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EDGE
OF
DARKNESS

A SHORT STORY PREQUEL
TO THE UPCOMING
RED WORLD TRILOGY

Edge of Darkness

(a short story prequel to the upcoming *Red World* trilogy)

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*“Survival of the line is the ultimate goal.
In these dark days it must be the supreme ideology.”*

– Nagilla the sage

He stood from the tallest, most slender tower of the palace, looking out across wide windows at the violet evening sky. The stars and the delicate light of the twin moons were bleeding in. Numerous towers and obelisks peppered the city, mirroring the tall rock spires of the southern highlands. They were spread out almost as far as the eye could see. Lantern lights flickered like fire bugs far below.

My mighty city. Its grandeur that he carved, wove and scripted on its walls, its people and its institutions. Just like his forebears before him who built it from the dust. *Assenna, the great city! Had not the Lord of the Deep Heavens decreed that it should stand forever? It is the pride and the jewel of the world. Should it not always be?*

He knew the answer.

“After me, the darkness.” He whispered. Always, the darkness was on his mind and in his dreams. Not even the jeweled evening horizon could shake his mood. There was a quick rap on the doors and the tiny bell chimed. He turned and put his hand on his hip, near the curved sword hidden under voluminous robes. He did not move from the window. The door opened.

“Your Greatness, Most Excellent One. Nagilla the sage is here to see you. May you live, even forever.” Radu entered and bowed low. The king detected a note of derision in that voice.

“Let him in, Radu. That will be all.” Radu nodded curtly to the sage and left. The sage, tall, unbent, with the broad musculature of a man who has known hard work wore the simple, wool gray robes and shaved head of the desert holy men. He was very old but his age could not be determined from his physical bearing. Only his somber, gray eyes revealed something of his great age. They both stood in silence for a few moments until the servant's footsteps grew faint. The sage then strode across the room and stood by the king.

“I’ve been thinking about retiring Radu. He has become too irksome for words. What do you think?”

“I know it can be a dangerous undertaking, keeping snakes underfoot. Nevertheless, keep him and the others close, for now. It is better to keep a snake under the foot, where you can see him and crush him rather than let him get behind a stone somewhere at your back. Radu thinks himself a clever spy. Let him continue his delusions.”

“Always you are right, Nagilla. Radu has joined the sect of the Ainash. They are growing, even after being banished from the city. Even my own sons sympathize with them. I could have crushed those apostates, had them all executed, their houses burned down and families banished, according to the law, but I withheld punishment.”

“You took the high course, even if many will not see it. There are still many who can see the difference in your rule and the hypocrisy the Ainash offer. The Lord of the Deep sees it and keeps account. Continue on the high course, Your Greatness, though it be thankless.”

“I am tired of bloodshed, Nagilla. I have made a mistake in letting this sect go on for so long. They have gained a strong foothold among the people.”

“It is hard to watch, I realize, but in this case the flowers must grow with the weeds so that all weeds can be plainly seen for what they are when it is time for the judgment. It is Divine Will that you allow it. A judgment is coming. Battling with the Ainash will not change things. The land has grown corrupt even with you as its ruler and it must be cleansed. Do not trouble yourself over it. Your dreams and visions are of divine origin. The land and its people are being called to account.”

“But they cry freedom, Nagilla, as if I were some tyrant! Some even go so far as to call for my death, those cowards outside of the city, at least. I wonder at who will really be free if these Ainash and the other rebels had their way?”

“They will find out one day. Some who cry freedom merely want power for themselves. There are many purposes at

work, my king. Some of them very dark. But the overriding one is higher than we know.” Nagilla was steadfast. The king sighed and stroked his, long beard. The jewels braided within clinked against his finger rings.

“What shall I do about my eldest son? Many call for his release. Others for his execution.”

“That is your decision alone, Your Greatness. The Lord of the Deep has willed nothing in this matter.”

“Of course not,” Said the king bitterly. “only that after I die, all will fall into darkness and fire!”

“Yes. The visions are true. They cannot be changed.”

