

World Of Midgard

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**The story of Schism, Swarm, Survival & Conquest, and
the Treaty of the Fallen Oak.**

1: Preamble

Stand forth, heroes of Midgard.

Stand forth and hear the tales of battles past.

List, brave ones, and you shall hear of the follies of men and the darkness that swept our land.

You shall know what honorable blood watered the ground beneath your feet.

You shall know the harrowing brawls that created our realm.

2: The Savage Ages

You who stand before me cannot know the horror of the ages past, when man cut down man in search of nothing more than a patch of land, a cow, or a pathetic cluster of hovels. These were the savage times.

The lawless times. Before the Treaty of the Fallen Oak. Before the Swarm. Before even the Schism of Midgard.

In these days, there were no villages or towns, but only itinerant factions who carved out territory by force.

They had no code but survival. Survival and conquest.

In these days, there were bands of Orcs that dwelled in the caves that dotted the sides of mountain ranges.

They lurked in the shadows, sharpening their blades and the edges of their shields.

These clans of ashen warriors subsisted for ages on the mushrooms and weeds of the rocky slopes and the wind-toughened meat of mountain beasts.

No living being dared accost these Orcs, who were renowned even there as vicious and unblinking fighters.

The lower mountain regions were theirs, but they longed to expand outward into the arable plains, lush woods, and plentiful shoreline.

To this end, a family of Orcs, that of Ofren the Bold, rose to power to unite the fractious warriors.

In the upper heights of the farthest of mountain ranges of Midgard, separated from the cave Orcs by miles, lived the proud Mountain Dwarves, who wore the skins of snow predators for warmth and hewed axe-blades from the diamond-solid rock found only in the highest summits of their homeland.

The Dwarves of this region had for centuries been led by a single line of stoic kings, a line that would eventually lead to the brave elder Dwarf, Gorst.

At the time of Gorst's ascension to power, the fiercely independent Dwarf clans wanted nothing more than isolated place in the stratosphere of their mountain home.

These ranges were theirs, and they were content to leave the Orcs in the lesser mountain systems, so long as they were left in peace.

History would force their hands, however, and bring them to enemy lands or fight with rock axe in the caves and plains.

The plains of Midgard have long been dotted with wild heaths and rock crags, and in these heaths and crag have long been the home of the strange and mysterious BloodDrakes.

A combination of murmured lore and hearsay would contend that the BloodDrakes are the unholy spawn of some ancient marriage between ill-begotten humans and vampyric lords.

I know not if this be so; all I can say is that these pale-complexioned aristocrats of the plains ruled their region without mercy or deference to any around them.

The BloodDrakes of Midgard, led at this time by the subtle and deceptive Craxis, cared little for any other race of the realm.

They longed to expand beyond the plains, true, but not for advantage in battle or resources: they longed to assume full control over all of Midgard, taking their rightful place in the highest order.

No enemy knew how to stand against their dark sorcery.

In the Center of Midgard has always been the Great Wood, a dense and expansive convection of trees that sheltered the Elvin legions, worthy archers that built homes in the Wood and stood sentry atop the towering trees, keeping guard over their dominion.

These Elves were disciplined and calm in their execution, firing volleys of bone-hewed arrows from the Wood in defense of their forest realm.

They were also unflinchingly loyal to their ancient leader, Glastor.

Glastor's word was unquestioned, and his word unerringly rang out in defense of the Great Wood.

The Elves of old had but one goal: the protection of nature against all other races of Midgard.

Before the time when men kept detailed record of Midgard events, though, a sect of Elves defied the will of the Elvin Leader.

These Dark Elves became reckless in their use of both bow and natural magic, for they were seduced by the thought of expanding beyond the natural boundaries of the Great Wood.

Led by some unnamed ancestor, they split from the larger Elvin community and settled on the border areas, even expanding into the plains to intermingle with the BloodDrakes.

The accumulation of wealth became the Dark Elves' only objective; they became mercenaries, led by the family of the great equivocator Helston, mortal enemies of Glastor's tribe.

The Humans of Midgard, meanwhile, had for centuries been divided both geographically and ideologically.

The settlers of the shore remained entrenched by the waters, and the mystic sorcerers sought solitude and dominion in the desert sands.

