**The History of the World**

**(as translated from the original text by Sherwin Matthews)**

Once, the world was rich, abundant in life and magic. The old gods had devised and birthed this universe, and their creation flourished; love, laughter, and song, all at once billowing from and returning to the well of raw mana at its centre. From this reservoir sprang new beings, who in turn shaped life and the world into something new once more.

As the gods played in their world, they began to invent new games, and devise pawns for their playing pieces. And so were mortals of all races and creeds made.

In time, the mortals proved poor instruments. They were truculent and wilful. Yet, despite their disobedience, the new and old gods found themselves fascinated by the curious and fragile beings they had spawned. Sometimes appearing in dreams or visions, other times as mysterious strangers, they frequently visited their creations, teaching the mortals the secrets of the world and the cosmos beyond. They gave their children the gift of magic, teaching them to draw from the well of mana to fuel their enchantments, and the wisdom of their creation, even enlightening a select few on the method of contacting the divine.

But the mortals were powerful and ambitious in ways the gods could never have imagined.

Unlike the gods themselves, mortals were mundane creatures of flesh and blood. When the gods drank from the world’s reserves, their essence soon replenished any absence. Mortals were not so blessed. The simple parlour tricks they’d learned were a tiny trickle which could easily be replaced by the gods; but their hunger could not be so easily sated. Over time, the mortals wrought ever more powerful sorcery, each spell and enchantment further depleting the mana to leave a gaping void.

The dwindling mana weakened the gods, and their influence began to diminish. Still the mortals continued their destructive path, consuming with abandon and greed… until, one day, magic appeared to disappear altogether. With the reservoir entirely exhausted, the gods could only watch helplessly as the seasons and the flow of time became unbound. Until a vast and apparently endless winter descended upon the world.

At last the mortals realised their folly, as snow and ice cascaded from blackened skies, and millions died in the miserable cold. Facing extinction, the children of the gods fled, retreating to those places they felt most safe.

The elves sought communion with nature, their greatest mages sacrificing themselves to transform their people into trees, rocks, water, and even light itself. The dwarves dug deep into the earth, far beyond the depth of their precious mines. Humans, the most populous yet also most wasteful of all, found refuge in caves and ancient tombs, scattering like vermin. Of the other peoples that survived this time, I cannot speak for how they escaped ruin, for their records are lost to the ages.

The Age of Winter had begun, and the world was abandoned for untold generations. But in these empty, ice-gripped lands, the mana seeded by the gods clung tenuously to life. Over the thousand years the winter ruled the world, a trickle of power grew to a steady flow, and then a torrent, and finally a storm which reinfused the world with life once more. And as the essence of the gods began to wax once more and the mana was slowly replenished, the blizzards calmed and the ice retreated. The great thaw had begun.

When the Age of Spring dawned at last, mortals gradually emerged, reaching out to discover a world whole generations had believed a myth, unrecognisable to even their oldest figures. Rotted and faded, the maps preserved from the time before were useless, the landscapes transformed by a thousand years of shifting glaciers. Frontier towns began to spring up as adventurers charted new land, connected first by lonely trade caravans, and then larger processions that led to wherever mortals found themselves.

The gods now returned to the mortals, wandering unseen amongst their children at last—though now they were more wary. They remained distant from even the most devout, and their lessons and judgement were much harsher. When they eventually saw fit to allow mortals the use of mana, it was with a price; for each spell cast, the cost of the magic had to be restored in some way, lest the evils of before return.

And so were the bards created; an order of the wisest and wittiest, to act as the memory of the world. Through the telling of stories, the bards were charged with reminding their audience of their obligation to the world, and through cultivating wonder, awe, and joy, they were to refill the reservoir and stabilise the ebb and flow of mana.

As time continued, the bards sought out heroes; those prepared to venture out into the wilds and protect the beings that had newly emerged, and to rediscover what had been lost.

The legends of these heroes thrilled those that heard them, in turn accelerating the rejuvenation of mana as the heroes spent it in their trials. The world was once again young and in need of nurturing, and the bards charged with carefully guiding its childhood.

**The Legend of the Ancient Forge**

*(Beware: Spoilers ahead!)*

At the advent of the Age of Winter, not all gods abandoned their worshippers. Some retreated into the darkness with the mortals, devoting their waning energies to the survival of their people. The god of the shadow elves was one such figure—although their name has long since faded from the memory of even the bards, and the gods are not wont to even whisper it.

Deep under the ground, as the world above was consumed by winter, the shadow elves refused to rejoin with nature as did their distant kin. Instead, they toiled and created a wondrous citadel known now as the Ancient Forge; a structure so great that it broke the surface and reached to the skies, in stark opposition to the desolation that so cursed the landscape.

Powered by the heat of the Firestone Peak, a nearby volcano, the forge defied the ruination of the world for some time, until it was swallowed again by the earth in a disaster that seemingly extinguished its fires. The fate of the shadow elves and their god within has never been known and since the great thaw, not a soul has emerged.

Nestled between the Stargazer mountains and the great Murkmist forest, only the ruins of the Ancient Forge’s tallest spires break the surface and provide access to the depths within. The local populace have always shunned the ruins, and considered them haunted, the suspected fate that befell the former inhabitants grown to a terrible curse that is visited upon any foolhardy enough to step foot inside.

Those few who have ventured into the depths in the past are either never heard from again, or emerged as raving lunatics, babbling about strange and unimaginable magic. Perhaps understandably, then, it has sat undisturbed for generations.

Until the hobgoblins arrived.

A militant tribe from the Murkmist Forest, none can say why the hobgoblins broke into the upper levels and set up camp—but they can speak of the raids that began shortly after. With increasing frequency and brutality, the tribe attacked local villages and trade routes, until the area became too dangerous for most and the people were driven away.

At the behest of the remaining village elders, and the bards themselves, a band of heroes now enter the forge, seeking to drive out the hobgoblins and restore peace to the region.

But as the party progresses and explores the Ancient Forge, they’ll find the true story of this place.

**The Lost Levels**

*(Massive spoilers ahead; really be warned!)*

(Sherwin: Still here? Okay, you must really want to know! I’ll try to keep this as spoiler free as I can...)

As the heroes journey into the Ancient Forge, they’ll inevitably discover traces of the former inhabitants; the enigmatic shadow elves. Traces such as the guardians they left behind—strange, mechanical creatures of wood, metal, and long-forgotten magic.

These creatures are not of the world that the heroes recognise, being both remnants from a time long since passed into myth, and also the designs of the shadow elves’ god.

In the aftermath of the struggle against the Greater Demon, the heroes will have triumphed and told their legend.

But as they stand victorious, they will also see that they can now travel deeper still. Down into the very bottom levels of the forge, where the most powerful and forsaken mana was harnessed, the true secrets still lie in wait, and the most powerful artefacts remain.

In these halls, the mechanica have awakened from their apparent slumber, and now patrol in endless search of intruders. Will this tempt the heroes to continue their campaign? Only time, and your resolve, will tell…