

## The Twelve

### History

The Twelve was the creation of one man - *Guile Snakering* (1841-1883), a politician who lost out in a power struggle to become the chief adviser to the King. In 1875, he used his remaining influence with King Eternity Farwatcher to persuade him to set up "Chamber Pasheen"<sup>1</sup>, an elite chamber consisting of fifteen or so of the most respected scholars in Chamber Platinum which would act, in modern parlance, as a think tank. Its stated purpose was to identify the "ultimate cause" of the Blood Plague and to ensure that nothing like it could affect Everway again. In reality, its purpose was far more grandiose, but Guile took care to hide this fact.

Guile's plotting started with the selection of the members of the Chamber. Senior scholars were selected who had personally suffered the death of someone close to them. They were privately sounded out on joining a committee engaged in "special projects for the enhancement and glorification of Everway". The range of families represented was unusually wide and included Scratch, Crookstaff, Snakering, Gold, Watcher, Crow, Tender, Mother and Moondance members. The true purpose of the meeting was only revealed when everyone was gathered in the inner sanctum of Chamber Platinum on the 6<sup>th</sup> day of the month of the Virgin, to general disappointment (numerous other groups within Chamber Platinum had been studying the Blood Plague). The nominal chairperson, Vellum Scratch, emphasised that the purpose was to "think bigger thoughts and present more grandiose visions" than had been presented before. "We must seek to find the *ultimate* cause of the Blood Plague, and an answer that will stand the test of time".

As Guile had intended, this started a torrent of argument. The Moondance representative, a dogmatic man by the name of Swirl, stated that the Plague was ultimately the will of the Walker and that there was nothing anyone could or should do about it. The majority of the other representatives disagreed with him and he walked out, saying that there was nothing further that he could usefully contribute to the conversation. After much heated discussion, Guile suggested that the plague could be ascribed to "the will of the gods", the gods in question being left to personal discretion. This was generally agreed to.

The discussion then moved on to what could be done about it. Suggestions included destroying or sealing all the gates to Everway (rejected as bad for trade and probably ineffective as the plague was already present), making Everway citizens immune to disease (rejected by the Mother representative as impossible - she brushed off suggestions that the Mother family would have no purpose to be in Everway if no-one was ill), reducing the plague's effects by reanimating the dead (a suggestion from a Dead Hand coven member which was rejected by everyone), quarantining all spherewalkers for six months (a Keeper suggestion, rejected by the Golds) and banishing anyone showing any sign of illness from Everway (a Watcher suggestion). Finally, Guile played his trump card. "It seems to me," he said, "that if the gods are responsible for the Blood Plague, then there is only one logical conclusion." He looked round at the ring of people he had carefully selected and manipulated to this point. "The gods must be fought, and to do that we must become as gods ourselves!"

There was silence for a moment, and then a general murmur of consent as the logic was worked through. Clearly the gods had effectively attacked Everway by allowing the plague to enter, and equally clearly they could only be prevented by beings with similar god-like powers. Various objections were raised ("You are suggesting a war against the gods!" "A little ambitious isn't it - we don't even know the nature of the gods" "what if the Walker returns - won't he, she or it be angry?" "Assuming your plan works - who will decide who will be deified?"), but Guile had answers to them all ("no war against the gods - only those who

---

<sup>1</sup> Pasheen: A mythical metal said to be even rarer than gold or platinum. It was supposed to be worked into a perfect reflective surface which never tarnishes or grows dull. It was immortalised in the children's fable "Little Wolf and the Pasheen Palace".

threaten Everway” “I propose that the first goal of the research will be to determine once and for all the nature of the gods” “I hardly think the Walker will be angry with us for protecting the Pyramid” “why, the people in this room, of course”).

And thus was the Twelve born. It was immediately agreed that the research must be done in absolute secrecy, as the ordinary folk would find it blasphemous and the powerful would regard it as threatening. For this reason, the king would not be told of the ultimate aim of the research. Vellum Scratch could not agree to this and left the meeting in protest (Guile had anticipated this and, after an unfortunate encounter with a Smiler, Vellum’s headless torso was found in a brothel in the Street of a Thousand Kisses). The remaining twelve took an oath, firstly to tell no-one, not even their own families, and secondly to meet on the 6<sup>th</sup> day of the Month of the Maiden and of the Water Carrier to review progress. It was agreed that the king would be fobbed off with a conventional programme to seek the origins of the Blood Plague in the realm in which it originated, to improve public hygiene etc. (ironically, it was this programme that led to the discoveries that eventually eliminated the Blood Plague from Everway). In the mean time, the real research was to begin, divided amongst the families so that no one family could make the discovery before anyone else, into the nature of the gods. This would be done by correlating all descriptions of gods on Roundwander and other spheres and looking for common factors. The meeting broke up, and each person hurried home to their beds and dreams of godhood.

