

Kastali's Diary – Late Spring, 435 Tz

Many Preparations – Late Spring, Day 1

The next morning I refocused my scrying mirror on Fairhaven. Even though the Crusaders' occupation was but a few seasons old, signs of their influence abounded. A newly erected temple to the Blood Goddess sat in the center of the trade district. Crusader militias patrolled the streets, and zombies speckled the back alleys, running errands for their masters. As the city was still of some importance, I spotted large numbers of travelers, but they seemed to be in a haste to leave the city by nightfall.

I found Maleficious already about his business. The little man scurried to and fro throughout Fairhaven's market district, assembling what looked to be quite the little expedition. Beasts of burden, laden with supplies, met a handful of humans with all the accoutrements for a major excavation project: picks, shovels, and enough powder to remove the greater part of a hillside.

A dark sorcerer accompanied them, a man I recognized almost immediately. He called himself Nilahit, and he fancied himself a much better necromancer than he was, although he was certainly capable. Nilahit and the scholar discussed their destination furtively, although in only the vaguest terms; they both possessed an understanding of their subject that frustrated my immediate efforts to discover more. Maleficious' paranoia notwithstanding, I would know soon enough.

The little caravan left Fairhaven by the northern gate shortly after noon. They followed the Roa Kaiten for a few hours before veering into the hills. As the day wore on, Maleficious became increasingly excited; the old man almost appeared giddy. I briefly scanned the area for anything unusual, but found nothing. Perhaps all the time the little scholar spent in Marz' tower had an ill effect on his mind, or perhaps too much of the renegade's wine supplies had been diverted into the old man's gullet.

As evening drew closer, the operation stopped. Maleficious dismounted and indicated to the sorcerer that they were close. An old path, little more than a track through the underbrush, led to a large scar in the ground. I quickly consulted an old map; the only feature in the area was a long-abandoned Atlantean mine. The expedition itself now made sense, but a question remained: What could Maleficious possibly expect to find that the Atlanteans did not?

A Grisly Discovery – Late Spring, Day 2

After resuming my observation this morning, I was startled by the scholar's progress. Some sense of urgency compelled him and his necromancer colleague to work through the evening, and large amounts of fresh dirt and rock lined the hole.

As the morning carried on, the servants worked like madmen to clear more rubble from the old mine. Maleficious buzzed around the operation like an insect, picking up rocks to

examine, critiquing an individual worker's performance, and sharing pieces of trivial information with Nilahit. He exhibited the animation of a young man – not a shriveled scholar.

During breaks in watching, I consulted some old tomes for further information about the area. I found several references to the mine, but nothing more than what one might expect to find: Atlanteans stripped the area for Magestone until the quarry ran dry, and then they left. Otherwise, the mine itself seemed completely unremarkable, making Maleficious' behavior all the more puzzling.

By early afternoon, the workers began to show the strain of their task. I noted that the piles of dirt grew at a much slower pace, and even the scholar and his friend spent more time sitting than moving around. Maleficious began compulsively mopping sweat from his bald head, which had begun turning a light – and then darker – shade of crimson as the day wore on. The scholar was so engrossed in his work that he did not seem to notice or care about the pain he would experience that evening. At least Nilahit had a little more sense; he had wrapped a piece of his robe around his crown.

Late in the afternoon, an excited shout rose among the workers. Maleficious scrambled into action, but became crestfallen when he discovered what had awakened their interest: a pit of corpses, each smaller than a human. The remaining bits of hair and clothes indicated that these were once dwarven slaves, likely worked to death and left in the ground when the Atlanteans stopped mining. The discovery sparked Nilahit's interest, and the two men began discussing an amendment to their contract. They ended by agreeing to forego the regular payment for the expedition in exchange for allowing Nilahit to animate the dwarves as servants. The ease with which Maleficious agreed to the change took me by surprise; the little man practically oozed desperation. The sorcerer dispatched a messenger to Fairhaven to bring back an unnamed relic. While interesting, none of this explained why Maleficious had begun digging in the first place.

Strange Happenings – Late Spring, Day 3

The next day I found Nilahit wasting little time with his new property: Skeletal dwarves now walked around the excavation site mingling with the human workers, some of whom looked as though they might drop from exhaustion at any time. Still Maleficious urged them on, the crazed look on his sunburned face disturbing to behold. At least he had found enough common sense to locate a hat to ward against the sun. .

Indeed, the scholar's paranoia had grown through the night. After he debated briefly with Nilahit, the skeletons formed a defensive perimeter around the camp. Before their shadows reached midday, Maleficious' over-cautiousness finally paid off. Two goblin scouts broke the perimeter, and with the silent coordination only the undead minions of the Crusaders possess, several skeletons converged on the unsuspecting spies. In a matter of seconds, rusted axes and ancient picks met goblinflesh, painting the dusty rocks with their blood. Then, as one, the enthralled dead returned to their posts. Watching their ruthless efficiency brought a smile to my face.

Like an hourglass in reverse, I marked time based on the growing piles of dirt and rock outside of the mine. As is the case with viewing any repetitive work, I grew somewhat bored and checked on them only periodically as I again tried to discover anything unusual about the area.

As evening approached, one of the workers put down his pick, approached Maleficious, and gave him a small object. At first, the object appeared to be nothing more than a dusty rock. Then the purpose of Maleficious' dig became clear.

The object was a red Magestone.

A Gathering Storm – Late Spring, Day 4

Shortly after witnessing the discovery of the Red Magestone, I communicated to Vextha what was going on. He instructed me to find out who else might be aware of this resource. I looked back on the excavation site, and I found Maleficious in deep debate with Nilahit. Several workers had apparently left over the course of the evening and could not be found. The necromancer ordered several of his dwarven skeletons back to Fairhaven to gather a much larger force to secure the area. As I turned my scrying pool elsewhere, I realized that Nilahit would need every warm – and cold – body in the city.

I found the orcs already en route, their warbirds pushed to their physical limits to make haste. I counted the banners of at least five tribes, and their numbers indicated a small host rather than a typical raiding party, their birds laden with soldiers, supplies, and all the weaponry of war. Similarly, I found General Vale already on the move from his Rivvenheim hiding-hole, mounted on an enormous Skyguard Griffon and surrounded by a flock of elven riders on smaller birds.

Turning my mirror to the West, I peered into Emperor Nujarek's throne room. There he stood, ordering General Volkare to mobilize his troops into one of the Atlantean flying citadels to move out toward Fairhaven.

I briefly located Drakor, only to confirm what I already suspected: I found him in flight with a large detachment of Draconum warriors, en route to the mine as well. On a hunch, I turned my mirror to the South and saw a Freeholders raiding party, somehow alerted and making its way north, their ragged numbers zealously bent on taking the stones.

In Rangraz, Blackwyn has already begun to mobilize a small army moving towards the Roa Kaiten which he can follow south, straight into Fairhaven. Later in the day, I returned to the mine and Maleficious, who seemed to sense the threat growing around him. I watched as he discussed further plans with Nilahit, and I observed as the Crusader reinforcements appeared on the horizon.