In these vast sands were the dunes-people, who dressed to vanish into the desert, and of the mystic airs of this desolate plane they learned the art of sorcery.

These dunes magicians would go years without speaking, and this inscrutable silence terrified poor pilgrims as they trekked cross the barren expanse.

The elements of fire and wind bent to the will of these hermits, and as a result, the desert sands were rarely contested by clans from without.

This isolation, indeed, was all the dunes-wizards wanted.

3: The Shore

Last among these warring clans were the families of the shore.

Expert with net and spear, these sea-hunters would stalk the seaside cusp of the realm.

With an unlimited supply of food from the ocean, theirs was the most coveted of the lands in the realm.

And they understood this only too well, drilling for hours on end to form a sort of impenetrable phalanx.

Foolhardy bandits would siege this phalanx for days on end, but the shore-wanders were patient and disciplined. Every day, they would strike down a handful of intruders, day upon day until the siege broke and retreat was sounded.

This omnipresent threat created wise and hearty strategists, and from the shore-clan would rise a great leader.

But that leader would take many centuries to emerge.

Understand, good adventurers, this time was an unrelenting crucible of battle that continued for generations.

Like a beast that survives by devouring itself, the constant bloodletting drew still more bloodletting.

The cave-dwelling Orcs would sweep into the fields below or trek miles into the Dwarven mountains, but within weeks

their enemies had regrouped and massacred the occupying contingents.

The BloodDrakes sent brigades up to the Great Wood to expand their influence, but the sentries of Elvin archers stayed atop their trees firing arrows in each direction, creating a no man's land littered with the bodies of BloodDrakes.

And in the desert, the charred and skeletal remains of ambitious invading adversaries multiplied daily.

Always, though, the wanderers of the shore – fishing and perfecting their phalanx – were the true targets. Many fell to Orcish steel, and the dark arts of BloodDrake and Desert Mage, but nonetheless they held the sea.

The one blessing of such chaotic times is that every clan was fighting its own battle, and there were several clans within each region, meaning that no sufficient force could be created.

Anyone who tried to take the coast could never muster more than a couple hundred under one banner.

Defending one's meager assets was always easier than taking someone else's.

4: Ofren, Necatus, and the Fury

This changed when Ofren of the Orcs made overtures of peace to the BloodDrakes of the plains. He called a parlay at southernmost rim of the great Midgard Mountain Range.

At this parlay, the Orcish leadership and the BloodDrake lords carved up a map of the Midgard betwixt the assembled clans.

They determined that they would unite under one banner and at last break the shore phalanx before conquering the rest of the realm.

All present agreed that Craxis and Ofren would jointly lead this coalition. This is how the tenuous union known as the Fury was formed.

The summit took place at the base of Mount Cormast in a mead-hall that would become known as Ofren's Hall.

At the moment when Craxis has been named co-commander he pulled a long blade from his belt and thrust it into Ofren's ribs.

Ofren dodged to blow and, taking his first lieutenant's broadsword, struck the BloodDrake's head from his shoulders.

The other BloodDrakes, seeing their fiercest lord dispatched so quickly, leapt forth to descend on Ofren.

So they would, had not Craxis' brother, the subtle and diplomatic Necatus not raised his hand to halt them.

The BloodDrakes, respecting the line of Craxis, stood to and awaited their new commander's order.

Necatus turned to Ofren and stated calmly that the unfortunate events of the previous moment illustrated aptly the way the Fury must be maintained.

The BloodDrakes and the Orcs could never truly trust each other, but they could work together to expand their collective influence.

Necatus clasped Ofren's hand, sealing the tenuous pact. Then, the BloodDrake consulate took up the body and head of Craxis and returned to the plains.

5: Astrell and the Alliance

This parlay was observed by Dwarven scouts, who immediately reported back to their king Gorst.

Gorst took a moment to assess the true implications of this Fury.

Focused though the BloodDrakes and Orcs were on the Shore, they may use this new-combined force to finally take the upper mountains for good and all.

Gorst was a quintessential Dwarf Lord: pragmatic , stubborn, and independent.

He insisted on forging through the Orc lands personally to deliver news of this turn of events to the humans of the Shore.

