

Attendees:

Bill Jingle (author)
Baron Silas
Frankk
Maggot
Xernes
Kassandra
Blaze
Spark
Dreiden
Skalgrim
Wulfrik
Nerak
Michael
Mr Neko
MoMo
Draal

Right my children, the night closes in, our days work is done, let us gather round this fireplace with a pot of rum, and I'll tell you all a tale. No, not Cardonaris, that one is too sad for me today. No today I will regale you with the tale of how brave Valley heroes defeated a much more ancient enemy. And more recently too!

Twas but a few weeks ago when myself, Baron Silas and a few other Skulls (Maggot, Frankk and Xernes) joined the rest of our adventuring party at a secret location. The rest of the party were a mix from various schools and guilds. We represented pretty much every School of Magic and each Sphere. Nerak and Wulfrik were our main warriors, Mr Neko and MoMo were our scouts, Dreiden, Skalgrim and I were our tri-sphere healers. Evil was well represented by the Baron, Xernes and Maggot, while magic was suitably shouldered by Sorcerers Spark, Blaze, Kass, Frankk, Draal and Michael.

We ended up in something called the Paladin's Hut. It was run by a team of Halmadonians, and was the means by which they travelled between planes. They were a little put out that their normal patterns of activity had been usurped by a Celestial, who had insisted that they provide us with every assistance possible. When all the evil sphere came a-knocking, suffice to say their eyebrows were raised.

The angel came to visit us that first night, and told us the tale of Yeho'sha-fat. This was a Hephath of unsurpassed power. He was the lord of 7 planes of sin, Lust, Greed, Gluttony, Envy, Pride, Wrath and Sloth. He told us of a long campaign in which the Celestials had sought to weaken him, eventually luring him onto a mortal plane, and attacking him there. Once defeated there, he fled back to the Abyss and a team of seven Celestials chased him down. Only one returned to say he had been defeated, before he too fell to his wounds.

He told of a prison they had wrought in the bottom of the Abyss itself, imprisoning Yeho'sha-fat for eternity. But we learned too that in the moment of his imprisonment, the Hephath had cast seven shards of sin out into the ether, to land where they may. And these shards of power had been used by mortals who had used the sin bound to each for great power... eventually these shards would come together and would be able to release Yeho'sha-fat back into the Abyss again, and he would be a touch peeved. Each of his realms in now being ruled over by his lieutenants, and they are now the rulers of each realm. They didn't want to relinquish power and so had indicated a willingness to work with the Celestial to remake the prison. But it must be done by mortal hands. So they picked us.

So all we had to do, was use the Paladin's Hut, travel to six of the these Shards (Michael already had the Shard of Sloth embedded in his chest), take these incredibly power artefacts from those in possession of them, take a quick jaunt into Hell itself, travel to the Actual Bowels of Hells, break open the prison, fight of the Ruler of Hell, while simultaneously rebuilding a stronger prison for him (which might motivate him to hurt us a LOT), then force him into the prison, an act I would like to add which had cost 7 Celestials their lives. How the Hell (forgive the pun) were we going to achieve all that? Here, said the Celestial, I wrote you a book. We read that book a LOT.

But to confuse matters, a totally unrelated yet very important issue arose. The Hut was compromised in a very sinister way. I must stress that this influence was not linked in ANY way to the original mission, but will have far-reaching consequences.

The Hut was a construct of Law, and had four nodes of Power that must be operated perfectly in order to fly through the planes. The Mechanic flew the Hut, the Engineer powered the hut, the Astrogater navigated the hut, and the Captain of the Guard set the wards that protected the hut from the denizens of the places the Hut flew through.

The crew were a mix of new and old, and one of the newer members attempted to

befriend me. Yes I know I'm not always friendly, but I guess he was desperate. He was something called a Watcher, and was a bit like an Internal Affairs Bureaucrat. He told me that some of the crew were acting a bit funny, but as far as I could tell, they were acting like most Halmadonians, a bit zealoty... He made us suspicious of the Captain of the guard, and I had my suspicions of the Astrogator too.

