

## The Sceptre of Necrodark

Location: Throughout the Continent of Gant

Starting level: 3-5 for 5-6 players

Prologue: Several stand alone quests preceded the introductory quest of the Sceptre of Necrodark campaign. Key events from these preceding quests are:

1. The introduction of Sir Archibald of Vesticar, who employs several of the key characters (Silus, Kal, Roginn, and Mute) to dispatch of his wayward younger brother Sir Fredrick. Sir Fredrick has been exiled from Vesticar after being found guilty of criminal activities involving the young daughter of a wealthy merchant. Archibald suspects that Sir Fredrick will attempt to return and further embarrass the family name. Archibald double crosses the group however and attempts to frame them for murder. The group manages to escape, unknown to everyone except the halfling assassin Silus, the escape was assisted by the Black Hand assassins guild. The group is now wanted by the City-State, and the group flees Vesticar for the Capital city of the Republic of Gant, Telestra. Silus remains behind and joins the Black-Hand, also retaining the keys and assuming ownership of the hideout where the group encountered Sir Fredrick.
2. Kal joins the Paladin Order of the Red Hawk, after successfully completing an errand for one of the Crusaders stationed at their Keep in Telestra. The errand turns out to be far from simple as the monastery that Kal was to deliver supplies to was attacked by Slavers. Kal, Roginn, and Mute defend the monks, with assistance from Silus, who appears out of nowhere to claim the bounty on one of the Slavers heads. The leader of the Slaver expedition carries a demonic weapon that Kal turns over to the Order of the Red Hawk to have it destroyed.
3. While traveling Kal, Roginn, & Mute stumble upon the High Elf Luktar, set upon by wolves on the road to Telestra. They rescue him from the wolf pack and a crazed Goblin Shaman and escort him to Telestra. Where he seeks to join the Star-Spire College of Astromancy, and begin apprenticeship as a Celestial Mage.
4. After a grisly assassination in the courthouse square Silus meets up with the rest of the group, now including Luktar, newly accepted as an apprentice at the Star-Spire. At the direction of Headmaster Goshind Luktar embarks on a quest to retrieve the remnants of a meteor that has crashed deep in the heart of the Athelnon forest. It is a race against time as the Headmaster assumes agents from their rival College in the High-Elven City State of Cailhast. Luktar convinces Silus, Kal, Roginn and Mute to accompany him. After retrieving the remnant meteor dust the group makes their way to Oth Gilin with the idea of booking passage on a ship rather than returning through the forest. They discover that an ambitious Republic Lieutenant has begun construction of a road from Oth Gilin to Telestra, cutting right through the deepest parts of the Athelnon forest. The Republican army stationed in Oth Gilin is forcing the civilians to build the road by holding their families hostage. After rescuing an old man from the lash the group gets entangled in the situation, narrowly avoiding being run down by Republican soldiers on horseback, by the intervention of the Guardians of Athelnon, a group of rangers lead by Ranger Captain Adeleth (Mute joins their ranks). The group eventually liberates the town from the corrupt soldiers and makes their way to the docks to board a vessel headed to Vesticar (Luktar booked the passage without knowing the groups past history in Vesticar, however Silus arranges for them to be smuggled out of Vesticar). At the docks the group is prevented from boarding their ship when agents of Archmage Elithistran from the greater College of Astromancy in Cailhast (the Tower of Eth'Kelen) appear to steal the remnant meteor dust. The group defeats them and hands them over to the remaining soldiers in Oth Gilin. The group goes their separate ways but agree to meet up sometime later at the Hideout.

5. After meeting up at the hideout the group embarks on a series of adventures centered on each character. These include an encounter with (now) Lord Archibald (lvl9) and some of his men, lured out of Vesticar through an elaborate trap laid by Silus to allow him to assassinate Eustace Gregor, Archibald's right hand man. Archibald escapes but in his haste drops a mysterious silver disc inlaid with a seven pointed golden star. The group then goes to rescue a young Wild-Elf named Deluth from the Athel-leaf tribe (Mute's tribe) who has been seduced by a witch's coven. They kill the Dalia the Fair-One and release Deluth, who retains the scars from the demonic symbols the witches etched on his body, even after being healed by Kal. On the return trip to Telestra Kal receives a letter from the Order of the Red Hawk that he is to investigate a case of Vandalism at the Memorial of Crusader Darion Proudhelm just outside the village of Kurst. The group discovers the source of the vandalism, a Red drake that attacks the party. Silus is nearly killed when he attempts to climb the monument to back stab the Drake who had perched there to eradicate the group from a safe distance. Kal is awarded with a set of bracers once belonging to Crusader Proudhelm, called Darion's Resolve, by High Templar Redieval. From there the Guardians of Athelnon ask Mute and the group to escort a Republican diplomat to a secret meeting regarding the issue of the unauthorized road construction in Oth Gilin. The animals believe that the Guardians of Athelnon have betrayed them and rise up to attempt to kill the Diplomat; however the group is able to safely escort him to the meeting. Upon arriving back in Telestra Headmaster Goshind asks Luktar to take care of some rogue air elementals that the College of Aethermancy in Calumbria has failed to take responsibility for. This leads the group to Calumbria where a Republic official asks them to take care of an orc encampment that has taken root in the farm land nearby, offering a bounty on orc teeth. The group tracks the orcs and arrives at a farm they suspect is being targeted for a raid by the orcs. They save the farmer and his two grand children but are not able to save the farmer's wife, when the orcs lay siege to the farmhouse. Silus is so disturbed by the event that he parts company with the group who go on to wipe out the entire orc camp, lead by a powerful Shaman.
6. Roginn and Luktar are attacked in an alley in Telestra after a night of drinking by relatives of one of the soldiers they killed in Oth Gilin.
7. A Half-Orc zealot named Aralthus, employed as an executioner in Telestra is charged with murder after he gets a little carried away defending himself against several grief stricken friends of one of his victims.

#### Chapter One: The Tomb King

Silus sends word that he has discovered a secret compartment in the Hideout that matches the mysterious disc dropped by Lord Archibald. Kal and Mute have some trouble locating Roginn who has taken it into his head to stand with his favourite executioner Arolthus in the public stocks. Once Aralthus is released Roginn convinces the group to let him come with them as he has been told to leave the city. Once at the hideout they discover an ancient tomb which they are immediately trapped in and attacked by the Tomb King's minions. After fighting their way through the numerous threats they face off against the Tomb Queen, who acts to defend her husband's Royal Chamber. During this battle she takes control of Roginn who, with the assistance of a swarm of flesh eating scarabs, very nearly kill Luktar. After defeating the Tomb Queen the group discovers that the Tomb King has been trapped in his tomb by someone named Agamedien by surrounding his sarcophagus with four pillars infused with holy power. The group moves on to discover a treasure room where they fill their pockets and backpacks. They also discover a sceptre (which the Tomb King refers to as the Sceptre of Necrodark) which seethes demonic energies. The group decides they should take it back to the Order of the red Hawk after they fail to destroy it. Once removed from its pedestal however the Tomb King

