

**THE BRIGHT CAMPAIGN AND THE
INTERVENTION OF SGRIOS**

There are ages in Temuair that cannot be measured with certainty. They stand before the oldest reigns, before the first proper annals, before Mileth's records learned the habit of dates. What remains of them comes to us through temple fragments, half-preserved hymns, and the careful arguments of priests who inherited more reverence than proof. Among these uncertain accounts, few are repeated with as much caution as the tale of the Bright Campaign, when Ceannlaidir drove the works of Chadul so far from the world that Sgrios was forced to intervene.

The old accounts do not agree on where the campaign began. Some place its first battle beneath mountains that have since fallen into the sea. Others claim it began in a plain now covered by forest, where the grass grew black at the root and no animal would graze. A few temple tablets name no place at all, only saying that the breath of Chadul had moved too near the living world, and that Danaan's light was being crowded from the places where mortals slept, planted, buried, and prayed. In this, at least, the traditions agree: the danger was real.

Chadul was not then defeated, nor could such a thing be done. Danaan and Chadul are not kings whose crowns can be broken, nor beasts whose hearts can be pierced. They are forever present, their opposition older than any mortal tongue. Yet the servants and works of Chadul had pressed too boldly into Temuair.

There were wells that gave no reflection, graves where the dead whispered in voices not their own, and children born under roofs where every lamp went dark at once. In those days, the people called for war, and war answered them.

Ceannlaidir came into the old songs as a necessary terror. He was not remembered first as wrathful, but as clear. His priests wrote that he stood where courage had failed and gave courage back its name. His standard was carried into places where Danaan's light had thinned, and those who marched beneath it believed they were not conquering for pride, but driving back a dominion that would have left no room for oath, harvest, hearth, or memory. The first victories of the Bright Campaign were therefore honored without shame. They saved what might otherwise have been swallowed.

The campaign moved from battlefield to battlefield, though the word battlefield is too small for what the fragments describe. Ceannlaidir's host fought in caverns where sound did not return, in forests whose trees bled dark sap, and beside rivers that had forgotten the direction of the sea. Wherever Chadul's corruption had gathered, Ceannlaidir struck it. The black wells cleared. The graves fell silent. The air over the old roads grew warm again. Those who survived the campaign said that, for a time, it seemed as though Temuair itself had begun to breathe more easily.

It is here that the oldest hymns change their tone. Praise remains, but it becomes uneasy. The campaign had restored the border between the living world and the dark that pressed against it, yet Ceannlaidir did not halt. The priests of Danaan, according to one fragment, sent white-robed envoys to the war-host and asked that the victories be sealed with offerings of thanks. Ceannlaidir refused them. Whether he spoke in anger or certainty is lost, but the answer preserved in three separate traditions is the same: no darkness that can be driven back should be permitted to remain near the world.

That sentence became the wound from which the rest of the tale unfolded.

Ceannlaidir pressed onward. His host descended beneath old burial fields and burned the hidden passages where shadows gathered too thickly. He broke the mouths of caverns through which Chadul's servants had passed. He drove the dark from dream, from root, from standing stone, from the cold hollows beneath ruined altars. The campaign was still sung as holy, and perhaps much of it remained so, but the wise began to fear victories that did not know where to stop.

The first signs were mistaken for blessings. Fields that had lain barren after Chadul's nearness suddenly grew bright with grain. The stalks stood high and pale, and from a distance they shone like sunlit hair. Yet when the grain was milled, the flour had little strength in it. Bread made from it filled the belly but did not nourish the body. Men ate and remained weak. Children woke hungry after full meals. Farmers thanked Danaan at dawn and stared at their empty hands by dusk.

Then came the trouble of the dead. On the ninth day after a battle near the western stones, the slain had not changed. No fly came near them. No smell rose from them. Their wounds remained open and clean, as if the hour of death had been fixed around them and refused passage into any hour after. The priests tried to bury them, but the soil would not take them properly. It lay over the bodies like a blanket over stone. Where there should have been decay, there was only waiting.

At first, this frightened only those who tended graves. Then it reached the living. Wounds closed too quickly, leaving pain trapped beneath unbroken skin. Fever passed from the brow but settled in the thoughts. A soldier whose arm had been split by a blackened blade rose after three days and returned to drill, yet he could not remember the faces of his brothers. A woman burned in a house-fire woke with smooth hands and clouded eyes, unable to weep for the children she had lost. The world had not been healed. It had been denied the means by which hurt becomes part of time.

