

A Tale of Four Kings: A Battle Kings Origin Story

By AJ O'Connell

The Beginning

In the first Age of Strife one isolated island, Tistrofel, suffered. Divided into three kingdoms, each with several scattered fiefdoms. Life was hard even for nobility. Those few who lived long enough to become an elder tended farm and raised children into warriors. When they could hold a sword, they learned its use and when deemed necessary, they fought for their king, often to the death for land that was not theirs.

Intense tidal waves ravaged the land. Terraforming and global changes caused by the divine outbursts pushed the continent far into the immense Hollow Sea. When the world finally settled, the survivors discovered that Tistrofel had been brought to ruination and separated from the rest of the world. Isolated and surrounded by dangerous volcanic barriers and grueling reefs, the inhabitants fell into turmoil. Skirmishes broke out and anarchy reigned. The skirmishes became battles that raged across the land. Before long, the battles became full-scale wars as armies amassed to fight for one set of beliefs or another. As years slipped into decades and decades to centuries, the warring never stopped. Kings arose within the separate factions. Great conflicts devastated the land as the kings and usurpers continuously built armies and forced their subjects to throw their lives at the king's enemies. Though few rulers grew close to complete domination of Tistrofel, none could ever remove all opposition. Still the wars continued. Millions of inhabitants died for reckless causes over the course of nearly nine centuries.

The Storm

In the early part of WoG 889, a violent storm appeared in the Southern Ocean. At first it resembled one of the infrequent tropical hurricanes that Tistrofel experienced. A solitary, monstrous waterspout erupted and over the span of a month, traveled in a full circuit around the island-continent. Finally, when the inhabitants had given up hope that the storm would ever abate, the waterspout crashed ashore. The south-western corner of Tistrofel was demolished before the storm finally dispersed. As the growing throng of concerned inhabitants watched from afar, they recorded that something had been terribly wrong about the whole ordeal. People claimed to have seen something within the center, just before it ended. In the midst of the dreadful tempest, a great shadowy shape had been seen inside. After the storm dispersed, a lone figure was found lying unconscious on a jutting stone. Many have said that they saw a spiraling tornado of colors at the center of the storm and that the man was a fallen god. Others swore that the solitary man had ridden atop the storm as if it were a mount and dubbed him a wizard. The practical believed he was an unlucky fisherman in the wrong place at the wrong time. Regardless his origins none had seen him before that day. The stories differ but that was when Kao arrived in Tistrofel.

The Journey

Kao quickly became a celebrity amongst the locals. As the first foreigner that Tistrofel had ever received, each of the four warring kings invited the young man to join them in their quest to dominate the land. The histories are muddled in theory and speculation, but it is generally agreed that Kao never truly accepted any of the kings' invitations. He spent his first several months traveling the land and exploring his new home. During his travels, he learned of the war that had never ended. He found the lands to be rotten with strife and disease. But perhaps worst of all, the young were taken from families at an early age. They were trained, molded and shaped so that they would fight, kill and die for their kings. Such were the accepted terms of life in Tistrofel. Those wounded or maimed would retire to breed more warriors. And so it was that Kao searched through futility for fertile lands and spoke with the commoners until he had heard enough. During his travels, several weary, wounded and homeless took it upon themselves to follow and observe Kao. At the end of his journey, Kao found the highest point of the island-continent and sat upon it reverently. There he meditated on his findings. Kao dreamed in waking slumber for a week without food or drink. When he stood, a change had come over him. When he opened his eyes, they were aglow with myriad strange swirling lights.

The Tower

Kao's voice resonated with raw energy when he sang in a language unheard before. The winds roared to life in reaction to his song and the sea itself - so far from where he stood - roiled and churned. Where his eyes gazed, colors sprung into existence. When Kao raised his arms, the land gave him walls. A tower rose from the ground under his feet in answer to his call. In a swirling mass of furious elements, the land and wind melded with the ocean

and clouds. Rainbows bended to touch him and lightning scarred the ground around him. Finally, nature calmed. Kao and his followers were nowhere to be seen. In their place, atop the highest peak in all of Tistrofel, a mighty Tower had risen into existence. The Tower of Kao had been built without entrance or exit, window or slit. It was a single, solitary silhouette that could be seen by all from any location on the island-continent.