“If only I could make them all see and walk the Red Path.” He looked out at the temples, pavilions, towers, domes and arenas. A jewel of a city, yet nearly completely corrupt. It was hard for him to accept such a beautiful place was so dark a place. Nagilla quoted a passage from the Holy Aishanna written by the prophet Kai’Alit: *“I have seen much blood and fire and smoke. I have seen the fires raging, the whole world burning. Fear not you people, for the fire is not eternal. It is a cleansing, a purification and then there shall be a rebirth. This, I have seen.”*

“Still, is it not beautiful?” The king asked sadly. He turned to Nagilla with a questing look. The sage’s eyes grew soft and kinder for a moment. There was a momentary flicker of white light within, like reflected starlight. Nagilla flicked his gaze over the room then returned his gaze to the king.

“My king, it is beautiful indeed, and will remain so until after your death. But even a beautiful woman must die when there is only evil within. The beautiful tree that bears rotten fruit must be cut down and thrown in the fire.” The king nodded, resigned. He went to the balcony doors and pushed them open. A gentle rush of cool air filled the room.

“So,” He moved to change the subject. “What news? Was our plan successful?” He motioned for Nagilla to follow him out to the balcony.

“All is ready, Your Greatness. All four of your sons born of the concubines have been dispersed through some of the wild tribes. I’ve had wise men and wise women infiltrate these tribes long ago to prepare for this time. These know the old ways and the old rites. Divine Will shall see to the rest.”

“A shame my royal sons were not fit for the task.”

“Had they still been babes they would have been but bloodline of the Red Kings is what is important. Bloodlines rise and fall, many die out but a promise has been made to your line. Bastard or true-born, they are of the blood.”

“Are they gone, safe from here already?”

“Yes. To the far corners of the world. Which one will take seed we do not know but the bloodline has been preserved. The darkness comes.”

“How long will it last?”

“It was told to me that it shall last through five ages.”

“That long? And the line can be preserved through all that time?”

“Do you doubt it now?”

“No, no. But my forebears and I have built this kingdom with our might and by a god’s hand. I sit at the apex of what was once holy and sacred only for it to crumble. One does not accept such a fall easily, even when the prophecy comes from a god.”

They grew quiet again. High above and just under the thin horizon floated the great balloons of the new star stations built for the Star Guild. They seemed from this distance like perfectly shaped oval clouds. The stations were beginning to descend. On the morrow he would hear new reports of the guild’s progress on the new star maps.

“Into the dust we all go, as we all came. What things will look like I do not know. Only that He has sent many of us to labor under the darkness bringing light here and there and keeping the light burning where it does not extinguish, until the time for rebirth. All the things that will be needed for that future day will be preserved. Do not worry, my king.” Nagilla pointed towards the floating stations. “The progress, the machines, the new knowledge your Star Guild and the Alchemist Guilds have acquired, all these good things will come again. They will come when the people are ready and the time is right.” The sage turned to face the king squarely.

“My king, my journey in this place comes to an end tonight, as you well know. I have been called home.”

“We shall not see the likes of your kind again, Nagilla.”

“Nor yours. At least, not in this age.”

“Yet, I am a defect.”

“We have been through all this before, my king. Who are you to decide what is defective? That defect has become the reason the peoples have prospered under you and your forebears.”

“Yet, with these coming schisms it will be forgotten and trampled underfoot.”

“And then in that future time, the long memory of time will be awakened again. I bid you farewell, my king.”

“Farewell my friend. Your counsel and wisdom was like cold water upon the dry throat. It will be missed.”

“And I shall miss you.” Said the sage. The king gathered the wide sleeves of his robes, threw them back and embraced the sage. Nagilla embraced him with equal affection. Then he gathered his own rough-hewn robes and strode out of the king’s study. The air in the narrow, high halls of the palace were crisp, flowing in from unseen vents in the gilded ceilings. It signaled that fall was coming. He passed by all the familiar rich, moving tapestries, through the long, vaulted halls, passed by the servants, most of whom greeted him with due respect. He would miss Cera the head cook and her little daughter

Laina, who always made him special little breads and cakes during festival times and always made sure that whenever he visited the summer palace on an extended stay that besides the king's household, he was served the richest dishes, though he had no need of such delicacies. Still, he'd always appreciated them.

When Nagilla had finally reached the gates he permitted himself a last look around the grounds. Nothing surpassed the beauty of Assenna in the whole land of Hybron, or anywhere else and he had traveled the world over many years ago. The pinnacle of that beauty was the summer palace, with its ivory white towers and spires that gleamed in both sunlight and moonlight. The many levels of verdant gardens of rare kata flowers and tended fruit trees, the pools and waterfalls that surrounded the palace from the grounds to the lower towers. No wonder so many assumed that things would always be as they were. No wonder the visions of its destruction still galled the king.

