

The (Final) Death of Lord Cardonaris

Gather round young 'uns, let Uncle Bill tell you a tale. First I need a cushion for my aching back. Thanks, young lady. Second I need some fine whisky. No, I can't let you buy it, you're too young. Gob, Bill would like you to ask the barman for a small whisky.

Right, now we can't start without Gob, he'll pout, and we don't want a sulky half-orc in the tavern do we? No, I didn't think so. So let's all get settled in, this'll be a long tale. Leave a bench for Gob. No lad, leave the whole bench, he is really that wide. Aaah, thanks Gob, you're a prince. What? This is a pint glass... of whisky... oh dear, well I hope I get the story in the right order. So where to begin....

I was called to a meeting in the Guildhalls, and met with several members of our soon to be party. Irwin, Oracle Kiara and Sir Kylar were all solemn and determined. I felt the grim nature of the atmosphere, and my resolve was steeled. We were to venture onto the Plane of Sleepless Dead, and search for our lost brothers from the Sacred Sword, who had been lost fighting Lord Cardonaris. While rescuing them, we were also to destroy Cardonaris, and hopefully damage to void avatar.

We gathered to us heroes, great heroes, many of whom we see every day. (No they don't all drink laddie, I mean they reside alongside us here in the Valley.) Kiara was my choice for leader, with the able assistance of Sorcerer Ichabod and Sir Kylar, but there was the reality that Kurt of the Humacti was determined to lead us until we found his brothers. Baron Irwin, of Corsair fame, led our fighters by example and deed, and was inspirational every day for his courage and determination. Sir Verrick derived some glee from tormenting the Evil Sphere casters, but was a stalwart warrior and priest, and his contribution cannot be denied. Anthrax came along, with a brand new shield, and was a capable and reliable fighter, with a sting in his sword. Little Scorch, who you kids torment and tease so often, is a Hero of the Valley. You should remember that. He stood toe-to-toe with some of the scariest creatures you can ever imagine, and did not shirk from his duty. High Priest Lupus was with us, breaking bones with his mighty hammer, and tiny Firebug, Ksandra, came too filling the air with fireballs and curses. One of the least experienced adventurers, Xernes, came along too, his quest for the teachings of Shamancy was not to be denied. (No lad, he's not a necromancer, just because he plays with skulls and bones, and talks to dead spirits, doesn't mean he is a necromancer)

We were taken far far south, through the lands of Xenos, travelling to the Humacti node. We were approached by a Greater fetch, who said he had been sent from Chancellor Untept. The message said that the Humacti node was being approached by large groups of Forgotten.

While we got ready to go to the Node, we were attacked by a group of Forgotten who called upon the Black Queen. While our casters were all busy, Sir Verrick held the line until our Dread Knight Kylar had finished his casting and the Forgotten were all slain.

We hurried then to the Humacti Node, encountering more Forgotten along the way. At the Node, we invoked the Good Sphere, Neutral Sphere and Evil Sphere, creating Hallowed, Balanced and Unhallowed grounds. While there, Kurt cast upon his own Node, and found that Humact's power has filled him, and the small invocation he had been casting had turned into a huge one! Such is the power of faith. As soon as the grounds had been cast, Calyx Wraithspawn appeared, with a retinue of Forgotten and two Ghuls. Calyx entered the portal to the Plane of Sleepless Dead and we were left fighting the creatures off. The Ghuls proved tricky, with their ranged magic blows, and the fact that they could only be harmed by ranged magic. Once they were all put down, we found that the portal was corrupted and we couldn't travel, but we also found that the Humacti had passed back to us, High Priest Cirith, Sorcerer Rancor, and Beran the dwarf.

Our party bolstered, we returned to the lodge where we were visited by Lord Mian and Chancellor Untept. It turns out that we had been duped, and that the Fetch had actually been sent by Calyx.

Cirith then explained that they had been fighting Cardonaris for years in the plane of the Sleepless Dead, and that Cardonaris was now fighting with the Void Aspect, for possession of his body. Cardonaris had stated that he now wished to pass on to the Hall of Heroes, and enter the Life Sphere and be obliterated rather than have the Void Aspect owning his body. We did question whether or not Cardonaris was to be trusted in this, but the information was definitely interesting.

