

**Fiction written for WizKids Games and
the *Mage Knight Scrying Chamber***
(<http://www.wizkidsgames.com/mageknight/chamber/>)
by Seth Johnson

Monday, May 24, 2004
Late Spring, 435 TZ, Day 25
The Gathering

This morning, I awoke refreshed and ready to continue my search for Warrior Huhn in the Wylden Forest. Neither he nor the surviving members of the Circle of Nine had been among the 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 again into the large silk pavilion at the center of the encampment. Around the periphery of its dim interior were more than three score of the Amazon's 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, then 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, 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 went to spend the day in search of an audience with the Tower's Solonavi masters.

Tuesday, May 25, 2004
Late Spring, 435 TZ, Day 26
Solonavi Cabal

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.

Wednesday, May 26, 2004
Late Spring, 435 TZ, Day 27
Hawk’s Fall

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.

Thursday, May 27, 2004
Late Spring, 435 TZ, Day 28
Way of the Wolf

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 Dark 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.

Friday, May 28, 2004
Late Spring, 435 TZ, Day 29
Plans and Surprises

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.

Tuesday, June 1, 2004
Late Spring, 435 TZ, Day 30
Hungry for Battle

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.”

Wednesday, June 2, 2004
Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 1
On Their Stomachs

I returned to the scrying chamber and watched as the force of Revolutionary soldiers assembled before dawn, then checked in on them throughout the day as a forced march took them overland toward Atlantean territory. As their commanders had described, they marched through fallow fields unbroken by a single plant. In the afternoon they stopped in a Revolution-controlled border town, but were unable to eat a meal--the locals could barely feed their own children and had nothing to offer.

As his men rested, the scarred officer spoke quietly with the town council. “Tomorrow, bring wagons south through Fool’s Vale,” he told them. “We’ll be waiting on the far side of the pass and you’ll be allowed to

take as much food as you can carry.” Assembling his troops and ignoring their grumbling about sore feet and empty bellies, they set off for the border.

I cast my vision about the westlands, and found that barren fields stretched across the land from Wolfsgate to Alrisar. It was if the thirsty wastes of the Blasted Lands were slowly creeping eastward toward the Roa Vizorr. The fields north of the Inland Sea were producing crops, but it was requiring a massive outpouring of magical effort by Solonavi sorcerers. When I stepped away from the scrying pool to partake in the wine and vegetable stew brought by a servant, I appreciated the meal more than any in quite some time.

After dark, I returned to the Revolutionaries to find them gathered in a culvert preparing quietly for battle. Not far away I discovered their target--an Atlantean supply depot. It was heavily guarded, but the warehouses of food and the granaries towering at the center of the encampment would be highly-motivating beacons to the hungry attackers.

Their faces blackened with ash and their rifles wrapped in dark cloth, the Revolutionaries crawled across the ground and into position. As each took aim on a target and waited for the signal a warm wind came out of the west, rippled through the dry grass, and the world fell still.

The scarred officer raised his rifle to his shoulder, and from somewhere off in the distance I heard the sound of harp music...

Thursday, June 3, 2004
Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 2
Requiem

Soldiers tumbling to the ground, armor falling away as their limbs wither...

Mouths yawning wide, skin turning waxy, hair falling away in great clumps...

Dead bodies surrounded me for more than a century as the Sect trained me in the arts of necromancy. Rotting flesh and yellowed bone do not turn my stomach. But what I saw last night as I watched in horror and fascination was something terrible and primal, and for the first time in many years I remembered what I felt like as a child, small and afraid.

The Revolutionaries attacking the Atlantean supply depot are all dead.

So are the Atlanteans.

Just as the Revolutionaries were about to begin their attack, a lone figure crested the nearby ridge riding a gaunt steed, black as the surrounding night. The Revolutionaries lay frozen in their positions as the rider approached, slumped in the saddle. Only the scarred officer mustered the force of will to climb to his feet and weakly bring his rifle around. But he was unable to pull the trigger as the rider reached out to touch him with a bony hand. The officer gasped and dropped his weapon as the life essence was ripped from his body, then collapsed to the ground. The rider smiled and hummed a contented tune for a moment, then suddenly groaned in pain and hunger. The nearby grass sizzled and died as the rider reached outward toward the concealed Revolutionaries and devoured them all.

Then he rode into the Atlantean compound. Too weak to raise a cry of alarm, the guards let him pass. Too faint to defend themselves, swordmages and shocktroopers lay in the dust and died as the rider came to them one by one.

Only when he came to the compound's one-cell prison did he pause. With a single swing of his bone-handled trident, the door was open. With a jab, he speared the prisoner inside. Drawing a moaning Gulthak orc into the firelight, he raised it into the air with surprising strength. “Your brethren will be the sweetmeats after the feast, creature,” he hissed. “First, though, I must journey to the east.”

Riding to the granaries at the center of the compound, he swung his trident again and cracked open the thick clay walls. Rotting grain spilled out, run through with maggots and vermin. "Fight over the land!" he cried. "Soak it with your blood! In the end you will all be consumed by Famine!"

Only the gutted and bleeding orc remained to watch as the dark avatar cackled and sang to himself as he rode off into the night.

Friday, June 4, 2004
Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 3
Famine's Refrain

This afternoon I steeled myself and sought out Famine once again. Even in the blighted plains they were easy to track, a black trail of death in a brown and dying land. When small towns of farmers, foresters and hunters had fallen in Famine's path, he had consumed them all. Despite his mount's slow plodding, in a single day they had already crossed much of the western plains and were almost to the Vizorr valley.

A palpable gloom hung around them both mount and rider, despite the bright afternoon sunshine. Warily, I kept the Scrying Eye at a distance. But as Famine continued to sing and talk to himself, I pushed in closer. As I did, I saw that the gloom around Famine was a swirling cloud of vapor...with faces. They would appear, and then suddenly vanish like smoke on a windy day. I saw orcs, trolls, elves, humans, and even a cyclops flicker by in the murk. For a moment, I even thought I saw the scarred Revolutionary officer I'd been following throughout the week. Then an elven face appeared, more solid than the rest, and spoke: "Milord...."

"Be quiet and listen to the song," muttered Famine. He strummed his maimed hand weakly over the surface of his shield and hummed a strange tune. "Just be quiet."

"Lord Shadowbane," said the spirit, more insistently.

Famine stiffened in the saddle. "That name is dead!" he said. "He was weak."

The spirit struggled against the forces pulling at it. "I can see many things now, Shadowbane. I see what happened to you. I see the hunger that consumes you. I see what you're going to do, and I can see that if it happens the whole realm will fall into darkness. You must not continue on this path! Stay away from--"

Famine swept a rag-wrapped arm through the spirit and it spun away into the gloom. "You can't possibly comprehend what I am now, Tryn. I have given myself to the apocalypse, and it has repaid me tenfold. The time of the gathering approaches. Soon the strength of the land will belong to me, and soon every creature in the land will hear my song of destruction!"

Monday, June 7, 2004
Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 4
The Message

Early this morning, I cast my vision to the west. On the blighted plains of Prieska, I saw hunters returning from dawn vigils empty-handed, and farmers despondently journeying into their fields. I passed over a horde of orc raiders whose khan was slaughtering a herd of sheep while two of his tribesmen restrained a weeping Prieskan shepherd.

I moved my view quickly north along the coastline. When the Galeshi dunes shimmered on the distant horizon, I spotted columns of smoke emerging from the ground deep in the western plains. As I closed for a better look, the ground around the smoke opened to reveal hide stretched across a wooden frame and threaded with dried grass to cover one of the pits used as lodges by wandering tribes of orc shamans. Grunting, an orc clambered out of the hole and squinted into the morning sun. Stiff muscles popping, he

strained his head to one side, then the other. Pulling his robe over his shoulders, he shuffled forward...then stopped.

Before him were six spears jammed deep into the ground. Blood and ichor ran down the shafts from the head jammed atop each and ran together in a black oily pool. The shaman gaped for a moment. Then he began shouting for his tribesmen. Within seconds orc riders erupted out of the ground, blackstone blades in hand. Down in the pits, their warbird mounts screeched their battle cries. Moving outward to encircle the camp, the warriors peered across miles of empty plain toward the distant horizon. I pulled my view upwards, and even I saw nothing but boot-sized rocks and sagebrush.

I dropped back down to the camp as a masked orc climbed out of his lodge. It was Bloodhawk, who had masterminded the Shadow Khans' winter offensive in the Blasted Lands. "What's going on?" he demanded from the nearest orc.

"It's the guards," said the warrior, pointing toward the heads. "They're all dead."

Bloodhawk considered them for a moment. "All dead. No alarm." He turned and scanned the horizon, a breeze ruffling his feathered cloak. "Nothing in sight within a half-day's ride." Around him, warriors hurried to pull on armor and guide their warbirds out of the lodges.

Finally he said, "Send a hawk and tell the others we're coming back." As the warrior rushed off, Bloodhawk shouted, "Make certain they triple the guard on the prisoner!" To himself he muttered, "It's him."

Tuesday, June 8, 2004
Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 5
The Prisoner

Bloodhawk drove his men and their desert warbirds through the night up the Greenroad, the ancient trade route running through the hills and valleys between the Blasted Lands and the desert. I left them behind to follow the orc shaman's courier hawk, magically imprinted with directions to his eventual destination.

Soaring into the mountains along the southern rim of cave orc territory, the hawk arrived at an orc village nestled in a pass high above the tree line. A raven-masked shaman waited patiently as the courier landed on his outstretched arm. Holding the bird in one massive hand, he drew his curved blade and gashed the shrieking hawk. Splattering the bird's blood on a nearby rock, he handed the courier to an apprentice to tend its wound. Muttering quietly, fingers dancing, the shaman cast a spell upon the spilled blood and it crawled across the rock's surface to form slashing glyphs from the orc alphabet. The orc read Bloodhawk's message, then hurried into the cavern.

Inside were several dozen shamans and their apprentices, meditating upon magestone crystals to the beat of a clurch drum. To one side, a group of apprentices were carefully carving their masks from wood and bone under the watchful eye of a grunting shaman. The raven shaman moved past them toward a chamber deeper into the cavern, where a pair of Broken Tusk warriors threw bone dice and moved polished stones around on lines traced into the dirt floor. The warriors jumped to their feet as the raven shaman approached, one warrior sliding the dice into a belt pouch as the other swept the floor clean with his boot. The shaman passed them without a word, stepping into the darkness just outside the range of the chamber's single torch.

When the shaman poked at the huddled form on the floor with his staff, it rolled over with a moan. Wrapped in a tattered blanket, it was a bruised and dirty human woman. She might have been beautiful once. Now, though, she had a festering wound in the center of her forehead and a filthy rag wrapped over her eyes. An iron anklet was connected to a chain bolted to the stone wall. The shaman waited for her to climb to her knees, then savagely kicked her and sent her sprawling.

Turning to the guards he said, "Chaos knows why, but the Wise One wants more guards on this wretch." He looked at the prisoner again. "He'll be here at sunset tomorrow. Tell the rest that triple watch starts that afternoon. Until then, double her beatings."

Wednesday, June 9, 2004

Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 6

The Reckoning

I watched the stronghold of the chaos shamans through the day, waiting for Bloodhawk to arrive. Thick clouds hanging in the pass made it impossible to see more than a few yards, yet the shaman and his marauders arrived in the late afternoon, pushing their exhausted warbirds up the narrow path at a dangerous pace. When the shaman finally jammed his heels into his mount's side, it collapsed to the ground. Bloodhawk leapt off the bird and called for the guards missing from the cavern opening.

I knew what he would find, and the shaman likely suspected. But I still wanted to see his reaction. A clurch drum lay just inside the cave, shattered into splinters. Beyond it was a fallen shaman, his manticore mask jammed between broken teeth. The cave was filled with acrid smoke from the apprentices burning on the fire in the middle of the chamber. Closing his eyes, Bloodhawk growled the syllables of a protective spell and magical energy crackled around him. As he cinched his wristblades tighter, he gestured for the marauders who had arrived with him to circle quietly along the edges of the cavern.

I credit the shaman for his courage. He continued through the smoke and made his way to where he hoped he would find his prisoner. Instead he found a dozen orc warriors hung from the walls on iron spikes pounded through their ankles. One gasped out a cry of pain or warning that became a death rattle, and then he was dead like the rest of his fellow guards.

When he saw that his personal quarters had been ransacked but were empty, the shaman sent the marauders following him to search the rest of the tunnels and chambers. Searching through his tumbled possessions, he threw aside three ripped scrolls. Underneath an upended chest he found a large claw on a leather thong, and he tied it loosely around his neck. Then he pushed his mask up onto the top of his head and wiped the sweat from his brow.

One of the marauders returned to the entrance to Bloodhawk's chamber. *Nothing*, he signaled with a shake of his head, keeping his blade raised and an eye on the darkness. The shaman pulled his mask back down and led the way out of the cavern.

Waiting outside was a single man. He wore a battered and tarnished Atlantean breastplate and leggings of tooled Prieskan leather. A baldric and scabbard over one shoulder carried an enormous manaclevt sword, and on his hip he had a holstered lightning pistol. Long, shaggy chestnut hair poured over his head in a narrow strip and down his back. It looked like it had been several days since he had bathed, shaved, or even slept.

It was Raydan Marz. "Welcome back," he said through clenched teeth. "I've been waiting for you."

Thursday, June 10, 2004

Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 7

The Escape

Yesterday I watched Raydan Marz attack the mountain cave where Bloodhawk's chaos shamans were training apprentices in the ways of magic, then lie in wait until Bloodhawk himself had returned. Yet when the battle began it didn't go the way that I--or Marz--had planned.

When Bloodhawk finally emerged from the cave into the thick fog outside, shaken by the wholesale slaughter of his students, he found Marz waiting. As five of Bloodhawk's marauders came out to line up around their master, Marz calmly drew his manaclevt. It was an incredible show of self-assurance, but it also gave Bloodhawk the moment he needed to pull a small black book from his belt pouch. When the

shaman began to read from its pages, Marz set the blade of his manaclevt in motion and began to move forward--only to find himself in the center of the circled marauders, while Bloodhawk stood in Marz's place on the cliff's edge.

Without hesitating further, Marz lopped off the sword arm of the nearest marauder, then spun to parry an incoming axe. Dropping to the ground, he rolled under another arcing blade and when he came back to his feet thrust his sword straight through his attacker's boiled hide armor. As another orc rushed forward with his sword held high, Marz left his own blade in the fallen marauder's chest and drew his lightning pistol to fire a bolt that threw the new attacker backwards.

Driven into a frenzy of pain and rage by the loss of his arm, the first orc Marz had attacked threw his remaining arm around Marz's neck. Two of the remaining orcs closed with their weapons at the ready as Marz struggled to get free--then suddenly lashed out with both feet and sent the orcs tumbling backward. Reaching over his shoulders, Marz grabbed the tusks of the orc restraining him and wrenched as hard as he could. When the orc roared and released his hold, Marz retrieved his manaclevt and brought it around to cut the one-armed orc off at the waist. As the tumbled orcs climbed to their feet, Marz lanced his blade through the throat of the nearest and sent a dagger spinning through the air into the forehead of the second.

The fight had lasted only a few moments. Panting, Marz turned to face Bloodhawk. "I'm going to cut that mask off your face," Marz said. "Then I'll do to you what you did to her." Without a word, Bloodhawk took a single step backward to fall away over the cliff and into the fog.

Marz sheathed his sword and rushed to look over the edge. Finding nothing but fog, he retrieved his pistol from where he had dropped it and fired three quick shots into the air. The sky brightened and the clouds parted to reveal Marz's tower hanging in the air a stone's throw distant. "Send a group down to search the valley for a body," Marz ordered the troops waiting behind the parapet. "Then we're done here."

Friday, June 11, 2004
Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 8
The Vow

The next afternoon found Marz moving his tower across the Blasted Lands. Trusting his sentries to watch for enemies in the air and below, Marz was in his quarters tending to the wounds Bloodhawk and the chaos shamans had inflicted upon Desmanda. Both of them had taken a hot bath and had a good night's sleep, but it appeared that the greatest improvement was that they were again in one another's company.

"We'll find him again," Marz promised as he wrapped a clean dressing around her raw and chafed ankles. "We'll find him if I do nothing but follow his trail."

"It will be us to find him," said Desmanda, topping off her glass of Sturnlander brandy. "And it will be us to kill him. But if what you've told me is true, there are matters that must be attended to before personal vendettas."

"Everything else can hang," said Marz. "At least until I have my boot on his throat and put a sword in your hand, the others can wait."

Desmanda reached out to find Marz and put her hand on his shoulder. "Raydan, if anyone needs to listen to a higher call, it's you." She touched the dirty rag still wrapped covering her eyes. "Besides, when we corner him, I want to see the look on his face before he dies."

"Will you at least let me put a fresh bandage on now?" Marz asked, and she nodded. Slowly unwinding the rag, beneath the wound where the chaos shaman had ripped the magestone from her forehead he revealed two empty sockets lined with scar tissue. Taking a clean cloth from the table, he dipped it in a bowl of hot water and gingerly began to clean the wounds.

Monday, June 14, 2004

Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 9
Buying and Selling

While I slept, Raydan Marz slipped away. I cast the Eye far and wide this morning, yet somehow couldn't find a flying tower. The rising level of magic in the land seems to be allowing even the simple mages in Marz's to perform increasingly annoying tricks.

By the afternoon, I was following the major trade routes in hopes that Marz had hidden the tower somewhere to proceed on foot. Travel was light--there was no spring harvest to sell, and it seemed that other trade goods were being hoarded rather than brought to market.

On the East Vizorr Road, I found a lone merchant leading his horse and pullcart up the dry and dusty road outside Rangraz. In fading crimson letters, a sign hung on the side of the cart read, "M. DAGON -- Buying and Selling". Dagon's cart groaned under the weight of its load, covered with a sheet of canvas, and his nag strained to pull it up the rutted road into the city. At the first inn on the edge of town, the merchant handed the leads to a stableboy and hurried into the cool interior. Giving up on my search for Marz, I followed in hopes that there might at least be travelers' gossip worth reporting.

The inn's few customers turned to watch Dagon as he made his way across the common room, loudly beating the dust from his gloves. Dagon eyed each in return: A group of Venetian caravaneers; an old man wearing the guild sash of a Khamsin merchant; an ugly dwarf in dark leathers. Inspections completed, everyone returned to their business.

Dagon bought two flagons of sour-ale from the innkeeper, and sat down across the table from the old man. "Drinking is all yours, old-timer," Dagon said quietly. "But only if you have telling me where I might finding some friends with the powder." The old man said nothing. Dagon looked around and hissed, "I trying to loosen your tongues with my friendlyship, but I need to seeing the rebels right quick. If friendly and drinking not your trade for answer, I have other things to offering." He leaned forward so that the old man might see the dagger hidden in the folds of his vest.

There was a pair of clicks behind Dagon, as the dwarf standing behind him cocked the hammers of a black powder pistol. "Old man's deaf, stranger," said the dwarf. "I heard you, though. You want to find them, you go through me."

"I knowing you are not rebel," said Dagon, pointing at the toothed ring branded into the dwarf's leathers. "You are from the Circling."

"I'm a rebel today," said the dwarf, sitting down across from Dagon. Keeping the pistol trained on the merchant under the table, he drained a mug of sour-ale and grinned. "So, what do you want to talk about?"

Tuesday, June 15, 2004
Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 10
Caveat Venditor

Dagon had apparently slept atop his cart for fear that it would be stolen during the night--although it was unclear whether he didn't trust the Black Powder Revolution or just the dwarf who had held a gun on him throughout the previous evening. After the dwarf had inspected what was hidden in the cart, he promised Dagon that he would return in the morning with payment.

Now the dwarf pounded on the side of the cart to wake Dagon, who snorted, coughed, then sat up wild-eyed and clutching a peg hammer. "You!" he said to the dwarf, brandishing his hammer. "You are not afraid of me and will be backing away! I am the ordering one!"

The dwarf snorted and spread his empty hands. "Yeah, that's right," he said. "You're in charge."

Dagon lowered the hammer. "You have with the paymenting for goods?"

“Nope,” said the dwarf. “But the rebels want to buy your stuff. I’m supposed to bring you to the guy with the money.” He led Dagon through the rutted streets and back alleys of Rangraz to a muddy pig yard. Squatting around a bonfire and arguing, the swineherds were barely paying attention to their charges, much less the dwarf and Dagon as they guided the merchant’s cart into a ramshackle barn.

Inside, the dwarf took Dagon down a steep flight of steps into a root cellar and then down a tunnel that had been cut through the dirt, recently dug out and shored up with sturdy timbers. At the end of the tunnel was a large underground room, also recently completed. At its center was a forge, the chimney venting upward-- and through the bonfire in the pig yard. Someone was going to a lot of trouble to hide a smithy.

Dagon took it all in, and then started as he saw the dwarf was once again pointing a pistol at him. “Why are the rebels not being here?” Dagon complained. “I am wanting to be with my money.”

“You’ll get it,” said another dwarf, stepping out from behind the forge. Dipping a red-hot shortsword into a barrel of water, he vanished for a moment in a cloud of steam. Setting the sword aside, he said, “Put the gun down, Terk. If we have to keep telling you Ninth Circle thugs to stop waving them around, we’ll just take them back, keep our gold, and you can go find another employer.”

“Sorry about that, Jargus,” said the mercenary. As the smith came forward, it was clear that the years had been rough on him. One foot dragged behind him as he hobbled across the floor, and he winced each time he took a heavy step. His grey beard was thick and full on the left side... and absent on the right where his face was covered in burns that stretched down his neck and arm. I had seen burns like them before, in the towns around the hellholes. They were magestone burns.

The old dwarf reached out to shake Dagon’s hand. “Well met, merchant. I’m Jargus Hammerfist. I hear you have some...goods for sale.”

“Some magestones,” said the mercenary

“Not without the moneying,” said Dagon.

“Of course,” said Hammerfist. “First, though, tell me what you told Terk. Tell me where you found the stones...”

Wednesday, June 16, 2004
Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 11
Swapping Tales

Jargus listened to Dagon’s story, then sent for the local leaders of the Revolution. Late that night a gruff-looking man and a young woman wrapped in a roughspun cloak arrived at the underground smithy, and Jargus had the merchant repeat his story for a third time.

“I was the traveling across Empire lands,” Dagon said. “I was hope to selling dried dates to the Imperial Legion. Plantings is not up in Atlantean fields and I was knowing the captain at Lonossai camp would be wanting the goods.”

“Lonossai,” said the woman. “That’s the supply depot south of Wolfsgate.”

“Yes,” agreed Dagon. “Always buying the foods and supplies, and with shortagers I would be profiting. But no buying that day. All soldiers were deading around.”

“A battle?” asked the gruff man.

“I am not thinking,” said Dagon. “Terrible deading, but not in battle. All were wastinged, like terrible sicknessing was in camp. I was leaving, and then saw a full warehouse with no guardings. I did not wanting

the sickness but could not leave by the profit. Especially when I see dead wizarders lying by a chest of the magestones. So I taking the stones and a full load of Empire supplies. But who to be selling them to? Legion will not be buying goods with their own marking. Then I see Revolutioning soldiers dead outside camp and am thinking I will sell to yours.”

“Why come all the way to Rangraz?” asked the woman.

“More deaders in villages north of Caero,” explained Dagon. “I am not sickening, but to be sure I traveling along river for week until I come here.”

“He’s got a wagon full of Atlantean gear,” said Terk, the dwarven mercenary. “But no stones.”

“I am hiding chest until the dealings are good,” said Dagon proudly. “Never have I dealing with Black Powderers before.”

“We’ll give you a good price for the Imperial equipment,” said the woman.

“Not until we see the stones,” insisted the man.

In a moment of glancing back and forth, there was a silent conference between the pair and Jargus. Then the dwarf turned back to Dagon and said, “Dagon, we may not be able to give you as much money as you want.” When the merchant stood to leave, Jargus grabbed his wrist. “Before you go, let me tell you my story. You might reconsider your price.”

Thursday, June 17, 2004
Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 12
Stealing Freedom

As Jargus Hammerfist told his tale to Dagon the merchant, it was quickly clear that he was a long-winded storyteller. The old dwarf started with bits about his childhood, touched on his time as a miner and slave in an Atlantean magestone mine, then passed through his liberation by the Black Powder Rebellion before finally getting to anything near the present.

“That’s when our scouts brought back samples of ore from the northern mountains, purer than anything I’d seen in a decade,” said Jargus. “They also said that there wasn’t much of a Shyft presence in the area anymore, so I put together a full expedition. Spent the winter up there, and it was a cold but fruitful journey. We gathered a sizeable quantity of ore, and headed back when the passes opened in the spring.”

“We were on the watch for the Crusade on the way back, but it was Atlanteans we ran into. A whole army, marching to Ashon Rye. We put up what fight we could, but they overwhelmed us. Most of us died in the fight or were killed by the Atlanteans afterward, but they added me to the chain of dwarven slaves they were marching off to some mine somewhere. Terk was among them.”

“Lying Imperial told me he was a merchant looking to hire guards for a trip across dangerous territory,” said Terk, the dwarven mercenary. “Soon as I show up, they take my axe and clap a pair of manacles on me. All they wanted was as many dwarves as they could catch.”

“Then the Atlanteans’ technomancer noticed my burns,” said Jargus. “It turns out he was studying those of us dwarves who had lost our ability to withstand the magestone energy. He asked a lot of questions and took a lot of notes in a little journal he had. He didn’t have much opportunity, though, as the caravan was getting harried by a couple of draconum.”

“Knew when I saw them that we were saved,” said Terk reverently. “First day they come through and take out the Legion’s old Dragonflies. Then they gave us a chance to free ourselves, and when we didn’t they came back the next day to tear apart the entire army and break our chains.”

“The others made a break for the woods,” said Jargus. “But I had seen the technomancer get trampled when the horses stampeded, and his journal was just laying in the mud. I managed to get over and grab it, but got my own leg crushed in the process. I only got away because Terk doubled back to help me.”

“Still haven’t gotten paid for it, either,” said Terk. “It was worth it just to fight along draconum in battle, though. I’d do that for free anytime.”

“What is this doing with me and my magestone?” asked Dagon.

“Everything,” said Jargus. “As we made our way back to Revolution territory, I read the journal--and that’s when I got the idea for our little project here...”

Friday, June 18, 2004
Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 13
Revolutionary

Jargus Hammerfist had spent an hour describing how he studied the journal he had taken from the Atlantean technomancer before finally getting around to revealing what he was trying to do. When he did reveal the secret behind the journal and the underground smithy, Dagon didn’t believe him. Neither did I, for that matter. Yet the Prieskan merchant went to retrieve his hidden cache of magestone--and after a signal from the young woman leading the local Black Powder cell, Dagon was quietly tailed by Terk, the Ninth Circle mercenary working for the Revolution.

I kept the Scrying Eye in the smithy, hoping to observe some of Jargus’ secret process. Instead I got to watch the old dwarf take a nap, then eat a meal of bread and cheese while his Revolutionary allies bored out pistol barrels. In the mid-morning Terk returned. Quickly dropping into a chair, he put on a bored expression and gnawed absently on a hunk of bread as if he had been waiting all night.

Less than a minute later, Dagon came into the room carrying a small chest and set it on the table. “Your frienders have been paying for the other goods,” said the merchant. “I have bringing you the stones to see if you are doing what you say.” Opening the chest, he revealed a half-dozen small blue magestones inside. “They are not being very large,” said the merchant. “But if they will serving your purpose, you will have them free and I will be selling many of your productions.”

Jargus chose a magestone from the chest and took it over to a workbench. Fixing it in a clamp, he set to work with a chisel until he had chipped off a pile of small fragments. These he handed over to the young woman while he helped the gruff Revolutionary at the forge heat crucibles of lead. When the woman brought over carefully-shaped crystals on a tray, Jargus placed them into a mold. Then he drew out the technomancer’s journal and read aloud as the man poured lead into the mold.

When the mold had cooled, Jargus knocked out its contents and held one up to the light. It was a bullet for a Revolution weapon, but it had a softly glowing magestone tip. “Time to turn magic against the Empire,” he said quietly.

“I will be selling these by the thousands!” said Dagon--and then the merchant yelped as Terk ran him through with a short sword. As the merchant hit the floor, the mercenary was already rifling through his robes and collecting loose coins, while the gruff Revolutionary collected the money they had paid Dagon.

“I’m sorry, my friend,” said Jargus to the surprised-looking corpse at his feet. “Sometimes the Revolution can buy what it needs, but it can never sell its secrets.”

Monday, June 21, 2004
Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 14
Swords and Plowshares

I had a strange moment of vertigo as I looked into the scrying pool this morning, as if I were about to tumble into its waters. The Eye slid wildly about the Land, and when I managed to regain my balance I found myself on the coast near the city of Darthion.

It was time for the city's annual Spring Festival, where the farmers of the midlands would gather in the city to celebrate the end of the planting season and the harvest to come. The streets were hung with banners in the red and gold of the Atlantean Empire, decorated with leaves of green silk. Choirs of midlander youth sang planting songs in the marketplace, but this year they had an undertone of worry and sadness that the children had picked up from their parents. The farmers and peasants of the land gathered in tight crowds looking for someone--anyone--who expected a successful crop. Crops aside, many couldn't even say whether they would still possess their homes and fields at the end of the season as the Dark Crusade continued to expand south along the Roa Galtor.

As I listened in on one of the larger conversations, a farmer stepped to the center of the crowd, removed his hat, and said, "My name is Ealo Landsman. Some of you know my farm, not a day's travel north of the city. Others of you have joined me in brining our complaints to our local Magi and Lord Maakha."

"Long ago, the blood of my forebears won this country from the wild. I honor them today as I work my fields, water them with my own sweat. My farm knows blood. It knows sweat. But it will never know tears."

He put his wide-brimmed hat back on his head and pulled it on tightly. "Those of you whose spirits are not as fallow as your fields will join me mid-morning tomorrow at Kelp's Landing. The dead will have no respect for the land of the living if they can win it without a fight."

Tuesday, June 22, 2004
Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 15
Farmers and Soldiers

I returned to the Galtor Valley this morning to see if any of those Ealo Landsman had spoken to the day before had taken up his call to arms. Like dozens of other trade towns scattered across the Galtor delta, Kelp's Landing was made up of a cluster of weather-worn buildings on thick stone pilings that kept them perched above high tide. Trade ships and ferries lined the piers and hanging bridges connecting the buildings, with cranes and workers ferrying cargo to and from the ships of pirates and merchantmen alike.

A surprising crowd had gathered with Landsman aboard the *Wavesong*, a small caravel flying Xandressan colors. As the ship cast off and the captain guided it up the mouth of the river, I inspected the ranks of Landsman's army. There were several score peasants equipped with arms and armor that were obviously family heirlooms, though most of it had been well cared for over the years. Near the middle of the deck were a pair of Guild enhancers, one making adjustments to a full squad of infantry golems while the other talked to Landsman. "Magus Ananub understands the plight of the midlands and is saddened that the demands of the Emporer allow the Golemcore to only assist the people with the midlands with these few soldiers," said the technomancer. "I fear that with only this paltry force we won't be able to chase the Crusaders away permanently, but we will be able to send a firm message." Smiling, Landsman clasped the sorcerer's hand in thanks, then climbed the steps to the aft deck to speak to the captain.

Throughout the day the passengers on the *Wavesong* pressed Landsman to reveal his battle plan. Yet the farmer would only smile and promise that by sundown all would be revealed. Though they couldn't uncover their destination, as each peasant pointed out the farms and distant valleys that they called home, all came to understand what was at stake if the Crusade was allowed to continue its advance.

Though the ship may good time up the river, faster than the army might have marched on foot, it was undoubtedly a dangerous journey. The Xandressan captain of the *Wavesong* demonstrated a skill comprised of equal parts seasoned skill and insane daring as he navigated among rocks and currents that could have easily destroyed ships twice as large. Late in the afternoon, judging by the wilting foliage along the river,

the ship crossed into territory controlled by the Crusade. Finally, as the horizon was turning orange and purple, Landsman finally directed the captain to anchor the galleon near the eastern bank.

The soldiers disembarked, and Landsman directed them to set up camp for the night. "Our allies will join us this evening, and we march in the morning." In frustration, the technomancers refused to unload the infantry golems until the farmer revealed the full extent of his plans. Landsman simply ordered the ship more firmly anchored, and waited.

Several hours later, a sentry cried out a warning. Though he readied his weapons with the rest, Landsman called for calm. Barking orders and epithets, two sword-wielding farmers herded an unarmed centaur into the firelight.

"Finally," said Landsman, turning to the angry crowd. "Our allies have arrived."

Wednesday, June 23, 2004

Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 16

Seeds of Darkness

It had taken Landsman nearly an hour to convince his midlander peasant army not to kill Pelius, the centaur envoy who had come to their camp. Long ago, the forests of the Wylden extended deep into the midlands, and human pioneers who came east to build farms and villages did so only after winning the land from the centaurs who called it home. Generations of bloody warfare are recorded in tales still passed down in midlander families, though several centuries have passed since expansion stopped at the Roa Galtor and the nations of the midlands came under the protection of the Atlantean Empire.

Even after Landsman convinced the peasants that accepting the assistance of the centaurs was the only way to save their land from the advancing Dark Crusade, it took most of the night for Pelius to convince the enhancers aboard the *Wavesong* not to turn their infantry golems against centaur and farmers alike as traitors against the Empire. Pelius described the major offensive the Dark Crusade had undertaken in the east, and how they had nearly destroyed the Council at Roanne Valle. He told how they were pushing their lines into the mountains.

"If the Crusade manages to eliminate both the Freeholds and the fortresses of the Lords of the Rivvenheims, they will be able to concentrate their forces in a single direction," said Pelius. "Against the Empire. I am here to offer assistance only in hopes that the forces of the Crusade will be divided and the eastern front will stand. Any victory won, any gains made--they will belong to the people of the land and the Empire. We have differences, it is true. But those are to be settled another time. For now, I ask that we stand together against the darkness."

Pelius' scouts had found that the land to the north was held by a small garrison of Crusaders at Riversgate, where the Kaiten and Sanguine joined to become Roa Galtor. A large portion of the Crusade's force had been drawn off to the east in the spring, leaving only a small group who had just begun to supplement their number with zombies. Pelius laid out a plan of attack, and slowly won the Atlanteans to his strategy.

An hour later, still before dawn, Landsman woke the sleeping farmers. Turning to Pelius, he said, "We can leave as soon as your troops arrive." The centaur put his hands to his mouth and did a startlingly realistic imitation of a Wylden falcon, answered by the hoot of an owl. Within minutes, two dozen centaur warriors in full battle gear trotted into the camp.

Together they left: Atlantean technomancers, Elemental centaurs, and peasant farmers and sailors. It was becoming quite the interesting little army...

Thursday, June 24, 2004

Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 17

Fields of Battle

In the mid-afternoon, the army led by Ealo Landsman and the centaur Pelius approached Riversgate, the fortress built by the Atlanteans in the fork between the Roa Kaiten and the Roa Sanguine. The rust-colored waters of the Sanguine ran past the eastern wall of the fortress to roar over Gateway Falls, while the channel of the Kaiten passed calmly three hundred feet below the fortress to meet the Sanguine below the falls. Riversgate had stood against decades of assault by the Elementals, only to fall to the Dark Crusade in a surprise winter attack. Blackened by fire during the battle and stripped of Atlantean markings, the walls of the fortress were now hung with the blood-red banner of the Crusade.

As they neared Riversgate, Pelius guided the group up a side valley to where a pair of trolls had been hard at work. Gathering dead trees from the area, they had constructed a half dozen rafts and a long log-ramp of some sort. Landsman directed his troops to carry the rafts as the trolls hefted the ramp onto their shoulders.

From there, the army split into two groups. The Elementals, led by Pelius, climbed the steep slopes until they were hidden in the scrub above Gateway Falls. Landsman took the Atlanteans, the midlanders, and the rafts to the quiet channel just beyond the roiling pool at the base of the falls. "Riversgate is where the Empire hoped to collect taxes on merchant ships traveling to and from Fairhaven," he explained. "Unfortunately, the Roa Galtor is so dangerous that few ships other than Xandressan pirates made it this far up river. Though the Empire removed the pier used by the tax collectors, the captain of the *Windsong* says that the stairway they came up and down from the fortress still exists, just beyond a locked door at river level."

From above, Pelius signaled with a burning torch tossed over the falls as the Elementals made their charge. The trolls led the way, throwing their ramp across the swift channel to create a bridge for the centaurs as the guards on the walls of Riversgate sounded the alarm. Crusaders loosed a hail of arrows from the ramparts, but as arrows bounced off the centaurs' bucklers and breastplates only a single Elemental was slowed by the assault. The centaurs returned fire with their own longbows, nearly every arrow sending a Crusader toppling out of sight.

The trolls dragged their ramp across the channel and hacked at it with an axe, cutting the lashings holding it together. Picking up one of the logs, they charged at the front gate of the fortress. Ignoring arrows and crossbow bolts, they rammed the gate again and again. Oil poured from murder holes above the gates and drenched the trolls, yet they continued their assault. Finally, the Crusaders pushed burning straw through the holes and the oil on the trolls was ignited. Still the beasts gave one last heave--and gates and trolls collapsed at the same time.

Leaping over the dying trolls, the centaurs charged into the courtyard ready to strike down the small force of Crusaders inside. Instead they found a courtyard lined with zombies, raised by the Crusade from the ready supply of dead fallen to the hunger and disease sweeping the Land.

With no means of escape, the only option left to the Elementals was to fight. "For the Freeholds!" cried Pelius. As one, the centaurs leapt into battle against the undead.

Friday, June 25, 2004
Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 17
Dark Harvest

Faced with an unexpected horde of undead in the courtyard of Riversgate, the centaurs were lucky to only lose four of their number before they charged up the north stairs to make a stand on the ramparts above the gate. Pelius ordered his troops to construct defensive palisades from whatever they could find as he and a trio of archers loosed arrow after arrow into the zombies climbing the steps.

Each arrow found its target, but there seemed to be an unending supply of undead. Soon the centaurs had expended all of their ammunition. Pelius led a charge out of the Elementals' crude redoubt to scavenge from Crusader guardsmen that had fallen in the attack on the gate, and though he returned with a dozen quivers he lost two more of his soldiers. Zombies that had made their way up the south stairs gathered the

bodies of centaurs and guardsmen alike and pushed them over the edge to the courtyard below where they were dragged off into the darkness of the fortress.

A pot of oil shattered on a pile of barrels and debris created a flaming barrier that slowed the undead making their way across the rampart. Still they came, and as darkness fell the supply of Crusader arrows dwindled. Three more centaurs were overwhelmed by the zombie attackers. "Damnable humans!" complained Pelius. "Where are they?"

It was a good question. As Pelius and the Elementals began their assault on Riversgate I had watched Landsman lead the midlanders and Atlanteans across the pool at the bottom of Gateway Falls to the tax collectors' gate at the mouth of the Kaiten. An infantry golem smashed away the rusted locks on the gate, and the group had entered the tunnel beyond. The plan was that they would come up the stairs inside and surprise the Crusaders. And yet...

I was about to go look for them myself when the doors to the fortress's entrance hall slammed open. A Crusader paladin emerged carrying a torch high in one hand and a broadsword in the other. Raising the sword, he pointed toward the Elementals and cried, "There! Kill the unbelievers!"

From the darkness came a fresh supply of zombies. At the front were the Crusader guardsman killed in the first assault and now returned to battle. Behind them, still bleeding from the wounds that killed them, came a half-dozen zombie centaurs--once allies of the Elementals, but now servants of the Dark Crusade. To win this battle, Pelius would have to kill his friends.

Monday, June 28, 2004
Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 18
Blood and Ashes

When I returned the scrying eye to Riversgate the next morning, I entered through the tax collector's gate along the river below the fortress. Pelius and his Elementals had withstood the assault of the Dark Crusader defenders for a full day, but each centaur that fell was stolen away by the Crusade to be raised as a zombie and sent back against their former allies. The centaurs' only hope lay with the midlanders and Atlanteans who were supposed to attack through the collector's gate and the tunnels beyond.

The tunnels were thick with dust and cobwebs, and it appeared that the invaders had been the first to come through the gate in many months. Yet it wasn't far inside that I found the first dead midlander farmer, near the shredded bodies of a half dozen imps. A few yards further brought me to the bottom of the stairway leading up to the fortress...and I began to see what had happened.

Disused and abandoned, at some point a section of the stairs had collapsed and rendered them impassable. The invaders, upon seeing the problem, needed a quick solution. Tearing apart their rafts had covered enough of the gap that the humans might jump across, but it hadn't been enough for the infantry golems. So they turned to the only other raw material available--a pair of thick, iron-bound doors at the base of the stairs. In their hurry to complete their makeshift stairs and assist the centaurs, it's likely none of them stopped to consider what might be beyond the doors.

Dead imps lay scattered about the floor of the chamber, along with the broken bones of skeletons clad in battered pieces of rusty chainmail. Lying among them were pieces of infantry golems, a dead technomancer, and many more dead midlanders. Venturing into the room beyond the broken doors, I found rough tunnels running off into the distance. I also found the remains of dozens of strange translucent pods, burned and broken in the fray.

But the stairs had been completed. I followed them upward and found that the midlanders had just arrived in the courtyard. The battle in the tunnels had taken a heavy price. Ealo Landsman commanded only a half-dozen midlander peasants, a wounded technomancer, and two infantry golems. It was enough. The centaurs had winnowed the numbers of the Crusade until they were forced to make a final assault with all of their

remaining forces--which was just when Landsman attacked them from the rear. It was a desperate struggle for all sides, but in the end the Crusaders fell to the two-sided attack.

Late in the day, after wounds had been bound and the undead had been burned, Pelius and his centaurs bid the humans farewell and set out to return to the Elemental Council with news of their success. As promised, they left Riversgate to the Atlanteans.

When the centaurs had crossed the river, the technomancer turned to Landsman. "I'm taking your ship and returning to Atlantis. Keep these men here, and find any others you need to defend this fortress."

"Of course," said Landsman. "What about--"

"You will tell no one until I have spoken to Magus Ananub," said the technomancer. "If anyone else hears of what we saw beneath this place, I will hold you responsible."

Tuesday, June 29, 2004
Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 19
The Council of Five

Again this morning I felt the twisting sensation as I looked into the scrying pool. As I tried to guide the scrying eye back to Riversgate to investigate what the Atlanteans had found in the tunnels below the fortress, my view slid across the countryside. First I saw mountains--the Ailons, I think--and then suddenly I could see the towering granite walls and cliff forts of the Sturnlander Coast. Although I was almost overwhelmed by the sudden shifts, I discovered it was less dizzying if I stopped fighting and relaxed, let the eye go where it would. Slowing, my view passed over the rim of the cliffs and into the Sturnmounts.

Skimming easily up the rough terrain north of Roanne Valle, I slid through a narrow cleft and found myself in a green valley surrounded by steep walls of sheer rock. Hidden among the trees on the valley floor was a pavilion lashed together with vines and thatched with a covering of living sod and ferns. It was perfectly camouflaged; if I had not followed whims of the scrying eye, I might never have found the pavilion on my own.

Under the green covering I discovered the hiding place of what remained of the Elemental Council. The Queen of the Faeries had mended from the wounds she sustained in the battle at Roanne Valle and paced along the border between sunlight and shadow, deep in thought. But Prophet-Priest Tremelen still lay swaddled in blankets, slumped against a tree trunk as an aide held a book in front of him. It was bound in green leather, with a sapling tooled into its cover. The old elf ran his fingers over the pages.

"It was found with two others in a hidden chamber beneath the Citadel of Ice," said the centaur shaman sitting near Tremelen. "Two of them are in an unknown language, but one of the druids studying them recognized the alphabet in this volume as one she had seen you use in the past."

"Yes," said the prophet-priest. "It's an old variant of the elven alphabet used by the noble learned classes, those who studied history, philosophy, and the ways of magic. I've heard of this book, but had feared them all destroyed long ago. This book, young druid, is known as *Leaves of Learning*. It is a spellbook, and given time to study it, it may be our salvation."

"Salvation from a doom you brought down upon us all," grumbled the forest troll perched on a boulder nearby. "You elves owe a great debt to the creatures of the Wylden for their sacrifice to save you from your own folly. We continue to protect you, but it does not come without a cost."

The Queen came over to crouch beside Tremelen. "We had not intended to discuss this until you had recovered, my friend, but time is running short. The study of these spellbooks is yet another distraction from an elven host whose numbers have already been winnowed."

“Put plainly, it’s time for the Council to reform,” said a gray-skinned mountain troll. “But this time, we all play an equal part in deciding what’s important and what isn’t.”

“Surely you won’t just set the books aside!” said Tremelen, wincing as he rolled toward.

The centaur raised a hand to calm him. “Of course not. The druids share your interest in whatever secrets the book might hold. But once those secrets are unlocked, the strategy for employing them will not be dictated to the races of the Wylden by five elves. It will be a decision shared by elf, centaur, faerie, mountain troll, and forest troll alike, a single representative from each. It will be decided by the Council of Five.”

Wednesday, June 30, 2004
Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 20
Lost and Found

Since Emperor Nujarek and the Imperial Legion took control of Atlantis, many technomancers and Guild traditionalists have returned to the island country of Delphane. There, in luxurious manors built among ancient ruins, they pursue their studies far from the Emperor’s eye.