A small delegation of officials were making their way up the main roadway to the steps. Some of them gave him the customary slight bow of respect due a desert holy man but most of them paid him no heed. Such was the age Nagilla found himself in. Sages like him were becoming irrelevant. Even derided by less charitable subjects. Most of the people living under the prosperous rays of the last Red King had no clue about the terrors they would face when he was gone nor did they care. And why would they? When any kind of bauble, food, spice, cloth and pursuit could be had, who needed a life of prayer, rituals, obedience? Who needed meditation on higher things that no one could see? It was all counted as foolishness and he a foolish relic of the past. It was at this thought that he permitted himself to feel despair for Assenna and all the peoples of Hybron. Even so, the old ways would be kept in some form by a few in Hybron and by some within the wild tribes out in the high desert.

He was let out through the gates and from the palace grounds and made his way towards the Last Gate. In the time he'd made his way from the palace to the streets he perceived clouds gathering. The wind had changed. Rain was coming. Rain rarely fell in Hybron. When it did, it was always a time for celebration. People gathered the water in jars and tanks attached to their houses and some of it was often offered up in tribute to whatever god they worshiped.

Nagilla wound through the streets, keeping to the wide, broad thoroughfares. They were busy but not nearly as crowded as during the day. He passed one of the large, central markets. Most vendors were gone for the day, a few were still closing up shop.

The rain, fine like silt, fell softly and covered the land in blessed dampness and wet. He passed jumbled neighborhood enclaves, smoking dens, minor temples and facades that hid underground tunnels. As the streets grew narrower and darker, the lantern lights grew more scarce and the shadows long. He felt eyes watching him. Shadowy figures were tailing him. This time he would not avoid them. He would teach a lesson. The rain fell harder. The air was moist and fragrant, strong with the slow decay of many things. Nagilla could smell and taste the air slipping down his throat. It was pregnant with fruit from the thousands of trees lining the streets, incense, opium, tar, perfume, smoke and goat meat or chicken stewing in myriads of pots. The watching and the spying was now a frequent occurrence after the political and religious riots in the capital. Opposing groups seemingly sprang up everywhere even in the neighboring city of Jhis. Nagilla approached one of the larger temples of Hec, the sun god and ducked swiftly behind a column. The temple was draped in dim light from the fires within and in deep shadow. Soon he saw the shadows of his followers spilling out across the polished stone floor. Three men surrounded him dressed in black tunics, their faces covered. One stood boldly in front. He was as tall as the sage.

"It is me you are looking for," Nagilla said calmly.

"It is not personal. Only business." The three brandished long, hunting knives. The first one lunged at him, quick as a snake, grabbing him by the neck and slashed at his throat. The other two rounded the column and came in behind him and immediately fell upon Nagilla, stabbing furiously but as soon as the first man had grabbed hold of him, his hand froze and then turned grayish white, calcifying into stone. This calcification spread to his arm and down his chest. The assassin gasped in horror, dropping his knife. It clattered uselessly to the ground. He opened his mouth to scream but the spread of the stone engulfed him until he was only a statue of stone and salt. The other two men also were turned into stone and salt. The third only partially so. Nagilla grabbed him and snapped off his calcified arm. A searing, white light issued forth from his eyes as he cauterized the gaping wound of the man's arm at the elbow. The man, in shock, was sweating profusely and stared at Nagilla with dread in his eyes. He began pleading for his life.

"Be silent and go! This night you and your companions have committed a grave offense against the Lord of the Deep Heavens. I am one of His emissaries, one of the great sages of old. Do not ever lift your hand against any innocent man again. Go and make amends for your evil and stay away from the Ainash if you value your soul in the coming destruction! Go!" Nagilla threatened. The man, quaking in fear and pain stumbled and then ran off into the night. Nagilla stood, unharmed by the attack. He kicked the knives away and threw down the stone arm. It crashed and splintered.