The first day, we were visited by the Pale Duke, the realm lord of the Realm of Pride. He wanted to give us a different perspective than that of the Celestial. He told us that some of the Celestials had in fact Fallen, one was a prisoner and the others had died in their original assault on Yeho'sha-fat. Disconcerting to say the least. He gave us a ritual to bind the Hephath, and asked that he be allowed to commune with his shard before we used it in the ritual. He seemed very reasonable...

We went off to different places using the Hut, and collected several of the shards. The Shard of Greed was in the possession of a vizier to one of the Sultans of the Dai-fah-Dyne. He had styled himself the Sultan of Sultans, and we had to slay him and his whole entourage to remove the shard. We had tried a more diplomatic approach, but he was determined not to give up the source of his new found wealth.

We got another shard that day, I can't remember exactly which. It might have been the Shard of Wrath. A Knight of Our Dark Majesty tried to usurp the Baron's position at the top of the Church of Arrakkis. That went badly for him... possibly his shard stopped him from thinking rationally. All I know is when the dust had settled, the pieces of him were scattered quite far and wide.

That night we returned to the Paladin's Hut, to travel further, and the Watcher ran up to me in a panic, and slipped me a note to the location of his secret journal.. It stated that he had seen the Halmadonian sorceress, Lunaria, fall in battle, yet here she was before us. He seemed very agitated and possibly a bit mad. We attempted to discern spiritual influence on her, and I even tried detecting Chaos, to no avail, she seemed totally fine.

I started to get a headache, which no amount of Good Power could get rid of. After a few conversations, the members of the party with connection to the Sphere of the Mind also reported similar headaches. Suddenly we (the Mindful Few – myself, Blaze, Frank, Michael and Nerak) were struck by something we can only describe as a Sensory Annulment. We could not see, hear, smell taste or feel. In the blackness of my mind, I heard a voice say

thusly: *'Vixirril, the nest at the Halmadonian Hut is nearly exposed. I will try and do what I can to salvage the situation but we should make preparations to move what we can to the alternative nests.'*

While hearing this, there was a sibilance to it, as though the mind producing it wasn't quite human. We awoke from this 'trance' only to each be struck by a psionic bolt. After a quick discussion, we agreed that we felt we had inadvertently been party to a conversation or telepathic message being sent in the clear. The feedback from this had hit our minds hard. We informed the party leader and advisers of what we had heard.

That evening, we decided that there was much suspicion to be laid at the feet of the Captain of the Guard, as he had been behaving erratically, even according to his own compatriots. We were asking questions about his activities and he did not make an appearance at all that night.

I attempted to telepathically link to a psionic being of my acquaintance, but was unaware that my telepathic message would not reach them so far from their place of repose. I was even less aware that my message would be intercepted by these new participants in our drama. We needed to find a way to determine if a Mind Flayer had Psionically Dominated these people, so I was asking if my psionic friend to teach us how to detect a Psionic Influence.

The next day, we landed the Hut with a crash, and awoke. We were assailed by foul rats, and determined that we had not landed where we wished. Something had penetrated the wards mid-flight and brought us down early. All the while curing Fatal Diseases, we spoke to the Mechanic, who said that one of his crew had clearly not done their job properly, and we were stuck on a undetermined plane, with something affecting two of the nodes. He asked us to clear the nodes and gave us access to these. While attempting to get to the nodes, we were attacked by Hepaths of Cheese, and with cries of 'Fear the Wensleydale!' and 'By the Power of Double Gloucester' they cast fear and terror invocations on my fellow adventurers. We fought our way to the first node, and saw the Power Node covered in a ripe pungent Cheddar-like Fungus... this was what was disrupting our travel... before I could cast a protection invocation against the Fatal Disease I knew would be on it, the Baron dived onto the problem, gums a-flashing, devouring the cheese completely. He hiccupped, got a surprised look on his face and promptly fell to the floor, a Spirit Strength leaving his body.

