

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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".

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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."

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."

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."

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."

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."

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.

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 paralleling 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.

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.

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 pre-emptive 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.

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.

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 unsatiable 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!

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.

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 cannoneer'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.

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.

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.