

The Battle of Ashon Rye

WizKids Games is pleased to announce the first nationwide tournament for Mage Knight – Rebellion. The tournament format for the collectable miniatures game will be head-to-head 200-point constructed army rules. Games are being fought throughout the land on the weekend of December 15, 2000 to determine control of Ashon Rye and the fate of the gathered hosts. On the plains of Ashon Rye a new hero will emerge.

Background:

Sheltered among the northern mountains for the Ailons lies Ashon Rye. Here, captains and demi-mages lead their troops in search of elusive mage stone. Here, fortunes are made and lost as humans, dwarves, elves, and trolls battle one another for glory, profit, and, occasionally, honor.

Rebellion has swept the lands. For four years near constant fighting has pitted brother against brother, clansman against clansman. The old factions still cling to the shattered remains of their power while a new order struggles to rise from the ashes of the old.

Many come to Ashon Rye to test their skills and seek their fortune. The lucky leave with their lives and plunder. Those smiled upon by fate and skilled in the arts of war leave with much, much more – they leave with knowledge and take the first steps down the road of Glory.

Now five Warlords gather their hosts and prepare to do battle. Representing their factions or themselves, they come to permanently break the balance of power at Ashon Rye and claim the magestone there for themselves. Each leads an impressive array of warriors.

- Kho'Ta – A former Elemental Priest, Kho'ta was corrupted by the machinations of the Necropolis Sect. Breaking free after battling his former mentor, Kho'ta traveled to the Ailons, setting up a new domain. From the mountains he continues to fight the Necropolis Sect in whatever manner possible.

- Raydan Marz, The Outlaw - Marz fled Atlantis under suspicion, fighting his way free through the royal guard. He has set camp in the northern reaches of the empire, where he works to garner the resources necessary to oppose the emperor. He remains loyal to the empire; however, flying the ensign of Atlantis over his command post.

- Darq, The Corrupt, of The Order Of Vladd - Said to be touched by the gods, his clansmen named him 'Darq the Immortal' and 'The Uncorrupt One.' Ages ago, however, Darq succumbed to the Necropolis Sect and betrayed his clan, becoming a prince of the nopheratus and a leader within the Sect he fought as a mortal.

- Carmine Sura – Born the pampered daughter of a northern Duke, Carmine became an implacable opponent of the Necropolis Sect when her father was turned into a vampire. Turning her back on her family dukedom, she takes a more aggressive role in the fight. Where the Necropolis gathers in strength, Carmine can be found thwarting their efforts.

- Kossak Mageslayer – Kossak claims blood kinship to the legendary Troll chieftain Paragon, though no such proof can exist. He is one of the League's proactive warlords, traveling beyond the confines of the Wylden Plateau as necessary to halt corruption of The Land or danger to the League before it begins.

Ashon Rye Battle Communications

The morning fog hid any surviving pockets of resistance as the small contingent moved forward into the mining camp. Utem Keravan slid down into the shallow depression amidst

a clattering of small rock and clumps of orange clay. In a line with five quick paces between every two crossbowmen came the members of his squad, crossbows held one-handed as they rasped swords free of leather scabbards. The nearest ones looked to Keravan, who wiped a cold gauntlet over his mist-dampened head, slicking back the queue of his topknot as he peered into the gloom. No sign of danger. He drew a second quarrel for his own crossbow, clamping it between his teeth, then a third which he held in his grip against the stock. With a sharp nod he ordered his team forward.

A row of derricks off to the left warned that he had come in near the main cut, the bases of the steeped frameworks half-buried in rock and dirt brought up from the dig. A good indication of magestone, all this effort. Good hiding places for any surviving defenders, also. His team swept the area, avoiding the ledge which fell down into dark holes. They found three human bodies and one unconscious dwarf bleeding out over the muddy ground. Keravan called the leech medic forward, leaving one of his men to safeguard the prisoner and potential convert.

Magestone.

