name of the attack's planner and a Bandicoon. The Bandicoons sent some of their warriors south to join with the Anura while the rest joined with the Foxen. The Anura attacked from the east while the Foxen marched from the north. They joined at a gap where they would then march like a spear to the Heartsbane Citadel, center of Vinga's power. They too were destroyed after battling the Vampires for the turn of a moon.

The Bleakness Begins

By this time, what we know as the Bleakness was well under way. The undead that survived the Undead War were rampaging around Europe as were the Vampires hunting them down. Most of the cities of mainland Europe had fallen or were effectively under siege, and disease and starvation were taking the young and elderly.

Thus far, Taurania, the Harts and Broccans of Anglorum, Midgaard, and the Atavians Tartessia were untouched, though undead and Vampires had been seen in the Pyrene Mountains on the border of Tartessia, and Tauranian hunters had reported similar encounters on their western border.

An emergency gathering of the leaders of Beasts in Europe was called, for it seemed that the legacy of Solomon was on the verge of being destroyed. The Treekin were also invited but would not leave their forest realm. Even the Amanita were extended an invitation but replied that they could not take time out of their searching.

The meeting was called the Assembly of Whitecliff, for they met near the famous ivory bluffs on the southeast coast of Anglorum, where neither the Undead nor the Vampires had yet penetrated. A Noctari High Priestess of Gaia named Eupheme presided over the Assembly as they discussed and debated what courses of action were yet left to the Beasts of the Covenant.

For a year and a day they argued. The Thunder Priests of Thor favored an all-out assault on the Blood Kingdom, while the Tartessians wondered where that would leave them if it failed. The Tuskens and Capricans, of course, were pressing for action as soon as possible, for their people had suffered the worst at the hands of Vinga. The Harts and Broccans of Anglorum wondered whether the Vampires would be able to reach them on their island at all while the Bandicoons, Longtails and others accused them of cowardice. The Anura favored dying to the last warrior among them to destroy what they viewed as a corruption of Gaia's work.

One by one, a move towards consensus was reached. The Blood Kingdom was a threat that could not be wished away. Eventually, it would be a threat to all, and Vinga showed no sign of ambition short of total domination. The nations of Beasts would unite once again, this time to root the vampiric evil from the Earth once and for all or fall trying. It would be the Last War

They gathered their armies in various hidden places around Europe in an attempt at surprise and planned a five-pronged assault on the Carpathians. This was to be the last stand of the Beasts of the Covenant. The Primal War had broken the Beast Empire but the nations of Beasts yet had strength in them. In this final war of the Carpathian Wars, defeat would likely mean the end of most of their civilizations.

The plan was to strike to the Heartsbane. Armies had tried before, of course, but this time the Beasts plotted to strike in through five separate routes, hoping to surprise the Vampires with at least a two or three of their five armies.

The Northern Army

Kamold of the Tuskens would lead the northern army, filled with Foxen, Tuskens, and Capricans thirsting to slay Vinga.

The Southern Army

Phoebe the Shining, of the Fangrens, led the southern army which was composed mainly of Fangren along with some Stone Lion warriors who had come to the Fangren under flag of truce asking to join with them to hunt Vampire.

The Eastern Army

Taurians, Noctari, Felines, and Longtails combined to make up the eastern army, led by the famous Longtail druid-warrior Darurian, also called the Spear, for few who faced him failed to fall to that, his weapon of choice.

The Southwestern Army

From the southwest came an army of Atavians of Tartessia, the Harts, the Anura, and the Bounders. The heart of the army was a motley crew known as the Whistling Companions, for their habit of whistling as they marched. They were lead by a male Atavian named Sion and a female Bounder named Siobhan who had spent the last ten years building the Companions into a deadly, if irreverent, force of Undead and Vampire hunters.

The Northwestern Army

Finally, from the northwest would come the combined might of the Bandicoons, the Broccans, and the Ursines, led by Captain Finlay, a Broccan and experienced mountain fighter. This was to be the last stand of the Beasts.

18 | THE CARPATHIAN WARS, PART 2

The appointed day came and the armies marched on the Carpathians, partly succeeding in taking the Vampires by surprise. Vinga had received intelligence on the southwestern army being led by the Whistling Companions, which had made no secret of its approach to the Carpathians, hoping to draw Vinga's attention. He was also aware of the existence of Kamold's northern army of Tusken, Capricans, and Foxen, for his scouts had been carefully watching the Tusken and Capricans, both of whom had more reason than any to strike at the Blood Kingdom.

The Pass of Grimhold

Kamold, a Tusken himself, had banked the fires of vengeance in his soul ever since he saw Bloodkin slay his family as a young boy. He had escaped with the other refugees from Eremantus but his heart had never left the wooded hills of his homeland, and nothing would stop him from taking back what his by right his peoples'. His army rushed into the Carpathians through the Pass of Grimhold, where they were ambushed by Vampire Mages who brought the mountainside down upon them, crushing half the army in one blow, including Kamold. Disorganized and leaderless, they were easy prey for the Bloodkin after that.

Guerilla War

Phoebe the Shining led the southern army's attack, though it assaulted the Carpathians less as an army and more as hunters, prowling through the mountains day and night, taking the fight to the Vampires through tooth and nail, sword and bow. They fought no pitched battles but nevertheless through guile, stealth, and sheer will managed to take two Blood Keeps, forcing Vinga to divert some of his multitudes away from Vinga's attack on the army of the Whistling Companions in order to siege the captured Blood Keeps.

Siobhan and Sion led the Companions into the Carpathians from the southwest and made a large show of capturing some vampire scouts and putting them to the question, which infuriated the Bloodkin. How dare the cattle capture the cattle's keeper? Vinga had received word of the crushing victory at the Pass of Grimhold and as he was unaware of the two remaining armies, threw most of his force at the Gap of Shornwall, a pass into the high Carpathians that the Companions were bound for, with sheer, high walls from which the only escape would be forward or back.

The Gap of Shornwall

The Companions marched into the Gap, harried all the while, to find, as expected, the bulk of the Vampire forces there arrayed against them. To the surprise of Vinga, however, just as the two armies were to meet, a third army marched onto the field. Finlay, that

hardy and clever mountain ranger, had led his army from the northwest into the Carpathians but then cut south through passes so treacherous the Bloodkin had discounted them. As they had met no resistance on their way to Shornwall, the Ursines, Bandicoons, and Broccans he brought were fresh and spoiling for a fight.

The three armies clashed and for two days the battle raged back and forth. Incredibly, the momentum seemed to swing towards the Beasts and each day Captains Finlay, Siobhan, and Sion would exhort their soldiers to greater and greater efforts. It was then that Vinga unleashed his new weapon: The Merihim.

Merihim and Defeat

Originally bred from captured Taurians, the Merihim were huge, brutish Vampires of incredible strength, though perhaps less incredible wit. There in the Shornwall, Merihim, unbloodied thus far and fully rested, fell upon the armies of Beasts like ravenous wolves. The armies were ripped apart until all that was left were bare remnants. Captain Finlay met his demise on the field of battle, while Sion and Siobhan led a small group of surviving Companions to join with the surviving forces of Phoebe the Shining, who had since lost the captured Blood Keeps back to the Vampires, but who fought a guerilla war in the mountains, vowing to continue to fight until the Bloodkin hunted her down. No more is known of the fate of the survivors of those three armies, but it is presumed that most were eventually slain.

Only one of the five armies is left to this sad story now – Darurian and the eastern army. Because the Beasts knew or suspected that Vinga was watching the Capricans and Tusken for signs of another attempt to recover their homelands, they intentionally sent those two displaced races of Beast with the northern army of Kamold. They hoped that since Eremantus, the ancestral home of the Tusken, was in the eastern foothills of the Carpathians, Vinga would assume that unless the Tusken were attacking from the east, there would be no eastern attack.

In this, the Beasts judged correctly, and while the Bloodkin were busy at the Gap of Shornwall, Darurian struck straight for the Heartsbane. His army rolled over the thin guard Vinga left in the eastern Carpathians and had soon battled its way to the Deadshale Plateau, where the Undead Army had met its defeat at the hands of the Bloodkin.

Destruction of the Heartsbane

There, Darurian ordered his Taurians, Felines, Noctari, and Longtails to begin tearing down the Heartsbane Citadel brick by brick until they found the very source of his power – his Sanctum Sanguis. Were it to be destroyed, Vinga would diminish and weaken and would likely soon be slain by one of his sons. Destroying the Sanctum Sanguis and the Heartsbane would be both a real and symbolic victory, giving hope to the Beasts of the Covenant.

Days passed, and they had nearly destroyed the Heartsbane but had not yet found Vinga's Sanctum Sanguis. Darurian was anxious, for he knew that Vinga would have abandoned the battle at the Shornwall the instant he sensed the Heartsbane was under attack. Finally, at sunset on the third day, they had started delving into the massive foundation stones of the Citadel when they discovered that an extensive set of catacombs ran beneath the Heartsbane. Success was near, but their delay had cost them dearly.

All for Naught

As the sun set on the ruins of the Heartsbane the army of Vinga, victorious at Shornwall and led by the newly-blooded Merihim, stormed onto the shadowed Deadshale. Darurian had done what he could to prepare his army for this assault, but he knew they could not stand. He had hoped to destroy the core of Vinga's power – his Sanctum Sanguis – before dying for his fellow Beast, but he had failed. Darurian and his lieutenants organized a defense and even managed to launch a handful of counterattacks during the course of that terrible night near the heart of the enemy's power. The Beasts fought valiantly, and the Taurians fought like those possessed when they realized that the Merihim were the corrupted products of the deaths of their missing Taurian brothers and sisters. But it was all for naught.

The Beasts were no match for the combination of the Vampire Mages, the Merihim, and Vinga and his seven sons. Though the Beasts had Druidic magic on their side, the Druids of that time were not what the Druids of today are. They were no match for masters of arcane magic, and were easily thwarted by the Vampires.

A Last Stand

Sometime before dawn during a brief pause in the fighting Darurian made a decision. He would lead a company of volunteers in a last stand, buying time for the remaining survivors to escape and tell the Beasts of the Covenant of Vinga's victory. Not a Beast in the army failed to volunteer, but Darurian did not mean to sacrifice lives needlessly.

The Taurians furiously argued that their very honor was at stake and that it was their duty to destroy the Merihim and put their corrupted brothers to rest. They would not retreat, regardless of Darurian's orders, so in the end every Taurian left would fight in this last stand of the Beasts. The rest of the group was made up of a collection of fierce Noctari, Felines, and Longtails. For every soldier that stayed, two were asked to go, to make sure that what happened at Deadshale did not die with them. Little was said in those last minutes before the army split between those destined to die that day and those who might live yet a little longer.

As the sun rose behind them in the East, rays of Apollo's light illuminating the plateau, the army of Beasts screamed out their defiance at the awaiting Vampires and, with

Darurian leading the vanguard, they charged. It's said that the ground thundered and the sky answered as these desperate heroes raced towards their doom. Fur met fang as Taurian fought beside Feline and Noctari Sons of Ares alongside Longtail Bladedancers. None of them survived but all of them died as heroes that day.

Remember the Deadshale

Though much would be forgotten in the long years of grey nightmare after the defeat of the Beasts, three words we have not forgotten even today. "Remember the Deadshale."

The end of the Carpathian Wars marked the beginning of a new era for the Beasts of Europe. All the strength of Beastdom had died at Grimhold, at Shornwall, and more than that had died at Deadshale – hope itself had perished.

No refuge was to be found from the dark slayers who wandered the land, and the Beasts were now unable to resist. Entire villages were rounded up by the Vampires and herded back to the Carpathians as cattle. Cities were sacked and refugees were everywhere. Tartessia fell during this bleakness, and Old Anglorum learned to its dismay that Vampires could cross water. Soon, it had fallen as well. Of all the civilizations of Beast known at that time, only three would survive, and even then, only barely: Midgaard, Taurania, and the Dog Soldiers of Amizeh.

The first two took in fleeing Beasts initially but the sheer numbers forced them to close their borders. All three were raided constantly by Vampire armies and held together virtually in name only. They were simply slightly better off than the Beasts in mainland Europe. Most of the Beasts now had nowhere to go and no one to turn to. They lived as animals; hunted and corralled. They had spent their strength and it was not enough. All they could do now was pray to their Gods, whom could do little to directly aid them. The glory that had been the nations of Beasts faded now in the dawn of the Blood Kingdom's terrible dominion. For nearly two thousand years the shadow of Vinga blotted the light of hope from the face of Europe.

So it was in the Bleakness.

19 | THE BLEAKNESS

With the defeat of the five Armies of the Beasts by the Lord Palatine Vinga and his Blood Kingdom, shadow and despair descended upon Europe. The mainland was infested by the remaining Undead from the Undead War and the Vampires hunting them and the Beasts both. The Treekin retreated into the Great Forest, and even the Vampires saw no value in the Amanita (the Shroomies), so they were left largely unmolested. The Amanita do not have flesh and blood in the way we think of them.

Though none of the Beasts of the Covenant escaped the Bleakness, some fared better than others. The Tartessian Empire of the Atavians on the Iberian Peninsula resisted the Blood Kingdom for some time, but eventually it fell to Vinga's predations. The Harts and Broccans of Old Anglorum learned that Vampires could cross water and they too fell. In Hayasa, between the Black Sea and the Sea of Caspian, the Felines were the last to feel the predations of the blood-sucking Vampires.

Until it was too late, the real enemy in the view of the Felines remained the Dog Soldiers who had driven them out of their ancestral homeland of Badaria on the Nile. It was the Taurians of Taurania, the Ursines of Midgaard, and the Dog Soldiers of Amizeh that survived best. The Ursines saw the Bloodkin take over mainland Europe and determined to split their efforts between holding back the Dvergar from the north and the Blood Kingdom from the south.

Sigrun and Midgaard

Here it was that the Thundergod Thor showed himself to have wisdom as well as strength. Aeons before, he had taken Sigrun, daughter of Sigurd the Stormking, to Asgard with him as payment for teaching Regnin the Smith the secret of forging dragonsteel. When the Dvergar attacked, Thor could not assist his Midgaardian Ursines, for he had been strictly censored by Odin the All-seeing for teaching Regnin. Sigrun, however, was not a Goddess and was under no such restriction.

For thousands of years, Sigrun had trained under the greatest fighters in Asgard. Sif, Thor, and Baldur had personally taught her the arts of battle, and had imbued in her a spirit as fierce as any had ever seen. After fighting alongside the Thundergod their many wars with Ymir and the Frost Devils of Niflheim, Odin bestowed upon her great length of life, though not immortality as a God knows it, and named her Valkyrie, or "Chooser of the Slain" and gave to her the task of recruiting the greatest warriors of the dead to prepare for the great battle at the end of days, known as Ragnarok, that Odin himself had long ago foreseen as inevitable.

It was Sigrun who saved Midgaard from utter destruction during the Bleakness. As she was not a Goddess, she felt she was not bound by the restrictions placed on Gods

regarding interfering in the affairs of mortals. When Midgaard turned its attention south to the Vampires, the Dvergar of Nidavellir attacked. Midgaard would likely have fallen in that first of the many attacks to come had Sigrun not come to their rescue, bringing with her a cohort of Einherjar – the dead warriors chosen by Sigrun to help defend Asgard. None can say for certain, but legend tells that the spirits of Sigmund and Sigurd, her grandfather and father, fought with her in that first attack.

Still, Sigrun was but one, albeit a shining Valkyrie, and those spirits worthy to join the Einherjar were few, and the Dvergar were many and more. Though they threw back that first attack, eventually Midgaard was all but destroyed. Twice Ironstad itself was captured and twice the Ursines took it back, but even the great city itself was only a ruined shell of what it had once been. Midgaard had held the Vampires back but the cost of doing so was nearly as great as domination by the Blood Kingdom.

Taurania

The Taurians resisted the vampire incursion across the Bosphorus Strait from Europe into Taurania, but at terrible cost. Generations of their finest warriors died, and numerous Vampire incursions destroyed all but the martial aspect of their most ancient culture.

The Dog Soldiers

The Dog Soldiers, of all the Beasts of the Covenant, felt little effect from the Blood Kingdom, and continued to maintain near-isolation from Europe.

Starkhold

Aside from these exceptions, the nations of the Beasts of the Covenant perished in the Bleakness and devolved into small tribes who lived rudely and in terror of the rampaging Undead and the Bloodkin that hunted both the Undead and the Beasts. Lord Palatine Vinga built a new fortress on the site of the Heartsbane, destroyed in the final battle of the Carpathian Wars. Twice as large and even better defended, the Starkhold Fortress would be the seat of the Palatine, and from there Vinga cast out his malevolent hand and took Europe into his iron grip.

Fifteen hundred years passed, full of misery, toil, and blood. Even when the Beasts could resist the force of arms of the Vampires, they had no magic powerful enough to battle that of the Bloodkin. The Beasts had never known such a time of darkness, and it seemed nigh-inevitable that the few nations of Beast that yet endured would fall as well.

Five hundred more years passed, and the Blood Kingdom reached the zenith of its geographic expansion. It now covered Old Anglorum and all of mainland Europe except for the very southern part of what was once Tartessia, where Atavians fought with their back against the sea in a battle for survival. It stretched east to the borders of the lands of

the People of the Skull in the Ural Mountains, where the Bloodkin were stopped by the hordes of the Khan, southeast to the borders of Taurania, and it north to the edges of the Ranger Kingdom, failing only to enter Midgaard. Vinga now ruled the largest empire on Earth, though he had never fully pacified the Beasts of the Covenant that lived within.

Hope?

There was but one last spark of hope among the Beasts: The Covenant had not been broken. All these thousands of years, from the moment Gaia had blessed it at the dawn of the age of Solomon and woven it into the very fabric of Beasts, no Beast of the Covenant had spilled the blood of another. Through the centuries of constant starvation, not once had a Beast slain a fellow adherent to the Covenant for a morsel of food, even to save his or her own life or that of someone dear. Some among the Beasts said they were being tested, and that someday one among them would rise to deliver them from this long nightmare if they but held true to the Covenant.

