Way of the Wicked: Tears of the Blessed

book three: tears of the blessed

A Villainous Adventure Path

by

Gary McBride, words

and

Michael Clarke, art

and

Chad Hardgrove, mechanics

Special Thanks:
Carl and Shirley McBride, Mike and Teresa Hall, Jim Hall, Michelle McBride-Hall, Kimberly Knight.

Fire Mountain Games LLC

www.firemountaingames.com

18795 SW Marko Ln

Beaverton, OR 97007

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Mitra: The Lord of Light

“War never takes a wicked man by chance, the good man always.”

--Sophocles

Advancement

This campaign uses the medium advancement track.

Act One: Ghastenhall

Our villains arrive in the city of Ghastenhall. They should be 10th level by their arrival.

Act Two: An Army of the Damned

Our villains build the army to storm the Vale of Valtaerna. This puts them halfway to 11th level.

Act Three: The Battle of Saintsbridge

The army raids Valtaerna upon the advent of winter. The battle elevates them to 11th level.

Act Four: Three Months of Terror

The PCs have three months to slay everyone that opposes them in the Vale. This season of slaughter raises them to 12th level.

Act Five: The Cathedral of Mitra Made Manifest

The final showdown occurs in the great Cathedral where the undying lord of the Order of St. Macarius dwells. With his defeat, our villains should be 13th level.

What Next?

13th level is where Book Four: Of Dragons and Princesses begins. Chargammon awaits.
INTRODUCTION: ATTACK OF THE UNUSED STATBLOCK

Over the course of my career as a gamer, I’ve bought a lot of monster books. A good bestiary is a thing of beauty. It’s likely buying a bag full of adventure seeds. When you encounter a cool monster, the creature demands that you find a place for it in your next campaign. And where would such a creature lair? What would it want? What it is up to? These are rich questions with legions of action-packed answers. Yes, I am a fan of a good monster book.

The best of these tomes and compendiums are always packed with countless abominations, horrors and beasts. But they also had another kind of creature hidden within their pages. This is a rare beast – definitely the odd man out. This is the good guy monster.

Amongst their ranks are the angels and archons, the metallic dragons, the phoenix, the lammasu, and the good celestials of every stripe. Most of those monsters, in my regular course of play, I never use. And when they see use, it isn’t against the PCs. They are heralds or messengers or patrons or allies. And only rarely do those need stat blocks. I corrupted a few into effective villains, true enough. But largely, the good guys languish in my bestiary collection, unused and ignored.

With “Tears of the Blessed” we change that.

Welcome to the adventure where your players get to fight an avalanche of good guy monsters. This is the adventure where an angel is the big boss at the end of the book. We’ve had a few good guy monsters already in “Way of the Wicked”. Book One had the lantern archons. Book Two had the treant, the lillend, the moon dogs, the avoral and the silver dragon. But this is the chapter where that count explodes. Book Three, the players are going to be assaulting one of the holiest sites in all of Talingarde – the Vale of Valtaerna. And that locale is lousy with good guy monsters.

We skip only the good guy dragons. None of those are to be found. We’ve just had the players slay Argossarian the silver. Another dragon so soon – that would probably be too much. Dragons need to be memorable encounters. Fear not – they’ll be back. There are prominent good dragons in both Book Four and Book Six.

After the complexity of Book Two: Call Forth Darkness, this is a simpler adventure. This is an adventure about sacking a temple of any enemy religion that threatens your cause. That is hardly new ground. In fact the very first adventure published for any roleplaying game was exactly the same sort of thing. How can we make such a well-worn plot fresh and interesting?

First, the PCs don’t come alone. They lead an army and in fact the first sections of this book deal not with the temple but with building that army and fighting the Battle of Saintsbridge. Rather than include a complex war game, we’ve instead chosen a narrative approach to the battle that keeps the action focused on the PCs.

Second, the PCs don’t just have to simply slay the enemy, they also have to keep them contained. This mission of murder depends upon secrecy.

Third, this is the only published adventure that I’m aware of where the primary enemies are good celestials. Yes, my friends, it is time for your villains to become angel-slayers.