It is not clear if Guile intended the Twelve to be his means of obtaining power and influence within Everway - if so, he was to be disappointed as he died in the last major outbreak of the Blood Plague in 1883, without any major breakthroughs in the secret research. The nature of the gods proved maddeningly difficult to pin down. Most spheres had several sets of gods active in different realms, and there was little consistency in their powers and abilities. In some cases it was clear that the local people had mistaken natural phenomena or magical effects for the actions of the gods - indeed, it was quite impossible to tell if the actions of holy men and women were due to divine power, an unusual magical gift, acute psychological insight or plain trickery. Nor was it clear which gods were responsible for bringing the blood plague to Everway. Most gods were very limited in their occurrence, normally to a few realms or spheres. Some were more generally known (the family dynasties of Odin, Ra, Quetzalcoatl, Zeus, Brighid and Coyote, as well as the Walker, were generally known throughout the Thousand Spheres, but only through stories), but even their powers were strictly limited to the spheres on which they were worshipped. None (other than the Walker) had abilities that could travel across spheres.

“Chamber Pasheen” ostensibly broke up when the Blood Plague was eliminated from Everway in 1890, but continued to meet every six months, carefully approaching new members likely to be sympathetic when old ones died. With the withdrawal of funding from the king and with no obvious progress, research was sporadic and desultory. The Scratches became interested in trade and concentrated their efforts on exploration, and work on the Secret Project was delegated to junior researchers in each family who had no idea what they were doing. This may explain why it took nearly three hundred years for the nature of the gods to be discovered. The Twelve became a cross between a gentlemen’s club and the Masons, an elite group that only the privileged few were allowed to join. Needless to say there were rumours of its existence, but no-one took them very seriously, except the paranoid Aric Whiteoar who had a number of senior scholars put to death for membership of “secret organisations inimical to the king” (although only two of their number were executed, the Twelve stopped meeting until after Aric’s death).

The breakthrough came in 2237 when Ink Scratch, a young spherewalker who had been investigating folk tales common to many spheres, came back with a very interesting account. She had been investigating stories of a “rainbow-haired girl” which she had encountered in several widely disparate realms. She eventually managed to meet her by getting herself imprisoned in *Giggle*, a realm where all the adults behave like children (she played a game with them which left her locked in a cave). The rainbow-haired girl, who called herself Silly Me, told her that there were indeed gods who were associated with the Fortune Deck, but that they did not appear as gods but as humans or objects with unusual powers. Silly Me mentioned Mother Harvest and one or two others that she had met. Ink wrote up her

experience and submitted it as a book for the library of Chamber Platinum. One of the reviewers, Sand Scratch, was a member of the Twelve and immediately recognised its importance. He riffled through the Fortune Deck and soon encountered the Cockatrice and Death cards. Here were plausible creators of the Blood Plague and the other evils which had inflicted Everway. Ink's book was, of course rejected for Chamber Platinum but was kept in the Scratch library. Ink herself became an indexer at the library and never became aware of the significance of what she had found.

Sand kept the discovery from the other members of the group, partly from greed, partly because he considered the Twelve to be a defunct society that had forgotten its original purpose. He initiated a programme to discover evidence of the avatars and to identify them with cards in the Fortune Deck. This required calling on the services of a number of spherewalkers, who all needed paying. Sand got the money by siphoning off funds that were to pay for Chamber Silver, which was in the process of being built. His opposite number and rival in the Crookstuffs, Dweomer, called foul, and various investigations were launched into Scratch affairs. Others in the Twelve, including Dweomer, got wind of what Sand was up to and forced him to spill the beans at the next biannual meeting. The result was an intensive effort to understand avatars, and within twenty or thirty years a number had been identified. It did not take an enormous leap of logic to deduce that the Walker was also an avatar, but there was confusion as to which card he/she/it represented. This confusion remains to this day - for the past hundred years, the Walker has been assumed to represent the Usurper (there are a number of other inaccuracies and misattributions, especially of objects such as the Twisted Library, the Crown of Odin and the Mother Fountain, in the Twelve's list of avatars). Representatives of the Twelve spoke with a few avatars (notably Mother Harvest, Silly Me, Warspear Orangebeard, the Prince of Swans and Heaven's Light) but did not achieve enlightenment as to their origins and weaknesses.

