



A CAMPAIGN JOURNAL

With Artwork by Jason Engle



Ptolus is the name of a city with ancient origins and a convoluted past. It's also the name of the campaign that I have set there. For about four years I ran Ptolus twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays, for two different groups of characters and (with a few exceptions) two different groups of players. But they all existed in the same city at the same time. Thus, each group had its own adventures, but dealt with many of the same NPCs and situations. Occasionally, plotlines overlapped—particularly since one player ran twin brothers: one on Mondays, one on Thursdays.

The Monday night group ultimately became known as the Runewardens, and the Thursday player characters formed the Company of the Black Lantern. I hope you enjoy reading about their exploits as they rose from 1st to 17th level. Please note that this journal may spoil some aspects of the campaign for players who read it, although they are somewhat minor aspects. At the very least, pay attention to the spoiler warnings – your DM will thank you.

Enjoy your visit to Ptolus!

Monte Cook
August 25, 2005

CAST OF CHARACTERS

The Runewardens

Serai Lorenci is a male shoal elf sorcerer. He is the twin of Sercian Lorenci, and the two of them hail from Dohrinthas in the south. Serai's original intention was to try to raise money to buy a sailing ship, but now he has settled down in the city, buying a house and joining the Inverted Pyramid society for arcanists. He has an affinity for machines and a deep interest in the strange devices some call chaositech. His friends believe it to be too deep an interest, and at least once had to go to great lengths to save him from himself as he volunteered to have himself "altered" by a mysterious figure called the Surgeon in the Shadows. *Played by Wizards of the Coast design manager Chris Perkins.*



Shurrin Delano is a male human fighter/rogue/cleric of Mirresh, the goddess of laughter. Born in Carper's Bay, a small fishing town to the north, he came to Ptolus to find adventure and the mysterious Urthon-Aedar. He bears the masterwork rapier carried by his



grandfather, an adventurer and hero for the common people. A friendly, positive, and courageous young man, he sees himself as a swashbuckler and a sword against evil forces in the world. *Played by game designer Sean K Reynolds.*



Sister Mara von Witten is a female human cleric of the Church of Lothian originally from Tarsis. She's motherly and of middle age and has climbed back up through the levels following a terrible experience-draining incident at the hands of the priests of Father Claw. While devoted to the Church

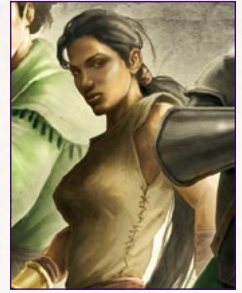
of Lothian, Sister Mara often finds herself at odds with its dogmatic administrators, who tend to frown on her prophetic visions and penchant for dreamspeaking. Her extensive travels have taught her that the folks you meet have a lot to offer—even if they don't always follow Lothian's strict doctrine. Of late, she has been attempting to enlighten the Rhoth-bred paladin Zophas Adhar. Not an easy task. *Played by Malhavoc Press co-founder Sue Cook.*



Canabulum is a male minotaur wizard. Born in the mountainous lands to the east, Canabulum learned magic from another minotaur named Raumon. Canabulum takes his time when speaking, preferring to fully formulate each thought perfectly. Likewise, he tries to see behind the

common facade of life, to learn the secrets and hidden truths beneath. He seeks ever to increase his knowledge of magic, which to him is a lifelong companion and drug. The most noteworthy of Canabulum's many accomplishments to date is the near-slaying of the frost giant Ymrik, who threatened to plunge Ptolus into Shadow. *Played by Wizards of the Coast senior game designer Bruce R. Cordell.*

Aliya Al-Mari is a female human monk/sorcerer. She came to Ptolus from far-off Uraq and joined the Order of the Fist. She has made close friends with Mara, Shurrin, and particularly Serai, although some of Serai's



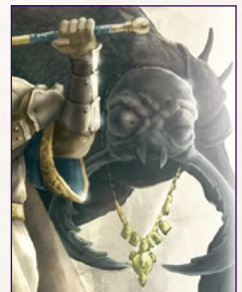
recent actions have brought their relationship into question. Aliya has died twice, and the experiences have scarred her somewhat—she is careful but deliberate in her actions now, knowing full well the danger she faces each day. For reasons unknown to her she is somehow linked to a woman held captive in the Dark Reliquary. She's able to see this poor soul thanks to her natural affinity for mirror magic and scrying. Aliya commands the respect and admiration of all who know her. Her martial prowess is well known, and the fact that she wields a little sorcery is a valuable ace up her sleeve. *Played by Wizards of the Coast senior editor Michele Carter.*

Zophas Adhar is a male aasimar paladin/Knight of the Pale. He hails from a small, isolated community in Rhoth where the religion of Lothian still holds total sway. Thus, he finds the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Ptolus to be bizarre and uncomfortable as he searches for the truth about his celestial lineage. Is he the



spawn of demons or a child of heaven? What he was taught growing up conflicts with what he sees for himself today. And now that he has found his half-brother in the ranks of the celestial Malkuth, he feels more confused than ever. His wizard cohort Ephendus is no help, for the frail wizard seems more interested in books than real life. Zophas' holy greatsword, the *Ankh of Justice*, was created by Ephendus and Mara working together. It has felled many a foe, and is sure to rid the world of even more demons and undead in the days to come. *Played by Erik Mona, editor-in-chief of Dragon and Dungeon magazines.*

Udalaag is a male half-dragon who is also part umber hulk, and part... well, we're not really sure. We do know that after decades of mistreatment in the palace of Storamere the dragon, he jumped at the chance to flee with the adventuring party that had killed his tormentors. (He didn't have the smarts to fend for himself, anyway.) Over time and thanks to much patient



instruction from the motherly Mara and “lairmate” Canabulum—well, the +4 *amulet of Intelligence* doesn’t hurt, either—the no-longer-evil dragonspawn has learned the value of friendship. Now, if we could only teach him to stop eating our fallen foes.... *Udalaag appears in Monte’s Beyond the Veil adventure from Atlas Games.*

The Company of the Black Lantern



Vexander Sangreal is a male shoal elf sorcerer/rogue from north of Ptolus. He never took to the life of a sailor, instead preferring to hone his growing sorcerous power. After arriving in Ptolus with his archer friend Chanticleer, Vexander soon fell in with a group of adventuring

elves who later dubbed themselves “The Company of the Black Lantern.” Together, these elves have ventured into a number of the dungeons beneath Ptolus, including recent explorations of the fabled ruins of Dwarvenhearth. Though he’s been known to act rashly at times, Vexander’s agility and quick thinking usually get him out of problems without too much difficulty. He knows his luck will run out at some point, and he trusts that his companions will bail him out as he has done for them (such as the time he goaded a red dragon into facing him rather than finish off the critically injured Gaerioth). *Played by Wizards of the Coast game designer Andy Collins.*



Sercian Lorenci is a male shoal elf rogue/fighter/sorcerer. His twin brother Serai and he traveled to Ptolus in the company of Aliya Al-Mari but split up after that, although they still get together now and again to trade stories and for Sercian to borrow money from Serai. Sercian joined the

Company of the Black Lantern and aided them in their exploration of the ancient city of Dwarvenhearth beneath Ptolus. However, Sercian was captured and secretly replaced by a dark elf. Only recently did he escape and help drive off the impostor. Now he seeks to lead the Black Lantern and other elves to the dark elf stronghold where he was held prisoner and crush his former jailers. *Played by Wizards of the Coast design manager Chris Perkins.*



Tellian Riverborn is a male shoal elf cleric. New to the city of Ptolus, Tellian is a devotee of Navashtrom, god of strength and harmony. Although good-natured and honest, Tellian has done most of his work in Navashtrom’s name from behind a nocked arrow. If Tellian has a fault, it’s that he tends

to see the will of Navashtrom in too many things. His unquestioning confidence in his god’s will has made him more trusting than most seasoned delvers and left him willing to overlook the darker side of his new adventuring companions in the Company of the Black Lantern. *Played by former Dragon magazine editor and current Wizards of the Coast development manager Jesse Decker.*



Gaerioth Shadowhand is a male harrow elf monk from Kem and a follower of the Brotherhood of the White Path (a mystical order of warrior monks devoted to the pursuit of enlightenment through the mastery of both body and mind). Despite his devotion to the order’s principles and philosophy,

Gaerioth has always struggled with a darkness within him—the legacy of his harrow elf heritage. It is this struggle that led his masters to send him out into the world as an *avedras*, a wandering monk tasked with a specific quest. Now he travels the world searching for the Word that Began all of Creation. His journeys have led him to the city of Ptolus and into the Company of the Black Lantern. Though gentle and soft-spoken by nature, he is fierce in battle. He eschews weapons and enters combat with only his war mask (a carved wooden mask covering the lower half of his face, reminiscent of a combination of Aztec artistry and Samurai armor) and the mastery of his body. Currently, the monk has devoted himself to a single cause: the destruction of the dark elves beneath the city.

*Walking
on the broad back of winter
I am pierced
by your terrible Needle—
Ptolus*

—From the Journal of Gaerioth Shadowhand.

Played by former Dungeons & Dragons brand manager Keith Stroh, currently Paizo Publishing's chief operating officer.

A member of the Order of the Dawn—the Emperor's personal cadre of knights—**Thoreaen Lightbringer** was assigned to infiltrate the Company of the Black Lantern to keep tabs on the increasingly powerful and roguish group. This devout elven paladin of Lothian has an intelligent sword that is perhaps even more devout than its wielder. He never shirks from expunging evil. *Played by former Dungeons & Dragons brand manager Keith Stroh, currently Paizo Publishing's chief operating officer.*



HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Where better to start than with the Lorenci brothers, Serai and Sercian? Hailing from faraway Dohrinthas, these two shoal elves came to Ptolus seeking their fortunes. They met up with Aliya Al-Mari on the road, and the three traveled to the city with hopes of money and magic. Outside the city, they met Sister Mara von Witten, a paladin named Feruch Balsura, a dwarven fighter with aspirations of wizardry named Maur, and the swordfighter Shurrin Delano. Sister Mara, Feruch, and Maur were traveling together from the capital, Tarsis, to look into an outbreak of something in Ptolus called “chaositech,” a new kind of chaos magic that the Church of Lothian—and thus the Empire—was none too keen on.

Once within Ptolus, they settled into an inn in Delver’s Square called the Ghostly Minstrel. Sercian left to look for some other elves, but Serai was happy to stay with Aliya and this new group of friends. Soon after their arrival, they stopped the attempted murder of a young woman named Phon Quarterman. This poor girl had no idea why anyone would attempt to kill her, but Sister Mara took Phon under her wing to watch out for her. The cleric was able to determine that—although even Phon did not yet realize it—the young woman was pregnant.

But there were bigger problems to solve. The group soon learned that the Prince of the Church had put a bounty on the rat men that lived in the sewers. Mara had it on good authority that these creatures were somehow connected with chaositech. Before they knew it, the lure of money, duty, and the desire just to do something fame-rewarding drove the group down into the sewers.

Wading around in the rain-filled Imperial-built sewers produced some odd encounters, but it wasn’t until they actually found their way down into the even older, original city sewers that it became clear how vast an area the rat men controlled. After numerous fights with dragon rifle-armed rat men, these adventurers found that the creatures had some rather disgusting human allies. These allies worshipped the “Rat God,” which was actually a front for something far more sinister: an entity known as Abhoth. The party members didn’t know much about Abhoth yet, but they soon would discover that he was actually one of the Galchutt, a group of mind-numbingly evil and unimaginably ancient beings that were “asleep”—for now.

Meanwhile, after getting to know his way around the seedier sections of Ptolus, Sercian visited the center of local elven culture: a place called Iridithil’s Home in the Emerald Hill neighborhood of Midtown. As he entered, assassins attacked him! Three other elves came to his defense: the sorcerer Vexander Sangreal, the monk Gaerioth Shadowhand, and an archer named Chanticleer Umanyar. When the assassins were defeated, the elven master of the place, Doraedian Mythord, tried to use a spell to peer into the mind of one of the would-be murderers. Not only did the attempt fail, but it triggered a demon-summoning! Once they defeated the demon, Doraedian told the four elves the assassins were members of the Vai, a guild of murderers. One of them had a small magical globe that held the image of three people. Serai recognized them—they were Aliya, Shurrin, and his twin brother Serai. Clearly, the assassins had mistaken him for his brother.

The fight forged a tight friendship among the elves. Chanticleer joined the Order of the Bow as a trainee, but still pledged to help explore the areas under the city with the rest of them (Chanticleer hoped to one day find the *Bow of Ahaar*, a magical weapon said to be lost below Ptolus).

First things first, however. Following a lead, they tracked down a contact of the assassins and soon found themselves in way over their heads with a half-orc named Toridan Cran and his gang of cutthroats. They managed to learn that these gang members had some connection to a powerful priest named Helmut Itlestein.

About the same time, the other group learned that their troubled young friend Phon Quarterman was having an affair.

With a priest named Helmut Itlestein.

Next Time: The elves get trapped in the dungeons under Ptolus! And they give their group a name! The other group runs afoul of a chaositech golem! And they head into the dreaded Necropolis!



THE STORY CONTINUES

So Mara, Aliya, Serai, and Shurrin continued in their struggle against the rat men in the sewers. They learned that officials with the Temple of the Rat God, whom they knew to be in league with the rat men, were seeking someone with knowledge of machines to help them with a job. Posing as criminal mercenaries, they went to the temple discreetly and offered their services, as Serai did indeed know a little something about machines. There they met a motley assortment of villains—humans who consorted freely with rat men, and priests who seemed to revel in filth and disease.

They discovered that the temple had somehow gotten hold of a chaositech golem. Posing as someone who knew much more about what he was doing than he actually did, Serai investigated it and learned a little about how it worked—just enough, in fact, to sabotage it. The golem ran amok, and the PCs just barely escaped the ensuing battle.

That adventure taught the characters some valuable things. Apparently, there was a loose confederation among the various cults of chaos gods, many of them fronts for mysterious evil beings called the Galchutt. Something big was afoot, and it was definitely cause for concern.

After a short rest, Aliya learned that, before she could join the Order of the Fist—a well-known but small group of monks who practiced a philosophy of goal-oriented empowerment—she would have to perform a quest. Her quest was to rescue a soul-gem that held the soul of Quideth Minisham, the lover of order's leader, Wynn Rabinall. Quideth was said to be within the tomb of a long-dead wizard named Alchestrin. Apparently, Wynn and Quideth had somehow traveled back in time and encountered Alchestrin while he was alive, 500 years earlier. Quideth was trapped in the past, and Wynn had learned only recently that her soul was locked inside a gem.

Alchestrin's tomb, of course, lay within the Necropolis, by far the most dangerous part of the city. The Necropolis was infested not only with undead but with humans called the Forsaken, who worked with and worshipped the undead, and with demons that called themselves the Fallen.

Meanwhile, Sercian, Vexander, Chanticleer, and Gaerioth were seeking an elf cleric to go with them on

a mission. Eventually they found Laethando Silversong, a particularly elfcentric (read: racist) priest. They hired him. Doraedian Mythlord, the influential patron of the city's elves, had convinced them to escort a mysterious woman down into the Undercity near where the Prison lay. This would involve hiring a boat and entering the Undercity via a sea cave along the cliffs. They were to help this woman pick up someone from the Prison. While this activity might not be entirely legal, they were assured that there would not be much danger involved. In addition, they might find a way into the Undercity ruins near the Prison, mostly unexplored by delvers because the Prison guards at the sea cave entrance did not let anyone in.

The prisoner pick-up and escort went smoothly, and the characters used their time there to figure out how to get into the ruins through an old window hidden within the cliff wall. After they returned the woman and the man she picked up—whose identities were never revealed—safely back to the city, they made their way back to the cliff wall and through the window. There, they found ruined areas originally built by a wizard named Sokalahn. Some goblins and bugbears occupied the place now. The bugbears utilized some tricky lever-operated portcullises to get the characters to face some owlbeats, one of which killed Gaerioth. In that pitched battle, the adventurers encountered a device that once was probably a magical dragon monument but now amounted to little more than a deadly fire-spraying trap. The group's only source of light, a lantern, was blackened and scorched in the melee. Thus, from that point on, the group called itself the Company of the Black Lantern.

The PCs escaped back to the city and got Gaerioth raised. When they returned to the area around the Prison, however, their boat was smashed upon the rocks near the cliff. They made it up the cliff and inside, but found themselves trapped. With nothing to do but investigate more of the forgotten underground ruins, they learned that Sokalahn had plumbed this area looking for an ancient artifact called the *Black Grail* placed here by an evil entity named Eslathagos Malkith.

Next Time: The group in the Necropolis is captured by demons! More about Helmut Itlestein! And the Company of the Black Lantern goes to work for a crime lord!!



CRYPTS AND CRIME LORDS

Shurrin the fighter/rogue, Serai the sorcerer, Aliya the monk, and Mara the cleric of Lothian had been to the Necropolis once before. They had gone there seeking an odd old man named Igor Reichstav, who seemed strangely preoccupied with the flies that were so prevalent in the vast cemetery. Through him, they found out important details about the rat men and the location of their warrens.

But Igor lived in an old crypt on the very edge of the place. This day, they had to go right to the center of the foul Necropolis. To get help, they enlisted their friend Feruch, a paladin who had joined a group called the Keepers of the Veil. The Keepers specialized in hunting and killing undead, so Feruch seemed an appropriate ally to bring along.

They sought a circle of standing stones bearing a special magical mark: the mark of Alchestrin, a long-dead wizard who had once imprisoned the soul of a woman they sought to rescue. The standing stones would point out the location of Alchestrin's tomb. After much searching, the group found the mark on a crypt and went inside.

To the surprise of no one, the crypt was filled with hostile undead. After much exploration of an entire underground complex beneath the tomb, they discovered that this was not the tomb of Alchestrin at all: Some of the crypt's walls had been built with the (repurposed) standing stones they had sought. Fortunately, thanks to an ancient carving in the crypt, they were able to learn where the stones had originally stood.

So finally they arrived at the old hill where a few stones remained. Erected long before the entire area was a cemetery, the old sarsens surrounded a stone plug. Deciphering writing atop it, the adventurers realized they could remove the plug only at night—a scary proposition in the Necropolis.

They went back to the city, where they promptly fell under attack by Vai assassins. The Vai apparently were still unhappy that the group had stopped them from killing a young woman named Phon. After fending off their attackers, they discovered that Phon was now missing. Could this have anything to do with Helmut Itlestein, the priest with whom Phon was having an affair (and the father of her unborn child)?

The adventurers could dredge up no leads as to Phon's whereabouts, so they went back into the Necropolis to try their hand at removing the plug. On their way, they came upon a small lake with a bridge reaching from the shore to an island. They had found Clasthamus Isle: a place controlled by a powerful druid named Andach and his young half-elf disciple, Hennem. Andach kept this sacred isle free of undead by the power of magical stones in the bridge—the Stones of Thamus. Heartened by the discovery of this new ally in an otherwise terrible place, they trekked farther into the Necropolis. Their plan was to go to the standing stones and wait there until nightfall.

They never made it. They encountered (and waylaid) a Forsaken courier who carried a message stating that the “Vault of the Kython” had been found and the “Night of Dissolution” would soon be at hand. The note—from a high-ranking member of the despicable, undead-loving Forsaken—was an attempt to gain support from Lilith, an influential member of the Fallen (the Forsaken's earthbound demon allies). Apparently the Forsaken wanted the demons to help them with whatever it was that they were doing, but the leader of the Fallen, Raguel, seemed slow to act on the matter. The Forsaken were clearly in league with the chaos cultists the adventurers had already encountered. Something big was afoot.

But before they could give it much thought, demons and Forsaken leaped upon them, capturing the characters and taking them straight to the worst place imaginable: the Dark Reliquary, home to both Fallen and Forsaken.

Meanwhile, the Company of the Black Lantern members grew tired of the dungeons around the city's Prison and bribed some Prison guards to sneak them out on a supply boat. Once in the city again, they decided to look into the individuals they had linked to the Vai assassins who had attacked them by mistake, thinking that Sercian was his twin brother Serai. They found a connection between these brigands and a man named Malkeen Balacazar. Malkeen was the son of Menon Balacazar, a power crime lord who dealt not only in typical malfeasance—extortion, gambling, prostitution, and simple theft—but also in items relating to black magic and dark, forbidden things.

After being thoroughly scrutinized by Malkeen's (probably vampiric) bodyguard, some of the company

met with the younger Balacazar and wound up working for him as bodyguards for his nephew. It seemed that someone was out to kill this nine-year-old child while he performed in a play at the Cloud Theater.

In a thoroughly comic escapade, the Company of the Black Lantern sought to safeguard the cast of the wholly awful play “The Boy who Could Sing”—an oeuvre clearly written around Malkeen’s nephew. (The plot made no sense but was just a showcase for the young boy to keep his uncle—the theater’s chief benefactor—happy.) Hired thugs did indeed make an attempt on the boy’s life but were thwarted by the efforts of the “heroes” in the crime lord’s employ.

The Company of the Black Lantern wondered why anyone would try to kill the lad. Was it because of the strange runelike mark on his face? Clues they followed up afterward led them to a strange conclusion: The forces hired to kill the boy had been contracted by Helmut Itlestein.

Next Time: Breaking out of the Dark Reliquary with the help of an orcish god of fire! The two groups work together! Confrontation with Helmut Itlestein!



THE UNION OF TWO ADVENTURING COMPANIES

Getting out of the Dark Reliquary was going to be really difficult. Not the least of the group's worries was that a marilith named Drusii took an interest in them once they arrived and were put in a cell.

Up until this point, Aliya had not told the others about her little secret. Since a young age, she occasionally would see in mirrors a face that was not her own—a similar face, but nonetheless not hers. She didn't know why this happened. Yet while the adventurers were in a cell in this stronghold of demons and undead, Drusii briefly showed herself in the form of this other woman: the face that Aliya had seen all these years. While this was upsetting, Aliya was to learn that Drusii was not the woman she had seen. That woman was Drusii's prisoner in the Dark Reliquary.

And no one knew where Feruch the paladin was at all. They would only much later learn that the demons had left him for dead in the Necropolis—at night. He barely got out alive.

Once they were alone again, a prisoner in the next cell started talking to them. Only through him did they learn where they were. The other prisoner, a half-orc, gave them a tooth from his own mouth with a very special rune on it. Serai was able to trigger the rune's special magic: It was the key to an extradimensional prison, where an orcish demigod of fire named Ochremeshk had been imprisoned.

The group used the distraction (to put it mildly) of the sudden appearance of a 25-foot-tall humanoid of fire to escape their cell, break into the pain pits where Sister Mara was facing terrible torture. They escaped through an arena into a maze of very old passages and down through a secret elevator that led to an ancient temple and a way out through the cliffs by the sea.

In the arena, however, the PCs encountered one of the Rat God priests they had seen before when fighting rat men elsewhere in the city. Clearly, the forces of chaos (the Rat God's followers among them) were allied with the Fallen and Forsaken of the Dark Reliquary. Even stranger, the old temple that they passed through seemed to belong to one of the evil and ancient Galchutt whom they had learned about. Did the demons above know about this place? It seemed not.

After some rest and recuperation, the group still needed to go back into the Necropolis and deal with Wynn's quest for his lost love, Quideth, the woman imprisoned in the gem. They needed to get into the tomb of Alchestrin, whose entrance was surrounded by standing stones, could access it only at night.

So, despite the dangers of the nocturnal Necropolis, they went to the standing stones and waited until dark. They were assailed by ghouls, seeking fresh human flesh to feast upon. Fending off undead, the adventurers pulled up the plug that sealed the entrance to the tomb of Alchestrin and went down inside.

Full of undead guardians and magical traps, this place was very dangerous. In fact, it was more than the adventurers could handle. Repelled by the defenders, they fled back up and out into the night, where they were further hounded by undead shadows and other terrible things that haunted the dark Necropolis. They decided to make for the island they had seen earlier: Clasthamus Isle and its druid protector, Andach. Crossing the old stone bridge, they were relieved to see their undead pursuers did not follow them.

They took shelter there until daylight, for the Stones of Thamus protected the island, just as Andach had said. They retreated into the city and recruited some friends to help them: namely, the Company of the Black Lantern.

Together, the combined group plundered Alchestrin's tomb, defeating its powerful guardians and even Alchestrin himself—undead now, his rotting intestines writhing and attacking them with mouths as he cast spells. One harrowing fight later, around the evil wizard's terrible undead tree that produced vampire spawn in its seed pods, the adventurers proved victorious. Sadly, though, there were casualties—both Aliya and Serai fell in battle. Worst of all, they learned that Quideth wasn't imprisoned at all: She had become undead herself and had fallen in love with Alchestrin. The group managed to imprison her in a soul-gem (the irony completely lost on them) and returned her in that state to Wynn. When confronted with the betrayal of it all, Wynn fell into a deep despair.

