

Kastali's Diary – Spring, 435 Tz

Gambling Halls of Caero – Spring, Day 1

While I expected it would take time to find Caldera, the agents of the Solonavi have already found her for me. While there are many who have made a deal with the Solonavi host, receiving a favor now in exchange for a returning a favor later, there seem to be more Oathsworn warriors serving the Solonavi than I previously expected. These warriors, having offered a period of service, like myself, can be called upon for many small favors or informational services. Through this, I know now that Caldera has been seen in the gambling halls of the merchant-city of Caero.

Caero is one of the oldest cities in the Land, and was once the sun-seat of the eastern Kosian Empire. While Caero's pyramids and ancient tombs are filled with unknowable evils and potent treasures, just above the surface a thriving merchant city throngs with people, beasts of burden, cargoes of exotic goods, and deadly intrigue. Within all the hustle of this Atlantean "neutral trade city" lies a district devoted to gambling houses and arenas of chance and skill.

While Caero is a city where anyone can come and go as they please, the appearance of any Draconum warrior is bound to be noticed. By searching the kitchens of the gambling hall our Oathsworn spy denoted in his report, I was able to find a larger-than-normal platter of food being prepared. When the sizzling sheep carcass was finally prepared, I followed the bald-shaven server down the tile hall to one of the secreted gaming rooms in the carefully secured sun-halls at the rear of the building. Splendid in a beam of sun shining down from a skylight, the Draconum Caldera waited by a game board, her hunger obvious by the scraping sweeps of her massive tail on the tile.

As she dived into her meal, seemingly starved, I noted that the collection of tiles on the game board were set up for a two-player match, between opponents of equal skill and game-playing caliber. As Tiles and Stones is usually played between the game-masters of Caero for a price of slaves, gold or blood, the idea of Caldera – who likely had no gold or slaves - playing games for body parts seemed somewhat ludicrous.

While she messily eats her meal, I sit, watch, and wait to see who her opponent is to be.

Arranged Meetings – Spring, Day 2

At the sound of heavy footsteps coming down the hall, Caldera looked up from her meal. I was pleasantly surprised to see another masked Draconum entering the gaming chamber, her sword drawn and at the ready. Pushing the table away with one heavy foot, Caldera sprung to her feet and drew her own weapon, ignoring the heavy crash of silver trays and smashing goblets on the tile floor.

"State your business," Caldera said with a wary snarl.

"State your own business," said the intruder, as she tossed a crumpled, rolled up scroll to Caldera's feet. "I was called here by invitation to meet with someone who might help me."

"As was I," said Caldera. "I received a similar invitation, of someone promising to help me remember some things from my past. I've been searching for a long time for someone who might know something about what happened to me."

“And I’ve been searching for the whereabouts of my life-mate, Denkai,” said the stranger. “My name is Chroma, slaughterer of Solonavi, and I seek the battle partner the Host stole from me.”

The two of them pondered each other for a few moments, but neither relaxed their weapons.

“As I don’t know anything about anyone named Denkai,” said Chroma, “I’m afraid I can’t help you. Which means that we’ve either been led here by mischief, you’re lying to me, or this is a trap for both of us.”

“I’m not lying,” said Chroma, “and I’ve no information for you either. Which means this might be a trap.”

“Not entirely,” said a human voice. Both spun to face the newcomer, a middle-aged man dressed in the brown robes of the Oracles of Rokos bearing a black, curved staff. “Both of you have ties to one another in a number of interesting ways. And both of you have your own role in two important prophecies – one Drakona, and one Solonavi.”

Oracle Matteo, ever since his ill-destined trip to the Necropolis years ago to recover the Staff of the Scarab from the Spiderweb Mirror, had been believed dead or vanished. While the powers of the Staff of the Scarab are unknown, the red auramark shining on Matteo’s heart shows him to clearly be in league with the Apocalypse – and that he somehow has banished the Solonavi mark that he once swore a lifetime of service to.

“I offer the both of you the chance to get what you want – Chroma, your beloved lifemate – and Caldera, your memories returned, as well as full knowledge of what roles you have in the destinies of the Land. But what it will take from the two of you is a promise of my safe passage, and for me to cast a spell upon you that will allow me to know you speak the truth.”

“But you’re already lying,” snarled Caldera.

“I can taste the Solonavi on you,” said Chroma. “which means you’re an agent of the Black Tower. Which means you’re good as dead.”

“Don’t be hasty,” said the monk raising his one free hand in warning. “I may not be your match in combat, but I do have the information you need to complete your lives.”

“Then we’ll beat it out of you,” said Chroma, “and gods help you if you’re alive when we’re done.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that,” said Matteo. “Then it seems, my dear ladies, I’m going to need to do this the hard way.” From around him, four warriors suddenly stepped into view, shedding the concealment spells that kept them from being detected by sight or smell. On one side of Matteo, a wizard and a warrior readied for battle; on his other side, a Necropolis priest and an archer prepared to fight.

“Oathsworn!” Chroma snarled.

“Not anymore,” said Matteo with a smile. “Let me introduce you to a few of my associates... I believe you’re heard of the Tu’raj?”

Dual Natures – Spring, Day 3

Side by side, without a moment of hesitation, both of the Draconum warriors sprung toward Oracle Matteo and his band of Tu'raj warriors. Raising their weapons to strike in near perfect mirror-image of one another, both chose the logical target and attacked.

As if from the same mind, both attacked the panicked Tu'raj wizard. While Chroma chopped her own blade through the wizard's jaw, cutting off his spell mid-sentence, Caldera struck low and drove upward, piercing the wizard's heart. So in synch with one another, Caldera's blow struck hard enough to clip the other Draconum's sword, throwing a spray of hot sparks across the chamber.

While the other remaining three Apocalypse warriors were momentarily awestruck at the intensity of the twin attacks, Matteo was unmoved by the masterful martial display. Raising his black staff, the Oracle invoked a spell – and the slaughtered mage suddenly stood beside him, eyes burning with unearthly vengeance for her enemies.

The two Draconum turned and looked at one another, sharing a momentary look of panic, and then both sprinted for the windows of the gaming room as quickly as they could run. Smashing out of the glass into the open sunlight, both unfurled their wings and began to climb upward into the wide blue sky as fast as they could, hoping to get out of the range of the spells and arrows of the Apocalypse warriors. Within sixty breaths they were high above the pyramids, temples and dust-colored buildings of Caero, without any visible sign of pursuit.

"You fight a lot like I do," said Chroma in-between wingbeats. "Pretty good for a copy."

"I don't think I'm a copy," Caldera said with irritation. "I think that we're each other, and that something at the bottom of the falls had some magical effect on us."

"Magical effect on *you*," Chroma insisted. "Not me. The High Elven monk that rescued me didn't sense anyone else in the river."

"But you still have your memories," Caldera asked in-between wingbeats. "I can't remember anything, and everyone I talk to has a different story about what happened. About me – us – and then Den kai being used by the Solonavi as a killing tool."

"That's about what happened," Chroma said. "I've flown down the length of the waterfall and the underground river dozen times since the fight, and I can't find anything out of the ordinary."

"There has to be something," Caldera said. "Maybe we can find it together?"

Then, before Chroma could respond, a volt of hot electric lightning seared the sky just above their heads. Both looked simultaneously over their left shoulders back at the fliers coming up behind them. Five winged horses hung like vultures against the blue mid-day skies. Riding and lashing them to top speed, Oracle Matteo and the Tu'raj drove their mounts toward their prey with grim determination.

"We have to dive into the city!" yelled Chroma, "We'll never outrun them out in the open."