The mission itself is straightforward – seal off the only entrance to the Vale and then over the course of one winter, wipe out every sentient thing that dwells there. Leave no survivors – they’ll only be witnesses to the villains’ crimes. By the time the snow melts, the pilgrims of spring will arrive to find their precious stronghold of light a burned out ruin. Their divine healers are gone just as the worst plague in a century rages unchecked through the major cities of Talingarde. And on the battle front, the Fire-Axe wins victory after victory.

This is a dark time for Talingarde and it is your villains’ fault.

Glorious.

-- Gary
BOOK THREE: TEARS OF THE BLESSED

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND: DOUBTS AND DEVILRY

It happened in the last day of the Horn, when the ritual to call forth the daemon prince Vetra-Kali came to its conclusion. It was then via his scrying that Cardinal Adrastus Thorn saw Sir Richard Havelyn for the first time. As he gazed upon the young paladin hero, he saw her – Bronwyn, his long ago beloved – reflected in that paladin. This was Bronwyn’s son, her only child, the last vestige of her upon this plane. This was Thorn’s nephew. This was all that remained of her.

Cardinal Thorn has traded his humanity for hatred. He has never doubted his mission of vengeance. But now, upon his iron throne in the Agathium, he has for the first time a vestige of doubt. It is in that moment he makes a fateful decision. He will not see Sir Richard dead. He will save this paladin’s life.

If Sir Richard escapes, he need do nothing. He simply watches the battle with clenched fist and sighs in relieve when Havelyn escapes. If Sir Richard did die, his actions are more direct. He teleports the corpse from the Horn before it can be further desecrated and into his sanctuary in the north. He raises Sir Havelyn from the dead (though never allowing him to regain consciousness) and returns him to the south.

Thorn’s actions were not unobserved. No such powerful use of divine magic would ever escape the notice of the lords of Hell. A contract devil named Dessiter saw the deed or sensed the intent. He realized that the great Cardinal Thorn had a weakness that may interfere with the wishes of his dread master. He schemed.

Dessiter of the Phistophilus has decided that the future may not lie with the Cardinal Thorn. This errand of retribution may need to be passed into more merciless hands. But who is worthy?

TOPPLING THE SECOND PILLAR

Four pillars keep Talingarde intact. The first pillar is the Watch Wall. That pillar has crumbled to ash. Two fortresses of the Watch Wall are broken – Balentyne and Lorringsgate. There is now a wide open entryway from the Savage North into Talingarde.

Thorn turns his attention now to the second pillar – the Order of Saint Macarius. The Order counts among its membership virtually every divine spellcaster in service to the Shining Lord, Mitra in Talingarde. Its healers and saints have restored the people in times of peace and aided the military in times of war. Within their fortress-monastery in the Vale of Valtaerna, the Order guards perhaps the most sacred site in all of Talingarde.

Thorn wishes to see it burn. And he wishes the task done soon. Summer fades and winter is close at hand. The Vale is a small mountain valley and during the winter months its only pass becomes treacherous. The Vale seals itself off and no pilgrims visit. For three months, the defenders of the Vale are cut off from the outside world.

Thorn’s plan is simple. He will assign his most dangerous servants – the Ninth Knot – to personally lead an army to the Vale of Valtaerna. The army will break the defenses and slaughter every living thing within the Vale. They will desecrate the temples and bring ruin to the Order of Saint Macarius.

During the same winter this is done, the fifth knot – the Stygian Knot under Barnabus Thrane – will spread the Tears of Achlys (acquired in Book Two) throughout the trade hub of Ghastenhall. The pestilence will run rampant and as the winter lifts, the pilgrims will return to the Vale desperate for relief and divine aid.

And they will find nothing but ashes and death. It will be a grand demoralizing stroke for Talingarde. With the second pillar broken, the plague will weaken the south. Talingarde will be one step closer to annihilation.

Still, there are difficulties. So far the cult of Asmodeus has largely kept itself hidden. Only in Farholde has there been an evidence of their involvement (see Book Two) and Farholde is a remote colony, far from the capital and far from the center of Talingarde’s power.

This then is the PC’s task. Deliver the tears to the Stygian Knot. Raise an army. And in one winter destroy the Vale of Valtaerna. Do this in such a way as it looks like rampaging bugbears. Make sure that anyone who knows the truth about the Cult of Asmodeus dies in battle. Plunge a knife into Mitra’s heart and then retreat to the shadows. What could be simpler?
THE COURSE OF THE WAR

The war goes well for the Nine Knots. The list of the Fire-Axe’s victory grows long – Balentyne, Ambryl, Tarlington Fields, and Lorringsgate. The armies of Talingerde were overconfident against the bugbear general. They thought Sakkarot Fire-Axe a mere brute leading a disorganized horde of raiders who would scatter before their knights. They now know better.

