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# War of the Twin Terrors

## Prologue

Several months have passed since a group of heroes arrived in Telestra, relaying a dire tale of the destruction of the once mighty city-state of Vesticar and their own capture and subsequent escape from the insidious forces of the Sceptre of Necrodark. The warning they brought with them, of a massive army of the dead, mobilized to invade the lands of the living, brought great fear and apprehension as the Master of the Sceptre had predicted. On the very same night that they arrived, haggard and wounded, an ominous omen appeared in the darkened sky. Scouts would report the next day that the giant fireball that had lit up the sky the previous night was no heavenly body crashing to the earth. Quite the opposite in fact. From the shattered remains of the ruins of Drakkus, rose a demon Prince of immense power, Cerebus the Blood Thirster, returned after his long exile from Gant.

During these months the Republic of Gant has done its best to assure its citizens that the Republican Army is more than a match for both evils forces set upon the continent. Only fools believe the rhetoric, the wise know the truth. The forces of Necrodark gain in strength with every soldier that dies fighting them. They know not hunger, pain, weariness, or weakness; they are the perfect army and are entirely focused on the complete destruction of all that draws breath. Meanwhile the Cult of Cerebus, with its patron deity returned to them, grow ever more powerful. For every drop of blood shed fighting this monstrous demonic army, the demon prince Cerebus grows in strength. Indeed the wise know that the situation is quite hopeless. But of course, the wise know it is best to remain silent and die with dignity and honour.

The Republican Army swells in numbers each week, as massive recruiting campaigns have been launched. Supplies are being gathered and defences are hastily being constructed as the entire Republic prepares itself for the coming war. But already the enemies of the Republic, the enemies of all living things, have begun to march, winning new lands almost uncontested, and consolidating their victories.

Meanwhile the heroes of this land have waited anxiously for the opportunity to rise to greatness and glory. Some have waited in obscurity while others have been busy preparing for the storm. Among these is Luktar, the mysterious Elven High Mage of the Starspire. He and his companions tracked down an elusive Athelnon Unicorn, and having won its trust by saving the mythical creature from the clutches of a pack of hungry Raptors, it has pledged itself to the Mage. The lone surviving Raptor was subdued and is now the unruly mount for the frightful Half-orc Zealot known as Arolthus, who has been wandering homeless, in the wake of the destruction of Vesticar. Rumour has it that Arolthus beat the raptor into submission with his own bare hands. The silent Watcher of the Forest, the Huntsman Ranger known simply as Mute, has been amongst his people, but finds himself a stranger at times. For every full moon he must wander out into the forest alone to protect his tribe from the beast that now lurks within him. The rowdy Centaur Vigilante Roginn, well known as an unlikely Champion of the People, has been doing his best to keep the common folk of Telestra at ease, largely through the liquid courage provided by his stills at the Smiling Mule tavern. His conservative cousin on the other hand, the proud and noble Centaur Paladin Kal, has been entrenched in the activities of the Order of the Red Hawk. With two terrifying armies stalking the lands these Holy Warriors know that they will be called upon heavily in the

defence of the Republic. Of Silus, the elusive yet stout hearted Halfling Assassin, little is known. When Deathlord Archibald attacked his friends in Vesticar, Silus was the only one able to escape. Since then no one has seen or heard from him, though the massacre of his brothers from the Blackhand must weigh heavily upon him, being the sole surviving member of the decimated Assassins Guild.

In the west, the brave heroes who fought so fiercely to prevent the return of Cerebus, but failed in the final hour, have returned to their homes and try to find peace in their own restless souls. They have not forgotten the final words of Hargast, Chief Druid of the Conclave of Vahlin's Earth, father to the Druid called Seleena Rainmaker. He sacrificed his own life so that they could escape and warn the Republic of the danger the cult now posed. For their part they have done what they can to prepare the people of Almsberg for the terror that will come. The mighty Battlemage, whose own story is wrapped up within that of Cerebus himself, works tirelessly with the Vestin College of Pyromancy to prepare for the defence of the city. Meanwhile his friend Taylor Lewis, a courageous and selfless fighter in his own right, lends the skills of his trade to the war effort. The beautiful and dangerous Ebonethia, Sablewood Elf turned Priestess of Vahlin, has been reclusive, haunted by the darkness she has seen in her dreams.

The continent of Gant is a rush of activity; however the people go about their business with breath held tight. For no one knows the hour that the War of the Twin Terrors will truly begin.

## **Part One: Prelude to War**

### **Chapter 1: Rescue at Blackmire Tower**

The first major offensive move was made by the Forces of Necrodark. They had been amassing troops on the east side of the Blackmire River for some time. Having made little progress in the north through the dense forest of Athelnon following the fall of Vesticar, and being held back by the Blackmire swamp, it was in the south that the undead began their invasion of the Republic. When they sweep into the area, the Republican army was not prepared for their numbers and the officers in charge of the small force wisely choose to fall back, evacuating Blackmire Village as they fled. They knew that a heroic death on these early battlefields would simply mean that their own friends and family would one day see their shambling corpses at their front door. Unfortunately, the small garrison of troops at Blackmire Tower were cut off and had no choice but to barricade themselves in the tower and watch as the Republican army retreated back to Nakren. At first they were hopeful, the undead seemed ill equipped to siege the tower and the garrison assumed that the army would return in greater numbers to rescue them. But as the days stretched on and no relief came, they began to despair. With their supplies and ammunition all but spent, they began to realize that time held no meaning for the undead forces surrounding them. The evil creatures had but to wait for hunger to claim them and then order their starved lifeless corpses to rise up and follow the will of the Sceptre of Necrodark.

When word of the dire situation faced by the garrison of Blackmire Tower reached Tobias Todbruin, a low ranking official in the republican government in Telestra, he immediately went to see the Commander of the army's Eastern Division. He demanded to know the daring rescue plan that was being drawn up for the ill fated men trapped in the tower, for among them was his own son. It was with great regret that the Commander informed him that no rescue would be attempted, that the garrison of

Blackmire Tower were a casualty of war. He explained that rescue would likely cost the lives of twice as many men as it would save, and that the army could not afford to engage the undead unless victory could be assured with near zero casualties lest they swell the ranks of their enemy.

But Tobias Todbruin was not the kind of man to throw away the life of his son so easily. He sold a great deal of his possession to procure a large sum of money and went in search of one whose name was known amongst the common folk of the Republic; one Roginn Hathelheftin. Some said he was a brave hero others called him a drunken opportunist, but either way this lawless Centaur sounded like the kind person Tobias needed. And he was not disappointed for when he finally tracked down Roginn at the Smiling Mule Tavern, not only did Roginn accept the offer but his two companions offered to accompany him. The 350 gold pieces bought the assistance of the rowdy Vigilante as well as his Paladin cousin Kal Emdar, and the masked High Mage Luktar. Tobias expressed to them the very urgent nature of the mission and they pledged to leave at day break the next day.

Luktar found it fairly simple to get away from his duties at the star-Spire College, after a very persuasive negotiation with Tobias regarding the new War Tax. It would seem that war or no, red tape could still be found and Tobias promised to tie up the taxes due from the Star-spire College for as long as possible. Headmaster Goshind found this to his liking, feeling that the Wars of the republic should not be the concern of the Star-Spire, and granted Luktar leave to go 'play' with his friends.

Kal on the other hand was ordered to stay in Telestra, after bringing his case before one of the High templar of his order. He was told that Order of the red Hawk could be called upon at any moment and that all Paladins needed to be ready to answer that call. Displeased at the High Templar's decision, Kal decided to make a plea to the Grand Marshal of the Order of the Red Hawk, Reginald Terdalion. Bared from an audience Kal charged past the guards outside his chambers, causing a great uproar. To the surprise of the High Templars gathered in council with their leader, Grand Marshal Terdalion ordered the room to be cleared and while he reiterated what had already been said by the High Templar, he also told Kal in hushed tones, that he must follow his heart. This sealed Kal's course of action, and he prepared to depart Red Hawk Keep, disobeying direct orders to instead join his friends in the Rescue at Blackmire Tower

The group journeyed in haste to Nakren, the closest settlement to the newly formed ghost town of Blackmire Village, which was now located in lands under the control of Necrodark, along with the tower. Here they found that the otherwise quiet fishing village had swollen in size as the army was marshalling their forces in preparation for the expected onslaught of the undead. Being disliked by the army the group choose not to tarry long in Nakren and proceeded on to Blackmire Village. They found the village eerily silent, its people leaving in such haste that the village appeared to simply have lost all its villagers in the blink of an eye. Logs still smouldered in fireplaces, and here and there a chicken strutted through the empty streets. But the smell of the living soon drew out of hiding a small force of feral zombies, who had been feasting on those unfortunate villagers that could not escape their own houses. While the vile creatures had the element of surprise they were no match for the heroes. Dispatching them quickly and without the mercy that is afforded the living, they proceeded on along the coastal pathway to Blackmire Tower.

They spent the night in a seaside cave, and shortly after sun rise rounding the bend which overlooks the large, flat cleft in the seaside cliffs where the tower stands; the heroes were able to survey the undead host silently keeping their deathly vigil over the lonely tower. They quickly realized that they alone could not break through these lines and save the garrison, so Luktar, with his swift Unicorn mount, rode hard back to Nakren to see what aid he could muster.

When he arrived back in Nakren, he found that amongst the Republican soldiers, there was also a squadron from mercenary band known as the Screaming Demons, camped here awaiting battle. They were eager to help Luktar, for the small sum of 150 gold coins. However Luktar was less eager to part with that much coin, and as he soon discovered a piece of his own handy work in their baggage train, a war golem that could not kill, he decide to take his leave from them. Moving on, he implored the Lieutenant of Willow Company, Archers of the Yeoman Guard, to spare a squadron of men to act as ranged support for their rescue attempt. All officers of the Republican army had been ordered to hold their ground and attempt no rescue mission, but the Lieutenant offered to look the other way for the small fee of 20 gold pieces. Once again Luktar proved to be persuasive and reduced the bribe to 10 gold pieces, allowing a squadron of archers, who were eager to help their friends, to join their rescue attempt. Lastly a group of militia men, under the command of Sergeant Tuck, veterans of the Battle of Teleos and friends to the heroes that helped save their village, brazenly disobeyed orders and followed Luktar to battle. Tuck's comment after knocking his commanding officer out cold with a swift right hook, was "orders be damned, Tuck's men are with you!"

As the rescuers took to the field the undead turned from their motionless siege and sprung to a mockery of life. As the skeletal archers rained down arrows upon the brave heroes the Republican archers did their best to cover the advance of the militia men, lead by Sergeant Tuck, and joined by Roginn. Meanwhile Luktar focused his considerable powers, along with support from Kal on the shadowy lich that marched alongside a large group of cadaverous soldiers. As the evil lich fell beneath the combined might of the stars and heavens the living rejoiced, thinking they had cut the head off of this undead force. However their rejoicing was cut short when the true leader of the besieging undead reanimated the fallen Lich. It was in fact a powerful Lazar that lead this force, and the malevolent tortured soul trapped within the husk of the undead priest's body, urged his minions forward.

By this time Tuck's men had advanced far afield but had suffered casualties at the skeletal hands of the archers. Kal, seeing the threat to the lightly armoured soldiers, charged headlong into the first group of skeletal archers. Their arrows bouncing off his heavy armour, he crushed the skeletons with the righteous fury of his hammer and consumed them with the divine power of the One God. Meanwhile Luktar turned his efforts against the Lazar and the soldiers it led, trying multiple times to lay a magical trap in front of the un-living warriors. However the Lazar was intelligent, unlike those he led, and continued to thwart Luktar's efforts. Persistence paid off however and at last the trap was sprung. The intense gravitational forces nearly tore the cadaverous soldiers to pieces, but once the magical forces dissipated they continued their relentless march. The battle was joined, as the militia and the now weakened undead closed ranks.

With the capable battle prowess of Roginn finally brought to bear against the undead, along with the stout hearted Sergeant and his men, the rescuers began to gain the upper hand. Roginn was a frenzy of attacks, swinging his flaming axe again and again, severing lifeless limbs from lifeless foes and cutting a swath through the enemy. Luktar and Kal once again combined their efforts to dispatch the second group of skeletal archers. It was not long before the heroes overpowered the undead and crushed them utterly. The Lazar was the last to fall, hurling curses and destruction at them with all its might. And just as victory was at hand and the Lazar's tortured soul was finally severed from its lifeless prison, it laughed, a grotesque and terrifying sound. From its outstretched hand one last pulse of necromantic energies burst forth striking a nearby mound of earth.

This was no ordinary mound of earth however. The small flat-lands between the sea cliffs at the mouth of the Blackmire River had been host to many battles for countless years, and this mound was in fact an ancient mass grave. As the earth tore asunder a massive skeletal creature rose up, comprised of shattered remains of countless fallen warriors, and stitched together into an unholy behemoth. The undead monstrosity was joined by the shifting transparent forms of several ancient war hounds whose ethereal jaws crackled with demonic forces. Recognizing a foe that the ill equipped militia and archers could not hope to face, Roginn ordered them to retreat and he along with his trusted companions charged at this new threat.

The undead war hounds attempted to swarm Kal while Roginn exchanged blows one-on-one with the massive grave horror. Luktar and his unicorn rode out some distance, largely unnoticed save for a single war hound. From this vantage point the masked mage unleashed the burning celestial powers at his command, blasting away at the undead repeatedly. The new force, meant to be the Lazar's parting gift to the would-be rescuers, was no match for the heroes. Soon cheers could be heard both from the men that had fought with them and the garrison in tower, now at last free.

Among the garrison Tobias' son was found, shaken by the ordeal, but otherwise healthy. He gave the heroes a letter to send to his father, and the group quickly retreated back to Nakren. They left Blackmire Tower in flames behind them lest the undead use it against them. Arriving back in Nakren, the army was in an uproar. Most of the soldiers were overjoyed to see the garrison alive and well, however the officers in charge were outraged at the rampant disobedience. Sergeant Tuck was to be severely punished, but Roginn recognized the heroic deeds of a man that fought with compassion for the people the depended on him. He refused to stand by and watch as the sergeant was flogged, and offered himself in the sergeant's place. The officers were eager for a display of authority and so decided to unleash their wrath on the centaur, a figure already much disliked by the army. They were sorely disappointed when Roginn failed to cry out as lash after lash was laid across his back, and instead the brash Vigilante mocked his assailants. Roaring, "Is that the best you've got?" Judging from the empty jug of moonshine on his belt, once again, his reputation as either a brave hero or a drunken opportunist was entrenched in the conversations of the common folk of the Republic.

It was with apprehension that Paladinyte Kal Emdar returned to Telestra. At the gates of Red Hawk Keep one of his own friends was under orders to bring him in chains before the High Templars. Roginn let out a low growl, a signal that his cousin knew well the meaning of, he would fight if need be.

But Kal, noble of heart, willingly turned himself in. He had followed his heart, as the Grand Marshal had said; he would face any accusation knowing that he had done what was right. The High Templar's were enraged, that one of their own would disregard a direct order. With heavy heart Grand Marshal Terdalion was forced to punish Kal in order to keep discipline within his ranks. With a light touch to his bowed head, what Kal had once dreamed would signify his promotion to the rank of Crusader instead sent a slight shock through his body. The shock was followed by a deep sense of loss, and without needing to be told Kal felt the divine powers which he had always felt within him disappear. The pronouncement was that to wield the powers of a Paladin was a privilege that was afforded to those who unerring served the Order and that when Kal had proven himself his powers would be returned to him. Grand Marshal Terdalion knew otherwise however and spoke with Kal privately afterwards.

"The One God knows the hearts and minds of all men, and it is he alone who has the power to grant or remove the powers that we Paladins wield. While we may have blocked them temporarily, it is the One God will decide your fate not mere man. You were true to your heart; there is no higher calling for a Paladin. I am proud of you Kal Emdar, I see greatness within you."

## **Chapter 2: The Forest War**

Within the wild and untamed depths of the Athelnon Forest the Wild Elves have been fighting a secret war against the undead forces of Necrodark. After the fall of Vesticar portions of the Necrodark army proceeded west into the forest where they are being resisted by various tribes of Wild Elves and the Guardians of Athelnon. Even the creatures of the forest itself have risen up to defend their home. The Republic knows little of the events taking place on this hidden front, however if it were not for the efforts of the Wild Elf tribes the undead would have marched unopposed to the eastern shores of Fallow Lake.

Mute of the Athel-Leaf Tribe was called away to duty with the Guardians of Athelnon some time ago and he has not seen or heard from his friends recently. His time has been spent mostly in training the new recruits to the Guardians of Athelnon, whose numbers have increased drastically with the threat of the undead advance through their forest home. The undead advance was cautious, whoever their sinister master was, he was no fool and understood that the Wild Elves had a significant advantage fighting in the dense vegetation and ancient trees of the Athelnon Forest. At first it appeared as though the rapid hit and run attacks of the tribes and the well laid ambushes of the rangers could hold up the undead indefinitely. With such tactics at their disposal and the forest as their battlefield they were able to destroy many of the slow moving undead and melt away into the brush before the undead could bring their numbers to bear. This simultaneously reduced the undead's numbers and denied them reinforcements in the form of Wild Elf corpses.

Around the same time as Blackmire Village was overrun in the south, and the garrison stranded at Blackmire Tower, the fortunes of the silent Forest War began to turn against the Wild Elves. Necrodark began sending patrols of the freshly dead, many likely former soldiers of Vesticar, into the forest in an attempt to find the tribal camps. These undead were much fleet of foot than the decaying zombies and skeletal soldiers previously thrown against the Wild Elf defence. Once again the Master of the Sceptre of Necrodark proved his intellect by choosing to threaten the safety of the camps and force

the Wild Elves to relocate deeper into the forest, making it more difficult for them execute rapid strikes against the undead.

Many of the smaller tribes began to worry that the undead would locate their camps, and fearful that harm would come to their families, they began to withdraw from the area. This cut into the war effort of the defenders, and slowly but surely the forces of Necrodark gained the upper hand. As the tribes retreated to the relative safety of the north the Guardians of Athelnon were increasingly forced to engage the undead without support. None knew better than Mute, just how desperate the situation was becoming. With the strength of the Wild Elves failing against the relentless advance of undead, Mute did the best he could to summon help from his friends, but could afford only enough time away from his duties to leave a notice at the hideout he and his friends often frequented, asking for their aid.

Arolthus was the first to answer the call. He had returned to the hideout looking to find Mute, hoping to receive more training for his unruly raptor mount from the skilled animal trainer. He found the hideout deserted but soon discovered the message left by mute. With no real course for his live since the fall of Vesticar he rushed off to assist Mute. Following the instructions left for him Arolthus made his way to the camp of the Athel-leaf tribe, one of the few tribes that still remained in the area. When he arrived he found that the tribe was already in the process of relocating. After explaining to the sentries that he was a friend and was here to help them he was escorted to Mute, who explained that for the least several days undead scouting parties had been drawing closer and closer to their camp. Unable to hide their presence any longer the Chief of the Athel-leaf tribe had decided that the camp would be dismantled and they would flee north as had so many of the other tribes. The timing of his decision was impeccable, as the previous night sentries had discovered an advanced force of undead heading directly for the camp. Most of the tribe was already underway; however Mute had been given command of a group of Athel-leaf braves and was tasked with covering the tribes retreat.

By the time the undead arrived the last of the tribe had departed and the braves now stood ready and eager to engage the enemy. The undead force, under the command of a skeletal champion, shambled onto the clearing that had once been home to the Athel-leaf camp, and immediately their skeletal archers took up position and began to fire. Meanwhile a mob of skeletal fighters rushed as fast as their decrepit forms could carry them across the battlefield, the scent of the living enraging them. On their right flank a small group of zombies careened towards the wild elves, carrying massive two handed flails, their rotting forms obscured by the cloud of virulent plague-ridden insects that swarmed around them. The braves had split up into two groups, one lead by Mute and the other by Arolthus upon his raptor. Both groups rushed forward to meet the foe. Mute and Arolthus did their best to keep the archers, and the lichling among their ranks, at bay until the braves could get close enough to throw a fierce salvo of tomahawks. While the axes smashed apart bones the undead advanced undeterred. Once engaged the Athel-leaf braves fought fiercely, knowing that every minute they bought trading blows with forces of Necrodark, allowed their families and kindred to retreat further to the north.

Arolthus and his raptor were a force to be reckoned with, tearing apart the undead with a flurry of claws. While the plague ridden zombies were no match for the half-orc and those he lead, the sinister disease they carried infected many in their group. Arolthus called upon the One God repeatedly to cure



them, but some among them were still claimed by the plague, their bodies left bloated and discoloured. Meanwhile Mute had stepped away from the braves he was leading in order to finish off the skeletal archers with a hail of arrows from his sturdy bow. This left the solitary lichling exposed and much to the surprise of the defenders, the skeletal mage was attacked from behind by a giant spider. At first they assumed that a creature of the forest had decided to join their cause, as had happened on several occasions in skirmishes with the undead. However it became clear why the spider was there when the diminutive form of Silus, unnoticed to this point, sprang from the back of the spider and severed the lichlings spine in three places. It fell to the ground twitching, and with that Silus joined the fray.

When the dust finally settled the undead were wiped out entirely, and though they suffered several casualties the wild elves, with the assistance of the three heroes, had won the day. Arolthus was less than pleased to see Silus, demanding to know why he had abandoned them on the docks of Vesticar when Deathlord Archibald had attacked them and carried them off to captivity. Silus merely shrugged and said that there was nothing he could do to prevent their capture so it was wiser to run and live to fight another day. Before things could escalate, one of the braves came to Silus' defence, thanking him for his assistance in dispatching the vile lichling. Mute then instructed them all to burn the bodies of the dead so they could not be reanimated, and the group followed after the fleeing Athel-leaf tribe to report that their escape would not be interrupted by the undead.

They did not stay long with the Athel-leaf however, within a few hours of catching up with them Mute's trusted avian scout Zuzu returned to report that a large undead army was marching along the highway to Fallow Lake, undeterred by the now fleeing wild-elves, the Guardians of Athelnon were calling for one last ambush before the remaining tribes left the area. The Chief of the Athel-leaf offered several of his own Beastmasters to Mute, and gave him and his friends leave to join up with the Guardians of Athelnon near the forest highway. By the time they reached the encampment of the Guardians of Athelnon, under the command of Ranger Captain Tarsis, a large host of Wild Elves had assembled. Among them were braves of the Deer Runner tribe, Warbringers of the Bluewater tribe, and Beastmasters of the Shadowmist tribe with their stealthy jaguar companions in tow. Adding to their number was not only the heroes and the Athel-leaf Beastmasters with their massive brown bears, but also denizens of the forest, roused to anger by the transgressions of the undead. The first to arrive was large wolf pack, pledging themselves to the defence of the forest. Mute's wolf companion, Bane, was quick to ask leave to join their ranks. Shortly after, a group of hulking wild boars trotted into the encampment, aggressively pawing at the ground in anticipation of facing the unholy forces of Necrodark.

The Guardians of Athelnon planned the attack, a deadly ambush with the combined forces of the Athelnon Forest lying in wait along either side of the highway. The guardians themselves divided up into two units, one led by Ranger Captain Tarsis, commanding the forces on the north side of the highway, and the other by Huntsmen Mute, commanding the forces on the south side. Arolthus chose to fight alongside the Warbringers of Bluewater tribe, while Silus remained alone in the shadows waiting for the opportune moment to strike.

The undead could be heard approaching from some distance off. While they had no voices, the constant rattle of rusted armour and weapons against old bones was an unmistakable omen of what was coming. When they finally came into view, the undead were a horrid sight to behold. They marched in a long column, row upon row of the living dead, intent upon bringing death to world of the living. At their head an underlich marched, swathed in dark energies, leading a large formation of heavily armoured grave guard. Behind them came a large block of skeletal soldiers and two long columns of skeletal archers. Beyond them could be seen a shambling mass of gravebourne zombies being urged forward by the tormented trapped soul of a Wight in the middle of their ranks. Behind them were two massive forms, stitched together from dozens of rotting corpses, and relentlessly swinging cruel looking meat hooks over their heads around and around; grave horrors. Bringing up the rear was the true commander of this force, flanked by two Skeletal Knights on each side and riding upon skeletal horses, a Death Knight. This was no raiding party; here was an army with clear intention of reaching Fallow Lake, being led by an intelligent and immensely powerful creature of pure evil.

The wild elves wasted little time, knowing that sooner or later the undead would sense an unusual amount of life in the forest they travelled through. The Guardians of Athelnon opened up with a massive barrage of arrows, as though hundreds of birds suddenly burst forth from the forest and dove into the ranks of the head of the column. It was an attack that would have decimated an army of the living, but the dead paid it little heed. With that their position was now compromised; the forest army charged. Had it been a mortal army they would have crumpled under the sudden and fierce attack from the forest, as animal and wild elf alike snarled and roared their way towards the foe, but the undead once again were not at all effected and simply turned to meet the threat. The skeletal archers prepared to let fly a volley of their own arrows, but Silus perceived the threat immediately, and called down a magical shadow which benumbed the archers' senses and rendered them useless. From every side the undead were hit, but their lines held firm. With the trap sprung the wild elves had hoped for much greater results than this, only a few undead now lay crushed beneath their fury. The battle raged on towards a stalemate; however the wild elves would grow weary eventually while the undead would not.

Again and again they tried to gain the upper hand. Arolthus called down the blessings of the One God and struck down the undead with his holy blades, while Silus brought forth torrential downpours of shadowy magic to dissolve the bodies of the undead. Mute and the guardians of Athelnon, were soon rendered ineffective, as the battle lines became unclear and any arrow they fired risked hitting their own troops. An army such as theirs was not meant to fight a protracted battle; their successes had always been for quick hit and run attacks, not this kind of deadly pitched battle. The wolf pack suffered heavy casualties and was forced to retreat while the bears and jaguars which the beastmasters commanded were wiped out entirely, giving their lives heroically but ultimately ineffectively.

The Death Knight sought to press the advantage and charged his knights behind the wild elf lines to the north. As fate would have it however, it was this action which eventually led to the downfall of the undead army. As the armoured terrors advanced down the lines the Death Knight wheeled about to reinforce his archers who had been drawn into close combat with the Warbringers and were swiftly being cut down. While the initial charge came close to shattering the formation of tattooed wild elves, their champion managed to hold their line together. The Death Knight paid them no heed and threw vile

unholy powers across the battlefield; he could have easily crushed the life out of the brave wild elf champion while the champion's axe, sharp as it may be, would have no effect on his ethereal form. The undead commander knew no fear. As such the indomitable Death Knight was caught entirely off guard when the champion charged headlong at him, his great axe held high and his tribal tattoos shimmering with magic. Rather than strike out at the Death Knight the brave champion shifted his swing and caught his skeletal mount full in the chest, the blow hitting with such force that it sent the horse over backwards, catapulting the Death Knight from the saddle where landing far behind his unit. While the tumble caused no real damage to the powerful Oathbourne Death Knight, it gave him the chance to step back and observe the battlefield.

The advantage he had sought to exploit had disappeared, the wolf pack had rallied and swarmed one of the grave horrors, bringing it down in a vicious onslaught of claws and teeth. Meanwhile Arolthus had thrown his might behind the braves that had been engaged with the zombies since the onset of the ambush, giving them the advantage they needed to overwhelm and defeat their foes. Silus and Mute, along with the bows of the Guardians of Athelnon, had also decimated the remainder of the skeletal archers. Had this army of the undead been lead by some mindless reanimated monstrosity they would have fought till they had won or been reduced to dust, but the Death Knight recognized that while he might still turn the tide in his favour their army would arrive on the shores of Fallow Lake too weak to pose any threat to the Republic. And so, much to his displeasure, the Death Knight ordered his forces to retreat.

Many of the wild elves were eager to pursue the undead and attempt to destroy them once and for all. But Ranger Captain Tarsis wisely ordered his force to hold their ground and gather up the dead and wounded, lest they be the ones caught in an ambush. Many wild elves and brave animals of the forest had paid with their lives to protect the Republic, who scarcely acknowledged their existence and knew nothing of the great sacrifice the Wild Elf tribes had made to prevent the forces of Necrodark from reaching Fallow Lake. They would now head north with the other tribes, the southern reaches of the Athelnon forest were no longer safe, the tribes could not be expected to give more. They had won the victory this day but it had cost them much, their homes, their ancestral hunting grounds, and many of their kindred's lives. The Guardians of Athelnon would patrol the southern reaches of the forest to ensure that the undead did not proceed northward, but the tribes would continue to head north, as far as they could go so that they would not have to face the undead again.

Mute was given orders from the Captain to rejoin with the larger bulk of the rangers forces and so bid farewell to his fellow tribesmen, and the gathered tribesmen of all those who had fought. He urged his friends to return to Telestra and to tell the Republic what had had taken place in the depths of the Athelnon Forest, and they were faithful to this charge. While many in the Republican government downplayed the role the wild elves had played in the defence of the Republic, the truth was told, and was forever known, as the Forest War.

### Chapter 3: The Evacuation of Welville

Shortly following the arrival of Cerebus the cult overran the village of Kingsfolly. Luckily they were given advanced warning and most of them found refuge across the Mithalon River. The cult then halted its advance and scouts reported that they began construction of a new shrine amongst the ruins of Drakkus. The shrine also appeared to be a vast fortress and was named Blood Shrine Citadel. With construction well under way the cult has begun to advance again, with the addition of demonic troops they have become a horrifying army

While in the east the undead forces were engaged both at Blackmire Tower and in the Forest War, in the West the Republic prepares to meet the demons and cultists in the plains east of Almsberg. However they are still trying to mobilize and bolster their forces and it has been decided that the village of Welville, having already suffered from attacks from the cult in the past must be hastily evacuated as the cultists draw closer. To this end the Republic has sent a company of infantry from the Silver Guard to cover their retreat should the cult decide to send a vanguard ahead to try to intercept the fleeing villagers.

Lewis Threads is one of many businesses that are contributing to the war effort, and through his new contacts in the military Taylor Lewis has learned about the Republican escort mission. Knowing firsthand how much Welville has already suffered at the hands of the cultists and wishing to atone for the failure of their mission to stop the arrival of Cerebus, he gathers his friends Ebonethia, Bloodbrood, and Seleena heads to Welville to see if they can lend a helping hand.

Some distance outside of Welville they run into the fleeing villagers and their escort, to their dismay they are already under attack from a combined force of cultists and demons. The Republic forces are fully engaged and on the verge of collapse, worse yet the force seems to be commanded by a Sloth Demon mounted upon a vicious hell-hound. The demon is terrorizing a squadron of swordsmen which it has engaged in battle and as the heroes draw closer the swordsmen begin to flee wildly, the demon laughs cruelly and with the swordsmen out of its way it prepares to charge into the defenceless villagers.

Both Taylor and Bloodbrood let out a wild battle cry and charge towards the demon hoping to draw its attention away from the defenceless villagers. The massive hell-hound stops in its tracks and spins around to face them, burning saliva dripping from the toothy maw on each of its two heads. But rather than charge at them the Sloth demon riding atop the demonic beast stretches out a long sinewy arm and utters something in the demon tongue. Seleena immediately falls to sleep, be-spelled by the demons powers. As she descends into a terrible nightmare and falls to the ground, the demon turns its gaze upon the charging Minotaur and the claymore wielding human. With a guttural slurping sound the demon spits some kind of sticky venom out of its frog-like mouth which strikes both men causing their skin to sizzle and burn and slowing their movements as the sticky tendrils drip down around their feet. But the heroes press forward, the pain of the demon's venom subsiding as Ebonethia begins to call out to Vahlin in her clear strong voice. Seleena's nightmare comes to a frightful conclusion and she wakes up screaming, her body wracked with pain. No longer able to hold back its fiery demon mount the Sloth demon dismounts and continues to spit venom at the approaching heroes while the hell-hound surges forward, the unnatural baying of the demon hound sets everyone's nerves on edge. The two men hastily

separate, with the faster minotaur rushing for the Sloth demon and Taylor hefting his mighty blade to meet the charging hell-hound. The ground about the hell-hound erupts in flames but Taylor stands his ground and battles both of the fearsome heads of the beast. Once Bloodbrood closes in on the Sloth demon it is no match for the enraged Battlemage, it tries to place its attacker in the same dread sleep as Seleena but is unsuccessful, and it is not long before the sloth demon is cut to pieces by Bloodbrood's razor sharp axe. With the help of both Seleena and Ebonethia Taylor is likewise able to defeat the hell hound.

With the death of the demon commander at the hands of these heroes, who arrived all together unexpected, the cultists flee. The caravan of refugees is narrowly saved. However the terrorized swordsmen have fled the battlefield in the direction of Almsberg, and now only one squadron of swordsmen remains at full strength, while two squadrons of spearmen as well as a group of archers have suffered casualties, among them being their sergeants. The remaining sergeant is babbling like a fool and is no use to anyone, leaving only the company's lieutenant to salvage the situation. However the lieutenant has been severely wounded, his leg broken, several ribs cracked, and nursing a massive gash across the side of his head leaving him partially scalped. Ebonethia is able to heal his wounds and stabilize his condition but he remains on the verge of passing out. With no sergeants left to take command he places the remaining men under Taylors command, and gives him a horn which he says was meant to summon reinforcements. He says he sounded the horn when the cultists first attacked but they were too far from the republican lines, but maybe if they get close enough the cavalry will hear it and ride out to assist them. He then passes out cold from the pain.

Taylor reluctantly takes command of the soldiers while the other heroes help the caravan of refugees get moving again. It is decided that Bloodbrood will lead the spearmen and act as a rear guard for the caravan. Meanwhile Taylor will guard the left flank with the remaining swordsmen. Ebonethia joins up with the archers to provide ranged support from the right flank and Seleena rides atop one of the caravan's wagons, her keen sense of hearing making her an excellent sentry.

Knowing that the cultists will not give up so easily and are sure to return, the heroes urge the refugee's forwards towards the republican defensive lines, still out of sight somewhere to the west. It is not long before Seleena calls out the alarm, hearing the sound of leathery wings beating in the clouds high overhead. Gazing up the people see the dark and terrible shapes of Anger demons darting back and forth overhead, many of the villagers cry out in fear but thankfully the step up their speed and continue to flee towards safety. The demons are only a prelude of things to come, and as they dip lower and lower the cultists renew their attack in full force. A large group of Cerebus' acolytes spring onto the road and begin running headlong towards caravan. From the vegetation flanking the road comes two more groups of cultists. On the right, not far from the republican spearmen a Ritualist steps forwards surrounded by Ritual Guards, and begins hurling curses and corruptive powers against the soldiers. On the left a small unit of demented blood dancers rushes onto the battlefield, eager to frolic in the fresh blood of their enemies. Leading them is an insidious champion of Cerebus. Once he would have been a man like any other, however with the marks of his lord carved into his flesh and feeding him with demonic energies he is now more demon than man.

Taylor calls out to Ebonethia as the Anger demons drop within range of the Republican bows. She responds by once again praying to Vahlin for strength. The archers instinctively surround her, both to protect her and to draw upon the courage that she shows in the face of such darkness. Her body begins to shine with pure light, a beacon of hope. The archers let loose their arrows, striking true, and causing the demons to shriek in anger. From their wounds burning blood begins to boil out, coalescing into pulsating globes which begin to swirl chaotically around their bodies. Meanwhile at the rear of the caravan Bloodbrood orders the spearmen to come about and prepare to meet the charging acolytes head on. The soldiers remember their training and within moments form a solid wall of armour bristling with spears, certain death for anyone who would be foolish enough to throw themselves upon it. However this makes the spearmen highly susceptible to flanking attacks by the Ritual Guards and Blood dancers. Seeing this, Taylor and his swordsmen rush to intercept the dangerous blood dancers. Bloodbrood also notices the threat, and towering over the spearmen he leads, he is able to summon up a large ball of flame which he hurls into the midst of the ritual guards, scorching them badly. From her perch atop the wagon Seleena calls out blessings upon the brave defenders but realizes that if she remains there she will soon be separated from her companions as the refugees continue to run in fear.

From overhead there is a blood chilling roar as the anger demons let loose their fury. The flaming globes cease to swirl about their bodies and instead begin raining down on the archers. One among their ranks falls to the ground dead, burnt beyond recognition before anyone can act to save him. Ebonethia is not fazed; she retaliates, smiting the demons with holy vengeance, the archers follow suit driving arrows deep into the demons leathery hides. Seleena too joins the fray, leaping from the top of the wagon and focusing divine power at the demons in an attempt to purge their presence from the physical realm. One imp among their number is narrowly saved from plummeting to the ground, and certain death, by the leader of the anger demons, who grasps the purged imp in its sharp talons. With every attack on the anger demons however more burning blood boils from their wounds. They now focus their attention on Seleena, alone and exposed, and sensing the threat she poses to them.

Elsewhere both the acolytes and the ritual guards charge Bloodbrood and the spearmen. The acolytes do not fare well, many of their number being forcibly impaled on the Republican spears, however the ritual guard preface their attack by demonically draining the very life-force of the spearmen, several of whom fall to ground as shrivel husks of their former selves. The powerful attack invigorates the cultists, healing many of the scorch marks upon their flesh from Bloodbrood's flames. They come crashing into the flank of the spearmen and soon the lines break apart in a wild melee of cultist and soldier. Their opposite flank is saved from a devastating charge by the blood dancers and their inhuman champion as they are forced to veer off and engaged Taylor and his swordsmen. While the Republican swordsmen fight bravely they soon discover that they are no match for the demonic forces coursing through their enemies. With each drop of blood they spill the blood dancers grow in power. Not to be out done the cultist champion raises his axe high and lands a vicious blow against one of the soldiers, splitting his upraised shield in two and severing his head, shoulder, and sword arm from his body.

Taylor responds without thinking, roaring his challenge to the champion and the blood dancers. Sensing the courageous fire within the young man that rivals the demon powers burning within their

own souls, they shift their attacks from the soldiers towards Taylor. Unprepared to receive the full brunt of their attacks Taylor is knocked off his feet when the haft of the champions axe slams into his stomach. Wasting no time several blood dancers fall upon his body, hacking at him wildly, as though possessed by Cerebus himself. While his stout armour deflects some of the blows Taylor feels several axe blades slice deeply into his back. He realizes that his time has come, and decides that he will look death in the face. With a roar he leaps up to his feet swinging his sword with every ounce of strength left in him, if it is blood they want then he will see to it that they dance in their own. The mighty claymore carves through the bare chests of several blood dancers like a warm blade through butter, and such is the momentum of the swing that it carries Taylor back down to the ground. Unable to prevent himself from falling he steels himself for the death blow.

In that moment it is as though the battle plays out in slow motion and an unnatural silence falls upon his ears. He hears nothing except the fearful cry of Ebonethia of the Sablewood tribe, who has just seen him fall in battle. He regrets that he will never see her face again, he regrets that he has now lost any chance to share his true feelings with her. In that moment he feels as if his heart will burst. The ground slowly rushes up to meet him, like a grave yawning wide to receive him. And then as quickly as it came the moment passes. He feels as a sudden burst of divine power courses through his veins, a voice speaks to him, telling him his time has not yet come and that he is to rise and fight back this great evil. Instead of landing in a heap Taylor rolls through the dirt and springs back to his feet, his wounds miraculously healed. From across the battlefield he catches a brief glimpse of Ebonethia, raven black hair framing her delicate lips, a beautiful smile meant just for him. With a nod she turns and is lost once again in the chaos of the battlefield. With renewed strength Taylor strikes out at the cultists and although they have suffered many casualties the swordsmen are inspired by his courage and fight on.

Astounded that this man was still alive after all they done, the cultists renewed their attacks however this time they found that their axes could not so easily spill his blood. Seleena had called upon the earth to reinforce Taylor and now it was as if his very skin was no longer flesh but hardened steel. It was in that moment that the cultists knew fear. They had been so confident that the power of their demon lord would crush the foe and that they would be praised for this great blood sacrifice they offered to him. But now, they began to doubt.

This was also the case for the acolytes, who with the combined might of Bloodbrood and the spearmen at his side had suffered a great number of casualties. And though they had slain some of the soldiers, particularly when a cultist agent had sprung from his hiding place amongst their ranks with a garrotte wire, it was clear they were losing. With no further heart to fight they turned and fled, escaping the battlefield with less than half as many men as when they had entered the fray. Bloodbrood wasted no time, breaking away from the spearmen and charging into the side of the formation of ritual guards. Still weakened from his earlier fire balls they were no match for his fury. His axe swung hard to the right sending several heads rolling, followed by another cultist being tossed high into the air by the Minotaur's sharp horns, entrails spilling out from a massive gash across his abdomen. The spearmen turned and pressed the advantage killing many more of the cultists. Within moments the entire group of ritual guards and the ritualist they were sworn to protect was swept away, killed to the last man.

After having been the divine instrument through which Taylor Lewis was saved from certain death, Ebonethia had renewed her attacks, along with the archers, against the demons. The hideous creatures began to drop out of the sky, no longer able to survive with so many arrows in their flesh. The last demon, the leader of the group, attempted to flee. But the archers brought it down with a flurry of arrows, crashing into the ground face first, a twisted and broken creature.

The cultist forces had been broken. Only the in-human champion of Cerebus continued to fight on, with a handful of blood dancers at his side. The wretch had bargained his very soul to Cerebus in exchange for great power and even as another of his warriors fell he continued to fight on. Taylor continued to hold his men together in the face of such ferocity, but try as they might they could not bring the champion down. However he and his remaining blood dancers were so intent upon defeating their foe they did not see Bloodbrood come barrelling into them from behind. Caught in a deadly vice they were crushed utterly. The champion was the last to fall, with Taylor's claymore through his belly and Bloodbrood's axe embedded in his shoulder, he stared at them defiantly, blood gurgling from his mouth and then fell to ground motionless. With that the battle was over, the caravan was safe and was now rushing towards the distant Republican defensive line, which could now be seen as campfire smoke on the horizon.

They soldiers had fought bravely and with the assistance of these remarkable heroes far less had given their lives than they had thought possible when the battle had first begun. They had not even needed to use the horn to call out the cavalry to rescue them. The surviving infantrymen of the Silver Guard were heroes now in their own right and when they finally reached the safety of the Republican lines there was great celebration. The heroes Bloodbrood, Taylor, Seleena, and Ebonethia were also celebrated with great acclaim by the republican army and the refugees from Welville.

When the lieutenant was finally well enough he asked for Taylor Lewis. When he had left his troops in Taylors command he had assumed they were all doomed, but having been told of the events that took place and the inspirational leadership that Taylor provided, particularly for the swordsmen he fought with, the lieutenant was very impressed. He asked Taylor if he had ever considered a career in the army, and mentioned that the Silver Guard would need some new sergeants. Taylor respectfully declined, wanting only to return home to Almsberg with his friends. In their own minds they had only just begun to make up for their past failures, but it was a start at least.

## **Part Two: Gathering Allies**

### **Chapter 4: Prototypes**

In the months following the first skirmishes of the war, the leadership of the Republican Army in the east quickly realized that they were ill equipped to fight an army as resilient as the walking dead. While the Republican Army had impressive numbers this was actually working against them. While the cumulative damage of mass infantry was impressive, it lead to high casualties, something that in this war was even more unacceptable than normal. Many of the seasoned Republican officers suggested increasing the number of cavalry, as mounted soldiers could inflict more damage with fewer numbers. But this was still a conventional solution to combat an unconventional army.