Gorst spoke of the Fury to one of the young commanders of the Shore: Astrell, a fair and just fisherman and general, universally beloved.

Even the elder warrior-strategists would cede important judgments to the preternaturally wise Astrell.

Astell in his reasoned assessment knew that his people's phalanxes would not be able to withstand a combined and coordinated assault.

The shore would need to unite with former enemies as well, and fast.

Gorst swore that if Astrell could hold against the assaults to come, he would organize hundreds of small Dwarf brigades to rove the Orcish mountains and strike at Ofren's commanding officers and reserve forces.

The Dwarves already in accordance, Astrell aimed to bring the Human Sorcerers of the Desert and the Elves of the Wood into an Alliance.

He had two brothers, Gregor and Elghinn. He sent Gregor to speak with the leader of the tree clans and Elghinn to wander into the desert under a flag of peace with the aim of uniting humanity in Midgard.

Gregor approached the Great Wood bearing a sack filled with dried fish and fruits.

He shouted to the Orcish guards that he came in peace and would not enter the Wood until their leader, Glastor, tossed his standard from the Wood as a sign of peace.

Every time Gregor called this, a volley of arrows shot from the Wood, landing at his feet.

And each time Gregor would step forward and call again.

This continued for three days time, until from the darkened forest emerged the elder Glastor, bearing his standard.

Glastor was more than a century old and rarely left the Great Wood, but the good of his clan impelled him to do so now.

He set his standard in the ground and sat next to it. Gregor set his sack of gifts before him and sat as well.

They spoke but briefly and to the point.

Glastor was a proud father to the woodsmen, but he understood the danger that lay before them and the opportunity the people of the Shore were offering.

A deal was struck wherein a weekly offering of fish and fruit would be brought to the Wood in exchange for the constant protection the Elves offered.

So was formed the Alliance.

6: Elghinn in Serapat

Meanwhile, Elghinn was taken prisoner by the Serapat mages, the dominant tribe of the sands.

The Serapats held Elghinn for ten years, sending an envoy to Astrell every month with a fresh lock of his brother's hair.

Each month, the envoy would kneel and offer the lock to Astrell, renewing the oath of the desert wizards never to take arms either with or against the Alliance.

This oath held a decade's time, only until the Fury entered the desert and the Serapats were forced by circumstance to join the Alliance.

In such time, Elghinn was held in a mud hut in the shadow of a large dune on which sat the skulls of four times one hundred vanquished foes. In the ten years he was there, many regiments of mages made camp near the hut to guard him both from escape and the dangers of the sands.

Elghinn, over time, would become the most honored of foreigners in the dunes.

7: The Schism of Midgard

From this crucible, heroes began the Great Schism twixt the Alliance and the Fury.

The Fury was merciless in its campaign to take the shore. Heedless of the danger, wave upon wave of Orcish warriors descended the mountains.

The Elvish Marksmen of the Wood shot volley after volley of arrows into the Orcish hordes. Meanwhile, Dwarvish contingents flanked them from behind and slaughtered absentee generals that remained in the caves.

Thousands fell, their blood intermingling with the half-melted snow at the foot of these expansive mountains.

The BloodDrakes of the Plains were the Fury's best hope to cross to the water's edge.

They infiltrated the Great Wood by subterfuge, employing young Orcs to dig tunnels beneath the plains and emerging in the heart of the forest.

They began to hack away at the base of the trees in an attempt to deny the Elves their advantageous position above their foes.

The BloodDrakes worked fast, but they were outmanned. Some Elves could swiftly descend their lofty perches and

engage the Drakes, while other archers above could rain death directly down upon them.

Moreover, these walkers of the plains were unaware of one thing.

The Great Wood had remained unbreached, as it were, for centuries in large part because the Elf inhabitants within were not its only defense.

You see, the Wood itself could withstand assault.

The trees of the Great Wood were invested with life by the four deities that shaped our realm.

And thence it was that the Assault of the Great Wood began.

Most BloodDrakes were swiped in twain by the limbs of Living Trees or instantly felled by the bolts from archers' bows, many yet still managed either to topple or climb the tree homes of their adversaries.

The Assault would last years, with much of the Wood reduced to ash.