The old records say that shadows grew thin. At noon, this was taken for a sign of victory. At evening, it became unbearable. Houses seemed exposed even with their doors barred. Sleep came without dreams, and those who woke from it felt no rest. Hunters found animals standing in clearings, alive but still, as if the instinct to hide had been taken from them. The dark beneath trees, beneath beds, beneath closed hands, had grown too faint to shelter anything.

This was the true consequence of the Bright Campaign. Ceannlaidir had not destroyed Chadul, for Chadul cannot be destroyed. He had driven the nearness of darkness so far from the mortal world that all lesser endings began to fail. The campaign had mistaken corruption for darkness itself, and in striking past the first, it wounded the second. Temuair was not made pure by this. It was made rigid. What lived could not properly rest. What died could not properly pass. What suffered could not properly change.

It was then, according to the tradition kept in the older shrines of Sgrios, that the god of decay came to the field of unburied dead.

The place is not named with confidence. Some call it the Pale Field. Some call it the Field Without Crows. The most severe account gives it no name, saying only that it was where Ceannlaidir's host had won its seventh victory beyond the proper boundary. The bodies of Chadul's servants lay beside the bodies of mortals, and neither had been claimed by rot, ash, worm, or soil. The soldiers of Ceannlaidir would not sleep near them. The priests could not consecrate them. Even the wind moved carefully there.

Sgrios did not come as Chadul's champion. This point is repeated often, perhaps because later ages were too quick to forget it. He did not come to raise the black banners again, nor to undo the victories that had saved Temuair from corruption. He came because a world without endings is a world in rebellion against its own making. Where there is no decay, there is no return. Where there is no death, there is no release. Where there is destruction without surrender afterward, war becomes a chain with no final link.

The accounts differ in how Sgrios appeared. Some say the ground darkened beneath the unburied dead. Some say the first crow seen in forty days landed on a broken spear and called once. Some say Ceannlaidir alone saw him clearly, while all others felt only the sudden weight of age in their bones. It is enough to say that Sgrios came, and that the field changed around him. The bodies began to smell. Blood blackened. Flies returned. Men who had feared the field covered their mouths and stepped back, yet many wept with relief, because the world had remembered how to continue.

Ceannlaidir came armed to meet him. The fragments are careful here. They do not say Ceannlaidir was cowardly, nor do they make him foolish. He had fought because Temuair had needed war. He had carried Danaan's cause where few others could have survived. But victory had narrowed his sight. He saw Sgrios standing among the dead and believed, for a moment, that the dark had found a new general.

“You would give the world back to Chadul,” Ceannlaidir said.

Sgrios answered, **“No. I would give the dead back to the earth.”**

This short exchange appears in nearly every surviving text, though small words differ between them. Its meaning has been argued over by generations, but the plain reading remains the strongest. Sgrios did not deny the danger of Chadul. He denied Ceannlaidir's claim that all darkness belonged to Chadul. A grave is dark, but it is not Chadul's throne. Soil is dark, but it feeds the root. Sleep is dark, but it restores the mind. The inside of a seed is dark until life breaks it open.

Ceannlaidir would not yield at once. War seldom releases its purpose simply because another truth has spoken. He lifted his weapon, and the hymns say that the host behind him beat their shields in answer. Those shields had driven horrors back from mortal doors. Those hands had saved villages, sanctuaries, and unborn generations. It is no small thing to tell victory that it has gone too far.

Sgrios did not raise an army. He did not call Chadul's servants from the deep places. He stood among the dead and let the field answer for him. The bodies that had lain untouched began to sink into consequence. Armor rusted where blood had dried beneath it. Wounds softened. The pale grain from nearby fields bent and shed its empty husks. The soldiers saw then what their campaign had held suspended. Every victory they had won had left behind a debt. Every battlefield required burial. Every wound required pain before healing. Every ending refused had gathered around them, waiting for the god whose office they had tried to outrun.

Ceannlaidir struck first. So say the war hymns, though the shrines of Sgrios phrase it differently and say that war did what war must do when challenged. His blow split the field from one end to the other, and light poured into the wound in the earth. For a moment, the old songs claim, there was no shadow anywhere. Men saw the undersides of stones, the bones beneath their own skin, and the fear hidden in the faces of the brave. Nothing was concealed.

Then Sgrios placed one hand upon the broken ground.