But now that the two groups were together, discussing matters and telling tales, one name kept creeping into conversation: Helmut Itlestein. He was connected with the assassins that had attacked both groups, as well

as those who'd attacked the boy under the Company of the Black Lantern's protection and Phon, the young woman the other group had aided. So they all decided to pay him a visit.

After much reconnaissance, they learned where he lived and infiltrated his home. He was not present, but they learned much from going through his things and interrogating the two people hiding in his basement. Helmut was a priest of the Watcher of the Skies, a god who dealt in prophecy and portents. The two people the group confronted worked for the Fate Weavers, an organization that claimed to see the weave of time and foretell the future. Both they and Helmut saw terrible things coming in the near term. Helmut specifically believed that certain children, all born bearing special runes (like Malkeen Balacazar's nephew), soon would bring about events that spelled disaster for the city. Helmut, it seemed, was a stalwart defender of the city and its people. He even backed a group that called itself the Republicans. This faction struggled to institute political change and transform Ptolus into a republic independent of the Empire, in which people could vote for representatives rather than serve distant Emperors and their appointed Commissars.

But worst of all, the group learned that Helmut believed that, should he ever have a son or daughter of his own, he was destined to have only these rune-marked children. Thus, when his lover Phon became pregnant, he resorted to drastic measures and hired assassins to kill her. After the adventurers saved her from the hired killers, he had spirited her away himself and ended the pregnancy.

So when Helmut came home, accompanied as he often was by his shield guardian construct, a fierce battle ensued. The adventurers defeated Helmut but could not bring themselves to kill him. Instead, they threatened to expose his treasonous political plans if he harmed any other children. It was a terrible position for the adventurers to be in, and not all of them agreed with the decision to let him go. The two groups parted, few of them really believing that this was actually over.

Next Time: The Company of the Black Lantern gets a key to the mysterious underground city of Dwarvenhearth and on the way there ends up finding a place to call home.



DUNGEONS AND (THREE) DRAGONS

After dealing with Helmut Itlestein, the Company of the Black Lantern turned back to the affairs at hand. Specifically, the reward that Malkeen Balacazar had given them for protecting his nephew: a strange circular metal key. Truth be told, he did not give it to them—it was on one of the would-be assassins—but Malkeen seemed to know ahead of time that it would be there. More importantly, he knew the location of the door that the key fit.

This was a key to Dwarvenhearth, a very old dwarven city that lay under Ptolus—much older than the current human city. No one, the PCs knew, had been to there for centuries. With plunder on their minds, the all-elf Company of the Black Lantern followed Balacazar's directions and found an old set of catacombs beneath the ruined clock tower in Oldtown. They met with strange resistance: orcs and other creatures with some sort of magical aid. It took many forays to clear a path through the catacombs—forays that ended the lives of Sercian (by a troll covered in magical rune tattoos), Chanticleer, and the opinionated NPC Laethando (both by a red dragon). That dragon was so fierce, the company was forced to make a deal with it in order to escape. They promised it a vast sum of treasure if they could only escape with their fallen friends. They agreed on a date upon which they would bring the money and left a magical sword as collateral.

They then returned to the surface and raised their friends. Unfortunately, they realized the deadline that they'd given themselves was far too pressing to either prepare for battle or gather the needed amount of treasure. But they also believed that, if they could not get past the dragon, they would never get to Dwarvenhearth. So they bought three cows and led them through the city, down into the catacombs, and used them as a bribe to buy themselves more time.

Yes. You read that right.

And it worked. The dragon was happy to have a beefy meal and gave them a bit more time. Meanwhile, the company members converted some of their belongings into cash, Sercian borrowed money from his brother Serai, and the Company of the Black Lantern spent the vast amount of money they would have given to the dragon on weapons and spells to help defeat it. Well-armed and heavily ensorcelled, they returned to the cave where they'd found the dragon (still many days before the appointed meeting).

The dragon was not there. They discovered that they cave wasn't the dragon's lair at all—they must have just encountered him by chance.

Thus, they reached the huge underground cavern known as the Giant's Steps prepared for a battle that did not come. This tiered cave led deep underground to an even more vast delving in which they knew they would find the passage to Dwarvenhearth. Balacazar's directions led the company right into an old dwarven tower currently occupied by an evil wizard named Ressad. ("Coincidentally," Ressad was a foe of Balacazar's who had betrayed the crime lord a year or so previous.) This, clearly, was the wizard behind the opposition they had fought beneath the clock tower. Since they were so very prepared for a battle, they assailed the wizard's home.

One harrowing battle later, the members of the Company of the Black Lantern were the proud owners of a tower in a cavern deep below the earth. They immediately went to the surface to hire mercenaries to help defend it and to buy some supplies for the place. They intended to use the tower as a base of operations as they explored nearby Dwarvenhearth.

Once they were settled, they plunged into the large cave to find the passage to Dwarvenhearth. They found an underground river and an ancient dwarven bridge guarded by a single Stonelost dwarf and his pet girallon. Although they attempted diplomacy, the company members' contempt for dwarves ensured that the encounter ended in a fight. Much to the elves' dismay, they could not get past the dwarf. Even after they had disarmed him and taken away his *urgrosh*, each time an elf attempted to get across the bridge, the dwarf grabbed him and threw him into the river. Eventually, they tired of this and retreated back to their new tower.

The next day, they found the tower surrounded by angry dwarves from Kaled Del, a fortress within the cavern. They wanted the bridge guardian's magical *urgrosh* back. This time, cooler heads prevailed, and the Company of the Black Lantern not only made peace with the dwarves, but gained them as allies. (The dwarves had had no love for the wizard Ressad and were happy to see him defeated). The PCs even convinced two of the dwarves to join them on their next mission.

And this mission would be a dangerous one, for the elves had not forgotten that there was still a dragon to deal with. On the appointed day, they prepared for battle again and brought no treasure—just sharp swords and many defensive spells (plus two dwarves with big guns). But the dragon was expecting betrayal at this point, so he brought his sister along. The battle was glorious, and in the end two red dragons lay dead—but not before one attempted to escape and reach their older sibling.

That didn't sound good. Deciding to be pre-emptive, the PCs licked their wounds, rested briefly, and hunted down the last dragon. Hansk, the dwarf that survived the first dragon battle, went with them. They made their way through side passages that led from the Giant's Steps into a fungi forest. Eventually, they found the lair of the three dragons, now occupied by the oldest sibling. One more dragon to slay, and slay it they did.

***Next Time:** The Company of the Black Lantern explores more underground caverns, and the other group gets teleported to... well, far, far away.*



GETTING IN DEEP

The Company of the Black Lantern continued to poke around the cave where the slain red dragons lived. The PCs managed to ally with a strange creature named Monmorath, a sort of fungus druid. He told them of a group called the Pactlords of the Quan, a confederation of monstrous creatures. (They would encounter Monmorath again much later, but in a more surprising form....)

But the Pactlords would have to wait. The company members had obtained a key that allowed them into fabled Dwarvenhearth, and they had put off their journey there long enough. Fighting through umber hulks, orcs, and giants, they reached the sealed gate and crossed over into an old, untouched subterranean city. The dwarves who lived there evacuated the place and sealed it tight hundreds of years ago, so it would not fall into the hands of an evil entity named Ghul.

Dwarvenhearth was vast—larger than the characters had even dared to speculate. Inside, they ran afoul of devious dwarven traps set up to keep out intruders. They found that some of the dwarves had sacrificed themselves to become eternal, unliving guardians of the city. They also encountered Erebacus, small bands of insane dwarves who had been left behind (or rather, the children of those left behind). Worst of all, though, they learned that a few dark elves had gained access to the city and were setting out to plunder its wealth. The dark elf leader, a vampire named Zachean, was in particular after something relating to the long-dead dwarf King Stardelve, also known as the Dayking.

The dark elves ambushed the Company of the Black Lantern and drove the group from Dwarvenhearth.

Meanwhile, Aliya, Shurrin, Mara, and Serai were unsure what to do next. They had learned many strange and arcane secrets—that children born with strange runes would bring about the city's doom; that these runechildren heralded the return of beings called the Elder Gods, absent from the world for millennia; and that the creator of the world, Praemus, was perhaps the only force that could oppose them. But was opposing the Elder Gods the right thing to do? And if so, would Praemus do so? Helmut Itlestein certainly believed that the runechildren brought doom. However, the characters' friend Kaira Swanwing thought otherwise. She belonged to an ancient order, the Knights of the Golden Cross, that revered the Elder Gods, whose return the runechildren heralded.

And even more confusing, all this seemed to tie in with the return of a moon that had been missing from the sky since the days of the Elder Gods, and with the wickedly evil and equally ancient Galchutt. The cultists who served the Galchutt hinted about something called the Night of Dissolution that would come to pass soon. Was this related? The adventurers did not know.

As a diversion, and to raise some funds to continue their quest, the characters decided to help another friend, a powerful wizard named Jevicca Nor. She had learned that the city's most mysterious (and powerful) spellcaster, the Iron Mage, was soon to accept a shipment at the Docks. It was well guarded and obviously magical—and for some reason, its handlers were not transporting it by magical means, but by ship. Jevicca simply wanted to know what it was.

The group agreed to find out. Disguised as city guards, they intercepted the boat at the docks and confronted those guarding a strange chest. (The PCs had to travel to the nefarious Dark Market under the city to purchase their disguises, which they did—but only after buying the slaves sold there and setting them free.) After being befuddled by illusions, the characters got into a scuffle with the chest's guardians—a pair of githyanki, a swordfighter named Vlad, and a bard named Urieth. The fight brought a number of real city guards and an Imperial official to the scene. In the ensuing melee, Serai made the chest invisible to see what was inside, and inadvertently triggered the powerful device that lay within. In a flash of darkness, they disappeared: all four of the group's members, all four of those guarding the chest, the six guards, the official, and a paladin of Lothian who had just arrived in the city.

They reappeared in some sort of teleportation nexus called the Tourbillion. This, apparently, lay within an ancient stronghold of one of the Galchutt—a being named Shallamoth Kindred. The displaced characters formed a quick alliance, including the paladin: an aasimar named Zophas Adhar from far-off Rhoth. They began to explore the stronghold filled with magical traps and horrible demonic creatures. They had no idea how they would ever get out.

Next Time: Aliya discovers she has a strange affinity for mirrors. And more is learned of the Galchutt, the Vested of the Galchutt, and the nature of demons.



THE LORDS OF DUST AND ASH

Sister Mara, Serai, Shurrin, Aliya, and their new ally Zophas found themselves in a weird place—transported via the *Signet of Shallamoth Kindred* to a strange chamber called the Tourbillion. With them were the mercenaries hired by the Iron Mage to protect the *Signet*: a pair of githyanki, a swordfighter named Vlad, and a bard named Urieth, as well as six Ptolus guards and an Imperial official also caught within the magical effect.

Taking charge, the group used some spells and deduction to determine that the Tourbillion was a magical transport nexus that one could activate using two magical lamps casting shadows upon a pattern on the floor. So Mara, Serai, Shurrin, Aliya, Zophas, Vlad, and Urieth set off out of the chamber to find the lamps.

The strange structure they explored was obviously very old: some sort of ancient citadel whose inhabitants seemed long gone. In their wanderings they found a magical door and room that they could see only in the reflection of a mirror. They also discovered that Aliya had a special talent for using mirrors to do so. There were more strange mirror-related magical effects here, but Aliya's newfound natural talent helped them navigate far enough to find someone who had been long trapped here: the archeologist who discovered the *Signet* in the first place. He explained that it belonged to one of the greatest of the evil Galchutt—Shallamoth Kindred—and that it was a transporter to that entity's palace. He also warned that there were demons about.

And there were. A few harrowing battles later, the group discovered the place was still inhabited by an entity called Thoggidrum. Thoggidrum was a “Vested” of the Galchutt—one of their most powerful servants—that devoted itself to destruction and decay. It had been split into four separate beings, all of whom hated the rest. Each aspect took on an even more specific devotion: dust, ash, slime, and rot. The characters used one aspect to betray the others to learn the location of the lamps needed to activate the Tourbillion. In doing so they battled belkers, bodaks, rasts, and slimy demons wielding chaostech (Thoggidrum had dealings with a demon of technology called Baalhazor).

Finally, with both lamps in hand, the group returned to the Tourbillion. On the way there, they came upon the archeologist they had rescued—except that he claimed to have never seen them before. Back at the

Tourbillion, they found another version of the same archeologist—the one that they had rescued. During that confusing encounter, they discovered that a plasm had replaced the archeologist and that doppelgangers had killed and replaced the two githyanki who had wandered off.

Once everyone's identity was sorted out and the shapechangers were defeated, the characters prepared their escape. Using the lamps to activate the magical transporter, the group returned to Ptolus. They learned that, after the *Signet* had sent them off, the Iron Mage had shown up at the Docks to take it away. Nevertheless, they earned their money for finding out what was in the box.

Next Time: We'll return to the city and check in on the Company of the Black Lantern.



BONDS FORGED

The Company of the Black Lantern had been driven from Dwarvenhearth after a surprise attack by dark elves somehow already inside the city. Undeterred by this turn of events, however, the members went back in, more prepared than ever. Once inside the ancient dwarven stronghold, they found a temple complex and began to explore, harassed by dwarven vampires that served some greater master: a dark elf vampire named Zachean.

Zachean also controlled a large cadre of stone giants and the orc tribe that served them. Pitted against all these foes, the company was forced out of Dwarvenhearth again. Meanwhile, another Black Lantern plan began to take shape. Ever since they had occupied the wizard Ressayd's underground tower (which he had taken from the dwarves), their friend and Grailwarden dwarf ally Hansk had watched over the place. Now the company set to fortifying it. The characters even hired elven mercenaries and warriors to help defend the place while they were away. The group now had a base deep underground.

They began establishing themselves, both in the local area under the city and—through word of mouth—above ground. People began to take notice.

Meanwhile, Shurrin, Sister Mara, Serai, Aliya, and Zophas investigated the now-abandoned Temple of the Ebon Hand, a church devoted to chaos. The Company of the Black Lantern had, long ago, dealt a serious blow to the cult, and since then the cultists had disappeared. Going on instinct more than anything (since they were still interested in finding out more about chaositech), the adventurers found a few traps and cultists in the lower reaches of the temple—as well as a secret passage into an extensive and still operational chaos temple hidden underground. More importantly, however, they discovered that a shipment of newly discovered chaositech from the Vault of the Kython was being shipped up into the city in a few weeks through a place called Mahdoth's Asylum.

But they could investigate those leads no further, at least not for the moment. They owed their old druid friend Andach a favor, after he'd saved their lives in the Necropolis. His secret grove-home on sacred Clasthamus Isle lost its protective magical wards on one night a year, on the feast of Godsdays. The adventurers had pledged to go to the island in the

middle of the Necropolis to help him defend it on that night.

Gathering help from the vigilant Keepers of the Veil—among them, their undead-hunting friend Feruch—the group met with Andach and made plans. They would hold the bridge leading from the Necropolis to the isle, and the druid and his apprentice Hennem (along with a legion of animals and awakened trees) would defend the rest of the island from invaders that flew, teleported, or swam.

A terrible battle ensued on the one bridge to the island that night. Undead, the Fallen (demons), and the humans who worked with them both (the Forsaken) stormed Clasthamus Isle, the only place in the Necropolis where they held no power. Ghouls, skeletons, wights, and far worse creatures came in wave after wave. The demons flew on magical pentagram-platforms and made ranged attacks. But the defenders held.

They even survived a terrible betrayal: Hennem revealed herself to be a Forsaken agent positioned there months ago to help build a magical gateway onto the island from the Forsaken's headquarters, the Dark Reliquary. The forces of good emerged victorious, although many fell. Andach himself was slain by a powerful lich, one of the original Wintersouled: mighty creatures of unlife who first began raising the undead of the Necropolis hundreds of years ago.

But great rewards come to the stouthearted, and those who'd fallen were raised—all but Andach, whose very soul was trapped in a *soul bind* spell. With both Andach and Hennem gone, an awakened lion took control of Clasthamus Isle. And with the passing of Godsdays into the following dawn, the sacred place regained its magical protections against the forces of evil.

Though his allies wanted to help Andach, they also had to stop the shipment of chaositech. But they still needed more information. Knowing the dangers that lay ahead, they called upon the help of their friends—a call answered by Chanticleer of the Company of the Black Lantern and his cohort, Quilambril. This combined strike force attacked the chaos temple and rooted out the corrupt priests within. Even the dread Demon of the Bells, summoned by the high priest of the temple, could not defeat them.

Once again, the servants of chaos and evil—the cultists of the dread Galchutt—suffered a terrible blow at the hands of the adventurers. But perhaps even more significant, the two parties of stalwart heroes learned that together, their might was undeniable. The bonds of friendship forged were so strong that Shurrin even returned with Chanticleer to help the Company explore Dwarvenhearth.

Next: More Dwarvenhearth! More dark elves! And what's gotten into Sercian...?



THE END OF THE COMPANY?

The Company of the Black Lantern was still determined to explore the unexplored. The members ventured into Dwarvenhearth yet again, with a new member in their ranks: an elf named Okoru from a land far to the southeast called Kem. Brother to one of the elves the company hired to guard its tower, Okoru had a talent for wizardry that soon became obvious to the group. They asked him to join.

Inside Dwarvenhearth, they found that some dwarves had dedicated themselves through a ritual to be eternal guardians of the city. These unliving (but not undead) guardians, the soulless, proved to be harsh opponents—particularly because of their use of ancient firearms and cannons. Worse still were the traps. The dwarves guarded their underground lair with devious and canny mechanical hazards of all sorts.

Still, the real threat were the dark elves who had managed to get into the city before the Black Lantern elves. Led by the vampire Zachean, they set up ambushes to attack the adventurers as they proceeded ever deeper into the vast underground metropolis.

Around that time, a few of the company began to notice that Sercian, the rogue/fighter in the group, was acting a bit strangely. He was developing a particularly hard edge—but with all that was happening and the constant fighting underground, who could blame him?

The Company of the Black Lantern eventually returned to its tower for some long-needed rest. Sercian went up into the city, just as his twin brother Serai came down to visit. Serai mentioned that he hadn't seen or heard from his brother in a while and wanted to find out whether everything was all right.

During the visit, dark elves struck. They launched a well-prepared and well-executed attack with great ferocity. During the fight, the Black Lantern elves learned that at least one of their opponents, an ogre monk mercenary, was hired in Ptolus just for this fight: specifically to battle the archer, Chanticleer. The dark elf spellcasters seemed to know exactly what spells Vexander the sorcerer would cast and either countered them or had equipped themselves with appropriate protections ahead of time. This harrowing fight carried on through the night, but eventually—just barely—the elves were victorious. However, only two of them remained standing when the sound of battle ended.

The company suffered great losses, as Hansk, their dwarf ally, was slain, along with Chanticleer's cohort, Quilambril. What's more, all the elf guards the group had hired to defend the tower lay dead as well.

Okoru took his dead brother and Chanticleer took Quilambril up to the city. None of them had any intention of returning. It appeared that the Company of the Black Lantern's very existence was in question.

In examining the bodies of the fallen dark elves, two things became clear. The first was that these dark elves had nothing to do with Zachean and the dark elves in Dwarvenhearth. In fact, they were enemies of Zachean and his house. These attackers, from House Vrama, sought entry into Dwarvenhearth to find out what Zachean was after, and the Black Lantern's key was simply the most expedient means to that end.

The group's second realization was that their foes had gained very exacting information on the members of the company. They found among the dark elf leader's possessions a letter from someone named Vastare that detailed each of them individually—right down to the tactics and weaknesses of each character. Who was this Vastare? Apparently, the Black Lantern had some as yet unrevealed enemy.

Battle weary with their underground tower in shambles, the members of the company carried their fallen up to the city. What would happen next was anyone's guess.

Next: Serai's personal quest for the Box of Shadows leads him and his friends into a fight with a ghostly dragon....



THE BOX OF SHADOWS, PART 1

Warning: This article contains spoilers for the adventure Beyond the Veil, published by Atlas Games.

While the Company of the Black Lantern was fighting for its life against dark elves, Serai Lorenci learned that an elf by the name of Daersidian Ringsire could tell him more about a strange key Serai's mother had given him before he ever left for Ptolus. The key opened something called the *box of shadows*, but that's all Serai knew.

He contacted Daersidian, a well-known adventurer who had heard of him and his friends due to their adventure in the Dark Reliquary. Daersidian agreed to tell Serai about the box, but for a price. He said some friends of his were attempting to "clear out" a section of ruined catacombs beneath the city but were having trouble with a black dragon. If Serai and his friends would take care of the dragon, Daersidian would give Serai the information he wanted.

So Serai, Shurrin, Zophas, Aliya, and Mara went to the location Daersidian described, entering the areas below the city through an old, ruined tannery in the Guildsman District. They found Daersidian's friends and learned a few things about this strange dragon. Its name was Storamere, and it attacked without provocation, taunting those it encountered by saying they could never defeat it in its lair. No one had any idea where its lair was, however.

After further investigation in the city, the characters learned that, about 900 years ago, the Sisterhood of Silence slew a black dragon named Storamere in that area of town. The dragon was a known emissary of Father Claw, an evil dragon god. Apparently, Storamere had been raised from the dead.

When Serai and his friends investigated down in the catacombs, they found the dragon and discovered—in battle—that the dragon was actually a ghost. They drove off the undead spirit but knew it was not slain. How would they put it to rest?

They delved deeper into the long-unexplored regions of the catacombs and encountered a few half-dragon humanoids. After defeating them, the characters pressed further and discovered the entrance to a huge cavern—they couldn't make out any of the walls, or even the ceiling or floor. From the door, a bridge

stretched into the darkness, and then just stopped. A stone arch stood at the end of the bridge. Careful investigation showed this arch to be a magical portal; the bridge continued through it to a floating island. Once through the portal, one couldn't see the cavern anymore. Those with some knowledge of the arcane determined that this was a floating ethereal island (and a foreshadowing of a major quest they would undertake much later).

The island held a magical fortress literally made of greenish acid. Powerful magic held the bubbling liquid in place to form walls, ceilings, and floors. This, as it turned out, was the lair of Storamere, a gift from Father Claw. It had never been breached in the dragon's life. Now stirred by the activity of Daersidian's friends, the ghost of Storamere haunted the surrounding area.

The heroes joined battle with Storamere in his lair that day. The dragon-ghost dwelled in a pool of acid with many living half-dragon spawn to serve him. In the horrific conflict that ensued, Aliya was slain while fighting the ghost dragon alone, hand to hand. Yet ultimately the heroes were victorious and destroyed the ghost of Storamere forever by doing what no one had ever done before: challenging and beating him in his own terrible lair.

The Aftermath

Now, unbeknownst to the others, Aliya and Serai earlier had begun a bit of a romance. When Serai saw Aliya fall, he snapped. The elf immediately took her away with him back up to the city.

During his time in the city, Serai had made some rather shady connections. One such connection was a being known as Kinion Luth, also known as the Surgeon of the Shadows (he had nothing to do with the *box of shadows*, despite the similar name). Luth was known for using various techniques of science, magic, and even chaoscience to "alter" people. These alterations granted great powers and enhancements, but often made the recipient into something of a monstrosity.

At first, Serai planned to have Luth perform these enhancements on Aliya before she was raised, so that she would never fall in battle again. Rethinking that plan (realizing she might not take well to such efforts), he left her to be raised at the temple of the Mother of All Machines and went off to have Luth give him some enhancements himself—the better to defend Aliya.

After Aliya came back from the dead, she and Zophas and Shurrin realized what Serai was up to. With the help of the clergy at the temple, they located their friend and went to stop him. As they invaded the secret base of Kinion Luth, they defeated his abomination creations and finally killed Luth himself (who was more metal than man by this point) in a fight literally over the operating table where Serai lay. Thus, Serai was “saved.” When they realized Luth’s serious underworld connections—he was an ally of the Balacazar family, the most powerful crime group in the city—they once again petitioned those at the temple of the Mother of All Machines for help. Fortunately, the followers of that extremely lawful deity looked upon the Surgeon of the Shadows as a chaos-wielding madman. They used a *miracle* to ensure that the identity of Luth’s assassins would never be discovered.

Yet Serai was denied his goal. Worse, his relationship with Aliya was no more.

Next: The group needs to finish going through Storamere’s lair—not to mention finding Daersidian Ringsire and learning all about the box of shadows. But all this gets put on hold while the heroes deal with that shipment of chaositech due to move through Mahdoth’s Asylum!