We now needed to take a different route to the Plane of Sleepless Dead, and with not very many choices left, the Chorien was called by High Priest Anthrax. She was less than pleased to be called on. I mean you don't just ask the Aspect of Death to drop whatever she is doing and rush to you. There would definitely be a consequence for this later.

She decided that she was going to send us to the Halls of the Damned, which while it is on the Plane of Sleepless Dead, is also a place that no mortal has ever entered and then left successfully. Chancellor Untept gave Xernes a bunch of stuff to aid in our travelling through the plane, and an invocation that would protect us from the embodiment of undead in us.

All night long, the Sacred Sword argued, but in the end we slept and when we awoke, we had been transported into the Halls of the Damned. Eerie noises, whining, a damp smell, yes Scorch wasn't happy. Neither was I, dark tunnels, damp walls, nowhere to sit and rest, eerie noises, and an all pervading oppressiveness. No-one felt comfortable. In fact, not a single Good Sphere caster could invoke anything, all Good Sphere protections were suppressed and everyone's Nation Guardian spirit was missing. What a dump. This was a rubbish holiday.

There were hordes of essence draining spirits, and some bodies. We found a few Haldonian corpses, with whom Xernes communicated. They said that they were guards of Rebecca Icefist, Head of the College of Light of Halmadon's Heights. Now she's a really powerful person, like a Guildleader or something. For her and her guards to be grabbed and assassinated by drow is creepy as heck. There ain't even all that many drow left on Orin Rakatha.

Once we entered the Hall of Damned, Rancor, Anthrax, Irwin and Lupus all turned into Void Husks. Their abilities remained with them, but they were incapable of thinking for themselves. They had a kinda purple aura around them, which we decided was cos of their low spirit strength. In order to drive them out of their catatonic state, we had to cast ritual level Good, Evil and Neutral power on each. Looking around, others had an orange glow, while I and several others had a greenish glow. It felt like part of our essences had been drained out of each of us, I was operating on just over half my normal power. Scouts lost their awareness, mages lost a very large proportion of their level 5 spells, and warriors were not able to hit as hard as before. We all felt more down heartened.

I found that I was the only person who could invoke the Good Sphere here. No pressure then.

While down here, we found a woman all in white, who asked me if I'd stay and serve her. She was real pretty, but that was kinda the give-away. No pretty woman ever threw herself at a face like this did they kids?

So we tried to leave amicably, but she got all grumpy and threw void creatures at us. Cow.

We wandered further, and encountered a bunch of Xenos Drones. Once these were dispatched, we saw the soul crystals. All around these soul crystals, we saw a blueish glow.

These we collected and gave to Ichabod to figure out their significance. We then encountered a group of more intelligent Xenos, instead of mindless drones. The High Enchanter offered to protect two of our party who had low spirit strength. This was a kinda of Guardian Spirit, which since ours were not in effect, was gratefully received. There might have been more information transferred, but I was casting Mass Cure Mortals, and unfortunately didn't get told anything. Everyone else got to hear. The life of a Hospitaller is a very lonely one. Well obviously not now, no lassie, you're entirely correct. Ahem, are those potato wedges looking for an owner? Jolly good.

Where was I? oh yes, Halls of the Damned. Well now it got really terrifying, we could hear the sounds of wings, flapping and swooping, and getting closer and closer. We had discovered a wandering Humacti spirit called Polis. He was getting very agitated too. Suddenly they were upon us, one of the Chorien's daughters, no-one cared to ask her name, for she was smiting us with the blows of seven men, but at the same time, each blow that landed was casting a Freeze! Our warriors were taking a royal pounding from this Avatar of Darkness, and it took a great deal of effort to shatter her form. When she and her dark essence creatures disappeared, we knew we did not have much time before they reformed to attack us again. The urgency we felt to get out of there was electrifying.

We moved on a ways, and were attacked again by a huge lump of a man, almost bestial, who reached out to us and grabbed one victim. All who were taken were unable to break free, even those who normally have the strength of three strong men. He was terrifying in his implacability. As more of our party were taken by this jailor, we were also under attack. We managed to follow the jailer back to his jail, and some of our party were able to talk to some of the inhabitants of the jail. While I was outside, a hideous creature, bleeding from a device attached to his head, dressed only in a large nappy, handed me my stolen essence. How it had landed with him I do not know, and didn't care to ask. I was instantly invigorated, as my power flowed back into me. We finally managed to defeat the jailer and move on.

