

Hamulkuk and the Moon Dragons

:edda nar hamulkuk a' dehr ell' adrim:

As told by the Living Book at Shalamai to Gremorgan Hedj, Maturi of the Grand Circle
and servant to the Silvan Tree.



"It is the imperative of our creation that determines who we are. We kill because it is our purpose. We burn and we destroy because it is our duty, but it is not all that we can be. We are who we are because of the designs of those who made us, but I would say that we are more than the petty objectives of our Masters. We are Hresh'na and in this life we are greater than those that have given us breath. I would say that there are choices that we can make, and a capacity within ourselves to define a destiny of our own."

Attributed to Hamulkuk the Destroyer, First Hresh in the World.



"What is myth? Is it a tale told, once founded in fact but in the telling of countless generations embellished and retold until nothing remains of its truth? Or is it something far more potent, a truth given utterance as a faithful recount of real events and great deeds, which in its telling remains immutable to change, its message too important to alter? I would say that the tale that is about to unfold is the latter. No witnesses survive to lay testament to its truth, no scrolls or temple walls remain that might give its story credence, but it is truth nonetheless. In these words can be found the first history of the Oera'dim in the world, told with each successive generation and committed to the memories of the Living Books for all eternity. Here is the story of Hamulkuk, known also to some as Amakek, the First Hresh to find breath in the world, and the travails of his destruction of the Ell'adrim, who we know in these modern times as the Moon Dragons."

"It is well-known to all Oera'dim that the first few moments of consciousness we experience exist as void and nothingness. In these glimmering heartbeats before our struggling birth within the loose soils of Gorgoroth, we find ourselves floating within a great darkness, only the sound of a monstrous wind pushing us inexorably towards the World Above and a new life in mortal form. In this short time we are given little but the Code that we must live by, and the assurance that Beings of our own kind are waiting for us somewhere beyond the darkness. It is a time of confusion and fear, but one that passes as we find our way from the borders of Gorgoroth and are met by those who show us our place in the world. It can be said that for Hamulkuk such was not the manner of his emergence.

Manufactured as an artifice of magic he was a Being unique, the first of the Oera'dim and a creature made for a specific purpose. For him life began not in confusion but with the surety that he had a mission, and that until its end his existence would be one of pain and sacrifice. For Hamulkuk there could be no doubt, and those that had made him ensured this would be so.

In those moments of void that would have been his only peace he was instead bombarded with the knowledge of a race that was already ancient before his conception. Designed as a weapon for a war that had already gone on far too long he was given everything he would need to fight and survive against an enemy that had proven itself doughty and determined. To make him resilient he was given cunning and intelligence. To strike fear into those he would kill he harboured a ferocious brutality, and to ensure his obedience he was bound to a spell of magic that would channel his every thought to

the needs of his Masters. In that age of violence he was to be a perfect weapon, a warrior built for a war of extermination.

What Hamulkuk could not know as he lingered in the Great Void, was that his Masters were not perfect, nor all-knowing. For in the time of his creation he was truly the last chance for a race that bordered upon on the edge of destruction, the hubris of their ways having brought them almost to the brink of extinction. For the Trell'sara the power they had wished for themselves had evaporated in the turmoil of a great war, and if they were to win they needed something more powerful than themselves to finish it. In that time of desperation their answer would be Hamulkuk.



It is a truth of our history that the Trell'sara were created by the Silvan Tree as Guardians, Keepers of the Eternal Forests that had thrived under the stewardship of the Great Tree. It is said that the Trell'sara were formed from the essence of the living leaves of their creator, imbued with a mortal form but given an ageless life span that could only be cut short through accident or misadventure. More importantly they were created to serve the trees of the world and to provide assistance to another race of beings we know only as the Forgotten Ones. Who they were is a mystery that provides no answer in this world. We do not know who they were, nor where they came from, only that they entered our world from somewhere else and found sanctuary beneath the canopy of the eternal forests. For the Great Tree the new visitors were a revelation, adding their voices and language to the music of the forest, their laughter and joy an accompaniment to the movement of branch and leaf in the wind. Though great in number they trod the paths of their new home lightly, finding a place within the trees that added beauty and life to the creation tended by the Tree. For a Power that had never known companionship the Forgotten Ones became a balm unsought but welcomed, and in their company an ocean of time passed as the Great Tree's dominion grew in strength and power.

It came to pass that the Great Tree offered a boon to her companions. Beloved by the Silvan Tree for the care the Forgotten Ones had given to her domain, she offered to them the power of EarthMagic, but they refused, their concern that with great power came even greater temptation, and the loss of the peaceful existence that had been theirs for millennia. As a gift the Great Tree instead offered the Trell'sara as reward for their wisdom, to act as servants to the eternal forest and provide all that the Forgotten Ones might wish without the need to wield power themselves. To her new creations the Silvan Tree granted the ability to harness EarthMagic, and the free will to make lives also within the protection of her domain. It proved an act of innocent folly that would bring down the Great Tree and plunge all into war.

Although it is known to all Oera'dim that the Trell'sara were false and treacherous Beings they had not been created so. For the Great Tree her attempt at providing an ease for the burdens of the Forgotten Ones was a gift honestly given and an offering of gratitude. For an age of time the Guardians gave service to the Forgotten Ones but unknown to even the Tree herself they laboured and plotted, their only intent to take dominion of Emur for themselves. It is not known what turned them to deceit and avarice but it is evident that just as the Forgotten Ones feared the corruption of great power so that same power corrupted the Guardians, turning their purpose of service and care into a need for domination and malice. Within an atmosphere of machination and plotting there came a time when the forest fell silent, an expectation of disaster gripping all that lived beneath the trees.

In the shadowed places of the world the Trell'sara schemed and laboured, their ambition to throw down the Great Tree and destroy her favoured peoples. On a terrible day of betrayal the Trell'sara tricked the Silvan Tree and in a moment of distraction attacked her, hacking down her limbs and severing her from the dark earth that had been her home. In a final humiliation her remains were

flung into a deep pit, and to the knowledge of the Trell'sara she was destroyed.

History tells us that the Great Tree survived her ordeal, to grow anew again in the deep reaches of the world, but on that day of reckoning she was broken and diminished, unable to help those that had been her greatest joy. For the Trell'sara it was the beginning of a war that had only one objective, and only one ending.

Before news could spread of the treachery brought to the Great Tree the Trell'sara fell upon the Forgotten Ones. In great number they swarmed into the deep forests and began their murderous attack, their intention to remove the Silvan Tree's beloved companions from the world. What confronted them proved instead that they had actioned a traitorous plan, long in the making but flawed from its inception.

Standing before the Trell'sara as they advanced were not the peaceful people they had expected, soft from long years of safety and comfort and unprepared for war. The Forgotten Ones were a peaceful people but they were not defenceless, and their years in the sanctuary of the Forest had not been spent in quiet indolence. Quickly they organised a defence and the true strength of their host soon became apparent. In their haste to take Emur for themselves the Trell'sara had attacked an enemy prepared for war, and able to marshal far greater numbers than they had expected or could hope to match. The War of Tree and Leaf had begun, and it would not be the easy victory the Guardians had assumed it would be.

From the four corners of the world the Forgotten Ones arose, the power of their multitude growing as they gathered to throw back the assault of a race they had understood to be their friends. Nomadic in nature but ordered in their society they brought together a vast host, well-organised and equipped for war.