Near Arcos, the largest city on the island, I found dozens of worker golems tending the sprawling grounds of a low-slung manor built along the crest of green, rolling hills. Inside the manor were more golems overseeing every aspect of the house’s upkeep and maintenance. Finally, as I brought the scrying eye into a workshop near the manor, I found a technomancer at work creating a new sort of golem, assisted by a young apprentice. They were at work on an arm, building an apparatus that would feed arrows out of an internal reserve--most likely onto the massive crossbow on a nearby workbench.

“The subassembly is complete,” said the technomancer. “Now I’ll connect it to the steam line.” He handed a large tool to the apprentice and left his hand outstretched in expectation of the next tool required. The apprentice tried to support the heavier tool while scrabbling on the tool rack, fumbled, and managed to maintain his hold on the heavier tool. But the small tool he was reaching for fell off the rack, bounced on the stone floor with a *ping* and rolled under the bench. “Clumsy fool!” said the technomancer.

“Sorry, Lord Balion,” said the apprentice. Carefully placing the large tool back on the rack, he fell to his knees and crawled under the workbench. “Hey!” the boy said. “There’s something wedged against the wall back here.” The bench wobbled and the technomancer grumbled as the boy worked his discovery free and emerged triumphantly with the tool he sought and a metal cylinder green with tarnish.

As the boy gave both objects to his master, the technomancer set aside the tool and squinted at the cylinder for a moment. Turning it in his hands, he rubbed at the patina to reveal a seam near one end. He twisted at it for a moment to no effect, then fixed the cylinder in a vise and retrieved a wrench from the tool rack. Clamping the cylinder in the jaws of the wrench, he tugged at the handle until the end of the cylinder turned. Soon he pulled the end of the cylinder loose to reveal a calfskin-wrapped bundle inside, which he retrieved and unrolled on the workbench. The parchment beneath crinkled and curled as the old man attempted to hold it flat, running one finger along its lines of text and reading aloud: “For greater technomantic control of a construct...”

Wide-eyed, he turned to his apprentice. “Boy, send a courier drone into the city and request an audience with Magus Vasia. I think we may have found some of the Delphana’s lost spells.”

Thursday, July 1, 2004
Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 21
Power of the Blood

After the defeat of the Dark Crusade at Riversgate, it was cheering to watch a Crusade army make a raid early this morning into Black Powder lands. During the darkest part of the night the Crusade had surrounded a small village called Mundort in the midland hills and waited in position for nearly an hour,

unnerving the local militia with the chanting of death-singers and the howling of pain-wraiths hungry for flesh.

Mundort was a quiet town, far from trade routes. Its only attraction to travelers was a time-worn shrine visited each autumn by a few aging pilgrims. Its inhabitants could barely provide for themselves, especially in these barren times. Yet I knew there was still one prize in the town that the Crusade would be happy to collect.

I knew the commander of the Crusaders. His name was Noctus Bloodblade, and he was the son of a death-speaker, a faithful and formidable sect elf who had entered the blood pits as a child and emerged a champion. Now he commanded this force, and had taken them on many such raids in the past months, always successful.

The people of Mundort responded as so many towns had in the past, lighting fires they hoped might ward off both darkness and their enemies. Instead they served only to light the battlefield and reveal the targets of the raid to the Crusade.

Bloodblade gave the signal that unleashed his forces on the town. Skull golems and pain-wraiths surged toward the terrified citizenry of Mundort, but held back from the killing blow. Marksmen atop the town's lodgehouse wielding black powder rifles slowed the advance until they were bulls-eyed by vampire archers. Then it was only a matter of moments before the town fell silent.

Men, women, children--all were gathered in the town square. I was reminded of Corella's attack on the hawk clan, but the Crusade was not here to capture their own; they were here to convert the enemy. Any who refused to join the sect were killed, and new initiates to the Crusade were baptized in their blood.

Bloodblade promised the villagers that there would be no looting by his troops, and that the homes and possessions of those who joined the Crusade would be sacrosanct. When a priest of the blood cult led a group of bone golems to Mundort's shrine, the sect elf walked over to join them. "Certainly the dead powers are no threat to the Crusade," he said.

"Of course not," said the fear priest, raising his hooked staff and directing the golems to break the shrine apart. "But a power can never truly die," said the priest. "It simply lays dormant, waiting for a new vessel."

Inside the broken mud and clay were a stack of stone tablets. "Long ago, there were those who knew how to focus the power of the Land," said the priest, reaching inside to draw out a tablet. "Now their spells belong to us. Now their sorceries belong to the Crusade!"

Friday, July 2, 2004

Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 22

Travelers

The scrying eye returned to Rangraz today. During the last few days I had seen mages of several factions, thousands of leagues apart, seeking out and discovering old magical secrets. It was a disturbing coincidence, but there had been a break in the pattern. The Black Powder Revolution had not uncovered lost spells. The Revolutionaries were developing their own magic, and I wanted to know more about it.

Yet when I brought the scrying eye into the smithy hidden beneath the pig yard, the forge was cold. The tools and scrolls that had littered the workbenches little more than a week before were gone. Jargus Hammerfist had moved his operation elsewhere. I searched the room, and the only clue I found was a fragment of burned parchment lying among the ashes that appeared to be a map of the high passes north of the Kuttar Depths.

So north I went, high over the crumbling pillars and winding canyons of the Depths. I stopped to investigate one Black Powder ore mine, recently raided by the Orcs, but I didn't find Hammerfist among the bodies. I continued on.

I often forget how easily the scrying pool allows me to send myself across the land. Just beyond the Depths I saw a travelers' waystop. It was little more than a crude lean-to of logs with a slate roof, but it was the first shelter travelers emerging from the Depths might have seen in a week. Smoke puffed from the shelter's chimney.

Had I been physically present, the moment I passed through the door I would have been beheaded by the draconum warrior standing guard just inside. Six more of his kind rested in the shelter, and even those who were asleep still wore their armor and had weapons nearby. They lay in such a way that any entering the shelter would have to pass all seven warriors before reaching the single figure who sat before the fire.

He was a draconum, but he wore an odd helm that covered his eyes with no obvious slit allowing vision. He sat cross-legged on the floor, wings spread to catch the heat from the flames. As his head swayed gently, he wrapped his left forearm in long strips of cloth marked with runes, clenching his fist so that the cloth could be bound as tightly as possible. After the left forearm was wrapped, he moved on to the right, then his ankles. When the binding was complete, he held out his hands, palms up, to accept an ornately-carved staff. He sat perfectly still, and world seemed to slow.

Then the draconum guarding the door broke the silence. "We must depart soon, revered one. We have little time before the gathering."

For a moment it seemed as though his words had been unheard. Then the meditating draconum spoke, in a rolling tongue that seemed older than the mountains. The flames danced with each word, flickering and leaping, flared high, then were suddenly snuffed. As the warriors climbed stiffly to their feet, the mystic stood gracefully. He faced the cooling embers until all were ready, then he turned and led them out of the shelter.

Tuesday July 6, 2004
Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 24
Stalker

It's surprising how quickly I've become accustomed to simply giving the scrying eye freedom to take me where it will. Feeling the first twinges of the falling sensation this afternoon, I simply let the eye loose to streak east across the countryside. The pale green and yellow of the struggling midlands gave way to the brown and gray of the dying east, struck not by the touch of Famine but by the blight of the Dark Crusade.

When the eye came to a stop I found myself in the rafters of a shattered barn, among the dust and the crows. Below, a trio of vampires sat sharpening their short, curved blades. "I tire of this search," said the first. "A lost patrol does not deserve to be found. Soon it will be a full moon since I've had a kill."

"These woods are overrun with Mage Spawn," said the second. "I give you leave to blood your blade on as many as you like."

"Killing a beast's not the same as killing in battle," said the first.

The third spoke without looking up from his work. "Then we should complete this search as quickly as possible. The deathspeakers are sending armies down the Wylden Plateau to hunt Elementals."

"That campaign was over after the battle at Roanne Valle," said the second. "I hope to join the force being assembled in the Serpines. I've heard word that they'll march north to retake the mines at Ashon Rye."

"I was told they were to travel west, toward Rangraz," said the first.

"Perhaps they're going south to secure the Galtor," said the third. "Whatever its goal, with the Darkbringer at the head, it's an army that will swim in blood and battle."

The first vampire stood and sheathed his weapon. "Then let's finish this search as quickly as possible. If we don't find the patrol by morning, we go to join the army in the Serpines."

"We still need to be thorough," said the second.

"We can be fast and thorough if we separate," said the third. "I'll follow the trade road, the two of you can flank along the ridges. Signal if you find anything, or we'll regroup at the crossroads." The other two nodded their agreement, and they set out from the barn.

A moment later, there was a push as if I had been tapped on the back. I was startled to realize I had been watching through another's eyes as a form dropped away from the rafters to the dirt below. Despite his bulk, he landed in a graceful crouch and reached out to sniff the scent of the hay where the vampires had been sitting.

He had traded his green cloak for one in a camouflaging light grey, and rubbed his armor with goosegrease thick with black ash to prevent it from glinting in the moonlight. When last I had seen him, he carried himself proudly. Now he was hunched like a beast, waiting for the moment to lash out. Still I recognized him.

It was Warrior Huhn.

Wednesday July 6, 2004
Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 25
Questions

I often wonder who reads the entries I make in these journals. When the last page of each volume is filled, I place it on my bookshelf. Whenever I enter the scrying chamber, the shelf is just as I left it, each book seemingly undisturbed. Certainly you peruse them at some point, Vextha, though I am uncertain when. Even here in the Tower, the Solonavi excel at protecting their secrets.

I wonder, however, for what I record today is not what I saw through the scrying pool, but with my own two eyes. This morning I returned to the scrying chamber, hoping to return to observing Warrior Huhn. The previous day, he had stalked and killed the vampires he spied upon, then continued traveling across the blighted forests of the northern Wylden. Whenever he found a formerly Elemental village occupied by undead, he quickly and ruthlessly eliminated them all before setting fire to the village. Perhaps he sought to retake the Wylden on his own.

Before I could even look into the waters of the scrying pool, an oathsworn page knocked at the door carrying a summons from Anquilis, the tower archivist. Under the terms of my own oath, I am unable to refuse a summons from any Solonavi, and so followed the page as he descended deep beneath the tower.

I was taken to an antechamber outside the archives, where Anquilis bid me sit, then immediately began to ask questions. Again, the terms of my oath with regard to the commands of the Solonavi forbid me from revealing the precise wording of the inquiries, but it was clear that the archivist had read my journals.

I report these events for two reasons: first, as I said, the Solonavi excel at protecting their secrets. Perhaps there is intrigue afoot among the masters of the tower, but I would not be caught in its web for not reporting any part I play to the one to whom I swore my own oath. Second, and more importantly, Anquilis' questions hinted that he believed I was keeping a secret of my own, withholding something from my daily reports. For fear that you might think the same, I want to reassure you--I cannot guarantee that I report the truth, but I will always report all that I see.

I will admit that when I took my oath to serve you, it was for the knowledge and power that would allow me to return to the Necropolis as a deathspeaker. I have found, however, that I take my duties and my bond more seriously than I would have believed.

Anquilis will have more questions soon, as well as a test of my abilities. I hope both serve their purpose. For now, I return to my search for Huhn.

Thursday July 8, 2004

Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 26

Quarry

Pillars of black smoke marked Huhn's trail across the northern Wylden, following his path to the banks of the Roa Sanguine. At the small village of Wyldford, the quick waters of the Sanguine slowed enough to allow a ferryboat to be pulled across the river. Not long ago, stout-thewed trolls had drawn the ferry along the thick hempen ropes strung above the water. Since the Dark Crusade had conquered the Wylden, their undead servants lined the rope on the boat's flat deck.

Today, however, a troll had returned to Wyldford Ferry. The undead crewing the ferry were commanded by a Crusader, but the ferryman was commanded by Warrior Huhn, who had his blade to the Crusader's throat. "Kill me if you like, beast," said the ferryman. "Enemy or ally, each one that falls will rise to swell the ranks of the Crusade."

"And you've been carrying those swollen ranks north," said Huhn. "Undoubtedly you've heard where they are being massed. And you'll tell me where."

"I'll tell you nothing," said the ferryman. "As I said, if you must, you can kill me."

The troll scoffed. "I know your kind. You lack the strength to overcome the challenges of living. You fear what life would ask of you. So you join the Crusade and rush headlong toward the freedom from pain of undeath. I know you."

"So I will not kill you, but neither will the Crusade. You think that the deathspeakers would reward the only Crusader still living in Wyldford Town? First they would question you, but they would not believe the answers. A single troll? I suspect that however they might make certain you were not lying would make the pain of living seem like a pleasure."

Huhn pulled the ferryman close and growled into his ear. "Yet still they would not kill you. They would believe you so craven that you couldn't step forward to die in battle, and hence unworthy of the rewards beyond death. You would live as long as they could sustain you, endlessly punished for your failures. But you would not die."

The north shore drew near. Huhn released the ferryman and pushed him to the deck. Framed by the flames of Wyldford burning behind him, the troll sheathed his sword. "You can tell me where the Crusade is massing its troops, and I might kill you. Or I will leave you here. You will be found soon enough."

The ferryman was shaken, his bravado as drained as the blood from his face. "The Vale," he whispered. "I heard a paladin say that the Darkbringer is gathering troops in the Vale." He looked up at the troll pleadingly. "Please kill me."

The ferry bumped against the rocky shore. For lack of a further command, the zombie crew slumped against the rail. For a moment, Huhn looked down at the ferryman in pity. Then he drew his blade and with a single stroke cut through both the Crusader and the ferry rope. As the boat began to drift with the current, he leapt over the rail to shore and continued his journey north.

Friday July 9, 2004

Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 27

Darkness

Despite the clear trail he left across the Wylden, once Warrior Huhn crossed the Roa Sanguine into the homelands of the Dark Crusade he vanished again. For hours I quested after the troll with the scrying eye, to no avail.

I was about to send the eye north, to find the Crusader army Huhn had sought, when suddenly the world dimmed around me and went black. I lost all sense of time and place, and floated in the dark void for what might have been a moment or an eternity.

Suddenly I could see again. A stone wall covered in chipped and fading tiles. It was a time-worn mosaic, depicting a chaotic and bloody battle on a plain ringed in flame, a dark, winged beast hanging in the sky overhead. As my head cleared, I saw rusted iron rings bolted to the wall below the image, circling the periphery of the round chamber. From the rings hung prisoners, some limp and others struggling. There were dozens of them, of all races--I could see a Kosian, a Sect elf, an orc, a troll, a dwarf, a Krugg, and even a battered but still breathing draconum. Before each prisoner stood a gray-cloaked figure, hoods pulled over their heads and each clutching a dagger reverently to their chest.

Their cloaks were inscribed with sigils I had seen before. I had seen them on those who followed Oracle Matteo in Caero. They were Tur'aj. This was a gathering of the Apocalypse cult.

At the center of the circle a cloaked woman raised a dagger and a torch and held them at arm's length. "The time of prophecy approaches," she said.

The Tur'aj responded: "*The darkness comes.*"

"The horsemen gather."

"*The darkness comes.*"

"Your servants take on their true forms."

"*The darkness comes.*"

The woman brought together torch and dagger so flames licked the blade. "The gateway awaits the key."

"*The darkness comes.*"

"We call upon the spirits below the Land." Dropping the torch, she raised the dagger high, the sleeves of her cloak falling away to reveal wan, ashen skin marked with scars and burns.

The Tur'aj raised their own knives, saying, "*The darkness comes.*"

The woman cut deep into her own palm, exalting in the pain as blood ran down her arm. "We give you this offering to water the seeds of destruction and hasten your return."

"*The darkness comes.*" As one the Tur'aj plunged daggers into their prisoners. Blood washed across the floor and I fell again into blackness.

Monday July 12, 2004
Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 28
Flames

I remember awakening beside the scrying pool, and crawling across the floor to write of the Apocalypse cult while the details were still fresh in my mind. Then nothing.

I awakened as the sun set outside my narrow window. For a moment I lay on my pallet, confused, wondering when I had left the scrying chamber, how I had returned to my own room, how I had somehow

lost an entire day. Then the door slammed open and Anquilis entered, followed by two oathsworn servants. He demanded more detail of my vision, particularly the location of the cult's temple. When I protested that I had not guided myself to the chamber, that the scrying eye had taken me there of its own accord, he insisted that I return to the scrying chamber immediately. I attempted to stand and follow his command, but found myself oddly weak. Anquilis ordered the oathsworn to support me, and they nearly dragged me back to the scrying chamber.

Solonavi and oathsworn stood nearby as I cleared my mind and gazed into the waters of the scrying pool. Rather than casting my vision in any particular direction, as I would normally do, I relaxed and let the eye go. I braced myself as I traveled again into darkness, but this time I merely journeyed into a part of the Land where night had already fallen. I saw Fairhaven pass below me, then the Serpines.

The eye slowed above the Vale of Dawn. As I had heard, the Dark Crusade was gathering a massive army. Two years ago the Crusade had sacked the township when they captured it from Raydan Marz. Not long ago, the Elemental Freeholds had retaken the town, and I could see signs that they had started the long process of rebuilding. But the Vale was now once again firmly under the control of the Crusade, its priests and paladins using the reconstructed buildings as their quarters.

Outside the walls, carts were arriving burdened with the plague-killed. One after another, they were being reanimated into zombies and skeletons, like the assembly process in a Black Powder factory. A large pit had been dug out of the earth outside the town, a crude replica of the blood pits in the Necropolis. Now a long line of troops waited to enter the pit, each victory rewarded with better weapons and armor, each loss weeding out the weak.

Overseeing it all was Kossak Darkbringer. The vampire troll observed each battle, watching his army grow, and seemed to be taking particular pleasure in the combat between recently reanimated centaurs and a barrow knight.

Just as the barrow knight dealt a crushing blow to a centaur, a shout went up from a priest pointing to the top of a nearby hill. One of the corpse wagons had been lit on fire, and came rolling down the steep hillside. The flaming cart slammed through the lines of Crusader troops and tumbled into the combat pit. Another alarm came from the town, where flames licked across the roof of the main barracks.

As panic began to spread among the Crusaders, a lone figure appeared on the ridge. Huhn. "This is your army, uncle?" he called down to Kossak. "The only weapon you could wield against Freeholds was surprise. Now you lack even that! Bring your army to Stonekeep if you dare, and let us settle this once and for all!"

Kossak ordered troops after the Elemental troll, but before I could get the eye to where Huhn had made his challenge, he was gone.

Tuesday July 12, 2004
Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 29
Prophecy

This morning I entered the scrying chamber and opened my diary to a fresh leaf, ready to record the day's events. I was startled to discover a line already written on the page:

It is now as it was, but how it was is not how it will be.

The hand betrays the source: I cannot recall doing so, but I wrote those words.

I go now to ponder the words, and to ponder myself.

Wednesday July 13, 2004
Early Summer, 435 TZ, Day 30
Oracle

I received your summons before dawn, Lord Vextha, and descended to a chamber deep in the catacombs beneath the tower. There I found you waiting with Anquilis, the chamber lit by a fire burning above each of its four doors. At the archivist's direction, I laid upon stone table in the center of the room. Anquilis began to chant as he placed burning incense on my forehead, my throat, and my upturned palms. You joined ritual as he began to pace around me. You circled me on opposing paths, chanting rhythmically, and I felt the same pull I felt when I released the scrying eye--

Hundreds of Draconum warriors side-by-side, awaiting the oncoming horde.

Men with yellowed, pox-scarred skin, crying for release from terrible pain.

A kneeling apprentice holding open a spellbook for her master.

Beneath a blood-red sky, a frenzied dance on burning sands.

Squealing cheers as the king is given his wooden crown.

Dwarves before forges glowing with fire and magic.

Tumbled magestones turning black.

An endless line of corpses.

Darkness.

I was lost. Then I was back in the chamber. Incense hung thick in the air, and the door-fires had burned down to coals. I thought myself unable to move. Then Anquilis waved his hand over the length of my form and I found the strength to sit up.

"You have survived," you said, though I was uncertain what you meant. "You must record all you saw in your journals." As I climbed weakly to my feet, rubbing at the greasy residue of the incense on my hands, I could only nod.

"You mustn't omit even the smallest detail," said Anquilis. "You have become more important than you can possibly imagine, young one. We have only been able to imbue a select few with the power of prophecy, and many of those are driven mad by their visions."

"But you have somehow opened the path within yourself," you said. "Your prophecies are sparked not by our magic but by a wild and untapped potential unseen in hundreds of years."

"It is our hope that we might train you to control your visions, to grant us information that we will require in the near future," said Anquilis.

"Anquilis will guide your training," you told me. "I require you to continue your duties in the scrying chamber, but you will answer to him as you would to me--and report all you see to both of us."

"This is your last moment living only in the present," you said. "From now on, you will have one eye on today and another on tomorrow. From now on, you will be addressed throughout the Tower as Oracle Kastali."

Thursday July 15, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 1

Training

“Open yourself to the world around you,” said Anquilis. We were in the gardens outside the Tower of Rokos. I had nearly forgotten what it was like to sit in the warm morning sunshine, to feel the breeze and hear it move through the bushes. I had grown accustomed to my stool in the scrying chamber, its wooden seat worn smooth from endless hours staring into the waters of the pool. Now my bare legs were prodded from a thousand stiff blades of grass.

“You must ignore what you feel to discover what you know,” said the Solonavi as he paced behind me. I suspected the archivist was also unused to being outside the tower, but he had said it important for us to be outside the tower’s walls for this first exercise. I closed my eyes and remembered back to my apprenticeship with the sect, straining a mixture of mashed bark, berries, and water through cheesecloth to make dye. Filtering. First I filtered out the sound of Anquilis’ footsteps. Then I separated myself from the breeze. I no longer felt the grass beneath me. Finally I felt the pull, like I was looking into the scrying pool...

The mountains. The draconum mystic still traveled with his companions, an odd gathering of a race that was typically and resolutely solitary. They were far north of Dragon’s Gate, further north than I had ever known any to venture, but the path beneath their feet appeared to be well-trod. They walked a high mountain path, buffeted by cold winds and snow. All had their weapons at the ready, and the two-headed warrior at the end of the column kept one head turned over her shoulders as if they might be followed.

The path opened into a wide and brilliant snowfield, the icy crust up a slope of undisturbed whiteness punched and broken by those who had preceded them. I followed the footsteps across the plain to a wall of sheer granite where a cave opening like a dragon’s jaws was nearly hidden by thick clouds of frost smoke hanging in the air.

Through the portal I discovered why the draconum had banded together and where they were going. Beyond was a sheltered valley, a warm haven heated by steaming pools reeking of sulphur. A massive fortress spanned the far end of the valley, its gates guarded by a vigilant draconum guard. Spread out before the fortress were scores of small encampments, and in each gatherings of draconum warriors and mystics trained and meditated. A dozen draconum traveling together had been an oddity. This many gathered was an omen.

On the ramparts of the fortress sat an ancient drakona, arms spread, radiating magical power. He was calling out to the scattered draconum. Calling them here. I heard the call...

And then I felt the grass, the breeze, the warmth of the sun. I was back in the gardens. Anquilis saw that I felt tired and weak. “Return to the scrying chamber,” he said. “Its magics will bolster you while you record what you saw. Your training will continue tomorrow.”

Friday July 16, 2004 Summer, 435 TZ, Day 2 Enigma

“Try again,” instructed Anquilis. It was easier this time, to separate myself from my sensations, to let the eye show me the northlands. Through the mountains, through the cavern, across the valley of draconum, up to the walls of the fortress--

Back in the gardens. While it was getting easier to use the scrying eye without the pool, it was continually becoming more exhausting. “I can’t,” I gasped. “I don’t know if it’s too far, or if I’m too tired--”

“A failure explained is still a failure,” said Anquilis. “We are done for the day.” He turned back to the tower, returning to his archives. Somehow, I made my own way back into the tower and up to the scrying chamber. Warmth and energy flowed into me as I entered the room, and I basked in the magic until I had recovered.

Once my strength had returned, I immediately took up my seat at the edge of the scrying pool. My skill at the new methods I was being taught may yet be weak, but my ability to use the pool was well-honed. I looked into the waters and pushed the scrying eye to the valley of draconum. There was no weakness, no exhaustion as I watched the draconum continuing their training below. Confidently, I crossed to the fortress, where the drakona on the ramparts still called to the draconum.

“Why does he call them?” Anquilis had asked. “What is inside the fortress?”

I guided the eye to the gates of the fortress. It was well-maintained, but old, crafted in a style that reminded me of the ancient structures of Dragon’s Gate. Runes inlaid with gold circled the gateway, and I studied them for a moment before pressing into the interior of the fortress...where I found nothing. A grey emptiness. I could hear nothing, feel nothing. It was as though I was back in the gardens, senses empty, but unable to release the eye. I flailed about mentally, and found myself back outside the fortress. Each time I tried to guide the eye back inside, I felt a pulse of magic that rebuffed me from entering.

There is something inside that fortress. Something the draconum have taken to the edges of the land. Something they are able to hide, even from my abilities. I know the Solonavi will want to know what it is ...but fear I will be unable to tell you.

Monday July 19, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 3
Crossing the Line

Anquilis feels I may be working against my abilities by attempting to focus them on a particular subject so closely and for so long. I’ve been instructed to release myself completely to the whims of the scrying eye, and to record what is revealed:

In the largest house in a small town on the eastern borders of Prieska called Silverleaf, Khan Ghugg and the warriors of his tribe drink away a warm summer evening. In the corner, one warrior bangs his mug on the table to train another in the rhythms of the clurch drum. “That one means a counterattack is coming and to fall back after setting fires,” he says. “Different beat for setting fires to roust cowards,” he says. “I’ll show you.”

Ghugg sits in a creaking wooden chair, his feet propped up on an overturned table. Once it must have been a nice house--that of a candlemaker, judging by the rendering pots and tallow casks along the back wall--but the orcs have turned the home into a hovel. Dozens of misshapen lumps of wax mark where the orcs have melted down the carefully crafted candles, and one wall shows the marks of a small fire. Emptied kegs and bottles have been thrown into the fireplace until it has been choked by debris. Bones and garbage litter the floor, and just outside the door flies buzz around the remains of a slaughtered hog. None of it bothers the orcs, as Ghugg recounts their recent raid into Atlantean territory in the Scythian Mountains. “They’re so distracted by the rebels and the crusaders and the famine that they forget about everything west of the Sein. Too busy fighting the war to notice the battles! Soon enough, we’ll be eating from the table of the Emporer himself!”

As the orcs cheer, two Prieskans stand unnoticed in the shadows outside. “Two weeks they’ve been here,” says the stablemaster.

“They always said Taper’s shop looked like it had been visited by orcs,” says the blacksmith. “Leastways it’s true now.”

“They may be staying at Taper’s, but they’re eating everything in town,” says the horseman. “You heard they found the food Innsong had hidden away in his hayloft?”

The smith nods. "Even took his cheeses and the cask of pickles. Don't think they even ate 'em--they just threw them to their dogs." He leans closer to his friend. "Um, Innsong and I were thinking about going to meet some people."

"Under the Moon?" asks the stablemaster.

"And the Sword," the smith confirms.

"I'll go with you, then," says the stablemaster. "They've already taken all my mounts. Might as well do what I can to save some others."

Together the two walk into the night, leaving the orcs to their revels.

Tuesday July 20, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 4
Sand and Blood

I release the scrying eye...

Night in the desert.

A guard walking the ringwall around the Galeshi city of Alrimjin has kicked off her sandals to feel the warm stone under her feet, a counter to the cold wind blowing in across the sands from the distant ocean. She walks through dancing shadows, one hundred paces between the watch-fires burning in copper braziers. Midway between braziers, she looks deep into the darkness. Many months have passed since Khan Rabahn and his horde nearly destroyed the Ringed Cities. Indeed, where once there were eight, seven now stand. When the guard looks to where the torches of Ribaya should be on the horizon, she remembers the flames of the city burning yet now sees only blackness. The orcs are gone, the night is still. But there are rumors among the guards of a terrible price paid by the leaders of the tribe that the green-skinned beasts might leave.

The guard has passed twenty-one braziers, and she will pass fourteen more before she can set down her rifle and rest in the barracks above the city's main gate. She will sleep in the morning, and in the afternoon she will work with her husband to repair the guard's stable of mechanical mounts. Contact with the Black Powder Revolution has been rare in the months since the orcish attacks, and spare parts are becoming increasingly sparse. So is gunpowder: she carries only the black powder charge in her rifle and one more in her belt pouch.

She stops to look once again into the darkness, this time toward Ghanshe. The gilded sun atop Ghanshe Palace reflects light from both the warm city below and the cool moon above. She had been at the celebration marking completion of the palace's reconstruction not a fortnight previously--a sign that the scars of the attack were finally healing. Contact with the Revolution would be reestablished. Trade along the Greenroad would thrive once again. The Galeshi people would survive, as they always have.

Walking to the next brazier, she pauses and turns to look over her shoulder. Had the shadows moved? She dismisses it as a mirage seen by tired eyes, and continues.

She nears the brazier. Suddenly she is grabbed from behind. An arm wraps over her mouth, preventing her from calling out, as her rifle is ripped away to tumble over the wall and into the darkness. A gaunt form in loose desert fighter's robes pulls the scarf away from his face to reveal a wide grin--and a pair of fangs. The guard has a moment to give a yelping alarm as her attacker shifts his grip, pulls her head aside, and sinks his fangs into her neck.

The tales are true. The Orcs have left Galeshi. The Black Powder Revolution can come to the aid of its people. And both are for the same reason: the desert now belongs to the vampires. Beyond her attacker, the guard sees another vampire extinguishing the brazier as others slip over the wall and drop into the city

below. Above, the moon is high in the sky, and before it sets the desert will know many more of its newest people--the moonborn.

Wednesday July 21, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 5
The Gathering

Four days' travel east of Venetia, the town of Karn's Cross was named for the two major roads that pass through it, one headed north to south and the other east to west. The last inn before Atlantean units march into the territory of the Crusade, the taproom of the Keg and Wheel in Karn's Cross is filled each night by Atlanteans and merchants. Tonight is no exception. The fire burns warmly in the hearth and the innkeeper is trading coins for ale as quickly as he could pour.

--so he says, 'I am not for the poking!'" a merchant says, taking a gulp of ale as his audience of Imperial swordsmen and infantry laughs. "Good old Dagon. I wonder whatever happened to that crazy old man." He waves his flagon and shouts, "Innkeeper, more ale for my friends from Caero--and don't forget some for me!"

The innkeeper raises an empty pitcher. "The boy is supposed to be bringing more. I'll see what's keeping him." He turns toward the kitchens, and finds a gray-cloaked figure standing in his path. "Are you looking for a meal, sir?" the innkeeper asks hesitantly. "Or perhaps a room for the night?"

The hooded figure turns slightly, and as the innkeeper follows his gaze he is startled to find cloaked figures standing before each door and window, silent and still. At the front door of the inn, a man in enameled steel armor studies the room. Raucous moments before, the laughter and chatter of the taproom is choked off as the patrons too notice the strange visitors. For a moment, the night falls quiet. Then the armored man speaks, and his rumbling voice seems to fill the room: "I am Kem Ravenbane. You will come with me, and you will die."

A bench screeches across the board as an Atlantean climbs to his feet. "Sounds like the Sect doesn't even know how to make threats." Drawing his sword, he crosses the room, swaggering a bit from the night of drinking. "Or. You want us to come with you, *or* we will die."

I don't even see Ravenbane draw his longsword, but suddenly its point protrudes from the back of the Atlantean soldier. He swings the skewered soldier on the end of his blade and pushes him to the floor before one of the cloaked figures. In a flash, the figure has drawn a dagger from inside his cloak and cut away the Atlantean's jerkin. Three more quick slashes and he has carved a bloody rune into the chest of the soldier. As the soldier sputters and coughs, a final cut slits his throat.

"I am not part of the ridiculous Crusade," says Ravenbane. "There is no eternal life. There is only death. We are the Tur'aj. You will come with me, and you will die."

The remaining Atlanteans, suddenly sober, leap from their seats and draw their weapons. Ravenbane strides into their midst, fighting a dozen soldiers simultaneously, his heavy blade parrying two strikes at once while his mailed fist lashes out to break the jaw of a disruptor-wielding soldier. Each time an Atlantean falls, a cloaked Tur'aj cultist dashes forward to perform the death ritual.

In moments, it is over. Ravenbane points toward the terrified merchants and the innkeeper. "Load them into the wagon with the others. The avatars hunger."

Thursday July 22, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 6
Legends and Truth

The Revolutionaries were over the western border of their territory, and they could see the fires of the orc tribe at the far end of the valley. To conceal their own position and keep warm, the Revolutionary warriors wrapped themselves in thick cloaks and sat close to talk quietly as they ate the last of their provisions. Tomorrow they would scavenge after their victory. If there was no victory, food wouldn't matter.

"I can smell the meat on the wind," said a young Khamsin trooper. "Probably out there stuffing their bellies, and won't leave any for us."

"We won't get anything if those Amazons don't show up to help in the assault," said the mechanic. "I have three golems up and running, but we'll need them to flank the greens and draw them into the trap."

"I don't think they're coming," said the dwarf, idly sharpening his dagger. "Sergeant said they were supposed to be here when we got here. Yesterday. No riders, no messages, no nothing."

"What we need is a magic weapon," said the young trooper. "Ever since I was a kid I hear about Dragonsbreath rifles and luckblades and magic lances. Spent a few years on the battlefield now, but can't say I've ever seen one."

"So let's say you could have one," said the mechanic. "Which one would you want?"

"Most guys might want a magic rifle," said the trooper. "But not me. I'd take Storm Maul."

"A hammer? I've never seen you swing a hammer in your life!"

"Wouldn't need to. All the legends say that whoever carries Storm Maul can call down lightning on whatever they please. I'd just sit up there on the ridge and burn the orcs before they even got into rifle range."

"Try and get two, then," said the mechanic. "I'll sit up there with you."

"Doesn't work like that," said the dwarf.

"How do you know?" asked the trooper.

"Maybe it worked like that back in the time of those legends," said the dwarf. "Now, though, Storm Maul has to be carried in close. It'll burn what it touches, but you have to be close enough to smell the scorched flesh and singed hair. Get the orcs to stand in a river, though, and then you might be able to get them all."

"I guess we've just heard different stories," said the trooper. "I'll take my Storm Maul and you can stick with yours."

"I'll do that," said the dwarf, folding back his cloak to reveal the silver-hafted hammer hidden beneath. Sparks seemed to dance across the surface of its rune-engraved head. "Took it off the body of a deathspeaker," he said. "I don't think I'll be giving it to an orc. Not tomorrow."

The mechanic chuckled. "Maybe we don't need the Amazons after all."

Friday July 23, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 7
Darkness and Flame

It was a time long ago, before I came to the Tower, even before I joined the sect. I was a child, and walked through a field of wildflowers. Then, with a wrenching pull, the world melted around me and I stared into the face of a dead man.

I started for a moment as I realized that the scrying eye had plucked me from my dreams and pulled me to the Blasted Plains. Bodies were scattered across the cracked and broken tiles of a forecourt at the base of the Black Pyramid. They were the bodies of the Elementals who had decreed themselves the guardians of the Pyramid, vigilant for any who sought to enter in search of the dark power said to lie hidden within. Only once had they failed, when the Wolfwitch had passed through its portals. Somehow she had gained mastery over the Pyramid's guardians, an army of monstrous Mage Spawn, and tonight she had sent them out to claw through the Elemental lines.

Had the Elementals stood alone, it might have been enough. Yet Torg Boneknitter still lived, though the medicine troll leaned heavily on his staff. Next to him was Nerab, the aging Galeshi leader whose visions had brought sunborn warriors to aid the Elementals. Together, the sunborn and the Elementals had slaughtered the beasts sent out of the Pyramid--but not without a terrible cost. Fewer than a dozen sunborn and sixty Elemental warriors had survived the battle. They bound their wounds tightly, continuing to keep watch across the pillars and pools of the courtyard, ready for another attack.

Boneknitter stared grimly at the gates of the Pyramid. "Even in the smallest cave, with the brightest fire, the least pebble casts shadows that give the darkness a place to hide." He turned to Nerab. "I cannot tell you what cast this dark shadow upon the Land, but our fire is burning low. We have won this battle, but the darkness comes close to the flame."

"Darkness cannot be contained," said the Galeshi. "With each day comes a night." He pointed toward the sun, just climbing over the horizon. "And with each night comes a day. Darkness has come into this world. We both sense it. We have both seen it. All we can do is keep the watchfires stoked and hope that we will see another morning."

"A message arrived yesterday from the Elemental Council," said the troll. "Just before the battle. The Council survives, but cannot help us. So I have taken their bird and sent it to summon the aid we need from another. Once it arrives, we will lick our wounds no longer. We will take our flame into the darkness."

Monday July 26, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 8
The Call

I heard the Call, and I was not alone.

In Arcos, a wizard of the Delphana looked up from where he was fitting lost pages into an ancient tome.

Under the trees of a grove in the eastern mountains, a centaur druid slept with her arms wrapped around a green-bound book. She sat up with a start, and listened for the voice whispering through the leaves.

Above the marshy hills of the Fist, an orc meditating with a Magestone crystal grasped in each fist opened his eyes and understood the message.

Deep beneath the hills, a dwarf set aside his hammer and wiped his brow. He knew where he had to go.

A draconum and a Crusade priestess locked in combat tumbled down a sandy dune in the Galeshi desert and rolled apart. As they came to their feet, they looked at each other for a moment before moving off cautiously into the darkness. It would be happening soon.

Deep in the Rivvenheims, an ancient elf reached for his traveling cloak. It was all happening again.

I looked out the window of my chamber into the night and in the courtyard below saw one of the tower's oracles mounting a hastily saddled mount. She had a long way to go, and a short time to get there.

To each and to all the voice had spoken. *Prove yourself*, it said. *Prove yourself and the power will be yours.*

All heeded the Call as they journeyed into the night.

Wednesday July 28, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 9
Pathis' Path

It was as Anquilis said: Only when I had let go of my wish to see more of the draconum valley in the north did the scrying eye return of its own volition. Suddenly I was there, looking down on the draconum mystic I had seen hiking through the mountains weeks earlier.

The mystic looked down on the draconum army training in the valley below as he made his way along a high and narrow path leading to a cave opening. The warmth of the sulphur pools was far away, and he wrapped his wings around himself tightly against the biting northern winds spilling over the lip of the valley. Gratefully, he made his way into the shelter of the torch-lit cave.

Inside, a lithe figure danced across the rough stone floor, balanced atop a long, sinuous tail in place of legs. She wore armor, but as with that worn by the mystic, it was clearly as much for ceremonial purposes as for protection. Her four arms moved in concert, one holding a dagger, another a small mirror, and the last pair an open scroll from which she read aloud the words of a spell. Robed whelps sat around her in a wide circle, heads bobbing as they studied her every movement. She gestured at a red-skinned whelp with the dagger and he rushed forward. Her tail whipped around to slap the whelp firmly, and he vanished--only to reappear behind the surface of the mirror. She smiled as the whelp poked ineffectively at the far side of the glass. "One should always know the effects of the spells one casts, young ones, and this is best achieved as the target of the spell. Practice upon one another, and understand."

As she made her way over to the mystic, he spread his wings wide and bowed low. "I thank you for your summons, Pathis."

"Rise, revered one," she answered. "All who are of the order will always be welcome." She held out the scroll. "For you. The Solonavi believe they are the only ones with this spell. Study it well. Perhaps you will find it useful in our journey."

"Journey, Pathis?"

"Not all have answered the summons, Hysthe. There is one who cannot, but one whose counsel will be invaluable in the coming days. We must seek out Krosthysas."

"He still lives?"

"He does, somewhere in these mountains. Yet he has not come." She shook her head as one of the whelps dropped a mirror. "Krosthysas is one of the old ones, and will not respect any who come as part of a massive search. He will think them weak, and short of cunning. So we must go alone, two warriors strong in sword and spell, and hope that he will grant us an audience."

"Scouts returned from the east this morning," said Hysthe. "The Shyft have left the mountains. Our days of easy hunting may be over."

"Another sign," said the Pathis. "The darkness is coming. Making it more vital than ever that we locate Krosthysas. Prepare yourself. We leave in an hour."

Thursday July 29, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 10
Redgear

Today the scrying eye took me to a warehouse near the docks in Caero, where the Golemcore had set up a workshop. The doors were open to let in the last of the late afternoon sun, and a mechanic in greasy

overalls paced the narrow and cluttered aisle between benches lined by tools, parts, and apprentices, lecturing the young men and women who worked beneath him. “A dwarf may have invented this new type of brain, but it will be the Golemcore who perfects it! Who invented the art of technomancy?”

“Revered Tezla,” responded the apprentices, most with zealous fervor, but at least one with enough distraction that the mechanic cuffed him with an empty leather glove.

“That’s right,” said the mechanic. “The rebels may be able to arm their golem with cannons, but we put centuries of accumulated skill and the power of magestones into our golems. If you demonstrate enough of the first, perhaps you will be trusted with a magestone for your golem like young Akhwan.” He gestured proudly toward where a young Caeronn worked on a golem in a cleared area at the end of the workshop. It had a fresh coat of red paint, and in place of one arm was a pneumatic crossbow with an enormous blade like a bayonet hung below. Through a hatch in its chest I could see the clockwork of its mechanical brain clustered around a crystal of red magestone.

“Master Ulwakan,” said Akhwan, hesitantly.

“What is it?” said Ulwakan.

“Redgear doesn’t seem to be working properly. He won’t follow all of my commands.”

The Kosian mechanic made his way down to stand beside the Caeronn. “What’d I tell you about naming the golems, boy? It’s a bow golem, not a rot-gear, or whatever you say. Show me the problem.”

“Redg--” Akhwan began, then caught himself. “Bow golem, load primary ammunition.” The golem reached out to pick up a cylinder loaded with quarrels, and locked it into his upper arm. “Bow golem, cycle weapon.” The gears in the golem’s arm whirred as an arrow was fed into the crossbow. “Bow golem, take aim on target.” The golem turned to face a golem hull leaning against the wall, the sigil of the Black Powder Revolution painted onto its chest. Akhwan looked at Ulwakan as he said, “Bow golem, fire weapon.” Nothing.

“Bow golem, fire weapon!” said Ulwakan. Nothing. “Well, something’s wrong, boy. We’ll have to chase it down tomorrow. Day’s running out on us now, but I expect you back here at first light.”

“Yes sir,” replied Akhwan.

“Day’s over!” said Ulwakan. “Clean up your tools and let’s get some dinner.”

An hour later, the workshop was deserted. Everything was quiet and still, broken only by the laughter from a nearby tavern. Then a red glow lit the room, coming from the bow golem. It was the magestone crystal in his chest, and the golem reached up to close the hatch. I was surprised by how quiet he was, the movement betrayed only by a slight whirring from his freshly oiled gears and the occasional hiss of escaping steam. Almost silently, he moved across the workshop. A single hammer with his fist knocked away the lock on the door and he slipped into the night.

Monday August 2, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 11
The Price of Failure

The scrying eye glided among the jagged towers of the Necropolis, drawn to the Prophet’s Tower. Even as I passed through its cold black walls, I felt the burning rage of the Prophet inside. The hollow roar of a gong summoned the Deathspeakers to the highest chamber of the Tower, where bracing winds came freely through windows overlooking the city and the dark waters of Black Lake.

As the Deathspeakers filed in, the Prophet stood mute and unmoving, his back to them as he stood before a golem draped in silk robes marked with the sigil of the Crusade. The Dark Tezla. Even among the highest ranks of the Crusade, the Prophet allowed few others into the presence of the Dark One. Though humanoid in form, the golem was made of polished bones from dozens of creatures--a cave orc's ribcage, the thighbone of an orc, elven fingerbones, the arm of a krugg--topped with a skull said to be that of the living Tezla, bound together by a black, tarry substance charged with necromantic magic. The room was suffused with the sickly, sweet odor of the golem and the power it radiated. The Deathspeakers basked in it, but stiffened when the Prophet turned to face them.

"I have not called you here before Tezla himself to reward you," said the Prophet grimly. "You were given a chance to earn that reward, and you have failed. You were given the largest army ever amassed in these lands, an army of conquest, and you failed. You were given a chance to earn unending life and power--and you have failed."

One of the younger Deathspeakers was foolish enough to speak. "We have succeeded in capturing the entirety of the Wylden, Prophet. The strongholds of the Forest Elves are shattered, and we have surrounded Roanne Valle."

The Prophet walked toward him calmly. "Yet you have failed to capture their precious Sanctuary." Another step closer. "You *failed* to destroy their Council, which even now is rebuilding its strength." Another step. "And you **FAILED** to destroy their False Tezla!" Thrusting his hand forward, the Prophet reached into the young Deathspeaker and tore out his soul. As the Deathspeaker slumped to the floor, the Prophet cradled his spirit in a web of black magic and carried it to the Dark Tezla. When the Prophet offered up the soul to his master, the spirit pulled free of the web and was absorbed by the bone golem. The rubies set into its eye sockets seemed to glow brighter.

"Do not think I don't know of your failures," said the Prophet, turning back to the remaining Deathspeakers. "I know that we have lost Riversgate. You will recapture it. I know that the army sent to capture the secrets of the ancient blood cult has taken them to Ribaya instead of returning here. You will retrieve them, and those responsible will be punished. I know that the Darkbringer marches his armies to Stonekeep rather than to Roanne Valle, as ordered. He will be corrected, and the Elementals will be destroyed."

