

**THE HISTORY OF
THE WORLD IN
FOUR
EPOCHS**


PROTO-EPOCH

IN the beginning, there were the *Flood* and the *Void*. It was the time when the *Elder Beasts* fought endlessly with wing and fin in the lightless turmoil of fluid and gas.

After eons without number, a shockwave rumbled through the chaos, heavy vibrations pulsing up from the inky depths of the waters. All violence ceased as the beasts milled in fear and confusion, night bred eyes blinking in the sudden glow of volcanic disturbance staining the submarine reaches.

An immense plume of vapour burst from the surface as eruption thrust upwards a column of rock, the behemoths of Flood and Void fleeing the roiling turbulence. Slowly from the churning waters arose a burning mountain, spewing forth molten rock as it extruded into the sulphurous clouds of its birth. The glowing torrent ceased and it cooled, hissing and cracking. Silence and darkness returned.

With sudden violence the cinder cone shattered, brilliant radiance piercing the murk to its heights and depths, disgorging a sphere of pure incandescence, the *Solar Orb*.



One of the marine Elder Beasts paused, eyes caught by the gleam penetrating down into the waters. It swam slowly back, drawn toward the source of the light.

Upon reaching the new island it threw its body up towards the Orb, only to land on the rock powerless to move, fins scrabbling, incapable of breath, gills heaving. In frustration it lurched back into the sea and circled the island, eyes locked on the glowing sphere, pondering how to reach it. It circled for seven ages, its body slowly mutating, limbs extending, extremities twisting into five digits with one opposing, skin peeling off to reveal gleaming scales. Finally it clawed its way out of the water and drew in a first breath, exhaling a roar of triumph and challenge.

But another of the beasts had hesitated, drawn not by the light but by envy and hate. It followed, hanging back hidden in the shadows of its rival's blinded eyes, torn between the desire to attack and the jealous

greed to possess. It was unable to comprehend the circling of the first beast until it had leapt out of the water, reformed.

The second beast was incensed by the roar of the first and furiously circled thrice, bellowing in agony as limbs burst from its body, skin ripping off from the pressure of scales beneath, fins twisting into digits. But it had not observed the others' changes closely enough and its own mutations were skin-deep, its extremities possessing six claws, with two opposing.


The first beast turned as its rival leapt up, its claw already settling onto the surface of the Orb. The second attacked in mindless fury the beast now coruscating with power. With contemptuous ease the first beast swept *the Despoiler* off the rock with a blast of energy, scorching its scales black for eternity.

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The Pangenitor turned back to the Solar Orb and the light burst into his mind.

Through its power he perceived the *Elements* underlying the structure of his universe; *Earth, Air, Fire* and *Water*. He fashioned four wards to tap into these Elemental Planes, wards in humanoid shape: *Cromnar, Elemental God of Earth*, a giant fashioned of dark stone, metal veins pulsing over his surface, gleaming gems as eyes and teeth; *Nirithis, Elemental God of Air*, a giant only visible by the coriolis patterns of wind gusting his outline; *Aguireon, Elemental God of Water*, a giant of aquamarine liquid, massive spume of foam forming hair and beard; and *Phyrroch, Elemental God of Fire*, a giant of burning red, surrounded by a corona of incandescent flames.

Looking deeper, he saw a complex geometry of planes, a pyramid of nexii. The interaction between the Elemental Planes produced the *Energies; Light, Sound* and *Motion*. Higher in the structure, the *Essences*, the structure of his own existence; *Being* and *Thought*. At the centre of all vertices, the *Entropy; Time*.



The Pangenitor took the hand of Cromnar, and with an almighty wrench pulled the island upwards, dragging out of the Flood a titanic rock column, the island now being the highest point, a huge mountain itself dwarfed into insignificance by the size of the megalith.

Then grasping the hand of Nirithis, he exhaled an enormous breath, clouding the top of the pillar with atmosphere against the surrounding Void. Phyrroch was next, as the Pangenitor stamped his rear claw and a quake rocked them, magma gushing forth from cracks splitting the rock, throwing up mountains and opening valleys.

Finally the hand of Aguireon was clasped and the Elder God urinated, water running in torrents down the mountain, quenching the lava in gouts of steam, filling cracks and hollows to finally pour off the edges, down into the waters of the Flood far below.

Then the divine dragon rested, his eyes roving the land until his

feet itched to follow. For an age he explored, but he was not content for the world was barren.

The Pangenitor returned to the *Mountain*, crouched and masturbated onto his palm, rolling his emission into a seed and placing it in a furrow in the earth. Up sprang a huge leafy plant, something to survive on the raw elements, producing a pod which swelled and grew until it towered above. It split to reveal a fecund figure stretching out, skin of green, spreading branches as antlers, head mantled with flowers opening to release their fragrance, stomach swollen, her gourd rich with seeds. This was *Haera, Mother Goddess of Fertility*. The Pangenitor charged her with greening the earth, and she walked the lands sowing seeds as she went.

Again he wandered through his creation, bearing the Solar Orb. He was the centre of a circle of radiance in which the Elemental Gods and the Nature Goddess worked their powers; the earth became rich, the mountains and hills multiplied, the winds blew,

the rivers flowed and the flowers bloomed. When he had walked on, soil turned to dust, the landscape became barren, the air was stagnant, the waters grew still and the flowers withered. But yet he was not content, for the world was dark.



The Pangenitor journeyed to the very edge of the world plain, and looking out over the Void sent out a call with the Solar Orb. Out of the darkness answered three of the aerial Elder Beasts, fierce and proud, coming in to land apart, snarling and snapping at each other.

Then he asked which of them would bear the Orb, but as they all howled their desire, he raised a giant claw to silence them. The condition, first you must withstand its harshest power. At this, two of the beasts cravenly took to the wing, screeching abuse in the Elder tongue and disappeared

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into the darkness. The third bent down its head in assent and submission.

The Pangenitor raised the Solar Orb over his head and unleashed its full power on the beast crouched before him, destroying it utterly. The assembled gods gasped in shock, but power still streamed over the pile of ashes that had been the creature. The ashes exploded and from them arose a winged being of pure energy, the *Phoenix*.

It circled above them, giving a cry of pure exultation. The Pangenitor handed the Orb into its glowing claws, and commanded the beast to carry it above the world. Wings beating, it took the burden aloft and the Orb's rays illuminated the whole surface of the earth, the dawn of the first day.

(The power of the Solar Orb is such that it can only be touched or used by a being not created by it, such as the Elder Beasts, any of its creations would be disintegrated by the merest contact.)



The two other Elder Beasts had watched with amazement and jealousy as the Phoenix took wing,

and tore at each other in their fury. The Despoiler had also been listening, hidden in his cave lair halfway up the world pillar, and called out to them, seducing them with his lies and entreaties. They came and clung to the rock face as he filled them with hatred for the Phoenix and promises they would be able to kill it and claim the Orb, if only they waited for his signal. As they waited impatiently, the *Fiends'* hatred twisted their minds and bodies.



The Pangenitor explored in the light of the first day. Unlike before, to the utmost limits of his vision he could see the processes of the earth at work, the Elemental Gods frantically racing to and fro exerting their powers to keep everything on motion. Soon they became weary and begged the Pangenitor to give them help.


I can do better, he replied, and called down all his power and crafted the *Lunar Orb*, a globe of swirling rainbow colours, another source of

magical energy. Then he created *Nomial*, a featureless humanoid with piercing eyes, to carry the globe and to deny no one the use of it. Make your own helpers, he told them.

(The power of this second orb is such that it can only be used by those who did not create it, thus barring only the Pangenitor himself from using it, but it must be touched to access its magic.)

All the Elemental Gods took their turn, creating the *Elemental Spirits* as their helpers. Cromnar created the four *Golems*; crystal, stone, metal, and magma. Nirithis created the four *Winds*; north, east, south and west. Phyrroch created the four *Sprites*; white, blue, yellow and red flames. Aguireon created the four *Nymphs*; vapour, running water, still water and ice. Lastly Haera took her turn and created the *Satyrs* and *Dryads*.