We were then assailed by the second of the Chorien's daughters. Her sword ripped open massive mortal wounds, and the spirit of seven. Terrifying doesn't fairly describe her. This fight drained many resources, as Sir Kylar required over ten cure mortals, and Irwin required eight. Since these warriors are some of the best warriors I have ever seen, this was no reflection of their inability, rather the horrors that they had faced. Once her form was shattered, we then ran on, seeking the way out.

We had realised that the glows around our bodies now meant something, and that we all needed to glow blue before we could leave. We resolved that none should be left behind, and

that we must all work together to ensure that our spirits were all bolstered.

We then found the third of the Chorien's daughters. I was really hoping at this point that she would only have three, and no more. This fight drained the blood from us, and she blew us backwards with thunderclaps from her sweeping wing. The crucial damage came from her continued possessions of our minds. Party members were attacking each other, and lots of stores were released, with no opportunities to recast them. Towards the end of this, I too was possessed and made to run off into the labyrinth. The party slew her and her minions, and Sir Verrick walked alone into the darkness to find me. Which he obviously did, or I wouldn't be here now telling you this tale.

As we were picking ourselves up from this, we found that Kiara and Rancor had been stolen from us. After a search, we discovered that they had been stolen by Shadowmancers. We attacked them and drove them off, although during this fight both I and Xernes were floored, and lost spirit strength.

Xernes then cast cosmic stuff, and communed with spirits to find out how we could get out. At the same time, Ichabod investigated the soul crystals. We each bonded with a soul crystal, and the spirits residing inside bolstered our spirit strength. We tried to match each spirit with someone who best matched them. I bonded with a Monk of Light and Life from Saldor, called Yulos Nan. He was concerned that his command group were lost too, but he knew he was to move on to the appropriate realm. He assisted me in curing by showing me his ki curing. Sadly I have forgotten this now.

We then were attacked by all three sisters. They had reformed and now they attacked with a vengeance. We performed a fighting retreat, as Xernes called the ancestors. We reached a pinch point in the tunnel, and held. Suddenly a yellow horned creature of flame and shoutiness appeared. He was known to some of us as Suliman. We had called him away from the Hall of Heroes.

He shouted that death would hold no sway there, and I was filled with power, instantly Greater Invoked. Words filled my mind that I had never uttered before, as I chanted and cast two Mass Cure Mortal invocations, and as soon as I was done, I was yet again filled with power. Truly our ancestors were protecting us, as I recast the invocations. The shrieks of rage from the Avatars of Darkness filled the air, as we were taken from there to the next realm.

Suliman was now lost to us, but he was embodied in the body of Gravesong, who had also been a Guardian of the Hall of Heroes. Gravesong wept as he found that he has lost his brother, but resolved to guide us on to the Hall of Heroes. The realm was called the Half Realm, but used to be called the Realm of Treachery. It did not have a Realm Lord. Instead it had a ruling council, several of whom visited us. I did not speak to them, that was the duty of Kiara and Ichabod. We did find that one of the Councillors was the ancestor of Chancellor Untept. Zalbeth Untept he was called. He indicated that there was political wrangling between him and Imbaash Eye-sen. Apparently Imbaash was once the Realm Lord, and now wanted to destabilise the realm so he could overthrow the council and regain the mantle of Realm Lord. The Realm was surrounded by a ward, made from the souls of many families. As the Lost Souls who wandered the land get killed, eventually they cease to reform, and move on to the next stage of their journey. When this happens, the ancestors of these souls that are stuck in the wall move on to the Hall of Heroes, weakening the ward.

Well to make a long story short, Imbaash had brought a necromancer in who had been exiled before, to start a rebel group called the New Order. They were under the impression they were trying to overthrow the council, by this agent of Imbaash's. The land also had a collection of corrupted spirits, which were really like undead, but the only way to figure out which type of undead they were was to look for subtle cues, the lurching gait of the zombie, the enraged berserk of power struck skeletal warrior, the power damage of the ghoul. At least they weren't the Chorien's daughters.

Xernes bonded with his ancestor, Great Grandad Umparok. Doing so is where Xernes got his surname. (No lad, Jingle is not my real surname, it's just a name that stuck, I don't actually know my surname) He also bonded with a whole bunch of spirits from that realm. During the council later, he was made a Shaman of that Realm.