20 | ATAN AND THE MORNING LANDS

In a small village somewhere in Europe, a Beast was born. His parents named him Atan, but none now can claim to know for certain of which Beast race Atan was. Most are more than pleased to inform you that Atan was a member of his or her race, for every race has claimed him as their own.

When he was 17, Atan became frustrated with the constant attacks by the Bloodkin on his village, and of living as cattle. He organized some of the villagers and attacked the local nest of Bloodkin, driving them out. He and his people quickly built a defensive perimeter around their village and patrolled the local area, hoping to keep it free of the Vampires. Their hopes were dashed and fears realized, however, when Bloodkin Mages were brought in with Vampire backups to put down the uprising in the bud. His people had a pair of Druids living among them but this far into the Bleakness so much knowledge had been lost that they could do little other than call upon the Earthmother for minor healing.

The Vampires leveled the village and took all they could catch with them to feed upon. Atan and a handful of others survived, but his parents and siblings perished at the hand of Lord Palatine Vinga's swift retribution. With no family left and the small world he had known shattered, Atan decided that life could not be any worse elsewhere, and set out east, for surely the land of morning could not be stained with the darkness of the Blood Kingdom.

To the Morning Lands

For two years Atan journeyed east, and the adventures he had make for a grand tale in themselves, but they must be told another time. He passed first into Taurania, slipping through the Vampire lines, and then eastwards into the Morning Lands. Through desert, swamp, and mountain he traveled. For much of his journey, after he was well out of memory of Taurania, he hid from more Dragons than even his mother had told him of in his bedtime stories. Finally, he found himself in a jungle land full of "snakes that are upright" but yet not Beasts.

Capture

Atan was discovered, half-dead and delirious from a poisonous bite he took in combat from these upright snakes, by a caravan of traders. They had never seen anything like Atan before, so they took him into one of their wagons and gave him the antidote to the venom. When Atan recovered enough to observe his surroundings, he realized he had been captured by slavers of an unfamiliar race of Beast. He couldn't speak their language, and they showed little interest in him except as a potentially valuable captive.

During their long journey, he was kept inside a cage on one of the wagons and could see naught outside, for the cage was covered with a tarp. He knew only that it was hot for weeks, then bitterly cold for weeks, and then finally mercifully temperate. Eventually the caravan stopped, and Atan heard a multitude of voices outside it. The tarp over his cage was lifted off briefly while another of these unfamiliar Beasts examined him. It was enough for Atan to see that he was at the gates of a city unlike any he'd seen before. Huge, with ornate carvings over the main gate, it teemed with a variety of Beasts different from any he'd seen. There were some with faces that echo that of Felines and some that seemed as if they may be related to the Ursines, while others were altogether unfamiliar.

The next he saw of the city he was on the selling block, and was purchased by some sort of Beast race that looked something like a Feline. He indicated that his name was Jishi and led Atan away to his domicile. It did not take Atan long to realize he had no hope of escape. Jishi did not even need to chain him or lock him in; Atan could not possibly blend in and even if he could escape the city he was in without being quickly re-captured, where would he go? He was a stranger, recognizable at a glance by even a child, and did not even know where he was.

Atan had never known any life but a terribly hard one, and this Jishi was a kind enough master. Soon after arriving, Atan witnessed something he had never seen before nor dreamt of seeing: Jishi started the fire in his hearth by simply concentrating on it!

Magic

Atan had never witnessed arcane magic before outside the hands of the Vampire Mages that destroyed his village, and he was astounded. Magic other than minor Druidic had long since died out in Europe after the ban on it was declared by King Solomon. Jishi saw the incredulous expression on Atan's face and demonstrated some other minor magical feats he could perform. Jishi realized that Atan was quite unfamiliar with magic, and decided he must learn about where Atan hailed from, for magic was not an uncommon tool in this land.

Jishi began to teach Atan his language and Atan learned quickly. Soon, they were able to hold basic conversations, and Jishi eagerly sought knowledge of the smallest detail of this land of 'Europe' and the Beasts there. Atan's most exhausting duty as a slave was talking through the night with the insatiably curious Jishi. In talking with the magician, Atan slowly gleaned information about where he was. He had been captured by the slavers in the jungles of the Serpent Clans in the southeastern Morning Lands. He was now in an ancient kingdom of Beasts called the Middle Kingdom, in a city called Jinkang, which was the regional capital of the Province of the South Wind. The Middle Kingdom had been ruled by the Jade Dynasty for the last twelve Emperors/Empresses, and was currently led by the Empress of the Four Winds, named Wu Zetian, the first woman to reign during the Jade Dynasty.

In time, Jishi came to realize that he must present Atan to the Empress, who had developed a reputation for seeking knowledge from foreigners visiting the Middle Kingdom, willingly or not. Together they traveled to Chang'an, capital of the Middle Kingdom. Though otherwise located in the Province of the North Wind, Chang'an was the personal city of the ruling Dynast, and was considered almost as its own tiny Province. The Imperial Court was at Chang'an, and within was the Lotus Throne, symbol of the great power of the Middle Kingdom. Everywhere they went as they traveled, they caused a minor sensation, for none had seen any Beast like Atan before.

The Empress of the Four Winds

On arriving in Chang'an, they found that word of their coming had preceded them, and they were summoned into the presence of the Empress, who sought knowledge of this strange land beyond the scope of the Middle Kingdom's purview. She commanded Jishi to leave Atan with him, and they began to talk.

For Atan, much of the discussion was similar to the long talks he had with Jishi, but he learned yet more of the Middle Kingdom from the Empress, for she was freer with her tongue and opinions than Jishi had been. She told Atan of the history of the Middle Kingdom and of the delicate balance the Emperor or Empress must strike in order to maintain the support of the great Houses that make up the Jade Dynasty. She told him of the Blasted Lands to the north, home to the People of the Skull and the absolute rule of their Khan.

The Empress claimed that the western border of the Khan's empire was at the edge of the Earth, but Atan had heard legends of the People of the Skull to the east as a child, and told the dynast that he came from lands west of the Skull Lands. She quizzed him extensively on a number of subjects, including the Treekin and the Undead, and they learned that the Amanita ("Shroomies") were known to both their people.

The Empress expressed her pity and disgust for the relative barbarism of the Beasts of the Covenant, and opined that such a thing as the Bleakness could not happen in her realm. Atan also learned that the Middle Kingdom was under constant threat of invasion by Dragons that inhabited the great mountains to the southwest. This sparked his interest greatly, for all knew of the legend of dragonsteel, which had not been forged since the death of the smith Regnin thousands of years before. The Empress told Atan that none in the Middle Kingdom had heard of this dragonsteel, and that venturing into the Dragon Empire was tantamount to suicide. Perhaps the major reason the Middle Kingdom had not fallen before the Dragons thus far was that the Dragons were unable to stop fighting amongst themselves.

At the end of their long conversation, the Empress recalled Jishi and informed him that henceforth Atan would be her personal slave. She ordered Jishi duly compensated, and sent him on his way. Atan did not know it, but it was counted an incredible honor to be

slave to an Empress. His abrupt appointment made him more than one enemy that day among those at the Imperial Court at Chang'an.

21 | MAGES OF THE YELLOW RIVER

Over the next few years, Atan educated himself extensively on the history of the Middle Kingdom and on the art of governance. He became one of the Empress's chief advisors and performed many valuable services for the Kingdom. In his sixth year of service, assassins were sent to slay the Empress of the Four Winds, that a rival House might assume leadership of the Jade Dynasty. Atan saved Wu Zetian's life that night by spiriting her into a secret passage he had discovered while examining records of the chief architect of the Imperial Palace.

Freedom

As a reward for his service, the Empress granted Atan his freedom. Though greatly relieved, Atan had no life to go to elsewhere and so requested that he be allowed to stay and serve the Lotus Throne by learning the secrets of arcane magic. The Empress was most pleased. Atan had ever been a loyal servant and possessed an uncommonly quick mind. He could represent a great asset to the Jade Dynasty and all of the Middle Kingdom were he to become mighty in the magical arts, for unlike her other mages, Atan had no competing loyalties to House or Family. He was loyal to her and her alone.

The Empress consented to Atan's request and sent him to a village called simply the Gardens of Mist where the Mages of the Yellow River dwelt. These Beasts were the keepers of the secrets of magic in the Middle Kingdom, and it was from them that Atan would learn.

Gardens of Mist

Upon arriving in the village, Atan was dismayed to see that the Gardens of Mist, which he had envisioned as a lush paradise, were nothing more than a dusty and dried up village of hovels next to a trickle of silty water that could be called a river only in the delirious dreams of the most optimistic among us. The Beasts living here seemed cheerful enough though, and soon an old Beast approached and introduced himself as Ping. The Beasts of the Yellow River did not have leaders per se, but Ping spoke for them in many cases.

Ping was, as was virtually everyone Atan met in the Middle Kingdom, fascinated by Atan's stories of his "barbaric" homeland, but he would not agree to teach Atan the arts of magic. Instead, he wanted to teach Atan jokes, for the Beasts of the Yellow River had, in Ping's opinion, the finest sense of humor in the world. Hadn't they named their dry little village the Garden of Mists, after all? And had not Atan expected that the Beasts of the Yellow River might reside some length further down the river where it was more of a river than a bare trickle? Ping would erupt into lengthy chuckling whenever he found occasion to reference the Gardens or the Yellow River in conversation. He truly was a legendary comic, as he often told Atan.

Atan's patience wore thin a week after arriving while Ping was telling yet another joke for the 8th or 9th time. He grabbed Ping by the shoulders and shouted, telling the old Beast to just...just shut up, or at least he tried to. Instead, he found himself unable to move, though nothing visible held him. It was the first magic Atan had seen since arriving in the Gardens of Mist, and it was what he had waited for.

Ping, no longer laughing, told Atan that he would not teach someone without a sense of humor, for no-one with a sense of humor could fail to find Ping's jokes funny, at least in Ping's view. Humor, said Ping, was the key to maintaining humility and without humility there could be no genuine service to fellow Beasts.

However, as the Empress herself had sent Atan to them, Ping allowed that Atan could demonstrate his sense of humor by performing a particularly humorous task. Reluctantly, Atan agreed for he truly did wish to learn the arcane mysteries. Reluctantly, because he had little doubt that he would find Ping's task about as funny as he found his jokes.

A day later, Ping summoned Atan to a small and distinctly unsmiling gathering of Beasts of the Yellow River, all old male and female Beasts. Ping informed Atan that these distinguished colleagues of his were also masters of the magical arts, but that the only way Atan would be permitted instruction would be to make one of them— any one of them — laugh.

Atan, who had, after all, led a difficult and tragedy-filled life, was unsure how he could make these foreign Beasts break into a smile much less laugh.

Jokes

Atan tried a joke or two, which fell into an uncomfortable silence. He contorted his face into what he hoped were funny expressions. He tried an experimental cartwheel. He stared one of them down and then suddenly made a loud 'whooping' noise. He tried repeating a few of the jokes that Ping had told him. All he got for his effort was a yawn by a sleepy-looking black and white Ursine-like Beast. Ping told him he should stop warming up and start being funny.

Atan thought and thought. He simply wasn't a very funny individual. He knew that and accepted it, but somehow he had to convince these dour old wizards that he had a sense of humor. Suddenly, he knew what he had to do. He asked the group to wait right there while he went and fetched a prop. He came back nine hours later, sure that this was within the scope of their humor. He expected them to have long ago gotten the "joke" and gone home, for it was now past midnight. Instead, he found the old Beasts sitting exactly where he had left them, looking placidly at him. Ping said that he felt he could use a good laugh right about now.

Another Try

Atan thought some more and then asked Ping and the rest to follow him. He led them outside to the Yellow River and asked them to wait by the river. He then crossed to the other side of the mighty trickle in a single stride, and began digging in the dry dirt a few dozen yards away from the stream. He had no tools, so simply dug with his bare hands. For hours he dug, until his hands were raw and blistered. Finally though, he had bored his way deeply enough that he found red clay underneath the parched soil. With great effort he gathered a great pile of clay next to the hole and then bit by bit carried it to the river, where Ping and his fellows waited, and made a pile of it on his side of the river.

When all the red clay had been moved to a pile next to the river, Atan started quickly throwing it all into the middle of the trickle that was the Yellow River at this point in its journey to the sea. Soon, the silty yellow trickle became a silty red trickle. Atan stood up, brushed his hands off and stepped across the streamlet to stand beside the group of wizened wizards. He said, “Yellow River” and pointed at the river to emphasize its current state of redness.

Atan was sure this would be funny, for it was just the sort of joke Ping seemed to find hilarious. Once again though: failure. Although one of the old Beasts cocked an eyebrow, and perhaps another allowed the corner of her mouth to rise ever so slightly, nobody cracked a smile. Ping asked how many holes Atan planned on digging before getting down to some serious funny.

Surrendur

Atan had no idea what to do now and did the only thing he could think of. He got down on his knees and pleaded with them to teach him magic. He reminded them of the oppressed land he had grown up in, of his village slaughter by the Bloodkin, and of his trials journeying to the Middle Kingdom. He spoke of his service to the Empress first as a slave and now as a free man.

Suddenly, Ping gave a short and began chuckling, and then they were all bent over wheezing and choking while they laughed themselves silly. Atan was baffled. Was his difficult life funny to them, he demanded to know?

Ping, catching his breath, expressed disbelief that Atan was being serious. Surely, he said, you realize that you will never be a free man? Slave or not, for good or ill, Ping said, Atan would always be bound to the Empress, for the Empress does not let value slip her grasp. Ping and his fellow Yellow River Beasts had simply assumed that Atan was making some sort of elaborate joke in referring to himself as free.

Atan, wisely, started chuckling right along with Ping, and Ping slapped him on the back in a comradely fashion. Atan knew that his life was about to change, again.

Student of Magic

For the next four years, Atan studied magic with Ping and other teachers of the Yellow River whenever he was not sleeping. He proved to be a quick study at magic, as with most things, and was progressing nicely. The Beasts of the Yellow River were masters of the magic of the four elements and Atan learned to weave them all together with his Will. Ping was of the opinion that Atan would someday be among the greatest of magic-users, held back only by the fact that he began studying relatively late. He learned to weave together explosive balls of fire, to protect himself with earth and water, and to move himself with air. He was not a master of the arcane arts yet but he was well on his way.

22 | MAGIC RETURNS TO EUROPE

Four years after Atan arrived at the Gardens of the Mist, a messenger arrived with urgent news from the Chang'an, the Imperial Capital. The Empress of the Four Winds, Wu Zetian, had been poisoned and was dead. A new Emperor – Shun Go - sat the Lotus Throne now, continuing the Jade Dynasty. Atan was summoned back to the Imperial City of Chang'an to attend to the Emperor in a capacity left unspecified.

One who values his life typically hastens to fulfill the wishes of the ruling dynast, but Atan hesitated. If he returned to Chang'an he may never leave again, for while the Empress he had known was, for an Empress at least, reasonably level and wellintentioned, Shun Go came to power in the wake of a poisoning in which his own innocence was murky at best. Atan had no idea what his status would be upon returning to the Imperial Court. While he was formerly one of the chief advisors to the Lotus Throne, he may now be cast as a virtual slave once more; a freak and foreigner whom a paranoid Emperor may not trust.

Further, a thought had been growing in Atan's mind of late. With his increasing mastery of the arcane, might he not try to return to Europe, spread the magical arts, and help free it from the dominion of the Blood Kingdom? Could the skills and knowledge he had gained at the Gardens of the Mist be the weapon the Beasts of the Covenant had hoped for during the century after century of Bleakness?

Atan spoke in confidence to Ping of the Imperial command, and of his hopes and dreams for freedom in his homeland. Ping listened quietly, without jokes, and when Atan was done he told a story of his own.

Artemis

When Ping was a young boy, he said, a year before he came to the Gardens of the Mist to learn magic, he had been visited by a Goddess who called herself Artemis. Ping had never heard of this Goddess before and seemed unsure whether it happened in a dream or not, but it did not seem to matter much, so real it felt to him.

Atan was also unfamiliar with Artemis. Though worship of her had once been scattered in pockets here and there throughout Europe, during the Bleakness many Beasts lost faith in all but Gaia and the Covenant she had sanctified. Artemis was still worshipped by some Noctari villages in southern Europe but it had been a thousand years since travelers crossed Europe and worship of her had died out elsewhere.

Ping said that Artemis had told him that someday he would break faith with the Lotus Throne and in doing so, create hope for not just the Middle Kingdom but for lands beyond the sunset. She said that Ping would put aside his loyalty to the Jade Dynasty and

the Emperor for the sake of one Beast. As Ping grew older, the visitation, whether dream or not, grew dimmer in Ping's memory until he was old and it was only a fond memory of childhood fancy. Perhaps he had simply imagined the whole thing. Who had ever heard of a Goddess with a name like Artemis anyway?

When Atan arrived at the village, Ping idly wondered if perhaps he hadn't invented the memory after all. When he received the news that an Emperor rather than an Empress now ruled, the words of the Goddess began to weigh heavily upon his mind, and when Atan asked Ping for his advice, Ping knew that the moment was at hand. His choice was between his duty to the Kingdom and the Emperor and a hazy memory from his childhood that he still was not sure he hadn't made up.

Ping's Counsel

Ping thought for a moment before giving his advice to Atan. "You must bring laughter back to your people," was all he said, and Atan never forgot those words. That very night he bade his farewell to Ping, whom he now looked at as a foster father. He knew they would never see each other again, for it would be death for Atan to set foot in the Middle Kingdom after refusing a command of the Emperor. It may be death to try to leave, but Atan's mind was made up: He would find the Beasts of the Covenant once more, and he would do what he could to help his people.

The Journey Home

His journey back from the Lands of the Morning to his birthplace in Europe is, as was his journey into the East, a tale for another time, but know that Atan, recognizing that he'd been incredibly lucky to have passed through the Dragon Empire safely on his way to the Middle Kingdom, chose to take the northern route around the mighty mountains called the Pillars of Heaven, believed to be the highest and most inhospitable on Earth. He narrowly escaped Imperial agents seeking him as he crossed through the Province of the West Wind, and was caught once by and subsequently escaped from armed soldiers of the People of the Skull, whose great Khan maintained constant patrols along the border with the Middle Kingdom.