informs the group that the one known as Agamedien would not allow anyone to wield the Sceptre. The Tomb King breaks free from his bonds, foolishly believing that Agamedien has allowed him to do so that he can prevent the intruders from taking the Sceptre. In actual fact the shattering of the pillars makes the whole tomb unstable and the roof begins to collapse. The group manages to make it to the exit but finds it is still blocked. They turn to face the Tomb King and an enormous swarm of Scarabs, ready to face their demise, but a block of stone comes crashing down on the Tomb King, crushing him and opening the exit. The group narrowly escapes as the rest of the tomb collapses. They seal the secret passage and remove the silver disc, locking the passage behind them. The group then rushes to Telestra and turns the Sceptre of Necrodark over to the Grand Marshal of the Order of the Red Hawk. But it is beyond even his vast powers to destroy it. He decides that it must be brought before the Council of Cardinals and that it will be locked away in their vault until the Cardinals can convene. The Grand Marshal also manages to award Aralthus a pardon so that he can remain in Telestra. Meanwhile Luktar makes his way to the Star-Spire with a disfigured face and missing his right leg below the knee. Headmaster Goshind is alarmed that they almost lost their prized pupil and as such fashions a skeletal leg made of titanium that will trap Luktar's soul within it if he ever falls in battle. The leg is grafted onto his body. He also receives a titanium mask that he uses to cover his now hideous face.

## Chapter Two: Escorting the Sceptre

The Council of Cardinals convenes but even their combined power is unable to destroy the Scepter of Necrodark. They decide to construct a special vault to contain its evil. Roginn, Kal, Silus, and Mute are asked to assist in escorting the caravan that is to carry the Scepter to its final resting place. The caravan is attacked by a large band of Ogres and High Templar Alistar and several Paladins of the Red Hawk as well as two priests serving the Council of Cardinals are killed. Roginn, Kal, Silus and Mute fight hard to defend the caravan but the Ogres eventually steal the scepter. The does not give up however, they track the ogres and discover them meeting with Knights under Lord Archibald's command. They discover that he was paying the ogres to steal the scepter for him. Silus sneaks into the camp but is discovered outside of Archibald's tent. Archibald orders that he be fed to the ogres but before they can cook him for supper he informs the leader of the Ogres that Archibald plans to double cross them. Fighting erupts in the camp between the Ogres and the Knights and Silus escapes back to the group who are still camped nearby. By the time morning comes the Knights have defeated the Ogres and are preparing to leave. Archibald leaves a Cadre of Knights behind to cover their retreat. The group draws the Cadre out and a vicious battle takes place. Kal falls in battle but luckily the rest of the group narrowly escapes with his body and make it back to Vesticar in time for Grand Marshal Terdalion to resurrect him. Reporting back to the Cardinals and Paladins in Telestra that Lord Archibald of Vesticar has stolen the Sceptre the Council of Cardinals erupts into conflict and seem to be unable to make a decision on what to do next (due largely to Cardinal Dunsmore of Vesticar). The Order of the red Hawk decides to take matters into their own hands and sends the group on a secret mission to recover the Sceptre from Archibald's tower house in Vesticar, (again the Black Hand tell Silus to ensure Archibald survives or they will never discover who he is serving). They enter Vesticar through the sewer but are swarmed by sewer rats. Silus and Mute are overcome and Silus very nearly dies while Mute is slain. The group retreats after Kal and Roginn dispatch of the Rat Swarms and manage to get to Mutes body to his people, the Athel-Leaf Tribe, where he too is resurrected. After recuperating the groups returns to the Vesticar sewers and makes their way into the cellar of Lord Archibald's tower house. They fight their way up to Archibald's dining hall. There is a showdown with Archibald, but he is defeated. He then

pretends to beg for mercy, stalling long enough that a mysterious outside force is able to intervene and provide for his escape. They rush after him as he flees into his private chambers but enter just in time to see him slipping out a secret passage leaving his Mistress, Adeline, covering in the corner. They discover that Archibald has taken the scepter but Adeline is no help in locating the switch to activate the secret passage. While the group seems to want to get forceful with her Roginn intervenes and allows her to go free. She immediately summons the town guard and the group must flee back through the sewers. They return to the Order of the Red Hawk and report all that happened. The Council of Cardinals is still in session and knows nothing of what happened.

### Chapter Three: Archibald's Coup

It has been well over a month since the group defeated Lord Archibald in his tower house only to have him escape with the Sceptre of Necrodark. In the meantime Kal has continued training with the Order of the Red Hawk, while Roginn has been brewing his moonshine for the inn keeper at the Smiling Mule in exchange for room and board. Luktar has spent most of his time at the Starspire College in study. Mute has been working closely with the Guardians of Athelnon but has not disclosed the particulars of his business with them. Most of this work has surrounded the recent increase in activity of the evil Sablewood tribe of wild elves that have been attacking travels passing through the Athelnon Forest. Every attack seems to be preceded by questioning their victims as to the whereabouts of a Sablewood woman named Ebonethia. Silus and Mute have both just recently arrived in Telestra and the group has met up for dinner and drinks at the Smiling Mule. Roginn has also decided to invite an old acquaintance of the group, the Half-orc Aralthus.

Kal informs the group over drinks that the Order of the Redhawk wishes him to return to Vesticar and see if he can turn up any information about the Sceptre and "unofficially" if possible force Lord Archibald to provide some answers. Silus responds by pulling a letter out and reading it too the group (See Chapter 3: Letter #1), telling of Lord Archibald's plans to overthrow King Dannorath of Vesticar. Archibald seems to have gained a great deal of support for his coup. Silus is ordered to kill Archibald by the Guild Master of the Black Hand. The group is excited to be given a chance to go after Archibald and decide to leave first thing in the morning.

On route to Vesticar the group stays at the **Lunar Inn** in Kurst where after some drinking Roginn starts a fight with a group of Republican soldiers, after knocking out an officer for some rude comments towards one of the barmaid. In the scuffle Luktar accidentally stumbles into another group of bystanders and starts another fight where he smashes a woman's face against a table knocking her out cold. He later wanders out of the tavern and falls asleep next to his stone golem. The group manages to defeat the soldiers and are forced to pay the inn-keeper some money for repairs. The other barmaid, who had been intrigued by Mutes newly purchased mask, is startled when he turns around suddenly with his mask partial removed from his face. She screams with fright and claws at his disfigured face.

The next day the group is attacked on the ferry crossing Fallow Lake and then again by a Sablewood scouting party on the road through the Athelnon Forest. The Sablewood elves ask

them if they have seen the elf woman, Ebonethia. When the group provides no information they attack. The group manages to defeat the Sablewood elves and towards the end of the battle the Guardians of Athelnon show up and congratulate Mute on job well done. After spending the night at the hideout the group reaches Vesticar and sneaks in through the sewers, encountering a group of feral zombies. They exit the sewers into the basement of a Black Hand safe house where Silus receives a second letter. (See Chapter 3: Letter #2) It is from Mardis of the Black Hand (Silus' usual contact). The letter tells Silus not to kill Archibald but rather to help him kill the king when the time comes and let Archibald become king at which point Archibald's true master is likely to show himself. Silus is instructed to not share this 'change of plans' with his 'friends'. This is all an elaborate deception perpetrated by Mardis to ferment chaos within the Black Hand.