The Fury's numbers were less than the Alliance's, but its strength came from the simple fact that it was willing to spend them heedlessly in pursuit of its goal.

The BloodDrakes gained entrance to the Wood because the Orcs were dying to distract the archers.

When the BloodDrakes made their assault on the Elves, the Orcs gained passage to the shore.

Ofren knew that he could not, by sheer force, overtake the phalanx.

He needed more partisans on his side, and for this he turned to his ally Necatus.

8. The Third Arm of the Fury

As I have said before, heroes, the Dark Elves of Midgard had long been mercenaries, whose dark magic and sure aim were often put to use for the highest bidder.

Ofren and Necatus, meeting at the latter's hovel in the plains, decided to make a bid to the Dark Elves that would retain their services for the Fury for time immemorial.

Understand, friends, that Helston was not necessarily predisposed to place his Dark Elves in the Fury camp as a matter of ideology.

True, the Fury's philosophy was more conducive to full coffers, and Helston despised the line of Glastor enough to fight against him in the Wood for sport, but the Alliance, with its numbers and resources, seemed sure to defeat the Fury.

If the Dark Elves joined with Astrell, they, too, might enjoy the same benefits as Glastor's clan, plentiful food and protection from the Humans of the Shore.

One night, however, the BloodDrake lord Necatus met Helston in the latter's wooded dwelling.

The Drake and the Dark Elf had met many times before, whenever Necatus needed a bit of dirty work carried out quickly.

Helston had arranged many such assassinations and ambushes, but this meeting seemed far more portentous than most.

Necatus was a fine negotiator, a dealmaker who could sway any hardened adversary with his eloquent calculation. In this instance, his offer was simple.

The BloodDrakes and Orcs of the Fury would furnish the Dark Elves with a magnificent battlement and encampment in the lushest quarter of the plains for the duration of the Schism if it would fight on the side of Ofren and Necatus.

Moreover, upon victory, the Dark Elves would be given dominion in the Woods as well as a share of the foodstuffs from the Shore and the minerals of the mountains.

The Dark Elves need only use their skills and knowledge of the Great Wood to unseat Glastor's archer forces.

Helston grinned broadly; Necatus, once again, had been successful in swaying a powerful leader to his side.

Beginning that very night, the Dark Elvin forces ascended the trees of the Great Wood and began a bombardment of Glastor's sentries.

9: The Desert Campaign

Even with the arrival of the Dark Elf contingents, the phalanx held firm, and the Great Wood stood against the unrelenting assault.

Ofren was losing hold of his senses; he had sworn to the Fury from the outset that in quick succession it would conquer the Shore, the Upper Mountains, and the Great Wood.

From there, he assumed, the sand-mages would understand their hopeless position, accept that they were outnumbered, and swear their homage to him.

Now that Ofren saw no end either to the Assault on the Wood or the battle with the phalanxes – and with Orcish strategists being slain daily by Dwarven axe in their caves - he set upon a decidedly unwise course.

From Ofren's fevered ambition rose the idea that, should the Fury seize the desert, it could out-flank both the Woods Elves and the Shore-dwellers.

It could squeeze them like a vice from both sides until they submitted.

In a rousing oration at the mead hall that bore his name, Ofren spurred his three finest Orc Generals to press into the desert, making a direct course for the encampment where the Serapat leader Qassim dwelled.

A force of Orcs proceeded with unprecedented brutality, leaving the dunes littered with the bodies of mages in its wake.

The leader of the Serapat forces, Qassim, had never bothered to meet Elghinn in the flesh.

When news came that the Shore hero Astrell had sent his brother to parlay, Qassim simply ordered that the man be held captive and the dunes' neutrality be relayed back to Astrell.

Qassim was a leader of remote and enigmatic disposition. He would go years without speaking to a soul other than his most trusted advisors.

He believed in the quick dissemination of directives and detested the notion of a ruler interacting with his subjects.

Still, when news came of the Orc-perpetrated massacres, Qassim immediately rode to meet, at last, with Elghinn.

Elghinn had been properly fed and tended for the last ten years.

He had even been allowed to hunt the dunes under guard. Elghinn was a patient, deliberative soul, and he knew that in due time he would meet his Serapat counterpart.