"After you," said Caldera, "and last one down to the marketplace owes the other one dinner!"

The Pyramids of Caero – Spring, Day 4

With a wave of my hand, I locked my scrying pool onto Caldera. Without hesitation, she let out an ululating scream, then veered and dropped away from her sister, down towards the packed streets of the trading city - plummeting fast enough that the passing air accompanied her war scream like

a banshee wail. Right behind her, Oracle Matteo whipped his steed in pursuit, while the other four Tu'raj attended to engaging, surrounding, and capturing the slightly slower Chroma.

Then we were amidst the streets, flying over a thoroughfare just barely wide enough for Caldera's extended wings. From behind her Matteo fired blast after blast from his black scarab staff, all of his shots missing by inches, but every one of them blasting into the crowds of panicked humans below. Dodging hard around a two-story high statue dedicated to Prophet-Magus Karrudan, Caldera wormed down an even thinner passage, barely navigating around laundry lines and plant-littered balconies with careful flaps of her wings.

And behind her, the Apocalypse warrior kept coming, relentlessly, firing shot after shot from his magic staff.

After another four blocks, realizing that she wasn't going to lose him in the streets, Caldera banked up, hard, and managed to just barely get over the top of a three story Atlantean temple before her momentum gave out. Landing for a moment, she took two wide, running steps to the corner, and dove off again, this time down over a busy market square. Behind her, the Oracle blasted the edge of the roof, even as his own mount flapped furiously in attempt to rise up over the wall at such a poor angle.

Taking advantage of Matteo's difficulties, she drove herself forward with all of her might, all while trying to figure out a place where she might have an advantage. In the distance, beyond the walls of Caero, she could see the statues, pillars and temple ruins standing in front of one of the great pyramids. While the two low squares of walls surrounding the place would not be effective in her defense, the cluster of wind-worn statues and monument obelisks might provide a three dimensional maze where she could hide and attack from.

Looking around for Chroma, Caldera saw her Draconum companion about a quarter mile distant, also heading toward the pyramid. Behind Chroma, the four Tu'raj warriors continued to pursue the warrior like a flock of angry crows. Gearing herself for the final sprint across the open desert, Caldera made herself head for the pyramid grounds at top speed, hoping her gamble would pay off in the end.

Using every ounce of her wing strength, Caldera forced herself to her highest speed, and within a minute was gasping at the effort. Muscles stretched and burned with every flap, and her breath came in hoarse gasps from her mighty lungs. Behind her, the Oracle's steed was having similar problems, but that didn't keep him from using the lash with every third wingbeat. But, while determined, Matteo was starting to fall behind, which offered Caldera a few seconds to make a plan of attack.

At the edge of the ruins, just after crossing over the second wall, the Draconum cracked open her right wing, hard enough to nearly dislocate her shoulder. As result, she banked hard around the edge of a tall, six-story high statue of an ancient, nameless Kosian warrior-priest. With her free hand she grabbed onto a stony outcropping, then lurched herself upwards with all her might. Landing on the slick stone proved harder than she first expected, as her foot-claws just barely clenched onto the wind-worn surface of the statue's massive arm. Once she had her balance, knowing she had little time, Caldera quickly scampered up the arm, then the sleeve, and then from foothold to foothold up onto the thick stone neck. There, she claimed herself a good perch where she could hopefully ambush the coming Apocalypse warrior.

But as she watched Matteo's horse fly over the first low, thin wall that marked the border of the pyramid's grounds, his black scarab staff suddenly burst into a sheet of shining white-hot flame. Shrieking, the Apocalypse warrior tried to veer his horse around, to steer away from the looming pyramid in front of him. But as he crossed the boundary of the second wall, his whole body suddenly burst into a sheet of living fire - and then his staff exploded violently, blasting him and his mount into a hundred pieces.

Staring speechlessly, Caldera watched as pieces of burnt robe, harness and armor tumbled and clattered to the desert sand below. Over to her right, she saw the four Tu'raj warriors, firmly in chase of Chroma, suddenly bank and turn away from their prey - and scatter away from the pyramid and Caero as fast as they could fly.

“By the Dragon gods,” Caldera swore with an awestruck hiss, looking down at the pyramid temple beneath her. “I wonder what the hell the ancients have hidden in there.”

Mystery of the Pyramids – Spring, Day 5

My master, Vextha, is on-route to the pyramids north of Caero, and should be arriving within a few days with a full exploration team consisting of Solonavi warriors and Oathsworn. For myself, after having my scrying sight repelled from the exterior of the pyramids by a series of non-lethal wards, I've been exploring the region surrounding the site for clues or archaeological information of any kind that might be of use to my masters.

From the Solonavi archives, I know that many of the burial tombs and pyramids in the hills surrounding Caero have long been discovered and plundered by thieves seeking gold and treasure - or in some cases torn apart by blasphemous and over-zealous Atlanteans desiring top-grade building materials for their bureaucratic structures. However, the group of pyramids at the center of the valley have been untouched, and there are no visible doorways or means of access to the interior of the structure. While the tales of Heroes discovering underground tombs are a constant in the region, the tunnels always seem to lead away from the main pyramids, rather than towards them.

Each of the four pyramids stand encircled by two low walls, with each wall standing no higher than the height of an average human male. Within the double circle of walls lays a number of massive structures and statues that only could have been built out of religious necessity by an army of workers and artisans. While the statue of the Kosian Priest-King that Caldera stood upon was clearly that of a human male (and certainly not an Elf), the amount of weather damage and the significant absence of certain Kosian sigils and ritual garments clearly proclaims that the carving predates the entire Kosian culture. This fact alone places the statues outside the pyramid as being at least a thousand years old (for the first recorded records of the Kosian culture evolving in ancient Prieska date back to roughly four and a half centuries before Tezla's birth) and possibly much more than that.

Tomorrow, I will explore the Black Pyramid as best I can, to see if I can discover any similarity between these two places.

Exploring the Black Pyramid – Spring, Day 6

Aside from the sizable Elemental army camp built just across from the Black Pyramid's opening, the location of this huge black stone temple in the Blasted Lands stands hundreds of miles away from any kind of civilization - either modern or ancient. Torg Boneknitter and his bastion of Elemental warriors have stood guard over this Pyramid for almost two years now, guarding against some real or imagined evil within. While some Heroes found their own ways into the ghost-haunted structure, or plundered nearby burial tombs for gold and relics, Torg's determination to prevent any other faction from gaining control of the structure has been

invariably successful. From our own faction, the Wolfwitch managed to penetrate the structure, but never returned from her journey into the interior of the cursed place.

While the construction of the desert temple is similar in architecture to the pyramids in Caero, the fact that there is an obvious opening into the interior and a complete lack of statuary or monuments of any kind is interesting. I checked carefully for pieces or ruins for almost two hours, but I could find little of note. It is as the Pyramid just rose out of the sand all by itself one day, which is something I find hard to believe.

While moving my scrying sight past the throng of Elemental guardians keeping watch over the main portal doesn't worry me, the descent down the steep stairs into the first chamber very soon becomes disturbing. While I am of the Dark Crusade, and no stranger to darkness, the eerie, dim, slightly phosphorescent light that radiates from the walls creates eerie phantoms and toothsome shadows at every corner.

The large temple chamber that the staircase empties into is massive, and is filled with stone pools, menacing guardian statues, and beautiful – though disturbing – wall paintings. While there is very little here that is archaeologically familiar, one of the murals indicates a crown-wearing Warrior-Priest being sealed into a stone box by a collection of clerics and loincloth wearing temple workers. Much like the statue I observed yesterday in Caero, the doomed priest bears none of the sigils of the Kosian age, implying that there may indeed be a connection between the builders of the pyramids of Caero and the builders of the Black Pyramid.