After sneaking into the palace the group is apprehended by Palace guards and put in prison. They convince the guards to give them an audience with the Captain of the Guard and tell him that Lord Archibald plans to stage a coup. The captain is reluctant to believe them but recognizing Kal's emblem of the Order of the Red Hawk he says he will consider what they have said. Before he can act however his Lieutenant stabs him in the back and orders the remaining guards to kill them all. The jailor, being loyal to the King, throws the keys into the cell just before a guard takes his head off. The group fights past the guards and recovers their equipment allowing them to defeat the guards. The Captain of the guard tells them how to get to the throne room and says they must go protect the King, he then dies. The group arrives just in time to save the King from Archibald, who in his monologue says he wants war with the Republic of Gant. Angered at being disturbed he leaves the king and attacks the group. During the battle Silus makes his way over to the King Dannorath and attempts to kill him. The old king plays dead and all believe him to be so. Luktar mind traps Lord Archibald and demands an explanation from Silus. Silus explains simply that he did what had to be done. He tells them some but not all of what the second letter said and while the group is not happy they agree that there may be bigger things at stake.

After hearing their conversation the king announces he is not dead. Silus turns around, preparing to finish the job, when a cloaked form descends from the ceiling yelling that he has been deceived. Silus recognizes him as a Citizen of the Black Hand and chooses to trust him. The group then discusses with the king that they want to question Lord Archibald before the King has him executed. They agree, and finish Lord Archibald off. As they drag his unconscious form to the dungeon may of the insurgent forces see him and flee, believe the coup to have failed. After Silus tortures Archibald he reveals that he no longer has the Sceptre of Necrodark and that his master has it. He adds that everyone is doomed and that they should be smart about it and align themselves with his master. Getting no further information from him the King declares a festival and Lord Archibald is publically beheaded by Aralthus (the newly appointed Royal executioner of Vesticar). The group receives a full pardon and are no longer considered criminals in Vesticar. Returning to the Black Hand Silus learns that the Guild Master has announced a price on the head of Mardis for counter manding his orders and betraying the Black Hand. When they

group stops off at the hideout on the way back to Telestra they discover a bloods soaked note in the main entrance of the Hideout saying, "Silus, you should have listened..."

Kal reports back to the order of the Red Hawk who are glad to hear that Lord Archibald is dead but vow to continue the search for the Scepter of Necrodark. After completing this mission Kal is offered entrance into the Military Arm of the Order of the Red Hawk. He is now a Paladinyte and is given a military tabard to signify his rank. Meanwhile Headmaster Goshind officially announces Luktar's promotion to Apprentice Adept.

#### Chapter Four: A New Threat

Silus received information from his sources saying that Mardis has fled Vesticar and that has most recently been seen in Telestra. As such he decided to come to Telestra to see if he can track him down. With the execution business having slowed down finally now that King Dannorath of Vesticar has purged most of the suspected conspirators from his city-state, Aralthus has come along for a change of pace. Meanwhile Mute met up with them on the road through the Athelnon forest. Mute finds a tree a few paces from the camp to perch in for his turn at the watch. The last he remembers is that he starts to feel unnaturally tired, with a slight tingling sensation moving across his body. In the morning Silus and Aralthus wake up and discover, much to their surprise, that Mute is gone. They notice that Mute's new pet "bird" is circling overhead, and seems to be trying to catch their attention. They follow the bird for some distance and eventually locate Mute lying completely naked under a bush, fast asleep. Not too far off they locate his clothes, lying in a heap. Upon waking up Mute is highly disoriented and claims he has no idea how he got out here or why he is not wearing any clothes. Arriving in Telestra late the next day they briefly meet up with Roginn at the Smiling mule.

The next day Mute and Silus heads off on their own to see if he can track down the whereabouts of the traitorous Mardis. Arolthus stays behind with Roginn and assists him with his work at the distillery in a back room at the Smiling Mule. At dinner time the four meet back up at the Smiling Mule. Silus and Mute discovered that Mardis was seen in Telestra only briefly and that he headed South some time ago, from there the trail has gone cold. While the sit around the table a man enters the tavern, he is a Republican Council and he seems somewhat distressed. He says that he has heard that Roginn and his associates are a capable group, able to deal with 'difficult' situations. It says there has been a disturbance at the nearby village of Burgen. The local mine had been shut down due to an entire shift of miners being killed. No one has been able to determine the cause of the catastrophe and as such a Squadron of Republican Soldiers was sent to investigate. None of the soldiers returned. The Council, desiring to re-open the mine, but fearing the loss of more lives have authorized the hiring of a private investigative force to go in, discover what has happened and make the mine safe for the workers once again. He is authorized to offer 400 gold pieces from the Republican Treasury to Roginn and his associates if they can ensure that the mine re-opens. Silus declines the offer and says that he must continue his search for Mardis and can't allow himself to be distracted, even if the money is good. The group sends word to Luktar and Kal about the job prospect. Kal receives a brief respite from his military training with the Order of the Red Hawk, his superiors deeming that it is a noble and

worthwhile quest to undertake. Meanwhile Headmaster Goshind is also eager to send his prized pupil Luktar to investigate the disturbance, claiming that he has sensed a strange foreign power growing in the south these last weeks. He asks that if Luktar discovers anything out of the ordinary that he brings some evidence with him for Headmaster Goshind to study.

Arriving in Burgen they discover that most of the villagers are either terrified or grief stricken. Burgen's primary industry is the nearby mine and most of the villagers families have been impacted in one way or another by the deaths of an entire shift of miners. The foreman of the mine meets the group, having been told of them coming by a messenger from the Council of Gant. The foreman takes them to the mine and opens the heavy steel gate, which appears to have been newly constructed. He informs them that he will be locking the gate behind them but will have a few men posted outside in case they return.

Once inside the main chamber of the mine they discover several bodies, they appear to be the remains of some of the miners. They have begun to decay but show evidence of having been partially eaten. Upon closer examination however the cause of death appears to have been a poison of some kind as their faces are twisted and their bodies contorted as though they writhed in their death throes. The bodies closest to the exit appear to have been fleeing for their lives. Further into the chamber they find the missing Squadron of Republican soldiers, their bodies piled up in the center of the room. While still fairly fresh these corpses too appear to have been partially eaten. Movement suddenly catches Mutes' keen eyes and he calls out a warning. The group quickly discovers what has been feeding on the bodies, a pack of grotesquely large rats. The battle is quickly won when Luktar demonstrates a powerful new Celestial Spirit Power he has recently learned. Concentric rings of cosmic matter swirl about his body and he destroys most of the rats. However the battle is not over. The chamber is suddenly filled with half-man half-rat creatures. Once again Luktar is instrumental in defeating the swarm of rat-men. With the chamber finally cleared out they discover the bodies of many more miners. Some appear to have armed themselves and attempted to fight off the creatures but most appear to have been struck down quickly, before they know what hit them. Proceeding on they enter a secondary chamber and are ambushed by more of the rat-men, these ones however hurl globes of poisonous gas down upon their heads. During the ensuing battle the group is also attacked randomly by an unknown stealthy assailant. They spot him several times but he scurries away into the shadows before they can attack him. After fighting through the ambush they discover the source of the infestation, a crack that leads from the mine into a series of natural and excavated caverns.

