

VALKYRX



Days
of the
Valkyrx

THE WAR AGAINST THE DEMON KING

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INTRODUCTION

Our "Days of the Valkyrx" backstory provides context for our tabletop game. This is the who, what, when and why of the battle for dominion of the Earth.

It will assist the player in understanding the motives of the main protagonists, their strengths and weaknesses.

This is an ancient tale of good vs evil, where creatures of myth and legend contend one against the other. A world of magic and mystery where the living resist the un-dead hordes beyond number. Earth is a battlefield where demons and heroes alike are mere pawns in the hands of the Gods.

Jealous Gods have sent Mangere and his demon lieutenants to destroy an early medieval Earth. Aided and abetted by unworldly necromancers they have raised an army of mutants, awakened long forgotten beasts from the underworld, and wraiths from their tombs. The zombie ranks of their evil army are swelled by the dead warriors of their opponents, raised again and turned against their former friends and allies.

King Modrof, raised from the dead as a living spirit by the Valkyrx herself, leads his unlikely alliance of dragons, elves and dwarves, in defiance of the seemingly irresistible tide of evil sweeping the once fair lands.

Our story has no ending. There are many battles to come.

"DAYS OF THE VALKYRX"

Chapter 1 The Creation

A void of impenetrable blackness. Nothing.

Only the thought of the Ágakan

Before the Beginning and beyond the End of Days the Ágakan were omnipotent across space, time and Everything.

From a spark of thought the Ágakan created Ánwalda. He who man may call "Father of Gods".

In the fire of his mind Ánwalda forged the Margr beyond number to bring physical form to the Emptiness. For time beyond measure they laboured creating a Universe without limits.

When the Margr showed Ánwalda the results of their labours He was dismayed. For the Universe was dark, impenetrable and foreboding with no living thing. But wait! Deep in the darkness a tiny light flickered. The birth of a Star. Around that new born sun a small blue planet. Blessed with water and the beginnings of life. Sustainable and self-supporting. A symbiotic amalgam of fauna and flora. Teeming with species with the gift of adaptation and evolution. Who amongst the Margr was responsible for this solitary jewel? Ámāte was made known and Ánwalda raised him up above the Margr and charged him with making the Universe anew. He hailed him as "Cræstiga", architect of worlds. Ánwalda then turned his wrath upon those others of the Margr who had failed in fulfilling his desires. They were delivered back into the fire of his mind and unmade. All save one.

Cargást fled and hid in a dark place for time without measure, unseen even by Ánwalda . When Ánwalda turned his face away from the world Cargást revealed himself again, full of hate and twisted with

burning jealousy for Āmāte, who had usurped him as first among the Margr. Now self-proclaimed "Mánswica", The Deceiver in the common tongue, Cargást sought, through spite, to undo all that Āmāte had done. His rage never left him, but grew in its strength and deviancy. He saw his destiny as ruler of the physical worlds, condemning them to everlasting darkness, death and despair. He would seek to thwart Āmāte with his weapons of hate, deceit, and war. To avoid the gaze of Ánwalda, who would unmake him in the fire, Cargást created of his thoughts the Mánwael - The Corruptors, as his spirit disciples to desolate the works of Āmāte. Amongst the most powerful of these demons were Ψεύδος, gehror, Cwild, and Ageddon. The spirits of deceit, war, disease, death and mutation.

Meanwhile as Āmāte turned his thoughts to other worlds, as instructed by Ánwalda, he appointed the Anginn as Guardians of H yñ, the blue planet that he loved so dearly, as it was born of him. Chief among the Guardians were Estmere, Scima, GreÓt and Arius. Spirits of water, fire, earth, animals and of the First Born. Into the care of the Guardians he entrusted the Remian (The Heart Stone of H yñ). The Heart Stone represented the very blueprint of life itself. A perfect copy of the blue planet H yñ in every detail. Every man, animal, insect, leaf and blade of grass that would ever be. The planet distilled into its very essence at the molecular and atomic level. Compressed to the size of a bird's egg. This was the Hope, the chance of re-birth in the event of Armageddon. "Look after the Heart Stone well for it is one and the same as H yñ itself. It will heal any ills that befall H yñ, but its destruction will rend the Earth in two and all life will cease. Value it above all other things".

Arius nurtured the First Born and he gave his name unto them and they were known as Elves in the lives of men. He loved them deeply and suffered not that they should die a mortal death as was the destiny of other living things. He blessed them with a 1000 years of mortal life, but provided that they should live on in spirit form in the Great Halls of Eastrðor on their passing.

Āmæte saw in the passing millennia the Coming of Man. Lesser than the Elves, yet greater. Mortal, yet living beyond the times of the First Born. Āmæte was wise and saw that a natural order of death and renewal was necessary for life itself. He saw the need for Hope in the lives of Man whose existence would be hard and often without joy. He decreed that Worthy Men shall be raised again as living flesh if they were taken too soon. They too would enter the Great Halls of Eastrðor on their passing, to live on in the spirit world. To provide Hope he created from his thought one more of the Anginn. Known in other tongues as the Valkyrx - The Chooser of the Dead, who stood alone in judgement of all on H yñ. Giving life anew to those of the Worthy that had fallen. The Valkyrx did not make judgement on the morality of the Chosen for such concepts are figments of the minds of man. Such transient inventions did not weigh upon her thoughts. It mattered not what misery the Chosen had inflicted on others, or whether others would declare them good, or evil, only that they were Worthy. Giants amongst men - achievers of great things, and valorous. The powers of the Valkyrx were strong and She held dominion over any living thing of flesh.

Now it should be known that none of the Anginn, nor any of the Mánwael, could make shape of their ethereal being. Though their influence was great upon H yñ they remained unseen, but not unknown. As the destiny of H yñ was contested the Corruptors created the Wælgæst - the living spirits. Made flesh, but with powers beyond the imagination of man. Here were created demons and necromancers to create a new world order and they grew ever powerful. With despair and darkness spreading the Guardians created the Arodnes, their own living spirits, in the form of heroes and wizards to contend with the spawning malevolence.

But the malignancy of the Corruptors was more devious in its designs. There were sent false tongued emissaries to poison the ear of noble and common man alike, sowing discord and enmity across the lands. The desolation of H yñ was to fall to the hands of those who lived upon it. Such a sweet irony in the deep malice of the mind of Cargást.



The Malice of Cargást

Chapter 2 The Two Kingdoms of Man

The lands of Mævdæs vi 'Vendi were at peace. Since time immemorial, measured from the signing of the Great Undertaking, the two Kingdoms of man had lived in harmony. Their rivalry limited to who celebrated the Festivals of the Equinox most well and the annual joust.

The royal dynasties boasted uninterrupted pure blood lineage for 1000 years. Indeed the noble houses of Flacg and Cîse were related by marriage between the lesser royals. King Deall hēafodgold of Flacg was a vainglorious man who favoured the flattery of sycophants over those honourable and wise enough to counsel the truth. King Môdrōf of Cîse was more measured. A valiant man of moderation and diplomacy. The Great Undertaking to live in peace signalled the end of a 100 years of bitter war and the Kings of Antiquity jointly adopted the name Mævdæs vi 'Vendi - "a way of living" - for their lands, to signify their arrangement for harmonious co-existence. Under the agreement, the House of Flacg secured the Northern lands rich in fertile earth and green pastures for raising livestock. The House of Cîse occupied the Southern lands. Fertile, though not the measure of the North, but rich in minerals buried deep in the Týnan mountains, which fell within the land of Cîse, yet marked the border between the two kingdoms.

The Týnan mountains held within them the Great Gate of Mynsterlif which guarded the way between the kingdoms. On either side battlements made good any natural gaps between the craggy peaks. For a thousand years the wall remained unmanned and the Great Gate lay open - a sign of peace between North and South.

From the peaks of the Týnan mountains flowed water into the Cwylla Valley and into the Great River of the North, sub-dividing into a hundred fingers, irrigating the rich fields of the Kingdom of Flacg, giving life.

Chapter 3 The Rending of Mount Týnan

The news was brought to King Deall hēafodgold as he waited impatiently for his servant to bring linen in preparation for his monthly bath. He closed his eyes in anticipation of luxuriating in the warm waters of the grotto he had commanded built of marble and gold some 10 years past. Copious amounts of warm water were supplied by three dedicated stokers feeding the fire under the huge copper boiler, constantly refilled by a dozen, hand-picked, maidens. Ashen faced, his faithful old retainer Wyrt blustered and stuttered as he stumbled panic stricken into the ante-chamber where the King waited. "Well! What the devil is it?" commanded the King. "There is no water Sire".

"Then fetch more!" Deall hēafodgold demanded. "There is none in the castle Sire" cringed Wyrt. "Then fetch water from the Lake fool" said the King delivering the back of his hand across the old man's face. Stunned, Wyrt gathered himself and delivered the news that turned the King's countenance as pale as his. "All of the water has gone". And then he wept.

The King, oblivious to his nakedness, save the thin gold crown he wore at all times, rushed to the Southernmost window of the high castle keep and there stared out at that which never was before, never could be, and yet.....was true.

The Great River of the North had ceased its life giving flow.

The King despatched riders to the Kingdom of Cîse for there lay the spring that fed the North. He commanded them "Send back word by raven as soon as you know what the fates have determined".

The road to the Great Gate of Mynsterlîf was long and hard, even for the best men and horse in the Kingdom. Five days ride at best.

As twilight fell on the second day they were met on the road by a similar fellowship of riders wearing the coat of arms of King Môdrôf riding North at a pace which was passing good. "Hail friend well met" exclaimed Hal of the Guard to his opposite number Helma of Cîse, who raised his right hand in salute to his old friend.

"We have been sent by our Liege to inform your King of the disaster that has torn asunder the great peak of Týnan and ripped the Northern lands

from the nourishing teat of mother nature herself'.

Hal and Helma dismounted, and ordering the men of the Guard to take their ease, moved a short distance away to talk. There Helma recounted the tale of the Storm of Storms that had engulfed the tallest peak in the Týnan mountains and how lightning bolts of great power struck with uncanny and unerring aim the same place on the peak "A hundred times, or greater..." exclaimed Helma, who had witnessed the strikes from the Tall Tower of Castle Gifstôl; seat of the King of the Southern lands. "The road the water has travelled for millennia is now gone and the river travels Southward and away from your lands"

"Then what is there to be done?" asked Hal. "We have sent engineers to survey the damage, but the earth has moved. Nature may have the power to move mountains, but man does not" said Helma with heartfelt regret.

"In the great spirit of friendship that has guided our peoples in peace since time immemorial my Liege has instructed the building of ten thousand barrels so that we may bring water by ox cart unto the Northern lands to assuage the suffering of your peoples who we love dearly. My King requests you despatch in haste carts and beasts of burden to the border to carry back this gift" said Helma.

"You give us a gift of that which is already rightly ours!" exclaimed Hal with frustration and anger.

"Go see for yourself!" said Helma pointing to the South. "If you have a miracle in your purse, or magic in your pocket, then use it - for we have no such supernatural power to wield"

The fire of defiance left the eyes of the old friends and they clasped each others forearms with warmth and respect at their parting. "Pray continue your mission to tell of the catastrophe to King Deall hêafodgold. For my part I will continue my journey to the South to see what can be done" said Hal and the two departed with their company. Though their faces were grim with deep foreboding.

As Helma continued his journey ever deeper into the Northern Kingdom he was shocked at how quickly the deprivation of water was taking its toll on man and beast. Animals were left to die as people took whatever water that was to be found for themselves. The crops were already starting to

fail and as they passed through the villages outside the walls of Deall hēafodgold's castle they were followed by the sunken eyes and pallid faces of the peasant folk.

No longer was heard the welcoming cheer as they rode past in their finery, only an accusing silence.

Helma passed over the drawbridge which provided passage across the deep and now stinking slime pit that was once the moat around Castle Môdigan for his audience with the King.

Given no time for rest, or refreshment, Helma was escorted to the throne room, more like a prisoner than the envoy of a Great King. There he was thrust forward in front of Deall hēafodgold who sat in barely concealed rage on the gold, bejewelled, chair - his ample rump cushioned by deep velvet. Helma could not help notice how well the King's face matched the purple of his cushion, but also the thin man with weasel eyes, who stood at the King's right hand. Whispering in the King's ear as Helma entered he turned with cocked head to look with sneering contempt upon the envoy from the South.

Helma bowed deeply, "Fealty to you my Lord. I bring grim news".

"What is this news carrion crow of the South? That you have come to pick the flesh off my bones and my eyes from my head?" spoke Deall hēafodgold harshly. At this point the weasel at his right hand whispered in the King's ear. The King became further agitated "Not only do you starve my people you disrespect my crown by not kneeling before me. We are offended passing grave".

Helma was disconcerted. He had met the King before and, although Deall hēafodgold believed he sat upon the throne of the North by Divine Right, he had before extended courtesy to visiting envoys.

Helma was firm in his response as fitted his rank and duty as representative of King Môdrôf. "I resolve to give no offence my Lord and give, without reservation if there be not understanding, my deepest respect for you, your people and your lands. But I stand here in the place of my King and as such give bended knee to none other" And then directly addressing the weasel "I am here to parley with the King. Who are you that stands at his right hand for I know you not and I bethought I knew all

the King's advisors well, and as friends?" With the arrogant air of those of low intellect who have undeservedly attained status in high office, the weasel spoke. "I am Sotig Ræt, Chief Advisor to the King and First Minister of the Legislative Council. I am here to carry out the wishes of his majesty Deall héafodgold.

Pray, tell us your deceitful tale as to why you have stolen our water".

Helma felt his blood rising with indignation at the accusation, but caught himself as his mission was one of friendship to give succour to a neighbour in trouble. "My Lord, nature has rained down storm and fire upon the peaks of Týnan making rock fall to dam the natural flow of water. The tributaries to the Great River of the North are no longer fed".

Sotig Ræt again turned to whisper in the King's ear.

The King stood and pointed at Helma. "Deceiver from the South! Our watchers in the sky have sent word of your devious works in collaboration with the Dwarves who rend the stone of Týnan. You have dammed the river and I will Damn you in return!"

Helma told of his King's promise of sending water in barrels if Deall héafodgold could send ox carts to carry it. He stepped forward with a scroll written in the hand of King Môdrôf, but was intercepted by Sotig Ræt who snatched it from him and ripped it up before him. The eyes of Deall héafodgold flashed as if this was an impertinence too great, but he let it lie.

Helma knew not why the King's was willing to acquiesce so, but could contain himself no longer. "Knaves! Who art thou to treat your King with such disdain, and mine also!" Driven by anger his hand went to the hilt of his sword, although he drew it not from its leather scabbard.

Sotig Ræt screamed to the King's Guardsmen as he took refuge behind the throne "He is going to kill the King!" At which point they rushed forward and secured Helma by the arms. "Release me! For by putting your hands on me you put them on the person of King Môdrôf himself. I am the King's nephew and son of Prince Hlêowung his brother. If you harm me you will bring great woe upon your kin".

"Silence Helma son of Hlêowung" said the King of the North rising from

his velvet seat. "I will send your King an ultimatum and you shall deliver it. Take him away".

At that the Helma's audience with Deall hēafodgold was past and he was led away to the Dungeon.

Chapter 4 The Insidious Workings of the Corruptors

Sotig Ræt was but one of the poison tongued emissaries of the Corruptors who roamed the lands of the North infiltrating society from the most humble Hamlet of a few cob built dwellings to the Royal Court. These deceivers were many, and wholly corrupted by the promise of gold and lands of their own if they did well the work of their masters.

