

# Concerns Me No More

by Lois Spangler



## Day 12, Early Morning: The Beginning, Fall 434 Tz

-From the personal written accounts of Kastali, Nightwitch-

This day marked the beginning of our work to recover a most important item. I am pleased to have been assigned to this task; it has offered me the opportunity to continue my ascension along the paths of power and knowledge.

In our group, there are five of us in total: Vinida, a Nightstalker; Ossu, a Mindsifter; Erlich, a Nightfiend; Thant, a Seething Knight; and myself: Kastali, a Nightwitch.

Most of us arrived at the pier just moments after the Necromancers finished their work. Erlich accompanied the lords on their mission, to clandestinely execute the captain and crew for the Necromancers to reanimate. The Xandressan captain, boarder, first mate, and navigator were taken, rendered zombies before their minds and memories fully deserted their bodies, and only two or three of the rest of the crew were dispatched in such a manner as to make them useless for reanimation. Such losses, sadly, cannot be avoided.

It became clear that our operation called no attention to the ship; no guards arrived, no curious neighbors came out to investigate. We had managed to work in darkness and silence. It took no time for us to settle ourselves in the ship, a strong trading vessel of Xandressan registry.

Lord Rami, one of the two Necromancers assigned to assist us in our work, speaks to no one but Lord Enmai. Lord Enmai speaks to us only when necessary. However, Lord Enmai does address me as would befit my rank, so I find myself a little more willing to tolerate Lord Rami's indifferences.

Lord Enmai declared that he and Rami would guide the ship towards our destination in the Shyft Isles, though they would not assist us in the recovery of the item which we were being sent to retrieve. It seemed a shame, in my mind; if this artifact was so rare and unique, wouldn't one want to send as many competent combatants as possible in order to ensure success?

The interior of the Xandressan ship was well-appointed and more comfortable than I would have expected. There were bunks instead of hammocks, and the food in the mess hall was of a quality I certainly wouldn't insist on having during an over-water journey. Such frivolity, I fear, makes one soft. And though I would be loath to belittle the skill and cunning of my fellow warriors, if the quarters hadn't been so luxurious, perhaps the captain and crew wouldn't have fallen so easily.

The structure of the ship, however, was beautiful, in the same way that a keen and efficient blade is beautiful. There was no wasted line, no extraneous curve or plank. Everything that was there was necessary, and what was not, wasn't. It was built for speed, though I fear it wouldn't stand up to much more than a naval scuffle. I am confident that it would outrun most, if not all, aggressors.

## Day 12, Evening: The Ship, Fall 434 Tz

It is now clear why the Necromancers chose this ship. The navigation room is one of the most current I have seen, though my experience in ships has been limited. There are detailed charts of the most commonly traveled waters, and there are one or two charts—sketchy, at best, though more than I expected—of the waters around the Shyft Isles.

We chose to wait till the morning to depart, at the time arranged by the captain when she was still alive, so as not to arouse anyone's suspicion. The navigator, in his undead haze, has mentioned something about the dockmaster having a taste for wine; perhaps in the morning he will be addled by a hangover, and not prone to causing us any difficulties.

## Day 13, Day: Departure, Fall 434 Tz

Early in the morning Hali, the dockmaster, came by, checking on the ship before its departure. I was correct in my assumption; the dockmaster was at our ship only for show. He had a nearly permanent wince from what I imagined must have been a brutal headache.

Lord Enmai masterfully puppeteered the captain into dismissing the dockmaster. Then, under cloak of light fog, against which Hali warned us, we left. The seas were calm and smooth as glass, and aside from the mist, our passage was swift into the harbor.

The captain, a woman of approximately middle age, if I am judging the lines of her face correctly, is highly competent. I daresay she may have been more valuable to us alive. As Thant had no interest in rummaging through the items of the dead, I was fortunate enough to be the one to search the captain's quarters. Her travels must have taken her far and wide in life. Among her personal effects were a small blade that is, if I am not mistaken, of Amazon make, and there was a trinket, a bracelet, fitted with charms made of the white and yellow stones the Galeshi find so handsome.

During the journey, Lord Rami has taken it upon himself to control the crew, while the captain remains under Lord Enmai's watchful eye.

**Day 14: Planning, Fall 434 Tz**

The navigator is also competent, but young. He explained to us in his own limited fashion that it will take five days for us to reach the Shyft Isles, if weather favors us and the Dhokonios Strait is merciful. It could take as long as ten days if weather and the Strait give us trouble.

The captain, navigator, and both Necromancers have agreed that the best landing site is a flat cove on the western strand of one of the larger islands; Vinida has taken to calling it the Devil's Elbow. A spur dangling from the elbow itself makes a small natural harbor that should assist in our landing.

There is a debate regarding the hour of our landing. Should we land at night, to stay unseen? How wise is it to tread on another's domain in darkness?

Darkness holds an advantage; we work best under cloak of night, it comforts us, it gives us strength. However, we are landing in a place we have never really seen; the reports from wayward spies and loosely drawn charts can only be partly believed, at best. And the Shyft, with their Mage Spawn lackeys, will be active at all hours, and are familiar with their own territory.

I volunteered that an afternoon landing may be best; Vinida can scout passages for us while there is still light, and we may be better able to see ambushes or attacks in the waning evening. Once night falls, however, we may travel hidden and silently, attracting as little attention as possible. I would rather save our strength for the adversaries that will surely arise from the great stone temple housing the artifact, than waste our energy cutting through the menagerie that is sure to lie within the thick jungle.

What I do find of some concern is a deep fen, running directly across the path we intend to take to the temple which houses the artifact. Considering the width of the island, I wouldn't consider the water very deep, and we will likely find that it is easily navigable. However, water slows us down, and may make us easy targets for an ambush. But we may lose a significant amount of time walking around the fen, and give our enemies enough time to discover our whereabouts, long before we reach the temple.

**Date 15, Day: Dhokonios Strait, 434 Tz**

I was awoken this morning by rough seas. I wonder if hammocks aren't more comfortable for ocean travel; though they may rock, one certainly isn't jostled out of sleep by a wayward swell, at least not as easily as if one were on a flat plank.

I dressed and went up on deck, where Lord Enmai and the captain were at the wheel, fighting the water. A cruel line of black clouds curled at the horizon, and a few fat drops splattered against my face.

I believe it will take us more than five days to get to the Shyft Isles.

I have heard tales of the Dhokonios Strait, most of which I regarded with a healthy dose of cynicism. Sea travel and I do not agree, and I would eat my words now if my stomach were settled enough for it. The cliffs of Delphane loom behind us and to our right, glowing weakly in the cold gray light of dawn. The winds fling themselves off the cliffs and against our ship as if their only purpose were to smash and drown any vessel escaping Xandressan harbors and enter truly open seas. And by the look of the skies, it only promises to get worse.

I can only help but wonder if perhaps it is the inherently magical nature of the isle of Delphane that drives the water and weather to such madness. Was it this inherent magical energy that manifested in Delphane's most famous native son—Tezla? In the very far distance, almost entirely behind us now, I can see the Windsong Monument glimmer—a tiny white point in the far distance, like a star against the black, roiling skies beyond.

The boat is lurching worse now, and Lord Enmai has requested me to return below decks. Though his cowl is low, I suspect he's feeling about as settled as I am.

**Day 17: Anticipation, Fall 434 Tz**

Yesterday was impossible, or nearly impossible, since we have actually made our way through it. Winter weather is always difficult and dangerous through the Strait, the navigator said, when he wasn't busy making sure we didn't drift into stony outcroppings just low enough not to be seen, but just high enough to rip the hull of a passing ship.

It is so diabolical that I cannot help but think the arrangement of such an environment is intentional. Ancient, but certainly intended.

Thant has slowly been growing more and more excited; he is eager to fight again. Vinida spends most of his time in the crow's nest, searching for other vessels. So far we have been alone at sea.

Ossu has spent time reading over the captain's diaries; if he had not reached them before me, I would have been the one reading them. But it seems I have saved myself some time. The Mindsifter has discarded them, I would imagine from boredom. I briefly checked for torn or missing pages, but the books were intact. In fact, they were filled with numbers and values, balance sheets and accounts.

No personal life for a Xandressan captain, it would seem.

**Date 18, Day: Early Arrival, Fall 434 Tz**

It looks like this evening we will land. The captain has reclaimed some time by catching an ocean current; the navigator has been hard at work making sure we have not veered off course. Vinida has spotted some distant flocks of seabirds in the far, far distance. Thant and Erlich have been talking more and more, recounting past battles and achievements. I question the wisdom of letting another know so much about one's self; knowledge is power. Always.

Ossu has kept to himself, occasionally standing on the bridge, watching the endless line of the ocean. I think he's worried about the Shyft Mind Thieves. So far, Ossu has never had to deal with a taste of his own medicine. He knows he is here to counteract the thought-clouding of the Mind Thieves, but since the Sect is the only organized group to employ the art of clouding minds, we have never found it necessary to learn to defend against it. I can only comfort myself with knowing that we employ those tactics of confusion, and so we should be more prepared for them if they should be used against us. For all his failings—the Mindsifter is too reticent for his own good, if he wants to make his way in the Sect—Ossu is competent and capable. Otherwise, he would not be traveling with us.

**Day 18, Late Afternoon: The Devil's Elbow, Fall 434 Tz**

The hour arrived, and we unanimously decided to bring most of the zombie crew along. Lords Enmai and Rami relinquished control of all the undead, save a handful of zombies to tend the ship and assist in navigation, should we fail, to myself and remained behind on the ship.

Devil's Elbow was thick with dark green vegetation; I have never seen anything like it. For a moment I felt we might be fighting trees and vines more than Shyft or Spawn. As we rode in the two small boats—the Xandressan ship would have run aground in the shallow waters—Ossu softly chanted beside me, weaving a clouding spell, making it harder for enemies to notice our arrival.

We were nearly at the shore when, bubbling up from the depths of the water below, rose a number of foul creatures, their fishy arms and hands reaching up for our little boats.

I suspect they had been placed there to overtake any invader; we had not necessarily been tracked to the cove. However, I had to contend with the possibility that we had indeed been seen, and we were walking into an ambush.

I heard Vinida's bow behind me, in the other boat, and Thant's sword slicing through air and more. The captain, who still held most of her mind and spirit, was tearing through Spawn on the opposite side, making the boat lurch sharply. It was safer for me to stay low; the boat was so small and another sword would have cut allies just as easily as enemies. Instead I began to row, bringing us closer to shore, and away from the Spawn.

Ossu leaned out of the boat and began chanting again. His voice was a little higher, a little more sibilant. Was he losing his nerve?

Soon the sea monsters—Deep Spawn, I was certain—began rising into perfect line for Thant or the boarder or the captain to behead them, or for Vinida to plant an arrow between their fishy eyes. Thant demanded that I bring back a number of them into our service, but I refused; Deep Spawn are a liability in anything but water. And I was busy keeping our zombies under control. Though I didn't intend to anger him, it served a purpose; he fights better when he feels he's thwarted.

Within moments the buffeting of the hull against the sand poured us out onto the shore. Some of the Deep Spawn followed, but by then their numbers had been thinned by my fellow warriors and our zombies.

The navigator and I came up to the tree line, looking for a way into the thick growth. With some keen observation and not a little effort on the part of the navigator's cutlass, we managed to open a small way into a greater clearing. I could smell the swamp not far away.

Vinida called for us to move ahead; he and the boarder stayed behind to finish off the rest of the Spawn. I ordered the navigator to cut the opening wider, so Vinida could find it easily, and I gathered everyone through the jungle wall, into a small clearing of tree roots and layers of old leaves.

Thant walked a little further into the jungle, until his boots squelched in mud. He returned and told us he'd run into the fen, but that he'd also found a fallen tree that might allow us to cross.

It seemed to be an unexpected stroke of luck, but once we arrived to examine the log, it was clear that we wouldn't be the first to use it. Wary of another attack, I waved at the navigator to go investigate. He walked up on the log, surprisingly nimble for an undead, and crossed, reaching the other side with no adverse effect.

At that moment Vinida and the boarder caught up with us. Vinida was untouched; the boarder was far worse for the wear.

Then, behind us, back where we'd left the boats, a soft lilting sound floated through the air. It was strange and foreign and very beautiful. And it was followed by the sounds of shuffling in the sand.

Thant leapt onto the log and began to cross, beckoning all of us forward. The shuffling and the music drew closer, and I ordered the zombies across next, in case another underwater ambush was waiting for a larger group of people. They crossed successfully, as did all of us, eventually. And we stood there, at the crown of the dead tree, listening to the piping echoing in the jungle.

Erich let out a yell; something had hit him from the side, in the tangle of vines and branches—and that's when we realized that in order to avoid an ambush, we had walked ourselves right into a trap!

We arranged ourselves in a circle, back-to-back, and saw a number of creatures, apes in tattered clothing wielding primitive weapons, rattled out of the forest around us. They howled and roared; several fell dead instantly from arrows and swords. I placed myself closer to the center of the group; those half-sentient animals that hadn't been damaged too badly I brought back from the dead, ordering them to rise and take their place at our side.

Ossu worked hard to keep the enemy from working together, but I'm afraid they were too stupid for his magic to affect them at all. He kept close to me as we made our way towards the temple, which we couldn't see yet through the trees.

Suddenly Ossu was gone, snatched from behind me in a gout of squelching mud. The mud took on a vaguely human form, fighting to keep some part of itself over the Mindsifter's face, preventing him from seeing, or, more importantly, breathing.

I had to keep Thant from attacking the Animated Mud for fear that he would cut Ossu to pieces. Instead I ordered our zombie apes to pull water from the swamp in their helmets and pour it over Ossu. In the meantime, our other zombies and Thant and Erich returned to tearing apes apart.

The piping grew nearer and more frequent, as if there were more than one musician. The possessed mud lost grip of Ossu, who leapt free of it, but the ape zombies who had been throwing water on it became entangled in its muck. As far as I was concerned, the mud could have them.

The rest of the apes were eliminated; Vinida declared that he had seen glimpses of a tall stone structure not too far away.

#### **Day 18 Night: The Lost City, Fall 434 Tz**

We followed him for nearly an hour through narrow gaps in vines and branches until we came upon a clearing, a space in the jungle free of growth.

It was paved with stone, large square blocks of it. Some were shattered, some were missing corners, but all were overgrown with grasses and weeds and the occasional hopeless sapling. Not much further were the remnants of a long lost city, crumbling buildings bearing the weight of jungle vines and flowers.

The style was unrecognizable to me, ancient in design. The sound of flowing water echoed nearby, closer than the piping now muffled by the growth around us.

Vinida volunteered to scout ahead, though the very top of the temple we were sent to find was visible maybe a half mile away. Erlich declared he would take up the rear and prevent a surprise attack from the mysterious pipers.

Vinida had been gone only minutes before Erlich called out. He described two Shyft, each with a pipe, coaxing a small group of lobstermen out of the swamp we had just crossed.

So there had been an ambush planned, but it hadn't come off in time! Was that because we'd taken the Shyft by surprise?

Vinida returned and told us of a relatively clear path to the foot of the temple, which seemed to be guarded by two Shyft with blowguns—Heart Seekers. Erlich relayed that the lobstermen were getting closer, but that he'd lost sight of one of the Pipers.

We agreed to keep moving forward, staying as low and quiet as we could. I went along with Thant and the zombies, who had no hope of being stealthy.

Vinida led us through twisting streets, amid boxes of stone whose purpose was now completely lost. Were they homes or stores? Taverns or offices? It was impossible to tell.

And then we came upon the fountain. It was completely out of place in the ruins of the city. Its stone was pristine, and it nearly sang with magic. Clean water bubbled up from a floral shape at the top and spilled down to a pool below.

If there had been time, I would have investigated further. Was it a scrying pool? Or was it a place for citizens to drink fresh water, a place to gather and talk as the day wore on?

We moved on through the tight tangle of buildings. The streets beneath our feet were paved. Some streets were in better condition than others, but there was no place within the city where, in its day, a citizen would have walked upon bare earth.

#### **Day 18, Night: The Temple Guards, Fall 434 Tz**

Vinida stopped us. We had not been approached or waylaid by Shyft or Spawn, which was enough to make us nervous, but if we held the advantage, then it would serve us to maintain it.

Two Heart Seekers stood at the foot of the stairs of the temple. We had been told that the artifact was in the interior, but I saw no way to get inside. Vinida explained that there likely was an entrance to the temple at the very top.

I suggested that Erlich and Vinida take the guards out—Erlich by carefully placing himself behind one of the Shyft unseen, and Vinida from a distance with his bow.

Thant agreed. The two warriors placed themselves in position; the moment one of the Shyft faltered from a fatal blow from the Nightfiend, Vinida planted two arrows in the other Shyft—in the head and heart.

Half a moment later, the Shyft rose again and awaited our arrival. We reached the foot of the steps, high and narrow, and Thant verified what Vinida had said. The entrance to the temple was at the very top.

We marched up, unchallenged. The temple was high above the canopies of the trees, garbed in thick vines so that it wouldn't be immediately recognizable for what it was from a distance. It was a large pyramid shape, with sides that stepped up as they went.

At the top platform of the temple were three small holes and a large opening cut into the corners of the floor. A wide set of steps led down from the largest hole.

#### **Day 18, Night: Inside the Temple, Fall 434 Tz**

Thant put one foot on a step, and then the world became a blur of green as the vines on the temple came alive, grasping at us and pulling with unnatural strength.

Swords were drawn on all sides; the zombie Heart Seekers stowed their blowguns and wrapped their hands around the tendrils of the animate vines. In the fight, we lost the navigator, who was torn apart by the ravaging flora. The Heart Seekers held their own, clearing a path for us to reach the stairs unhindered. Thant swung his sword with unmitigated wrath and joy; Vinida stayed well out of his way and used his own blade, knowing his bow was useless. The captain and her boarder kept themselves free of the vines with their own cutlasses; I resorted to my knife, as did Ossu, who was still wary and nervous, looking out for Mind Thieves.

Erlich stood near enough to Thant to stay clear of the vines; he reached into a bag he had slung under his cloak and removed a small flask, which he uncorked. He spread the fluid around himself, leaving a free lane to the stairway, and called to me to spark a flame.

Flame as a battlefield weapon isn't something I can do, but a spark, a simple flicker of flame, is nothing to me—a trick learned in the earliest part of training, decades ago.

Erlich had spread oil over the vines, and I had ignited the fuel.

The vines withdrew, rattling in what I can only assume was pain. We took advantage of the opportunity and dashed down the stairway towards a landing not far away.

The passage became a series of plateaus and ramps. More than once we heard clicks, like things arming, as we traveled down towards the bottom of the temple. Vinida and Ossu would stop occasionally to try and discover the source of the sounds, to search for traps, but it was futile. Erlich found torches along the walls and asked me to ignite those as well.

Thant took the lead; Vinida guarded the rear, in case anyone chose to follow us down. Every so often, and very faintly, we could sometimes hear the sounds of pipes filtering in from outside.

As we neared the final plateau of the walkway, a different sound rose up, the sound of a low voice, chanting. Ossu tensed, and I could see him straining to hear.

**Day 18, Night: Heart of the Temple, Fall 434 Tz**

Thant directed the zombies to move forward and take the lead. The Shyft and the crew did as they were told, and we stayed a few feet behind.

Then we turned the final corner, to come face to face with a man who had no face. All his skin had been removed, though he was robed in the finest linens and spun gold.

The flayed man grinned like a skull at us and told us we were not invited. And then it incinerated our front line.

We lost one of the Shyft immediately; the boarder was consumed beyond recovery. The captain had managed to be only singed, and two other crew members were also only partially damaged. Then our attacker vanished.

Behind him stood a small pedestal, and on that pedestal was a piece of a larger thing, like a stone that has been broken. It was a single jewel, set in fine gold, shining as brightly as the day it was made.

I knew it was a trap. We stood back to back, as close as we could. There was no way to know when the skinned guard would next appear.

It chose to attack and we were all engulfed in flame; the captain, though in the direct line of fire, managed to get her cutlass into the skinless creature. It cried out and the flame stopped.

Thant swung at the place he'd last heard the enemy; though he missed on the way in, he managed to tag the enemy on the way out. A bit of ichor spilled on the ground, leaving a trail for us to follow.

Suddenly the bloody trail turned directly toward us, moving slowly and deliberately, directly into Thant and the captain. Ossu muttered quietly beside me, his enchantments working perfectly.

The two sword wielders elicited a gout of ichor from the enemy, but in retaliation they each received a brutal blast of lightning. Thant fell back towards us. The captain rose no more.

I moved toward the pedestal, but received a fierce shock for my efforts. The skinless warrior was nothing to be trifled with.

Ossu drew me back and pointed at Erlich, who was moving to try the same thing.

Our Seething Knight was in full fury and would not be stopped. The last of our remaining crew fell to him as he cut through them to reach the enemy.

The enemy could no longer hide, and worse, he found himself drifting back towards the blades wielded by my comrades.

Instead of recovering the item, Erlich struck the monster from behind. It shrieked and crumpled, sending out a wave of flame from itself.

Thant was in very bad shape, as was Erlich. I was fine, but Ossu wasn't; he had borne the brunt of the attack for me.

I leapt over him and snatched the trinket from the pedestal. In a single moment, the sound of pipes shrilled loudly from the outside; the dead guard rose to his feet with an angry cry; and the temple shook with some unknown thunder.

**Day 18, Night: Escape from the Temple, Fall 434 Tz**

I called for us to escape; taking Ossu by the arm I dragged him up the first ramp, after which he was able to run on his own. The flayed guard roared furiously and sent blasts of flame towards us; in the flashes of light I saw Erlich creeping up behind the enemy, until all went quiet, and the guard made no more noise.

I never saw Erlich again.

I sent the remaining Shyft zombie ahead, in case something unpleasant was waiting for us at the top of the temple. But reaching the top was difficult enough; all the clicking we'd heard on the way down had triggered stones in the ramps to fall on the way back. Though the Heart Seeker was tripping a good number of those falling stones, enough were left alone to await our own feet. I nearly broke my leg on one of them.

Thant, though badly injured, made his way in front of me, as did Vinida. Ossu stayed back with me, and we were able to ascend with little more trouble. The Heart Seeker, however, lost a leg, and Vinida was running with a heavy limp.

We shot out of the temple, standing amid the burning remnants of the grasping vines. The shrill sounds of the pipes were deafening, and now we knew why: arrayed all around the temple, spilling back into the jungle, lined up in the streets of the ruined city, were rank after rank of Mage Spawn and their Guiding Shift.

And then a shimmering veil fell over me, and I felt a warmth I'd known only a few times before—Solonavi magic is a powerfully wondrous and unforgettable thing. I opened my hand, letting the broken amulet rest in my palm. Lord Heddravalis took it from me, then held my hand. The roar of the Shyft and Spawn dulled as the Solonavi magicked us away. Through the glowing mist, I saw my warriors and cohorts face down the countless enemy. Though their fate is clear to me, it concerns me no more. My task is done, and now I accept from my new masters the chance to fulfill my own limitless potential, completely outside the Sect. For I am certain it is my destiny to one day return to the Necropolis, heart and mind full of my new master's teachings, and destroy the Dark Prophet, taking my rightful place as ruler and master of the Dark Crusade.

Kastali's Diary – Fall, 434 Tz

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**Kastali, Solonavi Seeress - Fall, Day 19**

I am Kastali. Born of the Necropolis, I stood amongst the first warrior-mages to graduate a brutal century-long training program established by Dark Tezla himself. Having mastered the Necromantic arts, I now pursue my dark destiny outside of the barrows and towers of the Necropolis, in the service of the all-powerful Solonavi.

Having accepted the Solonavi's offer to become their diviner, their prophetess of secrets, I now tread the path to knowledge and near-omniscience. In exchange for laboring each day to note in these pages what I witness in their miraculous scrying pool, the Solonavi's collected knowledge of magic and power is mine for the taking. The Solonavi are unable to use the pool themselves, and must rely upon a 'lesser being' for this task.

I am not slighted by their point of view, and merely look forward to the task ahead. While I am bespelled by a Solonavi geas to scrye for them for some twenty years, it is only a matter of time before my work here is completed and the enchantment removed. Then, I shall return to the Sect with my newfound power, claim my position as a Deathspeaker, a leader of the Necropolis Sect, then guide the Sect in its destiny to conquer the Land.

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**The Siege of Khamsin - Fall, Day 20**

To give my masters context for my visions, there are currently three major military campaigns taking place in the Land. The first of these three involves the Atlantis Guild's petty attempts to crush the Rebels of Khamsin. After Lord Andreus' failure to crush the Rebels in the summer of 433 Tz, the Atlanteans have returned one year later, with a vengeance. Combining forces and magical might with the Knights Immortal, these two mighty armies work together to crush the chaotic Rebellion once and for all. While the arrival of Warrior Huhn's Elemental League army will certainly bolster the Rebel defense, the Atlanteans and High Elves are extremely likely to crush and scatter the Rebels by first snowfall.

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**The Sack of Prieska - Fall, Day 21**

The second of the three military campaigns taking place in the Land revolves around Kzar Nabar's plans of conquest. Kzar Nabar, leading a massive Orc army equipped with black powder weapons, has invaded the Atlantean territory of Prieska. While the Galeshi are proud of their coup, having earned Nabar's promise to never lead an attack against the desert-lands in exchange for arming and guiding his warriors through the Blasted Lands, there are many Rebel leaders in Khamsin who are unnerved by the Galeshi's unusual tactic.

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### **The Dark Crusade - Fall, Day 22**

The third of the military campaigns shaking the Land is being conducted by the Elves and Humans loyal to the Necropolis Sect. Dark Tezla himself devised the devious battle plan to cut off the League from outside aid by filling the western river-valleys with undead, and then marching armies into the heart of Elemental territory. The Elves of the League may have once been our brothers and sisters, but they made their choice to stand against us during Tezla's transformation. As result of their poor judgment, they will fall by sword and spell until none remain.

By the end of this year, the Elemental fortresses of Roanne Valle and Stonekeep will be under the control of the Necropolis Sect. Then, with the League dispatched, and the Knights Immortal trapped in the eastern mountains, then it will only be a matter of time before the Dark Crusade forms up and sweeps the Atlantean Empire into the western sea.

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### **The City of Rokos - Fall, Day 23**

Of all the areas that I have gazed upon in the Solonavi's scrying pool, so far there is one place that defies my investigation. While I can explore the outskirts of the city of Rokos with my visions, the Oracle's Tower at its heart defies the pool's scrying power. While I have asked my masters about why I am unable to spy upon the vaunted Oracles of Rokos, the Solonavi stated simply that the magical defenses built into the 'Needle' date back hundreds of years before Tezla was born, and that they are beyond the pool's power to penetrate.

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### **The Fall of the League - Fall, Day 24**

The Bone Legion, a military unit under the command of the vampiric Order of Vladd, marches south into the Wylden. Already victorious at the Battle of Blood Falls, with the Faerie homelands set aflame, Kossak Darkbringer's advance into the heartland of the League meets with little resistance. I've observed bands of Forest Elves, Trolls and Centaurs trying to rally a defense against the Vladd armies at a few key towns and bridges, but they are as but ants before the coming flood.

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### **The Fall of the League - Fall, Day 25**

It seems that the Elemental League has a new ruse. By the command of their 'false Tezla', the Circle of Nine has recalled all of the soldiers, priests and citizens of the League to the safety of the castle of Roanne Valle. The order dictates that the only hope for the League is for all members to hastily retreat within the capitol fortress on the edge of the Sturnmount Mountains. While many of the spineless Wylden Elves do whatever their false Tezla asks without hesitation, not a few Centaurs, Trolls and Faerie – faced with the destruction of their homeland by the armies of the Necropolis Sect – openly question the order, and refuse to retreat!

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**Paradise Lost - Fall, Day 26**

While the Trolls and Centaurs are shocked about the order for the Wylden Elves to retreat to Roanne Valle, more than eighty percent of the Elemental forces are already marching to their fortress hold. With four out of every five warriors moving to make the hard climb up the thousand stone stairs to the top of the Wylden Plateau, the Sect is facing little opposition in the lower Wylden. The Centaur communities, once the fast-moving bane of any Sect plan for invasion, have been left unsupported and outnumbered ten to one. Victory has never been so sweet, as the four-footed fools drop by the dozens before the might of the Dark Crusade!

I have noticed a new book on the second shelf of my book case. I was delighted to find that it was a copy of my journal of my task to prove myself to my Solonavi masters.

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**Gates of Roanne Valle - Fall, Day 27**

Early this morning the gates of the mountain castle of Roanne Valle were closed for the first time in the history of the fortress. I watched in my pool with fascination as groups of Wood Elementals pushed against the doors with all their might, even cracking their trunks in effort to close and bar the five-foot thick gates. While rope-lifts still ferry latecomers up the outside of the northwestern wall, by dusk this fortress will be ready for siege.

I cannot say whether this strategy will save the precious League from destruction but this evening, with the sealing of the Forest Elves into their stone coffin, everything north of the Plateau belongs to the Sect!

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**Burning Trees - Fall, Day 28**

With great pleasure, I watched today as a wave of flesh-hungry undead surged against the Wylden lines, and broke them as a wave through a sand-castle. Faced with thousands of undead climbing the stairs to the top of the Wylden Plateau, the defenders had no choice but to pull back to Roanne Valle. While the League's dragons have been seen in the skies over the Wylden, roaring out their great cries, the Circle of Nine that leads the League has not yet brought them into battle. Only when the great Wyrms land and fight will the battle be fully joined. While there are some signs that the reclusive Mountain Trolls are retreating into the protection of the Sturnmount Mountains, leaving the Forest Elves to rot, there are some indications that League agents are trying to recruit allies and mercenaries from the west in attempt to save their doomed homeland.

The enchanted map on my chamber wall has changed to reflect the dominance of the Sect in lands that were once controlled by the League. The League is the first to fall under the Dark Crusade.

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**The Kuttar Depths** - Fall, Day 29

Upon the recommendation of my masters, I moved the Scrying Eye to the northern mountain ranges, darting amongst the craggy peaks and abandoned mines of the Kuttar Depths. While humans, Dwarves, Elves and Orcs have mined here for centuries, gathering gold and steel, silver and – more recently – Magestone, there is a noticeable influx of Heroes marching into these territories armed for war. Secretly following one party of humans and Dwarves, I discovered that these Heroes are planning to delve into the mountain's depths... to somewhere they refer to only as "the Dragon's Gate".

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**Beneath the Mines** - Fall, Day 30

The quest through the caves is slow going, as the treacherous pits and caverns are filled with Mage Spawn and other perils. The band I am following discovered a wide staircase this morning, with countless stairs descending into the heart of the peaks. Ancient statues holding glowing lanterns light the way at places, providing a path leading to danger – and treasure?

Witnessing a critically injured Troll warrior being dragged off into a dark recess by hungry undead gave the Heroes pause and reason to mourn; for myself, the scene reminded me of home.

Kastali's Diary – Late Fall, 434 Tz

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**Wall-Castles - Late Fall, Day 1**

Under the heart of one of the greatest mountain ranges in the Land, my band of Heroes discovers a giant castle. Built into the wall of a cavern sizable enough to contain the entire floating city of Atlantis, the castle stands as a silent sentry of a race long-past. After crossing a wide ravine filled with gushing, black water, the three remaining Heroes were confronted by a giant, gated castle – abandoned save for a horde of loathsome Mage Spawn. While the Heroes managed to enter the structure by levitating themselves up to a lofty parapet, the maze of lofty rooms and arching corridors may take more time to unravel than they expect.

On a related note, a new book has appeared in my bookshelf. Titled "A Man's Home is His Castle", it details the story of an interesting Half-Orc rogue named Patchwork. It appears only half complete, I await the end of Patchwork's story with interest.

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**Dragon's Gate - Late Fall, Day 2**

The blast of sunlight at the end of the tunnel took me by surprise, even more so than the two Heroes remaining out of the original band of four. After killing the last of the highly intelligent Lizard people that slaughtered their Thief, the Heroes stepped through an ancient gate in the shape of a coiling Dragon – the “Dragon’s Gate” as they called it - and found themselves looking down upon a vast tropical valley.

While the human and the Dwarf make camp upon the first of the stair-ledges overlooking the valley, and prepare themselves for tomorrow’s descent into danger, I spent some time examining the corpses of the dead lizard-folk. Even in death, these Lizard Men seem far more intelligent than the ones I’ve caught and dissected along the shores of the Black Lake. I would like the chance to see more of these creatures, and to learn something of their society – as they would make excellent additions to the Sect’s unstoppable armies.

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**Dragon City - Late Fall, Day 3**

Abandoning the group of Heroes to their fate, I’ve explored deeper into the tropical valley, and discovered conclusive signs that the crumbling structures at its heart once formed the heart of a Draconum city long abandoned to the elements and time. Set within a circle of vast mountain peaks, the city is situated on an island in the middle of a vast, steaming caldera lake. For as far as the eye can see, the whole valley is filled with a tropical forest of lush vegetation – flowers and plants that I’ve never seen before, even amongst the books liberated by my Sect predecessors from the libraries of Atlantis.

Even more shocking than this monumental discovery, is that amidst the buildings, columns, watchtowers and ivy-tangled halls, lope more of the lizard-folk, vile Orc-things with hammers, and an amazing variety of Mage Spawn the likes I’ve never seen or read of before.

**The Awakening** – Late Fall, Day 4

I have dire news to report this morning. An ancient power has awakened deep within the depths of the Dragon City. Whether this is the work of the two Heroes that I abandoned some days ago I cannot say. In an amazing spectacle, hundreds of Mage Spawn have stopped trying to kill one another, and instead are scurrying madly throughout the complex, working to repair buildings damaged by weather and time.

I am both worried and curious about what the Heroes might have unleashed beneath the city, as seeing so many Mage Spawn working in close concert with one another is both amazing and deeply disturbing. Even the Shyft, with their empathic ability to control the monsters of the Blasted Lands, have never achieved anything on a scale as this.

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**Masters of the Valley** – Late Fall, Day 5

On no less than three separate occasions, I have seen a Draconum stalking through the halls of the Dragon City, overseeing the reconstruction of the ancient buildings and halls by obedient Mage Spawn. While I am keeping my distance, as I have no idea whether the creature can sense the Solonavi relic that allows me to spy upon her. I am already astonished about what I have seen.

While the Mage Spawn's leader is obviously Draconum, she looks much different than any Draconum I've seen before. She radiates a level of magical power that only the most powerful of Deathspeakers match, and she calls out her orders to her Mage Spawn workers in a crude and barbaric sounding speech. At any sign of disloyalty or slowing of work, she rips the faulty Mage Spawn to shreds with her teeth and claws, then forcefully promotes another to take its place.

While the Necropolis Sect has little information about the origins of the Draconum, and we are largely guessing about even such simple facts as habitation and social order, I want to say that these Draconum are very different from the warrior-monks we've fought against so often over the last two hundred years. I will observe more over the next few days, but I fear what may happen if the female Draconum discovers me spying upon her efforts to rebuild her city.

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**A New Species** – Late Fall, Day 6

By using a language-translation spell given to me by my Solonavi masters, I have been unable to unravel the mystery of the dragon-woman's speech. This powerful being calls herself Drakona, and appears to be amongst the first of her kind to awaken from some kind of long, magically-induced slumber. Whether these Drakona were placed into this state by a curse or some other kind of spell is unknown to me. But the idea that she numbers amongst the first – and perchance, the weakest – to awaken within the crypts beneath the Dragon City is a startling revelation!

The conclusion to "A Man's Home is His Castle" has become available to me. I was very curious to see the mention of another amulet piece. I wonder if this is connected to my own quest which obtained this position for me. If they are connected, it would appear that the Solonavi are willing to risk much to gain these artifacts.

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### **Interrogations – Late Fall, Day 7**

I have discovered the fate of the two Heroes I followed from the Kuttar Depths, and it is not at all what I expected. Amidst a sizable marble temple ringed by spiring columns and littered with stone benches worn by centuries of wind and weather, the female Drakona spent part of the morning interrogating her prisoners.

The first warrior, a Dwarf covered with burns and festering wounds, sat grimly upon the bench, answering her questions one after the other. Who is he? Where did he come from? Who was his master? What was the purpose of the strange pistol he'd brought with him into Dragon's Gate? Through all of these questions the Dwarf sat numbly, almost like a Zombie, obediently answering her questions. But when she asked about the origin of the black powder, he balked at her question – and was decapitated for his hesitation.

The second warrior, an Atlantean mage from Caero by his dress and bald-shaved head, had to answer a similar stream of questions, and lasted far longer than his counterpart. What are the crystals set into his head? What magics is he capable of with the crystals? How is it that humans are using magic, when they are typically a magic-weak race? And lastly, what is this 'Tezla' that he venerates as his master? While he answered these questions honestly, when he truthfully stated that Tezla, a human, is the greatest wizard to have ever lived in the Land, the Drakona hissed at him – and then savagely tore out his heart with her claws.

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### **A Deadly Raid – Late Fall, Day 8**

Five bands of Heroes fought their way into the valley this morning, having traversed the length of the underground passages to reach the Dragon's Gate. Within minutes of their arrival on the stairs, bands of lizard-folk, vile Orcs and other creatures charged forth to engage them in the leafy jungles. Then, to aid against the invaders, the Drakona used a powerful magic to summon forth other strange, powerful creatures out of thin air – beasts made entirely of fiery Magestone, or four-armed Slag Trolls armed with clubs and whips. Setting these beasts to defend the beaches of the isle, the Drakona then stalked into the depths of the Dragon City, and organized the defense with the chieftains of the varied Mage Spawn tribes.

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### **Kzar Rabahan – Late Fall, Day 9**

One of the most feared Orcs in the history of the Land is Kzar Rabahn. Throughout the summer of 424 Tz, Rabahn burned and looted cities along a five hundred mile march, and went out of his way to poison wells and burn fields along his route. While the Orc war-leader was eventually killed by the Elemental champion Kossak Mageslayer, Rabahn's

name spoken aloud is still enough to make the inhabitants of Khamsin, Rokos and Prieska shudder in horror.

After months of raiding, Rabahn's horde ended up in the heart of Atlantean territory. Just as Rabahn was about to lay siege to the Citadel of Luxor, Galeshi riders managed to lead Kossak into a position where Rabahn would be forced to engage him in single-combat. In the end, Kossak killed Rabahn, dispersed his horde, and collected and hid the Kzar's remains to ensure that he could never be brought back from the dead.

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### **The Broken Tusk – Late Fall, Day 10**

While the Black Grasses tribe number amongst the groups of Orc Raiders best known to the inhabitants of the Empire, few know that the Black Grasses are merely part of a larger tribe called the Broken Tusk. The newest leader of the Orc Raiders, Kzar Nabar, is a member of the Broken Tusk, and leads one of the most powerful and traditional castes of Orc society.

Years ago, a number of upstart tribes attempted to stand up against the Broken Tusk. The members of the Broken Tusk responded in two ways – first to soundly defeat them in the yearly dominance challenges, and then drove them out of the Fist homeland with violence and fire. The homeless Orcs eventually settled in caves north of the Blasted Lands, and became the Cave Orcs. While the Cave Orcs have recently made an appearance within Raider society, the Broken Tusk works hard to ensure that the upstarts have no chance to gain any stature or station in Orc culture.

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### **The Rules of Raiding – Late Fall, Day 11**

Although a way of life, raiding is a privilege in Orc society. Every year at the tribal gathers in the southern Fist, all of the Raider tribes come together to determine if one warrior is powerful enough to defeat all comers and be named the Kzar.

Once the festival is done, and the corpses buried or burned, tribes of Orc warriors then head south into the civilized territories, raiding and taking everything that isn't nailed down. By the end of the summer the survivors return to the Fist with their loot, and participate in another age-old ritual – a series of bloody dominance battles that determines which Orc tribe gets the best share of the spoils. While every tribe ends up with something, traditionally members of the Broken Tusk tribe gets better loot than everyone else, purely because their warriors are better equipped and better trained to win the bloody challenges.

Another book has appeared in my shelves titled "The Price of Freedom". This is a story of a dwarf named Sig Eightfingers, his involvement with the construction of a powerful Golem and his fight for freedom.

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### **Clurch Players – Late Fall, Day 12**

The Clurch Drum is an extremely important part of Orc society. As all Orcs have an intuitive sense for music, and Orc children are trained from an early age to recognize the “language” of Clurch music, drum-playing is found at nearly every level of Orc society. Clurch players are treated like bards by the Orc folk, as they are able to verbally tell the tale of a famous Orc Raider, while drumming out the background “scenery” of the battle the Orc is fighting in.

On the open plains of the Fist, Clurch players can relay messages quickly and easily with their drums, including the location, strength and fighting capacity of an enemy tribe or army. Within human cities, to avoid the problem of echoes, Clurch players switch to shrill bagpipe-like instruments, and communicate with key pitches and squeals to get information to their warriors.

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### **Orc Warlords** – Late Fall, Day 13

Hoping to increase their own power and prestige, some Orcs break away entirely from Orc culture, taking their warbands south to seek gold and power. While fighting for the Human, Elven and Dwarf warlords may not be seen as a most honorable path by Orc society, the battle, strategy and command experience that an Orc gains in fighting through dozens of southlander battles often allows an Orc to win dominance challenges when he returns home again. More than a few Orc Warlords have returned home to become Khans of their home tribes.

Kzar Nabar, who went missing for almost five years after a failed battle near Venetia, returned home stronger than any other challenger in 434 Tz. After only one season of trials, he became the Khan of the Broken Tusk tribe, and then won the right to be Kzar over a nearly uncountable horde of Orc warriors.

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### **Rivvenheim Mountains** – Late Fall, Day 14

Moving away from the throngs of noisy Orcs filling the borders of Prieska, I then moved my scrying sight to a place that few have ever laid eyes upon and lived – the homeland of the Knights Immortal. While my masters have advised that I do not spy upon the High Elves, I must find a way to see even one of their famous cities, even if just for a short time.

Viewing the mountains from a distance, from even as far away as the flowing waters of the Roa Galtor, they are a series of impossibly high peaks forming a wall between the Land and all points east. These peaks have been defended by the Knights Immortal for all of recorded history, and they have fought back hordes of Orcs, brash mercenary warparties and even Atlantean armies armed with the best weapons early Technomancy could create. From here, the mountains seem almost unreal in their height, and the five-hundred foot high Wylden plateau is only a single footstep before the mass of the unscalable wall.

### **Vurgra Divide** – Late Fall, Day 15

The Vurgra Divide has been controlled by the Sect for decades, and is filled with loyal humans wanting their chance at fortune, power and immortality. Originally rumored by many Sect tongue-waggers to be a gift or a bribe from the Knights Immortal, the huge glacial mountain valley is beautiful, pristine, and contains some of the best farmland in this part of the world. As the Divide stands at the northern edge of the Rivvenehims, it is a territory patrolled by Sect and Knights Immortal troops alike.

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### **Twin Passes** – Late Fall, Day 16

While the Rivvenheim Mountains have long stood as the border between the lowlands and the vaunted heights of High Elven society, North Pass and South Pass mark the only two direct highways leading into the well-defended realm. While South Pass has Stonekeep at its bottom, and North Pass bears the Wellkeep at its foot, at the top of both passes are a series of impenetrable High Elven fortresses that no army has ever broken.

While the Wellkeep – set on the edge of an apparently bottomless mountain chasm - has forever stood as the property of the Knights Immortal, South Pass currently stands in the control of the Elemental League, as the League and the High Elves have constantly captured and recaptured the contested keep for hundreds of years. With the recent Sect invasion of the Wylden homeland, it may be a matter of time before the Bone Legion turns to capture Stonekeep from the tree-lovers.

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### **Sturnmounts** – Late Fall, Day 17

To the south of the Rivvenheims lie the Sturnmount peaks, traditionally owned by the surly and hateful Mountain Trolls. While the Mountain Trolls have long been involved with the Elemental League, their long-term feud with their Forest Troll cousins has existed for far longer.

While the Sturnmounts are not even remotely as high as the Rivvenheims, and access to the east is cut off by the peaks, these low, rocky mountains do provide a backdrop to the southeastern edge of the Land. Believed to be uplifted at the same time that the Wylden Plateau was raised in a cataclysmic earthquake, the Sturnmounts are largely barren, with little usable metal or resources within. The Forest Trolls largely avoid the area, not just because of their angry cousins, but because the forested lands of the Wylden far better suit their way of life and diet.

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### **Freyhaven, City of Trees** – Late Fall, Day 18

I attempted to push my sight into the heart of the Rivvenheims today, and even had a few moments where I saw trees, cliffs and watchtowers set amongst the beautiful setting. But as soon as I reached an invisible line, my sight grew cloudy, and it felt as if lightning were about to strike within my scrying chamber.

Just as I managed to break my link with the pool, a flash of lightning and thunder tore through the scrying room. With the wail of ice-cold wind, books flew from their shelves, candle-sticks overturned, and I was tossed about the space like a discarded puppet. When the storm faded, I received a visit from my Solonavi master, who advised me to never spy again on the affairs of Rivvenheim...

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### **Darq the Corrupt** – Late Fall, Day 19

In the depths of my scrying pool, I've discovered something completely unexpected today. The war-leader of the Order of Vladd, the Vampire-General Darq the Corrupt, rode into the heart of the Kzar Nabar's camp this morning. His only companions were his four "mistresses" – a group of female Heroes who have long performed deeds of murder and theft in his service. Oddly enough, Kzar Nabar was not surprised to see him, and welcomed Darq and his 'ladies' into his tents as if Darq were an old and honored friend.

It turns out that Darq was visiting to negotiate a deal. In exchange for Nabar leading a major Orc attack against the Atlantean-held Citadel of Luxor, Darq would have his women sneak into the impregnable tower during the attack, and steal the bones of the famous Kzar Rabahn. Once the bones were spirited out of Luxor, Darq himself would reanimate the dead Kzar and offer him into Nabar's service. Apparently, Darq's newest Vampire – Kossak Mageslayer, once a master of the Elemental League and now merely a puppet servant of the Order of Vladd – disclosed the secret location of Rabahn's bones. If Darq can accomplish such a thing, he would gain major status within the Sect by unleashing one of the greatest scourges the western Land has ever known back into the world of the living.

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### **Preparing the Siege** – Late Fall, Day 20

With the kingdom of Prieska now firmly under Orc control, Nabar quickly rallies his troops for the assault against the Atlantean-held Citadel of Luxor. As the massive castle is only a day's run from here, every Orc in the entire army – whether warrior, cook, taskmaster or campfollower - is preparing for the trek. Nabar has whipped his khans into a frenzy with promises and threats. By the time the first wave of mounted troops reaches the Citadel this evening, Nabar's eager armies will be ready to do nearly anything he commands.

To the point of view of the Atlanteans at Luxor, this must be seen as an unconventional strategy. In the thousand years that the Citadel has stood, no army has ever taken the gates – and the Orcs must be suicidal to throw their army away against such a well-entrenched enemy. But with my secret knowledge, whether Darq's Ladies succeed in their mission will be the real test, as the resurrection of the greatest Orc warleader in memory will surely turn the Orcs from a deadly horde to an unstoppable tide of destruction.

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### **The Battle of Luxor Part One** – Late Fall, Day 21

Thousands of Orcs began the siege of Luxor this morning, surging forth in disorganized lines towards the waiting defenders. While the Atlanteans, brave in their conceit, opened the battle by sending waves of mounted lancers into the ranks of the Orcs, Half-Trolls and Goblins. While the tactic that has historically worked well against the Hordes in the past, Nabar's Orcs used a barrage of fuser shots, black-tipped arrows and flaming Ankhar dung to drive back the mounted charge. While hundreds of Raiders died in the mounted assault, Nabar's fearless front-line command style inspired the Orcs even more.

The next trick shocked the Atlanteans even more, as their best mages were thwarted at the heart of the battle. Before the Orc's first main charge, by Nabar's command, sleds of raw Magestone – collected by Goblin slaves through the long trip in the Blasted Lands – were cracked open and dispersed to Goblin Runners spread throughout the front lines of the Raider army. While the magical radiation quickly sickened the Goblin slaves, the energy from the raw stones created a huge magical disruption field, protecting the front lines from magical assault. Behind the lines, the spell-crazy Chaos Mages gorged themselves on extra Magestone, breaking crystal and cracking teeth in an orgy of preparation for enacting their primitive magics.

Then the Horde struck the walls of Rokos, like giant waves smashing repeatedly into a sea-wall, and the entire battlefield dissolved into chaos.

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### **The Battle of Luxor Part Two – Late Fall, Day 22**

For a day, a night, and the following day the Orcs attacked the Citadel of Luxor, throwing everything they had into breaching the six gates, catapulting members over the walls, or using explosives or Ankhar charges to crack the stone. But as the sun began to set beyond the western hills, Kzar Nabar abruptly gave the order for the Orcs to withdraw. As the battle had largely been even, with thousands of casualties on both sides, many Orcs were relieved to be beyond the range of the crossbows and war-Golems.

That night, on the open plains to the west of Luxor, I watched as the Orcs held a huge victory feast. Many were confused about why they were drinking celebratory grog when the castle still stood. But when Kzar Nabar told his armies about the true nature of the battle – about successfully stealing the Kzar Rabahn's bones from within Luxor – the slow-witted Orcs were stupefied. But once he held up the sack of bones for all to see, and then presented his Necropolis ally, Darq the Corrupt, the camp erupted into an impatient fury. Every Orc there knew that if Rabahn was there to fight alongside them, the Horde could never fail, and crowded around the ritual circle for a chance to see history happen.

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### **Bloody Rituals – Late Fall, Day 23**

In the darkness of a new moon, Darq the Corrupt and his four Sect mistresses conducted a dangerous ceremony. While I have been part of many such rituals during my training, resurrecting someone that has been fifteen years dead is beyond the scope of even the most powerful Necromancers. But with the aid of an ancient book stolen from the depths of an ancient Dungeon near Cainus Mons, Darq cast the spell, drenched the corpse in the

blood of a hundred human prisoners, and then called upon the power of Dark Tezla to bring the Orc warleader back from the dead.

When the corpse stirred, and stood, not an Orc within a mile made a noise; many believed at first that it was nothing more than a mindless Zombie. Then, when Rabahn stood, raised his arms skyward and howled his legendary war-cry to the assembled horde, the Orcs went crazy with battle-lust and fear, and began a bloody revel the likes has not been seen south of the Fist since the time of Rabahn's first death!

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### **Kzar Rabahn's Army – Late Fall, Day 24**

Rabahn's first desire, upon being brought back from the dead, was to personally avenge his own death – by personally confronting and slaughtering the Elemental Champion, Kossak Mageslayer in single combat. When Darq revealed to Rabahn that Kossak was already dead, transformed into a Vampire, and was being used to lead a massive attack against his own Elemental peoples, Rabahn was satisfied. He still wanted the chance to fight him again, which Darq – as one of the leaders of the Order of Vladd - agreed to arrange in the near future.

Rabahn's second desire was to avenge the tricky Galeshi that played a key part in his death before the gates of Luxor. By towing the Troll champion behind their horses on wooden sleds, the Galeshi were able to force a battle between Rabahn and Kossak before he was fully prepared. He demanded that Nabar's horde turn and attack the Galeshi territories immediately, or that Rabahn himself would take leadership and do it himself. Respectfully, Nabar explained that he had bartered with the Galeshi – and that in exchange for their scouts and black powder, that Nabar himself would never lead an attack against the Galeshi territories for as long as he lived. Rabahn stood as if to attack, and Nabar was within seconds of facing the greatest warrior in Orc history in single-combat.

But when Darq mentioned offhand that Rabahn himself had made no such promise, and that if he were to take a small war-horde of elite Orc warriors into the deserts led by Zombified Galeshi Scouts, it would likely be little more than a few days work to hunt down and punish the people responsible for his death. Nabar, pleased with this turn of events, offered to Rabahn five hundred warriors of his choice from the Horde. Rabahn eagerly accepted this, wished Nabar luck in his attack against the Atlanteans – and then left the tent to choose the members of his new Horde!

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### **Three Hordes – Late Fall, Day 25**

This morning, I watched as the two main Orc armies divided, and headed in the directions of their new conquest. Kzar Rabahn, taking five hundred Ankhar and Cave Lizard riders, rode north and west towards the Galeshi deserts. Kzar Nabar, skirting around to the eastern edge of the Citadel of Luxor, fanned out his war-horde across a five-mile stretch to catch any and all Atlantean scouts and spies in a massive net of swords and riders.

In Prieska, many of the more unfavored tribes – those not deemed worthy to fight at Luxor by Nabar, or not invited to join in Rabahn’s private Horde – began the process of intensive raiding throughout the countryside. Moving quickly, this “third army” began collecting all of the food, supplies, gold, jewels, weapons, armor and Technomantic devices they could find within the borders of the barbarian country.

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### **Khamsin and Atlantis – Late Fall, Day 26**

As the Orcs will take some time to get to their destinations, I spent the day scrying in two places – first within the besieged Rebel capitol of Khamsin, and then in Emperor Nujarek’s Imperial Throneroom.

The combined Knights Immortal and Atlantean armies have pursued their war plans to a devastating effect. While the Rebel city of Khamsin still stands, virtually all of the rest of countryside is under control of the invaders. While the city of Wolfsgate overlooking the River Khamita still holds its own, the troops within the city are few enough to act as little more than a hindrance against the might of the Atlantean invasion. While I expect the walls of Khamsin to fall in time, the real battle will be for Castle Khamita itself, which should be an extremely tough nut to crack.

In Atlantis, word of the Orcs marching on Rokos has already been received by a mage-writ message. For the history of the city of Rokos, whenever an Orc horde has reached within range to strike, the citizens have always fled to the safety of the Citadel of Luxor., Now, with the Orcs fanned out between Luxor and Rokos, many of the citizens of Rokos are fleeing to Atlantis, cramming the roads with carts and wagons filled with people seeking shelter from the coming war.

Shortly before midnight, Emperor Nujarek and Prophet-Magus Osiras publicly exchanged heated words during an Imperial gala, bringing on a storm of controversy amidst both the Imperial Courts and the chambers of the Atlantis Guild. While I was not close enough to overhear the brief dispute, it is clear that their squabble has already had an effect on the nobles of Atlantis.

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### **The Raider Tide – Late Fall, Day 27**

As Kzar Nabar’s Orc horde marches within view of the city of Rokos, their victory seems certain. While the Atlantean military within Rokos seems to be exceptionally well-trained, and more units and golems were being flown into the city every day by a massive Atlantean sky-castle, the sight of the screaming Orc Horde set the remaining inhabitants of the city into a panic. Kzar Nabar, confident in his victory, ordered the Orc Khans to set up camp and to prepare for the weeks of battle to come.

To my point of view, so well versed in the ways of military tactics, the Orcs are guaranteed to take Rokos, and will then be able to turn their wrath upon the capitol city of Atlantis itself. While the leaders of Rokos already put out the call for the members of the

Order of the Griffin & Cross, and the warriors of the Order of the Sable Obelisk to return to the city they had sworn to defend, a few hundred extra warriors and Heroes will not be enough to slow Nabar's undefeatable horde.

Moving my scrying eye back to Emperor Nujarek's throne room, I caught the entire length of an intriguing conversation. Finishing their argument from the previous evening, in the name of Tezla, Prophet-Magus Osiras ordered – against the wishes of Emperor Nujarek – that the Atlantean armies attacking Khamsin to immediately withdraw. The Emperor is furious, but must obey Tezla's commands. This act will certainly leave their High Elven allies high and dry in Khamsin, and may doom the campaign against the Rebels!

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### **Rebel Vengeance – Late Fall, Day 28**

With the Atlanteans suddenly pulling out of the battle in Khamsin, double-timing back to the capitol city of Atlantis as fast as they can march, the Knights Immortal are faced with a situation unlike any they've been before. Betrayed by their allies at the hour of triumph, the Knights Immortal suddenly found themselves outnumbered more than ten to one by the vengeful Rebels. Having already ordered the destruction of every Rebel city in town for fifty miles, and having singled out most of the older city buildings with fire attacks out of pure spite, the Knights Immortal find themselves with a peculiar choice: withdraw to save their lives at the cost of their honor, or stand and fight and be destroyed to the last warrior.

In time, the High Elves made their choice, and I watched all night with fascination as the Knights Immortal armies at Khamsin prepared to fight and die with honor.

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### **Rise of the Phoenix – Late Fall, Day 29**

The Knights Immortal armies lay broken and smashed. While it cost the lives of thousands of Rebel and Elemental warriors to finish the battle, the Rivvenheim warriors have been defeated and cut down to the last warrior. From my vantage, the Knights Immortal's honor is intact; they fought with all their might against insurmountable odds, and died without fear in an alien land. For the Rebels, a new era has dawned on their cause. While they are still facing incredible opposition by the Atlanteans, they have proved that nothing will keep them from the path of freedom.

Now, the Rebels are working together to drive out any Atlantean stragglers, and establishing a firm border around the edges of their Khamsin homeland. This third assault against Khamsin may well be the Empire's last, as with this great defeat the era of the Rebellion is past – and the Black Powder Revolution arises from the ashes like a fiery phoenix.

Observing the Black Powder Revolutionaries over the last few days has allowed me to compile notes of their leadership, philosophies and strategies. These have been compiled into a new scroll with the other factions.

**Rabahn's Revenge** – Late Fall, Day 30

While finding Kzar Rabahn's horde at first was difficult, as the shifting sea of sand that covers the Galeshi homelands is difficult to navigate, the plumes of black smoke rising over a distant horizon soon gave me a good idea of where to look. Upon moving my magical sight to the location of the fires, I found that the Orcs had indeed found the seven Ringed Cities of the Galeshi, and had already put a number of them to the torch.

While Rabahn's Orcs made quick work of the unprepared Galeshi – who had foolishly believed that their deal with Nabar would protect them for years to come - by nightfall, the Galeshi were fleeing in all directions, leaving behind their homes and their riches. Their valiant warriors were cut down by the score, all in the hope of creating a defensive screen to prevent their families from being slaughtered by Rabahn's vengeful Orc Raiders.

Kastali's Diary – Early Winter, 434 Tz

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**The Moonborn** – Early Winter, Day 1

Tonight, under the light of the full moon, all of the scheming finally becomes apparent. Much as Darq fearlessly strode into Nabar's camp only a few weeks ago, tonight walked into the Galeshi refugee encampment without even a sword lifted against him. At the heart of the camp, the seven leaders of the Galeshi awaited him, with their venerable leader bedridden at their side. Having already sent word of his coming by means of a shadow wolf, Darq merely stood and made his proposal. If a hundred Galeshi warrior volunteers swore service to Darq, and became his vampiric slaves, then Darq would use the vampire warriors to slaughter the Orcs looting the Seven Cities.

The Galeshi, having no idea that Darq was behind the entire plan, agreed. With their people being a day away from annihilation by the Rabahn's Orcs, the seven leaders agreed unanimously to his terms. Many of the veteran warriors cried out with hatred at the idea, saying it was better to fight and die cleanly than become a thing of darkness. While in the end no true Galeshi warrior came to stand at Darq's side, more than two hundred desert fighters chose to accept his offer, and to embrace dark power in order to free their people of the Orc menace. When the choosing was done, and the deal sealed, Darq and his Ladies began the process of converting the warriors into an army of vampires – thus beginning the creation of Darq's Moonborn army.

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**Prince Darq** – Early Winter, Day 2

In a bloody spectacle, Darq the Corrupt's vampire army mowed down the Orc horde like spring wheat before the scythe. Feasting upon fallen Orcs to regain their strength, it was only a matter of time before the vampires confronted and destroyed Kzar Rabahn. As the Orc killed his Vampires, Darq's mistresses raised them from the dead, sending them back into battle again and again, until Rabahn was reduced to little more than bloody meat. Once the the Orc Kzar had fallen, Darq strode amongst his feasting vampires, kicking them aside from the carcass as if they were hungry vultures. With his own hands, he reclaimed Rabahn's bones himself, placing them into a bloody sack, and then entrusted the relics to the care of his four dark mistresses.

And once the Orcs were eradicated, Darq personally led his vampire army right back into the Galeshi camps, and specifically slaughtered the seven leaders of the Galeshi peoples. Claiming the deserts in the name of the Order of Vladd, and ultimately the Necropolis Sect, the Vampire-Lord proclaimed himself Prince Darq, and that all the lands of the Galeshi were now his own.

Darq didn't lift a finger to stop the refugees from fleeing further into the trackless deserts, and ignored the blood oaths of the Sunborn Galeshi swearing to destroy him and his vampires. Returning to the greatest of the burned-out cities, now the Vampire sits quietly in the throne of its leaders, pondering his destiny. Greedy stragglers from the lower levels

of Galeshi come to swear fealty to him, some hoping to betray and destroy him. But there he sits without saying a word, ignoring them, with only a smug smile occasionally.

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### **The Fall of Fairhaven** – Early Winter, Day 3

With the Wylden fully under Crusader control, and with most of the armies of the Elemental League sealed within the stone coffin of Roanne Valle, now the Dark Crusade begins the next phase of their attacks. Spreading west like a deadly plague, the Crusade has already occupied the Atlantean countries of Fairhaven, brutally executing the leaders in public spectacles of bloodshed and torture. While the Crown Prince of Fairhaven managed to escape the deadly snare, and may be organizing some kind of resistance, the Crusade domination of the delta between the Roa Sanguine and Roa Kaiten is complete.

While Atlantean sky-castles drift lazily in the skies above Duncastor, there is only so much a Sky Captain can do with a handful of mages, a few dozen Dragonfly machines and a few hundred warriors and combat Golems. Below them, the tide of the Crusade armies already spreads thick, raising the dead as they go to fill their ever-widening ranks. The Dark Crusade has truly come to the Land, and it is only a matter of time before the Crusade rules over the entirety of the known world.

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### **An Unexpected Visitor** – Early Winter, Day 4

The Orcs began their first attacks against the walls of Rokos this morning, getting a feel for the strength and strategies of the defenders. Kzar Nabar is a cunning one, wasting his weaker warriors in order to measure the worth of the soldiers and generals guarding Rokos. While some of his tribes, angered that he would throw away their lives so easily, have slipped from his camp and escape back towards Prieska to loot and steal for themselves, Nabar still has enough warriors to do the job.

In Nujarek's Throne Room, I came upon a council meeting between Nujarek and his trusted generals – the Throne Lords of Atlantis. While they spoke of strategy, and how the retreating Atlantean armies from Khamsin should arrive to defend Atlantis just as Rokos fell, none of them were expecting the visitor that shimmered into place at the foot of their table.

A Solonavi mage, resplendent in his magical armor, addressed the Emperor and his men as would an envoy to a king. The Solonavi, in plain and simple terms, offered that their long-hidden sanctuary within Rokos – the Black Needle, or the Tower of the Oracles of Rokos – was in danger from the Orc menace. They offered an alliance to the Atlanteans, to fight side by side against the Horde, without price or oath from any man or woman who fought at their side. Nujarek, after a few moments of conference, agreed to the alliance.

Within the hour powerful Solonavi beings suddenly appeared on the walkways and towers of Rokos, lending their strength and magics to the Atlantean defenders. While the Oracle's Tower is still shielded from my scrying sight, reports from a number of soldiers

on the street note that a small army of masked warriors armed with powerful Solonavi weapons now man the gates to the Needle, and seem determined to hold the walls against any outsider.

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### **The First Day** – Early Winter, Day 5

While at first the Orcs showed a great deal of trepidation at the appearance of the Solonavi in Rokos, Kzar Nabar's speeches of gold, treasure and slaves beyond count appealed to the baser natures of many of the Raider warriors. While tales had circulated for weeks about Nabar's frequent visits from a Solonavi during the march to Prieska, Nabar dismissed the tales as rumors. Stating confidently that he had banished the Solonavi "advisor" after the being's plan to set aflame the libraries of Alrisar had failed, Nabar swore that he would personally oversee the destruction of every Solonavi defending Rokos!

At noon, the first major Orc attack took place, coming at the city in two prongs, from the west and the south. Hoping to keep the city walls intact for as long as possible, two armies of Atlantean warriors met each of the Raider spearheads in the grasslands outside the city. The battle between the armies was formidable, and for more than four hours the din of battle, the rattle of the Orc's fuser rifles, and the flares from magical explosions reverberated in the area. Above the battling armies, the sky-castle *Tezla's Fury* did their best to fire upon the enemy, and report troop movements with dozens of mage-writ messages.

In the end, the southern army defending Rokos broke and fled for the city, with the Orcs in close pursuit. The western army fared better, driving the Orcs into a retreat with waves of blasts from Storm Golem cannons and Solonavi spells. By the time the sun set over the beleaguered city, a unit of Half-Trolls had somehow managed to tear down one of the massive gates and most of the supporting foundation.

Unless the defenders of Rokos found a way to seal the breach, tomorrow morning Rokos would be surely be filled with Nabar's Raiders.

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### **The Second Day** – Early Winter, Day 6

With wisdom born of desperation, Captain Khazic of the sky-castle *Tezla's Fury*, crash landed his flying tower into Rokos, just inside the gap in the breached wall, effectively bottling the hole with more than twenty thousand pounds of metal and Magestone.

In answer to the Atlantean act, the Orcs let out a full assault against the South Wall anyway, with Nabar declaring again and again that the structural damage caused by the earth-quaking landing of the sky-castle would weaken other sections of the ramparts. Much to the defender's chagrin, Nabar was right. By swarming the south wall a second time, the Orcs were able to climb and gain control of a section of the walls for almost an hour.

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During that bloody hour, Nabar's Shamans and Chaos Mages were able to melt the very rock the walls were built upon with powerful spells, and ultimately collapsed a three hundred foot section of Rokos' defensive perimeter. While the Solonavi were able to eventually clear the area of Orc invaders, more than two dozen Solonavi were killed during the course of the battle. Tomorrow's battle will surely decide the fate of Rokos, as there is little left between Nabar and his bloody victory.

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### **The Final Day – Early Winter, Day 7**

At first light, the Orc Clurch drums began to rattle out their war-beat, and the whining drone of the Clurch Pipers began to take up their wailing war cries. More than ten thousand Orcs lined up, ready to begin the charge. Within the city, maybe half that number of veteran soldiers remained to face their charge – but every able bodied man and woman stood ready with arms and armor to take up the fight against the invaders.

Kzar Nabar strode out of the front ranks, ready to give the order to charge. The world stood before him, and the oldest city in the Atlantean Empire ready to fall at his command. Through the course of a year Nabar had returned to the Fist, become Kzar of all the Orc tribes, and led his people successfully into the underbelly of the Empire. Now, with Rokos cracked before him, and Luxor cowering behind him, Nabar had achieved goals that even Kzar Rabahn had never dreamed of, and would be hailed as a Hero and an ancestor by all the members of the Broken Tusk.

But when Nabar's old Solonavi advisor manifested behind him, and vengefully chopped him into two pieces with a broadsword made of burning light, Nabar's dream died in an instant. And the Orc tribes, suddenly without their leader, dissolved into panicked chaos.

Stunned by the sudden change of events, the Atlantean generals did the only thing they could do – they ordered the full-scale attack against the panicked Orcs, with orders for no mercy, no pity, and no prisoners. The warriors of Rokos broke from the city and fell upon the scattering horde with a vengeance, and drove amongst the Orcs as wolves amongst sheep, dividing and felling them one group at a time.

While many Orcs survived and fled the slaughter, heading north towards the safety of Prieska as fast as their legs could carry them, more than five thousand Orc warriors died that day. The Solonavi leaders watched silently from the walls, studying the ebb and tide of combat that steadily wore away Nabar's army, then returned satisfied back within the Needle.

At the end of the day, the mortals hoisted Kzar Nabar's remains onto the highest tower of Rokos in celebration of the Atlanteans – albeit treacherous – victory.

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### **The Arrival In Atlantis – Early Winter, Day 8**

When the Atlantean armies double-timing from Khamsin returned home, many had expected that they would be seen as the saviors of the Empire. But with the stunning turn

of events at Rokos, and word of the Rebel victory at Khamsin having already reached the Imperial Courts, the men and women of the armies found themselves in a strange position. Denied the chance to destroy the hated Rebellion by order of the Prophet-Magus, and secondly denied the chance to fight the Orcs by the intervention of the Solonavi, they returned to their barracks dispirited and demoralized.

While all of the Atlantean soldiers I studied were ultimately pleased that Rokos would stand, and they knew their time would come in driving the Orcs from Prieska, the strange chain of events left many of them feeling betrayed and powerless. The fact that the Rebellion was now stronger than ever before – just when the fifteen year war had almost come to a close - made many of the soldiers extremely angry. To come home as something less than a war-hero, to a city where every tavern was filled with excited conversation about the Empire's new Solonavi allies, left many of veteran warriors in a black mood.

With the loss of their two leaders, Khan Rabhan and Khan Nabar, the Orcs have fallen into two separate sub-groups, the Broken Tusk and Shadow Khans. I have detailed the new groups and added my notes to the faction shelf in my book case.

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### **The River Bridge** – Early Winter, Day 9

My scrying led me this morning to a sizable battle between Atlantean and Dark Crusader forces along the eastern shores of the Roa Kaiten. At a river bridge between the countries of Fairhaven and Duncastor, the Atlanteans are holding out against a tide of undead, Bloodsuckers and human Crusaders fresh from the Vurgra Divide.

While Crusader forces eventually managed to beat through the defenders and claim the bridge, something completely unexpected happened. Just at the point where one of the vampire-generals loyal to the Order of Vladd reached the midspan, the length of the bridge detonated in a series of violent black-powder explosions. When the smoke cleared, and the millennia-old bridge finished collapsing messily into the torrent of the Roa Kaiten, both the Atlantean and the Crusader armies were separated on either side of the river, which doesn't have another reliable crossing point for at least a hundred miles in either direction.

While I want to blame the Freyhaven Prince for the event, I believe that the Rebel presence must come from another source, as destroying the ancient stone bridge required a great deal of powder. After today's events, I'm determined to find out who so deftly sabotaged the tide of the Dark Crusade.

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### **The Sky-Castle *Callius*** – Early Winter, Day 10

An Atlantean sky-castle, the *Callius*, entered the battle today. Settling down in a protected field like an errant balloon, the Atlanteans disgorged a fleet of powerful new golems and a small army of battle-mages equipped with Technomantic weapons against the Sect forces Trapping the Crusader army against the waters of the Roa Kaiten, the

Atlanteans fought with a vengeance, destroying every Necromancer that they could get within the range of their guns and spells. Eventually, the Atlanteans drove the Necropolis forces upriver, into the thick forests to the north of Fairhaven.

However, the day was not over for the Atlanteans. Out of the sky, riding giant Griffins like the legends of old, came a strike-force of Knights Immortal warriors. With silent efficiency the war-party landed amidst the Atlantean mages and golems, slaughtered easy three or four dozen Atlanteans, and then took to the air again before the mages could regroup.

Through the course of this strike, right under the nose of the *Callius*, the Knights Immortal carried out the attack with a grim, honorable efficiency that only a High Elf could maintain. I wonder how many other similar attacks are happening throughout the eastern edge of the Empire, and what Emperor Nujarek could possibly do against such a rash of well-executed military strikes.

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### **Resistance** – Early Winter, Day 11

While observing a meeting of Crusader Necromancers and their Vampire-Generals within the captured Council Hall of Fairhaven, I happened to witness the arrival of a breathless Dark Crusader messenger. Without hesitation, the young warrior relayed the message – that the Dark Crusade either retreats from the country of Fairhaven, or every last one of them will die within Fairhaven's borders.

While the Necromancers initial response was to have a good laugh over the message -- the eruption of armed warriors and mages from a secret passage in the central fireplace caught everyone in the room off-guard.

The devastating attack by the combined force of humans, elves, trolls and dwarves took only minutes to complete. At the end of the battle, the savaged Vampires and Necromancers were drenched with lamp oil and lit aflame to prevent resurrection. With the aid of my scrying pool I was able to follow the band of mysterious warriors down the length of their secret tunnel and out into the thick forests surrounding the capitol city. As the group moved into the sunlight, I caught a glimpse of a red-skinned Troll in the trees ahead, wearing a tattered cloak around his shoulders. Before I could react, the Troll mage suddenly turned and looked right at me, as if he could somehow sense my presence. With a wave of his magical staff, I was suddenly jolted out of my trance as the scrying pool frothed and boiled before me.

As soon as the pool settled, I immediately went back to the grove, but the warriors and the mystic Troll were already gone. Even the ancient Drakona were unable to detect my presence - what manner of sorcery does this red-skinned Troll possess?

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### **Counterattack** – Early Winter, Day 12

Six units of the Crusaders' advanced scouts have moved across the river at a ford to the north, and began to search the area, sniffing out any hidden Atlantean forts and garrisons. By following the scouts for the course of a day, there were signs everywhere that the Knights Immortal windriders have attacked every Atlantean outpost along the northern edge of the client-state of Duncastor. While the larger cities stand untouched, virtually every outpost and supply station along the major roads has been attacked and burned by aerial forces.

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### **A Discovery** – Early Winter, Day 13

Answers have come to light through today's events. While following the actions of the Captain of the sky-castle *Callius*, drifting some seven hundred feet above the forest floor, I was lucky enough to be scrying when a series of events unfolded. When one of the Dragonfly riders noted a disturbance in the forests below, the Captain ordered the *Callius* moved closer to allow for more investigation. As sky-castles can only move along ley-lines, he could only get so close to the disturbance without risking plunging to the ground far below.

To my astonishment, from within a thick grove of trees, levitated up a small tower, perhaps a third the size of the *Callius*. The tower was of crude make, mere stones and wood knitted together by mortar and spike. At its base were a series of Magestone pieces, all glowing with a bright power. While the enemy castle was already out of firing range, and was somehow able to move off of the ley-lines without any trouble - the colors flying on the parapet indicated that the flying keep belonged to the Renegade Warlord, Raydan Marz. Add to that the dozen preening Griffons nested within the central bailey of his tiny sky fortress, and the source of the attacks against the Atlantean outposts became obvious – an alliance between the Emperor-hating Marz and a group of flight-capable Rivvenheim warriors. While the question of sending Dragonflies to pursue the tower were discussed, the Sky Captain of the *Callius* didn't want to risk any of his men against an enemy with unknown military capacities. Raydan Marz had personally defeated Emperor Nujarek in a pitched battle during the first year of his rule, and was known across the Land for his diverse tactics and well-equipped allies.

In the battle for Ashon Rye, where Raydan Marz, Kossak Mageslayer and Darq the Corrupt battled some three years ago, where Kho'Ta and Carmine Sura were killed in the course of a bloody five-way combat, the Magestone from that Magestone mine had allowed the victor – Raydan Marz – to build his own floating tower. And with the tales of the legendary Sphere of Jorandal being in Raydan's possession, he clearly had the ability to fly his castle anywhere he likes in the Land, without regard to ley-lines or borders. A dangerous man, that Raydan Marz. A very dangerous man.

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### **A War in the Wylden** – Early Winter, Day 14

Nothing appeals more to my darker side than watching swarms of pit-fighters, undead, and vampires raging through the flaming remains of a Centaur village. While the determined inhabitants of White Falls fought bravely against the Crusaders all morning, a

mere hundred Centaurs could not stand against the might of Dark Tezla's wrath. Even the red-skinned Mage-Troll defending the village eventually succumbed to the tide of hungry zombies, her corpse devoured by the Crusade's dogs of war. I only hope I witness the same fate for the red-skinned male Troll I saw just a few days ago. Now the Centaur village burns, and another pillar of smoke rises into the skies, joining the other dozen burn-sites visible from the highest tree-tops.

The Elemental retreat into Roanne Valle may have saved them from initial destruction, but the attacks against the Faerie, Centaur and Troll enclaves throughout the Wylden must be doing untold damage to the already fractured political structure of the League.

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### **Venison** – Early Winter, Day 15

Tonight, Kossak Darkbringer stands before the gates of Roanne Valle, with the Crusader army sweeping behind him into the night. Once the greatest champion of the League, this Vampire Troll stands as a puppet to Darq the Corrupt and the Order of Vladd – and stands as the key to the destruction of the League. By the power of the Vermillion Crown relic that Darq wears an entire world away, the thoughts of slave and master are as one. From everything I have researched over the last few years, from Kossak's capture at Darq's hands, to the failed quest by Mageslayer's nephew Huhn to rescue him from the Necropolis, to Kossak's creation as a Vampire, all of it is made possible by the powers of the Vermillion Crown.

To celebrate his arrival, the Order of Vladd is holding a venison party tonight – exclusively collected from more than a hundred Centaurs slaughtered at the battle of White Falls!

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### **Enigmas** – Early Winter, Day 16

Within Roanne Valle, I have made an astonishing discovery. The same red-skinned mage I encountered in Fairhaven only a few days ago has somehow made his way to the Elemental capital, and is making a presentation to the Circle of Nine. While the meeting room is shielded against all forms of magic, including my magical means of scrying, I am unnerved by what I have seen. There is no way that a Troll could make his way from Fairhaven, through the Crusader lines, and up to the Wylden Plateau and into the castle without opposition. While there is some chance that the mage-Troll may have ridden part of the way on dragonback, his access to Roanne Valle without being seen is extremely alarming and may show a lethal chink in the Crusader's plans. Is there some secret way into the Valle from the Sturnmounts? Or is there an underground passage leading from the forests up into the heart of the Elemental citadel?

I have already begged my masters to let me somehow pass along the knowledge I have gained to the Crusaders. But they state that I am now forever neutral, and that I am not to be allowed to change the destiny of the Land.

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**Thwarted** – Early Winter, Day 17

In exploring the castle of Roanne Valle, through the hundreds of beautiful, stone-carved rooms and passages that make up its labyrinthine interior, I have discovered something that disturbs me greatly. Deep within the stone, there are entire areas – areas the size of a small city – which are proof against magic and my own powers of scrying. While I know that the Glade Priestesses have this kind of capability, I thought it would be reserved for the deep forests and natural places in the Land, and not in the heart of this makeshift Elemental tomb. Whatever lies within those spaces is beyond my reach, and no one seems to enter or leave these areas, as if they have been quarantined away from the real world.

What do the Elementals have prepared? Are these the true lairs of their dragons, perhaps the breeding grounds where the young dragons and vulnerable eggs are kept safe?

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**Stonekeep** – Early Winter, Day 18

Stonekeep Castle, to the north of Roanne Valle by a dozen leagues, is controlled by Elemental armies loyal to the Spirit of Tezla. Having won their right to hold the castle after soundly defeating the armies of the Knights Immortal last spring, the Elementals have fared against weather and Crusader attacks to keep this valuable fortress in their possession. While the High Elves are likely sealing themselves in their peak-castles against the harsh winter to come – as snow is already scattered throughout the Rivvenheims – the busy Elemental armies in Stonekeep are bustling about, preparing weapons, supplies and plans for the months to come. They plan to start sneak attacks against the Crusader forces and supply lines in the lowlands, and the combined force of Forest Elves, Troll, Centaurs and Faeries has made some talk about continuing to raise a strong resistance against the invaders – for the good of the Land, rather than for the good of the Spirit of Tezla.

Amongst my own people, this kind of talk would be a punishable blasphemy. Here in Stonekeep talk of choosing to serve the Land over the wishes of the Elemental Prophet-Priest Tremelen and the Spirit of Tezla seems to be a topic spoken by nearly everyone – and amazingly is a philosophy toasted and praised at Stonekeep's long dinner tables every night. If this kind of fracture exists here, in one of the two fortresses remaining to the Elementals, then it is only a matter of time before the League is truly destroyed from within.

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**The Amazons** – Early Winter, Day 19

This morning I moved my scrying to the peaks of Nepharus Mons, the homeland of the Amazons. Ever since Ribhan Crag brought his Amazon slave back from a scouting mission a few years back, I've been intrigued by these warrior-women. With their reverent belief in the powers of animal spirits, the near-religious mental states they achieve when training for combat, and their complete physical and psychological domination of the "husbands" their mancatchers capture in battle, at first glance the Amazons seem little more than superstitious savages. But when I look at the architecture

of their centuries-old stone buildings, the offering-sites and totem-temples found scattered throughout the forests of Cainus Mons, and the ritual scarification that accompanies every phase of the life of an Amazon, I am beginning to understand why these warrior-women have grown so talented at the skill of battle.

Additionally, the libraries of the Necropolis hold tales of the origins of the Amazon peoples. One book in particular speaks of a band of human Elemental priestesses that left the Wylden centuries ago in order to pursue their own unique version of Elemental totem magic.

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### **Captured Males** – Early Winter, Day 20

With more than eighty tribes living on the slopes of Nepharus Mons, the Amazons at first seemed to be a very divided people. Each tribe, devoted to one or more animal spirits, is led by an Amazon Queen chosen through trial of combat. While the lesser Amazon warriors may earn the right to have a handful of husbands to serve as their slaves, the Queens seem to have an endless harem of husbands ready serving them hand and foot. The males are fed food mixed with a special plant-sap that inspires a kind of dazed loyalty and worship. Only the newest husbands not yet fully under the control of the drug are prone to outbreaks of free thought and violence.

While I was provident enough to witness an escape attempt by a young human male from his owner, watching the entire tribe's warriors gleefully hunt him down like a wild boar and stab him to death with spears convinced me that any attempt by the Crusaders to capture the Amazon homeland is going to be a difficult one. The Amazon Queen that led the hunt, a powerful young woman named Valia, seems to be well respected by her fellow warriors, and was respectfully deferred to by the other Amazons when the time came to deliver the killing blow.

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### **Totem Warriors** – Early Winter, Day 21

I witnessed the initiation of a pair of Amazon warrior-maidens under the light of the full moon. In a fire-lit temple clearing, two girls prepared for battle under the careful observation of more than a dozen Amazon priestesses. One girl, armed with twin silver knives and wearing only a headdress of raven feathers, seemed to be far more avid for the battle than her opponent, a sword-wielding warrior wearing bracelets and necklaces of jaguar teeth. But shortly before the battle began, both of the maidens invoked their totems, asking for the spirits of the wild to enter them and help them in the coming fight. While I've witnessed Elemental priestesses call in vain to the Land to protect them, just before they died at the hands of my old Necropolis warband, these maidens seemed to be truly infused with the very totem-spirits they called upon for aid.

Blessed with the ferocity and traits of their totem animals, the two maidens clashed in bloody combat, slashing and feinting in a dizzying dance of death. In the end, the jaguar maiden won by rendering her opponent senseless through a bloody series of bone-snapping kicks to the head and throat. While both girls were declared by the priestesses

as full warriors of the tribe, able to hunt and kill alongside their sisters, only the jaguar-warrior was given the honorary mancatcher staff, indicating that she alone would be allowed to catch her first 'husband'.

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### **Powder Mines** – Early Winter, Day 22

I've learned something astonishing this morning, as I followed a band of Amazon warriors through the thick forests of Nepharus Mons. On the far outskirts of the massive mountain, there are entrances to underground mines - filled with Dwarves and Northlanders! While the Amazons are guarding the site, none of the outsiders are showing any signs of dazed, drug-induced loyalty, and are going about conducting some kind of mining operation!

Upon looking at the piles of dust-filled sacks stored at the entrance to the mine, it seems that I've discovered a source of the Revolutions' explosive black powder. From everything I can detect, the underground mines have been operating for years, and the network of caverns and tunnels spreads for miles underneath the mountainside. While the Amazon's role in the Revolution has long thought to be about freedom, it seems that the Amazons have more involvement in the uprising against Atlantis than the masters of the Crusade ever thought!

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### **Queen Corella** – Early Winter, Day 23

Amongst the different Amazon tribes, clashes for dominance and superiority are constant. While the dozens of tribes each follow their own calling, there is one Amazon Queen who strives to conform all of the warrior-women to her own vision. Queen Corella, the leader of a tribe devoted to the dire wolf that haunts the northern forests of the Land, seems to have at least ten other Amazon Queens under her yoke. Throughout the course of a day I followed this beautiful but cold-hearted woman and watched as she meted out justice, arranged for the building of new warrior-temples throughout her territory, and even helped herself to 'husbands' belonging to other Queens.

But most surprisingly of all was the revelation that came when I watched her undress and prepare to bathe privately in a sacred hot spring. Like a ghost, a powerful Solonavi spirit moved from within her flesh and manifested into solid form beside her in the steaming pool -- and then discussed the day's events in detail, analyzing her every action and offering advice on how to continue to dominate all of the Amazons under her rule. At the heart of their conversation, the two conspirators discussed Amazon Queen Valia in detail, and how she would need to be removed in order for Corella's rule over the Amazon territories to be absolute.

My examination of the Elven Lords is as complete as my scrying pool allows. This self-appointed peacekeeping force is determined to stop chaos wherever they find it. How they define "chaos" however, is another matter.

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### **The Occupation of Prieska – Early Winter, Day 24**

While many of the Orcs have retreated into the Blasted Lands, or are trying to cut their way through Rebel territory to return home with their loot, there is a sizable number of Orcs who are not just looting Prieska, but seem to be setting up homes and permanent structures. Having gained more gold, food, slaves and weapons than they can carry, a number of Orc Khans have chosen to stay in Prieska and occupy the territory, rather than return to the Fist and split the spoils with the Broken Tusk tribes.

The Shadow Khans plan to weather out the coming winter in Prieska, and then continue their raids into Atlantean territory next spring from a reliable base rather than trekking across five hundred miles of territory into uncertain situations. Most astonishing.

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### **The Oracles of Rokos – Early Winter, Day 25**

The Oracles of Rokos have made a presentation to the rulers of Rokos, and sent missives to Atlantis apologizing for their centuries-long deception. The Oracles, acting as the speakers for their Solonavi masters, state that Rokos is still an Atlantean city under Atlantean rule, and that only the Needle and its compound will stand under Solonavi protectorate. The Oracles state that they will continue to offer divinational information to Atlantis, just as they did for Tezla, provided that Atlantis acts in good faith back towards the wizards of the Needle.

To my knowledge, for centuries the Oracles have acted as the advisors of nations in the western half of the Land. While Sect histories report that Tezla never truly trusted them, the Oracle's prediction of his birth and divination of his remarkable career shaped his life in amazing ways. Even the ancient Kosian warrior kings were advised by the Oracles, as their hooded 'seers' were sworn to be revered and holy. By the mere warning from the Oracles, a brewing civil war between the western and eastern Kosian Empires was finished overnight, as the superstitious Kos feared the wrath of the Oracles, and dreaded what would happen to them if they stood against the hands of fate.

While the truth behind the Oracle's nature is now revealed, and their ongoing quest throughout the Land to discover young men and women of every race who possess oracular talent is now decipherable in the face of their larger plan, the origins of the Solonavi are still unknown, as are their goals and purposes. But their link to the Oracles of Rokos is now revealed, and something of their true power has been revealed.

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### **The Offer of a Lifetime – Early Winter, Day 26**

Emperor Nujarek today received a private visitor – a Solonavi the color of burning fire, of a kind that I've never seen before. This Solonavi, in a hushed conference amidst the Emperor's private garden, made the Emperor an unbelievable offer. In exchange for a favor at a later time, the Solonavi swore that they would help Emperor Nujarek personally lead Atlantis to conquer every other faction of the Land. Their list of destruction included the stalwart Rebels, the invading Crusaders, and even the vaunted High Elves of Rivvenheim. All this would be given in exchange for a single favor to be

named later on in time. For a single favor, the Solonavi will give the world to Nujarek, and the alliance between Atlantis and the Solonavi will result in ensuring the eternity of the false Tezla's cursed Empire.

Nujarek, overwhelmed by this offer, asked for a day to ponder the offer. The Solonavi agreed, and then vanished without a trace. Within minutes, Nujarek spoke of the entire affair to the false Prophet, Osiras. Osiras, as the head of the mages of the Atlantis Guild, and as the lying voice of the Atlantean's false Tezla, told Nujarek that he must accept the Solonavi's offer for the good of Atlantis. Nujarek agreed, and made preparations to receive the Solonavi the following day, to cement the alliance that would guarantee Atlantis' place in history.

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### **Nujarik's Answer** – Early Winter, Day 27

Emperor Nujarek and Prophet-Magus Osiras met with the Solonavi this morning in his private garden. Much to Osiras' surprise, Nujarek gave the Solonavi the opposite answer.

*No.*

For a man gripped by greed and power-madness, who was seemingly appointed to the throne of Atlantis because he was a loyal puppet of the Atlantis Guild – Nujarek seems to have thrown away the chance of a lifetime. The Solonavi, towering over the Emperor in a blaze of angry, bloody light, told Nujarek that he would not get a second chance, and that he would ultimately regret not accepting the offer. Nujarek told him that he likely would, but that it was time for humanity to have its own destiny, and for Atlantis to forge its own path, rather than relying on non-Atlanteans to pave the path for them.

The Solonavi vanished in a flare of fire; Prophet-Magus Osiras stormed out of the garden in a blind fury, muttering to himself that as he put Nujarek on the throne, he could tear him off just as quickly. Nujarek, the villain of Atlantis, sat on his marble bench, alone, gently holding his scepter of rule. The look on his face – somewhere in-between resignation and wisdom – reminded me of the old pictures of Tezla. Powerful, determined, and regal. Above all, Atlantean, before anything else. The world is about to change. I can sense it.

My notes, though brief, on the Solonavi are complete, and can be found with the other groups and factions of the Land. Also, a new series of scrolls have been added containing information on the history of the Land, from the Age of Mist to the current Age of Chaos. They are available at the very bottom of my bookshelf.

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### **The Solonavi's Spell** – Early Winter, Day 28

Last night, the Solonavi performed a masterful spell from within their tower in the heart of Rokos. With a powerful flare of power, every ley-line in the Land – the source of all magical energy for mages of every race and culture – flared with a great bright light. When the blinding radiance ceased, every mage in the Land with any aspect of talent for

magery could feel that the amount of magical energy emanating from the ley-lines had doubled or tripled, and that the raw potential for spell-crafting had just been amplified beyond mortal reason. At the heart of this effect stands the Needle in Rokos, as the tower seems to have been originally built centuries ago for this exact purpose.

At the sight of the shining lines of light, citizens throughout Rokos are in a panic; the roads are jammed with people fleeing the city. While the Solonavi have still made no claims on Rokos, they are not stopping people from leaving, nor are they calming any of the rumors that they mean to destroy any Atlantean left within three days time.

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### **The Fall of Luxor** – Early Winter, Day 29

Yesterday, a flight of more than a hundred glowing, Solonavi warriors were seen flying over the western wall of Rokos. Within minutes, I found them again, laying an aerial siege to the Citadel of Luxor. Within the space of an hour, every Atlantean Mage, Golem and Warrior in Luxor was dead, destroyed by the power of the Solonavi.

This morning, the Solonavi announced to every king, queen, leader and tyrant throughout the Land that they have the only true Tezla; that his soul lies with them, and willingly serves their cause. To add to this outrage, they also state that the Tezlas of Atlantis, the League and the Sect are all false. With respect to my masters, these Solonavi speak lies; the only true Tezla is Dark Tezla, and nothing will ever convince me of the opposite. I will follow my orders and do my duty, as I have sworn to do these next twenty years – but I will never follow a Solonavi Tezla, and nothing will ever convince me that your Tezla is anything more than a lie.

Rokos lies abandoned, save for fools and those loyal to the Solonavi. Atlantis is in chaos, and dire times lie ahead.

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### **The Revelation** – Early Winter, Day 30

Emperor Nujarek, standing before a sea of more than a hundred thousand Atlantean citizens, both common and noble by birth, gave a speech tonight that would ultimately shape the history of Atlantis.

With Prophet-Magus Osiras seething in the shadows behind him, Nujarek told the crowd everything he knew about the events of the last few weeks, ranging from the reasons for the retreat at Khamsin, to the victory at Rokos, to finally the offer of the Solonavi to Nujarek for ultimate power.

Nujarek spoke honestly, in that he said that he believed that Atlantis should be for Atlanteans, and that for outsiders to take the reins of human destiny was wrong. He admitted with uncommon candor that he did not expect to live beyond the next few days; that his enemies were many, and there where whispers of assassins around every corner. But he vowed, as the reigning Emperor of Atlantis, that he would spend every last hour with dignity and purpose.

He swore that in the next few days, he would be sanctioning the creation of a new army - the Imperial Legion – made up of volunteers rather than raw recruits. An army whose ranks were filled with humans devoted to fighting for Atlantis, ready to retake the lands stolen from the Empire by the Rebellion, and ensure that the Orcs were driven out of Prieska once and for all.

He swore that he would create a military order that would rival even that of Tezla's famous armies, and that the army would work hand in hand with the mages of the Atlantis Guild at every victory – but would rely upon the experienced generals for leadership, rather than the mages who knew spellwork better than tactics. He swore that he would lead Atlantis into a new era where Tezla's vision for the Empire would be assured, and there would never again stand a threat that would undermine Atlantis from within. He swore that if he would lead this fight for as long as he was able, against all odds, and that he would fight as an Atlantean in the dark times ahead, rather than a puppet of dark powers.

The crowd roared and surged before him, driven to passion by his words, believing in his message of humanity's manifest destiny, and fulfilling Tezla's dream of one Empire across the width of the Land. They cheered and shouted, and found purpose amongst darkness that had claimed their souls for the last fifteen years.

But then the crowd abruptly hushed. From behind Nujarek came Tezla's Avatar Golem. Expecting an assassin, when Nujarek turned and readied himself to accept the blade, he was shocked to see Tezla hovering before him. He dropped to one knee in homage immediately, and bowed his head.

When Tezla put the crown on Nujarek's brow – Tezla's very own crown, from when he was the first Grand-Magus of Atlantis – the crowd went absolutely wild. When Nujarek stood, blazing with the enhancing fire of Tezla's magical blessing, the populous of Atlantis were near ecstatic with fervor. A hundred thousand citizens chanting Nujarek's name, young and old, rich and poor, with soldiers by the thousands screaming to be the first to be taken onto the lists of Nujarek's Imperial Legion. For the good of Atlantis, the good of the Empire, in Tezla's name, they would unite and raise swords to destroy the false Tezla's in an undeniable purge of sword and Technomancy.

In that moment, my masters, Atlantis was reborn and became the Atlantean Empire. Emperor Nujarek, whether genius or fool, is no longer a puppet of the mages – but a true leader, ordained and loved by Tezla, and revered as Tezla's son by all of the Atlantean people.

The year has become 435 Tz; and it becomes the Age of Power.

## **Kastali's Diary – Winter, 435 Tz**

### **Fort Wyndham - Winter, Day 1**

Last year, Black Powder forces managed to conquer a critical outpost along the river Vizorr. While the initial fighting brought the once-neutral Xandressan river-traders into the war, as Duke Skala ordered his cannons to shell the ships before they could bring their food, supplies, and war-golems to the aid of the beleaguered troops at Fort Wyndham, since then the Xandressans have been preparing to instigate their own kind of revenge.

This morning at first light, I observed in my scrying mirror as the Xandressans ferried no less than four warbands of Atlantean troops to the eastern shore of the Vizorr, just downstream from the main gates of the Black Powder fortress. While I am unsure of the outcome of this battle, as the forces seem to be evenly matched, the victor will surely lay claim to the Grange Valley. If the Revolutionaries manage to hold it against the original owners, then the battle lines extending from along the southern border of the Amazon, Northlander and Khamsin territories will hold.

If the warriors at Fort Wyndham fail in their defense, then the Atlanteans will effectively divide Khamsin from their other allies, and will break trade routes and supply lines as effectively as a burning branch scatters a column of ants.

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### **Sturnlander Coast - Winter, Day 2**

While the forces of the Dark Crusade have successfully invaded nearly every part of the Wylden forests, the forces of my former masters are scattered thin in places. After observing a band of Elemental warriors making their way down the western side of the Wylden plateau with ropes and harnesses, I watched with interest to see how far this group would get before they intersected with the Crusader patrols.

While their straight and determined path of travel seems to indicate the warband is heading towards the distant Atlantean citadel of Darthion, the consistent scouting by their Ranger spies seems to be more in tune with evaluating Crusader troop movements than providing for their own safety. It is possible the Elementals are going to attempt to create a kind of 'safe passage' to move supplies or mercenaries from the supposedly neutral river-city of Darthion, but this attempt will surely meet strong resistance from my former comrades.

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### **Imperial Favor - Winter, Day 3**

Within the city of Atlantis, the lines of warriors signing up for Emperor Nujarek's new "Imperial Legion" runs for blocks, with some of the more determined fighters waiting for more than two days in the cold and rain for the opportunity to get a position in the newest army of Atlantis. While I have my own doubts about whether this new military force will ultimately be effective, the amount of morale and Tezla-based fervor that Nujarek has inspired in the capitol is awe inspiring. Even the lowest citizens in Downtown, in the industrial city forever cast in the shadow of the floating city of Atlantis, are driven to new heights of loyalty by this new frenzy of devotion for Tezla, the Empire, and their newly revered Emperor.

Above Downtown, within the bureaucratic towers of the Atlantean Empire, the mages and the bureaucrats seem to collectively be sour about Nujarek's crowning. From what I know from my historical training with the Necropolis, the Atlantean Technomages have puppeted the Emperor for centuries. Having lost so much power so quickly, the recent turn of events must be somewhat disappointing to them. However, one of the golem-factories at the edge of the floating city stands remains industrious, as the mages loyal to Magus Anunub determinedly work around the clock, without food or sleep, in order to create new Magestone Golems. One of the new designs they are working on seems to have the capability to draw energy from the ley-lines on its own accord, as if the golem were a mage rather than a mindless machine.

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### **First Snow in Khamsin - Winter, Day 4**

At the battered walls of the city of Khamsin, the first winter storm to rage out of the Blasted Lands has covered the ragged walls with more than two inches of snow. While reconstruction continues at a brisk pace, with Duke Skala, the Red Duchess, and the members of the Council of Merchants personally overseeing the rebuilding of key sections of the city, the winter chill is already taking its toll on a beleaguered people struggling to repair their houses and find food not eaten during the months-long siege.

With the Atlantean army's retreat to Atlantis, and the crushing defeat of the valorous High Elves, Khamsin has earned a kind of freedom not seen through the fifteen years of the Rebellion. Now, with the greatest war behind them, the sense of the new "Revolution" is beginning to be spoken of by soldiers, merchants and commoners alike. Said with pride and purpose, this change in ideology seems to reflect a difference in attitude, as the people of Khamsin no longer seem to see themselves as defending themselves against the Atlanteans – but able to take the Empire on head-on and give as well as they get.

While there are some stories of the infamous rogue, Black Thorn, having something to do with the Battle of the Wall, the breadth of the tales being told in the local taverns speak of the recruitment of a number of Revolutionary warriors into a special elite unit formed of men and women with shady pasts or disreputable backgrounds. This group, formed by Black Thorn to protect Khamsin and the Revolution as a whole from “unconventional attacks”, is referred to the 'Bloody Thorns'. Compared to the stoic Northlander veterans from the cities of Enos Joppa, Nok and Rangraz, the men and women in of the Bloody Thorns seem to share a common background in thievery, murder and the black market. What Black Thorn exactly wants with this ragtag crew is uncertain. But I do feel relatively assured that the legendary half-elven Hero is likely quite comfortable amongst a band of lowlifes that even the Dark Crusade wouldn't embrace.

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### **Rim of the Mountains - Winter, Day 5**

Even as Khamsin completes its lengthy campaign to destroy the Atlantean threat, the Northlanders, smug and safe well behind the front lines, continue to build their armies and forge their weapons for the battles to come. Led unofficially by their beloved Warlord Blackwyn, the fierce-minded citizens of Nok, Rangraz and Enos-Joppa prepare their upcoming campaign to liberate even more citizens from Empire control. While the Northlanders have sympathy for their Khamsin cousins, these hardened peoples earned their freedom from the Empire far earlier than Khamita's kin, and at a far bloodier cost. For the Northlanders, respect must come with blood and price, and the folk of Khamsin are just beginning to earn their trust.