Then, submerged within a stone pool next to the mural, I see a beautiful jet necklace strung with silver beads and wire lying within the still waters. If I were physically there, I would have grabbed it in a moment, and even reached for it within my scrying chamber. But as I am not there, and have the choice and a moment to cast a spell, my aurasight reveals what I suspect – the telltale red aura around the relic indicates that it is of Apocalyptic origin, and thus cursed to own or touch. I logically conclude that if the other relics stored within the Black Pyramid are of similar make, then any thief that stole off with one of these objects before Torg arrived likely became a slave of the Apocalypse, if not put them on the path to becoming one of the evil Tu'raj.

My master, Vextha, has arrived at the pyramids. I am summoned, and must return my scrying sight to Caero.

Sand and Dust – Spring, Day 7

As the first light of dawn flooded across the Land, more than forty Solonavi and a host of Oathsworn had arrived at the Pyramids of Caero. While the Atlantean mages had put up an initial fight yesterday afternoon, fearing that Caero might be in danger of the same fate as Rokos and Luxor, the Solonavi used overwhelming strength and proven tactics to claim the site. While it is only a matter of time before reinforcements arrive, along with at least two sky-castles of golems, mages and troops last seen patrolling near the Revolutionary border, the Solonavi should have enough time to explore the Pyramid before the Empire brings battle. In the distance, a handful of Dragonfly pilots spy upon us. They can spy all they like, as long as they don't interfere.

Vextha, in broad daylight, is even more impressive than when I saw him in the Tower of Rokos. The raw strength he displays when commanding his drones and mortal troops is absolutely unquestioned and his every word a guarantee of punishment to those that fail him. I am clearly in a different status than the others; whether it is because he has a greater hold over me, or he actually respects me I have no idea. But I do know that he seemed very pleased with my report on the Black Pyramid, and indicated that I may have uncovered an important clue.

Four drones around Vextha each bear a sword or staff, weapons of an earlier age. As the Oracles of Rokos collected magical weapons for their hidden masters for centuries before the “return” of the Solonavi, it is Vextha’s hope that one of these four relics will act as a kind of key to the interior. When approaching the edge of the pyramid, its smooth sides climbing some twenty stories into the sky over our heads, I can see where Vextha is heading – into an area in the shadow of the Priest-King’s statue. After a brief conversation with one of his Oracles, he turns toward the foot of the pyramid and unleashes a series of powerful blasts, raising a massive cloud of sand and dust. The other Drones and Oathsworn mages follow suit. Being careful not to strike the pyramid itself, they clear away tons of sand in the space of ten minutes, and I watch with mirth as a cloud of choking dust washes across the walls of Caero some half mile to the southwest.

With a spell of wind Vextha clears away the last of the dust, revealing that the pyramid indeed is far larger than we’d first expected, descending down at least another ten stories. And at the bottom of the dust pit, is an aperture matching the one on the Black Pyramid. Vextha orders that I descend and watch over a relic-carrying Drones and a strike-team of Oathsworn. I do so, without hesitation.

Jackal Priest – Spring, Day 8

The short hallway leading into the interior of the pyramid is nearly identical to the hall that leads into the Black Pyramid, save that this one is covered with glowing, arcane symbols and incredible detailed hieroglyphs of men, beasts, and animal-headed gods. While there were the occasional hieroglyph scattered sporadically throughout the Black Pyramid, the ones engraved in this place seem to be much more decorative in nature.

At the end of the hall, the wide stairway leads up, rather than down, into the heart of the pyramid. The quad of Drones, bearing the ancient weapons across their forearms, float along like glowing beacons behind the four heroes, ready to fight or serve at their a moment’s notice. Like experienced temple thieves, the four Oathsworn are poised and ready for combat or reaction of any kind.

Out of the shadows, a shape materializes upon the stone stairs. Dressed in priestly robes, the person stands about eight feet tall, and is holding an ornate staff covered with rubies, jade, and pieces of cut Magestone. At first I think I am looking upon a man in a jackal mask – but then I realize that the mask is actually the face of the beast. With ears that twitch at every sound, the Jackal Spawn’s eyes burn with an unholy hatred for the intruders.

“You have violated a sacred place,” says the priest, “and now you will be tested.” At his command, from out of the walls, the hieroglyphs taking solid form, steps another dozen Jackal Guardians, each bearing a wide-bladed fan-spear in their deformed hands. The monstrous warriors leap down upon the Oathsworn, chopping and slicing with supernatural might, even as other hieroglyphs run along the lengths of the walls, seeking to erupt from the stone behind the party.

The melee is bloody, and the Oathsworn clearly outnumbered. Grabbing the key-relics from the Drones, they unsheathe the swords and power up the magical staffs, and begin to unleash destruction upon their assailants. But the numbers of Jackal Spawn are too great, as another dozen joins the fight within just a few more seconds. First the priest is chopped in half by a mighty blow, and then the assassin’s throat is torn out by the fang-teeth of one of his attackers. The warrior manages to chop his sixth opponent down before a seventh Jackal plunges his claws into the human’s back, and rends out a bloody string of entrails with a howl of elation.

The Drones wade into the fight, but are extinguished, one by one, by the fearsome defenders of the pyramid. The mage, having blasted a number of the Jackals into dust and ash, begins a slow and steady retreat back up the hallway, now outnumbered by more than forty to one. With a thundering roar, the score of Jackal Spawn scream battle cry in unison, and rush the mage like an avalanche of flesh and steel. While the wizard's opening spell does some damage, he is caught and torn apart by the mob before he can cast a second spell.

"You have been judged," the Jackal states in a sonorous tone, and then turns to walk back up the stairs, leaving the pack to consume the corpses. Taking a chance, I lock my scrying pool upon him, and secretly follow his slow passage into the heart of the temple.

Temple Chamber – Spring, Day 9

The Jackal Priest climbs the two hundred stairs, until he reaches a sizable room within the countless tons of stacked stone. More than a hundred feet high, the place resembles more of a desert oasis rather than the interior of a constructed tomb. Living trees and house-sized ferns line the walls, gurgling streams run along glistening limestone channels, and ruby, rose quartz, and Magestone statues catch and reflect beams of sunlight shining down from hidden vents high above. Alabaster coffins line the room in neat avenues, each carved with a likeness of the long-dead warrior-priest entombed within. At the heart of the chamber, a massive, ornamented throne constructed of pure emerald sits facing the stairway entrance, big enough to hold a giant humanoid being at least twenty feet in height. The entire scene is awe inspiring, and is nothing like I've ever read, seen or imagined before.

All around the room, flitting lights move from place to place like burning-flies, attending to the flow of water, blowing the fern leaves, and a dozen other chores required to maintain the space. The Jackal-Priest seems not to notice the wisps, and steps deliberately to the front of the throne, and kneels down before its empty seat. In the space of a moment, after a heartbeat of prayer-like reverence, the Spawn is gone, and a beautiful hieroglyph has taken his place on the stone floor, frozen in solidity until called again to judge outsiders.

Taking a moment to observe, holding my breath against the fear of being discovered and destroyed by the powerful magics that abound in this holy place, I move my scrying sight to one of the stone sarcophagi, and make careful note of the dress style and artifacts on the sculpted priest. While they are similar in origin in terms of priestly garb and human appearance to the Kosian warrior-priests, at first glance all of the sigils and signs are alien to me. They have nothing in common with the statues outside the temple, or with the mural of the Black Pyramid. While I want to intellectually imply that the culture that built this place is older than a mere thousand years, there is a kind of timelessness to the room that makes me want to doubt my own beliefs, as well as my own knowledge that there is a modern world just outside the walls of this eternal temple.