His sacrifice cleared the Node, but I am sure with a little more patience we could have cleared the Node with less pain... or loss. Having said that, patience is not one of the Baron's strongest suites. Especially when faced with such bounty of food.

We moved onto the second Node, and with the Baron now seemingly immune to the effects of cheese, cleared that in short order. Attempting to make our way back the Hut, we were assailed by something which can only be described as a Terror Cow. Giant hairy cows, with halberds, cries of Moo moo moo! We cleared the nodes, skinned the biggest cow and returned to the Hut to begin our days travels... We had to venture to the Mansion of the Rake, one of the Planes of Sin, this one particularly related to Gluttony. We were assailed by vampires and Hepaths and many Blood Drains later we has slain two of the Realm Lords Lieutenants and he then agreed to hand over his shard to us.

We returned to the Paladin's Hut, had a conflag, and decided to go after Envy that evening. The Serpent, all we knew of the Realm Lord of the Realm of Envy, delighted in mazes and poisons. We walked down a dark wooded path on her realm until we were assailed by Poison Wielding creatures. While being assailed, we were vanished one by one, and deposited in small groups to overcome challenges and hardships.

Draal and I had to face a giant mushroom in a very small space, while it shook off huge clouds of poison spores. We shot it to death with Power Hammers and Bolts, before finding a key on its trunk. As it started to come back to life, we ran, and joined others, and got ourselves back together. Armed with keys and clues, we penetrated her maze and finally met the Serpent. She was pleased with our intelligence and cunning and handed the Shard over to Skalgrim.

We got back to the Hut later on, and thought the evening was over, only to have my headaches return. Another Sensory Annulment happened, and we received the next message...

'Vixirril, Thrixen knows many secrets through his Initiated host so we cannot lose him. You must take some of the Soldier Labori and take the larvae from the main lab away from here to continue with our overall plan.'

The obligatory Psi Bolt followed as we recovered from the message. I was now convinced that somehow Captain of the Guard was a host to some Psionic Parasite. I reached out again to what I thought was the Psionic friend, with Blaze, Frankk and Michael, only to have the entity attempt to Psionically Dominate all four of us. Michael's defences kicked in, and he was unmercifully attacked and only his Guardian Spirit saved him from death. The three of us were dominated and left with a message. All night long, I wrestled with the conflicting thoughts in my head, until morning came. I spoke to Michael and said that while I felt that I had defeated it, I would appreciate it if someone else cast an Unshackle Spirit invocation on me. Michael did so, and was struck by the largest of Psionic Bolts... I immediately Unshackled both Frankk and Blaze, and was likewise bolted.

As soon as I relaxed though, I was struck by yet another Sensory Annulment, and the message 'Psionic Domination failed, proceed with plan B'... in very short order, were assailed by the Guard Captain, and some silent green constructs, doing large Bane damage. When they each died, they exploded in a large acid ball each doing damage to remove half of your living body! It seemed that only physical armour was any protection against this damage, and my protection from poison invocation did not mitigate this at all.

We shrugged off this situation, had a chat with the Mechanic, who said that without the other crew members, we would be unable to leave the plane we had landed on, and would be stuck on the abyss, and could we please assist him in rooting out the effects of this interference.

We realised that the Hut was not moving unless we donated a lot of power to its light, so we knew if we left the Hut on our adventures, it would still be there upon our return. Armed with that reassurance, we set off for another day of irritating people. We knew that Calix Wraithspawn, one of the Valley's chief irritants, had possession of the Shard of Lust. We also knew he had the ability to teleport himself away if he felt he was losing. The Pale Duke gave us assistance in the form of a pair of rituals to create a zone in which Calix could not teleport the Shard away from. All we had to do was set up the zone, and lure Calix into it, and attempt to destroy him in there and the Shard should be in our possession. As always plans don't always go according to plan. After a lot of carnage, many of us had been laid low. Calix forcibly embodied a ghoul inside me, but neglected to give it clear instructions, I'm told it randomly attached his personal Spectre and kept it busy for the rest of the fight! What a silly thing to have happen. Anyway, the fight finished with us in possession of yet another shard. The final shards were later collected and we went back to the Paladin's Hut.