"Nor was that personal." He shook his head sadly. It was not the first time someone sought to have him put to death. He now fully understood the king's lament. He wanted to gather all the peoples back to the old ways and protect them but it was not to be. The faithful would disperse before the tide of blood and fire came. Perhaps that lone assassin would wake up and walk the Red Path. The other two would stand as a confusing and unknown monument to ignorant people by tomorrow. Nagilla pulled on his hood went his way out into the rain.

He approached the massive Last Gate that held off the desert from civilization. He knew the men here.

"Halt! The hour is late. Who wishes to leave?" Called the head guard.

"I do."

"Who are you?" Asked the guard gruffly. Another man handed the guard a lantern and three of them approached, two older gatekeepers and a young one.

"I am the guardian of shadow who assists those who wish to pass from light to darkness and from darkness to light."

"Nagilla!"

"Burdun, old friend."

"It has been too long!" Burdun embraced him as Nagilla threw off his hood. "It is good that you came when you did. An hour later and the doors will be locked for the night."

"Who is he?" Asked the young man.

"He is one of the voices out of time who walks the earth with mortal men." Burdun said.

"For a time, but my time has come to an end, Burdun."

"Many of us have figured this. We have looked to the prophecies. We will miss you." Said the third guard, named Sabo.

"May the old ways live on in you men, Burdun and Sabo."

"They shall. The path will be rocky, the way dark but one day all will be well again."

"Where will you go, lord sage?" Asked the young man.

"Lord? No child, only Nagilla." The sage chided gently. Sabo cuffed him on the ear.

"Never mind him. He is young and not so swift. Go in peace, Nagilla." Said Sabo.

"I am leaving but others will come."

"But what is your *true* name?" Persisted the young man. "I have never met a desert sage but I had heard the desert holy men have more than one name!"

"And why should you ask, young Ketu? It is too wonderful for you. If you hear my true name from the blessed realms your ears would bleed. So be content. I am Nagilla." Ketu marveled.

"But how did he know my name?" He whispered to Burdun. Burdun laughed warmly.

"You look upon one who can tell a vision or prophecy long before it happens and you marvel at names?"

"There are not many of us about anymore, Burdun. Do not be too hard on him." Nagilla said. He turned to all the guards who had come to see him.

"Farewell Sabo, Burdun and Ketu and to all of you," He said to the gathered men and called up to those that stood atop the gate looking down with lanterns.

"Open the doors!" Shouted Burdun. Slowly the great doors heaved open slightly a few feet. Nagilla caught a glimpse of the shadow of the vast aqueduct to the left outside the city walls, filling with rain water. It ran from Assenna, the capital, all the way to the western border of Hybron. During the day it stood like a massive structure of bones shaped and sculpted over ages and now it loomed like the shadow of a fearsome siege tower. He pulled his robes close about his shoulders and disappeared into the deepening dusk.

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The gatekeepers watched the figure of the sage disappear.

"What will happen now? What about our people?"

"Do not worry yet, Ketu." Said Burdun. "We are still free to worship as we will, as is everyone else, as long as the king lives. The prophets, the sages, the Fathers and Mothers have time yet, and even when the darkness finally falls. Then we hide."

"I only wish we were at the end of the prophecy instead of the beginning."

"So do I but none of us can choose where to appear in the stream of time." The great rams' horns of the central temple of the Aishanna-La sounded for the Prayers of Night.

"I want go to the temple to pray tonight masters!" Said the young man excitedly. The others laughed. Sabo winked at him knowingly.

"Go then, Ketu. Perhaps you will find a wife there too. Hurry, before the Ainash come back and put a stop to it!" Sabo jested.

Women had always come to the temple to pray and worship. A few older ones became Temple Mothers and in rare cases, some women took up the calling as desert prophetesses. It was the same as it always had been, since anyone could remember. Yet, divergent groups within the ranks, the sect of the Ainash being one of the most powerful, had risen over the years protesting this right and they were becoming more strident and violent in their opposition to women taking any part in religious life. And these were just the groups that kept the ways of the Aishanna-La. These ideas had taken root in a few other groups well before they had infected the faithful. Other groups, political and religious, also opposed the Aishanna-La for other reasons. Opposition everywhere was growing. They all opposed the Red King but dared not speak against the king openly. Yet.