"This is our time. The time of the Crusade. Our rise to power will not be halted by our enemies, let alone by incompetence."

Wednesday August 4, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 12
The Ninth Circle

I sat in the gardens outside the tower today and watched as the scrying eye followed a lone dwarf hiking along the banks of the Roa Kaiten headwaters. As I got closer, I recognized him as Terk, the dwarf who had been working with the Black Powder Revolution in Rangrez. Mid-morning, he waded across the cold waters of a feeder spring and into a ramshackle town, one of the Whitespray region's innumerable hideouts for bandits and thieves. In front of a run-down tavern, a barbarian from the Vurga Divide and a minotaur were taking turns beating a barrow knight spiked to a tree, then watching its wounds regenerate.

Terk made his way into the tavern and dropped the bundle on his back onto a table, saying, "Either somebody gives me a drink, or I'm leaving again."

"Terk!" said the goblin behind the bar, sloshing ale into a mug. "You're back! Did you bring me a gun from the Rebels? Did you? Did you?"

"Nope," said Terk. "They were starting to off their friends, so I lit out. Left the guns so they wouldn't have a reason to track me down. Got my money, though."

“You mean *our* money,” said a gravelly voice, as a krugg warrior entered from the back room. “The Order gets a share of everything, dwarf.”

Terk shook his head and raised his mug to his lips. “Still saving up to get the Order’s symbol crafted out of gold or something, Bloodaxe? So you saw it on the wall down in the dungeons. Doesn’t mean you have to make it all fancy.”

“You pour expensive ale into your mouth, and all that comes out in return is salamander droppings,” said the krugg. “Wandering around so much, you don’t know anything about the Order’s business. We’ve been bringing whatever creatures are smart enough to listen, and as many of the Whitespray warlords as possible. Even managed to find a renegade draconum.”

“Really?” said Terk, leaning forward.

“Came to us,” said Bloodaxe. “Tough. Between him and the rest of the forces we’ve gathered, we even managed to chase the Sect away from the headwaters--most of their troops have been drawn south for some reason.”

“Doesn’t sound like there’s any money in that,” said Terk, motioning to the goblin for more ale.

“Money? No. But proof that the Order is a force to be considered, yes.” The krugg pounded the table with his axe. “We answer to nobody but ourselves now! The Spawn are banding together, and no longer will we be slaves. They want our swords and claws at their side, they bring gold to the table!”

Terk tossed back his second ale, then stood and hefted his bundle. “Whatever. I’m off to change into something a little more comfortable than these traveling leathers. Just let me know when there’s something to hit, and how much you’re paying.”

Friday August 6, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 13
Opening Salvo

The ancient Kosian pyramids built along the banks of the Roa Vizorr were sharp silhouettes against a cloud-darkened sky. Beyond the pyramids were the walls of Caero and the bright lights of the city’s gaming houses. Here the only light came from inside the gatehouse at the near end of the bridge across the river into Venetia. A tired Atlantean soldier collected the toll from a Venthian kegwagon headed to resupply the thirsty merchants of Caero. The wagon creaked off down the road and the night fell into a silence broken only by the murmuring of the terraced waterfalls on the side of the pyramids.

The Atlantean raised a hand to his mouth to stifle a yawn, stretched, and turned back to the gatehouse. Behind him, the shadow of a mile marker at the side of the road pulled loose and slid behind him. As they entered the torchlight spilling out the door, the shadow became a soft-footed Khamsin who dropped a garrote over the Atlantean’s head and pulled it tight. The struggle was over in moments. The Khamsin dragged the Atlantean into the gatehouse and extinguished the torch inside.

A dozen forms wearing heavy packs came out of the darkness and made their way out onto the bridge. Working in pairs, they attached ropes to the ornately-carved statues lining the crossing and dropped over the side.

The Khamsin stood in the shadows of the gatehouse, watching the road from Caero. From under the bridge came the occasional clink of a metal buckle against stone as burdens were fixed into place, or the whirr of cord being pulled off of a reel.

The sentry started at the whisper from behind him: “Everything’s in place. Move up the road.” He turned and nodded at the woman who had spoken, then vanished into the darkness. He was followed by those

returning from the bridge, trailing cords that they handed to the woman. She drew a wooden box from her own pack and set to work attaching the cords.

“This is ill-advised,” growled a voice from the shadows of the gatehouse.

“They’re getting too comfortable sitting before the hearths of Castle Khamsin,” said the woman.

She struggled with a connection. “Let me give you some light,” said the growl, and a tiny sphere of red light appeared in the palm of a clawed draconum hand. It illuminated the wires connected to the box, the handle atop it, and the face of the woman. I knew the face. It was Nadia os Darras. The Black Thorn.

Thorn attached the final wire, cinched it tight, and raised the handle. “It’s time to remind them that the war isn’t over,” she whispered, the handle whirring as she pushed it downward.

There was a massive roar from the bridge as the gunpowder charges beneath it detonated, goutts of fire rolling up into the sky. Their supports shattered, the timeworn stones of the bridge collapsed into waters below.

“They’ll all see,” said the Black Thorn. “It’s only beginning.” Followed by the draconum, she turned and headed toward the lights of Caero.

Monday August 9, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 14
Battle of Wills

This morning I entered the scrying chamber with a divided spirit. Anquilis had instructed me to follow where the scrying eye would lead, yet my mandate in the chamber was to gather information that would prove useful to the masters of the tower and the Solonavi cause. Observing one random scene after another, as I had for nearly two weeks, I had stumbled across much useful information--but only through providence, not planning. Though it might help to explore my abilities, trailing behind the whims of the eye didn’t seem to serve the needs of the Solonavi--or my own.

As I settled myself on a stool before the scrying pool, I felt the eye tug at me, ready to take me off into the distance. But I resisted its pull, and exerted my will to send it to the east and then up the Vizorr, back toward the scene it had shown me yesterday, between Caero and Venetia.

The work of the Bloody Thorns had been thorough. The bridge was in ruins, and the pilings so shattered that it would be difficult to rebuild. I watched an Atlantean legionnaire work his way along what remained of the bridge on the Venthian side of the river, crouched low and more cautious than the loosened stones might demand. Then a single shot rang out from the direction of the Caeronn pyramids, and the scout tumbled off the bridge and into the swift waters below.

Just outside the northern wall of Venetia, the Imperial Legion had set up a staging area with a command tent at its center. I guided the eye inside. A general was inspecting a map rolled out on the table before him as a lieutenant pushed his way in through the heavy flaps. “Snipers just got another scout, General Vateo. I don’t think we’ll be able to put any sort of temporary crossing in place without heavy losses.”

The general pounded the table in frustration. “What word from the Watch in Caero?”

“None, sir. Our observers in ornithopters have confirmed that the explosion shortly after the destruction of the bridge was indeed at their headquarters. It appears that the building has been totally destroyed. Street fighting is continuing between what remains of the Watch and the Bloody Thorns, and our troops are currently finding them more formidable than expected.”

“Tell me if I understand you properly, Lieutenant. The Rebels have somehow managed to not only destroy the headquarters for the eastern regiments, but also have enough troops into Caero to seriously vie for control of the city.”

“I’m afraid that’s correct, sir. Our current estimate says if we can’t retake the city within five days, we may lose it and the surrounding area. Perhaps we should call for reinforcements from the capital.”

“Which would you rather report to the Emperor--that we were so weakened by a single attack that we required assistance, or that we made a decisive counterattack with the resources we had available and crushed a major rebel uprising?”

“The latter, sir.”

The general turned back to his map. “Then perhaps you’ll live to be a general someday yourself. But first we need to make that happen. I expect to hear your plan in an hour.”

“Yes, sir.” I followed the young lieutenant outside, and as he stopped to look across the river at Caero I once again felt the tug of the scrying eye. There was a strange twist, and scene shimmered in the afternoon heat.

Caero in ruins. A gray-cloaked figure standing atop each of the pyramids, arms held high. A dark shadow hanging over the city. An enormous beast and a gout of flame...

Then all was as it had been. The lieutenant completed his deliberations and strode off toward into the camp, calling for his men.

Wednesday August 11, 2004

Summer, 435 TZ, Day 15

Inquisition

When I entered the scrying chamber this morning, my stool was already occupied by a woman in black robes trimmed in gold and violet, paging through one of my journals. Her hair was bound high on her head, above the strap of the mask she wore. The mask was similar to that worn by the Oathsworn but covered only the top half of her face, and while the Oathsworn mask provided holes through which the wearer could see, this golden mask had no such openings. The “eyes” attached to the surface of this mask were a blank whiteness, polished ivory. It was the mask of an Oracle.

“Good morning, Oracle Kastali,” she said. “We’ve been reading your journals. You show great promise.”

“Thank you,” I said, less out of politeness than for lack of anything else to say.

She closed the book--this very book--and placed it back on the shelf. “My name is Daheia,” she said. “I am the arcanarch of our order.” She rounded the scrying pool to study before the map on the wall. “When you accepted our offer, you joined one of the most ancient orders in the land. The Oracles of Rokos. Our powers come with a heavy burden of responsibility. We had ordered you to follow the guidance of your ‘scrying eye’, to go where it would take you and report what you saw.” She turned to face me across the pool. “Why did you disobey those orders and return to Caero yesterday?”

Anyone who lived in Rokos knew Daheia’s name. She was the leader of the Oracles, the most trusted of those sworn to the Solonavi, a powerful sorcerer with incredible mental abilities. For all I knew, she had been given permission to enter the scrying chamber, and to read my journals. But I was determined to avoid finding myself bound to yet another master: “I believe I recorded my reasons for disobeying my orders in my journal, and in doing so both uncovered important information and had another oracular vision. Regardless, I don’t remember those orders coming from you. My oath is to Lord Vextha, and I answer to him and Anquilis the archivist. They may have given me the title of Oracle, but that doesn’t put me under your command.”

I expected an angry rebuke, and instead received a gentle smile that unavoidably damped my anger. “You misunderstand, Kastali.” She pursed her lips, and lowered her head in concentration. As she spread her arms a form pulled away from her, a Solonavi stepping out of her body--Anquilis.

The archivist and the oracle mirrored each others’ motions for a moment. Then Anquilis came around the scrying pool to my side. “You misunderstand, Oracle,” he said.

“The two of you are bonded,” I said. “Like Rayevisayla and Corella.”

“The powers of the Oracles have waned with the passing centuries,” said Daheia. “We don’t know why. We can scry across the Land, as you can, but only those of us who have bonded with a Solonavi have any hope of seeing times to come. Even then, our visions lack the certainty of days past.”

“I have no such bond,” I said.

“Also correct,” said Anquilis. “That is what makes you so unique. We come here today not to reprimand you but to ask your assistance. When you guided your visions to Caero, you saw not only the present but what might be. We must know why, and how—and if there is truth in your vision.”

“The time comes when you will be required to decide where your loyalties lay, Kastali,” said Daheia. “Not because you will be required to answer to a cause, but because that cause may answer to you.”

Thursday August 12, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 16
Council of the Wolf

After their revelation yesterday, Anquilis and Daheia left the scrying chamber without further explanation or direction, leaving me alone to think. My thoughts whirled as I strove to understand what they had told me, about the Oracles, the Solonavi, and about myself. I slept little until I determined to set it all aside and concentrate on the path before me. I would let the future come when it would.

This morning, I returned to the scrying chamber. I looked into the waters of the pool and felt the tug of the scrying eye. I resisted the pull, and considered for a moment where I would choose to observe. Then I realized: it was not a place I wished to observe--it was a person. *Corella*, I thought. The eye tugged again and I willed at it: *Corella and Rayevisayla*. Now that I understood the relationship between the two, I knew that where I would find one I would find the other. The pull of the eye sagged, like a sail as the wind changed, then suddenly surged and carried me north.

The queen sat in council with the leaders of the tribes she had conquered. “What word from the north?” she asked. I could not see Rayevisayla, but I knew: the Solonavi was there.

“We’re still losing scouts sent to the north,” said an Amazon wrapped in a wolfskin. “But those who return are reporting high traffic by both draconum and Black Powder caravans through the area.”

“For now we still fight for the Revolution,” said Corella. “The huntresses we sent to Caero last week should assure them of that. That means the true threat are the draconum. Where are they going, and why? We’re about to begin our advance across northern Khamsin, and I don’t want an unexpected skirmish to reveal to the rebels or Valia exactly how many tribes we have working in concert. If that means we march to the north to face these draconum before we go to claim the holy mountain, so be it.”

Friday August 13, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 17
Heeding the Call

I still heard the Call, like a distant song. It had been a constant companion to my thoughts for more than a week, but little more than an annoyance. Still, I wondered about those whom it had driven into action.

I sent the scrying eye in search of one of them and found myself in Down Town, in the shadows beneath Atlantis. The Delphana mage I had last seen in Arcos was now impatiently pacing the flagstones of a wide plaza where flying platforms carried soldiers, technomancers, and the nobility of the Empire to and from the floating city above. The journey from Arcos to Atlantis had not treated the Delphana well. His robes were disheveled, and his unbound hair hung loosely over the magestone crystals implanted in his forehead. "How much longer will it take for you to assemble your cohort, captain?" he grumbled to a nearby Atlantean soldier.

"You're lucky General Volkare didn't dismiss you entirely," said the legionnaire, in the cautiously dismissive tone of those talking to the unbalanced--then he remembered who he was speaking to and added: "But I'm certain my soldiers will be here as soon as they've assembled their gear and provisions, Demi-Magus Lendat."

"Good, good," said the demi-magus, continuing to pace. "We have to go. We have a long distance to travel, and only a short time to get there. But we must bring as many troops as possible, or we may lose the prize. We must prove ourselves."

"These are my best men," said the legionnaire. "I'm certain that we will have no trouble capturing your objective, especially if it's in our territory." They watched the platforms coming down from the city for a silent moment before the captain spoke again. "What precisely are we traveling to acquire?"

The demi-magus turned, wild-eyed. "It's a rock. But it's so much more. And nobody knows except those of us who hears it calling. We must have it." The Delphana spun suddenly toward where a platform loaded nearby. "There shouldn't be spells in the palace. They were all moved to Arcos. But I'll go check. We will need their power. Be ready when I return!"

The legionnaire shook his head as the demi-magus ran across the plaza and leapt onto the platform as it lifted into the sky.

Monday August 16, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 18
Shattered Gates

When not making the observations recorded in the previous few days of this journal, I've spent a great deal of time observing the battle for control of Caero. The Bloody Thorns had chosen their sniper positions on the Caeronn pyramids wisely; the Atlanteans in Venethia were reluctant to bombard the ancient Kosian monuments, and instead made several attempts each day to get soldiers across to support the dwindling numbers of the Watch.

The most successful incursion came two nights ago in a flotilla of small boats with technomantic engines that emerged from the watery canyons of Venethia to shoot across the Vizorr and land more than two hundred soldiers on the west side of the river. They advanced northward into the streets of Caero, but it was too late. The Bloody Thorns already controlled too many key points and each time the Atlanteans tried to secure a beachhead in a side alley they found they had simply funneled themselves into another ambush. In the end, though the Atlanteans were better armed, well-rested, and well-fed, they succumbed to the enemy's greater numbers and superior planning--from their quick and easy movement through the newly captured territory it was obvious that the Thorns had been planning this attack for quite some time.

This morning the fighting stopped. The last surviving Atlantean soldiers were captured and brought to the cells of Stonegate, a prison that had held many Black Powder prisoners since the beginning of the Khamsin uprising. Though the Bloody Thorns moved from block to block and house to house making certain that there were no Atlanteans hidden inside, they didn't stop movement through the streets. By midday, the Grand Market of Caero was alive with business for the first time in a week.

In the afternoon, a squad of Bloody Thorns entered the marketplace, led by the Black Thorn herself. Behind the half-elf followed her draconum companion Tyrsis, his presence enough to part the crowd as they moved toward the eagle-topped fountain at the center of the plaza. The Thorn waited patiently for two old men to clear away the game of stones-and-tiles they were playing on a table near the fountain, then climbed onto the table and fired a single shot into the air. There were some screams, and some who dived to the stones, but within a minute all within earshot were silent and waiting for her to speak.

“People of Caero!” she shouted. “This city is now under our control! We are moving into the countryside, and by day’s end we will have sway over everything within a day’s travel.”

“This is an Atlantean city!” shouted someone in the crowd. “The Emperor will crush the rebellion!”

“This city is now under our control,” repeated the Thorn. “But it does not belong to us. However, we will not allow it to belong to the empire. The Revolution fights the Atlantean Empire not to create an empire of its own but to give the land back to its people. I know there are many here who agree with that sentiment. Live your lives. We can’t allow you to fight our cause, but we ask that you assist us only as you see fit.”

The Thorn jumped off the table and moved back into the crowd, which was already breaking into innumerable debates about the new state of the city. Behind the Thorn followed Tyrsis, smiling at something only he could perceive.

Wednesday August 18, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 19
Awakening

Today the scrying eye showed me a hut high in the western mountains, rough rock chinked with mud and clay. A smoky fire burned in the hearth, heating an iron cauldron filled with bubbling green sludge. A crude wooden shelf mounted high on one wall held a line of skulls, dried flesh pulled tight over yellowing bone. Another skull, that of a mountain troll, soaked in a bowl of foul-looking liquid on the scarred table below.

A orc witch in a tattered cloak paged through a large book bound in suspicious-looking leather. When she found the page she was looking for, she wedged it into a support on her skull-topped staff and carried it over to the sleeping pallet near the fire. Muttering to herself, she retrieved the troll head from the table and swung the sopping mess over the unconscious form on the pallet, a familiar-looking orc who twitched as the droplets rained down on his bare skin and pooled around the large claw he wore on a thong around his neck. Yet after three passes, he still lay still.

The witch clicked her tongue against her teeth and tossed the head back into the bowl. Crawling beneath the table, she drew out a leather pouch hidden among the mess of bones beneath. Opening the pouch, she spilled out a handful of magestone crystals, placed some into a granite mortar, and ground them down with a matching pestle, humming to herself. Finally she tossed the pestle aside and scooped out some of the magestone dust in the mortar with a taloned finger. Raising her finger to her mouth, her tongue darted out and licked away the dust.

Suddenly her stoop was gone. Standing straight, she scooped up the bowl and brought it over to the pallet. The unconscious orc snuffed as she blew the dust into his face, and when he parted his lips she poured the remaining dust into his mouth. For a moment his jaw moved as if he were chewing, and then his eyes snapped open. “Where--“ he rasped.

“I found you in my mountains,” the witch said. “Brought you back to my hut. I remember what you taught me, and owed you the favor.

“I need--“

“More crystals. Yes, yes.” She turned back to the table and gathered some of the remaining magestones. He took them from her and tossed them into his mouth. The sound of his teeth grinding against the stones filled the hut.

I watched as the strength flowed into him, and he squinted in a combination of pain and ecstasy. He rolled the tight shoulders of his muscles, cranked his head until stiff muscles popped, and stood up from the pallet. From a nearby pile he gathered up a rust-colored cloak, threw it over his shoulders, and fastened it with a clasp fashioned from a skull. “My mask,” he said, and the witch pointed toward the table. As he put it on, I finally recognized him. Bloodhawk.

“Now the Chaos Shamans owe you, old one,” he said. “You will be repaid in full.”

“I’ll be repaid in stones,” she said.

“You’re one of us,” Bloodhawk acknowledged. “Do you know what became of the others?”

“Hiding in the mountains,” she said. “Too many for my hut.”

“Good,” said Bloodhawk. “We must gather together and ride south.”

“I hear the song too,” said the witch. “But I stay to take care of you.”

“Song?” said Bloodhawk. “No. We ride south to find more stones. And Marz.”

Friday August 20, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 20
Oathsworn

This evening, rather than my usual repast in the scrying chamber, I decided to take my supper in the grand hall of the Tower. The tables of the hall were lined by the non-Solonavi residents of the tower, and the only seat I found was the fourth chair at a table with a trio of Oathsworn. They were all road-weary, yet still wore the masks that marked them as Oathsworn, even while eating.

The first was a female wearing the tunic of a Khamsin army regular. Next to her chair sat her traveling pack and a satchel of medical supplies. The second was another female, but this one with the severe bearing of a Crusader. She wore traveling clothes, but the unmistakable obsidian blades sheathed at her belt marked her as a deathsinger. Last, and strangest to see inside the Tower, was an enormous orc in boiled hide armor marked with the wolf sigil.

Though surrounded by the murmurs and chatter of the crowd, our table ate in silence. Finally, the surgeon pushed aside her plate and spoke. “After this meal ends, we go our separate ways. Once again we will be enemies.”

“We have fulfilled our vows to the Solonavi,” said the deathsinger. “For now.” She looked into her mug of tea. “Of course, your vows would not keep you from abandoning your own cause and joining the Crusade. I am certain I could get you an audience with my masters.”

“It is still summer,” grunted the orc, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “I return to my tribe, to gather what plunder I can while the days are warm. You have been strong companions, but if I ever see your faces without a mask on I will have to crush them with my axe.” Did he say it with regret or anticipation? I couldn’t tell.

My cup of summerwine clattered across the table as I was suddenly gripped by another vision:

Death. Destruction. Betrayal.

The blood-red wine spread across the table toward the Oathsworn, pulled out of their conversation to stare at me. I had sensed no specifics in the vision--only that there would be death and destruction, borne of betrayal, and it would find one of the three in front of me. Very soon.

I stood and walked away without looking back.

Monday August 24, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 21
Darkness' Dawn

Once again the scrying eye pulled me from my dreams, and I felt a sense of urgency as I skimmed over the darkened land. This was something important, something I had to see. Over the midlands, through the mountains, over the shores of Black Lake and across the single bridge over its cold waters into the Necropolis. Events had been put into motion by some unknown force. Through the black iron gates of the courtyards around the Prophet's Tower, past a guttering torch and into the dark tunnels beneath the surface. What was about to happen was important, would change things forever.

Deeper into the earth. Beyond laboratories where creatures were kept endlessly on the thin border between life and death. Through libraries that held the deepest secrets of the Dark Crusade. Into the sanctum of Deathspeaker Aeradon. A sharpened silver quill bobbed in the hand of the gaunt man, blood-red ink appearing as he worked its tip. Only when the surface he wrote on twitched did I realize that he wrote upon the skin of a creature clamped to his desk. Finishing his work, the deathspeaker set aside his quill and with quick strokes of a dagger pulled away the freshly completed scroll. Attaching one end to a wooden rod, he hung it in a rack to dry.

As Aeradon turned back to the mewling creature, a vampire in a cloak and wide-brimmed hat stepped into the room. He held his wings close and bowed respectfully. "I believe the message has arrived, sire."

"Thank you, Judge," said Aeradon. "Send it in." The judge relaxed his wings, revealing the pistols holstered at his belt, and allowed a shadow-spirit to enter. The dark cloud crossed to the deathspeaker. Stepping forward, Aeradon reached into the spirit with bony fingers and inhaled deeply, drawing the spirit into himself. His eyes closed and his hands clenched as he subsumed the spirit, then he relaxed.

"They come," he said. "We must prepare."

Wednesday August 25, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 22
The Power of Blood

Leaving his lieutenants in charge, the vampire warlord Darq has left the Galeshi deserts. The scrying eye shows me their path: weeks ago he led an army of moonborn and blood cultists out of their stronghold in caverns beneath the ruined city of Ribaya to feed one last time on the people whose homeland they had conquered. Then they crossed Atlantean and Revolution territory under cover of night, passing close enough to Caero to see the fires burning as the two factions had fought for the city.

Fording the Vizorr just below its northern fork, they had maintained the secret of their travels by cutting across the northern midlands, avoiding trade routes. Then they had encountered a group of draconum endeavoring to do the same, and they had lost a large portion of their number before the skirmish between them was over. The fallen draconum were raised and added to their number, but it wasn't enough.

So they had come to the small town a short distance away. Mundort. "You were guiding us here all along," said Darq.

"Of course," said the tall woman walking beside him, a high priestess of the blood cult. "You have your goals and I have mine, but we walk the same path. The scrolls Bloodblade recovered have been added to

our codex, and I learned the vital information I needed. But to make use of it I had to come to the place where they worshipped, when the goddess was at the height of her powers.”

She rubbed her hands together in anticipation. “Already I can feel the forces coursing through me. The Solonavi released powerful magic into the land, but it was achieved through brute force--an outpouring from behind a shattered dam. Not all waters flow into the river. This power of this place belongs to us, and cannot be so easily usurped.”

The people of Mundort rushed forth as Darq’s army entered the city, offering praise to the sect and the Dark Crusade. “I want a half dozen,” said the blood priestess.

Darq nodded, and told a nearby vampire, “Conscript the rest.” To the blood priestess he said, “It is time your ancient secrets proved their worth.”

Moonborn sorceresses brought six townspeople as the blood priestess pace around the shattered shrine at the center of the town. “This is the place,” she said calmly. “Put one on the altar.” She stepped forward and placed her hands on the cheek of the terrified farmer dragged forward. “Our pain is my strength,” she murmured. Her hands tightened on the farmer’s face, and he screamed in pain. As blood ran from beneath the hands of the priestess and dripped onto the stone of the broken altar, she shrieked in the shared agony. Yet as the farmer grew pale and wan, she gained a ruddy glow. Finally, the farmer fell limply to the ground. “Bring the next,” she gasped.

Five more were brought forward, and five more were consumed. When she was finished, the altar was slick with blood. Eyes shining with stolen vitality, she raised her bloody hands to the night. “I offer what I have taken,” she cried. “Come forth! Come forth and join your faithful! I call you by name!” She slammed her hands to the altar in a wet slap. “Amara!”

In a clap of thunder the altar cracked open and a dark cloud poured forth as the blood priestess collapsed. The warmth was pulled out of the summer night and even the vampires fell quiet as the chill spilled through the town. Swirling above the broken altar, the cloud slowly took form. First a pair of wide-spread wings, and a ribcage. Then arms, and a skull with a vicious grin. A serpentine, spine-like tail. The cloud scoured the blood from the altar, the droplets rising into the air and wrapping around the form as crimson vestments. As the cloud fell away, the creature came forward. “I have awakened,” it said.

Darq stepped boldly over the prostrate blood cultists to stand before Amara. “Good,” he said to the creature. “We have work to do.”

Monday August 30, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 23
The Order of the Crescent Sword

The Prieskans gathered in darkness, in a clearing far from the nearest town. Most orc warbands were likely to be spending the night sleeping or reveling after a long day of plundering, but volunteers still posted themselves in the distance watching for a wandering patrol.

Some of the men and women carried only tools--lumbering axes, hammers from smithies, scythes that had cut no wheat in this season’s orc and famine-ravaged fields--but others had brought armor and weapons. These were Atlantean soldiers who had returned to their homeland, not all under orders, to be with their friends and kin in Prieska’s time of trial. They spoke quietly to one another, waiting.

A newcomer emerged from the brush and was met by a pair of Atlanteans wielding lightning pistols. “Do you carry a sword?” asked one of the soldiers.

“I come under the moon,” said the farmer, drawing a shortsword from the bundle under his arm. Lowering their weapons, the soldiers were escorting him to the growing group when hoofbeats in the distance brought

everyone to attention. Some looked ready to scatter into the bushes, but the soldiers among their number brought them into a defensive formation around the perimeter of the clearing.

A stallion charged into the clearing, its rider clutching both the reins and the rope tied to the saddle's pommel. Tied to the trailing end of the rope was a bloody and battered orc. As the rider released the rope, the orc tumbled across the clearing spitting out dirt and guttural curses.

The rider reined in his horse and jumped down from the saddle. Chestnut hair spilled over her shoulders as she removed her helmet to reveal the green eyes and strong jaw of a Prieskan. "I thank you all for coming, under the moon and the sword," she said. "That you are here shows that Prieska still lives. Green-skinned raiders turned would-be conquerors can steal our homes and slaughter our herds, but they will never be able to touch our spirit."

She walked across the clearing and put a boot on the grunting orc. "I fought for the Empire when Rokos nearly fell to the hordes. Some of you were with me. We held the line! But when it was our own land under attack, did the Emperor rush the legions to Prieska's aid? No!"

"Our land was sacrificed so that Rokos and Luxor might stand. Yet those cities were lost to the Solonavi. Now news comes that Caero has fallen to the rabble of the Rebellion!" She walked the perimeter of the clearing, addressing each member of her audience. "The people of the empire are strong, but its head is addled by the luxury of the capital. So we will fight for ourselves, and recapture both our homeland and the glory of the Atlantean Empire."

"By coming here, you have brought me hope. In joining the Order of the Crescent Sword, you have brought hope to Prieska, and to the Empire. In return, I will bring you a champion!" She drew her sword and handed it to a nearby peasant, gesturing toward the orc. "Together, you will retake our homeland!" As the peasant slashed at the orc the gathered Prieskans cheered--caution be damned.

Tuesday August 31, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 24
Wanderer

The scrying eye showed me only blinding whiteness, the frozen peaks of the north where the snows fell even in summer. A narrow path had been blazed through the drifts, and already it was filling with wind-blown snow. Ahead two draconum battled a fur-wrapped giant. The first was the Pathis Arcana, already bleeding but dancing away from beneath another oncoming blow to unleash a magic blast that made the giant howl in pain. The other was the revered mystic Hysthe, stepping between the giant and the Pathis and brandishing his glowing staff to ward off the giant's approach.

The Pathis drew a narrow scroll-like spellbook from her pouch and used all four of her arms to hold it steady in the blustering wind as she read. Snapping the book shut, she chanted growling words of magic that caused fire to erupt around their feet. "Now!" she cried, and the mystic pumped his wings to launch himself high into the air. As the giant looked up to follow the movement, Hysthe brought his staff down between the giant's eyes.

The giant howled again and clutched his hands to a face shattered by the magically-enhanced blow. Stumbling backward, he turned and fled, scooping up enormous handfuls of snow and pressing them to his face. Hysthe remained on guard until the giant vanished into the storm, then jammed his staff into the snow near where the Pathis was inspecting the wound on her serpentine tail. "Not much bleeding, but I think most of the damage is internal," she said through gritted teeth.

"Let me help," said Hysthe, placing his hands on the wound. Murmuring calmly, he cast a healing spell and the Pathis relaxed.

In a moment, she tentatively flexed. "I think I'll be able to travel," she said.

“Good!” said a nearby voice. The Pathis slithered out from under the mystic’s hands and reared up, ready to cast. Hysthe snatched up his staff and spun to see the female draconum seated on a nearby rock. “We don’t have far to go,” she continued. “But I’m not going to carry you.”

“Who are you?” said the Pathis.

“A wanderer,” said the newcomer. “A seeker. A sorcerer. A warrior. Cold. Hungry. Like you.” To the mystic she said, “Since we have so much in common, is there really any reason for us to fight?” She hopped down from the rock. “Come. Let’s go find a fire and some food. And maybe more.” When the two draconum hesitated she continued as she walked off into the snow. “You just bested a giant. I’m not even armed. Do I look like anything to worry about?”

She was almost lost in the distance before the Pathis moved to follow. Then Hysthe followed her lead, quietly saying, “Even a sheathed blade has an edge...”

Wednesday September 1, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 25
Sword and Spell

“That palace should be ours,” growled Grand Magus Alment Lan.

I had not been able to take the scrying eye inside the heavily shielded Throne Palace to observe the deliberations of the Atlantean High Council, but when the head of the Delphana emerged with one of his advisors, I was quick to follow as they guided their floating platforms across the wide plaza in front of the palace.

Sitting in a gilded chair, the Grand Magus looked much older than the self-appointed mage-king who had come to the Grand Arena two years before. Now he looked toward the Arena in the distance, at the far end of the Golden Mile, as if considering the climb that had brought him to his seat of power. “We are not unrepresented in the Palace,” said the Delphana floating beside him on her own platform. “The Prophet-Magus still calls it home and still has the Emperor’s ear. Greenlee Manor is here on the Plaza and suits our needs nicely.”

“Pah,” spat Lan. “How long will Nujarek be able to trade magestone for our service? How long until what he willingly offers becomes what he threatens to cut off if we don’t follow his every command?” The magestones on his brow pulsed as he commanded his chair to pause in the center of the plaza. “It’s one of Tezla’s Precepts: the sword serves the spell. We are not meant to answer the call of the army--they are meant to answer ours. Where was Nujarek’s ‘volunteer legion’ when my city was captured?”

“You were in the council,” said the Delphana. “You know why the Emperor has been gathering together his forces. Besides, he was not informed of the attacks on Caero until it was too late to save the city. We will retake it, one day.”

Lan sat quietly for a moment. “I was made Grand Magus for a reason,” he finally said. “There are many who do not feel as you do. Were it not for Tezla’s crown on Nujarek’s brow, we would know what to do. Soon we may decide, and it may come much sooner than ‘one day’.” Then his chair glided off toward across the plaza.

Tuesday, September 7, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 26
Sorcerer’s Citadel

The scrying eye hung high above the plain, far from both the Vizorr and the Kaiten. Yet there were other rivers, the currents of magic that flowed through the Land, and with each pulse of power that moved along their length they moved slightly, like the hands of a clockwork. Where the magical currents crossed, there were bright pools where magestone might be born. As I watched, the currents moved again, shifting their

banks. The crossings and their pooled magical power drew closer together. The currents were converging, and the power called to sorcerers across the Land.

At the center of the currents was the Spire, a granite mesa topped by tall outcroppings of sun-baked rock. Ancient carvings hinted that this had once been a holy place, but whatever had been worshipped here was either long dead or forgotten. Still it had called out to the sorcerers: *Come. Come and prove yourself.*

Dropping through the dark clouds overhead, the elven sorcerer was the first of his army to land, his griffin touching down lightly on dusty turf ravaged by famine and the creeping influence of the Dark Crusade. The Rivvanguard accompanying him landed nearby and dismounted. The captain came forward to inspect the Spire on the horizon. "You're sure it's here?"

"Quite certain," said the old man. "What the eyes cannot see, the heart can hear." I saw the currents move again in the distance, and the ground beneath the elves roiled for a moment. "Sometimes the feet can feel it as well," the sorcerer said with a wry smile.

It was the only conversation I had a chance to overhear. The scrying eye moved quickly around the Spire, showing me massed armies from every faction, led by sorcerers who had heard the Call to come to this place. *Prove yourself and the power will be yours*, it had said. The chaos shamans were the last to arrive, leaping off of their exhausted mounts to stare impatiently at the Spire.

They had all heard the Call. They had all come.

The ley currents shifted again, and all the pools slid onto the plain around the Spire. The wind seemed to push away from the mesa in all directions, raising enormous clouds of dust. Then the earth leapt upwards, knocking everyone from their feet, and when it crashed downward it cracked the sides of the Spire. As the ground continued to rumble, lightning rained down from the sky and slammed into the Spire, each bolt tearing away rock. Hardened soldiers cried out in terror, but the eyes of every sorcerer were fixed upon the Spire--and what was being revealed.

When the silence finally came, it seemed as loud as the tumult before. Then it was broken by a cry of amazement. At the center of the plain, where the Spire had once stood, was now a squat citadel. Its harsh lines yet graceful curves reminded me of the architecture of the Tower or Rokos--or perhaps even the Black Pyramid. It was a lost artifact of an ancient time. The hammered gold trimming its towers and parapets were blackened by time, and the cold iron of its gates was rusted shut. But at its foundation, the stones were still polished and bright. Magestone. As I saw the currents shift yet closer, I suddenly understood: when they converged upon this citadel, it would take to the air.

Prove yourself and the power will be yours.

"It begins," said the elven sorcerer.

As the sorcerers charged forward at the front of their armies, the battle began.

Friday, September 10, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 27
Shaped by Magic

This afternoon, with Anquilis' encouragement, I took my first steps outside the grounds of the Oracle's Needle in nearly a year. The streets of Rokos were an overwhelming cacophony compared to the solemn tranquility of the tower, and standing in the gateway I was tempted to turn back. But rather than suffer certain derision from the tower's archivist and Oracle Daheia, I made my way down the street to a nearby taphouse.

Judging by the style of the building, it had been here nearly as long as the Needle, constructed long ago by the Priest-Kings of the Kosian wartribes. Remnants of not-quite scraped clean gold and crimson paint showed that the building had then been used by the Atlantean empire for some military or governmental purpose while they controlled the city. Now, walking inside, the sun streaming through the rainbow of colored glass that made up the front window lit a small but comfortable common room. At one end, a dwarf had set up some sort of pedal-powered fan to break up the stifling summer heat, and a crowd had gathered with their ales for the cool breezes and conversation.

I was outside the tower, but I wasn't ready for conversation yet. Purchasing a goblet of summerwine from the innkeeper, I took a seat on the far side of the room. Leaning my head against the cool stone wall, I closed my eyes and let the sounds of the city wash over me. But no sooner was I opening myself to the world around me than I felt the scrying eye drawing me somewhere else. Raising the goblet to my lips, I took a sip, then let go.

I was in the northern mountains somewhere, but before I could get a firm sense of a particular location the eye dived through the surface and into the rock below. Traveling through stone, the flat blackness was occasionally broken by a cave, or a stretch of worked stone--one of the Land's many dungeons, perhaps?

Then I entered a large cavern. Never had I been there, but I had seen it before. It had been in my vision, several weeks before. Dwarves were gathered in groups before massive, glowing forges. Some wore the leather apron of the smith, and carried hammers or tongs. But others wore robes embroidered with sigils and symbols that seemed more like the clothing of mages than dwarves.

At one gathering, a robed dwarf cast some sort of spell upon the hammer of an apprentice, who brought it down upon a nearby anvil to crush a piece of thumb-sized blue magestone. The mage gathered the dust and fragments together, and the smith extracted a glowing iron blade from the forge. As the smith hammered the blade into shape, the apprentice sprinkled magestone dust onto the weapon and the mage chanted the words of a spell. The cherry glow of the metal faded as the smith worked the metal, but a shimmering blue rippled up and down its surface--the enchantment that had been worked into the blade.

I wanted to see more, but the scrying eye pulled me across the cavern to a barrel-chested dwarf with a grey beard who was clearly directing the flurry of activity. While signing paperwork, he inspected an axe brought forward by an apprentice, noted an imperfection in the haft below the head, and sent it back. Moving an orange-enameled helm topped with an intricately-crafted bronze dragon, he pulled out a detailed inventory and handed it to a white-haired woman sitting nearby. "We've doubled production this month," he said. "Thanks to a new spell discovered by one of the sages we need less magestone than ever to ensorcel a blade, so it should be easier than ever to arm our men with weapons that will punch right through magical defenses."

"You've done well, Kenaz," said the woman. "What of the project?"

"Hammerfist hasn't been nearly as successful at mass production of the ammunition, but we hope to have it available in quantity soon."

"Good," she said. "I need to launch a campaign this fall or the push for more guerilla attacks will gain even more support."

"I heard about Caero," said the dwarf.

"Indeed," said the woman. "I wish the Thorns had seen fit to tell me before striking sparks that will only inflame Blackwyn and his supporters. The tactics and surgical strikes they favor are effective, but the Revolution now has enough support to field a standing army. Provided that we're properly armed, we can not only protect our lands from invaders but face the Atlanteans face to face and side by side."

The dwarf stroked his beard. "What will you need?"

“Weapons and ammunition, enough for a thousand men, delivered to--”

“Are you okay?” I opened my eyes to find the innkeeper standing before me, roughly shaking my arm.

“I’m fine,” I snapped, frustrated that I wouldn’t be able to deliver information on the full extent of the Revolutionaries’ plans. Back in the Necropolis, I would have killed any who were foolish enough to interrupt something this important. I stood, reaching for my dagger, and found myself weary and weakened from using the scrying eye so far from the scrying chamber. “I’m fine,” I repeated, stumbling into the table and knocking over the goblet.

“I’m fine,” I said, falling to the floor and into unconsciousness.

Thursday, September 16, 2004

Summer, 435 TZ, Day 28

Belief

I drifted in the dreamless black of unconsciousness for what may have been a minute or an eternity, yet I was only aware of it when I felt the pull of the scrying eye. Even insensate I could answer its call, and followed it into the infinite distance.

Despite its increasing independence, I usually thought of the scrying eye as an extension of myself, one I could use as a distant and immaterial vantage point for my consciousness. Now, though, I was an extension of the eye. It could see, but it could not understand. Now, drawing me out of the blackness, it was using me.

We were in the hidden valley in the Sturmounts that the eye had shown me before, the home of the Elemental Council since their escape from the Dark Crusade’s siege of Roanne Valle. The crude shelter I had seen previously had been replaced by a graceful structure of intertwining vines grown between the trees overhead to provide shade, surrounded by a palisade of stone and wood that had been constructed in the last month yet appeared so natural as to have been in place for a thousand years.

In the high mountain shade all the heat was sapped from the air, so a glowing hearth provided warmth for Prophet-Priest Tremelen, still recovering from his wounds but reclining comfortably among a swaddle of blankets. Nearby were the Queen of the Faeries, a centaur, and a pair of trolls. This, then, was a meeting of the Council of Five.

“Where is it?” demanded the mountain troll. “If you will not answer, perhaps it will.”

“We do not ask anything of the spirit of Tezla,” said Tremelen. “We can only do what it asks of us.”

“The health of the Land is the health of Tezla,” said the centaur, quoting a popular Elemental precept. “I am certain that it is Councillor Turan’dan’s concern for the health of both the Avatar and the Wylden that would make him speak so plainly.”

“Pah!” spat the troll. “The graves of my ancestors are under attack by our enemies and you would sit here and talk! Evil has taken root in our land, and the spirit will tell us how to drive it out!”

“The Avatar will come here when it can,” said Tremelen. “Until then, we must trust that the spirit has pointed our fate in the proper direction, even if there is no path under our feet.”

The troll threw aside his drinking gourd and stood. “Perhaps the spirit will not come because you are here. Perhaps you have failed the children of the wild one too many times.” Glaring at the centaur he said, “The elf will say it isn’t so. Then you ask him why magic will not heal his wounds.” With that, he stomped out of the council, followed by the forest troll.

The centaur began to follow, but Tremelen waved her back. "Let them go, Laurell. Even were the avatar here, the cooling breeze of Tezla's wisdom would only serve to fan the flames of their rage. They must fight for their people."

The centaur paused. "You misunderstand, Prophet-Priest. I am a servant of Tezla and the Land. I believe in the Spirit of Tezla. I believe in the Council, and our efforts to bring together all the creatures of the Land to live in harmony."

"Yet I am also a druid. High Priestess Kess is already at Stonekeep, and has been for several weeks preparing for this battle. Like her, I feel the pain of the Land as it is violated by creatures who find their pleasures and beliefs rooted in the horrors of pain and death. They must be destroyed so that the Council and the Land might live."

Laurell picked up her quiver. "I will do what I can to bring the trolls back to the Council soon, but for now I do not go to call them back. I go to join their fight. When we return, I hope that you and the spirit of Tezla will tell us we have done the right thing." Steeling herself, she suddenly shouldered the quiver and left the council.

Just as suddenly, the scrying eye dropped me back into darkness.

Monday September 27, 2004
Summer, 435 TZ, Day 29
Blood and Destiny

The boats came quietly out of the blackness, the mirror-calm surface of the water broken only by the long, quiet strokes of the oars. As soon as the lead boat scraped against the stony shore, blood cultists scrambled over the sides to lift it out of the water so that it would make no more noise. Only their leader stood apart, studying the towers on the cliffs above as more boats beached behind him. The army of Darq the Corrupt had come to the Necropolis.

"I bid you welcome, warlord," said a nearby voice. As Darq drew his sword, the nearby shadows dissolved to reveal Deathspeaker Aeradon, one hand resting on the head of the hound-like blood demon sitting beside him. Behind the deathspeaker stood a vampire wielding two blackened pistols, both pointed at Darq. "I trust there is reason for your unorthodox means of arrival."

"Blood and destiny," said Darq. "I have come to collect both."

As one of the blood cultists came too close, Aeradon's hound darted forward to snap off his sword arm at the shoulder. Armored limb between his teeth, the demon rumbled contentedly. Aeradon smiled coldly. "Very well, then. Allow me to give you your first victory." Reaching up to his neck, the deathspeaker pulled on the skull hanging around his neck, his ancient symbol of office. With a yank, the thin silver chain snapped and Aeradon tossed the skull at Darq's feet. "If I you are able to claim your destiny, it is because I will not allow you to stand in the way of mine. Attempt to do so, and I will destroy you."

Darq paused only for a moment before stooping to snatch up the skull. He rubbed its polished surface with his thumb as one of his lieutenants stepped up behind him. "Warlord--" she began.

"Deathspeaker," corrected the vampire.

"Deathspeaker Darq," said the lieutenant. "Our forces continue to arrive. We must get them under cover quickly."

"Judge Blacklock will lead you into the tunnels," said Aeradon. "We will meet again soon, Deathspeaker." Then the shadows wrapped around him and he was gone.

Tuesday September 28, 2004

Summer, 435 TZ, Day 30
Sacrifice

Bright afternoon sun was stabbing through the window when I opened my eyes today to find myself in my room in the Oracle's Needle. After the oathsworn healer waiting beside my bed sent a page to fetch Oracle Daheia, she informed me that I had been unconscious for nearly three days. I sipped at the broth offered by the healer until Daheia and Anquilis arrived, then told them of my visions during the last three days--the Forgemasters, the Elemental Council, and the arrival of Darq's blood cultists at the necropolis. When they went to go discuss what I had told them, they told me to rest. Instead I came here to the scrying chamber to update my journals.