Keravan found the strongbox under a canvas lean-to, depressions in the mud showing there had once been three containers. The survivors had carried away all they could, apparently. Utem Dalek used the pommel of his sword to break the hasp. The ore inside looked like chunks of gray rock. Shale, perhaps, except that no one locked shale up to prevent its theft.

So strange, he thought, that The Land's most valuable substance looked so common. But this is what they were after. This is what drew adventurers, soldiers, merchants and generals to the cold northern plains of Ashon Rye. What had drawn Raydan Marz, Keravan's warlord. The mana-infused stone which powered Guild weapons and artifacts. Which every faction sought for use in spells and ritual magicks.

Hefting the small chest between Utem Dalek and himself, the squad bore it back the way they'd come. The ore would be loaded on horseback and taken to Warlord Marz at once for safeguarding, his main force moving some four leagues to the south of this flanking contingent. A piece of luck, really, that they'd stumbled onto this mining site. Keravan and Dalek handed off their crossbows as they struggled back up the slick bank of muddy clay. One of Keravan's squadmates slipped and fell down hard across his own device, snapping the crossbar. He cursed the waste, but at least the fighting was finished for the day.

Wishful thinking.

The fog was thinning now, back to the same light mist which had socked in the plains for three days. Visibility increased by another fifty paces every moment. The gloom lifted away from the mining area and spread back from the Atlantean's main line of battle. It marched over the scrub-infested flatlands, leaving only a slight haze clinging to occasional clusters of boulders. It swept back through new formations, a host of darkened bodies not a fifth-league behind the Atlanteans. And marching forward.

Shouted alarms warned Blademaster Seyla, the high elf who commanded this contingent in Marz' name, and the templar knight turned his line to meet the new threat. Keravan and Dalek handed the chest off to a pair of cavalry outriders, protecting the spoils of the previous battle, then ran for their place in line.

Keravan forced a spot in between their last two Amotep lightning gunners and a quartet of elven pikemen. He counted a trio of mounted knights and the large shadows of two golems in the approaching warhost. Footsoldiers were harder to discern in the distant gloom, but the swaying shamble of several squads warned of zombies. A Sect warhost, or the work of a renegade grave robber? A dark banner streamed back off the upraised lance of one mounted knight, but Keravan could not make out its device.

The elven pikemen had no trouble with the design, their sharp eyesight able to pierce the haze. One elf spoke out in a savage whisper a name which sent icy thrills down Keravan's

spine. He tasted fear in his mouth, like a new copper piece under his tongue, and swallowed dryly before passing the name on to his squad.

"Kho'Ta."

* * *

This 4th day of the 2nd month, 432 Tz

Rayden Marz,

You ask about Ashon Rye. It is cold. It is damp. This time of year, the fog rises heavy at night and might burn off by midday. There are few actual settlements, and townships with organized law are fewer still. It is not a civilized land.

It has magestone.

For an Atlantean warlord, and one in your situation, I'm certain that this is the only redeeming quality about which you are concerned. Yes, the magestone exists here. In fact, it is very abundant though scattered about in small deposits. No one has ever discovered the lode, if it even exists. But the isolated ore is enough to draw hundreds of prospectors and more in the way of marauders looking for that easy conquest. I imagine it is even enough, with the latest rumors of a rich strike, to draw a warlord or two.

Of course I have outlined your other options already, but my sense of the matter is that you will head north. If this is the case, I will leave you with this final word of caution. No warlord since the death of Karrudan has ever held Ashon Rye for better than four months. That is historical fact. Because where one goes, others follow. Heed this in your plans, and do not be tempted to stay overlong.

~Maleficus

* * *

Lady Sura,

We have long waited to repay your service to the Nam d'elvan, for your care and the healing of the dreyid we brought to you. You asked then that we guard and watch the Seinlund. This we have done.

For several days now we have shadowed a warhost as it marches across the Wylden. It flies the banner of the Atlantis Guild as well as the silver fist of Raydan Marz. Marz himself leads the host which has already pushed through the hunting lands of Pinta's tribe. They appear bound for the Pass of Rye, though the Whitespray headwaters or Sturnlander Coast are possible as well.