The young man raced off towards the central temple. Two other gatekeepers took their places as Burdun and Sabo

went inside the little booth that sat beside the massive doors. Sabo rolled up his sleeves, untied his leather bands and washed his hands and arms at a stone bowl by the booth door. He dried them, bent his knees and prayed. Burdun looked out across the city night scape. It was dark now except for the cream white lanterns that dotted the streets and front porches of houses. They looked like tiny, balloon star stations from where he stood. There was a vast spray of stars in the violet black sky, slowly being engulfed by rain clouds. *"Like the darkness that is covering the twilight. . ."* He recalled a passage from the Aishanna. He would begin his own prayers after Sabo finished. Everything was changing and not for the better. But was that not the way of the world? The Lord of the Deep saw it from beginning to end and knew His purpose even as Man lived and died like the grasses of the steppes. The night spoke to him. All was silent in the night except the natural world and the thoughts of a contemplative mind. He loved the Prayers of Night ritual for this very reason. Tomorrow would be another day but the times in which they lived would never see the Dawn. Only people far into the future would. Burdun was weary. He would pray. It was its own power and solace. He would pray for the land, for the city, for the people and for the king.

. . .

He could hear riders coming. He motioned sharply to the servant.

"Their horses will need water." He snapped. The servant left quickly. The man poured himself wine from a delicate, glass ewer, then he poured some in the other two goblets. He glanced approvingly at his engraved, golden arm bands, then flicked his sleeve over his left arm. Footfalls approached the door and there was a knock.

"Come!" Two of his hired men came in. Dust and sand fell from their cloaks and boots.

"Well?" He demanded. He drank deeply from the goblet and stared at them expectantly.

"My Lord Tybbl, two of the caravans with your spies have already disappeared into the high desert. It will be yet a long time before we hear from them. The spy with the third caravan was accidentally killed by tribesman in the middle of a feud. That thread is now lost."

"Killed, you say?" He sucked his teeth. "What a waste. But there are two left. What were the caravans doing in the city? I'm sure it was more than simple trade. Have you two heard anything yet?"

"Last I heard, they had business at the palace some time ago. With one of those desert holy men, Lord Tybbl." Said one of the men.

"*Holy men!*" Lord Tybbl's words were loaded with scorn.

"We do not know for a certainty. . .we think. . ." Started the first man again.

"You *think*, Luwain?"

"My lord, the wild tribes are extremely dangerous and suspicious of city people. This is careful, slow work. Two of the spies are traveling with two tribes as we speak. How they will manage to get information is anyone's guess but it is their business. We can only trust them and wait for news at this point. It will be a long time in coming." Said Luwain.

"Someone from the royal family is behind this. Perhaps even the king himself." Said the second man.

"Yes."

"I wonder. What tribes were these caravans from, exactly?" Asked Lord Tybbl.

"I noticed one of the caravans in particular. Most of these people had the garb and tattoos of the polar tribes of the north."

"That far? Great stars! Why would northern peoples come this far south? The peoples beyond the great mountains of the west are unknown. Are they even truly *people*?" The other men shrugged. Lord Tybbl sighed in frustration.

"Something got out! Some kind of information, a person, a secret, something! And it's traveling with those tribes out into the deep desert!"

"You still mean to muster an army, my lord?" Asked the second man.

"Sending armies after wild tribes is a dangerous affair. An unpredictable, savage people. Bred for warfare and unafraid of anything. It will also not go unnoticed by the king." Said Luwain.

"I have changed my mind, Lisson. We must needs wait for more information from our plants. Let us hope they survive the trek. As for the kingdom of Assenna, I and others have plans for removing the kingship."

"How?" Asked the men eagerly. One of them went to take up a goblet.

"Never-ending unrest." He blocked the goblets and motioned towards a large stone bowl by the door. The first man removed his copper arm bands and washed his hands and arms. The second stood aloof from this ritual.

"Ah. I had forgotten, you are not of the Ainash, Lisson. Forgive me. Come. Sit down and have a drink and we will talk of many things." He then offered the wine. Breaking the night's stillness in their hideout outside the city was the fall of the rain.

"Rain. Finally. Great gods above." Said Luwain, who set about polishing his bands after washing and sitting down.

"Phah! One more thing the people will credit to that abomination sitting on the throne."

"The king, you mean? My lord, come now!" Said Luwain, grinning widely.

"I do mean *him*. I have also sent men to do away with that favorite sage of his."

"Some say he has special powers." Said Lisson taking a drink.