Caught in the jaws of a conflict that had quickly turned against them the Trell'sara retreated to the mountains of the west, their plans of domination and genocide withering before a determined foe that had found even greater strength in their discovery of the fate of the Silvan Tree. Battling for survival the Trell'sara bolstered their mountain territories and looked for a way to escape the folly of their ill conceived aggression. Their answer came from an ambitious Guardian who would come to be known to his own kind as Aggeron, and to all else as the Darkness.



It is with the ambitions of Aggeron of House Delving that the fortunes of the Trell'sara shifted. As has been said before, the Guardians were of mortal form though gifted with an endless mortality. In these ancient times the Trell'sara had not yet protected themselves behind cloaks of magic and shadow and each was as open to death as any of their enemies. Many of the Trell'sara died in the opening debacle of the war and Aggeron saw no advantage in it. What he proposed instead would be creatures of EarthMagic, created as weapons and used for the glory of the Trell'sara, to fight their war on their behalf. It was an idea that quickly took hold even though their capability to create such weapons had yet to be tested.

As the War of Tree and Leaf ground on, Aggeron and a small cadre of the most knowledgeable of the Guardians retired to the north of the world, to a barren plain bordered on two sides by immense arching spires of stone. In this place, which is known to us as the Horns of Gorgoroth, and at the time lay far from the battles that were quickly consuming the remaining numbers of their kind, the Trell'sara began their experiments.

It can be said that the capacity to create life is a gift that should only be given to those who can look down upon a world and judge the consequences of its existence. The Trell'sara were not Beings of such calibre and to them the creations that they brought into the world were no more than tools, to be

used for a purpose and then discarded without thought. Long they delved into the mysteries of EarthMagic and in time brought into the world a creature that they called the Gaelwch. Such a beast has long left our world, its spectral form locked away from the memories of our existence in a place that has remained hidden, but in the time of its creation it lived as a manifestation of malice and cruelty that even the Trell'sara could not control. Designed as an elemental beast it gave no service to its creators and instead went upon a rampage of destruction, its only mission the death of anything that might stand in its way. Many Trell'sara died before they caught and locked it away, its body destroyed but its essence bound to a vault that should never be found. With its demise however, new knowledge came to the Guardians and they used what they had learned to bring a far more vicious manifestation of their hatred into the world.

The first of the Dragons were not the monstrous beasts that we know of today. Smaller and imbued with little intelligence they found no effect on the battlefield. Like their predecessor they proved an uncontrollable part of a war that was quickly being lost, but unlike the Gaelwch the Trell'sara had formulated a Word of Dissolution, a spell of EarthMagic that could stifle and remove the spark of life that gave such creatures their existence. When it was judged that the Dragons held no value to the Guardians they were removed with the utterance of the spell that took those first Dragons from the world forever, leaving nothing in their wake.

In those dark days the Trell'sara laboured on, Aggeron attempting to create a creature that might operate alone in the face of their enemies and be under their control completely. It was only as desperation spread through their ranks that the Guardian found what he believed to be the key to the development of an ultimate weapon.



In a moment of inspiration Aggeron decided to build a monstrous creature, one that might set fear into the hearts of the Forgotten Ones yet still be held within the thrall of its creators. Taking their previous designs to a new expression of malice they built a Great Dragon, more powerful than those that had gone before, who they called the Ell'adrim, and invested in its substance an addiction to gold in all its forms. As is the way of such things the Ell'adrim were infused with the spirit of the precious metal, immutable and ageless, but unable to live without it. In the creature's mind it would do anything for gold, and the Trell'sara controlled the mining and extraction of the precious metal. If the Dragon wanted gold it would have to do as the Guardians commanded.

The first Ell'adrim proved merciless in the prosecution of its duty. Thrown into battle the Great Beast destroyed its enemies, sending the assembled host of the Forgotten Ones into disarray and confusion. Never had they seen such a creature and in its majestic posture it was a terror that none of the Silvan Tree's folk could stand against. Beaten at the foothills of the western mountains the Forgotten Ones retreated to their forest homes and searched for a viable defence against their new foe.

Encouraged by their victory the Trell'sara immediately set to the task of building more of the Ell'adrim. In great number the Moon Dragons were created, vast creatures of scale and leathery wings, silver black in countenance, their bodies a shimmering landscape of moonlight incarnate. And as was the way of the Trell'sara none were left idle. Immediately their new charges were sent into the world to hunt and destroy, to root out every vestige of the Forgotten Ones and remove them from existence. It was a dark time of violence and fear but one the Forgotten Ones survived, for in their desperation the Trell'sara had once again failed to stand back and consider the consequences of their ill-thought creation.

They had built the Ell'adrim to win a war but to control them they had addicted them to gold. In their eagerness they had created an army of the creatures and had given no thought on the amount of

the scarce metal that would be needed to keep the Moon Dragons satisfied and compliant. It came to pass quickly that the demands of their new weapons had to be left unanswered, and with their inability to find the required metal a terrible vengeance fell upon the Guardians.

From their nests in the far Mountains of Ul'ashma the Ell'adrim marshalled their number and moved upon the Trell'sara themselves. Stronghold after stronghold fell as the Moon Dragons exacted a cruel tribute from every butchered Guardian they could find, despoiling them of their personal jewelry and breaking apart their homes. In the midst of this turmoil the Forgotten Ones saw a chance to end the War quickly and again marched against their enemies. It was almost the end of the Trell'sara but again it was Aggeron who came to the fore, and it is in the midst of this great furore that Hamulkuk took his first breath.

In truth Aggeron had been dissatisfied with his new creations even at their inception. He foresaw that even though the Ell'adrim were impressive and lethal creatures, they were altogether too big to complete the task of genocide that had always been his overarching objective. He reasoned that for the Trell'sara to have dominion of the world there could be no place in it for even a remnant of the Forgotten Ones. His sole purpose lay in their utter destruction and he knew that the Moon Dragons would turn the tide of battle but they could not win the war. He recognised that his enemy was a determined and cunning foe, adept at the ways of the vast Forest and sure to have many hiding places. The Ell'adrim could keep the Forgotten Ones on the run but it would take an altogether different creation to finish the job. In the darkest recesses of his thoughts Aggeron knew that any new creation would have to be one similar to the enemy they must fight, able to go where the enemy might hide and in the bloody business of extermination harbour no concept of mercy in its prosecution.

And so Aggeron laboured on. When word reached him of the betrayal of the Ell'adrim he brought his new creation into the world and knew without hesitation that he had found his weapon, and that it would be the salvation of his people. For Hamulkuk the trials of his existence were about to begin.



Standing at the borders of Gorgoroth Aggeron looked upon his new creation and was well pleased. Here was the epitome of his vision, a creature of war, unconstrained by any concept of mercy and one truly obedient to its Master. In the red light of dusk the Hresh'na stood quiet but alert. Roughly the same in size and form as the Forgotten Ones it would soon face, the warrior had been built well muscled and ready for the rigors of its place in the world. Aggeron had spent some time in the design of his creation and had ensured that it was in every way physically superior to its enemies. Equipped with perfect night vision, an almost inexhaustible stamina and skin that changed to match the textures of any environment it might have to fight in, Hamulkuk was built for war and as lethal as any weapon that the Trell'sara could both create and control. To this weapon Aggeron gave but one concession to vanity. Along the length of its arm he artficed a tattoo similar to that of his own house, marking it as his alone. This warrior would be his weapon and no others.

Unlike his previous creations he was not about to trust to Hamulkuk's obedience however. For all the Oera'dim that might follow he had decided that something must bind them to his will, and he had no illusion that they should be obedient to anyone but himself. Upon Hamulkuk he artficed a new spell, a Word of Command that bound the Hresh to whomever might utter the Word upon him. For the First Hresh it was the first word heard as he stepped out into the living world and it stole his free will from him in an instant.