It was Colonel Blackwald who first suggested that the army think outside the box. He proposed that the best soldier to pit against the undead was one that was non-living. That way if it did fall in combat the undead could not raise it up and turn it against the Republic. He suggested that a regiment of golems could be created, with the sole purpose of destroying the undead. They could be deployed into situations deemed too risky to send live troops into. He was largely ridiculed by his peers and when he largely disappeared from the public eye most thought he had been ushered into some obscure administrative role for his foolish idea. To them, suggesting that the fate of the Republic lay with trusting the eccentric powers behind unpredictable animated creations of stone and metal was sheer lunacy.

But there were some of Colonel Blackwald's superiors that saw the wisdom in his suggestion and in secret asked the Colonel to provide them with a proposal outlining his vision of this Golem Regiment. Blackwald explained that the regiment would consist of five battalions. Each battalion would be comprised of a different type of golem, designed with a specific purpose. Two battalions would provide defensive support that could anchor a failing republican line in the face of great opposition. These he called the Ironwall and Stonewall Battalions. There would also be two battalions of faster moving golems which could be deployed for assaults deep into enemy lines, called the Siege Breaker and Steeltooth battalions. Lastly he envisioned a battalion of smaller golems which would be more numerous and capable of deployment in a variety of functions as the need arose, such as picket duties, patrols and flanking manoeuvres. These would be called the Wardog Battalion. After hearing his proposal they decided that there was certainly no harm in creating a small number of prototype golem soldiers to test his theory before going into large scale production. Colonel Blackwald was given full command of the experimental golem regiment, it would either be the most brilliant move of his career or the end of it, only time would tell.

And so it was that Luktar of the Star-spire College was employed to create a company of stone golems, part of the Colonel's vision for the Wardog Battalion. Alongside this was created a company of large bronze assault golems by a monk named Brother Willheim and a company of defensive stone golems by an elderly inventor from Telestra named Samuel Vernon. Colonel Blackwald discretely provided them with the materials they would need to bring the inanimate statues to life. The statues themselves were crafted by Republican tradesmen who had no idea what their creations would be used for. Once completed the golems were moved under cover of night to a large subterranean storage facility beneath the military ward of Telestra.

The whole project was nearly derailed however, when it was decided that the golems could not be deployed alongside living troops until they were properly tested against the undead. Otherwise the living soldiers would not be able to confidently rely upon the prototypes and any battle plan would be at risk of collapsing. Since Telestra was currently so far from the front lines it seemed unlikely that they would ever get a chance to be tested until the undead were at their doorstep, and by then it would be too late to produce the golems in numbers sufficient enough to have any significant impact. Colonel Blackwald refused to let his project be perpetually tied up in red tape and so asked Luktar, Brother Willheim, and Samuel Vernon to meet with him in secret.

The Colonel believed that if the golems could not be brought to the undead then the undead would need to be brought to the golems. Of course the Republican government would never allow the military to willingly bring the undead into Telestra and so “officially” the army would not be able to participate. However if one of the animators decided to bring several undead specimens into Telestra in secret to test their creations, the army could use the results of those “independent” trials to allow the project to advance to the next stage. It was of course a slight bending of the rules but Colonel Blackwald thought it was reasonable given the dire need. Brother Willheim did not see it this way and stomped off in an outrage over the suggestion of bringing such evil within the safety of Telestra’s walls and while Samuel Vernon had no such moral dilemma, he simply did not have the means to acquire the test specimens. Therefore it fell to Luktar, the most qualified candidate for the job based on his many prior dealings with the forces of Necrodark, to see that the prototypes could be properly tested.

Luktar jumped at the opportunity to test his creations, knowing that if they proved useful the army would certainly order many more, allowing Luktar to make a tidy profit. But Colonel Blackwald told him that he would have no official support from the Republican Army in acquiring the undead specimens. What he needed was muscle, something his frail body certainly lacked. Of course the second challenge would be smuggling the undead specimens into the city. A plan quickly formed in the brilliant mind of the celestial mage. The answer to both needs was a single centaur, one whom Luktar was well acquainted with, Roginn Hathelheftin.

The centaur certainly possessed more than enough muscle to protect Luktar in what would be a dangerous incursion into territory now controlled by Necrodark. But more importantly he was a talented enchanter as well, something few would expect from the oft misunderstood vigilante. Luktar proposed to Colonel Blackwald that if the military could secure the recipe and materials required for a rare and powerful enchantment they could create several objects which would be capable of containing some of the lesser undead, ones lacking any real will of their own, in a sort of magical stasis within the objects themselves. Thus, once captured, Luktar could smuggle the undead test specimens through the city gates as easily as a loaf of bread or a gold coin.

Colonel Blackwald claimed it could be done, so long as the real use for the expenditure remained a secret. This was simple enough to accomplish, as the same function which would allow them to capture and transport the mindless undead would work for transporting the slower moving golems around the battlefield. Blackwald told his superiors that the five enchanted Republican insignias could be fashioned onto a battle standard and carried to the front lines. In the event of a retreat the insignias could be activated to deploy five large golems who could buy precious time while the living retreated, greatly reducing casualties and thus denying the enemy reinforcements. His superiors liked the idea, and in fact the Colonel fully intended to put this plan into operation if the golems passed their tests. And so Luktar and Roginn departed with five Republican insignias made of the finest tranilium, towards the frontlines, intent upon capturing undead specimens to smuggle back into Telestra.

They traveled east, skirting the edge of the Blackmire Swamp and drawing very close to enemy lines. They were challenged however, before crossing over, by several Republican scouts. The scouts were perplexed at the unlikely pair's desire to travel into the lands now held by the undead and told them it

made them highly suspect. But before the situation could escalate Luktar used his celestial powers to persuade the scouts that their business was their own. Without further deterrence they crossed over. Their destination was an old cemetery, knowing that few corpses, no matter how old, remained in the ground once the forces of Necrodark moved through a region.

They were not disappointed. As luck or perhaps fate would have it, the cemetery was occupied by a small force of undead, lead by a Wight. The soul of the damned cleric shifting in and out of the undead husk it was trapped within. The Wight was raising up skeletons from beneath the old weathered gravestones which dotted the small hillside the cemetery was built upon. The hillside provided the perfect amount of cover, blocking them off from the large army of undead which was sitting idly “camped” to the south.

They would not be able to capture the Wight in the enchanted insignias, its will was simply too strong. Instead Luktar and Roginn granted it swift destruction, both to free its tormented soul but also to prevent it from summoning reinforcements from the main body of troops stationed nearby. The guards that travelled with it were also dispatched, both by the celestial magic of Luktar and the burning steel of Roginn’s axe. The freshly raised skeletons were the perfect specimen, especially with the Wight destroyed. They had no problem trapping them in the insignias.

The journey back to Telestra was swift and without consequence, as they took care to avoid the scouts they had encountered earlier. At the gates to Telestra no one could have suspected that the two travellers, fairly well known in the city, carried with them the living dead in their pockets. Even a passing paladin of the Order of the Red Hawk, so attuned to detecting the demonic energies of necromancy, did little more than raise an eyebrow as he rode past them.

Colonel Blackwald was very pleased to see them return, and the insignias were remanded into his custody for the combat trials that were to come. Luktar was confident that the golems would perform well and soon Colonel Blackwald would be placing an order for many more of his creations. While the War of the Twin Terrors was certainly not beneficial for the personal health and welfare of any citizen of the Republic, it appeared as though it would be VERY good for business.

## **Chapter 5: What Remains of Vesticar?**

Kal Emdar awoke with a start; it took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness of the chapel he found himself in. It was small and smelt of polished oak and incense. At the far end of the simple chapel several candles burned low, the only source of light. The centaur Paladin was confused, his brain refusing to entirely accept his surroundings. Only moments ago he had been somewhere else. But as the seconds slowly crawled by his memory of that other place became hazy as though covered in dense fog. He was alone in the chapel, and judging by the heavy ribbons of wax collected around the base of the candles, he had been here for some time. It was slowly coming back to him, this was the chapel at Red Hawk Keep, he had come here to pray and seek guidance from the One God. Suddenly it clicked, he was to leave in the morning on what many deemed a suicide mission, one that would send him and his friends deep behind enemy lines into the ruins of the once proud city-state of Vesticar, laid to waste by the undead forces of Necrodark almost one year prior. The High Templar had decided that

someone should be sent to investigate, to see what, if anything remained in that now accursed place. Rather than send a fully armed force of Paladins, the High Templar had said that a single Paladin would likely be able to slip past the undead patrols without drawing too much attention.

As Kal began to stir from his solitary vigil in the chapel the very first rays of the rising sun filtered through the small stained glass windows, lighting up the room with a dazzling array of colors, a clarion call to action for the young Paladin. He prepared to rise, his friends Silus and Arolthus would be waiting for him at the Smiling Mule. As he recalled he had gone there yesterday to seek the company of his enigmatic cousin Roginn for the dangerous journey ahead. He hadn't been able to find Roginn, who was purportedly off on some adventure with the high-mage Luktar. Instead he had run into the halfling and the half-orc, both transient citizens of Telestra after the destruction of their home city of Vesticar. They had agreed to accompany Kal on this mission. As the Paladin's thoughts conjured up images in his mind of his two unlikely allies, the fog of his memory lifted slightly. He had been somewhere else. As surely as he was flesh and blood he had not left this chapel, yet in his mind, or perhaps it was his spirit, he had seen much of their future journey laid out before him.

In the vision, and Kal was becoming more and more convinced that it was indeed some kind of vision, they had left Telestra and made their way to the town of Kurst. They had had some difficulty finding the ferryman to bring them across fallow lake. Now that trade had stopped along the forest road he was unemployed. They had eventually located him, dead drunk at the Lunar Inn, but had managed to talk him into ferrying them across and waiting for them on the far side of the lake. From there they had travelled along the forest road. Both Silus and Arolthus had remarked, as they passed a section of the road that was stained the deep brown of old blood, that this had been the site of the battle between the Wild Elves and the forces of the Sceptre of Necrodark, now known as the Forest War. All the bodies were gone, either recovered by the wild elves or brought back to a mockery of life to fight in the vast undead army.

As they had proceeded past the battlefield, the sounds of the forest had grown quieter. Kal recalled now that in the vision they had been set upon by a murder of crows. But these had been no ordinary crows; they were lifeless corpses, fuelled by unholy powers. The crows had very nearly put an end to their mission before it had begun. Arolthus had been forced to throw himself bodily over top of his raptor to save it from the sharp talons and beaks of the undead crows.

Upon reaching Vesticar they had found the city deathly quiet but not void of activity. Feeble looking zombies shambled about the streets and as the group drew nearer they were surprised to find that the zombies fled their presence. Unsure of what to make of the odd behaviour they had followed them at a distance and had discovered what appeared to be two large piles of corpses and shuffling around them, like a sickening slow motion macabre-dance, were several plague ridden zombies, former citizens of Vesticar from the looks of it. These zombies did not flee however, smelling the scent of the living they attacked. Kal recalled the horror he had felt, so real even though he now realized it had only been a vision, when they discovered that the corpse piles began to move. The bodies had been stitched together into a heaving mass of bloated and rotting flesh. The towering grave horrors and the plagued zombies were defeated in the visions, by the combined might of the three allies. But they came away

with infections and sicknesses from the gore of the diseased undead. In the vision Kal found himself once again regretting that he still could not wield the holy powers that should have been at his disposal as a Paladin. Arolthus had been able to take care of the worst of the infections though.

They had not been alone during this encounter, from the shadows someone had been watching, and waiting, to see how Kal and his companions fared. As the battle drew to a close the hidden figure must have decided that they were not enemies or looters and so decided to let loose a volley of arrows to aid the embattled trio. As it turned out he had been a scout for a group of survivors that was still residing in the now dead city. They called themselves the Remnant of Vesticar and by their estimation they were a collection of the last living residence of the city.

The scout brought them, via a winding and unpredictable course meant to throw the undead off their trail, to an old barracks. The building looked abandoned but inside they discovered a collection of filthy, half-starved soldiers, merchants, nobles, and far too few women and children. These were a people that were in utter despair. In the vision Kal's heart broke to see the hopelessness in their eyes. Oddly enough they possessed numbers enough to fight their way out of the city, but they were of one accord. They would not leave the city until King Dannorath had been laid to rest and his crown was in their possession. This puzzled the trio as they had been present when King Dannorath had been murdered by the villainous Skaven doppelganger Mardis. The leaders of the band of survivors informed them that King Dannorath had been raised up again by the sceptre of Necrodark and was now a mindless cadaver ruling over an empty lifeless city. It was one last insult to a city that had been all but wiped out.

Their course of action had seemed obvious. They would go to the palace and defeat the undead husk that was King Dannorath, along with a wraith that was reportedly holding deathly court alongside the king. It was rumoured that the wraith was all that remained of the powerful Wizard Hadastrian, who had served King Dannorath as his Grand Advisor for many years. As they prepared to depart for the palace cries of alarm went up. Apparently the undead had managed to follow them after all. They had brought them to their very doorstep. Kal and his companions offered to fight them off, feeling that they were responsible. They were surprised to discover that the wave after wave zombies that charged the sturdy gates of the barracks were full of some sort of volatile explosive gas which violently exploded. The zombies had very nearly breached the gate but in the end had been repelled.

Wasting no time the companions proceeded to the Palace. The halls which had once been warm, inviting, and richly adorned were now silent and empty, a lifeless husk just like the King who still ruled them. They found Dannorath in the throne room. Several guards kept silent watch over him and at his side was the shifting ethereal presence of Grand Advisor Hadastrian. In Life Dannorath had grown too old and feeble to wield the massive Great Hammer that he had always ridden into battle with in his younger years. But the grave had given him a new unholy strength to wield it once more. But it was the wraith that proved to be the real threat. In the vision Kal watched as Silus silently moved behind the former wizard, still serving the King in death as a powerful Everborne wraith. However, despite his best efforts Silus could not defeat the wraith. It seemed to somehow be linked to the King, perhaps the oath of servitude to Dannorath holding it in the physical world. In response to the attacks Hadastrian had

brought to bear fierce frost magic against the halfling. This, combined with the flocks of ethereal birds of prey that the wraith continued to summon, were too much for the assassin. Even despite Arolthus' efforts to heal him Silus fell unconscious as the icy grip of the wraith's magic took hold.

In the vision Kal remembered watching in despair as Arolthus failed to save Silus, crying out once again for the power to heal and aid his friends but receiving no reply from the One God, only silence. As he traded punishing blows with the undead King, Kal had caught a glimpse of Arolthus, surrounded by undead, there was a gaping hole where once the half-orc's eye had been. Shortly after Arolthus crashed to the ground, one of his hands smashed beyond recognition. All seemed lost, but at the last moment he had seen in his vision a group of soldiers from the remnant band of survivors charge into the room. Finally determined to take matters into their own hands after watching these strangers sacrifice themselves for a cause that was not their own. Together they had overpowered the King and reclaimed the Crown of Vesticar, as well as the King's mighty hammer. The Remnant of Vesticar at last escaped their doomed city and agreed that they would join any army that was determined to fight the undead. But the price had been high, both Arolthus and Silus were still alive but their bodies were broken and they would never recover fully.

For Kal he escaped the battle with few serious wounds, but bore instead intense shame that he could not save his friends from their injuries. As he turned to catch one last glimpse of Vesticar, as the group headed west to safety, he felt impotent and defeated. Had it really been worth all this? And then he had awoken from his vision in the silent, dimly lit chapel.

He realized now that the One God had given him these glimpses into the future for a purpose. He had asked for guidance and had received much. But what was it to warn him from going or to prepare him for the trials he would face? As the conflicted Paladin stood at the threshold of the chapel he made up his mind and decided that he would...

(Kal, do you stay and prevent these events from occurring, saving your friends from their permanent injuries but at the same time leaving the Remnant of Vesticar to their fate or do you go and rally them to the cause, rescue them from their predicament, and in doing so seal the fates of your friends. Let me know so I can finish the story.) KAL CHOOSES TO GO AHEAD WITH THE MISSION!

While he was apprehensive about charging headlong into the events which had been laid out before him in his vision, there was no other course of action that the Paladin could consider. The survivors held up in the barracks in Vesticar were doomed if Kal and his friends did not come to their aid. His friends would understand and he hoped they would have made the same decision if they had seen what he had seen.

As the trio embarked on their journey Kal quickly discovered that although he consistently knew what was coming, his actions did not seem to change the outcome of any of the encounters they had along the way. This was disheartening for the young Paladin, as he had secretly hoped that the reason he had been given visions of events to come was so that he could change their outcome. But still he knew he would see it through no matter what.

As he and his companions approached the throne room of the King Dannorath Kal's heart was breaking, he knew the pain and suffering that his friends would soon experience and he wished with all that he was that he could somehow prevent it. But as before, once the battle was joined it played out as it had in his vision. Once again Kal watched as Silus fell unconscious from the punishing magic powers of the wraith. Once again Kal cried out for the power to heal and aid his friends but received no reply from the One God, only silence. But then something changed.

There was a sudden flush of warmth that struck Kal, beginning at his head and shooting downwards through his body. Despite the dimness of the room it began to fill with a bright light. Kal could not discern where it was coming from until he realized it was coming from him. There was a voice in his ears, gentle yet unbearably powerful, it said, "My faithful servant, I have never left your side, rise up and drive back the darkness! My power is yours as it has always been."

The light that had been emanating from Kal's very being began to rapidly expand outwards, its power simultaneously healing his companions and causing the undead that they faced to writhe in pain. The guards fell to the ground motionless and the King fell to one knee. Only the wraith managed to stand its ground. But Kal now had full command of his powers once again. Raising his hammer high over his head, surging with holy energies, Kal brought it down upon the hunched form of the undead King, shattering his spine and knocking the last bit of undeath out of the king's form. With the King defeated the wraith was vulnerable and Silus wasted no time, springing up from the ground his enchanted blades sliced through Hadastrian's ethereal form. With one final shriek the wraith's body lost all cohesion and dispersed like a vapour on the wind. The battle was over.

The aftermath of the battle had played out just as it had in his vision but this time as Kal turned to catch one last glimpse of Vesticar, he felt overjoyed and triumphant. His willingness to do what was right in the face of such hopelessness had not only saved the surviving Vesticarnins, but had also prevented much of the injuries that his friends had suffered in the vision. Arolthus had still lost his eye in the fighting, just before Kal's powers had returned, but the rest of his body was healthy and whole. As for Silus, he had suffered severe frostbite at the hands of the wraith but had made a full recovery.

Kal returned home to accolades. Many among the Order of the Red Hawk were surprised to see him returned all. But not the Grand Marshal, he only nodded his head knowingly when Kal explained what had transpired. Grand Marshal Terdalion then proceeded to announce the young paladin's promotion to the rank of Crusader.

After the ceremony and festivities had concluded, as Kal headed to his quarters, he stopped off at the small chapel. He pinched himself sharply, just to make sure, then saying a silent prayer of thanks to the One God he left and sought out some much needed rest.

## **Chapter 6: Conclave of the Deep**

Ralgor, City of Dwarves, built beneath the towering West Gantnor Mountains. This has been the ancestral home of the Dwarven clans of Gant for countless generations. With love and care they shaped the vast sprawling galleries and intricate network of tunnels, out of the solid stone of the mountains roots. The wealth of minerals and precious stones made the city sparkle with a beauty that would bring

a tear to the eye of any dwarf. As a people the Dwarves of Ralgor were gruff and practical but also generous and loyal. While they retained their sovereignty out of love for their noble and enigmatic High-King Ungerban, they had always supported the Republic of Gant in all the years since its creation. This made it all the more strange that the mighty Dwarven city had remained silent since the start of the War of the Twin Terrors. Republican officials had expected the Dwarves to send aid, in the form of supplies and stout Dwarven soldiers, or at the very least diplomatic envoys. But to everyone's surprise no word came. Traders and diplomats have both reported that High-King Ungerban had become uncharacteristically reclusive, and refused to see any outsiders.

So it was that the Republic turned to one of Ralgor's own, a young druid named Seleena. She and her friends had recently become folk heroes amongst the people of the Republic for their daring actions during the evacuation of Welville. Surely the High-King would listen to the Republic's call for aid if it was issued from the mouth of one of his own citizens. To that end the Republic sent word to Seleena's friends; the mighty minotaur Bloodbrood, the beautiful Sablewood elf Ebonethia, and the brave human who had very nearly perished at the hands of the cultists but had now mostly recovered from his wounds, Taylor Lewis. The Republic asked that they escort a diplomat to Seleena's hometown of Keth, there to ask her to help them gain an audience with the High King and ask for his aid in the war.

The journey to Keth was uneventful Seleena was more than happy to help, though she was uncertain whether she could succeed in gaining an audience when so many others before her had failed. The group's first challenge to overcome was the guards stationed at the gateway into the city of Ralgor. The gates to the massive underground city had been shut and the guards were not keen on letting strangers in, by order of the King apparently. Seleena's presence immediately paid off, as the guards couldn't find a good reason for keeping one of their own out of the city. They demanded however that she take full responsibility for her non-dwarf companions.

Once inside the city, gaining an audience with the king was easier said than done. They waited for quite some time in the antechamber to the throne room, watching as many dwarves came and went while they seemed to go intentionally unnoticed. Here it was the feminine presence Ebonethia that won out. She managed to sweet talk a Dwarven attendant into getting them before High King Ungerban. The King appeared exhausted and under heavy strain, but Seleena brightened his mood by offering her services to prepare him a delicious meal. With a full belly he was much more amiable and so listened to the case that the diplomat presented him with.

In response to the diplomat's pleas, the King explained that he had every intention of sending his armies to aid the Republic in their time of need. He had in fact written up a royal proclamation committing Ralgor to the War, however before it could be issued something terrible had happened. Something terrible, and embarrassing. His mother-in-law was kidnapped, by a group that the High-King and his agents worked very hard to convince the citizens of Ralgor did not even exist. They were called fire-worshippers, a twisted and misguided bunch who believed that the Vahlin was a false God and that the dwarves were born of the fires that burned deep below the earth. It was believed that their worship of, what they called, the Eternal Flames eventually drove them to insanity. They had become a taboo within Ralgor, pushed to the outskirts of society and forced to live in the lowest parts of the massive



underground city. Their disruptive and often dangerous teachings threatened the peaceful lives of the people of Ralgor, but he had not the heart to do away with them, as they were after all still his people, however misguided. He banished them to the lowest places and tried to keep their unstable influence to a minimum, an embarrassing secret to be kept. But with such a high profile kidnapping, rumours were spreading like wildfire. It was commonly accepted that the fire worshippers, lead by a group of wayward druids who called themselves the Conclave of the Deep, were threatening the life of the King's Mother-in-Law, claiming that if Ralgor sent aid to the republic they would sacrifice her to the Eternal Flames.

Ungerban was conflicted; he knew the dire need of the Republic and was very aware that if the Republic were to fall it would only be a matter of time before his own Kingdom was threatened. With his hands tied up with such a private affair he had been too ashamed to face the Republican diplomats that had come seeking aid. And of course there was the Queen. It was often said that she was the true power beneath the mountains, as King Ungerban loved her dearly and was utter devoted to her every whim. She would hear nothing of sending the army off to war when her own mother was being held hostage.

As their conversation came to a close the King gave them an ultimatum. If they could safely return his mother-in-law without causing a disruption to the daily life of his city then he would be able to officially enter the war. The only assistance he offered was that the group should begin their search for the Fire Worshippers hideout in the underbelly of the city, many levels below where they now stood, a place where the laws of the city did not quite reach.

Snooping around the underbelly soon proved dangerous for the group as they were attacked by a mob, incited to violence by an unknown person hiding in shadows. Among the mob were two fire worshippers, one of whom lit himself on fire rather than be held for questioning. The inciter finally made himself known as the fight progressed; he wore an insignia under his black cloak that the group knew all too well. He was an agent of the cult of Cerebus. After defeating their assailants and questioning the remaining Fire Worshipper they learned that the cult of Cerebus had approached the Fire Worshippers and proposed a mutually beneficial alliance. The cult would help them claim the city once the war on the surface was over and in exchange the Fire Worshipers would prevent Ralgor from coming to the aid of the Republic. The kidnapping had been the perfect move to tie Ralgor's hands.

In order to gain entrance to the caverns in which the Fire Worshippers and the Conclave of the Deep practiced their fanatical religion Bloodbrood had to threaten to cut off the beard of the captive dwarf. Insane though he was, the dwarf decided this was enough to convince him to talk. He told them the pass phrase that would be required for them to gain entrance through the secret gateway to their sanctuary. "From the eternal flames we are born, we are the children of the deep. It is the ancient destiny for the earth to rise up and consume the world in flame."

Once through the heavy iron doorway the group was fiercely opposed by a combination of foes. The lucid druids of the Conclave of the Deep hurled fire and earth magics at them, as well as wielding the substantial powers of their misguided faith. The druids were protected by their congregation of Fire Worshippers, crazed dwarves whose skin was marked by the flames that they believed were divine. To make matters worse the caverns were also guarded by elementals. Whether they were native to these

depths or merely summoned by the conclave was unclear, but either way the creatures of pure flame and solid rock were not inclined to allow the group to pass. Among the elementals encountered was a strange hybrid creation, a massive elemental made of molten lava. All of these challenges the group faced and triumphed over, for they knew that the very fate of Gant could lie in the successful rescue of the Kings mother-in-law.

Weary and dehydrated from the intense heat of the caves through which they travelled they finally found themselves in the inner sanctum of the Conclave of the Deep. There, on a rocky precipice extending out over a river of lava, a large bronze contraption stood in silent vigil. It appeared to be part altar and part mechanical contraption. From the back side of it a long pole extended out over the river of fire. Dangling from it, unconscious and in chains was an elderly Dwarven woman, no doubt the one they had come to rescue. Standing before the altar was a robed figure. His skin had taken on the appearance of rough hewn rock and his eyes glowed like fire, a by product of the countless years the dwarf had spent watching over the deep places of the earth. He seemed not at all afraid of the intimidating group that were disrupting whatever solemn and utterly insane rituals he had been performing. With a guttural shout in a tongue none of the heroes recognized the bronze altar began to glow as though being heated from within. Waves of heat began pouring off of it.

The druid seemed to not notice but everyone else was nearly knocked off their feet by the blast of heat. Raising his hands high above his head, the druid then summoned forth massive waves of lava from the river below. They came crashing down on the rocky precipice, showing sparks and molten rock down upon the heads of the would be rescuers. The heroes had to scatter in order to avoid being burned alive by the liquid inferno that crashed down around them. Seleena's Dwarven legs were too small however and she could not get clear in time. Realizing this at the last minute she called upon the powers of the earth just as sheet of molten lava engulfed her. Her friends were horrified, sure that they had just watched their dear friend perish in flame. But as the lava began to slowly drain off the ledge they were overjoyed to discover the small form of a Dwarven woman still standing, her skin transformed into hardened steel by the powers she commanded and the glow of the intense heat that had engulfed her slowly fading away. The deep watcher merely shrugged at their small victory; clearly he was confident that in his most sacred sanctum he was all but invincible.

However the heroes were undaunted. They sprang to action, charging headlong into battle. As the rocky ledge continued to erupt in chaotic blasts of heat, flame, and molten lava Ebonethia and Seleena called out to Vahlin. Even here in the depths of the earth he heard their prayers and brought relief and healing, his presence like a cool breeze in the blazing heat of the forsaken cavern. Bloodbrood and Taylor had to take turns attacking the druid head on, the closer they got to the brazen altar the hotter it got. If they stayed near it too long they would have collapsed from exhaustion. It was as if they were sweating out their very life-blood through their pores. The druid was unarmed but responded to their attacks by striking at them with his fists. As he swung them they quickly grew in size and turned into massive boulders. Taylor was caught off guard and was struck full force, he could feel several of his ribs crack from the impact. The stone fist hit him so hard that it sent him sprawling backwards, his sword and shield falling out of his grip. Bloodbrood barked out a warning but it was too late. Taylor tumbled across the ledge and went over the edge towards certain death in the churning molten river below. At

the last second he was able to reach out and grasp a hold of the edge of the cliff. Pain wracked his body from the jarring motion and his fingers almost lost their grip but Taylor managed to hold on. But in the intense heat, his skin crawling with sweat, he would not be able to hold on long.

Bloodbrood instinctively tried to rush to the edge to aid his friend but the stocky druid blocked his path swinging wildly with another massive rocky fist. Bloodbrood was caught unaware by the blow and it sent him off in the other direction. He would be of no help while the crazed druid blocked his path. That left only one course of action. The Minotaur stretched out his hands and summoned up a massive fireball sending it rocketing towards the dwarf. The air erupted with the stench of charred flesh as the druid, who worshipped earth and fire, was consumed by it. If it had not been for the dwarf's tough rock-like skin the blazing fire ball would have surely burned every last scrap of flesh from his bones. Instead the deep watcher collapsed in a steaming heap of charred skin. But just in their moment of triumph Taylor let out a cry, his hand had slipped, he clung now to the rock ledge by only his finger tips.

Like a wild animal Ebonethia sprinted across the ledge and leapt towards Taylor. The dull reddish glow of the lava river glistened off her sweat drenched body as she soared through the air with lithe, feline like, grace. She landed just in time to reach a hand out to Taylor. With all his might he swung his free hand up and grasped her outstretched hand. Once again the fierce Sablewood woman had saved his life, but it was short lived. As they stared into each other's eyes they both realized the horrid truth. In the intense heat of this place their hands were too slick; Taylor was still slowly slipping away.

Seleena rushed forward to help, as fast as her legs could carry her, but she was still some distance away. Once again Bloodbrood started to make a move but the charred deep watcher still clung to life and threw himself towards the altar, reaching out with a hand that was almost unrecognizable as one. He was attempting to pull a lever, one that undoubtedly would release the mechanism holding the elderly dwarf woman over the river, even in death the corrupt druid would try to thwart them. Taylor saw the blur of movement out of the corner of his eye and yelled out a warning to Bloodbrood. The life of one man was nothing in comparison to the untold thousands that might suffer and die if they failed their mission. Bloodbrood reacted, quickly making up the distance between himself and the altar. Wasting no time he grabbed a hold of the pole which held the captive dwarf over the magma river and, pulling with all his might, tore it right out of the altar and hefted it back towards the ledge and safety. The deep watcher finally collapsed in death and defeat, his hand resting on the lever only seconds too late to accomplish his vengeful task.

Looking up at Ebonethia, Taylor mouthed a silent farewell to the beautiful Elven woman that had captured his heart so completely. He could utter only three simple words, "I love you." And then with a tormented cry from Ebonethia, Taylor's hand slipped out of her grasp and he began to plunge towards the fiery river below. Suddenly there was a burst of silvery light and a coil of pure arcane energy wrapped itself around Taylor's outstretched arm. With lightning quick speed the coil shot upwards and likewise entwined itself around Ebonethia's slender wrist, binding them together. The source of the arcane rescue was Seleena, who finally had reached the pair at the cliff's edge. She then threw herself bodily upon Ebonethia to keep her from being dragged off by the much heavier Taylor. Last onto the pile

of bodies was Bloodbrood, who added his considerable strength and hauled Taylor up and over the edge.

The four mismatched figures all lay panting on the ledge, the bond of their friendship having once again cheated death. Not only that, they had saved High King Ungerban's mother-in-law and in doing so had secured the dwarves allegiance once and for all. They had faced the Conclave of the Deep and now walked out of their sweltering caverns with heads held high. The King's mother-in-law was ornery, but grateful none the less, for her rescue.

The reunion was a bizarre one. The High King sat back in his throne smiling from ear to ear, while the elderly dwarf woman wagged her finger in his face and gave him a piece of her mind. Later the King gave his proclamation to join the war, with his official seal upon it, into the hands of the Republican diplomat. To the heroes, he gave them all a token of his gratitude, a finely crafted Dwarven ring, inscribed with powerful runes and set with a beautiful enchanted jewel. Their time under the mountain had been harrowing, but ultimately rewarding in so many ways.

## Chapter 7: The Griffons Call

Bloodbrood had only just returned from Ralgor and having taken his leave of his friends Taylor, Ebonethia, and Seleena, as well as the Republican diplomat, he headed straight for the Vestin College of Pyromancy. There a warm meal and a comfortable bed awaited him after his taxing adventures deep below the Dwarven City-State of Ralgor. But rest it seemed was not in the cards for the Minotaur Spellsword. Master Mage Tolith approached him during his meal and informed him that he required Bloodbrood's services. As was often the case, high ranking mages liked to travel with Battlemage escorts when they embarked on long journeys. Tolith's rank, as well as the unique friendship between the two, meant that Bloodbrood would not refuse. The Master Mage explained that a rare council of the Mage Colleges had been called in distant Telestra.

With the entire continent at war on two fronts, many of the mages believed that they must join the war effort or face certain doom once the Cities of the Republic were over run. Opinions on the matter were varied however. The High Elven colleges had not even replied to any of the magical summons that had been sent and the Royal Ghallant College of Hydromancy had respectfully declined the invitation. The rest of the colleges had agreed however that there was at least some merit in meeting to discuss the matter. The celestial Mages of Telestra, being a fairly egotistical bunch, naturally demanded that the council convene at the Star-Spire College. While the mages argued for some time over the matter, it was eventually decided that this location made relative sense.

Both the Geomancers from the Pillar of Theragorm in Hindin and the Aethermancers from the Storm Tower in Calumbria were agreeable and could make the journey with relative ease. The Hydromancers from Fair-Isle were required to cross Windalon Lake, which was fairly treacherous with the rash of raids recently carried out by the winged demons of Cerebus on settlements across the lake. But the Republican Naval presence on the massive lake was substantial so they reluctantly agreed. The reclusive mages of Shadow Reach didn't seem to care where the council took place so long as no one tried to suggest it be held at their college, the exact location of which was utterly unknown to anyone

outside of their own ranks. Indeed many claimed Shadow Reach didn't remain in the same place for more than a few weeks at a time.

However the presence of the Cult of Cerebus from the Standish Moors in the south to the Celeros Forest in the North cut Almsberg off from the rest of the republic, and as such the Vestin College of Pyromancy and Fulgrum's college of Solarancy had no choice but to travel by boat to distant Calumbria and then on by land to Telestra. Had it not been for the pleading of Master Mage Tolith himself, Fulgrum would likely have refused to send a delegate. The Vestin College was one of the biggest supporters of the council meeting, being one of the only colleges who had officially joined the war effort. And so with such a long journey ahead, in turbulent and uncertain times, Master Mage Tolith was pleased to have the hulking Minotaur by his side.

Meanwhile, across the stalwart lines of Republican Soldiers in the West, across the hordes of bloodthirsty cultists and the gibbering demons of the Cult of Cerebus, beyond the heavy defensive fortifications on the east side of Lower Mithalon River, and even beyond Telestra itself, the Wild Elf Mute began his journey towards the Capital. He carried with him a report from the Guardians of Athelnon. In this report the ever watchful rangers detailed troop movements of the undead forces of Necrodark. Since the costly victory of the Forest War the Guardians of Athelnon no longer actively engaged the undead. However they thought it important that the Republic know that whatever force commanded the restless dead, it seemed to be drawing more and more forces southwards, as though massing for an offensive.

What no one could have ever imagined was that something else was also preparing to make its way to Telestra. Something they were ill prepared to deal with. From the forges of the dread citadel of Necrodark were coming skeletal constructs upon leathery wings. Each one of the monstrosities carried with it a large oil skin satchel containing the fluids of the thousands of rotting corpses at the citadel's disposal. The sinister wielder of the Sceptre of Necrodark was positioning his skeletal raiders to approach in the dark of night and rain down disease and plague upon the heart of the Republic of Gant. But this was only the first half of the hideous plan to weaken and demoralize the enemies of the Sceptre. For once the skeletal constructs had dropped their fetid payload they would then return to Necrodark with fresh victims to add to the swarms of undead, plucked from behind the very safety of their precious walls.

The morning after the first attack many awoke to find that their loved ones were missing. But as people were greeted by streets and buildings thick with the stinking ichors of the dead and reports began streaming in of fevers and strange sicknesses, the populace of the mighty city began to panic. Republican officials tried hard to cover up the futile defence that the city guards had put up against these winged horrors. The constructs had all but ignored the bolts and arrows hurled at them, and only landed long enough to snatch up some unsuspecting victim after having bombed the city with their plagued satchels. As quick as they came they retreated, but every night they returned, and still after a week straight of the terrifying night time raids, the city guard and the even the military could think of no reasonable defence other than to order everyone to remain indoors during the dark of night.

The priests and paladins of the One God, and indeed holy men of any kind, were kept busy nullifying the plague ridden liquids that covered the city each morning and treating the infected and dying. By the time evening approached again they were too exhausted to successfully battle the undead high above the city, bringing only a handful of the constructs down. They were just too difficult to strike against and for every one that was destroyed several more would take its place. The city was slowly but surely falling into chaos. The invasion had begun, but not by land as all had assumed it would, it came instead upon wings of death.

It was dusk when Bloodbrood and Tolith approached Telestra from the south road. Neither of the pyromancers had ever been to Telestra before and as such they didn't notice anything out of place. But Mute, approaching from the east road at almost the same hour, immediately noticed that the battlements of the massive city walls were lined with archers and crossbowmen. His hands reflexively went to his bow, the action causing the wolf at his side to growl low in its throat and the eagle on his shoulder to rustle its feathers nervously. Mute's keen eyes scanned the horizon for whatever danger had the city guard out in full force but seeing nothing he relaxed slightly and hastened towards the city gates. As he passed through them the guards on duty, in numbers that he noticed once again were more than normal, warned him to find cover immediately. In little more than a whisper he asked them what was happening, why the city was on alert. They explained to him quickly the night time raids carried out by the undead and then rushed him on, ordering him to find cover immediately as the last rays of sunlight began to disappear. His first thought is to head to the Smiling Mule, hoping to meet up with his friends to see what can be done for the city.

Bloodbrood and Tolith were surprised to hear a similar explanation as they entered the city. Tolith asked the guards to direct him towards the Star-Spire, saying nothing about the council meeting. They indicated the tower to him, difficult to miss now that he knew what he was looking for. It towered over most of the city, dominating the cityscape. A myriad of spires branched off the main tower in a series of symmetrical patterns. Due to its tremendous height it was now the only building that still stood illuminated by the setting sun. The amethyst parapets glowed brightly and then suddenly dimmed, like a candle blown out by the wind, as the darkness of night finally claimed the city. It was a silent signal; the guards grew tense and told the pair in their flamboyant red garments to go immediately. As they approached the base of the Star-Spire they discovered, like so many before them, that there was no entrance to the College of Astromancy. But before they could ponder the situation a mage appeared out of thin air, adorned in the garish purple robes of a Celestial Mage. He indicated that only Tolith was permitted to enter.

Tolith tells him to see if he can assist in the defence of the city somehow. He suggests that perhaps Bloodbrood's actions here tonight will set an example for the other colleges to follow. The Celestial Mage rolls his eyes slightly and makes a small gesture and both he and Tolith disappear in a flash of star light. Bloodbrood is left standing in the now empty streets. With Tolith's parting words ringing in his ears he tries to make his way to the battlements, hoping to lend aid to the city guard.

As Bloodbrood heads through the streets the city becomes deathly silent, as though holding its breath for what it knows is coming. Then bells begin to ring throughout the city and cries of alarm can

be heard from nearby towers and battlements. Within moments the sound of arrows flying through the air and crossbow ratchets clanking reaches a crescendo, and then the undead are upon the city. The next sounds to fill the night sky is that of the putrid sludge carried by the skeletal constructs crashing into and running down the rooves of nearby buildings. As Bloodbrood rounds a corner in the street he finds himself rushing out into an open market square. On the far side he watches in horror as a satchel drops down upon a small dwelling. The simple thatched roof collapses under the weight of the impact. There are screams from within and the door to the dwelling bursts open. Several humans make a break for it. One among their number however is drenched in the foul sludge; he stumbles and falls to the ground writhing in pain. There is a creaking sound and one of the constructs descends from above and snatches up another of the humans, hauling him kicking and screaming in futility high into the air.

The man is rescued from his grizzly fate by a well placed arrow from the shadows, which strikes at the knee joint of the skeletal construct, causing the horrific flying abomination to drop the man before it can gain enough height. Mute arrives on the scene with Arolthus in tow, having found only the half-orc present at the Smiling Mule. The holy zealot immediately heads to the side of the man stricken with the plagued fluids. With a silent pray to the One-God he touches the vile substance covering the man. In a flash of light the fluids dissolve into nothingness and the man ceases his writhing. Wasting no time Arolthus hauls him to his feet and shoves him roughly to safety. Overhead the constructs react to the new threat and the battle joined.

Bloodbrood recognizes the new comers, having met them once before in an inn in the southern village of Delta more than a year ago. He joins the fray with gusto, just as several constructs drop down upon Arolthus and his raptor. Mute once again fades into the shadow of a nearby building and fires a hail of arrows into the enemies midst. As more and more of the constructs attack the group finds itself out manoeuvred. The undead swoop down from above on their leathery wings, strike, and then retreat out of reach of the formidable half-orc and Minotaur. But the constructs lack any real intelligence and so do not retreat quite high enough. The Raptor leaps skyward and latches its hooked claws into the wings of one of the constructs, shredding them and bringing the construct crashing to the ground. In this manner the group slowly gains the upper hand and defeats the constructs. Around them the sounds of battle fade and they realize that the raid is over. While they were successful in defeating this batch of constructs, elsewhere throughout the city the guards were not as fortunate. It is a hollow victory, many innocent victims were carried off this dark night, and the city has been hit hard by the constructs' plagued bombs.

Disheartened the group retreats to the Smiling Mule to recuperate and rest after the battle. The inn-keeper welcomes them, not even batting an eye at the arrival of a Minotaur in his establishment, having long catered to a vast assortment of unusual patrons. He rightly guessing that they have just returned from doing battle with the raiders and as such thanks them for trying to defend the city, giving them free room and board as a small token of his gratitude. In the morning he informs them that last night it was the estate district that was hit hardest and that if they want to lend a hand that they should head there.

The innkeeper is correct; the estate district is a flurry of activity, as exhausted priests and paladins set about the task of cleansing the city of the foul taint of previous night's raid. Arolthus offers to assist them and he is sent over towards a richly adorned meeting hall, belonging to the Knightly Order of the Griffon, which suffered a direct hit from a plague bomb on the adjacent gardens. Luckily no one was hurt in this particular strike, but the garden is now devoid of all life save for a tangle of diseased and corrupted vines which are spreading unchecked. Arolthus cures the blight from the area and the vines shrivel and die. Just as he finishes his task he is interrupted by what sounds like a muffled cry coming from around the back side of the hall. He rushes to investigate and comes across three well dressed men beating another younger man in the alleyway.

After chasing off the three cowardly attackers, the young man thanks the group for intervening on his behalf. He introduces himself as Sir Edden Todbury. He explains that he knows the men who attacked him. They are fellow knights, Sir Austin, Sir Morgan, and Sir Denich, lackeys of a high ranking knight named Lord Vermont. Yesterday the knights had gathered in their meeting hall to discuss the night time raids. Edden had been pleased to hear about the meeting, hoping that these raids on the city would finally stir the Knights of the Order of the Griffin out of their slumber. As one of the only remaining Knightly orders within the republic, the Order of the Griffon had a long and illustrious history. But it had been many years since the Knightly Order had stood for anything. As the years had passed they became little more than a wealthy social club.