Some weeks had passed since the Corruptors rained fire upon the mountain to dam the water flow to the Great River of the North. True to his word, in spite of his nephew being held as hostage by Deall héafodgold, King Môdrôf provided water in seemingly endless convoys of ox carts that bumped and screeched slowly down the winding track to the North. Emptying their 500 gallon barrels into the reservoir outside the steep walls of Castle Môdigian and then making the 10 day return trip, light of load but heavy of heart. It was solace, but never enough. King Môdrôf had entreated Deall héafodgold to send workers to the South to assist in digging a new canal, but none had come. The artisans and labourers of the South worked on alone, but the task was great and seemingly would be without end unless the North sent help.

But the hand of the Corruptors was everywhere. When a village of men, women and children lay dead, not less in number than 400, the word was out. "The enemies in the South have sent poisoned water". Panic spread and the weasel-tongued Deceivers inflated the falsehood until it became "The Truth that cannot be denied". Indeed officers of the State were appointed to every institution and community to ensure that should "The Truth that cannot be denied" be disputed the dissenting voice was silenced - permanently.

At their most cunning the Deceivers organised an armed attack on a farming community near the Southern border. Dressed in the uniform of King Môdrôf's Guard a dozen armed thugs, at the behest of the Deceivers, murdered brutally five families. They in turn were murdered by others in the pay of the Deceivers. Not only was this another example of "The Truth that cannot be denied", but also that the Deceivers were to be relied upon in the defence against the insurgents from the South. The grip of the Deceivers grew ever tighter around the throat of the North.

These insidious acts had a devastating effect on the peoples of the North. "The Truth that cannot be denied" told them that the South sought the

destruction of the North and all its inhabitants. "They steal our water, poison us with the hand falsely held out in friendship, and attack our homes to murder us as we sleep". The deprivation and fear was the catalyst for war and when the Deceivers demanded it the people of the North answered the call.

Chapter 5 The March To War

Word of war spread quickly for its preparations could not be concealed. King Môdrôf implored Deall hêafodgold to work with him for peace, but the King of the North's mind was twisted to the point of insanity by the whispers of Sotig Ræt.

King Môdrôf', for the safety of his subjects, withdrew all behind the border mountains of Týnan, and for the first time since time immemorial the Great Gate of Mynsterlif was forced shut. And then for many months they waited...

On the 100th rising of the sun following the shutting of the Great Gate a small contingent of the advance guard of the Northern Army approached it under a flag of truce. King Môdrôf and his captains were hopeful that sanity had been restored and rushed to the battlements above the Great Gate of Mynsterlif in the hope of a new beginning. As they made their way to a place of advantage atop the Great Gate they speculated as to what might transpire. Was the Mad King dead and replaced upon the throne by one of reason and of gentle nature? They prayed that it was so.

King Môdrôf looked down upon the captain of King Deall hêafodgold's Guard and smiled upon him. "Greetings Captain. Can we offer you and your company refreshment and fresh mounts?".

The captain was gaunt and unsmiling. "We trust not he who brings destruction and terror to the North. My mission here is to deliver a gift from King Deall hêafodgold". At this he threw a cloth wrapped parcel into the dust in front of the Gate and turned his horse and rode away.

A captain of King Môdrôf's guard snatched a loaded crossbow from one of the battlement sentinels and raised it to his shoulder. "No!" commanded the King, gently pushing down on the weapon to spoil the captain's aim.

Through a small side gate some 10 feet above the ground a ladder was lowered and a young boy clambered down with the speed and agility of a small monkey to retrieve Deall hêafodgold's gift. As fast as he had descended he returned and made his way up the 573 stone steps to the lower level battlement over the Great Gate where King Môdrôf waited. The boy and his burden arrived quickly He was breathless due to his

exertions and no less from the anxiety of being in the presence of his King. The boy proffered the parcel of linen and gasped as it was taken from his keep; for his hands were blood red.

For the first time in four months King Môdrôf looked again into the eyes of his beloved nephew Helma son of Hlêowung. There was no hope for peace now and the trumpets called the men of the South to alert.

Chapter 6 Blood on the Gates of Mynsterlîf

It was at dawn the next day that the first attack came. The army of the North lined up and it was vast and imposing. In the front line two thousand bowmen with phalanx after phalanx of spearmen behind. On the flank armoured Knights of the North in attendance around the Mad King. Towering above all in the rear were great machines of war.

At the sound of a trumpet and the raising of the Royal Standard of the House of Deall hēafodgold the catapults sent their missiles of rock high into the air to strike the battlements of Týnan. At the same time ballista loosed their heavy bolts and two thousand bowmen turned the sky black with their darts. The first attack created more shock and awe among the defenders than actual damage. For men were unused to war and some of the ancient skills were lost. Very few missiles found their target, but those that did wreaked destruction upon flesh and stone. Lesser in number, but greater in skill, the crossbowmen on the battlements loosed volley upon volley towards the archers of the North. Devoid of armour and without the protection of stone they were easy targets and in the first few minutes over 200 had fallen and they were much afraid. With lost heart they retreated back through the ranks of spearmen who let them pass through.

A bitter lesson learned, the archers were rallied by their captains in the shadow of the shield wall and continued their fight from behind the barrier of steel. Nonetheless they were of weak resolve and did not threaten as before.

The pounding by the catapults continued and the men of the South could retaliate little for they possessed no war machines of their own. They had no weapon of range to rain death upon the foot and horse of the North, who had pulled back a distant furlong to avoid the sting of deadly darts loosed from the battlements. There was no further movement of the army that day and as dusk fell the catapults rested also. Men of the Watch were attentive of their duty and the men of the South took rest uneasily at their stations as they feared an attack by night. Fierce rain came, but the attack did not. The walls of Týnan were intact and the Great Gate stood strong.

At dawn the next day the great assault came. Tall towers with ladders inside their protective skin of heavy leather were wheeled forward, pulled by heavy horse and manhandled by the strong. At the same time great

battering rams were brought forward to contest their strength against that of the foot thick oak of the gate. Behind the machines came armoured soldiers armed with axe, sword and spear ready to assault the battlements. As the machines made a reluctant progress over ground made thick mud from the overnight storm, the catapults and archers provided what covering fire they could over their heads. As one great stone fell short upon the top of the lead tower the order was given to cease the barrage of missiles for fear of further self-harm. Exposed in the open, and unsupported, the assault bravely pushed on towards the wall. One warrior of courage stood tall and exposed upon the wheel of a war machine, shouting and waving his sword urging the advance. His coat of arms, of white shield and battleaxe, was emblazoned on his leather jerkin and singled him out as a Prince of the Northern realm. Encouraged by his defiance his men put shoulders to the wheel and found strength they knew not they had. The men on the battlements stood in a silence that chilled the blood of the attackers. The accuracy of the crossbowmen was deadly at long range, how terrible would be the storm of missiles point blank? Glancing up at the battlements they were close enough to make out the features of the defenders who remained stock still and passing menace. On the wall the Captains talked gently to the crossbowmen "Steady, Men of the Wall, wait the order". And then it came. A thousand darts rained down upon the attackers and then a thousand more. It was terrible beyond imagination, for at this range nearly every dart found its mark. Among the first to fall was the brave prince. His men fell left and right, some pierced with a dozen darts. Disorder reigned. Some rushed forward to the wall, but were at a loss as to what they should do when they got there. Others abandoned their stations and ran, whilst others simple abandoned hope and lay face down in the mud waiting for the fatal shot. The carnage continued for a full five minutes for the blood of the defenders was up and the captains' orders went unheard as the crossbowmen fired and fired again until they had no darts remaining. Two thousand had been in the attack on the wall, and more than half that number now lay dead. The carrion birds wheeled and spoke one to the other in the sky above.

There was no further attack that day although the soldiers of King Deall hēafodgold remained at distance in clear sight. They no longer stood straight and proud, and the captains of the wall thought that a good blast on a trumpet would be enough to make them flee the field. Sure enough two hours before sunset they melted away.

The captains on the wall ordered the roll to be called and were sorrowful of the losses they had suffered. Fifty-two were slain and another twenty were with wounds. However, when they surveyed the thousand that lay in front of their walls they gave blessing for their good fortune. Now that battle was done they saw not the dead and dying as the enemy, but thought on happier times of friendship with the North and they were remorseful of the deeds that had been forced upon them. "We will bury them well with honour on the morrow" declared King Môdrôf. "For now take rest".

Nonetheless the sentries remained vigilant as dusk turned to dark night. Never had a night been so dark and impenetrable. It seemed even the moon did not want to look upon such sadness. Only the feeble lanterns threw some light into the gloom. The Guards were uneasy throughout the night as the shadows made shapes that unsettled them. The old hands steadied their comrades and kept to themselves the false spectres that tricked their own eyes. It had been the hardest of days. The mind plays tricks.

In the morning they looked out and were amazed. All the dead were gone.

Chapter 7 The Desecration of the North

King Deall hēafodgold did not ride with his army back to the North because he blamed them sorely for the defeat and felt distain for them. Instead he spurred his horse mercilessly until it died of its exertions. Cursing and kicking the helpless beast he snatched the bridle of another from one of his captains, and rode on. On reaching Castle Môdigan he raged and beat his fists against the walls. Slumped on his throne he seethed and vocalised madly to himself for there was no-one near to hear him.

Now, although the wars of man was a device of the Corruptors it was but a diversion to hide their real intent. While the eyes of all were upon the struggle there were dark arts at work elsewhere in the North. The Mánwael- the living spirits, created by the Corruptors, had been set upon the land in physical form. The power of such demons and necromancers was passing great, and their evil deeds were an abomination on the face of the earth.

Chief among the Demons was Mangere - The Slayer. Mangere took physical form as a giant with horned head and reptilian skin of red. His strength was passing that of five hundred men and those who saw him were full of dread for he was not of this world. Three other demons fell to earth on the command of the Corruptors. Pocâdl the bringer of plague, Unsibb bringer of war and Mistriwan bringer of despair. Each mighty and terrible, but lesser than Mangere, who held dominion over them.

Of the necromancers there were at first but three. Weosule, Galdor, and Dædweorc. They were later joined by Wærloga, The Oathbreaker who became the head of their order. All were skilled in the Black Art of Magic, but none was as great as Wærloga, who deffered to none on earth but Mangere himself.

In the Labyrinths under the Grennes mountains the Corruptors brought forth their abominations. A place of unsurpassed beauty on the surface now seethed, and squirmed beneath with vileness and stench. Forgotten creatures were re-awakened from a slumber passing ten million years to walk abroad again and contest the domination of the earth with man. Thus were woken the Minotaur, Trolls, Harpies, Ogres and other beasts

unknown to man other than in the myths of the ancients, or in the nightmares of the deranged. Perhaps the most grievous violation against nature was the creation of the Wearg, a new mutation of life in mockery of man, and of Āmēte himself. Created from the unnatural fusion of man and beast the Wearg were in the mutated form of man, yet born and suckled by goat.

But the servants of Mangere did not rest and worked the forges of the darkness beyond limit, creating a new more powerful breed of mutant through the amalgam of Ogre and Wearg. The Mægen were of great strength and number. But the art of creation among the disciples of the Corruptors was inferior to their skills as destroyers and their work was imperfect. The size and strength of the Mægen surpassed the designs of the necromancers, but their intelligence was sacrificed beyond intent.

Incapable of independent thought and action the Mægen needed constant instruction to perform the most basic of tasks. A solution was found in the pairing of a Mægen with a Puca. The process of creating the Wearg in their tens of thousands also produced a large number of runts that did not, on inspection, achieve the stature and strength required of a front line soldier. Some were put to use on menial tasks and worked to death in the mines and forges of Mangere. Others, named as the Puca, were so small and feeble they were put to the sword and their bodies sent to the kitchens to supplement the swill that flowed through the food troughs in the Wearg barracks. It had been noted, however, that the Puca were intelligent. Thus it came to pass that one, or two, Puca were appointed as handlers to each brutish Mægen, and served as might a mahout in controlling the actions of his elephant. Perched in high harness on the back of the Mægen the Puca screamed instruction in the ear of the beast and prompted action by the cruel dig of a hand-held bull pick into the head. But the temperament of the Mægen was not to be relied upon. Formidable in the charge and joyful in the ripping of limbs off a broken opponent the Mægen were inclined to go berserk if wounded. Liable to charge in any direction they would trample friend and foe alike oblivious to the pleadings of their Puca, who in their panic further inflamed the situation by smashing their pick unmercifully into the beast's skull.



The Mægen and puca

Notwithstanding this propensity for chaotic behaviour there were none who relished facing them in battle.

But the deviancy of the Corruptors did not end there. The dark arts brought forth stone Titans hewed from the rock and wickermen born of the trees; given life in the service of Mangere. Passing through the walls into the cold unearthy burial mounds of the ancients Mangere raised the wraiths with their screaming hatred of man and sent them forth in ethereal form to torment and hurry the demise of all things living. And yet there was worse to come....

Chapter 8 The Fall and Rise of Deall hēafodgold

Then that which became known as the "The Coming of Beasts" began. Like a tsunami, but from the East and West simultaneously, came the host of Mangere. Never was seen such slaughter of man. Such was the onslaught no stand could be made against the unworldly foe until the very walls of Castle Môdigian. There stood in defiance the last thousand of the once formidable Army of the North. The captains had told their men to be ready for their brothers-in-arms to join them soon from the garrisons in the outlying regions of the North. For the order had been sent three days before to fall back upon the strength of Castle Môdigian. They also ordered preparation for the refugees who would soon be arriving fleeing ahead of the beast horde. But none came. Not soldier, not man, woman, or child.

At the rising of the sun the very earth shook violently, and some men swore they could feel even the thick stone of the castle move. But the trepidation of nature's impending quake was soon replaced by a terror than none had ever felt before. Over the brow of the shallow hills that surrounded Castle Môdigian on all sides, they came. A hundred thousand strong. And harpies wheeled in the sky; screeching harbingers of doom. Behind them and unseen, stretching 200 miles in every direction lay the killing fields. The last of the inhabitants of the North were gathered here at Castle Môdigian together. Small in number and without hope.

King Deall hēafodgold was in the Shield Room. So called for the walls were covered in the shields and coat of arms of the one-hundred and eleven kings of his bloodline that had preceded him. A map of the castle and the outlying land was spread on the table before him. His captains stood with him in a council of war. Such was the king's madness that many were wary of his unpredictability in the face of the imminent assault about to break upon the walls. Only that morning he had ordered the execution of an adjutant for delivering news not to his liking. The king was animated, almost in frenzy, moving blocks of wood representing the men-at -arms of the realm around the table to outflank the invader here and crush him with overwhelming force there. Petr, Captain of the Guard, spoke up. "Sire, we pledge our allegiance and will willingly die for you, but we shall be overwhelmed and the thickness of the walls will not deny this. Let the women and children escape through the tunnel that will take them beyond the Northern outpost and the chance of escape to the sea



Mangere The Demon King

where they may find succour." In fury Deall hēafodgold swept the wooden blocks from the table and screamed "I shall not be beaten and if, through your betrayal and cowardice I shall be brought down, then there is no kingdom anymore. My bloodline shall wither and die as will all others." The Captain of Captains spoke firmly, "Sire, pray do not impeach the bravery of any here for you are in the company of the bravest in the Kingdom. We will pledge again, if any such pledge be necessary, that we will be with you in victory, or in death, whatever you command, or that which the Fates determine." In a rare moment of truth and lucidity Deall hēafodgold came to terms with his doom and spoke with great deliberation. Perhaps for the first and last time in his life he spoke worthy of the one hundred and eleven of his line that had proceeded him. "You are right my Captains. We may not see the sun rise tomorrow, but we will be remembered in song and legend and that is immortality. Assemble the army this side of the gate. I will not suffer the House of Deall hēafodgold to die like a rat in a sack within these walls. We will ride together one final time in glory with trumpets playing and drums beating. "To horse!"

So it came to pass that every man that could stand and hold spear, or sword, was assembled at the gate. Deall hēafodgold stood in his stirrups and turned to survey with pride the fluttering flags and glint of sun on armour. Drawing his bejewelled sword he commanded "Let us now ride into the jaws of Hell itself. Sound trumpet and drum. Open the Gate!"