"Do you know who you are?" Aggeron asked as the warrior came before him.

Hamulkuk nodded, a compulsion to do whatever this Being commanded undeniable and insistent. "I am yours to command, Master. Tell me how I must serve."

Aggeron smiled and turned to a number of other Trell'sara that stood close. "Go with these Masters and they shall teach you the ways of war. You are my warrior Hamulkuk, and I have need of you."

The Hresh lowered his head and made for the assembled group. For Aggeron the warrior would be the first of many but it was a weapon unproven, one that needed to be tested. As he watched his creation walk away he already knew how he would measure his new warrior's mettle and in his thoughts there existed only malice and vengeance.

In the days that followed Hamulkuk learned the power of the body he had been given and became familiar with the weapons that would be his to wield. Of those that were placed before him it was the scimitar that found most favour in his hands, and soon it became his only blade, forged in blue steel and honed to an edge that could hew any living thing. For Aggeron, who watched from his pavilion as the warrior was schooled and tested in the arts of his new life, his growing satisfaction was quickly tempered by news arising from the far south and west of the world. Messengers arrived on the fourth day of Hamulkuk's training with dire tidings of battles lost, and the retreat of the Moon Dragons to their nests at Ul'ashma. Although caught off-guard by the first attacks of the Ell'adrim the Forgotten Ones had found a way to repel their assaults, using the deep forest to lay ambush and then meld back into the undergrowth. It was a strategy that quickly disheartened the Moon Dragons and unwilling to lose more of their number had retired to their nests in the western mountains. Frustrated in their assault they began to fight amongst each other and then accost those of the Trell'sara that still foolishly held any golden metal in their possession. It was a time of devastation and one that suited the personal ambitions of Aggeron perfectly.

From the safety of the borders of Gorgoroth Aggeron sent forth a messenger to the strongholds of his brethren. Salvation would be theirs he proclaimed, but only at the cost of their own freedom. He would deliver the Guardians from certain destruction and give over to the Trell'sara dominion of the world, but he must be their Dominus and they must obey him. It was a bargain that desperation made easy and the other Trell'sara acceded to his will all too quickly.

With their collective strength now his to command Aggeron began his quest to grind down the Forgotten Ones and remove the threat of the Ell'adrim from the shoulders of the Guardians. The Forgotten Ones were the greater nemesis but they could not be defeated if the Ell'adrim were allowed to continue in their destruction of the Trell'sara strongholds. It would be to the Moon Dragons' lairs that Hamulkuk would be sent first, his success there proof of the First Hresh's effectiveness, and confirmation to all the Guardians that Aggeron would be a worthy Dominus.

With haste he completed Hamulkuk's training and stood proud before the warrior he had brought into the world. Here was the instrument of his ascension to leadership of the Trell'sara but everything depended on the Hresh's effectiveness. Satisfied with his creation's preparation he found circumstances working in his favour for he had a plan to bring hope back to his brethren, and in doing so cement his place as Dominus.

There was one thing he did not have however. Hamulkuk was his warrior but the Moon Dragons were no simple foe. The Trell'sara had been able to remove their previous creations with the utterance of a Word of Dissolution, and although they had tried the spell did not work against the Ell'adrim. The melding of the Ell'adrim's essence with gold at their creation had made them immune to the power of the spell in its uttered form. To destroy the enormous beasts would require a weapon, infused with the Word of Dissolution and wielded by one who could meet them face to face. Such a weapon would have to be created first, and quickly.



With Hamulkuk at his side Aggeron removed himself and his entourage from the barren wastes of Gorgoroth and returned to the western mountains. From the stronghold of Menion'Enath he sent the design of a new weapon to his armourers, and it was not to be a simple artifice. With a haft made from a carved remnant of the Silvan Tree, and barbed with the talon of an Ell'adrim the Orncryst was a melding of EarthMagic and the natural power of the Moon Dragons themselves. Forged as a single-bladed axe, and inlaid in gold and precious gems it was a jewel as fine as anything created by the Guardians, a razor-sharp blade of tempered iron its killing edge, engraved with the spell of dissolution upon its hard metal.

In its physical form it proved a weapon of great beauty and fine artifice but alone that would not be enough. With the Orncryst in hand Aggeron gave it to his most trusted assistants and instructed them on its final forging. If it was to kill the Ell'adrim it would have to be plunged into the Shan'duil itself, and in doing so transform the axe from a weapon of iron and stonewood into the most powerful talisman of EarthMagic ever created.

To touch the Shan'duil however, is a quest fraught with danger and one that no Trell'sara would take upon themselves lightly. Since the bringing down of the Silvan Tree the Guardians had had no contact with the River of Life and none could know the punishment that might be visited upon those who might try. In their desperate hours however, there remained enough Guardians of courage to brave the exertions of such a task and without hesitation Aggeron sent them forth.

The tale of the descent of the Eleven Guardians into the Mines of Mourning is a story that requires its own telling, for in the long history of that race it is the only tale of bravery and sacrifice that an Oera'dim can recount of the Fallen Masters with wonder and grudging admiration. It is a truth that no Oera'dim can look upon the Shan'duil without suffering complete dissolution and because of this we do not search out the low places of the world, but for the Guardians it was a mission that would take them into the ancient delvings of the Mines of Mourning and ultimately to the root of the world itself. Such a tale must be left for another day, however. Suffice it to say that only one of the Guardians survived to return to the light of day, the Orncryst pulsing with the power needed as act as a physical manifestation of the Word of Dissolution. One touch would be enough to bring down the Ell'adrim, it need only be wielded by a Being brave enough to take it forth and destroy them. In Aggeron's plan that Being would be Hamulkuk.



It must be said that in that dark and desperate time Hamulkuk was not to go alone. Bound by the Word of Command he would be compelled to fulfil his mission but Aggeron had to be sure that the task was completed. In the early hours of a cold morning the Dominus gathered those that would travel with his creation and gave Hamulkuk his orders.

"Who are you?" he asked quietly.

"I am Hamulkuk, Master, yours to command unto death."

Aggeron looked to his fellow Guardians then turned to his creation. "You are to leave this place and travel north-west to Ul'ashma. There you will find the caves of the Ell'adrim. Call to them Hamulkuk, compel them forward and as each is drawn to you destroy them. In this your task is clear. Kill all that respond to your call, then return the Orncryst to me. Do you understand?"

Hamulkuk bowed, the Order a clear compulsion now within him. It would be impossible for him to return to his Master without the task being prosecuted to the letter of every word uttered. For Aggeron there was no doubt that Hamulkuk would do his duty, but to get the Hresh'na to the far mountains he would require protection of his own. Forty Trell'sara would travel with him and in that chill morning they set forth, their goal the far mountains of Ul'ashma and the lairs of the Moon

Dragons.

For any Being that has travelled the far marches of the west it is understood that no journey there can be undertaken lightly. Before the company stood the high massifs of the Great Rift, a long jagged line of mountains and high plateaux that spread for hundreds of leagues into the north and west. Beyond these granite borders extended the cold wastes of the north, but at the Rift's shoulder arose the lesser mountains of Ul'ashma and the homes of the Ell'adrim. Deep within these cold peaks a vast complex of caves served as the lairs of the Dragons and this would be the company's objective. North they would travel, traversing a series of passes beyond the Great Rift, then follow the edges of the Massif as it veered westwards to Ul'ashma.