With their help the world ran smoothly, a green paradise. But even still the Pangenitor was discontented, for the world was uninhabited.



One other was still unhappy, Nomial. He alone had no helpers and was wracked by constant contact with the Lunar Orb, its power coursing through him. The Pangenitor sensed this and sought him out. Express your power, populate the earth, he commanded.

Nomial contemplated the flowers surrounding him as he sat with the Lunar Orb in his hands. The Pangenitor created the world, he thought, Haera created the plants to live off the raw earth, the next step is something to live in the plants.

In homage to the flowers that had inspired him, he created the *Insects*, a numberless swarm of jewel-like creatures that sported among the blooms. As he enjoyed the play of light on their carapaces, he looked into the air, and created the *Birds*, an immense flock of winged creatures soaring through the sky. Sensing a

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pattern, he went to a nearby brook and created the *Fish*, a streaming school of scaled

creatures swimming down the torrent. Lastly gazing at the ground beneath him and the lands all around, he created the *Animals*, a vast horde of quadrupeds to live in the different environments of the world, from mice to mammoths. These all were the *First Order of Beings*.

The world was filled with movement and noise. Nomial looked enquiringly at the Pangenitor who smiled his pleasure and encouragement for more. So again he contemplated his surroundings, watching the beasts feeding on the plants. We have all created wonders, but who will use the limitless resources of the world for more than food?

Using his own form as a template, he created the first *Humans*, the toolmakers, walking upright with clever hands. He made them of many colours but all of the same shape and strength. These were the *Second Order of Beings*.

But men had little magic in them, more were needed. They would need to have hardy bodies to withstand

the forces needed to use magic. Experimenting he created a being, trying to combine all four Elements within it, but the pull of the opposing pairs was too intense. It was twisted in form and mind but strong of body, able to withstand magic but with little gift for it. This was the *Goblin*.

Trying again he first concentrated on the aligned elements Water and Earth, creating three short and squat beings. These were the *Dwarves*. Then using the second aligned pair, Fire and Air, he created five muscular and fierce beings, the *Orcs*. Now Nomial cleared his mind and concentrated on balancing all four Elements, and created seven slender and graceful beings. These last were the *Elves*. Together they formed the *Third Order of Beings*.

In his mind, Nomial could see the pyramid of life forms he'd created and saw the lack of a peak, of beings capable of moulding the forces at the top of the pyramid formed by the Elements, the Energies, the Essences and the Entropy.

Focusing the power of the Lunar Orb he created a dynamic quad of figures: the *Devil*, stony skinned, crowned with a triple horn; the *Demon*, a golden skinned man, of beautiful form, with gleaming membranous wings; the *Seraph*, covered in rainbow plumage and scaled extremities; and lastly, the pinnacle of all his creation, the *Angel*, a woman of radiant beauty, flawless ivory skin, gleaming tresses of platinum hair and long white feathered wings. These were the *Fourth Order of Beings*.

All the assembled creatures milled around on the mountain, staring about themselves in wonder. The Pangenitor rose above and called out, you are the first of your races and this world is your cornucopia. The multitude spread out in excitement, mixing together in innocence and happiness.

But out in this garden paradise, the Despoiler was lurking, stalking the four highest beings, waiting for an opportune moment to pounce. Finally

he caught one of them alone, the Devil, and ambushed him, devouring him completely. He subsumed his powers and mimicked his bodily form, but unknowingly with one flaw carried over from his own true shape; six digits on each extremity.

He began to mingle and casually spread the seeds of discontent and confusion. That the Pangenitor was to rule them as a tyrant, that the strong would be given everything while the weak were discarded. To the beasts he hinted that they were created only for the higher orders to feed on, as they themselves fed off the plants. But he needed to subvert his first ally, and sniffed around for a weakness.

The Demon and the Angel had become inseparable, their conjoined beauty spreading a glow of peace that counteracted the growing unease wherever they went. The Despoiler picked his moment, waiting for a chance occurrence to separate

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them. What is your love doing right now? he asked. Did you know that she

speaks to the Seraph when you are not around? The Demon's heart was unprepared for this poisoned blow and the first wedge of jealousy was driven in. You must establish your superiority, the Despoiler insinuated. He explained his own desires and promised power for the Demon.

A man happened to be passing by the grove in which they were whispering, and due to the atmosphere of suspicion pervading the mountain, hid himself to eavesdrop on what the two were discussing. But the Despoiler sensed him immediately and lashed out, slaying the intruder. Horrified, the Demon wanted to flee but was held back by the other's taloned grip, told of his implication in the killing and his part in the growing plot.

The Pangenitor began to notice that something was wrong, eyes avoiding his glance, conversations faltering when he approached. Alarmed he called out in a voice

that carried over the mountain, requesting that all gather at the summit. With much muttering and foot dragging, all the creatures slowly assembled.

The Elder God scanned the mass, noting the absence of one man amongst them. Harsh suspicion flowering in his mind, he ordered all to line up, and passed along, inspecting each one minutely. At the end of the line stood the Despoiler in devil-form. With one glance the Pangenitor noticed the sixth digit and shook the mountain with his roaring battle challenge.

With a sneer the Despoiler reverted to his original dragon-form. At this signal, the Fiends rushed up into the sky from their hiding place and attacked the Phoenix. One of them scratched the Solar Orb with its claws, sparks flying off and becoming the *Stars*. The Phoenix was chased from the heavens, robbing the world of the light of the Orb. Darkness again descended, the first night. The mountain was lit by the fiery glow of the two Elder

Gods squaring up for battle, the Despoiler heaping insults upon his enemy and promising power to all who joined him. The mass milled about in panic as the two dragons crashed into terrible melee.

The air pulsed with thunder as the two clashed, small dragons spawning from the wounds they inflicted upon each other. From the three wounds on the Pangenitor's body sprang the *Gilded*, *Argent* and *Cupreous* dragons. From the many wounds of the Despoiler sprang dragons of many colours; the red *Drake*, the blue *Basilisk*, the green *Wyvern*, the brown *Kraken*, the iridescent *Chimera*, and others.

On the ground in the darkness and confusion, the Demon was sneaking toward the Lunar Orb, left unguarded by Nomial who naively focused on the battle. But the Seraph had been watching vigilantly for more treachery and also rushed forward. Both reached out and touched it in the same instant. With a tremendous explosion the Orb shattered, unable to

withstand the stress of simultaneous and opposing commands. The Seraph caught the blast full in the face, his face blackened, his eyes blinded. The Demon was craven and looked away at the last moment, saving his eyes but his beautiful body was scorched and scarred beyond recognition.

(Thus magic was freed into the universe, for all to use without having to touch the Lunar Orb.)

In the air the Despoiler had risked a glance down to see if the blast meant the Demon had been successful in stealing the Orb. The Pangenitor used the distraction to pound his enemy with a bone-shattering blow. The Despoiler, sensing defeat, turned tail and fled.

Gradually the clamour on the summit subsided into silence, the stunned crowd lit by the flickering rainbow radiance of the shattered Lunar Orb. Some of the men and most of the beasts had fled in terror.

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To the remainder, the Pangenitor spoke. Behold, the two gifts of the Despoiler, Fear and Death. A murmur of horror greeted the sight of the corpse of the slain man walking through their midst. But to compensate, he continued, I offer two gifts of my own.

The first is the freedom for each creature to choose between good and evil. The second is the right to a place in the world for each of you to live.

Then he picked up the three pieces of the Lunar Orb and hurled them into the sky, where they slowly revolved as they orbited overhead, starting the phases of the moons. You have until the pieces unite to choose where you will live.

At that moment, the Phoenix reappeared in the sky, relighting the world, forever fleeing from the Fiends, thus starting the cycle of day and night, and from this moment, time is counted.

(Because they had run away and not received the gifts of the Pangenitor, those men and beasts that ran away were amoral and had no land of

their own and roamed homeless. Many were caught in the energy of the exploding Lunar Orb, their forms mutating and becoming monstrous. Thus were born the Giants and Ogres, the Centaurs and Mermaids, and many others.)