Speaking of a greater threat to the Northlands than the Atlanteans, the Drakona insurgence into the Kuttar Depths disrupts two important resources - ore and black powder. Already, the supplies of black powder out of the northern mountains are slowing, and the Northlanders are starting to hoard their explosive lifeblood. While swords and spears are the best weapons when in the thick of battle, only black powder will prevent these peoples from being overrun by the Atlantean mages. Bows and crossbows aside, the Northlanders will likely be the first to be affected by the black powder shortage, and are guaranteed to number amongst those who will suffer the wrath of the Drakona's bloody plans of conquest.

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### **Smoke in the Trees - Winter, Day 6**

The Elemental forces of Roanne Valle still stand strong against the Crusader threat, manning their walls without sign of fear or apprehension. All along the wall, every thirty feet another Forest Elf armed with a Wylden longbow watches the seething horde of zombies and vampires, pit-fighters and necromancers. Any zombie that wanders too close to the walls finds themselves struck and pinned to the earth by a dozen arrows, and made a bloody example of the Elemental's capability with these primitive weapons.

Within Roanne Valle, the remnants of the Council of Nine continue to argue and bicker in their chambers. While water and food seem to be in great abundance, and the morale

of the Forest Elves seems to largely be high, my investigation of the Wylden Forests shows a different story entirely. Whole sections of the Wylden, thousands of trees, are blighted with dark magics. The woodland creatures, wolves and Trolls alike, are slaughtered and reanimated to serve in the Crusader's unstoppable armies. While the Forest Elves may believe themselves safe within their stone castle, their well-tended forests die, left behind in their flight to defend themselves and their precious false Tezla from destruction.

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**Winter's Chill** - Winter, Day 7

Within the fortress of Stonekeep, more than a foot of snow now stands atop the parapets, and the mountain pass to the east lies closed for the winter. While the High Elven defenders at Wellkeep seem well-prepared for the raging winter storms to come, it seems that the supplies of food and firewood within Stonekeep are already being rationed. The leaders of the Dark Crusade, wisely noting that they need to keep the Host warriors locked within their keep, continue to send bands of harassing troops into the valley to ensure the Forest Elves and their allies have a difficult time gathering meat for their tables or wood for their fires. While the Elemental warriors are giving the Crusaders a good fight, the Necromantic presence in the valley is causing just enough difficulty to be troublesome.

Additionally, with the aid of the energies generated from the great Solonavi spell, the massive bridge linking the eastern and western lengths of the mountain pass a day's travel from Stonekeep has been repaired. Come spring, the High Elves will be able to march on the castle again, and I doubt this time that Commander Searle's forces will fare as well against the Elven Lord's mystical might.

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**Frostbite** - Winter, Day 8

As I moved my scrying sight across the northeastern reaches of the Land, the frozen waters of the Roa Sanguine provided a spectacular sight this evening. While the river freezes yearly, temporarily ceasing its trek down to the warmer lands and the sea, the sight of an uncountable number of zombies shuffling their way across the ice was breathtaking. For decades, the Necromancers of the Dark Crusade have been busy reanimating every humanoid corpse they could get their hands on, in the hopes of creating an unstoppable army. With the aid of a powerful relic unearthed from the holy lands of the Amazon tribes, Deathspeaker Aeradon now controls an army of the dead that even Dark Tezla would find impressive.

While it will take time to move this warhorde south through the shattered trees of the Wylden, and the harsh winter snows slowing travel, it is only a matter of time before the army reaches the Wylden Plateau, and joins with Kossak Darkbringer and the rest of the Crusader horde in the destruction of the capitol of the faltering Elemental coalition.

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**Cold Comfort - Winter, Day 9**

Moving my view in the scrying pool north-east from the Wylden to the lands held and owned by the human Crusaders. I am still amazed by the hardiness of these rugged, determined peoples. Having come to the Vurgra Divide to get away from the rest of humanity's oppressive governments, the Dividers live two-edged lives in a massive mountain valley that is stands filled with life and abundance in the spring and summer - but turns into an icy hell haunted by hungry snow foxes in the dark of winter.

The lives of the Dividers are marked by a very proper amount devotion to Dark Tezla, and their strange ways are not considered blasphemous by even our most hardened priests. By continuing the long-standing superstitious tradition of worship of their Blood Goddess deity, they flaunt something primal and haunting within themselves that make them seem almost as dark as the most twisted of my kin. While the Blood Goddess is known throughout the Land as the bringer of immortality and dark wishes, here in the Divide she inspires her people to heights that even the pit-fighters of the Necropolis find inspiring. In their fervent belief that the sun will only rise again if the altars to the Bloody Lady are drenched with blood, through the course of the winter the men, women, boys and girls of the Divide practice their skills at swordplay in preparation of the Dark Solstice and the gore-stained trials that take place under the lightless sky. Once the festival begins, the old are slaughtered, the weak are strangled, and unworthy fighters are sacrificed on the bloody altars to ensure that the sun will come again and the green northern fields will continue to flourish. Once the unworthy and the weak lie dead, and the Blood Goddess is paid her due, the riotous celebration often lasts for days, filled with eating, drinking and non-lethal combat, until every last member of a Divider village lies exhausted or unconscious on the cold stone floor.

While I personally follow the wisdom of Dark Tezla and the teachings of his voice, the Dark Prophet Soma, I have never fully understood the ways of the Dividers. The priests of the Blood Goddess cults, out of their loyalty to the Deathspeakers they serve and the goddess they worship, do their best work in corrupting the weak and greedy to our cause in the western cities of the Land. But in the Divide, the worship of the Bloody Lady within the fire-lit stone temples seems to have evolved into a different kind of religion over the past few decades, but still carries a common meaning that any Crusader can recognize a a pillar of the Truths of Tezla - only the strong survive.

The Atlantean named Captain Jolum has continued his adventures in the Red Fen with the Shyft and Mage Spawn. His latest chronicles have been added to my bookshelf, titled "The River of Flames".

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### **Nest of Scorpions - Winter, Day 10**

Having seen enough in the eastern territories to convince me that the Dark Crusade's plan of conquest is running smoothly, I switched my focus over to another influential Crusader warlord, Darq the Corrupt. Having executed his marvelous plan of trickery and conquest, Darq's vampire army has scattered the capable Galeshi warriors to the four winds. After taking control over the Galeshi heartland - a series of seven oases within a day's ride of each other - Darq even now trains his newly-formed army of vampires to hunt down and destroy the scattered Galeshi survivors without mercy or pity.

While this is inspiring to me, after what I have witnessed today, I believe that Darq may have more of a fight on his hands than he realizes. After following a lone Galeshi Dervish through the desert, I have now seen a hidden encampment of Galeshi warriors and refugees. While the Galeshi are by no means happy about their situation, sent fleeing from their cities without food or supplies, I expected them to have a greater sense of defeat and hopelessness. Instead, they go about the process of surviving amidst the dunes, while their sun priests whip the survivors into a fury. Deep in the hills beyond the scattered camps, the Galeshi's robed sorcerers - suddenly blessed with more magical power than they know what to do with - are starting the process of learning to wield the forces of the desert against their foes. While I believe that Darq will prevail in the end, the belief that the Galeshi are a scattered, broken people is little more than a desert mirage. While the Galeshi's cities are burned and their leaders lie dead, new warriors are rising to the task of driving out the invaders and slaughtering Darq the Corrupt in a fit of bloody vengeance.

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### **The Floating Tower - Winter, Day 11**

At the request of my Solonavi masters, I spent the day searching for a certain floating tower belonging to the renegade warlord, Raydan Marz. While Marz spent the last couple of years near the Crusader-held Serpine Mountains, making allies with the folk of the Free Armies and constructing his flying fortress - rumors, tales tell of his love for his native homeland of Prieska, and his hatred for the Atlantean tyrant Emperor Nujarek. With the Orc Shadow Khan warriors filling the western forests with their green-skinned warriors, if Marz truly wants to liberate Prieska, he will need to likely gut every Orc south of the Fist in order to achieve his goal.

His flying castle, a single five-story battle tower mounted atop a short column of rock, provides close quarters for his warriors and followers. Compared to the massive Atlantean Sky-Castles that patrol the interior of the Empire, his keep can field only a dozen captured Dragonfly hover-machines, and maybe carry at most forty or fifty warriors loyal to his cause. While I wished to make a closer inspection of the tower before it entered into the Blasted Lands, specifically into an area where the Magestone deposits make my scrying difficult, I sensed a powerful mage residing within the tower's walls. After my experience with the red-skinned mage in Fairhaven, I did not wish to reveal my presence, but I will watch from a distance for as long as I can, in the hopes of

seeing whether my newest adversary is foolish enough to venture out onto the stone parapet of the floating tower.

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### **Dark Powers - Winter, Day 12**

Raydan Marz and his floating tower are beyond my sight now, lost within the magestone-infested wastes of the Blasted Lands. But to the northwest of Khamsin, at the end of a finger of low sandy mountains, the menacing shape of the Black Pyramid stands boldly against the morning light. While the Wolfwitch, a low-grade Necromancer that once thought herself my equal, successfully led her army to the edge of the Pyramid, the Elementals pursuing her managed to destroy her warband. While the Dark Prophet believes that she entered into the temple complex and managed to penetrate its depths, there has been little word of her for over a year.

But now, from that spiring pyramid amidst the wastes, I can sense a growing, forbidding power from within. While the Elemental Troll and his brave army have guarded the temple for a year without fail, and kept many Heroes from losing their lives within the maze of stone and death, the energies emanating from within the structure will surely be Boneknitter's undoing. While I am not unhappy with my fate or my assignment at the hands of the Solonavi, I've longingly wished more than once to have won the right to investigate the mystery of the Black Pyramid, and to see what ancient secrets were buried so long ago beneath the sands of the western deserts.

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### **Cave Orcs - Winter, Day 13**

The black grasses of the northern Fist are beautiful, swept by the mountains wind into a thrashing sea of bending, undulating pod-stalks. For the hardy Orcs that live this far north, game is plentiful for those cunning enough to hunt it within the whispering grasses. Scanning my view across the grasslands, this far north there are few true Orc villages, as many of the mountain tribes prefer a nomadic existence. Moving from one hunting ground to the next, the dwellers of the Fist walk a precarious maze of allegiances and loyalties nine months out of the year, where a mile's length off the accepted track can lead to the bloody massacre of an entire tribe.

Much like their cousins in the northern Fist, the Cave Orcs that live far to the west of the Fist grasslands have long been reviled by the Broken Fist tribes who originally drove them out of the Orc homeland more than a hundred years ago. But the Cave Orc's recent allegiance to the Black Grasses clans has given them some measure of protection, and the trade of goods, metal and lizard-mounts makes them invaluable allies. As far as my master's records show, up until two years ago the underground dwellers were the only pariahs of Orc culture. Now, with the break-away of the Shadow Khans from the Orc nation, the Cave Orcs may have a new puzzle to work out, as the Shadow Khans of Prieska are now far more hated - and have far more resources to offer - than any Orc tribe has had beforehand.

I will spend time here the next couple of days, and get a feeling for what the Cave Orcs are like, and get a flavor of their strange and enigmatic culture.

Additionally, as I have received reports from my masters about a number of warlords fighting throughout the Land, I have included these reports within my collection for further review.

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### **Black Labyrinth - Winter, Day 14**

The ragged cliffs ringing the western, northern and eastern edges of the Cave Orc homeland shield the interior from the worst of the deadly magestone storms. As most of the thunderwakes that frequent this part of the Land are born within the oceans west of Scythria, the northern-most recess of the Cave Orc's valley makes for a surprisingly hospitable oasis amongst the desert wastes. While finding the right area to explore was somewhat difficult, I knew that I was on the right track by the numbers of Cave Orc scouts watching over the landscape. Even in the first hour, the numbers of Cave Orc warriors standing watch with bows and horns easily outnumbered the scouts put out by ten whole tribes on the Fist. A cautious people, but their skill and resourcefulness has allowed them to carve a niche for themselves in one of the deadliest regions in the Land.

Past the guards and into the shadowy darkness of the interior caves, I found myself in an environment that reminded me of the deep passages beneath the Necropolis, where the failed experiments of the Necromancers skulk and feed. Here, amidst a maze of passages, I found my way to a series of apartments belonging to what I can only loosely call a 'family'. With ample water supplies available from dripping crevices, and food and furs supplied by the slaughter of Mage Spawn both from the surface and the tunnels, the Cave Orcs live in relative comfort - no worse off than the lesser tribes enslaved by the warriors of the Broken Tusk.

What shocked me the most is the sporadic light sources available through this labyrinth. Magestone in large quantities can be found throughout the upper caverns. While chipped or harvested Magestone emits a dangerous radiation, Magestone in its natural, untouched state is largely harmless - and the awesome white luminescence glowing from the oddly pulsing crystal has a very otherworldly quality. The Cave Orcs seem to stay away from the substance, save for a few crazy Shamans who insist on chipping off pieces and chewing the crystals in order to gain more magical power. Chewing crystal is not something I'd recommend, even to my worst enemies, as many of these strange witch-doctors seem to be completely mad, capering and growling as they tussle with make-believe spirit-beasts and dark ancestors that my scrying pool cannot detect in the slightest.

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### **Twisting Caves - Winter, Day 15**

Within the caverns and underground halls of the Cave Orc homeland, bands of fearless lizard-riders ensure that the ravaging subterranean Mage Spawn do not disrupt their way of life. Armed with spears, pikes, and flexible bone bows, the Cave Orcs ride their jebta

mounts with speed and surehandedness along outcroppings, narrow paths, and dark ledges that I can barely see. As these Orcs tend to live only for a few decades, they breed quickly and their young grow into adulthood within the space of only a handful of years. As result, through the course of the last century, the Cave Orcs have adapted to this deadly underground setting, and I suspect that newborn Cave Orc children quickly learn to rely on their senses of smell and hearing in their daily struggle to stay alive.

One thing I find extremely interesting is the lack of typical divisive Orc behavior within this underground society. In the Fist, as well as in Prieska this winter, Orcs undergo elaborate tests and rituals to determine which tribe gets the best share of the spoils. The Cave Orcs, while I would not call them peaceful or pacifistic by any means, seem to recognize that the future of their families depends on sheer numbers rather than the skill of any one specific champion warrior. In my first days of watching these odd Orcs, I witnessed at least a dozen fights over a dozen different things - but most of these battles were to first blood or broken bone rather than to the death per the way of the Broken Tusk and the Shadow Khans. At the same time, when a scout is devoured by a marauding Mage Spawn, there is little remorse or sadness amongst the surviving warriors - as death is a constant fact of life for these hardened people. The scouts merely take their fallen comrade's weapons and some token personal item to prove his death, and leave his remains to the spiders and vermin without a second thought.

While the Cave Orcs overall situation reminds me of my own Necropolis training, especially in the fierce subterranean stalking and blind fighting they need to master to survive, I wonder how well my own compatriots would last in these harsh conditions. While the Sect Elves are excellent fighters, and could likely wipe out the Cave Orcs in battle or arena fighting, I'm not sure how well my kin would fare away from the structured city-environment of the Necropolis and the demands of their ever-insistent masters.

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### **The State of the Empire - Winter, Day 16**

At Emperor Nujarek's command, General Volkare stood from his seat, and approached the podium at the front of the gold-flecked white marble-floored chamber. With his red cape flowing dramatically behind him, the Atlantean officer strode up the short flight of stairs, his gold armor reflecting glints from the dozen glow-lights hovering around the heights of the high-ceilinged chamber's interior. All around the circular chamber stood white marble busts of Tezla through the many phases of his supernaturally long life, from apprentice to master, from governor to emperor, and from a wizard to the Grand-Magus of the Atlantean peoples. As Emperor Nujarek sat on his velvet-covered throne, the commander of the Imperial Legion took the podium in front of the assembled crowd of attentive officers, muttering bureaucrats and stalwart Technomages.

"At the request of our Emperor," Volkare spoke, "in the name of Tezla, I was tasked with evaluating the current state of the Empire, both from a military and from an economic point of view. With the losses at Khamsin, the Orc invasion of Prieska, and the fall of Luxor and Rokos to the Solonavi, many outsiders view the Empire as weak. In some

respects, they are not wrong. But with Tezla's coronation of the Emperor these weeks past, our greatest resource - the millions of brave citizens of the Empire - now stand ready to fight for the cause. With tens of thousands of soldiers signing up for terms of service with the Imperial Legion, workers by the thousands volunteering for the golem factories, and hundreds of candidates being tested daily for mage capability, in this moment of darkness the Empire's time of destiny has finally arrived."

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**Assembly of Warriors - Winter, Day 17**

Within the Arena of Atlantis, General Volkare strode amongst the ranks of newly-joined Atlantean warriors, personally overseeing the newest members of the Empire's greatest army.

"General Volkare," asked a young recruit, "some of the veterans in my old regiment talked frequently about the Fall of Rokos, and how we could do nothing to stop the Solonavi from conquering the city. With the Empire facing so many potential threats from so many different armies, how do you plan to retake the city when we are already facing so many enemies just outside our borders?"

"A good question, recruit," said the General. "Externally, the launch of the Dark Crusade against the warriors of the Wylden drains the strength of two powerful rival factions, both of which would independantly have been strong enough to give the Empire a hearty fight if they chosen to attack during these last few years. But now the pendulum swings in our favor. The Revolutionaries to the north have lost a key ally with the Crusade's crushing of the Galeshi, and the Orcs have divided their strength equally amongst two rival Khans. Add to that the growing rumors that the Revolution is suffering major setbacks in the Drakona-held Kuttar Depths, and you can see why the time is ripe for our armies to take back what we have lost during these last fifteen years of bloodshed."

"Our largest puzzle lies with the Solonavi to the west. As our brave troops were able to hold the Prieskan capitol of Alrisar against the Orc onslaught, it means that we still have a seaport with which to transport goods and soldiers from Delphana and Xandressa. While the region is largely destabilized due to the Shyft's presence in the Red Fen, and the Dwarves questing for their mountain holts in the Scythrian Mountains, it is to our advantage that no one force controls the region - and in this chaos we have our advantage. Without fear of facing an organized enemy, our forces in Alrisar provide us a valuable base of operations from which to battle the spirit conquerors of Rokos. With the recent surge in magic and the availability of so much magical power from the ley-lines, many of Tezla's golem and Technomantic weapon designs that once were of fantastic origins are now quite practical, and will serve us well in conquering back both our rightful territory, and the rest of the Land when the time is right."

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**Crystal Spikes** - Winter, Day 18

"It has been said before that Magestone is the Empire, in that our way of life and the destiny of humanity depends upon the crystal. In order for the Empire to rebuild from our past defeats, we will need to harvest more Magestone crystal than we ever have before. While the ongoing Crusader assault of the Wylden and the appearance of the Drakona in the Revolutionary homeland should prevent any major Elemental or Revolutionary raids into Atlantean territory, we need two things desperately - more crystal, and able-bodied slaves to mine it. As of this morning, as part of an ongoing series of training exercises for the new Technomages in my command, I have authorized sending units to raid into Revolutionary territory. Their primary purpose is simple - capture as many Dwarves as possible for use in the Magestone mines."

Reaching into a pocket of his golden cloak, Magus Anunub took out a carefully carved spike of glowing Magestone crystal, and held it aloft for everyone in the room to see.

"While maintaining control over the Dwarves in the past was notoriously difficult, I have a solution that will make the harvesting of Magestone much easier in the future. Following a page from Tezla's own concepts and designs, these new Magestone crystals will be surgically implanted into every Dwarven slave's ribcage. While the Dwarves' natural immunities to magic prevent any subtle magical manipulation of the crystal, with a large enough energy charge these 'pain-crystals' are guaranteed to explode and shatter, killing the slave outright by pulping their internal organs. While our experimentation with implanting these pain-crystals in human subjects has been very promising, the invention of Magestone pain-staves will allow even a non-Technomancer to inflict pain - or final death - upon those slaves that disobey our orders. These devices guarantee that a jailor can cause enough negative stimulation to keep even the most unruly prisoner mining his weight in crystal for weeks on end. Even in the dangerous magical zones surrounding an active Magestone mine, these pain-staves have a guaranteed range of twenty paces, ensuring that a jailor can put an end to nearly any prisoner riot virtually as it starts."

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**The Sacred Garden** - Winter, Day 19

As I continued viewing the new Atlantean Empire, I found Magus Anunub talking to his commend staff. During the discussion, Anunub raised this interesting point:

"Economically, if we can claim enough Magestone and slaves in the coming months, we can guarantee that our golems will be top notch - and I'm not just talking about the military models. As the amount of magical power emitted by Magestone crystals and the ley-lines is now double what it was from just a few months ago, we are going to be able to create all manner of vehicles, devices and sentries to distribute throughout the Empire. Much the same way that the wise Delphana have kept their island homeland a paradise of peace and productivity, we believe that the interior of the Empire will become a sacred garden its own time - as with the research by the wise mages of the Golemcore these past

weeks, they have discovered that the increased amounts of magical energy in the Land also causes Magestone to grow at a faster rate, which means we may be able to double or triple our Magestone production if we are wise in our planning and our foresight."

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**Prophet-Magus Osiras - Winter, Day 20**

During a public address, Prophet-Magus Osiras made an interesting declaration.

"I bring word of new orders from Tezla, spoken before the Emperor this morning. In his wisdom, Tezla's Avatar has declared that any citizen of the Empire remaining in the vicinity of Rokos or found offering aid or assistance to the Solonavi should be captured and brought to the Spire of Atlantis. While these individuals may have flawed souls, their bodies will serve well for our golem-engineers to practice upon as our Technomages continue to strive for new bio-mechanical augmentations. Tezla founded his college upon experimentation and substantiating his intellectual principles; we are to follow his example and make excellent use of these traitors by transforming them into weapons of the Empire. In time, as our skill and purpose grows from concept to reality, we can use these men and women as the first weapons to fight the Solonavi, and can sacrifice them just as readily as the Crusaders send their own zombies to shred the doomed Elementals to the east."

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**Powder Train - Winter, Day 21**

The female green Draconum lays upon a thin ledge more than a hundred feet above the ravine, watching the slow progress made by the Revolutionaries below. With her wings laid flat and the tip of her tail anchored around a rock outcropping behind her, the winter wind barely even touches her supine form. Her sword, gripped loosely in her hand, seems to indicate readiness rather than a plan of attack. Her name is Caldera; I know her from my books.

As the Revolutionaries tried to navigate around a series of house-sized boulders, using their brawn and their mountain-bred mules to pull the heavy loads of black powder deeper into the Kuttar Depths, the Draconum seems to be sizing them up. While I am guessing that the wagons below hold black powder mined from beneath the Amazon's mountain homeland, I can only imagine what Caldera sees and smells with her keen Draconum senses.

Seemingly satisfied, she lithely stands on the ledge, unwinds her tail from the rock, and then lets the wind catch her like a kite. Like a fleeting shadow she flits inbetween the towering columns of rock, vanishing into the mountain maze within seconds. None of the Revolutionaries were watching when she vanished from sight; not even the pair of rifle-soldiers watching for ambush saw her leave. With the main roads through the Kuttar Depths watched by bands of vicious Drakona, these secondary routes must be torturous to travel upon. With any luck, the Revolutionaries will avoid Drakona patrols, and make

their way to their destination - which I would only imagine is some secret base secreted deep in the Kuttar.

It looks like snow - a deadly commodity in the Depths.

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**Snowy Vale** - Winter, Day 22

The wagon-train is forced into the open, and is faced with trudging a half-mile through blinding snow to the far side of the valley. The warriors are worried, and stand ready for any enemy. I haven't seen Caldera all morning; she could be anywhere in this howling storm.

Wolves. Travelling along the sides of one of the steep, ice-caked face of the open vale, a pack of white-furred winter wolves are parallelling the wagon-train's progress. Howling forlornly to one another in the rising storm, these beasts are far more at home in the blowing sleet than under an open sky. Bonding my scrying sight to the lithe form of one of the beasts, I watch as it stalks a shivering human sentry following closely behind the wagons. Completely invisible in the howling maelstrom, the leap and the kill is quick. Two guttural screams is all the guardsman can utter before his throat is torn out. When a young Khamsin soldier raises a gun to shoot the wolf, a Dwarf - possibly the commander of this expedition - slaps the barrel down with a gloved hand.

One shot, the Dwarf insists, will bring the Drakona down upon them. Better the wolves have their meal, then to risk all their deaths by Drakona attack. The white wolf stands over his prey, teeth bared, challenging the warriors to take his meal from him. But without another word, the people move on, leaving their comrade behind, with swords and axes close at hand.

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**Narrow Pass** - Winter, Day 23

After winding through a narrow pass filled with shattered stones and sharp jags of ice, the caravan reached the northern edge of the Kuttar Depths at noon today, and took a few moments to make camp and to distribute food. With the storm abating early this morning, having dumped at least six inches of snow on the ground, the bright sun overhead now brings the danger of snowblindness. The Dwarves are prepared for this, and hand out special goggles with tinted glass as protection from the glare. Even through the muted waters of my scrying bowl, the entire room of my chamber is lit by the intense northern sunlight, casting brilliant spears of warm, sun-hued radiance through a place that I thought would be always touched by shadow and cold.

To my surprise, Caldera reappeared, flying out of the cold blue sky and landing a few dozen paces in front of the wagon train. Even with the Dwarf's earlier warnings about the sound of rifleshots, many of the warriors level their black powder weapons at the warrior. Standing without fear, the green-skinned Draconum makes her statement in the human tongue - and vehemently insists that the Drakona already know that the Revolutionaries

are here. In exchange for a cask of black powder and a pair of the glasses, she barter her services as a scout and a warrior to keep the caravan safe from harm.

Astonished at his luck, the Dwarf agrees, and seals the bond with a handshake and a word of promise in the Dwarven tongue. Even more astonishing is the Draconum answering back the bonding word in broken Dwarvish, promising her loyalty to his holt.

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### **Frozen Lake - Winter, Day 24**

While the caravan's travel across the frozen lake had been swift, with the Dwarves replacing studded wheels with runners of sharpened steel, their speed was not enough to avoid the Drakona hunters. Diving out of the foggy sky like stooping hawks, the three dragon-men screamed challenge as they flew down onto the wagon-train. Clad in ancient spiked armor, and their wings shining with sparkling aerial frost, the triad looked like creatures of legend come to do battle with the champions of the Land. While a few preemptive shots were fired by the younger Revolutionaries, with their bullets going far and wide, the battle truly began when the Caldera manifested out of the clouds above the Drakona and dove down upon the leader of the trad from behind. With a vicious war cry she shredded his wing, and rode him mercilessly down into the ice.

Caldera stood from the crash. The ripped and ice-torn corpse did not.

Hissing his displeasure, the second Drakona confronted her, his tail lashing from side to side with anger, and his sword - crackling with lightning energy - arced and popped in his hand. Caldera held up a short metal rod in one hand, and readied her peculiar sword in the other. After bowing, she met his challenge, and the two warriors exploded into a battle of claws, fangs, and blades.

With the instigation of the duel, the last Drakona approached the caravan, watching with glee as the human warriors stammered and scattered at his dire approach. Armed with a double-edged broadsword, he prepared to make quick work of the trespassers, preparing to slaughter them as a cat amongst mice. But then, the Dwarven commander of the caravan rolled out from beneath one of the tarps with a heavy rocket launcher in hand. Puzzled, the Drakona didn't know what to make of the dragon-headed instrument - until the black powder propelled bomb fired from the tube exploded against his breastplate, blasting the unsuspecting Drakona into a dozen pieces. The mules, already frightened by the combat, nearly leap out of their harnesses at the explosion, and one of the wagons smashed its precious cargo of black powder onto the frozen ice.

In the duel, Caldera was barely holding her own, suffering wound after wound from the lightning blade - until she managed to bring her short rod around in a circle, connecting the metal bar with the enemy's sword. In connecting with the spellbreaker, the sword abruptly shot off a shower of sparks and went out, depriving the Drakona of advantage. Deprived of his main advantage, and still facing a very angry Caldera, the Drakona growled a promise of revenge, then leapt powerfully into the sky, leaving his two dead companions for the wolves.

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**Glacier Falls - Winter, Day 25**

After another day and a half of travel, the wagon-train has reached the far side of the frozen lake, and prepares to enter into a cave-mouth beneath the yawning lip of a massive glacier. Standing with his back to a thunder frost-blue glacial waterfall, the Dwarven caravan leader tells Caldera that their travels together stop here, for only those loyal to the Revolution may travel beyond this point. Caldera tells him that she has some loyalties to the Revolution, but she follows her own path, and she has no reason to follow. The Draconum states that she merely wants her reward, and she will leave them alone to their secrecy. The Dwarf agrees, and rustles out a keg of black powder from one of the sled carts.

Hefting the heavy cask under one arm, the Draconum offers that if they meet again, he has her alliance. He says his name is Stoneheart, and that he will keep an eye out for her in the future. He says that the Revolution will need all the help they can get to ferry black powder and weapons through the region, as the awakening of the Drakona has endangered the supply of weapons that the Revolutionaries will need to drive Atlantis to its knees. She acknowledges with a single, unreadable nod. Shrugging, he bids her goodbye, and leads the wagon-train into the ice caves beneath the mountain-side. Caldera sits and watches until the sound of the caravan is finally gone. Then, she grasps the cask between her feet, and flaps into the air, heading south, back towards the Kuttar Depths, until she is nothing more than a speck in the sky.

As Magestone emanations in the area are intense, my first attempts to follow the Dwarves into the labyrinth of caves shows is all but denied by the presence of so much raw crystal embedded amongst the rock and ice. To a Dwarf, travel into these deadly caves may be an inconvenience. But to any other being, they would be insane to follow the path, for they would be dead - or transformed - within hours by the crystal within. There must be some trick that allows the humans in the Revolutionary party to travel down these underground roads, but I don't yet know what that is. As result, I am disappointed that I will not have the opportunity to follow the caravan to their final lair.

This time.

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**The Banks of the Kuttar River - Winter, Day 26**

The Kuttar River thundered along the narrow gorge, threading its way between sets of plunging waterfalls and stands of mist-shrouded boulder-strewn rapids. Racing along in its quest for the lowlands only a few miles to the southwest, the flood-wash from the recent mountain storms frothed and hissed in the Kuttar's banks with increasing ferocity. As the Kuttar River runs from the ore-rich mines of the Kuttar Depths down to the Revolutionary city of Enos Joppa, by summer the river is known as a placid, predictable ally of mining parties and adventurers. But in the depth of winter, the Kuttar becomes a raging beast driven only by the unsatiated urge to kill and destroy.

I focused my scrying pool upon a blue-skinned Draconum watching a length of the winding mining road that leads up to the Kuttar Depths. Amongst the noise, mist and river's tumult, the dragonman known as Drakor stands concealed some fifty feet above the path. Sword in hand, he watches through slitted eyelids as the Dwarven wagon train steadily makes their way up the road.

Fifteen wagons strong, with a dozen armed fuser riflers riding guard in every wagon, the party seemed a formidable group for Drakor to take on alone. But when the lead wagon just crossed beneath his perch, the Draconum stepped out into thin air and dropped like a stone towards his prey. Spreading his wings at the last moment, Drakor caught the ragged edge of the mountain wind just before he collided with the cart. Grabbing the lead Dwarf under one arm, he glided out over the foaming river with his screaming prey before the Revolutionaries could even fire a shot. With great glee, ignoring the shouts of fear and outrage from the riflemen, and the death threats from the struggling captain, Drakor dashes the Dwarf's body against a sharpened rock the way a gull smashes a clam from a height. Before the Dwarf had even been swept off the rock into the turbulent gray waters, Drakor was already downriver and out of range, laughing at his enemy's cries of fear and dismay.

An new tale has appeared on my bookshelf, detailing the journey of an Elemental Freeholders group as they flee from the Dark Crusaders. "*Everything Dies*" is an interesting tale, and I can't wait to see how it ends!

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### **Drakor's Meeting - Winter, Day 27**

While Drakor's initial escape through the mountains was erratic, as if he somehow suspected someone was following him, I ultimately scryed the young Draconum as he came a tangle of peaks south of the Dragon City, where the fury of the earth long ago created a maze of tunnels, bridges, and ice ledges amongst a stand of knife-sharp mountains. There, sitting on the edge of a five thousand foot drop into blackness, Drakor sharpened his sword and waited, seemingly unconcerned about his act against the Revolutionaries - much in the same way that a hawk doesn't regret the feelings of a freshly caught rabbit.

In time, two Drakona sailed down on the winds from the north, landing with clawed toes on the cold and pitted stone. The differences between the ancient Drakona and this young Draconum are very evident, in the cruel jutting outline of the Drakona's jaws and teeth, to the way that their eyes are set further back into their skulls to give them more of a bestial appearance. Everything about the Drakona speaks of combat and adaptation.

The three dragonmen talked for a time, relaying information about the increasing numbers of humans and Dwarves heading into the mountains to defend the Revolution's mining resources. As the Kuttar Depths were once the sovereign territory of the Drakona in millennia past, the Drakona joke that they will continue to defend their homeland with

their lives, and will destroy or capture anyone that attempts trespass, no matter how boring the effort becomes.

On an interesting note, one of the Drakona mentioned to Drakor that a young green female Draconum had been sighted on the northern-eastern edge of the Depths, apparently defending a Revolutionary caravan. While the Drakona say that they have had great success in eliminating virtually every black powder caravan or adventurer they can catch, the female's victory on the ice lake represents their first loss or casualty in this mountain war. Drakor thanked them for their aid, and launched himself in that direction with renewed fury and determination.

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### **Caldera's Trail - Winter, Day 28**

Drakor stands before the glacier that Stoneheart's caravan stopped by only a few days ago, and gazes warily at the hole leading down into the pockmarked maze of stone and ice. Twice Drakor attempted entry into the Magestone ridden labyrinth, and twice he stumbled out of the opening back into the open air, overcome by the power of the deadly radiation emanating from below.

Earlier today, the young Draconum scouted the snow-littered site of Caldera's earlier battle with the Drakona. Moving from one place to another, he carefully analyzed the sled tracks, the residue and frozen Drakona body chunks left by the Dwarven cannoner's explosive round, and the shredded corpse of the ice-smashed squad leader. Following the tracks north, he discovered the shadowy cave leading beneath the glacier easily - and even checked behind icy spray of the thundering glacial waterfall to ensure there were no other secret passages through the ice.

But now, this young hunter has his first lead. Off to the east, amongst the jagged peaks leading towards the heights of the Amazon's mountain homeland, a thunderous report sounds from the peaks, like a distant explosion or landslide. Curious, Drakor soon lifts himself from the ground and heads to investigate, sword held at the ready.

The second part of *Everything Dies* has become available. The ending of Kolt's adventure warmed my heart indeed.

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### **Drakor's Discovery - Winter, Day 29**

It took almost a day for Drakor to find his prey. While the new snowstorm grows in intensity, and great, fluffy flakes of snow block visibility throughout the region, the young Draconum soon took great interest in a whole section of gray granite peak stripped of snow. A powerful avalanche recently swept the face of the small peak clear up the side of the northern face. Upon closer inspection, a series of stairs and balconies can be seen carved into the face of the mountainside, leading up from the snow-clotted canyon

far below to a series of ice-caked entrances carved along the granite sides. To all my knowledge, the place must be a long-abandoned holt - a city of the Dwarves - but how long ago it was abandoned I cannot tell. This place is older and darker than many of the southland holts I've seen. The place bears no small amounts of grim foretiding of a people long lost to the ice and snow of this frozen north.

A small shape moves in one of the lower doorways, more than a thousand feet below where Drakor is gliding. It is likely Caldera, exploring an entryway revealed by her explosive, artificial avalanche. (The use for her keg of black powder she bartered from Stoneheart is now obviously apparent.) While Drakor's hackles raise and the animalistic desire for combat seems surely upon him, this high up in the sky, buffeted by the constant and uncertain winds that surrounded this haunted place, he seems hesitant to drop into a hawk's dive. Instead he slowly spirals his way down to the ledge, trying to keep out of sight of Caldera's balcony. When he reaches the ledge, the snow tracked with Draconum prints, he confidently enters into the abandoned Dwarven holt, ready to defeat and capture his elusive prey.

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### **Caldera and Drakor - Winter, Day 30**

I'd venture that the stone of the Dwarven Holt has not seen warmth in a thousand years. Carved amongst the roots of a massive peak, the tunnels, chambers and storerooms of this Dwarven city lie long plundered and empty, bearing not even skeletons or Mage Spawn to warn away intruders. This place may explain the Dark Dwarves found some miles to the west in Dragon's Gate. Everything of worth seems to have been taken from this place long ago, and moldering meals lay half-eaten on plates of burnished silver.

Drakor, like the finest pit-fighter, stalks from one pillared hall to the next, following Caldera's scent through the stony maze, moving from one room to the next. After an hour of cat and mouse, he discovers Caldera in the heart of a large throne room, through the center of which runs an ice-clogged trench that once served as some kind of moat or ornamentation. So intent is she upon investigating a set of three Dwarven thrones at the back of the room, she doesn't even seem to notice his entry. Only when Drakor's feet whisper down onto the icy stone behind her, his sword raised for the strike, does she turn and attack with a vicious cry.

Drakor is brilliant in combat, combining a dizzying array of sword and martial-claw strikes together into a tornado of Draconum fury. While elements of his training as a Draconum warrior are evident, the savagery and brutality of his Drakona masters are obvious in every wicked strike, and in his careful attempts to incapacitate her - and not kill her. While Caldera holds her own, she seems as if she is better suited for fighting with others, as Drakor keeps gaining advantage over her by circling to one side or the other and attacking unexpectedly against the backs of her legs and her exposed wings.

After a harsh parry that sends the entire throne room echoing with the sound of ringing steel, Drakor stepped up into Caldera's guard and bit her shoulder with his foreteeth,

chewing a ragged line through her right shoulder blade without breaking the bone. In response, screaming with pain and outrage, Caldera pushes him off and delivers a whirlwind of blows, dealing one, two - almost three puncture strikes into his chest and belly with her own weapon. Together screaming blood-flecked battle wrath, the two grow silent as they stalk each other around the throne room. At a critical moment, as Drakor was about to strike, I watched as Caldera balanced the options within her mind - whether to chance a final conflict with Drakor that could leave her equally victorious or slain, or whether to flee and leave her purpose behind. She chose to flee, clenching her poisoned shoulder with her free hand, and escaped through the abandoned Dwarven city faster than he could follow in his injured state.

## **Kastali's Diary – Late Winter, 435 Tz**

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### **The Setting Sun - Late Winter, Day 1**

The spies of the Solonavi are rarely wrong. An agent secreted within the ranks of the Sunborn warriors of the scattered Galeshi alerted my masters that Raydan Marz is riding through the western mountains that edge the blighted wastes of the Blasted Lands, and seeking audience with a warleader of the desert tribes. While it took time to search Raydan's position out, I have discovered him and his band of warrior riders making their way up the steep, sand-blown switchbacks that lead to up to the heights of Jhegeri Pass.

Raydan Marz is a tall, handsome man, a Prieskan by birth, but a general and a statesman by nature. While he fights against the corruption of Emperor Nujarek, and is hunted by Atlantean troops throughout the Land, he still wears some of the trappings of his previous role as a commander in the armies of Atlantis. A manaclevt sword still hangs at his belt, though his lightning pistol is replaced by a black powder, wide-barreled weapon that looks as if it could blow a hole clean through a charging bear.

Behind him in the caravan line rides a number of other warriors I recognize. Raydan's chaste love and demi-magus, Desmonda, rides with her face lifted to the setting sun. At her side, riding a speckled horse the color of dust, is Lord Andreus, the famous general-turned-traitor who switched sides after the first failed battle at Wolfsgate. Then comes a motley collection of Dwarves, Orcs, and even a pair of High Elves – one male, one female – who make up the rest of his honor guard.

But behind them all, taking up the rear on his stiff-legged mule, is a little gray-haired man wearing a gray cloak, who radiates more magic than even an enraged Draconum. I recognize him from my studies. He is Maleficus, advisor to kings and one of the most renowned scholars in the Land – and now, from what I can sense in my scrying bowl, is apparently is a mage of unspeakable potential. The others do not seem to be aware of this, or to treat him with any reverence, and so far he has not noticed my presence.

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### **Jhegeri Pass - Late Winter, Day 2**

This morning, at the heights of the icy Jhegeri Pass, Raydan Marz and his band of warriors and mages were awake before dawn. By the time that the column of Galeshi Sunborn warriors arrived, Raydan and his warband had already prepared a hearty breakfast of exotic foods and drinks to honor their guests. While Raydan has left his floating tower somewhere to the east, amidst the Magestone-poisoned Blasted Lands where my scrying sight weakens and wanes, here I will be able to observe all without difficulty – provided that Raydan's wizard, Maleficus, does not notice my presence.

Forty Galeshi warriors, riding a mix of steam-powered mounts and flesh-horses, rode two by two up the eastern side of the pass, keeping the sun at their backs. With bows and pistols at the ready, they did not seem to openly trust Raydan and his open-armed invitation to break fast with him. But by courtesy and honor, two of the Sunborn leaders – a woman and a man, possibly a pair bound in marriage – sat down with Raydan, Desmonda and Maleficus to eat.

Raydan's offer is a simple one. In exchange for helping the Galeshi destroy Darq and the Moonborn, and return control over the western deserts, he would ask that the Galeshi fight, as free men and women, to drive the Orcs of the Shadow Khan tribes out of his own homeland of Prieska. While he says that he has no army, he does show them, with the tip of a stick drawn in the earth, that he has a flying tower that can carry them quickly and swiftly into battle.

The Galeshi pair ponder this silently for a time, sipping their tea. They return the verbal volley that Raydan Marz, while his successes as a warrior and a general are well known, that his failure to stop Darq from breaking the curse of the Vermillion Crown and enslaving Kossak Mageslayer doesn't give them much faith in his cause. Even with his alliance to the warriors of the Free Armies, the Galeshi don't believe that he has the resources to follow up on his promise.

"Kill Darq", they tell him, "and then we will negotiate. But not a moment before. Make up for your past failures," they add, "and then we will talk about creating a bright future between the Galeshi and the barbarians of Prieska."

Without another word, the Galeshi mounted up and rode from Raydan's camp, heading west into the sea of sand below, leaving the warlord and his captains shaking their heads about what to do next.

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### **Wide Stone Door - Late Winter, Day 3**

With Raydan and his band moving back into the Magestone-infested Blasted Lands, and out of the range of my scrying pool, I decided instead to follow the Galeshi to their destination, to see how they are faring against Darq's war of annihilation against the desert peoples.

Within the heart of the desert, the dunes do not just tower and stand like silent temples of sand. Deep within the desert, away from the oases to the west, the dunes roll and move, like waves on a distant sea. While I was able to easily track the forty Galeshi riders along their course, and know the rough vicinity in which they ride, I could not guide warriors to their camp even if my life depended on it.

The mouth of a deep canyon, yawning between piles of swimming sand, marked the entrance to their lair. Down the length of a stone canyon they rode, two by two, until shadow swallowed them whole. Soon, their horse's hooves were no longer striking on

sand, but on solid stone, and the clatter of metal mounts and horseshoes rang within the walls. One of the lead scouts made a light from a stolen Magestone lamp, showing the edge of the nearly underground box canyon just a few yards away. While it took me a moment to realize what I was seeing, witnessing the gigantic door – covered in ancient markings and standing at least twenty feet in height – start to open made we well aware that this place once served as a meeting place or a base for the Elves of Rivvenheim unknown ages ago.

Within the door lay a small, underground structure, safe from heat and cold, from wind and the knives of Darq's riders. Maybe two hundred Galeshi were going about the process of surviving within the town-sized space, and taking advantage of the last of the afternoon light arcing down from skylights high above the smooth stone floor. Stories within the Solonavi archives tell of such places, but for a race as primitive as the Galeshi to have discovered and entered one of the well-guarded *hal'dre'theh* chambers is impressive.

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#### **Desert Mirage** - Late Winter, Day 4

Little occurs in hiding, as the Galeshi stationed within the underground *hal'dre'theh* caves have little to do with war or vengeance. They are largely concerned with their own survival, and tending to the warriors that ride against the hated Moonborn that patrol the Galeshi's lands. While the whistle of pipes and song is somewhat pleasant, and I've learned that there are a handful of similar chambers scattered throughout the western deserts, there is little for me here to report. When the warriors ride the next morning, two bands of six fighters directed to hunt down and slaughter their own treacherous vampiric kin, that seems to be a thing worth watching.

The trek out of the mountainous dunes is a treacherous one, and a giant scorpion nearly felled the living mount that the leader of the warband rides. For the Galeshi, horses are a very important cultural icon, and only a person of true worth and bravery is entitled to have one. After a sand-plague destroyed many of the Galeshi's horses, many of the warriors ride steam-mounts crafted by their one-time Dwarven allies. For a sand-scorpion – while the size of a horse itself – to nearly claim the life of one of these brave mounts would be a terrible loss, and the warriors take no time in hacking the thick-shelled, stinger-tailed creature into pieces with their swords and spears.

At the height of noon, the twelve warriors laid an ambush for a patrol of Moonborn vampire warriors. While vampires are not injured by sunlight, their capacity for quick movement seems to slow in the heat. In the midst of the mid-day heat, sand-mirages are common above the rippling dunes, and tricks of the light are common. The Galeshi make use of this by charging at the trio of vampire warriors in a single line, then spreading out into a pack for the final moments of the charge.

While the vampires, armed with broadswords and dressed all in tattered black robes and veils, rise to the fight with vengeance. There is only so much that three Moonborn can do

against twelve Sunborn riders. Watching all of the Galeshi dance, whirl, parry and rebound from attacks was a breathtaking spectacle to watch, as they lack the clumsy, blood-stained combats so prominent amongst Atlantean and Revolutionary warriors. By the time the combat was finished, five Galeshi lay destroyed – three vampires, and two desert warriors.

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### **Oasis of the White Owl - Late Winter, Day 5**

It took until the long hours of the night, but a lone Moonborn, vampire warrior eventually found the signs of the combat. Tasting the piles of ash left behind, he noted the three dead vampires, and the already fading tracks of a dozen mounts heading east into the untrackable wastes. Taking to the air, the vampire flew for a time over the dunes, colored only in white and shadow by the chilly light of the three quarter moon.

After an hour of searching the vampire flew west once again, and landed amidst the palm trees that marked the Oasis of the White Owl. There, entertained by dancing girls, storytellers, fools and braggarts, sat Prince Darq in a throne covered with jewels and gold. Sitting on a stone slab in front of the sizable pool of clear, cool water, any other warrior would have looked vain and silly. But Darq, with his dark, hungry gaze, his black and red velvet cloak, and his sword ready and waiting by his side, reminded me more of a coiling snake sitting on a treasure trove of gold and jewels, poised to strike at anyone that extended their hand.

As the warrior made the report to Darq, bowed on one knee in front of his liege, the Vampire-Lord seemed very unmoved by his loss of warriors. He merely ordered one of his generals – a ferocious, dour-looking Galeshi warrior smiling through sharpened fangs – to rotate the duty roster so another four units could be assigned to search for the remaining Galeshi strongholds. While he could tolerate the Galeshi heading west, towards the distant, uninhabitable coast and the rippling deserts, for the Galeshi to have strongholds on the edges of the deep desert would be problematic.

Quick as a striking mongoose, a desert dancer spun from her position at his knee, a knife poised in her hand, striking for Darq's throat. Believing him distracted by the report of his scout, she was greatly surprised when the blade struck the back of the stone throne with a metallic clank. Before she could move, Darq had lifted her by the throat into the moonlit air, her slipper-clad feet daintily kicking at his metal breastplate. He didn't say a word, but merely growled a deep, resentful growl, then punctured her throat and spine with all five of his clawed fingers at once, as easily as I would crush an orange in my bare fist.

Red rain from her throat spotted the sand like drops of fallen wine. Angrily, he tossed the corpse across the pool, and let the wild dogs that frequented the camp have their nightly meat. Taking his place in his throne once again, he clapped his bloody hands, and the revel of music, flesh, and revelry began once again, overshadowing the sounds of the dogs crunching the dancer's bones behind them.

### **Zombie Trail - Late Winter, Day 6**

The high walls of the Elemental fortress of Roanne Valle called my curiosity this morning. From my point of sight along the well-manned length of the perimeter wall, my scrying pool revealed the cool quiet of early morning, just before the sun had begun to shine its brilliance over the top of the Sturnmounts behind the stalwart citadel. Wylden Elves patrol the walls with bows and spears, keeping a careful eye on the Crusader army camped a little more than a half-mile distant.

Every hour of every day, more Zombies arrive from the distant Necropolis. Herded by apprentice Necromancers, these undead seem to be controlled by one dominating force. Seeing so many undead working in unison is awesome, but the control required to make even a hundred Zombies fall into perfect step with one another would be the match of any of the greatest Deathspeakers living today. Here, thousands of Zombies perform labors in perfect, steady time with one another, never dropping a stone or missing a footstep along the long, zig-zagging road that leads to the top of the Wylden Plateau.

Every few seconds, another goblin-sized rock arrives at the top of the cliff, carried perfectly by four to six servile undead. While the rocks being brought up from the valley below will never be enough to shatter the massive walls surrounding Roanne Valle, they will certainly be more than enough to crack, fragment, and shatter the nerves of the inhabitants within. While the true invasion will likely not begin until Soma, the Dark Prophet, gives the signal to attack, Kossak Darkbringer's army grows every day with more undead – some sent by the Necropolis, others harvested from the forests of the Wylden - all controlled by the same, eerie, seemingly omnipotent Necromantic force.

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### **Slaying Dragons - Late Winter, Day 7**

Kossak Darkbringer speaks to his generals today from within the confines of his command tent. The weather outside is foul and cold, with a light drizzle that leaves a light frosting of ice on the helms, gauntlets, and leather capes of the vampire-warriors standing guard outside. Within, in a room lit by smoky candles and torches, Kossak speaks to his warlords about how to go about slaying one of the very things he once loved – dragons, one of the fiercest protectors of the Land.

Kossak, through use of his natural Troll skills as a storyteller, is educating his generals how the Elementals use Dragons to fight, and how to gain advantage over the winged beasts in case the Wylden Elves finally call their allies to battle. While I too have wondered why the Dragons have not come, with their weapons of fire, shadow and ice, I can only assume that their numbers are finite, and must be wielded carefully in face of

the days to come. While some of the lesser pit-fighters joke of the Dragons abandoning the children of this False Tezla, I believe that the true answer lies within the chambers deep within Roanne Valle, outside of the range of my scrying sight.

While Kossak's obvious answer to slaying a dragon, by means of concentrating fire upon one point, is one that even I have heard again and again in the Necromantic Academy as a young mage, his solution of sending groups of Zombie warriors to climb and blind the beast is original. While the Dragon's shield-like double eyelids are likely stronger than any Zombie's grip, the very act of being covered with clinging, biting ants may well give our stronger warriors advantages with their spears and pikes, for the cost of a few Zombies that would otherwise be crushed or burned beneath the Dragon's wrath.

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### **Shattering Stone - Late Winter, Day 8**

The catapults are ready this morning, more than fifteen light, mobile devices that can be easily moved in and out of range. With thousands of stones already brought from the river valley far below the cliff's edge, the undead Trolls in service of the Dark Crusade nearly need to follow instruction – lift, load, and step away – and let the experienced vampire siegers attend to aim and distance.

Moving my sight once again to the walls, the first volley of rocks – fired from far outside of even the greatest archer's range – fly up into the air like a scattering of deadly birds. Then, rocks explode and shatter all along the front face of the Elemental castle, striking randomly both high and low, by the door and by the parapet, and even some thudding into the ground a dozen yards in front of the base of the massive wall.

I'll give the Forest Elves some good credit, in that few of them show any outward signs of fear at that rain of deadly stone. They watch with disinterest as their distant enemies prepare the next wave, and casually move out of the way as, once again, the heavy stones arc down from high above. While one youngster is caught by an unlucky bounce and a ricochet, and his chest crushed like fruit under a hammer, the rest gird their spirit and continue their vigil, ready to destroy any Crusader warrior that gets within killing range.

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### **Deadly Cargo - Late Winter, Day 9**

The walls of Roanne Valle stand strong, though many of the front stones and decorations are chipped or smashed by the endless rain of stones. Gargoyles carved centuries ago to forever watch the walls of this Elemental fortress lie headless and broken. Beautiful stone doorways trimmed by lintels of the finest marble are cracked and powdered by the rain of the projectiles. Here and there stains discolor the walkways, showing signs that at least a few of the missiles met their mark.

But this next wave of rocks, now fired to the top of the wall with two days of sure practice by Kossak's engineers, are different. When these split open, they yield a fleshy cargo hungry for the taste of meat and blood. Goblins, stolen from the Fist, infused with the vampire essence by the dark power of Necromantic alchemy, steal forth, leaping and climbing onto the shrieking Forest Elven warriors with deadly strength. While some of these beasts lie broken and shattered from the fall, at least a dozen survived to exact a terrible vengeance on the enemy. One of these diminutive vampires, clad in a rotting cloak clasped with a shining pin of silver, makes a gesture and vanishes from sight, and is immediately lost amidst the carnage and the coming clatter of reinforcements charging up from the lower levels.

When the vampires are slain and set in a pile to burn, the Elves of Roanne Valle took only a handful of casualties from the attack, and already set additional watches to be ready in case such an odd assault happens again. But amongst this castle of a hundred thousand occupants, there is one peculiar beast with a mission that has yet to be revealed – and the ways of Necromancers, as of all of True Tezla's kin – are devious and cunning beyond compare.

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### **Torn Wings** - Late Winter, Day 10

Of the members of the Circle of Nine, one now lies dead at the hands of a Crusader assassin. In last night's raid of stones and Goblin Vampires fired over the impregnable wall of Roanne Valle, one Goblin Sorcerer hid under cover of magic from the Elven defenders. Today, after a brutal attack within one of the better defended sections of the castle, one of the Sprite princesses of the already shattered Faerie kingdoms of the north lies dead. When the guards were alerted by her screams, they found her tiny body half-eaten, with her wings chewed off by the loathsome Crusader Goblin, his teeth and face stained with shining Faerie blood.

The guards hacked the assassin to pieces, and did their best to save the only daughter of one of the key leaders of the Circle of Nine. But the princesses' savaged body was beyond repair. With her death, Driathania, the Queen of the Sprites, has turned into a creature of vengeance and rage. She accuses the Forest Elves of incompetence and states that the death of her only daughter is an act that must be repayed in blood – and that if by the end of the siege of Roanne Valle vengeance has not been met, she herself will ensure that those that failed to protect her will meet an end at her own enchanted knife.

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### **Giant's March** - Late Winter, Day 11

My masters alerted me this morning to an event taking place along the northeastern edge of the occupied country of Prieska. For the long winter months since the Battle of Rokos, tribes of Orcs loyal to the Shadow Khans have had a busy time capturing slaves, looting whole carts of food and rolling tuns of ale to their winter camps along the stretch of hilly crags known as the Giant's March.

After spending all day raiding the few remaining Prieskan villages in the area, the green-skinned warriors revel nightly around great bonfires constructed from the remains of shattered log walls and houses. This morning, while the ale-fog still lay heavily upon the four dozen Orcs of the tribe of the Black Skulls, a flight of Dragonflies descended upon one of these camps with a vengeance. Piloted by men and Elves, the dozen aerial assailants delivered crossbow bolts and rifle shot into the Shadow Khan defenders all throughout the camp.

While the Orcs outnumbered the fliers, they were no match for the agile attackers and had few weapons or shamans with which to counter the deadly ranged assault. Within an hour the leader of the Black Skulls gave the order to retreat. When the Orcs vanished over a distant hillside, the Dragonfly warriors landed their devices, and freed the Prieskan slaves left behind during the Orc's flight. Elated, the prisoners – men and women, old and young alike – were told to run north for the Blasted Lands, and that the fliers would provide cover for them until they reached a safe haven.

While my magical sight was negated long before the runners could reach their destination, as the Magestone emanations from the area disrupt my scrying magics, I don't doubt in the slightest that the fliers are in the service of the renegade warlord, Raydan Marz.

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### **Broken Wings - Late Winter, Day 12**

In the heart of the snowy Prieskan wilds, a log fort burns brightly against the foreboding gray skies. A surge of Orcs smashes against the front gates of the human village, using a toppled wolf-decorated totem pole to batter down the doors. While the Prieskans give a good fight, firing their bows and slings from the top of the low walls down upon the heads of the fifty raging warriors below, it will be only a matter of time before the gates are breached, and the defenders are overcome by the Shadow Khans.

A flutter of mechanical wings can be gently heard over the din. Driving down out of the low clouds, the half dozen stolen Dragonfly war machines manned by Raydan Marz' best pilots roll and target for the attack. But before even a single shot can be fired into the throng of green-skinned bodies at the gate, four Half-Trolls rise up out of their hiding places in the snow, tossing aside the icy burlap sacks that provided their camouflage.

With each of the monstrous half-Orc, Half-Troll beasts armed with a pile of lightweight throwing spears, they quickly set to the task of trying to bring down as many of the enemy as possible. One dragonfly spirals to the earth from more than a hundred feet in the air, its wing punctured by a long shaft. Another one is forced to crash headlong into the ground, sending up a plume of dirt, muddy snow, and shattered machine parts. While the remaining fliers manage to rescue the two injured pilots and limp out of range, there is little they can do for the villagers. The gate sunders inward with a crash, crushing some of the Prieskan warriors within, and the battle is joined. Within an hour, the village

is captured, slaves are chained, and the Orc warriors of the Black Skull tribe are looting every bin, chest, and cupboard they can find.

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### **Beheading the Serpent - Late Winter, Day 13**

The war-leaders and shamans of the Shadow Khans tribes met last night within sight of the walls of Alrisar, and held a convocation of war. Their chief concern – putting an end to the Dragonfly assaults, and finding some way of tracking down and destroying the base these combat pilots were flying from. Many Orc warriors offered to personally confront and destroy Raydan Marz, and some scuffling began over which warrior should have the right to battle the human interloper.

But when a powerful Orc Shaman by the name of Bloodhawk stepped forward into the firelight, many of the squabbling warriors ceased their arguing without another word. A number of Orc chieftains seemed to hold a great deal of superstitious reverence for this mage, as they instinctively bowed their heads when the eagle-masked entered the circle.

Bloodhawk, speaking in the guttural, choppy Orc tongue, offered that the many tribes of the Shadow Khans should continue to slave, raid and pillage, and that his hand-picked band of shadow warriors would work to strike off the head of the serpent. Then, the Shaman snapped his fingers, and a pair of two footed, feathered beasts skulked into the camp, snapping and biting at the startled Orcs with its axe-like beak. On the backs of the bird-mounts, guiding their monsters by subtle tugs of the reins, rode a pair of Orc warriors dressed entirely in black, each holding a drawn, curved sword carved entirely from mirror-like blackstone.

“Consider this matter dealt with,” continued Bloodhawk. “My warriors shall ride into the Blasted Lands upon these Warbirds I captured in the uncharted lands to the north. Once within the wastes, my warriors shall track down the enemy and smash their skulls. Assembled members of the Shadow Khans, do not lose focus upon savaging this weak, human country, and leave the destruction of this petty warlord to myself and my kin.”

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### **Shadows and Omens - Late Winter, Day 14**

This dusk, the wizard Bloodhawk sits in a underground pit, dug by his initiates over the course of the day. With the top of the pit covered by skins and hides, and a smoky fire built in the middle of the space, he seems to be ready to start some kind of magical ritual. Tossing grass bundles of herbs and dried leaves onto the fire, he chants even as he taps a ritual drum with a bone mallet.

The Shadow Khans warriors give this wizard and his kin wide berth. While these strange Orcs may have ties to the Shadow Khans, they do not ride or eat amongst them, and keep to themselves at all times. This morning, when more than a dozen of the warriors mounted up for war, and sprinted off into the northern distance on their Warbird mounts,

the other Shadow Khan warriors watched them go with more than a little dread at what foul ends would come to those who served Raydan Marz.

Within the pit, Bloodhawk changes the color and hue of the fire with the addition of a handful of sparkling salts. Suddenly, all around the walls of the small chamber, shadows of battle suddenly manifest to life. Orc warriors wheel and chop on their mounts, while thrown hatchets tear through both meat and metal to send human warriors and Dragonflies tumbling to the earth. Low shapes of Dwarves, and the tall thin silhouettes of Elves fight side by side against Orc warriors, fighting for their lives against a terrible, unstoppable enemy. Throughout the long fight, the wizard occasionally grunts guttural commands, establishing the right times to attack, retreat, and when his troops should refocus on a new or unseen enemy. His warriors fight and die in complete silence, as not even a single battle-cry sounds from the phantoms dancing across the walls of his makeshift scrying shrine.

Hours later, when the battle lines are divided, and when the fire finally gutters out, Bloodhawk crawls from his pit, his lungs raspy with green smoke. He orders his disciples to gather more herbs, more dried leaves, as tomorrow night his warriors will attack the tower belonging to Raydan Marz -- head-on.

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### **Shadow Battle - Late Winter, Day 15**

As my scrying pool cannot delve far into the Blasted Lands, I once again settle to watch the Orc Shaman, Bloodhawk, cast his deadly divination within his pit of smoke and shadow. Again, he sits in his pit and casts handfuls of grasses and powders into the flames. But this time, the Shaman has four of his disciples with him, each wearing a simple robe over their pockmarked green skin. When he calls upon the power of shadow once again, phantoms of his warriors once again are cast against the walls of the earthen pit, showing a battle line of Orc warriors driving hard towards a tower-like structure to the east. Arrows fall and lightning crashes down in the heavens, but his warriors drive towards the tower with greater determination and speed.

The tower begins to lift from the earth, and begins to hover up into the sky. From my own knowledge, Raydan likely utilizes the power of the Sphere of Jorandal to levitate the structure out of the reach of the coming riders – a cowardly but wise strategy. But on Bloodhawk's command, each of his four disciples takes a bone knife and slashes their fingers with the blade, and spatters their blood into the fire. All around the riders, a nimbus of fire-light surrounds them, sparking and shimmering like a fiery luminescence amongst the shadow. As one, the riders raise their weapons, and a crackle of lava-colored light bursts from their swords against the tower. Then again. And then again a third time. Cracks appear in the archetype of the floating citadel, and giant stones seem to tumble from the base of the structure down to the shadowy ground below.

Atop the tower, a form surrounded by a halo of icy light appears, and raises a long, crooked staff over its head. Bloodhawk screams challenge, and stands to his full height,

screaming out words of power in the Orcish tongue. Lightning strikes the top of the structure, sending bodies flying in all directions. With a brilliant flash of burning white light, the white wizard raised his staff and fires a bolt of brilliant light straight towards Bloodhawk. Like a cannon-shot, the firepit in the center of the pit explodes into a cloud of flying embers, destroying the scrying and negating Bloodhawk's concentration in one motion. Screaming with rage, the shaman stamps the fiery coals with his feet, while his students frantically try to knock stray sparks from his hair and clothing.

The moment is passed, and the spell is broken. Raydan's wizard could not stop Bloodhawk's warriors from attacking and damaging the tower, but he could stop the shaman's distant spell by some means. Only tomorrow will tell whether Bloodhawk's warriors were successful in their attack, and whether Raydan Marz escaped with his life.

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### **A Single Prisoner - Late Winter, Day 16**

Bloodhawk's riders return from the battle with a prize, a pretty female demi-magus with a single piece of Magestone set into her forehead. Knocked from the tower's parapet during the battle, young Desmonda now stands as a war-prize in the Orc Shaman's tent. Her mage robes are stained with blood and ash, and her eyes already bloodshot from the concoction of mind-altering herbs her captors force-feed her every few hours. She will do no magic for as long as she remains in Bloodhawk's power, and he chortles at both her beauty, and her continued, drunken promises of her lover's eventual, bloody vengeance against the Orc wizard.

Of Bloodhawk's riders, half lie dead in the Blasted Lands, left behind for the Mage Spawn to consume as they desire. But his surviving warriors state that Raydan's tower has lost some of its ability to fly, and that he will need to find new sources of Magestone in order for his citadel to regain full flight capability. Bloodhawk takes a chunk of shattered magestone from one of his warriors, and licks his tongue along the rough edges, savoring the taste of fading power within the fractured crystal.

“With a number of his Magestone blocks shattered or broken, Raydan must fly directly along the ley-lines,” he says to his warriors. “Just as the parched wanderer cannot afford to wander from the path that leads to the oasis, no matter what dangers lay ahead, Raydan must guide his damaged sky-ship along the straight tracks, and must that he can gain enough blocks of Magestone to repair his vessel. We have damaged him greatly, and my Orcs will track Raydan in the days to come, and ensure that he does not find safe rest anywhere near Orcish lands. Then, when the warlord least expects it, we will strike, and make him pay dearly for meddling in the affairs of Prieska.”

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### **Blasted Earth - Late Winter, Day 17**

Above the beautiful rolling valley that runs to the west of Stonekeep Castle, a dark cloud of dust and smoke hovers above the frozen grasslands. Beneath the cloud, a quarter mile of land lies smoldering and crisped, with groves of hundred-year old trees smashed to splinters from the force of an intense magical blast. At the epicenter of the explosion, a Draconum corpse dressed in splintered, heat-warped armor lies putrifying in the residual heat. Even hours after the blast, the ground still steams and smolders from the effects of the supernatural devastation.

As I watched, a column of Wylden Host warriors from Stonekeep rode up to the site, bows and swords at the ready. While first as awestruck as I was with the magnitude of destruction, their Rangers quickly found the dead Draconum, then scoured the ground for survivors and discovered only a few Crusader corpses. While some of the Dark Elves appeared to have been boiled alive in their own juices, others were simply blown into component parts that not even the most skilled Necromancer could make any use of.

One of the warriors, a young Elven maiden dressed in the green robes of an Elemental Priestess, concentrated at the epicenter of the blast zone, seemingly invoking the power of the earth to reveal any clues. After some concentration, the young sorceress moved, as if in trance, to a spot just a few paces away. Reaching down within a gloved hand, she thrust her fingers into the dirt and lifted out a short sword. After blowing dirt and dust off the rune-inscribed blade, the Priestess inspected the otherwise undamaged weapon. After a few moments, she proclaimed the weapon to be some kind of Draconum spellbreaker, that it was likely was used to shatter a Crusader relic, and thus was responsible for the devastating explosion.

When asked what to do with the weapon, and whether it should be taken to Stonekeep or delivered to Roanne Valle, the Priestess shook her head. She stated that the sword must be disposed of, as the spirits within the weapon were destructive and unnatural. While the other members of the warband postulated amongst themselves about what schism took place between the Crusaders and the Draconum on Stonekeep's doorstep, the Priestess, named Rhiamon, asked for volunteers to accompany her to the Emerald Grove, where the dangerous weapon could be safely disposed of. Rhiamon received the support of three female Rangers, and would leave immediately. The rest of the warband would ride back to Stonekeep to report on the situation, and send word ahead that Rhiamon was coming to deliver a dangerous tool into the hands of the Mysteries of the Emerald Glade.

As the four Elven women began their ride south to the occupied Wylden Plateau, I watched their travel with great interest, as the interior of the Emerald Glade is a place that I – as well as just about every other sorceress of the Necropolis – have always wanted to see with my own eyes.

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### **Travel to the Glade - Late Winter, Day 18**

The Elemental priestess Rhiamon and her three Rangers made slow time edging along the western slopes of the Sturnmonts, keeping well out of the way of Crusader patrols.

While their horses were strong and swift, they are bred for speed on the plains rather than skirting outcroppings of rock and forging muddy streams. By sundown, the Elementals have managed to avoid detection, but only traveled a few miles southeast of the mouth of South Pass.

Hunched over a small, smokeless fire, the four forest elves camp between two fingers of rock extending outward from the steep mountainside above. With their horses tethered and grazing on thin winter grass nearby, the three scouts talk quietly of the events of the day, and of the presence of the Crusaders in the Elemental homeland. Behind them, her face cast in shadow, Rhiamon continues to inspect the artifact with introspective silence.

Speaking a few words of power, the Priestess wreathes the blade in a dim nimbus of flickering blue flames. When one of the scouts asks what she sees, Rhiamon shakes her head and answers that she sees little of use. She relays that the disturbing presence surrounding the weapon the previous day now seems to slumber, and that the sharp-edged blade seems to radiate little magic.

When the embers die down, Rhiamon dutifully places the weapon back into her saddlebags, and lays down on her bedroll to try to sleep. For more than an hour, I watched as the Priestess contemplated the mysteries of the artifact, before she finally went to sleep. While one of the female Rangers keeping watch over the camp did her best to keep vigilant, her eyes continued to drift to Rhiamon's saddlebags, as if she were pondering the dangerous contents within.

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### **Shovels and Spades - Late Winter, Day 19**

This morning, one of the three Rangers lies dead. The scout that took second watch, a young Elf named Maribell, heard and saw nothing during her watch. With no visible marks or signs of violence upon the corpse, to all appearances it seems as if the Ranger merely died in her sleep. Rhiamon, greatly disturbed by the turn of events, went and arcanelly checked the magical short-sword, but there was no change in the artifact that she could detect.

Unable to cremate the body for fear of the smoke bringing Crusader patrols, the three companions dutifully buried their friend as deeply as they could in the rocky soil. Skipping breakfast, the survivors mounted up and began riding quickly toward the Wylden Plateau to the south. They shared little conversation, preferring to mourn their friend's death in silence.

When faced with the choice of either navigating around or over a sizable stretch of boulder-clogged hillside, Rhiamon elected that the group take the longer but more discreet route through the maze of stones. She believed that the Elementals could not afford for the weapon to fall into the enemy's hands, as its destructive power could be easily used by the Crusaders to bring doom upon the walls of Roanne Valle.

While the Elves narrowly averted discovery by a patrol of Nightblades, chiefly through a combination of stealth and patience, their steady progress brought them close to the base of the Wylden Plateau. This time they camped without fire in the shelter of a small grove of trees and waited in the dark for dawn to come.

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### **Stone and Water - Late Winter, Day 20**

In the morning light, Maribell sits against her tree, her eyes glazed and dull with death. Neither Rhiamon or the remaining scout saw anything, and both swear to one another that they were awake for the entire night. But the corpse proves that something happened, and Rhiamon has lost another of her Ranger's to the deadly malady.

The discussion is swift and brisk. The last remaining Ranger, an Elf with unruly hair named Wildgrass, superstitiously argues that the soul-eating weapon must be brought before nightfall to the Emerald Glade, and disposed of by the Mysteries before it has a chance to consume another victim. Rhiamon agrees, and offers that the two of them ride straight for the hidden pass that leads up onto the plateau. Wildgrass agrees; the two of them cremate Maribell's corpse to prevent reanimation, and then ride as fast as they can for the thousand-foot high wall of stone to the south. They quickly gain pursuers, but the fast Wylden horses are more than a match for the Crusader steeds. While the Crusaders can pursue the pair of Elves endlessly, Rhiamon believes that she has enough of a head-start to reach the passage to the top of the plateau before their pursuers can catch them.

A thundering waterfall greets them, cascading down a steep, boulder-strewn slope. Rhiamon, as a trained Priestess of the Glade, raises her hand and says a single word, quietly, so only the crashing waters can hear her. Within a few moments the froth of water abates, leaving behind a magically dry riverbed with just enough room for a well-trained horse to ride. After the two riders guided their horses up more than a hundred feet of riverbank, the path diverted into a fissure cave. As soon the two enter into the dark path to continue the climb up to the plateau's top, the waterfall resumes its course, covering all trace of their passage.

Within the darkness, shapes are indistinct and horse-hooves echo on the stone. But within the space of just a few minutes, the anguished scream of a dying Elf is unmistakable, nor is the sound of an armored body collapsing heavily to the rock floor of the passage.

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### **Dangerous Weapons - Late Winter, Day 21**

Just after dawn, a frantic Rhiamon reaches the top of the secret underground passage. Behind her, Wildgrass's horse follows obediently, her doomed rider lashed belly-down across his broad back. Rhiamon's face looks as if she stands on the brink of her sanity, and the cursed short-sword in her hand proves that she has indeed reached the edge.

On the edge of the Glade, there stands no Crusader picket line, for there is no point in guarding the borders of this Elemental bastion. For millennia a magical barrier has long dissuaded evil from entering within the depths of the haunted forest, and the silver wolves and keen-eyed archers secreted amongst the trees have long ensured the safety of the Mysteries that lie within.

When Rhiamon rides into the trees, a cold wind leaps up around her, setting both horses nearly mad with fear. Clouds of blowing leaves blur her sight, and stormclouds roll over the tree-tops with black fury. A figure in robes the color of autumn leaves appears on the path before her, flanked by a pair of silver wolves with eyes the color of ivy. Rhiamon dismounts and kneels before the ancient Elven matriarch, stating that she is honored to be met by one of the Mysteries of the Glade. Rhiamon says that she has brought an object of great evil to be hidden away by the Mysteries. The powerful Elementalist comes before her and takes the sword in her hand, and lifts it to the stormy sky, inspecting the dangerous weapon.

The Matriarch then states that the sword is empty, its purpose already fulfilled with the three deaths that Rhiamon caused by her own hand. While the Mystery agrees to keep the weapon away from mortals for the duration of the coming Age, she says that the spirits trapped within the blade have already found their host – and that which was life within Rhiamon, has now been transformed by the power of the relic into death. When Rhiamon looks up, her eyes burn with unnatural fury, and all beauty is gone from her face. She hisses at the Matriarch, and speaks curses from a language not known to elves for more than a thousand years.

Not strong enough to confront the terrible creatures that rides within the Priestess, the Matriarch merely turns her back, and walks into the trees, leaving Rhiamon to her madness and her fate. By nightfall, Rhiamon has presented herself at Kossak's camp, already feverish and consumed with the need for power.

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## **Crater Lake - Late Winter, Day 22**

Agents loyal to my Solonavi masters reported this morning that a flight of Griffons crossed over the Vurgra Divide, gliding down from the eastern mountains in the direction of Crater Lake. the sight of High Elves flying around the Rivvenheim peaks is not uncommon, reports of seeing sixteen fliers moving in combat formation so far away from the safety of their precious mountain homeland is highly unusual.

The crater lake to the northeast of the Necropolis Isle was created sometime before the Age of Mists, scooped out of living stone by a massive volcanic explosion that shook the region for hundreds of miles around. Except for a few days each year, the steaming waters of this sizable, shallow lake completely obscure visibility. The handful of secret Necromancer towers and fortresses built along the fog-shrouded shores are legendary

amongst the elite of the Dark Crusade, and stand as the sites of some of the most deadly research projects in our history. While the creation of Bloodsuckers and the Bloodsucker Plague that devastated the Atlantean interior had some merit, the artificially-created Sand Plague that wiped out the Galeshi's horses and oxen in the summer of 426 Tz was a particularly brilliant piece of alchemy that stripped down one of the greatest threats to our domination of the Land in the space of a few short months.

The Griffon Rider's destination is unknown to me so far, but I shall keep a keen eye out for these invaders, as the trouble that even a handful of determined High Elves can cause is legendary amongst my people.

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### **Drowning Pool - Late Winter, Day 23**

While scanning the Crater Lake for any sign of the Elven Lords and their griffon steeds, I thought I overheard the sounds of combat in the vicinity of the southern shore. While the thick fog muffled the screams, battle cries, and exact location of both elf and mount, the distinct sound of a large body splashing nearby was unmistakable.

I managed to find the disturbance in the mists, a bare spot where the wings of a drowning griffon had fanned the fog apart. While there was no sign of the rider, save for a thick coating of red, sticky blood sprayed along the left side of the griffon's saddle, the struggling griffon indicated that the Crusaders had dealt some damage during the battle high above. The black throwing spear buried deep into the mount's breast indicated that the beast had not long to live, even if it weren't in danger of sinking beneath the bubbling surface of the crater lake.

Then, to my surprise, another griffon appeared out of the fog, its majestic wings cutting through the misty air. Just as the first mount went under, the second one flapped its wings hard, driven by its High Elven rider to try to grab the doomed griffon below. But, the Elven Lord was too late, and the mount vanished beneath the surface. Before its own weight could drag his mount into the water, the High Elf angrily gave the command to continue, and to leave his companion for dead.

Greedily, I locked my scrying pool onto the second griffon, and will likely have a great deal more to talk about once the beast lands at whatever encampment the High Elves have secreted away along the shores of this steaming lake.

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### **Kastali's Cavern - Late Winter, Day 24**

Fifteen High Elves and fifteen mounts are secluded in a cave along the eastern side of the steaming crater lake. Ironically, the cave is one where I used to play when I was a child, when my own mother was taking her magical training with Deathspeaker Aeradon. While most of the other children were involved with the blood-pits or the ongoing rigors of proving ones superiority, myself and my friend, Vadoria, would practice hunting one

another amidst the stalagmites, or work together against the cruel but imaginary Atlanteans camped in the darkness. The fact that Vadoria died in this very cave after I surprised her on a high ledge during one of our chases, strikes me as a double irony, as her well-preserved skeleton is still concealed behind the rock ledge the warriors are leaning up against as they eat.

Now, the cave is filled with High Elves, and their magical fire-stones provide dim light, but enough warmth to heat the cave and cook their food. They sharpen blades, speak in their esoteric and difficult temple language, and eat food from lightweight metal bowls with the gusto of a starving Orc. The griffons, chewing and gulping down a combination of meat and grain from leathery feed-bags, make for an odd sight, lined up against the wall like human's horses. But their wings, their great claws, and their ever-watchful eyes makes them far more than just ordinary mounts. I'm still surprised they don't notice my magical emanations, and am very grateful for that fact.

On a personal note, I never told anyone about Vadoria, and her disappearance was a mystery to everyone, save for my own mother who seemed to know everything even before I could start lying to her. But my own mother's "sudden disappearance" after she displeased her master, Aeradon, is something I will never, ever forget, and will ensure that one day, when I return to lead the Crusade, Aeradon is the first to die.

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### **Soulmare** - Late Winter, Day 25

This morning, just after dawn, the griffons grew restless, pulling at their tethers and clacking their beaks in irritation. While the High Elves tended to their mounts, trying to quiet them while they tied on saddlebags and supplies, I moved my presence out of the cave mouth, into the unmeasurable deeps of the foggy morning. From high above, I recognized the flapping sound of slow, sizable wings in the mist, and moved towards the location as quickly as my scrying device would allow me.

In the mist, I soon found the flyer, having recognized the pattern of its wing-beats by easy association. A Fell Beast, rarely seen anymore in the presence of the Necropolis, flapped its tattered wings as it glided in a lazy circle above one point in the lake. On its back, one of the more legendary figures of the Dark Crusade, a powerful Hag Witch named Daemona, guided the beast in a search pattern through the fog. Behind Daemona, perched on the Fell Beast's back, sat Rhiamon, her hands raised in silent invocation.

From far below, a gurgling cry erupted from the water, and a great splashing could be heard. As the Fell Beast swung lower to the surface of the sulphurous mire, I caught a glimpse of something I already suspected I'd see – the High Elven griffon that drowned and died two days ago was struggling its way out of the water. A few minutes later, when the waterlogged creature dragged itself onto shore, where Rhiamon greeted it, mounted it, and then ordered it to fly. Without hesitation, the creature shook the water out of its wings, and then ascended into the air, with its new master laughing with cruel delight at her new-found ally.

### **Flooding the Divide - Late Winter, Day 26**

After acquiring her new mount, which Rhiamon called the Soulmare out of cruel deference to the legendary horses of the Wylden Plateau, the powerful sorceress followed Daemona to a cave to the northwest of the lake, where Daemona's sister, Hebrodia, awaited the two to arrive.

While the Hag Witches are believed to be the results of sorcerous experiments conducted within the Necropolis, to everything I know they are long-lived creatures that have seen centuries, if not millennia, of time go by in the Land. Their ability to scry and divine rivals even that of the fabled Oracles of Rokos, though their answers are always grim and have some dark tiding tied within.

While Rhiamon warmly accepted their hospitality and a seat at their fire, Daemona wasted no time in telling her what her sister had prophesied, and why she contacted Kossak Darkbringer for the loan of a potent ally. The High Elves sent a group of their best warriors to search out the Turning Door, a place lost to mortals since the dawn of the Age of Mists. At the Turning Door, the High Elves may be able to open a sluice gate that will drain a great deal of the lake water – down into the depths of the Vurgra Divide. While the amount of water will not be especially damaging, save for a temporary flood that will slowly spread over the period of days, the sulphurous content within the water will poison the crops and render the river undrinkable for a time.

Rhiamon laughs at this, and says that she no longer has any ties to the Land, nor does she care about whether the sluice is opened or not. But she does understand that she needs to win Kossak's trust, and will do everything she can to stop the Elven Lords before their plan can succeed. The Hags offer their own services, and the services of their other hideous sisters to Rhiamon's cause – and soon, an aerial battle will be joined that will determine the fate of the Vurgra Divide.

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### **Valley of the Gods - Late Winter, Day 27**

Today, on order of the Oracles of the Black Tower, a young wizard attends my chamber, watching as I scry a new area for my Solonavi masters. Together we witnessed a spectacle that has rarely been seen before in the Land.

Inbetween the territories controlled by the Cave Orc tribes, and the grassy Orc homeland known throughout the Land as 'the Fist', lies a region of broken mountains, treacherous paths, and more varieties of Mage Spawn than can be counted by a legion of scholars. While the lush Crow Valley acts as a buffer zone between the Blasted Lands to the south, just to the north lies a massive deposit of Magestone crystals that the Empire has never even considered trying to take. Being so far north of the Empire, and with the only tracks

leading through either Mage Spawn infested territory, or tribal lands belonging to the xenophobic Orc tribes, the Magestone deposits northeast of the Cave Orc territories have been investigated only by rogue Heroes and the fiercest Draconum.

An Orc tribe has slowly made its way out of the lush grasslands of the Fist, and have made their way to the Crow Valley with minimal losses. From there, they began the dangerous climb up to the Valley of the Gods. While I suspect that my scrying chamber will not have the capability to follow the Orc tribe past a certain point, within an hour of starting to follow their passage it became a moot point. From out of the skies above the Valley of the Gods came a flight of Draconum warriors and mages, intent on death and destruction. The chieftain of the Orcs, a slack-jawed, drooling tusked warrior, stood and stared at the oncoming death. While his family members began to panic and run, the chieftain's Shaman, a spindly, treacherous looking creature, grinned and cast a spell that vanished him from sight. The Orc blinked, shook his head, and screamed in rage just as a Draconum tyrant plunged an enchanted blade straight through his heart.

Just as the Draconum swept into the Orc ranks, chopping the screaming greenskins into pieces with their swords and spells, another force appeared from the south, glowing in colors that would make the muted rainbow of the dusk aurora seem pale. The Solonavi, having sprung the trap on the Draconum, engaged them in full combat, leaving the scattering Orcs to their own fate.

The Draconum quickly moved from the battleground to regroup and work out a new plan. The Oracle, satisfied with my performance, went to report to his masters on the success of the ambush, and that the first stages of the plan for the capture of the Valley of the Gods were now underway.

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### **Footsoldiers - Late Winter, Day 28**

Having followed the Solonavi back to their point of origin, I discovered that a sizable group of warriors, mages, priests and nobility had encamped at the southern edge of Crow Valley. About thirty of these warriors were ready at the service of their Solonavi masters, each having made a bond of service with the Solonavi sometime during the last couple of years. Now, with the favor called in, they were doomed to answer their duty in this cursed and forsaken section of the Land.

But at the darkest hour of the night, the sound of wings could be heard on the wind. With scouts already expecting retribution by the Draconum, they called out the watch without a moment of hesitation. All around the campsite, the Solonavi warriors leading the small, professional army began to glow with brighter light, and weapons of power manifested in their long-fingered hands. The grasslands were filled with light and shadow, as the fiery, jewel-hues of the Solonavi masters cast their brilliance through the night.

But the attackers were not Draconum, but Drakona, warriors from the distant city of Dragon's Gate. Screaming challenge, the ancient dragon-men swept down upon the waiting warriors without hesitation, swords swinging deadly, bloody arcs through the moonlight. While the Solonavi fought methodically, hewing with their weapons and blasting with their relics of power, their mortal footsoldiers could not withstand the Drakona assault, and many died hideous deaths underneath the mastery of the ancient warriors.

The battle lasted for nearly an hour before the Drakona retreated, satisfied they had done enough damage with their attack. While only a handful of true Solonavi and Drakona warriors were killed, nearly every Solonavi footsoldier in the camp bore wounds or burns from the vicious attack. The march to the Valley of the Gods would need to be delayed by another day, and reinforcements would need to be called for to face off against the two antagonistic dragonmen armies.

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### **Bloody Ledge - Late Winter, Day 29**

Following one of the wounded Drakona warriors, I soon found myself spying upon their encampment situated on a ledge overlooking the Crow Valley. While the Dragon City to the east boasts hundreds of Drakona warriors and tens of thousands of lizard and sub-human slaves, this warband only numbered about a dozen warriors, two less from last night's attacks. I partly expected to see the Draconum turncoat, Drakor, to be fighting alongside the Drakona battle force, but there were no outsiders present. Amidst the rocks some five hundred feet below, a column of upstart Draconum warriors searches for any sign of their primal ancestors, ready to confront and destroy them on sight.

The Drakona watch this with silence, secure in their safe spot as their dragon-cleric heals their wounds, one by one. While the process is lengthy, the cleric's work is very thorough, leaving no traces of wounds or even shattered scales after his work is complete. When all but two of the warriors are healed, an interesting thing happens on the rocks above their heads. A loud explosion sounds, a pop of air that reverberates and echoes for miles, followed by a sizable flare of bright green light that both blinds – and marks the site for observers from miles away.

As my scrying pool clears the brilliance, there is a strangled sound from within the waters, followed by a predatory hiss. When the picture returns, the lead Drakona, not yet healed of his wounds, has the spindly, cowardly Orc Shaman I saw from a couple of days ago caught in his clawed fist. The Orc tries desperately to get away, its little feet kicking in desperation, but with an exasperated roar, the Draconum crushes the creature's ribcage with raw strength, killing the screaming thing with its own shattered ribs.

The Draconum surge up the cliff face, using every last possible outcropping and handhold to propel themselves up the cliff. From above, blasting spells and balls of explosive fire begin to rain down upon the ledge, smashing both Drakona and stone into

pieces. Dropping from the ledge on outstretched wings, a couple of the Drakona glide down, latch onto the climbing Draconum with their claws, and rip them tumbling from the safety of the walls. One of the Drakona does not fare as well with this attempt, and is taken with their passenger in a long spiral to the valley floor.

Within minutes, the battle is over, and another dozen Draconum and Drakona lay dead in the rocks, and their comrades retreating in all directions. Soon, the crows will come, and claim their bloody feast.

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### **Fight or Flight** - Late Winter, Day 30

The humans and elves in the Solonavi's service ride at top speed across Crow Valley, with the Solonavi spirits following closely behind. Today, the warriors and mages loyal to the Solonavi are taking no chances, and their weapons and wands are at the ready.

The pass up to the Valley of the Gods was once washed away by a great cataclysm of water, a torrent that left a smooth trail more than a hundred yards wide leading from the valley floor up to the brim of the peaks. Up this trail the footsoldiers ride, hoping to gain the top of the pass before stopped by either Draconum or Drakona warriors can stop them. Taking a desperate gamble, I lock onto one of the lead riders, assuming that the Solonavi warriors will be engaged and slowed sooner than these fleet, lesser soldiers.

My gamble pays off – but not in the way that I expected. From ahead comes a wave of Draconum, Scalesworn, and loping Whelps, blocking the way into the Valley of the Gods. From above comes the Drakona, wheeling down with their spells and spears, screaming bloody challenge against all that stand against them. With a clash of metal and screaming horse my rider plows into, against, and through the Draconum lines, even as the rest of the footsoldiers are caught against the wall of scales and death.

Following orders, the rider leaves the battle behind, and seems for a few moments to not be followed by any of the predatory dragon-men. The warrior, a man of Khamsin riding a rare horse of Galeshi breed, rides as if his life depends upon his speed, for he knows the mere pistol and short sword he carries will not last long against the angry might of an enraged Draconum.

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## Kastali's Diary – Early Spring, 435 Tz

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### Top of the Pass – Early Spring, Day 1

It is nearly dusk when the Solonavi's footsoldier reached the top of the pass. While I suspect that the battle is long over down below, I cannot begin to guess the victory amongst the desperate three-way struggle for domination and victory.

As I expected problems scrying this close to a powerful Magestone source, the view is ruined quicker than I expected by the powerful Magestone emanations pouring out from the interior of the bowl-shaped cinder valley. What I didn't expect was the incredible view seen from the top of the pass, of an entire glimmering lake of water, stone outcroppings, and house-sized, shining boulders of Magestone glittering like diamonds in the winter sun.

While I only had seconds before my link was disrupted by an unbelievable wave of Magestone energies – energies that quickly reduced the rider and mount I followed to ash and smoldering bone - I was able to see a tall tower of Draconum architecture rising up in the middle of the lake. All around the tower were the forms of Draconum, as well as a host of diminutive figures – Dwarves, maybe – hard at work mining chunks of Magestone from the dozens of gem-littered islands surrounding the structure.

Then, my scrying room went dark, and I had little more information to give. Whether the forms I saw were Draconum and Mountain Dwarf, or Drakona and the Deep Dwarves that worship them I cannot say. I do know now why Tezla never conquered this unthinkable resource, as no golem, mage or human could survive the withering blast furnace that emanates from that accursed place. Only Dwarves and the Draconum – Draconum desperate for raw energies for their Chyrsalis – would thrive in this place, while all others would be destroyed or reborn as hideous Mage Spawn without destiny or purpose in the Land.

My masters are pleased with my choice and my performance; they state simple that they are going to be augmenting my scrying pool with additional powers, now that I have proved myself without question.

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### Counterassault – Early Spring, Day 2

Today, Lord Maakha, master of the Atlantean port city of the Darthion, makes his first move against the forces of the Dark Crusade. Soldiers, golems, mages and machines of war organize some miles west of the Roa Kaiten, preparing themselves for the long and bloody recapturing of the Atlantean province of Fairhaven.

When Emperor Nujarek first took power in 432 Tz, one of his first commands was to recall a sizable number of troops from the borderlands back to the floating city of Atlantis. As Nujarek feared a political coup from Raydan Marz, he called many of his old military comrades and allies back to the Atlantean heartland to ensure that his reign would not be endangered. This choice angered many of the inhabitants of the eastern Empire, who feared an increased number of attacks by Sect and Wylden elves and allies.

In the spring of 433 Tz, Nujarek held the first of his great bloody circuses of gladiatorial combat. After a pitched fight, the battle was won by soldiers loyal to Lord Maakha of Darthion. The busy coastal city of Darthion stands as one of Atlantis' most important client-states, and Nujarek's initial recall of borderline troops greatly weakened Maakha's ability to defend the midlands from attack. But with Gatekeeper Bassan's victory at the games, Bassan was able to fulfill Maakha's wish of asking for the return the defenders of the Midlands back to their posts, and soon the defenders of the frontier were back up to full strength.

Now, with the Dark Crusade ravaging and burning through the Wylden, crushing into Fairhaven, slaughtering Amazon warriors to the north, and threatening to invade into Duncastor and the interior Atlantean provinces, Lord Maakha has ordered Bassan to shape an army and recapture Fairhaven, to prove that Atlantis will no longer tolerate the presence of undead on Empire soil.

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### **Crossing the Kaiten – Early Spring, Day 3**

While the region west of the Roa Kaiten is deemed territory belonging to Fairhaven, and not to their ancestral rivals in Duncastor, the variety of droughts, wars and fires that have swept back and forth across Fairhaven these last five years have left this war-torn battleground largely a no-man's land. While the capitol fortress still stands in Fairhaven, (now a Crusader stronghold) a sizable number of structures including homes, businesses, barns, grange buildings, and even a sizable monastery have been destroyed or occupied.

From what I've overheard in the taverns, the region has lost more than half its population over the last two years, and a lot of families are now trapped until the tide of war passes them by. From my point of view, the Atlanteans have little to gain in this territory save for preserving face, and the rich Magestone deposits that dot the region.

While the inhabitants have had some luck against the invaders, including a remarkably well-executed attack against a number of Crusader leaders in the Council Hall, the sheer number of pit-fighters, undead, and necromancers has transformed the pleasant country into a land dominated by Necromancy. Now, as the first Empire troops begin to arrive on the edges of the swift-running Roa Kaiten, it is only a matter of time before the first Atlantean sky-castles arrive to begin ferrying warriors and golems across the waters, and right into the Crusader's waiting maw. While the destruction of the Stone Bridge by Revolutionaries late last year changed the whole dynamic of the region, the Stone Bridge

is being rebuilt by the ceaseless effort of hundreds of well-controlled zombie slaves, and it may be ready for use by Crusader armies by mid-summer.

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### **The Shattered Door** – Early Spring, Day 4

A faint wind began to whistle over the lake just after dusk. Tiny tornadoes of mist and fog danced and swirled atop the steaming surface of the water. Rhiamon, astride her griffon mount, Soulmare, watched the skies for any signs of the Elven Lord attackers. The twin hags, Hebrodia and Daemona, both said an attack - bigger than expected - would come tonight, after they consulted the still-pulsating membranes of a slaughtered Trog as a means of divinatory guidance. In assistance for the battle to come, Rhiamon had her hags call forth a number of their other sisters, undead and scampering bloodsuckers to defend the great sluice door that blocked the ancient channel leading out of the eastern side of the lake. More than four feet thick, extending thirty feet into the ground like a giant V-shaped wedge, and resistant to flame and spell, the gate's preservation this night against the High Elven attackers meant earning the trust of Kossak Darkbringer, and the goodwill of the leaders of the Dark Crusade.

True to their nature, the first flight of High Elves dived out of the starry sky, magic swords shining in the starlight, crying out valorous challenge. Within moments, the warriors in Rhiamon's command capable of flight were in the air, meeting the enemy head-on a hundred feet above stone and water. Letting the spirit forces within her soul guide her attacks, Rhiamon gleefully banked and watched herself engage and slaughter every High Elf that came into range.

The second wave came in fast after the first, bypassing the aerial swarm to directly confront the ground troops by the gate. Rhiamon had specifically instructed the hags to not stand down from a fight, and they followed her commands flawlessly. While the zombies, Bloodsuckers and lesser undead fared poorly against the skill and determination of a concerted High Elven attack, they slowed the enemy down enough for the hags to blast and crush them with equal might.

The third wave, consisting of the commanders and their bodyguards, flew in fast from the west, directly confronting Rhiamon and the survivors of the aerial battle. Calling upon the dark forces once again, she blasted a stream of cobalt-colored fire into the heart of the enemy flight, scattering them in all directions. The High Elven commander called out orders to fall back and regroup, and for a moment Rhiamon thought she had won in the space of only the first few minutes. But then, behind the Elven Lords, Rhiamon saw something she hadn't expected. A creature out of legend, mind-boggling in size and fury, a giant griffon bore down on her with incredible speed.

Easily the size of a mature dragon, Rhiamon barely managed to dodge Soulmare out of the way of its path, watching as the Griffon's rider skillfully guided the massive mount

down into the ravine by the Turning Door. Dismayed, knowing that the beast was beyond her Necromantic abilities to confront, Rhiamon watched helplessly as the magnificent creature settled down in front of the Turning Gate, crushing a handful of zombies beneath its massive weight. By the command of its rider, with one massive claw, the Skyguard Griffon grasped the upper edge of the massive metal block, then twisted, bent, and ripped the entire object out of the ground with ridiculous ease.

Dismayed, Rhiamon watched as a massive wave of water poured into the hole, and listened to the churning waterfall of water make its way down the long passage leading towards the upper reaches of the Vurgra Divide. By morning, most of the shallow lake would have drained down the wide passage, and would taint the headwaters of the Roa Sanguine. By tomorrow night, many of the human villages in the flood's path would be without drinkable water, and some of the most fertile fields in the Land would be poisoned, cutting the Crusader's supply of grain for their living warriors by half.

Shaking her head, Rhiamon turned her mount towards the Necropolis and flew away from the victorious High Elves with speed, needing to inform her new superiors of her failure - but more importantly - to relay the fact that the High Elves had unleashed a creature of legend against the Crusaders, and they would need to discover a new way to stop the impressive beast.

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### **Alteration and Augmentation – Early Spring, Day 5**

After a night of work by my Solonavi masters, my Scrying Pool has been augmented with a higher degree of power, allowing me greater capabilities of sight across the Land, and a far better chance of remaining hidden from any enemy wizards I encounter. However, with greater power comes a great price - as I now become vulnerable to the spells and sorceries cast by any enemy wizard that notices my phantom presence. I will be careful with this new gift, but I am looking forward to cautiously exploring territories I haven't been able to visit before.

Within the pool, I note that the Atlanteans are spreading all throughout the borders of Fairhaven, confronting and engaging any Crusader warforce that they encounter. For almost two days straight battle has been wrought throughout the countryside, and the burnt out husks of farms and abandoned villages ring with the sound of battle.

The Atlanteans have not yet reached Castle Fairhaven, but are setting up forces to make an assault against the capitol city tomorrow. While their Sky Castle can go no further, as the ley lines ahead are too unstable to support the massive weight, the ground troops and aerial golems will go ahead to attempt to grind the entrenched Crusaders to dust. My own people, ready and waiting for the assault within the walls of the blasted city, anticipate the battle, and in a small way I wish I was there to fight and kill Atlanteans myself, instead of being left as a mere observer within the walls of my scrying chamber.

## **The Battle for Castle Fairhaven – Early Spring, Day 6**

Years ago, when Kossak Mageslayer and Darq the Corrupt fought their way through Fairhaven, they only boasted armies of maybe a few hundred regular and mercenary troops at best. This morning, the Atlanteans threw ten thousand men, women and golems at the walls of Castle Fairhaven, and the valiant Crusaders withstood the attack, and engaged the Technomancers with swords and spells all their own.

The effective power of Atlantean sorcery, combined with the Technomantic might wrought by Tezla before his death, served the Empire well today. While the powerful Necromancers of the Crusade were resurrecting every fallen warrior in sight, providing a continuous wall of troops to defend the captured city with, the Atlantean's ability to blast and pulverize from range served them well against an opponent that continually threatened to outnumber them.

In the skies above Fairhaven, aerial combatants danced amongst a deadly rain of magical lightning and balls of explosive fire. While there was an abortive attempt by Prince Aaron to sabotage the Dark Crusaders during the peak of the battle, the treacherous noble son of King Johannes – and after his father's death, the last surviving heir of Fairhaven - soon found himself surrounded by a mob of angry vampires. While his warband was cut down to the man, he barely managed to escape by using a magical ring on his finger, twisting it and vanishing into thin air. While the witches and undead scoured the grounds to ensure it was not some kind of trick, they came to the same conclusion that I did – that Prince Aaron was not invisible, but truly moved to somewhere else either inside or outside Castle Fairhaven. Additionally, with my pool's refinement, I was able to better notice the pulse of powerful magic that came from the ring of transportation, and will likely be able to detect other such magical events in the future.