Qassim arrived at Elghinn's hut late one night.

In the hut, lit only by the moonlight peering in through a portage at the top, Elghinn listened as Qassim, in measured tones, informed him that he was to be set free.

He was to go immediately to Astrell and deliver news of the Serapat position.

The dunes forces would never, though the Fury massacres them all, swear allegiance to Astrell's Alliance.

They would, for as long as was necessary to ensure their safety, combat the Fury in the desert. Moreover, they would bring mages to the Great Wood and the Shore.

This was his pledge to Astrell. Elghinn had written it on a papyrus leaf.

Qassim drew a dagger, sliced open his palm, and poured his blood over the parchment.

It was engendered, and Elghinn rode to the Shore with the pledge.

Astell and Gregor were overjoyed to see their brother alive and well, a joy that was augmented by the news that the sorcerers of the dunes had decided to join the fray.

Within days, Serapats emerged from the sands and took up ranks in the Wood and on the shore. Qassim left the majority of the Serapat warriors behind to fend off the Fury, but he himself rode to meet with Astrell. Brusque as always,

Qassim curtly informed the leader of the Alliance that any man or woman of the desert would only take orders from Qassim: they were not at the disposal of the Alliance leadership. Astrell, as proud as he was wise, bit his tongue. The Alliance needed these skilled mages, and if enduring Qassim's arrogance was the price of this help, so be it.

10: The BloodDrake Contingent

Ofren was enraged by this turn of events. Orcs of the caves knew of the dunes-mages only through rumor and legend. This incursion of the Fury into the sand was proving as costly as the assaults in the Wood and the Shore. In fact, those latter two campaigns were growing progressively worse with the arrival of the Human wizards of Serapat. Ofren turned once again to the BloodDrake who had brought him the Dark Elves, Necatus. Ofren the Bold had the bloody will never back down from a fight, but his forces would surely have been decimated if not for the pragmatism of the BloodDrake strategist. Necatus had for weeks been receiving reports of spies within the Shore regiments and knew the location of Astrell's personal squadron. His recommendation to Ofren was simple: he and a small contingent of BloodDrakes would make their way to this squadron and dispatch the leader of the Alliance. Once the head is struck, the body would fall.

Necatus and his regiment arrived by night at the site of Astrell's camp. They quickly and quietly killed the night guard and then Necatus stepped into Astrell's tent. Astrell called in his first lieutenant – who, unbeknownst to Astrell, had been feeding the Fury information of their movements for months – and ordered him to give word the entire squadron should lay down their arms. Astrell proposed a single bout of combat twixt him and Necatus, Fury magic versus Alliance steel. Necatus hesitated not a second but accepted.

The duel was held at dawn on the shore of the realm. It was witnessed by one BloodDrake and one Astrell's first lieutenant. The Astrell and Necatus fought for three days and three nights, neither tiring nor showing advantage. On sundown of the third dawn, though, the man and Blooddrake rested between bouts, each returning to his second for sustenance. Astrell's second, the deceitful lieutenant, gave the shoresman a glass of brandywine laced with hemlock. As Astrell and Necatus met again for the next bout, Astrell fell to his knees, overcome by the fast poison. Astrell gasped, and Necatus put a foot on his neck.

Underfoot, Astrell coughed, spraying blood from his lungs with each of his last words, and those last words would ring through the whole of this land. Facing the great boat to the other side of life, Astrell, looked to the summit of Mount

Cormast – the highest mount in the whole of the Midgard ranges – and breathed two last words: “They come.”

Necatus was impassive at these words. They come? He did not understand the dire warning that he alone had been made privy to. Whatever providence allowed the virtuous Astrell to see the approaching cataclysm was not sufficient to save the many thousands who were to perish three days hence. The Fury’s victory, too, was to be short-lived, for their blood-spattered Orc leader would too fall, not to human blade or illness, but at the talons of one of the great serpents that rose ... but I am getting ahead of myself, friends.