Thus, the final ride of the Company of Deall hēafodgold took place that hour. Such episodes should be hailed as glorious, with the tale growing in the telling. Fireside stories of Deall hēafodgold slashing left and right, cutting a path to where the Demon Mangere stood and, after brave fight, lopping off his head. Tales of heroism and courage beyond the call of duty. But this is reality, not the stuff of legend. Glorious it may have been for a few seconds as the horses were spurred away from the gate, but the trumpets soon quailed as the Company were set upon on all sides by beast and mutant passing the strength of man and at advantage of one hundred to every one. There were no songs, for there were none left to tell the tale. Deall hēafodgold was unhorsed and thrown at the clawed feet of the Demon. The King's madness had returned, for to be in the presence of Mangere was sufficient to drive all but the greatest of men to the very brink of insanity, if not cascading into its deepest pit. "So you thought in your delusion to challenge me Deall hēafodgold. Your

Kingdom is forfeit and your life and spirit are mine." At this he took a great blade and severed the head of Deall hēafodgold. Mangere picked up the head of Deall hēafodgold and looked into the still open eyes of the Mad King and spoke "You wanted immortality and I shall give it you in my service. As the night falls rise again Deall hēafodgold and with your army follow me". At this he tossed the head back into the dust next to the still corpse of the King.

So it was that Mangere was crowned the Demon King with dominion over the lands, sea and sky. His horde of over 100,000 strong was now supplemented by 5000 of the dead in the colours of Deall hēafodgold. Skeletal, with the last remnants of putrid flesh clinging to their bones, this vile company were bent to the will of the Darkness. They were mighty in battle, for you cannot kill that which is already dead.

As the war moved close to its conclusion the army of the dead grew ever larger, for thousands of new recruits flocked to its ranks in each passing month of bloody conflict. The dead of either side that lay on the battlefield were oft raised to follow King Deall hēafodgold and fought as slaves in the service of Mangere. But the composition of the army of the dead grew more varied than before. The long war would see the deaths of many at the hands of the dead that followed Deall hēafodgold. Joining their contingent were men, dwarves, giants and dragons. All skeletal zombies without fear. Any wound they inflicted turning their opponent to undead, destined to rise again and walk at their side forever united in their hatred of the living. Yet Elves were not among their number for their spirits were strong and they could not be made undead.

The terrors of the North remained unknown to King Môdrôf and the men of the South. Oblivious to the extent of their jeopardy and impending doom they sat behind the formidable walls of Týnan , and the Great Gate of Mynsterlif was firmly shut. Scouts had been sent into the North and none had returned. Thus, they remained vigilant because the Darkness was spreading and there was certain danger outside their walls. Whatever horrors they could imagine from behind the relative safety of the battlements atop Týnan the reality for those in the North was unspeakably worse. The tide of malice was spreading like a flood from North to South. The advance was on a broad front and none in the lands to the East, or West were to be spared.



The King of the Dead aka Deall hēafodgold

Chapter 9 The Cleansing of the Deórhám

Man, Elf and Dwarf had peacefully co-existed for a thousand years. There was not always understanding of the ways of others, but all seemed happy to live and let live providing each kept to his own. There was a natural wariness between strangers and of the unknown. For man knew little of the customs of the Elves and the Elves cared little for mankind at all. There were, however, more tribes that dwelt at the borders of the two Kingdoms. The Hielfling were an unusual people that evolved with man. Their shortness of stature over-compensated by a friendliness and willingness to please. They kept themselves to themselves and did no harm. Indeed their expert nurturing and care for the land meant man was happy to leave them be, to live their gentle lives. By contrast the Deórhám were seen as wild men who would fiercely defend the dense forest of Ágrówen in the North Eastern lands where they dwelt. Near naked and painted blue the warriors of Deórhám would spark alarm if they were seen at the Western edge of the great forest. Man had crossed swords with the Deórhám frequently over the years, but it was an unrewarding confrontation for they would spit and scratch and fight like a mother guarding cubs when threatened. As the Deórhám now ventured not from the forest man was content, and indeed wise, to leave well alone.

But Mangere was no respecter of the past and he was in need of wood to feed the great forges for making weapons of war and for the building of a great fleet. Thus the full force of the Demon fell upon the forest of Ágrówen and the Deórhám who dwelt there. But the wild men fought hard, for this was a defence of their home and families. For although they appeared to cultured man as feral the love for their family was passing great and they were loyal. They were a band of brothers and brothers lay down their lives for each other. Thus the mutant hordes found the battle bitter and it was only on the release of the bestial trolls into the fray that the Deórhám gave ground. For trolls were primitive and wild and would fight to the death without concern for their own wounds. Mangere would have simply ordered the forest burnt if he had not want of fine wood for ship building. So the mutant hordes poured into the breach made by the trolls and despoiled all living things there. The Deórhám made their last stand upon the sandy beach at the Eastern edge of the forest where it met the sea. Here stood Bodig, great chieftain of the Deórhám, in defiance, tears unashamedly running down his bloody cheeks. Standing over the dead bodies of his wife Elene and five children, whose lives were

taken kindly by his own hand to spare them the horrors and defilement about to befall them. There was no escape on the edge of the sea. They were not a seafaring folk and other than spear fishing knee deep in the clear blue waters they had no love of the ocean. There were no boats, only a courageous death. And so Bodig, last of the Deórhám fell to a murderous assault by a great troll. At least he was spared witnessing the aftermath, as the beasts feasted upon the dead.

The golden sands were turned blood red and the Deórhám were no more.

Chapter 10 The Defiling of the Monasteries

Concurrent with the attack on the Deórhám the mutant hordes were overrunning the fertile fields outlying the great Monastery of Munec to the West. Mangere would leave no part of the Northern lands unsullied and settlement by settlement all would be turned barren, with no living thing.

The ruthlessness of Mangere was never better illustrated than in his invasion of Munec, sanctuary of the Monks of Cædmon. Unlike the Demon's invasion of Deórhám, where there was motive in pursuit of timber to built his fleet, the slaughter of the monks was annihilation for its own sake. Never was there a more gentle people who, through self-sacrifice, gave warmth and sustenance to the poor and spiritual wellbeing. The great Monastery of Munec stood on the highest peak of Mount Ar. Oft embraced by clouds the monks built upon it the highest tower known to man, as if trying to touch the feet of the Goddess of Humility, Culpian, who they worshiped.

Placing themselves lower than any living thing they often went hungry if there was insufficient food for their own modest bowls after the indigenous Comunus monkeys were satiated. They resisted not when the harpies fell upon them from the air and the Wearg from below. No mercy was shown. Some died in prayer and others simply stepped off the high tower to fall onto the razor sharp rocks in the raging sea below. The bodies of the monks were defiled and The Great Library burned. A thousand years of lore and wisdom lost forever. The Sacred Tomb of the Holy Father St. Worsfold was broken and his bones scattered. Other holy relics including the Shroud of Munec and the piece of the true pentangle, upon which the daughter of Culpian was martyred, were burned. The Order lived in abject poverty and the Wearg were doubly cruel in their torture of the monks as they searched for treasure that was not there. None escaped, although there were secret passages through which they could have done so. If the Goddess willed their deaths who were they to question this judgement? No resistance was offered.

Corennes was spiritual head of the Order of the Monks of Cædmon. He bore no formal title for he was humble, yet by age and wisdom the monks were attentive to his teaching. As the Wearg broke down the door into the small bare room of the Holy Sepulchre they found Corennes kneeling in prayer. In his hands the tiny box containing the finger bone of Calpanian,

the most sacred relic of their Order. Standing to meet the invader he held the box above his head and implored the Goddess Culpian to shine a light into the hearts of the Wearg so that they would understand kindness and love.

Man will believe what man will believe. It is oft said that if there were no God then man would invent one. Indeed there were Gods. Some benevolent and some cruel. Unfortunately for the Monks of Cædmon the Goddess of Humility, Culpian was a fiction - born of man's imagination. On the other hand the Gods that now sent death to the monastery door were real, and passing cruel.

The Wearg laughed as they hoisted Corennes high on the tips of their cruel spears. The sacred relic crushed to powder underfoot.

Never again would such humility in man be seen on the Earth again. It was a sad passing.

Chapter 11 The Malevolence of the Wraiths

On his passing from the mortal world man is laid to rest in the earth, or burnt upon a funeral pyre. Whether in life they believed there was a heaven where they would sit at the right hand of their God is for them alone. However, otherworldly spirits are real and strong. The greater the grievances and injustices they felt in their mortal life, the greater their malevolence as spirits. However, living man is unaware of this hatred that lies deep in the souls of the departed for the spirit has not the ability to take visible form, or use psychokinetic powers to reveal its presence.

*Mangere saw the potential power of the wraiths if he were to release them from their containment. For hatred and resentment of your fellow man is a powerful driver to murder and despair. So Mangere visited the tombs of the long departed, passing through walls to stand beside the stone sarcophagus and melded minds with the dead. He sought only the most tormented and resentful in their hatred of man. Finding the most bitter of murderous intent he released their spirits to wreak their revenge. Many twisted, poisoned, souls were raised from their uneasy sleep by the Demon. Murderers and murdered, betrayers and the betrayed. All with a seething sense of injustice and a burning desire to wreak retribution upon the living. But among the hundreds of the most psychotic of these tortured souls, one stood apart. Such was his rage and hatred of everything even Mangere hesitated before releasing him. What power! The inscription on the great stone tomb revealed this to be none other than the ancient King Ásnæsan (*The Impaler*). Pre-dating the blood lines of Môdrôf' and Deall héafodgold, Ásnæsan was a despotic leader whose paranoia drove him to slaughter his own people in their thousands. In the darkest times bodies were displayed publicly, impaled on sharpened wooden stakes as evidence of his power and ruthlessness. But he was ultimately betrayed by his wife, who cut his throat as he slept beside her. Evil in life and ten-fold so in death he was raging with malice. Insane, and deadly. Mangere bade him rise as the Wraith King and released him to terrorise the living at the head of a hundred lesser spirits, who killed for the joy of it.*

Now spirit wraiths are ethereal beings that fly shrieking into the faces of man, killing by fear and ice cold touch that stops the heart of even the most courageous. They are not un-dead for they cannot take physical form, but can pass any barrier in pursuit of bringing death and misery to the living.



Ásnæsan *The Wraith King*

Mangere sees the wraiths as his terror weapons. Exploiting the fears and superstitions of his enemy they can win a battle by shock before the first arrow is fired. No mortal weapon can harm them. Only magic, or mighty spirit, can dismiss them.

The wraiths first appeared with cataclysmic effect on the retreat of the men of King Deall hēafodgold's garrison at Bretenanmere. Recalled to Castle Mōdigian, where the last stand was to be made, the column of five hundred men were assailed upon the road by a screaming host of avenging spirits. Stricken by fear, with their thrashing swords passing harmlessly through the misty forms, many fell with eyes to the ground and their hands over their ears in an attempt to keep out the infernal shrieking. The wraiths swooped and wheeled in the air, their mouths wide and misshapen with bitterness. Like smoke they drifted and reformed, disappeared and materialised again, always more terrible than before. The soldiers of Deall hēafodgold could not keep out the interminable shrieking, nor remove the voices from their head that threatened, and then cajoled, with invasive thoughts of suicide to give release from this unbearable torment. Indeed some found peace at their own hand while others fell to the icy death touch of the wraiths. All were left dead and any witness to the terrible slaughter would have been shocked by the distorted faces of those who died paralysed by fear.

Chapter 12 The Demons Ride Abroad

Concurrent with the events overtaking the garrison of Bretenanmere the areas of the North outlying Castle Môdigian were to become the killing fields. The scattered forts and garrison towns were assailed by the Wærg, and civilian settlements were attacked by Titans and fearsome trolls. In spite of the slaughter there was the faint hope of survival and escape.

Forlorn was this hope as The Three Demon Servants of Mangere rode out. Pocâdl the bringer of plaque, Unsibb bringer of war and Mistrîwan bringer of despair. Unsibb rode with the armies of the Darkness dealing death with his spiked mace and sword. Impervious to the weapons ranged against him he spurred his spirit steed draca in pursuit of the routed battalions of Deall hêafodgold. Soldiers threw away their swords and shields to speed their retreat, but to no avail. Looking over their shoulders as they ran they saw the fire from the nostrils of draca and the fearsome countenance of Unsibb and hope left them. Falling to their knees they waited for death. And this was swift at the hand of the demon, but slow and tortuous for those falling into the hands of the Wærg.

Where Pocâdl passed through the night the plague took hold and all who saw him fell stricken with the Purple Death. Such was the nature of the contagion it spread like wildfire across the land sparing no man, woman, or child. He oft appeared as a hooded plague doctor with pronounced beak mask. His hands and bare feet were covered in bursting pustules that betrayed his malign purpose. To those unfortunates who witnessed his coming he seemed to move on a writhing mass of grey and black that rose and fell, bubbling with frenetic scurrying around his feet and extending far behind him. As he came closer the screeching, and stench, of a hundred thousand diseased rats assaulted the senses and it looked as if the earth itself was alive.

Mistrîwan assumed many physical forms. All designed to bring revulsion and horror to those who bore witness. So passing terrible was this apparition that all lost faith in the benevolence of God and the good heart of man. There could be no loving God, no salvation, no point in life itself. This was hell on earth with no escape other than death. To some he appeared as a giant insect, or spider. To others a three tailed crocodilian, or scorpion. The beast invariably had the head and torso of a despairing man, rotting and broken, wailing as if trapped in a perpetual living Hell.



Pocâdyl Bringer of Plague

J.P. TARGEDE 2020

Yet the beast spoke with a voice so strong the very earth did tremble.

Those who Mistrîwan passed among were beset with overwhelming despair and could not shake the voices in their heads. The voices were right, the only solution was death by their own hand. Such was the power of Mistrîwan that insanity overcame all within seconds of his passing by. The compulsion was to commit suicide immediately and by whatever means. Men poured lit oil lamps over their heads in acts of self-immolation, others threw themselves from heights while others searched for a blade to cut their throats, or impale their hearts.

So complete was the slaughter that none survived this holocaust. None arrived to the false sanctuary of Castle Môdigian. For the fortress fell soon after and he who was once Deall hêafodgold rode out as King of the dead in the service of Mangere.



Mistrīwan Bringer of Despair

Chapter 13 - Genocide of the Innocents

*The Hielfling were a gentle folk and in keeping with their good nature accepted the derogatory name given to them by man (Hielfling meaning "small coin" in the common tongue). Short in stature they lived a simple life and were full of joy at the sight of the rising sun and all natural things. They were expert farmers and fishermen and proficient builders of their "Inouts"; dwellings built partially on the surface and underground. Family and community were at the heart of their existence and other than the occasional dispute over who had grown the prize marrow of the season, everyone lived in peace with their neighbour. Disputes were soon forgotten over a flagon of ale in the village hall. With a small and stable population of around 5,000 the Hielfling lived in the West, to the North of Freobearn, the homeland of the Elves. Separated only by the narrow Straits of fyrgnast. They kept themselves to themselves and the Kingdoms of Flacg and Cîse left them free to pursue their idyllic, peaceful lives. There were no heroes among the Hielfling save **Pic** the brewer's son who had inherited the wide girth of his parents and stood a full cubit taller than the average Hielfling - albeit still a full head shorter than the average man. He could cast a stone with great force and accuracy over 50 paces and was hailed as a champion among a population renowned for its skill at stone throwing. But, they were great storytellers and the youngsters listened wide-eyed and open mouthed at the great exploits of the legendary Lodo, in the glow of the night fire. None knew if these tales of yesteryear contained any truth at all, for it was not uncommon for a tale to be as tall as the teller was short. Indeed some of the Hielfling frowned upon such tales of exotic foreign lands full of dragons and magic. There was no point putting such nonsense into the heads of the youngsters, creating unnecessary desires for adventure. And so for countless generations they lived in peace and utter contentment.*

*So when the servants of Mangere fell upon the settlement one night there was no effective resistance that the Hielfling could offer against the demons. The unholy trinity of **Unsibb**, **Pocâdl**, and **Mistrîwan** all descended in the darkness to commit one of the most despicable crimes in a war that raged too long. None escaped and none survived. The Hielfling were no more. If there were any small blessing that night it was that the Wearg horde stayed away - fearful of the indiscriminate violence of the demons in general and of **Pocâdl** - the Bringer of Plague, in particular. At least defilement was not added to the pain and horror suffered by the Hielfling that infamous night.*

Chapter 14 - The Lair of Mangere

Ψεύδος had rejoiced at the destruction of the Kingdom of Deall hēafodgold. Mangere had proven himself his worthy servant. Yet Ψεύδος craved a more physical presence upon the Earth. Mighty though Mangere was he did not possess the power of Ψεύδος who was closer to true God in the hierarchy of spirit beings. But as one of the Mánwael he was confined to the Otherworld. Though he could not manifest himself as living spirit he contrived to impart his very essence into physical structures upon the Earth. These structures would project his might, and a nearness to them would multiply the power of his demon servants that walked upon the Earth many fold. In melding minds with Mangere he created an image of a mighty fortress that would become a conduit for projecting his power upon Earth and the very foundation of Mangere's might.