I turned my gaze to Rokos. A glow on the outskirts of the city drew my attention. A Solonavi Creator was busy producing several hundred Drones, each wielding a long

saber. Later, more Solonavi joined her, from constructs to Oathsworn. I watched as they faded into the night, bound for Fairhaven.

Fairhaven has a history of attracting battles, but I doubt that even her seasoned walls will be prepared for the eight factions destined to clash near her.

The Bargain – Late Spring, Day 5

Valkyrie Tazia sat atop her black pegasus, looking down at Maleficious. “Why should I not simply take control of the mine and take your life, wizard?” Tazia had asked a good question, one I had considered already. I focused my scrying pool closer on the Crusader. I have fond memories of watching Tazia fighting in the blood pits of Necropolis, and I am not surprised to find her leading the Dark Crusaders’ mounted division. She was an incredible sight in her blood-red strap armor, which clung to every curve of her powerful body. I longed to return to my homeland.

Turning my attention back to the conversation, I watched as Maleficious responded with a grin. “My dear young lady. First, what makes you think you can kill me? And even if you could, you would then not have the knowledge that I have: how to forge Red Magestone into weapons.”

Tazia seemed to consider this for a moment. “So the bargain is this: We stop the others from taking this mine, and you will forge weapons for us.”

“Oh, no.” Maleficious obviously realized he had the upper hand. “The bargain is that whoever can hold this mine will allow me to set up a laboratory here and conduct my research in peace. In exchange, I will allow that group to mine the Red Magestone – as long as I get what I need for my research. If the agreement is upheld, I may be convinced to provide that faction with my research, when it is complete.”

“And what do you research, wizard?” Tazia’s mount stamped at the ground and rustled its wings. Nether rider nor mount liked being on the ground for too long.

“That’s no one’s concern but mine,” Maleficious responded. Seeing the scowl on Tazia’s face, he added, “It will, however, have military applications for those who know how to use it.”

A deep frown crossed Tazia’s attractive face. “I don’t like this one bit. However, Aeradon said that the Red Magestone would be of no use to him without you. So we have a deal. We will hold this mine and then hold you to your bargain!” She urged the pegasus into the air. “Reinforcements will be here tonight – no one will take this land from us.”

Maleficious turned and walked back to the entrance of the mine. “I don’t really care who holds this area, as long as I can do my research,” he said. At first I thought the old man was speaking to himself. Then he turned his gaze and looked straight out of the pool and

into my eyes. “Kastali, extend my offer to your masters as well. I’m sure they will see the wisdom of it.” He turned and entered the mine. The magical radiation that poured from the mine disrupted my pool, causing it to blink out.

I sat for some time pondering what I had witnessed before sending the wizard’s message to Vextha.

The Calm – Late Spring, Day 6

Tazia returned in the morning. With her were several necromancers, more pegasi, a small army of undead, and a large cache of weapons. Apparently, the Crusaders had been fortifying Fairhaven for some time.

During the day, I checked in on each of the factions. Apparently, Maleficious had made his offer to each of them, for each had been instructed not to harm the wizard or the mine. Even the orcs seemed willing to allow the scholar to live. Although Maleficious is a wizard of some renown, I was surprised that so many would go out of their way to claim his favor. Like a high-priced whore, Maleficious spent most of the day preening himself and the mine.

As I scryed for the Black Powder Revolutionary force, I came across the Atlantean Empire force. Right about that time, the Revolutionaries found them as well, and a brief-but-bloody battle ensued. Both forces eventually pulled back, but both had been weakened: Their old hatred may have cost them in the coming battle.

The War Begins – Late Spring, Day 7

I slept very little last night; I knew that the armies would be close to Fairhaven by now. Indeed, as the sun rose, the first armies crested the hills near the mine. The Dark Crusaders continued to pull whatever reinforcements they could from the surrounding area. Tazia commanded a flight of pegasi ridden by the recently unearthed skeletal dwarves, armed with dwarven fuser axes, swords, and armor.

Almost simultaneously, the Elemental Freeholders army, the Orc Khans army, and what was left of the Revolutionary and Empire armies appeared within a mile of the mine. If they had any sense among them, they would have joined forces and crushed the Crusaders. Petty jealousies and political differences, however, prevented even the opening of a dialog. Instead, the forces crashed into one another.

Giant salamanders pulled warbirds into pools of water. Elemental warriors on sky dragons jousting with the Dark Crusader riders on pegasi. A new Atlantean golem in the shape of a cat tore through the orc ranks, its rider barely holding on. Each force’s elite cavalry shaped the battle.

As the sun set, the battle lines had been clearly drawn, with each faction beginning to reinforce its position. Night fell, and over the screams of battle came the incantations of the necromancers. This day saw many die. This night will see those dead rise to fight again.

The Battle Continues – Late Spring, Day 8

As the sun rose over Fairhaven, it almost seemed like a peace had been called. The Atlanteans and Revolutionaries had already retreated, both ravaged by undead during the night. Orc Khan shamans had managed to heal many of their dying before the necromancers could get to them. They now faced both the Elemental and Crusader forces.

I do not know who hated the Crusaders more. The Orc Khans still held them responsible for Darq's actions. The Freeholders force consisted of warriors who had been driven out of their homelands by the Crusaders. If the two groups had but realized their mutual "interest," they could have combined forces to crush the Crusaders.

Instead, the orcs showed their total lack of sense with a stealthy attack on the Elementals, who were alerted by the forest itself and were waiting. As the two groups battled, Dark Crusader necromancers resurrected the dead, turning them against their former comrades. At the stroke of midday, the sound of flapping wings filled the air. At first the Elementals sent up a loud cheer; surely they thought reinforcements had arrived. Their cheers were cut off as the banner of the Elven Lords swept through the air, held aloft on a giant Skyguard Griffon.

The battle grew chaotic again as the four forces tore into one another, battling even as the day melted into the night.

Faction War – Late Spring, Day 9

During my years I have known several Draconum. A few even joined the Crusaders, seeking the promise of immortality. I have always been impressed by the dragon warriors and found their skills in one-on-one combat amazing. I often wondered what would happen if the Draconum ever organized into a true fighting force, like the Crusaders or Atlantean Empire.

Last night I found out. I have taken to sleeping next to the pool, letting the moans of the dying lull me to sleep. I was awakened by a roar of such volume, it must have shaken the very ground at Fairhaven. As I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, the pool illuminated as if it were day. The Draconum had arrived. Using both spells and their own fiery breath, they attacked from the sky, burning everything on the ground.

After this initial attack, which caused both shock and awe in the remaining forces, the Draconum landed and engaged the tired and weakened forces in melee combat, tearing through even the Dark Crusaders army. Much to my surprise the Draconum even managed to expose contingents of Atlantean and Revolutionary forces that were apparently biding their time until the other groups had beaten each other down. That both groups had the same plan was unsurprising.

It appeared that the Draconum would win this battle; they were far fresher than the other forces on the field. I searched for Tazia, who I found engaged in single combat with

Drakor. The two battled in the sky, wheeling around one another. Tazia seemed to be having the time of her life, and her grin matched my own. My grin faded as Drakor snapped the wings of Tazia's pegasus, causing her to plunge to the ground. As she fell, Tazia tore through Drakor's wings with a spear, causing him to plummet to the ground as well.

