Way of the Wicked
book one: knot of thorns

A Villainous Adventure Path
by
Gary McBride, words
and
Michael Clarke, art

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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“No one ever became extremely wicked suddenly.”
--Juvenal

ADVANCEMENT

This campaign uses the medium advancement track.

ACT ONE: PRISON BREAK!
  Justly imprisoned, a band of villains must escape from Branderscar Prison. Characters begin at 1st level and by the time of their escape, the PCs should be 2nd.

ACT TWO: INTO THE KNOT
  Cardinal Adrastus Thorn recruits the villains into his organization and gives them an opportunity to prove themselves. By the end of his cruel training, the PCs should be 3rd level.

ACT THREE: FIRE-AXE
  Having judged the villains ready, Thorn sends them on their first real mission to the north to arm the bugbear tribes and aid in bringing war to Talingarde. At journey’s end the PCs should be 4th level.

ACT FOUR: BURNING BALENTYNE
  With the bugbear tribes united under Sakkarot Fire-Axe and well-armed, now the horde needs only a breach in the Watch Wall. The villains infiltrate the watchtower of Balentyne to destroy both it and its commander. Thus completed, the PCs should be 6th level.

What next? 6th level is where the sequel of this tale “Way of the Wicked: Call Forth Darkness” begins.
Introduction

How many times have you saved the world? I’m serious. In all interactive entertainment – computer games, roleplaying games, maybe also live action games and choose your own adventure games -- how many times have you personally saved the world? I suspect that the answer is “too many times to count.” I know that’s my answer.

Welcome to “Way of the Wicked”. Here, the PCs are not trying to save the world. If anything, the world needs saving from them. In short, you have before you an evil campaign.

It is common wisdom in certain circles that evil campaigns never work out. It may sound like fun to be the bad guys but inevitably, the old saw goes, such games always turn into brutal player versus player vengeance fests. If the players do not simply assassinate one another, then they likely wander the world murdering everything unlucky enough to encounter them. If, miracle of miracles, they manage to meet someone else who is inarguably also a good guy and roleplaying will break up the monotony of murder. And who needs a complex plan as a good guy? You have a simple plan – smite evil! How liberating! You work together, defeat monsters, accumulate treasure and levels and perhaps by the end of the game save the world. Again. It sounds wonderful.

And it is. That’s a fine formula for a campaign. It’s such a great formula that I’m sure that if you have been playing RPGs for more than a year or two that you’ve explored that road probably more than once. In “Way of the Wicked” we are going to travel a darker road. We are going to put together an evil campaign that works. This entire endeavor is dedicated to the proposition that evil games don’t have to suck. Yes, they take a little more thought and preparation than a typical campaign. But when done well, they are immensely satisfying. Towards the back of this book, you will find an essay dedicated to helping you, the Game Master, overcome the well-known pitfalls that seem to plague the typical evil campaign. Read it. Take it to heart. Hopefully, it will help you overcome the usual points of failure.

Why bother? Why not always play good guys? The short answer – it is fun to be the bad guy! It’s fun to menace the populace in black spiky armor and to call forth the powers of hell to do your bidding. Bad guys get all the best lines. Bad guys have style. Bad guys get to laugh maniacally as they plot the downfall of those fools who dared oppose them!

Take a moment to look at the cover of this book. The cover (painted by the talented Mike Clarke) doesn’t show someone the PCs get to meet in this campaign. The cover shows what by this adventure’s end a PC in your party could become.

In this campaign, we try our best to put the pitfalls behind us. Here, the forces of evil have a reason to work together. Here, the forces of evil have a purpose beyond simply murdering everything they meet. Here, we provide you with what we hope you agree is a pretty neat wicked scheme. This book is the first of six “evil campaign” toolkits that together will show you how to be the best bad guy that you can be.

So take a break from saving the world. Take a break from restless farm boys and loveable scoundrels who unite to fight an ancient evil. Put on your best black hat and get ready to walk the Way of the Wicked. By the time we’re done, the world will tremble in your wake.