"Surely you do not believe such nonsense?" Said Lord Tybbl. "You are not even one of us."

"No I am not. But I have seen things. Great feats long ago, from when there were far more of those sages around."

"You sound like an ignorant, old woman. Magicians' tricks, I tell you. This is an age of machines and explorations and learning. Nay, the tricks these withered desert fathers and haggard old crones throw up is something they took from a once impossible, wonderful machine. They can make anything look a trick with a machine or contraption that is advanced enough. That is what they are after all. Tricksters."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps their powers are real." Lisson countered. Luwain scoffed.

"You cannot be serious?" They both stared at him, incredulous. Lisson merely shrugged. Lord Tybbl heaved an irritated sigh.

"Real or not, we lords and principals of the kingdom have our positions and livelihoods to look after. Our culture is at stake. Think those so-called holy men care for any of that? They munch on locusts and dirt and their own excrement and scream the end is nigh! They love the sound of their own voices. Listening to them is like listening for wisdom in the wind. Wisdom cannot be found there. Our culture and our civilization is where it can be found." Lord Tybbl sniffed. Lisson glanced at the stone bowl then looked back at him.

"So, you are not religious, then?" Lisson asked. They both looked at him.

"I am, when necessary. Not overly so. It is one of many levers that keeps the people in line."

"Oh. I was confused for a moment."

"You are right, my lord!" Said Luwain. Lord Tybbl grinned and narrowed his eyes.

"Forget the holy men! Forget rituals! I will tell you a thing - I have peered into the future and I do not see room for another Red King. The line ends with this one."

"Easier said than done." Said Lisson.

"Do you doubt the mission?" Asked Luwain. His copper arm bands shined like mirrors. Lisson wore no such bands, not being of the Ainash or the Aishanna-La.

"You sun-worshippers are a strange people. But we have one thing in common. We want an end to this tyrant on the throne." Lisson nodded and drained his goblet. He wondered at the Ainash. They were such contentious, spiteful men it seemed to him and they had no regard for their women. In that, they were much like the beast-like dragon -worshippers and the Strab, a sinister sect that kept their women hidden in underground enclaves. His own people had no such odd notions. Women had their duties as wives and mothers in the home but in religious life and in the healing arts a woman's wisdom was greatly respected. Little did these venal Ainash know that his own people had no use for them once the king was gone. There was only room for one god and that was Hec, as far as Lisson was concerned. Hec was the only god one could see, who also demonstrated His great power by riding his chariot across the sky every day and bestowing his glory upon the crops of believers and unbelievers alike, since the Age of Creation. Why worship something you could not see? One might as well make up a god and worship it. Naturally, Lisson did not volunteer these thoughts.

"There is only one problem with the plan. The most difficult part of any plan is the waiting. And we will need lots of it." Luwain reminded them again of the issue of time.

"Yes. And throughout that time many hidden levers have been put into place. One day, years from now we will pull them all."

"Rest assuredly." Said Luwain.

"We may not be the ones doing the pulling, my lord. When that day comes, we may all have reached an ancient age or we will all be dead." Said Lisson.

"There are others who will finish the work. One day this whole land will be set ablaze. A never ending fire." The three conspirators fell silent at this thought, each concerned with what the fire and darkness had come to mean to him. Far in the distance they heard the call for the Prayers of Night. Lord Tybbl made a disgusted sound.

"What is the matter, my lord? You do not pray any longer?" asked Luwain, grinning.

"I do. But not at the temples within the city. Too many women and common rabble. I prefer the Mountain Citadel and its temple."

"That far, my lord?"

"Close enough for me. When it is all said and done, when the wars and fires start, the citadel will be the place the people will flock to. In fact, more move there every year. Those sympathetic to our concerns. No women are allowed within its temple and only literates and educated men can enter the temple."

"A good thing. How it should be." Said Luwain. "I have wondered something, my lord. They say the king's own sons hate him. Perhaps they can aid us? Perhaps we should back one of them. . ."