When Edden was a boy his father, Lord Alexander Todbury, had campaigned that the knights take a more active role in serving the community and safe guarding the world at large. But just as he was beginning to sway the opinion of the head of the order, Knight Lord Mordengar, he had committed suicide. In his suicide note Lord Alexander Todbury had admitted to an adulterous affair with a Republican official, and had claimed he could not face his family and the order with this shame hanging over him, that death was the only honourable course of action he had left.

The Todbury family has publically disgraced and it was only through the compassion of the now elderly Lord Mordengar that Edden was allowed entrance to the order as a young man. Edden accepted the challenge, he had long wished to restore his father's name, and had always known his father's death was no suicide. Of course no one had believed the word of a foolish young boy.

Edden claimed that on the night that his father allegedly leapt from the West-road Clock Tower his father had come to him. He told his young son that by challenging the life of wealth and privilege the order enjoyed, he had made enemies of some of the other families. He said he feared for his life, and entrusted his son with tarnished silver signet ring, emblazoned with the emblem of the Griffon. He then told him a tale from the distant past of the order, telling of the ancient allegiance with the griffons of the Gantinor Mountains, that in the time of his great-great grandfather the knights had ridden the great beasts into battle. Before rushing off he also gave his son a torn and tattered piece of parchment, a map showing the location of a place called Griffon Hold. The map claimed it was an ancient fort in the Gantinor Mountains, long forgotten by the order after it was buried in snow and ice. The signet ring was one of only a handful of keys which could unlock the secrets of Griffon Hold. It was the last conversation Edden ever had with his father.

When he was still a boy the signet ring had been stolen from him by Lord Vermont, and with it all hope of restoring not only his father's name but the true name of the Knights of the order of the



Griffon. With the onset of these raids Edden had tried in vain to rouse the order to its destiny, much as his father had before him. In the meeting hall he had delivered what he had thought was a rousing speech, but for his efforts he had been mocked, especially by Lord Vermont and his men. It was the final straw for Sir Edden Todbury, later that evening, during the chaos of the air raid he had broken into Lord Vermont's study and stolen back his father's signet ring.

When Vermont discovered it missing he knew immediately who had taken it, and had sent his men after Edden. But he had wisely hidden the ring along with the ancient map, and so when Morgan, Austin, and Denich had caught up with him all they could do was try to beat the answers out of him. He had told them nothing, and now thanks to his rescuers he never would.

The heroes in turn explain their own experience from the previous night, sympathizing with the young Knight's desire to do more to protect the city from these raids. Sensing that he can trust these men, Sir Edden asks if they would accompany him in his quest to investigate the legends regarding the true function of the Knights of the order of the Griffon. They agree, and Edden rushes off to retrieve the hidden items he will need for his quest. Meeting up again at the western gates they are impressed to see him now riding upon a large horse, with both mount and rider adorned in shining heavy plate armour bearing the emblem of the griffon.

Together they head west towards Cornwin, and then turn northwards onto the old overgrown road way leading to Cailhast. Wisely they leave the road as they approach the forest, not wanting to needlessly attract the ire of the reclusive High Elves. Upon the barren stretch of rocky fields known as Gantinor's Gap they encounter a group of Ogres, who seem intent upon making a meal out of them. But the brutes are no match for them. Sir Edden proves his worth as a companion almost immediately with even the powerful blows of the Ogres unable to penetrate his well made armour.

The fields give way to hills and the first of the mighty East Gantinor mountains now loom in the distance. Their destination is the foot of a particular mountain, known as Griffon Peak. It is here that Edden's map claims the knights' ancient fort lies buried beneath snow and ice. The group searches for some time, but with the fortuitous aid of Bloodbrood's Pyromancy, they eventually uncover the entrance to what can only be Griffon Hold. Approaching the ancient doorway, still marked with a grand depiction of a griffon in flight, the group is interrupted by some uninvited guests.

Lord Vermont, a Knight Templar of their order, arrives with his three knights turned thugs at his side, all heavily armed and armoured on mighty warhorses. Bringing up the rear of their expedition is also several armsmen on foot. Change it seems is not acceptable to Lord Vermont and his supporters. So willing are they to defend their life of comfort and luxury that they intend to put down the rebellious Sir Edden. But they sorely miscalculate the strength of Edden's new allies, and the wayward knights quickly realize how soft and ill prepared the very lifestyle they seek to protect has made them. Even with greater numbers they are no match for the heroes. As Lord Vermont trades blows with Sir Edden he watches as his supporters are struck down one by one, he knows he is defeated. He sees Edden as a traitor to his order, and seeks at least to punish his new friends for supporting him, and so he spurs his warhorse ahead. Vermont levels his razor sharp lance and smashes into the unsuspecting Bloodbrood. The lance pierces clean through the large muscular body of the Minotaur pinning him to the ice behind him. By some miracle the lance misses any vital organs and once the group overpowers the vengeful Lord Vermont he is shocked, when the Minotaur he thought he had killed, is in fact the one severs the arrogant Knight Templar's head from his shoulders.

Now unopposed Sir Edden uses his father's ring to open the ancient doorway to Griffon Hold. While most of the fort has been destroyed under the weight of the ice, the main corridor is still intact. They follow it deep under the ice and discover one surviving side room. It appears to be a storehouse of weapons and armour. Amongst the dust coated armour are many oddly shaped pieces, vaguely resembling horse armour, but much too large, as though it were designed to be worn by a griffon. It is the first clue that perhaps the old legends are true. Sir Edden asked that they leave the equipment untouched for now, as his order may soon have need to retrieve these items. The only other room that survived after all these years was at the end of the long hallway. It was a simple vault, empty except for large ornate horn sitting upon a simple pedestal. Beneath the pedestal was a dust covered tome explaining that this ancient artefact was called the Horn of Gantinor, and that if it was blown from the top of Griffon Peak, it would summon forth the griffons to aid the Knights in their time of need.

With hope renewed the group made haste to scale the treacherous mountain before them. At one time there must have been a pathway which the ancient knights would have used to reach the summit. However, that pathway was only barely recognizable after so many years. It was a difficult climb. Most of the animals had to be left behind, except for the hardy wolf Bane, as blowing snow obscured their vision and slowed their ascent they were forced to take shelter in a cave for the night. It was an uneasy rest, as the cave clearly had been home to some kind of monstrous creature at some point, as evidenced by the large piles of animal bones strewn about the place. But whatever had lived in this cave did not appear that night to challenge them and so in the morning, with the weather more favourable, they continued on to the summit.

They were greeted at the summit by several strange formations of ice which seemed to surround a raised outcrop of rock. According to the tome if the Horn of Gantinor was sounded from this exact spot, it would reverberate along the mountain peaks and carry far into the distance. With his goal in sight, Sir Edden pressed forward through the deep snow drifts atop mountain's peak. It was Mute who first sensed something was amiss. He could not decide if it was a trick of the light shining on the surface of the strange ice formations, but to him he could have sworn he saw the ice move. The next clue in was Bane. The wolf approached one of the formations cautiously and upon giving it a good sniff, backed up with hackles raised. A deep growl in the wolf's throat communicated loud and clear to Mute, these were trolls. Mute gave a shout of warning but it was too late for Edden, his heavy armour and the deep snow did not allow him to react fast enough. The largest of the ice formations sprang to life. Now that it moved it was clear that these were indeed some wintery breed of troll. The massive creature pulled a long sharp shard from the ice crust and hurled it at the Knight. It caught Edden under a fold in his armour and plunged deep. He gave a stifled cry but then grit his teeth and advanced on the frost troll. All around them the frost trolls sprang to action, hurling sharp spines of ice down upon these intruders to their mountain home. But once again Bloodbrood's unique skills proved invaluable; calling forth enchanted flame upon his blade he rained punishing blows upon the creatures. But as though fate would not allow them to succeed so easily, there was a mighty roar as what appeared to be a wall of snow came rushing up the pathway to meet them.

From that wall of snow however two beady black eyes and a cavernous mouth full of razor sharp teeth could be seen. Here was the beast that had made its home in the cave. From the massive size of it was no wonder so many bones had littered the ground. It was a Yeti, but one larger than any of them had ever seen or heard tell of. The bellowing roar resonated in their skulls rendering most of the group

immobile as they fell to the ground claspings their ears. It was Arolthus who took the brunt of the Yetis attacks punishing attacks. But surrounded now on all sides the heroes fought bravely and defeated these creatures, they would let nothing stop them from achieving their goal.

It was with great anticipation that Sir Edden climbed the appointed position and let forth a bold and triumphant blast on the Horn of Gantinor. As promised the sound carried across the mountain tops, seeming to gain in volume as it echoed back upon itself. One could well imagine such a mighty sound carrying all the way across the vast mountain range. But as it finally faded into the distance the group could do nothing further except wait. As the minutes stretched on they felt like hours to the young Knight. All he and his family had suffered came down to this moment, and yet no griffons came to answer the call. The longer he waited the more anxious he became. Should he blow the horn again, did the griffons simply not hear, or was this legend nothing but a silly old tale taught to wide eyed children. As though answering his question a small swift moving form suddenly crashed into the snow at the knight's feet. There was a muffled chirp and out of the snow a tiny bird-like head popped out. It was a griffon, barely old enough to fly from the looks of it. Edden wondered if this was some sort of divine, albeit adorable, joke. How could this tiny creature aid them in their present time of need? Arolthus seemed to be forgetting any of this, completely enamoured by the tiny creature. He reached out to help pull it free from the snow, but the little griffon hissed and gave him a fierce scowl that made the half-orc chuckle loudly.

The laugh was cut short however by a sudden wind that struck the mountain peak with the force of a whirlwind. Behind them they could feel the ground shake as a heavy mass struck the ground. The group spun about to face whatever new threat assaulted them and discovered standing before them a massive griffon. Its curved beak and blade-like talons could easily tear a man apart, here before them was the ferocious fabled ally of the Knights of the Order of the Griffon. Looking up the heroes saw dozens of the proud creatures circling overhead, several more landing upon Griffon peak. The lead griffon bowed its head towards Sir Edden and allowed the Knight to climb atop its back. The griffon then seemed to squawk at Edden questioningly. Here Mute was able to step in and communicate with the griffon regarding their situation. Before long all of them sat upon a griffon. Even the massive Minotaur managed to get atop a griffon. This particular griffon was unusually large compared to the others and seemed to fly rather clumsily under its own bulk. As the griffons took to the air the heroes could do nothing except hold on for dear life. Only Sir Edden appeared to be at ease upon the griffon's back. Wheeling about, the flock of un-mounted griffons gathered in behind them as they set off in the direction of Telestra. The sun was already dipping low; the griffons would be needed this night.

As darkness set in their first glimpse of the sky over Telestra was from some distance away. The night sky was lit up by brilliant flashes of light in a wide variety of hues. As they drew closer they realized that the flashes of light were coming from the top of the Star-Spire. The mages it seemed had finished the deliberations and had decided to come to the aid of the city. It appeared as though most of the magical attacks were from the Celestial mages who called the tower home. But Bloodbrood smiled with pride when he saw several massive fireballs light up the sky. Clearly Master-Mage Tolith stood atop the tower in defiance of the undead. It seemed as though each of the representatives from the other mage Colleges were present and in the combined light of their spells it could be seen that the sky above Telestra was thick with swarms of the winged undead constructs. Worse yet the undead had constructed some further horror to assault the city. A massive structure hung in the air near the tower,

suspended on thick chains which were secured around the forms of four skeletal drakes overhead. The creatures apparently holding the whole structure aloft. The ship itself, as that is what it resembled in a way, was made up of not only wood, but also bone and flesh and through black veins along its hull coursed dark necromantic energies. From the lower reaches of the ship catapults rained plague bombs down upon the city beneath. This was no simple raid; this was an all out attack.

They drew near enough now that a group of constructs veered off towards them, sensing the life-blood of the newcomers. As the undead approached the griffons reacted instinctively, these mighty beasts clearly knew an enemy when they saw one, and had no problems with fighting. They caught the first wave of constructs unprepared, tearing them apart with talon and claw, snapping clean through solid bone with their powerful beaks. The riders were of no use however, unable to do anything at this point other than hold on. Sensing the uncertainty of the griffons carrying riders dipped low and swooped underneath the deadly skirmish. Unsure what to do Sir Edden urged his griffon towards the Mage Tower. It seemed these were the only others that were doing much to defend the city, the other Griffons followed suit. But as they approached the tower the several of the mages began to cast spells in their direction, thinking them to be some new undead threat. The griffons were agile creatures though and managed to dodge the worst of it. As they drew nearer the scarred sigil on Bloodbrood's hand lit up bright red, the proximity to the one who had carved that sigil out of pure flame upon their first meeting causing it to come alive. Bloodbrood heard the voice of Master mage Tolith in his head. They communicated quickly and once it was established they were not some new foe the mages ceased their attack. The griffons, along with their riders landed on the top of the tower.

They were greeted by an arrogant and very elaborately dressed Celestial Mage, Headmaster Goshind himself, who was very displeased about having these filthy animals on his tower. But Tolith took charge and explained the situation. The undead vessel floating nearby, the Necro Galley, as they had coined it was proving all but impervious to even their most powerful attacks. Each time they damaged the vessel the necromantic energies that pulsed through the veins of the ship would simply reconstruct the damaged areas. Whatever was powering the floating fortress would need to be destroyed before it was vulnerable to attack.

It seemed only natural to suggest that the heroes use the griffons to get aboard the Necro Galley and find its power source and moments later they mounted up again and did just that. As they flew towards the vessel they were detected by the undead manning the battlements of the hideous creation. The griffons carried them as fast as they were able but they were still hit by a barrage of crossbow fire as well shadow bolts from the lichlings that also patrolled the deck. As soon as they cleared the battlements the griffons plucked up the undead soldiers and flung them aside, no match for the might of the great beasts. Having arrived safely on deck the heroes rushed for the nearest hatch to get below deck and discover what powered the Necro Galley.

The design of the vessel was simple; the undead needed no creature comforts. They quickly found their way to central chamber where they discovered a grotesque scene. At the center of the unliving vessel was what looked almost like a giant human heart, combined with technology that looked akin to the crazed machinations of a gnome. But the whole contraption spewed foul fluids and smelled of rot and like a heart it seemed to be pumping the necromantic energies throughout the rest of the vessel. The necromantic engine was being operated by some kind of engineer, but it was clearly undead, having no lower jaw at all and an array of wires connected to its exposed brain through a large hole in its

skull. Also in the control room was the captain of undead vessel, a rotting corpse come to life. Every so often you could see the cursed begins soul attempt to break free of the undead husk. This was clearly the leader of the entire assault, as undead such as these actually displayed a twisted sense of will and ambition.

The Captain was alarmed at the presence of intruders and ordered his engineer to channel energy from what he called the Necro Tech Engine to repel the invaders. He also ordered a large skeletal ogre, called Chopper, to defend the unholy machine. As they battled within the heart of the Necro Galley, outside the mages continued to assault the vessel. But with the necromantic energy redirected to defend the engine it was now taking damage. Inside the vessel shook and listed sharply as the mages all but obliterated one of the skeletal drakes holding the ship aloft. Having slain the engineer and the skeletal ogre the captain now fought a losing battle. His was quickly overpowered and the heroes set about destroying the Necro Tech engine. As another of the drakes fell out of the sky, the heroes rushed to escape the floundering galley. As they climbed up onto the deck their griffons, who had been circling close by, swooped in to snatch them out of harms way and deposit them back on the tower.

The mages there continued to assault the vessel, which was now beginning to crash towards the city. The master mage from the Storm Tower was wise enough to summon up a powerful gale force wind to blow the vessel out beyond the city. As it crashed into the ground with a with a resounding thunder of smashed wood and snapping bone the mages, along with the many soldiers and guards far below, let a out a triumphant cheer. The Necro-galley had been blow almost completely clear of the city, and while it had clipped a section of the walls in its descent, causing a far amount of destruction, it could have been far worse. The remaining constructs began to flee back towards the Necrodark, the city was safe once again and a clear message had been sent to the undead, the skies over Telestra were no longer theirs to command.

In the days that followed the Republic immediately got repairs under way on the damaged section of the city walls. It was also announced that the assembled mage colleges had reached a tenuous agreement that they should take part in the war. Some of the colleges , such as Goshind's Star-Spire and Fulgrum's College of Solarancy, pledged only to participate in a support role, however the others all committed not only there vast powers to the defence of the republic but also War-Mages to fight on the front lines. Meanwhile Sir Edden Todbury returned triumphantly to the Knights of the Order of the Griffon, to the applause of many of the Knights who were inspired watched in the brave Griffons fight back the undead. Knight Lord Mordengar began preparations to mobilize his order and prepare them for battle. Among these preparations was to promote Sir Edden to the rank of Cavalier and give him command over the training of his fellow Knights to fight on griffon-back. There were still some naysayers that tried to accuse Sir Edden of treachery, but the flock of Griffons backing up Sir Edden silenced their tongues.

In the wake of such tragic losses suffered from night after night of the terrifying raids, the citizens of Telestra finally had reason to celebrate. Unfortunately, it would be a short lived reprieve from the even greater storm that was to come.

## **Chapter 8: Will Cailhast Fight?**

For thousands of years the High Elves of Cailhast have been a race set apart, distrustful of everyone, and seldom if ever leaving the confines of the city walls. But it had not always been so. Once

the High Elves had controlled vast territories in the north, their influence stretching from the Celeros Forest in the West to the borders of the Athelnon forest in the east. Their towering cities were centers of magic, art, and philosophy when the other races of Gant were still wandering the countryside in small nomadic tribes. They believed it was their duty to civilize what they called the 'lesser' races and it was this that set them on the path of seclusion and xenophobia. What had once been considered a noble goal, to teach the tribal races to develop higher forms of culture and society, had slowly turned against the High Elves. As the tribes began to change their way of life, settling in villages, planting crops and raising livestock, learning to mine and process metals, they began to demand more and more of their benevolent teachers. The High Elves had miscalculated how fast the lesser races would learn. With a lifespan drastically shorter than the elves, their mortality drove to develop at a pace well beyond what the Elves had intended. As a High Elf, one could spend years learning to paint a single brush stroke, and as such they were utterly unable to comprehend how rapidly the lesser races developed.

They sought in vain to slow the process and eventually the wisest scholars amongst the High Elves foresaw that with time the 'lesser' races would turn on them. Realizing their mistake they began to cut off all ties with the 'lesser' races, retreating farther and farther within their own borders in an attempt to remove their influence from the rest of the continent. Without the High Elves presence however the societies they had help to build began to fracture, wars over resources erupted, and Gant plunged into chaos. The old tribal lines resurfaced and many of the cultural advancements were lost, except for those pertaining to warfare, the lesser races became quite proficient in this area. Just as the scholars had predicted, the strongest among the lesser races soon set their sights on the wealth of the High Elves. Fearing their own strength the High Elves tried to warn the lesser races to stay away, but the reckless and greedy warlords refused to listen, they attacked in full force. It was a massacre; the High Elven armies were superior in every way and they defended themselves with magic and weapons that their enemies could not hope to counter. The death toll among the lesser races was so high that it was said that rivers throughout Gant ran red with blood for three weeks.

Disgusted at the meaningless loss of life the High Elves hoped finally that the lesser races would leave them in peace and go about rebuilding their societies. Apparently the leaders among the lesser races learned their lesson, and taught it to their children, and their children's children, for the High Elves were left in isolation in their cities; for a time at least. From behind their protective walls they cautiously watched at a distance as several powerful city states began to take root throughout the land and relative peace reigned. However all that would change with the arrival of the Demon Prince Cerebus.

No one can verify for certain, but it is said that it was the wholesale massacre of the lesser races which first drew Cerebus the Blood-Thirster to the continent of Gant. The High Elves surely must have believed this for they were the first to wage war against Cerebus. A great champion arose among them, and Noble elf named Ilethin. He gathered the grand armies of the High Elves and attacked Cerebus and his demons. Early on they were very successful, winning many battles against the demons. However Cerebus soon learned how easy it was to corrupt the lesser races, and he turned many of them against the High Elves. The Demon Prince spawned a loyal following, what would eventually become the Cult of Cerebus, and together they ravaged the High Elf nation. Ilethin and his armies fought bravely but were driven steadily back. Those among the lesser races that did not join the Cult still refused to aid the High

Elves, believing that this was their punishment for the massacres they had committed. Without allies they faltered and they were forced to retreat back towards their capital, the city now known as Cailhast. They made their stand at the Caillani River. They fought fiercely, with the conviction that the very survival of their race depended on defending the bridge. The battle raged on for weeks but eventually ground to a halt, locked in stalemate. Eventually Cerebus must have grown weary of the lack of bloodshed and so he left the High Elves with their lone city remaining, and made war upon the rest of the continent.

The reign of Cerebus and the dark tale of King Helius of Drakkus is another tale unto itself, one that will not be told here. But in the aftermath of these events the High Elves never again sought contact with the other races. In a way they held them responsible, they had forced their hand against them. They had only ever had the best intentions and had been repaid with the destruction of their nation. Their distrust and fear was founded on the simple fact that it was interaction with the lesser races that had been their downfall. So adamantly did they believe this to be true that it was written into Cailhast Law, with proclamations sent to all the major powers of the day; any race to approach the barred gates of the fortified bridge over the Caillani River, would be killed on sight. Years later the first diplomats sent with invitations to join the Republic of Gant barely escaped with their lives, spared only that they might carry back Cailhast's reply; utter refusal of the offer. In fact since that time few High Elves have even ever left the city, and those that do are not welcome to return.

And so the xenophobic High Elves of Cailhast have not permitted any of the lesser races, nor their own wayward kind, to enter their city in hundreds of years. But these are dire times; surely they must be open to discuss the combined threat posed by Necrodark and the return of Cerebus, for if the Republic fails how long can Cailhast survive. The Republic hopes against all odds that the Elves will see it this way, and come to their aid. But while there was much talk only one diplomat was actually brave enough to dare approach the gates, his name was Antonius, and he sought out the only fools brave enough to go with him. Antonius sent a courier to the only known address of Roginn Hathlheftin, a tavern in Telestra, known as the Smiling Mule. The letter that the courier delivered asked for the Centaur's aid, along with any of his other friends, and offered a small reward from his own pockets as well. Antonius was particularly interested in the High Elf Luktar, hoping that the mysterious celestial mage would be able to provide some insight into the political climate of Cailhast.

Roginn was more than happy to accept the offer, thirsting for adventure and action. He of course attempted to recruit his cousin Kal Emdar, and after requesting permission from his superiors the Paladin agreed to accompany him. However Luktar was almost forbidden from taking part by Headmaster Goshind. The pompous celestial mage was eventually convinced of the value of the trip when Luktar offered to gather whatever information he could about their rival college in Cailhast. None of the others were present in Telestra and the summons from Antonius had been urgent so the three friends set out at once for Antonius' hometown of Hindin. They left a note behind at the Smiling Mule for any of their friends who might stop by, explaining to them where they had gone should they be able to catch up with them. Unbeknownst to the trio, the very same day that they left Telestra and began their westward journey, Skeletal constructs also began their journey west from Necrodark to the capital city. That very night was the first of the many nights of terror that followed for the citizens of Telestra.

When finally the raids ended with the arrival of the griffons and the heroic deeds of Mute, Arolthus, and Bloodbrood, it was Mute alone who discovered the note from his friends. The wild elf knew he could not stay in Telestra as the moon's cycle had almost reached its peak, and very soon he would transform into the mindless beast that was trapped inside him. So Mute set out after his friends immediately, forgoing the celebrations, and putting as much distance between himself and civilization as he could before the next full moon.

By some twist of fate, as Roginn, Kal, and Luktar passed back through Cornwin, having met up with the Diplomat Antonius in Hindin, they stumbled upon an unruly band of hunters. As it turned out these hunters had made it their business to track and kill werewolves. The hunters leader claimed that they had evidence that a werewolf was nearby and that on the next full moon they would lay a trap for it and slay the beast. It was Kal who first realized the implications. They had left instructions for their friends to follow after them. If Mute had received the message he could be walking into a deadly trap. Realizing their folly they convinced the hunters to let them accompany them on their expedition. Antonius was wary of getting side tracked from his mission but, realizing he could not go alone, he agreed to follow them.

On the night of the full moon the hunters did indeed manage to trap a werewolf, using a freshly butchered pig as bait. As the hunters worked to subdue the creature the trio of friends looked for some sign that this particular werewolf could be their friend mute. Their suspicions were confirmed when Mute's hawk companion was spotted circling overhead, screeching loudly in warning. Having no other choice they attacked the hunters, attempting to either knock them unconscious or chase them off, but in the meantime having to defend themselves against Mute's Werewolf form. In the ensuing struggle the leader of the hunters was killed by Kal's hand, a death that weighed heavily on the Paladin, but was ultimately necessary to save the life of their friend. Antonius was astonished to discover when the sun came up that the beast Luktar had shackled in arcane bindings was indeed the Wild Elf companion they had spoke of. Accepting that Mute could not be held responsible for the actions of his bestial form, and not wishing to be further sidetracked from his mission, the Diplomat agreed to keep his secret, at least until something could be done about it.

The remainder of the journey northward through Gantinnor's Gap was uneventful. The hostile ogre band that roamed the area had been dealt with by Mute and his companions less than a week prior. As the imposing structure of the High Elves fortified bridge over the Caillani River loomed in the distance, the group approached with caution. Antonius held a white flag high overhead, hoping that the unseen guardians of the bridge would not fire upon them, as Luktar had warned may happen. There was no response from the High Elves until the group stood before the barred gate. With silent efficiency the group suddenly found itself surrounded by High Elven guards. Their leader informed them that according to Cailhast law their lives were now forfeit. Antonius tried to resolve the situation diplomatically but the guards responded by attacking the intruders. They had no choice but to defend themselves. Luktar was reluctant to engage and so removed his hood and mask to reveal his true identity in an attempt to stay their hand. He was given the choice to leave unharmed or die with his companions. Whatever his reasons for staying were, Luktar decided to join the fray. The battle that ensued was fierce. The considerable combined powers of Roginn, Kal, Mute, and Luktar were matched



by the fighting prowess of the elite Silent Guard of Cailhast, along with two Solar Mages. At first it seemed as though the High Elves would ultimately prevail, but they underestimated the potent magics at Luktar's disposal and slowly the battle began to turn against them. Just when it appeared as though the intruders would overwhelm the High Elves defences, dozens of Elven archers appeared upon the battlements over head, alongside two large ballistae loaded with multiple razor shape bolts. A strong feminine voice that had an almost musical quality to it called out for the intruders to lower their weapons and surrender.

The source of the voice was a beautiful well dressed Elven woman. She was clearly a very high ranking noble, but more than that she seemed to command an almost hypnotic obedience from the other High Elves. She was remarkable, even among the fair High Elves of Cailhast. Her hair was quite blonde, so much so that it shone almost pure white in the sunlight, and her skin was exceptionally pale. Even her eyes seemed to have very little coloring, an unusual trait among Elves that gave her face an exotic look. Yet beneath all the calming whiteness there appeared to be much latent power, like the thundering of a distant storm cloud. Only the leader of guards seemed to be able to deny her in the slightest, demanding that Cailhast Law should be satisfied. She responded by telling him that he was too liberal in his application of their laws and that it would be the council of nobles that would decide their fate. His resolve quickly failed beneath her stern gaze and the matter was settled. Knowing they had little other choice, the Republican Diplomat and his escorts allowed themselves to be led off into captivity.

All except Luktar were blindfolded as they were led into the city. As they walked their captor introduced herself as Lady Viladras. She explained that the council of nobles would hear their case. If it was deemed worthy their lives would be spared otherwise they would be executed. It seemed reasonable enough given the circumstances. It wasn't until she had her prisoners alone in a dungeon somewhere beneath the city that they began to question exactly why she had spared their lives. She dismissed the guards as though it was nothing at all for her to be left alone with five obviously powerful individuals. She then examined each of them closely. Her scrutiny made them all feel uneasy. She passed quickly over Antonius and Luktar, and seemed about to do the same to Mute, when she seemed to catch a scent. She leaned in close to Mute and inhaled deeply through her nose, commenting that he was not at all what he appeared to be. Her presence so close was almost intoxicating and Mute could not help but feel as though he would obey this woman without question. She seemed keenly interested in the two centaurs as well, addressing them and Mute as if they weren't even in the room, saying that they would make fine specimens. With that she suddenly left them, claiming as an afterthought that they would be brought before the council tomorrow evening.

The night was spent each in their own prison cell. They could overhear the guards laughing, and Luktar was able to understand their conversation. They joked that now that Lady Viladras was interested in the Centaurs and the Wild Elf they'd never even make it before the council. Luktar pondered this as he fell into a restless but very deep sleep. So deep was his sleep that he did not hear Lady Viladras return just before dawn and lead away Mute, Kal, and Roginn. It wasn't until the guards brought breakfast to the prisoners that anyone was even aware they were missing. This alarmed Luktar, but the guards merely laughed, remarking that at least they would die happy.

A short time later Luktar's senses came alive, he felt the air suddenly charge with high magic that was not his own. He knew a spell was about to be cast within his small cell. There was a flare of amethyst light and portal opened. Out of it stepped an older Elven woman, dressed in the robes of a High Mage. She wasted no time in addressing Luktar, though she called him by a different name. She claimed that his true name was Sarasith, and that she was his real mother. Her name was Lady Elendrith and she went on to explain that she had an affair with a Court Noble. Her indiscretion was made worse when she became pregnant. In Cailhast mages can only breed with other mages, in order to prevent the spiritual powers from being diluted by the non-gifted. When eventually Archmage Ethistran discovered the existence of the child he ordered her to dispose of it, but she could not. She instead gave the child to a common Goldsmith and his barren wife. They raised him as their own giving him the name Luktar.

Luktar was shocked to hear this wild story but as he considered his life it began to make sense to him. When he had matured into manhood and began to manifest the spiritual powers, he had been refused entrance into the Mage Colleges on the grounds that he was the son of a Goldsmith and nothing further, yet where then had his powers come from? He saw now that the refusal had been an attempt to further cover-up the lie perpetrated by his real mother. He tested the name on his lips, somehow Sarasith felt more natural than the name Luktar, which he had gone by his entire life. Lady Elendrith told her son that she had watched over him from a distance, that she was proud that he had risen to greatness as a Celestial Mage in Telestra. She also said it was folly for him to return to Cailhast. She then offered him the chance to escape; she could create a portal for him to get him out of the city safely.

Luktar asked about his friends, explaining to this woman who was apparently his mother, that Lady Viladras had taken them. All colour drained out of her face at the mentioning of her name. She told him they were lost, that when Lady Viladras took a liking to a man and he went willingly into her house they were never seen again. Their disappearance was always swept under the carpet by the council of nobles, who seemed to be entirely enthralled by the strange woman. Any who questioned her met a similar fate. The most common lie was that they had chosen to leave Cailhast, never to return.

The path before him became suddenly clear, he would take on this new name, but rather than fleeing the city and leaving his friends to their fate, he had to rescue them and in doing so expose this Lady Viladras' schemes, whatever they may be. Lady Elendrith was not keen on the idea but she said she owed him much for all the hardship she had brought him in life. She agreed to create a portal for her son that would take him into the guest chambers of Lady Viladras' estate. However the estate was heavily warded and once she got him in her powers would be drained. She would not be able to provide him with any further assistance.

Once inside Sarasith encountered a bleary eyed servant of some kind. It was simple enough to convince the enthralled servant that he was to be brought to Lady Viladras' private chambers. Once there he discovered that her private chambers were in fact completely empty. It was a simple enchantment that veiled the secret stairway from the eyes of simpletons, Sarasith had no trouble breaking through it. The wide stairway led steeply downwards for some distance, bringing him far below the city. At the bottom of the stairway was a room with a variety of finely crafted and richly adorned beds. Along the walls ran a series of chains which seemed to serve the purpose of holding prisoners

captive on these beds. Several of the beds had skeletal remains still chained to them; undoubtedly these were the Elves that Lady Viladras claimed had chosen to leave the city. Instead it appeared they had been left to die here in this chamber. In the far corner of the room Sarasith spotted both Centaurs. They appeared unusually docile, apparently unaware that they were in chains. Across the room he spotted Mute, chained in much the same manner as the skeletal remains that littered many of the other beds. He was alive and well, but also appeared docile and unconcerned with his situation. If anything he seemed to be smiling. Beside his bed was perched Lady Viladras.

As Sarasith entered the room she looked up at him suddenly. Something about her had changed however, her features now appeared almost reptilian, her eyes had narrowed to slits, and she sneered at him, revealing razor sharp teeth and a forked tongue. "Too late mage, I have already taken what I wanted. Their seed shall produce mighty soldiers for my Queens war. I shall let my children deal with you while I prepare my nest," she hissed. Before Sarasith could cast a spell to stop her she fled the room through a large iron door, her slender frame easily slipping through even though it was open just a crack. Immediately Sarasith roused his companions. Now that she was no longer in the room, they seemed to regain their senses. They had barely had time to gather their belongings when the iron door burst open. Four large reptilian creatures swarmed into the room, assaulting them with powerful magical winds, bolts of lightning and brute force. These were apparently the twisted offspring of whatever creature Lady Viladras truly was. Strong as they were, they still proved too weak to overcome, the reunited companions. They dispatched the hideous creatures quickly and preceded though the door. What they saw next was shocking.

Here, deep beneath the city of Cailhast was a massive cavern, the end of which was lost in darkness. It appeared ancient, likely predating the city itself. The door opened onto a ledge, where Lady Viladras had made her nest. There she stood, her hand lovingly caressing one of several large eggs which stood scattered about the cavern. Upon seeing them she flew into a rage, angered at the slaying of her children. Finally they discovered exactly what she was, as her body began to stretch out and grow in size. Wings began to sprout from her back, tearing her fine dress to pieces. The nails on her hands and toes began to grow as well until they became vicious claws. Her nose stretched forward and her face transformed, in mere moments Lady Viladras had been replaced by another form, a massive White Dragon.

She inhaled deeply through her nostrils and then opened her gaping maw wide. From the back of her throat lightning swelled up, coursing along row after row of long sword-like teeth, before bursting forth. The lightning forked wildly striking all of them and blasting them off their feet. But they would not be so easily defeated. What followed was a battle of epic proportions, but one that the details of which will not be recorded here. After a long and difficult battle, which almost destroyed them all, they were victorious. When the dragon came crashing down onto the ledge in defeat they cut her head from her long sinewy neck to bring back as evidence of their victory.

Initial reaction to the death of Lady Viladras was mixed. Many among the council of nobles were appalled that foreigners had been allowed into their city and had slain an Elven noble. Many demanded their immediate execution. However the High Elves as a race are nothing if not thorough. An

investigation was put underway and the story of the companions was verified and after several weeks of long and tedious proceedings it was officially announced to the people of Cailhast that a dragon had lived among them, in the guise of Lady Viladras. Exactly for how long no one could be sure, but for many hundreds of years she had been stealing men away to create draconic hybrids for her own purposes. It was unknown what she was planning to do with these twisted offspring, for dragons were much longer lived than even the High Elves, and their schemes often beyond the minds of mortals to comprehend.

A key witness in all of the proceedings was Lady Elendrith. When the proceedings had at one point turned against Sarasith and the rest, she came clean regarding her indiscretions and the true identity of the one she now claimed openly as her son. Her testimony carried great weight, and the story of one who had been shunned by his own people and forced out into the world to learn and grow amongst the other races, impacted the council significantly. Some among the council began to question the old ways of thinking, perhaps there was value outside of the walls of their city after all, and perhaps the lesser races were not lesser anymore. If they had taught a High Elf of loyalty and sacrifice, in the face of grave danger, perhaps there were other things that they could teach the High Elves.

While High Elves are not at all quick to change, they had begun to travel down a new path, one that would perhaps forever change the face of Gant. Whether it was these events that spurred this change of heart or the subtle diplomacy of Sarasith's true father, yet unidentified but undoubtedly a member of the council of nobles, either way the council decided to hear the pleas of the Republic. Antonius would remain behind to act as an ambassador for the Republic of Gant to the City-State of Cailhast and if the need was deemed great enough they would go to war against their old enemy, the Cult of Cerebus, as well as the undead hordes of Necrodark.

As the companions set out for Telestra, leaving the gleaming spires and rich architecture of Cailhast behind them, they could not help but be utterly amazed at the events they had taken part in. Happy to once again be outside of the confining walls of the city, Mute breathed deeply of the cool morning air. It seemed to help clear his head of the bizarre series of events that had unfolded in his life. As he walked he felt a wet nose nuzzle against his hand. Looking down he saw the wolf called Bane, who had befriended him some time ago when Mute had first begun to be afflicted with the werewolf curse. The rest of his companions would have simply heard the wolf let out a series of low whines and soft growls, but Mute understood the language of animals. Bane had a clear message, "I believe you are ready now. There are some people you need to meet..."

## **Chapter 9: Random Happenings**

### The Rite of the Ritualist

Taylor and Ebonethia had travelled to Keth in an attempt to comfort their Dwarven friend. Seleena was quite worried about Blood-brood, who was over due from his mission to Telestra with Master Mage Tolith. Seleena was told that in order to prepare for the upcoming rite she was to undergo, she must first venture out into the crags north of Keth in order to find a sacred place of reflection and communion with Vahlin's Earth. Taylor and Ebonethia agreed to go along and keep watch from a respectful distance. Seleena's communion with spirits of the Earth drew the attention of a nearby Orc Shaman who had

enslaved a couple of earth elementals. The Shaman attacked Seleena, intent upon siphoning her powers. Taylor and Ebonethia rushed to her aid but were quickly overwhelmed when an Orcish war band arrived to aid their Shaman. In an attempt to draw the Orcs away from his two female companions Taylor was surrounded, and though he stood his ground long past what could be expected he eventually fell beneath the swarm of their blades. The trio would surely have been lost had not Blood-brood arrived on the scene. He had reached Keth shortly after his friends had left, and was directed to go to the groups aid by the druid's Oracle who had a vision of Taylor's demise. With the newly appointed Warmage at their side, fought back the Orcs and recovered the body of their dear friend Taylor. His selfish sacrifice likely saved the life of one of their own, and so he was recognized for deeds by the Conclave of Vahlin's Earth. The ritual that marked Seleena's advancement within the conclave became an earnest supplication to Vahlin to restore the life of brave Taylor Lewis. Vahlin heard their prayers and restored his life. It would seem that once again, Taylor's time was not yet come and his destiny remained untold.

### To Tame the Beast

Meanwhile on the other side of the continent Mute goes before a secret council beneath the Lunar Inn in Kurst. Those gathered in the shadows represent a small community of villagers with a dark secret, they are all infected with the Werewolf Curse. But unlike the mindless beasts that most werewolves are assumed to be, this community has managed to learn to control the curse. They can transform at will and retain their will and higher brain functions while in their bestial form. Somehow Bane is connected to this group and it is the wolf that brings Mute before them. They seem to have been expecting Mute and administer a test to see if he can learn to tame the beast within. He is given a foul tasting potion which causes him to fall into a vivid dream state. Mute finds himself standing before the Lunar Inn with an angry mob intent on burning the Inn down along with the suspected werewolves trapped within. Mute proves himself loyal to the werewolves cause by eventually attacking the mob to defend the Inn. Next he finds himself face to face with his own werewolf form, with only a simple sword to defend himself. It is a fierce battle for supremacy. If Mute can defeat the beast within himself he will be able to control it. If not he will be forever lost to the curse, an outcome that he is told will force the Werewolves of Kurst to put him down to prevent him drawing attention to their community. Just when it seems as though Mute will overcome Bane enters his dream state, dropping Mute's bow at his feet. With his weapon of choice in hand, Mute is very narrowly able to defeat and tame the beast within him. With both tests passed he becomes a part of the secretive Werewolf community of Kurst and begins his training to fully master his unique abilities.

### **Chapter 10: Envoy to the Kingdom of Ghallant**

An urgent diplomatic mission is under way to the remote Kingdom of Ghallant. Though much smaller than the Republic their navy is well trained and very powerful. The Republic hopes that the Ghallant Navy can bring much needed relief to the beleaguered forces along the lower Mithalon Defensive line and the Republican Navy on Windalon Lake. But distant Ghallant is only reachable by sea and the envoy must travel by ship from Almsberg; through waters that are controlled by the Necrodark navy on the surface and which beneath lurk monsters equally as terrifying.

Taylor Lewis is recruited to the Republican Army to act as a Special Operations Sergeant for the mission. He is given command of a squadron of men and instructed to escort the Republican Diplomat, Prometheus on his harrowing journey. Naturally Taylor also asks his friends to come along, however Blood-brood is not given leave by the Vestin College of Pyromancy, having only recently returned from his mission with Tolith in the east.

During their voyage they are attacked by a flock of anger demons patrolling near the southern coast, the ships head farther out to sea hoping that the demons will turn back. The plan works, but before the demons give up the pursuit they unleash a volley of burning blood which rains down upon the deck. Many are killed or wounded, including most of the Republican soldiers under Taylors command. Highly damaged the ships limp their way to the safety of Calumbria harbour, their ship too damaged to continue the journey.

In Calumbria they find a local captain named Shale who is the only one willing to brave the passage through Necrodark controlled waters. He charges a hefty price and also takes some other passengers along, a young cheery Halfling named Silus and his shady companion, a man named Sectus. Seleena recalls having meet the Halfling some time ago with Bloodbrood in a tavern in Delta. She is wary of him, knowing that death is his trade. As they sail into Necrodark controlled waters the ocean's surface becomes clogged with a festering algae-like slime that reeks of death and decay.

Silus proves to be valuable great ship mate when the ship nearly runs a ground in the slime and the vessel is boarded by skeletal Necrodark sailors whose bones swarm with leeches. As the heroes engage the undead, Silus joins the fray lending his considerable skills.

Navigating through the cloying globules of the slime proves difficult, it sometimes spans kilometres at a time and almost seems sentient, intent upon dragging them down to their watery deaths. Eventually the ship breaks through the slime and makes its way into the Ghallant harbour. The Ghallant Naval forces are massed in the harbour, as though expecting an engagement at any time. Shale docks his smaller vessel some distance from the main port and Taylor and his companions disembark with Prometheus to meet with the Ghallant Nobles to discuss their proposed alliance. Silus disembarks on his own mission with Sectus in tow. The two groups have no idea that their missions are so intertwined.

Silus is here on business, having accepted a free-lance contract from Sectus here in distant Ghallant. He hopes that his anonymity will protect him from any assassin guilds who might take offence to his freelance operation. His target is Lord Gerard, a Ghallant Nobleman who has been trying desperately to persuade the other nobles into action against the undead armies and to join in the defence of Gant. Gerard has invested all his fortunes into doing what he can for Gant, and doing whatever necessary to gain the nobles vote. This now includes meeting with the envoy from the Republic that has recently arrived in the city, the diplomat Prometheus and his companions.

The meetings go well enough, but Prometheus' plea for Ghallant to send ships to aid the Republic falls on deaf ears. The Ghallant navy seems to be preoccupied with its own concerns. The Lord Admiral of the Fleet explains their situation.