The group battles many more strange rat creatures of various shapes and sizes. They seem to be very technologically advanced, bringing to bear many weapons that are beyond the group's comprehension. Once such a weapon spurts a greenish flame that results in the death of Mutes' new pet hawk. Some of the mystery behind the creatures' presence is revealed when the group discovers a strange green crystal that the rat-men call a 'warp crystal' which they seem to be harvesting to power their strange and unstable technologies. The crystal also seems to have a mutating effect as they encounter several hideously mutated creatures with pieces of the warp

crystal imbedded in their skin. The group continues to be suffer at the hands by the unknown stealthy attacker throughout the series of caverns and tunnels.

Eventually they fight their way down through the caverns and find themselves at a small underground lake that where numerous tentacled creatures lurk beneath the surface. They slowly make their way across the lake jumping across small rock islands that dot the length of the lake. While crossing however they are attacked by more of the rat-men's advanced technology. There are several close calls both at the hands of the rat-men and the tentacled creatures, particularly when Roginn falls in the water and is unable to pull himself out. Luktar and his stone golem come to the rescue however, selflessly throwing themselves into the water in an attempt to ward off the creatures beneath the surface. With several of the party near death hey finally make their way past the underground lake, however the stone golem seems to be lost forever in the depths of the lake.

Entering a massive cavern the party finally discovers who has been attacking from the shadows for the last several days. When the cloaked figure reveals himself to the group. It is the Halfling assassin Silus. He gives the following monologue.

"Hello my friends... Your ridiculous need for heroics has predictably led you right where we wanted you. I've come to see reason you see, Mardis was right after all. You can't fight what's coming. Archibald knew that and so do these creatures, they call themselves the Skaven. They have been around for a very long time. It seems rats are smart enough to stay alive, something I've got a keen interest in doing as well. And rather than die foolishly on the surface fighting powers beyond your comprehension, I offer you this final chance at life. Mardis and I have made a deal with these creatures. We will stay underground in their domain and we will live, by aligning ourselves with the Sceptre." (The group declines the offer angrily) "Mardis didn't think you would accept either, but I had hoped. Goodbye my friends. Unfortunately the Skaven do wish to be known to the surface world. They will be with you shortly."

Silus then vanishes and the group faces off against a massive rat creature that is being ridden by a Skaven Master of some kind. Also mounted on the platform on the creatures back are a two of the technological terrors of the Skaven, a Warp-fire Thrower and a Ratling Gun. The battle is long and fierce but the group manages to destroy the Skavens' advanced weapons and then slay the massive beast. In its death throes it collides with a natural stone pillar which causes the far side of the cavern to collapse, cutting off access to the further reaches of the tunnel system. The Skaven Master then attacks the group directly with two enchanted chain whips, and assisted by Warp-rats. The group prevails however and makes their way out of the caves.

Returning to the gate the miners unlock it and let them passed, amazed that they have returned alive. They send word to the foreman and by the time the group reaches the village there is a large crowd assembled. They are overjoyed to hear that the mine has been cleared of the vile rat creatures that infested it. They declare a festival in their honour, during which Luktar feels something bump against his feet and is delighted to discover that his stone golem has

returned and dropped a tentacle on his feet. The next day a squadron group of soldiers arrives in town with several Republican officials in tow. The party waits another day while they investigate. Upon satisfactory completion of the inspection the official awards the money. The group then returns to Telestra, where Silus is nowhere to be found. The Innkeeper at the Smiling Mule claims he checked out shortly after the rest of them did. Before much else can happen, Kal receives word that he must return to the Keep of the Order of the Red Hawk as the paladins are mobilizing for a crusade in the west, where a dangerous cult threat has arisen.

## Chapter Five: The Witch Hunt

A few days later a letter arrives at the Smiling Mule from Silus, addressed to his friends:

“Hello my friends, I trust this letter finds you well. I send word that Mardis has evaded my grasp again. He was apparently in Telestra for a few days and no more. I took up the trail heading south towards the coast and caught vague rumours of a new underground sect of dark assailants. I figured this was my best guess of where Mardis would have gone. Asking at tavern patrons and shop keeps, gatekeepers and lowly farmers along my course South, I lost his trail abruptly near the small town of Grevska. He stayed in a cave not far from town and appears to have vanished from there. My time has been spent searching through the area around the cave for any clues as to his whereabouts.”

Shortly after that a letter arrive for Aralthus from King Dannorath of Vesticar who orders him to hunt down and execute one of the traitorous nobles that managed to escape Vesticar, a woman named Gloria Dalinport, reported to wield strange unsavory powers. She is rumored to be residing somewhere in the fertile farm lands of the Galadras Delta. Aralthus leaves the next day, with Mute in tow, both hoping that they may also run into Silus as they pass through Grevska. Roginn declines to accompany them, still unsure of what to make of Silus involvement in recent events and finding the letter he sent extremely confusing. Luktar declines as well, citing that he must spend some time with Headmaster Goshind investigating the strange warp crystal sample he brought back from the caves below the Burgen mine.

Aralthus and Mute catch up with Silus at the Delta Inn and confront him; he claims to know nothing of the events they describe. Now completely confused they are unsure whether they can trust Silus, though he seems to exonerate himself with an off hand comment whilst under the influence of several mugs of ale claiming he wished he had the skill to pick the pockets of some Republican soldiers who are also at the bar. As Mute points out the Silus that attacked them in the caves also picked their pockets on several occasions.

The reunion is interrupted when a Minotaur arrives at the Inn with a Dwarven druid in tow. They are not greeted warmly as a Minotaur has never been seen in eastern Gant before. Aralthus, seeking to make the outcast feel more at home, strikes up a conversation. The Minotaur is a battle mage by the name of Bloodbrood, and his Dwarven companion is Seleena Rainmaker. They have travelled from distant Almsberg at the request of Seleena's mother, a powerful Oracle, claiming that they must interrupt a meeting between the cultist forces they fight against

in the west and a powerful witch from the east. Based on the description Aralthus believes the witch they are looking for is Gloria Dalinport. Shortly after this Bloodbrood and Arolthus break up a fight between Silus and the Republican soldiers.