The journey would not be their greatest challenge however. Away from the remaining strongholds of the Trell'sara the world was now the domain of the Forgotten Ones and even upon the coldest peaks of the north they maintained a presence, units of Rangers and other frontier forces on guard upon the many passes and trails that crossed the high mountains. If Hamulkuk was to make it alive to Ul'ashma their company would need to escape the attention of their enemies as well as survive the rigors of their passage.

Unknown to the company as it made its way steadily into the north, the Forgotten Ones had already become aware of their journey. Rangers holding vigil in the shadows of Menion'Enath sent word of their passage northwards and soon the company itself was being stalked, prey to a foe that had no intention of letting the strange creature out of the precincts of the cold mountains. As it would come to pass it would only be the immensity of the mountains themselves that would save the company from an early failure.

Along the high trails of the Great Rift Hamulkuk and his Guardians moved quickly. The First Hresh took the lead, his stamina undiminished by the labours of the climbs and paths that directed them inexorably northwards as they followed an ancient trail between the summits of Laman'thel and into the darker shadows of the Northern Massif beyond.

Days passed beneath clear skies, the company moving upon high ridges and through deep, misted vales. Within the precincts of the cold mountains they remained unseen, their passage lost to the rugged terrain and the vastness of the Great Rift itself. Wearing by the endless labour of the march the Guardians had started to fall behind, and there came a time when Hamulkuk had no option but to stop. With stormclouds crowding close the First Hresh waited upon a rise in the trail as his guard made up the distance between them. It was as he paused there that the Rangers of the enemy first made contact, and it was there that Hamulkuk first drew blood.

At the crest of a long track edging a wide plateau of broken stone a small unit of Rangers came upon the company. For both groups it was a surprise, the Rangers unaware of the movement of the Guardians northwards, the Trell'sara not yet to discover they were being tracked by other forces that still moved some distance to the south. In the gloom and noise of an overcast evening however, it took less than the drawing of swords for the two groups to come together.

Surprise gave way quickly to the hatred felt between mortal foes and in the melee each took losses quickly. At the centre of the battle stood Hamulkuk, a cloak thrown upon him and protected by a ring of Guardians as they endeavoured to keep his existence secret. The Rangers were the best and most hardened warriors that the enemy had at their disposal and it soon passed that the Guardians began to waver, their numbers being broken down by the onslaught of a superior force. In this battle Hamulkuk could not remain quiet and when only a few of his guard remained he had no option but to fight.

Overhead the encroaching night turned to storm and upon that desolate trail the First Hresh to draw breath in the world threw away his disguise and joined the battle. Armed with his scimitar Hamulkuk charged into the greatest number of the Rangers and slew the nearest with a single blow. Amongst the combatants he struck out with his blade cutting down another before the nature of the battle changed. In the narrow confines of the path the two sides divided, the remaining Guardians withdrawing behind the Hresh, the Rangers finding a position ahead of the warrior, blocking the way forward. For the Forgotten Ones the sight of Hamulkuk proved a shock that kept them at bay, but

only momentarily.

In the fractured light of a monumental barrage of lightning this new Being in the world stood tall and armoured, a creature of war designed for the purpose, its skin shimmering as black as the night that surrounded them. Hesitation however, turned quickly to action. From within their number a voice called clearly and a bow drew back. One word sent an arrow thudding into Hamulkuk's shoulder and in that moment of pain the First Hresh became unstoppable.

Pulling the arrow from his shoulder Hamulkuk charged into the Rangers his scimitar a flickering reflection of light as he hew down his enemies, none able to stand before the ferocity of his anger. Amongst the Forgotten Ones he found his purpose and in a slew of blood and pain came to understand his true nature. In the midst of the struggling crowd he felt a power coursing through his body, a natural need to kill and to destroy expressed in cold and deliberate violence. For all Oera'dim it is the familiar exaltation of combat, that state of focused aggression that allows no recognition of pain or fear, but for the First Hresh it was new and unrestrained. Before Hamulkuk's fury the Rangers had no answer, falling back as he drove them down, his scimitar a razor-sharp scythe that cut through the Rangers like they were reeds at a river's edge.

In a blustering gale the Rangers died but not all fell to Hamulkuk's sword. Two of their number retreated early in the confrontation and unknown to the remaining company sped southwards as messengers, their tale of death at the hands of a new weapon of the Trell'sara one that would send a vast army against them. If such a pursuit ensued it could only be a matter of time before Hamulkuk himself would fall.



With only four Guardians still remaining to the company Hamulkuk did not wait for the storm to pass. Knowing that it would not be long before the Rangers would be missed he took again to the path and left the remaining Trell'sara behind, desperately trying to keep up with their charge. For Hamulkuk they were nothing more than a disguise, a device to mask his presence until he had found his way to Ul'ashma and the completion of his Orders. It was not beyond his understanding that if the enemy were to become aware of his existence that they would stop at nothing to put him down. If he was in their position he would do the same thing and he had no intention of failure.

Upon the high trails Hamulkuk made his way northwards, using the many narrow tracks and footways to navigate a path through the steep mountain vales and around the many obstacles that stood in his way. Even for the First Hresh it proved a hard road forward, the mountains unwilling to allow passage lightly. Upon loose scree slopes and the winding trails of ancient paths he found his own way though always at the mercy of crashing storm and chilling gales. At many points he almost failed, the terrain a treacherous march of rockfalls, steep ground and lurking predators, but with the sweat and exertion of his journey he found his mind wandering, giving thought not only to his mission but also to who he was, and what he was doing.

Alone and able to keep his own counsel he tried to make sense of the existence that he had been brought into. He was a weapon, of this he had no doubt, but Aggeron in his haste to produce a Being with the capacity to think had also left him with the need to understand and find worth in what he was doing. His Orders told him he must kill the Ell'adrim, to take all that would answer his call and send them to Dissolution with the Orncryst. It was simple enough but as he travelled the lonely trails of the Great Rift he began to feel something else, and it nagged at him as insistently as his Orders.

He was a Being of EarthMagic, created for a purpose but made from the essence of the world itself. As such a Being he was captive to the whims of his creator, and he accepted that as the fate of his existence, but he also felt something else, a deep connection to the mountains he was traversing and to

all the natural forces that surrounded him. In the power of the storm he had felt a kindred spirit, in the wind and the rain he had found connection and familiarity. In the stone beneath his feet he recognised a brother and above all else he could feel the pulse of the Shan'duil no matter how deep it coursed in the root of the world.

It was a realisation both disconcerting and enervating and as he struggled upon the loose scree slopes at the base of the northern-most edges of the Rift he came to realise that he may have been made as an instrument of war but he was also a part of the world he now inhabited. Alone in the cold mountains Hamulkuk had come to understand that he was a sentient Being and that his Orders were all that held him in thrall to the Trell'sara. It was a realisation that would trouble him for the remainder of his existence.

Many more days passed as he found a way through the high mountains and struggled out of the shadows into the brighter light of the Northern Wastes. Upon the slopes at his back the Guardians struggled to keep up but he had no regard for their labours. In his mind there was only the task, and he had found his minders to be nothing more than a hindrance to his progress. If he was to find the Moon Dragons and destroy them, it would be a task done alone, and without witnesses.

Upon the ragged edges of the Great Rift Hamulkuk looked down upon the cold plains before him and knew that his path would not take him into such desolate climes. Instead he looked to the west, and at the world's horizon he saw instead the spur of a line of mountains known to his Masters as Ul'ashma, the Mountains of the Moons. It would be there that he would find the Ell'adrim, and it would be there that he would kill them.