Both warriors slowly climbed to their feet. Tazia had survived by using the body of her broken horse to cushion her fall. As they began to circle one another, a flash of light appeared between them. As it faded, the form of Vextha appeared between the two weary warriors. My masters had arrived. The tide turned once again.

The Solonavi force appeared quite small at first. Then I noticed that warriors from each faction began to turn on their comrades – Solonavi Oathsworn had managed to infiltrate almost every group. The Draconum formed into neat attack groups to face this new enemy, while the other factions scrambled to adapt.

It took me some time to figure out what happened next. From my viewpoint it seemed as if every dead warrior on the field suddenly rose and began fighting. I was unsure as to how this was happening because the Crusader necromancers had been prime targets for the other factions early in this conflict. Later, after piecing together conversations, I learned that Nilahit had used Red Magestone to enhance his own necromancy skills, giving unlife to every dead thing on the field. After the battle, even Tazia slapped Nilahit on the back in congratulations, almost knocking him to the ground.

Thus did one man turn the tide of battle and repel every major force in the land. Even the Solonavi had to admit that they could not deal with a self-replenishing army of the dead.

My heart soared as Maleficious informed Tazia that the Crusaders had secured his service – and the mine.

A Tempting Offer – Late Spring, Day 10

Although my fitful sleep back in my own cot had done little to refresh me, I pushed aside my weariness and focused on watching the Dark Crusaders consolidate their hold on their – or rather Malificious' – mine. I turned my scrying sight away from the scholar himself, as I did not want him to know that I continued to monitor his operation, and I instead followed Tazia's lithe form as she set about reorganizing the defending forces. Although bruised, battered, and still bleeding from her duel with Drakor, Tazia strode about the camp that had sprung up about the mouth of the mine, ordering her forces back to defensive positions.

No sooner had the Valkyrie set her fellow Crusaders to the ready once more than a lone Nightstalker was brought into the camp. The Nightstalker made his obeisance to Tazia, his eyes flinching from the swelling bruises marring her beautiful face as he reported his purpose at the camp. He bore a message from Deathspeaker Aeradon, who was offering employment that he thought she might be interested in. He showed her a scroll that detailed the assignment, but I was unable to read it before Tazia closed her fist about it,

an eager smile already lighting her delicate face. The Valkyrie turned away from the Nightstalker, calling for a mount to replace her crippled pegasus, her wounds suddenly forgotten.

Tazia spoke briefly to Nilahit, informing the necromancer that she was returning to the great city of Necropolis, and that he was in command of operations about the mine until she returned or someone else came to take over. Although I longed to investigate the project that Malificious was working on, the fierce joy in Tazia's face as she urged her new mount into the air promised events of even more interest. As weariness called me toward my bed at last, I locked my scrying pool on Tazia's form as she flew northeast on her Dark Pegasus' back.

The Flight to Necropolis – Late Spring, Day 11

Tazia drove her Dark Pegasus hard, the night-black creature soaring through the air, fleeing the setting sun. Although the Crusaders control the land over which Tazia and her Dark Pegasus flew, the Valkyrie kept her steed high, avoiding the patrols below in favor of swift, steady flight.

I was uncertain if the winged horse was going to survive the rigors of the trip, considering the demands Tazia made on it, but as the pair approached the end of their journey, the Valkyrie brought the Dark Pegasus down in the plains south of Black Lake. As her mount stood with its head down, breathing heavily and with lather coating its flanks, Tazia tracked and slew a deer. She brought the dead animal back to the clearing, slit the deer's neck, and allowed the Dark Pegasus to feast on the flesh and blood of the beast. The sight of the Valkyrie in her red-strap armor, splattered with the deer's blood, is not one I will soon forget.

With her steed refreshed, the pair took to the skies once more. Upon arriving at Necropolis, Tazia was met by an emissary of Deathspeaker Aeradon. He informed her that another was interested in the task: The matter of who would receive the contract would be decided the next morning in the blood pits. Although the Valkyrie took this news as a matter of course, I was more interested than ever. Not only did my suspicion that this contract was an important one seem to be true, but after all these years I also would have another chance to see Tazia compete in the blood pits.

In the Blood Pits – Late Spring, Day 12

As the morning of the pit-fight dawned, I came to the scrying pool to find it still locked on Tazia, the clear waters showing her preparing for the coming battle. The Valkyrie washed her hair and combed it out until the lustrous black locks shone in the predawn light. She then wound her hair in a complex braid, binding it with strips of cured elven skin. Tazia inspected each strap of her crimson armor as she laced it into place, ensuring that the spells placed upon it to protect her from damage were functioning correctly, and that the straps themselves fit her toned body as closely as possible. As a veteran of the blood pits, the Valkyrie knew that in Necropolis, appearance was second only to actual combat prowess on the sands of a blood pit.

When the appointed time came, a Blood Cultist came to escort Tazia to the blood pit. Hefting her twin short spears, the Valkyrie followed the acolyte into the small sand-floored arena where the combat would take place. Having heard Deathspeaker Aeradon's name invoked, I kept my scrying point hidden within the tunnel Tazia had taken into the blood pit, knowing that if anyone in Necropolis could see me through the veil of the scrying pool, it would be Aeradon. It was then that I got my first view of Tazia's opponent, a slim shape wrapped in a black cloak, its hood cast back to reveal a pale face and hair so light as to be almost white. I knew her as a Spirit Taker called Stiletto, thought to be lost in the Blasted Lands after the Black Pyramid debacle. Stiletto was also escorted into the ring by a devotee of the Blood Goddess, and both Blood Cultists withdrew from the arena after glancing toward the alcove where I assumed the Deathspeaker would watch this encounter.

A quiet, rasping voice filled the arena. Aeradon informed the two Crusaders that they were fighting for the honor of "tearing the heart from the followers of the False Tezla, the Land-worshipping fools of the Elemental school and their bestial allies." He did not go into further detail, but he apparently made a gesture for the combat to begin, for Stiletto swept her hood over her head, drew a knife, and attempted to pull back into the shadows under the great walls of the blood pit. Tazia was no slower, leaping forward and throwing one of her spears at the Spirit Taker. At first I thought the Valkyrie had missed, but then I saw that the spear was aimed slightly behind Stiletto, forcing the Spirit Taker toward Tazia. What happened next only a frequent attendee of pit fights could have possibly followed. Tazia and Stiletto came together in a blur of motion, the light of the arena glinting off the steel of their weapons. Stiletto made a quick slashing attack at her opponent, aiming to pierce the warding protection of Tazia's strap armor, but the Valkyrie was no longer there. There was a whirl of pale flesh, red leather, and black hair, and then Tazia was stepping away from her opponent, her second spear no longer in her hands. Stiletto crumpled around the haft of the spear, her blood spilling out to color the sand of the arena. Tazia had won the contract.