In 2287, a decision was taken to begin the next phase of the project, namely to discover a means by which human beings could become avatars. The nature of avatars themselves gave some cause for hope - the non-reappearance of the Walker implied that they could at least be thwarted for a time and the fact that so many of them had a human form implied that it was at least possible. The avatars themselves were vague on the subject of their origins - none reported having a family or parents. The age of the stories about them indicated that they were very, very old (certainly at least 1000 years before the foundation of Everway). The other major feature that they shared was that they were highly magical (troubling in the light of the fact that the Blood Plague wasn't).

These observations led to the attempt to find a magical means of achieving godhood. Whiteice Crookstaff examined several legends that suggested how the avatars could have been formed. He came to the conclusion that the avatars were ordinary humans who had transcended to a higher plane, whence came their special powers. He investigated means of achieving a transcendent state, and eventually came to the conclusion that it was necessary for people to be "born" into a sphere of pure spirit in which they could strengthen themselves and then return to the real world. The problem was finding a sphere of pure spirit. The Twelve's research effort for the next few decades focused on finding a solution to this problem. The break-through came when *Coiner Gold*, a Twelve member who was working on a secret (and illicit) deal with the Basahn for tableware and fortune decks, reported a tale that had been told to him about a mighty Basahni wizard called Spheremaker, who had once tried to create a new sphere for the Basahni with a spell using two magical artifacts called the Edge and the Pearl but was defeated by his evil twin, a wizard called Shadow. The legend also referred to a "Book of Words". This suggested that a realm of pure spirit could be created.

The Edge and the Pearl were of course well-known in legend, as was the wizard Shadow who had supposedly sacrificed his life to save that of the sorceress Ocean in the Daring Kingdom. Despite diligent researches, however, the Twelve were unable to establish the present whereabouts of the Sphere and the Edge. In desperation, they quietly offered a reward of several thousand hefts to whoever could procure the artifacts for them. One day, a fellow by the name of Redfox strolled into one of the biannual meetings of the Twelve, causing uproar. Redfox calmed them down, explaining that he was the "greatest thief of the Thousand

Worlds", that he could go anywhere, and oh yes, he knew where the Sphere and the Pearl were. The Twelve promised him anything, *anything*, if he got hold of them. Redfox said that he didn't want the money, but he did want a large house, close to the walls of Everway, with every room covered by mirrors that had to be made by a specific process. The Twelve acceded to this bizarre request, and at the following biannual meeting Redfox showed up bearing the Edge and the Pearl. He never said where and how he got them (and perhaps fortunately, Redfox had not been identified as an avatar by the Twelve).

With the artifacts in their possession, the Twelve started to prepare themselves to become gods. There was the small matter of the absence of the Book of Words, but Firebolt Crookstaff reckoned that they were only necessary to create a physical realm, whereas they were creating a realm of pure spirit.

The experiment was finally performed in 2382, almost one hundred years after the second part of the programme had started, in the Twelve's secret meeting room in Chamber Platinum of the Library of All Worlds. Unusually, the Twelve needed assistants to support them - each brought one trusted member of their family, telling them that they were to perform a secret ritual that would "strengthen Everway against its enemies". As there was paranoia over the Middleland's intentions after the One Eye's island invasion, the acolytes accepted this explanation without question. To reinforce the deception, the acolytes were required to wear special white robes with an orange stripe. They were earnestly assured by Sparkle Emerald that the king was aware of the ceremony and had approved it.