The Despoiler had crept back to his lair. While still in dragon-form, he thrust his talons into his own belly and ripped it open. From the gaping wound sprung two black demons; the long coiling *Serpent*, and the many-headed *Hydra*.

DIVINE EPOCH

THE multitudinous
beasts of the
First Order had
fled into the first night, and were
scared anew by the rising of the
second day. Many hid, only to
come out at night, becoming
the nocturnal beasts. In the light
the remainder began to feed on
the vegetable cornucopia.

The tribe of men, the Second Order, ventured more cautiously out into the world, allegiances and enmities already forming and reforming between them. They filled the lands with simple groups leading a subsistence existence, gathering wild foods and using sticks and rocks as tools.

The groups of the Third Order stayed around the elder mountain. The elves tried to take what they saw as their natural preeminent position, but the others rebelled. The orcs scornfully left without discussion. The dwarves stayed to argue their own position, then departed peacefully but with some enmity. The goblin was largely ignored and skulked around listening.

ORCS

The orcs set out, hunting and slaying the lesser creatures they came across, but soon came to a rest to decide on a direction. Two

males had been rivals for leadership; *Maronai* the eldest, red skinned; and *Yaszir* the youngest, yellow skinned.

Maronai had secretly taken the treacherous lessons of the Despoiler to heart, and conspired with *Hragon* the third male, blue skinned. At this halt, Maronai picked a fight with Yaszir while Hragon crept up behind and crushed his skull with a large rock.

There remained two female orcs, *Soris* the purple skinned and the eldest after Maronai, who summed up the balance of power and immediately offered herself to him as his concubine. *Borthla*, the green skinned female, now the youngest and weakest, became their lackey by default, gathering food while the discussion ensued.

After some exploration they settled on a high mountain aerie, building a harsh tower jutting out into the air, in a strong defensive position surrounded by fertile valleys. They tamed the wild *Gryphons* roosting nearby and began to raid the lands around.

The dwarves had followed the pull of the elemental power strongest in them, earth, and set off into the subterranean world, descending through caves and delighting at the precious metals and stones they found there. Eventually they had penetrated to the molten strata, and could go no deeper.

Two were keen to return to the higher levels but the youngest, *Socranen*, decided to stay in the fiery depths. His people built into the cliff faces of a deep crevasse, channeling the streams of magma to power their forges. The other two reluctantly left him, climbing upward again through the labyrinthine tunnels. Soon a branching in the way led to disagreement and the two acrimoniously split up.

The eldest, *Thuronar*, followed a torturous underground path up into the core of the highest mountains, the spine of the world.

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his skills for the brute strength of the giants, and carved a towering peak hollow for his hidden dwelling.


The last dwarf, *Mhorunak*, regained the surface and followed the geological signs to a site of incredible mineral wealth and settled in to mine it. He built a wondrous mansion on the peak of a hill, its intricate windows and balconies overlooking the surrounding temperate land. The races of dwarves were destined not to meet again till the last days, and remembered their kin with bitterness.

The elves stayed a while on the mountain epicentre. The Pangenitor had retreated to the very summit, sitting by himself under the now huge tree that had sprung from his seed and borne Haera as its flower. Nomial the Bearer, with no charge to bear, distressed with the situation of his children and unable to break into the Pangenitor's solitude, fretted and took counsel with those remaining on the mountain.

Also there were the angel, *Vallena*, and the seraph, *Xenith*. The latter, in the anger of his injury, declaimed passionately the need to act to prevent any further spread of the Despoiler's influence. The former, melancholic over the perversion of her loved one, agreed readily.

The elves, eager to repair their thwarted self-importance, clamoured their support. The eldest suggested a counter-conspiracy, the Legion, to combat evil. The Bearer regretfully declined, explaining his need to stay neutral, glancing up at the still form of the Pangenitor far above. The others swore a vow to oppose the Despoiler and uphold the ideas of honour and mercy.

Jeruk the goblin had been listening from the shadows, watching the beautiful assembled figures, knowing he in his ugliness would not be invited to join. He slunk off, the knowledge burning in his heart.



ELVES

Finally the elves set off. They began to explore the world with the strategic aims of the Legion in mind. But soon tensions appeared in the vain and narcissistic group. As well as more mundane arguments, jealousies arose. *Myraea*, the youngest female, with snow-white hair and skin, her cold beauty surpassed only by the warm radiance of the Angel, became spoiled by the rivalry of the males to win her attention. *Kesiaris*, the eldest female, with raven black hair, found that all her wise counsels went unheeded in the shadow of her sister's beauty.

Eventually they openly sniped at each other, with *Salaran*, the eldest of all, often siding with the younger female. One night, *Kesiaris* cast a dark magic in an attempt to bleach her hair white and become first in their affections. To her horror her hair did turn to a beautiful silver white but her skin was turned an inky blue-black. In shame she

secretly left the group and ran away, eventually fleeing deep underground to hide herself, building a dark city of hanging towers. Next morning, in shame at what had happened, the males turned away from Myraea and she petulantly stormed off, secluding herself away in high icy mountains, in a sparkling tower of ice crystal. Their mood sobered, the remaining elves continued to explore in earnest.

The two middle elves, *Thalisoë* and *Eirothede* had turned to each other in the midst of all the tensions and rivalries, withdrawing into themselves and love developed between them. After the departure of their estranged sisters, they openly declared their feelings and also left the shrinking group.

They traveled to the shore of the sea but soon Eirothede began to feel guilt at abandoning his commitment to the Legion for love. His guilt soured their companionship and he built a magical ship, then in a tearful

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scene set off to sea without *Thalisoë*. She attempted to swim after him and would

have drowned had sentient sea mammals not rescued her, living in the sea thereafter.

Eirothede in his ship sailed far into the uncharted waters, until he navigated too close to the edge of the world and was caught in the currents of the oceans pouring off the edge. Glimpsing a rock jutting from the torrent he set his course towards it, saving himself only to be shipwrecked on it.

This then became his land and his people lived there ever after. But their god was still bound by melancholy and spent his hours sitting on the utmost crag, staring out into the void. He built another ship from the ruins of his first and after tearful farewells, sailed out over the falls. His people constructed a soaring tower, and at its peak they set a lamp to be kept burning eternally, to guide their god home from his voyage.

The final three elves were chastened by events and resolved to devote themselves to the cause of the Legion. Sensing that the cycle of the moons and hence their time to

choose land was drawing to a close, they planned to maximise their choice by settling on the three main nexii of energy on the world, the mountain of the Pangenitor being the ultimate vertex. To achieve this they split up immediately.

Salaran unfortunately was the only one to reach his planned destination, the nexus at the extreme east of the main continent. There he tapped its energy and raised a floating city of glittering stone and crystal, soaring towers with arching bridges.


Arondaer, the second eldest male, had the longest distance to travel and discovered that his destination nexus was on an island when he reached the western edge of the continent. The moons conjoined before he could embark. Liking the woodlands he found, he cast great spells on some seeds and sowed the largest trees of the world; their roots like the folds of hills, their peaks casting shadows over the nearby mountains. The greatest of the trees he shaped, and formed a castle high above the forest floor.

Rethrien, the youngest male, set off south but was stopped by a much more sinister occurrence.

The Despoiler had also had his eyes on the nexii and had established a secret base at the southernmost one. He sent out a call to his henchman, the demon *Phelex*, who heeded the summons and joined him there. But others also heeded the call.

Jelissa, a human female with a lust for power arrived and was welcomed as his consort and acolyte. She took up the lands around the nexus to prevent others and disguise the presence of the Despoiler.

The last to arrive was Jeruk, the goblin, fearful and grovelling, to bribe his way in with knowledge of the fledgling Legion. The lands around had already been occupied, and knowing that it was too soon to reveal his hand, the Despoiler promised him the best lands when the time was right.



The conjunction of the three moons ended the first cycle and the time for choice of lands. Unknowing and unbound by this, the beasts lived and fed wherever they roamed, peacefully at first, then with greater competition as they bred and multiplied and the abundance grew thin, fighting each other and even their own kind.