To Tear Out the Heart – Late Spring, Day 13

Although I had gotten the chance to watch Tazia demonstrate her grace and mastery in the blood pits, I still did not know what the task was, beyond Deathspeaker Aeradon's bombastic words before the duel. Immediately after Tazia impaled Stiletto on her spear, acolytes of the Blood Cult rushed out to see to the Spirit Taker, and another bade the Valkyrie follow him to the deathspeaker's box. I have seen zombies created enough times to have little interest in watching the Blood Cultists deal with Stiletto, so I followed after Tazia and her guide, wary of coming too suddenly upon the deathspeaker and having my presence discovered.

I was able to find a point where I could listen in on what was being said within the room but be outside of Aeradon's sight. I do not know how the deathspeaker would react to my presence in Necropolis, but I knew that he would not be pleased. What I heard, however, soon drove all musings from my head: Deathspeaker Aeradon was contracting Tazia to slay the Circle of Nine.

While this task has often been attempted, it has always failed, given the complexity and strength of the Elemental defenses. Now, however, Aeradon claimed to have a secret tool that would allow Tazia to penetrate those defenses, which had time and again frustrated the efforts of the Crusaders. It was then that the deathspeaker introduced the Valkyrie to Rhiamon, the fallen Flame Priestess who now served the Crusaders.

Tazia and Rhiamon left Necropolis immediately, borne aloft by the Dark Pegasus and a reanimated griffon. They made their way southward with all haste, heading directly for Roanne Valle. Rhiamon led the Valkyrie into the Sturnmounts behind the sanctuary city, and there the two left their mounts and delved deep into the granite foundations of the fortress. Although Rhiamon was able to penetrate the magical wards guarding the passages, I was not, and I was forced to turn my scrying pool back to the surface: I had lost the two women in the underground passages beneath the Roanne Valle.

The Fury of the Elementals – Late Spring, Day 14

Apparently the followers of the false Tezla have increased their magical protection, most likely at the suggestion of the red-skinned Troll Maren'kar, for I have been unable to pierce the depths of the fortress of Roanne Valle with my scrying sight. Although I was unable to watch Tazia and Rhiamon enter the citadel of Roanne Valle, I was determined to see the outcome of Tazia's mission. Certainly my masters would want to know if the Circle of Nine were killed, but I also wanted to see if the Valkyrie could succeed in completing such a dangerous contract given the strain she had put on her body recently.

As I waited for some sign of Tazia's success or failure, I passed my time examining the defenses of the Roanne Valle. Although I searched for almost three hours, I was unable to find any weakness in the defenses by which Kossak Darkbringer's massive host might gain entry to the sanctuary of the walled city. Shortly after I began to grow tired and wonder if Tazia and Rhiamon might have failed in their task, there was a sudden commotion at the center of the city, and a dozen ferocious-looking trolls hustled a small group of priests and priestesses towards another building. Quickly centering my scrying sight upon them, I saw that the followers of the false Tezla were attending to a trio of bloodied forms borne on stretchers.

Those about the party were asking a barrage of questions, and from the short, rumbling answers given by the Trolls I learned that not only had Tazia and Rhiamon escaped, but that they had killed six of the Circle of Nine, and that the three survivors, including Prophet-Priest Tremelen and the Queen of the Pixies, were in such critical shape that even the vaunted healing skills of the Mending Priestesses could do little more than keep them stable. The two Crusaders had only been driven off when Warrior Huhn, the same Troll who had failed to rescue his uncle from Darq, heard the commotion and burst into the room the Circle was meeting in with almost a score of other Trolls and Wylden elves at his heels.

As the critically wounded survivors of the Valkyrie's attack were carried to safety, Huhn stayed behind with the crowd of sprites, Wylden elves, centaurs, and other woodland

creatures. Although Huhn had originally spoken in favor of the retreat to Roanne Valle, he now spoke angrily for the need to take the fight to the Crusaders, saying that sitting in their sanctuaries only allowed the Crusaders to strike at will and pick their targets. I assume that Deathspeaker Aeradon's intent in having Tazia strike down the Circle of Nine was to create such a divide amongst the followers of the false Tezla, but without the calming influence of Prophet-Priest Tremelen and the others of the Circle, it is possible that the Deathspeaker started a boulder rolling that he cannot stop.

The Noble Quest – Late Spring, Day 15

Upon waking this morning, I received a message from my Solonavi masters instructing me to investigate a potentially interesting development in the northern mountains. There I found two female Draconum, Chroma and Caldera, immersed in some kind of discussion. Several times, Caldera mentioned an Atlantean caravan bound for Ashon Rye. I couldn't understand how a routine Empire caravan could interest these two warriors, but their goals became clearer as I listened further. Apparently the caravan transported a large convoy of dwarven slaves, and the two warriors had made up their minds to set the wretches free.

Although I found their optimism somewhat reckless, I suspected they might have motives other than the liberation of a few dozen lowly dwarves. After all, Ashon Rye and its Magestone bounty were but a stone's throw from Necropolis, and what better way to subtly test its defenses than to lead guerilla raids on those coming to replenish the guards and workers? My conjecture remained theory, though, as Chroma and Caldera outfitted themselves for a lengthy trek, choosing weapons and armor with care.

As the two tested various swords and axes, I marveled at the raw strength beneath their scaly skin. They held their blades with a poise and ability that many warriors would never achieve in a lifetime of combat training. Even more remarkable was how evenly martially matched the two were. In the playful way of familiar friends, they occasionally took swipes at each other, each blow always matched with a parry or dodge.

They soon took to the skies, flying toward the south, the mountains passing steadily beneath them. The two Draconum showed little concern for speed; their spirits were high as they soared and dove through the sparse clouds, wings carrying them to their destination. They shared some basic banter, and I got the impression that they were on a quest to prove their valor; freeing the dwarves was merely a means to that end. They stopped before sunset to camp, feasting on a freshly caught stag and laughing and telling stories from their youth. The two stayed up long into the night, finally dropping off to sleep a few hours before dawn.

Testing the Waters – Late Spring, Day 16

Chroma and Caldera were still deep in slumber when I focused my scrying pool upon them again, so I decided to briefly investigate the caravan itself. I found it perhaps a day's flight to the south, hugging the Roa Kaiten on its slow march north. From previous experience, I knew the caravan would look for a ford north of Fairhaven, although there

were precious few places in those treacherous waters where such a large procession could easily cross.

The caravan itself was bristling with Prieskan guards, and several Drone Golems and a small host of Dragonflies provided scouting and air cover. Obviously, the Empire wasn't taking any chances with their goods; a brief look at their supply wagons revealed enough goods to run the mine for the better part of a year. Their dwarven cargo appeared to be a motley bunch of slaves, with defeat written on every part of them, from their hung heads to the limp shackles on their feet.

Around noon, the caravan arrived at an open meadow, where blooming wildflowers benefited from the moist air carried from the mountains by the spring runoffs flowing through the Roa Kaiten. Here, the Kaiten flattened into a fairly shallow, wide expanse perfect for fording, although I did not envy anyone whose skin came into contact with that icy water. The Prieskans took a defensive position around the meadow, while the slave drivers ordered the dwarves to begin preparing the wagons to cross the river.