The Twelve who took part in the ceremony were:

- Firebolt Crookstaff - head of Living Fire Coven
- Twining Crookstaff - head of Green Hand coven
- Papyrus Scratch - Master of the Library
- Question Scratch
- Sparkle Emerald - sister of the king
- Coiner Gold
- Trusting Watcher
- Caring Tender
- Wrathful Crow
- Twist Mask
- Gladsome Mother
- Rattle Snakering

The ceremony went well. After much magical preparation, Firebolt took up the Pearl and began a long chant, based on his studies of Cleacuun. Then a struggling bound and masked figure was brought into the room and bound against a man-high block of stone. As Firebolt reached the climax of his chant, he took up the Edge and, fitting the Pearl into the socket in its hilt, slit the victim from top to bottom, slicing deep into the stone below. As the bifurcated halves, held up by chains around the arms, swung open like a door to reveal a gate to a world full of yellow flames, the halves of the mask came off. The acolytes gasped in horror as they recognised the terrified, bloody visage of Prince Greatheart Emerald, the heir to the throne. Sparkle, his mother, looked on, her face stony.

Firebolt pointed the Edge/Pearl at the rent and a bright white light sprang from its tip, passing through the gate into the chaos beyond. He started to chant once again in his made-up Cleacuun, and slowly a ghostly world could be seen taking shape through the gate. Finally, Firebolt stopped; the light faded, but the gate and the world remained. Casting aside the Pearl and the Edge (which were picked up by his acolyte, a young member of the Dead Hand coven called Ulrich), he walked up to the Gate, passing between the dripping halves of Greatheart, and stepped into the new world.

An unseemly struggle ensued amongst the remainder of the Twelve to follow Firebolt. It was won by Wrathful Crow, who pushed aside Gladsome Mother and Rattle Snakering and strode into the void. As he passed through, his body faded, becoming defined by bright white lines as if sketched. The others passed through, the same thing happening to them. Finally, only the acolytes remained.

Firebolt had left instructions, a set of words that were to be chanted every day to keep the Gate into the new world open, "until the time of purification is complete". The acolytes, led by Ulrich, did as they were told and also watched the goings on in the new world. For a time, all seemed fine. The Twelve, their bodies growing more and more ghostly, had the power to create new objects and practised assiduously, erecting spectacular buildings and creating marvellous creatures out of the white smoke that drifted through the world. However, their edifices lacked substance and would soon start to dissolve away.

It was Ulrich who first noticed that the created world was starting to contract. He had been timing how long the Twelve's creations took to dissolve and found that far from them lasting longer as Firebolt had intimated that they would as their minds became progressively freer of their earthly bodies, they were dissolving after less and less time. The horizon of the ghostly world started to get closer. These alarming changes were noticed by the Twelve themselves, who abandoned their creative projects and turned on each other, fighting for the diminishing stuff of creation of which they themselves were made.

The acolytes started to panic, chanting Firebolt's words over and over until they were hoarse. It made no difference. Inexorably the spirit world contracted, the wraith-like forms of the Twelve flitting frantically to and fro, Occasionally a bright explosion of white fire would blossom as they hurled raw power at each other. One day Ulrich came in to discover that instead of twelve entities in the world, there were only eleven. As he watched, six of the figures combined their power into a dazzling white lightning bolt which struck one of the remaining wraiths (Caring Tender, he thought, though by this time it was hard to tell). With a thin cry of despair the wraith dissipated into mist on which the others fed hungrily to replace their fraying essence. That sated them for a while, but a few hours later they started to fade once again. The wraith of Gladsome Mother zoomed towards the Gate opening, batting frantically at it like a moth against a lantern, but she lacked the substance to break through. The others combined their power once again and she too was dispersed to feed the rest.

So it continued. By now the spirit world was no larger than the Twelve's meeting room, and only three wraiths were left - Firebolt Crookstaff, Sparkle Emerald and Wrathful Crow. Firebolt and Wrathful combined their forces, blasted Sparkle into oblivion, and then turned on each other. The battle raged furiously to and fro - Firebolt, with his mastery of elemental energies, created the more spectacular fireballs, but Wrathful's tactical mind devised attacks which came from many directions and shields of spinning fire that deflected the worst of Firebolt's spells. Both combatants drew recklessly from the substance of the spirit world, causing it to contract to just a few yards across.