Still, even in victory, the Fire-Axe’s horde needs replenishing. To this end, Thorn has sent his handmaiden devil, the wicked Tiadora, to the North. She has gathered every evil tribe and creature she could find and brought them under the Fire-Axe’s banner. It was this errand that kept her busy during the events of Book Two.

Tiadora has done her mission capably. Virtually every tribe of bugbears now bows to the Fire-Axe. She did not stop there. Sakkarot’s ranks are swollen with wolf-riding goblins, ogres, trolls, hill giants and even a small cadre of frost giants. These reinforcements have paid off on the battlefield.

At Upandershire Ford the armies of Farholde and Fairlyn met savage defeat. At Janderly Farm, a small group of the Fire-Axe’s scouts were caught unaware and slaughtered. But the brilliant Sakkarot quickly realized that patrol was missing and that this could mean an ambush. He used his wolf-riders to flank almost two hundred knights at Westkirk and caught in the vise, inflicting upon the armies of the Borderlands another savage defeat. He presses south now, headed towards the great city of Daveryn. It seems there is nothing to stop him.

After the first year of war draws to a close, winter fast approaches. The horde of the Fire-Axe shelters in the burnt out ruin of the Castle Westkirk. Glutted with stolen loot, they will winter there and reconvene their campaign of destruction in the early spring. The first year of the war has been a great and glorious affair for the Fire-Axe. The second, that is a tale yet to be told.

But Thorn knows that the course of the war is far from certain. King Markadian V called the Brave has finished rallying his army. An army camps near the capital that the Fire-Axe has little hope of defeating. It has been a slow process gathering his knights but now the work is done. With the spring, the king marches north. They head to the Vale of Valtaerna to rally the Order of Macarius to their banner. Thorn wishes them to be denied that aid, certainly, but that will not be enough.

He needs a plan to deal with Markadian once and for all. He has one, but it must be prepared for carefully. This plan is fully detailed in Book Four of this adventure path.

A FALLEN PRIEST

Barnabus Thrane is the closest thing that Cardinal Thorn has to a true friend. Brother Barnabus served with the Cardinal in the priesthood when he was still simply Brother Samuel Havelyn. From the first day he met Samuel, he was overwhelmed by his charisma and intellect. He worshipped the Cardinal and saw with him the potential for greatness. He also witnessed his fall in its entirety. He actually met Bronwyn, saw her beauty first-hand, and recognized Samuel’s gnawing obsession with her. In time he succumbed to the Cardinal’s great influence and was converted to the worship of Asmodeus.

When the Asmodean Purges began, Brother Barnabus was clever enough to lay low. He kept his distance from Cardinal Havelyn ever urging his friend to be more discreet with his ever growing infernal powers. The Cardinal only laughed. “Who can stop me now?”

The answer came swift enough. The inquisition of Mitra found the Cardinal, tried him and cleansed him in a pyre of purification. Barnabus and all close associates of the Cardinal were investigated, but Barnabus had always clever enough to keep no paraphernalia of his devotion to the dark prince of Hell. The inquisition judged him innocent. He alone among the Cardinal’s original cadre of diabolic devotees managed to escape the inquest.

Still, the suspicion ruined Brother Barnabus’ career within the church of Mitra. He was on the fast track to be a bishop before the inquisitors. That was all swept aside by the flames of the Cardinal’s pyre. He turned inward becoming a scholar and slowly shut himself off the world. His hatred burned silently within him.

His life changed again when he was visited by the reborn Cardinal Thorn. He pledged his life once more to the Cardinal. Thus did Barnabus Thrane become the leader of the fifth knot. For years his mission has largely been one of reconnaissance. Because of Barnabus, Cardinal Thorn received constant updates on the doings of Mitra’s faithful. Because of Barnabus he knows their strengths and weaknesses.