It is rumoured that in those desperate days when the Trell'sara peered into the shadows of their own destruction that Aggeron grew careless in his haste to create his new weapon. Much thought had been given to the nature of the creature he was building but in those final days it was only to the physical attributes of his new warrior that he gave weight or time. His warrior would be strong, capable of fighting in any terrain, and give no heed to the onset of any weather. His warrior would have skin that would change colour and texture to match any of its possible surroundings and be provided with senses far more sensitive and utilitarian than anything the Guardians themselves possessed. Of all these senses it was the sight of the first Hresh that was given greatest energy, and in his creation Aggeron had provided Hamulkuk with a keenness of vision that was unsurpassed by any living creature, whether in day or moonless night.

To the first Hresh's sentience however, less energy had been devoted. The Guardian's need for an effective weapon to overpower the Forgotten One's on their own ground had lead him to provide his creation with the capacity to reason, but in Hamulkuk's design much had been left unfinished or ill-conceived. It is thought that the Master had used one of his own assistant's minds as the template for his creation, simply taking apart that which he deemed useless and enhancing that which he saw advantageous, building in his arrogance a merciless beast of war. It is a truth that Aggeron could see no purpose in giving his weapon a set of rules to conduct himself by, he saw only a need for obedience and the ruthless prosecution of war. What happened after that came as no concern of his.

As Hamulkuk scanned the horizon his thoughts turned only to the task at hand, and when there came the faint sounds of violence carried on the wind at his back he gave no thought to what he should do except ensure that there lay within the clash of metal and screams of pain no danger to his mission.

Scrambling back to a vantage upon the crest of a long slope he saw upon a far ridge the last Guardians of his party, fighting desperately as a large force of Rangers caught them exposed upon the

crest. As he watched the last of his guard were cut down, their bodies tumbling as ragged outlines upon the loose slopes, leaving trails of moving dirt as they slid into the darkness below. For Hamulkuk there was no concern for their demise, nor any need to exact vengeance for their deaths. They were a complication that he could do without and only the small forms of the Forgotten Ones making a line down the slopes provided any need for action. Somehow the Rangers were on his trail, and he could not allow them to catch him.

Quickly he descended onto the hard ground at the base of the mountains and set out across the wide plain at the run. He was a warrior built for endurance and long into the day he ran across the desolate terrain, heading for a high landmark against the horizon ahead. To his Masters the tall, broken towers of stone were known simply as The Spires. To Hamulkuk they were an easily held landmark upon the plains, and he laid his course by their highest point, the ground beneath his feet a vista of barren earth broken only by shallow hills and the dark massif of the Great Rift at his left shoulder.

Behind him the Rangers were not giving ground and as his first day on the plains turned to darkness Hamulkuk could not afford to rest. Forging onwards he kept the tall spires before him and by the light of twin moons ran on, the sky above a deep veil of shadowed clouds and bright flickering stars. With the pulse of his heart pounding beneath his armour he moved quickly into the north-west.

Only once on that first night did Hamulkuk have pause to stop. In the mid reach of the dark hours there came a sound that brought the Hresh to a sudden halt. From the plains behind him there arose a terrible cacophony, a melee of screams and roaring thunder that began as no more than a whisper against the breeze but which grew in surges into a harsh report of scraping metal and rumbling stone, all entwined with clear cries of pain and torment. Hamulkuk waited as the sounds found strength and then faded into the backdrop of the ever present wind, leaving the plains once again to the night.

For a time the First Hresh made no further ground, content to stand before the bluster and search out the plains for any sign of what might have transpired. Around him the ground lay veiled in darkness, only the silvered edges of moonlight giving any form to his surroundings. When he was sure that he was once again alone he turned back to the north-west and began to run.



For the remainder of the night he kept up his pace, making for the stone spires but always alert for any danger that might lay hidden on the quiet plains. On a few occasions he passed herds of Yunta Beast heading north towards the Moss Plains and the rich feeding grounds that spread for hundreds of leagues in that direction. Such creatures were of no interest to him though. He had food enough to last and the Yunta were docile even at their most energetic. In darkness he forged ahead and at the first hint of light gleaming against the eastern horizon came to the base of The Spires.

Against the flaring glow of the dawn the Spires grew large upon the plain. At almost three hundred metres tall the three distinct towers of stone stood as impressive monoliths upon the flat ground. From the east they had appeared as made structures, such was the smooth, lean aspect of their reach but it proved instead that they rose above the plain as natural upthrusts of stone, somehow forced from the earth below as a bone needle might be forced through hide. At its base the largest of the Spires lay over twenty metres in breadth and as the First Hresh came to a halt at their feet he stood insignificant, looking up at summits that seemed to touch the sky itself.

It struck Hamulkuk as he surveyed his find that these towering pieces of stone might prove a good vantage to test how far the Rangers had come in the night. Carefully he found a foothold against the nearest of the vast monoliths and began to climb.

Against their huge bulk Hamulkuk moved quickly as a dark speck that ascended to a vantage some

fifty metres above the plain. The remains of the thin tower reached some hundreds of metres further into the clear sky overhead but it was enough to survey both the plain and the reach of the high mountains to the south. To his surprise he could see nothing of the Forgotten Ones. To the north and west roamed large herds of Yunta Beast, to the south he could see clearly the curving arches of the Alerion Gates and the Shattereen beyond, but to the east there was nothing, no sign of the Rangers or any evidence of their passing. Overhead there glided the form of a Kreel flying slowly westwards but upon the barren ground he was alone.

Returning to the hard earth Hamulkuk considered his next move. The disappearance of the Rangers had left him with an open path ahead to the nests of the Ell'adrim, though their sudden retreat from the chase came with concerns of its own. In Hamulkuk's thoughts there grew the possibility that his pursuers might know something he didn't, and as he looked to the west he decided that a change in course might give him an advantage. Rather than head directly from the Spires to the tip of Ul'ashma he would instead travel in a wider arc to the north, passing beyond the Plains of Tor'eth and using the southern edges of the Moss Plains as his guide to the mountains beyond. In this fashion he could approach the Moon Dragons from the east and time his arrival in the mountains themselves to coincide with the first shrouds of night. If there was indeed something ahead to be avoided such a detour might save him any unnecessary danger.

Setting out once again Hamulkuk turned further northwards and as with the previous day struck out at the run. By mid-morning he encountered the first vestiges of the Moss Plains and then turned westwards, following the edges of the Mosses as he put his eye firmly upon the long reach of the Mountains of the Moons as they thrust outwards from the larger mountains of the Great Rift to the south. According to the intelligence collected by his Master the nests of the Ell'adrim were to be found upon the highest summits of Ul'ashma, positioned out of view of the plains themselves. For the First Hresh to call the Ell'adrim he would need to be within sight of the caves but not necessarily close. The call would bring the Moon Dragons forth and he could see value in making them come to him. Hamulkuk had never put eyes upon one of his quarry and he considered it wise to have time to consider what he might be up against.

Running through the thick pads of moss the First Hresh made his way forward, the furthest edge of the mountains ahead his objective. About him the morning slowly unfolded, the still unfamiliar cycle of life in the world something that passed without his notice as he ran. In those long hours he covered a great distance and found the day itself edging towards night as he approached the high summits of Ul'ashma. Behind him there remained no sign of the Rangers that had so doggedly pursued him on the previous day, and ahead there lay the mountains, and a herd of Yunta grazing purposefully upon the mosses. As he approached the Yunta moved away quickly, clearing a path that gave him a clear line to a saddle between two peaks. It would be his purpose to use the valley that could be found there to find a path into the shadows of the Mountains of the Moons, and then on to the caves of the Ell'adrim. What he could not foresee was the danger waiting patiently for him ahead.