"For the past week our mighty ships have been under siege in the ocean. It all started with a few pools of green decay collecting on the surface. But it rapidly started spreading. Over the next few days, several of our ships became trapped. The substance ate away at our ships and sank them, their crew yelling in agony. What is even worse is the stories of a giant creature assaulting our ships. Of the three vessels that have been assaulted, there have been no survivors! So we have brought the full force of the fleet into the harbour and are preparing for a complete eradication of the undead forces in our oceans!"

The negotiations are interrupted when a Naval Captain named Hook stumbles into the meeting, half dead, telling a wild tale of a gigantic creature made of the slimy substance that pollutes the ocean's surface. He and his men only barely survived the encounter, and at that only because the creature seemed to be summoned away by whatever master it serves. This news abruptly ends the negotiations for it seems that until the current crisis is dealt with and oceans are cleared of this foul substance and the creature that dwells within it, the Republic cannot rely upon Ghallant Naval forces coming to their aid.

The next morning the city is awakened by alarm bells. The slime has drifted into the harbour over night and along with it a fleet of undead ships. Three of the undead ships are particularly large and carry massive Necro-tech constructs, which erect a stasis field of sorts around most of the harbour. The undead then begin to pour into the harbour. The soldiers and navy-men there are vastly outnumbered and begin to fall in great numbers, cut off from reinforcements from the city. Outside of the stasis field the rest of Ghallant can only watch in horror as the slime from the water's surface coalesces into the gigantic creature that Captain Hook spoke of. The creature assaults the ships in the harbour, tearing the stout Ghallant warships apart as though they were kindling. Only the Druids of the Heavens, a conclave local to Ghallant, are able to render aid to those unfortunate souls trapped within the stasis field. They do what they can to teleport out the wounded but their powers are quickly depleted under such a strenuous task.

Taylor, Seleena, and Ebonethia rush to the docks to see what they can do to assist the Ghallant defenders. At the docks there is a smaller undead vessel that has anchored just outside of the stasis field. A group of sailors are valiantly trying to assault the vessel from the docks but are not having much success for the gang planks are blocked by two hulking undead ogres. The three heroes offer their assistance and discover that the sailors are trying to commandeer the vessel in the hopes that the undead ship will be able to pass through the evil enchantments powering the stasis field, allowing them to strike at the undead fleet. Taylor leads the charge as they renew their assault on the ship, striking out with the combined strength of Taylor's flashing steel, Ebonethia calling holy fire down upon the undead, and the strength of the earth itself obeying Seleena's command they manage to push back the massive ogres. Once aboard the ship they make quick work of the remaining undead soldiers, particularly with the unexpected arrival of Silus, striking from the shadows with his deadly blades.

Triumphant the sailors board the decrepit vessel and sail it directly towards the lead undead warship. As they had hoped, their stolen ship succeeds where the Ghallant ships failed and they are able to penetrate the stasis field. The undead are caught unaware, not expecting an attack to come from one of their own vessels. Once again Taylor leads the charge as they board the larger undead vessel carrying

one of the three massive Necro-tech constructs powering the field. The sailors hold the relatively small crew at bay while the three heroes try to find a way to shut down the Necro-tech construct. Before they can however the slimy substance polluting the harbour gathers itself together and forms into a massive creature upon the decks of the undead warship. The creature wastes no time attacking the intruders, spewing corrosive slime down on their heads and battering them with a frenzy of powerful blows from its writing appendages. For every wound they inflict upon the creature it sprays more of its vile stinking ichors upon them. If it had been any ordinary soldiers that attacked the creature they surely would have been defeated. But Ebonethia and Seleena's faith in Vahlin the maker was strong and they are able to heal they and their companions time and again from the effects of the corrosive slime. Though they suffer greatly at the hands of the creature it is eventually defeated. It collapses into a pool of steaming ichor, quickly eating through the rotten wood decking of the vessel. Within moments the ship begins to break part. By the time they retreat back to their captured vessel, the larger undead vessel is floundering, taking on sea water. As they sailed away from it the undead warship begins to roll to one side, plunging the Necro-tech construct into the seawater of the harbour.

With one of the three evil contraptions disabled the stasis field is disrupted. There is a mighty roar of victory from the Defenders of Ghallant. With the stasis field broken and the hideous slime creature dispatched, the undead begin to retreat, as though called by some silent signal from their cruel master. Those mindless undead that can't retreat quickly enough are crushed beneath a tide of Ghallant soldiers now unleashed upon the harbour area. Ghallant is victorious.

In the aftermath of the battle Gerard is found amongst the bodies of the dead. Mysteriously he was one of only a handful of casualties found outside of the stasis field. His death is deemed to be at the hands of some sort of undead assassin that infiltrated the city in the chaos of the attack. He is buried in high honours along with hundreds of men that gave their lives to defend Ghallant. The nobles, and the King, honour Gerard's memory by doing as he had always wanted, committing their forces to assist the Republic in the war. They realize at last that no place on Gant is safe from the onslaught of Necrodark.

Several weeks later Taylor, Ebonethia, Seleena, and Prometheus board the first of wave of Ghallant Warships departing for Republican shores. They eventually return home to Almsberg, to the accolades of Republican officials and the Republican army, celebrated for having secured this valuable ally. Silus on the other hand remains in Ghallant to try his fate in this new city of opportunity.

## **Part Three: Evil Marches**

### **Chapter 11: The Battle of Farthing Field**

With the Republic having successfully rallied many new allies to their banner, the continent braces for all out war. The time for skirmishes and tactical retreats is over. In the east the vast armies of Necrodark have begun to march, a slow moving tide of terror sweeping across the land, heading unerringly towards the capital of Telestra. In all its long history the mighty walled city of Telestra has never been taken by force. Its stout walls and impenetrable gates had weathered every siege and turned back every invading army. But this army was not like the others. It needs not sleep or food or



shelter, it does not tire or grow ill, nor will it lose morale as so often happens in prolonged sieges. It possesses a singular mind, the end of all that lives.

Conversely the capital city of Telestra is the beating heart of the Republic of Gant. Its population has swollen many times in size as refugees have flooded in from across eastern Gant. Now as the black tide draws near even more villagers and rural folk flee in terror before it. Fear is like a tangible odour in the now overcrowded streets. With so many living in such close quarters, disease has become a very real threat. However the Republican government has now realized, perhaps too late, that the greatest threat of all is not fear, or disease, or even the undead army itself, but rather starvation.

To the south east of Telestra lies a sprawling stretch of fertile farmlands known as the Farthing Fields. During harvest time, it is said that the golden fields stretch on for as far as the eye can see in every direction. These prosperous lands are the bread basket for the capital city's vast population. But with all the farmers fleeing the oncoming armies of Necrodark there is no one to tend the fields. Come winter, with Necrodark at their doorstep, Telestra will fall to hunger. Therefore the Republic has decided that it cannot hide behind the walls of Telestra and await death. The Farthing Fields are too vital to be allowed to be spoiled beneath the rotting tread of the undead. So the Republic decides to draw together most of the Eastern Division of its army, along with a resolute contingent of heavily armoured horse mounted Knights from the Order of the Griffon, the fierce Vesticar remnant who are eager to avenge their fallen city, and even a Company of War Golems, into the single largest fighting force the Republic has even sent to the field of battle. The Generals have been given a mandate to halt Necrodark's advance in its tracks and secure the Farthing Fields so that the farmers can return to the field and harvest the much needed crops that will sustain Telestra through the winter.

The two armies faced off in the open fields, both arranging their forces in a wide line of troops. As large as the Republican army was, it was dwarfed by the sheer numbers of undead they opposed. But for all the dread the decrepit undead inspired on the battlefield the Republic commanders yet had hope, for the undead had very little cavalry. The Republic on the other hand, fielded two full brigades of cavalry along with a third comprised of hard hitting Knights and rapid flanking outriders. Also the forces of Necrodark appeared to have very few archers or ranged support within their ranks while the Republic had two battalions to rain destruction down upon their foe. Perhaps the Republic could prevail against the mindless undead horde through the use of combined arms and superior tactics.

As the undead drew closer however, the Republic's generals discovered one obstacle to this hope. The undead did not march as mindlessly as they first had believed. Leading the foul host on each flank was an ancient Lich Lord and at the center of the whole army was Deathlord Archibald himself. Each of the powerful undead commanders rode upon the back of an undead dragon, arguably more dangerous than even their riders. But while the undead had these champions of death and darkness, the Republic too had champions in their midst. These brave men stood in defiance of the darkness, willing to face this great evil whether in the name of glory, revenge, or freedom. Among them was Sarasith the High-mage, given command of the war-golem company he helped create, and joining his fellow Vesticarins to bring vengeance upon the enemy was the mighty zealot Arolthus. Even the mysterious

ranger, know to most as Mute, took to the field fighting alongside a company of particularly fearless Militiamen from the village of Kurst, for reasons unknown.

The undead wasted little time, pausing only briefly to rearrange their ranks slightly as they neared the battlefield and then pushing relentlessly forward again. The Republic wisely held back its forces, knowing that to be victorious they would need to greatly thin out the undead ranks by the time they were ready to charge into battle. There was the sudden clamour of creaking wood as the Telestran Military Engineers Guild let loose a salvo from their catapults. As the massive stones crashed down in the midst of the enemy there was but eerie silence from the undead army. Undeterred by the scores of soldiers crushed and broken by the Republic war machines the undead continued to march forward. Next the sun was momentarily blotted out of the sky by a swarm of arrows from the Yeoman's guard. Though not as effective as the war machines against the resilient bodies of the undead, many more of them fell to the sheer volume of missiles that rained down upon them. For every inch of the battlefield they gained the undead paid a heavy price and in the opening moments of the battle Republic morale soared.

But that would all change. As the undead drew closer several of the Republic war machines were destroyed by massive stone obelisks in the back ranks of the undead army, able to harness the power of hundreds of damned souls trapped within them strike out with precision and devastation. From the front ranks of the slow moving enemy, massive hordes of feral zombies suddenly surged forward, along with packs of undead wolves from the flanks, gaining ground for Necrodark much quicker than the Republic had thought possible. While the Republic was able to get several more volleys off, they now began to concentrate their fire against the enemies that were closing in on their own ranks. High overhead there could be heard the war-cry's of the Griffons who, alongside the Knights that rode them were barely holding back Necrodark's aerial forces. Neither sides ground forces would benefit from air support. Sooner or later this battle would be won, or lost, in the deadly melee of hand to hand combat.

Not wishing to lose any more distant to reach full gallop on their horses the cavalry was ordered to charge. The feral zombies, anticipating the taste of man and horse flesh, also charged forward. Within moments the battlefield erupted in chaos. The cavalry struck with the force of a gale wind but the feral zombies superior numbers and frightening speed quickly began to overwhelm the cavalry, riders were pulled from their mounts, horses were swarmed and brought down by countless wounds from claws and teeth. Only the heavily armoured Knights seemed to be able to withstand the onslaught. As arrows, magicks, and war machines continued to rain down death and destruction from both sides. The Republican infantry rushed forward to aid the floundering cavalry charge. Necrodark's remaining ground troops continued to shamle forward as fast as their rotten legs could carry them. The Republican Foot Guard and Local Militiamen reached the fray first, bolstering their comrades in the Horse Guard. For a moment it seemed like things would turn back in the Republic's favour and that the feral zombies would be wiped out, caught too far ahead from the rest of the undead horde. But then the unthinkable happened.

Those in the thick of battle did not even at first notice, for the ringing of steel and the cries of the dying were like a drone in their ears. It was those closest to the raised wooden dais, from which the Generals of the Republic commanded their army, that first felt the ground shudder beneath their feet and saw the sudden cloud of dust. Dozens of holes suddenly appeared in the ground surrounding the command post and from them darted hundreds of sleek furred creatures, Necrodark's treacherous ally, the Skaven. The heroic Huscarls who guarded the command post fought bravely but where in disarray and were overcome, dying to the last man in defence of their charges. As the Skaven butchered the Huscarls several stealthy assassins rushed past them. Though the Generals and their staff drove most of them off it was not before they had themselves been wounded by the poisoned blades of the Skaven assassins. As quickly as they had come the Skaven retreated back down their burrows. Ultimately their task was successful, as one by one the Republic Generals fell to deathly poison in their veins.

It was a ripple effect, panic moved through the ranks like a deadly foe. Some of the soldiers rallied to the calls of their field officers but many more began to flee the field. Most of the center and right flank of the Republic army began to collapse. Only the left flank remained resolute, largely due to the presence of the unflinching Vesticar Remnant, spurred on to battle by the rousing words of their Blessed Champion Arolthus.

Back on the right flank, as lesser men fled past him Sarasith stood defiant, blasting away at the enemy with star-fire and crushing them to pieces with wells of gravity beneath their feet. Some swore that as they ran past the mage his countenance glowed with the power of the cosmos. Mute also was to be counted as a hero that day, for he single handily brought down one the Lichlords and his undead Wyrms. But it was not enough, the Republic continued to lose ground, and lose men. Worse yet, some of the fallen had already begun to rise up again, compelled by the foul powers of necromancy to fight against their former countrymen as undead warriors of Necrodark. Chaos and terror began to reign supreme on the battlefield.

Into the midst of the chaos came Death Lord Archibald, the skeletal drake upon which he rode was a lit with unholy flames, scorching all those nearby like the fires of hell itself. At a shout a Cavalier that bravely stood against him fell instantly dead, with a gesture of his hand an entire squadron of pike men were cast aside like leaves in a windstorm, death and despair he wore like a garment, and any thought of victory fled those near him.

With their leadership in disarray and their forces severely weakened the horns began to sound a full retreat. Victory was no longer achievable and the Farthing Fields were lost. The only small victory that could be won now was to leave the field with as few dead as possible. They had all fought this foe enough to know that for every fallen comrade left behind there would be one more mindless cadaver aiding Necrodark in laying Siege to Telestra. The Republic fled the field in haste, fortunate at least, that they could easily out run the slow moving army of the dead. They carried what dead and wounded they could to save them from an otherwise terrible fate.

It now fell to Arolthus and his Vesticar remnant to hold off the undead long enough for the rest to escape. Sarasith too aided in the retreat, setting magic traps in the path of the feral zombies that

were trying tried desperately to catch their escaping food supply. His war golems struck out against any foe they could get at, incapable of fear and impossible to be turned against the republic if slain, they at last proved their worth as the rest of the army retreated. Mute also remained behind, bringing down many foes with his bow. The Militia men from Kurst stayed at his side, proving to be as fearless as the war golems. Though no foe got close enough to them, as together they slowly backed away from the battlefield, from the look of grim determination on their faces they were prepared to tear apart any undead soldier that got too close. Once all those remaining were sure that as many had escaped as possible could, they turned and ran for the safety of Telestra. A safety that would likely be very short lived.

At the Battle of Farthing Field the Republic of Gant suffered a terrible defeat, but it could have been a massacre if not for the heroic deeds of many brave men on the battlefield that day. As the Republic does its best to deal with the loss, and prepares Telestra for the inevitable, the black tide marches onwards. Only time will tell if the wave will break upon the Republic's mighty bastion or if it will instead drown it in utter darkness. Hope seems distant and fragile, a candle burning in the face of a hurricane. Worse yet, on this dark night, Necrodark is only one of two terrors the Republic faces. If the Cult of Cerebus cannot be held back in the west, then hope does not exist at all.

## **Chapter 12: The Defence of the Lower Mithalon**

The Western Division of the Republican Army is split in half and the Eastern Division has its hands full with the slow but relentless march of the armies of Necrodark. It falls to Colonel Thomas Birch to ensure that no force of cultists or demons crosses the Lower Mithalon River. As such his regiment, the Continental Defence Force, has been spread too thinly along the eastern bank. But with support from local militia and naval forces stationed in Windalon lake it is believed that the Republic can hold the line here. With daily raids on their defensive positions, the Republican army is growing weary.

The latest reports from scouts behind enemy lines claim that the Cult of Cerebus may be massing for a concentrated offensive, their likely target is the Mithalon Bridge. However this could be a distraction meant to encourage the Republican army to pull forces from elsewhere along the eastern bank to reinforce the bridge, while the Cult slips behind them. Colonel Birch recognizes this possibility and has therefore sent no reinforcements, leaving the defence of the bridge to Captain Adams and a single battalion of troops.

But help is on the way. The order of the Red Hawk sends several Paladins, under the command of Centaur Crusader Kal Emdar, to bolster their defences and fend off any incursion by the Cult of Cerebus. Eager for action the infamous Centaur Roginn, known to many as a Champion of the People, has accompanied his cousin Kal. Hydromancers from Fair-Isle have also pledged to defend the river and the skies are patrolled by the newly reformed Knights of the Order of the Griffon. Rumour has it that even the reclusive High Elves of Cailhast have made good on their pledge to lend support against their ancient foe, dispatching patrols of the fabled Great Eagle Sentinels to do battle against the aerial forces of Cerebus.

The defenders morale is boosted yet again when a warship flying the colours of the Ghallant Navy sails up the Mithalon River. The rumours it seems are true, the mighty Ghallant Navy has pledged itself to help defend the Republic's waters, whether from the terrifying undead hordes of Necrodark or the insidious Cult of Cerebus and its Demon allies.

The reports are true and the tension can be felt by all as the Blood Host of Grand Summoner Thadrek draws near to the bridge. He brings with him mobs of devout followers of Cerebus with many demons in toe. Most terrifying is the arrival of Baleroc the Hell-mouth on the west bank of the Lower Mithalon. This monstrous half demon half war machine inspires fear in the hearts of the valiant defenders and spews foul acidic projectiles from its cannon like mouth. As Thadrek's forces storm across the bridge, battering rams in hand, the defenders let lose volleys of arrows and deadly ballistae from their fortified towers and their warships. Coming under such heavy fire, it seems that perhaps the Cultist's will not reach the gates on the fair side of the bridge with sufficient numbers to cause any harm.

But Thadrek and his Summoners have cleverly foreseen this problem and begin to summon Demon gates onto the battlefield, allowing their forces to cross considerable distances in the blink of an eye. Seeing the danger several Paladins step forward to face the oncoming cultists. The chants of their battle prayers reach a crescendo as they are bathed in an aura of Holy light. The bridge on which they stand on is now Holy ground, the demons and foul cultists cannot cross whilst the Paladins hold their ground. Changing tactics one of the enemy Summoners opens a new Demon Gate on a Republican river barge that is inflicting heavy casualties on the cultists exposed flank. But a lone Paladin has also been stationed on the barge and inspired by his brothers on the bridge he too begins to chant. As the portal opens on the bow of the ship he steps forward into the threshold of the gateway to hell itself, claiming it as Holy ground. Though it takes all of his strength and faith to hold steady, the enemy is confounded and cannot cross over.

But Grand Summoner Thadrek has other tricks up his foul sleeves yet. His anger demons rain fiery death down upon the Republic and from the waters of the Lower Mithalon hideous sloth demons begin swarming up the sides of the warships, putting many of the defenders into a dread sleep as they approach. On the far bank the demonic Wolfen begin crossing the river on foot, freezing it solid beneath their icy tread.

Aboard the Ghallant Warship, navy men and marines fight for their lives. But they do not battle alone, for unbeknownst to them they have had a stowaway aboard since they left port in Ghallant. The deadly Assassin Silus springs into action, dealing death from the shadows with his enchanted blades and raining dark destruction down upon his foes.

With swarms of Anger demons in the skies over the bridge the archers and Hydromancers stationed on the battlements, and even the graceful Great Eagle Sentinels, are forced to concentrate their efforts on bringing down the cruel vulture like demons. Their bolts and globes of burning blood have become a deadly threat to the infantry holding the bridge. The stalwart Paladins are forced to turn their attention to healing their fallen allies. As the light fades from the holy ground that was holding them back the Blood Host charges forward, foolishly assuming that they will cut down the defenders

and break open the bridges fortified gateway. They is loud battle cry from the clouds overhead as a Cadre of heavily armoured Griffons carrying Sir Edden Todbury and his Knights swoop down upon the foe. Though they are few in number they hurtle through the enemy ranks again and again, striking the cultists down with great violence and returning to the skies unscathed beneath their shining plate armour.

Grand Summoner Thadrek is taken aback as he soon finds his Blood Host in tatters. He attempts a very dangerous ritual, attempting to summon Cerebus himself to the assist in the assault. A portal begins to form over the bridge, wreathed in dark red blood, and for a moment the defenders grow deathly silent. As of yet Cerebus has never been seen on a battlefield. If the Demon Prince were to come to his servants aid what hope would there be to hold the bridge? But it would seem that Cerebus the Blood Thirster does not appreciate weakness for his booming voice can be heard through the partially opened portal. The demon prince condemns the Grand Summoner for failing to win his objective and instead of coming to his servants aid the Grand Summoners body is slowly shredded to pieces as the blood in his veins is torn out of him and consumed by Cerebus on the other side of the portal.

As the bloody summoning portal snaps shut, and the dried husk of Grand Summoner Thadrek crashes to the ground, what is left of his Blood Host turns tail and runs. A great shout of victory is taken up in the mouths and hearts of the defenders as Paladins loudly proclaim the greatness of the One God for delivering them from this great evil. For today the bridge has held, as so with it the Defence of the Lower Mithalon is secure. The defenders do not even realize how great a victory this is, for word has not yet reached them of the Republics defeat upon the Farthing Fields. If they had failed here today then Eastern Gant would have been caught between both terrors and utterly crushed. Thanks to aid from both allies and heroes alike, the Republican forces have won a key victory in the war and when the news reaches the capital it is received with great acclaim by all. Hope, however slight, has not yet been extinguished.

### **Chapter 13: The Battle for Almsberg**

Republican forces prepare to meet the full strength of the Cult of Cerebus head on in a pitched battle that will decide the fate of the Republic in the west.

In an attempt to slow the cultists advance and to allow the Republic more time to dig in and consolidate their defences, the Republic's Dwarven allies, with aid from a Druid of Vahlin's Earth, have collapsed a section of road between Welville and the Republican defensive line, utilizing a nearby abandoned mine shaft. The Cultist army has sent its main forces ahead undeterred while only its war machines have been forced to stay behind. Scouts report that a small force of cultists, under the supervision of several demon taskmasters, are attempting to build a bypass around the damaged road. If the Republic can keep the cultist forces divided they believe that the main force of Cultists, in their thirst for blood, will throw themselves against the fortified Republic position without support from their war machines and suffer very heavy casualties. Therefore the cultist work crew must be disrupted at all costs, and the war machines destroyed if possible.

A task force has been assembled for the mission, under the command of Special Infantry Sergeant Taylor Lewis, which includes specially trained Republican Heavy Infantry, a powerful Warmage from the Vestin College of Pyromancy and support from a Deaconess of Vahlin, Ebonethia Sablewood. (A quest appointed by her Bishop before she can be promoted to the rank of Under Priest). They are to be dropped behind enemy lines by the swift and silent High Elf Great Eagle Sentinels whilst the Knights of the Order of the Griffon distract the winged demons that patrol the skies overhead. Once inside the abandoned mine they are to meet up with the Druid Seleena Rainmaker, and the Dwarven miners responsible for the road collapse. The miners have prepared a secondary tunnel which should place them almost directly under the feet of the Cultist work crew. With a final effort from the Druid they should be able to create a massive sink hole beneath the work crew, simultaneously burying them in the rubble and allowing the task force to launch a surprise attack against the vulnerable war machines and the demons guarding them. The Republican scouts stationed in the area have also been ordered to assist in any way possible.

Once engaged however, a single winged demon, one of the Gargoyles perched upon the mast of a cultist catapult, manages to fly off towards Blood Shrine Citadel and presumably rally reinforcements. Meanwhile demon Overlord Zhanaxa leads his demon host in defence of the war machines. At first the battle seems to be in Zhanaxa's favour when several more of his gargoyles come to life and manage to all but wipe out the brave Dwarven miners. But the tide of battle turns when Seleena conjures up a massive Sand Storm, combined with Blood-brood's Rain of Fire. Zhanaxa's humanoid followers are knocked to their feet and then burned alive by the storm of molten sand that is created. Ebonethia tirelessly upholds the group, doing her best to heal the massive casualties that the demons have inflicted on the Republic task force. She saves many, but she has only one priestess, and many bravely give their lives beyond her reach.

Their sacrifices are not in vain however, the Republican forces continue to gain momentum and overwhelm the demons. Taylor sends his elite infantry troopers to chase down and slaughter the now fleeing frost demons, the vile Wolfen, who earlier had debilitated much of the Republic's forces with magical chains of ice. The highly trained infantry men cut down the wolf-like demons with ease. But the massive, six-armed, Hatred Demon is a force to be reckoned with. Even with his forces crushed, he defiantly fights on, nearly slaying Blood-brood. Taylor breaks off from his squad of men to challenge Overlord Zhanaxa, knowing that the burden is his to bear. They trade vicious blows and from the rage and fury with which Zhanaxa attacks it would seem that no mere mortal could face this hideous demon overlord. But Taylor is able to stand his ground with the support of his friends, who circle around the pig-faced behemoth. Working as one they eventually bring the brute down. As Blood-brood's massive axe severs Zhanaxa's head from his shoulders they know they have won the day.

The Republic forces next turn upon their true goal and begin dismantling and setting fire to the Cultists' fleet of war machines. The insidious creations will not participate in the Battle for Almsberg, the taskforce has accomplished its mission, at the cost of much of their own blood. The battlefield is a quagmire of dwarf, human, and demon blood.

The victory is short lived however. One of the keen eyed scouts is first to spot the return of the lone Gargoyle that escaped at the beginning of the battle. The deceptive demon is no longer alone however, it flies at the head of a formation of powerful War Demons, who dwarf the smaller Gargoyle, and even Zhanaxa himself. The War Demons red skin, large curved horns, and massive wings are the very picture of hell itself and they quickly surround the puny Republic taskforce. Knowing that they are doomed, but still ultimately triumphant in their mission. Taylor orders everyone to put their backs together and face their death with weapons and heads held high.

Salvation for the Republic and her allies comes in an unlikely form. From within the Celeros forest the sound of many battle horns erupts. Several among the Republic's ranks recognize the sound. and filled with hope and despair at the same time. There is the rumble of many hooves pounding on the ground in full gallop as the Riders of Ilethin come charging out of the nearby forest in numbers unseen until this time. The War Demons shift positions to face this large war band of High Elves and the two sides crash together in a crash of thunder. The remnant of the Republic taskforce is forgotten as the Riders of Ilethin and Cerebus' most powerful minions engage in battle. While the War Demon's strength is immense they are outnumbered and many of them fall, pierced through by dozens of razor-sharp lances. Recognizing they may be out matched and seeing that the war machines have already been destroyed the War Demons quickly retreat.

As quickly as it began this new battle is over, but the Republic forces do not know if they should rejoice or prepare to defend themselves. The leader of the Riders approaches Taylor and his men, weapon still drawn. Taylor's muscles tense as he prepares to launch himself at the heavily armed Knight, but the High Elf lowers his blade and removes his helm to address the entire group.

"Cailhast has determined that the lesser races are now our allies and though I would purge you of the demon taint on the spot it is no longer my decision. You are to be spared and brought as 'guests' to our headquarters. The Knight Lord of our Order will decide what is to be done with you."

The "guests" are rounded up and marched North into the Celeros forest. However along the way a rider meets up with the main group, bringing news that the cultists forces have been massacred at the Battle for Almsberg. As predicted without the support of their heavy weapons their forces were decimated before they ever reached the Republican lines. After a short skirmish with the entrenched Republic infantry the cultists began to retreat and were slain to the last man when the cavalry rode out against them. Only the demons managed to escape. The Republican's in the group all let out a mighty cheer at hearing the news of the grand victory of the Republic and her allies. But the leader of the Riders scolds them.

"You fools. Every action that the cult takes serves the will of Cerebus. Did not your generals wonder why the cultists charged on in the face of such insurmountable odds? Cerebus and his demon host knew full well that their mortal allies would be massacred, in fact they counted on it. We High Elves have fought this enemy for years beyond the counting of the lesser races, we know his twisted and evil tactics. While Cerebus the Blood-Thirster is present on our realm, every drop of blood spilled in his name serves to strengthen the Demon Prince. Why do you think we go to such lengths to burn the



bodies of those infected with the demon taint. Their blood cannot be allowed to feed Cerebus. With this grand offering presented by his loyal followers he and his demons will now be powerful enough to level the cities of your precious Republic and her allies. Very soon Cerebus himself will take to the field of battle and force all mortals to bow their knee to him. You have won the battle only to lose the war."

The Riders of Ilethin lead them to their new head quarters at the Ruined Temple of As'Paris. The location is familiar to Seleena and her companions, being the same ruined temple they investigated when they first meet several years ago. They did not know however that it was a High Elven temple named after the beloved wife of Ilethin himself. As they enter the hallowed ruins, the mace in Seleena's pack begins to glow brightly, as it always does when she visits this place. Her pack is unable to contain the pure silver light that spills out and the Riders of Ilethin quickly take notice. The High Elves are dumb founded, amongst the collective murmurs one voice calls out loudly.

"At long last! Our search is over. Hope is reborn, for the Drenn'Salar is found!"

## **Part Four: Terrors End**

### **Chapter 14: Agamedien's Rest**

Three days after their victory at Mithalon Bridge the weary defenders finally received reinforcement. A large force of Paladin's, under the command of High Templar Juris Ferdinand, arrived to assist with the defence of the Lower Mithalon. While for most of the defenders this was welcome news for Kal Emdar it was not. Juris had long held ill will towards Kal, after the young Crusader had disobeyed his direct orders and along with his friends had participated in the daring Rescue at Blackmire Tower. The High Templar was not happy about the praise Kal received from his Paladin brothers on his victory several days prior. It should have been Juris who received their praise, but his force of Paladins had travelled so slowly and Kal's small force had arrived ahead of them. Not wanting to share any further glory with the popular Centaur Paladin, Kal was ordered to return to Telestra. Juris spouted off some half hearted notion about the Order needed a hero like Kal on the front lines should the Republic fail at the Battle of Farthing field. Little did any of the paladins know that the battle had already taken place just before Juris arrived out west, and that the Republic was soundly defeated.

Unwilling to argue further with his superior officer Kal reluctantly left his men under High Templar Juris' command and began the journey home. Roginn, ever loyal to his cousin, accompanied Kal on the journey, despite his desire to remain behind and dispense justice upon the foul Cult of Cerebus at the end of his axe. Silus also wished to travel with them, never one to shy away from a fight that he felt he could win, but knowing that there was little profit for him here and desiring to return to Telestra after his time away. But instead he got good and drunk and was too hung-over the next day to leave the camp, so they left without him.

Their eastward journey towards Telestra was long and uneventful, at least until they crossed the Galladras river. Not long after saying farewell to the Garrison stationed at the bridge, they were met on the road by a courier bearing the livery of Telestra. His horse was frothing at the mouth, clearly having been ridden hard and without rest since leaving the capital. As he drew close they noticed that he and his horse were wounded. Bringing his horse to a stop in front of them the beast collapsed, panting

heavily along with its rider. Kal quickly tended to their wounds, sensing immediately the touch of the undead in the wounds.

Once the courier caught his breath he claimed that the One God had smiled upon him, for he had barely escaped Telestra with his life. He reports that the city is now surrounded by a silent army of the undead, the Black Tide of Necrodark has reached the capital, and is now cut off from the rest of Gant. The Courier carries with him a message, penned by Grand Marshal Reginald Terdalion himself.

"Crusader Kal Emdar, Paladin of the Order of the Red Hawk, brother.

The unthinkable has happened. No doubt High Templar Juris informed you that the Republican Army had determined that it would halt Necrodark's advance and meet their army in battle at the Farthing Fields. Through the treachery of their rat-men allies the Skaven, the Republic was defeated and our armies forced to retreat. You should know that several of your friends fought in that battle and were responsible for saving many lives as the army retreated. The Half-Orc Arolthus and your mage friend Sarasith have returned safely, though the Ranger seems to have taken his leave. No doubt he did not wish to be trapped in confining walls of Telestra with the rest of us. I'm sorry to say that his whereabouts are unknown at this time.

Within days of the defeat, the undead armies were spotted from the city walls, and now we are besieged. We did what we could to prevent it but, the city is now surrounded on all sides. It seems as though the dead from all times past have risen against us. Their numbers are beyond counting. Our walls are strong and our resolve firm but we daily repel their attacks and it is only a matter of time before we run out of supplies. Necrodark has but to wait until the city starves or succumbs to illness. Even now our own dead rise up against us within the city walls. Shortly before even the skies were cut off to us by the winged horrors of Necrodark, aerial scouts reported to me that a single Paladin rode towards Telestra. I knew in my heart that it was you. I had hoped you would reach us before the undead but if you are reading this then that is not the case. I tell you now, you may very well be our only hope.

Amidst this great darkness, the One God has moved His hand in our favour. The army has chosen to disregard this new development as a foolish hope, but we men of faith know better. Guided by a dream given to the Patriarch, our scribes have located an ancient text hidden in the Archives. Our best estimates indicate that the original text is thousands of years old. It talks of the Sceptre of Necrodark and an ancient King who foolishly wielded its power to rise above his rivals and build an empire that covered all the land. But there were those who rose up to fight him and his wretched armies. So inspired by their courage a great angel of the High Heavens, called Agamedien, was granted leave to descend to the earth and take up arms alongside the enemies of the Sceptre. With Agamedien's help they were able to eventually defeat the King's undead armies, however the King and his Royal court, so empowered by the evil of the Sceptre could not be killed and so Agamedien imprisoned them along with the Sceptre in a tomb beneath the earth. Four pillars of great holy power were erected around the tomb of the King to ensure he would never break free. The sceptre was set just beyond his reach to torment him for his folly for all eternity.

From what we understand, Agamedien desired to keep watch over the Sceptre however his divine essence could not remain permanently on the earthly plane. The details are not clear, as the text is very old and parts have been damaged with time, but it seems that somehow he was able to find a way to remain behind as the vigilant keeper of the tomb prison. There is mention of a perch, high above a vast plain, where he remained for many years, keeping watch from above over the subterranean prison he had helped create. It is said that he remained there for so long that he watched as a great forest grew up around the perch from the plains below. It is not known what became of Agamedien or the Tomb which he watched over, for beyond this point the book is damaged beyond recovery and no more of the story exists.

However the Tomb mentioned in the text seems to match the description of the complex where you and your companions accidentally discovered the Sceptre of Necrodark several years ago. If the Tomb still existed after so long could this angel, Agamedien, also still exist after thousands of years? If he can somehow be found perhaps he can be roused against his ancient foe?

Due to its relative proximity to the tomb you discovered, our scribes believe that the snowy reaches of the Scarlan Plateau may be the high perch above the great forest mentioned in the text. It all seems unlikely, but yet why would the One God have directed us to this ancient text if not rescue us in our most desperate time of need. I entrust this mission to you. I know you will not fail us. We cannot send you aid, as it is now impossible to escape the city, and the nearest Paladin's that could assist you are fighting to hold back the Cult of Cerebus in the West. You are alone, but the One God and all of prayers go with you. Head northwards, towards Alderglen. The undead have as yet not reached that far north. From there make your way through the Athelnon Forest to the Scarlan Plateau. Beyond that we cannot tell you what to search for.

Make haste Kal, the fate of the Republic hangs in the balance.

God speed,

Grand Marshal Reginald Terdalion"

Without delay the two centaurs bid farewell to the courier and struck out north towards Alderglen. They were not on the road long before they were intercepted by a massive griffon. Both the griffon and its rider bore the shining armour of the Knights of the Order of the Griffon. Lifting his visor the mysterious new comer revealed himself as none other than Sir Edden Todbury. He explains that he had heard after the fact of Kal's dismissal from the front lines, believing it dishonoured Kal's good name, and out of protest left his men under the command of another young Cavalier and left the front as well. He had flown hard hoping to catch up with Kal on the eastward road. Upon hearing of the desperate quest they two centaurs intended to undertake, Edden immediately pledged his services, He claimed that perhaps the events leading up to this moment were no mere coincidence, that the One God was moving to rescue his people in their darkest hour. Much heartened the three companions continued on to Alderglen together.

As they approached Alderglen they stumbled upon a scene of carnage. It appeared as though a force of undead had been dispatched to Alderglen after all. But they were ambushed on the road as they crossed into the forest by the Guardians of Athelnon. This was evidenced by the multitude of arrows that had pierced the bodies of the mindless Cadavers, many of whom were Republic soldiers that had fallen at Farthing Field. The insidious lazar who had commanded the force of undead had been destroyed, and now the remaining undead acted on instinct alone, kill the living. They were no less dangerous in this respect and had slain the Ranger Captain, his death they assumed, the reason that the wild elf rangers had fled the undead's still superior numbers. Only one of their rangers remained behind, covering his comrades retreat. Looking more terrifying than the hulking Grave-Horrors he faced off against was Mute, having cast of his Elven form in favour of the teeth and claws of the werewolf caged within him.

Leaderless, the undead were no match for the four united heroes. The centaurs dealt swiftly with the Grave Guard and the hulking Grave Horrors turned their attention upon Edden and his mount, meanwhile Mute single handily faced of against several undead champions, rending them to pieces with his vicious claws. Not wishing to further delay their quest they pressed onwards, wiping the gore from their blades leaving only burning corpses in their wake.

They spent the night in Alderglen, informing the small local garrison to be on alert for signs of more undead. They left before the sun had risen and with all haste began the journey east through the Forest of Athelnon towards the mighty cliffs of the Scarlan plateau looming in the distance. Their pace was quickened now that Mute had joined their cause, his knowledge of the forest he called home was unparalleled, even amongst his own kind. He guided them unerringly and without incident through the forest until they reached the base of what most considered the impenetrable cliffs that form the foundation of the Scarlan Plateau high above. However Mute's knowledge of the land once again proved invaluable. He lead them up through a narrow cleft in the rocks, into an otherwise hidden pass. Up and up they climbed. The higher they went the more the wind began to howl around them. Even Edden's mighty griffon, Stormstrike, was unable to bear the treacherous gusts among the jagged outcrops of rock and was forced to travel on the ground with the rest of them. Finally they reached the summit of the pass, as the steep ground levelled off and the narrow track gradually opened up into a saddle between two towering peaks. The companions respite from their exhausting climb was short lived however. The entrance to the snow swept plateau beyond was blocked, by the most unexpected of sentinels.

Arrayed across the gap, entrenched behind barricades and manning contraptions whose function was unknown but whose purpose was clearly menacing, was a sizeable force of Gnomes. With the steep peaks on either side the gnomes had the perfect choke point, anyone that wished to approach was exposed for the entire length of the windswept gap, with no cover at all. One of Gnomes called out in a shrill but determined voice. He warned the companions to come no closer, demanding that they turn back at once. When questioned the Gnome had a lengthy reply;

"This area is a highly secure archaeological dig site of extreme importance to the Gnomish Archaeological Society for the Preservation and Discover of Technology to not only Advance our

Understanding of the Universe but also Improve the General Life and Wellbeing of Citizens of the Republic of Gant and Beyond, Including but not Limited to Mechanical, Magical, or Otherwise Fantastic Technologies which may or may not Originate from Beyond the Confines of our Dimension Existence."

Kal tells them of his quest and for a brief moment it seems as though they might consider letting him pass, but the Gnomes suddenly double over in pain hands held to a device that each of them has implanted in their ear. When they recover, they reiterate their position. None shall pass. With no other option but to proceed, the companions ignore the warning and begin to cross the gap. Without hesitation the Gnomes open fire, loosing a volley of electrically charged bolts from some kind of advanced crossbows. Worse yet, the air erupts with arcane blasts from magical/mechanical turrets. As the explosions reverberate between the sheer rock faces the entire gap erupts into chaos.

Kal and Edden fair the worst, their heavy armour seeming to attract the electrified bolts that rain down upon the companions. Despite his stealthy approach Mute is inadvertently caught by an arcane blast randomly fired into the group. Realizing their perilous position the companions do all that they can to rush the Gnomes defensive line. Edden manages to coordinate his charge with Kal and they leave Roginn trailing behind. He uses them as a cover as he does his best to close the distance and get close enough to the gnomes to throw his tomahawks. But for every meter they gain the Gnomes make them pay. Volley after volley is fired at them. Luckily in their zeal to defend the pass, some of the Gnomes overload their weapons, causing explosions among their own ranks. But the Gnomes seem to be unconcerned that several of their number were just vaporized and they continue firing. Had it not been for Kal's healing powers the companions surely would have been cut down to the last man, but finally after enduring numerous wounds and being scorched by arcane energies they reached the gnomes lines. Here the companions have the upper hand, the gnomes drop their contraptions and valiantly strike back with anything they can get their hands on. Roginn is the last to join the fray, leaping over the barricade and wreaking havoc amongst the Gnomish defenders, knocking many of them unconscious. Not wishing to shed unnecessary blood Kal calls for their surrender and finally seeing reason the remaining Gnomes tear the contraptions out of their ears and throw down their weapons.

Exhausted and bleeding the companions want nothing more than to rest but they know that every lost second could mean the end of the city of Telestra, and so they press on. They trudge through the snow and ice of the frozen plateau, following as best they can what appears to be Gnomish footprints. After some time they come over a slight rise. From their elevated position they can see down into the dig site that the Gnomes defending the pass had mentioned. There is a sizable camp set up, and the Gnomes have partially excavated a structure of some kind that appears to be built into the side of one of the large rocky peaks that surround the perimeter of the Scarlan Plateau. It's difficult to tell what the Gnomes have unearthed, as it is still largely buried in snow and ice. But there appears to be an entrance into the structure. The camp is mostly deserted but near the entrance that they have opened there is a large table piled high with a variety of unusual and otherworldly devices. Four Gnomes are hunched over the table, and appear to be debating the function of a particular device. So engrossed are they in their conversation that they do not see the companions spying on them in the distance. As they contemplate their next move, each of the companions simultaneously hears a voice inside their head.

"Please, if anyone can hear me, I require assistance. I have lost control of most of my systems. I awoke to discover that I was being invaded by these fanatical Gnomes. They seek to steal my technology and have taken control of what little functioning systems remain intact after my long rest. I attempted to communicate with them, but for some reason they cannot hear me. As though my signal is being jammed somehow. I cannot fulfill my mission in this state. If you are able, please find your way to my central relay junction chamber. From there I can direct you to assist me in reasserting control."

Though the message is confusing the companions agree that they should investigate, and that whatever this chamber might be, it is likely contained within the structure that the Gnomes of unearthed. So they make their way to the entrance. As they approach one of the Gnomes looks up from his work and takes notice of them. He gives a high pitched yelp of alarm and he and his companions talk so rapidly between themselves that their conversation is unintelligible to Kal or any of his friends. Seeing a chance they contemplate making a break for it, but the Gnomes resolve whatever discussion they were having and one of them produces some kind of control switch which he activates. What had at first appeared to be some kind of gnomish building suddenly comes to life. A fusion of mechanical construct and crystalline arcane energy, the contraption moves to block the entrance. It possesses a form not unlike one of Sarasith's golems, but much larger and clearly not some simple animated construct.

It speaks in a robotic voice, "Magitek Sentinel online, foreign life signs detected, eradication protocols engaged." With the metal behemoth behind them, the Gnomes seem to be confident in their position and draw forth metallic rods which they brandish like weapons. Each device looks slightly different but they all have a metal coil protruding from one end. The gnomes flip a switch on their devices, there is a loud hum and a burst of energy and suddenly a 3 foot long column of swirling silver and gold light extends from the rods in their hands. Kal immediately senses something different about these new Gnomish devices though. Their energy source is not the same as the Magitek sentinel behind them, nor is it the same as the weapons that guarded the pass. These devices seem to be powered by Holy energies. Kal is intrigued, but has little time to ponder the mystery as the robotic Sentinel fires a salvo of rockets from a launching device mounted on its shoulders.