As I recorded the meeting between Darq and Aeradon, I considered attempting to send a warning to the deathspeakers. Certainly such a message would win me favor--enough to get me closer to the seats of power so that one day, when I was free of my oath to the Solonavi, I could make strive to capture a seat among them myself. Though I had seen it only hours ago, the Necropolis now seemed a distant place and my return far in the future. Better that I simply continue to fulfill my oath, I decided, observing and recording events as they occurred, and gathering the power that came from observing the leaders of the land's major factions and knowing much about them that they would kill to know about one another.

With that decision, I was again reminded of the true purpose of these journals, and the increasing value of the service I provided to the Solonavi.

Chasing the thoughts from my mind, I went to my familiar seat beside the scrying pool and pushed the eye across the land, back to the Necropolis. The sun was a heavy crimson orb sliding behind the eastern peaks, and the long dark shadows of the Prophet's Tower fell across the former Temple of Uhlrik. After the Order of Vladd had won their victory over the Order of Uhlrik in the vampire civil war, the temple had been rededicated to the blood goddess. The scattered groups of cultists hurrying to enter the temple caught my eye, and the group dragging in a black-robed figure lured me to investigate further.

As I guided the eye into the temple, I saw that tonight all the followers of the blood goddess had gathered in her temple, both those from the Necropolis and the many more who had journeyed across the land from Galeshi with Darq's army. Darq stood behind the temple's altar, as did the pale-skinned priestess of the blood cult and Bloody Amara, the demon she had summoned in Mundort. The gathered cultists chanted rhythmically as the dark-robed figure was dragged toward the altar. When they chained her to the slab, I finally recognized her--it was Deathspeaker Nedki.

"You'll pay for this, vampire!" Nedki hissed. "The Prophet and Tezla himself will reach out to avenge me upon you and all weak fools who think they can climb above their place!"

Darq reached down to draw the deathspeaker's skull from around her neck. Hanging it around his own beside Aeradon's badge of office, he leaned close to Nedki as the cultist's chanting built to a roar. "Soon the Prophet will need me as much as I need him." Taking the blood priestess' hand, he drew her closer. "Carlana, I leave her in your hands."

The vampire priestess smiled viciously. "Good. Amara has been so hungry."

Darq returned her smile. "If the demon hungers for deathspeakers, I can promise that it will soon have its fill."

Wednesday September 29, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 1
Deathspeakers' Fall

Five more deathspeakers were abducted and sacrificed by the blood cultists before the alarm spread through the city. Then the battle began.

Long kept in check by the deathspeakers and the prophet, the night allowed the rivalry between the Tezla-worshipping priests of the Dark Crusade and the goddess worshippers of the blood cult to finally flare into an inferno of fury as crusader priests led the charge against the blood temple. Whenever a cultist fell, the others would draw upon his waning strength to bolster their own. Whenever a priest fell, the others would raise her as zombie and send her back into the fray.

In a fletcher's shop several blocks from the temple, Deathspeaker Vagar directed newly arriving squads of warriors as he attempted to establish a cordon around the area. It was well known that Vagar better served Tezla as a necromancer than a military commander, but those with more experience and skill had been the first captured and sacrificed to Bloody Amara. It was clear he was growing frustrated. "I want a wall of zombies ten deep at the Torturer's Gate!" he growled. "If they want to take one step forward, they'll have to take it through a dozen blades!"

Given the innumerable narrow alleys and underground tunnels pervading the Necropolis, it seemed Vagar was attempting the impossible. The deathspeakers controlled the major thoroughfares through the area, but were often flanked by blood cultists who would unexpectedly boil out of a nearby building where they had emerged from their hidden trip through the maze of passages. I saw one such ambush led by Judge Blacklock, which explained how the newly-arrived cultists seemed to have such intimate knowledge of the city.

By dawn it was clear that the deathspeakers had lost control of at least the temple district, if not the entire city. Vagar sat exhausted in a battered ebony chair as his apprentices gathered the maps and weapons scattered around the shop. A young woman wearing the deathspeaker's skull entered the room and hurried over to Vagar. As I didn't recognize her, it seemed likely that she was the replacement for the speaker sacrificed to Tezla several weeks earlier. A line of scarred flesh began on her left temple and ran down beneath her robes to her ruined left hand, clutched in a jeweled silver brace ending in claw-like fingers. "Vagar," she said. "The cultists are coming. We must fall back to your manor."

"I must go to the prophet, Quila," said Vagar. "I will report my failure personally."

"I grew up in this area," said Quila, gathering nearby scrolls. "Let me guide you. We can travel more quickly on our own. You others--meet us at the deathspeaker's manor." Handing off the scrolls and taking Vagar's arm, she led him out a back door and down an alley.

The orange sky above was shrouded in smoke from a building burning nearby. As Quila and Vagar emerged into a plaza, she paused. "Wait," she whispered.

"What is it?" said Vagar impatiently. "I can see the Prophet's Tower ahead. Let's go."

"I don't think so," she said, and brought her silver-clad hand down heavily on the deathspeaker's head. With a gasp, he fell to his knees. Another hit, and he slumped to the street. Drawing a chain and shackles from beneath her robes, she quickly snapped them onto Vagar's wrists. "You can come out now, Demethostes," she said. "I nearly missed the sign," she said, pointing to a symbol painted in fresh blood on the wall.

"You never miss anything," said the red-robed cult enforcer who emerged from the nearby shadows. When he drew Quila close, she leaned in and kissed him. "Hide the sigil until you meet with Darq. You don't want to be caught up by some random patrol."

The deathspeaker handed the chain to Vagar's shackles to the enforcer. "For the demon and the goddess," she said, reaching up to drop the skull around her neck into her robes.

"Both will be pleased," he said, hefting Vagar onto his shoulder. "I'll see you at the tower."

Friday October 1, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 2

Deathspeaker's Coup

A final sacrifice of Vagar and another pair of captured deathspeakers was made to the blood goddess yesterday morning as the blood cult prepared for a final assault to capture the remaining two deathspeakers.

Deathspeaker Jafik and Deathspeaker Tolomen made their stand at the Prophet's Tower. Built atop the highest ridge in the Necropolis and backed by sheer cliffs dropping hundreds of feet to the waters of Black Lake, the Tower was the most defensible position in the city. With a cloud of pain wraiths swarming around the tower dozens of demon dogs summoned by the deathspeakers to guard the gates, it appeared nearly impregnable. Yet the cultists were relentless, sending not only an army of their own zealous warriors but also charge after charge by vampiric skeletons. But whenever the cult appeared to be making an advance, one of the deathspeakers would lash out with spells that ripped into the cultists' ranks, and their progress would be lost.

The stalemate continued through the night until the cultists finally started to gain some ground against the weakening forces of the deathspeakers. Finally, late this afternoon, Darq led the charge to kill the few remaining defenders outside the tower. After the last had fallen Bloody Amara came forward, infused with power from the cult's sacrifices. In a single blow, Amara shattered the obsidian gates and the cult poured into the Prophet's Tower.

The cultists moved from room to room, eliminating any guards they found. Finally they encountered the deathspeakers, barricaded behind corpses melded together into a wall of shrieking undead flesh that prevented further progress. Jafik and Tolomen tossed spell after spell at the attackers in a desperate but vicious last stand, slaughtering dozens of cultists. Again it was Darq and Amara who made the attack to break through, and as the cultists raised the deathspeaker's heads on pikes, Darq added their skull-sigils to his collection.

Finally Darq emerged onto the parapets atop the Tower's base. Ahead lay Tezla's Gate and entrance into the tower proper. Beyond the gate, all souls belonged to Dark Tezla. Only deathspeakers could enter without having their spirits torn from their bodies and consumed by his wrath. Now, though, Darq wore the symbol of a deathspeaker. Calling forward a dozen cultists, he hung the other skull-sigils around their necks. "Victory is ours!" the vampire lord cried. "No longer will the Crusade place itself before the glory due to the blood goddess and her greatest servant, the Dark Tezla. We will kneel before Tezla and sing his praises, Prophet be damned--"

Darq's speech was cut off by a shout from above as a robed figure tumbled from the highest window of the tower. The figure reached out with magic in an attempt to stop his fall, but shrieking spirits coalesced from the soot-blackened air and tore it apart. What little remained splashed into the dark waters far below the Tower.

Once the moment of shock had passed, Darq dashed through Tezla's Gate and up the long stair, his dozen followers close at his heels. At their top they found the Prophet's audience chamber, and at the center of the room, the Dark Tezla. The cultists immediately dropped to their knees on the cold black marble and gazed rapturously at the embodiment of living death. Though hardened in a century of battles across the Land, even the legendary Darq the Corrupt was solemnly reverent...until Aeredon stepped into the room and crossed before him.

"That was the Prophet?" Darq said, and I too realized who the figure was that had fallen from the Tower.

"Soma was weak," said Aeredon. "He couldn't even defend the purity of the Crusade from the likes of you."

Darq leapt to his feet. "You are a fool to impugn a traditional older than even Tezla himself! We are the deathspeakers now, and I will see that your pain will be unending until you repent!"

Aeredon considered Darq for a moment, then raised his hand and spoke a single word. Bands of crimson energy lanced out from his fingertips to bind the blood cultists, who shook in agony as their souls were ripped from their bodies. Casually, Aeredon walked from one to the next, gathering their spirits. Bringing them to the death golem, he bowed and offered them forth. One after another, they were consumed by Dark Tezla, and the screaming of the blood cultists fell silent.

Aeredon spared only one, cradling it in his hands. "You have never been my equal," he said. As he thrust the spirit at Darq, the vampire lord gasped and fell free of his bonds. "You are not worthy to call yourself a deathspeaker," said Aeredon. "The deathspeakers are dead. Yet Tezla has decreed that you and those who follow you be allowed a chance to prove your worth to the Crusade. I suggest you do so quickly, or I will see that your pain ends very quickly. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"Yes...Prophet Aeredon," said Darq. Tearing the skull from his neck, he threw it to the floor and left the Tower.

Wednesday October 6, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 3
Fallen

As I've observed the races and cultures of the Land, I've found that each deals with the dead in its own way. Before dropping the dead over the side of their family ships into the eternal sea, the Xandressans wrap corpses tightly in 'spirit bindings' so that both body and spirit will never be separated. In the Golemcore, superstition among apprentice mechanics is to attach a piece of a fallen golem, said to carry the knowledge it gained in battle, somewhere within the shell of each new technomantic creation.

Most trolls who die in combat are left where they fall, believed by their brethren to have been judged by fate and arrived at their destiny. Only the most honored are gathered up and taken high into the Sturnmounts to be interned in the ancient graveyard established by the mountain trolls. In a high mountain canyon of unimaginable wealth, the graveyard has veins of gold running through its walls and growths of magestone erupting from its floor. Yet the trolls have always treated these inviolable. They come to the canyon only to place their most legendary warriors into the crevices in the stone, sealed behind enormous slabs carved with images and tales of the warrior's battles. It is a sacred place of cold and savage beauty.

Until today. Desperate to hold Stonekeep, the troll defenders of the fortress led Elemental forces to the graveyard in hopes of recovering any weapons and artifacts that might have been entombed with the legendary warriors. When they arrived, they discovered a group of Draconum already looting the tombs and the battle began. The trolls among the Elementals fought to defend both their race and faction, but the draconum seemed driven by their own needs and pushed back with both sword and spell. When the battle was over, there were many fresh corpses in the graveyard and only a half dozen draconum remained. Working quickly, they gathered heavy packs of artifacts and magestone and hurried down the pass.

Not long thereafter, as shadows hung deep in the canyon and night gathered above, a lone red-skinned troll came to the graveyard. He roared in rage at the desecration he found as he stalked grimly among the broken tombs. When he came to an empty niche in the canyon wall, he opened the bundle he carried and placed it inside, revealing what remained of a forest troll failed not only by martial skill but also by his ability to regenerate from his wounds. Putting his shoulder against an enormous nearby boulder, the red-skinned troll heaved with all his strength and pushed the boulder in place in front of the tomb opening. Using a war hammer collected from a fallen Elemental, the troll carved a single word onto the boulder: HUHN.

Then he threw aside the hammer and turned back to the corpses of the fallen draconum and Elementals. "Now, defilers, you will find that death is no escape from the Crusade."

Thursday October 14, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 4
Stratagem

This afternoon, Oracle Daheia accompanied me outside the tower grounds to the same inn I had visited a week previously. The innkeeper smiled as we came through the door. "Oracle Daheia! Welcome back!" Stepping close he whispered, "There hasn't been much in the way of new supply, but I still have a bottle of that Wylden honey mead you like so much. I'll get you a glass." To me, in a more normal tone: "Mistress Kastali, it is good to see you up and around again. When I sent the boy to fetch the tower guards, I wasn't sure you'd ever wake up."

"You will address her as Oracle Kastali," said Daheia.

"Of course," said the innkeeper. "I apologize for not recognizing you without your vestments, Oracle Kastali. Please, pick the table you like. I'll bring your drink--and something special for you, Oracle Kastali." Without explanation, he rushed away and Daheia led me to a table far from the crowd gathered around the fireplace.

Sitting across from one another, Daheia reached out to take my hands. "It is vital that you learn to employ your abilities away from the tower. I want you to close your eyes, feel your connection to your scrying pool and the rocks of the Oracle's Needle." I did as she instructed, sensing the cold emptiness around me and the warming bulwark of the tower's magic in the distance. "Draw strength from it," said Daheia, and I reached toward the tower until I felt a trickle of warmth come from the tower and slowly envelop me. "Now cast the eye," came Daheia's voice from the darkness. "Now!"

"We've gone through this pass before!" The blackness was wiped away and I once again found myself observing the frozen mountains of the north. The Pathis Arcana and Hysthe the draconum mystic were wrapped tightly in furs against the cold, but the draconum they followed held her arms wide as if welcoming the wind.

"We've come this way before!" repeated Hysthe. "I recognize those rocks, and can see our tracks right over there! Why are you leading us in circles? You said you knew where we were going!"

"Maybe you are not ready to arrive," said the draconum, scooping up snow and balling it in her hands. "Maybe you must go round and round and round until you are ready to throw." She dropped the snowball at her feet. "Or perhaps you can just turn back."

"I'm ready to throw, all right," said Hysthe, clenching his fists.

The Pathis stepped between them. "Respectfully, Wanderer, we have been traveling for many days when time is of the essence. If you know where we can find the elder, I ask you to take us to him as soon as possible or our paths will part until we find him on our own. We will not turn back."

The draconum smiled. "You are ready." She led the pair around a nearby boulder, revealing a cave mouth concealed behind it and under a shelf of ice hanging overhead. Out of the wind and into the stillness of the cave, silence hung thick around the trio as they went further down the tunnel. The white glow behind them receded until they moved through near darkness...and then toward the warm glow of a torch ahead. Following from torch to torch they went deeper and deeper, down a spiraling path until they were deep in the mountain.

They stopped by a large brazier whose flames shimmered across the surface of a large underground lake. "The elder likes fish," said the wanderer, shrugging. Across the dark waters was a rocky island marked by another bright fire. The trio of draconum boarded a raft and the wanderer offered poles to the other two. "No," said the wanderer as Hysthe put his pole into the water. "I'll get us across. The elder likes fish." The Pathis took the hunt and attached lines and hooks from a box on the raft to their poles. "The grubs in there aren't just for us," suggested the wanderer.

By the time the wanderer had poled the raft to the island, Hysthe and the Pathis had caught a brace of long, pale fish. They loaded the fish into oily baskets waiting on the shore, and carried them toward the structures waiting ahead. They were made of crude stones from the surrounding chamber, but artfully pieced together

as if they had been forever joined. They looked as though they had stood for a thousand years and would stand for a thousand more. Young draconum whelps played outside one, and waved as the wanderer approached, shouting, "Gryn!" The wanderer waved in return but led Hysthe and the Pathis toward the largest building at the center of the village.

Firelight spilled out of the building into the gloom of the cavern, and inside I could see a drakona sitting atop a cushion studying a large tome. He had a powerful torso and arms, but his legs were oddly shrivled and bent. "Welcome back, Wanderer," he said without looking up. "Good, you've brought me fish."

"Krosthysas," said the Pathis, bowing low in the doorway. "We have come in an attempt to heal the ancient and unknowable rift between us, and to ask your assistance in our time of need."

"Those who make the journey to my home are always welcome," said Krosthysas. "Physically, that is." As I followed the draconum into Krosthysas' home, there was a flash around me and I noticed that the stones around the entrance were engraved with the same golden runes I had seen in the draconum valley.

The world went gray, neither light nor dark, cold nor warm. I released my connection to the scrying eye and found myself back in the inn. Daheia sat across me quietly sipping her mead. "Good," she said. "You will tell us of your vision." She waited for me to pick up my own glass and nod before she continued. "First, though, you might tell me who's been leaving you gifts at the inn." She gestured at the innkeeper's tray on the edge of the table, and what lay on it: an exquisitely crafted necklace.

Monday October 18, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 5
Road to Luxor

I spent last night examining the necklace, searching for answers both for Daheia and myself. The centerpiece was a large tooth of some sort, carved with an abstract sigil. Flanking it and threaded on the same crimson thong were two yellow wooden beads from which hung thin magestone crystals. Around the rest of the necklace, ivory cylinders intricately carved with various scenes of ships, shorelines, and the sea alternated with dyed pearls in a variety of colors. None of it gave any clue as to where the necklace came from or what it meant, so I locked it in a chest in my room and put it out of my mind.

In the scrying chamber this morning, I sat before the pool and cast the eye loose. Perhaps luck would be with me and I would learn more about the necklace.

Instead I found myself in an abandoned village on the borderlands between Prieska and Revolution territory. The famine had hit hard in this area, and it appeared that sometime in the last month the few survivors had finally given up. The buildings were covered in a fresh layer of grime and cobwebs, but they had yet to show any true disrepair. They had made a fine stop for the group of adventurers whose pack mules were tied up outside one of the houses while they waited inside.

An elven swordsman was cooking at the hearth, while a long-bearded dwarf and an orc hunched over stones set atop grooves carved into the wooden table. "Explain it again, Groom," complained the dwarf. "And if it doesn't make sense this time, you can forget the whole stupid game."

"Very popular," said the orc. "Roll dice, move stones that much. You take stones you go around. That simple."

"Move some of the stones? All of the stones?" The dwarf threw up his hands and got up from the table. "Forget it. Just about time for another meal anyway. Another meal while we wait for--"

"Me?" A silver-haired Kosian reddened by the summer sun threw down his pack as he came through the door. "Sorry I'm late."

“Two days you kept us waiting,” said the dwarf.

“I’m sure an ancient tomb lost in the Blasted Lands won’t be going anywhere,” said the Kosian.

“It’s not wasted time,” said the elf. “It’s wasted supplies. There isn’t much to forage around here.”

“You also said you weren’t sure we had the strength of arms we needed. So I think you’ll find the wait was worth it. Come on.” Gesturing over his shoulder, he left the house.

The others followed to find him standing beside a bow-armed golem whose red paintjob was splattered with mud. Normally the Golemcore kept their golems in near perfect condition, but this one looked as though it had been traveling for weeks without an inspection. “Found him on the road a day east of here, just standing there at the crossroads to Luxor.”

“You mean you found *it*,” said the dwarf. “How’d you get it to come with you?”

“No, I mean *him*,” said the Kosian. “I watched for a while to see if it was some sort of trap, then went up and called around. He answered and told me his name.”

“What do you mean, ‘He answered’?” said the dwarf.

“I am Redgear,” said the golem in a buzzing voice.

“Gah!” cried the dwarf, leaping backward.

“I asked him where the rest of his kore was, and he didn’t respond. Then I told him I was off for a bit of adventure, to explore an ancient tomb and fight some monsters,” said the Kosian. “He said--”

“I want to go adventure and fight monsters,” said the golem. The mechanism in his arm whirred as it fed arrows into his weapon.

“Not yet, Redgear,” said the Kosian, grinning and patting the golem’s metal casing.

“Okay, then,” said the elf. “Let’s eat and get back on the road.”

“Yeah--sooner we there, sooner it can shoot us in back,” mumbled the orc.

Wednesday October 20, 2004

Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 6

Silent Citadel

The morning seemed unusually quiet, and it wasn’t until I was making my way to the scrying chamber that I realized why: the Call had ended. No longer was there a voice in my head calling me to come join the battle for the citadel in the midlands. I was barely into the chamber before I cast the eye to the east, across the Vizorr...

The sorcerers and their armies had retreated to the edge of the plain around the shattered rock of Spire, tending to the few survivors of the battle. The plain itself had been rent asunder by magical power, both that of the sorcerers and that naturally flowing through the Land, concentrated on this place as it was inexorably drawn to the citadel that had long been hidden beneath the Spire. Now I could see that all the ley currents in the area flowed into the citadel, charging the magestones at its foundation. It would fly, and it would fly soon.

Only one ley current ran around the citadel, pooling instead at one of the encampments on the edge of the plain. I brought the scrying eye down into the area and found an ancient elven sorcerer, gravely wounded. Younger warriors kneeled around him, heads pressed to the ground as they made vows of vengeance. Only

the scrying eye and one priestess, tending to the sorcerer, was close enough to hear his final words, barely a whisper:

“Ley anchor...will be gone when I am. It has all happened again....the drakes have seized power, yet they...lack the wisdom to...wield it properly....”

“It has all happened again...”

With a shudder, the sorcerer died. The ley currents flowing beneath him snapped away toward the citadel, and a rumbling shook the plain. I sent the scrying eye toward the citadel, where draconum warriors cheered when the portcullis blocking entrance to the citadel ground slowly upward.. A drakona sorcerer pushed past them to be the first between the doors of the citadel as they swung open. In the courtyard beyond, he stopped to face the warriors following behind him. “Are there any now who dare call the silent citadel nothing more than a legend? The blood of my blood held the truth through the centuries, and now it is ours! I have captured it!”

“You have all the drakona weaknesses and none of the humility that should come with it, Goldyx,” growled the lead draconum warrior. “This citadel belongs to the draconum, and if you disagree we’ll bring one of our mystics to explore this place.”

The drakona raised a clawed hand dismissively and closed his eyes, feeling the magical power running into the citadel. “All your mystics perished in the battle, warrior. Only I remain to guide the silent citadel when it rises into the sky--which it should be doing very.....soon.” The drakona dashed up a ramp to the parapets and roared triumphantly as the citadel shook and rose off the plains in a rain of rock and dirt, the magestones beneath it glowing with power.

As the citadel climbed up into the clouds, I thought back to the elven sorcerer’s final words: “It has all happened again.” Pushing aside the scrying eye and finding myself once again in the scrying chamber, I pulled one of my journals from the shelf and flipped through the pages until I came to my entry several weeks ago, the one Anquilis called a prophecy:

It is now as it was, but how it was is not how it will be.

Wednesday October 27, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 7
Scourge Ship

The bloodpit’s weaponmaster advanced on me, and I knew that my lessons were over. Dodge or die. Kill or be killed. He was strong, but the weight of his blade still made each swing a commitment--allowing me to step clear of his first attack and stab with the point of my own sword at his unarmored legs. His words: if it can bleed, it can be a target. He grunted as my sword sunk deep and hit bone, but rather than flinch the veteran warrior twisted his body in an attempt to pull the sword from my hands. I grasped the hilt tightly and pulled...

The scrying eye pulled me from dreams of my training in the Necropolis and drew me across the land, over the Scythrians and Prieska, then up the green band along the shore south of the desert dunes to the Galeshi port of Mazzeba. Xandressan ships flying the flags of every major family were tied up at the city’s docks. Alongside them was a small fleet of cold riggers, the ships of hardened sailors who traversed up the cold currents to search for the icy islands floating off the furthest coast. At the mouth of the harbor stood the Eye of the Sun, the enormous fire-lit tower guiding ships into port even on black nights like this. At the base of the tower, sailors were passing around a bottle and swapping stories.

“So he offloads his ship in Kelp’s Landing, and he’s trying to get someone to buy this big slimy egg!” said one old captain. “Like crusty ambergris, and smelled twice as bad. I told him my ballast stone was worth more than that thing. Weren’t anybody going to eat it, and nobody’d want to raise anything that came out of it. Last I heard he dumped it back in the bay where he found it.”

“Ship a’bay!” cried a young mate who looked like an escaped Amazon boy.

“This time of night?” said the captain. “He’s got the wind, but who’d be coming in the pitch, and against the tide?”

“Looks like Achraf’s rigger,” said a sailor at the edge of the pier.

“Back from another hunt for the birds in the ice,” said another. “And likely with empty hands.”

“But not empty coffers,” said the captain. “Some fool sponsored this voyage. If he’s smart, he filled his hold full of ice, too. Word is that a caravan is headed for Alrimjin tomorrow, and they’ll be looking for a fresh load.”

“He’s not headed for the coldhouse,” said the mate.

“No, boy, he’s not,” said the captain, rising from the cask he had been sitting on. “He’s still got sail, and he hasn’t dropped chain. Damp your pipes and hold your bottles, men, she’s coming straight for us!”

The sailors dove for cover as the rigger slammed into the pier, wood splintering and mortar grinding. The rigging snapped in the impact, cords snapping like whips and tumbling spars knocking cargo aside like children’s toys. Calm returned, broken by the moans of a sailor pinned beneath a part of the shattered bow and an enormous carved figurehead of a gryphon. “Help him out,” growled the captain, storming across the wreckage. “On the ship!” he shouted. “Achraf, you fool! Get out here!”

The mate clambered up and slung an arm over a broken railing. “All the hands are asleep, or dead, or something,” he said. “I don’t see anything moving, except for--rats!” The boy threw himself onto the pier and scabbled backward as a wave of rats swarmed over the side and onto the pier. The rats rushed over the sailors, who swatted and kicked as the creatures crawled up their clothing and tore at their flesh. One sailor dove over the edge into the water, and was followed by at least a dozen vermin.

The captain grabbed the shrieking mate by the collar as he kicked at the cask he had been sitting on, shattering the sides and spilling brandy across the stones. Snatching a torch from the tower wall, he swung it in a wide arc around he and the boy, setting the liquor afire. The rats squealed and danced back from the flames. “Settle down,” said the captain, though I wasn’t sure if he spoke to the boy, the rats, or himself.

“My arms!” cried the boy. Where the rats had bitten him, black welts were oozing yellow ichor and blood. “My...arms...” he said again, and collapsed at the captain’s feet.

“Sun’s embrace,” breathed the captain. “What are these creatures?”

A dark-cloaked figure stepped heavily off the ship, dragging a limp leathery sack behind him. He reached up under his hood to pull aside his scarf and I saw limp, stringy hair, pointed ears, and brightly glowing yellow eyes in a face webbed by broken blood vessels. Throwing the sack onto the pier, he pursed blackened lips to whistle shrilly.

The rats swarmed across the pier and into the sack, and as it filled it took the form of a bizarre mount. The vermin writhed beneath its skin as it stomped its hooves on the stones. As the cloaked figure climbed astride the beast, he seemed to finally notice the captain. Inhaling, he held the breath for a moment and then coughed wetly toward the man. A miasma of droplets hung in the air and floated over the dying flames to envelop the captain, who suddenly clutched at his throat and fell to his knees retching.

A rat swarmed up the cloaked rider’s back and came to rest on his shoulder. “It will be a long journey home, little ones,” said the rider. “Before we continue on, let’s spend a night in town.” The beast shuffled forward.

Wednesday November 3, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 8
Dark Tiding

Through the night I watched in horror as the strange horseman ravaged the port quarter of Mazzeba. Not once did he show a weapon, or was a blade lifted against him. Instead he was preceded by his army of rats, and by swarms of flies that billowed out from beneath his cloak. And wherever they went, people died. The only thing that could outrun the slow but inexorable advance of the plague was panic, as the terrified citizenry fled.

Finally, late in the night, the city guard responded. Already well prepared for an invasion as they guarded themselves against the incursions of the moonborn vampires from the deserts, they turned their forces inward. Using black powder charges smuggled in from Khamsin, they destroyed warehouses and homes until the debris clogged the major thoroughfares of the city. Then they pulled cart-borne catapults into position and began to lob barrels of burning pitch over the debris. Within an hour, the port quarter was ablaze. While the citizenry fought to keep the flames from spreading, the guard kept the flames burning high and hot along the border of the area in an attempt to keep anything from passing through.

I guided the scrying eye through the flames and found the rider in the fish market, the ground around him a living, roiling thing as rats crowded close. Sitting heavily on his mount, the rider threw back his hood and watched the flames grow around him. Sharp elven features were the only graceful accents in a face swollen and pocked by disease, and only black pupils could be seen in his otherwise butterflower-yellow eyes. The rider watched the flames grow around him, and he smiled. Pushing his hand through the hide of his mount and drew out a handful of rats. "There are caves down by the shore," he said to them. "Go there and wait. Return when the flames have died."

Throwing the rats to the stones, he turned the silhouettes of Galeshi warriors that could be seen moving along the distant rooftops, shooting burning arrows into the port quarter. The rider tried to speak, but the words were lost in a deep, hacking cough. Wiping black and yellow phlegm from his lips, he began again, shouting above the roar of the fire:

"We are alike, tribesmen! Betrayed by those we thought would protect us, our passion swallowed by our struggle."

"I go to collect my debt from those who truly owe me, but I leave you with a message: look at the pestilence I have brought, and see I am merely a wave in a rising tide. The darkness is coming, and your flames will be extinguished. Know that I wish you luck, tribesmen, but that I already lament your death."

Jabbing a green, swollen heel into the side of his mount, Pestilence rose off toward the sails of ships in the harbor.

Thursday November 11, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 9
Tired

After watching Pestilence for nearly two days, exhaustion overtook me. I felt the scrying eye pulling me onward, but I lacked the energy to follow. *I'll only rest for a moment*, I told myself, and closed my eyes...

Swords raised before a mountain burning with holy fire.

Screams as black stones are shattered.

A shining shield tumbling into the water.

I opened my eyes, still exhausted. New prophecies--as mysterious as those I made during the ritual deep beneath the tower, I thought as I wrote the new ones in my journal. Or were they? Retrieving the journal from the shelf, I looked again at what I had written:

Hundreds of Draconum warriors, side-by-side, awaiting the oncoming horde. The Draconum were indeed gathering in the north, and whatever threat they prepared for was dire enough that the Pathis Arcana had gone in search of an ancient Drakona in hopes that they might help. Draconum and Drakona had also fought together at the Battle of the Spire to capture the Silent Citadel. Preparations for the battle I had foreseen were underway, but the question remained: what horde of enemies were they facing? I tried to look back into my vision, but found no answers.

Men with yellowed, pox-scarred skin, crying for release from terrible pain. The memory of Mazebba was still fresh, its people writhing in agony as they were consumed by disease released by Pestilence.

Dwarves before forges glowing with fire and magic. The image I could recall from my vision was of the same forges I saw in the sanctuary of the Forgemasters. There I had heard of their plans to launch an important campaign somewhere in the fall, which was fast approaching. Yet I still had no idea when or where that campaign would take place.

Then there were prophecies that still remained obscure and unclear. Perhaps the dancers on burning sands were the moonborn of the blood cult, but those I had seen in the invasion of the Necropolis were far from the sands of the vision. The king with the wooden crown. The kneeling apprentice. The blackened magestones...

I realized that the black stones of my first prophecies were the same as those I had seen today. The stones that screamed when they were shattered. One vision was connected to another. Yet it remained unclear.

Above it all, my first prophecy: "It is now as it was, but how it was is not how it will be." The riddle surrounding the mysteries.

I was tired. Not just physically tired, but also tired of waiting for the whim of the scrying eye. First I needed to sleep. But when I awakened, I would go in search of answers to my questions.

Wednesday November 17, 2004

Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 10

Quandry

I felt the need to prepare myself mentally before going to the scrying chamber, and so descended from my room to spend the afternoon in the tower baths. While soaking in the waters of an underground stream heated by magical fire, I again wondered at the incredible extravagances of magic employed around this Solonavi fortress. As I thought back to the cold ablutions of my youth, I felt the scrying eye tugging at me. Perhaps it wanted to show me more of Pestilence's journey, or drag me off to the northern mountains again, or to the Necropolis. I didn't care, and pushed it away. Today it would answer to me.

Four rounds of the tower's central stair brought me to the level of the scrying chamber, as I approached it down the hall I could feel the power of the scrying pool through the blackstone walls. My connection to it was growing. When I closed the heavy oaken door behind me the magic wrapped around me like a blanket, and my perspective skewed as the scrying eye pulled at me like a skittish mount. Even before I settled onto my stool before the scrying pool the eye had taken me out into the courtyard, headed west.

NO, I thought, and pulled the eye back into the tower, through the walls, and into the scrying chamber. There, through the scrying eye, I saw myself. Freshly cleaned, draped in the fine Caeronn linens worn here in the tower, I looked the part of a noble. I barely recognized myself. Where was the nightwitch? Where was the Sect warrior I had once been?

I guided the scrying eye back out of the tower, feeling the crackle of power as we passed through the walls. Recently, Anquilis had recounted to me the history of the Oracle's Needle. Long ago, before the time of Tezla, human oracles were drawn to the black cliffs of the Scythrian Mountains to have dreams of the past, present, and future. Once they had become trusted advisors to the Priest-Kings of Kos, they requested that the king quarry the stone and bring it to Rokos where they could build a home and fortress on the shores of the Inland Sea. In the centuries since, as kingdoms and empires rose and fell around it, the Oracle's Needle had remained a symbol of the Oracle's power. Many also believed that it was the source of their power as well, until the Solonavi chose to reveal themselves. When I asked how long the Solonavi had hidden themselves--inside the Tower, inside the Oracles, Anquilis had said it was a tale for another time.

I guided the scrying eye out over the lamp-lit windows of the city below, feeling no struggle from the scrying eye. *Stonekeep*, I thought, and almost as quickly as the thought itself the eye had slid across the land to show me the fortress, pillaged by its Crusader conquerors, its fallen elven defenders shambling on the ramparts as zombies under the command of Crusade necromancers.

The scrying eye was mine to command.

Thursday November 18, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 11
Orders

I spent the night guiding the scrying eye across the Land, from one location to the next. I returned to the draconum encampment in the far north, where draconum and drakona alike had gathered in unheard of numbers to train with sword and spell. Of course, to get to the encampment the dracs had to travel through the maze of the Kuttar Depths. Though the drakona who called the Depths home were allowing the draconum safe passage--and in some cases accompanying them as they headed north--the Black Powder Revolutionaries who still manned their long-held fortresses in the area weren't nearly as accommodating. As the scrying eye glided over the canyons of the depths, the night was lit by the flames from draconum magic and Revolutionary muzzle flashes--and occasionally shattered by the explosions of massive black powder charges.

Fires started by the explosions among mount scrub in the Depths were quickly doused by the heavy rains falling in the area, rains that ran in rivulets down the peaks, gathered into rising streams, and swelled the Roa Kuttur into a raging torrent. After a summer of famine and blazing sun, fallow fields and muddy riverbanks that had been baked into cracked walls now crumbled into the waters and stained them brown as they rushed down into the valleys past the besieged city of Enos Joppa. From the banners that flying above the armies encamped around the city--the Wyndfenners, the Ivydowns, the Fairhames, the Starsdawns--it appeared that the Elven Lords had finally come to take revenge for the betrayal of the Revolution at Khamsin, but the battle wasn't yet over.

Following the river south brought me to Caero and Venetia. The bridge across the river still lay in ruins, with Atlantean soldiers entrenched at one end and Bloody Thorns at the other, taking occasional shots at one another using black powder cannon and magestone-powered lightning artillery--and accomplishing little more than feeding more bits of the once beautiful marble bridge to the hungry waters below. Moving behind one of the great Kosian pyramids silhouetted against the rising sun on the west bank, I saw Thorn commandos giving lessons in using black powder rifles to militia dressed in a mixture of Khamsin colors and Caeronn linen.

Pausing south of the cities, it was time to answer one of my questions. *Tell me about the upcoming Revolutionary campaign*, I told the scrying eye, thinking back to the discussion I had overheard in the underground smithy of the Forgemasters. Nothing. The scrying eye hung over the river, unmoving. Considering it for a moment, I realized that the eye had rarely told me anything in the past; it had merely taken me to where I could see something for myself. *Take me to the horde the draconum army will face*, I told it. Still nothing.

Dejected and tired, I finally released the scrying eye and found myself back in the scrying chamber. Most certainly I was in control of the eye--but it would only go where I told it to. In the solitude of the chamber, I indulged my frustration and cursed in Sect-elven. "I just wanted to know what would make the draconum gather," I said aloud.

I felt the tug of the eye.

Startled, I followed the eye as we glided south, back to Atlantis, up into the floating palaces. The Grand Plaza was alive with early risers, servants headed to market and functionaries hurrying to their posts long before the nobles would arise. Yet as the eye took me into Greenlee Manor and into a study hung thick with curtains and incense smoke from long-burning braziers, it was clear that the Magus Anunub and the mages within had been in discussion for many hours already. Before them stood a bedraggled technomancer, his arm wrapped in a sling and a tattered traveling cloak still over his shoulders.

"Thank you for your report, technomancer," said the magus. "You and what remain of your cabal have two days to rest and reequip, and then you will travel to Venetia. The Emperor has requested more support from the Delphana be sent to the city."

The technomancer started for a moment, turned as if to leave, then stopped. "Magus, perhaps I might repeat my report. The things I have seen, beneath that fortress, while captured by the dark cult thriving in the midlands, after my escape--surely there are others that can be sent--"

"There are others being sent to Venetia," said Anunub. "And your warriors will be among them. The Delphana share the ideals of the emperor: to send as many men north as possible, as soon as possible. Go." The technomancer swallowed, accepting his orders, then touched his hand to the magestones set in his forehead, bowed, and left the room.

Before the conversation could continue, the eye released me, and I found myself in the scrying chamber, left to consider what I had learned.

Friday November 19, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 12
Raven

When I entered the alley, I was well aware that I might be dead before I reached the other end. I could feel the scrying eye, thought about reaching toward it, using it to look around the area. But that was hardly the point.

It had taken me most of the morning wandering around the Oracle's Needle to find an unattended sword. In a tower full of seers, oracles, and sorcerers, blades were rarely used when spells were so close to hand. Eventually, though, hanging from a belt around a post in the stables, I found a scabbard--and in the scabbard, a shortsword. It had been forged in the Wylden, judging by the leaves inscribed in the blade and tooled in the scabbard. Far from Bloodhook, it wouldn't measure up to any blade carried into the bloodpits of the Necropolis. Yet it would do. I hid the blade underneath my robe, bid a good morning to the guards, and left the tower grounds.

Outside, I waited a distance down the street until I saw a woman in a long traveling cloak come out the tower gate. Underneath the cloak, I knew that she wore the leather armor of an Amazon warrior. I had seen it as she prepared to travel in the tower courtyard, where I had also seen her take off the mask of an Oathsworn. Now she was another anonymous traveler. Perfect.

"Warrior," I called out as she passed. She didn't break stride, but I saw her eyes flick toward me. She kept walking, then stopped at a street stall not far away where an old woman sold fruits and vegetables.

As I walked up beside her, she sliced a pear in half with her belt dagger and inhaled its aroma. "There's nothing like this outside the lands around Rokos," she said. "Not this year. Might as well enjoy it while I can."

"I need your help," I said.

The Amazon glanced over to make sure that the old woman was helping another customer. "You see my face?" she hissed. "Notice something missing? You get nothing from me right now."

"I'm not asking the mask," I said. "I'm asking the warrior. I have need of your blade, and have coin to pay."

"Pay for the fruit," she said. I reached into my pouch, drew out a coin, and placed it before the old woman, who nodded her thanks and returned to her customer. "Give me the rest of the pouch and I'm yours," said the Amazon. I weighed it in my hand. It was nearly all the coin I had, but there really hadn't been much need for it inside the tower. It was time to start spending it. I handed it over, and she tucked it beneath her cloak. "Raven Swiftblade," she said.

"Kastali," I replied

"Well, Kastali, you've just hired me and my blade. What do you want us to do? Kill someone?"

"Yes," I said. "Me."

At dawn it had seemed like a good idea--hire a warrior to test my skills, prove that I was still the warrior I had been when I left the Necropolis. Enough Oathsworn were falling in the bloody battle the Solonavi were waging against the Shadow Khans in Prieska that they would hardly miss one. As the day passed, though, it seemed I may have been overconfident. Near midday, forced to cross the crowded market plaza, the Amazon had come out of nowhere and cut a nasty gash in my side before I could slip away. Binding my wound, I considered calling the city guard; they could easily get me back to the safety of the Needle. But I knew that I would be recounting the day in my journal later--I could hardly leave a day unaccounted for--and it would be better to describe a costly victory than a foolish failure. I pressed on.

We met again in the late afternoon, as I walked the docks along the Inland Sea. We spotted each other from a distance, and I had time to prepare as Raven charged. I called upon the training of my old weaponmaster and kept my blade low, defenses seemingly open, until she was nearly upon me, blade held high over her head, lips pursed grimly. It's likely she thought I had given myself over to my fate. Instead I stepped forward and spun beneath her swing to bring my shortsword around. My weapon skidded across her bracer, then cut into her arm just below the elbow. She danced away, cursing. "My turn to bind my wounds," she said between gritted teeth and slipped away into the crowd of onlookers.

I was accustomed to battles that lasted moments, not ones where hours passed between exchanges. Perhaps it was part of her strategy. Perhaps she was toying with me. Regardless, it was unnerving. As darkness fell across the city, it constantly seemed as though Raven could be within arm's length. I kept my blade unsheathed, which meant that I couldn't walk the streets lest I be spotted by the city watch.

Now I made my way down the alley. Raven wouldn't run away with my money. Her Amazon sense of honor would keep her nearby until the battle was finished. Yet she had to appear soon, or I would need to return to the tower before the gates were closed for the night. The nightfall bell rang in the distance--

--and she struck from the rooftops above. Only one boot caught me in the back, but it was enough to send me sprawling. Still, I had kept my sword. As we both scrambled to our feet, I saw that she held her own blade in one hand, the other strapped to her side with the torn remnants of her cloak. Steel rang on steel once, twice, then three times as I engaged. She had one hand, I had two. It was the advantage I needed. Catching her blade on my hilt, I twisted to hold it there for a moment, then grabbed her forearm. I pulled

my blade free, then brought the flat around to knock her sword from her hand, sending it clattering across the cobblestones.

Raven growled, and brought her leg around to sweep my feet from beneath me. She followed me to the ground, bringing all her weight down on me and knocking the wind out of me. As stars danced before my eyes, she stole my sword and reversed the blade, bringing the point around to my throat.

Then she climbed off of me, using my blade to help her to her feet. "You don't want to die," she said, panting. "Now tell me why."

I leaned on one elbow and rubbed the back of my head where it had struck the cobbles. "Just wanted to see if I still had it in me," I said. "Seems not."

"You've got skills, Kastali, even if they're hidden under a little tarnish." Raven grimaced a bit as she held her free hand to the one bound her side, then smiled. "We're not in the Atlantean arena or the blood pits, you know. If you wanted a sparring partner, you just had to ask."

"Come back to the tower with me," I said. "I have to tell my masters what happened today, but as far as the healer is concerned--"

"Cutpurses?"

"Against the two of us? Dead cutpurses now, I'd say. Let's go."

Monday November 22, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 13
Responsibility

It was late in the night before Raven and I left the healers, and I retired directly to my chambers. In the morning, I went to the scrying chamber and recorded the events of yesterday, then went down for my morning meal. Even before I finished my first plate of fruit and cheese, a page came with a summons calling me to the tower archives. Immediately.

I left the food behind and descended into the levels beneath the tower. Perhaps they were constructed at the same time as the tower itself, but I suspect not. The Needle and the parts of the fortress built above the ground are in the solid style of the Kosian empire. The labyrinth of passages and rooms beneath the surface have the sharp, graceful lines of the Solonavi. It appeared as though it had been constructed much more recently, yet it seemed older. Haunted, even. I constantly felt as though there was something flitting around just beyond the edge of my vision, hiding in the darkness.

I pushed the thought aside and composed myself as I entered the archives. Anquilis was studying a scroll nearly five feet across, held in a framework against one wall. The magical light emanating from his being illuminated a runic script hidden on the vellum, words appearing and disappearing as he cast his hand across its surface. Nearby, Oracle Daheia sat a table piled high with tomes. "I was summoned," I said.

"You are given a great deal of latitude in your duties, Oracle Kastali," said Daheia, without looking up from her work. "This is partially due to the nature of your abilities, but primarily because in the past you have been productive without requiring guidance."

Daheia stood and crossed the room to a tall shelf, reaching out with her magic to draw a book from a high shelf and float it down to her hands. "While we appreciate your candor about your activities yesterday, we can hardly approve. You are a valuable asset to the Solonavi cause, and we do much to protect you. So you understand why we might be concerned when you go out in search of danger, and even pay it to follow you."

"I do," I said. "However--"

“You are not to leave the tower again without informing the tower guard,” she said. “If you do, out of willfulness or forgetfulness, I will see to it personally that you receive a reminder of your oath to the Solonavi that you will not choose to ignore and find hard to regret.”

“I understand,” I said.

“I have requested that the Amazon you engaged yesterday remain here at the tower,” said Daheia, once again seated at her table. “If you must train your martial skills, you will do so with her. After you have completed your duties for the day, and after you have completed any exercises Anquilis has assigned you. You are dismissed.”