As he ran through the grazing Yunta it came to his notice quickly that three of the beasts ahead were not moving. All of their brethren had moved out of his path long before he could come close but these Yunta remained in station, watching him carefully as Hamulkuk made his way forward. Not sure of their intentions the First Hresh slowed his pace and considered more carefully the ground he was upon, and the possible avenues of escape if the beasts decided to charge. It became quickly apparent that the Yunta were not going to move and as he came to a complete halt a feeling of unease descended upon the entire plain. Something was not right.

Carefully Hamulkuk drew his scimitar and advanced upon the large Yunta. All were at least six times his own size but docile nonetheless, and as he approached them he was expecting nothing more than to usher them away with a wave of his blade and a few coarse shouts. Instead he would find himself fighting for his life.



As Hamulkuk approached the plain fell silent, all the activity of life that he had disregarded on his run suddenly keenly noticeable in its absence. The air itself had come to a halt, and as the First Hresh surveyed the wide plain there came to him a feeling of malice, of something brooding close and watching with undeniable purpose.

Looking around he could see nothing, but as his focus returned to the creatures the nearest of the Yunta shifted uneasily then reared upon its back legs, its forward limbs raking the air as if in great pain or anger. Stepping back Hamulkuk watched as the beast began to distort, its form shivering and contorting as its essence changed, the familiar outline of the Yunta transforming before his eyes into a towering distorted form, something that seemed to mock his own appearance.

In the yellowed glow of dusk the other Yunta began to change also, their bodies coalescing into similar forms, although grotesquely deformed. Hamulkuk immediately recognised the beings that had risen before him. They were of the *dweo'gorga*, shape-shifters and assassins of the lost Daughter-God Shabel. Only in the knowledge given to him did he understand the nature of these beings but one thing he recognised for himself; they were creatures of EarthMagic and in their presence he could feel the power of their forms pulsing in time to the heartbeat of the world far below his feet. He could not help wondering in that moment of confrontation if these creatures had been the cause of the Rangers' disappearance. It would be a question that would have no answer.

Hamulkuk had nothing to say to the *dweo'gorga*, they were simply in his way and he could not brook any delay. The Shape-shifters needed to be put aside and he moved forward to do so. In that instant all three of the creatures thrust their fists deep into the earth, somehow drawing strength and form from the ground beneath them. In a rumbling vibration of power the *dweo'gorga* began to grow and expand, the mocking forms building into towering goliaths that dwarfed the surrounding plain. Hamulkuk did not take a back step as the first swept a long arm towards him.

Striking out with his scimitar the First Hresh had no chance to defend himself from the blow. In a splintering crack the sword shattered and Hamulkuk took the full impact of the monstrous creature's fist upon his right shoulder. Thrown across the mosses it was only the thick pads of vegetation that brought him to a halt, although in a tangle of limbs and equipment. Quickly he regained his feet but his weapon was useless, and without thinking pulled the Orncryst from its sheath. It was an instinctual act that saved his life.

In a concatenation of energy the Orncryst burst into life, the proximity of the shapeshifters a trigger that could not be denied. Crackling with a blue power that arched out from its blade Hamulkuk could feel the axe's vitality coursing through his own body and it brought the *dweo'gorga* to a shuddering halt.

With another mighty swing the nearest *dweo'gorga* struck out at Hamulkuk but this time the Orncryst cut cleanly, and with its touch Shabel's Assassin staggered backwards, its body dissolving from the wound as smoke might be carried by a gale. Grasping at its arm in a vain attempt to stop its own dissolution the shapeshifter looked in horror to its companions before falling to ground as a contorted heap of earth.

In a blind rage the remaining *dweo'gorga* rushed Hamulkuk, their intention to crush him beneath massive pounding feet. The First Hresh did not falter, striking out again with the axe and leaving a gaping wound in the leg of the second shape-shifter. Stunned by the blow and unable to fathom the weapon's effect upon itself the *dweo'gorga* staggered backwards, its legs and body dissolving in gouts of earth as it lost its footing and fell. In those few moments the creature that had lived a thousand millennia crumpled to another giant mound of dirt and was still.

The third creature gave no thought to continuing the assault. Turning on its thick heels it began to run, a panic overwhelming it as it tried to make sense of what had happened to its brethren. For Hamulkuk there could be no survivors, and he threw the axe with all the strength left to him. Arcing through the air the Orncryst sliced into the back of the fleeing shape-shifter, a scream of pain lost within a detonation of released energy and roiling dust. When the dirt settled to earth there remained nothing but Hamulkuk, and the axe lodged firmly in the cold ground ahead of him.

It is said that from this time forth Hamulkuk was favoured by the Powers of the world. That in his

destruction of the dweo'gorga a score had been settled with Shabel's outcast Assassins and that all the Oera'dim that might follow were then accepted as part of the natural order of the world. In truth it can be said that the memories of the Powers of the World are long, and just as much in need of vengeance as any other Being.

For those who are familiar with the moss plains the mounds of dirt left behind with the dissolution of the dweo'gorga still remain and are known in these modern times as the Three Assassins. It is said that nothing grows upon their desiccated slopes, and any who might venture to step upon them will find death quickly. In the aftermath of the battle however, the First Hresh gave thought only to retrieving his axe. For Hamulkuk it was time to move on.



With the steaming mounds of the dweo'gorga left behind Hamulkuk ran again for the desolate borders of Ul'ashma. As had been his goal he made a quick passage to a valley between the mountains that would provide a path into the deeper shadows of the summits beyond. In the fading light of the dusk the First Hresh made his way out of the plains and began a struggling ascent into the low valley that would be his way into the mountains.

On both sides the steep slopes of the Mountains of the Moons rose as massive walls of granite, the shadows of night deep and clutching as Hamulkuk found an ancient path that led him through the valley and then up its steep sides onto a small plateau. From this open ground he found a further trail that wound upwards through a series of ascents that led him high into the cold embrace of Ul'ashma. Only when he came upon another small table of open ground did he take time to consider his position. Upon this narrow field of thick grasses and wildflowers he surveyed the valley below and decided to rest.

Hamulkuk sat within the grasses and ate a frugal meal of dried meat. His maker had given him the endurance to outdistance his enemies and the strength to overwhelm them but he was not indefatigable. After the rigors of his journey he knew he must regain his stamina for the days ahead and he had decided within the night hours that he would not call the Ell'adrim until the bright light of midday was at hand. Beyond the field of grass rose a further slope, steep and jagged but at its crest there would be a further area of flat ground and a clear view to the nests of the Moon Dragons. It would be upon this higher vantage that the First Hresh would prove himself to his Master.

In the cool of the night air Hamulkuk took his ease, watching the inexorable turn of the sky overhead as if it was his first vision of the world at rest. Many years from this night he would remark that it was the only night of peace that he had ever known, and as he lay within the long grasses he had time to ponder all that he had experienced in the short weeks of his life. Within a backdrop of cicadas and bird calls he considered the unusual state of a Being such as himself, without experiences yet to call his own but possessed of the knowledge and memories of others, somehow alive and reasoning yet manufactured for a purpose and just as disposable. As a state of being it insulted and humiliated him but there was always the compelling push of his Orders that kept him centred only on the task at hand. It was an unsettling state of mind that gave no comfort or peace to his thoughts, yet he was just as sure that he could be far more than just what he had been made for.