As they began their preparations, which would take the remainder of the day at least, I turned my gaze back to Chroma and Caldera, whom I found already in the air. As if following some hunter's instinct, they made their way east through the mountains until landing at the source of the Roa Kaiten. They talked about the best way to proceed; Chroma recommended ambushing the caravan as it crossed the river, as it inevitably would, while Caldera favored an assault on the eastern side after the caravan crossed. Chroma argued that escape would come easier to the slaves if they didn't have to swim the river twice, an argument with which Caldera eventually agreed. They used the light from the setting sun as a blind to investigate the river to the south and discovered the meadow as night was falling. The two warriors then retreated into a deep forest to make preparations for their assault in the morning.

Battle in the Sky – Late Spring, Day 17

I found the two Draconum stretching tired wings and limbering up their sword-arms. Before taking to the sky, they both sat cross-legged on the ground, their bodies perfectly still except for a slow fanning of the wings. I'd witnessed other Draconum perform this ritual before; they believed that clearing their minds of distractions before battle allowed them to fight better. Perhaps there was a grain of truth to it, although I suspected that their sheer skill and love for combat contributed to their success as well.

While they meditated, I briefly turned to the south and found the caravan beginning its long crossing. The first few wagons were already in the water, and the guards seemed to have lowered their hackles momentarily as they tried to help the slaves and drivers comfort the horses, which obviously cared little for the freezing, rocky river.

Chroma and Caldera swooped across the river from the east, the sun at their backs. The only warning they gave the Imperial guards was a triumphant cry as Chroma flew across the front of the lead wagon, severing the driver's head from his body in one clean stroke. The horses, already uneasy from the cold water, caught the scent of blood and bolted; the

wagon hit a rock and overturned, breaking into pieces and scattering cloth-bound foodstuffs into the water. A swarm of Dragonflies appeared and attacked, while the startled guards tried to mount a counterattack.

Caldera engaged the Dragonflies with gusto, her pole arm removing pieces from the flying constructs and tearing chunks of wing. Their Atlantean riders maneuvered for a clear shot at the Draconum, but Caldera flew through and around the confused riders like a crazed bird, never giving them the opportunity to train their crossbows upon her. Chroma shot skyward to help her friend, while the Prieskans on the ground unleashed a hail of arrows at the duo. One struck Chroma in the wing, but she barely paused, breaking the shaft in one fluid motion. A Dragonfly plummeted toward the ground, its rider already dead, gears and pieces hanging from the construct. Its body hit a wagon with a loud smack, destroying it.

Another cloud of arrows caught Chroma's attention, and she folded her wings behind her for a fast dive. The Prieskans watched, transfixed, as she plummeted toward them, turning to run at the last moment as she buried her pole arm in a guard's back, lifting him off of the ground and then dropping him onto his startled companions.

Meanwhile, Caldera slammed into one of the Atlantean riders, sending him screaming to the ground and then wrangled the back of a Dragonfly as if she were trying to break a stubborn horse. The construct, confused, flew in circles as Caldera repeatedly drove her sword into its metallic hide. The Draconum warrior eventually resorted to tearing into the machine with her bare hands, ripping off its wings as a child might do to a tiny insect. The wicked claws on her feet finished the job, tearing the Dragonfly's flank to ribbons before she jumped off and flew skyward again, meeting Chroma above the carnage. The two warriors then returned to the north woods, where Caldera saw to Chroma's light wound, and they began making plans for the next day's attack.

Flight to Freedom – Late Spring, Day 18

I began watching the two Draconum again early the next morning. They were up before me, and I found them already on the move. A brief glimpse at the caravan revealed that it forded the river sometime in the night, and it was making all haste for Ashon Rye and the safety of the Imperial forces there. Chroma and Caldera seemed to know their destination, as they effortlessly flew over the river and made their way directly to the convoy.

They flew low, so close to the treetops that their scales brushed the leaves beneath them. They hit the caravan quickly, swooping across and sinking their claws into a pair of hapless guards, whom they carried skyward in tandem, the humans struggling as the Draconum gripped them by their shoulders and chests. In a mirror pattern, Chroma and Caldera swooped in opposite arcs, coming back for a second run, the two guards still kicking in their clutches.

This time, the Prieskans were prepared, and they filled the sky with a hail of crossbow

bolts. As one, Chroma and Caldera folded their wings and pointed their captives forward, the crossbow bolts filling their chests with loud, sickening thumps. The two Draconum flew straight at the dwarven slaves, using their human shields to push a few brave Prieskans out of the way.

In scant seconds, the Draconum had severed the Imperial chains, and the dwarves began running for their freedom. A couple of guards made a feeble attempt to catch them, but most were now concentrated on Chroma, who began cutting through them with her blade, and Caldera, who used the tips of her claws to stampede several pairs of horses drawing the wagons. A dozen Atlanteans were trampled, and the confusion the stampede created was enough to cover the Draconum and dwarves' escape. The Imperial troops, attempting to salvage what remained of the caravan and their dignity, turned their attention to calming the beasts.

The winged warriors followed the freed slaves back toward the north, hovering as they went so that they faced their foes. A pair of Drone Golems gave chase, but the two made quick work of the constructs. Chroma and Caldera found the dwarves in the forest, the little wretches out of breath and on the verge of collapse. Water skins were passed around and shackles removed, but respite was only momentary: The Imperial forces were not far behind. They spent the rest of the day in terse retreat, stopping only to replenish water and distribute a few pieces of dried meat among the dwarves. Their pursuers, unfamiliar with the terrain and their morale shaken, gave up midway through the day, but not before sending a fast rider to Ashon Rye for reinforcements.

Imperial Counterattack – Late Spring, Day 19

Having watched Chroma and Caldera's exploits the day before, this morning I decided to turn my eye toward Ashon Rye and the inevitable retributive attack. The two Draconum not only succeeded at freeing slaves, but also struck a potentially crippling blow to Imperial mining operations; already riders were in the air, making all haste for Atlantis so that more supplies could be dispatched.

My immediate interest lay with the large force of Drone Golems launched from Ashon Rye to hunt down the two Draconum. A score of the metal monsters took to the sky at dawn, fanning out to the north and west in a wide search pattern. It took them only a couple of hours to find Chroma and Caldera, who were deep in prebattle meditation.

The Draconum seemed to anticipate the Imperial attack, and at the first sound of the Golems' buzzing wings, their eyes opened simultaneously. They took to the air in one fluid motion, drawing weapons as they sped skyward. As one, the Golems ceased their search and began converging on the two Draconum. The sheer size of the force initially shocked Chroma and Caldera, and they quickly began shouting plans even as the constructs engaged them.

The first wave hit Chroma and Caldera like an angry nest of mechanical hornets. A trio of them managed to grab Caldera by her arms and tried to tear her in half. She dispatched

them, but not before they sank their pincers into her left wing, opening a wicked gash. Another pair hit Chroma from the front and the back, and one drove a long beak through her thigh. A slice from her sword removed the offending appendage, but it stayed jammed in her leg as she fought the other attackers.