AN ASYLUM AND A PALACE

Much earlier, Serai, Aliya, Shurrin, and Mara had learned that a shipment of chaositech, discovered in something called the Vault of the Kython, was coming into the city through Mahdoth's Asylum. The time had come for the shipment to arrive, and so the group moved to intercept it. It had always been Sister Mara's mission for the Church to stem the tide of dangerous chaositech into the city, and the others agreed with the goal to varying degrees; Serai had a slightly new outlook—he actually wanted some of the chaositech for himself, to study.

Mahdoth's was an underground asylum for insane spellcasters, those afflicted with mental maladies that no remedy or spell seemed to allay. Most of the place utilized magic-dampening fields, which made it extremely hard to use spells there. The group members didn't know whether those who ran the asylum were a part of the chaos cult conspiracy or not, so they went in cautiously. Their plan was to turn Serai over to the asylum as an inmate so he could observe things from the inside. The rest of the group would wait close at hand in case trouble started.

And of course it did. Serai spent a strange night among the inmates and soon found an exit from the asylum to passages that went much deeper underground. From there, the cultists were transporting large gray cubes as well as a variety of weaponry and devices. Serai attacked, and all manner of chaos broke loose—so to speak.

Mara, Aliya, Shurrin, and Zophas intercepted the chaos agents coming down from the city to meet with those bringing the shipment up. In the ensuing battle, which extended down into the asylum itself, some of the inmates were freed, including a particularly dangerous mage whose name was unknown, even to the staff. He used soul magic to conjure a tyrannosaurus into the middle of the battle, then escaped.

The administrator of the asylum believed that the adventurers were attacking the place and did his best to hold them off with his own guards. Finally, who should appear but Mahdoth himself—a beholder who had long ago been reformed of his monstrous ways by a group called the Brotherhood of Redemption. Mahdoth would tolerate no threats to his charges—the inmates—and thus began attacking everyone, both the cultists and the player characters.

Serai discovered the hard way that the strange gray cubes were storage containers holding some sort of liquid power—the pure essence of chaos itself. This liquid began to spurt out of a pair of cubes after he used a *fireball* to attack the cultists transporting them. The cultists also brought with them kython: horrible monstrosities from ancient times, when the chaositech was created. These creatures were amalgams of serpents and insects.

Eventually, the characters defeated the cultists and the kython, and recovered most of the rest of the chaositech. Some was turned over to the Church of Lothian for examination. Some Serai took. The asylum returned to normal, although a few guards had perished in the fight, and the nameless mage had escaped. Even Mahdoth himself was appeased.

Back to the Dragon's Lair

But the characters still wanted to explore the rest of Storamere's lair. After a good long rest, they again went deep underground (with Zophas' new wizard cohort Ephendus Thal) to the strange ethereal island-palace. There they encountered one of Storamere's bizarre progeny, a half-dragon/half-umber hulk named Udalaag. Rather than fight the pitiful creature (who had been persecuted by its half-siblings for hundreds of years due to its slow-wittedness), they befriended it, particularly Sister Mara. After much coaxing, Mara even convinced Ephendus to lend Udalaag his *headband of intellect* so that they could more thoroughly question him.

They also found an intelligent elvish dagger named Shayla. Shayla claimed to have been made by the wizard-priests of Ni-Gorth almost 16,000 years earlier. These wizard-priests were the very same ones who helped create the "Jewels of Parnaith," which some of the group had heard about earlier from an intelligent magical pool in the Necropolis abode of Alchestrin. They had learned the Jewels were vital in their quest to stop the rise of chaos and the Galchutt's return.

Now, however, Shayla told them that the Jewels were not objects, but places. Specifically, they were ethereal islands that could be reached by "colordoor" and the use of a magic item called the *illitor*. Eventually, they found the strange *illitor* in the dragon's palace (a ring, a bracer, and a belt made of bronze, all connected by a bronze chain) and decided to return to the surface to learn more about all of this.

On their way back up, shadowdancers and shadowmages in the employ of House Sadar, one of the noble houses in Ptolus, ambushed them. The servants of Sadar demanded from Serai the key to the *box of shadows*, the very object that started the whole quest. After a bitter fight, the characters escaped—but now they realized they were hunted by one of the most powerful forces in the city. They knew they needed to find that box—and quickly!

Next: The Box of Shadows, Part 2!



THE BOX OF SHADOWS, PART 2

So, Serai the sorcerer, Shurrin the roguish priest of Mirresh, Sister Mara the cleric of Lothian, Aliya the monk of the Order of the Fist, and Zophas the paladin of Lothian had just left Storamere's lair. On the way, though, they were hounded by shadowdancers and shadowmages. Their ears to the ground, the group learned that their assailants were from one of the noble houses in the city: House Sadar, also called the House of Shadows. A less than reputable family, they were known allies of the evil Vladaam noble house. With that kind of power hunting for the *box of shadows* (and the key to it, which Serai held), the adventurers knew they had to act fast.

They had been fighting the ghost dragon Storamere on behalf of Daersidian Ringsire, an elf who supposedly knew how to find the box. After they fulfilled their end of the bargain, Daersidian upheld his as well. He told them that the *box of shadows* had been in the keeping of a group of earthbound angels called the Malkuth, but that a frost giant sorcerer named Ymrik stole it from one of their agents. He told them about a minotaur wizard named Canabulum who had helped Ymrik but then had second thoughts after seeing how evil his erstwhile ally was. Canabulum might very well know where Ymrik was, and thus the location of the box.

The group met up with Canabulum in the lair he kept in an underground ruin beneath the city, accessed by the sewers. After a brief exchange of information, Canabulum agreed to lead the group to Ymrik's lair, which also lay beneath the city. So they all went together. They even took Udalaag, the monstrosity dim-witted half-dragon/half-umber hulk that now resided in their care, still wearing the intelligence-boosting magic item that allowed them to converse with him.

Ymrik's lair was well defended by giant and minotaur mercenaries. After fighting their way through a horde of them, the group found a strange secret area filled with soul magic runes. After careful examination, they discovered the runes provided the magical means and necessary protection to travel to a strange and shadowy half-world. To the shadow of the city of Ptolus, in fact.

But the group was not ready for such a trip. The PCs needed to rest and recuperate. As they decided to leave, the agents of House Sadar struck again. This was a

tense fight, but new ally Canabulum really shone, sending the shadowmages running with a well-cast spell. The group left Udalaag to guard Ymrik's lair and went home to rest. Serai met up with Daersidian again, complaining about the forces of Sadar. Daersidian said he would "give them something else to think about."

A few days later, after a brief and comical chase through the streets of Ptolus (another group of adventurers had stumbled upon Udalaag under the city and wanted to turn him over to the Brotherhood of Redemption for the standing bounty on monsters), the heroes went back to Ymrik's lair. Udalaag was safe in his new home: the underground abode of Canabulum, his new "lairmate." They traveled to the location of the *box of shadows*, the "shadow" of an otherwise innocuous tower in the city. There, they encountered and defeated Ymrik and his most trusted henchmen. But they did not have the box.

The box was in the hands of Thurvan, an old friend of Daersidian Ringsire who had allied with Ymrik after being obsessed with—later consumed by—the *box of shadows*. Its dark, shadowy power tempted all who came in contact with it, granting power to a willing character but forever stealing the poor creature's soul. So it went with Thurvan. Now, he wielded the shadows of the box like a weapon. Daersidian had told Serai long ago that the key wasn't important because it could open the box, but because it could close and seal it. It was clear now what had to be done. The group entered melee with Thurvan, and finally Shurrin was able to knock the box from his hands. They closed and sealed the box, defeating Thurvan.

When they finally returned home, they learned that Ren Sadar, head of House Sadar, had been assassinated by an unknown assailant. Daersidian was nowhere to be found.

The adventurers turned the now-sealed *box of shadows* back over to the Malkuth, who rewarded them greatly. After much celebration, they settled in for a well-deserved rest. During this time, they learned the latest gossip, almost all of which involved the Emperor of the Church.

The Tarsisan Empire was in a state of disarray these days. Three different forces claimed to be the rightful heirs to the throne. There was Segaci, in the capital of Tarsis, who had advised many emperors in his life

and claimed to rule by virtue of being the most fit to do so. Empress Addares, on the other hand, claimed a distant blood tie to the Imperial line and declared the capital of the Empire to be her home, the southern city of Dohrinthas. And there was the Emperor of the Church of Lothian. For centuries, the Empire had actually had two emperors: the secular Emperor of the Lion-Guarded Throne and the Emperor of the Church. The current holder of the latter title, Rehoboth Ylestos, finally declared it Lothian's will that he rule not only the Church, but also the secular Empire as well. This move would reunite a position that split into two during the Empire's early days. Not only that, but Rehoboth officially declared Ptolus the new capital of the Empire, rather than Tarsis or Dohrinthas.

Suddenly, the Empire had three emperors and three capitals. Rumors began to spread that the barbarian tribes in the east—who had attacked and defeated the Empire years back—were stirring. This was a delicate time.

In a seemingly unrelated bit of news, after much searching for someone to cast *true resurrection* on the dead leader of their house, House Sadar found those willing to help them... in the Church of Lothian. The next day, Sadar and Vladaam put their official support behind the reign of Holy Emperor Rehoboth as the one true emperor. Strange times indeed.

Next: But what about the Company of the Black Lantern during all this? In the next installment, the Black Lantern begins its war against the dark elves.



THE REVENGE OF THE BLACK LANTERN

Back in the surface city, Gaerioth and Sercian learned from a monk of a minor order that there was some trouble at an apartment house in Oldtown. Investigating, they found the whole place strangely sealed and very quiet. While they looked around, two figures approached. One was a tall, blue-skinned ogre-mage with numerous *ioun stones*. He was fairly well known in the city, so they recognized him as Urlenius, the Star of Navashtrom. He was a boisterous cleric of the god of harmony and strength, and a representative of the Brotherhood of Redemption—the group that turned him from his evil, monstrous ways. With him was Tellian Riverborn, another cleric of Navashtrom. A newcomer to Ptolus, the elf Tellian had pledged to follow Urlenius. The ogre-mage was quick to tell Gaerioth and Sercian that he had experienced a dream that sent him here looking for evil and chaotic creatures known as kython.

From the other group, the Black Lanterns had heard of kython: insectile/reptilian horrors created by the Galchutt. (Sercian's brother Serai had encountered a few of the creatures and had heard they were somehow related to the chaos cults and chaositech.) The four of them entered the building and found that Urlenius' dream had proven true. The place was overrun with kython that had come up from the sewer.

Eventually Vexander joined them, and the group explored the sewer to find the entrance to yet another chaos temple under the city. This temple teemed not only with cultists, but with kython of all shapes and sizes.

It was during this adventure that the Black Lanterns noticed more and more often that Sercian was acting very strangely. They had noted this behavior before, back at their tower and in Dwarvenhearth. There was also that odd comment from Urlenius as the group made its way through the sewer back to the surface: "I thought that elves and dark elves didn't get along."

No one realized at the time that he was using *true seeing* and looking at Sercian.

As the clues began to lead to the revelation of an imposter in their midst, Sercian went back down to the tower the group held under the city. They had left the place in the hands of their dwarf friend Hansk, whom they had raised after the last battle in the tower.

Gaerioth followed Sercian and, once in the tower, asked him what was going on. While they spoke, someone came to the door.

It was Sercian, looking mistreated and underfed. As Gaerioth stared at two Sercians, the one in the tower gave a command, and hired mercenaries erupted out of hiding. Gaerioth and Sercian suddenly had to face "Sercian" and a bunch of thugs. Eventually, they drove off the imposter and defeated the mercenaries, taking one githyanki woman prisoner. They learned that the imposter was a dark elf named Vastare. Sercian told Gaerioth that dark elves had captured him long ago while he was on his way to Dwarvenhearth. Using Sercian's belongings and magic, they transformed one of their own to look like the shoal elf in order to infiltrate the Company of the Black Lantern and get the key to Dwarvenhearth, so they might learn what was going on in there. These dark elves were enemies of the dark elves who had already gained entrance to the ancient dwarven city and served the vampire Zachean. The ones who'd captured Sercian were from House Vrama; they'd taken their prisoner to a stronghold of theirs and branded him a slave.

The group also learned that Vastare had slain Hansk and taken much of their treasure reserves. At that moment, the Company of the Black Lantern stopped whatever else they were doing and swore vengeance upon House Vrama and Vastare. They spoke with the most powerful elf they knew in the city, Doraedian Mythlord, seeking aid. He told them he thought he knew of some elves that might want to help them.

He also told them about an artifact that might prove helpful in fighting dark elves: the *Eye of Ardaen*. Ardaen was an old elvish god of light and the sun who died long ago. The artifact—literally his eye—commanded powers of light that would surely be of use against dark elves. However, an evil cult serving Danansk, God of a Thousand Pains, had stolen it and secreted it away from the powers of good in a hidden vault on Tridam Island in the underground Shadow Lake. The company knew that a group called the Pactlords of the Quaen maintained a stronghold on that same island.

The Company of the Black Lantern put out a call for mercenaries, hoping to gather a number of them quickly. Also joining them was Sercian's brother, Serai, who wanted to help them get revenge for what the

dark elves did to his twin. While scouring the city for help, they came upon a dwarf named Soren Clanstone, who said he could wrangle some help from the dwarves living in a citadel called Kaled Del, below Ptolus. The Company had dealt with these dwarves before and were grateful for the help. Little did they know that their new friend was a member of Kaled Del's nobility! When they arrived at the citadel, they were surprised to discover that Soren was the prodigal son of the local dwarven lord, Terrik Clanstone. In the citadel, they learned that dark elves had been attacking often of late—they'd suddenly grown particularly active in the region. The dark elves would blow up sections of the fortress with chaositech weapons, then flee. However, the dwarven alchemists had devised a counter to the chaositech: a form of concentrated law.

To help fight the dark elves, Soren's father had given him a unit of boar cavalry, a unit of riflemen, and a beastmaster with an anklyosaur. The army was shaping up. But the Black Lanterns felt the cause still needed a source of real power. They needed the *Eye of Ardaen*. So they traveled to the underground island in Shadow Lake, encountering and falling to the Pactlords of the Quaan. Approaching later with stealth, they followed Doraedian's instructions and entered the secret vault. After overcoming numerous traps, tricks, puzzles, a maze, and false orbs—not to mention fearsome demonic guardians—the group found the artifact they sought and returned home.

They gathered their army of 30 mercenaries led by Jaren Thor (a human fighter); an elite unit of elven fighters led by Chaldakin Wingsoft (an elven fighter) and Charneset (a litorian); the dwarves of Kaled Del; and Doraedian's friends, Kelaed Morningword (an elven cleric), Zaetra (a cherubim elf sorcerer/bard), and Paellindar (an elven sorcerer/fighter). With the *Eye of Ardaen* in hand, the Company of the Black Lantern and their followers—almost 60 in all (not counting boars and dinosaurs)—followed Sercian's directions and headed off to bring down House Vrama.

Next: Urlenius leads the other group to the chaos temple to fight kython, and the Company of the Black Lantern discovers more deception.



CHAOS AND DECEPTION

Warning: Some spoilers for the Fiery Dragon adventure Queen of Lies appear below.

With the Black Lantern elves interested in taking on dark elves, Urlenius the ogre-mage contacted Mara, Shurrin, Aliya, Canabulum, and Zophas to tell them about the chaos temple he helped find down in the sewers. As a group, they investigated the place. The cultists attempted to make the front area appear abandoned, but the adventurers were not fooled and pressed on, discovering a large temple. Within was a horrible mind-controlling worm-creature that took command of Urlenius. The ogre-mage slew Zophas before the others could bring him to his senses.

After Zophas was restored and the group rested a while, the heroes went to speak with a local noble: Lord Kirstol Dallimothan, whom they had contacted before, both as a mutual friend of Andach the druid (killed in the battle of Clasthamus Isle) and as someone to consult with regarding Shayla, the intelligent ancient elven dagger they recently acquired. House Dallimothan was also known as House Dragon, and rumors said that some or all members of the house were actually dragons or half-dragons. Lord Dallimothan, who was clearly older than he looked, enjoyed talking with Shayla. Together they all began to piece together how they could reach the Seven Jewels of Parnaith, which the group had learned of earlier. One could reach those islands only by “colordoor,” which a person could find in certain places at certain times using a device called the Orrery. A magic item they already had, the *illitor*, opened the first door.

But they were getting ahead of themselves. For the group discovered that the priests of Lothian could not bring Andach back from the dead after the battle of Clasthamus Isle. Divinations revealed that his soul was trapped in a black gem held within the Dark Reliquary of the Necropolis.

The adventurers pledged to Lord Dallimothan that, after they cleared out the chaos temple, they would go to the Necropolis and rescue Andach’s soul. Then, they would turn their attention to the Seven Jewels of Parnaith. Meanwhile, Dallimothan and Shayla would attempt to locate the Orrery.

Soon thereafter, the group found itself back in the subterranean chaos temple. After harrowing fights with

cultists and kython, the PCs discovered links between the chaos cult and the Fallen and the Forsaken of the Necropolis. (The Fallen are demons, and the Forsaken are undead or people who prefer the company of the undead.) They also received an ominous reminder that the chaos cultists actually served the Galchutt, dormant beings of great power and evil below the city. The cultists, like their foul masters, awaited a fast-approaching “Night of Dissolution.” With it would come the ultimate victory of the Galchutt and the destruction of all else.

Finally, the heroes came to a huge door with a serpent motif, behind which they could hear the workings of a vast machine. However, Sister Mara had received prophetic dreams about this door and the great dangers beyond. Based on that warning, the group decided to leave without going any farther. They dealt the cultists a terrible blow, however, virtually destroying the temple.

Then they prepared to go yet again into the Dark Reliquary. This time, they sought to free their friend. Aliya also had her own, secret agenda...

Dark Elf Hunt

Meanwhile, the members of the Company of the Black Lantern led their army down into the deep reaches of the earth to find the dark elves of House Vrama. On their way, they encountered a small city of kuo-toa as well as some other monsters. The kuo-toa proved reasonable, accepting a small tribute for allowing the army to pass. And for the most part, the monstrous beasts of the subterranean realms seemed to give the large group a wide berth.

After days of travel, the Black Lanterns became wary, and rightfully so. As they entered a large cavern, dark elves charged out in ambush. Some rode velociraptorlike lizards, while others were accompanied by bugbear warriors. The Black Lantern brought their own mercenary army to bear, and the two large groups clashed. After a tremendous battle, the Black Lantern troops emerged victorious. Although many were gravely injured, the clerics among them healed them quickly, keeping overall casualties low. The group pressed on.

It wasn’t until well into the underground journey that Gaerioth noticed that the dwarf leader, Soren Clanstone, was acting strangely. Specifically, he noted

that, when the group reached a watering hole, Soren didn't drink from it, but sat quietly. Gaerioth told the others, and they watched the dwarf carefully for a time. Finally, Serai grew tired of the situation and grabbed Soren, tricking the dwarf into teleporting with him back to Ptolus. "We don't trust you and can't take any chances," the sorcerer said. Then, Serai teleported back to the Black Lanterns far underground, leaving the bewildered dwarf in a tavern.

Little did the group realize that Soren was actually the dark elf Vastare in a magical disguise. This dark elf of House Vrama not long ago impersonated Sercian, which sparked this whole quest to begin with. At least he could do no more harm to their quest now.

Next: The Company of the Black Lantern reaches Ul-Drakkan, fortress of House Vrama. The others enter the Dark Reliquary and find more than they expected. And there's even a villain who shows up in both places. But how can that be?



HEROES AGAINST EVIL

Warning: Some spoilers for the Fiery Dragon adventure Queen of Lies appear below.

Shurrin the fighter/rogue/cleric, Aliya of the Order of the Fist, Sister Mara the cleric of Lothian, Zophas the Knight of the Pale, Canabulum the minotaur wizard, and Urlenius the Star of Navashtrom decided to enter the Dark Reliquary to rescue the trapped soul of their ally, Andach the druid. The Dark Reliquary, home to the Fallen (demons) and the Forsaken (undead and those who work with them), was a terrible place the first time the members of the group were taken there. They just barely escaped with their lives. Now they were going back intentionally.

Zophas got three of his allies from the Knights of the Pale—Vestra, Dartalus, and Cardillian—to go with them. On their way through the Necropolis, they saw a huge cage made of wicker in the shape of a man, with children inside. Undead were about to set it on fire. Of course the heroes intervened to save the children, only to discover that the whole event was set up as an ambush: Their enemies knew they were coming. Wounded and spent from the battle, they retreated, intending to return the next day, although the young and inexperienced Dartalus' nerves were shattered already. When they re-entered the Dark Reliquary, they did so without him.

They found that there had been some strife in the Necropolis of late—factions among the Forsaken were in the middle of a power struggle. The heroes had learned that the tower of a local necromancer held a secret underground passage into the gothic, palacelike Dark Reliquary. They were unsure as to whether they would parley with or fight the necromancer, but when they arrived at the tower she was already dead, killed in the strife. The adventurers found the secret passage and rode atop a huge creature/construct of bones to gain entry to the nefarious fortress.

There were many tense fights in the Dark Reliquary, mostly with undead. Through divinations, the characters knew they were looking for a place called the Temple of the Half-Born. When they found it they discovered a terrible demon that could take a small tissue sample from a creature and give birth to copies of that creature. Luckily, they avoided being copied themselves but still had to deal with other half-born progeny. Once that demon was destroyed, they found

rooms of hundreds of black gems, each holding a captive soul. Destroying all of them, they freed not only Andach's trapped soul, but those of many others.

They fled the Dark Reliquary, their mission accomplished—but it wasn't. Aliya had another goal as well. Ever since she was young, Aliya had possessed a strange affinity for mirrors. She could see things in them that were being reflected in completely different mirrors in places many miles away. Occasionally, she saw a young girl who looked a lot like her, but this girl was trapped, held by a marilith named Drusii in the Dark Reliquary.

So the group did not rest after its initial success but instead went back again. This time, the adventurers entered via the secret cliffside passage that they had once used to escape. They encountered Drusii but used magic to force her away. After even more horrific battles, they found the girl, whose name was Calista. They also found a deva named Falstef who had been imprisoned there for decades, his wings ripped from him. They freed both and sought a way out. Just as they thought escape was close, they found themselves surrounded by demons. The creatures told them that their master, Raguel, wished to speak with them. Raguel's lover, Lilith (the only creature Drusii answered to), was present and seethed with anger—she wanted the heroes dead for their attacks. (She also did not want them to leave with Calista, who was an important key to the whole situation. But that comes later...)

They were brought before Raguel and left alone with him. Much to their surprise, Raguel was not a demon, but an angel. He explained that long ago his parents, two of the Elder Gods, put him in charge of the netherworld. As new powers, such as Demogorgon and Orcus, arose over the next twenty thousand years, Raguel began to lose faith in his own position. However, all attempts to contact his parents failed. The Elder Gods were gone. So he and the Fallen—demons that still served him—came to the world to learn what was going on. Now, some of them, encouraged by Lilith, wanted to ally with the forces that sought to wake the Galchutt and bring upon the “Night of Dissolution.” Raguel was unsure.

He told the heroes he knew they planned to visit the Seven Jewels of Parnaith. He gave them a small silver orb that floated in the air and told them that, if they agreed to take it with them, they could all leave safely.

If they found what he thought they would find in the Jewels, Raguel said, it would help him decide to uphold peace for the innocent people of Ptolus, rather than allow a horde of demons to sweep into town.

The heroes took the orb with grave reservations and, together with Calista and Falstef, they walked out of the Dark Reliquary. Nothing stood in their way.

Dark Elves and Chaositech

Meanwhile, deep under the city, the Company of the Black Lantern encountered another bastion of the dark elves: a tower held aloft high by webs above the floor in a riftlike cavern. The adventurers battled a number of dark elves, as well as the bebilith who'd made the webs. Capturing the tower, they learned that the fortress of Ul-Drakkan lay just ahead in their path. They positioned their mercenaries in the cavern while the company moved ahead.

Before reaching Ul-Drakkan, they encountered a dark elf from an opposing dark elf house who wanted to help them attack House Vrama. He told them about an agent within that they could contact for aid, once inside.

Ul-Drakkan consisted of three towers carved out of natural columns in a gargantuan cave. The path in was guarded by a number of bugbears and a fire giant, who repelled the group members. They retreated and took a different tack. Serai made himself look like a dark elf and entered surreptitiously. Once inside, he found the agent they'd heard about and obtained a special tuning-fork-like object that the spy said would allow one to teleport in safely: a teleport key. Otherwise, entering Ul-Drakkan via teleportation was impossible.

But Serai's scouting mission took too long. The others assumed he was in trouble and attempted to teleport in to help. Their spell rerouted them into a pit whose bottom was wrapped in an *antimagic field*. Serai learned what had happened and reached them to help. Reunited, the company began its assault on Ul-Drakkan from the inside.

