Once the Council has assembled in the small private meeting chamber, they receive a briefing from a middle-aged high human who wears the favor of House Ardashir at his belt.

“Shade and water unto you, honored Council members. For those of you I have not met, I am Zhu, acting as Master of Eyes for this Outpost. We have this past month dispatched our scouts as far and wide as possible, and I bring their reports to you now. We will take our next direction from you when you have reached a decision.”

He unrolls a map of the area around the Outpost, pointing first up the trail to Senabi and then up the Onyx Road to Kishar.

“Unrest continues in the Ruby City. Farlanders are under sanction there, and many flee. Some come here, others take the trade roads. This migration has driven up prices along the ways, and made supplies scarce.”

His finger trails back to Senabi. “Production in the opium fields here is down. There have been complaints of droughts and pests. The town itself grows rapidly with the influx of farlander coin. More warehouses and merchants come with that, so perhaps in time we will have more goods to buy, and not fewer.”

He points next to an oasis marked on the map some distance from the Outpost. “This is the Sunspear camp site. My scouts report there are no living things there, but that much still moves. They are less active by day, but by night it swarms with the unliving. There are the corpses of gnolls, but also other types of skeletons and great black shadows. A green fire burns in the high tower each night without ceasing.”

“There are still gnolls in the area – several tribes of them – but they show no sunspear symbols. I am unsure that they do much other than scavenge.”

He moves to a small dot on the map. “The site of the great hand dig by the Royal Academy has been pacified. With the inscriptions that were recovered, the scholars were able to deactivate the artefact, although I am told it did not survive this.”

He circles around to a small group of hills marked on the map. “One of my Eyes claims to have seen a new ruin here. Perhaps it is of the Lost Ones. If we could convince the scholars to travel there, I am sure they would know more, but I doubt they will move without an escort after most of them were slaughtered.”

He points to the Outpost itself. “The assistant foreman here, Lever, is a construct. They are not much given to complaint. This one says that Ibna, the head foreman, does not often come to the planning sessions, and is sometimes entirely unable to be found for work. When she is there, her suggestions cause as much delay as progress.” His eyes go up to the Council members. “It is not for me to act on this, but I will say I personally have seen her leave the Outpost some evenings and walk into the sands. The last time, I tried to follow her, but I became lost.” He holds their eyes, letting that sink in. “I am an expert tracker, and highly familiar with the area here. I… became… lost. It took me two hours to return. I have never seen that area since.”

His eyes return to the map. “There have been rumors, although I do not think they are related. Some workers go missing now and then, but I think this is normal when you work in a place such as this. Perhaps some of the merchants hire the laborers away, or farlanders eat them. Who knows?”

He gestures vaguely in the direction of the Silver Sea north of Kishar. “There is a delegation that has just arrived, from some farlander country. They claim to be an Embassy. I did not speak with them, myself. I assume they have some business with the Guild, and perhaps they are here now as farlanders are not popular in the great city. Since they have arrived we have been receiving word that other dignitaries intend to come as well.”

Shrugging, he taps the desert in general. “Some of the animals in the sands are acting oddly. My Eyes have spoken of seeing sand dragons endlessly walking in circles, or dead by waterholes, apparently of thirst. Some of them have been bleeding, but show no wounds. The blood comes from the natural openings of the body. They have also found the body of one of the giala, a great red-headed lizard that is rarely sighted, in a similar state.”

“There have been more encounters with those who call themselves ‘the Green’ – antlike beings who seem to have some intelligence and a large store of gems. Their foes, ‘the Red’, move in great numbers, and have on occasion come into conflict with my Eyes. They are mighty adversaries and difficult to down unless they are outnumbered. Usually, we have fled from them instead.”

“The beings in the black robes, called Tarikhan, have come twice in the night against the Outpost, but have been turned away now that they must fight through our perimeter again. They show no signs of depleting their forces, however. We have seen none of the ones wearing red robes among them for some time, so I am concerned that they are elsewhere, doing something even less savory.”

“My Eyes have scoured the sands around here for a week in each direction. We have –never- found a track or trace of them, although they have moved against us in this time. They are like ghosts.”

He seems reluctant to add the last piece of information, crossing his arms over his chest and looking down for a moment before proceeding.

“A part of the Sea of Sands is… sinking. I do not know why, and it troubles me greatly.” He traces a few lines in the desert, a good way away from the Outpost. “Here, and here, and there. Trenches are appearing, and widening. I have seen no hand behind it, but my scouts have reported seeing the sands… move, as if on their own.”

Zhu bows to the Council. “My Eyes stand ready to serve, honored Council members. We ask that you appeal to those gathered here at the Outpost to come out with us on missions to investigate whichever of these tidings you find important. My men and women are fast and quiet, but they are not great warriors.”