The archetypal animals, those created originally by the hand of the Bearer, were most powerful amongst them, the lords of the animal kingdom. Some, twisted by their fear and suspicion became equally warped in body, stalking the other beasts and devouring them, gaining in power.

The humans however had spread with more purpose, numbers congregated around fertile areas, starting basic agriculture with the harvesting of fruit and tending of gardens. And also starting basic politics, organising their members to defend

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their land against others. As with the beasts, the first of their number were as gods to the rest, powerful and immortal, each a kernel of intrigue.

These societies slowly developed, crude and increasingly violent, with first the domestication of animals and then the consumption of them, widening the gap of fear and hatred between men and beasts.



ALTINE

But even at this early stage there were islands of civilisation in the sea of savagery. In the north, *Galadin* had also travelled with the dark lessons of the age in mind. Seeking and finding a fertile valley high in the mountains, accessible only by one thin pass through which a river flowed. Exploring this land he chanced upon a magnificent red bull, fiercely trying to protect his cows from a pack of monstrous twisted carnivores, inexorably being pushed back. Inspired by the proud

beast, he joined the battle and the two routed their enemies.

The *Great Ox* looked upon him with gratitude and some small measure of suspicion, but Galadin offered him a partnership, he would swear to always protect the bull and his cows in return for their labour. The deal was sealed and the pair began work on fortifying the entrance to the valley, cracking mountains for the blocks to build huge earthworks across its mouth, damming the river.



IRUAN

A greedy man, *Fareign*, had wandered south, and finding a land of rich fields and forests, had taken it all for himself, settling there despite dark rumours of events further south.

But the central plains began to be crowded and tensions rose from the demands of the growing population.



VOLSKAAND

One stubborn and hardy male, *Storune* set off into the north, wading first the great bogs and fens, then scaling the icy peaks to arrive eventually at a hidden land of steep wooded valleys and sheltered coves. Building himself a massive longhouse of pine, he settled there and his people became a harsh race of hunters and sailors.



SELANTIA

Another male, *el-Ke'min*, set off to the southeast, a land ignored by the other gods for its barrenness. Trudging through broken desolate wastes he eventually became lost, and wandered aimlessly until he stumbled upon a rich oasis of cool springs and lush date palms. His people for a long time eschewed permanent dwellings and became a nomadic people.

Others escaped the crowded lands, by journeying over the ocean to the still empty continent to the south.

SOUTHERN TRIBES

There were two brothers, both dark of skin but very different in stature; one was tall and well muscled, *Barunta* the giant; the other short and quick of mind and body, *Mbuntu* the pygmy. From the very beginning when they set out, they challenged each other: I shall claim better lands than you, I shall go further than you; and thus they ended up swimming the chain of islands to the eastern continent in this competition to outdo the other. Their peoples lived together on the fertile central plains in a simple hunter-gatherer lifestyle.

But the two were still rivals in everything; hunting, wrestling and especially the courting of the young women. Never was

there a clear winner, but the shorter always seemed to end with the better hand by using his cunning and wit, and happily giving away the best cuts from his kills. The taller began to be ungracious in victory and sour in defeat.

Eventually there appeared among them a woman of beauty, strength and wit, *Djeroti*. Her skin was like polished ebony and she could outrun the gazelle on the hunts. As always, the two brothers fought to pay court to her, but by spurning both, she heaped the fuel on both their desire for her and to defeat each other.

Barunta was out on a long hunt, desperate to find a kill equal to Mbuntu's effort, and lost himself in the increasingly arid lands to the north. Cursing in frustration and thirst, the sight of cool waters appeared over the crest of a dune and he ran down only to sink into the dust drifts of the mirage. Out of the shimmering appeared a gaunt white husk of a man, a vision of the Despoiler, looking for a foothold

on this virgin continent, croaking out his enticements. In return for his daughters, seed of a new chapter of the growing sisterhood of his witches, he would give the taller victory over his brother and dominion of the woman they both loved. Greed overcame sense and he readily agreed, wanting strong sons in any case. To seal the pact, the haze cleared to reveal an enormous lion sleeping nearby. Fear turned to joy at an easy slaying of a supreme trophy beast with one spear thrust into its slumbering flank.

The excitement buzzed around the campfires long before the figure trudged out of the distances, draped by a bloody pelt. Seizing the moment and the acclaim, he whipped the people into a frenzy and had his rival bound, the blood of his faction spilled into the dust. Djeroti he would have ravished on the spot had she not feigned modesty and demanded a wedding. Preparations were begun for that night, she retiring to her hut, Mbuntu thrown in with the beasts to await execution after the celebration.

Night fell and the feasting began, but amid the commotion the woman parted the rushes at the rear of her hut and slipped out into the night. Sneaking into the corral she loosed the ropes of the pygmy.

“I would not have another suffer on my account. We must head in separate ways. Together we would be caught, in his rage he will not know which of us to chase.” Thus Mbuntu headed out into the barren plains and hills to the north, covering himself in mud, always remaining hidden. His people roamed and hunted, never settling for fear of vengeance from below, becoming the *Mwengabe Tribe*. Djeroti travelled into the deeper woods to the south, her people building elaborate mud brick compounds, advancing in skill and knowledge, becoming the *Olowayo Tribe*.

The remainder of the people stayed on the plains to become the *Urukasa Tribe*. Cheated of both vengeance and bride, Barunta tried to back out of his bargain with the Despoiler, but

his daughters soon returned with strange powers. The people became fierce and savage, blood sacrifices and cannibalism rife amongst them.

REMPHALUR

A group of gods had banded together and travelled to the southern coast. Amongst them was a woman of wit and cunning, *Quenlhatun*. She had hypothesized from the talk of the higher gods in the previous epoch, that there must be a land to the south. The others were sceptical, unwilling to take the risk. Using honeyed arguments she won over the boldest of the males, *Temnenut*, whose support then convinced the rest.

By strength of combined personality, they became the leaders of the group, with some small rivalry between them. Realising this, she

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planted the idea of building a reed boat and let the male take the credit, assuaging

his pride and assuring the success of the venture. It was soon built and the group was hastened on board to begin the journey before any doubts could arise among them.

After a long and perilous journey in the coracle they landed on the southern continent. This success cemented the two as leaders and they were from then on quick to crush dissent. They found a long fertile river valley, protected on both sides by tall stone cliffs surmounted by desert, a natural paradise.

The banks were dotted with heavy melon vines, the drier areas near the cliffs were covered in seed and fibre crops, and flocks of fowl wandered without fear of predators. This ease of agriculture gave them a luxury unseen in the rest of the world, leisure, and they used this spare time to develop the skills of their minds with language, and the skills of their hands with craft.

Although there was little love between them, the dominant two married with much ceremony, to found their

dynasty. They usurped the powers of their submissive followers to remake themselves, golden skinned and four armed, as overgods of their people. Under their direction, the society advanced rapidly, using the plentiful stone of the cliff faces and other natural resources, to become the pre-eminent human culture.

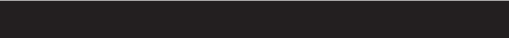
They developed the first written language and system of numbers. It didn't take long for the people to become stratified according to their tasks. The thinkers became elevated in luxury from those doing the building of their schemes.

But soon Temnenut became bored with peace and plenty, and the pursuit of luxury. He gathered and trained his warriors and began to lead them into battle with the tribes to the south and with the snake-men to the west. He became brutish and arrogant, belittling the civil advances wrought by his wife.

Soon he began to restrict her power and take the leadership entirely into his own hands. Quenlhatun found her

intrigues becoming more hidden and desperate, the final straw seeing her son tutored in the ways of ignorance. Feigning the desire to take a journey on her pleasure barges, she gathered together her handmaidens and those of her trusted servants. Her husband was pleased, seeing only her removal even further from government, but from under his nose she sailed down the river and out to sea. Temnenut was furious at this betrayal, and forbade physical contact between the sexes of the royal caste from henceforth.

On she sailed looking for a new land. But the time for choosing had ended with the first cycle of the moon, so she discovered a tropical country of godless people and usurped their land. Landing in her ornate barges, golden skinned, they knelt down in worship of her and from then on she was known in their tongue as *Quienh*. Learning the lessons of her past, she built a massive temple complex, and governed the land through arrays of delegates and offices.