As more Golems closed on their location, and the two Draconum took more wounds, they decided to attempt a measured retreat. Fighting nearly back-to-back, their fearsome wings streaked with blood, they dispatched a few more Golems before splitting up, each flying in separate directions. The Golems, initially confused, hesitated momentarily before pursuing, which was all the initiative the two warriors needed. They circled each other in a double loop before meeting back-to-back once more, and they began destroying the Golems as the constructs attempted to process their rapid movements. Their blades hummed and spun nonstop, chewing into Golem after Golem, one at a time.

After the last Golem had streaked toward the ground, Caldera began seeing to Chroma's leg, which hung useless and limp. They settled to the forest floor, wounded but not defeated. They – and I – now realized that the Magestone-rich mines of Ashon Rye were unsupplied, possibly undermanned, and now drastically underdefended.

Huhn's Rage – Late Spring, Day 20

Although once again frustrated at my inability to inform the Crusade of a weakness revealed by my time at the Scrying Pool, I was thankful when my masters ordered me to return to investigating the situation in and around Roanne Valle. Although five days had passed since I last looked upon the encircled fortress of Roanne Valle, at first glance it seemed that little had changed. The forces of the Dark Tezla's Crusade still surrounded the plateau upon which Roanne Valle sits, and the followers of the false Elemental Tezla still sat within; except they no longer simply sat within their walls. The Wylden Elves and their woodland allies seethed within the sanctuary of Roanne Valle, their anger and frustration nearing the boiling point.

Since the removal of the calm strength of the Circle of Nine from discussion, those in favor of breaking out of foothills of the Sturnmounts and taking the fight to Kossak Darkbringer's forces were gaining strength and support. The city buzzed with discussion, and while many Wylden Elves still called for caution and a maintenance of their defensive stance, the tide of discussion was turning, thanks in no small part to Warrior Huhn. The Troll's influence within Roanne Valle had grown with his actions against Tazia and Rhiamon, and his anger had grown with it. From what I could overhear throughout the fortress, the majority of warriors and priests of the False Elemental Tezla were coming around to Huhn's line of thinking, emissaries were being sent to all of the allies of the Wylden Elves, and planning for a breakout was beginning!

Strike and Counterstrike – Late Spring, Day 21

Having determined that it was only a matter of time before the Elemental heretics sallied forth from the fortress of Roanne Valle, I now set about trying to find out what the Crusade, and Kossak in particular, were planning to do about it. I directed my scrying

sight down towards Kossak's command tent, amidst piles of cracked and splintered bones created by his habit of feasting on various creatures of the False Tezla's Elemental armies. I found Kossak in the midst of a meeting with the commanders of his forces, a Talon Warrior roasting on a spit in the middle of the table. As a Vampiric Archer I recognized as Sanguine spoke, the General of the Crusade tore off one of the bird-creature's arms, eating as he listened.

"Our raiding parties have reported much fiercer resistance, General. The followers of the False Tezla have been bringing more and more warriors to the wall in response to our strikes, and the counterassaults are much more ferocious than before, although not as well coordinated."

Darkbringer responded to Sanguine's words around a mouthful of stringy meat, his rumbling voice filling the tent with its triumphant tones.

"It is as Deathspeaker Aeradon said it would be. The Circle of Nine has been destroyed, and the followers of the False Elemental Tezla have become uncoordinated and overcome with their righteous fury." The Troll's voice was filled with scorn as he spoke, but his good humor remained, his terrible grin showing his blackened tusks, "They will ride out in their wrath," there was a commotion amidst the Crusade's commanders at this, with some of the vampires voicing their worry that they did not have the force to defend against the Elemental onslaught, and others glorying in the thought of the upcoming battle. But Kossak paid them no mind, merely raising his voice above the hubbub, his words drawing bloodthirsty cheers from all present, "and we will be ready for them. It shall be the end of the False Tezla's reign in this corner of the Land!"

Zombies and Trolls – Late Spring, Day 22

There was much feasting and revelry within Kossak's camp the night of his meeting, but the next day the commanders returned to the business of preparing to destroy the upcoming Elemental sortie. Most were in high spirits as they arrayed their forces for battle, but a number of the necromancers wore concerned looks, and whispered together that the Wylden itself was rising up against them. Apparently, a number of Zombies had recently begun to disappear. From the tales the necromancers told, an ever increasing number of small patrols had been ambushed and completely wiped out, while the few survivors from larger patrols mentioned six-limbed "forest demons" rising from the ground to drag their prey beneath the loam of the Wylden Forest. Despite the Crusaders putting out more and more patrols, they had not been able to bring down one of these "demons" yet, and the number of patrols disappearing continued to rise.

Before I could pursue this mystery, my thoughts were interrupted by an explosion of sound from the fortress of Roanne Valle. I quickly shifted my scrying sight to within the fortress, and an amazing sight greeted my eyes: the entirety of the fortress was filled with warriors and priests, Wylden elves, Trolls, sprites, centaurs, mounts of war and creatures of the Wylden Forest; the entire strength of Roanne Valle. Standing before this great array of martial force was a single troll: Warrior Huhn. Kossak's nephew stood basking in the acclaim of the Elemental Freeholds for a long moment, then raised his arms,

throwing back his green cloak as he held his giant hands out for silence. Between the space of two breaths, what had been a sheer torrent of noise died away to nothing but echoes, leaving a hush over the courtyards of the Roanne Valle. Once silence reigned, Warrior Huhn raised his voice, filling the fortress with his words.

“Warriors of the Land!” This brought another roar of sound that echoed through the sanctuary of Roanne Valle, but was quickly quieted as Huhn raised his arms once again, “For too long we have sat in the dark of this fortress and endured the attacks of the foul, death-obsessed minions of the Dark Crusaders’ False Tezla. For too long we have stayed in one place, allowing the bloodsuckers and grave-defilers to strike us as they please!” Each statement brought another roar of agreement, and even through my Scrying Pool I could feel the rage building up in those gathered to hear the Troll speak. “Now our greatest leaders have been laid low by a pit fighter and a traitor. Six of our leaders lie dead, and three so badly wounded that they cannot even speak.” A hush fell over the crowd now, and Huhn’s voice was the only sound which broke the silence, “No more will we accept this abuse! The Land cries out for want of Defenders, and that cry shall not go unheard! We will ride out, and we will destroy the Dark Crusade!”

We Will Ride Out! – Late Spring, Day 23

I feel sure that if Prophet-Priest Tremelen and the others of the Circle of Nine could have stood before the followers of the False Elemental Tezla he could have spoken reason and restrained them, but without calmer heads, Warrior Huhn’s rage led them forth. The great doors of Roanne Valle swung open, and the full force of the Elemental fury struck upon the ranks of the Crusade. Unicorns and Sisliths thundered forward beside Horned Stags, while Griffons and Sky Dragons swooped and dove in the air above. Trolls bellowed their rage as they charged forward beside Freeholder Warriors and Sorceresses, while Sprites and Centaurs guarded the flanks of the attacking army. Huhn had ordered that the doors be closed behind the charge of the Freeholders, in order that they might destroy the Crusade or die trying, and so the stone gates swung shut once more behind the forces of the False Tezla.