Eventually, Atan came across Foxen living in the ruins of the Border Holds. Surrounded on three sides as they were by the Vampires from the southwest, the People of the Skull from the east, and even occasional raids by Dvergar from far to the north, the destitute and always-starving Foxen were among the worst off of the Beasts of Europe. When Atan told them he could teach them to use magic, they laughed at him, and when he demonstrated his new powers, they shunned him and told him he would bring down the wrath of the Vampire Mages on them.

One must not judge these Foxen too harshly though, for arcane magic was then less than a bedtime story, and their lives were lived in nearly all-encompassing fear of the enemies

that surrounded them and held dominion over them. Downhearted at this rejection by the people he sought to save, Atan headed south across the great Ukran Grasslands, trying to avoid the Bloodkin but twice slaying lone Vampires with the power of earth, air, water, and fire, until he came to what had once been Hayasa and the remaining Felines. There he received a reception wholly unlike that he received in the mostly-conquered Border Holds.

The Hayasans responded eagerly to his demonstrations and soon the canniest among the half-feral tribes of Felines became students of Atan. Magic had returned to Europe, nearly twelve thousand years after Solomon, first Overking of the Beast Empire, had outlawed it.

23 | THE WHITE SHIELD

Atan, arrived in the remains of the Feline nation of Hayasa, had found these descendants of ancient Badaria eager to learn what he had learned in the Middle Kingdom. In secret he taught a score of them. Had the Bloodkin discovered twenty Beasts together in a room, they would have taken the Beasts and penned them as cattle to be feasted upon. Atan knew he had not studied the arts of magic long enough to face the true arcane might of the Vampire Mages and Vampire Lords, and he knew that he lacked the knowledge to train his Feline apprentices well. His only option was numbers. He must teach as many as possible, and the best of his students must go out and do likewise. Only in numbers would the Beasts counter the Blood Kingdom, as ever.

Within a year, Atan decided he had to move. He and his apprentices had gone out hunting Vampires occasionally, and the Bloodkin seemed to be getting suspicious. Greater concentrations of Vampires were being seen in the area, and reports had come in of a Vampire Mage. None of his apprentices were ready to begin teaching, and if Atan was captured, magic would dwindle and die once more.

Taurania

They went. Atan and his apprentices, who were collectively calling themselves the White Shield of Atan for their habit of dressing in white, journeyed south into Taurania, which had been virtually brought to its knees but continued to fight on. The Taurians gave them shelter and the White Shield grew. For two years Atan worked with his students, and all their skills improved. At the end of their relatively safe stay in Taurania, the most adept of Atan's students were ready to begin teaching novices themselves.

Bidding a goodbye to the safety of Taurania, Atan and the White Shield slipped, in groups of threes and fours, across the Bosphorus Strait and into Europe proper. There they made for the Noctari living around Mt. Olympus, for the Taurians had told them that they had heard rumors that there was a spirit of fierce resistance yet left in some Noctari. Along the way they found small traveling groups of Longtail nomads, and occasionally one would join the White Shield and begin learning the mysteries of the elements. They also encountered Bloodkin resistance along the way but between force of arms and the two score members of the White Shield with their budding arcane skills, the bloodsuckers were quickly and more importantly, quietly, slain. They could not allow Lord Vinga to discover that magic had returned to the Beasts of the Covenant.

Artemis Again

The Noctari were glad to see Atan, for Artemis, the Protector, as they called her, had spoken through Apollo's Oracle at Delphi over eighty years ago and told the Noctari that

a Beast bearing a white shield would come to them and with their help begin a war in secret aimed at throwing off the shackles of the Blood Kingdom forever. The Noctari eagerly embraced Atan's teachings, and the White Shield quickly grew to over one hundred members. Atan left most of his best students (mainly Felines from Hayasa) there to teach continue the training of the new Noctari students, and took twenty-five with him, journeying west to make contact with the Fangren who had survived the Vampire sacking of Roma yet still dwelled in the Tiber Valley.

The Tiber Valley

On arriving at the Tiber, Atan was greeted by a welcoming party. Word of his coming had preceded him, which meant that surely the Vampires knew who he was now too. The Bloodkin frequently put Beasts to the question and were not kind in their inquiries, so it was assumed that anything not kept strictly a secret would make its way ultimately back to Lord Vinga in the seat of power in the Blood Kingdom. It was now critical to stay on the move and grow his White Shield quickly. Atan gained a score more followers in his short time in the valley of the Tiber, and together they left, aiming to sneak through to southern Tartessia and there recruit freedom fighters they had heard were still actively battling the forces of Vinga.

Andalusia

This would be their most dangerous travel thus far, and Atan was without his best students, whom had been left at Mt. Olympus to train promising Noctari. As they crossed the mountains into the Tartessian Peninsula, they found that they had been expected. A hunting party of Bloodkin, led by a Vampire Mage, found them while a-camp one night. Six of the White Shield were dead before they could organize, but soon the Vampires discovered that they were up against twenty magic-users, not one. (The new Fangren members of the White Shield had not learned enough yet to contribute except as hand-to-hand combatants). Atan was not the equal of a Vampire Mage, but once organized and weaving spells together, he and the White Shield bested the Mage and all of his Bloodkin companions. Vinga had underestimated the Beasts. It was to prove a major miscalculation.

Argantonio's Guerillas

Atan and the White Shield did cross to southern Andalusia, at the very southern end of the Tartessian Peninsula, though they had to make a mad dash through the battle lines of the Vampires to do it, losing three more of their own. Once there, they made contact with the leader of the guerilla movement, an Atavian named Argantonio who was the last descendant of the last king of Tartessos.

Atan took in the plans and operations of the guerillas and could not believe they had not been decimated by the Bloodkin. He had passed through their lines and seen the

organization of the Vampires and the power they could bring to bear. How could this small band of Atavians hold the Vampires at bay with no natural barrier to hold them back such as Taurania and Midgaard had? Even they must eventually fall it seemed, for the Bloodkin had taken the isle of Old Anglorum many centuries ago, crossing miles of water to do so.

The answer was nothing Atan could have expected. Argantonio took him to a camp set by itself away from the Atavians and there Atan was astounded to discover a type of Beast he'd never seen before. Scaled, like a lizard, these beings called themselves Lisians. They said they came from the Dunelands across the narrow water at the Rock at the southern tip of Andalusia, from a place called Maraket at the foot of mountains they called the Atlas Mountains. Beasts these Lisians were, but they were not part of the Covenant and had never felt the hand of Vinga. Most crucial: They had not been part of the Beast Empire and the ban on arcane magic that Solomon, the founder of that Empire, had instituted as reaction to the excesses of the Mystarchs. Thus, they still had magic.

The Lisians had always been a reclusive people, they told Atan, but they had kept a secret eye upon the advance of the Blood Kingdom into the Tartessian Peninsula and were alarmed to see that the Atavians who had unknowingly protected Maraket from assault from the north were on the verge of utter defeat. After much debate, the Lisians felt that letting the Atavians discover their presence would be worth the risk if they could prevent a Vampire incursion into the Dunelands, on the edge of which Maraket sat. The Lisians had enough enemies in the Dog Soldiers of Amizeh and occasional raids from under the Atlas Mountains by Undead without bringing down the wrath of the Vampire Palatine upon them.

Thus, centuries ago, the Lisians had begun sending some of their mages to the Atavians, to help them in secret. They could not deploy their magic openly against the Vampires for to do so would be to draw Vinga's direct attention and ensure defeat. The Lisians had never lost magic, it is true, but their self-imposed isolation through their history had prevented them from trading ideas with others and learning thereby. Their magical growth had been stunted, and their greatest mages were only a little more powerful than Atan.

Further, the Lisians largely lacked directly offensive magic, for theirs was a culture of born desert warriors, and they used their magic to enhance their physical combat capabilities rather than replace them. The Lisian mages sent to aid the Atavians assisted by strengthening their armor, by lending them extra speed and strength, and by keeping their weapons unnaturally sharp; never enough to alert the Bloodkin that something was amiss beyond some barely troublesome Atavians holding worthless ground and who could be easily taken after Taurania was pacified.

The Wandering One and Prophecy

Those same mages also declined to ever teach the Atavians their arts, for there was a prophecy from the early days of Maraket. It is said that the perhaps legendary founders of Maraket – Ismael and Karina – had written a book of prophecy at the end of their lives called the “Siroccan Saga”. The original was lost long ago, and supposed copies differ somewhat, making it difficult to ascertain the truth, but during their wanderings in the desert, Ismael and Karina had encountered a God they called “the Wandering One.” This God, so the legend goes, taught Ismael and Karina magic, and told them to found a nation at the foot of the Atlas Mountains.

The existing copies of the Siroccan Saga disagree on many things, but one thing that all agree upon was that the Wandering One had prohibited Ismael and Karina from passing on their knowledge to any but the people of the Dunes – the Lisians. The prophecy says that a day would come when the affairs of the larger world would intrude into the desert paradise (as they saw it) of the Dunelands. It said that a Beast would come from beyond the dawn and they would know him by the magic he bore.

This Beast, said the prophecy, would be the key to turning back an enemy that would, unchecked, eventually destroy Maraket and the Lisian nation. The Lisians felt that Atan was the Beast of ancient prophecy, and so for the first time in the history of their people, the Lisians taught an outsider their magic. Atan taught them what he could of his offensive magic in return, and quickly both he and the Lisians grew in power. The Lisians would not join the White Shield, for to expose themselves to the Blood Kingdom at this stage would invite retribution on a scale they could not endure, but they had done more than Atan could have hoped for.

The White Shield now possessed both the magic to enhance warriors and the magic to directly combat the Bloodkin. Though it was too early in the fight to openly employ magic against the Vampires on the battle lines, the morale of the Atavians was greatly improved by this secret weapon they harbored, and they resolved to fight on for as long as Atan needed to expand the White Shield.

24 | ATAN'S WAR

Over the next several years Atan traveled Europe, always arriving with some of his White Shield with him, and always leaving his most advanced pupils behind to continue teaching others. He was hunted constantly by packs of Bloodkin but managed to either stay ahead of them or successfully slay them when he was found. He made contact with the remnants of the Broccans and Harts in Old Anglorum, with the displaced Bounders gathered on the west coast of Europe dreaming of return to the Emerald Kingdom, and with the decimated tribes of Bandicoons in central Europe. He found frightened but determined groups of Anura living here or there hidden in the depths of marshes, and stubborn Capricans and Tusken in the foothills of the Carpathians themselves, both almost completely wiped out after their unceasing resistance to the Blood Kingdom.

He returned to the Foxen in the former Border Holds where he was given a much warmer welcome this time, for the rumor of the White Shield had spread to all the Beasts of the Covenant by now. Everywhere he went, he left behind pockets of determined resistance. Some of these underground groups were discovered and destroyed by Bloodkin after he left, but others survived, and the White Shield took root and began to grow.

Back to Hayasa

Finally, Atan journeyed back to the wreckage of Hayasa, to reconnect with the first students – all Felines - he had trained. There, he found that those he had left behind had progressed, and recruited more members. Incredibly, the White Shield in Hayasa alone now numbered more than one hundred, but Atan knew it wasn't enough. To match the Blood Kingdom, he needed an army able to wield physical and magical force with equal ease. Hayasa was a conquered nation, and training an army there was simply not possible.

There was only one place in the former lands of the Beast of the Covenant where raising and training an army might be possible without attracting undue attention from the Vinga in the Starkhold: Taurania. The land held by the Atavians in the southern Tartessian Peninsula was too small to hide an army from the Vampire Palatine, and Midgaard was both too far away and reportedly had its own problems with the Dvergar of Nidavellir.

Once again, repeating his journey of years past, Atan traveled from Hayasa to Taurania, this time with every member of the White Shield that had come with him to old Hayasa and every member therein. Once in Taurania the leaders of the Taurians quickly agreed to support Atan, and a revolution was born.

The word went out, and members of the White Shield slowly, ever so slowly, filtered into Taurania by sea and by land. Many who would join Atan came as well. Old and young, male and female, the Beasts came. Many fell to the Bloodkin on their way there, but for

every Beast that was taken, one escaped capture and arrived, ready to fight for freedom for themselves and their fellow Beasts of the Covenant.

They trained, and they drilled. They studied and they sparred. In one year, the White Shield was an army ready to take to battle. Six months later, it was an army honed to a fine edge with which to slit the throat of the Blood Kingdom. They had successfully evaded Vinga's notice, and were ready to make their fateful move.

The Battle of Talon Point

Rather than try to attack across the Bosphorus, Atan and his army struck north, to Hayasa, where for the first time the White Shield faced the Vampires in open warfare. Surprise won the day, for the Bloodkin there were not prepared to face an organized army backed by mages. Hayasa was liberated, and Atan sent messengers out across Europe to spread the news of their victory at the Battle of Talon Point and rally what strength was left in the Beasts of the Covenant.

Events moved quickly now. White Shield agents organized a resistance in Old Anglorum, and soon the Harts and Broccans there were in open revolt, taking and ripping down the Blood Keep on the isle of Avalon where the Bloodkin preyed upon them from. The Lisian-aided Atavians launched a last-ditch assault on the Vampires sieging them and managed to reverse the momentum of the war, pushing the Vampire lines back for the first time in the previous two centuries, though Argantonio, last heir to the throne of old Tartessos, perished in the battle.

Vinga Reacts

Lord Vinga, first of the Vampires, was not idle in his Starkhold Fortress, deep in the Carpathian Mountains. He knew his Bloodkin legions faced a foe who could wield arcane power for the first time since they had defeated the Undead forces of Shabaka, and that he had made a mistake in not rooting out this White Shield earlier. He was determined to correct that error immediately, and ordered the bulk of his strength to be sent to Old Anglorum, Tartessos, and Hayasa, to quell the rebellions before they spread, and find, capture, or kill Atan.

The Pendulum Swings Back

His actions were as a pendulum, and Atan took advantage of the swing of Vinga's attention to the outer parts of the Blood Kingdom's conquered lands. He marched his army back to Taurania, and crossed the Bosphorus rather than take the expected route north around the Black Sea. Atan had gained a foothold in Europe, and the nearby Noctari rose against their conquerors just before the White Shield marched to Mt. Olympus to free them. Their timely rebellion paved the way for a relatively easy victory for Atan.

Next were the Fangren of ruined Roma, who took to hunting down the fleeing Vampires with a passion that was fearsome to behold. Lord Vinga was forced to consolidate, recalling his armies from the far reaches of his Kingdom to protect the heart of it – the Carpathians and their surroundings. He would not suffer armies of Beasts in the Carpathians again. With the recall of Bloodkin forces from the outer reaches of the Blood Kingdom's boundaries, Old Anglorum and the remains of the nations of the Atavians of Tartessos, the Felines of Hayasa, the Noctari of Olympus, and the Fangren of Roma had been effectively freed from the Blood Kingdom's dominion.

The White Shield had proven itself in battle against the Bloodkin over and over, and for every Beast they lost, two were ready to sign up and be trained in the arts of battle, the secrets of magic, or both. Many Druids of the time joined as well, seeking to augment their now-meager nature mysticism with the power of arcane magic.

Stalemate

The nations still captured inside the Blood Kingdom – the Bounders, the Capricans, the Tuskens, the Bandicoons, the Anura, the Foxen, and many of the roaming Longtails – periodically revolted, but Vinga's power was concentrated enough now that his forces were able to put these down, as brutally as possible. Only the Treekin of the Great Forest and the Beasts that had taken shelter there before its borders were closed remained free of Vampire dominion, but no news had passed out from the Treekin realm in two thousand years. The Blood Kingdom's borders were shrunken, but still far beyond what they were at the beginning of the Bleakness.

For a decade more, Atan and his White Shield fought against the Vampires. The lines waxed and waned, and heroes fought and died in the cause of freedom from the Vampires, but twenty years after Atan returned from the Lands of the Morning with the secrets of magic, it was clear that the Beasts could make no more progress against the Blood Kingdom. Atan was a mighty sorcerer now, able to stand one-on-one with a Vampire Mage and live, and the most skilled of his disciples had barely less mastery than he.

Yet, the Bloodkin were fearsomely strong and were able to renew their unskilled front-line soldiers somewhat with captured Beasts sucked dry of will at the same time they were drained of their life's blood. And then there were the Merihim, hulking giants of Vampires able to rip the head off a Beast with its bare hands. Many a battle had been won for the Bloodkin when the Beast lines crumpled before an onslaught of rampaging Merihim.

The Blood Kingdom's dominion had been reduced, but Vinga had lost none of his potency, and Atan and the White Shield, now composed of multiple armies, lacked the might to contain the Bloodkin any further than they had. The war was at a standstill, but

all feared that it was only a matter of time until the Blood Kingdom massed the power to launch a new offensive.

25 | ATAN AND THE TREEKIN

The battle against Lord Vinga, Palatine of the Vampires and his Blood Kingdom had ground to a standstill. Atan and the armies of the White Shield had liberated half of Europe but the other half yet lived in the despair of Bloodkin rule. It had been a decade and more since the White Shield last made a significant advance against the Vampires, and it was assumed by all that Vinga was gathering his strength for another all-out assault on the Beasts of the Covenant.

There was one center of strength in Europe that had not been tapped. The Treekin, hiding in the Great Forest these last two thousand years, had not communicated with the outside world all these years of Bleakness. Surely they could not be blind to what happened outside their borders. Now that Atan and his forces had pushed the Vampires back somewhat, surely they might send aid to tip the balance for the Beasts?

Accompanied by a group of the most senior members of the White Shield, Atan journeyed to the borders of the Great Forest and there they made camp, for they didn't know how long they would need to remain. The next day, at dawn, Atan rose and went to the very edge of the Treekin domain.

“Lords of the Forest, great children of Gaia, I come to you in humility and with no cause to expect you to grant that which I must have, nor even that you will hear what I must ask,” said Atan. “But nevertheless, I speak for the Beasts, and I will ask this. And we must have this.”

“For two thousand years the Beasts who were as pupils at your feet when our races were young have lived as blood cattle under the fang and claw of the Bloodkin. The noble Treekin protected themselves and what Beasts they could when Vinga cast his shadow across Europe, and for this we are grateful.”

“Now, however, we must ask the Treekin for more. We have nothing to offer in return but eternal gratitude and the resumption of the alliances of old, but yet we must ask it.”