Although many battles with dark elves followed, the largest took place on a bridge that joined two of the towers of Ul-Drakkan more than 100 feet above the cave floor. They learned two important things then. First, the dark elves had demonic allies. (One, in fact, was a foul-mouthed succubus whom the other group

had encountered in the Dark Reliquary.) Second, the dark elves had recently stolen a vast amount of chaositech from the kython. One of the demons, a massive glabrezu, was there to help them understand how to use it. But he—like many of the dark elves' demonic associates—was actually more spy than ally. When the members of the company reached the dark elves' main trove of gray liquid chaositech power containers (which Serai had run afoul of in Mahdodh's Asylum), they also found a huge deactivated chaositech construct. The glabrezu, in human guise, appeared and offered to teach them how to use it. They didn't trust him, of course, and quickly learned his true nature.

Serai, however, got the demon to tell him how to command the construct. He then told the company how to make the liquid power cubes explode in order to destroy the dark elves' tower. And then Serai teleported away with the construct.

Eventually, of course, the dark elves mobilized and reacted to the company's attack. The company found itself trapped at the top of a tower in a room full of chaositech and a demon, with a veritable dark elf army on the way up.

It was Tellian the cleric who made the decisive move. He told Vexander the sorcerer to teleport away with their monk friend, Gaerioth, then made a deal with the demon to get himself and Serai's twin, Sercian, safely away. The demon said he would name his price later, and Tellian agreed. The demon happily gave Sercian, a budding sorcerer, two *teleport* scrolls and vanished. The two elves teleported away (Sercian failed with the first scroll, so both really were needed) just as the power cubes exploded in a burst of pure chaos energy, destroying the entire tower and slaying a horde of dark elves.

They were all safe. But now the Black Lantern elves hated Serai for what they took as a betrayal. They returned the next day (via teleportation) to their mercenaries' camp and marched with them back up to the surface. They had dealt House Vrama the blow they had come to deliver.

Next: Ptolus noble houses get involved.



THE CHALLENGE IS ISSUED

Warning: Some spoilers for the adventure *The Banewarrens* appear below.

Having walked, unaccosted, out of the Dark Reliquary, Shurrin the fighter/rogue/cleric, Aliya of the Order of the Fist, Sister Mara the cleric of Lothian, Zophas the Knight of the Pale, Canabulum the minotaur wizard, and Urlenius the Star of Navashtrum (a reformed ogre-mage) deserved a nice long rest. Their rest was troubled, however, for they now found themselves in possession of a mysterious floating silver orb given to them by Raguel, leader of the Fallen. Although he seemed more angel than demon, the heroes hardly trusted him. They decided to push on toward the Jewels of Parnaith, as they had planned.

Now, Parnaith was once the wife of Danar, a powerful and altruistic cleric who lived aeons ago. He built the Banewarrens, an underground vault where he stored the worst of all evil artifacts, so that no one could ever get at them. It was the evil of the Banewarrens that created the spire of Ptolus, legend said. Danar became known as the Dread One when he fell to temptation and threatened all of creation with his dark might.

Before all that happened, however, Parnaith, in conjunction with the wizard-priests of Ni-Gorth, created a series of seven ethereal islands, each reachable only through magical *colordoors* (opened only by a device called the *illitor*, which the group already had. One had to travel through the islands sequentially. To get to the first, a special Orrery showed where a *colordoor* accessible from the normal world would open. Thus, the characters had to find this Orrery.

They turned to their friend Lord Kirstol Dallimothan, head of House Dallimothan—also known as House Dragon. In an ancient tome in the family’s library, Kirstol found a reference to the Orrery. It was stolen long ago and ended up in the possession of another noble house: House Vladaam, an evil and corrupt line of diabolic powermongers.

Shurrin, Canabulum, Zophas, and Zophas’ wizard cohort Ephendus decided to sneak into the estate of House Vladaam and take the Orrery. They contacted another old friend, Kaira Swanwing, an elven member of an order called the Knights of the Golden Cross. This ancient order had vied with the Vladaam family since before recorded history, so Kaira was more than

happy to help. She gave them an idea of the layout of the estate and had some of her people create a diversion at the estate gates while the four adventurers flew over the wall and onto the estate’s grounds.

They broke into the manor house without much difficulty and wandered through its back rooms. Their burglary was interrupted by some of House Vladaam’s guards, who promptly turned into werewolves. Really large and powerful werewolves.

Things got worse when the family members at home woke up. Most members of the Vladaam family were powerful spellcasters, rogues, or fighters (or all three). Although a few lucky breaks allowed the heroes to hold their own for a time against Gattara and Aliaster Vladaam—both powerful mages—the swarm of werewolves separated the group into different rooms. In fact, at one point, Shurrin found himself trapped in the study where he thought the Orrery was (it wasn’t there) behind an *arcane locked* door while the others were overwhelmed. Vicious werewolf blows knocked Ephendus unconscious, and Zophas was mortally wounded, soon to die. Shurrin managed to get free of his room just in time to greet the arrival of yet another Vladaam—Godfred—with yet more werewolf guards and a soul-devouring *hungersword*. Canabulum used magic to clear a path, then grabbed Zophas in one arm, beckoning Shurrin to come with him, to retreat out of the terrible place. Shurrin tried to comply, but he soon found himself on the wrong end of Godfred’s *hungersword*. Canabulum grabbed Shurrin’s body as he fell and flew out.

After this terrible defeat, the group realized that the direct approach was neither wise nor ethical. They needed a new plan. Kirstol Dallimothan again provided a great deal of help.

But meanwhile, Shurrin was lost in the beyond. By all rights, the *hungersword* should have consumed his soul forever. Yet his soul was rescued by his goddess, Mirresh, with the help of her much more powerful sister Gaen, goddess of light. The two told Shurrin that in exchange for his life he must swear his allegiance to Gaen, “whose might will be needed in the coming months,” they said cryptically. Of course, Shurrin agreed, and his friends were able to get him resurrected.

Back at House Dragon, Kirstol told the heroes about the ancient Rites of Custom, obeyed by the noble houses since long before the Empire. He explained that a thousand years ago, the area of called Palastan around Ptolus was ruled by a king, and all noble families answered to him. The nobles developed a code called the Rites of Custom that they all obeyed—or the others would gather together and destroy the offending family. These rules governed the nobles for centuries. When Ghul, who called himself the Skull-King, usurped the reigning king, the royal line was thought gone forever. That, however, was not true. The soul of the last king remained preserved within a magical stone. To this day the noble houses look upon him as a judge for their disputes, although rarely does anyone invoke the Rites of Custom anymore.

Kirstol suggested that the adventurers issue a challenge of combat against the Vladaam family for possession of the Orrery. But first, they had to figure out how to suggest that the item didn't rightfully belong to House Vladaam—if they didn't, the king could reject the challenge as baseless.

The group had first learned about the Orrery and the Jewels from Shayla the dagger, who was created by the wizard-priests of Ni-Gorth. With the wizard-priests long gone, they reasoned, Shayla was actually the Orrery's rightful owner. As their last sentient heir, she owned all that once belonged to the wizard-priests. And that was all the justification they needed.

A noble must issue a challenge against another noble, and Kirstol did not hesitate to sponsor his friends' cause. The formal challenge, then, as presented to the King, was this:

“By the Laws of Custom and the Ancient Rites, I, Kirstol Dallimothan, in league and fellowship with Mara von Witten, Shurrin Delano, Aliya Al-Mari, Zophas Adhar, Serai Lorenci, and Canabulum, on behalf of Shayla, heir to the Wizard-Priests of Ni-Gorth, challenge the family and house of Vladaam to a combat of nine nondivine beings for the right to the Orrery of Ni-Gorth, rightful property of Shayla, on the 11th of Blessing, in the Imperial Year of 721.”

Kirstol volunteered to fight alongside them, as did Andach the druid, a longtime friend of Kirstol's whom the heroes had recently saved from the Dark Reliquary. They also recruited help from the celestial Malkuth

order; during their raid on the Reliquary, the group had rescued Falstef the deva, first of the Malkuth. As Falstef was bereft of his wings and still sorely wounded, another angel, Mooncry, offered to take his place and help them fight the Vladaam family.

The Vladaams, as was their right, made only one counter-challenge: that no one slain in the combat could ever be brought back from the dead.

This was for keeps.

Next: The Challenge! And afterward comes... the Day of Black Rain and the Return of Helmut Itlestein.



THE CHALLENGE AND AFTERMATH

Warning: *Plenty of spoilers for my online D&D adventure Black Rain appear below.*

To get an item they knew only as the Orrery, once created by the legendary wizard-priests of Ni-Gorth as a means to locate the only way into the Seven Jewels of Parnaith, the intrepid band of heroes formally challenged the item's current holders, House Vladaam.

The day of the challenge loomed close, and many allies gathered. In addition to Mara, Shurrin, Aliya, Zophas, Serai (recently returned from forays against the dark elves), and Canabulum, the challengers had as allies Lord Kirstol Dallimothan, his friend Andach the druid, and a celestial named Mooncry. Andach, of course, was already known to the heroes and owed them quite a favor for rescuing his soul from the Dark Reliquary. Mooncry was one of the Malkuth, the group of earthbound angels in the city. She represented the angel Falstef, whom the heroes had also rescued from the Dark Reliquary. Since Falstef was still convalescing, she would pay back that favor for him.

The challenge was held in an ancient and hidden ceremonial spot in a crevice partway up the Spire that overlooked the city. The challenge was moderated by the mysterious and ancient figure known only as "the King," who seemed to be only a spirit. House Vladaam responded to the challenge by sending Gattara Vladaam, an extremely powerful cleric/wizard, as well as various rogues and fighters associated with the house, and their "ringers": a beholder, an ancient vampire fighter, and two pit fiends.

The challenge for the Orrery of Ni-Gorth was an epic battle. It quickly became clear that House Vladaam's strategy was to focus most of their attention upon Lord Dallimothan. Since this challenge stipulated that no one slain in the battle could be raised, the Vladaams were very interested in eliminating the head of a powerful rival house. The beholder and the vampire, led by Gattara, attacked the others. But underestimating Dallimothan's allies was their undoing. Shurrin killed the beholder with one thrust of his grandfather's rapier. Andach obliterated the vampire with a spell that called down the power of the sun. A concentrated effort even managed to overcome Gattara herself, who thought she was invincible in her *arcana form* (which Serai managed to dispel).

Thus the heroes came to Lord Dallimothan's aid, lending him support and healing as he vanquished the pit fiends. In the end, a few of House Vladaam's representatives fled the challenge area and the rest died. Miraculously, all the heroes survived.

House Vladaam turned over the Orrery to Shayla the magical dagger, whom the heroes represented. With Shayla and the Orrery, they would be able to reach the Seven Jewels of Parnaith.

The adventurers took a few days to prepare for their journey. As they readied to go, however, the unexpected happened. A strange storm blew into Ptolus, and an odd black rain began to fall. They had heard of such a thing before: While the storm lasted, they would be cut off from the power of the gods, they knew. Clerics were without any spells. A dark day indeed!

But it got worse. Almost as soon as the storm struck, in early morning, the word spread: The Holy Palace was under siege!

The huge and lavish home of the Prince of the Church had for the last few years—since barbarians had sacked the capital of the Empire—also been home to his father, the Emperor of the Church. The Holy Emperor had recently declared himself to be not only the Empire's religious leader but its secular ruler as well. This move harkened back to the early days of the Empire, when the Emperor led the Church as well as the realm.

While most of the heroes wanted to go see what was going on at the Palace (particularly the Lothianites Mara and Zophas), Canabulum ran off to check on a cleric friend of his, to make sure she was safe. On the way to the Holy Palace, Mara, Zophas, Aliya, Shurrin, and Serai ran into Sercian and Tellian of the Company of the Black Lantern. They were also out and about trying to figure out what was going on.

At the Holy Palace, a strange sight greeted the heroes. Today, as the black rain fell, the characters saw the entire building surrounded by the city guards, marshaled by the Commissar himself. These troops held a mob of rioting and chanting people at bay on one hand and attempted to gain entrance to the palace on the other. They were failing at both. The rioters shouted about the overthrow of the current establishment. But stranger still, the group found the palace surrounded by an energy field that no one could get through.

The heroes approached a woman they knew: Aoska, a half-celestial member of the Malkuth. She was also one of the Twelve Commanders, a group of powerful individuals who worked directly with the Commissar and oversaw the city's well-being. She explained that the palace, and therefore the Emperor himself, was under attack. Events began just as the storm appeared, as if the attackers had known the black rain was coming. Somehow, the attackers appeared within the palace and erected the energy barrier to keep the palace guards from getting reinforcements. Aoska knew the guards were still fighting off the invaders inside, but no one could guess how long they could last.

"Who would attack the Emperor of the Church?"

Mara asked Aoska. The Commander told the heroes they had captured enough rioters to determine that the attackers belonged to the Republican movement—a group interested in helping Ptolus become an independent republic rather than remain part of the Tarsisan Empire. The questioned rioters bragged that their leader would kill the Emperor himself. This leader was Helmut Itlestein, who was alive today only because the heroes had once spared his life.

Clearly, the group had to do something.

Next: They do something. And another old friend shows up. This one's a demigod.



BLACK RAIN

Warning: Plenty of spoilers for my online D&D adventure Black Rain appear below.

As a mystical black rain fell on Ptolus, cutting off the world from the power of the gods, Helmut Itlestein, an old nemesis of the adventurers, plotted nothing less than the invasion of the Holy Palace and the murder of the Emperor of the Church to further his dreams of an independent Ptolus ruled by the people. Standing outside the Holy Palace in the middle of the Nobles' Quarter, Zophas, Shurrin, Mara, Aliya, Serai, Sercian, Gaerioth, and Tellian found that a powerful force field surrounded the building. They could see explosions and other signs of a great battle occurring within. All around them, city guards dealt with rioters who supported Helmut Itlestein and his so-called Republican movement.

With the blessing of the Commissar, the group went across town to the temple of the Watcher of the Skies, where Helmut once served as high priest. They immediately saw signs of a recent fire there and blustered their way into the church, past a priest who could not keep from weeping at the state his temple and religion had sunk to in recent months.

The investigation proved fruitful, for the group discovered the remnants of a magical portal in Helmut's personal chambers. They were unsure as to the cause of the fire (which had clearly centered in his room), but they successfully reactivated the portal. Leaping through it, they found that it led to the courtyard of a black citadel. It took only a moment to orient themselves to see where they were: the Ptolus Spire jutted up directly above them. They were in Goth Gulgamel, the forbidden fortress halfway up the Spire. This was the ancient home of Ghul, the self-proclaimed Half God, also known as the Skull-King.

Across the courtyard, they saw another portal. Near it rested a cannon and some military supplies, including racks of weapons. Not wishing to spend any more time in Goth Gulgamel than needed, they passed through the second portal and found themselves in the interior of the Holy Palace. Before them, they saw the temple defenders—including the Emperor's own Knights of the Dawn—struggling against a horde of well-equipped orcs, some of whom rode reptilian beasts, and a hydra. The heroes leaped into fray on the side of the defenders. After a huge battle, the invaders lay in defeat.

Taking no pause, the adventurers and those knights left alive raced to the Holy Emperor's throne room. To their horror, they found Helmet Itlestein there, armed with two mysterious interlocking staves, about to slay the Emperor and some of the high priests, who were spell-less due to the black rain. At his side, Helmut commanded still more allies, including a destrachan and what appeared to be various demons. The group moved to the Emperor's defense and discovered the hard way that Helmut's staves granted him great power. The destrachan's sonic attack reduced some of the group's equipment to powder, including their black lantern.

The black lantern.

When things looked worst, Gaerioth used his might to break one of the staves. At that moment, an evil, incorporeal spirit rose up out of the broken staff, greatly angered. The spirit grabbed Helmut and disappeared. At the same time, the force field around the Holy Palace faded, and those outside could come in.

The Emperor bestowed upon the group his deepest thanks, but both he and the adventurers worried about where Helmut had gone. The group came to the inevitable conclusion that somehow Helmut had gained his new devices and allies in Goth Gulgamel. They chose to go back through the portal to that dreaded place to see if they could learn more. Accompanying them was Aoska, one of the city's Twelve Commanders and a half-angel, as evidenced by the unicornlike horn on her forehead.

The interior of Goth Gulgamel was filled with a soul-numbing cold and darkness. Extremely leery, the heroes followed what appeared to be a trail though a portion of the keep and down some stairs into a cavern hewn crudely from the rock of the Spire. In this cavern, they found a number of cavorting, fiery demons, and none other than Ochremeshk. The fiery demigod held Helmut, crucified and dying, as his prisoner. Clearly, Ochremeshk had made some sort of a deal with Helmut, and Helmut had failed him by letting one of the staves be destroyed.

Obviously out of their depth, the heroes turned to diplomacy rather than force of arms. Ochremeshk approached Serai, who had freed the orcish deity while in the Dark Reliquary to aid in his group's escape. The

demigod offered Serai great power in exchange for his devotion and his soul. Serai declined the offer, but not as stringently and utterly as his comrades would have liked. It looked as though the group would get away free, but Zophas insisted that he return to the Holy Emperor with proof that Helmut Itlestein would trouble him and the city no longer. With a wave of his hand, Ochremeshk burned the words, “Helmut Itlestein is dead” onto Zophas’ formerly perfect face.

Choosing to be content with that proof, the group fled Goth Gulgamel. Once through the portal, they dismantled both gateways so they could not be reused (or so they thought...).

A cleric regenerated the wounds on Zophas’ face, although the rest of the group agreed that if you looked at him just right, you could still see the faint scars—an eternal reminder of the penalty one pays for dealing with evil demigods.

The Emperor’s gratitude was vast. Not only did each adventurer receive a ring connoting friendship with the Holy Emperor, they also gained great treasures and the deed to a large house in the Nobles’ Quarter, near the home the Lorencis had purchased for themselves.

The members of the Company of the Black Lantern found magic to restore their symbol, and eventually joined their absent comrades. The rest of the heroes planned to make their way finally into the fabled Seven Jewels of Parnaith.

Next: The Jewels of Parnaith, Part 1.



THE JEWELS OF PARNAITH, PART 1

Having gathered everything needed for a foray into the mysterious Seven Jewels of Parnaith—including the intelligent dagger, Shayla; the Orrery showing the conjunction of the *colordoors* that provide access to the Jewels; and the *illitor*, a mysterious device intended to create specific tones to open the *colordoors*—the adventurers were ready to go. They even had the strange floating orb given them by Raguel in the Dark Reliquary.

The Jewels were, in fact, ethereal islands created by the wife of Danar Rotansin (he would later become the infamous monolithic figure known as the Dread One). Delving into the Jewels were Sister Mara von Witten, Zophas Adhar, Aliya Al-Mari, Canabulum, Serai Lorenci, Shurrin Delano, Gaerioth Shadowhand, and Udalaag, the half-dragon/half-umber hulk the group had “adopted.”

A portal in the ethereal palace of the dragon Storamere led them to the first *colordoor*, which itself was located in a small floating structure high above the city of Ptolus. The Orrery indicated that all of the *colordoors* orbited Jabel Shammar, the castle atop the Spire.

Wearing the strange *illitor*, Shurrin rang a small chime that hung from a brass stand. As he did, a swirling vortex of color appeared. With a little nervous hesitation, the members of the group stepped through the *colordoor*... and found themselves in a small structure exactly like the one they’d left. Except this open edifice (which the group called the “gazebo”) stood on solid ground and had a strange symbol carved on the floor. The sky above was a swirling, silvery gauze of shining lights.

Around them, the adventurers saw only a few trees and a path leading up a hill. A little investigation of their surroundings—thanks to some *fly* spells—allowed Serai and Aliya to determine that they were indeed on an island floating in the middle of ethereal space. They found an ancient, ruined city and a strange crystal henge blocked from the city by a maelstrom of swirling energy. Within the maelstrom stood a stone tower without feature.

Meanwhile, the others determined that the symbol carved on the floor was the Draconic rune “Orr,” meaning the beginning and the end. Exploring the ruined city, they found an obelisk with a plaque that

read, “The Spark of Life, the Spectre of Death. What is important lies in between.” While pondering this statement, the group came across a small boat and a river that cut the ruined city in half. Following the river, Serai saw that it reached the edge of the island and it wrapped around underneath, twisting its orientation as it did (so that it flowed through mid-air).

Eventually, the group found some magical drinks hidden in the hold of the small boat. These drinks allowed them to direct the craft over the edge of the island and wrap around, where they found a magical dock that gave them access to a cavern within the island.

Inside, exploring a strange set of rooms, they came upon a beautiful elvish woman named Daystral. She claimed to know Shayla but only after a confusing exchange did Shurrin realize that Daystral was attempting to use sophisticated illusions to fool everyone and that Shayla was attempting to warn them (but the illusions prevented them from hearing her). Thus they did not fall into Daystral’s trap, but fled instead. As they did, they came upon a pit surrounded by runes. These runes were actually a part of a soul magic spell that forced Canabulum to cast it—another trap! The spell freed a horrible spirit of icy winter named Kartana Roton. During this encounter, a strangely garbed mage named Kor and a bard named Asa showed up and got involved; both were terrified of Kartana Roton and wary of the adventurers as well. In the end, the group wisely joined forces with Kor and Asa to defeat Kartana Roton, imprisoning her back in the pit.

Kor and Asa revealed much about the Jewels of Parnaith to the group. Each Jewel, they said, revolved around a distinct concept. When one has mastered the concept, one can pass on to the next Jewel. Eventually, at the end of this journey, one would attain true enlightenment, and perhaps actual godhood. Otherwise, anyone in the Jewels is trapped forever. (The adventurers did not take this as good news.) Kor and Asa had been here at least 100 years themselves, attempting to proceed along the path. Long, long before they arrived, this Jewel, named Orr, was besieged by terrible forces called the Galchutt. The ruler of this Jewel, a being named Damarcan, sealed himself in the tower and surrounded it with the protective maelstrom.

A divination by Sister Mara suggested that the group needed to go up (“Seek what is above, not what is below”). Kor and Asa told them there was a passageway up to Damarcan’s tower, but that they would face impassable guards and wards. The group scoffed and decided to pass the impassable.

Next Time: We pause in the tale of the Jewels to find out what’s going on with the Company of the Black Lantern.



LIES WITHIN LIES

Before Gaerioth left with the other adventurers to explore the Seven Jewels of Parnaith, he, Sercian, Vexander, and Tellian took a well-deserved rest. They had just dealt a terrible blow to their enemies, the dark elves who had kept Sercian prisoner for so long.

During their break, Sercian was approached by a woman claiming to be the figure they'd once escorted into the Prison for the recovery of her husband. She said she needed help in another matter now. A book, important to her family, was stolen and she wanted it recovered. She offered a very large sum of money for its return. She would not say what the book was, only that it had a lightning bolt on the cover.

The book was stolen, she said, by a crime lord named Aggah-Shan. Aggah-Shan operated a number of gambling dens in the city, some legal, some not. One illegal establishment the group quickly learned of was a tavern called the Cock and Bull in the South Market. This, they discovered, was the most likely place to contact Aggah-Shan, a mysterious figure who rarely met with anyone.

The group did some investigating and learned that the woman was Fransin Nagel, leader of House Nagel. Convinced that the offer was legitimate, the Company went in disguise to the Cock and Bull and cased the place. Sercian (posing as his brother, Serai), managed to speak with Aggah-Shan's lieutenant, Naosh, a half-orc. After more wrangling, he got an "audience" (through a magical mirror) with Aggah-Shan, although he could not see the crime lord clearly.

Hoping to gain some information about the book, draw Aggah-Shan out, and potentially ingratiate himself, "Serai" told him that his new enemies, the Company of the Black Lantern, were after the book. He even told him where they would be later on. The crime lord indicated that he did indeed have the book, and thanked "Serai."

Meanwhile, the rest of the company gambled, gathered information, and tried to find a secret door or some other way into a private area where Aggah-Shan might be. Gaerioth became very tempted to take on a minotaur gladiator in a fighting pit. Eventually, however, they all left so they could wait in ambush for Aggah-Shan or some of his powerful servants to show

up where "Serai" had told the crime lord they'd be. If Aggah-Shan himself didn't show up, at least they could question some of his servants.

But neither Aggah-Shan nor his servants showed. Instead, to the surprise of the company, the crime lord tricked some of his own enemies, the Shuul, into attacking them instead. The Shuul were a secretive organization devoted to order and the old ways—the use of firearms, steam-powered clockwork mechanisms, and so forth. The Company of the Black Lantern, assuming that the Shuul were allies of Aggah-Shan, attacked and defeated them.