But Kossak’s forces were ready for them. When the cavalry of Roanne Valle struck, it was not vampires, necromancers, or pit-fighters they slew; instead it was rank upon rank of zombies: the undead corpses of former companions and Atlantean soldiers. Centaur struck zombie centaur, crushing rotted flesh with blade and hoof. Freeholder arrows peppered former friends, sending them once again to the rest of the dead. Huhn himself was attacked by a quartet of zombified trolls, but he dropped the first with a mammoth crossbow bolt through the head, and dispatched the second with a crushing blow with the butt of his crossbow. The third managed to bite into Huhn’s leg, baring muscle, but then it was torn from the earth by the claws of a Sky Dragon, and born high aloft to be dropped back down into the press of bodies. Warrior Huhn caught the fourth zombie’s grasping arms, and tore the deceased troll limb from limb before he was carried away from my Scrying Sight by the tide of battle.

At first it looked as if the horde of zombies was going to be enough to stall the charge of the followers of the False Elemental Tezla, but as the day wore on it became clear that the losses the zombies had sustained during the siege meant that there were simply not enough of them to halt the sheer fury of the creatures of the Wylden. It was then that Kossak ordered his own elite troops into the battle. Vampire Archers and Barrow Knights upon dark pegasi swept into the air to engage the Sky Dragons, Griffons, and their riders who swooped and dove above the Freeholder forces. Pit-fighters leapt into battle, their grace and ferocity more than matching anything the followers of the False Tezla might bring to bear. More Barrow Knights urged Salamanders up and over the edge of the plateau, taking the Freeholder's from the flanks and rear.

If Huhn's forces had been fresh, they might have been a worthy foe for the cream of the Crusade, but they were weary after almost a full day of battering their way through masses of zombies. For a long moment I thought that Kossak had finally broken the forces of the Elementals, but then, as the sun dipped low to the horizon, a long, low horn blast echoed across the field of battle, and a tall, horned and hooved figure stepped from the woods behind the Crusader lines, a cloak of leaves trailing behind him. In one hand it carried a long hunting spear and in the other was a heavy horn from which the creature wrung another haunting note. Arrows began to fall on the Crusader lines from the forest, and battle was truly joined as the Wylden Host fell upon the Crusaders from two sides.

The End of a Dream – Late Spring, Day 24

The battle outside the gates of the Roanne Valle raged on into the night. Although the pit-fighters and vampires of Kossak's army were as used to fighting in the pitch blackness as they were in daylight, the Wylden Host knew the Land, and used every copse and gully to their best advantage. The Crusaders lust for battle was matched by the fury of the warriors of the False Elemental Tezla. Vampires drained of the lifeblood Wylden elves. Trolls smashed Pit-fighters to the ground by sheer brute strength. Sprites flitted about the heads of zombies, frustrating them before moving in to return the reanimated corpses to true death. A herd of zombie centaurs speared into the midst of the Elemental lines, crushing Freeholder warriors beneath their massive hammers. For almost the length of the night it seemed that the Crusaders and Freeholders would destroy one another in an orgy of destruction, but as dawn neared, it became apparent that small sections of the Freeholder forces were breaking through the Crusader lines and into the depths of the Wylden.

The plan of the Freeholders became clear to me at just the time it appeared to dawn upon Kossak, for the Crusader army broke into smaller forces to follow the fragmenting Wylden Host. Although many had been killed on the plateau before Roanne Valle, many more of the Elemental Freehold had broken through Crusader lines to join their comrades in the Wylden in their ongoing guerilla war against the Crusaders. No more could Kossak keep the bulk of his force before Roanne Valle, now the majority of his forces would be kept busy dealing with the weight of the Wylden Host as it attempted to strangle his lines of supply.

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As the morning sun rose, fighting died out before the walls of the Roanne Valle as the last of the followers of the False Elemental Tezla who took to the field faded into the Wylden forest, with sections of the Crusader army pursuing them. I searched the piles of fallen, but could find no sign of the troll who had started the break-out, Warrior Huhn.

The Gathering – Late Spring, Day 25

This morning I awoke refreshed and ready to continue my search for Warrior Huhn in the Wylden Forest. Neither he nor several other members of the Circle of Nine had fallen on the battlefield – and as long as they lived, the Elemental League would never truly be destroyed.

As I looked deep into the scrying pool, my view was unexpectedly drawn to the wooded foothills west of Enos Joppa. There I found an enormous encampment of amazons, larger than any I'd seen off of Nepharus Mons. In the dim light before dawn, I saw amazon warriors drawing whetstones along their blades and making offerings to the spirit of the dire wolf. They were preparing for war, but against whom?

I felt myself pulled further into the scene, this time into the large silk pavilion at the center of the encampment. Around the periphery of its dim interior were more than three score amazon tribal queens. They were seated cross-legged on the earth, clearly unaware of anything around them as they gazed blankly toward the center of the pavilion. There, in the light of a smoldering brazier, stood Queen Corella. Clad in a cloak trimmed in wolf fur, she brushed her chestnut hair with calm, deliberate strokes.

A Solonavi stepped from the shadows and handed Corella her mancatcher, and then he turned to look directly into my eyes. “Kasteli,” he said. “Tell my brethren that the preparations are underway. I will speak to them tomorrow at noon. Go.” He gestured casually, and I felt a painful shock as magic sparked through me.

I pulled back from the scrying pool, startled and disturbed. First Maleficious, now Corella's mysterious benefactor – how much control did I truly have over the pool's magic? More importantly, even in the chamber and distant from the battlefields, was I truly as safe as I had believed?

I would have plenty of time to consider both questions as I prepared to spend the day securing an audience with the tower's Solonavi masters.

Solonavi Cabal – Late Spring, Day 26

The confines of the scrying chamber were even more cramped than normal this morning, as I shared it with a trio of Solonavi. They waited silently as I called upon the magic of the pool and returned to the northlands. The encampment I had seen the previous day was gone. All that remained was Corella's pavilion. I ventured inside and found her sitting alongside the same Solonavi I had first seen so long ago in that forest glade.

The shimmering blue creature stepped forward to address those of us in the scrying chamber. “I am Rayevisayla,” he said. “In the past my dedication to the cause has been questioned. That will come to an end. With my magic and Queen Corella’s diplomatic skills, you can see that we have gathered together the majority of the Amazon tribes. Only the obstinate resistance of Queen Valia has prevented us from unifying all of the Amazons into a single force.”

“Beginning tomorrow, our warriors will march upon the villages belonging to Valia and those loyal to her. They will join us, or they will be destroyed. By summer’s end, we will have an army. Then, I will await your appeal. We all know that the time of danger approaches, and when it arrives the Oathsworn will not be numerous enough or sufficiently organized. Then you will call upon me.”

The Solonavi beside me cursed and snuffed the pool’s magic. “Rayevisayla,” he grumbled, each syllable its own complaint. Turning to me he said, “You will watch these battles. Tell us whether he can truly assemble the force he claims.” Together, the trio swept out of the chamber, leaving me alone beside the darkened pool.

Hawk’s Fall – Late Spring, Day 27

As commanded, today I sought out the Amazon forces. I found camouflaged Amazons of the tribes gathered by Queen Corella and Rayevisayla--the dire wolf, the mountain tiger, the jaguar, the boar, the white ape, and more-- hiding in the forest surrounding a town on the shores of a mountain lake.