Then I see it. Emblazoned upon one of the sculpted priests, just over his heart, is a single symbol I recognize from the Solonavi's most ancient lorebooks. The symbol, a double square with a seven-pointed cross in the middle, stands for Guardian. After a quick search, I discover that every sarcophagus in the vicinity bears the same symbol, and I am awestruck by the ramifications of my finding.

Then, one of the wisps floats through my scrying point, and suddenly lights up with a fiery, heated glow. All around the room, the hundreds of other wisps also enflame with the same fiery color, and all begin drifting toward me with alien menace.

Having learned my lesson with the Avatar of Death, I quickly close the scrying pool, plunging my chamber into darkness, and then retreat to the farthest corner. My back pressed against the cool stone, I ponder with fractured sanity what I've seen, and no longer wonder whether the slumbering gods beneath the Land are fantastical, or question whether these Guardians – or the true Tu'raj - keeps us all from destruction at the hands of divine wrath.

Into the Fist – Spring, Day 10

With the Solonavi having retreated from the temple pyramids at Caero, driven away by the predicted appearance of two Sky-Castles and more than a thousand troops loyal to the Imperial Legion, we now leave the site to the control of the Atlanteans. I believe they will have far less luck with exploring the place as we did. While I am pleased not to have to go back into the chamber, I would like very much to see what is really inside those sarcophagi and to see if any ancient bodies within could possibly be reanimated and controlled by one skilled in the black arts of Necromancy. While my kin even now are digging up the Valley of the Mists in search of reanimatable Amazon Queens, gaining services of an army of Kosian Priests may be a far more powerful coup.

I have been given a new assignment by Vextha, this time within far less dangerous country. I am to explore the Fist in search of a powerful warrior rumored to be an eventual contender for Khan Harrowblade. His name is Scorch, and is a Half-Troll wizard born with Orc strength and a Troll's red-skinned curse of magic.

My first day exploring the grasslands is largely uneventful, as the sporadic discovery of Orc scouts and the occasional archer does little to further my goals. While the steady, distant beat of clurch drums can still be heard everywhere I go, with such a sizable number of Orc tribes either raiding the southlands or having defected months ago with the Shadow Khans, many of the traditional tribal grounds stand empty. Since the Orcs are still a full season away from their first gathering of the year, I will need to find a tribe, spy upon them, and hope that I am lucky enough to gain knowledge of the Half-Troll I seek.

Bloody Battle – Spring, Day 11

In Orc society, there are three different reasons for fighting – honor, resources, and vengeance. In the battle I've come across, where a sizable tribe of Broken Tusk has cornered a group of Cave Orc warriors within a low valley, I can only guess that vengeance is the deal of the day. While the Harka tribes long ago drove the founders of the Cave Orc culture out of the Fist, the strength of the Black Grasses tribes ultimately gave the hated Cavers a way back into the political structure as teachers, traders, and mercenaries. Now that the strength of the Black Grasses lies fighting for food and treasure in Khamsin, the Harka can finally make their move against an ancestral and hated enemy.

The first wave of Ankhar-mounted troops lumbers down the hillside, while Orc archers fire dozens of missiles down at the Cave Orcs below. While casualties occur from this deadly rain, the thick hides of the Cave Lizards protect them against the worst of the fire. Some Cave Orcs even take refuge beneath their mounts, firing shot after shot against the armored turtle-

beasts moving down along their left flank. In the background, the clurch drummers announce their attack with rhythmic fury, as the commander of the Harka forces orders the foot troops to begin the charge from the right side to support the slow mounted advance.

While the Cave Orcs have enough mounts to transport a bit more than half of their troops, they seem reluctant – or maybe honorable – in not wanting to let their unmounted brethren be slaughtered or captured by the Harka forces. Instead, the riders turn and head to engage the Ankhar troops, while the foot troops begin a steady motion in the same direction, firing arrows at the charging line of green-skinned tribal warriors. The Cave Orcs seem to be doomed, but bravely determined to take as many Harka with them as they can.

Red Skin, Blood Magic – Spring, Day 12

Just as the jebta-riding Cave Orcs were about to clash with the Ankhar, a thunderclap sounded from overhead. Confused, many Harka riders stopped to look up at the clear skies – only to see the blistering storm of mana and lightning pour down from overhead. Whole Ankhar roasted in their shells from the deadly magical attack, and riders were blown apart, severed hands clenching charred and melting swords.

Screaming, the Harka's lines dissolved, even as another burst of energy fell across the foot soldiers, blasting and burning across their formations. While the Cave Orcs seem confused by the magical aid, they are taking the attack in better stride than their enemies and using every spare second to their advantage. Then, from the opposite hillside, a ball of burning light arcs up into the sky, traverses across the Cave Orc position, and then rockets down upon the Harka warlord. Blown backwards more than fifteen feet by the blast, the warlord is slow to get up – only to be vaporized by the wizard's second attack.

I don't see the mage yet, but as I move my scrying sight closer to the origin of the magical attack, I see the distinctive visage of a Half-Troll with red skin, already incanting another spell. Below, the Harka are breaking off the attack and running in all directions. The wizard, without remorse, blows apart as many of the Orcs as he can, leaving their smoking remains for the vultures to pick apart.

I have obviously found Scorch, and will alert my masters to his location in the Fist.

Building the Trap – Spring, Day 13

Around a series of campfires, the Cave Orc survivors cluster and watch their battle-leader talk and negotiate with the Half-Troll mage. While the scattering of night stars overhead burn with a cold fury, the firelight reflecting off of Scorch's bloody red skin casts off a nearly demonic glow. His face framed by his filed half-tusks, and his strap armor giving him the appearance of a hulking Necropolis pit-fighter, this Scorch has a fearsome appearance and an aura that bleeds violence.

The negotiations center around Scorch wanting to help the Cave Orcs regain their position as a tribe of the Fist and as a recognized member of the Broken Tusk. In exchange for his help convincing Khan Harrowblade and disrupting the Harka's political influence throughout the Fist Scorch wants a legion of Cave Orc riders to serve as his personal army. When asked whether

Scorch intended to rule the Fist, he replied that he wasn't ready yet – but that he needed the Cave Orcs for a different purpose.

While he took some time to get to his point, especially between bites of roast haunch and long draughts of sour beer, Scorch eventually stated that there is one other mage in the Land that he needs to capture, torture, and destroy - and that it will take an army of Orcs to lay a proper trap for the wizard. When questioned further, it turns out that the wizard that Scorch wants destroyed is the Troll wizard Maren'kar, and has devoted his life to destroying the Elementalist and acquiring the use of the wizard's magical tools.

The Promise of Power – Spring, Day 14

As the Cave Orcs escorted Scorch off of the Fist, starting the long journey through the choppy lands west of the steppelands to the Cave Orc homeland, I witnessed a lone Orc rider coming up fast from the east on a gray spotted horse. When the Cave Orc scouts noticed the oncoming warrior, they fired warning shots, causing him to spur his mount to one side just outside of their arrow range. Within a few moments, the Orc had pulled a small clurch drum from his saddlebags and began beating out a furious, though quiet message.

After a few moments of this, Scorch came riding out of the Cave Orc lines with fury on his face, moving with lethal intent toward the Orc. While the lone warrior stood his ground, the mere presence of the malevolent Half-Troll wizard obviously unnerved him.

“State your offer,” growled Scorch, when his came within range of conversation. “You’ve called me out in front of my warriors; this had better be worth my time.”