The animals and peoples of the world multiplied. This was the second time of peace in the world. A few of the degenerate gods became fierce and monstrous, plaguing the lands, and were hunted down by heroes of the sword and spear.

Others of greatness built wonders of craft and magic, the powers of the gods still walking the earth were used to these ends. Great artifacts whose like were never seen again, were created in particular by the elves. But also were fantastic castles raised and arms forged against the suspicions that lurked in the hearts of all.

To the south the lands of the Despoiler were also thriving and the forges were never silent in preparing for war. The Sisterhood of the Black Robes had risen in open worship of the dark lord and whipped their proud people into a martial frenzy.

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The men were trained in the arts of war and the brutal among them rose to the top,

to command the hordes. Soon, they began to test the strength of their neighbours to the north, sending out small raids into the rich lands.

These tidings spread through the land and tensions mounted. The people of Galadin in the north redoubled their own efforts at fortification and armament. But Fareign in Iruan was complacent, trusting in the status quo and the power of the Pangenitor to hold back the dark tide to his south.

Then one night arose a storm the like of which had never been seen, fist sized hail stones pelted from swirling black clouds that boiled over their borders, lightning blasted the land. Even the soldiers on the watches were forced to seek shelter and under this cover the dark army struck.

A titanic bolt of lightning shattered the gates, the thunder shaking the city to its foundation, leaving the townsfolk blinded and stunned. Then through the breach rushed a terrible vanguard. Wyvern riding witches had flown on the wings of the storm and the black force of

their magic cut through the terrified people like a scythe. Behind them rushed a horde of twisted and fell beasts and all defense crumbled before their onslaught. After this night of evil, the dawn rose over the burning wreck of the city and the corpse of Fareign hanging from the broken front gates. Out of the south marched the regular armies of the Despoiler, and drunk on an easy victory they overran the rest of the land.

Harsh was their treatment of the people, whom they rounded up and bound into slavery, forcing them to rebuild their cities and towns for the benefit of their oppressors. For the Evil One knew that the time was short before retribution came down and was using it wisely, digging in his forces to withstand any assault, raising huge earthworks and sinking miles of trenches. The bones of numberless slaves were buried beneath them.

The other peoples were stunned and panic spread quickly. On his mountain the Pangenitor was troubled but

refused to listen to the entreaties of his allies, the Angel and the Seraph, sorrowfully forbidding them from joining the fight. "If all we gods fight in this battle, the very earth may crumble beneath us."

But among the humans, Galadin spoke to the contrary, inspiring the people of different tribes to unite and fight to protect their lands. His messengers rode far and wide over the land. Eventually a great army assembled on the plains. But there were many quarrels as to who should lead and they ended up marching in long columns side by side to the south.

The elves also held a council of war and they too were divided. Arondaer argued for them to join the humans and fight with them, but Salaran used his seniority to vote against it. Thus the bulk of the elves held their strength separately and little love there was between them and humans over it. But the wood elves joined with their neighbours the hill dwarves and set out to catch up with the main army.

Hence the battle was joined, called thereafter the *Godwar*, and the fierce struggle laid the rich conquered lands to barren waste. The race gods fought with their people and terrible powers and weapons were unleashed. The elves arrived and kept up running attacks on the rear of the enemy.

The orcs also joined in the battle but caused chaos by wading in and fighting both sides purely for the love of battle. The armies of darkness were forced back to their massive fortifications in the south.

Until now most of the soldiers on both sides had survived the largely tactical war but now bloody siege was joined. It lasted long with fruitless slaughter on both sides until only the central defences survived.

Then the gods joined their powers together and in a last ditch attack, unleashed a torrent of magic which breached the walls. Then the fiercest

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fighting began, leveling the ruins of the city and leaving most of the mortal troops slain.

Those powerful and immortal beings left standing on both sides gathered in the central crater of the city, creating a stalemate, none able to best the other. Into this maelstrom arrived the Despoiler himself, with the Demon his lieutenant, and the scales tipped heavily in their favour.

But a ray of brilliance suddenly pierced the pall of smoke and ash that covered the battle. The fume parted and the Pangenitor descended with his own allies, brought out of his withdrawal by the return of his ancient enemy. Into the silence he spoke.

“We meet for the third time. With the fourth comes the end of the world.” Fear gripped all but the Despoiler who launched into attack with scathing abuse. Again the two were joined, the glare and fury of their elder magics driving back all who yet survived. Slowly silence fell and the radiance faded.

The Pangenitor stood over a defeated Despoiler, pinning him down in anger and humiliation. Their

battle had split the earth in a huge chasm and into this he threw his enemy, banishing him again. The Demon, seeing only the faces of his enemies around him, grabbed Jelissa, the race goddess of the dark allied people, and leaped into the chasm after his master.

With a burst of power that shook the world, the victor raised his fists and wrenched his mountain aerie from its stony roots and raised it high into the sky. Then he gathered the gods of all races and took them into exile with him, forbidding all gods to tread upon the world.



But the peoples in the far reaches of the world had no knowledge of the Godwar until the Pangenitor arrived in the aftermath, mantled with power, and took their gods from them. Thus they bear him little love and much suspicion.

MORTAL EPOCH

IN the aftermath of the Godwar the lands were torn and broken. Chaos descended on the many peoples, riven of their gods. Of all, the races of the central plains had born the brunt of the destruction, their strongest slain, their lands made barren, the survivors wandering homeless. As always, the crows and the bandits grew fat.

But not all fared so evilly. The angels and seraphs had followed the gods into exile, to keep the balance in the world now the demons and devils had left. The elves and dwarves had been spared the ruin of their lands and cities, their people wisely following the heirs of their gods.

Of the higher races only the orcs fell into disorder, but one of their own making; an orgy of maneuvering both political and martial, to decide the most fit to rule. The goblins received their promised reward for their part in the turmoil, lands of their own. Their remnants crept out from their hiding places and took the ruined country of Iruan.

Garand son of Galadin had been forbidden by his father to ride with the host to war. Altine had long prepared for war and loss, and they suffered little in its aftermath. Again like an island in a dark sea they shone. Garand as king, looked ever inward, continuing the work on the defences,

till the dam wall rose 500 cubits from the valley floor, and the lake of its waters was like a sea stretching back. Upon its crest he built a soaring citadel, *Stoneheart*, as capital of the country. In later times he is called the Builder-King.

But *Ganeth*, his son, chafed in their self imposed exile, celebrating his passage into manhood by leading scouting parties into the chaotic lands around. Though the blood of gods coursed through his veins, Garand's life, long in the eyes of men, came to an end, and Ganeth took the crown.

All the warriors flocked to his court, and he elevated the knights to be his highest councillors. They talked of nothing but bringing "peace and leadership" to the lesser peoples below their walls. Again the bulls were trained for war, and their horns tipped with steel.

The hosts swept out into the land, the disorganised people no match for mounted cavalry and well drilled soldiers. Soon the bandits fled even at

the rumour of their coming and the peasants cheered them into their 'liberated' towns. Eventually most of the central plains were under their dominion, and for this Ganeth is known as the Conqueror-King, having ridden in the van of his victorious armies. The knights of renown he further elevated to be hereditary lords of the provinces now created.

But warriors too grow old and Ganeth passed to be succeeded by *Gadron*. His inheritance was an enormous kingdom, and he turned all his energy to administering it, setting up the institutions to smooth its running. Under him knights patrolled the land and mendicant priests of Galadin wandered, acting as adjudicants in the disputes that arose. For this he was known somewhat scornfully, as the Bookkeeper-King. This was a time of prosperity and the lands again grew bountiful.

In Remphalur far to the south, the tenets of law which had been set by Temnenut became set in stone and rigidly adhered to. His line ruled with an iron fist, raising great cities and temples in their own honour. Battles waged unceasingly along the borders with their neighbours, the Urukasa tribes to the south and the Snakemen to the east.