That night Aralthus has dreams of Silus killing him in his sleep. He wakes suddenly to discover that the soldiers have come back for blood, attacking Bloodbrood in his sleep. They fight off the soldiers and kill one of them in the process. Events then spiral out of control, the local Republican army Sergeant turns out to be demon possessed and sacrifices some of his own men at the meeting with the cultists and Gloria the witch. The group interrupts the meeting however and kills the cultists. Gloria summons a grotesque imp to defend her but is eventually slain when Mute puts an arrow into each of her eye sockets. Aralthus is able to exorcise the demon plaguing the Sergeant and order is finally restored to the small village of Delta. Having accomplished their mission Bloodbrood and Seleena bid their new friends farewell and begin their long journey home.

## Chapter Six: Messy Business

During the high profile public execution of Aedan Mullfist, aka the stone Shard killer, an amateur assassin kills Duran Causland, Captain of the Guard, with a poisonous explosion. Many innocent bystanders are killed in the process. Roginn and Aralthus are present during the brazen attack and manage to apprehend the assassin. He gives up some information before Silus strikes from the shadows and ends his life. They find a letter on his person.

“Recruit, upon Aedens’ death, you are to throw the first poison vial at Duran Causland, followed immediately by the second vial of activating agent. It does not matter who dies in the process as long as Duran dies. Once you have confirmation of his death, return to the Smiling mule and ask for Zeck. You may be of worth to the Silver Shadows.”

Roginn is not surprised to see Silus but is outraged that this affair somehow involves his beloved bar the Smiling Mule. They rush to investigate. Upon arriving they find Luktar and Mute already at the bar, exchanging coin for a mutual business arrangement to secure a crafted recurve bow for Mute. They mention that just prior to Roginn, Silus, and Aralthus arriving a shady character referring to himself as Zeck in third person has just left. The bartender comes by to serve his well known patrons and mentions that Zeck was obviously faking his drunken state and mentions an ugly scar across Zeck’s forehead and an unusual symbol branded on his hand. The bartender believes he recognizes the symbol as belonging to a group of Slavers called the **“Three Swords”** that are known to have a hangout in a house in the Telestra slums.

What the group doesn’t know is that Silus is here on orders from the Black Hand to deal with the assassin’s guild known as the Silver Shadows, as per a letter he receives from his masters. (See ‘Letter to Silus regarding the Silver Shadows’)

Roginn, not understanding the connection between Zeck, the Three Swords and the Silver Shadows is agitated and recognizing that Silus is not here by coincidence asks how Silus is involved. Silus gives little information other than to say that he would like to speak with the Silver Shadows. Roginn asks for a cut of whatever Silus is being paid for ‘speaking’ with the Silver

Shadows. Aralthus and Luktar also decide they would like a cut. Silus gets somewhat indignant and takes his leave from the group. Roginn decides that at the very least he does not like the idea of Slavers visiting 'his' bar, having a general dislike of slavers to begin with. The group decides to investigate the house in the slums.

What they discover is a sizeable group of Slavers holed up in the run down old house. After Mute scouts it out and informs them that the slavers are tormenting a woman inside Roginn and Aralthus are quick to rush in and break down the door. The group is more than match for the slavers, even without Silus' particular talents available to them. Unbeknownst to the group however Silus has followed them and observes silently from the rafters debating when and if he should make his presence known to the group. After dispatching the slavers the group discovers a secret passage leading down into the basement of the building. Here they find even more slavers, including a man called Bleeding Sword Borac, one of three leaders of the "Three Swords" slavers. During the battle Silus intervenes upon realizing that Zeck, the connection between the Three Swords and the Silver Shadows is not here and that if the group kills bleeding Sword Borac may never find out how to locate the Silver Shadows. Borac is interrogated and then left to bleed to death. He has this to say about Zeck.

"There has only been one who has escaped after we had em Branded! One of my men even threw a dagger at him and hit him in the face, by some luck he was not killed then! We chased that rat till he somehow disappeared in the canyon just north of the city. We couldn't even find the blood from his head wound. I'm sure the birds are eating him now anyways. And if you do find him, kill him; he is a disgrace to the Three Swords."

Before dying he swears that the other two swords of the Three Swords slavers will seek revenge for his death. With the slavers dead the group sets several prisoners free. Among them is a young half-elf named Seth, who was captured by the three swords as a young boy and trained as a pit fighter to make the Three Swords money. His childhood was one of abuse and neglect, often used to fulfill the heinous appetites of the slavers. He is extremely happy to finally be free and offers his services as an accomplished pit-fighter to the group for whatever endeavours they have planned, stating that really has no place else to go. The group accepts his offer.

With Silus back with the group an uneasy agreement is struck, since Roginn still seeks to discover why Zeck was at the Smiling Mule and Silus knows that if he finds Zeck he will find the Silver Shadows he has been tasked with destroying, the group decides to investigate the canyon north of Telestra that Borac mentioned before he died.

After some trials the group locates the secret hideout of the Silver Shadows and fights their way through many of the lower ranking members of the new assassin's guild, including Jareg, Assassin Adept of the Silver Shadows. They also find Zeck who has indeed joined the Silver Shadows and acts as there recruiter. He claims that he stumbled into the canyon half dead after escaping the Three Swords and that he awoke within the hideout. He was offered life if he joined the Silver Shadows and worked to recruit new members. Of course he agreed. He tells Roginn that the three swords often used the Smiling Mule to scout for potential victims. Roginn is outraged but knowing that Zeck might be his only hope of tracking down the remaining members of the Three Swords and permanently stopping them from polluting his favourite establishment the Smiling Mule, offers Zeck life in exchange for information. Silus on the other

hand wishes to kill him in order to fulfill his contract of decimating the Silver Shadows. During the debate, Zeck manages to slip away and escape.

The group proceeds to clear out the remainder of the hideout and comes face to face with the Guild Master of the Silver Shadows along with a mysterious figure which at first appears to be his second in command. The Guild Master, upon learning that his guild is all but destroyed offers the group money, begging for his life. His companion turns on him, calling him a pathetic. He casts a very powerful spell on the Guild Master sucking the life out of him and leaving him a shrivelled corpse. The mysterious companion then claims that he has grown bored with this endeavour and that he will leave the group as a snack for his children. Moments later he leaves and a Silver Drake flies into the chamber from an adjacent cavern. A long and strenuous battle ensues, assisted by several Silver Whelps and a Silver Wyrn, but eventually the group is victorious. With the death of the drake the magic holding the chamber together destabilizes and it begins to cave in. The group barely escapes with their lives.

#### SIDE QUEST

Luktar has deal gone wrong with the Screaming Demon mercenary band, failing to make them a large biped stone golem twice and on the third try sold them a malfunctioning golem that won't kill.

Luktar brought before Headmaster Goshind, strange reports from a new logging town (Alderglen) on the edge of the Athelnon forest. A strange creature has been sighted in the town on several occasions appearing roughly humanoid in shape and size but lacking physical substance. After approaching several townsfolk it shot a beam of starlight at them, freezing them in time, and in some cases killing them. It then retreats without a word. The Starspire was consulted and Goshind believes that the creature is some kind of Celestial being, perhaps coming to Gant in the meteor that crashed into the Athelnon forest last year (see Prologue #4) Luktar is ordered to go investigate. Looking for some companionship for the journey he finds only Kal, who has returned from the crusade in the west. He is disappointed to say that the Order of the Red Hawk has not been able to engage the enemy and has largely sat around with nothing to do. On the way out of town they bump into Luktar's new acquaintance Seth, who agrees to accompany them.