“My name is-“

“I don’t care who you are or where you’re from. You are of no consequence to me. State your offer quickly, or die.”

The Orc swallowed hard. “My masters in Rokos would like to make you an offer – in exchange for your service, they will help you capture the wizard Maren’kar.”

The Half-Troll wizard grinned widely. Dangerously. The Orc smiled nervously, trying to make some sense of what was going through the mage’s mind.

“From what I’ve been told by the spirit-fathers,” he said with a knowing look, “Maren’kar was trained in the ways of magic in Rokos, by the Oracles themselves.” Raising his hands to the sky, I watched as Scorch called a volt of lightning from a nearby ley-line into his hands, and then leveled his firing hand toward the panicked Orc.

“Maren’kar has his own agenda,” the Orc said quickly, hoping to save his life. “And powerful magic, and is building an army-“

“I have my own agenda, and my own magic, and my own army,” Scorch interrupted with a growl. “Why would I need the permission of the soulless to do something I can do myself?”

“We have similar interests-“

“We do at that,” said Scorch. “No deal. I want him myself, and I will not become a puppet of Rokos.”

“But we could offer you-“

“Shut up, weakling,” Scorch said with disdain, “this conversation is over.” Leveling his hand at the Orc’s heart, he blasted the rider off of his mount with a blast of lightning. As the limp body hit the ground, Scorch fired a second blast, then a third, until the corpse lay a burning husk in the

grass, beyond reanimation. Dismounting, he walked over to the corpse and rolled it over, taking a look at the face. "Harka tribe," he said with disdain.

"Figures."

A Draconum in Caero – Spring, Day 15

When word came from my masters that a Draconum Hierophant had been spotted flying into Caero, I quickly shifted my sight to get the dragon master in sight, to lock my pool onto him, and to see where his path would take me. While the Solonavi agent's directions were mostly accurate, it still took me over an hour to track the Draconum down amidst the marble columns, still pools, fountains and Magestone sculptures that littered the Atlantean bureaucratic center in Caero.

The Draconum and an Atlantean magus were playing a game of tiles and stones, with a small sack of refined red Magestone crystal sitting on a pedestal next to them as prize. As I've said before, the game usually involves the loser sacrificing something, and the stakes weren't immediately clear. But they were definitely playing for some prize, for while the magus kept levitating a cup to his hand as a showy, Technomantic means of distracting his opponent, the Draconum smoked a pipe of some bitter weed, and would occasionally flex his wings to drift the overly aromatic smoke in the magus' direction.

Most games go on for no more than two hours. From the sizable hourglass placed next to the board, these two had played for more than four, and the game was nowhere near complete. While the Atlantean kept up a very focused attack, trying to capture or kill his enemy's warlord, the Draconum used a variety of tactics that allowed for range and distance to be a factor. During this whole time, neither of the players spoke, and would only distract from the game long enough to take food or have their wine cups refilled by passing servants.

Prizes and Secrets – Spring, Day 16

The game of tiles and stones concluded last night at midnight, after nearly an entire day of play. In the end, the Draconum won, capturing the Atlantean's warlord after a fierce and costly chase. While the Atlantean was disappointed with the loss, and even moreso when the Draconum tucked the sack of red Magestone back into a deep pocket, the Atlantean began speaking shortly afterward, per the bet they had placed, of what he knew about the mountains of Scythria.

As Technomancers are able to significantly extend their lifespans with their magics, this Atlantean talked about things he'd seen nearly 150 years ago, when he was just a demi-magus leading assault teams into the Dwarven heartland. While he first talked about Tezla's successful transarnation into the metal Avatar Golem, and eventually spoke of Emperor Bazlus' realization that the magic-resistant Dwarves might be good for mining Magestone, he eventually turned to the topic the Draconum wished to speak of, regarding his own command role in the first attacks against the Dwarven holt in Scythria.

The Draconum asked a number of in-depth questions here, about the nature and size of the underground cities the Dwarves built, the defenses and methods the Dwarves used to attempt to hold off the Brass Golems and well-armed Atlantean troops, and other such tactical questions. While the venerable magus could only tell him so much, he was able to give him the rough locations of three holts in Scythria. When pushed about the whereabouts of a fourth holt, called Hlothlot Holt in the Dwarven tongue, the magus recalled it being near a peak that was roughly formed in the shape of an eagle's head. He had never visited the site, but he knew that the Dwarven defenders of that underground city took nearly a year to defeat, and in the end had to be burned out with pitch and liquid fire.

At the end of the talk, it was nearly dawn, and the Hierophant politely took his leave of the Atlantean. While the two did not seem to be old friends, there was a kind of grudging respect between them, as if they'd faced each other on the battlefields of the Land.

Dwarven Cities – Spring, Day 17

After many Dwarves were freed from slavery at the hands of the Atlanteans, many of them traveled to a valley just south of the Amazon homeland. There, with tools of metal and stone, they began the process of carving out homes from the living rock. Compared to the holts of old, they were small, cramped, and not very comfortable. But they were homes in nature and in name, and they gave Dwarves shelter from the open sky, and gave them a place to call their own.

The Hierophant's landing in the cramped valley leading up to one of these makeshift holts was a very noteworthy thing, as hundreds of Dwarves came out of ledges, openings, cracks and apertures throughout the valley to see the sight. Then, spiraling down from high above, a Scalesworn Honor Guard flew down on her Sky Dragon, drifting easily on the breeze as a Xandressan trader ship dances upon the water.

Landing next to the Hierophant, the two exchanged words in a tongue I'm not familiar with, likely a battlefield variant of the overly complex Draconum language. At the Scalesworn's arrival, a group of Dwarves came out, bearing a litter between them. On the litter was the oldest Dwarf I've ever seen, wrapped in a thick blanket, with a long white beard that stretched to his knees. As Dwarves typically only live for a maximum of fifty years, this one had to be close to that age.

Without word or question, the Draconum nodded to the Dwarf, as if this small being was an old friend. Unable to speak for his age and infirmity, the Dwarf nodded in return, his eyes bright with tears. Another one of the Dwarves handed the Hierophant a black cloth bag, covered with Dwarven runes; the Draconum reverently handed the object to his Scalesworn, then carefully gathered up the old Dwarf in his arms, cradling him gently within muscles better suited for tearing apart buildings.

Then, without another word, the two were off into the blue skies, and the Dwarves behind cheered in unison, their voices echoing amongst the stone of their home.

A Life Best Lived – Spring, Day 18

For a full day the Draconum and his Scalesworn flew, moving first across the vastness of Revolutionary territory, and then down across the Grange Valley and the corner of Khamsin. From this height, the castle city of Rangraz seemed but a blot against the ground, and the twinkling waters of the Roa Vizorr just a blue line amidst the green lands of the Grange

Valley. While far to the east the mountains of the Rivvenheims grew this high, and higher, out here in the lowlands the Draconum flew alone. Wrapped within the blanket, the Dwarf marveled at the scene, and occasionally exchanged words or pointed out places he'd been to during his travels.

At nightfall, the three warriors made camp just north of the city of Wolfsgate, which the Dwarf talked about with great reverence and familiarity. Having been one of the first Dwarves freed by the fledgling Rebellion, the human city of Wolfsgate and its marvelous bridge was the first civilized thing he'd seen in his life that didn't involve chains or strip-mine walls. During the years to come, he'd fought and killed in the name of Wolfsgate with prototype black powder weapons, and even fought for Ellaine Steward in the Khamsin Civil War of 423 Tz.

In time, the old Dwarf settled to sleep, leaving the Hierophant and Nepherea to watch for Atlanteans, thieves and Mage Spawn, protecting their charge until first light at dawn.