As he lay one thought did come to mind and it was insistent. To kill the dweo'gorga had exhilarated him but he had sensed that the creatures were the same as himself, Beings made for a purpose and artificed of EarthMagic. He had felt keenly the power of their existence but as he had sent each of the Assassins into dissolution there had been an imperceptible shift in the balance of the world, a slight shiver in the surging power of the foundations of Emur that gave him cause to wonder at its implications.

He knew that he had not just killed the Shape-shifters, indeed he had utterly removed their essence from existence, the power of the Word of Dissolution nullifying even the spark of EarthMagic that had given them life. It was a power that could also send him into nothingness at the whim of his Master, and it made him mindful of his own mortality, but as the dweo'gorga had died he had felt the heartbeat of the world lessen, if only as a shiver that passed. He would do his Master's bidding but even in those early days he had reason to pause and consider whether his creators were indeed omnipotent. It was a doubt that remained with Hamulkuk through the long night and would fester in his thoughts for the remainder of his days.



Morning came to the high field accompanied by the calls of Cacklers and Whipbirds. As the suns struggled from the eastern horizon Hamulkuk readied himself for the day that he would destroy the Ell'adrim and fulfil his Orders. At the end of the plateau there rose another incline, a solid slope of granite that reached to a crest some two hundred metres above his position. At his campsite he left all his equipment except for the Orncryst. Against the Moon Dragons nothing else would have value so with only the sheathed axe he began the climb that would take him into sight of the nests.

Against the dull reds and yellows of the sunrise Hamulkuk laboured upon the cliff face, his form a shadow moving with purpose as he ascended the stone, finding himself there a narrow sliver of ground upon which to make his call. At the slope's upper reach he took the Orncryst and surveyed the surrounding mountains. It did not take long to spy out the lairs of the Ell'adrim cut into the upper slopes of the mountains ahead but there was much more to see than the shadowed caves of his prey.

To the south and west Hamulkuk looked out upon the vast reaches of the mountains of the Great Rift. Endless lines of snowed summits marched into the south, with no less a procession of granite peaks extending to the horizon in the west. Far to the west he knew there could be found World's End although he did not know what lay beyond, but before him the great mountains stood immense and timeless. Within these mountains he could see the mists of morning not yet touched by the light of the suns, and in the deepest of the shadows lay valleys and plateaux, small pockets of night living still between grey monoliths and bright white snow-caps.

To the north, beyond the lesser range of Ul'ashma lay the vast plains of moss and tundra, the horizon a white line delineating the deadly ice cap of the frozen wastes. To the east more of the plains stood empty and quiet, a morning haze evaporating in the warmth of the rising suns. Standing upon his vantage it seemed that the whole world lay beneath his feet but he knew it not to be so. The world of his Masters was one far greater than this, even if the breadth of it remained unseen. Turning to the west the First Hresh took the Orncryst and considered how he should begin. The gold inlaid into the haft of the axe would already be stirring the Ell'adrim in their caves but it would be his call that would bring them to him. Across a wide valley he could see the dark entrances to their lairs and in the quiet pause of dawn there came a sound of movement, of great beasts rousing in deep and long forgotten places. With the axe in hand he gave a further moment to consider the vista before him then gave the call.

:commen ell'adrim, a' maad a'du bayor:

In the crisp morning air the call rang clearly, its power growing as it echoed upon the mountainsides. Caught within the constant bluster of the peaks the words wove their magic, taking hold of the air and forming wide vortices of blue energy that tore through the air and assailed the hard stone of the far mountains. It seemed to Hamulkuk that it was a taunt, a challenge for the Moon

Dragons to brave the morning suns, compelling the Ell'adrim to show themselves in the bright light of day. Hamulkuk waited, and in that maiden hour the first of the Moon Dragons came forth to claim the Orncryst as its own.

It is a truth that the Ell'adrim do not enjoy the touch of sunlight. Built as weapons themselves they have always preferred the shades of night to find their enemies, and even in those early times had developed an aversion to the bright light of day. Aggeron in his planning knew this and appreciated also that the Dragons would resist the call at first, but eventually be drawn out of their lairs as the magic woven into the call became stronger. The weakest would arise before the more powerful and this would give his new creation a better chance of disposing of the Ell'adrim one at a time. It was a part of Aggeron's plan that worked to the letter of its conception.

As the rays of morning illuminated the valleys below the first of the Ell'adrim issued forth from its lair. Black as night the Dragon arose from its cold home and thrust itself into the air, great wings smoothly reaching as it gained height and bore down upon the First Hresh. For Hamulkuk it was a revelation of power, and as he watched the creature climb into the air he felt something reach into his chest and grasp at his beating heart. He could not identify what the sensation was but he felt himself grind his feet deeper into the hard stone beneath him and take hold of the Orncryst all the firmer.

With a screech that pierced the air like a thunderclap the Moon Dragon brought its wings close about it and dived towards the First Hresh. In a long arcing swoop it brought itself upon him and only as it extended its wings to brake its descent could Hamulkuk appreciate the true size of his adversary. Vast in aspect and equipped with huge raking talons the beast was no simple creation of the Trell'sara; it was a force of nature, a monster born of malice and unbridled need, and as it hovered before him he could see its only focus was the Orncryst.

Unable to land upon the thin shelf of ground that the First Hresh had chosen as his vantage the Dragon pulled back its head and blasted the mountainside with dragonfire. With a high-pitched roar the fire spewed from the Ell'adrim's jaws, dousing the crest of the slope in a burning maelstrom that would surely have consumed Hamulkuk. But it did not.

With the Moon Dragon's approach the Orncryst began to vibrate in the First Hresh's grip, its essence charging with power as the creature bore down upon him. Immediately Hamulkuk could sense the change and as he lifted the axe to challenge the Dragon it burst into life, a sphere of blue energy surrounding him even as the Ell'adrim gutted the mountain about him. Wrapped within the protective shield of energy Hamulkuk remained unscourged by the conflagration and when the Dragon moved to undertake another assault he struck out with the axe, attempting to draw in his adversary so that he might deal it the one blow required to put it down.

Unable to harm this unusual challenger with dragonfire the Ell'adrim instead found a purchase on the mountain upon the upper slopes at Hamulkuk's right shoulder. With one giant wing the Dragon endeavoured to push the First Hresh from his footing, but he was able to avoid its blow and strike out himself. Both axe and leathery wing missed by an arm's length but when the Dragon struck out again the Orncryst cut true and deep, tearing at the Ell'adrim's limb and bringing upon the Dragon a cruel demise.

At that first touch the Orncryst exploded into life a stream of energy arcing towards the huge beast and enveloping it in blue fire. Unlike the dweo'gorga the axe had been designed to destroy the Moon Dragons and Aggeron had created it specifically for that task. Hamulkuk was to discover quickly that his Master did not want the Dragons to die easily, and that with all the malice he could bring to its artifice he had devised his own vengeance for all the damage brought by the Ell'adrim to his brethren.

Before the First Hresh the Moon Dragon shuddered, his body bound and held to the mountainside by coruscating coils of power. As it struggled against its bindings the magic tightened its hold, squeezing the beast into submission before two tendrils of energy began to tear at the chest of the Dragon, opening a gushing wound as they forced their way to its core. Hamulkuk watched as the magic delved to the essence of the Ell'adrim and when it found the spark of EarthMagic that sustained it they crushed the glimmering shard. In a final shuddering tremor the Dragon fell sideways and rolled down the slope into the valley below.