But that time is past. Barnabus waits in the great city of Ghastenhall to meet other servants of Cardinal Thorn – the Ninth Knot. He has been instructed to receive from them a plague of almost unimaginable virulence and to use a network of hired thugs and underlings to distribute the plague through the cities of the south. The thugs are dupes believing they are part of a plan to poison nobles in some sort of power grab. What they don’t recognize is that they themselves will become living plaguebearers. They will spread the plague to every corner of Talingerde. And everywhere will be heard the tears of the blessed.
ACT ONE: GHASTENHALL

EVENT ONE: THE JOURNEY INTO TALINGARDE’S HEART

This adventure picks up where Book Two leaves off with Tiadora handing them a small pouch full of emeralds and a handwritten letter from Cardinal Thorn. As they open it Tiadora teleports away her task done.

That leaves the PCs to find a way to Ghastenhall. Likely the PCs have a boat or could get one. They may have the “Seventh Voyage” taken from Traya’s Raiders or either of the barges used by the knots to get to Farholde. They can sail around the Caer Bryr, a safe but long route, or they can brave Lake Tarik and the Godscar River. The Godscar cuts right through a mountain range and connects the great inland sea of Lake Tarik to the open waters of the Cambrian Bay. Or perhaps the PCs can now teleport bypassing the journey altogether.

Either way, the journey is uneventful. The only exception is if the PCs are not quite tenth level yet. If they have not reached tenth level, perhaps craft a few random encounters to bump them up. They should be tenth level by the time they reach Ghastenhall.

THE TEARS OF ACHLYS

So, what are the Tears of Achlys? The Tears are no mundane disease. Instead this pestilence is a very minor self-replicating disease spirit – the least form of plague daemon. A normal illness is mindless. Not so with the Tears. This horror is about as smart as a dog and above all desires to spread. The Tears can lie in wait, manifesting only when it has the maximum chance of infecting others. It is cunning like stalking beast and relentless in its drive to spread. And unless magically cured it kills (in time) one hundred percent of those who catch it. The Tears begins as exhaustion and perennially red eyes. In time, the victim begins to weep intensely salty tears. Dehydration slowly sets in and the victim wastes away to nothing. Effectively, to suffer from the Tears is to die of thirst regardless of how much you drink. It is a terrible death.

The Tears of Achlys

Type disease, contact, inhaled or injury; Save Fortitude DC 16

Onset variable but at least 1 day; Frequency 1/day

Effect 1d6 Con damage; Cure None. The Tears of Achlys can only be cured by casting remove disease on the victim.

Note The Tears has an INT of 3 and can do less damage (perhaps even seeming to be cured) to better infect more victims.

THORN’S LETTER

To My Ninth:

Since that day you arrived filthy and famished upon my doorstep, I have always seen within you great potential. And today you prove me correct once more. You have the Daemon’s Gift! I could not be more pleased. You have in your possession a terrible weapon and now, we must see it used.

Get thee to Ghastenhall with all haste. Therein seek Barnabus Thrain, master of the Stygian Knot. He awaits you in the Library of Ghaster. Ask him whom he serves. He will answer “only knowledge.” Yes, he is a priest of Mitra, but fear not – he has seen the power of our cause. Into Thrain’s hand deliver the Gift. He has agents who will see that the Tears are delivered to where it may do the most good. He will have something for you as well – a token of my esteem.

Even I command you; wait in Ghastenhall, avoiding the eyes of our enemies. You will have one month to rest and regain your strength’s full measure. Use it well. Prepare yourself for your next mission for it shall be thy greatest test yet.

The Tears of Achlys is a scalpel, my Ninth, and with it we will cut the hated Mitran faith from the heart of Talingarde. When the month is past, Tiadora will fetch you and bring you to audience with the Fire-Axe. He will give to you the kernel of an army. Build upon it! Recruit any who can aid you and once your army is ready, with the first gale of winter – you march to the Vale of Valtarna, the most holy site in all of Talingarde.

They will not expect a winter assault. Break the Watchtower of Saintsbridge, invade the Vale and during winter’s merciless heart destroy everyone in that sacred place. Leave no witness making it look like a bugbear raid. Violate the holy heart of the Cathedral of Mitra Made Manifest and leave not a single soul alive. By the time winter is ended, the Tears will be well spread across Talingarde. The people desperate for respite will run to the simpering Mitrans begging for relief. And they will find in your wake only death and ashes, my Ninth.

Do all as I command and the time of our victory draws ever nearer. Commit my commands to heart and then burn this letter.

~Thorn