The Great Hall – Spring, Day 19

Another long day of flying followed the first, and the Hierophant, his Scalesworn, and the Sky Dragon were all showing signs of exhaustion – but none spoke at all of their hurts. After first following the trade road south, the group cut along the eastern edge of Solonavi territory, moving through the middle of the Empire's heart.

Upon reaching within sight of the floating city of Atlantis, the Dwarf was stunned, even brought to tears by the sight. Swallowing back his pride, he said that he'd fought his entire life to bring Atlantis and the Empire down, but until this moment, he'd never even seen it. Shining in the afternoon light like a twinkling star, the mile-wide floating city hovered over the Vizorr Delta like a shining jewel. He said he'd never seen anything so beautiful, and with absolute certainty, followed by saying that it seemed a shame that the Revolutionaries would one day have to tear it down out of the sky. The Hierophant chuckled at that. But as the Dwarf laughed, his laughter soon turned to a coughing fit that left him wheezing and gray by the time it passed. Wordlessly, the Hierophant readjusted the cradle of his arms so the Dwarf was more comfortable, then began the long, slow bank toward the Scythrian mountains to the west.

While the peaks of Scythria are not as high as the Rivvenheims, they share the same toothsome, jagged quality, and seem like a daunting obstacle of stone in the middle of a region rich with greenery and water. Following the magus' directions, the Hierophant found the eagle's stone within the space of an hour, and landed in front of a black opening into the mountain's heart. While the statues and arches that once decorated the entrance to Hlothlot Holt had long ago been tumbled by Technomantic golems, the carved opening still stood open to the wind and the world, as it had been for hundreds of years.

As the three warriors moved into the passage, I was aware that the Dwarf's breathing was growing more labored, and he was having a hard time focusing his eyes in the dark. The Hierophant made a light with a spell, and together the group walked into the heart of the holt, stepping around shattered stone, broken benches, and bits of shattered artifice and sculpture smashed more than a hundred years beforehand. Unerringly, the Draconum led the way into the depths, moving through one door then another, then down a long staircase, and then along the length of a once-grand hallway populated only by dust and shadows. While his Scalesworn had weapon at the ready for Mage Spawn or other denizens of the dark, the Draconum didn't seem worried about the location.

At the end of the hall, the Draconum moved open one of the great thirty-foot high stone doors, and led the way into a massive audience hall. At the far end of the chamber sat three stone

thrones; throughout the chamber were dozens of marble tables and benches, even some with stone plates and mugs still intact upon their surfaces. Moving through the maze of tables, the Hierophant climbed the short steps leading up to the seats of rule. Here, he gently set the Dwarf down into the middle-seat, as carefully as one would lay a baby in a crib. The Dwarf opened his eyes, felt the worn stone armrests with his withered fingertips, and looked with wonder upon the heart of a kingdom no Dwarf had seen in over a hundred years.

“Is this a dream?” he said weakly, staring with wonder at the hall before him. “Are we where I think we are?”

“It is not a dream, my friend,” the Draconum said quietly. “Jarl Frostriven, King of the Dwarven Vale, Hero of the Rebellion, and my dear friend for many years – this is the holt and hall of your ancestors, where your grandfather’s grandfather fought and loved and drank more golden mead than any Dwarf alive. You, my friend, are in the hall of your forefathers.”

“Thank you, my friend Escu,” Frostriven said back. “This is a good place to die.”

“That it is, my friend,” Escu said quietly, with a knowing look in his eye. Nepherea stepped forth at that moment, and offered the black cloth bag with reverence. Taking the sack and opening it, the Hierophant pulled out a beautiful axe forged from silver and mithril, marked with the runes of the Dwarven Kings of Scythria. “While I have no mead for you to drink, nor bards to sing you to the forgotten lands, I do have your axe, your rightful scepter of rule within this honored place.”

“I’d be happy to hold that again,” Frostriven said, and let the warrior place the weapon in his lap. While not strong enough to lift the weapon, the Dwarf’s fingers curled around the handle with a strength and familiarity that made the Hierophant proud.

“I need to take a rest,” the Jarl said quietly, “just for a moment...”

“You do that,” said the Draconum, “and I’ll watch over you as you sleep.” And after taking one more look at his forefather’s hall, and letting a small, pleased smile cross his lips, Jarl closed his eyes, and gently let himself fade to slumber.

An hour later, Jarl Frostriven passed from this world to the next, and his funeral pyre lit the skies of the Scythrian Mountains like a shining beacon. Soon, the tales of his life and his passing were told by Draconum, Dwarf, Amazon, and Revolutionary alike throughout the Northlands and beyond.

Deadly Race – Spring, Day 20

Hooves pounding, mane streaming in the wind, the Centaur runs for its life along the shores of the Roa Sanguine. Behind it, riding high on the wind, flies a flock of Crusader vampires toying with the idea of either tearing the Elemental warrior apart, or running it to death. For myself, observing the scene from my scrying pool, it is another game of life and death in the Wylden, with the predator assuredly about to catch its prey.

While the Centaur is heading toward a distant stand of woods – one of the few not showing outward signs of Zombie lumbering or the tree sickness spread by the Necromancers of the Dark Crusade – the Vampires overhead seem unconcerned. Gliding in the breeze, they bet with one another about whether the Centaur will make it to the woods alive.

But when a long, metal arrow scores through the lead vampire’s chest, and then explodes into brilliant, phosphorescent flame, the other undead scatter like a bunch of frightened crows. When

they regroup, the Centaur is already safe in the trees, and there is no sign of the mystery assassin that so easily destroyed one of the Crusader's most powerful undead.

Fight or Flight – Spring, Day 21

Spending the night recuperating in the deep woods did the Centaur some good. While the heavy rainstorm washed away most of the scents that the undead would use to track the lathered beast through the trees, every odd splash of water left the Centaur flinching against possible attack. By first light, the Centaur was already on the move, eyes wild, nose sniffing the cold morning air for any signs of pursuers.

While Centaurs are more evolved than mere horses, when they are being openly hunted by a predator, they share many of the same instincts. When defending their young, leading the cause of war, or scouting enemy terrain, their “civilized” instincts take the forefront, allowing them a great deal of capability in times of conflict. But here, divided from the pack, alone amongst the trees, the creature seems to be on the verge of fight or flight, both of which should lead to its final death.

In the distance, a vampire screams its final death; the Centaur, like the birds and forest animals around it, bolt and take flight, running through the maze of trees for its life.

Grace and Ferocity – Spring, Day 22

Bursting out into a clearing lit by leaf-dappled sunlight, the Centaur puts on all of his speed, hoping to make it across the grassy expanse to the safety of the trees beyond. But when a form moves out of the trees ahead, silent as a stone, the Centaur balks for a moment at the strange, but terrible sight.

Half Centaur, half cat, the shaggy, lynx-like creature stares at the Elemental warrior as if its never seen the like. In contrast to the sunlight shining off of the Centaur's flank, the alien cat-centaur stays in the shade of the trees, keeping out of the heat of the mid-day sun. With pointed ears, wide paws, and alabaster skin, this strange being carries herself with a beautiful grace - and a terrible ferocity only matched by the bloodsuckers of the Dark Crusade during their most predatory mating flights.

The creature says a term in the High Elven tongue; “Snow Centaur”. The forest Centaur has no knowledge of the word, and steps away nervously at the sound of the High Elven language. Nodding at the centaur's lack of understanding, the Snow Centaur reaches into a pouch, takes out a handful of vampire fangs, and lets them drop to the ground in a rain of glittering bone.

“Will you help me?” the Centaur asks. The cat-creature merely nods, and gestures for the Elemental warrior to follow.