“Children of Gaia, will you lend us your aid?”

Silence. The wind whispering in the trees, but saying nothing. Atan began again, repeating his words. Again, nothing but the pastoral quiet of an apparently empty woodland. Until dusk that day, Atan repeated his plea over and over, with no reply. The next day he arose again at dawn, approached the edges of the Great Forest, and began again, begging for aid. Again, silence.

Waiting

For a year and a day, Atan repeated this ritual until his plea became like a prayer. The members of the White Shield that Atan had brought along began joining him in their daily entreaties, spending dawn until dusk repeating their plea for help, willing the Treekin to respond. Inside the Great Forest, the Treekin were not deaf to Atan's pleas, nor were the descendants of the Beasts who had taken shelter there before the Treekin had closed its borders. Among the Beasts, who called themselves the Harbored, there was a split of opinion. Some of the Beasts preferred to remain in the small, tranquil world of the Great Forest, cut off from the outside world, while others yearned to fight with their oppressed brothers and punish Vinga and the Blood Kingdom for their crimes against Beastdom.

The Treekin themselves did not participate in the debates among the Harbored, preferring the quiet language without words that they used among themselves. Like the Beasts sheltered in the Great Forest, the Treekin were divided. Many among them remembered the days of freedom before the Bleakness began two aeons before, and all longed to range to woodlands beyond the closed borders of the Great Forest. In opposition, many among them have developed isolationist tendencies, and would have preferred to remain uninvolved in the affairs of the larger world around them, but with discussion it became clear that there was only one viable option.

Though more than a few among the Treekin wished to deny it, it was apparent that this race of forest lords already ancient when the Beasts were born was diminishing. Restricted to a relatively small forest compared to the vast green realm in which they once ranged, the Treekin lost their contact with the source of much of their potency. Older Treekin died off at increasing rates, and many Seedlings were sprouted sickly and weak.

The Borders Open

There was no true choice, and with a certain inevitability, exactly one year and one day after Atan had begun to beseech the Treekin, they opened the borders of the Great Forest and for the first time in two thousand years an outsider entered those green boundaries. Inside, Atan found perhaps a thousand Beasts, living simply and with little capacity to impact the fight against the Bloodkin. Still, it was a joyous moment to be reunited with long-separated Beasts, and there was a sense of a hope in the act.

The Treekin summoned Atan, alone, to a council of the greatest among them. Were the Tree Lords to pick one amongst them to speak for the rest, it would have been Ilnar Greatbranch, who yet remembered when the Beasts were newly arisen.

Said Ilnar, "My heart tells me that I have found a friend long-lost, that a new era has begun in which hope supplants despair. But we are weakened by our long years of solitude here inside our walls of leaf, branch, and root. The Vampire Palatine is too strong for us to face directly and thereby risk the utter destruction of the Great Forest. And yet,

you have come so far and done so much. The Treekin will lend what aid we are able. When the time is right and what strength is left in us will tip the balance, the Treekin will march to war. Until then, young Atan, we can but share with you what we know and what we remember. Long ago when we ourselves were new upon the Earth, the Amanita walked the forests. In those dawning days they had not yet begun their eternal search and were freer with what they knew. They were birthed at the ending of the Age before, and the beginning of this Age, long before even we of the Trees were, and they saw things and knew things that we did not. They told us of the Maar, or “Iron Children.”

Ilnar sighed the sigh of a slowly creaking oak tree. “A great race of crafters they were, living deep in the bowels of the Earth, where we do not tread. Never have I seen one, but the Amanita in those times had traffic with them, and I have seen a Maar artifact. You would know it as the Boncairn, the Trillium Shard, or the Stygian Eye; all names for the same.”

Atan replied, in wonder, “The Trillium Shard was thought to be only a story. My grandmother told me a tale once of the Bandicoons at the beginning of the Bleakness holding back the Blood Kingdom with a power called the Trillium Shard. She claimed her grandmother had told her the story, and her grandmother’s grandmother before her, and back and back, but I always believed it to be just a children’s tale.”

“If these Iron Children still exist and can be found,” continued Atan, “mayhap we can find a way to enlist their aid. One of their artifacts was enough to allow the Bandicoons to resist the Vampire plague for years in my grandmother’s story. What could we do with five, or ten, or twenty? Friend Ilnar, great Forest Lord, this may be the key we have been searching for. Tell me: Where are the Maar?” asked Atan.

”I do not know,” replied Ilnar. “North, the Amanita said. North and deep below, where Treekin do not tread. That is all I know, and it causes me sorrow that we cannot do more.”

It would have to be enough.

26 | ATAN'S NORTHERN JOURNEY

And so Atan set off with his small band of trusted compatriots. North they went, making the difficult crossing to the besieged land of Midgaard to search for the Maar. There, they found the Ursines under threat of constant Dvergar attack, and still without magic of any sort. Atan could not leave fellow Beasts of the Covenant so defenseless, and so for months he and those of the White Shield with him instructed the Ursines in the arcane mysteries.

Calaburn

So grateful were these heirs to the legacy of Sigurd that they gifted to Atan a legend: Calaburn, one of the three dragonsteel weapons forged by the Ursine smith Regnin and the Thundergod Thor long, long ago. It is likely that Calaburn was the finest blade ever wielded by a Beast at that time, and Atan was honored. The Ursines, to the disappointment of Atan, knew nothing of the Maar, however, nor did they know of any cave systems that went deep into the earth, save for one: that of Nidavellir, the dark home of the Dvergar, their ancient enemy. The Ursines assured Atan that he should seek out a different power, for entering Nidavellir meant death for a Beast.

Atan allowed that perhaps this was true, but that there was nowhere else to turn. The Beasts of Europe had taken the fight against the Vampires as far as they could without a new weapon, and that weapon must be the Maar. Too much time had passed, and the hand of Vinga would surely strike again soon.

To Nidavellir

North again they went, slipping into the underground realm of Nidavellir with magic and stealth. For a week they journeyed through side tunnels searching for a way down while avoiding Dvergar patrols. They witnessed the cruelty and malice of the Dvergar, and their twisted rites to Loki, whom they worshipped. They saw nothing but vicious hatred, penned and driven by religious fervor.

Finally, in the lowest parts of Nidavellir, they came to a great gate guarded by a large complement of Dvergar soldiers and berserkers. As they watched the gate they noted that twice a day it was opened. Once, a party of Dvergar went out through the gate and once it came back, sacks filled with something heavy. Deciding that this must be the route to the caverns and dark places below the lowest reaches of Nidavellir, Atan and his companions captured a Dvergar patrol in a side tunnel, stripped them of their clothing and disguised themselves, hoping to pass unnoticed through the gate between their disguises and the aid of a minor spell of disguise that Atan had developed.

At the appointed time, the gate opened and they quickly joined the back of the party of Dvergar passing through it. Nearly safe were they when a Dvergar in the party bumped

into one of Atan's companions, shattering the illusion. Though the disguises worked well enough from a distance, up close there was no mistaking Atan or his allies for Dvergar once the spell of disguise had been broken.

Detection and Flight

The Dvergar screamed a warning and suddenly Atan and those of the White Shield with him found themselves far underground, fighting for their lives. They were far outnumbered and soon had to flee, away from the gate and towards the unknown of the deep. On and on they ran, soon finding themselves in tunnels that grew warmer as they went deeper. They wandered, lost, for an unknown time. Two days? Four? A week? They did not know.

To make matters worse, they were not alone in these hot, barren tunnels. Three times they had been attacked and they had lost five members of their party in those attacks. It was never entirely clear what they were being attacked by, for all they saw was, improbably, an apple floating down a tunnel and then all was a blur of teeth and fear. It stopped as soon as it began, and one or two of their dwindling group would be gone forever.

The Hot Darkness

Despair filled their minds just as endless hot darkness and tunnel walls filled their vision. Though it seemed that it had been long since the grace of Gaia had blessed the Beasts of the Covenant, in desperation the lost party of Beasts fell to their knees and began to pray, begging Gaia, or indeed any greater power than they, for aid. They prayed for help not for their sake alone, but for the sake of all the Beasts of the Covenant who looked to Atan and his White Shield for deliverance from Vampire dominion. It did not seem to them that it was Gaia who had pushed back the Blood Kingdom thus far, nor did Gaia seem to have offered succor to the Beasts during the two aeons of Bleakness, but the legends die hard and the Earthmother still held a place of reverence and awe in the minds of most of those of the Covenant.

They did not abandon themselves to the mercy of benevolent Powers, but made a ritual of wandering the tunnels for awhile, praying for a time, sleeping, and repeating the process. Their food was nearly gone and though they were able to find pools of water here and there the water was foul and stank of rotted eggs. Drinking it made them ill and sapped their strength. They knew that if they did not find their ways out and if their prayers were not answered, they would die and in all likelihood, Europe would once again be plunged into total Bloodkin domination for failure of Atan's mission to find a new weapon for the Beasts.

Days passed as best as they could estimate in the unchanging gloom of the world below and now the food was gone. Their strength was waning and their prayers had gone

unheard or unanswered. The attacks on them from the darkness had continued and they were down now to only four.

Four Remain

Atan was their leader, of course, and was both the most powerful mage amongst the Beasts of the Covenant and one of its finest warriors. When he strode into battle with the mighty Calaburn wielded and spells flying he was a powerful, fearsome enemy. A Feline named Janpur was the finest wielder of the arcane arts next to Atan in all of Europe. Fergus, a Broccan, was a near-berserker, heedless of wounds taken while slicing and gouging with an old form of strapped-on wrist blades, and a sturdy Caprican called Kirili was one of the few who had been raised worshipping the Earthmother. As a Druid, Kirili had greatly prolonged their survival in the dark tunnels by healing the wounds taken and hurts endured by the remaining foursome, and could be found in the thick of battle laying about her with staff and enchantments of life and death.

27 | THE MAAR

Four they were, lost in the tunnels deep within the Earth. Four they would have died had it not been for an encounter that seemed chance. They had given themselves up for dead, and were in a cavern with walls that flowed a deep, hypnotic red, lighting the cavern well beyond the small light that Atan had the strength left to conjure. Suddenly they saw the now-dreaded ‘apples’ in two different tunnels leading away from the cavern, and then for the first time, they saw what plagued them.

Some were the size of a dog, and some were larger than the largest bull, but all scuttled on four legs and had mouths half the size of their bodies, filled with teeth like daggers. Atan and his companions braced for the attack and met it with sword and spell. Wave upon wave came, and still the Beasts held their ground. Within minutes though, they keenly felt their weakened state and they began to accumulate wounds – a gash on the shoulder here, a cut on the thigh there.

A Last Stand

They had liberated half of Europe together, gained entry to the Great Forest for the Beasts for the first time in two thousand years, journeyed through the depths of frozen Nidavellir and found the warm heart of the Earth, but here it seemed that life must be wrenched from them despite all of it. Atan laid about him with Calaburn and spells of fire. Fergus whirled and spun, cutting the enemy to pieces with each movement. Janpur wove arcane shields to protect them while using the power of water and air to freeze and confound their attackers, which they thought of simply as ‘chompers.’ Kirili was a whirlwind of flying oak, sending her staff crashing into skull, bone, and the armored skin of these chompers.

It was not enough. Fergus fell first, pursuing an enemy that had wounded Kirili with all the reckless disregard for his own safety that was the hallmark of his rage. Wounded and disarmed, Atan shouted and rushed to him, cutting a huge chomper down with a single blow of Calaburn, but it wasn’t enough. He was taken from behind and driven to the ground while his attacker prepared to feast upon him imminently. Janpur and Kirili similarly failed, and in moments the four companions had transformed from desperate defenders to prey that knows it is defeated and to be consumed.

Rescue

And then suddenly they were there. The Maar. The Children of Iron! Chanting and marching they came through the tunnels, and with them, an Ursine female wielding magic greater than Atan’s! Before them the monstrous chompers scattered and fled. The Maar were larger than the largest Ursine or Taurian but still managed to have a gentle air about them. Their ‘skin’ seemed to be a melding of iron and stone, both solid and molten,

and their eyes were as of black obsidian. With huge, gentle hands they picked up the four Beasts and carried them off. The four fell into a deep, healing sleep and when they awoke they were surrounded by the Maar.

They were hungry, and the Maar gestured to some sort of fungus placed in front of Atan and his companions. Consuming the fungus seemed to bring new life to their body and soul and they noted that their wounds felt less sharp. Then the ranks of the Maar parted and the mysterious female Ursine stepped forward. She strode to stand before Atan and his wounded friends and said, in the common tongue of the Beasts of Europe, "Though I am not of the Maar, I will speak for them in this matter for they are a shy people and do not speak our language well," said the Ursine.

"We thank the Maar for our timely rescue," replied Atan, "but I must ask: Who are you that you dwell in this lost dark so far below the surface? Who are you that you may speak for these Children of Iron?"

"Have you not guessed? I am called Jarnsaxa. Perhaps my name is known still."

Atan and his companions were stunned into silence. Could it be? Could the ancient, exiled Mystarch be alive, much less still young, after all these thousands of years? Indeed it could, and was. Atan and Jarnsaxa, a living legend, talked for many hours, and Atan learned of how Jarnsaxa had come to dwell with the Maar and to live for such an incredible span of years.

28 | JARNSAXA'S STORY

After Jarnsaxa had been exiled from Europe by the judgment of the Solomon (not yet OverKing), she went north, for at the least the north felt like home to her. Midgaard, now part of the budding Beast Empire, was barred to her as were all nations of the new-formed Covenant. She had nowhere to go and nobody to turn to, though none were like to extend her sympathy given the abusive reign of the Mystarchs.

She wandered the borders of Midgaard for a time, hunting in the woodlands and contemplating how her life had gone so wrong. She had begun with the best of intentions. The Shadow and the Dark Lords were real and she had just wanted to protect the Beasts that she loved. Tyranny had never been in her plan, and yet a tyrant she had become, only to be cast down and exiled by those she had originally sought to protect. She was honest enough with herself to know that she was no innocent victim and came to accept that her exile was right and just.

Solitude

With exile came a period of reflective solitude in her life but eventually she began to wish for atonement or at least mitigation of her many sins. In her wanderings she came across a cave while hunting an elk through the snowy forests, and chased the panicked elk inside. After she had cleaned the elk and prepared the meat to be dried, she explored the cave a bit more and found a tunnel leading in and down. Following it from idle curiosity she found it went far deeper than expected. Past huge caverns with walls that glittered, tiny underground lakes, and precarious ledges she journeyed, finding herself drawn ever deeper.

She knew of the UnderRealm, of course, but even the Mystarchs had hesitated to tread there more than necessary, for the Undead make powerful, implacable enemies and their numbers are great. These tunnels and caverns were completely free of undead presence however, though she found other hostile creatures there, such as the chompers that Atan had encountered. Jarnsaxa was and remained one of the most powerful mages in the history of the Beasts of Age of Legend, and was able to disguise herself from these threats without difficulty. She didn't wish to attack them for she was invading their home and had been the source of enough suffering already.

The Maar

Finally, she came across a group of beings she had never seen before working a kind of magic that seemed somehow both more fundamental and more complex than any she had encountered before. They appeared to be fashioning some sort of object but what, she did not know. Fascinated by these creatures who were, of course, the Maar, she

waited, wrapped in spells to avoid detection, and watched them. Jarnsaxa followed them and found that they were only a few hours walk from their home, such as it was.

The caverns the Maar lived in were barely distinguishable from the caverns surrounding them. They were warm and in some places, hot. Magma could be seen here and there, flowing in and out of a cavern or bubbling up from below, and there were no houses or dwellings that Jarnsaxa could distinguish. The Maar did not appear to sleep and were always quietly and calmly engaged in some activity, often involving enchantments using this unfamiliar magic that they wielded.

The Maar Speak

One day, for no reason that Jarnsaxa could discern, the Maar indicated that they knew she was there watching them. Nearly as one the Maar in the cavern she was in turned to look at her, and she knew she was undone. She had cause to be afraid, certainly, for the Maar wielded a magic she did not understand and though she had seen no violent tendencies from them she had also not seen them have any cause to become angry. Yet, she felt a strange lack of fear and removed the spells that didn't appear to conceal her from these Iron Children at all.

Her lack of apprehension was justified, for the Maar did not appear to mean her any harm. In fact, they seemed to have a very basic grasp of the language of the Beasts, though they spoke in short, clipped sentences and were frustratingly obscure in everything they said. They told her she was welcome to stay with them and showed her the fungus called irid moss that would sustain her. She did, and slowly learned to appreciate the slow life of calm purposeful tasks and thinking that the Maar led.

The Iron Children also taught her some rudimentary elements of their magic and seemed to find humor in her inability to work it beyond the level of one of their young ones. It seemed to her that part of the magical essence they worked with stemmed from the Maar themselves, so perhaps she could not hope to gain mastery in it. In any case, beyond assisting one of the Iron Children with his or her work, Jarnsaxa was largely unable to use their magic to achieve anything.

With time, Jarnsaxa saw the power of the artifacts the Maar had been creating since the Lost Ages. Enormous amounts of time and careful attention were required such that many lifespans of a Beast are required to finish a single Maar artifact of any power. But such power! The artifacts of the Maar were wondrous things that could create matter from energy, slow the passage of time, and more.

Jarnsaxa discovered that the reason the Maar seemed to show no inclination to journey far beyond the caverns that served as their homes was because of one of these artifacts. So long ago that the Maar say that Djall had not yet made his presence felt on Earth, the Maar collectively fashioned their greatest artifact. For three centuries every Iron Child

worked to create the Orean Symmetry, a matrix of magical energy taking up an entire cavern on the outskirts of their home set of caverns. The Orean Symmetry granted the Maar a nearly unlimited natural lifespan and their other artifacts were powerful enough to keep outsiders at bay. Thus, few of the Maar ever perished and there were those who had been alive since the Orean Symmetry had been finished, long before the Amanita walked the Earth.