11: The Swarm

The origins of the Dark Swarm are a matter of great conjecture. The wisest alchemists, philosophers, and magicians of Midgard have speculated as to the seismic, spiritual, and ethereal origins. All we know is that some dread corruption had brewed deep below the surface of Midgard for some time. This unnatural tumor grew with each year and this only escalated as the ground above became saturated in civil blood. We know that the Dark Swarm thrives on the blood of they that dwell above. Perhaps those dark forces were merely biding their time, waiting for the right moment to emerge from their supposed slumber. Perhaps the years of war woke them. Perhaps they

knew the time was right, that the foolish mortals above were too busy killing each other to defend against the Swarm.

Whatever the origins and whatever the time, the Swarm came, erupting from the summit of Mount Cormast. The first day after Astrell fell, the Alliance collected his body and washed it. As Gregor washed his fallen brother's face, he smelled the stale almond odor of hemlock and knew his brother was betrayed. On the second day, his brave brother Gregor made to Ofren's hall and announced to the Orc that the Alliance had no intention of surrender. After a long struggle, Ofren took the defiant shorseman's head. Necatus, always wary of the foolhardy revels of the savage Orc, returned to the plains. On the third day, Elghinn set his two brothers' bodies on a funeral pyre, the whole of the Alliance watching in full battle regalia. But before the pyre could be lit, a rumbling came from below their feet. Looking to Mount Cormast, the grieving Alliance saw the summit crack and four beasts, serpentine and fierce, emerge from the gaping abrasion. These were the four dragons of the Swarm, vanguards guiding the way for the perverse fiends that were to emerge behind them. There was a dragon of pestilence; one of flame, one of ice, and one of sand and rock. Each had with it a cohort of golems, which waited on it.

As they descended the mount, the full force of the Swarm appeared behind them. Orcs, trolls and goblins gamboled down the incline, hooting at the wind and bashing at

anything in their path. These orcs were not like those who lived in the lower caves of the mountain. They were mad, frothing berserkers, loyal to not master but chaos. Pestilent larvae spread along the ground, and vicious razor-talon gallouses erupted into the sky, obliterating the sun. Men who seemed to be half-pig and others who seemed to be half-wolf made their way to the plains, where they set up camp and prepared to stalk their human prey.

Most terrifying of all, though, was the military retinue that formed ranks behind each dragon and its attending golems. This was the army of the Swarm, dread warriors of sickly blue complexion without an iota of mercy in their being. Heedless of their own demise these mercenaries would prove loyal to the point of foolhardiness in the defense of their dragon lord.

These dragons, their golems, and their regiments of Dread Warriors, made each their several ways to the four corners of Midgard. Ice remained on the mountain; Fire went to the Shore. Pestilence went down into the plains, and dragon of sand and rock traveled into the dunes. Even now, dear adventurers, these serpent kings lie in wait. But I have digressed. Let me speak of the horrors that befell Midgard as the Dark Swarm swept our land.

12: Ofren's Demise

Ofren the Bold fell first. Since he had struck the head from Gregor's body, he had declared himself the sole and unequaled tyrant of the realm. He was carousing in his Hall when the Earth began to quake. As I have said before, Ofren had long ago lost hold of his senses. Drunk on mead, victory, and an all-consuming bloodlust, he was certain that no man, beast, or force of nature could shake him from his golden throne. As his generals and partisans huddled beneath the banquet table, understanding then what the dying Astrell had meant in his final words, Ofren removed his great sword from the wall and stormed out to face the Swarm. Standing at the foot of Mount Cormast, looking up at the approaching hordes, Ofren let loose a battle cry that shook the columns of the Hall and seemed set to rally his troops behind him. So it might have, had the Ice Dragon not swept down upon him and snatched his head and torso in its teeth, leaving two bloody legs behind.

Word of Ofren's death had barely spread through even the mead hall, but the Fury began to flee the land surrounding the smoking mountain range. Some few made it to the encampment of the Dark Elves, where they were relieved to find the able Necatus in conference with Helston the Younger. The two were in talks planning the overthrow of the mad Ofren and a subsequent sharing of power. This would prove unnecessary, as the remaining Orcs, led by Ofren's first general Marxen, took a cue from Necatus after

his brother Craxis's death. Marxen took the hands of both Helston and Necatus and expressed the commitment of the Orc troops to stand by Dark Elves and BloodDrakes in protecting the Fury. Most of the Fury, sadly, had already been slaughtered in the space of an hour and lay at the foot of the mountain range. Necatus, Marxen and Helston immediately set to preparing a desperate defense of the battlements.