We were awaiting another visit from the Celestial, but while that was still approaching, I had to translate a scroll from somewhere, written in Power runes... It said the following:

"The hunger, it cannot be fought, overpowering a never-ending cycle Every 31 years a morphological change begins, it calls us all forth to swarm. A great noise shall rise from the earth as many mouths cry out for sustenance. Countless wings will darken the skies and famine's teeth shall strip the flesh from the bones of the world. Let all this and more come to pass, that our children may partake of the endless feast."

Now reading this, I was more and more convinced that there was some kind of insectoid flavour to the unknown. Baron Silas did a vision on this, and he found that these creatures were called Ouhri, and they were from the Astral Plane, from somewhere called Ixalan... He said they had a ruling class called Grist, with a Queen, Commanders and Royal Drones.

Below them were the Labori which were Divided into the Soldier Grist, who fight for them, the Worker Grist who create the laboratories and the Nectar Grist who feed them. Beside the Labori we also find the Orphia, grubs that live inside people, feeding on cerebral and spinal fluids... is this their 'nectar'? because it seems this is collected to feed the Grist.

The Baron also said the Nests were always 10 in number, with one Royal Drone, and 9 Labori, and a number of Orphia and Constructs.

We had a chat with the Mechanic and he said several groups had searched the Paladins' Hut from top to bottom, the groups who had reported nothing untoward are now highly suspect, but the ones who reported ill effects from some areas are more trusted. We, the Mindful Few, searched beyond the wards to find several Psionic locks. Examining these caused massive psionic backlash, but we persevered until we opened the lock. Opening this opened an astral door to the Astral Plane. At this point, Lunaria burst into the room followed by Spark, she determinedly strove to get through the astral door, but was unable to do so, she fought with Spark, and he subdued her. Unconscious, she slumped to the floor, leaking acid. I determined she was in fact a construct, and as I saw this, a grub crawled out of the wounds in her belly. It was killed by fire bolts and weapon blows. Frankk collected its corpse in a tube for further study. Wulfric and Spark joined us and we ventured through the door onto the plane. We fought our way through waves of these psionic Grist, and their constructs (which exploded in massive acid clouds). Periodically we received psionic intercepts.

Evacuate all Grist and Labori now. You have permission to sacrifice all Antennae and Uninitiated

This just before our fight with the Royal Drone and his attendants... his blows were truly powerful, and he wasn't even a commander. The future is indeed bleak.

We also received the following troubling message...by parsing together what we remembered, the five of us collectively remembered the following information

Zygothra

I hope the disorientation caused by the second stage of control for the host Initiated passes swiftly.

It seems that the Labori have made an error and due to these circumstances, we need to relocate the nests. One of the Grist will arrange the movement of the supplies to Nest seventeen established in the Kalid Nation.

I will arrange for this information to travel via some Uninitiated to Nests four and five that have been established in the Black Tower.

I would advise that one of the Uninitiated along with eight Antennae travel to Dragur Forest to meet with the Grimlock slaves of Qophrask. I don't trust the Mind Flayer but needs must. Be aware that the Circle Aflame are searching for something in that area so I would advise not using Halmadonian colours.

We must feed, and ensure that all are fed.

We are One

Thrixen

So from this we can see that the Black Tower has been infected by no less than two nests. Not only that, but they are able to produce potions that can mask the effects of psionic influence, which we can't even detect properly yet either, so if we do develop the skills to detect it, they can, if properly prepared, mask it. And due to the friction between Black Tower and Valley, and the lack of trust recently on show between the two, who's to say it's not psionic influence or just human naughtiness driving the schism....