As does most power of any magnitude, the Orean Symmetry and the aeon-spanning lives it granted to the Maar had a drawback. Were the Maar ever to leave the radius of effect of a dozen miles or so that Orean Symmetry possessed, they would die nearly instantly. They learned that the Orean Symmetry merely delays the aging process rather than truly stopping it. Leaving the area of effect caused the accumulated delayed aging to impose itself on the unfortunate victim in a span of minutes. Thus, spending an hour within the power of the Orean Symmetry would not cause problems, but were one to spend a few decades inside and then leave, one would age by those decades in the course of minutes.

The Maar had spent hundreds of thousands of years living in the energy shadow of the Orean Symmetry. Leaving would kill them in the blink of an eye. The other effect this had was that the Maar no longer spawned younglings as they once did. Their population was static with a slight drop every few centuries when a Maar grew careless and was attacked by a particularly brave chomper or other denizen of the deep places. These incredibly long years in the 'confinement' of the Orean Symmetry had taught the Maar humility, for they were once a proud (if peaceful) race bent on achieving greater and greater heights in their feats of power. During this extended isolation, the Maar had arrived at what can best be called an 'understanding' with the very stone and rock around them. Though they did not refer to the soul of these caverns as Gaia, it was the Earthmother that they communicated with.

Unlike the Beasts, the Maar did not see Gaia as a Goddess, nor Djall nor any other as a God. To them, whose forefathers had lived and died long before either Gaia or Djall had been formed or arrived on this planet, Gaia and Djall were interlopers, if of such power that they demanded respect and eventually loving devotion (but not outright worship) in the case of Gaia and fear and loathing in that of Djall.

Djall

The Maar began to understand that the consciousness that was Gaia had coalesced from the unconscious, collective spirit of all natural things in and on Earth, alive and inert. Gaia told them that she became conscious either because the Earth felt the threat of Lord Djall approaching or because the Earth reacted to the arrival on this planet of a manifestation of Lord Djall. She was not sure which for her earliest memories were full of holes and vague and insubstantial where they existed at all.

Lord Djall, the Maar told Jarnsaxa, was a God above Gods that commanded power that extended well beyond the Earth itself. From where the God of the Dark had come, neither the Maar nor Gaia knew, but Djall's aim was clear: To cause all things, living and unloving, to submit or suffer destruction. How many worlds had fallen before Djall's power or were on the brink now they didn't know, and indeed, when Djall's potency on Earth was greater than ever it was not possible to worry about overmuch. His hand was both as forceful as the blow of a hammer on anvil and as subtle as the growth of a mighty oak. The Undead were His children, said the Maar, and the Dor'kana, His personal agents. Even the Vampires served His cause unwittingly, for any who weakened those who revered Gaia served Djall's ends.

The Shadow Legion

The Maar knew of the threat of the Shadow, for Gaia and they had grown close by the time the Mystarchs discovered the Shadow Legion attempting to force open a tear in the planar barrier in order to infect Earth. They were keenly interested in Jarnsaxa's account of the Mystarchs' experience with the Shadow. Though they could not know for certain, the Maar felt reasonably sure that the Dark Lords must be tools of Djall. They were also certain that the Dvergar, whose most remote patrolshad occasionally wandered close to the Maar's, were ultimately the tools of Djall, through Loki, the False God. Loki had long ago sold his soul to Djall for might enough to match his hated nemesis Thor, for Loki had not been born a God.

The Maar knew that Djall had long sought to take their Orean Symmetry and harness its potency for His own ends and in times past the Maar had contended with Salamanzar, the Protolich, who was the creation of Djall. The artifacts the Maar created proved enough to fend off the Protolich until such time as he decided to turn his attention to Hell and the power that he hoped to find there. Salamanzar, of course, never returned from Hell, for there he fell in battle with Mammon, the Duke of Hell.

The Children of Iron told Jarnsaxa that in her they sensed a kindred spirit. Perhaps her study of the Mysterium Primordial and the powerful magics learned therein had somehow fundamentally changed her and moved her closer to beings whose very being is rooted in arcane power, such as the Maar. Regardless, they invited her to stay with them if she chose.

A Unique Choice

Jarnsaxa's choice was one unique among any decision a Beast had had cause to make since their creation: Live forever without aging but without ever leaving the realm of the Maar again, or go her own way and hope to find what beings would accept her where she could. In the end, it was the purpose that the Maar had been working towards for millennia now that informed her choice. The Children of Iron were creating a handful of artifacts intended to be given to a worthy individual who would make him or herself

known in time. That Beast would come, they were told by Gaia, at a pivotal time for many Beasts and would use the creations of the Maar fight against the servants of Djall, whether witting or unwitting.

She chose to stay. Jarnsaxa felt that this was the atonement she had hoped for. By assisting the Maar she would ultimately help many, many Beasts and no matter what the temptation to wield the artifacts of the Maar within two or three decades she would not be able to survive leaving the area of the Orea Symmetry. It was an insurance policy against falling into the trap of prideful power that had snared her earlier in life, as a Mystarch.

Now, many many lifetimes later, the Beast they had been waiting for had arrived. Indeed, Atan and his companions were the only Beasts to have entered the realm of the Iron Children since Jarnsaxa had, aeons before.

29 | THE BEASTS TRIUMPHANT AND ATAN'S FINAL YEARS

While Atan, Fergus, Janpur, and Kirili recuperated on a diet of irid moss, the Maar, with Jarnsaxa translating (for the Children of Iron remained fairly shy around Atan and his friends), taught Atan the secret of forging dragonsteel. Although they used the last of the dragon bone ash that they had, teaching Atan this art ensured that the Beasts would have a way to create new dragonsteel weapons (providing they could obtain dragon bone ash) without returning to the Maar. The Iron Children required that in return for this aid, Atan and his companions swear by Gaia herself never to reveal the location of the Maar, nor ever to return once they left for fear that the agents of Djall might track the Maar this way.

As significant as gaining the secret of forging dragonsteel were the artifacts given to Atan by the Maar. They had worked on these, with whatever contribution Jarnsaxa could give, for a very, very long time, for they were fewer in numbers than they once were. It's uncertain how many artifacts Atan received but we still have the names of a few, though there's widespread disagreement over the exact powers these artifacts could manifest. There was the Thunderous Aura, the Worldgate, the Ark of Imperium, the Brimstar, and more.

Atan Leaves the Maar

It was in these moments that Vinga's defeat was written, long before the Lord of the Vampires was even aware that the quill of fate had begun to write his doom. Bidding farewell to the Maar, and promising Jarnsaxa that he would make sure her atonement was made known, Atan and his faithful companions were led by the Maar to the edge of the Orean Symmetry's effect and given direction to the surface. They departed the realm of the Maar, never to return.

All know of what happened next. Atan returned to Europe with Fergus, Kirili, and Janpur and there journeyed to the Tiber Valley where the Fangren lived and then to Taurania. In both places, he recruited the best Lupine and Taurian hunters and with the three who had returned with him from the caverns of the Maar they went east to the Dragon Empire through which Atan had passed as a young man fleeing the Bleakness and traveling blindly east into the Morning Lands. There, they took a number of dragons unaware and before they could be hunted down, they burned the bones, gathered the resulting ash, and slipped back to the West.

At the foot of Mount Olympus, in a forge maintained by the priests of the crafter God Hephaestus (called Vulcan by the Fangren), Atan taught the Noctari smiths the secret of

forging dragonsteel, and together they forged three score dragonsteel weapons. While perhaps the smiths were not of like ability with the legendary Ursine smith Regnin, who had forged Atan's mighty blade Calaburn in the earliest days of history, even a dragonsteel blade forged by an indifferent smith was a wonder.

The Blood Kingdom Diminished

With the dragonsteel weapons, the White Shield armies of mages, druids, and warriors, and the Maar artifacts, Atan and the Beasts of the Covenant pushed the Vampires back, bit by bit, and victory by victory. In the decisive battle, the Treekin joined in as promised and the look of panic upon the faces of the usually smug Vampires was almost worth having had to endure the Bleakness for. Merihim were used to ripping the heads off Beasts, not being ripped in half by Treekin. Palatine Vinga had not foreseen this influx of power into the Beasts and soon found his Blood Kingdom pushed back to the borders of the Carpathian Mountains, approximately where they were at the beginning of the Bleakness.

There though, Vinga held, for when his Bloodkin had finally broken the Bandicoons wielding the Trillium Shard he took that artifact for himself. Now he too employed it to defend his territory, and a stalemate was reached once more. All the historical lands of the Beasts of the Covenant were now free of Blood Kingdom dominion except for the Tusken lands of Eremantus in the Eastern Carpathians and Kar Luthin and the other ancient cities of the Capricans in the high places of the Western Carpathians. To the dismay of the Tusken and Capricans, it was here that the Beasts decided it was time for as much peace as they could have with the Bloodkin. They created a defensible perimeter around the much-shrunk borders of the Blood Kingdom and resolved that if they couldn't eradicate the threat, they would simply ensure it could not spread again.

The End of the Bleakness

The Bleakness was now over and a new golden age began for the Beasts of the Covenant. The displaced Tusken and Capricans were warmly welcomed anywhere they chose to settle and the end of the war and resumption of trade led to the closest relations between the Beasts of Europe since the line of Solomon died out in the Primal War.

Atan was revered as the savior of Beasts, having first brought magic back to them and then helped them rescue themselves from the blood-soaked grip that Vinga had held over them. He was an old Beast now and was tired of doing great deeds and of the world seeming to depend on him. He had no children and had never married, for he had given his entire life to serving his fellow Beast. Now, he just wished somewhere to commune with Gaia, whose worship had come back into fashion in force, and contemplate all he had learned, and to simply enjoy the feel of the cool breeze upon himself.

Fergus, Janpur, and Kirili were assisting the newly freed Beasts and Atan felt he was no longer truly needed.

He had never been to Old Anglorum but had been told that some of it was quite pastoral. He traveled first to the Great Forest to say hello and thank, in person, the Treekin for their help, and from there took a small skiff across the water to the great isle of Old Anglorum. There, he was feted by the resident Harts and representatives from all the Broccan clans living in the Scotian Highlands at the north end of the isle. For a few weeks he made new friends and enjoyed relaxing in the countryside manor that had been given over to him for as long as he wished by one of his many admirers.

Avalon

Atan began to hear a rumor repeated here and there of strange happenings spotted, from shore, on the isle of Avalon in a lake nearby. No one had lived on Avalon since the Blood Keep there had been sieged and mostly destroyed 20 years ago when Old Anglorum had been freed, but travelers on the nearby road said they had seen an ethereal lady floating above the lake at night.

Curious and a bit tired of the constant stream of admirers to his manor, Atan set out for an afternoon's walk to the nearby isle. It was nearly dark when he arrived, so he made camp on the shore of the lake and sat down to watch for this apparition. As the moon rose, the spirit appeared, but after all Atan had been through in his life he was not likely to be spooked by anything less than a rampaging God.

The spirit was in the water between the shore and Avalon and it beckoned to him to come. Stripping off his clothing but keeping Calaburn at his side, he waded into the water and found it came only to his neck. The spirit kept ahead of him, drifting towards Avalon, and Atan followed it.

The Avatar of Gaia

On arriving on the grassy shore of the little isle, the spirit seemed to become more substantial and she spoke to him, saying, "Know that I am the Avatar of Gaia, and my voice is Hers. Atan, my greatest of children, you have fulfilled the purpose set out for you long before you were born and by your hand have we blunted the will of Djall at least for a time and prepared the Beasts with magic, dragonsteel, and the artifacts of the Maar to resist the next, inevitable move of the God of the Dark. This storm has passed. Though there will be others, they will not be your burden to bear. I must ask one small final thing of you, dear child of the Earth, and then you will be free to live in peace."

"My Lady," said Atan, kneeling, "It has been my privilege and joy to serve You and my fellow Beast. Simply ask and if it is in my power to do so, I will grant your request. Ask a thousand times, my Lady, and the answer will be the same."

The Avatar of Gaia laughed trillingly and said, “Your devotion to service knows no boundaries Atan. It is a small thing I must ask though, and I will not need to ask it a thousand times. Far, far in the future, in an Age yet to come, a King will arise in a time of dire need just as you did. They will know him by the sword he bears: yours. You will have no more need of Calaburn in your life, and I must ask it of you.”

Atan stood and drew Calaburn slowly, his eyes never leaving the ghostly eyes of the Avatar. He then kneeled again and laid the great blade at the feet of the spirit, after which Calaburn vanished in a small flash of white light. The Avatar said, “Farewell, my beloved child. Soon, you will make the journey from this world to the Dusklands and beyond. I am certain that the Creator has set aside a special place for you there beyond even the sight of the Gods. We will not speak like this again but know that you are in the thoughts of a Goddess tonight.”

Death

With that, the Avatar of Gaia turned and slowly floated away, disappearing as she did so. And that night, there on the isle of Avalon, Atan’s mortal body failed him and he died. His body was discovered the next morning surrounded by a type of huge purple flower none had ever seen before. They named it Gaia’s Tears. Calaburn was, of course, not found and it was assumed by most that it had been stolen by a thief before Atan’s body had been reported as found.

Even in death Atan’s legacy served his fellow Beasts for in the great celebrations that followed the Beasts of the Covenant grew close again as they had once been. As revered as heroes of the past had been, Atan had eclipsed them all and stood first in the pantheon of the great among the Beasts.

He would never be forgotten.

30 | SARGON AND THE VAMPIRES

The years after the death of Atan led into a new time of prosperity for the Beasts of the Covenant that rivaled that experienced during the line of OverKings descended from Solomon. The nations of Beasts grew stronger generation after generation and though there were frequent skirmishes with Bloodkin in the south and the Dvergar in the north, peace otherwise reigned through Europe. The Ursines sent a squadron of berserkers to aid in containing the Blood Kingdom and many of the races of Beast sent help to Midgaard, enabling them to push back the Dvergar to the old borders of Nidavellir.

One hundred and thirty-five years after the death of Atan, Europe was shook by an event that ended the threat of the Blood Kingdom for the foreseeable future. Lord Vinga, Palatine of the Vampires and tyrant over Europe for two thousand years was slain by a mighty Taurian hunter. Sargon, he was called, and he had hunted Vinga for years. The ancient Taurian culture placed a heavy emphasis on the skills of the hunter and Sargon was among the greatest their race had ever produced. For months he probed the borders of the Blood Kingdom, always traveling alone. By making his way along mountain paths so narrow only goats tread them he made his way, undetected, to the Vinga's Starkhold Fortress. There, he scaled the walls, taking two Merihim guards by surprise on the way and slaying them before they could raise an alarm.

The Starkhold

Once inside, he made his way down through the Starkhold and escaping detection, descended into the catacombs underneath, searching for Vinga's Sanctum Sanguis. Defying all odds, Sargon found it without raising an alarm, despite the need and opportunity to slay more than a few Vampire guards. The Sanctum Sanguis of the Palatine was, to Sargon's mild surprise, simply a small cave dominated by what could only be described as a pond of blood. Rivulets of red flowed down the cave walls, feeding into the pond. Torches of bone that lit the cavern dimly were the only other features in the room.

Sargon secreted himself outside of the entrance to the Sanctum Sanguis and waited. With time, his patience was rewarded as Lord Vinga strode in, ready to refresh himself and extend his unlife yet further. It was for lesser Vampires to rot and perish with time, not the Palatine.

The Palatine Falls

Almost the Bloodkin Lord was fast enough. Almost. Sargon hurled his short hunting spear with all his might, and from such a short distance the weapon took a fraction of a second to cross the distance. In that time, Vinga had whirled and leapt to the side, almost to avoid the blow but instead taking the point deep in his side. His body would heal it in a

matter of seconds, but in that moment of pain Sargon leapt forward and with a single great swing of his huge scimitar he took Vinga's head.

Sensing that there was fresh air flowing from a tunnel that led away from the Blood Keep, the great Taurian hunter followed the scent and eventually found his way out, exiting from a cave hidden behind a waterfall. It seemed that Lord Vinga had prepared for the possible need to escape another Beast incursion into the Deadshale Plateau. From there, Sargon journeyed back to Taurania, carrying the news with him that Vinga was dead. All he met rejoiced at the news, and the Longtails he encountered on the way home joined with him.

The Taurians were a joyful people now that war had left their doorstep, and all knew that the Longtails had a great love for singing and dancing. The journey home was filled with laughter and many long nights of storytelling and roasted meats around the campfires. At the Bosphorus Strait, the Longtails turned back and vowed to spread the good tidings to all the Beasts of the Covenant: Vinga was dead!

Upon Sargon's arrival in Taurania he was greeted as a conquering hero, for the news had outpaced his leisurely trip home. Soon, he was universally elected King of the Taurians for who could doubt that the slaying of Vinga was the single greatest act of hunting in the history of the Beasts?

The Blood Kingdom in Chaos

Meanwhile, the Vampires were reeling from the death of their Palatine. None of them had ever known ought but the hand of Vinga as their ruler, for Vinga, born of the Archlich Abiel whom he slew, was the first-created of all Vampires and all Bloodkin descended from him.

The Bloodkin split into seven Broods on the death of Vinga. Each was led by a 'son' of Vinga (one of the first group of eleven vampires, four of which died in the Undead War), called a Vaj. The Broods were:

- The Zapolya
- The Thokoly
- The Dallos
- The Koltai
- The Turan
- The Hunyadi
- The Rakosi

The Brood Vampires accounted for over three-quarters of the Vampires, with the remainder made up of the lowest caste of Vampires – the Broodless – and the Merihim, who were viewed as barbaric and stupid, and shunned by all the Broods. Each of the

seven Vaj claimed one of the Blood Keeps for themselves and made it their seats of power. The Blood Kingdom was now a kingdom without a king, and a much reduced threat to the Beasts, for each Vaj fancied himself the next Palatine and his Brood warred with the other Broods for dominance.

The Sargonite Dynasty

In Taurania, Sargon died an old man, having unified Taurania and strengthened it for the trials to come. The next four generations of Taurian Kings would be known as the Sargonite Dynasty, and they were perhaps the most revered time in the history of the Taurians.