13: Elghinn, Mahida and Florizel

The Alliance, being some distance apart from the point of attack, fared much better. Elghinn and Gorst, seeing the carnage occurring in the west, took charge of the Alliance and ordered a line of phalanxes be set along the shore to protect the women and children. The Dwarf contingents remained with them as supplemental fighters. Old Glastor conferred with Elghinn and Gorst briefly and then gathered his Elves to climb the Great Trees and begin a preemptive defense of the Alliance's land. Qassim did not say a word to Elghinn. He did not say a word at all. Following a wave of his hand, the full force of the dunes-sorcerers took up their belongings and began their march to the desert. Elghinn saw this and did not protest. The Humans of the Sand were not interested in the survival of the Alliance. The rest of the realm could be trampled underfoot by the ranks of darkest evil, so long as the Serapat land was left unbothered. In

truth, though, my friends, one Serapat remained behind, and her presence saved the Alliance from certain demise.

The first week following the emergence to the Dark Swarm saw the near decimation of both the Fury and the Alliance. True, the Alliance was better prepared for the onslaught, but no amount of foresight could improve the odds of the small, tired force against the overwhelming numbers of Dread Soldiers and various fiends. Within days, the phalanx was broken by wave after wave of berserker warriors who continued to fight even after their arms were hacked from their trunks. Elghinn was not nearly as foolhardy as Ofren. He knew that if he held firm on the shore, his troops would soon be trampled underfoot and their families would be torn limb from limb. He selected his two most able squadrons and ordered them to lead the women and children into the Great Wood. Then, he determined how best to detain the Swarmish forces on the Shore.

Every second that passed, more Alliance fighters were falling to Dread blade. Elghinn believed in the importance of death with honor, but he also knew that to die on this beach and allow the Swarm to overwhelm the rest of the realm was not a wise decision. He needed a way to hold them back. At this time an elder priestess of the Shore called Florizel approached the one Serapat who remained with the Alliance, a wind mage called Mahida. Florizel had a spiritual connection with the Water. She could raise waves and call

the rain, and with Mahida's assistance she made a promise to Elghinn.

Elghinn and Gorst's forces were trapped and needed some cover to retreat to the Great Wood, and Florizel promised him a storm. He swore to her that if she delivered him gales, he would repay her in any way he could. So the next day, Elghinn and Gorst's regiments awaited the new onslaught from the Dread forces and Fire Golems that had buffeted them for weeks. If Florizel and Mahida delivered the storm, they were prepared to make a speedy retreat to the Wood. If not, this conflict would likely be their last stand. As the sun rose, the Dread army crested over the horizon. Elghinn and his men held their breath, inwardly begging whatever providence might favor the forces of good over evil to deliver them from the Swarm. Even as they waited, drops of rain began to fall from above. Then the heavens opened up, and a tempest engulfed both man and fiend. Florizel was good to her word, and the remaining Alliance fighters made it to the Great Wood as the storm raged behind them.

14: Treaty of the Fallen Oak

Cloistered in the relative safety of the Wood, Elghinn, Gorst and Glastor gathered the remaining forces of the Alliance around them. They spoke of the danger facing them, a seemingly insurmountable retinue of unabashed malevolence. Elghinn rallied his comrades, but inwardly he

knew that if the Fury and the Alliance fought the Swarm and each other they would be trampled underfoot like a fallen leaf. If the Alliance and the Fury united against the Swarm, they stood a chance. That night, Elghinn rode alone to the encampment of the Dark Elves, leaving Glastor and Gorst in command of the Alliance.

The next day, Elghinn arrived at the battlements of the Dark Elves. He could tell immediately upon his arrival that the Fury's forces were badly beaten by the buffets of the Swarm. He approached the splintered wall of the encampment and laid down his spear. For a moment, nothing happened. Then a lone, gaunt figure appeared from a breach in the battlement. It was Necatus, his eyes wild with battle, his face spattered with Dread blood. He stepped defiantly to Elghinn and gazed into his eyes. Through these portages to the soul, Necatus understood Elghinn's intent. He removed his sword and placed it in the dirt. He and Elghinn walked to a blasted oak not far from the battlements, clearly felled during an assault in recent days. With a knife the two rivals carved their oath:

SO LONG AS THERE BE DREAD BLOOD TO SPILL
FURY SHALL NOT SPILL THE ALLIANCE'S
NOR ALLIANCE THE FURY'S
THIS ALONE IS ENGENDERED. THIS AND NOTHING MORE.