Upon arriving at Alderglen they discover that the Guardians of Athelnon have been hired by the town to hunt down and destroy the creature. Their representative is Mute, who is being tested to see if he is ready to become a Huntsman of the Guardians of Athelnon. Mute is not able to find any conventional tracks to follow but eventually discovers that many nearby plants seem to have shriveled up and died and they appear to follow a path of some kind. They decide that since it is getting dark that they should track the creature in the morning rather than venture off into the forest at night.

After dinner the group hears a commotion outside. It appears that the locals have set up a crude ring in the town square where they fight (unarmed) for amusement and money. Seth steps forward and accepts, with a few townsfolk and he and his friends betting on him to win. Unfortunately he is soundly beaten and the group losses their money.

The next day, following the trail of dead plants, they proceed into the forest. After encounters with river trolls and a Sablewood warband they eventually find the mysterious creature. After a

short altercation the creature probes Luktar's mind and after learning his language communicates with him. It is a Star Child, a very powerful and evolved form of life, and it seems to simply want to learn more about life on this planet. It is unaware that when it's cosmic energies are harmful to life on this planet. Luktar convinces it to travel to the Star-Spire where it can learn in a safer environment. It agrees and uses Luktar's memories to teleport the entire party to Head Master Goshind's study. He is startled at first but is excited to see what Luktar has brought him. Goshind quickly attempts to trap the creature in a jeweled rod. The creature asks for Luktar to help it evade capture, at first he tries too but Goshind convinces him that it could bring immense power and prestige to the college. Luktar decides to let Goshind trap the creature and is rewarded.

Goshind transports the rest of the group out of his study and wipes their memory clean up to the point when the star child teleported them. They return to Alderglen, the group is awarded 50 gold each in thanks and Mute is awarded the title of Huntsman as a reward for his unorthodox but apparently successful hunt.

During the weeks that follow Seth decides that he wants to try and make a name for himself as a Pit-Fighter, despite his loss in Alderglen. With Roginn and Luktar backing him up he heads to Kurst where an underground fighting league is having a contest of sorts. In Kurst they also meet up with Mute and Arolthus. Arolthus is actually here on orders from King Dannorath of Vesticar regarding a suspected Heretic that is recruiting fighters at this event. Seth wins his preliminary bout and is recruited into a group called "Life's a Battle". After the fight Mute is found unconscious, having been asked to follow a cleric named Bowdan. The group goes after Bowdan and discovers he is a member of the Cult of Cerabus, a cult from the West that is seeking new recruits in the East to grow their numbers. After defeating the heretic and his demonic minions the group almost puts a stop to his Bowdan's heresy, but he manages to escape their grasp. Arolthus goes back to Vesticar with a demon head instead and simply tells King Dannorath that there were some complications and that he will continue to track Bowdan. Meanwhile Seth faces off against a Champion of "Life's a Battle" that wishes to test the new recruits skills. Seth is soundly better but puts up a good fight. He is granted the title of Challenger and accorded the Champions respect. He then also travels to Vesticar, his new home now that he has joined "Life's a Battle".

Two weeks later, Roginn embarks on another quest when the bartender at the Smiling Mule complains to him about seeing more men bearing the mark of the Three Swords at the bar. With the help of help of Arolthus, Mute (who have headed east on the trail of Bowdan the Heretic), as well as Luktar they track down the slavers known as the Three Swords and discover that they are constructing a hidden roadway to traffic slaves from various small villages out to the Galladras River. Posing as a slave trader himself, Roginn attempts to sell a "captive" Luktar to the Three Swords. They believe the ruse long enough to position Luktar in their midst where he suddenly breaks free of his bonds and decimates the slaves with his celestial magic. With the trap sprung Mute and Arolthus also spring into action from there hiding places on the slavers flanks. The battle is won quickly and a group of slaves is set free. Roginn promises to bring them back to their homes safely and is awarded the Title of Peoples Champion by the village of Cornwin.

Returning to the hidden roadway they continue to track the Three Swords. Eventually they reach the docks where the slavers are loading their slaves onto rafts. As Roginn comes onto the scene he sees a slaver beating on a defenseless woman. Outraged he charges into battle with no

thought to his own safety and realizes too late that it is a trap, meant to prey on his sense of honor. In the ensuing battle Roginn is driven to insanity by foul demonic forces and falls in combat. His friends are able to eventually defeat the slavers but discover with the death of yet another leader of the three swords that something more powerful might be at work here. As the demonic blade disappears right out of the hands of the dying slaver he says "you know nothing of the three swords. They will soon find a new host to feed from. They will never stop corrupting our will!!!" In the aftermath the friends work quickly to try and save Roginn, loading him into a wagon salvaged from the Slavers and bringing him back to Telestra. As a favour to Kal, Grand Marshal Reginald Terdalion of the Order of the Red Hawk resurrects the fallen centaur Champion, who though forever scarred from the encounter vows to vanquish the evil behind the three Swords.

## Chapter 7: The Dead March

Silus is offered the opportunity to advance in rank with the Black Hand if he is willing to prove his loyalty lies with the assassin's guild and not his friends. Silus initially is reluctant when he is presented with the contract for the assassination of the Royal Executioner of Vesticar, Arolthus the Half-Orc. However after he is offered a handsome sum of money and knowing his future with the Black Hand is at stake Silus accepts. He passes the test by secretly pouring a powerful poison into Arolthus' wine. The Black Hand later informs him that the poison was a fake and that they have no desire to indiscriminately kill without cause, explaining that the Black Hand chooses its marks very carefully. They are however pleased that his allegiance to the Black Hand is strong and he is granted his promotion.

Meanwhile Roginn overhears a conversation regarding the supposed whereabouts of Mardis, the Traitor of the Black Hand, whose head carries a high price through the black-market. Roginn sends word to his friends to gather to come to Telestra with all haste so that they can go to the village of Teleos and capture Mardis. Unknown to Roginn, the man spouting the information in a supposed drunken stupor is in fact Mardis himself, once again altering his form to deceive the group and lure them to Teleos for a hidden purpose. The group takes the bait and Roginn, Silus, Mute, Kal, and Arolthus embark on the journey to Teleos.

As they are leaving the city they have a chance encounter with a thief who is being chased by the City Guard. Luktar binds the thief in Arcane Shackles allowing him to be captured. Roginn regrets allowing his friends to assist in the thief's capture though when he learns that the man had just stolen some bread to feed his family.

To make up time the group heads across country to Teleos traveling well into the night by the light of the moon. They eventually set up camp on the edge of the Farthing Wood. During the night Mute inexplicably wanders off again. In the morning he arrives back in camp with a wolf following him. Mute claims to remember nothing except waking up in the woods with the wolf sniffing at him. After communicating with the wolf it seems to want to accompany Mute for some reason that it will not disclose.