Castle Môdigian burned that night. The flames leaping so high that the glow could be seen from the battlements atop the wall at Mynsterlif, many leagues to the South. The final great symbol of the Kingdom of the North crumbled and collapsed into piles of rubble. A thousand years of unbroken royal lineage reduced to dust. The only nod to the past evidenced by a partially visible coats of arms on a twisted and broken shield lying in the debris.

And then came a great rumbling from deep under the ground where Castle Môdigian once proudly stood. Suddenly the top of a great spire broke the surface and thrust skyward and then another, far distant. Then four more huge columns climbed from the Earth reaching higher than the tallest watchtower of Môdigian had ever done. Then a mountain of stone was risen up to create a great wall about the towers that now seemed to touch the sky above. But this lair of Mangere was not of any architecture previously known to mankind for it contained the very essence of Ψεύδος and seemed to live. It appeared to be made of stone yet its structure was irregular and chaotic. In places it flowed and dripped like melted wax. Columns were slanted and bent in defiance of gravity. No surface was smooth, but rough hewn stones protruded like spikes to deter any invader that might dare to challenge its might. It came to be known as Scylf - a suitably unworldly name for that which was not

of the Earth. With the power of Ψεύδος in its walls Mangere was invincible as he sat deep in its twisting catacombs, on his throne of skulls.

Impregnable defence was not enough for Ψεύδος and he joined minds again with Mangere to create a number of temples in his honour across the Northern lands. Into each he gave his essence and great powers could be bestowed upon he who made sacrifice there, if they had the strength to meld minds with one so mighty. Through the temples Ψεύδος projected his power ever wider, imbuing his emissaries that walked upon the Earth with increased strength to wage increasingly bitter war against all living things. But the eyes and ears of even one as mighty as Ψεύδος could not be everywhere at once and in opening portals between the Earth and the Otherworld he inadvertently gave opportunity to those of the Anginn, the Guardians, to also project their power upon those who walked upon the Earth. So passing strong was the presence of Ψεύδος in the living soul of Scylf that none of the Anginn would contest against the Demon there. But Ψεύδος's presence was lesser in the widely spread temples and, by stealth, the Guardians could sometimes reward the prayers of those in the service of the Demon with an unwanted gift of their own.

Chapter 15 The Making of the Spirit King

Uneasy months had passed since the assault upon the walls by Deall héafodgold. There was no word from outside and those of the tall watchtowers atop the peaks of Týnan could see no sign of life to the North. No birds in the sky, not a rabbit, or even a mouse, scurried across the still scarred ground. Then on the eve of Winter they came. Not knowing if they were truly awake, or still asleep, the sentries of the wall screwed up their eyes, and their courage, as they witnessed the coming of Hell to the Gate of Mynsterlíf. The number of insurgents was not great, being of less than a dozen, but there was deep dread of the great beasts that now assaulted the gate.

The bull like creatures stood 7 cubits tall and moved upon their hind legs in the parody of man. They were armed with spear and sword and their forelegs were as arms with gripping claws. Upon their heads two great horns, which they now used to batter the Great Gate of Mynsterlíf. The beast weighed two-fold that of the largest ox.

The alarms rang loud and the crossbowmen of the wall took station. By surprise, and fleet of foot, the beasts had come within the shadow of the wall and it was difficult for the bowmen to take aim, for the angle was passing steep. King Môdrôf ordered his personal guard to assemble swiftly on horse, for even the thick oak of the gate was starting to split under the ferocious charge of the Minotaur. A great bull led the assault, crashing again and again against the huge iron hinge that held the gate. His giant head bled , but he charged without restraint and the bolts that held the hinge started to break.

King Môdrôf sat at the head of his personal guard of 60 men-at-arms, the best in the Kingdom. At his signal the gate was opened and he spurred his horse towards the great bull. With consummate skill, and courage to match, he drove his lance through the heart of the bull who bellowed his last and fell backwards to the ground outside the gate, where his black blood soaked into the dust. Discarding his broken lance King Môdrôf drew his sword and charged towards those abominations that still stood. Bellowing their dismay at seeing their Chieftain fall they turned and fled.

If the Guard bethought the pursuit and kill would be an easy affair they

were sore mistaken. For by placing their forelegs upon the ground the creatures were as swift as the best horses in the Kingdom. The Guard spurred their horses on and King Môdrôf started to put distance between himself and his men, but even then could not close the gap to their quarry. After 20 furlongs the horses started to tire, but the beasts also seemed to moderate their pace due to fatigue. Here was their chance and King Môdrôf stood in his stirrups and cried "Now we have them!" They were fast approaching the Dale of Læfel, a basin like depression, which the road followed towards the North. Now closed to within 15 lengths of the beasts two of the biggest bulls suddenly turned in an instant and charged towards Môdrôf. Sworn by duty and for the love of their King two of his captains drove their mounts in front of the King's rearing horse and took the terrible impact. The light armour of the horses provided no protection against such force and the captains and the King were knocked to the ground. The great bulls extricated themselves from the melee and backed away purposefully as if preparing for another charge. The confusion in the ranks of the Guard was only momentary and although the bulls were of great strength they were but two against 60 lances and the skirmish lasted only a few fleeting minutes before the bulls lay mortally wounded on the ground. Their great chests rose and fell for a few times more and then were still. None of the Guard were seriously hurt, but five horses lay dead.

"Haste, men haste!" was the rallying call of the King. "Do not let the other abominations escape. They are not of Mother Earth and should be wiped from her fair face!". At this, the company re-formed and charged over the lip and down into the Dale of Læfelin in hot pursuit. Whether through exhaustion, or in defiance, the remaining eight beasts stood in a tight circle less than a furlong distance. They intended to make their last stand and drag as many of the Guard to Hell with them.

The King slowed his men to a trot and approached within 10 lengths of the evil assembly. "What art thou who are not of this earth, and yet are a stain upon it? A large bull stepped forward and with harsh voice, that chilled the hearts of the men, proclaimed; "We serve our Lord Mangere and are appointed Slayers of Kings".

"If you are so appointed it seems that today you will disappoint your master" replied Môdrôf.

The bull snorted in contempt, and raising his right arm to shoulder height he invited, with open palm, the King and his troop to view the upper edge of the valley in which they now stood. To the left and right rose up a great host. To the front the sound of trumpets and to the rear the flags and drums of the followers of Mangere. Wheeling his horse left, and now to the right, King Môdrôf realised his folly. He had ridden into a trap from which there was no escape. Two thousand strong against sixty, their doom was surely sealed.

*And yet, in spite of their great peril, not a man flinched from his duty and all stood tall ready to defend their King to the last. Releasing their horses the Guard formed a tight circle, in two ranks and, with their lances, presented a wall of spikes. To the hidden observer, **and there was one**, the circle of brave hearts was tiny, being not more than 10 paces across.*

With drums beating on came the horde. Here were the Wærg, the mutant casts made in the depths of the North by the hand of Mangere. Taller than man, and bestial, they formed the majority of the host ranged against them. Here, and there, a fearsome troll in the company of the surviving minotaur completed the swarm ranged against the Guard.

If the servants of Mangere expected an easy victory they were soon roughly disabused by the skill and strength of the King's men. The first attack was repelled leaving two score mutants on the ground providing further bloody obstacle for the next assault. They had felt the sting of sharp lances penetrating their leather armour and thick hides and many carried wounds as they withdrew fifty paces. Notwithstanding their loss, and with a zeal born of stupidity, they came on again and fierce battle was joined once more. On their withdrawal this time a further three score of their number lay upon the ground, but the brave circle was shrinking.

Now the Wærg Chieftain called upon the minotaur to spearhead the next assault and they came forward, pawing at the ground, and lowering their great heads. The King realised the attack would be terrible when it came for the minotaur were heavy and their horns deadly. "Die Hard Men of the Guard and you will live on in the songs of The House of Cise forever". At great speed the bulls charged against the circle of brave hearts and they broke spear and heads as their impetus carried them through the shield wall. If it were not for the piles of mutant bodies impeding their way they would have ridden over the men of the Guard, trampling them

into the dust. As it was, the King's men now drew sword and hacked at their oppressors leaving four of the great beasts dead.

As the remainder of the minotaur drew back the King looked about him. Now half of his brave troop lay dead, but the bloodied remainder were unbowed and unyielding.

Attack after attack came and bravery alone was finally outmatched by weight of numbers. Greater than five hundred of the Wearg would not return to the North that day. But King Môdrôf was carrying grievous wounds, as were the last of his captains that now stood back-to-back with him. The final assault came, led by the Wearg Chieftain who raged in his hatred of those who had inflicted such hurt upon his army. Thrusting a spear through the midriff of the King he screamed, "Die now false King for your crown belongs to Mangere". Knowing his doom was come Môdrôf performed his final act. The mutant Chieftain tried to withdraw his lance from the torso of the King, but found his firm grasp was equalled by that of Môdrôf, who gripped the shaft with both hands. They tussled, but none would concede possession. By placing hand over hand progressively up the shaft the King thrust the spear further through his own body and drew the mutant closer. Now, holding firm with one hand the King took his dagger from his belt and flashed it across the throat of the mutant. His green blood spurted high and he who was born in mockery of man stared in disbelief at the now dead King, while his own life-force drained into the dirt.

So ended the days of the mortal King.

Victory it may have been, but the cost was high and the mutant horde was subdued. Never in the North were men this brave, though this engendered no respect, only hatred.

Unceremoniously they piled the bodies of the Guard, and their slaughtered mounts, in a bloody heap and set upon the top Môdrôf in mockery. And then soaking the corpses in oil they set the pyre alight with torches, and cursed the men of the House of Cîse as their mortal remains burned.

Still over a thousand strong the Wearg horde now turned to the North and started their long march back. They hoped Mangere would be



Môdrôf The Fire King

pleased and reward them, but most feared His distain and the sting of the whip.

The buzzards circled in the sky in the hope of a great banquet. But, the mutant flesh laid before them tasted so foul that it was spurned, even by the vultures that daily feasted on the putrid.

As the remains of the mutant army marched North in loose formation the unseen observer looked down upon the battlefield. What courage some men could show. To a man the Guard had shown great courage and the King was the bravest of them all.

The Valkyrx then spoke. "With the power given to me by Āmāete himself I command you to rise from the flames and walk again as living spirits"

"Worthy King you are blessed with power beyond man and are the equal of any living spirit on earth including He that man call Mangere. Walk on the earth again and bring with you your brave Knights, for they too have been most valiant this day".

At first nothing, and then one by one, led by that which was once Môdrôf the Guard walked from the fire, followed obediently by their horses. None showed wounds and their uniforms were again resplendent. They stood taller than before and their power was palpable. But above all there was understanding. They had heard the voice of the Valkyrx. They were mightier than before, but lesser. Blessed with immortality, but denied the peace of death.

The Valkyrx spoke once more. "Now fight for your lands and for the future of man. Bring Light to the pervading Darkness. I have raised you from the burning pyre to live again. Ride now Fire King and Knights of the Fire. Bring death to those who corrupt the works of Āmāete".

Without command of the King the Knights mounted their mighty steeds, for there was understanding. Forming up they set off in pursuit of the mutants. Without apparent exertion the horses galloped as if they travelled upon the wind. The noise of their pounding hooves was deafening though there seemed to be little contact with the ground. A league ahead the mutants heard the thunderous advance and were sore afraid. Their easy pace turned to a trot and their trot into a run born of

panic. What were these spirits on demon horse that now pursued them? Throwing away their weapons and armour to lighten their burden the mutants routed at astonishing speed, but to no avail. The Knights of the Fire were soon upon them with the Fire King at their head, slashing to the left and to the right with swords that seemed to burn with bright and vengeful flame. In a few short minutes the battle was over. A thousand of the Wearg lay dead and here and there the bloody corpse of minotaur and troll. The Fire King turned for home and was followed in close formation by his Guard.

The Anginn had watched the battle and saw the rise of the Fire King. They now named the Arodnes - the living spirits of their own thought who would, under the command of he that was once Môdrôf, contest the future of H yn with Mangere, and others of the Mánwael.

Upon the earth was placed they who would be worshipped by man as demi-gods. With the power to fight like three hundred men and immortal. Among their number was Weorpere to take mastery of the skies, Gelác for the seas and lakes, and Wælhwelp the she-wolf, charged with the defence of man and all living things. To match the necromancers of Mangere they named as wizards of the White Order bladesung Dyderung, Sunscin, and Ymele. So it was that the Guardians matched the power of the living spirits of the Corruptors, with those of their own making. The dominion of H yn would fall to those who showed the greatest skill and cunning upon the field of battle.

Chapter 16 - The Battle in the Otherworld

The *Mánwael* (*The Corruptors*), not only waged war on Earth through their appointed proxies, the living spirits, but sought also to throw the *Anginn* (*The Guardians*), their adversaries in the Otherworld, into the fire of unmaking. If the Guardians could be defeated then the Earth was at their mercy. They had contended for millennia, but none could win the upper hand for they were of the same order of spirits and equal in might. But evil finds a way. And it was the very essence of evil that finally swayed the balance. Cargást, who spawned the *Mánwael*, and who had hidden from his own creator Ánwalda for time without number, saw his opportunity to deliver a devastating blow against the Guardians. By stealth, to avoid the near all seeing eye of his creator, Cargást - The Deceiver, travelled from the most outlying galaxy in the Universe to the solar system that was home to the blue planet. There he unmade those of the Guardians named Estmere, Scima, and GreÓt. For The Deceiver was of a higher order of power and threw them into the Void. Of the highest order of the *Anginn* only Arius, father of the first born, and The Valkyrx survived to restore their power. It was their good fortune that Cargást was passing fearful of the eye of Ánwalda and he fled again before his work was completed, to the far reaches of the universe and to those places that lay beyond the physical realm. For if he were discovered he would be destroyed. But great were the losses among the Guardians and they were now outmatched by the Corruptors. It would take many an age of man before they would contest on an equal footing again. Desperate though things were there was yet hope. For the Remian (*The Heart Stone of H yñ*) was safe in the hand of the Valkyrx. The Heart Stone was the very blueprint of life itself and, as long as it survived, the Earth could be made again. But it would surely be destroyed if the war against the Corruptors was lost in the Otherworld. A hiding place was needed. Even the farthest reaches of the Universe were within reach of the Corruptors and of him that had spawned them. But neither the Corruptors, nor those of the higher order of spirits, could themselves take physical form upon the Earth. Therefore it was determined that the Heart Stone would be delivered into the hand of a worthy caretaker upon the blue planet. Who could bear a burden of such importance? Arius

made strong his advocacy in favour of the Elves, for they were dear to him and he knew them to be worthy. Some of the lesser of the Anginn petitioned for the Heart stone to be given into the care of the humble. Perhaps a cleric, who had avowed poverty and lived an isolated life as a hermit. Surely the Demon King and his servants would not look for the Heart Stone in such a place. "A worthy strategy perhaps," opined the Valkyrx, "but forget not that Mangere and his black-hearted servants are set on the total destruction of every living thing. There is sanctuary for none. Kings and paupers will perish at his hand. Better the Heart Stone is put into the care of one that has the strength to defend it".