Free Passage – Spring, Day 23

More than a dozen of the Snow Centaurs rest from the mid-day sun in a cave of trees and leaves, their white-furred bodies sensitive to the heat of the lowlands. From a conversation that took place between one of the males and the skittish Centaur, the Snow Centaurs are the servants of the Heirraman, the mystical High Elven warriors of the Rivvenheim mountains just a few days east of here.

Having long guarded the highest passes and slopes from invaders, now groups of Snow Centaurs are being sent into the lowlands to scout and fight for their High Elven masters. They state that the Crusaders have overstepped their bounds in sealing off North Pass, and that they must allow the Elven Lords free passage into the Lands of the west or face their retribution.

The Centaur states that there is little that he, or the other Elementalists can do. When he points out that the bulk of the Elemental forces are either holed up in Roanne Valle or Stonekeep, the Centaur seems to pay little heed. Their concerns are simple – to gain the service of Centaur allies in order to learn as much about the region around North Pass as possible. Once the way has been cleared for their Lords, then they will consider whether to aid the Elementals in their situation with the Dark Crusade.

Vested Authority – Spring, Day 24

Having been gone for most of the day, the Centaur returns from meeting with the members of his tribe. While he is off finding out what aid his tribe will offer, the Snow Centaurs merely wait, eat sparingly, clean and prepare their weapons, and occasionally kill small birds and animals and eat them whole. These beings are definitely not herbivores, and they seem to prefer the taste of small voles over the crunchy, gooey interior of hummingbird bodies.

When the Centaur returns, he brings with him interesting news. While he is sure that the Centaurs in Roanne Valle are to be of no aid, there are scouts and warriors loyal to the Wylden Host that would be willing to aid in the Snow Centaur's mission, in exchange for a future favor. The Snow Centaurs, with the authority vested to them by their Elven masters, agree to the deal, and demand to immediately begin their education about the battleground to the west of North Pass.

The Outpost - Spring, Day 25

Vextha directed my gaze to the hills west of Enos Joppa. A settlement had formed there, and Vextha suspects that it may be of interest to the Solonavi.

At first glance, I was skeptical. To call the collection of tents and partially built houses a “village” would be a kindness. It was clear to me that this was a newly established settlement. But as I watched, I began to realize the significance of this village. Mixed with peoples from the scattered Galeshi tribes, workers from Khamita, and even a few dwarves, this place had the markings of a new Black Powder Revolutionaries outpost. After seeing the Bloody Thorns banner flapping over a Revolutionaries banner placed atop a partially completed wall, I began to understand not only the purpose behind this outpost, but also its mastermind. Hence the Solonavi's interest: Although I could see neither Black Thorn nor her Draconum bodyguard, Tyrsis, either – or preferably both – would make a glittering prize for the Solonavi.

The outpost's purpose is clear: to aid the Revolutionaries in recovering the scattered Galeshi and to turn a watchful eye on the orcs who maraud in the desert. The plan is ambitious to say the least, especially with Darq also hunting Galeshi in the area. I believe the orcs will take offense at this village, especially when its walls are raised, as they will consider it a challenge to their strength. It soon became clear, however, that the orcs would not wait even that long.

Out of the western desert, the orcs attacked faster than a sandstorm. The workers barely had time to raise the alarm as six orcs, each riding a two-legged desert warbird, tore through the encampment. The odd gait of the agile warbirds made them look almost comical as they weaved through the tent village. Although I thought I understood the nature of this attack, it became apparent that the orcs were actually searching for something specific. As they tore the oasis apart, the Revolutionaries began to mount a counterattack.

Suddenly a loud racket tore through the air. The source was within a large crate almost the size of a small house. The crate had exploded, throwing several orcs from their mounts. As the smoke and debris cleared, I began to suspect that this was what the orcs were searching for.

I burst into laughter when I saw it. A dwarf had managed to strap himself into a golem! The smoke was actually steam pouring out of its back. One of the golem's arms ended in a massive fist, the other in a buzzing round saw. Both the saw and the golem slowly began to pick up speed.

My laughter was cut short as the dwarf landed its first blow, crushing an orc and its warbird to the ground. This stopped the other orcs in their tracks; they were unsure how to handle this new threat. Taking advantage of their hesitation, the villagers pushed their attack with swords and black powder pistols. After the construct landed several more powerful blows, the orcs quickly realized they were out of their league, and they fled as quickly as they had come.

A few Khamita men tried to give chase, but the Galeshi prevented them, explaining that the warbirds were faster than most men. Although the orcs had left a pair of dazed warbirds behind, the Revolutionaries seemed either unsure about riding them or unwilling to try.

As I watched the golem-encased dwarf and others pick up the pieces of their encampment, I realized the purpose of this new "weapon": It was designed to cut down trees and fashion lumber for buildings. The orcs had somehow gained knowledge of the tool and decided to try to capture it. The leader of the village seemed to come to this conclusion just as I did, and she dispatched one of the Galeshi with a hastily written letter meant for Black Thorn. The orcs would probably return, and reinforcements were in order.

Enos Joppa - Spring, Day 26

As I watched the Galeshi courier make his way to Enos Joppa, I considered the ramifications of the new Bloody Thorns outpost. Black Thorn is known for associating with thugs, murders, and lowlifes, and her ragtag band of outlaws would be more at home skulking around a black market – not establishing a way station on the edge of orc territory. This new development was out of character. The fact that the Galeshi courier was making his way to Enos Joppa, a city known for supporting Blackwyn and the Northlanders, confused me further. Something was at work in Black Thorn's camp.

The division between the Bloody Thorns and the Northlanders was not as distinct as the division between, say, the Imperial Legion and the Golemcore. Still, these two subgroups of the Black Powder Revolutionaries were distinct and often at odds.

As the courier entered the outskirts of Enos Joppa, I took the time to scan the city. Once distinct cities, Enos and Joppa had been forced to merge for mutual protection against orc raiders. Central to several gold and iron mines, the newly secure city became a thriving trade community, which brought in higher-class clientele. But it didn't take long for corruption to set in, and for a long time the city's polished exterior hid a deeper unscrupulousness. That was, until Blackwyn liberated the city a few years ago. Now the city is maintained by patrols of Northlander "regulars," and order has been established.

I was very surprised, therefore, to see the courier move to avoid the patrols and finally arrive at a pub on the banks of the Roa Vizzor. The courier sat at a table for a few minutes, watching the entrance. Satisfied that he had not been followed, the Galeshi slowly moved to a back hallway and knocked at a door. After giving a muffled password, the door opened and the Galeshi stepped in.

I could not believe my luck – the Galeshi had led me to Black Thorn herself! I hastily wrote a note and sent it, via magescrit, to the Solonavi. This piece of information would certainly be valuable to them. Returning to the pool, I noticed that Black Thorn was very unhappy with her own letter. "Three men dead! I told you the orcs wouldn't wait! This was always a stupid plan."

The man to whom this was addressed took the letter from Black Thorn and read it over briefly before responding. "The outpost is important. It will not only provide a layer of defense for Enos Joppa, which will endear you to Blackwyn and the council, but it will also allow us to make first contact with the Galeshi who are fleeing Darq's forces."

"I agreed to the plan, Warden; however, I still worry that it takes us away from our goal of further undermining Atlantis." Black Thorn paused, rubbing her temples. This problem was apparently giving her a headache. "There is nothing to be done about it now. Take some additional men to reinforce the outpost." Prince Warden gathered his helm and shield and walked to the door.

Before he reached it, Black Thorn spoke again. "Warden, why not take the new lance we captured? It might be useful in securing more of the orc warbirds?"