Sennacherib succeeded Sargon and under his rule expanded the borders of Taurania east into the Waste, and when he died his son Kheit expanded further until Taurania extended east to the borders of Hayasa between the Black and Caspian Seas. Akkad succeeded Kheit and continued the Taurian expansion, pushing southeast and south of its eastern border south of Hayasa, and finally his son Marduk succeeded him. Marduk was a hunter with a reputation nearly as large as Sargon's legend. He counted among his notable kills warriors of the People of the Skull, a Vampire Mage, and stranger beings from the lands far south of the Dog Soldiers of Amizeh. He had famously hunted Djinn in the deserts of the secluded and reclusive Djinn Caliphate and he had once brought down the largest wild boar anyone had ever heard of, taking a deep wound in his thigh from the crazed animal's tusks.

Marduk the Hunter

Now he sought to outdo himself and cement his place in history by hunting and slaying a dragon single-handedly. East he went, through the Waste and to the Dragon Empire where he crafted an elaborate trap of weights, counterweights, a pit, and crushing stones. When the great red dragon that he tracked was near, he sprung the trap. The giant wyrm fell into the huge pit Marduk had dug and the stones stunned it. Seizing the moment, Marduk leapt into the pit and, holding tightly to the fire-spewing, writhing monster's neck he stabbed it over and over with his short hunting sword, driving the blade between its hard protective scales until it stopped moving.

In the history of Beastdom, no one had ever slain a Dragon single-handedly. Typically, groups of twenty or more were needed to distract and harry the huge wyrm while magic and sword were used to chip away at its strength until finally it could be taken down. Marduk roared his challenge to the world and set about the bloody business of cutting out as many bones as he could carry back to Taurania, to turn into dragon bone ash. He sought to have a dragonsteel weapon forged for him to commemorate his victory.

Once back in Taurania Marduk was hailed as a hunter on par with Sargon, and was accorded many honors as well as the favors of more than one admiring Taurian maiden.

His triumph would have devastating consequences for the Taurians, however, as it seemed that Marduk had slain the offspring of one of the Dragon Princes, and while the Princes rarely cooperated to do anything but make war on another Prince, they felt that this outrage perpetrated by the Taurians must not go unpunished.

Flights of Dragons

Banding together, the Dragon Princes led their flights of dragons to Taurania where they proceeded to visit destruction upon it such as no nation in the history of Beasts had experienced before. Though the Dragon Princes began to fight with each other before they could completely destroy Taurania, they razed eastern Taurania utterly, killing every living Taurian in it that wasn't able to flee westwards before the dragon storm. The Taurian borders were pulled far back and Marduk was cast down from power in disgrace. The Sargonite Dynasty, marking the greatest expansion of Taurania in history, had ended.

31 | THE LEGACY OF ATAN

Despite Taurania's misfortune, many of the nations of Beast now reached their highest achievements in culture and wealth, for peace is good business for all but weapons merchants and blacksmiths. The Dog Soldiers built huge pyramids that were wonders for their immense size, and the Noctari invented entire new styles of architecture. The Bounders on the west coast of Europe and the Capricans now living here and there across the various cities of the Beasts were much in demand as composer and musicians both. The former was beloved for festive and celebratory events, while the Capricans favored grand compositions involving many musicians and complex harmonies.

Midgaard had recovered from its generations of near-defeat by the Dvergar and were busy engaging each other in mock battles and composing epic poems to heroes from Sigurd to Atan. The Fangren had developed statecraft to an art form, and the Anura, Bandicoons, and Harts were taking Druidic power to new heights.

The Broccan Clans were, like the Ursines of Midgaard, generally pre-occupied with tests of strength and warcraft but for such a fierce race of Beast they produced a number of notable thoughtful philosophical works of importance. The Felines, who were the first to gain back the gift of magic when Atan returned from the Morning Lands, were the greatest mages among the Beasts of the Covenant and developed many new spells and magical processes.

The Lisians and Atavians maintained their friendship and though the Lisians were not of the Covenant they were warmly welcomed in Europe when the truth of their aid to the Atavians in order to hold back the Blood Kingdom was made known. For the Lisians' part, this represented a renaissance as for the first time in their history they had open traffic with other Beasts. Likewise, the Atavian culture now blended many elements taken from Maraket, the home of the Lisians, and visiting there became the aspiration of many an Atavian. The Longtails, always a joyous race even in times of difficulty, became entertainers of all sorts. They had dancers and illusionists, jugglers and acrobats, and storytellers of great renown.

The Foxen and Tusken were less fortunate than most of the other races. The Foxen of the Border Holds had long kept watch on the People of the Skull to the east and their rangers reported that the rumors were that the Khan of the Skull Lands would soon strike west, as the Middle Kingdom had stymied the People in the east. The Tusken, who were spoiling for a fight by nature, joined the Foxen in the Border Holds and helped them train and prepare for a possible invasion. As a result, most of their wealth and energy went into preparations for war rather than the better things in life.

In general then, peace and prosperity reigned throughout Europe and its near environs, aside from the border surrounding the Blood Kingdom in the Carpathian Mountains. The

Ursines suffered occasional attacks by the Dvergar, and the Outcast Carrionites and Stone Cats resumed occasional raids on Beasts, but in the grand scheme of things these were minor events, especially compared to the Bleakness, which was now fading into the category of history for most Beasts. Times were good and the legend of Atan, Defender of the Covenant, was revered by every Beast in the land.

32 | THE BREAKING OF THE COVENANT

It began in Amizeh, homeland of the Dog Soldiers.

A Taurian had found a following there by preaching of the virtues of the Dog Soldiers and of their natural superiority to the Felines that they had displaced from Badaria. The Taurian told them of how the Felines coveted their ancient lands and planned to eventually attack. He told tales of Felines capturing young Taurians and doing terrible things to them before sacrificing them to their dark Gods. In short, he manipulated the Dog Soldiers with lie built upon lie wrapped in a lie. The Taurian soon built a group of over one hundred followers, each giving up his or her family and possessions to follow the Taurian who promised that the Dog Soldiers were destined to be first among the Beasts and that the evil Hayasans must be stopped in order for this to happen.

Now, this was all patently nonsense for though the Hayasans did not bear the Dog Soldiers any particular love, they had been joined together in the Covenant for millennia. Further, unlike the rest of the Beasts of the Covenant, the Dog Soldiers had not felt the Vampire plague. They had had their own troubles, of course, but those did not compare to the horror of the Bleakness in any way or form and as their people had not been preyed upon by the Vampires for two thousand years, they were much more numerous than the Felines.

The Hayasans were no true threat to the Dog Soldiers, and yet those around this Taurian seemed to believe that the very fate of their civilization was at stake. Soon enough, the Taurian proposed actually making what he called ‘a war of righteousness’ upon the Felines of Hayasa. It was madness to most Dog Soldiers. They could no more attack a Beast of the Covenant than they could turn themselves inside out. Gaia had woven the Covenant into the very fabric of their ancestors and it was a part of their souls.

And yet, somehow the Taurian’s followers agreed whole-heartedly. They seemed almost eager to bloody themselves upon the Felines, which was impossible, surely. Their cries for war grew louder while the apprehension they inspired in the rest of the Dog Soldiers grew stronger. Soon, those whom the Taurian seemed to be leading towards disaster were doing more than just urging for war. They were demanding it, and they took a whole tribe of Dog Soldiers captive, though without shedding blood as the Covenant bound them still.

When their fellow Dog Soldiers reacted with revulsion and condemnation, the Taurian puppet master pulled a string and his followers threatened to begin killing the kidnapped

villagers – fellow Dog Soldiers all – in defiance of all reason. And then, when the other Dog Soldiers still would not relent and make war on Hayasa, it happened.

There are not words to describe the loss that the Beasts felt, for when the Taurian's followers executed a fellow Dog Soldier, the Covenant was shattered, forever. All Beasts who had been a part of it felt something torn from the most fundamental fiber of their being and all despaired.

For her part, Gaia was greatly saddened, for the Beasts of the Covenant were among the most loyal friends of the Earth. The Covenant had been held sacred for thousands of years and had defined the Beasts that were a part of it. The Beasts were as Her children. How dare this Taurian and these Dog Soldiers undo her work and the pledge that had been bound in the Covenant?

The Earthmother is slow to anger, and forces beyond mortal imaginings that bind the conduct of the Gods stayed their hand in all but a handful of cases through history, but this was too much to bear.

Gaia cursed the Dog Soldiers and the Taurian with a curse such as never before and never since been uttered. Within days, they had begun to lose their most Beast-like features. Their fur fell out in great clumps, their tails shriveled, and their snouts shortened. Their claws fell out and the pointed teeth of the Dog Soldiers that had performed the execution flattened. The Taurian shrunk and watched as every day his horns grew shorter. After a week, the freakish Dog Soldiers were in horror of what they'd done; what they'd brought upon themselves.

The great majority of the Dog Soldiers looked upon the group that had broken the Covenant with hatred, and some proposed that since they had broken the Covenant by murder, murder should be done on them. Most, even without the Covenant, were still simply appalled by the notion of shedding the blood of those who were once of the Covenant. For we modern Beasts, it is hard to overestimate the impact that the cleaving of the Covenant had on all who had once been part of it.

Instead, the cursed Dog Soldiers and Taurian were cast out of the territory of Amizeh and into the Waste to the northeast. Daily their mutations grew worse and soon they began to all look alike, both Dog Soldier and Taurian. As they wandered the Waste the Dog Soldiers cried out for mercy, gnashing their teeth and tearing at what little fur remained. What had they been thinking? What had they done? It seemed like a hazy nightmare to them.

Gaia watched, in Her own way, the progress of these accursed Beasts, for though She bore great hatred for them She did not understand how the Taurian's words, persuasive though they might be, could have overcome the power of the Covenant. Through a dream, She instructed Her High Priestess of the time to send someone to the Waste to

find the cursed ones and hear what the Taurian had to say for himself and the miseries he had brought on both he and the Dog Soldiers he had corrupted.

The High Priestess sent a young Druidess named Kirili, in honor of Atan's steadfast companion during his journey north to find the Maar. Through the empty, blasted Waste she journeyed, searching for the cursed ones. Finally, at a small oasis she found those for whom she searched. They were a sorry sight, to say the least, bereft of fur, fang, and claw as they were. When they learned she was there as a representative of the High Priestess of Gaia, the cursed Dog Soldiers beseeched her to intervene on their behalf and ask the Earthmother to remove the curse.

The Taurian was curiously quiet, and simply sat with his head downcast, as if he never intended to move again and meant to die there on that spot. Kirili knelt before him and asked, simply and without judgment, who he was and how he had done what he had done.

The Taurian lifted his head, turning tired eyes to Kirili and said, "I am Zahhak."

33 | ZAHHAK'S STORY

Stunned at discovering that the mad Mystarch Zahhak was the Taurian who sat before her, Kirili recoiled and asked how that could possibly be and Zahhak told Kirili his story. As all know, he had lost his mind upon trying to read the Enigma Primal with only a partial 'key' to it. The other Mystarchs imprisoned him for the safety of the Beasts, for he had killed many of them performing his 'experiments' on them. After a decade and a half in confinement, he had been visited by a Dor'kana who healed his mind enough to teach him mind magic that no other Beast was known to possess. With that mental magic he was able to convince the other Mystarchs that he was sane and that they must take power in order to prepare the Beasts for an invasion by the Darklords and their Shadow Legion.

When the Mystarchs were eventually defeated by the Beasts they claimed to seek to protect, Zahhak was tried and found guilty by Solomon, the judge at those trials, and was sentenced to death. Just as he was to be sent to the afterlife, a trio of Dor'kana appeared through a portal, grabbed Zahhak, and hauled him back through the portal with them, slaying the guards that surrounded the disgraced Mystarch while doing so.

Zahhak was taken to a cell where time flowed...differently... and was told that he had two choices: Serve the Dor'kana as and when they required, or suffer torment beyond what his mind could comprehend. Zahhak was one of the mightiest mages ever to live among the Beasts, but here he was unable to summon the smallest flame. As he was larger than these Dor'kana, he launched himself physically at them, only to find himself swiftly thrown to the ground.

Though Zahhak was still somewhat insane, he recognized that he was beaten for now and that co-operation was his best chance of escape. He told the Dor'kana that he would do as they asked. He was left there for an amount of time he could not judge, until the Dor'kana returned. They used the mind magic they had taught him to heal his mind completely and told him that he would need his sanity to perform the task they had in mind for him.

The Waiting

And then they left. How long he was alone there in his featureless cell where time itself felt unfamiliar, he did not know. His body seemed to make no demands on him while there, so hunger and thirst did not inflict themselves upon him. He found that he was unable to sleep but that he did not get tired. Time passed, he thought, but how much he had no idea. After a time, he felt certain that a year had passed, and then ten years, but he simply had no way to know.

Eventually he began to wish for death as the constant, unchanging environment had become a torture worse than physical pain. Every moment of sameness was as a spike

driving itself into his skull, and he found that taking his own life was not possible. He tried bashing his head into the stone walls but discovered that he simply could not harm himself.

Life, such as it was, went on and on, every iota of his existence wishing for anything else. Any change, any minor variation would have been more welcome than water to a man dying of thirst. He did not know if the Dor'kana would ever come for him. Perhaps he would spend eternity here, suffering in a way he had never imagined despite the horrors he had inflicted upon his fellow Beast during his madness.

Though Zahhak's perception of time in his cell was completely skewed, he guessed that he had been there for the equivalent of well over two hundred years when finally, finally, the Dor'kana returned. So glad was Zahhak that something, anything had changed in his environs that he fell to the floor weeping and thanking his captors over and over. His spirit had been broken more thoroughly than he had thought possible, and he would do anything to escape this prison of eternal monotony that he was in.

The Dor'kana Threat

The Dor'kana told Zahhak that the long, lonely time he had spent in his cell would be as nothing were he to do anything other than show the greatest enthusiasm for completing the task they would set before him. They would not hesitate to leave Zahhak there for such a span of time that the period he just finished in his cell would be as a drop of water to an ocean. Zahhak's heart quailed at the thought and he felt all will leave him as a fear more overwhelming than any he'd ever known took him. On his knees, he begged them with every fiber in his being not to leave him there again, promising with utter sincerity that there was nothing he would not do for these Dor'kana who offered him salvation from his timeless prison.

"And the rest of my story you know," said Zahhak to Kirili.

Kirili took it all in, understanding that it was the Dor'kana's mind magic that Zahhak used to persuade the cursed Dog Soldiers to break the Covenant. She felt a mixture of pity and disgust for this bedraggled creature in front of her. He was a tyrannical, insane mage from bedtime stories her old grandmother had told to her as a child, and yet it was clear that the Dor'kana had manipulated him and used the Mystarchs through him for their own nefarious ends, or the ends of whomever they might serve. Kirili left Zahhak and the cursed Dog Soldiers to wander the Waste and find their own fate.

Zahhak's End

Years went by and nothing was heard from the cursed ones until rumor filtered in, later confirmed, that the cursed Dog Soldiers had eventually cast the blame for their plight on

Zahhak and tore him to pieces. It was assumed that their curse had caused them to die out, for they now lacked all ability to survive in the wild, seemingly.

Three generations after the Covenant was broken, it was discovered that these cursed Dog Soldiers had not died out after all. They had established a tribe in the Waste and managed to scratch out a bare living. Felines traveling to seek knowledge from the Djinn encountered them and wondered at their survival. The Felines even left these unfortunate Beasts supplies before they moved on, taking pity upon them.

34 | THE END OF THE AGE OF LEGEND

Years turned to decades and decades turned to centuries. The cursed Dog Soldiers, who had begun calling themselves 'Man,' meaning 'Cursed' in the tongue of the Lost Ages, multiplied quickly and soon there were numerous poor tribes of them subsisting in the Waste. The Beasts of Europe took pity on these unfortunate descendants of the breakers of the Covenant, and permitted them to wander freely, for they seemed no threat to anyone.

The Border Holds Fall

Eight hundred years after the Covenant was broken, the Khan of the People of the Skull led his armies against the Border Holds of the Foxen, and wiped out that nation completely and utterly. It was clear at the time that the People intended to drive further into Europe, but an attack by their long-time enemies in the Middle Kingdom drew the Khan's attention away from Europe.

Two thousand years after the breaking of the Covenant, the tribes of Man had multiplied to the point where their sheer numbers in some parts of Europe were such that they outnumbered the other Beasts living there. Some of the race of Man were beginning to grow aggressive as well. Man was physically weak but infernally clever and came in large numbers.

Five hundred years later, Man had begun to attack Beasts here and there, seeking to take territory for Man rather than Beast. It was not an organized movement by Man, but rather a simple response to quarrels over resources like land, fresh water and hunting grounds. There were deaths on both sides, but Man's numbers and his cleverness in killing did not bode well.

The Threat of Man

Soon, a debate among the Beasts began to simmer. The Covenant was broken and there had already been many skirmishes between Beasts of the former Covenant. There was nothing stopping the Beasts from attacking Man but their own sense of morality. Some Beasts felt that Man was just another race of Beast and most of the Beasts who had once been bound to the Covenant retained a strong aversion to spilling the blood of their fellows, even if nothing now formally prevented them from doing so.

A hundred years later, the debate had intensified from a simmer to a full boil and some Beasts were calling for the extermination of Man, pointing out that they were cursed by the Earthmother herself. Time passed and Man began to dominate much of the territory he resided in through sheer numbers. The Beasts were pushed back and their ranges reduced dramatically. Though there was no general war yet, it was clear that the age of

prosperity ushered in when Atan and the White Shield freed Europe from the hand of Vinga was coming to an end. Pitched battles were fought between Man and Beast in Hayasa, Taurania, and the territory of the Dog Soldiers, who were soon pushed out of old Badaria and back to Amizeh.

Now, even the ruling Vajs of the Blood Kingdom were forced to recognize that Man was a new kind of threat and that while they were pleased to see the Beasts weakened in their struggle with Man, they wished to ensure that Man was also suitably diminished at the end of the war that all saw was coming.

The Ferals

The details of the creation of the Ferals are not well-known but we know that the response of the Vajs was to kidnap groups of Ursines, Longtails, and Fangren and corrupt them using magicks rooted in the power of death and decay. The resulting debased Beasts were vicious, paranoid, and ruthless killers which the Vampires hoped to unleash upon Man and Beast both. Instead, they found that these Ferals they had created were willing to hunt and kill Man and Beast, but that their favorite targets were their own Bloodkin creators.