What followed was a confusing period during which the company tried to sort things out. Gathering some information, they learned that Aggah-Shan was closely related to the forces of chaos, not order, and thus the conflict with the Shuul must have been a mistake. Tired of all this maneuvering, the Black Lantern elves decided they just needed a way to confront Aggah-Shan directly. Spending the money to get some help with powerful divinations, they learned that he was working on a huge machine. Sercian remembered his brother speaking of a forbidding door with a huge serpent on it in a chaos temple they had raided—behind which, Serai had said, they'd heard the workings of a vast machine. Putting machine noises plus chaos temple together, the group developed a hunch that they could find their new nemesis there.

Gaerioth, however, had to leave to join his friends going to the Jewels. Short one combatant, the group was happy to welcome into their ranks an elf who belonged to the Order the Dawn (the Emperor's personal knights). This elf, Thoreaen Lightbringer, was actually sent by the office of the Emperor to infiltrate the Company of the Black Lantern and keep tabs on the increasingly powerful and somewhat roguish group. Together, they prepared to go to the chaos machine, find Aggah-Shan, and recover the book.

Of course, the whole thing was predicated on a lie. Fransin Nagel never contacted Sercian. That was a falsehood that he and a woman friend of his came up with. A woman whom they both knew the rest of the company would not want to work with. A woman who really wanted to recover the book. A woman Sercian was beginning to fall in love with: Fesamere Balacazar, daughter of Menon Balacazar, the worst of the city's

crime lords—and quite a capable rogue and thief in her own right.

Soon: The Jewels of Parnaith, Part 2



THE JEWELS OF PARNAITH, PART 2

Following Sister Mara's divination, the group—with new allies Kor and Asa—attempted to breach Damarcan's tower from below. They soon discovered why Kor and Asa could never do so before: The path was filled with traps, magical barriers, and iron golems. After a hard-fought battle in which Gaerioth was slain by a golem (but raised by Mara), they reached a chamber that gave access to the tower above.

Entering the tower, Mara, Zophas, Aliya, Canabulum, Shurrin, Serai, Gaerioth, and Udalaag all saw at the center of the main chamber a floating energy sphere. The sphere itself was surrounded by a column of force. Suddenly, however, the silver orb Raguel had given them flared to life, emitting a beam of energy that nullified the force barrier. With the barrier gone, the energy sphere fired a ray of light at each of the characters, striking them in the forehead but causing no harm. But there was one ray too many. The group realized that an invisible intruder was with them! Using a spell to dismiss the invisibility, they found a tall, lean creature with blue skin and a massive greatsword—Damarcan, the ruler of this Jewel! Worse, Zophas could sense the taint of evil about him. Damarcan lunged for the silver orb, but the characters kept it away from him. Finally, thanking them for his release, he teleported away.

Kor and Asa were confused. While they'd never met Damarcan, they knew that Parnaith herself had assigned to watch over this Jewel. The holy woman would never choose someone evil. A search of the tower revealed an answer. In Damarcan's bedchamber, they found a hideous, skin-bound tome titled *The Book of Darkness*. Simply looking at it almost destroyed Sister Mara. The group hotly debated what they should do with the tome. When they realized that Orr was deteriorating and collapsing in on itself, they decided to leave it be. Soon, they hoped, the evil book would be destroyed.

Among Damarcan's things, they also found a brief guide to all seven Jewels of Parnaith:

- **Orr.** The Jewel of beginnings and endings. Ruled by Damarcan.
- **Ond.** The Jewel of the body and physical matter. Ruled by Donrah.
- **Imn.** The Jewel of nonmagical energy. Ruled by Znaam.
- **Av.** The Jewel of the mind. Ruled by Varen.

- **Ath.** The Jewel of the spirit. Ruled by Faranastra the Faithful.
- **Unn.** The Jewel of magical and metaphysical energy. Ruled by Leisarth.
- **Esh.** The Jewel of the divine. Ruler unknown.

The group, along with Kor and Asa, escaped the tower and went to the crystal henge not far away. The henge, Asa told them, was the means to get to the next Jewel. No one could approach it safely without the blessing of Orr, gained when the energy sphere fired its rays at each of them. However, Asa said, that blessing was supposed to come to them when they had achieved enlightenment and understood what Orr stood for, the concept of the beginning and end of all things. He held a deep regret that the silver orb effectively allowed them to cheat, to gain the blessing without enlightenment. Still, they obviously needed to leave Orr soon or be destroyed, so he accompanied them. They stepped into the henge and found a red jewel to place within an empty slot in the *illitor*. Then they disappeared.

They reappeared in a small structure floating high above Ptolus, unseen from the streets below—much like the place where they found the first *colordoor*. Here, they used the *illitor* to open the second *colordoor* to the next Jewel, Ond. (Kor does not accompany them, but instead goes down into Ptolus using a *fly* spell.)

The group members appeared in a cavern, their morale a bit low after realizing they had set the evil Damarcan free (presumably either into Ptolus or into Ond) and were effectively cheating their way through the Jewels of Parnaith thanks to a magic item given to them by the lord of the demons in the Dark Reliquary. Soon thereafter, they were beset by evil elementals and strange incorporeal undead. They learned that, although history held that Ghul, the Skull-King had died in Orr, he actually managed to reach Ond before he was slain. Apparently, Ghul also moved through the Jewels with a silver orb that allowed him to cheat. (This lowered morale among the group members even further.)

Within Ond lay the remains of Ghul. The undead creatures the heroes encountered surrounded a stone obviously twisted and corrupted by evil. They soon ascertained that horrible blight stones formed where his evil essence had fused into this realm of physicality—in other words, in the places where Ghul's blood was

spilled, where his sword broke, where his armor was destroyed, and, finally, where he himself succumbed. Speaking with the inhabitants of Ond—living crystalline structures—the group learned that they would only be welcome if they destroyed the blight stones. They also learned that Damarcan had arrived here shortly before they did.

After horrific battles with more undead and corrupted elementals, the group succeeded in this quest. Thereafter, they met Donrah, a humanoid made of crystal, who showed them into a chamber with a sphere surrounded by a force field similar to the one they saw in Orr. Again, the silver orb suppressed the force field for a brief moment, and rays struck each of the characters. And again, Damarcan waited there, invisible, to partake of the orb's ability to bypass the Jewels' requirement of enlightenment. Damarcan teleported away immediately. The group raced to Ond's exit, an energy whirlpool in a cave that Canabulum discovered. There they placed another jewel (orange this time) within the *illitor*.

Shurrin activated the third *colordoor*, and the group passed into Imn. Most of this ethereal island was dominated by a huge metal tower with strange protrusions, each blasting the other with continual bolts of electricity. The tower had no obvious entrance, and the heroes camped at its base, sure that Damarcan had reached this Jewel ahead of them.

The next day, Serai and Aliya discovered an entrance at the top of the tower. Using spells to fly, the group got inside and met with Znaam, a bloated, flylike creature who told them that Damarcan had warned him that they were coming and instructed him not to help them. Zophas used his charm and diplomacy skills, and the others offered gifts to show that they were not as terrible as made out to be. Thanks to Znaam's greed, they eventually succeeded and gained access to the sphere of Imn. As before, they were blessed by the rays. They took precautions this time, making sure Damarcan was not nearby. Znaam explained that the power this tower generated was the path out of Imn. To depart this Jewel, they would have to climb to the top and jump down into the bolts of electricity. They were obviously a little leery at the thought, but finally believed him.

At the top of the tower, Damarcan made his move! He attacked, trying to get hold of the silver orb—his

goal was no less than to reach the final Jewel and attain divinity. However, Serai put a stop to his plan with a new spell he had just learned: *disintegrate*. As Damarcan's ashes blew away in the ethereal winds, the heroes leaped into the cascading energy, on their way to Av.

Next: In the Jewels of Parnaith Part 3, Mara and Zophas find some unusual fellow Lothianites in an unexpected place. But is it true that Lothian himself has branded the two of them enemies of and traitors to the Church? Plus, what—or who—really waits for them in the seventh Jewel?



THE JEWELS OF PARNAITH, PART 3

Having made their way out of Imn, the Jewel of Energy, Mara, Zophas, Aliya, Canabulum, Shurrin, Gaerioth, Serai, and (of course) Udalaag, passed through the next *colordoor* using the *illitor* into Av.

Av, Jewel of the Mind

They found themselves in a realm of nothingness—utterly blank and devoid of anything other than whiteness as far as they could see. They pressed on to investigate this place and hopefully find an exit. What they discovered was a strange hole ripped in the fabric of space, a flaw in the Jewel. Through it, they spied a strange ruin, which Gaerioth recognized from his distant homeland of Kem. Serai experimented by casting a spell through the hole and caused the hole to become slightly larger.

The group pressed on into the nothingness.

Eventually, they found something else in the white void. The blank space gave way to a verdant wilderness teeming with life. Within this wilderness stood a wooden palisade fort flying banners that bore the symbol of Lothian. Strange jackal-headed men defended the fort. Mara and Zophas remembered an obscure bit of scripture from the *Books of Lothian* that spoke of the time after the god rose from the dead. During this time, he counseled a tribe of jackal-like humanoids called sibeccai, and they took his teachings to heart.

However, as soon as the party arrived at the gates, the sibeccai attacked them! Lothian himself had foretold their coming, they said, and bade them destroy these unholy visitors. The adventurers engaged a number of the creatures, including Nalsek the Speaker, a seemingly insane cleric. After a bloody battle, the group is captured and taken to a small cell filled with anti-magic. Only Shurrin escaped.

The captives demanded to see Varen, whom they knew to be the ruler of Av. Finally, someone arrived to see them: It wasn't Varen, but a sibeccai named Savan the Dreamer. Savan led the local sibeccai by virtue of the dreams he has, apparently sent by Lothian. Varen was dead, he told them.

Aliya sensed that Savan was not what he seemed. When pressed, he admitted that he was not a sibeccai, but a being called an arcanaloth. He said he had

been trapped in the world since its creation and wanted out. He had spent his entire life in the world fomenting strife, such as the magical wars in Kem that inadvertently created the rift that sent him here. He found the sibeccai to be easily manipulated through the insane Nalsek. He has seen many others pass through this Jewel over the millennia (creatures do not age in the Jewels of Parnaith), some of whom would go on to return to the world as gods. But Savan managed to get something of value and power from each of them as they passed by.

Much to the dismay of some of the others, Gaerioth offered Savan the location of the *Book of Darkness* in exchange for their freedom. Savan accepted. Meanwhile, however, outside the fort, Shurrin met a sibeccai named Malteris the Heretic, who rejected Savan and his “words of Lothian.” Malteris helped Shurrin sneak into the fortress to free his friends.

A terrible battle ensued, Savan disappeared, and the adventurers (and Malteris) fled down a sealed shaft that led below the fortress and back into the white void. The sibeccai refused to enter the void, and the group was safe.

While resting here, the heroes spent a great deal of time focusing on the nature of this strange place. They realized that Av, the Jewel of the Mind, was shaped and controlled by subconscious (and sometimes conscious) thought. With this realization, they achieved enlightenment and actually mastered the Jewel, not needing the silver orb to “cheat” as they had in the others.

Using their mastery of this concept, they focused their minds jointly on finding the “key” to the Jewel. A sphere of energy appeared and fired beams of light at them, as in the other Jewels.

Before leaving, they summoned an astral deva to go to Nalsek and see if he could be healed of his madness. With Savan gone, perhaps the sibeccai could return to the right path, they reasoned: Their faith was strong, just misplaced. In exchange for a powerful sword Canabulum had found in a previous Jewel, the deva agreed to see what could be done for Nalsek, then return Gaerioth to Ptolus. Believing that the trip through the Jewels of Parnaith was not the right path for him after all, the monk desired to return to his friends in the Company of the Black Lantern.

While in Av, Mara had an odd dream about a lost elven City of Dreams called Dreta Phantas. A strange creature/structure there told her: “We are your only protection in the coming storm. To get here there are three beings who each have something you need: the Dreamer, the Dreamspeaker, and the Dreamwalker.” Upon telling her companions of the dream, they all decided that the Dreamer was Savan—now long gone, probably after the *Book of Darkness*—and the Dreamspeaker was Mara, but they did not know who the Dreamwalker was. Ironically, even as they wondered, the Company of the Black Lantern knew all too well the identity of the Dreamwalker... but that’s another story.

Ath, Jewel of the Spirit

The next Jewel was Ath, Jewel of the Spirit. The group members appeared there amid a terrible snowstorm. They attempted to make their way through it and but were attacked by a white dragon and an ice devil. After defeating these foes, they discovered a keep run by the Order of the Steadfast Heart, whose members claimed to be followers of the Way. They had all taken an oath to protect the few remaining inhabitants of the Jewel from the servants of the winter harridan who had slain the jewel’s ruler, Faranastra the Faithful. The winter harridan herself served the Galchutt, the mighty creatures who besieged the Jewels of Parnaith long ago. Although the Galchutt were long gone from here, the harridan remained. Having encountered a harridan named Kartana Roton in the first Jewel, the heroes knew how powerful they were.

They offered to use their power to bring Faranastra back from the dead. Amazed by such power and willingness to help, two members of the order swore a new oath to follow the adventurers and aid and protect them. Their names were Amlond and Imuit.

With these new companions, the party trekked through ice and snow to reach the tomb of Faranastra. Of course, it was well guarded by icy demons and frost giants—sent by the harridan to keep anyone from doing just what the heroes planned! After the group overcame the guardians, they succeeded in raising Faranastra from the dead.

Faranastra thanked them and gave assurances that, now that the winter harridan could not take her by surprise, she could be victorious over the invader. She then showed them the key and exit from the Jewel, and

the group once again “cheated” its way out with the silver orb, taking Amlond and Imuit with them.

Unn, Jewel of Magic

Unn was the sixth Jewel, the Jewel of Magic. Here, the group found a comfortable, wooded island with many towers. Each, the heroes soon learned, was the home of either one of the many sorcerous offspring of Leisarth, the realm’s original ruler, or an individual hoping to gain enlightenment and pass into the final Jewel.

After encountering much treachery from the offspring of Leisarth, they learned that the next and last Jewel, Esh, was a direct conduit to the Elder Gods. To get there, one must find an obelisk hidden from view. Scouting in the air using a *fly* spell, Aliya found the obelisk on a small floating island high above Unn. There, they used the orb to activate the obelisk, which was made entirely of Vallis moonstone. This provided them with the key and the exit.

Esh, the Jewel of Divinity

Finally, after long adventures, the group passed through the last *colordoor* into Esh, the Jewel of Divinity. Esh appeared to be a wide crater, with 1,500-foot-tall walls of sheer rock. Along the walls stood statues of the Elder Gods, rising 1,500 feet above them as well. After a terrifying encounter with the spawn of Nathrak, the Elder God of Destruction (in which Amlond was destroyed), the group flew out of the crater and found that it was merely a small hole in a much, much larger statue of another god, whom they took to be Praemus, the Creator.

At the top of the statue, they encountered a small boy who spoke in a strangely fatherly tone. He seemed to expect them. With a wave of his hand, the silver orb flew to him, and he looked into it. He said, “Your parents wish to speak to you,” and flung the orb into the crater, where it fell to the feet of the statues of the Elder Gods. He told the group, “You were right to trust him,” referring of course to Raguel, who’d given them the orb, “even though it appeared you should not. It got you here in time.”

The boy explained that the heroes’ home, the world of Praemal, was a prison created to trap the Galchutt and keep them from getting at the rest of the multiverse. Nothing that came into the world could ever leave, and the people—including the adventurers—were all wardens of this prison. The Creator had given them

all power with which to fight the evil machinations of the Galchutt, he said... and with a touch of the small boy's hand, a mystical rune suddenly appeared on the face or hand of each hero. All people of the world were runechildren, he explained.

He told them that great changes were coming. After a 20,000-year absence, the Vallis moon was returning, and along with it the Lords of the Seven Chains. These chains were the physical representations of the forces that bound the Galchutt to Praemal and kept the world together. These terrible lords of chaos sought to break the chains and thus destroy the world to enact their escape.

He assured the heroes that all was not lost, however. Many safeguards existed. He urged them to seek out the city of Dreta Phantas, where already the ancient elves were making preparations. He told them of an artifact called the *diadem* that could protect them from the power of the Galchutt, but cautioned that Danar Rotansin (who would become the Dread One) had mistakenly considered it an evil bane and hidden it away long ago. The boy also promised them that the Elder Gods were returning as well and could aid them in their struggle.

Lastly, Aliya asked the boy about Calista, recently freed from the Dark Reliquary. For all her life she had felt a connection with this woman but didn't know why. The boy told her that Calista was her cousin. The demons would not have held her prisoner for so long unless she had some purpose or knowledge vital to them—and perhaps to everything.

Then Esh faded, and the adventurers found themselves back in Ptolus, with a shining new green moon in the sky overhead....

Next: Back to the saga of the Black Lantern, the chaos machine, and not one but two liches!



A TALE OF TWO LICHES

Vexander, Sercian, Tellian, and Thoreaen—the current roster of the Company of the Black Lantern—needed to find a criminal in Ptolus named Aggah-Shan, who had stolen an important book they were hired to recover. Aggah-Shan operated a number of illegal casinos in the city, all of which featured a new game called Mrathrach. Their investigations uncovered the fact that the game was magically sapping chaotic energies each time it was played and directing them to some terrible machine hidden beneath the city. Using clues garnered from their adventuring comrades, they learned the location of the machine and went to confront Aggah-Shan directly.

Of Kython and Aggah-Shan

When the elves arrived at the machine's subterranean location, it was more than they'd suspected. The huge and terrible device was hundreds of feet tall, surrounded by scaffolding upon which kython, the creatures of chaos created by the Galchutt, maintained all the machine's complex functions. The machine, an awesome expression of chaositech, was an abomination that had to be destroyed—but how? The group moved in to attack, hoping to inflict some damage with spells.

Much to their surprise, however, they found that the machine absorbed magic as well, using its energy for its own dire (and still unknown) purposes. The kython repelled the company's attacks, and the party fled.

Gathering its strength, the Company of the Black Lantern returned to attack the machine and its guardians again. This time, they found more success and slew a number of the kython. Knowing a bit about machines Sercian entered the interior of the device itself and sought a way to disable it from within. However, the machine had more kython guardians inside. Again the company had to retreat after suffering terrible losses, but not before making two discoveries. First, the adventurers got far enough to see that a serpentine being resided within the machine, devouring all the energies it absorbed. (The characters did not know it, but this was Mrathrach, one of the Vested of the Galchutt, who had been slain 20,000 years earlier. The kython looked upon him as a patron and sought to bring him back to life. Secondly, they saw Aggah-Shan himself at the bottom of the cave with the machine, and discovered that he was a lich working directly with the kython.

Worse, however, Aggah-Shan saw them and gained enough information to track them. As they rested in their favorite inn, Iridithil's Home, Aggah-Shan himself teleported in and attacked. Fortunately for the company, their old friends Chanticleer and Quilambril were also at the inn at the time. With their combined forces, they defeated the lich, after a costly battle. But every lich had a phylactery, they knew; they would have to find it in order to destroy their foe permanently. Plus, even destroying him still did not get them the mysterious book they sought.

The only way to locate the book would be to find Aggah-Shan's real lair (and thus, probably his phylactery as well). At this point, Sercian brought his new friend and lover, Fesamere Balacazar, into the picture (although he did not reveal her/their deception with regard to the book). She suggested that they go to Aggah-Shan's most exclusive casino and high-class bordello: the White House in Oldtown. Much as they had done before, they infiltrated the casino posing as patrons. After much searching and not a little subterfuge, they found a secret area beneath the casino. Holding off guards and guardian monsters with a *wall of force*, they explored this area and found a terrible thronelike chair. A careful examination revealed that it was trapped and magical. They determined that the chair would transport anyone sitting in it somewhere (Aggah-Shan's inner sanctum?) but in so doing it would produce spikes and razorlike blades to slice the person to ribbons. Unless, of course, that person were nothing but a skeleton (like, say, a lich), in which case the perfectly spaced blades and spikes would inflict no harm.

Impetuous as always, Sercian leaped into the chair. Knowing where each spike and blade would go, he managed to avoid some of the worst of the damage, but was still terribly mauled as the throne took him to where Aggah-Shan kept not only his phylactery (which Sercian destroyed), but the book and other treasures. Unfortunately, the elf discovered that the only way out of there was a return trip in the throne. He didn't survive the trip back, but his friends managed to escape with his body and return him to life in short order. In the fracas, the company learned that it was Fesamere who was after the book all along, but she paid them as promised, so ultimately no one was entirely unhappy. But they never did learn what the book was.

Undead Like Me

After a good rest, the company learned that an old enemy had resurfaced: the dark elf Vastare, who had once impersonated Sercian. Apparently, the dark elves were exploring the areas beneath the city near the Prison. So, the group returned to their old haunts and found the trail of their enemies, but not the dark elves themselves. Instead, they encountered the entity that they had learned about long ago, one who had built this area of the dungeon looking for a way to get at the *Black Grail*, an evil artifact of great power.

The entity was Sokalahn. He was also a lich, but no ordinary one. He was an undead half-demon, far more powerful than even Aggah-Shan. Sokalahn had awoken after years of sleep, disturbed by all the activity around his home. Apparently, in his quest to get at the *Black Grail*, he had managed to draw on the power of another ancient artifact, called the *Entropy Sphere*, to weaken the protections around the vaults that held the grail (and thus creating an unstable magical zone called the Conflagration). These vaults were created in ancient days to hold evil artifacts and terrible curses, keeping them away from the world. The vaults were called the Banewarrens and Danar, the saint who created them, was eventually corrupted by the evil therein. He became the entity known as the Dread One, Eslathagos Malkith, and it was he who created the fortress Jabel Shammar at the top of the Spire that rose above Ptolus.

The group assumed they had to get past Sokalahn to find a way into the Banewarrens to follow the dark elves. They were mistaken in this belief, and it cost them dearly. They suffered a terrible defeat at his hands and were forced to teleport away, leaving Thoreaen behind. It was around this time that Gaerioth returned from his aborted attempt at exploring the Jewels of Parnait, so he reinforced them when they went back down. Sercian, however, chose not to accompany the group.

When they returned to Sokalahn's lair, they found a terrible sight, a portent and warning they did not heed: Thoreaen had been killed and reanimated as an undead creature. He was entwined in a web of razorwire, the hilt of his holy sword imbedded in his head. The undead paladin was forced to renounce and curse the name of his deity, Lothian, over and over again. Horrified and angered, the group went after Sokalahn again.

This time, the lich slew them all (except Sercian, of course) and brought them back to a semblance of life as vampires. In an ironic turn, he commanded them, as well as an undead dwarven defender he had slain years earlier, to go into the Banewarrens and kill the dark elves that had already entered. Looking for the *Black Grail*, the dark elves had stolen a key from his vaults that allowed them passage into the Banewarrens. Sokalahn no longer desired the artifact, but he did not want to see it in the hands of anyone else, either.

Utilizing the unstable magical zone known as the Conflagration, through which no living being can pass, Sokalahn transported the undead Company of the Black Lantern into the Banewarrens. They obeyed his commands well and killed most (but not all) of the dark elves in the warrens, as well as their demonic and monstrous allies.

Meanwhile, Sercian enlisted the aid of the powerful priests of Gaen to help him find his friends. They learned of the company's fate, and entered the Banewarrens (now unsealed by the efforts of the dark elves) to help. The clerics and paladin of Gaen fought against the vampires and managed to subdue them. Once back in the city, they brought the dead members of the company back to life, as well as their new Grailwarden dwarf ally, Dazlo.

Next: Barbarians invade. Magic ends. Everything gets worse.



THIS IS THE WAY THE WORLD (OR AT LEAST THE CITY) ENDS

Seers had been speaking foreboding omens for a long time. The heroes had been hearing about things like “the return of the Vallis moon,” and “the Night of Dissolution” for some time.

Rumors that the barbarians of the far east had become restless again had been circulating for months. It was these same barbarian tribes that had, just a few years earlier, sacked the city of Tarsis and in many ways brought the Tarsisan Empire (of which Ptolus was a distant part) to an end. Recently, however, the Emperor of the Church—having fled to Ptolus when Tarsis fell—had not only declared that he was now both the secular Emperor and the Holy Emperor, but that Ptolus was the new capital of the Empire.

So now the barbarians marched on Ptolus.

Days before the invasion, a mysterious green light appeared in the night sky, growing stronger each night. Seers and diviners proclaimed it a horrible omen, but truth be told, no one knew exactly what to make of it. Meanwhile, the people of Ptolus prepared for a barbarian invasion. Some met the thought of it with fear, but most with excitement. Despite the barbarians’ past victories, the people of Ptolus had faith in two things: the Commissar and his battery of powerful cannons, and the mages of the Inverted Pyramid, the most powerful and renowned arcanists’ guild in the world.