A devilish smile grew on Prince Warden's handsome face. "As you command."

Tinkers and Warbirds - Spring, Day 27

Prince Warden's arrival at the Bloody Thorns outpost was met with cheers. He was well known and liked by the men and dwarves at the camp. I imagine that the small company of men who accompanied Warden was also a welcome sight.

Warden spent part of his day examining the new machines in action. Apparently, the team had only two, and those were on loan from the Northlanders. From the secretive grins of some of the men in the group, I have the distinct impression that Blackwyn may not even be aware he is lending them out.

As I watched and listened, I learned that the devices were not golems in the traditional sense. Most golems had some rudimentary intelligence and could respond to verbal or magical commands. These machines were more like chariots, requiring a “driver.” Because of the size of the machine and the skill needed to operate it, dwarves, with their natural aptitude for tools, were best suited to the task. The men jokingly referred to the machines as Steam Tinkers, playing off the human nickname for dwarves: “tinkers.”

The Steam Tinkers were making short work of much of the surrounding forest. A large stack of lumber stood ready while the rest of the outpost built and rebuilt portions of the encampment. Hasty repairs to the few standing buildings were made, but I realized that the group had spent the last two days shoring up and finishing the outer walls. They obviously feared the orcs more than the elements.

Warden eventually made his way over to the pen that contained the captured warbirds. He approached one of the birds cautiously. The villagers had been feeding and watering the beasts, which seemed to make them a bit more docile. I imagine that the humans treated the steeds better than the orcs had. Warden displayed no apprehension while walking around the inside of the pen. It was obvious that he was used to being around animals. After some time, he finally felt confident enough to ride one.

Slowly maneuvering the warbird, Warden adapted to the unusual gait of the hooked-beaked birds. Before long, Warden was zipping around the perimeter of the camp. He pulled up near one of the Galeshi leaders. “Ashek, these are fast!” he said. “And you say they can keep up this speed even in the desert?”

“Aye, milord,” the Galeshi responded, taking the reigns of the warbird.

Warden dismounted. “If we could capture a few more of these, we could send out search parties to round up the remaining Galeshi. They would also make excellent scout steeds.”

“Aye, milord, but how would we obtain more? We were lucky to get these two from the orcs. Had they not been in a panic, they would have killed these two before running,” Ashek responded as the two men walked back to the warbird pen.

Warden smiled. “Well, we might be able to arrange another surprise when they return,” he said, as the two of them retired to a large tent to plan further.

The Battle at the Oasis - Spring, Day 28

At dawn, a hundred orcs, warbeasts, and goblins crashed against the tall wooden walls of the oasis. Orcs have raided villages, castles, and even cities throughout their warring history, so this fort should not have seriously challenged them. While under fire from Revolutionaries riflemen, Thunder Drummers commanded warbeasts to attack a single section of the hastily built wall.

With a great explosion, the wall collapsed, pulled down by the orc warbeasts. Prince Warden rode a warbird out of the gaping hole and into the midst of the orc army. Other Galeshi – on foot and on warbirds – the Steam Tinkers, and a pair of Steam Knights supported him. The battle dissolved into a chaotic melee.

Warden and his lance were a sight to behold. Although the lance was too long for hand-to-hand combat, Warden used it to devastating effect against other mounted warriors. Every time he would joust, he would send the other rider flying from its mount. A Galeshi warrior would then kill the rider and claim its mount. Eventually, Warden managed to dismount almost all of the orcs, capturing eight to ten warbirds in the process.

As the sun began to set, the few remaining orcs attempted to flee. A few Galeshi chased those down before they made it over the first dune. To my horror, the Revolutionaries gathered the bodies of the dead, both orc and human, and began to build pyres. A skillful necromancer could have turned those dead into an impressive army! Among the dead was Ashek Sandslayer, a legendary Galeshi warrior and leader of this encampment. Apparently, Ashek was a longtime friend of Prince Warden, who took the Galeshi's sword and pistol.

Ashek's Pyre - Spring, Day 29

As the sun rose over the oasis, the Bloody Thorns held a mass memorial. The fires from the night before had burned themselves out, leaving an oily black residue on the field of battle. The surviving men and women gathered in a semicircle around the area and buried the broken weapons of their fallen comrades, including the sword and pistol of Ashek Sandslayer. I am often baffled by how other cultures tend to their dead; Crusaders honor death in a different way – they revere it.

As the sun hit its zenith, a group of dwarves and humans arrived at the outpost. They were sent by Black Thorn herself. A member of this party hand delivered a letter to Prince Warden. Short and to the point, the letter commanded Warden to return to Black Thorn's side. He was to bring the griffon lance and a desert warbird or two, if he felt they were up to the task. She also informed him that she had sent additional reinforcements to help guard the oasis.

After reading this, I scanned the group of newcomers. At first I believed them to be unimpressive, dwarves mostly, until I noticed four wooden crates. Too small to carry Steam Tinkers, the boxes confused even Warden at first. One of the dwarves approached him as the others cracked open the boxes. Inside were large golems, each the size of a small horse and shaped like a sand scorpion. One arm ended in a huge pincer while the other ended in a long cannon.

"I calls them Screechers, milord," the dwarf commented. "I intended for them to lob shells far into the air like those new Steam Maulers do. For some reason, they just can't get the distance." The dwarf shook his head in sad frustration.

"So why do you call them Screechers?" Warden asked, as the dwarves lit the steam boilers in the belly of the golems. The dwarf's answer was cut short as a loud piercing whistle, similar to a tea kettle, issued from each of the golems. At a verbal command from the Dwarf, the Screechers scuttled off, protecting the perimeter of the encampment.

Later in the day Warden began his journey back to Enos Joppa. As he left he spoke to the assembled group. "We should name this place," he said. "I think 'Ashek's Pyre' is fitting, don't you?" The leader of the encampment indicated her improvement, as did the rest of the remaining warriors.

As I watched Warden depart, it became clear why Black Thorn had chosen this prince to become a lieutenant. While her group was more focused on the underworld operations often needed to

support a beginning nation, Prince Warden would be the public face that concealed whatever actions she felt necessary to take.

Rekindled Interests - Spring, Day 30

Upon waking this morning I decided to direct my gaze back to a familiar face. I found Maleficious in the renegade Raydan Marz's tower, high above Prieska; the two men were locked in a heated debate.

As their conversation progressed, it became obvious that Maleficious' interest lay with a small power surge he detected far to the east. This interested me, as I had detected nothing, and if my Solonavi masters had, they deemed it too insignificant for me to investigate. As in the past, I suspected the little scholar of manipulating Marz, but I could see no immediate reason for his doing so.

After allowing Maleficious to make his case, Marz summarily dismissed the scholar and reminded the old man of his place. The old man returned to his chambers, and I was about to turn my attentions elsewhere when I noticed that he began packing for a journey. Interested in the reasons for his defiance, I let my gaze linger a few more moments, and I'm glad I did: It became clear that the scholar wasn't simply leaving for a few days; he was planning some kind of expedition.

The morning wore on, and the little man continued his perpetrations until he left the tower on the back of a Dragonfly. As expected, he turned the golem east. Maleficious flew for the better part of the day, taking no rest and making great haste. His mount's wings moved faster than any in my experience as he pushed the construct to its mechanical limits.

When Maleficious finally descended through the clouds, his revealed destination was no less surprising than his anxiousness: Fairhaven, the former Atlantean stronghold. What this old man could possibly want in a Crusaders city intrigued me even more than the unusual circumstances surrounding his hasty departure from the renegade's tower. This situation certainly merits more investigation.