We went off to investigate the New Order, and found they were lead by an Evil Sphere user, and judging by their grumpy attitude, and the distrust they held us in, Sir Verrick repelled the Evil in him, which kicked off the fight. We slew the New Order leader, and moved on.

Heading back to the building where the remainder of the party were waiting to hear from us, we were set upon by a necromancer and his undead. Rancor went absolutely beserk, screaming that this spirit was once the man who had killed his mother. He attacked in a blind rage, and was spirit-wracked for his troubles. The necromancer was not actually attacking us, rather he was drawn to us. In this realm, family ties are EVERYTHING. He actually was Rancor's father. Who had killed his mum. We slept Rancor with a potion, and had a chat. The Necromancer, Handar, said he wasn't really sure what was going on, as he had only been a father for about

ten minutes. While this was slightly dark, it was rapidly eclipsed by the awkward situation that then developed where we were told that he had been recruited (even though exiled) by Imbaash, in order to destabilise the council that Imbaash was part of, so the Imbaash could reclaim his realm as Realm Lord.

Yes Gob, him very sneaky bastard, but you shouldn't use language like that in front of these young 'uns. What's that? He was a sneaky git? Yes Gob much better. Now Gob, you've drunk my pint of whisky. Could you go and get me a smaller glass of it this time please. Right, while we wait for Gob, we'll have a recap. Sneaky Calyx, Halls of Damned (nasty place), three of Chorien's daughters, rescued by Gravesong, now guiding us, in Half Realm (ex-Realm of Treachery) being witness to a whole bunch of betrayal. Got it? Right. Aaah Gob you return, well done that chap. We've kept the whole bench for you, so sit! No! Gently! Oh dear, could someone get another bench for Gob please? No Gob, you're not sitting on the floor, you're an important and brave warrior, and you need to sit higher. There we go. Oh dear, another pint of whisky? Gob, you need to remember details sometimes. Right, let's carry on.

So now we had to protect Handar the evil mother-murdering necromancer from Imbaash until he could give testimony at the council. This didn't go as planned as the Council rules were difficult to follow and were as twisty and conniving as a drow lawyer. They basically said they weren't interested in the words of the exile and he was chased of by the majority of the present council. We think he was murdered but we were not sure. During the Council, Xernes was made a Shaman of the Realm, which basically meant he could not lie to them during the council, or he would die. Great, so he stitched up Imbaash a treat, and so did the wonderful Kiara. For such a tiny wee thing, she's got grit and courage, you young 'uns could do no better than to emulate. (Copy Gob, that means copy. Sorry brother.) So the council broke into uproar with accusations flying everywhere, but ultimately we had reached our goal, aided them, and they in turn said they would send us on to the next Realm, the next morning. We went and found an ancestor of Calyx's, and fought his undead to a standstill, they were brutal, and finally spoke to the Wraithspawn spirit. He agreed to call Calyx to him, as we would

So the next morning, Fireday, we expected to awaken in the Necropolis. No such luck. He was still enacting his ritual to call Calyx. So we ate brekkie. Then we travelled to the Necropolis, exchanging places with Calyx on the way. We arrived, to find ourselves where Calyx had been, surrounded by his Forgotten guards and a Cryptfiend. Now we managed to dispatch the guards, but the Cryptfiend seemed to need blunt Empowered objects to slay it, which we figured out after several people had been left in heaps all over the place. For future reference, Cryptfiends need blunt empowered weapons, and do Mass Cause Mortals, Paranoia invocations, they paralyse people, and drain their power too. They are a nasty combination of skills in a hideous skull headed spiritual form.

Once it was dead, we encountered Mountain Clegg, a Humacti, and one who we had ventured so far to find. Much joy and hugs ensued, and then we attempted to move through the Necropolis. Naturally we encountered several more Forgotten. The standard types responded as predicted to the Unshackle Spirit invocation, but a not should be made of a new spirit which I had not encountered before, that drained the blood from its opponents, and their essences. The Unshackle did not affect this.

While we were transporting to the Necropolis, we had varying visions of Cardonaris, where he was standing with a strange black glow around himself. Calyx Wraithspawn was standing at his shoulder, and four shapes arrayed themselves before him, also glowing blackly. These were a man with a half skull-face, and bandage wrapped form, and maniacally giggled loon, and a cleric. He said to them, 'How shall we vote?' They all said 'yes'. And he turned to Calyx and said 'come, let us be off to Orin Rakatha' and disappeared.