"Then we pass the Heart Stone into the hands of Erendil, High Lord of the Elves?" spoke Arius. The Valkyrx was thoughtful and after a while spoke again. "I know of your love of the Elves, for they are in part you and you are of them. But whether we ultimately achieve victory in the Battle at the End of Days, or we are thrown into the fire of defeat, the Age of the Elves is in its twilight. I do not doubt their oneness with the land and their love of the trees and animals, but they do not dwell upon the Earth in perpetuum. They live but a thousand years of their immortality there and then move for all time to the spirit world. Thus their interest in the Earth is lesser. It is mankind who has the greatest stake in the survival of Hynd, for it is their whole existence. Their only home".

"I understand your testimony, but is not man too weak to defend a thing so valuable" said Arius.

The Valkyrx spoke a final time. "There is Môdrôf, who was once mortal King now raised by my own hand to living spirit. He is strong enough to contest against the might of Mangere and he is most worthy". And so it was decided that the Valkyrx would deliver the Remian into the keep of Môdrôf The Fire King.

Chapter 17 The Order of the Grima

The Valkyrx had watched the creation of the Wælgæst and the Arodnes - the living spirits, and saw that their power was great among those who walked upon the earth. Greatest of all was Mangere, self-appointed Spirit King of the World, but compared to the Anginn, of which She was one, the living spirits were of lower rank and power. To her chagrin the Valkyrx could not take physical form on earth, and had not the means to determine who of the living should die, but only who among the brave should live again. As the Anginn had created living spirits to contest the earth so now the Valkyrx, from Her thought, brought forth the Grima in the service of Môdrôf, to live in secret upon the earth. Stealthy and of great power, the Grima (of the mask) were of an order and meaning that defied understanding. Some would name them as "assassins for hire", but they honoured their own impenetrable code. Appearing from nowhere they would offer their service without bounty, if the mission was worthy according to their code. Gold and jewels were rarely sufficient to buy their service, for the Grima would rather kill in return for future favours promised, and woe betide those who broke their word. Able to move unseen and pass through walls the Grima could take the face and form of others, to pass among an unknowing enemy. The Grima determined who was worthy of life, or death, according to their own doctrine. No power that walked on earth was immune to the death sting of the Grima.

King Môdrôf's first meeting with the Grima was as unexpected as it was shocking. In the security of an ante chamber next to the throne room itself, deep within Castle Gifstôl, Môdrôf held a Council of War with his most trusted captains and close advisors. The great doors were locked and men of his personal bodyguard stood at the ready both outside in the passage and inside the room. The single window was shuttered and a guard stood by. Although it was near noon not even light could penetrate the room. Oil lamps burned and flickered making shadows dance upon the grim faces of those around the table studying a map.

The subject of debate was the province of Ersc, a green and pleasant part of the Kingdom of the North. A former favourite of King Deall héafodgold for the hunting of wild boar and the rare white hart. As a man he disappointed in most aspects of Kingship, but as a pig-sticker he was worthy of genuine respect.

*Now under the cruel dominion of one of Mangere's most sadistic demon lieutenants **Ator**, who took the form of a serpent with horned head, the province of Ērsc had been re-named Cwead - a foul and derogatory name that was sadly a match for the corrupt sewer it had now, in reality, become. The once fertile land was now a killing field, black and dead, stained with the blood of the former subjects of Deall héafodgold. Those who had not been cruelly cut down lived in slavery to work at the bidding of the demon, until hunger and pestilence gave welcome release.*

In good conscience The South could not stand idly by while there was a chance of bringing salvation to those in Ērsc who wore the yoke of slavery. "Even if the odds are stacked heavily against success we must try" spoke Môdrôf. "I speak now with great respect my liege" said Ardwan, Captain of the Wall, "but we are presently weak and in imminent danger of attack. If the chances of success are so small and the risk of further loss so high, should we weaken ourselves further in a quest so futile. Is rescue not just a forlorn hope?"

*The dilemma for Môdrôf was that **Ator** was passing powerful and a good match for the very best in the South. Lying in wait, deep in the twisting catacombs of his lair, he would be a formidable foe indeed. Môdrôf could not send an army for his forces were painfully small by comparison to the gargantuan mutant hordes of Mangere. For now the forces of Môdrôf stood alone as the alliance with Dwarf, Elf and Ancient was yet to be forced. Stealth was required. Perhaps a single powerful hero could succeed where an army could not. But the loss of any of the living spirits of the South would be a great blow indeed, and even their chance of battling the 200 leagues through enemy infested territory to confront **Ator** was beyond slim.*

And then it happened. The lamps simultaneously flickered and went out as if extinguished by a mighty wind, but there was none. The room was plunged into darkness. Even though no man could see a hand in front of his face there was nonetheless a sensation of shadows continuing to move, although there was no light to throw them. "Un-shutter the window!" commanded Môdrôf. Hurried fingers pulled at the catches and threw the shutters wide, allowing the sun to flood the room. Immediately all eyes were drawn to Ardwan Captain of the Wall who now sat stock-still and

pale, blade at his throat. Behind his chair stood a man who pulled back upon Ardwan's long hair raising his chin and laying bare his windpipe on which the blade edge now rested.

Acting as one, the captains unsheathed their swords. "Hold!" cried Môdrôf for none, not even he, could move fast enough to save Ardwan should the insurgent choose to flash the blade across his captain's vital artery. For the next few seconds all were still. Seconds seemed like minutes as Môdrôf and his companions took in the scene and scrutinised the face of the attacker. But the more they looked, the less they appeared to see. As soon as they registered the face it seem to change so as to give them no memory of it. Similarly the clothing was irregular in style and some would later describe it as crimson, while others would say green, or blue. "Who are you and how did you make entry here?" spoke Môdrôf calmly. "I have no name to give you Môdrôf, but I am of the Grima, and I was already here when the doors were locked by my own hand in the guise of your guard".

"These are indeed dark arts at work. What is your purpose other than the murder of my loyal guards" said Môdrôf.

*"Your guard is unharmed other than a sore head and I release here your captain so we can acquaint ourselves more properly" said the mysterious intruder, sheathing his dagger. "I am sent by the Valkyrx, who raised your own mortal remains from the funeral pyre to walk again on Earth as living spirit. She has sent me in your hour of need to throw the demon serpent **Ator** back into the void from whence he came. You may consider this introduction a demonstration of my power. You need worry no more about the demon governor of Cwead, for his time is short". At that he who was of the Order of the Grima turned over the hour glass that rested upon the table. "When the glass has emptied and filled but twenty times the beast shall be dead". The men were momentarily transfixed by the grains of sand in the glass and when they looked upon the Grima again he was gone. They heard no noise and no door was opened.*

*Môdrôf was cautiously pleased to have such an ally and did not doubt the word of the Grima that **Ator** would shortly fall into the abyss. However, the Grima was mysterious. Could he call upon him again? Was he loyal? For to Môdrôf it seemed the Grima embodied the very essence of the Valkyrx herself. A worthy friend, but a terrible enemy if her wrath was unintentionally provoked.*



J.P. TARGE/E 2020

The Grima

CHAPTER 18 The Grima Strikes

To travel the 200 leagues from Castle Gifstôl to the lair of the Demon serpent would take mortal man and horse two weeks. Even as the dragon flies a full day without rest. Yet the Grima had vowed that within the passing of but 20 hours he would have infiltrated the lair of Ator and cast him into the abyss. But the Grima was not mortal man. The Order of the Grima is indeed mysterious. They are at the same time one and they are many. Whether the Grima travelled from Môdrôf's castle over every one of the 700 miles through enemy territory is not known and never shall be. Perhaps a transportation spell was used. More likely he departed his physical form and his mind joined with another of his Order who was already walking the corridors of the Demon's lair - a fortress by the name of Bordweall. Indeed we next meet the Grima in the kitchens of Bordweall as one of an army of cooks preparing meat for the table of Ator. He has taken on the resemblance of Bita, an assistant baker. The kitchen staff are mainly the half-starved survivors of the great purge that befell the subjects of Deall hêafodgold at the hand of Mangere. They are manacled to their allotted station by a heavy chain and cruelly supervised by Weargs who do not spare the whip. The Grima befriends Andbita, the head baker, whose skin is now translucent and stretched over his frail bones. Conversation is difficult, for the Wærg welcome any excuse to throw a horny backhand slap across the face of any offender. Beatings are frequent for it relieves the boredom for a Wærg guard. Andbita has served long as a slave of Ator and is trusted to carry the tray of bread to the feasting hall where the Demon Serpent dines alone.

The Grima's deceitful words fall upon Andbita's ears as if they are the only truth he has ever heard. "You must free yourself of this physical form. For you have lived many times before. Sometimes you have lived a good life and sometimes one less worthy. You will die and be re-born many times. Here you wait in miserable purgatory. Unfold your wings and fly again. Honour the true God by taking the life of the guard with the knife you now hold. You will be martyred and considered most worthy by the One God. He will reward you with riches and nobility upon your re-birth".

Andbita's face changes as if the Rapture is upon him. He calls the guard, intimating there is something wrong with the bread. The Wærg is

instantly angry and shouting in the face of the baker. Andbita proffers the bread to the distorted face of the Wearg for him to smell. At the same time, from behind his back, he raises the blade in a high arc and plunges it with all his strength into the eye of the guard and deep into his brain. All hell breaks loose as the other Wearg guards shake off their wine induced stupor and fall upon Andbita. The action is vicious and short as the Wearg attack with blade, tooth and claw. The Grima looks unemotionally down upon the broken body of Andbita. He is disembowelled, and the Wearg have pulled off both his arms in the struggle. Without ceremony the Wearg toss his remains into the pot, for "long pig" is considered somewhat of a delicacy and they laugh and salivate at the prospect. There is a brief confrontation over the body of their fallen comrade as two of the bigger guards contest the ownership of his weapon and bone necklace. With a frightening display of wide open jaws and ear-splitting snarls they determine the victor without the spilling of more green blood. The loser retreats muttering and delivers a spiteful clubbing fist to the back of a butcher's head to re-assert his authority within the group.

At that moment a nervous looking Puca bursts through the swing doors of the kitchen "His Highness is calling for bread. You are to send some to him immediately" he stuttered. The large Wearg looked around for his Head Baker. "Where the hell is Andbita!". The others looked at each other. They were not particularly bright, but the large Wearg was of a different order of stupidity. Just as well their masters set a low bar. Obedience was higher up the list than brains when it came to selecting front line cannon fodder. "He's in the pot you bone head!" the guards chorused. The large Wearg snarled with fury and moved closer to the guards to administer a disciplinary beating. Then he remembered the Puca and his pleading eyes. The Demon was not renowned for his patience and there was every chance they would all end up in the pot if the bread was not delivered in short order. "You!" said the large Wearg pointing menacingly at The Grima. "Take bread". Feigning fear and bowing humbly the Grima pointed to the manacle on his ankle that was quickly unlocked. "Now hurry!" said the Wearg delivering a helpful kick to The Grima's back to speed his departure. "The runt Puca will show the way".

The runt Puca was one of the few to survive re-cycling into the food

troughs of the Wearg. Too small for battle their utility value was low. The constant threat of imminent death went a long way to explain his trembling limbs and involuntary facial twitch. "Hurry please, hurry" said the runt Puca with urgency and apology. For he was scared of everyone. A hundred stairs and several doors later they stood at the entrance to the chamber where the Demon awaited his bread. The Puca cringed at the great wooden door with its riveted iron hinge and silently mouthed the words "In there..." pointing at the door. A small pool of pee formed at his feet. The personification of fear itself. But his fear did not last. For the Grima snapped his scrawny neck, which he found no more tasking than despatching a pheasant.

*Inside the chamber the demon serpent lay coiled. "Come!" he bellowed in response to the quiet knock on the great door. The door opened and the runt Puca entered nervously carrying the large loaf. There lay **A**tor in great stinking coils half on the floor and half draped over a golden thrown that bent under his great weight. A wild boar screamed and struggled in its final death throes as the breath was squeezed out of it by the constricting coils. The demon, with well practised dexterity, raised the large boar above its head, unhinged its jaw, and swallowed the hog whole - tusks and all. The Puca watched as the lump passed into the throat of the beast, and by a process of alternative muscular contraction and relaxation saw the serpent propel the meal to its belly, where it would be digested over the next hour or so. "Now where is my bread!" demanded the demon. Offering it out in front of him with both hands, as if it would shield him from the wrath of the Demon, the runt Puca placed it on the table. Slithering from the throne to the table the Demon devoured it whole as was his usual practice be it bread, fowl, or boar.*

The Demon glanced up to see the runt Puca looking at him with a faint trace of amusement on his thin lips. "Out!" screamed the Demon, "For I will not countenance insolence. Do you want to feel the warmth of my belly, little goat?!"

"Your Highness, a moment more I beg you" answered the runt Puca. The eyes of the Demon were like burning coals as he puzzled over this strangely confident Puca. His puzzlement turned to confusion as the Puca transformed into the Grima. Coiled like a spring he sought to deliver a mortal bite upon the intruder. But he could not move. For the Grima are skilled in all manner of dealing death. In this case a paralysing poison

*had deprived the demon of his mobility and would soon deprive him of his life. Although death would arrive swiftly the Grima did not want **Ator** to enjoy a peaceful demise. Rather he wanted him screaming inside, suffering cruel words he would hear in his head for millennia, as he floated helplessly in the Void. The Grima grasped the great head of the Demon in both hands and fixing the stare of the serpent with his own eyes he spoke softly, but with menace. "You have failed Mangere by negligence and he shall never forgive you. You were given great powers that you have used poorly and you have been vanquished by the weak.*

*Children will laugh at the name "**Ator**" and it shall take the meaning of "Fool" in the common tongue. Hate yourself as Mangere will hate you. You shall never return to this place". At that the Grima drew a blade of the finest **Iren** diamond steel and flashed it across the throat of the serpent, as a hot knife would pass through butter. The eyes of the beast stared with unconstrained hatred and the mouth in the severed head of the serpent tried to open and close, but no words came. With the final convulsive beats of the heart the beast pumped thick dark blood over the table and across the flagstones.*

*The Grima sheathed his blade and bade it the ritual "*Andet*" by way of thanks, for **Iren** diamond steel was a product of long forgotten crafts and none now, other than some of the Elves and The Grima, had the gift.*

But his mission was only half complete. The release of the men held in slavery under the yoke of the Demon was to be achieved if possible. But the rescue was too late. For of the thousand driven by the whip in the deep mines there were not more than a dozen men who remained alive, and they were without sound mind, or spirit. The Grima felt no sorrow, for his Order valued honour and stout heartedness. Whatever these men once were they were no longer so. What was the value in rescuing such men - if that's what they still were? For the Grima, who would have taken his own life well before such decline into dishonour had occurred, they were no longer worthy of life. Life dealt them a final kindness. A merciful and swift death at the skilled hand of the Grima.