The real battle started just after the stroke of noon, when the Dark Crusaders opened wide the outer gates of Castle Fairhaven, and sent a stream of hungry vampires, powerful undead, and vengeful pit-fighters directly into combat with the Atlantean warriors and golems. Seeing that they would eventually suffer from the Empire's long-ranged abilities, they took the fight directly to the warriors, and spent the rest of the day engaged in bloody slaughter with their enemies. By nightfall, when both sides retreated to prepare for the days of battle to come, both sides seemed to have delivered equal damage to one another – and just as quickly as the Atlanteans scoured the battlefield for parts to scavenge or corpses to burn, the Necromancers searched amongst the crow-eaten corpses for suitable bodies to reanimate and serve in the fight to come.

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## **Order and Authority – Early Spring, Day 7**

Today, by the request of my Solonavi masters, I search for one of the leaders of the new Atlantean Empire amidst the teeming city of Xandressa. While I am sad at not being allowed to view the outcome of the battle in Fairhaven, I figure the war will resolve itself one way or another, and the conflict will ultimately weaken the Empire whether they win

or lose the territory. That is one of the key rules of fighting as a Crusader - you can depend on the fact that there are always more of us than them, no matter how poorly a battle turns out.

Xandressa, one of the most glorious cities in the Empire, stands as one of the great port cities in the western half of the Land. To those unschooled in the way of this massive trading city, the place is best summarized of as a zone of absolute order and authority surrounded by chaos, greed and murder. The heart of Xandressa is an area of law and peace, with Xandressan warriors jealousy guarding the well-secured docks and warehouses built along the Delphana passage. Surrounding that dock district, just beyond high walls, there are at least a dozen neighborhoods of merchants and hagglers that make their fortunes through Xandressan trade. When the Xandressan river ships make their way throughout the Land, bartering, buying and trading with shopkeepers from most of the other factions, they ultimately come back to their home city to handle sales, taxes and inventory from a season-long run up one coast or the other. It is here that they disembark, record their goods, and then sell what treasures and goods they've collected to the highest bidder.

For the Xandressans, who have little need for wealth beyond the luxury of being able to get what they need when they want it, this arrangement is very beneficial. Through their actions they benefit the Empire, the Empire in turns provides amnesty and recognizes their neutrality, and the Xandressan merchants maintain a firm level of control over the situation. With Duke Skala's ill-thought out attack against the Malia ship family in 433 Tz, the Revolution has since suffered due to having their once lucrative trade agreements with the Xandressans be rewritten into open declarations of war.

But I digress. So far, as I've explored the richer homes and Atlantean citadels lining the outer city, there is no sign of Magus Anunub. He is the one I seek, as my masters have slated him for death, and I will be instrumental in leading the Solonavi agents in the hunt against one of the most dangerous mages in the Empire.

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### **The Red House – Early Spring, Day 8**

The outer city of Xandressa is an impressive place. While I have seen my share of bustling markets and crowded marketplaces, the seemingly endless string of marketplaces in the Outer City - better known as the "Pearls of the Empire" - is mind-boggling. As I moved my scrying sight from one dignitary to another, from mage to guard, peasant to thief, and even from golem to golem, I was treated to some impressive sights - including one of the largest Red Houses in all the Empire, containing more than two hundred rooms stocked with every luxury, vice, and pleasure available anywhere in the Land. While the first and foremost Red House is in distant Venetia, this one - also run by the Venthians, well known as masters of pleasure and pain throughout the Land - contains a maze of sights that even a jaded warrior Crusader as myself could find both shocking and original.

Within the Red House, after more than two days of searching uneventfully through the palace-sized complex, I finally discovered a stunningly beautiful, young female magus that wore Anunub's Golemkore seal around her neck - even when in the throes of passion with a handsome young male slave from the Galeshi territories. When finished with her experience, she was treated to a bath, a meal of meats, breads and cheese in the Delphana fashion, and then escorted to a gate at the back of the Red House where she could discreetly make her way back to her own quarters in the Outer City.

While I hoped that this beautiful magus would lead me to Anunub, providing enough information for the Solonavi ambush, the young Atlantean was attacked by a sword-wielding Draconum warrior no more than a few blocks from the Red House. While I'll give the Technomancer credit for evading his first mighty strokes with a deft display of tumbling and acrobatics, and injuring him with a few well-placed strokes of sizzling lightning from her fingertips, in the end she failed to remember a lesson taught to every Crusader recruit - humans can never outrun a Draconum. As soon as her headless body hit the pavement, the Draconum was already on his way to his destination, with her draining head tucked under one arm. Satisfied that the assassin might lead me somewhere interesting, I locked my scrying gaze upon the warrior, and watched as he made his way through the tangled maze of streets towards his dark destination.

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### **Lock and Key** – Early Spring, Day 9

If it weren't for the use of the scrying pool, even the best tracker would have lost the Draconum within the maze of Xandressan streets - especially when the warrior took to the sewers after tracking through an abandoned tannery. After negotiating through a series of tight underground drain-tubes that the warrior had to slither through like a snake, the assassin climbed up a ladder into the basement level of one of the larger Xandressan warehouses - within the well-guarded wall of the Inner City of Xandressa.

Moving through the basement filled with boxes, crates and barrels of unknown goods, the Draconum warily watched for assailants, keeping his sword in hand at all times. While I figured that the warrior would be safe this far into the city, he had an air of paranoia about him that indicated he may be fearing a threat that even he could not face alone. Climbing a stone staircase, the sound of gently washing waves could be heard from nearby, as well as the creak of timbers and ship's mast in the flowing tide. He exited through a massive set of open doors out onto a stone quay stretching along the waterfront of Xandressa.

Waiting for him, was a pair of cloaked human figures, one diminutive, and one of a standard human size. The Draconum tossed the severed head at their feet. The smaller figure picked up the head, considered it for a moment, then said that the Draconum had indeed passed the test they had put before him. The larger man reached into his pocket, then tossed a large, ornate key to the Draconum, agreed that the warrior had earned his prize.

The Draconum bowed, then hastily moved back into the shadows of the warehouse. Navigating the back part of the building, he climbed up the stairs three at a time, with quick, almost desperate movements. He entered a large storeroom on the top floor of the structure, and after dodging through a shadowy maze of crates, he soon came to an iron door at the far side of the room. With an almost palpable frustration, the Draconum inserted the key into the lock, turned the shaft, and opened the chamber door. The sudden blast of magical energy billowing out of the chamber nearly disrupted my scrying pool, as the interior of the storeroom was filled with an amazing quantity of unprocessed Magestone. The Draconum desperately leaped into the heart of it, apparently more than ready for what could be nothing other than his long-delayed Chrysalis transformation.

Wisely, I held back from the ghostly light, and watched as the door slowly swung shut on its hinges, until it locked and latched solidly shut. Moments later, a thick grillwork of metal slid down over the door, trapping the Draconum in for the duration of his Chrysalis - and whatever lay beyond within that hell of burning, mutating light. Then, stepping around a collection of crates, the two cloaked figures moved out of the shadows. Pulling down her hood, the diminutive figure revealed herself as a dark-featured three-stone Magus from Xandressa, still holding the dripping head of the slaughtered warrior. Her companion also revealed himself, showing the stalwart, resolute face of Prophet-Magus Osiras, with four magestones shining from his bald forehead.

Osiras nodded grimly, just as the Draconum in the Magestone room began screaming. Not sure what was to come, I patiently waited for what would happen next.

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### **Black Chrysalis – Early Spring, Day 10**

I no longer believe the warriors of the Dark Crusade to have the monopoly on cruelty. For nearly twenty hours the Prophet-Magus watched over the sealed Magestone vault, listening to the screams of the Draconum trapped inside. While the young Xandressan magus came and went, bringing Osiras food and wine during his vigil, he continued to focus his attentions upon the storage room and his prisoner inside.

Once the Draconum ceased to thrash, and its pitiful screams finally ceased, Osiras stood from his chair, and raised the door grating with the move of a hidden switch. Opening the doorway, he vanished for a moment within the chamber, his body lost within the glow of the wealth of unprocessed Magestone within. Coming out, he had the Draconum by the tail, dragging the unconscious dragon-warrior out of the space as easily as if it were a lost toy. Once out of the room, Osiras sealed the chamber, then bent to inspect his work. Still steaming from the half-completed transformation, the unconscious Draconum looked hideous in the dim light, a jagged work of bone, scales, and glowing chunks of Magestone. The Draconum had half-formed wings, and one side of its face seemed to be fused with a brass-colored piece of metal, giving him the semblance of some kind of hideous lizard-golem.

Taking a spike of Magestone crystal from within his robes, Osiras turned the Draconum's head, then jammed the sliver into the back of the monster's original head, just along the left side of his spine. While the Draconum convulsed for a moment, but when the activity ceased, Osiras laid his fingers on the spike and pulsed a wave of energy into it. I watched as the spike suddenly grew in size and shape, and spread through the skin along the back of the Draconum's neck in a crystalline formation. Satisfied that his work would hold, Osiras then stood, concentrated, then gestured with his hands.

A veil of powerful magic began to surround the Draconum, shifting and shaping around his form. The monster began to stir awake, and growled with a feral agony. Angry, Osiras sent a volting shock of energy from his hands into the Drac, causing it to tremble. He sent another shock, causing it to growl menacingly, and its eyelids to flutter. A third shock caused the Draconum to spring to its feet, completely in the throes of an uncontained, primal rage. Osiras nodded with a pleased look on his face, as if his experiment seemed to be working, just as the Draconum took a step towards him and raised a massive, clawed hand to strike. Completing his spell, Osiras *sent* the Draconum, moved it from one place to another with a powerful spell not seen in this Land in probably a thousand years. On instinct, I locked my scrying pool onto the Draconum's vanishing form, and hoped the gamble would pay off. After a moment, we appeared somewhere very noisy, very bright, where showers of sparks and the sound of metal grinders echoed within a confined space.

Once the disorientation from the teleportation faded, I found myself looking up at none other than Magus Anunub, the leader of the Golemcore faction of the Atlantean Empire. The look of shock on his face at finding a furious, bestial Draconum appearing only a few feet from where he stood was impressive. With a blur of motion, driven by the twin forces of the Technomantic crystal in the back of the Draconum's neck and his own half-completed Chrysalis, the hideous Draconum attacked, claws raised to strike Anunub down where he stood.

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### **Bloody Workshop** – Early Spring, Day 11

With the maddened Draconum's first roar, I quickly locked my scrying pool onto Anunub, not sure where the battle would take him - especially when it came down to the young magus either confronting the beast, or trying to escape down one of the wide corridors exiting out of the vaulted hall. While I recognized that we were within a central workshop within the floating city of Atlantis, some hundreds of miles away from the darkened warehouse where Osiras created his monstrous beast of war, our exact location in Atlantis was uncertain.

The Draconum slashed down upon the unprepared magus, crushing ribs and tearing a foot-wide bloody swath from shoulder to groin. Only Anunub's decorative shoulder armor saved his life, preventing the beast from getting purchase on his collarbone and tearing him completely in half with the first stroke. As Anunub tumbled backwards, at least a dozen demi-magi from all around the room rushed to their master's aid - but

Anunub ordered for all of them to leave, that he would handle the problem alone. As the mages fled the room, and the Draconum circled in for the next attack, Anunub retreated slowly, step by step, until he moved behind one of the rolling carts that littered the room. Even as Anunub took refuge behind a pile of wires, cogs, machine parts, and half-completed mechanical limbs, I could see smoke rising from the back of the Draconum's neck, as the altered *magewrit* crystal finished its disintegration. While a magewrits are typically used to send messages to other mages, or larger versions can be used to summon specially prepared Mage Spawn, a version that would allow Osiras to send a raging monster to his enemy, without warning or time to prepare, shows that Osiras has his own collection of deadly spells, and that he's been collecting ancient tomes of magic at a similar rate to my own Solonavi masters in Rokos.

With the room cleared, Anunub let loose with a blast of lightning from his forehead crystal, trying to fry the Draconum where he stood. Wading through the torrent of energy as an Elven Ranger would wade through a raging stream, the enraged assassin laid one hand on the cart, threw it aside, then made a grab for the Technomancer's neck. Scrambling back amongst the tables, Anunub threw two more blasts, each damaging the Draconum to a small degree, but not enough to stop his opponent from advancing.

Seeing his only chance just behind the monster, Anunub tensed, waiting for the next strike, gambling he would be fast enough in his injured state to avoid the blow. When the Draconum lunged, driven to fury by its half-transformation and Osiras' magical meddling, Anunub managed to duck under the claws and roll to a table behind the Draconum. Grabbing a Magestone-powered handsaw, Anunub pressed the command stud and swept the blade up at the Draconum's head. Throwing up one hand against the attack, the Draconum was shocked to see the blade sheer through its wrist. When Anunub attacked again, the assassin used its reach to pin down the warrior's shoulders, smashed the weapon out of his grip with a clawed foot, and then bit down hard on Anunub's other shoulder with a vicious snap of its massive teeth, staining its maw with blood and gore.

Screaming with agony, Anunub threw himself backwards, leaving a significant section of his shoulder dripping in the Draconum's mouth. Raising his remaining good arm, he fired a desperate bolt of energy at the monster, but only singed the creature once again. Then, from behind the Draconum came the sound of heavy feet stomping on the stone floor, and the whirl of gears and a powering Magestone cannon. The assassin turned and looked, to see a fully functional Storm Golem coming through the doorway into the high-ceilinged chamber. Desperately, the monster leaped into the air, a full ten feet or more, and screamed out a primal Draconum war cry never before heard in the halls of Atlantis. As he came down upon Anunub, the Storm Golem fired both cannons, blasting the beast dead-on with lethal effectiveness. The smoking corpse landed just behind Anunub, steaming and twitching in its death throes.

Moments later, Anunub was surrounded by a handful of Atlanteans, but his life signs were fading with every breath.

## Marking the Mage – Early Spring, Day 12

Anunub stirs in his recuperation bed, looking around the high-ceilinged medical chamber. Outside Atlantis, it is a beautiful day, with the winter sun shining down upon the distant, twinkling waters of the river Vizorr. Within the shadowy chamber where Anunub rests, the whirl of machines and the shine of Magestone crystals predominates, his only companionship aside from the pair of massive Golems that stands guard at either side of his sickbed.

While the Draconum's vicious claw wound was healed through the use of a number of potions and fantastic-looking Technomantic healing devices, the surgery on Anunub's shattered shoulder blades took almost nine hours, involving the carefully replacement of key bones and muscles with machine parts and golem ligaments. While the human's appearance will be largely unaltered by the surgery, the surgeons promised him that he would gain the ability to lift greater weight than any normal human.

Ten hours ago, as Anunub was being levitated down to the surgical center, I pressed a stud on the side of my scrying pool, signaling to my masters that I had found Magus Anunub. Now, in the shadowy interior of my scrying chamber, a shimmering figure stands beside me, watching for the perfect moment. When satisfied that no one is going to enter the room for a time, as the bustling horde of nurses, doctors and students seems to have subsided for a time, Vextha raises his hands and begins to cast a spell I have not seen before. A shining glow of green, luminescent light erupts between his palms, and then beams down into the scrying waters - and *through* the surface pool down into the very room where Anunub slumbers.

For a moment, the phosphorescence dances on Anunub's face, and neither the mage nor the Golems beside him react. From the harmony of the spell energies, I recognize that Vextha has somehow marked the mage with his strange magic, much the same way that the lords of the Necropolis mark slaves slated for the death-pits with a similar spell. Then the scrying waters boil and froth, and the image is lost, casting my chamber into near darkness. Vextha, magically spent, his radiance flickering and strobing in the dim light, staggers away from the edge of the pool, barely able to function.

"What did you do?" I ask subserviently, hoping he will answer.

Vextha looks down upon me with disdain, as a god looking down upon a wriggling cockroach. "After the failed attack by the false prophet's, Anunub is now too well defended for a guarantee of success. Thus, I marked the human for the others to find in the future. As Anunub refuses all of our deals and temptations, and will not waver in his loyalties to the Empire or to his false Tezla, he must be destroyed. Our real danger lies with Osiras being inconveniently eliminated by one of his own rivals, leaving Anunub and Nujarek to rule the Empire side by side - which is exactly what my master doesn't want. We need to have the next false prophet of Atlantis under our control, and only Anunub's elimination will pave the way for other ambitious Technomancers to enter our field of control."

"Is Osiras in our service?"

"No," Vextha replied, as he made his way to the door, "but we believe he wants to be."

I bow as Vextha leaves the scrying chamber, leaving me alone with my notes, and my thoughts.

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### **The Elemental Coalition** – Early Spring, Day 13

The nine members of the Elemental ruling council assemble in the Hall of Leaves in Roanne Valle. For weeks now, ever since the assassination of the Faerie Queen's daughter, talk of division and disassociation has been a constant. While the Forest Elves stand solidly behind their false Tezla, many of the members of the other races - Centaur, Sprite, Troll - are growing more and more angry with each passing day. With Commander Searle's forces at Stonekeep renewing their vows to protect the Land, but breaking their oaths to Tezla, the Freeholder's options grow steadily smaller with each passing hour.

When a red-skinned Troll Wizard enters the chamber, accompanied by two Wylden Elf guards, the conversation abruptly ceases, as bitter words suddenly turn to astonishment and shock. Even for myself, the appearance of the red-skinned Wizard is shocking, as this was the Troll that disrupted my scrying pool during the resistance in Fairhaven some months ago. His name is Maren'kar, and from what my masters tell me, he was once trained in the Oracular Towers at Rokos in the ways of magic, but was sent away due to his inability to become a full mage of the Order.

Maren'kar is welcomed by the council, and he offers news that I didn't expect. He says that his agents within the Necropolis have discovered the artifact that allows the Master Necromancers to animate hundreds of zombies at a time. Maren'kar, with the use of his potent magics, will transport a small strike team into the heart of the Crusader capitol, and allow them the chance to destroy the artifact once and for all. When questioned on whether he will lead this team, Maren'kar humbly states that he has his own path in life, and that this critical, but suicidal mission, is destined for another.

While I knew that the Deathspeakers had a relic that allowed them to create unstoppable hordes of Zombies, and have seen the effects of these uncountable armies in the Wylden, I don't know how Maren'kar could have learned of it. While I suspect that even if the relic is somehow destroyed the existing armies of Zombie slaves and warriors will retain their potency, I also believe that the Deathspeakers will lose the ability to raise entire graveyards of potential warriors at one time with little to no effort. Defeat here will not be enough to stop our war effort, but it may damage it if the Elementals are successful.

Maren'kar completes his time with the Council of Nine, and asks that they assemble a team for transport the following morning, as time is short and the need is dire. Before he

can get away, I try to lock my pool onto him - but my magical bonds utterly fail against his magical defenses. The Troll, with a smirk on his face, turns and looks right at my vantage point and winks like a foolish old grandfather. Then my magical pool, again, is disrupted by the Troll's magic, and the scrying chamber is filled with my screams of rage and fury.

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### **Atop the Parapet** – Early Spring, Day 14

Maren'kar waits for his soldiers atop one of the highest towers in Roanne Valle. To the east, the sun just starts to rise over the chilly peaks of the Sturmounts. To the west, along the face of the Wylden Plateau, the armies of Kossak Darkbringer prepare for another day of war. Every night another group of warriors, zombies, siege engineers or monsters make the long climb up the zigzagging switchbacks that lead to the top of the plateau. Every day, the skirmishes against the Elemental walls take more Wylden lives, weakening the Forest Elves resolve and defenses. While Kossak has time, and an unbelievable warforce, he chooses wisely to wait until everything is prepared, as he cannot afford to lose any of the advantage he's gained over these past weeks.

Four warriors arrive to join with Maren'kar. One, an old Wylden elf, a silent ranger named Oakes, stands by the ramparts watching the milling crowds of Crusader warriors a thousand feet below. Two young Centaurs, seemingly brother and sister, are Woodroot and Laurell, each checking their packs for the tenth consecutive time to ensure the tools, weapons, potion bottles, and seedling packets needed to carry out their foolhardy plan are intact. The final warrior, a smug warrior named Byrch, adeptly toys with a single gold coin in his nimble fingers. At his side is the tool of his trade, a crystal broadsword noting him as a Crystal Bladesman, and a Defender of Roanne Valle. Of the four, I choose to lock my pool onto Oakes, for I believe he will survive long after the other three lesser warriors fall.

Once assembled, Maren'kar speaks few words, save the mention that there will be a time of disorientation as he moves the group from one place to another. To Laurell he gives a map that will lead them to the artifact's location. Then, to Byrch, Maren'kar gives a ring from his own finger, and tells him to wear it and invoke its magic only if he is in the direst need. Byrch, pretending to not be impressed by the pretty bauble, happily dons the ring and waits for Maren'kar to transport them and seems largely unconcerned - as if he's done this before? Maren'kar raises his staff, and with a gesture and a moment of concentration, summons enough magical energy through his relic to levitate a second Atlantean city. Then, the scene wrenches, and the group appears in a place very familiar to me - the Yard of Bones, deep within the Third Tower district of the Necropolis.

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### **Yard of Bones** – Early Spring, Day 15

This far north, the sun has not yet risen over the eastern peaks, and the courtyard known as the Yard of Bones still lies in darkest shadow. Not used since the first days of the

Vampire Civil War, the huge space is littered with chairs, broken tables, and scuttling black and red spiders the size of war dogs. With the fall of the House of Uhlrik, this entire district became a wasteland devoted to the dance between prey and predator. Since the fall of Deathspeaker Spider, no Necromancer has yet survived a successful bid for his empty seat on the ruling council of the Dark Crusade, and claimed possession of the Third Tower and the surrounding estates.

Concentrating, Laurell casts a small spell that will muffle the sound of the Centaur's hooves on the cobblestones, and Woodroot tests his sister's work with a couple of light, exploratory steps on a shard of broken pavement. Oakes, already off hunting and exploring, is likely making a perimeter check around the abandoned yard. Off to Laurell's right, like a hunting serpent, Byrch has already discovered prey cowering beneath one of the shattered stone tables ringing the courtyard, and has raised his blade to strike. Maren'kar, shaking his head, quietly tells Byrch to put away his weapon, and then speaks something in the tongue of my people. - *Come Out* - he says, in the language of the Dark Elves.

A black-haired Elven child emerges, no more than a dozen years of age, dressed in clothes that identify her as a slave, rather than the novice clothes a child her age would be wearing if she had actually had a real purpose in her life. Whether this young Elf is of the Necropolis or the Wylden I cannot say, as her short-cut hair, bruises, hollow eyes, and malnutrition takes away many of the attributes I would use to guess the purity of her lineage. Maren'kar speaks gently for the girl to come to him, and she does, bare feet padding on the stone. By the time she reaches his side, she is already under his spells of protection, and beyond my ability to lock.

"Who's this?" Byrch asks, his bright attention focused on the little girl.

"Natalia," Maren'kar replies. Byrch reaches for her, but she flinches back, then grabs onto Maren'kar's massive knee for security.

"Why is she so important for you not to come fight with us?" Byrch asks. "You've always liked a good fight."

"Because she might save us all," the Troll replies. "Good luck, my friend. Don't die."

"Blackwyn will be awful grumpy if you get me killed," Byrch hisses out, but Maren'kar and the girl are already gone, vanished into thin air. "Wizards," the elf says grumpily. "Never trust 'em. Never pay their debts, either."

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## **The Doors of Tolsku Harda – Early Spring, Day 16**

Maren'kar's map is accurate, leading the warriors through the maze of the Necropolis without either discovery or confrontation. With the sun up, the city is as subdued as a

human city is in the dark of night. Guards walk the streets, priests and priestesses of the Blood Goddess sing and wail from courtyard to courtyard, and vampires seek their prey in alleys awash with pools of stagnant rainwater. High above, the arches, bridges and towers that make up the true heart of the Necropolis are brilliant against the morning sky, a perfect, shadowed reflection of Atlantis, showing the strength of darkness even against the power of the Wylden's beloved morning light.

Drawn in a childish scrawl, the map was probably worked out by Maren'kar's young protégé - but the Troll's blockish handwriting notes key locations, likely patrols, and possible obstacles to overcome. With so many Crusader warriors either fighting in the Wylden or battling the Vurgra flood, even a novice pit-fighter could have made their way through the outer city without being seen.

But when the map led them to the doors of Tolsku Harda, one of the largest churches of the Blood Goddess in the Necropolis, I watched Byrch's shock and awe with a smirk. As one of the best defended cathedrals in the city, the interior is filled with vampires, blood priests, and penitents already tested for their worth by lash and blade. It makes me homesick just thinking about it.

Taking a blackened tome from her pack, Laurell opens the spellbook and threads through the pages. With a gesture she casts a spell - and the sky suddenly boils with dark clouds, and a chill wind begins to whine amongst the towers and parapets. When the first sheets of rain begin to fall from the sky like a flight of ten thousand arrows, Woodroot is already digging out the seedling packets from his pack. As the cobbles darken and the roar of the rain becomes deafening, the Centaur charges out of hiding, right into plain sight, heading towards the doors of the cathedral tossing handfuls of seed to one side or another.

And, behind him, a forest of wooden beings grows and takes shape on the dirty stone, fed by magically-enhanced rainstorm above, growing from seedlings to five-foot high, spindly Mage Spawn beasts of wood and driving hunger in a matter of seconds.

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### **Torrent** – Early Spring, Day 17

The diversion in front of the hall of Tolsku Harda is very effective, as the sudden appearance of a supernatural storm and more than five hundred Spawn Golems. Ever since the Elementals built the fortress of Roanne Valle, they have worked hard to ensure that every type of plant in the Land is preserved within their gardens. Apparently, much the same way that the Necropolis experiments on Bloodsuckers and other beasts, the Elementals have had some luck altering plants for their own desires.

To one side, Oakes vanishes, heading toward the kitchens. In the other direction, heading for the rectory, Byrch runs full out, bow and quiver over his shoulder. At the gates of the Blood Goddess cathedral, the Centaur warrior Woodroot leads his horde of creaking wooden warriors, leading a deadly distraction against some of the most competent warriors in the Land.

I quickly shift my scrying pool onto Byrch, barely able to lock onto the warrior before I lose him amidst the torrential downpour. Climbing up the side of a shed, and then a wall, and then making his way up a thin ledge to a low, barred window alongside one of the cathedral towers, he seems more like a leaping tree-squirrel to me than an elf. Drawing a short metal rod from a pouch, blinking past the rainwater dripping down from his matted hair, he uses the Elemental rockcutting blade to carve his own aperture alongside the window, slicing through the naked stone with ease.

Inside, after orienting himself and arming himself with his bow, Byrch heads up a flight of stairs, taking them three at a time, arrow nocked and ready. At the top of the flight, he comes to one of the Stained Rooms, and sees two young Elves - one male, one female - chained to a blood-stained wall awaiting sacrifice. Without a moment of hesitation, Byrch fires two of his precious supply of arrows, splinters their links and frees them from their honored place of doom. Ignoring their cries of thanks, he moves further down the hallway towards the cathedral's vaulted hall, heading towards a very deadly destination.

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### **The Altar of Tolsku Harda – Early Spring, Day 18**

The normal tones of voice and horn that are commonly found in a Blood Goddess altar room are silent, and the sounds of combat echo just up the main hall. While I cannot see anything of the Centaur Woodroot, the fact that only a few vampires remain to guard the space is a sure sign that the Elemental warrior and his wooden host managed to make their way into the front gates of the cathedral.

Taking a position in a secluded balcony some five stories above the tiled floor below, Byrch empties a dozen heavy arrows from his quiver and lays them out on a dust-covered velvet bench next to him. Maybe sixty seconds after Byrch's arrival, just when he manages to calm his breathing, we both catch sight of Oakes moving from pillar to pillar down below, moving closer and closer to the main altar at the end of the hall. Four vampires from the Order of Vladd guard the altar – a location where my new levels of scrying sight show a ripple of power and light – and thus is likely the location of a powerful artifact. It makes sense for this object to be kept in this cathedral, for it is here that every worthy dead is raised for service in the Crusade, and there is room enough to raise an army of corpses.

Oakes, without hesitation, begins the long dash across the open tiled floor. The Vampires see him almost immediately and shout the alarm. With a flurry of motion, Byrch launches a rain of arrows down up the Vampires, just as Oakes fires his own deadly shots into the midst of the defenders. From two doorways comes another foursome of Crusader warriors and Pit-Fighters, dressed in ceremonial garb. Down by the entrance of the chamber, a Priestess of the Blood Goddess appears, and begins firing bursts of green light from a wand, blasting the tiles at Oakes' running feet. Byrch feathers the Priestess three times, eye, mouth and heart, sending the warrior spilling to the ground with a strangled cry.

Oakes tries to make his way around the cordon of Vampires, but they are too fast for him, even with shafts sticking out of their throats and joints. The first Vampire catches him and tears at his left arm, but only shreds his armor with a scream of torn metal. Pulling out his short sword, and using his bow like a staff, Oakes carves one opponent into two separate pieces, before staking another Vampire coming up behind with the point of his bow. Above, Byrch fires another three arrows, taking out one of the Nightblades coming up behind his ally, and then an additional three into the back and throat of another of the altar's bloodthirsty defenders.

A hiss sounds from behind him, and Byrch looks up to see the pretty Elven girl he rescued only minutes before -- coming towards him with her vampiric fangs extended. Sighing with exasperation, he fires the last two arrows on the bench into her heart and skull, then scampers out of the way of her exaggerated death throes. Then, looking down upon the cathedral floor, he sees Oakes engaged in a very deadly combat, and is already bleeding from a half-dozen wounds. Reaching into his shirt, openly praying to the Gods of the Wylden, Byrch takes out a potion, swigs a mouthful, then vaults out over the ledge into open air. The potion takes effect some two levels down, and Byrch begins to float harmlessly to the tiled floor some fifty feet below.

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### **The Price of Surrender** – Early Spring, Day 19

Byrch lands lightly on the floor of the cathedral, even as Oakes suffers a terrible blow, his chest torn asunder by a mailed fist of rending claws. Facing a half-dozen Crusaders, Oakes drops to his knees, anger showing in his eyes even his lifeblood pools on the floor beneath him. Tossing his bow to the lead Vampire in a motion of angry surrender, the Ranger takes out his sword, and motions that he is about to drop it as well – but holds, frozen for a moment, confident under the gaze of a horde of blood-crazed killers.

The oldest warrior – who I recognize as Priest Sydin, a Priest of the Blood Goddess and the Domo of Tolsku Harda - cries out to kill the weakling. Oakes, with a burst of energy, is suddenly up on feet, spins out of low crouch, and jams his blade into the Priest's heart. In Sydin's hands, Oakes' bow begins to glow brightly, and shines with growing intensity the closer he comes to death.

Byrch, already knowing what is to come, ducks down behind the surface of the stone altar. The sound of a Technomantic whine begins to reverberate in the air, and I can hear running footsteps in all directions. Then, the magical bow explodes with enough violence to crack the sky-arches of the cathedral, sending vampires tumbling in all directions. In the distance, the sound of battle at the front gate is overwhelmed by the noise, and screams of panic can be heard throughout the structure.

When the wave of destruction has passed, and waterfalls of pouring rainwater are beginning to sluice down into the interior of the cathedral, Byrch stands and observes what is before him, doing his best to ignore the chaos and screaming going on around

him. An hourglass, made entirely of refractive, beautiful Magestone crystal, is placed at the front of the altar, but is sheltered within a protective dome carved from a giant ruby. With a moment of hesitation, knowing what his stonecarving wand will do to such an immeasurably expensive gem, greedy Byrch grits his teeth and grinds the rod across the surface, knowing that he is destroying a jewel worth a dozen Atlantean kingdoms.

Reaching within the gap, Byrch then removes a small hourglass, made of silver and glass, and filled with a thousand tiny granules of glowing Magestone crystal. He shrugs, pockets it, and then looks around the chamber for his companion. Moving down the steps two at a time, he reaches Oakes motionless body by the main aisle. Repugnantly tossing aside the severed Vampire leg laying across the warrior's chest, Byrch lays one hand on the warrior's neck and feels he's alive – but barely.

Hearing mumbling in the distance, Byrch looks up to see another Priestess in the throes of casting a spell. Wishing aloud he still had arrows for his bow, he then saw his friends, the two Centaurs Laurell and Woodroot, bolting down the wide, carpeted hallway toward him. Behind them, the sounds of battle and destruction were starting to cease, but the wooden warriors had done their job.

When the warriors were within an arm's length, out of breath and wounded in a dozen small ways in the desperate fight, Byrch twisted Maren'kar's ring, once again moving them to somewhere else in the Land. Behind them, the witch completed her Necromantic spell, and Priest Sydin manifested back into the world of the living, his face contorted with a terrible rage.

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Maren'kar stood waiting for them, sheltered from the pounding rain within a low-ceilinged cavern. Behind him, warming her hands by a make-shift fire, sat Natalia, shivering in the cold winter air.

“Give it up,” Maren'kar said, extending his red-skinned hand out to Byrch.

“Not even a hello?” Byrch mocked, playfully moving the artifact behind his back.

“Not for you. I know you too well. Pass it over, before I take it from you by force. And I can guarantee, you don't want that.”

“You play dirty,” Byrch offered, then handed over the device. Without a moment of hesitation, as if loathe to touch the object, the Troll dropped the relic to the dirt and stomped on the fragile creation, breaking it into a hundred pieces.

“You playing god with people's lives and souls is a dirty thought all by itself,” Maren'kar said. “But now the field of war is balanced, and the winner determined by skill and valor, rather than by the product of war-dreams of elves long dead.”

“I thought you were rooting for us, Maren’kar?” Laurell said abashed. “You being a red-skinned Mage-Troll and all, I thought you would naturally fight for the Land.”

“Red-skinned,” Maren’kar said with some sadness, “is exactly the reason why I can’t pick a side.” He gestured to Natalia. “And neither can she. Provided she is what I’m looking for.”

“And what is she?” asked Byrch, with a curious smile. “Is she another of your Mage Princes, like your little Jason?”

Maren’kar just smiled, adjusted his stance, and said absolutely nothing.

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### **Bloody Supper** – Early Spring, Day 20

Having witnessed one of the Dark Crusade’s most precious relics stolen and smashed by the Troll Wizard Maren’kar, I quickly moved by scrying sight to spy upon the other key Crusader warlords in the Land, to see what ramifications would come from the Elemental victory in the Cathedral of Tolsku Harda.

My first visit started with the private chambers of Deathspeaker Aeradon, within the Necropolis. Confident that the powers of my pool would keep me from detection, I made my way down the winding passages that led to his tower in the Fifth District. Passing guards and magically engineered Necromantic watchdogs without challenge, I moved my scrying sight through doors and curtains of Aeradon’s private quarters, until I came upon him in a secluded dining room.

The meal of the day seemed to be Orc and blood wine. A pair of servants carefully cut sections of his rib-cage for their master’s plate, much the way a human would serve meat from a roast. As his dinner was being prepared, a Vladd commander showed a sizable map to Aeradon detailing the pattern of Crusader troops in the Wylden, and explained the reasons for his confidence that the castle of Roanne Valle would soon fall. With superior numbers, greater weaponry, and Darq’s continued control of Kossak Darkbringer, the time to strike was soon to come. At this point, with the news of the defeat of the Atlantean forces attempting to recapture the client-state of Fairhaven, Aeradon would merely need to give the order to redeploy troops from Fairhaven and the banks of the Roa Galtor to the Wylden Plateau, and doom would be cast upon the Elemental capitol.

Aeradon, while sucking at a forkful of tender, but pungent Orc meat, countered the concept. While he assumed the Darq’s loyalty would continue, the warriors that would be pulled from the Roa Galtor to finish off the Elementals would not be of loyalty to either Aeradon or to the Order of Vladd. He continued saying that for the victory to be complete, it would need to require that Vladd oversaw the entire operation – and thus could claim full reward once Roanne Valle was ultimately breached. Aeradon then posed the plan that the war-element of the vampiric house of Vladd immediately begin the long journey south to Roanne, and be present in force when the final battle took place some

weeks hence. It was a risk, and would leave Aeradon vulnerable to attack in the Necropolis. But with the other Deathspeakers and Vampiric Houses no longer having an infinite supply of disposable Zombie Troops, it was a perfect time to take a risk, crush the Elementals, and maybe use the impetus to capture the open seat on the Deathspeakers Council for one of his own apprentices.

The Orc moaned. Aeradon ignored it, gave the order for his will to be carried out, and briskly continued with his supper.

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### **Kossak's Warcamp** – Early Spring, Day 21

Word has already arrived in the warcamp that the Necromantic relic has been smashed, and that the supply of Zombie troops from the capitol will begin to cease. But that, combined with the news that the Order of Vladd is coming to administer the coup de tat to the Elementals, has the camp charged with excitement, fervor, and intrigue.

For the many other Vampire Houses that serve the Dark Crusade, acknowledgement of the Order of Vladd as the dominant warrior house in the Necropolis is a given after the outcome of the Vampire Civil War. But now that everything rests on the coming battle with the Elementals, many of the Crusaders are wondering what will happen in the Necropolis if the Dark Elves win the battle – will it pave the way for Deathspeaker Aeradon to fill slain Deathspeaker Spider's still empty seat with one of his own pupils, or will victory allow him make his move against the Dark Prophet Soma and challenge for dominance of the entire sect?

While failure on the Wylden Plateau will surely bring ruin to the house of Vladd, I can only wonder what it must be like to be here as the army continues to gather in strength. The host of the Elemental League lies within those walls, and the might of the Necropolis will soon be gathered to confront and destroy them, without mercy or quarter.

Every day more siege engine parts are moved up the switchbacks to the top of the Wylden Plateau, and the existing Crusader catapults continue to batter the walls and defenders with chunks of stone and barrels of biting flies. While there have been no signs yet of blood plague erupting within the castle of Roanne Valle - likely a testament to the fine skills of the Elemental healers - the lack of aggression from the doomed Forest Elves within that mountain-sized fortress makes everyone question what secrets and surprises the Elementals have in reserve.

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### **Bitter Fruit** – Early Spring, Day 22

Prince Darq, wearing the Vermillion Crown, sits smugly in his tent chair, and eats a bitter desert fruit as he listens to his vampire commanders update him on the Galeshi campaign. At this point, many of the surviving tribes have been driven deep into the western deserts, beyond the reach of even the most far-stretching Moonborn patrols. While the Sunborn

Galeshi still make attacks from their hidden lairs amongst the dunes, there are fewer and fewer attacks with each passing week, as more and more of the Sunborn fall to the swords and fangs of Darq's sizable army of vampire warriors.

Courtesy of his psychic link to Kossak Darkbringer, Darq already knows about the smashed artifact at Tolsku Harda, and the marching orders for the Order of Vladd. This morning, before the meeting with his commanders, Darq asked one of his "advisors" about the situation, asking what she thought about the likelihood of Vladd and the Moonborn being recalled back to Roanne Valle with the rest of the Order. Carlana, his mistress and bodyguard, languidly stretched out on the silk coverlet, and told him that he shouldn't go. She said that that it was too far, they had done their part to conquer the west, and Kossak was there to handle the situation. Darq agreed that they shouldn't go, but a questioning look came across his face, as if he was pondering a greater puzzle than the fall of the Elemental capitol.

Back in the command tent, reports have come in of a floating tower limping along on the fringes of the Galeshi Desert. Not of Atlantean make, the Moonborn kept an eye on the war citadel until it moved to the north, up near the borders of Cave Orc territory. When asked what to do about it, Darq merely replied that for the moment, they should let Raydan Marz be, as he might come in handy in the future. After all, it was Marz that ultimately allowed Darq to break the curse on the Vermillion Crown and capture Kossak at the Battle of the Dwarven Forge – and maybe he could be put to use again, maybe as a foil against the Atlanteans or even against the foolish Orcs loyal to the pleasure-loving Shadow Khans.

When asked what the Moonborn troops should be doing with their spare time, with so many Galeshi having been driven beyond their reach, Darq ordered the digging of several blood-pits, and that any warrior that displeased him be forced to fight for their lives against other miscreants, and give the other more worthy vampires a spectacle to watch and bet on. The commanders acknowledged his decision, the hastily scurried from the chamber, hoping to not to be on the first of his fighting lists.

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### **Horns and Drums** – Early Spring, Day 23

The rain of stones and barrels continues, and warriors armed with make-shift flame throwers march along the walls, destroying as many of the swarms of biting flies as they can, before the pests spread into the interior of the stone warrens. While the beautiful gardens of Roanne Valle are in full view on the far side of the wall, powerful enchantments protect the thousands of varieties of vegetation within the garden from attack or insects. While the precious seeds, fruits, and plants are safe from attack, the inhabitants of the castle not working in the great gardens are constantly on their guard against the next Crusader trick or attack.

News has arrived already of the success by Maren'kar's band of warriors, and the destruction of the Necromantic artifact. Oakes and the others have already received

commendations for their bravery, though the broken hope that all the existing Zombies would just “fall down” seems to be shared by everyone I overhear. While there is some joy at the victory in the heart of Crusader territory, the growing blot of soldiers and siege engines spreading across the Wylden Plateau is a sight enough to dampen the spirits of even the most free-spirited Centaur. The relentless blasting of horns and beating of drums made a solid effect on everyone here, and nobody looks refreshed or rested. The wards that protect the innermost sections of the Elemental fortress still repel me, even with all of the powers of my scrying pool. But the first clue I’ve found to what they might be working upon comes not from the interior, or from the chambers of power. It lies in the dozen wide staircases leading up from the underground gates, each being covered with planks of wood, as if transforming the walkways into a place for beasts or chariots to ride. Many of the older statues and decorations are being ripped or torn down to make way for the planking. The Elemental’s craftsman labor night and day upon these peculiar modifications, and speak not a word to anyone of what they are doing or why.

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### **The Price of Water** – Early Spring, Day 24

The Vurgra Divide is awash with activity, as the poisoned waters are diluted and swept down the Roa Sanguine. Everywhere, warriors, nobles, priests and commoners sandbag and dig furiously, trying to prevent the mineral-tainted waters the Elven Lords released from the Crater Lake from destroying any more crops. Whole castles stand abandoned of the living, as their water stores and wells become filled with poisonous stews. Bands of vampiric warriors attempt to reign in order with violent, aggressive displays of force, but humans have always panicked when their livelihood is threatened. Those of long-lived elven stock know that the benefits of life come and go, and that in time, through hardship and determination, one worthy of a warrior’s name will turn benefit.

Many of these men and women, either refugees from human wars, or too old to wear armor and sword and fight for the Crusade, are not warriors. At the first sign of trouble, they panic like a struggling mouse steeping in a cup of freshly boiled wine.

Those nobles that carefully constructed their fortresses, temples and towns over high wells are now more powerful than ever before. Able to ration water to petitioners at a steep price, for the next few months until the fall rains clears the whitish residue left from the flood, these men and women will become rich, and will in time become able to afford the many luxuries of the Necropolis. For the rest, they must grovel or die of thirst; better yet, they willingly become vampires beyond such things, or may end up Zombies in service of Kossak Darkbringer at the coming battle of Roanne Valle.

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### **Storm Rider** – Early Spring, Day 25

A lone rider navigating the hills east of Khamsin is not an uncommon sight in Revolutionary territory. But for a lone rider to be making his way by night, in the middle

of a drenching rainstorm, and to be suspected of being a warrior of the Apocalypse is something else entirely.

My masters first alerted me to the warrior's presence in Wolfsgate, where he had just supposedly arrived from a long journey in the Blasted Lands. With a chest of gold and jewels taken from some long-lost dungeon, he bought an exquisite double-barreled black powder shotgun, as well as the livery of an Atlantean scout from a certain black-market vulture who long ago sold his soul to the Solonavi for a bauble of magic and glass that allows him to tell whether his customers are telling the truth. Unfortunately for the shopkeeper, he asked the wrong question of the stranger, and got a very violent, final double-barreled answer in return.

The Solonavi have long had a standing order for me to be on the watch for these greatest of enemies, for the times when the minions of the Tu'raj begin to scurry and enact their plans. While the Solonavi are masters at deal-making, the warriors of the Apocalypse are chosen for their greed, their black hearts, and their utter desire to unmake anything that is made. While it is surely impossible for the Apocalypse to destroy the Land, they may be able to corrupt or conquer everything in it – Human, Elf, Orc, Dwarf, Troll and Fae – that stands against them when they are ready to make their move.

The rider continues through the darkness, his steed relentlessly charging ahead through the black, driving rain. I can hardly see the ground beneath his mount's feet, nor his hands clenched in the beast's black mane, but I know he makes his way east, to either Caero or Venetia, and into the heart of the Atlantean power-base in the region.

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### **Crossing the Vizorr – Early Spring, Day 26**

When the storm cleared and the sun rose the following morning, I got a better look at my adversary. He was an older human male about six feet in height, probably in his seventieth year, with long gray hair following down over his back and his broadsword sheath. Dressed out in the armor and livery of an Atlantean mounted scout, he didn't seem out of place along the cart-clotted roads west of Caero. While he looked like any other aging fighter in the Land, likely just a few years short being challenged and gutted by some headstrong brat, my masters indicate that this enigmatic champion vanished more than a year ago while questing in the open deserts for the Black Pyramid. Now, his return to the world of the living, with a very obvious sense of speed, secrecy and purpose, makes him a perfect candidate for the corruption of the Tu'raj.

A truth amongst the Solonavi, is that one who receives gifts or offers service to our masters is marked by a powerful magic – a kind of sigil that stands watch over their heart. This magic makes the Solonavi's agents incapable of being magically corrupted by the warriors of the Apocalypse, though it offers them no protection against spells, sorcery, or the ever-constant threat of being chopped to pieces. For this warrior, I can sense in my scrying pool a kind of rippling red light in his aura, one that highlights and taints the people and creatures around him. While the warrior seems fully in control of his senses,

the fact that he is riding his horse half to death in a hard ride from Wolfsgate either means something very important is ahead of him, or something extremely dangerous is behind him.

While most people believe the Tu'raj, the legendary guardians of the gods that lay sleeping deep under the Land, are just another tale to be told at the hearthside, the Solonavi know the truth. Whether the original Tu'raj still maintain their eternal vigil in the Ebon Halls is in question, these modern-day imposters do fully seek to awaken the old gods in an endless quest for personal glory. While the Horsemen have been seen in the Land for years now, the Solonavi fear that the agents of the Apocalypse are on the rise, and that any convocation of these deadly Tu'raj must be stopped at all costs.

By this evening, silhouetted in the burning, bloody light of a beautiful sunset, the warrior makes it to the gates of Caero. While his uniform gave him clear access to the city, within minutes he'd made his way to the docks along the River Vizorr, and left his horse to die on the cobblestones. Without hesitation, he purchased raft-passage southward with a handful of silver coins not seen in the Land since the time of the Kosian Warrior-Priests. As the sun sets, he is half-way to the canyon city of Venthia. And I now see, by the way he faces towards the last glow in the western darkness with a cold, driven look in his eyes, what he seeks is in front of him, and nothing but death will stop this warrior from his goal.

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### **The House of Blood** – Early Spring, Day 27

Before dawn, the trader raft made its way through the Technomantic Docks leading into the river-canyons of Venetia. Once the great stone quarries for the massive Caeronn pyramids just a few miles upriver, after the Delphana 'acquired' the metropolis of Caero and transformed it into a neutral trading city, the quarries were flooded and the slaves freed to carve their own homes from the walls. Now, Venetia is built amongst a maze of shadowy, five hundred foot high cliffs littered with bridges, balustrades, balconies and assassin's nooks. As one of the newest, but greatest cities in the Empire, the city of Venthia stands between stone and water, and bears some of the greatest treasures and dangers the Land has to offer.

The warrior disembarks at a tavern's dock in a stagnant part of the city, and makes his way with purpose up two hundred long foot-worn stairs. At the top of the stairs, a door into a Red House stands ajar. He enters the shadowy interior without hesitation. Within the sizable brothel, amidst a hundred rooms carved into the living stone, there isn't a single other person alive. Every whore, concubine, noble and eunuch lies dead, all slaughtered in a great orgy of violence and bloodshed. At first holding his hand over his mouth to block the smell of the rotting corpses, the warrior continues into the great fire-lit hall of the Red House, where he meets the man he's been travelling towards over the last two days.

I recognize the man sitting at the great table immediately. He is En-Zar, once a holy warrior of the Galeshi peoples, and now the Apocalypse's Avatar of War.

The warrior kneels before the Avatar, and deftly takes a slim silver circlet from within his tunic. Laying it on the floor at the Avatar's feet, he quickly stands and backs away. The blackstone jewels within the crown twinkle in the firelight.

"I have brought your brother," the warrior says with reverence. "He was imprisoned right where you said he'd be, within the lion's mouth in the southern-most gate of the Dungeons of Endwell."

"I am rarely wrong," says the Avatar of War, in a voice that has little to do with En-zar's once priestly personality. Now possessed by a powerful spirit of Apocalypse, the priest I once knew – and once drugged and interrogated within one of our hidden Sect temples in Darthion – has been completely consumed by flame and darkness. Once driven to hunt down and destroy evil, En-Zar has now become its tool, and now threatens every faction in the Land with destruction.

"Time no longer moves for me as it once did," says the warrior. "Only weeks ago I was young and healthy; now I bear the semblance of an old man. Spending seasons searching for Endwell in the Blasted Lands cost me nothing, nor did evading Kzar Nabar's great war column of Orcs and their allies. But ever since finding my way into the deeps and recovering your talisman, my life vanishes before my eyes."

"Then don the Crown, young Tu'raj, and embrace Death, as I once embraced War. When my people fell to the vampires of the Dark Crusade, I knew that Darq's path could not be my own. That I would need to follow a new path out of necessity. And where necessity called, I followed, and found the answer I desired." Standing, the Avatar flared his cape, and a sheet of red flames erupted around him, running along his shoulders and arms like a cloud of burning fire.

Raising his hand, the black crown slapped telekinetically into War's waiting palm. The aging Tu'raj knelt down before his master, ready to accept the gift of power and immortality...

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## **The Second Avatar** – Early Spring, Day 28

The flare of powerful energies blasting out from the silver circlet nearly blinded me, and transformed my scrying pool into a roiling, seething whirlpool of water and energy. As I watched the scene taking place within the turbulent waters with fascination, I witnessed a creature of incredible power move out of the crown, and then violently possess the waiting warrior.

Even as a veteran warrior of the Dark Crusade who has witnessed everything from zombie creation to vampiric transformation, I couldn't believe the gruesome sight that took place before my eyes. While the warrior had complained earlier of supernatural

aging, the way that his skin, muscle, and organs suddenly violently shredded from his body – as if he was trapped within an invisible, scouring sandstorm - is largely beyond my ability to describe. But in a matter of moments, the warrior's body was reduced to bones and strands of sinew, and the long-slumbering creature gained full possession of its new skull-headed skeletal minion.

Death stood, re-adjusting himself to the world of the living. With a motion, a blue-edged sword magically appeared in his hand, glinting and radiating a dark, sapphire power.

“Where are our brothers?” he asked, his voice hissing like sand across a tombstone. War held up two more silver circlets, one ridged with diamonds, and one with emeralds.

“They are here. We merely wait for the arrival of those who shall be their vessels.”

“And of our masters? Do they ride?”

“Yes, my brother,” replied War with a frightening smile. “Indeed they ride. The Four Horsemen have already risen within the Land, and defeated those that stood against them. And we are tasked to lead the warriors of the Tu’raj until the darkest hour. Already, all of the peoples of the Land fight with one another, seeking glorious combat whenever they can. In the east, the life-givers and death-takers are set to fight a battle that will break destinies and determine their final fates.”

Death turned to face me, its sightless socket-eyes looking straight into my own.

“And what of this Necromancer, my brother? Of what relation is she to you?”

“I know of no Necromancer,” War said. “What do you see?”

“Death,” the demi-god replied. “I see death.” With a motion of his staff, and a word of power whispered from his clacking jaw, every last corpse in the room was suddenly standing beside the Avatar, faster than the blink of an eye.

Pointing his staff directly at me, Death hissed like a striking adder. Suddenly, all of the corpses suddenly exploded screaming into a rain of flesh, gore and bone that spattered the room from one end to the other - and a stream of howling ghosts suddenly bore towards me. Somehow piercing the veil of my scrying pool, the maddened spirits poured into my scrying chamber, moving through the magical portal in a way that both the Solonavi and myself had never thought possible. As the screeching, slashing whirlwind surrounded me, already tugging at my hair and tearing at my flesh, I quickly closed the magical portal and reached for my dagger as I prepared to fight for my life against an army of the hungry dead...

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## Ethereal Claws – Early Spring, Day 29

Focusing myself, I began disrupting the patterns of the assaulting spirits, dismissing them one after the other in a vain hope that it would be enough. At first they kept their distance, only reaching out to claw my skin or tear at my hair. But after the first three spirits were banished, the rest of the ghostly horde closed around me, without fear or further hesitation.

I slashed with my magic blade, slicing and gashing through their phantom bodies, setting a number of them howling with pain and the agonies of the second death. But then the mass settled upon me like a swarm of raging wasps, pulling, biting, and ripping me from head to toe. I fell to the stone floor, struggling against their mighty grip, when one of the ghosts bit my hand off at the wrist, sending the magical blade clattering to the floor behind my remaining grip.

Then they were upon me, and I was torn apart, section by section, first my limbs, then my ribs like sundered branches. Gaining strength from my spilled blood, the vengeful spirits then bent and broke every bone in my body, demolished my skull, sundered my organs, and section by section, tossed and sprayed my body across the floor, walls, and precious books of the Solonavi's oracular library.

Then, blackness, an eternal, timeless blackness silenced my screams, and for the first time, I was lost within the void. Then, a great white light shone down upon me, and burned everything it touched, setting my nerves and flesh aflame.

I awakened in a stone room drenched in moonlight, lying within coarse sheets on a soft bed. I realized with a start that I'd been brought back from the dead. Blinking against the glare, I soon recognized that my master, Vextha, was standing over me. Behind him, a Solonavi Resurrector was exiting the room, her normally bright aura tainted and stained by the dark energies required to wield the highest powers of Necromancy.

"You failed us." Vextha stated with great displeasure. "Don't be so foolish in the future."

"I won't be so foolish again," I replied with complete honesty.

"Because of you, the Apocalypse now knows we watch them. With your inadequacy, they know we are here, and they now know where to find us. In time, they will bring battle to the Black Tower, likely long before we had prepared for their arrival."

I said nothing. What had happened in the scrying chamber with the spirits was completely unexpected. The movement of spellwork through the scrying gate was one thing I was prepared to accept; but the movement of spirits of the dead through a scrying gate with such power, control and precision was unheard of. And apparently, even by the all-powerful Solonavi.

“When you are ready for your tasks again, you will be returned to your chamber. Until then, you will remain here and think about how much opportunity you lost this day with your inadequacy. Follow our path, and we would make you a Deathspeaker. Serve our needs, and we could even instate you as the Dark Prophet of the Crusade itself. But you must serve us first, without hesitation, and without further failure. You still want that, don't you?”

Looking out the window, I could see the entire city of Rokos beneath me, spreading out from the Black Tower for miles in every direction. Nightbirds cried, and ship bells rang in the gentle waves of the Inland Sea. While iron bars blocked the window, and some ten stories of open space lay beneath the aperture, my spirit soared at the sight of the night sky, and of the moon rising over the horizon.

“I want that,” I said quietly, affirming my own desires. “I will not fail.” Vextha nodded, then turned and glided out of the room, closing and sealing the door behind him with a spell. I then turned away as if to sleep, and pondered the dark sky, trying to imagine what would come next.

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### **Loyal Service** – Early Spring, Day 30

Today, having recovered from the spiritual attack sent against me by the Avatar of Death, I met with the masters of Rokos, an assembled group of Solonavi and human Oracles that would decide whether I would be allowed to continue my duties in the Scrying Chamber.

While the human Oracles were prepared to allow me to continue with my duties, and would post spiritual and physical guardians to ensure my safety, the other Solonavi – including Vextha – were not as prepared to have me re-enter service. Already the agents of the Solonavi were beginning to search through the city of Rokos for their Apocalyptic enemies, and had unearthed a number of spies within the Black Tower.

In turn, warriors and mages loyal to the dark offers of the Apocalypse had enacted a bloody revenge, in one neighborhood of Rokos alone slaughtering more than a dozen tavern-goers in order to bind and use their souls in battle. While it would be some time before the armies of the Apocalypse came to the gates of Rokos, the “War of Dust” between the Oathsworn and the Tu’raj definitely has begun.

Additionally, news came from the distant Necropolis, that the Dark Crusaders had somehow unearthed a pair of Solonavi agents deep within the ranks of the Order of Vladd. How this came to be, they were not sure, as it takes a very specific spell to divine whether a warrior bears the Solonavi mark. What use the Dark Crusade will make of this is yet to be known, but the inquisition running within the Deathspeakers halls will likely render them free of Solonavi agents by the turn of the year.

For myself, I have been given one final chance. While my scrying pool will remain at its current state, I will be taught how to summon Solonavi Drones at a moment’s notice, so I

may invoke warriors in times of desperate need. While they deliberated giving me one of the hundreds of relics they've collected in the Black Tower, they decided that I need to prove my loyalty and earn my place before being deemed worthy of a weapon of power.

My first task – to rediscover the whereabouts of the Draconum warrior Caldera. From what the Oracles have divined, she lies at the heart of a complex Drakona prophecy. While I saw her once, up within the Drakona-infested Kuttar Depths, it will take time and foresight for me to find her again amongst the war-torn cities and mountain-scapes of the Northlands.

## Kastali's Diary – Spring, 435 Tz

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### Gambling Halls of Caero – Spring, Day 1

While I expected it would take time to find Caldera, the agents of the Solonavi have already found her for me. While there are many who have made a deal with the Solonavi host, receiving a favor now in exchange for a returning a favor later, there seem to be more Oathsworn warriors serving the Solonavi than I previously expected. These warriors, having offered a period of service, like myself, can be called upon for many small favors or informational services. Through this, I know now that Caldera has been seen in the gambling halls of the merchant-city of Caero.

Caero is one of the oldest cities in the Land, and was once the sun-seat of the eastern Kosian Empire. While Caero's pyramids and ancient tombs are filled with unknowable evils and potent treasures, just above the surface a thriving merchant city throngs with people, beasts of burden, cargoes of exotic goods, and deadly intrigue. Within all the hustle of this Atlantean "neutral trade city" lies a district devoted to gambling houses and arenas of chance and skill.

While Caero is a city where anyone can come and go as they please, the appearance of any Draconum warrior is bound to be noticed. By searching the kitchens of the gambling hall our Oathsworn spy denoted in his report, I was able to find a larger-than-normal platter of food being prepared. When the sizzling sheep carcass was finally prepared, I followed the bald-shaven server down the tile hall to one of the secreted gaming rooms in the carefully secured sun-halls at the rear of the building. Splendid in a beam of sun shining down from a skylight, the Draconum Caldera waited by a game board, her hunger obvious by the scraping sweeps of her massive tail on the tile.

As she dived into her meal, seemingly starved, I noted that the collection of tiles on the game board were set up for a two-player match, between opponents of equal skill and game-playing caliber. As Tiles and Stones is usually played between the game-masters of Caero for a price of slaves, gold or blood, the idea of Caldera – who likely had no gold or slaves - playing games for body parts seemed somewhat ludicrous.

While she messily eats her meal, I sit, watch, and wait to see who her opponent is to be.

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### Arranged Meetings – Spring, Day 2

At the sound of heavy footsteps coming down the hall, Caldera looked up from her meal. I was pleasantly surprised to see another masked Draconum entering the gaming chamber, her sword drawn and at the ready. Pushing the table away with one heavy foot, Caldera sprung to her feet and drew her own weapon, ignoring the heavy crash of silver trays and smashing goblets on the tile floor.

"State your business," Caldera said with a wary snarl.

"State your own business," said the intruder, as she tossed a crumpled, rolled up scroll to Caldera's feet. "I was called here by invitation to meet with someone who might help me."

"As was I," said Caldera. "I received a similar invitation, of someone promising to help me remember some things from my past. I've been searching for a long time for someone who might know something about what happened to me."

“And I’ve been searching for the whereabouts of my life-mate, Denkai,” said the stranger. “My name is Chroma, slaughterer of Solonavi, and I seek the battle partner the Host stole from me.”

The two of them pondered each other for a few moments, but neither relaxed their weapons.

“As I don’t know anything about anyone named Denkai,” said Chroma, “I’m afraid I can’t help you. Which means that we’ve either been led here by mischief, you’re lying to me, or this is a trap for both of us.”

“I’m not lying,” said Chroma, “and I’ve no information for you either. Which means this might be a trap.”

“Not entirely,” said a human voice. Both spun to face the newcomer, a middle-aged man dressed in the brown robes of the Oracles of Rokos bearing a black, curved staff. “Both of you have ties to one another in a number of interesting ways. And both of you have your own role in two important prophecies – one Drakona, and one Solonavi.”

Oracle Matteo, ever since his ill-destined trip to the Necropolis years ago to recover the Staff of the Scarab from the Spiderweb Mirror, had been believed dead or vanished. While the powers of the Staff of the Scarab are unknown, the red auramark shining on Matteo’s heart shows him to clearly be in league with the Apocalypse – and that he somehow has banished the Solonavi mark that he once swore a lifetime of service to.

“I offer the both of you the chance to get what you want – Chroma, your beloved lifemate – and Caldera, your memories returned, as well as full knowledge of what roles you have in the destinies of the Land. But what it will take from the two of you is a promise of my safe passage, and for me to cast a spell upon you that will allow me to know you speak the truth.”

“But you’re already lying,” snarled Caldera.

“I can taste the Solonavi on you,” said Chroma. “which means you’re an agent of the Black Tower. Which means you’re good as dead.”

“Don’t be hasty,” said the monk raising his one free hand in warning. “I may not be your match in combat, but I do have the information you need to complete your lives.”

“Then we’ll beat it out of you,” said Chroma, “and gods help you if you’re alive when we’re done.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that,” said Matteo. “Then it seems, my dear ladies, I’m going to need to do this the hard way.” From around him, four warriors suddenly stepped into view, shedding the concealment spells that kept them from being detected by sight or smell. On one side of Matteo, a wizard and a warrior readied for battle; on his other side, a Necropolis priest and an archer prepared to fight.

“Oathsworn!” Chroma snarled.

“Not anymore,” said Matteo with a smile. “Let me introduce you to a few of my associates... I believe you’re heard of the Tu’raj?”

### Dual Natures – Spring, Day 3

Side by side, without a moment of hesitation, both of the Draconum warriors sprung toward Oracle Matteo and his band of Tu'raj warriors. Raising their weapons to strike in near perfect mirror-image of one another, both chose the logical target and attacked.

As if from the same mind, both attacked the panicked Tu'raj wizard. While Chroma chopped her own blade through the wizard's jaw, cutting off his spell mid-sentence, Caldera struck low and drove upward, piercing the wizard's heart. So in synch with one another, Caldera's blow struck hard enough to clip the other Draconum's sword, throwing a spray of hot sparks across the chamber.

While the other remaining three Apocalypse warriors were momentarily awestruck at the intensity of the twin attacks, Matteo was unmoved by the masterful martial display. Raising his black staff, the Oracle invoked a spell – and the slaughtered mage suddenly stood beside him, eyes burning with unearthly vengeance for her enemies.

The two Draconum turned and looked at one another, sharing a momentary look of panic, and then both sprinted for the windows of the gaming room as quickly as they could run. Smashing out of the glass into the open sunlight, both unfurled their wings and began to climb upward into the wide blue sky as fast as they could, hoping to get out of the range of the spells and arrows of the Apocalypse warriors. Within sixty breaths they were high above the pyramids, temples and dust-colored buildings of Caero, without any visible sign of pursuit.

"You fight a lot like I do," said Chroma in-between wingbeats. "Pretty good for a copy."

"I don't think I'm a copy," Caldera said with irritation. "I think that we're each other, and that something at the bottom of the falls had some magical effect on us."

"Magical effect on *you*," Chroma insisted. "Not me. The High Elven monk that rescued me didn't sense anyone else in the river."

"But you still have your memories," Caldera asked in-between wingbeats. "I can't remember anything, and everyone I talk to has a different story about what happened. About me – us – and then Den kai being used by the Solonavi as a killing tool."

"That's about what happened," Chroma said. "I've flown down the length of the waterfall and the underground river dozen times since the fight, and I can't find anything out of the ordinary."

"There has to be something," Caldera said. "Maybe we can find it together?"

Then, before Chroma could respond, a volt of hot electric lightning seared the sky just above their heads. Both looked simultaneously over their left shoulders back at the fliers coming up behind them. Five winged horses hung like vultures against the blue mid-day skies. Riding and lashing them to top speed, Oracle Matteo and the Tu'raj drove their mounts toward their prey with grim determination.

"We have to dive into the city!" yelled Chroma, "We'll never outrun them out in the open."

"After you," said Caldera, "and last one down to the marketplace owes the other one dinner!"

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### The Pyramids of Caero – Spring, Day 4

With a wave of my hand, I locked my scrying pool onto Caldera. Without hesitation, she let out an ululating scream, then veered and dropped away from her sister, down towards the packed streets of the trading city - plummeting fast enough that the passing air accompanied her war scream like

a banshee wail. Right behind her, Oracle Matteo whipped his steed in pursuit, while the other four Tu'raj attended to engaging, surrounding, and capturing the slightly slower Chroma.

Then we were amidst the streets, flying over a thoroughfare just barely wide enough for Caldera's extended wings. From behind her Matteo fired blast after blast from his black scarab staff, all of his shots missing by inches, but every one of them blasting into the crowds of panicked humans below. Dodging hard around a two-story high statue dedicated to Prophet-Magus Karrudan, Caldera wormed down an even thinner passage, barely navigating around laundry lines and plant-littered balconies with careful flaps of her wings.

And behind her, the Apocalypse warrior kept coming, relentlessly, firing shot after shot from his magic staff.

After another four blocks, realizing that she wasn't going to lose him in the streets, Caldera banked up, hard, and managed to just barely get over the top of a three story Atlantean temple before her momentum gave out. Landing for a moment, she took two wide, running steps to the corner, and dove off again, this time down over a busy market square. Behind her, the Oracle blasted the edge of the roof, even as his own mount flapped furiously in attempt to rise up over the wall at such a poor angle.

Taking advantage of Matteo's difficulties, she drove herself forward with all of her might, all while trying to figure out a place where she might have an advantage. In the distance, beyond the walls of Caero, she could see the statues, pillars and temple ruins standing in front of one of the great pyramids. While the two low squares of walls surrounding the place would not be effective in her defense, the cluster of wind-worn statues and monument obelisks might provide a three dimensional maze where she could hide and attack from.

Looking around for Chroma, Caldera saw her Draconum companion about a quarter mile distant, also heading toward the pyramid. Behind Chroma, the four Tu'raj warriors continued to pursue the warrior like a flock of angry crows. Gearing herself for the final sprint across the open desert, Caldera made herself head for the pyramid grounds at top speed, hoping her gamble would pay off in the end.

Using every ounce of her wing strength, Caldera forced herself to her highest speed, and within a minute was gasping at the effort. Muscles stretched and burned with every flap, and her breath came in hoarse gasps from her mighty lungs. Behind her, the Oracle's steed was having similar problems, but that didn't keep him from using the lash with every third wingbeat. But, while determined, Matteo was starting to fall behind, which offered Caldera a few seconds to make a plan of attack.

At the edge of the ruins, just after crossing over the second wall, the Draconum cracked open her right wing, hard enough to nearly dislocate her shoulder. As result, she banked hard around the edge of a tall, six-story high statue of an ancient, nameless Kosian warrior-priest. With her free hand she grabbed onto a stony outcropping, then lurched herself upwards with all her might. Landing on the slick stone proved harder than she first expected, as her foot-claws just barely clenched onto the wind-worn surface of the statue's massive arm. Once she had her balance, knowing she had little time, Caldera quickly scampered up the arm, then the sleeve, and then from foothold to foothold up onto the thick stone neck. There, she claimed herself a good perch where she could hopefully ambush the coming Apocalypse warrior.

But as she watched Matteo's horse fly over the first low, thin wall that marked the border of the pyramid's grounds, his black scarab staff suddenly burst into a sheet of shining white-hot flame. Shrieking, the Apocalypse warrior tried to veer his horse around, to steer away from the looming pyramid in front of him. But as he crossed the boundary of the second wall, his whole body suddenly burst into a sheet of living fire - and then his staff exploded violently, blasting him and his mount into a hundred pieces.

Staring speechlessly, Caldera watched as pieces of burnt robe, harness and armor tumbled and clattered to the desert sand below. Over to her right, she saw the four Tu'raj warriors, firmly in chase of Chroma, suddenly bank and turn away from their prey - and scatter away from the pyramid and Caero as fast as they could fly.

“By the Dragon gods,” Caldera swore with an awestruck hiss, looking down at the pyramid temple beneath her. “I wonder what the hell the ancients have hidden in there.”

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### **Mystery of the Pyramids – Spring, Day 5**

My master, Vextha, is on-route to the pyramids north of Caero, and should be arriving within a few days with a full exploration team consisting of Solonavi warriors and Oathsworn. For myself, after having my scrying sight repelled from the exterior of the pyramids by a series of non-lethal wards, I've been exploring the region surrounding the site for clues or archaeological information of any kind that might be of use to my masters.

From the Solonavi archives, I know that many of the burial tombs and pyramids in the hills surrounding Caero have long been discovered and plundered by thieves seeking gold and treasure - or in some cases torn apart by blasphemous and over-zealous Atlanteans desiring top-grade building materials for their bureaucratic structures. However, the group of pyramids at the center of the valley have been untouched, and there are no visible doorways or means of access to the interior of the structure. While the tales of Heroes discovering underground tombs are a constant in the region, the tunnels always seem to lead away from the main pyramids, rather than towards them.

Each of the four pyramids stand encircled by two low walls, with each wall standing no higher than the height of an average human male. Within the double circle of walls lays a number of massive structures and statues that only could have been built out of religious necessity by an army of workers and artisans. While the statue of the Kosian Priest-King that Caldera stood upon was clearly that of a human male (and certainly not an Elf), the amount of weather damage and the significant absence of certain Kosian sigils and ritual garments clearly proclaims that the carving predates the entire Kosian culture. This fact alone places the statues outside the pyramid as being at least a thousand years old (for the first recorded records of the Kosian culture evolving in ancient Prieska date back to roughly four and a half centuries before Tezla's birth) and possibly much more than that.

Tomorrow, I will explore the Black Pyramid as best I can, to see if I can discover any similarity between these two places.

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### **Exploring the Black Pyramid – Spring, Day 6**

Aside from the sizable Elemental army camp built just across from the Black Pyramid's opening, the location of this huge black stone temple in the Blasted Lands stands hundreds of miles away from any kind of civilization - either modern or ancient. Torg Boneknitter and his bastion of Elemental warriors have stood guard over this Pyramid for almost two years now, guarding against some real or imagined evil within. While some Heroes found their own ways into the ghost-haunted structure, or plundered nearby burial tombs for gold and relics, Torg's determination to prevent any other faction from gaining control of the structure has been

invariably successful. From our own faction, the Wolfwitch managed to penetrate the structure, but never returned from her journey into the interior of the cursed place.

While the construction of the desert temple is similar in architecture to the pyramids in Caero, the fact that there is an obvious opening into the interior and a complete lack of statuary or monuments of any kind is interesting. I checked carefully for pieces or ruins for almost two hours, but I could find little of note. It is as the Pyramid just rose out of the sand all by itself one day, which is something I find hard to believe.

While moving my scrying sight past the throng of Elemental guardians keeping watch over the main portal doesn't worry me, the descent down the steep stairs into the first chamber very soon becomes disturbing. While I am of the Dark Crusade, and no stranger to darkness, the eerie, dim, slightly phosphorescent light that radiates from the walls creates eerie phantoms and toothsome shadows at every corner.

The large temple chamber that the staircase empties into is massive, and is filled with stone pools, menacing guardian statues, and beautiful – though disturbing – wall paintings. While there is very little here that is archaeologically familiar, one of the murals indicates a crown-wearing Warrior-Priest being sealed into a stone box by a collection of clerics and loincloth wearing temple workers. Much like the statue I observed yesterday in Caero, the doomed priest bears none of the sigils of the Kosian age, implying that there may indeed be a connection between the builders of the pyramids of Caero and the builders of the Black Pyramid.

Then, submerged within a stone pool next to the mural, I see a beautiful jet necklace strung with silver beads and wire lying within the still waters. If I were physically there, I would have grabbed it in a moment, and even reached for it within my scrying chamber. But as I am not there, and have the choice and a moment to cast a spell, my aurasight reveals what I suspect – the telltale red aura around the relic indicates that it is of Apocalyptic origin, and thus cursed to own or touch. I logically conclude that if the other relics stored within the Black Pyramid are of similar make, then any thief that stole off with one of these objects before Torg arrived likely became a slave of the Apocalypse, if not put them on the path to becoming one of the evil Tu'raj.

My master, Vextha, has arrived at the pyramids. I am summoned, and must return my scrying sight to Caero.

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### **Sand and Dust** – Spring, Day 7

As the first light of dawn flooded across the Land, more than forty Solonavi and a host of Oathsworn had arrived at the Pyramids of Caero. While the Atlantean mages had put up an initial fight yesterday afternoon, fearing that Caero might be in danger of the same fate as Rokos and Luxor, the Solonavi used overwhelming strength and proven tactics to claim the site. While it is only a matter of time before reinforcements arrive, along with at least two sky-castles of golems, mages and troops last seen patrolling near the Revolutionary border, the Solonavi should have enough time to explore the Pyramid before the Empire brings battle. In the distance, a handful of Dragonfly pilots spy upon us. They can spy all they like, as long as they don't interfere.

Vextha, in broad daylight, is even more impressive than when I saw him in the Tower of Rokos. The raw strength he displays when commanding his drones and mortal troops is absolutely unquestioned and his every word a guarantee of punishment to those that fail him. I am clearly in a different status than the others; whether it is because he has a greater hold over me, or he actually respects me I have no idea. But I do know that he seemed very pleased with my report on the Black Pyramid, and indicated that I may have uncovered an important clue.

Four drones around Vextha each bear a sword or staff, weapons of an earlier age. As the Oracles of Rokos collected magical weapons for their hidden masters for centuries before the “return” of the Solonavi, it is Vextha’s hope that one of these four relics will act as a kind of key to the interior. When approaching the edge of the pyramid, its smooth sides climbing some twenty stories into the sky over our heads, I can see where Vextha is heading – into an area in the shadow of the Priest-King’s statue. After a brief conversation with one of his Oracles, he turns toward the foot of the pyramid and unleashes a series of powerful blasts, raising a massive cloud of sand and dust. The other Drones and Oathsworn mages follow suit. Being careful not to strike the pyramid itself, they clear away tons of sand in the space of ten minutes, and I watch with mirth as a cloud of choking dust washes across the walls of Caero some half mile to the southwest.

With a spell of wind Vextha clears away the last of the dust, revealing that the pyramid indeed is far larger than we’d first expected, descending down at least another ten stories. And at the bottom of the dust pit, is an aperture matching the one on the Black Pyramid. Vextha orders that I descend and watch over a relic-carrying Drones and a strike-team of Oathsworn. I do so, without hesitation.

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### **Jackal Priest** – Spring, Day 8

The short hallway leading into the interior of the pyramid is nearly identical to the hall that leads into the Black Pyramid, save that this one is covered with glowing, arcane symbols and incredible detailed hieroglyphs of men, beasts, and animal-headed gods. While there were the occasional hieroglyph scattered sporadically throughout the Black Pyramid, the ones engraved in this place seem to be much more decorative in nature.

At the end of the hall, the wide stairway leads up, rather than down, into the heart of the pyramid. The quad of Drones, bearing the ancient weapons across their forearms, float along like glowing beacons behind the four heroes, ready to fight or serve at their a moment’s notice. Like experienced temple thieves, the four Oathsworn are poised and ready for combat or reaction of any kind.

Out of the shadows, a shape materializes upon the stone stairs. Dressed in priestly robes, the person stands about eight feet tall, and is holding an ornate staff covered with rubies, jade, and pieces of cut Magestone. At first I think I am looking upon a man in a jackal mask – but then I realize that the mask is actually the face of the beast. With ears that twitch at every sound, the Jackal Spawn’s eyes burn with an unholy hatred for the intruders.

“You have violated a sacred place,” says the priest, “and now you will be tested.” At his command, from out of the walls, the hieroglyphs taking solid form, steps another dozen Jackal Guardians, each bearing a wide-bladed fan-spear in their deformed hands. The monstrous warriors leap down upon the Oathsworn, chopping and slicing with supernatural might, even as other hieroglyphs run along the lengths of the walls, seeking to erupt from the stone behind the party.

The melee is bloody, and the Oathsworn clearly outnumbered. Grabbing the key-relics from the Drones, they unsheathe the swords and power up the magical staffs, and begin to unleash destruction upon their assailants. But the numbers of Jackal Spawn are too great, as another dozen joins the fight within just a few more seconds. First the priest is chopped in half by a mighty blow, and then the assassin’s throat is torn out by the fang-teeth of one of his attackers. The warrior manages to chop his sixth opponent down before a seventh Jackal plunges his claws into the human’s back, and rends out a bloody string of entrails with a howl of elation.

The Drones wade into the fight, but are extinguished, one by one, by the fearsome defenders of the pyramid. The mage, having blasted a number of the Jackals into dust and ash, begins a slow and steady retreat back up the hallway, now outnumbered by more than forty to one. With a thundering roar, the score of Jackal Spawn scream battle cry in unison, and rush the mage like an avalanche of flesh and steel. While the wizard's opening spell does some damage, he is caught and torn apart by the mob before he can cast a second spell.

"You have been judged," the Jackal states in a sonorous tone, and then turns to walk back up the stairs, leaving the pack to consume the corpses. Taking a chance, I lock my scrying pool upon him, and secretly follow his slow passage into the heart of the temple.

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### **Temple Chamber – Spring, Day 9**

The Jackal Priest climbs the two hundred stairs, until he reaches a sizable room within the countless tons of stacked stone. More than a hundred feet high, the place resembles more of a desert oasis rather than the interior of a constructed tomb. Living trees and house-sized ferns line the walls, gurgling streams run along glistening limestone channels, and ruby, rose quartz, and Magestone statues catch and reflect beams of sunlight shining down from hidden vents high above. Alabaster coffins line the room in neat avenues, each carved with a likeness of the long-dead warrior-priest entombed within. At the heart of the chamber, a massive, ornamented throne constructed of pure emerald sits facing the stairway entrance, big enough to hold a giant humanoid being at least twenty feet in height. The entire scene is awe inspiring, and is nothing like I've ever read, seen or imagined before.

All around the room, flitting lights move from place to place like burning-flies, attending to the flow of water, blowing the fern leaves, and a dozen other chores required to maintain the space. The Jackal-Priest seems not to notice the wisps, and steps deliberately to the front of the throne, and kneels down before its empty seat. In the space of a moment, after a heartbeat of prayer-like reverence, the Spawn is gone, and a beautiful hieroglyph has taken his place on the stone floor, frozen in solidity until called again to judge outsiders.

Taking a moment to observe, holding my breath against the fear of being discovered and destroyed by the powerful magics that abound in this holy place, I move my scrying sight to one of the stone sarcophagi, and make careful note of the dress style and artifacts on the sculpted priest. While they are similar in origin in terms of priestly garb and human appearance to the Kosian warrior-priests, at first glance all of the sigils and signs are alien to me. They have nothing in common with the statues outside the temple, or with the mural of the Black Pyramid. While I want to intellectually imply that the culture that built this place is older than a mere thousand years, there is a kind of timelessness to the room that makes me want to doubt my own beliefs, as well as my own knowledge that there is a modern world just outside the walls of this eternal temple.

Then I see it. Emblazoned upon one of the sculpted priests, just over his heart, is a single symbol I recognize from the Solonavi's most ancient lorebooks. The symbol, a double square with a seven-pointed cross in the middle, stands for Guardian. After a quick search, I discover that every sarcophagus in the vicinity bears the same symbol, and I am awestruck by the ramifications of my finding.

Then, one of the wisps floats through my scrying point, and suddenly lights up with a fiery, heated glow. All around the room, the hundreds of other wisps also enflame with the same fiery color, and all begin drifting toward me with alien menace.

Having learned my lesson with the Avatar of Death, I quickly close the scrying pool, plunging my chamber into darkness, and then retreat to the farthest corner. My back pressed against the cool stone, I ponder with fractured sanity what I've seen, and no longer wonder whether the slumbering gods beneath the Land are fantastical, or question whether these Guardians – or the true Tu'raj - keeps us all from destruction at the hands of divine wrath.

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### **Into the Fist – Spring, Day 10**

With the Solonavi having retreated from the temple pyramids at Caero, driven away by the predicted appearance of two Sky-Castles and more than a thousand troops loyal to the Imperial Legion, we now leave the site to the control of the Atlanteans. I believe they will have far less luck with exploring the place as we did. While I am pleased not to have to go back into the chamber, I would like very much to see what is really inside those sarcophagi and to see if any ancient bodies within could possibly be reanimated and controlled by one skilled in the black arts of Necromancy. While my kin even now are digging up the Valley of the Mists in search of reanimatable Amazon Queens, gaining services of an army of Kosian Priests may be a far more powerful coup.

I have been given a new assignment by Vextha, this time within far less dangerous country. I am to explore the Fist in search of a powerful warrior rumored to be an eventual contender for Khan Harrowblade. His name is Scorch, and is a Half-Troll wizard born with Orc strength and a Troll's red-skinned curse of magic.

My first day exploring the grasslands is largely uneventful, as the sporadic discovery of Orc scouts and the occasional archer does little to further my goals. While the steady, distant beat of clurch drums can still be heard everywhere I go, with such a sizable number of Orc tribes either raiding the southlands or having defected months ago with the Shadow Khans, many of the traditional tribal grounds stand empty. Since the Orcs are still a full season away from their first gathering of the year, I will need to find a tribe, spy upon them, and hope that I am lucky enough to gain knowledge of the Half-Troll I seek.

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### **Bloody Battle – Spring, Day 11**

In Orc society, there are three different reasons for fighting – honor, resources, and vengeance. In the battle I've come across, where a sizable tribe of Broken Tusk has cornered a group of Cave Orc warriors within a low valley, I can only guess that vengeance is the deal of the day. While the Harka tribes long ago drove the founders of the Cave Orc culture out of the Fist, the strength of the Black Grasses tribes ultimately gave the hated Cavers a way back into the political structure as teachers, traders, and mercenaries. Now that the strength of the Black Grasses lies fighting for food and treasure in Khamsin, the Harka can finally make their move against an ancestral and hated enemy.

The first wave of Ankhar-mounted troops lumbers down the hillside, while Orc archers fire dozens of missiles down at the Cave Orcs below. While casualties occur from this deadly rain, the thick hides of the Cave Lizards protect them against the worst of the fire. Some Cave Orcs even take refuge beneath their mounts, firing shot after shot against the armored turtle-

beasts moving down along their left flank. In the background, the clurch drummers announce their attack with rhythmic fury, as the commander of the Harka forces orders the foot troops to begin the charge from the right side to support the slow mounted advance.

While the Cave Orcs have enough mounts to transport a bit more than half of their troops, they seem reluctant – or maybe honorable – in not wanting to let their unmounted brethren be slaughtered or captured by the Harka forces. Instead, the riders turn and head to engage the Ankhar troops, while the foot troops begin a steady motion in the same direction, firing arrows at the charging line of green-skinned tribal warriors. The Cave Orcs seem to be doomed, but bravely determined to take as many Harka with them as they can.

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### **Red Skin, Blood Magic** – Spring, Day 12

Just as the jebta-riding Cave Orcs were about to clash with the Ankhar, a thunderclap sounded from overhead. Confused, many Harka riders stopped to look up at the clear skies – only to see the blistering storm of mana and lightning pour down from overhead. Whole Ankhar roasted in their shells from the deadly magical attack, and riders were blown apart, severed hands clenching charred and melting swords.

Screaming, the Harka's lines dissolved, even as another burst of energy fell across the foot soldiers, blasting and burning across their formations. While the Cave Orcs seem confused by the magical aid, they are taking the attack in better stride than their enemies and using every spare second to their advantage. Then, from the opposite hillside, a ball of burning light arcs up into the sky, traverses across the Cave Orc position, and then rockets down upon the Harka warlord. Blown backwards more than fifteen feet by the blast, the warlord is slow to get up – only to be vaporized by the wizard's second attack.

I don't see the mage yet, but as I move my scrying sight closer to the origin of the magical attack, I see the distinctive visage of a Half-Troll with red skin, already incanting another spell. Below, the Harka are breaking off the attack and running in all directions. The wizard, without remorse, blows apart as many of the Orcs as he can, leaving their smoking remains for the vultures to pick apart.

I have obviously found Scorch, and will alert my masters to his location in the Fist.

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### **Building the Trap** – Spring, Day 13

Around a series of campfires, the Cave Orc survivors cluster and watch their battle-leader talk and negotiate with the Half-Troll mage. While the scattering of night stars overhead burn with a cold fury, the firelight reflecting off of Scorch's bloody red skin casts off a nearly demonic glow. His face framed by his filed half-tusks, and his strap armor giving him the appearance of a hulking Necropolis pit-fighter, this Scorch has a fearsome appearance and an aura that bleeds violence.

The negotiations center around Scorch wanting to help the Cave Orcs regain their position as a tribe of the Fist and as a recognized member of the Broken Tusk. In exchange for his help convincing Khan Harrowblade and disrupting the Harka's political influence throughout the Fist Scorch wants a legion of Cave Orc riders to serve as his personal army. When asked whether

Scorch intended to rule the Fist, he replied that he wasn't ready yet – but that he needed the Cave Orcs for a different purpose.

While he took some time to get to his point, especially between bites of roast haunch and long draughts of sour beer, Scorch eventually stated that there is one other mage in the Land that he needs to capture, torture, and destroy - and that it will take an army of Orcs to lay a proper trap for the wizard. When questioned further, it turns out that the wizard that Scorch wants destroyed is the Troll wizard Maren'kar, and has devoted his life to destroying the Elementalist and acquiring the use of the wizard's magical tools.

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### **The Promise of Power – Spring, Day 14**

As the Cave Orcs escorted Scorch off of the Fist, starting the long journey through the choppy lands west of the steppelands to the Cave Orc homeland, I witnessed a lone Orc rider coming up fast from the east on a gray spotted horse. When the Cave Orc scouts noticed the oncoming warrior, they fired warning shots, causing him to spur his mount to one side just outside of their arrow range. Within a few moments, the Orc had pulled a small clurch drum from his saddlebags and began beating out a furious, though quiet message.

After a few moments of this, Scorch came riding out of the Cave Orc lines with fury on his face, moving with lethal intent toward the Orc. While the lone warrior stood his ground, the mere presence of the malevolent Half-Troll wizard obviously unnerved him.

“State your offer,” growled Scorch, when his came within range of conversation. “You’ve called me out in front of my warriors; this had better be worth my time.”

“My name is-“

“I don’t care who you are or where you’re from. You are of no consequence to me. State your offer quickly, or die.”

The Orc swallowed hard. “My masters in Rokos would like to make you an offer – in exchange for your service, they will help you capture the wizard Maren’kar.”

The Half-Troll wizard grinned widely. Dangerously. The Orc smiled nervously, trying to make some sense of what was going through the mage’s mind.

“From what I’ve been told by the spirit-fathers,” he said with a knowing look, “Maren’kar was trained in the ways of magic in Rokos, by the Oracles themselves.” Raising his hands to the sky, I watched as Scorch called a volt of lightning from a nearby ley-line into his hands, and then leveled his firing hand toward the panicked Orc.

“Maren’kar has his own agenda,” the Orc said quickly, hoping to save his life. “And powerful magic, and is building an army-“

“I have my own agenda, and my own magic, and my own army,” Scorch interrupted with a growl. “Why would I need the permission of the soulless to do something I can do myself?”

“We have similar interests-“

“We do at that,” said Scorch. “No deal. I want him myself, and I will not become a puppet of Rokos.”

“But we could offer you-“

“Shut up, weakling,” Scorch said with disdain, “this conversation is over.” Leveling his hand at the Orc’s heart, he blasted the rider off of his mount with a blast of lightning. As the limp body hit the ground, Scorch fired a second blast, then a third, until the corpse lay a burning husk in the

grass, beyond reanimation. Dismounting, he walked over to the corpse and rolled it over, taking a look at the face. "Harka tribe," he said with disdain.

"Figures."

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### **A Draconum in Caero – Spring, Day 15**

When word came from my masters that a Draconum Hierophant had been spotted flying into Caero, I quickly shifted my sight to get the dragon master in sight, to lock my pool onto him, and to see where his path would take me. While the Solonavi agent's directions were mostly accurate, it still took me over an hour to track the Draconum down amidst the marble columns, still pools, fountains and Magestone sculptures that littered the Atlantean bureaucratic center in Caero.

The Draconum and an Atlantean magus were playing a game of tiles and stones, with a small sack of refined red Magestone crystal sitting on a pedestal next to them as prize. As I've said before, the game usually involves the loser sacrificing something, and the stakes weren't immediately clear. But they were definitely playing for some prize, for while the magus kept levitating a cup to his hand as a showy, Technomantic means of distracting his opponent, the Draconum smoked a pipe of some bitter weed, and would occasionally flex his wings to drift the overly aromatic smoke in the magus' direction.

Most games go on for no more than two hours. From the sizable hourglass placed next to the board, these two had played for more than four, and the game was nowhere near complete. While the Atlantean kept up a very focused attack, trying to capture or kill his enemy's warlord, the Draconum used a variety of tactics that allowed for range and distance to be a factor. During this whole time, neither of the players spoke, and would only distract from the game long enough to take food or have their wine cups refilled by passing servants.

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### **Prizes and Secrets – Spring, Day 16**

The game of tiles and stones concluded last night at midnight, after nearly an entire day of play. In the end, the Draconum won, capturing the Atlantean's warlord after a fierce and costly chase. While the Atlantean was disappointed with the loss, and even moreso when the Draconum tucked the sack of red Magestone back into a deep pocket, the Atlantean began speaking shortly afterward, per the bet they had placed, of what he knew about the mountains of Scythria.

As Technomancers are able to significantly extend their lifespans with their magics, this Atlantean talked about things he'd seen nearly 150 years ago, when he was just a demi-magus leading assault teams into the Dwarven heartland. While he first talked about Tezla's successful transarnation into the metal Avatar Golem, and eventually spoke of Emperor Bazlus' realization that the magic-resistant Dwarves might be good for mining Magestone, he eventually turned to the topic the Draconum wished to speak of, regarding his own command role in the first attacks against the Dwarven holt in Scythria.

The Draconum asked a number of in-depth questions here, about the nature and size of the underground cities the Dwarves built, the defenses and methods the Dwarves used to attempt to hold off the Brass Golems and well-armed Atlantean troops, and other such tactical questions. While the venerable magus could only tell him so much, he was able to give him the rough locations of three holts in Scythria. When pushed about the whereabouts of a fourth holt, called Hlothlot Holt in the Dwarven tongue, the magus recalled it being near a peak that was roughly formed in the shape of an eagle's head. He had never visited the site, but he knew that the Dwarven defenders of that underground city took nearly a year to defeat, and in the end had to be burned out with pitch and liquid fire.

At the end of the talk, it was nearly dawn, and the Hierophant politely took his leave of the Atlantean. While the two did not seem to be old friends, there was a kind of grudging respect between them, as if they'd faced each other on the battlefields of the Land.

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### **Dwarven Cities – Spring, Day 17**

After many Dwarves were freed from slavery at the hands of the Atlanteans, many of them traveled to a valley just south of the Amazon homeland. There, with tools of metal and stone, they began the process of carving out homes from the living rock. Compared to the holts of old, they were small, cramped, and not very comfortable. But they were homes in nature and in name, and they gave Dwarves shelter from the open sky, and gave them a place to call their own.

The Hierophant's landing in the cramped valley leading up to one of these makeshift holts was a very noteworthy thing, as hundreds of Dwarves came out of ledges, openings, cracks and apertures throughout the valley to see the sight. Then, spiraling down from high above, a Scalesworn Honor Guard flew down on her Sky Dragon, drifting easily on the breeze as a Xandressan trader ship dances upon the water.

Landing next to the Hierophant, the two exchanged words in a tongue I'm not familiar with, likely a battlefield variant of the overly complex Draconum language. At the Scalesworn's arrival, a group of Dwarves came out, bearing a litter between them. On the litter was the oldest Dwarf I've ever seen, wrapped in a thick blanket, with a long white beard that stretched to his knees. As Dwarves typically only live for a maximum of fifty years, this one had to be close to that age.

Without word or question, the Draconum nodded to the Dwarf, as if this small being was an old friend. Unable to speak for his age and infirmity, the Dwarf nodded in return, his eyes bright with tears. Another one of the Dwarves handed the Hierophant a black cloth bag, covered with Dwarven runes; the Draconum reverently handed the object to his Scalesworn, then carefully gathered up the old Dwarf in his arms, cradling him gently within muscles better suited for tearing apart buildings.

Then, without another word, the two were off into the blue skies, and the Dwarves behind cheered in unison, their voices echoing amongst the stone of their home.

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### **A Life Best Lived – Spring, Day 18**

For a full day the Draconum and his Scalesworn flew, moving first across the vastness of Revolutionary territory, and then down across the Grange Valley and the corner of Khamsin. From this height, the castle city of Rangraz seemed but a blot against the ground, and the twinkling waters of the Roa Vizorr just a blue line amidst the green lands of the Grange

Valley. While far to the east the mountains of the Rivvenheims grew this high, and higher, out here in the lowlands the Draconum flew alone. Wrapped within the blanket, the Dwarf marveled at the scene, and occasionally exchanged words or pointed out places he'd been to during his travels.

At nightfall, the three warriors made camp just north of the city of Wolfsgate, which the Dwarf talked about with great reverence and familiarity. Having been one of the first Dwarves freed by the fledgling Rebellion, the human city of Wolfsgate and its marvelous bridge was the first civilized thing he'd seen in his life that didn't involve chains or strip-mine walls. During the years to come, he'd fought and killed in the name of Wolfsgate with prototype black powder weapons, and even fought for Ellaine Steward in the Khamsin Civil War of 423 Tz.

In time, the old Dwarf settled to sleep, leaving the Hierophant and Nepherea to watch for Atlanteans, thieves and Mage Spawn, protecting their charge until first light at dawn.

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### **The Great Hall – Spring, Day 19**

Another long day of flying followed the first, and the Hierophant, his Scalesworn, and the Sky Dragon were all showing signs of exhaustion – but none spoke at all of their hurts. After first following the trade road south, the group cut along the eastern edge of Solonavi territory, moving through the middle of the Empire's heart.

Upon reaching within sight of the floating city of Atlantis, the Dwarf was stunned, even brought to tears by the sight. Swallowing back his pride, he said that he'd fought his entire life to bring Atlantis and the Empire down, but until this moment, he'd never even seen it. Shining in the afternoon light like a twinkling star, the mile-wide floating city hovered over the Vizorr Delta like a shining jewel. He said he'd never seen anything so beautiful, and with absolute certainty, followed by saying that it seemed a shame that the Revolutionaries would one day have to tear it down out of the sky. The Hierophant chuckled at that. But as the Dwarf laughed, his laughter soon turned to a coughing fit that left him wheezing and gray by the time it passed. Wordlessly, the Hierophant readjusted the cradle of his arms so the Dwarf was more comfortable, then began the long, slow bank toward the Scythrian mountains to the west.

While the peaks of Scythria are not as high as the Rivvenheims, they share the same toothsome, jagged quality, and seem like a daunting obstacle of stone in the middle of a region rich with greenery and water. Following the magus' directions, the Hierophant found the eagle's stone within the space of an hour, and landed in front of a black opening into the mountain's heart. While the statues and arches that once decorated the entrance to Hlothlot Holt had long ago been tumbled by Technomantic golems, the carved opening still stood open to the wind and the world, as it had been for hundreds of years.

As the three warriors moved into the passage, I was aware that the Dwarf's breathing was growing more labored, and he was having a hard time focusing his eyes in the dark. The Hierophant made a light with a spell, and together the group walked into the heart of the holt, stepping around shattered stone, broken benches, and bits of shattered artifice and sculpture smashed more than a hundred years beforehand. Unerringly, the Draconum led the way into the depths, moving through one door then another, then down a long staircase, and then along the length of a once-grand hallway populated only by dust and shadows. While his Scalesworn had weapon at the ready for Mage Spawn or other denizens of the dark, the Draconum didn't seem worried about the location.

At the end of the hall, the Draconum moved open one of the great thirty-foot high stone doors, and led the way into a massive audience hall. At the far end of the chamber sat three stone

thrones; throughout the chamber were dozens of marble tables and benches, even some with stone plates and mugs still intact upon their surfaces. Moving through the maze of tables, the Hierophant climbed the short steps leading up to the seats of rule. Here, he gently set the Dwarf down into the middle-seat, as carefully as one would lay a baby in a crib. The Dwarf opened his eyes, felt the worn stone armrests with his withered fingertips, and looked with wonder upon the heart of a kingdom no Dwarf had seen in over a hundred years.

“Is this a dream?” he said weakly, staring with wonder at the hall before him. “Are we where I think we are?”

“It is not a dream, my friend,” the Draconum said quietly. “Jarl Frostriven, King of the Dwarven Vale, Hero of the Rebellion, and my dear friend for many years – this is the holt and hall of your ancestors, where your grandfather’s grandfather fought and loved and drank more golden mead than any Dwarf alive. You, my friend, are in the hall of your forefathers.”

“Thank you, my friend Escu,” Frostriven said back. “This is a good place to die.”

“That it is, my friend,” Escu said quietly, with a knowing look in his eye. Nepherea stepped forth at that moment, and offered the black cloth bag with reverence. Taking the sack and opening it, the Hierophant pulled out a beautiful axe forged from silver and mithril, marked with the runes of the Dwarven Kings of Scythria. “While I have no mead for you to drink, nor bards to sing you to the forgotten lands, I do have your axe, your rightful scepter of rule within this honored place.”

“I’d be happy to hold that again,” Frostriven said, and let the warrior place the weapon in his lap. While not strong enough to lift the weapon, the Dwarf’s fingers curled around the handle with a strength and familiarity that made the Hierophant proud.

“I need to take a rest,” the Jarl said quietly, “just for a moment...”

“You do that,” said the Draconum, “and I’ll watch over you as you sleep.” And after taking one more look at his forefather’s hall, and letting a small, pleased smile cross his lips, Jarl closed his eyes, and gently let himself fade to slumber.

An hour later, Jarl Frostriven passed from this world to the next, and his funeral pyre lit the skies of the Scythrian Mountains like a shining beacon. Soon, the tales of his life and his passing were told by Draconum, Dwarf, Amazon, and Revolutionary alike throughout the Northlands and beyond.

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### **Deadly Race – Spring, Day 20**

Hooves pounding, mane streaming in the wind, the Centaur runs for its life along the shores of the Roa Sanguine. Behind it, riding high on the wind, flies a flock of Crusader vampires toying with the idea of either tearing the Elemental warrior apart, or running it to death. For myself, observing the scene from my scrying pool, it is another game of life and death in the Wylden, with the predator assuredly about to catch its prey.