Finally Firebolt seemed to gain the upper hand. A series of fireballs drove Wrathful back to the gate itself and left him cowering behind his rapidly fraying shield. Firebolt gathered his energies, causing cracks to appear in the walls of the ghost world through which yellow flames leaked, and raised his hand to deliver the final blow... and Wrathful sent out a fireball, aimed not at his opponent but at the gate. Its fragile structure broke, releasing a tsunami of power, and Ulrich's last glimpse of the spirit world as the gate closed was of two great gouts of energy in the shapes of the two halves of Greatheart's snarling head smearing his former master against the walls of the world, his rapidly dissolving face twisted into a silent scream [Ulrich never worked out whether Greatheart's appearance was a final flourish by Wrathful or whether his destruction of the gate had released Greatheart's trapped spirit].

Thus did the transcendence of the Twelve end in abject failure. The political ramifications of the disappearance of thirteen of Everway's most senior family members, including the heir to the throne and his mother, were significant. Officially, blame was placed on "Middleland assassins" (Ulrich arranged for Greatheart's remains to be washed up in the marshes at the mouth of the Ruby Sunset river). However the Scratches, led by Papyrus Scratch's wife (to whom he had led slip some hints of what he was about), never accepted this and blamed the Crookstuffs, accusing them of "underhand magicks to betray Everway to its enemies". They barred the Library of All Worlds to them and Ulrich, who had used the panic and confusion to become the king's chief adviser, had to use his influence to have it struck down. The leader of the Keepers was forced to resign for allowing Middlelanders into Everway and was

imprisoned for many years. The king authorised a tit-for-tat assassination of Middleland leaders, but the plot was discovered and the would-be assassins were executed.

Eventually the crisis died down and Ulrich felt able to re-form the Twelve based on the acolytes who were present at the original ceremony. The first thing was to work out what had gone wrong. Several of the Twelve blamed Firebolt's made-up Cleacuun which they reckoned had destabilised the world. Ulrich thought otherwise, however. He pointed out that since Avatars were linked to the Fortune Deck, and since there were only 36 cards, there could only be 36 Avatars. This could explain why Firebolt's world wasn't stable. The only solution, said Ulrich, was to destroy an Avatar, allowing a new one to be created. But how?

The Twelve thought about this for many years. The obvious solution was to use the Edge to kill a trapped avatar in much the same way as Firebolt had killed Greatheart. Capturing an avatar, however, proved to be a problem. The Twelve simply didn't have the magical strength necessary. For a while, it looked as if the project would have to be abandoned.

It was Ulrich once again who provided the solution. He decided to repeat Firebolt's ritual to see if there was any way in which the spirit world could be magically strengthened. If it could last long enough, he reasoned, the conversion process might go on long enough to give adepts the power they needed to kill an avatar and thereby make their transcendence permanent. Sacrificing a petty criminal procured for him by the Plumes in Strangerside, he managed to open the gate once again. To his considerable surprise, the spirit world was still there and larger than it had been when he had last seen it, though weirdly transformed. It changed constantly, objects forming on one side of the space and drifting across to disappear on the other, like light from a lantern illuminating a dark room. The objects were ghosts of walls, buildings, trees and creatures. Often the drifting would stop for a while and then resume after a few hours.

Ulrich was even more surprised when one day he looked into the portal - and sensed someone looking back. Quickly he closed the gate and discussed the situation with the rest of the Twelve. As it happened, one of the other Twelve was Newt Crookstaff, leader of Deepmind coven, and it was she who suggested that the reason for the continued existence of the spirit world was that its de facto owner, Wrathful Crow, must still be alive. Newt reasoned that somehow Wrathful must have manifested himself in the physical world and was carrying the spirit world around with him. She also reckoned that Wrathful probably was not fully aware of what the spirit world actually was, which meant that he must have forgotten his origins.

Newt's theory was easily testable - if Wrathful had indeed manifested anywhere in the Thousand Spheres, reports of his activities should soon reach Chamber Platinum. When Ulrich heard word of a new military leader called Wrath who was forming an empire in the outer spheres, he knew that Newt was correct. The Twelve quickly arranged for spies to be sent from Chamber Platinum to find out more about him. It soon became clear that Wrath was indeed completely unaware of his origins, and his mastery of the spirit world had become largely unconscious. The world reflected the physical environment in which Wrath happened to be located.