The gnomes fight like true fanatics and the heroes are forced to put them down. This they do with relative ease, however the Magitek sentinel is not so easily dispatched. It boasts a vast array of weapons and attacks which seem to be able to counter almost every offense the heroes mount. To make matters worse, the machine's armour seems all but impenetrable. As the machine deals blow after blow the heroes realize they cannot outlast the sentinel. It is Mute who first decides to try a change in tactics. He notices what he believes might be a weak spot and begins to fire arrows at the machine's crystalline eyes. It is no small feat to hit such a small target, but after several attempts Mute is able to shatter both eyes. The damage seems to effect the sentinel's ability to target the heroes, and its attacks become clumsier and more random.

Following Mute's lead the heroes begin to search for any weak spot they can find, hoping to render more of the sentinel's systems inoperable. Soon both of the sentinel's arms hang idly at its sides, damaged beyond the ability to wield the weapons mounted on them. Also having suffered significant damage to its legs, the machine becomes immobile. But it continues to battle on, and sensing that it

may soon be destroyed a loud alarm goes off and the Magitek machine announces that it has engaged fail safe measures. Dozens of small panels all across the sentinel's armour suddenly open, and waves of arcane energy begin to pulsate outwards damaging everything in close proximity. With no choice but to fight on and destroy the machine that blocks their path, the heroes suffer terrible scorching wounds from the arcane energies unleashed upon them. As they renew their attacks, the sentinel can no longer sustain itself and with one final blast of magical energy it explodes.

The way into the buried structure is now open to them and the heroes waste no time in entering and making their way to what the voice called, the central relay junction chamber. As they rush towards their goal they pass all manner of unusual technology. Even what appears to be simple hallways contain a vast assortment of devices that even the most imaginative gnomish inventor would likely not be able to comprehend. The heroes are puzzled, wondering who built all of this, and what it is meant to do. Kal is especially intrigued, sensing the hand of the divine throughout the structure, as though the structure which they travel through was crafted by the hands of angels.

They hear the voice in their heads again as they wend their way through a maze of hallways and rooms, the speaker still sounds disoriented and confused, but the voice is able to guide them towards the chamber where it claims they can assist it in reasserting control. Exactly what the voice means is a mystery to the four companions as the communication seems to be only one way, with every question going unanswered, but somehow they know they must help if they can.

As they enter the central relay junction chamber the voice directs them to three wall mounted devices. The first the voice refers to as a Power Flow Regulator, comprised of a complex series of lighted switches and panels. There is a diagram above, in a frame of some kind, which seems to move and change as the Power Flow Regulator is manipulated. The voice explains that on its signal the user must divert power to the appropriate system by locking in a complicated pattern with the switches and panels.

Once the power flow is locked into a particular system the voice explains that the system needs to be reset using the second device, a large metallic lever, that it calls the Manual System Reboot. With power flowing to the system the voice believes that the reset lever will allow it to reassert control of the system. Unfortunately they discover that the lever has corroded over time and requires an immense amount of strength to operate.

The voice also claims that as soon as they begin manipulating the power flow the gnomes that have invaded the structure will become aware of it and will attempt to stop them, likely by overloading the power flow in an attempt to disrupt the reboot. In the event that this occurs, there is a third device, called the Pressure Release Override, that can vent excess power to safeguard the system from overload. In order to prevent this button from being accidentally pressed it is protected by a sliding panel. Due to all the malfunctioning systems, the panel opens and closes randomly for only a short period of time, requiring someone that is extremely agile to actually press the button should there be a problem.

Each of the heroes takes up a position at one of the three devices, while Sir Edden guards the doors leading into the chamber. The voice then prompts them to begin, claiming that the first system that must be restored in order for it to proceed any further is the Extra Sensory Response Network. After several attempts the heroes are able to reboot the system. They now hear the voice again, however this time it is audible, and seems to be emanating from several devices mounted in the ceiling.

"Sensors coming online now. These readings are confusing... No time for that now, I detect a spike in the power flow, as suspected, the invaders are attempting to disrupt our efforts. We must proceed to reboot the Autonomous Structural Analysis and Diagnostics System. Once engaged I can properly assess the apparent damage to my systems as well as determine the extent of control the invaders have gained."

In response to their efforts, not only do the gnomish invaders attempt to overload the power flow, they also find a way to begin venting some kind of gas into the chamber. The heroes must act fast before they are subdued by the noxious fumes, and they begin working on the next system. They are successful in rebooting the Autonomous Structural Analysis and Diagnostics System, however the Pressure Release Override has to be pressed at the last minute to prevent catastrophe. Once again the voice fills the room, a calming presence, despite the urgency of the situation.

"Beginning Autonomous Structural Analysis and Diagnostics now. This may take a moment."

The heroes have no choice but to wait, already the noxious gas is making it hard to think straight and they must struggle to remain conscious. There is ominous silence for several minutes, but it seems like an eternity to the heroes, they can feel themselves weakening more with every second that goes by. They are relieved to hear the voice again, though its news is not encouraging.

"Analysis complete. Many systems are inoperable due to structural decay from my long rest. Secondary Internal Drive Motors are operable but are insufficient to repair the damage. Attempt to reboot the primaries." The heroes attempt to reboot the Primary Internal Drive Motors, but are disrupted several times by the gnomes who manage to overload the power flow. Each time the heroes must start again from scratch, losing precious time. When finally they are successful, they receive more bad news.

"Primary internal drive motors will not engage. Power reserves have fallen drastically low, power save mode seems to have been engaged to protect key systems. The Main Divinity Engine Core must be brought online." Once again due to their lack of understanding of what the voice is asking of them, it takes several attempts for the Power Flow Regulator to be properly configured. Once the correct pattern is locked in however they avoid any disruption from the gnomes meddling.

The voice speaks again, "the engine core is spinning up... estimated power output will peak at only 40% of maximum. It should be enough until more systems can be repaired. We can now proceed with rebooting my neural mechanical interface."



The gnomes make one last attempt at overloading the power flow, but the heroes are able to override it and vent the excess energy before it causes any problems. However the noxious gas is too strong and one by one they begin to feel consciousness slipping away. Through a haze they hear the voice speak again.

"Neural Mechanical Interface engaged. Re-routing control to my main terminal now... All operable systems are now under my control once again. Mortal life support systems have been engaged, venting gases from your location. The invaders have been locked out of all key systems, sealing off their location now. They should not trouble us further. I time I will attempt to reason with them, I do not believe their attempts were malicious, they merely misguided by their own curiosity. Thank you for your assistance. I have many questions for you, but rest now and regain your strength, there is much I must do to begin restoring myself to my former strength."

With a sense of peace and safety that none of the companions has experienced since before the start of the war, they gladly accept the rest that their host offers them. It was as if hope radiated from the very walls of the structure itself. They fall into a deep, uninterrupted slumber and would have remained asleep for some time if not for Kal. It must have been the urgency of his mission, still weighing heavily on his great heart, for he awoke suddenly and called out to their benevolent host, seeking an immediate audience, wanting to meet the one whom they had been speaking with all this time.

The voice explains as best as it can that he IS the structure in which they stand, and that the structure is him, a reliquary for his divine essence here on the earthly plane. In that moment Kal knew his mission was successful, though he did not understand exactly how such a thing could be, he was speaking with the Angel of legend, mentioned in the ancient text. He had found Agamedien.

Kal explains to Agamedien that he had been searching for him, that he and his companions had unwittingly uncovered Agamedien's ancient charge, the Sceptre of Necrodark. They had many questions for each other and after some time the truth of things became clear. After defeating the forces of Necrodark many thousands of years ago, Agamedien had asked leave of the heavens that he might safeguard the Sceptre, lest its powerful evil ever be released again. However angels are not of the earthly realm like their fallen brethren the demons, but rather they are spiritual beings of pure divine energy . As such they cannot stay manifest indefinitely in the physical plane of existence. However the One God in His infinite wisdom saw fit to grant Agamedien his request. Therefore, from the very forge of creation itself was created the Battle Ark of Agamedien. A physical construct, charged with divine power, Agamedien had built the Battle Ark in the likeness of the winged warrior he had manifested as when battled the forces of Necrodark here in the earthly plane so long ago. Agamedien's spirit was bound into the construct, his very essence becoming a part of it, simultaneously allowing him to remain in the physical plane but barring him from returning to the heavens whilst still bound to the Ark.

Agamedien had chosen a perch high above the subterranean tomb he had built to contain the Sceptre of Necrodark and its foul master, and from there set himself to endlessly watch. As years turned into centuries and the world around him grew, Agamedien remained ever vigilant. However being a creation of eternity, Agamedien had never known a true concept of the passage of time, he had never

known what it was to grow tired. And so, unaware of exactly when it had happened the mighty angel had fallen asleep. Centuries turned into millennia and the Scarlan Plateau became a frozen wasteland, eventually burying the Battle Ark of Agamedien beneath the snow and ice. During this time a minor imperfection began to manifest itself in Agamedien's creation. Like all things in the earthly realm it began to decay, however slowly. And though he had designed the reliquary of his divine spirit to be able to repair and regenerate itself indefinitely, it could not do so without his consciousness guiding it, and therefore his slumber was his undoing.

Had it not been for the Gnomish archaeological expedition's discover, Agamedien would likely have continued to slumber until his Battle Ark had decay to the point that it could no long contain his essence. In some ways he owed them his existence. Now that he was awake again Agamedien could begin to repair the damage that his long rest had caused and given enough time he could completely restore the Ark. But Kal's story of the rediscovery of the Sceptre of Necrodark, and the black tide of the undead which even now surrounded Telestra, spurns Agamedien to action.

Even in his weakened state, the snow and ice which had almost been his tomb was no match for the immense power of Agamedien. All across the Scarlan Plateau the ground shakes and the loud cracking of breaking ice echoes again and again from the mountain tops like a volley of thunderbolts. Ponderously slow at first, but quickly gaining momentum, the Battle Ark of Agamedien rises up. First one leg, then another, finds purchase on the icy plains of the Scarlan Plateau. His rising is like a tumultuous blizzard, as snow and ice fall off of him in great sheets, smashing into thousands of pieces far below him only to be caught in a mighty rushing wind. Standing at long last to his full height Agamedien would have dwarfed even the tallest towers of Telestra and been able, in a single stride, to step over her stout walls. Arrayed in shining gold and silver armour and carrying a sword so massive that even a giant would not have been able to lift it much less wield it in battle, the Battle Ark of Agamedien is a sight to behold. From his shoulders a fan of blue flame erupts, quickly coalescing into what looks like ethereal wings. They do not flap wildly, such as a bird of the air, but rather billow outwards, lifting his immense bulk several spans above the ground.

He certainly is not without scars from being trapped beneath the ice for so long. Here and there his armour is pockmarked with dents and holes, and his movements at times lack the grace of his former glory. But for a land caught between the vice grip of two unimaginable terrors, Agamedien would be a beacon of hope that would light their darkest hour. The great evil of Necrodark walks this world's realm once more, but now at last, so too does her greatest champion. With firm resolve Agamedien sets off towards Telestra, carrying his rescuers within himself. Agamedien's rest is over, and very soon he will unleash havoc upon his foes.

### **Chapter 15a: Agamedien Unleashed**

As the tallest structure in Telestra the mage college was the first to catch the rays of the rising sun each morning. In more peaceful times many people came to Telestra to gaze in wonder as the towers amethyst spires drank in the morning sun and exploded in a radiant shower of violet and indigo upon the still dark streets far below. But in the evil days which had fallen upon the Republic of Gant no one came to gaze upon the tower in wonder anymore. For the people of Telestra each new day brought

only the realization that the writhing tide of death which had relentlessly assaulted their battered walls through the night was not some terrible nightmare but the simple reality of their doomed existence. One had but to gaze over the once stout and now crumbling battlements to see that Telestra, and with it the entire continent of Gant, was living on borrowed time. The undead forces of Necrodark hurled themselves against the city walls without ceasing. Their heinous machines of war hurled raining death upon the living day and night. There was no respite for the defenders. At dawn the soldiers from the night shift were relieved of their posts and granted their meagre rations and a brief, fitful rest. In their place, what could hardly be called a fresh batch of soldiers, took up the defence, somehow mustering the resolve to hold the black tide of the undead at bay. This morning, as with every morning since the Republic's defeat at the Battle of Farthing Fields, the rising sun striking the Star-Spire College brought no sense of wonder, no sense of hope, only despair.

For the High mages that lived and studied at the Star-spire College the rising sun was usually the signal that it was time to retire. The uppermost spires of the College were home to the mages observatories, from which they gazed upon the celestial bodies of the night sky through magical devices that enabled them to gaze far into the distance. The arrogant Headmaster of the Star-spire, Goshind, still somehow believed that the plight of Telestra's citizens was not really the concern of Celestial Mages. While he had in his mind very graciously agreed to send mages to support the army in the defence of the city, he foolishly thought that within the safe cocoon of his College the undead could not touch him. Many had tried to tell him, even fellow mages, that when the walls of Telestra fell it would only be a matter of time until the insatiable hunger of the undead found a way to overcome their magical defences. But Headmaster Goshind smugly dismissed this notion and as such the vast power and resources of his College were largely still focused on the usual pursuit of the spiritual knowledge of the cosmos.

As the sun's light began to filter through the amethyst walls of the eastern observatory, bathing the interior in soft purple hued tones, the mages silently packed up the stacks of parchment which they had scribbled notes upon throughout the night. As they left the observatory all that could be heard was the sound of their violet robes dragging lightly upon the tiled floors. The magical defences of the College blocked out the unpleasant sounds of the war for survival being fought just outside their walls. However there was one mage that did not retire, one who shook his head in mild irritation at the foolishness of his brothers. While he respected Headmaster Goshind's considerable powers, and was in fact considered to be the Headmaster's star pupil, Undermage Sarasith understood the gravity of the situation and was appalled at his Master's arrogance. Sarasith had faced the undead forces of Necrodark countless times over, on many occasions barely escaping with his life. Unlike his master, Sarasith knew the dire peril that faced all of Gant, the capital, and his own College. More importantly he knew firsthand the terrible power that drove the undead relentlessly forward, the malevolent evil will of the Sceptre of Necrodark.

He recalled with great regret the day he had come face to face with the Sceptre, having unwittingly helped to release it from its ancient prison. As he removed the mask he wore over his disfigured face, a reminder of that ill-fated day, his fingers unconsciously lingered on the chill metal surface. Setting the mask down gently on ornate wooden table nearby, he placed his eye against the

small viewing lens of one of the magical devices that his brothers had recently been using to study the stars. Gesturing with his hands and speaking magical words of power he began to make adjustments to the device. High above in the ceiling the larger bulk of the device began to shift, angling downwards towards the horizon and the rising sun. Regardless of the Headmasters position, Sarasith had done, and would continue to do, what he could to assist the Republic in defending itself. It was not that Sarasith was afraid, he was in fact profoundly confident in his own powers and those of the College, but he knew that those powers could be used to great benefit to the city in its most dire need. And so each morning since the siege had begun he had lingered here in the observatory, using the devices to gaze far into the distance, not to study the stars above but rather to search far and wide for some distant glimmer of hope on the horizon. Truthfully he did not know what he hoped to see, perhaps an army from across the sea come to aid them in their time of need or maybe some sign that deep within the Barren Plains, Necrodark's base of power, some sign of weakness would present itself. For days now Sarasith had forgone the early morning rest to search for something, anything.

This particular morning he decided to search out across the vastness of the Athelnon Forest, not visible to the naked eye from Telestra's towers, but made so by the magical device he commanded. So accustomed had he become to the futility of his searching that at first he almost passed over something remarkable. Luckily there was an uncanny brightness to it and it had caught his eye. He halted the devices ponderously slow panning movement and adjusted it until the bright blue light he thought he had seen came back into the blur of his viewer. With a delicate twist of a nearby crystal his viewer began to pull back, focusing the image as best he could. His jaw suddenly dropped and he forgot to breath. Pulling away from the viewing lens Sarasith rubbed his tired eyes to be sure that they were not playing tricks on him. These instruments where not designed to view things at such relatively close proximities, but rather to view and chart the courses of distance celestial bodies, as such he couldn't be sure he had actually seen correctly. Hesitantly he pressed his eye back against the lens. There it was again, illuminating the shadows casts by the towering Scarlan Plateau, what appeared to be a pair of enormous angelic wings, made of pure blue flame.

Knowing that this report would hardly impress Headmaster Goshind, Sarasith made his way instead to the college's magnificent Hall of Portals. Here the mages maintained row upon row of marble archways, each with a thin pane of pale amethyst crystals set within it. The structures were exceptionally delicate and belied the immense powers stored within them. Each of the crystalline panes acted as a sort of doorway to another place. To those who knew their secrets the crystal panes could be activated, dissolving for a few brief moment into an insubstantial collection of magical power, and allowing anyone who stepped through it to be instantly teleported to a fixed location on the other side. Creating even a single one of the marble and crystal portal structures was the work of many celestial mages, sometimes taking months to stabilize to the point where they were safe enough for a living being to travel through. As such the mages were limited in the number they could operate at any time and were extremely picky about what locations the portals were tied to. None the less it was a very convenient method of travel for Sarasith.

Selecting the portal that would place him nearest the chambers of the War Council, he spoke a word of activation and lightly touched the crystalline pane with his staff. The portal flared to life,

suddenly replaced by a swirling vortex of violet energies that hummed with latent power. Unfortunately, unlike the more conventional spell work that the Master Mages of the Celestial Colleges could perform at will, these portals were a one way trip. Sarasith would have to return to the College grounds through more conventional means. Without a second thought the Elven mage stepped into the portal. For most, teleportation was a unsettling experience, but not for the Celestial mages of the Star-spire College. Early on they become accustomed to their very substance being torn apart and reassembled in some distance place. Teleportation was in fact the only way into or out of the College, part of what made it seem impenetrable to the likes of Head Master Goshind.

There was a sudden flash of light in a discreet corner of the parade grounds outside of the War Council's main chambers, and where before there had been empty air the Undermage was now standing reassembled. The grounds were swarming with guards, security was tight these days, more and more doomsday fanatics had been cropping up and causing trouble in the city as of late. But Sarasith was known to many within the Republic government and even served as a Captain of sorts of the Wardog Battalion, comprised of stone golems fashioned after fierce war hounds, that he had helped create. As such he was able to reach the doors to the council's War Room before any guards finally refused him entry.

"Halt," barked one of the guards, lowering a halberd to block Sarasith's path, "I'm sorry Undermage, the council is currently in session and cannot be disturbed."

Sarasith did not have time to waste arguing with the man about the importance of his discovery and instead muttered an incantation under his breath before addressing the guards.

"You will let me pass," he said simply.

"Forgive me Undermage, I did not realize you were here with important news for the War Council, please proceed inside immediately," the guard replied as though he had know Sarasith's business all along.

Without hesitation Sarasith swept past the guards and entered the antechamber of the Council's War Room. Had he bothered to listen, he would have heard a very puzzled second guard questioning his companion why he had disobeyed direct orders and let the mage pass. There were few who could match the subtle persuasive powers of a well trained Celestial Mage. That being said the men and women gathered in the room that Sarasith now hastened towards would not so easily be swayed as the simple minded guards.

The dimly lit room he entered failed to reflect the grandeur of the collection of high ranking officials, stately leaders, and military advisors arrayed about a massive oak table. Spread out across its well weathered surface was a detailed map of Telestra and the surrounding lands. Some sat hunched over the table, deep in thought, whilst other paced about the room restlessly. It was clear to Sarasith that none of those gathered here in the War Room had slept in days. The stress in the room was a tangible presence, hanging thick like a persistent fog. It was Grand Marshal Reginald Terdalion of the

Order of the Red Hawk, arguably the most powerful and well respected Paladin alive, who first noticed Sarasith's diminutive entrance.

"Undermage, Sarasith I believe they call you, why do you disturb our council?" the Paladin said with mild reproach, "the Celestial College must bear news of great importance to so brazen interrupt us. Speak quickly and leave us to the defence of the city."

"I do not come on the orders of Headmaster Goshind, in fact he does not I'm here. But nonetheless I do have news to share, with you in particular Grand Marshal," replied the mage. "You see rumours have reached my ears that the fate our city may now lie upon the shoulders of a friend of mine, one your Crusaders, the Centaur Kal Emdar. It is said that he was sent on a desperate quest into the east, to search for some clue of the whereabouts of an ancient angelic being called Agamedien."

The Grand Marshal cleared his throat awkwardly, interrupting Sarasith to say, "I do wish you had approached me about this matter in private. There is no need for deception, however I did not want to give this Council, nor the people of Telestra, false hopes. But since it has come to light, I suppose an explanation is warranted." By now the other members of the War Council were exchanging puzzled looks, each murmuring to their neighbour, asking if they knew something about this being called Agamedien. It was Sarasith that answered their question.

"I am acquainted with the name Agamedien," he quietly replied, at the same time absently reaching up to touch the reassuring coolness of his metallic mask. "Years ago I heard that name, issued as curse from a mummified undead King, the former master of the Sceptre of Necrodark, who seemed to believe that Agamedien was his jailor. At the time I assumed that Agamedien was a long dead hero from days before our histories began. I thought little of at the time, but when I heard it issued once more in the wild eyed rumours of an off duty soldier, the pieces fell into place in my mind. I knew then that this near impossible quest for hope was no mere rumour."

As quickly as they could, Paladin and Mage, the two men brought the War Council up to speed. Sarasith explained as much as he could about his previous encounter with the name Agamedien, telling them of the harrowing experience in the subterranean prison-tomb where he and his companions had first rediscovered the Sceptre of Necrodark. Terdalion then went on to explain the letter he had sent to Kal Emdar, in the hands of a frightened courier, moments before the undead had completely surrounded the city. The council was not particularly impressed that the Order of the Red Hawk had withheld this information, and several among them began to raise their voices in anger. However one Republic General bellowed out above his peers, his booming voice reverberating around the empty expanse of the high ceilinged chamber.

"This changes this nothing. There is no sense in arguing about it. While I believe as you do, that Grand Marshal Terdalion was remiss in withholding this information from us, we cannot lay our hopes upon a fool's errand."

"You dare call me a fool!" retorted the head of the Paladin Order. "It is you who is foolish to assume that you can defeat this foe with swords and soldiers alone. We face an enemy that does not

feel fear or pain, that does not tire or rest, that hungers not for food but for the blood of the living. We are surrounded on all sides, and you talk of military tactics. I am no coward, but I am wise enough to know that our hope now rests solely upon the deliverance of the One God."

"You speak of hope, Paladin. That word fled this accursed city when we failed at the Battle of Farthing field. Our food stores are dwindling, disease runs rampant through our streets, and day by day the undead wear down our walls, we are doomed I tell you. Do not speak of hope again Terdalion, or I will rip the word from your tongue myself!" raged the City Quartermaster in response to the Grand Marshal's impassioned speech.

The room plunged into chaos, all those gathered were now on the feet, yelling and flinging accusations about the room. Some were even reaching for their weapons. Amidst this wild fray the chamber was suddenly lit up bright as day by a flash of violet light and a loud thunder crack as Sarasith slammed his staff down hard on the stone floor. High above in the dome of the War Room a vast array of stars erupted into life for the briefest moment, each a tiny brilliant pin prick of light, blinding the men below and silencing their angry voices.

"Hear me!" Sarasith roared, "I have spent time beyond counting searching for some distant event on the horizon. While my brothers go to their rest each morning I remain in the observatories high above this city, ever vigilant for some sign, some portent of hope that Telestra may yet overcome this foe. And this very morning, almost obscured in the rising of the sun, I have seen a pair of gigantic angelic wings, wreathed in blue flame. Something approaches this city, at remarkable speeds. Mark my words, before the sun rises again tomorrow it will be upon us."

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Sarasith's meeting with the War Council had been exhausting, after delivering his news he had expected the War Council to react quickly and decisively but instead they had argued endlessly amongst themselves. Even the wise Grand Marshal was pulled into the pointless debate. Eventually Sarasith had slipped out of the War Room unnoticed and had gone to his rest, knowing that one way or another tomorrow would be a memorable day, if only there would be someone left to remember it.

His dreams were fleeting, and disjointed. He dreamt of things outside of time, confusing and conflicting things. Every time he came close to understanding what it meant, the knowledge was suddenly snatched away from his fingertips. Eventually he awoke, having slept much longer than he intended. By now his brethren would be preparing to retire, dawn was almost upon them.

Before Sarasith could even reach the observatories dawn came. At least that's what he thought it was at first, the slightest brightening of the sky in the east. However this was no natural dawn, the light that filtered in through the many windows of the tower was not the golden light of dawn, but rather a brilliant blazing blue light, that flickered like flame. As Sarasith had claimed, Agamedien was approaching, only moments ahead of the rising of the sun.

By the time Sarasith had made his way to the Hall of Portals once more, and then in the blink of an eye on to the parade grounds outside of the War Council's chamber, the entire city was bathed in the strange blue dawn. Everywhere curious and fearful men and women peered out from their half opened windows and doors, wondering what new terror this strange blue light held in store for them. On the parade grounds the members of the War Council were quickly gathering together to assess this new development. Sarasith boldly approached them, a smug smile lying unseen beneath his mask, the mysterious blue flame of Agamedien's approach dancing across its reflective surface.

It was difficult to look directly at the light, however all could now plainly see what only the Celestial mages enchanted viewing scopes had seen the morning before. In the distance, approaching with uncanny speed, was what appeared to be a gigantic pair of angelic wings made of pure blue flame.

"You did not hear me yesterday, hidden in the ignorant darkness of your War Room, but now outside in the open you see with your own eyes that which I foretold was coming," Sarasith spoke solemnly, casting an accusatory finger at the loose gathering of men and women.

"What would you have us do *Undermage*?" replied the an outspoken General, contempt dripping from his every word. Now turning to address to his peers he said, "here stands one of those who believes their precious tower could never fall to the undead, on his advice should we march our armies out like lambs to the slaughter on the foolish hope that some long-lost angelic being has come to aid us? How can be sure this is not some new terror unleashed upon us by Necrodark? For the moment we are safe behind our walls, why throw that away. Let us wait and see what these *wings of flame* really are. And if it is truly a mighty angelic being, then why should we expend anymore of our own soldiers lives, who have already paid so high a price in blood only to be brought back as mindless soldiers of Necrodark. I say let the One God spend his own soldiers to win a war we never even started."

Throughout the group there was nods and murmurs of approval, as one by one the members of the War Council agreed that the army would not ride forth. Sarasith could not believe his own ears. Only one amongst the Republic's brightest and bravest leaders raised his voice in dissention.

Stepping forth Grand Marshal Terdalion addressed the council, "brothers and sisters, I know you have borne the weight of countless deaths upon your shoulders, and I know too, that the utter darkness that is the armies of Necrodark has stolen away your hope and fighting heart. In that respect, Necrodark has already won, for you have allowed yourselves to be cowed in self-pity. I know in my heart, as do you, that the salvation of our fair city even now approaches. Rise up and embrace this gift of the One God in our most desperate time of need. For if we leave this angelic being to face the endless hordes of Necrodark alone, whilst we cower in fear, how can we even call ourselves worthy of such a gift."

The silence of the War Council was deafening. They stared blankly back at the Paladin and then as one, turned their backs on him and retreated to their chamber. The shoulders of the old Paladin dropped in defeat and he stalked off without another word. Sarasith followed suit, knowing that there was nothing more that could be said to sway the council's decision to allow Agamedien to fight their enemies for them, alone and unaided.



Not knowing what to do next, Sarasith made his way to the eastern gatehouse and climbed the long stairs leading up to the battlements. From here at least he would have a good view of Agamedien as he drew ever closer. Gazing out over the ragged stone battlements Sarasith saw a writhing mass of undead soldiers stretching as far as he could see, many of them wearing the arms and armour of the Republic army, their colours darkened by dried blood. It was like standing on the shoreline of a storming black sea of death and decay. In the distance the foul war machines of Necrodark were preparing another salvo of boulders and disease ridden projectiles to pummel the city walls. However the salvo would never be fired.

All along the battlements Republican soldiers gazed in uneasy wonderment at the bright blue light in the distance, it was drawing ever closer and it could now be seen that the light was not merely disembodied wings of flame, but rather they were attached to an enormous armoured figure. The figure was the very picture of a noble knight arrayed for battle in his most splendid armour. It was Telestra's first true glimpse of the Battle Ark of Agamedien, and they stood in rapt awe at the immense size and glory of this new arrival. As it drew near the furthest edge of the undead army, the angelic construct seemed to hover above the ground, held aloft by its brilliant burning wings. Then, without warning, the bright shining blue flame of Agamedien's wings flared to such intensity that everyone had to look away or be blinded. When they looked again they saw that the blue flame had gone out and that Agamedien had propelled his Battle Ark high into the sky. With a earth shattering boom that knocked all but the stoutest of men on the wall off their feet, Agamedien came crashing down in the midst of the cruel war machines of Necrodark. The initial shockwave of his heavy armoured feet crashing into the ground shattered the sturdy structures of the surrounding war machines like kindling. In a booming flash the blue flaming wings returned, however this time they did not draw Agamedien upwards but rather swept across the ground beneath him in a wide circle. Anything that the flame touched was instantly incinerated. Wherever the wings passed only smouldering ash was left in its wake. In the mere blink of an eye, Agamedien had laid waste to the undead's primary siege weapons. However the angel's assault on the undead forces was a tiny ripple in a seemingly endless ocean of the undead. So vast were their armies that it seemed they took little notice of the angel's presence on the battlefield and continued to slowly and unwaveringly surge against the city walls, as they had done for countless mornings before this.

If Agamedien was daunted by the immense task he faced in purging the battlefield of the undead scourge, he did not show it. With vigour he charged across the battlefield, unleashing his full fury. Each step crushing hundreds of undead, never to rise again. As he charged he swung his massive sword, holy powers arced across its surface like silver and gold lightning, and the undead fell beneath it as wheat to a sickle. With his other hand he reached out towards the heavens, and from his opened palm an orb of flashing light, blazing like the sun, shot forth. It arced slowly across the sky and finally fell far to the west. When it hit the ground it erupted, vaporizing skeletons and sending shambling cadavers skyward. From the battlements a mighty cry went up. For the first time in many weeks Men of the Republic felt hope kindle in their hearts. They watched as the Hand of the One God at last moved in their favour, sending this brilliant angelic soldier to save them. They redoubled their efforts, raining

arrows and boiling oil down upon the undead trying to scale the walls, doing what little they could from behind their walls to stem the black tide.

As hope rose up like a tangible aroma from the city, the undead finally seemed to take notice to the intruder in their ranks. Whatever dark will the master of the Sceptre of Necrodark wielded, it was now focused on Agamedien. The skies were suddenly filled with all manner of winged undead terrors. Bone dragons, skeletal constructs, and gigantic rotting bats only a few of the minions under Necrodark's sway. As one, a large flight of zombie drakes wheeled about and flew straight at Agamedien, spewing putrid diseased breath at him in a thick cloud. As the greenish vapours raced towards the Battle Ark they seemed to encounter an invisible shield of holy energies that flared to life in the presence of the diseased breath. In response dozens of rockets shot out from a small aperture on Agamedien's shoulder. The dragons scattered but they could not escape, the rockets seemed to have a life of their own, following them through every dive and roll. Most of the undead drakes that had so brazenly attacked Agamedien did not survive the ordeal.

But there were many more that rose up to fill their ranks, among them an immense Bone Dragon that dove at Agamedien from behind. The great skeletal beast managed to penetrate Agamedien's armour with its razor shape tail, lodging itself into his back it used this as an anchor to lay several punishing blows with its skeletal claws. Agamedien reached back and tore the dragon loose with one hand, grasping it around its long neck he swung the creature swiftly around and used it as a flail to decimate a massive swarm of approaching feral zombies to his left. Though the wound was minor, the undead seemed to be invigorated by the fact that this angelic soldier was not indestructible.

From his position on the eastern gate house Sarasith watched as more and more of the undead turned from the walls of Telestra to face this new threat. The mage marvelled at the vast powers that Agamedien wielded, but knowing all too well himself that all power has its limits, he began to watch more closely for signs that Agamedien could yet be defeated. Snatching a viewing scope from a nearby officer Sarasith scanned the Battle Ark with a discerning eye. It was then that he noticed, that as magnificent as Agamedien appeared at a distance, his armour showed signs of damage that clearly existed prior to his engagement with the undead forces. Worse yet, he could see small black specks swarming up the legs of the Battle Ark, the deceptively agile forms of feral zombies, along with bloated undead spiders carrying skeletal riders. Every few seconds there would be pulse of holy energy that would flash across the surface of Agamedien's armour, sending the clinging undead creatures crashing down to their destruction. But his quick intellect told him the terrible truth, with each pulse less and less of the undead were sent flying. It was only a matter of time, the smallest of foes could prove his undoing.

"All power has its limits," he muttered to himself. The Celestial mage knew then what his Crusader friend had already discovered. Agamedien's long rest had left him in a weakened state of disrepair. Without another glance, he tossed the scope back to the officer and hurried off the battlements. If someone didn't do something soon, Agamedien would very well be overwhelmed.

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Sarasith knew that this new information would not sway the Generals. They had already made up their minds and would see Agamedien fall long before they ever set foot outside of the city walls, walls that would eventually become their tomb. But there was one faint hope that he had not yet explored. It didn't take Sarasith long to locate the man whom he was looking for. Colonel Blackwald was the officer in charge of the recently formed Golem Regiments, whose particular arm of the Republic Army did not officially exist. As such there was a fair amount of bureaucratic red-tape involved with issuing orders to the Golem Regiments. It was Sarasith's hope that the orders to stand down and await the outcome of the battle raging outside the city walls had not yet reached the Colonel. He tracked down the Colonel in the unassuming warehouse that was their base of operations and pleaded his case, explaining what he had seen while up on the battlements.

"Colonel Blackwald, you must realize that if ever our Golem's were to be of service this is their time. They can wade into the undead's ranks with no fear of death, for even if they are defeated they cannot be raised up again to fight for Necrodark," Sarasith implored, "we must do what we can to aid Agamedien."

"I was thinking the same thing," he replied in his usual gruff and abrupt manner. "I actually had just finished activating the whole damn regiment just before you got here. Of course someone from the War Council got here first and gave me orders to stand down..."

Sarasith's head drooped in disappointment, "then we are lost."

The Colonel chuckled and slapped the mage on the back firmly, "Cheer up tin man, I've got no intention of following that order. Let's get these beasties moving, all of 'em."

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Despite the spectacle caused by Agamedien's ongoing battle with the undead, Colonel Blackwald and Sarasith still managed to create quite a stir as they marched through the streets of Telestra with five full battalions of Golems behind them. No one from the War Council showed up to detain them, nor would they have been able to anyways. They made for the market square situated at the eastern gate of the city. In times of war this was where the army mustered before marching through the gates. While there should have been many more of them, the Golem Regiments would have to do. If they were the only ones to march out to aid Agamedien then so be it, both men knew they would probably die. Sarasith had to marvel at Blackwald's courage, death for him would mean un-death, or possibly worse. At least Sarasith knew that should he perish his soul would be safely trapped within the device Headmaster Goshind had given him when he had lost his leg, and nearly his life, once before.

"Are you sure you want to come with me?" Sarasith directed the question not to the Colonel, knowing full well that the veteran officer would be insulted that asked. Instead the question was directed telepathically to his unicorn mount Stormstride. The mage was riding ahead of the pack and was surprised by the response he received from the notoriously stubborn creature.

"This one time, I'll forget my better judgement," replied Stormstride, "I'm with you, I don't know why, but I'm with you." As they rounded the corner and entered the market square the unicorn quietly added , "just don't tell anyone I went along willingly, I've got a reputation to uphold you know..."

Sarasith chuckled to himself, but his mirth caught suddenly in his chest. Something unexpected awaited in the market square. Arrayed in orderly rank and file was every last soldier of the Vesticar Remnant. Knight and infantryman alike, stood side by side, equal in all respects for they were all ready to give their lives willingly. Grim faced, these were men that knew no fear, who were driven by one solitary force, revenge for their fallen city. And at their head was one solitary man, whom they now followed without question. Sarasith trotted up to the front of the small but dangerous force of men to speak with their leader. As he pulled alongside the stoic commander of the Vesticar Remnant Sarasith glanced down at him from his mount, another smile hidden beneath his mask.

Here was someone of few words but prone to action. A Half-Orc who had once been a mere court executioner and was now the undisputed leader of this ragged band of warriors. Many would view him as a Zealot for the intensity of his beliefs, but none could argue that his faith in the One God was as unshakeable as the most devout Paladin. He stood informally, one of his bulky arms resting casually on a fierce looking raptor beside him. At first he seemed to not even notice the Mages arrival, and continued to aimlessly sharpen the long claws strapped to his forearms. The raptor beside him however appeared far less relaxed, its nostrils flared wildly and its keen eyes darted about, observing everything around it. The beady yellow eyes betrayed the frightening intellect that the beast possessed. It was obviously eager for action, the long scythe like claws on its feet clacked against the paving stones impatiently.

"What took you so long," Arolthus grunted, and with little effort vaulted into the saddle of this raptor mount. His troops seemed to take this a signal of some kind, for they all snapped to attention.

Before any explanation could be given there was another commotion from the opposite end of the square. There was a loud clattering of hooves on the stone cobbles and the almost musical sound of men and horses riding full tilt in heavy armour. Into the square rode the Paladin's of the Red Hawk. They were small in number compared to a Cavalry Brigade, even smaller yet, due to how thinly they had been forced to stretch their numbers in recent times. But they were nonetheless impressive to behold when riding in force, faith and hope emanated from them like a beacon. Grand Marshal Teraldion rode directly to where Sarasith, Arolthus, and now Colonel Blackwald, were sitting in conversation upon their mounts.

"My apology for the delay Undermage, when I heard that the Golem Regiments were preparing for battle I thought to convince the Generals one last time to ride with us," declared the old Paladin, as he lifted the visor of his resplendent helm. "Sadly, it was a futile effort. However for our part the Order of the Red Hawk will ride out to aid Agamedien, even if it is our death. The One God will guide our hand this day and should we fall we will receive a hero's welcome when we join him in paradise."

They spoke a few brief words, planning how best to utilize their small but lethal force. It was decided that the Ironwall and Stonewall Golem Battalions would be positioned at the head of the column, when the gates opened the undead would undoubtedly try to rush through. The bulky slower moving bipedal golems would easily be able to push the undead back and create a wedge to make a

hole for the rest of the troops to charge through. Once the gate was secure the faster moving quadruped Golems of the Siegebreaker and Steeltooth Battalion's would burst through and act as a spear head, driving deep into the enemies ranks and creating a lane for the living soldiers to travel though as the strove to reach Agamedien. The Knights and cavalrymen of Vesticar, along with Arolthus, Sarasith, Colonel Blackwald, and Grand Marshal Terdalion, as well as Sarasith's own Wardog Golem Battalion would lead the charge of the living. Behind them would come the infantry. These stubborn foot soldiers would be invaluable once they reached Agamedien, as the living would soon be surrounded on all sides. The infantry would provide a wall of shields and spears that could hold off the undead much more effectively than mounted troops whose strength was in the charge. However the mounted troops would outpace the infantry quickly and so it would fall to the Paladins to create a protective wall of holy power around the infantry and hold the darkness at bay until the infantry could catch up.

They wasted no time, as soon as the troops were formed up the gates opened and the large iron Golems ploughed ahead. As expected many of the undead turned to rush the now open gates but they could not penetrate the Ironwall. Slowly the golems pushed outwards, as they spread out the smaller Stonewall Golems filled in the gaps. Soon a small pocket had been created. At a command from Blackwald the Golems then shifted, splitting down the center and forcing the undead to left and right of the gate. Several groups of fast moving feral zombies rushed to exploit the opening in the center only to be crushed to pieces when the mass of Bronze Golems that made up the Seigebreakers came rushing through the hole, any that feebly attempted to rise again were crushed a second time by the onrush of the slightly smaller sized, but no less dangerous, Steeltooth Battalion. The Golems pressed onwards and with most of the undead now rushing to engage Agamedien their backs were turned. The slow moving undead were cut down like grass before a ravenous swarm of locusts. As expected this opened up a wide swath of ground ranging outwards from the gatehouse towards Agamedien. Seeing this new offensive issuing forth from their own city a mighty roar was heard all along the battlements.

Unclear as to what was occurring the undead mindlessly began to spill back into the lane that the Golems were cutting through their ranks. However the living now charged through in earnest. The easy part was over, the Golems where doing their work, and it now was up to the living to reach Agamedien unscathed.

Sarasith decided he would do what he could to aid them in reaching their goal. Regardless of his Masters warning against using such a powerful spell in an uncontrolled manner, Sarasith spoke forth words of immense power and summoned forth the Star of Goshind. Even in the now morning bright sky the star shone forth with a radiance unlike any star Sarasith had ever seen. The undead were confounded by it, even fearful of it, if such a thing was possible. Sarasith felt the power of the cosmos surge through him. He began calling star fire down upon the foe, blasting apart any undead that stood in their path. And to aid the infantry coming behind them he laid magical traps to protect their flanks. Upon being triggered the traps tore the undead to pieces with the unrelenting forces of gravity. Onwards they rode, cutting down any foe within reach of their weapons. So focused were the foe on destroying Agamedien, that very few of the living were slain, even so deep into the enemies ranks.

For his part Agamedien must have noticed their approach for he began to work his way towards the brave men that were coming to aid him. Perhaps he was moved by their bravery for he seemed to fight on with renewed vigour, blasting the undead to dust in droves with beams of holy power from the eye slits of his helm, and causing chaos in their ranks simply by walking towards the onrushing Golems.

As they drew closer Sarasith could finally see why the undead were so intent upon scaling the armoured legs of the Battle Ark. Upon closer examination they seemed to me many holes worn in the angels armour by the passing of untold centuries. Most of them appeared to have been recently patched, however at about hip height on both sides of Agamedien was a gaping hole that was obviously too large to patch. It was these two holes that the undead were trying to reach. His defences continued to repel the invaders as best as they could but the undead were getting very close to their goal. Had Sarasith and the others delayed any longer Agamedien might have already fallen.

Sensing them drawing so close now, and not wishing to accidentally harm the living, Agamedien planted his feet firmly. While this saved anyone from getting inadvertently crushed beneath his massive feet it allowed the undead to renew their attack. Not only did they attempt to gain entry to the Battle Ark by climbing him, winged skeletal constructs and other flying minions of Necrodark were now trying to air lift troops into the breach on each of his legs. Most of these attempts ended disastrously for the undead, but some were getting dangerously close.