While the Centaur is heading toward a distant stand of woods – one of the few not showing outward signs of Zombie lumbering or the tree sickness spread by the Necromancers of the Dark Crusade – the Vampires overhead seem unconcerned. Gliding in the breeze, they bet with one another about whether the Centaur will make it to the woods alive.

But when a long, metal arrow scores through the lead vampire’s chest, and then explodes into brilliant, phosphorescent flame, the other undead scatter like a bunch of frightened crows. When

they regroup, the Centaur is already safe in the trees, and there is no sign of the mystery assassin that so easily destroyed one of the Crusader's most powerful undead.

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### **Fight or Flight** – Spring, Day 21

Spending the night recuperating in the deep woods did the Centaur some good. While the heavy rainstorm washed away most of the scents that the undead would use to track the lathered beast through the trees, every odd splash of water left the Centaur flinching against possible attack. By first light, the Centaur was already on the move, eyes wild, nose sniffing the cold morning air for any signs of pursuers.

While Centaurs are more evolved than mere horses, when they are being openly hunted by a predator, they share many of the same instincts. When defending their young, leading the cause of war, or scouting enemy terrain, their “civilized” instincts take the forefront, allowing them a great deal of capability in times of conflict. But here, divided from the pack, alone amongst the trees, the creature seems to be on the verge of fight or flight, both of which should lead to its final death.

In the distance, a vampire screams its final death; the Centaur, like the birds and forest animals around it, bolt and take flight, running through the maze of trees for its life.

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### **Grace and Ferocity** – Spring, Day 22

Bursting out into a clearing lit by leaf-dappled sunlight, the Centaur puts on all of his speed, hoping to make it across the grassy expanse to the safety of the trees beyond. But when a form moves out of the trees ahead, silent as a stone, the Centaur balks for a moment at the strange, but terrible sight.

Half Centaur, half cat, the shaggy, lynx-like creature stares at the Elemental warrior as if its never seen the like. In contrast to the sunlight shining off of the Centaur's flank, the alien cat-centaur stays in the shade of the trees, keeping out of the heat of the mid-day sun. With pointed ears, wide paws, and alabaster skin, this strange being carries herself with a beautiful grace - and a terrible ferocity only matched by the bloodsuckers of the Dark Crusade during their most predatory mating flights.

The creature says a term in the High Elven tongue; “Snow Centaur”. The forest Centaur has no knowledge of the word, and steps away nervously at the sound of the High Elven language. Nodding at the centaur's lack of understanding, the Snow Centaur reaches into a pouch, takes out a handful of vampire fangs, and lets them drop to the ground in a rain of glittering bone.

“Will you help me?” the Centaur asks. The cat-creature merely nods, and gestures for the Elemental warrior to follow.

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### **Free Passage** – Spring, Day 23

More than a dozen of the Snow Centaurs rest from the mid-day sun in a cave of trees and leaves, their white-furred bodies sensitive to the heat of the lowlands. From a conversation that took place between one of the males and the skittish Centaur, the Snow Centaurs are the servants of the Heirraman, the mystical High Elven warriors of the Rivvenheim mountains just a few days east of here.

Having long guarded the highest passes and slopes from invaders, now groups of Snow Centaurs are being sent into the lowlands to scout and fight for their High Elven masters. They state that the Crusaders have overstepped their bounds in sealing off North Pass, and that they must allow the Elven Lords free passage into the Lands of the west or face their retribution.

The Centaur states that there is little that he, or the other Elementalists can do. When he points out that the bulk of the Elemental forces are either holed up in Roanne Valle or Stonekeep, the Centaur seems to pay little heed. Their concerns are simple – to gain the service of Centaur allies in order to learn as much about the region around North Pass as possible. Once the way has been cleared for their Lords, then they will consider whether to aid the Elementals in their situation with the Dark Crusade.

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#### **Vested Authority – Spring, Day 24**

Having been gone for most of the day, the Centaur returns from meeting with the members of his tribe. While he is off finding out what aid his tribe will offer, the Snow Centaurs merely wait, eat sparingly, clean and prepare their weapons, and occasionally kill small birds and animals and eat them whole. These beings are definitely not herbivores, and they seem to prefer the taste of small voles over the crunchy, gooey interior of hummingbird bodies.

When the Centaur returns, he brings with him interesting news. While he is sure that the Centaurs in Roanne Valle are to be of no aid, there are scouts and warriors loyal to the Wylden Host that would be willing to aid in the Snow Centaur's mission, in exchange for a future favor. The Snow Centaurs, with the authority vested to them by their Elven masters, agree to the deal, and demand to immediately begin their education about the battleground to the west of North Pass.

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#### **The Outpost - Spring, Day 25**

Vextha directed my gaze to the hills west of Enos Joppa. A settlement had formed there, and Vextha suspects that it may be of interest to the Solonavi.

At first glance, I was skeptical. To call the collection of tents and partially built houses a “village” would be a kindness. It was clear to me that this was a newly established settlement. But as I watched, I began to realize the significance of this village. Mixed with peoples from the scattered Galeshi tribes, workers from Khamita, and even a few dwarves, this place had the markings of a new Black Powder Revolutionaries outpost. After seeing the Bloody Thorns banner flapping over a Revolutionaries banner placed atop a partially completed wall, I began to understand not only the purpose behind this outpost, but also its mastermind. Hence the Solonavi's interest: Although I could see neither Black Thorn nor her Draconum bodyguard, Tyrsis, either – or preferably both – would make a glittering prize for the Solonavi.

The outpost's purpose is clear: to aid the Revolutionaries in recovering the scattered Galeshi and to turn a watchful eye on the orcs who maraud in the desert. The plan is ambitious to say the least, especially with Darq also hunting Galeshi in the area. I believe the orcs will take offense at this village, especially when its walls are raised, as they will consider it a challenge to their strength. It soon became clear, however, that the orcs would not wait even that long.

Out of the western desert, the orcs attacked faster than a sandstorm. The workers barely had time to raise the alarm as six orcs, each riding a two-legged desert warbird, tore through the encampment. The odd gait of the agile warbirds made them look almost comical as they weaved through the tent village. Although I thought I understood the nature of this attack, it became apparent that the orcs were actually searching for something specific. As they tore the oasis apart, the Revolutionaries began to mount a counterattack.

Suddenly a loud racket tore through the air. The source was within a large crate almost the size of a small house. The crate had exploded, throwing several orcs from their mounts. As the smoke and debris cleared, I began to suspect that this was what the orcs were searching for.

I burst into laughter when I saw it. A dwarf had managed to strap himself into a golem! The smoke was actually steam pouring out of its back. One of the golem's arms ended in a massive fist, the other in a buzzing round saw. Both the saw and the golem slowly began to pick up speed.

My laughter was cut short as the dwarf landed its first blow, crushing an orc and its warbird to the ground. This stopped the other orcs in their tracks; they were unsure how to handle this new threat. Taking advantage of their hesitation, the villagers pushed their attack with swords and black powder pistols. After the construct landed several more powerful blows, the orcs quickly realized they were out of their league, and they fled as quickly as they had come.

A few Khamita men tried to give chase, but the Galeshi prevented them, explaining that the warbirds were faster than most men. Although the orcs had left a pair of dazed warbirds behind, the Revolutionaries seemed either unsure about riding them or unwilling to try.

As I watched the golem-encased dwarf and others pick up the pieces of their encampment, I realized the purpose of this new "weapon": It was designed to cut down trees and fashion lumber for buildings. The orcs had somehow gained knowledge of the tool and decided to try to capture it. The leader of the village seemed to come to this conclusion just as I did, and she dispatched one of the Galeshi with a hastily written letter meant for Black Thorn. The orcs would probably return, and reinforcements were in order.

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### **Enos Joppa - Spring, Day 26**

As I watched the Galeshi courier make his way to Enos Joppa, I considered the ramifications of the new Bloody Thorns outpost. Black Thorn is known for associating with thugs, murders, and lowlifes, and her ragtag band of outlaws would be more at home skulking around a black market – not establishing a way station on the edge of orc territory. This new development was out of character. The fact that the Galeshi courier was making his way to Enos Joppa, a city known for supporting Blackwyn and the Northlanders, confused me further. Something was at work in Black Thorn's camp.

The division between the Bloody Thorns and the Northlanders was not as distinct as the division between, say, the Imperial Legion and the Golemcore. Still, these two subgroups of the Black Powder Revolutionaries were distinct and often at odds.

As the courier entered the outskirts of Enos Joppa, I took the time to scan the city. Once distinct cities, Enos and Joppa had been forced to merge for mutual protection against orc raiders. Central to several gold and iron mines, the newly secure city became a thriving trade community, which brought in higher-class clientele. But it didn't take long for corruption to set in, and for a long time the city's polished exterior hid a deeper unscrupulousness. That was, until Blackwyn liberated the city a few years ago. Now the city is maintained by patrols of Northlander "regulars," and order has been established.

I was very surprised, therefore, to see the courier move to avoid the patrols and finally arrive at a pub on the banks of the Roa Vizzor. The courier sat at a table for a few minutes, watching the entrance. Satisfied that he had not been followed, the Galeshi slowly moved to a back hallway and knocked at a door. After giving a muffled password, the door opened and the Galeshi stepped in.

I could not believe my luck – the Galeshi had led me to Black Thorn herself! I hastily wrote a note and sent it, via magescrit, to the Solonavi. This piece of information would certainly be valuable to them. Returning to the pool, I noticed that Black Thorn was very unhappy with her own letter. "Three men dead! I told you the orcs wouldn't wait! This was always a stupid plan."

The man to whom this was addressed took the letter from Black Thorn and read it over briefly before responding. "The outpost is important. It will not only provide a layer of defense for Enos Joppa, which will endear you to Blackwyn and the council, but it will also allow us to make first contact with the Galeshi who are fleeing Darq's forces."

"I agreed to the plan, Warden; however, I still worry that it takes us away from our goal of further undermining Atlantis." Black Thorn paused, rubbing her temples. This problem was apparently giving her a headache. "There is nothing to be done about it now. Take some additional men to reinforce the outpost." Prince Warden gathered his helm and shield and walked to the door.

Before he reached it, Black Thorn spoke again. "Warden, why not take the new lance we captured? It might be useful in securing more of the orc warbirds?"

A devilish smile grew on Prince Warden's handsome face. "As you command."

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### **Tinkers and Warbirds - Spring, Day 27**

Prince Warden's arrival at the Bloody Thorns outpost was met with cheers. He was well known and liked by the men and dwarves at the camp. I imagine that the small company of men who accompanied Warden was also a welcome sight.

Warden spent part of his day examining the new machines in action. Apparently, the team had only two, and those were on loan from the Northlanders. From the secretive grins of some of the men in the group, I have the distinct impression that Blackwyn may not even be aware he is lending them out.

As I watched and listened, I learned that the devices were not golems in the traditional sense. Most golems had some rudimentary intelligence and could respond to verbal or magical commands. These machines were more like chariots, requiring a “driver.” Because of the size of the machine and the skill needed to operate it, dwarves, with their natural aptitude for tools, were best suited to the task. The men jokingly referred to the machines as Steam Tinkers, playing off the human nickname for dwarves: “tinkers.”

The Steam Tinkers were making short work of much of the surrounding forest. A large stack of lumber stood ready while the rest of the outpost built and rebuilt portions of the encampment. Hasty repairs to the few standing buildings were made, but I realized that the group had spent the last two days shoring up and finishing the outer walls. They obviously feared the orcs more than the elements.

Warden eventually made his way over to the pen that contained the captured warbirds. He approached one of the birds cautiously. The villagers had been feeding and watering the beasts, which seemed to make them a bit more docile. I imagine that the humans treated the steeds better than the orcs had. Warden displayed no apprehension while walking around the inside of the pen. It was obvious that he was used to being around animals. After some time, he finally felt confident enough to ride one.

Slowly maneuvering the warbird, Warden adapted to the unusual gait of the hooked-beaked birds. Before long, Warden was zipping around the perimeter of the camp. He pulled up near one of the Galeshi leaders. “Ashek, these are fast!” he said. “And you say they can keep up this speed even in the desert?”

“Aye, milord,” the Galeshi responded, taking the reigns of the warbird.

Warden dismounted. “If we could capture a few more of these, we could send out search parties to round up the remaining Galeshi. They would also make excellent scout steeds.”

“Aye, milord, but how would we obtain more? We were lucky to get these two from the orcs. Had they not been in a panic, they would have killed these two before running,” Ashek responded as the two men walked back to the warbird pen.

Warden smiled. “Well, we might be able to arrange another surprise when they return,” he said, as the two of them retired to a large tent to plan further.

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### **The Battle at the Oasis - Spring, Day 28**

At dawn, a hundred orcs, warbeasts, and goblins crashed against the tall wooden walls of the oasis. Orcs have raided villages, castles, and even cities throughout their warring history, so this fort should not have seriously challenged them. While under fire from Revolutionaries riflemen, Thunder Drummers commanded warbeasts to attack a single section of the hastily built wall.

With a great explosion, the wall collapsed, pulled down by the orc warbeasts. Prince Warden rode a warbird out of the gaping hole and into the midst of the orc army. Other Galeshi – on foot and on warbirds – the Steam Tinkers, and a pair of Steam Knights supported him. The battle dissolved into a chaotic melee.

Warden and his lance were a sight to behold. Although the lance was too long for hand-to-hand combat, Warden used it to devastating effect against other mounted warriors. Every time he would joust, he would send the other rider flying from its mount. A Galeshi warrior would then kill the rider and claim its mount. Eventually, Warden managed to dismount almost all of the orcs, capturing eight to ten warbirds in the process.

As the sun began to set, the few remaining orcs attempted to flee. A few Galeshi chased those down before they made it over the first dune. To my horror, the Revolutionaries gathered the bodies of the dead, both orc and human, and began to build pyres. A skillful necromancer could have turned those dead into an impressive army! Among the dead was Ashek Sandslayer, a legendary Galeshi warrior and leader of this encampment. Apparently, Ashek was a longtime friend of Prince Warden, who took the Galeshi's sword and pistol.

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### **Ashek's Pyre - Spring, Day 29**

As the sun rose over the oasis, the Bloody Thorns held a mass memorial. The fires from the night before had burned themselves out, leaving an oily black residue on the field of battle. The surviving men and women gathered in a semicircle around the area and buried the broken weapons of their fallen comrades, including the sword and pistol of Ashek Sandslayer. I am often baffled by how other cultures tend to their dead; Crusaders honor death in a different way – they revere it.

As the sun hit its zenith, a group of dwarves and humans arrived at the outpost. They were sent by Black Thorn herself. A member of this party hand delivered a letter to Prince Warden. Short and to the point, the letter commanded Warden to return to Black Thorn's side. He was to bring the griffon lance and a desert warbird or two, if he felt they were up to the task. She also informed him that she had sent additional reinforcements to help guard the oasis.

After reading this, I scanned the group of newcomers. At first I believed them to be unimpressive, dwarves mostly, until I noticed four wooden crates. Too small to carry Steam Tinkers, the boxes confused even Warden at first. One of the dwarves approached him as the others cracked open the boxes. Inside were large golems, each the size of a small horse and shaped like a sand scorpion. One arm ended in a huge pincer while the other ended in a long cannon.

"I calls them Screechers, milord," the dwarf commented. "I intended for them to lob shells far into the air like those new Steam Maulers do. For some reason, they just can't get the distance." The dwarf shook his head in sad frustration.

"So why do you call them Screechers?" Warden asked, as the dwarves lit the steam boilers in the belly of the golems. The dwarf's answer was cut short as a loud piercing whistle, similar to a tea kettle, issued from each of the golems. At a verbal command from the Dwarf, the Screechers scuttled off, protecting the perimeter of the encampment.

Later in the day Warden began his journey back to Enos Joppa. As he left he spoke to the assembled group. "We should name this place," he said. "I think 'Ashek's Pyre' is fitting, don't you?" The leader of the encampment indicated her improvement, as did the rest of the remaining warriors.

As I watched Warden depart, it became clear why Black Thorn had chosen this prince to become a lieutenant. While her group was more focused on the underworld operations often needed to

support a beginning nation, Prince Warden would be the public face that concealed whatever actions she felt necessary to take.

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### **Rekindled Interests - Spring, Day 30**

Upon waking this morning I decided to direct my gaze back to a familiar face. I found Maleficious in the renegade Raydan Marz's tower, high above Prieska; the two men were locked in a heated debate.

As their conversation progressed, it became obvious that Maleficious' interest lay with a small power surge he detected far to the east. This interested me, as I had detected nothing, and if my Solonavi masters had, they deemed it too insignificant for me to investigate. As in the past, I suspected the little scholar of manipulating Marz, but I could see no immediate reason for his doing so.

After allowing Maleficious to make his case, Marz summarily dismissed the scholar and reminded the old man of his place. The old man returned to his chambers, and I was about to turn my attentions elsewhere when I noticed that he began packing for a journey. Interested in the reasons for his defiance, I let my gaze linger a few more moments, and I'm glad I did: It became clear that the scholar wasn't simply leaving for a few days; he was planning some kind of expedition.

The morning wore on, and the little man continued his perpetrations until he left the tower on the back of a Dragonfly. As expected, he turned the golem east. Maleficious flew for the better part of the day, taking no rest and making great haste. His mount's wings moved faster than any in my experience as he pushed the construct to its mechanical limits.

When Maleficious finally descended through the clouds, his revealed destination was no less surprising than his anxiousness: Fairhaven, the former Atlantean stronghold. What this old man could possibly want in a Crusaders city intrigued me even more than the unusual circumstances surrounding his hasty departure from the renegade's tower. This situation certainly merits more investigation.

Kastali's Diary – Late Spring, 435 Tz

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**Many Preparations** – Late Spring, Day 1

The next morning I refocused my scrying mirror on Fairhaven. Even though the Crusaders' occupation was but a few seasons old, signs of their influence abounded. A newly erected temple to the Blood Goddess sat in the center of the trade district. Crusader militias patrolled the streets, and zombies speckled the back alleys, running errands for their masters. As the city was still of some importance, I spotted large numbers of travelers, but they seemed to be in a haste to leave the city by nightfall.

I found Maleficious already about his business. The little man scurried to and fro throughout Fairhaven's market district, assembling what looked to be quite the little expedition. Beasts of burden, laden with supplies, met a handful of humans with all the accoutrements for a major excavation project: picks, shovels, and enough powder to remove the greater part of a hillside.

A dark sorcerer accompanied them, a man I recognized almost immediately. He called himself Nilahit, and he fancied himself a much better necromancer than he was, although he was certainly capable. Nilahit and the scholar discussed their destination furtively, although in only the vaguest terms; they both possessed an understanding of their subject that frustrated my immediate efforts to discover more. Maleficious' paranoia notwithstanding, I would know soon enough.

The little caravan left Fairhaven by the northern gate shortly after noon. They followed the Roa Kaiten for a few hours before veering into the hills. As the day wore on, Maleficious became increasingly excited; the old man almost appeared giddy. I briefly scanned the area for anything unusual, but found nothing. Perhaps all the time the little scholar spent in Marz' tower had an ill effect on his mind, or perhaps too much of the renegade's wine supplies had been diverted into the old man's gullet.

As evening drew closer, the operation stopped. Maleficious dismounted and indicated to the sorcerer that they were close. An old path, little more than a track through the underbrush, led to a large scar in the ground. I quickly consulted an old map; the only feature in the area was a long-abandoned Atlantean mine. The expedition itself now made sense, but a question remained: What could Maleficious possibly expect to find that the Atlanteans did not?

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**A Grisly Discovery** – Late Spring, Day 2

After resuming my observation this morning, I was startled by the scholar's progress. Some sense of urgency compelled him and his necromancer colleague to work through the evening, and large amounts of fresh dirt and rock lined the hole.

As the morning carried on, the servants worked like madmen to clear more rubble from the old mine. Maleficious buzzed around the operation like an insect, picking up rocks to

examine, critiquing an individual worker's performance, and sharing pieces of trivial information with Nilahit. He exhibited the animation of a young man – not a shriveled scholar.

During breaks in watching, I consulted some old tomes for further information about the area. I found several references to the mine, but nothing more than what one might expect to find: Atlanteans stripped the area for Magestone until the quarry ran dry, and then they left. Otherwise, the mine itself seemed completely unremarkable, making Maleficious' behavior all the more puzzling.

By early afternoon, the workers began to show the strain of their task. I noted that the piles of dirt grew at a much slower pace, and even the scholar and his friend spent more time sitting than moving around. Maleficious began compulsively mopping sweat from his bald head, which had begun turning a light – and then darker – shade of crimson as the day wore on. The scholar was so engrossed in his work that he did not seem to notice or care about the pain he would experience that evening. At least Nilahit had a little more sense; he had wrapped a piece of his robe around his crown.

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Late in the afternoon, an excited shout rose among the workers. Maleficious scrambled into action, but became crestfallen when he discovered what had awakened their interest: a pit of corpses, each smaller than a human. The remaining bits of hair and clothes indicated that these were once dwarven slaves, likely worked to death and left in the ground when the Atlanteans stopped mining. The discovery sparked Nilahit's interest, and the two men began discussing an amendment to their contract. They ended by agreeing to forego the regular payment for the expedition in exchange for allowing Nilahit to animate the dwarves as servants. The ease with which Maleficious agreed to the change took me by surprise; the little man practically oozed desperation. The sorcerer dispatched a messenger to Fairhaven to bring back an unnamed relic. While interesting, none of this explained why Maleficious had begun digging in the first place.

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### **Strange Happenings – Late Spring, Day 3**

The next day I found Nilahit wasting little time with his new property: Skeletal dwarves now walked around the excavation site mingling with the human workers, some of whom looked as though they might drop from exhaustion at any time. Still Maleficious urged them on, the crazed look on his sunburned face disturbing to behold. At least he had found enough common sense to locate a hat to ward against the sun. .

Indeed, the scholar's paranoia had grown through the night. After he debated briefly with Nilahit, the skeletons formed a defensive perimeter around the camp. Before their shadows reached midday, Maleficious' over-cautiousness finally paid off. Two goblin scouts broke the perimeter, and with the silent coordination only the undead minions of the Crusaders possess, several skeletons converged on the unsuspecting spies. In a matter of seconds, rusted axes and ancient picks met goblinflesh, painting the dusty rocks with their blood. Then, as one, the enthralled dead returned to their posts. Watching their ruthless efficiency brought a smile to my face.

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Like an hourglass in reverse, I marked time based on the growing piles of dirt and rock outside of the mine. As is the case with viewing any repetitive work, I grew somewhat bored and checked on them only periodically as I again tried to discover anything unusual about the area.

As evening approached, one of the workers put down his pick, approached Maleficious, and gave him a small object. At first, the object appeared to be nothing more than a dusty rock. Then the purpose of Maleficious' dig became clear.

The object was a red Magestone.

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#### **A Gathering Storm** – Late Spring, Day 4

Shortly after witnessing the discovery of the Red Magestone, I communicated to Vextha what was going on. He instructed me to find out who else might be aware of this resource. I looked back on the excavation site, and I found Maleficious in deep debate with Nilahit. Several workers had apparently left over the course of the evening and could not be found. The necromancer ordered several of his dwarven skeletons back to Fairhaven to gather a much larger force to secure the area. As I turned my scrying pool elsewhere, I realized that Nilahit would need every warm – and cold – body in the city.

I found the orcs already en route, their warbirds pushed to their physical limits to make haste. I counted the banners of at least five tribes, and their numbers indicated a small host rather than a typical raiding party, their birds laden with soldiers, supplies, and all the weaponry of war. Similarly, I found General Vale already on the move from his Rivvenheim hiding-hole, mounted on an enormous Skyguard Griffon and surrounded by a flock of elven riders on smaller birds.

Turning my mirror to the West, I peered into Emperor Nujarek's throne room. There he stood, ordering General Volkare to mobilize his troops into one of the Atlantean flying citadels to move out toward Fairhaven.

I briefly located Drakor, only to confirm what I already suspected: I found him in flight with a large detachment of Draconum warriors, en route to the mine as well. On a hunch, I turned my mirror to the South and saw a Freeholders raiding party, somehow alerted and making its way north, their ragged numbers zealously bent on taking the stones.

In Rangraz, Blackwyn has already begun to mobilize a small army moving towards the Roa Kaiten which he can follow south, straight into Fairhaven. Later in the day, I returned to the mine and Maleficious, who seemed to sense the threat growing around him. I watched as he discussed further plans with Nilahit, and I observed as the Crusader reinforcements appeared on the horizon.

I turned my gaze to Rokos. A glow on the outskirts of the city drew my attention. A Solonavi Creator was busy producing several hundred Drones, each wielding a long

saber. Later, more Solonavi joined her, from constructs to Oathsworn. I watched as they faded into the night, bound for Fairhaven.

Fairhaven has a history of attracting battles, but I doubt that even her seasoned walls will be prepared for the eight factions destined to clash near her.

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### **The Bargain** – Late Spring, Day 5

Valkyrie Tazia sat atop her black pegasus, looking down at Maleficious. “Why should I not simply take control of the mine and take your life, wizard?” Tazia had asked a good question, one I had considered already. I focused my scrying pool closer on the Crusader. I have fond memories of watching Tazia fighting in the blood pits of Necropolis, and I am not surprised to find her leading the Dark Crusaders’ mounted division. She was an incredible sight in her blood-red strap armor, which clung to every curve of her powerful body. I longed to return to my homeland.

Turning my attention back to the conversation, I watched as Maleficious responded with a grin. “My dear young lady. First, what makes you think you can kill me? And even if you could, you would then not have the knowledge that I have: how to forge Red Magestone into weapons.”

Tazia seemed to consider this for a moment. “So the bargain is this: We stop the others from taking this mine, and you will forge weapons for us.”

“Oh, no.” Maleficious obviously realized he had the upper hand. “The bargain is that whoever can hold this mine will allow me to set up a laboratory here and conduct my research in peace. In exchange, I will allow that group to mine the Red Magestone – as long as I get what I need for my research. If the agreement is upheld, I may be convinced to provide that faction with my research, when it is complete.”

“And what do you research, wizard?” Tazia’s mount stamped at the ground and rustled its wings. Nether rider nor mount liked being on the ground for too long.

“That’s no one’s concern but mine,” Maleficious responded. Seeing the scowl on Tazia’s face, he added, “It will, however, have military applications for those who know how to use it.”

A deep frown crossed Tazia’s attractive face. “I don’t like this one bit. However, Aeradon said that the Red Magestone would be of no use to him without you. So we have a deal. We will hold this mine and then hold you to your bargain!” She urged the pegasus into the air. “Reinforcements will be here tonight – no one will take this land from us.”

Maleficious turned and walked back to the entrance of the mine. “I don’t really care who holds this area, as long as I can do my research,” he said. At first I thought the old man was speaking to himself. Then he turned his gaze and looked straight out of the pool and

into my eyes. “Kastali, extend my offer to your masters as well. I’m sure they will see the wisdom of it.” He turned and entered the mine. The magical radiation that poured from the mine disrupted my pool, causing it to blink out.

I sat for some time pondering what I had witnessed before sending the wizard’s message to Vextha.

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### **The Calm** – Late Spring, Day 6

Tazia returned in the morning. With her were several necromancers, more pegasi, a small army of undead, and a large cache of weapons. Apparently, the Crusaders had been fortifying Fairhaven for some time.

During the day, I checked in on each of the factions. Apparently, Maleficious had made his offer to each of them, for each had been instructed not to harm the wizard or the mine. Even the orcs seemed willing to allow the scholar to live. Although Maleficious is a wizard of some renown, I was surprised that so many would go out of their way to claim his favor. Like a high-priced whore, Maleficious spent most of the day preening himself and the mine.

As I scryed for the Black Powder Revolutionary force, I came across the Atlantean Empire force. Right about that time, the Revolutionaries found them as well, and a brief-but-bloody battle ensued. Both forces eventually pulled back, but both had been weakened: Their old hatred may have cost them in the coming battle.

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### **The War Begins** – Late Spring, Day 7

I slept very little last night; I knew that the armies would be close to Fairhaven by now. Indeed, as the sun rose, the first armies crested the hills near the mine. The Dark Crusaders continued to pull whatever reinforcements they could from the surrounding area. Tazia commanded a flight of pegasi ridden by the recently unearthed skeletal dwarves, armed with dwarven fuser axes, swords, and armor.

Almost simultaneously, the Elemental Freeholders army, the Orc Khans army, and what was left of the Revolutionary and Empire armies appeared within a mile of the mine. If they had any sense among them, they would have joined forces and crushed the Crusaders. Petty jealousies and political differences, however, prevented even the opening of a dialog. Instead, the forces crashed into one another.

Giant salamanders pulled warbirds into pools of water. Elemental warriors on sky dragons jousting with the Dark Crusader riders on pegasi. A new Atlantean golem in the shape of a cat tore through the orc ranks, its rider barely holding on. Each force’s elite cavalry shaped the battle.

As the sun set, the battle lines had been clearly drawn, with each faction beginning to reinforce its position. Night fell, and over the screams of battle came the incantations of the necromancers. This day saw many die. This night will see those dead rise to fight again.

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### **The Battle Continues** – Late Spring, Day 8

As the sun rose over Fairhaven, it almost seemed like a peace had been called. The Atlanteans and Revolutionaries had already retreated, both ravaged by undead during the night. Orc Khan shamans had managed to heal many of their dying before the necromancers could get to them. They now faced both the Elemental and Crusader forces.

I do not know who hated the Crusaders more. The Orc Khans still held them responsible for Darq's actions. The Freeholders force consisted of warriors who had been driven out of their homelands by the Crusaders. If the two groups had but realized their mutual "interest," they could have combined forces to crush the Crusaders.

Instead, the orcs showed their total lack of sense with a stealthy attack on the Elementals, who were alerted by the forest itself and were waiting. As the two groups battled, Dark Crusader necromancers resurrected the dead, turning them against their former comrades. At the stroke of midday, the sound of flapping wings filled the air. At first the Elementals sent up a loud cheer; surely they thought reinforcements had arrived. Their cheers were cut off as the banner of the Elven Lords swept through the air, held aloft on a giant Skyguard Griffon.

The battle grew chaotic again as the four forces tore into one another, battling even as the day melted into the night.

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### **Faction War** – Late Spring, Day 9

During my years I have known several Draconum. A few even joined the Crusaders, seeking the promise of immortality. I have always been impressed by the dragon warriors and found their skills in one-on-one combat amazing. I often wondered what would happen if the Draconum ever organized into a true fighting force, like the Crusaders or Atlantean Empire.

Last night I found out. I have taken to sleeping next to the pool, letting the moans of the dying lull me to sleep. I was awakened by a roar of such volume, it must have shaken the very ground at Fairhaven. As I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, the pool illuminated as if it were day. The Draconum had arrived. Using both spells and their own fiery breath, they attacked from the sky, burning everything on the ground.

After this initial attack, which caused both shock and awe in the remaining forces, the Draconum landed and engaged the tired and weakened forces in melee combat, tearing through even the Dark Crusaders army. Much to my surprise the Draconum even managed to expose contingents of Atlantean and Revolutionary forces that were apparently biding their time until the other groups had beaten each other down. That both groups had the same plan was unsurprising.

It appeared that the Draconum would win this battle; they were far fresher than the other forces on the field. I searched for Tazia, who I found engaged in single combat with

Drakor. The two battled in the sky, wheeling around one another. Tazia seemed to be having the time of her life, and her grin matched my own. My grin faded as Drakor snapped the wings of Tazia's pegasus, causing her to plunge to the ground. As she fell, Tazia tore through Drakor's wings with a spear, causing him to plummet to the ground as well.

Both warriors slowly climbed to their feet. Tazia had survived by using the body of her broken horse to cushion her fall. As they began to circle one another, a flash of light appeared between them. As it faded, the form of Vextha appeared between the two weary warriors. My masters had arrived. The tide turned once again.

The Solonavi force appeared quite small at first. Then I noticed that warriors from each faction began to turn on their comrades – Solonavi Oathsworn had managed to infiltrate almost every group. The Draconum formed into neat attack groups to face this new enemy, while the other factions scrambled to adapt.

It took me some time to figure out what happened next. From my viewpoint it seemed as if every dead warrior on the field suddenly rose and began fighting. I was unsure as to how this was happening because the Crusader necromancers had been prime targets for the other factions early in this conflict. Later, after piecing together conversations, I learned that Nilahit had used Red Magestone to enhance his own necromancy skills, giving unlife to every dead thing on the field. After the battle, even Tazia slapped Nilahit on the back in congratulations, almost knocking him to the ground.

Thus did one man turn the tide of battle and repel every major force in the land. Even the Solonavi had to admit that they could not deal with a self-replenishing army of the dead.

My heart soared as Maleficious informed Tazia that the Crusaders had secured his service – and the mine.

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### **A Tempting Offer – Late Spring, Day 10**

Although my fitful sleep back in my own cot had done little to refresh me, I pushed aside my weariness and focused on watching the Dark Crusaders consolidate their hold on their – or rather Malificious' – mine. I turned my scrying sight away from the scholar himself, as I did not want him to know that I continued to monitor his operation, and I instead followed Tazia's lithe form as she set about reorganizing the defending forces. Although bruised, battered, and still bleeding from her duel with Drakor, Tazia strode about the camp that had sprung up about the mouth of the mine, ordering her forces back to defensive positions.

No sooner had the Valkyrie set her fellow Crusaders to the ready once more than a lone Nightstalker was brought into the camp. The Nightstalker made his obeisance to Tazia, his eyes flinching from the swelling bruises marring her beautiful face as he reported his purpose at the camp. He bore a message from Deathspeaker Aeradon, who was offering employment that he thought she might be interested in. He showed her a scroll that detailed the assignment, but I was unable to read it before Tazia closed her fist about it,

an eager smile already lighting her delicate face. The Valkyrie turned away from the Nightstalker, calling for a mount to replace her crippled pegasus, her wounds suddenly forgotten.

Tazia spoke briefly to Nilahit, informing the necromancer that she was returning to the great city of Necropolis, and that he was in command of operations about the mine until she returned or someone else came to take over. Although I longed to investigate the project that Malificious was working on, the fierce joy in Tazia's face as she urged her new mount into the air promised events of even more interest. As weariness called me toward my bed at last, I locked my scrying pool on Tazia's form as she flew northeast on her Dark Pegasus' back.

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### **The Flight to Necropolis – Late Spring, Day 11**

Tazia drove her Dark Pegasus hard, the night-black creature soaring through the air, fleeing the setting sun. Although the Crusaders control the land over which Tazia and her Dark Pegasus flew, the Valkyrie kept her steed high, avoiding the patrols below in favor of swift, steady flight.

I was uncertain if the winged horse was going to survive the rigors of the trip, considering the demands Tazia made on it, but as the pair approached the end of their journey, the Valkyrie brought the Dark Pegasus down in the plains south of Black Lake. As her mount stood with its head down, breathing heavily and with lather coating its flanks, Tazia tracked and slew a deer. She brought the dead animal back to the clearing, slit the deer's neck, and allowed the Dark Pegasus to feast on the flesh and blood of the beast. The sight of the Valkyrie in her red-strap armor, splattered with the deer's blood, is not one I will soon forget.

With her steed refreshed, the pair took to the skies once more. Upon arriving at Necropolis, Tazia was met by an emissary of Deathspeaker Aeradon. He informed her that another was interested in the task: The matter of who would receive the contract would be decided the next morning in the blood pits. Although the Valkyrie took this news as a matter of course, I was more interested than ever. Not only did my suspicion that this contract was an important one seem to be true, but after all these years I also would have another chance to see Tazia compete in the blood pits.

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### **In the Blood Pits – Late Spring, Day 12**

As the morning of the pit-fight dawned, I came to the scrying pool to find it still locked on Tazia, the clear waters showing her preparing for the coming battle. The Valkyrie washed her hair and combed it out until the lustrous black locks shone in the predawn light. She then wound her hair in a complex braid, binding it with strips of cured elven skin. Tazia inspected each strap of her crimson armor as she laced it into place, ensuring that the spells placed upon it to protect her from damage were functioning correctly, and that the straps themselves fit her toned body as closely as possible. As a veteran of the blood pits, the Valkyrie knew that in Necropolis, appearance was second only to actual combat prowess on the sands of a blood pit.

When the appointed time came, a Blood Cultist came to escort Tazia to the blood pit. Hefting her twin short spears, the Valkyrie followed the acolyte into the small sand-floored arena where the combat would take place. Having heard Deathspeaker Aeradon's name invoked, I kept my scrying point hidden within the tunnel Tazia had taken into the blood pit, knowing that if anyone in Necropolis could see me through the veil of the scrying pool, it would be Aeradon. It was then that I got my first view of Tazia's opponent, a slim shape wrapped in a black cloak, its hood cast back to reveal a pale face and hair so light as to be almost white. I knew her as a Spirit Taker called Stiletto, thought to be lost in the Blasted Lands after the Black Pyramid debacle. Stiletto was also escorted into the ring by a devotee of the Blood Goddess, and both Blood Cultists withdrew from the arena after glancing toward the alcove where I assumed the Deathspeaker would watch this encounter.

A quiet, rasping voice filled the arena. Aeradon informed the two Crusaders that they were fighting for the honor of "tearing the heart from the followers of the False Tezla, the Land-worshipping fools of the Elemental school and their bestial allies." He did not go into further detail, but he apparently made a gesture for the combat to begin, for Stiletto swept her hood over her head, drew a knife, and attempted to pull back into the shadows under the great walls of the blood pit. Tazia was no slower, leaping forward and throwing one of her spears at the Spirit Taker. At first I thought the Valkyrie had missed, but then I saw that the spear was aimed slightly behind Stiletto, forcing the Spirit Taker toward Tazia. What happened next only a frequent attendee of pit fights could have possibly followed. Tazia and Stiletto came together in a blur of motion, the light of the arena glinting off the steel of their weapons. Stiletto made a quick slashing attack at her opponent, aiming to pierce the warding protection of Tazia's strap armor, but the Valkyrie was no longer there. There was a whirl of pale flesh, red leather, and black hair, and then Tazia was stepping away from her opponent, her second spear no longer in her hands. Stiletto crumpled around the haft of the spear, her blood spilling out to color the sand of the arena. Tazia had won the contract.

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### **To Tear Out the Heart** – Late Spring, Day 13

Although I had gotten the chance to watch Tazia demonstrate her grace and mastery in the blood pits, I still did not know what the task was, beyond Deathspeaker Aeradon's bombastic words before the duel. Immediately after Tazia impaled Stiletto on her spear, acolytes of the Blood Cult rushed out to see to the Spirit Taker, and another bade the Valkyrie follow him to the deathspeaker's box. I have seen zombies created enough times to have little interest in watching the Blood Cultists deal with Stiletto, so I followed after Tazia and her guide, wary of coming too suddenly upon the deathspeaker and having my presence discovered.

I was able to find a point where I could listen in on what was being said within the room but be outside of Aeradon's sight. I do not know how the deathspeaker would react to my presence in Necropolis, but I knew that he would not be pleased. What I heard, however, soon drove all musings from my head: Deathspeaker Aeradon was contracting Tazia to slay the Circle of Nine.

While this task has often been attempted, it has always failed, given the complexity and strength of the Elemental defenses. Now, however, Aeradon claimed to have a secret tool that would allow Tazia to penetrate those defenses, which had time and again frustrated the efforts of the Crusaders. It was then that the deathspeaker introduced the Valkyrie to Rhiamon, the fallen Flame Priestess who now served the Crusaders.

Tazia and Rhiamon left Necropolis immediately, borne aloft by the Dark Pegasus and a reanimated griffon. They made their way southward with all haste, heading directly for Roanne Valle. Rhiamon led the Valkyrie into the Sturnmounts behind the sanctuary city, and there the two left their mounts and delved deep into the granite foundations of the fortress. Although Rhiamon was able to penetrate the magical wards guarding the passages, I was not, and I was forced to turn my scrying pool back to the surface: I had lost the two women in the underground passages beneath the Roanne Valle.

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### **The Fury of the Elementals** – Late Spring, Day 14

Apparently the followers of the false Tezla have increased their magical protection, most likely at the suggestion of the red-skinned Troll Maren'kar, for I have been unable to pierce the depths of the fortress of Roanne Valle with my scrying sight. Although I was unable to watch Tazia and Rhiamon enter the citadel of Roanne Valle, I was determined to see the outcome of Tazia's mission. Certainly my masters would want to know if the Circle of Nine were killed, but I also wanted to see if the Valkyrie could succeed in completing such a dangerous contract given the strain she had put on her body recently.

As I waited for some sign of Tazia's success or failure, I passed my time examining the defenses of the Roanne Valle. Although I searched for almost three hours, I was unable to find any weakness in the defenses by which Kossak Darkbringer's massive host might gain entry to the sanctuary of the walled city. Shortly after I began to grow tired and wonder if Tazia and Rhiamon might have failed in their task, there was a sudden commotion at the center of the city, and a dozen ferocious-looking trolls hustled a small group of priests and priestesses towards another building. Quickly centering my scrying sight upon them, I saw that the followers of the false Tezla were attending to a trio of bloodied forms borne on stretchers.

Those about the party were asking a barrage of questions, and from the short, rumbling answers given by the Trolls I learned that not only had Tazia and Rhiamon escaped, but that they had killed six of the Circle of Nine, and that the three survivors, including Prophet-Priest Tremelen and the Queen of the Pixies, were in such critical shape that even the vaunted healing skills of the Mending Priestesses could do little more than keep them stable. The two Crusaders had only been driven off when Warrior Huhn, the same Troll who had failed to rescue his uncle from Darq, heard the commotion and burst into the room the Circle was meeting in with almost a score of other Trolls and Wylden elves at his heels.

As the critically wounded survivors of the Valkyrie's attack were carried to safety, Huhn stayed behind with the crowd of sprites, Wylden elves, centaurs, and other woodland

creatures. Although Huhn had originally spoken in favor of the retreat to Roanne Valle, he now spoke angrily for the need to take the fight to the Crusaders, saying that sitting in their sanctuaries only allowed the Crusaders to strike at will and pick their targets. I assume that Deathspeaker Aeradon's intent in having Tazia strike down the Circle of Nine was to create such a divide amongst the followers of the false Tezla, but without the calming influence of Prophet-Priest Tremelen and the others of the Circle, it is possible that the Deathspeaker started a boulder rolling that he cannot stop.

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### **The Noble Quest – Late Spring, Day 15**

Upon waking this morning, I received a message from my Solonavi masters instructing me to investigate a potentially interesting development in the northern mountains. There I found two female Draconum, Chroma and Caldera, immersed in some kind of discussion. Several times, Caldera mentioned an Atlantean caravan bound for Ashon Rye. I couldn't understand how a routine Empire caravan could interest these two warriors, but their goals became clearer as I listened further. Apparently the caravan transported a large convoy of dwarven slaves, and the two warriors had made up their minds to set the wretches free.

Although I found their optimism somewhat reckless, I suspected they might have motives other than the liberation of a few dozen lowly dwarves. After all, Ashon Rye and its Magestone bounty were but a stone's throw from Necropolis, and what better way to subtly test its defenses than to lead guerilla raids on those coming to replenish the guards and workers? My conjecture remained theory, though, as Chroma and Caldera outfitted themselves for a lengthy trek, choosing weapons and armor with care.

As the two tested various swords and axes, I marveled at the raw strength beneath their scaly skin. They held their blades with a poise and ability that many warriors would never achieve in a lifetime of combat training. Even more remarkable was how evenly martially matched the two were. In the playful way of familiar friends, they occasionally took swipes at each other, each blow always matched with a parry or dodge.

They soon took to the skies, flying toward the south, the mountains passing steadily beneath them. The two Draconum showed little concern for speed; their spirits were high as they soared and dove through the sparse clouds, wings carrying them to their destination. They shared some basic banter, and I got the impression that they were on a quest to prove their valor; freeing the dwarves was merely a means to that end. They stopped before sunset to camp, feasting on a freshly caught stag and laughing and telling stories from their youth. The two stayed up long into the night, finally dropping off to sleep a few hours before dawn.

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### **Testing the Waters – Late Spring, Day 16**

Chroma and Caldera were still deep in slumber when I focused my scrying pool upon them again, so I decided to briefly investigate the caravan itself. I found it perhaps a day's flight to the south, hugging the Roa Kaiten on its slow march north. From previous experience, I knew the caravan would look for a ford north of Fairhaven, although there

were precious few places in those treacherous waters where such a large procession could easily cross.

The caravan itself was bristling with Prieskan guards, and several Drone Golems and a small host of Dragonflies provided scouting and air cover. Obviously, the Empire wasn't taking any chances with their goods; a brief look at their supply wagons revealed enough goods to run the mine for the better part of a year. Their dwarven cargo appeared to be a motley bunch of slaves, with defeat written on every part of them, from their hung heads to the limp shackles on their feet.

Around noon, the caravan arrived at an open meadow, where blooming wildflowers benefited from the moist air carried from the mountains by the spring runoffs flowing through the Roa Kaiten. Here, the Kaiten flattened into a fairly shallow, wide expanse perfect for fording, although I did not envy anyone whose skin came into contact with that icy water. The Prieskans took a defensive position around the meadow, while the slave drivers ordered the dwarves to begin preparing the wagons to cross the river.

As they began their preparations, which would take the remainder of the day at least, I turned my gaze back to Chroma and Caldera, whom I found already in the air. As if following some hunter's instinct, they made their way east through the mountains until landing at the source of the Roa Kaiten. They talked about the best way to proceed; Chroma recommended ambushing the caravan as it crossed the river, as it inevitably would, while Caldera favored an assault on the eastern side after the caravan crossed. Chroma argued that escape would come easier to the slaves if they didn't have to swim the river twice, an argument with which Caldera eventually agreed. They used the light from the setting sun as a blind to investigate the river to the south and discovered the meadow as night was falling. The two warriors then retreated into a deep forest to make preparations for their assault in the morning.

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### **Battle in the Sky – Late Spring, Day 17**

I found the two Draconum stretching tired wings and limbering up their sword-arms. Before taking to the sky, they both sat cross-legged on the ground, their bodies perfectly still except for a slow fanning of the wings. I'd witnessed other Draconum perform this ritual before; they believed that clearing their minds of distractions before battle allowed them to fight better. Perhaps there was a grain of truth to it, although I suspected that their sheer skill and love for combat contributed to their success as well.

While they meditated, I briefly turned to the south and found the caravan beginning its long crossing. The first few wagons were already in the water, and the guards seemed to have lowered their hackles momentarily as they tried to help the slaves and drivers comfort the horses, which obviously cared little for the freezing, rocky river.

Chroma and Caldera swooped across the river from the east, the sun at their backs. The only warning they gave the Imperial guards was a triumphant cry as Chroma flew across the front of the lead wagon, severing the driver's head from his body in one clean stroke. The horses, already uneasy from the cold water, caught the scent of blood and bolted; the

wagon hit a rock and overturned, breaking into pieces and scattering cloth-bound foodstuffs into the water. A swarm of Dragonflies appeared and attacked, while the startled guards tried to mount a counterattack.

Caldera engaged the Dragonflies with gusto, her pole arm removing pieces from the flying constructs and tearing chunks of wing. Their Atlantean riders maneuvered for a clear shot at the Draconum, but Caldera flew through and around the confused riders like a crazed bird, never giving them the opportunity to train their crossbows upon her. Chroma shot skyward to help her friend, while the Prieskans on the ground unleashed a hail of arrows at the duo. One struck Chroma in the wing, but she barely paused, breaking the shaft in one fluid motion. A Dragonfly plummeted toward the ground, its rider already dead, gears and pieces hanging from the construct. Its body hit a wagon with a loud smack, destroying it.

Another cloud of arrows caught Chroma's attention, and she folded her wings behind her for a fast dive. The Prieskans watched, transfixed, as she plummeted toward them, turning to run at the last moment as she buried her pole arm in a guard's back, lifting him off of the ground and then dropping him onto his startled companions.

Meanwhile, Caldera slammed into one of the Atlantean riders, sending him screaming to the ground and then wrangled the back of a Dragonfly as if she were trying to break a stubborn horse. The construct, confused, flew in circles as Caldera repeatedly drove her sword into its metallic hide. The Draconum warrior eventually resorted to tearing into the machine with her bare hands, ripping off its wings as a child might do to a tiny insect. The wicked claws on her feet finished the job, tearing the Dragonfly's flank to ribbons before she jumped off and flew skyward again, meeting Chroma above the carnage. The two warriors then returned to the north woods, where Caldera saw to Chroma's light wound, and they began making plans for the next day's attack.

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### **Flight to Freedom** – Late Spring, Day 18

I began watching the two Draconum again early the next morning. They were up before me, and I found them already on the move. A brief glimpse at the caravan revealed that it forded the river sometime in the night, and it was making all haste for Ashon Rye and the safety of the Imperial forces there. Chroma and Caldera seemed to know their destination, as they effortlessly flew over the river and made their way directly to the convoy.

They flew low, so close to the treetops that their scales brushed the leaves beneath them. They hit the caravan quickly, swooping across and sinking their claws into a pair of hapless guards, whom they carried skyward in tandem, the humans struggling as the Draconum gripped them by their shoulders and chests. In a mirror pattern, Chroma and Caldera swooped in opposite arcs, coming back for a second run, the two guards still kicking in their clutches.

This time, the Prieskans were prepared, and they filled the sky with a hail of crossbow

bolts. As one, Chroma and Caldera folded their wings and pointed their captives forward, the crossbow bolts filling their chests with loud, sickening thumps. The two Draconum flew straight at the dwarven slaves, using their human shields to push a few brave Prieskans out of the way.

In scant seconds, the Draconum had severed the Imperial chains, and the dwarves began running for their freedom. A couple of guards made a feeble attempt to catch them, but most were now concentrated on Chroma, who began cutting through them with her blade, and Caldera, who used the tips of her claws to stampede several pairs of horses drawing the wagons. A dozen Atlanteans were trampled, and the confusion the stampede created was enough to cover the Draconum and dwarves' escape. The Imperial troops, attempting to salvage what remained of the caravan and their dignity, turned their attention to calming the beasts.

The winged warriors followed the freed slaves back toward the north, hovering as they went so that they faced their foes. A pair of Drone Golems gave chase, but the two made quick work of the constructs. Chroma and Caldera found the dwarves in the forest, the little wretches out of breath and on the verge of collapse. Water skins were passed around and shackles removed, but respite was only momentary: The Imperial forces were not far behind. They spent the rest of the day in terse retreat, stopping only to replenish water and distribute a few pieces of dried meat among the dwarves. Their pursuers, unfamiliar with the terrain and their morale shaken, gave up midway through the day, but not before sending a fast rider to Ashon Rye for reinforcements.

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### **Imperial Counterattack – Late Spring, Day 19**

Having watched Chroma and Caldera's exploits the day before, this morning I decided to turn my eye toward Ashon Rye and the inevitable retributive attack. The two Draconum not only succeeded at freeing slaves, but also struck a potentially crippling blow to Imperial mining operations; already riders were in the air, making all haste for Atlantis so that more supplies could be dispatched.

My immediate interest lay with the large force of Drone Golems launched from Ashon Rye to hunt down the two Draconum. A score of the metal monsters took to the sky at dawn, fanning out to the north and west in a wide search pattern. It took them only a couple of hours to find Chroma and Caldera, who were deep in prebattle meditation.

The Draconum seemed to anticipate the Imperial attack, and at the first sound of the Golems' buzzing wings, their eyes opened simultaneously. They took to the air in one fluid motion, drawing weapons as they sped skyward. As one, the Golems ceased their search and began converging on the two Draconum. The sheer size of the force initially shocked Chroma and Caldera, and they quickly began shouting plans even as the constructs engaged them.

The first wave hit Chroma and Caldera like an angry nest of mechanical hornets. A trio of them managed to grab Caldera by her arms and tried to tear her in half. She dispatched

them, but not before they sank their pincers into her left wing, opening a wicked gash. Another pair hit Chroma from the front and the back, and one drove a long beak through her thigh. A slice from her sword removed the offending appendage, but it stayed jammed in her leg as she fought the other attackers.

As more Golems closed on their location, and the two Draconum took more wounds, they decided to attempt a measured retreat. Fighting nearly back-to-back, their fearsome wings streaked with blood, they dispatched a few more Golems before splitting up, each flying in separate directions. The Golems, initially confused, hesitated momentarily before pursuing, which was all the initiative the two warriors needed. They circled each other in a double loop before meeting back-to-back once more, and they began destroying the Golems as the constructs attempted to process their rapid movements. Their blades hummed and spun nonstop, chewing into Golem after Golem, one at a time.

After the last Golem had streaked toward the ground, Caldera began seeing to Chroma's leg, which hung useless and limp. They settled to the forest floor, wounded but not defeated. They – and I – now realized that the Magestone-rich mines of Ashon Rye were unsupplied, possibly undermanned, and now drastically undefended.

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### **Huhn's Rage** – Late Spring, Day 20

Although once again frustrated at my inability to inform the Crusade of a weakness revealed by my time at the Scrying Pool, I was thankful when my masters ordered me to return to investigating the situation in and around Roanne Valle. Although five days had passed since I last looked upon the encircled fortress of Roanne Valle, at first glance it seemed that little had changed. The forces of the Dark Tezla's Crusade still surrounded the plateau upon which Roanne Valle sits, and the followers of the false Elemental Tezla still sat within; except they no longer simply sat within their walls. The Wylden Elves and their woodland allies seethed within the sanctuary of Roanne Valle, their anger and frustration nearing the boiling point.

Since the removal of the calm strength of the Circle of Nine from discussion, those in favor of breaking out of foothills of the Sturmounts and taking the fight to Kossak Darkbringer's forces were gaining strength and support. The city buzzed with discussion, and while many Wylden Elves still called for caution and a maintenance of their defensive stance, the tide of discussion was turning, thanks in no small part to Warrior Huhn. The Troll's influence within Roanne Valle had grown with his actions against Tazia and Rhiamon, and his anger had grown with it. From what I could overhear throughout the fortress, the majority of warriors and priests of the False Elemental Tezla were coming around to Huhn's line of thinking, emissaries were being sent to all of the allies of the Wylden Elves, and planning for a breakout was beginning!

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### **Strike and Counterstrike** – Late Spring, Day 21

Having determined that it was only a matter of time before the Elemental heretics sallied forth from the fortress of Roanne Valle, I now set about trying to find out what the Crusade, and Kossak in particular, were planning to do about it. I directed my scrying

sight down towards Kossak's command tent, amidst piles of cracked and splintered bones created by his habit of feasting on various creatures of the False Tezla's Elemental armies. I found Kossak in the midst of a meeting with the commanders of his forces, a Talon Warrior roasting on a spit in the middle of the table. As a Vampiric Archer I recognized as Sanguine spoke, the General of the Crusade tore off one of the bird-creature's arms, eating as he listened.

“Our raiding parties have reported much fiercer resistance, General. The followers of the False Tezla have been bringing more and more warriors to the wall in response to our strikes, and the counterassaults are much more ferocious than before, although not as well coordinated.”

Darkbringer responded to Sanguine's words around a mouthful of stringy meat, his rumbling voice filling the tent with its triumphant tones.

“It is as Deathspeaker Aeradon said it would be. The Circle of Nine has been destroyed, and the followers of the False Elemental Tezla have become uncoordinated and overcome with their righteous fury.” The Troll's voice was filled with scorn as he spoke, but his good humor remained, his terrible grin showing his blackened tusks, “They will ride out in their wrath,” there was a commotion amidst the Crusade's commanders at this, with some of the vampires voicing their worry that they did not have the force to defend against the Elemental onslaught, and others glorying in the thought of the upcoming battle. But Kossak paid them no mind, merely raising his voice above the hubbub, his words drawing bloodthirsty cheers from all present, “and we will be ready for them. It shall be the end of the False Tezla's reign in this corner of the Land!”

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### **Zombies and Trolls – Late Spring, Day 22**

There was much feasting and revelry within Kossak's camp the night of his meeting, but the next day the commanders returned to the business of preparing to destroy the upcoming Elemental sortie. Most were in high spirits as they arrayed their forces for battle, but a number of the necromancers wore concerned looks, and whispered together that the Wylden itself was rising up against them. Apparently, a number of Zombies had recently begun to disappear. From the tales the necromancers told, an ever increasing number of small patrols had been ambushed and completely wiped out, while the few survivors from larger patrols mentioned six-limbed “forest demons” rising from the ground to drag their prey beneath the loam of the Wylden Forest. Despite the Crusaders putting out more and more patrols, they had not been able to bring down one of these “demons” yet, and the number of patrols disappearing continued to rise.

Before I could pursue this mystery, my thoughts were interrupted by an explosion of sound from the fortress of Roanne Valle. I quickly shifted my scrying sight to within the fortress, and an amazing sight greeted my eyes: the entirety of the fortress was filled with warriors and priests, Wylden elves, Trolls, sprites, centaurs, mounts of war and creatures of the Wylden Forest; the entire strength of Roanne Valle. Standing before this great array of martial force was a single troll: Warrior Huhn. Kossak's nephew stood basking in the acclaim of the Elemental Freeholds for a long moment, then raised his arms,

throwing back his green cloak as he held his giant hands out for silence. Between the space of two breaths, what had been a sheer torrent of noise died away to nothing but echoes, leaving a hush over the courtyards of the Roanne Valle. Once silence reigned, Warrior Huhn raised his voice, filling the fortress with his words.

“Warriors of the Land!” This brought another roar of sound that echoed through the sanctuary of Roanne Valle, but was quickly quieted as Huhn raised his arms once again, “For too long we have sat in the dark of this fortress and endured the attacks of the foul, death-obsessed minions of the Dark Crusaders’ False Tezla. For too long we have stayed in one place, allowing the bloodsuckers and grave-defilers to strike us as they please!” Each statement brought another roar of agreement, and even through my Scrying Pool I could feel the rage building up in those gathered to hear the Troll speak. “Now our greatest leaders have been laid low by a pit fighter and a traitor. Six of our leaders lie dead, and three so badly wounded that they cannot even speak.” A hush fell over the crowd now, and Huhn’s voice was the only sound which broke the silence, “No more will we accept this abuse! The Land cries out for want of Defenders, and that cry shall not go unheard! We will ride out, and we will destroy the Dark Crusade!”

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### **We Will Ride Out!** – Late Spring, Day 23

I feel sure that if Prophet-Priest Tremelen and the others of the Circle of Nine could have stood before the followers of the False Elemental Tezla he could have spoken reason and restrained them, but without calmer heads, Warrior Huhn’s rage led them forth. The great doors of Roanne Valle swung open, and the full force of the Elemental fury struck upon the ranks of the Crusade. Unicorns and Sisliths thundered forward beside Horned Stags, while Griffons and Sky Dragons swooped and dove in the air above. Trolls bellowed their rage as they charged forward beside Freeholder Warriors and Sorceresses, while Sprites and Centaurs guarded the flanks of the attacking army. Huhn had ordered that the doors be closed behind the charge of the Freeholders, in order that they might destroy the Crusade or die trying, and so the stone gates swung shut once more behind the forces of the False Tezla.

But Kossak’s forces were ready for them. When the cavalry of Roanne Valle struck, it was not vampires, necromancers, or pit-fighters they slew; instead it was rank upon rank of zombies: the undead corpses of former companions and Atlantean soldiers. Centaur struck zombie centaur, crushing rotted flesh with blade and hoof. Freeholder arrows peppered former friends, sending them once again to the rest of the dead. Huhn himself was attacked by a quartet of zombified trolls, but he dropped the first with a mammoth crossbow bolt through the head, and dispatched the second with a crushing blow with the butt of his crossbow. The third managed to bite into Huhn’s leg, baring muscle, but then it was torn from the earth by the claws of a Sky Dragon, and born high aloft to be dropped back down into the press of bodies. Warrior Huhn caught the fourth zombie’s grasping arms, and tore the deceased troll limb from limb before he was carried away from my Scrying Sight by the tide of battle.

At first it looked as if the horde of zombies was going to be enough to stall the charge of the followers of the False Elemental Tezla, but as the day wore on it became clear that the losses the zombies had sustained during the siege meant that there were simply not enough of them to halt the sheer fury of the creatures of the Wylden. It was then that Kossak ordered his own elite troops into the battle. Vampire Archers and Barrow Knights upon dark pegasi swept into the air to engage the Sky Dragons, Griffons, and their riders who swooped and dove above the Freeholder forces. Pit-fighters leapt into battle, their grace and ferocity more than matching anything the followers of the False Tezla might bring to bear. More Barrow Knights urged Salamanders up and over the edge of the plateau, taking the Freeholder's from the flanks and rear.

If Huhn's forces had been fresh, they might have been a worthy foe for the cream of the Crusade, but they were weary after almost a full day of battering their way through masses of zombies. For a long moment I thought that Kossak had finally broken the forces of the Elementals, but then, as the sun dipped low to the horizon, a long, low horn blast echoed across the field of battle, and a tall, horned and hooved figure stepped from the woods behind the Crusader lines, a cloak of leaves trailing behind him. In one hand it carried a long hunting spear and in the other was a heavy horn from which the creature wrung another haunting note. Arrows began to fall on the Crusader lines from the forest, and battle was truly joined as the Wylden Host fell upon the Crusaders from two sides.

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### **The End of a Dream** – Late Spring, Day 24

The battle outside the gates of the Roanne Valle raged on into the night. Although the pit-fighters and vampires of Kossak's army were as used to fighting in the pitch blackness as they were in daylight, the Wylden Host knew the Land, and used every copse and gully to their best advantage. The Crusaders lust for battle was matched by the fury of the warriors of the False Elemental Tezla. Vampires drained of the lifeblood Wylden elves. Trolls smashed Pit-fighters to the ground by sheer brute strength. Sprites flitted about the heads of zombies, frustrating them before moving in to return the reanimated corpses to true death. A herd of zombie centaurs speared into the midst of the Elemental lines, crushing Freeholder warriors beneath their massive hammers. For almost the length of the night it seemed that the Crusaders and Freeholders would destroy one another in an orgy of destruction, but as dawn neared, it became apparent that small sections of the Freeholder forces were breaking through the Crusader lines and into the depths of the Wylden.

The plan of the Freeholders became clear to me at just the time it appeared to dawn upon Kossak, for the Crusader army broke into smaller forces to follow the fragmenting Wylden Host. Although many had been killed on the plateau before Roanne Valle, many more of the Elemental Freehold had broken through Crusader lines to join their comrades in the Wylden in their ongoing guerilla war against the Crusaders. No more could Kossak keep the bulk of his force before Roanne Valle, now the majority of his forces would be kept busy dealing with the weight of the Wylden Host as it attempted to strangle his lines of supply.

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As the morning sun rose, fighting died out before the walls of the Roanne Valle as the last of the followers of the False Elemental Tezla who took to the field faded into the Wylden forest, with sections of the Crusader army pursuing them. I searched the piles of fallen, but could find no sign of the troll who had started the break-out, Warrior Huhn.

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### **The Gathering** – Late Spring, Day 25

This morning I awoke refreshed and ready to continue my search for Warrior Huhn in the Wylden Forest. Neither he nor several other members of the Circle of Nine had fallen on the battlefield – and as long as they lived, the Elemental League would never truly be destroyed.

As I looked deep into the scrying pool, my view was unexpectedly drawn to the wooded foothills west of Enos Joppa. There I found an enormous encampment of amazons, larger than any I'd seen off of Nepharus Mons. In the dim light before dawn, I saw amazon warriors drawing whetstones along their blades and making offerings to the spirit of the dire wolf. They were preparing for war, but against whom?

I felt myself pulled further into the scene, this time into the large silk pavilion at the center of the encampment. Around the periphery of its dim interior were more than three score amazon tribal queens. They were seated cross-legged on the earth, clearly unaware of anything around them as they gazed blankly toward the center of the pavilion. There, in the light of a smoldering brazier, stood Queen Corella. Clad in a cloak trimmed in wolf fur, she brushed her chestnut hair with calm, deliberate strokes.

A Solonavi stepped from the shadows and handed Corella her mancatcher, and then he turned to look directly into my eyes. “Kasteli,” he said. “Tell my brethren that the preparations are underway. I will speak to them tomorrow at noon. Go.” He gestured casually, and I felt a painful shock as magic sparked through me.

I pulled back from the scrying pool, startled and disturbed. First Maleficious, now Corella's mysterious benefactor – how much control did I truly have over the pool's magic? More importantly, even in the chamber and distant from the battlefields, was I truly as safe as I had believed?

I would have plenty of time to consider both questions as I prepared to spend the day securing an audience with the tower's Solonavi masters.

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### **Solonavi Cabal** – Late Spring, Day 26

The confines of the scrying chamber were even more cramped than normal this morning, as I shared it with a trio of Solonavi. They waited silently as I called upon the magic of the pool and returned to the northlands. The encampment I had seen the previous day was gone. All that remained was Corella's pavilion. I ventured inside and found her sitting alongside the same Solonavi I had first seen so long ago in that forest glade.

**Fiction written for WizKids Games and  
the *Mage Knight* Scrying Chamber**  
(<http://www.wizkidsgames.com/mageknight/chamber/>)  
by Seth Johnson

**Monday, May 24, 2004**  
**Late Spring, 435 TZ, Day 25**  
**The Gathering**

This morning, I awoke refreshed and ready to continue my search for Warrior Huhn in the Wylden Forest. Neither he nor the surviving members of the Circle of Nine had been among the fallen on the battlefield--and as long as they lived, the Elemental League would never truly be destroyed.

As I looked deep into the scrying pool, my view was unexpectedly drawn to the wooded foothills west of Enos Joppa. There I found an enormous encampment of Amazons, larger than any I'd seen off of Nepharus Mons. In the dim light before dawn, I saw Amazon warriors drawing whetstones along their blades and making offerings to the spirit of the dire wolf. They were preparing for war, but against whom?

I felt myself pulled again into the large silk pavilion at the center of the encampment. Around the periphery of its dim interior were more than three score of the Amazon's tribal queens. They were seated cross-legged on the earth, clearly unaware of anything around them as they gazed blankly toward the center of the pavilion. There, in the light of a smoldering brazier, stood Queen Corella. Clad in a cloak trimmed in wolf fur, she brushed her chestnut hair with calm, deliberate strokes.

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I pulled back from the scrying pool, startled and disturbed. First Maleficious, now Corella's mysterious benefactor--how much control did I truly have over the pool's magic? More importantly: even in the chamber, distant from the battlefields, was I truly as safe as I had believed?

I would have plenty of time to consider both questions as I went to spend the day in search of an audience with the Tower's Solonavi masters.

**Tuesday, May 25, 2004**  
**Late Spring, 435 TZ, Day 26**  
**Solonavi Cabal**

The confines of the scrying chamber were even more cramped than normal this morning, as I shared it with a trio of Solonavi. They waited silently as I called upon the magic of the pool and returned to the northlands. The encampment I had seen the previous day was gone. All that remained was Corella's pavilion. I ventured inside and found her sitting alongside the same Solonavi I had first seen so long ago in that forest glade.

The shimmering blue creature stepped forward to address those of us in the scrying chamber. "I am Rayevisayla," he said. "In the past my dedication to the cause has been questioned. That will come to an end. With my magic and Queen Corella's diplomatic skills, you can see that we have gathered together the majority of the Amazon tribes. Only the obstinate resistance of Queen Valia has prevented us from unifying all of the Amazons into a single force."

"Beginning tomorrow, our warriors will march upon the villages belonging to Valia and those loyal to her. They will join us, or they will be destroyed. By summer's end, we will have an army. Then, I will await

your appeal. We all know that the time of danger approaches, and when it arrives the Oathsworn will not be numerous enough or sufficiently organized. Then you will call upon me.”

The Solonavi beside me cursed and snuffed the pool’s magic. “Rayevisayla,” he grumbled, each syllable its own complaint. Turning to me he said, “You will watch these battles. Tell us whether he can truly assemble the force he claims.” Together, the trio swept out of the chamber, leaving me alone beside the darkened pool.

**Wednesday, May 26, 2004**  
**Late Spring, 435 TZ, Day 27**  
**Hawk’s Fall**

As commanded, today I sought out the Amazon forces. I found camouflaged Amazons of the tribes gathered by Queen Corella and Rayevisayla--the dire wolf, the mountain tiger, the jaguar, the boar, the white ape, and more-- hiding in the forest surrounding a town on the shores of a mountain lake.

Down in the town, Amazon warriors basked in the sun and watched their daughters as they chased a captured Galeshi boy among the mud-daub houses. Whenever a girl tackled him to the ground, the others would raise him to his knees and then force him to kiss the feet of the one who caught him. Then they would let him go and the game would begin anew. It was a quiet day in a distant frontier outpost, and more of its people carried gourds of water or wineskins than weapons.

Arrows flashed out of the forest and unerringly found their targets in the scouts guarding the perimeter of the town. A wolf howl broke the quiet day, calling Corella’s Amazons to begin their attack. They erupted from the woods and surged into the town, herding the surprised locals toward the temple square. For the first time, I saw Amazons using their mancatchers against other Amazons; only those who gave too much resistance were eliminated. Corella and her Solonavi patron clearly hoped to add another tribe to their forces.

The battle was quick and decisive. Corella passed the time taking her pick of the local breeding slaves until all of the prisoners had been gathered at the foot of the temple. Then her lieutenants brought the local queen forward in shackles, and together Corella and the queen climbed the tall, wide steps of the temple to the altar at its top, where Corella pulled her prisoner close and whispered in her ear. Stepping back, Corella drew her sword...and handed it to the queen. Tears in her eyes, the local ruler raised the blade high and brought it down upon the gilded hawk perched on the altar. The totem shattered easily, pieces sliding down the sloped sides of the temple.

Corella called her own troops to the top of the temple with a wrapped bundle. Setting it atop the altar, they uncovered it to reveal a new totem--the hawk beneath a rampant wolf. As the local queen swore fealty to Corella, the Amazons gathered below cheered in victory.

**Thursday, May 27, 2004**  
**Late Spring, 435 TZ, Day 28**  
**Way of the Wolf**

Today I watched two more tribes fall to Corella’s Amazons. The antelope tribe now marched in her ranks, but the warriors of the valley boar had proven as obstinate as the totem spirit they worshipped. When every member of the tribe proclaimed their loyalty to Valia, Corella had all of them put to the sword.

Each evening the ravaging horde feasted on spoils taken from that day’s conquest. Dancing wildly around fires burning high and bright, a sheen of sweat glistened on the Amazons as they shouted their ululating songs of victory into the night.

Songs and drums fell silent as Corella walked into the center of the celebration. “Valiant warriors, I salute you!” she cried, answered by a roar of triumph from the crowd. “There are those who say each tribe fights only for itself. They say I am breaking with the old ways.”

“I agree with them.”

“The old ways could rule our lives when each valley was our home, when each mountain was our kingdom. Even when the Atlanteans cast out their borders to craft their ridiculously large empire, they never pushed their claim upon us. We were left alone, to pursue the old ways.”

“But now enemies close in upon us from all sides. Atlanteans from the south. Khans from the west. The Dark Crusade from the east. To follow only the old ways is no longer enough. Our allies among the rebellion are no longer enough.”

Corella waited for the murmuring in the ranks to subside before continuing. “We still follow the old ways. We follow the wolf and the eagle, the bear and the tiger. But we fight for a new way. Because nobody else will, we fight for *our* way. We fight for each other! Those who will not fight with us fight against us--and in the end, they will fall to our fury!”

The crowd erupted into a frenzy of cheering, and the celebration exploded anew.

**Friday, May 28, 2004**  
**Late Spring, 435 TZ, Day 29**  
**Plans and Surprises**

Before dawn, while her warriors engaged in morning exercises and scavenged meals from the remains of the previous night’s feast, I watched as Queen Corella met with her Solonavi partner. “Our forces are already strong enough to crush the defenses of Nephanus,” said the queen, playing with a dagger as she lazed comfortably in a campaign chair. “Each day we wait is a day when a messenger might slip past our forces and warn Valia of our approach.”

“None will escape,” said Rayevisayla. “Even if an envoy does get through, my agents among her tribe will ensure that the message never reaches her ears.”

Corella rose and stalked across the pavilion to where Rayevisayla sat at a table littered with scrolls and battle plans. “You never told me you had placed agents on the holy mountain!”

The Solonavi calmly pulled a map of the region across the table and held it up to the flickering candlelight. “You should recognize as well as anyone that my Oathsworn are everywhere,” he explained. “They are my eyes and ears, lurking in the shadows, ensuring that plans set in motion are not turned in unexpected directions.”

Rayevisayla rolled the map as he stood, eyes glowing as he towered over the Amazon queen. “It would be best that you remember that, dear Corella, lest you find that I have agents much closer to hand.” He smiled tightly as he took the queen’s fur-lined cloak from atop a chest and draped it over her shoulders. “But I’m certain that as we continue our campaign as planned, I will be content to remain in your service...my queen.” Fading, the Solonavi stepped forward and dissipated to hide inside Corella’s form as she went to inspect her troops.

When Corella stepped outside, one of her lieutenants ran up to report. “Queen! A scout has returned from the Depths and claims that the villages there are gone.”

“Abandoned?” said Corella.

“No, mistress--gone. Razed to the ground.”

“What other forces are in the area?” asked the queen.

“None that we are aware of,” said the warrior. “But three other scouts have failed to report in.”

“Then send more scouts!” snapped Corella. “If there is another force in the northlands, I want to know everything about it before midday or I swear you’ll serve the breeders!” The lieutenant hurried off, already calling for scouts and fresh horses.

I would have to investigate the matter further myself, but I already knew what I would report to the masters of the tower that evening: unless there was a massive army hiding in the mountains waiting to defeat them, by summer’s end the Solonavi would control an army of Amazon warriors.

**Tuesday, June 1, 2004**  
**Late Spring, 435 TZ, Day 30**  
**Hungry for Battle**

After reporting to the Solonavi last evening, I was told to turn my attentions away from Corella and Rayevisayla until ordered to check in on them again. But my curiosity drove me to skirt the edges of my instructions and seek out high-ranking commanders in the army of the Black Powder Revolutionaries. How could they not know that their allies among the Amazons were being inexorably torn away from them, tribe by tribe?

I spied upon the Revolutionaries for most of the day and soon discovered that their attentions were consumed by preparations for a major campaign later in the summer. Ythlim and the leaders of the Black Powder cabal had yet to reveal where the strikes would take place, but local units were already stockpiling supplies.

Late in the afternoon, in a Revolution town on the edges of a liberated hellhole, I found several officers drinking in a holeside tavern. Often Revolutionaries will drink before battle, to celebrate the night that might be their last. Yet these battle-hardened soldiers appeared to be getting more sober with each drink. Finally one spoke: “We aren’t ready. We have to admit it, and report it.”

“If it was more powder we needed, or more boot leather, I’d carry the message myself,” said the eldest in the group. “But what is the Revolution supposed to do about this? Food supplies are scarce everywhere! I’ve heard that it’s not just our spring crops lying fallow--the fields are dead as far away as Prieska.”

“It’s strange,” said another officer. “Not even a single shoot of green, no matter how much water and dung are spread on the fields. There’s been nothing like this in the time of my father or even my father’s father.”

“It’s not just strange,” said the first officer. “It’s a curse.”

A young officer who had been silent leaned forward into the light, revealing the scar crossing his face from forehead to chin. “It’s not a curse, it’s a call to action,” he declared. “Go to your men and have them ready to march in the morning. We’ll fill their bellies by sunset, and our caches by week’s end.”

**Wednesday, June 2, 2004**  
**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 1**  
**On Their Stomachs**

I returned to the scrying chamber and watched as the force of Revolutionary soldiers assembled before dawn, then checked in on them throughout the day as a forced march took them overland toward Atlantean territory. As their commanders had described, they marched through fallow fields unbroken by a single plant. In the afternoon they stopped in a Revolution-controlled border town, but were unable to eat a meal--the locals could barely feed their own children and had nothing to offer.

As his men rested, the scarred officer spoke quietly with the town council. “Tomorrow, bring wagons south through Fool’s Vale,” he told them. “We’ll be waiting on the far side of the pass and you’ll be allowed to

take as much food as you can carry.” Assembling his troops and ignoring their grumbling about sore feet and empty bellies, they set off for the border.

I cast my vision about the westlands, and found that barren fields stretched across the land from Wolfsgate to Alrisar. It was if the thirsty wastes of the Blasted Lands were slowly creeping eastward toward the Roa Vizorr. The fields north of the Inland Sea were producing crops, but it was requiring a massive outpouring of magical effort by Solonavi sorcerers. When I stepped away from the scrying pool to partake in the wine and vegetable stew brought by a servant, I appreciated the meal more than any in quite some time.

After dark, I returned to the Revolutionaries to find them gathered in a culvert preparing quietly for battle. Not far away I discovered their target--an Atlantean supply depot. It was heavily guarded, but the warehouses of food and the granaries towering at the center of the encampment would be highly-motivating beacons to the hungry attackers.

Their faces blackened with ash and their rifles wrapped in dark cloth, the Revolutionaries crawled across the ground and into position. As each took aim on a target and waited for the signal a warm wind came out of the west, rippled through the dry grass, and the world fell still.

The scarred officer raised his rifle to his shoulder, and from somewhere off in the distance I heard the sound of harp music...

**Thursday, June 3, 2004**  
**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 2**  
**Requiem**

Soldiers tumbling to the ground, armor falling away as their limbs wither...

Mouths yawning wide, skin turning waxy, hair falling away in great clumps...

Dead bodies surrounded me for more than a century as the Sect trained me in the arts of necromancy. Rotting flesh and yellowed bone do not turn my stomach. But what I saw last night as I watched in horror and fascination was something terrible and primal, and for the first time in many years I remembered what I felt like as a child, small and afraid.

The Revolutionaries attacking the Atlantean supply depot are all dead.

So are the Atlanteans.

Just as the Revolutionaries were about to begin their attack, a lone figure crested the nearby ridge riding a gaunt steed, black as the surrounding night. The Revolutionaries lay frozen in their positions as the rider approached, slumped in the saddle. Only the scarred officer mustered the force of will to climb to his feet and weakly bring his rifle around. But he was unable to pull the trigger as the rider reached out to touch him with a bony hand. The officer gasped and dropped his weapon as the life essence was ripped from his body, then collapsed to the ground. The rider smiled and hummed a contented tune for a moment, then suddenly groaned in pain and hunger. The nearby grass sizzled and died as the rider reached outward toward the concealed Revolutionaries and devoured them all.

Then he rode into the Atlantean compound. Too weak to raise a cry of alarm, the guards let him pass. Too faint to defend themselves, swordmages and shocktroopers lay in the dust and died as the rider came to them one by one.

Only when he came to the compound's one-cell prison did he pause. With a single swing of his bone-handled trident, the door was open. With a jab, he speared the prisoner inside. Drawing a moaning Gulthak orc into the firelight, he raised it into the air with surprising strength. “Your brethren will be the sweetmeats after the feast, creature,” he hissed. “First, though, I must journey to the east.”

Riding to the granaries at the center of the compound, he swung his trident again and cracked open the thick clay walls. Rotting grain spilled out, run through with maggots and vermin. "Fight over the land!" he cried. "Soak it with your blood! In the end you will all be consumed by Famine!"

Only the gutted and bleeding orc remained to watch as the dark avatar cackled and sang to himself as he rode off into the night.

**Friday, June 4, 2004**  
**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 3**  
**Famine's Refrain**

This afternoon I steeled myself and sought out Famine once again. Even in the blighted plains they were easy to track, a black trail of death in a brown and dying land. When small towns of farmers, foresters and hunters had fallen in Famine's path, he had consumed them all. Despite his mount's slow plodding, in a single day they had already crossed much of the western plains and were almost to the Vizorr valley.

A palpable gloom hung around them both mount and rider, despite the bright afternoon sunshine. Warily, I kept the Scrying Eye at a distance. But as Famine continued to sing and talk to himself, I pushed in closer. As I did, I saw that the gloom around Famine was a swirling cloud of vapor...with faces. They would appear, and then suddenly vanish like smoke on a windy day. I saw orcs, trolls, elves, humans, and even a cyclops flicker by in the murk. For a moment, I even thought I saw the scarred Revolutionary officer I'd been following throughout the week. Then an elven face appeared, more solid than the rest, and spoke: "Milord...."

"Be quiet and listen to the song," muttered Famine. He strummed his maimed hand weakly over the surface of his shield and hummed a strange tune. "Just be quiet."

"Lord Shadowbane," said the spirit, more insistently.

Famine stiffened in the saddle. "That name is dead!" he said. "He was weak."

The spirit struggled against the forces pulling at it. "I can see many things now, Shadowbane. I see what happened to you. I see the hunger that consumes you. I see what you're going to do, and I can see that if it happens the whole realm will fall into darkness. You must not continue on this path! Stay away from--"

Famine swept a rag-wrapped arm through the spirit and it spun away into the gloom. "You can't possibly comprehend what I am now, Tryn. I have given myself to the apocalypse, and it has repaid me tenfold. The time of the gathering approaches. Soon the strength of the land will belong to me, and soon every creature in the land will hear my song of destruction!"

**Monday, June 7, 2004**  
**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 4**  
**The Message**

Early this morning, I cast my vision to the west. On the blighted plains of Prieska, I saw hunters returning from dawn vigils empty-handed, and farmers despondently journeying into their fields. I passed over a horde of orc raiders whose khan was slaughtering a herd of sheep while two of his tribesmen restrained a weeping Prieskan shepherd.

I moved my view quickly north along the coastline. When the Galeshi dunes shimmered on the distant horizon, I spotted columns of smoke emerging from the ground deep in the western plains. As I closed for a better look, the ground around the smoke opened to reveal hide stretched across a wooden frame and threaded with dried grass to cover one of the pits used as lodges by wandering tribes of orc shamans. Grunting, an orc clambered out of the hole and squinted into the morning sun. Stiff muscles popping, he

strained his head to one side, then the other. Pulling his robe over his shoulders, he shuffled forward...then stopped.

Before him were six spears jammed deep into the ground. Blood and ichor ran down the shafts from the head jammed atop each and ran together in a black oily pool. The shaman gaped for a moment. Then he began shouting for his tribesmen. Within seconds orc riders erupted out of the ground, blackstone blades in hand. Down in the pits, their warbird mounts screeched their battle cries. Moving outward to encircle the camp, the warriors peered across miles of empty plain toward the distant horizon. I pulled my view upwards, and even I saw nothing but boot-sized rocks and sagebrush.

I dropped back down to the camp as a masked orc climbed out of his lodge. It was Bloodhawk, who had masterminded the Shadow Khans' winter offensive in the Blasted Lands. "What's going on?" he demanded from the nearest orc.

"It's the guards," said the warrior, pointing toward the heads. "They're all dead."

Bloodhawk considered them for a moment. "All dead. No alarm." He turned and scanned the horizon, a breeze ruffling his feathered cloak. "Nothing in sight within a half-day's ride." Around him, warriors hurried to pull on armor and guide their warbirds out of the lodges.

Finally he said, "Send a hawk and tell the others we're coming back." As the warrior rushed off, Bloodhawk shouted, "Make certain they triple the guard on the prisoner!" To himself he muttered, "It's him."

**Tuesday, June 8, 2004**  
**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 5**  
**The Prisoner**

Bloodhawk drove his men and their desert warbirds through the night up the Greenroad, the ancient trade route running through the hills and valleys between the Blasted Lands and the desert. I left them behind to follow the orc shaman's courier hawk, magically imprinted with directions to his eventual destination.

Soaring into the mountains along the southern rim of cave orc territory, the hawk arrived at an orc village nestled in a pass high above the tree line. A raven-masked shaman waited patiently as the courier landed on his outstretched arm. Holding the bird in one massive hand, he drew his curved blade and gashed the shrieking hawk. Splattering the bird's blood on a nearby rock, he handed the courier to an apprentice to tend its wound. Muttering quietly, fingers dancing, the shaman cast a spell upon the spilled blood and it crawled across the rock's surface to form slashing glyphs from the orc alphabet. The orc read Bloodhawk's message, then hurried into the cavern.

Inside were several dozen shamans and their apprentices, meditating upon magestone crystals to the beat of a clurch drum. To one side, a group of apprentices were carefully carving their masks from wood and bone under the watchful eye of a grunting shaman. The raven shaman moved past them toward a chamber deeper into the cavern, where a pair of Broken Tusk warriors threw bone dice and moved polished stones around on lines traced into the dirt floor. The warriors jumped to their feet as the raven shaman approached, one warrior sliding the dice into a belt pouch as the other swept the floor clean with his boot. The shaman passed them without a word, stepping into the darkness just outside the range of the chamber's single torch.

When the shaman poked at the huddled form on the floor with his staff, it rolled over with a moan. Wrapped in a tattered blanket, it was a bruised and dirty human woman. She might have been beautiful once. Now, though, she had a festering wound in the center of her forehead and a filthy rag wrapped over her eyes. An iron anklet was connected to a chain bolted to the stone wall. The shaman waited for her to climb to her knees, then savagely kicked her and sent her sprawling.

Turning to the guards he said, "Chaos knows why, but the Wise One wants more guards on this wretch." He looked at the prisoner again. "He'll be here at sunset tomorrow. Tell the rest that triple watch starts that afternoon. Until then, double her beatings."

**Wednesday, June 9, 2004**

**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 6**

**The Reckoning**

I watched the stronghold of the chaos shamans through the day, waiting for Bloodhawk to arrive. Thick clouds hanging in the pass made it impossible to see more than a few yards, yet the shaman and his marauders arrived in the late afternoon, pushing their exhausted warbirds up the narrow path at a dangerous pace. When the shaman finally jammed his heels into his mount's side, it collapsed to the ground. Bloodhawk leapt off the bird and called for the guards missing from the cavern opening.

I knew what he would find, and the shaman likely suspected. But I still wanted to see his reaction. A clurch drum lay just inside the cave, shattered into splinters. Beyond it was a fallen shaman, his manticore mask jammed between broken teeth. The cave was filled with acrid smoke from the apprentices burning on the fire in the middle of the chamber. Closing his eyes, Bloodhawk growled the syllables of a protective spell and magical energy crackled around him. As he cinched his wristblades tighter, he gestured for the marauders who had arrived with him to circle quietly along the edges of the cavern.

I credit the shaman for his courage. He continued through the smoke and made his way to where he hoped he would find his prisoner. Instead he found a dozen orc warriors hung from the walls on iron spikes pounded through their ankles. One gasped out a cry of pain or warning that became a death rattle, and then he was dead like the rest of his fellow guards.

When he saw that his personal quarters had been ransacked but were empty, the shaman sent the marauders following him to search the rest of the tunnels and chambers. Searching through his tumbled possessions, he threw aside three ripped scrolls. Underneath an upended chest he found a large claw on a leather thong, and he tied it loosely around his neck. Then he pushed his mask up onto the top of his head and wiped the sweat from his brow.

One of the marauders returned to the entrance to Bloodhawk's chamber. *Nothing*, he signaled with a shake of his head, keeping his blade raised and an eye on the darkness. The shaman pulled his mask back down and led the way out of the cavern.

Waiting outside was a single man. He wore a battered and tarnished Atlantean breastplate and leggings of tooled Prieskan leather. A baldric and scabbard over one shoulder carried an enormous manaclevt sword, and on his hip he had a holstered lightning pistol. Long, shaggy chestnut hair poured over his head in a narrow strip and down his back. It looked like it had been several days since he had bathed, shaved, or even slept.

It was Raydan Marz. "Welcome back," he said through clenched teeth. "I've been waiting for you."

**Thursday, June 10, 2004**

**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 7**

**The Escape**

Yesterday I watched Raydan Marz attack the mountain cave where Bloodhawk's chaos shamans were training apprentices in the ways of magic, then lie in wait until Bloodhawk himself had returned. Yet when the battle began it didn't go the way that I--or Marz--had planned.

When Bloodhawk finally emerged from the cave into the thick fog outside, shaken by the wholesale slaughter of his students, he found Marz waiting. As five of Bloodhawk's marauders came out to line up around their master, Marz calmly drew his manaclevt. It was an incredible show of self-assurance, but it also gave Bloodhawk the moment he needed to pull a small black book from his belt pouch. When the

shaman began to read from its pages, Marz set the blade of his manaclevt in motion and began to move forward--only to find himself in the center of the circled marauders, while Bloodhawk stood in Marz's place on the cliff's edge.

Without hesitating further, Marz lopped off the sword arm of the nearest marauder, then spun to parry an incoming axe. Dropping to the ground, he rolled under another arcing blade and when he came back to his feet thrust his sword straight through his attacker's boiled hide armor. As another orc rushed forward with his sword held high, Marz left his own blade in the fallen marauder's chest and drew his lightning pistol to fire a bolt that threw the new attacker backwards.

Driven into a frenzy of pain and rage by the loss of his arm, the first orc Marz had attacked threw his remaining arm around Marz's neck. Two of the remaining orcs closed with their weapons at the ready as Marz struggled to get free--then suddenly lashed out with both feet and sent the orcs tumbling backward. Reaching over his shoulders, Marz grabbed the tusks of the orc restraining him and wrenched as hard as he could. When the orc roared and released his hold, Marz retrieved his manaclevt and brought it around to cut the one-armed orc off at the waist. As the tumbled orcs climbed to their feet, Marz lanced his blade through the throat of the nearest and sent a dagger spinning through the air into the forehead of the second.

The fight had lasted only a few moments. Panting, Marz turned to face Bloodhawk. "I'm going to cut that mask off your face," Marz said. "Then I'll do to you what you did to her." Without a word, Bloodhawk took a single step backward to fall away over the cliff and into the fog.

Marz sheathed his sword and rushed to look over the edge. Finding nothing but fog, he retrieved his pistol from where he had dropped it and fired three quick shots into the air. The sky brightened and the clouds parted to reveal Marz's tower hanging in the air a stone's throw distant. "Send a group down to search the valley for a body," Marz ordered the troops waiting behind the parapet. "Then we're done here."

**Friday, June 11, 2004**  
**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 8**  
**The Vow**

The next afternoon found Marz moving his tower across the Blasted Lands. Trusting his sentries to watch for enemies in the air and below, Marz was in his quarters tending to the wounds Bloodhawk and the chaos shamans had inflicted upon Desmanda. Both of them had taken a hot bath and had a good night's sleep, but it appeared that the greatest improvement was that they were again in one another's company.

"We'll find him again," Marz promised as he wrapped a clean dressing around her raw and chafed ankles. "We'll find him if I do nothing but follow his trail."

"It will be us to find him," said Desmanda, topping off her glass of Sturnlander brandy. "And it will be us to kill him. But if what you've told me is true, there are matters that must be attended to before personal vendettas."

"Everything else can hang," said Marz. "At least until I have my boot on his throat and put a sword in your hand, the others can wait."

Desmanda reached out to find Marz and put her hand on his shoulder. "Raydan, if anyone needs to listen to a higher call, it's you." She touched the dirty rag still wrapped covering her eyes. "Besides, when we corner him, I want to see the look on his face before he dies."

"Will you at least let me put a fresh bandage on now?" Marz asked, and she nodded. Slowly unwinding the rag, beneath the wound where the chaos shaman had ripped the magestone from her forehead he revealed two empty sockets lined with scar tissue. Taking a clean cloth from the table, he dipped it in a bowl of hot water and gingerly began to clean the wounds.

**Monday, June 14, 2004**

**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 9**  
**Buying and Selling**

While I slept, Raydan Marz slipped away. I cast the Eye far and wide this morning, yet somehow couldn't find a flying tower. The rising level of magic in the land seems to be allowing even the simple mages in Marz's to perform increasingly annoying tricks.

By the afternoon, I was following the major trade routes in hopes that Marz had hidden the tower somewhere to proceed on foot. Travel was light--there was no spring harvest to sell, and it seemed that other trade goods were being hoarded rather than brought to market.

On the East Vizorr Road, I found a lone merchant leading his horse and pullcart up the dry and dusty road outside Rangraz. In fading crimson letters, a sign hung on the side of the cart read, "M. DAGON -- Buying and Selling". Dagon's cart groaned under the weight of its load, covered with a sheet of canvas, and his nag strained to pull it up the rutted road into the city. At the first inn on the edge of town, the merchant handed the leads to a stableboy and hurried into the cool interior. Giving up on my search for Marz, I followed in hopes that there might at least be travelers' gossip worth reporting.

The inn's few customers turned to watch Dagon as he made his way across the common room, loudly beating the dust from his gloves. Dagon eyed each in return: A group of Venetian caravaneers; an old man wearing the guild sash of a Khamsin merchant; an ugly dwarf in dark leathers. Inspections completed, everyone returned to their business.

Dagon bought two flagons of sour-ale from the innkeeper, and sat down across the table from the old man. "Drinking is all yours, old-timer," Dagon said quietly. "But only if you have telling me where I might finding some friends with the powder." The old man said nothing. Dagon looked around and hissed, "I trying to loosen your tongues with my friendlyship, but I need to seeing the rebels right quick. If friendly and drinking not your trade for answer, I have other things to offering." He leaned forward so that the old man might see the dagger hidden in the folds of his vest.

There was a pair of clicks behind Dagon, as the dwarf standing behind him cocked the hammers of a black powder pistol. "Old man's deaf, stranger," said the dwarf. "I heard you, though. You want to find them, you go through me."

"I knowing you are not rebel," said Dagon, pointing at the toothed ring branded into the dwarf's leathers. "You are from the Circling."

"I'm a rebel today," said the dwarf, sitting down across from Dagon. Keeping the pistol trained on the merchant under the table, he drained a mug of sour-ale and grinned. "So, what do you want to talk about?"

**Tuesday, June 15, 2004**  
**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 10**  
**Caveat Venditor**

Dagon had apparently slept atop his cart for fear that it would be stolen during the night--although it was unclear whether he didn't trust the Black Powder Revolution or just the dwarf who had held a gun on him throughout the previous evening. After the dwarf had inspected what was hidden in the cart, he promised Dagon that he would return in the morning with payment.

Now the dwarf pounded on the side of the cart to wake Dagon, who snorted, coughed, then sat up wild-eyed and clutching a peg hammer. "You!" he said to the dwarf, brandishing his hammer. "You are not afraid of me and will be backing away! I am the ordering one!"

The dwarf snorted and spread his empty hands. "Yeah, that's right," he said. "You're in charge."

Dagon lowered the hammer. "You have with the paymenting for goods?"

“Nope,” said the dwarf. “But the rebels want to buy your stuff. I’m supposed to bring you to the guy with the money.” He led Dagon through the rutted streets and back alleys of Rangraz to a muddy pig yard. Squatting around a bonfire and arguing, the swineherds were barely paying attention to their charges, much less the dwarf and Dagon as they guided the merchant’s cart into a ramshackle barn.

Inside, the dwarf took Dagon down a steep flight of steps into a root cellar and then down a tunnel that had been cut through the dirt, recently dug out and shored up with sturdy timbers. At the end of the tunnel was a large underground room, also recently completed. At its center was a forge, the chimney venting upward-- and through the bonfire in the pig yard. Someone was going to a lot of trouble to hide a smithy.

Dagon took it all in, and then started as he saw the dwarf was once again pointing a pistol at him. “Why are the rebels not being here?” Dagon complained. “I am wanting to be with my money.”

“You’ll get it,” said another dwarf, stepping out from behind the forge. Dipping a red-hot shortsword into a barrel of water, he vanished for a moment in a cloud of steam. Setting the sword aside, he said, “Put the gun down, Terk. If we have to keep telling you Ninth Circle thugs to stop waving them around, we’ll just take them back, keep our gold, and you can go find another employer.”

“Sorry about that, Jargus,” said the mercenary. As the smith came forward, it was clear that the years had been rough on him. One foot dragged behind him as he hobbled across the floor, and he winced each time he took a heavy step. His grey beard was thick and full on the left side... and absent on the right where his face was covered in burns that stretched down his neck and arm. I had seen burns like them before, in the towns around the hellholes. They were magestone burns.

The old dwarf reached out to shake Dagon’s hand. “Well met, merchant. I’m Jargus Hammerfist. I hear you have some...goods for sale.”

“Some magestones,” said the mercenary

“Not without the moneying,” said Dagon.

“Of course,” said Hammerfist. “First, though, tell me what you told Terk. Tell me where you found the stones...”

**Wednesday, June 16, 2004**  
**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 11**  
**Swapping Tales**

Jargus listened to Dagon’s story, then sent for the local leaders of the Revolution. Late that night a gruff-looking man and a young woman wrapped in a roughspun cloak arrived at the underground smithy, and Jargus had the merchant repeat his story for a third time.

“I was the travelering across Empire lands,” Dagon said. “I was hope to selling dried dates to the Imperial Legion. Plantings is not up in Atlantean fields and I was knowing the captain at Lonossai camp would be wanting the goods.”

“Lonossai,” said the woman. “That’s the supply depot south of Wolfsgate.”

“Yes,” agreed Dagon. “Always buying the foods and supplies, and with shortagers I would be profiting. But no buying that day. All soldiers were deading around.”

“A battle?” asked the gruff man.

“I am not thinking,” said Dagon. “Terrible deading, but not in battle. All were wastinged, like terrible sicknessing was in camp. I was leaving, and then saw a full warehouse with no guardings. I did not wanting

the sickness but could not leave by the profit. Especially when I see dead wizarders lying by a chest of the magestones. So I taking the stones and a full load of Empire supplies. But who to be selling them to? Legion will not be buying goods with their own marking. Then I see Revolutioning soldiers dead outside camp and am thinking I will sell to yours.”

“Why come all the way to Rangraz?” asked the woman.

“More deaders in villages north of Caero,” explained Dagon. “I am not sickening, but to be sure I traveling along river for week until I come here.”

“He’s got a wagon full of Atlantean gear,” said Terk, the dwarven mercenary. “But no stones.”

“I am hiding chest until the dealings are good,” said Dagon proudly. “Never have I dealing with Black Powderers before.”

“We’ll give you a good price for the Imperial equipment,” said the woman.

“Not until we see the stones,” insisted the man.

In a moment of glancing back and forth, there was a silent conference between the pair and Jargus. Then the dwarf turned back to Dagon and said, “Dagon, we may not be able to give you as much money as you want.” When the merchant stood to leave, Jargus grabbed his wrist. “Before you go, let me tell you my story. You might reconsider your price.”

**Thursday, June 17, 2004**  
**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 12**  
**Stealing Freedom**

As Jargus Hammerfist told his tale to Dagon the merchant, it was quickly clear that he was a long-winded storyteller. The old dwarf started with bits about his childhood, touched on his time as a miner and slave in an Atlantean magestone mine, then passed through his liberation by the Black Powder Rebellion before finally getting to anything near the present.

“That’s when our scouts brought back samples of ore from the northern mountains, purer than anything I’d seen in a decade,” said Jargus. “They also said that there wasn’t much of a Shyft presence in the area anymore, so I put together a full expedition. Spent the winter up there, and it was a cold but fruitful journey. We gathered a sizeable quantity of ore, and headed back when the passes opened in the spring.”

“We were on the watch for the Crusade on the way back, but it was Atlanteans we ran into. A whole army, marching to Ashon Rye. We put up what fight we could, but they overwhelmed us. Most of us died in the fight or were killed by the Atlanteans afterward, but they added me to the chain of dwarven slaves they were marching off to some mine somewhere. Terk was among them.”

“Lying Imperial told me he was a merchant looking to hire guards for a trip across dangerous territory,” said Terk, the dwarven mercenary. “Soon as I show up, they take my axe and clap a pair of manacles on me. All they wanted was as many dwarves as they could catch.”

“Then the Atlanteans’ technomancer noticed my burns,” said Jargus. “It turns out he was studying those of us dwarves who had lost our ability to withstand the magestone energy. He asked a lot of questions and took a lot of notes in a little journal he had. He didn’t have much opportunity, though, as the caravan was getting harried by a couple of draconum.”