– Gary
BOOK ONE:
A Knot of Thorns

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND: FROM WHENCE THIS DARKNESS

The Kingdom of Talingarde (pronounced Talin-guard) is perhaps the noblest, most virtuous and peaceful nation yet founded. The royalty of this dominion has rescued a dispirited people from the brink of despair and darkness. They dealt with their enemies honorably and their allies faithfully. Talingarde is a paragon of the age, a bright shining city upon a hill. Yet the nation faces now its greatest test. That test is you. It is the ambition of our protagonists to do nothing less than destroy Talingarde utterly.

Why must this be done? Not for the sake of simple malice. This is a holy purpose. Once the people of Talingarde (the Talireans as they are known) worshipped a great pantheon of deities deemed worthy of respect. That pantheon included Asmodeus, the Lord of Nessus, the devil god and master of hell. Asmodeus was not necessarily loved, but he was rightly feared and respected. The new royalty, the House of Darius, are devout worshippers of the sun god Mitra, arch-enemy of Asmodeus. They have elevated the Shining Lord to the head of the pantheon. Further, their regime has outlawed the worship of Asmodeus and purged the cults of the Prince of Hell from their island. No doubt this has made Talingarde a safer place.

Alas, they missed one.

This plot against Talingarde was born in the mind of that one surviving high priest. Samuel of Havelyn always stood in the shadow of his brother Thomas. Born into a noble house, Samuel was the second son of Lord Richard Havelyn and at an early age was given to the clergy of the great god Mitra. He showed amazing promise and proved a brilliant scholar. In time, he would become a great man of the church and was elevated to the rank of High Priest at an unusually young age.

None of these sedentary deeds impressed his father. Lord Richard always viewed his second son as a layabout, inferior to the knight that commander that his first son Thomas had become. Samuel resented the old man but took solace in his scholarly pursuits and his firm faith. Samuel’s life seemed destined for quiet contemplation and distance from his family. Then Samuel met Bronwyn. Bronwyn of Balentyne was perhaps the greatest beauty of her generation. Samuel fell deeply in love almost instantly and, using all his wit and charm, befriended her.

His hope was that with time he could turn friendship into love. And who can say -- perhaps, he might have. But fate would not have it so.

Instead, the High Priest Samuel brought Bronwyn to a family gathering to introduce her to his kin. There Bronwyn met the handsome knight Thomas and love had its way. Their love was fast, deep, true -- the stuff of fairy tale and legend. Samuel was unable to feel happiness for his brother and instead burned with fury and jealousy. This was a personal betrayal of the highest order. Thomas had stolen Samuel’s beloved.

When Samuel confronted his father and demanded that Lord Richard speak to Thomas, the old man only laughed. “What would you have me do, boy?” the old man rasped. “Tell Tom to avoid the most beautiful girl who ever loved him?” Samuel was devastated. As he watched the love between Thomas and Bronwyn blossom, devastation festered into hatred and rage.

Upon Thomas and Bronwyn’s wedding night, Samuel called on Asmodeus for the first time. He invoked the powers of the inferno to curse the young newlyweds. The curse would claim the life of Bronwyn, causing her to die in child birth. Still her child survived and was named for his grandfather, who had died the year he was born -- Richard Thomasson of Havelyn. This young boy would grow to be a great paladin and will become our band of villains’ greatest nemesis.

As for Samuel, his first use of infernal power would not be his last. He diligently pursued the study of the infernal to increase his personal might. He collected a great library of banned and blasphemous books. Even as he did this, he rose to become one of the princes of the Mitran faith -- a Cardinal. But in time he was discovered for what he truly had become -- a cultist of the Lord of Hell. During the Asmodean purges, he was captured, tried, condemned, branded and burned at the stake with his library heaped at his feet. His name was forever stricken from the roles of the church and his family. For any normal man, this burning would have been fatal. But Samuel, thanks to infernal pacts and the resistance to fire they granted, survived the pyre.