Here was the perfect weapon for taking on the avatars. But how to wield it? The spies gave the clue. Wrath had sent out messengers to all corners of the empire seeking out "the Twelve", who were to be recognised by their white robes with orange stripes. He had had a vision, he said, that they would show him his destiny. So Ulrich duly arranged for another vision to occur. He and the rest of the Twelve dressed in their ceremonial robes and re-opened the gate, then waited for the sense of being watched. Ulrich then spoke, telling Wrath that he was the "Chosen One" who was to "seek out and destroy death itself". "That", he said, "is your destiny."

The consequences were exactly as the Twelve had hoped. Wrath abandoned his empire and started travelling the spheres. Ulrich used carefully stage-managed appearances to guide Wrath first to the zhi-bow (which he stole) and then to Storm (whom he first tried to tame and then killed with the bow). The acquisition of Storm's son Tempest as a companion was an

additional (and unscripted) action of Wrath's which is giving Ulrich a major headache. Tempest has a strong astral presence and has made Wrath extremely difficult to reach.

### *Recent Developments*

The current membership of the Twelve is as follows:

1. Ulrich Crookstaff (M)
2. Blizzard Crookstaff (M, head of Stormwind Coven)
3. Codex Scratch (M, Master of Library of All Worlds)
4. Quill Scratch (F)
5. Render Crow (M)
6. Cunning Gold (M)
7. Absinthe Emerald (F, wife of Bitter Emerald, the king's advisor)
8. Loudvoice Mask (F, controls body doubles)
9. Buryer Tender (M, controls Smilers)
10. Slowstep Watcher (F, head of Court of Fools sept)
11. Wolfskin Plume (F, supply of victims for Gate opening ceremony)
12. Wile Snakering (F, spy network)

There is, of course, politics within the Twelve. There is the Ulrich faction (Ulrich Crookstaff, Render Crow, Quill Scratch, and Wolfskin Plume) who support Ulrich's leadership; the Codex faction (Codex Scratch, Blizzard Crookstaff, Buryer Tender, Cunning Gold and Loudvoice Mask) who think that Ulrich is going off the rails and that the Twelve's efforts should be concentrated on getting hold of the Book of Words; and the Royal faction (Absinthe Emerald, Wile Snakering, Keensight Watcher) who are somewhere between the two, but who generally support Ulrich.

Because of Tempest's interference, the Twelve has had relatively little contact with Wrath. Alarm bells were sounded when Wrath suddenly disappeared from the sphere where he had been setting up an empire. Reports from nearby realms indicated that he had not gone through any of the gates.

Ulrich managed to make a brief connection as the heroes were leaving Skylight so the Twelve now knows that he has joined with a group of spherewalkers. The contact was too brief to allow them to determine where Wrath was, however. Ulrich managed to insinuate the idea that the heroes will lead him to Death, the idea being to keep Wrath with the group and then to track the group (the precise words were "Well done. You have found the Five, as we intended. Stay with them and they will lead you to Death.")

The heroes' arrival in Everway will (eventually) trigger a crisis within the Twelve. The Ulrich faction has already lost major face by losing control of Wrath, and his inevitable arrival in Everway will cause some of the group to panic. Fortunately for Ulrich, his faction is (probably) the first to hear of the heroes' impending arrival thanks to Quill's message via Inkhand.

- *Ulrich's* approach will be softly-softly. He will wish to try to interrogate the heroes and get them on his side. He will know as soon as they arrive that Wrath isn't with them. His aim will be to try to get the heroes to tell him about their previous adventures, without directly asking them about Wrath if he can avoid it. He will not work directly, of course. Ulrich will realise immediately that killing Wormwood in full view of everyone will embarrass Keensight and, if the body double killer is discovered, Loudvoice Mask as well.
- *Codex* and *Blizzard* will want to get the heroes out of Everway as soon as possible. The chief concerns will be that a) Wrath could find out something about his origins and b) he will try to take over Everway. Codex will try to persuade Keensight to come up with trumped up charges that will exile the heroes from Everway.
- *Buryer* will be in favour of assassinating the heroes in case they know too much. He will offer the use of his Smilers.
- *Wile* may learn something of the heroes from Gentle Dew via Fish Trader (possibly), which she will report to *Absinthe*.
- *Keensight* will be highly paranoid, arresting the heroes if she gets the chance as she will suspect that they set up Wormwood's murder. When she works out that they are Wrath's

companions, she will become even more paranoid. By then, Ulrich and Codex will (separately) be putting forward action plans.

22/07/2006