As I turned to leave, I saw that Anquilis still stood at the scroll, but he was now studying me intently.

Tuesday November 23, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 14
Delving

Although Daheia had given me permission to leave the tower grounds, I knew it would not be wise to do so again so soon. So upon arising, I went immediately to the scrying chamber. My attempts to guide the scrying eye to the revelations hidden by my prophecies had been both taxing and unrewarding, so I set them aside for the day in hopes of being more productive. Instead I opened this journal to a fresh page, set my quill nearby, and set the Eye loose, to take me where it would.

We flitted through high, wispy clouds toward the warmth of the morning sun, the Roa Sein a glistening break in the brown lands below. North of Prieska, as we crossed over the southern part of the Blasted Lands, rocks thrusting through the earth. When the eye dropped down among those rocks, I marveled again at the incredible forces that had long ago cascaded over the area and given parts of the rocks a smooth, glassy sheen.

The eye left the Sein behind to cut across the cracked and dusty plain, toward a pile of jumbled rocks in the distance. As it drew closer, I saw that it had once been a town, or a city, or at the very least a large building. Now it lay in ruins, its true form as lost as whomever had originally constructed it.

There was a group of Elemental warriors and Galeshi nomads gathered at the edge of the ruins, weapons drawn, centered around a monstrous troll kneeling at the edge of a hole in the ground. The troll ran his fingers along the edge of the hole, then rubbed his fingers together and watched the dust rain toward the ground. “Two, maybe three days,” he said. Pushing through the crowd, he walked slowly away from the hole. “Look at the tracks. It’s a small group, and it’s headed in, not out.”

A medicine troll came forward to join him. It was Torg Boneknitter, self-appointed warden of the Black Pyramid and the Blasted Lands. “You’re certain?” he asked. The large troll answered only with a snort. “Of course,” said Boneknitter. “Apologies, Gora’din.”

“I am a lone warrior no longer,” said the troll. “You called upon our blood debt with promises of many Mage Spawn to hunt. I answered, and I am joined to your cause.”

“I’m told the talekeepers of the Watch have taken to calling you Stormblade,” said the medicine troll.

“It will do,” said the warrior. “Look. These tracks. Too large, too regular. And here--grease. Strange. It’s almost as if--”

A shout from the warriors at the hole brought both trolls back to the opening. From the darkness came shouts and the flash of lightning, followed by a clap of thunder. The warriors stood ready to strike. Suddenly an orc was catapulted out of the hole and rolled limply across the sand. Boneknitter’s warriors leapt into the fray as a metal arm came emerged from the hole, but their swords clanged ineffectively.

"It's the golem that went in!" shouted the troll warrior. Shoving the others aside, he grasped the metal arm and heave upward with all his might. Muscles straining, he pulled a golem I recognized from the hole-- Redgear Bowblade. The massive crossbow that made up Redgear's right arm fired repeatedly into the hole, the shrieks of his targets drowned out by the built-in mechanisms feeding fresh bolts into place for another shot. "Still coming!" buzzed the golem, as flying Mage Spawn erupted from the hole.

The next few minutes were a chaos of battle, as Redgear and Stormblade led the fight against the winged creatures. Blood was spilt on both sides before Boneknitter and his sorcerers cast a spell that sealed the hole and halted the flood of creatures. Finally, the ruins were quiet once again and the warriors piled rocks atop the hole to close and conceal it. "With luck, forever," said the medicine troll.

"There's . . . no luck down there," gasped the orc laying nearby.

"Grook," said Redgear quietly as Boneknitter hurried to the orc's side.

"Heard they were gone," said the orc. "Thought the crypts would be easy pickings, that we'd just sneak in and come out rich." He tried to laugh but was caught in a spasm of wet-sounding coughs. Boneknitter's spells staunched the flow of blood and pulled the edges of his wounds together, but even I could see it was too late. His green skin was pale and waxy as he reached toward Redgear. "We just wanted to be . . . our own masters..."

"Dead," said Boneknitter a moment later.

"All dead," said Redgear.

"What's going on down there?" demanded Stormblade. "What did you see?" But the golem said no more.

Wednesday November 24, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 15
Visitors

I spent much of the day with Anquilis engaged in a variety of 'exercises', few of which I understood but most of which involved calling upon the scrying eye in various parts of the tower while Anquilis took notes. When we were done I had to retrieve my evening meal directly from the kitchens, as it was no longer being served in the great hall, and carrying my tray I wearily climbed the stairs to the scrying chamber-- where I found Raven waiting outside the door.

"Been looking for you," she said.

"Not today," I said. "I've been in the archivist's chambers all day, still have duties to perform before I can rest, and I'm exhausted. Maybe we can spar tomorrow."

"Whatever you like," said Raven. "I just wanted to ask if you knew anything about the mysterious visitor to the tower."

"Visitor?"

"Everyone's been talking about it. The Solonavi have someone important in Seatower, but nobody seems to know who it is." Seatower was a short tower topped by a watchpost along the curtain wall around the Oracle's Needle, on the side closest to the Inland Sea. I had heard of oathsworn being housed outside the tower, but certainly not anyone important. "I thought maybe you might know."

"I don't," I said, stepping into the scrying chamber.

“You know, you could have told me you were an oracle when you hired me to kill you,” she said. “I thought you were just some eastborn noblewoman looking for excitement.”

“Would you have taken the gold if I had?” I asked.

“Noble blood’s one thing, blood that belongs to the Solonavi is another.”

“Sometimes secrets need to be kept,” I said, and closed the door.

I ate quickly and called up the scrying eye as I settled onto my stool. It was late in the day, and I was tired. Unfortunately, the Eye showed no particular inclination. Perhaps it was tired too. It floated out over the tower courtyard, and I saw the Seatower below. So close. But my oath hadn’t been taken to discover and record what the Solonavi already knew.

I pointed the Eye toward the blood-red horizon of dusk and the Necropolis.

The banners of the Blood Cult had replaced the sigils of the Deathspeakers in the streets. Enormous fires blazed before the Grand Temple, where new converts waited to tithe with their own blood. At the entrance, I saw Darq and the high priestess Carlana walking beside Azrosha Khant, one of the most respected necromancers in the Crusade. The histories I had read as a child told how he had been among those who left Atlantis to found the Necropolis more than a century ago. Though he had both the political and magical power, he had never sought to become a deathspeaker--content to seek the secrets of immortality that would make the deathspeakers dependent on him.

“We need you just as Soma did,” Carlana told Khant. “The goddess teaches us how to sustain one another with the strength of the blood, and how to take it from the weak. But we must discover for ourselves how to sate our hungers forever, to bring an end to the feast of blood before all that is left to consume are our own.”

“Your bloody deeds speak louder than your words, vampire,” said the old sect elf, stopping to look into the temple. “It wasn’t long ago that those who might have offered you just such power were bound to that very altar.”

“Rest assured that you and all other necromancers are sacrosanct,” said Darq. “No harm will come to you while we lead the Crusade.”

“I’m certain that the Prophet and Dark Tezla would be pleased to hear that their cause is in such good hands,” said Khant, raising an eyebrow.

“What he means is that we will not shirk our duties to the cause, nor defy the will of Tezla,” said Carlana. “My lord and his forces will march at the fore of our armies until all power and all life belongs to the Dark One.”

“Very well, then,” said Khant. “It matters little to me who brings fresh subjects to my laboratories so long as they keep coming. We aren’t getting many stragglers from the Wylden these days.”

“Soon you will have all you need,” said Darq.

Monday November 29, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 16
Evocation

Followed by his underlings, an elven general strode down the high street of Enos Joppa between buildings blackened by fire. “The city is ours, General Ivydown,” reported a lieutenant. “All enemy warriors have been disarmed and are being gathered into work crews.”

“Good,” said the general. “One-third of the work crews are to begin work on making the west quarter of this city defensible. That will be our fallback until the remaining crews can help the sorcerers complete the gatewall at the pass. Once that’s complete, the barbarians can have their city back.” The lieutenant saluted and ran off to deliver the orders.

An archer captain stepped forward to walk alongside the general as they climbed stairs to the top of the city wall. “General, my family has fought alongside yours for generations, so you know I ask only to clarify the situation, not to question your orders--”

“Ask your question, Kierin,” said the general impatiently.

“Why do we remain here? A week’s journey beyond enemy lines is a worthwhile endeavor to take vengeance for our fallen friends and comrades, but why do we stay when the battle is done? We are surrounded by enemies, our supply lines more than three days beyond breaking.”

The general looked down on the chained Revolutionaries being taken into the nearby hills. He was silent for a moment, the blue and orange flames from a building burning nearby flickering in his polished silver armor. “Soldiers are children of duty, armed with pride and honor,” he finally said. “We have returned for vengeance, but we stay because we are told to do so. Both Master Cyrus and the elders of the Order of Sorcery were quite adamant that the pass into the Kuttar Depths must be held at all costs, and that we could not trust the lowlanders to do so when the time came.”

“What enemy are we to hold the pass against?”

The general smiled. “Now you see that clarification doesn’t always provide answers. And so we return to duty.”

The archer knew his cue. “And I to mine. Thank you, General.”

I left the elven general on the ramparts and released the scrying eye. The daycandle had burned low, and further thought on what I had seen would have to wait.

Shortly thereafter, I was in the tower yards training with Raven. “Your fighting style was born in the bloodpits,” she said, parrying my wooden sword. “You use the edge of your blade, hacking at your enemy like you were cutting wheat. That works fine in the pits, where the audience expects blood and a lengthy battle where you kill your opponent one slice at a time.”

She had, of course, chosen to train in the courtyard below Seatower, hoping to catch a glimpse of the tower’s mysterious inhabitant. It didn’t seem to be distracting her. “In a true battle, your opponent is an obstacle to be removed as quickly as possible, while putting yourself in as little danger as possible.” She danced around another of my swings. “That means maximum force with the maximum distance between you and the enemy.” Suddenly she simultaneously stepped backward and thrust forward, her blade stopping just as it touched my stomach. “That means using the point of your blade.”

I swatted away the blade, annoyed at myself. It ran contrary to everything I had been taught, but it seemed so clear. “You did well, Kastali,” Raven said. “I had to wait for an opening, and you weren’t distracted by chatter. That’s better than most pit-fighters manage.” She stood beside me, and we practiced the attack. I let my body learn the movement as my mind went back to my training with Anquilis that morning.

Think back to your vision, he had told me. What you see is not all you can see. See more.

I was back on the ramparts of Enos Joppa. I delved into my memory of the moment. The world was still, pillars of smoke hanging in the air like stone columns. Below, I saw an elven spearman paused in mid-jab as he urged a prisoner forward. Nearby, the archer waited for an answer to his question. Flame and magic reflected in the general’s armor.

Magic? I looked closely at the armor. The orange was from flames, but before them was a translucent blue shade, slender and humanoid. Wings folded. A Solonavi. Rayevisayla.

Raven batted my sword and broke my concentration. "There!" she whispered. "Someone just moved past that window. Did you see it?"

"I saw something," I said.

Tuesday November 30, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 17
The Tainted Path

Lord Vextha's page still waited. Whenever I released the Eye and returned to the scrying chamber, I heard the shuffling of the boy's boots as he drew patterns on the dusty corridor floor to relieve his boredom. He waited to take news back to our lord. He waited to hear that I had fulfilled the order I had been given that morning: Find Rayevisayla.

I had returned to Enos Joppa, where the Elven Lords had begun to dismantle the walls of the city, transporting the materials toward the fortress they planned to build across the Kuttar Gates. I had journeyed across the foothills to the east, passing over countless Amazon villages flying the banner of the wolf.

Every hour or so I released the scrying eye and returned to the chamber, in an attempt to let the Eye take me there. Listening to the page shuffle in the hall, I willed toward the Eye: find Rayevisayla....to no avail. As evening fell, I still hadn't found the renegade Solonavi or Corella's pavilion.

I knew Vextha would not be happy. I had heard how each Solonavi had their own dark appetites, and my lord's seemed to be for information. Word from his Oathsworn spies arrived at all hours of the day and night, and though I rarely saw him I knew he read my reports regularly. I had written yesterday's entry in my journal as the evening bell sounded, and before midnight a page had been sent with my orders.

Sighing, I called upon the scrying eye once more. I needed something to pass along. The eye tugged--and I was pulled eastward through the darkness.

I saw the fire from a distance. An enormous pyre burned on the plains. It towered over the famine-scorched plains. In the distance I saw the remains of the Spire, a broken black tooth against the velvet night. Armor and weapons lay scattered near the corpses who had carried them into battle for that now-shattered rock and the tower that had been hidden within. Yellow-eyed, disease-ridden ravens gamboled amidst the carnage, bellies full and ready to take flight.

Thick iron stakes had been hammered into the earth around the pyre. Chains on the stakes led to shackles worn by prisoners being unloaded from nearby wagons by gray-robed Tur'aj cultists, while others fed the flames with fuel and magic. The last prisoner was brought forward by Kem Ravenbane, and the Apocalypse knight smiled grimly as the last prisoner was locked into place, the sharp sound of the shackles closing a counterpoint to the rising and falling chant of the cultists. Captured Khamsin soldiers had been chained alongside kidnapped midlander peasants and what appeared to be elven refugees from the Wylden. More than three score prisoners formed a ring around the fire.

Ravenbane walked back to a gaunt woman and fell to one knee before her, head low. I remembered her, from the Tur'aj sacrifice I had witnessed before. She reached out to touch the knight's head with one hand, and both stiffened as energy passed between them. As she stepped past him, the other cultists moved with her, their circle closing around the fire. The flames swelled with their chanting, crawling closer to the prisoners. Some cried out, while others faced their fate with courage. The gaunt woman ululated over the chanting and the flames exploded outward to consume the prisoners. "THEY COME!" she screamed.

They arrived at once but came from all directions. From the north came Famine, heels thumping his mount to the beat of the chant as he strummed at his shield. The ravens leapt into the air as Pestilence approached from the south, circling over their master and the shambling skin-bag he rode. From the east rode War, his proud steed hung with skulls of warriors fallen at Roanne Vale, Stonekeep, and the Necropolis. Then fear gripped me as Death arrived from the west, grinning as he reached out to toy with the cloud of magic-limned spirits released in the sacrifice.

“It begins!” cried the gaunt woman, as the other Tur’aj prostrated themselves before the avatars. “It begins here, and it ends everywhere!”

Magic swelled through the area as the avatars dismounted and stepped forward into the pyre. Famine cackled and danced in the flames, while War’s armor turned a cherry-red in the heat. Flies and lice burst into sparks as they leapt away from the Pestilence’s protection, and Death drank in all around him...until he looked at me.

“Again,” he hissed in a mixture of annoyance and amusement. He reached forward--

There was a wrenching, and I was back in the scrying chamber. I still felt the touch of Death, a cold void within me. It took me a moment to recover before I could I stumble to the door and throw it open.

“News for Lord Vextha?” asked the page.

“Yes,” I said. “Tell him....tell him the scrying eye is dead.”

Wednesday December 1, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 18
Barren

I’m trying. I’m trying!

I believe I did it. May I go check?

The eye was gone.

I had called to it for hours, waited for it for hours more. It didn’t answer, wouldn’t come. After writing what I had seen yesterday into my journals, I somehow made my way back to my bedchamber and collapsed into a fitful sleep where I relived the darkest moments of my life. A bolt of lightning lancing through my father. The grinding pain of broken bones as I crawled from the lair of a cave orc. The taste of blood. Even in my dreams I called out to the eye, to pull me away.

I awakened weary, but refused to fall back under the bloody veil of my dreams. There didn’t seem to be much point to leaving my bedchamber, so I didn’t. For hours I watched as the pillar of light the sun cast through the window tracked across the wall. Despite the thick summer air, I wrapped myself tightly in my blankets against the frigid emptiness inside me.

I ignored the page knocking at the door. I ignored him when he returned, and let the tray of food he left outside go cold. The pillar of light dimmed as the sun crossed to the far side of the tower. I pulled the blankets tighter.

Finally the door opened and Raven came in, sword drawn. "Oracle Daheia says that if you don't come with me, I can run you through." I looked up blankly until she prodded me to make her point. Relenting, I shrugged off the blankets and followed her out of the room.

The garden was still warm, insects darting from one flower to another. The winding paths and twisting bowers were the passion of one particular Solonavi, and I had come to them many times to escape the shadowed confines of the scrying chamber. Today, though, they felt as cold and dark as that stone room.

"I've got news," said Raven as we sat on a bench beneath a trellis of ironvine, tendrils idly reaching out to strike at the tinkling bells hanging before it. "I talked to Mahdi this morning." She expected me to know the name. I had lived in the tower for nearly a year. I should know it. Raven had resided in the tower for less than a week, and already she knew it better than me. Of course, I had spent much of my time in the chamber, with the eye. The thought crossed my mind like dark clouds over the sun.

Raven must have seen the look on my face, for she continued without waiting further. "Mahdi is the page who delivers food from the kitchens. Nice Galeshi kid, probably left the tray outside your chamber this morning. I ate your fruit, by the way. It was starting to turn." I shrugged. "Anyway, I saw him coming across the courtyard this morning with an empty tray. From Seatower. So I talked to him, and he didn't know who was staying there, but he has been delivering food twice a day." I grasped vainly for the eye. "That means that whoever it is, they need to eat. Which means it's not a Solonavi," she said. "It's not an answer, but it's something." She was trying to cheer me, to draw me away.

"Sure," I said.

Raven shook her head as she stood. "Well, I've had my chance. They said I could have an hour to try and pull you out of your stupor. Now you go to Anquilis. Come on." She took my hand and dragged me back toward the tower.

Where Raven had trying to distract my mind with idle chatter, Anquilis used other methods. At first they involved physical labor, my first in quite some time. A douser's yoke was waiting, and I was tasked with carrying water from one pool deep in the tower's labyrinth to another, three stories above. When I was more exhausted than I thought possible, he called me into the archives. "The eye," he began.

"It's gone," I said, on the verge of tears. "It's dead. Why did it die and not me? Last time it was me."

"You mewl uselessly," said Anquilis. "You have been touched by powerful magic, but still you live. It is a testament to your growing powers. Do you still sense the pool?"

Past my exhaustion, past my grief, I reached out through the darkness, and found the light of the pool in the distance. "Yes," I said.

"Your power lives, as you do. It will heal, just as you will. We will use the time productively. You feel the pool. Focus on its magic. Feel it. Study it."

I reached out to the pool again. The light provided small comfort, like a thin blanket against a chill wind. I drew it closer. As I did, I realized that it was not one light, but several. "There's more than the pool," I said.

Anquilis' voice came through the darkness. "The magics of the scrying chamber encompass more than the scrying pool. They include the entire room. You feel the pool. Do you feel your journals?" I reached out and a line of light within the light became a line of stars. My journals, standing on the shelves. "Can you find the newest book?" said Anquilis. I looked, and found one star was weaker than the others, as if incomplete. "Reach toward it," said Anquilis. "It is a part of you, and you are a part of it. Even at a distance you can shape one another. Just as you draw strength from the pool, you can write words on the pages of your journals. Do it."

"I'm trying," I said.

“Write your thoughts on its pages,” said Anquilis.

“I’m trying!” I protested. The star twinkled, and felt the gossamer connection between us twist as if caught in a wind before settling and drawing taught. Something had changed. “I believe I did it,” I said. “May I go check?”

I blinked my vision clear, the orange light that made up Anquilis flooding into the darkness. “Keep in mind, Oracle, that you are not a singular being. Your powers are many, and you must master them all if you are to chase prophecy.” I nodded respectfully and hurried up the stair to the scrying chamber. Throwing open the door, I turned to the latest section of this journal.

My words were at the top of the page.

I picked up my pen and began to write this account of the day. I felt the nearby power of the scrying pool, of the scrying chamber, and it comforted me.

The eye was gone. But it would return.

Thursday December 2, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 19
Life and Death

I awakened with the dawn this morning. There was still a cold stillness inside me, but it felt warmed a bit today. Perhaps by hope.

As I neared the scrying chamber after a quick visit to the tower’s laundry, I called to a passing page. I asked her name--Jadlin, a young Wylden Elf--and sent her in search of Raven. In the chamber, I reached again for the eye, but found nothing. I had nearly been conquered by despair, but today I was determined to fight back. I set aside the robes I typically wore around the tower and donned clothing I had taken from the laundry, something more akin to what I had seen people wearing in the streets of Rokos. The finishing touches were the necklace I had been given by my mysterious admirer and my sword belt--both hidden beneath a light cloak.

Raven has just arrived at the chamber, and quickly guessed my plan. Today I am going out into the city--to test my connections with the chamber and my journals. She will guard me while I establish the connection. Perhaps by nightfall I will not only enhance my powers but also observe something genuinely worth reporting to my masters.

We dutifully reported to the tower guards, as I had been ordered to do by Oracle Daheia, then left the grounds. I didn’t want to stray far before making my first test, so Raven and I are in the Shrouded Cup, the inn near the tower I had visited previously with Daheia. “Jek! Two tall cups!” Raven said as we entered, and the innkeeper smiled broadly.

He looked me over, then walked close. “Oracle Kastali,” he said quietly. “You are always welcome in the Shrouded Cup and the house of Jekepratur.” Perhaps my change of clothing hadn’t worked its intended effect. “I never forget a pretty face,” the innkeeper explained, reading my look of disappointment.

It took me a few moments of quiet concentration to follow the tether back to the scrying chamber, and sort out the journals. Considering what appeared in the journal yesterday, I am attempting to order my thoughts as I would my written words. It is surprisingly difficult.

Raven and I are now down at the port, concealed behind a stack of empty barrels. I've considered waiting to write these words until back in the safety of the tower, but Raven assures me that her abilities with the sword are more certain than my own with the chamber. So I practice again, and tell what has happened since we left the inn:

After sharing a late morning meal with Jekepratur at the Shrouded Cup, Raven and I walked down to the port. Fishermen returning from morning trawls in the Inland Sea were carrying their catch ashore, and when Raven spotted a puddle of spilled fish blood she joked that it was her own, spilled in our fight. I offered to fight her again and attempt to spill more--so long as she didn't charge me this time. We laughed, and for a moment I forgot the pain inside me.

As we walked the docks, I spotted a Xandressan sailor wearing a necklace much like my own--a large tooth flanked by ivory cylinders and beads. Stopping him, I asked about his necklace. He explained that it was a Xandressan custom, and that to the trained eye they told much about the wearer. He also pointed out his personal sigil on the tooth, and the intricately carved scenes from his own experience at sea inscribed into the ivory cylinders--the bones of a large sea beast he and his crewmates had captured off Windsong Point.

I reached beneath my cloak to draw out my own necklace, told the sailor it had been a gift, and asked him to explain its meaning. He held it up to the light for a moment, then he blanched and backed away clasp his hand as if he had been burned. "What does it mean?" I asked.

He shook his head, and refused to explain until Raven stepped forward and scraped her sword loose in its scabbard. The sailor looked at the necklace again, then back up at me. "You should not be wearing that," he said. "It means that you're dead!"

As he dashed away into the crowd, I was once again grasped by the coldness at the core of my being.

Friday December 3, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 20
Reborn

I spent the night in the scrying chamber. Perhaps it was as I told Raven, to catch up on work that had lain long fallow, keeping the other books on my shelf updated. But I accomplished little; when in need of information on a specific place or person, I was too accustomed to simply sending the eye there or using it to track them down. Without it, I could only read the books and speculate.

Deep in the night, I finally admitted that I wasn't in the chamber to work. I was there to be close to its magic. It was only through my connection to the magic that I felt truly alive anymore. Eventually I fell into an exhausted and fitful sleep.

I opened my eyes.

The chamber's candles guttered, wick deep in the pool of wax seeping over the edges of the scrying pool. Shadows danced on the walls as the tiny flames flickered. The pool hissed as a drop of molten wax fell into its cold waters.

I felt a tug.

The Eye.

I grasped at it, feeling it slip away. I clung to the connection between us as the scrying chamber slipped away, dragged behind the scrying eye like a goblin hanging from the tail of a skittish cave runner. As the eye pulled me through the skies above Rokos, into the clouds, northbound, I exalted in its return. Our connection was still as slippery as a handful of fine sand, but I sensed that the Eye was as desperate as I was. We had to be together, had to see where it was taking me.

We came back through the clouds above the Kuttar Depths, and continued north to the valley stronghold of the draconum. Pits of battling hatchlings surrounded the sulfur pools in the valley, with elder draconum fishing the oldest and strongest whelps out to begin their training with the warriors camped on the valley floor or the mystics in the caves above. Their army had continued to swell.

Deeper into the valley, to the ancient stone fortress at the far end of its depths. Even in the middle of the night a drakona sorcerer remained perched on its ramparts, issuing the magical summons that called so many draconum and drakona to this faraway place. But the magic took its toll. As the eye and I approached, the sorcerer faltered, dropping his arms as he succumbed to exhaustion. Two draconum warriors stepped forward to catch him as he fell, and in a moment, an elder mystic would take his place.

The moment was enough.

A cloaked figure dashed forward from the darkness to the gates of the fortress. The red magestone atop his staff flared as he traced a glowing sigil on the gates. The words he chanted rang through the night, sharp syllables cutting through the magical hum of the wards that protected the fortress. As the draconum guard leapt from the ramparts to charge the intruder, he drew his staff back and struck the gates with all his might.

The sigil flared, the stone gates shattered, and a wave of magic exploded outward and flooded down the valley, over its rim, to the horizon. A column of light shot up into the sky, and for a moment the valley was bathed in midday light. The intruder's cloak had been ripped to tatters by the explosion, and the light revealed his glowing red eyes and horns tipped with crimson. He was a draconum, but he had been touched by the vampiric rituals of the Dark Crusade.

"It's done!" he screamed. "Draconum, drakona--even your loathsome alliance will not keep it hidden! They will know she lives, and the beastmother will be reborn!" He continued to rant as the warriors tackled him to the ground and ran him through.

As his words became gurgles, I urged the eye into the darkness beyond the gates. At the end of a long tunnel, beyond a score of iron gates, was a single chamber. It was in that chamber, atop a pedestal, tall as a giant, glowing with the life and power contained within it.

An egg.

Monday December 6, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 21
Sun and Moon

After it took me to the draconum valley, the scrying eye released me and I found myself back in the scrying chamber. I quickly recorded what I had seen in my journal, then remained by the scrying pool throughout the night. But my desperation was gone, and I no longer called repeatedly for the Eye. Instead I waited, certain that it would return.

I had just lit a new daycandle to mark the morning when I felt the Eye again. I reached out to it and together we drifted out of the tower. *West*, I thought, and we flew across the Inland Sea and the northern Scythrian Mountains, into Prieska where the farmers were clearing their fields and preparing to plant winter wheat. Burdened by fate with a summer of famine and a nearby encampment of orcs, they still labored to grow food that might feed their people.

As I admired their tenacity and determination, my connection to the Eye was broken, and I found myself in the scrying chamber. Sighing, I instructed a page to bring my morning meal to the chamber and continued my vigil.

Midway through the morning, the Eye returned. This time I let it choose the direction of our travel and we slowly wandered south. Past the Inland Sea and the lower Sein we drifted across the southern reaches of the

Atlantean Empire and the Dhokanios Strait, where I saw a Xandressan ship flying the banner of the Delphana approaching Arcos, the island's capital. I got close enough to see Magus Lan himself, overseeing deckhands bringing a large crate onto deck, ordering them to be careful with their load. Then the Eye was gone, and I was back in the scrying chamber.

A young Galeshi page brought my midday meal to the chamber. "Thank you.... Mahdi," I said, remembering. He smiled, bowed, and took away the tray from the morning.

I had just sat down with the tray when suddenly the Eye returned and pulled me from the chamber. West, but past Prieska. Over the sea, curving north into the Galeshi deserts. We dropped down among the dunes, and slowed as we passed through an oasis. A semicircle of carts and steam rams were nearby, half-buried in the drifting sands. It took me a moment to spot the nomads of the caravan. Then I saw faces and hands sticking out of the sand on the water's edge, their skin yellowed and covered in red pox. Now the fouled watering hole belonged to flies, red-eyed rats, and the scavengers circling in the sky above.

The Eye pressed on, taking me to the Ringed Cities. The streets of most of the once great desert capitals were empty and abandoned. But the largest was surrounded by newly constructed rings of defenses. A caravan bringing fresh water from the coast was let in through an outer gate, and not until it was closed and the caravan inspected was another gate opened and the wagons let into the city. Beyond, the streets were thronged by people. The Galeshi people, once famed as nomads, had been corralled inside the walls of Alrimjin.

A captain of the city guard watched the wagons rolling into the city as a sand-skinned woman sat in the shade nearby. "Well, Bez, word from the outriders is that this is the last untainted caravan," he said. "All the water we get from now on has to come from our own wells."

The woman drew a wavy bladed knife from the scabbard hanging on her jeweled belt and carefully began to sharpen it. "The Ghosts and I go out again tonight to hunt for the creatures," she said. "Within a fortnight, we'll be drawing from the Fafyeh springs again."

"At midday, perhaps," he said. "But at night, Fafyeh will still belong to them. When will my brother be able to return to his home? When will we be able to worship in Ghanshe Palace again?"

"I long for my home too," she said. "I long for my family. For me, there is no chance of return. But for you and yours, we must depend on Nerab. The council knew his journey was long and perilous, but it was agreed that it would be the only way."

"The sun baked the mountains that we would never have to enter those blasted wastes," said the guard.

"It isn't the sun that has caused our problems," she said, climbing to her feet and sheathing her knife. "It's the moon."

Wednesday December 8, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 22
Safe Harbor

I awakened this morning to sense the Eye waiting nearby as if it had never been gone. When I went in search of Raven to share the good news, I was told that Oracle Daheia had sent her north on a mission. Eating alone I still smiled, even hummed along to the singsong drifting from the nearby scullery. For the first time in almost a week, I felt whole again.

The gallery above the tower's great hall let out onto a short bridge over the courtyard to the outer wall. I found a perch on sun-warmed stones with a view looking out over Rokos, then called to the Eye.

Together we went south over the Scythrian Sea to Delphane, and the city of Arcos. Magus Lan's ship was still docked in the harbor, but its crew was enjoying the wharfside taverns and whatever cargo the ship had

carried yesterday had long been unloaded. I felt a tug by the Eye and let it guide me to the Delphana citadel at the heart of the city. We glided through its walls unhindered.

Inside was a maze of libraries and laboratories, sages and students talking in the halls and rushing from one place to another on mysterious errands. I noted that there were few legionnaires guarding the fortress. Instead massive magestone-powered golems stood watch at entrances and intersections.

The Eye unerringly guided me through the labyrinth, and quickly we were in a round hall deep in the heart of the citadel. Hooded Delphana masters reclined on the opulent cushions ringing the edge of the room, their faces hidden in shadow and smoke from the fenweed braziers at their side. Magus Lan sat on his own throne, hovering in the column of light spilling down into center of the room through an enormous crystal disc set into the ceiling. The crate from the ship sat in the center of the polished marble floor, two apprentices standing nearby.

“Since the Solonavi released more magic into the Land, we have sought to master our increased powers,” said the magus. “They have shaped us. What we did not know is that the power is also shaping others.”

He nodded to the apprentices, who fit crowbars into the crate and levered it open. The sides fell away to reveal a large glass cylinder packed in straw. As the apprentices cleared away the packing material, it was revealed that the vessel was filled with an oily, yellowish liquid. Floating in the liquid was a creature. “This creature was recovered from just inside an ancient dungeon beneath the fortress of Riversgate,” said Lan.

Even through the murky oil, it was clear from the serpentine snout and rough skin that the creature had once been a Shyft warrior. What it had become was less clear. Its features had melted like wax near a fire, and the body was elongated and twisted, lumped with strange, swollen nubs. Scales had fallen away in clumps and littered the bottom of the vessel.

“Shyft,” spat a mage who had approached to peer closely through the glass. “They walk with the beasts. Is it any surprise that they too have been twisted by magic?”

“If the tales we have been told by the technomancers who discovered them are to be believed, this is different, Lord Balion,” said Len. “This corpse was found near the remains of what appeared to be some sort of cocoon or chrysalis. I believe this transformation is deliberate.”

“Who knows of this?” asked another mage.

“I have endeavored to keep the information within our circle,” said Len. “Those who discovered the creatures have been sent directly to the front, where they will ideally perish quickly. I have not, of course, informed Nujarek.”

Len raised his throne into the air, addressing all the assembled mages. “There is only one place where we can truly discover the answers to our questions. The Emporer has requested that the Delphana provide full support for sky fortresses being including in an expeditionary force he is sending across the sea in search of rich magestone deposits. We had planned to indulge him with a host of scholar-mages supported by the Golemcore in hopes of securing a supply of magestone for ourselves. Now we will send members of our own number as well. After the battle is won and the stones complete, they will continue east.”

The Eye released, and I was back on the parapets of the Needle. Lost in thought about what I had seen, it was a moment before I realized that Anquilis stood behind me. “You have found your Eye,” he said as I climbed stiffly to my feet. Before I could determine if it was a statement or a question, he turned and left.

Thursday December 9, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 23
Plunder

I guided the Eye into the field I had seen two days ago, a rough clearing hacked out of the thick Prieskan forests, stumps piled around its edge. The stacked logs that marked the construction of a small structure had been put to the torch, and their blackened remains still smoldered in the moonlight. An iron-bladed plow lay abandoned in the middle of the field, at the end of a half-plowed row. There was no sign of the farmers, or their beasts.

One of the latter, at least, I found a short distance away at the encampment of a dozen orcs. The ox had been spitted, and was roasting over a bonfire. Two orcs struggled to turn the meat over the coals while rest of the tribe sat nearby sharpening their weapons to the beat of a clurch drum. "The weaklings in these woods have nothing more to take," said their chief as he walked among them. "Tomorrow we go in search of fresh plunder!" The tribe cheered, and chanted along to the drums.

With the chanting, an orc danced out of the darkness, a skull pendant bouncing on his chest and an obsidian blade swinging from his belt. Shadows flickered across the bony beak of his masked face as he came into the tribal circle, the head of a Prieskan held high above his head in each hand. It was Bloodhawk. As the orcs noticed him among them, they fell silent until only the chaos shaman chanted, growling words booming beneath this mask. When the shaman fell silent, so did the night, broken only by the popping of the coals and the sizzling of cooking meat.

Finally the chief spoke. "Who are you?" he demanded.

Bloodhawk threw a head at the chief. "I am the one who comes between you and those silent ones who would kill you while you feasted. How would you pay for your lives?"

The chief chuckled and brandished his sword. "Two softskins? You should have let them come--we needed the entertainment!" The other orcs grunted and chuckled, raising their own weapons.

"There were more," said Bloodhawk. "Many more."

"You tell me you killed them all yourself?" said the chief.

Bloodhawk threw back his head and howled into the night. There was a roaring chorus in return as three score shamans emerged from the woods. Bloodhawk raised his hand and they fell silent. "I ask you again," he said to the chief. "How would you pay for your lives?"

The chief pointed toward a pile glittering nearby. "Gold, furs, weapons, take what you like." The chaos shaman threw the other head at him. "Gems," the chief said, digging into the pile. "Hear that you shamans like gems. Here."

Bloodhawk pushed his mask back on his head as he took the offered stone and put it between his teeth. He bit down hard, grimaced, then spat it back at the chief. "Emerald," he said. "You give us magestone."

"Don't have any," said the chief, shrugging. "Who needs it? And plunder's been scarce. Not much more they have hidden away around here, so we're moving on. Rich plunder to the east, though. Come with us and you'll see."

"If you have no magestone, you have nothing we need," said Bloodhawk. He turned to leave, then stopped. "Have you seen any flying towers?"

"Saw a sky fortress over the mountains two days ago, headed toward the Empire," said the chief.

"No, too big," said Bloodhawk.

"I saw a tower," said one of the orcs at the fire. "Down in the valley near a waterfall," he offered when the chaos shaman turned to him, pointing to the south. "Flying imperial flag, but with this below it." He scraped his boot through the dirt, tracing a curve broken by a straight line.

“Yes,” said Bloodhawk. “Yes. Good.” He turned back to the chief. “The seasons change. You have plunder. Yet you stay here, again.”

“The plunder is still good,” said the chief. “And what we take is ours, how it should be.”

The shaman shook his head. “The stones have spoken. Those who call this home will die,” he said. “Leave now, or find your fate.” The shamans followed Bloodhawk as he walked off into the darkness.

Monday December 13, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 24
Observations

The Revolutionaries’ observation post above the Kuttar Gates was well hidden, but not from the unerring guidance of the Eye. Inside, a scout peered through a long spyglass, while another sat at a small desk below beside a shrouded oil lamp, snoring quietly. Rivulets of the unending rain outside had run down the walls to turn the floor of the post into a muddy mess. The observer reached down to swat the scribe, who awoke with a snort. “What?” he demanded irritably.

“More for the report,” said the observer. “Three days after capturing the orc camp, the Freeholders are taking their wounded and what spoils they have in a small wagon and are headed into the forests to the west.”

“It’s not the Wylden, but it has more trees,” joked the scribe.

“Quiet,” said the observer. “The skirmish between the Solonavi forces and Amazons flying our banner appears to have ended, but it is difficult to report a clear victor.”

“What about the caravan?” asked the scribe.

“Gone,” said the observer. “Whoever won that battle took everything with them. Luckily it was headed north, so they only got food and raw materials. In a few weeks, they would have captured a full load of rifles and powder.”

“If the Solos won,” said the scribe.

“If they won,” agreed the observer. “If not, the Amazons got the caravan into the depths. Doesn’t seem likely, though. Anyone headed north from the bridges has to go through that meat grinder between the Dracs and those incinerators the Legionnaires hauled into position.”

“I thought you said the burners ran out of fuel yesterday.”

“I said it appeared that they ran out of fuel.” The observer swung the spyglass around to look to the north. “Probably right, though. Scalies are making another attack up in Eastmouth, and it doesn’t look good for the Legion. The trenches have been bridged, and the command tent is down. I can’t tell from here, but they’re probably dividing up whatever the Atlanteans had captured from that northbound Enos-Joppa refugee train.”

“Poor folks,” said the scribe as he wrote. “They get chased out of their homes, and run straight into another battle.”

“Won’t be much left of their homes soon,” said the observer. “The damnable bluebloods are still pulling the city down and hauling everything up here.” He set the spyglass aside and scabbled forward to peer directly downward, as best he could. “The Dracs are going to take the river bridges and the mouths of the Depths, but meanwhile the elves are just walling the whole thing off.”

“What about us?” asked the scribe.

“I thought you were bored when all we had to record our caravans headed into the Depths,” said the observer. “Said that if the action wouldn’t come to you, you would go to it.”

“Yeah, here’s the action,” said the scribe. “And you won’t let me take a single shot. Come on, just a few shots. They’re right down there, and I bet I can punch right through that silver plating--”

“I’ve seen you shoot,” said the observer. “You’re no Snow. You’d just give away our position, and then what good would we be?” He clapped shut the cover on the observation slot and sat on a nearby bench to put the spyglass carefully into a leather case.

The scribe blotted his paper, then pushed it aside to reveal a grid of lines carved into the table and grinned. “Got time to kill. Wanna play?”

“That’s why you pulled this duty, you know,” said the observer. “Too much talking to orc prisoners. Might as well, though. Used too many cards lighting that lamp to play roundshot.” He started scooping stones piled on a stone outcropping into his hand. “No courier yet, you know,” he said as he poured them onto the table. “If he hasn’t shown up by tomorrow and you really want some excitement, somebody has to take our reports to Vansfield and tell them that they’re going to have to find a new way to bring powder caravans south.”

“Like I said, anything to get out of here,” said the observer.

Wednesday December 15, 2004
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 25
Sacrifice

For much of the day I had observed the ongoing battle between the Revolutionary troops in Caero and the Atlantean forces entrenched across the River Vizorr outside Venetia. The Caeronn side of the river had been scorched by Atlantean lightning cannons, and the Venetian lines were pocked by the craters created by black powder shells. The Revolution had the edge in the battle; to win they just needed to hold the lines, and to attack them the Atlanteans had to cross the more formidable obstacle of the river. There was a narrow band of muddy no-man’s-land along the western bank littered with tracks and the wreckage of destroyed golems demonstrating that the Atlanteans hadn’t given up, but it was going to be a long fight.

As darkness was falling, I prepared to release the Eye and return to the scrying chamber to report the day’s events. Instead the Eye pulled me toward Venetia. Long ago the canyons of Venetia had been the towering walls of a stone quarry, flooded before the time of Tezla by the Delphane when they took control of the area. Over the centuries, the descendants of slaves who had refused to leave the quarries had carved homes and businesses into the rock and built arcing bridges to span the black waters below. Stairs and ramps were built to take the people of the city from level to level, while chains dangling from enormous windlasses on the canyon rim raised and lowered heavier loads from the wharfhouses along the river to the roads out of the city far above.

The Eye brought me to a palatial home with a view down the central canal toward the river. The red rock of the canyon that made up the exterior had been polished smooth and trimmed in white marble. Liveried guardsman stood watch outside the main door, and came to attention as a palanquin approached, carried by a quartet of hooded men. They stopped as one at the coachman’s bark, and carefully lowered their load to the cobbles directly before the home. The coachman jumped down to pull the curtain aside for the passenger, a woman shrouded in a gray cloak. The door opened as she approached, and the Eye followed her inside before the servant closed the door.

The thick wood paneling that lined the inside of the home belied the fact that it was carved deep inside stone. Pools of light cast by oil lamps were swallowed by the surrounding gloom, but the servant and guest

made their way unerringly through the darkness until they came to a pair of heavy oaken doors. The servant knocked twice, and opened the doors when bid to enter.

“Welcome, Preceptor Nala,” said a voice from the dimness beyond. The servant hurried to place another log into the fireplace, and slowly the flames lit the room to reveal an old man sitting in a deep velvet chair. He sat before the fire, below an enormous map of the Land nearly as detailed as the one that hung in the scrying chamber. To one side of the chair was a table piled high with books and scrolls, with more on the floor below. Close at hand on the other side were paper, a variety of inkpots and bottles, and a crystal goblet half-full of a thick amber liquid. “Perhaps the servants can bring you something else,” he said as he reached for the goblet. “I’m afraid this is quite the acquired taste.” He leaned forward to bring the goblet to his lips and I saw his face for the first time, thick scars slashing across it from forehead to jaw. I knew those scars, and I knew the man. The tales I had read said the scars had been inflicted by the Black Thorn using poisoned roses on the very man who had meant to kill her--the Venetian merchant Darset Frehr.

“That which would sate me, you would not give,” said his guest, sitting across from Frehr and casting back her cloak. I shivered as I realized why I recognized her as well. When last I had seen her, she was in the presence of Death and the other avatars of the Apocalypse. Kem Ravensbane, the dark knight of the Tur’aj, had knelt before her. She was the leader of the Apocalypse cult.

“I do not give, Nala,” agreed Frehr. “You see this home, the life I have won. Rarely has something passed from my hands unless I make a greater gain. Only once have I failed, and that is why you are here.”

“I have come in recognition of your generous contributions to our cause,” said the cult leader. “The Tur’aj have but a single goal, and it is not to pursue your vendetta.”

“Sometimes two objectives fall along a single path,” said Frehr. “Particularly when pursued by an agent dedicated to both.” He raised his hand and the servant opened the door to allow a young man into the room. “I give you my son, Valot. I have guided him through the rituals myself, and he is ready.”

The man crossed the room to kneel before the cultist, who reached out and placed her hand on his shoulder. He shuddered as closed her eyes and basked in the energy flowing between them. “Yes,” she said, releasing him. “He will do.”

She sat back in the chair, smiling thinly. “Let us speak of other things, my friend. I bring good tidings: they are coming. All things will soon be as they were. Our call has been answered, and the signs are as were told. The darkness comes.”

“The darkness can have us all,” said Frehr quietly. “As long as it takes Nadia first.”

Thursday December 16, 2004

Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 26

Enlightenment

It has all happened again

All things will soon be as they were.

The first were the words of the ancient elven sorcerer who died at the Battle of the Spire. The second were the words of the gaunt woman leading the Apocalypse cult. Both led me to the archives deep beneath the Oracle’s Needle.

“Greetings, archivist,” I said to the Solonvai as I entered the archives.

Anquilis looked up from a circle of stones laid out on the table before him. “Oracle Kastali,” he said. “I cannot answer your question.”

“But I haven’t--”

“You were about to ask how the words of the Tur’aj preceptor might be connected to your own prophecy.”

“ ‘It is now as it was, but how it was is not how it will be’,” I agreed. “The words were echoed by an elven sorcerer as well. They know what I don’t, what might be key to my prophecy--the past. History. How it was. Perhaps I was wrong to hope that the archivist of the Oracles of Rokos might be able to provide some insight.”

Anquilis shook his head. “Neither flattery or insult will bring you to enlightenment, Oracle, nor can I. It is a path you must walk on your own.”

The archivist turned back to his stones, but I refused to be ignored. “If you won’t help me, perhaps I can help myself,” I said, crossing to the nearest shelves. I ran my finger down the spines--*Princes of Scythria, The Night of Fire, The Vurga Rift--A Comparative Bestiary*--and pulled one out at random. “*Pre-Imperial Kosian Architecture*,” I read. “Unless you’ll suggest another volume, it will have to do.”

I was about to open the book and begin reading when Oracle Daheia took it from me and placed it back on the shelf. “Again you overstep your bounds, Oracle,” she said.