Down in the town, Amazon warriors basked in the sun and watched their daughters as they chased a captured Galeshi boy among the mud-daub houses. Whenever a girl tackled him to the ground, the others would raise him to his knees and then force him to kiss the feet of the one who caught him. Then they would let him go and the game would begin anew. It was a quiet day in a distant frontier outpost, and more of its people carried gourds of water or wineskins than weapons.

Arrows flashed out of the forest and unerringly found their targets in the scouts guarding the perimeter of the town. A wolf howl broke the quiet day, calling Corella’s Amazons to begin their attack. They erupted from the woods and surged into the town, herding the surprised locals toward the temple square. For the first time, I saw Amazons using their mancatchers against other Amazons; only those who gave too much resistance were eliminated. Corella and her Solonavi patron clearly hoped to add another tribe to their forces.

The battle was quick and decisive. Corella passed the time taking her pick of the local breeding slaves until all of the prisoners had been gathered at the foot of the temple. Then her lieutenants brought the local queen forward in shackles, and together Corella and the queen climbed the tall, wide steps of the temple to the altar at its top, where Corella pulled her prisoner close and whispered in her ear. Stepping back, Corella drew her sword... and handed it to the queen. Tears in her eyes, the local ruler raised the blade

high and brought it down upon the gilded hawk perched on the altar. The totem shattered easily, pieces sliding down the sloped sides of the temple.

Corella called her own troops to the top of the temple with a wrapped bundle. Setting it atop the altar, they uncovered it to reveal a new totem--the hawk beneath a rampant wolf. As the local queen swore fealty to Corella, the Amazons gathered below cheered in victory.

Way of the Wolf – Late Spring, Day 28

Today I watched two more tribes fall to Corella's Amazons. The antelope tribe now marched in her ranks, but the warriors of the valley boar had proven as obstinate as the totem spirit they worshipped. When every member of the tribe proclaimed their loyalty to Valia, Corella had all of them put to the sword.

Each evening the ravaging horde feasted on spoils taken from that day's conquest. Dancing wildly around fires burning high and bright, a sheen of sweat glistened on the Amazons as they shouted their ululating songs of victory into the night.

Songs and drums fell silent as Corella walked into the center of the celebration. "Valiant warriors, I salute you!" she cried, answered by a roar of triumph from the crowd. "There are those who say each tribe fights only for itself. They say I am breaking with the old ways."

"I agree with them."

"The old ways could rule our lives when each valley was our home, when each mountain was our kingdom. Even when the Atlanteans cast out their borders to craft their ridiculously large empire, they never pushed their claim upon us. We were left alone, to pursue the old ways."

"But now enemies close in upon us from all sides. Atlanteans from the south. Khans from the west. The Crusade from the east. To follow only the old ways is no longer enough. Our allies among the rebellion are no longer enough."

Corella waited for the murmuring in the ranks to subside before continuing. "We still follow the old ways. We follow the wolf and the eagle, the bear and the tiger. But we fight for a new way. Because nobody else will, we fight for our way. We fight for each other! Those who will not fight with us fight against us--and in the end, they will fall to our fury!"

The crowd erupted into a frenzy of cheering, and the celebration exploded anew.

Plans and Surprises – Late Spring, Day 29

Before dawn, while her warriors engaged in morning exercises and scavenged meals from the remains of the previous night's feast, I watched as Queen Corella met with her Solonavi partner. "Our forces are already strong enough to crush the defenses of Nephanus," said the queen, playing with a dagger as she lazed comfortably in a campaign chair. "Each day we wait is a day when a messenger might slip past our forces and warn Valia of our approach."

"None will escape," said Rayevisayla. "Even if an envoy does get through, my agents among her tribe will ensure that the message never reaches her ears."

Corella rose and stalked across the pavilion to where Rayevisayla sat at a table littered with scrolls and battle plans. "You never told me you had placed agents on the holy mountain!"

The Solonavi calmly pulled a map of the region across the table and held it up to the flickering candlelight. "You should recognize as well as anyone that my Oathsworn are everywhere," he explained. "They are my eyes and ears, lurking in the shadows, ensuring that plans set in motion are not turned in unexpected directions."

Rayevisayla rolled the map as he stood, eyes glowing as he towered over the Amazon queen. "It would be best that you remember that, dear Corella, lest you find that I have agents much closer to hand." He smiled tightly as he took the queen's fur-lined cloak from atop a chest and draped it over her shoulders. "But I'm certain that as we continue our campaign as planned, I will be content to remain in your service...my queen." Fading, the Solonavi stepped forward and dissipated to hide inside Corella's form as she went to inspect her troops.

When Corella stepped outside, one of her lieutenants ran up to report. "Queen! A scout has returned from the Depths and claims that the villages there are gone."

"Abandoned?" said Corella.

"No, mistress--gone. Razed to the ground."

"What other forces are in the area?" asked the queen.

"None that we are aware of," said the warrior. "But three other scouts have failed to report in."

"Then send more scouts!" snapped Corella. "If there is another force in the northlands, I want to know everything about it before midday or I swear you'll serve the breeders!" The lieutenant hurried off, already calling for scouts and fresh horses.

I would have to investigate the matter further myself, but I already knew what I would report to the masters of the tower that evening: unless there was a massive army hiding in

the mountains waiting to defeat them, by summer's end the Solonavi would control an army of Amazon warriors.

Hungry for Battle – Late Spring, Day 30

After reporting to the Solonavi last evening, I was told to turn my attentions away from Corella and Rayevisayla until ordered to check in on them again. But my curiosity drove me to skirt the edges of my instructions and seek out high-ranking commanders in the army of the Black Powder Revolutionaries. How could they not know that their allies among the Amazons were being inexorably torn away from them, tribe by tribe?

I spied upon the Revolutionaries for most of the day and soon discovered that their attentions were consumed by preparations for a major campaign later in the summer. Ythlim and the leaders of the Black Powder cabal had yet to reveal where the strikes would take place, but local units were already stockpiling supplies.

Late in the afternoon, in a Revolution town on the edges of a liberated hellhole, I found several officers drinking in a holeside tavern. Often Revolutionaries will drink before battle, to celebrate the night that might be their last. Yet these battle-hardened soldiers appeared to be getting more sober with each drink. Finally one spoke: "We aren't ready. We have to admit it, and report it."

"If it was more powder we needed, or more boot leather, I'd carry the message myself," said the eldest in the group. "But what is the Revolution supposed to do about this? Food supplies are scarce everywhere! I've heard that it's not just our spring crops lying fallow--the fields are dead as far away as Prieska."

"It's strange," said another officer. "Not even a single shoot of green, no matter how much water and dung are spread on the fields. There's been nothing like this in the time of my father or even my father's father."

"It's not just strange," said the first officer. "It's a curse."

A young officer who had been silent leaned forward into the light, revealing the scar crossing his face from forehead to chin. "It's not a curse, it's a call to action," he declared. "Go to your men and have them ready to march in the morning. We'll fill their bellies by sunset, and our caches by week's end."