But in the lands of the Despoiler, in defeat and isolation, the chaos could only turn upon itself. The Sisterhood of the witches knew that their influence would surely wane before it would wax again. Using the last of their power, they chose the strongest of the surviving generals, *Hadrach*, and installed him as Emperor.

As a gift to ward him against treachery they made the *Dreadknights*. Three dark suits of armour they were, scribed with fell runes and sigils. A great competition was held to find the fiercest warriors to wear them.

With great acclaim and ceremony three won through, and the witches helped them don the pieces. The cheers of the crowd turned to horror when they saw the blood pouring from the suits, for they were cruelly barbed on the inside and could never be removed. The eyes of the now undead champions shone with unholy power as the helms, triple horned, were driven onto their heads. They would obey only the wearer of the imperial crown and his heirs. Hadrach laughed in triumph as they carried out his first order, the slaying of his rivals.

A large part of the Iruanese people were bound in slavery and were now bred like cattle and worked to the brink of death to rebuild the nation. The capital was refortified, and knowing that his power was due to the Despoiler and his mouthpiece in the world, the witches, Hadrach had a temple built in the heart of his palace. The blood of many sacrifices consecrated it.

But elsewhere the temples were shunned and fell into disrepair.

The witches travelled the lands by night and the people barred their doors against the dark things that journeyed with them. One temple that still shone as if newly built, was the Despoiler's ancient pleasure dome on the very southernmost tip of the continent. It was to here that the witches retreated to plot their return. The land around was tropical in climate, but the belching ash of volcanoes made it a place of choking ash rain and rivers of mud.

The Altonian expansion had been balked even at its greatest moment. To the east, the steppe had long been uninhabited by the races of men, and there the centaurs roamed freely. A harsh unsheltered land, the armies were harassed by the ferocity of the horsemen, and took little territory before judging it not worth the toil and blood.

In the south-west, their lines were stretched thinnest and there they met their fiercest

resistance. The Selantish nomads on camels were faster than the bull mounts of the Altine knights. But the nomads had fought against each other as much as their enemy and were pushed back into the barren hills they knew intimately. Over time the defenders of the Altine borders became complacent, unworried by the constant but small incursions by the nomads.

The Selantish people, since the departure of el-Ke'min, had been largely preoccupied with infighting between his many sons, to see who was truest to his spirit of independence and individuality. Thus the raids against their enemy were uncoordinated and largely counting coups, shows of bravery. But over time the presence of the Altonians united the people living in the harshest areas around the front line.

They were lead by a fearless warrior, *al-Ma'sab*, in a bloody coup that established him as absolute ruler,

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the Sultan, and as the true bloodline of el-Ke'min, with sentence of death as heretic

for any who suggested otherwise. His people had developed the art of archery and soon all the warriors were trained to great accuracy even from the lurching back of a running camel. Now organised raids took place. The speed of their guerilla raids and the deadly rain of their arrows pushed back their enemies.

The Altine people, long accustomed to peaceful farming were taken unawares, and before long had been overrun. Selantia soon held the Western Province and after setting up a Caliph to rule there, were raiding far into the heartland. But the knights regrouped after their first shock and fought back.

Neither side could gain the upper hand and the border shifted back and forth over the long years. The people of the land were treated well by both armies, who needed the fruit of the land to feed them, and hence the peasants to gather it. They became indifferent to who ruled them, alternately cheering (and selling their produce) to both the Caliph and the West Warden.

Galain, the Altine king, sent out his most trusted messengers between the armies scattered along the front line, to organise a final push. But the Wardens had become tired of the war, and used the knowledge of their own power to press for autonomy in return for their continuing help. Emissaries met in a small fishing village on the southern coast, neutral to all.

But secretly, the small forces of the poor North Province had withdrawn and were fleeing back to their lands. Their emissary brought a declaration of secession and was cast out, his people hated as traitors henceforth. Then heated negotiation raged until a treaty was written and sealed with the signatures of all.

The Eastern Province became the *Duchy of Dunfort*, in the strongest position because their lands were not threatened and were second in power to the King in Altine.

The Western Province became the *Marquisate of Cagellan*, a government in exile.

The central lands were still loyal, but Galain, fearing further erosion of the kingdom, named the vassals there as Barons, to secure their alliance.

Now the battle was rejoined in earnest and nearly all of their old territory retaken. For some time there was still fighting along the border but eventually the Marquis negotiated a truce, cementing it with the marriage of his son to the former Caliph's daughter, symbolic of the history and now mixed heritage of the people there.

Then came a time of trade and craft. *Treaty City*, as the fishing village became known, was the centre of the movement of goods between the countries and became rich upon it.

The signatories to the treaty held embassies there and bureaucracy arose around them, government by the *Committee of Ambassadors*. The original inhabitants became largely

excluded and formed the merchant guilds, growing in power and wealth until there were essentially two ruling bodies in opposition. For a while most of the trade goods originated in the western bloc, until the merchants rebuilt their fishing vessels and sailed far over the seas, bringing back goods first from Selantia and then from the east.

Remphalur had stagnated into a long decline, with their territory shrinking under the assault of the tribesmen until they held only the great river valley. The nobles traded raw materials for luxury goods and became more decadent, while their people laboured and starved.

Further east they came to Tsinlian, where the hidden matriarchs had established their own trading empire among the islands and small nations around them. Lack of strong timber had limited the range of their trading

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vessels and they welcome the ships of the merchant guilds as a means to extend it.

Altine, now a shadow of its former greatness, slowly became arrogant and xenophobic, holding itself to be the superior race of men. The people of the upper valley even held themselves above their vassals in their territory below the dam, calling them scornfully the Beef Barons.

The Barons' chief industry was the raising of the lesser ox, huge herds roaming the grasslands. They only traded dairy cows and neutered bulls as beasts of burden, to keep their monopoly. Every year there was a muster, and the herds driven down to Treaty City for the annual market.

In the north, the former North Warden had proclaimed himself king of his land. But it was a poor land, and they were blocked from the rich trade to the south by their old allies, now bitter enemies. The Volskaandir began to raid their coastal towns, easy pickings for the fierce barbarians in their longships, striking at random.

Soon the king was forced to rule harshly, executing dissenters and taxing heavily. Amongst the people a false prophet arose, spreading a message that the sun was the source of all power. All the evils of the earth, he said, were punishment for the sins of the gods and those who followed them. We must worship only the sun and atone for our sins to return to the light of abundance.

His sect walked the streets flagellating themselves, brutal suppression by the king's soldiers bringing only screams of gratitude. The cult swelled until it filled the towns, now fallen into neglect as all concentrated on atonement. The capital echoed with cries for the king to be punished also, before the fever drove them into the castle, unarmed flagellants overcoming the panicked soldiers by force of numbers, filling the halls with their bloody dead.

The king and his surviving supporters were dragged before the castle gate and flogged into ribbons, starting an orgy of destruction which marked

the birth of the *Solarite Annexation*. Anarchy reigned and like rats from a sinking ship, fanatical missionaries spread out into the surrounding countries. In Altine they were executed as revolutionaries wherever they were found. Elsewhere they were driven like dogs from the towns and cities.

Dunfort, in the east, became the granary of the treaty lands, its rolling hills now fields of wheat and cotton, its people a stocky race who loved bread and beer. But the centaurs ever fought to liberate the land from the plough, burning crops and villages alike, until the capital proved its name true; Dunfort, a heavily defended bunker that doubled as a grain silo. In Treaty City, their ambassador ever sided with Altine, dependant on the labour of bulls to plough their fields.

Cagellan, in the west, had a renaissance of culture, influenced by the two races who made up its people. Their capital and towns having been ruined many times, they had learnt well the skills of building, and raised a beautiful city out of the

rubble, built not for defense but for beauty. All the arts they developed: the culinary, making wines from their grapes, jams and preserves from their fruits and cheeses from the milk of their goats; the millenary, making beautifully spun cloth, dying and patterning it; and not least the cultural, making many instruments and music to play on them.

Their principle trade became luxury goods and the skills to make them, particularly with their nearest neighbour, Selantia. These links made them suspect in the Committee of Ambassadors, their proposals voted down by the hidebound Altonian delegates and their Dunfort supporters.