That is what I and several others saw, others saw it where not all the four shapes agreed.

Anyway, while we were licking our wounds after the last wave of Forgotten, a group of Dymwan appeared, one with a half skull-face. We figured out that these four shapes were Cardonaris' lieutenants in the Necropolis. We sent a delegation forward and negotiated with the Dymwan about the void Avatar and the staff of doom. I ate my lunch. It seemed more productive. I was wrong, as the Dymwan agreed to be neutral to us, and left us to it.

We wandered further and a different bunch attacked us. There are a mummy, but it was positively engaged by the sorcerers. By that I mean a hail of firebolts flew from Rancor and Firebug and shot it so full of burny death, that it was consumed. A short aggressive Dymwan walked through our fighting line, attracted to the Staff of Doom, and there ensued a tug of war between him and Xernes. He was beaten off, and murdered, but all the while a strange white shape paced through our midst, very little seemed to hurt it at all, and it did worry us. We later found that this was the Void Collector. But that's getting ahead of ourselves.

We were still licking our wounds when we were attacked by a red sorcery person. She was surrounded by Fire Elementals, and was a proper grumpy cow. She was like that ex-girlfriend who always has one last negative thing to say. She called a humungous fire elemental who appeared in front of us and fire bolts flew from both sides. I was protected in the most part by Ksandra's Fireskin, but I was still forced to cure myself no less than four times. In that one fight, I had received more damage than the entire adventure so far, well, not counting my death of

course.

We cured all wounds, then invoked and moved on, to find a bunch of Dymwan waiting for us, or should I say Dym-nuns, never seen a Dymwan in a wimple before. Apparently they were the House of Old, whatever that means. Their Mother Superior had clearly led a hard life, and the crags of age etched deep on her cheeks. The chap in charge (also wearing a wimple?) spoke quiet reasonably to Kiara, and we negotiated safe passage.

That was great until a different House attacked us, this time laughing like loons. Guess we'd found house number four then. House of Giggles? Who knows. Their boss was a tall bearded madman, and his gauntlet allowed him to force undead into people, Sir Verrick was taken by a Spectre, and I had to unshackle him, to stop him attacking the party. They were ultimately all defeated. And we walked on until we found Lord Cardonaris's Lodge.

We approached with a certain amount of trepidation, here resides one who is called the Greatest Enemy by some... We were graciously invited inside. Naturally the Humacti refused, and all sat under a tree outside. We started to enter and were shouted at by Cardonaris to leave his place. Strange, we thought, but graciously Kiara started to back out. Then we were again invited back inside. At the far end of the room sat Cardonaris, and on either side of him sat his lieutenants. What followed was strange. He seemed erratic, and emotional. We offered him his staff and he refused it. His lieutenants insisted he take it as his symbol, but he refused. Xernes took it and attempted to hand it to him, but was struck so hard he reeled. Pandemonium ensued, with lieutenants shouting and people accusing each other. Kiara calmly strode over to Xernes, took the Staff of Doom from him and leapt upon Cardonaris, thrusting it flat against his chest. He flailed madly, wailing and then suddenly all was calm. He calmly stood, and thanked Kiara, and us. He calmly addressed his Dymwan, too, and told all of us to be rested and welcome in his house.

Clearly the staff had arrested the possession of the Void Avatar inside him, and allowed him to take control back of his own body. I went outside to relay this to the Humacti, but they were ever distrustful, and doubted all they were told. It was understandable, for Cardonaris has always been twisty, his mind is as straight as a spring. A few bits of information I did glean was that Void Avatar had been released from an artefact, which had been discovered by Calyx Wraithspawn and delivered to his master, Cardonaris. We asked if Cardonaris thought that Calyx had done this deliberately, and said he thought that Calyx had no idea of what would happen. While here, another Humacti, Lei Feng just wandered up out of the blue. He had no idea of how he had got there.

He understood that Calyx was now a free agent, and having taken the void into the Court of a Thousand Swords, had taken the Black Queens power and corrupted them into what we now know as the Forgotten.