There was a sudden war cry issued from the breach on the left side and out flew Sir Edden Todbury upon his fearsome griffon, Stormstrike. In one fluid motion he skewered a giant bat with his lance whilst his griffon tore the wings off of a skeletal construct. Both foul creatures fell crashing to the ground. The brave Knight, who had been instrumental in the revival of the Order of the Griffon, soared high above the battlefield and let forth a great peal on his battle horn. Within moments the call was taken up by scores of Griffon Knights, who could be seen flying up from their Aviary in Telestra. They covered the distance quickly, and though they seemed surprised to see him they fell into formation with the courageous young Cavalier without hesitation, doing what they could to defend Agamedien from the aerial assaults. The Griffon Knights were vastly outnumbered, but they fought with the savagery of the beasts they rode. Still it was not enough, the undead were on the brink of gaining entrance to the Battle Ark.

"Someone needs to get up there and defend the breach," Blackwald yelled to the others above the din of battle. They had finally reached their destination and were now trying to clear out a defensive perimeter around Agamedien's feet for the soon to arrive infantry. However the enemy was thick here and it was proving a challenge.

"A sound plan, but we cannot hope to scale Agamedien with so many undead swarming him," replied the Grand Marshal, as he effortlessly shattered a passing skeletal warrior with the tremendous mass of his riding hammer.

"Sarasith, you High Mages possess the power of teleportation, don't you have a spell you can cast to get us up there?" Blackwald suggested hopefully, at the same time dodging nimbly in the saddle

as a feral zombie leapt through the air in an attempt to de-saddle him. As the slaving abomination flew past him Blackwald gutted it with his long curved blade.

"I have been studying such spells, but they are forbidden to one of my rank. I am sorry but I do not think I can help," was Sarasith's reply.

"Perhaps I can be of assistance," a new voice sounded, though Sarasith immediately identified that he had not heard the voice out loud, but rather inside his own thoughts. Arolthus had a similar expression on his face and Sarasith knew he had heard it too. The others seemed to not have heard the voice however. "Forgive the intrusion into your thoughts, but I have precious little time. I am Agamedien, Angel of the High Heavens and sworn Guardian of the Sceptre of Necrodark. High above you your friends make preparations to defend me from within. I could sense that their thoughts were of you both, and another companion, a Halfling called Silus. They seem to think you can be of great assistance. My power reserves are drastically low however I believe I can spare a short burst of energy to transport you aboard. You must prevent the undead from gaining access to my internal systems or all is lost. Please standby..."

Arolthus appeared dumbfounded by the brief interaction with Agamedien, knowing intrinsically the raw divine power that had just touched their minds, however Sarasith was quick to recover. He turned to the Colonel and the leader of the Paladin's and blurted out as quickly as he could, "Arolthus and I go to defend the breach, take up position around Agamedien and do what you can to stem the flow of the undead. We will do our best to deal with any that get through."

Before either of the two men could reply there was a low humming sound followed by a precipitous flash of light and the Mage and Half-Orc were simply gone, along with their mounts.

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"Well Edden's gone for now and I think those crazy gnomes have their hands full trying to hold Agamedien together, so it's just the three of us," Roginn stated matter-of-factly. "I guess I'll take the one breach Kal, and you and Mute can have the other."

"While I question not your courage cousin, I do question that moonshine soaked brain of yours. You cannot possibly hope to hold them off alone," Kal replied in surprisingly good humour considering their predicament.

"Not alone," came a barely audible whisper from Mute, who was now pointing at the forms of Sarasith and Arolthus, who seemed to have appeared with a bright flash of white light and a tell-tale high pitched hum. Roginn rubbed his eyes furiously, thinking perhaps he had too much to drink again, but could not rid himself of these apparitions. Thinking nothing further of it he gave them both a firm bear hug and welcomed them aboard.

"Well that evens the odds somewhat. Curious, I was just thinking about you two, " said Kal

"That's what Agamedien told us," intoned Sarasith. "We had ridden out with a small force to assist him in his battle with the undead and he told us that you were here and that you needed our help to defend the breaches in his armour."

"Small force?" interrupted Kal, "Why hasn't the entire Republic army ridden out, don't they realize that Agamedien cannot possibly defeat all of Necrodark by himself?"

"The rest of the story can wait, the situation is more dire than I think you realize, we must see to Agamedien's defences immediately," the Mage replied.

"Fair enough, let's get to fighting," Roginn chimed in eagerly.

"Well there is an odd number of us, how should we split up?" said Kal, ever practical, "where's that Halfling of ours when you need him?"

"Look," whispered Mute again, pointing behind them, "see?"

As one the group turned to look at whatever it was the contemplative Wild-elf ranger was pointing at. As it turned out it was yet another mysterious appearance. This time however was different, instead of there being a bright flash of light, the new arrival had appeared as if out of thin air. He also appeared to be unconscious. From the size of the heap that lay on the metal floor they guessed it was indeed a Halfling, and moments later when the heap came too with a low groan they saw that it was none other than their infamous and highly controversial companion, Silus.

Silus sat up slowly, eyes squinting fiercely against the light as one who had spent many days in darkness. It took him a few moments before he could even fully open them, and even then he stared about in bewilderment, trying to shield his eyes from the brightness with his small but dexterous hands.

"Where am I? How did I get here?" Silus began slowly, as though he had not spoken in a long time and was unfamiliar with the sound of his own voice, "the last thing I remember... was waking up hung over after winning that victory at the Lower Mithalon, and then just black... It feels like I've been asleep for months." The confused Halfling gave himself a shake to try and recuperate.

Roginn reached down and offered him a drink. "This'll clear your head little buddy," he joked.

"Anomalous readings detected, unidentified surge of power. Origin... unknown. Presence of Halfling life form detected. This was not my doing, further scans required. Cannot spare resources at this time. Incoming flight of Zombie Drakes, shields up..." Agamedien's voice sounded in their heads again. This only served to further confuse the stunned Halfling.

"What the heck was that... what's going on..." said a bewildered Silus.

"You tell me Silus, where the hell have you been and how did you get here?" growled Arolthus

"That's a mystery for another day, I for one am glad Silus is with us once more, we shall need his blades," Sarasith concluded.



"Correct," it was Agamedien again, "I have detected undead intruders. Internal defences are not operable at this time. Heroes, you must defend the breach so that I can continue to fight the undead on your behalf. If they gain access in great numbers they will be able to destroy my Battle Ark from within. I will do what I can to aid you, go now. I must deal with several undead giants approaching from the south. "

Roginn pulled his saddle axe from the sling on his back, its keen axe head spontaneously erupting in flames in his hands. "Well boys, who's with me?"

### **Chapter 15b: Agamedien Defended**

As Roginn rushed off to towards the breach in the starboard side he threw back another swig of his signature 'Mule Kick' Centaurian Moonshine. He was already well into his supply and they all knew he was spoiling for a fight, lucky for them the more he drank the more of beast he became in battle.. With a hint of a smile Kal watched his impetuous cousin disappear down one of the many access hallways that riddled the interior of the Battle Ark. Roginn was nothing if not predictable.

"Arolthus, Mute," Kal barked, taking control of the situation, "go after him and back him up, he's liable to challenge all of Necrodark to single combat, make sure he doesn't get himself killed."

"With pleasure," Arolthus grunted and stalked off after Roginn. His obedient raptor trotted after him without a second thought. Mute merely raised his bow and nodded in silent agreement and then fell into step behind the Half-Orc, his own menagerie of animal companions in tow.

"Silus, no doubt you're confused." Kal now addressed the stunned Halfling, who was at last on his feet again. The small but deadly assassin was curiously investigating what appeared to be some new additions to his equipment, in particular a blade tucked into his belt that seemed to be solid steel one moment and ethereal shadow the next. Kal attempted only a brief explanation, "Suffice it say that the undead surround us and if they successfully invade this structure all hope of survival is lost. We need your help."

"I'm with you," was all the Halfling said. Replacing the mysterious blade into his belt he suddenly sprung into action, and with the uncanny ability gained from years of intense training, within moments he melded into the darkness of the dimly lit interior of the Battle Ark and became all but invisible, a silent ally to strike from the shadows when least expected.

"Time is of the essence gentlemen," Sarasith chimed in, "let us proceed."

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By the time the heroes arrived at their respective locations the undead invasion of the Battle Ark had already begun, some new and even more dangerous breed of enraged feral zombies had managed to climb up Agamedien's legs and were now tearing at his insides with random violence. As soon as they smelled the scent of the living they eager left their task and leapt upon the heroes, ravenous and possessing a hideous strength that seemed impossible given their rotting and diseased forms. But the heroes had faced the undead countless times before and had long since overcome the utter shock and

revulsion of doing battle with creatures such as these. They dispatched them quickly, though not without receiving wounds of their own.

However more and more of the enraged zombies began to board the Battle Ark, clawing their way up and leaping through the breach into the fray. Knowing how much was at stake the heroes refused to back down and beat back the undead with a combination of steel, muscle, magic, and faith. They managed to stem the tide, but had only a moment to catch their breath before Necrodark unleashed more of its horrors upon them.

In the skies round about Agamedien, Sir Edden Todbury and his valiant Griffon Knights fought hard to prevent any of the winged skeletal constructs from approaching the breaches in the Battle Arks armoured exterior, but there was just too many of them. The skies were thick with the presence of the dead. Several constructs broke through and deposited a new wave of undead into the breach before retreating to re-engage the Griffon Knights. Lead by the tortured form of one of Necrodark's Lazars, the undead priests whose souls were bound to their own lifeless bodies in eternal torment, the undead advanced. With the Lazar was a well armed cadaverous champion of Necrodark, a strange glowing sigil marked its forehead and it seemed to act with an intelligence other than its own. Next came what at first appeared to be a freshly raised skeleton, it bore no weapons or armour, and the heroes would have likely ignored it until the other more obvious threats were addressed, but before their eyes the skeleton suddenly burst into flames and without sparing a moment hurled a massive fireball into their midst. This sent the heroes scattering and as the skeleton advanced forward it left behind it a trail of deadly flame. But most dangerous of all was the arrival of a squat, bulky, and nightmarish skeletal construct whose form could only have been dreamt up by the most diabolical of minds. The heavy construct of bone, iron, and chains was dropped through the breach by two of the smaller winged constructs, and immediately launched itself forward with a vicious assault. A pair of heavy iron spikes shot outward from what resembled a mismatch of skeletal troll and ogre shoulder blades, causing massive destruction in the heroes midst. Worse yet each of the spikes had chains attached to it, which the construct used to rapidly pull itself forward. In the space of only a few adrenal charged heartbeats chaos erupted in the small compartment where the heroes fought to defend Agamedien. This was no mindless wave of zombies, these creatures fought with well laid strategy and deadly purpose.

The chaos of the battle took its toll on Roginn and his friends, the ferocity of the attack had them back on their heels. Roginn was pulled into hand to hand combat with the marked Champion by a ghostly hand formed of pure Necromantic energies. Before he could recover he was caught square in the head by the flat of the cadaver's enormous zweihander sword and it was some time before the centaur could shake the stars out of his eyes. Unable to protect his allies, as was so often Roginn's role on the battlefield, the rest of the undead forces brought a dazzling array of attacks to bear against the remaining heroes. Arolthus' raptor was forced to retreat down the hallway after being levelled by a massive blow from the constructs bone scythes. They fought for their very lives, but to little avail and would have likely been defeated had they not finally found their stride and began to focus their attacks to bring down their foes one at a time.

On the port side of the Battle Ark the heroes fared better after the initial onslaught, due in part to the swift intervention of Silus. As was his way, the diminutive Halfling worked his way up the battle field largely undetected, and unleashed a series of deadly blows from behind the Lazar. This, combined with untrained spiritual powers that had inexplicably come to the Halflings mind in the heat of battle, proved to be too much for the Lazar and it fell, spine severed by the Halflings mysterious new weapon. Without the support of the Lazar the remaining undead forces fell one after the other.

Sensing that they were defeated the marked Champions on both sides touched the sigil on their foreheads and instantly exploded in a bright flash of necromantic force that turned their weapons, armour, and mangled body parts into deadly flying projectiles. Although the present threat seemed to have been defeated the heroes knew that the battle was far from over. On both sides of the Battle Ark they saw to their wounds and recovered as quickly as possible. The respite was brief.

"Your allies below have successfully established a perimeter defence and have effectively cut off the flow of undead attempting to gain access by scaling my exterior, only a handful remain out of their reach. I will attempt to stop them however you should prepare yourselves for more another incursion." The voice of Agamedien boomed in their minds.

The incursion Agamedien spoke of arrived within seconds of his warning, several of the bloated undead spiders that Sarasith had seen earlier had reached the breach. Outside the gaping hole in the Battle Arks armour, the massive gauntleted hands of Agamedien could be seen swiping away the venomous creatures, but not before some of the riders were able to dismount and gain entry. Once again the undead were beyond his reach and Agamedien would have to rely on the heroes to defend him from within.

Thankfully the riders appeared to be simple skeletal soldiers, better armed than most, perhaps an elite fighting force of some kind, but seeming to be driven by the single minded compulsion to kill the living. This marked them as lesser minions of Necrodark and made them predictable. The heroes pulled back from the breach and attempted to dispatch the slow moving soldiers from a distance, however they skeletal guards locked their shields together and advanced as an impenetrable wall of steel. The dark will of the Master of the Sceptre was once again at work, this was all meant as a well planned distraction from the true threat lurking in the shadows, the Necrotech Agents. These freshly raised cadavers seemed to be created to act deadly assassins and agents of disaster, fused and outfitted with an assortment of Necrotech weapons and devices. While most undead moved sluggishly or with wild enraged movements, these agents were silent and stealthy, moving with precise and calculated intent. Using their Necrotech powered utility guns, they had fired grappling hooks up from the battlefield and had scaled Agamedien undetected. As the heroes manoeuvred around the encroaching shield wall of the skeletal Elite Guard and readied themselves to charge, the Necrotech agents took up positions around the heroes.

The only warning that the heroes had was the sound of steel sliding against steel as the undead agents struck from behind, using a sword in each hand in tandem to attack in a rapid, scissor like, movement. While the heroes armour prevented any killing blows, anywhere that the blades touched

flesh was instantly infected with a sinister necrotic poison. It was fast acting and made it difficult for even the considerable healing powers of Kal and Arolthus to counteract. Worse yet, as the battle wore on more of the agents snuck their way into the fray. They struck with precision, one moment firing nets from a distance, charged with necromantic powers that seemed to disrupt the heroes powers, and the next moment incapacitating the heroes with strange electrical devices at close range. And always they seemed to be able to attack from behind for when the heroes would turn to face them, they would fire clouds of choking black smoke that would sear the lungs of the living and allow the dead to slip away.

What had started as a sure victory for the heroes now seemed to be their certain doom, particularly for the heroes and their animal allies on the starboard side. They battled with all that they had, with axe and bow, tooth and claw, but could not overcome their foes. For a few tense moments the heroes became sure that they would be overwhelmed by the combined assault of the Necrotech Agents. However in a rare moment of battle insight Roginn turned their own tactics against them. Knowing that the agents always attacked from behind, Roginn positioned himself near the maw of the breach. He then waited for the inevitable attack from behind, sure to present himself an easy target. The ruse worked, the agent struck from behind, and though the blow was extremely painful it only fuelled his fury. Roginn spun around and unleashed his wrath, striking with his burning axe and sealing the agents doom. The blow caught the agent in the chest, and though for the undead a wound such as this was by no means a killing blow, the force of the attack sent the agent reeling backwards. In its thirst for blood the agent failed to realize just how close it was to the breach, with an unholy shriek the agent went sailing over the edge. It tried desperately to fire its grappling hook back up at the Battle Ark to save itself but it missed its mark and the agent plummeted to ground far below, its body mangled beyond even the powers of necromancy. Although it was one of only three agents that met its demise it was the turning point that the party needed, and they quickly shifted the tide of battle. As the battle neared its end on both sides, Agamedien's voice sounded in their head again.

"Be warned friends, Sir Edden and his Griffon Knights have been forced to turn back and regroup or risk being overwhelmed. Another wave of the undead approaches without resistance."

Exhausted and wounded, the heroes readied themselves once again for the arrival of more foes. The group that was air lifted into the breach was similar to the second group they had faced; Lazar, marked champion, heavy assault construct, and a lone unarmed skeleton. This skeleton did not burst into flames however, instead jagged spines of frost began to rapidly grow from the skeletal form, and swirling icy mists enveloped it. Having learned from their past encounter the heroes on the starboard side of the Battle Ark dispatched the foe with relative ease, not so for those on the port side however. The undead fought with overwhelming malevolence and Kal, Sarasith, and Silus were forced to throw everything in their arsenal at the enemy. In the ensuing struggle Silus lost his giant spider mount Edward, and even Sarasith's nearly indestructible stone golems fell prey to the rampaging assault of the construct, one of them being shattered into dust by the full force of the constructs bone scythes. But the sacrifices of their valiant companions were not in vain, and eventually the heroes beat back and destroyed the relentless undead. As though in answer to the silent thoughts of racing through the minds of each of the heroes, Agamedien's voice echoed in their thoughts, strong yet soothing at the same time.

"You have fought well heroes, but my sensors tell me that your strength is fading. I regret that you must hold the breach longer yet. My new gnomish friends have found a way to bypass some of my damaged systems and power up my internal defences, however it will take some time. You must hold!"

The heroes were filled with both relief and dread. Soon the ordeal would be over, but would they be able to hold on long enough? What choice did they have? Though every one of them was now soaked in their own blood and sweat they had no other course of action but stand once again in the breach, to defy the malefic will of Necrodark, and as one triumph or see all of Gant destroyed forever.

In response to their courageous last stand it seemed that Necrodark would pit them against its most powerful weapons, to truly test their resolve. Upon the backs of several giant rotting bats, two new adversaries were delivered into the breach. A Lazar Primarch, with its elaborate garb charged with an unholy power that would stagger even the mightiest champion of the heavens, alongside an ancient Frost Wight, its armour exuding the chill of a thousand graves. The two fearsome creatures seemed to mock the valiant last stand of the heroes by immediately wading into the fray with the full force of their considerable powers. The bones of the fallen became deadly weapons with a simple gesture from the Lazar, and none could stand long in the presence of the Wight before their body was riddled with disease, their strength extinguished like a flickering candle in a winter storm. And this was not enough for Necrodark, for from the shadows struck its fiercest and most evil weapon, an advanced form of Necrotech Agent that made those that came before it look like mere children. This trinity of evil was a force unlike any the heroes had ever faced, even had they been well rested and in good health they would not have been ill prepared to face it. It was as though victory hung on the edge of a knife blade, so tangible and within their sights yet so impossible to realize.

On the heroes fought, drawing on reserves of strength and faith that they did not know they even possessed. All around them the forces of good and evil, life and death, clashed. Even outside on the battlefield the pace became almost frantic. The undead threw themselves feverishly against the perimeter set up by Blackwald and Terdalion far below, the Battle Ark hummed with divine energy as bolts of holy power shot forth from a hundred different places. Even all along the battlements the soldiers of the Republic could feel the tension in the air, like the vibrating of a piano wire pulled taut. They were living and breathing in a singular moment that would define the very course of history or be the complete end of it.

And then everything snapped. Sarasith fell, victim of a bone shattering blow from the Wight's massive ice-encrusted war hammer. The mage's bones had already become unnaturally brittle from the Necrotech poisons afflicting his body, and he could feel in excruciating detail as the ribs, collar bone, and shoulder blade on his left side exploded like glass. Somehow the combined hopes of the living had held the heroes aloft like a mighty breath in a sailcloth and it was as though Sarasith's agonizing scream rend the sail in twain. They had stood their ground but they could do no more.

As darkness closed in around Sarasith's mind he felt himself falling into a deep pit, a bottomless void. He was confused, for he knew that Headmaster Goshind had seen to it that even if he fell in battle he wouldn't truly perish, his soul would be trapped within the magical device that had replaced his

mangled leg years ago. He decided that this sensation of falling into darkness was more a representation of the extinguishing of the light of hope. He knew it was pointless to fight it any longer, and so he relaxed and let the darkness claim him. Yet in that same moment there was a sudden flash light and he felt something catch him gently and break his fall. The last thing Sarasith remembered was hearing the voice of Agamedien.

"Internal defences online."

## Chapter 16a: Agamedien's Charge

It was days later that Sarasith finally awoke. He had been placed in a deep healing sleep by Agamedien, and at times his companions had thought him dead for his breath barely stirred on his lips and his heart beat was the slightest flutter. But Agamedien had assured them that he would live, though most likely he would carry the hurt of his wounds for the rest of days. The mages body had been shattered and although a quick response by Kal was able to stabilize his condition, neither he nor Arolthus possessed the power to mend bones that had been so irreparably damaged. While Agamedien remained occupied with the war raging outside the Battle Ark, the two healers did all that they could to ease the mages suffering, until at last the angel was able to turn his attention to them and intervene. Even still, they had hovered over him in concern for a long while after the battle had ended and finally Agamedien had to order them to leave and get some much deserved rest. All except Stormstride. The notoriously stubborn unicorn simply refused to leave Sarasith's side, and mighty as Agamedien was, an entire army of Battle Arks could not have moved him.

Sarasith had come to with start, bolting upright in the makeshift bed his friends had crafted for him. He was greeted by searing pain as his fragile bones were forced to shift for the first time since Agamedien had painstakingly reconstructed them. Like a smashed porcelain vase each tiny fragment of bone had been gathered in side his body by the divine powers of the angel and one by one returned to its rightful place. But his bones were weakened and would never be as strong as they once had been. The pain was such that despite his rigorous discipline the high elf mage cried out.

"For a dead man you make a lot of noise," chuckled Stormstride sarcastically, "welcome back. I thought you were a goner. Here I was thinking that I'd finally be able to get off this noisy old relic we've been hanging around in. But I guess I'm stuck with you for a little longer."

Despite the unicorns tone Sarasith could sense the concern in the creatures voice. It was touching nonetheless and it helped Sarasith focus. With concerted effort he forced the pain away and stood to his feet, but he was unsteady and would have collapsed if not for the warm flank of Stormstride coming alongside him for support.

"Come on mage, lean on me a while and I'll take you to see your friends. You'll want to know all that's happened I should think."

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Roginn was the first to see the frail looking mage come hobbling into the room. He took a step towards him, ready to scoop Sarasith up in a massive bear-hug, but Kal laid a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Easy big fella, you'll crush the poor guy, give him some space," the Paladin said. Then turning to Sarastih he added, "it's good to see you on your feet again Sarasith. You took quite the hit from that undead fiend, but I knew you'd make it. How do you feel?"

"Like the morning after a night out at the Smiling Mule with Roginn," Sarasith croaked in a voice raspy from disuse. His companions roared in laughter, glad to see that Sarasith was in good spirits.

"Undoubtedly you'll want to know what happened after you fell," Kal started in after all the jokes and well wishes had finished. "We're all still here so you must have figured out by now that we were victorious. Moments after you were hit, with the help of the gnomes, Agamedien was able to bring his internal defences online. There was blinding flash of light and before our eyes the undead were reduced to dust."

"You should have seen it Sarasith, more of those damned constructs tried to fly in through the breach, but Agamedien raised some kind of shield over the gap and they were vaporized! Poof, just like that, all that made it through was ashes. It was incredible!" Roginn added enthusiastically.

"They kept trying, for what seemed like hours, but Agamedien's defences held and so did the perimeter set up by Colonel Blackwald and the Grand Marshal. Necrodark threw everything it had at the Battle Ark and as near as I can gather their foul master finally decided that he couldn't defeat Agamedien, at least not here. I never thought it could happen but the whole undead army turned and fled. Seeing them all flee like that must have finally woken the War Council up because the cavalry eventually charged out and ran all the slower moving undead to the ground. The siege was broken and all of Necrodark's infernal war machines along with it. Thanks to Agamedien the Republic was victorious. The army now rides out in full force, with Agamedien leading the way, to lay siege to the heart of evil, the stronghold of Necrodark itself." Just as Kal finished his tale the group was promptly interrupted by the voice of Agamedien. How easy it was to forget that the powerful angel seemed to be aware of everything that was said inside the Battle Ark.

"My friends, it was the courage and faith of mortal men that won this great victory. Had you not defended the breaches in my defences the undead would have destroyed me from within. Now that Sarasith is back with us I would like to show my gratitude for assisting me to combat the terrible evil of Necrodark, when greater men instead choose to hide in fear."

There was a sudden high pitched hum followed by a brilliant flash of light and where once there had been nothing but open air, there was now a great gold and silver chest in the center the room. Inside it were treasures of the finest craftsmanship, surpassing the jewelled splendour of Dwarven kings and the elegant workmanship of the most ancient Elven masters.

"Kal Emdar, Paladin and Crusader of Light, Defender of Righteousness, Upholder of Faith and Goodness, for your leadership and unwavering devotion to duty and honour I gift you this armour. I trust that when the need is great you will do what is necessary, as must we all."

"I thank you fellow servant of the One God, may His Blessing be upon us all," Kal said as he approached the chest and bowed low. Reaching in he pulled out a shining breast plate of pure Tranilium, the heavenly metal. Emblazoned across the chest was the majestic bright red emblem of a hawk soaring on the wind, the symbol of his order.

"Roginn Hathelheftin, Great of Heart, Champion of the Downtrodden, Advocate of Justice, your courageous spirit is an unstoppable force. For always remaining loyal to your friends and never turning your back to an enemy in fear, I gift you these gauntlets. With mighty resolve may you always uphold what is right and just and may your blade never waver."

Placing one fist over his heart, with the other hand Roginn raised his jug of spirits and then drank deeply in salute to Agamedien, "you honour me beyond my worth Agamedien, I will wear these proudly." The Centaur vigilante accepted the pair of sturdy gloves, whose finely wrought steel links were intricately woven to resemble the ferocious maw of a Kodiak bear. When he placed them on his hands it seemed to those observing that his hands and arms actually grew in size. Grinning from ear to ear the centaur stepped back again to stand with his comrades.

"Arolthus Half-Orc, Guardian of Truth, Enemy of Evil in all its Sinister forms, Commander of the Stalwart Vesticar Remnant, who like their leader valiantly stood to defend me in my time of need. I foresee heavy burdens for you in the years to come, but I know like me, you would bear those burdens willingly and without question for those under your protection. Take this mantle upon yourself and know that it is the Will of the One God that Vesticar one day be restored, see it done."

"So long as my brothers and sisters are by my side, there will be no force that could stand in the way of returning my people to their former glory." Arolthus smirked as he examined the bulky leather spaulders and then added with a grunt, "hmm, but this gift certainly won't hurt my cause."

"Spoken like a prophet Half-Orc, you do not realize the truth of your statement. But you will in time," was Agamedien's cryptic reply.

The armour Arolthus placed upon his shoulders was a deep charcoal colour, and was reinforced with thick stylized leather ribbing. Etched across each shoulder in burnished gold was the crest of once proud Vesticar. Once firmly secured on his broad Orcish shoulders a pair of angelic wings, made of pure blue flame, erupted without warning for a brief instant from the back side of his new armour. Arolthus nodded his head in approval, well satisfied with the new addition to his equipment.

"Silus, so skilled in the trade of death, I will admit, you are an enigma to me. Despite my best efforts I still cannot explain your arrival here. However it was timely indeed. Oft misunderstood, but ever willing to lend a hand to those you call friend, I thank you. Please accept this amulet as a token of my gratitude, may it one day light your darkened paths."



"There must be something interesting in here... ooo shiny! That's the perfect size for my pocket. Oh wait, someone is talking to me," Silus said, his voice somewhat muffled due to the fact he was already standing inside the chest sorting through the remaining items. Silus picked up the amulet, made of thousands of strands of fine tranilium threads all woven together into a resplendent chain. Fixed to the chain was a large triangular claw in which was set a massive multi-faceted diamond that glittered like a tiny sun. As soon as he placed around his neck it disappeared from sight, though the halfling could still feel the weight of it around his neck.

"Mute of the Athel-Leaf, protector of the very forest that grew up to protect me during my long rest. Though you did not know it, in your own way you and your kin guarded over me when I was vulnerable and weak. You are a stalwart companion and faithful friend. Silent though you may be, you are a comfort to your companions, for they know that no matter what they face somewhere you stand alert and ready to protect them. I give you this ring of purest tranilium, encrusted with emeralds from the deep places of the forest you so love, so that if the need is great you can always find your way back home. And when all hope seems lost, may it enable you to fight on. Like a breath from Heaven, hope shall be yours to impart."

Taking the ring, Mute simply bowed his head and said a humble thank you.

"And finally there is Sarasith. My heart is glad that we were able to pull you back from the brink of death. For it is you I understand that rallied those brave few who rode out, against all odds, to defend me from the vile plans of Necrodark. Mighty you are Undermage, but know that you have only scratched the surface of the dormant powers that lie within you. With that immense potential however comes the need for great wisdom. Great is your calling and many are the paths that lay before you, but should you ever lose your way I entreat you to rely upon the counsel of these your friends and companions. For this reason I gift you this phial, the liquid contained within it will allow you to communicate over vast distances with these who stand with you. But use it wisely for once drained the liquid cannot be replenished."

"It is with great gratitude that I accept this priceless gift. I am also indebted to you for bringing me back from the brink of death. And yet, though you have done so much for me already I find myself asking more of you. For rare is the opportunity to speak to a being with such vast knowledge of the cosmos and the infinite ways of the heavens. You say that I must rely upon my comrades, so I must ask; is there knowledge that you possess that could be of use to me, not for myself, but that I might protect my friends. For drawing so near to death has made me feel inadequate. When I was needed most my strength failed and I cannot allow this to happen again. I believe you have knowledge that even years spent studying the stars will never achieve. You must have something more you can impart to me."

"Ask and you shall receive, knock and the door shall be opened to you. Knowledge of the cosmos you seek and you shall find it when you reach the end of yourself and embrace a power greater." Agamedien spoke this to Sarasith alone and then went on to address all of the heroes in concert.

"Great though our victory is my friends, the most difficult task has yet to come. The armies of the Republic and her allies march with me, but ahead of us lies the still considerable forces of Necrodark. When they reach their stronghold they will turn to fight once more. The Sceptre of Necrodark must be recovered at all costs. Rest now, for the sun will not set a second time before we are forced to do battle once more."

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Agamedien's prediction had been the truth. It had taken some time to mobilize the cavalry after Necrodark had begun its retreat and as a result a large portion of their forces had escape unscathed. It had taken longer yet to mobilize the full strength of the army and march forth from Telestra. They had harried the rear guard of the undead as best they could once they began their slow advance towards Necrodark. But even having suffered such heavy losses the black tide of the undead was far from beaten and as yet outnumbered the living. To make matters worse many of them had retreated into Necrodark's stronghold and now took up defensive positions along the battlements. The combined forces of the Republic and her allies had gone from being besieged themselves to having to lay siege to the stronghold of their foe in less than fortnight.

As soon as they were in position the Telestran Military Engineers Guild had begun to pummel the walls of Necrodark with their war machines. However these walls were not held together simply by mortar and stone, they were infused with Necromantic powers that allowed them shrug off barrage after barrage of heavy stones and other projectiles that would have levelled an ordinary city in days. Being that the undead could not be starved out like the living inhabitants of Telestra it seemed like an impossible task. However it seemed that at last the War Council had found fire in their bellies and would storm Necrodark no matter what the cost. Luckily the Republic had an ally that would not be daunted by walls of any kind.

Agamedien surveyed the situation from his lofty perspective. The Republic Generals had drawn up the lines just outside of the range of the enemy and were laying plans to scale the walls with large blocks of infantry armed with ladders and grappling hooks. However in order to do so the cavalry and some of the heavy support units of Knights and Golems within the army would have to push through the swarms of undead that now stood in silent vigil around the walls of their fortress. It was a sound plan under ordinary circumstances and against an ordinary foe, and while Agamedien believed they could possibly still be victorious he knew the loss of life would be tremendous. Therefore the angelic warrior decided that it was time for him to take decisive action.

His first act was to deposit the heroes back amongst the Republican front lines. He then ordered everyone to stay back, concerned that when he attacked the walls of Necrodark the living could inadvertently be harmed. As much as the heroes did not wish to see Agamedien charge the walls alone they saw wisdom of his words, as did the Generals. Everyone held their position and the Engineers Guild ceased their bombardment, lest they accidentally strike the Battle Ark. Breaking from the Republic ranks Agamedien drew his gigantic angelic sword and from his shoulders the bright blue flaming wings erupted. For the first time the audible voice of Agamedien could be heard, calling out a battle cry in the

tongue of angels that gathered strength like a tidal wave before washing over the battlefield. For an instant time stood still, and then Agamedien charged.

In only three paces Agamedien reached the wall. He towered over it and left in his wake nothing but the charred remains of the undead, finally at rest. He raised his blade high over head and brought it crashing down on the walls with such force that it could have split a mountain in two. But instead a shower of sparks erupted as the sacred blade encountered the heinous magicks of Necrodark's reinforced walls. The undead reacted by hurling projectiles of every kind at the Battle Ark. Those with actual substance clattered harmlessly off his heavy armour and those comprised of pure demonic power flash brilliantly against his shields only to dissipate instantly. Again he raised his blade and brought it crashing down. The sound resounded across the barren plains as once again the walls withstood his onslaught. He struck a third time and at last beneath his formidable might a crack began to form in the walls. Encouraged by the triumphant roar of the Republican army behind him Agamedien struck again, and though the walls weakened further there was also a ear-splitting explosion as the angels sword shattered into thousands of pieces. The tranilium fragments rained down upon the hordes of undead swarming about his legs in an undulating mass and where each fragment landed the undead were vaporized. The great angel seemed surprised by the sudden destruction of his blade, but it did not deter him.

"Necrodark will fall!" Agamedien bellowed and plunged forward onto one knee, crushing hundreds of skeletal soldiers beneath him. He reach out and grasped a hold of the walls on either side of the crack he had made. Bolts of black lightning shot up his arms and in places his armour began to smoulder as the fel energies of Necrodark desperately tried to repel him, but he held fast. The powerful gauntleted fingers of the Battle Ark sank into the stone and with a mighty roar Agamedien wrenched his arms back and tore the wall asunder. A massive section of wall tore free in each of his hands causing nearby towers to crumble. In his now upraised arms the walls seemed to come alive, wrapping around his forearms like snakes in their death throes. But Agamedien wasted no time in hurling the walls sections back down upon the heads of the undead army below. In one fluid motion the Battle Ark began to stand again but at the same time Agamedien also swung his arm outwards delivering a punishing back hand to the strongholds main gates. The power that held the walls together seemed to have been dispelled for the massive gate house came crashing down with the blow.

Whoever the master of the Sceptre was, it must have sensed that defeat was imminent for as one the undead forces turned and charged headlong towards the living. In response the Republic lines surged forward to meet the charge lest their front ranks of mounted men be overwhelmed. All around the heroes horses rush past, their riders levelling razor sharp lances towards the foe. The battle horns sounded the clarion call to war and the Republic soldiers answered with vigorous battle cries of their own. Every one of them had been touched somehow by the war, having lost a brother, a son, a father, or having been driven near to madness by the long siege of Telestra. They seemed to harness that frustration as they charged forward and it was all the heroes could do to not be trampled as they were swept up in the charge.

As the battle lines meet a dreadful dichotomy was struck on the battlefield. Throughout the undead lines the crushing of bone and tearing of rotten flesh could be heard as their front ranks of infantry collapsed against the cavalry of the Republic, but no cry escaped the lips of the dead. Meanwhile ringing steel mixed the shouts of men and whinnying horses. But both man and horse alike screamed in pain as they were cut down by their foe, who seemed to be able to spring up in force no matter how many were struck down. The silent ruthlessness of the undead versus the proud battle-song of the living.

Amidst all of this Agamedien continued to tear apart the walls and use them to decimate the undead nearby. The righteous violence of his attack had cleared a wide swath of ground about him and the heroes found themselves suddenly out in the open, separated from the thick of battle by their own allies. This allowed them a brief moment of clarity amidst the chaos around them. As such they were the first to feel the tremors.

### **Chapter 16b: Agamedien's Burning**

The barren ground round about the Battle Ark was largely devoid of obstacles which made it easy to see past the towering metallic columns that were Agamedien's legs. Beyond them the shattered walls of Necrodark gave way to the inner courtyard and it was here that the source of the unexplained tremors emanated. The intensity of vibrations continued to escalate and the ground shook so hard that the heroes struggled to stay on their feet. It seemed as if the very world was tearing apart. There was a loud groan and suddenly the courtyard heaved wildly, once, twice, and on the third time it began to collapse inwards. Despite the commotion the Republic soldiers had no choice but to continue fighting for their lives as the undead seemed to have no interest about what was going on inside their now crumbling stronghold.

It mattered little however, for none of them had any knowledge of the subterranean chambers beneath Necrodark. The heroes however had been here once before and knew that beneath the courtyard, now nothing more than a gaping hole in the ground, was a massive chamber where the undead armies were assembled and the foul Necromantic constructs were forged. They had been prisoners here, shortly after the fall of Vesticar, and in their daring escape they had investigated this chamber. While it had contained countless smaller forges, there had been one that dominated the chamber. Built inside what had appeared to be a massive skull, one that rivalled even the Battle Ark in size, the forge had churned out what seemed like an endless supply of undead constructs of bone, wood, and iron from its fiery maw. At the time they had simply assumed that the titanic skull was a patchwork construct in and of itself, for not even a giant possessed a skull so large. But in their haste to escape Necrodark they had not been able to get a closer look. To their utter horror they now saw the Skull-Forge of Necrodark rising up from the rubble of the collapsed courtyard.

As it drew level with the surface its cavernous empty eye sockets and jagged toothed maw flared orange and red, as the forge within erupted into life like a surging volcano. Thick black smoke poured out in waves, like a mockery of breathing. The skull continued to rise, carrying along with it two massive sections of the chambers stone floor on either side of a thick skeletal neck. Beneath these stone pauldrons was a skeletal rib cage, clearly damaged in places and later reinforced with heavy iron bars.

Inside the rib cage was two enormous bellows, fashioned after human lungs and writhing with Necromantic energy, it was these that fed oxygen to the fiery forge contained within the skull. The monstrosity rose higher still, revealing a full humanoid skeletal structure of titanic proportions. Whatever creature this skeleton had belonged to it had clearly laid buried beneath the barren plains since time immemorial. In places its bones had been replaced by bulbous clumps of solid rock and hardened crystalline formations, and here and there the undead forge masters seemed to have grafted thick iron plates, rusted with age, onto the skeletal structure.

It seemed unimaginable that any Necromancer could give the false life of undeath to such a immense being. But at last the heroes, and indeed all of the Republic's brave soldiers gathered there that day, saw the raw power of the Sceptre of Necrodark demonstrated. The long skeletal arms of the creature began to move, slowly at first but quickly gaining momentum. They stretched outwards and then with clenched fists drove upwards into the exposed foundation of a nearby tower on each side of the inner citadel. The towers themselves were stone, banded with iron, numerous bladed ridges ran down most of their exterior, and they were crowned with razor sharp iron battlements. The skeletal titan's arms finally came to halt when it had sheathed them fully inside the core of the towers and for a moment it appeared as if it had inadvertently shackled itself. But then, with tremendous force, it tore the towers free from the citadel, at last allowing the Skull-Forge to stand to its full height, taller even than the mighty Battle Ark of Agamedien. Its long forearms were completely encased inside the towers which now acted as a pair of deadly gauntlets. It levelled them off at its sides as it readied itself to face Agamedien.

If Agamedien was concerned, he did not show it. And even though he had to look upwards to meet the fiery stare of the Skull-Forge, he did so without flinching. The Battle Ark's wings flared to life and Agamedien's voice rang out like thunder.

"Fall back mortals, I must face this evil alone!"

As if on cue the Skull-Forge lurched forward and opened its bony mouth wide. There was sound like rushing wind as the bellows inside its chest contracted and it belched forth flame. Agamedien barely had time to react, stretching his arms wide to protect the Republic army behind him from the deadly gout of flame. A divine shield flared to life around him as the flames completely engulfed the Battle Ark. The sheer power of the flames forced Agamedien to take a step backwards. His massive armoured feet cut a wide furrow in the earth as he struggled to stand his ground. All around the Republic began to fall back, unable to remain anywhere near the intense heat of the inferno. The shields surrounding the Battle Ark crackled loudly as they attempted to protect Agamedien from the unholy flame of the Skull-Forge, but the torrent of burning breath was too much for them and with one last flare the shields fell. Still the flames did not cease and now without his shield it was even more difficult for Agamedien to hold his ground. The Battle Ark dropped down to one knee and seemed to be on the brink of being sweep over backwards. In a last attempt to hold his ground Agamedien reached out and dug his left hand into the ground, clawing at the dirt in desperation. A mocking voice sounded out above the roaring flames, the dark master of the Sceptre had taken the battlefield at last, in this its most foul creation.

"Foolish Agamedien, your pathetic Battle Ark is no match for the Skull-Forge, I will melt your armour down around you and force you to take your true form. And then, I will crush you beneath my heel. You cannot prevail, Necrodark will reign supreme. Leave these mortals to their fate and run while you can."

"So long as Necrodark stands I shall not yield!" bellowed Agamedien, like a thousand roaring lions. The right arm of the Battle Ark shot up into the air, rising above the flames, and began to glow with a pale golden light. From high overhead bolts of silver energy began to surge down from the heavens and swarm wildly about the metallic fist. The blue flame of the Battle Ark's angelic wings flared brightly and Agamedien lunged forward, his armour glowing red hot from the heat, catching the Skull-Forge under the chin with his gauntlet, which was bathed in holy power from on high. The skeletal jaw slammed shut and the flames were instantly doused. The massive skeletal titan stumbled backwards a step but held its ground, largely undamaged from what was an unfathomably powerful blow. Conversely, the Battle Ark's armour was weakened from the intense heat of the Skull-Forge's flame. As the glow began to fade, in places it could be seen that the silver and golden hued tranilium armour had melted off in great sheets.

The counter attack was swift for such an ancient looking creature. The Skull-Forge wielded its tower-gauntlets with deadly intent, landing a succession of powerful blows on the top of Agamedien's head. The blades imbedded in the stone towers cut deeply into the Battle Ark's softened armour and fluids vital to the operation of the Battle Ark began to stream from the wounds. But Agamedien was able to block the next blow and set the Skull-Forge off balance. He followed up with a blast of holy energy from his palm that sent the skeletal titan stumbling backwards. The two opposing behemoths charged each other, closing the short distance in a heartbeat, and became locked in hand to hand combat. Though the Skull-Forge had an advantage in size Agamedien returned every blow with twice as much vigour. Pieces of the skeletal form were sent flying to and fro as Agamedien tried to tear the Skull-Forge apart with his bare hands. But every blow he received from the twisted weapons born by the colossal skeleton caused just as much damage, cutting deep gashes in Agamedien's armour and puncturing vital mechanisms throughout the Battle Ark. Unseen to everyone, the brave gnomes that had refused to leave Agamedien worked desperately to repair the damage. It was possible that the Battle Ark would have fallen already had they not stayed behind to assist. The gnomes knew they would likely not survive, but to them it was their penance for almost destroying such a magnificent machine because of their ignorance.

The two behemoths threw each other back forth, sometimes standing and sometimes rolling through the rubble of the ruined walls. The battle seemed to rage endlessly, neither being able to gain the upper hand, until without warning Agamedien was caught off guard and driven down to the ground by a devastating overhead swing from both weapons. The Skull-Forge attempted to deliver a finishing blow but Agamedien managed to get his left arm up just in time to block the bladed tower-gauntlet aimed at his head. It saved his life but at the cost of his arm. There was a screech of tearing metal and the arm was severed just above the elbow. The Skull-Forge readied to strike again, but Agamedien rolled out of the way and the blow struck the ground where he had been but a moment earlier. However the undead creation followed after the rolling Battle Ark and there was once again the tell tale sound of

creaking bellows as the Skull-Forge spit forth its flame. The force of the fiery breath caught Agamedien in the back and pinned him to the ground, his good arm beneath him and his severed arm dangling uselessly. He tried feebly to rise once more but collapsed again under his own weight and unable to rise again.