The split earth closed around the dead. Not all at once, and not gently. It took them as earth takes what belongs to it. Armor bent. Spears vanished point-first. The bodies of men and monsters sank together, and the field gave off the first true stench it had known since Ceannlaidir's overreach began. Many fled from it. Others remained on their knees. The smell was terrible, but it was honest.

Ceannlaidir raised his weapon again, but this time the host behind him did not beat their shields. They were looking at the graves. They were looking at their own healed scars, which had begun to ache properly for the first time. They were looking at the shadows beneath their feet, now dark enough to prove that light still had a shape. The world had not been handed to Chadul. It had been returned to itself.

“War may make the dead,” Sgrios said, “but it does not own them.”

This was the rebuke that ended the Bright Campaign. Ceannlaidir had the strength to continue. No account denies that. The god of war was not broken, humiliated, or cast down. Such additions belong to later storytellers who preferred simple victories. The older history is more difficult and more useful. Ceannlaidir stopped because he understood, at last, that his campaign had passed beyond defense and become an assault upon the order that allowed defense to matter. If the fallen could not be buried, then sacrifice had no completion. If wounds could not pass through pain, then courage became only endurance without release. If darkness had no place near the world, then Danaan's light no longer blessed life. It trapped it.

So Ceannlaidir lowered his weapon.

No treaty was written. No mortal hand could have recorded such terms, and no god would have needed them. Yet the traditions agree that from that day the Bright Campaign ended. Ceannlaidir withdrew from the farthest boundaries he had crossed. The hidden passages were not reopened to corruption, but neither were they burned clean of every shadow. Graves darkened again. Crows returned to battlefields. The grain that grew the following season was shorter, duller in color, and strong enough to feed those who ate it.

Children dreamed. The wounded cried out in their sleep and woke with clearer eyes.

Sgrios did not restore Chadul's dominion. He restored the lesser darknesses that belong to the world: the darkness of soil, sleep, grief, age, burial, and forgetting. These are not gentle gifts, and only a fool would call them kind. Yet without them, Temuair had begun to suffer beneath a brightness it could not survive. Sgrios gave back the end of things, and by doing so, he gave back the passage by which things may begin again.

The final words from Sgrios appear in a broken tablet whose missing lines have invited far too much invention. The surviving words are few: **“light stand against darkness neither devour the road between.”** Though incomplete, the fragment is often placed at the end of accounts of the Bright Campaign, and rightly so. It names the matter plainly. Danaan and Chadul remain forever present. Their opposition is not a contest to be finished by zeal, no matter how righteous. The world exists in the tension between them, and the gods who serve within that world must know the difference between guarding the balance and mistaking themselves for its master.

In later ages, the Bright Campaign was remembered differently by different temples. The war-priests of Ceannlaidir preserved the first victories with pride, as they should have. Without them, many places of Temuair may have been lost to Chadul's nearness. They taught that courage must answer when darkness presses too close, and that hesitation before true corruption is its own form of surrender. Yet the more careful among them also kept the account of the Pale Field, where Ceannlaidir lowered his weapon before Sgrios. For this reason, old rites of Ceannlaidir did not honor victory alone. They named the fallen. They burned offerings for those whose courage ended beneath the banners they followed. They remembered that war which refuses burial becomes desecration.

The followers of Sgrios kept another lesson. They pointed to the Bright Campaign as proof that their god was not merely a servant of ruin and not a mask worn by Chadul. Sgrios destroys, but destruction is not always corruption. Sgrios decays, but decay is not always defilement. Sgrios brings death, but death is not always defeat. His office is dreadful because endings are dreadful to those who must endure them. Yet the pre-history of Temuair records a time when the absence of his work became more terrible still.

This is why the Bright Campaign remains worth preserving, though its dates are lost and its battlefields cannot be named with certainty. It warns against the arrogance of perfect victory. It teaches that even a holy war may overstep its purpose when it begins to hate the conditions of life rather than the corruption that threatens them. Ceannlaidir was not wrong to fight. Sgrios was not wrong to stop him. Chadul was not defeated, and Danaan was not diminished. The world was simply brought back from an edge where light had become too sharp for living things to bear.

Such is the oldest shape of the account. Before the kingdoms, before the clean keeping of years, before scholars could place one age neatly after another, Ceannlaidir won too much. Sgrios came among the unburied dead and gave them back to the earth. From that intervention came a lesson stern enough to survive the ruin of its own records: war may defend the world, but only endings allow the world to continue.

-Shoop

Priest of Sgrios