

Kastali's Diary – Early Spring, 435 Tz

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 Golemcore 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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."

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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...

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...

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.

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.