“Knew when I saw them that we were saved,” said Terk reverently. “First day they come through and take out the Legion’s old Dragonflies. Then they gave us a chance to free ourselves, and when we didn’t they came back the next day to tear apart the entire army and break our chains.”

“The others made a break for the woods,” said Jargus. “But I had seen the technomancer get trampled when the horses stampeded, and his journal was just laying in the mud. I managed to get over and grab it, but got my own leg crushed in the process. I only got away because Terk doubled back to help me.”

“Still haven’t gotten paid for it, either,” said Terk. “It was worth it just to fight along draconum in battle, though. I’d do that for free anytime.”

“What is this doing with me and my magestone?” asked Dagon.

“Everything,” said Jargus. “As we made our way back to Revolution territory, I read the journal--and that’s when I got the idea for our little project here...”

**Friday, June 18, 2004**  
**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 13**  
**Revolutionary**

Jargus Hammerfist had spent an hour describing how he studied the journal he had taken from the Atlantean technomancer before finally getting around to revealing what he was trying to do. When he did reveal the secret behind the journal and the underground smithy, Dagon didn’t believe him. Neither did I, for that matter. Yet the Prieskan merchant went to retrieve his hidden cache of magestone--and after a signal from the young woman leading the local Black Powder cell, Dagon was quietly tailed by Terk, the Ninth Circle mercenary working for the Revolution.

I kept the Scrying Eye in the smithy, hoping to observe some of Jargus’ secret process. Instead I got to watch the old dwarf take a nap, then eat a meal of bread and cheese while his Revolutionary allies bored out pistol barrels. In the mid-morning Terk returned. Quickly dropping into a chair, he put on a bored expression and gnawed absently on a hunk of bread as if he had been waiting all night.

Less than a minute later, Dagon came into the room carrying a small chest and set it on the table. “Your frienders have been paying for the other goods,” said the merchant. “I have bringing you the stones to see if you are doing what you say.” Opening the chest, he revealed a half-dozen small blue magestones inside. “They are not being very large,” said the merchant. “But if they will serving your purpose, you will have them free and I will be selling many of your productions.”

Jargus chose a magestone from the chest and took it over to a workbench. Fixing it in a clamp, he set to work with a chisel until he had chipped off a pile of small fragments. These he handed over to the young woman while he helped the gruff Revolutionary at the forge heat crucibles of lead. When the woman brought over carefully-shaped crystals on a tray, Jargus placed them into a mold. Then he drew out the technomancer’s journal and read aloud as the man poured lead into the mold.

When the mold had cooled, Jargus knocked out its contents and held one up to the light. It was a bullet for a Revolution weapon, but it had a softly glowing magestone tip. “Time to turn magic against the Empire,” he said quietly.

“I will be selling these by the thousands!” said Dagon--and then the merchant yelped as Terk ran him through with a short sword. As the merchant hit the floor, the mercenary was already rifling through his robes and collecting loose coins, while the gruff Revolutionary collected the money they had paid Dagon.

“I’m sorry, my friend,” said Jargus to the surprised-looking corpse at his feet. “Sometimes the Revolution can buy what it needs, but it can never sell its secrets.”

**Monday, June 21, 2004**  
**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 14**  
**Swords and Plowshares**

I had a strange moment of vertigo as I looked into the scrying pool this morning, as if I were about to tumble into its waters. The Eye slid wildly about the Land, and when I managed to regain my balance I found myself on the coast near the city of Darthion.

It was time for the city's annual Spring Festival, where the farmers of the midlands would gather in the city to celebrate the end of the planting season and the harvest to come. The streets were hung with banners in the red and gold of the Atlantean Empire, decorated with leaves of green silk. Choirs of midlander youth sang planting songs in the marketplace, but this year they had an undertone of worry and sadness that the children had picked up from their parents. The farmers and peasants of the land gathered in tight crowds looking for someone--anyone--who expected a successful crop. Crops aside, many couldn't even say whether they would still possess their homes and fields at the end of the season as the Dark Crusade continued to expand south along the Roa Galtor.

As I listened in on one of the larger conversations, a farmer stepped to the center of the crowd, removed his hat, and said, "My name is Ealo Landsman. Some of you know my farm, not a day's travel north of the city. Others of you have joined me in brining our complaints to our local Magi and Lord Maakha."

"Long ago, the blood of my forebears won this country from the wild. I honor them today as I work my fields, water them with my own sweat. My farm knows blood. It knows sweat. But it will never know tears."

He put his wide-brimmed hat back on his head and pulled it on tightly. "Those of you whose spirits are not as fallow as your fields will join me mid-morning tomorrow at Kelp's Landing. The dead will have no respect for the land of the living if they can win it without a fight."

**Tuesday, June 22, 2004**  
**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 15**  
**Farmers and Soldiers**

I returned to the Galtor Valley this morning to see if any of those Ealo Landsman had spoken to the day before had taken up his call to arms. Like dozens of other trade towns scattered across the Galtor delta, Kelp's Landing was made up of a cluster of weather-worn buildings on thick stone pilings that kept them perched above high tide. Trade ships and ferries lined the piers and hanging bridges connecting the buildings, with cranes and workers ferrying cargo to and from the ships of pirates and merchantmen alike.

A surprising crowd had gathered with Landsman aboard the *Wavesong*, a small caravel flying Xandressan colors. As the ship cast off and the captain guided it up the mouth of the river, I inspected the ranks of Landsman's army. There were several score peasants equipped with arms and armor that were obviously family heirlooms, though most of it had been well cared for over the years. Near the middle of the deck were a pair of Guild enhancers, one making adjustments to a full squad of infantry golems while the other talked to Landsman. "Magus Ananub understands the plight of the midlands and is saddened that the demands of the Emporer allow the Golemcore to only assist the people with the midlands with these few soldiers," said the technomancer. "I fear that with only this paltry force we won't be able to chase the Crusaders away permanently, but we will be able to send a firm message." Smiling, Landsman clasped the sorcerer's hand in thanks, then climbed the steps to the aft deck to speak to the captain.

Throughout the day the passengers on the *Wavesong* pressed Landsman to reveal his battle plan. Yet the farmer would only smile and promise that by sundown all would be revealed. Though they couldn't uncover their destination, as each peasant pointed out the farms and distant valleys that they called home, all came to understand what was at stake if the Crusade was allowed to continue its advance.

Though the ship may good time up the river, faster than the army might have marched on foot, it was undoubtedly a dangerous journey. The Xandressan captain of the *Wavesong* demonstrated a skill comprised of equal parts seasoned skill and insane daring as he navigated among rocks and currents that could have easily destroyed ships twice as large. Late in the afternoon, judging by the wilting foliage along the river,

the ship crossed into territory controlled by the Crusade. Finally, as the horizon was turning orange and purple, Landsman finally directed the captain to anchor the galleon near the eastern bank.

The soldiers disembarked, and Landsman directed them to set up camp for the night. "Our allies will join us this evening, and we march in the morning." In frustration, the technomancers refused to unload the infantry golems until the farmer revealed the full extent of his plans. Landsman simply ordered the ship more firmly anchored, and waited.

Several hours later, a sentry cried out a warning. Though he readied his weapons with the rest, Landsman called for calm. Barking orders and epithets, two sword-wielding farmers herded an unarmed centaur into the firelight.

"Finally," said Landsman, turning to the angry crowd. "Our allies have arrived."

**Wednesday, June 23, 2004**

**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 16**

**Seeds of Darkness**

It had taken Landsman nearly an hour to convince his midlander peasant army not to kill Pelius, the centaur envoy who had come to their camp. Long ago, the forests of the Wylden extended deep into the midlands, and human pioneers who came east to build farms and villages did so only after winning the land from the centaurs who called it home. Generations of bloody warfare are recorded in tales still passed down in midlander families, though several centuries have passed since expansion stopped at the Roa Galtor and the nations of the midlands came under the protection of the Atlantean Empire.

Even after Landsman convinced the peasants that accepting the assistance of the centaurs was the only way to save their land from the advancing Dark Crusade, it took most of the night for Pelius to convince the enhancers aboard the *Wavesong* not to turn their infantry golems against centaur and farmers alike as traitors against the Empire. Pelius described the major offensive the Dark Crusade had undertaken in the east, and how they had nearly destroyed the Council at Roanne Valle. He told how they were pushing their lines into the mountains.

"If the Crusade manages to eliminate both the Freeholds and the fortresses of the Lords of the Rivvenheims, they will be able to concentrate their forces in a single direction," said Pelius. "Against the Empire. I am here to offer assistance only in hopes that the forces of the Crusade will be divided and the eastern front will stand. Any victory won, any gains made--they will belong to the people of the land and the Empire. We have differences, it is true. But those are to be settled another time. For now, I ask that we stand together against the darkness."

Pelius' scouts had found that the land to the north was held by a small garrison of Crusaders at Riversgate, where the Kaiten and Sanguine joined to become Roa Galtor. A large portion of the Crusade's force had been drawn off to the east in the spring, leaving only a small group who had just begun to supplement their number with zombies. Pelius laid out a plan of attack, and slowly won the Atlanteans to his strategy.

An hour later, still before dawn, Landsman woke the sleeping farmers. Turning to Pelius, he said, "We can leave as soon as your troops arrive." The centaur put his hands to his mouth and did a startlingly realistic imitation of a Wylden falcon, answered by the hoot of an owl. Within minutes, two dozen centaur warriors in full battle gear trotted into the camp.

Together they left: Atlantean technomancers, Elemental centaurs, and peasant farmers and sailors. It was becoming quite the interesting little army...

**Thursday, June 24, 2004**

**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 17**

**Fields of Battle**

In the mid-afternoon, the army led by Ealo Landsman and the centaur Pelius approached Riversgate, the fortress built by the Atlanteans in the fork between the Roa Kaiten and the Roa Sanguine. The rust-colored waters of the Sanguine ran past the eastern wall of the fortress to roar over Gateway Falls, while the channel of the Kaiten passed calmly three hundred feet below the fortress to meet the Sanguine below the falls. Riversgate had stood against decades of assault by the Elementals, only to fall to the Dark Crusade in a surprise winter attack. Blackened by fire during the battle and stripped of Atlantean markings, the walls of the fortress were now hung with the blood-red banner of the Crusade.

As they neared Riversgate, Pelius guided the group up a side valley to where a pair of trolls had been hard at work. Gathering dead trees from the area, they had constructed a half dozen rafts and a long log-ramp of some sort. Landsman directed his troops to carry the rafts as the trolls hefted the ramp onto their shoulders.

From there, the army split into two groups. The Elementals, led by Pelius, climbed the steep slopes until they were hidden in the scrub above Gateway Falls. Landsman took the Atlanteans, the midlanders, and the rafts to the quiet channel just beyond the roiling pool at the base of the falls. "Riversgate is where the Empire hoped to collect taxes on merchant ships traveling to and from Fairhaven," he explained. "Unfortunately, the Roa Galtor is so dangerous that few ships other than Xandressan pirates made it this far up river. Though the Empire removed the pier used by the tax collectors, the captain of the *Windsong* says that the stairway they came up and down from the fortress still exists, just beyond a locked door at river level."

From above, Pelius signaled with a burning torch tossed over the falls as the Elementals made their charge. The trolls led the way, throwing their ramp across the swift channel to create a bridge for the centaurs as the guards on the walls of Riversgate sounded the alarm. Crusaders loosed a hail of arrows from the ramparts, but as arrows bounced off the centaurs' bucklers and breastplates only a single Elemental was slowed by the assault. The centaurs returned fire with their own longbows, nearly every arrow sending a Crusader toppling out of sight.

The trolls dragged their ramp across the channel and hacked at it with an axe, cutting the lashings holding it together. Picking up one of the logs, they charged at the front gate of the fortress. Ignoring arrows and crossbow bolts, they rammed the gate again and again. Oil poured from murder holes above the gates and drenched the trolls, yet they continued their assault. Finally, the Crusaders pushed burning straw through the holes and the oil on the trolls was ignited. Still the beasts gave one last heave--and gates and trolls collapsed at the same time.

Leaping over the dying trolls, the centaurs charged into the courtyard ready to strike down the small force of Crusaders inside. Instead they found a courtyard lined with zombies, raised by the Crusade from the ready supply of dead fallen to the hunger and disease sweeping the Land.

With no means of escape, the only option left to the Elementals was to fight. "For the Freeholds!" cried Pelius. As one, the centaurs leapt into battle against the undead.

**Friday, June 25, 2004**  
**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 17**  
**Dark Harvest**

Faced with an unexpected horde of undead in the courtyard of Riversgate, the centaurs were lucky to only lose four of their number before they charged up the north stairs to make a stand on the ramparts above the gate. Pelius ordered his troops to construct defensive palisades from whatever they could find as he and a trio of archers loosed arrow after arrow into the zombies climbing the steps.

Each arrow found its target, but there seemed to be an unending supply of undead. Soon the centaurs had expended all of their ammunition. Pelius led a charge out of the Elementals' crude redoubt to scavenge from Crusader guardsmen that had fallen in the attack on the gate, and though he returned with a dozen quivers he lost two more of his soldiers. Zombies that had made their way up the south stairs gathered the

bodies of centaurs and guardsmen alike and pushed them over the edge to the courtyard below where they were dragged off into the darkness of the fortress.

A pot of oil shattered on a pile of barrels and debris created a flaming barrier that slowed the undead making their way across the rampart. Still they came, and as darkness fell the supply of Crusader arrows dwindled. Three more centaurs were overwhelmed by the zombie attackers. "Damnable humans!" complained Pelius. "Where are they?"

It was a good question. As Pelius and the Elementals began their assault on Riversgate I had watched Landsman lead the midlanders and Atlanteans across the pool at the bottom of Gateway Falls to the tax collectors' gate at the mouth of the Kaiten. An infantry golem smashed away the rusted locks on the gate, and the group had entered the tunnel beyond. The plan was that they would come up the stairs inside and surprise the Crusaders. And yet...

I was about to go look for them myself when the doors to the fortress's entrance hall slammed open. A Crusader paladin emerged carrying a torch high in one hand and a broadsword in the other. Raising the sword, he pointed toward the Elementals and cried, "There! Kill the unbelievers!"

From the darkness came a fresh supply of zombies. At the front were the Crusader guardsman killed in the first assault and now returned to battle. Behind them, still bleeding from the wounds that killed them, came a half-dozen zombie centaurs--once allies of the Elementals, but now servants of the Dark Crusade. To win this battle, Pelius would have to kill his friends.

**Monday, June 28, 2004**  
**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 18**  
**Blood and Ashes**

When I returned the scrying eye to Riversgate the next morning, I entered through the tax collector's gate along the river below the fortress. Pelius and his Elementals had withstood the assault of the Dark Crusader defenders for a full day, but each centaur that fell was stolen away by the Crusade to be raised as a zombie and sent back against their former allies. The centaurs' only hope lay with the midlanders and Atlanteans who were supposed to attack through the collector's gate and the tunnels beyond.

The tunnels were thick with dust and cobwebs, and it appeared that the invaders had been the first to come through the gate in many months. Yet it wasn't far inside that I found the first dead midlander farmer, near the shredded bodies of a half dozen imps. A few yards further brought me to the bottom of the stairway leading up to the fortress...and I began to see what had happened.

Disused and abandoned, at some point a section of the stairs had collapsed and rendered them impassable. The invaders, upon seeing the problem, needed a quick solution. Tearing apart their rafts had covered enough of the gap that the humans might jump across, but it hadn't been enough for the infantry golems. So they turned to the only other raw material available--a pair of thick, iron-bound doors at the base of the stairs. In their hurry to complete their makeshift stairs and assist the centaurs, it's likely none of them stopped to consider what might be beyond the doors.

Dead imps lay scattered about the floor of the chamber, along with the broken bones of skeletons clad in battered pieces of rusty chainmail. Lying among them were pieces of infantry golems, a dead technomancer, and many more dead midlanders. Venturing into the room beyond the broken doors, I found rough tunnels running off into the distance. I also found the remains of dozens of strange translucent pods, burned and broken in the fray.

But the stairs had been completed. I followed them upward and found that the midlanders had just arrived in the courtyard. The battle in the tunnels had taken a heavy price. Ealo Landsman commanded only a half-dozen midlander peasants, a wounded technomancer, and two infantry golems. It was enough. The centaurs had winnowed the numbers of the Crusade until they were forced to make a final assault with all of their

remaining forces--which was just when Landsman attacked them from the rear. It was a desperate struggle for all sides, but in the end the Crusaders fell to the two-sided attack.

Late in the day, after wounds had been bound and the undead had been burned, Pelius and his centaurs bid the humans farewell and set out to return to the Elemental Council with news of their success. As promised, they left Riversgate to the Atlanteans.

When the centaurs had crossed the river, the technomancer turned to Landsman. "I'm taking your ship and returning to Atlantis. Keep these men here, and find any others you need to defend this fortress."

"Of course," said Landsman. "What about--"

"You will tell no one until I have spoken to Magus Ananub," said the technomancer. "If anyone else hears of what we saw beneath this place, I will hold you responsible."

**Tuesday, June 29, 2004**  
**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 19**  
**The Council of Five**

Again this morning I felt the twisting sensation as I looked into the scrying pool. As I tried to guide the scrying eye back to Riversgate to investigate what the Atlanteans had found in the tunnels below the fortress, my view slid across the countryside. First I saw mountains--the Ailons, I think--and then suddenly I could see the towering granite walls and cliff forts of the Sturnlander Coast. Although I was almost overwhelmed by the sudden shifts, I discovered it was less dizzying if I stopped fighting and relaxed, let the eye go where it would. Slowing, my view passed over the rim of the cliffs and into the Sturnmounts.

Skimming easily up the rough terrain north of Roanne Valle, I slid through a narrow cleft and found myself in a green valley surrounded by steep walls of sheer rock. Hidden among the trees on the valley floor was a pavilion lashed together with vines and thatched with a covering of living sod and ferns. It was perfectly camouflaged; if I had not followed whims of the scrying eye, I might never have found the pavilion on my own.

Under the green covering I discovered the hiding place of what remained of the Elemental Council. The Queen of the Faeries had mended from the wounds she sustained in the battle at Roanne Valle and paced along the border between sunlight and shadow, deep in thought. But Prophet-Priest Tremelen still lay swaddled in blankets, slumped against a tree trunk as an aide held a book in front of him. It was bound in green leather, with a sapling tooled into its cover. The old elf ran his fingers over the pages.

"It was found with two others in a hidden chamber beneath the Citadel of Ice," said the centaur shaman sitting near Tremelen. "Two of them are in an unknown language, but one of the druids studying them recognized the alphabet in this volume as one she had seen you use in the past."

"Yes," said the prophet-priest. "It's an old variant of the elven alphabet used by the noble learned classes, those who studied history, philosophy, and the ways of magic. I've heard of this book, but had feared them all destroyed long ago. This book, young druid, is known as *Leaves of Learning*. It is a spellbook, and given time to study it, it may be our salvation."

"Salvation from a doom you brought down upon us all," grumbled the forest troll perched on a boulder nearby. "You elves owe a great debt to the creatures of the Wylden for their sacrifice to save you from your own folly. We continue to protect you, but it does not come without a cost."

The Queen came over to crouch beside Tremelen. "We had not intended to discuss this until you had recovered, my friend, but time is running short. The study of these spellbooks is yet another distraction from an elven host whose numbers have already been winnowed."

“Put plainly, it’s time for the Council to reform,” said a gray-skinned mountain troll. “But this time, we all play an equal part in deciding what’s important and what isn’t.”

“Surely you won’t just set the books aside!” said Tremelen, wincing as he rolled toward.

The centaur raised a hand to calm him. “Of course not. The druids share your interest in whatever secrets the book might hold. But once those secrets are unlocked, the strategy for employing them will not be dictated to the races of the Wylden by five elves. It will be a decision shared by elf, centaur, faerie, mountain troll, and forest troll alike, a single representative from each. It will be decided by the Council of Five.”

**Wednesday, June 30, 2004**  
**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 20**  
**Lost and Found**

Since Emperor Nujarek and the Imperial Legion took control of Atlantis, many technomancers and Guild traditionalists have returned to the island country of Delphane. There, in luxurious manors built among ancient ruins, they pursue their studies far from the Emperor’s eye.

Near Arcos, the largest city on the island, I found dozens of worker golems tending the sprawling grounds of a low-slung manor built along the crest of green, rolling hills. Inside the manor were more golems overseeing every aspect of the house’s upkeep and maintenance. Finally, as I brought the scrying eye into a workshop near the manor, I found a technomancer at work creating a new sort of golem, assisted by a young apprentice. They were at work on an arm, building an apparatus that would feed arrows out of an internal reserve--most likely onto the massive crossbow on a nearby workbench.

“The subassembly is complete,” said the technomancer. “Now I’ll connect it to the steam line.” He handed a large tool to the apprentice and left his hand outstretched in expectation of the next tool required. The apprentice tried to support the heavier tool while scrabbling on the tool rack, fumbled, and managed to maintain his hold on the heavier tool. But the small tool he was reaching for fell off the rack, bounced on the stone floor with a *ping* and rolled under the bench. “Clumsy fool!” said the technomancer.

“Sorry, Lord Balion,” said the apprentice. Carefully placing the large tool back on the rack, he fell to his knees and crawled under the workbench. “Hey!” the boy said. “There’s something wedged against the wall back here.” The bench wobbled and the technomancer grumbled as the boy worked his discovery free and emerged triumphantly with the tool he sought and a metal cylinder green with tarnish.

As the boy gave both objects to his master, the technomancer set aside the tool and squinted at the cylinder for a moment. Turning it in his hands, he rubbed at the patina to reveal a seam near one end. He twisted at it for a moment to no effect, then fixed the cylinder in a vise and retrieved a wrench from the tool rack. Clamping the cylinder in the jaws of the wrench, he tugged at the handle until the end of the cylinder turned. Soon he pulled the end of the cylinder loose to reveal a calfskin-wrapped bundle inside, which he retrieved and unrolled on the workbench. The parchment beneath crinkled and curled as the old man attempted to hold it flat, running one finger along its lines of text and reading aloud: “For greater technomantic control of a construct...”

Wide-eyed, he turned to his apprentice. “Boy, send a courier drone into the city and request an audience with Magus Vasia. I think we may have found some of the Delphana’s lost spells.”

**Thursday, July 1, 2004**  
**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 21**  
**Power of the Blood**

After the defeat of the Dark Crusade at Riversgate, it was cheering to watch a Crusade army make a raid early this morning into Black Powder lands. During the darkest part of the night the Crusade had surrounded a small village called Mundort in the midland hills and waited in position for nearly an hour,

unnerving the local militia with the chanting of death-singers and the howling of pain-wraiths hungry for flesh.

Mundort was a quiet town, far from trade routes. Its only attraction to travelers was a time-worn shrine visited each autumn by a few aging pilgrims. Its inhabitants could barely provide for themselves, especially in these barren times. Yet I knew there was still one prize in the town that the Crusade would be happy to collect.

I knew the commander of the Crusaders. His name was Noctus Bloodblade, and he was the son of a death-speaker, a faithful and formidable sect elf who had entered the blood pits as a child and emerged a champion. Now he commanded this force, and had taken them on many such raids in the past months, always successful.

The people of Mundort responded as so many towns had in the past, lighting fires they hoped might ward off both darkness and their enemies. Instead they served only to light the battlefield and reveal the targets of the raid to the Crusade.

Bloodblade gave the signal that unleashed his forces on the town. Skull golems and pain-wraiths surged toward the terrified citizenry of Mundort, but held back from the killing blow. Marksmen atop the town's lodgehouse wielding black powder rifles slowed the advance until they were bulls-eyed by vampire archers. Then it was only a matter of moments before the town fell silent.

Men, women, children--all were gathered in the town square. I was reminded of Corella's attack on the hawk clan, but the Crusade was not here to capture their own; they were here to convert the enemy. Any who refused to join the sect were killed, and new initiates to the Crusade were baptized in their blood.

Bloodblade promised the villagers that there would be no looting by his troops, and that the homes and possessions of those who joined the Crusade would be sacrosanct. When a priest of the blood cult led a group of bone golems to Mundort's shrine, the sect elf walked over to join them. "Certainly the dead powers are no threat to the Crusade," he said.

"Of course not," said the fear priest, raising his hooked staff and directing the golems to break the shrine apart. "But a power can never truly die," said the priest. "It simply lays dormant, waiting for a new vessel."

Inside the broken mud and clay were a stack of stone tablets. "Long ago, there were those who knew how to focus the power of the Land," said the priest, reaching inside to draw out a tablet. "Now their spells belong to us. Now their sorceries belong to the Crusade!"

**Friday, July 2, 2004**

**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 22**

**Travelers**

The scrying eye returned to Rangraz today. During the last few days I had seen mages of several factions, thousands of leagues apart, seeking out and discovering old magical secrets. It was a disturbing coincidence, but there had been a break in the pattern. The Black Powder Revolution had not uncovered lost spells. The Revolutionaries were developing their own magic, and I wanted to know more about it.

Yet when I brought the scrying eye into the smithy hidden beneath the pig yard, the forge was cold. The tools and scrolls that had littered the workbenches little more than a week before were gone. Jargus Hammerfist had moved his operation elsewhere. I searched the room, and the only clue I found was a fragment of burned parchment lying among the ashes that appeared to be a map of the high passes north of the Kuttar Depths.

So north I went, high over the crumbling pillars and winding canyons of the Depths. I stopped to investigate one Black Powder ore mine, recently raided by the Orcs, but I didn't find Hammerfist among the bodies. I continued on.

I often forget how easily the scrying pool allows me to send myself across the land. Just beyond the Depths I saw a travelers' waystop. It was little more than a crude lean-to of logs with a slate roof, but it was the first shelter travelers emerging from the Depths might have seen in a week. Smoke puffed from the shelter's chimney.

Had I been physically present, the moment I passed through the door I would have been beheaded by the draconum warrior standing guard just inside. Six more of his kind rested in the shelter, and even those who were asleep still wore their armor and had weapons nearby. They lay in such a way that any entering the shelter would have to pass all seven warriors before reaching the single figure who sat before the fire.

He was a draconum, but he wore an odd helm that covered his eyes with no obvious slit allowing vision. He sat cross-legged on the floor, wings spread to catch the heat from the flames. As his head swayed gently, he wrapped his left forearm in long strips of cloth marked with runes, clenching his fist so that the cloth could be bound as tightly as possible. After the left forearm was wrapped, he moved on to the right, then his ankles. When the binding was complete, he held out his hands, palms up, to accept an ornately-carved staff. He sat perfectly still, and world seemed to slow.

Then the draconum guarding the door broke the silence. "We must depart soon, revered one. We have little time before the gathering."

For a moment it seemed as though his words had been unheard. Then the meditating draconum spoke, in a rolling tongue that seemed older than the mountains. The flames danced with each word, flickering and leaping, flared high, then were suddenly snuffed. As the warriors climbed stiffly to their feet, the mystic stood gracefully. He faced the cooling embers until all were ready, then he turned and led them out of the shelter.

**Tuesday July 6, 2004**  
**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 24**  
**Stalker**

It's surprising how quickly I've become accustomed to simply giving the scrying eye freedom to take me where it will. Feeling the first twinges of the falling sensation this afternoon, I simply let the eye loose to streak east across the countryside. The pale green and yellow of the struggling midlands gave way to the brown and gray of the dying east, struck not by the touch of Famine but by the blight of the Dark Crusade.

When the eye came to a stop I found myself in the rafters of a shattered barn, among the dust and the crows. Below, a trio of vampires sat sharpening their short, curved blades. "I tire of this search," said the first. "A lost patrol does not deserve to be found. Soon it will be a full moon since I've had a kill."

"These woods are overrun with Mage Spawn," said the second. "I give you leave to blood your blade on as many as you like."

"Killing a beast's not the same as killing in battle," said the first.

The third spoke without looking up from his work. "Then we should complete this search as quickly as possible. The deathspeakers are sending armies down the Wylden Plateau to hunt Elementals."

"That campaign was over after the battle at Roanne Valle," said the second. "I hope to join the force being assembled in the Serpines. I've heard word that they'll march north to retake the mines at Ashon Rye."

"I was told they were to travel west, toward Rangraz," said the first.

"Perhaps they're going south to secure the Galtor," said the third. "Whatever its goal, with the Darkbringer at the head, it's an army that will swim in blood and battle."

The first vampire stood and sheathed his weapon. "Then let's finish this search as quickly as possible. If we don't find the patrol by morning, we go to join the army in the Serpines."

"We still need to be thorough," said the second.

"We can be fast and thorough if we separate," said the third. "I'll follow the trade road, the two of you can flank along the ridges. Signal if you find anything, or we'll regroup at the crossroads." The other two nodded their agreement, and they set out from the barn.

A moment later, there was a push as if I had been tapped on the back. I was startled to realize I had been watching through another's eyes as a form dropped away from the rafters to the dirt below. Despite his bulk, he landed in a graceful crouch and reached out to sniff the scent of the hay where the vampires had been sitting.

He had traded his green cloak for one in a camouflaging light grey, and rubbed his armor with goosegrease thick with black ash to prevent it from glinting in the moonlight. When last I had seen him, he carried himself proudly. Now he was hunched like a beast, waiting for the moment to lash out. Still I recognized him.

It was Warrior Huhn.

**Wednesday July 6, 2004**  
**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 25**  
**Questions**

I often wonder who reads the entries I make in these journals. When the last page of each volume is filled, I place it on my bookshelf. Whenever I enter the scrying chamber, the shelf is just as I left it, each book seemingly undisturbed. Certainly you peruse them at some point, Vextha, though I am uncertain when. Even here in the Tower, the Solonavi excel at protecting their secrets.

I wonder, however, for what I record today is not what I saw through the scrying pool, but with my own two eyes. This morning I returned to the scrying chamber, hoping to return to observing Warrior Huhn. The previous day, he had stalked and killed the vampires he spied upon, then continued traveling across the blighted forests of the northern Wylden. Whenever he found a formerly Elemental village occupied by undead, he quickly and ruthlessly eliminated them all before setting fire to the village. Perhaps he sought to retake the Wylden on his own.

Before I could even look into the waters of the scrying pool, an oathsworn page knocked at the door carrying a summons from Anquilis, the tower archivist. Under the terms of my own oath, I am unable to refuse a summons from any Solonavi, and so followed the page as he descended deep beneath the tower.

I was taken to an antechamber outside the archives, where Anquilis bid me sit, then immediately began to ask questions. Again, the terms of my oath with regard to the commands of the Solonavi forbid me from revealing the precise wording of the inquiries, but it was clear that the archivist had read my journals.

I report these events for two reasons: first, as I said, the Solonavi excel at protecting their secrets. Perhaps there is intrigue afoot among the masters of the tower, but I would not be caught in its web for not reporting any part I play to the one to whom I swore my own oath. Second, and more importantly, Anquilis' questions hinted that he believed I was keeping a secret of my own, withholding something from my daily reports. For fear that you might think the same, I want to reassure you--I cannot guarantee that I report the truth, but I will always report all that I see.

I will admit that when I took my oath to serve you, it was for the knowledge and power that would allow me to return to the Necropolis as a deathspeaker. I have found, however, that I take my duties and my bond more seriously than I would have believed.

Anquilis will have more questions soon, as well as a test of my abilities. I hope both serve their purpose. For now, I return to my search for Huhn.

**Thursday July 8, 2004**

**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 26**

**Quarry**

Pillars of black smoke marked Huhn's trail across the northern Wylden, following his path to the banks of the Roa Sanguine. At the small village of Wyldford, the quick waters of the Sanguine slowed enough to allow a ferryboat to be pulled across the river. Not long ago, stout-thewed trolls had drawn the ferry along the thick hempen ropes strung above the water. Since the Dark Crusade had conquered the Wylden, their undead servants lined the rope on the boat's flat deck.

Today, however, a troll had returned to Wyldford Ferry. The undead crewing the ferry were commanded by a Crusader, but the ferryman was commanded by Warrior Huhn, who had his blade to the Crusader's throat. "Kill me if you like, beast," said the ferryman. "Enemy or ally, each one that falls will rise to swell the ranks of the Crusade."

"And you've been carrying those swollen ranks north," said Huhn. "Undoubtedly you've heard where they are being massed. And you'll tell me where."

"I'll tell you nothing," said the ferryman. "As I said, if you must, you can kill me."

The troll scoffed. "I know your kind. You lack the strength to overcome the challenges of living. You fear what life would ask of you. So you join the Crusade and rush headlong toward the freedom from pain of undeath. I know you."

"So I will not kill you, but neither will the Crusade. You think that the deathspeakers would reward the only Crusader still living in Wyldford Town? First they would question you, but they would not believe the answers. A single troll? I suspect that however they might make certain you were not lying would make the pain of living seem like a pleasure."

Huhn pulled the ferryman close and growled into his ear. "Yet still they would not kill you. They would believe you so craven that you couldn't step forward to die in battle, and hence unworthy of the rewards beyond death. You would live as long as they could sustain you, endlessly punished for your failures. But you would not die."

The north shore drew near. Huhn released the ferryman and pushed him to the deck. Framed by the flames of Wyldford burning behind him, the troll sheathed his sword. "You can tell me where the Crusade is massing its troops, and I might kill you. Or I will leave you here. You will be found soon enough."

The ferryman was shaken, his bravado as drained as the blood from his face. "The Vale," he whispered. "I heard a paladin say that the Darkbringer is gathering troops in the Vale." He looked up at the troll pleadingly. "Please kill me."

The ferry bumped against the rocky shore. For lack of a further command, the zombie crew slumped against the rail. For a moment, Huhn looked down at the ferryman in pity. Then he drew his blade and with a single stroke cut through both the Crusader and the ferry rope. As the boat began to drift with the current, he leapt over the rail to shore and continued his journey north.

**Friday July 9, 2004**

**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 27**

**Darkness**

Despite the clear trail he left across the Wylden, once Warrior Huhn crossed the Roa Sanguine into the homelands of the Dark Crusade he vanished again. For hours I quested after the troll with the scrying eye, to no avail.

I was about to send the eye north, to find the Crusader army Huhn had sought, when suddenly the world dimmed around me and went black. I lost all sense of time and place, and floated in the dark void for what might have been a moment or an eternity.

Suddenly I could see again. A stone wall covered in chipped and fading tiles. It was a time-worn mosaic, depicting a chaotic and bloody battle on a plain ringed in flame, a dark, winged beast hanging in the sky overhead. As my head cleared, I saw rusted iron rings bolted to the wall below the image, circling the periphery of the round chamber. From the rings hung prisoners, some limp and others struggling. There were dozens of them, of all races--I could see a Kosian, a Sect elf, an orc, a troll, a dwarf, a Krugg, and even a battered but still breathing draconum. Before each prisoner stood a gray-cloaked figure, hoods pulled over their heads and each clutching a dagger reverently to their chest.

Their cloaks were inscribed with sigils I had seen before. I had seen them on those who followed Oracle Matteo in Caero. They were Tur'aj. This was a gathering of the Apocalypse cult.

At the center of the circle a cloaked woman raised a dagger and a torch and held them at arm's length. "The time of prophecy approaches," she said.

The Tur'aj responded: "*The darkness comes.*"

"The horsemen gather."

"*The darkness comes.*"

"Your servants take on their true forms."

"*The darkness comes.*"

The woman brought together torch and dagger so flames licked the blade. "The gateway awaits the key."

"*The darkness comes.*"

"We call upon the spirits below the Land." Dropping the torch, she raised the dagger high, the sleeves of her cloak falling away to reveal wan, ashen skin marked with scars and burns.

The Tur'aj raised their own knives, saying, "*The darkness comes.*"

The woman cut deep into her own palm, exalting in the pain as blood ran down her arm. "We give you this offering to water the seeds of destruction and hasten your return."

"*The darkness comes.*" As one the Tur'aj plunged daggers into their prisoners. Blood washed across the floor and I fell again into blackness.

**Monday July 12, 2004**  
**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 28**  
**Flames**

I remember awakening beside the scrying pool, and crawling across the floor to write of the Apocalypse cult while the details were still fresh in my mind. Then nothing.

I awakened as the sun set outside my narrow window. For a moment I lay on my pallet, confused, wondering when I had left the scrying chamber, how I had returned to my own room, how I had somehow

lost an entire day. Then the door slammed open and Anquilis entered, followed by two oathsworn servants. He demanded more detail of my vision, particularly the location of the cult's temple. When I protested that I had not guided myself to the chamber, that the scrying eye had taken me there of its own accord, he insisted that I return to the scrying chamber immediately. I attempted to stand and follow his command, but found myself oddly weak. Anquilis ordered the oathsworn to support me, and they nearly dragged me back to the scrying chamber.

Solonavi and oathsworn stood nearby as I cleared my mind and gazed into the waters of the scrying pool. Rather than casting my vision in any particular direction, as I would normally do, I relaxed and let the eye go. I braced myself as I traveled again into darkness, but this time I merely journeyed into a part of the Land where night had already fallen. I saw Fairhaven pass below me, then the Serpines.

The eye slowed above the Vale of Dawn. As I had heard, the Dark Crusade was gathering a massive army. Two years ago the Crusade had sacked the township when they captured it from Raydan Marz. Not long ago, the Elemental Freeholds had retaken the town, and I could see signs that they had started the long process of rebuilding. But the Vale was now once again firmly under the control of the Crusade, its priests and paladins using the reconstructed buildings as their quarters.

Outside the walls, carts were arriving burdened with the plague-killed. One after another, they were being reanimated into zombies and skeletons, like the assembly process in a Black Powder factory. A large pit had been dug out of the earth outside the town, a crude replica of the blood pits in the Necropolis. Now a long line of troops waited to enter the pit, each victory rewarded with better weapons and armor, each loss weeding out the weak.

Overseeing it all was Kossak Darkbringer. The vampire troll observed each battle, watching his army grow, and seemed to be taking particular pleasure in the combat between recently reanimated centaurs and a barrow knight.

Just as the barrow knight dealt a crushing blow to a centaur, a shout went up from a priest pointing to the top of a nearby hill. One of the corpse wagons had been lit on fire, and came rolling down the steep hillside. The flaming cart slammed through the lines of Crusader troops and tumbled into the combat pit. Another alarm came from the town, where flames licked across the roof of the main barracks.

As panic began to spread among the Crusaders, a lone figure appeared on the ridge. Huhn. "This is your army, uncle?" he called down to Kossak. "The only weapon you could wield against Freeholds was surprise. Now you lack even that! Bring your army to Stonekeep if you dare, and let us settle this once and for all!"

Kossak ordered troops after the Elemental troll, but before I could get the eye to where Huhn had made his challenge, he was gone.

**Tuesday July 12, 2004**  
**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 29**  
**Prophecy**

This morning I entered the scrying chamber and opened my diary to a fresh leaf, ready to record the day's events. I was startled to discover a line already written on the page:

*It is now as it was, but how it was is not how it will be.*

The hand betrays the source: I cannot recall doing so, but I wrote those words.

I go now to ponder the words, and to ponder myself.

**Wednesday July 13, 2004**  
**Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 30**  
**Oracle**

I received your summons before dawn, Lord Vextha, and descended to a chamber deep in the catacombs beneath the tower. There I found you waiting with Anquilis, the chamber lit by a fire burning above each of its four doors. At the archivist's direction, I laid upon stone table in the center of the room. Anquilis began to chant as he placed burning incense on my forehead, my throat, and my upturned palms. You joined ritual as he began to pace around me. You circled me on opposing paths, chanting rhythmically, and I felt the same pull I felt when I released the scrying eye--

*Hundreds of Draconum warriors side-by-side, awaiting the oncoming horde.*

*Men with yellowed, pox-scarred skin, crying for release from terrible pain.*

*A kneeling apprentice holding open a spellbook for her master.*

*Beneath a blood-red sky, a frenzied dance on burning sands.*

*Squealing cheers as the king is given his wooden crown.*

*Dwarves before forges glowing with fire and magic.*

*Tumbled magestones turning black.*

*An endless line of corpses.*

*Darkness.*

I was lost. Then I was back in the chamber. Incense hung thick in the air, and the door-fires had burned down to coals. I thought myself unable to move. Then Anquilis waved his hand over the length of my form and I found the strength to sit up.

"You have survived," you said, though I was uncertain what you meant. "You must record all you saw in your journals." As I climbed weakly to my feet, rubbing at the greasy residue of the incense on my hands, I could only nod.

"You mustn't omit even the smallest detail," said Anquilis. "You have become more important than you can possibly imagine, young one. We have only been able to imbue a select few with the power of prophecy, and many of those are driven mad by their visions."

"But you have somehow opened the path within yourself," you said. "Your prophecies are sparked not by our magic but by a wild and untapped potential unseen in hundreds of years."

"It is our hope that we might train you to control your visions, to grant us information that we will require in the near future," said Anquilis.

"Anquilis will guide your training," you told me. "I require you to continue your duties in the scrying chamber, but you will answer to him as you would to me--and report all you see to both of us."

"This is your last moment living only in the present," you said. "From now on, you will have one eye on today and another on tomorrow. From now on, you will be addressed throughout the Tower as Oracle Kastali."

**Thursday July 15, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 1**

## **Training**

“Open yourself to the world around you,” said Anquilis. We were in the gardens outside the Tower of Rokos. I had nearly forgotten what it was like to sit in the warm morning sunshine, to feel the breeze and hear it move through the bushes. I had grown accustomed to my stool in the scrying chamber, its wooden seat worn smooth from endless hours staring into the waters of the pool. Now my bare legs were prodded from a thousand stiff blades of grass.

“You must ignore what you feel to discover what you know,” said the Solonavi as he paced behind me. I suspected the archivist was also unused to being outside the tower, but he had said it important for us to be outside the tower’s walls for this first exercise. I closed my eyes and remembered back to my apprenticeship with the sect, straining a mixture of mashed bark, berries, and water through cheesecloth to make dye. Filtering. First I filtered out the sound of Anquilis’ footsteps. Then I separated myself from the breeze. I no longer felt the grass beneath me. Finally I felt the pull, like I was looking into the scrying pool...

The mountains. The draconum mystic still traveled with his companions, an odd gathering of a race that was typically and resolutely solitary. They were far north of Dragon’s Gate, further north than I had ever known any to venture, but the path beneath their feet appeared to be well-trod. They walked a high mountain path, buffeted by cold winds and snow. All had their weapons at the ready, and the two-headed warrior at the end of the column kept one head turned over her shoulders as if they might be followed.

The path opened into a wide and brilliant snowfield, the icy crust up a slope of undisturbed whiteness punched and broken by those who had preceded them. I followed the footsteps across the plain to a wall of sheer granite where a cave opening like a dragon’s jaws was nearly hidden by thick clouds of frost smoke hanging in the air.

Through the portal I discovered why the draconum had banded together and where they were going. Beyond was a sheltered valley, a warm haven heated by steaming pools reeking of sulphur. A massive fortress spanned the far end of the valley, its gates guarded by a vigilant draconum guard. Spread out before the fortress were scores of small encampments, and in each gatherings of draconum warriors and mystics trained and meditated. A dozen draconum traveling together had been an oddity. This many gathered was an omen.

On the ramparts of the fortress sat an ancient drakona, arms spread, radiating magical power. He was calling out to the scattered draconum. Calling them here. I heard the call...

And then I felt the grass, the breeze, the warmth of the sun. I was back in the gardens. Anquilis saw that I felt tired and weak. “Return to the scrying chamber,” he said. “Its magics will bolster you while you record what you saw. Your training will continue tomorrow.”

### **Friday July 16, 2004 Summer, 435 TZ, Day 2 Enigma**

“Try again,” instructed Anquilis. It was easier this time, to separate myself from my sensations, to let the eye show me the northlands. Through the mountains, through the cavern, across the valley of draconum, up to the walls of the fortress--

Back in the gardens. While it was getting easier to use the scrying eye without the pool, it was continually becoming more exhausting. “I can’t,” I gasped. “I don’t know if it’s too far, or if I’m too tired--”

“A failure explained is still a failure,” said Anquilis. “We are done for the day.” He turned back to the tower, returning to his archives. Somehow, I made my own way back into the tower and up to the scrying chamber. Warmth and energy flowed into me as I entered the room, and I basked in the magic until I had recovered.

Once my strength had returned, I immediately took up my seat at the edge of the scrying pool. My skill at the new methods I was being taught may yet be weak, but my ability to use the pool was well-honed. I looked into the waters and pushed the scrying eye to the valley of draconum. There was no weakness, no exhaustion as I watched the draconum continuing their training below. Confidently, I crossed to the fortress, where the drakona on the ramparts still called to the draconum.

“Why does he call them?” Anquilis had asked. “What is inside the fortress?”

I guided the eye to the gates of the fortress. It was well-maintained, but old, crafted in a style that reminded me of the ancient structures of Dragon’s Gate. Runes inlaid with gold circled the gateway, and I studied them for a moment before pressing into the interior of the fortress...where I found nothing. A grey emptiness. I could hear nothing, feel nothing. It was as though I was back in the gardens, senses empty, but unable to release the eye. I flailed about mentally, and found myself back outside the fortress. Each time I tried to guide the eye back inside, I felt a pulse of magic that rebuffed me from entering.

There is something inside that fortress. Something the draconum have taken to the edges of the land. Something they are able to hide, even from my abilities. I know the Solonavi will want to know what it is ...but fear I will be unable to tell you.

**Monday July 19, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 3**  
**Crossing the Line**

Anquilis feels I may be working against my abilities by attempting to focus them on a particular subject so closely and for so long. I’ve been instructed to release myself completely to the whims of the scrying eye, and to record what is revealed:

In the largest house in a small town on the eastern borders of Prieska called Silverleaf, Khan Ghugg and the warriors of his tribe drink away a warm summer evening. In the corner, one warrior bangs his mug on the table to train another in the rhythms of the clurch drum. “That one means a counterattack is coming and to fall back after setting fires,” he says. “Different beat for setting fires to roust cowards,” he says. “I’ll show you.”

Ghugg sits in a creaking wooden chair, his feet propped up on an overturned table. Once it must have been a nice house--that of a candlemaker, judging by the rendering pots and tallow casks along the back wall--but the orcs have turned the home into a hovel. Dozens of misshapen lumps of wax mark where the orcs have melted down the carefully crafted candles, and one wall shows the marks of a small fire. Emptied kegs and bottles have been thrown into the fireplace until it has been choked by debris. Bones and garbage litter the floor, and just outside the door flies buzz around the remains of a slaughtered hog. None of it bothers the orcs, as Ghugg recounts their recent raid into Atlantean territory in the Scythian Mountains. “They’re so distracted by the rebels and the crusaders and the famine that they forget about everything west of the Sein. Too busy fighting the war to notice the battles! Soon enough, we’ll be eating from the table of the Emporer himself!”

As the orcs cheer, two Prieskans stand unnoticed in the shadows outside. “Two weeks they’ve been here,” says the stablemaster.

“They always said Taper’s shop looked like it had been visited by orcs,” says the blacksmith. “Leastways it’s true now.”

“They may be staying at Taper’s, but they’re eating everything in town,” says the horseman. “You heard they found the food Innsong had hidden away in his hayloft?”

The smith nods. "Even took his cheeses and the cask of pickles. Don't think they even ate 'em--they just threw them to their dogs." He leans closer to his friend. "Um, Innsong and I were thinking about going to meet some people."

"Under the Moon?" asks the stablemaster.

"And the Sword," the smith confirms.

"I'll go with you, then," says the stablemaster. "They've already taken all my mounts. Might as well do what I can to save some others."

Together the two walk into the night, leaving the orcs to their revels.

**Tuesday July 20, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 4**  
**Sand and Blood**

I release the scrying eye...

Night in the desert.

A guard walking the ringwall around the Galeshi city of Alrimjin has kicked off her sandals to feel the warm stone under her feet, a counter to the cold wind blowing in across the sands from the distant ocean. She walks through dancing shadows, one hundred paces between the watch-fires burning in copper braziers. Midway between braziers, she looks deep into the darkness. Many months have passed since Khan Rabahn and his horde nearly destroyed the Ringed Cities. Indeed, where once there were eight, seven now stand. When the guard looks to where the torches of Ribaya should be on the horizon, she remembers the flames of the city burning yet now sees only blackness. The orcs are gone, the night is still. But there are rumors among the guards of a terrible price paid by the leaders of the tribe that the green-skinned beasts might leave.

The guard has passed twenty-one braziers, and she will pass fourteen more before she can set down her rifle and rest in the barracks above the city's main gate. She will sleep in the morning, and in the afternoon she will work with her husband to repair the guard's stable of mechanical mounts. Contact with the Black Powder Revolution has been rare in the months since the orcish attacks, and spare parts are becoming increasingly sparse. So is gunpowder: she carries only the black powder charge in her rifle and one more in her belt pouch.

She stops to look once again into the darkness, this time toward Ghanshe. The gilded sun atop Ghanshe Palace reflects light from both the warm city below and the cool moon above. She had been at the celebration marking completion of the palace's reconstruction not a fortnight previously--a sign that the scars of the attack were finally healing. Contact with the Revolution would be reestablished. Trade along the Greenroad would thrive once again. The Galeshi people would survive, as they always have.

Walking to the next brazier, she pauses and turns to look over her shoulder. Had the shadows moved? She dismisses it as a mirage seen by tired eyes, and continues.

She nears the brazier. Suddenly she is grabbed from behind. An arm wraps over her mouth, preventing her from calling out, as her rifle is ripped away to tumble over the wall and into the darkness. A gaunt form in loose desert fighter's robes pulls the scarf away from his face to reveal a wide grin--and a pair of fangs. The guard has a moment to give a yelping alarm as her attacker shifts his grip, pulls her head aside, and sinks his fangs into her neck.

The tales are true. The Orcs have left Galeshi. The Black Powder Revolution can come to the aid of its people. And both are for the same reason: the desert now belongs to the vampires. Beyond her attacker, the guard sees another vampire extinguishing the brazier as others slip over the wall and drop into the city

below. Above, the moon is high in the sky, and before it sets the desert will know many more of its newest people--the moonborn.

**Wednesday July 21, 2004**

**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 5**

**The Gathering**

Four days' travel east of Venetia, the town of Karn's Cross was named for the two major roads that pass through it, one headed north to south and the other east to west. The last inn before Atlantean units march into the territory of the Crusade, the taproom of the Keg and Wheel in Karn's Cross is filled each night by Atlanteans and merchants. Tonight is no exception. The fire burns warmly in the hearth and the innkeeper is trading coins for ale as quickly as he could pour.

--so he says, 'I am not for the poking!'" a merchant says, taking a gulp of ale as his audience of Imperial swordsmen and infantry laughs. "Good old Dagon. I wonder whatever happened to that crazy old man." He waves his flagon and shouts, "Innkeeper, more ale for my friends from Caero--and don't forget some for me!"

The innkeeper raises an empty pitcher. "The boy is supposed to be bringing more. I'll see what's keeping him." He turns toward the kitchens, and finds a gray-cloaked figure standing in his path. "Are you looking for a meal, sir?" the innkeeper asks hesitantly. "Or perhaps a room for the night?"

The hooded figure turns slightly, and as the innkeeper follows his gaze he is startled to find cloaked figures standing before each door and window, silent and still. At the front door of the inn, a man in enameled steel armor studies the room. Raucous moments before, the laughter and chatter of the taproom is choked off as the patrons too notice the strange visitors. For a moment, the night falls quiet. Then the armored man speaks, and his rumbling voice seems to fill the room: "I am Kem Ravenbane. You will come with me, and you will die."

A bench screeches across the board as an Atlantean climbs to his feet. "Sounds like the Sect doesn't even know how to make threats." Drawing his sword, he crosses the room, swaggering a bit from the night of drinking. "Or. You want us to come with you, *or* we will die."

I don't even see Ravenbane draw his longsword, but suddenly its point protrudes from the back of the Atlantean soldier. He swings the skewered soldier on the end of his blade and pushes him to the floor before one of the cloaked figures. In a flash, the figure has drawn a dagger from inside his cloak and cut away the Atlantean's jerkin. Three more quick slashes and he has carved a bloody rune into the chest of the soldier. As the soldier sputters and coughs, a final cut slits his throat.

"I am not part of the ridiculous Crusade," says Ravenbane. "There is no eternal life. There is only death. We are the Tur'aj. You will come with me, and you will die."

The remaining Atlanteans, suddenly sober, leap from their seats and draw their weapons. Ravenbane strides into their midst, fighting a dozen soldiers simultaneously, his heavy blade parrying two strikes at once while his mailed fist lashes out to break the jaw of a disruptor-wielding soldier. Each time an Atlantean falls, a cloaked Tur'aj cultist dashes forward to perform the death ritual.

In moments, it is over. Ravenbane points toward the terrified merchants and the innkeeper. "Load them into the wagon with the others. The avatars hunger."

**Thursday July 22, 2004**

**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 6**

**Legends and Truth**

The Revolutionaries were over the western border of their territory, and they could see the fires of the orc tribe at the far end of the valley. To conceal their own position and keep warm, the Revolutionary warriors wrapped themselves in thick cloaks and sat close to talk quietly as they ate the last of their provisions. Tomorrow they would scavenge after their victory. If there was no victory, food wouldn't matter.

"I can smell the meat on the wind," said a young Khamsin trooper. "Probably out there stuffing their bellies, and won't leave any for us."

"We won't get anything if those Amazons don't show up to help in the assault," said the mechanic. "I have three golems up and running, but we'll need them to flank the greens and draw them into the trap."

"I don't think they're coming," said the dwarf, idly sharpening his dagger. "Sergeant said they were supposed to be here when we got here. Yesterday. No riders, no messages, no nothing."

"What we need is a magic weapon," said the young trooper. "Ever since I was a kid I hear about Dragonsbreath rifles and luckblades and magic lances. Spent a few years on the battlefield now, but can't say I've ever seen one."

"So let's say you could have one," said the mechanic. "Which one would you want?"

"Most guys might want a magic rifle," said the trooper. "But not me. I'd take Storm Maul."

"A hammer? I've never seen you swing a hammer in your life!"

"Wouldn't need to. All the legends say that whoever carries Storm Maul can call down lightning on whatever they please. I'd just sit up there on the ridge and burn the orcs before they even got into rifle range."

"Try and get two, then," said the mechanic. "I'll sit up there with you."

"Doesn't work like that," said the dwarf.

"How do you know?" asked the trooper.

"Maybe it worked like that back in the time of those legends," said the dwarf. "Now, though, Storm Maul has to be carried in close. It'll burn what it touches, but you have to be close enough to smell the scorched flesh and singed hair. Get the orcs to stand in a river, though, and then you might be able to get them all."

"I guess we've just heard different stories," said the trooper. "I'll take my Storm Maul and you can stick with yours."

"I'll do that," said the dwarf, folding back his cloak to reveal the silver-hafted hammer hidden beneath. Sparks seemed to dance across the surface of its rune-engraved head. "Took it off the body of a deathspeaker," he said. "I don't think I'll be giving it to an orc. Not tomorrow."

The mechanic chuckled. "Maybe we don't need the Amazons after all."

**Friday July 23, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 7**  
**Darkness and Flame**

It was a time long ago, before I came to the Tower, even before I joined the sect. I was a child, and walked through a field of wildflowers. Then, with a wrenching pull, the world melted around me and I stared into the face of a dead man.

I started for a moment as I realized that the scrying eye had plucked me from my dreams and pulled me to the Blasted Plains. Bodies were scattered across the cracked and broken tiles of a forecourt at the base of the Black Pyramid. They were the bodies of the Elementals who had decreed themselves the guardians of the Pyramid, vigilant for any who sought to enter in search of the dark power said to lie hidden within. Only once had they failed, when the Wolfwitch had passed through its portals. Somehow she had gained mastery over the Pyramid's guardians, an army of monstrous Mage Spawn, and tonight she had sent them out to claw through the Elemental lines.

Had the Elementals stood alone, it might have been enough. Yet Torg Boneknitter still lived, though the medicine troll leaned heavily on his staff. Next to him was Nerab, the aging Galeshi leader whose visions had brought sunborn warriors to aid the Elementals. Together, the sunborn and the Elementals had slaughtered the beasts sent out of the Pyramid--but not without a terrible cost. Fewer than a dozen sunborn and sixty Elemental warriors had survived the battle. They bound their wounds tightly, continuing to keep watch across the pillars and pools of the courtyard, ready for another attack.

Boneknitter stared grimly at the gates of the Pyramid. "Even in the smallest cave, with the brightest fire, the least pebble casts shadows that give the darkness a place to hide." He turned to Nerab. "I cannot tell you what cast this dark shadow upon the Land, but our fire is burning low. We have won this battle, but the darkness comes close to the flame."

"Darkness cannot be contained," said the Galeshi. "With each day comes a night." He pointed toward the sun, just climbing over the horizon. "And with each night comes a day. Darkness has come into this world. We both sense it. We have both seen it. All we can do is keep the watchfires stoked and hope that we will see another morning."

"A message arrived yesterday from the Elemental Council," said the troll. "Just before the battle. The Council survives, but cannot help us. So I have taken their bird and sent it to summon the aid we need from another. Once it arrives, we will lick our wounds no longer. We will take our flame into the darkness."

**Monday July 26, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 8**  
**The Call**

I heard the Call, and I was not alone.

In Arcos, a wizard of the Delphana looked up from where he was fitting lost pages into an ancient tome.

Under the trees of a grove in the eastern mountains, a centaur druid slept with her arms wrapped around a green-bound book. She sat up with a start, and listened for the voice whispering through the leaves.

Above the marshy hills of the Fist, an orc meditating with a Magestone crystal grasped in each fist opened his eyes and understood the message.

Deep beneath the hills, a dwarf set aside his hammer and wiped his brow. He knew where he had to go.

A draconum and a Crusade priestess locked in combat tumbled down a sandy dune in the Galeshi desert and rolled apart. As they came to their feet, they looked at each other for a moment before moving off cautiously into the darkness. It would be happening soon.

Deep in the Rivvenheims, an ancient elf reached for his traveling cloak. It was all happening again.

I looked out the window of my chamber into the night and in the courtyard below saw one of the tower's oracles mounting a hastily saddled mount. She had a long way to go, and a short time to get there.

To each and to all the voice had spoken. *Prove yourself*, it said. *Prove yourself and the power will be yours.*

All heeded the Call as they journeyed into the night.

**Wednesday July 28, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 9**  
**Pathis' Path**

It was as Anquilis said: Only when I had let go of my wish to see more of the draconum valley in the north did the scrying eye return of its own volition. Suddenly I was there, looking down on the draconum mystic I had seen hiking through the mountains weeks earlier.

The mystic looked down on the draconum army training in the valley below as he made his way along a high and narrow path leading to a cave opening. The warmth of the sulphur pools was far away, and he wrapped his wings around himself tightly against the biting northern winds spilling over the lip of the valley. Gratefully, he made his way into the shelter of the torch-lit cave.

Inside, a lithe figure danced across the rough stone floor, balanced atop a long, sinuous tail in place of legs. She wore armor, but as with that worn by the mystic, it was clearly as much for ceremonial purposes as for protection. Her four arms moved in concert, one holding a dagger, another a small mirror, and the last pair an open scroll from which she read aloud the words of a spell. Robed whelps sat around her in a wide circle, heads bobbing as they studied her every movement. She gestured at a red-skinned whelp with the dagger and he rushed forward. Her tail whipped around to slap the whelp firmly, and he vanished--only to reappear behind the surface of the mirror. She smiled as the whelp poked ineffectively at the far side of the glass. "One should always know the effects of the spells one casts, young ones, and this is best achieved as the target of the spell. Practice upon one another, and understand."

As she made her way over to the mystic, he spread his wings wide and bowed low. "I thank you for your summons, Pathis."

"Rise, revered one," she answered. "All who are of the order will always be welcome." She held out the scroll. "For you. The Solonavi believe they are the only ones with this spell. Study it well. Perhaps you will find it useful in our journey."

"Journey, Pathis?"

"Not all have answered the summons, Hysthe. There is one who cannot, but one whose counsel will be invaluable in the coming days. We must seek out Krosthysas."

"He still lives?"

"He does, somewhere in these mountains. Yet he has not come." She shook her head as one of the whelps dropped a mirror. "Krosthysas is one of the old ones, and will not respect any who come as part of a massive search. He will think them weak, and short of cunning. So we must go alone, two warriors strong in sword and spell, and hope that he will grant us an audience."

"Scouts returned from the east this morning," said Hysthe. "The Shyft have left the mountains. Our days of easy hunting may be over."

"Another sign," said the Pathis. "The darkness is coming. Making it more vital than ever that we locate Krosthysas. Prepare yourself. We leave in an hour."

**Thursday July 29, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 10**  
**Redgear**

Today the scrying eye took me to a warehouse near the docks in Caero, where the Golemcore had set up a workshop. The doors were open to let in the last of the late afternoon sun, and a mechanic in greasy

overalls paced the narrow and cluttered aisle between benches lined by tools, parts, and apprentices, lecturing the young men and women who worked beneath him. "A dwarf may have invented this new type of brain, but it will be the Golemcore who perfects it! Who invented the art of technomancy?"

"Revered Tezla," responded the apprentices, most with zealous fervor, but at least one with enough distraction that the mechanic cuffed him with an empty leather glove.

"That's right," said the mechanic. "The rebels may be able to arm their golem with cannons, but we put centuries of accumulated skill and the power of magestones into our golems. If you demonstrate enough of the first, perhaps you will be trusted with a magestone for your golem like young Akhwan." He gestured proudly toward where a young Caeronn worked on a golem in a cleared area at the end of the workshop. It had a fresh coat of red paint, and in place of one arm was a pneumatic crossbow with an enormous blade like a bayonet hung below. Through a hatch in its chest I could see the clockwork of its mechanical brain clustered around a crystal of red magestone.

"Master Ulwakan," said Akhwan, hesitantly.

"What is it?" said Ulwakan.

"Redgear doesn't seem to be working properly. He won't follow all of my commands."

The Kosian mechanic made his way down to stand beside the Caeronn. "What'd I tell you about naming the golems, boy? It's a bow golem, not a rot-gear, or whatever you say. Show me the problem."

"Redg--" Akhwan began, then caught himself. "Bow golem, load primary ammunition." The golem reached out to pick up a cylinder loaded with quarrels, and locked it into his upper arm. "Bow golem, cycle weapon." The gears in the golem's arm whirred as an arrow was fed into the crossbow. "Bow golem, take aim on target." The golem turned to face a golem hull leaning against the wall, the sigil of the Black Powder Revolution painted onto its chest. Akhwan looked at Ulwakan as he said, "Bow golem, fire weapon." Nothing.

"Bow golem, fire weapon!" said Ulwakan. Nothing. "Well, something's wrong, boy. We'll have to chase it down tomorrow. Day's running out on us now, but I expect you back here at first light."

"Yes sir," replied Akhwan.

"Day's over!" said Ulwakan. "Clean up your tools and let's get some dinner."

An hour later, the workshop was deserted. Everything was quiet and still, broken only by the laughter from a nearby tavern. Then a red glow lit the room, coming from the bow golem. It was the magestone crystal in his chest, and the golem reached up to close the hatch. I was surprised by how quiet he was, the movement betrayed only by a slight whirring from his freshly oiled gears and the occasional hiss of escaping steam. Almost silently, he moved across the workshop. A single hammer with his fist knocked away the lock on the door and he slipped into the night.

**Monday August 2, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 11**  
**The Price of Failure**

The scrying eye glided among the jagged towers of the Necropolis, drawn to the Prophet's Tower. Even as I passed through its cold black walls, I felt the burning rage of the Prophet inside. The hollow roar of a gong summoned the Deathspeakers to the highest chamber of the Tower, where bracing winds came freely through windows overlooking the city and the dark waters of Black Lake.

As the Deathspeakers filed in, the Prophet stood mute and unmoving, his back to them as he stood before a golem draped in silk robes marked with the sigil of the Crusade. The Dark Tezla. Even among the highest ranks of the Crusade, the Prophet allowed few others into the presence of the Dark One. Though humanoid in form, the golem was made of polished bones from dozens of creatures--a cave orc's ribcage, the thighbone of an orc, elven fingerbones, the arm of a krugg--topped with a skull said to be that of the living Tezla, bound together by a black, tarry substance charged with necromantic magic. The room was suffused with the sickly, sweet odor of the golem and the power it radiated. The Deathspeakers basked in it, but stiffened when the Prophet turned to face them.

"I have not called you here before Tezla himself to reward you," said the Prophet grimly. "You were given a chance to earn that reward, and you have failed. You were given the largest army ever amassed in these lands, an army of conquest, and you failed. You were given a chance to earn unending life and power--and you have failed."

One of the younger Deathspeakers was foolish enough to speak. "We have succeeded in capturing the entirety of the Wylden, Prophet. The strongholds of the Forest Elves are shattered, and we have surrounded Roanne Valle."

The Prophet walked toward him calmly. "Yet you have failed to capture their precious Sanctuary." Another step closer. "You *failed* to destroy their Council, which even now is rebuilding its strength." Another step. "And you **FAILED** to destroy their False Tezla!" Thrusting his hand forward, the Prophet reached into the young Deathspeaker and tore out his soul. As the Deathspeaker slumped to the floor, the Prophet cradled his spirit in a web of black magic and carried it to the Dark Tezla. When the Prophet offered up the soul to his master, the spirit pulled free of the web and was absorbed by the bone golem. The rubies set into its eye sockets seemed to glow brighter.

"Do not think I don't know of your failures," said the Prophet, turning back to the remaining Deathspeakers. "I know that we have lost Riversgate. You will recapture it. I know that the army sent to capture the secrets of the ancient blood cult has taken them to Ribaya instead of returning here. You will retrieve them, and those responsible will be punished. I know that the Darkbringer marches his armies to Stonekeep rather than to Roanne Valle, as ordered. He will be corrected, and the Elementals will be destroyed."

"This is our time. The time of the Crusade. Our rise to power will not be halted by our enemies, let alone by incompetence."

**Wednesday August 4, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 12**  
**The Ninth Circle**

I sat in the gardens outside the tower today and watched as the scrying eye followed a lone dwarf hiking along the banks of the Roa Kaiten headwaters. As I got closer, I recognized him as Terk, the dwarf who had been working with the Black Powder Revolution in Rangrez. Mid-morning, he waded across the cold waters of a feeder spring and into a ramshackle town, one of the Whitespray region's innumerable hideouts for bandits and thieves. In front of a run-down tavern, a barbarian from the Vurga Divide and a minotaur were taking turns beating a barrow knight spiked to a tree, then watching its wounds regenerate.

Terk made his way into the tavern and dropped the bundle on his back onto a table, saying, "Either somebody gives me a drink, or I'm leaving again."

"Terk!" said the goblin behind the bar, sloshing ale into a mug. "You're back! Did you bring me a gun from the Rebels? Did you? Did you?"

"Nope," said Terk. "They were starting to off their friends, so I lit out. Left the guns so they wouldn't have a reason to track me down. Got my money, though."

“You mean *our* money,” said a gravelly voice, as a krugg warrior entered from the back room. “The Order gets a share of everything, dwarf.”

Terk shook his head and raised his mug to his lips. “Still saving up to get the Order’s symbol crafted out of gold or something, Bloodaxe? So you saw it on the wall down in the dungeons. Doesn’t mean you have to make it all fancy.”

“You pour expensive ale into your mouth, and all that comes out in return is salamander droppings,” said the krugg. “Wandering around so much, you don’t know anything about the Order’s business. We’ve been bringing whatever creatures are smart enough to listen, and as many of the Whitespray warlords as possible. Even managed to find a renegade draconum.”

“Really?” said Terk, leaning forward.

“Came to us,” said Bloodaxe. “Tough. Between him and the rest of the forces we’ve gathered, we even managed to chase the Sect away from the headwaters--most of their troops have been drawn south for some reason.”

“Doesn’t sound like there’s any money in that,” said Terk, motioning to the goblin for more ale.

“Money? No. But proof that the Order is a force to be considered, yes.” The krugg pounded the table with his axe. “We answer to nobody but ourselves now! The Spawn are banding together, and no longer will we be slaves. They want our swords and claws at their side, they bring gold to the table!”

Terk tossed back his second ale, then stood and hefted his bundle. “Whatever. I’m off to change into something a little more comfortable than these traveling leathers. Just let me know when there’s something to hit, and how much you’re paying.”

**Friday August 6, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 13**  
**Opening Salvo**

The ancient Kosian pyramids built along the banks of the Roa Vizorr were sharp silhouettes against a cloud-darkened sky. Beyond the pyramids were the walls of Caero and the bright lights of the city’s gaming houses. Here the only light came from inside the gatehouse at the near end of the bridge across the river into Venetia. A tired Atlantean soldier collected the toll from a Venthian kegwagon headed to resupply the thirsty merchants of Caero. The wagon creaked off down the road and the night fell into a silence broken only by the murmuring of the terraced waterfalls on the side of the pyramids.

The Atlantean raised a hand to his mouth to stifle a yawn, stretched, and turned back to the gatehouse. Behind him, the shadow of a mile marker at the side of the road pulled loose and slid behind him. As they entered the torchlight spilling out the door, the shadow became a soft-footed Khamsin who dropped a garrote over the Atlantean’s head and pulled it tight. The struggle was over in moments. The Khamsin dragged the Atlantean into the gatehouse and extinguished the torch inside.

A dozen forms wearing heavy packs came out of the darkness and made their way out onto the bridge. Working in pairs, they attached ropes to the ornately-carved statues lining the crossing and dropped over the side.

The Khamsin stood in the shadows of the gatehouse, watching the road from Caero. From under the bridge came the occasional clink of a metal buckle against stone as burdens were fixed into place, or the whirr of cord being pulled off of a reel.

The sentry started at the whisper from behind him: “Everything’s in place. Move up the road.” He turned and nodded at the woman who had spoken, then vanished into the darkness. He was followed by those

returning from the bridge, trailing cords that they handed to the woman. She drew a wooden box from her own pack and set to work attaching the cords.

“This is ill-advised,” growled a voice from the shadows of the gatehouse.

“They’re getting too comfortable sitting before the hearths of Castle Khamsin,” said the woman.

She struggled with a connection. “Let me give you some light,” said the growl, and a tiny sphere of red light appeared in the palm of a clawed draconum hand. It illuminated the wires connected to the box, the handle atop it, and the face of the woman. I knew the face. It was Nadia os Darras. The Black Thorn.

Thorn attached the final wire, cinched it tight, and raised the handle. “It’s time to remind them that the war isn’t over,” she whispered, the handle whirring as she pushed it downward.

There was a massive roar from the bridge as the gunpowder charges beneath it detonated, goutts of fire rolling up into the sky. Their supports shattered, the timeworn stones of the bridge collapsed into waters below.

“They’ll all see,” said the Black Thorn. “It’s only beginning.” Followed by the draconum, she turned and headed toward the lights of Caero.

**Monday August 9, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 14**  
**Battle of Wills**

This morning I entered the scrying chamber with a divided spirit. Anquilis had instructed me to follow where the scrying eye would lead, yet my mandate in the chamber was to gather information that would prove useful to the masters of the tower and the Solonavi cause. Observing one random scene after another, as I had for nearly two weeks, I had stumbled across much useful information--but only through providence, not planning. Though it might help to explore my abilities, trailing behind the whims of the eye didn’t seem to serve the needs of the Solonavi--or my own.

As I settled myself on a stool before the scrying pool, I felt the eye tug at me, ready to take me off into the distance. But I resisted its pull, and exerted my will to send it to the east and then up the Vizorr, back toward the scene it had shown me yesterday, between Caero and Venetia.

The work of the Bloody Thorns had been thorough. The bridge was in ruins, and the pilings so shattered that it would be difficult to rebuild. I watched an Atlantean legionnaire work his way along what remained of the bridge on the Venthian side of the river, crouched low and more cautious than the loosened stones might demand. Then a single shot rang out from the direction of the Caeronn pyramids, and the scout tumbled off the bridge and into the swift waters below.

Just outside the northern wall of Venetia, the Imperial Legion had set up a staging area with a command tent at its center. I guided the eye inside. A general was inspecting a map rolled out on the table before him as a lieutenant pushed his way in through the heavy flaps. “Snipers just got another scout, General Vateo. I don’t think we’ll be able to put any sort of temporary crossing in place without heavy losses.”

The general pounded the table in frustration. “What word from the Watch in Caero?”

“None, sir. Our observers in ornithopters have confirmed that the explosion shortly after the destruction of the bridge was indeed at their headquarters. It appears that the building has been totally destroyed. Street fighting is continuing between what remains of the Watch and the Bloody Thorns, and our troops are currently finding them more formidable than expected.”

“Tell me if I understand you properly, Lieutenant. The Rebels have somehow managed to not only destroy the headquarters for the eastern regiments, but also have enough troops into Caero to seriously vie for control of the city.”

“I’m afraid that’s correct, sir. Our current estimate says if we can’t retake the city within five days, we may lose it and the surrounding area. Perhaps we should call for reinforcements from the capital.”

“Which would you rather report to the Emperor--that we were so weakened by a single attack that we required assistance, or that we made a decisive counterattack with the resources we had available and crushed a major rebel uprising?”

“The latter, sir.”

The general turned back to his map. “Then perhaps you’ll live to be a general someday yourself. But first we need to make that happen. I expect to hear your plan in an hour.”

“Yes, sir.” I followed the young lieutenant outside, and as he stopped to look across the river at Caero I once again felt the tug of the scrying eye. There was a strange twist, and scene shimmered in the afternoon heat.

*Caero in ruins. A gray-cloaked figure standing atop each of the pyramids, arms held high. A dark shadow hanging over the city. An enormous beast and a gout of flame...*

Then all was as it had been. The lieutenant completed his deliberations and strode off toward into the camp, calling for his men.

**Wednesday August 11, 2004**

**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 15**

**Inquisition**

When I entered the scrying chamber this morning, my stool was already occupied by a woman in black robes trimmed in gold and violet, paging through one of my journals. Her hair was bound high on her head, above the strap of the mask she wore. The mask was similar to that worn by the Oathsworn but covered only the top half of her face, and while the Oathsworn mask provided holes through which the wearer could see, this golden mask had no such openings. The “eyes” attached to the surface of this mask were a blank whiteness, polished ivory. It was the mask of an Oracle.

“Good morning, Oracle Kastali,” she said. “We’ve been reading your journals. You show great promise.”

“Thank you,” I said, less out of politeness than for lack of anything else to say.

She closed the book--this very book--and placed it back on the shelf. “My name is Daheia,” she said. “I am the arcanarch of our order.” She rounded the scrying pool to study before the map on the wall. “When you accepted our offer, you joined one of the most ancient orders in the land. The Oracles of Rokos. Our powers come with a heavy burden of responsibility. We had ordered you to follow the guidance of your ‘scrying eye’, to go where it would take you and report what you saw.” She turned to face me across the pool. “Why did you disobey those orders and return to Caero yesterday?”

Anyone who lived in Rokos knew Daheia’s name. She was the leader of the Oracles, the most trusted of those sworn to the Solonavi, a powerful sorcerer with incredible mental abilities. For all I knew, she had been given permission to enter the scrying chamber, and to read my journals. But I was determined to avoid finding myself bound to yet another master: “I believe I recorded my reasons for disobeying my orders in my journal, and in doing so both uncovered important information and had another oracular vision. Regardless, I don’t remember those orders coming from you. My oath is to Lord Vextha, and I answer to him and Anquilis the archivist. They may have given me the title of Oracle, but that doesn’t put me under your command.”

I expected an angry rebuke, and instead received a gentle smile that unavoidably damped my anger. “You misunderstand, Kastali.” She pursed her lips, and lowered her head in concentration. As she spread her arms a form pulled away from her, a Solonavi stepping out of her body--Anquilis.

The archivist and the oracle mirrored each others’ motions for a moment. Then Anquilis came around the scrying pool to my side. “You misunderstand, Oracle,” he said.

“The two of you are bonded,” I said. “Like Rayevisayla and Corella.”

“The powers of the Oracles have waned with the passing centuries,” said Daheia. “We don’t know why. We can scry across the Land, as you can, but only those of us who have bonded with a Solonavi have any hope of seeing times to come. Even then, our visions lack the certainty of days past.”

“I have no such bond,” I said.

“Also correct,” said Anquilis. “That is what makes you so unique. We come here today not to reprimand you but to ask your assistance. When you guided your visions to Caero, you saw not only the present but what might be. We must know why, and how—and if there is truth in your vision.”

“The time comes when you will be required to decide where your loyalties lay, Kastali,” said Daheia. “Not because you will be required to answer to a cause, but because that cause may answer to you.”

**Thursday August 12, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 16**  
**Council of the Wolf**

After their revelation yesterday, Anquilis and Daheia left the scrying chamber without further explanation or direction, leaving me alone to think. My thoughts whirled as I strove to understand what they had told me, about the Oracles, the Solonavi, and about myself. I slept little until I determined to set it all aside and concentrate on the path before me. I would let the future come when it would.

This morning, I returned to the scrying chamber. I looked into the waters of the pool and felt the tug of the scrying eye. I resisted the pull, and considered for a moment where I would choose to observe. Then I realized: it was not a place I wished to observe--it was a person. *Corella*, I thought. The eye tugged again and I willed at it: *Corella and Rayevisayla*. Now that I understood the relationship between the two, I knew that where I would find one I would find the other. The pull of the eye sagged, like a sail as the wind changed, then suddenly surged and carried me north.

The queen sat in council with the leaders of the tribes she had conquered. “What word from the north?” she asked. I could not see Rayevisayla, but I knew: the Solonavi was there.

“We’re still losing scouts sent to the north,” said an Amazon wrapped in a wolfskin. “But those who return are reporting high traffic by both draconum and Black Powder caravans through the area.”

“For now we still fight for the Revolution,” said Corella. “The huntresses we sent to Caero last week should assure them of that. That means the true threat are the draconum. Where are they going, and why? We’re about to begin our advance across northern Khamsin, and I don’t want an unexpected skirmish to reveal to the rebels or Valia exactly how many tribes we have working in concert. If that means we march to the north to face these draconum before we go to claim the holy mountain, so be it.”

**Friday August 13, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 17**  
**Heeding the Call**

I still heard the Call, like a distant song. It had been a constant companion to my thoughts for more than a week, but little more than an annoyance. Still, I wondered about those whom it had driven into action.

I sent the scrying eye in search of one of them and found myself in Down Town, in the shadows beneath Atlantis. The Delphana mage I had last seen in Arcos was now impatiently pacing the flagstones of a wide plaza where flying platforms carried soldiers, technomancers, and the nobility of the Empire to and from the floating city above. The journey from Arcos to Atlantis had not treated the Delphana well. His robes were disheveled, and his unbound hair hung loosely over the magestone crystals implanted in his forehead. "How much longer will it take for you to assemble your cohort, captain?" he grumbled to a nearby Atlantean soldier.

"You're lucky General Volkare didn't dismiss you entirely," said the legionnaire, in the cautiously dismissive tone of those talking to the unbalanced--then he remembered who he was speaking to and added: "But I'm certain my soldiers will be here as soon as they've assembled their gear and provisions, Demi-Magus Lendat."

"Good, good," said the demi-magus, continuing to pace. "We have to go. We have a long distance to travel, and only a short time to get there. But we must bring as many troops as possible, or we may lose the prize. We must prove ourselves."

"These are my best men," said the legionnaire. "I'm certain that we will have no trouble capturing your objective, especially if it's in our territory." They watched the platforms coming down from the city for a silent moment before the captain spoke again. "What precisely are we traveling to acquire?"

The demi-magus turned, wild-eyed. "It's a rock. But it's so much more. And nobody knows except those of us who hears it calling. We must have it." The Delphana spun suddenly toward where a platform loaded nearby. "There shouldn't be spells in the palace. They were all moved to Arcos. But I'll go check. We will need their power. Be ready when I return!"

The legionnaire shook his head as the demi-magus ran across the plaza and leapt onto the platform as it lifted into the sky.

**Monday August 16, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 18**  
**Shattered Gates**

When not making the observations recorded in the previous few days of this journal, I've spent a great deal of time observing the battle for control of Caero. The Bloody Thorns had chosen their sniper positions on the Caeronn pyramids wisely; the Atlanteans in Venethia were reluctant to bombard the ancient Kosian monuments, and instead made several attempts each day to get soldiers across to support the dwindling numbers of the Watch.

The most successful incursion came two nights ago in a flotilla of small boats with technomantic engines that emerged from the watery canyons of Venethia to shoot across the Vizorr and land more than two hundred soldiers on the west side of the river. They advanced northward into the streets of Caero, but it was too late. The Bloody Thorns already controlled too many key points and each time the Atlanteans tried to secure a beachhead in a side alley they found they had simply funneled themselves into another ambush. In the end, though the Atlanteans were better armed, well-rested, and well-fed, they succumbed to the enemy's greater numbers and superior planning--from their quick and easy movement through the newly captured territory it was obvious that the Thorns had been planning this attack for quite some time.

This morning the fighting stopped. The last surviving Atlantean soldiers were captured and brought to the cells of Stonegate, a prison that had held many Black Powder prisoners since the beginning of the Khamsin uprising. Though the Bloody Thorns moved from block to block and house to house making certain that there were no Atlanteans hidden inside, they didn't stop movement through the streets. By midday, the Grand Market of Caero was alive with business for the first time in a week.

In the afternoon, a squad of Bloody Thorns entered the marketplace, led by the Black Thorn herself. Behind the half-elf followed her draconum companion Tyrsis, his presence enough to part the crowd as they moved toward the eagle-topped fountain at the center of the plaza. The Thorn waited patiently for two old men to clear away the game of stones-and-tiles they were playing on a table near the fountain, then climbed onto the table and fired a single shot into the air. There were some screams, and some who dived to the stones, but within a minute all within earshot were silent and waiting for her to speak.

“People of Caero!” she shouted. “This city is now under our control! We are moving into the countryside, and by day’s end we will have sway over everything within a day’s travel.”

“This is an Atlantean city!” shouted someone in the crowd. “The Emperor will crush the rebellion!”

“This city is now under our control,” repeated the Thorn. “But it does not belong to us. However, we will not allow it to belong to the empire. The Revolution fights the Atlantean Empire not to create an empire of its own but to give the land back to its people. I know there are many here who agree with that sentiment. Live your lives. We can’t allow you to fight our cause, but we ask that you assist us only as you see fit.”

The Thorn jumped off the table and moved back into the crowd, which was already breaking into innumerable debates about the new state of the city. Behind the Thorn followed Tyrsis, smiling at something only he could perceive.

**Wednesday August 18, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 19**  
**Awakening**

Today the scrying eye showed me a hut high in the western mountains, rough rock chinked with mud and clay. A smoky fire burned in the hearth, heating an iron cauldron filled with bubbling green sludge. A crude wooden shelf mounted high on one wall held a line of skulls, dried flesh pulled tight over yellowing bone. Another skull, that of a mountain troll, soaked in a bowl of foul-looking liquid on the scarred table below.

A orc witch in a tattered cloak paged through a large book bound in suspicious-looking leather. When she found the page she was looking for, she wedged it into a support on her skull-topped staff and carried it over to the sleeping pallet near the fire. Muttering to herself, she retrieved the troll head from the table and swung the sopping mess over the unconscious form on the pallet, a familiar-looking orc who twitched as the droplets rained down on his bare skin and pooled around the large claw he wore on a thong around his neck. Yet after three passes, he still lay still.

The witch clicked her tongue against her teeth and tossed the head back into the bowl. Crawling beneath the table, she drew out a leather pouch hidden among the mess of bones beneath. Opening the pouch, she spilled out a handful of magestone crystals, placed some into a granite mortar, and ground them down with a matching pestle, humming to herself. Finally she tossed the pestle aside and scooped out some of the magestone dust in the mortar with a taloned finger. Raising her finger to her mouth, her tongue darted out and licked away the dust.

Suddenly her stoop was gone. Standing straight, she scooped up the bowl and brought it over to the pallet. The unconscious orc snuffed as she blew the dust into his face, and when he parted his lips she poured the remaining dust into his mouth. For a moment his jaw moved as if he were chewing, and then his eyes snapped open. “Where--“ he rasped.

“I found you in my mountains,” the witch said. “Brought you back to my hut. I remember what you taught me, and owed you the favor.

“I need--“

“More crystals. Yes, yes.” She turned back to the table and gathered some of the remaining magestones. He took them from her and tossed them into his mouth. The sound of his teeth grinding against the stones filled the hut.

I watched as the strength flowed into him, and he squinted in a combination of pain and ecstasy. He rolled the tight shoulders of his muscles, cranked his head until stiff muscles popped, and stood up from the pallet. From a nearby pile he gathered up a rust-colored cloak, threw it over his shoulders, and fastened it with a clasp fashioned from a skull. “My mask,” he said, and the witch pointed toward the table. As he put it on, I finally recognized him. Bloodhawk.

“Now the Chaos Shamans owe you, old one,” he said. “You will be repaid in full.”

“I’ll be repaid in stones,” she said.

“You’re one of us,” Bloodhawk acknowledged. “Do you know what became of the others?”

“Hiding in the mountains,” she said. “Too many for my hut.”

“Good,” said Bloodhawk. “We must gather together and ride south.”

“I hear the song too,” said the witch. “But I stay to take care of you.”

“Song?” said Bloodhawk. “No. We ride south to find more stones. And Marz.”

**Friday August 20, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 20**  
**Oathsworn**

This evening, rather than my usual repast in the scrying chamber, I decided to take my supper in the grand hall of the Tower. The tables of the hall were lined by the non-Solonavi residents of the tower, and the only seat I found was the fourth chair at a table with a trio of Oathsworn. They were all road-weary, yet still wore the masks that marked them as Oathsworn, even while eating.

The first was a female wearing the tunic of a Khamsin army regular. Next to her chair sat her traveling pack and a satchel of medical supplies. The second was another female, but this one with the severe bearing of a Crusader. She wore traveling clothes, but the unmistakable obsidian blades sheathed at her belt marked her as a deathsinger. Last, and strangest to see inside the Tower, was an enormous orc in boiled hide armor marked with the wolf sigil.

Though surrounded by the murmurs and chatter of the crowd, our table ate in silence. Finally, the surgeon pushed aside her plate and spoke. “After this meal ends, we go our separate ways. Once again we will be enemies.”

“We have fulfilled our vows to the Solonavi,” said the deathsinger. “For now.” She looked into her mug of tea. “Of course, your vows would not keep you from abandoning your own cause and joining the Crusade. I am certain I could get you an audience with my masters.”

“It is still summer,” grunted the orc, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “I return to my tribe, to gather what plunder I can while the days are warm. You have been strong companions, but if I ever see your faces without a mask on I will have to crush them with my axe.” Did he say it with regret or anticipation? I couldn’t tell.

My cup of summerwine clattered across the table as I was suddenly gripped by another vision:

*Death. Destruction. Betrayal.*

The blood-red wine spread across the table toward the Oathsworn, pulled out of their conversation to stare at me. I had sensed no specifics in the vision--only that there would be death and destruction, borne of betrayal, and it would find one of the three in front of me. Very soon.

I stood and walked away without looking back.

**Monday August 24, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 21**  
**Darkness' Dawn**

Once again the scrying eye pulled me from my dreams, and I felt a sense of urgency as I skimmed over the darkened land. This was something important, something I had to see. Over the midlands, through the mountains, over the shores of Black Lake and across the single bridge over its cold waters into the Necropolis. Events had been put into motion by some unknown force. Through the black iron gates of the courtyards around the Prophet's Tower, past a guttering torch and into the dark tunnels beneath the surface. What was about to happen was important, would change things forever.

Deeper into the earth. Beyond laboratories where creatures were kept endlessly on the thin border between life and death. Through libraries that held the deepest secrets of the Dark Crusade. Into the sanctum of Deathspeaker Aeradon. A sharpened silver quill bobbed in the hand of the gaunt man, blood-red ink appearing as he worked its tip. Only when the surface he wrote on twitched did I realize that he wrote upon the skin of a creature clamped to his desk. Finishing his work, the deathspeaker set aside his quill and with quick strokes of a dagger pulled away the freshly completed scroll. Attaching one end to a wooden rod, he hung it in a rack to dry.

As Aeradon turned back to the mewling creature, a vampire in a cloak and wide-brimmed hat stepped into the room. He held his wings close and bowed respectfully. "I believe the message has arrived, sire."

"Thank you, Judge," said Aeradon. "Send it in." The judge relaxed his wings, revealing the pistols holstered at his belt, and allowed a shadow-spirit to enter. The dark cloud crossed to the deathspeaker. Stepping forward, Aeradon reached into the spirit with bony fingers and inhaled deeply, drawing the spirit into himself. His eyes closed and his hands clenched as he subsumed the spirit, then he relaxed.

"They come," he said. "We must prepare."

**Wednesday August 25, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 22**  
**The Power of Blood**

Leaving his lieutenants in charge, the vampire warlord Darq has left the Galeshi deserts. The scrying eye shows me their path: weeks ago he led an army of moonborn and blood cultists out of their stronghold in caverns beneath the ruined city of Ribaya to feed one last time on the people whose homeland they had conquered. Then they crossed Atlantean and Revolution territory under cover of night, passing close enough to Caero to see the fires burning as the two factions had fought for the city.

Fording the Vizorr just below its northern fork, they had maintained the secret of their travels by cutting across the northern midlands, avoiding trade routes. Then they had encountered a group of draconum endeavoring to do the same, and they had lost a large portion of their number before the skirmish between them was over. The fallen draconum were raised and added to their number, but it wasn't enough.

So they had come to the small town a short distance away. Mundort. "You were guiding us here all along," said Darq.

"Of course," said the tall woman walking beside him, a high priestess of the blood cult. "You have your goals and I have mine, but we walk the same path. The scrolls Bloodblade recovered have been added to

our codex, and I learned the vital information I needed. But to make use of it I had to come to the place where they worshipped, when the goddess was at the height of her powers.”

She rubbed her hands together in anticipation. “Already I can feel the forces coursing through me. The Solonavi released powerful magic into the land, but it was achieved through brute force--an outpouring from behind a shattered dam. Not all waters flow into the river. This power of this place belongs to us, and cannot be so easily usurped.”

The people of Mundort rushed forth as Darq’s army entered the city, offering praise to the sect and the Dark Crusade. “I want a half dozen,” said the blood priestess.

Darq nodded, and told a nearby vampire, “Conscript the rest.” To the blood priestess he said, “It is time your ancient secrets proved their worth.”

Moonborn sorceresses brought six townspeople as the blood priestess pace around the shattered shrine at the center of the town. “This is the place,” she said calmly. “Put one on the altar.” She stepped forward and placed her hands on the cheek of the terrified farmer dragged forward. “Our pain is my strength,” she murmured. Her hands tightened on the farmer’s face, and he screamed in pain. As blood ran from beneath the hands of the priestess and dripped onto the stone of the broken altar, she shrieked in the shared agony. Yet as the farmer grew pale and wan, she gained a ruddy glow. Finally, the farmer fell limply to the ground. “Bring the next,” she gasped.

Five more were brought forward, and five more were consumed. When she was finished, the altar was slick with blood. Eyes shining with stolen vitality, she raised her bloody hands to the night. “I offer what I have taken,” she cried. “Come forth! Come forth and join your faithful! I call you by name!” She slammed her hands to the altar in a wet slap. “Amara!”

In a clap of thunder the altar cracked open and a dark cloud poured forth as the blood priestess collapsed. The warmth was pulled out of the summer night and even the vampires fell quiet as the chill spilled through the town. Swirling above the broken altar, the cloud slowly took form. First a pair of wide-spread wings, and a ribcage. Then arms, and a skull with a vicious grin. A serpentine, spine-like tail. The cloud scoured the blood from the altar, the droplets rising into the air and wrapping around the form as crimson vestments. As the cloud fell away, the creature came forward. “I have awakened,” it said.

Darq stepped boldly over the prostrate blood cultists to stand before Amara. “Good,” he said to the creature. “We have work to do.”

**Monday August 30, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 23**  
**The Order of the Crescent Sword**

The Prieskans gathered in darkness, in a clearing far from the nearest town. Most orc warbands were likely to be spending the night sleeping or reveling after a long day of plundering, but volunteers still posted themselves in the distance watching for a wandering patrol.

Some of the men and women carried only tools--lumbering axes, hammers from smithies, scythes that had cut no wheat in this season’s orc and famine-ravaged fields--but others had brought armor and weapons. These were Atlantean soldiers who had returned to their homeland, not all under orders, to be with their friends and kin in Prieska’s time of trial. They spoke quietly to one another, waiting.

A newcomer emerged from the brush and was met by a pair of Atlanteans wielding lightning pistols. “Do you carry a sword?” asked one of the soldiers.

“I come under the moon,” said the farmer, drawing a shortsword from the bundle under his arm. Lowering their weapons, the soldiers were escorting him to the growing group when hoofbeats in the distance brought

everyone to attention. Some looked ready to scatter into the bushes, but the soldiers among their number brought them into a defensive formation around the perimeter of the clearing.

A stallion charged into the clearing, its rider clutching both the reins and the rope tied to the saddle's pommel. Tied to the trailing end of the rope was a bloody and battered orc. As the rider released the rope, the orc tumbled across the clearing spitting out dirt and guttural curses.

The rider reined in his horse and jumped down from the saddle. Chestnut hair spilled over her shoulders as she removed her helmet to reveal the green eyes and strong jaw of a Prieskan. "I thank you all for coming, under the moon and the sword," she said. "That you are here shows that Prieska still lives. Green-skinned raiders turned would-be conquerors can steal our homes and slaughter our herds, but they will never be able to touch our spirit."

She walked across the clearing and put a boot on the grunting orc. "I fought for the Empire when Rokos nearly fell to the hordes. Some of you were with me. We held the line! But when it was our own land under attack, did the Emperor rush the legions to Prieska's aid? No!"

"Our land was sacrificed so that Rokos and Luxor might stand. Yet those cities were lost to the Solonavi. Now news comes that Caero has fallen to the rabble of the Rebellion!" She walked the perimeter of the clearing, addressing each member of her audience. "The people of the empire are strong, but its head is addled by the luxury of the capital. So we will fight for ourselves, and recapture both our homeland and the glory of the Atlantean Empire."

"By coming here, you have brought me hope. In joining the Order of the Crescent Sword, you have brought hope to Prieska, and to the Empire. In return, I will bring you a champion!" She drew her sword and handed it to a nearby peasant, gesturing toward the orc. "Together, you will retake our homeland!" As the peasant slashed at the orc the gathered Prieskans cheered--caution be damned.

**Tuesday August 31, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 24**  
**Wanderer**

The scrying eye showed me only blinding whiteness, the frozen peaks of the north where the snows fell even in summer. A narrow path had been blazed through the drifts, and already it was filling with wind-blown snow. Ahead two draconum battled a fur-wrapped giant. The first was the Pathis Arcana, already bleeding but dancing away from beneath another oncoming blow to unleash a magic blast that made the giant howl in pain. The other was the revered mystic Hysthe, stepping between the giant and the Pathis and brandishing his glowing staff to ward off the giant's approach.

The Pathis drew a narrow scroll-like spellbook from her pouch and used all four of her arms to hold it steady in the blustering wind as she read. Snapping the book shut, she chanted growling words of magic that caused fire to erupt around their feet. "Now!" she cried, and the mystic pumped his wings to launch himself high into the air. As the giant looked up to follow the movement, Hysthe brought his staff down between the giant's eyes.

The giant howled again and clutched his hands to a face shattered by the magically-enhanced blow. Stumbling backward, he turned and fled, scooping up enormous handfuls of snow and pressing them to his face. Hysthe remained on guard until the giant vanished into the storm, then jammed his staff into the snow near where the Pathis was inspecting the wound on her serpentine tail. "Not much bleeding, but I think most of the damage is internal," she said through gritted teeth.

"Let me help," said Hysthe, placing his hands on the wound. Murmuring calmly, he cast a healing spell and the Pathis relaxed.

In a moment, she tentatively flexed. "I think I'll be able to travel," she said.

“Good!” said a nearby voice. The Pathis slithered out from under the mystic’s hands and reared up, ready to cast. Hysthe snatched up his staff and spun to see the female draconum seated on a nearby rock. “We don’t have far to go,” she continued. “But I’m not going to carry you.”

“Who are you?” said the Pathis.

“A wanderer,” said the newcomer. “A seeker. A sorcerer. A warrior. Cold. Hungry. Like you.” To the mystic she said, “Since we have so much in common, is there really any reason for us to fight?” She hopped down from the rock. “Come. Let’s go find a fire and some food. And maybe more.” When the two draconum hesitated she continued as she walked off into the snow. “You just bested a giant. I’m not even armed. Do I look like anything to worry about?”

She was almost lost in the distance before the Pathis moved to follow. Then Hysthe followed her lead, quietly saying, “Even a sheathed blade has an edge...”

**Wednesday September 1, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 25**  
**Sword and Spell**

“That palace should be ours,” growled Grand Magus Alment Lan.

I had not been able to take the scrying eye inside the heavily shielded Throne Palace to observe the deliberations of the Atlantean High Council, but when the head of the Delphana emerged with one of his advisors, I was quick to follow as they guided their floating platforms across the wide plaza in front of the palace.

Sitting in a gilded chair, the Grand Magus looked much older than the self-appointed mage-king who had come to the Grand Arena two years before. Now he looked toward the Arena in the distance, at the far end of the Golden Mile, as if considering the climb that had brought him to his seat of power. “We are not unrepresented in the Palace,” said the Delphana floating beside him on her own platform. “The Prophet-Magus still calls it home and still has the Emperor’s ear. Greenlee Manor is here on the Plaza and suits our needs nicely.”

“Pah,” spat Lan. “How long will Nujarek be able to trade magestone for our service? How long until what he willingly offers becomes what he threatens to cut off if we don’t follow his every command?” The magestones on his brow pulsed as he commanded his chair to pause in the center of the plaza. “It’s one of Tezla’s Precepts: the sword serves the spell. We are not meant to answer the call of the army--they are meant to answer ours. Where was Nujarek’s ‘volunteer legion’ when my city was captured?”

“You were in the council,” said the Delphana. “You know why the Emperor has been gathering together his forces. Besides, he was not informed of the attacks on Caero until it was too late to save the city. We will retake it, one day.”

Lan sat quietly for a moment. “I was made Grand Magus for a reason,” he finally said. “There are many who do not feel as you do. Were it not for Tezla’s crown on Nujarek’s brow, we would know what to do. Soon we may decide, and it may come much sooner than ‘one day’.” Then his chair glided off toward across the plaza.

**Tuesday, September 7, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 26**  
**Sorcerer’s Citadel**

The scrying eye hung high above the plain, far from both the Vizorr and the Kaiten. Yet there were other rivers, the currents of magic that flowed through the Land, and with each pulse of power that moved along their length they moved slightly, like the hands of a clockwork. Where the magical currents crossed, there were bright pools where magestone might be born. As I watched, the currents moved again, shifting their

banks. The crossings and their pooled magical power drew closer together. The currents were converging, and the power called to sorcerers across the Land.

At the center of the currents was the Spire, a granite mesa topped by tall outcroppings of sun-baked rock. Ancient carvings hinted that this had once been a holy place, but whatever had been worshipped here was either long dead or forgotten. Still it had called out to the sorcerers: *Come. Come and prove yourself.*

Dropping through the dark clouds overhead, the elven sorcerer was the first of his army to land, his griffin touching down lightly on dusty turf ravaged by famine and the creeping influence of the Dark Crusade. The Rivvanguard accompanying him landed nearby and dismounted. The captain came forward to inspect the Spire on the horizon. "You're sure it's here?"