In this later age, it was Selantia that began to flower. In many of the other lands, the lodes of metal had been largely mined out, but the previously nomadic Selantish

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had not even begun to realise their natural wealth. With expertise hired from

Cagellan they found rich deposits, particularly of gold. Soon the tent city that had formerly surrounded the central oasis was replaced with a city of lofty minarets, *Mek'halat*.

Most rich was the gleaming palace of the Sultan, filled with the gilded handiwork of the burgeoning numbers of artisans. The people of the city became settled, nomads no longer. Life outside the city was still hard, date farmers eked out a rough living around the few smaller oases throughout the country.

But still there were clans of nomads, travelling on camels with their homes stowed behind them, driving their herds of goats between the sparse grazing grounds. They saw themselves as the true Selantish people, spitting in the direction of Mek'halat and cursing the city dwellers as soft.

The *Borderlands* between the countries of the central plains and the dark kingdom to the south,

formerly the rich lands of Iruan, were now a wasteland of barren hills and dry riverbeds, but its mineral wealth had drawn the adventurous. The scorched land around the great crevasse was held by the goblins, the slag heaps from their mines and the fumes from their smelters adding to its devastation. To the north were the fortified mines of men, many of them little better than the goblins, run by harsh men and the labour of slaves.

Under the skirts of the mountains was a murky creek, and it was there that the largest of the settlements was carved out of the cliffs and fortified with huge earthworks of slag, *Mudwall*. Rich lodes of iron ran back under the hills, but most of the wealth went into the pockets of the mercenaries needed to protect the walls and vital trade caravans from the gangs of bandits and goblins that roamed unchallenged.

The last outpost of the old Iruan kingdom was a coastal town, protected by rocky hills, which had escaped the devastation. Abandoned

for long years until it was resettled by the outlaws and outcasts displaced by the return of order to the lands under the rule of Altine.

As prosperity returned to the lands in the north, so grew those parasites who lived off them, thieves. In all of the cities but especially in Treaty City, where the pickings were rich and the administration cumbersome, their power grew until the highest amongst them banded together.

From theft and smuggling, they advanced to extortion, and eventually to assassination. Hunted ever more vigilantly, they hid themselves, and conducted their business with an increasingly complex system of initiations, fronts and passwords. In mockery of the guilds of the merchants and artisans, they named themselves the *Guild of Assassins*, and carried black bladed kris knives as tokens.

Through their connections with bandits and smugglers, they heard of the little town. One morning the

townsfolk awoke to find their leaders disappeared and their village became known by dark rumours as *Blackport*.

The crime lords ruled openly there and bandits flocked there bearing loot from the Borderlands. With its good harbourage it became a haven for pirates raiding the rich trade corridor and smugglers shipping out contraband goods.

A huge black market grew where anything could be had for the right price, including their richest commodity, slaves. As the wealth flowed in they erected in the centre of town a massive arena, where beasts, slaves and warriors fought to satiate the thirst for violence and gambling of the degenerate townsfolk.

The guildsmen were called *blackdaggers* for the blades they wore, and the tentacles of their power were far reaching. Goblins and other dark races walked the streets, and their trade routes included the empire to the south.

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In the lands of the Maledium Throne, the Emperors had become progressively weaker and inept. Under them the Dreadknights had sunk from being reavers in enemy lands, to bodyguards of the craven overlords. Through fear and arrogance they ostracised the witches, boarding up the temples and barring the sisterhood from the Imperial court. The people had become lazy and their industries reliant on the labour of slaves, whose number had swollen over the years, bred like cattle.

Based on unwilling labour, the empire had descended into chaos and mismanagement, slave revolts undermining it further. The family and descendants of the emperors' line had grown into a court of rank nobility, living a corrupt and decadent life on the excessive taxes of their leader. Intrigues were rife and the army splintered into supporting factions.

Slums had spread wide around the original city, and from amongst

the street gangs a youth rose to prominence, filled with the spirit of the Despoiler. With shaven head and austere habits, *Lacharn's* fiery charisma and strength attracted many of the disenfranchised young men. He swore them to the service of his dark patron rather than to himself, subjecting them to rigorous discipline until he had whipped them into a hard-core cell of followers.

They set about cleaning up the slums of the city, suppressing or absorbing the smaller gangs, and brutally slaying all the racketeers who preyed on the poor. Using the money taken to feed and equip themselves, they soon controlled large sections of the lower city, and the poorest people harboured them as saviors.

The witches secretly contacted him and hailed him as the chosen one, destined to lead the nation to greatness in the name of the Despoiler. The dark arts of magic they taught him, and many secret ways of the city.

The Emperor began to be worried as well organised and armed gangs ran unopposed through the city. He doubled then tripled the number of patrols, with orders to slay them on site. To man them he conscripted young men by force, but many of them were members of the very gangs he was attempting to suppress.

With bribes and blackmail Lacharn's lieutenants worked their way into positions of rank. The army was thus infiltrated by a fifth column as the factions splintered further in their maneuverings for power. The time was ripe. On a dark night with no light from the moons to pierce the shadows, the slums were lit with fires and rioting drew the loyal patrols. Rebel soldiers mutinied, attacking their commanders and immobilising the army.

In the chaos, with a guard of witch-warriors, the dark youth stormed the palace, sweeping through the guards like a scythe. The terrified Emperor had fled to the secret holds in the

royal chambers, commanding the Dreadknights to protect him at all costs. The heavy doors of the vault burst open with thunder and into the breach he calmly walked. Bowing down before his might, the Dreadknights recognized their true lord and refused to attack him. The Emperor crawled on his knees but was slain as he opened his mouth to beg for mercy. Lacharn beheaded him and impaling the crowned skull on a pole as his token, proclaimed the imperial line ended and himself Regent of the Despoiler.

His purge of the army was instant and unforgiving, the surviving faction leaders and corrupt officers slain outright. Harsh discipline was imposed and all who refused to swear obeisance to the black god joined their former leaders in death.

The smoking dawn rose over a fearful nation. Joyous witches heralded the new overlord, and none now dared to turn them away. The streets rang

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with the stamp of soldier's boots as they rounded up the false nobility, and corpses

soon hung from the door posts of their mansions. Lacharn's first act as Regent was to order that all slaves should be slain by the hands of their masters. The empire was gripped by violence and cleansed in a baptism of blood. The riches of the executed nobility were confiscated by the treasury and melted down into hard currency.

All able bodied men were conscripted, to man the army or labour in public works. The roads and cities were rebuilt, garrisons fortified and manned, and the industries of the land retooled for the production of war. The trade with other nations that had developed under the Emperors was focused, agents roamed the lands buying up goods from unscrupulous dealers and stockpiling them.

But the most fertile rebirth was that of the Sisterhood of the Black Robes. Temples that had lain neglected and shunned, ran with the blood of consecration. Public worship was mandatory, and young women flocked to the covens.

In the marketplaces of the cities and towns, the pompous monuments to the old lords were thrown down, and in their place arose effigies of the Despoiler, his horned shadow falling upon all they did. And ever the witches watched to weed out the weak and seditious. Their machinations spread beyond the empire's borders, secret covens springing up in many cities of men, funnelling back tribute in coin and secrets from the debased membership.



Over many years the Empire of the Maledium Throne was honed to a hard edge, the lands and people productive, crowds cheering the Regent wherever he appeared. Ambassadors to Treaty City spoke honeyed words of truce while in their homeland the legions of the army trained and amassed engines of war.

INFERNAL EPOCH

AND then began
the woes that
foretold the
coming of the end to the wise.

The age old patterns of the weather fell into chaos: torrential rain ravaged the lands with flood, tainting the waters, riverbanks torn away and landslides devastating all before them; blizzards howled through the lowlands, snows and frosts shrouding the grasslands; drought shrivelled the mighty rivers into mere trickles in a mire of cracked mud, the smaller leaving only their stony beds; and tremors shook the earth, tumbling walls and buildings. Blights and rot struck the fields and orchards; sickness decimated the herds of livestock, gaunt and hungry as they wandered through the withered pastures.