In fact, on the day the barbarian armies reached the gate, the people of Ptolus gathered atop tall buildings and even the city wall to watch the spectacle. They waved flags and drank ale and munched on bread and cheese, expecting a good show. (Fesamere Balacazar invited the members of the Company of the Black Lantern to join her where she watched on the wall, along with her sister Maystra (mother of “The Boy Who Could Sing”) and her brother Malkeen.)

While the Commissar’s positioning of his cannons was impressive, when the Inverted Pyramid mages showed up with their flying battle barges, each filled with wizards and sorcerers ready for battle, it was an incredible sight. Amid cheers, the mages flew off to deal with the barbarian horde. Without hesitation, the wizards called down *meteor swarms*, *fireballs*, *lightning bolts*, and more upon the ranks of the invaders. The barbarians broke and scattered. The cityfolk cheered!

And then, the mysterious green light in the sky grew so bright that you could see it even during the day. Although few knew it yet, this was the Vallis moon, a third moon that had been missing for almost 20,000 years. The Vallis moon held upon it the keystone of the world, the source of that which bound everything together—the mystical Seven Chains. The source of all magic, it controlled the flow of eldritch power in the same way that the other moons dictated the tides. In the incredibly distant past, the Galchutt had almost destroyed the world by breaking the Seven Chains, but the Elder Gods and a few mythic heroes had thrust the moon away and thus ensured that the Galchutt would be thwarted forever. Or, at least, for what seemed like forever—approximately 20,000 years.

But forever finally came to an end. The Vallis moon had returned. Its sudden influence on the flow of magic disrupted that flow and brought it to a halt.

Magic stopped working all across the world. And the Galchutt began to awaken.

Needless to say, there were screams of horror and shock as the Inverted Pyramid’s battle barges came crashing down, and the most powerful wizards and sorcerers in the city died a terrible, fiery death, all at once.

Needless to say, the magical protections covering Malkeen Balacazar’s vampire bodyguard failed and he was caught out in the middle of the afternoon, on top of the city wall, on a cloudless day. He exploded in flame.

Needless to say, the people of the city panicked and fled from the walls. But not everyone lost their composure. A few kept their wits long enough to exploit the situation. Someone, for example, used the confusion and the lack of magical protection (and lack of the magical ability to counter poison) to put a poisoned dagger in the back of Malkeen even as the family (and the Company of the Black Lantern) fled to a Balacazar safehouse.

Needless to say, without magic, the Seven Jewels of Parnaith—already decaying and disintegrating, their time now passed—winked out of existence. This event brought the other heroes, now called the Runewardens, back into the world and into the chaos that presented itself.

Next Time: ????



ONCE MORE, AGAINST CHAOS!

The Runewardens arrived back in Ptolus with an idea of what needed to be done. They had to reach Dreta Phantas, the Dreaming City, and stop the forces of the Galchutt from bringing on the Night of Dissolution. They met up with the Company of the Black Lantern at Rosegate House, the manor house granted them by the Emperor, and discussed what they had discovered in the Seven Jewels of Parnaith.

No magic functioned in Ptolus, and the city was degenerating into chaos. Some of the members of either group did what they could to help. Rumors spread of monstrous creatures rising up from beneath the streets, and rat men armed with terrifying chaositech weapons appearing in places throughout the city where no rat man would have dared to go before.

Meanwhile, an army was still outside the gates, waiting to attack. To a lesser degree, the barbarians may have been experiencing the same surprise and disorientation that occurred within the city, as their priests and shamans were unable to call upon magic to aid them.

It seemed as though the end of the world—the Night of Dissolution—was already here.

Then Zophas was contacted by his superior in the Knights of the Pale, Dierna Hillerchaun. She explained that she had learned, in her position as one of the Twelve Commanders of the city, that the chaos cults seemingly had all joined together. The cultists believed that magic would soon return and, when it did, they would conduct a ritual that would spell disaster for the city. Putting two and two together, Dierna and Zophas realized that this was it. With the barbarians ready to attack at any moment, the Commissar and the Twelve Commanders couldn't afford to divert any attention away, but she knew that someone had to do something.

Dierna further explained that this ritual of chaos was being masterminded by a figure known as Shigmaa Wuntad, who apparently had some important prisoners to sacrifice as part of the ceremony. The group already knew where Shigmaa Wuntad was: under the Temple of the Fifty-Three Gods of Chance, a church devoted to luck, fortune and chaos. Until now, they had thought the place harmless.

Fifty-Three Gods of Chance

Both groups assembled and went to the Temple District. By the time they arrived at the Temple of the Fifty-Three Gods of Chance, magic had once again returned. The hidden underground chambers beneath the temple were guarded by a powerful demon—a glabrezu. But this demon was one that some of them had encountered before. Tellian had made a deal with it when the Company of the Black Lantern encountered the glabrezu in the Dark Elf fortress of Ul-Drakkan. The demon called in Tellian's debt, but the cleric refused to pay up. A fierce battle ensued, and the heroes emerged victorious.

Proceeding farther into the temple, they found a huge sacrificial chamber with an elaborate altar. Wuntad stood atop what looked like a huge, bloody claw: It was the dismembered claw of an actual Galchutt. It turned out that long ago, in the distant, misty past, the Galchutt turned on one of their own and slaughtered him. They left the remnants of his blood and flesh for their servants to consume at the proper time to awaken and invigorate the rest of the godlike beings.

Without hesitation, the group attacked. To get closer, they fought through a line of rat man musketeers and a number of rabid clerics and their flesh golem creations. Then more clerics used a massive magical/chaositech contraption to draw power from a few humans and elves held in some kind of stasis (some of the group recognized these captives as sorcerers formerly held within Mahdath's Asylum). The energy siphoned from the prisoners was focused into the altar, where four young children waited in chains to be sacrificed. While some of the group struggled with a half-demon warrior and a massive kython warmaster, Aliya and Zophas used a *dimension door* to get at the hideous, mutated abomination that was Wuntad. Meanwhile, Canabulum and Serai made their way to the altar. Canabulum destroyed the chaositech energy machine, and Serai teleported each of the children, one by one, back to his house in the Nobles' Quarter.

Dazlo the dwarf fell to the power of the kython but was avenged by Tellian, Vexander, , and Gaerioth. Mara and Sercian dealt with the remaining clerics, and Zophas and Aliya, covered in the godsblood of the dead Galchutt, defeated Wuntad himself.

But the surprises were not over. Once they had recovered from the battle, a quick search of the nearby

rooms uncovered a prison where the “important” prisoners held by the chaos cult waited. The characters had believed that the prisoners Dierna’s informants mentioned were the captive sorcerers and children. However, the “important” prisoners were none other than King Olgas of the eastern barbarian tribes, his shaman, and two bodyguards. The cultists had engineered the whole barbarian invasion! The amassed army outside the gate was here not for conquest, but to ensure the return of the captive king.

Olgas was angry, but grateful to the heroes, believing that they had come here intending to free him. He wanted to go to his people, and the group could fulfill that request with greater speed than even he had thought. Serai and Zophas teleported with the king and his men to the front rank of the barbarian horde.

It took a great deal of diplomacy and well-crafted words—mostly on the silver-tongued Zophas’ part—to convince the barbarians that not only was this actually their king (and not a “city-wizard’s trick”) but that the perpetrators of the crime were not acting on behalf of the city at all. Eventually, the barbarians were satisfied, and Olgas commanded them to withdraw.

The city was saved, and—with the cultists’ ceremony interrupted—so was the world. But the blow to the forces of chaos was only a setback, not a permanent defeat. To stop (not merely postpone) the Night of Dissolution, the heroes still needed to reach Dreta Phantas. And to do so, they would have to locate the enigmatic race known as the Urthon Aedar. They also had to find a mysterious *diadem* that would help protect against the forces of chaos. Splitting up once again, the Runewardens went off in search of the Urthon Aedar, and the members of the Company of the Black Lantern resigned themselves to seeking the *diadem* in the dreaded Banewarrens.

Next: The Runewardens find the means of reaching the Urthon Aedar with the help of none other than the Iron Mage.



COUNCILS AND PLANS

The Runewardens found themselves summoned to appear before the Commissar and the Twelve Commanders in the fortress of Dalenguard. The Twelve Commanders were the Commissar's special advisory council, made up of a dozen of the most powerful and influential people in the city. The Commanders were in no way related to the City Council, which usually concerned itself more with mundane matters; the Twelve Commanders specifically dealt with strange and uniquely Ptolus matters: powerful magic, horrible monsters, the actions of high-level characters, and so forth. Far from being mere advisors, the Commanders were often called upon to face some of these threats directly on behalf of the city.

The Commissar bade the Runewardens to give a report of everything that had happened regarding the barbarian incursion. He personally thanked them for everything they'd done, and the Twelve Commanders exchanged information with them about the forces of chaos and the tide of evil clearly rising in the city. The heroes said they had been told to find the ancient elven city of Dreta Phantas and suspected that the Urthon Aedar could help them do so. The Commissar called the Urthon Aedar—also known as the Wandering Judges—untrustworthy vigilantes whose true motives were unknown. In the middle of the conversation, a figure suddenly appeared in the meeting hall within Dalenguard. It was the Iron Mage.

The Iron Mage, with whom the group had once briefly had distant contact, was reputedly the most powerful wizard in the world. He defied the conventional appearance of a wizard in that he was clad from head to toe in armor, and each piece of the armor appeared to have come from a different suit or harness. Rumor had it that the mage had taken a piece from no less than 13 different suits of artifact-level magic armor and wore them all, somehow gaining the powers of each suit.

The Commanders displayed disdain and even fear of the mage, but he didn't speak with them—he only addressed the Runewardens. If they wanted to find out more about the Urthon Aedar, he said, they should speak to a man named Dharrim Boch, who worked with a group called the Fate Weavers.

After the meeting, Serai went to his home, where he had taken the children he had rescued from the chaos

temple. These were all children of the city who bore runes. One was even the nephew of noted crime lord Menon Balacazar. Much to the surprise (and unease) of his companions, Serai decided that the children would stay with him for safekeeping.

The group eventually found Dharrim Boch at the headquarters of the Fate Weavers in the Rivergate District. Dharrim was a human who wore the strange baroque armor of the Urthon Aedar. He told the heroes that he got the armor when he came upon and helped a dying Urthon Aedar named Nim Saravor. He explained that the Urthon Aedar were, in fact, elder elves, long thought gone from the world. They could see into the future, he told them, and so the judgments and reprisals they made on others—which could be perceived as unfounded vigilantism at best—were in fact based on acts that the Urthon Aedar knew the person would commit.

The only way to reach them was via the Entropy Sphere, a magical construct created by Eslathagos Malkith, the Dread One, now housed within the Spire. The sphere was a huge whirling ball of pure chaos called into being by six magical gates called the Gates of Delirium. They drew power from otherworldly realms placed equidistant apart. (The half-demon lich Sokalahn used a spell long ago to destroy one of the gates, making the sphere unstable now. The backlash of the resulting energy blast allowed him to breach the legendary Banewarrens.)

To reach the Entropy Sphere, the group learned they must enter Goth Gulgamel, a horrible place they had visited before, during the black rain. At least they knew how to get inside the fortress: through the gate in the temple of the Watcher of the Skies, once run by Helmut Itlestein. Unfortunately, when Serai, Aliya, and Shurrin went to find the gate, they discovered it gone—officials from the Church had taken the pieces away.

A little investigation revealed that the gate was now stored within the Holy Palace. Meanwhile, the group heard the news that the Holy Emperor had led an army from far-off Tarsis against the retreating barbarian horde. There was great bloodshed in the clash. Almost immediately the Commissar decreed that Holy Emperor Rehoboth was not acting in the best interests of the Empire and forbade Rehoboth from re-entering Ptolus.

When the heroes arrived at the Holy Palace, they found it under siege again, this time by Lord Khatru under the authority of the Commissar. Everyone inside was to be arrested. *Now* how are they going to get the gate?

Next: Goth Gulgamel and the Dreaming City



THROUGH THE DARKNESS INTO DREAM

Holy Emperor Rehoboth was no longer welcome in Ptolus. By order of the Commissar, troops under the command of Lord Khattru had surrounded the Holy Palace. But the Runewardens needed to get inside, where they hoped to find a collapsible magical portal that had been confiscated by the forces of the Church—a portal that would lead them into Goth Gulgamel, the ancient fortress of Ghul, the Half God.

Sister Mara and Zophas suggested to Lord Khattru that they could go inside and help mediate a truce. The group got in and found that the Emperor and his retinue were leaving the city. Figuring that this was for the best, the group instead turned toward the matter at hand and looked through the vaults for the pieces of the magical gate. They were gone! Further investigation revealed that Satorranis, one of the holy mages who worked in the vaults safekeeping the dangerous stored materials, had not been seen for a few weeks. Following a hunch, they asked for his address and left to find him.

Sure enough, as the heroes approached the wizard's home in the north part of Oldtown, summoned monsters attacked them on the street. They fought their way inside, found Satorranis, and slew him. From his apprentice, they discovered that the mage had suddenly started acting very strangely; he had kept the lad tied up in the house for the last few days while he attempted to reassemble the pieces of the gate.

Zophas and Serai were able to determine that Satorranis was a victim of the Soulriders, a mysterious group that somehow was able to take over and “ride” the souls of others, controlling all their actions, thoughts, and emotions. They had briefly run afoul of these beings before but never understood their motivations. Worse yet, they wondered, how do you fight such thing?

Doing what they needed to secure Satorranis' home, Serai, Shurrin, Mara, Zophas, Aliya, Canabulum, Udalaag, and the Fate Weaver Dharim Boch all went through the reactivated gate.

The gate they used had been created by Helmut Itlestein, who had learned to build it from the intelligent battlestaves of Ghul that he had recovered. Helmut had used the staves to seal the Holy Palace

in an impenetrable force field on the day of the black rain, then used the gate to get to Goth Gulgamel, where another gate had been set up to take him through the palace. The magic of the gates, it seemed, could bypass any barriers, no matter how powerful, as long as one end of the trip was in Goth Gulgamel. Thus, despite the fact that the citadel of Ghul was well sealed from intrusion, the group was able to gain access for the second time.

Goth Gulgamel

Passing through the gate, Aliya discovered that they were being scried by the marilith Drusii, whom they had recently confirmed was working directly for a powerful demoness called Lilith (lover and companion to Raguel). There was little they could do about that now, though.

Once inside the fortress, they encountered some massive, shadowy beings that spoke to them. They shadowy things revealed themselves to be the Soulriders and said they didn't want to fight the Runewardens if they did not have to. The Soulriders seemed to know a lot about what the heroes had discovered and, in fact, had recently decided to help them rather than hinder them (or, they implied, to deal with the situation themselves). These creatures seemed as worried about the coming Night of Dissolution as the Runewardens themselves. The Soulriders gave the adventurers directions for getting through the castle most expediently and entering the Spire itself, where the Gates of Delirium created and maintained the Entropy Sphere. Not fully trusting them, the heroes used their own spells to divine the best way—although it seemed their mysterious benefactors were telling the truth.

The Soulriders warned the group of the Chamber of Burning Souls, and beyond it the Ageless Titan. The Chamber of Burning Souls was a hellish place of torment for victims of Ghul trapped hundreds of years ago. After dealing with its evil guardians, they encountered undead Cthorn, a race so evil it had been wiped out generations ago in the war against Ghul.

They persevered and made their way into a vast chamber of blackness. Crossing walkways of skulls that seemed suspended in an eternal, dark void, they fought against rhodintor: goat-headed demons that, like the kython, had been created by the Galchutt thousands of years ago. In the center of the chamber stood the Ageless Titan, a mummified undead being 30 feet tall.

Rather than fight him, the group was able to parlay with the titan. They impressed him with the fact that they had been through the Seven Jewels of Parnait, and Shurrin granted him a *bag of holding* filled with various magic items the group had gathered over the last few months that were too evil for them to use. The titan accepted the offering and caused the skull of an impossibly huge dragon to open and grant them access into the interior of the Spire and the chamber of the Entropy Sphere.

The Entropy Sphere was as bizarre as they had been told—a mass of congealed chaos brought into being at the confluence of six portals called the Gates of Delirium. And, just as they had heard, one of the portals was gone, destabilizing the sphere and causing the laws of physics and magic to alter without warning in areas around it called Pits of Insanity.

They were soon greeted by an Urthon Aedar named Baenarum, who was not at all surprised to see them. They did not even need to explain who they were. With his guidance, they entered the Entropy Sphere.

Dreta Phantas

This passage brought them at long last to Dreta Phantas—the Dreaming City, the Stolen City, and the Soul of the World. This elven creation of graceful spires and golden domes, built thousands of years ago, was the seat of power of the Dream King, the Warden of the Worldsoul. When the Elder Gods and the ancient heroes who served them long ago stopped the Galchutt from destroying the Seven Chains that held the world together, they cast the Vallis moon (which held the Seven Chains) far into the stars and gave the Soul of the World to the first of the Dream Kings. But through sorcery unimagined today, the dark elves stole Dreta Phantas and hid it away deep under the earth.

Now the line of the Dream Kings was gone. The Elder Elves within the city held off the dark elves for generations, using the magic of the Hexamon : a group of elves who had committed their own spirits into the very substance of the city, taking the form of a giant six-sided obelisk. Dreta Phantas was held in a state of eternal magical siege.

And even as the heroes arrived, the dark elves prepared for a final assault. With the help of someone called the “Architect,” the dark elves of House Urganth were using the energy of a dead god (an elvish god of light

named Ardaen) to power something they called the *Dayslayer*, a freshly forged lance of artifact-level power. The *Dayslayer* would kill the sun and plunge the world into eternal night. Then, with the power it absorbed from the sun’s soul, the dark elves could break through the protections around Dreta Phantas. The Urthon Aedar were about to launch a counterassault on Sinistar, the dark elf fortress where the Architect put the finishing touches on the *Dayslayer*. After speaking with the Hexamon, the Runewardens offered to go as well.

Serai suggested that, to help them in their quest, they get the *Eye of Ardaen*, a relic of the dead god that he used with the Company of the Black Lantern against dark elves once before (plus, there was the appeal of the irony that they would use the might of Ardaen against those who would misuse the might of Ardaen). The *Eye* was in the possession of the Clerics of Gaen in the city. Baenarum said getting it would be no problem and left, returning shortly thereafter with the *Eye*. The group then realized why the Urthon Aedar had such mysterious and fearful reputations—they imagined what the people in the Temple District must have thought when an enigmatic armored figure showed up, broke into the temple, ignored any wards or safeguards, and took the artifact without a word of explanation or a bit of subterfuge.

Sinistar

Sinistar was a vast subterranean citadel built suspended over a huge natural lava flow. The Urthon Aedar and the heroes teleported to it and immediately began fighting dark elves and demons. The *Dayslayer* itself was guarded by a half-fiendish deep dragon that the PCs managed to best in a titanic struggle. The Architect, it turns out, was a Galchutt agent (a mind flayer) who had been manipulating the dark elves. Canabulum turned him to stone. The heroes destroyed the *Dayslayer* and returned to Dreta Phantas carrying the petrified Architect.

After much celebration, the Hexamon told the heroes that the only way to restore the city to the surface—which certainly would stave off the Night of Dissolution, at least for a time—would be to recover the stolen Dreaming Stone and the Cask of Frozen Dreams. This cask held every dream ever dreamed, both waking and not; the stone represented every dream still to be dreamt. Moreover, the cask and stone, they learned, could restore the memories of Aliya’s

cousin Calista, who seemed to possess important but unattainable knowledge—at least that's what the group learned in the Seventh Jewel of Parnaith.

The cask and stone were stolen when the city itself was wrenched into the underworld by a demonic creature who seemed to be behind the event in the first place. This figure was not unknown to the Runewardens—it was the arcanaloth Savan. All was coming to pass just as Mara had seen in a dream long before. Savan was the Dreamer, she was the Dreamspeaker, and Sokalahn the half-fiend lich was somehow the Dreamwalker.

But there were schemes within schemes afoot. An object in the possession of the petrified Architect activated when it was brought into Dreta Phantas, calling upon carefully structured contingencies. It opened a portal through the city's defenses straight into the heart of Dreta Phantas, where the statuelike mind flayer stood. Kython came through first, and then a traitorous Urthon Aedar named Kohath the Betrayer, who had turned against his people long ago. Kohath called through the gate to usher in a creature called a shoggoth. Finally, an entity known only as the Crawling Chaos stepped through, announcing that the stars were right, the dark prophecies had come to pass, and that he—the harbinger of the awakening Galchutt—was there to bring about the Night of Dissolution.

Next Time: A sacrifice foretold in a dream. One final trip to the Dark Reliquary.



BINDINGS AND RIVEN SOULS

The Runewardens stood in the stolen elf city of Dreta Phantas as the Crawling Chaos, avatar and harbinger of the Galchutt, led a swarm of kython and group of corrupt Urthon Aedar through a magical portal.

Even as this horror loomed, Sister Mara was reminded of another of her prophetic dreams in which Calista, the mysterious woman freed from the Dark Reliquary, told her, “There’s a reason the demons kept me alive. I’m important to Lilith—I know something. There’s still a chance for you to save everything. But sacrifices must be made, and not of yourselves.”

She took this to mean that it was, in fact, the defenders of Dreta Phantas who had to be sacrificed. With great regret, the characters magically fled from the Dreaming City back to Ptolus along with an Urthon Aedar warrior named Baenarum, who had led them to the city in the first place.

Calling All Allies

Back in the city, they contacted the druid Andach, who told them he had seen the strange fiendish being known as Savan (foretold long ago as the Dreamer in another of Mara’s dreams) dealing with the Fallen and the Forsaken in the Dark Reliquary. He also agreed to help in any way he could against the coming darkness. Likewise, the Malkuth in their Pale Tower, who currently harbored Calista from demonic attempts to recapture her, agreed to help, with Mooncry once again joining the heroes’ ranks. Serai even managed to contact the Iron Mage himself and convinced him to help them summon and bind Savan. The only place safe enough to perform such a rite, he said, lay within a place called the Vault of the Dragons, which they could reach only with the help of Lord Kirstol Dallimothan. Fortunately, Kirstol was a friend of the Runewardens from past events, and they gained his assistance, despite his disdain for the Urthon Aedar, whom he called “dragon slayers.” Barred from entry, Baenarum was forced to stay at the heroes’ home, Rosegate House, during the ceremony.

The Vault of the Dragons was a sanctuary reachable only through magic ritual within the tower of House Dallimothan. It was a circular platform floating in darkness amid the “breath of the dragons.” This extremely powerful assembly—Mara, Serai, Canabulum, Aliya, Zophas, Mooncry, and Kirstol—watched as the Iron Mage cast a spell that called

Savan. But before they could bind the arcanaloth, he called Lilith herself to his aid. Once the consort of the now-missing Raguel, Lilith had become the default leader of the Fallen and chose to act on the side of chaos. She cast a spell that immediately incapacitated Mooncry. Lord Dallimothan called upon the spirits of his draconic ancestors—in this, their most hallowed of places—which manifested as huge dragons that attacked Lilith. The demoness was forced to flee, promising that the heroes would all be beset by demons as soon as they left the vault.

The Iron Mage’s spells shrank Savan to doll size and bound him in a small brass birdcage. Despite their best efforts, the group could not force or trick the cunning fiend into giving them any help. All he told them was that the Cask of Frozen Dreams lay in the Chamber of Riven Souls, within a demon-sealed box that only Lilith or he could open.

Fearing attacks by demons, the group decided to go only where they could not be openly attacked. They teleported to the Pale Tower, where they delivered Mooncry’s comatose form and also learned the exact location of the Chamber of Riven Souls from Falstef, the deva they once freed from the Dark Reliquary. The chamber was a chapel to darkness in the heart of the Dark Reliquary itself.

They also learned that the undead and the Forsaken had taken the Siege Tower, home to the Keepers of the Veil, so the forces of evil and chaos ran unchecked throughout the Necropolis, even during the day; only Clasthamus Isle, the bastion of Andach, remained inviolate. Further, Rosegate House lay in shambles after a terrible attack by demon-possessed Ptolus residents, whom Baenarum fought off singlehandedly.

Assault on the Reliquary

Coordinating their actions with the surviving Keepers of the Veil, the heroes teleported as close as possible to the Chamber of Riven Souls (most of the horrid place was proof against magical intrusion) while the Keepers launched a frontal assault on the Dark Reliquary as a distraction. Needless to say, Mara, Zophas, Canabulum, Serai, and Aliya (and some celestial guardians) encountered ghastly demons, dreadful undead, and chaos cultists. They fought their way through the demonic halls with haste, so the entire place’s inhabitants would not come crashing down upon them at once.