What is your desire?

Belle

* * *

Belladonna,

Thank you, dear friend, for your warning. I am coming out of Sanctuary.

I have already sent my flyers to Pinta, asking him to lend aid. Follow Raydan Marz, find out where he is bound. Do not badger him or otherwise disrupt his march unless he moves deeper into the Wylden.

Carmine Sura

* * *

My goals are two. Your orders are two.

The keep of Magus Danuub must fall to me by the fifth month. It is the key which unlocks for us the Sturnlander Coast, and I want it. I will have it. Danuub is weak and he is isolated. Send Travshii to deal with him. Make certain Travshii knows that failure will be answered by the harshest possible means.

Ashon Rye. A merchant caravan bound for the northern plateau assaulted one of my encampments along the Whitespray. They could not wait for the Vale, they would raid my forces for supplies! Unacceptable. Ashon Rye has been left to its own law for too long, making rich and dangerously bold men of prospectors and raiders. I care not for the coin, but the mana now belongs to me. Go, Vargha, and take it from them.

By my command.
Kho'Ta

* * *

Lady Sura,

Yesterday Raydan Marz' rear guard pushed back an assault from Pinta's chargers. Today, he has turned for the Pass of Rye. We revealed ourselves long enough to aid Pinta's withdrawal.

Marz knows we follow him.

Belle

* * *

Lady!

Yesterday we came across two wounded lancers from Pinta's tribe. While falling back from Raydan Marz, they were then ambushed by Sect warriors. Two hunters were captured by nightstalkers. A third was torn apart by a fist of bloodsuckers. The rest escaped, though Pinta may be hurt.

Kho'Ta has apparently moved a large force from the Whitespray headwaters. Whether or not the necromancer personally commands, we are not certain. They are several days behind Raydan Marz and travel slower than the Guild warhost, so it seems unlikely that they mean to attack him.

Far more likely that Kho'Ta means to attack the League!

Belladonna

* * *

Trollsong hammered at the darkness, raised by strong voices gathered round the bonfire while Kossak Mageslayer stalked the edge of the firelight, his back to the camp. His shadow flickered and jumped with each new burst of flame. The scent of burning greenwood and roasted stag came with each breath, tempting him back toward the warmth of the fire. He resisted. The sprite had warned of Pinta's coming, and Kossak would be first to hear any news, make any plans. So he waited, watched. And he listened.

The quieter races belonging to Kossak's warhost had retired to outlying camps several hours before. Only a few hardy dwarves remained, toasting the trollsong and each other as they wished on themselves longer, fuller lives. The troll warriors would sing many of the old tales this night, readying themselves for the long march out of the Sturmonts and a summer of campaigning against the Necropolis Sect. They sang of their victories as well as those of their fathers and grandfathers before them. Eventually they would sing of Paragon, the ancient one, the greatest of all troll chieftans whom Kossak Mageslayer claimed as blood kin, and then Kossak would join them to honor his ancestor.

The sharp clack of hooves striking stone—a sound out of place so close to the troll encampment. Intentional. Pinta would know better than to approach Kossak without warning. Kossak had tied his war ax across his chest with leather thongs, but the great double-headed mace he held ready in massive, scarred hands. He hefted it one-handed now, his left hand placed flat to the ground to feel the other's approach. Slight, overlapping tremors betrayed the centaur, and Kossak stepped forward boldly to meet him, a growl of warning rumbling in his throat.

"Strength to you, Kossak Mageslayer, and honor to your ancestors." The centaur strode up confidently in the darkness, halted, standing just out of the troll's reach with one front leg lifted in salute. His lower half, a sleek and well-muscled pony, was protected by light barding. Pinta's upper body wore armored mail, his hands full of a war ax similar to Kossak's own, though lighter in weight.

"Wide pastures, Pinta." Kossak's return greeting was the bare minimum courtesy demanded. Pinta had come armed, and had evaded his pickets, and that did not set well with the troll chieftan. The centaur at least had the good sense to stare down at Kossak's hands, refusing to provoke a challenge with eye contact. "What do you want?"