The Ferals banded together and fought their way out of the Blood Kingdom where the Ursines and Fangren Ferals banded together and, forming the Dominion of the Claw we know even today, cast out the Longtail Ferals, whom they felt were small, weak, and beneath them. The Ferals of the Dominion of the Claw then sought to make war on the Blood Kingdom, as well as on any Man or Beast that ventured into their Dominion. The Feral Longtails bred quickly and soon returned to the traditional range of the Longtails in southeast Europe, and displaced the Longtail tribes to wander Europe for what time the Beasts had left.

These last years before the Age of Man were not well documented, for soon the Beasts were at war with Man everywhere. Many Beasts launched an all-out war upon Man, but it was clear that Man was multiplying at such a rate that his eventual dominance was ensured.

The Exiles

There were some Beasts, however, who felt that cursed or not, Man was still a Beast and though the Covenant was broken they would not spill the blood of their brothers. These were the first of what we now know as the Exiles, for when the final, all-out war between the Beasts and Man began, the Exiles would not take part and were, shamefully, branded traitors and driven from the lands of the Beasts. No one knew at the time where the Exiles would go and few cared. Man seemed to grow in numbers and ferocity by the day and soon, the Bitter War had begun.

The chaos of those closing days of the Age of Legend has obscured all detail about the individual battles, the leaders, and the progress of the Bitter War. We know that all the world the Beasts knew at the time were part of it in one way or another. The Beasts fought Man. The Vampires fought the Dominion of the Claw, Man, and the Beasts. The Outcast tribes of Carrionites and Stone Lions poured from the mountains and sought to hold back Mankind's onslaught and the Yeti ripped to pieces any of the race of Man that entered the high part of the Alpine Mountains.

The Undead, strangely quiet for these long years, boiled up from beneath the Earth to take advantage of the bloodbath above. They were the most egalitarian of the participants, for they took equal pleasure in the slaying of Beast, Man, Yeti, Outcast, Feral, or Vampire.

Man's Victory

This Bitter War was seemingly the war to end all wars, and in the final calculation it was the simple advantage of numbers that won it. Man had no great civilization, little magic, and only crude weapons but they washed over the world like a flood, smashing all that stood before them. We believe the Bitter War lasted perhaps twenty years but in that time every nation of the Age of Legend that we know was almost entirely destroyed. The remnants went into hiding for there was no hope of victory before the budding might of Mankind.

The Beasts had been devastated in the War, and one of every two had perished. In the years that followed famine and Man took their toll and soon the Beasts had lost nine out of every ten. It seemed that time had run out for the Beasts, but they had underestimated the love that the Earthmother bore for them.

Gaia is one of the great Powers, supreme on Earth save only Djall, her dark opposite. Odin, Zeus, Anubis, Pan, Ra, Artemis, Thor, Loki, Curnon, Bast and all the rest were ultimately subordinate to Gaia and Djall in one way or another. But even these two Powers are not the ultimate in Creation.

Two Primal Gods there are that reign supreme. They are known by different names in different times and different places, but the Creator and the Demiurge are the two poles between which all that is exists. They are silent Gods above Gods, and they do not act as we mortals think of action. It is they who prohibit most intervention by Gods below them in the affairs of mortal beings.

It's within this framework that we must consider what the Earthmother did for the Beasts whom she loved. We know, of course, virtually nothing of the interactions between the Gods and the Primal Gods but we believe that there is a cost of some sort extracted, or perhaps a punishment imposed, for every direct action taken in mortal affairs. We have only the haziest evidence for this in the form of speculations in surviving fragments of

writings by the earliest Druids. What Gaia did went beyond anything imagined or hoped for.

We now call it the Migration. They called it salvation.

The Groves

She could not watch her Beasts suffer extinction at the hands of Man and in the end whatever cost She paid for Her actions was Hers to bear. She gathered her Beasts together and moved them to spaces outside of time and space called Groves that She created for Her wards. Each was a valley of forests and verdant grasslands, burbling streams of cool, fresh water, and gentle breezes, and there the Beasts wandered, dream-like, in their private, timeless paradises where they would stay for an Age.

With the complete victory of Man in the Bitter War and the Migration of the Beasts to the Groves, the Age of Legend had ended and the Age of Man had begun.

35 | THE AGE OF MAN BEGINS

Though the Age of Legend came to an end with the great Migration of the Beasts to the Groves, Man did not yet dominate the Earth to the extent he would. The Undead, the Vampires of the Blood Kingdom, the Dominion of the Claw, the Yeti, the Outcasts (whom Gaia did not bring to the Groves), the Dvergar and the Dragons all remained on Earth, battling against Man for their survival.

The Treekin and Amanita remained on Earth as well, though the former retreated deep into the forests and the latter continued their enigmatic, never-ending search in the forests, mountains, and marshes of the world. In time, the Treekin began to find themselves weakening as they had in the past when circumstances forced their confinement within the Great Forest. Without the exposure to the wider world they put their roots down and drank deeply from the soil and water. They grew sleepy and one by one the Treekin began to fade into the arboreal background. In the space of a handful of centuries, the echoing footfalls of these mighty creatures would cease to echo within even the deepest and most sacred forests on Earth.

The Veiled War

The Vampires were forced to retreat into the deepest parts of the Carpathians, abandoning most of the Blood Keeps. With the weakening of their creators and mortal enemies, the Ferals of the Dominion of the Claw made outright war upon the diminished Bloodkin and the two groups spent thousands of years in a war that took place in the shadows, almost (but not quite) unnoticed by the burgeoning race of Man. This Veiled War, as it was called, was witnessed by Man only in brief glimpses, though fragments of Man's writing we have found since tell us that the stories they told their children included both Vampires and Ferals. It is likely that both of these races would have attacked Man here and there, on the fringes of his civilization, inspiring Man's nightmares of the two.

When the Feral Ursine and Fangren formed the Dominion of the Claw after rebelling against their Bloodkin creators, they cast out the Longtails, feeling that they were too small and weak to be allies with. These Feral Longtails, like the uncorrupted Longtails, chose a nomadic existence, splitting into small tribes. They traveled in secret, always sticking to the wild places of the Earth for there was no struggling against the might of Man. In their travels, they learned to master dark magics with darker purpose and soon Man had another enemy in the shadows, for the Feral Longtails became the very Gloom Witches we know today.

Man's Ascendancy

Most of the beings of Earth fled into hiding as Man grew into his ascendancy, but some fought back. The Yeti launched no offensives but fell upon any Men who entered their domain with crushing ferocity. The Outcasts fled deeper into the mountains but would frequently raid the encampments of early Man. As humans grew more numerous and sophisticated however, the Outcasts were also forced into a purely defensive strategy.

The Undead, under the leadership of Abidan, the Metalich, had taken advantage of the Bitter War to rise to the surface once more and plague the Earth. For hundreds of years their skeletons, zombies, mummies, and lichs preyed upon Man until, as with all others, the tide turned and Man's sheer numbers and organization overwhelmed the Undead, pushing them deep into the UnderRealm, where Abidan brooded in his seat of power in the Undead city of Sheol.

The People of the Skull and Dvergar both made war upon Man, the former from their kingdom in the Ural Mountains and the latter from their frozen underground home of Nidavellir, only to meet with eventual defeat. They too forsook the surface world and fled, ragged and desperate, deep into the vast caverns and tunnels of the UnderRealm.

Last of the known world to fall to Man were the Dragons, for in Man they finally encountered an enemy mighty enough to not simply rival them but to turn the hunters into the hunted. Though Man did not possess the secret of forging dragonsteel from the ash of dragon bones, he prized the act of dragon slaying as a marker of great heroism and soon these immense wyrms were hunted nigh to extinction. A mere handful survived the Age of Man, hiding in the wilderness and the few caverns accessible to beings their size.

Dominion

Man now held unchallenged dominion over the Earth and he began to take its bounty on a scale never before imagined. The forests of the world began to fall to his axe and he opened great rents in the Earth to take minerals, stone, and more. He plundered the seas of its immense bounty and, unknowing, even slew most of the slumbering Treekin, mistaking them for ordinary trees.

Of all the known creatures remaining on the surface of the Earth, the Amanita were the closest witnesses to Man's actions, for the Shroomies have always had the ability to escape notice when they wish to. They watched while they continued their unending search and for the most part ignored Man, for the searching of the Amanita is paramount to them.

The Amanita Virosa

But some could not ignore. Some could not turn a blind eye. For some of the Amanita, watching Man desecrate the Earth was nearly intolerable, and the destruction of the Treekin they had watched grow from acorn and sapling proved to be too much. Their

hearts turned angry and their minds turned bitter. Twisted with the hatred of Man, these Amanita became the Amanita Virosa, which means 'Destroying Angel' in the old tongue, though they are most often called simply the Black Shroomies for the darkness that has taken hold of their souls.

When Men disappeared from their beds at night, never to be seen again, it was as often the work of the Black Shroomies as it was the Gloom Witches or Vampires, for in sharp contrast to their Amanita brothers, the Amanita Virosa hated Man more than any beings on Earth.

36 | THE RISE AND FALL OF MAN

Thousands of years passed, and Man's might seemed to have no limit. His technological magics dwarfed that of any force previously known on Earth, and all races, from Vampire to Yeti, Shroomie to Dragon, were on the verge of elimination. Man had spread across the Earth, filling nearly every corner of it, and had even learned to travel beyond it. The roots of the Earth itself shuddered beneath the damage Man inflicted but still Mankind took more, for it was in his nature.

Though we do not truly understand what the culture of Man was like, fragments of his writings have survived. We know that by the end, many Men considered even the existence of the thinking other creatures of the Earth to be nothing more than children's stories. Vampires? Dragons? Talking Beasts? To most Men, these were likely nothing more than myth, but we know that not all Men were as blind to the wider world that exists beyond the view of those who do not wish to look. One scrap that has survived was written by a Man (with the decidedly odd name 'Henry Beston') who seemed to sense the presence of the Outcasts in the world, or perhaps the shadow of a memory of the Beasts, for he wrote:

"We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals. Remote from universal nature, and living by complicated artifice, man in civilization surveys the creature through the glass of his knowledge and sees thereby a feather magnified and the whole image in distortion. We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate of having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein we err, and greatly err. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth."

Who knows what the world would be had Man been led by those such as Henry Beston, who choose to live with open eyes? We only know what is, not what might have been.

How could a race destroy itself? What would cause behavior on a mass scale that any sensible Beast would deem insane? Were the suicidal urges of Mankind an inevitable result of the corruption of the Dog Soldiers by Gaia's curse as punishment for breaking the Covenant? Speculation, again, but that is the best that is on offer.

What we know is that Man launched a series of cataclysmic wars on himself over the course of forty or fifty years that culminated in the total destruction of his civilization and his near-complete extinction. His cities burned and the air was poisoned, and those of the race of Man who survived found themselves in a world bereft of the technological marvels that had sustained their lives. Without these, the survivors of the Cataclysm, as we now

know the war that ended Man's dominion, were barely able to scratch a living from the ruined Earth. Many of these survivors quickly died of poisoning from the war, disease, and famine.

Aftermath

Worse still for Man was the fact that some of the races who had been driven into hiding thousands of years before, at the beginning of the Age of Man, were resistant to the invisible poison that seemed to permeate the air in many places now. None were invulnerable to it but some, such as the Undead, the Vampires, and the People of the Skull, were resistant to it.

The Undead boiled up from the deep places of the UnderRealm and boiled out of the Earth, attacking Man and anyone else they came across, for Abidan sensed that the destruction of Man left the world without a dominant power. He aimed to succeed where Salamanzar, his creator, had failed.

The Vajs of the Vampire Broods struck out from their hiding places in the Carpathians to assert their power and combat that of the Undead, their ancient, hated enemy, while the People of the Skull chose a new Khan and began to build their empire anew from their homeland under the Ural Mountains.

Man was not yet extinct, but he was a pitiful and ruined people now. His numbers, decimated by the Cataclysm, dwindled further now, from the poisons lingering in the atmosphere and from the predations of hostile beings – the Bloodkin, the Undead, the People of the Skull, and more.

The Earthmother

Gaia, the Earthmother, watched events on Earth with dismay. So much destruction. So much suffering. Was it Her fault? Did Her Beasts and the other denizens of Earth pay the price for Her direct interference? Were the Creator and the Demiurge so capricious as to arrange this as Gaia's punishment? Even the Earthmother could not know.

She was certain, however, that She could not permit Her domain to fall into utter darkness and give the Earth over to the hand of Djall. No matter what else, this must not happen. She could not believe that this could be the will of the Creator, and She would not let evil utterly take the world when for the first time since the Age of Man began there was hope.

The Earthmother then made a decision that was perhaps inevitable. The Beasts could not remain in the Groves forever. They had dwelt there since the Migration, living their lives among the forests and valleys of the Groves. Time passed much more slowly there than on Earth and from the point of view of the Beasts there, only four hundred years had

passed since the Migration, compared to the approximately four thousand years that had passed on Earth. As a result, much that might have been lost was not, and the Beasts retained much of their knowledge of both arcane and Druidic magic, as well as a great deal of their battle skill, though of course they had no opportunity to use their skills in anything more dangerous than friendly spars.

Hope

Within this surviving core of the descendants of the Migration, Gaia saw the light that could prevent the world from a long fall into the dark. She would return them to Earth, as She had always planned when the time was right, and there they would oppose the forces ultimately loyal to Lord Djall. The Beasts had long known that they or their descendants would leave the Groves someday and they yearned to return to the Earth to reclaim it for Beastdom.

Unlike the dread forces currently prowling the Earth however, the Beasts had no particular resistance to the lingering poison that permeated the atmosphere. Even the strange and ancient Amanita were forced to avoid areas too heavily affected by the Cataclysm. In particular, the ruined cities of Mankind remained so deadly that they did not venture anywhere within sight of them.

37 | THE GODS AND THE MAAR

The Gods themselves, including even the Earthmother, dared not intervene so directly and openly as to cleanse the Earth themselves, for if the repercussions of the curse Gaia laid upon the Dog Soldiers that became the earliest Men were any indication, then surely those that would result from acts of far greater immediate significance would be terrible beyond imagining. Any interference must be as subtle as possible.

The Gods sympathetic to the larger cause of the Earthmother were called to Her in the first known gathering of the different pantheons. Zeus, Odin, Ra, Curnon, Apollo, Thor, Athena, Hephaestus, Osiris, Thoth, Marduk, Bast, Artemis, and more came together in a great conclave. They compared what they had seen in their realms, and began to perceive a subtle logic to the events that began with the Mysterich Zahhak convincing the Dog Soldiers to break the Gaia-blessed Covenant, through Man's meteoric rise in power and his eventual self-destruction in a cloud of war that dwarfed any before it.

They discussed, argued, and Odin the Allfather, though blind in one eye, was the first to see the truth: Not only was Man's creation a plot that ultimately sprung from Djall, Lord of the Dark, but Man's eventual fall seemed also to play into the Dark Lord's hands, for while Man served none but himself, Mankind had eliminated virtually all enemies of Djall from the Earth.

While those beings who worshipped the Dark had not escaped Man's all-encompassing thirst for complete domination, they had suffered little by comparison to the Beasts and the Treekin. The stage was now set for the forces of the Dark to overrun the Earth and take it utterly and forever.

Seekin the Maar

There was but one race on Earth for the Gods to turn to – The Maar. These Iron Children had no Gods of their own and looked upon the Gods of the Beasts as powerful beings worthy of respect, but not of adoration and worship. The Maar had, however, played a key role in turning the tide against the Blood Kingdom and ending the Bleakness that had covered Europe for 2000 years during the Age of Legend. Most importantly, the Iron Children were born of the Lost Ages and were a different form of life entirely. They were immune to the poisoned energy that Mankind unleashed on itself.

But what could the Iron Children do, confined as they were within the Orea Symmetry? To leave its area of effect would mean instant death for any Maar as the weight of tens of thousands of years of suspended time came crashing down upon them. Gaia decreed that they must not contact the Maar without a solution, for fear that the Iron Children would believe that the Gods meant to essentially sacrifice them in vain.

Hephaestus, Athena, and Thoth agreed to work together to understand the Oean Symmetry, which was of a magic alien to them, and vowed to construct a way to extend its influence or somehow prevent the Maar from instantly aging and dying upon leaving its range. Together they were able to understand, at least rudimentarily, how the Oean Symmetry worked.

“If one imagines a large rock high in the air,” explained Thoth to the assemblage of Gods, “one may imagine that were it to fall to the Earth it would potentially deliver a great deal of power to anything it struck on the way to the Earth. Using this imperfect analogy, one may begin to understand the Oean Symmetry.”

“You see,” continued Athena, “we can think of life energy as that rock. As mortals age, that rock slowly floats to the ground, until it is finally resting on the Earth and there is no more energy to be delivered. This is when mortals die from age. The Oean Symmetry seems to prevent this from happening to the Maar. It’s holding up the proverbial rock by continually replacing the life force that the Iron Children would normally expend as they aged, albeit slowly, for the Maar are naturally quite long-lived.”

Hephaestus broke in, saying, “The trouble is that the very nature of the Symmetry dictates that there remains an...attraction...that the energy it has given to the Maar has towards the Symmetry. The energy wants to return to the Symmetry but the power of it prevents the energy from returning as long as the Maar stay within a relatively small radius of it. At some point however, the Oean Symmetry is unable to stop the energy returning to it and when that happens what we see is the rock from the analogy plummeting to the Earth in the blink of an eye. Death, in other words.”

“What we aim to do,” said Athena, “is to create a device of some sort to slow or halt the fall of the rock so that the Maar may safely leave the radius of the Symmetry.”

“They cannot fail to agree to lend us their aid if we free them, even fleetingly, from the prison that they are effectively confined to by their dependence on the Symmetry,” said Thoth.

The conclave of Gods agreed this was an excellent plan and bade the trio speed and offered any assistance possible in the creation of this device. They felt that this intervention in the affairs of mortals was as small as could be expected in the circumstances. Nothing else they could conceive of involved less direct action and so it was resolved.

Success

Thoth, Hephaestus, and Athena went to work at a feverish pace. Two years later, and with the assistance of many of the other Gods as well as the Earthmother, they completed the

device, which they called the Temporal Aegis. It was determined that the trio that created the Aegis would approach the Maar and seek their assistance.