The Four Kings: Hearts

King Bonduc Hartwynn was born into royalty and embraced by his subjects at a young age. He was an exceptional student to war, politics and the arts and he was loved by his people. When his father died, he became the first firm and fair king that Tistrofel had seen in generations. King Hartwynn was a gentle, humble man off the battlefield and a ferocious warrior on the warfront. He had taken no queen, but was responsible for the birth of several bastards throughout his northern kingdom. Due to his strong love for his subjects and a ravenous desire for women, his subjects dubbed him the "King of Hearts". One week after the erection of the Tower of Kao, King Hartwynn stepped out of his private quarters as the sun broke the horizon. Kao stood in King Hartwynn's antechamber adorned in a simple grey cloak.

"Good rise King of Hearts, I am Kao. Though I have but a moment, I have come to accept your invitation. You were the first king to invite this stranger into your home, so in return, I invite you first to my Tower. Five weeks from today a herald will greet you on the northern side of my tower to show you the way." The king's response was heard only by the breeze that wafted through the window.

The Four Kings: Spades

King Serrun Guthwith was born a noble and raised as a spearman for his king's army. Most commonly, spearmen were expected to charge the front lines and die honorably, but Guthwith was the exception. So unique were his fighting skills with the spear that his king made him a general of the armies and had a banner made for his regiment: the black spade - or spear tip - on a receding field of white. His reputation quickly preceded him, and his banner became synonymous with victory. For years his reputation often won victories for him, until his defeat on the Western Ridges where the King of Diamonds' personal guard routed Guthwith's regiment. Wounded but not slain, Guthwith and the remainder of his soldiers returned home to discover that his land had been given to an upstart, rival noble house. In addition, Guthwith learned that his king had demanded that scribes remove the Guthwith name from the history books because he was apparently not undefeatable. Later, Serrun Guthwith snuck into the king's room and assassinated him in his sleep. That night the black spade was raised over the kingdom. With the aid of his loyal regiment, Guthwith overthrew the eastern kingdom of Tistrofel. Since the takeover, he has been known to frequently patrol the dangerous Eastern Highways with his men. During one such expedition, Kao stood alone on a stormy highway, clad in a simple grey cloak, when he was set upon by a group of testy outlaws. Kao did not move. The intrepid band drew near and still Kao stood motionless. A moment before a bandit's dagger slid from its sheath, a spear penetrated his heart. The remaining bandits fled and the horsemen - all but one - ran them down.

"Are you mad traveler?" said the remaining horseman, King Guthwith, as he pulled his spear free. "You merely stood like a log!"

"You have my gratitude, King of Spades," Kao said as he doffed his hood and revealed himself. "I am Kao. Though I have come here to accept your invitation, I have but a moment. You were the second king to invite this stranger into this land that is your home, so in return, I invite you second to my Tower. Four weeks from today a herald will greet you on the eastern side of my tower to show you the way." The king's response was heard only by the rain.

The Four Kings: Diamonds

Before Andor Opismire, there were but three kings in Tistrofel. The dashing handsome man is said to have been born with a silver tongue that perfectly matched his golden hair. His charm and wit quickly became the whispered stories of giggling maidens, though even his prowess with the opposite sex was overshadowed by his limitless wealth. Opismire frequently hosted galas in his enormous manner where he would shower his friends in lavish gifts in grandiose fashion. The parties were not good for everyone though as his popularity bred jealousy. Infuriated by the starry hold that Opismire held over their women, several burly southern men of the Rocky Shores raised a small militia to confront him. Despite several assassination attempts and subtle efforts, they could not get close enough to Opismire to unleash their vengeance. Vexed, the militia went public. They raided homes and storefronts for their weapons and food and often terrorized traveling salesmen and caravans for funds. Opismire, having heard the

woeful tales, hired a handful of guards and quickly found the militia. The stories of the battle differ only slightly - depending on which of the guards told it - but one detail in all of them remained the same: Opismire's twin blades were the only two swords to taste blood the day the militia was destroyed. Believed to be the wealthiest person in all of Tistrofel, and recognized by the southern people as the savior of the south, Opismire was crowned the "King of Diamonds".

Overlooking the glistening, southern shores of Tistrofel, Kao visited King Andor Opismire in his immense castle. The sword master was renowned throughout his kingdom as the owner of the two finest weapons in the land. He often practiced his craft on the ornate balcony that extended over the glittering Southern Ocean. King Opismire had just finished one such session when Kao approached.