Pinta bridled at the harsh tone, his tail flicking in agitation. Now he glanced up into the chieftan's face. "I came to do you a service, and now I am considering leaving."

Kossak snorted his lack of care. Centaurs were a free-spirited race, and as such did not get on well with trolls. They tended to aggravate each other equally. But then, Pinta had come to him. That meant something. And the dark stain, soaking through the centaur's barding and matting the hair along his rear left leg, that meant something as well.

"You're injured."

Kossak was no fool. Centaurs ranged over much of the plateau and, with the nomadic elves, were among the best early indications of trouble. And if Pinta were coming to him... "Magus? Necromancer? Who's on the plateau, Pinta?" Kossak's loathing for the perverted magicks of the Necropolis Sect and Atlantis Guild was well known.

Even so, the prize held out by the centaur was obviously worth special consideration. And Pinta knew it, holding it back for a long, challenging gaze into the chieftan's face. Kossak knew then who it was, and that he did indeed owe the man-beast a debt. It would be him, the fallen one. The elemental priest, corrupted by the Sect's hand and turned to the dark works of the necromancers.

"Tell me where to find him," Kossak demanded, a savage grin splitting his face. "Tell me where to find Kho'Ta."

* * *

Pinta,

I will be unable to meet you at our prearranged site. It has taken longer than I'd thought to prepare Sanctuary for my departure. We shall meet instead at the Pass oRye in ten days

time. The sprites have informed me that Kho'Ta is trailing after Raydan Marz. We shall follow them to prevent whatever mischief has pulled them northward.

Rest your tribe. We will ride together soon.
Carmine Sura

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For Darq, of our Order,

Brother. Knowing your amused interest for the family Sura, and for the Lady of the Frost Fell in particular, I deign to pass on to you the following information. It was wrung from a messenger sprite brought down in my hunting along the Seingard. I sense no reason to distrust the message, though of course I would pass it along to you even so.

I think I prefer to let the Lady pass, and make a stab at the heart of her Sanctuary while she is away. To you I allow the pleasure of her slow death, if that is what you desire. Or, you might ignore her as she crosses into the Ailons with impunity from the Sect.

It is your decision, of course.

Kauphin, of our Order

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The sun had fallen out of the mountains a half hour before, leaving a small riot of color playing at the edge of the world. Darq had watched the death of daylight with the exquisite attention of any connoisseur. Now he walked the edge of the thin parapet surrounding his tower, unconcerned with the sharp winds or the long fall to broken rock below. His cape billowed artificial wings out behind him while he studied the missive with feral eyes.

Carmine Sura was abandoning Sanctuary.

That did hold true interest for him, despite his brother's feeble goads and digs. Darq cared little for Ashon Rye when the necromancers demanded his attention, and less when they didn't. Magestone was important, to the Order of Vladd as much as to any faction of The Land, yes. But collecting it was for servants of the Sect or as a result of other actions taken by the Order. What interest did scrounging in the earth hold for a prince of the nopheratus?

But Sura... she held his interest. Her years of silent suffering, even while she healed those around her. The great loss that had to be eating her up inside. Darq smiled, tasting her anguish even in memory.

Stopping before the open arch that lead into his chamber, Darq balanced himself on the ledge with heels hanging over into nothingness, summoned a winged terror from the shadows. The dark creature grinned savagely, showing rows of needle-sharp teeth. A long, forked tongue licked out hungrily.

"Find me Sura-phas, the homeless one," he ordered the creature, "and summon my lieutenants." The terror hopped around Darq in two bounds, spreading ragged wings to catch the cutting winds.

"Time for a family reunion," he whispered to the tower, treasuring the emptiness behind each word.

He would lead a warhost to Ashon Rye. But not for magestone—not first and foremost. Darq would go to mine something far more valuable to him. Pain. Despondency. He spread his arms wide to embrace the evening, then he fell gracefully back off the parapet.

His laughter died on the winds.