Arriving in Teleos the group finds no sign of Mardis and is told that in fact no newcomers have been seen in Teleos for some time. The group becomes suspicious but before much else can happen some woodcutters arrive in town with a dire tale of a small undead army traveling towards Teleos. The village erupts in panic until one man, Sergeant Tuck of the Teleos militia,

takes charge and issues orders for the evacuation of all those that can flee fast enough and then prepares to defend the village. The group naturally offers their assistance and together they prepare a battle plan. Several hunters are recruited into the militia to provide ranged support from the roof tops and Lutkar with the cooperation of a rather eccentric shop keeper named Edward the Odd animates the statue of the village's founder, one Arthur Albrecht, to help defend the village. An elderly priest named Father Alderman also offers assistance in tending to the wounded.

With their defences prepared, Sergeant Tuck gives a rousing speech as the undead arrive on the scene. They attack in waves, each one fiercer than the one before it. After a long hard battle nature of the attack becomes clearer when the group's old nemesis, Lord Archibald of Vesticar, arrives in the village. He claims to have been brought back from the dead as a death knight by his master and now goes by the name Death Lord Archibald. He explains that this attack was simply a test of the strength of his master's creations and that Mardis was employed to lure the group, the most worthy adversaries that Archibald could think of, to assist in the test. He then gives the group a taste of his new powers as a Death Knight and curses all of the defenders before leaving to report to his master. In his place he leaves a giant skeletal scorpion ridden by a powerful lich. Weary from battle the group nevertheless defeats this final undead monstrosity and saves the village of Teleos. When the dust settles five village defenders have been killed and many more are wounded, but the village rejoices that they have been spared a massacre at the hands of the horrid skeletal army.

#### SIDE QUEST: Lutkar's Undermage Test

Lutkar requests to undertake the test required to become an Undermage of the Lesser College of Astromancy. Headmaster Goshind allows Lutkar to take the test even though he is still lacking some of the experience normally required, believing that the test will provide this experience and that Lutkar is already competent enough to pass the rigorous test. The details of the test are a secret known only to those within the Starspire; however Lutkar did manage to pass his test and was granted the promotion to Undermage. He is also taught a new spell created by Goshind using the latent energies of the Starchild which Lutkar assisted in trapping.

#### Chapter 8: The Fall of Vesticar

Silus, in self imposed exile from Vesticar, sends word to his friends that something is not right in his home city (see "Letter to Telestra"). Only Kal and Lutkar receive the message and given the urgency they make haste to meet up with Silus at the Hideout. On their way out of the city Kal and Lutkar are confronted by the wife of the thief they helped apprehend weeks before. Feeling remorse at having inadvertently driven her onto the streets Kal attempts to assist her. Unbeknownst to Kal, Lutkar uses his powers to "persuade" her from making a scene.

Passing through the village of Kurst and boarding the ferry across Fallow Lake, Kal and Lutkar discover that merchant travel between Vesticar and Kurst, a daily affair, has mysteriously stopped all together. As it turns out the Guardians of Athelnon have been hired to investigate what might be causing the disruption on the forest road. After meeting Silus at the hideout they soon learn that the merchant caravan's have been halted due to the presence of undead creatures preying on the caravans. One such caravan is under attack and the group arrives on the scene to discover Mute attempting to defend the merchants. They join the battle and easily

defeat the ravenous zombies. Placing the merchants under the care of his subordinates, Mute joins the rest as they head towards Vesticar.

Arriving at the outer gates they find Vesticar in disarray. There are no guards at the gates and instead a group of ruffians has taken control of them and is charging a hefty toll to the inhabitants of Vesticar who wish to flee the chaos within the city walls. A single massive figure is attempting to challenge their authority and as the group draws nearer they discover it is the Half-orc Arolthus, Royal Executioner of Vesticar. Though he likely did not require their aid the group does join the fray and puts an end to their toll collection, though they keep the collected tolls at the conclusion of the battle.

Proceeding into the Outer City it becomes apparent that the city guard has fled. Chaos reigns in the streets with looters having already caused considerable damage, fires burn unhindered, and surprisingly undead soldiers roam freely. The heroes clash with one particularly large band of undead that seem to be harvesting the bodies of the dead, piling them into large carts and hauling them towards the docks. Here the undead are loading them into several massive ships, crewed by skeletal sea-men. The devastated remains of the small Vesticar Navy can be seen floating in the bay. On the docks a large army of the dead is assembling, preparing to march on the fortified Inner City

Silus splits off from the group to investigate what has become of the Black Hand and discovers that their secret head quarters have been ransacked by the undead. He finds no survivors, though not all of the Citizens of the Black Hand seem to be accounted for. He meets back up with the group and tells them what has transpired.

On the advice of a family they rescue from the clutches of the undead, the heroes head for the Inner City of Vesticar. Here the army and city guard is preparing its defenses for the coming siege however they are disorganized and appear on the verge of fracture due to internal conflict between the two Generals of Vesticar. A level headed Lieutenant informs them that due to the strange sickness afflicting King Dannorath, he has not appeared to lead the army. Recognizing Kal as a Paladin of the Order of the Red Hawk he urges him to head to the palace and see what can be done for the King before it is too late.

Gaining entrance to the Palace turns out to be much more difficult than anticipated, but Arolthus is able to negotiate with the Palace guards from the group to go see the King. Seeking out the King in the throne room the heroes instead are ambushed by a group of Skaven Assassin's, whose presence in the Palace seems highly suspicious. Barely escaping the ambush with their lives they rush to the Kings private chambers and are relieved to find it still under heavy guard. Unknown to the heroes however, the shape shifting Skaven assassin Mardis has killed the Kings long time steward, Harold von Bachtan, and taken his place. Having thus gained the Kings confidence Mardis has been slowly poisoning King Dannorath, keeping him weak and unable to rule, but alive to ensure his death does not enrage the defenders of Vesticar. Mardis' plan is disrupted however with the arrival of the Paladin Kal, who senses deceit from the Royal Steward. Mardis acts quickly to salvage the situation, slitting King Dannorath's throat before anyone can act. He then flees through a secret passage into the sewers beneath Vesticar. The party gives chase and seems to have Mardis cornered, still in the form of Harold von Bachtan, when he turns and finally shows his true form. He seems not at all concerned with being cornered and vents his frustration at having his plans ruined, nonetheless he gloats that

when the undead forces of the Sceptre of Necrodark have laid waste to the surface world, it is the Skaven who will inherit the cities of men. As though to further indicate the twisted alliance between the rat-men and the undead, an undead Rat-Ogre burst onto the scene with several Skaven weapons teams in tow. Mardis disappears and attacks from the shadows throughout the ensuing battle. Once the creature is put down, the situation only worsens with a whole swarm of Skaven come rushing towards the group from behind. Mardis cuts off the only avenue of retreat and the heroes ready themselves to go down fighting.