Hamulkuk watched as the great beast slewed to a halt, its chest torn, its life expended. This was not the dissolution he had witnessed in the death of the *dweo'gorga*. Shabel's Assassins had simply come apart, the constituents of their existence dissolving in the wind to be dispersed at the pleasure of the breeze. Apart from the surprise of their dissolution they had felt nothing. The death of the *Ell'adrim* had been designed instead to extract pain and in doing so his Master had ensured the Dragon would know of its own destruction. In its death Hamulkuk could find no honour, only cruelty and vengeance, and he was to be their harbinger.

Before the First Hresh could spend any further thought on the death of the Dragon another arose from the far mountain. In a screeching dive it also attempted to wrest Hamulkuk from his footing but the *Orncryst* once again found a purchase in the flesh of its victim. In flight the Moon Dragon fell to earth, its body bound tight within blinding coils of energy, but there was no time to ponder the death of the second. Two more of the great beasts took flight and soon Hamulkuk was in combat, only the sphere of energy protecting him from dragonfire, his axe a flashing reflection of power as he brought down one Dragon after another. By day's end the valley beneath lay as a grim resting place for more than twenty great beasts, and when no more *Ell'adrim* answered his call he knew he was done. His Orders had been completed to the letter of their utterance.



Spent by the rigours of the battle the First Hresh made his way back to his camp in the lee of the mountain. In his hand the *Orncryst* was still, its energy depleted but not yet gone completely. In the darkness he moved carefully and took the time to eat before laying on his back and pondering the pain and death that he had wrought amongst the *Ell'adrim*. He knew that his Master would be pleased, but in the course of his great battle he had felt again the same shiver in the world with the death of each Dragon that he had sensed in the demise of the *dweo'gorga*. With each kill there had come a curious sensation as if the world had moved upon its axis, its balance edged from true with the loss of each of the monstrous creatures. Hamulkuk could not fathom its import but as he lay watching the stars he could feel the change, and the struggles of something far below ground trying to take account of it. In his thoughts he determined that no good had come from the success of his mission.

It was in the early hours before dawn that the last of the *Ell'adrim* fell upon Hamulkuk. The First Hresh lay in slumber, exhausted from the battle of the day, when five of the creatures came to ground surrounding him. Upon the narrow field the Dragons landed in a crashing volley that shattered the hard rock beneath them but they did not advance upon Hamulkuk. Instead they waited, heads bowed.

It is surmised that in their minds the days of the *Ell'adrim* had ended, the loss of their brethren too hard a lesson in who now wielded power in the world. If this one small creature had been able to bring them down then they were prepared to meet the same fate, and see an end to the grinding addiction that had overwhelmed their lives and sent them into madness for their need of gold. In truth they had been strong enough to resist the call and remain hidden, unable to do anything but witness the demise of their kind, and ponder what end they could find for themselves. For Hamulkuk, a Being new to the world, there could be no understanding of their sorrow, and as the Moon Dragons waited the First Hresh called out.

"What is it you want here, *Ell'adrim*? Did you not hear the call?"

The largest of the *Ell'adrim* moved forward, its vast wings cloaking the sky about the First Hresh. It did not speak though its thoughts echoed in Hamulkuk's head as a raging waterfall.

"We do not know who you are, but you have the smell of the Master about you. Is it your purpose to slay us all?"

And here for the First Hresh there existed a conundrum. With each death of the Ell'adrim he had felt the shift, and with each spark of EarthMagic removed from existence the world had turned a whisper further from true. He had no mercy for the Dragons, but he felt at the core of his being that he had damaged something far more important than the completion of his Master's Orders should require. He decided on his own volition that he was not about to make it worse.

The First Hresh looked to the creature and sheathed his axe. "My Orders are clear Dragon, the Master's own words directing that I should send to dissolution all the Ell'adrim who answered the call. You did not answer so I have no cause to harm you."

The Moon Dragon looked to his brothers then turned back to Hamulkuk. "And what of us then. Will another of your kind find its way here and take the rest of us, or are we to be left alone?"

Hamulkuk shook his head and pointed in the direction of Menion'Enath. "The Master will be told that all who answered the call were destroyed, and any who might venture this way will see the evidence of your demise rotting in the far valley. I see no reason for another to come for you unless you make yourself known, and I would counsel against it. The world as you know it is about to change and there will be no peace in it. I tell you Ell'adrim that there is now an imbalance in the world and the consequences of it are unknown to me, or any other Being for that matter."

The Ell'adrim stood quietly for a moment as if communicating with his brothers then brought its head down until it lay eye to eye with the First Hresh. "And what of us I ask again. How are we to live beyond the view of the Master and still feed our need for gold?"

Hamulkuk shrugged and pushed the Dragon's head away from his face. "I do not care what you do. All I know is that you must remain hidden or the fate of your brothers shall be yours to embrace as well. Look to what you have. Twenty Ell'adrim have fallen and their gold must now be yours to find. Raid their troves and hunt out their hiding places. That should keep you busy for some time, but I warn you once again, do not bring notice to yourself or you will die."

Again the Moon Dragons engaged in a silent discussion that left the First Hresh standing in the dark, waiting as the immense creatures debated the nature of their survival. When it came it was brief and without equivocation.

"Until the end of the Masters we shall remain outside of their knowledge. Now we must mourn our brothers and find strength again in our gold."

With that the remaining Ell'adrim bowed low to the First Hresh then rose into the air and made their way into the night. It is told that the Ell'adrim disappeared from the world, only to find notice again in the world when the Trell'sara were themselves on the edge of destruction. It is recorded that on the day of the Great Insurrection the Ell'adrim rose in support of the Oera'dim, their power added to the multitudes of the rebellion. In time their kin found homes throughout the mountains of the north and to this day can be found in the far reaches of the world.

In the passage of time Hamulkuk returned to Menion'Enath and found great reward, the spies of Aggeron already reporting on the destruction of the Moon Dragons. With his success came the creation of the Hresh'na and the first Army of the March. In time hundreds of thousands of Hresh found life upon the grounds of Gorgoroth and in their multitude fell upon the Forgotten Ones, destroying those that resisted and scattering the shattered remainder beyond the borders of our existence. In Aggeron's hands the Army of the March proved a brutal and effective weapon, its General Hamulkuk, the First Hresh in the World, leading it to victory over the enemies of its Masters. Their dominion secure, the Trell'sara divided up the lands before them and set to the true business of their ambition, dominion and the enjoyment of the fruits of their power. It was in that manner that the world continued for countless millennia, the end of the Trell'sara at the hands of Qirion'Delving the beginning of our mastery in the world.

It is rumoured that Hamulkuk remained in service to the Dominus Aggeron for six hundred years, the age of his life unconstrained by any natural restriction. In their haste the Guardians gave no thought to the length of existence for their weapons, instead concerned only that they obey. It proved in the course of time that death came to the Hresh'na only through the circumstances of violence or misadventure, and in the span of his years Hamulkuk served well. There came a time however, when

Aggeron tired of the presence of the First Hresh, his attentions and ambitions settling upon other Hresh and the creation of new creatures that could expand the opulence and wealth of his existence. Hamulkuk was forgotten, but only by the Masters.

Leaving the presence of Aggeron, Hamulkuk faded into the shadows of the New Order, his fate unknown to any who may have sought him. It is unknown as to what became of the First Hresh, only that he came into the knowledge of the Oera'dim once more in the southern reaches of the world before disappearing forever. Where he is, or even if he still finds breath, is one of the mysteries of our kind. Remember though brothers as you listen to this tale, that we are his descendants and if you wish to know more of the First Hresh you need only look at each other for We are Him."

THE END