The merciless flames melted off what remained of his armour, creating a pool of molten metal all around the Battle Ark. Satisfied that Agamedien's vital mechanisms were now sufficiently exposed the Skull-Forge ceased its fiery breath and began to rain blow after blow down upon the Battle Ark. The spiked battlements on the ends of its weapons tore massive chunks of his divine mechanical parts out of his now crushed and barely recognizable form. Agamedien lay there, utterly still, defeated.

Still un-satisfied with the destruction it had wrought, the Skull-Forge used a massive foot to flip the Battle Ark over like a rag-doll. As it flipped him over the foul creature made to stoop down and grasp him by the head, ready to end Agamedien's existence permanently. Face up now, the Battle Ark still vaguely resembled its former glory, its armour not fully melted away, though still in a sorry state of repair. In its haste to destroy Agamedien the gloating undead monstrosity failed to notice the glint of light reflecting off a small shard of metal in Agamedien's right hand. As the Skull-Forge drew close Agamedien sat up suddenly and swung his good arm with all his remaining strength. The shard of metal was a small fragment of Agamedien's shattered sword which by divine providence the angel had rolled on top of. It slid past the undead titan's rock armour and caught it squarely in the spinal column, just below the skull. The force of the blow sent the skull rolling backwards through the air, severed completely from its body. It struck the ground, rolled, and then came to a stop next to the main gate of the inner citadel of Necrodark. The titanic skeletal body wavered for a moment and then came crashing down in a pile of splintered bone and twisted metal. Cracked and battered, the Skull-Forge itself remained largely intact, but the flame within it had all but gone out.

As Agamedien fell motionless to the ground again, for a brief moment the entire battlefield ground to a standstill. Even the undead stopped in their tracks, many of them letting weapons slip out of their hands to clatter harmlessly to the ground. It was as if the dark will of the Sceptre of Necrodark had been silenced. For the span of six ragged breaths from the beleaguered Republic soldiers, silence reigned amidst the carnage. Then, like the passing eye of a hurricane, the undead renewed their attack. No one had time to contemplate what this meant, whether they attacked mindlessly or if the Sceptre still held sway over them. Either way the army had no choice but to defend itself once more.

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Having observed all this from a distance the heroes were dumbstruck. They could not believe what they had just witnessed, mighty Agamedien defeated. It seemed impossible. And then they heard a voice in their minds, feeble, muted, but undoubtedly there.

"Heroes, the Sceptre of Necrodark is not defeated. Its evil master yet lives within the Skull-Forge. While he still holds the Sceptre he is too powerful for you to face, you would be enslaved before you could ever draw close enough to rest it from his hand. Though my Battle Ark is irreparably damaged there is still hope. If I can detach myself from it I may be able to take my true form for long enough to

retrieve the sceptre. However it has been millennia since I have taken my true form. The process of releasing myself from the Battle Ark will take time in my current condition and will leave me vulnerable. I must call on you to defend me once more, hold back the undead while I prepare myself."

As though in mocking reply to Agamedien's request, the gates of the inner citadel began to grind open on rusted hinges. From within the darkened maw there was the clatter of hooves as three knights rode forth upon rotting and diseased undead horses. Their heavy plate armour was jet black and beneath their visors their eyes glowed the tell tale red of death knights. Behind them came a fourth figure. The fear and dread that emanated from the first three riders paled in comparison to that which this last knight bore like an unholy garment. Unlike his companions he rode upon the back of a large skeletal drake, wreathed in flame. The heroes knew this last figure well, and in some ways were surprised that he had not taken to the field earlier, here at last, was Death Lord Archibald.

"Death Lord Archibald, the angel yet lives, I can sense him communicating with the living, destroy him!" The terrifying voice of the master of the Sceptre rang out, though it sounded weakened, and less certain of itself.

With singular purpose the Death Lord and his minions raced to towards the remains of the Battle Ark, intent upon finishing Agamedien off once and for all. The heroes rushed forward to meet them, arriving only a moment before Archibald and his death knights.

"Meddlesome wretches, I should have known I would find you here," Archibald spat angrily as flew high over head upon his terrible mount, "I claim the life of this broken and defeated angel in the name of my Master."

"You will never defeat us Archibald, we stand together, you shall not have him! ", roared Kal.

"Brave words, but I have heard such nonsense uttered from the mouths of many fools. Now they all serve our Master and the glorious will of Necrodark. Lord Talvanus, Lady Gertrude, Sir Roderick, bring me these fools corpses that I might add them to our ranks," the Death Knight replied from over head.

The three lesser death knights levelled their lances and prepared to charge. At the same time ribbons of dark energy shot upwards from each of them and struck Lord Archibald high above. A pale ghostly sphere surrounded their leader and in a dark forbidden tongue the heroes' long time nemesis began to chant.

The putrid mounts of the Death Knights surged forwards and their riders began to chant in the same dark tongue as their leader. Many of the heroes found that while they chanted it seemed almost impossible to concentrate their thoughts or take any but the most basic of actions in combat. Worse yet, all of the death knights hurled bolts of chaotic energy at the heroes as they closed in on them. Over head Death Lord Archibald, safe within the soul linked shield surrounding him, began to mark each of them, one by one, for undeath. Each time he did so a strange black substance would begin to creep through the veins of one of the heroes, threatening to overtake them completely. The insidious Death



Knight gloating all the while about how very soon each of them would perish and rise again to serve him as a Death Knight.

It seemed that the master of the sceptre was not content to let his champion battle the heroes without his assistance. For Archibald announced a great boon of Necrodark for he and his allies, which seemed to allow them to fight with a viciousness and un-remitting strength that was shocking even for the undead. Periodically a thin ethereal tendril would also reach out from the Skull-Forge and fasten itself to the head of one of the heroes. While it was attached there, they lost all control of their own action and became slaves to the Sceptre of Necrodark, assisting the Death Knights in their onslaught and attacking their own allies.

While Kal and Arolthus seemed to be able to cure themselves and their allies of the creeping black necromancy coursing through their veins, the foul tendrils from the Skull-Forge and the incessant chanting of the Death Knights made it difficult for them to think for themselves, let alone cure their allies. And where they would cure one of their friends another would simply become infected. On top of this, as the Death Knights closed in on them, their rotting equine mounts spread a foul bouquet of plague throughout the heroes. Sarasith did his best to keep them away from his friends, successfully turning gravity against the heavily armed knights time and again.

The battle raged on and on, and became a war of attrition. The evil curses, withering diseases, and terrible necromancy of Archibald and his minions wore heavily upon the heroes. However they did inflict damage of their own. Mute rained arrows down upon them while Silus would randomly, and without notice, strike violently at them from behind. As was his way, Roginn chose to face them head on, and weathered a host of punishing blows, allowing his allies to inflict heavy damage with relatively little retaliation from the three mounted Death Knights. However each time they struck Archibald's minions it seemed to charge up the shield surrounding their commander. From his lofty perspective he could see that Sarasith was causing massive damage to his minions and seemed to ever be out of their reach. So he unleashed the power he had stored up in his shield and began to bombard the mage with the feedback caused by his own powers.

The battle took a turn for the worse when Arolthus fell from his raptor mount, his body consumed by the creeping black necromancy in his veins. The raptor fought valiantly to defend its master's body, even bringing one of the foe down with its razor sharp talons. But it was too late for Arolthus. In thrall to the sceptre, Kal was too busy attacking Roginn to come to the Half-Orc's aid. The rest of his companions watched in despair as undeath began to take hold of their once indomitable ally. But to their surprise, just as it seemed Arolthus would rise once more as one of Archibald's death knights, a pair of angelic wings erupted from the leather armour Agamedien had gifted to the zealous Half-Orc. As the blue flame flared brightly the black substance that had all but consumed his body quickly receded and disappeared. And although he did not rise immediately, Arolthus' companions could see that he could yet be counted among the living.

This renewed the companions' hopes and they fought on. Overhead Sarasith summoned forth the famed Star of Goshind, its celestial brilliance illuminating the sky even though it was still midday.

Wherever its light shone the undead seemed to shrink away. Its presence empowered the celestial under-mage and made his enemies extremely vulnerable to his attacks. But the death knights were far from defeated and it was not long before the situation became dire once more. This time it was Roginn who was almost overcome with the dark mark the Death Lord had placed on him. Kal was once again under the control of Necrodark which left it to a still weakened Arolthus to attempt to purge the Necromancy from Roginn's blood. But Archibald's mark proved too strong. Knowing he had only moments left Roginn prepared himself for the end, outraged that he would soon be used as a weapon against the living.

But no one had counted on Silus, ever unnoticed, his intentions oft misunderstood, the Halfling rushed to Roginn's aid, pulling the invisible amulet given to him by Agamedien from around his neck. The instant he removed it the amulet became visible again, an elegant and utterly beautiful piece, fit for the greatest of kings. Silus had noticed early on in their fight with the Death Knights that the amulet seemed to afford him some manner of special protection from the diseases and necromancy that the enemy brought to bear against them. The quick thinking Halfling decided that saving Roginn was his own best chance of survival and so thrust the shining amulet against Roginn's blackened skin. The large diamond fixed upon the amulet began to draw out the inky substance from Roginn's veins as though it was some kind of poison to be purged. As it did so the diamond began to grow cloudy and dark. The necromancy reacted in kind, accelerating its growth across the surface of the Centaur's skin to try to overcome the power of the amulet, and for a few tense moments it appeared as though it would, but the Halfling knew the stakes were far too high for the amulet to fail and he willed it to redouble its healing powers. The amulet responded to his will and swiftly drained out the foul poison. But the diamond was now black as night and the entire amulet corroded and fell apart in Silus' hands, the diamond cracking into pieces and then disappearing all together. Silus' simple act, born out of desperation, saved Roginn's life, and he hoped perhaps all of their lives. For if Roginn had been turned against them the death knights might have been able to overpower the heroes and defeat them.

This last failure by Archibald and his forces seemed to break the back of their enemies battle plans. The heroes worked in concert to bring down one of the undead horses, forcing the slow moving rider to fight on foot, while Sarasith's blazing Starfire incinerated one of the death knights that was still mounted. Outraged Archibald sought revenge on the high-mage, blasting him and his mount with the full force of the energies contained within his soul shield. The unbreakable will of Sarasith, a gift of his High Elven heritage, allowed him to resist the powerful burst of necromantic energy but his unicorn mount Stormstride was not so fortunate and was torn to pieces by the chaotic blast. The only evidence that remained to prove that the stubborn but incredibly loyal unicorn had even existed was his horn, possessing a purity that even the powerful necromantic explosion could not consume.

The attack did not have the demoralizing effect that Archibald had hoped, instead the heroes rallied together and defeated their foe. As the last of the three lesser Death Knights fell the ghostly aura surrounding Lord Archibald was extinguished. Knowing that he was now vulnerable, the heroes nemesis climbed high upon the skeletal wings of his frightful mount so that he could survey the situation. Likewise the heroes had a moment to gather themselves and prepare for the inevitable showdown with

Death Lord Archibald. The Death Knight wheeled overhead once and then dove, the flames from his mount trailing behind him like a falling comet, intent upon their destruction.

At last the heroes were given the opportunity to face their long time nemesis. As Archibald descended upon them Roginn rushed out into the middle of the battlefield drawing the Death Knights attention.

"Here am I Archibald! Take me!" Roginn roared, brandishing his axe menacingly. Meanwhile his friends strategically spread out in all directions. Silus took advantage of Roginn's brazen challenge had slipped away again, moving unnoticed to take up position behind Archibald and his skeletal drake mount when they eventually landed.

The unnatural flames that wreathed the drake's skeletal form blistered Roginn's skin as landed and it wasted no time in laying down a fearsome barrage of attacks with its deadly claws and powerful toothed maw. Roginn managed to dodge the worst of it but suffered a ragged gash down his arm from one of the razor sharp claws. He would not be daunted however. The Centaur bravely stood his ground, though blood and sweat poured freely from his body. His valiant stand allowed the rest of his companions to concentrate their attacks on Archibald. But in life Archibald had been a highly skilled knight and in death he was much more. He expertly manoeuvred his mount to block the majority of the attacks with its immense skeletal bulk. Several of Mute's arrows slipped past but bounced harmlessly off of Archibald's hideous blackened armour, which was crafted to resemble a ghastly array of demonic skeletal faces. The Death Lord's defences were formidable but he seemed more than happy to redirect as many blows as possible to his blazing mount. The drake's skeletal frame took the punishment well, but it began to show signs of weakening.

Archibald himself retaliated with a wide array of sinister abilities, wielding his massive two handed sword, once a symbol of his honour as a knight but now a corrupted vampiric instrument of destruction, with deadly precision and uttering words of death that would have extinguished the life of lesser men in an instant. Archibald wielded death like it was his own personal play thing. He had but to stretch out his hand and the chilling power of death would rush out in waves to buffet the heroes. All the while his cursed form and his Oath of Supreme Devotion to the master of the Sceptre of Necrodark enabled him and his mount to deal deadly amounts of damage to the heroes.

But the heroes stood firm, doing what they could to increase their chances of survival, knowing that each moment they resisted Archibald was bringing Agamedien one step closer to taking his true form. When it seemed like Roginn would falter under the punishing blows of the foe Arolthus summoned a warding angel to assist him. The angel hovered over Roginn, bolster his defences and allowing him to fight on. As if in response to the divine interference the Skull-Forge issued forth more tendrils and began to systematically take control of whichever hero seemed most crucially needed at that moment. It sent the companions best laid battle plans into disarray.

In the chaos the skeletal drake at last located the bothersome Halfling that had been constantly harrying his hind quarters. Silus was very nearly killed by the attack and was forced to fall back. This left Roginn alone with the monster and a moment later it managed to lock its jaw around the centaur, its

teeth piercing through his armour like paper. It lifted the bulky centaur off his hooves and effortlessly tossed him around like a rag doll. By the time it let him go Roginn's face had gone pale and he collapsed to the ground unmoving.

The drake moved in to finish the job. Everyone looked to Kal, hoping the Paladin could intervene on his cousins behalf but they instead saw the enslaved Paladin charging straight at Sarasith, weapon raised high over head , ready to crush the mages skull. Sarasith's keen, almost supernatural, senses quickly assessed the threats and he reacted quickly. First he used his staff to ward off the onrushing Paladin, spinning around quickly as the Paladin rushed past like a rampaging bull. Then in one fluid motion he summoning forth all of his considerable powers to fire a massive beam of starfire that seemed to swell in size as it caught the light of the Star of Goshind, still blazing in the day time sky above. It struck the drake in its mouth, which was opened wide and poised to snap the Centaur in half. The blast of celestial light blew the drake's jaw bone to pieces and carried through the rest of its skeletal frame, sending bone flying in all directions, and passing clean through to sever the mighty tail bone of the beast. The bone drake collapsed and Death Lord Archibald crashed down to the ground, landing on his feet with the ruined remains of his mount all around him.

"Dragon, I am not finished with you. Return to serve me once more," Archibald said, almost casually, as the bones suddenly flew back together and reformed. Though the drake appeared to have sustained some permanent damage in the process it was still very much a threat.

As more of Mute's well placed arrows rained down upon Archibald's mount the Death Knight reached out with his unholy senses to locate the hidden ranger. Like a shark drawn to bloodied waters, so was Archibald drawn to the elves living essence. Wheeling his mount about Archibald leapt towards Mute. The ranger had so far sustained little damage at the hands of the undead, but in one single salvo from the skilled knight and his deadly mount the ranger was laid low, barely escaping their reach with his life.

Luckily Kal had finally been released from the power of the sceptre, which had gone on to control another. His clarion call of faith restored Roginn's health enough that the enraged centaur was able to get up, the massive wounds in his humanoid gut and equine flank now partially healed over but still leaking vital fluids. Unconcerned for his own health Roginn charged towards Archibald, drawing his attention once more. As Archibald wheeled to face the brash centaur another blast of starfire ripped though the drakes flank and again its form broke apart. But Archibald called his mount back yet again. It seemed that so long as Archibald still stood the drake could not be defeated. As the heroes weathered another round of counter attacks Sarasith came to the realization that as powerful as his starfire was it was not sufficient for the task. The mage quickly surmised that his companions needed him to summon forth some form of celestial power that could damage both targets simultaneously. The mages mind raced as he tried to think of some spell hat would work, but he came up blank. The screams of his companions struck his nerves like a hammer, he desperately reached for something, anything that might assist them in their time of need. He could not fail them again. And then he remembered Agamedien's words to him on the Battle Ark.

"Powerful though I may be Agamedien, I acknowledge that a power infinitely greater spoke the very cosmos into being. May that same voice impart to me the means to save my friends now," Sarasith called out to the heavens. In answer to his plea a streak of burning violet light descended from the heavens, a comet spoken into being by Sarasith's acknowledgement. With lightning speed it struck Archibald and the bone drake full force, blasting both of them very near to the brink of defeat.

That the mage could inflict so much hurt on he and his mount infuriated Archibald. But he was not in range to strike back at the mage and so took out his anger on those that were closer by. Stretching a gauntleted hand towards the heroes, a wave of freezing necromantic power swept towards them. It enveloped the warding angel that had stayed close by to Roginn, very nearly destroying it. But it was far worse for Silus. The Halfling was caught in the wave, and already weakened from trading blows with the bone drake his wounded body could not resist the overwhelming chill of the grave. Kal raced forwards to try and push Silus out of the blast of freezing death but came up short. The paladin watched in horror as Silus's body shattered into pieces beneath the icy blast. But Kal was not ready to accept the Halfling's death, nor the fact that he had not been able to reach him in time. The Paladin would have gladly sacrificed his life to save one of his friends and it seemed that this was precisely what Agamedien had anticipated, for the emblem on Kal's tranilium breastplate began to glow brightly, reaching a brilliant crescendo. A moment later Silus's body reformed, unconscious but otherwise unharmed. Kal smiled as he realized the implication of what had just happened. The centaur paladin looked almost peaceful as frost began to form on his skin, like one who dies knowing he has fulfilled his purpose. A moment later, all that remained was Kal's armour, lying amidst a thousand frozen shards that had once been the selfless paladin.

Roginn stood speechless. His cousin and closest friend was dead. It had all happened so fast and the wounded vigilante could barely believe his eyes. In response the centaur's skin flushed a deep crimson as fury literally overwhelmed him.

"You killed my friends Archibald! I'll make you pay you bastard!" Roginn screamed as he unleashed a flurry of blows that shattered the bone drake's skull and caused Archibald to pitch forwards in the saddle. The last of the series of wild swings caught the death knight in the back as he fell, cleaving the armour and causing the axe to become lodged there. The enchanted flames that enveloped the axe burned brighter than they had ever burned before, seeming to be fuelled by the raw fury and emotion of the distraught centaur. Roginn was barely able to pull the axe away in time before the ethereal form of Death Lord Archibald burst into flames. Roginn fell backwards nearly engulfed in the ensuing inferno as the magical flames consumed the Death Knights blackened soul.

When the battle ended all that remained of Deathlord Archibald was his scorched armour, once so terrifying to behold, now an empty husk. Round about it was the shattered remains of the skeletal drake he had rode into battle, cracked and splintered bone still smouldering with heat. All of the heroes triumphs and failures had lead them to this moment. What seemed like so long ago to be random happenstance had thrown this group of mis-matched and untested characters together. And together they had grown to become close companions, friends, and heroes. Ironically Lord Archibald and the

events he had set in motion had very much been the catalyst of all that had befallen the heroes. Now at long last it seemed he was defeated.

There was a mixed sense of elation and sorrow as the companions tried to come to grips with the demise of not only Lord Archibald, but also their heroic friend Kal. But there was little time to digest the events that had played out for some distance away the sound of cracking bone could be heard as what remained of the Skull-Forge began to vibrate. From the cracks throughout its battle worn exterior a foul light began to seep through. One strand of eerie light seemed to take on a life of its own and curled outwards like the thick bloated tentacle of some long forgotten creature. The tendril flailed wildly and then plunged into the wreckage of Archibald and his mount. Just as suddenly as it had struck, the tendril coiled back into the Skull-Forge, the light dimming, though the Skull-Forge still continued to rattle. At the same time there was a clatter of bone against bone, accompanied by the sound of heavy steel armour scrapping against itself. From the rubble of the crushed bone drake Archibald's form arose once more.

The heroes hearts sank, it seemed that yet again they were unable to truly defeat the corrupt Knight and former Lord of Vesticar. Even Kal's sacrifice was not enough to keep this twisted and foul servant of darkness from rising again. However something was different this time, the foul red glow of the Death Knight's eyes were not visible through his visored helm and as it took an unsteady step forwards it seemed to move unnaturally, almost mechanically, as though the power of the Sceptre had actually animated the armour to fight on again, with or without the ethereal presence of Lord Archibald within it. The heroes readied themselves for battle once more, working to surround the animated armour as best they could, unsure of what was going to happen next. Then the sinister voice of the master of the Sceptre of Necrodark roared forth from the Skull-Forge.

"Necrodark has seen the rise and fall of countless civilizations, it is eternal and can never be defeated. Archibald your master calls you back once more. Your task is not yet accomplished, destroy these foolish mortals."

An instant later Archibald's armour begins to rattle and shake violently, with a sudden flash the demonic glow of the Death Knight's eyes reignite inside his helm, followed by a massive explosion. The foul armour fractured into pieces as it explodes outwards, each piece a deadly projectile flung towards the heroes with uncanny speed. They were thrown to ground by the force of the blast and by the time they stagger back to their feet the dust had begun to settle. They immediately noticed not only the absence of the warding angel that had assisted them, having been dispatched by the blast, but also that the black armour of the Death Knight was gone, as was the skeletal remains of the bone drake. All that remained was an ethereal shadow of the man that Lord Archibald once was, that and his glowing red eyes. Without a word the shadow began to distort and swell, growing to triple its size in a heartbeat, and then growing even further. As it grew its features became bloated, and before long it was a incongruent mass of swirling shadow and demonic energies. But still the eyes remain fixed on the heroes, full of hatred, wanting only their deaths.

Knowing that they had no other choice the heroes readied themselves for battle once more. Exhaustion circled in around them like a pack of hungry wolves but somehow they found the strength to rally themselves and meet the foe as it surged forwards towards the fallen Battle Ark. Roginn led the way, half stumbling and half charging, blood running freely from the partially healed puncture wounds in from the bone drakes teeth. Around them the sky darkened as the shadow of Death Lord Archibald summoned forth a storm of death magic. The wild torrent effortlessly blew Mute's arrows and Sarasith's spells aside and simultaneously began to tear the flesh of the living from their bones. The pain was excruciating, but the heroes had come this far and they refused to give up.

Roginn was the first to fall, but not the last. As he closed in on the ever shifting ethereal mass of shadow dozens of claws materialized and attacked Roginn from every angle, the uncanny speed with which the claws struck combined with the pitiful state of his own health prevented the centaur from properly defending himself. Again and again the claws lashed out, raking against his thick leather and mail armor until it became a shredded useless mess. Still the shadow form of Archibald did not relent. Having exposed his flesh the ethereal claws tore the centaur open with far more efficiency than the sharpest of steel blades. The centaur's skin began to fall off in ribbons. Roginn's powerful, well muscled, form tried desperately to stand up to the assault, and truly the centaur stood far longer than any mortal creature should have been able too, but the claws had made their way through sinew and bone and were now tearing at his vital organs. With one last defiant roar, the courageous centaur teetered and then collapsed, dead before he even hit the ground.

Far from finished with its assault, the shadow of Archibald switched its tactics, hurling massive arcane missiles and poisoning the very air with foul necrotic fumes. Then without warning the glowing red eyes flared and began to emit a beam of demonic flame. The beam swept across the ruinous battlefield, indiscriminately burning everything in its path, setting even the stealthy Halfling aflame.

Enraged at the gruesome death of their friend, Arolthus and Silus seemed to not even notice that their own flesh was burning. They rushed forward and attempted to attack the swirling undead shadow from opposite sides, and while the holy powers of the half-orc zealot and the enchanted knives of the assassin seemed to inflict heavy damage there was a feedback of demonic energy each time they struck. In their weakened state their bodies could not withstand the blast and both fell dead at the same time.

It was now Mute's turn to selflessly give his life, in defence of Agamedien, in defence of his friends, indeed in defense of all of Gant. The swirling storm of death had ceased and so the ranger emptied his quiver of arrows into the creature that was once Lord Archibald. Each time one of his arrows sank into the ethereal monstrosity they would explode with a blinding flash. The magic imparted to the deadly projectiles by his enchanted bow caused great pain to the shadow creature, causing it to snarl and howl like a wild beast. But just like his companions, the ranger was struck by a blast of demonic power each time his arrows found their mark. Realizing too late that he had just sealed his own fate, the wild elf watched helplessly as one after another arrow sped towards the shadow creature. The blast of demonic powers triggered by his first arrow caused him to stagger, the second forced him to his knees, the third sent him spinning backwards head over heels. All of the remaining arrows fired by the

expert archer unerringly found their mark, but the repeated demonic feedback they triggered simply blasted the already lifeless corpse of the wild elf. Mute died as he had lived, in the silence of his own choosing.

Of the once mighty heroes all that remained was Sarasith. Unlike the others he had gone into this last battle relatively unscathed compared to his heavily wounded companions. After having witnessed the first of his spells go awry, the highly intelligent mage had decided that rather than acting brashly as his friends had he would instead take the time to fortify his body and his defences with a wide array of elixirs and potions that he carried on his belt. If any of the heroes stood a chance of defeating this last terrible evil that Necrodark had unleashed, it would be him, for the mage possessed vast powers and impeccable discipline. Sarasith calmly and decisively attacked the shadow, switching back and forth between a variety of powerful celestial spells, some in close combat and others at range, attempting to throw the shadow into confusion. The mage achieved some mild success, but as with his companions, every attack was met by the same demonic feedback. The mage weathered the blasts comparatively well and even managed to survive when the shadow suddenly rushed at him with the same thrashing claws that had utterly destroyed Roginn. But as Sarasith had so often reminded himself, all power has its limits, and he was quickly reaching his.

And so Sarasith found himself preparing for his last stand, desperately hoping that Agamedien would extricate himself from the Battle Ark and come to their aid. But Agamedien's aid did not come, and though the mage valiantly continued to battle on against all odds, when a second barrage of the deadly shadow claws was unleashed against him, Sarasith was caught with his guard down. The claws did not cease their brutal assault until the mage was long dead. The force of the blows kept the mage upright in a gruesome mockery of life, while the shadow of Death Lord Archibald continued to batter his lifeless form. Finally, satisfied in the destruction it had wrought, the shadow moved off towards the Battle Ark, intent upon finishing off the vulnerable Agamedien once and for all.

Sarasith's broken form fell to the ground like a discarded rag. From a pouch on his belt a finely crafted phial slipped out and rolled across the ground. Several times since receiving the gift from Agamedien, Sarasith had tried in futility to wrench free the ornate stopper, in the hopes that the golden liquid contained within it held some boon that could assist him in defeating his foes. And now, as it slowly rolled to a stop in a pool of Sarasith's blood the immovable stopper opened of its own accord. The golden liquid spilled freely out onto the battlefield, mingling with the mages blood. As the thirsty ground soaked up both substances it seemed that the true mysteries of the strange glowing liquid, which Agamedien had simply said would allow Sarasith to communicate with his companions over great distances, would be lost forever.

But there is perhaps no greater distance than the yawning chasm of death, for as the last drop of the golden liquid and crimson blood mingled each of the companions felt consciousness return to them. The sensation was peculiar, like being trapped deep beneath the ground only to be suddenly carried upwards by a raging blast of wind. Up through the darkness of the ground they seemed to travel, at unimaginable speeds, and then there was the dim light of the battlefield once more. The raging wind seemed to hold them suspended over the battlefield. Far below they could see the armies of the



Republic bravely doing battle with the undead, and somewhat removed from the conflict they could see the swirling mass of shadow, the foul remnant of their old enemy, Lord Archibald, moving triumphantly towards the Battle Ark. In his wake they could see their own shattered, lifeless bodies. The experience was puzzling, for they seemed to be hanging somewhere in between life and death, disembodied spirits still somehow able to observe the battle raging below. Upon closer examination the heroes noticed that both the republic soldiers, and the mindless undead they fought, seemed to appear translucent and insubstantial, as if they did not quite belong here. Conversely, the previously ethereal shadow form of Death Lord Archibald was now made up of a thick churning substance, a tar-like black ooze.

The heroes were suddenly aware of each other's presence and they discovered that they could not so much hear but rather feel each other's thoughts. At the same time a pale golden light began to emanate from each of them, the same golden light that had been contained within the phial Agamedien had gifted the mage. Just as the angel had promised, even across the distance of death itself, the heroes were able to communicate with each other. As one they all had the same thought; if Archibald's shadow form had become a physical substance in this strange world between worlds, then perhaps they could still prevent him from reaching Agamedien. Hope ignited in their hearts like a living flame.

As if in response to their collective thought, the wind that was holding them suspended began to lessen, and the heroes drifted down towards the battlefield. As their feet touched down near to what remained of their own respective bodies, the lifeless husks still appearing to be translucent and without substance, their spirit forms seemed to take on a sort of golden hued form of their former self's. In their hands they discovered their weapons, and on their bodies their armour, all undamaged. They could feel the weight of them, as if they were made of physical substance. They also felt strength and vitality coursing through their new bodies and while all around them the air should have been loud with the battle clash there instead seemed to be peaceful silence, except for the comforting collective thoughts of their comrades.

A fair distance away the flowing mass of black slime that was the shadow of Death Lord Archibald in this realm must have sensed their unexpected arrival, for it stopped abruptly. Its putrid form seemed to turn inside out as it changed directions to face them without actually turning around. Before long the glowing red eyes and distorted face of Lord Archibald appeared from within the shapeless dripping anatomy of the creature. Without a word or sound of any kind the remnant of Lord Archibald began to advance on the heroes.

## **Chapter17: Agamedien Triumphant**

The heroes steeled themselves for Archibald's onslaught, determination prevailing like a steady hand through their collective conscience. They knew how much was at stake, the fate of the living world rested on their golden hued shoulders here within this world between worlds. They had been given a second chance and they would not squander it, they would stand together and face this evil, Agamedien's last line of defence. So unified were their thoughts and intentions that the sudden intrusion of a stray thought into their minds shattered the collective confidence that they shared. The uninvited guest was panic. It took but a moment for the heroes to realize from whom this undesired thought originated for without warning the spirit form of Silus began to be pulled back towards his body.

All across his lifeless form invisible tattoos flared into existence. The same tattoos suddenly appeared on his spirit form as well, mirroring those on his former body. The strange symbols seemed to be some kind of script, but what significance they held was unknown, even to the learned mage Sarasith. In all his studies he had never seem symbols such as these. The closer Silus' two forms became the more fiercely the tattoos flared, with what could only be described as an anti-brightness, as if they sucked in all light. The Halfling struggled to escape, but he was caught and could not escape whatever force was drawing him back to his body. Still able to share his thoughts his friends desperately tried to latch on to his consciousness, to aid him in some way, but all they could sense from him was indecipherable chaos, confusion, and panic. And then, just as suddenly as it all began, Silus was gone, without a trace. Neither of his bodies, nor even a shred of a thought remained. The heroes had little time ponder the mystery for the Shadow of Death Lord Archibald was upon them and they would have to face him without their companions aid.

The unblinking eyes of the monstrosity let loose with their unholy glare, sending out beams of demonic fire which rapidly swept across the battle field. The heroes scattered in all directions in an attempt to escape the deadly beams as all around them the battlefield erupted with the swirling demonic winds that Archibald seemed to command. The battle was fierce but ultimately short lived, for here on the same plane of existence as Archibald's shadow form, the heroes attacks seemed to be far more effective. As well their own forms seemed to almost hum with divine power, making them far more resilient to the demonic feedback that had cost several of them their lives. Even the deadly shadow claws were still no longer the grave threat to Roginn that they had been previously. With two guardian angels at his back the centaur was able to stand toe to toe with Archibald. This seemed to encourage his companions for they began to swarm the creature. From across the battlefield Arolthus' holy armour suddenly grew gigantic angelic wings in response to a critical healing power performed on Roginn. Wreathed in blue flame, Arolthus leapt into the air, covering the distance between himself and Archibald's corrupted form with ease. As he descended he reached out with his bladed claws and tore a vicious swath down the shapeless flank of the blank pulsating monstrosity, at the same time the blue flames that surrounded him ignited the foul fumes emanating from the beast. All but finished, Archibald's shadow form thrashed about wildly, inflicting heavy damage, but far from enough to bring any of the bothersome heroes down.

Sarasith closed in and struck with a series of blows, which at first seemed to be delivered with nothing more than his bare fists. But as the High Elves fists swung through the air they began to crackle with cosmic energy. By the time they contacted Archibald's oozing form they were no longer flesh and blood but rather massive celestial fists of whirling indigo and violet light. Three times Sarasith struck the monster and by the time the final blow was struck, Archibald's form began to quiver and shake, as though it was losing cohesion.

Gathering all its remaining strength the dire evil that Lord Archibald had become sought to punish his attackers for the faith they placed in Agamedien and the One God who granted the angel his powers. That faith had allowed Kal and Arolthus to anchor the heroes defense of the vulnerable angel and Archibald wanted nothing more than to see them burn for it. All of his single minded hatred struck like a weapon, focused specifically on the two holy warriors. Their shimmering golden forms erupted in

an unnatural flame. As they writhed in pain it seemed to fuel Archibald's hatred and the flames burned with even greater intensity. Even in their revitalized bodies Kal and Arolthus would have surely been burned to cinders had not Sarasith fired upon Archibald from behind with a blast of concentrated Starfire. Though they were within this strange altered reality the Star of Goshind yet burned brightly over head and this final burst of power from Sarasith's outstretched hand, which drained the very last of his own strength, seemed to take on the full force of the star. As the starfire struck Archibald's vile form the flames surrounding Kal and Arolthus instantly went out. Archibald lurched towards Sarasith as if to seek revenge, but his bloated body was shaking so violently now that it seemed he came apart.

"It cannot be! I am eternal. Master save me once more, that I may fulfill your will!" Archibald roared. But there was no reply, and unable to hold his form together any longer the Shadow of Death Lord Archibald began to unravel. As if caught in a raging wind, its inky dark substance was scattered into millions of shredded fragments before disappearing all together. It took the heroes a moment to realize that they had defeated Archibald once and for all, and part of them yet seemed to wonder if it could actually be true, for no fiend had proved to be more resilient and troublesome then Lord Archibald of Vesticar. The harsh reality of it all was despite their victory over Archibald, the Sceptre of Necrodark still remained at large, as did the vast army of the undead it commanded.

Not willing to be forgotten, an eerie light flared once more from the remains of the Skull-Forge, bursting through the cracks with such raw intensity that the skull could no longer contain it. With one last crack the Skull-Forge split asunder and the foul glowing light began to move towards the ruined Battle Ark. The evil glow was impossibly bright, but at its heart could be seen a vague, transient shape. At the core of the pulsating necromantic powers was what looked to be a hooded and robed figure, stooped with age, but proudly carrying the grisly artefact that had started all of the Republics troubles, the Sceptre of Necrodark itself.

The heroes reacted immediately, placing themselves in between the Sceptre and Agamedien's ruined Battle Ark. Without complaint they formed up once more and prepared to do battle with the dark master of the Sceptre of Necrodark. "We must protect Agamedien at all costs. We stand together or not at all," the singular thought rang through their minds like the mighty call of a battle horn.

The master of the Sceptre seemed to be aware of their presence, but did not appear to be over concerned. The robed figure muttered something to himself and instantly a swarm of necromantic tentacles flew towards the heroes. Even in the spirit form the Sceptre seem to hold sway over them. Try as they might the heroes could not move. "Behold mortals! With the slightest effort your victory is undone and your hopes are crushed," the robed figure called out mockingly, "Witness the immeasurable power of Necrodark and despair. Even in death you not beyond our reach, you are all now slaves of the Sceptre, you will serve the dead without question. Where Archibald has failed you shall fulfill the will of Necrodark. The corpses of the living will replenish our forces and all the land will be brought under the dominion of Necrodark. Only the remnant of Agamedien stands in the way. Champions destroy him!"

The heroes tried desperately to resist, but their new bodies now seemed like they did not belong to them at all, rather they were imprisoned within them with no choice but to watch as they

obeyed the evil will of Necrodark. As one they charged the ruined Battle Ark, with every fibre of their being willing them to turn away. But they could not. As they drew close to the fallen form of Agamedien's Battle Ark, weapons were lifted high and power began to flow through their hands. All seemed lost, despair and hopelessness ruled their hearts. And then Agamedien broke free.

There was a brilliant explosion of pure holy light as the helm of the Battle Ark erupted in a shower of sparks and swirling energy. Even though they did not control their own bodies the heroes were forced to look away, for to behold Agamedien rising up from the Battle Ark in his true form was like staring at the heart of the sun. While the Battle Ark had resembled his true form somewhat, in all its grandeur and splendour, it paled in comparison the awe inspiring presence of the true angelic form of Agamedien. While Agamedien appeared to be much smaller than the Battle Ark he had commanded, at the same time he mounting up on wings that seemed to reach from one horizon to the other. Climbing high in no time at all Agamedien's wings then retracted and wrapped around him like a protective cocoon of holy fire. As his upwards momentum was overcome by gravity the angel turned plunged head first towards the robed figure bearing the Sceptre of Necrodark. As the two figures clashed their diametrically opposed powers flashed in a wild storm of good versus evil. Agamedien grasped a hold to the sceptre and tried to wrench it free from the robed figures hands. Unholy lightning crackled all around the angel and any lesser being would have been torn apart by the fluctuating forces at work. So equal and opposite the auras surrounding them were that they flared violently and then went out. Leaving the combatants locked in a vicious wrestling match over the Sceptre.

Although the master of the Sceptre appeared to be ancient his strength was fuelled by the necromancy he commanded within the Sceptre. It was no small feat to try and pull the sceptre from his grasp, but Agamedien would not relent. He managed to pin the robed figure and placed an armoured knee against his opponents throat, the angel then locked both hands around the sceptre and gave a mighty heave. The sceptre almost came loose, but still its master kept the iron grip of his right hand fixed upon it. The tug of war continued, but just when it seemed like Agamedien was on the verge of success his form began to flicker. As he had predicted, outside of the Battle Ark his true angelic form could not remain in the physical realm, nor even in this world between worlds, he had been here far too long and was being drawn back into the heavenly realm. With each flicker the decrepit robed figure regained his hold on the Sceptre.

"Heroes, I cannot hold my form here, you must try to break free and assist me!" Agamedien pleaded.

Each of the heroes searched inside himself, to the very depth of their being to find the strength to resist Necrodark. But the power of the Sceptre was immense. Of the five heroes only the raw fury of Roginn and practiced disciple of Sarasith prove enough to overcome the Sceptre's hold. If only for a moment the two had their free will back. It lasted barely long enough for Roginn to even lift his axe, and then they were once more under the Sceptre's control.

However the simple act of breaking free from the thrall of the Sceptre, brief though it may have been, was enough to distract the dark master. For a split second the master of the Sceptre shifted his

concentration to recapture Roginn and Sarasith's will, but it was all Agamedien needed. He grabbed a hold of the Sceptre and pulled with all his might. It came loose, and instantaneously Agamedien's wings erupted into fiery existence again. He shot up into the sky as fast as he could, trying to distance himself from the robed figure below, who seem stunned that the Sceptre was no longer in his grip. But the angels form was fading quickly and each time he briefly flickered out of their world the Sceptre would slip and fall, only to be snatched up again as the angel willed himself to take form again. Heroic though it was, Agamedien was fighting a losing battle to remain in their world.

"You cannot have the sceptre, it belongs to me Agamedien!" the master screamed. From his outstretched hand a wave of necromantic power swept out, taking the form of a giant rotting hand on a long tendril of greenish mist. It grasped a hold of the sceptre in a desperate attempt to recapture it. "We both know you cannot remain here angel, return to your pathetic realm or face oblivion."

"To end the evil of Necrodark once and for all, I would gladly face oblivion. So be it!" Was Agamedien's stoic reply. The angels form ceased flickering and took solid form once more. A shockwave of holy energy shot out from all around him, dissolving the necromantic hand like a column of salt in a monsoon rain. This last burst of power drained Agamedien's remaining strength and his fiery wings were snuffed out. He hung suspended in the air for a brief moment, a leaf caught on the wind, and then he began to plummet back towards the earth. As he fell, he held the Sceptre of Necrodark tight to his chest. The angels head turned towards the heroes spirit forms, acknowledging their presence. The heroes heard his voice sound one last time in their heads.

"My burden has ended, with this my final act, Necrodark is defeated. Farewell my friends, remember me..."

Before Agamedien's form ever struck the ground, cracks began to appear across his entire body, his form fractured and began to collapse inwards. It was as if a tiny drain had opened inside him and his whole body was being compressed to fit through it. The heroes watched helplessly as the mighty angel gave up its eternal life in the heavenly realms and was sucked into the non-existence of oblivion. The last they saw of the guardian who had watched over all of Gant for thousands of years, whose sole purpose had been to prevent Necrodark from consuming the living world, was a speck of golden light being sucked through a tiny pin-prick tear in reality. And then Agamedien, along with the Sceptre of Necrodark was gone.

"Noooooooooooo," shrieked the robed figure, no longer the master of anything at all. His voice gurgled in his throat and then went silent and collapsed. As he fell his hood slipped from his head, revealing a man so old that his flesh appeared to have mummified on his bones while he still lived. But without the Sceptre he could no longer sustain himself and his body turned to dust right before the heroes eyes. Soon, the only evidence of his passing was a tattered old robe, and then even his robes crumbled to dust and the dark master of the Sceptre of Necrodark was no more.

His passing was like a stone thrown into still waters. A ripple raced outwards from where he had stood, and every undead creature it touched fell to the ground lifeless. A spirited shout of victory erupted from the mouths of the living. The power of Necrodark was broken and its armies no more. At

long last the war in the East was at an end. And though the War of the Twin Terrors was far from over, the Republic of Gant and all her loyal allies could now turn their full strength upon the remaining threat in the West, the Demon Prince, Cerebus the Blood-Thirster. But that is another tale.

As for the heroes, they watched in awe as the cloud of dust that was once the master of the Sceptre of Necrodark, the supreme enemy of the living, was scattered to the winds. As the last speck drifted away the golden hue began to fade from their bodies and they could feel themselves being pulled slowly but inexorably towards the remains of their former bodies. They discovered also that the strange ability they had developed to feel each other's thoughts was rapidly fading. Agamedien's great gift to them was temporary it seemed, allowing them to finish this ultimate task, to fulfill their destiny and as heroes give their lives for a greater cause. As one, they looked upon each other one last time and before their ability to communicate faded all together they shared one last thought with one another. As ever in life, so in death Roginn was the first to wish his friends well.