Salvation comes in an ironic form however. The remnant Citizens of the Black Hand, masters of death, come to the Heroes aid. Led by Guildmaster Jarad, they unleash wave upon wave of shadowy energies and silent steel. The Skaven onslaught is forced to turn to face this new threat leaving the heroes to settle the score with the villainous Mardis. Both the heroes and the assassins emerge victorious, but casualties are high amongst the Black Hand. Only Jarad and hand full of others remain standing. Jarad wipes blood from his blades and calls out across the sea of dead rat-men.

"Well met Silus of the Black Hand. It's good to see still live, much has been lost in Vesticar in these dark days. I suppose I owe you and your friends this, as promised long ago, for the head of Mardis the traitor." Jarad throws a thick leather satchel at Silus' feet from across the passageway. Surveying the carnage around him he adds, "Only now do we learn how deep his betrayal cuts. You have done well, and at last I realize my mistake in referring to your friends as a simple resource to be expended. You were right all along to place such value in them and I did not see. I apologize for my presumption gentlemen; you do not know me but trust that an apology is due none the less. Silus is fortunate have friends such as you. I suppose we should try to see what is happening in the city above..."

His sentence is cut short when a mortally wounded Warp-fire thrower technician, writhing in its death throes, ignites its fuel supply. There is a massive explosion. The shockwave knocks the group of their feet and they watch in horror as the passageway collapses on the form of Jarad and the remaining assassins. In an instant the gruesome battlefield is buried under stone and earth, and Silus becomes what he can only assume is the last living citizen of the Black Hand.

Reluctantly the group makes their way back to the surface, finding themselves behind enemy lines. The undead army has begun its assault, with the bulk of its forces nearing the sturdy wall of the Inner City of Vesticar. The death of the King seems to have only further fractured the army and far too few soldiers man the battlements. Seeing their only means of assisting the beleaguered defenders to be disrupting the undefended undead war machines, which through foul magic seem to be making quick work of the walls, they rush to attack the machines. All hope is lost however when they hear a familiar mocking laughter which chills them to the bone. Turning they see the headless form of Lord Archibald, his flesh now replaced with a shadowy ethereal form, his disembodied eyes glow red within his empty helm. He sits astride a skeletal horse, and is fully dressed for battle. He questions the group, clearly amused.

"Did you really believe it would that easy? Vesticar will be mine!" The battle is short lived, as Death-Lord Archibald easily subdues the heroes one by one. Only Silus escapes, sneaking off before Archibald can use his new found powers to place his soul into bondage. The rest are forced to watch the invasion unfold, a particularly cruel punishment for Arolthus, who called

Vesticar his home. Once satisfied that the heroes' spirits had been sufficiently broken, he informs them that it is time they are brought before his master.

A hazy darkness begins to fill the heroes' vision, accompanied by the feeling of falling backwards, the last thing they see as the darkness envelopes them is the walls of Vesticar beginning to crumble and the armies of the dead swarming over them.

## Chapter 9: The Rise of Necrodark

The party awakens to the gentle rocking of the ocean. Luktar, Kal, Arolthus, and Mute are chained together in what appears to be the brig of one of the undead ships. Everyone is mostly unharmed however Luktar is incoherent, having been drugged to prevent him from using his powers. Deathlord Archibald comes in to speak to them, informing them that unlike the cargo hold full of corpses harvested from Vesticar, they will be much more valuable to the master alive, so that their souls can be harvested when they are slain and bound to your lifeless bodies becoming powerful agents of the forces of Necrodark.

The ship stops off at an unknown port on the east side of the barren Lands and the group is marched inland. The journey is long and harsh as they cross the desolate landscape for they are forced to march without rest, as the dead that guard them need none. Exhausted and near death they discover that Archibald and the forces of the Sceptre of Necrodark have constructed a massive fortress in the center of the Barren Lands.

The group is imprisoned, each in separate cells, and finally given some meager rations and a bowl of stale water. They are there for several days without much of anything happening but eventually there is a disturbance as a force of undead drag an enraged centaur through the dungeon and put him into another cell, the group recognizes it as Roginn. As it turns out he arrived back in Telestra only a few days after Kal and Luktar left, and received the message Silus had sent to the Smiling Mule for him. He then rushed towards Vesticar to try and catch up with his friends. He informs them that by the time he arrived at Vesticar the city fallen to the Undead army. He was apprehended trying to search for survivors and was brought here on one of the other boats.

They are there one more day, during which time there is a full moon. That night the heroes hear disturbing sounds coming from one of the nearby cells. Kal is able to see some of what happens through the narrow window on his cell door. He sees one of the prison cells doors torn from its hinges as a wolf like creature erupts from the cell. It makes quick work of the undead guards and in what appears to be a frenzied hunger devours their rotting bodies. This in turn makes the creature extremely ill and it eventually collapses somewhere beyond Kal's vision.

In the morning all of the prison cells are opened by a rather confused Mute, who remembers only waking up in a pile of vomit and partially eaten zombies. Kal informs Mute that he is likely a were-wolf. Suddenly many strange events over the last year or so begin to make sense to the group of friends. Unsure of what exactly to do about it, they decide that first they must escape the fortress where they have been imprisoned.

The heroes fight their way through the fortress, encountering many unspeakable horrors along the way. They also discover a massive underground chamber where thousands upon thousands

of undead soldiers are drawn up in formations. Among their ranks can be seen entire units reanimated from the corpses of the fallen troops of Vesticar. The destruction of Vesticar was only one step in the construction of a massive undead army, the purpose of which is unknown but can only spell doom for the continent of Gant.

The group flees the fortress and head for Vesticar but the undead catch up with them, in the form of several undead Wyrms, lead by a powerful ethereal Drake. The reanimated dragons attempt to capture the escaped prisoners. The battle is long and exhausting but the heroes manage to defeat their attackers. In the aftermath of the battle Mute is garnered the title of 'Worm Slayer' by his friends for having stuck the final blow on all three of the monstrosities that sent them crashing to the ground.

Only the ethereal Drake escapes to report its failure to the master of the Sceptre of Necrodark. Death Lord Archibald moves to punish the powerful creature, which cowers before him. But his mysterious master speaks from the shadows and stays Archibald's blade, explaining that the prisoners were allowed to escape so that they could return to their people and spread terror among the populace, preparing they way for the undead invasion.

Arriving back in Telestra the heroes are immediately brought before various organizations, having sent word via Mute's trusted eagle of the dire threat faced by Vesticar, just before they entered the palace. Though exhausted from their ordeal they inform them that not only has Vesticar fallen but the forces of the Sceptre of Necrodark appear poised to launch a full scale attack on their entire continent. Among those organizations warned of the impending invasion is the Order of the Red Hawk, the Republican Army, the Star Spire College (though Headmaster Goshind seems to not be at all concerned), and even the far removed Guardians of Athelnon. As their meetings conclude and they go to their respective homes for some much earned rest, an ominous sign appears over head and the night sky begins to brighten as a sickly mockery of day. A massive fire ball streams across the sky and seems to crash somewhere in Western Gant...