This was an oath more honored in the breach than in the custom. Elghinn and Necatus dripped their blood upon the trunk, signifying the Treaty, but we of Midgard know that the scars left by the Great Schism twixt Fury and Alliance shall never be healed. No partisan of the Alliance shall ever share bread with Fury, nor shall a son of the Fury marry a daughter of the Alliance. Nonetheless, the Treaty of the Fallen Oak signified the end of the Schism and the beginning of the battle with the Dark Swarm that continues to this day.

This cessation of hostilities between the Fury and the Alliance agreed upon, Elghinn rode back to the Great Woods – fighting Swarmish fiends as he rode – and returned to find the Alliance refashioning weapons and preparing rudimentary battlements. A few days later, a bundled figure approached from the desert. It was Meno, the favored nephew of Qassim. He brought word that the Swarm had overwhelmed the Serapat forces. Qassim had fought an entire Dread regiment singlehandedly, decimating 50 dark warriors before being overtaken and torn asunder. Elghinn took Meno's hand and named him commander of all human regiments. As such, the whole of humanity was, for the first time, united under one standard, that of the Alliance.

15: Midgard After the Treaty

Elghinn and Meno spent the remainder of their violent lives fighting yard by yard, out from the Great Wood. When both

men died, the Alliance did not control the Shore. It did not hold the fertile plains or the oases of Serapat or Mount Cormast. What it did hold was a beaten down, blood-soaked patch of land with the Great Wood at its center.

Gorst of the Dwarves and Glastor of the Elves were dubious of the honor that bound any Fury pact, but they consented with Elghinn to hold all hostilities against their former foes. The Dwarves set out to retake the mountain ranges that they had lost to the Swarm. This endeavor would take centuries, would outlive Gorst. He died in the heavier air of the lower reaches of the mountains, yearning still for his homeland, fearing his people would never see it again.

Glastor and his clan could well have told Elghinn that the Elves were never to emerge from their wooded home again. Instead, he pledged Elvin support to the Humans of Midgard, espousing the belief that the only way to defeat the Swarm was to expand out from their retreat position, establish towns, villages and outposts. They must turn Midgard into a civilized land to defeat the barbarous demons of the deep. Even now, we fight for this aim.

The Orcs of the Fury were initially livid that Necatus would pledge nonaggression with the Alliance. They marched back to their ancient cave homes, only to find this region infested with the beasts of the Swarm. Many perished fighting in the chasms, and in time Marxen saw the futility of this action.

He called parlay with the leaders of the Orc families at the ancient Hall of Ofren. He spoke of reuniting with the BloodDrakes to fight the Swarm, but the Orcish ranks had seen enough of treaties. They dispersed throughout the land, a hundred autonomous cells, fighting the Dread Warriors and beastly creatures of the deep. Marxen and his small contingent returned to the plains, there to take sides with Necatus. When he arrived, he found the Dark Elves of Helston standing astride the new Fury. They would, in the hundreds of years to follow, spread throughout the realm battling with the Swarm.

16: A New Age of Midgard

I said to you at the beginning of this tale, heroes, that this sage takes place in the times before the Treaty of the Oak. So it does, but as the two factions of the realm put aside – it least in word – their bitter feud and took arms against the common enemy of the Swarm, they saw the necessity of a true realm to their safety.

Three centuries have passed between the Treaty and now. All of this progress, born out of the blood and terror of the ages past, dear listeners, has been to one end: the defeat of the Swarm. This is why we plant crops and build watchtowers on the roads. This is why we fashion weapons and maintain homes. This is why the strong take up the sword and the wise learn the magic arts. But we know,

heroes of Midgard, that from the moment that the Dark Swarm emerged from the summit of Mount Cormast, it has grown stronger by the day. We must remain ever vigilant, dear friends. Ever vigilant.