"You should give care to whom you startle stranger," said the king to Kao, "I am not unskilled with these weapons." Kao removed the hood of his simple grey cloak and smiled.

"My apologies King of Diamonds," he said. "I am Kao. Though I have come to accept your invitation, I have but a moment. You were the third king to invite this stranger into your home, so in return, I invite you third to my Tower. Three weeks from today a herald will greet you on the southern side of my tower to show you the way."

The king's response was heard only by rays of sunlight beaming down from above.

The Four Kings: Clubs

King Varrus Goerwhey had risen to his status by sheer force. By far the largest of the four kings, he bullied or buried any opposition he met in his ascension to the Throne in the West. Goerwhey was born a commoner and grew up in the vast farm fields of western Tistrofel. By the age of thirteen he had maneuvered and pummeled his way into a more prestigious line of work in the mines. Goerwhey was pulled into the Endless War at only fifteen where he nurtured his ill temper and trained his body beyond mere strength; he became a veritable wall on the battlefield. As part of a coup that led to the death of his predecessor king, Goerwhey stepped in and took the crown. Unhappy with what remained of the previous king's castle, King Goerwhey slaughtered a noble family housed in a keep in the Western Ridges. He then personally led the reconstruction of his castle-fortress over the keep. It was immediately apparent that he cared more for the land under his feet than his subjects. King Goerwhey worked his subjects tirelessly in the fields and mines to fuel his stolen army. Often, he would dress in a traveling cloak and wander his lands to observe his people at work. When he discovered 'laziness' or an overabundance of resting workers, he would crack them over the head with a thick shillelagh. The weapon's reputation became feared throughout the western region of Tistrofel with its three bulbous knobs on the head. Some of his subjects began calling him the "King of Clubs" in quiet circles, and eventually, the word reached King Goerwhey's ears. Few have ever seen him smile, but rumors abound that he was so thrilled with the derisive title that he fashioned his banner to reflect his status. He even went so far as to make a holiday dubbed the "Day of Clubs".

Kao found the king in his personal smithy where he vigorously labored over a bellows. Kao watched as the fire blazed furiously, and the king finally moved to his workbench. He heated a block of metal and smashed his smithy hammer against it, then heated it again and smashed again until the fire ebbed once more. When the king went back to the bellows, Kao spoke.

"Good eve, King of Clubs," he said as he stepped forth from the shadows. "I am Kao. Though I have come to accept your invitation, I have but a moment. You were the fourth king to invite this stranger into your home, so in return, I invite you fourth to my Tower. Two weeks from today a herald will greet you outside the western wall of my tower to show you the way."

The king's response was heard only by hot metal of the forge.

The Arrival

The four kings arrived outside of the tower in the order they were invited. Upon arrival each king was greeted by a man bearing the king's own symbol prominently displayed on a standard.

"Greetings my king," they each said, "I am your herald as designated by Kao, and I would be honored to escort and represent you in all endeavors. To gain entrance, you must agree to these terms and touch your banner." The kings all agreed and touched their symbols. Once inside they found themselves in a large room with an enormous round table at its center. Four grand thrones had been positioned symmetrically around the table. When the heralds positioned themselves behind a throne, the king would take his rightful seat. Kao was nowhere to be seen. When the final king arrived, the four kings sat in an uncomfortable silence. Long moments passed of uneasy tension until finally the table moved. It turned and shifted as

pockets of wood and trees rose up to form miniature houses and forests. Grassy knolls, barren strips of burnt land and beaches grew until a fully functioning replica map of Tistrofel had been crafted onto the table's surface. At the center of the map the Tower of Kao grated up and out of the highest hill. The apex of the tower reached high above any other structure in the land, widened, and then opened. A stairwell appeared, and Kao emerged.

"I must apologize for my tardiness," he began, "There is much to discuss and little time in which to discuss it."

The Plan

Kao was dressed in a fine dinner robe and bore a staff that was made from all the colors of a fresh rainbow. As he stepped out of the center of the map, the tower returned to its scale size. Without giving either king a chance to respond, Kao began.