Chapter 19 A Gift for a King

As he rested in his bed chamber in the early dawn Môdrôf sensed a presence sitting in the shadows in the corner of the room. A calmness was upon him for he did not sense any evil intent. He rose and walked to the window where he gently unfastened the wooden shutters and opened them wide for the weak early sun to enter the room. He did not recognise the face of the stranger yet knew him and greeted him as friend. The Grima addressed the King "Good morning good King Môdrôf. I have gifts for you". The King looked the Grima up and down and saw no gifts in his hand, nor upon the nearby table. "Then these must be gifts of words for I see nothing. But if it be a gift of words only I will still value them greatly, for I know well of your craft and wisdom".

"Do not judge the value of a gift by its size. My gifts are indeed tangible. One is greater than the other, but both are of value" spoke the Grima. At that he reached into his pocket and extended his arm towards the King. He opened his hand to reveal a serpent's tooth, equal in length to the span from the tip of his thumb to the tip of his little finger - a full half cubit in length. "This is the tooth of Ator the demon serpent who now lies dead and cold in his fortress Bordweall" spoke the Grima.

"This must be the greater of the two gifts you bring me friend, for I can think of no other thing that could bring me more joy at this time than to know the cruel demon serpent is dead" said Môdrôf with a wide smile upon his countenance. The Grima's expression changed not. "If the value of my gifts is measured by the joy they give then perhaps the fang of the demon is the greater. But by any other measure the value of the second gift I bring far surpasses that of the first. Follow me".

At that the Grima stood and led the King out of the bedchamber and into the vestibule where the stone stairs let upwards to the day quarters and down to the lower levels of the castle. The Grima led him down, ever deeper into the bowels of the castle, where natural light did not penetrate, but torches burned to show the way. Doors that Môdrôf knew to be locked the Grima opened as if unsecured and continued to lead the King down. After five minutes they stood in front of the door to a chamber known as the Rest of Kings - a mausoleum that housed the sarcophagus of a hundred Kings that sat upon the throne before Môdrôf, including that of his father. The chamber stretched a full fifty cubits by twenty and along each wall the stone effigies of past Kings stood tall and proud. More magnificent than they were in life and endowing their memory with

a greatness now lacking in the grey bones buried in the detritus of their mortal remains that lay within. In the centre of the room stood a stone plinth with a pentangle atop, with the form of a dragon entwined. The five pointed star and dragon was an ancient symbol of the Kings of Cîse and this artifact had stood in the chamber since time immemorial. "Why do you bring me here?" spoke Môdrôf in hushed, respectful tones. "Because it is a place both worthy and secure" replied the Grima. And what is the gift you offer in this place? Modrof thought, but spoke the words not.

"The gift" spoke the Grima as if Môdrôf had spoken aloud "is this". At that he opened his hand to reveal a bird's egg size stone. But this was no ordinary stone and Môdrôf's gaze was drawn to it for it was a wondrous thing of beauty. "The Valkyrx has sent this into your care. It is the Heart Stone of H γη. It is the twin of the Earth on which we walk and it can restore this land in the event of its destruction at the hand of Mangere. But if it is lost then everything is lost". At this he placed the stone above the pentangle where it turned slowly in the air, suspended above the sculpted dragon's head. "Know well, my King, that although this jewel be small it contains everything that is upon the lands, in the seas and at the burning core H γη. Although it appears light in my hand it weighs the same as the Earth itself. No mortal man can move it from where I have rested it. I have brought it here unto your care until the time comes for it to be cast into Mount GlÉd. The mountain lies in the heart of the North and has lain dormant without fire since before the lands were fully formed. The mountain is an opening to the Heart of the Earth itself, where rock runs in flaming rivers at its very centre. Should the Earth die and its own heart cease to beat the Heart Stone will give it life again. But know this, the stone can only be used when Mangere is dead and his puppet master Ψεύδος has been thrown back from his window on the world. Mangere's fortress of Scylf must be razed to the ground as must any other edifice that is a lightning rod for the power of Ψεύδος. Destroy the buildings in which his spirit is invested and you will cast him into the Void. Until this time comes to pass you must keep the Heart Stone safe. For if the Demon lays his hand upon it all is surely forfeit".

"I will secure this place with the very best of my guardsmen" spoke Môdrôf. The Grima raised his hand and shook his head. "There is no need for more guards for I will stay. Forever, if need be". At that he sat down cross-legged at the foot of the plinth and bowed his head. Eyes closed.

"I thank you and will send victuals daily for your sustenance" spoke Môdrôf.

"I have no need" spoke the Grima.

At that Môdrôf left the chamber and closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER 20 The Exodus of the Dwarves

Of the peoples of the earth, before the coming of the living spirits, were the first born (The Elves), Man and the Dwarves. Although the Dwarves were closer related to man than they were to Elf they were a race apart, not only in their stocky build, but in their ways and beliefs. But the passing millennia had even brought division among the Dwarves themselves. Petty squabbles had grown into blood feuds and the creation of two distinct castes within their own social order.

In common, they felt at home working with stone oft deep in the bowels of the earth, where they carved great underground cities from the solid rock. Miners of iron, gold and jewels they proclaimed themselves the richest peoples of the earth. Yet while man saw such treasures for their utility value to be bartered in exchange for the comforts of life the Dwarves, in their hubris, were hoarders. They wanted gold, for gold's sake. There was never enough to satisfy the dwarves. Thus, their appearance was ragged. For clothes were not valued other than for warmth. "Make do and mend" was their mantra. However, skilled at the forge their weapons were strong and sharp, for they were expert tool makers. With their battleaxe thought of equally as treasured possession and weapon of war they stinted not in the use of diamonds to harden the edges of their blades - making them the equal of the seemingly magical weapons of the First Born. Venturing rarely above the ground, save to hunt meat for their ample bellies, their skin was pallid and this exacerbated the striking appearance of their tangled mess of fiery red hair. A signal to beware their quickness to anger. Their language was unrefined and they were proud of their directness without thought to the hurt feelings their harsh words may bestow. "Dwarves speak as they find".

The greatest of their number remained in Olifstan, their Homeland in the North. While, as previously told, some five hundred of their estranged number lived, by the Grace of King Môdrôf, under the Great Peak of Týnan in the South.

Although warlike when the need was great the Dwarves took little interest in the affairs of man. They saw no merit involving themselves in the wars of others, especially if no gold was on offer. They recoiled from such grievous events and readied themselves only for the defence of what was theirs, rather than fight for something of importance to man.

But with the rising of Mangere and his demon disciples there was real and present danger. Under the cover of war between men, the demons and necromancers brought forth the Wearg, Trolls, Minotaur and other bestial things from the deep earth. This was no longer a threat only of concern to man. This was on the very doorstep of the Homelands of the Dwarves. Their tunnels, magnificent halls and treasure vaults were infiltrated and the number of insurgents was great beyond number.

The Dwarves battled on without respite for many days, but they could not hold back the endless flow of the enemy any more than they could hold back the tides of the sea. Chief among the Dwarves was Drisne (The Red) and he had fought bravely and numbered the heads sent spinning by his axe as passing forty. However, many of the Dwarves had fallen and a momentous decision was needed as the unrelenting drums of the Wearg grew ever nearer to the heart of the Homeland. Summoning his brother Drasna to his side he passed to him his heavy chain of office and instructed him thus: "Take what treasures twenty wagons and forty oxen may carry and exit by the West passage and fight your way to our cousins at Týnan. Tell them the time for disunity is past and if they believe you not it will be but a short time before the boiling pot of the North spews the Wearg and other bestial creatures into their laps. I will stand alone at the stone bridge of the lower passage, which is the way the intruder must now come". Putting his hand on the shoulder of his brother he said "Goodbye good brother. Lead now the Dwarves of the North to a new settlement. Remember me. Lose no more time. I shall hold as long as I have breath in my body. They shall not pass". And so they parted in tears, but with fierce determination.

The Battle of Stone Bridge, in the deep catacombs of the North, is remembered in song. Not only by the Dwarves, but also by man and Elf, for courage is a common currency. And the courage that Drisne showed was passing brave. For seven days he held the bridge alone and the bodies of the Wearg were piled six deep at the bottom of the chasm over which the bridge gave passage. But finally, with the help of a great troll that could not be cast in the abyss, Drisne fell and the Wearg spread like poison through the arteries of the underworld.

However, Drisne would not live on in song alone. The Valkyrx had seen



Drisne Dwarf Lord

acts of courage in the face of the Darkness before, but none passing this. "Rise up Drisne of the Dwarves. You shall live again as living spirit, with power surpassing mortal man. Rise Lord Drisne Stoneaxe for you shall not rot on a bed of stinking corpses of the Wærge in this chasm of despair. I shall put you down upon the road to the Gate of Mynsterlîf. There join your clans and lead them against the Darkness in the company of man and Elves". And She who was the Valkyrx raised Drisne and put him down upon the road, where he joined his brother Drasna and the Exodus of the Dwarves. Drasna knew his brother, but also knew he was now living spirit, with one foot in this world and one in the next. He wept in sorrow for his brother's mortal passing for he knew he would not feel the warmth of brotherly embrace again. But there was pride at his brother's courageous stand and joy to have him at his side again in the bloody days to come. Drasna, however, felt unease. For although love for his brother was never stronger the Dwarves, by nature, had a morbid phobia of the spirits, bordering on paranoia and panic. The bravest in the land when faced with mortal foe, they quailed with fear when matched against the unworldly. Cursing himself for the thoughts that now filled his head Drasna saw visions of his brother lying dead on the stone bridge and wondered if it were better had the legend of Drisne ended there.

Chapter 21 The Liberation of Grondul

Thus, the battle lines were drawn and the forces assembled.

The whole of Mævdæs vi 'Vendi became a killing field. Death, plague and misery were rife and the Darkness was all pervading. For months the battles raged, but none could gain the upper hand for their strength was near evenly matched. Without doubt the numbers under the flag of The Fire King were far fewer than the horde beyond count that followed Mangere, but those fighting at the side of Môdrôf were individually of the greater power and guile.

Heroes rose and fell and there was much regret at the passing of comrades. There were not songs enough to remember them all well.

It is an unpalatable fact that a war of attrition favours those with inexhaustible manpower and a willingness to sacrifice it in its millions without hesitation. For what did Mangere and his demons care about life when their purpose was to wipe it from the face of the earth in all its forms leaving only a dark, dead planet. The final battles were approaching. The Battles of the End of Days.

Giants had no allegiance in the early days of the approaching darkness. Until the Demon hordes invaded Meroetius, home to the last remaining colony of giants upon Earth. Many were slaughtered and their leader Grondul led away in chains. Now cruelly held in manacles in a cave, he was tortured mercilessly by the inquisitors of Mangere. Yet deliverance was at hand. Grondul, the Doyen of the Giants of Meroetius, was soon to be released from captivity by Drisne Stoneaxe, raised again as living spirit by the Valkyrx. Finding their Exodus blocked by Wearug patrols upon the road to the South, and wishing to stay concealed from the eyes of the enemy, for they carried with them twenty carts full of gold, they took a different path. After the sun had risen and fallen thrice a dwarf scout returned to deliver news of a cave ahead guarded by sentries of the Wearug. They had no choice but to silence this enemy, so their presence and intent could not be betrayed. Drisne led a score of his kin in a stealthy attack upon the unsuspecting servants of the Darkness. The victory was swift for the sentries were not great in number and the hooded inquisitors were not fighters, but capable only of the sadistic

torture of the helpless. The Dwarves may have spared the lives of the inquisitors for they knew not at first meeting the terrible deeds they had performed. But hearing groans in the gloom of the dimly lit cavern they discovered Grondul manacled and bloody, with a witch's bridle attached with spikes driven into his great head. A torturer was still at work with bloody smock attesting to his deviancy. "Kill them all for they are cruel and unworthy" ordered Drisne. Justice was swiftly served.

A dwarf stepped forward with sword drawn to finish the suffering of Grondul. For dwarves were fearful of giants, having felt the blows of the great trolls in the service of the Corruptors. But Drisne stayed his hand. "I shall deliver the blow". At this he raised his great axe high and swung it with the strength of a hundred men, for he was a living spirit of unworldly strength. The diamond edged axe sliced through the chains that held the giant and without the support of the manacles he slumped forward on to his knees, at the feet of Drisne. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend. And we shall need many friends of the strength of this brave giant who has resisted well his tormentors". And so was formed an unlikely alliance between the Giants of Meroetius and the dwarves, and both fought valiantly at the side of the Fire King in the many battles to come.

Chapter 22 The Rising of the Elves

Nurtured and shaped by Arius, who was appointed Guardian of Hyn by Āmæte himself, the High Elves were already promised immortality in a spiritual world when their long life was at an end. Although imbued with an ethereal quality, they were not living spirits in the way of Mangere and Môdrôf, for they were of warm bloodied flesh, not merely a cold manifestation taking physical shape, as was the doom of the living spirits.

Their mortal life span of 800 years, with some passing 1000, was of mystery to man, who viewed the Elves with suspicion. In turn, the High Elves viewed man with barely concealed contempt. For by any practical measure they were vastly superior beings. Between man and ape the Elves made little distinction. For not only were the High Elves tall and slender, they possessed a strength that belied their endomorphic appearance. They were blessed with intellect and reason beyond the wit of man. Blond with steely blue eyes and pale of skin, they appeared almost as clones, for it was difficult for man to distinguish between them. But it was by building upon their natural advantages with a lifetime of learning that elevated the High Elves closer to the Gods than they were to man. Educated by the Elders in the arts, science and nature the Elves achieved majority at 30 years. Not only were the Elves long lived, but they declined not in strength and intellect even with the passing of ten centuries, but rather gained strength with every passing day until the time came for their journey to the spiritual realm. Thus, imagine the mastery achieved in every aspect of existence if skills are studied and practised over a thousand years. All Elves were masters in the making of weapons and trained in their expert use. Apart from the living spirits they were the most formidable of all who stood upon the earth. However, they could be slain by weapon and their immortal life was then forfeit along with their mortal one. Their spiritual nature gave them an understanding of the world of the wraiths and the un-dead and they were unafraid of encountering the ethereal. Indeed such foes felt the sting of the magical weapons the Elves forged.

The Elves dwelled in Freobearn, to the South West of the lands of men. Surrounded by forest and blessed with bright streams and good soil, the Elves lived a life apart from man and dwarf. But through their psychic awareness and the arts of prophesy the Elves could see the Darkness



Erendil Lord of the High Elves

coming. There could be seen images of a great Demon spreading its shadowy wings to embrace and crush the Earth and the Elves along with it.

Then they witnessed first hand the destruction of the Hielflings from the across the Straits of fyrgnast. The flames leapt high, and carried upon the Southerly wind were the battle cries of the beasts and the pitiful pleading of the innocents.

Their immortality was threatened and must be defended. The Great Council of the Elves was, however, conflicted. Some argued this was "The Great Paradox". War would result in the death of Elves who would forsake their mortal and immortal lives to preserve the immortal lives of others amongst them. The Elves cared little for the lives of man, for the lives of men were short and miserable. Thus, the High Elves would not fight to preserve man, but would fight alongside them to secure their own promised destiny in the Celestial Halls of the Afterlife.

The Council decreed that Elvish blood would not be spilt to save mankind and if the costs of any battle were too grievous then they would leave the field to debate strategy anew. This should not been seen as cowardice, for the Elves were the bravest of the brave. But they were a thinking people and their death in battle was countless times more worthy than that of a man who lost but a few years off the span of his short life. In dying on the battlefield a High Elf gave up life everlasting.

The Great Council ordered the sending of an army to the South to fight at the side of man. Six thousand of the finest exponents of the military arts, worth ten times their number as men would count. What a sight to behold! Arrayed in mirrored steel armour of the lightest and strongest design, inlaid with fine decorative gold, the army of the Elves marched swiftly and silently East, led by Erendil the Lord of the High Elves. Erendil was fair of face and, although his 900 years of wisdom could be seen if one stared deep into his blue eyes, he appeared youthful. Resplendent in the armour of his own making, as was the tradition amongst his kin, he carried Glimmer, the sword of a hundred High Lords before him, which was bequeathed to him by his predecessor Arandras at his passing into the spiritual life everlasting. The Elves marched onwards without joy because they knew the inevitability of loss in the battles to come, even if victory was finally gained.