* * *

The presence of Raydan Marz and Carmine Sura is unexpected, but not damning. If anything, they will help punish Ashon Rye for its complacency. Turn them against one another, and then pick the bones of each after they lay bleeding upon the earth.

I will have my victory, Vargha, or I shall have you to answer for it.

Kho'Ta

* * *

Raydan Marz,

This letter, delivered under truce shield, is the only warning you'll get from me. You're in my way. I give you one hour to leave Holson's Ridge, after which I come through you.

Move!

Prepared for Kossak Mageslayer

* * *

Warlord Kossak,

I am neither magus nor necromancer. Nor am I concerned with your threats or aims here.

Go around!

Raydan Marz

* * *

The Lady Carmine Sura, of the Frost Fell,

Well met, old friend. I wondered if you would honor a truce shield attached to my banner. It is pleasing to know that some events in life, besides myself, are a constant.

If you were hunting Raydan Marz, I'm sorry to inform you of his absence here at this time. But I shall endeavor to entertain you in good fashion. I have even gone to great lengths to make you feel right at home on the cold plains, so far from Sanctuary. For what is more warming than time spent with family?

If you look closely from the edge of your battlelines, you might see a stooped figure carrying the banner of my Order. Oh yes, it is him. Forgive his pale complexion. I'm afraid your father sees less time in the sun than he once knew. And don't mind the scream you are about to hear, before you can give any order to prepare. That is simply my truce-bearer, feeding on your nearest officer.

With great affection,
Darq, of the Order

**Ashon Rye Epilogue:
Raydan Marz Scores Decisive Victory at Ashon Rye
Raydan Marz Rules!**

Read about the Battle of Ashon Rye through the eyes of the Warlord who placed second, Kossak Mageslayer.

Kossak Mageslayer took a deep breath and violently blew the foam from his blood-encrusted lips. His massive lungs were working like an Atlantean bellows, but still he felt light-headed.

“I could learn to hate this Guilder,” he said to nobody in particular. He stood amid a field of fallen Atlanteans, recently followers of the Warlord Raydan Marz.

Kossak wiped his brow with a massive forearm and made his way toward a knot of his kinsmen as they battered their way through a throng of freshly risen corpses. Relying on bulk as much as skill, Kossak and his kin quickly returned the uneasy dead to the earth.

Kossak spat as the last of the zombies fell. “Curse Darq and all his foul kind,” he grumbled. “He’s another I could learn to hate.”

“Aye,” added Huhn as he pulled back on the string of his crossbow. The catch groaned, but held, as the young troll sat a stubby quarrel into the guide. He palmed the massive weapon and grinned up as his chief and uncle.

“Bah!” countered Kossak, what would you know of the Necropolis Sect, youngster? Those nubs above your ears you spend so much time polishing can’t truly be called horns.” The youth smiled at the insult and aimed his crossbow. Kossak turned as the quarrel dropped a grave robber at thirty paces. Kossak returned the smile. Although he would suffer no familiarity, he admitted to himself he had a soft spot for his nephew. The younger troll had been a great support during Kossak’s rise to power. Although young, his strength was second to only Kossak and the youth had an easy way with others that Kossak didn’t have and didn’t want.

Kossak flicked his wrist and sent his balanced axe twirling toward an Utem Guardsman. The small human was hurled backward by the force of the blow as the two trolls moved forward. Kossak tried to relax and return his breathing to normal. He was tired, but anxiety as much as fatigue pulled at his chest. The day had not gone as planned, not by a wide margin.

“How do we fare,” the younger troll asked as nonchalantly as his youth would allow. Kossak placed a boot on the corpse and pulled his axe free.

“Not well, kinsman. Not well at all.” Huhn reloaded his crossbow, but did not speak. Kossak looked around for something else to kill, but could find little in the immediate area. He set off almost at random toward the top of a hillock in the hopes of getting a better view. Huhn kept his tongue and looked for targets with his crossbow.