"This land has been torn asunder by the greed of its leaders for centuries. The people have starved or been slain by foolishness while their kings have only prospered and demanded more. It is time for change and I have developed a plan to do so." He stepped down from the table and walked a circuit around it as he spoke. "I have divided this land into four parts. They are not separated by size, but by their value to the overall survival of this island-continent." The map altered colors to highlight the distinct districts. "There are four kings, and therefore, there will be four kingdoms. Each king will be held accountable by his people and by the land over which he rules. Each kingdom will maintain one fourth of the total resources of this continent which means you are all responsible for your own survival. I've called the red area the Planner Kingdom. This king will make laws to maintain order among the subjects and attend to their needs, judge their crimes and govern over them. The laws are absolute, but remember, all kingdoms must be placed under fair laws. All black you see is the Warrior Kingdom. The warriors must defend against inner turmoil as well as external intruders. The Warrior Kingdom will enforce laws and maintain justice and peace. I call blue the Crafter Kingdom. It is their responsibility to ensure that tools, weapons, armor and buildings are built to sustain the needs of the many. The green you see is the Gather Kingdom. They will provide food and supplies from fishing and planting to mining and skinning." When Kao finally stopped talking he had walked completely around the table four times. He waited.

"I like your plan," stated king Serrun Guthwith, the King of Spades. "But there is a flaw," he said with a grin, "It is plain to see that everyone will choose to rule over the Planner Kingdom. War will continue. You have wasted our time."

The Staff of the Four

"I feared the same," Kao nodded his agreement. "In answer to that, I created a game," he held his rainbow staff high. "This is the Staff of the Four, a mighty tool that has been taught to listen to the land. It can also feel the emotions of the people within Tistrofel and channel that energy into each of you four kings. As you agreed before you entered my tower, the man with your banner will remain at your side. In doing so, your banner will feed the energy necessary into the Staff of the Four."

"What good is this power to us? This only gives *you* a means to grade *us*." King Opismire, the King of Diamonds said.

The Tournament

"As I said, the four of you will be held responsible for the people and lands in your control. So it stands to reason that you should also risk the most to keep it. At the beginning of each new year, the four of you will meet in the Hall of Kings." Kao looked at the map and a new building rose up from the grassy fields, south of the Tower of Kao. "I have considered your greedy natures. Though equally important, each land has been placed into an Order of Prestige. This order was created by fate. You see, I was invited to each of your kingdoms at different times, and each of you arrived at this tower in that same order. Likewise, I explained when I met with each of you, the order in which we met. After this meeting, you each have four weeks to gather your items and move into the humble estates I have provided, in the areas you see before you."

"Is that a threat?" King Goerwhey, the King of Clubs slammed his fist on the table and stood.

"My clothes alone will take four weeks to move!" King Opismire shouted as he too stood.

"Never again!" Kao drove his staff into the floor and the entire room shook. The two kings fell into their seats.

"You will never again murder your people in the name of your own greed. This mass fighting is over." Kao

stepped onto stairs that could not be seen and onto the table once more. He glared at the two kings and waited.

“Challenge me at your own peril. Play in my tournament each year and you can remain a king, but you must *earn* your prestige.” Kao looked at each of them.

“King Hartwynn is the People’s Champion and will begin in the Planner Region. King Guthwith is the Banner Champion and will move to the Warrior Region. King Opismire will rule the Crafter Region as the Sword Champion and the Gather Region will be King Goerwhey’s, you are the Shield Champion.” Kao placed the staff onto the model of the newly erected Hall of Kings then looked to each king individually again. “You have four weeks to take your families and your most precious commodities and move into your districts. Your heralds will guide you as needed, but be warned, your castles and keeps will be returned to the land at the end of four weeks. Tell your people to clear out.”

Flabbergasted all but one of the kings shook their heads.

“In five weeks, we will hold the first tournament, and you will fight for the region of choice or you will take what is left.” Kao explained.

“What if we disagree?” Asked King Goerwhey, the King of Clubs. But it was King Hartwynn, the King of Hearts who answered.

“It is too late,” he said with a sigh, “To enter this room, we already agreed.”

The Game Begins

Five weeks after that fateful meeting, the arena filled with commoners from all over Tistrofel to watch their kings fight for them. Kao explained the rules and placed the Staff of the Four in the center of the arena. The kings all stood at the front of their advisors, families and heralds. As promised, the Staff of the Four kept the tournament fair by slinging spells and maintaining balance throughout. When the subjects of Tistrofel realized that the staff was keyed to their energy, they would often change “Equalize!” when they wanted the Staff of the Four to intervene; and it would frequently respond. Who won the first Battle Kings tournament? Let’s find out...