He said that in order to move on to the next realm, we needed to destroy the Void Collector. This creature we had faced already that day, and it was horrendously difficult to damage, and in fact it had simply walked off, leaving us weakened and bleeding. Now we were to go and fight it, in the darkness. Wow, that was going to be tricky. Cardonaris said it was a creature that tried to absorb the damage inflicted upon it, to take the power and magic back to the Void, but that we could overload it with sufficient spells and invocations of damage and it would fragment.

He was right, and it did, but it was a hell of a fight, because he was not alone. Naturally Calyx had defended it with lots of really powerful Forgotten. We split into two groups, and one group, which would normally be called the soft underbelly, drew the Collector behind the fighting line and away from the Forgotten. The warriors, led by Irwin and Kylar, put up a resounding defence against the Forgotten, protected and healed by the Humacti and Verrick, while the mages and evil casters beat the tar out of the collector, and were kept on their feet by me. It took some doing as he was able to absorb some of the effects and repeat them back onto the casters, but eventually he crumbled and flew apart. We cheered, and moved down the hill to where our stalwart warriors were embroiled with the ranks of the Forgotten. With the additional firepower of the mages, we managed to destroy the Forgotten, and move back to the Lodge for late tea and crumpets in Lord Cardonaris's lodge.

Steel Day broke finding us in Lord Cardonaris's lodge, with him nowhere to be seen. I was tempted to cast a Hallowed Ground on Cardonaris's chair, but thought that would be petty and a waste of power which we would probably need that day.

We started disappearing one by one and woke up in the Realm of Pain. All spirit-wracked. Being accosted by spirits of pain. Who took great delight in everyone's pain. Utter gits. Until they realised that I can cast while in pain, and was steadily removing pain from the Good Sphere casters, and then we did the same to everyone. The pain was still there, nagging in the back of your mind, like a hangnail, or a vicious ex-girlfriend. No-one (except me) could invoke anything, and we had a lot of urgency to get the heck out of there. We proceeded to try to make as much noise as possible, killing as many spirits as possible, to attract the Realm Lords attention. When we finally succeeded, we had a chat, and he agreed that our task was admirable and in his interests too, eradication of the Void would protect his realm too. However he wanted to cause a bit more pain, or to allow us to move on, he insisted that he be granted a

member of our group to cause pain to. Irwin stood forward, and was spirit wracked, but the pain would not leave. He will have to live the rest of his days in pain, so that we could move forward. Now we know he dulls the pain with grog, but that's a heck of a way to wake up each morning. That's a sacrifice I hope none of you ever have to make.

While we were waiting to be transported to the next realm, the Realm of Battle, we were attacked again. The void creature teleported in and brought with him a collection of strong Forgotten. We were sitting down enjoying our lunch too, the dirty gits. We destroyed them, and sat again to cast a Mass Cure, and guess what? We shifted to the Realm of Battle, only to find ourselves between two opposing sides of a battle, between some knightly types and some barbarians. The barbarians attacked us and knocked us all over the place, because we were disorganised from the realm shift. Once they were dispatched, the knightly types attacked us.

We found out that Puke, the Realm Lord of the Realm of Battle, once a Valley Member, had got bored so he started a war between these two groups for his own entertainment. We finally got to meet him, and after we had eradicated one of the sides. Since our group was not designed for the chaos of a barbarian fight, we chose to eradicate the knightly types. It took a while, but we got the job done.

We met up with Puke, who was passed out drunk on a chair in the sun, his feet resting on the back of the previous Realm Lord. He decided he wanted to see a good fight, so he let us pick our three best fighters to fight his champion. Irwin, Lei Feng and Beran fought the guy who was being humiliated by Puke. Beran was put down first, then Lei had all his limbs hacked off, leaving Irwin frantically parrying the ex-Realm Lord's blows. Doing the blows of eight men, that bypassed any armour, dismembering at will, shattering bones, creating massive wounds. I think it was the moment that Lei Feng, with no limbs, rolled into the champion's ankle and bite him that hurt him the most. Puke said that we simply had to die in a glorious battle and we could move on to the Hall of Heroes. Umm, we still had Guardian Spirits which meant we wouldn't die. The leadership decided to get Anthrax to call upon the Chorien to get her to remove our guardian spirits. She turned up and berated Anthrax soundly for disturbing her three days in a row. Very wisely, he bent his knee and head and kept saying sorry. She removed our Guardian Spirits with a graceful wave of her hand. And then left. Anthrax was quite put out that we had caused him to disturb his deity so much, and categorically stated that we would not be doing that at all again on this adventure.