Chapter 23 A New Alliance and a New Horror

Word of the coming of the Elves was a cause of great joy amongst the men of the South. For although they were full to the brim with courage they were sorely outmatched in number by the abominations arrayed against them. The might of the Elves was legendary and in the mind of man they were considered invincible. Few men had ever seen an Elf and the tales of these mysterious beings had been handed down over the generations. There was much excitement and the peoples of Cîse lined the battlements above the Gate of Mysterlif, straining their eyes into the far distance to catch a first glimpse of their saviours. They waited with mounting anticipation as the sun travelled towards its apex. And then a blinding light from the North made them shield their eyes. They blinked and re-focused upon the road. People were pointing and shouting "There, there, they are coming!". Sure enough there was the movement of a great company some two leagues distant. Detail was hazy for the mirrored armour of the Elves reflected the burning sun into their eyes. But there was no doubt the Elves had come as they had promised. King Môdrôf ordered an honour guard of twenty Knights to ride out to greet Erendil and his company. With banners flying, and resplendent in full ceremonial dress of blue tabard over shining cuirass, they spurred their steeds out of the gate with their hearts full of joy.

Yet the day would not be a joyous one.

Some say that the chirping of a grasshopper at 20 leagues would not escape the ears of Mangere, so what chance the march of a 6000 strong army of Elves?

Mangere held Erendil in contempt for he had spurned the approaches of his deceivers. He had planned to overthrow this formidable race through stealth and not direct confrontation, for he was fearful of their power that transcended the mortal and spiritual plane. At worst he hoped the first born would stand back as neutral observers until it was too late. Now they had declared their allegiance to man they would be sorry. He was not ready to take on the Elves in open battle, for although his forces were great they would soon be ten fold stronger as the forges of the North worked without rest. He would destroy the Elves by one stunning surprise attack. For this purpose he strove with his mind until he found what he was looking for in the deepest recess of the Earth. He used his unworldly

demonic power to summon from the depths of the Earth that which man had never seen, for it was old beyond reckoning. The Great Worm was a gigantic beast exceeding 300 cubits long and 50 high. It lived underneath the bed of the seas and satisfied its voracious appetite by breaking the ocean floor and devouring great leviathans of the deep in a single swallow. Now it obeyed the command of Mangere. Literally eating its way through rock and earth The Great Worm travelled unseen. From time to time it would drive one of the tentacles on its head to break the surface to sniff the air. This tactile receptor contained a long redundant eye for there was no light underground, nor in the deep sea. It was blind but it could smell that its prey was close, and it was passing hungry.

As the honour guard approached the vanguard of the Elves, with Erendil at its head, they discerned some unusual behaviour. A number of Elves were on their knees, heads to the ground. Was this some sort of humble greeting, or a prayer to their God perhaps? Suddenly all was chaos as Elves split from their orderly column and moved swiftly off the road. Composite bows were in their hands and drawn with shafts ready to loose. The captain of the honour guard raised his hand to halt his company in good order. Was this a betrayal? Were the Elves, after the promise of an alliance, in the service of Mangere? The captain soon had his answer, but his death and the death of his men was instantaneous as the Great Worm broke the surface with immense power that propelled it high into the air. Its mouth cavity only partially filled by the twenty men and horse. As its eight hundred ton bulk fell to ground the air sang and a thousand arrows struck and then a thousand more. The Great Worm hardly felt the sting of the shafts, but it was in great distress from the pounding sun for it was rarely exposed to its burning eye. The elves were swift and dispersed, offering a poor target for the Worm. With surprise lost it put its head into the earth and in a few seconds was gone.

There was nothing that could be done for the honour guard of men. The Elves re-formed in their mighty column and marched swiftly to the gate where the watchers were no longer joyful, but stricken with grief at their loss.

Mangere was furious, as here was a great opportunity lost to inflict grievous loss upon the Elves. The Worm's errant navigation confused by the presence of the honour guard had saved many of their number. The Demon King had reckoned that substantial losses may have persuaded the Elves to give up the fight and retreat to their homeland, or better still leave the Earth for their promised afterlife in the spirit world.

No matter. What is done is done, and what is to be will be. The Great Worm will rise again. And next time it will not fail.



Astigend Fire Dragon

Chapter 24 The Awakening of the Ancients

*Ancient lore, passed by word of mouth by the Monks of Cædmon, spoke of dragons in the pre-history of man. No living man had seen one, and though there was some belief in the legends among the ignorant, those of even modest education did not believe such beasts ever flew across the face of the sun. There was no evidence ever found of their existence. The whale bones displayed by the nomadic Zigani, and used to make their "Dragon's Breath" cure all medicines, were debunked. There were many of the Zigana that felt the roughness of a wooden pillory around their neck and wrists as reward for their deceit. However, dragons do not readily seek out the company of others like a lapdog. For they have no use for ordinary man and the taste of sheep and goat are preferred. Thus, for these 5000 years past the great dragons can only be found on the island of Dism, over the Eastern Sea beyond the edge of the known world. There, high on the peaks of eÓten, the last colony of the Ancients build their Aerie where they can look out across the sea and towards the lands of man. In the beginning there were many different breed of dragons. Before the coming of man dragons colonised the mainland in great number. On the highest peaks of **Mount gicel**, in the extreme North, were the ice dragons who evolved a thick down under their scales for warmth and an ability to emit a blast of icy breath that could freeze prey in its tracks for an easy kill. Further south, on the then active volcanic summit of **Mount beácenstán** lived the fire dragons, who had great resistance to heat and evolved the ability to swallow and regurgitate flame. In the dense jungles and swamplands of the East were the venomous serpent dragons. Swift and small they were agile on land and in the air. For thousands of years these dragons fought and killed each other wherever they should meet. But now they lived in relative harmony as one family across the sea. For all their wisdom and knowledge the Ancients remain wild and untamed. Discipline among the colony is harsh when necessary and a strict hierarchy is maintained, and occasionally fought over. Dragons mate once every hundred years and the ritual of finding a female can leave many males bloodied, but rarely dead. Strength is the final arbiter of status. But when hunting prey, or fighting a common threat, the dragons will act as a co-ordinated single body to devastating effect.*

A lifespan of over a thousand years has provided the dragons with ample time to learn consummate skills in flying and hunting. But the most

venerable amongst the Ancients also developed skills in mind reading and communicating by the projection of thought waves. For while a dragon had a fearsome roar, it spoke no words known to man.

Sensitive to the energy in the air and scent upon the wind the Ancients meditated on the psychic messages emanating from the over the sea. There was evil abroad that had never been encountered this strongly before. They, like the Elves, sensed the coming darkness and feared the chaotic terror of Mangere. After silent debate the great skein took to the air with wings beating fiercely. Led by the esteemed Ancient Astigend they directed their eyes towards the South, across the seemingly infinite sea.

After two weeks without rest the Ancients completed the 3000 leagues betwixt Dism and the Gate of Mynsterlif. Circling in the sky above Castle Gifstôl they settled upon the peak of Týnan. It was with awe and wonder, and considerable apprehension, that the peoples of the South watched the twenty great dragons fold their wings and rest. All but the great Ancient Astigend who landed with great finesse on the battlements where Môdrôf The Fire King stood. "Fear not" spoke the living spirit to his people, "for we are joined now by powerful friends who give us hope that the spreading darkness will be turned back and the evil of Mangere dismissed from our lands. Welcome Astigend".

Chapter 25 Contending With The Gods

If in the beginning men had knowledge of the Anginn , and the Mánwael, they would have worshipped them as Gods. For they were powerful beyond any thing that walked upon the Earth. But, although their power was passing great they could not themselves take physical shape and walk among men. As their emissaries upon earth they created living spirits in the form of demons and necromancers. However, for Ψεύδος, most powerful of the Mánwael, the inability to project his immense personal power into the mortal realm was a great frustration and he raged in a madness that made the skies of H γη white with fire. Feeling the power passing through him he devised a means by which his power could touch the Earth. He ordered the building of great temples across the land in homage to Himself as God of Gods. Now these Temples of Ψεύδος were not simply buildings of cold empty stone that reached upwards to the heavens so man felt closer to the divine. Rather they were in fact receivers, tuned to the power transmissions of the Gods. Those who walked upon the Earth could, through entering the inner sanctum of the Temple, be imbued with unearthly power. But there was danger. If Ψεύδος decreed that those who beseeched him for a gift of divine power were trespasser, or unworthy, he would destroy their mind. For those he favoured he could endow Godly powers for a limited time. But how much time is required to vanquish your enemy when you have the power of a God?

Although a device of Ψεύδος the Anginn saw opportunity to use the Temples as a conduit for their own power transmissions. In the other worldly void the Anginn , and the Mánwael, contested daily for control. Sometimes Ψεύδος would answer the prayers of those entering the Temple, but equally it could be Arius, chief among the Anginn. This made beseeching the Gods for unearthly powers by prostration on the altar in the Temple of Ψεύδος a potentially fatal game of chance. For in opening the portal to the Gods you could not be sure who would sit in judgement on your prayer. Because of the dangers the use of the Temples was usually an act of last resort by those in desperate need of a miracle.

One of the most cautionary tales of the power of the Temples was the

cataclysmic fall of bladesung. Set upon the Earth by the Anginn to head the White Order bladesung was learned and powerful. He was worthy to lead the White Wizards and contest with the Dark Arts of the necromancers. He conceived the war against the Corruptors could be brought to a conclusion in the favour of man and Elves if he were to cut off the head of the serpent Ψεύδος. Thus he summoned to him the other Wizards, put upon the earth as living spirits by the Anginn, and took unto himself their powers, which they lent to him gladly. For they realised his plan was to contest directly with the God Ψεύδος and to throw him back from his window into the mortal world and in so doing diminish the powers of his emissaries that walked upon the Earth.

Splitting asunder the great doors of the Temple at Burgsteall in the heartlands of the North bladesung stood upon the Altar of Ψεύδος and raising his staff high challenged the God of Gods. He contested directly with the mind of Ψεύδος and after great fight his mind was destroyed and restored in the service of the Corruptors, for no matter how powerful a living spirit that walks upon the Earth may be it is no match for a God. In his spite Ψεύδος now named he who was once bladesung as **Wærloga** The Oathbreaker, and appointed him to lead the necromancers of the Darkness.

The wizards of the White Order waited apprehensively for a sign of the outcome of bladesung's quest to cast Ψεύδος away from the Earth. In the very instant of bladesung's defeat the wizards screamed in agony as if their skulls were being crushed in the vice like grip of a giant. They fell to their knees gripping their heads in their hands. With the rise and fall of the sun their physical pain relented, but their powers were much diminished and they retired from the Earth for a time to re-build their powers with the help of the Anginn .

The forces of the light were gathered under the banner of living spirit Môdrôf, the Fire King. At first they knew not the terrible fate of bladesung. Certainly they knew he was diminished, or even cast into the void, but had he inflicted hurt upon Ψεύδος? They could not contemplate



Wærloga The Oathbreaker

the complete and utter defeat he had suffered, and his re-creation as Wærloga, The Oathbreaker, in the service of The Corruptors. Was it possible he had succeeded in his quest, but now lay injured awaiting succour? "We must seek out bladesung for he is undoubtedly in great need. We must discover the outcome of his contest with Ψεύδος though I fear he has not prevailed and we will reap the whirlwind soon". Môdrôf dispatched in haste Wælhwelp the She-Wolf and the ancient Astigend to scour the lands between Castle Gifstôl and the Temple of Ψεύδος.

Chapter 26 The Bleeding of Wælhwelp

*Taking the form of a great white wolf Wælhwelp travelled at speed passing that of the fastest mortal steed at the gallop. Day after day without rest she searched, making short work of the occasional scouting party of **Wearg** unfortunate enough to cross her path. However, word of her presence reached the ears of **Wærloga** and he in turn searched for her. On the eighth day she found the mighty necromancer waiting for her atop Mount Brord. Thereafter known as Mount glÉd, for the fire of the battle lit the sky. Wælhwelp approached he who she had known as bladesung with caution. For although this looked like him there was something about his face that had changed. Sniffing the air confirmed that something was not as it should be. Yet **Wærloga**'s words were soft and pleading. "Help me Wælhwelp for I have suffered greatly and been witness to terrible things". As she approached to sniff his bejewelled hand she noticed a black ring with the mark of Ψεύδος. Too late she was thrown by supernatural force backwards into a rock face. Quickly recovering herself she launched herself upon **Wærloga**.*

*For five days the battle raged between the living spirits. Never were there two more evenly matched in physical and mental strength. The necromancer threw debilitating spells that would have humbled armies, but Wælhwelp was immune to much of the magic that would devastate mortals and she struck back with tooth and claw at lightning speed. To his chagrin **Wærloga** felt the crushing jaws upon his living form and saw that he could bleed. But living spirit is not mortal and the great necromancer was passing strong. He grew in physical stature and manifested in his hands great bladed weapons that were cruelly felt by Wælhwelp. The she-wolf was fast and strong and excelled at close quarter fighting. The necromancer fought with his mind, but finding most of his spells ineffective was forced into close combat against his fearsome opponent. The battle shifted from field to mountain and from mountain to sky. They fought on the edge of the otherworldly void. Locked together trading blow for blow each seemed to grow in determination of ultimate victory, even though their strength grew less in equal measure.*



Wælhewelp Living Spirit

*As twilight came upon the fifth day **Wærloga** fell down upon his back, exhausted in mind and body. In an instant Wælhewelp was upon him to close her great jaws upon the necromancer's throat and send him crashing into the void. But the Corruptors do not believe in a fair fight, or honour in defeat, and a great flapping of leathery wings alerted Wælhewelp to a new danger. A dozen harpies descended, shrieking as they threw spears down upon the back of she-wolf. Wælhewelp turned and leapt skywards ripping the wings of the first harpy. It fell screaming to earth, writhing in pain. However, the distraction afforded two other harpies sufficient time to grasp the bloodied shoulders of **Wærloga** and they lifted him high and away to the sanctuary of the deep North, where he would heal his wounds and plot his revenge. Wælhewelp could do no more. She limped away and travelled with stealth towards home, resting for several days when she felt it was safe to do so. She returned to Castle Gifstôl with the devastating news of bladesung's death and re-birth as *Wærloga* in the service of the Corruptors. She counselled "Wærloga is mightier than bladesung was before him. I only defeated him because of my immunity to his magic. Against mortal man he is a fearsome foe beyond reckoning". And then Wælhewelp rested. The forces of the light were greatly diminished. bladesung's encounter with the mind of Ψεύδος had, for a time, decimated the wizards of the White Order.*

Chapter 27 The Flight of the Heart Stone

And so the time of the final battles approached. For man, Elf and Dwarf knew that they could not hope to gain advantage by waiting longer. The darkness was spreading and the forces under the shadow grew in number each passing day. It was to be now, or it was to be never. Summoning a final council of war on the grassy knoll in front of the Great Keep, within the walls of Castle Gifstôl, The Fire King called the esteemed leaders of the Great Coalition together. Representing the Arodnes was the mighty Wælhewelp the She-Wolf, and Dyderung, now head of the Order of White Wizards. Môdrôf spoke for man, as he was once of their kind, Astigend for the Ancients, Drisne for the dwarves and Erendil for the First Born. Completing the Great Council was the giant Grondul. In the shadow sat one of the Order of the Mask - The Grima.

"Here is a mighty gathering indeed" spoke Môdrôf. "We are here to determine the final doom of Hyn after a year of bitter war and grievous loss. Our brave watchers have sent dispatches and the news is grim.

