

# SERPENTFALL

*“The Nazi myth which is important ... [to] men like Hitler requires a Götterdämmerung...”*

— U.S. WAR DEPARTMENT COUNTERINTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENT, FEB. 12, 1945

Patton’s death in September didn’t do it, although the wilder-eyed addicts in the Wewelsburg basement claimed that Skorzeny’s “Operation Walküre” had changed things, that the American general was “the rope of the Norns,” somehow tied to past and future in a way that others weren’t. His breaking, they swore, signaled the new Twilight. But the Bulge ground to a halt in sight of the Moselle, and Montgomery slowly pushed the Wehrmacht back across the Ardennes. Not to worry, swore the Ahnenerbe men, sweating out the amphetamines and stinking of extinct herbs pulled from Finnish bogs. The Norns’ rope was broken. Things would be different.

Montgomery swept into Lübeck, and Bradley’s armor growled closer to Nuremberg, and Zhukov smashed across the Oder, and the sun of July rose over a prostrate Reich. Wagner’s Götterdämmerung played on Berlin Radio night and day, and the smoke blotted out the stars. And then it happened; the whole world heard the howl of Garm, and the moon was eclipsed in blood. The head of Jörmungandr, the Midgard Serpent, 350 miles across, breached the surface of the Arabian Sea and rose up into the troposphere. Its first lunge destroyed three troop convoys and their escort carriers, swallowed in one bite 100 miles south of the Azores. A coil of the Serpent now stretched across Africa from Mogadishu to Morocco.

When the head reared up again off Vigo Bay, it gulped down the U.S.S. Essex and TF 24, and paused to splinter a few hundred thousand tons of shipping. President Truman gave the go-ahead, and a lone B-29 took off from Iceland. Its original target had been Berlin, but Captain Joseph Westover had new orders. He, and the crew of the *Strange Cargo*, were to seek out and engage the Midgard Serpent with the Trinity Device. On July 21, 1945, spotter planes for “Operation John Henry” zeroed the *Strange Cargo* in on the Serpent, its head 20,000 feet above Oslo and moving southeast at 80 knots. Captain Westover was an ace pilot, capable of flying a plane through something much smaller than a snake’s pupil 500 yards across. The Device detonated, tearing a piece of the Sun down from heaven and destroying the Serpent’s brain in a torrent of atomic fire. Westover and his crew died instantly. Jörmungandr took a little bit longer than that.

## THE SERPENT DIES

The polar vortex drove strong high easterlies that day, and a plume of radioactive venom hit the upper atmosphere and headed west. It slowly fell out of the sky into clouds and storms, twisters and waterspouts, all headed west. Dark crimson rain fell from Dublin to Denver. Where it struck, the seas boiled and the earth drank poison. And things engendered, mutated horrors born of dragon’s blood and broken strontium atoms. Some coiled down to the sea’s depths; others clumped together and pulled apart ships. Some climbed or flopped or skittered or slunk from swamps and sewers and gutters and ponds and everywhere else rain ran in eastern North America. And some people and beasts drank from those pools and reservoirs before they knew, and some people’s blood changed and they knew it not. Or at least not yet.

But it hardly mattered, not at first, because the fall of the Serpent's body back into the Atlantic sent up a wall of water a hundred miles high that smashed into the coast from Halifax to Havana. New York, Washington, Boston, Charleston, Philadelphia, Miami (and poor low-sunk New Orleans) all drowned. Montreal and Cleveland and Chicago, and Veracruz and Houston and Caracas, were merely battered. Salt water, flecked with venomous foam, lapped against the Appalachians.