The people, frightened by these changes began to hoard food and guard it against their neighbours. Soon the storehouses began to run empty, and the poorest were the first to go hungry. Rioting began, stores looted on the merest rumour of food.

The powerful and wealthy still ate well behind guarded walls. Order began to break down as hungry

soldiers joined the hungry crowds breaking into the mansions of their masters. Into this chaos fell the final misery. Plague.

The first few fevered and raving victims went unnoticed in the tumult, but soon pestilent corpses lay in the streets and every house was stricken. People fled the populated areas, the smaller villages soon emptied by exodus and death. Towns free of the disease were overrun by carriers, and began to slay all outsiders on sight, hopelessly trying to stem the flood.

The Maledium Empire in the south was unaffected by these calamities and desperate groups drifted in that direction, many falling prey to bandits. Those who survived the perilous journey were captured on the borders and forced into service as scouts for the huge army that was preparing to march under the black banner of the Regent.

Dark messengers bearing offers of truce arrived at Treaty City. Fierce arguments arose between the ambassadors,

urging rebuttal, and the merchant council, rife with corruption and even direct trade links with the Empire, desiring to avoid war above all else.

The armies arrived, and camped in seeming peace before the walls. The arguments raged on as the silhouettes of siege engines rose above the encampment. The merchant lords stood gaping on the walls, while the ambassadors escaped upriver by boat, as the city was encircled. Resistance was disorganised and short lived. The largely decorative city gates fell and Treaty City became the forward camp of the invasion.

The army advanced northward with little effort until they hit the line of baronial castles and the gathered forces of Altine. Fierce battles raged but they were inexorably pushed back and the castles abandoned. In the east, the Duke and his soldiers refused to leave Dunfort after the people were evacuated. Besieged

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by a token force and largely forgotten, until the lord of a people derided for their

gluttony, starved to death holed up in his own granary.

The Dreadknights fought in the van of the army, bringing death and despair to all who faced them. Before the great wall of the dam, *Gandar* the Crown Prince, was slain with a troop of the bravest knights, protecting the retreat of the army, and of his father, *Gamond* the King. The invaders beat in futile rage against the towering fortifications.

The Regent toured the conquered lands in triumph, consolidating his grip and installing his puppets to rule. The people were harshly oppressed, heavy tribute exacted from the meager fruits of their barren fields.

Everything of value was stripped to fuel the war machine, long lines of wagons stretching back to Nacigonac. The capital of the enlarged empire had grown into a huge and sprawling metropolis, its streets crawling with soldiers debauching themselves on the evil pleasures available.

Under the iron fist of the Regent, the last generation of the conquered lands grew up twisted and cruel. Many left the harsh toil of their homelands, drawn to the centre by the lure of decadence, only to end up serving their oppressors in the army or in darker ways, their flesh sold into brothels and their blood laving the altars.

But all shunned the old parts of the city. At its heart, the palace had been rebuilt as a colossal temple, the witches on their wyvern steeds like bees around its hive. On the pinnacle reared a huge statue of the Destroyer, gleaming black stone under-lit by the fires of the altars, its eyes peering into every part of the city.

The fire drakes, massive red dragons, had been awoken from their slumber amongst the volcanoes, and brought fire and destruction to the forest of the hidden elves. The orcs, neutral in the greater scheme, were effectively removed from the playing field. Their inability to resist the temptation to hunt down and finish off their old enemies,

the elves, left the dragons free to continue their carnage elsewhere.

In the north, the Twenty Year Siege had dragged on in stalemate. Facing the dam wall was a virtual city of besiegers. A ragged cheer from the enemy brought the Altine guard out onto the walls as the first wave of dragon breath swept the castle.

In their secret councils, the elves prepared for war, shamed by their denial of the entreaties of Altine before the Godwar. To show their good faith, they drove off the dragons with great loss of life, fighting from their sky boats and winged steeds. On the burning battlements of Stoneheart they made their alliance with the humans. All but the soldiers had long since retreated to the mountains at the far end of Altine's great valley, but now they too abandoned their capital.

For a day and a night the greatest of the elvish sorcerers prepared their counter blow. At dawn a thunderous boom echoed down over their enemies.

Suspicion turned to panic as cracks began to appear on the dam wall. Water poured through, widening the gaps, until with a roar that shook the ground, it collapsed. A colossal wave of water and rubble swept the encamped army away without trace, leaving a ruinous plain of mud and stone.

Now the lines were drawn, and all who yet lived chose their side, old enemies drawn into strange alliances. Marching down out of the north, the remnants of the human lands, led by the last King of Altine, Gamond. With them were the gathered host of the elves, heavily armoured columns of dwarves, and strangest of all, the centaurs, satyrs and lords of the animal kingdoms, knowing the passing of the old order was at hand.

Facing them on the great central plains, was the core of the Maledium army, well drilled and armed, surrounded by their mercenary rabble and a ravaging horde of fell beasts, goblins, and giants.

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Over the wastelands rose the last dawn, wan and feeble through the smoke and fume that hung in the air. The three moons circled in the paling skies, conjunction reforming the Lunar Orb. The Phoenix flew above it, bringing about the first and only solar eclipse. The Fiends seized their chance, scrambling from their deep dens and soaring up the shadow cast, hidden from the Phoenix. Their harsh cries of victory as they slew their quarry heralded the ending of things.

The Solar Orb fell from the dying Phoenix's claws and hit the conjoined moons, shattering them utterly. Like a fiery meteor of doom the Orb crashed into the earth, throwing up an immense crater and rocking the world to its very foundations.

The Despoiler and his minions rushed to the smouldering site of impact, desperate to gain the ultimate source of power. But in the heavens the Pangenitor who had withheld his

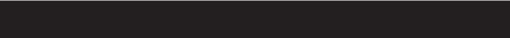
forces until this last moment, now unleashed his army of gods and angels to descend upon their foes. The two divine armies clashed in a battle of unimaginable power and fury, torrents of magic lashing the combatants and the surrounding land. Fragments of the Lunar Orb became unearthly weapons in the hands of the warring gods.

With the Solar Orb torn from the influence of the Pangenitor, his creations began to fail. The stars rained from the darkened sky, setting the world ablaze until the air was a sulphurous fume of choking black smoke.

The pillar of the world was wracked by massive earthquakes, sending towering tidal waves crashing over the coastlines, torrents of molten lava spewing up from the widening cracks in the land. The scream of rending stone filled the air as immense sections of the earth fell away or were thrust upward, the oceans draining away in tremendous whirlpools through the faults in the bedrock of the world.

Around the crater of the orb, the dead and dying gods lay scattered, as for the fourth and final time, the Pangenitor and the Despoiler faced each other, one with silent tears for the ruin of all his creation, the other taunting in exultation of the deed.

The last battle was joined. The thrashing of their elder forms rocked the weakened earth until with a deafening roar the whole collapsed. Locked in an eternal stalemate, the two ancient enemies were drawn heedlessly into a maelstrom of destruction.



The Solar Orb sank beneath the waters of the Flood, and again the darkness was unbroken.



Western
Ocean

Eastern
Ocean

Tundra Waste

The Isle of
the Magi

Labyrinth of Waves

Frozen sea

Ellanuth

Volkskaand

Cragneck

Solarite Annexation
(Nth Province)

Icehorn Ridge

Fennire
Swamp

Orrery

Morbairn

Stoneheart

Nurmethill

Altine

Baronry
(Lower Altine)

Dunfort
(East Province)

Randish River

Bandaren River

Treaty City

Meride Bay

Blackport

Pragler River

Cagellan

Marquisate of Cagellan
(West Province)

Sylvan Forest

Arbigh Mountains

Central Plains

Mudwall

Angthulart

Pillars of Heaven

Hwalleng

Bithat Delta

Kverpogit

Helithroat Rift

Nacgannac

Brokerrin River

Drakos Range

Naosliart

Tsinlian

High Temple
of the Despoller

Dragon Archipelago

Wood

Neaznune

The Wild Steppe

Theuriala



MAP OF THE WORLD PLANE