"We Centaur's believe that there is no better way to live ones life than in the company of friends. But it seems that there is also no better to way to die. If we should ever meet again, I give you my solemn oath, I'll buy the first round," Roginn chuckled as he bid farewell, and even here in this otherworldly form he raised one last toast to his companions.

"Indeed cousin, the One God has smiled down on us this day and saw us through to victory over this great evil, he never left us in this life and shall not in the next. Be blessed my friends until we meet again," Kal said and then gave a heartfelt salute to his comrades.

Arolthus was silent for a moment as he surveyed the battlefield and looked upon the shattered and smoldering remains of him and his companions. "Well my brothers, I think we might have over done it this time." This statement brought what could almost have been called a smile to his perpetually fierce countenance, "but let it be said that the evil we unknowingly unleashed upon this world was defeated here today by the strength of our own hands and the courage of our hearts, for together in death we have triumphed!" As the mighty half-orc let loose a final bellowing victory cry he was joined in concert by all.

Even the ever-silent Mute joined in the revelry of the moment and when the last roar ceased to echo within their collective mind, so too did the Wild-Elf of the Athel-Leaf tribe address his companions. Perhaps it was the fact that he could communicate with his companions without having to audibly speak a word, or was it simply that he knew the end was here and it no longer matter. Either way the silent ranger addressed his friends in greater length than any of them had ever witnessed before. "Now that we have reached the end of things for us all and yet retain this Heavenly gift which has linked our minds, I can sense that you all wish to know the name that my family gave to me. You wish to know me, not just as a companion for our journeys, but as a brother, and I can think of none more worthy to hear my true name. My friends, I am Iulin Lumornor, and it has been an honor to live and die by your sides. Farewell, and may the Life-Father embrace you."

"Iulin Lumornor, I regret to learn your name only now, for it is a name worthy to be remembered for all time. I do not doubt that you will all be welcomed into the next life, but alas for me,

I do not know where I go from here, or what my future holds. But know that I regret nothing, for it has been a glorious journey, and I will look forward to one day joining you in the end. Thank you for accepting me for who I was and not what my past dictated me to be. What a grand adventure we have had my truest friends," Sarasith concluded.

The heroes spirits lingered for one last moment above their lifeless remains, drinking deeply of this most hallowed moment. Then a peaceful blackness rushed up to greet them, the final embrace of death. For the people of Gant, left behind to mourn the heroes passing and celebrate their victory, there was the sincere belief that these brave souls went on to a better place, an Eternal Kingdom, where they would experience endless joy and perfect peace as a reward for their sacrifice. And this is likely the truth of the matter, but not for Sarasith of the Starspire College. The mage's soul belonged to another, one who was not willing to part with it just yet. While his friends perhaps went on to see wondrous lands which remain shrouded in mystery, to all save those who had perished in the war, this was not the case for Sarasith. As he found himself being drawn back into his body his eyes remained transfixed on a singular image, the faint glowing outline of Headmaster Goshind.

## **Chapter 18: Drenn'Salar**

The great deeds which transpired beneath the shadow of the fortress of Necrodark will likely live on in song and story for generations to come. The noble sacrifices of Agamedien and his companions bought the freedom of the people of Gant from the icy grip of the undead in the east. But as great as their sacrifice was, the fate of the continent was still very much uncertain, for it was still held in the bloody grasp of Cerebus and his demented cultists in the west. Such was the true despair of the War of the Twin Terrors, that breaking the hold of one of the sinister powers did not ensure victor. And while the two heinous armies had never truly been allied against the people of Gant, they had none-the-less assisted each other in breaking the fighting spirit of Gant's defenders by sowing mutual fear and hopelessness, both eager for the harvest of death. Some had speculated that the Twin Terrors secretly aided each other, but they would have likely made poor allies in the long run, for their ultimate goals were quite different. Regardless of their allegiance to one another, the people of Gant were an unfortunate lot for having to face both evils at once.

However despite their divergent goals, the Twin Terrors were linked together, in ways that only the mysteries of prophecy could have foretold. For the defeat of Necrodark was but a portent of things to come, predicted nearly a thousand years earlier, as was the sacrifices that would be made in order to ensure it was accomplished. However in their arrogance, the High Elves of Cailhast had foolishly assumed that the Prophecy of the Drenn'Salar was meant for them alone. They did consider that it could have been linked to the Republic of Gant and its struggle against Necrodark. After all, the prophecy had come about because of another foe, arguably more insidious than even the Sceptre of Necrodark.

For in the days when the Prophecy of the Drenn'Salar was first uttered, Cerebus the Blood-Thrister had laid waste to what remained of the already diminished High Elven kingdom. The Demon Prince, along with his demonic army and loyal cultist followers, had pressed the High Elves to the brink of extinction.

However, the High Elves had fought them to a stalemate and eventually Cerebus turned on weaker prey, lured by his cultist followers with the promise of fresh blood. In the aftermath of the war the High Elves had been left with only a single city standing, their capital, Cailhast. With no other choice available they turned inwards and looked to their own survival. They had lost their war against Cerebus and it would fall on others to deal with the Demon-Prince, namely King Helius of Drakkus, though his victory would be the curse of generations to follow.

Despite having broken the back of the High Elven armies, Cerebus the Blood-Thirster never learned just how close he had come to being defeated himself. For in the early days of the war, when the hero Ilethin had first challenged Cerebus' might, a group of priests from the Elven Order of Triunas had devised a means to weaken Cerebus' and drain him of his terrible blood powers. Under the leadership of the High Priestess As'Paris, beloved wife of Ilethin himself, the Priests constructed a vast subterranean structure beneath a remote temple far to the west. The buried array of tunnels were charged with the potent Psionic powers the Order of Triunas had at their disposal. They believed the array could catch and store the demonic blood-energy that gave Cerebus' his true powers, cutting him off at the source. All that was required was for a device to be driven into the demon's flesh, to tap Cerebus' powers, releasing them to be caught up by the Psionic conduits of the array, and stored in secret. Due to its remote location, they hoped that Cerebus would remain unaware of the temple long enough that the army could defeat the Demon Prince in his weakened state.

As the priests laboured to construct their Psionic array, powerful Elven mages and skilled craftsmen worked together to create a device that could penetrate Cerebus' formidable defenses and release his powers. And so the Drenn'Salar was born. Forged in two pieces, the first appearing as an unassuming mace that could be wielded by even the lowest Triunas acolyte without suspicion of its greater purposes. The second piece of the Drenn'Salar was a sharp needle-like device, charged with just enough arcane energy to pierce the Demon's thick hide. The arcane needle was to be attached to the mace handle and as one driven into Cerebus' flesh, scattering his blood-energy through the many flanges of the mace and allowing the Order of Triunas to steal it away. To prevent their plan from being discovered by the cults many agents, the arcane energy of the two pieces was designed to remain undetectable until they were brought into close proximity.

In this way both pieces of the Drenn'Salar arrived at the temple undetected, where the Priests attuned their Psionic powers with the unique resonance of the arcane device. Unfortunately by the time the Drenn'Salar was finally prepared, Cerebus' armies had attacked and driven Ilethin back towards Cailhast. Hopeful that her husband would find a way to break through Cerebus' lines and retrieve the Drenn'Salar, As'Paris waited, trusting the secrecy of their location. However before Ilethin could reach her, the temple was accidentally discovered by a demonic scout. Though they did not understand its true purpose they saw the priests and temple guards as a source of more blood for their master and under the command of a particularly ambitious Cultist Summoner, a large raiding party attacked the Temple. Fearful that the Drenn'Salar would be discovered, As'Paris orders two of her most trusted Acolytes to separate the two pieces and flee into the maze of subterranean tunnels of the array. The two acolytes were never seen again.



Though none survived the brutal attack, a few wounded priests recorded what they could of the final hours of the temple, scrawled unto the solid stone of Temple foundations with their own blood. It is said that As'Paris herself was the last to fall beneath the tide demons and cultists. She rallied the remaining temple guards and priests of her order and made her last stand upon the stairs leading up to the inner temple. Even with her final act she sought to confuse the demons and hide the existence of the Drenn'Salar and the Psionic array beneath their feet. With her companions laying dead all around her, she summoned up a storm of telekinetic energy and brought the temple down around her, crushing her along with her enemies and burying any trace of the array.

Due to their self-imposed isolation following their defeat at the hands of Cerebus, the final fate of As'Paris and temple remained a mystery to the High Elves. It was Ilethin who discovered the final writings of the priests. Having barely survived the war himself, he became the first High Elf to leave Cailhast in over a hundred years since their defeat. By this time he was elderly even among elves and in ill health from his old war wounds, but he determined that he would not go to his death bed without discovering the fate his beloved As'Paris. Ignoring the laws of his people he gathered with him his loyal knights and left Cailhast in search of his wife. He never returned from the journey, but the Knights who travelled with him claimed he died not of old age or old wounds, but rather of a broken heart, upon discovering his wife's death. From then on the knights called themselves the Riders of Ilethin, as they ridden proudly with him in this his final battle. They pledged themselves to honoring his memory and fighting demons where ever they could be found. Word of their deeds even reached back to Cailhast where more Knights flocked to the banner of the Riders of Ilethin. So too did word reach Cailhast of As'Paris and her valiant last stand, and amongst the High Elves the ruined temple forever became known as the Temple of As'Paris, a tribute to her courage and wisdom.

But of the Drenn'Salar no sign was ever found, and given the departure of Cerebus' from Gant, it fell into legend among the High Elves of Cailhast. In time, from within the ranks of the Order of Triunas remaining in Cailhast, a prophecy eventually surfaced; the Prophecy of the Drenn'Salar.

"When great heroes give their lives to defeat an ancient evil, what was lost shall be found again, and in the hands of the most unlikely champions, hope shall be reborn." .

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As was foretold, with the giving of their lives, the great heroes in the east defeated the ancient evil of Necrodark. Unknown to the Riders of Ilethin, their Republic "guests", or the heroes with them, the power of the Sceptre was finally broken in the very same hour that a non-descript mace in Seleena Rainmaker's traveling pack began to glow with a intense silver light. In that moment hope was rekindled in the hearts of the High Elves, for the mace she carried was the missing piece of the Drenn'Salar.

Since Cerebus' return to Gant, the Riders of Ilethin had been scouring the ruined Temple of As'Paris for any sign of the Drenn'Salar. They were overjoyed when they recovered the first piece of the Drenn'Salar, the arcane needle, held tightly in the skeletal grip of a long dead acolyte beneath the ruined stone of the temple. But as time stretched on they lost heart, for all their searching they could not locate the mace, and without it the arcane-needle was a useless hunk of metal. But now, with the pieces

re-united the Riders quickly began to plan their next move, forcibly removing the mace from Seleena's possession, as they believed it was both their duty and their right to wield the Drenn'Salar in the final confrontation with Cerebus.

Several days later news reached the Riders and those camped with them, that Cerebus himself was on the move. Scouts reported that he was riding into battle with the remnant of his army upon a makeshift throne, carried on the backs of a horde of demons, into what is believed to be the final battle with the Republic's forces. His throne was a massive structure which appears to also be some kind of demonic war machine. Empowered by the massacre of his own cult, it seemed Cerebus now wished to utterly destroy Almsberg. The latest reports claimed that the Republic had refused to retreat to Almsberg but instead prepared to meet his forces in the field once again, entrenched in their defensive line and confident in their earlier victory. However their confidence was sorely misplaced, for unlike the Riders of Ilethin, they had not grasped that their previous victory had only served to make Cerebus stronger.

The Riders of Ilethin mobilized their forces and took up position some distance away, hidden on the outskirts of the Celeros Forest. Spirits were high amongst those whom the Riders had claimed as guests, believing that at last the Riders would come to the Republic's aid, bearing a weapon that could potentially turn the tides and rescue the Republic army from certain doom. They ready themselves in anticipation for the call to charge to go up amongst the Riders of Ilethin.

As Cerebus and his forces come into range of the Republic lines the demons lowered the throne to the ground and charged headlong towards their enemy, snarling cruel beasts, intent upon destruction and mayhem. Cerebus himself proved to be more than a counter for the Republican war machines. Sitting comfortably upon his throne he belched forth streams of burning blood from his mouth that consumed entire regiments, all the while Republican ammunition bounced harmlessly off of his oily, blood drenched hide. Overhead winged demons delivered a non-stop supply of captured soldiers who were dropped through a hatch in the side of Cerebus' throne. What terrible fate awaited them inside the cruel machine of war was unknown to the onlookers.

It was Taylor who first realized that the High Elven knights did not intend to charge to the aid of the Republic, instead they seemed content to hold back, waiting until Cerebus' forces were fully engaged in the slaughter of the Republic. The Republic deaths would act as a distraction for the Riders to make their move, exposing their flank the demon army would be cut down by the surprise charge of the knights. It was a tactically sound maneuver, but the blatant disregard for Republic lives sickened Taylor. Despite the urgings of the heroes in their midst, the Riders of Ilethin refused to act, rather they simply held their position with the Drenn'Salar in hand, while the Republic lines were decimated. Some of the more gregarious Knights attempted to explain that they would have to strike at the proper moment, when Cerebus was fully distracted by gorging himself on the Republic troops. They claimed it was the only way to get close enough to Cerebus, for in order for their plan to work, the Drenn'Salar had to be driven into the swollen blood-sac on the Demon Prince's back, tapping his supply of blood-energy and making him weak enough to be defeated. Regardless of their explanation, Blood-brood cursed them for cowards and it took several knights to hold him back from charging out and revealing their position.

The screams of the dying began to drown out the gibbering war cries of the demon host. In many places the well entrenched picket lines of the Republic began to crumble. Whole formations, once bristling with razor sharp spears and sturdy shields, begin to falter and flee as massive demons, bred for war, smashed them apart. Smaller demons took the opportunity to surge through the legs of the beleaguered soldiers and eagerly fell upon the lightly armour archers and crossbowmen in the back ranks, tearing them limb from limb. And with each and every drop of blood that was shed Cerebus seemed to revel in it, drinking deeply of the carnage. When it appeared as though the Demon Prince was completely focused on his feast of bloodshed, the Riders of Iletin at last sounded the charge and rode out en-masse. At last able to act, the heroes charged out alongside them, but they were quickly outpaced by the mounted High Elven Knights.

As predicted, the Riders easily crushed the exposed flank of the demonic army, catching them unaware. As the ranks of demons melted before them it seemed as though they would reach the throne almost unopposed. But with a slight turn of his bloated and hideous head Cerebus took notice of the new threat. Taylor and his companions looked on in helpless agony as Cerebus summoned forth a towering wave of boiling blood that swept through the High Elves midst, knocking most of the riders to the ground, many to never rise again. Moments before the Knights had been an unstoppable wedge of flashing steel driving deep into the side of the demon host, but with seemingly no effort at all Cerebus was able to stop their charge in its tracks. As quickly as it came the wave of boiled blood dissipated and sank into the battlefield. The heroes slower pace was all that saved them from the fate that had befallen the Riders of Iletin. To her dismay, Seleena was the first to spot her former possession, the Drenn'Salar, disappearing beneath a mass of scorched Elven bodies. Chaos erupted and the Riders struggled to regroup while what demons remained fell upon horse and rider, most utterly defenceless.

As they rushed upon the massacre, attempting to aid the Riders, the heroes found themselves closer to the Drenn'Salar than any of the remaining Knights. Without a second thought they rushed to the mound of dead knights, the bodies of both elves and horses twisted in what must have been an agonizing death. Seleena snatched up the Drenn'Salar and as one they began to make their way towards Cerebus' throne. Without any words spoken they formed their simple plan, reach the throne, find a way to get inside, and then fight their way to the top so that they could strike at Cerebus. However it quickly became clear that this task is almost impossible. Between them and the throne was a sea of demons which had rallied and were now bearing down upon them. Sure of death, but intent upon facing it together, the heroes braced themselves for the demon onslaught.

But the onslaught never came, for without warning the ground beneath their feet opened up and swallowed the heroes. Sure that this was some new demonic attack by the malevolent Demon Prince, panic set in as they awaited suffocation. However much to their surprise they instead find themselves whole and unharmed, save for the dirt in their hair and the gravel in their ears, in a tunnel carved by some unnatural means. A familiar voice echoed through the tunnel, instantly calming them.

"My daughter, my friends, fear not. It is I Hargast, I have become one with Vahlin's Earth and He has sent me to assist you now in your time of need. I have command the earth to open a way that will lead you directly to the entrance to Cerebus' throne." Tears instantly began well up in Seleena's eyes

and her companions stood there dumbstruck by this latest turn of event. But the voice of Hargast seemed to come from everywhere at once, urging them on, "Quickly now, Cerebus seeks to disrupt my aid."

As if on cue, blood began to pour through fissures in the tunnel walls. Instinct took over and Taylor snapped into action, pulling Ebonethia after him as he sprinted off down the tunnel. Blood-brood likewise made to run, but saw that Seleena was still transfixed on the spot, unable to cope with the discovery that her Father somehow had come back to her.

"Seleena we need to go," Blood-brood roared, "now!"

"Father," she sobbed, unmoved by Blood-brood's plea, "can it truly be you?"

Large chunks of blood soaked earth began to fall all around Seleena's head but still she stood transfixed. In her state she failed to see a large boulder crashing down towards her head. It would have been the end of her had not Blood-brood unceremoniously tossed her over his shoulder and head-down barreled after Taylor and Ebonethia. The minotaur finally caught up to his companions when he nearly bowled them over. They had come to a standstill, the tunnel having come to an end as abruptly as it began. Behind them a wave of bloody mud and debris raced towards them. Hargast's voice pierced through the roar of the chaos around them one final time.

"Seleena, I am so proud of what you have become. Take heart, Vahlin goes with you."

This phrase is the last thing they hear before the ground beneath their feet surges upwards, only moments before the blood reaches them. Suddenly the heroes were standing in the light of day, a short distance away was the imposing structure of Cerebus' war-machine throne. On the wall facing them was a large wooden door, barred but otherwise non-descript.

As if cued by their first steps towards the door, the voice of Cerebus boomed out overhead, "Pitiful mortals, you crawl through the dirt to challenge me, like the insects that you are. You think your allies wield power, but I have drank deeply of this world, I know real power, Cerebus is supreme!"

From somewhere above the throne structure a blood curdling scream rings out and is then cut short. A splash of fresh blood rains down upon them. When it touches the ground it collects into unnaturally large pools all around the heroes.

"You are not worthy of my time, however you will make a splendid feast for my children," Cerebus taunts from up on high.

All around the heroes gluttonous imps crawled out of the pools of blood, dragging their bloated and dripping forms forward. Their vile and tortured bodies, oozing with partially congealed blood, churn the stomach and inspire terror. But these heroes had faced off against the demonic forces of Cerebus enough times that they were not daunted. Cerebus had vastly underestimated them and they made quick work of his so-called children. Without even waiting to wipe the blood from his axe Blood-brood

went to work on wooden door that bared their entrance into the throne of Cerebus. After only a few powerful swings the door splintered and crumpled inwards.

Once inside the throne they found themselves in a rectangular room full of captive soldiers and littered with filth. Terror permeated the air like a foul odour and once freed the captives fled for their lives. The commotion of their escape attracted attention however and several guards descended from a set of stairs in the corner. The guards; a wolfen, a cultist and one of the frog like sloth demons, carried empty shackles in their hands, as though they were returning to lead more captives up the throne. However much was their surprise when they discovered that their captives had all been set free and they now instead faced a well armed force of heroes. They tossed aside the shackles and flew at their enemies, the wolfen attempting to ensnare them in chains of ice while the sloth demon spat forth its venom, meanwhile the cultist, a ritual guard, issued a battle cry and charged forward with his bloodstained axe high overhead. But as fearsome as he trio appeared, they too were no match for the heroes combined fury, and soon all three minions of Cerebus lay in a heap.

Undeterred by this latest obstacle the heroes raced up a series of stairways, climbing ever higher up the Throne of Cerebus. When they at last emerged onto the top of the throne their eyes were met by a gruesome sight. From this vantage point they could see the battlefield laid out before them. All across the Republic lines soldiers fought desperately to hold back the demonic host, but with Cerebus raining destruction down upon them they were no match for their enemies. Any time the soldiers rallied to some mighty heroes side, or stood defiantly to defend a standard bearer, Cerebus would hurl massive globules of burning blood into their midst and within moments they would be fleeing or simply butchered to the last man right where they stood.

And while all around them they observed gruesome atrocities, it paled in comparison to what was occurring right in front of them. Here on platform at the highest point of the throne was an altar, carved of black stone into the twisted visage of countless demonic faces. Standing before the altar was a High Priest of Cerebus, his robes soaked in gore from the countless blood sacrifices he had offered up on the altar. The floor on which the altar stood was carved of the same black stone, with channels that collected the blood as it ran freely down the sides of the altar. The channels encircled the altar and then drained towards a massive iron ring that extended over the edge of the platform. The iron ring was crafted in the likeness of a cruel looking crown, suspended over top of the head Cerebus the Blood-Thirster himself. Some demented mind had designed the iron crown such that it was able to collect the blood sacrifices and provide Cerebus with non-stop flow of blood as it drained down the crown onto his immense form. As Cerebus bathed in the thick crimson blood showering down on him from the iron crown, the blood seemed to soak into his skin, causing demonic power to visibly surge through his body.

As the heroes scanned the horrific scene before them they saw what they could only assume was the next sacrifice that the High Priest would offer to Cerebus, four docile captives, chained to the altar behind the High Priest. Once they had been proud soldiers of the Republic, but plucked from the battlefield by winged demons they now stood naked and defeated, on the brink of death. As Taylor looked upon their faces, devoid of expression with no hope for victory, he could not help but see the fate of the entire Republic army reflected there. And if the army fell here, Almsberg would become a

banquet of blood for Cerebus. If they accomplished nothing else here today, it would be to punish this vile priest for so ruthlessly tossing away the lives of his fellow man to appease the beast that he served.

Brandishing his claymore, Taylor charge headlong towards the priest, thinking to catch him off guard and take his head from off his shoulders. But at the last moment the High Priest of Cerebus turned and met Taylor's blade. In his hands the priest wielded an iron staff with the twisted skull of a demon mounted upon it. The macabre weapon erupted into flames the moment it touched the steel of the claymore, causing a shower of sparks to explode in Taylor's face and sending him reeling off to one side. As one the rest of the group sprang into action, both to protect Taylor and in an attempt to capitalize on the distraction Taylor had created. A ball of churning flame erupted from Blood-brood's outstretched hand, at the same time as a torrent of molten bronze issued forth from the fingertips of the Druid Seleena. A moment later a pillar of holy light slammed down upon the High Priest as Ebonethia's prayer rang out like a clarion call. But as each attack erupted upon the High Priest his blood stained robes would flair with an unholy glow of their own and each attack would dissipate around him as if it was nothing more than a slight breath of wind.

This was clearly no meager servant of Cerebus, but rather one of the most powerful and most trusted members of his cult. With a gesture from the priest, the eyes of the four captive soldiers began to glow red and long cruelly curved claws tore out of their fingertips. With lightning speed the four soldiers, who had moments before been so docile, tore the chains from their ankles and wrists and were upon the heroes, snarling and slashing as if possessed by some enraged demonic beast. It was all they could do to hold the possessed soldiers at bay, which allowed the High Priest to chant in some devilish tongue. As his chant reached crescendo a pulse of demonic energy blasted out from all around the High Priest, knocking the heroes to the ground. For a moment it seemed that the heroes would be overwhelmed, and this very well would have been true for lesser heroes, but these four had stared demons in the eye and lived to tell the tale. The steel in their arm was strong and stronger still was their faith in the One God. As Taylor and Blood-brood positioned themselves to defend the women, Ebonethia and Seleena called out to Him, seeking not salvation for themselves but rather freedom for the possessed soldiers. With unwavering resolve they held fast to their faith, challenging the demonic presence and commanding it to give up its hosts. With a deadening scream the demonic entities were torn from the bodies of the soldiers, only to manifest as clawed beasts with forked tails, made of blood and pure hate. The soldiers, now free, ran for their lives. No longer afraid to harm their attackers the heroes went on the offensive, battling with their combined strengths; steel, earth, flame, and holy faith.

The High Priest of Cerebus, along with his demonic blood-beast pets, delivered wave after wave of punishing blows but they could not shatter the heroes resolve. They fought back the blood beasts, dispatching them one by one, and then turned their fury upon the High Priest. Clad as he was in robes ensorcelled with demonic power he weathered their attacks far beyond what any would have suspected for a lightly armoured foe such as this. But the High Priests faith in the Demon Prince Cerebus would ultimately prove misplaced, for after a long and hard battle the heroes cut down the vile priest and cast his remains from the throne, to crash among the nameless dead far below.

However the elation of victory was short lived, for the death of his favoured priest seemed to barely register with Cerebus. Secure as the Blood-Thirster was in his own powers, he continued to lay waste to the Republic's lines. From their high perch the heroes could see that the army was begin to rout and would soon be in full retreat. They had to act fast. From the top of the throne they could easily identify the exposed weak spot that the Riders of Ilethin had described, a sac of leathery skin on the demons back, swollen to immense proportions by the vast quantities of blood that the powerful demon had drank. But there in lay the problem, how to close the distance between them and Cerebus, Drenn'Salar in hand, to pierce the Demon Prince's weak spot. It took only moments for the entire group to come to the same conclusion; someone would have to jump, and it would likely be a one way trip.

Knowing full well the disposition of each of his dear friends, Taylor knew that he must act fast or they would all volunteer to make the jump. He could not live with himself if any of his friends perished while it was within his power to save them. Without a second thought Taylor tore the Drenn'Salar from Seleena's hands, before any debate could be had he stepped towards the edge of the platform. All three of his friends moved to stop him, but it was Ebonethia that reached him first. Even amidst the carnage around them, her blood smeared countenance radiated beauty, like a battle-born goddess. As she reached out to restrain him Taylor firmly grabbed a hold of her, his free hand tightly encircling her waist. He pulled her close to him, his own face only inches from hers. For a moment he was held locked in her stare, her dark liquid eyes like two deep and eternal pools, concern marring her otherwise enthrallingly perfect features. The roar of the battle raging around them, and indeed the very world itself, fell away as they looked deeply into each other's eyes. It was a bittersweet moment, and though they both knew it would last for less than a breath, they would have given anything to be able to simply stay locked in this embrace forever. But it was Taylor who broke the hallowed moment.

"Ebonethia, I may never get another chance to say this," he whispered, "I love you."

As Taylor tore himself from her embrace it was if Ebonethia's heart was being ripped from her chest. How she had longed to hear these words from Taylor, but not like this. With her delicate Elven hands desperately trying to claw him back, Taylor turned and leapt from the platform. Ebonethia would have followed after him, to whatever end, had it not been for Seleena and Blood-brood arriving just in time to restrain her. She could only watch in anguish as Taylor plunged towards Cerebus, the Drenn'Salar raised in both hands high over his head and a battle cry bellowing forth from his mouth. The force of the impact drove the needle like handle of the Drenn'Salar deep into Cerebus' flesh, piercing his thick hide with ease. However the jolt caused his grip to slip and it was all that Taylor could do to keep one hand on the Drenn'Salar, clinging to it for dear life. He now dangled helpless but triumphant, a fatal fall from Cerebus' back awaiting him should his hold on the weapon fail. And now at last Cerebus took notice.

"Foolish mortals," the Demon Prince mocked them, "the mighty Cerebus cannot be defeated by a mere pin prick!"

As if in answer to his hubris, the ornate flanges on the mace head sprang open and the Drenn'Salar began to do its work. Ribbons of crackling crimson light exploded through the air, arcing

across the metallic surface of the Drenn'Salar and causing a torrent of blood to rush from the seemingly innocuous wound on the Demon Princes back. The blood seemed to hover in the air for a moment, like a mist, as if unsure of what should happen next. But then, deep within the Celeros Forest to the north, an answering beacon of crimson light erupted, causing a swirling mass of blood tinged storm clouds. The crimson mist then coalescing into a river of blood, wildly racing through the sky towards the distant beacon that could only be coming from the Ruined Temple of As'Paris.

"What is this? It cannot be! My powers... fail me," bellowed Cerebus, "How is this possible? I am undone!"

The Demon Prince began to thrash about on his throne in an attempt to free himself, enraged, but otherwise powerless to stem the tide of blood flowing from his body. As the blood rapidly drained from the blood-sac, the leathery skin to sag and deflate. Taylor was tossed side to side but continued to cling to the Drenn'Salar, unsure of whether it would continue to sap Cerebus' powers away of he were to let go, and utterly committed to seeing the demon defeated. Realizing that his efforts were availing him nothing, and with his blood-powers mostly drained, Cerebus ceased his rampage and seemed to calm himself.

"Revel and grow fat in your victory while you can mortals. I go to drink the blood of softer, more palatable worlds. But the memory of Cerebus is long enduring. I shall return one day, and drain this wretched world dry," vowed the Demon Prince, his voice dripping with malice and contempt.

Collecting what little of his blood-power remained, Cerebus began to chant in the demon tongue, speaking words that only the most powerful demons could even utter. Quite suddenly, his oily hide to burst into flame. Beginning with the bloated appendages that must be his legs, the hellfire began to crawl up his immense body, threatening to engulf Taylor. Dangling helplessly from the Drenn'Salar, still lodged in the demon's flesh, Taylor turned to look upon his friends and gave them a knowing nod of farewell.

"Taylor! No!," screamed Ebonethia, an edge of lunacy in her voice.

So taken aback by the heart wrenching cry, both Seleena and Blood-brood let their grip on their wild elf companion slip, if only for a moment. Free from their restraint Ebonethia sprang from the edge of the throne like some kind of wild animal. As she soared through the air and rising flames her body began to shimmer. The elegant tresses of her hair trailed out behind her, seeming to grow longer, engulfing her entire body and at the same time become like the feathers of a bird. Just before they lost sight of her in the flames, they could swear that she had transformed into a massive jet black raven. An instant later the flames were parted by a set of powerful wings, which sent the Ebonethia's avian form soaring towards Taylor. With razor sharp talons extended she snatched Taylor from the flames, now racing across the broad back of the demon. As his fingers were torn free from the shaft of the Drenn'Salar the weapon shattered into thousands of iridescent pieces, swallowed up by the flames. Just as Ebonethia's Raven form landed elegantly back on the platform, Taylor still clutched tightly in one powerful talon, the flames fully engulfed Cerebus. An instant later the Demon Prince rocketed skyward



in the blink of an eye, escaping into the depths of the cosmos just as he arrived, a massive ball of demonic flame.

Without their leader, the demons below immediately turned on one another, vying for control. By the time one faction regained some semblance of control the Republic army began to rally and before long, the cult and what few demons remained, were completely over run by the Republic army and her allies, who slew them all without mercy or remorse.

The second terror had been vanquished, the War of the Twin Terrors was over.

## Epilogue

With Cerebus gone, his demons either slain or having fled to whatever hellish realm from whence they came, and his cult in shambles, the Republic of Gant's victory was almost complete. The only thing that remained was to march upon Blood Shrine Citadel itself and lay waste to it. What meager forces were left to defend its walls were no match for the Republic and her allies and within days Cerebus' base of power on Gant, built upon the ruins of the ancient city-state of Drakkus, returned once more to ruin.

In the weeks that followed, the dead were buried and the living were celebrated. For the heroes of the war in West there was rest at last. Among those celebrated were Taylor, Ebonethia, Blood-brood, and Seleena, for though they had failed to prevent Cerebus from returning to Gant, they had worked tirelessly to defeat him and in the final hour they had vindicated themselves at last. The Republic government awarded them the highest honors and commissioned the creation of powerful artefacts, worthy of such mighty heroes.

Taylor was awarded a helmet, richly plumed and befitting an officer far beyond his own rank. Forged by the best craftsmen that the Republican Army had to offer, the Generals dubbed it the Helm of Republic Champion, and it became an icon of bravery and determination for any soldier that beheld it. Not to be out done the Church of Vahlin in Almsberg gifted Ebonethia with a Tranilium pendant, as beautiful as it was powerful. The Hand of Vahlin, as they called it, would allow Ebonethia to invoke the power of the One God to aid her allies and defeat her enemies, as though Vahlin's hand itself lay upon her. For Blood-brood, the Republic officials left the details to the Vestin College. High Curator Goleg himself assisting in crafting a mighty weapon, which he named Flamewake. An axe so large that only a Minotaur could wield it, wreathed in flame and enchanted to empower Blood-broods spiritual energies with every swing. Lastly, Druids from the Conclave of Vahlin's earth travelled to Almsberg to craft what at first appeared to be a simple pair of boots for Seleena. However their mundane appearance belied the tremendous forces at work within them. For not only did the Treads of Sacred Earth bolster both her faith in Vahlin and her ability to channel the powers of the Earth, they also allowed made her immovable so long as her feet were firmly planted on the ground. A fitting tribute to the small Dwarf woman, utterly immovable in even the face of the greatest adversity. With much fanfare and ceremony these gifts were given. The celebrations last for days, and the heroes seldom had a moment to themselves. But eventually the people of Almsberg returned to their daily lives and so too did the heroes of the war.

Taylor was promoted by the Republican Army, to the rank of Special Infantry Captain. And while he graciously accepted the promotion he was simply relieved that for the time being his duties would be almost non-existent, allowing him to at last return to his quiet passion for tailoring. However his once modest shop, Lewis Threads, saw a drastic increase in business due to his new found celebrity status as a hero of the war and champion of the Republic of Gant. Before long he was forced to buy a much larger shop and hire several apprentices to assist him. With business booming he also bought a lovely new home in the Merchant district where he and Ebonethia were married and lived together in the peace that they had fought so hard for, embracing the bliss of their long overdue romance. The fire of their love was inspiring to behold, for having come so close to losing it forever, they now choose to celebrate it each and every day.

For Ebonethia, the course her life had taken was almost surreal. For once she had lived in darkness, amongst the cruel and demented Sablewood Elves, trained and bound in servitude as a priestess to the malevolent primal gods of her people. She could hardly have imagined that on that day she had spared Taylor from his fate as a human sacrifice and helped him escape, making her forever an enemy of her own tribe, that this would become her life. To be celebrated as a hero among a people not her own and live in the glorious light of one devoted to the Church of Vahlin, a Priestess of the One True God, who had faithfully aided her in defeating this terrible evil. With each day that passed the darkness in her dreams faded into distant memory. This was her life now, and she would jealously defend it until her last breath.

Bloodbrood returned to his studies at the Vestin College of Pyromancy, having been promoted in the field to the rank of Warmage, he now dove into the duties and lessons that he had missed while deployed in the fight against Cerebus. Never one to sit idle, Blood-brood was determined to be prepared for whatever task he was next assigned. But even the grim Minotaur took time to celebrate with his friends. Though he found that he almost preferred the days when he first came to Almsberg, despised by some and distrusted by most, due to his unusual form. For having heard of the part he played in defeating Cerebus, the common folk of Almsberg now actively sought him out, even being so bold as to cheer as he passed by. Blood-brood found the attention disconcerting, and was glad when the festivities finally came to a close and his masters at the College called him back to his studies.

Seleena also participated in the celebration in Almsberg, but when the time came she returned to her hometown of Keth, to be with her mother, and the Conclave of Vahlin's earth. For her Cerebus' defeat was bittersweet. For the ordeal had left a scar on her heart, having taken her father, Hargast the Chief Druid, away from her. And then to suddenly discover that he somehow lived on, but in an intangible way. While she had been overjoyed to hear her beloved father's voice, she was unsure if she would ever be able to speak with him again. There had been so much more she had wanted to say, but Cerebus had stolen the time away from them. But in the embrace of fond memories shared with her mother, and the simple comforts of home, she found healing. As time passed, and with the gentle urgings of her fellow Druids, she learned once again to enjoy the simple things in life.

For the four heroes of the War of the Twin Terrors in the West, the end of the war left them stronger and more alive than they had ever thought possible. Their friendship and love continued grow,

and they made sure to visit one another often. The bond that had formed between them, through darkness and blood, bitter defeat, and eventually glorious victory, would remain until the end of their days.

Sadly, this was not so for the heroes of the War of the Twin Terrors in the East. While the war in the east had been won and the people of Gant finally freed from the grip of terror at the hand of the Sceptre of Necrodark, the victory had come at a high price for the heroes of the east. With that final climactic battle with Deathlord Archibald and the insidious master of the Sceptre of Necrodark himself, the heroes had given their lives, accepting death as the ultimate sacrifice to secure victory for the living.

With the Sceptre of Necrodark cast into oblivion by the final act of the angel known as Agamedien, the battle lines of the undead armies collapsed. Freshly raised dead and ancient skeletal warriors alike collapsed to the ground, never to rise again. While some of the necromancers and undead priests among them were able to sustain their troops, the majority of the undead host had been held together by the power of the Sceptre. With the Sceptre banished and the undead army a fraction of its former strength, the Republic army surged forward, led by a vanguard of Paladins from the Order of the Red Hawk.

In a matter of minutes the battle was won and the dust had yet to settle on the site of the heroes final battle with Archibald when the Paladins arrived amidst the carnage of that final confrontation. As they reigned in their horses, Grandmaster Reginald Terdalion himself leapt from his saddle to fall to his knees among the broken bodies of the heroes of the east. Tearing his battered helmet from off his head and tossing the hawk shaped silver and enamelled red great helm into the mud, he wept openly. He cursed himself for not reaching them sooner, his great heart nearly torn in two in anguish. His Paladins spread out among the rubble to see if any had survived, but as the Grandmaster lifted his eyes to each of them they could only sorrowfully shake their heads.

When they located the armour and shattered remains of Kal, their brother in both faith and arms, some of the Paladins looked hopefully towards their leader, for it was said that Grandmaster of their order had the power of resurrection in their hands. However with Kal's body so irrevocable shattered when he choose to trade his fate with that of his fallen friend Silus, even the immense power at Grandmaster Terdalion's command could not restore Kal to life. It was with great regret that aging Paladin turned aside from what remained of Kal, saving what strength remained to instead do what he could for Kal's closest kin.

While Roginn Hathelheftin was no Paladin, and in many ways stood opposed to the very laws that the Paladins sought to up hold, Terdalion resolved that he would use his remaining powers to attempt to bring Roginn back to life, in honor of the memory of his cousin Kal. As it was the extreme effort required caused the Paladin to collapse unconscious. But his efforts were not in vain, for miraculously the ragged wounds all across Roginn's body began to close and the slightest breath escaped his lips. There was a slight flutter of the centaur's eyelids and a weak attempt to move and then Roginn slumped over, unconscious, but very much alive.

This set the paladins into frenzy of activity and before long more republic soldiers moved throughout the wider battlefield bearing wagons to collect the dead and wounded. But of the heroes only the now revived centaur Roginn and the dead remains of the half-orc Arolthus could be loaded into one of the wagons. Of the other heroes, all were pronounced dead. The only remains that could be recovered was the armour of the Crusader Paladin Kal, the staff and robes of the mage Sarasith lying alongside a unicorn's horn, unsullied by the filth around it, and a lone bow once belonging to the ranger Mute. Of their last companion, the Halfling Silus, there were no remains at all and he was assumed to have been completely obliterated by the unholy forces of the enemy. Of those there to witness it, no one had survived to tell the true tale of how both his body and spirit had been whisked away by the strange tattoos upon his skin.

Before long Grandmaster Terdalion was roused, weak from his efforts but still able to proudly mount his horse of his own strength. He bid the wagoneers to make haste for Telestra, for there was those amongst the high ranking officials of the Church of the One God who also possessed the ability to bring the dead back to life. However the journey was slow going, and even though an envoy of Cardinals and Priests met them on the road outside of Telestra it was too late for Arolthus. Try as they would, his spirit had been too long from his body and he could not be restored.

There was much ceremony and celebration in the capital, for many had thought themselves doomed. All of the heroes of the war were honored, even down to the lowest foot soldier. As the only living member of the heroes that had given their lives to defeat Deathlord Archibald and ensure that Agamedien could finish his task, Roginn received the honors due to all his friends.

However, the once gregarious vigilante and champion of the people, seemed a shadow of his former self. Other than to play his part in the ceremonies and festivities he was seldom found outside of the Smiling Mule tavern, drinking even more heavily than usually. Some said that he bore the deaths of his comrades upon his shoulders, others claimed that it was the guilt for being the only one to survive, but regardless of the reasons, darkness followed him like a brooding storm cloud. After laying hands upon several well wishers and nearly beating a man to death at the ceremony for his cousin Kal, most people quickly learned to leave the drunken self-loathing centaur well enough alone.

After Roginn's arrest and the rather abrupt ending to the public ceremony held for Kal, the centaurs armour was brought to Red Hawk Keep. There it was enshrined in the armory vaults, as reminder to all paladins of the brave and noble calling of their Order. Kal was held up as an example to all new recruits, as one who sacrificed everything in the service of others.

Arolthus too was celebrated, by the citizens of Gant as well as his own people, the refugees and few ragged survivors of the war known as the Vesticar remnant. A mausoleum was built on a small hill overlooking the Cathedral of the One God. There Arolthus was entombed with the highest honors, regaled not in fanciful funeral garb but in his scarred and battle-worn armor with his fearsome reaper claws laid across his broad chest. Some said it seemed as though he was merely resting, his grim visage looking oddly at peace yet his body ready to spring into battle in the afterlife at a moment's notice. Long after the ceremony had ended, it was said that a centaur could be seen sitting in silent vigil beneath the

shadow of his friends tomb, an empty flask of strong spirits in his unmoving hand. Carved overhead in the stone of the mausoleum it read, "*HERE LIES THE BEST OF US, BORN INTO SHAME, YET DYING IN GLORY*"

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As far as all know, this ends the tale of the war of the Twin Terrors. With all public fanfare and wide spread celebration all across Gant and in the cities of her allies eventually giving way to the necessities of life. For there was much rebuilding to do, throughout the land. Free from the terrible shadow of death, life continued on.

In Telestra, the streets once again rang with the laughter of children and the steady buzz of the market place. People slowly returned to the day to day busyness of life. Perhaps that's why on one such day, weeks later, no one noticed a crippled dog, moving ponderously slow through their midst. Both of the unfortunate creatures hind legs were missing and it was forced to drag its rump along the cobblestones. Using its front legs to pull itself along, bit by bit the strange creature made its way unnoticed through the back streets of Telestra, without complaint, right to the foot of the resplendent amethyst tower known as the Star-Spire College.

If any had cared to look closer besides a few curious children, they would have noticed that the creature was not flesh and blood but rather had once been masterfully carved from a block of charcoal coloured marble, veined with quartz and flecked with shining bits of pyrite. However now the stone was chipped and cracked in many places, its finer features marred and its hind quarters worn smooth from dragging through the dirt on its long journey home. If they had cared to look they also would have noticed that it carried a long bone, tightly locked in its stone jaws, a femur covered in mud and dried blood.

One small child timidly approached the strange dog when it finally came to a halt next to the smooth violet-hued walls of the Stare-spire, completely devoid of doors or windows at these lower levels. The child reached out a hand to pet the poor animal. But before it could the creatures jaw opened like two stones grinding together, followed by an out of placed sound as the bone dropped to the ground, not the hollow clattering of bone at all but a loud metallic ringing of pure platinum.

The child hesitated, his hand hanging several inches above the dogs shoulder. Without warning the child's hair stood straight up on end and there was a flash of bright indigo and violet. An instant later both the stone creature and the bone it carried were gone. The child turned on his heel and ran.