Puke left to get the keys to Realm of Battle, so we could leave, and as he returned, our glorious battle arrived too... Eight Death Knights. Eight. Our glorious battle lasted for about a minute for half the party, three minutes for the majority of the rest, with Ichabod and Sir Verrick lasting the

longest, Verrick because he had challenged one to single combat and Ichabod because he ran like the wind, and kept casting slips on fully armoured Death Knights, who apparently had forgotten to have a Prot Battle Magic cast on them. When they finally caught him, he was marmalized.

And so we left the Realm of Battle, and Puke joined us, bored of battle, and seeking to return to the Valley again. So now we were bringing back two Heroes. But seriously, eight Death Knights? Eight? Madness.

When we were sat at the Hall of Heroes, we were told where the Life Sphere would rise each twilight. We knew then that the final fight was soon to be upon us. Rancor volunteered to remain behind and become the new Guardian of the Hall of Heroes so we had a little ceremony to say goodbye to him. We were all a little emotional at his sacrifice. He said it was his time, and that if he could still provide a service that it was his duty to do so. I swear someone is chopping onions around here. It's making my eyes run. Some of you young 'uns too, eh?

While we awaited food, a hearty meal before dying so to speak, a Dymwan appeared and said that Lord Cardonaris would be with us shortly, and that he was just meeting up with a few old friends. After tea he appeared, with three Dymwan, a really powerful mage, and really powerful power user and an incredibly powerful warrior. We divided into three teams, the first to watch Cardonaris at all times and watch to see when he betrayed us. This team was the Sacred Sword, as they knew him best. They were bolstered by the appearance of Tancred, another Humacti who we had come to rescue. Another team was to attack the Void Avatar when it appeared, and finally team B, also called team big bollocks, because of their insane courage, who were to get in the way of anything scary and stay there. They placed me behind team big. I proceeded to cast Prot Death and Prot Fear on as many people as possible, with the shorter casting times possible in the Hall of Heroes. We moved off toward the Life Sphere. Cardonaris walked towards it and the Void Avatar leapt from his body. Cardonaris retreated and void team started attacking the Avatar. The Avatar did a huge mass effect to sunder the protections against the void's essence draining. He followed up with a mass effect of draining the unprotected essences. At least four members of our party fell.

He chased the void team around for a while, before disappearing. We all stood around watching each other for we knew he had disappeared into one of us. Lord Cardonaris had told Kiara that it would head for the most powerful evil person. Slowly our gazes all turned to Sir Kylar. He stood there, saying nothing. Kiara accused him of being possessed which he obviously denied. She started hitting her brother, and we all stood watching, ready to step in in a moment. Ksandra said 'Kylar would ever hit his sister, ever' just as Kylar unleashed a Fatal

Disease upon her. She fell to the ground and the warriors fell upon him like hounds on a boar. Assailed on all sides, his was unable to stop me curing Kiara. Finally he fell, dead upon the ground.

Hearts in our mouths, chests heaving, we stood again, waiting for the next person to behave out of character. We knew this was not over. We knew another had been possessed. Kiara announced that she was going for a drink. Stunned, I looked her way, before it dawned upon me. Kiara would never leave the field of battle before all her people she was responsible for had been protected and the fight was over. Never. It was in her. We ruefully slew her too. It was a hard fight, but once again, surrounded on all sides, she was cut down.

Yet again we stood there. Who had been possessed now? Irwin announced that the warriors were to follow him. Automatically the warriors turned to follow him, but then paused for he was leading us away from the combat. Irwin is probably once the most courageous warriors I have ever known. He would never leave battle while there was still battle to be done. I said 'Are you sure, Irwin?'

'Don't you question my orders' he responded. I stared at his eyes, trying to read what was going on inside. I felt that I could see the torment inside him, as I said 'That's not an order you'd ever give, Irwin. Get him lads.'