"Quite certain," said the old man. "What the eyes cannot see, the heart can hear." I saw the currents move again in the distance, and the ground beneath the elves roiled for a moment. "Sometimes the feet can feel it as well," the sorcerer said with a wry smile.

It was the only conversation I had a chance to overhear. The scrying eye moved quickly around the Spire, showing me massed armies from every faction, led by sorcerers who had heard the Call to come to this place. *Prove yourself and the power will be yours*, it had said. The chaos shamans were the last to arrive, leaping off of their exhausted mounts to stare impatiently at the Spire.

They had all heard the Call. They had all come.

The ley currents shifted again, and all the pools slid onto the plain around the Spire. The wind seemed to push away from the mesa in all directions, raising enormous clouds of dust. Then the earth leapt upwards, knocking everyone from their feet, and when it crashed downward it cracked the sides of the Spire. As the ground continued to rumble, lightning rained down from the sky and slammed into the Spire, each bolt tearing away rock. Hardened soldiers cried out in terror, but the eyes of every sorcerer were fixed upon the Spire--and what was being revealed.

When the silence finally came, it seemed as loud as the tumult before. Then it was broken by a cry of amazement. At the center of the plain, where the Spire had once stood, was now a squat citadel. Its harsh lines yet graceful curves reminded me of the architecture of the Tower or Rokos--or perhaps even the Black Pyramid. It was a lost artifact of an ancient time. The hammered gold trimming its towers and parapets were blackened by time, and the cold iron of its gates was rusted shut. But at its foundation, the stones were still polished and bright. Magestone. As I saw the currents shift yet closer, I suddenly understood: when they converged upon this citadel, it would take to the air.

*Prove yourself and the power will be yours.*

"It begins," said the elven sorcerer.

As the sorcerers charged forward at the front of their armies, the battle began.

**Friday, September 10, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 27**  
**Shaped by Magic**

This afternoon, with Anquilis' encouragement, I took my first steps outside the grounds of the Oracle's Needle in nearly a year. The streets of Rokos were an overwhelming cacophony compared to the solemn tranquility of the tower, and standing in the gateway I was tempted to turn back. But rather than suffer certain derision from the tower's archivist and Oracle Daheia, I made my way down the street to a nearby taphouse.

Judging by the style of the building, it had been here nearly as long as the Needle, constructed long ago by the Priest-Kings of the Kosian wartribes. Remnants of not-quite scraped clean gold and crimson paint showed that the building had then been used by the Atlantean empire for some military or governmental purpose while they controlled the city. Now, walking inside, the sun streaming through the rainbow of colored glass that made up the front window lit a small but comfortable common room. At one end, a dwarf had set up some sort of pedal-powered fan to break up the stifling summer heat, and a crowd had gathered with their ales for the cool breezes and conversation.

I was outside the tower, but I wasn't ready for conversation yet. Purchasing a goblet of summerwine from the innkeeper, I took a seat on the far side of the room. Leaning my head against the cool stone wall, I closed my eyes and let the sounds of the city wash over me. But no sooner was I opening myself to the world around me than I felt the scrying eye drawing me somewhere else. Raising the goblet to my lips, I took a sip, then let go.

I was in the northern mountains somewhere, but before I could get a firm sense of a particular location the eye dived through the surface and into the rock below. Traveling through stone, the flat blackness was occasionally broken by a cave, or a stretch of worked stone--one of the Land's many dungeons, perhaps?

Then I entered a large cavern. Never had I been there, but I had seen it before. It had been in my vision, several weeks before. Dwarves were gathered in groups before massive, glowing forges. Some wore the leather apron of the smith, and carried hammers or tongs. But others wore robes embroidered with sigils and symbols that seemed more like the clothing of mages than dwarves.

At one gathering, a robed dwarf cast some sort of spell upon the hammer of an apprentice, who brought it down upon a nearby anvil to crush a piece of thumb-sized blue magestone. The mage gathered the dust and fragments together, and the smith extracted a glowing iron blade from the forge. As the smith hammered the blade into shape, the apprentice sprinkled magestone dust onto the weapon and the mage chanted the words of a spell. The cherry glow of the metal faded as the smith worked the metal, but a shimmering blue rippled up and down its surface--the enchantment that had been worked into the blade.

I wanted to see more, but the scrying eye pulled me across the cavern to a barrel-chested dwarf with a grey beard who was clearly directing the flurry of activity. While signing paperwork, he inspected an axe brought forward by an apprentice, noted an imperfection in the haft below the head, and sent it back. Moving an orange-enameled helm topped with an intricately-crafted bronze dragon, he pulled out a detailed inventory and handed it to a white-haired woman sitting nearby. "We've doubled production this month," he said. "Thanks to a new spell discovered by one of the sages we need less magestone than ever to ensorcel a blade, so it should be easier than ever to arm our men with weapons that will punch right through magical defenses."

"You've done well, Kenaz," said the woman. "What of the project?"

"Hammerfist hasn't been nearly as successful at mass production of the ammunition, but we hope to have it available in quantity soon."

"Good," she said. "I need to launch a campaign this fall or the push for more guerilla attacks will gain even more support."

"I heard about Caero," said the dwarf.

"Indeed," said the woman. "I wish the Thorns had seen fit to tell me before striking sparks that will only inflame Blackwyn and his supporters. The tactics and surgical strikes they favor are effective, but the Revolution now has enough support to field a standing army. Provided that we're properly armed, we can not only protect our lands from invaders but face the Atlanteans face to face and side by side."

The dwarf stroked his beard. "What will you need?"

“Weapons and ammunition, enough for a thousand men, delivered to--”

“Are you okay?” I opened my eyes to find the innkeeper standing before me, roughly shaking my arm.

“I’m fine,” I snapped, frustrated that I wouldn’t be able to deliver information on the full extent of the Revolutionaries’ plans. Back in the Necropolis, I would have killed any who were foolish enough to interrupt something this important. I stood, reaching for my dagger, and found myself weary and weakened from using the scrying eye so far from the scrying chamber. “I’m fine,” I repeated, stumbling into the table and knocking over the goblet.

“I’m fine,” I said, falling to the floor and into unconsciousness.

**Thursday, September 16, 2004**

**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 28**

**Belief**

I drifted in the dreamless black of unconsciousness for what may have been a minute or an eternity, yet I was only aware of it when I felt the pull of the scrying eye. Even insensate I could answer its call, and followed it into the infinite distance.

Despite its increasing independence, I usually thought of the scrying eye as an extension of myself, one I could use as a distant and immaterial vantage point for my consciousness. Now, though, I was an extension of the eye. It could see, but it could not understand. Now, drawing me out of the blackness, it was using me.

We were in the hidden valley in the Sturmounts that the eye had shown me before, the home of the Elemental Council since their escape from the Dark Crusade’s siege of Roanne Valle. The crude shelter I had seen previously had been replaced by a graceful structure of intertwining vines grown between the trees overhead to provide shade, surrounded by a palisade of stone and wood that had been constructed in the last month yet appeared so natural as to have been in place for a thousand years.

In the high mountain shade all the heat was sapped from the air, so a glowing hearth provided warmth for Prophet-Priest Tremelen, still recovering from his wounds but reclining comfortably among a swaddle of blankets. Nearby were the Queen of the Faeries, a centaur, and a pair of trolls. This, then, was a meeting of the Council of Five.

“Where is it?” demanded the mountain troll. “If you will not answer, perhaps it will.”

“We do not ask anything of the spirit of Tezla,” said Tremelen. “We can only do what it asks of us.”

“The health of the Land is the health of Tezla,” said the centaur, quoting a popular Elemental precept. “I am certain that it is Councillor Turan’dan’s concern for the health of both the Avatar and the Wylden that would make him speak so plainly.”

“Pah!” spat the troll. “The graves of my ancestors are under attack by our enemies and you would sit here and talk! Evil has taken root in our land, and the spirit will tell us how to drive it out!”

“The Avatar will come here when it can,” said Tremelen. “Until then, we must trust that the spirit has pointed our fate in the proper direction, even if there is no path under our feet.”

The troll threw aside his drinking gourd and stood. “Perhaps the spirit will not come because you are here. Perhaps you have failed the children of the wild one too many times.” Glaring at the centaur he said, “The elf will say it isn’t so. Then you ask him why magic will not heal his wounds.” With that, he stomped out of the council, followed by the forest troll.

The centaur began to follow, but Tremelen waved her back. "Let them go, Laurell. Even were the avatar here, the cooling breeze of Tezla's wisdom would only serve to fan the flames of their rage. They must fight for their people."

The centaur paused. "You misunderstand, Prophet-Priest. I am a servant of Tezla and the Land. I believe in the Spirit of Tezla. I believe in the Council, and our efforts to bring together all the creatures of the Land to live in harmony."

"Yet I am also a druid. High Priestess Kess is already at Stonekeep, and has been for several weeks preparing for this battle. Like her, I feel the pain of the Land as it is violated by creatures who find their pleasures and beliefs rooted in the horrors of pain and death. They must be destroyed so that the Council and the Land might live."

Laurell picked up her quiver. "I will do what I can to bring the trolls back to the Council soon, but for now I do not go to call them back. I go to join their fight. When we return, I hope that you and the spirit of Tezla will tell us we have done the right thing." Steeling herself, she suddenly shouldered the quiver and left the council.

Just as suddenly, the scrying eye dropped me back into darkness.

**Monday September 27, 2004**  
**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 29**  
**Blood and Destiny**

The boats came quietly out of the blackness, the mirror-calm surface of the water broken only by the long, quiet strokes of the oars. As soon as the lead boat scraped against the stony shore, blood cultists scrambled over the sides to lift it out of the water so that it would make no more noise. Only their leader stood apart, studying the towers on the cliffs above as more boats beached behind him. The army of Darq the Corrupt had come to the Necropolis.

"I bid you welcome, warlord," said a nearby voice. As Darq drew his sword, the nearby shadows dissolved to reveal Deathspeaker Aeradon, one hand resting on the head of the hound-like blood demon sitting beside him. Behind the deathspeaker stood a vampire wielding two blackened pistols, both pointed at Darq. "I trust there is reason for your unorthodox means of arrival."

"Blood and destiny," said Darq. "I have come to collect both."

As one of the blood cultists came too close, Aeradon's hound darted forward to snap off his sword arm at the shoulder. Armored limb between his teeth, the demon rumbled contentedly. Aeradon smiled coldly. "Very well, then. Allow me to give you your first victory." Reaching up to his neck, the deathspeaker pulled on the skull hanging around his neck, his ancient symbol of office. With a yank, the thin silver chain snapped and Aeradon tossed the skull at Darq's feet. "If I you are able to claim your destiny, it is because I will not allow you to stand in the way of mine. Attempt to do so, and I will destroy you."

Darq paused only for a moment before stooping to snatch up the skull. He rubbed its polished surface with his thumb as one of his lieutenants stepped up behind him. "Warlord--" she began.

"Deathspeaker," corrected the vampire.

"Deathspeaker Darq," said the lieutenant. "Our forces continue to arrive. We must get them under cover quickly."

"Judge Blacklock will lead you into the tunnels," said Aeradon. "We will meet again soon, Deathspeaker." Then the shadows wrapped around him and he was gone.

**Tuesday September 28, 2004**

**Summer, 435 TZ, Day 30**  
**Sacrifice**

Bright afternoon sun was stabbing through the window when I opened my eyes today to find myself in my room in the Oracle's Needle. After the oathsworn healer waiting beside my bed sent a page to fetch Oracle Daheia, she informed me that I had been unconscious for nearly three days. I sipped at the broth offered by the healer until Daheia and Anquilis arrived, then told them of my visions during the last three days--the Forgemasters, the Elemental Council, and the arrival of Darq's blood cultists at the necropolis. When they went to go discuss what I had told them, they told me to rest. Instead I came here to the scrying chamber to update my journals.

As I recorded the meeting between Darq and Aeradon, I considered attempting to send a warning to the deathspeakers. Certainly such a message would win me favor--enough to get me closer to the seats of power so that one day, when I was free of my oath to the Solonavi, I could make strive to capture a seat among them myself. Though I had seen it only hours ago, the Necropolis now seemed a distant place and my return far in the future. Better that I simply continue to fulfill my oath, I decided, observing and recording events as they occurred, and gathering the power that came from observing the leaders of the land's major factions and knowing much about them that they would kill to know about one another.

With that decision, I was again reminded of the true purpose of these journals, and the increasing value of the service I provided to the Solonavi.

Chasing the thoughts from my mind, I went to my familiar seat beside the scrying pool and pushed the eye across the land, back to the Necropolis. The sun was a heavy crimson orb sliding behind the eastern peaks, and the long dark shadows of the Prophet's Tower fell across the former Temple of Uhlrik. After the Order of Vladd had won their victory over the Order of Uhlrik in the vampire civil war, the temple had been rededicated to the blood goddess. The scattered groups of cultists hurrying to enter the temple caught my eye, and the group dragging in a black-robed figure lured me to investigate further.

As I guided the eye into the temple, I saw that tonight all the followers of the blood goddess had gathered in her temple, both those from the Necropolis and the many more who had journeyed across the land from Galeshi with Darq's army. Darq stood behind the temple's altar, as did the pale-skinned priestess of the blood cult and Bloody Amara, the demon she had summoned in Mundort. The gathered cultists chanted rhythmically as the dark-robed figure was dragged toward the altar. When they chained her to the slab, I finally recognized her--it was Deathspeaker Nedki.

"You'll pay for this, vampire!" Nedki hissed. "The Prophet and Tezla himself will reach out to avenge me upon you and all weak fools who think they can climb above their place!"

Darq reached down to draw the deathspeaker's skull from around her neck. Hanging it around his own beside Aeradon's badge of office, he leaned close to Nedki as the cultist's chanting built to a roar. "Soon the Prophet will need me as much as I need him." Taking the blood priestess' hand, he drew her closer. "Carlana, I leave her in your hands."

The vampire priestess smiled viciously. "Good. Amara has been so hungry."

Darq returned her smile. "If the demon hungers for deathspeakers, I can promise that it will soon have its fill."

**Wednesday September 29, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 1**  
**Deathspeakers' Fall**

Five more deathspeakers were abducted and sacrificed by the blood cultists before the alarm spread through the city. Then the battle began.

Long kept in check by the deathspeakers and the prophet, the night allowed the rivalry between the Tezla-worshipping priests of the Dark Crusade and the goddess worshippers of the blood cult to finally flare into an inferno of fury as crusader priests led the charge against the blood temple. Whenever a cultist fell, the others would draw upon his waning strength to bolster their own. Whenever a priest fell, the others would raise her as zombie and send her back into the fray.

In a fletcher's shop several blocks from the temple, Deathspeaker Vagar directed newly arriving squads of warriors as he attempted to establish a cordon around the area. It was well known that Vagar better served Tezla as a necromancer than a military commander, but those with more experience and skill had been the first captured and sacrificed to Bloody Amara. It was clear he was growing frustrated. "I want a wall of zombies ten deep at the Torturer's Gate!" he growled. "If they want to take one step forward, they'll have to take it through a dozen blades!"

Given the innumerable narrow alleys and underground tunnels pervading the Necropolis, it seemed Vagar was attempting the impossible. The deathspeakers controlled the major thoroughfares through the area, but were often flanked by blood cultists who would unexpectedly boil out of a nearby building where they had emerged from their hidden trip through the maze of passages. I saw one such ambush led by Judge Blacklock, which explained how the newly-arrived cultists seemed to have such intimate knowledge of the city.

By dawn it was clear that the deathspeakers had lost control of at least the temple district, if not the entire city. Vagar sat exhausted in a battered ebony chair as his apprentices gathered the maps and weapons scattered around the shop. A young woman wearing the deathspeaker's skull entered the room and hurried over to Vagar. As I didn't recognize her, it seemed likely that she was the replacement for the speaker sacrificed to Tezla several weeks earlier. A line of scarred flesh began on her left temple and ran down beneath her robes to her ruined left hand, clutched in a jeweled silver brace ending in claw-like fingers. "Vagar," she said. "The cultists are coming. We must fall back to your manor."

"I must go to the prophet, Quila," said Vagar. "I will report my failure personally."

"I grew up in this area," said Quila, gathering nearby scrolls. "Let me guide you. We can travel more quickly on our own. You others--meet us at the deathspeaker's manor." Handing off the scrolls and taking Vagar's arm, she led him out a back door and down an alley.

The orange sky above was shrouded in smoke from a building burning nearby. As Quila and Vagar emerged into a plaza, she paused. "Wait," she whispered.

"What is it?" said Vagar impatiently. "I can see the Prophet's Tower ahead. Let's go."

"I don't think so," she said, and brought her silver-clad hand down heavily on the deathspeaker's head. With a gasp, he fell to his knees. Another hit, and he slumped to the street. Drawing a chain and shackles from beneath her robes, she quickly snapped them onto Vagar's wrists. "You can come out now, Demethostes," she said. "I nearly missed the sign," she said, pointing to a symbol painted in fresh blood on the wall.

"You never miss anything," said the red-robed cult enforcer who emerged from the nearby shadows. When he drew Quila close, she leaned in and kissed him. "Hide the sigil until you meet with Darq. You don't want to be caught up by some random patrol."

The deathspeaker handed the chain to Vagar's shackles to the enforcer. "For the demon and the goddess," she said, reaching up to drop the skull around her neck into her robes.

"Both will be pleased," he said, hefting Vagar onto his shoulder. "I'll see you at the tower."

**Friday October 1, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 2**

## Deathspeaker's Coup

A final sacrifice of Vagar and another pair of captured deathspeakers was made to the blood goddess yesterday morning as the blood cult prepared for a final assault to capture the remaining two deathspeakers.

Deathspeaker Jafik and Deathspeaker Tolomen made their stand at the Prophet's Tower. Built atop the highest ridge in the Necropolis and backed by sheer cliffs dropping hundreds of feet to the waters of Black Lake, the Tower was the most defensible position in the city. With a cloud of pain wraiths swarming around the tower dozens of demon dogs summoned by the deathspeakers to guard the gates, it appeared nearly impregnable. Yet the cultists were relentless, sending not only an army of their own zealous warriors but also charge after charge by vampiric skeletons. But whenever the cult appeared to be making an advance, one of the deathspeakers would lash out with spells that ripped into the cultists' ranks, and their progress would be lost.

The stalemate continued through the night until the cultists finally started to gain some ground against the weakening forces of the deathspeakers. Finally, late this afternoon, Darq led the charge to kill the few remaining defenders outside the tower. After the last had fallen Bloody Amara came forward, infused with power from the cult's sacrifices. In a single blow, Amara shattered the obsidian gates and the cult poured into the Prophet's Tower.

The cultists moved from room to room, eliminating any guards they found. Finally they encountered the deathspeakers, barricaded behind corpses melded together into a wall of shrieking undead flesh that prevented further progress. Jafik and Tolomen tossed spell after spell at the attackers in a desperate but vicious last stand, slaughtering dozens of cultists. Again it was Darq and Amara who made the attack to break through, and as the cultists raised the deathspeaker's heads on pikes, Darq added their skull-sigils to his collection.

Finally Darq emerged onto the parapets atop the Tower's base. Ahead lay Tezla's Gate and entrance into the tower proper. Beyond the gate, all souls belonged to Dark Tezla. Only deathspeakers could enter without having their spirits torn from their bodies and consumed by his wrath. Now, though, Darq wore the symbol of a deathspeaker. Calling forward a dozen cultists, he hung the other skull-sigils around their necks. "Victory is ours!" the vampire lord cried. "No longer will the Crusade place itself before the glory due to the blood goddess and her greatest servant, the Dark Tezla. We will kneel before Tezla and sing his praises, Prophet be damned--"

Darq's speech was cut off by a shout from above as a robed figure tumbled from the highest window of the tower. The figure reached out with magic in an attempt to stop his fall, but shrieking spirits coalesced from the soot-blackened air and tore it apart. What little remained splashed into the dark waters far below the Tower.

Once the moment of shock had passed, Darq dashed through Tezla's Gate and up the long stair, his dozen followers close at his heels. At their top they found the Prophet's audience chamber, and at the center of the room, the Dark Tezla. The cultists immediately dropped to their knees on the cold black marble and gazed rapturously at the embodiment of living death. Though hardened in a century of battles across the Land, even the legendary Darq the Corrupt was solemnly reverent...until Aeredon stepped into the room and crossed before him.

"That was the Prophet?" Darq said, and I too realized who the figure was that had fallen from the Tower.

"Soma was weak," said Aeredon. "He couldn't even defend the purity of the Crusade from the likes of you."

Darq leapt to his feet. "You are a fool to impugn a traditional older than even Tezla himself! We are the deathspeakers now, and I will see that your pain will be unending until you repent!"

Aeredon considered Darq for a moment, then raised his hand and spoke a single word. Bands of crimson energy lanced out from his fingertips to bind the blood cultists, who shook in agony as their souls were ripped from their bodies. Casually, Aeredon walked from one to the next, gathering their spirits. Bringing them to the death golem, he bowed and offered them forth. One after another, they were consumed by Dark Tezla, and the screaming of the blood cultists fell silent.

Aeredon spared only one, cradling it in his hands. "You have never been my equal," he said. As he thrust the spirit at Darq, the vampire lord gasped and fell free of his bonds. "You are not worthy to call yourself a deathspeaker," said Aeredon. "The deathspeakers are dead. Yet Tezla has decreed that you and those who follow you be allowed a chance to prove your worth to the Crusade. I suggest you do so quickly, or I will see that your pain ends very quickly. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"Yes...Prophet Aeredon," said Darq. Tearing the skull from his neck, he threw it to the floor and left the Tower.

**Wednesday October 6, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 3**  
**Fallen**

As I've observed the races and cultures of the Land, I've found that each deals with the dead in its own way. Before dropping the dead over the side of their family ships into the eternal sea, the Xandressans wrap corpses tightly in 'spirit bindings' so that both body and spirit will never be separated. In the Golemcore, superstition among apprentice mechanics is to attach a piece of a fallen golem, said to carry the knowledge it gained in battle, somewhere within the shell of each new technomantic creation.

Most trolls who die in combat are left where they fall, believed by their brethren to have been judged by fate and arrived at their destiny. Only the most honored are gathered up and taken high into the Sturnmounts to be interned in the ancient graveyard established by the mountain trolls. In a high mountain canyon of unimaginable wealth, the graveyard has veins of gold running through its walls and growths of magestone erupting from its floor. Yet the trolls have always treated these inviolable. They come to the canyon only to place their most legendary warriors into the crevices in the stone, sealed behind enormous slabs carved with images and tales of the warrior's battles. It is a sacred place of cold and savage beauty.

Until today. Desperate to hold Stonekeep, the troll defenders of the fortress led Elemental forces to the graveyard in hopes of recovering any weapons and artifacts that might have been entombed with the legendary warriors. When they arrived, they discovered a group of Draconum already looting the tombs and the battle began. The trolls among the Elementals fought to defend both their race and faction, but the draconum seemed driven by their own needs and pushed back with both sword and spell. When the battle was over, there were many fresh corpses in the graveyard and only a half dozen draconum remained. Working quickly, they gathered heavy packs of artifacts and magestone and hurried down the pass.

Not long thereafter, as shadows hung deep in the canyon and night gathered above, a lone red-skinned troll came to the graveyard. He roared in rage at the desecration he found as he stalked grimly among the broken tombs. When he came to an empty niche in the canyon wall, he opened the bundle he carried and placed it inside, revealing what remained of a forest troll failed not only by martial skill but also by his ability to regenerate from his wounds. Putting his shoulder against an enormous nearby boulder, the red-skinned troll heaved with all his strength and pushed the boulder in place in front of the tomb opening. Using a war hammer collected from a fallen Elemental, the troll carved a single word onto the boulder: HUHN.

Then he threw aside the hammer and turned back to the corpses of the fallen draconum and Elementals. "Now, defilers, you will find that death is no escape from the Crusade."

**Thursday October 14, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 4**  
**Stratagem**

This afternoon, Oracle Daheia accompanied me outside the tower grounds to the same inn I had visited a week previously. The innkeeper smiled as we came through the door. "Oracle Daheia! Welcome back!" Stepping close he whispered, "There hasn't been much in the way of new supply, but I still have a bottle of that Wylden honey mead you like so much. I'll get you a glass." To me, in a more normal tone: "Mistress Kastali, it is good to see you up and around again. When I sent the boy to fetch the tower guards, I wasn't sure you'd ever wake up."

"You will address her as Oracle Kastali," said Daheia.

"Of course," said the innkeeper. "I apologize for not recognizing you without your vestments, Oracle Kastali. Please, pick the table you like. I'll bring your drink--and something special for you, Oracle Kastali." Without explanation, he rushed away and Daheia led me to a table far from the crowd gathered around the fireplace.

Sitting across from one another, Daheia reached out to take my hands. "It is vital that you learn to employ your abilities away from the tower. I want you to close your eyes, feel your connection to your scrying pool and the rocks of the Oracle's Needle." I did as she instructed, sensing the cold emptiness around me and the warming bulwark of the tower's magic in the distance. "Draw strength from it," said Daheia, and I reached toward the tower until I felt a trickle of warmth come from the tower and slowly envelop me. "Now cast the eye," came Daheia's voice from the darkness. "Now!"

"We've gone through this pass before!" The blackness was wiped away and I once again found myself observing the frozen mountains of the north. The Pathis Arcana and Hysthe the draconum mystic were wrapped tightly in furs against the cold, but the draconum they followed held her arms wide as if welcoming the wind.

"We've come this way before!" repeated Hysthe. "I recognize those rocks, and can see our tracks right over there! Why are you leading us in circles? You said you knew where we were going!"

"Maybe you are not ready to arrive," said the draconum, scooping up snow and balling it in her hands. "Maybe you must go round and round and round until you are ready to throw." She dropped the snowball at her feet. "Or perhaps you can just turn back."

"I'm ready to throw, all right," said Hysthe, clenching his fists.

The Pathis stepped between them. "Respectfully, Wanderer, we have been traveling for many days when time is of the essence. If you know where we can find the elder, I ask you to take us to him as soon as possible or our paths will part until we find him on our own. We will not turn back."

The draconum smiled. "You are ready." She led the pair around a nearby boulder, revealing a cave mouth concealed behind it and under a shelf of ice hanging overhead. Out of the wind and into the stillness of the cave, silence hung thick around the trio as they went further down the tunnel. The white glow behind them receded until they moved through near darkness...and then toward the warm glow of a torch ahead. Following from torch to torch they went deeper and deeper, down a spiraling path until they were deep in the mountain.

They stopped by a large brazier whose flames shimmered across the surface of a large underground lake. "The elder likes fish," said the wanderer, shrugging. Across the dark waters was a rocky island marked by another bright fire. The trio of draconum boarded a raft and the wanderer offered poles to the other two. "No," said the wanderer as Hysthe put his pole into the water. "I'll get us across. The elder likes fish." The Pathis took the hunt and attached lines and hooks from a box on the raft to their poles. "The grubs in there aren't just for us," suggested the wanderer.

By the time the wanderer had poled the raft to the island, Hysthe and the Pathis had caught a brace of long, pale fish. They loaded the fish into oily baskets waiting on the shore, and carried them toward the structures waiting ahead. They were made of crude stones from the surrounding chamber, but artfully pieced together

as if they had been forever joined. They looked as though they had stood for a thousand years and would stand for a thousand more. Young draconum whelps played outside one, and waved as the wanderer approached, shouting, "Gryn!" The wanderer waved in return but led Hysthe and the Pathis toward the largest building at the center of the village.

Firelight spilled out of the building into the gloom of the cavern, and inside I could see a drakona sitting atop a cushion studying a large tome. He had a powerful torso and arms, but his legs were oddly shrivled and bent. "Welcome back, Wanderer," he said without looking up. "Good, you've brought me fish."

"Krosthysas," said the Pathis, bowing low in the doorway. "We have come in an attempt to heal the ancient and unknowable rift between us, and to ask your assistance in our time of need."

"Those who make the journey to my home are always welcome," said Krosthysas. "Physically, that is." As I followed the draconum into Krosthysas' home, there was a flash around me and I noticed that the stones around the entrance were engraved with the same golden runes I had seen in the draconum valley.

The world went gray, neither light nor dark, cold nor warm. I released my connection to the scrying eye and found myself back in the inn. Daheia sat across me quietly sipping her mead. "Good," she said. "You will tell us of your vision." She waited for me to pick up my own glass and nod before she continued. "First, though, you might tell me who's been leaving you gifts at the inn." She gestured at the innkeeper's tray on the edge of the table, and what lay on it: an exquisitely crafted necklace.

**Monday October 18, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 5**  
**Road to Luxor**

I spent last night examining the necklace, searching for answers both for Daheia and myself. The centerpiece was a large tooth of some sort, carved with an abstract sigil. Flanking it and threaded on the same crimson thong were two yellow wooden beads from which hung thin magestone crystals. Around the rest of the necklace, ivory cylinders intricately carved with various scenes of ships, shorelines, and the sea alternated with dyed pearls in a variety of colors. None of it gave any clue as to where the necklace came from or what it meant, so I locked it in a chest in my room and put it out of my mind.

In the scrying chamber this morning, I sat before the pool and cast the eye loose. Perhaps luck would be with me and I would learn more about the necklace.

Instead I found myself in an abandoned village on the borderlands between Prieska and Revolution territory. The famine had hit hard in this area, and it appeared that sometime in the last month the few survivors had finally given up. The buildings were covered in a fresh layer of grime and cobwebs, but they had yet to show any true disrepair. They had made a fine stop for the group of adventurers whose pack mules were tied up outside one of the houses while they waited inside.

An elven swordsman was cooking at the hearth, while a long-bearded dwarf and an orc hunched over stones set atop grooves carved into the wooden table. "Explain it again, Groom," complained the dwarf. "And if it doesn't make sense this time, you can forget the whole stupid game."

"Very popular," said the orc. "Roll dice, move stones that much. You take stones you go around. That simple."

"Move some of the stones? All of the stones?" The dwarf threw up his hands and got up from the table. "Forget it. Just about time for another meal anyway. Another meal while we wait for--"

"Me?" A silver-haired Kosian reddened by the summer sun threw down his pack as he came through the door. "Sorry I'm late."

“Two days you kept us waiting,” said the dwarf.

“I’m sure an ancient tomb lost in the Blasted Lands won’t be going anywhere,” said the Kosian.

“It’s not wasted time,” said the elf. “It’s wasted supplies. There isn’t much to forage around here.”

“You also said you weren’t sure we had the strength of arms we needed. So I think you’ll find the wait was worth it. Come on.” Gesturing over his shoulder, he left the house.

The others followed to find him standing beside a bow-armed golem whose red paintjob was splattered with mud. Normally the Golemcore kept their golems in near perfect condition, but this one looked as though it had been traveling for weeks without an inspection. “Found him on the road a day east of here, just standing there at the crossroads to Luxor.”

“You mean you found *it*,” said the dwarf. “How’d you get it to come with you?”

“No, I mean *him*,” said the Kosian. “I watched for a while to see if it was some sort of trap, then went up and called around. He answered and told me his name.”

“What do you mean, ‘He answered’?” said the dwarf.

“I am Redgear,” said the golem in a buzzing voice.

“Gah!” cried the dwarf, leaping backward.

“I asked him where the rest of his kore was, and he didn’t respond. Then I told him I was off for a bit of adventure, to explore an ancient tomb and fight some monsters,” said the Kosian. “He said--”

“I want to go adventure and fight monsters,” said the golem. The mechanism in his arm whirred as it fed arrows into his weapon.

“Not yet, Redgear,” said the Kosian, grinning and patting the golem’s metal casing.

“Okay, then,” said the elf. “Let’s eat and get back on the road.”

“Yeah--sooner we there, sooner it can shoot us in back,” mumbled the orc.

**Wednesday October 20, 2004**

**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 6**

**Silent Citadel**

The morning seemed unusually quiet, and it wasn’t until I was making my way to the scrying chamber that I realized why: the Call had ended. No longer was there a voice in my head calling me to come join the battle for the citadel in the midlands. I was barely into the chamber before I cast the eye to the east, across the Vizorr...

The sorcerers and their armies had retreated to the edge of the plain around the shattered rock of Spire, tending to the few survivors of the battle. The plain itself had been rent asunder by magical power, both that of the sorcerers and that naturally flowing through the Land, concentrated on this place as it was inexorably drawn to the citadel that had long been hidden beneath the Spire. Now I could see that all the ley currents in the area flowed into the citadel, charging the magestones at its foundation. It would fly, and it would fly soon.

Only one ley current ran around the citadel, pooling instead at one of the encampments on the edge of the plain. I brought the scrying eye down into the area and found an ancient elven sorcerer, gravely wounded. Younger warriors kneeled around him, heads pressed to the ground as they made vows of vengeance. Only

the scrying eye and one priestess, tending to the sorcerer, was close enough to hear his final words, barely a whisper:

“Ley anchor...will be gone when I am. It has all happened again....the drakes have seized power, yet they...lack the wisdom to...wield it properly....”

“It has all happened again...”

With a shudder, the sorcerer died. The ley currents flowing beneath him snapped away toward the citadel, and a rumbling shook the plain. I sent the scrying eye toward the citadel, where draconum warriors cheered when the portcullis blocking entrance to the citadel ground slowly upward.. A drakona sorcerer pushed past them to be the first between the doors of the citadel as they swung open. In the courtyard beyond, he stopped to face the warriors following behind him. “Are there any now who dare call the silent citadel nothing more than a legend? The blood of my blood held the truth through the centuries, and now it is ours! I have captured it!”

“You have all the drakona weaknesses and none of the humility that should come with it, Goldyx,” growled the lead draconum warrior. “This citadel belongs to the draconum, and if you disagree we’ll bring one of our mystics to explore this place.”

The drakona raised a clawed hand dismissively and closed his eyes, feeling the magical power running into the citadel. “All your mystics perished in the battle, warrior. Only I remain to guide the silent citadel when it rises into the sky--which it should be doing very.....soon.” The drakona dashed up a ramp to the parapets and roared triumphantly as the citadel shook and rose off the plains in a rain of rock and dirt, the magestones beneath it glowing with power.

As the citadel climbed up into the clouds, I thought back to the elven sorcerer’s final words: “It has all happened again.” Pushing aside the scrying eye and finding myself once again in the scrying chamber, I pulled one of my journals from the shelf and flipped through the pages until I came to my entry several weeks ago, the one Anquilis called a prophecy:

*It is now as it was, but how it was is not how it will be.*

**Wednesday October 27, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 7**  
**Scourge Ship**

The bloodpit’s weaponmaster advanced on me, and I knew that my lessons were over. Dodge or die. Kill or be killed. He was strong, but the weight of his blade still made each swing a commitment--allowing me to step clear of his first attack and stab with the point of my own sword at his unarmored legs. His words: if it can bleed, it can be a target. He grunted as my sword sunk deep and hit bone, but rather than flinch the veteran warrior twisted his body in an attempt to pull the sword from my hands. I grasped the hilt tightly and pulled...

The scrying eye pulled me from dreams of my training in the Necropolis and drew me across the land, over the Scythrians and Prieska, then up the green band along the shore south of the desert dunes to the Galeshi port of Mazzeba. Xandressan ships flying the flags of every major family were tied up at the city’s docks. Alongside them was a small fleet of cold riggers, the ships of hardened sailors who traversed up the cold currents to search for the icy islands floating off the furthest coast. At the mouth of the harbor stood the Eye of the Sun, the enormous fire-lit tower guiding ships into port even on black nights like this. At the base of the tower, sailors were passing around a bottle and swapping stories.

“So he offloads his ship in Kelp’s Landing, and he’s trying to get someone to buy this big slimy egg!” said one old captain. “Like crusty ambergris, and smelled twice as bad. I told him my ballast stone was worth more than that thing. Weren’t anybody going to eat it, and nobody’d want to raise anything that came out of it. Last I heard he dumped it back in the bay where he found it.”

“Ship a’bay!” cried a young mate who looked like an escaped Amazon boy.

“This time of night?” said the captain. “He’s got the wind, but who’d be coming in the pitch, and against the tide?”

“Looks like Achraf’s rigger,” said a sailor at the edge of the pier.

“Back from another hunt for the birds in the ice,” said another. “And likely with empty hands.”

“But not empty coffers,” said the captain. “Some fool sponsored this voyage. If he’s smart, he filled his hold full of ice, too. Word is that a caravan is headed for Alrimjin tomorrow, and they’ll be looking for a fresh load.”

“He’s not headed for the coldhouse,” said the mate.

“No, boy, he’s not,” said the captain, rising from the cask he had been sitting on. “He’s still got sail, and he hasn’t dropped chain. Damp your pipes and hold your bottles, men, she’s coming straight for us!”

The sailors dove for cover as the rigger slammed into the pier, wood splintering and mortar grinding. The rigging snapped in the impact, cords snapping like whips and tumbling spars knocking cargo aside like children’s toys. Calm returned, broken by the moans of a sailor pinned beneath a part of the shattered bow and an enormous carved figurehead of a gryphon. “Help him out,” growled the captain, storming across the wreckage. “On the ship!” he shouted. “Achraf, you fool! Get out here!”

The mate clambered up and slung an arm over a broken railing. “All the hands are asleep, or dead, or something,” he said. “I don’t see anything moving, except for--rats!” The boy threw himself onto the pier and scabbled backward as a wave of rats swarmed over the side and onto the pier. The rats rushed over the sailors, who swatted and kicked as the creatures crawled up their clothing and tore at their flesh. One sailor dove over the edge into the water, and was followed by at least a dozen vermin.

The captain grabbed the shrieking mate by the collar as he kicked at the cask he had been sitting on, shattering the sides and spilling brandy across the stones. Snatching a torch from the tower wall, he swung it in a wide arc around he and the boy, setting the liquor afire. The rats squealed and danced back from the flames. “Settle down,” said the captain, though I wasn’t sure if he spoke to the boy, the rats, or himself.

“My arms!” cried the boy. Where the rats had bitten him, black welts were oozing yellow ichor and blood. “My...arms...” he said again, and collapsed at the captain’s feet.

“Sun’s embrace,” breathed the captain. “What are these creatures?”

A dark-cloaked figure stepped heavily off the ship, dragging a limp leathery sack behind him. He reached up under his hood to pull aside his scarf and I saw limp, stringy hair, pointed ears, and brightly glowing yellow eyes in a face webbed by broken blood vessels. Throwing the sack onto the pier, he pursed blackened lips to whistle shrilly.

The rats swarmed across the pier and into the sack, and as it filled it took the form of a bizarre mount. The vermin writhed beneath its skin as it stomped its hooves on the stones. As the cloaked figure climbed astride the beast, he seemed to finally notice the captain. Inhaling, he held the breath for a moment and then coughed wetly toward the man. A miasma of droplets hung in the air and floated over the dying flames to envelop the captain, who suddenly clutched at his throat and fell to his knees retching.

A rat swarmed up the cloaked rider’s back and came to rest on his shoulder. “It will be a long journey home, little ones,” said the rider. “Before we continue on, let’s spend a night in town.” The beast shuffled forward.

**Wednesday November 3, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 8**  
**Dark Tiding**

Through the night I watched in horror as the strange horseman ravaged the port quarter of Mazzeba. Not once did he show a weapon, or was a blade lifted against him. Instead he was preceded by his army of rats, and by swarms of flies that billowed out from beneath his cloak. And wherever they went, people died. The only thing that could outrun the slow but inexorable advance of the plague was panic, as the terrified citizenry fled.

Finally, late in the night, the city guard responded. Already well prepared for an invasion as they guarded themselves against the incursions of the moonborn vampires from the deserts, they turned their forces inward. Using black powder charges smuggled in from Khamsin, they destroyed warehouses and homes until the debris clogged the major thoroughfares of the city. Then they pulled cart-borne catapults into position and began to lob barrels of burning pitch over the debris. Within an hour, the port quarter was ablaze. While the citizenry fought to keep the flames from spreading, the guard kept the flames burning high and hot along the border of the area in an attempt to keep anything from passing through.

I guided the scrying eye through the flames and found the rider in the fish market, the ground around him a living, roiling thing as rats crowded close. Sitting heavily on his mount, the rider threw back his hood and watched the flames grow around him. Sharp elven features were the only graceful accents in a face swollen and pocked by disease, and only black pupils could be seen in his otherwise butterflower-yellow eyes. The rider watched the flames grow around him, and he smiled. Pushing his hand through the hide of his mount and drew out a handful of rats. "There are caves down by the shore," he said to them. "Go there and wait. Return when the flames have died."

Throwing the rats to the stones, he turned the silhouettes of Galeshi warriors that could be seen moving along the distant rooftops, shooting burning arrows into the port quarter. The rider tried to speak, but the words were lost in a deep, hacking cough. Wiping black and yellow phlegm from his lips, he began again, shouting above the roar of the fire:

"We are alike, tribesmen! Betrayed by those we thought would protect us, our passion swallowed by our struggle."

"I go to collect my debt from those who truly owe me, but I leave you with a message: look at the pestilence I have brought, and see I am merely a wave in a rising tide. The darkness is coming, and your flames will be extinguished. Know that I wish you luck, tribesmen, but that I already lament your death."

Jabbing a green, swollen heel into the side of his mount, Pestilence rose off toward the sails of ships in the harbor.

**Thursday November 11, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 9**  
**Tired**

After watching Pestilence for nearly two days, exhaustion overtook me. I felt the scrying eye pulling me onward, but I lacked the energy to follow. *I'll only rest for a moment*, I told myself, and closed my eyes...

*Swords raised before a mountain burning with holy fire.*

*Screams as black stones are shattered.*

*A shining shield tumbling into the water.*

I opened my eyes, still exhausted. New prophecies--as mysterious as those I made during the ritual deep beneath the tower, I thought as I wrote the new ones in my journal. Or were they? Retrieving the journal from the shelf, I looked again at what I had written:

*Hundreds of Draconum warriors, side-by-side, awaiting the oncoming horde.* The Draconum were indeed gathering in the north, and whatever threat they prepared for was dire enough that the Pathis Arcana had gone in search of an ancient Drakona in hopes that they might help. Draconum and Drakona had also fought together at the Battle of the Spire to capture the Silent Citadel. Preparations for the battle I had foreseen were underway, but the question remained: what horde of enemies were they facing? I tried to look back into my vision, but found no answers.

*Men with yellowed, pox-scarred skin, crying for release from terrible pain.* The memory of Mazebba was still fresh, its people writhing in agony as they were consumed by disease released by Pestilence.

*Dwarves before forges glowing with fire and magic.* The image I could recall from my vision was of the same forges I saw in the sanctuary of the Forgemasters. There I had heard of their plans to launch an important campaign somewhere in the fall, which was fast approaching. Yet I still had no idea when or where that campaign would take place.

Then there were prophecies that still remained obscure and unclear. Perhaps the dancers on burning sands were the moonborn of the blood cult, but those I had seen in the invasion of the Necropolis were far from the sands of the vision. The king with the wooden crown. The kneeling apprentice. The blackened magestones...

I realized that the black stones of my first prophecies were the same as those I had seen today. The stones that screamed when they were shattered. One vision was connected to another. Yet it remained unclear.

Above it all, my first prophecy: "It is now as it was, but how it was is not how it will be." The riddle surrounding the mysteries.

I was tired. Not just physically tired, but also tired of waiting for the whim of the scrying eye. First I needed to sleep. But when I awakened, I would go in search of answers to my questions.

**Wednesday November 17, 2004**

**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 10**

**Quandry**

I felt the need to prepare myself mentally before going to the scrying chamber, and so descended from my room to spend the afternoon in the tower baths. While soaking in the waters of an underground stream heated by magical fire, I again wondered at the incredible extravagances of magic employed around this Solonavi fortress. As I thought back to the cold ablutions of my youth, I felt the scrying eye tugging at me. Perhaps it wanted to show me more of Pestilence's journey, or drag me off to the northern mountains again, or to the Necropolis. I didn't care, and pushed it away. Today it would answer to me.

Four rounds of the tower's central stair brought me to the level of the scrying chamber, as I approached it down the hall I could feel the power of the scrying pool through the blackstone walls. My connection to it was growing. When I closed the heavy oaken door behind me the magic wrapped around me like a blanket, and my perspective skewed as the scrying eye pulled at me like a skittish mount. Even before I settled onto my stool before the scrying pool the eye had taken me out into the courtyard, headed west.

*NO*, I thought, and pulled the eye back into the tower, through the walls, and into the scrying chamber. There, through the scrying eye, I saw myself. Freshly cleaned, draped in the fine Caeronn linens worn here in the tower, I looked the part of a noble. I barely recognized myself. Where was the nightwitch? Where was the Sect warrior I had once been?

I guided the scrying eye back out of the tower, feeling the crackle of power as we passed through the walls. Recently, Anquilis had recounted to me the history of the Oracle's Needle. Long ago, before the time of Tezla, human oracles were drawn to the black cliffs of the Scythrian Mountains to have dreams of the past, present, and future. Once they had become trusted advisors to the Priest-Kings of Kos, they requested that the king quarry the stone and bring it to Rokos where they could build a home and fortress on the shores of the Inland Sea. In the centuries since, as kingdoms and empires rose and fell around it, the Oracle's Needle had remained a symbol of the Oracle's power. Many also believed that it was the source of their power as well, until the Solonavi chose to reveal themselves. When I asked how long the Solonavi had hidden themselves--inside the Tower, inside the Oracles, Anquilis had said it was a tale for another time.

I guided the scrying eye out over the lamp-lit windows of the city below, feeling no struggle from the scrying eye. *Stonekeep*, I thought, and almost as quickly as the thought itself the eye had slid across the land to show me the fortress, pillaged by its Crusader conquerors, its fallen elven defenders shambling on the ramparts as zombies under the command of Crusade necromancers.

The scrying eye was mine to command.

**Thursday November 18, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 11**  
**Orders**

I spent the night guiding the scrying eye across the Land, from one location to the next. I returned to the draconum encampment in the far north, where draconum and drakona alike had gathered in unheard of numbers to train with sword and spell. Of course, to get to the encampment the dracs had to travel through the maze of the Kuttar Depths. Though the drakona who called the Depths home were allowing the draconum safe passage--and in some cases accompanying them as they headed north--the Black Powder Revolutionaries who still manned their long-held fortresses in the area weren't nearly as accommodating. As the scrying eye glided over the canyons of the depths, the night was lit by the flames from draconum magic and Revolutionary muzzle flashes--and occasionally shattered by the explosions of massive black powder charges.

Fires started by the explosions among mount scrub in the Depths were quickly doused by the heavy rains falling in the area, rains that ran in rivulets down the peaks, gathered into rising streams, and swelled the Roa Kuttur into a raging torrent. After a summer of famine and blazing sun, fallow fields and muddy riverbanks that had been baked into cracked walls now crumbled into the waters and stained them brown as they rushed down into the valleys past the besieged city of Enos Joppa. From the banners that flying above the armies encamped around the city--the Wyndfenners, the Ivydowns, the Fairhames, the Starsdawns--it appeared that the Elven Lords had finally come to take revenge for the betrayal of the Revolution at Khamsin, but the battle wasn't yet over.

Following the river south brought me to Caero and Venetia. The bridge across the river still lay in ruins, with Atlantean soldiers entrenched at one end and Bloody Thorns at the other, taking occasional shots at one another using black powder cannon and magestone-powered lightning artillery--and accomplishing little more than feeding more bits of the once beautiful marble bridge to the hungry waters below. Moving behind one of the great Kosian pyramids silhouetted against the rising sun on the west bank, I saw Thorn commandos giving lessons in using black powder rifles to militia dressed in a mixture of Khamsin colors and Caeronn linen.

Pausing south of the cities, it was time to answer one of my questions. *Tell me about the upcoming Revolutionary campaign*, I told the scrying eye, thinking back to the discussion I had overheard in the underground smithy of the Forgemasters. Nothing. The scrying eye hung over the river, unmoving. Considering it for a moment, I realized that the eye had rarely told me anything in the past; it had merely taken me to where I could see something for myself. *Take me to the horde the draconum army will face*, I told it. Still nothing.

Dejected and tired, I finally released the scrying eye and found myself back in the scrying chamber. Most certainly I was in control of the eye--but it would only go where I told it to. In the solitude of the chamber, I indulged my frustration and cursed in Sect-elven. "I just wanted to know what would make the draconum gather," I said aloud.

I felt the tug of the eye.

Startled, I followed the eye as we glided south, back to Atlantis, up into the floating palaces. The Grand Plaza was alive with early risers, servants headed to market and functionaries hurrying to their posts long before the nobles would arise. Yet as the eye took me into Greenlee Manor and into a study hung thick with curtains and incense smoke from long-burning braziers, it was clear that the Magus Anunub and the mages within had been in discussion for many hours already. Before them stood a bedraggled technomancer, his arm wrapped in a sling and a tattered traveling cloak still over his shoulders.

"Thank you for your report, technomancer," said the magus. "You and what remain of your cabal have two days to rest and reequip, and then you will travel to Venetia. The Emperor has requested more support from the Delphana be sent to the city."

The technomancer started for a moment, turned as if to leave, then stopped. "Magus, perhaps I might repeat my report. The things I have seen, beneath that fortress, while captured by the dark cult thriving in the midlands, after my escape--surely there are others that can be sent--"

"There are others being sent to Venetia," said Anunub. "And your warriors will be among them. The Delphana share the ideals of the emperor: to send as many men north as possible, as soon as possible. Go." The technomancer swallowed, accepting his orders, then touched his hand to the magestones set in his forehead, bowed, and left the room.

Before the conversation could continue, the eye released me, and I found myself in the scrying chamber, left to consider what I had learned.

**Friday November 19, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 12**  
**Raven**

When I entered the alley, I was well aware that I might be dead before I reached the other end. I could feel the scrying eye, thought about reaching toward it, using it to look around the area. But that was hardly the point.

It had taken me most of the morning wandering around the Oracle's Needle to find an unattended sword. In a tower full of seers, oracles, and sorcerers, blades were rarely used when spells were so close to hand. Eventually, though, hanging from a belt around a post in the stables, I found a scabbard--and in the scabbard, a shortsword. It had been forged in the Wylden, judging by the leaves inscribed in the blade and tooled in the scabbard. Far from Bloodhook, it wouldn't measure up to any blade carried into the bloodpits of the Necropolis. Yet it would do. I hid the blade underneath my robe, bid a good morning to the guards, and left the tower grounds.

Outside, I waited a distance down the street until I saw a woman in a long traveling cloak come out the tower gate. Underneath the cloak, I knew that she wore the leather armor of an Amazon warrior. I had seen it as she prepared to travel in the tower courtyard, where I had also seen her take off the mask of an Oathsworn. Now she was another anonymous traveler. Perfect.

"Warrior," I called out as she passed. She didn't break stride, but I saw her eyes flick toward me. She kept walking, then stopped at a street stall not far away where an old woman sold fruits and vegetables.

As I walked up beside her, she sliced a pear in half with her belt dagger and inhaled its aroma. "There's nothing like this outside the lands around Rokos," she said. "Not this year. Might as well enjoy it while I can."

"I need your help," I said.

The Amazon glanced over to make sure that the old woman was helping another customer. "You see my face?" she hissed. "Notice something missing? You get nothing from me right now."

"I'm not asking the mask," I said. "I'm asking the warrior. I have need of your blade, and have coin to pay."

"Pay for the fruit," she said. I reached into my pouch, drew out a coin, and placed it before the old woman, who nodded her thanks and returned to her customer. "Give me the rest of the pouch and I'm yours," said the Amazon. I weighed it in my hand. It was nearly all the coin I had, but there really hadn't been much need for it inside the tower. It was time to start spending it. I handed it over, and she tucked it beneath her cloak. "Raven Swiftblade," she said.

"Kastali," I replied

"Well, Kastali, you've just hired me and my blade. What do you want us to do? Kill someone?"

"Yes," I said. "Me."

At dawn it had seemed like a good idea--hire a warrior to test my skills, prove that I was still the warrior I had been when I left the Necropolis. Enough Oathsworn were falling in the bloody battle the Solonavi were waging against the Shadow Khans in Prieska that they would hardly miss one. As the day passed, though, it seemed I may have been overconfident. Near midday, forced to cross the crowded market plaza, the Amazon had come out of nowhere and cut a nasty gash in my side before I could slip away. Binding my wound, I considered calling the city guard; they could easily get me back to the safety of the Needle. But I knew that I would be recounting the day in my journal later--I could hardly leave a day unaccounted for--and it would be better to describe a costly victory than a foolish failure. I pressed on.

We met again in the late afternoon, as I walked the docks along the Inland Sea. We spotted each other from a distance, and I had time to prepare as Raven charged. I called upon the training of my old weaponmaster and kept my blade low, defenses seemingly open, until she was nearly upon me, blade held high over her head, lips pursed grimly. It's likely she thought I had given myself over to my fate. Instead I stepped forward and spun beneath her swing to bring my shortsword around. My weapon skidded across her bracer, then cut into her arm just below the elbow. She danced away, cursing. "My turn to bind my wounds," she said between gritted teeth and slipped away into the crowd of onlookers.

I was accustomed to battles that lasted moments, not ones where hours passed between exchanges. Perhaps it was part of her strategy. Perhaps she was toying with me. Regardless, it was unnerving. As darkness fell across the city, it constantly seemed as though Raven could be within arm's length. I kept my blade unsheathed, which meant that I couldn't walk the streets lest I be spotted by the city watch.

Now I made my way down the alley. Raven wouldn't run away with my money. Her Amazon sense of honor would keep her nearby until the battle was finished. Yet she had to appear soon, or I would need to return to the tower before the gates were closed for the night. The nightfall bell rang in the distance--

--and she struck from the rooftops above. Only one boot caught me in the back, but it was enough to send me sprawling. Still, I had kept my sword. As we both scrambled to our feet, I saw that she held her own blade in one hand, the other strapped to her side with the torn remnants of her cloak. Steel rang on steel once, twice, then three times as I engaged. She had one hand, I had two. It was the advantage I needed. Catching her blade on my hilt, I twisted to hold it there for a moment, then grabbed her forearm. I pulled

my blade free, then brought the flat around to knock her sword from her hand, sending it clattering across the cobblestones.

Raven growled, and brought her leg around to sweep my feet from beneath me. She followed me to the ground, bringing all her weight down on me and knocking the wind out of me. As stars danced before my eyes, she stole my sword and reversed the blade, bringing the point around to my throat.

Then she climbed off of me, using my blade to help her to her feet. "You don't want to die," she said, panting. "Now tell me why."

I leaned on one elbow and rubbed the back of my head where it had struck the cobbles. "Just wanted to see if I still had it in me," I said. "Seems not."

"You've got skills, Kastali, even if they're hidden under a little tarnish." Raven grimaced a bit as she held her free hand to the one bound her side, then smiled. "We're not in the Atlantean arena or the blood pits, you know. If you wanted a sparring partner, you just had to ask."

"Come back to the tower with me," I said. "I have to tell my masters what happened today, but as far as the healer is concerned--"

"Cutpurses?"

"Against the two of us? Dead cutpurses now, I'd say. Let's go."

**Monday November 22, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 13**  
**Responsibility**

It was late in the night before Raven and I left the healers, and I retired directly to my chambers. In the morning, I went to the scrying chamber and recorded the events of yesterday, then went down for my morning meal. Even before I finished my first plate of fruit and cheese, a page came with a summons calling me to the tower archives. Immediately.

I left the food behind and descended into the levels beneath the tower. Perhaps they were constructed at the same time as the tower itself, but I suspect not. The Needle and the parts of the fortress built above the ground are in the solid style of the Kosian empire. The labyrinth of passages and rooms beneath the surface have the sharp, graceful lines of the Solonavi. It appeared as though it had been constructed much more recently, yet it seemed older. Haunted, even. I constantly felt as though there was something flitting around just beyond the edge of my vision, hiding in the darkness.

I pushed the thought aside and composed myself as I entered the archives. Anquilis was studying a scroll nearly five feet across, held in a framework against one wall. The magical light emanating from his being illuminated a runic script hidden on the vellum, words appearing and disappearing as he cast his hand across its surface. Nearby, Oracle Daheia sat a table piled high with tomes. "I was summoned," I said.

"You are given a great deal of latitude in your duties, Oracle Kastali," said Daheia, without looking up from her work. "This is partially due to the nature of your abilities, but primarily because in the past you have been productive without requiring guidance."

Daheia stood and crossed the room to a tall shelf, reaching out with her magic to draw a book from a high shelf and float it down to her hands. "While we appreciate your candor about your activities yesterday, we can hardly approve. You are a valuable asset to the Solonavi cause, and we do much to protect you. So you understand why we might be concerned when you go out in search of danger, and even pay it to follow you."

"I do," I said. "However--"

“You are not to leave the tower again without informing the tower guard,” she said. “If you do, out of willfulness or forgetfulness, I will see to it personally that you receive a reminder of your oath to the Solonavi that you will not choose to ignore and find hard to regret.”

“I understand,” I said.

“I have requested that the Amazon you engaged yesterday remain here at the tower,” said Daheia, once again seated at her table. “If you must train your martial skills, you will do so with her. After you have completed your duties for the day, and after you have completed any exercises Anquilis has assigned you. You are dismissed.”

As I turned to leave, I saw that Anquilis still stood at the scroll, but he was now studying me intently.

**Tuesday November 23, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 14**  
**Delving**

Although Daheia had given me permission to leave the tower grounds, I knew it would not be wise to do so again so soon. So upon arising, I went immediately to the scrying chamber. My attempts to guide the scrying eye to the revelations hidden by my prophecies had been both taxing and unrewarding, so I set them aside for the day in hopes of being more productive. Instead I opened this journal to a fresh page, set my quill nearby, and set the Eye loose, to take me where it would.

We flitted through high, wispy clouds toward the warmth of the morning sun, the Roa Sein a glistening break in the brown lands below. North of Prieska, as we crossed over the southern part of the Blasted Lands, rocks thrusting through the earth. When the eye dropped down among those rocks, I marveled again at the incredible forces that had long ago cascaded over the area and given parts of the rocks a smooth, glassy sheen.

The eye left the Sein behind to cut across the cracked and dusty plain, toward a pile of jumbled rocks in the distance. As it drew closer, I saw that it had once been a town, or a city, or at the very least a large building. Now it lay in ruins, its true form as lost as whomever had originally constructed it.

There was a group of Elemental warriors and Galeshi nomads gathered at the edge of the ruins, weapons drawn, centered around a monstrous troll kneeling at the edge of a hole in the ground. The troll ran his fingers along the edge of the hole, then rubbed his fingers together and watched the dust rain toward the ground. “Two, maybe three days,” he said. Pushing through the crowd, he walked slowly away from the hole. “Look at the tracks. It’s a small group, and it’s headed in, not out.”

A medicine troll came forward to join him. It was Torg Boneknitter, self-appointed warden of the Black Pyramid and the Blasted Lands. “You’re certain?” he asked. The large troll answered only with a snort. “Of course,” said Boneknitter. “Apologies, Gora’din.”

“I am a lone warrior no longer,” said the troll. “You called upon our blood debt with promises of many Mage Spawn to hunt. I answered, and I am joined to your cause.”

“I’m told the talekeepers of the Watch have taken to calling you Stormblade,” said the medicine troll.

“It will do,” said the warrior. “Look. These tracks. Too large, too regular. And here--grease. Strange. It’s almost as if--”

A shout from the warriors at the hole brought both trolls back to the opening. From the darkness came shouts and the flash of lightning, followed by a clap of thunder. The warriors stood ready to strike. Suddenly an orc was catapulted out of the hole and rolled limply across the sand. Boneknitter’s warriors leapt into the fray as a metal arm came emerged from the hole, but their swords clanged ineffectively.

"It's the golem that went in!" shouted the troll warrior. Shoving the others aside, he grasped the metal arm and heave upward with all his might. Muscles straining, he pulled a golem I recognized from the hole-- Redgear Bowblade. The massive crossbow that made up Redgear's right arm fired repeatedly into the hole, the shrieks of his targets drowned out by the built-in mechanisms feeding fresh bolts into place for another shot. "Still coming!" buzzed the golem, as flying Mage Spawn erupted from the hole.

The next few minutes were a chaos of battle, as Redgear and Stormblade led the fight against the winged creatures. Blood was spilt on both sides before Boneknitter and his sorcerers cast a spell that sealed the hole and halted the flood of creatures. Finally, the ruins were quiet once again and the warriors piled rocks atop the hole to close and conceal it. "With luck, forever," said the medicine troll.

"There's . . . no luck down there," gasped the orc laying nearby.

"Grook," said Redgear quietly as Boneknitter hurried to the orc's side.

"Heard they were gone," said the orc. "Thought the crypts would be easy pickings, that we'd just sneak in and come out rich." He tried to laugh but was caught in a spasm of wet-sounding coughs. Boneknitter's spells staunched the flow of blood and pulled the edges of his wounds together, but even I could see it was too late. His green skin was pale and waxy as he reached toward Redgear. "We just wanted to be . . . our own masters..."

"Dead," said Boneknitter a moment later.

"All dead," said Redgear.

"What's going on down there?" demanded Stormblade. "What did you see?" But the golem said no more.

**Wednesday November 24, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 15**  
**Visitors**

I spent much of the day with Anquilis engaged in a variety of 'exercises', few of which I understood but most of which involved calling upon the scrying eye in various parts of the tower while Anquilis took notes. When we were done I had to retrieve my evening meal directly from the kitchens, as it was no longer being served in the great hall, and carrying my tray I wearily climbed the stairs to the scrying chamber-- where I found Raven waiting outside the door.

"Been looking for you," she said.

"Not today," I said. "I've been in the archivist's chambers all day, still have duties to perform before I can rest, and I'm exhausted. Maybe we can spar tomorrow."

"Whatever you like," said Raven. "I just wanted to ask if you knew anything about the mysterious visitor to the tower."

"Visitor?"

"Everyone's been talking about it. The Solonavi have someone important in Seatower, but nobody seems to know who it is." Seatower was a short tower topped by a watchpost along the curtain wall around the Oracle's Needle, on the side closest to the Inland Sea. I had heard of oathsworn being housed outside the tower, but certainly not anyone important. "I thought maybe you might know."

"I don't," I said, stepping into the scrying chamber.

“You know, you could have told me you were an oracle when you hired me to kill you,” she said. “I thought you were just some eastborn noblewoman looking for excitement.”

“Would you have taken the gold if I had?” I asked.

“Noble blood’s one thing, blood that belongs to the Solonavi is another.”

“Sometimes secrets need to be kept,” I said, and closed the door.

I ate quickly and called up the scrying eye as I settled onto my stool. It was late in the day, and I was tired. Unfortunately, the Eye showed no particular inclination. Perhaps it was tired too. It floated out over the tower courtyard, and I saw the Seatower below. So close. But my oath hadn’t been taken to discover and record what the Solonavi already knew.

I pointed the Eye toward the blood-red horizon of dusk and the Necropolis.

The banners of the Blood Cult had replaced the sigils of the Deathspeakers in the streets. Enormous fires blazed before the Grand Temple, where new converts waited to tithe with their own blood. At the entrance, I saw Darq and the high priestess Carlana walking beside Azrosha Khant, one of the most respected necromancers in the Crusade. The histories I had read as a child told how he had been among those who left Atlantis to found the Necropolis more than a century ago. Though he had both the political and magical power, he had never sought to become a deathspeaker--content to seek the secrets of immortality that would make the deathspeakers dependent on him.

“We need you just as Soma did,” Carlana told Khant. “The goddess teaches us how to sustain one another with the strength of the blood, and how to take it from the weak. But we must discover for ourselves how to sate our hungers forever, to bring an end to the feast of blood before all that is left to consume are our own.”

“Your bloody deeds speak louder than your words, vampire,” said the old sect elf, stopping to look into the temple. “It wasn’t long ago that those who might have offered you just such power were bound to that very altar.”

“Rest assured that you and all other necromancers are sacrosanct,” said Darq. “No harm will come to you while we lead the Crusade.”

“I’m certain that the Prophet and Dark Tezla would be pleased to hear that their cause is in such good hands,” said Khant, raising an eyebrow.

“What he means is that we will not shirk our duties to the cause, nor defy the will of Tezla,” said Carlana. “My lord and his forces will march at the fore of our armies until all power and all life belongs to the Dark One.”

“Very well, then,” said Khant. “It matters little to me who brings fresh subjects to my laboratories so long as they keep coming. We aren’t getting many stragglers from the Wylden these days.”

“Soon you will have all you need,” said Darq.

**Monday November 29, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 16**  
**Evocation**

Followed by his underlings, an elven general strode down the high street of Enos Joppa between buildings blackened by fire. “The city is ours, General Ivydown,” reported a lieutenant. “All enemy warriors have been disarmed and are being gathered into work crews.”

“Good,” said the general. “One-third of the work crews are to begin work on making the west quarter of this city defensible. That will be our fallback until the remaining crews can help the sorcerers complete the gatewall at the pass. Once that’s complete, the barbarians can have their city back.” The lieutenant saluted and ran off to deliver the orders.

An archer captain stepped forward to walk alongside the general as they climbed stairs to the top of the city wall. “General, my family has fought alongside yours for generations, so you know I ask only to clarify the situation, not to question your orders--”

“Ask your question, Kierin,” said the general impatiently.

“Why do we remain here? A week’s journey beyond enemy lines is a worthwhile endeavor to take vengeance for our fallen friends and comrades, but why do we stay when the battle is done? We are surrounded by enemies, our supply lines more than three days beyond breaking.”

The general looked down on the chained Revolutionaries being taken into the nearby hills. He was silent for a moment, the blue and orange flames from a building burning nearby flickering in his polished silver armor. “Soldiers are children of duty, armed with pride and honor,” he finally said. “We have returned for vengeance, but we stay because we are told to do so. Both Master Cyrus and the elders of the Order of Sorcery were quite adamant that the pass into the Kuttar Depths must be held at all costs, and that we could not trust the lowlanders to do so when the time came.”

“What enemy are we to hold the pass against?”

The general smiled. “Now you see that clarification doesn’t always provide answers. And so we return to duty.”

The archer knew his cue. “And I to mine. Thank you, General.”

I left the elven general on the ramparts and released the scrying eye. The daycandle had burned low, and further thought on what I had seen would have to wait.

Shortly thereafter, I was in the tower yards training with Raven. “Your fighting style was born in the bloodpits,” she said, parrying my wooden sword. “You use the edge of your blade, hacking at your enemy like you were cutting wheat. That works fine in the pits, where the audience expects blood and a lengthy battle where you kill your opponent one slice at a time.”

She had, of course, chosen to train in the courtyard below Seatower, hoping to catch a glimpse of the tower’s mysterious inhabitant. It didn’t seem to be distracting her. “In a true battle, your opponent is an obstacle to be removed as quickly as possible, while putting yourself in as little danger as possible.” She danced around another of my swings. “That means maximum force with the maximum distance between you and the enemy.” Suddenly she simultaneously stepped backward and thrust forward, her blade stopping just as it touched my stomach. “That means using the point of your blade.”

I swatted away the blade, annoyed at myself. It ran contrary to everything I had been taught, but it seemed so clear. “You did well, Kastali,” Raven said. “I had to wait for an opening, and you weren’t distracted by chatter. That’s better than most pit-fighters manage.” She stood beside me, and we practiced the attack. I let my body learn the movement as my mind went back to my training with Anquilis that morning.

*Think back to your vision, he had told me. What you see is not all you can see. See more.*

I was back on the ramparts of Enos Joppa. I delved into my memory of the moment. The world was still, pillars of smoke hanging in the air like stone columns. Below, I saw an elven spearman paused in mid-jab as he urged a prisoner forward. Nearby, the archer waited for an answer to his question. Flame and magic reflected in the general’s armor.

Magic? I looked closely at the armor. The orange was from flames, but before them was a translucent blue shade, slender and humanoid. Wings folded. A Solonavi. Rayevisayla.

Raven batted my sword and broke my concentration. "There!" she whispered. "Someone just moved past that window. Did you see it?"

"I saw something," I said.

**Tuesday November 30, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 17**  
**The Tainted Path**

Lord Vextha's page still waited. Whenever I released the Eye and returned to the scrying chamber, I heard the shuffling of the boy's boots as he drew patterns on the dusty corridor floor to relieve his boredom. He waited to take news back to our lord. He waited to hear that I had fulfilled the order I had been given that morning: Find Rayevisayla.

I had returned to Enos Joppa, where the Elven Lords had begun to dismantle the walls of the city, transporting the materials toward the fortress they planned to build across the Kuttar Gates. I had journeyed across the foothills to the east, passing over countless Amazon villages flying the banner of the wolf.

Every hour or so I released the scrying eye and returned to the chamber, in an attempt to let the Eye take me there. Listening to the page shuffle in the hall, I willed toward the Eye: find Rayevisayla....to no avail. As evening fell, I still hadn't found the renegade Solonavi or Corella's pavilion.

I knew Vextha would not be happy. I had heard how each Solonavi had their own dark appetites, and my lord's seemed to be for information. Word from his Oathsworn spies arrived at all hours of the day and night, and though I rarely saw him I knew he read my reports regularly. I had written yesterday's entry in my journal as the evening bell sounded, and before midnight a page had been sent with my orders.

Sighing, I called upon the scrying eye once more. I needed something to pass along. The eye tugged--and I was pulled eastward through the darkness.

I saw the fire from a distance. An enormous pyre burned on the plains. It towered over the famine-scorched plains. In the distance I saw the remains of the Spire, a broken black tooth against the velvet night. Armor and weapons lay scattered near the corpses who had carried them into battle for that now-shattered rock and the tower that had been hidden within. Yellow-eyed, disease-ridden ravens gamboled amidst the carnage, bellies full and ready to take flight.

Thick iron stakes had been hammered into the earth around the pyre. Chains on the stakes led to shackles worn by prisoners being unloaded from nearby wagons by gray-robed Tur'aj cultists, while others fed the flames with fuel and magic. The last prisoner was brought forward by Kem Ravenbane, and the Apocalypse knight smiled grimly as the last prisoner was locked into place, the sharp sound of the shackles closing a counterpoint to the rising and falling chant of the cultists. Captured Khamsin soldiers had been chained alongside kidnapped midlander peasants and what appeared to be elven refugees from the Wylden. More than three score prisoners formed a ring around the fire.

Ravenbane walked back to a gaunt woman and fell to one knee before her, head low. I remembered her, from the Tur'aj sacrifice I had witnessed before. She reached out to touch the knight's head with one hand, and both stiffened as energy passed between them. As she stepped past him, the other cultists moved with her, their circle closing around the fire. The flames swelled with their chanting, crawling closer to the prisoners. Some cried out, while others faced their fate with courage. The gaunt woman ululated over the chanting and the flames exploded outward to consume the prisoners. "THEY COME!" she screamed.

They arrived at once but came from all directions. From the north came Famine, heels thumping his mount to the beat of the chant as he strummed at his shield. The ravens leapt into the air as Pestilence approached from the south, circling over their master and the shambling skin-bag he rode. From the east rode War, his proud steed hung with skulls of warriors fallen at Roanne Vale, Stonekeep, and the Necropolis. Then fear gripped me as Death arrived from the west, grinning as he reached out to toy with the cloud of magic-limned spirits released in the sacrifice.

“It begins!” cried the gaunt woman, as the other Tur’aj prostrated themselves before the avatars. “It begins here, and it ends everywhere!”

Magic swelled through the area as the avatars dismounted and stepped forward into the pyre. Famine cackled and danced in the flames, while War’s armor turned a cherry-red in the heat. Flies and lice burst into sparks as they leapt away from the Pestilence’s protection, and Death drank in all around him...until he looked at me.

“Again,” he hissed in a mixture of annoyance and amusement. He reached forward--

There was a wrenching, and I was back in the scrying chamber. I still felt the touch of Death, a cold void within me. It took me a moment to recover before I could I stumble to the door and throw it open.

“News for Lord Vextha?” asked the page.

“Yes,” I said. “Tell him....tell him the scrying eye is dead.”

**Wednesday December 1, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 18**  
**Barren**

I’m trying. I’m trying!

I believe I did it. May I go check?

---

The eye was gone.

I had called to it for hours, waited for it for hours more. It didn’t answer, wouldn’t come. After writing what I had seen yesterday into my journals, I somehow made my way back to my bedchamber and collapsed into a fitful sleep where I relived the darkest moments of my life. A bolt of lightning lancing through my father. The grinding pain of broken bones as I crawled from the lair of a cave orc. The taste of blood. Even in my dreams I called out to the eye, to pull me away.

I awakened weary, but refused to fall back under the bloody veil of my dreams. There didn’t seem to be much point to leaving my bedchamber, so I didn’t. For hours I watched as the pillar of light the sun cast through the window tracked across the wall. Despite the thick summer air, I wrapped myself tightly in my blankets against the frigid emptiness inside me.

I ignored the page knocking at the door. I ignored him when he returned, and let the tray of food he left outside go cold. The pillar of light dimmed as the sun crossed to the far side of the tower. I pulled the blankets tighter.

Finally the door opened and Raven came in, sword drawn. "Oracle Daheia says that if you don't come with me, I can run you through." I looked up blankly until she prodded me to make her point. Relenting, I shrugged off the blankets and followed her out of the room.

The garden was still warm, insects darting from one flower to another. The winding paths and twisting bowers were the passion of one particular Solonavi, and I had come to them many times to escape the shadowed confines of the scrying chamber. Today, though, they felt as cold and dark as that stone room.

"I've got news," said Raven as we sat on a bench beneath a trellis of ironvine, tendrils idly reaching out to strike at the tinkling bells hanging before it. "I talked to Mahdi this morning." She expected me to know the name. I had lived in the tower for nearly a year. I should know it. Raven had resided in the tower for less than a week, and already she knew it better than me. Of course, I had spent much of my time in the chamber, with the eye. The thought crossed my mind like dark clouds over the sun.

Raven must have seen the look on my face, for she continued without waiting further. "Mahdi is the page who delivers food from the kitchens. Nice Galeshi kid, probably left the tray outside your chamber this morning. I ate your fruit, by the way. It was starting to turn." I shrugged. "Anyway, I saw him coming across the courtyard this morning with an empty tray. From Seatower. So I talked to him, and he didn't know who was staying there, but he has been delivering food twice a day." I grasped vainly for the eye. "That means that whoever it is, they need to eat. Which means it's not a Solonavi," she said. "It's not an answer, but it's something." She was trying to cheer me, to draw me away.

"Sure," I said.

Raven shook her head as she stood. "Well, I've had my chance. They said I could have an hour to try and pull you out of your stupor. Now you go to Anquilis. Come on." She took my hand and dragged me back toward the tower.

Where Raven had trying to distract my mind with idle chatter, Anquilis used other methods. At first they involved physical labor, my first in quite some time. A douser's yoke was waiting, and I was tasked with carrying water from one pool deep in the tower's labyrinth to another, three stories above. When I was more exhausted than I thought possible, he called me into the archives. "The eye," he began.

"It's gone," I said, on the verge of tears. "It's dead. Why did it die and not me? Last time it was me."

"You mewl uselessly," said Anquilis. "You have been touched by powerful magic, but still you live. It is a testament to your growing powers. Do you still sense the pool?"

Past my exhaustion, past my grief, I reached out through the darkness, and found the light of the pool in the distance. "Yes," I said.

"Your power lives, as you do. It will heal, just as you will. We will use the time productively. You feel the pool. Focus on its magic. Feel it. Study it."

I reached out to the pool again. The light provided small comfort, like a thin blanket against a chill wind. I drew it closer. As I did, I realized that it was not one light, but several. "There's more than the pool," I said.

Anquilis' voice came through the darkness. "The magics of the scrying chamber encompass more than the scrying pool. They include the entire room. You feel the pool. Do you feel your journals?" I reached out and a line of light within the light became a line of stars. My journals, standing on the shelves. "Can you find the newest book?" said Anquilis. I looked, and found one star was weaker than the others, as if incomplete. "Reach toward it," said Anquilis. "It is a part of you, and you are a part of it. Even at a distance you can shape one another. Just as you draw strength from the pool, you can write words on the pages of your journals. Do it."

"I'm trying," I said.

“Write your thoughts on its pages,” said Anquilis.

“I’m trying!” I protested. The star twinkled, and felt the gossamer connection between us twist as if caught in a wind before settling and drawing taught. Something had changed. “I believe I did it,” I said. “May I go check?”

I blinked my vision clear, the orange light that made up Anquilis flooding into the darkness. “Keep in mind, Oracle, that you are not a singular being. Your powers are many, and you must master them all if you are to chase prophecy.” I nodded respectfully and hurried up the stair to the scrying chamber. Throwing open the door, I turned to the latest section of this journal.

My words were at the top of the page.

I picked up my pen and began to write this account of the day. I felt the nearby power of the scrying pool, of the scrying chamber, and it comforted me.

The eye was gone. But it would return.

**Thursday December 2, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 19**  
**Life and Death**

I awakened with the dawn this morning. There was still a cold stillness inside me, but it felt warmed a bit today. Perhaps by hope.

As I neared the scrying chamber after a quick visit to the tower’s laundry, I called to a passing page. I asked her name--Jadlin, a young Wylden Elf--and sent her in search of Raven. In the chamber, I reached again for the eye, but found nothing. I had nearly been conquered by despair, but today I was determined to fight back. I set aside the robes I typically wore around the tower and donned clothing I had taken from the laundry, something more akin to what I had seen people wearing in the streets of Rokos. The finishing touches were the necklace I had been given by my mysterious admirer and my sword belt--both hidden beneath a light cloak.

Raven has just arrived at the chamber, and quickly guessed my plan. Today I am going out into the city--to test my connections with the chamber and my journals. She will guard me while I establish the connection. Perhaps by nightfall I will not only enhance my powers but also observe something genuinely worth reporting to my masters.

---

We dutifully reported to the tower guards, as I had been ordered to do by Oracle Daheia, then left the grounds. I didn’t want to stray far before making my first test, so Raven and I are in the Shrouded Cup, the inn near the tower I had visited previously with Daheia. “Jek! Two tall cups!” Raven said as we entered, and the innkeeper smiled broadly.

He looked me over, then walked close. “Oracle Kastali,” he said quietly. “You are always welcome in the Shrouded Cup and the house of Jekepratur.” Perhaps my change of clothing hadn’t worked its intended effect. “I never forget a pretty face,” the innkeeper explained, reading my look of disappointment.

It took me a few moments of quiet concentration to follow the tether back to the scrying chamber, and sort out the journals. Considering what appeared in the journal yesterday, I am attempting to order my thoughts as I would my written words. It is surprisingly difficult.

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Raven and I are now down at the port, concealed behind a stack of empty barrels. I've considered waiting to write these words until back in the safety of the tower, but Raven assures me that her abilities with the sword are more certain than my own with the chamber. So I practice again, and tell what has happened since we left the inn:

After sharing a late morning meal with Jekepratur at the Shrouded Cup, Raven and I walked down to the port. Fishermen returning from morning trawls in the Inland Sea were carrying their catch ashore, and when Raven spotted a puddle of spilled fish blood she joked that it was her own, spilled in our fight. I offered to fight her again and attempt to spill more--so long as she didn't charge me this time. We laughed, and for a moment I forgot the pain inside me.

As we walked the docks, I spotted a Xandressan sailor wearing a necklace much like my own--a large tooth flanked by ivory cylinders and beads. Stopping him, I asked about his necklace. He explained that it was a Xandressan custom, and that to the trained eye they told much about the wearer. He also pointed out his personal sigil on the tooth, and the intricately carved scenes from his own experience at sea inscribed into the ivory cylinders--the bones of a large sea beast he and his crewmates had captured off Windsong Point.

I reached beneath my cloak to draw out my own necklace, told the sailor it had been a gift, and asked him to explain its meaning. He held it up to the light for a moment, then he blanched and backed away clasp his hand as if he had been burned. "What does it mean?" I asked.

He shook his head, and refused to explain until Raven stepped forward and scraped her sword loose in its scabbard. The sailor looked at the necklace again, then back up at me. "You should not be wearing that," he said. "It means that you're dead!"

As he dashed away into the crowd, I was once again grasped by the coldness at the core of my being.

**Friday December 3, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 20**  
**Reborn**

I spent the night in the scrying chamber. Perhaps it was as I told Raven, to catch up on work that had lain long fallow, keeping the other books on my shelf updated. But I accomplished little; when in need of information on a specific place or person, I was too accustomed to simply sending the eye there or using it to track them down. Without it, I could only read the books and speculate.

Deep in the night, I finally admitted that I wasn't in the chamber to work. I was there to be close to its magic. It was only through my connection to the magic that I felt truly alive anymore. Eventually I fell into an exhausted and fitful sleep.

I opened my eyes.

The chamber's candles guttered, wick deep in the pool of wax seeping over the edges of the scrying pool. Shadows danced on the walls as the tiny flames flickered. The pool hissed as a drop of molten wax fell into its cold waters.

I felt a tug.

The Eye.

I grasped at it, feeling it slip away. I clung to the connection between us as the scrying chamber slipped away, dragged behind the scrying eye like a goblin hanging from the tail of a skittish cave runner. As the eye pulled me through the skies above Rokos, into the clouds, northbound, I exalted in its return. Our connection was still as slippery as a handful of fine sand, but I sensed that the Eye was as desperate as I was. We had to be together, had to see where it was taking me.

We came back through the clouds above the Kuttar Depths, and continued north to the valley stronghold of the draconum. Pits of battling hatchlings surrounded the sulfur pools in the valley, with elder draconum fishing the oldest and strongest whelps out to begin their training with the warriors camped on the valley floor or the mystics in the caves above. Their army had continued to swell.

Deeper into the valley, to the ancient stone fortress at the far end of its depths. Even in the middle of the night a drakona sorcerer remained perched on its ramparts, issuing the magical summons that called so many draconum and drakona to this faraway place. But the magic took its toll. As the eye and I approached, the sorcerer faltered, dropping his arms as he succumbed to exhaustion. Two draconum warriors stepped forward to catch him as he fell, and in a moment, an elder mystic would take his place.

The moment was enough.

A cloaked figure dashed forward from the darkness to the gates of the fortress. The red magestone atop his staff flared as he traced a glowing sigil on the gates. The words he chanted rang through the night, sharp syllables cutting through the magical hum of the wards that protected the fortress. As the draconum guard leapt from the ramparts to charge the intruder, he drew his staff back and struck the gates with all his might.

The sigil flared, the stone gates shattered, and a wave of magic exploded outward and flooded down the valley, over its rim, to the horizon. A column of light shot up into the sky, and for a moment the valley was bathed in midday light. The intruder's cloak had been ripped to tatters by the explosion, and the light revealed his glowing red eyes and horns tipped with crimson. He was a draconum, but he had been touched by the vampiric rituals of the Dark Crusade.

"It's done!" he screamed. "Draconum, drakona--even your loathsome alliance will not keep it hidden! They will know she lives, and the beastmother will be reborn!" He continued to rant as the warriors tackled him to the ground and ran him through.

As his words became gurgles, I urged the eye into the darkness beyond the gates. At the end of a long tunnel, beyond a score of iron gates, was a single chamber. It was in that chamber, atop a pedestal, tall as a giant, glowing with the life and power contained within it.

An egg.

**Monday December 6, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 21**  
**Sun and Moon**

After it took me to the draconum valley, the scrying eye released me and I found myself back in the scrying chamber. I quickly recorded what I had seen in my journal, then remained by the scrying pool throughout the night. But my desperation was gone, and I no longer called repeatedly for the Eye. Instead I waited, certain that it would return.

I had just lit a new daycandle to mark the morning when I felt the Eye again. I reached out to it and together we drifted out of the tower. *West*, I thought, and we flew across the Inland Sea and the northern Scythrian Mountains, into Prieska where the farmers were clearing their fields and preparing to plant winter wheat. Burdened by fate with a summer of famine and a nearby encampment of orcs, they still labored to grow food that might feed their people.

As I admired their tenacity and determination, my connection to the Eye was broken, and I found myself in the scrying chamber. Sighing, I instructed a page to bring my morning meal to the chamber and continued my vigil.

Midway through the morning, the Eye returned. This time I let it choose the direction of our travel and we slowly wandered south. Past the Inland Sea and the lower Sein we drifted across the southern reaches of the

Atlantean Empire and the Dhokanios Strait, where I saw a Xandressan ship flying the banner of the Delphana approaching Arcos, the island's capital. I got close enough to see Magus Lan himself, overseeing deckhands bringing a large crate onto deck, ordering them to be careful with their load. Then the Eye was gone, and I was back in the scrying chamber.

A young Galeshi page brought my midday meal to the chamber. "Thank you.... Mahdi," I said, remembering. He smiled, bowed, and took away the tray from the morning.

I had just sat down with the tray when suddenly the Eye returned and pulled me from the chamber. West, but past Prieska. Over the sea, curving north into the Galeshi deserts. We dropped down among the dunes, and slowed as we passed through an oasis. A semicircle of carts and steam rams were nearby, half-buried in the drifting sands. It took me a moment to spot the nomads of the caravan. Then I saw faces and hands sticking out of the sand on the water's edge, their skin yellowed and covered in red pox. Now the fouled watering hole belonged to flies, red-eyed rats, and the scavengers circling in the sky above.

The Eye pressed on, taking me to the Ringed Cities. The streets of most of the once great desert capitals were empty and abandoned. But the largest was surrounded by newly constructed rings of defenses. A caravan bringing fresh water from the coast was let in through an outer gate, and not until it was closed and the caravan inspected was another gate opened and the wagons let into the city. Beyond, the streets were thronged by people. The Galeshi people, once famed as nomads, had been corralled inside the walls of Alrimjin.

A captain of the city guard watched the wagons rolling into the city as a sand-skinned woman sat in the shade nearby. "Well, Bez, word from the outriders is that this is the last untainted caravan," he said. "All the water we get from now on has to come from our own wells."

The woman drew a wavy bladed knife from the scabbard hanging on her jeweled belt and carefully began to sharpen it. "The Ghosts and I go out again tonight to hunt for the creatures," she said. "Within a fortnight, we'll be drawing from the Fafyeh springs again."

"At midday, perhaps," he said. "But at night, Fafyeh will still belong to them. When will my brother be able to return to his home? When will we be able to worship in Ghanshe Palace again?"

"I long for my home too," she said. "I long for my family. For me, there is no chance of return. But for you and yours, we must depend on Nerab. The council knew his journey was long and perilous, but it was agreed that it would be the only way."

"The sun baked the mountains that we would never have to enter those blasted wastes," said the guard.

"It isn't the sun that has caused our problems," she said, climbing to her feet and sheathing her knife. "It's the moon."

**Wednesday December 8, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 22**  
**Safe Harbor**

I awakened this morning to sense the Eye waiting nearby as if it had never been gone. When I went in search of Raven to share the good news, I was told that Oracle Daheia had sent her north on a mission. Eating alone I still smiled, even hummed along to the singsong drifting from the nearby scullery. For the first time in almost a week, I felt whole again.

The gallery above the tower's great hall let out onto a short bridge over the courtyard to the outer wall. I found a perch on sun-warmed stones with a view looking out over Rokos, then called to the Eye.

Together we went south over the Scythrian Sea to Delphane, and the city of Arcos. Magus Lan's ship was still docked in the harbor, but its crew was enjoying the wharfside taverns and whatever cargo the ship had

carried yesterday had long been unloaded. I felt a tug by the Eye and let it guide me to the Delphana citadel at the heart of the city. We glided through its walls unhindered.

Inside was a maze of libraries and laboratories, sages and students talking in the halls and rushing from one place to another on mysterious errands. I noted that there were few legionnaires guarding the fortress. Instead massive magestone-powered golems stood watch at entrances and intersections.

The Eye unerringly guided me through the labyrinth, and quickly we were in a round hall deep in the heart of the citadel. Hooded Delphana masters reclined on the opulent cushions ringing the edge of the room, their faces hidden in shadow and smoke from the fenweed braziers at their side. Magus Lan sat on his own throne, hovering in the column of light spilling down into center of the room through an enormous crystal disc set into the ceiling. The crate from the ship sat in the center of the polished marble floor, two apprentices standing nearby.

“Since the Solonavi released more magic into the Land, we have sought to master our increased powers,” said the magus. “They have shaped us. What we did not know is that the power is also shaping others.”

He nodded to the apprentices, who fit crowbars into the crate and levered it open. The sides fell away to reveal a large glass cylinder packed in straw. As the apprentices cleared away the packing material, it was revealed that the vessel was filled with an oily, yellowish liquid. Floating in the liquid was a creature. “This creature was recovered from just inside an ancient dungeon beneath the fortress of Riversgate,” said Lan.

Even through the murky oil, it was clear from the serpentine snout and rough skin that the creature had once been a Shyft warrior. What it had become was less clear. Its features had melted like wax near a fire, and the body was elongated and twisted, lumped with strange, swollen nubs. Scales had fallen away in clumps and littered the bottom of the vessel.

“Shyft,” spat a mage who had approached to peer closely through the glass. “They walk with the beasts. Is it any surprise that they too have been twisted by magic?”

“If the tales we have been told by the technomancers who discovered them are to be believed, this is different, Lord Balion,” said Len. “This corpse was found near the remains of what appeared to be some sort of cocoon or chrysalis. I believe this transformation is deliberate.”

“Who knows of this?” asked another mage.

“I have endeavored to keep the information within our circle,” said Len. “Those who discovered the creatures have been sent directly to the front, where they will ideally perish quickly. I have not, of course, informed Nujarek.”

Len raised his throne into the air, addressing all the assembled mages. “There is only one place where we can truly discover the answers to our questions. The Emporer has requested that the Delphana provide full support for sky fortresses being including in an expeditionary force he is sending across the sea in search of rich magestone deposits. We had planned to indulge him with a host of scholar-mages supported by the Golemcore in hopes of securing a supply of magestone for ourselves. Now we will send members of our own number as well. After the battle is won and the stones complete, they will continue east.”

The Eye released, and I was back on the parapets of the Needle. Lost in thought about what I had seen, it was a moment before I realized that Anquilis stood behind me. “You have found your Eye,” he said as I climbed stiffly to my feet. Before I could determine if it was a statement or a question, he turned and left.

**Thursday December 9, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 23**  
**Plunder**

I guided the Eye into the field I had seen two days ago, a rough clearing hacked out of the thick Prieskan forests, stumps piled around its edge. The stacked logs that marked the construction of a small structure had been put to the torch, and their blackened remains still smoldered in the moonlight. An iron-bladed plow lay abandoned in the middle of the field, at the end of a half-plowed row. There was no sign of the farmers, or their beasts.

One of the latter, at least, I found a short distance away at the encampment of a dozen orcs. The ox had been spitted, and was roasting over a bonfire. Two orcs struggled to turn the meat over the coals while rest of the tribe sat nearby sharpening their weapons to the beat of a clurch drum. "The weaklings in these woods have nothing more to take," said their chief as he walked among them. "Tomorrow we go in search of fresh plunder!" The tribe cheered, and chanted along to the drums.

With the chanting, an orc danced out of the darkness, a skull pendant bouncing on his chest and an obsidian blade swinging from his belt. Shadows flickered across the bony beak of his masked face as he came into the tribal circle, the head of a Prieskan held high above his head in each hand. It was Bloodhawk. As the orcs noticed him among them, they fell silent until only the chaos shaman chanted, growling words booming beneath this mask. When the shaman fell silent, so did the night, broken only by the popping of the coals and the sizzling of cooking meat.

Finally the chief spoke. "Who are you?" he demanded.

Bloodhawk threw a head at the chief. "I am the one who comes between you and those silent ones who would kill you while you feasted. How would you pay for your lives?"

The chief chuckled and brandished his sword. "Two softskins? You should have let them come--we needed the entertainment!" The other orcs grunted and chuckled, raising their own weapons.

"There were more," said Bloodhawk. "Many more."

"You tell me you killed them all yourself?" said the chief.

Bloodhawk threw back his head and howled into the night. There was a roaring chorus in return as three score shamans emerged from the woods. Bloodhawk raised his hand and they fell silent. "I ask you again," he said to the chief. "How would you pay for your lives?"

The chief pointed toward a pile glittering nearby. "Gold, furs, weapons, take what you like." The chaos shaman threw the other head at him. "Gems," the chief said, digging into the pile. "Hear that you shamans like gems. Here."

Bloodhawk pushed his mask back on his head as he took the offered stone and put it between his teeth. He bit down hard, grimaced, then spat it back at the chief. "Emerald," he said. "You give us magestone."

"Don't have any," said the chief, shrugging. "Who needs it? And plunder's been scarce. Not much more they have hidden away around here, so we're moving on. Rich plunder to the east, though. Come with us and you'll see."

"If you have no magestone, you have nothing we need," said Bloodhawk. He turned to leave, then stopped. "Have you seen any flying towers?"

"Saw a sky fortress over the mountains two days ago, headed toward the Empire," said the chief.

"No, too big," said Bloodhawk.

"I saw a tower," said one of the orcs at the fire. "Down in the valley near a waterfall," he offered when the chaos shaman turned to him, pointing to the south. "Flying imperial flag, but with this below it." He scraped his boot through the dirt, tracing a curve broken by a straight line.

“Yes,” said Bloodhawk. “Yes. Good.” He turned back to the chief. “The seasons change. You have plunder. Yet you stay here, again.”

“The plunder is still good,” said the chief. “And what we take is ours, how it should be.”

The shaman shook his head. “The stones have spoken. Those who call this home will die,” he said. “Leave now, or find your fate.” The shamans followed Bloodhawk as he walked off into the darkness.

**Monday December 13, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 24**  
**Observations**

The Revolutionaries’ observation post above the Kuttar Gates was well hidden, but not from the unerring guidance of the Eye. Inside, a scout peered through a long spyglass, while another sat at a small desk below beside a shrouded oil lamp, snoring quietly. Rivulets of the unending rain outside had run down the walls to turn the floor of the post into a muddy mess. The observer reached down to swat the scribe, who awoke with a snort. “What?” he demanded irritably.

“More for the report,” said the observer. “Three days after capturing the orc camp, the Freeholders are taking their wounded and what spoils they have in a small wagon and are headed into the forests to the west.”

“It’s not the Wylden, but it has more trees,” joked the scribe.

“Quiet,” said the observer. “The skirmish between the Solonavi forces and Amazons flying our banner appears to have ended, but it is difficult to report a clear victor.”

“What about the caravan?” asked the scribe.

“Gone,” said the observer. “Whoever won that battle took everything with them. Luckily it was headed north, so they only got food and raw materials. In a few weeks, they would have captured a full load of rifles and powder.”

“If the Solos won,” said the scribe.

“If they won,” agreed the observer. “If not, the Amazons got the caravan into the depths. Doesn’t seem likely, though. Anyone headed north from the bridges has to go through that meat grinder between the Dracs and those incinerators the Legionnaires hauled into position.”

“I thought you said the burners ran out of fuel yesterday.”

“I said it appeared that they ran out of fuel.” The observer swung the spyglass around to look to the north. “Probably right, though. Scalies are making another attack up in Eastmouth, and it doesn’t look good for the Legion. The trenches have been bridged, and the command tent is down. I can’t tell from here, but they’re probably dividing up whatever the Atlanteans had captured from that northbound Enos-Joppa refugee train.”

“Poor folks,” said the scribe as he wrote. “They get chased out of their homes, and run straight into another battle.”

“Won’t be much left of their homes soon,” said the observer. “The damnable bluebloods are still pulling the city down and hauling everything up here.” He set the spyglass aside and scabbled forward to peer directly downward, as best he could. “The Dracs are going to take the river bridges and the mouths of the Depths, but meanwhile the elves are just walling the whole thing off.”

“What about us?” asked the scribe.

“I thought you were bored when all we had to record our caravans headed into the Depths,” said the observer. “Said that if the action wouldn’t come to you, you would go to it.”

“Yeah, here’s the action,” said the scribe. “And you won’t let me take a single shot. Come on, just a few shots. They’re right down there, and I bet I can punch right through that silver plating--”

“I’ve seen you shoot,” said the observer. “You’re no Snow. You’d just give away our position, and then what good would we be?” He clapped shut the cover on the observation slot and sat on a nearby bench to put the spyglass carefully into a leather case.

The scribe blotted his paper, then pushed it aside to reveal a grid of lines carved into the table and grinned. “Got time to kill. Wanna play?”

“That’s why you pulled this duty, you know,” said the observer. “Too much talking to orc prisoners. Might as well, though. Used too many cards lighting that lamp to play roundshot.” He started scooping stones piled on a stone outcropping into his hand. “No courier yet, you know,” he said as he poured them onto the table. “If he hasn’t shown up by tomorrow and you really want some excitement, somebody has to take our reports to Vansfield and tell them that they’re going to have to find a new way to bring powder caravans south.”

“Like I said, anything to get out of here,” said the observer.

**Wednesday December 15, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 25**  
**Sacrifice**

For much of the day I had observed the ongoing battle between the Revolutionary troops in Caero and the Atlantean forces entrenched across the River Vizorr outside Venetia. The Caeronn side of the river had been scorched by Atlantean lightning cannons, and the Venetian lines were pocked by the craters created by black powder shells. The Revolution had the edge in the battle; to win they just needed to hold the lines, and to attack them the Atlanteans had to cross the more formidable obstacle of the river. There was a narrow band of muddy no-man’s-land along the western bank littered with tracks and the wreckage of destroyed golems demonstrating that the Atlanteans hadn’t given up, but it was going to be a long fight.

As darkness was falling, I prepared to release the Eye and return to the scrying chamber to report the day’s events. Instead the Eye pulled me toward Venetia. Long ago the canyons of Venetia had been the towering walls of a stone quarry, flooded before the time of Tezla by the Delphane when they took control of the area. Over the centuries, the descendants of slaves who had refused to leave the quarries had carved homes and businesses into the rock and built arcing bridges to span the black waters below. Stairs and ramps were built to take the people of the city from level to level, while chains dangling from enormous windlasses on the canyon rim raised and lowered heavier loads from the wharfhouses along the river to the roads out of the city far above.

The Eye brought me to a palatial home with a view down the central canal toward the river. The red rock of the canyon that made up the exterior had been polished smooth and trimmed in white marble. Liveried guardsman stood watch outside the main door, and came to attention as a palanquin approached, carried by a quartet of hooded men. They stopped as one at the coachman’s bark, and carefully lowered their load to the cobbles directly before the home. The coachman jumped down to pull the curtain aside for the passenger, a woman shrouded in a gray cloak. The door opened as she approached, and the Eye followed her inside before the servant closed the door.

The thick wood paneling that lined the inside of the home belied the fact that it was carved deep inside stone. Pools of light cast by oil lamps were swallowed by the surrounding gloom, but the servant and guest

made their way unerringly through the darkness until they came to a pair of heavy oaken doors. The servant knocked twice, and opened the doors when bid to enter.

“Welcome, Preceptor Nala,” said a voice from the dimness beyond. The servant hurried to place another log into the fireplace, and slowly the flames lit the room to reveal an old man sitting in a deep velvet chair. He sat before the fire, below an enormous map of the Land nearly as detailed as the one that hung in the scrying chamber. To one side of the chair was a table piled high with books and scrolls, with more on the floor below. Close at hand on the other side were paper, a variety of inkpots and bottles, and a crystal goblet half-full of a thick amber liquid. “Perhaps the servants can bring you something else,” he said as he reached for the goblet. “I’m afraid this is quite the acquired taste.” He leaned forward to bring the goblet to his lips and I saw his face for the first time, thick scars slashing across it from forehead to jaw. I knew those scars, and I knew the man. The tales I had read said the scars had been inflicted by the Black Thorn using poisoned roses on the very man who had meant to kill her--the Venetian merchant Darset Frehr.