The Serpent's head, its skull cored out by nuclear flame, kept moving toward Nuremberg where it had been Called, but its dead muscles overshot their mark. The head finally crashed to earth in Egypt—or rather, *on* Egypt. Its body followed it down, thunderously settling across Europe in a 300-mile wide swath from Scotland to Sicily, and setting off earthquakes 100 miles on both sides of its fallen body. England, the Low Countries, western Germany and Austria, the boot of Italy, coastal Yugoslavia, southern Greece all vaporized beneath the monster's coil. Wales was not obliterated, a stretch of western France and Savoy could see the sun, Spain survived. (The other side of the tsunami battered Portugal.) Most of the armies of the Western Allies, and millions of those they had come to liberate, died, smashed beneath the scales. The coil across Africa had also come down hard, mostly in the Sahara, although Ethiopia had little chance to enjoy its hard-won independence. Reptilian flesh blocked the Mediterranean Sea and the Suez Canal. The earth trembled, cities around the world toppled and burned. Smoke filled the air. Snow fell in August.

## THE GIANTS REVIVE

The shock resounded around the world, but nowhere more than in the icy depths of the Caucasus Mountains. These peaks that Hitler tried to reach in 1942 (on what advice, learned from what unknown insects' mead?) held the bound giant who had betrayed the gods. Hitler would call him Loge or Loki, the Eton-and-Oxford lads would have known he was Prometheus, but to the Ossetians of the valleys he was Nasren, greatest of the Narts, the giants at the dawn of the world. The thunder of the Serpent's fall shook him loose from his icy chains and he slid down the mountains, walking north toward Moscow, where he knew another god-hater ruled.

East of the Serpent's fall, the Red Army was mostly intact, and Eastern Europe likewise, safe in the Red Army's embrace. Russia had lost little, and the few hundred thousand dead in Hungary were nothing next to the thirty million that Stalin had killed or left to die in the last two decades. Moreover, the deadly venom fallout never touched Mother Russia; her monsters would be solely of human making. And of the giants': Molotov and Suslov declared Nasren a bogatyr, a glorious Russian giant born of Soviet Man from the scientifically nurtured soil of Soviet Georgia. Stalin's scientists (and those who had been oh-so-recently Hitler's scientists, at distant camps in Poland) pulled venom from the fallen beast and injected it into "volunteers," or collected Nasren's wisdom about the dawn time. Mysterious fires burned all across Siberia. Frozen mammoths struggled back to their feet, and resumed chewing their buttercup breakfasts. Other giants clambered out of the permafrost, or sailed south on the ice: Soslan of the steel body, Batyrez the invincible swordsman, Satanya the beautiful. It is a shame, Stalin told each of them, looking at them with his wise brown eyes, it is a shame that your sons the Ossetians and the Ingush were killed to the last child by the fascists and the imperialists. It is a shame, they agreed, and their own icy eyes narrowed.

## THE EAGLE BROKEN

It is 1948, the third year without a summer since the Fall of the Serpent. America's Pacific fleets sailed home, to shore up the Western remnant of a shattered nation. The Evacuation of '46 ended in death and horror; only General MacArthur's troops kept order even on the West Coast. With Washington gone, a controversial election made California Governor Earl Warren the President of the United States, or of six of them, anyway. The war in the Pacific is over—holding on to Hawaii is challenging enough—and the Russians are welcome to the wreck of Europe. It took two years, but the last of the great monsters have been driven back down east of the Rocky Mountains. The Americans—and Texans—have their own continent to win back, from the things that wash up now with every Atlantic tide. But left alone across the Rockies for years of famine and fear, the survivors may be building their own future without waiting for permission from Los Angeles or Austin.

Chicago, Detroit, Toronto, Buffalo, Birmingham, Pittsburgh, Memphis: Such city-states survived the Serpentfall by being more willing, and more able, to push other folks to the wall. They had to feed their people when the grain was poisoned and the water was full of vileness. They had to act fast, and cut up rough, when the crisis hit. And for these cities, the crisis isn't over yet. All across the Poisoned Lands, from Houston to Hudson Bay, life is still brutal, short, and all too interesting.

## THE LION WAITING

What's left of Wales and Cornwall still swear to King Henry IX in Sydney, as does Australia, and a third of India, and what's left of Canada, and South Africa in its own accent. The battered British Empire made an armistice with Japan through gritted teeth, and looks at independent "Congress India" with bitter regret. But the Empire survives.