The warriors fell upon Irwin, their blades rising and falling like butchers on a side of beef. Irwin's courage and strength of arms made this a difficult task, harder than any we had faced so far, but eventually he was down. A wail erupted from Anthrax, a bellow of agony and rage, as he called to the Chorien to protect his mind. Clearly the Avatar had chosen him now. Anthrax and the Chorien repelled the Avatars attempt to possess Anthrax, and it was once again in the open. Magic bolts rained in upon it, mighty blows rained in upon it. It lashed out with rage and spite, whipping up with the draining effect of the void. Gravesong fell to the drains, so did many others, and I had to power gift several people until they were able to stand again, and fight on. Lupus was smashed to the ground, as was Anthrax. Gravesong fell again. Still we fought on, I trailing behind the fight, getting the broken back on their feet if possible, or moving bodies so they could tend safely. It summoned void creatures to its aid, several times, as it weakened. Cheered by this, we sundered them and fought on. Unbeknownst to us, Cardonaris, seeing the avatar growing weaker, knowing it would be destroyed, walked off the field of battle, pursued by the Sacred Sword. Eventually, the avatar disappeared and Xernes cheered, announcing to us that he felt it entering the Staff of Doom.

Most of us at this point turned and ran off toward the distant sounds of battle, where the Sword and Lord Cardonaris were locked in mortal combat. Cardonaris was desperate to get away, and the Sword were having none of it. I was not able to rush over as I was dealing with the fallen, as the ground of the Hall of Heroes tended them, I healed them. Once we were ready, I invoked and we ran off to the final battle.

The Sacred Swords vast amount of curing had been used up from the terrible invocations wielded by Cardonaris and his minions. I arrived and cast Mass Cures as fast as I could and reinvoked and did it again. Eventually, Cardonaris was subdued. Tancred grabbing him and frogmarched him toward the Life Sphere.

We marched behind, confident, exultant, fuelled by our success. This turned to horror as Tancred, without pause in his stride, marched into the Life Sphere with Cardonaris and was obliterated. Gone. No coming back. Gone. The shocked shrieks and groans of loss from the party are with me to this day. Imagine our renewed horror when we realised that the Staff of Doom, which needed to go in with him, which contained the Void Avatar, was still in Xernes's hand. We could not throw it, it needed to be carried in. By a second person. We looked at each other, Kurt offered to go, but before anyone could move or utter the thoughts in their minds, Rancor snatched the staff from Xernes, and ran towards the waning Life Sphere, shouting 'my time is now!'

We screamed at him not to go, he had just been recused from years of horror in the Realm of the Sleepless Dead, and he was now he Guardian of the Hall of Heroes. But it was for naught. He plunged into the Sphere, and was gone. Gone forever. Just like Tancred. Both of them are gone and will never return. Except in song, except in legend. We will never forget them, because their sacrifice allowed the rest of us to return to tell you of their Heroism. If we who do these deeds get called Hero of the Valley, what higher accolade can we give these people? Cirith would say there is no higher accolade than 'brother' (or sister, sorry lassie), but surely we have wordsmiths here greater than I, who can praise these swordbrothers as deserve.

No Gob! Put me down! I'm not hurt, I'm just crying. It's not onions that was just a joke. I 'm just sad. What? No! Don't hug me! Aargh, that's a rib. Ow ow ow. Blessings of the Good Sphere be upon me, grant the strength to accomplish mighty deeds, like fixing the wounds caused my friends, Cure Mortal. Gob, you've gt to remember your own strength. Spheres!

Right kids, we're nearly done here, don't worry about young Gob here, I won't let him hug any of

you. Sit back down. Hand me my bucket of whisky. Here Gob, drink most of this please for me. Thanks. Aaah.

So now that our brothers had left us, we stood in a daze around the life sphere, some sobbing, some recriminating. I tried to play to them, but the music had left my soul. I couldn't even drum, my tears fell like rain upon my drum skin. Suddenly I felt a pulse from the Life Sphere, a wave of gentleness, yet at the same time filled with unimagined raw power. It washed over me, and my drum began to beat. I gently followed the rhythm and found music had returned. Stronger. With more resolve. Like the resolve shown by these two great and noble heroes.

We still needed a Guardian and Mountain Clegg volunteered to stay behind and perform this task. We slept then, and upon awakening were back upon Orin Rakatha. We have brought down a great Evil, we had rescued many brothers from the Plane of Sleepless Dead, and we had destroyed the Void Avatar. While the cost was high, the sacrifice was theirs to make, and the glory we will forever grant them is well deserved.

Now Gob, since you've fed me so much whisky, it is your responsibility to make sure I don't end up in a ditch on the way home. I'm going, I'm leaving, now.