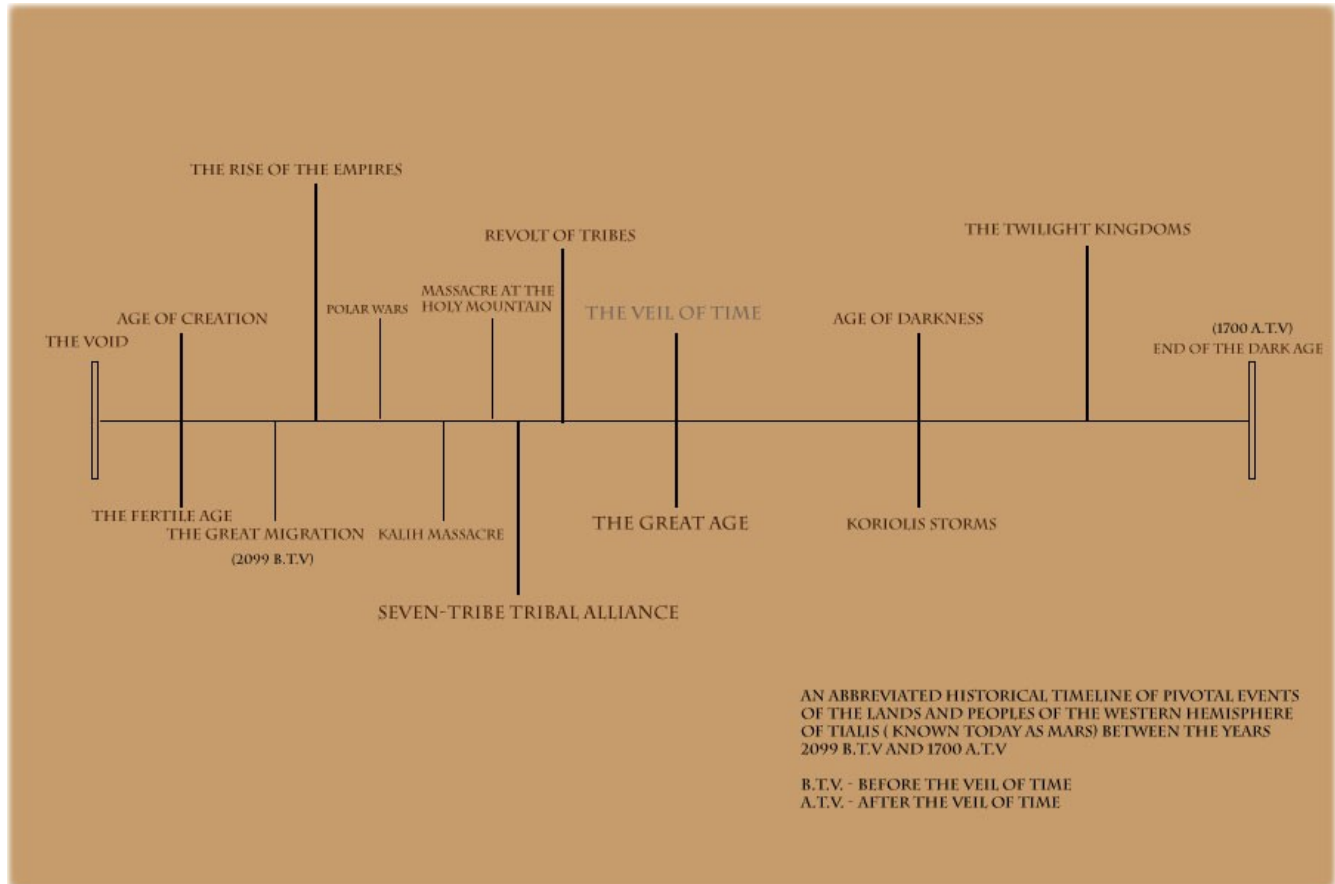
"Perhaps they can. We can find some use for them in the scheme of things, maybe even lend support if they can demonstrate that they can help us but they remain the king's sons. Through them the monstrosity lives. They are of the blood. Even sons who are sympathetic to our cause must die in the end. The entire royal line must be destroyed, else they will always remain a threat to us all." Lord Tybbl lifted up his goblet and sipped. The wine was very dry and astringent. The taste reminded him of the difficult tasks that lay ahead. He poured more wine for himself and his spies.

"Death to the king." He said coldly. The other two toasted him, unafraid and bold, now that they were outside the city

walls.

“Death to the king!”

The distant sounds of the rams' horns eventually died away.



This short story is a prequel to the upcoming *Red World* trilogy.

Look for the first book of the trilogy late fall, 2012.

It will be partially serialized on the blog.

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