It is British Petroleum who came up with drilling the Serpent for oil, and Royal Dutch-Shell who set up the great cracking plants in Wales and Kenya to refine it. The Russian advisers in Arabia and Persia don't like it, but there's nothing they can do, yet. It is the Royal Navy that dives deep to salvage things from the rift where Jörmungandr rose. It is the Royal Society who have cut into the Serpent at Hereford, and (at hellish cost) brought back living samples of the things, the cultures, swarming in its cavernous belly. It is Rhodes University men in South Africa who took those writhing creatures and strapped them down and drew out the sera and built the equipment that allowed Sir Edmund Hillary and his team to climb to the top of the Spine and look down at the curving world. It is Vickers who brought Jean-Jacques Barre from France (and salvaged Goddard's plans from the wreckage of Roswell) to build the rocket planes to get the Royal Rocketry Air Force (RRAF) there faster. It is Prime Minister Menzies and his government who alone seem worried about what Stalin means when he promises a "final titanic struggle." Spies, and rocketeers, and oilmen, and speleo-herpetologists gather in Sydney and Capetown and Plymouth and Nairobi, and wonder if the sun has set on the British Empire at last, or if somewhere in this smoke-stained, poisoned world there is still room for a green and pleasant land.

# The World After Ragnarok

Adventures can happen anywhere and everywhere on **The Day After Ragnarok**. This guide gives you the lowdown on the world situation, with enough information to get you started running heroic adventures in any corner of the globe. Don't worry about history: It went off the rails in a big way a few years back. Inventions might get made early or not at all, plenty of folks died in this world that didn't in others, and the geopolitics can go any which way in the wake of the Serpentfall.

*“Brothers shall fight and fell each other,  
And sisters’ sons shall kinship stain;  
Harsh times on Earth, a wanton age;  
An Axe Age, a Sword Age, when shields are Sundered,  
A Wind Age, a Wolf Age, before the world falls;  
No man to another shall show mercy.”*

— VÖLUSPÁ, STANZA 45

## THE BRITISH EMPIRE

The falling Serpent smashed the British Isles, but the Empire was bigger than that. The Duke of Gloucester, Prince Henry, serving as Australia's Governor-General in 1945, transferred the Imperial capital to Sydney and took the throne as King Henry IX. He and Prime Minister Menzies have taken controversial steps since then: negotiating an armistice with the Japanese, holding on to as much of India as they could, pushing ahead with ophiurgic research, and drawing a “thin red line” across the path of Soviet expansion. However, most Australians see no better plan on offer, and the rest of the Empire is if anything even more monarchist and supportive. So far, Henry has managed to govern an Empire of four parliaments (Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa) with one (mostly Australian) Cabinet; constitutional reform is one more question that opponents accuse Menzies and the King of ducking. They, on the other hand, see other problems as bigger and more immediate: the Soviets, the Serpent, and the need to hold onto Empire by the skin of their teeth or see barbarism roll over the world unresisted. His Majesty's Government has decided who and what its enemies are, and what it needs to do and build to fight them in this new world.

## Fimbulwinter

According to the sagas, the “Great Winter” comes before Ragnarok: three years without a summer before Garm howls. And indeed, 1941-1944 were exceptionally cold and wet, another doom for Operation Barbarossa. But in 1945, the Serpentfall truly brought on the great cold.

The Serpent's coil fell into the sea, splashing not just the mega-tsunami across the Atlantic but a plume of water up into the atmosphere. There, it froze out and fell again as snow in August. And September. And for nine months after that. Burning cities tossed their share of soot and smoke into the darkening skies, as people starved and rioted all across the Northern Hemisphere. (Except in Russia, where the Narts' “Red Spring” held winter at bay, and the NKVD liquidated any rioters.) The icy atmosphere reflected more of the sun's light back into space. The Gulf Stream, blocked by the Serpent's corpse, slackened. The globe began to cool.