Kossak looked a good fight and so far Ashon Rye had turned out to be a good one. His troops were well trained and well lead. They were eager for the confrontation that had started at dawn. That was the last time he’d actually seen his entire army. Right from the start, the battle had turned into a confused tangle of soldiers as warbands fought one another with absolutely no regard for strategy and forethought. In truth, this was his favorite type of fight, but his forces were often on the receiving end of the punishment. Where he fought, his soldiers won, but he could not be everywhere at once and his best lieutenants had been among the first to fall to that twice cursed Raydan Marz. Kossak felt his anger rise as he considered the renegade Atlantean and subsequent mess he was in.

As near as his scouts had been able to determine, Raydan Marz fielded the largest force. That was acceptable to Kossak, who valued the skills of his individual soldiers above the

rank and file of the Atlanteans. His forces were nearly equal to Marz in number and superior in ability. Unfortunately, there were other warlords in the fight, so Kossak had to respond to them as well.

Darq, of the Order of Vlad, was nearly Kossak's equal in quantity, but Kossak didn't really believe the vampire would stand against him in an equal fight. Darq preferred superior numbers or ambush to do his work.

Kho'ta had a sizable force, but he'd undoubtedly underestimate the importance the others had placed on Ashon Rye. Although impressive by most standards, his forces were outnumbered by all save Carmine Sura. Kossak shook his mighty head at the thought of the woman and her "army." She fielded fewer than half the numbers of he or Marz, but she marched into battle nonetheless. Kossak was not sure whether to be impressed by her bravery or repulsed by her stupidity. In the end, he decided her decision was stupid, but that was only because she was going to lead many trolls to their deaths. They were kinsmen who could and should have followed him.

No less than five warlords fought over the same patch of ground. Kossak was silently thankful that none of the others had managed to form any type of alliance. That would have spelled doom to the other three. He frowned and unconsciously increased his pace. It was a five-way scrap and none of the armies involved would escape unscathed.

Kossak considered his army. He had the forethought to bring every trooper he could muster and march them toward Ashon Rye. The Serpentine Mountains were an unforgiving batch of crags and uncomfortably close to the Necropolis homelands, but the lure of Magestone made the risk seem worth it. He'd expected Marz to be there. The fight was practically on his front porch. He'd also expected somebody to slither from under a rock with a Necropolis banner, but he had to admit he was a bit surprised to see the personal banner of Darq. An unconscious growl slipped past his lips causing Huhn to raise an eyebrow. When Kossak didn't continue, the youth looked the other way. The intelligent gesture confirmed Kossak's opinion of the boy.

No, he thought, the wildcards had been Carmine Sura and Kho'ta. The fact that they were so far from their normal stomping grounds was a testament to the prize they all sought and the lengths some would go for Magestone. Last night Kossak and his warband had actually been eager to come to grips with the new opponents. The boasting and feasting had lasted long into the night. Kossak himself has been one of the last to retire. Although Kossak was sure of victory, the sun brought another outcome.

First Carmine Sura, a supposed ally and member of the Elemental League had attacked his right flank. Without instructions Kossak's commanders had moved out of position and countered her weak attack. Although they'd swept the human's forces aside, the gap in the lines allowed several of Raydan Marz warbands to slip to the rear of his army. The unexpected attack had cost Kossak time and battle.

Carmine quickly found herself outnumbered, caught between Darq's undead legions and Kossak's overly eager warbands. By the time Kossak had managed to restore order, his troops were woefully out of position and Carmine was crushed. Only the heroic stand of her Knights Immortal allies allowed her to escape the field with her life in the face of Darq's unrelenting torment. Kossak allowed her to slip through his lines as she fled the area.

Darq was less than happy with the gesture, but Kossak could not bring himself to waste more resources on the woman. Besides, he reasoned, Darq's Nightstalkers forced him to face the vampire, not an already defeated foe. Kossak was confident of victory. He even considered the chances of ending the undead lord's unnatural life, but again he was

thwarted. Refusing to fight, Darq managed to save or resurrect the bulk of his forces. Kossak's kinsmen, ever seeking the most direct solution to a problem charged into Darq's waiting army.