“That which would sate me, you would not give,” said his guest, sitting across from Frehr and casting back her cloak. I shivered as I realized why I recognized her as well. When last I had seen her, she was in the presence of Death and the other avatars of the Apocalypse. Kem Ravensbane, the dark knight of the Tur’aj, had knelt before her. She was the leader of the Apocalypse cult.

“I do not give, Nala,” agreed Frehr. “You see this home, the life I have won. Rarely has something passed from my hands unless I make a greater gain. Only once have I failed, and that is why you are here.”

“I have come in recognition of your generous contributions to our cause,” said the cult leader. “The Tur’aj have but a single goal, and it is not to pursue your vendetta.”

“Sometimes two objectives fall along a single path,” said Frehr. “Particularly when pursued by an agent dedicated to both.” He raised his hand and the servant opened the door to allow a young man into the room. “I give you my son, Valot. I have guided him through the rituals myself, and he is ready.”

The man crossed the room to kneel before the cultist, who reached out and placed her hand on his shoulder. He shuddered as closed her eyes and basked in the energy flowing between them. “Yes,” she said, releasing him. “He will do.”

She sat back in the chair, smiling thinly. “Let us speak of other things, my friend. I bring good tidings: they are coming. All things will soon be as they were. Our call has been answered, and the signs are as were told. The darkness comes.”

“The darkness can have us all,” said Frehr quietly. “As long as it takes Nadia first.”

**Thursday December 16, 2004**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 26**  
**Enlightenment**

*It has all happened again*

*All things will soon be as they were.*

The first were the words of the ancient elven sorcerer who died at the Battle of the Spire. The second were the words of the gaunt woman leading the Apocalypse cult. Both led me to the archives deep beneath the Oracle’s Needle.

“Greetings, archivist,” I said to the Solonvai as I entered the archives.

Anquilis looked up from a circle of stones laid out on the table before him. “Oracle Kastali,” he said. “I cannot answer your question.”

“But I haven’t--”

“You were about to ask how the words of the Tur’aj preceptor might be connected to your own prophecy.”

“ ‘It is now as it was, but how it was is not how it will be’, ” I agreed. “The words were echoed by an elven sorcerer as well. They know what I don’t, what might be key to my prophecy--the past. History. How it was. Perhaps I was wrong to hope that the archivist of the Oracles of Rokos might be able to provide some insight.”

Anquilis shook his head. “Neither flattery or insult will bring you to enlightenment, Oracle, nor can I. It is a path you must walk on your own.”

The archivist turned back to his stones, but I refused to be ignored. “If you won’t help me, perhaps I can help myself,” I said, crossing to the nearest shelves. I ran my finger down the spines--*Princes of Scythria, The Night of Fire, The Vurga Rift--A Comparative Bestiary*--and pulled one out at random. “*Pre-Imperial Kosian Architecture*,” I read. “Unless you’ll suggest another volume, it will have to do.”

I was about to open the book and begin reading when Oracle Daheia took it from me and placed it back on the shelf. “Again you overstep your bounds, Oracle,” she said.

“What good are prophecies if we cannot divine their meanings before the events occur?” I complained. “The future to come is rooted in history. I’m certain of it. The archivist knows the past, and might even guide me toward the answers I seek, but the glowfly refuses to help!” I regretted the Crusader slang as soon as it escaped my lips. Daheia reddened in anger, and I saw her emotion cross their bond to color the Solonavi.

I awaited judgment. Finally Anquilis spoke. “I did not say I would not help, Oracle,” he said calmly. “I said that you must find the answers on your own.”

Daheia offered me a small box of polished black wood. “Lord Heddravalis nearly refused to let this leave his possession, and even I am uncertain about giving it to you. It is Anquilis who insisted that it must be in your hands.” I opened the box to find a piece of broken jewelry lying in the velvet-lined interior, one-half of an intricately carved amulet.

“I gave one of these shards to Lord Heddravalis,” I said.

“Now it returns to you, with one of its brethren,” said Anquilis. “You must seek the others. For too long we have waited for destiny to reunite them.”

“Unless the scrying eye takes me to them, I don’t know where to begin looking,” I confessed.

“Wear the shards at all times,” said Anquilis. “When the time comes, you will know.”

**Wednesday January 12, 2005**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 27**  
**Road to Rangraz**

The Order of the Ninth Circle marched west. Molog Bloodaxe had assembled an army unlike anything I’d seen before, the krugg marching at the head of a chaotic rabble that included phooka, frost wolves, and even a pack of gnolls. To one side of Bloodaxe a lumbering half-troll carried the notched-ring banner of the order. On the other walked Terk, the feather in the dwarven mercenary’s cap bouncing as he hurried to keep up with Bloodaxe.

“Some group you got here,” said the dark dwarf. “My guys are about the only ones that even look like soldiers.” He jerked his thumb at a nearby group of similarly pale dwarves, all clad in the same leathers and

feathered cap as Terk. They were joking and passing an aleskin among themselves, swiping at one another with scabbarded swords.

“Soldiers don’t make an army, and a sword is a poor substitute for a fang,” said the krugg, eyes glinting beneath the bearskin he wore over his head and shoulders.

“Yeah, about that,” said the dwarf. “We’ve passed up plenty of villages waiting to be plundered, and all I’ve gotten is dusty feet and an earful of smart-talk from you and that book you read all the time. You promised us fights and gold when we signed on, and I haven’t seen much of either lately. We’re actually walking to a fight and not just so you have someone to talk to, right?”

“There is a battle at our journey’s end, and we bring it with us,” said Bloodaxe. “Soon chaos will fill the streets of Rangraz.”

“Rangraz! I leave there, walk over a mountain range to find you, and now we’re walking back?” Terk clenched the hilts of his swords. “I’m cutting down anything in that town that gets in my way, and there better be someone paying us to do it.”

“It’s all there for us to take,” said Bloodaxe. “Plunder. Respect. Power.”

“Right, right,” said Terk. “Someone is paying us, though, right? I’m not facing down magic guns unless I get coins first.”

“The Venthian merchant’s caravan will meet us a day away from the city,” said Bloodaxe. “You’ll get your gold then. And I’ll get my map.”

“Map?”

The krugg looked up at the banner beside him. “A map to true power…”

**Thursday January 13, 2005**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 28**  
**Fenborn**

Entering the scrying chamber this morning, I thought of Anquilis’ command to seek out the other shards of the amulet I now wore around my neck, dangling from the Xandressan necklace. I looked down at the piece I had recovered, and as I sat down beside the scrying pool I cast the Eye east, across the sea.

The Eye followed the ley currents across the waters, gliding along the streams of power like a hawk. Off in the distance, to the north, I saw the high cliffs of the Sturmlander coast. Once they had been crowned by the green hills and forests of the Wylden. Following a season of pillage and famine those lands were gray and brown, but occasional flashes of brightness suggested that given time the Wylden would be green again one day.

Ahead I saw my destination, the rocky islands off the southern coast, cast-off siblings of the Sturmounts. They were home to the dark temple where I had found the shard of the amulet--and an army of the Shyft. Approaching the coast of the largest isle I spotted a mage-tower floating above the bay, the Delphana come to investigate the hibernating Shyft as they had planned.

It appeared that a small detachment of Delphana mages and swordsmen had landed on the beach in a flying skiff, and received a violent reception. The skiff was overturned, and the swordsmen were fighting a pitched battle against giant, fanged worms crawling out of the jungle. The warriors still held the line against the Mage Spawn, and aided by the technomancers behind them they might have won the battle. But finned wave spawn had come from beneath the waters to attack them from the rear, and their spears were cutting through the Atlantean ranks. The mages on the tower were attempting to provide support from above, but

even they were harried by a cloud of winged creatures flapping and screeching around the flying tower's battlements. The Atlanteans had come planning to explore and pillage wild islands, but the beasts were mounting a formidable and organized defense. Which meant--

A trio of Shyft warriors in feathered headdresses erupted from the underbrush, streaking forward on four legs like centaurs. As they leapt over the worms, the opposable hands on their middle legs allowed them to draw a second pair of blades and they fell in among the Atlanteans as a whirling frenzy of death. Though the Mage Spawn howled and roared in triumph, the Shyft were disturbingly silent. I guided the Eye closer to the carnage and saw that beneath their beady, yellow eyes the mouths of the creatures were covered by a smooth, unbroken piece of skin, their jaws moving behind the membrane but no sound emerging.

The battle on the beach was over quickly, but the mages in the tower were having more success, cutting through the wild creatures flying around them. Then the Shyft warriors raised their eyes upward, peering toward the battle, concentrating. Suddenly the black-winged creatures reared backwards, arcing upwards and returning in oddly organized ranks that attacked the Delphana mages in a wave that brought one slashing pass after another without respite. I saw the heads of the Shyft bob as they followed the creatures in the sky, and realized that they were controlling the creatures. I had seen them guide the Mage Spawn before, organize them into a guidable force, but never had they been able to make them so effective. These new Shyft were dangerous.

Beyond the warriors, I saw that another half-dozen Shyft had emerged from the treeline and stood in a line along the beach, unarmed. Distracted by the attack, the newcomers were unseen by the Atlanteans as the mystics brought their hands to their heads and concentrated. The ley currents fluctuated as they were drawn into the Shyft, focused through their mind, and drawn outward as pure power. They reared back in pain or ecstasy as the power built in their hands, then lashed out as one and cast it at the tower.

The tower shook as if struck by a cannonshot, but it appeared unscathed by the blast...until I saw the mortar crumble away between the stones in the lower part of the tower. With a grinding noise, the blocks fell apart.

Stone and soldiers spilled from the rent bottom of the tower, splashing into the turquoise water below. Even then the battle might have continued. But the magestones at the base also fell away, and with it the tower's ability to fly. The tower canted away from the beach, throwing the mages off the battlements. Then it twisted and finally collapsed into the deep waters below.

On the beach, the Shyft stood victorious among the fallen. One warrior lifted a gasping mage and pressed his mouth to the human's head. There was a leyglow around the warrior as he drew out the mage's life force to consume it, and the Atlantean's eyes went dull and lifeless as he fell limply back to the sand.

A spindly Shyft came forward, head sagging beneath the weight of a heavy headdress. Two attendants followed behind her, gathering the wet, amber-colored eggs sliding out of the bulging membranes on her back. The Shyft mystics and warriors fell prostrate before the matriarch, pressing their heads to the sand.

"We are ready," she said, and I realized that I heard the words as the Shyft did, in my mind. "The sign has come for us to prepare for our masters' return. Let the call go out across the fen--tonight we cross the waters. We will gather the sleeping tribes as we journey north, and go to face our ancient enemies as was intended--in our true forms. We leave at last light."

"We will be ready, Domina Vo'kara," said one of the warriors, and the Shyft scattered into the jungle to prepare. The matriarch remained on the beach, smugly watching those few Atlanteans who escaped the wreckage and surfaced were quickly pulled back under by triumphant wave spawn.

**Friday January 13, 2005**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 29**  
**Dragon Lord**

It was midday in Rokos, but when I gave the scrying eye freedom to take us where it would, I was plunged into darkness. I heard the murmur of voices in the distance, and the scuffing of boots on broken stone. A glow in the distance grew into dancing light and shadows, cast by a torch held by a woman in necromancer's robes. It was Quila, and behind her was the blood cult enforcer Demethostes.

"How much further?" asked Demethostes, his voice hollow behind his skull-faced mask.

"I don't know," said Quila. "Soma told every new deathspeaker that they had free reign over anywhere in the Necropolis but these tunnels. Even that wouldn't have stopped some, if not for the necromantic wards Soma put in place. But it seems they died with him."

"What is it you hope to find?" the cult enforcer asked as they continued down the tunnel.

"Whatever Soma wanted to hide. Aeredon promised me power if I supported his plan to become Prophet. Yet he bars even me from his chambers and spends all day 'communing with Dark Tezla'. The deathspeakers' circle is a sham, Darq maintaining the council in a fruitless hope to discover Aeredon's plans. He ignores the battle reports from the generals and whiles away the hours focusing his ire on me. I need to find something to shore up my own power, open the door to Aeredon, and keep Darq at bay before his ankh-headed ignorance brings down the entire Crusade." Her tirade caught in her throat, and she turned to look at the blood cultist walking behind her.

"I serve the Goddess and you, my love," said Demethostes. "Not him." He took the torch from Quila and gestured down the tunnel. Both took a half-step--then stopped, listening to the skittering in the distance. The enforcer jammed the torch into a crack in the wall, and drew his blade as the skittering grew louder. Quila put her hands to the badge of office hanging around her neck, and her fingers danced as she whispered the words of a spell.

The skittering became a rushing noise like the wind as a line of magical power curved around the feet of the pair. Quila and Demethostes moved back-to-back as spiders swarmed toward them in a liquid wave that covered the floors, wall, and ceiling. Those that crossed the magical barrier sizzled and fell limp, but others took their place, more and more until they surrounded the Crusaders.

"Unnerving," said Demethostes. "But hardly dangerous. Incinerate them."

"No need," said a raspy voice from the darkness. "They were merely curious, and if you proved a danger to them or me you would be dead already." Crystals flared atop a staff supporting a sect elf in dark robes. A heavy crimson cape hung over his shoulders, and his head was capped by a strange, metal helm.

"Who are you?" asked Quila.

"Attractive and brazen," said the elf. "I'm glad I spared you. I am Katalkus."

Quila gaped, then bowed deeply. "My lord," she said, eyes lowered.

"Your name means nothing to me," said Demethostes.

The elf's eyes hardened as he turned to the enforcer. "*You* may call me *Lord* Katalkus."

Quila stood, still staring at Katalkus. "He's a sect elf," she said. "Our histories say that when the necromancers brought the Dark Tezla to this island, Lord Katalkus was the elder of the sect elves already living here."

Demethostes dropped his blade. "So you're a necromancer, guarding Soma's treasure?"

“A necromancer?” said Katalkus. “Hardly. Though I have...internalized some of their knowledge.” He drew a dagger from behind his belt and gashed his arm. For a moment, blood dripped onto the floor and the spiders surged toward it--and then the wound had healed. “Soma was merely providing me sanctuary during my studies, though I suspect he might not have been so generous had he known my true goals.”

He walked forward, the carpet of spiders parting for each step. “I will be leaving soon. I heard your words, young one. I know your needs. You will serve both our purposes.”

“I swear,” said Quila, stepping forward and breaking her circle.

“You will protect her,” said Katalkus to Demethostes. “That is the only reason you still live, and the only reason we will all prosper together.”

“You said you were leaving,” said Demethostes. “Where are you going, and what are we supposed to do?”

“When you are not doing what I tell you, you will do what you must,” said Katalkus. “As for me, I’m going to get something I’ve wanted for a long, long time--my own dragon.”

**Monday January 17, 2005**  
**Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 30**  
**Reprisal**

Another army of oathsworn warriors left Rokos this morning, headed toward the battlefields on the Prieskan frontier. For days I had heard the chatter from Mahdi and the other pages about the fighting; apparently the Shadow Khans had ravaged Prieska to the breaking point, and had started looking east toward the only land enjoying a bountiful harvest this season--the lands to the east that had been protected from famine by the Solonavi’s powerful magic.

All it had taken was a single orc tribe crossing the Scythrian foothills for the Solonavi to respond in full force, as if they had been waiting for the provocation. Armies of Solonavi and oathsworn had rapidly assembled in Luxor and attacked in kind, pushing the orcs back into Prieska.

Mahdi’s chatter said that the Shadow Khans could move more quickly than the Solonavi armies, and had the advantage of territory that they knew well through conquest and plunder. Further, while their combat edge had dulled a bit through a year of easy plunder, their long unsated lust for combat quickly sharpened their wits and their blades. Finally, they had the support of powerful chaos shamans that had come down from the Fist. The orcs would not give up their conquered land without a fight.

Yet the Solonavi were determined to eliminate anyone who threatened their borders, particularly before the orcs gathered in strength sufficient to once again lay siege to Luxor. The thousands of swords in the oathsworn were the bulk of the Solonavi armies, but they were hardly the fore. Behind them came the Solonavi themselves, drawing on the powerful ley lines that ran through the Scythrians to cast bolts of pure magical power that tore apart the ranks of the orcs.

Still, for each orc that fell an oathsworn fell beside him. Solonavi were knocked from the skies and torn apart by the spells and axes of the orcs. The road between Luxor and Alrisar became soaked in blood. Mahdi was certain that soon even the pages of the tower would be called to arms and sent to support the oathsworn armies, and seemed possible. Unless one side gained an edge, they would fight to the death.

So I cast the eye west to Prieska, and was surprised at what I found: a tribe on the run. They had abandoned the Alrisar road to cut north through the forests. Perhaps they were attempting to flank the Solonavi forces I could see a few miles away, or headed to regroup.

The orcs came out of the woods into a clearing, and found an army waiting for them. I recognized some of the faces. I had seen them in midnight glades, and hidden behind inns. They were peasants and plowmen,

craftsmen and innkeepers. They were Prieskans, their armor marked with the sigil of the Order of the Crescent Sword, and before them stood Raydan Marz.

“You’ll do,” he said.

With a roar, the Prieskans swarmed toward the orcs. A chaos shaman grinding a magestone between his teeth and grunting the syllables of a spell was interrupted by the snap-crack of Marz’s lightning pistol. Marz and his buzzing manaclevt sword cut through the orcs two at a time, but he was nothing compared to the rage of the Prieskans, finally able to vent their frustrations at the creatures who had destroyed their land. When the battle was over, healers were binding the wounds of a dozen Prieskans...and every orc was dead.

“Fall back and scatter,” commanded Marz, pulling a rough cloak over his armor as many others did the same. “Gather in three hours at Pipyn’s Crossing and we’ll go in search of more greenskins. Don’t let the scouts for either army see you as anything other than travelers looking to avoid battle. We still need everything to fall into place for the real battle.”

**Tuesday January 18, 2005**  
**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 1**  
**Lost**

Kastali?

Are you there?

I don’t know if you can see me, or hear me, or even read this, but this is Raven. It feels wrong to be messing up your book with my rough letters, but Oracle Daheia said I should come up here and see if you might be trying to reach us through the book.

See, we don’t know where you are.

I got back to Rokos late last night. Right away I reported to Lord Vextha. He had sent me north to find something that the Solonavi wanted. Someone, actually. And where they were hiding. I found them, and that’s what I told Vextha. Not sure if I should write it here, even though Vextha said you were the one that spotted the old greenskin first. Don’t think I’ve ever heard a Solonavi use language like that before. I think he and the drak have some sort of history, and not a good one.

Would have told you all this in person, but when I went to your chamber you weren’t there. I didn’t think anything of it. Maybe you were in the baths, or down in some crazy Solonavi testing room under the tower. Who knew? Not me.

I didn’t see you at the morning meal or the midday. Finally, in the afternoon I went to the scrying chamber and knocked. No answer. I asked Mahdi, and he said that you hadn’t had any food brought up all day. So I ordered a tray and just went in.

(I don’t know how you do all this writing. My hand is pretty sore already. But Oracle Daheia said to just keep writing for a while. Here we go.)

You weren’t there. You weren’t in your sleeping chamber, either. Finally I found Oracle Daheia and she said you had asked for permission to leave the tower last night. Found the guard who had been on the gate and he said you said you were headed for the Shrouded Cup. I went there. Talked to Jek, but the innkeep hadn’t seen you for weeks, since we were there before I left.

You're lucky I got worried at that point, because I was getting pretty tired of chasing you down.

I came back to the tower and told Oracle Daheia everything, and she called the captain of the tower guard. They called a bunch of pages, Anquilis came in and did some magic, and in a few minutes they were pretty sure you weren't anywhere nearby. I suggested we should check in Seatower. I'm not sure if they heard me or not.

So now the city watch of Rokos is looking for you. Anquilis and a bunch of oracles are looking for you. And I'm here, writing in your book.

Where are you?

I'm going to go soak my hand in some water now. I'll check back in a few hours.

----

*..connection to chamber is all I can feel. The Eye is here but it feels like its sleeping. Or afraid. I can't cast it out. I can't see where I am.*

*I'm surrounded by blackness. I feel cold stone all around me. It's like I'm buried in a tomb--except for the rocking.*

*Back and forth. Back and forth.*

*I'm cold and tired. I feel tired, sick. It feels like I've been poisoned.*

*Help me.*

**Wednesday January 19, 2005**  
**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 2**  
**Hunting the Wolf**

I think these words are appearing in the journal. I can feel the words appearing on the page, but can't read them. I hope that you and Daheia are reading these pages, Lord Vextha.

I think I'm on a boat.

The last thing I remember is walking toward the Shrouded Cup in Rokos. Then I was hit from behind. I'm still sore, but I can only feel a little dried blood, so the wound can't be that bad.

I'm still in the dark.

I'm definitely surrounded by cut, polished stone. Very cold, and very hard. If I lie on my back, it's wide and long enough that I can't brace myself with my hands or feet. It's short enough that I can't sit up. So for endless hours I've been rocked back and forth, sometimes gently enough that I'm lulled off to sleep and at least once hard enough that I probably got a few more bruises.

Only once have I seen a little light, and after hours in the dark even a little was too much. The top of my prison scraped open as it was pushed away and I was blinded by the hazy light that flooded in. I could only make out silhouettes. I grasped toward the Eye, in hope that it could help me see, and it slipped away, torpid but sliding out of the box.

Two of the shadows reached in and held me while another pushed a waterskin to my lips. I drank deeply until they pulled it away, water sloshing down my chin. Then a wooden spoon was held to my mouth. "Eat it," said a deep voice. A man. The pasty glop on the spoon smelled terrible. "Eat," insisted the voice, and whoever was holding my arms jostled me until I did as I was told. They gave me more water, then pushed me back.

"I'm glad to see you're wearing the necklace," said the man. He was dark-skinned. Xandressan. "You've just eaten ground memory root. When next we talk, you'll tell me if you remember where it came from." Then the lid was closed again, thudding into place.

My heart thudded as I tried to remember what I had heard about memory root. As far as I knew, it didn't see much use around the Oracle's Needle, as it focused the senses inward. But what the root did invoke was held to be true, albeit often twisted. For the first time since waking up in the blackness, I felt warmth as the memory root burned through my blood. The floor began to slide out from beneath me, and I feared that I was about to slip into madness.

Then I was caught by the Eye. I hadn't felt its return, but it was there, holding me above the whirlpool yawning below. I heard my own voice, swearing fealty to Lord Vextha and the Solonavi. I smelled the flowers of my youth mixed with a pungent rot. I heard the words of elven magic, then the death cry of my father. Whenever I slipped toward it, the Eye buoyed me upward, and a picture formed in my mind:

A low line of buildings terraced along a green slope. Along the ridge of each building are intricate carvings of beasts and female warriors, a recording of both history and legend. Above them, steep stairs leading to a high temple, the doors at the peak flanked by marble bears supporting crystal orbs. This was Nepharus Mons, home of the Amazon tribes.

"Traitor!" said Queen Valia, her advisors rushing down the paved pathway to keep up with her angry stride. "I can't believe I didn't see it earlier. That so many tribes would simply turn away from the totems of their ancestors to suddenly worship the wolf is ridiculous."

The group turned into one of the buildings, distinguished as Valia's home only by the royal guard standing on post outside the door. The queen threw aside her cloak of office as they entered. "Man!" she barked to a nearby servant. "Gather my armor and ready my mount. Now!" Crossing to one of the weapons racks mounted on the wall, she chose a sharp-tipped pike, and a pair of short swords. From a cabinet, she withdrew a rifle and powder box."

"How many troops will you be taking with you, Queen?" asked a young Amazon standing nearby, hand on the pommel of her own sword.

"All of you, of course," said Valia, and the women shared a wry smile, both hungry for battle. "Go through the royal guard and draw out any who worship the totems she has disrespected. Call back the troops on retainer in Rangraz to replace them if you have to --the Revolution will have to stand on its own while we hunt down Corella and deal with her once and for all."

**Friday January 21, 2005**  
**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 3**  
**Memories of Blood**

All through the night I felt the touch of my past--fighting against Wylden elves when my unit was sent to raid one of their burial grounds, swimming the Roa Sanguine to cross into Sect territory, struggling back to the Necropolis as the lone survivor, being thrown into the blood pits for my failure. Only the constant embrace of the Eye reminded me of the present, that the cold waters of the river and the lash of the pit master were nothing more than phantoms. Yet the madness still raged through my system, dragging me inexorably toward the moments I least wished to revisit.

At some point the lid of my stone prison was opened, and water sloshed over my cracked lips and down my throat, raw from my howls and sobs. I felt the Eye's longing to escape, but it stayed to protect me as I stood in the entrance to the pits, blood poured over me by worshippers of the goddess as I waited to face a starving warbear. The lid was closed, and we were once again trapped.

Both in the past and the present, I was ready to die.

I reached out for the scrying chamber, but was too weak. Even the Eye's strength was flagging. The gates to the blood pit ground open, and I heard the hungry roar of the bloodthirsty mage spawn waiting outside. The Eye's hold on me slipped, and I wondered if it was doomed to share the pain I had once barely survived.

Then I was touched by a second Eye.

As the warbear leapt forward, the blood pit faded away in a wave of white. I gasped in relief as I found myself in the caverns deep under the northern mountains that had been the destination of the Pathis Arcana. She was still there in that hidden underground village, with the mystic Hysthe. They sat before the ancient drakona Krosthysas, whose cushioned platform had been moved out to the edge of the still waters. The draconum known as Gryn stood nearby, pike in hand and a satchel slung over her shoulder.

"The time has come, old one," said Gryn.

"Once I called you old, Wanderer," said Krosthysas with a chuckle. "Go, if you must. I have known you too long to try and deny you your nature. I would go with you if I could," he said, looking down at his shriveled, paralyzed legs.

"I know," said Gryn. "I know. But on foot or standing still, we all move toward our destiny."

"Will you see the Brotherhood?" asked the drakona.

"If I do, I do," said Gryn. "If I don't, I don't. Such is our way."

"So it is," said Krosthysas. "Good luck, my friend." Without another word, Gryn boarded the boat and poled herself out across the black waters, toward the path that led up to the snowy wastes above.

The others watched quietly until she reached the far side of the lake. Then the Pathis spoke: "You shouldn't have let her go. If you do not need her, I do. They know of the valley now. They know of the egg, and their servants must be coming. I will need every warrior I can muster--especially those as powerful as her."

"Gryn Wanderer follows only the wind," said Krosthysas. "Perhaps she will come when you have need of her, or perhaps she will be beyond the sunset. I do know that history shows she will be where she must."

"If what she says is true," said Hysthe. "I can hardly believe that she is as old as she claims."

"Perhaps not," said Krosthysas. "I know that she is older than I, yet appears as though she were recently no more than a whelp. But enough of her. As you said, the time approaches. We must complete our strategy, and you must begin your journey home."

"Your plan to put forces in the Kuttar Depths was a wise one," said Hysthe. "It will give us additional warning, and slow any army that would attack the valley."

"It has attracted the attention of the Khamsin Revolution," said the Pathis. "There is something somewhere in the Depths that they are desperate to keep hidden from us."

"So long as we control passage through the area, they can keep their secrets, for now," said Krosthysas.

“Could they be the one who have found us?” asked the Pathis. “The tracks the sentries found outside the caves were those of human-sized boots.”

“Perhaps they know of the valley,” said Krosthysas. “But here? You two have been the only visitors this place has known for some time. I deliberately chose it for its isolation, and those I bring here to study and train rarely leave.”

“You’ve doubled the guard,” said Hysthe. “Let that be enough. We only have a few hours to review our plans. Then the Pathis and I must depart. Time is short”

Suddenly I was once again back on the boat, in the box, trapped with two Eyes, and my memories. I was also in the blood pit, though thankfully the battle was over. The warbear was dead nearby and I lay on the hot sand, bleeding, waiting to be dragged back to my cell. Time marched forward, and even with two Eyes I couldn’t escape. Still, for the moment, I felt strong, and reached out for the scrying chamber and my journal.

**Monday January 22, 2005**  
**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 4**  
**Haunted**

I slept.

I dreamed of awakening in a pile of corpses, stripped of the armor and weapons I had won in the pits, fodder for experimentation by Sect apprentices. I dreamed of crawling free, escaping into the shadows of the Necropolis where I lived until the day I felt strong enough to go to the Prophet’s Tower. I dreamed of the fight in the courtyard, of the shackles around my ankles, of my escort into the circle of deathspeakers. Of the deciding vote in a circle divided between execution and making me one of their own. Of my father.

In my dreams I saw the pride on my father’s face when the Dark Prophet declared that I would be the first through a new regime he had designed, one that only a warrior tested in the pits would survive. I did not know then the years of training and trial that stretched before me, of what I would endure. I didn’t care. My father’s pride made me strong.

Then I was awakened by a thumping sound, and my strength faded with the dreams. I was exhausted, as if I had not slept at all. But the fire no longer burned in my veins. I was no longer in the grip of the memory root. I lay still on the cold stone, conserving my strength, thankful that my dreams had reminded me of times I had survived worse situations with less to work with. I had been coddled in the Oracle’s Needle for too long.

I heard the thump again, and then the heavy stone lid of my prison was jostled open. Again I squinted into the hazy light as the lid slowly slid aside, stopping when it was less than three handbreadth ajar.

A brighter light. I twisted weakly, trying to shield my eyes. “I’d hoped you might be awake, witch,” said a voice--the Xandressan I had seen previously.

“Wha--” I began, only to have a hand clapped over my mouth. He stank of sweat, fish oil, and sulphur.

“No,” he said. “I want the first word out of your mouth to be her name. Say it.”

He pulled his hand away. “I don’t know what you want me to say,” I said. I tried to get my elbows beneath me, to sit up.

The barrel of a pistol was jammed against my teeth, and I was pushed heavily to the stone. "I want you to say that you know what you are, and what you've done!" he shouted. "You killed her! You killed her and our family, took everything that meant anything to me, and vanished into the night! You made me an outcast among my own people, and when I tried to regain my station that I might hunt you down like a seaspawn, I became a cripple instead! You made me go to our most hated enemies and beg for them to take me in, give up information on every harbor that had ever sheltered me just in hopes that I might live long enough to find you and to hear you say her name! SAY IT!" I desperately tried to mumble some words around the pistol barrel as he cocked back the hammer.

"Hey!" said another voice. "Captain, what're you doing? You can't kill her--we don't deliver her, we don't get paid."

My eyes had adjusted to the light, and I saw every detail of the Xandressan captain standing over me. The tight-knuckled hand wrapped around the pistol grip. A sailor's muscular arm. A close-shaven head. A dirty cotton shirt and a tattered seacloak in his people's yellow that fell away to reveal another pistol strapped in a holster across his chest--and a metal cap just below his shoulder, where his left arm would have begun.

"Some things are more important than money, sailor," said the captain.

"You'll be the one to tell her that," said the sailor.

The captain's hand tightened on the pistol, the barrel twitching between my lips... and then he pulled it away. "Give her a double helping of the paste," he said, and the sailor quickly stepped forward with a wooden spoon heaped with the memory root-laden paste. "You will remember, witch," said the captain.

Then the lid closed again, and as the memory root took hold I reached for the Eyes. I found only one this time, and I cradled it close.

**Tuesday January 25, 2005**  
**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 5**  
**Mistwalker**

The sharp peaks of the Rivvenheims crowned the horizon outside the palatial hall. Intricate banners of tightly woven silk hung from the towering ceiling and fell behind seven tall seats of polished wood, decorated with the sigils of the elven noble houses. The elders of each house were gathered together, in rare council. Beyond the chamber's heavy doors I could hear the murmurs of the council's army of advisors and retainers, awaiting word of the council's outcome. Yet inside it was silent.

Finally, one of the elders spoke. "It cannot be denied that it is a sign, one that we have seen before."

"With respect, Lord Fairhame," said another, rising from her seat to address the circle. "The whole of the Land knows of the egg, but it is not yet hatched. The beast has not yet been reborn. The reports from Lady Ivydown's kin-son say that the gateway at Enos Joppa is completed, and our warriors are in place. It may be that we will defeat those who would come for the egg long before they even approach it."

"And if we do not?" asked Lord Fairhame. "Surely you don't think that the beast-men will be able to protect it? I bow to the wisdom of Lord Starsdawn and those of you who were on the council when the decision was made to entrust them, but surely those were different times. They were a united people then, not the coordinated rabble that has been moving north in the last few months."

"As you say, it was our decision then, and we are bound by our word," said Lord Starsdawn, his jaw lined by a neatly-trimmed beard of white and his skin marked with faint creases. "Yet if there is a way to prevent the egg from hatching, we must play a part. We have built the gateway. It is manned by our finest general,

supported by my own kin-sons and kith from your own lines. We will hold the enemy, as we always have, and the drakona can return to being custodians.”

There was a thud as Lord Stormbringer set his warhammer on the marble floor. “There is no decision to be made. We have sent those forces that we can spare. If the gatewall does fall, if the egg is captured, and if they know how to hatch it, then doom will be unleashed upon the Land. Even then council edict binds us from sending in the full strength of our armies. We must remain mindful of why we moved our people to the eastern reaches of the Land, and vigilant of the true threat--”

His speech was interrupted by a gray column that formed in the center of the chamber, just as suddenly surrounded by wards cast by the sorcerers on the council. The woman who stepped from the column stumbled forward, and would have fallen had she not leaned heavily on the tall silver staff she carried. The ring of blue fire atop the staff damped, and the grayness was drawn inward...but into the woman rather than the staff. Lady Ivydown rose from her seat and rushed forward. “Jaysari!” she exclaimed.

The wards were dropped, and the woman climbed to her feet, aided by Lady Ivydown. “You interrupt a meeting of the high council, Priestess,” said Lord Starsdawn.

“I have done as you commanded,” said Jaysari. “I sought out the gods themselves. I walked the mists, and paid the price.” The blue fire from her staff burned in her eyes, and tears rolled down her cheeks. “We have already failed.” She fell heavily into the arms of Lady Ivydown--then kept falling, collapsing into a cloud of gray mist that rolled across the floor and dissipated.

The council chamber again fell into silence.

The Eye had done what it could, and the chamber too fell away. I found myself in my prison. I felt the heat of the memory root in my blood, and knew that it was once again taking hold of me. As I fought it, my hands slid across the stone floor and walls, and I recalled what I had seen when it had been lit by the Xandressan captain’s lantern. The stone was black and smooth. I knew that color, knew the flecks running through it. I had seen it nearly every day for the last year.

It was the same Scythrian blackstone that made up the Tower of Rokos.

**Thursday January 27, 2005**  
**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 6**  
**On the Move**

I think only a day has passed. Perhaps it’s been two. The memory root drags me through the past at an irregular rate, a decade of training passing in a minute, while the few seconds I spent strapped on a necromancer’s table learning what it was to be brought close to death stretched into hours of agony. I cursed my past that haunted me, cursed the present that tortured me, cursed the Eye for not providing succor. When anger failed me I fell into sorrow and sobbed for the Eye’s return, especially as I relived the months approaching the end of my training. Past and present were about to collide, but I knew I had yet to survive the worst. I had to get out, had to escape.

Then my prayers were answered. The lid above me scraped open. “Blasted witch smells like an orc,” said the sailor who reached under in to pull me out of my stone prison. “Grab that bucket,” he said, as he dropped me onto the deck. It knocked the wind out of me, but I reached out thankfully to feel something--anything--other than stone beneath me. I ran my fingers over the smooth veins of the well-worn wood, and the past began to fade away--then was knocked away completely as I was struck by a wave of cold seawater. My parched tongue licked the salty drops from my lips as the sailors pulled me up the stairs.

Dragged onto deck, I was once again blinded--this time by the afternoon sun hanging overhead. After days in the tomb-like prison, the world seemed unbearably bright, impossibly hot. “Bind her to the forward

mast,” came the voice of the Xandressan captain. I’m wasn’t being rescued, I thought as they stood me against the mast, but at least I wasn’t being shot. Yet.

Slowly, painfully, I opened my eyes to find the one-armed captain with his back to me, looking out to sea. “You see them?” he asked. I peered through the sun-dazzle, out across the water, and saw enormous humped shapes moving over the nearby waves. “Aquatics,” he said. “Big ones, and mean. We’ve either hunted or avoided them for generations. They were just too dangerous. The dance to their masters’ tune, though.” I squinted, and saw that the humps were actually Shyft crouched low on the beasts’ backs, riding them. Just behind one creature’s head I saw a Shyft, long-fingered hands pressed to his temple. A bond of energy danced between the two; they were linked. “I’ve seen more Aquatics in the last week than I ever heard about in any Xandressan inn,” said the captain. “And each has a whole army riding on it. Don’t know where they’re headed, but it looks like they’re all going.”

“That has nothing to do with me and you, though,” he said. “Tomorrow we’ll get to Wylden Bay, and then you get handed over to their friends. Nasty folk, and I couldn’t wish you in any other hands. Except mine, of course. We have a bit more time, though. So I brought you up here, to give see if the sights will jog your memory.” He turned to leave, then paused. “Still, the memory root hasn’t done the job. Maybe you need something more to help prime the pumps.” He cracked his knuckles, made a fist, and drew back.

The Eye pulled me away just before the punch landed. I saw the streets of Khamsin. The streets were crowded with Revolutionary troops, traders, and commonfolk. But a group dressed in white cotton stood out as they moved through a throng dressed in gray and brown Khamsin wool. They were Galeshi nomads, led by the elder Nerab. A grizzled Khamsin officer walked beside him, eyes scanning the crowd as they walked. “I’m sorry that we can’t offer more, but you have my word that my men are all you’ll need.”

“Suns above,” said Nerab angrily as he spat onto the cobblestone. “Fifty men. What good are fifty men against the darkness that has taken root in our land?”

“Fickett’s Fifty are the best soldiers the Khamsin army has to offer,” said the officer firmly. “I’m teaching them everything I know about war, and some have even taught themselves a few new tricks. A couple of the liberated dwarves are pretty smart, and they’ve loaded us up with a few surprises.”

The elder relented. “Very well, Commander Townley. Your nation has long been a good ally to my people, and I trust that you will not fail us this time. But time is short. We must leave quickly.”

“We’re ready to march when you are,” said Townley.

Then I was back on the ship. I hung limply against the rope, my jaw was sore, and I tasted the tang of blood in my mouth. I felt the pain, and the memory root surging through me, and in the back of my mind I saw myself at the celebration after I emerged from Dark Tezla’s training program. I sat across from my father, and I could only listen helplessly as I heard him say the words I least wanted to hear:

“I’ve been given a mission by the Prophet himself, Kastali, and I want you to come along.”

**Friday January 28, 2005**  
**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 7**  
**Remembrances and Resurrections**

I felt the cool night breeze wash over me, but it wasn’t enough. I twisted against the ropes binding me to the mast, the rough bounds cutting into my flesh. I focused on the pain, pushing away the past. The worst of the memory root fever had passed, but the embers still burned inside me, waiting for a moment of weakness.

The Eye had returned time after time as the hours passed, helping me in my struggle. It showed me visions of Atlantean loyalists burning a Khamsin barracks in Czero, of drakona mentors drilling draconum warriors

in the hidden valley, of Bloody Amara prowling the streets of the Necropolis. Raydan Marz peered through a spyglass toward where armies of Solonavi oathsworn battered the defenses of Alrisar, the Council of Five met in quiet counsel, and the courtyard of the fortress at Riversgate swarmed with newborn Shyft emerging from the tunnels below.

Finally, eventually, it wasn't enough. I succumbed to the relentless pull of the memory root, and found myself again sitting across from my father. He had been given a mission by the Prophet, to recover the bones of a cave orc, needed by Dark Tezla himself. I thought of the last time I had seen the Prophet, and his look of disdain as the deathspeakers voted to spare me from execution. Yet it was my father asking. It was a crucial mission, one that the Prophet had insisted must remain secret--so my father was allowed to bring only two Sect warriors with him for protection and assistance. The Prophet was sending a young necromancer named Valrath. My father wanted me to be the other.

I agreed, then tried to cling to each moment as my father and I prepared for the excursion. But the memory root ripped me past these pleasant times, beyond our journey to the far end of the charted Land. Time slowed as we entered the caverns that were home to a tribe of cave orcs. Valrath waited at the opening to the cave beside my father, who stood above a sigil marked in blood on the floor that glowed with magic dampening all sounds in the cave. I moved silently forward, closing on an orc and raising my blade for a quick kill...

There was a flash of light. I heard my father choking behind me, and spun to see him scuffling across the sigil and breaking its magic. His robes smoked, and he stumbled backward. Valrath raised his hands again, and black-red lightning lanced from his fingertips to stab into my father. The roar of the magic exploded through the cave, and as I stared in shock I heard a snuffling behind me. The cave orcs had awoken.

Valrath gave me a cold sneer and dashed out of the cave. Before I could bring my blade around, the nearest cave orc smashed into me with a massive club that shattered the ribs under my left arm. I brought one of my swords around and caught him right below the ear, then thrust out with my other and pierced him through the throat. One was down, but there were many more to go.

Gasping, I retreated toward where my father lay as the orcs advanced. My swords quickly proved useless as they began to throw massive rocks across the cavern. One caught me in the leg and I heard another bone snap. I fell to one knee beside my father, who looked up at me weakly and said, "Go." I reached for him, but he pushed me away. "This is my fight," he said. "Yours is yet to come." He closed his eyes, calling upon his dark magic one last time. As I limped out of the cave, the dead cave orc leapt to its feet and attacked the others from behind. Only one orc avoided the scuffle, chasing after me as I stepped painfully into daylight. I tried to ready myself, but my injured leg folded beneath me.

As I crawling forward, the orc close behind, suddenly everything was clear. We had never been meant to succeed. My father and I had both been pawns, and the Prophet was taking us off the board--my father as part of unending power struggle between Soma and the deathspeakers, and I for my insubordination and refusal to be broken.

I grieved for my father, and burned with hatred. This was the moment, and the memory root stretched it into an eternity. I ground my teeth in rage as tears rolled down my cheeks, the cave orc frozen less than a spear's throw away. I felt the Eye drawing on me, but I pushed it away, wrapping myself in grief and rage.

Then time suddenly leapt forward, as the rocks above the opening gave away in a rumbling slide that knocked down the cave orc. The landslide continued, entombing my father behind the shattered mountainside. As the dust settled and the cave orc gurgled his last, legs buried beneath the rock, I realized that the stones were piled high on either side of me yet I had not been struck by a single one.

"Kastali," said a voice behind me.

It was Lord Vextha, come to offer me a place in the Tower of Rokos. He promised me knowledge and power, and in return I had only to swear my loyalty to the Solonavi cause. I immediately did so, vowing to

someday win a place among the rulers of the Sect. Perhaps he knew my true reasons. Perhaps not. But he accepted my oath, and my request that he use his magic to strip the flesh from the bones of the cave orc.

I promised that I would come to Rokos as soon as I was able, and asked Lord Vextha to leave me outside Khamsin. There I made contact with a Sect sympathizer and had my bundle of bones sent to the Prophet. Before I vanished into the mysteries of the Solonavi, the Prophet would know I still lived.

As I recovered from my injuries, a sealed message came from the Prophet congratulating me on my success and asking me to undertake another impossible mission by joining a group of Sect warriors--now calling themselves Crusaders--and go to the southern isles to retrieve a powerful artifact. An amulet. Still stiff, I set out for Xandressa. If the Prophet wanted the amulet so badly, it would be my first gift to the Solonavi.

In Xandressa I met the Crusaders in a shadowy wharfside shed. They had chosen a ship at random, slaughtered the crew, and now we set out for--

I opened my eyes, returning to the present. I had seen them through the Scrying Eye recently, but it had been nearly a year since I had seen them through my own.

The Shyft Isles.

I saw them before me, saw the Shyft boarding the enormous creatures that would take them to the mainland. I remembered them. I remembered the ship we traveled on, saw the captain that had been made into a zombie to guide the ship during our journey. I remembered her name, the same name inscribed into the side of that vessel.

“Onitsha,” I said.

“Finally,” said the captain, waiting at my side. “I am the second Captain Onitsha. The first was my wife. She was the true sailor, the warrior in the family. I would have been happy to be a tradesman, and we would have lived a quiet life traveling the seas if you had not crossed our path.”

“Imagine how shocked I was to return to the pier in Xandressa after a night drinking with the dockmaster and find our family ship missing. He said they had sailed early that morning, but I knew they wouldn’t have left without me. My wife was the captain, my cousin the first mate--we were all family,” he said wistfully. “It isn’t unheard of for unwanted crew on a family ship to be cast away, stranded on shore, but my family would have come looking for me rather than leave. So I went looking for them.”

“Though our ship had been seen by traders on the eastern sea, bound toward the Sturmlander Coast, when they didn’t return in a month, I was officially declared an outcast. I challenged the Guildmaster in a duel, for elevation to captain that I might take a ship in search of my family.” He paused, took a deep breath. “The Guildmaster showed what he thought was mercy to a grieving man. When he could have killed me, he only took my arm.” He chuckled ruefully. “Only.”

“So I walked out of my homeland a cripple and an outcast. The story of the duel and my humiliation spread to every Atlantean port, so I kept walking for months until I reached Darthion. There I met a cell of the Black Powder Revolution, soldiers from a landlocked country looking for a seaworthy crew who wouldn’t look out of place smuggling in Atlantean ports. Even then they were wary of a one-armed sailor until I told them everything I knew about every Atlantean port I had ever visited. Every officer, every defense. Everything.”

“The necklace,” I said as the thought occurred to me. “You found her.”

“I found her, wrapped what was left in spirit bindings, and gave her to the sea. Then I marked the necklace in the traditional manner for the dead and came in search of you.”

For the first time in days I felt myself again, stronger. "I'm not the one who killed your wife, Captain," I said. "I took your ship, but they were already dead when I boarded. Let me go and we can come to an understanding before my masters come to settle their own accounts."

Onitsha snorted. "He said you'd say that, but I wanted to hear the lie from your lips."

"Who?" I asked.

"I'm not the only one you've crossed, witch," he said. "I was happy to do the legwork, but there were others who knew where you were hiding. They want you as badly as I do."

"I told the captain he could have you until tonight, but perhaps it is time we talked as well," said a vampire, stepping up onto the foredeck.

I thought I had finally escaped the past. I couldn't have been more wrong.

It was Erlich.

**Monday January 31, 2005**  
**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 8**  
**Captive**

Erlich. I had thought the nightfiend had fallen to the Shyft more than a year ago. While my mind still whirled at his reappearance he uncurled a braided leather whip coiled at his belt. "Turn her," he said. Captain Onitsha nodded, and two of his sailors loosened the cords binding me to the mast, then spun and bound me so that I embraced the wood.

"Vindia would have skinned you alive for betraying us," said Erlich. "Ossu would have torn into your mind until the captain's root paste seemed like a pleasant drink of summerale. That would have just beheaded you and been done with it."

I heard the whip shuffle across the deck. "I can't do that. I betrayed the Crusade long before you did. No, I do this because I was supposed to deliver that amulet to my own true masters." A whirling sound behind me, then blazing pain. "And because it's fun."

I gritted my teeth through a dozen strokes. I finally cried out after another six. Still he didn't stop. I reached out for the Eye--and again found two. I grasped for one of them, either of them--

The floating tower of Raydan Marz hung in the night sky. Marz stood on a balcony near the top of the tower, looking down into the darkness below. Campfires dotted the valley floor like the last of the summer glowbugs. "The Order has become a real army," he said.

"They may have chased off the orc rabble, but they wouldn't stand against the Solonavi--let along the armies of the Empire," said a technomancer standing behind him. When she pushed the hair out of her face, the line of magestones implanted into her brow glinted in the moonlight. "Remember the terms of our alliance, Marz."

"Everyone gets what they want," said Marz. "The Prieskan people get their land back, and we get a staging ground to retake the Empire."

"When the time comes, will you conscript the Prieskans?" she asked.

“No,” said Marz. “The conscription of dwarves to work the mines was part of what sparked the Khamsin rebellion, and the Empire has been losing ground ever since. We have to show the people of the Land that there is a true Empire, one they would want to be a part of. And it starts here.”

“Perhaps I have something that might change your mind about compulsion,” said the Delphana. Three soldiers dragged a bound orc out onto the balcony. “Your men caught this Harka headed north through the forest. Luckily I was nearby when they searched him and found this.” She tossed a pouch on a long neck-thong to Marz. Burned into the leather was a horned, sharp-edged sigil.

“The Chaos Shamans,” said Marz, as he poured the contents of the pouch into his hand. Magestone crystals, ranging from small flakes to a piece as long as his finger. “You’re no shaman. Tell me where you got this pouch.” Magical power arced between the fingers of the technomancer as she stepped forward menacingly, but stopped when Marz raised his hand. “I have no quarrel with you, if you were headed back to the Fist. But if you’ve seen the Shamans here in Prieska, you will tell me.”

“The Khans pick the bones of this country clean, and the Shamans come to suck the marrow from the bones,” spat the orc. “The Khans take everything from this place except these stones, and the Shamans take those. They break the traditions of our fathers by staying here. The plunder will be poor here even for my son’s sons. I find one of the tribes and bring a command from Khan Harrowblade himself, ordering them to come home for the winter. When they say no, I kill their shaman.” He grinned fiercely. “You give them what they deserve, and I make it easy.”

“What mask did the shaman wear?” asked Marz.

“He wore the ankh mask,” said the orc, shaking his head. He tilted his head and squinted. “You are Marz. I have heard of you. You are looking for the Bloodhawk.” Again he smiled. “Let me go and I will help you find him.”

“Untie him,” said Marz.

I was pulled out my vision as the Xandressan ship bumped against a stone jetty. Myself again, I felt weak. I sighed. I was tired of being tired. I craned my head around to look over my shoulder. In the dim light of sunrise I saw the lines left on my flesh left by the whip, but no blood. It was as if I had been healed by magic, but the skin was grey and pallid. The scars were smooth, but the flesh was dead.

A sailor cut me loose, hefted me over his shoulder, and followed Erlich and Captain Onitsha down the gangplank to the shore. Beyond them I saw Shyft leading packs of Mage Spawn up the steep slope of the valley toward the Wylden Plateau. Nearer, I saw warriors and priests dressed in gray. Tur’aj. The Apocalypse cult.

“Your payment is ready, Captain,” said the woman waiting among them. Again my visions were made flesh before me as I realized that this was Preceptor Nala--the leader of the Cult. “As promised, there will be further payment when you return the blackstone to where it was given to you.”

The sailor dropped me onto the rocky shore. “You can have it all back if you let me kill her,” said Onitsha. “Do what you have to, but let me kill her.”

“Not yet,” said Nala. “We have need of her. Then perhaps I will play with her for a while, like young Valot.” She lifted her hand and rested it atop the head of the creature standing beside her. Perhaps he had once been the boy I had seen, but now his skin was wan, his face distended into a snout full of sharpened teeth, and his eyes were yellow and unnaturally bright. Nala paused for a moment, long enough for the beast to make an impression and give a slurping hiss, before she continued. “Keep your blood money, Captain, with my promise that when she dies, she will die painfully.” With a grunt, Onitsha beckoned to his men, and they turned back toward the ship.

“The Xandressan pulled her out of the coffin a few hours ago,” said Erlich. “I kept her as distracted as I could.”

“Yes,” murmured Nala. “I can see from the marks across her back that you had a taste of her.” Suddenly her hand snapped out and she grabbed Erlich by the jaw. His eyes bulged, and I watched the skin of his face dry and crackle. “Do not do it again. We have need of her. The Xandressan will receive the payment he earns when he completes the second half of his journey.”

Nala reached down to tear the necklace from my neck. “We can’t have your friends finding you quite yet, Oracle. Is it ready, Valkut?” The priest beside Nala handed her a bundle of cloth. She let it fall loose in her hands, and I saw that it was a sack of black velvet inscribed with runes in silver thread. She murmured the words of a spell and the runes pulsed with magic.

Then she fit the sack over my head and the world went dark.

### **Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 9 Draconum on the Hunt**

I awoke this morning sore and aching from being bound, hooded, and jolted about in the back of a wagon all night. Unable to see anything with my own eyes, I did my best to reach the state of concentration which allowed me to see through the Scrying Eye. It took some time, with the darkness rattling and lurching about me, but suddenly the sack slipped slightly open at the neck and I felt my sight drawn away. When next I knew, I looked out over a jagged carpet of mountains, spread out beneath me like a dragon’s scales. The Eye soared directly towards one of the towering pinnacles, slipping through a crack in the rock of the mountain and winding its way deep beneath the surface. The Eye followed the crevasse into the dark bowels of the mountain, twisting and turning through the ribbons of open space between the bedrock. What I came upon there surprised me, for it was a small fire where there should be none, the flickering light of the small blaze illuminating the white and green scales of Chroma and Caldera.

The two Draconum were sitting crouched on either side of the fire, their wings curled about them to hold in the warmth of the fire. They kept their voices quiet to keep them from echoing in the caverns about them, but I could still hear them clearly.

Caldera was concerned that the light of their fire might draw unwanted company, but Chroma was sure that they were yet far enough away from “it” that the heat and light would go unnoticed. Chroma had apparently won the argument, although it could have been the bitter cold beneath the mountain which decided the red and green Draconum. Both females looked miserable, shivering over the small fire between them. Given how little mind Caldera had paid the icy reaches of the Kuttar Depths, this was extremely surprising, and I began to wonder if something beyond the normal chill of winter might be afoot. I closed in on the pair, attempting to hear more about what “it” might be, but at that moment something struck my body, and I lost contact with the Scrying Eye, jolting back to the velvet dark of my hood.

Erlich stood over me, his face still gray with the pallor of Nala’s magic, “Can’t have you getting too comfortable... I may not be able to lash you, but I can still make you miserable enough to forget about looking for help.”

### **Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 10 Down Once More...**

I resolved to try once again to find the two Draconum this morning, and waited until the wagon had begun its slow pace along the road to our destination—wherever that might be—before reaching out once more for the Scrying Eye. I fell into the slow rocking pace of the wagon wheels in the ruts of the road, letting the motion lull me into contact with the Eye. Almost immediately I was once more within the frozen mountain where Chroma and Caldera traveled.

The two dragon-women were well into their day, walking down corridors which looked half natural and half man-made. From the looks of the walls, someone had taken an already extensive network of tunnels and caverns and enlarged it for their purposes. The two Draconum moved cautiously, keeping their steps quiet and their voices hushed when they spoke at all. Those words they did exchange suggested that they were searching for something and that they expected to find it defended, but not what it was or why they were looking for it.

Abruptly, Chroma stopped, holding up one hand to bring Caldera to a halt as well, but the green and red Draconum had already come to a stop as well. Caldera shifted the fangblade in her right hand as she cocked her head, looking for all the world like a bird listening to a distant sound. It was as the two Draconum shared a look and started forward cautiously that I too made out the noise—a rooting sound like a pig digging for truffles, but echoed strangely off the stone walls. I darted the Scrying Eye forward, and found myself in a large chamber with fungal growths climbing up the walls. In one corner were a trio of large porcine beasts, their bodies twisted and distorted, with plates and spikes of bone jutting from their leathery skin. Their long front legs doubled up, allowing them to push their snouts down into the fungus to feed. The roof of the chamber rose high into the darkness above and the only two exits were the one Chroma and Caldera were moving down and another near the strange Mage Spawn.

I did not have long to study the creatures, however, as the two Draconum suddenly erupted into the chamber, Chroma rushing directly at them with a cry as Caldera lifted into the darkened heights on hushed wings. The white and blue Draconum was a blur as she bowled into the surprised Mage Spawn, her glaive sweeping about in graceful arcs to keep all three creatures busy. I expected the Draconum to make short work of the pig-like beasts, but the blade of Chroma's polearm glanced off the bony protrusions on the Mage Spawn, and they moved to surround the shocked Draconum. It was then that Caldera struck. Like a stooping hawk she fell from the shadows, her fangblade slashing out towards the flanks of one of the creatures. I was as surprised as the Draconum was when her weapon chipped upon contact, a small piece flying off to land amidst the trampled fungus.

The two Draconum did not allow their surprise to paralyze them, however, and Caldera let the blade drop, instead grasping one of the grunting Mage Spawn by one leg and soaring directly upwards, hissing and straining with the effort. Chroma, meanwhile, was stuck dealing with the two remaining beasts, whirling and twisting away from their repeated charges. Caldera's prey came tumbling out of the darkness, crashing with a wet thud into the stone floor where it lay unmoving. Although unable to pierce their sword-breaking backs, Chroma set her polearm against the charge of one beast, the tip catching the Mage Spawn directly beneath the chin as it came barreling towards the Draconum and tearing the creature's throat out. The two went down in a pile of twitching limbs, and Caldera dropped to the floor of the cavern before the last could trample her fellow Draconum, stepping in close and closing her jaws upon the Mage Spawn's throat, crushing the life from it.

Chroma disentangled herself from the dead creature, pulling her weapon from its carcass as she did. Caldera retrieved her damaged fangblade and the two Draconum studied the weapon in disbelief for a moment before shaking their heads in a mirror image of one another and starting off down the hall at the far end of the chamber.

### **Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 11 Draconum Frenzy**

After being once more cut off from the Scrying Eye by Erlich's attentions, I resolved to do what I could to find out exactly where I was, and where I was being taken. Immediately after I reached the level of concentration necessary to use the Scrying Eye, however, I was beneath the mountain with Chroma and Caldera once more. As frustrating as it may have been for me, the two Draconum were definitely in a more dangerous situation.

Chroma and Caldera circled back to back, surrounded by a twelve-strong pack of Frost Wolves, the shaggy-haired predators snarling and growling at the two dragon-women in their midst. The ceiling here

was too low for Caldera or Chroma to fly out of the grasp of the creatures, and surrounded as they were the pair couldn't flee the pack. Chroma proved that these Mage Spawn weren't impervious to their blows as the Sword-Breakers had been when one lunged forward to drive her back against Caldera. Instead, Chroma brought up her polearm in a sweeping arc, slashing into the Frost Wolf's side and knocking the slaving beast away to lie in a crumpled heap. The rest of the pack paused for a long moment, staring at their fallen comrade, then leapt for the pair of Draconum as if controlled by a single mind.

The melee was quick and brutal, the two dragon-women striking out with a ferocity to match that of the pack about them. Chroma's blade kept the area before her clear of attackers with broad sweeps, while Caldera fought to protect her friend's back. As Caldera disemboweled a Frost Wolf that sought to leap on Chroma's back, the pack alpha sunk his teeth into her shoulder, eliciting a cry of pain from the green-scaled Draconum. Chroma whirled at the cry, and drove her polearm into the alpha's chest. The impact jarred the beast's jaws open, allowing Caldera to tear her arm back without losing her whole shoulder. The rage of the two Draconum was frightful to watch—both Caldera and Chroma disdained the use of their weapons in their fury, tearing the remaining Frost Wolves apart with fang and claw.

Only when all of the thick-furred Mage Spawn lay dead about them, sprawled about the low-roofed chamber in their final repose, did Chroma and Caldera come to their senses once again. Watching through the Scrying Eye, I could see faint tinges of red starting to creep about their auras, seeping into them from the air about them. With some surprise, I realized that this red stain touching their auras was the same which had infected Oracle Matteo and other agents of the Apocalypse—clearly whatever lay buried within these frozen halls was related to the dark gods of the Tu'raj.

### **Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 12** **Search's End**

Each time I touched the Scrying Eye and was pulled to the frozen tunnels, it became easier to slip away from the hood which constrained my physical vision. By now I could touch the Scrying Eye at will, although I could still not see my own location. As the Scrying Eye showed me the dark caverns through which Chroma and Caldera trod, I could see that the air was getting colder with every step the two Draconum took. Ice covered the walls and floor and frosted above their nostrils as their breath froze immediately after touching the air beneath the mountain.

The two Draconum were moving carefully through a series of tunnels that looked to be more carefully constructed than previous sections of the caverns. Doorways displayed abstract ornamentation around their edges, and the floor and walls were smooth under their coating of ice. The clawed feet of the two dragon-women allowed them to move easily enough along the slick surface, but neither one looked particularly comfortable. Through it all, I could see the red aura of the Apocalypse's influence tainting the air, the dark power growing stronger in the direction Chroma and Caldera walked.

The tunnel ahead opened up to a broad chamber carved out of the dark rock. The ice was blurred with dust captured and frozen deep within it. Evidently no one had been into this chamber in some time. At the back of the chamber, atop a small dais, stood an ornately engraved box, the red aura of the Apocalypse bleeding from it to fill the room. Chroma immediately moved across the room towards the box, but Caldera hung back a moment, seeming to sniff the air about her. As Chroma reached out to grasp the box, Caldera called out,

“Wait! It's infected with the taint of the Apocalypse. I don't think we should touch it.”

Chroma stopped, turning back, “We need to open it though. Stay back.”

With that, she drew a spellbreaker from a pouch at her belt, and started towards the box once more. Caldera remained near the door, watching her pale companion stop before the chest, raising the spellbreaker high. Chroma brought the hammer down hard, and the carved box shattered, the resulting shockwave blasting ice from the walls and ceiling and knocking the white and blue Draconum to the floor. Caldera rushed forward and helped her friend regain her feet, and the two turned as one to look at the dais

where the Apocalypse-tainted box once rested. Among the remnants of the chest lay a single broken piece of metal that I immediately recognized... one of the four shards of the Amulet the Solonavi sought.

### **Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 13** **A Trap Is Sprung**

Caldera and Chroma wasted little time in leaving the chamber with the shard of the Amulet of Summoning, discarding the stealth of their approach in favor of speed. When their caverns opened up sufficiently, the two Draconum took to the air, winging rapidly towards the surface. When they could not fly, Chroma and Caldera ran quickly over the stone floor of the tunnels and grottoes, racing for the surface.

Despite the extreme speed of the dragon-women, it took nearly the entirety of the day for them to reach the surface, so deep beneath the mountain had the shard been hidden. As they burst out of the caverns, they stood overlooking the Kuttar Depths, the setting sun staining the snow-covered mountains about them red and gold. The two Draconum stood overlooking the brilliant scene for a long moment, then took to the air, soaring quickly high into the sky. They began flying northward, their powerful wings carrying them deeper into the Ailons north of the Depths.

They had not been flying long, however, before Caldera spotted a gaggle of small dots in the sky off to their right and behind them, quickly growing larger. She called out a warning to Chroma, flying off to her left, and the two dragon-women tucked their wings in and dropped like a pair of rocks towards the mountains below them. I quickly directed the Scrying Eye to stay with the two Draconum, but turned to study the other fliers. Despite the speed with which Caldera and Chroma now dodged and wove about the craggy mountain peaks, the other dots continued to grow larger as the fliers approached. As they neared, I recognized the midnight black Pegasi as kin to those Oracle Matteo and his Apocalypse warriors had ridden after these same Draconum in Caero, and the sickly red aura about the staff that the lead rider carried was enough to tell me that it was indeed the Apocalypse that now hunted Chroma and Caldera through the Ailons.

As the sun sank beneath the jagged peaks of the Ailons, the Tu'raj drew near, evidently driving their winged horses hard to catch the Draconum. As the quintet approached their prey, two of their number began firing red-centered bolts of black energy from their hands and the staff-bearer unleashed a sheet of black fire, aiming to bring down the fleeing dragon-women. Caldera dove down even further, banking and turning to avoid the dark bolts in the fading light, while Chroma pulled directly up, twisting in midair to fly directly towards the approaching warriors. Seeing Chroma's aggressive move, Caldera continued her looping dive, circling under and coming up heading towards the warriors of the Apocalypse, a short distance behind her companion. As the two Draconum arrowed directly in towards the Tu'raj, the formerly tight formation of Apocalypse warriors scattered. One of the magic users dove downward, followed by the two warriors while the staff-wielder peeled away to the east, accompanied by the last magic user.

Caldera called out to her friend in their Draconum battle-tongue, and both Draconum jack-knifed over and swept after the trio of Tu'raj headed for the ground. Tucking their wings in close to their bodies, the two dragon-women quickly gained on their new quarry, making constant adjustments to their body position to keep their flight path erratic and make themselves difficult targets. As they neared the warriors of the Apocalypse, the two riders escorting the wizard pulled up to intercept the Draconum, one aiming a long lance at Chroma, while the other guided his Pegasus towards Caldera with murder in his eyes and a large axe in his hands.

Again the Draconum split before the assault of the Tu'raj, using their greater mobility to evade the first blows of their attackers. Chroma stretched her polearm out as the Tu'raj whipped past, tearing into the wing of his mount and sending the wounded beast plummeting groundward. Caldera took another moment to dispatch her prey, the human warrior swinging his battleaxe about him in broad slashes to keep the Draconum at bay. He could not protect his Pegasus sufficiently, however, and in a short while he too was falling towards the snowy peaks below. As the two dragon-women turned to give chase to the wizard the two soldiers had been protecting, a sorcerous blast rent the sky between them, heralding the return of the

other two Tu'raj. The staff-wielding Apocalypse priest swept upward on his dark Pegasus, calling out across the cold mountain air, "You cannot win, scabies, we will take the shard off your corpses!"

This brought Chroma up short, and evidently gave her an idea, for she pulled the piece of the Amulet of the Summoning from a pouch in her belt, and held it forth. Immediately a blast of cold swept between the peaks where the combatants flew, buffeting them about the sky. The first wizard cried out, and all three Tu'raj urged their Pegasi forward in a rush, arrowing through the sky directly towards the two Draconum. Before they could reach the pair, however, the Amulet flared, and ice formed upon the faces of the warriors of the Apocalypse, chilling their steeds until they fell from the sky, landing with dull thuds in the rocky snowbanks well below. The two dragon-women stared in amazement as their opponents were felled, glanced at one another, then resumed their flight northward, deeper into the mountains.

**Monday February 14, 2005**  
**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 14**  
**Desert Ambush**

I had been jostled around in the back of the wagon for so long that I only noticed when it occasionally stopped. With each jostling stop more people were added until I was pressed to the splintered wall of the wagon, the warm body tight beside me warding off a chill that might have been the first hints of the cold seasons to come or just a memory of my visions of the draconum and the mountains.

I continued to reach down the thin silver thread connecting me to the scrying chamber, recording what I saw. When the scrying eye deserted me, I pictured Daheia or Anquilis in their chambers deep beneath the Oracle's Needle, reading each new entry in my journals. When, in my imaginings, it came time for them to decide whether to send Solonavi to rescue me or simply leave me to tumble down the path of events, I couldn't determine what the decision would be.

With the ensorcelled hood over my head I saw and heard nothing of the world around me. I tried to speak to the people I felt crowded around me, even shouted at them, but received nothing in reply. When the Eye returned to me, I gladly followed.

The afternoon sun hung low in the sky over the Galeshi deserts and a small wagon parked in the shade of a sand-blasted cliffside. A white-robed tradesman leaned against the hull of a steam ram that pulled his wagon, chin resting on his chest as he dozed.

Dark shadows moved across the bright sand of the dunes, as a group of vampires quietly closed in on the caravan. They surrounded the tradesman in a semicircle, blades scraping quietly from their scabbards. "Didn't think I'd run into anyone this far from the Ringed Cities," said the tradesman without looking up.

The vampires started and looked toward their leader, who smiled and shifted his grip on his dagger. "We didn't think we'd find anything to eat when our master sent us down this road," said the vampire.

"Maybe our surprise can be a pleasant one, then," said the tradesman. "If you want something to eat and have some extra coin, I might have some figs in my wagon."

"We were looking for something a little....fresher," said the vampire, stepping forward.

"Don't think so," said the tradesman. Raising his hands from his lap revealed a pair of pistols, which he fired into the approaching vampire. As he cocked for another shot, the canvas fell away from the wagon to reveal three Revolutionary soldiers manning a mounted steam gun that roared and hissed as the soldiers traversed its line of fire across the other vampires.

In the space of four breaths, it was over. One vampire, only wounded, limped toward cover behind a nearby boulder. Before he could get there, the tradesman fired at him twice and he fell to the sands. The tradesman pulled the scarves from his head, revealing the pale northerner skin and pointed jaw of Fickett Townley.

“That won’t work too many more times,” said Townley, mopping the sweat from his brow. “But while it does, it’s pretty fun. Bury the bodies, and let’s move two miles up the road. We’ll do this one more time, and then go to meet Nerab.”

Suddenly I was myself again, as the hood was pulled away. I blinked into the dim light of dusk as I was pulled to my feet. “We’re here,” said Erlich.

**Wednesday February 16, 2005**  
**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 15**  
**Branded**

For a moment, when there wasn’t anyone looking, I pulled at the shackles around my wrists and found them as tight as the last dozen times I had tested them. As I rubbed at my sore wrists, my eyes traced the short chain on the shackles down to an iron stake driven deep into the earth. I was held fast, but I wasn’t alone. If I might have outstretched my arms, I would have touched prisoners on either side of me. One was a Wylden elf, judging by his clothing, and the other was a thin midlander peasant wife.

We were part of a broad circle with a roaring pyre at its center, and surrounded in turn by the Tur’aj. The gray-robed Apocalypse cultists were around us three ranks deep, scores of them. The faces I saw were pale and gaunt men and women, but there were some shrouded forms in the crowd that were too large to be human. Among the legs of the cultists crawled grimy, twisted creatures that may have once been human, but I hoped not. All through the night, the cult chanted words in a language I couldn’t understand but somehow knew to be a lost and ancient tongue.

Logs as large as cannon and cultists working brass-and-leather bellows kept the fire burning bright. Deep in the flames were four black crystals glowing white-hot in the heat. They radiated dread and doom, and I could feel that the scrying eye sensed what I did--the crystals were what remained of the avatars of the Apocalypse.

The Eye huddled close beside me, within me, unable to protect me and unable to leave. We were going to be sacrificed.

As I pulled again at my chains, desperate for a way to escape, the chants of the cult fell to a murmur as Preceptor Nala stepped between the prisoners to stand before us all. “The time of prophecy approaches,” she called to the cultists.

“*The darkness comes,*” responded the Tur’aj.

“We called, and the horsemen answered,” said Nala.

“*The darkness comes.*”

“We bring together the wretched, touched by plague, wracked by famine, torn by war, on the brink of death.” With each disaster she named, cultists stepped forward to kill the prisoners before them, cutting a bloody rune into their chest before letting them fall to the ground.

I tensed, waiting for the footsteps behind me, but again only heard: “*The darkness comes.*”

“Your servants go to unleash chaos upon this land,” said Nala, her voice rising.

“*The darkness comes!*” said the cult.

Preceptor Nala thrust her arms into the fire. Her robes smoldered and burst into flame as she stepped into the flames to draw forth the gleaming crystals and hold them high. As she emerged two Shyft came forward, carrying a chest trimmed in bone and jade. They were followed by Lord Katalkus, who bowed deeply as Nala placed the crystals into the chest. Katalkus gently closed the chest, and the Shyft withdrew.

Nala turned to the only prisoner remaining. Me. "The gateway awaits the key!" she shouted to the cultists.

*"The darkness comes!"* cried the cult.

"The key awaits the messenger!" said Nala. I saw the fervor in her eyes, radiating as much heat as her silver jewelry, heated by the flames. "You will see them!" she hissed quietly to me. Her hand darted out as she pressed it to my forehead, and I felt my flesh searing--

The Eye and I both shrieked, and the world dropped away into a misty grayness. I saw the shape of Nala before me, but no longer felt the pain of her touch. The shackles fell through my wrists and away, to my feet.

The Eye and I were one.

We were free.

We ran.

I heard the Nala-shape cry out in a dull roar as I fled through the cultists, sliding through their insubstantial bodies. The light of the flames receded behind me as I ran through trees as if they were pillars of smoke. Away. I saw the shape of a Shyft beside me, hunched forward, running on two sets of arms, swords drawn. I dodged aside, through brush--and over a cliff.

Whatever traits the Eye and I shared, I could not fly.

I tumbled through the air and fell into blackness.

**Thursday February 17, 2005**  
**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 16**  
**Company**

A small and oily candle cast long shadows and yellow light across a battered table strewn with clay tankards and the remains of a messy feast. An odd and motley crew sat around the table--a massive draconum clawing the last strands of meat from a roast bird, a pale Sect elf drawing the razorhead at the end of an arrow across a whetstone, a gray-bearded dark dwarf belching contentedly as he balanced a tankard on his sated belly, and a goblin who perched on a bench to clatter dice across the table and shuffle around the black and white stones arranged before him.

In the deepest shadows of the corner beyond the table sat a man whose black coat and hat cast even darker shadows across the man hidden inside them. He waited until the innkeeper's daughter had cleared away the dishes before he spoke: "The time for pleasantries is over. You have all provided me with information in the past, information that has been quite useful to myself and my masters. Now I have a greater need of you. A friend of mine is being held by the Delphana, in Arcos. I must rescue him, but I must also do it without my usual resources. That's why you're coming with me."

"Is there truly a friend in need, or is this more of your vendetta against the Atlanteans?" asked the elf. "For every blow you strike against them, someone beside you seems to fall down--the priest, the dwarf..."

"Whatever," said the dwarf. "There's more of us where they came from, Jess, starting with me. If there's Atlantean gold to be taken, I'm in."

"Plunder!" said the goblin, grinning. The draconum nodded grimly in agreement.

“Very well,” said the elf. “If the Delphana truly do pave their streets with magestone, we’ll walk away rich or dead.”

Judge Blacklock leaned forward out of the shadows. “Most people live life with no guarantees, but now I give you one: each day will bring you one step closer to wealth or death. As long as you’re part of the Black Blades, the one you find will be up to you.

The scrying eye pulled away, and I was left in the darkness behind my closed eyes. Whatever bond we had shared the night before, it had been broken. I felt the word through a veil of stiffness; it hurt to even think about moving. I rested for a moment, listening to the wind through the trees, the sounds of wildlife moving through the brush in the distance--and someone breathing beside me.

I forced my eyes opened and gasped at the dragon skull before me. As I saw that it was strapped atop the head of a man, his hand snaked forward and clapped over my mouth. “Quiet,” he hissed. He lay beside me, the skull and his cloak dyed a bright red that contrasted with the tall green grass around us.

I peeled his hand away and rolled over to follow his gaze. In the distance a pair of Shyft prowled along the shore of a pool at the base of a cliff alongside a waterfall, while squat Mage Spawn beat the nearby brush with sticks. “Found you over by the water,” whispered the man beside me. “Figured you wouldn’t mind if I brought you over here until they went away.”

The scrub in front of one of the Shyft’s minions erupted as an enormous worm burst forth, its mouth flanked by what looked to be extended, prehensile fangs. It snatched up the puny creature in front of it and drew it into its maw. The other tiny Mage Spawn shrieked and turned to flee the larger beast--until the Shyft wearing an elaborate headdress touched his fingers to his forehead. Energy crackled between his brow and fingertips. Suddenly his minions turned and charged the worm. They moved in as one, then suddenly broke apart to flank the beast. As the others drew its attention, the third circled around behind and leapt up onto the worm’s back. Fangs spread it reared up, but the tiny creature on its back held on with its knees, raised up its sharpened branch, and drove it into the worm. Simultaneously, the others stepped forward, stabbing with their own crude pikes. The worm hissed and slammed downward. The creature on its back pulled out its weapon and dove forward to jam it directly between the worm’s eyes. The worm gave a final hiss and fell silent.

The Shyft both slumped, weakened, as if they had been in the battle themselves. They faced one another, and though the no sound came from their flesh-covered mouths, communication passed between them. They surveyed the area one final time, then moved off along the cliff, their minions in tow.

After a few minutes, the man beside me let out a relieved whistle. “That was close,” he said. Rolling to his feet and grinning, he said, “Not that I couldn’t have taken them--but they have a lot of friends up there on the cliff.” He sheathed his shortsword and extended his hand to help me up. “I’m assuming, of course, that they aren’t your friends.”

“No,” I said, wincing as I stood. “Last night they were going to kill me.”

“Well that makes you a friend of mine, then,” he said. “My old masters call me Freeblade. But a pretty lady can always call me Wisp.”

I looked at the landscape around me, then asked, “Where are we?”

Wisp raised an eyebrow, but answered. “North of Nok, near the headwaters of the Vizorr. I’m headed north into the Depths, but it looks like someone’s gone and built a fortress that blocks the entire blasted pass.”

I tried to remember the map in the scrying chamber, and wondered if there might be an agent of the Solonavi in Nok. Someone who could help me get back to Rokos. “Which way back to Nok?”

“Right back through armies of Mage Spawn and lot more of those four-armed things,” said Wisp.

“Shyft,” I offered.

“Don’t think so,” said Wisp. “Fought them once, and they looked different. Incredible battle, really. There were four of us, and we had found this dungeon--”

“Listen,” I said. “Thanks for your help, but I need to get out of here, and I think Nok is the way to go.”

“We’re both going to have trouble getting where we’re going, then,” said Wisp. “But--” he said with a slight bow and a flourish of his cloak. “I have a solution. Let’s find some hidden glade and relax. You’re beat up enough that you can’t object to that. Then, tonight, I think have a way to get us where we need to go. Okay?”

I considered it for a moment, then concurred that a day’s rest before traveling would be a good thing.

“Fine,” I said. “But I need a weapon.”

“Done,” said Wisp, drawing one of the blades sheathed at his waist and handing it to me. “Always did love a woman with a sword.” He cocked his head away from the cliff, toward the forest. “Let’s go. While we do, I can tell you about the dungeon. Great story. You’ll like it.”

I sighed and followed.

**Friday February 18, 2005**  
**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 17**  
**Reclamation**

“Listen, Kastali, I’m always up for a good fight,” said Wisp. “But you’re still in pretty rough shape. It’s not too late to head to that honeyfruit grove, you know.”

Wisp and I had made it halfway to where he was meeting his allies before I realized I had to go back. The swordsman was kind enough to turn back with me, and even refrained from questions when I sat down and called to the scrying eye. When it came, I marshaled my will and sent it back to the camp of the cultists. The raging pyre had burned down to a pile of smoldering coals surrounded by the bodies of those the cult had sacrificed.

Most of the cultists had departed, though I didn’t have to send the Eye far to find them among the ranks of the armies of Shyft and Mage Spawn marching on the road to Enos Joppa. Nala remained in the camp, reviewing maps of the area and making plans with her warlords. One argued that they should avoid Enos Joppa altogether and try to find another pass north of Rangraz, but Nala maintained that only by traveling on the established roads through the Kuttar Depths would they arrive at their final destination with their army at sufficient strength. “Also, I have promised one of our brethren that we would avoid Rangraz,” she said. “It will play a different part in our plans. Now, mount up. If the elves have built a fortress in our path, we must see it before our armies do.” The warlords followed the preceptor without question, mounting large, long-necked raptors that flew off to the west.

Now I was back near the camp, watching though my own eyes from behind the cover of a fallen tree. I was armed with one of Wisp’s swords, and when we turned back he had given me his shortcloak as well, though he had only half-armor on underneath. “Should give you some protection,” he said. “More than the rags you’re wearing, at least.” My clothing still maintained my modesty, but that was about all; the back of my robe had been shredded by Erlich’s whip, and below my knees my dress was in tatters. I had endured much worse during my Sect training, but after a year living in the comfort of the Oracle’s Needle, I accepted the cloak gratefully.

A small group of Tur’aj cultists remained, packing gear into wagons. Most were humans, pale and wan. But they were led by an enormous troll in a steel helm and furs, brandishing his greatsword at anyone he thought to be moving too slowly. They were stripping the bodies of valuables, loading what they found

into an empty wagon along with the chains that had bound the prisoners. Near them was our goal--the campaign chests containing Nala's equipage.

"Okay," I said to Wisp. "I'm going to sneak into the camp, over by the chests. Then you're going to come in from the other side and provide a distraction. I'll signal when I find what I'm looking for, and then we make a break for it."

"I'm going in first. Then you'll sneak in while I fight the big guy," said Wisp. Then he grinned. "Good plans make good stories."

I made my way around the encampment at a distance, then closed as quietly as I could. The leaves above had started to turn with the seasons, but thankfully they had yet to fall and become the crinkling carpet that would have made stealth impossible.

I couldn't see Wisp, but he must have watched me move into position. Just as I neared the edge of the clearing, he charged out, sword raised and roaring a battle cry. Head low, leading with his dragonhelm and snaking back and forth as he closed, it was clear that he had been trained by the draconum. The troll knocked aside one of the cultists to clear the way, raising his blade to catch Wisp's first blow. Wisp leapt aside to skewer the tumbled cultist, then danced backward as the troll growled and brought his greatsword around in a broad arc.

With all other eyes focused on the battle, I moved toward Nala's chests and began to open them. One was full of strange liquids in glass bottles, packed in straw. The next had maps and slots stuffed with rolled scrolls, but also a small tray of rings; I took one and slid it on my finger. On top of the miscellany packing the third I spotted a small box carved from blackstone that seemed the right size. Inside, I found what I was looking for: Captain Onitsha's necklace, and the pieces of the amulet. The necklace had snapped when Nala pulled it off of me, beads and ivory rolling loose around the box. But sitting among them was the half-amulet. I snatched it up and stuck it into my boot.

Looking up, I saw several of the cultists had fallen--though it was hard to tell if they had been taken out by Wisp's swordsmanship or the troll's wild swings. The troll had several cuts across his chest and a nasty wound on his leg, yet he ignored the injuries and continued to press his attack. Wisp was tiring, and an especially heavy blow knocked him to one knee. He brought his sword up to block a blow from above, but as the troll raised his blade I saw him switch his grip to sweep in from the side.

With a yell, I climbed up onto the chests and leapt toward the troll, landing on his back. I hacked at his wrist and he dropped the greatsword before he could bring it down on Wisp. As the troll struggled to reach me I clung to his hair with one hand and brought my sword down into the meat of his shoulder. He roared in pain and clutched at the blade of my sword, ripping it from my hand.

The troll reared and twisted, and I fought to hang on. My now free hand came down on the bloody wound in his shoulder--and suddenly I felt strength flowing into me. The troll's roar caught in his throat, and he staggered--giving Wisp an opening to drive his sword home.

The troll twisted and fell, dead, and I rolled free. Wisp snatched up the sword I had lost, and beckoned to me. "Come on--let's get out of here before they figure out there's more of them than us." We left the stunned cultists behind and fled back into the woods.

A while later and a distance away, Wisp winced as he prodded at his ribs. "Nothing broken, I think. You okay?"

I was surprised to answer: "I feel better than I have in days." I did.

"That makes one of us," said Wisp. "I hope you at least found what you were looking for." I held up my hand, showing him the ring I had taken from Nala's trunk. "All that for a ring?" Wisp said, shaking his

head. "If you weren't you, I weren't me, and I didn't have a new story about the time I killed a troll in single combat, I might be upset."

Wisp hadn't killed the troll. I had. I felt his strength in me...and the mark burned into my forehead throbbing. What was happening to me?

Several hours later, Wisp finally led me into the grove. It was all he had said and more: a bubbling stream, a stand of honeyfruit trees, and an ancient tower sitting on a magestone foundation. I recognized it from the Battle of the Spire: the Silent Citadel.

A drakona sorcerer waited impatiently inside the gates. "You are late, Freeblade. I come here to retrieve you and your...friends out of a respect for our past. You must in turn respect my need to continue north as quickly as possible."

"Good to see you too, Goldyx," said Wisp. "Don't let us hold you up. I can tell you what held us up while we travel. Exciting stuff."

"She will be coming with us?" asked Goldyx. I had just been asking the question myself. This was my last chance to go my own way. Then I thought about the broken amulet in my boot, and what I had seen. Chroma and Caldera with another piece of the amulet, headed north. I remained silent and waited for Wisp to give his inevitable answer.

"Yeah," he said. "She's with me." Goldyx motioned to a draconum warrior nearby, and the gates closed behind us.

**Tuesday February 22, 2005**  
**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 18**  
**Destiny**

The Silent Citadel flew northward, following the current of a ley line running through the land below. Those chambers I had seen inside the citadel were being used by draconum warriors to tend to their weapons and armor, and to train with one another. Many of the warriors bore scars that were reminders of battle, or possibly of the fierce sparring they engaged in through the night. Wisp had found me a small, dim chamber where I beat the dust from the bedding and collapsed into dreamless sleep. When I awakened, I searched the chests and drawers in the room to find a robe and sash. Both were embroidered with geometric patterns in gold and silver thread, but gave little other clue as to the long-lost sorcerers who might have once called the Citadel home. I also found a scarf, which I used to tie back my hair--and to cover the mark the Tur'aj had burned into my forehead.

I tried to explore the tower, but found the corridor outside my chamber guarded by whelp who barred my path and directed me toward the citadel's greatroom. There I found Wisp sitting before a roaring fireplace, a plump aleskin in hand, grinning at a tale being told by a Kosian in imperial armor. "So there I was," said the Kosian, laughing. "Hanging off the side of a 'berg, the egg in one hand, the rope in the other, while the blasted bird sinks its talons into the ice next to me and starts pecking at my arm!"

"What'd you do?" asked an incredulous Amazon.

"Well, I sure as stone wasn't going to drop the egg," said the Kosian. "And I couldn't let go of the rope. So I started shimmying down the rope, fast as I could, using the egg as a shield. If the bird was going to bleed me, she was going to have to go through that first!" The group roared with laughter.

I was just about to the circle when another of the group spoke. "Wisp, what are we doing here?" I didn't recognize the voice, and even were her back not to me I knew I wouldn't recognize her face. Normally when I saw her, she was wearing a mask that disguised both. But she was definitely one of the Oathsworn--I had seen her in Rokos, wearing the same armor and sharpening the same wavy-bladed dagger she was

honing now. I stopped, and slipped back into the shadows further from the fire. "It's great to get together and swap tales with the troupe and all, but I can't believe we're traveling with the scalies."

"Hey, just because I left in search of a few tales doesn't mean I don't have any loyalty to them," said Wisp. "They trained me, and trained me well. Besides, if what I hear is true, we're headed toward the biggest battle in a hundred years. Maybe more. Don't you want to be able to tell everyone that you were there, when it was all on the line?"

Suddenly the scrying eye snatched me away from the scene, drawing me through the clouds until it dropped down between the peaks north of Enos Joppa.

The elven gateway was broken and in flames. Mage Spawn bigger than anything I had ever seen were hurling boulders that crushed arrow slits inward, and wherever the wall fell away to reveal archers arcs of lightning soon followed from the hands of Shyft sorcerers. Creatures that seemed to be all wing and toothy maw carried Shyft warriors in their talons, depositing them atop the wall to spin double-ended blades that cut through the Rivvanguard like winter wheat. The high elves fought valiantly, and eliminated a Shyft or a half-dozen Mage Spawn for each of them that fell in battle. But the beast-armies were a roiling carpet at the foot of the wall, thousands upon thousands of them waiting to advance.

General Ivydown raced down the parapet and waited for an archer to loose his arrow before tapping him. "Nock! Come with me!" he shouted over the din. The archer grabbed his bow in both-hands, and brought it around to catch an incoming spear on the bowshield attached to his weapon. The general nodded his thanks and ducked into an alcove stacked high with quivers of arrows. "We've lost," said the general. "Bowman, I have a final mission for you. You know Starsdawn?" The archer nodded. "Find him, and tell him to come with you. He won't want to, and will claim rank. Show him this." The general pulled his signet ring from his hand and dropped it into the archer's palm. "Follow the northroads, and skirt to the north around Cainus. Get back to the high tower, no matter the cost. Take Kierin before the council, and report to the council that the fault for failure here falls clearly on my shoulders. Go." The archer put his hand to the general's shoulder and smiled, warmly, sadly. Then, without a word, the archer snatched two quivers, and ran away into the fray.

The general took a deep breath and stepped back out onto the parapet. He barked to two footmen, ordering a landslide be dropped behind the wall so that the gates could never be opened. The Shyft would have to clear away the debris before they could make full use of the pass. Then he spotted the sorceress standing at the edge of the parapet, braced on a silver staff as she leaned over to look down into the battlefield. As Ivydown approached, she turned to him, tears in her eyes. "It's all happening again," Jaysari said. Then her staff burned with a blue flame as she collapsed into a gray mist that mixed with the smoke from below.

I found myself back in the Citadel. Wisp and his 'troupe' were still trading tales, passing ale that continued to increase their volume if not their clarity. My eyes had adjusted to the shadows, and I found myself standing beside battered wooden chair. In the chair was Goldyx, the drakona sorcerer. Had he been there before, or had he come while the Eye had my attention focused elsewhere?

"They are young and loud," said the drakona. "I cannot decide which is worse." He considered me. "You, I like. You watch before you act. You see your destiny coming, as I do." He ran his fingers over the brass-bound leather tome he clutched to his chest. "Do you know where we are going, young one?"

"North," I said.

"Yes," said Goldyx. "To a valley that hidden since time lost a word for time. We made a vow to the elflings that when the day came all of our blood would defend the valley lest evil be loosed upon the world." He considered me again, eyes narrowing. "Do you share our blood, girl?"

"No," I said. "But I share your destiny."

**Wednesday February 23, 2005**

**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 19**  
**Fruition**

In the dim depths of the Silent Citadel I sat on the floor in my chamber, calm and rested, meditating upon the coals glowing in the brazier before me. I found the scrying eye nearby and drew it close. If the Solonavi would not come for me, I would go to them.

The Eye responded eagerly, and caught up in its enthusiasm it was unclear whether I was guiding the Eye or simply following in the direction it wished to go as it pushed through the walls of the citadel and dove through the wispy morning clouds. In the distance I saw the white and stony cap of Nepharus Mons towering above long, green slopes dotted with the capital of the Amazon nation. The Eye continued west as the valley widened, shrouded by the broad-boughed evergreens of the northlands. Before we slipped past the warriors guarding the perimeter of the camp, before we neared the pavilion hung with the banner of the wolf, I knew what the Eye was taking me to see.

Queen Corella and Rayevisayla.

Were I at the Tower of Rokos, I was under standing orders to send a page for Lord Vextha whenever I located the renegade Solonavi. Though it had proven difficult, it was clear they wanted to keep a close watch on Rayevisayla's activities. Yet it was also clear that they were allowing he and Queen Corella free reign to pursue their plans, for now.

As I was on my own, I continued to write these words in my journal with one part of my mind as we passed through the walls of the pavilion. Queen Corella sat inside on a cushioned campaign chair beside a tray piled with bread and dried figs. One hand dangled into a bowl of water, where a young girl worked with a sponge to clear the dried blood from beneath Corella's fingernails. Another girl had hung the queen's bloodstained armor on a rack and was scrubbing furiously to clean the leather before it could stiffen.

Corella toyed with a glass of wine in her free hand but her lips were pursed so tightly that she never drank. When the girl set the bowl aside and asked if the queen would like her hair combed, the queen set the glass aside, saying, "Both of you leave now, and tend to your own weapons."

Once she was alone, she spoke. "She was here! Valia was within our grasp and you did nothing to prevent her escape!"

Rayevisayla emerged from her, wraith-like, and hovered nearby. "Surely you don't think it was your faith alone that brought wolves to fight your enemies. As always, my contributions to this cause are subtle but crucial. My spies say that of the troops that marched out with Valia, less than one in three returned with her."

"Your spies," said Corella disdainfully as she turned away from Rayevisayla to straighten the wolfskin cloak hanging over armor. "Where were your spies when we marched across Khamsin?"

"Were it not for me, you would have gone to Enos Joppa begging for supplies just as it was being conquered by the elven lords," said Rayevisayla. "I watched that battle, and guided you around unnecessary combat."

"Right into that mess at the Kuttar Gates," said Corella.

"The food you now eat came from the Khamsin supply train given to your warriors by Solonavi forces I commanded to fall back," replied Rayevisayla. "Again I wonder if bonding myself to you was the best choice."

Corella dropped back into her chair and speared a fig on her dagger. "You had little choice, and you know it. Without me, you would have been trapped in Dragon's Gate forever. Without me, you wouldn't have the

troops you need to make an attack on Nepharus. Without me, you wouldn't have the strength of the wolf to keep these tribes together."

"Without me, you would have never made it out of Dragon's Gate alive, and even had you managed to bring together the tribes on your own you would have never made it this far."

Corella put the fig in her mouth. For a moment while she chewed, the pavilion fell silent. "We should have put her to the sword," Corella said quietly. "This would be over, and I would be marching up Temple Road tonight."

"The time will come, and today's battle makes that ever more certain," said Rayevisayla. "But never forget, Queen, that gathering your armies and putting you on the throne only fixes the firmament for what must come. If ever last one of your warriors falls so that we take the mountain, that is what must happen."

"The mountain has always been holy to my people. Why is it so important to you?"

Rayevisayla looked over the queen, beyond her. "Long ago I was cursed," he said. "Now that curse consumes me. Only by retaking the mountain can I hope for salvation."

"Does this have to do with them?" asked Corella, gesturing off-handedly with her dagger. Suddenly I realized she was pointing at me! I panicked, pulling the Eye out of the pavilion, out of the forest, into the sky.

The Eye fell away and I found myself being jostled by Wisp. "Plenty of time for blank stares later," he said. "We're almost there. Time to get you some weapons and armor. I'd look for something to cover all your pretty parts, but I think a full set of plate would slow you down."

**Monday February 28, 2005**  
**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 20**  
**Gathering**

I tightened the straps on my bracers as I walked, leaving a line of tracks in the thin layer of fresh morning snow that barely hid the ravaged and muddy floor of the draconum valley.

The Silent Citadel had touched down late the previous night at the mouth of the valley. Goldyx called for me to accompany him as he immediately set out into the darkness. Campfires dotted the slopes, lit at the corners of training areas where whelp masters still trained young draconum in the ways of combat. In the caves piercing the valley wall, I saw the blue-green glow of dragon mystics teaching their apprentices. By one fire I saw a group of drakona stripping the bones from a fallen snow giant, shaping them into hafts for fresh-forged blades. A group of sweating scalesworn stripped to the waist despite the cold moved among vats of boiling oil and wax, crafting armor for draconum warriors.

Goldyx led me into the fortress at the far end of the valley. Guards eyed me suspiciously, but Goldyx waved them away. Finally we entered the room at the heart of the fortress. Again I saw in person something I had heretofore only seen through the scrying eye: the enormous egg. It was twice as tall as the tallest draconum in the room, and big enough that it would require three trolls grasping hands to fully embrace it. The gathered draconum discussed their battle plans, where their warriors would be gathered when the enemy broke through the defenses at the valley mouth. Goldyx said something about magestone he brought from the south, but I found all my attention focused on the egg. It was an ancient thing, its shell like leather left in the sun. Yet when this close you couldn't deny that it was a living thing. It had a radiance that shifted from warmth one moment to bitter cold the next, and a light at its heart, like a glowfish deep in a well, that slowly ebbed from blood-red to a sickly yellow to a deep green. It felt...wrong, and I knew why the draconum defended it. Inside the egg was a terrible thing.

As the council broke into smaller groups, I turned to Goldyx and whispered, "The egg--you protect it, yet you do not want it to hatch." When the drakona nodded I continued. "Why don't you just destroy it?"

“You think we haven’t tried?” hissed Goldyx. I saw the Pathis Arcana look up from a nearby discussion, and I wondered where Hysthe might be. “It cannot be destroyed. It can only be defended from those who would bring what lies inside into our world.”

The dark night had broken to a morning bright with fresh snow. Yet I still felt the dread hanging in the air, melting away hope just as the hot springs of the valley melted away the snow. I thought about reaching for the scrying eye, then decided that I would continue to see things with my own eyes. Strapping on my new robes and armor, I set out from the Silent Citadel toward the tunnel leading out of the valley. Along the way I passed a drakona hissing at two draconum warriors twice his size, lashing out in rage and tearing away lines of scales from their hides. The warriors were keeping their own humiliation and anger in check--but only barely. If the Shyft didn’t come to battle the allied drakona and draconum soon, it was possible they might tear each other apart.

Snow piled high at the far end of the tunnel, blowing in from the cold wastes outside the valley. Among the crowd gathered at the opening I found Gryn Wanderer. As she spoke to a high elf wearing a thick fur cape, the blue-scaled drakona leaned heavily on her pike and I saw that one of her wings had been shredded. “It will grow back,” she said. “They always do.”

“If only we were all so lucky. I was traveling with my lord’s expedition,” said the elf, gesturing to where a noble elf in armor tended to a hawk perched on his arm. “Twelve of us set out from the tower. Now only the two of us remain.” He smiled sadly. “But I should have known that fate would bring me to the brotherhood in a time of trouble.”

“It remains to be seen whether the trouble is yours or the Brotherhood’s,” said Gryn. A human sorcerer crouched nearby, working a spell on a struggling figure held down by a pair of draconum. I was shocked to see that it was one of the twisted beasts created by the Tur’aj. “That was once our friend from Venetia,” said the drakona. “What she is now is uncertain.”

“I may be able to free her mind, but I can’t undo what they’ve done to her body,” said the sorcerer. As he looked away from the thrashing creature, I saw the bright light glinting off the tears running down his cheeks--and the magestones in his brow.

“This is a bad omen, a bad omen,” said another cloaked figure--an orc witch, of all things. How had Gryn Wanderer called this group together? “Not all paths lead into the light.”

Gryn sighed deeply. “I haven’t seen anything like this for a thousand years,” she said, looking out of the tunnel. I walked up beside her, dazzled by the brightness. I couldn’t believe the sounds, but was forced to as my eyes adjusted. Outside the cave, prowling just out of bow range, thousands of Mage Spawn filled the plain.

**Tuesday March 1, 2005**  
**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 21**  
**Sparring**

The armies of the draconum and drakona had enough trouble maintaining order among themselves, allowing only those who were clearly subservient scalesworn to join in their sparring. So the rest of us gathered at the Silent Citadel to train and prepare for battle with one another: Wisp and his “vigilants”, the strange brotherhood gathered by Gryn Wanderer, and an oracle far from home.

It was clear that war had raged in our land for years: we were all children of battle, and those I faced in the Citadel’s courtyard were incredibly skilled with their weapons. As the day passed, I pushed myself to complete what I had begun with Raven in Rokos--strip away the layers of stiffness and hesitation that lay between me and the Sect warrior who had once ruled the blood pits.

Late in afternoon, I sat to one side resting while I watched the elven lord fight against the Imperial soldier who had come with Wisp. The elf was good. From my vantage on the sidelines, I could see that he was using his shield not only to protect himself from attack but to hide his sword hand as he varied his grip and changed the direction of his own attacks. The measured attacks of the Atlantean held out against the elf but made no progress. Finally the elflord gave a shrill whistle, calling in his falcon to swoop past and distract the Atlantean for the crucial moment that allowed the elf to make a touch with his swordpoint and end the match.

An argument immediately broke out as to whether or not the tactic was a fair one, but I paid it no heed. I was to face the elf next, and had to consider my own approach. It was possible that I was a better swordsman, or a faster one, but I would need to be both to defeat him quickly. I needed an edge.

The elf smoothed the feathers on the falcon's head as I stepped up to take my place in the circle. "Do you mind?" he asked. "He needs the practice as well, and you have shown yourself to be quite skilled." It appeared that we were each hoping to bring an edge to the battle. I nodded my acceptance, and as the lord raised his arm the falcon leapt into the air, circling close overhead and waiting for the battle to begin.

Drawing my sword, I reached out to the scrying eye. When it answered, I willed my own eyes to remain open and saw the courtyard in a blurry double-vision separated by a stone's throw. I raised my blade--and saw myself do the same through the Eye. The elflord saluted with his sword, then concealed it behind his shield as he brought it into position.