Barely alive, this once great man of the cloth crawled naked and scarred from an unmarked pauper’s grave into a sacred mausoleum. Cold and alone, the burned husk invoked a great and terrible prayer to the Prince of Hell. He whispered to the darkness promises of fire, death and retribution upon Talingarde, and the darkness heeded. He was reborn that night merciless and immortal -- a lich. He kept his rank calling himself a Cardinal but took the name Adrastus Thorn. He would have his vengeance.
Cardinal Thorn’s Plan
Cardinal Thorn fled to the savage north and, guided by his devil-god, met another follower of Asmodeus—a great black-furred bugbear war chief named Sakkarot. Thorn would gain Sakkarot’s allegiance by crafting him an infernal weapon—an axe made of hellfire. There in exile, Cardinal Thorn conceived how to gain vengeance and to fulfill his oath. He laughed long, loud and terrible in his icy sanctum when he realized that his plan might just work.

Adrastus would bring war to peaceful Talingarde. He would unite the scattered northern bugbear tribes under Sakkarot and weaken Talingarde’s defenses through fifth column agents. These agents include the PCs. The shaggy barbarians of the north had attacked Talingarde before but had always been repulsed largely, the learned Thorn knew, for five reasons:

- The bugbears are disorganized
- The Watch Wall guards the frontier
- The Holy Order of Saint Macarius provides healers for army and peasant alike
- The Knights of the Alerion serve as the center of Talingarde’s military
- The Royal House of Darius unites the realm

With Sakkarot he would overcome the first obstacle—uniting the bugbears. Then he would break the other four pillars of Talingarde’s might one by one and the land would be left defenseless against the goblinoid onslaught.

Who then in this darkest hour would ride to Talingarde’s rescue? None other than an army recruited from the mainland by a banished scion of the royal family that reigned before the rise of Darius. This scion would rout the bugbears, restore the kingdom and become the new monarch.

And who would be this great paragon’s patron deity? He would revere none other than the unjustly banished Asmodeus, Lord of Order and Ambition. The people would welcome the devil prince back into their hearts and Talingarde would be given into the hands of the fallen. What greater revenge than to rule over the very land than had once turned against you?

It is an ambitious plan and there is much to be done if it shall come to pass. In secret, Cardinal Thorn turns all his mind, might and magic ceaselessly to this great and wicked work.

The Gathering of Pawns
Cardinal Thorn quickly determined that no matter how powerful he may be, he cannot undertake this intricate plan alone. He needed minions! He has decided to gather bands of followers who can each be given individual assignments and will know little of each other. He will have nine of these ‘knots’ as he calls them, one for each circle of Hell. At the campaign’s start, he has already gathered eight. He seeks now a ninth—the Nessian Knot. This knot shall be more elite and ruthless than any of the others. He will recruit this knot from Talingarde’s most infamous jail—the prison Branderscar.

As fate would have it, Branderscar prison this very day receives a shipment of Talingarde’s most infamous criminals. These villains will be shackled securely in their cell and there held for only three days until their sentence can be carried out (be it execution, life at hard labor or inquisition). As they were being transported to the prison, Cardinal Thorn used his substantial resources to research these prisoners. They were perfect! But how can the Cardinal collect these condemned souls without revealing his presence? Yes, doubtless there was no one at the prison powerful enough to stop him from assaulting the place. But that would reveal his hand far too soon.

Instead, he sends one of his greatest servants, the handmaiden devil Tiadora (in disguise of course), to recruit the ninth knot. Tiadora, with her ability to enthrall the guards, would be able to free the prisoners herself. But Cardinal Thorn wants to ensure he recruits the best. So, instead she simply charms her way into a private meeting with a prisoner and gives to one of the PCs a memento to remember her by—a veil of useful items. She informs them of a rendezvous point and then departs. Escaping the prison is our young villains’ first mission.

The player characters will in this first book escape their just fate and join the last bastion of Asmodeus’ wicked faith. They are the bright young hope of infernal evil—dedicated, capable, and ruthless. It will be their purpose to bring down the current regime and restore the Lord of Nessus to his proper place of devotion and dominance here on this island kingdom. Nothing shall save the fools who dared believe they could escape the grasp of Hell.

Talingarde shall burn for its blasphemies.

The Other Eight Knots
Cardinal Thorn’s cult of Asmodeus, The Knot of Thorns, consists of nine cells of conspirators (or ‘knots’)—one for each circle of Hell. The PCs are of course the ninth knot—the Nessian Knot. But what are the other eight knots up to?