Weorpere master of the skies has observed the hordes gathering on the land beyond numbers ever seen before and the Harpies dominate the sky and they are sorely cruel. Gelac of the seas is lost. No ship sailing under our flag is safe and, if we cannot feed our people from the land, the seaway offers no remedy. The darkness is closing around us in a serpent's choking grip". "So what options remain Great King" spoke Erendil, Lord of the High Elves. "For we have fought many battles and though the balance is oft in our favour we grow ever weaker while our enemies grow in number and power. The tide is against us and it seems we cannot hold it back much longer".

Môdrôf stood tall "I have spoken in my dreams with the Valkyrx who made me rise and walk again as living spirit. She has promised that all who die valiantly in battle, whether they be King, squire, Elf, Dwarf, or any other who fights by my side, shall be raised to the Halls of Eastrôdor to live a life immortal."

"So our doom is to die" spoke Astigend by the power of his thought. The King responded softly. "I do not counsel defeat, but proclaim that should the final battle be lost then there is reward in the life hereafter for those

who die with courage. And with the promise of the Valkyrx fresh in their thoughts there is hope that each of our soldiers will fight as ten for their fear of mortal death is lessened. With good fortune we can overthrow Mangere and his minions of hate."

Elendil spoke with palpable feeling in response. "Great King, I hear your words and understand that our hope of victory is small, for the numbers arrayed before us are passing great. But I speak to you as one of the First Born who, before time, have been among those chosen to live again as spirits in the Halls of Eastrðor . I implore you not to consider a mortal life upon this earth as an easy trade for a spiritual life immortal. For although the High Elves may live for a thousand years as mortals, and forever thereafter as spirits, we know that one without the other is worthless. Our eternal lives are enriched with the memories and music of our time in the mortal realm. The touch of the breeze upon our faces and the warmth of the sun upon our backs is joyful. We are at one with the trees and animals of the forests. We are sustained in the afterlife by the friendships and love we found here. Mangere will destroy H yn and all that will remain will be dark with no living thing. We must find a way to defeat him."

"You speak true my Lord", said Modrof. "We have in our keep the Heart Stone of H yn and here lies the final Hope to restore the Earth in all its beauty. But the Council gathered here has a choice to make. The darkness has now spread to within a few leagues of the Great Gate of Mynsterlif. All the lands to the North are now black and dead. Only the beasts can breathe the poisonous air and drink the polluted water. We can continue to fight battles of deep defence. But we are locked in position and Mangere can concentrate his forces. We can defend the battlements at Mount Týnan and fall back upon each entrenchment, citadel and bulwark in turn, but we are merely slowing the progress of an inexhaustible mutant army supported by vile beasts, necromancers and demons. We can only delay Mangere, not destroy him. Although now he knows not of the existence of the Heart Stone he will discover it and bring an end to Hope. I counsel that our best chance lies on the open plains beyond the Great Gate where our superiority in speed and manoeuvre can turn and isolate parts of his armies where we may destroy them. If we can prick the Demon so that he rages uncontrollably he may become careless. In his hubris he may open a chink in his armour through which

the Grima can thrust a dart. If Mangere falls the mutant horde will not hold. I command the Heart Stone be taken from this place for we cannot guarantee its safety here, no matter how thick the walls. It will be hidden by the Grima until the time for Earth's renewal is nigh".

And so it was decided. The strategy would be to meet the forces of Mangere on the open plains to the North of Mynsterlif. There by speed of manoeuvre and deception they would seek to isolate and destroy the horde piecemeal. By frustrating Mangere there was hope he would become careless, making him less vigilant and vulnerable to the Grima. If he could be cast into the void his forces would be severely shaken and rout in great panic. Then the full force of the South must ruthlessly pursue their retreating adversary and with blade, lance and fire utterly destroy them. But the action must be swiftly executed and the Temples of Ψεύδος razed to the ground. Even Mangere's fortress Scylf must fall, for this is the heart of Ψεύδος's power upon Earth and its destruction would throw him back from his window upon the world. But even if such great victories were achieved the chances of restoring the Earth to its former glory, and delivering lasting peace, remained slim. For there is always another waiting to replace those that have fallen, be they King, Demon, or God. The thin opportunity afforded by the fall of Mangere and Ψεύδος must be exploited with speed. The Heart Stone must be cast into the mouth of Mount glÉd before the forces of Darkness can recover.

"We must test the strength of the defences around Mount glÉd" spoke Modrof. For if we gain the opportunity to use the Heart Stone we must be ready to complete the task. Or our great sacrifice will have been in vain".

"Then what do you propose?" spoke Erendil.

Modrof considered for a moment and all others awaited his words. "We must know with certainty the way to the mouth of glÉd. For if we have the chance we must not fail at the final hurdle". Before anyone else could speak all gathered heard the thoughts of Astigend. "Why cannot I carry the Heart Stone and from above drop it into the gaping mouth of Mount glÉd? If needs must I will gladly dive to my doom inside the mountain to deliver the Heart Stone to the fiery depths of the Earth".

Modrof answered kindly and with great respect. "You are most worthy ancient one but only the Grima can bear this burden for its weight is passing great. Even if you could carry the Grima and stone together we cannot release it into the mouth of Mount glÉd prematurely. And when the time is come who knows how fiercely the skies will be defended. The Grima must take it now and conceal himself within the Mountain ready to act when the fate of Mangere is known".

Modrof continued. "I propose a diversion to engage the forces of the Demon. I shall lead this legion myself. While Mangere's eye is upon me a small part of our number will find safe passage through the tunnels and catacombs of Mount glÉd. So when the time is right we can act swiftly to deliver the Heart Stone with less risk of failure. Until such time as the demon and his master are destroyed the Heart Stone will be kept secretly at the place of its final destiny by those of the Order of the Grima. When the time for casting the Heart Stone is nigh the Grima shall deliver it into the fire. The Demon is presently ignorant of the existence of the Heart Stone and Mount glÉd is of no strategic importance to him. Therefore it is likely to be unguarded. Let us find out now".

And so it was decided that Modrof would distract the Demon while a small party would be delivered by dragons to the foot of Mount glÉd. Living spirit Drisne, Dwarf Lord, would lead a dozen volunteers of his kin, including his brother Drasna, to navigate the tunnels of the mountain. All gathered were agreed the dwarves were a natural choice for such a quest. Modrof would assemble the best of his men, to tweak the nose of the Demon and draw his eye away from Mount glÉd.

And so The Fire King ventured out with his personal guard of Knightly living spirits. Swift and powerful they could outpace the horde, creating a diversion of sufficient duration to cover the exploration of glÉd by the dwarves. Six of the Ancients took to the air with two dwarves apiece strapped to their backs. A seventh carried the Grima, who rode easily without harness. In the lead was Astigend carrying Drisne and his brother Drasna. They flew high, circled once, and set their faces towards Mount glÉd.

Chapter 28 - Triumph and Disaster at Mount glÉd

The Ancients flew high to avoid detection by the spies of Mangere. The dwarves, held fast in their harnesses, pulled their cloaks around them in an effort to deny the cold. The freezing temperature turned their hair and beards white. If hard cursing was a substitute for a thick blanket they would have been wrapped warmly indeed. The seven Ancients were all fire dragons, resistant to the insufferable heat of the volcanoes where their ancestors first nested. It had been agreed, by Modrof's counsel, that they were best prepared to face the unknown dangers awaiting them at Mount glÉd. The volcano may have been dormant for centuries but these were strange, unpredictable, times.

The journey was just a few hours, but the Ancients swooped low when they felt it was safe to do so to warm their protesting passengers. At higher altitudes they had attempted to alleviate the dwarves' suffering from the cold by breathing fire. However, when an unexpected cross wind bent the breath of Astigend to remove a good proportion of Drisna's beard the dwarves determined to freeze to death if need be, rather than be roasted alive.

After circling above Mount glÉd the company of dragons determined there was no sign of the enemy and searched out a place to land their increasingly belligerent cargo. With a gracefulness defying their bulk the dragons alighted on a ridge half way up the mountain, where they had espied the entrance to a cave. On dismounting their riders the dragons launched themselves back into the air to explore the rest of the mountain and patrol the surrounding country for signs of approaching danger.

With an overwhelming gratefulness at finding firm rock under their boots the previous hours were soon forgotten, other than by Drasna who felt the full weight of ridicule from his kin over the disfigurement of his great beard.

"This is a serious business" spoke Drisne firmly. "Follow me and be ready". At that he pushed aside the overgrowth and entered the cave. Only when they were gathered inside the darkness did he order the lighting of torches, for he did not wish to shine a beacon atop a mountain to alert Mangere. The dwarves were at home in the mountain and they

had missed the comfort of the rock. Danger, or not, each had a smile upon their face. The Grima followed the company at a short distance and spoke not. He carried no torch. When the dwarves turned to confirm his presence he was sometimes there, other times he was not.

The passageways inside the mountain were numerous and labyrinthine. But a dwarf had a sixth sense about such challenges and their instinct was a reliable compass. Their objective was to find a place inside the mountain where the stone could be cast into the very core of the Earth. There the Grima would wait until the time for renewal was come.

As they worked their way through the interconnected passageways it was clear to them that these were neither formed naturally by water, or fire, nor by the hand of man. The rock had been chewed, or scratched away, by some creature. For the road was uneven and could rise and fall sharply. There were no steps and the dwarves oft found themselves climbing on hands and knees, or scrabbling down a steep drop. Gripping a torch and battleaxe was challenging as they braked their descent with their feet and lamented the ruination of their leather boots in the process. By good fortune it seemed the excavations were ancient and they hoped the architects were long gone, or dead. Certainly, by the smell of the place something had undoubtedly died and decomposed here. A sense of unease grew as they stumbled across bones and putrefied pools of unidentifiable slime. In front they could see the passage way opening up. Drisne ordered the company to halt as he moved forward in advance to reconnoitre. As he reached the opening he was greeted with a sight that would shake the resolve of the bravest of men. Below, at a distance of 50 feet was a great web that spanned the 100ft width of the chamber. A dozen giant arachnoids moved and spun their proteinaceous silk threads, each strand finger thick, yet translucent and difficult to see. Unconsciously, his foot dislodged a small stone that touched the web as it fell into the hidden depths below. Such a small stone, but such big consequences.

*The instant the web was touched the spiders were still. Feeling the vibration in the net upon which they stood. Although unknown to the dwarves here were the **Hefeldian**, as ancient as the dragons, and hidden from the world. Mangere knew of them because the Wearg guards he had posted at Mount glÉd had been devoured in short order and their replacements suffered the same fate. As Mangere considered glÉd of*



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*Láf gangewifre Queen of the
Hefeldian*

*little strategic value he decided to leave the **Hefeldian** colony be. After all, they had proved themselves a natural and formidable guard. There was no need to commit more of his own mutants to the task.*

Emitting a loud and penetrating scream the arachnoids raced towards Drisne.

"Run for your lives" he screamed. Go back, Go back". He reached his company before they had grasped the situation and he pushed, punched and dragged them away. "If you value your lives, make haste!" The Grima was nowhere to be seen.

*The way back was difficult to find as the dwarves had dropped all but one of their torches and they stumbled and tripped over rocks and each other. Behind them they could hear the **Hefeldian** screaming and following. Turning a bend the lead dwarf, Cardw, ran directly into a newly spun web. The arachnoids were in front, behind and everywhere. Crawling out of their holes in their hundreds to block the escape of the trespassers. Drisne swung his axe to break the threads to which Cardw stuck fast. The web was strong, but Drisne's battleaxe was stronger. But he could do nothing to rid Cardw of the threads that stuck directly to his body. As he fell to the ground others reached to help him up, but soon found themselves stuck to him where they contacted the threads. As Drisne led the way the others stumbled and fell as they struggled on, two welded together as one, limbs flailing, as if in mockery of the eight legged beasts that pursued them. Now in darkness their eyes probed for the exit that their instinct told them was near, for the air was fresher. But then the beasts were upon them. Drisne Dwarf Lord, and living spirit, smashed his way through the many arachnoids that blocked the way out. He felt the sting of the venomous hairs on their long legs and the foul smell of the guts as his axe opened their bellies. But the mortal dwarves had not the power and resilience of a living spirit and although they fought bravely they fell. Last of all and with black blood lapping his heels Drisne's brother Drasna died, ripped asunder by claw and jaws. All were bound in silk and dragged away. Cursing, Drisne knew their fate was sealed and that it was hopeless to attempt a rescue. Turning his face away he burst into the daylight pursued onto the rocky ledge by a dozen of the **Hefeldian**. There he stood in open stance, battleaxe in hand. The heel of his rear foot kissing the very edge of the cliff, a thousand feet above the ground. Ready. As the arachnoids charged Drisne knew that even should his axe bite deep the sheer impetus of these giants would carry him over.*

But then he could see nothing but fire as the great beasts shrivelled and collapsed into burning husks. But their screams were terrible indeed. The dragons were waiting.

*This could have been the end of it, but a dwarf knows how to bear a grudge and take his revenge when he has the means to do it. By transference of his thought he communicated to Astigend, who advanced over the burning bodies to the passage entrance. The other six circled and then dispersed themselves around the mountain at other openings they had found. A few minutes passed and then all together the Ancients released the Fires of Hell into the labyrinth. The open top mountain acted like a giant chimney and drew the flames through and upwards entering nearly every chamber where the host lived. Thousands of the Hefeldian died that day. Indeed only one survived. The Great Queen **láf gangewifre** screamed as she fled to a bolt hole and watched her unborn children burn. If a dwarf's desire for revenge was great it was but a trifling thing compared to the hatred that now nestled in the breast of this behemoth - the largest of her kind ever to walk the Earth. Her time for revenge upon the dwarves would come, and when taken it would be cruel and slow. But in her fury the small bundle sheltering from the dragons' fire close by had gone unnoticed. The Grima could have slain **láf gangewifre** at that moment, but his mission was too important to risk injury. The death of the beast could wait and the Grima slipped away to remain hidden until it was time to cast the Heart Stone into the fire.*

With heavy heart Drisne mounted Astigend and they took to the sky. The Ancients formed a great skein and headed South.

Chapter 29 The Battles of The End of Days

The die was cast. Mangere's forces now controlled all but the Kingdom of Cise. Gathered together behind the battlements of Týnan the Great Alliance of man, Dwarf, Elf and living spirits stood together to defy him.

The strategy was determined. They would not sit back waiting for the mutant hordes to pour over the walls like a flood. They may hold for a month, a year even, but there was no prospect of victory fighting a defensive battle. Now outnumbered twenty to one they could not resist for long. They expected an assault on the Gate of Mysterlif, but also a landing by sea now that Fydraca had fallen, exposing their soft underbelly on the East coast. Victory goes to the big battalions. They would not win a war of attrition. In any event final victory, and the restoration of the Earth through casting the Heart Stone into the mouth of Mount glÉd, could only be achieved following the destruction of Mangere and his master Ψεύδος. They must leave the relative safety of Cise and hunt the Demon down, destroy Scylf and the Temples of Ψεύδος.

With grim determination the armies of man passed in long, winding, columns through the Great Gate of Mynsterlíf. At their head was Môdrôf The Fire King and at his side Dyderung the wizard. Their vanguard was joined by the armies of the Dwarves and Elves, resplendent in their mirrored steel armour. Grondul brought up the rear with his company of giants. The skein of dragons flew ahead and the living spirit Wælhewlp, the She-Wolf, kept pace with the Ancients along the ground. They would join with Weorpere, living spirit of the sky, and with the white wizards Sunscín, and Ymele at the place of final battle.

Of the Grima there was no sign. For they could become invisible. Moving through the enemy defences they were to strike at the heart of the Demon King Mangere and at the throat of his disciples. Perhaps in the Grima lay man's greatest hope.

The great Battle at the End of Days is yet to be fought. There will be many other battles on the path to final victory, or defeat. Now is the time for brave leaders to rise in the service of King, or Demon, to secure ultimate victory and dominion over the Earth...