In Africa, rain fell in the Sahara, as the wet air hit the miles-high wall of the Serpent's coil. Even more rain fell in Algeria and Libya, on Spain and France, as the wet air from the Atlantic poured between the Serpent's coils in a storm channel from Ireland to Aden. None of that moisture crosses the Serpent's European coil—without the Narts, the Soviet empire would be in the first stages of a millennia-long drought.

While running games, make sure to mention the terrible weather: snow, rain, sleet, freezing rain, hail, blizzard, ice storm, drizzle, fog. The skies are gray, and cloudy, and overcast, and threatening, and roiling, and murky, and thunderous. Roads are slick, and treacherous; passes are snow-choked and impassable. Good weather should feel like a reward; like a dramatic sunbeam at the end of the movie. Or it should be a contrast: Australia is still sunny, while the rest of the world grays out.

## Rhodes University

With Cambridge and Oxford smashed under a trillion tons of Serpent, the surviving scientific and scholarly minds of the British Empire needed somewhere to pool their urgent research. Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa, stepped up and offered substantial signing bonuses “to any exemplary English-speaking scholar regardless of speciality.” Rhodes University experts work with the Royal Society speleo-herpetologists, with the Vickers-Barre rocketeers, with Royal Dutch-Shell geologists, and every other group in the Empire studying the Serpentfall and its implications—very much including His Majesty’s Government. Rhodes engineers and technicians design ophi-tech devices for those groups, and keep improving new prototypes. “Rhodes Scholars” explore Africa and the world, cataloging (and sometimes capturing) new life forms and ancient survivals.

The University finds itself politically split: institutionally, Rhodes very much favors the Nationalist “strong hand” in Africa, but many of its scholars are socialists, internationalists, liberals, and otherwise suspicious of Boer policy.

### Australia

With a population of 10 million, Australia is the country on Earth least affected by the Serpentfall physically. Even the “years without a summer” were milder in Australia, on the other side of the world from the Serpentfall’s plume of dirt and mist. But it is one of the most affected politically: it has suddenly become the heart and fulcrum of the British Empire.

Australia has no bandits worth mentioning, although some Aboriginal tribes in the interior worship the Serpent. The desolate Outback allows the government to isolate major experimental facilities such as the Woomera Proving Grounds for ophiurgical and rocketry research.

### South Africa

The Union of South Africa is the other major pole of the British Empire. Its white population of less than 3 million maintains near-total control over the economy and political structure of the country, although it is split between the monarchist South African Party and the pro-independence National Party of mostly Boer stock. The National Party believes first in controlling the 10 million Xhosa, Zulu, and other blacks in South Africa, and secondarily in pursuing South African independence. (There are also about 3 million Indians, mostly laborers and small businessmen, in British Africa.) King Henry and his government must walk a fine line in South Africa. Trying to bring it completely into the Imperial mainstream will offend the Boers and possibly splinter the Empire; leaving the Boers to their own devices will encourage white nationalism and stir up native unrest throughout Africa. Complicating matters further, South Africa also produces strategic minerals necessary for British industrial and weapons development, and holds Rhodes University, the Empire’s premier (and indispensable) research facility.

With the British Isles destroyed, there is an urgent shortage of colonial administrators for King Henry’s Empire. South African and Rhodesian whites increasingly flow into African colonial posts, including Tanganyika, the “protectorates” of formerly Portuguese Angola and Mozambique, and the former Belgian Congo. (British East Africa has its own native British aristocracy.) Hence, South Africa and Australia find themselves competing for influence in Africa under the common British Imperial crown.

With its vital strategic location, mineral deposits, colonial presence, and Rhodes University, South Africa has a good deal of scope for independent action. For example, the South African Police (SAP) maintains their own network of spies and mercenaries to keep rebel groups and “subversives” down. The SAP does not accept MI5 control or oversight, although it cooperates with British Intelligence on a case-by-case basis.

### British India

After the Serpentfall, the British government altered its policy of treating India as an indivisible dominion on a single track to independence. The elections of 1947 included an option to remain under British control: the Muslim and Sikh sections of India, along with a number of the “princely states,” voted