Together, they approached the Maar and met with them en masse. The Mystarch Jarnsaxa, who had so long ago agreed to stay with the Iron Children and learn their magic, was there as well. The trio of Gods did not need to explain the situation on the surface to the Maar, for though they could not go to the surface physically (as it lay out of the range of the Orean Symmetry) they possessed artifacts that allowed them to view it from afar.

The Maar did not view the primacy of Djall as inherently bad, though they preferred the Earthmother, it was true. On the other hand, the Metalich Abidan, and Salamanzar before him, had long coveted the powerful magical weapons and devices of the Maar, and though the Iron Children had been able to repel any assault upon their home thus far, there was no telling what strength the Undead would bring to bear upon the Maar were they to be allowed to expand unopposed.

Beside this, of course, was the possibility of existence outside the Orean Symmetry's sphere of influence. The Maar had long ago abandoned hope in this respect, having resigned themselves to never-ending lives of quiet labor within the Symmetry. The prospect of true freedom was irresistibly attractive to many of the Iron Children, regardless of the risk that the Temporal Aegis may fail to prevent their deaths.

There was no unanimity among the Maar, however. Some of them did not wish to involve themselves in the affairs of the world, for they had grown comfortable in their timeless caverns deep beneath the surface. They scorned those Maar who expressed a desire to leave their home and proclaimed that they would not do so. This group of Maar was led by one named Epimetheus.

The Maar did not have a concept akin to our families, but we might say that Epimetheus was the brother of Prometheus, perhaps the greatest of the Maar and the most eloquent proponent of assisting the Gods in their quest. Epimetheus himself was a power among the Maar, but always in the shadow of Prometheus. Though none of the Maar were given to boasting or aught but attitudes of placid calm, we might now guess that a storm boiled beneath the unrippled surface of Epimetheus's soul.

In the end, there were two voices that persuaded the Maar. Prometheus was greatly respected among the Iron Children and spoke with a gravity that none could fail to hearken to. In contrast and perhaps oddly, the Mystarch Jarnsaxa spoke passionately and persuasively of the need to do this thing that the Gods asked of them. Though Jarnsaxa herself could not participate in cleansing the Earth of the poisons that infected the planet, she felt that perhaps this was another way to atone for her past sins.

It was her voice as much as Prometheus's that led the Maar to near-unanimous agreement. Near-unanimous, for Epimetheus and some of those in his camp only grudgingly agreed that any Maar at all should leave the Symmetry but they declared that they would not and implied that those who did were foolish at best, and traitors at worst. Prometheus responded by volunteering to test the Temporal Aegis created by the Gods.

38 | THE CLEANSING

Together, Jarnsaxa and the Maar marched to the edge of the Orean Symmetry's radius of effect and Prometheus prepared to do what no Iron Child had done in two Ages of the Earth. There, Epimetheus and Prometheus had a last private, clearly near-violent disagreement, and Prometheus stepped over the invisible line....nothing but an ever-so-slight and unfamiliar tug as Prometheus began to age only slightly faster than he would have otherwise.

The Temporal Aegis created by Athena, Hephaestus, and Thoth had worked, and the other Maar, barring Epimetheus and some of his followers, stepped over the line that had kept them prisoner for so long. Jarnsaxa too had to stay behind for Athena had warned her that the Temporal Aegis was tuned specifically for the Maar. Jarnsaxa would remain effectively imprisoned.

The Maar did not worship the Gods but they now had even greater respect for them. The Iron Children's future was forever changed and they knew where their debt lay. Prometheus proclaimed to his kin, "These beings who are called Gods have brought us salvation from our past and we are obligated, every one of us, to do for them what they ask. We will cleanse the surface of the legacy of Man that the Beasts may return by the will of those who have freed us."

The Maar Journey Forth

Returning to their home caverns, the Maar gathered their most powerful artifacts for defense against the hostile beings roaming the poisoned surface, and set out to the diverse parts of the Earth, rising out of the UnderRealm through murky, hidden caverns and tunnels. Jarnsaxa, Epimetheus and those Maar who did not wish to leave the Orean Symmetry. They would stay and guard the great artifact that maintained their nigh-eternal lives while the rest of the Iron Children were doing the work asked of them.

The Maar roamed the Earth, seeking the places that suffered the strongest concentration of the terrible, ghostly poison that permeated the very air. Using the artifacts they'd formed over millennia, they drew the foul energy from the air, soil, and water, cleansing it and paving the way for new life to thrive. It was a monumental task, for the Maar were relatively few and Mankind's ruins covered the Earth.

Within the great, dead cities of Man, where the most powerful and numerous weapons of the apocalypse had been unleashed, not even the Undead could tread, for they retained some basic affinity for the fundamental essence that makes what we know as life. The Maar, conversely, were completely unaffected by the poison, for they were formed before the Gods themselves, products, as they were, of the Lost Ages.

Dor'kana

And yet the Maar were not alone. On the fringes of perception they felt the presence of other beings in the hearts of the ruined cities of Man. There, the air was so thick with the toxic, all-encompassing energy that it shimmered as if a great fire burned just below the ground. They used their farseeing artifacts to monitor their surroundings, but never were they able to detect any intruders.

Finally, a dozen years after they began to cleanse the Earth, one of the Iron Children caught a direct glimpse of what had lurked just beyond their sight. Dor'kana! Not seen for an Age, it was long theorized that these creatures were the personal emissaries of Lord Djall himself. They had been seen only a handful of times, often connected with the insane Mystarch, Zahhak. They had driven him mad, saved him from execution after the dominion of the Mystarchs had been overthrown, and set him to lead the Dog Soldiers to break the Covenant, the direct result of which was the birth of Mankind.

The Maar subsequently spotted the Dor'kana a handful of times over the course of five decades, always in the regions that had suffered most heavily during the Cataclysm that ended Man's civilization. Each time, the Dor'kana that was seen quickly faded into the alleys and ruins, not to be seen again, but on its departure the concentration of poison in the air was drastically reduced. It was as if the Dor'kana were assisting in the cleanup, though none could know why.

The Iron Children did, of course, encounter the hostile beings roaming the Earth. The Maar were relatively few in number but they possessed defensive magics that were capable of destroying most who might attack them. Some Maar fell to the weight of numbers that the Undead, the People of the Skull, and the Vampires fielded, and for this the Iron Children wept while continuing their work. It was not in their nature to make war and so they did not. They defended themselves when attacked but did not pursue nor seek retribution.

Thirty years after the Maar left the Oreal Symmetry to cleanse the Earth, Jarnsaxa, Epimetheus, and the other Iron Children who had remained behind continued their lives as they had for thousands of years previously, except for magical dispatches from the Maar working on the surface on what they had encountered of note – primarily, the Dor'kana.

Jarnsaxa's Malaise

One day (or perhaps night, for that deep in the UnderRealm the light of the sun fails to penetrate), however, Jarnsaxa was out at the fringes of the Symmetry's influence, for in truth she chafed a bit at being confined, though it had been her choice. Still, Jarnsaxa simply accepted her lot for it was as nothing when weighed against her past sins. As she reflected upon the strange turns her life had taken, the incredible discoveries she had

once made, the power she had commanded, and the simple, restricted life she lived now she felt a pang of regret that it seemed her days of joyful discovery of the new and novel were past.

She had long since explored every inch the caverns that the Orea Symmetry held sway over, and had spent decades in deep reflection to come to peace with herself. She had learned much from the Maar, but had eventually hit a wall in her learning where it seemed that the fundamentally different nature of the Maar when compared to what she knew as life prevented her from achieving greater mastery.

Life for Jarnsaxa had become, in other words, monotonous. There was nothing new for her to learn, nothing to enjoy for the first time. She gazed into the dark for long minutes that stretched into hours, as melancholy faded into amusement at her own self-pity.

But then...a chittering in the dark. Furtive footsteps, and a pair of eyes. Jarnsaxa immediately brought up her shielding magics and prepared to attack were this one of the chompers that roamed the UnderRealm

Krostakin

It wasn't a chomper. It was something...new. It walked upright, with two arms and two legs. At the end of one arm was a hand while the end of the other was a large pincer claw. It had a tail reminiscent of the lobsters fished from the sea, and its face was alien. It chittered at Jarnsaxa and held up its hands in a way that looked like it signaled peaceful intentions, at least. Jarnsaxa dropped the destruction magics she had been prepared to unleash and gestured similarly.

She motioned to herself and said, slowly, "Jarnsaxa." The thing motioned at itself and chittered, slowly, "Krrroostakkkinnn."

With the formalities of introduction apparently taken care of, Jarnsaxa motioned to Krostakin that it should follow her. It did and she led it back to the home caverns of the Maar, whom she assumed knew of these creatures.

She was wrong. The Maar had no memory of record of these creatures and it became clear that their race was the Krostakin rather than this one's name being Krostakin. It offered forth no name for itself, merely insisting that it was Krostakin.

Epimetheus and the other Maar were greatly interested in this Krostakin. Epimetheus used one of their artifacts to translate from to and from their language but as it worked mentally rather than audibly it was a conversation between Epimetheus and the Krostakin, related afterwards by Epimetheus to the other Maar and Jarnsaxa.

Epimetheus and the Krostakin

For hours upon hours Epimetheus and the Krostakin conversed. When they were done, Epimetheus convened Jarnsaxa and the Maar who had remained behind to tell what he had learned. The Krostakin, he said, were a reclusive people living far below where even the Maar had tread. They built their settlements on the shores of hot underground springs and lived peaceful lives, but lately the Undead had begun to penetrate down as well as across the surface of the Earth, and they had had many skirmishes that resulted in dead Krostakin. They had been aware of the Oreal Symmetry for millennia but feared that if the Undead were to take it, as the Metalich Abidan wished, the Krostakin too would fall under the dominion of the Undead seat of power in their UnderRealm city of Sheol.

The Krostakin knew of the Maar's work on the surface and that the Oreal Symmetry was, as a result, thinly guarded. They came with an offering of assistance. The Krostakin would help guard the Symmetry and together they and the Maar would ensure it stayed out of the hands of Abidan. Epimetheus and the Maar gladly accepted this offer for they had the same fears that the Krostakin did. Only Jarnsaxa was suspicious, for the Krostakin and Epimetheus spent much time together and she suspected that Epimetheus was perhaps not telling them everything that the Krostakin communicated to him. Still, more Krostakin came and took up residence with the Maar. Nothing was overtly amiss and Jarnsaxa did not mention her concerns to any of the Iron Children, for those who remained behind were all close allies of Epimetheus.

39 | THE AGE OF MAN ENDS

Twenty more years pass, and the Maar were nearing the completion of the task set to them by the Gods. The poison in the air had lessened and was nearly absent from the Earth, thanks to the careful ministrations of the Maar. Jarnsaxa's suspicions of Epimetheus, however, had only grown. She had seen him and one of the Krostakin cloistered in silent discussion too many times and she believed he was working on a new artifact with the closest of his followers, though he denied it when she casually brought it up. With naught to truly occupy her time, Jarnsaxa made it her mission to discern what Epimetheus was up to.

What she discovered through the subtlest use of stealth magic and good old-fashioned skullduggery was far beyond the worst she had suspected. What Epimetheus was planning was madness. Although she did not know exactly how the artifact Epimetheus was creating worked, she could tell that it was intended to interface with the Orean Symmetry somehow. There was no possible benevolent reason to interfere with the Symmetry now, and that Epimetheus was determined to keep what he was doing a secret from Jarnsaxa set off every alarm she possessed. Altering the Symmetry with most of the Maar on the surface, outside of its protective radius, could kill every Iron Child up there!

Why would Epimetheus be doing this? Jarnsaxa did not know but she knew she had to do something. She had no hope of forcing Epimetheus to do anything, for though she was one of the most powerful mages ever to walk the surface of the Earth, and could probably overmatch Epimetheus alone, each of the Maar were nearly her equal in magical might. She had no hope against the group that had remained behind, all of whom were loyal to Epimetheus.

Jarnsaxa Discovered

Jarnsaxa determined that she had to find out more and then get word, somehow, to Prometheus to warn him of his brother's treachery. She wanted to have one final look at the artifact and learn what else she could of it, to confirm what she had discovered and ensure she was not crying wolf. She knew deep down that she was right, but went to see it regardless, in a cavern adjacent to that in which the Orean Symmetry resided. She snuck past the Krostakin and Maar guards and approached the artifact when a deep voice rang out.

"Jarnsaxa," boomed Epimetheus as he strode into the underground chamber. "So you have seen it. What of it? There is naught you are capable of to stop us now."

Jarnsaxa knew her game was up and said, "Do not do...whatever you plan to do. I beg you. Those are your people on the surface. Do not imperil their lives!"

Epimetheus began to chuckle darkly in a very un-Maar-like way. “My people? My people are here, around me.” He gestured to the Maar in the cavern with him. “Those who left the Symmetry to serve the ‘Gods’ are fools. We walked the UnderRealm long before they were created. Why should we serve them when we are the true Gods? We will take the power that is rightfully ours and we will rule this world as its Gods.”

“And now, little Beastling, it is time to pass into the Dusklands. Farewell,” finished Epimetheus who immediately raised a hand towards Jarnsaxa. Flame blasted out of his palm to incinerate the spot where Jarnsaxa had been until a split second before. She was already leaping towards an exit, surprising a pair of Krostakin guards with a stunning kick on one side and an icy blast of magic on the other. Out the door she ran, but she knew it was hopeless. She was confined by the Orea Symmetry and though she might run, she would quickly reach the limit of its influence and be forced to turn back. They would find her, and she could hear the chittering Krostakin and pounding footsteps of the Maar echoing through the caverns as they searched for her.

Jarnsaxa’s End

She could only think of one thing to do. She broke off the tip of a narrow, low-hanging stalactite and tore off a piece of the simple shift she wore. She used a sharp ridge of rock to open a small cut in her forearm and dipped the tip of the stalactite in it. Using her own life’s blood she penned a terse message on the cloth, knowing she could be seconds from discovery at any moment: “Epi traitor. Will destroy Symmetry. Danger!”

She took one lingering glance around and then used teleportation magic she had learned from the Mystarch Al-Idrisi to travel to Prometheus, who stood in the center of a ruined city of Man, cleansing the air. The weight of thousands of years of age delayed came crashing down on Jarnsaxa and the disgraced and now reformed Mystarch died instantly.

Prometheus Warned

Prometheus and the handful of Maar working with him to clean that particular city had time to register that Jarnsaxa appeared before she essentially turned to dust and collapsed. Her clothes fell to the floor and a scrap of cloth fell from where her hand had been. Prometheus instantly knew that for Jarnsaxa to sacrifice herself like this something must be terribly, horribly wrong.

He quickly picked up the scrap of cloth and read the message with horror. The Maar had not mastered teleportation magic since they had been limited by the short range of the Symmetry and thus there was no reason for it. Prometheus possessed no way of returning to the Symmetry quickly but he was able to communicate at great distances with those he had met.

He and the Iron Children with him quickly reached out, hoping to find one of the Gods, whom he had conversed with twice since the Temporal Aegis was deployed to share the news that Dor'kana had been spotted. After a few minutes of probing, they made contact with Curnon, Lord of the Wild Hunt, and sent him an urgent warning and request for help. Lord Curnon immediately commanded the giant, ethereal wolves that pull his chariot to take him to Prometheus, and moving far faster than any mortal wolf, they brought him to the greatest of the Maar in minutes.

Upon Curnon's arrival, Prometheus quickly explained their need to return to the Symmetry immediately. They managed to fit Prometheus and two of the other Maar into Curnon's chariot and, borne by a God, they began traveling back to the Symmetry for the first time in fifty years. But it was too little, too late.

As Curnon watched, the Maar with him turned to dust as did, indeed, all the Maar outside of the Orean Symmetry. For what Epimetheus had done was truly insane. He had inserted his artifact "between" the Orean Symmetry and the Temporal Aegis and then smashed the Temporal Aegis. Instantly the "rock" that was the life energy of the Maar tried to plummet to the ground (meaning leaving the Maar to return to the Orean Symmetry, thus killing the affected Iron Children immediately)...but was caught by Epimetheus's artifact, altered, and refocused directly onto Epimetheus and the other traitorous Maar.

They expected to become Gods, for the Krostakin had whispered in Epimetheus's ear and stoked the fires of ambition within him. What they became was something very different.

Birth of the Goliaths

Epimetheus reveled in the life energy of the other Maar flowing back to the Symmetry, but intercepted by his artifact and focused onto he and his allies. It filled his body and shone in his mind like a thousand suns. For a brief instant, his perceptions expanded and he felt the world. But then, in the corners of his expanded vision came a deep red, slowly washing over his expanded vision. His expanded perceptions collapsed and his world became red rage. Pain enveloped him as he felt his body changing and bursting and dimly he perceived his fellow Maar wracked with agony. He screamed as fire that was heat beyond possibility consumed his mind. And then there was no Epimetheus, as the fire burned thought out leaving him as a hulking Goliath, filled with a rage that would never diminish.

Around him, the Krostakin chattered to each other in satisfaction as they watched the Maar transform into the various types of Goliath we know today: Hill, Ice, Cave, and the mighty Flame Goliaths, born of Epimetheus himself. Prudently, the Krostakin now fled back to their beloved hot springs, their work for Lord Djall completed for now.

We know these things only because we know that Curnon had continued to the Symmetry after the Maar perished, and there he witnessed this. We know that in this moment the Maar became a dead race, for all left alive had become the Goliaths – unthinking beings full of rage and deadly intent. They are yet another weapon that the Lord of the Dark unleashed upon the Earth in his never-ending, singular quest to cover it forever in hopeless shadow.

An Age Ends and Begins

The Maar were the oldest known race on or in the Earth, and the last mortal creatures from the Lost Ages to perish. With their passing, which roughly coincided with the clean-up of the lingering effects of Man's destructive reign, the Age of Man had ended. The Earthmother returned the Beasts to the Earth now, an act which we know as the Reclamation, for the Beasts now set about to reclaim the Earth that had been taken from them.

The Age of Man was over, and the Age of Beasts had begun.

The End, for Now.

Note: There's an approximately 2000 year period between the end of this history and the game period. That history is forthcoming, as is a summary version of this history.