Cutting through puissant magical wards and passing through two adamantine doors, they finally reached the Chamber of Riven Souls. There, amid other demonic defenders, they encountered Drusii the marilith. Aliya flew into a fury as she attacked the demon, wounding it greatly with her holy-power-infused fists. A final spell from Sister Mara destroyed the marilith, but only after she had summoned not one, but two balor demons. One of the balors used a *symbol of death* to slay Canabulum. The rest of the group grabbed the demon-sealed box and teleported to the safety of Clasthamus Isle.

The victory still left them with the matter of an unopenable box, one of their number fallen, demons on their tails (although the Stones of Thamus kept them safe for now), and the Night of Dissolution—coming appropriately in the month of Moons—just days away.

Next: Even as things grow tense for the Runewardens, we turn for a moment and look back on the exploits of the Company of the Black Lantern to hear their very last tale...



THE END OF THE BLACK LANTERN

Warning: Some spoilers for the module *The Banewarrens* appear below.

As mentioned before, the Company of the Black Lantern—the elves Vexander, Gaerioth, Sercian, Tellian, and the dwarf Dazlo—had worked with the Runewardens against the chaos cult, but in time they went their own separate way again. Their goal: to return to the Banewarrens and find an ancient artifact known as the *diadem*, placed there by mistake aeons ago by Danar, who had believed it to be a bane. They discovered through consultation with a sage named Ishara Jare that the *diadem* lay in a vault in a place deep within the Banewarrens called Tremoc Korin—the Baneheart.

Re-entering the Banewarrens wasn't terribly hard. Many of the protective seals had already been broken by invading dark elves looking for the *Black Grail*. However, the company members knew they needed to not only get into the warrens and find the artifact, but reseal the Banewarrens before they left, to make sure no one would ever get in again. Their research had revealed that doing so required that they destroy the Banewarrens key (which was, in fact, the mummified hand of Eslathagos Malkith, creator of the place), now in possession of the dark elves. And the only way to destroy it was with the item that had helped slay the Dread One originally: the *staff of shards*. Still more investigation revealed that the staff was broken long ago, and the only piece still known to exist was in the hilt of an intelligent dagger named Yaeshla, "sister" to the Runewardens' intelligent dagger, Shayla. In fact, it was Shayla who revealed this last piece of information. Yaeshla was in the hands of the Pactlords of the Quaan, old enemies of the Company.

Following a magic spell keyed to search for the signature rings worn by all Pactlords, the company encountered a male medusa monk and his green dragon ally, both Pactlords, under the city. The Company of the Black Lantern trounced the Pactlords and learned from them that they must go through a portal into the Quaan itself, a tiny "half-world" created and sustained by magic. The adventurers learned that agents of the Pactlords—called Pactslaves—posing as Lothianite priests had such a portal in a chapel in the Rivergate District.

The Black Lanterns sneaked into the chapel and made it all the way up into the belfry before engaging their foes. After dispatching the fallen cleric and the fake priests, they found the magic portal at the top of the belfry.

Passing through it, they entered a dismal gray swamp that stretched for mile after slimy mile in every direction. This was the Quaan. Slogging—and fighting—their way through this strange half-world, they finally came upon the Black Manor, the very heart of the Quaan. Battling through ogres, ogre-magi, a behir, and a kythonesque serpent creature druid, they found Yaeshla and still another portion of the staff. What's more, they learned that the remaining part lay within the Banewarrens, specifically at the top of the Baneheart.

Returning from the Quaan, the elves of the Black Lantern rested and planned. They knew they had to get both the Banewarrens key and finish putting together the *staff of shards* to destroy the key, after resealing the Banewarrens for good. When they were ready, Vexander used a *teleport* spell to take them back to a familiar area.

After much exploration and some encounters with undead and various Banewarrens guardians, the group entered a huge shaft that apparently ran up through the Spire of Ptolus. This was the Baneheart—the object of their goal. Here, they were attacked by a vrook demon and ambushed by dark elves. These were new dark elves, sent into the dungeons after the Company had virtually eradicated all who had explored the place earlier. The elves, realizing that "competitors" had (re) entered the Banewarrens, had only just made it to the Baneheart themselves. The ensuing battle was costly, although the Company of the Black Lantern emerged victorious in the end. The members considered it prudent to leave again to recuperate in the city above. Fortunately, Vexander's *teleport* spells made this fairly simple, and the very next day they were back in the Baneheart.

Unfortunately, foes were waiting for them. Ever since the Company of the Black Lantern had laid waste to the fortress of Ul-Drakkan, the dark elves of House Vrama sought revenge. During their encounter the previous day, one of the elves recognized the members of the company and teleported away. Word spread through the very highest echelons of the dark elf

hierarchy, all the way to their goddess/mistress, Gorgoth-Lol.

“These *strikkesh** have inflicted a wound upon us,” Gorgoth-Lol said to her high priestess in Nluguran, the dark elf city beneath Ptolus. Violet hate glistened in her many spiderlike eyes. “And we do not forget such transgressions. Blood for blood, my children—that is our way. We shall send those against whom they cannot triumph: my own personal Hand of Vengeance.”

* The dark elven word for surface elves

And so when the Company of the Black Lantern reappeared in the Baneheart, vicious foes out for their blood waited for them: a succubus rogue, a dark elf fighter/wizard, a drider cleric, a half-fiend dragonne, and a vampiric half-dragon.** These malefactors, called the Hand of Vengeance, clashed with the Company of the Black Lantern in a titanic battle. Terrible spells were unleashed, and neither side held back. The combat shook Tremoc Korin itself. In the end, the Company of the Black Lantern carried the day. Even the elite forces of a goddess fell before them—though a pair of them escaped. But once again, the adventurers had to retreat back to the city using magic. Not only were they all sorely wounded, but Sercian had fallen to one of the drider’s spells.

After they brought Sercian back to the realm of the living, the group returned. Expecting another ambush, they teleported high up into the shaft of the Baneheart, each of them magically flying, figuring that even a bit of an error in the wide shaft would not result in any great calamity, and they were correct. Within the shaft were many balconies and many doors. After exploring various of these chambers and facing down a powerful advanced kython standing on a chain bridge in a room full of chains, they came to a chamber guarded by an iron golem. This guardian must be warding something important, they thought, and they were right. After destroying the golem, a search revealed... the *diadem*! All that remained was to find the rest of the *staff of shards*. The group rested, then proceeded further—to the top of the shaft, where the Dread One himself was said to have fallen in battle against mighty heroes.

However, they found the shaft’s top now filled with webs that had not been there before. Cutting their way through, they found that the dark elves had returned—*en masse*. Powerful wizards and clerics stood at the

ready, next to dark elf warriors armed and armored in the best chaositech their vile race could muster. The dark elves had decided once and for all to have it out with the Company of the Black Lantern. Those assembled were the last remaining willing and capable volunteers they could muster after the defeat of the Hand of Vengeance.

After all their victories, the members of the company had grown overconfident. So many dark elf champions and mages had fallen before them, so many fiends and monsters lay dead in their wake, that they imagined themselves unstoppable. But here, at the top of Tremoc Korin, the legendary luck of the Company of the Black Lantern—one of the greatest adventuring companies ever to plumb the depths below Ptolus—ran out.

Sercian was *held* by a spell almost right away, and Dazlo quickly fell victim to a similar effect. Chaositech-blade-wielding fighters finished off the two helpless heroes. Gaerioth was overcome by spells even as he fought solo against a horde of dark elves. Vexander was *disintegrated* after felling a number of foes with *lightning bolts*. In the end, Tellian found himself alone. Under the effects of a spell that allowed him to fly, he started to flee, then he thought, “No, I can still finish them off. I can still save my friends.” But the dark elves proved too numerous and too strong. Though his arrows flew truly, they were too few. Tellian died, falling down the shaft that ran the length of the Spire’s interior.

The Black Lantern shone no longer. The company was dead.

Epilogue

Months later, Sercian’s twin brother Serai of the Runewardens spared no expense in magical or monetary resources to find his missing brother and his old comrades. Even though they had quarreled so much in the past, Serai—after many harrowing adventures on his own—recovered the remains of all of the Company of the Black Lantern members. In the city, he had no trouble finding those willing to use magic to bring back the vaunted heroes. After they were all returned to life, Sercian and Serai set sail on a ship purchased with their remaining wealth, leaving Ptolus behind (although they return now and again, often surreptitiously). Vexander found his old friend Chanticleer, and the two left Ptolus for good, returning to their home in the Moonsilver Forest to the north. Dazlo departed for the southeast,

to his Prustan homeland. Tellian joined up once more with Urlenius, the Star of Navashtrom, devote himself fully to the work of their god. Gaerioth disappeared, muttering something about a quest and the “Word that Began Creation.”

Next Time: The Runewardens face their greatest challenge as the Night of Dissolution comes to Ptolus and the Galchutt awaken in the finale of the campaign.



THE END IS BUT THE BEGINNING

The Runewardens had obtained the demon-sealed box containing the mythic Cask of Frozen Dreams. Canabulum stood once again among the living after a *resurrection* spell. Aoska, one of the city's Twelve Commanders and a high-ranking member of the angelic Malkuth, came to Clasthamus Isle where the group had taken sanctuary and told them that all the demons of the Fallen were now marshaled against them, led by Lilith herself. Only on Clasthamus Isle were they safe. Using a *thoughtstone*, Serai summoned the Iron Mage, who came to use a *wish* spell to open the demon-sealed box. Even as demons and undead assaulted the island in vain, the mage cast the spell, and the group removed the cask. They knew they needed to take it to the Dreaming Stone to activate it.

They had been to the Dreaming Stone once before, after having been sent to the Fortress of Shallamoth Kindred, one of the fearsome Galchutt. They had been sent there when exposed to an artifact called the *Signet of Shallamoth Kindred*—they now began to suspect that it was not at all a coincidence that the Iron Mage himself possessed the Signet. Aoska brought Aliya's cousin Calista to the island so that she could go with them to the Dreaming Stone. It was, after all, her well-hidden memories they sought, hoping that a message left to her by the Elder Gods would contain the secret to stopping the Night of Dissolution and, quite literally, the end of the world. Just before leaving, their old friend Shurrin joined them to hopefully bring the quest to an end.

Back to the Fortress of Shallamoth Kindred

The *Signet of Shallamoth Kindred* is the key to a powerful teleportation matrix called the Tourbillion that lies within the Galchutt's fortress. After transporting there, the Runewardens and Calista made their way through the underground structure, now far more active and filled with creatures than it was on their last visit (it had been a fairly quiet place while the Galchutt slept—their stirring was clearly obvious here). Fighting past horrors, they traveled through yet another gateway to a strange half-world of decay where the Tower of the Dreaming Stone lay. The entire tower was built around the massive stone, but when they arrived there, so did Lilith and none other than the demon-lich Sokalahn, now fully under Lilith's domination. Sokalahn, the Dreamwalker of Mara's prophetic dream, was to be a key player in all of this, and Lilith clearly knew that as much as the heroes. The

two assailed them with dreadful spells and got the best of the Runewardens.

Drinking the *dreamstep* potion that Canabulum and Mara had labored to create weeks earlier, the heroes were able to flee with the box *into* the stone. Unleashing the frozen dreams yet to come with the dreams that had yet been, they found themselves in a metaphysical "place" of all the world's thoughts, memories, hopes, dreams, and feelings. While Lilith and Sokalahn attempted to access the stone as well, the Runewardens found Calista's hidden memories—and the shock of her reunion with them knocked her unconscious. Girding themselves for a mighty battle, they exited the stone. Their unexpected appearance surprised their foes, and the combined fury of Aliya's fists and Mara's holy power destroyed the demon-lich Sokalahn, putting his long-unquiet spirit finally to rest. Meanwhile, Canabulum summoned forth all of his own eldritch might and destroyed Lilith with a single spell.

Heady with victory, the members of the group returned to the world to learn what they could from Calista.

Good News and Bad

Calista told them that the Elder Gods, children of Praemus, had rebelled against their father for trapping the noble races along with the Galchutt in the world the Creator had formed to imprison these evil Lords of Chaos. Unbeknownst to the Creator or the Galchutt, they fashioned a secret in the world and planted the seed of that secret's location within their own lineage so that it would one day manifest within one of their bloodline: Calista. For her own safety, and the safety of the world, they hid the knowledge even from her.

The Elder Elves, in their great wisdom, had long ago glimpsed a bit of this secret and built the city of Dreta Phantas, the Dreaming City, for the moment it was to become important to the world, although they did not know exactly what would happen. The elves had always called their city the Soul of the World, but this was a bit of a misnomer. The Soul of the World had always existed within the Seven Chains, located on the long-absent Vallis moon, which had only recently returned. When the Night of Dissolution came, the Galchutt would travel to Vallis, slay its guardians, and break the chains, which would destroy the entire world and free them forever. (At that moment, the Galchutt's forces were attacking Dreta Phantas, proving that even they were confused as to where the Soul of the World truly lay.)

And there was nothing that the heroes could do to stop the Night of Dissolution from coming. The world no longer possessed the might to stop the Galchutt once they had fully awakened.

The secret of the Elder Gods, however, lay in an artifact—a golden sword—they had forged and hid within a place called the Mountain of Making. If they wished to save the world, the Runewardens would have to beat the Galchutt to the Vallis moon and use the sword to destroy the Seven Chains before the Lords of Chaos did.

This plan seemed insane to the heroes, but there also seemed to be no other solution. Thus, they gathered their courage and used the Tourbillion to travel to a place they had considered only a myth: the Mountain of Making, where the Creator long ago crafted each race and each creature that inhabited the world.

Exploring the mountain was like something out of a dream. The heroes literally walked the halls and wandered through the chambers where Praemus had made their ancestors. Finally, they found the young boy they had encountered in the Jewel of Esh. “My children think they keep secrets from me, but it is not so,” the boy told them. “I’m not so terrible as they believe—and, you know, their plan might just succeed.” Then he handed them the sword.

So armed with a golden sword of the gods, the group traveled back to Ptolus—specifically to the Pale Tower—to talk the Malkuth. Afraid to tell the angels there of their plan, the Runewardens informed them only that they needed to get to the Citadel of the Seven Chains. Their friend Falstef, an angel they had rescued from the Dark Reliquary in an earlier adventure, warned them that they would almost certainly not be admitted into the Citadel but volunteered to go with them to help. At the Pale Tower, they also encountered another old friend: Urlenius, the Star of Navashtröm. Urlenius offered to accompany them on whatever heroic quest they were undertaking. The group agreed, although Zophas was a little hesitant to take the exuberant ogre-mage along (considering that the cleric had once slain him in error).

The Lords of the Seven Chains

On the Vallis moon, the heroes stood before the gates of the Celestial City, the first mortals to lay eyes upon it since the very early days of the world. Falstef

introduced them, claiming that they were the finest heroes of the mortal world, and that any one of them could stand shoulder to shoulder with the mightiest angel in the arenas of nobility and heroism. Needless to say, they gained admittance and entered the Citadel.

Each of the massive Seven Chains within the citadel was guarded by a solar. Zophas stepped forward to speak with them, but suddenly Shurrin interrupted, saying simply: “I’m sorry.” Then emerged a *contingency* put in place by the Galchutt months earlier, when Shurrin had wandered off in an ancient temple below the Dark Reliquary that even the Fallen and Forsaken knew nothing of. The Galchutt attempted to use Shurrin’s body as a conduit into the citadel. His form began to coalesce into that of a nightmare...

“No,” Aliya said, even before it could happen. With a single blow and the power of the quivering palm, she killed Shurrin outright. Then she began to weep.

Meanwhile, afraid that something more might happen to stop them, Mara stepped forward, with the sword aloft. She, Zophas, Canabulum, and Serai explained what needed to be done. To their surprise, the Lords of the Seven Chains heard their words and knew the heroes were right. But, the angels explained, they themselves were bound to the chains on a spiritual level. To destroy the chains, they would have to kill the solars.

What followed was not a battle, but a teary, painful process as each angel bared his chest and allowed himself to be slain by the golden sword. With a simple touch, the sword then severed each angel’s chain. When the last of the Seven Chains was destroyed, the Soul of the World was loosed. The bonds of the prison that was the world were broken.

The Night of Dissolution

Thus, it was the Runewardens themselves who brought the Night of Dissolution to pass, not the Galchutt or their cultists or their servants.

Now awake, the Galchutt soared out of the world, something that had been impossible since its creation. However, the power of the secret sword of the Elder Gods did not allow this event to destroy the world from within. In fact, because the Night of Dissolution had come early and not at the hands of the Galchutt, the Elder Gods were able to shunt the escaping Lords

of Chaos into a new prison plane they had labored for 10,000 years to build—one without a world full of wardens trapped inside with the prisoners.

The Soul of the World, meanwhile, needing a new receptacle, drew the elven city of Dreta Phantas back up to the surface where it had once stood, and infused itself within. The silver spires of Dreta Phantas gleamed again in the sunlight. The plans of the mysterious Urthon Aedar had finally come to fruition.

The Runewardens joined the ranks of the greatest ancient heroes of myth and legend. Thanks to them, the world was not only safe forever from the Galchutt, but it was no longer a prison. The Malkuth, the Fallen, and other outsiders could return to their otherworldly homes. Mortals could explore the strange regions beyond the borders of their own world.

The future lay before them all, with infinite potential.

The End

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PTOLUS CAMPAIGN REPRISE NOTES

Zophas, Mara, Canabulum, Gaerioth, Tellian, Aliya, Sercian, and Serai



April 11, 2005

In the three years since we left the Runechildren, Aliya and Zophas spent some time clearing out the Dark Reliquary. Gaerioth took off on a quest for the word that began creation. Serai led a team down to the Banewarrens to recover and raise the Company of the Black Lantern. Tellian has been off looking for the birthplace of Navashtrom and he recently returned to protect Urlenius. Canabulum remained in the city researching more arcane secrets in his underground laboratory. Serai and Sercian have gone off on a voyage in their new ship. Mara has spent a good deal of time in Drediphantas helping restore the Dreaming City and studying its magical nature. Now restored to its proper place in the world, north of Ptolus, it has become home to elder elves and modern elves alike. Shurrin is married to Telyth and happily domesticated, living a quiet family life in Ptolus.

Now it is the end of the month of Moons, and rumors are circulating that the Emperor of the Church is dead. After almost three years of not experiencing any sending dreams, one comes to me—I dream of Calista, Aliya's cousin, reaching out to all of us in urgent need of us. Symbols in the dream suggest that Serai's presence is particularly vital.

It's wonderful to see everyone again, despite the looming threat of the circumstances. We head over to the Pale Tower to see Calista. She recounts for us a tale of a curious dragonscales game in which an ancient elf spelled out "Something stirs once again in Jabel Shammar" with the playing pieces, then died.

Jabel Shammar, the fortress atop the Spire, created by the Dread One, Eslathagos Malkith some 20,000 years ago. He wanted to corrupt the world, and created countless evil creatures and aberrations. In pursuit of this goal. After the defeat of Eslathagos Malkith (an effort that took the combined work of the gods and powerful heroes), the elder gods sealed Jabel Shammar for good. No one has ever been there for the last nearly 20,000 years. And now something stirs there?

Ghul, thousands of years later, claimed to be the son of Malkith. Whether or not that was true, he was very powerful and built his own evil fortress Goth Gulgamel halfway up the Spire. Ghul conquered much of the world and created the Utterdark domain, which covered Palastan and other realms in darkness. But the dwarves and remaining elves (Ghul killed the Elder Elves) and humans all joined together for the first time ever and defeated Ghul, killing him in the Jewels of Parnaith.

We ask Falstuff, the angel we rescued from the Dark Reliquary, for more details about the history of this wretched place. He said that after Danar built Mosul Pearl, three envoys of the elder elves went there to treat with him and received a gift to give to him. That gift was *The Book of Inverted Darkness*, and it was agents of the Vested of the Galchutt that gave this book to the envoys. The book corrupted him and caused him to fall. Falstuff points out that this evil tome is still there atop the Spire. That could be what the Galchutt want—perhaps they think it's time to corrupt a new person.

We adjourn to House Lorenci to discuss matters further. A divination implies that the Galchutt are involved in what is stirring in Jabel Shammar but only tangentially—their reach is not transinfinite.

Commune

Is the *Book of Inverted Darkness* in Jabel Shammar? (It would appear to be nowhere else)

Is the book itself the danger stirring in Jabel Shammar? (I don't know)

Is it reaching out to someone now? (Not to the extent of my knowledge.)

Can we safely touch the *Book of Inverted Darkness* without dying? (Perhaps)

Without corruption? (No)

Is a vested involved in the danger stirring? NO

What are the whereabouts of the Vested:

- Gorgoth-Lolth (now god of the dark elves)
- Thoggidrun (quartered into the Lords of Dust and Ash)
- Mrothrok (killed long ago by runechildren)
- Sscree (Balhazor, patron of chaositech)
- Wuntad (wanted to be a vested, dead)
- Moloch (ordainer of the Galchutt, dead)

Are others planning to enter Jabel Shammar? NO

Have others entered Jabel Shammar already? NO

Will Serai's key allow us inside? YES

Is Ghul involved in what is stirring? NO

Are the forces of chaos involved in what is stirring? Unclear ("forces of chaos" too vague)

Are the dark elves involved in what is stirring? NO

Is the Church of Lothian aware of the danger? NO

Was the elf Naelen Blueflight involved in the danger? Not to the extent of my knowledge.

Is the message true? I don't know.

Does anyone else know something may stir there? YES

Is Eslathagos Malkith dead. I don't know.

Is Jabel Shammar still sealed? YES

Do any Shigma (chaos cult leaders) know? NO

Is the spirit of Naelen Blueflight at rest? YES

The next day, the elves in our group visit Iridithyl's Home and meet with Doeradian Mythlord about trying to speak with the spirit of the deceased elf. Doeradian says that Naelan died of natural causes, but he was poisoned too—he just died before this virulent (dark elven?) toxin could take effect.

It seems that Naelan was an expert in ancient history. The spirit says he was visited by the ghosts of three elves—the ancient envoys?—and they told him it was true, a last attempt at goodness reaching out through a shroud of evil. It says that this evil could get out if left unchecked. It doesn't think it's a trap for us. The elf didn't reveal it openly because the knowledge was a danger. The spirit thinks that when it was sealed, Jabel Shammar still held only a very few relatively minor servants of the Dread One. But it has long been speculated that the Dread One may have had long-term magical contingencies. There may also be remnants of Mosul Pearl (Danar's good home) and its inhabitants still hidden somehow within Jabel Shammar.

The Company of the Black Lantern members, Tellian and Gaerioth, recall that Shayla (our old intelligent dagger) was part of the Staff of Shards, which was wielded by a hero named Maethra Moonrise and sundered to finally kill the Dread One. The company was defeated near Jabel Shammar three years ago by dark elves, so it stands to reason that the staff of shards (and Shayla) is now in the hands of the dark elves. (Tellian tells us that Shayla had been under a compulsion to do the will of the Pactlords of the Quann, a group of aberrations out for the death of all humanoids.) Zophas notes that the poison given to Naelen Blueflight might have been dark elven. Hmmm...

So Tellian communicates with Shayla via a *sending* spell and Canabulum's scrying determines that she is in a niche in a dark hallway among dark elves. I am able to learn that the dagger currently is beneath Palastan in a city called Nluguran in the Grand Hall of Dark Victories. We decide to go.

When we teleport into the hallway, we set off an alarm and horrify passersby. At first the dark elves think we're illithids attacking "again." We battle a number

of dark elves as well as a drider before we teleport out again with Shayla (and a magical belt on display next to her).

April 18, 2005

That evening, Canabulum receives a visit from emissaries of the four great dwarven gods, who know from longstanding spells cast by their ancestors that we intend to visit Jabel Shammar. He said that long ago the Dread One captured Queen Doral the Elder, mistress of all the Earthsinging Overclan. (Earthsingers were overclans like Stonelost and Grailwarden dwarves are now.) Their spell was designed to alert them in the hopes that visitors could find out whether she still lived in that magical place. Legends speak of a secret prison in the dungeons beneath Jabel Shammar. He offers Canabulum a magical chisel to inscribe a wish on natural stone, and the inscription shall become reality.

When I relate our mission to Fr. Rol Heinren, he is eager to inform the Church Elders and the Prince of the Church. I try to dissuade him, at least until we return with more information about the situation.

Shayla, meanwhile, gives us some info about the place: its towers, and so forth. And we prepare to leave on the morrow.

The next morning, we fortify ourselves with a *hero's feast* at the Grey Minstrel. Then we activate Serai's intelligent spell and appear in a fortress. A massive central tower rises up before us, flanked by several smaller towers. Two of the towers have some bridges that extend to the central Tower of Malice. We find ourselves upon one of those bridges.

We advance toward one of the smaller towers and come up against a wraithlike gigantic serpent. It seems to recoil from the sunlight of the Eye of Ardaen, but a combination of spellpower and monkpower ultimately lays it low.