“What good are prophecies if we cannot divine their meanings before the events occur?” I complained. “The future to come is rooted in history. I’m certain of it. The archivist knows the past, and might even guide me toward the answers I seek, but the glowfly refuses to help!” I regretted the Crusader slang as soon as it escaped my lips. Daheia reddened in anger, and I saw her emotion cross their bond to color the Solonavi.

I awaited judgment. Finally Anquilis spoke. “I did not say I would not help, Oracle,” he said calmly. “I said that you must find the answers on your own.”

Daheia offered me a small box of polished black wood. “Lord Heddravalis nearly refused to let this leave his possession, and even I am uncertain about giving it to you. It is Anquilis who insisted that it must be in your hands.” I opened the box to find a piece of broken jewelry lying in the velvet-lined interior, one-half of an intricately carved amulet.

“I gave one of these shards to Lord Heddravalis,” I said.

“Now it returns to you, with one of its brethren,” said Anquilis. “You must seek the others. For too long we have waited for destiny to reunite them.”

“Unless the scrying eye takes me to them, I don’t know where to begin looking,” I confessed.

“Wear the shards at all times,” said Anquilis. “When the time comes, you will know.”

Wednesday January 12, 2005
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 27
Road to Rangraz

The Order of the Ninth Circle marched west. Molog Bloodaxe had assembled an army unlike anything I’d seen before, the krugg marching at the head of a chaotic rabble that included phooka, frost wolves, and even a pack of gnolls. To one side of Bloodaxe a lumbering half-troll carried the notched-ring banner of the order. On the other walked Terk, the feather in the dwarven mercenary’s cap bouncing as he hurried to keep up with Bloodaxe.

“Some group you got here,” said the dark dwarf. “My guys are about the only ones that even look like soldiers.” He jerked his thumb at a nearby group of similarly pale dwarves, all clad in the same leathers and

feathered cap as Terk. They were joking and passing an aleskin among themselves, swiping at one another with scabbarded swords.

“Soldiers don’t make an army, and a sword is a poor substitute for a fang,” said the krugg, eyes glinting beneath the bearskin he wore over his head and shoulders.

“Yeah, about that,” said the dwarf. “We’ve passed up plenty of villages waiting to be plundered, and all I’ve gotten is dusty feet and an earful of smart-talk from you and that book you read all the time. You promised us fights and gold when we signed on, and I haven’t seen much of either lately. We’re actually walking to a fight and not just so you have someone to talk to, right?”

“There is a battle at our journey’s end, and we bring it with us,” said Bloodaxe. “Soon chaos will fill the streets of Rangraz.”

“Rangraz! I leave there, walk over a mountain range to find you, and now we’re walking back?” Terk clenched the hilts of his swords. “I’m cutting down anything in that town that gets in my way, and there better be someone paying us to do it.”

“It’s all there for us to take,” said Bloodaxe. “Plunder. Respect. Power.”

“Right, right,” said Terk. “Someone is paying us, though, right? I’m not facing down magic guns unless I get coins first.”

“The Venthian merchant’s caravan will meet us a day away from the city,” said Bloodaxe. “You’ll get your gold then. And I’ll get my map.”

“Map?”

The krugg looked up at the banner beside him. “A map to true power...”

Thursday January 13, 2005
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 28
Fenborn

Entering the scrying chamber this morning, I thought of Anquilis’ command to seek out the other shards of the amulet I now wore around my neck, dangling from the Xandressan necklace. I looked down at the piece I had recovered, and as I sat down beside the scrying pool I cast the Eye east, across the sea.

The Eye followed the ley currents across the waters, gliding along the streams of power like a hawk. Off in the distance, to the north, I saw the high cliffs of the Sturmlander coast. Once they had been crowned by the green hills and forests of the Wylden. Following a season of pillage and famine those lands were gray and brown, but occasional flashes of brightness suggested that given time the Wylden would be green again one day.

Ahead I saw my destination, the rocky islands off the southern coast, cast-off siblings of the Sturmounts. They were home to the dark temple where I had found the shard of the amulet--and an army of the Shyft. Approaching the coast of the largest isle I spotted a mage-tower floating above the bay, the Delphana come to investigate the hibernating Shyft as they had planned.

It appeared that a small detachment of Delphana mages and swordsmen had landed on the beach in a flying skiff, and received a violent reception. The skiff was overturned, and the swordsmen were fighting a pitched battle against giant, fanged worms crawling out of the jungle. The warriors still held the line against the Mage Spawn, and aided by the technomancers behind them they might have won the battle. But finned wave spawn had come from beneath the waters to attack them from the rear, and their spears were cutting through the Atlantean ranks. The mages on the tower were attempting to provide support from above, but

even they were harried by a cloud of winged creatures flapping and screeching around the flying tower's battlements. The Atlanteans had come planning to explore and pillage wild islands, but the beasts were mounting a formidable and organized defense. Which meant--

A trio of Shyft warriors in feathered headdresses erupted from the underbrush, streaking forward on four legs like centaurs. As they leapt over the worms, the opposable hands on their middle legs allowed them to draw a second pair of blades and they fell in among the Atlanteans as a whirling frenzy of death. Though the Mage Spawn howled and roared in triumph, the Shyft were disturbingly silent. I guided the Eye closer to the carnage and saw that beneath their beady, yellow eyes the mouths of the creatures were covered by a smooth, unbroken piece of skin, their jaws moving behind the membrane but no sound emerging.

The battle on the beach was over quickly, but the mages in the tower were having more success, cutting through the wild creatures flying around them. Then the Shyft warriors raised their eyes upward, peering toward the battle, concentrating. Suddenly the black-winged creatures reared backwards, arcing upwards and returning in oddly organized ranks that attacked the Delphana mages in a wave that brought one slashing pass after another without respite. I saw the heads of the Shyft bob as they followed the creatures in the sky, and realized that they were controlling the creatures. I had seen them guide the Mage Spawn before, organize them into a guidable force, but never had they been able to make them so effective. These new Shyft were dangerous.

Beyond the warriors, I saw that another half-dozen Shyft had emerged from the treeline and stood in a line along the beach, unarmed. Distracted by the attack, the newcomers were unseen by the Atlanteans as the mystics brought their hands to their heads and concentrated. The ley currents fluctuated as they were drawn into the Shyft, focused through their mind, and drawn outward as pure power. They reared back in pain or ecstasy as the power built in their hands, then lashed out as one and cast it at the tower.

The tower shook as if struck by a cannonshot, but it appeared unscathed by the blast...until I saw the mortar crumble away between the stones in the lower part of the tower. With a grinding noise, the blocks fell apart.

Stone and soldiers spilled from the rent bottom of the tower, splashing into the turquoise water below. Even then the battle might have continued. But the magestones at the base also fell away, and with it the tower's ability to fly. The tower canted away from the beach, throwing the mages off the battlements. Then it twisted and finally collapsed into the deep waters below.

On the beach, the Shyft stood victorious among the fallen. One warrior lifted a gasping mage and pressed his mouth to the human's head. There was a leyglow around the warrior as he drew out the mage's life force to consume it, and the Atlantean's eyes went dull and lifeless as he fell limply back to the sand.

A spindly Shyft came forward, head sagging beneath the weight of a heavy headdress. Two attendants followed behind her, gathering the wet, amber-colored eggs sliding out of the bulging membranes on her back. The Shyft mystics and warriors fell prostrate before the matriarch, pressing their heads to the sand.

"We are ready," she said, and I realized that I heard the words as the Shyft did, in my mind. "The sign has come for us to prepare for our masters' return. Let the call go out across the fen--tonight we cross the waters. We will gather the sleeping tribes as we journey north, and go to face our ancient enemies as was intended--in our true forms. We leave at last light."

"We will be ready, Domina Vo'kara," said one of the warriors, and the Shyft scattered into the jungle to prepare. The matriarch remained on the beach, smugly watching those few Atlanteans who escaped the wreckage and surfaced were quickly pulled back under by triumphant wave spawn.

Friday January 13, 2005
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 29
Dragon Lord

It was midday in Rokos, but when I gave the scrying eye freedom to take us where it would, I was plunged into darkness. I heard the murmur of voices in the distance, and the scuffing of boots on broken stone. A glow in the distance grew into dancing light and shadows, cast by a torch held by a woman in necromancer's robes. It was Quila, and behind her was the blood cult enforcer Demethostes.

"How much further?" asked Demethostes, his voice hollow behind his skull-faced mask.

"I don't know," said Quila. "Soma told every new deathspeaker that they had free reign over anywhere in the Necropolis but these tunnels. Even that wouldn't have stopped some, if not for the necromantic wards Soma put in place. But it seems they died with him."

"What is it you hope to find?" the cult enforcer asked as they continued down the tunnel.

"Whatever Soma wanted to hide. Aeredon promised me power if I supported his plan to become Prophet. Yet he bars even me from his chambers and spends all day 'communing with Dark Tezla'. The deathspeakers' circle is a sham, Darq maintaining the council in a fruitless hope to discover Aeredon's plans. He ignores the battle reports from the generals and whiles away the hours focusing his ire on me. I need to find something to shore up my own power, open the door to Aeredon, and keep Darq at bay before his ankh-headed ignorance brings down the entire Crusade." Her tirade caught in her throat, and she turned to look at the blood cultist walking behind her.

"I serve the Goddess and you, my love," said Demethostes. "Not him." He took the torch from Quila and gestured down the tunnel. Both took a half-step--then stopped, listening to the skittering in the distance. The enforcer jammed the torch into a crack in the wall, and drew his blade as the skittering grew louder. Quila put her hands to the badge of office hanging around her neck, and her fingers danced as she whispered the words of a spell.

The skittering became a rushing noise like the wind as a line of magical power curved around the feet of the pair. Quila and Demethostes moved back-to-back as spiders swarmed toward them in a liquid wave that covered the floors, wall, and ceiling. Those that crossed the magical barrier sizzled and fell limp, but others took their place, more and more until they surrounded the Crusaders.

"Unnerving," said Demethostes. "But hardly dangerous. Incinerate them."

"No need," said a raspy voice from the darkness. "They were merely curious, and if you proved a danger to them or me you would be dead already." Crystals flared atop a staff supporting a sect elf in dark robes. A heavy crimson cape hung over his shoulders, and his head was capped by a strange, metal helm.

"Who are you?" asked Quila.

"Attractive and brazen," said the elf. "I'm glad I spared you. I am Katalkus."

Quila gaped, then bowed deeply. "My lord," she said, eyes lowered.

"Your name means nothing to me," said Demethostes.

The elf's eyes hardened as he turned to the enforcer. "*You* may call me *Lord* Katalkus."

Quila stood, still staring at Katalkus. "He's a sect elf," she said. "Our histories say that when the necromancers brought the Dark Tezla to this island, Lord Katalkus was the elder of the sect elves already living here."

Demethostes dropped his blade. "So you're a necromancer, guarding Soma's treasure?"

“A necromancer?” said Katalkus. “Hardly. Though I have...internalized some of their knowledge.” He drew a dagger from behind his belt and gashed his arm. For a moment, blood dripped onto the floor and the spiders surged toward it--and then the wound had healed. “Soma was merely providing me sanctuary during my studies, though I suspect he might not have been so generous had he known my true goals.”

He walked forward, the carpet of spiders parting for each step. “I will be leaving soon. I heard your words, young one. I know your needs. You will serve both our purposes.”

“I swear,” said Quila, stepping forward and breaking her circle.

“You will protect her,” said Katalkus to Demethostes. “That is the only reason you still live, and the only reason we will all prosper together.”

“You said you were leaving,” said Demethostes. “Where are you going, and what are we supposed to do?”

“When you are not doing what I tell you, you will do what you must,” said Katalkus. “As for me, I’m going to get something I’ve wanted for a long, long time--my own dragon.”

Monday January 17, 2005
Late Summer, 435 TZ, Day 30
Reprisal

Another army of oathsworn warriors left Rokos this morning, headed toward the battlefields on the Prieskan frontier. For days I had heard the chatter from Mahdi and the other pages about the fighting; apparently the Shadow Khans had ravaged Prieska to the breaking point, and had started looking east toward the only land enjoying a bountiful harvest this season--the lands to the east that had been protected from famine by the Solonavi’s powerful magic.

All it had taken was a single orc tribe crossing the Scythrian foothills for the Solonavi to respond in full force, as if they had been waiting for the provocation. Armies of Solonavi and oathsworn had rapidly assembled in Luxor and attacked in kind, pushing the orcs back into Prieska.

Mahdi’s chatter said that the Shadow Khans could move more quickly than the Solonavi armies, and had the advantage of territory that they knew well through conquest and plunder. Further, while their combat edge had dulled a bit through a year of easy plunder, their long unsated lust for combat quickly sharpened their wits and their blades. Finally, they had the support of powerful chaos shamans that had come down from the Fist. The orcs would not give up their conquered land without a fight.

Yet the Solonavi were determined to eliminate anyone who threatened their borders, particularly before the orcs gathered in strength sufficient to once again lay siege to Luxor. The thousands of swords in the oathsworn were the bulk of the Solonavi armies, but they were hardly the fore. Behind them came the Solonavi themselves, drawing on the powerful ley lines that ran through the Scythrians to cast bolts of pure magical power that tore apart the ranks of the orcs.

Still, for each orc that fell an oathsworn fell beside him. Solonavi were knocked from the skies and torn apart by the spells and axes of the orcs. The road between Luxor and Alrisar became soaked in blood. Mahdi was certain that soon even the pages of the tower would be called to arms and sent to support the oathsworn armies, and seemed possible. Unless one side gained an edge, they would fight to the death.

So I cast the eye west to Prieska, and was surprised at what I found: a tribe on the run. They had abandoned the Alrisar road to cut north through the forests. Perhaps they were attempting to flank the Solonavi forces I could see a few miles away, or headed to regroup.

The orcs came out of the woods into a clearing, and found an army waiting for them. I recognized some of the faces. I had seen them in midnight glades, and hidden behind inns. They were peasants and plowmen,

craftsmen and innkeepers. They were Prieskans, their armor marked with the sigil of the Order of the Crescent Sword, and before them stood Raydan Marz.

“You’ll do,” he said.

With a roar, the Prieskans swarmed toward the orcs. A chaos shaman grinding a magestone between his teeth and grunting the syllables of a spell was interrupted by the snap-crack of Marz’s lightning pistol. Marz and his buzzing manaclevt sword cut through the orcs two at a time, but he was nothing compared to the rage of the Prieskans, finally able to vent their frustrations at the creatures who had destroyed their land. When the battle was over, healers were binding the wounds of a dozen Prieskans...and every orc was dead.

“Fall back and scatter,” commanded Marz, pulling a rough cloak over his armor as many others did the same. “Gather in three hours at Pipyn’s Crossing and we’ll go in search of more greenskins. Don’t let the scouts for either army see you as anything other than travelers looking to avoid battle. We still need everything to fall into place for the real battle.”

Tuesday January 18, 2005
Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 1
Lost

Kastali?

Are you there?

I don’t know if you can see me, or hear me, or even read this, but this is Raven. It feels wrong to be messing up your book with my rough letters, but Oracle Daheia said I should come up here and see if you might be trying to reach us through the book.

See, we don’t know where you are.

I got back to Rokos late last night. Right away I reported to Lord Vextha. He had sent me north to find something that the Solonavi wanted. Someone, actually. And where they were hiding. I found them, and that’s what I told Vextha. Not sure if I should write it here, even though Vextha said you were the one that spotted the old greenskin first. Don’t think I’ve ever heard a Solonavi use language like that before. I think he and the drak have some sort of history, and not a good one.

Would have told you all this in person, but when I went to your chamber you weren’t there. I didn’t think anything of it. Maybe you were in the baths, or down in some crazy Solonavi testing room under the tower. Who knew? Not me.

I didn’t see you at the morning meal or the midday. Finally, in the afternoon I went to the scrying chamber and knocked. No answer. I asked Mahdi, and he said that you hadn’t had any food brought up all day. So I ordered a tray and just went in.

(I don’t know how you do all this writing. My hand is pretty sore already. But Oracle Daheia said to just keep writing for a while. Here we go.)

You weren’t there. You weren’t in your sleeping chamber, either. Finally I found Oracle Daheia and she said you had asked for permission to leave the tower last night. Found the guard who had been on the gate and he said you said you were headed for the Shrouded Cup. I went there. Talked to Jek, but the innkeep hadn’t seen you for weeks, since we were there before I left.

You're lucky I got worried at that point, because I was getting pretty tired of chasing you down.

I came back to the tower and told Oracle Daheia everything, and she called the captain of the tower guard. They called a bunch of pages, Anquilis came in and did some magic, and in a few minutes they were pretty sure you weren't anywhere nearby. I suggested we should check in Seatower. I'm not sure if they heard me or not.

So now the city watch of Rokos is looking for you. Anquilis and a bunch of oracles are looking for you. And I'm here, writing in your book.

Where are you?

I'm going to go soak my hand in some water now. I'll check back in a few hours.

..connection to chamber is all I can feel. The Eye is here but it feels like its sleeping. Or afraid. I can't cast it out. I can't see where I am.

I'm surrounded by blackness. I feel cold stone all around me. It's like I'm buried in a tomb--except for the rocking.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

I'm cold and tired. I feel tired, sick. It feels like I've been poisoned.

Help me.

Wednesday January 19, 2005
Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 2
Hunting the Wolf

I think these words are appearing in the journal. I can feel the words appearing on the page, but can't read them. I hope that you and Daheia are reading these pages, Lord Vextha.

I think I'm on a boat.

The last thing I remember is walking toward the Shrouded Cup in Rokos. Then I was hit from behind. I'm still sore, but I can only feel a little dried blood, so the wound can't be that bad.

I'm still in the dark.

I'm definitely surrounded by cut, polished stone. Very cold, and very hard. If I lie on my back, it's wide and long enough that I can't brace myself with my hands or feet. It's short enough that I can't sit up. So for endless hours I've been rocked back and forth, sometimes gently enough that I'm lulled off to sleep and at least once hard enough that I probably got a few more bruises.

Only once have I seen a little light, and after hours in the dark even a little was too much. The top of my prison scraped open as it was pushed away and I was blinded by the hazy light that flooded in. I could only make out silhouettes. I grasped toward the Eye, in hope that it could help me see, and it slipped away, torpid but sliding out of the box.

Two of the shadows reached in and held me while another pushed a waterskin to my lips. I drank deeply until they pulled it away, water sloshing down my chin. Then a wooden spoon was held to my mouth. "Eat it," said a deep voice. A man. The pasty glop on the spoon smelled terrible. "Eat," insisted the voice, and whoever was holding my arms jostled me until I did as I was told. They gave me more water, then pushed me back.

"I'm glad to see you're wearing the necklace," said the man. He was dark-skinned. Xandressan. "You've just eaten ground memory root. When next we talk, you'll tell me if you remember where it came from." Then the lid was closed again, thudding into place.

My heart thudded as I tried to remember what I had heard about memory root. As far as I knew, it didn't see much use around the Oracle's Needle, as it focused the senses inward. But what the root did invoke was held to be true, albeit often twisted. For the first time since waking up in the blackness, I felt warmth as the memory root burned through my blood. The floor began to slide out from beneath me, and I feared that I was about to slip into madness.

Then I was caught by the Eye. I hadn't felt its return, but it was there, holding me above the whirlpool yawning below. I heard my own voice, swearing fealty to Lord Vextha and the Solonavi. I smelled the flowers of my youth mixed with a pungent rot. I heard the words of elven magic, then the death cry of my father. Whenever I slipped toward it, the Eye buoyed me upward, and a picture formed in my mind:

A low line of buildings terraced along a green slope. Along the ridge of each building are intricate carvings of beasts and female warriors, a recording of both history and legend. Above them, steep stairs leading to a high temple, the doors at the peak flanked by marble bears supporting crystal orbs. This was Nepharus Mons, home of the Amazon tribes.

"Traitor!" said Queen Valia, her advisors rushing down the paved pathway to keep up with her angry stride. "I can't believe I didn't see it earlier. That so many tribes would simply turn away from the totems of their ancestors to suddenly worship the wolf is ridiculous."

The group turned into one of the buildings, distinguished as Valia's home only by the royal guard standing on post outside the door. The queen threw aside her cloak of office as they entered. "Man!" she barked to a nearby servant. "Gather my armor and ready my mount. Now!" Crossing to one of the weapons racks mounted on the wall, she chose a sharp-tipped pike, and a pair of short swords. From a cabinet, she withdrew a rifle and powder box."

"How many troops will you be taking with you, Queen?" asked a young Amazon standing nearby, hand on the pommel of her own sword.

"All of you, of course," said Valia, and the women shared a wry smile, both hungry for battle. "Go through the royal guard and draw out any who worship the totems she has disrespected. Call back the troops on retainer in Rangraz to replace them if you have to --the Revolution will have to stand on its own while we hunt down Corella and deal with her once and for all."

Friday January 21, 2005
Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 3
Memories of Blood

All through the night I felt the touch of my past--fighting against Wylden elves when my unit was sent to raid one of their burial grounds, swimming the Roa Sanguine to cross into Sect territory, struggling back to the Necropolis as the lone survivor, being thrown into the blood pits for my failure. Only the constant embrace of the Eye reminded me of the present, that the cold waters of the river and the lash of the pit master were nothing more than phantoms. Yet the madness still raged through my system, dragging me inexorably toward the moments I least wished to revisit.

At some point the lid of my stone prison was opened, and water sloshed over my cracked lips and down my throat, raw from my howls and sobs. I felt the Eye's longing to escape, but it stayed to protect me as I stood in the entrance to the pits, blood poured over me by worshippers of the goddess as I waited to face a starving warbear. The lid was closed, and we were once again trapped.

Both in the past and the present, I was ready to die.

I reached out for the scrying chamber, but was too weak. Even the Eye's strength was flagging. The gates to the blood pit ground open, and I heard the hungry roar of the bloodthirsty mage spawn waiting outside. The Eye's hold on me slipped, and I wondered if it was doomed to share the pain I had once barely survived.

Then I was touched by a second Eye.

As the warbear leapt forward, the blood pit faded away in a wave of white. I gasped in relief as I found myself in the caverns deep under the northern mountains that had been the destination of the Pathis Arcana. She was still there in that hidden underground village, with the mystic Hysthe. They sat before the ancient drakona Krosthysas, whose cushioned platform had been moved out to the edge of the still waters. The draconum known as Gryn stood nearby, pike in hand and a satchel slung over her shoulder.

"The time has come, old one," said Gryn.

"Once I called you old, Wanderer," said Krosthysas with a chuckle. "Go, if you must. I have known you too long to try and deny you your nature. I would go with you if I could," he said, looking down at his shriveled, paralyzed legs.

"I know," said Gryn. "I know. But on foot or standing still, we all move toward our destiny."

"Will you see the Brotherhood?" asked the drakona.

"If I do, I do," said Gryn. "If I don't, I don't. Such is our way."

"So it is," said Krosthysas. "Good luck, my friend." Without another word, Gryn boarded the boat and poled herself out across the black waters, toward the path that led up to the snowy wastes above.

The others watched quietly until she reached the far side of the lake. Then the Pathis spoke: "You shouldn't have let her go. If you do not need her, I do. They know of the valley now. They know of the egg, and their servants must be coming. I will need every warrior I can muster--especially those as powerful as her."

"Gryn Wanderer follows only the wind," said Krosthysas. "Perhaps she will come when you have need of her, or perhaps she will be beyond the sunset. I do know that history shows she will be where she must."

"If what she says is true," said Hysthe. "I can hardly believe that she is as old as she claims."

"Perhaps not," said Krosthysas. "I know that she is older than I, yet appears as though she were recently no more than a whelp. But enough of her. As you said, the time approaches. We must complete our strategy, and you must begin your journey home."

"Your plan to put forces in the Kuttar Depths was a wise one," said Hysthe. "It will give us additional warning, and slow any army that would attack the valley."

"It has attracted the attention of the Khamsin Revolution," said the Pathis. "There is something somewhere in the Depths that they are desperate to keep hidden from us."

"So long as we control passage through the area, they can keep their secrets, for now," said Krosthysas.

“Could they be the one who have found us?” asked the Pathis. “The tracks the sentries found outside the caves were those of human-sized boots.”

“Perhaps they know of the valley,” said Krosthysas. “But here? You two have been the only visitors this place has known for some time. I deliberately chose it for its isolation, and those I bring here to study and train rarely leave.”

“You’ve doubled the guard,” said Hysthe. “Let that be enough. We only have a few hours to review our plans. Then the Pathis and I must depart. Time is short”

Suddenly I was once again back on the boat, in the box, trapped with two Eyes, and my memories. I was also in the blood pit, though thankfully the battle was over. The warbear was dead nearby and I lay on the hot sand, bleeding, waiting to be dragged back to my cell. Time marched forward, and even with two Eyes I couldn’t escape. Still, for the moment, I felt strong, and reached out for the scrying chamber and my journal.

Monday January 22, 2005
Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 4
Haunted

I slept.

I dreamed of awakening in a pile of corpses, stripped of the armor and weapons I had won in the pits, fodder for experimentation by Sect apprentices. I dreamed of crawling free, escaping into the shadows of the Necropolis where I lived until the day I felt strong enough to go to the Prophet’s Tower. I dreamed of the fight in the courtyard, of the shackles around my ankles, of my escort into the circle of deathspeakers. Of the deciding vote in a circle divided between execution and making me one of their own. Of my father.

In my dreams I saw the pride on my father’s face when the Dark Prophet declared that I would be the first through a new regime he had designed, one that only a warrior tested in the pits would survive. I did not know then the years of training and trial that stretched before me, of what I would endure. I didn’t care. My father’s pride made me strong.

Then I was awakened by a thumping sound, and my strength faded with the dreams. I was exhausted, as if I had not slept at all. But the fire no longer burned in my veins. I was no longer in the grip of the memory root. I lay still on the cold stone, conserving my strength, thankful that my dreams had reminded me of times I had survived worse situations with less to work with. I had been coddled in the Oracle’s Needle for too long.

I heard the thump again, and then the heavy stone lid of my prison was jostled open. Again I squinted into the hazy light as the lid slowly slid aside, stopping when it was less than three handsbreadth ajar.

A brighter light. I twisted weakly, trying to shield my eyes. “I’d hoped you might be awake, witch,” said a voice--the Xandressan I had seen previously.

“Wha--” I began, only to have a hand clapped over my mouth. He stank of sweat, fish oil, and sulphur.

“No,” he said. “I want the first word out of your mouth to be her name. Say it.”

He pulled his hand away. “I don’t know what you want me to say,” I said. I tried to get my elbows beneath me, to sit up.

The barrel of a pistol was jammed against my teeth, and I was pushed heavily to the stone. "I want you to say that you know what you are, and what you've done!" he shouted. "You killed her! You killed her and our family, took everything that meant anything to me, and vanished into the night! You made me an outcast among my own people, and when I tried to regain my station that I might hunt you down like a seaspawn, I became a cripple instead! You made me go to our most hated enemies and beg for them to take me in, give up information on every harbor that had ever sheltered me just in hopes that I might live long enough to find you and to hear you say her name! SAY IT!" I desperately tried to mumble some words around the pistol barrel as he cocked back the hammer.

"Hey!" said another voice. "Captain, what're you doing? You can't kill her--we don't deliver her, we don't get paid."

My eyes had adjusted to the light, and I saw every detail of the Xandressan captain standing over me. The tight-knuckled hand wrapped around the pistol grip. A sailor's muscular arm. A close-shaven head. A dirty cotton shirt and a tattered seacloak in his people's yellow that fell away to reveal another pistol strapped in a holster across his chest--and a metal cap just below his shoulder, where his left arm would have begun.

"Some things are more important than money, sailor," said the captain.

"You'll be the one to tell her that," said the sailor.

The captain's hand tightened on the pistol, the barrel twitching between my lips... and then he pulled it away. "Give her a double helping of the paste," he said, and the sailor quickly stepped forward with a wooden spoon heaped with the memory root-laden paste. "You will remember, witch," said the captain.

Then the lid closed again, and as the memory root took hold I reached for the Eyes. I found only one this time, and I cradled it close.

Tuesday January 25, 2005
Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 5
Mistwalker

The sharp peaks of the Rivvenheims crowned the horizon outside the palatial hall. Intricate banners of tightly woven silk hung from the towering ceiling and fell behind seven tall seats of polished wood, decorated with the sigils of the elven noble houses. The elders of each house were gathered together, in rare council. Beyond the chamber's heavy doors I could hear the murmurs of the council's army of advisors and retainers, awaiting word of the council's outcome. Yet inside it was silent.

Finally, one of the elders spoke. "It cannot be denied that it is a sign, one that we have seen before."

"With respect, Lord Fairhame," said another, rising from her seat to address the circle. "The whole of the Land knows of the egg, but it is not yet hatched. The beast has not yet been reborn. The reports from Lady Ivydown's kin-son say that the gateway at Enos Joppa is completed, and our warriors are in place. It may be that we will defeat those who would come for the egg long before they even approach it."

"And if we do not?" asked Lord Fairhame. "Surely you don't think that the beast-men will be able to protect it? I bow to the wisdom of Lord Starsdawn and those of you who were on the council when the decision was made to entrust them, but surely those were different times. They were a united people then, not the coordinated rabble that has been moving north in the last few months."

"As you say, it was our decision then, and we are bound by our word," said Lord Starsdawn, his jaw lined by a neatly-trimmed beard of white and his skin marked with faint creases. "Yet if there is a way to prevent the egg from hatching, we must play a part. We have built the gateway. It is manned by our finest general,

supported by my own kin-sons and kith from your own lines. We will hold the enemy, as we always have, and the drakona can return to being custodians.”

There was a thud as Lord Stormbringer set his warhammer on the marble floor. “There is no decision to be made. We have sent those forces that we can spare. If the gatewall does fall, if the egg is captured, and if they know how to hatch it, then doom will be unleashed upon the Land. Even then council edict binds us from sending in the full strength of our armies. We must remain mindful of why we moved our people to the eastern reaches of the Land, and vigilant of the true threat--”

His speech was interrupted by a gray column that formed in the center of the chamber, just as suddenly surrounded by wards cast by the sorcerers on the council. The woman who stepped from the column stumbled forward, and would have fallen had she not leaned heavily on the tall silver staff she carried. The ring of blue fire atop the staff damped, and the grayness was drawn inward...but into the woman rather than the staff. Lady Ivydown rose from her seat and rushed forward. “Jaysari!” she exclaimed.

The wards were dropped, and the woman climbed to her feet, aided by Lady Ivydown. “You interrupt a meeting of the high council, Priestess,” said Lord Starsdawn.

“I have done as you commanded,” said Jaysari. “I sought out the gods themselves. I walked the mists, and paid the price.” The blue fire from her staff burned in her eyes, and tears rolled down her cheeks. “We have already failed.” She fell heavily into the arms of Lady Ivydown--then kept falling, collapsing into a cloud of gray mist that rolled across the floor and dissipated.

The council chamber again fell into silence.

The Eye had done what it could, and the chamber too fell away. I found myself in my prison. I felt the heat of the memory root in my blood, and knew that it was once again taking hold of me. As I fought it, my hands slid across the stone floor and walls, and I recalled what I had seen when it had been lit by the Xandressan captain’s lantern. The stone was black and smooth. I knew that color, knew the flecks running through it. I had seen it nearly every day for the last year.

It was the same Scythrian blackstone that made up the Tower of Rokos.

Thursday January 27, 2005
Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 6
On the Move

I think only a day has passed. Perhaps it’s been two. The memory root drags me through the past at an irregular rate, a decade of training passing in a minute, while the few seconds I spent strapped on a necromancer’s table learning what it was to be brought close to death stretched into hours of agony. I cursed my past that haunted me, cursed the present that tortured me, cursed the Eye for not providing succor. When anger failed me I fell into sorrow and sobbed for the Eye’s return, especially as I relived the months approaching the end of my training. Past and present were about to collide, but I knew I had yet to survive the worst. I had to get out, had to escape.

Then my prayers were answered. The lid above me scraped open. “Blasted witch smells like an orc,” said the sailor who reached under in to pull me out of my stone prison. “Grab that bucket,” he said, as he dropped me onto the deck. It knocked the wind out of me, but I reached out thankfully to feel something--anything--other than stone beneath me. I ran my fingers over the smooth veins of the well-worn wood, and the past began to fade away--then was knocked away completely as I was struck by a wave of cold seawater. My parched tongue licked the salty drops from my lips as the sailors pulled me up the stairs.

Dragged onto deck, I was once again blinded--this time by the afternoon sun hanging overhead. After days in the tomb-like prison, the world seemed unbearably bright, impossibly hot. “Bind her to the forward

mast,” came the voice of the Xandressan captain. I’m wasn’t being rescued, I thought as they stood me against the mast, but at least I wasn’t being shot. Yet.

Slowly, painfully, I opened my eyes to find the one-armed captain with his back to me, looking out to sea. “You see them?” he asked. I peered through the sun-dazzle, out across the water, and saw enormous humped shapes moving over the nearby waves. “Aquatics,” he said. “Big ones, and mean. We’ve either hunted or avoided them for generations. They were just too dangerous. The dance to their masters’ tune, though.” I squinted, and saw that the humps were actually Shyft crouched low on the beasts’ backs, riding them. Just behind one creature’s head I saw a Shyft, long-fingered hands pressed to his temple. A bond of energy danced between the two; they were linked. “I’ve seen more Aquatics in the last week than I ever heard about in any Xandressan inn,” said the captain. “And each has a whole army riding on it. Don’t know where they’re headed, but it looks like they’re all going.”

“That has nothing to do with me and you, though,” he said. “Tomorrow we’ll get to Wylden Bay, and then you get handed over to their friends. Nasty folk, and I couldn’t wish you in any other hands. Except mine, of course. We have a bit more time, though. So I brought you up here, to give see if the sights will jog your memory.” He turned to leave, then paused. “Still, the memory root hasn’t done the job. Maybe you need something more to help prime the pumps.” He cracked his knuckles, made a fist, and drew back.

The Eye pulled me away just before the punch landed. I saw the streets of Khamsin. The streets were crowded with Revolutionary troops, traders, and commonfolk. But a group dressed in white cotton stood out as they moved through a throng dressed in gray and brown Khamsin wool. They were Galeshi nomads, led by the elder Nerab. A grizzled Khamsin officer walked beside him, eyes scanning the crowd as they walked. “I’m sorry that we can’t offer more, but you have my word that my men are all you’ll need.”

“Suns above,” said Nerab angrily as he spat onto the cobblestone. “Fifty men. What good are fifty men against the darkness that has taken root in our land?”

“Fickett’s Fifty are the best soldiers the Khamsin army has to offer,” said the officer firmly. “I’m teaching them everything I know about war, and some have even taught themselves a few new tricks. A couple of the liberated dwarves are pretty smart, and they’ve loaded us up with a few surprises.”

The elder relented. “Very well, Commander Townley. Your nation has long been a good ally to my people, and I trust that you will not fail us this time. But time is short. We must leave quickly.”

“We’re ready to march when you are,” said Townley.

Then I was back on the ship. I hung limply against the rope, my jaw was sore, and I tasted the tang of blood in my mouth. I felt the pain, and the memory root surging through me, and in the back of my mind I saw myself at the celebration after I emerged from Dark Tezla’s training program. I sat across from my father, and I could only listen helplessly as I heard him say the words I least wanted to hear:

“I’ve been given a mission by the Prophet himself, Kastali, and I want you to come along.”

Friday January 28, 2005
Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 7
Remembrances and Resurrections

I felt the cool night breeze wash over me, but it wasn’t enough. I twisted against the ropes binding me to the mast, the rough bounds cutting into my flesh. I focused on the pain, pushing away the past. The worst of the memory root fever had passed, but the embers still burned inside me, waiting for a moment of weakness.

The Eye had returned time after time as the hours passed, helping me in my struggle. It showed me visions of Atlantean loyalists burning a Khamsin barracks in Czero, of drakona mentors drilling draconum warriors

in the hidden valley, of Bloody Amara prowling the streets of the Necropolis. Raydan Marz peered through a spyglass toward where armies of Solonavi oathsworn battered the defenses of Alrisar, the Council of Five met in quiet counsel, and the courtyard of the fortress at Riversgate swarmed with newborn Shyft emerging from the tunnels below.

Finally, eventually, it wasn't enough. I succumbed to the relentless pull of the memory root, and found myself again sitting across from my father. He had been given a mission by the Prophet, to recover the bones of a cave orc, needed by Dark Tezla himself. I thought of the last time I had seen the Prophet, and his look of disdain as the deathspeakers voted to spare me from execution. Yet it was my father asking. It was a crucial mission, one that the Prophet had insisted must remain secret--so my father was allowed to bring only two Sect warriors with him for protection and assistance. The Prophet was sending a young necromancer named Valrath. My father wanted me to be the other.

I agreed, then tried to cling to each moment as my father and I prepared for the excursion. But the memory root ripped me past these pleasant times, beyond our journey to the far end of the charted Land. Time slowed as we entered the caverns that were home to a tribe of cave orcs. Valrath waited at the opening to the cave beside my father, who stood above a sigil marked in blood on the floor that glowed with magic dampening all sounds in the cave. I moved silently forward, closing on an orc and raising my blade for a quick kill...

There was a flash of light. I heard my father choking behind me, and spun to see him scuffling across the sigil and breaking its magic. His robes smoked, and he stumbled backward. Valrath raised his hands again, and black-red lightning lanced from his fingertips to stab into my father. The roar of the magic exploded through the cave, and as I stared in shock I heard a snuffling behind me. The cave orcs had awoken.

Valrath gave me a cold sneer and dashed out of the cave. Before I could bring my blade around, the nearest cave orc smashed into me with a massive club that shattered the ribs under my left arm. I brought one of my swords around and caught him right below the ear, then thrust out with my other and pierced him through the throat. One was down, but there were many more to go.

Gasping, I retreated toward where my father lay as the orcs advanced. My swords quickly proved useless as they began to throw massive rocks across the cavern. One caught me in the leg and I heard another bone snap. I fell to one knee beside my father, who looked up at me weakly and said, "Go." I reached for him, but he pushed me away. "This is my fight," he said. "Yours is yet to come." He closed his eyes, calling upon his dark magic one last time. As I limped out of the cave, the dead cave orc leapt to its feet and attacked the others from behind. Only one orc avoided the scuffle, chasing after me as I stepped painfully into daylight. I tried to ready myself, but my injured leg folded beneath me.

As I crawling forward, the orc close behind, suddenly everything was clear. We had never been meant to succeed. My father and I had both been pawns, and the Prophet was taking us off the board--my father as part of unending power struggle between Soma and the deathspeakers, and I for my insubordination and refusal to be broken.

I grieved for my father, and burned with hatred. This was the moment, and the memory root stretched it into an eternity. I ground my teeth in rage as tears rolled down my cheeks, the cave orc frozen less than a spear's throw away. I felt the Eye drawing on me, but I pushed it away, wrapping myself in grief and rage.

Then time suddenly leapt forward, as the rocks above the opening gave away in a rumbling slide that knocked down the cave orc. The landslide continued, entombing my father behind the shattered mountainside. As the dust settled and the cave orc gurgled his last, legs buried beneath the rock, I realized that the stones were piled high on either side of me yet I had not been struck by a single one.

"Kastali," said a voice behind me.

It was Lord Vextha, come to offer me a place in the Tower of Rokos. He promised me knowledge and power, and in return I had only to swear my loyalty to the Solonavi cause. I immediately did so, vowing to

someday win a place among the rulers of the Sect. Perhaps he knew my true reasons. Perhaps not. But he accepted my oath, and my request that he use his magic to strip the flesh from the bones of the cave orc.

I promised that I would come to Rokos as soon as I was able, and asked Lord Vextha to leave me outside Khamsin. There I made contact with a Sect sympathizer and had my bundle of bones sent to the Prophet. Before I vanished into the mysteries of the Solonavi, the Prophet would know I still lived.

As I recovered from my injuries, a sealed message came from the Prophet congratulating me on my success and asking me to undertake another impossible mission by joining a group of Sect warriors--now calling themselves Crusaders--and go to the southern isles to retrieve a powerful artifact. An amulet. Still stiff, I set out for Xandressa. If the Prophet wanted the amulet so badly, it would be my first gift to the Solonavi.

In Xandressa I met the Crusaders in a shadowy wharfside shed. They had chosen a ship at random, slaughtered the crew, and now we set out for--

I opened my eyes, returning to the present. I had seen them through the Scrying Eye recently, but it had been nearly a year since I had seen them through my own.

The Shyft Isles.

I saw them before me, saw the Shyft boarding the enormous creatures that would take them to the mainland. I remembered them. I remembered the ship we traveled on, saw the captain that had been made into a zombie to guide the ship during our journey. I remembered her name, the same name inscribed into the side of that vessel.

“Onitsha,” I said.

“Finally,” said the captain, waiting at my side. “I am the second Captain Onitsha. The first was my wife. She was the true sailor, the warrior in the family. I would have been happy to be a tradesman, and we would have lived a quiet life traveling the seas if you had not crossed our path.”

“Imagine how shocked I was to return to the pier in Xandressa after a night drinking with the dockmaster and find our family ship missing. He said they had sailed early that morning, but I knew they wouldn’t have left without me. My wife was the captain, my cousin the first mate--we were all family,” he said wistfully. “It isn’t unheard of for unwanted crew on a family ship to be cast away, stranded on shore, but my family would have come looking for me rather than leave. So I went looking for them.”

“Though our ship had been seen by traders on the eastern sea, bound toward the Sturmlander Coast, when they didn’t return in a month, I was officially declared an outcast. I challenged the Guildmaster in a duel, for elevation to captain that I might take a ship in search of my family.” He paused, took a deep breath. “The Guildmaster showed what he thought was mercy to a grieving man. When he could have killed me, he only took my arm.” He chuckled ruefully. “Only.”

“So I walked out of my homeland a cripple and an outcast. The story of the duel and my humiliation spread to every Atlantean port, so I kept walking for months until I reached Darthion. There I met a cell of the Black Powder Revolution, soldiers from a landlocked country looking for a seaworthy crew who wouldn’t look out of place smuggling in Atlantean ports. Even then they were wary of a one-armed sailor until I told them everything I knew about every Atlantean port I had ever visited. Every officer, every defense. Everything.”

“The necklace,” I said as the thought occurred to me. “You found her.”

“I found her, wrapped what was left in spirit bindings, and gave her to the sea. Then I marked the necklace in the traditional manner for the dead and came in search of you.”

For the first time in days I felt myself again, stronger. "I'm not the one who killed your wife, Captain," I said. "I took your ship, but they were already dead when I boarded. Let me go and we can come to an understanding before my masters come to settle their own accounts."

Onitsha snorted. "He said you'd say that, but I wanted to hear the lie from your lips."

"Who?" I asked.

"I'm not the only one you've crossed, witch," he said. "I was happy to do the legwork, but there were others who knew where you were hiding. They want you as badly as I do."

"I told the captain he could have you until tonight, but perhaps it is time we talked as well," said a vampire, stepping up onto the foredeck.

I thought I had finally escaped the past. I couldn't have been more wrong.

It was Erlich.

Monday January 31, 2005
Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 8
Captive

Erlich. I had thought the nightfiend had fallen to the Shyft more than a year ago. While my mind still whirled at his reappearance he uncurled a braided leather whip coiled at his belt. "Turn her," he said. Captain Onitsha nodded, and two of his sailors loosened the cords binding me to the mast, then spun and bound me so that I embraced the wood.

"Vindia would have skinned you alive for betraying us," said Erlich. "Ossu would have torn into your mind until the captain's root paste seemed like a pleasant drink of summerale. That would have just beheaded you and been done with it."

I heard the whip shuffle across the deck. "I can't do that. I betrayed the Crusade long before you did. No, I do this because I was supposed to deliver that amulet to my own true masters." A whirling sound behind me, then blazing pain. "And because it's fun."

I gritted my teeth through a dozen strokes. I finally cried out after another six. Still he didn't stop. I reached out for the Eye--and again found two. I grasped for one of them, either of them--

The floating tower of Raydan Marz hung in the night sky. Marz stood on a balcony near the top of the tower, looking down into the darkness below. Campfires dotted the valley floor like the last of the summer glowbugs. "The Order has become a real army," he said.

"They may have chased off the orc rabble, but they wouldn't stand against the Solonavi--let along the armies of the Empire," said a technomancer standing behind him. When she pushed the hair out of her face, the line of magestones implanted into her brow glinted in the moonlight. "Remember the terms of our alliance, Marz."

"Everyone gets what they want," said Marz. "The Prieskan people get their land back, and we get a staging ground to retake the Empire."

"When the time comes, will you conscript the Prieskans?" she asked.

“No,” said Marz. “The conscription of dwarves to work the mines was part of what sparked the Khamsin rebellion, and the Empire has been losing ground ever since. We have to show the people of the Land that there is a true Empire, one they would want to be a part of. And it starts here.”

“Perhaps I have something that might change your mind about compulsion,” said the Delphana. Three soldiers dragged a bound orc out onto the balcony. “Your men caught this Harka headed north through the forest. Luckily I was nearby when they searched him and found this.” She tossed a pouch on a long neck-thong to Marz. Burned into the leather was a horned, sharp-edged sigil.