Carmine Sura's forces had depleted the undead ranks, but she lacked the numbers to make a difference for Kossak. In the end Kossak had forced Darq to retreat, but the troll chieftain suspected that retreat fit the vampire's plans. Now, Kossak had less than half his original force but knew of the struggle between the bulk of Marz's force and the army of Kho'ta. Fortunately, most of his remaining troops were kinsmen, easily worth two or three of the smaller humans they'd likely face.

Kossak crested the hill, Huhn close at his side. The view was just short of spectacular. Below him he could see the arrayed forces of the warlords spread across Ashon Rye. Although some might consider trolls dense, Kossak had not risen to his rank and position by being stupid. His eyes scanned the battlefield once and he instantly knew how the day had progressed and how it would end.

Carmine Sura and shattered remains of her forces were fleeing south. She'd brought the smallest force to the fight and it looked like she'd managed to save almost a quarter of her command. She was out of the fight and would pose no further problem.

Darq was withdrawing to the northeast. His forces were harder to track, but Kossak picked out several of the shifting shapes as they slunk back through the long grass to the highlands beyond. Darq's personal banner slid steadily along the only trail. Kossak briefly considered charging the vampire, but quickly decided against it. Darq could wait for another day.

Across the shallow valley, on the other side of the hill, the forces of Raydan Marz and Kho'ta swirled in apparent confusion. It was hardly a fair fight. Kho'ta had started the battle with only 2/3 of Marz's force and the Atlantean had used the advantage to wear down the other warlord. Cracks in line became gaps, which would lead to a rout. As Kossak watched, Kho'ta sounded the retreat and his forces moved to disengage. The Atlanteans kept up the pressure, but Kho'ta was too good a general to let his forces be cut down piecemeal. Showing the discipline of a seasoned army, the warbands drew back toward the southwest.

The only forces left to contest Ashon Rye were Raydan Marz and Kossak Mageslayer. Kossak shook his head and surveyed his troops.

To his left a Brass Golem bounded up the hill. Half scuttling beetle, half loping wolfhound, the machine clearly intended to end its unnatural existence on Kossak's axe. Huhn snapped off a quarrel, but the point rebounded off the machine's thick armor. Kossak waited a brief instant after the quarrel disappeared before throwing his balanced axe. The blade shattered the machine's hip and wedged in the gears beneath the metal plates. Kossak and Huhn leapt to the attack as the battered machine flailed about with heavy limbs. The machine punched, but Kossak caught the weak blow on the haft of his second axe. Reversing direction, he brought the weapon down squarely between the machine's shoulders. Fluid sprayed out as the machine fell at Kossak's feet. He quickly worked his axes free and turned toward Huhn.

"We're finished here, Huhn. Time to regroup and fall back." The younger troll looked stunned. Kossak held up a hand, showing patience he didn't really have.

"It's over. While you and the kin were fighting Darq, the cursed Guilder outmaneuvered us. Unfortunately, Darq did a better job of bleeding us than Kho'ta did to Marz. We may have started with day with equal numbers, but we're outnumbered better than two to one now and look." Kossak pointed with his balanced axe toward the knot of golems assembling below.

"We're more than a match of his human troops, but it looks like he's saved his golems just for us." Kossak watched as several blade golems formed around one of the fabled Storm

Golems. The larger creature began walking with deliberate steps toward Kossak's forces, who were just disengaging from the rear guard of Darq's troops and the remains of Kho'ta's more bloodthirsty survivors.

"We could win," offered Huhn. Kossak snarled and growled at the youth.

"We **WOULD** win and I'd tear that abomination apart with my teeth," countered Kossak. The chieftain relaxed and looked away. "But his humans would reinforce their machines and we'd be swept away." Kossak shook his head. "It's time to start thinking about what happens after today.

The crossbow twisted in Huhn's grip, but the youth nodded his assent. Kossak turned toward the Atlantean forces, just able to make out the personal banner of Raydan Marz in the distance.

"He's carried the day," he said under his breath, "but he's not rid of me so easily." Turning his back on the approaching golems, Kossak began gathering his forces and planning for the future.