In a room above, beyond a barrier of impenetrable darkness, lies an obelisk flanked by two iron cauldrons filled with darkness. The writing on the obelisk appears to be inscribed in shadow. The inscription is a curse against light and nature—this must be the Tower of Blasphemy. We continue up the stairs to a room with black and white chequered flooring and a table holding a lance. It appears to be another *sunslayer* (like the one we encountered in our confrontation with dark elves),

not entirely finished. Zophas gleefully destroys it.

In the next room up we observe a well rendered mural depicting all manner of depravity and horrible, sacrilegious bestial activities. Fonts here are labeled “lies,” injustice,” and “immorality.” We work our way up, unfortunately through six *symbols of pain*. The next room contains six reliefs of large faces, each with a shaft of blue light being emitted from the faces. Ten niches each hold mummy-like creatures, with six more on the balcony above: They are undead creatures in armor and jewels. Death knights? Whatever they are, they cast a silent effect across the whole room. With a quiet cry, I realize that I am no longer in contact with Lothian in this unholy place.

It takes us a long time and quite a few terrible injuries before our foes have all fallen at our feet.

April 25, 2005

A layer of mummy dust coats the floor, all that is left of our recent foes. It seems that these mummies were the defenders of impiety as a concept. They are the very opposite of religious. We investigate the blues hafts of light here, but it seems that they are magical rays of intense cold. We experiment in disrupting all the raylike columns, but it has no effect that we can see.

Exiting, we still can find no way into the main tower. When I use a divination to discover how to enter it, I'm told: “Wear the malefic mask.” Hmmm... a literal mask of evil, or does it have something to do with the evil fonts in the Tower of Blasphemy?

Uncertain of the meaning of Lothian's message, we fly carefully over to the next tower. This one is designed to appear fleshlike, though it is made of stone. The Tower of the Misbegotten, we wonder?

We make quick work of a group of shadows in this tower's lower level as we enter. The shadows had been haunting a room containing vats of chemicals, part of a laboratory of someone who had experimented with the mutability of flesh. Quite disturbing, and it reminds us of the stories of how so many strange creatures—owlbears, destrachan, and so on—were all created by Eslathagos Malkith. We hoped to find the dwarven prisoner Canabulum was told about beneath one of these towers, but the only thing here is a small but empty natural cave. As we ascend in the tower, we emerge in a room guarded by 189-foot statues

of misshapen, cancerous humans. There's a large adamantine valve in the ceiling 80 feet up, and it's surrounded by a large serpent. As we enter, the statues and serpent come to life to attack us. But no, it's not a stone serpent—it's a stone red dragon golem, and its fire breath turns into fire elementals. By manipulating the gemstones from the golems' eyes, Canabulum manages to call down the plug, which comes down like a lift to carry us up through the ceiling. The stone dragon remains quiet.

We emerge into a laboratory, stocked with a vat of green liquid, empty steel coffinlike cases, a u-shaped table, and fetuslike creatures growing in tubes of liquid. *Almost* all the coffins are empty—one holds a creature that's big and hairy, like a proto bugbear. It's unconscious, alive, but mindless and soulless. We send it to Lothian's care with a prayer and an application of the Ankh of Justice.

In a closet that we purified of yellow mold infestation, we find a gold-rimmed ivory egg. Curious—Shayla believes it was made by Parnaith. (Perhaps it is one of those little fragments of Mosul Pearl that we learned yet lived here.) We take it along. After a short misadventure with Zophas getting concentrated evil on his winged boots, we continue on up the stairs to a chamber filled with brackish green water. Big tentacles stretch down to meet us.

May 2, 2005

Turns out these tentacles are mere illusions. Armed with a water breathing effect from Canabulum, we continue climbing the stairs then head into the brackish water. It's fouler than anything we've ever breathed before. In this murk we encounter a nymph—no wait, that's an illusion too. In reality she's a horrid aboleth, accompanied by a Huge octopus! Somehow before we realize what's happening, it manages to slay Canabulum and hide itself (and us!) in an inky cloud. A combination of spellpower and Aliya's mighty fists lay the creature low, and I manage to revivify Canabulum in the heat of battle. Just as we decide to retreat, a second aboleth makes its presence known near the top of this column of fetid water. Canabulum finishes it off and we explore the chamber at the top of the column of water. It's full of monsters of all kinds, all standing immobile as we enter the room. No, they're all stuffed, and all specimens of creatures that the Dread One is said to have created.

In this room we see black pillars, each holding one or more severed heads. One more level up and Canabulum spies an invisible mind flayer with powerful spell shields up. The mind flayer is wearing a bracelet with a cube-shaped charm on it, which seems to govern the *wall of force*-like effect he has called up around him. He seems to be connected by a polyplike strand to the walls of the tower, which rejuvenates him as long as he lives. Following our battle with him, we are ready for a rest.

May 23, 2005

We have rested a while in a *Mord's magnificent mansion* at the lowest level of the Tower of the Misbegotten—Canabulum sets it up in the crevice we found earlier. We hear occasional strange sounds scraping along the walls outside the mansion, but our wizard friend tells us that shouldn't be possible. Still, we think something is trying to get in.

We return to the room near the top of this tower, to the chamber where we fought our mind flayer friend. Passing through an iron door, we enter a room whose walls are painted with horrid murals of mind flayers worshipping the Galchutt (their creators). A shallow pool is half filled with slime, which Serai thinks is a mind-flayer-rejuvenating fluid. Inscribed near the edge of the pool is the word "Ssenkrad99" -- "darkness" spelled backward. We appear to be at the top of the tower, but it's unclear as to why the mind flayer wished to guard this room.

Is the mirrored mask we pulled off the mind flayer in fact the "malefic mask" I divined that we must wear to enter the central "Tower of Malice?" A new divination says, "Better to wear the mask you have than the one you do not."

Returning to the laboratory, we see three horned and winged creatures sifting through the rubble. When they see us, they mutter, "They stir! Fall back," then disappear.

We continue on across the bridge to the Tower of Malice. While its black adamantine door would not budge for us before, Gaerioth is able to open it easily while wearing the mirrored mask. We enter into a large round hall with three two-headed giant suits of armor and symbols of evil. As we enter there are three flashes or reddish lights and creatures appear inside the suits of armor. They pull great battle axes off the wall of the chamber and advance upon us.

These cruel two-headed brutes cut a cruel swath through our group, laying low both Sercian and myself at various times. We ultimately prevail, but at quite a cost.

The immense room beyond has a crescent-shaped platform supported by thick stone columns. Upon it is another platform holding an iron cage with a chain that goes up to a hole in the ceiling. There is something forbidding about this room, and we all feel a little sapped by the evil surroundings as we enter and make our way to the platforms. When we go up through the hole in the ceiling, we enter into absolute darkness that even the Eye of Ardaen cannot penetrate. We pass through a soul-wrenching blast of terrible pain, as though we were passing through a membrane of evil. Once we're through it, the darkness recedes and we see the inside of a vast, dimly lit room ringed with black altars. At the center is a great black throne upon a dais.

The evil of the place weighs heavily upon us and we leave immediately, emerging in a smaller chamber with mirrored walls. Coming around a corner toward us is a gigantic umber hulk. The mirrors of this place put us at greater risk of its foul gaze. A *blade barrier* slows it down a bit, but it manages to confuse Aliya with its gaze before we can take it down. And we can hear that more foes are on the way.

June 6, 2005

We think about breaking the mirrors in this chamber, but sadly they are polished metal wall coverings. Not easily broken, but perhaps there are no more creatures with gaze effects coming. Footfalls sound on the approach and we see our hope was in vain—another umber hulk, this one even uglier than the last, with oozing pustules on its hideous countenance. Aliya finds herself confused by its horrific appearance and flees: straight into the arms of another one. She just manages to tumble away and we manage to slay them both in time.

At a bit of a loss over our direction, we decide to head away from the continuing sound of heavy footfalls. After battling yet another fearsome umber hulk, we find ourselves in a shrine of hideous evil. An image of Lothian shows a spike driven through his head, and chaos symbols abound. To our surprise, the altar in this shrine smiles a terrible, vicious smile and utters a blasphemous word that dazes us all, A mimic! Canny Sercian drops a void bomb into its mouth which

implodes with satisfying power—and we all manage to dodge out of the way of the implosion just in time (although it was a close shave for Sercian, as he'd gotten himself stuck to the thing's pseudopods). The implosion causes a great hole in this level.

Up some stairs, we arrive in a ruin of a room, with once-fine appointments. Bedchambers open up off the main atrium. Suspended from the ceiling are concentric rings of serrated iron wheels. It surrounds the stairway going up, so we'd have to cross into their sphere of cutting blades to get there. The whole area disrupts magic as well. Perhaps, if the magic-disruption were nullified, I could cast *peaceful weapon* on the wheels.

In one of the bedrooms we chance upon another one of the awful mimic altars. We quickly leave and Serai bars the door with sticky globules of chaositech goo. Just in time, too, as we're suddenly faced with two Large furnace golems. Although injured gravely by Tellian's holy arrows and Serai's rust grenades, it still manages to fling Gaerioth and Zophas into the area of the iron wheels. One hero point and many damage points later, they're free—and we hear more thumping at the door where we've barricaded the mimic.

June 20, 2005

The door seems to hold, so we begin exploring the rest of the chamber. We can find no mechanism to turn off the wheeled bladed trap, but Serai and Sercian did evaluate it, proclaiming it a difficult trap to disable. We find a number of bedchambers but not much else. We discuss various options for disabling the wheeled and bladed trap. Sercian shoots the works with viscous globs from his brother's chaositech gun to jam it and we rush in.

We make it to the stairway where we find a *symbol of death* waiting for us. It lays Sercian low, but Tellian brings him back from the brink. From the top of the stairs Zophas hears a shout: "You move with the speed of a coward!" That compels us forward and we find ourselves atop a platform in a pool of red liquid—not blood, not lava, but something else. Two crystal obelisks rise up at one end of the room. Inside each is a diabolical-looking creature. Floating nearby is an insectlike creature with a spear, and a lanky blue creature with a polearm. We've seen creatures like them in the Dark Reliquary, we recall.

“Welcome to the Court of Hate,” says one of the demons in the obelisks. “You have been found guilty and shall pay for your crimes.”

“Who sees fit to pass judgment on us?” Sister Mara calls out.

“We who have been empowered to do so by Eslathagos Malkith!”

“Eslathagos Malikth is dead,” Sister Mara replies. They answer her with jeering laughter. Then they open fire with a *meteor swarm* (target: Zophas), and Gaerioth leaps out of danger—right into the blood-red liquid pool. However, the malefic mask he’s wearing seems to protect him and he pulls himself out. Then the insectoid ice devil hits us with a *cone of cold*, but Aliya takes down the gangly blue-skinned fiend. Meanwhile, what we discover are pit fiends inside the obelisks continue to hammer us with *fireballs* and worse. Lothian grants Sister Mara a *miracle* that raises three of her fallen comrades and leads Canabulum to convert on the spot. Praise to Holy Lothian!

Canabulum uses powerful magic to remove the crystal obelisk around one pit fiend, and the group gangs up on him. However, he and his brother manage to stun Mara, Canabulum, and Aliya. In fact, all the group winds up stunned at some point, but in the end, two mighty blows downs one of the pit fiends. As we rejoice, the other one summons a new gelugon into the fray. But Tellian-Gelugon-Slayer takes it down with his enchanted arrows, then turns his mighty arrows on the last pit fiend. (Aliya and Sister Mara together managed to take down the obelisk first.) We revive Serai, who had expired in the last moments of battle.

All our foes lay dead, but we are exhausted, so we teleport back out of the tower to our previous refuge. Canabulum provides a *magnificent mansion* and we sigh in relief after this harrowing experience.

July 11, 2005

The Runewardens return to the tower and locate a magical transport circle, which takes them to a curving plain stone hall. Several of the group members fall unconscious in the process due to the foul mood of the place. A feeling of overwhelming evil hammers at their skulls. It seems to be directed from the outer curving walls of this hall toward the inner tower. The mages can see inside the central portion of the tower

that some good items seem to be secreted away in there behind a sealed black adamantium door—perhaps more evidence of Mosul Pearl? Canabulum manages to get the group into the room. Inside it smells like rose petals. The tinkling sounds of harp music surround the heroes. It’s one of the nicest, most blessed places the group has ever been in.

The Runewardens see a marble statue of a winged lion (a lammasu) and a female bald, green-skinned angel, as well as a book and a recessed area filled with pillows. A large chest of gold sits up against a wall. *Incense of meditation* burns in a brazier here. The book is titled *Understanding*, and the chest holds ten potions and ten flasks.

When Sercian and Canabulum search the statues, with a flash the planetar comes to life! “Greeting,” she said. “You are welcome here.” She introduces herself as Belaya, and says her duty is to guard this place. She knew the lady Parnaith well, she says. When the Runewardens show her the egg they found earlier, she tells them that they should open it, since they have already defeated the fiends of the Court of Hate. “Parnaith left that behind for just such as you.”

The Runewardens *consecrate* the egg, and its two halves come apart. Inside is a small sphere of gold, bejeweled and three inches across. It smells like lilac. Belaya said it was called *Parnaith’s Heart*; if someone pure of heart concentrates on it, it is likely to explode out with a powerful burst of positive energy that will have all sorts of good effects. It will work twice per century.

“Is there a way to restore Mosul Pearl?” the group wonders. She doesn’t know, but she does know that the Malignancy is stirring here. “Even when Danar was defeated and slain, the Book was left here.” Ah, *The Book of Inverted Darkness*. “Its otherworldly power has grown like a cancer ion the millennia that it has rested here alone. If it is allowed to continue, it is likely that the eternal soul of Danar, which is still, sadly, quite corrupt, will once again be given form. He will once again become Jabel Shammar. As much as he was one with his tower of Mosul Pearl, he was one with this tower in every aspect. His power is an extension on a most primal level of his will, even beyond the grave.”

Can the Book be destroyed, the Runewardens wonder? “I don’t think that is within your power. It

may be within your power to send it away.” She says Eslathagos Malkith couldn’t destroy her because he couldn’t enter the Alabaster Sanctuary, which was the core of Mosul Pearl and the heart of everything good in the world at that time. “The great wall of evil surrounding this room is an attempt to weaken it, but it has not succeeded in thousands of years.”

She tells the group that the lammasu statue is a manifestation of positive energy and can heal the heroes of their physical and spiritual woes. Everyone touches it and feel its healing and benevolence.

Belaya says she thinks the dwarven Earthsinger overlord is still here, in the dungeon (accessible from the bottom of this tower). There the group will find the Master of the Dungeons, who is quite powerful, she warns.

“If you proceed above, you will find levels used by Danar to house his servants, his library, and his own personal suite. And somewhere, though the specifics elude me, you will find an entrance to pass into a place called the Test of the Book. I believe that is where you must go to reach it.” She says she thinks his bodyguard and harem may remain in his suite. She believes his spirit may be manifest within the heart of the Malignancy. It is more his shadow than his true presence, so he is likely more a corrupting influence than a physical danger.

“The *Book* is not a sentient force *per se*, but it has a will, it has a presence. It is more than just a magical tome. The Natharlnacna brought it here; the *Book* is older than the world. The Malignancy is the extension of its will, its corruptive force given physical reality.” She said she thought the tiny bit of the spirit of Eslathagos Malkith that remained will have no harbor here if the Runewardens send the *Book* off the plane. If the group destroys its physical form, that may send it back to the world that spawned it.

And how can the group approach the *Book* if Danar himself couldn’t stand against it? “Be strong of heart, be prepared and wary, do your best. As long as there is yet a bit of a handhold in this, the heart of evil, then good has a chance”

The group rests in this room and gains the benefits of the incense, and the angel blesses them with several spells. Leaving the Corridor of Corruption, they make

their way to another teleportation circle (following the angel’s directions) to a new chamber festooned with murals of demons and the Galchutt. A black spiral stair leads up.

Emerging into a new hall, they hear distant soft woodwind music in a minor key. They also hear chains rattling—something’s moving around to the left. Following the sound of chains, the Runewardens enter a room with three coffins. Tellian thinks these might belong to the three elves who brought the *Book* to Danar. The stone floor here is made to look like writhing snakes. Although they try to leave, the occupants of this room follow the group out, then draw them back in. A few well-placed blows with sword and spell turn these undead elves to dust.

July 18, 2005

Up the stairs the heroes march to the next level, which holds many many tall bookshelves filled with books. A 9-foot tall winged humanoid figure approaches us, clanging as though made of metal. Its fiery sword causes awful harm to Sercian before the elf’s twin brother manages to wall it off with a *wall of force*, where the monks take it down. But the Runewardens are not out of the woods yet—two metallic creatures who exude lightning attacks approach from the other direction. Another *wall of force* from Serai separates them from the group for a time, but they get around to attack from another direction. The heroes finally take them down and look around the library a little. The books here are all most foul; the flaming sword that the metal angel wielded was fouler still to the touch.

Moving on, the heroes find a staircase, and venture up to challenge the next hazards of this malefic tower. At the top of the stairs, four goutts of *color spray* hit the group. They weather the blasts fairly well (no one died) but a blue beam turns Canabulum to stone and Zophas is transported away in the light of a violet beam.

Before they can even get their bearings, an altar of blasphemy in the room utters a foul word of power and lashes out at Aliya, but Gaerioth steps in and gets hooked by a tentacle. Around us we see rooms of roiling black smoke and wicked-looking blades. “I have what you need to know,” says a voice from the smoky room. A fiery whip wraps around Tellian and drags him into the room—a balor!

Aliya cries out a warning about what we face and Mara prays for a *miracle*—to get Zophas back in fighting form. It looks like it takes a good deal out of her, but their paladin companion rejoins the group and launches himself at the unholy demon he was born to fight. (When he reappears, curiously, he's covered in maggots. But that's a story for later...)

Before they know it, they find themselves over their heads in foes: not only the balor and blasphemous shrine, but also a succubus, an erinyes, and two mariliths from Eslathagos Malkith's harem. One of them splits us up with a blade barrier; Gaerioth and Sercian are left dazed on the side of the room with the shrine. A marilith cuts down Serai, who manages to stand up to all of her wicked blades but falls to the tail slap.

A *fire storm* by Mara and a shower of perfectly aimed arrows from Tellian slay half the harem, One marilith throws Serai's unconscious form through the *blade barrier* separating us from Gaerioth and Canabulum. She then proceeds to tear into Sercian in the same way. In a feat of great heroism, Gaerioth leaps nimbly through the *blade barrier* with poor Serai's body so Mara can revive him before it's too late. He lands practically on top of the surprised marilith, who then suffers a great blow from Zophas' *ankh of justice*. Aliya, Gaerioth, and Tellian gang up on her and she falls, dropping Sercian safely to the ground. Then Tellian single-handedly takes down the erinyes with his amazing bowmanship.

Just as Sercian comes to, the entire group finds itself at the receiving end of a *fire storm* now. The balor chuckles evilly from behind the protection of his *blade barrier*. The creature, which must be the onetime bodyguard of Eslathagos Malkith, rids the room of smoke and we can finally all see his fearsome fiery form. Gaerioth makes a remarkable leap into the room, swinging on a chain that holds a corpse suspended from the ceiling and makes a big-hearted though ineffectual attack. The group has never seen a balor so taken aback as by that crazy monk's latest stunt.

Then it's a free-for-all, the forces of the Runewardens arrayed against the resurgence of evil in Jabel Shammar. Serai manages to drop some of the balor's protective magic while some of the others fly in to meet it. Gaerioth sunders the evil creature's sword but sadly the balor *dominates* him. In a surprising move, Sercian damages the monk with a disintegrate spell, leaving

the Harrow elf vulnerable to a *power word stun* from Serai. Moments later the balor dies, his explosive death throes washing over the group. Pain never felt so good.

July 25, 2005

After another eight hours of rest back in the Alabaster Sanctuary, we arm ourselves with all our magical might and head back up. We use a combination of the cube of force and teleportation to evade the *prismatic spray* and arrive at a door trapped with antimagic.

Searching our fallen foes from the night before, we recover 20,000 in jewelry from the demons and their victims, curative potions, malefic masks, four gray *immovable rods*, as well as a *robe of eyes*. Best of all, we find the key to the Dread One's bedchamber.

Using the key we enter the bedchamber and feel a worse sense of evil than anywhere else in the tower. Canabulum finds the *Dread One's staff*, his most powerful artifact, but Serai can tell that it is not related to the Malignancy or this tower. Using his new *robe of eyes*, Canabulum can see the bloating tendrils of what we now know to be the Malignancy growing out of the walls. Sercian reaches out and opens the book, but the words make no sense -- it's all meaningless gibberish. We try various combinations of reading it backward, in a mirror, and so on, but nothing works.

Sister Mara finally remembers the code word that the mind flayer had inscribed in a pool where they fought him and won his *cube of force*. She utters the code, "Ssenkrad99," and disappears. One by one, the rest of the Runewardens do the same.

They appear in a round room with no exits, about fifty feet in diameter. A horrifying 9 foot tall skull-faced figure appears before them. "I am Eslathagos Malkith, the Dread One," it says. "You are unworthy to be here. Be gone!" The magic of the room prevents the heroes from seeing each other, although they are all there. Sister Mara challenges the figure in the name of Goodness and Lothian. Aliya retorts that he does not belong there and attempts to will him away, but he doesn't budge. He only repeats his command. Serai and Sercian, with *true seeing* active, can tell that the figure is only an illusion, and they can see the others. Serai speaks defiantly at the figure and is sucked into the illusion. Likewise, Mara and the others defy him either physically or verbally and one by one they disappear into the illusion.

The group reforms in an enormous place, unlike any they have ever seen before. It is like being inside a bodily organ, and all around are the polyplike tendrils of the Malignancy. With the heroes are the huge, nasty-looking *Book*, floating in midair and flapping its pages like wings. This entire chamber seems to emanate from the book. Also in the room, darting in and amongst the tendrils, is a shadow. As the angel told us, this must be the Dread One. It has the form of a man wearing robes with a crown upon his head.

As soon as the group members get their bearings, they see tendrils are reaching out for them. The touch of the tendrils are pure corruption. Tellian shoots a powerful arrow at the *Book*, only to run up against a shield of some kind surrounding it. Canabulum's spell takes down the shield, but a moment later, a terrifying foe emerges from among the polyps: a horrid corrupted angel shod in blue metal with razorwings and sharp claws. Mara recognizes that it was once a solar named Averon, one of the boon companions of Danar. The creature deals grievous damage to the group and some force also manages to dispel Mara's *holy aura*. Zophas rings his *ankh of justice* against the ultrahard surface of the *Book*. Serai, meanwhile, lobs a void grenade at Dark Averon and the *Book*. Zophas and Gaerioth find a black cloud encroaching around them from their attacks on the *Book*—they can keep it at bay only with *protection* spells. Sadly, Zophas, Aliya, and Gaerioth get sucked into the void from the grenade. Moments later, Dark Averon dispels Aliya's protection spell and suddenly Zophas and Gaerioth are swamped in the blackness. Their eyes sparkle with black light, and the others know that they are lost.

The longer the heroes stay in the Malignancy, the more corrupted they become. Slowly, Sercian begins to look drawn and depraved. Evil Zophas and Gaerioth turn on Aliya and *disintegrate* her. Trying desperately not to lose heart and calling on the faith of his new conversion to Lothian, Canabulum grabs the *Heart of Parnaith*, and sends positive energy shooting out of it in a burst of golden light that heals everyone, reduces their corruption levels, and frees Zophas and Gaerioth from their possession. The *Book* flares with golden energy and disappears. We believe it has been ejected from this place, just as the angel said.

Almost immediately, a green doorway of light appears in the Malignancy and Dark Averon burrows back down into the carpet of polyps. Mara spots the wispy

spirit of Eslathagos Makith cowering in a corner, and Zophas says, "There is still good in him! He must be redeemed!"

Shivering, and then for a moment we saw a glimmer of his old self, Danar. Then he vanished.

We recognize the green of the Vallis moon, where we have stood once before, Here in this immense hall suffused with green light we see seven massive figures seated before us. A voice says, "You have done exceedingly well and once again performed a huge favor on behalf of the world. Truly you are the equals of the runechild heroes of the world's earliest days. Do you wish to be returned to the place of evil you have just left or to go elsewhere?"

"I do not know who you are," says Gaerioth quietly. "But I have been searching the world over for the word that began all of creation."

A voice he has never heard before says, "Why?" Gaerioth agrees to ponder this wisdom.

The Elder Gods then free the heroes of all remaining corruption and do as they wish: return them to Jabel Shammar, where they can begin their search for the long-imprisoned Earthsinger dwarf. "And go with our blessing," they said as the heroes fade away....

...back into the bedchamber of Eslathagos Malkith, now free of Malignancy polyps and, we believe, free of the Dread One.

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