“The Chaos Shamans,” said Marz, as he poured the contents of the pouch into his hand. Magestone crystals, ranging from small flakes to a piece as long as his finger. “You’re no shaman. Tell me where you got this pouch.” Magical power arced between the fingers of the technomancer as she stepped forward menacingly, but stopped when Marz raised his hand. “I have no quarrel with you, if you were headed back to the Fist. But if you’ve seen the Shamans here in Prieska, you will tell me.”

“The Khans pick the bones of this country clean, and the Shamans come to suck the marrow from the bones,” spat the orc. “The Khans take everything from this place except these stones, and the Shamans take those. They break the traditions of our fathers by staying here. The plunder will be poor here even for my son’s sons. I find one of the tribes and bring a command from Khan Harrowblade himself, ordering them to come home for the winter. When they say no, I kill their shaman.” He grinned fiercely. “You give them what they deserve, and I make it easy.”

“What mask did the shaman wear?” asked Marz.

“He wore the ankh mask,” said the orc, shaking his head. He tilted his head and squinted. “You are Marz. I have heard of you. You are looking for the Bloodhawk.” Again he smiled. “Let me go and I will help you find him.”

“Untie him,” said Marz.

I was pulled out my vision as the Xandressan ship bumped against a stone jetty. Myself again, I felt weak. I sighed. I was tired of being tired. I craned my head around to look over my shoulder. In the dim light of sunrise I saw the lines left on my flesh left by the whip, but no blood. It was as if I had been healed by magic, but the skin was grey and pallid. The scars were smooth, but the flesh was dead.

A sailor cut me loose, hefted me over his shoulder, and followed Erlich and Captain Onitsha down the gangplank to the shore. Beyond them I saw Shyft leading packs of Mage Spawn up the steep slope of the valley toward the Wylden Plateau. Nearer, I saw warriors and priests dressed in gray. Tur’aj. The Apocalypse cult.

“Your payment is ready, Captain,” said the woman waiting among them. Again my visions were made flesh before me as I realized that this was Preceptor Nala--the leader of the Cult. “As promised, there will be further payment when you return the blackstone to where it was given to you.”

The sailor dropped me onto the rocky shore. “You can have it all back if you let me kill her,” said Onitsha. “Do what you have to, but let me kill her.”

“Not yet,” said Nala. “We have need of her. Then perhaps I will play with her for a while, like young Valot.” She lifted her hand and rested it atop the head of the creature standing beside her. Perhaps he had once been the boy I had seen, but now his skin was wan, his face distended into a snout full of sharpened teeth, and his eyes were yellow and unnaturally bright. Nala paused for a moment, long enough for the beast to make an impression and give a slurping hiss, before she continued. “Keep your blood money, Captain, with my promise that when she dies, she will die painfully.” With a grunt, Onitsha beckoned to his men, and they turned back toward the ship.

“The Xandressan pulled her out of the coffin a few hours ago,” said Erlich. “I kept her as distracted as I could.”

“Yes,” murmured Nala. “I can see from the marks across her back that you had a taste of her.” Suddenly her hand snapped out and she grabbed Erlich by the jaw. His eyes bulged, and I watched the skin of his face dry and crackle. “Do not do it again. We have need of her. The Xandressan will receive the payment he earns when he completes the second half of his journey.”

Nala reached down to tear the necklace from my neck. “We can’t have your friends finding you quite yet, Oracle. Is it ready, Valkut?” The priest beside Nala handed her a bundle of cloth. She let it fall loose in her hands, and I saw that it was a sack of black velvet inscribed with runes in silver thread. She murmured the words of a spell and the runes pulsed with magic.

Then she fit the sack over my head and the world went dark.

Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 9 Draconum on the Hunt

I awoke this morning sore and aching from being bound, hooded, and jolted about in the back of a wagon all night. Unable to see anything with my own eyes, I did my best to reach the state of concentration which allowed me to see through the Scrying Eye. It took some time, with the darkness rattling and lurching about me, but suddenly the sack slipped slightly open at the neck and I felt my sight drawn away. When next I knew, I looked out over a jagged carpet of mountains, spread out beneath me like a dragon’s scales. The Eye soared directly towards one of the towering pinnacles, slipping through a crack in the rock of the mountain and winding its way deep beneath the surface. The Eye followed the crevasse into the dark bowels of the mountain, twisting and turning through the ribbons of open space between the bedrock. What I came upon there surprised me, for it was a small fire where there should be none, the flickering light of the small blaze illuminating the white and green scales of Chroma and Caldera.

The two Draconum were sitting crouched on either side of the fire, their wings curled about them to hold in the warmth of the fire. They kept their voices quiet to keep them from echoing in the caverns about them, but I could still hear them clearly.

Caldera was concerned that the light of their fire might draw unwanted company, but Chroma was sure that they were yet far enough away from “it” that the heat and light would go unnoticed. Chroma had apparently won the argument, although it could have been the bitter cold beneath the mountain which decided the red and green Draconum. Both females looked miserable, shivering over the small fire between them. Given how little mind Caldera had paid the icy reaches of the Kuttar Depths, this was extremely surprising, and I began to wonder if something beyond the normal chill of winter might be afoot. I closed in on the pair, attempting to hear more about what “it” might be, but at that moment something struck my body, and I lost contact with the Scrying Eye, jolting back to the velvet dark of my hood.

Erlich stood over me, his face still gray with the pallor of Nala’s magic, “Can’t have you getting too comfortable... I may not be able to lash you, but I can still make you miserable enough to forget about looking for help.”

Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 10 Down Once More...

I resolved to try once again to find the two Draconum this morning, and waited until the wagon had begun its slow pace along the road to our destination—wherever that might be—before reaching out once more for the Scrying Eye. I fell into the slow rocking pace of the wagon wheels in the ruts of the road, letting the motion lull me into contact with the Eye. Almost immediately I was once more within the frozen mountain where Chroma and Caldera traveled.

The two dragon-women were well into their day, walking down corridors which looked half natural and half man-made. From the looks of the walls, someone had taken an already extensive network of tunnels and caverns and enlarged it for their purposes. The two Draconum moved cautiously, keeping their steps quiet and their voices hushed when they spoke at all. Those words they did exchange suggested that they were searching for something and that they expected to find it defended, but not what it was or why they were looking for it.

Abruptly, Chroma stopped, holding up one hand to bring Caldera to a halt as well, but the green and red Draconum had already come to a stop as well. Caldera shifted the fangblade in her right hand as she cocked her head, looking for all the world like a bird listening to a distant sound. It was as the two Draconum shared a look and started forward cautiously that I too made out the noise—a rooting sound like a pig digging for truffles, but echoed strangely off the stone walls. I darted the Scrying Eye forward, and found myself in a large chamber with fungal growths climbing up the walls. In one corner were a trio of large porcine beasts, their bodies twisted and distorted, with plates and spikes of bone jutting from their leathery skin. Their long front legs doubled up, allowing them to push their snouts down into the fungus to feed. The roof of the chamber rose high into the darkness above and the only two exits were the one Chroma and Caldera were moving down and another near the strange Mage Spawn.

I did not have long to study the creatures, however, as the two Draconum suddenly erupted into the chamber, Chroma rushing directly at them with a cry as Caldera lifted into the darkened heights on hushed wings. The white and blue Draconum was a blur as she bowled into the surprised Mage Spawn, her glaive sweeping about in graceful arcs to keep all three creatures busy. I expected the Draconum to make short work of the pig-like beasts, but the blade of Chroma's polearm glanced off the bony protrusions on the Mage Spawn, and they moved to surround the shocked Draconum. It was then that Caldera struck. Like a stooping hawk she fell from the shadows, her fangblade slashing out towards the flanks of one of the creatures. I was as surprised as the Draconum was when her weapon chipped upon contact, a small piece flying off to land amidst the trampled fungus.

The two Draconum did not allow their surprise to paralyze them, however, and Caldera let the blade drop, instead grasping one of the grunting Mage Spawn by one leg and soaring directly upwards, hissing and straining with the effort. Chroma, meanwhile, was stuck dealing with the two remaining beasts, whirling and twisting away from their repeated charges. Caldera's prey came tumbling out of the darkness, crashing with a wet thud into the stone floor where it lay unmoving. Although unable to pierce their sword-breaking backs, Chroma set her polearm against the charge of one beast, the tip catching the Mage Spawn directly beneath the chin as it came barreling towards the Draconum and tearing the creature's throat out. The two went down in a pile of twitching limbs, and Caldera dropped to the floor of the cavern before the last could trample her fellow Draconum, stepping in close and closing her jaws upon the Mage Spawn's throat, crushing the life from it.

Chroma disentangled herself from the dead creature, pulling her weapon from its carcass as she did. Caldera retrieved her damaged fangblade and the two Draconum studied the weapon in disbelief for a moment before shaking their heads in a mirror image of one another and starting off down the hall at the far end of the chamber.

Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 11 Draconum Frenzy

After being once more cut off from the Scrying Eye by Erlich's attentions, I resolved to do what I could to find out exactly where I was, and where I was being taken. Immediately after I reached the level of concentration necessary to use the Scrying Eye, however, I was beneath the mountain with Chroma and Caldera once more. As frustrating as it may have been for me, the two Draconum were definitely in a more dangerous situation.

Chroma and Caldera circled back to back, surrounded by a twelve-strong pack of Frost Wolves, the shaggy-haired predators snarling and growling at the two dragon-women in their midst. The ceiling here

was too low for Caldera or Chroma to fly out of the grasp of the creatures, and surrounded as they were the pair couldn't flee the pack. Chroma proved that these Mage Spawn weren't impervious to their blows as the Sword-Breakers had been when one lunged forward to drive her back against Caldera. Instead, Chroma brought up her polearm in a sweeping arc, slashing into the Frost Wolf's side and knocking the slaving beast away to lie in a crumpled heap. The rest of the pack paused for a long moment, staring at their fallen comrade, then leapt for the pair of Draconum as if controlled by a single mind.

The melee was quick and brutal, the two dragon-women striking out with a ferocity to match that of the pack about them. Chroma's blade kept the area before her clear of attackers with broad sweeps, while Caldera fought to protect her friend's back. As Caldera disemboweled a Frost Wolf that sought to leap on Chroma's back, the pack alpha sunk his teeth into her shoulder, eliciting a cry of pain from the green-scaled Draconum. Chroma whirled at the cry, and drove her polearm into the alpha's chest. The impact jarred the beast's jaws open, allowing Caldera to tear her arm back without losing her whole shoulder. The rage of the two Draconum was frightful to watch—both Caldera and Chroma disdained the use of their weapons in their fury, tearing the remaining Frost Wolves apart with fang and claw.

Only when all of the thick-furred Mage Spawn lay dead about them, sprawled about the low-roofed chamber in their final repose, did Chroma and Caldera come to their senses once again. Watching through the Scrying Eye, I could see faint tinges of red starting to creep about their auras, seeping into them from the air about them. With some surprise, I realized that this red stain touching their auras was the same which had infected Oracle Matteo and other agents of the Apocalypse—clearly whatever lay buried within these frozen halls was related to the dark gods of the Tu'raj.

Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 12 **Search's End**

Each time I touched the Scrying Eye and was pulled to the frozen tunnels, it became easier to slip away from the hood which constrained my physical vision. By now I could touch the Scrying Eye at will, although I could still not see my own location. As the Scrying Eye showed me the dark caverns through which Chroma and Caldera trod, I could see that the air was getting colder with every step the two Draconum took. Ice covered the walls and floor and frosted above their nostrils as their breath froze immediately after touching the air beneath the mountain.

The two Draconum were moving carefully through a series of tunnels that looked to be more carefully constructed than previous sections of the caverns. Doorways displayed abstract ornamentation around their edges, and the floor and walls were smooth under their coating of ice. The clawed feet of the two dragon-women allowed them to move easily enough along the slick surface, but neither one looked particularly comfortable. Through it all, I could see the red aura of the Apocalypse's influence tainting the air, the dark power growing stronger in the direction Chroma and Caldera walked.

The tunnel ahead opened up to a broad chamber carved out of the dark rock. The ice was blurred with dust captured and frozen deep within it. Evidently no one had been into this chamber in some time. At the back of the chamber, atop a small dais, stood an ornately engraved box, the red aura of the Apocalypse bleeding from it to fill the room. Chroma immediately moved across the room towards the box, but Caldera hung back a moment, seeming to sniff the air about her. As Chroma reached out to grasp the box, Caldera called out,

“Wait! It's infected with the taint of the Apocalypse. I don't think we should touch it.”

Chroma stopped, turning back, “We need to open it though. Stay back.”

With that, she drew a spellbreaker from a pouch at her belt, and started towards the box once more. Caldera remained near the door, watching her pale companion stop before the chest, raising the spellbreaker high. Chroma brought the hammer down hard, and the carved box shattered, the resulting shockwave blasting ice from the walls and ceiling and knocking the white and blue Draconum to the floor. Caldera rushed forward and helped her friend regain her feet, and the two turned as one to look at the dais

where the Apocalypse-tainted box once rested. Among the remnants of the chest lay a single broken piece of metal that I immediately recognized... one of the four shards of the Amulet the Solonavi sought.

Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 13 **A Trap Is Sprung**

Caldera and Chroma wasted little time in leaving the chamber with the shard of the Amulet of Summoning, discarding the stealth of their approach in favor of speed. When their caverns opened up sufficiently, the two Draconum took to the air, winging rapidly towards the surface. When they could not fly, Chroma and Caldera ran quickly over the stone floor of the tunnels and grottoes, racing for the surface.

Despite the extreme speed of the dragon-women, it took nearly the entirety of the day for them to reach the surface, so deep beneath the mountain had the shard been hidden. As they burst out of the caverns, they stood overlooking the Kuttar Depths, the setting sun staining the snow-covered mountains about them red and gold. The two Draconum stood overlooking the brilliant scene for a long moment, then took to the air, soaring quickly high into the sky. They began flying northward, their powerful wings carrying them deeper into the Ailons north of the Depths.

They had not been flying long, however, before Caldera spotted a gaggle of small dots in the sky off to their right and behind them, quickly growing larger. She called out a warning to Chroma, flying off to her left, and the two dragon-women tucked their wings in and dropped like a pair of rocks towards the mountains below them. I quickly directed the Scrying Eye to stay with the two Draconum, but turned to study the other fliers. Despite the speed with which Caldera and Chroma now dodged and wove about the craggy mountain peaks, the other dots continued to grow larger as the fliers approached. As they neared, I recognized the midnight black Pegasi as kin to those Oracle Matteo and his Apocalypse warriors had ridden after these same Draconum in Caero, and the sickly red aura about the staff that the lead rider carried was enough to tell me that it was indeed the Apocalypse that now hunted Chroma and Caldera through the Ailons.

As the sun sank beneath the jagged peaks of the Ailons, the Tu'raj drew near, evidently driving their winged horses hard to catch the Draconum. As the quintet approached their prey, two of their number began firing red-centered bolts of black energy from their hands and the staff-bearer unleashed a sheet of black fire, aiming to bring down the fleeing dragon-women. Caldera dove down even further, banking and turning to avoid the dark bolts in the fading light, while Chroma pulled directly up, twisting in midair to fly directly towards the approaching warriors. Seeing Chroma's aggressive move, Caldera continued her looping dive, circling under and coming up heading towards the warriors of the Apocalypse, a short distance behind her companion. As the two Draconum arrowed directly in towards the Tu'raj, the formerly tight formation of Apocalypse warriors scattered. One of the magic users dove downward, followed by the two warriors while the staff-wielder peeled away to the east, accompanied by the last magic user.

Caldera called out to her friend in their Draconum battle-tongue, and both Draconum jack-knifed over and swept after the trio of Tu'raj headed for the ground. Tucking their wings in close to their bodies, the two dragon-women quickly gained on their new quarry, making constant adjustments to their body position to keep their flight path erratic and make themselves difficult targets. As they neared the warriors of the Apocalypse, the two riders escorting the wizard pulled up to intercept the Draconum, one aiming a long lance at Chroma, while the other guided his Pegasus towards Caldera with murder in his eyes and a large axe in his hands.

Again the Draconum split before the assault of the Tu'raj, using their greater mobility to evade the first blows of their attackers. Chroma stretched her polearm out as the Tu'raj whipped past, tearing into the wing of his mount and sending the wounded beast plummeting groundward. Caldera took another moment to dispatch her prey, the human warrior swinging his battleaxe about him in broad slashes to keep the Draconum at bay. He could not protect his Pegasus sufficiently, however, and in a short while he too was falling towards the snowy peaks below. As the two dragon-women turned to give chase to the wizard the two soldiers had been protecting, a sorcerous blast rent the sky between them, heralding the return of the

other two Tu'raj. The staff-wielding Apocalypse priest swept upward on his dark Pegasus, calling out across the cold mountain air, "You cannot win, scabies, we will take the shard off your corpses!"

This brought Chroma up short, and evidently gave her an idea, for she pulled the piece of the Amulet of the Summoning from a pouch in her belt, and held it forth. Immediately a blast of cold swept between the peaks where the combatants flew, buffeting them about the sky. The first wizard cried out, and all three Tu'raj urged their Pegasi forward in a rush, arrowing through the sky directly towards the two Draconum. Before they could reach the pair, however, the Amulet flared, and ice formed upon the faces of the warriors of the Apocalypse, chilling their steeds until they fell from the sky, landing with dull thuds in the rocky snowbanks well below. The two dragon-women stared in amazement as their opponents were felled, glanced at one another, then resumed their flight northward, deeper into the mountains.

Monday February 14, 2005
Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 14
Desert Ambush

I had been jostled around in the back of the wagon for so long that I only noticed when it occasionally stopped. With each jostling stop more people were added until I was pressed to the splintered wall of the wagon, the warm body tight beside me warding off a chill that might have been the first hints of the cold seasons to come or just a memory of my visions of the draconum and the mountains.

I continued to reach down the thin silver thread connecting me to the scrying chamber, recording what I saw. When the scrying eye deserted me, I pictured Daheia or Anquilis in their chambers deep beneath the Oracle's Needle, reading each new entry in my journals. When, in my imaginings, it came time for them to decide whether to send Solonavi to rescue me or simply leave me to tumble down the path of events, I couldn't determine what the decision would be.

With the ensorcelled hood over my head I saw and heard nothing of the world around me. I tried to speak to the people I felt crowded around me, even shouted at them, but received nothing in reply. When the Eye returned to me, I gladly followed.

The afternoon sun hung low in the sky over the Galeshi deserts and a small wagon parked in the shade of a sand-blasted cliffside. A white-robed tradesman leaned against the hull of a steam ram that pulled his wagon, chin resting on his chest as he dozed.

Dark shadows moved across the bright sand of the dunes, as a group of vampires quietly closed in on the caravan. They surrounded the tradesman in a semicircle, blades scraping quietly from their scabbards. "Didn't think I'd run into anyone this far from the Ringed Cities," said the tradesman without looking up.

The vampires started and looked toward their leader, who smiled and shifted his grip on his dagger. "We didn't think we'd find anything to eat when our master sent us down this road," said the vampire.

"Maybe our surprise can be a pleasant one, then," said the tradesman. "If you want something to eat and have some extra coin, I might have some figs in my wagon."

"We were looking for something a little....fresher," said the vampire, stepping forward.

"Don't think so," said the tradesman. Raising his hands from his lap revealed a pair of pistols, which he fired into the approaching vampire. As he cocked for another shot, the canvas fell away from the wagon to reveal three Revolutionary soldiers manning a mounted steam gun that roared and hissed as the soldiers traversed its line of fire across the other vampires.

In the space of four breaths, it was over. One vampire, only wounded, limped toward cover behind a nearby boulder. Before he could get there, the tradesman fired at him twice and he fell to the sands. The tradesman pulled the scarves from his head, revealing the pale northerner skin and pointed jaw of Fickett Townley.

“That won’t work too many more times,” said Townley, mopping the sweat from his brow. “But while it does, it’s pretty fun. Bury the bodies, and let’s move two miles up the road. We’ll do this one more time, and then go to meet Nerab.”

Suddenly I was myself again, as the hood was pulled away. I blinked into the dim light of dusk as I was pulled to my feet. “We’re here,” said Erlich.

Wednesday February 16, 2005
Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 15
Branded

For a moment, when there wasn’t anyone looking, I pulled at the shackles around my wrists and found them as tight as the last dozen times I had tested them. As I rubbed at my sore wrists, my eyes traced the short chain on the shackles down to an iron stake driven deep into the earth. I was held fast, but I wasn’t alone. If I might have outstretched my arms, I would have touched prisoners on either side of me. One was a Wylden elf, judging by his clothing, and the other was a thin midlander peasant wife.

We were part of a broad circle with a roaring pyre at its center, and surrounded in turn by the Tur’aj. The gray-robed Apocalypse cultists were around us three ranks deep, scores of them. The faces I saw were pale and gaunt men and women, but there were some shrouded forms in the crowd that were too large to be human. Among the legs of the cultists crawled grimy, twisted creatures that may have once been human, but I hoped not. All through the night, the cult chanted words in a language I couldn’t understand but somehow knew to be a lost and ancient tongue.

Logs as large as cannon and cultists working brass-and-leather bellows kept the fire burning bright. Deep in the flames were four black crystals glowing white-hot in the heat. They radiated dread and doom, and I could feel that the scrying eye sensed what I did--the crystals were what remained of the avatars of the Apocalypse.

The Eye huddled close beside me, within me, unable to protect me and unable to leave. We were going to be sacrificed.

As I pulled again at my chains, desperate for a way to escape, the chants of the cult fell to a murmur as Preceptor Nala stepped between the prisoners to stand before us all. “The time of prophecy approaches,” she called to the cultists.

“*The darkness comes,*” responded the Tur’aj.

“We called, and the horsemen answered,” said Nala.

“*The darkness comes.*”

“We bring together the wretched, touched by plague, wracked by famine, torn by war, on the brink of death.” With each disaster she named, cultists stepped forward to kill the prisoners before them, cutting a bloody rune into their chest before letting them fall to the ground.

I tensed, waiting for the footsteps behind me, but again only heard: “*The darkness comes.*”

“Your servants go to unleash chaos upon this land,” said Nala, her voice rising.

“*The darkness comes!*” said the cult.

Preceptor Nala thrust her arms into the fire. Her robes smoldered and burst into flame as she stepped into the flames to draw forth the gleaming crystals and hold them high. As she emerged two Shyft came forward, carrying a chest trimmed in bone and jade. They were followed by Lord Katalkus, who bowed deeply as Nala placed the crystals into the chest. Katalkus gently closed the chest, and the Shyft withdrew.

Nala turned to the only prisoner remaining. Me. "The gateway awaits the key!" she shouted to the cultists.

"The darkness comes!" cried the cult.

"The key awaits the messenger!" said Nala. I saw the fervor in her eyes, radiating as much heat as her silver jewelry, heated by the flames. "You will see them!" she hissed quietly to me. Her hand darted out as she pressed it to my forehead, and I felt my flesh searing--

The Eye and I both shrieked, and the world dropped away into a misty grayness. I saw the shape of Nala before me, but no longer felt the pain of her touch. The shackles fell through my wrists and away, to my feet.

The Eye and I were one.

We were free.

We ran.

I heard the Nala-shape cry out in a dull roar as I fled through the cultists, sliding through their insubstantial bodies. The light of the flames receded behind me as I ran through trees as if they were pillars of smoke. Away. I saw the shape of a Shyft beside me, hunched forward, running on two sets of arms, swords drawn. I dodged aside, through brush--and over a cliff.

Whatever traits the Eye and I shared, I could not fly.

I tumbled through the air and fell into blackness.

Thursday February 17, 2005
Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 16
Company

A small and oily candle cast long shadows and yellow light across a battered table strewn with clay tankards and the remains of a messy feast. An odd and motley crew sat around the table--a massive draconum clawing the last strands of meat from a roast bird, a pale Sect elf drawing the razorhead at the end of an arrow across a whetstone, a gray-bearded dark dwarf belching contentedly as he balanced a tankard on his sated belly, and a goblin who perched on a bench to clatter dice across the table and shuffle around the black and white stones arranged before him.

In the deepest shadows of the corner beyond the table sat a man whose black coat and hat cast even darker shadows across the man hidden inside them. He waited until the innkeeper's daughter had cleared away the dishes before he spoke: "The time for pleasantries is over. You have all provided me with information in the past, information that has been quite useful to myself and my masters. Now I have a greater need of you. A friend of mine is being held by the Delphana, in Arcos. I must rescue him, but I must also do it without my usual resources. That's why you're coming with me."

"Is there truly a friend in need, or is this more of your vendetta against the Atlanteans?" asked the elf. "For every blow you strike against them, someone beside you seems to fall down--the priest, the dwarf..."

"Whatever," said the dwarf. "There's more of us where they came from, Jess, starting with me. If there's Atlantean gold to be taken, I'm in."

"Plunder!" said the goblin, grinning. The draconum nodded grimly in agreement.

“Very well,” said the elf. “If the Delphana truly do pave their streets with magestone, we’ll walk away rich or dead.”

Judge Blacklock leaned forward out of the shadows. “Most people live life with no guarantees, but now I give you one: each day will bring you one step closer to wealth or death. As long as you’re part of the Black Blades, the one you find will be up to you.

The scrying eye pulled away, and I was left in the darkness behind my closed eyes. Whatever bond we had shared the night before, it had been broken. I felt the word through a veil of stiffness; it hurt to even think about moving. I rested for a moment, listening to the wind through the trees, the sounds of wildlife moving through the brush in the distance--and someone breathing beside me.

I forced my eyes opened and gasped at the dragon skull before me. As I saw that it was strapped atop the head of a man, his hand snaked forward and clapped over my mouth. “Quiet,” he hissed. He lay beside me, the skull and his cloak dyed a bright red that contrasted with the tall green grass around us.

I peeled his hand away and rolled over to follow his gaze. In the distance a pair of Shyft prowled along the shore of a pool at the base of a cliff alongside a waterfall, while squat Mage Spawn beat the nearby brush with sticks. “Found you over by the water,” whispered the man beside me. “Figured you wouldn’t mind if I brought you over here until they went away.”

The scrub in front of one of the Shyft’s minions erupted as an enormous worm burst forth, its mouth flanked by what looked to be extended, prehensile fangs. It snatched up the puny creature in front of it and drew it into its maw. The other tiny Mage Spawn shrieked and turned to flee the larger beast--until the Shyft wearing an elaborate headdress touched his fingers to his forehead. Energy crackled between his brow and fingertips. Suddenly his minions turned and charged the worm. They moved in as one, then suddenly broke apart to flank the beast. As the others drew its attention, the third circled around behind and leapt up onto the worm’s back. Fangs spread it reared up, but the tiny creature on its back held on with its knees, raised up its sharpened branch, and drove it into the worm. Simultaneously, the others stepped forward, stabbing with their own crude pikes. The worm hissed and slammed downward. The creature on its back pulled out its weapon and dove forward to jam it directly between the worm’s eyes. The worm gave a final hiss and fell silent.

The Shyft both slumped, weakened, as if they had been in the battle themselves. They faced one another, and though the no sound came from their flesh-covered mouths, communication passed between them. They surveyed the area one final time, then moved off along the cliff, their minions in tow.

After a few minutes, the man beside me let out a relieved whistle. “That was close,” he said. Rolling to his feet and grinning, he said, “Not that I couldn’t have taken them--but they have a lot of friends up there on the cliff.” He sheathed his shortsword and extended his hand to help me up. “I’m assuming, of course, that they aren’t your friends.”

“No,” I said, wincing as I stood. “Last night they were going to kill me.”

“Well that makes you a friend of mine, then,” he said. “My old masters call me Freeblade. But a pretty lady can always call me Wisp.”

I looked at the landscape around me, then asked, “Where are we?”

Wisp raised an eyebrow, but answered. “North of Nok, near the headwaters of the Vizorr. I’m headed north into the Depths, but it looks like someone’s gone and built a fortress that blocks the entire blasted pass.”

I tried to remember the map in the scrying chamber, and wondered if there might be an agent of the Solonavi in Nok. Someone who could help me get back to Rokos. “Which way back to Nok?”

“Right back through armies of Mage Spawn and lot more of those four-armed things,” said Wisp.

“Shyft,” I offered.

“Don’t think so,” said Wisp. “Fought them once, and they looked different. Incredible battle, really. There were four of us, and we had found this dungeon--”

“Listen,” I said. “Thanks for your help, but I need to get out of here, and I think Nok is the way to go.”

“We’re both going to have trouble getting where we’re going, then,” said Wisp. “But--” he said with a slight bow and a flourish of his cloak. “I have a solution. Let’s find some hidden glade and relax. You’re beat up enough that you can’t object to that. Then, tonight, I think have a way to get us where we need to go. Okay?”

I considered it for a moment, then concurred that a day’s rest before traveling would be a good thing.

“Fine,” I said. “But I need a weapon.”

“Done,” said Wisp, drawing one of the blades sheathed at his waist and handing it to me. “Always did love a woman with a sword.” He cocked his head away from the cliff, toward the forest. “Let’s go. While we do, I can tell you about the dungeon. Great story. You’ll like it.”

I sighed and followed.

Friday February 18, 2005
Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 17
Reclamation

“Listen, Kastali, I’m always up for a good fight,” said Wisp. “But you’re still in pretty rough shape. It’s not too late to head to that honeyfruit grove, you know.”

Wisp and I had made it halfway to where he was meeting his allies before I realized I had to go back. The swordsman was kind enough to turn back with me, and even refrained from questions when I sat down and called to the scrying eye. When it came, I marshaled my will and sent it back to the camp of the cultists. The raging pyre had burned down to a pile of smoldering coals surrounded by the bodies of those the cult had sacrificed.

Most of the cultists had departed, though I didn’t have to send the Eye far to find them among the ranks of the armies of Shyft and Mage Spawn marching on the road to Enos Joppa. Nala remained in the camp, reviewing maps of the area and making plans with her warlords. One argued that they should avoid Enos Joppa altogether and try to find another pass north of Rangraz, but Nala maintained that only by traveling on the established roads through the Kuttar Depths would they arrive at their final destination with their army at sufficient strength. “Also, I have promised one of our brethren that we would avoid Rangraz,” she said. “It will play a different part in our plans. Now, mount up. If the elves have built a fortress in our path, we must see it before our armies do.” The warlords followed the preceptor without question, mounting large, long-necked raptors that flew off to the west.

Now I was back near the camp, watching though my own eyes from behind the cover of a fallen tree. I was armed with one of Wisp’s swords, and when we turned back he had given me his shortcloak as well, though he had only half-armor on underneath. “Should give you some protection,” he said. “More than the rags you’re wearing, at least.” My clothing still maintained my modesty, but that was about all; the back of my robe had been shredded by Erlich’s whip, and below my knees my dress was in tatters. I had endured much worse during my Sect training, but after a year living in the comfort of the Oracle’s Needle, I accepted the cloak gratefully.

A small group of Tur’aj cultists remained, packing gear into wagons. Most were humans, pale and wan. But they were led by an enormous troll in a steel helm and furs, brandishing his greatsword at anyone he thought to be moving too slowly. They were stripping the bodies of valuables, loading what they found

into an empty wagon along with the chains that had bound the prisoners. Near them was our goal--the campaign chests containing Nala's equipage.

"Okay," I said to Wisp. "I'm going to sneak into the camp, over by the chests. Then you're going to come in from the other side and provide a distraction. I'll signal when I find what I'm looking for, and then we make a break for it."

"I'm going in first. Then you'll sneak in while I fight the big guy," said Wisp. Then he grinned. "Good plans make good stories."

I made my way around the encampment at a distance, then closed as quietly as I could. The leaves above had started to turn with the seasons, but thankfully they had yet to fall and become the crinkling carpet that would have made stealth impossible.

I couldn't see Wisp, but he must have watched me move into position. Just as I neared the edge of the clearing, he charged out, sword raised and roaring a battle cry. Head low, leading with his dragonhelm and snaking back and forth as he closed, it was clear that he had been trained by the draconum. The troll knocked aside one of the cultists to clear the way, raising his blade to catch Wisp's first blow. Wisp leapt aside to skewer the tumbled cultist, then danced backward as the troll growled and brought his greatsword around in a broad arc.

With all other eyes focused on the battle, I moved toward Nala's chests and began to open them. One was full of strange liquids in glass bottles, packed in straw. The next had maps and slots stuffed with rolled scrolls, but also a small tray of rings; I took one and slid it on my finger. On top of the miscellany packing the third I spotted a small box carved from blackstone that seemed the right size. Inside, I found what I was looking for: Captain Onitsha's necklace, and the pieces of the amulet. The necklace had snapped when Nala pulled it off of me, beads and ivory rolling loose around the box. But sitting among them was the half-amulet. I snatched it up and stuck it into my boot.

Looking up, I saw several of the cultists had fallen--though it was hard to tell if they had been taken out by Wisp's swordsmanship or the troll's wild swings. The troll had several cuts across his chest and a nasty wound on his leg, yet he ignored the injuries and continued to press his attack. Wisp was tiring, and an especially heavy blow knocked him to one knee. He brought his sword up to block a blow from above, but as the troll raised his blade I saw him switch his grip to sweep in from the side.

With a yell, I climbed up onto the chests and leapt toward the troll, landing on his back. I hacked at his wrist and he dropped the greatsword before he could bring it down on Wisp. As the troll struggled to reach me I clung to his hair with one hand and brought my sword down into the meat of his shoulder. He roared in pain and clutched at the blade of my sword, ripping it from my hand.

The troll reared and twisted, and I fought to hang on. My now free hand came down on the bloody wound in his shoulder--and suddenly I felt strength flowing into me. The troll's roar caught in his throat, and he staggered--giving Wisp an opening to drive his sword home.

The troll twisted and fell, dead, and I rolled free. Wisp snatched up the sword I had lost, and beckoned to me. "Come on--let's get out of here before they figure out there's more of them than us." We left the stunned cultists behind and fled back into the woods.

A while later and a distance away, Wisp winced as he prodded at his ribs. "Nothing broken, I think. You okay?"

I was surprised to answer: "I feel better than I have in days." I did.

"That makes one of us," said Wisp. "I hope you at least found what you were looking for." I held up my hand, showing him the ring I had taken from Nala's trunk. "All that for a ring?" Wisp said, shaking his

head. "If you weren't you, I weren't me, and I didn't have a new story about the time I killed a troll in single combat, I might be upset."

Wisp hadn't killed the troll. I had. I felt his strength in me...and the mark burned into my forehead throbbing. What was happening to me?

Several hours later, Wisp finally led me into the grove. It was all he had said and more: a burbling stream, a stand of honeyfruit trees, and an ancient tower sitting on a magestone foundation. I recognized it from the Battle of the Spire: the Silent Citadel.

A drakona sorcerer waited impatiently inside the gates. "You are late, Freeblade. I come here to retrieve you and your...friends out of a respect for our past. You must in turn respect my need to continue north as quickly as possible."

"Good to see you too, Goldyx," said Wisp. "Don't let us hold you up. I can tell you what held us up while we travel. Exciting stuff."

"She will be coming with us?" asked Goldyx. I had just been asking the question myself. This was my last chance to go my own way. Then I thought about the broken amulet in my boot, and what I had seen. Chroma and Caldera with another piece of the amulet, headed north. I remained silent and waited for Wisp to give his inevitable answer.

"Yeah," he said. "She's with me." Goldyx motioned to a draconum warrior nearby, and the gates closed behind us.

Tuesday February 22, 2005
Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 18
Destiny

The Silent Citadel flew northward, following the current of a ley line running through the land below. Those chambers I had seen inside the citadel were being used by draconum warriors to tend to their weapons and armor, and to train with one another. Many of the warriors bore scars that were reminders of battle, or possibly of the fierce sparring they engaged in through the night. Wisp had found me a small, dim chamber where I beat the dust from the bedding and collapsed into dreamless sleep. When I awakened, I searched the chests and drawers in the room to find a robe and sash. Both were embroidered with geometric patterns in gold and silver thread, but gave little other clue as to the long-lost sorcerers who might have once called the Citadel home. I also found a scarf, which I used to tie back my hair--and to cover the mark the Tur'aj had burned into my forehead.

I tried to explore the tower, but found the corridor outside my chamber guarded by whelp who barred my path and directed me toward the citadel's greatroom. There I found Wisp sitting before a roaring fireplace, a plump aleskin in hand, grinning at a tale being told by a Kosian in imperial armor. "So there I was," said the Kosian, laughing. "Hanging off the side of a 'berg, the egg in one hand, the rope in the other, while the blasted bird sinks its talons into the ice next to me and starts pecking at my arm!"

"What'd you do?" asked an incredulous Amazon.

"Well, I sure as stone wasn't going to drop the egg," said the Kosian. "And I couldn't let go of the rope. So I started shimmying down the rope, fast as I could, using the egg as a shield. If the bird was going to bleed me, she was going to have to go through that first!" The group roared with laughter.

I was just about to the circle when another of the group spoke. "Wisp, what are we doing here?" I didn't recognize the voice, and even were her back not to me I knew I wouldn't recognize her face. Normally when I saw her, she was wearing a mask that disguised both. But she was definitely one of the Oathsworn--I had seen her in Rokos, wearing the same armor and sharpening the same wavy-bladed dagger she was

honing now. I stopped, and slipped back into the shadows further from the fire. "It's great to get together and swap tales with the troupe and all, but I can't believe we're traveling with the scalies."

"Hey, just because I left in search of a few tales doesn't mean I don't have any loyalty to them," said Wisp. "They trained me, and trained me well. Besides, if what I hear is true, we're headed toward the biggest battle in a hundred years. Maybe more. Don't you want to be able to tell everyone that you were there, when it was all on the line?"

Suddenly the scrying eye snatched me away from the scene, drawing me through the clouds until it dropped down between the peaks north of Enos Joppa.

The elven gateway was broken and in flames. Mage Spawn bigger than anything I had ever seen were hurling boulders that crushed arrow slits inward, and wherever the wall fell away to reveal archers arcs of lightning soon followed from the hands of Shyft sorcerers. Creatures that seemed to be all wing and toothy maw carried Shyft warriors in their talons, depositing them atop the wall to spin double-ended blades that cut through the Rivvanguard like winter wheat. The high elves fought valiantly, and eliminated a Shyft or a half-dozen Mage Spawn for each of them that fell in battle. But the beast-armies were a roiling carpet at the foot of the wall, thousands upon thousands of them waiting to advance.

General Ivydown raced down the parapet and waited for an archer to loose his arrow before tapping him. "Nock! Come with me!" he shouted over the din. The archer grabbed his bow in both-hands, and brought it around to catch an incoming spear on the bowshield attached to his weapon. The general nodded his thanks and ducked into an alcove stacked high with quivers of arrows. "We've lost," said the general. "Bowman, I have a final mission for you. You know Starsdawn?" The archer nodded. "Find him, and tell him to come with you. He won't want to, and will claim rank. Show him this." The general pulled his signet ring from his hand and dropped it into the archer's palm. "Follow the northroads, and skirt to the north around Cainus. Get back to the high tower, no matter the cost. Take Kierin before the council, and report to the council that the fault for failure here falls clearly on my shoulders. Go." The archer put his hand to the general's shoulder and smiled, warmly, sadly. Then, without a word, the archer snatched two quivers, and ran away into the fray.

The general took a deep breath and stepped back out onto the parapet. He barked to two footmen, ordering a landslide be dropped behind the wall so that the gates could never be opened. The Shyft would have to clear away the debris before they could make full use of the pass. Then he spotted the sorceress standing at the edge of the parapet, braced on a silver staff as she leaned over to look down into the battlefield. As Ivydown approached, she turned to him, tears in her eyes. "It's all happening again," Jaysari said. Then her staff burned with a blue flame as she collapsed into a gray mist that mixed with the smoke from below.

I found myself back in the Citadel. Wisp and his 'troupe' were still trading tales, passing ale that continued to increase their volume if not their clarity. My eyes had adjusted to the shadows, and I found myself standing beside battered wooden chair. In the chair was Goldyx, the drakona sorcerer. Had he been there before, or had he come while the Eye had my attention focused elsewhere?

"They are young and loud," said the drakona. "I cannot decide which is worse." He considered me. "You, I like. You watch before you act. You see your destiny coming, as I do." He ran his fingers over the brass-bound leather tome he clutched to his chest. "Do you know where we are going, young one?"

"North," I said.

"Yes," said Goldyx. "To a valley that hidden since time lost a word for time. We made a vow to the elflings that when the day came all of our blood would defend the valley lest evil be loosed upon the world." He considered me again, eyes narrowing. "Do you share our blood, girl?"

"No," I said. "But I share your destiny."

Wednesday February 23, 2005

Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 19
Fruition

In the dim depths of the Silent Citadel I sat on the floor in my chamber, calm and rested, meditating upon the coals glowing in the brazier before me. I found the scrying eye nearby and drew it close. If the Solonavi would not come for me, I would go to them.

The Eye responded eagerly, and caught up in its enthusiasm it was unclear whether I was guiding the Eye or simply following in the direction it wished to go as it pushed through the walls of the citadel and dove through the wispy morning clouds. In the distance I saw the white and stony cap of Nepharus Mons towering above long, green slopes dotted with the capital of the Amazon nation. The Eye continued west as the valley widened, shrouded by the broad-boughed evergreens of the northlands. Before we slipped past the warriors guarding the perimeter of the camp, before we neared the pavilion hung with the banner of the wolf, I knew what the Eye was taking me to see.

Queen Corella and Rayevisayla.

Were I at the Tower of Rokos, I was under standing orders to send a page for Lord Vextha whenever I located the renegade Solonavi. Though it had proven difficult, it was clear they wanted to keep a close watch on Rayevisayla's activities. Yet it was also clear that they were allowing he and Queen Corella free reign to pursue their plans, for now.

As I was on my own, I continued to write these words in my journal with one part of my mind as we passed through the walls of the pavilion. Queen Corella sat inside on a cushioned campaign chair beside a tray piled with bread and dried figs. One hand dangled into a bowl of water, where a young girl worked with a sponge to clear the dried blood from beneath Corella's fingernails. Another girl had hung the queen's bloodstained armor on a rack and was scrubbing furiously to clean the leather before it could stiffen.

Corella toyed with a glass of wine in her free hand but her lips were pursed so tightly that she never drank. When the girl set the bowl aside and asked if the queen would like her hair combed, the queen set the glass aside, saying, "Both of you leave now, and tend to your own weapons."

Once she was alone, she spoke. "She was here! Valia was within our grasp and you did nothing to prevent her escape!"

Rayevisayla emerged from her, wraith-like, and hovered nearby. "Surely you don't think it was your faith alone that brought wolves to fight your enemies. As always, my contributions to this cause are subtle but crucial. My spies say that of the troops that marched out with Valia, less than one in three returned with her."

"Your spies," said Corella disdainfully as she turned away from Rayevisayla to straighten the wolfskin cloak hanging over armor. "Where were your spies when we marched across Khamsin?"

"Were it not for me, you would have gone to Enos Joppa begging for supplies just as it was being conquered by the elven lords," said Rayevisayla. "I watched that battle, and guided you around unnecessary combat."

"Right into that mess at the Kuttar Gates," said Corella.

"The food you now eat came from the Khamsin supply train given to your warriors by Solonavi forces I commanded to fall back," replied Rayevisayla. "Again I wonder if bonding myself to you was the best choice."

Corella dropped back into her chair and speared a fig on her dagger. "You had little choice, and you know it. Without me, you would have been trapped in Dragon's Gate forever. Without me, you wouldn't have the

troops you need to make an attack on Nepharus. Without me, you wouldn't have the strength of the wolf to keep these tribes together."

"Without me, you would have never made it out of Dragon's Gate alive, and even had you managed to bring together the tribes on your own you would have never made it this far."

Corella put the fig in her mouth. For a moment while she chewed, the pavilion fell silent. "We should have put her to the sword," Corella said quietly. "This would be over, and I would be marching up Temple Road tonight."

"The time will come, and today's battle makes that ever more certain," said Rayevisayla. "But never forget, Queen, that gathering your armies and putting you on the throne only fixes the firmament for what must come. If ever last one of your warriors falls so that we take the mountain, that is what must happen."

"The mountain has always been holy to my people. Why is it so important to you?"

Rayevisayla looked over the queen, beyond her. "Long ago I was cursed," he said. "Now that curse consumes me. Only by retaking the mountain can I hope for salvation."

"Does this have to do with them?" asked Corella, gesturing off-handedly with her dagger. Suddenly I realized she was pointing at me! I panicked, pulling the Eye out of the pavilion, out of the forest, into the sky.

The Eye fell away and I found myself being jostled by Wisp. "Plenty of time for blank stares later," he said. "We're almost there. Time to get you some weapons and armor. I'd look for something to cover all your pretty parts, but I think a full set of plate would slow you down."

Monday February 28, 2005
Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 20
Gathering

I tightened the straps on my bracers as I walked, leaving a line of tracks in the thin layer of fresh morning snow that barely hid the ravaged and muddy floor of the draconum valley.

The Silent Citadel had touched down late the previous night at the mouth of the valley. Goldyx called for me to accompany him as he immediately set out into the darkness. Campfires dotted the slopes, lit at the corners of training areas where whelp masters still trained young draconum in the ways of combat. In the caves piercing the valley wall, I saw the blue-green glow of dragon mystics teaching their apprentices. By one fire I saw a group of drakona stripping the bones from a fallen snow giant, shaping them into hafts for fresh-forged blades. A group of sweating scalesworn stripped to the waist despite the cold moved among vats of boiling oil and wax, crafting armor for draconum warriors.