Anyway, we fought through the Grist and came upon a pod, glowing with green light.

We managed to open the pod and found the true Lunaria inside, with pipes going into her head, unconscious in a lab. Frankk took the lab potions and recipes, we picked up Lunaria and stabilised her from travel and we removed ourselves from that plane back to the Paladin's Hut.

Once there, we took Lunaria to the central room and she seemed very happy to see us. We thought all was well until someone detected a large amount of Psi localised in her abdomen. I reasoned that another grub was residing in there, influencing her thoughts. She realised this and immediately tried to escape. The Halmadonians understandably distressed and we weakened her to the floor. I set about preparing myself for emergency field surgery, and Michael forced me to stop. He said I was wrong and that this was not the right thing to do. I asked him why and he was at a loss for words. Now kids, if you've ever seen a sorcerer at a loss for words, let me know, cos I haven't... I immediately determined that he had been Psionically Dominated by the entity, and went to get my scrolls to unshackle him. Once unshackled, he said I was in fact right and that we needed to hold her down and cut it out. I made a long incision in the abdomen and reached in between the intestines. I felt a sac behind her stomach, and burst it, and wrestled the grub within to the surface of the wound. It fell on the floor and sorcerers destroyed it with bolts. I cured the wounds with an unnecessarily large number of Cure Mortals, but rather safe than sorry. Lunaria immediately woke up then and it was apparent that her mind had been 'off' since she had been implanted several days ago, all she remembered was being knocked down, and waking up with my bloody hands on her tummy.

With the danger of all this averted, we planned for our final day. I slept well finally, and awoke ready to do our duty.

Our plan was not to follow the ritual as described by the Pale Duke, as we believed that it might power him up, or that he might siphon power from the trapped Yeho'sha-fat. Instead of making seals with the shards of sin, we instead were to use the opposing virtues of the sins to create seals. But to do this we would have to sacrifice much to empower this. I cannot remember the order of these things, but as the day progressed we would move through the abyss creating the seals, and sacrificing our parties' abilities to cast Spheres or Schools of Magic, until we had nothing left. We were left with only myself able to still cast Good power due to my permanent connection to Good Sphere, and the Baron and Kass the only ones able to cast Evil due to their connection to Dreadlord Arrakis.

After dinner, we marched sombrely to the Bowels of Hell, the very bottom of the Abyss. I have only felt dread like it once before, in the Halls of the Damned. I do go to the craziest

places on Valley Business. We came upon a warded pit, and fought through Yeho'sha-fat's final loyal Hepaths. Defeating them and viewing a portal, we witnessed Yeho'sha-fat himself, sat on a throne. He admonished us to listen as he described the nature of his sins, and in explaining them made them seem reasonable and not something a person should feel ashamed of. The sorcerers placed the seals on the prison, and the throne emptied and suddenly we were assailed by the King of Hell himself. The virtue I had been embodying finally came good, as all the blows and effects of the hepaths had no effect on me. I was able to help my compatriots and keep many alive because of my connection to the Good Sphere... and the Mind Sphere.

The blows of the King of Hell were hideous, causing damage that could not be healed. Spark, Wulfrik and Nerak stood before him and beat him resolutely for what seemed like an eternity. We killed off all his minions and the mass effects were taking a toll on us. At this point, our abilities had been returned to us, and the rest of the party rained a virtual avalanche of magic and power invocations onto Yeho'sha-fat, until his last reserves of defence were assailed away. He was driven back to the edge of the pit, and as he was being driven to the brink, I dived in with a Thunderclap from the Sneverheim, which blew away the last reserve of balance he had left. The gallant warriors knocked him free and he fell back through the portal which closed over his rage.

We didn't stay to gloat, we took our battered selves off back through the abyss to the Paladin's Hut and left immediately for Orin Rakatha.

And so my children, we have destroyed and imprisoned an ancient Chaotic being, and opened our eyes to dangers within. Rest well, for our work is just beginning.