I guided the Eye to the far side of the elf, so I could see him ready his attack. He advanced slowly and I tried not to smile, to give away what I knew. He would attack me with a low swing, and I kept my blade high as if prepared for a chopping strike--but ready to drop it as he extended his arm.

He sprang forward, and the falcon dove toward us. A wave of disorientation washed over me as I saw the sudden motion from two perspectives, and I knew I wouldn't get my sword down in time to block. When I stumbled, it was into the line of his thrust. I was about to pay for my vanity.

The Eye leapt forward, and our perspectives merged as we did. I felt the elven sword push on my armor--then pass through it, and the rest of me. The falcon clutched at the scarf covering my head, but its talons closed only on empty air. I danced aside, but it was clear to everyone what had happened.

The elf looked at me strangely as I backed away from the battle. I felt the Eye pull away, and vanish. Again we had been bonded, and again the bond was broken.

Gryn Wanderer put an arm over my shoulders before I could retreat back into the Citadel. "I think we should talk."

**Wednesday March 2, 2005**  
**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 22**  
**Visions**

I begged exhaustion. I feigned annoyance. I made empty conversation. I had done everything but threaten Gryn Wanderer and still she followed me, making statements that verged on questions I didn't want to answer:

"Judging by your fighting stance, it looks like you were Sect trained."

"You're tight-lipped, so you're not one of Wisp's braggarts."

"Goldyx says it was your choice to come here, so you're not part of my Brotherhood."

"The last time I saw anything like what happened to you in the courtyard, I was in the southlands."

Finally I retreated to my chamber, hoping that she had at least some sense of propriety. She stopped outside, but not before making one final observation: "You know more than you say." I closed the door and went to sleep.

In the morning, I found Gryn still waiting outside my chamber, sitting against the stone wall across from my door, dozing. I thought about remaining in my chamber all day, but I could smell meat cooking somewhere in the citadel and realized I was ravenously hungry. Slowly I swung the door open, but just as it was wide enough for me to pass, Gryn's eyes snapped open.

"You're an oracle," she said.

I promised her answers--after I ate. So an hour later, we stood on a balcony near the top of the Citadel, looking back down the valley toward the armies of the draconum. "Do you think they're ready?" I asked.

"What do you think, oracle?" countered Gryn. When I sighed, she said, "Don't worry. I'm not going to tell anyone else. Dressed like that, fighting like that, it's doubtful that they'll figure it out. I wouldn't have even tumbled to it if you hadn't pulled that trick yesterday--an old defense technique the Oracles of Rokos knew, but I thought even they had lost the secret. I'm just curious what brings you here. Only time I saw oracles outside Rokos was before they built that ugly black tower of theirs, back when they used to wander down into the Scythrians to have their visions."

"Before the Needle was built?" I said. "That was before the birth of Tezla!"

"It's not only elves that are long-lived," said Gryn. "And my life's been a little...stranger than most. But I'm asking you: do you think our armies are ready? You saw what's gathering outside the valley. Have you seen what's to come?"

"I've seen a vision of the battle," I admitted, remembering the prophecies I had made, recorded somewhere in my journals. "But not its outcome. My vision of the present is much clearer."

"Perhaps we can make use of that, then," said Gryn. "What do you see out there? What forces are coming?"

I thought back to the battle of the Kuttar Gates, to the Tur'aj ritual where I had nearly been killed, to the forces I had seen gathering on the Sturmlander coast. I knew what was coming--but like Gryn had said, under my oath to the Solonavi it seemed to be my role to know more than I could say.

I reached out to the scrying eye, and guided it out of the valley, beyond the draconum guardians at the entrance tunnel and over the swarms of Mage Spawn. The beasts prowled restlessly around the plain, snapping at each other.

On a distant slope I found a line of Shyft, and through the Eye I could sense the energy streaming from them to the creatures of the Land, calling them to battle. They danced in a loping gait around an endless circle, a magical ritual of some sort, but it seemed its only purpose was to amplify the powers of their minds. Whatever control they had over the Mage Spawn, it was innate.

"The Darkmarch will come within the day, Fys'okro," said a voice--in my head, and I recalled that the mouthless Shyft communicated with one another mentally.

"Good," said another as the Eye helped me find the conversation taking place between two summoners at the edge of the gathering. "The Domina herself comes with them. We have long waited for this moment, when we might once again unleash our masters' greatest servant. If we succeed, they will be pleased."

"If they survive," said the other.

"They are eternal!" snapped Fys'okro. Do you believe they could be destroyed by that...fleshy rabble?" He pointed toward the draconum valley with his emerald-tipped staff. "They rest, as we did, and as we did,

they will return stronger than ever. Speak your doubts no more. Focus your mind to the task at hand. Tell the others to begin calming the beasts and preparing them for guidance. Once the fenblades come, the attack begins.”

I released the Eye, and returned to Gryn’s side. “The Shyft are out there controlling the Mage Spawn,” I said. “Their armies are approaching. Tell the others--the battle will start soon.”

**Thursday March 3, 2005**  
**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 23**  
**The Calm**

Gryn believed my warning, and so did Goldyx. I don’t know if any of the other drakona and draconum did, but it confirmed what they had been hearing from their own scouts and from the few straggling warriors who still managed to fight their way into the valley from the outside world. The Mage Spawn outside the valley were being joined by the first Shyft warriors coming north through the Kuttar Depths. I sent the scrying eye south in the morning and found that the shattered gateway at the Kuttar Gates had been cleared by the massive beasts under the control of the Shyft. While some of the draconum warriors in the Depths were still doing what they could to slow the never-ending column of troops and Mage Spawn, most had fallen back to join their brethren at the valley and prepare for battle.

Yet for all the furor building outside, the valley was calm. The drakona and draconum had given up snapping at one another as they made their final preparations. Even the scalesworn were being armed and sent to positions they would defend if the tunnel was breached. The courtyard of the Silent Citadel lived up to its name as everyone inside sought a place to rest and wait for the alarm to be sounded.

I sat on the walls of the Citadel. I was in the sun, but the stone was cold beneath me. I looked up toward the snow on the nearby peaks. It hadn’t been long ago that I walked out into the sweltering streets of Rokos, looking for a challenge. Now I found myself in cold lands where summer was already a distant memory, and the challenge to come was unavoidable.

I had a sword at my side. I felt strong. I felt ready. But for a moment, I wanted to be somewhere far away, somewhere warm. I reached for the Eye and followed as it soared south, over the mountains and forests, across the Blasted Lands, and into the deserts.

Ribaya had been the oldest of the Ringed Cities, the Great Oasis of the Galeshi people. Then Darq the Corrupt and his moonborn vampires had claimed the surrounding deserts--and closed on the great cities. Ribaya’s greatest asset had turned out to be its greatest weakness, as the dark magics of the moonborn had sent the city tumbling into the vast watery caverns beneath that had been its lifeblood. All that remained were jagged fragments of buildings, thrusting up from the ground around the crater like fangs tipped with tarnish-green, a memory of the polished bronze tiles that had once reflected the glory of the sun gods worshiped by the Galeshi.

Now Ribaya belonged to the moonborn. It belonged to the blood cult. It belonged to Darq. In one of the many tunnels and caverns branching off from the crater, the vampire lord weighed the badge of office hanging around his neck, the silver skull that marked him as a deathspeaker. Nearby was Carlana, his consort and a high priestess of the blood cult. She bared her fangs at the Galeshi strapped to the table below her, drawing her dagger lightly down his torso and licking her lips as blood welled from the cuts.

“Accursed witch,” said a woman’s voice quietly, and I realized the Eye was looking over the shoulder of a pair likewise spying on Darq and Carlana. Judging by the hoods they wore, they were Galeshi, deep in the lair of the enemy.

The other put a long finger to his lips and his hand on her shoulder. She winced in pain, and when he withdrew his hand she pulled the shoulder of her jerkin back up over a patch of horribly burned flesh that

started on her shoulder and ran down her back. He gestured and they retreated away from the torchlight, fading into silhouettes as they moved back down the tunnel. I followed.

They stopped at an intersection, and as she edged forward to look in both directions, her partner whispered to her. "You knew this was the plan, Hazna," he said in a hollow voice. "We can do nothing to give away our presence. We are only to make certain that the moonlord is here."

Hazna nodded and they advanced. "I know," she whispered. "But that was Kareth. I remember feeding him dates and ice when he was a baby."

"He will be avenged," said the other. "They all will."

Hazna raised her hand, and the pair flattened themselves against the wall of the dark tunnel. They waited silently as a group of blood cultists passed in the distance. "What's the word from the sands?" she asked as they finally continued.

"The Khamsin troops are well trained and well led," said her partner. "They have secured the traderoads, and their sweeps continue to drive the moonborn here, toward your own greatest concentration of troops. The time for battle will come soon."

"Not soon enough," said Hazna as they emerged from the tunnels and onto the slope of the ruins of Ribaya. As they began to pick their way through the wreckage, I finally got to see Hazna's partner in the light--and I understood why his voice had been so hollow, and why he could move so silently. He wore an iron mask, a dark cloak, and hovered above the ground. I had heard them described among the oracles and oathsworn, but never seen one.

It was a Solonavi shade.

**Friday March 4, 2005**  
**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 24**  
**The Storm**

The attack came just after dawn.

I was sipping at a mug of hot barleybroth when I heard the gongs in the courtyard. While I snatched up my weapons and followed the others outside, I sent the scrying eye ahead.

A swarm of winged Mage Spawn had come over the high ridges surrounding the valley and dropped down to attack. A group of enormous insects led the way, engaging the draconum in close combat. They were followed by black-winged beasts that tore at the warriors' flanks with a mouthful of sharp teeth that seemed to take up their entire torso. Once the draconum were distracted and outnumbered four to one, a pair of wereravens swooped through in fast arcs, slashing out at the wounded with long blades mounted on the back of their fists. Before reinforcements could get into position, the blood of six draconum warriors ran down the slope.

As more draconum stepped forward to join the fray, I saw dragon mystics raising their hands to the sky. Spaced a bowshot apart, they ringed the valley. Though distant, they spoke as one. With each syllable, the clouds overhead roiled, drawing inward. The wind rose until its howl drowned out the echoed roars of the Mage Spawn outside the valley. The clouds blackened until it seemed the valley had become a cave, lit only by the watchfires still burning throughout the valley. Surrounded by four draconum, one of the wereravens leapt into the air, soaring upward to escape--until it was caught up in the winds and hurled into a granite wall. On the far side of the valley, I saw more insects and blackwings fall out of the dark clouds, forced to the ground where they were quickly attacked by the draconum.

Another alarm sounded, and I saw drakona commanders urging groups of soldiers up toward the tunnel. Inside the tunnel, the battle raged. Thick-hided beasts that barely rose to the waists of the draconum charged forward, heavy hooves clattering as they pushed their way through the draconum. The defenders hacked at the creatures with swords and greataxes, but the blades seemed to bounce off the beasts' hides with no effect. A whelp pikeman stumbled and fell, and one of the creatures lashed out with its hoof over and over until the whelp's breastplate caved inward with a sickening crack.

The draconum in the tunnel surged forward, shoring up their sagging lines just as a new onslaught crashed into them. A snow-furred manwolf jumped high above the draconum to tumble, clawing and slashing, into scalesworn just coming up the tunnel from the valley. Draconum who turned to stab at the frost wolf were fighting back-to-back with their front lines, who were faced with bare-chested four-armed swordsmen, their eyes blazing with fury. The Shyft had joined the battle.

"Get them in here and seal the gates!" roared a voice beside me. I pulled away from the scrying eye and found Goldyx beside me on the battlements of the Citadel. As the doors of the Citadel rumbled shut, Gryn and Wisp slipped between them with a few others, all carrying tools and muddy from head to foot. "Is everything in place, Wanderer?" Goldyx shouted.

"Ground was pretty frozen, but we dug the holes," said Gryn, as she poured a bucket of water over her head to clean herself. Her armor waited nearby. "Where'd you get them, anyway?"

Goldyx ignored the question and turned his attention back to the sounds of battle coming from the temple. "They didn't believe in this Citadel when I went in search of it," he said to me. "But once I found it--once I won it--they were all too happy to order me to bring it back up here." The lines of draconum moving into the tunnel began to stumble backward, pushed back by the assault. "Drakona ordering one another!" he spat. "They see it as nothing more than a wall to be parked here, to split the beasts' forces so they can be taken on blade to blade," said Goldyx. "Yet any fool can see that even if you brought all the drakona together, with all the draconum and every last whelp, they would still be outnumbered by the Mage Spawn. Then there's the Shyft. Who knew how many had survived, sleeping underground? When one of our own betrayed us to the Tur'aj and revealed our hiding place to the world, I knew that our vaunted strength wouldn't be enough. So before I brought the tower north, I went south."

The draconum lines gave way, and the armies of the Shyft advanced into the valley. Behind the Mage Spawn and the blade-wielding Shyft were summoners and armored Shyft warriors, prowling calmly back and forth as they reached out with their minds to guide the Mage Spawn toward the thickest concentrations of defenders.

"This place is strong with magic," said Goldyx. "Do you sense it?" I looked through the Eye and concentrated until I saw the glow that pervaded the area. "Hide magic under magic, train their young sorcerers to use foreign spells," said Goldyx. "That was the only way they thought to use this valley. Fools."

Goldyx closed his eyes and concentrated. A spark of magic leapt from the drakona sorcerer and arced outward, drawing a glowing line through the earth as it flowed toward the tunnel. It touched something beneath the ground and flashed as it ignited a pool of pure magical power beneath the ground. A buried magestone crystal.

The earth erupted in an explosion that hurled both Shyft and Mage Spawn into the air. A moment's concentration from Goldyx and there was another explosion a stone's throw away. As the attacking armies continued to advance, explosions threw them into disarray, giving the draconum enough time to bring their armies into position. Still, for each attacker that fell, fresh reinforcements spilled out of the tunnel.

As the day turned night was shattered by explosions and screams, the battle for the valley was underway.

**Wednesday March 16, 2005**

**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 25**  
**Advance**

The battle was endless and unrelenting.

With the black clouds blotting out the sky, the darkness was cut only by fires and flashes of magic. Wind roared through the valley as if the battle were taking place in the belly of an enormous beast, but it was worse when it slowed enough for me to hear the screams of the dead and dying from both sides.

I lost track of time, and often wondered if it was days that had passed--or merely minutes.

Goldyx had tried to use one of his magestone bombs to collapse the tunnel leading into the draconum valley, but it was already too late--guiding their waves of Mage Spawn forward, the Shyft took control of the tunnel. Once they had surrounded the area with enormous beasts, Tur'aj sorcerers of the Apocalypse cult came forward behind them to provide magical support. While Goldyx was trying to slow the Mage Spawn advance down the valley's southern flank, the Apocalypse mages had made their way unerringly to the magestones buried in the ground near the tunnel. Shyft-controlled beasts set to work with clawed hands and quickly excavated the giant red stones Goldyx had brought from the southern isles. Two Tur'aj paced around the stone, chanting, then stepped forward and placed their hands on the stone. The magestone began to fade--first to the color of bloomwine, then to spilled blood, and finally to an inky darkness as black as the skies above. When Goldyx attempted to spark the magestone, he stumbled backward. "It's dead," he gasped.

Like floodwaters against a muddy bank, the unending wave of attackers slowly cut through the defenders of the valley. Given the numerous assaults on the dungeons beneath the Land by various heroes and adventuring companies, I had never suspected that so many Shyft might remain. Nor could I believe the vast numbers of Mage Spawn they had summoned to their side.

The Shyft didn't seem to care if the draconum cut down Mage Spawn by the dozen; the warriors of the Darkmarch merely painted their bodies in the blood of the fallen beasts and called more to the front. Then I saw a massive blue-skinned draconum spread his wings and leap through the air, over a swarm of pock-skinned creatures, swinging his axe in a wide arc that cut down a Shyft warrior before he could bring his double-bladed sword around to block the blow. Every nearby Shyft froze and spun to face the draconum in mute rage. As the Shyft moved to surround the draconum, the fearsome beasts they had been guiding, left to their own devices, became a chaotic herd.

But that was only a moment of weakness in an overwhelming attack. Soon the Shyft lines had moved past the Silent Citadel. Though Mage Spawn gathered around the Citadel in a solid mass, they made no attempt to breach our walls. It was clear the Shyft were directing their attack toward the far end of the valley. Toward the draconum fortress and the egg.

**Thursday April 14, 2005**  
**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 26**  
**High Tide**

The battle went on. Soon it became difficult to remember each moment. From the parapets of the Citadel, Gryn and Wisp led attacks firing blindly into the masses below, each arrow certain to hit a target. I commanded a trio of draconum thrusting pikes through the portcullis, blocking the gateway with slaughtered Mage Spawn. Yet soon the bodies would be cleared away and a new wave would push forward.

In the distance, I saw that the draconum defenders of the valley who lacked the benefit of stone and iron defenses were having a more difficult time. Groups of draconum and drakona were scattered throughout the valley and doing what damage they could, but for the most part they were barely slowing the advance of the combined forces of the Shyft and the Tur'aj as they moved on the fortress at the far end of the valley.

The ranks of the dragon mystics who had been defending the valley had been thinned as well, and the dark clouds that had roiled overhead finally began to break apart.

Finally, one of the creatures outside the gates spit acid between the bars, into the face of the draconum warrior beside me. He hissed in pain, and I pulled him back into the courtyard, shouting "Close the gates!" The iron-banded doors rumbled shut. I didn't need the Eye to tell me we were about to have bigger problems.

An orc witch--a friend of Gryn's--dug in her many pouches as she hurried over to the wounded draconum. She poured water over his face, flushing away the acid, then dusted his face with a white powder. The draconum winced, but relaxed as the pain diminished. I pulled the scarf from my head and tied it loosely over his wounds. One eye was destroyed, melted away. Biting his lip so hard he drew blood, he climbed to his feet and drew his weapon. He might or might not live, but he would have vengeance.

I heard an explosion in the distance, and Wisp shouting. "They've breached the fortress!" Then: "Here they come!" A wave of blackwings burst over the parapets of the Citadel, sending our archers tumbling. Grapplers leapt up onto the walls and reached down with their long arms to help more Mage Spawn over the edge. The eyes of the grapplers sparked with unusual intelligence, and it was clear that we had at long last drawn the full attention of the Shyft.

A pair of frost wolves leapt down from the wall and ripped into the Citadel's defenders with claw and fang. A swarm of insects carried small, yellow grimplins to the upper balconies of the Citadel, and moments later I heard shouts from inside. The hard earth of the courtyard erupted and a gigantic worm burst forth, roaring, fangs spread.

Up on the parapet, Goldyx clutched his spellbook like a shield as he fired magical bolts that arced from one creature to the next. "Fall back into the tower!" he shouted. Nearby I saw Gryn whirling her pike with one hand, fending off three bare-headed Shyft warriors as she dragged one of her elven allies back into the Citadel.

I looked toward the armory entrance and saw my way blocked by the worm and wolves who now commanded the courtyard. As I headed to the gatesteps leading up to the parapet, the gates splintered and fell inward. Horned, thick-hided creatures charged forward, giving a strange, honking shout. I danced aside and ducked behind a broken ballista as hooded Apocalypse cultists followed behind the Mage Spawn, weapons drawn.

Though I waited until they moved past, I heard a shout as I climbed the gatesteps. I felt a tendril wrap around my ankle and fell hard onto the stone stairs, knocking the wind out of me. The grappler drew me closer as I hacked at it with my sword. By the time I got free, two cultists were almost upon me. I engaged them without even climbing to my feet. Blood sprayed from the leg of one as I got in a mortal strike, just as the other knocked my weapon from my hand. He stomped on my sword arm, pinning it to the stone, and brought his longsword up.

I raised my free hand in a hopeless attempt to stave off the killing blow. I think I screamed.

"Stop!" said one of the Tur'aj, a grey-robed priest pointing at me with his staff. A small, twisted creature danced on the end of the staff, pointing at me in a mockery of his master's motions. "She wears our mark, and the sigil of the preceptor. She is one of us. Spare her!"

I felt the scar on my forehead pulse, saw the silver ring on my hand. Nala's ring. "Get her out of here, and tend to her wounds," said the apocalypse priest. Surrounded by the enemy, I could only cooperate as the Tur'aj warrior and one of the Shyft helped me to my feet and through the gates, out of the Silent Citadel.

They left me on a muddy embankment near the entrance to the valley, beside a pile of corpses. "Rest here," said the Tur'aj, and the pair returned to the battle. In the distance I heard the roar of a victory shout, and

looked toward the draconum fortress. Casting the Scrying Eye forward, I arrived just in time to see the Shyft present their prize to Nala, Preceptor of the Apocalypse Cult.

They had captured the egg.

**Monday April 18, 2005**  
**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 27**  
**Gathering**

I rested for a while, exhausted, slumped near the pile of corpses. Though the Apocalypse cult had won the egg they came for, they had yet to capture the Silent Citadel. They had taken the courtyard, but the tower itself remained impregnable. I heard the sound of axes on wood, followed by curses of disappointment. I heard the hollow thud of Mage Spawn throwing themselves against the doors, as commanded by their Shyft masters. Finally I heard a call for sorcerers, and knew that Goldyx and the others inside the Citadel had managed to buy a few minutes. But it was just a matter of time...for the invaders.

Before the cultists could bring a sorcerer to the Citadel, I saw what I had been expecting. The magestones around the base of the Citadel glimmered as Goldyx channeled power into them from the valley's ley lines. The mud and blood that had caked on the stones during the battle melted away as the stones glowed brighter than the morning sun, finally visible now that the clouds over the valley had dissipated. With a grinding sound, the Silent Citadel rose into the air.

I heard panicked shouts from the courtyard, as cultists dashed to the gates and jumped to the ground as it rapidly fell away below them. Finally the Citadel was too high for even the foolhardy to leap off, and they could only stand indecisively in the opening. Goldyx helped them make their choice. Slowly the Citadel tilted, and cultists spilled from the opening and fell, screaming, to the valley floor.

No sooner had the Citadel righted itself than the barred slitcovers of the tower snapped open. The elven archers and dragon mystics inside were at last given a chance to strike back at the few invaders remaining in the courtyard. They made it short work. In minutes I saw Gryn Wanderer leading draconum warriors back to attack positions on the parapets.

An enormous, winged beast swooped by the Citadel, giving a shrill screech. I saw Preceptor Nala riding a saddle mounted on its back, and the egg strapped into a harness slung beneath the creature's belly. The beast swiped at the Citadel with a massive claw as it passed, then beat the air with its wings to climb up and away. As it crested the valley wall, headed away, it was clear that the Preceptor had her prize and the battle was over. The Apocalypse had won.

Still, the draconum would mount what counterattack they could. As the cultists and Shyft began to make their way back up the valley, the Citadel rained arrows, spells, and debris on them from above. It didn't do much to thin their ranks, but it proved sufficient intimidation to keep them moving and prevent them from looting the bodies of the dead.

I realized I sat near the only tunnel leading out of the valley, and soon they would all be coming my way. The odds were good that one of the cultists had seen me at the ritual where I was nearly sacrificed. It was time for me to leave.

Standing, I realized that I would need a cloak and a sword to brave the wilds outside the valley. There were fallen Shyft nearby, but there was no way I could grasp the strange ball-shaped hilts of their weapons. I saw a grey-robed cultist, but he carried only a dagger.

A short distance away, a polished blade caught the sun. I found it in the hand of an elven warrior, the noble whose aide had known Gryn. When I reached to take the sword, I started when he gasped and coughed up blood. "It's you," he said.

I knelt beside him and looked over his wounds. The elflord had felled a warbear in single combat, but not before the animal had torn open his torso. There was nothing I could do, so I draped his bloody cape back over him. "Just rest," I said. "I'll stay with you."

"One obeys the commands of the Council," said the elf. "Even if one does not believe. 'Give it to the last person you see before you die', they said. I always wondered how I would know. But--" He coughed again wetly. "But it's you. I have no question. And no fear. I have played my part in destiny, and now the role goes to you."

He was fading fast, and I still had no idea what he was talking about. "I don't understand," I said.

The elf reached up weakly to tap his chest. "On a chain. Under my armor." I slid my hand under his breastplate and found the chain, followed it with my fingers. I hooked my finger around what I found and drew it out.

A piece of a broken amulet.

I reached into my boot and pulled out the half of the amulet I had been given by the Solonavi. I pressed the new piece to my half. With a hiss, they melded together.

"Yes," said the elf. "I knew...you were the one." He went limp. I pulled the chain from around his neck and put it over my own, tucked the amulet under my robes. As I took the sword from the elflord's hand, I paused for a moment and considered claiming his soul for Dark Tezla. But I found I couldn't bring myself to say the words.

The cultists were getting closer, not to mention the Mage Spawn running wild now that they were no longer under the control of the Shyft. If I was going to leave, now was the time to do it.

Instead I turned away from the tunnel and walked deeper into the valley.

**Tuesday April 19, 2005**  
**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 28**  
**Denouments**

It took me most of the day to work my way down the valley, skirting the outgoing soldiers of the Apocalypse. Even more difficult to avoid were the Shyft--they moved silently among the wreckage, crouched low on their lower two sets of arms like the beasts they controlled.

Late in the afternoon I nearly stumbled over a Shyft summoner; luckily its attention was on directing a pack of grimlins tearing a group of wounded scalesworn. Raising my elven longsword, I brought it down and severed the creature's head from its shoulders. The grimlins paused for a moment, dazed and confused, giving the scalesworn enough time to set on them and exact bloody revenge. Saluting me with their swords, they set to tending to their wounds. I continued into the valley.

I saw survivors from both sides of the battle. There were not only Apocalypse and Shyft but also scalesworn, draconum, whelps, and drakona. But it was unclear if either side would remain united in the aftermath. The cultists moved in groups, but the Shyft ranged far apart and individually, the common cause that had united them in battle gone. The defenders of the valley had come together in an impossible alliance, the drakona and draconum overlooking grudges that stretched into the shadows of the past; now, as I saw them snapping at once again, it was clear that defeat had broken whatever bonds had grown between them.

Pausing to wash the blood from my hands at one of the valley's hot springs, I looked back to see the Silent Citadel floating over the wall of the valley in pursuit of the Apocalypse army. Long ago I had given up hope that anyone back in the Oracle's Needle was reading these journals. Now I had lost my only other way back to Rokos, and it was going to be a long walk.

Finally I arrived at the fortress. The defensive walls had been splintered, and the mighty gates thrown aside like child's toys. The protective glyphs carved into the stone were blackened from the magical power that had been pumped through them until they overloaded. Shattered bodies were everywhere, caked in muddy, broken earth soaked with as much blood as water.

Yet there were survivors here too. I found who I was looking for where I expected to find them, in the remains of the last defenses between the Apocalypse and the room where the egg had been kept. Slumped against a wall, Chroma cradled Caldera's head in her arms. Both were as close as a living creature can come to death and not cross through the veil, yet they both raised their weapons when I approached.

I set my own sword on the ground and raised my empty hands. "They've gone," I said. "They've taken the egg with them."

"Then all is lost," said Caldera, the words hissed through broken teeth.

"No," I said. "Not if you give me the artifact you found beneath the mountains."

"Never!" said Chroma. "With all we have lost, you would take more? It may be all we have."

"You'll lose everything eventually if you don't give it to me now," I said. "The cult has taken the egg. They will hatch it. Whatever is inside is about to be unleashed upon the Land." I pulled the medallion from beneath my robes and held it out. "The only thing that can stop it--the only thing that can save us all--is this medallion, and it means nothing without your piece."

"We were told what would happen if we failed," said Chroma. "It would live again. It would ravage the world, as it has done before. She reached into her belt and drew out the piece of the medallion. "Take it, but know that if you do not do as you say and destroy the creature we will die--but not until I kill you first."

She dropped the piece into my hand. I fitted it to the others, and it fused into place. The amulet, complete at last. I felt the weight of history upon me, knew it had been a thousand years since it had last been a single piece, saw the hammer falling upon it to break it into pieces, heard a voice in my head:

*"When all is as it was, they will return."*

There was a flash, and I looked up to see Lord Vextha floating before me.

"Oracle," he said. "It is time."

**Wednesday April 20, 2005**

**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 29**

**Omens**

Today, for the first time in nearly a month, I write in this journal with my own hand. Strange to look back over pages written from afar, under impossible circumstances. It's strange to be back in the scrying chamber.

Lord Vextha took me from the draconum valley last night, lifting us both on the wings of a powerful spell. As he carried me away from the valley, from Chroma and Caldera and all the wounded among the torn wreckage below, I asked if he could not use his magic to heal them. "We leave them to their destiny," he said. "And I take you to yours."

As though I were the Eye, we flew through the clouds. Before sunrise I saw the watchfires of Rokos, and the harbor beacons down on the waterfront. We dropped down among the buildings and into the courtyard outside the Oracle's Needle, where Lord Vextha set me lightly on my feet.

Oracle Daheia was waiting, with Anquilis. “Welcome home, Oracle,” said Daheia.

“She cannot wear those robes,” said the archivist, looking at the robes I had found in the Silent Citadel. I thought back to the silk robes I had worn since I came to Rokos, so carefully tended yet now reduced to rags.

“Come,” said Daheia. “Let’s get you cleaned up and fed.” So while the pages poured the days newly heated water into the stone tubs I had a bath, and I ate a meal in the Tower kitchens while the cooks prepared the morning’s breakfast. To describe how much I enjoyed them would needlessly fill pages in a volume already approaching its end. Suffice it to say that I was happier than I had been in weeks.

I met Daheia in her quarters, where she had laid out robes in the colors of the Oracles. “Why did Anquilis object to the clothes I was wearing?” I asked as I put on the clean robes.

“The symbols on them have... meaning to the Solonavi,” said Daheia. I considered the clothing from the Silent Citadel for a moment, inspecting the intricate geometrical symbols dancing embroidered on the robes and inscribed into the belt. If the Solonavi still felt the need to keep secrets from me, I wasn’t going to fully acquiesce to their demands. I picked up the silver belt, ornamented with gold and rubies, and strapped it around my waist.

“I’m afraid that you need to cover the scar on your brow,” said Daheia. “Not only will it disturb many people who understand its meaning, but there is the possibility that it somehow binds you to the Tur’aj. A scarf will not be enough,” she said, presenting me with a tray. “It is time for you to choose a mask.”

A mask. Though in service to the Solonavi I had avoided wearing one for so long. Determined to one day be free of my debt, I refused to allow myself to be marked. Yet Daheia was right. I considered the masks on the tray. Some were full masks of the type worn by Oathsworn. Others were nearly helms, like that worn by Daheia. I didn’t want to wear any of them.

But buried beneath them I saw another. Drawing it forth, I saw that it would mark me as an Oracle and hide the scar, yet it would not hide my identity. I would be an Oracle, but I would remain Kastali. The words of my father came to mind: “Never let anyone forget that your power comes from you, and not your office.” Stepping before a mirror I put on the mask and let my hair fall free. I looked different--felt different--yet it was right.

Daheia walked with me to the scrying chamber, where we found Lord Vextha waiting outside. “You have always seen, Oracle,” said Vextha. “Now you will know.” He reached out a finger and placed it on the mask, between my eyes. I blinked as I felt a pulse of magic wash over me.

“Go inside, Oracle,” said Daheia. I looked to both the Oracle and the Solonavi, but neither gave me any indication what might be going on. I opened the door and stepped inside.

I sighed in relief. It was just as I had left it. I ran my fingers down the spines of my journals, looked at the map on the wall and noted the spreading stain of the Apocalypse on the Land, smiled as I looked into the waters of the scrying pool and remembered when I thought I needed it, before I had found the Eye.

No sooner did I think of the scrying eye than I felt the tug of its approach. I looked up from the pool--and was startled to see a ghostly Solonavi coming toward me, through the wall! I stumbled backward into the bookcase, and the candles mounted on it flickered and cast dancing shadows across the room.

The spirit reached for me, the mouth moving but no words coming out. As its hand passed through me, I felt the tug again...and realized I was looking at the Eye! I relaxed and released myself into its hands, and we passed through the walls of the Tower.

The Eye pulled me across the Land, and once again I returned to the northlands. Travelling eastward across the midlands, we found the valley of the Roa Kaizen and followed it toward its source. I saw Nepharus

Mons off in the far distance, ringed in clouds glowing in the morning light. To the east was the central spur of the Ailons, and beyond, Black Lake and the Necropolis. There were many things I wanted to see, but first I would go where the Eye was taking me.

We approached the cold, barren foothills, and as we descended I saw a creature I had seen only days ago in the draconum valley--the beast ridden by Nala. Lower, and I saw a circle of prostrate cultists ringing Nala...and the egg, glowing as if full of coals.

"The time of prophecy is here!" she said.

*"The darkness comes,"* responded the cultists.

"We have seen the omens!" said Nala.

*"The darkness comes."*

A cultist stepped forward, in black robes rather than gray. It was Lord Katalkus, and he carried a chest in his arms. He opened the chest to reveal four gleaming gems--all that remained of the riders of the Apocalypse. "It cannot be destroyed," he shouted as he showed them to the crowd.

*"The darkness comes,"* said the cultists.

"It cannot be killed!" he said.

*"The darkness comes."*

"It is reborn!" he cried. As he set the gems on the eggs surface, they sunk through the shell. With each the glow of the egg intensified, like a bellows working a blacksmith's flames. Finally cracks rippled across the shell--and it broke open.

The Apocalypse Dragon was reborn.

It uncoiled, spreading its wings. Five heads roared at the sky. Even the cultists looked up in horror at what they had unleashed. A cultist jumped to his feet and turned to run. One of the Dragon's heads snapped in his direction, a skull bereft of skin. The air rippled, and suddenly the cultist fell to the ground, dead. For a moment I couldn't be certain, but it looked as though the Dragon grew in size. Then the Dragon saw the other cultists. One after another they slumped, and with each the Dragon grew larger as it absorbed their life forces.

Finally only Lord Katalkus and Preceptor Nala remained. "Stop," said Katalkus calmly, raising a hand. The Dragon paused, growling. Katalkus stepped forward and placed a hand on the beast's haunches. "Yes," he breathed. "Finally."

The eyes of the Dragon's central head glowed. "Such power," said Katalkus, echoed in the wordless rumbling of the Dragon. "We cannot fully control her power, but I can guide it. Where shall we go first?"

"For now it matters little," said Nala. "Go south. Show them all that we have endured. Tell them all that the darkness is coming." The Dragon turned--and looked at me. The eyes of the skull peered at me, and again I felt the terrible cold touch of death--

I was back in the Tower, gasping. "The Eye is gone," I said.

"No Kastali," said Daheia, looking into my eyes. "You've always known the truth--you just couldn't see it."

It was true. "The Eye cannot die," I said. "There are others."

Dozens of ghostly Solonavi came through the walls of the scrying chamber.

**Thursday April 21, 2005**  
**Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 30**  
**Friends and Foes**

Perhaps it was the mark of the Tur'aj. Perhaps it was Lord Vextha's touch. Perhaps it was my own growing powers. But I could see them. I could see the translucent, insubstantial Solonavi who floated all around me as I walked through the Tower. Some flitted through a room, traveling from one destination to another. Some hovered behind the shoulder of an Oathsworn or an apprentice, watching. A few, like those around the blackstone pillars in the entry hall, circled menacingly, as if protecting something.

It seemed as though I was the only one who could see the ghosts, though it was possible that they could be seen by the--normal? Living? Luminous?--Solonavi that normally moved about the Tower.

Strangely I felt no tug from the ghosts, and they didn't respond when I reached out to them...until finally I saw one come through the rose window above the main Tower doors. I felt the pull as it came closer, and I reached out to make contact--

Then we were flying above Rokos, out into the grasslands. Soon we were out of Solonavi lands and into Atlantean territory, where the landsmen were harvesting the meager crops they had mustered after recovering from a summer of plague and famine. They would make it through the winter, but food would be scarce.

I could see Venetia in the distance as we arrived at an Atlantean supply depot. I saw the flash of sorcery and the boom of black powder in the distance as the Empire's campaign to retake Caero continued. All that remained in this encampment were Golemcore mechanics laboring on a trio of battered golems.

"I don't know what's making 'em balky," said one, a wiry Kosian girl. "The new dwarfbrains are still wired in solid, and I don't see any kind of mechanical failure. Must be the magic."

"No way," said a stout man who wore a leather 'Kore apron over dirty apprentice robes. "The magestones are good, so the motivator spell should still be in place."

"Maybe you'd know if the Delphana hadn't kicked you out," said the girl.

"Hey!" A gray-bearded man extracted himself from the inner workings of a defunct golem to glare at the two of them. He cocked his head, and they all heard the stomp of approaching metal feet. "I can hear more work comin' in already!" he shouted. "If you can't get these two hunks of junk walking toward the front lines, that'll be all the excuse the Legion needs to shut us down and take you up to there instead. I can't spare mechanics, so howsabout we send some expendable golems instead, okay?"

The mechanics nodded just as the new golems walked into the area. In the rear were a technocat wearing saddlebags stuffed with tools and ridden by a dwarven mechanic, walking alongside a pair of thin-limbed golems with blades where their hands should be. They followed a massive golem with a belt-fed crossbow in place of his left arm, the Atlantean gold of his outer casing nearly covered in a sloppy coat of red paint.

It was Redgear Bowblade.

"Expendable," said Redgear, leveling his weapon at the elder mechanic.

"Lower your weapon and get over there!" shouted the 'Koresman, pointing toward a relatively clear area.

With a twanging sound Redgear loosed two bolts that slammed into the wall beside the mechanic's head, one on either side. The gearing of his upper arm spun two fresh bolts into place and pushed them forward

while a ratchet beneath jacked the bowstring back into position. "I am not expendable," he said in his buzzing, metallic voice.

"Hey, whatever you say," said the mechanic, dropping his wrench and raising his empty hands. The two smaller golems had moved to threaten the two younger mechanics with their blades until they backed away from their work.

Now Redgear moved over to the bright-eyed but dormant golems. "You are not expendable," he said to them.

One moved. "NOT...EX....EX....EXP..." it stammered in a voice that sounded like someone dragging a rusty barrel.

"Come with us if you want to live," said Redgear thudding back toward the exit. The smaller golems spun their hands so they threatened the mechanics with the flat of their blades--which they promptly used to knock them unconscious.

"Hey!" shouted the older mechanic.

"Tell the emperor hello from the Steelhands!" cackled the dwarven mechanic. "He better start treating golems decent, or we'll have to do down and talk to him ourselves!" Raising a lightning caster, he blasted the mechanic with an arc of lightning that knocked him on his back.

Slowly, the Atlantean golems climbed to their feet--

--and I found myself back in the entry hall of the Tower. The Eye--the ghostly Solonavi--danced away. It had shown me what it thought I needed to see.

So I came here, to the scrying chamber, to record what I had seen. I turned to a new page, the last page in the journal, and found a note tucked between the pages:

*Kastali--*

*I've been reading your journals while you're gone, and it looks like you'll soon be coming back. Which means it's time for Raven to say good-bye. By the time you find this, I'll be long gone. Don't come looking for me, even with the Eye--I've got a lot of experience hiding, and it's easier when you don't have to be in plain sight.*

*Frankly, I'm surprised the Solonavi didn't figure it out. They're supposed to be the masters of secrets, after all. I was pretty sure I could get by as an Oathsworn, but hanging out with an Oracle, around the head of the order and any number of the firebugs? Well, I couldn't pass up the chance, but I thought I might finally be the one to find out if there were dungeons under the Tower of Rokos.*

*I've lived a long, long time, Kastali. Long enough that even if I don't know what the Solonavi are up to, I know what they did. So do a few others, and we're waiting to see what happens next. Gryn Wanderer knows. Whatever the elves have done to her, it sounds like Jaysari--the Mistwalker?--knows now too.*

*If you get all the pieces of that amulet, it means you're headed toward the truth too. When you find it, you'll have to make a choice, and I hope that choice means our paths will cross again.*

*The Solonavi aren't going to be happy to hear there was a spy in their ranks, so I'd suggest you report this note. I wouldn't want a friend to get in any trouble she wasn't looking for.*

*Your friend,  
Tonon Swiftblade*

*P.S. I know who's in Seatower.*

## Fall 435 Day 01

### The Dragonslayers' Tomb

As Raven--or Tonen, or whatever her name was--suggested, I immediately showed her letter to Lord Vextha, who was less than amused. He immediately ordered that I search for her, and I retired to the Scrying Chamber to do so.

Calling upon the Scrying Eye was an incredible experience now that I could see the ghostly form of a Solonavi entering the room, and I could feel my sight merging with that of the Solonavi until I saw what it did. As soon as the connection was made, I bent my will towards finding the Amazon Swiftblade, the woman who had been my friend, but the Eye--despite knowing that it was the vision of a Solonavi I shared, I could not think of my guide as anything but the Scrying Eye--had other ideas, and I found myself whisked away far to the north and west, up the Roa Sein and through the Blasted Lands.

My vision focused on a long lake, tucked away amidst inhospitable mountains. Despite the advancing season, snow covered the ground, and ice ringed the waters of the mountain lake. The Eye took me to the end of the lake, where a cavern delved deep into the heart of the mountains to the north. Icicles ringed the entrance like the teeth of a great beast, but the Scrying Eye did not hesitate, sweeping quickly through the labyrinthine passages beyond the icy jaws until I saw before me a small room, the walls ornately carved with pictures, and four golden caskets lying side by side.

As I entered the chamber, my vision blurred, and I could feel the amulet about my neck, many days travel to the south, grow warm, and then hot. Still seeing the underground chamber before me, I grasped the chain which held the amulet close to my throat, and lifted the heated metal away from my skin. Immediately my vision cleared, and I could see the room clearly once again. My eyes first went to the caskets, and I saw that the tops of each were gone, as if they had never been there. At the foot of each casket, there was a symbol. On the largest, there was a staff, radiating lines that I could only assume were magic. The next largest had a pair of axes carved into the ancient gold of the coffin. The final two, of nearly equal size, were marked by a sword and oval shield, and a bow nocked with a flaming arrow. The caskets, however, were entirely empty.

It was then that I raised my eyes to the carvings on the walls. Although they were highly stylized, I was able to quickly follow the story they showed. Four beings: a spell-wielding dragon-man, an orc with two great axes, an elf armed with a sorcerous bow, and a man in full armor with sword and shield, gathered a small army of all four races, along with many of the others which now inhabit the Land. They led this army across burning wastelands, through the ruins of cities and across battlefields choked with dead, until they came to a valley ringed with mountains. The last wall had only two scenes upon it, the first of the army, still led by the four warriors, arrayed in battle against a cloud of darkness; and the second of the same four warriors standing amidst a field of slaughter, their forces destroyed, but their enemy defeated as well, and I could see that their defeated enemy was none other than the five-headed Dragon of the Apocalypse.

It appeared that I now stood in the tomb of the beings who had slain the Apocalypse Dragon the last time, the great warriors that the Amulet of Summoning was supposed to awaken, but they weren't there...

## **Fall 435 Day 02**

Kastali Awakes: Kastali once again sets her thoughts and experiences down in the ledges of the Scrying Chamber.  
Four to Combat One...

Chaos Spreading Throughout The Land...

The Land Fighting Against the Chaos, and Against Itself...

Fevered Dreams...

Suffering...

Death...

I awoke within the infirmary of the Tower of Rokos, agony searing through my body. An Oathsworn sat beside the table, keeping watch on me. As my eyes opened and I tried to sit up, he spoke. "Rest, Oracle. Your body and spirit are still recovering from your ordeal. I will find Lord Anquilis and inform him you are awake."

I collapsed back in the bed, more from the pain of my movement than from the Oathsworn's words. I tried reaching for the Eye, calling out to it, but the attempt brought nothing but another sharp shock of pain. Deciding not to risk that agony again, I simply lay back in my bed, awaiting the archivist's approach. Oracle Daheia accompanied Anquilis into the room, coming over to the side of my bed and resting a hand on my arm as she spoke. "Your mind and body have been sorely tried, Kastali. We did not anticipate such powerful resistance to your scrying from The Four. We will not set you to watching them again."

Confusion flooded me, "But Orac—Daheia, aren't they fighting the Apocalypse as the Solonavi do?"

It was Lord Anquilis who answered my question, a frown contorting his fiery countenance, "Although they fight the same enemy that we do, there are many methods to combat the evil that is the cult of the Apocalypse.

"We do not agree with their methods, and they do not agree with ours."  
As I reflected on the words of the Tower archivist, the crimson rays of the setting sun cut through the room, filling the room with a warm red glow, and I suddenly realized I did not know what day it was.

As if sensing my question before I voiced it, Daheia spoke again, "You have been unconscious for several weeks, Kastali. It was feared you would not survive the

experience. It appears that the Dragonslayers of old still retain much of their formidable power."

"Weeks?" I could not believe ears... I had been rushing to discover what I could of the slayers of the Apocalypse Dragon, and now I had lost weeks.

Daheia once again patted my arm, "Take comfort, Kastali. Although we have not had the use of your skills, we are not without our own. Now rest, and quietly. Our other patient has only recently been able to leave the Seatower for more comfortable lodgings here in the infirmary, and we do not wish for her rest to be disturbed."

My eyes sought the shape of the other patient, for finally my curiosity would be sated with the identity of the inhabitant of Seatower. To my consternation, I found myself meeting gazes with Desmanda, the paramour of the renegade Atlantean Rayden Marz, and even more disturbingly, the unblinking eyes which met mine were carved of living red magestone.

### **Fall 435 Day 03**

What had driven Desmanda to seek refuge in the Tower of Rokos? As far as I knew, neither she nor Rayden Marz served the Solonavi—or at least, they had not until now, for I could not imagine what Desmanda must have promised the Solonavi in exchange for them implanting precious magestone into her barren eye sockets. I would have given anything to ask the red-eyed magus about her new eyes, but I obeyed Daheia's order not to bother my silent companion.

I slept fitfully, as images that seemed vaguely familiar flashed through my mind: an ork with twin axes and the skull of a drakona on his head fighting alongside a human with a sword, shield and archaic armor; humans and elves kneeling before the Domina Vo'kara of the Shyft; draconum in chains, being dragged behind wagons driven by Preceptor Nala's modern-day Tu'raj; and strangely, amidst the dark and terrible visions, a small goblin sitting atop a shining shield with a hulking orc standing behind him, setting a circlet of steel atop his head. When I awoke, I felt much refreshed, despite my disturbing dreams. As there were no attendants outside of a pair of drones, I arose from my bed, dressed, and made my way back to the Scrying Chamber. I had spent nearly an hour there, clearing things up, checking the material on the bookshelf and looking for changes in the map hung on the wall, when I suddenly felt the presence of another. I spun towards the source of the feeling, reaching for the sword that was no longer at my side, only to find myself face to face with a figure wearing a full face-mask and a dulled golden breastplate over a long maroon coat.

The voice that spoke from behind the mask was strangely distorted, echoing hollowly as if from the depths of a well, "Lord Heddravalis tasked me with watching you for a time, Oracle." Despite the use of my title, there was little respect in the tone—for that matter, there was little emotion of any kind. "The Masters do not wish for you to come to harm while you are still recovering."

I nodded, a bit shocked that anyone could have simply appeared from nowhere in such a small room. Glancing over the slim form, I recognized the man by the violet blades of sorcerous fire jutting from his bracers, "If Lord Heddravalis insists, Seeker Mock, I will not disobey. Just stay out of my way."

The Seeker's answering laugh had a sardonic ring to it, but I turned my back on the coarse man, focusing my attention on the scrying pool in the center of the room. I tried to connect with the Solonavi who served as the Scrying Eye, but even with the assistance of the pool I could not. When I looked up from my efforts, Seeker Mock had disappeared again. I spent some time pretending to study the pool while I attempted to spot him once more, but the assassin did not cooperate, and remained out of my sight.

By evening, I was thoroughly frustrated, unable to either find my newly-appointed guardian or contact the Scrying Eye, and I returned to my quarters for the night, resolving to find a way to use the Eye once more in the morning.

### **Fall 435 Day 04**

I could have asked Oracle Daheia or any of the Solonavi inhabiting the Tower for assistance connecting with the Scrying Eye, but I felt I had something to prove after having been knocked senseless by the Dragonslayers and having a minder assigned to me. I was determined to succeed without help.

The day did not start off well, however, as I opened the door of my quarters to face the nearly featureless golden mask of Seeker Mock. The sneak-thief did not speak, but merely stepped out of the way, allowing me to precede him down the hallway to the Scrying Chamber. I was a dozen paces down the hall before I realized that I could not hear the Seeker's footsteps, and whirled to find nothing but an empty hallway. Looking about, I could not find the man, but when I turned to continue on my way to the Chamber, I nearly ran into him.

The annoying little man had seemingly appeared from thin air once more, and he had the nerve to bow in a manner that was clearly mocking and gesture towards the Scrying Chamber as if impatient.

Anger seethed within me, but I managed to return his bow with a regal nod of my head and stride off ahead of him once again. Once ensconced in the Scrying Chamber, I spent several hours struggling to find the Scrying Eye with only a raging headache to show for it. I had not seen Mock since entering the room, but when I left for the midday meal, I caught a glimpse of him out of the corner of my eye. At first I felt a surge of pride at having spotted the killer, but then I noticed the arrogant angle at which his hooded head was cocked, and nearly snarled aloud as I realized he had allowed me to see him once more.

Returning to the Scrying Chamber, I thrust the irritation of the Seeker's presence from my mind, and after several hours was finally able to concentrate on opening a connection to the Scrying Eye. Although I was unable to see the Solonavi approach, I felt the pull of the Scrying Eye, and let it take me away from the chamber about me.

Reveling in the Eye's pull, I set my mind to Rayden Marz, and let it pull me away to the north and west. To my surprise, the Solonavi did not stop anywhere near the renegade Atlantean's sky-fortress, but instead I saw before me a small collection of rude huts somewhere in the hills where Prieska becomes the Blasted Lands. Orcs filled the group of shanties that I hesitate to call a village, patrolling the outskirts and fighting and brawling in the center of the village, as is their wont.

I was unsure why the Scrying Eye had pulled me to this seeming backwater, until I caught sight of some small movement on one of the cliffs overlooking the huts. Swooping low over it, I saw the wiry form of a Golem Familiar in the colors of the Golemcore skulking about, keeping watch on the orc encampment. It did not stay long, but quickly scampered away with its tail whipping behind it, leaving me to follow, curious at why an Atlantean golem might be so far from any other Atlanteans. The Familiar turned a corner into a draw canyon, and there before me was an Atlantean military camp, with warriors and golems in the bronze and purple of the Golemcore filling the small area with military might.

In the center of the camp, Anunub directed the organized chaos of the camp. The Golemcore magus was easily identifiable by the heavy gearwork of his artificial arm, a keepsake of an assassination attempt masterminded by Grand Magus Osiris. The Golem Familiar slunk up to Anunub's feet, winding around his ankles like a cat or large rat might. The magus bent low, placing a palm on the construct's forehead. The magestones set in his forehead gleamed brightly for a moment, then the Golemcore leader straightened once more, announcing to a Kore Gunner standing beside him, "It is time. Tonight, we hunt orc."

Confident that I could find the Atlanteans easily enough whenever I wished, I directed the Scrying Eye back to the orc huts. The activity there was calming down for the night, but one figure stood out in the center of the village, speaking with several hulking half-trolls. It was Bloodhawk, Chaos Shaman, mutilator of Desmanda, and mortal enemy of Rayden Marz.

## **Fall 435 Day 05**

### The Kore of Combat

Knowing that Anunub's assault would take place after dark, I called for an Oathsworn and requested that my dinner be brought to the Scrying Chamber so that I could observe the fight without interruption. I neither asked nor cared if Seeker Mock would get hungry in the intervening time... maybe if the vexing Seeker got hungry, he would leave me alone for a while.

Guiding the Scrying Eye back to the orc encampment, I could see that the Atlanteans hadn't attacked yet as the green-skinned marauders still lazed about the camp, throwing bone dice, brawling, or otherwise amusing themselves. I settled my point of view above the camp, where I would have a good view of the upcoming battle and could also see the bluff where the Golem Familiar had been lurking earlier. Hours passed, the food I ordered grew cold, and I began to fear that Anunub's force was destined to strike another force of orcs than the one I watched. When the assault came, it was with a suddenness I had not previously seen from the Golemcore. It began with a half-dozen Kore Gunners creeping up along the rim of the cliff, then launching a volley of small objects down into the camp. The projectiles shattered in booming explosions when they struck in the camp, knocking down tents and sending orcs and goblins scattering. Under cover of this confusion, a quartet of Atlanteans carrying multi-barreled disruptors sprang up from their places of concealment at the base of the cliff and sprayed the orc camp with incandescent arcs of lightning.

The battle was not entirely one-sided, however, as a pair of orcs so covered in iron plates as to barely be recognizable as orcs came charging from the ruins of one hut. The Disruptors focused their attention on the two iron-clad orcs, but were only able to bring one down before the other reached them, smashing two of the humans down with crushing blows from a pair of hammers before it too was killed by Atlantean gunnery.

The assault of the Ironclads had bought the orcs the time they needed to re-organize, however. Bloodhawk strode through the camp, a hunk of magestone in one hand, blasting away at any movement along the edge of the valley with bolts of purple magic with his other. Several orc witches supported him, one channeling a torrent of healing magic into the Shaman, repairing the damage even as the magestone caused it. A solid wedge of Magestone Golems was met by a wave of frenzied orcs, bits of magestone crunching between their teeth. Dozens of the orcs were slaughtered in the first moment of collision, but those who remained pulled down golem after golem. It was then that the Maelstrom Golems came into play—fearsome engines of destruction with long arms ending in a trio of wicked claws. They cut a swathe through the orc warriors, and in their wake came Anunub himself, firing blasts of pure technomantic magic at the green-skinned fighters left alive by the bronze-armored behemoths. The magus-led Golems headed directly for the center of the compound where Bloodhawk directed the defenses, seemingly intent on coming to grips with the leader of the orc resistance.

## **Fall 435 Day 06**

### Caging the Hawk

As the night passed its midpoint, the battle still raged in the encampment of the Chaos Shaman Bloodhawk. The orc war-leader cut down a Combat Magus who dared close with him, and then let loose a sorcerous blast that blasted a nearby Infantry Golem apart. The skin on his left arm began to peel away from his flesh, rolling down towards the blazing chunk of magestone in his left hand. Bloodhawk bellowed as the Nal-Khan Witch dancing behind him channeled her healing magic into him, the gray-green skin of his arm unrolling itself and meshing back into place once more.

The leader of the Chaos Shaman was decimating his attackers, but Anunub's phalanx of Maelstrom Golems continued to close the gap. The Witch defending Bloodhawk stepped forward to face the first one, and was thrown a good dozen feet by an almost casual sweep of one clawed arm, the monstrous golem not even missing a step as it dealt with the last threat between the magus and the shaman. With a wave of Anunub's bronze staff, the golems parted, leaving the two sorcerers facing one another across a short expanse of charred and torn ground. Bloodhawk's snarl was audible even from beneath the bird-skull mask he wore, and it was the orc who made the first move. Casting aside the magestone in his left hand, Bloodhawk threw himself forward, a deep purple nimbus surrounding him as he rushed forward, firing blast after blast of blazing magical fire at the Golemcore magus as he charged. Anunub stood firm, thrusting forth the staff in his right hand, and the magical assault rolling off the human's defenses like rain from a metal roof. A hut behind Anunub, hit by one of the magical bolts, burst into flames, lighting the scene with a flickering blaze of shadow and light.

As the orc closed in, Anunub spun out of the way, dancing more awkwardly, although no less effectively, than a Sect pitfighter. Anunub's bronze left arm came around, striking the shaman full force on the back of his head as the orc stumbled by. Already hurting from his role in the defense of the encampment, Bloodhawk nearly fell, but whirled about, facing the Atlantean. The two magic-users circled each other slowly, and the orc growled from beneath his mask, "Why do you seek me out, Bronze-arm? We both hate Marz, and we could work together to destroy him."

Anunub feinted with his staff, cutting off Bloodhawk's words and causing the orc to shift his blade out to one side to defend against the threat. While the shaman was still off-balance, the magus struck with the speed of a cobra, latching his bronze fingers about the orc's throat and lifting him inches off the ground. A wave of pain washed over me, and my vision started to go black. Before my connection to the Scrying Eye dissolved entirely, however, I heard Anunub's response to Bloodhawk's offer, "Who says I hate Rayden Marz, orc? You will make a fine peace offering to him."

When I came to, I awoke to a most unpleasant sight—Seeker Mock's flat golden mask staring down at me. However, a woman in maroon, purple, and gold and wearing a half-mask was also there, and it was she who spoke, her voice mellifluous and regal, "You are pushing yourself too hard, Oracle. My healing will allow you to return to your quarters for the rest of the night, but I would suggest that you not remain connected to the Scrying Eye for so long until you are fully recovered."

As the woman I now recognized as Elydia turned to leave, she paused, remarking off-handedly, "If Mock had not come get me as quickly as he did, you might be in a much less comfortable place, Oracle. You should be thankful you have such a minder as him."

I thought hard on Elydia's final words to me as I made my way back to my quarters, with the long-coated Seeker Mock following behind me, thankfully remaining fully visible the entire trip. Was Mock merely an annoyance, or could he prove useful...?

## **Fall 435 Day 07**

Upon waking, I once more made my way to the Scrying Chamber and found a neat breakfast of fruits and cheese laid out beside the bookshelf, although I certainly had not ordered anything. Perhaps Seeker Elydia had seen fit to ensure that I maintained my health. Connecting once more with the Scrying Eye brought a brief flash of pain, but nothing comparable to what I experienced during my time in the blood pits of Necropolis.

Apparently I had been able to direct the Solonavi currently serving as the Scrying Eye to stay with Anunub before I collapsed last night, because when I reached through the Scrying Pool to connect with it, I found myself instantly looking upon Anunub at the head of his column. They appeared to be traveling south and east, into the heart of Prieska. Despite the fierce battle with Bloodhawk's orcs, the column still numbered some two dozen humans and thirty-to-forty golems, and I had the sneaking suspicion that there were more golems scattered about as scouts and guards.

Directly behind Anunub, two drehj labored over the rough terrain. Remembering encounters with the beasts at the head of Atlantean Rams before, I was glad that the Scrying Eye allowed me to see and hear events, but not smell them. Thick chains

ran from the creatures' harnesses back to a most pitiful sight. Without his mask, cape, and armor, Bloodhawk was an orc sunken in upon himself. He was dusty, dirty, battered, and bruised from being dragged across the ground when he fell, and his shoulders slumped in defeat.

Even as I watched, one of the orc's feet caught on a protruding rock, and he tumbled to the ground. The drehj continued their serene, steady pace despite the increased resistance. In fact, one of the ornery beasts started to plod off at an angle, dragging the shaman faster across the ground as the chains holding him tightened. An enormous golem with a crossbow mounted on one arm noticed that Bloodhawk had fallen, and stepped in, hauling the orc back to his feet with one huge, clawed hand. Although the Golem was none-to-gentle in lifting the Chaos Shaman up, it was evident that Anunub wanted Bloodhawk intact when he delivered him to Rayden Marz.

I was brought back to the Scrying Chamber by an insistent knocking at the door. Opening it, I found Mahdi the page outside with a cup of stew and a heel of bread. I took the food from him, frowning about the room as I closed the door. As my head turned back to an area of the room I had just scanned, I found myself looking at the dark figure of Seeker Mock. Keeping myself from jumping, I frowned gravely at him. The only response I got from the blade-thin figure was a shrug, and the hollow words, "Seeker Elydia said you needed to watch your health." I looked down at my food, then back up, anger flaming across my face, but he was gone as if he had never been present. Calming slowly, I forced myself to take my time eating, not willing to give the obnoxious Seeker the satisfaction of watching me hurry.

Chewing idly on the bread, I stepped back to the Scrying Pool, regaining my connection with the Solonavi watching Anunub's train of men and machines just in time to see them crest a hill and look out over a valley dominated by Rayden Marz's sky-castle. Almost immediately, a trio of men on Dragonflies buzzed low over the column, their weapons at the ready.

One landed before the Magus, a manaclevt and a fuser pistol clenched in his hands, "What do you want, Magus? Be quick, or you will never live to report what you see below." The jerk of the man's head made it obvious that he meant the grounded sky-castle sheltered within the valley.

Anunub's smile was filled with self-assured confidence, and he reached slowly into the saddleback of one of the drehj, withdrawing a mass of feathers and bone. He then urged the two beasts apart, speaking to the outrider as he held up Bloodhawk's mask in his left hand, "I come to parley with your commander. I have brought him a gift that I believe he wants most desperately."

Rayden Marz's man looked from the newly-revealed orc to the mask in the magus' hand, then nodded shortly, "I believe you will have the General's attention, Magus. Wait here, and I will take your message to him."

## **Fall 435 Day 08**

It did not take long for Raydan Marz's outrider to return with the warlord's invitation for Anunub to join him within the rogue Atlantean's sky-castle. The Magus directed his men to make camp on the hill where they were stopped, and started down into

the valley, accompanied only by Marz's messenger, two Magestone Golems, and the two drehj dragging the orc prisoner.

As Anunub walked boldly into the den of the Lion of Prieska, I did what I could to scan Raydan Marz's defenses. The warlord had repeatedly refused the offers of the Solonavi, and I felt certain that Lord Vextha would like very much to know how he defended his mobile base of operations. Unfortunately, I could discern little, as the Atlantean's patrols were either too well hidden or too scarce for me to spot. I focused my attention on Anunub as he entered the sky-castle, and although my vision was blurred and I began to get a low-level headache from my proximity to the huge chunks of magestone at the base of the castle, I was able to follow him inside the fortress.

Bloodhawk was immediately taken to a dungeon, escorted by the two Golems, while Anunub was led up to the top of one of the gatehouse towers. Waiting for the young Magus was one of the most sought-after men in the Land, Raydan Marz himself. The former Atlantean had his manaclevt and lightning pistol nearby, but did not seem to be worried at the intrusion of the Magus. "I have not seen you for some time, Anunub." The warlord's voice was rough, perhaps with the pain of revisiting painful memories, "I believe you were on the tribunal set to determine whether I was a traitor to Atlantis." Although Marz managed to keep his voice somewhat light, the muscles of his jaw clenched, "You voted against me, as I recall."

Anunub did not seem put off by this harsh reception, however, responding quickly and confidently, "I did as I was ordered. I have come to you with an offer."

Raydan Marz barked a short, sharp laugh, "Really? I do appreciate your delivery of the orc swine. I would have preferred to capture him myself, but this is certainly more convenient. I hope that this is not all you planned to offer me, however..." The older man left the words hanging in the air, but he had not fallen silent long before Anunub answered.

"Not at all, General. You have been fighting a cancer at the heart of the Atlantean Empire for a long time now, but you are not fighting the right enemy." Raydan Marz made as if to interrupt, but Anunub held up his bronze mechanical arm in a gesture begging for patience, and Marz fell silent once more. "Emperor Nujarek was not the one who ordered me to find you guilty, Raydan Marz, it was Osiris. I would offer you the assistance of the Golemkore, if you can accept what I say to be true."

Marz paused for a long moment, obviously thinking the offer over, and when he replied, his voice was cautious and calculating, "We shall see, Magus. I do not think that Jeet Nujarek is blameless, but it may be that Osiris is the larger threat to Atlantis. I will work with you and yours, but you have not yet gained my trust. You will have to do more than kill orcs and make vague promises to do that."

## **Fall 435 Day 09**

When I drew back from the Scrying Pool, the room was dark, lit only by the golden radiance of a Solonavi Striker. Bowing my head, I never-the-less recognized Heddravalis, one of the integral players in the search for the shards of the Amulet of Summoning that I now wore around my neck. "Lord Heddravalis, it is an honor."

The Solonavi's words echoed in my brain, "You have done well, Oracle, to recover the use of the Scrying Sight so soon, but do not push yourself. I have need of Seeker Mock for other duties, but I will not have you rendering yourself useless to us."

Sinking my head deeper obediently, I responded, "As you command, Lord Heddravalis. I will not strain myself." Inside, however, I exulted; as I would not have to deal with Seeker Mock any more. The Striker paused a moment, studying me for a long moment as if he could feel what I was thinking, then turned and left, gliding through the door and out of the Scrying Chamber. An instant later, Seeker Mock materialized before my eyes, appearing from thin air beside the book-case. As if in imitation of the Solonavi before him, the Seeker paused, his golden mask facing me for a long moment.

"I will return, Oracle. Once the Oath-breaker has been punished, I will return." With that, the assassin disappeared in a whirl of maroon cloth, and I was once more alone in the Scrying Chamber.

I pondered calling for supper, but decided to take one more look into the Scrying Pool. Once more, I was looking down upon the valley that hid Raydan Marz's sky-castle, and I could see the tail end of Anunub's column entering the gates of the fortress. In the courtyard inside, members of Raydan Marz's renegade force met with comrades of years past, catching up on old times. Despite the seemingly warm reception, however, there was a hesitancy on both sides, a wariness that did not fade even as the members of the Golemkore took up residence within Marz's sky-castle.

## **Fall 435 Day 10**

The morning dawned cold, the first hints of winter coming early this year. Wrapping myself in a cloak, I made my way to the Scrying Chamber. When I arrived, there was a note from Lord Vextha directing that I look in on events around the fortress of Stonekeep. I glanced about, half expecting a breakfast to be waiting for me, but found nothing. Apparently, Seeker Elydia had gone with Mock to do Lord Heddravalis' bidding and was no longer watching over me so carefully.

Although I was interested in what would become of Raydan Marz and Anunub's tenuous alliance, I was more than happy to direct my attention over the Wylden and see how the Dark Crusade fared. As I connected with the Scrying Eye and directed the Solonavi spirit over the Atlantean Empire, across the Roa Galtor, and into the Wylden, I was surprised at the changes that had occurred. Although armed camps of Dark Crusaders still dotted the landscape, much of the forest was recovering. When last I viewed the verdant foliage from above, it was spotted and scarred with a multitude of flame-scorched holes, and now many of them had begun to grow back, the Land itself slowly recovering from the scourging we of the Dark Crusade had given it on our way to the fortress of Roanne Valle.

I bent my thoughts on the fortress of Stonekeep, and the Scrying Eye dove up the South Pass and towards the ancient fortress. It stopped short, however, and dove down to where a large forest rose up into the foothills of the Sturmounts at the cap of the valley. Tearing through the canopy, I found my sight centered in a small clearing where the rock of the mountains met the underbrush of the forest. Two Elven Lords in full plate-and-chain stood within the glen. The woman looked agitated, turning her head from side to side with a frequency that sent the white horse-hair plume atop her helmet swaying violently. She did not speak, but continued to dart

glances towards her companion, who stood in regal calm, his long braid and blue cloak unmoving.

I did not have to wait long to see why they risked an encounter with Dark Crusader patrols in this remote region, for a pair of figures melted out of the edge of the forest, moving slowly so as not to surprise the pair already present. Their cautious approach reminded me bitterly of the suddenness with which my erstwhile minder, Seeker Mock, had appeared and disappeared before my very eyes. As the two Elven Lords recognized their new companions, the male greeted the centaur who approached them, nodding politely, "Councillor Laurell, it is an honor. I do not believe I have the pleasure of meeting your companion, but this," he gestured towards the female elf behind him who now grasped the hilt of the shortsword at her side, "is Rivvenguard Jaysa, a staunch friend and loyal companion."

Laurell sank into a graceful bow that bent her front legs and dipped her humanoid torso low to the ground, "I am honored as well, Lord Jamus, Rivvenguard Jaysa. I present to you High Priestess Kess, a true warrior of the Land." One lithe arm gestured to the Wylden elf accompanying her, "I thank you for coming to meet us."

Lord Jamus's answering smile was broad and seemed genuine, "How could I resist such a tempting offer? The idea of the Elven Lords and the Wylden Host joining forces to strike against the Dark Crusade is most interesting."

## **Fall 435 Day 11**

Council Lord Jamus and Councillor Laurell spent the morning speaking quietly, both phrasing their words with the utmost care and displaying perfect polite manners towards one another. It was obvious that this alliance would have some bad blood to overcome if it were to succeed. Throughout the conference, Lord Jamus often glanced over to High Priestess Kess, as if expecting the Wylden elf to assume control of the Elemental side of the discussion, and his Rivvenguard protector seemed quite uncomfortable with the idea of an elf standing silent while a centaur spoke, directing vaguely disgusted glances to the raven-haired half-woman, much as a Necromancer would if a zombie had sat down at the table and begun discussing politics with him.

I expected this to break down the talks, but Laurell carried on her end of the conversation with silent grace and pride, either not noticing the discomfort of the Rivvenheimers or ignoring it. Despite the unease of the Elven Lords, the two sides parted amicably just short of mid-day, with Council Lord Jamus requesting that Kess remain behind a moment when the two Elementals turned to leave. As Councillor Laurell moved off to the edge of the glen, Jamus turned away from the centaur and spoke to the Wylden elf in low tones, "Why did you hold back from the discussion, High Priestess? Do you feel that you have gained something from me by forcing me to parley with your guard?"

Kess seemed most surprised at this suggestion, laughing lightly as she replied, "Honored Lord, with all due respect, I am the Councillor's guard. She sits on the Council of Five, not I, and she directs the will of the Wylden Host. If you will excuse me, Lord Jamus." With that, she bowed her way out of the Elven Lord's presence, leaving both Rivvenheim elves standing shocked in the center of the clearing.

Although I was amused at the discomfort of the elves, I was not pleased with the agreement they had reached. I know my place, and would not think of doing so, but my heart yearned to warn my fellows of the Dark Crusade that a force of the

Wylden Host would be traveling through the Rivvenheims to join with an army of Elven Lords and strike at the Vurgra Divide and the rear of the Black Lake.

### **Fall 435 Day 12**

Still pondering what affect this new alliance between the Elven Lords and Elemental Freeholds might have on the might of the Dark Crusaders, I went down to find something to eat, as no food had been brought up to the Scrying Chamber. I was beginning to miss the fact that Seeker Elydia had departed with Mock when I nearly ran into her in the hallway. She paused, studying my expression for a moment, and then inquired, "You seem surprised, Oracle. May I inquire as to why?" Flushing slightly, I responded, "I assumed that you had left with Seeker Mock, since you were part of the same team of Seekers previously."

Elydia shook her head, "No, Seeker Mock's task required his specialized skills, but not mine," the statuesque woman held up a hand to forestall my next question, "Nor those of Seeker Azruk, Oracle, although it is not your business to ask." Inclining my head, I thanked Elydia and continued on towards the kitchens, my mind awl. If Elydia was still in the Tower, she likely had not simply decided to stop sending food up to the Scrying Chamber. This led me to a most perplexing conundrum: someone else within the Tower of Rokos knew of my recent injuries, had been taking an interest in my well-being, and had since stopped doing so.

Briefly, I toyed with the idea that it might have been Seeker Mock himself having the food brought up to the Scrying Chamber, but I quickly discarded that possibility, as the annoying little man had done nothing to demonstrate any interest in me besides taunting me with his ability to vanish at will. My time with the Dark Crusade had taught me to be wary of those who knew of my weaknesses, so I would have to find out who else knew that I had been vulnerable, before they used that knowledge against me.

### **Fall 435 Day 13**

Once again, the day dawned cold and clear, the tang of winter thick upon the air. Interested in learning more about what the Elven Lords were doing in preparation for their alliance with the Wylden Host, I directed the Scrying Eye over the foothills of the Rivvenheims. Around the North Pass, I found numerous camps filled with snow centaurs and elves, apparently waiting for the time to strike down into the lowlands and into the forces of the Dark Crusade arrayed below.

Most camps were relatively small, with only a few elves and a tribe of snow centaurs, but I found one that was different far southwards, at the tip of the peninsula of rock jutting out into South Pass. This camp was filled with Skymages with their wings wrapped tightly about them to ward off the cold, Cloud Warriors wearing their heavy tabards, and mages of the Order of Sorcery. At the center of the camp was a large tent, and within it I found an even greater surprise: an elf in a wolf-fur cape, another in a cloak of blue with falcon's feathers adorning his helm and arm-guards, and a green and orange Draconum arrayed in armor of obvious elven craftsmanship.

"You are sure of what your companion has seen, Falconer?" It was the Draconum who spoke, his hissing tones filling the tent despite its size.

The feathered elf nodded once, one hand reaching out to caress the head of a beautiful raptor perched nearby, "My friend has never been wrong before. The Dark Crusaders gather at Stonekeep. If we cut them off here, at the base of the pass, our companions should be able to strike hard and take the fortress back. It can be done, Miraxus."

The second elf present broke in, obviously impatient, "We waste our time striking against Stonekeep. We should be breaking out into the lowlands to strike against the real threat. The Tu'raj and the Darkmarch are on the attack, and I believe that those guiding them have knowledge that they should not."

Miraxus made a calming gesture with his clawed hands, his wings beating slowly in the cold mountain air, "Peace, Longblade. Without Stonekeep, our flank is not secure. With the Fortress, we can move down into the lowlands without danger. Our ultimate aim is not lost, but before we strike against the forces of the Apocalypse, we must crush the Dark Crusade."

## **Fall 435 Day 14**

Whether or not Miraxus, Geddion Longblade, and Keldane Falconer were aiming their forces at the Dark Crusade in the long term, I knew that they could do a great deal of damage in the short term. If they were able to take Stonekeep, the Elemental Freeholders would be able to join with the Elven Lords and easily march into the Rivvenheims without traversing the Sturmounts as well.

Although I could do nothing to help them, I decided to see how the Dark Crusaders were preparing to meet the coming onslaught. Directing the Scrying Eye down from the spur of mountains jutting into the Wylden and into South Pass, I quickly found a large encampment of Crusaders in the center of the valley. The camp looked like it held easily twice the number of warriors as the camp of the Elven Lords that I had just left, but even as I watched, a thick column of Crusaders, Vampires, and Zombies began the long march up the pass towards Stonekeep. Evidently, the commander of the Crusader camp did not know that it was about to be attacked.

The attack came shortly after midday, after the column had passed out of sight, and began with a flight of Skymages lifting on white wings from within a nearby copse of trees. Several immediately loosed blasts of magical power into the camp of the Dark Crusaders, hanging back to cover the diving approach of their fellows. The encampment boiled like a kicked anthill under the sudden assault. Most of the Skymages' blasts were blocked by shields of magic that sprang up before them, but several found their way through, shattering walking corpses and blasting apart mortal warriors.

The chaos created by this aerial assault kept the attention of the Dark Crusaders long enough for the ground assault to strike home. Geddion Longblade and Keldane Falconer led the charge in person, the fur-clad elf hacking at his enemies with a single-minded fury and the feather-adorned elf dancing amidst his foes, leaving them to slash his billowing blue cloak if their weapons caught any part of him at all. The charge of the Elven Lords was met by a solid wave of zombies, but the ponderous undead were no match for the martial skill of the Rivvenheimers. It was

not until the pitfighters and Vampires of the Necropolis hit the elven lines that the attack faltered.

Even as the elves on the ground began to slow, Cloud Warriors and Skymages swooped down towards the camp of the Dark Crusaders, with Miraxus at their head. Vampires rose up to meet the new threat, accompanied by pitfighters and undead creations upon dark-winged pegasi. The sheer weight of the defenders threatened to overwhelm the attackers, but none could come within the reach of the fearsome Draconum's weapons and survive. Behind the apparently unstoppable guard of Miraxus, the Cloud Warriors and Skymages joined their companions on the ground, reinforcing the wavering lines.

The tide of battle looked to be turning towards the Elven Lords once again, when suddenly their flank was thrown into disarray. I quickly sent the Scrying Eye winging over in that direction, and I saw a solid wedge of Blood Cult Enforcers striking the elven lines, with none other than Mortifier Carlana at their head. Although the assault of the Elven Lords had done a large amount of damage to the Dark Crusaders and had breached the perimeter of their encampment, it looked as if the elite of the elves would be dragged down and join the ranks of the zombies still shuffling about the battlefield.

## **Fall 435 Day 15**

With the elven assault getting bogged down and the elite of the Blood Cult striking them from the flank, it looked as if the forces led by Keldane Falconer, Miraxus, and Geddion Longblade would be unable to survive for long.

A half-dozen pitfighters kept Miraxus busy, leaping and darting about the armored Draconum, unable to pierce his defenses, but quick enough to avoid the ferocious sweeps of his heavy blade. Geddion Longblade was being assaulted on all sides by wave after wave of zombies, his two-handed sword striking down one after another seemingly without effort, but despite their losses the undead continued to surround the elven warrior. Mortifier Carlana found herself facing Keldane Falconer, the two experienced warriors circling one another warily. Other combatants kept well away from the two, despite the press of bodies, not willing to get within reach of them.

The Mortifier was the first to attack, her impatient nature showing through as she broke the impasse, striking out with a bolt of dark magic, but the elf was not there. Spinning away, Keldane Falconer struck like a stooping raptor, his curved blade rising in a graceful arc that Carlana barely parried with the haft of her bladed staff. For a long moment the two heroes stood face to face, barely a foot apart. Their slim forms strained against one another, the Mortifier's smooth, pale flesh and black leather adornments a stark contrast to the blue and steel of Keldane's armor. Just as I thought Carlana would break the press once again, the Falconer slipped from the clench, the feathers adorning one arm flaring out to brush against the Mortifier's thigh. The contact was not a soft one, however, as steel glittered beneath the feathers and blood sprouted where they touched skin. Keldane Falconer laughed loudly as he pirouetted away, the sound ringing over the clash of arms.

Mortifier Carlana snarled at the dancing elf, baring her fangs and wiping one hand over the smear of blood trailing down her thigh. She brought the crimson-stained fingers up, examining them for a moment before turning her attention back to the elf who had the audacity to challenge her. Then the Mortifier's eyelids fluttered, and her knees sagged, the flesh around the cut almost immediately swelling and turning a vibrant red as some Rivvenheim poison made its way into her system. Keldane

Falconer started forward to finish Darq's mistress then, but Carlana's phalanx of Cult Enforcers closed in, blocking him away. I looked the battle over once more, looking to see whether or not the Crusaders would fall apart with their leader out of the fight, but they seemed not to notice, intent on destroying the elite elven assault force now trapped within their ranks.

My attention was distracted then by a sounding of horns from the forest behind the Crusader encampment. I directed the Scrying Eye in that direction, and I saw a force of centaurs armored with ironwood leading other centaurs wreathed in magic towards the Dark Crusaders. Behind the centaurs came shambling beasts of rock and plant with the torsos and heads of Wylden elves emerging from their shoulders. I recognized these creatures from descriptions I had heard as Darkling Symbiotes, combinations of elf and elemental construct fearsome on the field of battle. As the centaurs cleared a path through the Dark

Crusaders guarding the rear of the camp, and the Symbiotes surged forward, I recognized two figures standing at the edge of the forest: High Priestess Kess and Councillor Laurell.

### **Fall 435 Day 16**

With the addition of the centaurs and symbiotes of the Wylden Host to the fray, the Elven Lords broke out from the tight circle the Crusader attacks had battered them into. As the pressure on the elven lines lessened, the leaders of the strike force fought their way free.

Miraxus burst back into the air, scattering the pitfighters gathered around him as he launched himself into the aerial fray. The orange-striped Draconum reached out, plucking a pitfighter off her pegasus and throwing her to the ground below as he soared upwards. He had been stung and slowed by numerous small wounds, but he still wheeled and swooped among the fighters in the air.

Geddion Longblade finally fought his way through the press of zombies about him, bowling over a Vampire and decapitating it with an almost casual slash of his heavy blade. The elf was covered in gore, and his luxurious wolf-skin cloak was torn and his armor scratched and dented, but he fought his way through the ranks of the Dark Crusaders with a fury matched only by the fiercest of vampires.

Keldane Falconer struggled against a half-dozen Cult Enforcers, deftly ducking and dodging the ponderous swings of their giant hammers, but unable to land a telling blow on any of them due to the effort required to avoid their attacks. He cut down one, two, but still he could not escape from the circle of hammer-wielding fanatics.

While a group of Enforcers held off the Falconer, another few Crusaders pulled the comatose body of Mortifier Carlana away from the fight, a pair of Necromancers attending closely. The armored centaurs crashed into the Crusader lines, running down their opponents and cracking a hole in the defenses. Eight Darkling Symbiotes strode into this gap, tendrils of plant matter congealing from one arm as giant boulders were extruded from the other. Using the tendrils to bind their foes and the boulders to shatter them, the symbiotes waded into the center of the Crusader camp, shattering the last of the resistance between them and the remaining elves.

An hour or so later, High Priestess Kess, Councillor Laurell, Keldane Falconer, Geddion Longblade, and Miraxus met in the wreckage of what had once been a large Dark Crusader camp. Behind the Elven Lords and the Draconum, the elven strike force

gathered, staring past the Priestess and centaur towards the ranks of the Wylden Host. There was a long, tense moment, then Keldane Falconer stepped forward, extending a hand to Kess and clasping her wrist, "It is good to see you once again, Kess."

A smile bloomed on the High Priestess' face, and she nodded, "Good indeed, Keldane. I am impressed, your force might have even won through without the aid of the Host."

The Falconer laughed lightly, shrugging aside the backhanded compliment, and gesturing behind him, "May I present Geddion Longblade, and Miraxus. They share the command of this force with me."

Kess nodded to each in turn, then inclined her head towards the centaur archer with her, "This is Councillor Laurell." Geddion, Keldane, and Miraxus bowed to the centaur in turn, and she returned the gesture with a regal nod. Kess continued, "What do you intend now, Keldane?"

The Falconer stepped back, raising one arm, and a majestic falcon swooped down and alighted on his gauntlet, "Even my friend's sharp eyes have been unable to find the Mortifier, so we must assume that she escaped. Despite that, our next goal is clear, and with your assistance, it is a sure thing." The elf paused for a moment, a smile stealing across his face beneath his beaked helm, "Now Stonekeep will fall to us once again."

## **Fall 435 Day 17**

After spending some time speaking with people throughout the Tower of Rokos and trying in vain to find out who else knew of my late weakness, I returned the Scrying Eye to South Pass to look in on the elven assault upon Stonekeep. Several of the elven and snow centaur camps from the surrounding mountains had emptied to refill the ranks of Miraxus, Keldane Falconer, and Geddion Longblade's army, and combined with a healthy number of Elemental warriors, the besieging force was certainly strong enough to threaten the defenders of Stonekeep, if not overwhelm them entirely.

The fortress sat with its back to the slopes of the vast eastern mountain ranges, well protected by high walls and steep slopes, but that did not slow the attacking forces. Cloud Warriors and Skymages swooped directly up to the parapet, and Rock Griffons carried other warriors up to support the assault. Although the centaurs of the Elemental Freeholds were stymied by the thick stone walls, the Darkling Symbiotes extended tendrils of vine from their heavy arms and hauled themselves directly up the face of the fortress.

The Dark Crusaders were not caught unawares by the approach of their attackers, but they were surprised by the ferocity of the assault. Bowmen and mages sought to pick off the elves and griffons, and brought many down, but they could not stop the attack. Once the Skymages and Cloud Warriors had secured a section of the wall, the elementals brought up tall ladders, and Keldane Falconer and Geddion Longblade led the remainder of their forces into Stonekeep.

The first target for the former Hero was the gatehouse, and he led an elite force of Symbiotes and Cloud Warriors directly there, aiming to open the gates and allow his

centaur allies into the battle. Keldane Falconer, High Priestess Kess, and Miraxes headed straight for the keep, fighting their way through the hordes of zombies and skeletons filling the fortress's courtyard.

A quartet of Skull Golems guarding the gatehouse slammed directly into the Symbiotes accompanying Longblade, felling one of the half-elven creatures in the fury of their charge, but it was not enough to stop the assault. Geddion shattered one of the Golems himself, while the remaining Symbiotes left two more in pieces, and six Cloud Warriors circled about the last, hacking away at the construct's limbs until it fell, leaving no Dark Crusaders between them and the gatehouse. It would not be long until Councillor Laurell and the other centaurs with him joined the fray.

### **Fall 435 Day 18**

The furious assault on the Crusader-held fortress of Stonekeep continued as the Darkling Symbiotes held the area around the main gatehouse and Geddion Longblade led his force of Cloud Warriors inside. Soon the thick ironwood doors of Stonekeep creaked open, and a flood of centaurs rushed in, sweeping through the courtyard with the momentum of their advance. Now it was only a matter of time before Stonekeep fell.

The Dark Crusaders manning the fortress fought long and hard, but they were overmatched by the sheer force of the forces of the Elven Lords and the Wylden Host. A few dozen escaped from postern gates and hidden tunnels leading deep into the mountains, but most of the garrison was destroyed, cut down and burned in a huge pyre just outside the walls. The necromancer in command of the fortress was thrown into the flames alive, his screams clearing the befouled air above Stonekeep. As night fell and the last of the Dark Crusaders were destroyed or driven into the hills, the leaders of the Elemental and Elven forces met in the courtyard. All five of the commanders looked worn and bloodied, but none was in true danger of succumbing to their wounds.

Longblade was the first to speak, addressing the Elementals, "Now that we have secured our flanks, we must move down into the lowlands. The cult of the Apocalypse and the Darkmarch Shyft must be stopped, and soon."

Councillor Laurell shook her head, her sweat-streaked flanks gleaming in the rising moon, "My path does not lie towards the lowlands, Master Longblade. I and mine will travel north, to strike again at the forces of the Dark Crusade."

Geddion Longblade looked shocked, and stepped forward, anger writ plain on his strong features, but Miraxus put out a hand, his voice hissing and slithering between his teeth, "Councillor... you must know that the Apocalypse represents the greatest danger to the Land."

The elegant centaur shook her head once more, tossing her long, dark hair, "No, Draconum. The Land cries out for revenge against her despoilers. The misguided fools in the Necropolis must pay for their crimes against the Land."

The argument continued for some time, and tempers flared between the former Hero and the Councillor, until finally Keldane Falconer broke in, speaking for the first time this eve, "I understand your wish for revenge, Councillor, and I respect your fervor. If We leave a garrison here to hold this fortress open for those forces which

follow you north, will you divert part of your force to the lowlands with us? Even a score more fighters could turn the tide of the battle we mean to find."

The centaur was silent for a long moment, and was about to answer when Kess, who had been watching Keldane since he spoke up, stepped forward and placed a hand on Laurell's flank, smiling up at her for just a minute before looking away once again. Apparently, something passed between the two, however, for Laurell sighed heavily, "We will do that, Falconer. High Priestess Kess and a small portion of our forces will join you as you pass into the lowlands, but the majority still goes north."

Geddion Longblade once again looked like he wished to protest, but Keldane Falconer set a hand on his arm, nodding to the Elemental leader, "That will be enough, Councillor. I thank you."

Longblade grimaced, but nodded his grudging agreement, then raised his voice, speaking to the gathered fighters in the yard before the keep, "Get your rest now... we leave to fight the Darkness at dawn!"

### **Fall 435 Day 19**

I watched as the force led by Miraxus, Geddion Longblade, Keldane Falconer, and High Priestess Kess left Stonekeep under a strong garrison of Elven Lords. Councillor Laurel led her centaurs and symbiotes north into the Rivvenheims, gathering up a few small tribes of snow centaurs as they went, but it was the larger force that I watched.

They had swept South Pass clean on their way to Stonekeep, destroying the column of zombies and necromancers that left the Crusader camp just before it was assaulted and cleaning up several additional patrols, but they still had to fight a few skirmishes with the remnants of the forces they had shattered, as well as additional patrols no doubt looking for those Crusaders they had already killed.

As the host made their way out of South Pass and into the Wylden, I pulled away from the Scrying Eye, returning to the Tower of Rokos and the Scrying Chamber. As my sight re-focused on the room before me, I found myself looking at a flat and brutal face, devoid of any emotion. Shocked by the sudden appearance of such a visage, I took a step back, and reached for the blade I no longer carried, but the man before me made no move.

It was not until the intruder spoke, his voice deep and rich with power and command, that I took in his purple and gold attire and recognized him as Seeker Azruk, "Oracle Kastali. 'Ve been asked t'give y'this." The words were filled with the growling tones of Down-Town Atlantis, but it was the slim roll of paper he held out that caught my attention. I took it from him, nodding my thanks, and he turned to leave without another word. By the time I had unrolled the paper into a neat strip, covered with fine, spidery script. I did not recognize the hand, but the message made the source clear enough: To Watch A Traitor Die, Tomorrow Night, Find Me If You Can.

## Fall 435 Day 20

I slept until the sun was well over the horizon, knowing that I would not be returning to my bed until late tonight. I spent most of the day wandering the Tower grounds, watching Oathsworn spar in the courtyards, and pacing the aisles of the library. When I finally entered the Scrying Chamber, the light was starting to fade, and a chill had come into the air, causing me to draw my cloak about me.

When I connected to the Solonavi who would serve as my Scrying Eye, I immediately attempted to direct it towards Seeker Mock, but my view did not move, merely drifting in place within the Scrying Chamber. Frowning to myself, I turned my thoughts to the Oathbreaker Contri, and immediately my vision blurred across the Land. I did not go as far as I expected, however, as the Scrying Eye darted southwards, settling into the depths of the hilly forestland south of Atlantis. Hidden under the broad, thick canopy was sizeable camp. Men and women dressed in gray bustled here and there, while bowmen, mages, and warriors in leather and steel armor stood guard all about. Symbols of the Apocalypse Cult hung from the trees above, were daubed on the tents and lean-tos in blood, and were carved into the sod itself. My forehead burned under my mask, where I had been branded, but I guided my spiritual eyes forward, into the camp.

I moved cautiously, wary of any sorcerers with the ability to see me, but I made it to the large, central tent without incident. There I found what appeared to be a council of war gathered. I recognized the Galeshi Khoura, Rurik-that-was-Blessed, and Kem Ravenbane amongst the dozen or so cultists present. I searched about, and was about to give up, when Contri Oathbreaker strode in the door of the tent, the dead Solonavi weapon he carried seeming to suck up what little light there was within the heavy cloth walls.

Ravenbane snarled, his black face competing with Contri's lightning bolt for an absence of light. "You're late, Oathbreaker."

The former Oathsworn shrugged mildly, opening his mouth to speak, but no sound came out. Arching his back, Contri threw his hood off with a violent shake of his head, the stolen weapon he carried clattering to the ground as light blossomed from his chest, resolving itself into a slim glowing blade thrust through his stomach from the back.

The light from the blade threw harsh shadows across the stunned faces of the cultists present, reflecting from Rurik's once-gleaming armor and Khoura's wide round eyes. Kem was the first to cast aside his shock, snatching up his sword and charging across the room towards where Contri Oathbreaker was even now collapsing to his knees. The black-armored elf knocked the dying traitor aside, sweeping his silver blade in a wide arc through the area behind the body, but he caught only air.

I smiled to myself, quickly darting away from the tent to search out Mock and to see the results of his handiwork. Although the slim Seeker eluded my sight, he also left the cultists grasping at air, leaving behind a high, mocking laugh ringing from the trees as the camp dissolved into turmoil.

## Fall 435 Day 21

The chaos in the Apocalypse camp was complete. Even after a short night's sleep, the Scrying Pool was alight with men and woman running this way and that, and the

number of unhappy people with weapons in the camp seemed to have doubled. I wasn't sure why the cultists had chosen this location for such a large camp, if they wanted to strike at Atlantis, they would certainly not have made camp beyond the city, and they were across a broad expanse of water from Xandressa. I supposed that they might be preparing for a strike on the isle of Delphane, but they were some distance from that end of the point, and would require significant movement down the peninsula to reach a place opposite the island.

Knowing that Lord Vextha would wish to know what the Apocalypse cultists were doing, I settled my Scrying Sight back into the pavilion where Mock had slain the traitor Contri. Khoura, Rurik, and Kem were once again within the tent, but they had been joined by the Xandressan Dagon and none other than Preceptor Nala. Gasping softly to myself, I ducked away from the tent, but she took no notice of me, and I slowly directed the Solonavi providing my Scrying Sight back into the meeting-place.

Rurik's lilting elven tones had been tainted by a harsh rasp, but the accent of the Rivvenheims was still printed strongly on his words, "All is in readiness, Preceptor. Our forces are assembled, and we only await your command."

"And what of the Venthian Contri and his killer? What progress there?" Nala's words were harder, colder, than those of the former elven priest, and even without the hissing of the twisted beast curled about her feet it was clear that she was unhappy. Khoura's words were hushed by the fine gold mesh hanging from her headdress, but they were still audible, "Contri's body has been disposed of, but the killer, he escaped." I felt like laughing at Mock's escape, and my mirth doubled at the affect the news had upon the head of the Apocalypse cult.

Nala surged forward, grasping the Galeshi about the neck with one slim hand and lifting her from the ground with a strength belying her thin frame. Kicking wildly, the veiled cultist struggled for air, shaking her head wildly as the Preceptor asked, "And what affect will that have on our operation?"

It was Kem Ravenbane who answered, his colorless lips writhing around the words, "None, Preceptor. Our plans are unimpeded by the death of one commander." The emphasis on the last two words of the elf's statement drew Nala up, and she released Khoura, allowing the woman to collapse to her knees, gasping for breath.

The Preceptor turned to leave, with Dagon, still silent, moving to follow her. At the door, she turned about, addressing the cultists gathered within the pavilion. "Do not fail me. This is too important for a bout of incompetence to get in the way."

## **Fall 435 Day 22**

When I entered the Scrying Chamber this morning, a page with two wrapped scrolls awaited me. The first was a thin strip of paper, and this time I immediately recognized the handwriting, "I Hope You Enjoyed The Show. I Will Return Soon." I could not decide if I was glad or upset at this news, for although the Mock was skilled, his attitude left something to be desired.

The second piece of paper was written in a precise hand, and signed by Daheia, "Lord Anquilis requests that you look in on Raydan Marz once again. We have reason to believe he is planning a major operation."

Although unsure what the renegade Atlantean could be doing that was more important than investigating the plans of Preceptor Nala, I obeyed the archivist's wish, directing my Scrying Sight northwest, into the valley that hid his sky-castle.

What I saw there was astonishing. The valley was filled with tents and other shelters, the encampment of a sizeable army. In addition to Raydan Marz's personal troops, I spotted a small group of Amazons, a half-dozen lean-tos filled with dwarves, a force of soldiers from Khamsin, a score or more Galeshi, Anunub's Golemcore warriors, a small crew of Xandressans, some Scalesworn and a few Draconum, Caeronns and Venetians, and motley assortment of Prieskans fresh from the defense of their homeland.

My amazement grew as I scanned the camp more closely, as although there were very definite gaps between each of the small encampments, I could see no actual clashes between the broad range of warriors represented within Marz's valley. Whatever has drawn them here is apparently important enough that they have put aside, for the most part, the differences that have so long split the Land with strife.

I studied the camp for most of the day, and the sun was beginning to set when a series of Dragonfly riders began to buzz in from the east. I directed the Scrying Eye in that direction, and came upon a quick-moving column of elves and centaurs. They were dirty, and as haggard as I have ever seen Elven Lords, but they kept up their ground-eating pace, heading directly towards the Prieskan valley that sheltered Marz's sky-castle. At their head, I recognized none other than Geddion Longblade, Keldane Falconer, High Priestess Kess, and Miraxus. They had fast-marched their force across the breadth of the Land more quickly than I had ever seen it done before.

As the elves and centaurs crested the last hill before the valley, a small group exited the sky-castle, moving out to meet them. The group met with the newcomers, directed them towards a section of ground yet unclaimed, and brought their leaders into the sky-castle. Of those champions already gathered, I recognized Raydan Marz and Magus Anunub immediately, and they were flanked by a Xandressan captain and a Khamsin pistoleer I did not recognize, as well as a bronze-armored dwarf with a hammer taller than himself. The two who surprised me by their presence, however, were Desmanda, walking behind Raydan Marz as if she could see perfectly through her deep crimson magestone eyes, and an Amazon I immediately recognized as Tonen Swiftblade.

### **Fall 435 Day 23**

I watched the planning and preparations of the warlords gathered by Raydan Marz with great interest, and the plan that they laid out was ambitious to the extreme. A group of men and golems commanded by Anunub and formed around his Golemcore strike force left the valley almost immediately after the arrival of the elves and centaurs from the east. This small army was dressed in Atlantean uniforms, particularly those stolen from the Imperial Legion. Although they did not quite have the shine and luster of true Legionnaires, they looked quite authentic at first glance. A large portion of the remaining soldiers left soon after, led by the Dwarf and Geddion Longblade, marching with a great deal more stealth eastwards around Luxor and Rokos, then back southward, towards Atlantis. Although I intended to keep an eye on the force traveling past Luxor and Rokos, Anquilis requested that I

continue to watch Marz himself, as he was sure to be at the forefront of any fighting to be done.

Not long after the majority of the force he had gathered left the valley, Raydan Marz brought the remainder within his sky-castle, and the citadel flew eastward, following a ley-line that arched northeast towards Venetia, then followed the Roa Vizorr south once more. This advance was not a quiet one, and soon garnered a great deal of attention from the Atlanteans guarding the banks of the river. The sky-castle, however, flew above the range of any artillery the Atlanteans could bring to bear, not deigning to come down and fight, but continuing its stately progress towards the capital of the Empire. Dragonfly patrols were sent up to attack the rogue warlord's fortress, but Marz's own dragonfly riders and elves mounted on griffons met them, engaging in hard-fought dogfights over the broad river and managing to hold off the attackers.

As Marz's citadel approached Atlantis itself, I was shocked to see the huge force arrayed to meet them. Imperial Legionnaires, Delphana mages, members of the Golemcore, and basic Atlantean soldiers were arrayed in seemingly unending ranks. And yet, when the sky-castle approached the city-in-the-sky, it began to drop closer to the ground. As it sank lower, the Atlantean forces awaiting it began to fire. Blasts of magical energy, explosive bolts, and arcs of lightning lanced out towards the approaching fortress, many missing, but an increasing number striking home, shattering turrets and blasting apart walls. I drew the Scrying Eye closer to the sky-fortress, expecting to see Marz's force being savaged on the battlements, but they were not there. The walls and walks of the sky-castle were devoid of life, entirely unmanned.

As the structure of the sky-castle began to falter, and chunks of masonry rained down on the Atlantean defenders, a large force of sky-mages, dragonfly riders, griffons, and other aerial combatants left from a postern gate on the north side of the fortress, protected from the Atlantean fire by the still-sinking sky-castle. Closing with group, I spotted Raydan Marz, Desmanda, Tonen, Kess, Keldane, Miraxus, and other commanders among them, abandoning the sky-fortress to its fate.

I could not think what would be worth sacrificing Marz's sky-castle for, until a series of huge explosions rocked Atlantis-on-High, and the city itself seemed to shudder. Directing my Solonavi guide there, I saw Anunub standing on the edge of a widening precipice, as a huge section of Atlantis itself separated from the rest. Anunub's men, along with Xandressans and Rebel troops in Atlantean uniforms guarded the edges of this giant floating rock, keeping back any true Imperial Legionnaires who tried to jump the expanding gap.

As the last few functioning lifts dropped down, ferrying more of Marz's warriors up to the commandeered section of Atlantis and Marz himself and his flying compatriots circled around to join Anunub, I saw the method to the renegade warlord's madness. He had, in effect, traded up for a larger version of his sky-fortress, one which could carry all of his warriors. Where he would take this formidable force remained to be seen, but with the powerful Magestone blocks beneath their stolen section of Atlantis for power, there were few places in the Land he could not reach.