Goldyx led me into the fortress at the far end of the valley. Guards eyed me suspiciously, but Goldyx waved them away. Finally we entered the room at the heart of the fortress. Again I saw in person something I had heretofore only seen through the scrying eye: the enormous egg. It was twice as tall as the tallest draconum in the room, and big enough that it would require three trolls grasping hands to fully embrace it. The gathered draconum discussed their battle plans, where their warriors would be gathered when the enemy broke through the defenses at the valley mouth. Goldyx said something about magestone he brought from the south, but I found all my attention focused on the egg. It was an ancient thing, its shell like leather left in the sun. Yet when this close you couldn't deny that it was a living thing. It had a radiance that shifted from warmth one moment to bitter cold the next, and a light at its heart, like a glowfish deep in a well, that slowly ebbed from blood-red to a sickly yellow to a deep green. It felt...wrong, and I knew why the draconum defended it. Inside the egg was a terrible thing.

As the council broke into smaller groups, I turned to Goldyx and whispered, "The egg--you protect it, yet you do not want it to hatch." When the drakona nodded I continued. "Why don't you just destroy it?"

“You think we haven’t tried?” hissed Goldyx. I saw the Pathis Arcana look up from a nearby discussion, and I wondered where Hysthe might be. “It cannot be destroyed. It can only be defended from those who would bring what lies inside into our world.”

The dark night had broken to a morning bright with fresh snow. Yet I still felt the dread hanging in the air, melting away hope just as the hot springs of the valley melted away the snow. I thought about reaching for the scrying eye, then decided that I would continue to see things with my own eyes. Strapping on my new robes and armor, I set out from the Silent Citadel toward the tunnel leading out of the valley. Along the way I passed a drakona hissing at two draconum warriors twice his size, lashing out in rage and tearing away lines of scales from their hides. The warriors were keeping their own humiliation and anger in check--but only barely. If the Shyft didn’t come to battle the allied drakona and draconum soon, it was possible they might tear each other apart.

Snow piled high at the far end of the tunnel, blowing in from the cold wastes outside the valley. Among the crowd gathered at the opening I found Gryn Wanderer. As she spoke to a high elf wearing a thick fur cape, the blue-scaled drakona leaned heavily on her pike and I saw that one of her wings had been shredded. “It will grow back,” she said. “They always do.”

“If only we were all so lucky. I was traveling with my lord’s expedition,” said the elf, gesturing to where a noble elf in armor tended to a hawk perched on his arm. “Twelve of us set out from the tower. Now only the two of us remain.” He smiled sadly. “But I should have known that fate would bring me to the brotherhood in a time of trouble.”

“It remains to be seen whether the trouble is yours or the Brotherhood’s,” said Gryn. A human sorcerer crouched nearby, working a spell on a struggling figure held down by a pair of draconum. I was shocked to see that it was one of the twisted beasts created by the Tur’aj. “That was once our friend from Venetia,” said the drakona. “What she is now is uncertain.”

“I may be able to free her mind, but I can’t undo what they’ve done to her body,” said the sorcerer. As he looked away from the thrashing creature, I saw the bright light glinting off the tears running down his cheeks--and the magestones in his brow.

“This is a bad omen, a bad omen,” said another cloaked figure--an orc witch, of all things. How had Gryn Wanderer called this group together? “Not all paths lead into the light.”

Gryn sighed deeply. “I haven’t seen anything like this for a thousand years,” she said, looking out of the tunnel. I walked up beside her, dazzled by the brightness. I couldn’t believe the sounds, but was forced to as my eyes adjusted. Outside the cave, prowling just out of bow range, thousands of Mage Spawn filled the plain.

Tuesday March 1, 2005
Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 21
Sparring

The armies of the draconum and drakona had enough trouble maintaining order among themselves, allowing only those who were clearly subservient scalesworn to join in their sparring. So the rest of us gathered at the Silent Citadel to train and prepare for battle with one another: Wisp and his “vigilants”, the strange brotherhood gathered by Gryn Wanderer, and an oracle far from home.

It was clear that war had raged in our land for years: we were all children of battle, and those I faced in the Citadel’s courtyard were incredibly skilled with their weapons. As the day passed, I pushed myself to complete what I had begun with Raven in Rokos--strip away the layers of stiffness and hesitation that lay between me and the Sect warrior who had once ruled the blood pits.

Late in afternoon, I sat to one side resting while I watched the elven lord fight against the Imperial soldier who had come with Wisp. The elf was good. From my vantage on the sidelines, I could see that he was using his shield not only to protect himself from attack but to hide his sword hand as he varied his grip and changed the direction of his own attacks. The measured attacks of the Atlantean held out against the elf but made no progress. Finally the elflord gave a shrill whistle, calling in his falcon to swoop past and distract the Atlantean for the crucial moment that allowed the elf to make a touch with his swordpoint and end the match.

An argument immediately broke out as to whether or not the tactic was a fair one, but I paid it no heed. I was to face the elf next, and had to consider my own approach. It was possible that I was a better swordsman, or a faster one, but I would need to be both to defeat him quickly. I needed an edge.

The elf smoothed the feathers on the falcon's head as I stepped up to take my place in the circle. "Do you mind?" he asked. "He needs the practice as well, and you have shown yourself to be quite skilled." It appeared that we were each hoping to bring an edge to the battle. I nodded my acceptance, and as the lord raised his arm the falcon leapt into the air, circling close overhead and waiting for the battle to begin.

Drawing my sword, I reached out to the scrying eye. When it answered, I willed my own eyes to remain open and saw the courtyard in a blurry double-vision separated by a stone's throw. I raised my blade--and saw myself do the same through the Eye. The elflord saluted with his sword, then concealed it behind his shield as he brought it into position.

I guided the Eye to the far side of the elf, so I could see him ready his attack. He advanced slowly and I tried not to smile, to give away what I knew. He would attack me with a low swing, and I kept my blade high as if prepared for a chopping strike--but ready to drop it as he extended his arm.

He sprang forward, and the falcon dove toward us. A wave of disorientation washed over me as I saw the sudden motion from two perspectives, and I knew I wouldn't get my sword down in time to block. When I stumbled, it was into the line of his thrust. I was about to pay for my vanity.

The Eye leapt forward, and our perspectives merged as we did. I felt the elven sword push on my armor--then pass through it, and the rest of me. The falcon clutched at the scarf covering my head, but its talons closed only on empty air. I danced aside, but it was clear to everyone what had happened.

The elf looked at me strangely as I backed away from the battle. I felt the Eye pull away, and vanish. Again we had been bonded, and again the bond was broken.

Gryn Wanderer put an arm over my shoulders before I could retreat back into the Citadel. "I think we should talk."

Wednesday March 2, 2005

Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 22

Visions

I begged exhaustion. I feigned annoyance. I made empty conversation. I had done everything but threaten Gryn Wanderer and still she followed me, making statements that verged on questions I didn't want to answer:

"Judging by your fighting stance, it looks like you were Sect trained."

"You're tight-lipped, so you're not one of Wisp's braggarts."

"Goldyx says it was your choice to come here, so you're not part of my Brotherhood."

"The last time I saw anything like what happened to you in the courtyard, I was in the southlands."

Finally I retreated to my chamber, hoping that she had at least some sense of propriety. She stopped outside, but not before making one final observation: "You know more than you say." I closed the door and went to sleep.

In the morning, I found Gryn still waiting outside my chamber, sitting against the stone wall across from my door, dozing. I thought about remaining in my chamber all day, but I could smell meat cooking somewhere in the citadel and realized I was ravenously hungry. Slowly I swung the door open, but just as it was wide enough for me to pass, Gryn's eyes snapped open.

"You're an oracle," she said.

I promised her answers--after I ate. So an hour later, we stood on a balcony near the top of the Citadel, looking back down the valley toward the armies of the draconum. "Do you think they're ready?" I asked.

"What do you think, oracle?" countered Gryn. When I sighed, she said, "Don't worry. I'm not going to tell anyone else. Dressed like that, fighting like that, it's doubtful that they'll figure it out. I wouldn't have even tumbled to it if you hadn't pulled that trick yesterday--an old defense technique the Oracles of Rokos knew, but I thought even they had lost the secret. I'm just curious what brings you here. Only time I saw oracles outside Rokos was before they built that ugly black tower of theirs, back when they used to wander down into the Scythrians to have their visions."

"Before the Needle was built?" I said. "That was before the birth of Tezla!"

"It's not only elves that are long-lived," said Gryn. "And my life's been a little...stranger than most. But I'm asking you: do you think our armies are ready? You saw what's gathering outside the valley. Have you seen what's to come?"

"I've seen a vision of the battle," I admitted, remembering the prophecies I had made, recorded somewhere in my journals. "But not its outcome. My vision of the present is much clearer."

"Perhaps we can make use of that, then," said Gryn. "What do you see out there? What forces are coming?"

I thought back to the battle of the Kuttar Gates, to the Tur'aj ritual where I had nearly been killed, to the forces I had seen gathering on the Sturmlander coast. I knew what was coming--but like Gryn had said, under my oath to the Solonavi it seemed to be my role to know more than I could say.

I reached out to the scrying eye, and guided it out of the valley, beyond the draconum guardians at the entrance tunnel and over the swarms of Mage Spawn. The beasts prowled restlessly around the plain, snapping at each other.

On a distant slope I found a line of Shyft, and through the Eye I could sense the energy streaming from them to the creatures of the Land, calling them to battle. They danced in a loping gait around an endless circle, a magical ritual of some sort, but it seemed its only purpose was to amplify the powers of their minds. Whatever control they had over the Mage Spawn, it was innate.

"The Darkmarch will come within the day, Fys'okro," said a voice--in my head, and I recalled that the mouthless Shyft communicated with one another mentally.

"Good," said another as the Eye helped me find the conversation taking place between two summoners at the edge of the gathering. "The Domina herself comes with them. We have long waited for this moment, when we might once again unleash our masters' greatest servant. If we succeed, they will be pleased."

"If they survive," said the other.

"They are eternal!" snapped Fys'okro. Do you believe they could be destroyed by that...fleshy rabble?" He pointed toward the draconum valley with his emerald-tipped staff. "They rest, as we did, and as we did,

they will return stronger than ever. Speak your doubts no more. Focus your mind to the task at hand. Tell the others to begin calming the beasts and preparing them for guidance. Once the fenblades come, the attack begins.”

I released the Eye, and returned to Gryn’s side. “The Shyft are out there controlling the Mage Spawn,” I said. “Their armies are approaching. Tell the others--the battle will start soon.”

Thursday March 3, 2005
Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 23
The Calm

Gryn believed my warning, and so did Goldyx. I don’t know if any of the other drakona and draconum did, but it confirmed what they had been hearing from their own scouts and from the few straggling warriors who still managed to fight their way into the valley from the outside world. The Mage Spawn outside the valley were being joined by the first Shyft warriors coming north through the Kuttar Depths. I sent the scrying eye south in the morning and found that the shattered gateway at the Kuttar Gates had been cleared by the massive beasts under the control of the Shyft. While some of the draconum warriors in the Depths were still doing what they could to slow the never-ending column of troops and Mage Spawn, most had fallen back to join their brethren at the valley and prepare for battle.

Yet for all the furor building outside, the valley was calm. The drakona and draconum had given up snapping at one another as they made their final preparations. Even the scalesworn were being armed and sent to positions they would defend if the tunnel was breached. The courtyard of the Silent Citadel lived up to its name as everyone inside sought a place to rest and wait for the alarm to be sounded.

I sat on the walls of the Citadel. I was in the sun, but the stone was cold beneath me. I looked up toward the snow on the nearby peaks. It hadn’t been long ago that I walked out into the sweltering streets of Rokos, looking for a challenge. Now I found myself in cold lands where summer was already a distant memory, and the challenge to come was unavoidable.

I had a sword at my side. I felt strong. I felt ready. But for a moment, I wanted to be somewhere far away, somewhere warm. I reached for the Eye and followed as it soared south, over the mountains and forests, across the Blasted Lands, and into the deserts.

Ribaya had been the oldest of the Ringed Cities, the Great Oasis of the Galeshi people. Then Darq the Corrupt and his moonborn vampires had claimed the surrounding deserts--and closed on the great cities. Ribaya’s greatest asset had turned out to be its greatest weakness, as the dark magics of the moonborn had sent the city tumbling into the vast watery caverns beneath that had been its lifeblood. All that remained were jagged fragments of buildings, thrusting up from the ground around the crater like fangs tipped with tarnish-green, a memory of the polished bronze tiles that had once reflected the glory of the sun gods worshiped by the Galeshi.

Now Ribaya belonged to the moonborn. It belonged to the blood cult. It belonged to Darq. In one of the many tunnels and caverns branching off from the crater, the vampire lord weighed the badge of office hanging around his neck, the silver skull that marked him as a deathspeaker. Nearby was Carlana, his consort and a high priestess of the blood cult. She bared her fangs at the Galeshi strapped to the table below her, drawing her dagger lightly down his torso and licking her lips as blood welled from the cuts.

“Accursed witch,” said a woman’s voice quietly, and I realized the Eye was looking over the shoulder of a pair likewise spying on Darq and Carlana. Judging by the hoods they wore, they were Galeshi, deep in the lair of the enemy.

The other put a long finger to his lips and his hand on her shoulder. She winced in pain, and when he withdrew his hand she pulled the shoulder of her jerkin back up over a patch of horribly burned flesh that

started on her shoulder and ran down her back. He gestured and they retreated away from the torchlight, fading into silhouettes as they moved back down the tunnel. I followed.

They stopped at an intersection, and as she edged forward to look in both directions, her partner whispered to her. "You knew this was the plan, Hazna," he said in a hollow voice. "We can do nothing to give away our presence. We are only to make certain that the moonlord is here."

Hazna nodded and they advanced. "I know," she whispered. "But that was Kareth. I remember feeding him dates and ice when he was a baby."

"He will be avenged," said the other. "They all will."

Hazna raised her hand, and the pair flattened themselves against the wall of the dark tunnel. They waited silently as a group of blood cultists passed in the distance. "What's the word from the sands?" she asked as they finally continued.

"The Khamsin troops are well trained and well led," said her partner. "They have secured the traderoads, and their sweeps continue to drive the moonborn here, toward your own greatest concentration of troops. The time for battle will come soon."

"Not soon enough," said Hazna as they emerged from the tunnels and onto the slope of the ruins of Ribaya. As they began to pick their way through the wreckage, I finally got to see Hazna's partner in the light--and I understood why his voice had been so hollow, and why he could move so silently. He wore an iron mask, a dark cloak, and hovered above the ground. I had heard them described among the oracles and oathsworn, but never seen one.

It was a Solonavi shade.

Friday March 4, 2005
Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 24
The Storm

The attack came just after dawn.

I was sipping at a mug of hot barleybroth when I heard the gongs in the courtyard. While I snatched up my weapons and followed the others outside, I sent the scrying eye ahead.

A swarm of winged Mage Spawn had come over the high ridges surrounding the valley and dropped down to attack. A group of enormous insects led the way, engaging the draconum in close combat. They were followed by black-winged beasts that tore at the warriors' flanks with a mouthful of sharp teeth that seemed to take up their entire torso. Once the draconum were distracted and outnumbered four to one, a pair of wereravens swooped through in fast arcs, slashing out at the wounded with long blades mounted on the back of their fists. Before reinforcements could get into position, the blood of six draconum warriors ran down the slope.

As more draconum stepped forward to join the fray, I saw dragon mystics raising their hands to the sky. Spaced a bowshot apart, they ringed the valley. Though distant, they spoke as one. With each syllable, the clouds overhead roiled, drawing inward. The wind rose until its howl drowned out the echoed roars of the Mage Spawn outside the valley. The clouds blackened until it seemed the valley had become a cave, lit only by the watchfires still burning throughout the valley. Surrounded by four draconum, one of the wereravens leapt into the air, soaring upward to escape--until it was caught up in the winds and hurled into a granite wall. On the far side of the valley, I saw more insects and blackwings fall out of the dark clouds, forced to the ground where they were quickly attacked by the draconum.

Another alarm sounded, and I saw drakona commanders urging groups of soldiers up toward the tunnel. Inside the tunnel, the battle raged. Thick-hided beasts that barely rose to the waists of the draconum charged forward, heavy hooves clattering as they pushed their way through the draconum. The defenders hacked at the creatures with swords and greataxes, but the blades seemed to bounce off the beasts' hides with no effect. A whelp pikeman stumbled and fell, and one of the creatures lashed out with its hoof over and over until the whelp's breastplate caved inward with a sickening crack.

The draconum in the tunnel surged forward, shoring up their sagging lines just as a new onslaught crashed into them. A snow-furred manwolf jumped high above the draconum to tumble, clawing and slashing, into scalesworn just coming up the tunnel from the valley. Draconum who turned to stab at the frost wolf were fighting back-to-back with their front lines, who were faced with bare-chested four-armed swordsmen, their eyes blazing with fury. The Shyft had joined the battle.

"Get them in here and seal the gates!" roared a voice beside me. I pulled away from the scrying eye and found Goldyx beside me on the battlements of the Citadel. As the doors of the Citadel rumbled shut, Gryn and Wisp slipped between them with a few others, all carrying tools and muddy from head to foot. "Is everything in place, Wanderer?" Goldyx shouted.

"Ground was pretty frozen, but we dug the holes," said Gryn, as she poured a bucket of water over her head to clean herself. Her armor waited nearby. "Where'd you get them, anyway?"

Goldyx ignored the question and turned his attention back to the sounds of battle coming from the temple. "They didn't believe in this Citadel when I went in search of it," he said to me. "But once I found it--once I won it--they were all too happy to order me to bring it back up here." The lines of draconum moving into the tunnel began to stumble backward, pushed back by the assault. "Drakona ordering one another!" he spat. "They see it as nothing more than a wall to be parked here, to split the beasts' forces so they can be taken on blade to blade," said Goldyx. "Yet any fool can see that even if you brought all the drakona together, with all the draconum and every last whelp, they would still be outnumbered by the Mage Spawn. Then there's the Shyft. Who knew how many had survived, sleeping underground? When one of our own betrayed us to the Tur'aj and revealed our hiding place to the world, I knew that our vaunted strength wouldn't be enough. So before I brought the tower north, I went south."

The draconum lines gave way, and the armies of the Shyft advanced into the valley. Behind the Mage Spawn and the blade-wielding Shyft were summoners and armored Shyft warriors, prowling calmly back and forth as they reached out with their minds to guide the Mage Spawn toward the thickest concentrations of defenders.

"This place is strong with magic," said Goldyx. "Do you sense it?" I looked through the Eye and concentrated until I saw the glow that pervaded the area. "Hide magic under magic, train their young sorcerers to use foreign spells," said Goldyx. "That was the only way they thought to use this valley. Fools."

Goldyx closed his eyes and concentrated. A spark of magic leapt from the drakona sorcerer and arced outward, drawing a glowing line through the earth as it flowed toward the tunnel. It touched something beneath the ground and flashed as it ignited a pool of pure magical power beneath the ground. A buried magestone crystal.

The earth erupted in an explosion that hurled both Shyft and Mage Spawn into the air. A moment's concentration from Goldyx and there was another explosion a stone's throw away. As the attacking armies continued to advance, explosions threw them into disarray, giving the draconum enough time to bring their armies into position. Still, for each attacker that fell, fresh reinforcements spilled out of the tunnel.

As the day turned night was shattered by explosions and screams, the battle for the valley was underway.

Wednesday March 16, 2005

Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 25
Advance

The battle was endless and unrelenting.

With the black clouds blotting out the sky, the darkness was cut only by fires and flashes of magic. Wind roared through the valley as if the battle were taking place in the belly of an enormous beast, but it was worse when it slowed enough for me to hear the screams of the dead and dying from both sides.

I lost track of time, and often wondered if it was days that had passed--or merely minutes.

Goldyx had tried to use one of his magestone bombs to collapse the tunnel leading into the draconum valley, but it was already too late--guiding their waves of Mage Spawn forward, the Shyft took control of the tunnel. Once they had surrounded the area with enormous beasts, Tur'aj sorcerers of the Apocalypse cult came forward behind them to provide magical support. While Goldyx was trying to slow the Mage Spawn advance down the valley's southern flank, the Apocalypse mages had made their way unerringly to the magestones buried in the ground near the tunnel. Shyft-controlled beasts set to work with clawed hands and quickly excavated the giant red stones Goldyx had brought from the southern isles. Two Tur'aj paced around the stone, chanting, then stepped forward and placed their hands on the stone. The magestone began to fade--first to the color of bloomwine, then to spilled blood, and finally to an inky darkness as black as the skies above. When Goldyx attempted to spark the magestone, he stumbled backward. "It's dead," he gasped.

Like floodwaters against a muddy bank, the unending wave of attackers slowly cut through the defenders of the valley. Given the numerous assaults on the dungeons beneath the Land by various heroes and adventuring companies, I had never suspected that so many Shyft might remain. Nor could I believe the vast numbers of Mage Spawn they had summoned to their side.

The Shyft didn't seem to care if the draconum cut down Mage Spawn by the dozen; the warriors of the Darkmarch merely painted their bodies in the blood of the fallen beasts and called more to the front. Then I saw a massive blue-skinned draconum spread his wings and leap through the air, over a swarm of pock-skinned creatures, swinging his axe in a wide arc that cut down a Shyft warrior before he could bring his double-bladed sword around to block the blow. Every nearby Shyft froze and spun to face the draconum in mute rage. As the Shyft moved to surround the draconum, the fearsome beasts they had been guiding, left to their own devices, became a chaotic herd.

But that was only a moment of weakness in an overwhelming attack. Soon the Shyft lines had moved past the Silent Citadel. Though Mage Spawn gathered around the Citadel in a solid mass, they made no attempt to breach our walls. It was clear the Shyft were directing their attack toward the far end of the valley. Toward the draconum fortress and the egg.

Thursday April 14, 2005
Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 26
High Tide

The battle went on. Soon it became difficult to remember each moment. From the parapets of the Citadel, Gryn and Wisp led attacks firing blindly into the masses below, each arrow certain to hit a target. I commanded a trio of draconum thrusting pikes through the portcullis, blocking the gateway with slaughtered Mage Spawn. Yet soon the bodies would be cleared away and a new wave would push forward.

In the distance, I saw that the draconum defenders of the valley who lacked the benefit of stone and iron defenses were having a more difficult time. Groups of draconum and drakona were scattered throughout the valley and doing what damage they could, but for the most part they were barely slowing the advance of the combined forces of the Shyft and the Tur'aj as they moved on the fortress at the far end of the valley.

The ranks of the dragon mystics who had been defending the valley had been thinned as well, and the dark clouds that had roiled overhead finally began to break apart.

Finally, one of the creatures outside the gates spit acid between the bars, into the face of the draconum warrior beside me. He hissed in pain, and I pulled him back into the courtyard, shouting "Close the gates!" The iron-banded doors rumbled shut. I didn't need the Eye to tell me we were about to have bigger problems.

An orc witch--a friend of Gryn's--dug in her many pouches as she hurried over to the wounded draconum. She poured water over his face, flushing away the acid, then dusted his face with a white powder. The draconum winced, but relaxed as the pain diminished. I pulled the scarf from my head and tied it loosely over his wounds. One eye was destroyed, melted away. Biting his lip so hard he drew blood, he climbed to his feet and drew his weapon. He might or might not live, but he would have vengeance.

I heard an explosion in the distance, and Wisp shouting. "They've breached the fortress!" Then: "Here they come!" A wave of blackwings burst over the parapets of the Citadel, sending our archers tumbling. Grapplers leapt up onto the walls and reached down with their long arms to help more Mage Spawn over the edge. The eyes of the grapplers sparked with unusual intelligence, and it was clear that we had at long last drawn the full attention of the Shyft.

A pair of frost wolves leapt down from the wall and ripped into the Citadel's defenders with claw and fang. A swarm of insects carried small, yellow grimplins to the upper balconies of the Citadel, and moments later I heard shouts from inside. The hard earth of the courtyard erupted and a gigantic worm burst forth, roaring, fangs spread.

Up on the parapet, Goldyx clutched his spellbook like a shield as he fired magical bolts that arced from one creature to the next. "Fall back into the tower!" he shouted. Nearby I saw Gryn whirling her pike with one hand, fending off three bare-headed Shyft warriors as she dragged one of her elven allies back into the Citadel.

I looked toward the armory entrance and saw my way blocked by the worm and wolves who now commanded the courtyard. As I headed to the gatesteps leading up to the parapet, the gates splintered and fell inward. Horned, thick-hided creatures charged forward, giving a strange, honking shout. I danced aside and ducked behind a broken ballista as hooded Apocalypse cultists followed behind the Mage Spawn, weapons drawn.

Though I waited until they moved past, I heard a shout as I climbed the gatesteps. I felt a tendril wrap around my ankle and fell hard onto the stone stairs, knocking the wind out of me. The grappler drew me closer as I hacked at it with my sword. By the time I got free, two cultists were almost upon me. I engaged them without even climbing to my feet. Blood sprayed from the leg of one as I got in a mortal strike, just as the other knocked my weapon from my hand. He stomped on my sword arm, pinning it to the stone, and brought his longsword up.

I raised my free hand in a hopeless attempt to stave off the killing blow. I think I screamed.

"Stop!" said one of the Tur'aj, a grey-robed priest pointing at me with his staff. A small, twisted creature danced on the end of the staff, pointing at me in a mockery of his master's motions. "She wears our mark, and the sigil of the preceptor. She is one of us. Spare her!"

I felt the scar on my forehead pulse, saw the silver ring on my hand. Nala's ring. "Get her out of here, and tend to her wounds," said the apocalypse priest. Surrounded by the enemy, I could only cooperate as the Tur'aj warrior and one of the Shyft helped me to my feet and through the gates, out of the Silent Citadel.

They left me on a muddy embankment near the entrance to the valley, beside a pile of corpses. "Rest here," said the Tur'aj, and the pair returned to the battle. In the distance I heard the roar of a victory shout, and

looked toward the draconum fortress. Casting the Scrying Eye forward, I arrived just in time to see the Shyft present their prize to Nala, Preceptor of the Apocalypse Cult.

They had captured the egg.

Monday April 18, 2005
Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 27
Gathering

I rested for a while, exhausted, slumped near the pile of corpses. Though the Apocalypse cult had won the egg they came for, they had yet to capture the Silent Citadel. They had taken the courtyard, but the tower itself remained impregnable. I heard the sound of axes on wood, followed by curses of disappointment. I heard the hollow thud of Mage Spawn throwing themselves against the doors, as commanded by their Shyft masters. Finally I heard a call for sorcerers, and knew that Goldyx and the others inside the Citadel had managed to buy a few minutes. But it was just a matter of time...for the invaders.

Before the cultists could bring a sorcerer to the Citadel, I saw what I had been expecting. The magestones around the base of the Citadel glimmered as Goldyx channeled power into them from the valley's ley lines. The mud and blood that had caked on the stones during the battle melted away as the stones glowed brighter than the morning sun, finally visible now that the clouds over the valley had dissipated. With a grinding sound, the Silent Citadel rose into the air.

I heard panicked shouts from the courtyard, as cultists dashed to the gates and jumped to the ground as it rapidly fell away below them. Finally the Citadel was too high for even the foolhardy to leap off, and they could only stand indecisively in the opening. Goldyx helped them make their choice. Slowly the Citadel tilted, and cultists spilled from the opening and fell, screaming, to the valley floor.

No sooner had the Citadel righted itself than the barred slitcovers of the tower snapped open. The elven archers and dragon mystics inside were at last given a chance to strike back at the few invaders remaining in the courtyard. They made it short work. In minutes I saw Gryn Wanderer leading draconum warriors back to attack positions on the parapets.

An enormous, winged beast swooped by the Citadel, giving a shrill screech. I saw Preceptor Nala riding a saddle mounted on its back, and the egg strapped into a harness slung beneath the creature's belly. The beast swiped at the Citadel with a massive claw as it passed, then beat the air with its wings to climb up and away. As it crested the valley wall, headed away, it was clear that the Preceptor had her prize and the battle was over. The Apocalypse had won.

Still, the draconum would mount what counterattack they could. As the cultists and Shyft began to make their way back up the valley, the Citadel rained arrows, spells, and debris on them from above. It didn't do much to thin their ranks, but it proved sufficient intimidation to keep them moving and prevent them from looting the bodies of the dead.

I realized I sat near the only tunnel leading out of the valley, and soon they would all be coming my way. The odds were good that one of the cultists had seen me at the ritual where I was nearly sacrificed. It was time for me to leave.

Standing, I realized that I would need a cloak and a sword to brave the wilds outside the valley. There were fallen Shyft nearby, but there was no way I could grasp the strange ball-shaped hilts of their weapons. I saw a grey-robed cultist, but he carried only a dagger.

A short distance away, a polished blade caught the sun. I found it in the hand of an elven warrior, the noble whose aide had known Gryn. When I reached to take the sword, I started when he gasped and coughed up blood. "It's you," he said.

I knelt beside him and looked over his wounds. The elflord had felled a warbear in single combat, but not before the animal had torn open his torso. There was nothing I could do, so I draped his bloody cape back over him. "Just rest," I said. "I'll stay with you."

"One obeys the commands of the Council," said the elf. "Even if one does not believe. 'Give it to the last person you see before you die', they said. I always wondered how I would know. But--" He coughed again wetly. "But it's you. I have no question. And no fear. I have played my part in destiny, and now the role goes to you."

He was fading fast, and I still had no idea what he was talking about. "I don't understand," I said.

The elf reached up weakly to tap his chest. "On a chain. Under my armor." I slid my hand under his breastplate and found the chain, followed it with my fingers. I hooked my finger around what I found and drew it out.

A piece of a broken amulet.

I reached into my boot and pulled out the half of the amulet I had been given by the Solonavi. I pressed the new piece to my half. With a hiss, they melded together.

"Yes," said the elf. "I knew...you were the one." He went limp. I pulled the chain from around his neck and put it over my own, tucked the amulet under my robes. As I took the sword from the elflord's hand, I paused for a moment and considered claiming his soul for Dark Tezla. But I found I couldn't bring myself to say the words.

The cultists were getting closer, not to mention the Mage Spawn running wild now that they were no longer under the control of the Shyft. If I was going to leave, now was the time to do it.

Instead I turned away from the tunnel and walked deeper into the valley.

Tuesday April 19, 2005
Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 28
Denouements

It took me most of the day to work my way down the valley, skirting the outgoing soldiers of the Apocalypse. Even more difficult to avoid were the Shyft--they moved silently among the wreckage, crouched low on their lower two sets of arms like the beasts they controlled.

Late in the afternoon I nearly stumbled over a Shyft summoner; luckily its attention was on directing a pack of grimlins tearing a group of wounded scalesworn. Raising my elven longsword, I brought it down and severed the creature's head from its shoulders. The grimlins paused for a moment, dazed and confused, giving the scalesworn enough time to set on them and exact bloody revenge. Saluting me with their swords, they set to tending to their wounds. I continued into the valley.

I saw survivors from both sides of the battle. There were not only Apocalypse and Shyft but also scalesworn, draconum, whelps, and drakona. But it was unclear if either side would remain united in the aftermath. The cultists moved in groups, but the Shyft ranged far apart and individually, the common cause that had united them in battle gone. The defenders of the valley had come together in an impossible alliance, the drakona and draconum overlooking grudges that stretched into the shadows of the past; now, as I saw them snapping at once again, it was clear that defeat had broken whatever bonds had grown between them.

Pausing to wash the blood from my hands at one of the valley's hot springs, I looked back to see the Silent Citadel floating over the wall of the valley in pursuit of the Apocalypse army. Long ago I had given up hope that anyone back in the Oracle's Needle was reading these journals. Now I had lost my only other way back to Rokos, and it was going to be a long walk.

Finally I arrived at the fortress. The defensive walls had been splintered, and the mighty gates thrown aside like child's toys. The protective glyphs carved into the stone were blackened from the magical power that had been pumped through them until they overloaded. Shattered bodies were everywhere, caked in muddy, broken earth soaked with as much blood as water.

Yet there were survivors here too. I found who I was looking for where I expected to find them, in the remains of the last defenses between the Apocalypse and the room where the egg had been kept. Slumped against a wall, Chroma cradled Caldera's head in her arms. Both were as close as a living creature can come to death and not cross through the veil, yet they both raised their weapons when I approached.

I set my own sword on the ground and raised my empty hands. "They've gone," I said. "They've taken the egg with them."

"Then all is lost," said Caldera, the words hissed through broken teeth.

"No," I said. "Not if you give me the artifact you found beneath the mountains."

"Never!" said Chroma. "With all we have lost, you would take more? It may be all we have."

"You'll lose everything eventually if you don't give it to me now," I said. "The cult has taken the egg. They will hatch it. Whatever is inside is about to be unleashed upon the Land." I pulled the medallion from beneath my robes and held it out. "The only thing that can stop it--the only thing that can save us all--is this medallion, and it means nothing without your piece."

"We were told what would happen if we failed," said Chroma. "It would live again. It would ravage the world, as it has done before. She reached into her belt and drew out the piece of the medallion. "Take it, but know that if you do not do as you say and destroy the creature we will die--but not until I kill you first."

She dropped the piece into my hand. I fitted it to the others, and it fused into place. The amulet, complete at last. I felt the weight of history upon me, knew it had been a thousand years since it had last been a single piece, saw the hammer falling upon it to break it into pieces, heard a voice in my head:

"When all is as it was, they will return."

There was a flash, and I looked up to see Lord Vextha floating before me.

"Oracle," he said. "It is time."

Wednesday April 20, 2005

Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 29

Omens

Today, for the first time in nearly a month, I write in this journal with my own hand. Strange to look back over pages written from afar, under impossible circumstances. It's strange to be back in the scrying chamber.

Lord Vextha took me from the draconum valley last night, lifting us both on the wings of a powerful spell. As he carried me away from the valley, from Chroma and Caldera and all the wounded among the torn wreckage below, I asked if he could not use his magic to heal them. "We leave them to their destiny," he said. "And I take you to yours."

As though I were the Eye, we flew through the clouds. Before sunrise I saw the watchfires of Rokos, and the harbor beacons down on the waterfront. We dropped down among the buildings and into the courtyard outside the Oracle's Needle, where Lord Vextha set me lightly on my feet.

Oracle Daheia was waiting, with Anquilis. "Welcome home, Oracle," said Daheia.

"She cannot wear those robes," said the archivist, looking at the robes I had found in the Silent Citadel. I thought back to the silk robes I had worn since I came to Rokos, so carefully tended yet now reduced to rags.

"Come," said Daheia. "Let's get you cleaned up and fed." So while the pages poured the days newly heated water into the stone tubs I had a bath, and I ate a meal in the Tower kitchens while the cooks prepared the morning's breakfast. To describe how much I enjoyed them would needlessly fill pages in a volume already approaching its end. Suffice it to say that I was happier than I had been in weeks.

I met Daheia in her quarters, where she had laid out robes in the colors of the Oracles. "Why did Anquilis object to the clothes I was wearing?" I asked as I put on the clean robes.

"The symbols on them have... meaning to the Solonavi," said Daheia. I considered the clothing from the Silent Citadel for a moment, inspecting the intricate geometrical symbols dancing embroidered on the robes and inscribed into the belt. If the Solonavi still felt the need to keep secrets from me, I wasn't going to fully acquiesce to their demands. I picked up the silver belt, ornamented with gold and rubies, and strapped it around my waist.

"I'm afraid that you need to cover the scar on your brow," said Daheia. "Not only will it disturb many people who understand its meaning, but there is the possibility that it somehow binds you to the Tur'aj. A scarf will not be enough," she said, presenting me with a tray. "It is time for you to choose a mask."

A mask. Though in service to the Solonavi I had avoided wearing one for so long. Determined to one day be free of my debt, I refused to allow myself to be marked. Yet Daheia was right. I considered the masks on the tray. Some were full masks of the type worn by Oathsworn. Others were nearly helms, like that worn by Daheia. I didn't want to wear any of them.

But buried beneath them I saw another. Drawing it forth, I saw that it would mark me as an Oracle and hide the scar, yet it would not hide my identity. I would be an Oracle, but I would remain Kastali. The words of my father came to mind: "Never let anyone forget that your power comes from you, and not your office." Stepping before a mirror I put on the mask and let my hair fall free. I looked different--felt different--yet it was right.

Daheia walked with me to the scrying chamber, where we found Lord Vextha waiting outside. "You have always seen, Oracle," said Vextha. "Now you will know." He reached out a finger and placed it on the mask, between my eyes. I blinked as I felt a pulse of magic wash over me.

"Go inside, Oracle," said Daheia. I looked to both the Oracle and the Solonavi, but neither gave me any indication what might be going on. I opened the door and stepped inside.

I sighed in relief. It was just as I had left it. I ran my fingers down the spines of my journals, looked at the map on the wall and noted the spreading stain of the Apocalypse on the Land, smiled as I looked into the waters of the scrying pool and remembered when I thought I needed it, before I had found the Eye.

No sooner did I think of the scrying eye than I felt the tug of its approach. I looked up from the pool--and was startled to see a ghostly Solonavi coming toward me, through the wall! I stumbled backward into the bookcase, and the candles mounted on it flickered and cast dancing shadows across the room.

The spirit reached for me, the mouth moving but no words coming out. As its hand passed through me, I felt the tug again...and realized I was looking at the Eye! I relaxed and released myself into its hands, and we passed through the walls of the Tower.

The Eye pulled me across the Land, and once again I returned to the northlands. Travelling eastward across the midlands, we found the valley of the Roa Kaizen and followed it toward its source. I saw Nepharus

Mons off in the far distance, ringed in clouds glowing in the morning light. To the east was the central spur of the Ailons, and beyond, Black Lake and the Necropolis. There were many things I wanted to see, but first I would go where the Eye was taking me.

We approached the cold, barren foothills, and as we descended I saw a creature I had seen only days ago in the draconum valley--the beast ridden by Nala. Lower, and I saw a circle of prostrate cultists ringing Nala...and the egg, glowing as if full of coals.

"The time of prophecy is here!" she said.

"The darkness comes," responded the cultists.

"We have seen the omens!" said Nala.

"The darkness comes."

A cultist stepped forward, in black robes rather than gray. It was Lord Katalkus, and he carried a chest in his arms. He opened the chest to reveal four gleaming gems--all that remained of the riders of the Apocalypse. "It cannot be destroyed," he shouted as he showed them to the crowd.

"The darkness comes," said the cultists.

"It cannot be killed!" he said.

"The darkness comes."

"It is reborn!" he cried. As he set the gems on the eggs surface, they sunk through the shell. With each the glow of the egg intensified, like a bellows working a blacksmith's flames. Finally cracks rippled across the shell--and it broke open.

The Apocalypse Dragon was reborn.

It uncoiled, spreading its wings. Five heads roared at the sky. Even the cultists looked up in horror at what they had unleashed. A cultist jumped to his feet and turned to run. One of the Dragon's heads snapped in his direction, a skull bereft of skin. The air rippled, and suddenly the cultist fell to the ground, dead. For a moment I couldn't be certain, but it looked as though the Dragon grew in size. Then the Dragon saw the other cultists. One after another they slumped, and with each the Dragon grew larger as it absorbed their life forces.

Finally only Lord Katalkus and Preceptor Nala remained. "Stop," said Katalkus calmly, raising a hand. The Dragon paused, growling. Katalkus stepped forward and placed a hand on the beast's haunches. "Yes," he breathed. "Finally."

The eyes of the Dragon's central head glowed. "Such power," said Katalkus, echoed in the wordless rumbling of the Dragon. "We cannot fully control her power, but I can guide it. Where shall we go first?"

"For now it matters little," said Nala. "Go south. Show them all that we have endured. Tell them all that the darkness is coming." The Dragon turned--and looked at me. The eyes of the skull peered at me, and again I felt the terrible cold touch of death--

I was back in the Tower, gasping. "The Eye is gone," I said.

"No Kastali," said Daheia, looking into my eyes. "You've always known the truth--you just couldn't see it."

It was true. "The Eye cannot die," I said. "There are others."

Dozens of ghostly Solonavi came through the walls of the scrying chamber.

Thursday April 21, 2005
Early Fall, 435 TZ, Day 30
Friends and Foes

Perhaps it was the mark of the Tur'aj. Perhaps it was Lord Vextha's touch. Perhaps it was my own growing powers. But I could see them. I could see the translucent, insubstantial Solonavi who floated all around me as I walked through the Tower. Some flitted through a room, traveling from one destination to another. Some hovered behind the shoulder of an Oathsworn or an apprentice, watching. A few, like those around the blackstone pillars in the entry hall, circled menacingly, as if protecting something.

It seemed as though I was the only one who could see the ghosts, though it was possible that they could be seen by the--normal? Living? Luminous?--Solonavi that normally moved about the Tower.

Strangely I felt no tug from the ghosts, and they didn't respond when I reached out to them...until finally I saw one come through the rose window above the main Tower doors. I felt the pull as it came closer, and I reached out to make contact--

Then we were flying above Rokos, out into the grasslands. Soon we were out of Solonavi lands and into Atlantean territory, where the landsmen were harvesting the meager crops they had mustered after recovering from a summer of plague and famine. They would make it through the winter, but food would be scarce.

I could see Venetia in the distance as we arrived at an Atlantean supply depot. I saw the flash of sorcery and the boom of black powder in the distance as the Empire's campaign to retake Caero continued. All that remained in this encampment were Golemcore mechanics laboring on a trio of battered golems.

"I don't know what's making 'em balky," said one, a wiry Kosian girl. "The new dwarfbrains are still wired in solid, and I don't see any kind of mechanical failure. Must be the magic."

"No way," said a stout man who wore a leather 'Kore apron over dirty apprentice robes. "The magestones are good, so the motivator spell should still be in place."

"Maybe you'd know if the Delphana hadn't kicked you out," said the girl.

"Hey!" A gray-bearded man extracted himself from the inner workings of a defunct golem to glare at the two of them. He cocked his head, and they all heard the stomp of approaching metal feet. "I can hear more work comin' in already!" he shouted. "If you can't get these two hunks of junk walking toward the front lines, that'll be all the excuse the Legion needs to shut us down and take you up to there instead. I can't spare mechanics, so howsabout we send some expendable golems instead, okay?"

The mechanics nodded just as the new golems walked into the area. In the rear were a technocat wearing saddlebags stuffed with tools and ridden by a dwarven mechanic, walking alongside a pair of thin-limbed golems with blades where their hands should be. They followed a massive golem with a belt-fed crossbow in place of his left arm, the Atlantean gold of his outer casing nearly covered in a sloppy coat of red paint.

It was Redgear Bowblade.

"Expendable," said Redgear, leveling his weapon at the elder mechanic.

"Lower your weapon and get over there!" shouted the 'Koresman, pointing toward a relatively clear area.

With a twanging sound Redgear loosed two bolts that slammed into the wall beside the mechanic's head, one on either side. The gearing of his upper arm spun two fresh bolts into place and pushed them forward

while a ratchet beneath jacked the bowstring back into position. "I am not expendable," he said in his buzzing, metallic voice.

"Hey, whatever you say," said the mechanic, dropping his wrench and raising his empty hands. The two smaller golems had moved to threaten the two younger mechanics with their blades until they backed away from their work.

Now Redgear moved over to the bright-eyed but dormant golems. "You are not expendable," he said to them.

One moved. "NOT...EX....EX....EXP..." it stammered in a voice that sounded like someone dragging a rusty barrel.

"Come with us if you want to live," said Redgear thudding back toward the exit. The smaller golems spun their hands so they threatened the mechanics with the flat of their blades--which they promptly used to knock them unconscious.

"Hey!" shouted the older mechanic.

"Tell the emperor hello from the Steelhands!" cackled the dwarven mechanic. "He better start treating golems decent, or we'll have to do down and talk to him ourselves!" Raising a lightning caster, he blasted the mechanic with an arc of lightning that knocked him on his back.

Slowly, the Atlantean golems climbed to their feet--

--and I found myself back in the entry hall of the Tower. The Eye--the ghostly Solonavi--danced away. It had shown me what it thought I needed to see.

So I came here, to the scrying chamber, to record what I had seen. I turned to a new page, the last page in the journal, and found a note tucked between the pages:

Kastali--

I've been reading your journals while you're gone, and it looks like you'll soon be coming back. Which means it's time for Raven to say good-bye. By the time you find this, I'll be long gone. Don't come looking for me, even with the Eye--I've got a lot of experience hiding, and it's easier when you don't have to be in plain sight.

Frankly, I'm surprised the Solonavi didn't figure it out. They're supposed to be the masters of secrets, after all. I was pretty sure I could get by as an Oathsworn, but hanging out with an Oracle, around the head of the order and any number of the firebugs? Well, I couldn't pass up the chance, but I thought I might finally be the one to find out if there were dungeons under the Tower of Rokos.

I've lived a long, long time, Kastali. Long enough that even if I don't know what the Solonavi are up to, I know what they did. So do a few others, and we're waiting to see what happens next. Gryn Wanderer knows. Whatever the elves have done to her, it sounds like Jaysari--the Mistwalker?--knows now too.

If you get all the pieces of that amulet, it means you're headed toward the truth too. When you find it, you'll have to make a choice, and I hope that choice means our paths will cross again.

The Solonavi aren't going to be happy to hear there was a spy in their ranks, so I'd suggest you report this note. I wouldn't want a friend to get in any trouble she wasn't looking for.

*Your friend,
Tonen Swiftblade*

P.S. I know who's in Seatower.